

ESSAYS
and
STORIES
for the

LITHGOW
WRITERS'
GROUP

Vaughan Bryers
2015

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The Lithgow Writers' Group

was convened on 31st March 2015 by Alicia Braithwaite, a published author of children's books and young adult fiction, to foster and promote writing in the City of Lithgow.

The group has met weekly since that date with a steady membership of seven. A weekly topic is usually drawn at random from a varied list submitted by each of us.

The advantage of this type of group for my writing is twofold. First, it provides a source of *external discipline* which encourages me to write for an immediate reason and audience (which I aim to please). Second, and more important, the cooperation and encouragement and example of my fellow writers has allowed me to expand my style beyond anything I could have imagined before.

I dedicate this first batch of work to my colleagues, to my dear friends, without whom none of this would have been remotely possible. Thank you all.

Buon scrivere

Vaughan Bryers
Oakey Park

27th November 2015

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On being a budding writer

I was recently told that my writing was *self-indulgent* to which I replied that *all* writing is self-indulgent, otherwise we'd be out feeding the starving, healing the sick and empowering the poor. All of which maybe we should be doing more.

But I sit in my study and write. Why am I doing this? Perhaps, childless in the strictly biological sense, I feel the need to leave a trace of my being here on Earth for when I am no more. Perhaps, no longer formally employed, I feel guilty that I am not *productive* in an economic sense. Perhaps I just don't know what else to do with the day after day after day that has become my lot.

Perhaps I am conceited enough to think that what I have to say is important, valuable, even wise or that I can enhance my self-respect by the admiration of others. When I put it like that, maybe that guy (Katoomba John) was right about self-indulgence after all.

OK. So I write stories and pieces for the writers' group; that's modest enough. But going to the trouble of editing, assembling, printing and binding (and especially writing a foreword) goes a step further.

Because I want other people to read what I write – it goes beyond just my hobby or a desire to polish skills. That can only mean that I am happy enough about my writing to show it.

The topics or keywords of each of these pieces were not selected by me. The way the group works is that a random word is selected and we go off for a week and use that word as a springboard for our creativity. The genre is not preselected either.

My starting-out point was biography and history, but the pieces here include poems, memoirs, hobbyhorse rants, murderous fiction and attempts at futurology and slapstick humour. They are printed here in the order they were written through the year and there is no progression or continuity. Several of the pieces did not work to completion and, in others, time ran out so abridgements were made. I have included them and left them as they stood to illustrate the processes and the pitfalls of the budding writer.

On a couple of occasions I have experienced what it is like to be a real writer – that magical instant when the story takes over and I become a mere scribe, a medium, to the story itself. That is a truly exhilarating time, so exciting. And it is NOT self-indulgent.

~ TEMPEST ~

There must be fear involved. The threat of destruction or overwhelming danger. That makes a tempest, when all possibility of control is lost. To experience a tempest is to understand that we might not see tomorrow's dawn.

It is a curiously old-fashioned word now that we are all so scientific. Here in the 21st century it is all about Category 5 cyclones and the like, as though we are pretending it is all under control, predictable, measurable, dealable-with. We can sagely watch unfolding maps on the lounge-room tele, see amazing snaps from Outer Space, maybe make a remote Credit Card payment to help the poor bastards in the aftermath. But, as in much of our lives, there is no experience, no visceral engagement. No fear. We are so fucking cosy.

I remember a night, years ago, walking away from my house into a small wood nearby. There was a storm – almost a tempest, but not quite because I was not afraid; in fact I was exhilarated. Standing in a grove of Messmate gums, not adapted for high winds, I knew there was a small chance that one of those 10 tonne cellulose giants might take a dislike to my 70kg of water, fat, flesh and ideas and decide to exterminate me, or worse, to maim and mutilate my frailty. Who knows what trees think? In tempests they become maniacal murderers, not caring whom they crush because they also are in their death-throes.

Lightning flashed and crashed. I was on high ground, even higher trees all about. Perhaps the nearest was the highest, reaching up to to the stratosphere,

inviting the celestial voltage to use it as a gateway in its diabolical journey to the Underworld. I had no real fear – my senses were alive.

Who are those rare humans who receive a lightning strike? What a mystery! What a death! What does it mean? It's very special, that's for sure. Almost the ultimate in rebuffing our idiotic hubris that we are in any sort of control. "Spontaneous Combustion" indeed.

And what of people who are tempests? We don't see them on the streets. Outer tempests of this sort are rare. We confine our tempests to our hearts and souls, hiding them, wrapping them in impenetrable shrouds of stainless steel lest others know our inner torment. Better to be torn apart by a lightning bolt than to have "trouble" listed on our C.V.

My dictionary tells me that tempest first meant 'a season', 'a portion of time', as though it was something to be waited-out, to be endured. Sage advice from the world of words. The ancients knew a thing or two that we have forgotten in our rush to be clever.

Tempest – wait it out or die. It probably doesn't matter all that much in the long run.

~ THE SINGER ~

Last week I met a singer
true – not much of a voice
she's just moved into my place
I didn't have a choice

sometimes one has to face the facts
and look life in the face
the consequences of one's acts
have set a scene in place

'til now I'd had to contemplate
a future on my own
with no sweet girl to complement
the talents that I'd grown

for men in general have some skills
whilst sorely lacking others
laundry, ironing, clothing frills
are largely left to mothers

with mine now dead, both wives run off
who now will hem my jeans?
The answer here, and you may scoff
is now “just me”, it seems

and this is where my singer shines –
with zigzag and straight stitches
four speeds forward, guiding lines –
she'll shorten up me' britches

~ UNDERNEATH ~

A single green light flashed on the console.

'It's Mr Newcombe in Room 61. Needing his bit of feminine consolation. Will you go and tuck him in or shall I?'

Janet said she'd go.

'He's an old sweetie isn't he? and he's doing it hard adjusting here. I don't mind!'

As it happened, Terence had been admitted to the nursing home on the same day that Janet had started as an RN about three months ago. He was one of the rare ones, fully cognitive (well, more-or-less), well-groomed and requiring minimal care. He was grieving his wife's recent death which was the main reason he had had to come to Surfside Lodge. He was alone. Terribly alone, he had found no commonality with any of the residents and relied solely on the staff for meaningful human contact. Fortunately, because he was so little work, the staff favoured him highly.

It was only 8 o'clock. All the other residents, most of them sedated, were out for the night and Janet and Sapphira were already tidying up all the loose ends prior to the usual boring night shift. Terence was still up, sitting in his chair reading. 'Oh, nurse, thanks.'

'Do you need a hand getting ready for bed Mr Newcombe?'

'Oh no dear. Not yet, you know me. I don't need much sleep. But what I wanted was ... do you have a dictionary in the place? I need to check something.'

'Mmmm. Not sure. I'll have a look in the library and the office. Or maybe I can look it up on-line for you if you tell me what you want.'

'It's a simple thing really, but it's got me tangled up in my head, and I hate mysteries. What's the difference between *underneath* and *beneath*. That's all. Oh. And is there a word just *neath*? No need straight away; tomorrow'll do. If I'm still alive.'

'Come on, Mr Newcombe, don't say that. We'd miss you too much, and look at you, so fit and well!'

'Well, the Moslems always say *insh'allah*, and we used to say *God willing* up to about 70 years ago – fancy that. They even used to end Public Notices in the paper with *D.V.* in the bottom right-hand corner when I was young. Latin. *Deus vult*. We never took tomorrow for granted. I liked it back then, not so much now. I won't mind going off. Just so long as it's quick. Not like my poor Florence. She suffered so badly. I doubt I'd have her bravery and grace.'

'But she had you there with her.'

'And I've got you, dear'.

He took her hand and gave a gentle squeeze. In that moment, Janet soaringly, fervently wished that it would be she who was there for him at the end. Some people were just like that. There were beautiful deaths.

'OK Mr Newcombe. Give me a buzz if you need anything more. Otherwise I'll see you tomorrow arvo with an answer, one way or another. Sleep well.'

Janet surprised herself by leaning over the reader and kissing him lightly on the forehead.



When Janet turned up a bit early for her shift the following afternoon, it was with some sense of purpose and delight. She had an answer – or answers – for Terence Newcombe. She had become more entranced and delighted than at any time since primary school with her sleuthing. She would never have imagined that something so nerdy as Terence's request could have absorbed her interest, intelligence and curiosity so much.

He was out of his room when she arrived, and also when she called back a half-hour later. Mrs Jackson's door, roughly opposite, was open.

'Hello Mrs Jackson. Have you seen Mr Newcombe?'

'Hah! Prob'ly still lickin' 'is wounds I'd say.'

'What's happened?'

'Oooh. Big fight between him and Maudie this afternoon. Ova nuthin'.

Janet was intrigued as to why Maud Philips and Terence Newcombe would even be in the same room at the same time, nevermind having a conversation to start a fight. She couldn't resist asking.

'What happened? What was it about?'

'Well. See. She calls him "Terry" and he goes all cranky, says "It's Terence, not Terry if you don't mind madam".'

' "Same difference!" she yells,

and he goes on about Roman poets and bicycle clips, I dunno. More jibbah-jabbah, then he goes

"You're beneath contempt madam" or somesuch and she goes

"underneath my arse fella!".

Talk about laugh! Never seen such a ding-dong here before!

Janet went back to the station and relayed all this to Sapphira with some sense of delighted disbelief. Sapphira said that it had been noted in an "Incident Report" but that no action had been taken or recommended. Noting that Mr Newcombe was still not in his room, Janet decided to mount a search party all on her own.

Eventually she spotted her friend sitting under a frangipani tree in the last of the evening's rays. He was leaning back against the trunk, smoking and she noted his hand trembling unusually. She also noted blood on his clothing.

Quite a lot of blood.

'Hello dear.' He paused. 'It's alright now. I just need a little rest.'

Janet thought to tread warily and calmly.

'I have that information for you. About the different *neaths*. It was really interesting.'

'That's lovely dear, but I worked it out myself as it happens. Mrs Philips helped me.'

'Speaking of her, have you seen her recently? This evening? Where is she?'

'Last I saw her was in the kitchens. Dreadful woman.'

'And you say she helped with the words. That's a surprise, isn't it?'

'Oh, it was indirectly of course. She wouldn't know anything. Barely human, that one.'

'Do you know where she is now?'

Yes. He did. Exactly. And that was the wonderful thing that Mrs Philips had shown him.

For, whilst Maud Philips now rested, serenely calm and quiet *underneath* a blanket in the kitchen, in the very last sunray the knife glistened *beneath* the frangipani tree.

~ ADAM & EVE ~

Adam and Eve were an average couple. No. Let me rephrase that, for it's not remotely true.

For a start, they shared the same birthday, the 1st of October, but a year apart. Secondly, their mothers, coincidentally both single-mums named Mary, were best friends, having met in hospital at the time of Eve's birth. Adam had been admitted for a small surgical procedure to correct a birth deformity close to his first birthday. Nothing major, just an odd, rather strange, extra bone in the left side of his ribcage which spoilt an otherwise ideal symmetry.

What that meant was that the two children had known each other from birth, had grown up together, had attended the same schools. Had, in fact, been inseparable. Adam was Eve's first (and only) lover, and Eve had been Adam's first (and only) lover. At 19 and 18, on their mutual birthday, they had married.

Five years later they bought their first home together, 7 Eden Street, Mount Druitt. It was a bargain – a dilapidated fibro shack set at street level, but with a huge overgrown backyard that covered 90% of the block. Eve was terrified of snakes. Adam was a tradie, having done an apprenticeship at Penrith TAFE in landscaping, so it was no trouble for him to clear the block. They decided to leave the house as it was – it was liveable and they weren't that fussy or

house-proud. Anyway, it was only their bedroom that mattered so they made that gorgeous, but the rest of the house could wait. No, it was the garden that mattered.

Adam reckoned that, just as builders had Display Homes, he would make a Display Garden that he could use to demonstrate his natural and acquired skills. That way, he could impress potential clients, or even a potential employer. But he would only appeal to the best. He wasn't interested in local jobs from the housos and bogans around him. No, he would make a world-wide impact through a sophisticated online presence and marketing. By careful photography, no-one could know if his garden was in Mt Druitt, San Francisco or Versailles.

Eve was his workmate in this. Her camera skills, eye for beauty, and her I.T. and media skills were superb. She was also his best model and selling feature. For Eve was physically perfect. Clothed or not, a picture of Eve could sell anything. To anyone.

By day, Adam worked as a groundsman at the Strathfield Golf Club while Eve commuted to Parramatta where she was a receptionist at a government department. By evening and night they toiled, side by side, in the garden to make Adam's dream – and their future – come to fruition. Such a garden takes decades to develop, but a start must be made. Wherever the budget allowed, plants were bought at the maximum maturity to get years and years of head-start. They planned, revised and worked. The centrepiece was of course to be the focus and they were not going to rush that decision so they left an empty reservation there. Night by night the imaginations always allowed a little time for this. In a curious reversal of expectation, Eve was favouring a spectacular plant, Adam something sculptural. Either way there would be water.



The two Marys, once their children had married and left the nest, had settled into a calm common existence in the old house at (fittingly) nearby St Mary's. People of course conjectured on their relationship as there never appeared to be blokes around despite the two women still being in their early 40s. Over whisky one evening they themselves were musing on their individual sex-lives, realising that, again, a commonality existed.

“it's like”, tall Mary struggled for the right words. “it's like that ONE night, the night Adam was conceived, was enough for a whole lifetime. Like I was so FILLED that I still feel it every day and night of my life. I'm so happy.”

“I know.” Pause. “and that guy, how amazing, how unbelievable really. He just came from nowhere at that New Year's Eve party down on the harbour. The most beautiful man I've ever seen in my life – and he chose me.” Pause. “Of course I wanted him for ever, and in a weird way I have, because I never miss him, don't want anyone else – ever – ,don't even care that he bugged off as quickly as he arrived, because it was so I dunno.”

“Ha! Same with mine; shit I hope it wasn't the same the same guy!!! That'd make the kids My guy said he was Michael.”

“No worries, mine was called Gabriel.”



“The centrepiece, the centrepiece, we've got it” Eve yelled as she awoke, startled, one morning. “Sculpture, vegetation, image, information”

“We do an open sculpture, vegetate it and include our whole I.T. in an organic screen, or screens, viewed through tree portals. There'll be nothing like it.”

Two years later Adam sat, as ever, at his creation. Eve was alarmed that now the tree portal had replaced her in Adam's life. Hour after hour he sat, still, transfixed, feverish over the design program. He could no longer tell day from night, the trivial from the profound, good from evil.

She walked up to him from behind. Naked. Perfumed. Perfect. She slithered up to him, entwined him, wound her litheness around him. “Adam” she hissed, “Man”, she whispered.

~ WHO SAID THAT? ~

a nostalgic monologue

'You'll get into trouble doing that' she said.

'Stick ya head up a dead bear's bum!' was my witty retort.

That was all so long ago now, for I am old – hoary as they used to say. Not “whorey” worse the luck! Ha! Just joking. No, just sad – a crooked man upon a crooked stick walking a crooked mile. Towards a crooked grave. Only another mile.

And of course, she was right. Whoever “she” was. I DID get into trouble doing that. And of course it was MY head that eventually became wedged in the rectum of a deceased ursuloid. Metaphorically speaking.

Silly me.

Who said that? Who was it who warned me?

So long ago; lost in the fogs of the grog and the dope and the good times. But I do remember a girl's voice saying that. Maybe more than one. They were kind, those girls back then. Their voices were warm and kind. No trace of the brass and the uncivil arrogance and the ridiculous groundless confidence I witness so often in their grand-daughters now. Self-esteem in truckloads, but no trace of self-respect. Hollow. How will they live? But I digress.

Who said that?

Maybe it wasn't one of those flesh-and-blood girls. Maybe it was a black-vinyl girl like Janis Ian or Carol King or Carly Simon. Do you remember those great 70s girls? And the blokes too – James Taylor, Jackson Brown – all those West Coast dudes who were warm and kind and wise, and who knew that love could be the best game in town. And even when it was over, the sadness was kind-of great too. In a way. But our world did not choose their way.

Maybe it was about not finishing things off properly. The “she'll be right” carelessness of not putting on the handbrake while you'd rush in for a pie. Or not tying a proper knot on the painter of the sailboat at the jetty 'cause you were in a hurry to set up the picnic. Or not checking the tyre-pressure on the Ducati before a fast run up New South Head Road.

These days I know about things like mindfulness, about consequences. But it's too late. There's no-one left to hurt. And my hurt-space is all full up. No more room. Oh, I HOPE it's full. Surely there's no room for more!

'You'll get into trouble doing that' The warm, kind voice echoes. But it is only an echo.

Many years later Sandra, level-headed, cool-hearted, harsh-voiced Dr Sandra, told me explicitly to “stop doing that” – in this case working – or I'd get into trouble. I didn't stop and sure enough, five years later my brain crashed and burned. Ninety-six percent of my brain eventually recovered, but the four percent that didn't – scar tissue, necrosis or just pulp – must have been an important bit. Maybe it was my soul.

~ THE FLEETING GLIMPSE ~

How long does it take to see something? I mean REALLY see something. If it's a jar of Vegemite on the front of the pantry shelf, it takes me about six minutes. But I once saw something in the space of – maybe – half a second that altered my life for ever.

And how long exactly is half a second? It sounds much more scientific to say “500 milliseconds” but that doesn't help. All I can say was that it was definitely less than one second (count 'one-and-two') and definitely more than nothing, so if I say 'half a second' I can't be far wrong. And, where scientific precision fails me, maybe poetry will come to the rescue. A fleeting glimpse. Yes, that's what it was.

It was a leg. To be more precise, the right oblique view of a woman's right calf just as it scissored into a shop doorway in Church Street Richmond, near the corner of Swan Street. For half a second. I wasn't watching, it just caught my eye. Half a second. Maybe a quarter.

What I am about to say sounds so improbable, so ridiculous, so over-the-top that I will not blame you for thinking me a fool – or a hopeless romantic at best. But in that half a second I instantly, utterly knew that the owner of that calf – unseen, unknown – from one side of the galaxy to the other, from the Big Bang to the End of Eternity, of all the billions and billions who live and

had ever lived and who would ever live; that person was the the one person inscribed in the Book of Life to be my soulmate. I warned you. Ridiculous. I know. I don't even believe in that concept myself. But it's true.

What happened next? I went into shock; panic; confusion; sweating; dry mouth. I knew I had to do something. There were two big issues; first that I looked like a street-person, dirty, terrible work clothes, tired and unkempt. Second that I was *en route* to the home of my lover (yes, even dressed like that. My clothes were at her place.) and I am an inherently faithful man, a serial monogamist with a three-year use-by date. But the intensity of what I was experiencing should easily have outweighed those problems. But there was a third and much bigger issue. I am a coward.

In a short time (I think. Time had become fluid.) she came out of the shop and walked towards me. I was at the tram stop waiting for the next St Kilda tram. I could do nothing, not even look at her. The whole situation had overwhelmed my safety-limit. Then began the craziest dance that ever occurred.

To be finished

~ MY NEW TOWN ~

A lot of cities have a place called “Newtown”. Ironically they are almost always very old, being the first place of development after the original settlement. A quick squiz at the Australian Postcode Directory (I'm such a nerd) will reveal Newtowns (or New Towns) in big old towns like Sydney, Hobart, Geelong, Ballarat, Ipswich and Toowoomba – but also one halfway between Wallaroo and Kadina, just to blow a raspberry at my theory.

In a sense, Lithgow qualifies as a “Newtown”. It dates from roughly 1875 when the astute William Gray saw an opportunity to fill in the gap between two older settlements – Andrew Brown's pastoral Bowenfels and Thomas Brown's industrial Eskbank. Mainly with a pub, The Royal. With the arrival of the railway in 1869 and Enoch Hughes' iron-works in 1875, neither existing place was quite right.

But the subject of this essay is Lithgow as a town that is new to me – although of course it is me that is new to it. As you hear me read this I will have been in my new town for two years, eight months and twenty-three days. What do I have to say?

I am happy. On balance. As a Libran I DO the balance thing. I have to because I am a person of extremes and if I paid too much attention to any one thing in my life I would be either unbearable or dead. I struggle to avoid both of those eventualities.

My coming to Lithgow (another story) contains all the elements that would have a superstitious person saying (deeply and slowly) “It was meant to be.” and us rationalists saying “Oh, that’s highly improbable!” which nicely confuses the issue of which side is psychologically better-off. One key (and very rational) element was the low cost of housing, and this is crucial to understanding many of the observations I have made.

But first and foremost, there is beauty here. Most strikingly in the ring of sandstone bluffs that stand sentinel over the valley of the Coerwull Brook (renamed by some *unæsthetic* moron as Farmer’s Creek). From below, these catch the first and last sunrays of the day and light up in tones of warmth and power. They are somehow comforting and delighting.

When one walks ABOVE them, a whole fairytale world – that of the pagodas – begins, stretching on and on to the north and west to become The Gardens of Stone National Park.

Luckily there is a special spot that is easily accessible by a 5 minute drive that will introduce you to this landscape. When visitors comes for the first time, I always drive them here first – then they “get it”. They are invariably stunned, mystified, enchanted; and they understand immediately why I can live in this country town.

There is also beauty in the people and activities of the town. This beauty requires excavating because it is below the surface. The surface can be less than beautiful, I assure you. When I arrived, a bit battered and bruised, my first port-of-call was the Library. I hoped that here would be a locus of the like-minded. I was right, and my circle of friends to this day is largely

drawn from the Friends of the Lithgow Library. Then I discovered Eskbank House, the Local History Museum, and became a volunteer there. Again, new friends and an insight into a great industrial history (Lithgow had its heyday between 1870 and 1920.)

Again by great coincidence (or fate), the home I found (another story) is located only 200 metres from the old Terry's – or Zig Zag – Brewery, closed as a commercial brewery in 1958, then used as a spring for bottled water and now being reborn as a micro-brewery. I had had a brief period there as an employee, and during that time had become very friendly with the owners. Whilst the employment did not work out, I remain a member of the “team” and have been commissioned for their historical research and miscellaneous writing tasks. Again, it is hard to imagine a more unreal and beautiful sight than a 125 year old brewery tower nestled in a ferny Australian bush gully.

In the last six months, Bathurst's Mitchell Conservatorium of Music has radically increased its presence here in Lithgow, meaning that beautiful music is now available with monthly concert performances. For my own musical life I need to travel the 25 minutes up the hill to Blackheath – which I have renamed Lithgow Heights – and to do this I have the delight of driving through Brown's Gap and Hartley Vale at least two days a week. A joy to the driver (even more so to the motorcyclist) and a range of landscapes that never ceases to delight the eye.

~ Genie ~

Late last night Genie emailed me to say that she and her bloke have applied for an artists-in-residency place in Assisi for October.

I was once her bloke, nearly 20 years ago, and we went to Italy too. I remember so little about such a great journey of exploration – she had taught me about HER France, I taught her about MY Italy – but how I was feeling then, what happened, where we went is all blurred and misty. If I concentrate, perhaps some of it will come back. There is also a box of photographic slides somewhere, but no projector. A year ago I bought a device to digitise them, but the box lies unopened. What does that say? But I will try to lever open that particular compartment in my brain and see what I can find.



There was the time of our parting on the platform at Lyon where we finished our shared journey from Italy and changed trains – she to go on to her mother in England, me to Paris to return home. A huge gut-tear of emotion as her train pulled away, her waving, I felt suddenly lonely, all alone like a lost boy. I must have loved her. But we were companions more than lovers, although there was that too – albeit in a minor key.

There was a park, a bridge, a kiss, captured on my camera by a friendly local girl who laughed “*che carino*” (how cute) as she obliged. Not in Venice or Florence or Verona, but in Italy's least romantic city, Milano. (Interestingly, just as Lyon is probably France's least romantic city).

We made friends – one of those fleeting, intense, instant, friendships of travel – with a couple on Sulmona Railway Station. Panfilo and Miriama were travelling to the coast to visit their daughter, settling in to her new university. They were just in front of us in the ticket queue as I (at her insistence) was coaching Genie how to request “two one-way tickets for Venice please”. Miriama had overheard and, without turning around, had assumed it to be a father teaching a 5 year old. Later on the platform she shared the joke with us, and that was the start of our wonderful 12 hour friendship. I promised to write. I never did, but I will never forget them. Maybe I'll write tomorrow. Yeah. Right.

There was the joy of staying for two weeks in a REALLY cheap hotel in the Marais, the loveliest part of Paris. To get to the shower meant going down to the ground floor, along a corridor behind the Algerian concierge (Fouad's) desk, a corridor filled with boxes and boxes of stationery, canned food, cleaning products and finally into a tiny cubicle that miraculously (for a cheap hotel) always had copious gushes of sublime hot water. Our bill for two weeks was what many would spend for two nights in a “nice” hotel.

Being a contrarian by nature, in those two weeks I never went anywhere near the Tower, the Louvre, Versailles, the various Palais or the Moulin bloody Rouge. Just the streets, the markets, the banks of the Seine. They were more than enough. There was a night spent sleeping under a rock shelf in the Forest of Fontainebleu and, best of all, Chartres – mystical,

magical, overwhelming Chartres. There was an English guide there, Malcolm, who had devoted his whole life to the cathedral and in sharing his enthusiasm and knowledge, only (with embarrassment) asking a donation for his wonderful work.

From Sulmona (where we had met our friends, a country town high in the Appenines due east of Rome) we hired a car and went on a pilgrimage. Back home we had some special friends, Clare and Frank. A brother and sister (and really Francesco and Chiara, like the saints of Assisi), their parents had come to Australia from a tiny village left ravaged and depopulated by the war. We arrived in what was left of Cansano – a bar, two shops, a Post Office open 3 afternoons a week – at exactly the wrong time, the middle of the day. It was a scene from a spaghetti western – nobody moved, just a couple of scroungy dogs, The sun glared, a zephyr whipped up some dust from the road and caused a loose door, hanging on hinges, to bang against its wall.

I knew enough of Italy to know that whatever life there was at that time of day would be in the bar. Correct, but miraculously (or serendipitously if you prefer) the bar was run by a cousin of Frank and Clare's. It turned into a party and we were fed and fêted like film stars. The fact that someone had come from halfway around the world specifically to visit Cansano in honour of the long-gone Donato and Pasqualina made us the biggest thing to hit town that month.

Back in Sulmona and staying in a gorgeous little country hotel, I had noticed a sempeternal crowd of youths lounging around the piazza by the entrance. The answer made total sense once I had asked. Italy has National Service. Sulmona has a Military Camp. Our gorgeous little country hotel was also Sulmona's bordello!

Sulmona (and I will always love her) was the first place I experienced the Italian Friday evening *passeggiata*, an ancient rite of social bonding – and control. One goes to see and to be seen, your presence or absence noted. But it is absolutely delightful. Everyone is there. Families amble along in a disambiguated gaggle; lovers of all ages and marital status mooch along leaning in on each other; young teenagers practice their amatory arts under watchful eyes that feign shock but really approve of this ancient apprenticeship. And everyone eats – *gelato* of course, but pastries and sweets of all sorts and, best of all, the paper cones of fresh-roasted chestnuts, *castagni*, fragrant and steamy during the colder seasons. There is always music hanging in the air, coming from invisibility, and here and there an impromptu dance will materialise. A middle-aged couple might begin. He, fat and balding might suddenly pull her, short and dumpy, close to his heart and they are young again, she the love of his life. Her ancient mother might then grab the eight-year-old grandson and tease and coax him into dancing with her, to teach him. They laugh.

~ THE BRUISE ~

The darkening sky triggered the streetlights along Main-street just as Beppe Barbuto was closing up shop for the day. Wednesday was his favourite night of the week. He didn't have to get up at 3 to go to the markets, he didn't even have to get out of bed at all as it was the tradition that his beautiful wife Barbarella looked after the fruit-and-veg shop known as Barbuto's Fruitarama on Thursdays. Even better, he knew that right now, as he was leaving, BB would be preparing his favourite dinner – *scaloppine alla marsala* – WITH NO VEGES.

Barbarella Barbuto did not mind the occasional giggles at her name – after all, she had married Beppe precisely because he had a nice short 3-syllable name to replace her hated family name of Barbarella Montemarcellonini. She had made sure she didn't pass this particular curse onto their two children who were given nice short Aussie names (Betty and Barney). But I digress.

As he walked out the door he gave his usual “Good-a night *frutti*, Good-a night veges. Don't-a get into trouble while I'm-a gone! Heh, heh, heh!”. The lock clicked shut. Silence.

Silence.

Silence. Almost.

“What's that noise?”. The sharp bitter voice of Bernard the Brussels Sprout broke the almost-silence. “It sounds like a child. I HATE children!”

“Only because they hated you first” giggled his big cousin, Claudia Cabbage. She was a jolly soul, a little self-conscious about her shape perhaps. This was a topic of neverending talk with her friend Paula Pumpkin, mainly because they were so jealous of Paula's cousin Butternut whose figure was the wonder of the Fruitarama. They just decided it must have been in her genes and there was nothing to be done about it.

“I can't hear no noise – look at this, look at me girls”. There was a collective sigh – almost a moan. It was Guido Zucchini, the ladies' man of the shop. “Look at me girls, watch this”.

With the aid of his sidekicks Ricky and Rocky Radish (the family had been old Russian nobility, Raditskeyawicz, before the Revolution) he had propped himself up on end and was wagging himself skywards. Having watched this nightly performance *ad nauseum* most of the veges variously ignored, heckled or jeered him (“Put it away, Guido!”), but plump, pale-skinned Desirée felt her firm flesh beginning to purée a little and made an arrangement to see him later on over at Rosemary's. She loved rolling around with Rosemary too, it was so good for her skin. “and Guido,” she added “bring the salt”.

“Yes. I can hear it. It sounds like someone crying.” This was Colin Corncob, who of course had excellent hearing. “It's coming from the fruit section.”



Middle section in which all the fruit and veges discover that the crying is from Princess Peach who is distraught over a bruise she sustained while Beppe was stacking her on the display.

Princess pulled herself together and looked around the circle gathered about her. She tried to explain.

“All the others are laughing at me, giggling. I'm ruined. No-one will ever want me now. They say I'm only good for one thing now; a Tart! But I'm not like that. I want to fulfil my destiny, not be just a flash-in-the-pan instant gratification. We peaches are brought up to think of that long, drawn-out sensuous delirium that we – and only we – deliver. I want to be loved!”

Just then, Barbarella entered the shop and began preparing for the day.

“Porca miseria, Beppe!” “Why you leave all these other fruit and veges in the peach box?”

She bustled around rearranging the shop, unaware that she had cut short a possible catharsis for a fragile fruit.

Fifteen minutes later, for it was the time that the children were on their way to school, the tinkle-tinkle bell above the door announced the arrival of the day's first customer.

“Hello Mrs B.”. It was Esther, Beppe's favourite customer; eight years old and full of fight. She needed to be with that family of hers. “Esther!” Barbarella shouted with shock, “what happened to your lovely face?”

“Walked into an open door.” the girl said, too quickly, too flat. Barbarella was genuinely upset to see the big fat swollen eye and the puffy black spreading away from it.

Esther had come in for her regular fifty-cent salad pack which the Barbutos had made a speciality for the kids' lunches. OK, they didn't make any money out of them, but Beppe took a long-term view of entrapping future customers early, and he got lots of brownie-points from the do-gooders in the community.

“Darling. Here. Have some little frutta from me to cheer you up. Have a treat.”

And so, a match made in heaven was struck. “No No No; not that one Esther. See, it's got a big Oh, I see. You're right, doesn't make her any less a peach does it? Off you go.”

And so Princess achieved her apotheosis, her destiny, her karma. For never did a peach get eaten with such delight, such reverence and such consciousness.

~ FIVE TRIANGLES – PART 1 ~

The geology of the area could easily explain the remarkable shape of Mount Pentadont, but the locals preferred to stick with the mystery. Forty years ago, some globe-trotting sophisticate had dubbed it “The Montserrat of Minnesota” and had produced dozens of postcards for the trickle of strangers who passed through their valley each year, usually by navigational error. The less sophisticated locals had morphed that into “The Monster of Minnesota” and a bunch of myths and legends had grown up to suit, usually variations on the Sasquatch theme. But nothing ever actually happened.

The town of Pentadont lay in the valley that skirted the western edge of the jagged ridge-line. There was a road, a river and a railway line, now long disused. No more than forty houses, a couple of churches, two stores, a gas station and the compulsory bar 'n' grill lined the single road that connected the State Forest up north to the nearest town, Bemidji, a twenty-mile, half-hour bus trip away for the handful of students and workers.

Mid-winter festival (the folk were wary of words like 'solstice') was the big annual event. They were hardy folk there in Pentadont, descended from miners and lumberjacks and they took pride in their toughness – spring, summer and fall were easy seasons, anyone could be happy – but it took a certain frame of mind to really love the winter. Oft-times the road could be closed for a week on end before the snowploughs could be spared from more urgent work on the State Routes and Highways.

Jack Jorgensen was closing up the general store at six o'clock. It was pitch black outside the circles of the streetlamps. That was normal at this time of year. He was going to call into Annie's Bar on the way home. That also was normal. But what wasn't normal was that it had not yet begun to snow. Not just today, 13th June 2014, but not at all this winter. Yet. And the Festival was only a week or so away.

He had heard the talk from the East Coast about how the weather was changing and it was his fault for driving his Chevrolet pickup, but everyone out here in the real world knew that things just changed and a man was a fool for asking questions. No, Jack's concern was that he had been the winner of the "Five Triangles Monster Marathon" for the last four years straight. He won because he was big and tough and just kept on ploughing through. But if there wasn't much snow – or worse still, NO SNOW – the young ones, slimmer and faster, had so much more speed than he did and he wouldn't stand a chance. Maybe it didn't matter. No-one else had ever won four in a row, and if the kids beat him because they were faster when the going was easy, well that's sort of how it is. He was 42 now.

And the snow might yet come. Every day the sky had that steely-grey both above and below the clouds. It was cold enough. Every day held out the chance and there were still nine more days. Jack wasn't a praying man, but the thought did cross his mind before being laughingly put away. Still.

The Monster Marathon was 26 and a bit miles up and over Mount Pentadont with its five peaks. This was no high-speed 4-hour event, the record (Jack's, 3 years before) stood at 9 hours, fifteen minutes and twenty-three seconds, but a bad year might see times of over 14 hours. There were gravel roads on the ascent and descent, but the ridge track was just that, and each peak was more

like a rock climb than a footrace. There were not many entrants from Boston or Miami.

Middle section. Still no snow. How the townsfolk prepared for the mid-winter festival. Entries in for the race – Jack and five other locals, five from area around and six from further afield, mainly college athletic students.

Sunday 22nd June. Jack had been watching the sky carefully for the last two days. He KNEW (as much as anyone can know) that the snow would come today. It just had to. It would. At the muster at 5:45, all the runners were prepared for the cold, not for snow. The six o'clock start allowed for the fact that the first nine miles of the course were on graded roads that wound up from the valley along the flanks of the ridge, uphill but sheltered and easy going. The challenge began once the ridge was crested. The landscape was challenge enough, but it was here that the weather was the wildcard. This 12-mile, north-heading section was the real race, here it was won or lost.

The starter's pistol sent them off. At once it was clear that Jack's backpack was twice the size (and weight) of the others'. Jack reckoned it would snow, and he had gambled all on that hunch. If it didn't snow, the extra ten pounds of snowgear would just be a useless encumbrance. But then, in that circumstance he wasn't going to win anyway; it would be those bright college stars who would carry the sash by the end of the day. If he was right, they wouldn't even finish.

Jack used the early stage as a meditation. There was no need to concentrate on the course, it was just a steady trot on autopilot, conserving his strength and energy for the tough ridge section. His meditation was on everything that was happy and good during the course of his life, all that he had to live for. He quietly whistled his favourite songs and mouthed his favourite poems from childhood. He re-ran, for the thousandth time, the movie he had made in his head of Alice, by his side for nearly every day of his life, a wife whom he loved and desired as much today as in the days of their schoolyard romance three-quarters of his life ago. He paced himself to allow for the extra he carried and was content to fall further and further behind the leaders. In a way, he was asleep.

After two hours, his autopilot alerted him to the red road sign in the distance, the one advising of the end of the road and the beginning of the track. His awakening senses also detected something else. Looking up ahead and to the left of the track where the side of the ridge began to fall away, there was nothing – no view, just white horizontal lines like a TV gone bung.

To be continued

~ AN ODE FOR ALICIA'S DAY ~

When first I wended down the Pass
– Victoria's, not the Brenner alas!
I would not then have ever guessed
a Star was rising – in the west.

This town, begot from iron and steel
from coaley pits and engines' smoke,
could rarely boast a smith whose words
– like rosettes drawn red from the forge,
then hammered into artful shape –
would cause folk gasp at such delight
and pause reflectful on their meagre lives.

Alicia by nature
Braithwaite by birthright
Today with joy unbounded
and heaven's trumpets sounded
we thank fair Providence that here amid
the blossoms blue of Coerwull
and kine-grazed contours of Kanimbla
Thou art with us, guiding light,
pen-ly mentor, trusted friend.

~ BLOOD MOON ~

I can still scarcely imagine if it was the moon or the blood that came first. Certainly it was the sight of the blood – so much blood – that caused me to flee from the house and gaze up at a full and heavy moon; in search of – what? Consolation? A bigger picture? Or maybe just cold, fresh air to slake the rising horror of it all. I had phoned the police and sat outside awaiting their arrival. I thought I could already hear a distant siren.

But could it have been THAT moon itself being instrumental in David Brooks's hysterical murder? For, from my five-second viewing of the room, it was nothing less than that – mad, lunatic, frenzied butchery. Whoever had done this was not acting under a calm, premeditated motive.

I'm ashamed to say so, but my first thought was that he had brought this upon himself. Brooks had been studying "occult phenomena" and their connection to violent crime. He was a tutor at the nearby University and studying for his doctorate in psychology. There were plenty of detractors who suggested he might have had an ulterior motive in this work. He himself had a lengthy criminal history of violence, much of it sexually triggered. Two lengthy terms of imprisonment and the opportunity to redeem himself through study had appeared to have rehabilitated him, but there were plenty who did not believe in redemption of any kind, nevermind in this particular case.

David was my next-door neighbour, although in our village 'next-door' meant half-a-mile away. I had grown to like him and was certainly stimulated by his relentless intellectual mindset. He was no lightweight but equally not arrogant, always probing, questioning, re-checking things. He had a healthy level of self-doubt and was sceptical of finding 'The Truth'. "The chase is the thing" was his oft-repeated mantra. I wouldn't be hearing that again.

Under the calming light of that beautiful big moon my breathing and pulse began to slow again. I wished I had never seen what I had back in the house and I knew that it would be locked forever inside my mind. I tried to reason that I had seen such things a hundred times on television – but it is not the same at all. I remembered the odd smell and the overwhelming sense of "this is not right, this just doesn't happen".

Yes, it was a siren I had heard, closer. But now another sound, here, right here. A soft woman's voice. "Beautiful Mother Moon. She looks pregnant – Look! Wow! She's giving birth. New life. So beautiful"

Clearly having been there all the time, although in my distress I had not seen her, a woman lay on the lawn only ten yards away from me. I recognised her as Diana, one of David's tutorial students who had sometimes joined us for discussions and, as I suddenly mused, never seemed to have left before the last of the others.

"You shouldn't, like, be here, you know. This Moon, this Blood, it's, like, for women, you know. You're not supposed to be here. You should, like, leave now." Her voice was calm and flat but the pauses and some little gasps told me her breathing was troubled. The siren was nearly here.

“Do you know about David?”

“He shouldn't be here either.”

“Well he's not here anymore now.”

“Good. He'll be, like, OK then.”

“I've called the Police. They're almost here.”

“Well, like, if they're men police, they shouldn't come.”

“Diana, someone's been killed.”

“Yeah, that's cool. It's an OK thing to happen. It helps actually.”

As the first car rounded the side of the house, I rose to walk towards it. Without a sound or a delay I felt Diana's slight weight plunge onto me and somehow I knew that the electric shock going through my back was a knife blade. And again. The howling began, I can't describe the sound. My head was torn backwards by my hair, my throat exposed to the Moon's light.

A lower growling took over the howling and more weight than I had ever known ground me into the earth. The howling became a screeching, then a silence.



The second morning after that, resting in my hospital bed, I was brought a copy of *The Morning Standard* dealing with the events of that night. Across Britain, seventy-two men had been killed. Most had been academics or social workers, some husbands and lovers, some, as I might have been, just in the wrong place. The most famous casualty was Sir Eric Lambden, the Astronomer Royal.

A group calling itself "*Reclaim the Night*" said it was responsible, but so did another, "*Reclaim Wymyn's Rights*". As it happened, it was the protracted arguing between these two groups that lead Police to uncover their headquarters and to absolve both of actual involvement, although charges were laid on the making of false claims.

Diana herself, as most of the other perpetrators, did not defend her charges and throughout seemed entirely disinterested in the proceedings. She refused to engage with 'a patriarchal system' and seemed unperturbed at the sentence of at least twenty years in a women's prison.

Her only comment as she left the Court was "That wasn't the last Blood Moon."

~ AND THE WHEELS GO ROUND ~

That great celestial wheel with its 12 life symbols that some say cast our tendencies slid on across the night sky. But Judith, fitfully awake, knew it was not that; nor that other Great Wheel, the relentless Mill of Fate, senselessly crushing its load of human grain and chaff with its twin stones of Cause and Effect. For Judith knew the trick of Grace that could disengage its cogs. No, it was HER own wheel, ticking insistently inside her but also, somehow, infinitely connected. Her time of anguish was beginning again.

It was the greyest Holy Week she had ever known; the sky was dead. Days and nights full of drear, steady rain that at another time of year would have been a delight. The equinox weather was usually kind here in the South, underlining the benign change of season to a quieter time, and blessing people with a last chance to feel some warmth on their skin before Sol Invictus began to seriously shorten his stride and sleep longer each night.

Just as countless market towns in the Old Lands had, for a thousand years, marked this time with cycles of drama known as Passion Plays, so Judith in secrecy and in embarrassment, felt compelled to enact a role. How and when this had started she could not now remember. She knew that it had roughly

coincided with the onset of what her friends had muttered as Depression, with that episode of profound loss and disappointment that had increasingly marked her as different, withdrawn, a lone wolf. Perhaps in an effort to avoid oblivion, she had convinced herself that this state was a truer, nobler form of existence than that lived by her old friends. Their endless fascination with iPhones and myBanks and personal trainers.

Were they happy? It looked like it. She was not, but “happy” was not the point. Myth was the point. They told her, in decreasingly patient and polite terms, that her myths were not real. Judith was no lightweight intellectually, more than a match for all of her circle in fact. This wasn't much help since it seemed the case that the more one explores and observes, the less certain one becomes. More possibilities open up, questions frequently have more than one answer. Her friends were certain, confident, cockily-, sometimes arrogantly-so. They had begun to patronise her.

Judith knew her myths were not “real”, not “true”. They were real-er than real and tru-er than true. They were the carefully-crafted tales that wove people's shared physical lives into their wider, transcendental experiences of memory, dream and reflection. The imagination of what might be. A provisional explanation for the inexplicable. Above all, why? How could people not be curious? It was the hallmark of our species, our greatest inspiration. Her preoccupation now was to place herself INSIDE a myth, to find a valid space to keep alive in a world that had completely lost its appeal.

It was Good Friday morning and staying in bed was by far the best option for her. The cruel grey was still monopolising the window but in here she was warm and her musings and wonderings were freely dancing inside her mind. How much she wanted to go to a church, to encounter fellow-mythicists, to

know she was not alone. The risk of going but not finding was much too high and would have the direst consequences. But what she would do today, eagerly anticipated, would be to immerse herself into Haydn's perfect "*Stabat Mater*". She only allowed this disc on two days of the year – in stubborn acknowledgement of the Church Calendar – and this was one of them. It worked better that way, she never wanted to fully know it, to take it for granted. This was the greatest telling of a myth that she knew – so utterly beautiful, so sublimely faithful, so humanly transcendently divine.

~ THE BOARDER ~

AN 1872 COLD CASE

a true story

It could all be solved with the answer to one question:-

“Did the boarder return to Mrs Jackson's Lodging-house in Clarence-street, Sydney on the night of Wednesday 10th of April 1872?”.

If the answer is “Yes, he did”, then William Watkin Jones almost certainly took his own life the following morning, a defeated and hopeless man.

If “No, he didn't”, then he was surely murdered.

The Inquest into his death – which resulted in an open finding – was held only 19 hours after the discovery of his corpse, bobbing gently under the old Hunter River Steam Navigation Company's Wharf close to where the trendy King Street Wharf development now rises; Darling Harbour, Sydney, at the then-foot of Margaret Street and fairly close to Mrs Jackson's lodgings.

A mere nineteen hours, of course, left no time for any police investigation beyond the initial discovery and a cursory check. This seems very odd to the modern sensibility, trained by endless hours of watching “Silent witness” and “Wire in the blood” and especially as the Coroner noted many signs of conflict and violence on the body – an existing black-eye, more

recent abrasion to the knuckles and a bruise around the throat. And yet, one key witness was located – a witness who tendered much evidence to suggest that Jones was responsible for his own demise, but one who (seen with the benefit of historical research) may have had an undeclared interest in the death.

This witness, John Jenkins, licensee of *The Forth and Clyde Hotel* in Balmain, attested that Jones had arrived in Sydney from Gulgong two or three weeks earlier (say 20th–27th March). The policeman (Senior Constable William Dick) who retrieved and initially examined the body deposed that he had found “nothing upon it, but an empty purse and a piece of newspaper.” The empty purse backed up Jenkins' evidence that Jones was broke, but no further mention, no enquiry, was ever made about the piece of newspaper. Why would a man's last possession be a piece of newspaper?

On the 16th March, reported that night and in following days in the Melbourne *Argus*, a Supreme Court sitting in Melbourne found against another man named Jenkins. Was this the piece of newspaper, torn out and sent to Jones? His vindication against the man who may have ruined him? Was Jones seeking justice for himself?

Mr. William Jenkins was an important man, a Government Mining Agent responsible for the administration of mining activities in Gippsland, but also an active promoter and investor of dozens of speculative mining ventures. The jury (in majority, not unanimously) found that he had acted deceptively in share-trading of *The Monmouth Copper Mine*, a mine that had been discovered by and embodied all the hopes of the dead man, William Watkin Jones. The mine, discovered to much fanfare in late 1869, had come to nothing and some local newspaper reports implied that William Jenkins and his partner J.R. Davies had been “dodgy” all along. Jones had staked all on

this discovery (Monmouth was his birthplace) and had lost all including, it would seem, his family and self-respect. He had taken refuge with relatives in Gulgong.

Although lodging in Clarence-street since his arrival in Sydney, Jones had visited *The Forth and Clyde Hotel* at Balmain on at least three occasions. This was clearly not just for a drink as there would have been many, many pubs along the way. He had known the licensee John Jenkins from a time when both men were at the copper-mining township of Currawang. This was close to the date and place of the discovery of the *Monmouth* mine (and of the involvement of Mr. William Jenkins). Perhaps the men were old friends, although the testimony of Jenkins at the Coroner's Inquest was set in a negative, distancing tone. If (and this is not proven at the moment) there was a connection between John Jenkins and Mr. Edward Jenkins, with John Jenkins as the go-between to Jones, then Jones would have a very specific reason to visit – to claim his vindication.



Aspects of the Inquest are very puzzling to the 21st Century mind. First, the unseemly haste – a mere 19 hours – and the lack of any police investigation. Then the testimony of the doctor responsible for the autopsy, Dr. George Henry Hamilton, estimated that the body had been in the water for “five or six days” whereas other witnesses had seen him alive only a day-and-a-half prior to the retrieval of his body – a serious inconsistency.

Dr. Hamilton gave the official cause of death as “asphyxia by drowning” and yet the body was afloat before gas decomposition would have raised a submerged body and the clothing that was described would have not aided buoyancy. This flotation is more consistent with his death being out of water and the lungs containing air.

Clear marks of fighting were not considered overly suspicious. Jones had clearly been beaten in the days leading up to his death. What appeared as a ligature mark around his throat was not considered sufficiently deep to cause strangulation and was attributed to having his tie done up too tightly!



So; was it suicide or was it murder?

It all hinges on that question that should have been asked of Mrs. Jackson, but that wasn't. Strange, isn't it. Unless the truth was not really wanted to be known. The only two substantial witnesses, John Jenkins and his wife Catherine, may have been implicated. Mrs. Jackson lived just a ten-minute walk from *The Observer Tavern*, the site of the Inquest. Also, there is the question of just what that "piece of newspaper" was. Did it implicate Mr. William Jenkins, an important public man, in the case? Why was it not examined?



There are reasonable grounds to consider that William Jones took his own life. First, where he was found was the nearest piece of water to Mrs. Jackson's Lodging-house. Second, Jones was in a truly desperate state – financially ruined, estranged from his wife and four children, apparently now an alcoholic. Third, he may well have come seeking vindication and found only fists and failure – literally a broken man. Fourth (and most poignantly), 10th of April was his 38th birthday.

But the tides and winds of the 10th and 11th of April 1872 as recorded in *The Sydney Morning Herald* would have been able to carry a body, killed on land and dumped into the harbour at *The Forth and Clyde Hotel*, out of Mort's Bay to just beyond Goat Island and then back into the adjacent Darling Harbour the next morning.

~ SPEED ~

This story is rated MA 45+. It is not recommended for readers under the age of 45. Sorry, Linda.

It contains strong language, sexual references and offensive racist stereotyping.

(Also, there are no cats in this story.) (Sorry, Linda.)

Speed?

Slow speed.

That's what I like.

Making tea or making love.

Quick sex is like a teabag.

I'll have a fine strong dusky Darjeeling, please. Loose-leaf of course. Or maybe one of those exotic fragrant types from the misty mountains of Ceylon, once called Serendip.

But the horror of the premature esaturation of a teabag makes me think of the itsy-teeny-weeny bit I know about Japanese culture.

The Tea Ceremony.

Give me the Tea Ceremony of sex any day.

Every movement controlled and precise, rehearsed and refined, held-back.

Then given.

But not the white-painted face. No. Yuck! Not the white-plastered face.

But. Is it true what they used to do to girl's feet? There's something mighty sick about that. Does Japan have an equivalent of The Ozarks where some people still do that? I wouldn't be surprised.

There's something I don't like in Classical Japanese Culture – something about the disconnect between *finesse* and barbarity. A bit like the Gestapo *kriminal-direktor* who would go home after a good day's work tearing flesh of tortured victims and weep over the beauty of a Liszt *nocturne* whilst sipping an iced *trockenbeerenauslese* (give or take an umlaut or two) and nursing his little girl Lotti.

No sirree! Fast ai'nt for me no more. Not “furious” neither. I'm too old and too sick. A testosterone-free zone, that's what I am. Why else would I be with a bunch of girls in a writers' group in Lithgow when I could be hanging out with a very different bunch of girls at Club 220 down at Penrith.

Yesterday I returned from Sydney on the 4:21 limited-stops train “The Fish”. It runs express Central-Parramatta-Penrith, then ignores all those little numpty places like Warrimoo and Linden and Bulla-fucken-burra, then all-stops from Wentworth Falls. Passengers for Bell or Zig Zag, please inform The Guard at the End of the Train.

Do you know how much quicker it is than the regular service? Do you? No. I'll tell you. It's 3 minutes quicker. Two hours, forty-seven minutes as against two hours, fifty minutes.

Now.

Lithgow is 155.8 km from Central. That's official. So, the bog-standard slow train has an average speed of 54.998 kph whereas The Fish blisters along at 55.976 kph. NEARLY (but not quite) one kilometre per hour faster!

I think Stephenson's *Rocket* could do 35mph.

And over the years? How are we doing?

So. Now. Yesterday the train took 2:47 or 2:50. I'm not going to quibble over 3 minutes.

In 1944, the (steam-powered) journey took 4:34. So we've come a long way in 70 years. In 1957, the (now electrified) journey took 3:08. Oooh! That's only 18 minutes (or 10%) slower than now. We haven't come very far in 58 years after all.

BUT. In 1981, 34 years ago, the journey took 2:42. Hang on. That's 5 minutes FASTER than now. AND you could hop across to Platform 1 at Lithgow and board a railmotor for Mudgee!!

So if I wanted speed, I wouldn't find it on an Australian Railway.

I remember the first time I ever saw a speedo needle at 100mph. The magic "ton", every boy's right of passage. I was driving my mate's (Matthew's) car. A FIAT 124S. He had lost his licence, so I had to drive. It was on Sydney's Southern Cross Drive just after it was opened, maybe 1971 or 2.

I remember the first time I ever saw a speedo needle at 200kph. The back road from Orange to Mullion Creek in September 1976. My Ducati was only

two years old (now she will be 41 in October). My only regret is that I could not also have been a bystander and heard the sound of us passing. It would have been glorious. I saw it again only about 5 years ago, using the last of my testosterone on my new Spanish Honda. But all I could think of was what could happen to my body if something went wrong. I had become too old.

There is no more speed in my life. I generally obey the speed limits these days.

I cannot run. I sit and stand up with care and attention and perhaps a little grunt or groan.

My thinking is slower too. Or if, on some occasion, it is fast, I cannot catch up with it and it gets away.

Am I to despair? I could easily. I hover there, the edge of despair. But going over would be pointless. Better now to see my life as an ongoing Tea Ceremony. To take joy in art, in consciousness, in wise deliberation. To be able to say "I am wiser than a Prime Minister". To say "I have some grace, some dignity". To say "My thoughts are finely crafted, they are kind". To say "I love you".

~ UNDERGROWTH ~

The two gardeners paused from the work. It was not yet lunchtime, but it was hot and their sweat, streaked with the dusty soil, was running down inside their elegant white workrobes. They caught each others' eyes and, as one, mischievously directed their glance to their third workmate twenty metres away. He was dressed unlike them in a coarse brown woollen robe that looked like dirt and dead grass even when it was clean, which it rarely was. With his mediæval tonsure and kneeling close to the earth, Brother Botanicus looked as though he had come off second-best in a fight with a Victa lawnmower.

“Oy! Schlepp! Botty! Get up and do some real work with us!” Rebbe Emmanuel ben Itzak called. “This undergrowth is getting out of hand.” His companion, Mullah Ali al-Akhzani, roared out a laugh that flashed gold in the sunlight. “Be gentle with him, brother. He THINKS he IS helping with the gardening, even if he isn't.”

Brother Botty awkwardly arose and huffed-and-puffed his way back to his comrades. “I know, I know what you think! But this new infestation is not of natural cause and natural methods don't seem to work and you know it. I believe in redemption – conviction, confession, forgiveness, restitution and glorious redemption. Whether it's weeds or people, the principle's the same.”

“Give me a flamethrower anyday.” said Al-Akhzani.

“Make mine a glyphosate on the rocks” said Manny.

“Bloody Calvinists” said Botanicus.

“A-A-A-MEN!” the three of them chimed in tenor harmony in perfect thirds.



The three comrades had been tending The Garden of Human Culture together for the last seven years. The massive UNESCO project had started in the 1960s and so was just beginning to look like the vision of its planners. The Garden is organised in Fields corresponding with a range of arts and sciences (for example Music, Architecture, Engineering, even Storytelling) and trees were planted and named for 'the big names' within those Fields. A plaque beside each tree tells the story. Right now they were labouring in The Field of Philosophy where something decidedly odd was happening. Brother Botanicus had hit the nail right on the head – something unnatural.

“These new invasive species are threatening to smother and poison all our finest specimen trees” Botanicus began. “Look at our wonderful *Philosogloptus schoepenhauerii*, it's all but invisible under that parasitic *Ridicula derrida*. I can't understand it – no-one can – but it just keeps growing. We've tried to restrict it, to understand it, to physically strip it off. We can't poison it without damaging the main tree. We'd be accused of all sorts of things if we burned it. I don't know what to do.”

“You should tell me your problems! I've got worries of my own” whined Emmanuel. Look at my *Maimonides cordobensis*, the most beautiful tree ever seen by Man and he's dying from strangulation by *foucaultiana*. All that bloody weed knows is reproduction and power. It's unstoppable.”

The mullah continued the complaint. “And my *Sapienta arabica* is withering under the poison sap of *vitriolicus dennettii*. My question is 'What are these weeds doing in The Field of Philosophy in the first place?' They don't belong here.”

“It all started when the Committee approved the planting of that *Nietzschiana*. I never liked that tree – all twisted and black. Now that's one tree that doesn't belong here!” The monk's face grew red with indignation.

“You can't say that, Botty. You know the rules. No discrimination against trees you don't like. There was a lot of debate in the Committee, but they decided that Nietzsche actually WAS a philosopher.”

“Yes, but a shit-house philosopher, pardon my French. And haven't you noticed that all these new invasive weed species seem to start off under the *Nietzschiana* then spread out?”

Al-Akhzani shot bolt upright. “You are right, wise brother. Now that you say it I can see it!”

Emmanuel, slightly miffed that the plodding monk had worked this out before he had, never-the-less acceded that this did seem to be the case. “So, esteemed brethren, what do we need to do?”

“First we think, then we pray, then we talk. Let's all take the afternoon off, go our separate ways, then get together under the bright moon this evening. The Universe will give us an answer.”



At 9 o'clock the three men met at their usual council place where serious discussions were always held. A round table in the centre of a glade of 9 oaks was provided with three comfortable chairs, three fine crystal glasses and a bottle of the finest Armagnac. Botty had assured Ali that Armagnac wasn't alcoholic (well, not much) and that, even if it was, he had opened the bottle towards Mecca and thus rendered it *halal*. The mullah thought that sounded just fine.

Each man knew these 9 giant trees intimately. Solomon, Socrates, Epicurus, Avicenna, Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Confucius, Marx, Aquinas. They came here with reverence and trust, recognising that they themselves were as dust in the universe, grains of sand on the shore, mere men who would soon die and rot in the good earth. But that they were also Children of Infinity with the power to imagine, to dream and to love.

In silent contemplation of the bright moon above and the soil below and the trees around, the bottle of armagnac seemed to slip away all too soon.

“So brothers.” it was Ali who spoke first, “Who will be our Guide in this decision tonight?”

“You do it.” said Botty “I always fumble it, you're the deftest here.”

“I accept your trust with both humility and pride.” responded the courtly Arab. With a seeming invisible flick of the wrist, the empty bottle span like a deranged compass needle in the perfect centre of the round table, skimming within millimetres of the crystal glasses yet not touching one. It slowed, became visible, slowed again until that agonising point when it seemed that it must stop, yet continues another little while as if to confound.

“And. Our Guide tonight is” drumrolled Emmanuel

“Socrates!” joyfully called Botty as he aligned the bottle's length with the nearest oak tree.

The three men, as excited and skittish from the bottle's first purpose as from its second, ran to the base of the tree, formed a ring around it and held hands. The process was to say the first word that came to mind and hope to billy-oh that there was some degree of inspiration involved, divine or otherwise.

“IN” chanted Emmanuel ben Itzak. He was wily. Maybe he meant “OM”, or maybe he just wanted to be non-committal so that if it all went wrong, it wouldn't be his fault.

“DEATH” intoned Brother Botanicus, always inclined to the morbid.

“FRESH” sang Ali al-Akhzani as pure as the song of the muezzin.

“LIFE” called Botty, either in remorse for his previous call, or else because he was a Libran.

Silence fell. The men cherished the serenity of the moment, the coolness of the night air and the sense that they had just been a part of something beyond the ordinary. With nods and smiles, they invited each other to return to the table. The monk miraculously furnished a second bottle from beneath his poor habit. To help the deliberations, he said.

“And so. What do we make of the Master's words?”

“It's a bit like a Delphic Oracle, isn't it? It seems so trite but could mean anything.”

“Sounds suspiciously christian to me.”

“Or pantheistic, or most belief systems really.”

“Suppose so.”

“But Socrates never spoke much of death.”

“No, he just DID it.”

A pause.

A silence.

A three-way unison shout.

“HEMLOCK!”

“We isolate the alkaloid

“Mix it with a hydrophilic agent

“Spray it below the trees' leaf canopy

“All the soft plants will weaken enough for us to remove them.”

“I knew they'd be no match for a real philosopher.”

“Yes, but it was a close-run race all the same.”

“Burn the weeds, burn the weeds, burn the weeds!”

“NO!”

“Why not?”

“Bad association, philosophers and fire. Remember Giordano Bruno?”

“And what about the *nietzschiana* that caused all the problem in the first place?”

Silence.

Thought.

Heavy breathing.

“Burn it.”

~ PURPLE ~

The first thing that jumped to my mind was 'purple prose' and I contemplated writing a breathtaking history of my erotic adventures throughout life. Purely from the point of view of documentation of course, especially as 'history' is now the operative word.

I looked up my Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (I chose 'the Shorter' as appropriate to my own stature) and was amazed to be corrected from thinking that 'purple prose' implied a degree of racy salaciousness to understanding that it actually means prose that is excessively florid, over-written. Well! I already do that as a matter of course; so there goes that idea.

Purple? I'm not really a visual person, so the colour itself doesn't mean much to me. The word associations for me are with bishops, Roman Emperors and eccentric women of late middle age. Nothing much inspiring there.

I like irises, and some of those are slightly purple in a bluish sort of way, but I wouldn't want to write about irises, especially as I frequently bought them for my wife whose pleasure ultimately became my pain. (I wonder who's buying her irises now?).

So. Having wasted 182 words and several minutes of your time, I'm not going to write about 'Purple' at all.



No. But all of a sudden it came to me. The most luscious, rich, deep purple I know is that of our common variety of eggplant. I love that colour, it makes me feel all gooey, and I think of Italy and cooking and eating and making love. And that combination makes me think of the wonderful Clara del Mancino and some very happy Italian times that included eggplant and cooking but not, alas, making love.

Clara and her son, Rinaldo, run Bar Bellavista in the locality of Barcola, northwest Italy. Bellavista (beautiful view) is the spot on the road from Sarzana where you rise to a crest and follow a sweeping left-hand curve, then nearly faint with pleasure because here you glimpse for the first time the Gulf of La Spezia, the fairytale islets of Palmiria and Tino, the peninsula of Portovenere and beyond, the Tyrrhenian Sea whose other shore breaks on Barcelona.

It is a magical place so, being Italy, there must be a Bar. No question. Bar Bellavista is tiny, the size of my living room, no more. A curved wooden bar with a terrazzo top, a tiny drinks fridge, some shelving with bottles for sale and a few essentials like packets of chips, cakes and pastries. Three, maybe four, tables along one side are the accommodation, but most patrons prefer to just lean on the bar.

But purple? Eggplants? Magic? I'll tell you. Behind the bar is a kitchen, or rather, a cupboard that ACTS as though it's a kitchen. And 5 days a week, Clara del Mancino turns out pranzo di lavoro – “lunch of work”. Most places do workers' lunch, and the pattern is standard; a first course of pasta with sauce, a second course of something more substantial, a chunk of bread, a 500mL bottle of water, a 250mL carafe of wine and a coffee to finish. Six years ago that all cost €6, 2 years ago it was €9, still a bargain.

To recount my initial experience, I can't do better than quote my travel diary:

Lunch started out with me being an outsider, they pretty much just took my order, brought it out and left me alone. I ate a first course of pasta in a boring tomato sauce then a second course of eggplant parmigiana. Now I have to say that this last was probably one of the most delicious things I've ever put into my mouth in my entire life! It was a symphony of flavours highlighted by virtuoso herbs and olive oil on a basso continuo of seared eggplant, tomato and cheese. The richness of flavour was incredible. When I commented on it to the waitress, she looked at me as though I was a bit touched and said "E normale". I replied "Quindi sono in paradiso."

That was the first time I ever went into that Bar, but over the following five years it became my home away from home, a source of friendships and a real inner connection with the Italian society of that little area. When you are a foreigner in Italy, the best thing you can do is to find a Bar and make it "Your Bar". The first time you go in you will be ignored after the initial polite greeting. The second time a few eyebrows will be raised. The third time you will have to explain yourself – mainly Where do you come from? Why are you here? – and the fourth time; you're IN. And even now, after a two year absence, Clara and I exchange the occasional email.

I have found eating in Italy is very touch and go. You can go to a proper restaurant and be very disappointed, or stop at a roadside caravan and be blown out by something wonderful. You have to keep your eyes (and nose) open. For instance, the Bar Bellavista could be easily missed – a doorway with the ubiquitous plastic fly-strips, a step down into a space dark after the bright

Mediterranean light. No signage, no flashing lights, not even a name (hah! I just remembered that “the place to be” in Sydney in the '70s was an Italian restaurant called “No Names”! I didn't get it at the time, but it was just being authentically Italian!).

Supermarkets DO exist in Italy, but they are few and not used like they are here. Any town the size of Lithgow and up still has a weekly market where people go and buy everything. And it is here that you can still buy the freshest fruit and veg. As in country France, it is amazing how much love and art go into arranging the stalls. I don't think it's done for “the competitive edge” or to make more money, it seems to come from a traditional respect for both customer and produce. Everything is laid out “just so”, colours are coordinated, each piece is stacked and displayed with care.

So now, here in my new home far from the Tyrrhenian Sea, I will not buy my eggplants at Woolies or Coles. I go to “Country Table”, look to see if the eggplants are good that day and, if they are I'll buy a couple and take them home. And then I'll try my best to recreate that wonder I first experienced in a tiny bar in Italy. Each time I get a little better at it. Clara del Mancino is just behind my right shoulder, whispering into my ear, guiding me. I would love to cook for her someday. (20.08)



 123RF

**HOT
WATER**

September 2015

PREAMBLE

This story is set in Canberra in 2022, just 7 years after the so-called “Accidental Coup” that brought Parliament to an end and installed a benign military rule under Governor-General Peter Cosgrove.

The “Accidental Coup” of October 2015 was not planned, but initiated after a lone disgruntled serving SASR Captain, Peter O’Shea, in response to what he considered the appalling standard of Members of Parliament, lobbed four hand-grenades into the front benches of both Government and Opposition during a packed Question Time.

It was not considered an Act of Terrorism, as The Returned Foreign Fighters Act of 2015 exempted people who had been radicalised, trained and fought overseas by ourselves. The actions of Peter O’Shea were considered an act of reasonable desperation by the general populace and a High Court decision (the last before it was abolished) ultimately ratified that view.

All activities of Federal Government in Canberra were suspended and all administration was devolved to the six State Governments. The Northern Territory and the A.C.T. were effectively under direct Military Rule. The Commonwealth of Australia was formally and constitutionally changed to the United States of Australia in August 2020. Christopher Pyne, who heroically survived the bomb-attack by using Treasurer Hockey as a human shield, was appointed the first President of Australia.

The coup unfortunately exactly coincided with the beginning of The Second Great Depression. All government services and infrastructure development ceased overnight.

It was 6 in the afternoon so the water was due to come on. Still, she wouldn't hold her breath. Not yet anyway. The sound of exhaling air came from the tap – a good sign because that meant that water, somewhere, was pushing through a pipe. Towards her. A minute later the clanking began. Another good sign, and she chuckled, remembering her dad's stories about back-packing across India and Pakistan back in the 1980s.

Before The Troubles.

But this wasn't Lahore in 1982, this was the Nation's capital, perfectly planned Canberra, in 2022. In only forty years, World Equality had finally been achieved. Now everyone lived like the Pakis did in 1982 – except the Rich And Powerful everywhere. In both Lahore and Canberra, we now guessed that the rich were doing fine inside their compounds. But we didn't know. They weren't telling.

Sylvie needed water and she needed hot water even more. She stank. Even more, she needed the comfort and consolation of floating, as if *in utero* again.

Weight-less, sight-less, warm, alone. But music would be nice. She had thought on the way back to strip half an armful of wild lavender from amongst the ruins of an old church. They said it was calming.

Six days earlier Sylvie had been swept up in an ASIO raid near Woden and held in a detention facility at the Fairbairn Base. It was not her first time but, ironically this time, she wasn't actually doing anything. She hadn't even

been processed beyond the obligatory ChipScan. She had just put in a standard cell with three others and forgotten until this afternoon when she was released. No interview, no explanation (of course), no comment.

Six days without a wash and exuding the stink of fear.

The Resistance Manual gave useful techniques for appearing an innocent in these situations. So, for the camera, she had paced crazily, she had pissed herself, she had vomited up her first meal (easy to do), had called and called at the door to let her family know, then had resorted to the bunk and wept for hours. She kept yelling out stupid questions. It had worked.

She had walked the six kilometres into Civic where several of her cadre worked in brothels, still as ever the best place to uncover secrets and manipulate an enemy. She knew they had baths there and hopefully hot water to fill them. And her friends would have clean clothes. It was risky, and Sylvie was aware that the irregular release could as well be a tailing operation as much as the normal incompetence.

In the classic oxymoronic mode of Security Intelligence, all tailing operations relied now on satellite tracking of Mchips. One human following another was considered inefficient when it was all now possible from a monitor at ASIO. Except when people just disappeared, as Sylvie had just done right in front of the Console Operator. She had picked up a ChipNix bonnet, one of hundreds stashed around the city, especially near police stations and places like the Fairbairn Detention Facility.

The operator had reverted to what she always did when that happened; she locked onto someone else's Mchip nearby and pretended it was

Sylvie. It wasn't worth her job to report the irregularity and, besides, she rather liked the look of the young woman whose photo came up on the file. She didn't care, her supervisor didn't care, no-one really cared. The file would register a number change, but no-one ever checked the files. As long as they were following somebody. That's what mattered.

Sylvie slipped in the back door after two circuits of the block and a double-back. Penny's warm face initially smiled until it was hit by the barnyard stench that wafted around her friend. Knowing it was serious, no words were needed and Penny hit the door release for the private quarters down the back. The Civic Gentlemen's Club was safe ground; nobody touched it except the odd driven newsblogger hoping for a scoop that would make him or her famous for a day before being shut-down and disappeared.

And so the pipes clanked and gurgled their way into action. Sylvie only ran an inch into the big bath and began to scrub every bit of her body she could reach with a lathered facecloth. She used lots of soap and scrubbed hard until her skin reddened. The soapy water running off her stank but she figured it was better to get rid of as much as possible before the real bath that she hoped for – if the water held up.

She sluiced the residue away and appreciated that the hot water was still running. Before running the bath, she scattered the lavender stems around the bottom of the bath, hopped in and began to roll and writhe and wriggle around to release the oils and sap right into her skin. She enjoyed the rough prickling of the harder stems and briefly thought to ask Penny to come in and give her a birching with them, but she knew where that would go and tonight was not the night. Not yet anyway.

At last, the time for the water came. She set the flow to a slow rate and the temperature just right then lay back, still, but with her body stretched and taut. She focussed all her senses on the feel of the water level slowly climbing every inch of her body. The hot water was like a million tiny kisses as it pooled around the dam of her buttocks then licked its way along her sex and climbed her thighs. It tickled her waist and hips as it rose higher until, with exquisite tenderness it lapped at the sides of her breasts. Sylvie had done this ever since her child-hood discovery. It was her first act of eroticism and had set her along a certain path in life.

Before the level got too high, Sylvie cut the cold water off and let the bath temperature rise as much as she could bear. The floating wreath of lavender stems began to release all its scent as the heat reached some magical point. Holding her nose after emptying her lungs, she drifted below the water and played dead for as long as she could. It was another childhood dare. Wait until you thought you couldn't last any more. Then, count to ten. Wait until the dizzies started. Then, count to ten. If you dared.

She washed her hair at least four times before it felt clean enough. Sylvie couldn't remember exactly when her last bath was before this. She guessed two or three months. In these languid floaty moments, she began to take stock of her situation, to try and get her thoughts for the immediate future into some clarity.

The apartment block where she lived no longer had hot water at all and the mains water was rationed to residential areas only between 6 and 9, morning and evening. The electricity was generally holding up but cuts were often and unheralded. The local Pool was where she once went for showers until the crowds got too big, too unruly and it was shut down for good.

Canberra was a ghost of its old self. Defence and Security were the only old Departments still employing and most people had drifted away over the last three years, some to Sydney or Melbourne, but many more had decided that the cities were in for even more trouble in the days ahead. Sylvie's parents, Ron and Yvette, were amongst these. They went bush.

By good fortune, they had owned for years a bush-block near the village of Rydal, four hours drive north of Canberra and three hours west of Sydney and a long way from the nearest highway. Ron was a Wordsworth lover and had been deeply impressed that someone had named an Australian village after Wordsworth's Lakeland house. But he did prefer not to notice the preposterous disconnect between the lush green of Cumberland's village landscape and this semi-arid backwater.

But for the way that circumstances had panned out, it was ideal. There was no State apparatus here at all. There was no infrastructure to fail. No-one in any city would even know it existed. Three years after their transition, there was a fine vege garden and the beginnings of an orchard, a secure run for hens and ducks, a comfortable two-roomed cabin and three secure shipping containers. A simple wind generator and a home-made solar heating system had just been finished.

Sylvie treasured the knowledge that there would always be a place that was as secure and safe as anywhere could be. An escape hatch. Maybe even a place to die in peace.

But in the meanwhile, Sylvie would stay. Sylvie would fight.

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

11:30am Wed 21st October 2015
House of Representatives, CANBERRA

“Madame Deputy–Speaker!” Prime Minister Abbott's tenor voice, slightly strangulated, cut high over the hubble–bubble of The House's discontent. Again, “Madame Deputy–Speaker, Madame Deputy–Speaker!”

This was, remember, a man with a passionate attachment to the number Three, as if a threefold repetition invested his words with a ring of truth that would otherwise be missed. Likewise any policy that could be framed in a three–word slogan was, in his world–view, more likely to be taken on board by his adoring constituency. The exception to the Rule of Three was, of course, in his use of polysyllabic words. Two syllables were generally sufficient in this respect; three a confusion, an arrogance, a losing of touch with his tribe.

“The cowards have fled, Madame Deputy–Speaker!. The Death Cult has been beheaded! Like wolves in the night, Madame Deputy–Speaker, they have folded their tents!” Hilarity from the Opposition. “On the very day, the very day, Madame Deputy–Speaker, the VERY day that Australian Super Hornets began their mission in support of our friends, our Allies, to free the skies above Syria, the Daesh have folded like the cowards they always were. The stunning victory of the Free against Evil shines before us like a new sunrise over The Levant.”

He paused, bobbed his head and leered that leer at his fine turn of phrase and the tsunami of adulation rising from his Front Bench.

Question Time had ensured a full crowd at this first sitting-day of the Spring Session of the Australian Federal House of Representatives. All Members were aware of the timing, the two-year mile-stone of the current government and the likely prospect of another 12 months until the next election. They would not go early.

The Nation and its Representatives were as one in their complete loss of direction, of any hope for a vision.

For the last 25 years, a generation, Parliament had been working its way towards a new model, a Parliament of professional politicians rather than the hotch-potch of lawyers, train-drivers, teachers and miners that had characterised the nation's first 75 years. That new model had largely been achieved, but the pre-selectors of both major parties had increasingly favoured spivs and party hacks, greasy men and women with Ambition lodged in that part of their brains where Service once resided, with Cleverness ousting Wisdom, and a honed knowledge-base that lacked both depth and breadth.

Amidst the kerfuffle of the centenary of Gallipoli and the 70th anniversary of VJ Day, not one Parliamentarian recalled that, in 7 months time, another Centenary was due. For the smooth men of the government, "Sykes and Picot" sounded like an advertising agency.

The leaders of Daesh remembered the 16th May 1916. They just needed a wee rest.



The world had seen nothing like it. The guns around Mosul, Khobane, Damascus and a hundred smaller places didn't start that morning. The Twitterfeeds stopped, drone target signals disappeared. Thousands of hostages and tens of thousands of civilians wandered free and dazed to come to the terrifying decisions of how they were to live. Nobody did anything for a week.

Then MSF and UNHCR made some initial, cautious flights into disputed territory. Nothing happened despite the dire warnings of many that this was a Trojan Horse operation. While bombing missions were stopped because of a lack of credible targets, surveillance flights went into overdrive. They flew ever lower and lower and slower, listening for non-existent phone and radio signals, scanning for non-existent troop movements, even hoping to draw non-existent fire. Daesh had gone underground, the one eventuality for which the West did not have a response.

No serious person thought that the war was won. Serious people acknowledged that it was a masterstroke. The West was not good at waiting and now Daesh had laid down the challenge to come to it before its next move on its own terms. And Allah alone knew what that might be. And maybe not even He.



“And, Madame Deputy-Speaker, I take this, ah, opportunity to say to the Honourable Leader of the Opposition – Shorten by name, Shorten by stature, and even more Shorten in his future in This Place – that the resolve of My Government has been shown, yet again Madame Deputy-Speaker, yet again I say, yet again, to have been correct, to have been courageous, and to have been the will of the Australian People. Our triumph will speak for itself.”

The electrician stood on the requisitioned ladder and changed another fluorescent tube in the empty Public Gallery high above the farcical mêlée, overlooking the eruption of cheering and jeering, of catcalls and booing. He felt a further rise in his blood pressure and quickly breathed to counteract it. His 12 years with Australia's Special Air Services Regiment, his six tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq, had readied him for the approaching moment. The disgrace below confirmed, as if by a miracle, the Rightness of his Act.

He descended the ladder, neatly put the spent tube into the cardboard tube of its replacement and rummaged into his large aluminium toolbox. Peter O'Shea wasn't really an electrician.

He was a currently serving Captain of the SASR and he had pledged his allegiance to the Queen and sworn to resist her enemies. He had no doubt, no conscience, that the rubbish swilling below him were the enemies of the Queen, of the Australian people and of decency. He and his comrades had lived and died through multiple hells with superhuman courage, skill, loyalty, resourcefulness, humanity. He had no doubts about what he had done, but to be commanded by this Parliament? No, it was just not right.

From the toolbox, O'Shea withdrew four standard-issue Thales F1 fragmentation grenades, each with a lethal radius of six metres and a nominal fuse time of 5 seconds. Four would be enough. They were spray-painted cricket-ball red for the occasion.

He knew the Prime Minister to fancy himself a sporting type. With pins withdrawn and three grenades held between his forearm and chest, the first grenade was launched in a slow gentle arc directly to the Prime Minister

of Australia. With precise timing and conscious projection, O'Shea called out, not too loudly, not too softly, the single word –

“Tony”

In truth, and in practice, it would have made no difference whether the man had caught the grenade or not, but as an act of symbolism O'Shea prayed that he would. With his lopsided leer, the boy in Tony Abbott, the ill-suppressed yobbo, the innocent locked away inside the compromised sinner, rose gloriously to the moment and a catch to credit a baggy-green-crowned silly-mid-on was faultlessly taken. The buffoons of the Front Bench roared their delight

“Onya Captain!”

“One for Team Australia!”

“Howzat! Shorten for a duck! Pathetic!”

As the three balls followed.



Buffoons no longer, the immortal souls that they never even knew they had, separated – with a touch of regret perhaps – from the mess of blood and pulp and merged into Infinity.

And in that millisecond that became Beyond Time, freed of our four-dimensional prison, they saw It All. Without blinkers, without lenses. And they wailed for their wickedness.



The electrician's overalls were neatly stowed in the abandoned toolbox as Captain Peter O'Shea strode through the corridors of Parliament House to exit precisely 18 seconds before the lock-down. Indeed he assisted in it for a little while before he walked the five kilometres to Yarralumla to present himself to his one-time Commanding Officer, Major-General Peter Cosgrove.

He hoped that he would understand.

AT RYDAL

“Poppy!”

“Tea's up!”

Ron had spotted Yvette down in the fern-glade 200 metres away down by the creek. He watched her rise, twist and raise her hand in reply.

The memory came back of the first time he saw that raised hand, acknowledging the roar of the spectators after her perfect score in the final equestrian round of the Women's Modern Pentathlon at the Sydney Olympics. It was a standing joke that, while she had missed out on Bronze by a slim 20

points, no-one remembered Kate Allenby anyway. If she had won even a Bronze and had remained in Latvia, well she may have been a little famous for a while, but she was an Aussie now – for better or for worse.

Real tea was becoming scarce and they were happy to enjoy their own-grown mint or chamomile most of the time. Their tea-times were not about what went into their mouths but about the warmth of their shared company which they consciously enhanced by making sure they had plenty of time apart to follow their individual interests.

He called her 'Poppy' because, while he was a farm boy growing up with war-surplus .303 rifles, Yvette's skill was with air pistols – pop-guns in his opinion. Ron treasured the moment, now 22 years ago, when this little bombshell appeared before him and said, in her very insecure English "I like your horse."

He had snorted, exploded, a chuckle "Well", "that's a bloody good start!" Then he looked down into those Baltic blue eyes and knew that this was not only the start, but the finish as well, and everything else in between and beyond.

Their Sylvie had been conceived amidst, but apart from, the mega-fuckfest that was the Sydney Olympic Village. The general public might snigger and muse about what could possibly go on when thousands of physically perfect people in their teens and 20s from every country on the planet are herded into tight quarters. Let me tell you; their most lurid imaginings would fall short by half.

But away from the Village, in a park of roses and palm trees and lakes and dozing ducks, Yvette had been drowned beneath the southern sky and the

scent of this tall bushman. She had actually drifted into unconsciousness at the end, her last vision being the bright clear stars she recognised from his blue flag; and there was a calm and firm conviction that here was her new life, for she utterly knew that their infatuation had taken root.

Iveta (as she was) had gone back with her team to Riga on a promise to return. Through Ron's persuasion with his Equestrian Team Captain and closest friend, a coaching position was found for the returned Yvette at the Australian Institute of Sport. The Sydney Olympics had been the very first for Women's Modern Pentathlon and Australia's Kitty Chiller had only managed 14th in an event that should have been an Australian natural. (In sweet irony, at London in 2012 Yvette's protégée Chloe Esposito came in 7th, that same 20 point margin ahead of Latvia's Jelena Rublevska.)

Three months later, she spent a snowy Latvian Christmas with her family outside Riga as Iveta and, a week later, a Sydney New Year's Eve as Yvette. The contrast could not have been more dramatic. From Ron's friend's apartment balcony above Sydney Harbour, the midnight fireworks doubled themselves by reflection, and the glorious lights and the sound and the smell of cordite delighted her less than the fact that it was 26° with a skin-caressing breeze – at midnight. This was surely Heaven and Ron her Angel.

To be continued

~ STILL LIFE ~

A still life is a beautiful thing. Not the painting, with its obligatory vase of flowers, a carafe of wine or an apple on the edge of over-ripeness. But that moment in one's life where nothing pressing needs to be acted upon.

My beautiful bastard language, offspring of a chance meeting between a guttural monosyllabic German warrior and a svelte, complex and lively Franco-Latin coquette can make a sentence such as “Still, the still's still still.” and it means something! Please explain? “Nonetheless, the fractionating device continues to be inactive.” I don't know if I'll ever need to use that sentence, but it is a joy to know that it's there. Just in case.

Socrates once said – or it may have been Plato. Or Aristotle. Anyway, some ancient Greek once said “Never is a man so occupied as when he is doing nothing.” Contrast that with a television ad from Harvey Norman – “Go, Harvey, go!” and what's that about? Nothing. Cluttering up your life with unnecessary crap.

No. It's the still life for me. Sitting on my verandah in the afternoon sun, looking up at the bluffs above Burcholz's Gully, a Campari and soda on one side of me, my snoozing dog on the other, Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im spiegel* playing on the stereo. Now that's Still with a capital S. But is it a Denial of Life with a capital D?

We in the West have a split personality when it comes to Interior/Exterior stuff. We have defined our work practice as “Busyness”. We are told by some sages that ants and bees are good rôle-models. Even when we're not busy working, leisure – even shopping – is busy. Televisions and radios are increasingly busy. It's as if, should we just sit quietly for a while, somehow we're letting the side down, not Contributing to the Economy.

Introspection, the time spent to do a quick check of our thoughts and actions, is probably seen as a symptom of Depression these days. Certainly as a lack of self-confidence, even of self-esteem. “Guilty as charged, Your Honour”.

I think that being busy is a cop-out. A cover-up. It's a way of avoiding looking into that vast chasm, that Tardis, that is what used to be called “The Soul”, perhaps the very essence of what it is to be human. I know about 80% of my comrades will disagree with me, and the other 20% are as eccentric as I am, but History, Art, Literature, Music are all on my side.

And, d'you know what? I don't particularly like busy people.

~ WHAT IF ? ~

What if ?

If only ?

Similar but different – one speculative, exploratory, slightly wondrous.
The other, deeper and darker, tinged with regret.

Edith Piaf sings – *Non! Rien de rien! Je ne regrette rien!*

Frank Sinatra sings – Regrets? I've had a few;
but then again, too few to mention.

The tightrope act is to acknowledge our regrets without being debilitated by them. For The Little Sparrow to claim that she regrets nothing, or for Cranky Franky to brush his regrets off as inconsequential is surely to admit to a life lived without risk or to have a heart so damaged that it can not or will not feel pain, either our own or that of others that we have hurt.

The business of living is fraught with miscalculations – how can it not be? Life is so multi-faceted, so damn full; we make a thousand decisions every day, most small and trivial and it doesn't matter that much if we get them wrong – there's not far to fall. But, in the glorious paradox of human existence, while we are but grains of sand on a beach, we are also Cosmic Beings of imagination and dreaming and it is in this capacity that we have a mighty power to act with or without care.

And I use the word “care” in both senses, that of being sensible to our own well-being (as in “taking care of”) and to the well-being of others. Above all, in matters of the heart. For this is surely where we have simultaneously the most power and the greatest vulnerability provided, of course, that we love freely and generously and not exploitatively. But then, that is not to love at all. The personæ of Piaf and Sinatra in their famous songs are not free as they proclaim. They are those who have been so deeply wounded that the only possible course is to repress the pain. But there are other ways.

Western Culture, so generous to the spirit of those who seek Her, broadly offers us a choice of two paths, explicated in Terence Mallick's beautiful film *The Tree of Life* as 'The Way of Nature' and 'The Way of Life'. They harken back to my reference to 'grains of sand' and 'Cosmic Beings'. We each fit somewhere within that contradictory conundrum, different somewheres at different times perhaps, and it is a difficult call at times to know just where we stand in the spectrum. And we have some ability to choose as well, though too often this is skewed by self-deception, lack of insight or ignorance.

Edith and Frank, for different reasons, clearly recommend 'The Way of Nature' – Karma, Cause and Effect, Eye-for-Eye – where pain is expiated by yet more pain. One suffers what is necessary to open one's eyes. This is the way of the courageous, the noble, the self-sufficient, who take it on consciously (Edith). It is also the way of the brutish, the proud, the wilfully-ignorant, the self-deceivers (Frank). And, like the Hatfields and the McCoys or the Israelis and the Palestinians, it doesn't work all that well. It is a cyclic process when Insight is lacking. Buddhist and Eastern traditions (to my rudimentary understanding) work hard to encourage Insight to ensure better outcomes. This begins to coalesce with our 'Way of Life'.

This drives to the very heart of what it is to be a human. It takes in our dual natures, what it means to be self-aware, imaginative, to be able to reprocess and evaluate memory. We have such ability to hurt and harm – even (?especially?) a two-year-old knows how to do it – as well as an ability to create pleasure that transcends everything. How do we mediate this? We have the ability to foresee the future and we can calculate quite accurately the trajectory and consequences of our actions. Pretty neat, eh? But why should we particularly care? Where does empathy come from? Are we individuals or subunits of a species?

I maintain that we make sense of our lives by (consciously or otherwise) placing ourselves within some external frame of reference. That way we can tell up from down, left from right, forwards from behind – psychologically speaking, that is. I observe people who have no reference point other than themselves. Not pretty. The choice of a frame of reference is almost infinite these days, some seem to work better than others and I would say that any is better than none. The trap is deception – it's as though we need a psychic ACCC – and the biggest trap of all is self-deception, as illustrated by Frank and Edith.

~ AND THEN ... ~

Well, if this is a writing trip, I'd better get writing.

There. See. I've made a start. Actually I made a start yesterday on the train, writing with a pen in my notebook (the paper one), and I will transcribe that before long.

But now I'm up in the air on a Canadian plane on my way to Vancouver. I do not feel excited, just calm and resolute. It's a nice feeling. The plane in a sense is already Canadian 'soil', and I was welcomed aboard by someone so like the stereotyped Dudley Do-right that I had to suppress a smile. What a lovely homely guy – big and normal-looking, but so innocent or simple or uncomplicated. Now there's a lesson straightaway. Am I seeking complexity too earnestly? Peter advises me to place some boundaries on my speculations – he feels that my attempts to find “It All” confuse or overload my thinking processes. I think he may have a valid point.

I am a lucky traveller. I have written elsewhere about the privilege of travelling, but good fortune is another thing altogether. I have taken my great experiences of serendipity or luck to signify that I am on some sort of right track. Maybe I'm not that unusual, maybe lots of people have these experiences. They just don't tell me about it, or I haven't read their books.

A simple thing made me smile when I opened up my laptop to start this writing. The first thing I noticed was a single white strand of Rocksey's fur, hiding between the Shift and Z keys. I went to brush it off, then thought 'No, I'll leave it there and see how long it takes to disappear of its own accord, perhaps leaving a little part of her somewhere foreign. How long will that hair survive? Will it cling to someone else? In 50 years' time, will a woman, walking a Vancouver street, notice a solitary white hair blemishing her little black dress, brush it away in horror, and just for a fraction of a second, unwittingly pat my little dog, by then long dead?

Lunch has been and gone. Aeroplane food. Very like Nursing Home food. They supply a knife. They don't need to. It was tasty – braised beef with mash and 2 veg. A bread roll first. I break it and consciously remember the Body of Christ. I give thanks, even if I'm no longer quite sure for what, technically speaking that is. But I am grateful.

Eating the meal, the nursing home meal, I then remember my mother. Diana. How for her, at the end of her life, to eat fish and chips or a prawn roll at La Perouse was perhaps her last act of defiance against her fate. Slightly before that, we used to go to a dreadful little café at Maroubra Beach. That was until her pain and immobility became so bad that she had to give up even that small normality. It breaks my heart to remember that, her defiance. Then her capitulation.

With my lunch, I am fastidious. The foil covering the tray is meticulously folded and refolded until it is a tiny cube. I go back a few folds and incorporate the paper from the pepper and salt and a bit of plastic from the accessories. I refold the foil. I place a smaller tray inside a larger tray. I minimise the volume. There is a little bottle of French wine. It is good and

distinctively French, despite being *Vin de France*, the absolute lowest standard. I consciously remember the Blood of Christ, and again give thanks, again being not sure. Sacraments and symbols are probably not meant to be things to be sure about – they lose their meaning, their potency, their hope. I am happy that I am not sure, it keeps me questioning. Sure people are not that attractive to me.

Flight 34 today is only carrying 99 people in Economy – what a privileged little herd of cattle we are! I am on a Boeing 777-200, and for the first time in my life, I have all THREE seats. So when we fly into the night, maybe another 4 or 6 hours, I am going to lie down and SLEEP. Who would have imagined?

Just then I had to stop typing. I actually swooned. I am playing my beloved Sibelius Piano Quintet (JS 159) and the second movement started. I must be in an elevated state because I was so deeply affected by it, even knowing it so well. This is auguring well for this trip – my senses and my sensibilities are elevated. I am very happy.

The next day

Although it's late morning here in Bellingham, it's 5am Monday back in Lithgow so I've slipped nearly a day away somewhere, only to have it restored in three weeks' time – a sort of time bank really. I have felt minimal bodily disruption with the change; a slight dizziness after landing in Vancouver which two hours' snoozing seemed to fix. Then a gorgeous and long sleep the night before last on my first night here in Bellingham. Last night's sleep was just normal and now I feel fine.

This place, Bellingham, is a bit of a Paradise. Cliff and Lynn live on about 5 acres near Lake Whatcom, about 20 minutes' drive northeast of the city of

Bellingham. Most of the houses and properties look prosperous, comfortable. There is stunning residential architecture around here, the traditional houses are homely and well-proportioned and the more modern versions respect and mirror this heritage. The scenery is stunning, the lake pretty as any Italian *lago* and the whole area overseen by Mount Baker, about ten miles away. This 10 000 ft volcano is a sister to the more famous Mount St Helens which blew up about 30 years ago. The vegetation is lush and rich looking. It is a damp climate (we are only 10 miles south of the Canadian border), but apparently the soil is not much for cultivation, although orcharding is big, mainly apples as I know so far.

The city itself (on the coast) is small and comfortable from the short time I spent there yesterday with Lynn. We went to the farmers' market, a couple of op shops and ate at the "5 guys" burger joint. The North West (Washington and Oregon states) are nicknamed "Granola Country" because people eat healthy food, granola rather than fried chicken and fries for breakfast! One suspects it is a haven for upmarket hippies and gentle socialists – Bernie Sanders' stall at the market seemed to be doing good business, the three people manning it seemed very groovy types indeed. The two adjacent corners of the crossroads were manned by opposing Christian factions – Gay Christians on one and the "You're gonna burn in hell" brigade opposite. No-one seemed to pay much attention to either.

~ STARDUST ~

Old Harry – in his usual seat by the window of Rockingham's, by far Lithgow's seediest pub – was holding forth again.

“Ya know what's wrong with the world today? Do ya?”. “I'll tell ya what's wrong..”

he went on without pausing to hear whether I was interested or not, which I sort of was and sort of wasn't simultaneously. It was a Wednesday.

“Stardust. That's what's wrong. Everyone wants to be Tinkerbell in some Disney Fantasy Land – The Happiest Kingdom of Them All. All except them what doesn't – and they're even worse. Miserable sods”

“And another thing. Just look out the window, will ya. A hundred people walk past here while I drink a beer, and do I detect any Stardust? Bulldust mainly. Frumpdust. Or, what's even worse, just Plain dust. Boring, domestic, unremarkable Dust. Tragic really. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

I didn't want to puncture Harry's balloon by referring to the delights of Lithgow such as Bill's Old Fashioned Cake Shop or Maree Statham's legs, so I just shut up and let him continue.

"I suppose Stardust's bad enough when it's in Disney, but, what's even worse, is when people think it's TRUE. I mean, have you heard some of these idiots? "We're all composed of Stardust" as though that's supposed to mean something special, as though that means we're Special, or Good, or Magical !"

Harry was right of course. If he had, at one time – birth perhaps, been composed of Stardust, the Great Hoover In The Sky had long ago sucked it back up. No use wasting good Stardust where it wasn't appreciated. Or maybe all that Toohey's New had dissolved it and Harry had unwittingly pissed all his magical powers away. I reckon that could have happened. I entered the fray from dangerous ground.

"What about that missus of yours Harry? I reckon she was pretty Stardusty in her own way."

"Aw, was she now, d'ya reckon? Didn't do her much good, did it? I mean, leaving me and Lithgow. Where's she gunna find anything better than what she had here, with me?" The remaining half of his schooner went down in one quick slurp with a telltale spill running down his chin. His hand had shown a little tremor.

"But Harry. Don't you ever feel as though there's something else going on? I mean, something from outside your own head?"

"Nah. And even if I did I'd tell it to piss off." "I mean, that's all that Stardust bulldust. I tell ya, it doesn't exist except in people's imaginations."

"So-o-o, anything in your imagination, mate? Us winning the Rugby World Cup? Your missus coming back? You being happy, f'rinstance?"

Harry just stood up and walked over to the bar to get his next schooner. He hadn't even looked at me. He eventually came back and still didn't look at me.

Through the open window onto the street, the sound of a class of Primary School kids emerged and swelled as it approached down Main Street. Little kids, 7 or 8, in their broad sunhats in a twin-file procession led by Matt Helmsley and shepherded by a couple of yummy-mummy helpers. All oblivious to a couple of old deros looking on from above.

All, except one wispy little girl who, looking up to reveal all untidy hair and pink ribbons under her hat, smiled at Harry and waved a – yes, it was – a little pink fairy wand at him, a Rainbow Brite one, probably her mum's. A cheery smile complete with standard missing teeth flashed and she was gone. The hubbub faded away, bit by bit.

Harry still wasn't talking and now his eyes were tightly clamped shut. He was unnaturally still. Pain was seeping out of him. “What's going on, mate?”
“Fuck off.”

I went back to my drink, enjoying the relative positivity of Harry's silence.

“That little girl” he eventually resumed the conversation “is my granddaughter.”

“Ah, OK. So that's why she waved.”

“Nope. She wouldn't even know who I am. Doesn't know I exist. Just pure luck.”

“Or Stardust. Imagine that.”

~ YET ANOTHER RANT ~

IS IT SAFE TO TELL THE TRUTH?

No, of course not.

Absolutely adamantly certainly clearly consciously definitely definitively emphatically indubitably ineluctably obviously positively prohibitively quintessentially really surely truly unequivocally. Not. Nor should it be.

It's like asking "Is it safe to fall in love?". Which has much the same answer. No.

Our comfortable, safety-seeking, western, postmodern world has made an artform of asking the easy question, the shallow question, the evadable question. More interesting questions might go something like :-

"Am I brave enough to take the consequences of telling the truth?", or
"Under what circumstances can I withhold truth?".

Bravery on the one hand; withholding on the other. For it is often risky to tell the truth, whether we have the luxury of being able to ponder the situation and evaluate it, or whether we are precipitously hurled onto the spot and have to rely on instinct. The consequences of truth-telling may indeed be calamitous, but in my experience the consequences of silence are dangerous, perhaps even cruel, so one can equally ask "Is it safe to NOT tell the truth?".

It's either a toss-up or a matter for judgement, a matter of time, a moral issue for some.

At the heart of it lies the theoretical extreme that we should always tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth regardless of consequence. But as children, with a child's focus on 'here and now', we learn very quickly the skills of untruthfulness. Parents are never infinitely wise, and society is no better as our horizons extend. So what hope is there?

Morality has had bad press recently. Or, no press at all outside the handful of low-circulation papers and journals that still cling to the hope that someone out there still wants to think about ideas. Morality becomes vague and almost impossible to discuss when each of us is the centre and arbiter of our own personal morality. Corporate morality is increasingly difficult to agree upon, people are loathe to disagree about others' view-points or actions for fear of being 'judgemental'. My experience of the 'fear' of judgementalism is that most folk are unsure of their own ground, so if there is a retort or a rejoinder or the beginning of a debate they will be found to be hollow or, even worse, shallow.

It's not the making of judgements that is the problem, indeed we make judgements almost continuously to help us navigate the world. It's usually that others do not share the premisses of our judgement-making process. And that's when truth-telling becomes not only unsafe, but potentially perilous.

And even worse, nobody REALLY wants to know the truth. Because if we were really convinced that something was true, we might have to get off our arses and actually do something, and maybe something courageous and perilous. And we couldn't have that. Could we?

~ LOVE BUBBLE ~

*A Bubble of Love from Heav'n above
glid gently o'er the Earth.
It hovered over Bethlehem
in mem'ry of a birth –
so long ago – by some forgot,
by many more dismissed.
But the Bubble knew (and so do I)
the Earth was somehow blessed.*

A hot dry south wind straight of the Sinai desert drove the Bubble relentlessly northward and a bit easterly. As it drifted over a West Bank Israeli Settlement, a mob of angry confused men with funny hats and Uzis began shooting at it. Not because they knew what it was, but precisely because they didn't. It was a guilt thing.

About 27 bullets out of 1634 fired actually hit the Bubble, but the Bubble didn't mind. This Bubble was protected by a carefully applied layer of polycyclic Resilience[©] which was able to heal over instantly on puncturing. The Bubble descended to just above their heads (it was a massive Bubble) and said in faultless Hebrew (which I shall translate) "Love your neighbours" drifting out of earshot before adding a gleeful *sotto voce* "... arseholes!"

On it travelled over the Sea of Galilee. It was a perfect late autumn day and the water was clear and a deep blue, contrasting with the hills and cliffs surrounding it, all a multitude of shades of terracotta, ochre, straw yellow and the occasional vivid green of a carefully cultivated patch amidst the more restrained olive groves. The Bubble really wished, in that moment, that it could paint.

It was around here that The Teacher had spouted all his theories into mainly uninterested ears. The Bubble went over it all in its brain”Blessed are the peace-makers, the merciful, the meek, those who mourn, those who hunger after righteousness, the pure in heart and the poor in spirit and, most troubling, those persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” Most of the audience had been more concerned with the Trifecta on the fifth at Caesarea which was paying really good odds that day. Still, you never knew, maybe something sank in. But it didn't get them far, did it? Bloody Romans.

“Mustn't grumble,” said the Bubble to itself as it crossed the Golan Heights into Syria. “I've got work to do!” The Bubble had punched the address of Bashar al-Assad's palace into its SatNav and so could relax for a while.

To be continued