

FRIDAY NIGHT ON THE RANTAN

There may be a body of opinion that the half dozen bottles of mineral water transferred to the cave were a bit over the odds, but half a dozen it was.

Not that I was needing all of them right away. I thought one would be needed while I prepared myself for a spell in the cot, while a second might be needed for refills between the time I finished the first and my re-mergence. A third would probably cover the spell between the re-mergence and the arrival of the Dipsomaniacs, while the other three would be handy over the next couple of days.

There was every chance when I returned home on any of the forthcoming nights minor matters like overnight hydration would skip my mind.

Some five hours later I was back on deck, freshly showered and ready for anything. As I emerged from the cave, the remnants of the second bottle of mineral water in hand, I found the other long-term inmates gathered in the pool area.

"We've made an executive decision," I was informed as I pulled up something to sit on.

"Which was?" was my response.

"Considering your predictions regarding the likely course of events over the weekend," Sandy began, "we figured that there wouldn't be much for Bright Eyes to do between now and Monday morning." It seemed a reasonable assumption.

"I mean," Hopalong went on, "after she's dropped us at the pub tonight, we can probably get a ride in on your mates' bus tomorrow afternoon and there's every chance you'll be wanting a spell on Sunday night rather than heading into the pub for the evening session."

"I've got temporary accommodation upstairs at the Palace if I need it," Jeffrey pointed out. "So we figured if there was going to be a weekend when Bright Eyes could conveniently head off for a spot of child-bride-grooming, this was it."

My vote made the decision unanimous.

"She won't be taking the Red Chariot with her," Sandy added. "I'm going to be using the chance to get the marking and everything else up to date since the kids have both been invited to birthday parties and sleep-overs so there's no point in going to Townsville for the weekend. She's left the keys with me so I'll be available to cover for any chauffeuring that needs to be done. After tonight, of course."

With all those issues resolved, Jeffrey, Sandy and Hopalong departed in the Bright Eyes mobile at around four-forty-five while I hunkered down with the third bottle of mineral water and a suitable soundtrack to await the arrival of the Dipsomaniacs.

Knowing the path developments were likely to take I'd suggested there was no need to hold a spot at the bar for me. It would also be advisable, I pointed out, to remind His Lordship and The Duchess they'd promised to use their respective vehicles to reserve a parking space for the Dipsomaniac bus.

"Bernelle?" Hopalong asked. "if she arrives looking for you do we point her in this direction?" My response had indicated that, while unanticipated developments might affect the game plan, it was unlikely she'd be looking for me at any time before Sunday evening.

In any case I had the next ninety minutes or so to myself so I wandered back indoors, selected a James Lee Burke novel from the back catalogue. I'd stacked the CD player with a selection of blasts from the bayou so it was a matter of passing the time until it was time to board the *Oblivion Express*.

On my way I paused to ponder telephone connections. Barry Ballmer, in his role as Tour Coordinator, had advised he'd call if there were any unforeseen delays, so I wandered down to Reception to check where the phone had been switched.

Once I'd reassured myself I'd be able to hear it from my poolside location I selected a shady spot close to a light source so nightfall wouldn't pose an insurmountable problem and settled down to have a quiet read while I used the contents of the bottle of mineral water to ensure that when I arrived at the Palace dehydration wouldn't have me going at the grog like a bull at a barred gate.

Around six-fifteen the shades of night were gathering and I thought of switching on the lights but with a page or two until the end of the chapter I could wait another five minutes. The sound of a car in the car park prompted me to put down the book and ponder the possibilities. Lack of illumination around the pool provided me with some cover; although the stereo blaring across the environs would probably be seen as evidence there was someone on the premises.

Although Bright Eyes had departed ninety minutes before, it was possible she'd forgotten some vital piece of child-bridegrooming apparatus and been forced to return to base to fetch same.

The other residents of the premises would by this time be in *Full Friday Night Mode*, and could be ruled out.

Unless the Dipsomaniacs had left Townsville around three-thirty they could safely be eliminated from the list of possibilities, and, in any case the vehicle didn't sound like a coaster bus..

Waddles and Wally were, by now, safely ensconced in whatever locations they thought would provide secure long-term refuge.

The living quarters and Reception were, as far as I could recall securely locked. Rather than moving from my current spot to investigate, I felt that whoever'd arrived was probably going to find me eventually. If that is, they needed to locate me.

In the gathering dark I thought it might be an idea to move away from my current spot into the shadows where I could monitor developments without being spotted immediately. A car door slammed. Footsteps took themselves along the length of the building, paused outside my door and, I guessed tried the door; and then the footfalls pointed themselves directly towards the pool. A familiar blonde head appeared over the childproof gate, followed by an inquiry whether I was there.

"Over here," I volunteered, emerging from a convenient patch of greenery. "I was in the middle of pointing Horace at the hydrangeas when I heard the car pull up. Normally I would have wandered inside but Sandy reckons they're in need of a bit of nitrogen so I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone. What's up? Nothing serious, I hope."

A cynic might well detect a degree of hypocrisy in that last observation, given the fact that I'd determined a relationship that hadn't quite succeeded in going anywhere was due to be concluded. I had, on the other hand, provided guarantees in the case of developments concerning certain people's employment status.

"You got into work OK?" seemed to be the best way to approach the issue.

"Yes," was the reply, "and I had time to have a quick shower at home on the way too, which meant that it was a couple of minutes before eleven when I walked through the door."

"The boss? Not standing there with a scowl, tapping one foot pointing at the clock on the wall?"

"Not at all. Her first words were *Bernelle, thank God you're here. I was so worried.*"

"Hardly what you were expecting after comments about *knowing what's good for you.*"

"Exactly. I tried to find out what was up, but she didn't say anything else. I'd just started shampooing Mrs Shankley's hair when the phone rang."

"And?"

The narrative was going somewhere although its eventual long-term destination remained a close-kept secret.

"Mrs D. answered the phone, said something like *Yes, she's here* and *No, of course I haven't* and told me she'd finish shampooing Mrs Shankley while I talked to these people who were on the other end of the line."

"People?" I asked. "So it was some sort of conference call?"

"And you'll never guess what it was about." I gave her time to clarify matters.

"You remember a couple of days back I was telling you that Mrs D and John and Jane from the fashion boutique next door had entered me in this *Apprentice Hairdresser of the Year* competition?"

I recalled something along those lines, though exact details eluded me.

"Anyway the people on the end of the line were the judges and I'm one of four Queensland finalists. They'd filmed all the entrants cutting hair when we'd gone for our block prac earlier this year and we've all submitted a portfolio of photos to show some of the work we've done. So they'd picked out the final four and the phone call was like an interview to select the winner."

"So what happened?"

"Well, they started off asking whether I knew what was happening, and whether Mrs. D had warned me that the call was coming. At least I think that's what they were asking."

I raised an interrogatory eyebrow and the narrative went on.

"Anyway, one voice asked whether Mrs D. had intimated that the call was coming..."

"You replied?"

"That I'd never been intimate with Mrs D. After all she's a married lady who's old enough to be my mother; and I have a boyfriend when it comes to things like that. *That's you,*" she pointed out helpfully.

I couldn't help thinking that this was stretching the facts of the case more than slightly but refrained from making a comment.

"So this other voice said something like *So she's said nothing to you apropos this phone call?* I said no, because I'd already told you she's a married lady and she'd never proposition someone who worked for her and that anyway I'd just come back from Airlie Beach and I thought he was going to propose while we were there."

Certain suppositions had, in other words, been rather close to the money.

"So someone asked if winning the competition was likely to be a problem in that regard, and I said that it wouldn't be because your name was David not Beauregard and they all laughed and someone wanted to know whether it'd be a problem if I won the national competition and had to go to London for a year to work with a top hairdressing salon and I said no because you had plenty of money since you won the Lotto and you liked overseas travel and had just come back from two months in New Orleans and Los Angeles where you'd been collecting rhythm and blues and learning to cook Cajun food and they said you sounded quite fascinating."

"To which you replied?"

"That you were, of course, but if they were looking for someone fascinating they'd have to go out and find their own and I saw you first and they all laughed and asked where we'd gone last night so I told them all about *The Balcony* and the *Shoalwater*, and explained how we ended up talking to the chefs about *bouillabaisse* and vermentino and what a nice wine it was and how you and Simon were so keen on the interesting new grape varieties from Spain and Italy and even Russia that they're starting to grow in northeastern Victoria and the *paella* and how much we enjoyed it then before I knew it they were saying good-bye and telling me the results of the competition were going to be published on Monday and I'd probably know the results on Monday morning and they hoped you wouldn't propose over the weekend."

Fat chance, I thought, but maintained a diplomatic silence and what I hoped could be interpreted as a look of diplomatic resignation.

"I told them that you had friends coming down from Townsville for a big cricket weekend, and I wasn't supposed to be seeing you till Sunday night but I might pop over tonight to let you know the news..."

"I'm glad you did," I replied, which was true enough, since it seemed a totally satisfactory solution to a potentially thorny little problem might have appeared over the horizon.

"I remembered what you said about this afternoon, but I thought if I came straight out here I'd find out you'd changed your mind, so I called in at the Palace after I'd been home to tell Mum about the news. When I saw that you weren't there with the rest of them I was about to turn around and come out here when Elizabeth came out of the kitchen and she'd been talking to Mrs D. and you know they're very good friends, so I had to sit down and tell her all about it in the kitchen while she was getting things ready for Friday night and have a little glass of bubbles to celebrate which is why I was so late getting here."

"Since I wasn't expecting company I can't really be too upset if it turned up a little bit late, could I?" I suggested in what I hoped was a perfectly reasonable tone.

"So," Bernelle went on, "you're not upset about it? I've been wondering whether to tell you that Mrs D. said I had a very good chance since she said I had a natural flair for creative hair styling..."

"You never think those things are going to work out, do you? I mean, after all you're sitting up here in Denison and there have to be people in the running from flash hair salons in Brisbane and places like that. So where does it go from here?"

"If I win the Queensland section, they're going to want me in Sydney next weekend for the national final. There's a week of modelling and deportment classes before the final, so even if I don't win there's a good chance of picking up some fashion work if I don't win the trip to London."

"Amazing, isn't it?" I remarked. "This morning you were driving back from Airlie in a blue funk..."

"I beg your pardon. You know perfectly well I drive a white Hyundai not a blue car from some German company I've never heard of."

I recalled an exchange from Wednesday evening when Jeffrey, having inquired whether the name *Quasimodo* rang a bell, was informed that it was a Japanese company that manufactures motor cycles. There was, I decided, every chance that this kid was going to take out the prize through repeated instances of what could only be described as *episodes of blonde*. I put all references to German car companies to one side and went on.

"Anyway, so there you were, driving back panicking about what was going to happen if you got pulled over and worrying about whether you still had a job when *if you know what's good for you* was a clue something you'd regret missing was heading your way around eleven this morning. A mere matter of eight hours ago you were probably looking at a career as a small-town hairdresser and mother of two point six kids and here you are looking down the barrel of international stardom and the jet set big time. Funny how things change, isn't it?"

"I'm sure, that no matter how things turn out I'll always be a small town girl at heart. You're right about how things change. What was the name of that album? You know, the one you say is the greatest achievement in the history of recorded music. *Everything Changes*? Something like that."

"*Forever Changes*," I pointed out. "By a little-known West Coast band called Love, if you recall."

"That's it. Why don't you put it on now? Seems very appropriate now, for some reason. That song about being *alone again tonight my dear*."

The request wasn't one that could be rejected out of hand and since I was apparently incapable of accomplishing the mission without supervision Bernelle accompanied me indoors. Once the change had been accomplished I found myself in what could only be described as a *compromising situation* while, in the distance I detected a sound that bore a remarkable resemblance to a ringing telephone.

By the time I'd extricated myself from the situation and sprinted towards the office, of course, the caller had decided there was nobody home. Predictably, the phone had rung off when I was about five metres away.

I paused for a few minutes on the off-chance that whoever it was might deign to call back. Since I'd turned the office lights on, I spent a moment or two wondering whether I should do the same to the poolside ones. Figuring that there was no likelihood of resuming where I'd stopped reading, I figured that if I did I'd only have to turn them off again on the way out. On the way back I met Bernelle, headed towards the pool.

"Who was it?" she asked.

"Dunno, but if it's important they'll call back."

"I'll tell you what. Since you're going to be standing up in the hot sun all day tomorrow, how would you like a back massage? Dad always said I gave the best back massages..."

I'll bet he did, was my nonverbal reaction. The spoken response was *sounds good to me*.

Once I'd slipped my shirt off as directed, Bernelle set to work. The need for a solid surface to work on had prompted a move to a wooden bench and, for a good five minutes she sat astride me, working on the back muscles. When instructed to turn over, I acted as directed and the presence of someone straddling the groin area while she worked on my shoulders produced the inevitable physical reaction.

With that stage of the proceedings complete, Bernelle stood, directed me to sit up and was about to resume kneading my shoulders from the other side when she noticed something.

"What's that?" was the immediate inquiry.

"What's what?" While I was not unaware of certain physical developments, recent events suggested certain parties were not particularly interested in tumescent erectile tissue.

"There!" An arm reached over my left shoulder and continued to stroke the area in question.

"Well, it's hardly a new development," I observed. Previous instances of a similar development had, indeed, been evident at various stages of the previous half-dozen evenings.

"Hardly is the operative word," was the response as Bernelle stood up and circled to the left. Squatting in proximity to the area under consideration she proceeded to unbuckle a belt, manipulate a button and release the trapped flesh.

Given the experience of the previous night I had difficulty accepting that current developments were taking place. She was discussing something with an individual seemingly named Harry or Hairy Hardly, her lips were poised over the interloper and I was about to pinch myself when I heard a coaster bus turning into the car park. The sound was immediately followed by a series of blasts on the horn.

In a matter of about five seconds various items of clothing had been rearranged and someone was hauling me to my feet and remarking that my *cricketing friends seemed to have arrived*. The bus came to a halt as I stood up, and there was the immediate sound of an automatic door opening, followed immediately by the dulcet tones of one Barry Ballmer inquiring *Anybody in?*

As I made my way through the pool gate the bus emptied, with various bodies vanishing to various sections of the shrubbery. I emerged into the lit portion of the premises. Balls turned towards me.

"Herston, you bastard. Hope we're not interrupting anything. I called about fifteen minutes ago but no buggers answered, so I tried the Palace. Took the buggers about five minutes to answer there, and when they did they handed the phone to someone called Sandy who told me that you were here, but that we should probably be discreet since he didn't think you were here all alone."

He turned in Bernelle's direction.

"We were discreet, weren't we? I know you from somewhere, but if you don't think we've been discreet enough I'll get all these bastards back on the bus and we can go around the block a couple of times till we get it right."

Various figures were reappearing from the shrubbery, adjusting their clothing as they moved. Bernelle was in the process of reassuring him that their arrival had been quite discreet and there was no need for a repeat performance. Ballmer continued undeterred.

"Anyway, you might be able to settle a long-standing argument. Sources have stated that Mr Herston here has the biggest middle stump in the business. Not that I'd know, I'm a virgin out of marriage..."

"The general opinion around the schools around town was that Herston was the biggest prick unhung," was the opening volley from one of the figures emerging from the surrounding gloom.

John Menzies was widely known, for obvious reasons, as *Ming* and had acquired a reputation for merciless sledging. His arm reached towards Bernelle. He was holding an imaginary microphone.

"So, Miss..."

"Butler," Bernelle replied.

"That's it," Balls mumbled. "Knew I'd seen her somewhere."

"So, Miss Butler, your independent opinion," Ming continued mercilessly. "Please tell us, in your opinion, is this mongrel one of the biggest pricks unhung? Inquiring minds need to know."

"Not like this bastard," came a voice from the back. I recognized it as belonging to fast bowler and arch sledger Al Angry Anderson. "The one they couldn't root, shoot or electrocute. Or circumcise, because there's no end to the prick."

The boys had obviously enjoyed a highly fluid and interactive couple of hours on the bus. Bernelle had developed an interesting crimson hue, and I decided to defuse the situation by suggesting that the party resume their seats on the bus so that they could be delivered to the pub with the greatest rapidity. As the crowd filed onto the bus, I turned to Bernelle.

"Not coming to the pub?" I suggested in my politest and non-pressing tones.

"Not tonight. After all the excitement I think I'll have a quiet night at home and let it all sink in. I'll be around Sunday afternoon." She gave me a quick peck on the cheek and retreated hurriedly towards her car, closely attended by various wolf whistles and appreciative comments.

"Bit of all right there," was Mr Ballmer's assessment of the situation. "I wouldn't mind sinking into that myself, should the occasion arise. Better in there than in debt."

"I thought," I remarked as we boarded the bus, 'that you were a virgin out of marriage.'"

"Which one?" Balls replied. "Been three so far with no sign of the count stopping there. Tell me, she said her name was Butler, right?"

"Spot on," I replied.

"First name Bernelle, by any chance? Dad's a real estate agent in Townsville? He's onto his third missus as well, but the mother would be named Olga? Russian piece, or at least that's what she claims. Was holding her age rather well last time I saw her."

This unexpected development required a few moments to allow me to gather my thoughts.

"Right on all fronts. Hang on a bit though, there's one job I haven't quite done."

With that I extracted the secure mobile from the pocket, thanking my lucky stars I'd gone to the trouble of entering certain key numbers on the SIM card. One of them was, predictably, the Palace. The phone rang for what seemed an eternity but was the time it took us to travel through three or four intersections. Eventually Maggie deigned to pick up the receiver.

Once I'd informed her that the Dipsomaniacs were inward bound and suggested that His Lordship might like care to move the vehicles that were safeguarding the parking spot and provide access to the old movie theatre, I was free to return to recent topics of conversation.

"So, you've run across Bemelle and her mum before."

Then the penny dropped. Mr Ballmer had extensive experience in the real estate industry.

"Working for her old man by any chance?" It seemed like the most likely explanation.

"Until three months ago, yeah. I was looking after his rental. Been doing that sort of shit for about three years. Not as much money in it as selling, of course, but there's no weekend work, and there are a few other ways a bloke can pick up a bit of cash on the side."

"So what happened?" The question seemed obvious enough.

"Been there about eighteen months when the prick gave me the bullet, but he paid for it. Soon as the word went around that I'd got the chop I was fielding phone calls right left and centre. Ended up going back to where I was before Butler made me a better offer."

"Presumably, they made you a better offer as well."

"Bloody oath they did. When I went back I took back the hundred and twenty properties I took with me when I went to Butler with another sixty for good measure. That'll teach him, the prick."

I could have investigated further, but since the bus was negotiating the corner on which the Palace is situated I turned my attention to directing the driver into the alley at the rear of the premises. References to back alleys produced the predictable volley of salacious comments, and as the bus pulled into the reserved parking space His Lordship appeared from the shadows of the garage.

Introductions were made, hands were shaken and we moved onto the main business of the evening. Once the overnight bags had been retrieved from the trailer, His Lordship guided the group through the back of the beer garden into the disused movie theatre that would be accommodation for the next two nights.

"Toilets and showers down there, boys. You'll find the lighting's basic unless we turn on the main lights and light up the whole place. I'll leave the lights down there on all night, and there's another switch here beside the door. As you can see we've make up two dozen camp beds. Take your pick, Daphne'll make up the ones that've been used in the morning. Now, on more important matters."

The consensus was that the assortment of luggage items would be best left in a central location where they could be retrieved by the various owners as the need arose. With that done, the party was ushered back into the beer garden.

"I gave it a bit of thought," His Lordship began, "and decided the till you wanted would be better off out here in the beer garden, rather than in the main bar which, as you can see, is pretty crowded."

He gestured towards the doorway that lead into the Dining Room which in turn debouched into the Lounge Bar. From where we were standing it was obvious the population density increased in direct proportion to the proximity to the bar.

"I've stocked the bar out here with just about everything that you're likely to need, but if there's something I've forgotten, just let Yeti know and we'll fix the problem. So."

He gestured towards the bar facilities in a manner that seemed to suggest *the facilities are there, go your hardest*. Predictably, the majority of the party headed straight for the bar in much the same manner as a school of piranha approach a bleeding animal in the Amazonian shallows.

Equally predictably, a smaller dissenting party wanted to investigate the social and sexual possibilities on offer inside the premises. The favoured option seemed to involve exiting through the beer garden entrance, making a left turn and going on along the building to make a grand entrance through the main doorway.

"If you're looking to get into the Lounge Bar, you'd be best off heading down through the Dining Room," I suggested. "You'll find the area down there gets packed on a Friday night."

While it would be reasonable to expect visitors to take on board whatever local knowledge is on offer, the leader of the group in question was a relocated Melbourne grade cricketer and, as has been widely observed, while you can always tell a Victorian, you can't tell him much.

Sandy's version of the next couple of minutes runs as follows:

"We knew you'd arrived because someone spotted the bus and trailer going around the corner. Then Hopalong sighted His Lordship talking to the mob out in the beer garden. No problem, everyone kept on as normal. Then someone said *Hey, look at these bastards* and next thing you know there are these three blokes crawling through the window."

The trio, in other words, having arrived at the main entrance to find the bar packed to the gunwhales and faced with the ignominious possibility of a retreat along the path by which they'd arrived opted for the only available alternative point of entry.

Once the preliminaries were out of the way, the night developed along predictable lines. Introductions were made, acquaintances established or renewed and news exchanged. The exchange of news apprised me of two interesting developments.

First, I learnt of the circumstances under which Mr Ballmer had left his previous employment.

Having established early in his real estate career that people tended to prefer inspecting properties on the weekend and this would have unfortunate ramifications for his playing career, Balls had moved into the rental property management side of things and, being possessed of slightly more get up and go

than the average punter; had built up his employer's rental holdings to the point where he was Number One on the local real estate hit parade.

Such success was hardly going to go unnoticed, and he was soon recruited by a rival firm to build up their portfolio of properties. Some extent of the gentleman's rating among owners of properties he was managing can be gauged by the fact that when Balls jumped ship, so did they.

Predictably, these developments also failed to go unnoticed, and when Balls' initial twelve-month contract was up for re-negotiation, Butler Realty stepped with an offer of, effectively, *twenty per cent on top of whatever they're offering*. Working on the principle that fixed contracts reduced flexibility Mr Butler hadn't gone to the trouble of setting anything in concrete.

Real estate salesmen can rarely be described as *shrinking violets* and much of Butler Realty's success was ascribed to the eye-catching fact that rather than the predictable *Sold by* signs that appear on site whenever a successful sale has been negotiated, Mr Butler advised the world at large of his success through signs featuring a large white tick on a red background over which was superimposed the simple message of *Sold. The Butler Dunit.*

With Balls on board, it wasn't long before rental properties all over the city were sporting signs with a slight variation on the original legend, which now read *Another Rental Vacancy Filled. The Butler Dunit.* In almost every case, however, the individual responsible for filling the vacancy was B. Ballmer, property manager extraordinary of this village.

In the meantime there were other developments on the rental front of which Balls' employer was unaware. The first was the emergence of a new player in the rental market, one that could be appropriately described as Barry Ballmer and Cricketing Associates.

It began simply enough. From the time he'd started in the real estate industry Balls had spotted an occasional property that represented good value as an investment or a rental proposition. There were houses on sites that looked promising as unit developments down the track and could be rented out in the meantime, and a couple of other properties that weren't appropriate for redevelopment but could be relied on to bring in a reasonable income stream. Given the fact that rents on the properties were paying them off, it was hardly surprising to learn Balls was disinclined to pay commission or management fees on the payments and preferred to look after the properties himself.

Once he'd made the transition into property management he was dealing with most of the issues that concerned his property portfolio. When one of his cricket mates came looking for someone to look after a property he'd inherited, Balls added it to his own portfolio, deducting only the expenses incurred along the way. Mates do things like that, and when opportunities came for them to build up their residential empire other properties were added to the list.

Most of the Dipsomaniacs had, in one way or another, ended up with real estate interests that Balls was kind enough to administer for them at the right price.

When a couple of landlords approached him because they preferred not to have signs on the lawn drawing attention to a rental property Balls could see exactly where they were coming from. After all, once he'd finished running around cricket fields he expected to set up an agency in his own right and the fees from property management would be a vital income stream, so he was only jumping the gun by a year or three when he agreed to take them on. That was fine while it lasted, but inevitably someone dropped a hint of Balls' extracurricular activities into The Butler's shell-like ear, and when he learned what was going on Mr Butler was far from pleased.

"Reckoned I'd never work in Townsville real estate again. 'Course that was bullshit, because when I got the bullet the phone was ringing hot with offers to come across to one of the others. Ended up going back to where I was before I went to Butler's and took back everything I'd taken with me when I left them. Plus a few more for interest."

"No hard feelings?" I asked.

"Mate, the only hard feeling was the hard on they got at the prospect of Butler being well and truly shafted. When I'd settled in they had me contacting every one of Butler's remaining rentals clients to see if they were switching over. You'd be surprised how many of them were."

"So you're sticking it to Butler any way you can," I suggested.

"'Knoath," was the response. "Any way I can get at that prick it'll be done."

"If I was to point out that his ex-missus is more than likely in the Lounge Bar as we speak?" I inquired.

"Point me right at her. Has she got a bloke at the moment? No? Then we'll see if there's an opening for a smart lad. Always was a bit of a looker. If you weren't seeing a bit of the daughter I'd be sniffing around there as well."

Here, in other words, was an escape avenue for Jeffrey. I was confident the development would be getting a warm welcome. As we moved into the Lounge Bar I was greeted by Denison's leading dispensers of ladies' fashion. The area around the bar contained the usual suspects, including Jeffrey, Sandy, Hopalong, The Twins and, predictably, Olga. As Balls moved towards Olga, I stopped to chat to Dagwood and Blondie.

"Actually, David," was Blondie's opening remark, "we were hoping we'd catch up with you tonight. We've got a bit of a problem."

"Fire away," I replied. "As the old saying goes, there are no problems. Only solutions."

"It's this *Apprentice Hairdresser of the Year* competition," Dagwood explained. "The major sponsor is one of our best ranges, so when they told us about it we decided to sponsor young Bernelle Butler. We figured we'd get a good write up in the paper and the winner'd be someone from the southeast corner, so it wasn't going to cost us much. Not that the cost was a factor when we made the offer to Bernelle, of course. All we were looking at was the cost of a return air fare and a night's accommodation in Brisbane if she won, and that's no problem. Or so we thought."

"Until she made the short list for the state finalist," I suggested. "More than likely until she took a certain phone call."

"Exactly," Blondie chipped in, "we knew you'd been seeing a bit of her. Now we probably shouldn't be saying anything to you, but this afternoon we got a phone call from Brisbane."

"Which was something to the effect that Bernelle had taken it out?" I suggested. "I thought that the news wasn't supposed to be out till Monday, but there you go. What did they say?"

"Since he's the Queensland distributor for the range, Roger was one of the judges," Blondie went on.

"And was presumably highly impressed."

"He was more than impressed," Dagwood explained. "He reckons there's every possibility that if she comes across in person the way she came across over the phone."

Pity she didn't come across over the past half dozen nights was my unspoken observation on the matter. On the other hand, in ten minutes I'd been presented with neat solutions to two thorny problems.

"She'd be close to a shoe-in for the national title. He was so impressed that he wanted her to fly down on Sunday or Monday so they could have four or five days to work with her before they fly her to Sydney for the national final on Saturday."

"When we signed the entry form," Blondie pointed out, "we'd agreed to meet all her travel and accommodation costs between here and Brisbane. So instead of a plane fare on Friday which we could probably have got fairly cheaply, we're looking at paying the full fare and instead of one night's accommodation we're looking at five or six. That's what Roger was calling to check about. They'd always planned to do something like that when they'd found the state winner..."

"Of course, since they'd expected that the winner would come from down that way so there wouldn't be that much extra expense involved," was my response.

"Precisely," Blondie agreed. "Here's the tricky part. They haven't announced the winner yet. They haven't *actually* decided on the winner. It'll be Bernelle if we can guarantee we'll meet the costs. That was why Roger called us, to check we'd be able to do it. If we say no, we'll end up costing Bernelle the chance of winning the trip to London which is the prize for the national winner."

"There's a big benefit for the state winner as well," Dagwood pointed out. "She'll get her apprenticeship papers transferred to the leading salon in Brisbane till she's finished her time and there's a full wardrobe from the major sponsors that'd be worth a couple of grand at least."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Let me know what you're up for and I'll cover the lot."

"Really?" Blondie replied. "we were hoping you'd maybe be willing to chip in part of the extra cost. It's our business that'll get the publicity out of it, so we wouldn't expect you to pay everything."

It was obviously impossible to point out that someone winning the national title would take care of certain difficult issues on my own front.

"Don't worry about it. Only too happy to help out. Call this guy back first thing tomorrow and let him know you can have her on the plane Monday. I assume there'll need to be a write up for the **Sausage Wrapper**, so that'll need to be done Monday morning after the announcement has been made. Just give me the receipts and I'll reimburse you for the lot. Don't go around trying to look for the cheapest options, either. If it's full fare on Monday or a cheaper fare Tuesday or Wednesday go for Monday. If the choice of accommodation is some backpacker hostel or a five star hotel on Southbank, you go for the five stars. Spending money? You reckon a grand would be enough?"

"So we'll call Roger first thing tomorrow," Dagwood promised, "but really we should..."

"Don't even mention it. If there was a need to fly her Mum down to keep her company I wouldn't be surprised to find out Jeffrey would be only too happy to cover that side of things."

If he wasn't I could more than likely be persuaded. Once that offer had been made the rest of the evening unfolded along predictable lines. When His Lordship indicated the bar was about to close

eskies were stocked and relocated to the movie theatre where the Dipsomaniacs were happy to host members of tomorrow's opposition and any other players who might care to join them.

For my part, once *Time* had been called I was only too happy to call a cab, retreat to the cave and roll the rock across the door. Tomorrow was going to be a long day, and while no amount of beauty sleep was going to turn me into a matinee idol a good eight hours was going to be handy for someone who was going to be standing at the bowler's end for something like fourteen hours over two days.

CRICKET DAY ONE

Predictably I wasn't up with the sparrows on Saturday morning. Having partied until around midnight, it would've been surprising if I had. Around eight hunger pangs were setting in since, as usual, I'd forgotten minor matters such as dinner; and while the quantities of chips I'd snaffled as the evening unwound contained a substantial calories I needed something solid in the system if I was going to make it through six hours on the cricket field. Blotting paper was definitely the order of the day.

After a flying visit to the shower it was a case of into the kitchen, locating a substantial lump of rump, poaching a couple of eggs while the steak was in the fry-pan and de-glazing the pan juices with a tin of mushrooms in butter sauce and a cup of water. Hardly something you'd expect to find in the pages of *Healthy Living* magazine, but then, what parts of my lifestyle were?

There was probably going to be a need to slow down at some point in the future, but provided that point lay on the other side of Sunday evening that was fine with me.

As I attacked the plateful I pondered a couple of days on the dry. It would be easy to move into hibernation mode once the Dipsomaniacs were safely on the highway, and there were no social engagements on the horizon, so I promised myself, barring unforeseen circumstances, I'd be taking things very quiet on Monday and Tuesday. I could even extend the interlude into Wednesday, though I expected the wheels would more than likely fall off at dinner time, given pasta night at the Palace.

Once the cooking implements, plates and other paraphernalia had been consigned to the dishwasher I wandered towards the cricket field. Nine o'clock was too early to expect players to be rolling up, but there were various tasks which could be undertaken while I was waiting. A visit to the shed produced two sets of stumps and a pile of boundary markers, and once preparations had been completed in the middle, I was half way through a lap around the boundary, placing a marker every ten metres when the first couple of vehicles arrived.

Various figures wandered out while I completed my task, and I was on my way to join them when the Dipsomaniacs' bus appeared, closely followed by His Lordship in the Palace truck, packed to the gunwhales with eskies. Arriving at the pitch I was immediately summoned to a hastily convened conference.

"Listen," Brooksy began, "we've got a problem, not a big problem, but it's a pain in the arse."

I glanced at the other members of the huddle, all of whom appeared as nonplussed as I was.

"Got a phone call an hour ago. Rambo and Hammer can't make it. Derailment between Gumlu and Gutha over night and they're expecting the line to stay closed for at least thirty-six hours while they repair the damage, so they're out tomorrow as well."

"So you need to find a couple of subs," I guessed.

"Right on. Fortunately I ran across Zero when I got here."

Zero, the High School's Japanese teacher, was a sports enthusiast who'd thrown himself into the local scene. Not having a baseball team he'd opted for cricket, and had excelled in the field although batting and bowling remained matters of continuing mystery as far as he was concerned.

"He came out to watch the morning's play. He's playing for the Crustaceans in Mackay, but if we field first, he can stay until the bus leaves. We won't lose anything in the field while he's here and if we field first he won't be needed to bat later today."

"So we need at least one more sub," Denison vice-captain Big Al Huxley pointed out. "Two or three would be better..."

"We need to have them in place before the game starts," Brooksy pointed out. "Under normal circumstances we could just run blokes on and off, but when I was talking to them last night the blokes from the Dipsos have their own take on the playing conditions."

"So you need to exchange team lists before the toss," I pointed out.

"Right again. Once Zero pisses off we can run subs on and off but we need someone else to fill in the gap in the batting order. So we need someone to fill in, and we need him quick."

I glanced across towards the car park.

"What about His Lordship?" I suggested. "He's supposed to have been an all-round athlete in his day."

Sorting that out couldn't be done where we were so we adjourned to the pavilion. His Lordship had been anticipating a leisurely day dispensing grog and listening to the races. Suggestions he might fill in the space in the batting order were countered by pointing out someone had to look after the beer truck, and much as he'd love to have a run, the need to find someone reliable to look after the grog meant that he'd have to decline.

I glanced across towards *The Crossroads* and noted an approaching scoffer.

"What about Hopalong? I mean you'd have to pay him for his time, but he's always on the look out for a bit of pocket money. Want me to ask?"

His Lordship nodded, and I set off to negotiate. It wasn't a difficult task, and I pointed out that the back of the truck would be a suitable vantage point to watch the day's play.

"In any case," I pointed out, "doing something during the day will give you something to occupy your mind while you're waiting to hear from Liz."

Having solved that problem I joined Balls, Mr and Mrs Brooks and the captain of the Dipsomaniacs so negotiations concerning playing conditions could be carried out before the toss. Brooksy's better half's position as scorer explained her presence. The easiest option would have been to follow standard fifty-over one-day format, but after a visit to Dunk Island the Dipsomaniacs realized the benefits of slight tweaks to the regular rules.

"First things first," I began, reasoning that my role as umpire carried with it the role of chair of the group discussing playing conditions. "Drinks break every ten overs, right? Drinks off the field and we keep the break to ten minutes. Agreed?"

There was unanimous endorsement although His Lordship would have preferred more frequent intermissions.

"So we've got twelve on each side. Eleven on the park at any one time, right? Bat eleven?"

This was the Dipsomaniacs' preferred option, since Bryan *Ankles* Angstrom was notorious for his ineptitude with the willow. The consensus was that Ankles made your average tail-enders look like Don Bradman and only carried a bat because he thought it was part of the uniform.

"Naah," Brooksy cut in. "Stuff it. Bat twelve. We're the home team, and besides I want to see Zero bat." The suggestion did not go down over-well.

"Listen," Brooksy pointed out, "we've had two blokes who work for the railways called out for a derailment on the line north of here. They'll be out for both days, which means that we needed to find two subs in a hurry. Zero is the Japanese teacher at the High School. Turns up to watch and have a couple of beers every Saturday and doesn't mind running around in the field if someone needs a sub for a couple of minutes. Good bloke."

"So?" Balls was unconvinced. "Bat eleven. He can still have a run around. Nothing to stop that."

"If we bat eleven that gives him an excuse not to bat. If it's part of the playing conditions he'll have to. He's been coming to the cricket for a year and a half and no one's seen the little bugger bat. *That's* why I want to bat twelve."

Since the explanation suggested little benefit to the Denison side the variation to the preferred playing conditions was agreed to.

"Batsmen retire at the end of the over once they've passed fifty," I went on. "Retired bats can come back at the end of the innings if there are overs left."

Again there were nods all round.

"With the bowlers, maximum of eight overs, minimum of two for everyone bar the wicket-keeper and one other non-bowler. Maximum of four overs in a spell and no one gets a second spell until ten blokes have bowled. Now do we have to specify the non-bowlers? Makes it easier for the scorer."

"That'll be Pretty Boy," Balls interjected. "Joel Francis, he'll be on the batting list, right Nuts?" His opening partner, Peter Nuttall, captain of the Dipsomaniacs, agreed. His brother Paul, who rejoiced in the nickname of *Psycho* was a contender for new ball duties.

"Well, we *could* bowl him at a pinch," Nuts went on. Pretty Boy, according to popular mythology, had cultivated a non-bowling role to avoid overexertion at net practice. It was generally believed that he possessed a remarkable inability to land a cricket ball within the confines of the practice enclosure.

"Your non-bowler?" I turned to Brooksy. "Care to nominate him now, or wait till later?"

"We'll probably bowl eleven," Brooksy responded. "As you can understand, we'd love to give Zero a bowl. Just for one over, to see how he goes. Might give him a second, assuming underarm is OK?"

Zero's background meant that while he had difficulty in bowling in the conventional manner he could deliver a ball using a softball technique. I suspected this wasn't quite what Balls and Nuts understood as *underarm*. The proposal was met with grudging approval.

"Nothing else?" I asked. "If we're all cool there I guess it's just a matter of a toss to get things rolling."

Prior experience with the Dipsomaniacs indicated their preference was to bowl first, and there had been occasions where a gentleman's agreement rendered the toss unnecessary. Brooksy, Nuts and

Balls had conducted a lengthy discussion the previous evening and I wouldn't have been surprised if the toss was deemed unnecessary.

"Got a coin?" Brooksy inquired. "I left my wallet in the car."

From their response it seemed Balls and Nuts felt the request breached conclusions that may or may not have been reached the night before. Reaching into my pocket I located a fifty-cent piece.

"Your call," Brooksy intimated to Nuts, producing a response of *Tails*. The coin looped through the air, spinning vigorously and came to earth about three metres away. I moved over to examine the result.

"It's a head," I remarked. "Mick?"

"We'll bowl," was the response. Again the reaction suggested further agreements had been breached. As the pair of Dipsos moved off to prepare themselves for battle I noted signs of vigorous warming up by the Denison side in the practice nets beside the amenities block.

"Looks like they're getting serious," I remarked to Mr Brooks as we wandered back to the pavilion.

"Fucking oath we're serious," was the response. "These pricks aren't going to know what hit them. Got 'em on about three fronts already, and there's plenty more where that came from. Craven and Muscles haven't had a drink all week."

By the look of them Denison's new ball combination were firing on all cylinders. Russell *Muscles* Lindsay looked like he was operating off thirty metres and Danny Craven wasn't far behind him as a delivery from Muscles nearly took the batsman's head off.

Brooksy was rolling his arm over as we walked, a gesture apparently greeted with relief by the batsmen in the nets who appeared to think further warming up was unnecessary and moved away from the firing line. Over the rest of the walk I learned last night's negotiations had produced an expectation that all their preferred playing conditions would operate to the Dipsomaniacs' advantage.

"I think that we've got right up their noses. No way it'll be stopping there," he added as he headed off to don the wicket-keeping gear. "We'll be knocking fifteen different bells out of the bastards. By the way, make sure you've got that index finger oiled and ready for use. I have a feeling it'll be seeing a bit of action."

Ten minutes later we were on the paddock with Muscles charging in off the long run, left arm over the wicket pushing the ball across the right hand batsman and jaggling the odd delivery back off the seam. It might have been the lack of a decent warmup, but Balls, who faced the first delivery poked, prodded, was comprehensibly beaten four balls out of six and was nearly cut in half by the fifth ball of a maiden over. Having managed to connect with one out of six Balls was left scratching his head as the Denison side jogged into position for the second over.

"Fuck me, Herston," was his comment as I reached the bowler's end for the start of the second over. "What'd you bastards feed that prick on?"

"Dunno. Maybe it's what he's not been fed. They tell me he's been off the grog all week."

"In that case," Balls observed, "I'd hate to see the bastard with a hangover. If he's bowling that way on the dry I'd hate to be facing him when he's got a sore head."

For intensity the second over wasn't far behind its predecessor: Nuts managed a streaky two through the slips off the third ball. Balls was far from impressed by the call for the second, having decided the best way to face Muscles was to locate yourself at the other end. The rest of the over produced air swings, as did the third, another Muscles maiden. Muscles pulled up at the end of his follow through after the fifth ball had produced yet another *play and a miss*.

"Stuff me," he remarked, "how many bats does this bastard want?"

Balls stared back down the track. You could almost see the glint of fire in the eye.

"Dunno," was his response. "How many you going to give me?"

Nuts was ducking and weaving his way through the next over when a voice chimed in from the sideline. *Hit him in the nuts!* There was a ripple of laughter; and since local spectators were thin on the ground the most likely source was from within the ranks of the Dipsomaniacs.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"His brother," Balls replied. "If he does, wait and see what happens."

A further play and miss produced a repeat of the call and when the penultimate ball of the over had the same result, the voice from the boundary changed it's message.

Not there, was the new version following a ball that had gone close to decapitating the batsman. Not his head. It's solid rock. Hit him in the nuts. Craven took the advice. The final ball cannoned into the batsman's midriff, hitting him *between wind and water*. *Oh dear*, came the voice. *It's hit him in the groin.*

After an enquiry regarding the batsman's welfare I wandered back to hand Craven his cap.

"We're in for a bit of fun now," Balls observed. "Watch what happens next."

It took a couple of minutes for Nuts to regain his composure, and, once he had, Muscles was charging in to begin the fifth over. At no wicket for two after four overs, a run rate of 0.5 meant it was time for action. Balls got enough bat on the first to steer it wide of third slip and set off for a single.

"Watch this," was his instruction as Muscles charged in again. I did, and followed the trajectory of the pill as it disappeared over mid-wicket. I raised my arms to signal the six. "See? When he's batting like a hairy goat you want him to get hit in the nuts. Fires him up."

That was a fair summary of the situation as Nuts despatched the rest of the over through the same area. With a single, three sixes and two fours off the over, Muscles' figures were copping a pounding as the score advanced rapidly from none for two to none for twenty-nine.

His partner's form reversal seemed to have worked some magic on Balls' attitude and while he didn't manage to get the ball over the boundary that was more a result of the athletic fielding of a certain Japanese teacher than lack of intent from the batsman, three twos and a single off the over took the score to thirty-six after six.

Having had the short-pitched deliveries in his previous over despatched through cow corner, Muscles' fourth over was much fuller in length with the fourth ball producing a three through mid off. The three put Nuts at the striker's end. Most deliveries, going across the right hander had been played out into

the arc between gully and mid off and the three had come from a handy bit of placement and a smidgeon more bat on ball.

Since Nuts had been given a good look from the non-striker's end, once he was on strike Muscles worked a variation, getting the fifth ball to jag back off the seam, thudding into the pads. The fielding side went up for the appeal and I took a long look before deciding that the ball was more than likely just going down the leg side.

"Not out," was the verdict, and while it didn't go down that well the delivery proved Nuts' undoing. The next ball looked to be following the same path, but failed to jag, producing an outside edge that was gleefully accepted by Big Al at second slip. Seven overs gone, one for thirty-nine. As Nuts made his way back to the pavilion I made my way over to the inevitable huddle to return the bowler's cap. As I arrived Brooksy looked over his shoulder.

"You can tell your mate Balls," he instructed, "that Zero's coming on to bowl underarm. Softball style."

I nodded. It seemed like a smart move. With three overs till drinks, a new batsman at the crease and the different mode of delivery, meant two overs from Zero might go past relatively cheaply, and with those two gone Brooksy would've been clear to avoid bowling someone else.

Brooksy's daughter had been a member of the District Schools' Softball team, which trained at the other end of the oval from my cricket squad and Zero had been called in to assist with the coaching. Before the girls headed off to their trials we'd built up a tradition of giving them a game against the cricket boys, and, given the slightly different skill sets involved pitching had been a problem until Zero arrived on the scene. Once he did, assigning him the pitching duties solved that issue.

Coincidentally, after the first such encounter we had the unprecedented experience of, first, having the Denison girls going through the trials without a home run scored against them (probably nothing to do with the Zero factor) while walloping three or four a game themselves (which probably did).

The final selection game at the trials was traditionally a Possibles versus Probables affair, with the most likely candidates for each position lined up against each other; but this time they opted for a Denison versus the best of the rest affair, which proved even more one-sided than the preceding games and they'd ended up selecting the Denison team *holus bolus* as the Zone side, which had then gone undefeated through the Regional trials, providing three-quarters of that year's NQ team.

Given that precedent the boys and Zero versus the softball girls went straight into annual event status, though subsequent attempts failed to repeat the first year's success. As a result, I knew what to expect from Zero in the bowling department.

Balls wasn't entirely happy about the prospect when I informed him about the impending change. "What, you mean lawn bowls Trevor Chappell style?"

"Not exactly. You can probably expect a full toss somewhere between the top of your pads and half way up your chest. You know, that sort of area where you'd call a *strike* in baseball or softball."

"Run up?"

"Zilch. Standing start, couple of twirls of the arm to get some momentum going and *whammo!* Be about the same speed as your average medium pacer. That's about all I can tell you."

The arrival of the incoming batsman, who didn't exactly revel in the moniker of *Pretty Boy* but didn't have much choice in the matter broke up the impromptu conference, and as Balls checked his guard, Zero handed me his baseball cap.

"This'll be interesting," I remarked.

The first three got to the other end a little under knee height about a foot outside off stump. Balls got an edge to the third, and the result was a single to third man. Given the *Strike zone* concept the stumps weren't exactly an endangered species, and since the pitching distance on a softball diamond is five or six metres less than the length of a cricket pitch the relative lack of height probably wasn't surprising.

After another *play and a miss* at the other end, Zero seemed less than happy with the height and *Pretty Boy* seemed less than impressed by the concept. After the fourth delivery I decided a little assistance for all concerned was needed.

"Listen, Zero, you've been bowling from way back. You'd be better off bowling from up *here*." I pointed to the popping crease, and suggested if he placed his front foot right on the crease he'd be as close to the regulation pitching distance as the rules of cricket allowed. Balls watched with interest. I called both batsmen to a quick mid-pitch conference. Brooksy decided to invite himself as well and waved Zero into the huddle for good measure.

"We've got a situation where Zero's sending the ball down over a distance about five metres longer than he's used to, which probably accounts for the low full tosses. Looking at twenty metres along the pitch, if we take the crease at each end out of the equation, you're down to about eighteen. On a softball diamond you're looking at fourteen, so there's still going to be a bit of a difference. So if you're worried about the height you could try batting out of your crease."

While the advice wasn't strictly within the umpire's job description, I could see difficulties on the horizon if issues weren't addressed.

"If we bat out of the crease," Balls pointed out, "we're going to risk being stumped."

"True," I turned to Brooksy. "You got a problem with standing back? Say about two metres? Seems like the best way around the different distances. Since you're probably looking at cross bat shots, Brooksy, don't go stacking the leg side field. Three in the arc between square leg and mid on sounds fair to me. Four? Well, I guess that'd be OK if the fourth guy's a boundary rider..."

It seemed a reasonable compromise, and the next delivery went through higher and *Pretty Boy* managed to connect. Predictably, the ball went straight to mid-wicket, where it was fielded by His Lordship.

The form reversal continued with what should have been the final ball of the over; which got to *Pretty Boy* earlier than he expected, resulting in a bunt down to mid on, but with unusual circumstances, mid-pitch conferences and other factors somewhere in the preceding five deliveries I'd neglected to click over the counter and the result was a seven-ball over.

You wouldn't need to be Einstein or a devout devotee of Murphy's Law to figure out what came next. The additional delivery went through slightly higher and a top edge looped into the air before a circling Brooksy accepted the catch. Two for forty after nine overs.

Pretty Boy was less than impressed by the dismissal and as *Ming* Menzies arrived at the crease I noted that a bat, a pair of batting gloves and a pair of pads were being liberally distributed around the pavilion, and that was *before* he'd had a look at the score book.

Coming on as second change, Mark Silver, better known as *Aravinda* gave away two singles and another over from Zero produced a two to Ming, a single to change the strike and a couple of dots faced by Balls before I indicated it was time for a break.

I'd given the drinks breaks a fair bit of thought over the preceding day or so. After a week of big nights with another looming on the horizon, since I'd be looking after the bowlers' end umpiring for the full hundred, I decided to limit myself to a beer or two over lunch.

So, what was I going to do over the next ten minutes? I'd thought of staying in the middle, but dismissed the idea since it'd draw attention to the fact I wasn't drinking, and could also be seen as putting undue pressure on the players.

As we walked off, I thought I might get away with assisting Hopalong behind the bar; but discovered, as we reached the pavilion, things in that department were under control. Best, I decided, to approach things the way I would if it was a school-kids' match. Wander over to the score book, check the details, have a bit of a chat and keep one eye on the clock on the mobile phone.

The score book the expected work of art since Heather Brooks had filled in the details using a variety of coloured pencils to record ball-by-ball details. Heather, as a softball player had been impressed by Zero's performance with the ball, and was complimenting him as she explained the finer points of the bowling analysis to him.

Her husband joined us at the point where Heather was concluding, "So I think under the circumstances, you've done very well, Hira."

"Fuckin' oath," was the Denison captain's assessment. "You're on for at least one more, Zero. We're down one of our bowlers with Rambo not here, but another one same as the first two will go down very well. Those bastards might not agree, but stuff 'em. That's four-nil, I think. You want to let them know, Herston? Nice little coaching tip, by the way. Zero, from here on there's no reason why you can't roll your arm around on a Saturday. Now about this batting caper..."

Frozen out of the conversation, I wandered over to the Dipsomaniacs bearing news that wasn't going to go down well. I was surprised by the relative lack of objections, which seemed to have something to do with Pretty Boy's reaction to his dismissal.

Pretty Boy was, when the news had been imparted, vehement in his assessment of the situation. His colleagues, on the other hand, were inclined to take a more favourable view, even after the irregularity in the ball count had been belaboured at some length by the disgruntled batsman.

"Listen, Pretty Boy," *Psycho* Nuttall responded, "Balls and Ming can fucking bat. So can The Godfather, J.C. and Rum & Coke for that matter. Just because you can't drop a fucking waist high full toss over mid-wicket without stuffing it up doesn't mean every other bastard can't. A twelve-year-old school-kid could've tonked that ball. Not fucking good enough."

He turned towards his brother.

"Told you this prick shouldn't be batting three. Far as I'm concerned I hope the little bloke's still on when I get in. Not putting you blokes down, but if they bring him back on when I get in I'll be quite happy. Never hit six sixes in an over before. There's a first time for everything."

"It's something that's probably going to have to wait a bit," I pointed out. "Zero's only here until it's time for him to piss off to play Rugby with the Crustaceans, so this over might be his last. Depends on Brooksy and when he has to piss off, but in any case that's about ten minutes since we came off."

Since Balls and Ming had a little to finish in the bottom of a bottle the Denison side, in line with the long-standing etiquette of the game, hit the paddock first, and as I made my way towards the middle I passed Brooksy and Zero in the middle of a serious tactical discussion. Psycho's assessment of the tactical situation had obviously reached Brooksy's ears.

"So, Zero, you put the ball out *there*. Forget the stuff about the strike zone that you picked up from softball and baseball. Put it out there, and if you can work it so that the ball bounces just in front of 'em, so much the better."

"If I bowl there," Zero pointed out, "I don't get them out. I should aim for the wicket, I think?"

"That's why we don't do that *three strikes and you're out* thing in this game. You bowl and it's their job to hit it and score runs. Yeah, it's nice to get the bastards out, but you don't just do it by hitting the stumps. You got that first wicket because he made a mistake. You put the ball where I want it, I set the field the right way and with a bit of luck they make a mistake and you get another wicket."

As Balls and Ming made their way back I interrupted the conference before Zero could hand me his cap.

"Sorry, Mick," I interposed. "No way you're getting away with bowling Zero both sides of the drinks break. I presume Aravinda's coming on this end."

There had been a concerted attempt at a spot of skulduggery since Aravinda had been despatched to deep cow corner, and there was a delay while arrangements were rearranged.

Over eleven produced three dots and three singles, and Zero returned to the bowling crease while Brooksy went about setting the field, taking a great care with the leg side. Muscles was despatched on *boundary rider* duties just forward of square leg while his opening partner was pushed back to a wide deep mid on. Big Al moved from slip to short mid-wicket and the rest of the fielding side were arranged in an arc on the off side.

"You said no more than three in front of square on the leg side, Herston," Brooksy inquired. "How's that arrangement? Fair?"

I nodded, Ming took guard on middle and off and I signalled that we were ready for the resumption of play.

It's hard to decide whether it was good luck or good management, but Zero managed to deliver six out of six as low full tosses about two feet outside the off stump. There wasn't a lot Ming could do with them apart from get his front foot across and play the ball away on the off side. He got one through the cordon off the fourth ball, and Balls repeated the stroke off the last delivery.

Psycho's assessment of the situation was obvious to all and sundry.

Aravinda came on for his third, producing a three through mid-wicket and a two to Ming before Brooksy signalled to Zero that his presence was required at the bowlers' end. As a couple of mid-wicket conferences convened, Psycho went about ensuring everybody in the neighbourhood was aware of his take on the situation.

The batting conference broke up while Brooksy and Zero were still engaged in deep consultation. As Ming reached the non-striker's end Psycho chipped in.

"Toonka! Go Balls! Hit the little prick outta the park!"

"Bloody easy for his to say from where he's sitting," Ming observed.

"True," I replied. "Puts a whole new dimension to the term *psycho-babble*, doesn't it?"

"Knoath. It's not like he's likely to be asked to do what he reckons we should be doing."

"Of course, we could always do something to put him *into* that position."

"Not on your life," Ming retorted. "Keep that frozen fickle finger of fate firmly in the pocket or wherever you store it when it's not required, thank you hairy crutch."

At that point the Brooks-Zero huddle broke up and we started the fateful thirteenth over. Balls obviously decided to ignore acerbic pointers from the pavilion and adopt a conventional approach to issues raised by Zero's unorthodox action and worked the first ball away into the covers for a single.

As Ming took guard I noticed a signal from Mr Brooks that seemed to suggest the next delivery should be around a good length about a foot outside off stump, which is where it duly landed, to be worked away through the off side for another single.

"Not there," came a familiar voice from beyond the boundary. "Hit that shit."

"Up your arse, Psycho," was the mumbled response from Mr Menzies. "Like to see you do much better your prick."

Brooksy was signalling again. From what I could make out he was calling for more of the same, and the result was a single into the covers.

"Go the toonk," was the predictable assessment. "Hit that shit."

Brooksy's signal changed. The line requested seemed unchanged, but he seemed to be advocating a fuller delivery, which was what ensued, with an air swing from Ming the result.

"Hit the shit. Hoick 'im into next week."

Brooksy signalled for more of the same, and there was a replay of the previous delivery. Same result and the same predictable assessment from the boundary. Ming took guard again and Brooksy's right glove bounced upwards and moved slightly in towards the stumps. The last ball of the over came through a little higher on a line closer to the batsman's body.

"That's outta," came the voice from the boundary as Ming unwound a heave towards mid-wicket.

"Here," it went on as Ming's bat came through.

Unfortunately the prediction was a little too close to the money. A top edge looped out to the short mid-wicket where Big Al took a comfortable catch.

"I think," I suggested to Balls as I handed Zero his baseball cap, "that you might find Psycho making himself scarce for the next half hour or so."

Ming was rather large and was not known to possess a mild-mannered temperament.

"No way," Balls retorted. "It'll be like the scenes you see in those wildlife documentaries. You know, the ones where those big bastards with the antlers on their heads lock horns and start to wrestle?"

"Sure," I replied.

"It'll be something like that. Not much noise, but little niggles running right through the afternoon, more than likely. Not much noise but *niggle, niggle, niggle*."

Which seemed to be the way it went. There was no explosion as Ming arrived on the sideline, and a slight realignment in the seating arrangement the absence of audible *Psycho-babble* from the sideline suggested there could well be some lower volume to-ing and fro-ing nearby.

Having reclaimed his cap, Zero had headed towards Brooksy, informing him that time for him to head off was nigh.

"If you wouldn't mind hanging on about five minutes, we need to get a sub for you. I mentioned that to the Warbler when we came off for drinks, and he's headed home to get his whites. Should be back shortly," as he glanced towards the road out of town. "That looks very much like his wagon headed this way. If that white Tarago turns in here, you're right to go. By the way, next cricket season you're playing for my mob, even if I have to pay your rego. Haven't had so much fun in years."

As the white Tarago made its way towards the car park Zero headed off. Play was held up while The Warbler made his way on and Brooksy made adjustments to the field. Since the Warbler is no spring chicken, a direct slot into Zero's boundary rider role was out of the question, and the field setting needed substantial rejigging.

Incoming batsman, Dave Godfrey, *The Godfather* was the first of three almost inseparable teachers. They'd been mates since high school, gone to University together, and played Rugby with a well-known religious affiliated club as a useful Reserve Grade centre-five-eighth combination. Two taught at a Catholic high school, while the third worked at the neighbouring primary school. Two of them had gone so far as to marry twins while Primary dude had taken up with their cousin without having set the relationship in concrete.

I'd first met them on a trip to Dunk Island as the Dipsos' umpire. That status hadn't prevented after-hours socializing, and we were sitting beside the pool in the small hours when I remarked on the fact I'd rarely sighted any of them without the other two close by.

This continuous proximity reminded me of D'Artagnan's offsiders in the Palace kitchen, and I'd remarked on the fact these three reminded me of the Three Musketeers but the label had already been consigned to Athos, Porthos and D'Aramis in downtown Denison.

"You could go with The Trinity," Balls had pointed out from an adjacent deck chair. "Didn't we tell you they're all Micks? Micks are big on the Trinity."

"So who are they?" I asked.

"The big feller," Balls explained, "is Dave Godfrey. Bloke beside him on the left is Timmy Cochrane and the other fella's Jason Carter. Got it figured yet? What they call themselves?"

"Big fella's surname is Godfrey? That bloke's initials are J.C. Well that's got to be the Father and The Son. Guess the other bloke's got to be the Holy Spirit."

"True," That's why he calls himself Rum & Coke."

The Godfather made his way to the non-striker's end while Balls remarked his guard and Brooksy continued to adjust the field. The final over of Aravinda's spell proved uneventful. Balls worked the first forward of square for a single, The Godfather blocked the second and drove the third through the covers for a couple, played the fourth back down the track, nudged the fifth down through the gully and Balls played the final ball out on the off side.

At 3 for 63 after fifteen overs that was, I guess, par for the course. Less than a third of the innings gone, three top order batsmen back in the shed, consolidation obviously needed.

I noted with interest that the ball was headed towards Greg *Typhoon* Tyson, another of my schoolboy protégés who'd gone close to State selection when he was a little tacker, slight in build and liable to be blown backwards in a strong breeze before the growth spurt set in.

Once it had done its thing, Typhoon stood six-four on the old scale and about two and a half pick handles across the shoulders.

"Another quickie?" was a fairly predictable question from the non-striking Balls.

"Spinner, believe it or not," I replied. "Wouldn't guess it from the looks, eh?"

The twelve-year-old Typhoon may have lacked the physical wherewithal to hurl down thunderbolts but had developed into a left arm spinner with a remarkable ability to land the ball on a sixpence and to vary the location of the coin.

As a kid he'd had a charming habit of talking to himself, describing the forthcoming delivery with an uncanny degree of accuracy. I'd had plenty of opportunities to observe that little quirk since he regularly managed to deceive batsmen and I found it best to stay away from square leg when he was bowling, leaving the rival coach with the responsibility of adjudicating appeals for a stumping.

We'd had three years from the time I'd sighted him as a Year Five kid, by the end of which he'd developed his stock ball into a flighted turner delivered on a nagging line and length, developed an arm ball few batsmen could pick and added a Chinaman that wasn't quite as accurate but delivered a surprisingly high percentage of wickets when he decided to send one down.

A spell of medium pace as he started to fill out had been enough to convince him spin was where it was at, and at six-four he didn't have to loop the ball much to maintain a trajectory above most batsmen's eye-line. He'd also added a couple of mean darts, one that turned and one that didn't, to the repertoire, and had enjoyed a fairly successful couple of seasons playing Third Grade in Brisbane while he finished his Commerce degree and had been lured back to Denison by a local Rugby-mad accountant who thought he'd be useful in the Crustaceans' line-out.

Unfortunately, Typhoon proved unable to jump and soon developed a strong dislike for finding himself on the bottom layer of the ruck or maul, which explained why he was coming on to bowl rather than heading off to the footy with the Crustaceans.

I was fairly sure how the next few overs would pan out. Typhoon would keep it tight at one end, and Brooksy would use the other end to get through the rest of the bowling line up two overs at a time so he could get the better bowlers back to finish eight-over spells.

Typhoon's first over would have been a maiden but a misfield gave The Godfather a single and both batsmen the opportunity to get a good look at his stock ball from both ends. All six landed around the same spot and turned sharply enough away from the right hander to demand respect.

As expected, Brooksy started working his way through the rest of the bowling order, calling His Lordship into the attack presumably, since as an unknown commodity in this environment his overs might best be disposed of while the batsmen were being kept quiet rather than down the track when they were well set and in shot playing mode.

"Big hoo-er, ain't he?" The Godfather remarked with a nod towards the receding Typhoon as I reached the other end for the new over. Brooksy was involved in reshaping the field to a standard *Dunno what this bloke bowls so play it safe* field. I nodded. "So why doesn't he bowl fast?" was a fairly predictable question under the circumstances as Brooksy impersonated a traffic cop at the other end.

"Had a go in the Under 16s," I replied. "Got carted. That sort of size is OK, I guess, but as far as anyone can work out he hasn't got the right muscle fibre."

"Heart muscle?"

"Nope, he's got a ton of that. Can run all day, but hopeless if he tries to sprint. Doesn't have that fast twitch muscle fibre you get in West Indian sprinters and quickies. Can't jump, either," and I went onto a brief description of a brief career in the line-out between deliveries from His Lordship that were met with a mixture of respect (#s 3 and 5) and outright contempt (the other four legal deliveries which were despatched to the boundary).

With a couple of wides thrown in it wasn't as expensive as Nuts' onslaught against Muscles, but 18 would've been too many for most people's liking.

So we were in for an interesting time when Typhoon loomed into view for his second over. The first turned in much the same way as the previous six, and The Godfather, having seemingly sorted out what was what, worked the second away for a single. Balls treated the third with respect, but then, having sorted matters out as well, danced down the track to the fourth, lofting it back over the bowler's head for four.

At this point, out of ten deliveries, Typhoon's variations had been noticeably absent, but when Balls tried a repeat off the next ball he found himself stumped, having completely failed to connect with what I strongly suspected had been one of a certain ex-twelve-year-old's *little Chinese fellers*. I had the chance to verify my suspicion as Balls disappeared into the distance and J.C. arrived at the crease, playing the final delivery back down the pitch.

His Lordship's second over followed the same pattern as the first, with a couple more wides, a brace of fours, a massive hoick by The Godfather that produced the fourth six of the innings, a bye and a single that meant The Godfather would've been on strike for Typhoon's fourth over had Brooksy

decided to go down that track. Instead, he had the ball going out to Peter *Sunset* Westaway, who obliged by keeping things relatively quiet.

Three twos, two singles and a dot were a welcome change from the preceding carnage, and with twenty gone we adjourned for drinks with the score on 4 for 117 - a decent run rate but with seven wickets in hand and thirty overs to go someone was obviously going to need to stick around.

Unlike the other fourteen blokes making their way off the field I didn't have an urgent appointment with the drinks truck, so I made my way to the score book and took a casual glance. Brooksy, evidently working on the principle that diplomacy on the domestic front was a worthwhile exercise before after-hours factors came into play, did the same.

"Bit of a master stroke with Zero," I remarked after I'd spotted his figures in the bowling analysis. "Four overs, two for nine. Rather handy Pity you let him go o the Rugby..."

"Well," Brooksy replied, with unusual self-deprecation, "it was a bit of luck, really. The idea was to see if we could slip in a couple of *non-bowler* overs before they'd had a chance to get themselves set."

"Any particular reason?"

"Seen him in action with the cricket boys against the softball girls. Underarm, different angle. Figured we'd get through one over before they got used to the idea. Even if he really got tonked in the second one, wouldn't be too much worse than two overs from the *Scum Dog*."

Peter *Scum Dog* Hewitt was regarded as the most accurate bowler in the local competition due to his uncanny ability to search out the middle of the bat. A *Scum Dog* over was a rare occurrence at the best of times, and when one did happen it was more than likely to be extended due to the difficulty of locating lost cricket balls.

"So now it looks like you won't need to bowl him at all. Also means you've got a bit of leeway if they get onto one of the other blokes. Who's going to get the full eight?"

"Figure it out yourself. Muscles, Craven, Aravinda and Typhoon all get another four. 'Course it'd be different if we had Rambo here. He'd be another four; but he isn't so stiff shit. Four out of *Sunset* and Big Al, maybe. See how it goes. Get eleven wickets and we won't have to worry about it at all."

While Brooksy took delivery of a beer and headed off to consult with the rest of the Denison side I noted the crowd around the beer truck had dissipated and sidled across to see how things were going on that front. His Lordship had been helping Hopalong dispense the chilled articles, and had turned his attention to one of them as I moseyed up to the truck.

"Been a while since you rolled your arm over, mate?" mightn't have been the most diplomatic opening gambit, but was, I thought appropriate under the circumstances.

"Not since High School. Might be a while until I do it again, too. Be interesting to see how I pull up in the morning. Muscles that haven't been used for years and all that."

"Still, I guess, you're not likely to be complaining too much as long as they keep sucking piss the way they're going." The incoming cash flow into His Lordship's bottom line would, I suspected, be sufficient to relieve any muscular discomfort.

"Can they keep it up? Cassidy tells me they've been on it like it's going out of style since we started." A nod from Hopalong verified the story.

"You might find them slowing down after lunch. You can blame Brooksy if that happens. If they'd been bowling first, which was what they wanted to happen, you wouldn't have had this rush at all, would you? There are blokes who don't usually get to spend too much time at the crease who could need to ease up a bit if they're going to get through the fifty overs. Couple of the quickies'll need to be semi-sober to bowl in that hour up to stumps tonight too. They'll keep on going after stumps. Might see the last of 'em fall into bed about three..."

A moving vehicle on the access road caught my eye, and as I glanced that way His Lordship did likewise. The vehicle was The Duchess's preferred chariot, hardly surprising since she'd have been due within the next half hour to coordinate lunchtime arrangements. The car came to a halt and a minute or so later The Duchess had joined us.

"Bit early," I suggested. "Shouldn't take that long to crank up the barbie and all that. Told you the facilities were going to be adequate. Not like we're talking the average back yard barbie here."

"Darling, I *know*, but I thought I'd better come out just that little bit early to make sure that there wasn't anything that we need to bring from the pub."

"Well, if you'd care to step this way, I can show you around. I'm sure the fellas won't mind if we're a minute or two late going back on." I was quietly proud of the facilities we'd installed at the ground, though this had been the first opportunity to do the guided tour bit.

"First stop the barbie. Should be adequate. Being electric it'll take a couple of minutes to heat up, but there you go. Don't have to worry about the gas bottle being full, anyway."

"I know. Margaret was in for lunch during the week and..."

The technological side of the design and redevelopment of the complex had been handed to Gilhooley, and I suspected The Iron Maiden had been sceptical of the results.

"She was saying practically none of Gilhooley's little inventions ever seem to work as advertised. You can't blame a girl for wanting to check. The boys've got the pub barbeque in Bryan's ute just to be on the safe side."

"Preparation and serving area here and here," I went on. "Should be enough space, judging by what I've seen around school carnivals. Only need to feed thirty, thirty-five here, but I reckon you could do up to sixty or so provided they weren't all looking to eat at the same time. Might be a problem then..."

"No. You might be right even then. I'll just call the boys and tell them they won't need tables or any of that stuff, so they can come straight out."

As she headed off to make the relevant calls I checked the time and indicated we'd better be making our way back onto the paddock.

Brooksy's consultations had sorted out the next bit of the bowling order as I found Paul *The Duck* Drake handing me his cap and stepping out his run up as the fielders made their way to prearranged positions.

The Duck wasn't a bowler likely to strike fear into a batsman's heart, operating not much over half-rat power; and a four and a two to J.C. was a relatively lenient toll. Brooksy obviously worked on the principle of getting one of Paul's overs out of the way before the batsmen got set again.

That over had, however, provided a sighter, since Sunset's second went for three singles, a brace of twos and a boundary four. The Duck's second yielded three boundaries and a two to The Godfather, taking his total to 48 and posing an interesting conundrum.

The playing conditions indicated retirement at the end of the over in which the batsman passes fifty, so if he continued to take full toll of what was on offer, two balls would see him off. As the ball camey back from the boundary Psycho's voice boomed out again after a lengthy absence from proceedings.

"Forty-eight, big feller. Way to go. Hit the shit!" His team mate, however, declined the advice, taking the single that would deliver him the bowling for the next over and calling a mid-pitch conference to ensure that was the case. J.C. duly obliged by despatching the final delivery across the boundary.

Having used Typhoon as a foil to His Lordship earlier and with two Typhoon overs up his sleeve until everybody else had rolled their arm over it came as no surprise to see the left-arm twerker back into the attack for the over in which The Godfather was almost certain to depart. While he could have played out a maiden and taken his chances with whoever came on next, it was reasonably certain he wasn't going to take things down that path, so the approach Typhoon was going to take was a matter of considerable interest.

Along with his cap I'd been expecting an *over the wicket* comment from the lad, and had been just about to comment along those lines when I was informed that he *might start off round the wicket*. The first ball, delivered from wide on the crease, landed about three metres in from the mid-wicket boundary, settling the retirement issue. From there it was a matter of *when* rather than *whether* with an additional consideration of *how many more*.

"Now I'll go over the wicket, thanks very much," was Typhoon's reaction.

The next two were spinning deliveries pitched just outside the line of off stump. The Godfather had a good old-fashioned *heave ho* at both, missing the first and carving the second out to the deep cover boundary for a comfortable two. Three would have been feasible but would have cost him the strike.

Ball four pitched around the same spot but, being the arm ball rather than the turner, caught the inside edge, went uncomfortably close to leg stump and failed to produce a run as Muscles charged in from deep backward square. There was always a single in it, but an aggressive approach to the ball meant that J.C. called a *wait*, unaware that Muscles was a left arm thrower and the ball was on his right side.

Ball five was wider; but this time turned out to be the chinaman, spinning back and avoiding the bat by a comfortable margin. With that, Typhoon indicated he was going back around the wicket, and the final delivery was the big spinning turner delivered with the right cheek of his arse a hair's breadth away from the stumps.

A thickish outside edge down to third man would've yielded a comfortable single, but working on the *nothing ventured, nothing gained* principle, The Godfather went back for the second, finishing sufficiently short of his ground to prompt Nuts, who was serving his stint as the square leg umpire to deliver an immediate adverse adjudication.

As The Godfather was replaced by the third member of the Trinity, the impressive bulk of *Big Al* Huxley arrived at the bowling crease and the field scattered for distant pastures. Big Al's military mediums were a tad slower than The Duck's but tended to find the boundary with similar frequency.

Brooksy would have preferred the new batsman on strike, but you can't (as the song goes) always get what you want, and at five-for at the half way point of the innings with the 'keeper and four specialist bowlers to come this pair weren't going to be able to flay the bowling to all points of the compass.

The over brought ten runs including a boundary, a bit of strike rotation, and not much else. Typhoon's emergence for his fourth produced, wonder of wonders, a Rum & Coke-flavoured maiden.

Big Al returned for his second, with the same results as his first, seven to J.C. and three to Rum & Coke, who retained the strike as Damien *Spider* Webber came on as the tenth bowler, much to Scum Dog's evident annoyance. Three twos to Rum & Coke from Spider's first four deliveries were followed by a single to put J.C. on strike. A boundary brought forth a Scum Dog suggestion that things would have been different had he been given his rightful turn at the bowling crease.

'Fuckin' oath it'd be different," was Spider's reply. "If you were fuckin' bowling we'd have just spent ten fuckin' minutes looking for the replacement ball," which in turn produced merriment all round.

With the twenty-ninth over coming up and the laws of the game preventing Spider from delivering consecutive overs it was obvious that someone hadn't bowled their full complement of four overs, and the someone was Craven, who'd taken the new pill and been held over in case Brooksy needed him as a partnership breaker (or that was how it seemed from where I was standing).

To Rum & Coke, however those matters weren't quite as clear cut.

"He's had four, hasn't he?" was a predictable question.

"Three," I responded, "I think you'll find that he came off after three. Zero bowled two before drinks, so with five from that end before drinks, he must've had three. Like a hundred on it? We can check the score book at the lunch break Can make it a grand if you like."

As an astute punter, in the face of the mathematics and the size of the offered bet, Rum & Coke declined, and set about negotiating a one over spell, much of which came through above waist height.

A top edged pull shot over the slips brought two, and a single off the last ball gave him the strike for the last over before lunch. With his score on eleven, Rum & Coke was able to take close to full toll off Spider's second, and a two, a couple of fours and a three took him to a round two dozen and the total to 5/207, a healthy score but one that would have looked rosier with one or two less wickets.

It was just after one as we made our way off the field, and we had close to an hour to take it easy before we made our way back out. With the majority of those present making a beeline for the catering department I wandered across to the beer truck, confident there'd be something left if I waited for the queue at the tucker trough to dissipate.

His Lordship had been temporarily enlisted in the catering corps, so I chatted with Hopalong, and took over the bar duties while he found a bite to eat. By that stage the crowd was gone, so once the incumbent had hopped back into his designated role I wandered across in search of a feed.

I wouldn't have wanted to have waited too much longer. The catering table looked like it had been attacked by a swarm of locusts but there was enough left to assemble a reasonably decent burger. My

attempt to pay for same was politely declined because according to prior agreements they'd refused to take any money from anyone else, so what did I think I was doing?

"So," I ventured once the bun and its contents had been consigned to the digestive tract, "everything worked OK? No problems? Nothing that we'll need to take a look at before the kids' season starts."

"Darling, I should've known better than to doubt you, but when Margaret was in for lunch."

"Well," I cut in, not wishing to get the nuts and bolts of a lengthy lunchtime conversation, "we did manage to put a fair bit of thought into the layout and that sort of stuff."

Which was true enough. I'd had plenty of chances to assess cricket venues and was aware of regular complaints regarding the availability of shade, the proximity of toilet and catering facilities and the location of all three in relation to the field itself.

"It's obvious that you did. Good view across the ground, shade right beside the edge of the field, and it even looks like you've got one of those sight screens across there."

She indicated a substantial white wall on the opposite side of the field.

"If you step this way, you'll see we've got something similar at the back of the, um, amenities block,"

The structure that housed toilets, showers and storage space presented a nine foot high bare white wall to the playing field.

"Dunno if you've used the facilities there, but if you have, you'll have noticed that they're lit by skylights and the regulation ventilation space goes through the roof rather than the back wall. That wall mightn't be quite high enough for someone like Typhoon over there, but it's going to be more than adequate for a primary school kid." Her Ladyship nodded, and I went on.

"The catering department's there to make sure the kids, and anyone else who uses the ground for that matter, have cooking facilities right here so there's no need for everyone to piss off looking for lunch."

Experience suggested unless it was obvious lunch would be available at the ground, visiting teams invariably departed in search of takeaways, and any suggested time for a resumption was almost invariably a good half-hour less than was needed for the visitors to locate food, consume same and make their way back to the ground.

"No, you've done a great job. As long as you've got someone who knows what they're doing."

"The kids'll have an extra little income stream. Won't need to charge ball fees. Should even be enough in the kitty for team outfits and petrol money for parents who choose to drive to the away games. Could've sponsored all that stuff myself, of course, but."

"That's not what I was getting at. What Margaret had to say was while she was quite sure you'd worked out everything very carefully, she hoped you hadn't made a big mistake in hiring someone to put in all the electrical stuff."

"Who turns out to be," I pointed out, "her husband."

"Exactly. As far as she's concerned practically nothing Gilbert spends his time tinkering with ever works the way it's supposed to, and very little works at all."

The Iron Maiden's experience, of course, had differed marginally from our own. Our financial windfall was largely due to Gilhooley's inventiveness and he'd come up with a number of interesting devices to go into the redeveloped Crossroads. Consultations leading up to our departure for the States, however, revealed tensions within the Hoolihan marriage had stretched it close to breaking point.

"That little bastard called the Family Court" Gilhooley had pointed out the last time I'd laid eyes on him, "isn't on the horizon right now, but if you cast your gaze towards the horizon you'll probably notice the odd hair sticking up over the skyline."

As a result, when we'd hired Gilhooley to undertake the installation of an environmentally friendly power supply, we'd expected we'd be paying handsomely for same, and that the money would be funnelled into the man's dodgy bank accounts away on the coalfields. Gilhooley, however, didn't want things done that way.

"For a start," he pointed out, "she'll know bloody well where I've been working while I'm putting that stuff in, and she'll expect me to be paid for it. She'll expect that the payment will go into the joint account where she can keep her beady eyes on the bastard."

Gilhooley was expecting a detailed forensic accountant's examination of his finances once the Family Court came into the equation, and was determined investigations would find enough to satisfy their insatiable curiosity without venturing too far into the woods, where Gilhooley had managed to secrete a larger windfall, including, of course, his dividend from our Lotto successes.

"No," he'd concluded, "you're getting this for nothing. Well, not quite for *nothing*. I'll be sending you regular invoices, and you'll pay them out of money that would've gone into the cunning kick. Once we've got the legalities sorted out, the money can go back into the slush funds. In the meantime I'm going to need somewhere around two hundred thousand in full view of her beady eyes, and with a bit of luck as long as she can see what looks like enough right there, she won't go venturing much further afield."

The patents for the devices would in Gilhooley's reckoning, go into the equation, and while he wasn't happy about the prospect, the fact that these things worked and looked to be capable of delivering an income stream might prevent an investigator uncovering others that also worked and were already generating a healthy return.

"Well," I ventured, "we've laid out big time on the electricals around here."

"Which is why Margaret was concerned. When you look at it, based on his track record there's not much that he's turned his hand to that has worked."

Which was true. Very little he'd unveiled in Denison apart from a certain dedicated computer did.

"I'd hoped she was wrong, of course," was a statement that I didn't regard as fully credible, but I let it pass. "that's why I didn't come out to check things myself before today. We had the pub barbie ready to roll if the cooking facilities weren't up to scratch, and once I'd had a look at your setup here I knew that was the only likely problem."

"They tell me," I cut in, "that there was a big power outage here about three and a half weeks ago."

"There was," His Lordship agreed. "Bloke in a semitrailer took out a power pole just down the road just before six. Took them close to closing time before they got the power back on all over town."

"Well, remembering I wasn't here when it happened so I didn't actually experience this myself, you may well have noted, had you gone past this place while the power was out, everything was hunky dory in these parts. According to Hopalong and Sandy they went around making sure everything that could be turned on was turned on and running flat chat."

"It couldn't have," the Duchess protested, "there wasn't any power."

"Take a look along the roof line across there," I pointed out. "Notice anything?"

"Roofing's a little strange," His Lordship ventured.

"My oath it is. That line faces north and we've got solar panels running right along there. Go a couple of hundred metres back over my shoulder and you'll see the same thing here. According to Gilhooly, that gives us enough capacity to power every electrical device you'd want in every room, with all the lights on and the air con going flat chat and still be pumping power into the main grid as well."

Both members of the audience seemed reasonably impressed, though not totally convinced.

"Of course," I pointed out, "we'll probably never get to check out whether that's the way things are. All I know is that the control panels in the office suggest we haven't drawn an electron off the grid since the system was switched on, and we've pumped out a heap. Looks good to me."

There was movement away to my right and when I turned my attention that way I noted Brooksy and Balls making their way in my general direction.

"It's only a quarter to," Brooksy suggested when they reached me, "but it looks like everyone's just about right to go back on."

"On both sides," Balls added. "So we might as well go back, say ten minutes earlier. That OK with you, Mr Umpire Sir?"

Given the fact that I had another three hours at the bowler's end with a further four tomorrow, an early start suited me though I'd expected the players would have preferred a longer spell, which was why I'd opted for the two o'clock resumption. As it was, with the predictable stuffing around it wasn't far short of two o'clock when the field was set, the batsmen in place and the bowler at the top of his run. It was the identity of the bowler that had me bemused.

Looking at the state of play, it was fairly obvious what either side would be aiming to do.

At 5 for 207 with J.C. on 36 and Rum & Coke 15, for the Dipsos it was a matter of getting through ten overs without losing wickets, Rum & Coke doing most of the scoring and retiring both incumbent batsmen. That would leave the keeper and the bowlers ten overs to have an old-fashioned *heave ho* with the prospect of two fairly decent bats able to come back for a slog at the end.

As far as Brooksy was concerned, he had to find four overs. With twenty to go and Muscles, Craven, Aravinda and Typhoon obvious choices for sixteen of them, there was always going to be a temptation to run through those and hope the wicket tally got to eleven. That could be dangerous if J.C. and Rum & Coke found themselves back at the crease able to take full toll of whatever overs were left.

My study of the score-book led me to suspect that we'd get two from Big Al and two from Sunset, since they had the most respectable figures. Instead I found The Duck handing me his cap, and the decision made sense when the six legal deliveries went for five singles and a two to Rum & Coke. There was a wide in there as well, but eight off the over was a strikingly better economy rate than the bowler had managed previously. The following over saw Aravinda back in action, with Rum & Coke taking most of the action, stroking a four through the covers, and working a couple of singles to rotate the strike. It was obvious J.C. was going to take his time negotiating his way to fifty.

Over 33 brought Big Al into the attack, and Rum & Coke taking his time over the scoring with a pair of twos and a single while J.C. gave him back the strike with a single. With both batsmen into the forties it was obvious that one was going to stick around while the other had a dip, and the dip came in the form of a brimming beaker of Rum & Coke.

Aravinda's next effort went two, four, one to Rum & Coke, a dot and a one to J.C. and a dot to Rum & Coke. Sunset was on for #35, which started with a single to J.C. followed by a four to Rum & Coke creamed through the leg side, not quite cow shot corner, but not a million miles away either. A pair of twos took him to 48, a dot led to the last ball of the over and a single should have left him on 49 with the strike for the next over.

He couldn't manage the single, which put J.C. in the invidious position of needing twos and fours if the Holy Spirit was going to get a full over of tonking time. As a result Aravinda's seventh yielded a measly six, with two dots to J.C. a pair of twos and a single on top of that and a single to Rum & Coke to give him open slather at whoever came on to bowl what might well have been the last of the *missing four*.

Running commentary from the pavilion ensured everyone involved was aware of score-line issues.

The ball went to Typhoon along with instructions to bowl darts into the popping crease, giving Rum & Coke the choice of playing out a maiden or taking whatever he could weasel out of the six. The first ball, however, didn't quite follow Brooksy's instructions. While it wasn't flighted it wasn't quite a dart either, and a fair old whoosh made it clear that Rum & Coke wasn't interested in maiden overs, but he didn't get it quite in the middle.

The first run took him to fifty, and obliged him to go back for a second, which wasn't the easy run it should have been thanks to an impressive chase and remarkably accurate throw on the turn from Craven. With Rum & Coke on 51 with five balls left in the over, we were obviously in for a cat and mouse game.

"That's his fifty, dart, mate!" was the call from behind the stumps. The next ball, speared in on middle and leg, evaded the bat, rapped the rear pad and produced a raucous shout. I took a long look, noted the position of Brooksy's feet indicated he'd anticipated taking the ball down the leg side and declined the appeal.

"No time to be fair, Herston."

"Dunno what Hawkeye would've said, but take a look where your feet ended up. Just going down leg side, I reckon."

Brooksy took a glance down, observed that you're not going to get what you don't ask for and repeated the call for darts. I'd suspected the previous delivery had been the arm ball, though the distance between where the ball pitched and the pad was so small that it would have been impossible to note anything significant in the turn department. Ball three was pitched around middle, looked to

be the turner, and was whipped away through the leg side, producing a two and a photo finish as the return came in to the bowler's end.

The regulation call for a dart failed to materialize with ball four, flighted and turning sharply enough to catch the outside edge, flying to Big Al's right hand at slip. Al got a finger to it, slowing it down enough to suggest a comfortable single, though there was never going to be a second run. Heather Brooks would've been entering dots in the relevant sections of the score-book.

Ball five went wide of mid on for another two, and with one ball to go, there was an adjustment to the field with everyone fielding in front of the wicket dropping back, cover, mid off, mid on and mid-wicket to the boundary, point to cover, extra cover to a deepish mid off, slip to point, square leg to a standard mid-wicket, third man and deep backward square stationary before Typhoon headed in again.

Given the circumstances the bowler's natural inclination would have been to spear in another dart around leg stump, ensuring there was no chance of the ball being hoisted anywhere. Typhoon, however, headed in the opposite direction. Flighted higher than the preceding deliveries it pitched, spun hard and caught the outside edge of the bat. Craven set out from third man at full pace and managed to get a fingertip to the ball as it went, first bounce, across the boundary.

Better known as *Retread*, incoming batsman Dipsos' wicket-keeper Jack Patchen had a reputation as someone partial to the tonk and with J.C. on 46 it was obvious that once he'd had a chance to get his eye in Retread would be doing the majority of the scoring.

J.C. took a single off the first ball of Aravinda's seventh over, and underlined that point with a *twos and fours, mate* once he was at the non-striker's end. Ball two attracted a textbook forward defensive shot, the following two produced successive pairs through the off side. Another dot was followed by a four and it looked like Retread was well on the way.

Brooksy must have been tempted to get the last of the *missing four* overs out of the way but opted for Craven, who managed to keep J.C. on strike for three balls with the field up before the expected single turned the strike back to Retread. *Twos and fours, mate* was the call as the field dropped back. Ball four could've brought a single into the deep on the leg side, but with the end of the over approaching J.C. wasn't interested.

Retread got a bit more bat on the next one and managed to bisect the leg side field, and the boundary was followed by a three, eliminating the need for J.C. to score a single to return the strike to the fresher batsman. Over 40 saw Muscles back into the attack, and three twos into the score book before we wandered off for another refreshment break.

With J.C. at the non-striker's end, it was fairly predictable that we'd end up conversing on the way off the field. Nicknames always interest me and Retread was an unfamiliar face, so the origin of the moniker was an obvious matter for discussion.

"It was up at the Towers for the Ashes," J.C. explained. "He was up there with Benno's Mob, and they were camped next door to us at the Showgrounds, so you can guess what the sledging was like. Two teams in Al camped next door to each other, and we were down to play each other on Saturday."

"It would've started as soon as you got there," I suggested.

"Yeah, and both went up Friday arvo, so it was a case of set up camp and straight on the piss and straight into the sledge. Anyway, things got a bit heated, and he was expecting to play with Benno's Rebels, not the main mob, so he'd brought a new pair of spikes that he needed to break in, not

expecting to be playing A1, like. After Friday night's little kerfuffle Benno decided they were going to have a go at us and put 'im in the main side and sent him in to open."

"With the new spikes, no doubt."

"Right on. Anyway he went the big heave ho from ball one and ended up on one-eighty."

"Cementing his place in the side for the weekend."

"Yeah, well normally that's be the case. The new boots were the problem. Before he got to sixty his feet was starting to blister so he just stood there and went ballistic, figuring that he'd hole out and get off the paddock..."

"But he didn't. Dropped catches?"

"In the beer tent, yeah. Anyway when he eventually got out his feet were stuffed. Couldn't field in the afternoon. They had that show pony from Gatton keeping for 'em, that's what'd got the sledge going big time the night before, so he was never going to keep. When they turned up at Sunday's game the groundsman at Souls wouldn't let any bastard bat in rubbers, so he ended back in B2 with their third side, you know, Benno's Rejects."

"Where he kept."

"Yeah, but there was another little problem. The Rejects were down to play on one of the new fields, and he couldn't run. So he had to dive around a bit more than would've been necessary otherwise."

"Ouch." I knew by reputation what the playing surface was likely to be like when you're looking at a new B2 field. The usual preparation was to bulldoze the scrub, put it in a pile and burn it, and leave things like china apple stumps in the ground. Diving wasn't the desirable option in such circumstances.

"Yeah, well we got back to camp Sunday night and Psycho went across to Benno's camp."

"For a spot of polite conversation, no doubt."

"Course. Anyway, Retread's there, not that the name had come into play just yet, and he's got bark off all over 'im. His girlfriend was using about half the stuff in the first aid kit to patch him up when Psycho got there. Anyway some bastard said *Look what they've done to bloody Patchen*."

"Bloody Patchen being the operative word," I suggested.

"Psycho took one look *Patchen?*" he says. *Bastard doesn't need patchin'. Needs a bloody retread.*"

"The name stuck."

"You got 'im. Catch you back out there," and with that J.C. wandered off in search of a chilled article. A check at the beer truck revealed sales had slowed marginally, and Hopalong suggested if current trends continued he'd be redundant after the change of innings.

"Not if I have anything to do with it," Brooksy cut in from a neighbouring team huddle where batting tactics had obviously been discussed. "Scum Dog and Big Al are going to take it easy for the first ten when we bat, and we've got Muscles as night watchman, so the rest of us'll be having a few cool drinks after a long spell in the paddock. You won't be going anywhere."

Back on the paddock, a single off the second ball of the Craven over took J.C. to 49 and we were back into *twos and fours* territory since Retread managed a three off the last ball to go with an earlier two and four, making ten off a reasonably expensive over. Had J.C. been on strike for the over, presumably the ball would've gone to Typhoon, but with Retread on strike and more twos and fours as the scripted option, Brooksy opted for another one from Muscles, which duly produced two pairs and gave J.C. the tonk for as many of the forty-third as he could manage.

Typhoon would've probably have preferred the other end, but he was the *go to man*, and it was the batsman who determined the end he was going to be coming from. As it was, the matter turned out to be academic. J.C. worked the first ball behind point and Retread, figuring there wasn't enough on the ball to get it across the boundary, set off in search of a two while J.C. (who obviously figured there weren't two on offer) refused to run at all.

Retread found himself retracing his steps while Heather Brooks entered a dot in the relevant sections of the score book. Ball two went much the same way, and with the halfway mark in the over approaching it was fairly clear that something was going to break the temporary deadlock. The third delivery was flighted enough to allow J.C. to get under it and the ball flew out to deep mid-wicket where the catch was duly taken by none other than The Warbler.

The batsmen, however, had crossed, so while Psycho made his way into the middle it was Retread who was going to face the next delivery. There must have been a degree of temptation to flight it as well, a single or a three would, after all, bring the new batsman to the striker's end, but Brooksy's call for darts was acceded to for the next two before a flighted delivery that could've been a comfortable two was used by Retread to retain the strike.

It wasn't a development that went down well with Psycho, who was forthright in demanding access to the strike as Muscles headed off towards the top of his mark. The first ball, pitched up around the block hole, was worked wide of mid on and was presumably meant to reach the boundary, but an excellent chase from Craven kept it down to three and gave Psycho his wish.

"One'll do it, mate," was a predictable suggestion from Retread. He was, after all, on 34 and there were four deliveries after the next.

The game plan called for him to get as close to fifty as possible, preferably retiring in the process, then a quick fall of the remaining wickets to bring himself and Rum & Coke back right at the end.

"Bullshit," came the reply from the far end. "If it's in the slot it's outta here." Muscles pitched the next right up, just about in the block hole, and narrowly missed taking off stump.

"That's the slot right there, Muscles," was the comment from behind the stumps. "Let's see what he can do with another one right there."

The next wasn't *quite* right there, being a little further up and dead on middle, forcing Psycho to jam down a defensive bat and ensuring Muscles' economy rate remained relatively low. Ball four was the same, but some unfavourable commentary from the boundary caused Psycho to plant his left foot down the wicket, take an almighty swing and depart with leg stump about three metres from where it should have been.

There were two balls remaining, as I informed Bill Barker, known to one and all as *Brown Dog*, and my advice was followed by a suggestion from his batting partner that they should be played out. Ball five

produced a classy forward defensive stroke, a comment of *Good dog* and a remarkable *Woof* from the other end.

The final ball was supposed to go the same way, but an inside edge sailed uncomfortably close to leg stump and Retread, seeing the opportunity for two, called his partner through, offering specific advice about the second as they crossed on the first.

Over 45 saw Craven back for his second last, and while Retread managed a four and a three, Brown Dog was able to edge the fourth delivery past slip for a single, giving Retread the chance to pick up another three off the next. With the final delivery played out, the news that Retread was on 48 and would more than likely be retiring at the end of the over brought Typhoon back on.

A flighted first delivery was tonked through the covers for a boundary. The remaining five balls were more economical as Typhoon worked through his repertoire, offering up something different each time, switching sides, varying his position on the crease and keeping the scoring down to two twos before Retread staged a (hopefully temporary) retreat to the pavilion.

With four overs to go, two tail-enders at the crease, three of the top bowlers left with one over each and the prospect of retired bats returning with the fall of two more wickets, this was obviously the stage to use up the last of the *missing four*, and a quick consultation saw the ball go to Big Al for #47.

Brown Dog picked up two off the first delivery, and the following five went for a string of singles. Still, seven off the over was good going at this stage, and with Muscles back for the forty-eighth things were poised for an interesting finish. Brown Dog had taken a single off the last ball of the previous over to retain the strike, but the first ball of Muscles final over would've troubled most batsmen, reversing through the gate and striking middle and leg.

Under the original playing conditions, with each side playing twelve but batting eleven this would have seen Rum & Coke back as the first of the retired batsmen. Brooksy had insisted on batting twelve because he wanted to see Zero bat, but there was more to it than that.

As Brown Dog departed, Brooksy headed down to consult with the bowler, suggesting as he passed me that I take note of the time. What followed was ninety seconds of high farce as #12, Bryan Ankles Angstrom, having managed to scrounge a pair of pads, attempted to negotiate the loan of a bat. There were repeated shouts of *No, fuck off!* before non-striker Angry took matters into his own hands.

"Just get out here in a hurry Ankles. You can use this one."

Ankles was a notoriously inept bat, and owned neither bat, pads nor batting gloves. The club gear bag was called into play on the rare occasions when he was forced to bat in the Townsville competition and the fact that he was invariably the Dipsos' designated non-bat meant the issue rarely raised its ugly head when they were playing. Everybody else had their own gear; and unwillingness to lend him a blade was, according to Angry, largely attributable to Ankles' inability to retain a grip on the bat handle.

"I mean," Angry pointed out as Ankles made his way to the middle "if you've paid a couple of hundred for a decent lump of willow you don't want to see it flying through the air do you?"

"Is that two minutes?" inquired Brooksy as he made his way to the far end with Ankles about half way out to the middle. The question produced a suggestion from Angry that he run the rest of the way, and after a pause to allow the incoming batsman to regain his breath and a quick stroll to the other end to provide him with a bat I indicated we were ready for the second ball of the over.

It was obvious strategic considerations had been taken into account as Muscles steamed in for the rest of the over. The wicket-taking first ball was followed by four dots, with each ball delivered left arm over the wicket, pitching around off stump and going away with the left-armers' natural angle. Ankles took a swing at each, and predictably failed to connect with any.

I've done more than my share of umpiring kids' games, but I don't think I've ever seen a more casual bit of wicket-keeping than the effort Brooksy put in to the final delivery after it, again, beat the bat. A casual wave of the right glove towards the ball was enough to deflect the ball behind slip providing ample opportunity for a bye.

It was a prospect that apparently appealed to Ankles, though Angry was totally disinterested, having taken a stroll back towards mid-off before wandering down to retrieve the bat. Having accomplished that task he turned back towards the striker's end, delivering specific instructions to his partner.

"Remember, no singles, no threes and no short runs either. Hopefully you won't have to run at all."

Mid-pitch seemed to be the preferred venue for conferences since Brooksy had claimed his own portion of the area for a discussion with Craven, who'd been assigned the forty-ninth. The discussion was followed by a careful rearrangement of the field, stacking the off side and limiting the leg side field to a fine leg, forward square leg and a rather wide mid-on.

Given the field it was fairly obvious that nothing was going anywhere near leg stump, which was how it worked out. The first ball, six inches outside off was driven for four, after which Craven moved his line increasingly wide of the stumps.

The rest of the over yielded a pair of twos on the off side and by the time Craven steamed in for the final delivery Angry's stance had moved to the point where leg stump was clearly visible. A yorker pitched on middle would've shattered the stumps if Angry hadn't conveniently placed a pad in the way, and a raucous appeal was fairly predictably upheld.

As Rum & Coke made his way back another mid-pitch conference delivered rather specific bowling instructions to Typhoon, who'd predictably been assigned the final over; though he probably would've expected to be bowling to another more capable batsman. Half a dozen big-turning deliveries from around the wicket produced a maiden over; along with increasing agitation from Rum & Coke since, despite throwing everything bar the kitchen sink at the ball Ankles failed to connect with any of them.

As soon as the last ball was bowled, Brooksy was inquiring about the time, and after the mobile had revealed it was seven minutes to four; he was making a beeline towards the Dipsomaniac cluster; and by the time I'd had a glance at the score book and noted a fairly impressive 9 for 336, a total I thought might take a bit of catching, and made my way across to the beer truck, Brooksy had arrived at the same location, bearing news of a slight change to the schedule.

"Listen," he announced, taking his wallet out of the pocket, "I've just had a chance to your mate Balls, and he's agreed not to go back on till a quarter past to give the openers time to have a beer before they pad up. Nice bloke, eh?"

I glanced over towards where the Denison side was gathered. No one seemed in any hurry to obtain a drink, and Big Al, Scum Dog and Muscles were in the middle of padding up. Brooksy waved a fifty in His Lordship's general direction.

"That's for the boys to have a few beers once the innings starts. Having one, Herston?" I indicated my plans hadn't included that particular scenario, but since we weren't going back until a quarter past...

"Good. One for him and one for me out of this," as he wielded a ten. "Put the change with the fifty. The boys'll be thirsty. This way," was the final direction as a nod of the head indicated a movement that would take us to the other side of three batsmen getting a thorough warm up.

"Is that six or seven-nil?" as we made our way behind the three batsmen. "The toss, that was one. Bat twelve, two. Zero, three. Four overs from Zero makes four; couple of wickets to him is five, the timed out would've been six if it'd come off, but keeping him on strike for two overs is six, delayed start makes seven. Yeah, seven nil."

"You seem," I remarked, "to be taking this rather seriously."

"Knoath," Brooksy replied. "You remember a couple of years back I played that season in Townsville?"

Given a location half way between Townsville and Mackay, Denison sporting bodies were aligned with one or the other; though there was no consistent pattern. Cricket usually went the Mackay way, though as far as the Development Officers were concerned we were on Townsville's patch.

Until three years ago, Brooksy had regularly held down the 'keeper's spot in the Mackay rep. side and had progressed as far as Queensland Country after one of the rare occasions when North Queensland had absolutely hammered the South.

Three years before, the Mackay selectors informed Brooksy they were keen to *bring a young bloke along* and the job for the forthcoming season wouldn't be his. In Townsville the incumbent had retired and there was no obvious light on the horizon, so Brooksy decided to try his luck there.

However, while the Mackay selectors had done the right thing by Brooksy, giving him the chance to look elsewhere, when he went looking he found that most clubs in the Townsville competition *already had a wicket-keeper, thank you very much*, and weren't interested in trading their incumbent in, even when the replacement on offer had reached Queensland Country level.

There was one club that had a vacancy, although this would last till their preferred option, a young bloke widely being for stardom had finished Year Twelve exams *et cetera*, but that was fine with Brooksy. If he could do well enough with the bat in the pre-Christmas fixtures he could probably hold down a spot as a specialist bat when the kid came back, and there was always the chance that he might keep the gloveman's spot as well.

So, for four months Brooksy, his missus and two kids packed up on Friday afternoon, headed north and stayed with Mick's cousin, a handy Reserve Grade player, on Friday and Saturday night. If there was nothing on the fixture front they'd head back Sunday morning, but with two kids in tow Brooksy wasn't able to do much socializing after stumps on Saturday.

His cousin, Ben *Blotto* Fuller; however, could, and spent much of his after-hours social life with a smattering of players who were followers of the night club circuit. His relationship to Brooksy wasn't something he went around advertising, at first because it wasn't anybody's business. If Mick was going to get the 'keeper's spot he was looking for; there was nothing Blotto could do to assist and, given his own well-known ability to take a drink (*Ben Fuller? If he'd ben any fuller, the bastard would've ben blotto* was a frequent assessment) the relationship might work against him.

That was only the start of it. According to the scuttlebutt, young Matthew Stokes was being duded by this ring-in who was past his best anyway. That was how the story went. Brooksy had, he explained, copped his share of the sledge on the paddock, and there were barbed snipes from the opposition

when it came time for a cool drink after stumps so he ended up having Heather and the kids turn up on the dot of six, and that was that. He didn't get the 'keeper's spot either.

Most of this was already familiar territory as far as I was concerned, but there were a few aspects I hadn't heard before, such as the fact young Stokesy's parents had initially refused to allow him to play cricket at all until the exams were out of the way, but had been persuaded to relent to the point where he could play Third Grade on Sunday afternoons under fairly specific conditions.

"So," Brooksy went on as I noted Balls and Nuts making their way around the back of the warm-up activities, "every time I went in to bat there was this shit going on behind me. You can imagine the sort of stuff. *Good young kid pushed back into Third Grade by this wanker*, that sort of shit, that went on as I was facing up, and there's nothing I could do about it. When Ben got home on Sunday morning after a night on the piss and a spot of rooting, couldn't take the girl home, he reckoned because we were there, we'd hear the shit that was going around."

"Herston," Balls began, as he got within conversational distance, "what do you reckon we go back out? Been a good ten minutes and."

"No way," Brooksy cut in. "We agreed quarter past, so quarter past it is. Herston'll need to finish his beer for a start. It's his shout. Not that I'd insist, but."

"When you saw us," Nuts chipped in, "you said that putting the start back to quarter past would give you blokes the chance to have a beer before they padded up..."

"Yeah, they had the chance. Didn't choose to use it, but they had the chance. Nothing to stop you blokes having one, but. See you at quarter past, I'm doing the first stint at square leg."

With that, he turned his back to resume our conversation, leaving Balls and Nuts with little alternative but to make their way back to their team mates, who were less than impressed by the delaying tactics.

"Eight-nil," Brooksy remarked. "It could well be into double figures by the time we draw stumps."

"Taking it a bit far, aren't you?" I suggested.

"No way, and that pair don't have very long memories. Two of the most vindictive sledgers out of that little episode right there. Takes a while, sometimes, but what goes around comes around."

The interruption had broken Brooksy's recount of the background to the niggle, and once he'd finished the story he wandered off to supervise the end of the warm up.

As I glanced at my mobile I noted the time had crawled towards ten past. The Dipsos were looking eager to get back on the paddock and I guessed that Brooksy's supervision of the warm up was as much directed towards ensuring the batsmen didn't go out for at least five minutes as it was about the actual preparation for the resumption.

Psycho and Angry had begun their preparation to take the new ball when they'd discarded the batting paraphernalia, evidently expecting the regulation ten minute change of innings, so the extra delay probably took Brooksy's score to nine-nil..

In any case, once I'd moseyed past the beer truck, glanced at the score book to check the batting order, retrieved the new ball from the store room, and made my way to the boundary it'd probably be close to time for the resumption.

As I made my way back I considered the avenues for further niggles. As square leg umpire there wasn't a lot he could do, since his duties were limited to clicking over the ball counter and adjudicating on the odd run out. With Angry and Psycho opening the bowling there didn't seem much chance of a stumping in the first ten overs.

The score book revealed Big Al and Scum Doggie were opening the batting and Angry rather than Psycho was going to be operating with the wind from the southern end. Muscles was padded up if a night watchman was needed, and the written sheet beside the book had Brooksy at number five after Sunset and Spider, so there was every possibility that he'd be out there for the full ten.

I glanced at the mobile again when I reached the boundary, noted it was fourteen past and started making my way towards the middle. If I hadn't been intent on getting this stint out of the way as soon as possible I might've changed my mind about things when a voice behind me remarked it was *about fucking time*, but I was quite sure Brooksy would be ensuring that the resumption of play was delayed as much as possible.

I reached the middle, collected Angry's cap and settled in for the session as Angry paced out his run up and the openers crossed the boundary line. There was no sign of Brooksy as Nuts went about setting the umbrella field. Scum Dog had reached the bowler's end and marked his guard when Michael Brooks appeared on the boundary, walking briskly into position. I noted that we were on four-seventeen as he arrived, explaining he'd been *caught short* requiring a quick detour *via* the urinal.

"Could've sent some other prick out," was Pretty Boy's take on the situation.

"They're all on the piss after a hard day out on the paddock. Couldn't have got any of the bastards out here without a couple of ton of gunpowder and the odd team of wild horses."

"In any case, we're here now," I cut in, "and the sooner we get started the sooner we can finish and then we can get on the piss. *Play*."

Angry's first over was, all things considered, uneventful. Most of it pitched in his half rather than Scum Doggie's and the two that didn't produced stylish forward defensive strokes. He may have been a Scum Dog, but his batting had the same raffish elegance he let loose among the female fraternity.

I wasn't, however, quite as impressed by the method he'd used to handle the short-pitched stuff, swaying back and watching the ball fly past his throat. After the third such evasion I expressed my technical disapproval.

"At least he can do it," Big Al commented. "More than I can do. Hit it or be hit for me."

True enough. The Scum Dog was towards the greyhound end of the scale of canine physiognomy whereas Big Al was right on the bull mastiff/Staffordshire extremity. I knew from previous experience short stuff directed towards Mr Huxley wouldn't be resulting in much ducking and weaving.

Brooksy took his time wandering across to square leg, something that didn't do much to lighten Psycho's mood since he'd paced out his run up and planted the bowling marker before he'd set off for fine leg before the previous over.

A glance around the field, no one in front of the wicket on the off side, forward square leg and a wishy mid-on on the leg, suggested an off stump line with possible outswinging intentions as Psycho steamed in, unimpressed by operating into the wind and less than happy about being forced to wait.

The first ball could have been pitched shorter; but if it had been there was a fair likelihood he'd have been sporting a bruised big toe. As it was, the missile flew straight towards Big Al's head. Since ducking and weaving weren't part of the equation, the bat came round, there was an almighty whack and the ball sailed away in front of square leg and landing about ten metres on the other side of the boundary. Square leg set off on a retrieval mission.

The extra delay associated with foxing the ball, the time it took Ankles to find his way back and his brother's instructions to *pitch it up* did nothing to sweeten Psycho's mood and the second followed the same trajectory. The result wasn't quite the same, and rather than connecting with the middle of the bat a top edge, looping over gully and bouncing ten metres inside the boundary ran away to take the score into double figures.

Ball three was much the same, slightly better timed on Big Al's part, and disappeared over square leg, resulting in a line ball decision. Given the impossibility of a television replay and lacking a disinterested witness, diplomacy suggested I signal a four.

"Pitch the bloody thing up, Psycho," was a predictable instruction, and I was more than a little surprised when he did. Mind you, it was bloody fast, and just wide enough to allow Big Al to ignore it, before Brooksy threw his two bob in.

"He threw that," was the comment from square leg. "If he does it again I'll have to call him."

"I fuckin' what?" wasn't an unexpected response as Brooksy made his way towards me.

He obviously wanted a conference, so I headed in his direction and Nuts and Psycho invited themselves as well.

"You probably don't know this, Herston," Brooksy began, "but there was a bit of a shitfight at the NQ titles last year about this bloke. One of the Mackay blokes reckoned he chucked his effort ball. Got the Queensland Cricket bloke at the trials to video him, and it turns out he does."

"So how do you fuckin' know?" Psycho wanted to know.

"Reevesy and I go way back, and I've seen the footage and read the report. But it's not every ball, is it?"

Psycho, dumbfounded, nodded.

"No," Brooksy went on, illustrating. "You're a side on bowler and just about everything you bowl works like this," He mimed the classic *look over the front shoulder* side on action. "But," the explanation went on, "when you're really fired up, occasionally you put in a bit extra, your front shoulder drops and you chuck. Right? You did it just then, and if you do it again I'll have to call you. Sorry, Herston, but that's the way it is. He can tell you himself, but every grade umpire in Townsville has been given that message, and the bastard thought he could come down here to Hicksville and get away with it."

With that he was headed back to square leg.

I raised an interrogatory eyebrow in Psycho's direction, and he nodded.

"He's right," was the admission, "won't happen again."

The pressure must've been getting to him, since the next one, while short wasn't menacing, but was on the right length to be pulled forward of square for another boundary.

The final delivery, pitched up and moving off the seam brought a play and a miss, though it could also have brought a warning from yours truly that the bowler was going perilously close to overstepping. *Still, I thought, a spell away at fine leg to cool down, see what happens after that.*

Angry's second was pitched up around off stump and forcing a stroke five times out of six. A two and a single off the last ball took Scum Dog to the business end for Psycho's second over.

Psycho wasn't a happy camper as he came back with one eye on Brooksy and the other on an unimpressed elder brother. He wasn't bowling *total* crap, but four out of six came through around chest high with a little sign saying *Hit me* and after a first ball single to Scum Dog turned the strike back to Big Al, that's exactly what he did. Increasing frustration was taking its toll, and the last ball went down after the front foot had landed well clear of the popping crease.

"Listen, mate," I said as I handed the bowler's cap back, "when you come on for the next over it might be an idea to move your bowling mark about this much." A hand gesture indicated the distance by which I reckoned he'd overstepped. The response was brief, explosive and limited to four letters.

Under those circumstances I felt it might be time to have a quick word to the captain, who was fielding at first slip and would therefore be passing through the vicinity in the immediate future.

"Got a sec, Nuts?" I asked. "two things. One, right through that last over your brother's been right up on the crease, and if I was a vindictive bastard there were at least two balls I could've called since his front foot landed around *here*." I took a moment to demonstrate, shaking my head as I did since Brooksy looked like he was about to change course and add his two shillings' worth to the discussion.

"The last ball came from here, and if he oversteps like that again I'm going to have to call him. I've suggested that he move his mark back about yea far, but I don't know whether he's listening."

Nuts nodded. "That's one thing," he replied. "What was the other?"

"Just getting in before it happens, and hopefully it won't. We've had a couple of interruptions and we started late, so I thought you'd better know about one of the local rules in the comp here, just so you don't think we're making things up as we go."

"Such as?"

"If you keep one eye on the street lights over there on the highway you may find they come on, and if they do while we're out here you'll find Brooksy and the batsmen claiming it's too dark to continue. There's a light meter gadget over on Beacon Hill beside the harbour that comes on automatically at five every afternoon. Once the light reading drops below a certain level the street lights come on automatically, and when they do the light meter turns itself off. The standard rule here is that when the lights come on you finish the over and that's that."

"So if we come off?"

"The obvious answer would be to add the extra overs onto the session after lunch tomorrow. Ten overs, drinks, ten overs, drinks, ten overs, lunch then whatever's left. Hopefully it won't get to that but you can probably see why I mentioned it. If it's starting to get dark you might want to think about

who you're going to bowl for the last two." Nuts didn't seem to be totally convinced by all this, but at least I'd set things up so that he'd been forewarned should certain issues raise their ugly heads.

Angry's third over was uneventful. A single off the third turned the strike back to Big Al, who blocked the next and took a single off the fifth to return the favour. While it seemed Psycho had taken my advice and moved the mark back there was little change in the length and three or the six deliveries found their way across the midwicket boundary after landing inside the field of play.

The first of them saw third slip go to deep midwicket, while the last one, lathered colossally and bouncing just short of the line brought grudging admiration from Balls.

"Need a compass and a cut lunch to fetch that bastard," he remarked as the slips field moved to the other end. "Might be easier to have 'im field over in that tomato patch or whatever it is. Save a bit of time, anyway. Shit, I'm thirsty."

"Won't be necessary," Nuts remarked as they passed me *en route* to the appropriate end. "You're on from that end next over."

"You gonna tell Psycho?" was a natural inquiry.

"He knows," Nuts replied. "Trust me, he knows. There's an issue with street lights, so Herston reckoned I'd need to be looking at who I bowl at the end. I'll take the second last one."

There was a further delay while the ball found its way to Angry, and after Big Al had been informed he was on forty-seven, the over was a quiet affair.

Scum Dog took a single off the second, Big Al did the same off the third, Scum Dog matched that off the fifth and the final ball produced a dot.

Psycho got the message his presence at the bowling crease was no longer required, and wandered into mid on as Balls made a few adjustments to the field and set about bowling innocuous off spinners. Scum Dog moved things up a notch with a two off the third, a single off the fourth, and when Big Al took a single off the last ball his score moved on to 49 with the prospect of a dip at the ninth over.

Nuts had specified that he'd come on for this one, and his military medium looked like cannon fodder to someone who should, by now, have been well set. I'd seen him in action, and while he'd always been tidy there was the distinct possibility of substantial carnage if he pitched short, which he did first up, and the result was another lengthy foxing expedition.

He's a sly old dog, is Nuts. With the striker on 53 the rest of the over was comfortably spread around without being so obvious that a *wide* call would become necessary. About half way through I noticed the lights go on over on the roadway, and while Big Al managed a pair there was nothing that could get hammered and a couple of straightforward singles were declined to retain the strike.

"Lights are on over on the highway," Brooksy pointed out as I called *Over*. "That'd be stumps, then."

I can't be certain the intention was to fuel further controversy since the remark was delivered in a matter of fact tone, but if it was, Nuts failed to nibble.

"Fine with me. Thirsty, Herston? What'll that make it tomorrow? Ten, ten, ten, lunch, eleven?"

GIVE THEM CURRY

After I'd deposited an armful of stumps in the store room the next step was to make a bee line for the beer line, which fortunately wasn't much of a line at all. After a beer at lunch time and another at the change of innings I had a bit of catching up to do, and the pursuit was aided by the fact His Lordship and Hopalong were both operating the beer booth.

"So," I inquired once I had something to hold on to, "how has it gone? Satisfied?"

His Lordship, having spent most of the day's play on the field, hadn't been able to monitor sales too closely, but the start of the Denison innings had given him the chance to do a stock take. Hopalong looked across as he handed over a couple of cans to a couple of the Denison boys.

"You were right about one thing," he observed. "Bastards can drink."

Standing on the back of the truck, His Lordship, opened the esky and scrutinized the contents.

"Lucky I put those extra cartons in. There I was thinking fifteen would do it. Twenty-five to thirty at the ground, and you wouldn't expect them to drink more than that, say, a dozen cans. That'd be fifteen. So I threw in a couple of extras after what you said about people sticking to their own brand. Figured that twenty'd be plenty."

"So what's left?" I asked. "Of course you'd have done well out of the spectators."

The majority of Denison's cricket fraternity had rolled up to watch the game, most arriving around lunch time.

"Can't be more than three cartons. Hard to tell with the ice. Definitely less than four. Probably, what, fifty cans?"

"That," Hopalong pointed out, "is after I had to ask the Duchess to bring out another ten midway through the afternoon. She wasn't impressed but she could see how things were going."

Once thirsty players had been catered for, His Lordship stood on the back of the truck and addressed the masses.

"I've taken the liberty," he explained, "of setting up a section of the beer garden for dinner tonight. We couldn't do that last night since it was Friday night and the boys wouldn't be turning up till after the rush had started. Anyway when you get there tonight you'll find plenty of sitting room reserved for players from both sides, and I've put on extra staff so there'll be table service, so."

"Good move," I remarked as His Lordship jumped down from the tray. "Get them there, sit them down and see how much you can persuade them to spend. Got anything else up your sleeve?"

"Had a talk to Betty when you went back out after lunch, and that's when we came up with the table service. We'd already arranged for extra staff last night and tonight, so it's just a matter of working out the best way to use the extra bodies."

"True," I observed. "It's not as if you're over-endowed with space behind the bar!"

"That's what we figured. Get 'em in, sit 'em down and bring the food and drink to them. That's the theory, anyway. Mind you someone'll probably stuff things up well and truly. Murphy's Law and all that."

"Your biggest problem's going to be ordering food, though," I suggested.

"That's what Betty said. Fortunately Maddy's in the process of saving up for something. Refuses to say what it is, but she's making a big noise about doing it. Betty's got her on the computer doing up a menu for tonight, not the whole box and dice, but the things we've got plenty of plus a couple of one-off specials. She likes doing that sort of thing, and she'll come up with something that'll look good. Betty's had a glance at the wine stocks and we'll have a wine match for everything on that version of the menu."

"So they come in, sit down, order a couple of beers while they take a gander at the menu, then change over to the wine that's matched up to whatever they order. Nice move. You'd figure that'll be a case of a bottle a head at the very least. Good thinking."

"That's the theory. Like I said something's bound to go wrong. It always does."

"Fate, in other words, will be lurking around the corner slipping the lead into the boxing glove."

Further discussion of the catering arrangements was precluded by the arrival of the Dipsomaniac's bus. There had evidently been earlier discussion regarding the transfer of players and spectators between the day's playing field and the evening's equivalent.

"I'm ready for the first load if you'd like to attract their attention," the driver suggested. As His Lordship clambered onto the back of the beer truck I sighted Sandy on the horizon.

"Folks, if there are a few of you just about finished here and you're looking for a ride into town, Tony's ready to take the first load of passengers. Not that there's any hurry. We're not likely to run out of beer here for the next hour, but we'll need to make two or three trips, so if some of you are ready to move, don't forget we've got people back at the Palace waiting to look after you."

My beer was just about finished as Sandy joined the circle.

"The bus is about to head into the Palace. Reckon you can last another ten minutes before you fall off the wagon?"

From Sandy's response, having refrained over the preceding eighteen hours a ten minute delay would not be an insurmountable problem.

"Hopalong?" I turned towards the gentleman in question.

"I'll be driving this back when things wind up here. I'll be right," was the response from that quarter.

"In that case, it may be time for us to make like the flidgeons and flock off. After you, Mr McNab."

The bus filled fairly with assorted Dipsomaniacs, the odd denizen of Denison and various hangers-on, and when we arrived at the Palace we found the staff ready to surge into action. While one of them surged off in a beer-seeking direction, I turned to Sandy.

"So, given a quiet day with minimal disturbances you should have broken the back of the report card shit? Nearly wrapped up?"

"Completely wrapped up. As you'd remember from your past, that's a cause for celebration."

The area around us filled gradually, to the point where Sandy pointed out that a certain one-legged member of the scoffing fraternity would be requiring a seat and that it might be an idea to ensure there was one waiting for him. It was a suggestion much appreciated when Hopalong emerged from the garage.

Fortunately there was a member of the staff hovering when I waved to Mr Cassidy to indicate the available seating. Equally conveniently, I needed a refill and Sandy, having spent the day on the dry, was waiting.

"So how was your day as a bartender?" I asked as Hopalong pulled up a pew. "Did they keep you hopping, or what?"

"Or what? Holy shit those bastards can drink. And sledge. Right through the day. Constant abuse of everything that moved. The opposition, their own players, His Lordship, me, you, the traffic on the road. The lot. One bloke even had a go at a fly, believe it or not."

I raised an eyebrow. Not that I was doubting his word for a moment, but elucidation was required.

"Half way through their innings," Hopalong went on, "one of them was swatting this fly. Reckoned it was the same fly that was giving him a hard time at the Goldfield Ashes back in January. *How do you know it's the same fly?* one bloke asked. *'Course it's the same fly,* this bloke answered. *It's got the same Julia Creek number plates.*"

"Out of it all would you have a particular favourite. I mean, out of the constant torrent of verbal abuse on display through the day was there anything that particularly stood out?"

Hopalong turned to Sandy.

"You'll love this one. Right back at the start of the game. This bloke from Townsville was batting. Batting like a hairy goat, at least that's what one of the other blokes reckoned when he came across to buy a beer. Wouldn't know myself because I've never seen a hairy goat bat, but there you go. Anyway a couple of minutes later this bloke calls out *Hit 'im in the nuts!* One of his own team, coming out with something like that."

"In case Mr Cassidy's not been filled in on the finer details of the matter, the batsman in question's name is Peter Nuttall. That's him over there. Big bloke who can hit the ball a mile when he puts his mind to it. You wouldn't be too surprised to learn his nickname's *Nuts*, so there's a bit of by-play involved there."

Sandy nodded and I went on.

"Anyway the bloke who called out, as Hopalong may or not know is his brother, who's about ten years younger."

"So someone told me," Hopalong added. "Since his brother's *Nuts* he's *Psycho*."

"Exactly. If you ask around you'll find that the general opinion is that the nickname is well deserved. Anyway, according to Balls."

"You like that?" Hopalong cut in. "*Nuts and Balls* opening the batting."

The remark was followed by a shake of the head, intimating, perhaps, Hopalong had now heard it all.

"According to Balls, when he's not batting well they want him to get hit there. Fires him up, they reckon."

I was about to elucidate when I sighted Gordon Walter Jeffrey appear on the horizon. I noted that he was coming from the street outside rather than the interior of the pub.

"Greetings and salutations," he announced on arrival. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything important, but I need to speak to Herston for a minute. Confidentially."

He nodded towards the table we'd used to plan our strategy in the wake of the *Big Collect* a few months earlier. It sat, unoccupied, in a discreet corner of the beer garden.

"I was on my way down to see you on Thursday arvo," he began. "To be more accurate, I was *thinking* of heading down to make you aware of some interesting developments when your girl turned up and it became academic. Anyway, since I reckoned you'd be occupied for the night I got Bright Eyes to drop me at the Palace, figuring that I could catch up with you Friday once I knew how the ground lay."

"Regarding?" There were, I thought, issues that needed elucidation.

"The incoming phone call I'd fielded about five minutes before the girl turned up."

"From?"

"Larry out at the roadhouse, where her mother *worked*. The long and short of it was the mother pulled the pin on the job at the roadhouse that morning."

"Really?" I remarked. "News to me."

"News to me too. When Larry inquired about the reasoning behind this apparent disregard of the need to pull in a crust he was told she wouldn't need to be working any longer since she was getting married to someone with enough money to keep her in the manner she's become accustomed to."

"Namely yourself," I guessed.

"Larry'd picked up the odd reference over a couple of days and thought I was the likely suspect. Then again, he knows me from the bowls club, and knows how I feel about the institution of marriage."

"Which, in the words of Groucho Marx, *may be a fine institution, but who wants to be confined to an institution*," I remarked.

"Exactly. The bridal path down the aisle inevitably leads to a bridle path for the unsuspecting bridegroom. Anyway I told Larry it was the first I'd heard of it and I was about to head down to put you in the picture when the girl showed up. I needed to check on a few things, which is why I got Bright Eyes to drop me off here."

"On arrival?" I asked.

"I found the Duchess ensconced in our spot at the bar. Not the most welcome sight, since I was expecting some flack from the previous night and I wasn't keen to be on the receiving end, but since I

was supposed to meet up with the Twins, I thought it was going to be a case of *cop the serve* and get it over with."

"And?"

"The serve, surprisingly, failed to arrive. She was unusually cordial, so I let sleeping dogs lie until the Twins turned up, when I expected that they'd be wide awake."

"Predictable," I agreed.

"Except for one minor detail. The Twins failed to arrive. By the time The Duchess took herself into the kitchen arrivals were, except for a certain individual with ambitions towards a walk down the aisle, sort of thin on the ground. That's the way it stayed till close to closing time, when somebody suggested that it might be time to adjourn upstairs."

"Which you, of course, did," I suggested.

"Well, it's not like I had a great deal of choice at the time. After all, there were no other options on the horizon."

"References to impending marriages?" I asked.

"Completely absent. That's the way it stayed while we got down to it. It was afterwards that the matter was raised. I'd mentioned that The Duchess had been unusually cordial earlier in the evening, which was when she came out with it."

"The *it* being?"

"The fact that she'd dropped in to see The Duchess in the afternoon, just after she'd run into The Twins outside the newspaper office and had given all parties the good news."

"Which explained the Twins' absence in the evening?"

"Spot on. I was forced to drop by their place in the morning to set things straight, but I'm getting ahead of myself. Olga thought a double wedding would be extremely romantic, and Bernelle thought it was as well."

The news tied in with remarks on the road between Denison and Airlie Beach.

"Anyway there was no way I was going to commit myself to anything, as you'd understand, and when I was interested in seconds."

"You got the cold shoulder," I suggested, figuring we were looking at a variation on my experience.

"Exactly. Anyway I gave myself a couple of hours' sleep, in any case, and around *sparrow fart* while she was still asleep I snuck off for breakfast at the bakery before I went round to set the Twins straight. They weren't exactly what you'd call impressed about it."

"Hardly likely, under the circumstances. So that line of things is still fine?"

"For the moment, though I don't think it's likely to last much longer. I have a suspicion they're eyeing off some bloke down at the Yacht Club. You can picture the sort of thing I guess. Middle-aged bloke

with a yacht who needs a couple of deck-hands. I have a suspicion they're not getting on too well with Clark Kent, so there's every chance they could chuck in the jobs at the *Sausage Wrapper* and run away to sea."

"Where there are plenty more fish. The other member of the newly unemployed? Where did things progress after you'd been to see the Twins on Friday morning? You weren't in evidence when I got back from Airline."

"Needed some time to nut out a few things, and I knew if I went back to base she'd sniff me out. For instances like that there's always the bowls club. Get a strategic point at the bar and you can keep an eye on all approaches and nick off around the back if you need to. Blokes do it all the time."

"So that's been your base for the past couple of days," I guessed.

"Correct. I've been able to send out scouts to sniff around the place so I know the lie of the land. For instance, an hour ago I got Paddy, you know who I mean, Irish bloke who lives around the corner; drops in here for a beer from time to time for a quick one on the way home from bowls. While he was here he took a quick *shufti* around and established that Olga's inside."

"Which explains the change of entry point," I suggested.

"Bang on. After this I'll piss off, and she'll be none the wiser. You haven't seen me, by the way."

"You were with her last night?" Unless I'd been mistaken things had appeared to be operating as normal the previous evening.

"Until it was time to head upstairs I was," Jeffrey agreed. "That's where the arrangements I'd made in the morning when I called in to see the Twins kicked in. They hadn't been over-impressed when Olga pulled them up outside the office and started telling them about weddings, so when I explained I needed somewhere to hide they agreed to put me up last night, but only for the one night."

"So you came in here last night, carried on as normal..."

"When it was time to head upstairs I slipped her the key to the room. I'd already suggested when the time came she'd best head upstairs to get herself ready, because it might get tongues wagging if we were seen heading upstairs together. The Twins left about ten minutes earlier, and I'd hardly spoken to them all night, so I was sure she'd swallow the bait."

"So she pissed off upstairs and you pissed off through the side door. Spent the night with the Twins, then hid out at the bowls club till just now. Tonight?"

"What you don't know can't get you into trouble. The fuss'll blow over in a couple of days, and then we can get things back to normal. I'll give you a bell in the morning before the cricket starts and you can let me know what happened tonight. If I were you I'd head inside now, and if anyone asks you haven't seen me since last night. Now I'm off."

"As the gorgonzola said to the Danish blue."

Wandering back into the melee, I found Hopalong and Sandy in earnest discussion over the dinner options on Maddy's menu. Indicating that my preference ran to *Death By Garlic* and a bottle of Wirra

Wirra I plonked down two twenties and headed inside to scope out the scene as directed. There were matters of interest that needed investigating.

I expected to find Dagwood and Blondie on the premises and as I passed through the doorway that links the Dining Room to the Lounge, there they were. Over at the bar I spotted Bernelle, her mother and Gloria. Bernelle waved as I stopped to confer with Dagwood and Blondie.

"So how'd we go?" I asked as I squatted beside the table. Unoccupied seating was noticeably absent. "Just by the look of things over at the bar; someone looks fairly happy."

"So she should be," Blondie volunteered. "We were on the phone to Roger first thing in the morning. Had to call him at home, but he was expecting that. When we told him we had someone who could guarantee all Bernelle's expenses he couldn't believe it. At first, anyway. When I explained the sponsor was Bernelle's boyfriend and he's won the Lotto recently so he could definitely afford it, he realized that we weren't kidding."

"Since the only issue, as we told you last night was whether we could cover the costs," Dagwood added, "that sealed it. He was on the phone to Bernelle within the next half hour, so by the time you were kicking off at the cricket this morning Bernelle was kicking up her heels."

"It was so exciting," Blondie went on. "After the call she burst through the door, screaming. When we'd calmed her down and explained how you'd helped by guaranteeing her travel costs."

"So," I asked. "when does she head off? Tomorrow afternoon? Monday?"

"Actually," Blondie pointed out, "if Roger had anything to do with it he'd have her down there already. He's really confident she'll take it out. We persuaded him since you were tied up with the cricket all weekend it'd be best to wait till Monday so you can have some time together before she leaves."

It was a nice thought, but I suspected by the close of play on the morrow the only thing I'd be capable of doing would be pushing up Zs.

I also suspected this Roger dude had ambitions regarding regular rogering of a certain party. If that was the way it panned out, I imagined that a brief spate of regular rogering would be followed by a march down the aisle, two-point-something kids, a house on acreage out Kenmore way and a root on his birthday if he was lucky. At least that was how it looked based on my experience.

"So, the itinerary from here on? She flies out Monday afternoon, when does she head to Sydney?"

"She's got three days in Brisbane, working with the top hairdressers and modelling agencies and then flies to Sydney on Friday. There's a big do on Friday night and then the final judging happens Saturday, with the winner announced on national TV Saturday night," was Dagwood's summary of the itinerary. "Anyway, you'd better get over there to congratulate her instead of talking to us."

That was the plan in any case, as there was other information that needed to be gleaned so, thanking them for their efforts I left Dagwood and Blondie and headed towards the party at the bar.

"I hear congratulations are in order. Yes, thanks Maggie," was my opening salvo, the latter in response to a well-known bar attendant's inquiry about liquid requirement. "And whatever the ladies are having, of course."

Once liquid replenishment had been declined, the response was as expected, Bernelle having maintained a state of high excitement since a phone call around nine-thirty.

"Under other circumstances I'd be suggesting we crack out the bubbly," I remarked, "but since I'm..."

"Tied up with the cricket, Gloria and I are off to the movies. We're about to go now, so it's lucky you came in when you did. I was wondering whether to go looking for you. Anyway, we're running late. Bye, Mum. I'll call in to see you tomorrow afternoon when the cricket's finished," was Bernelle's parting remark, leaving me with her mother.

"So," I began, grasping at conversational straws, "that worked out well. You must be very proud of her. From what I hear there's a very good chance she'll take out the national thing and be jetting off to London for a year. Chance of a lifetime."

"It might be, and I'm very glad for her. It means that things I'd been hoping would come about aren't going to happen."

Further details regarding the matters under notice were not forthcoming.

"Whatever happens," I observed, "happens for the best. That's the way I look at it anyway."

"Indeed. When you see Mr Gordon Jeffrey you might let him know that I'm not very happy with the way I've been treated. I'd like to give him a piece of my mind myself, but he's hiding somewhere. Still, never mind, I've found out where those two hussies live, and I'll be calling on them tomorrow morning if I don't see them here tonight. They're probably hiding as well."

Given earlier conversations I suspected the Twins were, more than likely, establishing a strong link to a member of the yachting fraternity, and would be ensconced at the Yacht Club, but pointing this sort of thing out would hardly have been diplomatic. Of course, should an irate Slav-descendant appear on their doorstep there was every chance the result would be an increased willingness to provide assistance to Jeffrey, if further assistance was required.

"In any case," I cut in, "there should be a *Death By Garlic* and a bottle of Wirra Wirra landing on a table outside, so I'd better head out that way. If I see Jeffrey."

"You can tell him it's over," Olga instructed. "Of course, when I see him I'll have more to say on the matter. I had hoped things had changed, but it seems."

"The leopard can't change its spots," I observed. "Nor the zebra its stripes."

With that I was gone, heaving a mighty sigh of relief on several fronts. There had been no word regarding Waddles or Wally, and I thought it was safe to assume *no news was good news*.

Bernelle was on her way out of town and Olga had accepted the state of play. She mightn't be exactly overjoyed but that, like all things, would pass.

I arrived back at the table to find a bottle of wine waiting. There was no sign of the meal it was going to accompany, but that would no doubt be forthcoming.

"Lucky you ordered the wine," Sandy pointed out. "Once it arrived it made explaining that your chair was taken quite a bit easier."

As I looked around the gathering I noted that there were no more than two or three unoccupied chairs. Table service and lack of incentive to move towards the bar resulted in a sedentary gathering. I imagined questions regarding unoccupied seating would have been frequent.

"So," I inquired as I helped myself to a glass of red, "what'd you pair end up deciding on for dinner? Not the *Death By Garlic*?"

Sandy's liking for highly flavoured dishes would have made the menu item in question a prime suspect.

"I looked at it," Sandy explained, "but then I spotted the special was a prawn vinaloos. I asked the girl how it was, she said it was *very hot* and that was that. End of issue. Of course, her idea of *very hot* might be different to mine."

"So he asked her to bring out a bottle of Tabasco just in case," Hopalong interjected. "I pointed out to the girl that he obviously didn't think it'd be hot enough."

"Scoffing bastard. You always need the condiments. Very important, the condiments."

"The zebra cannot change its spots. Nor the leopard its stripes. Once a scoffing mongrel, always a scoffing mongrel."

The arrival of three platters and a bottle of Tabasco sauce removed the need for further elaboration. A quick sniff was enough to determine *Death By Garlic* was as advertised, but I was unlikely to be kissing anybody in the near future and it would ensure vampires were kept well and truly at bay.

A quick taste was enough to allow Sandy to determine that his Vinaloos *could* have been hotter and he added a liberal helping of chilli sauce to remedy perceived shortcomings. Should that seem excessive, I only need to point out back in the days when we were sharing teacher accommodation a standard sized bottle of Tabasco would scarcely last a week, and he would, more than likely have added the fiery flavour enhancer to his corn flakes if he'd been partial to that form of breakfast cereal.

Hopalong, familiar with Sandy's chilli fixation, was hardly likely to repeat the procedure to the same extent, having labelled Mr McNab's chilli-enhanced dishes as *ring-burners* but, given the quantity of additive Sandy had deemed necessary, felt it was advisable to add a drop or two to the plate in front of him.

As he did so, I noticed D'Artagnan emerge from the alley connecting the kitchen to the storerooms behind the main section of the premises and giving access to the garage. He scanned the crowd in the beer garden, obviously looking for something. I turned my attention to *Death By Garlic* as Hopalong tried his first taste of the Vinaloos. D'Artagnan, having failed to locate whoever he was seeking, moved towards the waitress who had delivered our meals. A portion of prawn propelled itself from a certain scoffer's mouth, followed by a *Holy shit!*

The waitress pointed in our direction. As noted The Duchess had been forced to enlist extra staff for the evening, and the girl in question was, presumably, a backpacker recruited from diagonally across the Palace intersection. That was the usual source of casual bar and wait staff. D'Artagnan moved towards us, gathering pace as he went.

"Excuse me," he began, "I am very sorry. There has been a terrible mistake."

I looked at my plate. If there was a mistake I doubted that it related to *Death By Garlic*. Sandy, unconcerned, took another mouthful of Vindaloo and rice. Hopalong waved his hand in front of his face in an attempt to deal with heat-related issues. D'Artagnan grabbed the platter:

"It was the girl," he explained. "When she told me there was some bastard who thought the Vindaloo would not be hot enough she said it was somebody from the cricket crowd. I thought she meant some bastard from Townsville. *Right, you arsehole!* I thought. I give you *hot enough!*"

D'Artagnan was, like all members of his profession, prickly when he felt his culinary abilities were being maligned. Saturday nights were busy and the addition of fifty diners would place additional pressure on the kitchen staff. The Duchess' decision to add a special to the extensive menu and an insistence that it should be a curry was guaranteed to get right up D'Artagnan's nose.

A report regarding the adequacy of the Vindaloo's heat level had sparked a snap.

The Duchess took considerable pride in her collection of chilli sauces. Pride of place went to a bottle labelled *Pleasure and Pain* and a substantial portion had been added to the platter in question. An offer to replace the offending platter with a *nice steak* was accepted by the offended party. D'Artagnan moved to remove the plate.

"Hang on a minute," Sandy cut in, his fork darting towards the plate. D'Artagnan looked concerned as the dish was sampled.

"Not bad," was Sandy's initial reaction, followed about fifteen seconds later by "Very nice, in fact. Sort of a lingering after-burn. Tell you what, you can leave that one here. I'll look after it. You can take this one back instead. Not that there's anything wrong with it, you understand. It's just that the extra heat here is very nice."

D'Artagnan retreated, plate in hand, shaking his head ruefully. The incident was, I learned later in the evening, the culmination of a series of crises in the kitchen sparked by the addition of fifty random orders to the regular Saturday night chamozzle.

From the start D'Artagnan had been unimpressed by His Lordship's lack of foresight and forward planning. Had D'Artagnan been in charge, he would have done something like a pig on a spit that could be prepared in advance. The equipment was already on the premises and looking after it could be assigned to those responsible for the Sunday roast.

I couldn't help but agree. The option would also have appealed to the Dipsomaniacs, who would have seen a substantial roast as perfectly acceptable blotting paper. His Lordship, on the other hand, was interested in the revenue that could be created by persuading the visitors to order meals from the regular menu and wash them down with an appropriate wine rather than several gallons of beer.

As far as the Duchess was concerned, while the extra revenue was useful, the increased business was likely to interfere with her need to mix and mingle with the public. Saturday nights tended to be more relaxed affairs than Fridays since people were able to arrive and order earlier than on a working day, so while both nights delivered the same number of meals, on a Friday these were produced in a burst from seven till nine, Saturdays saw them spread out between six and ten.

As a result people who were in a hurry to eat on Saturday tended to arrive and order early, while those less concerned by a delay tended to have a late lunch and approached matters in a more leisurely manner. The additional business, in other words, presented a significant move away from the

regular flow of things, exacerbated by the need to move some of the kitchen staff to the cricket ground to cater for lunches.

On the other hand, with The Duchess required to oversee the lunch preparation at the ground, D'Artagnan had enjoyed a relatively stress-free lunchtime. He had not been a happy camper when he arrived at work in the evening and found her back *in situ*.

The sniping had started early and continued through to the time the offending platter had left the kitchen with D'Artagnan following fairly closely in its wake. His return to the kitchen was duly noted, as was the insertion of a replacement meal at the top of a hefty pile of orders awaiting attention.

"Where the fuck have you been and what the fuck do you think you're doing?" was hardly the most diplomatic way of beginning the next exchange. Once the explanation had been given, *so you tried to poison some poor bastard and kill him by wasting a good serve of my very best chilli sauce!* was hardly likely to defuse the situation.

Finally, when the identity of the *poor bastard* was revealed the resulting explosion rated about a seven on the open-ended Richter scale and left few of the inhabitants of the Lounge and the Dining Room unaware that there had been a significant falling out amongst the kitchen staff.

In the beer garden we were blissfully unaware of these developments, but His Lordship was in transit through the Dining Room when the eruption occurred. His appearance in the kitchen gesticulating frantically and pleading *Betty! Betty! Don't swear! There are people out there from Airlie Beach!* produced an even greater upheaval as The Duchess burst into the Dining Room.

It was at this point that the denizens of the beer garden became aware of the ruckus as a voice boomed over the top of the usual pub hubbub. *Airlie Beach? Who's from Airlie Beach? **Don't you bastards say fuck in Airlie Beach!***

With all hell breaking loose, His Lordship's attempt to defuse the situation was to suggest D'Artagnan absent himself from his post for the rest of the night. He would, of course, be paid up to his usual knockoff time.

While this alleviated the atmosphere in the kitchen, an extremely pissed-off Frenchman, rather than removing himself from the premises launched himself on a monumental bender which was progressing well when I suggested to my companions that, with the meals out of the way and the bottle of red down to a final glass, indoors seemed to be the place to be.

Our adjournment to the Lounge coincided with the return of the Crustaceans. It also brought sight of Olga in intimate conversation with Mr Ballmer.

Unfortunately for all concerned, the Crustaceans had been on the receiving end of a substantial thumping on the rugby field. In itself, the result was bad enough but, as those in the know were aware a loss was usually followed by riotous consequences whereas a victory usually resulted in the team sitting down in a subdued manner trying to figure out what had caused this rare and unexpected development.

The match had been a bruising encounter, so the team bus had been delayed and the rest of the team forced to wait for two hours while players had their wounds patched up at Casualty. The players were therefore well and truly into *post-loss celebration mode* before they boarded the bus for the three hour piss-stop interrupted journey back to Denison.

Walking into the Lounge I saw Balls in conversation with Olga, D'Artagnan settled into drinking mode and Crustaceans' captain Mad Mick, crawling through the front door on all fours, having enjoyed an extremely fluid trip. The time and effort required to rise to a standing position meant he'd reached the stage of rolling onto his back trying to peer up women's dresses when his girlfriend arrived to take command of the situation.

His Lordship and one of the few members of the Crustaceans who were still capable of maintaining a vertical position without the aid of external objects hauled Mick to his feet and decanted him into the vehicle waiting outside. Mick's girlfriend, the Lovely Susan, was supervising when a voice from the other side of the room boomed out. The source was none other than our old friend Mr Nuttall.

"Surely you're not going home with *that*?" was the query.

"I am," she responded as she turned to face the world at large in sheer and strangely demure defiance. "Not only that, when we get home I'll be making love to it."

By this time, with the party starting to hit its straps, I'd wedged myself into a spot at the bar beside D'Artagnan and had been filled in on the finer points of the Chilli affair.

In the stunned silence that followed that last statement, I ventured the opinion that the area was dangerously quiet. *Since that's the case*, I suggested to D'Artagnan and the rest of the crew in the corner, *I might just slip over to the juke box and remedy the situation.*

For some reason, the company that supplied the juke box and I do not agree on the subject of music. Given the machine's proximity to the kitchen, The Duchess maintained a degree of supervision over the contents, and had whatever material she disliked removed from the playlist. Unfortunately everything that was removed from the machine was replaced by something drawn from the *dreck* that tends to dominate commercial radio.

That wouldn't have been so bad when they threw some Steely Dan and Bruce Springsteen into the mix, but the disks in question were removed fairly quickly after a casual remark about a band named after a dildo from a William Burroughs novel and the discovery that The Duchess had developed a strong aversion to *Born In The USA*.

As a result the only thing on the machine I play is a selection of George Thorogood's greatest hits. As I turned towards the juke, D'Artagnan, aware of the likely consequences spoke up. Apart from definite opinions on culinary matters he had strong opinions on music, a strong preference for the gypsy jazz of Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grapelli, and an aversion to loud electric blues guitar.

"Herston, please, I beg you," D'Artagnan slurred, "it has been a *ferry trying day*. Please, no George."

Since the presence of George on the evening's soundtrack was likely to cause distress and given my status as a caring and sympathetic human being, I relented. As I did so I noted that Nuts moving towards the juke box.

I knew Nuts was a fan of The Doors. Previous experience suggested when Nuts took control of the music the Doors generally followed. I also knew that the juke box was a totally Doors-free zone and I wondered what selection Nuts would make. As the opening bars of *Bad to the Bone* broke out across the side bar: I turned to D'Artagnan, raised the bent finger of scorn and remarked, *George by remote control!*

His mission accomplished, Nuts moved away from the juke box, heading for Balls and Olga at the other end of the bar. The furniture arrangements in the Lounge were such that his route took him past where I was standing. "Nuts!" I called. "a moment of your valuable time, if you don't mind."

"Yeah," was the response as he turned in my direction.

"I didn't know you were a George Thorogood fan. I thought it was a case of *The Doors or nothing*."

"Usually it is. But if there's no Jimmy Morrison what can you do? You've got to go with someone who'd do a fair job of *Roadhouse Blues*, haven't you?" He paused for a moment. "I mean he'd *probably* do a good version," he went on, raising the stubby in his hand to a position where it could serve as a microphone. "*Well, I woke up this mornin' and I got myself a bee-ah!*" he roared in a voice that sat remarkably in between Jim and George.

The performance was too much for D'Artagnan, who rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Gentlemen, I bid you farewell. I am unable to withstand this noise any further!"

"Who the fuck was that?" Nuts asked. It was a question that needed to be answered with a question.

"What did you have for dinner this evening?" I inquired. "It wouldn't, by any chance, have been the prawn vindaloo?"

"Well," Nuts conceded, "I did look at it. I ended up with the *Death By Garlic*."

"A wise move, given the fact that if you'd gone for the Vindaloo *after* you'd played George Thorogood he might have done the same thing to you as he did to this poor bastard." I pointed to Hopalong.

"Which was?" was Nuts' unsurprising response.

"Empty half a bottle of *Pleasure and Pain* chilli sauce into his dinner. Heard about temperamental French chefs? He's one of them. Been there, done that, wrote the rule book, got the T-shirt and waiting to star in the movie."

Nuts moved off towards his opening partner and I addressed the other residents of *The Crossroads*.

"Nine-twenty. What do you reckon? Time to head off? Or one more and then it's time to head off?"

The absence of Bright Eyes meant that we would be relying on the taxi service to deliver us home. There was likely to be a rush around ten so it was a case of leave now, or soon, or expect to be arriving home some time closer to eleven.

"I'll call the cab," Sandy volunteered. "There'll be time for another beer if you grab one now." I

As Sandy moved into the phone booth and I negotiated a resupply with Magpie, Olga left her chair and headed towards me, producing a key and dangling it in front of my nose.

"If you see Mr Gordon Walter Jeffrey, you can thank him for his generosity."

Behind her I could see Balls stand and move towards us.

"I will," I replied, though I suspected that the message was going to cause any distress whatsoever.

"Ready?" Balls asked. As the pair of them disappeared towards the stairs that lead to the rooms on the upper floor the movement attracted the notice of Michael Brooks, conveniently seated with a couple of other members of the Denison side.

"Well cut me off at the knees and call me *Shorty*" he remarked. "Bet he's got a big middle stump!"

Sandy appeared at my elbow.

"Major turn up for the books. Taxi bloke said he'd be straight down. Bottoms up."

Ten minutes later I was paying the cab fare, expressing the opinion that I'd had enough for the night and forty overs at the bowler's end tomorrow meant I'd be retiring for the night without further ado.

CRICKET DAY TWO

When I surfaced I could have rattled off a good half-dozen activities that would be preferable to standing around a cricket field, but nobody asked and I was left to consider things I would rather be doing as I passed through the rain room and towelled myself dry.

A substantial breakfast similar to the previous day's had just been demolished when the phone rang. *Moderation. Herston speaking* was my response although I was reasonably sure of the caller's identity.

"Herston," a familiar voice replied. "What's going on? More to the point what went on last night?"

"At the moment, right as I speak, nothing's going on. Nothing's coming off either. Though I suspect that if one was a fly on the wall you'd have witnessed quite a few things coming off in a certain room upstairs at the Palace. It may even be the case that things are going on there as I speak."

"Meaning?"

"Just before we left last night I was asked to thank you for your generosity leaving the key to that room with a certain party. Shortly afterwards she was sighted making her departure with Barry Ballmer, noted Dipsomaniac and former employee of her ex-husband. Your problems in that area may well have been resolved."

The news was greeted with a degree of relief.

"All the same, I'd keep a low profile until the Dipsos' bus is safely on the road, remembering she might be inclined to wander out this way and check out her conquest's form on the cricket field."

"No dramas. Nothing else to report?"

"Plenty to report, but that'd be best done over the next day or three. Dunno where the Olga-Ballmer situation's headed but I'm sure all will be revealed in the fullness of time."

Once I'd hung up, slathered on the sunscreen and made my way to the playing field in time to see the Dipsomaniacs' bus turn off the highway onto the access road I didn't have long to wait for the revelation.

As the players trooped off the bus it was obvious Balls had been the subject of much ribald abuse. The most moderate comment I heard was an inquiry as to the date when Balls would be *making an honest woman out of her*. I wandered across to where the subject of the abuse was standing.

"Got a shot away last night?" The direct approach seemed the best.

"Four shots, actually. Which is four more than any of these bastards managed, as far as I can tell."

"You'll love this, Herston," was Nuts' contribution to the discussion. "He was late coming down for breakfast. You can probably guess why. Anyway he'd just got his bowl of corn flakes and was in the middle of sitting down looking like the cat that got Tweety Pie when Psycho chimed in from the other end of the table. *Stand for a rooter!* That's what he came out with. Every bastard stood up. All at once while he was still sitting down. Shit, I laughed."

"So, Baz," I asked, "when's the big day?" The response was *Don't you start* but was followed by news that Olga was thinking of relocating two hundred kilometres north of where we were standing.

"To which your response would be?" Inquiring minds needed to know.

"Doesn't worry me," Balls shrugged. "Won't last if she does. They never do. Tell you what, but..."

"What?" I asked.

"If she did it'd get right up Butler's nose."

"So you wouldn't be making any objections if she did. The news'll be music to the ears of one of the blokes who lives here."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the beer truck on its way in, and while there was a good half-hour before the scheduled resumption I knew from experience that standing around chewing the fat wasn't going to guarantee a punctual resumption.

With forty overs to go, as far as I was concerned a punctual resumption was what it was all about, so I headed for the store room, grabbed an armful of stumps and headed out to make sure requisite preparations had been carried out.

The journey out and back gave me time to consider the possibilities.

Three hundred plus was going to take some chasing under any circumstances, and with what amounted to a representative team, on paper it should have been just about insurmountable. On the other hand, the run rate was round about where it needed to be. There were at least two decent fast-medium bowlers to come into the attack, and while Ankles couldn't bat to save his life he was a classy leg spin bowler, but there were five bowlers who would have to send down two each, though two of them had already been called into action with fairly economical results.

With Big Al already retired, I figured Denison would need to see at least one more bat retire, and if two more could go close to retiring the rest could probably put about another hundred together, all of which would add up to around three hundred.

If we got that far, the final session could well be interesting. Those musings looked after the journey out to the middle and back, and with warm up activities going on around me I wandered past the score book, checked the list of bowlers, noting Brown Dog and Rum & Coke would be kicking things off and wandered over to the beer truck, where His Lordship was temporarily unoccupied.

"No sign of Hopalong," I remarked.

"No," His Lordship agreed. "Told him last night I'd need some help later, but I'm down to bat number eleven, so he should be able to take his time getting here. Phone calls from England and all that."

"Still, things would've been fairly quiet so far?" I hypothesized.

"About half of them were over for a heart starter when I pulled up," His Lordship reported.

It didn't take much figuring to put Nuts, Balls, Psycho and Angry among that number. Probably Pretty Boy as well, since his name had failed to make its way onto the bowling schedule. I took a wander around, exchanged greetings with whoever was so inclined and found myself back at the beer truck, where the tray offered a reasonable vantage point to sit and wait for five to ten to roll around.

Comings and goings around the beer truck provided a couple of opportunities for a chat while I was waiting, but when an alarm call on the mobile suggested that Mickey's big hand was pointing to the eleven I set out to go about ensuring the requisite prompt resumption. Still, I was in the middle at the bowler's end before the Dipsomaniac eleven took the field, and they were almost in the same area before Scum Dog and Sunset made their way onto the paddock.

I wasn't surprised to find Brown Dog handing me his cap. He would, under ordinary circumstances, have been operating at first change, and Balls and Nuts were *two each* candidates and would probably be sending down their seconds around overs twenty-nine and thirty.

With Scum Dog on strike, Brown Dog's over went for four; a two off the third, singles off the last two, and, as expected, Rum & Coke arrived for over eleven, which produced a single and a Scum Dog boundary off the final delivery. Sunset managed a couple off the second ball of Brown Dog's second, but the next one jagged back rapped him on the back pad. While I thought the ball was going down the leg side the boisterous appeal may have done something to Sunset's state of mind since a short-pitched fifth delivery was fairly tamely hit down Ming's throat just in front of square leg.

That wasn't quite what the close finish scenario required but on the other hand the incoming bat, Damien Spider Webber was probably the best bat in the side, and if he managed to get a start was quite capable of tearing an attack apart.

But if he was going to do that *tearing apart* routine he needed a start, and he's a notoriously nervous starter. At one stage it was believed he had a weakness against the short ball, and was subjected to a regular repertoire of chin music when he arrived at the crease.

While that came off regularly, as it will, even if you're not dealing with a nervous starter; the barrage continued through most his time at the crease so he had plenty of opportunities to work on that side of his game. While he still got out early against short pitched bowling, regular run-a-ball hundreds against such tactics suggested the problem lay in *getting started* rather than *getting peppered*.

As such, there was a marked contrast between Spider and the bloke at the other end. Nothing, but nothing worried Scum Dog, who wandered through his day to day life with the calm insouciance of somebody who doesn't give a stuff.

Spider, on the other hand, was the sort of bloke who'd check his guard three or four times after a play and miss. That may have been his personality, but it wouldn't have been helped by his day job in an accountancy practice, acting as the interface between Denison's taxpayers and the machinations of the Australian Tax Office.

Mail on the supposed weakness may or may not have arrived at a Townsville destination, but if it had it wasn't acted on. The first ball Spider received was a fizzing leg-cutter that caught the outside edge of the bat and flew through a vacant third slip for a couple.

Scum Dog worked a two through the off side in Rum & Coke's next over; followed it with a single, and left Spider to face two balls, the second of which produced a single and brought him back to face Brown Dog, when a sharp bit of fielding from Psycho ruled a second out of the question. He wasn't happy, and it showed when the batsmen met in the middle of the pitch. In answer to Spider's concern, Scum Dog shrugged, made a casual suggestion, and headed back to the non-striker's end.

Brown Dog's third over could only be described as a thoroughly luckless doing over of an unfortunate batsman. Six balls, a random mixture of off- and leg-cutters produced six play and misses, and the

resulting maiden meant that while the run rate was around the asking rate, without Big Al's 55, things were looking particularly green around the gills at 1 for 82 off 13.

The batsmen met mid-pitch at the end of the over, and as I passed I caught a Scum Dog suggestion that he'd try to farm the strike for a while, which also served to lift the run rate as a couple of fours and a two that he couldn't quite turn into a three came off Rum & Coke's third, but left Spider to face Brown Dog again.

As I passed the huddle, Spider was expressing his frustration at his inability to distinguish between the two deliveries. The Scum Dog response, delivered with an *in that case this is the way it is* shrug, was to suggest that attack was the best form of defence.

"Well, if you get right down the track you can hit it before it gets the chance to do too much."

The first ball found Spider on the charge, and while he didn't middle it, he managed to chip it over mid-on for a three. Scum Dog worked the second for a single, and ball three sailed over mid off, running away to the boundary. When the next went the same way, it looked like Spider was on the way. Ball five produced a solid defensive shot that would've been unimaginable two overs before, and the final delivery went behind square leg for a single.

Rum & Coke evidently didn't present the same threat, as a solid forward defensive stroke was followed by a boundary and a single, with Scum Dog taking another one to retain the strike as Ankles came into the attack. Over eighteen, as a result, delivered a bag of flighted leggings with a wrong 'un thrown in for variation. Three singles kept the score board ticking over as the batsmen took their time adjusting to a sharp decline in pace.

It was safe to assume the four quickies and Ankles were going to be the *eight over* options, and while Ankles got his four in and Psycho ended up getting a fourth somewhere before the thirtieth, the rest of the bowling for the foreseeable future was going to be entrusted to the five bowlers who had to be given two each.

The first of them was The Godfather, who sent down a brisk set of medium pacers that Scum Dog despatched to the boundary twice with a two thrown in for good measure. With his total on 44, the question of getting the strike on 49 raised its head and with drinks on the horizon the remaining deliveries were defended away.

Like the previous day, I'd decided drinking during the day would be limited to a maximum of two beers at lunchtime. With a maximum of eleven overs after lunch I suspected I could get away with three if necessary, but couldn't see where the necessary could come from, and maybe a couple after the game before I headed off to the cave to hibernate for a day or three.

Heather Brooks wasn't there when I got to the score book, but a very happy looking Zero was. He was examining the details in the score book with considerable interest, though I wasn't sure how much sense he was eliciting from it. Here was the avenue by which I could spend the ten minute break without going anywhere near the beer truck.

"You're looking happy today Zero," I remarked. "big bus trip yesterday?"

"No. On the way home I have only two, three beers. I go straight home off the bus. *Listen you bastards, I tell them, particularly Mick, tomorrow I must play cricket. Against Townsville. And I must bat, so today I do not drink. Understand?*"

"What did Mick say?"

"At first he was not happy, but I say *Maybe just one* and he goes away. Later when I insist only one more, he says to *make sure that I am right to beat those bastards*. So I think he understands. I look at the score book, and I think it will not be necessary for me to bat, Huxley retired hurt for 55, Hewitt on 44, Webber 21. Brooksy says I must bat, but I do not think so. I think it looks good."

"Yeah, if it was an ordinary game it would. For a start they still need more than two hundred off thirty overs, which is still run a ball territory. There's not much batting after Brooksy, Aravinda and The Duck when you take the quality of the bowling you'll have to deal with into account."

"If Hewitt, Huxley and Webber do their job, I think surely that will not be necessary?"

"In an ordinary game, yes, but this isn't an ordinary game. This one's set up so everybody gets a go. It's a sort of compromise between pub cricket when the game's an excuse for everybody to have a couple of dozen beers, and the serious stuff. For a start, just about everybody gets a bowl. With twelve on the teams that's a bit trickier than it might be with fifty overs, so the rule here is that you can leave one bloke out of the bowling, but everybody else must bowl two, and no one can bowl more than eight."

"So I bowl four?"

"If you'd been able to stay yesterday, you might've gone eight. You have to make sure that everybody has a bowl before the good bowlers come back."

"Otherwise everybody might not get a go," Zero agreed.

"So they're limited to four overs first up. So your five good bowlers bowl the first twenty, then your five other bowlers bowl ten before the good blokes are back to finish off. That middle ten is coming up. Even if we, sorry, *they*, score a hundred off this next ten there's still another hundred to get."

"The batsmen will be, how do you say it, *well set* And Huxley can come back."

"He can, but he can't do that till you've had a bat. If Scum Dog gets past fifty, he'll have to retire as well, and he can't come back till after Huxley. Spider'd come back after Scum Dog if he gets that far. But none of that can happen until after you've had a go."

The news didn't go down as well as it might, but that was more than likely fear of the unknown.

"Anyway, even if you get out first ball that means that Huxley and whoever else has retired can come back a bit earlier. Relax. Enjoy it. Have a couple of beers like you do on a Saturday. Watch the game, it'll be interesting and there's the chance it'll end up being close and you'll more than likely be involved towards the end. Anyway, how did the Rugby go yesterday? It's not as if the boys were too coherent when they got back to the Palace last night."

A match report took up much of the rest of the allocated time for the drinks break and shortly thereafter I found myself back at the northern end for Ankles' second over.

The bowler might have been the pick of Townsville's leg spinning fraternity but you wouldn't have known it from the way Spider laid into him. Nine off his own bat and a single to Scum Dog made for a productive over; but there was a definite threat that the slightest miscalculation could bring disaster:

A second from The Godfather yielded a three to Scum Dog and a couple of pairs to Spider. With Scum Dog on 48, it was obvious that the scenario for the upcoming Ankles over was a single to Scum Dog followed by even numbers from Spider, though it took the Dog two balls to get the single, and the need to avoid odd numbers turned easy singles into dots and threes into twos, but four more took Spider to 38 as Scum Dog got set to take full toll of Ming's first over.

Avoiding the odd numbers meant the over wasn't as expensive as it could've been, and a two, a four and a six took care of all the even number options. There could've been three singles as well, and the two could have yielded three if they'd pushed the issue, but twelve runs was par for the course.

Brooksy arrived at the non-striker's end with Spider not far from the golden over, after which it'd be up to Brooksy and Aravinda to guide the tail through the top order bowlers, which meant Spider needed to take his time getting to the magic 49 while Brooksy got himself set.

Ankles added a few complications by working through his variations. He'd mainly been bowling leggies, but in the space of six balls he ran through the rest, going around the wicket for a couple of deliveries and limiting Spider to a two and a four and luring him down the track with the last ball.

A smart piece of glove work from Retread saw him on his way back to the shed for 44, with the total on a healthy 2/162 and the match delicately poised, as the saying goes, coming up to the halfway point of the innings.

According to the conventional wisdom of the TV commentariat you expect to end up with around double the score at the end of thirty overs, and since we were well short of that mark and about halfway there already, things should've looked reasonably cosy.

Losing Spider, however, wasn't part of the preferred stream of events, and with two batsmen yet to face a ball at the crease, things could have gone into a serious tailspin. With Ming on for his second Brooksy and Aravinda rotated the strike, adding three singles to the total, and the end of the over saw the inevitable consultation.

Given the fact that Aravinda was widely regarded as a serious *tonk* merchant, the most obvious ploy would've involved giving him as much of the strike as possible, but that raised the possibility of dismissal since Aravinda seemed constitutionally incapable of keeping the ball on the ground.

There's a lot of air out there, he'd been known to remark, *and besides they've only got nine blokes to field, so a lot of it's vacant space.*

While there was something in the argument, Denison players knew the way he bats and two on the boundary around cow corner and two deep in the covers were regulation settings likely to produce a wicket, assuming the bowlers could pitch the ball where it would collect a not-quite-middled hoick across the line or a lofted front foot drive.

Besides, Aravinda inevitably added when pressed on the wisdom of the aerial route, *the grass on these fields is so fuckin' thick that if you hit the thing along the ground you'll never get value from your shot.*

Personally I thought the aerial option was the result of shortcomings in the weight transference department and an inability to lean into the shot by bending the front knee, *but I'm not a moderately successful Denison A Grade cricketer, so what would I know?*

J.C. came on to bowl Over 26, and Brooksy took a single to hand over the strike, and we were off again. With Aravinda at the crease, a Denison captain would have set a deep field in front of square on

both sides of the wicket and more than likely dropped mid-off and mid-on back as well, but that was another bit of mail that'd been lost in transit, so Aravinda had a while to blaze before Nuts, Balls and whoever else was involved with the Dipsomaniacs' brains trust woke up.

Mind you, Aravinda took a ball or two to settle in. A solid back defensive, a single out on the off side, single to Brooksy to give the strike back, then *Whack*. Aravinda didn't quite middle ball four, but got it away behind square for four, but the next one was right where he wanted it and disappeared towards the highway, clearing the boundary by a good ten to twelve metres.

Having rolled his arm over the previous evening, Balls only needed to bowl one more to use up his allocation, and escaped relatively lightly, keeping Brooksy on strike for the first two, sneaking a dot ball down the leg side while I was feeling generous and only getting hammered off the final three, with a total of eleven off the over.

J.C.'s second went the same way, except that it took Brooksy three balls to get off strike and the other ten came as boundaries rather than four-two-four.

You didn't need to be psychic to work out what came next.

With two overs before *bring back the top bowlers* time, and one before drinks, the choice between Nuts and his brother was straightforward. By letting him know a couple of overs beforehand, Psycho would be given time to warm up, something that more than likely wouldn't have occurred if he was reintroduced to the attack after the break.

Given a choice between beer and calisthenics, the beer would've won by the length of the straight.

The preceding overs had also given Nuts time to adjust his tactics. With Brooksy on strike the field came up, aiming to cut off the single, and Psycho obliged by pitching the ball up outside off stump, so half the over went by without any damage. Brooksy got the single off the next, and a quick conflagration was followed by a fast yorker that removed middle stump while Aravinda attempted to launch it into the tomato field that lay on the eastern side.

I gave momentary consideration to calling the drinks break there and then, but as The Duck approached the middle I approached Nuts, signalled to Brooksy to join us and suggested that we make this session the eleven-over one.

"Has to happen eventually," Brooksy shrugged. "Now or after lunch or whenever. Fine with me."

The reaction was one I found bemusing. Had I made such a suggestion the day before Brooksy's reaction would've been to go for whatever option was most likely to stir the possum, but here he was, the epitome of *whatever suits you is fine with me*. Nuts was of the same mind. The Duck arrived, Psycho bowled, the ball was blocked and Nuts made his way back to the bowling crease about ten minutes earlier than he'd anticipated.

Not that lack of a warm-up had much effect on the gentleman's routine military mediums. Three balls to Brooksy yielded a two, a dot and a one, while The Duck got off the mark with a two from the penultimate delivery before blocking the last.

I found myself accompanying Brooksy as the players made their way towards the drinks dispensary, hardly surprising given we were both starting from the same end of the pitch, and recent developments were an equally unsurprising topic of conversation.

"Acquiring a bit of diplomacy in your old age, mate," I suggested as a starter: "Recent development, like in the past eighteen hours or so?"

"You have to let them think they've had a win occasionally. Not too often, mind, but occasionally. Anyway I'd seen Drake warming up over there, and reckoned he's be better coming out for an over rather than sitting on his arse for ten minutes."

"It solves the problem of the missing over from last night," I suggested.

"That too."

A glance around revealed the vast majority of Dipsos had gathered around the beer truck, and tactical discussion was unlikely to be overheard as we made our way towards the scorer.

"It also means that when we *do* give them a serve they're less likely to be looking for it."

"Animal cunning," I remarked. "It might be a tad subtle for this mob. From my experiences the standard operating procedure involves hitting them before they hit you."

"That's true, but there is such a thing as a false sense of security. Speaking of which," Brooksy added as we reached the card table that served as the scorer's bench, "we need to lull them into that sense of false security before Zero comes in to bat. Looking forward to it? Looks like you're ready."

Zero was seated beside the scoring table, pads on, gloves and bat by his side.

"Yes, and no," was the reply. "The boys tell me I need to put on pads now because when you get out no other bastard can bat, but I tell them *Bullshit* and they no listen."

"Actually," Heather chipped in, "they were telling him that there was only one set of pads in the gear bag that'll fit him, so he'd better make sure he gets them."

"Anyway," Zero went on, "I tell them *Murphy's Law*. If I put on pads now, I not need them later on. If I wait I will need. So I put them on now to be safe."

"Could be something in that," I remarked. "What's the total?"

At 3 for 206, with Big Al and Scum Dog able to come back, you'd have had reason to be confident but, as Brooksy pointed out, Psycho was back in the attack and more than likely to bowl out his eight from here on.

"Overheard 'em out there a couple of overs ago. His brother reckoned that he couldn't bowl any worse than he did last night, but if he did it was a smart move to get his overs out of the way early so he couldn't do too much damage."

"Nice bastard for a brother," I suggested.

"It worked. His last over was better than his first spell, and if he can get the breakthrough..."

"Anything else you overheard out there? Keep this up and we'll be calling you *Radar* or something."

"They're saving the spinner till the tail comes in, as you'd expect. Possibly keep one from Psycho up their sleeves if they get the breakthrough, and they'll look at Angry and Brown Dog to finish."

"So what's the plan? See Psycho off, have a dip at Rum & Coke and try to take on the spinner?"

"Two overs to get Drake started. Get him to have a go after that. Same with Typhoon, Craven and Muscles. Dunno how His Lordship's going to go. Judging on his effort with the ball you wouldn't be hoping for much. Then it'll all be up to Zero..."

"I try to ask the boys to show me how to bat," Zero interjected, "but they say No."

"As they should've. That's what I told them to do."

The remark caused raised eyebrows all round.

"Look, for a start if they gave you an hour's practice they're not going to be able to teach you to bat. That takes time. You weren't here yesterday when their spinner was batting, but he's been playing the game for, what? twenty-something years and he *still* can't bat. No you're better off doing what you did yesterday, stick with what you know, and if it comes off good. If you get out first ball that just gets Big Al back earlier. Anyway, you've already made your contribution, so anything extra's a bonus."

The expression on Zero's face expressed extreme doubt.

"For a start," Brooksy explained, "we needed someone to be the twelfth player and we needed him before the toss. Might've been able to get away with adding someone afterwards, but that would've prevented me from doing a couple of other things."

While Zero probably didn't get what the Denison captain I was referring to, I was ticking off little giggles in my mind. Yep, without that twelfth player being written in from the start, a good bit of Brooksy's point-scoring wouldn't have been possible.

"So then we got a couple of overs out of you. For what? Nine? Ten? Whatever it was it was less than what would've happened if we'd bowled Hewitt instead. Would've been nine or ten *wides*, even with Herston being charitable. Plus what came off the bat."

Zero nodded. This much made sense to him.

"It worked well enough to give you four overs instead of two. That was two extra overs someone else *didn't* have to bowl, and would've gone for a sight more than nine or ten too. So if you hadn't bowled, with the other blokes bowling they'd have made well over three-fifty. Then there's the runs you saved in the field. What do you reckon, Herston, would've been a good ten?"

I nodded.

"But wait, there's more. Because you were playing and we hadn't been able to persuade you to bat in the local comp, when I said we wanted you to bat that meant their number twelve had to bat too."

"He," I pointed out, "faced two maiden overs and prevented their retired batsmen from coming back to face a ball."

"Exactly. So if you add all that up without your contribution we would've been chasing more than four hundred. So whatever you get with the bat, like I said, is a bonus. I'm going to try to bat through to the end, and if I'm still there I'll give you a couple of pointers when you get out there and we see how things are going. You'd help out too, wouldn't you Herston? Like you did when he bowled?" I nodded.

"Anyway, that's got to be close to the ten minutes. Time to head back? Get 'em to hurry that last bit of the beers?"

As I made my way back to the middle there was plenty of time to reflect that Brooksy was definitely intent on maximizing his points score, and even if he hadn't had the odd personal score to settle, everything he was trying was a contribution to a possible Denison win.

His mail about the resumption proved spot on, and Psycho's fifth over yielded three singles and a two as the batsmen settled back in.

Rum & Coke came on from the other end and the conference before the over seemed to have resulted in agreement that Brooksy would turn the strike over while Drake had a go, Brooksy's single off the first ball was followed by a dot, a two, another dot, a four and a three. We were about half way through Psycho's next over, and The Duck had just pulled one through the leg side after a first ball two when Brooksy decided to rise the stakes.

"That front foot's getting close, Herston," he remarked as Psycho passed on his way back to the top of his mark. "Bears watching."

The following delivery was short, producing an air swing on its way through to Retread and a further observation on the positioning of the front foot. Another short one followed, and this time bat hit ball and midwicket had another *fetch it* mission. Psycho was muttering on his way back, and I glanced in Brooksy's direction, shaking my head.

While three deliveries had seen the bowler hitting the crease, he wasn't in immediate danger of overstepping, and I wanted to avoid stirring the possum. The final ball didn't go quite as far, being intercepted just inside the boundary by Rum & Coke on his way round from fine leg and limiting the score to two. Brooksy, however, couldn't help himself.

"That's three where he's been right up there," he remarked. "Like I said, bears watching."

While the observation failed to elicit a response, it evidently, as subsequent events indicated, found its mark.

Brooksy kept up the strike rotation with the second ball of Rum & Coke's next over, but things came to a grinding halt as the third caught the edge and was well taken by Nuts at slip.

Typhoon got off the mark with a single from the second ball he faced, Brooksy played out the over, the batsmen met mid-pitch and when Brooksy reached the non-striker's end he remarked that Drake's dismissal hadn't been the preferred option but the contribution was valuable.

"Fifty from me, ten from Typhoon, get another ten from Cravo and Muscles and we'll be right up around the target. There's a way to go but it's definitely gettable."

The first ball of Psycho's penultimate over passed the edge of Typhoon's bat and produced the observation that the front foot was getting close, and this time Psycho lived up to his moniker.

"You want to stay down this end, smartarse," he responded. "Get down there and you'll get what for."

"Mate," I interjected, "don't worry. How many times have I umpired when you've been bowling?"

"A few."

"Tell me if I'm wrong, but have I called you without warning you you're getting close first?"

"Don't think so. Can't remember."

"More to the point, never mind Mick here, have I told you you were getting close?"

"No."

"So there's no problem, is there?" I thought was a reasonable conclusion to draw.

"Fuckin' oath there's a problem. It's standing right over there and it's name is Mick Fuckin' Brooks. He doesn't want to get to the other end, I can tell you."

My attempt to smooth things over had failed to produce the desired result since the next ball was a searing bouncer Typhoon didn't have much difficulty evading but had Retread at full stretch in an attempt to avoid conceding byes.

He succeeded in getting a finger to it and deflecting it on the leg side, preventing four byes but conceding a single one. If they'd pushed it there was definitely two for the taking, but it seemed Brooksy was up for the challenge.

The third ball was much the same as its predecessor though I suspect Retread was more prepared this time around (you didn't need to be a mind-reader to see it coming) and got it in the right glove. Brooksy had swayed out of the way, and had then, rather pointedly, inquired after the welfare of the bowler's big toe.

The response was a yorker, aimed at the *batsman's* big toe, but Brooksy, expecting that result was down the track clipping the low full toss behind square for four. Again, you didn't need to be psychic to spot what was coming, and the bouncer was hooked over fine leg's head for six.

"Another one right there would go down rather well," was the Brooks assessment as the batsmen completed a perfunctory run aimed at getting himself into optimal niggles territory.

Psycho responded with a raised fist, Brooksy demonstrated a bat could be a handy deterrent in such situations and both protagonists returned to their respective ends for the final delivery.

Under most circumstances you'd expect another bouncer, and it seemed Brooksy certainly did, but for some reason the ball was pitched up, and cannoned into the back pad, resulting in an appeal that would've blown out the bowler's dentures if he'd had any.

There was, however, one slight technical difficulty, apart from the fact that the ball was arguably just going down the leg side.

"Which one would you prefer?" I asked. "The *Not Out* or the late no ball call? I think under the circumstances it might be best to just call *Over*."

"Fuckin' what?"

"That ball, your front foot landed about *here*. Now remembering I was going to point that out to you and suggest that the mark goes back about *that much* do we stick to the script or do I call the no-ey and have another delivery? Under the circumstances it might be best to avoid the re-bowl option."

"What about the LBW?" Psycho persisted. "How was he?"

"I thought it was just going down the leg side, which is why I preferred not to call the no ball. Now here's your cap and let's get on with the game."

The confrontation had obviously got to his brother; however. Not that Nuts conveyed this directly. A shouted *Ankles! Next one that end!* left no one in any doubt as to his displeasure.

"Think that's about thirteen-nil," Brooksy observed as I reached the other end. "Typhoon out of the firing line and that bastard out of the attack."

Typhoon looked much more comfortable against Rum & Coke, taking a two off the second ball, while two subsequent singles rotated the strike and left Brooksy at the right end to welcome the spinner into the attack.

With fourteen to go and a tad under ninety required we were well over the run a ball equation, but at four wickets down, Brooksy at the crease, and Big Al and Scum Dog to come back, that shouldn't have been a problem.

The key question was what would happen with the leggie at the bowling crease.

If he was dealing with a tail-ender you'd expect he'd be sending down a stream of leggies with the occasional well-disguised variation thrown into the mix to take the wicket if he couldn't accomplish that through flight and turn on the stock delivery.

Against a 'keeper like Brooksy, or a top order bat (and Brooksy was good enough to bat in the first four) that mightn't have been successful. He'd probably pick the difference as the variation went in, and would probably be a better chance of scoring off whatever Ankles was going to throw up.

Ankles opened with the leggie, however, and Brooksy treated it with respect. He followed it with the top-spinner, which was worked away through the leg side for two. Another leggie could've produced a single, but there wasn't a second on offer so Brooksy stayed put.

Ball four was the wrong 'un, which brought another two, and the leggie that followed was worked into the covers for a single. Typhoon edged the final delivery behind point for a possible single, and since Typhoon would be facing Rum & Coke at the other end, Brooksy was happy to take it.

Rum & Coke was back for his last, which started with a dot and a two through the covers to Typhoon, but when he tried to repeat the shot an outside edge was snapped up in the gully, where Balls was loitering with intent.

Typhoon's seven wasn't quite the ten Brooksy had been counting on, but Craven was capable of getting a few, and Muscles could hold up an end though he tended to take his time scoring runs.

Craven made his intentions clear from the outset. Two off the first one he faced, swing and a miss off the second and the last one could've gone for three, which would've left him dealing with Ankles next over so they settled for two. Brooksy didn't have much difficulty with a four; a two and a single off the last ball, holding the strike as Brown Dog came back for one more before drinks.

Brown Dog started with a couple of dots before Brooksy got one through the covers for four and worked the following ball for a single. Craven took a single straight off, and try as he might Brooksy couldn't get the single he needed off the last ball, so that it would be Ankles versus Craven when we came back from lunch.

With ten overs to go, sixty-five to get, six wickets effectively in hand and quality bowlers in operation things looked likely to go down to the wire. I called *Over* and turned, heading off towards the shed. I'd barely gone ten metres when I heard a familiar voice call my name, turned and sighted Nuts moving at a jog-trot in my direction. I slowed down to give him time to catch up.

"Handled that well," he remarked as he arrived within close conversational distance. "If you'd called that no-ball I reckon the next one would've been a beamer straight for Brooksy's nut."

"Consistency, mate. Just did what I'd said I was going to do. Warn him when he was getting close to overstepping, which I would've done if the ball hadn't hit the pad. It was going down the leg side. Slightly, but down the leg side. Would've missed leg by, what? *That much.*"

"Thought of signing up as a diplomat?" They tell me there's a vacancy."

"Yeah," I responded, "Ambassador to North Korea or somewhere."

"Psycho would give those mad bastards a run for their money, I can tell you. Bastard swings a mean wooden train. I know that from personal experience. Anyway, well done. Owe you a beer."

With everybody else making a predictable beeline for the tucker table, I wandered across to the score book, an area vacated by everyone except Heather Brooks and Zero, padded up and not happy. Brooksy arrived about thirty seconds later.

"You can take those pads off," he told Zero. "Be a good hour before we go out again. Get 'em off. Don't play your innings before you get out there. That's another reason why I didn't want you having a hit beforehand. If you'd started back at the last break you'd probably still be there. You'd have been stuffed by the time you got on the paddock. Lunch, Heather?"

As the two of them headed over to join the queue I pulled up a chair and seated myself beside Zero.

"Not eating, mate?" I ventured.

"No. Nervous. This is not like Saturday cricket. Very important to win, I think. Brooksy very determined."

"Well, if you look at it that way, there's probably only two games that matter in Saturday cricket. It's a four team comp, so you only really need to win the semifinal and the final. So, yeah, of course the vibe here'll be different to what you get on a Saturday. We're playing Townsville, so we're behind the eight-ball from the start."

Zero nodded, and I went on.

"I mean, look at the numbers. We've got, what eight, nine thousand people? Hundred and twenty thousand up there. That's about fifteen to one for starters. A team picked from the whole of Townsville should always beat a side from here. Just on the numbers."

"So your skill does not matter?"

"Of course it does, and that's where it gets worse. For a start just about everyone out there bar the wicketkeeper has played rep cricket for Townsville. What rep players have we got? Brooksy. Spider could *probably* make the Mackay side if he lived in Mackay, but there's no one else as far as I can see. So you add those things together, and it's going to be hard to win on the score book. But there's more than one way to get a win."

"How?"

"Well, for a start, Brooksy's got a little points scoring thing going. Anything he can put over them is one point. Anything they can put over him is one to them. If you ask him, he'd probably tell you something like twelve-nil. When you go out to bat there'll probably be a couple more scored."

"So I must make runs. That is worrying me."

"No, mate, that's where you're wrong. Soon as you walk out there you're making it easier for the bloke at the other end. Listen, these blokes have been playing cricket for years. Give them a problem on a cricket field and they'll more than likely know how to tackle it. Mightn't always work, but they'll know what to try. Look what happened when you came on to bowl. Something different they hadn't seen before, and they didn't know how to handle it."

"But when I bat."

"You go out and do what you know. Treat it like softball. Stand where their batsmen stood against you. Make their bowlers work out what to do, Don't get me wrong about this, but it's like when you're playing pub cricket and a woman comes in to bat. What do you do? Bowl flat out? Not sure whether you should. You go out there to bat, they'll have to figure out what to do. If you get a single, they've got to change, and if the other bloke gets a single and you're back on strike, they've got to change again. Just like having a right hander and a leftie batting. Every single, the bowler has to change his line."

"I still worry," Zero stated. "I stop worrying when game is over. I am not wanting to let the side down."

"Mate, doesn't matter. You've already done your job. Soon as Brooksy got you to play you'd fixed one problem. When you bowled, that saved him from bowling Hewitt. When he got two more out of you, that was two overs someone else didn't have to. Then you took wickets, and they were good wickets. Good batsmen. You'll be fine."

I glanced towards the beer truck. Brooksy, burger in hand was talking to Psycho, and, wonder of wonders, both of them were finding something funny.

"Look over there," I suggested, "and you'll see Brooksy talking to a bloke who was trying to kill him half an hour ago. They're laughing. Come over for a burger."

"I not think I can eat anything," Zero insisted. "Too nervous."

"A beer then, something that'll help you relax. No? Well in any case if you sit here on your Pat Malone, you're just going to worry. C'mon. I've got to grab something to eat now the queue's died down. Over we go."

Zero followed me across with some reluctance, but at least he followed me. As we moved towards the tucker table I noticed Balls detaching himself from the group he was chatting to and head in our direction.

"Zero, pleased to meet you. I'm Barry Ballmer, what's your other name? You know, not the nickname?"

"Hira, Hira Yamaguchi."

"Mate, *really* pleased to meet you. Would've been looking for you when the footy blokes got back last night but I had other fish to fry. Just wanted to thank yer. Really interesting out there, it was. Good to see something different once in a while. When're you batting? Looking forward to it. Feel like a beer? My shout."

I left a nonplussed Japanese teacher to sort those matters out as Balls looked over his shoulder.

"Nuts! Get over here and talk to the little Jap. Make sure he doesn't get away. Gotta buy 'im a beer."

Nuts detached himself from the group and wandered across, hand extended. Balls headed for the bar and I took my time helping myself to what was on offer while The Duchess looked on.

"Big one last night?" I asked. I hadn't had a chance to get an assessment of the evening's takings in the catering department. I knew what the bar trade would've been like, but I'd left well before the end, so I had no idea how well the patrons had kept up the pace, but, on the other hand, I a fair suspicion.

"They can come back whenever they like. Maybe not quite next week. It'll take a while to restock, but once we have..."

"So it should become an annual event?" I suggested. "Equivalent weekend every year?"

"Would be wonderful," was the response. "See what you can do about that. If you need money, you can count on us to sponsor it. To a reasonable amount, of course."

I could've stayed where I was, but the sight of Brooksy moving towards the Zero-Nuts-Balls conflagration prompted me to do the same.

"Now," Brooksy was stating as I came within earshot, "no giving trade secrets away, Zero. Tell the bastards *nothing*. Make 'em wait and find out."

"All the same," Balls said, evidently continuing a conversational thread that had preceded Brooksy's arrival. "I'd like to get an over when he comes in to bat. Any chance of that, Nuts? Save you from bowling your brother for his last. Be interesting, I reckon. Looking forward to it."

Nuts was noncommittal about the prospect, and the two of them wandered back to where they'd come from.

"See, Zero?" Brooksy remarked once they were out of earshot, "Nothing to worry about. They're already thinking about what they'll do when you get in. More they think about that, the less they're going to be thinking about the important stuff."

The rest of the lunch break passed with little controversy but considerable ribaldry, laughter and general character assassination until a glance at the time revealed we were ten minutes out from the resumption. Brooksy headed off to round up Craven and batting requisites, instructing Zero to stay

right where he was and not to even *think* about padding up until the batsmen were on their way out to the middle.

With two minutes to go I headed out, followed by the batsmen. Under normal circumstances the etiquette of the game would've had the fielding side take the field first, but Brooksy stopped twenty metres in from the boundary for a tactical discussion while the Dipsomaniacs got their act together. Much of the discussion would've been dedicated to the best approach to Ankles, who'd presumably be bowling the first over after lunch.

Part of the issue, I guessed, was that Brooksy, on 42, needed another seven before *magic* over time. Had he been on strike you'd have assumed he'd have taken about five from the early part of the over; get himself down to the other end on forty-seven, take a single and have a dip at Ankles' last over. Either that or take the single and give Craven a chance to have a serious go at the spinner.

Since he wasn't going to face, I reckoned the options were either to work the singles or tell Craven to have a go at the other end.

There's no way of knowing what the plan was, and it may well have been the *work the singles* option, but Ankles' first delivery saw Craven dancing down the wicket, looking to loft the ball over the bowler's head. Ankles saw him coming, dropped the ball slightly shorter and induced a skied outside edge that produced a two rather than the intended four or six.

The next got slightly more respect, and a single got Brooksy to the striker's end. He took another off the third, while Craven decided it was *heave ho* time and was stumped off the fifth.

With Muscles on his way to the crease, Brooksy had a problem. While Muscles could bat, and had frequently been used as a stabilizing influence when his side lost a flurry of wickets, attacking wasn't his strong suit.

If Brooksy was going to be there when Zero came in, there would have to be some adjustment to the standard *modus operandi* if winning the game was part of the equation. I wasn't able to eavesdrop on the conversation as Brooksy beckoned Muscles over for a chat before he took guard, but the *You're sure?* from Muscles could be taken as a clue.

In any case, the final ball was blocked out, Brooksy faced up to Brown Dog's last and all would shortly be revealed.

Over Forty-two revealed a single to Brooksy, an edge through the slips for two and a more convincing cover drive for three from Muscles and a last ball single to Brooksy. 6 for 286, Brooks 45, as a helpful informant on the sideline informed us.

Ankles came on for his last, Brooksy took two off the second and a single off the third, leaving Muscles with the strike. There was another *You sure?* as the batsman took guard, and as the ball left the bowler's hand, Muscles left his crease.

Under normal circumstances, Muscles played a slog about every third season, but where lack of practice might have presented a problem, sound technique got the front foot close to the pitch of the ball and the bat came through in a booming straight drive that would easily have reached the boundary if the stumps at the bowler's end hadn't got in the way. The ricochet was enough to produce another two, and the next ball went much the same way but managed to stay away from intervening furniture. Four.

Now you'd have expected that the final ball would see something similar, but Muscles stayed in his crease, worked the ball into the covers and took a single to retain the strike.

Since he had four overs to go, it was obvious Angry had to come on for the forty-fourth and the remaining even numbers. There were just over forty left in the *runs required* compartment, and it was obvious Muscles was under instructions to get as many as possible as soon as possible.

He missed the first, slammed the second over mid-off for four, attempted to repeat the shot and holed out off the third with Pretty Boy taking the catch at deep mid-off. A brief expression of disappointment to my right attracted my attention as Muscles trudged off and His Lordship hove into view.

"Not part of the game plan?" I suggested.

"No. Dot or even number, single, single. That was how it was supposed to go."

With that he headed off to confer with the incoming batsman. It was a tricky little situation. If His Lordship could get a single off the next delivery or the one after, a further single would take Brooksy to 49 and the strike, but there was no guarantee that His Lordship was going to survive.

As it turned out the first delivery he faced suggested he didn't know a great deal about batting against bowling of the calibre on offer; and the second, a scorching sandshoe crusher which would've bowled most batsmen who weren't playing first class cricket, and quite a few who were, uprooted leg stump.

With Zero on the way in and one ball left in the over, there were problems all round.

For a start, Brooksy headed towards the approaching figure while the Dipsos' celebratory huddle dissolved into dissension. A certain member of the fast bowling fraternity was calling for a repeat of the wicket-taking delivery; while, interestingly, the contrary viewpoint was being put by the batsmen who'd been at the crease when Zero was bowling.

"Look," Balls stated bluntly, "we know the little bloke's never played cricket at all. Don't need to bowl flat out. Just stand at the crease and roll your arm over. Should be enough."

"Bullshit," Psycho counter-asserted. "Flat out. Yorker! Middle stump skewering the keeper! Way to go!"

"Now hang on a minute," Nuts cut in, "stop and think for a bit. Now I know you've never *actually* done that, but this needs what you'd call a considered approach. So you bowl the little Jap. What happens? You get the big tonker back in, and you've got Brooks at the other end on 48. He'll have to go the tonk next over anyway, and that'll bring the other bloke who retired back in. We take the next over as it comes. Brooks'll want the strike for all of it and then we want the Jap there for the whole of the next. Give him a single towards the end'd be even better. Like Balls said, just stand at the crease and roll your arm over."

There was the predictable expression of copulatory dissent from his brother; but Nuts went on.

"We've been caught out a few times this game."

You're spot on there, was my silent observation on the matter. Brooksy and Zero had made their way to the striker's end where Brooksy was demonstrating the correct way to ground the bat when turning for a second run. Given the fact Brooksy would be looking for even numbers next over it seemed like a wise precaution.

"Most of them have involved the little bloke. Now, he's not a bad bloke, and as Balls said at the lunch break it'll be interesting to see how he goes. As far as winning the game goes, they need about forty and there's every chance a chunk of them'll come off this next over. If they don't, fine, but we know Brooks'll be going for the doctor. So apart from seeing how he goes, our best chance to win the game is to keep the Jap out there and keep him on strike, got it?"

While there were nods all round, there was also one notable dissenter:

"Right! That settles it," Nuts had evidently come to a decision. "Angry stands there and rolls his arm over this ball. Brown Dog does the same when the little bloke's on strike. Work as usual to the other blokes and just rock and bowl when the Jap's there. We're bowling Angry out this end, and Brown Dog's got, what another two? So if it gets to the stage where we have to bowl the last over at the other end and the Jap's still in, Balls gets his wish and bowls it. Right?"

With Brooksy making his way towards where I was standing the cluster broke up. I found Angry standing beside me ready to bowl.

"Dunno about this," he remarked. "More than likely be a wide."

"If it is," I suggested, "I'll only call it if it's way off line. Off the pitch. You'd have no problem with that Mick? Looks like they're going to bowl from a standing start while Zero's down there, so you might as well give 'em some leeway."

"You're the umpire," Brooksy responded. "Call 'em the way you see 'em. You've let plenty go past that I would've called."

The delivery, was lobbed around a decent length and a good thirty centimetres outside the off stump. Zero took a swing, but mistimed things completely. While he didn't miss it by *that* much, he seemed disappointed with the failure to connect.

I called *Over* and set off for the other end, passing close enough to the Brooks-Yamaguchi conference to hear "I'll call for everything and remember, be ready to run two if we run. No ones, no threes. Then see how you go when I'm gone."

The *no odd numbers* factor came into play first ball, but Brooksy collared the second, sending it winging away to the boundary, and it was then a matter of finishing the over. The third, flicked out through midwicket could have brought three though they settled for two and the fourth, edged down to third man produced a much hairier pair. Had the umpire at square leg been a disinterested party it may well have still been seen as a line ball decision. It certainly looked line ball from twenty metres away, but The Duck at square leg wasn't likely to be adjudicating against his skipper in the circumstances.

The *Not out* didn't go down that well, however, and the fifth was short, pulled away through mid-wicket and picked up on the bounce by the boundary-rider. There was an easy single on offer; but two would have been risking another run out appeal. In the end they stayed put. As Angry ran in for the last ball I saw Brooksy moving onto the front foot. Angry saw it too, as the ball pitched well short. Brooksy, quite possibly expecting the reaction, uppercut the ball which flew down towards third man. They ran one, turned for the second, paused, ran, looked again and with the ball on the way back to the 'keeper, settled for two.

With five overs to go and thirty runs needed as Big Al came out to resume his innings we were right on the run-a-ball requirement. Unfortunately (or fortunately if you were barracking from the Dipsos)

Big Al wouldn't be facing and, as indicated, I was aware of the game plan. You wouldn't have needed to be Einstein to figure that one out, of course.

Angry did exactly as the captain required in *stand and deliver* mode. His previous effort had been a foot outside off, and it seemed there was no way he was going any closer. The first two balls brought a swing and a miss, but the third, pitched in the same area and coming through at the same height, was carted away on the off side for what would've been a comfortable two. Big Al, however, wasn't interested in the second.

As Angry set out on the long march back to his mark the batsmen met in mid pitch. While the conversation was out of earshot, the topic under discussion wasn't difficult to guess, though the yorker that Angry speared in wasn't going to result in any of the options they'd been discussing.

Big Al took a wander as Angry marched back again, and when he came back to face up, asked for a guard again. Now, remembering almost everybody had been taking either middle or middle and leg, I didn't think this was totally necessary, but when they ask for it you comply.

I was still bemused when Mr Huxley carefully marked a point on the mat, replaced the chalk behind the stump and took guard with the point he'd just marked visible in front of him. Not *that* far in front, but definitely not where he was standing although his bat was in line with the mark.

Angry charged in, Big Al took a substantial stride forward and the bat scythed down on top of the mark, collected the ball before it pitched and sent it rocketing back at the bowler around head height as it passed him. It was uncomfortably close to head height and head position as it passed *me*, still on the up.

What goes up, must come down, but gravity failed to complete its mission before the ball crashed into the back of the amenities block. Six.

Now, presuming the game plan involved pitching the ball in the blockhole to keep the batsmen at their current ends, it should come as no surprise that it went out the window for the final ball of the over. It was short, and would have gone through at head height but for Big Al's *hit or be hit* factor. It, too, cleared the boundary and kept going. Brown Dog, fielding at fine leg took a good two minutes to retrieve it, and as far as I could tell the pill had finished its journey uncomfortably close to the highway.

That interval gave Big Al and Zero plenty of time to confer; and while they did so, Nuts headed off to intercept Brown Dog on his way back. They were way out of earshot, so I couldn't catch the conversation, but it seemed, from where I was standing that landing six deliveries in about the same area and giving Zero room to swing meant that once he got used to the bounce there was a fair chance he'd hit one, and if he managed to do it early in the over Big Al would be able to carve a fair chunk out of the remaining deficit.

The first one landed just short of a length and flew under the swinging bat. Having induced one *play and miss*, Brown Dog presumably intended to repeat the dose by pitching it up a little further next time, but the blade swung through a little lower, caught the edge and, more by good luck than good management, ran away in front of third man, evading a diving Psycho before crossing the boundary.

Ball three maintained the same line, but this time landed where the block hole would've been had the bat been taking guard that far outside off, and the next went through the same space. Two more dots. Dealing with a softball style cross-bat swing, that seemed a perfect line, and ball five was headed in the same direction when something quite remarkable happened.

I hadn't been taking to much notice of any by-play between Big Al and Zero, and neither had anybody else. As the ball made its way back to the bowler Big Al had been miming a front foot shot, fair enough under the circumstances, but when the ball was bowled, lo and behold Zero copied what had been demonstrated at the other end, but he didn't quite get it right.

The front foot went towards the line, the bat swung through straighter, but not quite where it should have been and the resulting edge flew through where fourth slip could have been. It was intercepted by Psycho, and while things must have been close at that end Zero managed to scramble back for two. The following ball brought a dot, but the six runs off the over brought the ask close to single figures with three overs to go, which meant Angry had a problem. While I hadn't seen the ploy used before, Big Al had given himself a marker that could be used to intercept suspected sandshoe crushers before they pitched, and Big Al had demonstrated what was likely to happen as a result. Yorkers were not going to be a good idea.

A *Nothing short* from Nuts suggested we were going to be seeing the ball up around a good length, and I suspected the stumps were going to be given a wide berth as well. Having been lenient on the width right through the game so far, I couldn't really change my tune all that much as the first three deliveries flew past the bat to be taken by Retread almost in front of Nuts at slip.

As Angry charged in for the fourth I noticed that Big Al wasn't quite facing up where he had been. Under normal circumstances with the batsman taking guard on middle you'd be able to see a bit of off stump and the rest of them would have been obscured by Big Al's impressive bulk. Now, as Angry hit his delivery stride, I caught a glimpse of leg stump. Whether Angry had spotted the move or not, the delivery followed a different line, but the front foot came forward just inside the new line, the bat came through and a leg glance delivered a boundary. With two balls to go, anything down that line was likely to yield more of the seven runs needed, but Angry tried anyway, got away with it, so decided it was worth another go and paid the price with another boundary.

With the score on 8/337, two overs to go and Zero on strike, Balls wandered across to hand his cap to me. I'd already heard Nuts discount the possibility of his brother bowling an eighth over, so this came as no surprise to me. This development, on the other hand, while well and truly telegraphed in advance, seemed to have come as late-breaking news as far as Psycho was concerned.

"My fuckin' over," was the opening salvo as he attempted to reclaim what he saw as rightfully his.

"Look," Nuts replied, as a voice from the boundary advised that there were two runs required for a win. "that's the situation. First up, you'd more than likely to knock the little bloke's block off. No, don't shake your head. You know that if I asked you to do what Angry and Brown Dog have done when he's on strike you'd tell me to *fuck off*. They need one to tie. We already know he can handle the medium pacers, so we see how he looks against spin. If Ankles still had an over left, he'd be on. We need to keep him on strike for all this over, so shut up and fuck off to deep backward square."

He turned his back and set about adjusting the field, He didn't want a single conceded and, as a result, Psycho was the only fielder more than twenty metres from the bat.

The first three deliveries, flighted, landing around a good length and spinning inwards caused Zero no end of trouble, and after the third Big Al summoned his partner for a mid-pitch conference that included plenty of bat swinging and demonstrations involving footwork. Nuts had also consulted the bowler, and while this was done in muffled tones I did catch the words *donkey drops*.

Ball four, as a result, was tossed up further, and while the stumps were in no danger there was always the possibility of a mishit should Zero succeed in connecting.

That failed to happen, and Balls loped in to bowl again, and as he did, Zero went down the wicket and found himself able to swat the ball away on the leg side. He cleared the infield, set off for a run, and with Psycho about to collect the ball, and Big Al, obviously banking on the throw going to the 'keeper's end called Zero back.

Psycho, however, had other ideas. He must have figured the big bloke was the slower of the two and with nothing to lose had a ping at the bowler's end. I saw it coming, and was on my way into position to adjudicate on any run out when the return, hard and flat with the trajectory of a heat-seeking missile hit the stumps with Big Al a good metre and a half short. Even though I wasn't in the best position to make the call it was clearly out, so up went the finger. I was more than a little bemused to note that the incoming batsman was Mick Brooks.

"So what happened to the Scum Dog?" I inquired as he arrived at the bowler's end for the final delivery of the penultimate over.

"Last seen heading off towards your swimming pool singing *I can feel a head job coming on*. At least that's what I've been told. Happened while I was batting, so I couldn't do anything about it. One of his playmates turned up and he was telling her about the etchings you've incorporated in the pool decor."

"Gross moral turpitude," I suggested.

"That too," Brooksy agreed. "You'll probably find a used franger in your spa when you get there later this afternoon. Don't call him the Scum Dog for nothing."

I nodded. "Tried his mobile?"

"Turned off. Sent a runner to fetch him back. Not that I thought we'd really need him, but we can't have the bastard spearing the bearded clam while the game's still on."

"No shagging during cricket hours," I suggested.

Cricket hours, however, were about to come to an abrupt end. Having successfully connected once, Zero tried the same tactic, missed, and being well out of his crease was a certain goner provided Retread took the ball cleanly, which he duly did.

With no sign of a returning Scum Dog there was nothing for it but to explain the missing batsman situation to Nuts and the rest of the Dipsos, who'd assumed Scum Dog would be making a belated appearance. As he wouldn't be, there was nothing for it but to call stumps. There were the regulation handshakes and *Good games* all round as I gathered up the items that needed to find their way back into storage.

By the time I'd stowed the stumps the post-match festivities were well and truly underway and there was no way I wasn't going to join in. As I grabbed a beer I noted His Lordship in conversation with Brooksy, Nuts and Balls and might have joined them if it wasn't for the presence of Olga in the same vicinity.

I thought of joining them since gathering the latest intelligence about plans for the future might be a good move, decided against it because deep down I didn't want to know and was contemplating which of the other clusters I could join when His Lordship waved me over, and the issue was settled.

"I was just suggesting to Barry here," His Lordship announced, "that we make this an annual event."

Hardly surprising really, as the possibility had been telegraphed at least once and His Lordship knew a golden-egg-laying goose when he laid eyes on one.

"Fine with me. You'd need to make it the equivalent weekend, though. Get too much later in the year and you're going to run into complications, but I can't see why it can't work out."

"I was going to suggest a trophy. You know, give the teams something to play for, and a man of the match award, of course," His Lordship added.

"Make it two," Brooksy suggested. "One for each side. Captain to pick the best player on the other side. That's the best way."

"Anyway," His Lordship laughed, "we won't be needing the trophy right away. What with the tie and all that. Still, we could do the man of the match thing for this game. It'd be easy enough to get a trophy from Bill down at the Craft Shop. Any ideas?"

"Easy enough from where I'm standing," Nuts observed. "the little Jap. Has to be, even if he wasn't here for the whole game. Did more than anyone else to determine the result."

"If you're talking about someone who helped to determine the result," Brooksy began.

"It might be a good idea," I cut in, "to change it from a *Man of the match* thing to an *outstanding effort* sort of thing. Make it less formal. I mean, look at it, there were, what, five blokes who retired with the bat. About the same who took two or three wickets. Keep it to one bloke on each side and you're sure to get the other contenders' noses out of joint."

"When it comes to someone who stood out from the pack," Brooksy agreed, "yeah, you'd have to say Zero was it. I like it. Wouldn't have to be an award for something that happened on the field, either."

"Like some bastard who disappears for a shag and isn't available to bat?" I suggested.

"Yeah," Brooksy agreed. "Or something that happened at the pub. Agreed, Nuts?"

"Cool with me."

"So, fellas, you're going to want to be hitting the road before too long. You want me to make an announcement about the trophy, Zero the hero, that sort of thing?"

"Go ahead," was the consensus.

Climbing onto the back of the truck His Lordship called for attention.

"I won't keep everybody very long," he began, "but I've just had a chat to the two captains and Dave Herston, and we've decided that this game needs to become an annual event. So around this time next year there'll be a rematch."

There were *Hear, hear's* all round.

"Betty and I will be donating a trophy, which will be held at The Palace until the boys come down to take it."

"From our cold dead hands," Brooksy interjected. "Won't happen."

"Bullshit," was Psycho's contribution. "This time next year it'll be heading north on the bus. You'll have a vacant space in the trophy cabinet, Brooksy."

"Well," His Lordship suggested, "there's a way around that. "We'll have two trophies, like they do in the Rugby comps. The winner gets the Cup, runner up gets the plate."

"I like that," Balls observed. "Winner and runner up. If it's a tie."

"The trophies stay where they are," I suggested.

"Anyway, now that we've got that sorted out, there's just one more thing. We've looked at something like the Man of the Match thing, but as Herston pointed out there'd be, what? Eight to ten blokes who'd be in the running for a single award, even if we made it one on each side. I think you'd all agree that there's one bloke who's made an immense contribution to the way things have worked out, so I'd like to announce that the first Outstanding Contribution trophy will be ending up on Zero's book shelf, When I've managed to buy it, that is."

"Now," Balls requested, "if we could get the members of both teams over that way for a photo. Herston, you too, Give them time to pack the piss into the esky for the trip home."

Photographs and general conviviality meant it would be a good half hour before the bus set out on the northward journey. I left them at it and strolled cave-wards. Ninety-nine overs at the bowler's end and a succession of big nights preceding same had certainly succeeded in taking their toll.

There was, one thing that needed to be done before the hibernation began. Standing at the door to my sleeping quarters I recalled Brooksy's suggestion that we'd be finding a used prophylactic in the spa, and given the likelihood that the post-match festivities would relocate to the pool area I thought it might be worth taking steps to avoid potential embarrassment.

"Whatever you're doing in there, Pete," I suggested, "it might be a good idea to give it a break. The game's over, and there's a fair chance you'll be getting some company in the not-too-distant future. No used frangers in the spa, if you don't mind."

I headed off, leaving behind me the protests that certain parties *wouldn't do that sort of thing.*

Bullshit, I thought, there aren't too many things you wouldn't do, you bastard, and leaving conspicuous evidence of sexual excess isn't one of them.

SUNDAY NIGHT

While I was inclined to head straight for the cave, roll the rock across the entrance and hibernate for three days there were drawbacks to operating on that scenario immediately.

For a start there was the subject of food. I'd had a substantial lunch, but needed sustenance if I wasn't going to wake up with the munchies half way through the night. With that in mind I thought it would be best to establish what everybody else was planning for the short term before setting any of my own plans in concrete.

When I arrived at Reception I discovered Bright Eyes back from Airlie Beach and discussing her weekend and plans for the immediate future with Sandy.

"Bright Eyes was just suggesting, that she was inclined to head down to the Palace for the Sunday roast, but I've told her I doubted she'd find many volunteers wanting to join her."

I nodded.

"That's what I suspected," Sandy continued. "Which raises the small matter of eating tonight. I could throw a curry together, but the easiest option would have to be something from the fish shop."

"True," I replied. "That one gets my vote. Still, it might be best to wait till The Scoffer gets back here. He's dropping the pub ute back to the Palace and The Duchess or someone is supposed to be dropping him back here. In the meantime, I'm ready to put my feet up for a bit."

Before I could put my feet up, however, there were things that needed to be done. Once half a dozen bottles of mineral water had been checked into a more convenient situation I found a pair of shorts, changed out of the umpiring togs, grabbed the half-empty bottle from the fridge and wandered back poolside. A bit lasted no more than fifteen minutes. At that point slamming doors and the sound of various voices heralded the arrival of Hopalong and Jeffrey.

"Aha!" was Jeffrey's opening remark. "Have I got news for you? The worm has turned and the swallows have come home to roost. Hang on while I grab a beer and all will be revealed. Anybody?"

Hopalong and Sandy indicated they could handle a beer, while I waved the bottle of mineral water to indicate I'd be right for the time being. The gesture was evidently misinterpreted since Jeffrey returned with beer for all concerned.

Faced with the inevitable, I weakened and waited for developments to be revealed.

"Ran into the tug boys Friday arvo," Jeffrey began. How this related to anything at all wasn't clear, but I refrained from comment confident that all would be revealed in the fullness of time.

"And?" Hopalong evidently did not share my confidence.

"I was informed, due to everything that was going on this weekend they'd volunteered to do the kitchen at the pub on Sunday and were wondering whether I'd be free to give them a hand. Well, not a hand, but they wanted someone who knew the ways things work to check things went back the way they were supposed to."

"From the days when they gave you a hand in there I'd have thought they knew the ropes."

"They do. After I'd left, the job went to Athos, Porthos and D'Aramis, and they'd been giving them a hand. With the catering at the cricket and everything else, the boys from the kitchen asked if they'd be right to do it on their own."

Nobody in the vicinity expressed surprise at the arrangement.

"They knew that if there was anything that wasn't exactly right when The Duchess walks in there at ten tomorrow morning the kitchen boys will be on the receiving end. Big time."

A further round of nods indicated that the drift had, indeed, been caught.

"Anyway, I said I'd be in there about ten-thirty, if that was okay with them, and when I got there they were just starting. Wouldn't let me do anything but got me to keep an eye on what they were doing. When the pub opened at eleven The Duchess was in the bar swanning around when I heard her say *Looking for Jeffrey?* Luckily I hadn't had to say too much so she didn't know I was in there."

"Why?" Hopalong was unable to let the narrative reach wherever it was going in its own good time.

"You know what it's like. Sitting in the office you can hear everything that's said in that corner where every bastard heads when they want to have a discreet conversation."

"Well," Jeffrey went on, "it's the same in the kitchen. After she's asked whoever it was if they were looking for me, Olga's voice answered that she wasn't looking for me *as such*, but that if she did happen to run across me she had a large chunk of mind that'd be heading in my direction."

"So that if The Duchess knew you were in the kitchen, she'd have pointed Olga in that direction," Hopalong guessed. "Pity about that. You look like you could do with a bit of her mind."

The response was ignored as the narrative resumed.

"So when The Duchess asked *Why?* they ended up sitting in that corner, right where a smart lad could drop a few eaves without hitting himself on the foot. Anyway, the long and short of it was that Olga put The Duchess right in the picture as far as my little subterfuge from Friday night was concerned, and they both agreed that I was an arsehole."

"A widely held view," I remarked. "But a better class of arsehole."

"Olga went on to point out it had all worked out for the best, because if I hadn't nicked off the way I had she wouldn't have been able to entertain *Barry* upstairs last night."

"Because if you hadn't sent her upstairs with the key," I guessed.

"She wouldn't have had it in her purse, and if she hadn't been able to disappear upstairs with your mate he wouldn't have suggested if she felt inclined there was space in his unit she could occupy."

"Which is something that would get right up her ex's nose," I felt obliged to point out.

"Yeah, vindictive bitch. Anyway that started The Duchess asking about young Bernelle. Where was that going to leave her? That kind of thing. Which is when Olga came out with the fact that Bernelle has already won that Apprentice Hairdresser of the Year thing, and is supposedly a shoe-in for the national title, so she'll more than likely be off to London and Olga would either have to find a flat-mate or pay all the rent herself."

"Whereas if she moves to Townsville."

"It's rent free with this Ballmer bastard, at least as long as that lasts. Well, not quite rent free. You'd guess there'd be a certain amount of fucking involved. But more or less. Besides the only job she's been able to find here was at the roadhouse. Ballmer reckons that there's a vacancy in the office where he works, so she can fill that while he's filling her; if you catch my drift. There's a unit near the Casino and Olga can check it all out after she drops Bernelle at the airport at ten tomorrow."

"So, in other words," I suggested, "the whole thing's wrapped up. Speaking of things that are wrapped up, do we put you down for fish and chips? Hopalong?" There were signs of assent from both.

"I'll ring that through, if you like," Sandy suggested. "Bright Eyes'll head down to collect them when they're ready. Only thing is the size of the order."

"Easy," I replied. "Use the standard formula when you're ordering for more than three or four people."

"Which is?"

"Number of heads. You, me, Jeffrey, Hopalong, Bright Eyes. That's five. Times one and a half. That's seven point five. Round it up to the next whole number. Eight. One for good measure makes nine."

"What about chips?"

"Heads divided by two and round up. Add one for good measure if you're feeling hungry. Three or four scoops. Whatever you think is a fair thing."

"The final question, of course," Sandy concluded. "Crumbed or battered?"

"You know my thoughts," I responded. "I prefer my fish without any trace of domestic violence."

"Meaning?" Hopalong interjected. "Preferably something in the Queen's English."

"Not battered, though I've been known to make the occasional exception when it's beer batter."

The poolside consensus was that crumbed was the better option, and, should Bright Eyes decide to differ, a single battered fillet would suffice. Sandy departed to take care of the order while I turned back to Jeffrey to let him finish recounting his adventures.

"After Olga had dropped those couple of bombshells? Anything further to report?"

"Not a great deal. The Duchess pointed out it was about time that she headed out to look after the catering and asked whether Olga was headed in the same direction, which she was. Oh, and she also pointed out that Hopalong was looking after the beer truck which suggested I'd be able to get a lift back here if I needed one, since I figured that if His Lordship's playing cricket with a bunch of drunks he'll be drinking and the truck can't drive itself home."

"Olga took up the offer?"

"After she'd asked whether the catering needed another hand, yes, which made my plans for the rest of the day clearer: Finish in the kitchen, head up the bowls club, get a lift back here or down to the

pub depending on who was ready to go when I was. Could've stayed at the pub but discretion is the better part of Valerie. Though all of her is nice, of course."

"Better to be safe than sorry," I suggested.

"So anyway Paddy was being collected by his missus so I got a lift to his place, walked to the pub and got roundly abused by The Duchess for my troubles. Par for the course, more or less."

Sandy's return signified that the administrative details were in hand, so from there it was a matter of sporadic small talk until Bright Eyes' return turned the topic of conversation to the subject of drink.

"Something in a Clare or Eden Valley Riesling," I suggested as I headed indoors in search of a bottle and glasses.

Figuring five heads meant five glasses and five glasses meant an empty bottle, I grabbed a second one to be on the safe side. As it turned out Jeffrey opted to stay with beer, so the reserve bottle wasn't called into immediate action. Once the mountain of fish and chops had been demolished, Hopalong rose to his feet.

"Since there's nothing left," he remarked, "I guess I'd better look after the washing up."

With that he collected the fish and chip wrapping, bundled it into a ball and headed towards the wheelie bin. "I'm waiting to hear from Liz, so that's it for me tonight."

"After a weekend in Airlie it's time to start looking at the next assignment," Bright Eyes announced. "See you in the morning."

Sandy indicated he'd be casually winding down after the report card ordeal and would be having a quiet night with a book, leaving me by the pool with Jeffrey and a substantial portion of the second bottle of Riesling for company.

I was considering whether to return remaining Riesling to refrigeration when the sound of a car pulling into the driveway signalled the arrival of reinforcements. A minute or two later Bernelle appeared out of the darkness. The arrival prompted a departure as Jeffrey shuffled off discreetly.

"I told you I'd be out here this afternoon. Sorry I'm late, but Mum disappeared through the middle of the day and I couldn't finish packing till she got back, and then it was dinner time and we had to have a mother and daughter talk over dinner..."

"It's time to toast your success," I suggested, reaching for the glass that Jeffrey rendered redundant when he opted for beer. "Really, of course, we should be cracking a bottle of bubbly, but..."

"I'm driving," Bernelle pointed out.

"After a long stint behind the stumps I'm shagged out, so after you've taken care of this glass and I've topped mine up there'll only be one glass left in the bottle. After that, I guess, it'll be time for bed."

"I can't stay. You know why. Besides I have to get up early in the morning..."

"I'm not expecting you to. As I said, I'm just about totally stuffed, so I don't think I'm up to anything in the way of strenuous activity. Anyway, what's the latest on this trip away? When does the flight leave?"

"Ten-forty. I want to be there well before that."

"Know what you mean. The last thing you'd want would be to turn up half an hour before departure time, find that the flight's been overbooked and have to wait till the next one."

"When I spoke to Roger this afternoon, he said that they absolutely have to have me on the ground in Brisbane by four o'clock so that the announcement makes it on to the TV news tomorrow night."

"With the first news bulletins going to air at five, four o'clock would be the absolute latest," I guessed.

"That's right. Roger told me if I missed the plane not to bother catching the next one because they'll have someone else for the TV cameras."

"So you won't be missing the plane. If check-in opens two hours before departure time, you'd want to be right on the spot to be on the safe side. So that's eight-forty. Rush hour in Townsville with people going to work, dropping the kids at school and all that shit, and you've got to go right across the city to get to the airport so you'd need to be somewhere around the race course by eight."

"It takes two hours to get to Townsville."

"So you'd need to be on the road by six. You can probably bet on being held up along the way. Be too early for them to be starting road works and that kind of thing, maybe, but you get caught behind a slow vehicle, held up at the scene of an accident or whatever. You'd be looking at leaving by five-thirty. Five to be on the safe side. I can see why you're not planning on staying the night. The last thing you need is a repeat of Friday morning."

The astute reader will, of course, figure the agenda underlying these remarks. The affair, such as it was, was effectively over and there was a reasonable exit strategy for all concerned.

As I refilled my glass that was the end of the bottle, and with the end of the bottle it would be time for bed. When I went to bed, Bernelle would be going home. I was merely providing a window through which she could make a graceful exit.

"I don't have to leave straight away. I can stay for a little bit. If you're ready to go inside, maybe I can hear a little bit of that *Forever Changing*."

"*Forever Changes*. While you're in Brisbane you might be able to track down a copy."

Picking up my glass, I rose to my feet. No one could deny I'd provided the opportunity for a swift and easy exit. If someone had declined to take advantage of it, that wasn't my problem, though if, someone missed out on their excursion it was likely to be a major drama.

"So what have they got planned for you when you get there?" I thought that it was wise to provide continual reminders about tomorrow's events.

"Roger's sending someone to meet me at the airport, and I go straight to where they're making the announcement. They'll have all the other finalists there as well. They're all from around Brisbane, so."

"You'll have to act surprised when they make the announcement. All the rest of them will be thinking they're still in with a chance of winning. Once the announcement's been made?"

"I go to the hotel, check in, and then it's off to Roger's fashion agency for a new wardrobe."

"Which means that packing would be a straightforward affair," I guessed as I put my glass down. I wasn't quite sure which way events were likely to head. "So even if you don't take out the national title, you've picked up clothing that's probably worth a grand, at least. After the new wardrobe?"

"I'm off to a beautician, and then it's off to dinner and a fashion parade and some interviews for breakfast TV tomorrow morning. They can't do that live because they want the footage from the fashion parade cut in with the interview and they have to do that ahead of time."

Arthur Lee's voice lilted across the room. *Yeah, said its all right, I won't forget...*

"I won't forget," said Bernelle as she motioned towards the bed. "So if you'd like to lie down I can do something to help you go to sleep."

Fine with me. Go ahead, do your worst. Good luck. Such sentiments could not, obviously, be voiced. Nobody apart from me knew how close to extreme exhaustion I was, but I did what I was told. If I was going to get a back rub or something, fine. Anything that didn't involve actual physical exertion would be nice. Anything that did would be a problem.

"Just lie back," I was told as someone undid the button at the top of the pair of shorts.

Now here, I thought, is another turn up for the books. Thursday night, what's looming on the horizon was yucky, Friday night things were entirely different. That was on the end of a massage, of course. Something came up and needed to be investigated, but it wasn't planned that way. Now, two days later we've got a situation of unzipping with intent.

Sensing that I was needed to allow various items of clothing to be lowered, I complied. As the process was completed I continued musing on the track that developments were taking.

So Thursday night we had a case of No action till you've popped the question and by Friday it was you've been good to me so I'll be good to you so here's a little something for unexpected developments. Now we're loitering with intent of receiving swollen goods.

I watched as attempts were made to generate *swollen goods*. The item under examination could only be described as a *flaccid fixture*.

So what caused the change? I recalled a reference to a *mother and daughter talk* and wondered about the content. Olga had, after all, been known to use sex for personal benefit.

That had been the whole motive behind throwing herself at Jeffrey, and her tryst with Barry Ballmer could hardly be described as altruistic generosity.

I suspected certain advice had been offered. There may have even been a suggestion practice would be advisable. I recalled an interview with a prominent female rock star that appeared in a magazine a year or so before.

Best advice you've had in your career? was the question. The response? *Keep sucking.*

If a practice session was going to take place certain developments were a necessary prerequisite. I did my best to bring them about, conjuring up visions of massed apprentices in ranks, delivering oral stimulation while an instructor barked out a rhythm.

To no avail. As much as I meditated on matters of the flesh, the only result was sound sleep broken when I awoke around midnight needing to void the bladder. The room was deserted. Bernelle had let herself out. The door was locked, What transpired after my earlier meditations I would never know. Once calls of nature had been answered, it was time for serious and lengthy hibernation.

VISITORS, WELCOME AND UNWELCOME

The game plan involved rolling the rock across the cave and hibernating until, at some point in the indeterminate future, I felt the need to hibernate no more.

That's not to suggest the whole of the spell in the cave was going to be spent in a deep slumber. Occasional visits to the plumbing would be needed, dehydration countered with mineral water, and once the sleep factor had been eliminated there would be reading and quiet contemplation at least until pasta night and more than likely extending all the way to Friday night.

The first item on the agenda was sleep, and plenty of it. Discussions the previous afternoon had produced agreement that I was not to be disturbed under any foreseeable circumstances so when I detected signs of movement outside the living quarters I paid them no mind.

The sound of someone opening the door to the music room was a different matter. *Probably that scoffing bastard getting ready to start ripping out the bathroom next door*, I thought as I rolled over.

From the time we'd bought the property I'd suggested that there was no need for two sets of bathroom facilities in my quarters and that the installation next door could be removed and replaced by something. I had not, at that moment, determined what the *something* should be.

At the moment the bathroom was the repository for containers that had stored items that now filled the office next door. Hopalong had been threatening to do a run to the dump some time in the future, and suggested he'd be able to borrow the pub's truck, indicating he felt Monday morning would be an appropriate time.

Don't you fucking dare, had been my response and faced with what I thought was deliberately provocative behaviour the best policy was to turn my back and wait for the interloper to remove himself.

After all, once he'd removed the boxes he'd need to deliver them to the dump and return the truck to the pub. At that point all that would be required was to slip the security chain into place and resume hibernation mode safe in the knowledge that all master keys were rendered ineffective. When the expected ruckus associated with the removal process failed to happen, I was slightly puzzled, but paid it no real mind. I could sense another presence in the room.

The interval that followed was probably considerably shorter than the half hour it felt like. I lay there feigning deep slumber and waiting for the presence to remove itself.

As time passed, I became increasingly irritated. I'd heard the door open, and there had been no sound indicating an exit. In the end I felt I could no longer ignore the intruder's presence.

"If you wouldn't mind removing your scoffing presence, you bastard, I wouldn't mind if the door doesn't hit your arse on the way out," was, I thought, a *reasonably* diplomatic expression of my point of view.

"I won't be going anywhere," an unfamiliar voice intoned, "at least, not until I've found out what Little Tony wants me to find out."

I rolled over to investigate and found a large gentleman of continental extraction pointing a firearm towards me. The penny dropped with extreme rapidity. Little Tony was my acquaintance from Randwick races and the information concerned the current whereabouts of Waddles and Wally.

As I got out of bed I reached for the shorts which had found a resting place on the floor the night before.

"None of that. Just keep your hands on your head and move towards the door. When you get there you open the door and the hand goes back on the head. Don't try to make a run for it because my mate's outside and he tells me he's never shot a man in his jocks before. Still, first time for everything."

Given an absence of choice, I followed directions and the intruder followed me.

"That's it," a voice behind me informed his colleague. "Three others, just like the girl said. Still, there could be someone else lurking somewhere. Hang on here while I take this one back to the office and then we check the place again. Doesn't look like there's anyone else here, but Little Tony'll want to be sure, so we check things out and then we start asking questions."

The latter part of the remarks were obviously intended to suggest the required information had better be forthcoming.

I soon found myself joining Bright Eyes, Jeffrey and Hopalong in Reception

"Pretty kettle of fish," Jeffrey remarked as I entered. "When you see Mr Waddington tell him I said to thank him for the skid marks on the y-fronts. Just as well you're wearing your brown jocks."

"That's the four of them," Intruder Dude instructed. "You keep an eye on them while Silvio and I give the joint a good going over. Once we've finished that it's Question Time. Hopefully we won't need to get nasty about it. Furniture wouldn't look the same splattered with blood."

For the next little while there wasn't a lot said. Silvio and Intruder Dude conducted a thorough search of the premises and desultory conversation in the Reception area established the trio had started by detaining Bright Eyes who had, under pressure, revealed Jeffrey, Hopalong and I were also located on the premises and indicated the whereabouts of the master key.

One by one rooms on the premises had been checked and once the four residents had been detained a further thorough search ensured the rest of the premises were not concealing further inhabitants. That investigation took longer than I thought was strictly necessary. If the interval wasn't intended to unsettle and render the four of us more willing to tender the required information, it certainly felt that way.

Eventually Intruder Dude and Silvio returned to the rendezvous.

"See?" Jeffrey inquired. "Nobody here but us chickens. Told you. Believe me? Nope. Please yourselves."

"We will," was the reply from Intruder Dude, who seemed to be stepping into the role of Chief Interrogator. "At least, we will once you've told us what we want to know."

"Which is presumably where Waddles and his jockey are hiding. Pity we can't help you," I remarked.

"Go to the top of the class," Jeffrey observed. "Don't take your books. You won't be there long."

"Rather not be there at all," I replied. "Looks like we're well and truly up shit creek,"

"In a barbed wire canoe without a paddle," Jeffrey added.

"OK," we were instructed. "Cut the comedy. Time to be handing over serious information. You first." He turned towards Bright Eyes.

"Where are they?" was the inevitable question.

"Honestly, I've got no idea. I met Scott Waddington, if I've got the name right, twice. Once when we picked up the red convertible and the next day at Randwick races. Since then I haven't laid eyes on him. This other guy you're looking for?"

"Wally Matthews," was the Interrogator's response. "The stable jockey."

"Don't even know what he looks like. Sorry, but that's it. Nothing more I can tell you."

Given the direction the questioning was taking, I guessed Jeffrey was next in line before the spotlight was transferred to Hopalong and finally to myself. In that case I could monitor whatever information was imparted, figure what could be divulged and how much information might suffice. Obviously I couldn't offer details about what had happened after Waddles and Wally left Townsville, since I hadn't heard from either of them since.

So do I mention Perth and the Gulf?

Obviously not. Mention the travelling salesman?

Could do, if necessary. If the script unfolded the way Waddles had outlined, he'd have dropped Waddles and Wally at Rising Sun taxi rank. They'd be able to ask questions among Townsville's cabdrivers and might be able to track the two of them as far as their respective departure points. So, should I go so far as to mention the motel? I was pondering the point when the inquisition turned the arc lights towards Jeffrey. This needed to be watched, since Jeffrey knew a fair bit of what had transpired.

"So, Jeff, what about you? What can you tell us?" Interrogator Dude had moved on to the next in line.

Silence.

"Come on, Jeff," Interrogator Dude continued. "Out with it. Where are they?"

Silence.

"We're not fucking around now. Out with it."

Silence.

"Look, Jeff. We're serious. Out with it."

Silence.

If the process didn't take up half an hour, again, it felt like it. The only clock in the room was behind me, and since I'd finished work I'd felt no need to invest in a watch, so I had no way of measuring the passage of time. After several more terse requests for information, Hopalong weakened.

"It's no good," he observed. "As you may have noticed, he's not going to say a thing. You know why? Because he's a pigheaded bastard who doesn't like anyone abbreviating his surname."

Interrogator Dude raised an eyebrow. "I thought Jeffrey was his first name"

"So do a lot of people until they get to know the bastard. If you want to know, his name is Gordon Walter Jeffrey. So you can see where he's coming from unless you don't mind being called Gordon."

The eyebrow raised itself again.

"I mean, he's been *known* to answer to *Gordon*," Hopalong went on. "Not often, but it *has* happened. Usually when he's in an exceptionally good mood. Happens once in a blue moon. Try *Walter* or *Wally* and he'll just clam up. If any bastard decides to abbreviate Jeffrey he really gets the shits. If you bastards weren't carrying firearms he'd probably have abused the shit out of you, but since you are, he's just cracked a shitty. Thanks for getting us all killed, asshole. Been a pleasure to be associated with you. Not."

This last remark was directed in Jeffrey's direction but the whole of Hopalong's remarks were far removed from what the trio were expecting. Presumably their script had us quivering in our boots and volunteering a flood of information.

I sensed a degree of uncertainty as to where to continue from here.

"You've got some idea about this Waddles," the leader pointed out to him. "You've been making deliveries to that motel on the hill as you're coming into town."

That, I thought, means that I can be straightforward on everything up to the fugitive's departure. Hopalong looked unsure about where to go next. I suspected it almost might be time to jump in.

"We know you were doing it because you told your girlfriend about it on Thursday night. You didn't say *Waddles* and *Wally*, that's true."

So, I thought, *there's the security breach that landed us in the soup.*

"Yeah," Hopalong agreed. "'Knuckles and Buckets were the names Herston gave me.'" I nodded as I kept running through the permutations and combinations of permissible possibilities. "Thought it was bullshit from the time he came out with it, of course. Stories about blokes who'd raced off some other bloke's missus and got the daughter up the duff. Bullshit. Only happens in penny dreadfuls. Not in real life. No, I acted dumb and played along..."

"Herston couldn't have done that job himself?"

"Herston doesn't drive. Probably the only smart thing he's done in his whole life."

It was obvious the threat of physical violence was prompting an unprecedented outburst of A Grade scoffing.

"Since he's been pissed for most of the time I've known him. No, when he needs a job done here's Muggins who gets the privilege of running here and there across the countryside..."

"So, when you were out at the Shoreline Motel" the chief interrogator cut in, "did you see the people you were taking these videos and the rest of the stuff out for? You do know this Scott Waddington?"

"Of course I know the bastard," Hopalong scoffed. "If you've ever seen the mongrel you'd know exactly what I mean. He's like Retraction."

The reference to television commercials in the late eighties flew straight over the inquisitors' heads.

"Too big to ignore, if he's been anywhere in sight I'd have spotted him. Blot on the landscape. Used car salesman, *Pahl!*"

The presence of a handy spittoon would have enhanced the dramatic effect. Lacking such an object, scoffing mode was resumed.

"No, I did just what I was told. Took the videos and the bourbon and the seafood and all the rest of the shit out there, handed them in at the office exactly the way I was told to and went on my way."

"We've called in there on our way here," Interrogator Dude pointed out. "We've identified the people out there as Scott Waddington and Wally Matthews and we know that they left there on Thursday afternoon with a travelling salesman called."

Now that I knew how much had been unearthed to date it was obvious that it was time for Herston to throw in his two bob's worth.

"Well," I began, "it's like this way. Yeah, Waddles and Wally were here. Almost exactly a week ago, and they lobbed on the doorstep with as much warning as you three. They wanted to stay here, but that was never going to happen, even before your boss called looking for them. We didn't invite them. They invited themselves."

This was obviously more along the lines they were expecting.

"Once he'd called it was a matter of getting them somewhere to lie low while someone worked out what to do next. I did that. Nobody else. Me. The folks out at the Shoreline owed me a favour or two, and I thought that if we stuck them out the back there, it might give them enough time to work out what they were going to do next."

The assembled heavies nodded, so I went on.

"Now you'll notice that I've been saying *they*, not *we*. The deal was supposed to be that we'd get them whatever they needed and deliver it out to them. If they could lie low enough they'd be safe. I know Waddles, and there's no way he's going to allow himself to be cooped up in a motel for too long. Eventually cabin fever's going to come into the equation."

Again, it seemed, this information matched the results of their own researches.

"So as far as I was concerned it was a matter of keep them supplied and wait for that to happen. I did what I could to make sure nobody was at risk in case someone like yourselves turned up, and, eventually, Waddles let me know they'd found a lift to Townsville. I didn't make the arrangements. He did. Like I said all I did was wait till he got the shits with where he was and moved on to wherever he was moving on to. So that's what you know already. Sorry I can't give you anything more."

"These messages. How did you communicate with Waddington?"

"As you might guess," I explained, "there were mobile phones involved. We had my friend here buy two as presents for his sister's kids. Prepaid jobs. One for me, one for Waddles. I suspected you guys might be able to monitor the phone line here, and in case you'd planted bugs on the premises I made sure that any phone calls were made over on the other side of the cricket field."

"This mobile phone? Where is it now?"

I paused for a moment. Should I come clean? Pretend it had been lost? In any case there was every chance that Waddles would have disposed of the one he'd been using, so it was best to appear to be being straightforward.

"In my room. I could have grabbed it when you roused me out of bed, I suppose, but to be honest, since I haven't heard from Waddles since Thursday, I haven't been bothering about keeping it with me. It's not like there's going to be anybody apart from Waddles calling the number and given the likelihood something like this was always likely to arise if Waddles were to call, I'd prefer not to take the call, if you know what I mean."

As I spoke I thought I heard a car pulling up somewhere nearby. Not in the driveway, since there would have been wheels on gravel. Not in the car park, for the same reason. It was a case of a sound that had been there and then disappeared. I went on.

"So, if you like, I can go down there and get the thing. Or I can give you the directions and one of you guys can go down and grab it. No difference as far as I'm concerned."

"If we get the wrong one? Your own mobile for example?" It seemed that some people were inclined towards extreme pickiness.

"My mobile is where I can lay my hands on it easily. Not that I use it much. Can't stand the things, to be honest. If you go into my room you'll find it in clear view on the bedside table. You probably can't miss it. The other one you'll have to look for."

"Why?" Someone was running true to revealed form.

"When you've got hold of both of them," I explained patiently, "you'll notice that the two of them are remarkably similar. Hardly surprising since they both came from the Post Office. So one has all my personal contacts and that sort of shit on it. That's on the bedside table. The other one's only got one number on it, so if I were to grab it by mistake, if anyone tries to call me."

I shrugged in a manner intended to suggest the outcome of such an attempt would be unsuccessful.

"For reasons that make sense if you take a gander at the situation that we find ourselves in right now, if I never hear that other one ring again I won't be exactly devastated. That's why it's at the bottom of the bottom drawer under a pile of papers and other shit. Where it's been since Friday morning, so if it hasn't run out of charge by now it won't be too far off. Anyway, having said that, you know where to look. I presume you're not going to let me go down there to get the thing."

Reactions suggested that I was right on the money.

"After all, I might have a gun or a can of capsicum spray or something in there. Since there are three of you here, it's not as if you can't have one bloke go down and rummage around in my room and still leave two of you watching the rest of us."

With one of his offiders despatched to fetch the objects in question I turned to the chief inquisitor.

"So once you've got that phone you can go on from there, can't you? As far as I can tell you know as much as I do about where Waddles and Wally are holed up, so there's nothing I can tell you. I guess if you were to go to Townsville and talk to every bastard who drives a cab you could find out where one of them dropped them off, and if you kept asking questions there's every chance you might be able to track them down. You could charge up that phone and see whether the big bastard's silly enough to answer it. Last I heard he was going to chuck his one away, but for all I know."

"You can talk about that to your friend Little Tony. He'll be calling here within the next quarter hour to see what we've come up with, so you can tell him what you've told us. If he's satisfied with that, fine. If not."

A finger across his throat wasn't a gesture intended to inspire confidence.

"Still, we'll worry about that when the time comes. We can't call him, and if he decides to take his time calling here, there's nothing we can do to speed things up. When Silvio gets back with those phones we can have a look at things, but apart from that it's a matter of waiting."

He shrugged and an uncomfortable silence ensued, broken by the sound of footsteps.

"That'll be Silvio now," the chief inquisitor remarked without bothering to turn his head.

His companion beside the door, whose function in life seemed to consist of pointing a fire arm in the direction of bodies that needed to be intimidated, did likewise. At least that was the case until the door opened and the expression on Hopalong's face changed. *Then* they looked around.

But it was too late.

In the hands of a Hollywood director the next ten seconds would have been morphed into forty seconds of to-and-fro ultra-violence, but the realities of unarmed combat in everyday situations are another thing entirely.

Threatening Bastard By The Door Dude found himself reeling backwards as a slight redheaded female flew through the door, followed by a male of unknown origin. His weapon found its way into his assailant's hand with a speed that would have made a sceptic opine it was all done with mirrors.

Inquisitor Dude, under the impression his colleague by the door was adequate security under the circumstances, had placed his firearm on the table behind him. As he reached backwards he found himself propelled in the opposite direction as the second intruder filled what had previously been his sole and exclusive personal space. By intrusion plus fifteen seconds, the pair of roosters who'd previously been in total command of the hen house found themselves under severe restraint as Intruder #2 barked out "Got 'em Mick. You can bring the other one in now."

At that moment the phone rang.

"Don't just stand there," Dude Who'd Assumed Command directed. "Answer the bloody thing."

I was closest, and as I picked up the phone the door opened, admitting Silvio, hands cuffed behind his back and under close supervision.

"Moderation. Herston here. I guess I'm talking to Little Tony." It seemed like a fair guess. "I'm afraid if you're looking to talk to Silvio and the boys they've been unavoidably detained."

"If it's someone connected to these bastards," New Dude in Charge instructed, "tell him to call back in half an hour. No, make it an hour there are a few things that need to be tied up."

"Sorry, mate," I spoke into the mouthpiece, "if you happened to overhear what I've been told to tell you I'm wasting my time, but in case you didn't I've been asked to tell you to call back in an hour; by which time, I presume, we'll have someone on hand to answer any inquiries you might have."

Replacing the handset I turned to identify the recently arrived cavalry. By this point three disarmed heavies had been securely restrained and there was time for formal introductions.

The first figure through the door had appeared awfully familiar through the flurry of action and was the woman known as either Elaine Forsyth or Liz Fothergill or possibly something else entirely, who was in the process of establishing intimate and reassuring contact with a one-legged member of the scoffing fraternity.

So there were not going to be too many introductions coming from that direction.

New Dude in Charge reached out his hand. "Dave Griffin," was the introduction, "and this is Mick Hollis. We've been delegated to make sure young Liz is safely set up in her new arrangement. Looks like it's lucky we were here."

Once the introductions were out of the way, he excused himself.

"Got a few phone calls to make. Mick'll be able to make sure those three are under control, and I'll be outside so if you'd care to."

"Move towards the bar?" I suggested, indicating the dining room. "Don't know about anybody else but I feel the need for strong drink. I'll just switch the phone through, so there's no need to come back here when it rings. That way you can join in the conversation when Little Tony calls back."

Once we'd retreated to the bar the story unfolded. Liz had called on Thursday night, while I was wining and dining in Airlie. During the conversation, Hopalong mentioned he'd been ferrying supplies to the Shoreline, and suggested the people in hiding out there were in a spot of bother.

Liz indicated an impending departure, but was unable, for security reasons, to provide details. She would, she'd informed Hopalong, call when she was on the ground in Townsville, Mackay or wherever she was able to break radio silence. Hopalong had been content to sit and wait and decided, given the lack of concrete detail he'd say nothing at all.

"When I got off the flight in Townsville I realized there was a slight problem. If I was going to call I'd need an Australian mobile, wouldn't I? So I told Dave, who was there to meet me, that I was going to find a pay phone. He asked why, and I explained I wanted to call Jack, and Dave said I could use his mobile once we were away from the airport. Said that would be far more secure."

Mick obviously knew something about security matters.

"So once I'd got my bag and we were in the car, I asked for the phone, and he said *Not yet* because we had a couple of transfers to make that'd put anyone who was following us off the track. So we drove 'round to the Air Force base, and transferred to a chopper, which dropped us between

Townsville and Ayr, where Mick was waiting with the car, and once we were on the other side of Ayr I was allowed to make that phone call."

"The phone here didn't ring," Jeffrey remarked.

"Exactly. But I wasn't calling here. I was calling Jack's mobile, because there was every chance he'd be delivering things to that motel. So I left a voice message and waited. After all, he could have been in the shower, but at half past ten that wasn't likely. Maybe he was driving and couldn't answer right away."

"Whereas he was," I suggested, "being monstered by a couple of heavies from the Mafia or whatever. When do you start to suspect?"

"Straight away," was the response. "After all he'd told me all about your big win at the races, and that people tied in with the race horse were on the run from the Mafia. He'd mentioned he was taking things out to this motel on the edge of town, so when he didn't ring back straight away..."

"When he'd had time to pull over to the side of the road, or whatever," Jeffrey observed.

"I started explaining things to Dave. He's with witness protection in the Australian Federal Police, or something like that, and I suggested there was the possibility of trouble on the horizon. He was on the phone to his bosses while I tried Jack again. Every time his phone didn't answer I left a voice message. By the time we were on the other side of that township with the name starting with G."

"Guthalunga," Hopalong suggested helpfully.

"That's the one. It was obvious something was seriously wrong, so we started making plans. The local police here checked with the motel and were told that there had been three gentlemen asking questions about a couple of guests..."

"The guests were the ones that Hopalong had been making deliveries to," Jeffrey suggested.

"Which made it likely that you guys were in some danger. So we met a car from the local police in the car park at the roadhouse, and worked out the arrangements once Dave and Mick had transferred some of the stuff they'd need out of the boot, and unmarked AFP cars have some very interesting stuff in the boot. Did you notice that there hasn't been much traffic going past here for the last twenty minutes or so?"

"I did," I remarked. "I think I heard your car pull up outside. Not a screech of tyres or anything like that, or the crunch of tyres on the gravel. More like something cut out and then there was nothing."

Liz nodded. "That was the plan. You'll be interested to know someone detected a gas leak outside here. That's what the papers will say on, is it Wednesday? So they called out the Emergency workers."

"Heard the siren going in town," Jeffrey remarked. "Wondered what was going on. Didn't think it was going to help us any, but there you go."

"So the Emergency workers blocked off the road a couple of hundred metres away. That stopped traffic coming out of town for a start. The police cut off the road to the north and south and when that was done and all the traffic had been cleared out of the area, we pulled up outside here."

I nodded. The gradual decline in traffic noise mightn't have been obvious but once it was gone, with the AFP car pulling up outside, you could notice the difference. At least, I thought I did.

"Once we'd pulled up, Dave and Mick had one of those supersensitive microphones that'll pick up a conversation from about a hundred metres away."

"Yeah," Jeffrey observed. "Snooping bastards."

"The snooping may have saved your lives. Anyway we came into the conversation when you were talking about mobile phones, and giving one of them the directions to your room and where your other mobile was hidden. That meant we had the chance to take one of them out, so we left the car..."

"One thing," Hopalong wondered, "while you were away from the car, how did you know what was going on. Once you were away from the microphone, I mean."

"You noticed the headsets Dave and Mick were wearing?" Liz explained. "The signal from the microphone was patched through to the Operations Room in Canberra or wherever it is, and the Operations Room are in touch with Dave and Mick through the head sets. You wouldn't want the feed from the microphone going straight to the head sets. Too distracting. Anyway now you know..."

"How the cavalry arrived," I concluded as Dave Griffin wandered into the room, "and speaking of the cavalry, where do we go from here? I guess our friends won't be staying on the premises too long."

"Actually," Dave pointed out, "they'll be on site for a bit longer than you'd expect. More of that later. We've got a couple of loose ends to tie up. Have you four, not counting you Liz, nobody knows you're here at the moment, and you've got that holiday planned, so you won't be here that long."

The suggestion was news to a certain member of the party, but Dave went on.

"Until we've got these three off the premises, you're going to be a bit limited with what you can do. The story is we've traced the *gas leak* to the motel here, and it's safe to let the traffic back onto the highway. You'll notice a police car and a few SES people hanging around outside, but the main question is what happens to you four. It's got to be four, not five. You're not going to be able to stay here, because of the *gas leak* that'll be front page news in your local paper whenever it comes out."

"Wednesday, that's the paper day," Jeffrey observed. "Pig's arse I'm going anywhere. Staying right here. Or maybe the pub."

"That's out of the question, sorry," Dave countered. "Do you have anywhere that'd be the logical evacuation point for this place?"

"Sure," I said. "the shed over the other side of the cricket field. Logical choice."

"Pig's arse," was Jeffrey's rejoinder. "Told you. Not going anywhere unless it's the pub."

"You might not have to," Dave pointed out. "If you're happy to lie low here for a couple of hours, fine, but we need to have a car and four people over at this shed for the next couple of hours. Anyone?" There wasn't exactly a rush of volunteers.

"Doesn't have to be four of you," Dave indicated, "One'll do, as long as it's someone who can drive a car around there. We've got a couple of blowup dummies in the boot of the car..."

"See?" Liz remarked. "Told you it was surprising what these guys keep in their boot."

"So if someone can drive round there and stay for a couple of hours..."

"That'll be me," volunteered Bright Eyes. "I've got plenty of reading for my next assignment and I can do that over there just as well as I can do it here. Maybe better. Fewer distractions."

"So, Miss," Dave suggested, "if you'd like to come with me I'll show you how to inflate the dummies, and you're on your way. Be back to fill the rest of you in shortly." The party diminished by two. When Dave and Bright Eyes had departed, Hopalong turned to Liz.

"Holiday?" he asked. "What holiday?"

"I couldn't tell you over the phone," Liz explained. "but for *security reasons* I can't officially arrive here for a fortnight. We need a time gap to wait while certain events stop being front page news."

"Certain events relating to overseas terrorists. In London, perhaps"" I suggested.

"What you don't know, can't hurt you. You can guess what you like, but you didn't hear anything from me. The point is we don't want people guessing if someone happens to bear a resemblance to somebody who's been in the news. So I have to go somewhere for a fortnight."

She turned to Hopalong.

"How does a fortnight on Dunk Island sound? All reasonable expenses covered. If a fortnight's not long enough the fallback involves Lizard Island. Sound fair? Sort of a honeymoon in advance."

With that objections became less than the dust under her chariot wheels.

"When do I start packing?" was Hopalong's reply.

"Not until Dave's finished with us. His job is to make sure I'm OK and he's got to be thorough. No loose ends. You'll see when he gets back."

Since we were going to see when he got back, there seemed little else to talk about. Some five minutes later; the man in charge was back in our midst.

"Right," he said, "here's how it plays. Jonelle's sitting over beside the cricket field for a couple of hours' quiet reading. No one's going to get over to her because the road's blocked off with an SES worker on the road block. We think a gas pipe or something goes through there, but we're not sure. You two are over there as well."

He pointed towards Jeffrey and I.

"What about me?" Hopalong cut in. "Where am I?"

"You're about to disappear to pack a few things for Liz to take with her; but you'll shortly be finding yourself in the back of an ambulance on your way to a medical evacuation flight. There's an army chopper in transit that'll be diverted to pick you up. Be here in half an hour. Once Liz and I are back in Townsville we'll rendezvous and then you're on your way to Dunk. Liz told you about that? Good. So if you wouldn't mind throwing a few things into an overnight bag."

Hopalong and Liz departed, and Dave turned towards Jeffrey and I.

"Now, as far as you two are concerned, you're over the other side of the paddock. If anybody drives past they can see you, or what they think is you. If we didn't have that in place there'd be some picky bastard asking where the hell you pair got to when the road was closed and the building evacuated and he was five minutes late for something or other. Liz will be giving your mate Cassidy the same drill I'm about to give you pair. Jonelle's heard it already, and you can pass the same message on to the other bloke who lives here. He won't be back till after we leave."

"You're leaving?" It was only natural that the question should be asked.

"When we've got an extra couple of escorts from Townsville. You won't want to know the details after that. We'll take your three friends with us. You shouldn't have any more trouble in that direction. Now, as far as Liz is concerned."

He paused, seemingly intent on gaining our undivided attention.

"You've probably already gathered that she's been involved with some high level stuff back home and, effectively, she's under witness protection. Never mind how, or why, or whatever. What everyone here needs to remember is everywhere she goes, she's got a *panic button*. If the shit hits the fan, one signal from that and the big guns come to the rescue."

"Reassuring," I suggested, "surely there's a catch?"

"Two," I was told. "First is that the big guns are probably going to be no closer than Townsville and they'll take time to get here. If *Al Qaeda* or some mob like that turn up on your doorstep, you're in deep shit till the cavalry arrives. You fluked it this time. Next time?" He shrugged.

"Our friends out the front?" I asked. "I'd have thought they would be a more likely threat?"

"When your mate Little Tony calls back we'll more than likely have that side of things taken care of. In cases like this people can usually be persuaded to see things from our point of view. By the time these three turkeys are let go we'll have enough material to hang a shitload of charges. Deprivation of liberty here would just be the start. We'll have all sorts of other information that'll help us with a range of other inquiries."

"I thought there was this *omerta* thing?" I suggested. "What if they don't tell you anything?"

"You'd be surprised what we can put together in this sort of situation. For a start they're blown as far as their boss is concerned, so when we let them go they're likely to end up *sleeping with the fishes* so there's every chance at least one'll become interested in the witness protection program."

"I thought there were two things?" Jeffrey remarked. "The cavalry being two hours away was one. What's the other?"

"When the cavalry arrive, if she's still alive, that's the last you'll see of young Liz. If she's still with us at that point, she'll be whisked away and she'll be on her own. So if you do anything that puts her safety at risk, that's the last your mate sees of her."

"When you put it that way," I remarked, "things become remarkably clear cut. So what do we do when she and Hopalong get back?"

"When she's back it'll be because we think it's safe for her to be who she's supposed to be. You just do what you were going to do as if none of this has happened. As far as anyone knows, this place had an unexplained gas leak. Cassidy discovered it. The fumes left him unconscious, and he needed to be medevac'd. Liz was on her way out here to join him. She'll ring tonight looking for him. You'll tell her he's in hospital in Townsville and she'll join him there. After he's recuperated for two or three weeks the two of them will be back here, ready to get on with the rest of their lives."

"Which will unfold as if none of this had happened," Jeffrey suggested.

"Precisely," Dave replied. "Because none of it did. Now, it must be about time for that phone call."

Wandering back into Reception, I was greeted by the sight of three less than impressed and decidedly deflated heavies. Mick had them under close supervision.

"We thought of taking these guys and sticking them in one of your rooms until the guys from Townsville arrive. They'll be another two hours, but if we were to do that they'd be missing out on the chance to tune into the conversation when their boss calls back, so we reckon they're better here. No need for the two of you to hang around, but remember, once you're gone from here you lie low in your rooms. Remember, according to the authorized version you're on the other side of the cricket field."

While Jeffrey took advantage of the invitation to relocate, I decided to stay put in the interim, at least for as much of the interim that included a phone call. In the meantime I filled in the background detail that explained the presence of the trio in the corner. When a call came, it wasn't the one we were expecting. I listened as Dave explained the premises were temporarily evacuated and that he was here checking on the gas leak. Reaching for a note pad he offered to take a message and pass it on to the regular inhabitants once the *all clear* had sounded.

"Who was that?" I asked as the handset was replaced in its cradle, thinking it was lucky I hadn't answered the thing myself.

"Bloke called Roger," Dave replied. "Ringin' STD judgin' by the pips."

I had momentary visions of someone doing their best to acquire one of the other forms of STD in the company of a certain apprentice hairdresser. I put them to one side reflecting that I'd prefer not to know the ins and outs of the casting couch if I wasn't going to be in charge of same myself.

"What did he want?" was a predictable question under the circumstances.

"Wanted to know a few things to tie in with the publicity for the quest. Nothing that pertains to this matter, I hope?"

Putting those concerns to rest was a convenient way of filling in the time until the phone rang again and brought an expected participant into the arena.

"So you're not bothered by this? I mean, your girlfriend and all. Now, from what you're saying, she's more than likely off to London. Bright lights, big city and all that."

"Mate," I replied, "if that's the way it pans out, that's the way it pans out. It's not that things progressed too far, anyway. I mean I've only been back from the States for a bit over a fortnight, and..."

A trill from the telephone spared me the necessity of further explanation. Dave picked up the phone.

"Tony, old mate," was his greeting, "so glad you took the time to call back."

Dave turned towards me.

"Speaker phone?"

I nodded.

"Got your mates here with me and Dave Herston as well, and I can put you on the speaker phone if you'd like. That way everyone can hear. No? You'd prefer I didn't. Fine, your call. Most important thing is to put you in the picture. After that it's your call. I'm with the AFP, antiterrorism section, if you want to know, rather than the boys you may've had dealings with. Well, the situation's this. Your three boys stumbled onto the edge of one of our operations, and we'd have preferred it if they hadn't, to be quite honest. You can probably appreciate that. Yeah, I know it's a bastard, but shit happens, you know?"

I found myself wishing that the speaker phone was in operation, but it was, after all, Little Tony's call.

"Anyway, the situation's this. We'll be hanging on to your boys for a couple of days. More than likely till Friday. Yeah, I know we're not *supposed* to be able to do that, but we're talking antiterrorism and under the Act we've got a few strings that wouldn't normally be on the bow. Of course, we could always go for straight criminal proceedings. Deprivation of liberty comes to mind for starters and head office could probably come up with a few more when they put their minds to it. Of course the betting ring stewards at Randwick would be interested in circumstances surrounding a race last Saturday week."

The man was obviously an experienced negotiator who wasn't used to holding back.

"So all going well," Dave went on, "we'll be turning them loose in Brisbane, maybe Sydney, more than likely on Friday or Saturday. No, can't be any earlier. It'll take a good day to drive the car down to Brisbane and the boys down that way will be wanting to take a good look at it. That'll take two days, more than likely. So that's Friday, by the time they've put everything back together." There was a fridge behind the counter. I grabbed myself a cool drink as the conversation continued.

"No, you don't want legal counsel. Trust me. That's why we'll be letting your boys go without charge once we've got enough stuff to act as insurance. To be quite honest, just between you, me, the wall, your three boys and Dave Herston, we'd prefer not to have this little matter go through the courts. As you can appreciate in your line of work there are things you'd prefer to keep out of the spotlight. You understand? Good. So you won't have anyone sniffing 'round here looking for this Waddington bloke and his mate the jockey."

Good, I thought. Now we're getting somewhere.

"Yeah," Dave went on, "I've got Dave Herston here with me and he's quite open about the fact that the two of them were here, very briefly on the premises, and in the town long enough to make up their minds where they were going next. No, Dave didn't have anything to do with their departure, so you wouldn't expect him to know too much about where they were off to. Sure, if you feel inclined, you can go on asking questions in Townsville and see if you can pick up the trail there, no probs in that regard. It's just here that should be a *no go* zone at the moment."

All of which were developments that warranted a substantial tick of approval as far as Herston and Company were concerned.

"Between you and me, mate, I'd be inclined to put the whole thing down to experience. Face it, you made a little mistake last Saturday week, and if you hadn't the whole situation wouldn't have arisen."

I couldn't, I reflected, have put it better myself.

"Want to talk to Dave Herston? Not at the moment? Fine, but when you do call back, remember we'll be monitoring the line so you might want to be careful about what's said. What's that? A few racing tips? Fine, as long as you don't mind them going a bit further."

With that the call was concluded.

"You'll probably be hearing from Little Tony later in the week, but I wouldn't be too worried about that. By the time we've finished with these three we'll have enough up our sleeves to make things very difficult for Tony and his mates, and if they know what's good for them they'll let sleeping dogs lie."

"No problem this end," I remarked, "now if you don't mind I'll be heading back to my room. I'm Fifteen, if you need me. Jeffrey's in Four."

As I headed back to the cave I passed Liz, who'd obviously seen Hopalong off in the ambulance.

"I'll be trying to catch up on a few Z's," I explained. "As you may have gathered I was rudely awakened and there's a bit of a backlog to catch up on. Have a good time on Dunk and we'll see you when the pair of you get back. You've had a look upstairs? Room for the pair of you and two point something kids, if you want to take advantage of it."

Having pointed her in the general direction of her future living quarters I headed off.

A couple of hours later a tap on the door indicated the *all clear* had sounded and I was at liberty to contact Roger re. whatever it was he wanted to consult me about.

"Thanks for your help. We'll be off, and with a bit of luck you won't be seeing us again. That's the plan anyway. When Liz and her bloke get back, remember none of this happened. You had a bit of excitement with a gas leak serious enough to land Cassidy in hospital for observation, but nothing to really worry about."

The phone rang a couple of times before someone deigned to pick it up. When someone did, I formed the distinct impression that I'd reached the secretary: "My name's Dave Herston and I was hoping to speak to Roger," I began.

"Speaking," was the reply. For some reason I suspected that the respondent preferred to be on the receiving end when it came to a question of rogering. Bernelle's virtue, it seemed, was safe.

"You rang earlier this morning..." I prompted.

"Yes," I was informed. "About the publicity for the Quest. We're making the announcement later today and talking to Bernelle, *lovely girl*, I formed the distinct impression here was a human interest angle that might interest the current affairs people on TV."

"Sorry. We'd rather not. Happy to cover expenses and all that, but no publicity if you don't mind."

The disappointment at the other end was palpable.

"Look," I went on, "We're in a tricky situation here. I'd like to help, and I've seen enough examples of kids from the country missing out on things because money turned out to be a problem. So you can rest assured I'll help with expenses. At the same time I don't want every hard up case for miles around beating a path to the door. *Generous benefactors who prefer to remain anonymous*, fine. Anything beyond that could be a problem. There are a few other issues involved that I'd prefer not to go into."

With that issue addressed there was one more thing that needed to be done, so I headed past Room Four. Unsurprisingly, the occupant was less than impressed by recent developments, particularly the parts involving police presence on the premises.

"Unavoidable, mate. Especially since someone had to meet Liz in Townsville, get her down here and make sure the security arrangements are right. After all we don't want Osama or some of his mates knocking on the door."

"I know all that, but it's the principle of the thing. If Hopalong hadn't blabbed about running messages we wouldn't have had those three goons on the doorstep and they could have dropped Liz off, taken a quick squiz around the place and fucked off. Anyway, as it is, it's lucky they turned up."

"All we need to do is make sure we've got our story right," I observed. "Keep it simple. Cassidy was getting his breakfast together when he was overcome by the gas leak. That'd just about fit?"

"We ask Sandy whether he smelt gas earlier in the morning when he was getting his."

"Sandy'll probably tell you it's been a while since he got his, but that'd be right. Hopalong won't know anything since he was unconscious."

"Knew fuck all in the first place," was Jeffrey's blunt appraisal of the gentleman's mental capacity. "So who found him?"

"Since I'm on the record as planning to cave myself for a substantial chunk of the week, it'd better be you or Bright Eyes. You, I think. You bullshit better."

The compliment was accepted graciously.

"So I called 000 and raised the alarm. The girl on the switchboard told me to leave the place open and get the fuck out, so I roused you and Bright Eyes and we did. Drove round to the shed at the cricket ground and waited till the *all clear*. What'd we do while we were there for the three hours?"

"Bright Eyes had some reading to do for her assignment," I suggested. "She's always got reading to do for her assignment. Since she had two dummies over there with her, maybe we'd better ask her what they were doing. In case anyone noticed them from the highway," I suggested.

Subsequently, outside the door to Room One we learned that Jeffrey had laid down on a bench and gone to sleep. "I figured that I needed something that'd explain a lack of movement," Bright Eyes explained. "So when I inflated one dummy I laid it out on one of the benches. I figured that one'd be Jeffrey. The second one I sat at one of the tables and arranged for it to slump over the table. You'd brought a book to read but the pressures of the weekend meant you fell asleep as well."

"Sounds good. Since we were both unconscious there's no need to fill in the finer details."

After we'd run through the details again, just to be on the safe side, that was it.

"So what now?" I asked. "All the excitement's over. We're under instruction to lie low for a couple of days. So we sit around and wait till Sandy gets home and ask him whether he smelt gas, I guess. In the meantime, I'm off back to bed."

As I spoke a car turned into the driveway. The occupants were the Twins, obviously on a mission of some journalistic import.

"You talk to them," I said. "You're the one who discovered Hopalong on the floor."

The Twins were the first in a string of visitors who'd called by *just to check that everything was OK*, which, of course, translates as *find out what the fuck is going on*.

When I'd made it into the sanctuary, I found sleep was impossible. At the same time I was disinclined to venture out and answer questions, so I needed something to fill in the time. The music library catalogue was, virtually, finished, and, lacking anything better to do I sat down at the computer and started typing. What I typed started as a straightforward account of recent events, which morphed, over time, into the current manuscript.

Not that it's ever likely to see the light of day as far as the literary scene is concerned.

National security issues will see to that. On the other hand, at some undisclosed point in the future, a set of circumstances may arise that result in another account, and, then, some of the material gathered here might be useful.

JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS

Sandy's return just after three that afternoon prompted a major crisis.

He'd come straight from work, partly because Monday was a sufficient shock to the system and he was disinclined to prolong the agony, but largely because news of a gas leak at *The Crossroads* had spread around town like wildfire. The flow of visitors continued unabated, so there was no opportunity to disclose the real story, even if we'd received specific instructions to keep the actual details to those who were there at the time.

Having been informed Hopalong had been hauled off to hospital in Townsville *So, how is the scaffolding bastard?*" shouldn't have been entirely unexpected.

Of course, the rest of us had a fair idea of what he was likely to be engaged in, and felt no concern whatsoever. Faced with the question, Jeffrey shrugged to indicate complete ignorance, prompting Sandy's departure to see if he could find out over the phone. I wasn't there at the time, and the first I knew of this unexpected development was a knock on the door, followed by a rapid entry of a concerned Jeffrey.

"What'll we do? He's ringing the hospital, and there's no way Cassidy's going to be there. Mind you, he's probably playing *Doctors and Nurses* right at this moment, but no one's going to tell Sandy that."

"Relax. Dave'll have had that all covered. They've probably had some cover story. Allegedly put him in the secure section of the hospital. The one where they put the crims from the jail when they need hospital treatment. Either that or the Psycho ward. In either case they won't be allowed to divulge details to any Tom, Dick or Sandy over the phone." The thought produced a chuckle.

"The Psych ward, eh? Always said the bastard'd go mad from scoffing."

Further musings on the matter were, however, cut short by Sandy's arrival on the scene.

"What'll we do?" Sandy asked, highly *agitato*. "The hospital said they couldn't discuss the case over the phone. Liz is in transit somewhere between London and here. She'll need to know."

"When Liz gets here," I pointed out, conveniently neglecting the fact that Liz had, in the words of more than one old blues man *done been here and gone*, "she's bound to ring. She'll more than likely be ringing from Townsville. Where Hopalong is. She's got a bit more status than any of us, being his fiancée and all that. Relax. She'll probably end up telling *us* how the bastard is rather than Vicky verka," which was the way things panned out.

"A more important consideration is what we do about eating tonight," was my way of diverting attention from a difficult subject. "I mean we could go to the pub for a counter meal, but I don't feel like explaining the story about what happened here about fifty times. Remember, we had fish and chips last night and Luciano's closed on Mondays."

"I could do a curry, but do you think that's wise after a gas leak? Using the stove, I mean."

"You've got a rice cooker, remember?" Jeffrey cut in. "And an electric fry pan. No need to use the gas. It's probably best to give the gas range a break for a couple of days. Do it in the restaurant rather than the kitchen, just to be on the safe side. You got everything you need? Bright Eyes can do a grocery run if you need anything."

The words, though Sandy failed to recognize them as such, of a master of diversionary tactics, and with that minor hiccup out of the way it was a case of *every man about his own business* until it was time to assemble for dinner.

I headed back to the room and took up where I'd left off on the draft of this narrative before a knock on the door at five reminded me the first of the evening news bulletins was about to hit the airwaves. I switched on the TV, turned down the volume and resumed typing while I waited for the coverage of the *Apprentice Hairdresser of the Year* award.

Sure as eggs, around five-thirty there they were announcing the winner. The announcement was made by a gentleman who resembled the runner-up in a *Liberace-Look-Alike* contest. I recognized the voice. As predicted, the winner was Bernelle Butler, who managed to feign the right mixture of shock, joy and amazement when the announcement was made. After that performance she was probably also looking at a career in acting. The item had barely finished when the door burst open.

"Holy dooley," Jeffrey announced as he entered the room, "I've seen some raging faggots in my time, but that one just about takes the biscuit."

"I presume," I remarked as I closed the computer file, "that you're referring to Roger, who happened to call here earlier today, if you recall. When I'd first heard the name from Blondie I thought we were talking about some bloke who's have young Bern gnawing the 'nana within the first ten minutes and end up making the beast with two backs till well into the midnight hour. At least that's what springs to mind whenever that particular name comes up. Roger the Lodger the sod. Roger Ramjet and all that."

"Fat chance, That one'd have to be queer as a fish milkshake. Freckle puncher if ever I saw one."

"*Punchee* might be more accurate. That was the impression I got over the phone this morning. More likely to be a *rogeree* than a *rogerer*, I thought, though at the time I'd expected we'd find out that he was a bloke with an unfortunate speech impediment, a wife and three lovely kiddies."

"About as much chance of that as I have of flying to the moon. Ready for something from the bar while we wait for the next bulletin?"

For all my good intentions it was obvious there wasn't going to be any form of productive activity for the rest of the evening, so I joined Jeffrey on a stroll to the Restaurant, where we turned on the TV and engaged in a little whimsical character assassination while Sandy started dinner preparations. Just after six-fifteen we were waiting for the next coverage from Brisbane when the phone rang. Sandy was busily engaged in culinary activities, and Bright Eyes was yet to arrive. Jeffrey looked at me. I shrugged. He'd been doing public relations all afternoon. It was my turn.

"Moderation. Herston here. What can I do you for?" was my new standard gambit when answering incoming calls. The caller informed me that she was Liz, and apologized for not calling earlier. Obviously while Jeffrey had been engaged in public relations she'd been indulging in public relations.

"So, Liz," I went on playing along with the party line, "how are you? More importantly, *where* are you? Townsville? Excellent! Hold your horses. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars or, specifically, do not leave Townsville. We had a little accident this morning and as far as we can tell Hopalong's in Townsville General. Relax, he's in there under observation. Should be fine. Sandy tried to call earlier but they wouldn't discuss the case over the phone. You're in a different category being his fiancé and all that. You'll find out how he is and keep us posted? Excellent! Tonight or tomorrow morning, whenever. 'Bye."

"There you go," I said to the assembled multitude. Bright Eyes had arrived on the scene in the interim, more than likely summoned by the trilling telephone. "Liz is in Townsville. She'll check how the scoffing mongrel is and let us know."

"You should have pointed out to her," Jeffrey suggested, "that he's probably in the Psycho Ward. Gone mad from scoffing. Probably wasn't a gas leak at all. More than likely passed out due to an interruption of oxygen to the brain after a long scoff. It's a wonder it hasn't happened before."

"Good grief," was Bright Eyes' contribution to the developing topic of conversation. "The poor guy's in hospital and you're still into him. Don't you ever leave off?"

"Why should we? Yeah, why should we? Absent friends and all that. Why should he get away scot free just because he's not here. Up him for the rent, the bastard. Silly as a bagful of arseholes. Wouldn't know if you were up him with an armful of chairs."

As the curry hit the table I cracked a bottle of Gewurztraminer and the conversation descended into general ribaldry as we scanned the TV channels for further coverage of Bernelle's triumph. Around seven-forty-five the phone rang again. After I'd answered I was able to report on Cassidy's condition. "Liz says they've got him in a private room," I started.

"Probably don't want him scoffing over every bastard," Jeffrey observed. "Still, with a room to himself there's every chance he'll be exercising the B.V.J.P. if they're not keeping a close eye on him."

"What," Bright Eyes inquired, "is a B.V.J.P. when it's at home? No wait, I don't think I want to know."

There was a consensus around the table that ignorance in these matters was bliss, but Bright Eyes was, strangely, undeterred.

"No, really, what is it? It's a new one on me?"

"Do you mean," Jeffrey suggested, "that on your frequent child-bridegrooming expeditions you've avoided entanglements with that portion of the anatomy that could be loosely labelled the Blue Veined Junket Pump? That it's a new one on you?"

"I should have known," Bright Eyes replied, lifting her eyes skywards. "Why did I ask?"

I decided it was time to come to the rescue.

"Liz goes on to say that he's resting quietly."

"See?" Jeffrey responded, "They've been at it already? Sound out of breath, did she? Probably been at it ever since she arrived. Or ever since she *came*, rather."

"Jeffrey, he's *under observation*," Bright Eyes pointed out. You'd have expected the girl to know better.

"I'll bet he's under observation. Kinky bastards. I'll bet the wardsmen are all lined up, twangin' the wire like it's going out of style."

It was at this point that Bright Eyes admitted defeat and retreated to her assignment reading. It was the end of the evening news cycle, the Traminer was almost terminated, and a wave of weariness washed over me.

"Right, you bastards," I stated as I rose. "Time for this little black duck to hit the cot, and for the next two days unless we have an emergency I am incommunicado as far as the world's concerned."

It didn't, of course, quite work out that way. In the wake of Bernelle's success, and despite assurances from Roger when I raised the matter with him we received a wave of phone calls from producers of current affairs shows looking at a human interest story about philanthropists from a northern town who had been so supportive of a small business-sponsored entry in a certain national quest.

Since their dictionaries did not seem to have an entry for the word *no* in the end the best we could do was to soothe the whole *great wing of the bastards* off to Dagwood and Blondie. After all, they were the official sponsors. At the end of the week the judging delivered the predicted result.

On a Monday two weeks later we were gathered in front of the TV again, having just finished watching the *Midday Show* report on Bernelle and her imminent departure for the hairdressing fleshpots of London. This was supposed to transpire at an indeterminate point in the future, but the press coverage had gone through the roof.

She has, in the short space of a fortnight, become something of a media sensation, to the extent that one prominent women's magazine had her on the front cover with an invitation for the readership to decide whether she should remain Bernelle Butler or change her name to Marilyn Mundsden. **Bernelle or Marilyn? YOU decide.** Sheesh.

Some of us, of course, were missing.

Sandy, informed of the screening, hoped to catch it from the comfort of the staff room, provided it came on during the lunch hour or one of his few spares.

Hopalong and his lovely paramour, effectively honeymooning on Dunk, and more than likely drunk on Dunk, had been instructed to watch it. Bernelle, of course, was in Sydney, having just appeared live on the programme.

Olga was in Townsville, hopefully still keeping Balls company. Long may she stay there.

The report itself looked very good indeed. Starting with a panoramic sweep of the less scenic approach to the town, the voice over informed Australia appearances can be deceptive. Most travellers, faced with this aspect, drive straight past, but those who take the trouble to drive in find plenty of attractive beaches and the people have a sense of community so strong that one group of anonymous benefactors pooled together to make sure that an apprentice hairdresser does not miss out on the opportunity of a lifetime.

This was followed by a short interview with Dagwood, who intimated the anonymous benefactors are *quiet types who have done a lot to the town*. Asked if they meant **for** the town, he was quite definite. No, they'd definitely done plenty **to** the town. Thanks, Dagwood.

The film footage was followed by Bernelle live in the studio, and a virtuoso performance it was, with a string of *episodes of blonde* that had the studio audience beside themselves.

Soon after that she flew out, but rang the night before she left with profuse thanks *for everything*, suggesting that I come over to London to visit some time soon.

Despite assurances that I'd find a bed any time I arrived. I had to turn down the offer; though rather more diplomatically than you would turn down a bedspread. Overseas travel, I explained ruefully, had little appeal for me these days in view of what happens when you get home. She said she knew what I was talking about.

No, as far as I'm concerned, from here on it's the quiet life, lived to the accompaniment of a rhythm and blues soundtrack on the outskirts of town with the occasional visit to the side bar of the Palace, whenever a change of scenery is indicated.

So the affair of the Olga, the Lovely Bernelle and the Mafia reached a satisfactory conclusion and the world had, at least temporarily, been righted. Not, of course, that this state of affairs was likely to last. Never expect any extended period of tranquillity when there is a Jeffrey to fit into the equation.

For sure, somewhere around the corner, fate was slipping the lead into the boxing glove.

All I could hope for was that the relative calm would last longer than a day.

Don't make plans.