

The Only Ones Worth Having are Married

Stories about Petra, Emma, Sue and Kathy
(and if you insist, Robbie and Des)

D.W. Walker

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Introduction

Petra, Emma, Sue and Kathy (not forgetting Des, Robbie and Charles) are characters that grew. The four women (and Des, although he is not named) first appeared in *The Daisy Chain Theory of the Universe*, which was written for a theme “Lovers and Others”. When I was writing *Not a Bad Drop*, I realised that I didn’t have to invent a new set of characters because I already had them. Since then, they have appeared in another thirty two stories, and are now about to star in a series of novels.

The stories were written to be read aloud at performance venues — typically Canberra bars such as Kimbos, Dorettes and Tilley’s (many no longer with us). This dictates the length (about 6-7 minutes) and the style. Many of the stories have since been published and/or read on community radio. Mostly, the stories are as originally read, but in a few cases, small changes have been made to references that are seriously dated.. Some of the most recent stories have appeared in *AntipodeanSF*, a web magazine which specifies a length of 500 words, so the stories are slightly shorter.

Each story is intended to stand alone, but obviously there are benefits from knowing the characters from previous stories. The stories don’t read well if they are read in big lumps or at long sittings — a form of mental indigestion is the result. They are better dipped into, and read one at a time. The stories are given here in the order that they were written. Although there is an overall progression in the lives of the characters (Sue does eventually ditch Des), the order of reading does not matter.

The Daisy-Chain Theory of the Universe

It was at Sue's wedding that I began to realise what was wrong with the world.

I like weddings, even dry ones, because you get to meet all sorts of people that you would never see otherwise, and get to see how the ones you wouldn't want to meet behave.

I went with Emma, who's Sue's fourth-best friend. Numbers one, two and three got to be bridesmaids, but Emma didn't see her exclusion from those elite ranks as being a total disaster. Emma's definition of a diet is "what you eat", and the bridesmaids' dresses were an unflattering shade of apricot and cut to show every wrongly-placed bulge.

Emma believes that Sue chose the dresses deliberately, with full malice intended. Alan, the bridegroom, has been hanging out for Kathy, bridesmaid number one, for as long as Emma can remember. Kathy isn't interested, but then Sue's not the sort of person to forget to nail the coffin shut.

Emma nudged me in the ribs. "Watch Jason," she said. I watched. Jason was the best man, but under that gaiety was a mask of pain. "It's the end of the world for him," she said. "He knows Alan's only marrying Sue because she's the last one left of the gang, and Sue's worn him down, but Jason knows what a shit he is, and how unhappy he'll make her. And he'd do anything for Sue."

I contemplated the tragic triangle for two forkfulls.

"Now look at Petra," Emma said. I looked. The second bridesmaid was making sheep's eyes at Jason.

"And Michael."

Michael, in his formal morning suit, was drooling over Petra.

Emma continued to point. "Julie's crazy about Michael, Andrew's still chasing Julie, Debbie wants Andrew, ... It's like a daisy-chain, only much more fun to watch."

I was watching Debbie, who is a nice lady, though with a poor taste in men.

Emma followed my stare, with an observant grin.

"Where do you fit into all this?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm crazy about you. But don't worry about it. I'm sure Martin will make me a suitable offer."

I thought that the first round of divorces might sort things out a bit, but it didn't. Alan fell immediately to a predatory secretary who made him feel marvellous for the first six weeks and old from there on in. Sue took one look at Jason, who had broken up with Petra especially for the occasion, and decided that she preferred a married used-car salesman. Julie decided that she might as well hang in there, because Michael was still waiting for Petra to get over a crush on her counsellor, and there was no way that she was letting go until she had to.

I had lunch with Emma, still on her diet and prospering from it.

She was cynical about the state of the world. “Ten billion people,” she said, “and not one of them in love with the person that loves them.”

“I think it’s a good thing,” I said. “Think of the cliques that would form. The smug, self-sufficient couples, the happy families. Where would be our great literature, the wars, the entrepreneurs, the muggers, the swindlers, the tax commissioners obsessed with personal power?”

“But do we need so much unhappiness to make the world an interesting place?”

“The reason that I’m bored at the moment is that somewhere out there, someone’s happy.”

Emma paused over a spoonful of creamy dessert. “I’m going to do something about it,” she said.

The first attempt was a disaster, and so were the second and third. Petra was left with two black eyes and pregnant to a wharfie that left after two weeks, taking all her shoes. Jason shackled up with an eighteen year old guy that made him feel totally miserable and left his records all over the floor. Kathy found God but discovered that he was two-timing her with a Deaconess.

“I’m going to have to be a bit more scientific,” Emma said.

Piles of psychology books and many deep and meaningful conversations later, she realised it wasn’t as easy as it sounds. “I’m not a rat, so they can’t tell me what turns me on,” she said. “All I’ve found out is that conditioning isn’t what I do to my hair, adjustment isn’t what I do to my TV, and Psychopathology isn’t a rock band. They’re not interested in love — there’s no money in it.”

She thought she might try alternative, less socially entrenched, avenues. She discovered that, cognisant with the expanding opportunities available to women, witches are too busy making nerve gas and napalm to bother with aphrodisiacs and love potions.

Then she struck gold. She appeared at lunch, her finger in a thick tome.

“It’s easy,” she said. “Look at Sue. She’s a Pisces. Water sign. Devious as all hell. Emotionally manipulative. And poor old Alan. Leo. Fire sign. Physical. Emotionally vulnerable. He didn’t have a hope. And the used-car salesman was an Aries.”

“So what do you plan to do?”

“Make sure that people meet compatible people, Air signs with Fire signs, Earth with Water, that sort of thing.”

Emma organised a dinner party. The target was Sue again. Her intended was Stuart, straight out of Dynasty in an immaculate dove-grey suit, handsome, craggy features, a Jaguar, and a Virgo. A solid Earth sign, geared to possessing, caring, nurturing. A firm foundation for a solid relationship. Petra, an Aquarius, had been invited, washed-out and wispy, as a token cover-up.

Kieran, Emma’s current flame, was there too. Ugly, scruffy, vague, head in the clouds, and a Gemini to boot, Kieran was a threat to nobody. Sue took one look at him and went “grab”.

A week later, Emma was still fuming. “Bugger the lot of them,” she said. “If that’s the way they want it, then let’s break the chain for good and all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Finding the right partners for people isn’t the only solution,” she said. “Think laterally for a moment. There is another way, and it’s staring you in the face.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Have you ever realised how totally disgusting the human body is? How it sags and smells and oozes. And flakes and wrinkles and cracks.

“See me for a moment as a dermatological David Attenborough. Life on Body, a study at enormous magnification and glowing colour of the mites, nits, germs and bacteria that infest our temple of humanity. A celebration of organised revulsion. If anybody goes to bed with anybody after that ...”

“But who’d finance it?”

“Every wowsy body in the country, from Bob Hawke and the Churches to Mothers against Drink Driving. All I need to do is sell the concept.”

You must have seen the series. The ABC is repeating it for the 139th time, and for five of those the rating was more than an asterisk. To me the highlight was the episode called Eating People is Wrong. The one in the restaurant, where the cascade of skin and hair from the cook forms into a snowstorm over the soup. But Green Slime, where they did saliva, had its moments, too.

Even if you didn’t see it, all the right people must have. That is why, if you hadn’t realised, eating drinking, talking or even breathing in public is forbidden, why it is a capital offence to touch somebody, and why the ecological crisis is being solved by the simple expedient of the extinction of the human race.

But for all the gloom and doom, there is a silver lining. Now she can’t eat out any more, Emma is gorgeously slim. She takes my breath away. But she won’t have a bar of me. She says she doesn’t like fair weather friends.

Not a Bad Drop

Normally I only have one disaster per dinner party. Sometimes it's a big disaster, like putting out a whole spread of curries and then realising that I forgot to turn on the rice; sometimes it's a little disaster like forgetting to put out some side-dish that nobody expected anyway. But once I've had it, I know I'm clear, and can relax.

This party I had last month, I wasn't so sure, because the disaster was up front, in the guest list.

Petra had brought Robbie. I've nothing against Robbie. Salt of the earth. Good worker. Great with cars. Ask him. He'll tell you. No don't ask. He'll tell you anyway. Not his fault nobody'll give him a job. Well, it wasn't his fault the PM's car exploded in the middle of Commonwealth Avenue. He'd been told to clean out the bloody carburettor, not put the damn thing back together again. That was Andy's job.

Robbie reckoned dinner parties were a bit posh, so he'd dressed down in a pair of torn jeans and a T-shirt that described his last sexual encounter with a crocodile. Petra was most embarrassed, but only because he hadn't washed the T-shirt since the encounter. Robbie's moustache fitted neatly around the outside of a can of beer — his fourth, and they'd only been there half an hour.

He'd decided I was a greenie because I hadn't mowed the lawn.

“Sanctuary for the lesser spotted ten-toed numbat, is it?” he asked, in a voice which said, I want trouble.

“Yes,” I said.

“Cat too good for you?” he said.

“They're predators,” I said. “They eat the wildlife.”

“Good on them. That's what we want.” He shoved a foamy moustache forward. “Real survivors. None of these endangered bloody species that die out if you pick a bloody gum leaf.”

“We need genetic diversity,” I pointed out. “For when the climate changes.”

“That's what we pay the guys in white coats for, isn't it. They built bloody Frankenstein. They ought to be able to sort out a bit of sunburn.”

I retired to the kitchen to stir the soup, wondering where the hell Sue had got to.

Emma joined me.

“Where does Petra find them?” I asked.

“Robbie told you. The guys in white coats, they churn them out by the hundreds.”

The doorbell rang. Sue, but she wasn't alone.

If I haven't already told you about Sue's married used-car salesman, you haven't missed anything. Sleaze is not in it. A six foot slob in a suit with a permanent five o'clock shadow, flabby lips, and the biggest ego since Saddam Hussein. He's the sort of guy that boasts about having made money from HIH because he knew when to sell.

I'd taken great care to check with Sue that she was free — even changed the night — but there he was on the front doorstep, hand pumping like a stationary steam engine, latest model mobile phone in his top pocket.

Sue presented a bottle with a label written in French and a \$39.95 price tag on it.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, "but Des was free, and we didn't want to waste the opportunity."

Des winked. "Sales conference. Bungendore," he said.

I ushered them in. Des and Robbie glared at each other, like two tomcats, before Robbie tried to rip Des's arm off in a pretence of greeting.

Dinner was painful. If anyone said more than two words, there was Des, finishing the sentence in his own way, and Robbie topping it, or vice versa. Most of the time, we concentrated on chewing and left them a clear field.

"0-200 in 0.79 seconds..."

"It's a heap of shit..."

"Immaculate styling..."

"Lines like a steaming turd..."

"It was such an incredible buy..."

"Even the block was solid rust..."

During the middle of the main course, Des pulled out his 3G video mobile phone and started tapping away. Having secured two sets of football replays and arranged lunch, he replaced it with a man-of-the-world smile. Later, while Emma was on an extended visit to the lavatory, he received an obscene call from a hooded alien, complete with tentacles.

For dessert, Des cornered Petra, salesman style, cutting off the corner of the table, back to the rest of us, so we couldn't horn in, leaning towards her so she couldn't escape without him taking the rest of her private space.

"You've never had anything like it," he was saying. "It's total magic."

"But how come it's a 2028 vintage. Is it like buying futures?"

"Relativity. Time dilation. You can't ship a wine half way across the galaxy and expect to get this year's, you know. It's a good year. The best. You can't imagine what you'll be getting. The first three million cases, didn't get out of the States."

We all knew what he was talking about. I don't know if you've seen the reviews of the Altair '28, but the word they use is mind-bending. In the Golden Triangle, they're dead worried, and the New South Wales Rugby League are already testing for it. As for the police, they're helpless. It's supposed to get you down to the new legal limit of minus 0.5 in one sip.

And Des, being Des, had a case in the car. For sale, of course. And there was more where that came from.

"Altair?" Emma whispered.

"You've got to try it," Des was saying, as he made for the door.

It fumed slightly as Des poured a purple stream, glinting yellow and green and orange, into a glass. He waved it around, waiting for a taker. Emma held up a full glass of white, Robbie did the same with a can of beer. “Not now,” Emma said. The rest of us watched in silence.

“All the more for me,” Des said, swilling it around in the glass.

Two drops spilled into the rubber plant. It clapped its leaves to its head, a tentacle lashed out, then it staggered two steps, collapsed and began to go brown.

“It thinks it’s a triffid,” Petra said.

“Thought,” Emma said.

“Some drop,” Des said admiringly.

“You’re still going to drink it?” Sue said.

“Why not? I’m not a rubber plant with delusions.”

He sniffed at it.

Emma nudged me in the ribs. I glared at her. Robbie had been doing it all evening, whenever I wasn’t listening, so I was sore.

“With luck he’ll turn into a purple blob with pseudopods,” she whispered.

“Don’t,” I said. “It’ll probably be telepathic and increase its sales a hundred-fold.”

Des delicately tipped the wine past the flabby lips, every inch the connoisseur. We waited, holding our breath.

Nothing happened.

Des took another sip, surveying his audience with a superior smile.

Then he frowned a little.

“It’s not bad,” he said. “A little lacking on the middle palate, perhaps.”

Sue clutched Emma’s arm in panic. “There’s something wrong,” she said. “Two sentences, and not a single superlative. Can we ... call a doctor.”

Emma was already heading for the telephone. “Bugger that,” she said. “I’m ringing Altair to see if we can get some beer for Robbie.”

A Birthday Gift

Sue and Kathy were late, as usual. So was Petra. Emma was wondering whether to have a preliminary entree while we waited. Nibbling on a corner of the menu, she said, "I'm trying to think of something for Petra's birthday."

"That's not going to be easy," I said. "If Petra hasn't got it, it hasn't been thought of yet."

"But her one is always broken, chipped, never worked or slops oil all over the floor," Emma pointed out. "So what has she broken lately that most needs replacing?"

"Her heart, I'd guess," I said.

Emma glowed. "You mean, she's got rid of Robbie?"

"He ran over her cat, and tried to blame her for it."

"Poor Petra."

"Poor cat. Petra's got another eight lives."

Emma counted on her fingers, enumerating Petra's ex-husbands and boyfriends. She shook her head. "She's down to two."

"Maybe that's what she needs for her birthday. A liferaft for her swimming pool. Or a squad of lifesavers."

"Don't know any," Emma said. "But there's Daniel. I could bring him to the party on Friday."

I looked at her long and hard. "Don't," I said.

"Don't what?"

"Don't matchmake. It always goes wrong."

Emma laughed. "That was Sue. Petra's already met Daniel, and she likes him."

"Why do you think that?"

"They were talking for over an hour at Kathy's party."

"Because nobody could be bothered rescuing her."

"But the way he was looking at her."

"She said he was undressing her."

Emma snorted. "Everybody undresses Petra, though I can't see why, because the top five buttons are undone anyway and she doesn't have a blouse that isn't see-through."

"Daniel talked for the whole hour about the epidemiology of phylloxera in the Ob river valley prior to the Russian Revolution."

"Oh."

"It's his Ph.D. topic."

"Maybe he's a bit young for her," Emma suggested.

Sue pulled out a chair and slid into place, immediately looking as if she'd been there for hours. Kathy thumped down, looking breathless. "Sorry we're late," she said. "We got held up."

Emma looked over Sue's flawless decor and nodded understandingly.

"Emma's trying to find a man for Petra," I told them.

"Not a hope," Sue said. "There's a world shortage. Of nice ones, anyway." She thought for a moment. "But if you find one, you'd better give me a look first. I can tell you if they'd suit Petra."

"Did you have anything in mind?" Kathy asked.

"It's got to be a hunk," Sue said. "To Petra, there's only two kinds of men, hunks and wimps. And she's not interested in wimps."

"That's not true," I said. "Petra thinks there's only one kind of man. Wimps aren't men."

"But there's nice hunks and horrible hunks," Kathy said.

"Show me a nice one," Sue said.

"There's Karl, and Alexander, and Joseph, and ..."

"And what do they all have in common?"

"They're attached," Emma said.

"And likely to remain that way."

"What about Simon?" Kathy asked.

Sue winced. "He can't even grunt without forgetting what he was saying half way through."

"Besides, he's got a crush on Jason," Emma said.

"I think you ought to get her something useful," Kathy said. "Something more long-lasting, capable of providing comfort and affection."

"Such as?" Emma asked.

"A bottle of gin," Sue suggested.

"I was thinking of a teddy bear," Kathy said.

"She's already got one," I said. "That colossal pink panther that sits on the staircase. It's so old it's going grey. And the black arm band has been there since Peter Sellers died."

"Kathy's right, though," Sue said. "The last thing Petra needs is a man."

"She needs to find herself," Kathy said.

Emma sighed. "Okay," she said. "I'll get her a cat."

Petra wafted in, a foot off the floor, in a flurry of blond hair and a black jumper that would fit a five cent piece between each stitch.

"I'm bringing Alexander to the party," she announced.

Kathy's jaw dropped. "But he's married."

“So is everybody else who’s worth having. And if they think I’m going to wait until they get round to busting up of their own accord, then they’ve got another think coming.”

Exmas

“You’re not really going to sit at home on Christmas day?” Kathy said, her glass of mineral water rocking agitatedly.

“Yes, I am,” Emma said. “I’m going to curl up with a dozen bottles of cold white wine, an ocean of prawns and a fingerbowl, and a nine thousand page epic encompassing seven generations of lust, infidelity and miscegenation in the Deep South of Silesia, and enjoy myself.”

“But you’ll be so lonely, with everybody else out there having such a good time. What about your family?”

“Both my brothers are blessed with wives and children, and will be quite far enough up the wall, thank you, without me descending on them.”

“Doesn’t sound much of a family,” Kathy said. “Why don’t you come to our place? We always get together at Christmas, all of us. It’s so nice. Never a cross word.”

“That’s not what Gordon tells me,” Sue said, her champagne glass poised between two talons like the claw of a crab.

“My brother wouldn’t know a cross word from a jigsaw puzzle.”

“The way he tells it, it’s a remake of Pol Pot meets Vlad the Impaler, only with a referee present.”

“That’s mean.”

“Not at all. He says your uncle Godfrey’s got a set of yellow and red cards. If you make a snaky remark, like say your last one, that’s a yellow card.

“Remarks like ‘But after all the trouble I’ve gone to ...’, ‘Why was that long-haired lout with the holes in his jeans pawing your engagement ring?’ and ‘I fail to understand why you have to go down to the pub at seven thirty in the morning?’ get two hours in the sin bin.

“When you were three, you had this lovely doll’s house, with trees all round it, and you used to pretend you were a dog, ...’ gets a red card — off to your room for the rest of the day.”

“At least we don’t fight,” Kathy said. She turned back to Emma. “It’s really nice. Do come. Mum and dad are dying to meet you.”

Petra listed her eyes momentarily distracted from the column of bubbles in her glass and held up a yellow coaster. “Is this how it works?” she asked.

Kathy ignored her.

“Why don’t you have dinner with me and Des?” Sue asked.

“What about his wife and kids?” Emma asked.

“They’ve got him at lunchtime.”

Petra lifted her eyes from the glass and twisted her shoulders into position, the movement flowing into her breasts, as if to say Look at Me. “I did that once,” she said. “It doesn’t work. The guy turned up at ten o’clock, stuffed to the gills with turkey, drunk as a skunk and with this story about

having to wait till his wife flaked before he could get away. I've got a better idea. Why don't you both come to my place."

"After last year!" Emma said.

"Last year was good. Everybody was there."

"Two ex-husbands, four ex-boyfriends, five new girlfriends, eleven children, parentage various ..." Sue interpreted, using a fingernail as a tally stick. "Plus a murder. It sounds like your book on Southern Silesia, Emma."

"My sociology textbooks describe it as typical blended family Christmas," Emma said. "Sort of like a fruitcake, only heavier, and it can't hold its grog as well." She nibbled at a hunk of cheese.

"It won't happen again," Petra said. "Robbie thought Roland was my new boyfriend ..."

"Couldn't you explain that he was an ex-husband's ex-wife's new boyfriend," Sue asked, "or would that have been too hard for him to follow?"

"What's going to happen to him?" Kathy asked.

"His trial's in March. I'm hoping he doesn't get off, but there's a risk."

"How come?" Emma asked. "Didn't he shoot him point blank with a sawn-off shotgun?"

"The Australian Shooters' League is paying for his defence," Petra said. "They say it was a hunting accident." She paused. "You see, Roland had buck teeth and sticky up ears. They say Robbie mistook him for a rabbit. And rabbits are vermin. So Robbie is a public benefactor."

"It's Robbie that's the vermin," Kathy said.

"Unfortunately, troglodites and dinosaurs are protected," Sue said.

"Do come," said Petra. "There'll be lots of nice men there."

"Such as?" Sue asked.

"Andrew, Joseph, Karl, Wayne, Bruce, ..."

"What about their wives?"

"I'm not sure. Does it matter? But hands off Andrew. I saw him first."

"What happened to Alexander?" Emma asked.

"His wife called in the loan. He's got to babysit now while she has her affair."

"Why don't you and Emma get together?" Kathy asked me.

I shook my head. "There's this mob," I said. "We get together, get so much grog into us that the food floats, and pretend we're having a great time. I wouldn't miss it for worlds." I looked at Emma. "You're welcome to come," I said. "The only qualification for admission is that you're not related to anybody else there."

Kathy looked imploringly at Emma. "You must do something. You can't have Christmas on your own. We won't let you."

Emma smiled a thin smile. "Then perhaps you should all come here. I will supply scrawny chicken, deep fried with greasy parsnip, macadamia nuts still in their shells, hundreds of

gift-wrapped socks, handkerchiefs and aprons, and a most gorgeous fruit punch that will bore you out of your skulls in half an hour flat.”

“That would be nice,” Kathy said, “but ...”

The party moved for the door.

Ratings War

Petra sighed a thank god that's over sigh. "Robbie's off our hands," she announced.

"Which gaol?" Sue asked.

"Better than that," Petra said. "He's gone to fight in Iraq. With any luck, he'll get killed."

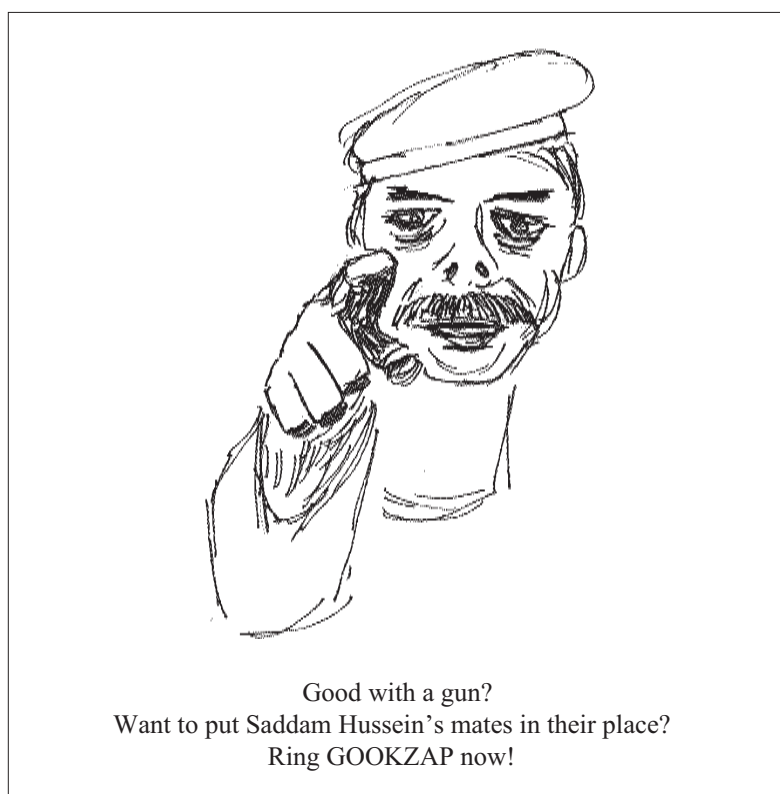
"I thought the Government wasn't sending any more troops," Emma said. "Ground war or no ground war."

"It's not the Government," Kathy said. "The TV stations kicked up such a fuss about the conduct of the war that they've handed it over to private enterprise."

"Haven't you seen the ads?" Sue asked.

Emma shook her head. "I've been on overtime, dismantling the Australian economy."

Sue wrenched the Telegraph-Mirror from under Des's cup, splashing coffee over the financial page, and folded it over to the two pages of classified ads. "Here's one," she said. A picture of a man with a Merv Hughes moustache, pointing out of the page. The moustache had shrivelled a bit at the ends, making it look more like Saddam Hussein's.



"Here's another one," Kathy said, pointing to the Personal Column, between

Spunky 95-year-old requires Toy Boy.
Lamborghini negotiable.

and

Ring Sexy Susie and discover new dimensions to your phone bill.

She read:

Do you like killing people?
Did they call you a psychopath when you tried to join the army?
That's their mistake.
GOOKZAP wants You now!

"There's a full page one near the front," Petra said.

You enter an enemy city.
The civilian population, cowed, is at your mercy.
What do you do?
1) Do your best to facilitate the return to normal life.
2) Secure the town hall, the TV station and the brewery.
3) Slaughter the entire population and burn the city to the ground.
What would Ghengis Khan have done?
GOOKZAP
An Army in the Tradition of the Golden Horde

"There's even one in the Women's Weekly," Sue said, folding it open at a full page picture of a woman in battledress:

Sick of Muslim MCPs
Get even in a way that they'll understand
GOOKZAP
The answer to a Maiden's Prayer

"They sound a nice bunch," Emma said, sarcastically.

"The world's biggest private army," Des said proudly, as if he owned it. "Ten million recruits world-wide and more every day."

"But why?" Emma asked. "What's the problem with the Yanks?"

"You saw the war coverage," Petra said. "Managed. Boring. Generals pontificating, file footage of planes taking off, all those women in black. Oh no, we can't do that, we might damage a collateral. Now there's real of action, TV crews right alongside, wham, bam, thump, splat, just like the movies."

"It is an application of the three principles of TV sports coverage," Des said. "Immediacy, lots of gore, and a result at the end of the day."

"But why not use the professional soldiers, still?" Emma asked. "Most sports are professional."

"And have them all of with a groin strain?" Des said. "What we need here is dedication. Enthusiasm. The joy of the battle. This is a real war. No piss-farting around. Hit 'em where they're weakest. Slash at the soft underbelly. Stop treating it like a game. These guys, they're ace on atrocities, and

just see them on the innocent bystanders. That's how you win wars. Rip the shit out of the population so the soldiers in the trenches are too worried about granny to shoot straight, even when they haven't run off home."

"It's revolting," Kathy said, making a face. "Last night, they were talking about the spirit of Mai Lai. And the statistics:

Private Rory Muldoon.
Debut: vs Panama, 1989
53 sorties, 187 rounds fired
25 paraplegics, 10 deaths
Kill rate: 536

"And then the live interview:

Madam, how do you feel about your impending disembowlement?
Distinctly negative.
Do you feel that somebody else should be chosen?
Definitely. Yes.
Private Muldoon. How do you feel about disembowelling this woman?
I'm looking forward to it.
Are you confident of success?
Very much so. My horizontal slash is working well at the moment.
So that's it, folks. A replay and another slaughter right after this break."

"Good stuff," Des said. "That's a real war. Last night's ratings beat the grand final."

Sue flapped at a non-existent fly with the Women's Weekly. "It's as boring." She put on a high-pitched, "silly", voice. "Petra. What did you think of that dress in Dominique's?"

"It'd clash with Des's colouring."

Sue looked at Des speculatively. He looked away. "Is that likely to be a problem?" she asked.

You may not have heard of Medisave yet. It is a new, comprehensive, bipartisan approach to health care. This is the Social Impact Statement for the scheme.

Medisave

Kathy glared at Des, sitting at the table in his silver-grey suit, briefcase tucked beneath his legs, flashing his used-car salesman smile on and off like a neon sign. “What’s he doing here?” she whispered to Sue.

“He’s pretending he’s a retrenched executive,” Sue said. “That way his wife thinks he spends the day sitting on a park bench because he’s too scared to tell her he’s been sacked. I thought he might like some lunch.”

“Des, eating Yum Cha? That’s a bit of a comedown from the 5 kilo pepper steak, isn’t it?”

“It’s okay,” Sue said. “They’ve got a European menu. MacChar. Dinky little hamburgers, match-stick chips, inch diameter pizzas, party pies, ... I brought him here last month and he wolfed it down. Put it all on his social security card, as proof that he’s not starving.”

Emma thumped down in the chair opposite Des, empty handed, steam rising slowly. “Bloody shopping malls. All I wanted was some cakes for afternoon tea. You know what they’ve done?”

Kathy and Sue nodded, but that didn’t stop her.

“Weighbridges. And steel rails like the airlines use to check cabin baggage. If you don’t fit through, you don’t get in.” She looked pleadingly at Sue. “Can you nick in and get me something after lunch?”

Petra arrived, even more breathless than usual. “Sorry I’m late. Got stopped by the AMA. Random cholesterol test.”

“Did you get off?” Des asked.

Petra shook her head. “They’re reduced the limit — again. It’s down to 3.5. Thousand dollar fine. Gaol and controlled diet for over 6.5.”

“It’s a rip-off,” Kathy said. “3.5’s quite normal.”

“They’re pushing for a zero limit for under 30’s,” Emma said.

Des looked at Kathy, accusingly. “People like you have been complaining for years that there’s not enough preventative medicine. Now you get it, you complain.”

“I want preventative medicine, not medical harassment.”

“If they didn’t run checks, would you really do the right thing?”

“But fines? And gaol?”

“How else are they going to finance it? It’s not cheap to put trained nurses on the streets.”

“Medisave is a crucial breakthrough in medical work practices,” Sue said. “A redistribution of medical effort from the mundane to the frontiers of medial science.”

“From the mundane to the lucrative, more like,” Kathy said.

Des shook his head. “There is ample evidence that the number of doctors needed to perform an operation is directly proportional to the square of the patient’s wealth.”

“Only because they’re more likely to sue.”

“Not at all. It’s imperative for Australia’s future that they have only the best. And if that means cutbacks elsewhere, then so be it.”

“Sounds like you need a team of microsurgions to prick a boil,” Emma said.

Des ignored her. “We need a lean, efficient system, not some money guzzler. Effective use of resources. Airlines don’t keep their best seats till the last minute just in case someone turns up. People book holidays a year ahead. Why are hospitals so different?”

“What happens if I have an accident? Or get pregnant?” Kathy asked.

Sue glanced at Emma. “Perhaps they think we’re elephants.”

“You wait your turn,” Des said. “Or buy someone else’s place in exchange for yours. You’ve met Albert, at the Football Club. He lives off that hernia of his on the Health Futures market.” Des toyed with a chopstick. “And did you know that over half the cost of medical treatment is incurred in the last year of a person’s life? So make them wait. Bang. Halve our taxes straight off.”

A waitress appeared with a trolley, and began to dump bamboo steamers on the table, intoning “Char sieu bun. Prawn dumpling. Chicken feet ...”

Emma sniffed. The only smell was a mix of Sue’s perfume and Des’s aftershave. She lifted the lid of a steamer and surveyed the bamboo slats at the bottom. “It’s empty,” she said.

Petra and Sue peered into another two. “So are these.”

They looked at the waitress, who was busy ticking them off on the menu card. “Pretend char sieu bun. Imagine prawn dumpling. Chicken still got feet. Safer that way.”

“We ordered real yum cha,” Kathy said.

“So charge real price,” the waitress said, practicing her calligraphy in a row labelled \$4.00. She pointed at Emma. “Good for you this way. Too fat.”

“I demand to speak to the manager,” Des said.

“Luigi say to say, too busy cooking books. If customer want food, go to supermarket. Labels on tins, saying ingredients. Eat wrong thing, Medisave not pay, that customer problem. Cook food here, too risky. Too much fat, soy sauce, MSG. Customer die of heart attack, then sue. Bang, no business.”

“Then what sort of restaurant is this, if we can’t eat?” Kathy asked.

“Social restaurant. Place meet friends. Satisfy need for company. Table to sit at. Go talk, talk, talk. Mouth not full, so more polite.” She lifted a corner of the table cloth. “Make cover charge. Big profit. Low overhead. No waste. Productivity gain five hundred percent. Business lean, efficient. Customers lean, efficient. Government happy.”

Emma groaned. “I don’t like being lean.”

Genes

Emma chewed listlessly on an éclair.

“You look tired,” Kathy said.

“Not tired, sandblasted. Alice invited Maryanna to her dinner party last night. The other five of us got to say about three words between us.”

“I thought Maryanna was nice,” Kathy said.

“She is. In small doses.”

“What was she on about this time?” Sue asked.

“The usual. Fixing up the world. Every problem has its solution, and Maryanna knows just what it is. If the kids are homeless, then chuck the pollios on to the streets. If the air’s polluted, ban the cars and build tramlines to every suburb. If the trees don’t regrow, chop the loggers off at the knees with their own chainsaws.

“I sort of like most of them, but if you suggest a few improvements, to ... well ... make them practical, she puts on that suprised and disappointed look, and then barges straight on.

“And afterwards, she’ll say to someone, pityingly, ‘Emma’s really very conservative, you know.’”

She paused to draw breath, paused some more, and then laughed. “Sorry, I’m talking like Maryanna.”

“Should we buy her a chess clock?” Sue asked. “Start it going when she opens her mouth, and when it runs out, she’s got to shut up for the rest of the night.”

Emma sighed. “It would’t work. Maryanna solutions aren’t applicable to Maryanna.” She put her éclair down, half-eaten, and stirred a very black black coffee.

“Are you coming to see Petra’s new house?” Sue asked.

“She hasn’t bought it!” Kathy said.

“Not yet. But why shouldn’t she? It’s a good buy.”

“It’s downwind from a genetic engineering factory.”

They took Kathy’s car, its rust plus protest sticker amalgam a defiance of planned obsolescence, and its exhaust a bold attempt to force action on the greenhouse effect by bringing it on single-handedly. Instead of the Estate Agents’ route through quiet leafy streets, past schools and shops, she took them a block away, past the car yards, scrap yards and furniture factories, until the buildings opened out onto an idyllic rural scene, surrounded by barbed wire.

Set well back from the road was a grey lump of a building in a ring of bare earth. By the gatehouse, was a noisy demonstration.

“Yuk,” Sue said. She thought for a moment. “Though they’re an improvement on mobs at the place the Petra looked at next to the football ground.”

“Is that Maryanna?” Kathy asked, gesturing towards a figure in overalls shouting through a megaphone.

“Sorry. I was wrong,” Sue said.

A girl in the crowd saw Kathy’s adornments and waved to them to show them where to park.

“We’d better stop,” Emma said. “After last night, I think I’m supposed to know about this. If Maryanna finds out we went straight past, bang goes any pretence that we’re not troglodites.”

They parked the car and edged close to the crowd. There would have been twenty or thirty people, uniformly dressed in jeans and coloured shirts. A snatch of “Clone on the Range” and the chant of “Come Out Dr Frankenstein” were drowned out by the screams of their offspring as they reestablished their pecking-order in a new environment. And over the top, Maryanna’s megaphone boomed away.

“Look at the grass,” she was saying.

“It’s not grass, it’s clover,” Sue said.

Emma bent down and picked a head. “Four leafed.”

“That’s lucky.” Sue knelt. “So’s this one.”

“They all are,” Kathy said. “And that’s not lucky. And did you hear about the three metre yapless dachshund that got out?”

“Some stupid cleaner left the door open, didn’t they?” Sue said.

“Because the warning signs were in English and Japanese.”

“That sounds like a Maryanna story,” Sue said. “Who would want to breed a three metre dachshund?”

“Arms traders use them to hide scud missiles,” Kathy said.

Maryanna was pointing to an air-conditioning duct. “... venting malignant mutated viral genotypes that are raging uncontrollably in our fragile environment.” She stabbed her arm towards the ground. “Why is that earth bare ...?”

“If she believed all that, she’d be miles away,” Sue said.

“They say that it is safe. That it meets International Standards,” Maryanna boomed. “What International Standards? The Chernobyl Containment Standard. The Pentagon Biological Warfare Standard of 33 gigamutations per square centimetre? There are no standards, and if there were, could we trust them?”

“She’s got a point,” Kathy said. “They had a picture of their control room on TV a couple of weeks ago. Fifty three thousand dials and gauges, monitoring everything, alarms making more noise than those kids, people fiddling, fiddling, fiddling. It’s got to go wrong.”

“It hasn’t so far,” Sue said.

“We hope,” Emma said.

“I still think Petra’s stupid to live here,” Kathy said.

Emma looked at her watch. “We’ve done our duty, I think. Time to go.”

Kathy drove them around the block. The house looked nice from the street — old, big, rambling and a bit run-down, with lots of trees. Petra’s sort of place.

But as they pulled into the driveway, Petra came storming out, hair and breasts flying. “The deal’s off,” she said, teeth clenched. “There’s rats under the house.”

“A good pest exterminator will fix that,” Sue said.

Petra snarled. “They were playing strip poker with a psychologist,” she said.

Dressing Up

Emma, in oversized jeans that fitted like a tarpaulin and a baggy purple jumper, sat hunched over a very large brandy, enveloping it in an all-devouring look of adoration that told it that it was the most important thing in the world, at least until it was finished and a refill was needed. There were black rings right round her eyes. Sue, elegant in a fawn suit and a white silk blouse, nursed a tall glass with sugar on the rim. Kathy's floral overalls looked garish beside her blue-tinged mineral water. In the background was the choonk, thunk, rattle, rattle, rattle of the poker machines and the endless one, two, one, two of a band setting up.

"Do you really have to go back to work?" Kathy asked Emma.

Emma nodded. "Silly buggers are still crossing i's and dotting t's."

Sue raised an interrogative eyebrow.

Emma wasn't looking. The hidden lights in the brandy held her in thrall.

"It's some sort of report," Kathy explained for her. "It's supposed to be ready by tomorrow."

"By the second coming, more likely," Emma said, "the rate they're going."

"What's the problem?" Sue didn't really care, but she was obviously supposed to ask.

"There's a committee," Emma said, as if that explained it all.

There was a long silence, counted down by One, Two ...

Kathy tried again. "How did the court case go," she asked Sue.

"Okay," Sue said, without much enthusiasm.

"I thought you were bringing Des back with you," Kathy said.

"He couldn't come," Sue said. "He's in gaol."

Emma looked up, interested at last. "This was the assault case? When Des rolled up at the dole office in his executive suit, and got relieved of it?"

Sue nodded.

"What did he do? Abuse the judge?"

Sue shook her head. "Just forgot to put his mind in gear. He's still pretending to his wife that he's got a job, so when they asked his occupation, guess what he said."

"Used-car salesman," Emma and Kathy said in chorus.

"Add to that, the kid who rolled him turned up hair combed, wearing Des's suit, and apologised sweetly for wearing exhibit A because he hadn't anything else suitable."

"He couldn't have looked worse than Des in it," Emma said.

"It was three sizes too big, but the houndstooth pattern complemented the acne beautifully. And did the defence lawyer pour it on." Sue dropped her voice an octave:

“Your honour, picture the scene of this unfortunate incident. An expanse more bleak than an airline terminal filled with destitute, starving humanity. Vomit yellow carpet. Bare notice boards whose sole offerings are for Uzbekh to Swahili interpreters. A mud green maginot line garrisoned by sadists whose sport is to pour contempt and derision upon the cream of Australia’s youth for the crime of not obtaining the jobs that their elders have failed to provide.

“Your honour, my client was desperate. Cut off the dole by a chinless micro-Hitler for being improperly dressed. His only clothes those in which he stood.

“Into this Dickensian nightmare walks the alleged victim, in a brand-new suit, handkerchief in his top pocket, smelling of aftershave, elbowing aside the proletariat like some member of the Senior Executive Service.

“Is it any wonder that my client, faced with such provocation, perceived instantly an admittedly misguided solution to his alleged sartorial deficiencies.

“The magistrate didn’t buy it, surely?” Emma asked.

“Of course he did. Mitigating circumstances. And it seems that, considering Des’s occupation, being ripped off is unlikely to cause him the sort of psychological damage that it would for an honest man. So he gave the kid a bond.”

“So that’s when Des attacked the magistrate?” Kathy asked.

Sue shook her head. “I’ve never seen Des speechless before. He was so busy trying to think of a scathing remark that he missed his chance.”

“Then why’s he in gaol?” Emma said.

“The moment the verdict was handed down, the cops shunted Des out, charged him with indecent exposure, and shunted him back in again.”

Emma shook her head in confusion.

“Once the kid’d got the suit off,” Sue said, “his mates got in on the act. Shirt, monogrammed silk underwear, the lot.”

Kathy said “Ugh!”

“That’s what one of the dole office staff said.” Sue put on a twittery high voice this time.

“It gives me nightmares, your honour, just to think about it. The hair. I never saw so much since I got trapped in the gorilla cage at the zoo.”

Sue put on a smug look. “He is pretty hairy,” she said.

“So what did Des get?” Kathy asked.

“Remanded in custody for psychiatric examination,” Sue said.

“I can see the headlines in the Telegraph-Mirror,” Emma said:

“NAKED NUTTER
NABBED
Dole Chick
in Hirsute
Ordeal”

“I never could get Des to dress properly,” Sue said. “I think it’s his wife’s influence.”

A bouncer, all muscles and beer-stained T-shirt, loomed over the table. He leaned towards Sue.

“Excuse me madam, I must ask you to leave.”

Sue looked at him, rigid with anger.

The bouncer pointed to a sign.

WORKING CLOTHES
NOT
PERMITTED
After 7 p.m.

“It’s ten past seven,” he said.

Sue looked down at her suit, then at Emma’s jeans and Kathy’s overalls.

“Your friends can stay,” the bouncer said, as Emma finished her brandy and stood up.

Emma smiled a false smile at the bouncer. “I’ve got to get back to work,” she said.

Permanent Residence

Kathy bit into her wholewheat seaweed quiche with the malevolence of a vegetarian shark. She ground it viciously, shook it till its crumbs fell off, tugged it like toffee. The salt-laden strands, octopuslike, formed a cat's cradle to neutralise her teeth. She went to hurl it across the room, but it hung on, fearful of the civil war that raged across the television on the cafe wall.

Kathy glared at the TV, then at the clock, then at Petra. "Where's Emma?" she asked.

Petra stirred her frothless cappuccino with a well-sucked spoon, her blue jumper blending patriotically with the red and white check tablecloth. "She said she'd be late. Something about having to see Martin."

"I thought he was Ancient History."

"He is. Very."

Petra went back to stirring her coffee. Kathy resumed her campaign against the quiche. Petra watched her, puzzled. Kathy wasn't usually this angry, even over a beached brontosaurus.

"What's up?" Petra asked.

"Bloody estate agents!"

"Sue said you were looking for somewhere." It was a question more than a statement.

"Since Soong pissed off on me, I've got no option. Can't afford where I am. Not on my own."

"She hasn't come back then?"

"No sign of her. Her stuff's all there. She told me she was going down the coast for the weekend. Cops say she's shot through with her boyfriend."

"Maybe she has."

"They haven't even looked for her. All they're interested in is drugs and dead police commissioners. They're not going to bother themselves with a missing boong."

"So what sort of place are you looking for?"

"Somewhere liveable. And not too expensive. But tell that to an estate agent. Sue told me about a guy Des recommended. Talk about sleaze ..."

"What did he show you?"

"Inner suburban. Bed sit. Close to transport. So close you breathe the fumes. Monocrete. Sort of circular, with orange fittings. Similar one, with murals. Bloke sleeping there didn't recommend it. Reckons he gets a crick in his back sleeping in a curve all the time. And they're not warm."

"I told him I didn't like monocrete, so he trots out this weatherboard number. Describes the decor as Minoan Palace. I'd call it Egyptian Tomb, but I suppose there's not much in it. You know the sort of thing: words and pictures forming a frieze around the walls, laboriously inscribed in basic black, a story of blighted romance whose simplicity and power makes it stand forever among the great walls of literature."

Kathy freed the last chunk of seaweed from her teeth and assumed a declamatory posture.

“Adam is spunky
Melissa is sexy
Adam fancies Melissa
See Melissa go PANT! See Melissa’s pants.
Adam ♥ Melissa”

Kathy stopped, her face mournful. “But Melissa has been scored out with savage black strokes, and Jason written in instead.”

She chomped for a moment on an errant piece of seaweed. “And so the story continues, dragging its participants to their inevitable doom:

Jason sucks
Jason’s a whore
Guess what Adam got from Jason
Melissa ♥ Jason
Melissa’s a whore.
Ring Melissa, any time. 131 008. Say Adam sent you.
Tanya’s got the hots for Melissa.
Adam ♥ Tanya. She’s welcome to him.

“And in a circle

	Adam		
	♥	♥	
Jason		Tanya	—
	♥	♥	
	Melissa		

You read
it first
on the 35

“And then, in a final triumphant assertion of humanity, in purple spray paint:

MELISSA LIVES!

So F

“It breaks off there, suddenly, inscrutably, as if some irresistible, inconceivable event had swept them from the scene, never to return.”

“Did you take it?” Petra asked.

Kathy shook her head. “It wasn’t really my style.”

“What else did he show you?”

“I think he thought he’d softened me up by then, so he went up market. This totally horrendous pink marble mansion, dug into a cliff face for the views, five millimetres from a pseudo-Georgian town hall on one side and an inhabited molecular model on the other. They’d built it for some diplomat who’d forgotten he had to sleep, so it’s acres of open plan living space criss-crossed by multi-level bridges like a freeway interchange, but the only bed folds out from the broom cupboard ...”

She trailed off, staring at the television on the wall. Petra followed her gaze. The daily boat people story. A refugee camp. Strained, sad faces. A girl shouting abuse through the barbed wire at a policeman.

“It’s Soong,” Kathy said, in a voice so flat as to be unrecognisable.

“It can’t be.”

“It is. And the guy behind her is her boyfriend.”

There was a gust of wind. The light was blotted out for a moment. Emma dumped herself down at the end of the table. “You’ve seen it,” she said, glancing up at the TV, then at Kathy.

“We’ve got to get her out,” Kathy said.

Emma shook her head. “It’s file footage,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“It was on one of the current affairs shows last night, so I rang up the station. It’s three weeks old. She was deported last week.”

“But how come?”

Emma smiled, grimly. “That’s why I had to see Martin.”

Petra’s ears pricked up. “Where’s he now?” she asked, in a “tell me the gossip” tone.

“Immigration. Director, Unauthorised Arrivals.”

“And?” Kathy asked.

“She’d gone fishing, hadn’t she? So what do the cops see? Two Asians in a boat, coming ashore. No papers. No identification. Port Hedland, here you come. Then first plane out, no questions asked. You can’t waste time on them, or your processing costs go sky high. She’d got flesh on her bones, for God’s sake, and not a cigarette burn in sight. No grounds for anything there.”

“But she’s a permanent resident,” Kathy said.

“I know that. So does Martin — now. And so does his boss.”

“What are they going to do?”

Emma smiled, sharklike. “The whole section’s off on an unscheduled Asian visit.”

“Will they find her, do you think?” Petra asked.

“Maybe.” The sharklike look intensified, and there was a distinct gloat in her voice. “But they’re more likely to be mistaken for peacekeepers. And you know what happens to them.”

Steamed Up

Petra sagged as she chewed on a wilting cheese roll. Her face was lined. Her blonde hair hung listlessly, straight down. Her shoulders drooped and her breasts had gone into hiding.

“I think I’ve got rid of Duncan,” she said.

She didn’t sound very pleased about it.

“Good decision,” Sue said, disentangling an alfalfa sprout from a microscopic ball of cottage cheese. “He would have cost you a fortune in batteries.”

Petra looked at her, puzzled, the bags under her eyes making her look like a bloodhound.

“Or is he solar powered? Steam driven?” Sue continued remorselessly.

Petra glared halfheartedly. “He’s not a machine,” she said.

“He might as well be. He’s got as much conversation as Arnold Schwarzenegger and as much personality as a radiata pine. Frankly, I’d rather have it off with a bulldozer.”

“He’s very gentle,” Petra said, offended.

“So are gorillas.”

“I’ve never tried,” Petra said.

Emma finished her piece of cheesecake. “He did seem very technologically oriented,” she said mildly.

“Obsessed is the word,” Sue said. “Who else would send love faxes?”

Petra blushed. “It’s not his fault that the whole office reads what comes in on the fax machine.”

“What about the electricity bill?”

Petra pulled a computer printout from her handbag and thumped it down on the table. Below the Amount Payable, in a box outlined in asterisks, were the words I LOVE YOU. There was also a RECEIVED stamp. “I’ve paid it,” she said defiantly. She paused. “It was very embarrassing.”

“Not as much as the e-mail,” Sue said, rubbing it in.

“His thesaurus told him the e could stand for erotic.”

“But you weren’t even connected to the system.”

“That didn’t mean that they had to put it on the notice board in the foyer.”

“All of which proves that you’re well rid of him,” Sue said.

“This sounds like the course I’m on,” Emma said, trying some diversionary tactics. “Theory and Practice of Office Politics.”

“Is it for experts or beginners?” Sue asked.

“Practitioners,” Emma said. “This morning was all about Love-Hate Diagrams.”

Sue frowned. Petra returned contemplation of her cheese roll.

“There’s a standard set of symbols,” Emma said. “A halo, a bottle of ulcer pills, a doormat, a brown cylinder ... You use them to represent the people on the office. Then you draw the relationships: a jackboot, hands in prayer, an arrow with a dollar sign on it ... And at the end, the whole group gets together to compare diagrams.”

“That must be interesting,” Sue said.

Emma laughed. “You do two diagrams, one for you, one to show. But you’ve got to compare them and give yourself a gutlessness score.”

“How’d you go?” Petra asked.

“I got an A for diplomacy.”

Emma scoured her plate for crumbs. “This afternoon we’ve got a workshop on bitchy comments, snide remarks and underhand manoeuvres.” She looked at Sue. “You’d love it,” she said.

Sue pursed her lips. “I don’t think that that sort of thing is necessary,” she said.

“Duncan plays those sorts of games,” Petra said. “There’s a sort of fantasy workshop, where they look at circuit diagrams and imagine what they could do with them. And of course there’s Trivial Acronyms.”

“That’s the one where you’ve got to guess what SFA means, and it turns out to be Scottish Football Association?” Sue asked.

Petra nodded.

“So how long is it since you’ve seen him?” Emma asked.

“A week. Not since the Queensland trip.”

“Was it that bad?”

Petra nodded. “We went on a train, didn’t we? A traditional Australian train. Slow, creaky, lumpy seats, bang thump wallop as they shunted in the middle of the night.”

“You don’t have to go to Queensland for that,” Emma said. “Just catch the train to Sydney.”

Petra ignored her. “But Duncan was shitty because it wasn’t steam. Every stop he was out in the goods yard, peering into the sheds in the hope he’s find a steam engine. He got so frustrated at one place, I thought he was going to rebuild the diesel engine with his bare hands.”

“She does go for the strong, silent type,” Sue murmured.

“So anyway, we got there, and off we go to find some food to wake us up, and there’s this cafe — you know, the usual little Italian place, limp pizza masquerading as laminex tables, poppa leaning on his shotgun while momma heaves flour sacks in the kitchen, the bambino doing wheelies on his 750cc ghetto blaster, and behind the counter a massive, gleaming espresso machine steaming away, the daughter pumping the handles like its going to jackpot any minute.

“The first shrp, grrk, ssssssSSSSSS and Duncan was history. You’d think the daughter was a fully qualified angel, straight from the almighty, the look on his face.”

Petra paused. “That’s the last time I saw him.”

Her face was becoming flushed, an unnatural pink. Emma glanced at Sue. The same was happening to her. She looked at the table and the walls. The whole room was turning slowly pink. She looked out the window. On the wall of the opposite building, gigantic letters were forming:

PETRA, WILL YOU MARRY ME?

Petra slumped even further in her chair, and then began to crawl under the table. Her face was grey-green, neutralising the pink.

“Oh, Christ!” she said. “He’s back.”

Catnap

Kathy and Petra arrived, shoulder to shoulder, breathless, radiating triumph. Petra's hair was a bird's nest, complete with twigs and leaves. Kathy had pulled threads in her jumper and an enormous patch of mud on one knee of her jeans.

"We found the cat," Petra said.

"Or she found us," Kathy said.

Emma scooped up a spoonful of cappuccino. "So she'd gone walkabout?" she said.

"It doesn't surprise me," Sue said, tapping a concrete rusk on her plate like a gavel. "If anyone gave me a name like Salami, I'd go walkabout too. And I wouldn't come back."

"But then you're not into food," Emma said. "Salami is."

"She was supposed to be called Salome," Petra said. "But my sister's kids didn't know that word, so they went for the nearest one to it."

"Where had she been?" Emma asked.

"We think Mrs Campbell had her," Kathy said.

"That's the old lady up the road," Petra said.

"I though you'd asked there?"

"Asked!" Kathy growled. "We smelt there. She opens the door two millimetres and it hit you. Petra was gagging, it was so bad, and I kept saying 'Do it, it won't make any extra mess'. And behind her it's knee deep in moth-eaten dogs and starving, mangy moggies, all watery eyes and running sores, some of them so weak they can barely drag themselves up."

"So we ask her and she says no she hasn't seen her, and of course she'd recognise her, she's so like her own Flopsy ...".

"You told me Salami was a genetic freak," Sue said.

"She is," Petra said. "She's the only monochrome tortoise-shell that I've ever seen."

"So anyway, we looked in a few other places," Kathy said, "Like down the drains ..."

"... which are full of mutant rats forging renaissance masterpieces," Petra said.

"... and in the roof ..."

"... where there's a whole aeroplane that predates the Wright brothers ..."

"... and under all the bushes in the park ..."

"... where all we found was coke cans."

"Did you try your old flat?" Sue asked.

Petra shook her head. "She hated the place. No birds. No trees. Nowhere to sun herself. A thug of a tom who thought he owned the place. She wouldn't go back. Particularly not after three weeks."

"So back it came to Mrs Campbell?" Emma said.

“All the neighbours said that’s where she was. Mrs Singh says Mrs Campbell’s always pinching her kids’ rabbit, and Mrs Nguyen watches her chooks like Mrs Campbell was a fox.”

“Arani Singh offered to try for us,” Petra said. “She spun Mrs Campbell some yarn about Salami having FIBS, which was going to stand for Feline Infectious Breath Syndrome ...”

“Which Salami has,” Sue said, “because she never cleans her teeth.”

“... but Mrs Cambell didn’t ask. Arani said she just went tut-tut and said she hoped Salami wouldn’t come spreading it here.”

“And two hours later, who turns up at the back door but Salami,” Kathy said.

“She’s pretty sick. And she hadn’t been fed for days,” Petra said. “But with any luck she’ll have enough sense not to get caught again.”

“I’d like to do something about that woman,” Kathy said.

“Have you tried the RSPCA?” Sue asked.

“They’re too busy running extermination camps,” Kathy said.

“Maybe we could haunt her,” Emma suggested, “with the ghosts of animals past.”

“She wouldn’t notice,” Petra said. “There’s no way she’d hear a plaintive ghostly miaow over all that yapping and yowling.”

“Which means we need something a bit more substantial,” Kathy said. “Donate her a pit bull, or a rotweiler, maybe.”

Emma thought for a moment. “Maybe we could borrow Tigger.”

Petra, Kathy and Sue looked at her, puzzled.

“He’s part of Customs’ exhibition of prohibited imports. A sort of Assamese feral cat. Black and orange stripes. Two and a half metres long, and I’m not sure if that includes the tail. Very friendly, really, if you don’t rub him up the wrong way. I’m sure we could borrow him for the weekend.”

“Does he need a handler?” Kathy asked.

“You could use some of Jason’s friends. They’re into leather gear.”

* * *

A furniture van with motor-cycle escort brought Tigger late on Friday afternoon. He yawned, sniffed, then deigned to step down. He paced the bounds of the back yard, sniffed at the cat flap in the back door, and then flopped down with his chin on the concrete surround to the fish pond, his paw trawling idly for passing goldfish. The house vibrated to the sound of a semi-trailer idling.

Salami glared from behind a firmly closed window, and returned to washing the yellow streak down her back.

The neighbours watched from behind high fences.

Mrs Campbell’s voice wafted plaintively across the street. “He’s just like my Tiddles, Mrs Singh, come back at last ...”

At three in the morning, the neighbours were still watching, as Mrs Campbell ambled slowly down the street with a bucket of milk, a gigantic collar and a leash.

* * *

Emma finished her second éclair before asking “And how is Tigger?”

“Tiddles,” Kathy said.

“He’s not pleased,” Petra said. “He was peering out of Mrs Campbell’s lounge room window last night with an If this is how you treat refugees, I want to go home expression.”

“So when are we going to get him back?”

Kathy frowned. “It’s not easy extracting a long-lost kitten from a lovelorn old lady.”

“Even if he bites?”

“They’ve achieved peaceful coexistence,” Kathy said. “Mrs Campbell’s not stupid. She knows she’s got to feed him, or she’s it. But she knows she’s not exactly at the top of Tigger’s list of succulent morsels, either.”

“She’s cheating,” Petra said. “The milkman delivered a case of valium last night.”

“We’ve thought of a stop-gap,” Kathy said. “Mrs Singh put this in the paper for us yesterday.” She pushed forward a scrap of newsprint:

WANTED

Assam cat, 2.5 metres, orange and black stripes. Must answer to Tigger. Panther and can of yellow paint favourably considered.

“It’d better get results,” Emma said. “Because if Tigger’s not on show when the Director gets back on Friday, they’re going to lend me the white elephant as well.”

The Big Spill

The shopping mall was a compromise between a gothic cathedral and a mediaeval castle, its great hall soaring like the cathedral nave, the buttresses hiding outside walkways and the side aisles, vestry and chapels the shops, but with castellations and an onion dome. A footbridge from the car park reached out across the blue-green waters of the artificial lake. A crisp breeze brought the smells of gum leaves, noodles and rotting fish.

Emma lumbered from the dark recesses of the carpark at the speed of a stampeding elephant. She reached the bridge at the same time as Kathy and Sue.

“I thought I was going to be late,” she gasped.

“You are,” Sue said, “but so are we.”

She looked at Emma’s maroon executive suit, with the shoulder pads that would sleep at least two cats, the white silk blouse, the bright scarf tucked into her collar. “Meetings with the heavies?” she asked.

Emma nodded. “I’m running just about the whole department,” she said, “since the spill.”

Sue frowned. “The spill?”

“Remember the environmental hazards investigation where the department insisted that the oil tankers continue going as close as possible to the Great Barrier Reef — on economy grounds, of course?”

“It didn’t seem very bright of them,” Kathy said.

“They assume it’ll never happen. Like floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, asteroids hitting the earth ...”

“So two days later, one hit,” Kathy said.

“Three,” Emma said. “So now all of the senior executives, and most of the transport economics division are up there scrubbing oil off skin divers and glass-bottomed boats. It gives them a chance to rub shoulders with the oil company executives and the shipping magnate, of course, so no doubt they’ll claim it as a conference.”

“How did you get out of it?” Sue asked.

“I’d made sure my dissent was recorded in the minutes.”

“Isn’t there some kick up about human rights?” Kathy asked.

Emma nodded. “They’re not allowed to use their mobile phones while they’re working.”

As they walked across the bridge, the smell of rotting fish grew stronger. Sue looked down at the evil blue-green scum dotted with the corpses of carp. “They could do with an oil spill here,” she said.

Kathy shook her head. “Not allowed,” she said. “It’s a Defence Department biological weapons incubation ground.”

“Shouldn’t it be somewhere a bit more secret?” Emma asked.

“If they did, the U.N. arms control inspectors would find it. As it is, they’ve got a cover. A nice, incompetent local government to blame. And if they need it, a quick scoop of thriving blue-green algae, a quick dunk in the Danube or the Congo or wherever, and Radovan or Sitiveni or whoever’s your late uncle.” She slapped her hands together in a rubbing motion. “Neat. If you’ve got the hide.”

As the glass doors slid closed behind them, the smell of fish was replaced by perfume, disinfectant and stale popcorn.

A voice echoed from the fake plastic vaulting far above. “Naah. Gave it away. Got sick of getting shot at.”

They froze. Emma moved behind a pillar, dragging Kathy and Sue behind her.

“Got a job in pest control now,” the voice went on. “Real environmental. Feral humans. Got to get rid of them, or there’ll be nothing left. No air. Nothing. Breed like rabbits, some of them.”

“It’s Robbie,” Emma said. “See if you can see him.”

They peered around the pillar. Then Kathy pointed to a table outside a cafe, half way down the mall. Robbie, hunched forward like a thwarted orang-utan; Des, twisting uncomfortably in his chair, trying to remember a sales conquest to cap the extermination of the human race; Petra, leaning forward, eyes wide, lips apart, neckline gaping, drinking it in.

“It’s good sport, I’ll tell you that. Like when we told half the duck shooters the best hide was a duck disguise, and the other half that duckus giganticus was a protected species, but sort of forgot to tell them that they were armed. There’s not many coming back next year, and that’s a fact.”

“We’ve got to rescue Petra,” Emma said.

“How?” Kathy said.

“Blue-green algae in his coffee?” Sue suggested.

Kathy pointed to a mass of half-height figures in blue uniforms. “What about a stampede?”

Emma was eyeing off a fire alarm.

Sue pointed towards two brown-uniformed security guards bending over the table next to Robbie’s. The woman at the table was gesturing towards Robbie. The guards moved towards Robbie.

“I think we may be all right,” Sue said quietly.

A moment later the mall exploded in a ball of bodies, chairs and china.

* * *

In the Lakeside Bar, the green waters slop limpidly under glass floors to the piped sound of surf and smell of salt air. Drift nets hang in folds like gauze from the ceiling.

Petra, Sue and Kathy sat waiting, at a table near the door.

“He’s joined the Environmental Vigilantes,” Petra said. She sounded washed out. “They do things like chopping loggers off at the knees with their own chainsaws and asking them how long it’ll take for their legs to regrow. And trapping graziers that overstock on their own properties so that they starve. And they kill three hundred randomly selected Japanese a year for research into the effect of whale meat on the human metabolism.”

“Doesn’t sound much different from ethnic cleansing, or whatever it was he was doing before,” Kathy said. “They claim that that’s in a good cause, too.”

“But why did he attack the guards?” Sue asked.

“He’s been up north, protecting aboriginal paintings. The idea seemed to be, if a tourist went to touch one, you shot them.” She frowned, then said sadly. “I think he must have been a sniper somewhere.” She paused. “I think he thought the security guards were park rangers.”

It was nearly dark when Emma joined them. The scarf was not so bright, and the shoulder pads seemed smaller. She swallowed a double whisky and looked around for another.

“Where is he?” Petra asked.

“They’ve sent him to Queensland,” Emma said. “Community service. Help clean up the spill. We thought we’d show the oil company executives that we’ve got our quota of thugs, too. And ours don’t need mobile phones.”

Personal Assistance

The salad bowl was an enormous glass shell, big enough for Botticelli's Venus with room to spare. Even Emma's nervous picking every time she passed barely impacted on the enormous mound of lettuce, tomato and olives. The smell of burnt sausages signalled further delights to come.

Hierarchically organised huddles in neat casual dress occupied the scarce patches of sunlight, moving slowly across the lawn as the icy cold of the shadows engulfed them. Sue, wearing black and red ski pants and a red jumper, lurked possessively over the wine casks. Petra, in tight fitting white jeans and a baggy orange jumper that said "There's lots to see underneath, but it's too cold out here", and Kathy, in blue jeans and an even baggier brown jumper, stood guard over the plastic cutlery, the paper plates and the plastic cups.

Emma had called them out in a flurry of frantic telephone calls the previous night. "We've got this visiting expert from Iceland," she had said, "and he's got to be exposed to Australian culture, so guess what they want to do ... So I said what's wrong with El Toro, or Cookayourown, the steak's the same, there's fifty different bean salads, and it's warm, but they said no, it wasn't the same, and anyway it was my turn. So heeellllp!"

But the call had been in vain. They had tried to mingle, without any luck, and had retired to the strategic high ground.

Even that hadn't worked.

"They'd rather not drink, than talk to us," Kathy said.

"What do you expect," Sue said. "I told Emma that there was no point in us coming to a work barbeque."

Emma swept by, her left hand making a dive for the salad. "It's not for your benefit," she said. "It's to keep me sane. The only ones out there not actively backstabbing are asking polite questions of our guest of honour about pickled herring."

Sue helped herself to another glass of wine, slopping it a little. "How come all the males are fat or ancient?" she asked.

She surveyed the crowd with a patrician air of disgust, then stopped as her glance traversed the barbeque. A blonde man with a craggy face and a chin, in jeans and a white roll-neck jumper, was pil-ling sausages at the side of the hotplate at the speed of a dealer shuffling a pack. He saw them watch- ing, and waved a steak. "Nearly ready," he said.

"I suppose he looks half okay," Sue said. She turned to Emma. "Who is he?"

"That's Charles, my personal assistant. I'm just hoping he hasn't the sense to claim overtime."

Kathy frowned. "He doesn't look like a P.A.. All the ones I've seen are wet behind the ears or they glare at you."

"He's an ex-professional student," Emma said. "But after two Ph.D.'s, temporary research jobs all over the show, and still no tenure, I think he gave it up as a bad job. I can't see him staying for long, though. He's very competent."

"Is he married?" Sue asked.

“Knowing our luck, he’s probably gay,” Petra said.

“Or narcissistic,” Kathy said. She glanced at Petra and Sue. “Do the boss’s friends count when it comes to sexual harassment?” she asked.

Emma was ushering them towards the barbeque. “I can always claim that I don’t know you,” she said.

“Is Emma a good boss?” Sue asked Charles after Emma had continued on her rounds.

Charles turned over a steak. “It’s an interesting job,” he said.

“In what way?” Kathy asked.

“I now know why personal assistants get big-headed. You really feel that you have your fingers on the reins of power. All that information ...”

“So you’re going to launch a coup against Emma any day?” Kathy said.

Charles shook his head. “It’s more fun being a fly on the wall. But if you want to write a thesis on Personal Ego as the Determinant of Policy, it’s the place to be.”

“Do you plan to stay there?” Petra asked.

Charles shook his head. “I’m going for a job in the Bureau of Ecclesiastical Economics,” he said.

Sue looked puzzled. Petra pulled at the neck of his jumper and glanced down. “No dog collar,” she said.

“It would be a conflict of interest,” Charles said. “But my Ph.D. was on Schism and Amalgamation in Greek Mystery Religions in the first century B.C., which means that I’m ideally qualified.” He bowed.

“So what’s this Ecclesiastical Economics place supposed to do?” Sue asked.

Kathy frowned. “I think I know,” she said. “The government needs a miracle to get the economy straight. But because most people in this country who worship anything worship the same god, he or she has become complacent and has been a bit sparing on the miracles lately. So the government is looking at introducing a degree of competition into the field.”

Charles speared a sausage and passed it to her. “Got it in one. They’ve even got a couple of possible contenders.” He rotated a steak. “There’s BuddhaCorp, which has substantial Asian backing, and The Animist Association, which has strong environmental links, particularly to the spirits of the forests and the streams. But it will be open tender, of course. To give minor or hitherto unknown religions a chance.”

“But how will they get established?” Kathy asked.

“The existing churches will be required to share their facilities. Let’s face it, most of them are grossly underutilised. Once a week and weddings, most of them. And multitasking. There’s no reason why the same person can’t do Muslim on Friday, Jewish on Saturday, Christian on Sunday, and a couple of others during the week, apart from some irrational prejudices and closed-shop agreements. And as an additional aid, there will be a salvation levy of three cents on a loaf of bread and five cents on a cask of wine, to be distributed to suitable applicants by a suitably chosen panel.”

“So what’s the job you’re going for?” Sue asked.

“Director of Armageddon,” Charles said, stacking the steaks onto a plate. “More and more splinter sects are predicting the coming of the end of the world, millenium or no millenium. But they’ve all got different dates, so commercially it’s a disaster area. If we can get them to agree, at least on the day that it’s going to happen, if not the year, then the shops can organise their End of the World sales, the tourist operators can arrange to populate the mountain tops, the weather forecasters can recommend the best places for thunder and lightning.”

He looked at the sky, at the gathering clouds, then picked up the plate.

“Better get this lot fed first,” he said.

Kathy nodded approval. “We wouldn’t want the sausages to be struck by lightning,” she said.

As they tipped the last of the bones into the rubbish bag, and scraped the last crushed plastic cup off the lawn, Petra said, “We didn’t find out if he’s attached.” She glared at Kathy. “You were too busy getting stuck into him.”

“He’s a drug dealer,” Kathy said. “And if you don’t believe me, read Marx.”

“He’s spunky,” Petra said.

“Have you got his phone number?” Sue asked Emma.

Emma shook her head. “But you could check with Kathy in a couple of days. Because Charles asked me for hers.”

Trade In

Disillusioned ex-married used-car salesman requires desperate female for meaningful biological interface. No dogs or children. Box D5167

Sue put the newspaper down on the coffee table with a superior smile.

“Did Des really put that in?” Kathy asked.

“I’m not even sure that it is Des,” Sue said. “But the timing’s right.” She paused. “Maybe one of you should answer it. Under a false name, of course.”

“But what’s happened?” Petra asked.

“You know we broke up?” Sue said.

“We ought to,” Kathy said.

“And you know that he thought his wife didn’t know about us?”

“Did she?”

Sue nodded. “From the start, apparently.”

“How did she find out?” Petra asked.

“She says she just noticed,” Sue said.

“You’ve talked to her, then,” Kathy said.

“What’s she like?” Petra asked.

“Tall, slim, blonde, totally together, impeccably dressed, ...”

“No offence, but it sounds like you,” Emma said.

Sue nodded. “Erica’s a couple of years older, I think. The way Des talked, you’d think he was shackled to some lumpen hausfrau. Though I knew she worked. When I first met her, I didn’t even realise it was her. But she’d picked me.”

“How did you meet her?” Kathy asked.

“On a computer course. She was teaching it. She runs a training business.”

“So that’s how Des makes his dole stretch to expensive suits,” Kathy said.

“Did she give you a hard time?” Petra asked.

Sue shook her head. “I didn’t realise she’d spotted me till right at the end. As we were leaving, I said something polite like ‘Thanks, I enjoyed it’, and she said ‘If you see Des before I do, tell him Samantha’s sick and can’t go to school tomorrow’, then smiled and turned to the next person. So of course I passed the message on, and Des panicked, and tried to pretend even harder that nothing was happening.

“It’d always been a bit of a disaster. I couldn’t ring him at home. Half the time he’d stand me up, and then claim Erica made him babysit, but he couldn’t ring because someone would hear ...”

“So I told him where he can go,” she said. “I told him I’m sick of being a convenience bonk — quick service, no waiting, any time he asks, would you like an extra cuddle sir, have a nice day.”

“So Des is kaput,” Petra said.

“Kaput. Dead. Gone. No more married men. Ever.”

Petra nodded agreement. “There’s far too many of them,” she said.

“That doesn’t explain the ad,” Kathy said.

“Des started spending more time at home, didn’t he? All the time, because he’d got nothing to do. And he got pretty lonely, because there wasn’t much Erica. Distinctly not much Erica. Off early, back late. Some nights, when the kids are at friends’ places, not back at all. No explanations, not even pressure of work. No prior warning, either. She’s there when she’s there, when she’s not, she’s not.”

“Sounds like the way Des treated you,” Kathy said.

“So he came round,” Sue said, “and asked me, ‘Sue, do you think she’s having an affair’, and I said ‘Why not? You’ve had one’ and he started spluttering, and when he said ‘But it’s different for a woman’ I threw him out.”

“Do you know what happened then?” Petra asked.

Sue nodded. “I had to go on the advanced course last week, and Erica told me the story at lunch-time.

“She says that Des decided to do a bit of private detecting — following her round, lurking on street corners, dodging back into doorways, pretending he didn’t see her when she waved. So she decided she’d better deliver the goods.

“So she organised lunch with this really spunky guy from the next office, and met him at a posh pavement cafe in full view of the world. She’d worded him up first of course, so she got the full spontaneous hug and the right gooey looks.

“And Des, being Des, promptly thundered up purple in the face, accusatory finger pointing, the model of the outraged husband, and Erica smiled sweetly, said ‘I’d like you to meet Stefan’, and then added ‘If you hadn’t realised, darling, I’ve traded you in on a younger item’.

“And that night, of course, she brought him home. Erica says that the poor guy was embarrassed as all hell, and if she hadn’t kept a firm hold on him he would have been out the door at the speed of light. She says the kids took a bit of dim view of him, too, because the only football he knows how to play has got a round ball, and he dribbled all the time. But Des got the hint and packed his bags.”

“Sounds a bit pat to me,” Petra said. “I smell a cover-up.”

Sue looked at her. “You mean, she has got a lover?”

“And it’s not this Stefan guy. It’s someone she doesn’t want you or Des to know about.”

“But who?”

Emma stirred on the sofa in the corner. “I think I know,” she said. “I saw them last week, coming out of her office.” She looked at Sue. “It’s Alan. Your ex.”

Does It Take After Its Father?

Emma hoisted a massive wad of noodles from the bowl, splashing soup generously on the laminex table, and wound them around her chopsticks. Kathy lifted up a Buddhist Heavenly Vegetable and inspected it closely, as if she suspected it of consorting with meat. Petra frowned a little as she deftly shelled a prawn.

Sue wasn't eating. "My diet says its my liquids only day," she said, sipping at her glass of white wine.

Petra frowned again: an it's not important but I'm supposed to worry about it frown. "My sister's pregnant," she said.

"So what's the problem?" Sue asked. "She must be used to it by now."

"It's not Athena," Petra said. "It's Juliana. It's her first."

"So what? Your family isn't exactly noted for difficult pregnancies."

"She's a worrier," Petra said, "so she had that new test done. The one where, when it gets to four cells, they grab one, and it tells you everything from the colour of its eyes to its star sign."

"And the baby comes out with its top left corner missing," Sue said.

"I don't think so," Petra said, in a that's not funny voice.

"Or is it just three quarters of normal size?" said Sue, ignoring her. "That'd make the birth easier."

"Does it develop hyperactive growth hormones to catch up," Emma suggested, "so that when it's seven it's my size?" She looked down at her vast bulk with pride.

"That's not the problem," Petra said. Her voice became grim. "It's got the salesperson gene."

There was a hush at the table. Even Emma's last remaining noodle froze, waiting in vain for its impending doom.

"I thought that was an American shock horror medical beat-up," Kathy said.

Petra shook her head. "The doctor told Juliana that the research is pretty conclusive. They did a whole lot of tests on twins that are insurance salesmen, and found the same DNA pattern. And they've confirmed since that 98% of real estate agents and politicians have it, too."

"Has Des had a hand in this?" Emma asked. "He's been seen in some strange places since he broke up with Sue."

Petra shook her head. "Juliana's husband is a diplomat," she said.

"So what happens with kids with the gene?" Sue asked. "Do they flog off their kid sisters at the school fete?"

Petra nodded. "Something like that. It's the same as boy children being innately violent. They learn to lie before they start to talk, they cheat at putting round pegs into square holes, and when they're teenagers, they always promise to be home before midnight, because they know that's what their parents want to hear."

“Can’t they deal with it at school?” Sue asked. “I thought that they were supposed to provide training in Adequate Socialisation these days.”

“That’s in between the Lesson on Drug Abuse and the boat trip to explore Sexual Harassment is it?” Kathy asked.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Petra said. “They’re fully qualified teachers’ pets, before you can blink. Or the larrikin with the big smile. That’s why girls with the gene are no good at maths — they think it’ll wreck their image with the boys.”

“Is the baby a girl?” Emma asked.

“No,” Petra said.

“That must be a load off her mind. Having a kid with a gene like that would be in breach of feminist solidarity,” Sue said.

“That’s the least of her problems,” Petra said. “She’s got legal advice that if she has it, the kid’s got a good case for maternal malfeasance. Improper selection of father.”

“Is she still living with the guy?” Emma asked.

Petra nodded.

Emma smiled. “Then if I was a smart lawyer, I’d get in now. Quick judge in chambers. Get myself appointed the kid’s advocate. Because where the mother’s concerned, there’s a clear conflict of interest between her relationship with her husband and that with the child.”

“I wouldn’t,” Sue said. “Because if that kid’s even half as revolting as Petra says it’s going to be, there’s only going to be one winner, and it won’t be the lawyer.”

“So what happens to kids like that?” Kathy said. “They can’t all sell real estate.”

“There’s always used cars,” Sue suggested. “Stockbrokers, entrepreneurs, peace negotiators ...

“I can’t see what your sister’s worried about,” Emma said. “Where I work, the salespeople go a long way ... like right to the top. You get promoted for what you say you’re going to do — not for what you do.”

“So she’s going to sit back and let the brat destroy the world,” Kathy said. “Chair committees the facilitate destruction of the ozone layer. Run conferences on overpopulation. Fund long-term investigations of the rise in sea level.”

“You could make a lot of money out of that,” Emma pointed out. “Run a sweep on exactly when Kiribati goes under. Or when it’s no longer safe to step outside in the daytime. Or the date we grow gills so we can breathe carbon monoxide.”

“That’s what they ought to apply their genetics to,” Sue said. “Grow people with longer legs. And thicker skins.”

“Sounds revolting,” Petra said. “Like a sort of humanoid giraffe fish. Not cuddly.”

Emma searched the remaining inch of soup with her chopsticks, hoping that another noodle might have materialised. “The kid’s not going to wipe out civilisation as we know it single-handed,” she said.

Kathy shook her head. “But you know what salespeople are like. They get together. They congregate. Sales Teams. Task Forces. Negotiating sessions. Peace Conferences. Parliaments. Synods. Conspiracies. Cabals ...”

“So we should wipe out all salespeople?”

“Preferably.”

“Hear. Hear.” said Sue.

“Isn’t that an infringement of their civil liberties?” Emma said.

“And isn’t a corn flakes ad interrupting a steamy love scene an infringement of yours?”

Petra dismembered her last prawn.

“I think that you’re missing something,” she said.

She chewed for a moment.

“Salespeople spend half their lives getting themselves into sticky situations ...”

“When they’ve told one lie too many, you mean?” Kathy said.

Petra nodded. “And how do they get out of them?”

“They talk fast. Try to make their victim feel important, wanted — give them a warm feeling inside, so they get conned anyway.”

“And what do you think that kid’s doing to Juliana right now? It’s pumping her full of hormones — warm, maternal, isn’t it lovely hormones...”

“O to be a mother, now that baby’s here,” Sue said.

“Precisely.”

Emma lifted up her glass, so the sun glinted in the wine. “Then let’s drink to the end of the world,” she said.

On Course

Kathy knocked back a double-strength tomato juice in a single gulp and thumped the glass on the bar for a refill. Beads of sweat glistened on her forehead, and she was shivering.

“I’ve had a narrow escape,” she said.

Petra nodded sympathetically. “Who was he?” she asked.

Kathy shook her head so the sweat drops ran. “It’s a course,” she said. “My boss dobbed me — again!”

“Taking it, or doing it?” Emma asked.

“Doing. I don’t get to take courses. Not with St Hitler in charge.”

“Why not?”

“He doesn’t like me. I know my job. I’m a threat.”

“But did you have to make it so obvious that you thought he was a fool?” Sue asked.

“I didn’t. I just can’t stand that stupid crucifix on his office wall. He sits there, preaching care and concern, with this gruesome lump of torture and violence glaring down at you over his shoulder. And he thinks he’s credible. I don’t, and maybe it shows.”

“So he’s diverted his overflowing milk of human kindness to more receptive arenas, I gather,” Emma said.

Kathy nodded. “I’ve been sent to my own private reeducation camp,” she said. “I’ve had to go to courses on every word processor and spreadsheet on the market, and one or two that aren’t. I’ve learned to write my resume fifteen different ways, and I’m word-perfect on the selection test for my own job. I know all about equal opportunity, theories of gender bias, and the repair and maintenance of glass ceilings. I’m an expert on risk management, human resources management and document management. And I’m bored stiff.”

“It sounds better than putting you in an empty office with nothing to do,” Emma said.

Kathy shook her head. “That’s a known tactic.” She smiled. “I could get him for that.”

“So how does he justify this one?”

“I’m doing a comparative survey of available courses, so I can advise other members of the department on their training needs. Except that when they ask to go, there’s no money in the training budget, because it’s already been used on me.” She paused. “He thinks that’s a good thing, too, because it means his staff is there to do proper work, and isn’t wasting its time on training.”

“What are you going to do about him?” Sue asked.

“Sit him out. He won’t last long. The buzzwords he spouts, and the sleazes he crawls to, he’ll be promoted in no time.”

A cloud crossed her face. “Pity I stuffed this one up, though. I was going to enjoy it.”

“What happened?” Petra asked.

“I booked him in on this course. Contentless. Totally improving. All weekend, starting tonight. They truck them out to some way out place on top of a waterfall, and immerse them totally in mindless experience. It’s right up his alley.”

“What did it claim to be?” Emma asked. “Organisational Ecology? Client Infiltration? Total Authority Management?”

“Professional Revitalisation.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

Kathy grinned. “You remember, in the days of the Empire ...”

“I don’t,” Emma said sternly. “We seceded, remember.”

“... In the Empire, administrators didn’t know anything useful. They did Latin and Greek at Oxbridge, and spoke posh. Well, these guys have got the same idea. They thought, what skill, nowadays, is so totally irrelevant to anything you’d ever really want to do that it’s a joke, but anyone who’s done it waffles on and on, so you’d do anything to get them to go away.”

She looked at the other three in turn.

“Computers,” said Petra.

“Economics,” Sue said.

“You’re getting warm,” Kathy said. She looked at Emma.

“Sex?”

“Speak for yourself,” Petra said.

Kathy smiled. “Much, much more useless. Selling used cars.” She paused. “But it’s not the selling itself. It’s the holistic nature of the experience that’s so educationally valuable. The self expression. The creativity. The inner confidence that the selling of an overpriced rust bucket to a blind pensioner with Parkinson’s disease can give to an otherwise unremarkable specimen of humanity.”

Sue looked at her, a hard light in her eyes. “Who’s running this course?” she asked.

“That guy you used to go out with. Des something.”

“You mean, he’s got a job?”

“It’s a franchise. McTraining. Kentucky Fried Courses. Some U.S. education export business, anyway. But they’re registered as a religion for the tax breaks. Which is how I snared the boss.”

“So what went wrong?”

Kathy winced. “Wrong communion, I guess. Not affiliated with the Union of Respectable Religions. He must have checked it out. Because he was on the phone talking about it when I got back to the office this afternoon. I thought he was talking to one of our heavies, because he was crawling like mad, boosting the course like it was a new set of tablets, but then he went into ‘But...but’, ‘But...but’ mode, and then he said, very disappointed ‘Of course, I must accept your ruling, Your Eminence’ so it must have been some bishop or cardinal or something. And then he said, ‘I’m sure my Training Officer will appreciate the experience’, so I grabbed my bag and I ran.”

“So you think he’s dobbed you?” Emma said.

“If he can’t find me, he can’t tell me,” Kathy said. “And tomorrow will be too late.”

Sue was watching in the mirror behind the bar as a bus pulled up outside the door. A solid male, arms hanging from his side like a gorilla, was getting off. She jammed Petra in the ribs.

“Duck,” she said. “It’s Robbie.”

Petra shrugged. “I can handle him,” she said. “He’s so ex- now, he’s past his violence use-by date.”

She watched him as he came across the room, but he wasn’t looking at her.

He was heading for Kathy, head thrust forward, scowling. He grabbed her arm. “You’re holding up the bus.”

“What bus?”

“For Des’s course. He said you’d be here.” He tried to drag her towards the door, but she dug her heels in. “You’ve got a date with a waterfall.”

“Since when?”

“You trying to renege?”

“I’m not going.”

Robbie started to twist her arm behind her back. “Then I’m gunna have to persuade you.”

Emma stood up, followed by Petra and Sue. They formed a ring around Robbie, blocking his way, dazzling him with glittering smiles.

“Did Des tell you to do this?” Petra asked.

“Naa. Just said there’d be some sales resistance. And not to take ‘No’ for an answer.”

“And you reckon this is the right way to overcome sales resistance?”

“Well she’s not my woman, is she? So I can’t thump her.”

Petra looked at Emma, who looked at Sue.

“This guy needs some training,” Emma said. “Social Rehabilitation.”

“Based on something so totally useless that everybody regards it as a joke,” Sue said.

“Like etiquette,” Petra suggested.

They looked at Kathy.

“Reckon you could do it?” Emma asked.

Kathy nodded. “With pleasure. But I want Des in the class, too.”

Lost Love

The room was designed for sensory deprivation. Acres of low white ceiling pressing down on featureless beige partitions ending in beige carpet dotted with little groups of figures making polite conversation with people they had met for the first time. On the sign by the door, the words Chilean Ecotourism Reception replaced the more conventional Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here.

Emma was cornered, too far from the trestle table that formed the bar. He was a little man, thin and dark, with an intense rat-like face. His dark suit and sombre tie sat on him like a strait-jacket. His badge said Emilio. He was into his fifth whisky in twenty minutes.

“I am disappointed in your country,” he was saying. “It is not right for tourists.”

“Why not?” Emma asked.

“Your wildernesses, they are useless. Too big. Too far apart. It is all travel. Fly here. Fly there. Drive. Walk, even. For hours. Days. To see, what? Trees. More trees. Again trees. Who wants to go for hours and just see trees. Your animals, too, are wrong. All nocturnal.”

He drew breath. “You should make little wildernesses. Right outside the back door of the hotel. Next to the golf course. With kangaroos and koalas. So visitors can see it in comfort.”

“We don’t see wildernesses in that way. They are vast, unspoiled tracts of nature ...”

He shook his head. “Not commercial. They cost you money that way. If you want to keep one, you should build a big city, right in the middle, with airports, fast trains, freeways, so people can see it properly.”

Emma looked around the room, trying to catch an eye, to summon a rescue squad. But all eyes were down, studiously looking the other way.

Emilio had taken another whisky from a passing tray. He was still talking, but the subject seemed to have changed. “I wish for your help,” he was saying. “I am looking for a woman.” He looked deep into Emma’s eyes. Emma looked away, pointedly. Emilio’s voice took on an air of studied pathos. “It is a woman that I knew long ago,” he said. “The most beautiful woman in the world. Soft blonde hair, her eyes, brown sometimes, perhaps green, her face like a heart, and her figure ...” His whisky sloshed as he made the traditional out and then in gesture with both hands.

He leaned towards Emma. “We were happy. We were in love. We were to be married. But on our wedding day, she was gone.” He clicked his fingers. “Disappeared! Poouf! Stolen away. Nobody knew where.”

He straightened his shoulders. “And so I looked. And asked. And searched. I waited for the ransom note. I thought of the customs of my country, and dreamed for a moment of mass graves. But I know, that they were keeping her from me. That somewhere, she is alive, still waiting.”

He pulled out his wallet and opened it to show a photograph. A girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen, her arm around a stone cupid in a fountain, her wet dress clinging to her as she flashed a teasing grin at the camera. A young version of the man, standing stiffly a metre or so away, trying not to get wet.

“I look for her everywhere,” the man said. “I must find her. Or I will be unhappy forever.” He paused. “Have you, perhaps, seen her?”

Emma glanced around the room again and this time she caught an eye — another of the Chilean delegation — and signalled “help”. Then she looked down at the photograph and shook her head.

Her rescuer was large and loud, with a spectacular bandido moustache and a name-tag which said Carlos. “I must discuss with you the lesser nine-toed numbat,” he said, and whisked her off towards the bar.

“I am sorry,” he said, when her glass was full again. “Emilio is, what you might call, a successful businessman. A little one-track, perhaps.”

Emma smiled grimly. “His ideas on what is eco- and mine don’t quite match,” she said.

“We are here to see how you do things,” Carlos said. “But Emilio, he does not understand that. He sees only business opportunities.” He grinned. “Did he tell you his plan for the Great Barrier Reef?”

Emma shook his head.

“To Emilio all those boats, taking tourists out and back, are a big waste of money. He wants to build a hotel. On the reef. A big one. Hundreds of kilometres long. With glass-bottomed rooms, to watch the fish.”

Emma said “Ugh!”

“Be careful,” Carlos said. “Emilio is a powerful man. His brother is a general, and his other brother is a cardinal. He has lots of money. And you have lots of stupid politicians. If he sets his mind to something, he will succeed.”

“Except for finding his long-lost love,” Emma said.

Carlos shrugged. “Even that. It is a long time ago, but he has not given up.”

“Then we must hope that he never finds her.”

Carlos laughed. “She is middle-aged now. He would not recognise her.”

* * *

Emma was stretched at full length on Petra’s sofa: a beached whale holding aloft a half full wine glass. Petra was curled up in an armchair opposite, looking slim and youthful, her blonde hair framing her heart-shaped face, her hazel eyes sparkling, her hands cradling a gin and tonic.

“I knew someone called Emilio once,” Petra said. “One school holidays, when I went to Europe. Little dark guy. Thin, peaky face. Awfully earnest. I sort of liked him at first. So deep, so intense. And so mature.” She laughed. “I guess he must have been all of twenty. He was at uni, studying something or other so he could go into the family firm.

“I suppose I went out with him a couple of times, but then he started hanging around like a bad smell, and barging in every time I talked to a guy. And after the first time, he just said the same things, over and over again. Like how his father was some big wheel in South America, and how he was going to be even bigger and rounder. And anything you said, if it was more than ‘pass the salt’, he’d just smile as if you’d done something clever and go on talking.

“He asked me to marry him, and when I said ‘No’ he wouldn’t believe me, and went off and bought a ring and tried to organise a priest ...”

“So what did you do?” Emma asked.

Petra grinned. “I was due to meet my parents in Lapland. So I went. On schedule. He should have known I was going. But he probably wasn’t listening. And I didn’t go out of my way to say goodbye.”

“Surely he could have traced you?”

Petra shook her head. “He didn’t know where I was staying. They were friends of my parents. And I didn’t want him bothering them.”

“He showed me a picture of you. In a fountain.”

Petra nodded reminiscently. “Wasn’t that cupid spunky?” she said.

Generation Gulf

The cat sat rigidly upright on the speaker by the door, paws together, tail wrapped around, its long grey hair a sombre mantle, its orange eyes glaring from above its squashed in nose and discontented mouth. From the sofa, under the half-closed curtains, two identical old crones, one male, one female, both grey, glared back, their beaky noses casting shadows across their beady eyes and pursed lips.

There was the sound of a key in the lock, the clack of businessperson high heels, the thump of a briefcase on the hall table. Sue came in.

The cat inclined its head as she scratched its ear. "Did you have a good day," Sue said to the crones.

"That daughter of yours brought her friends home," the female crone said, stiff with disapproval.

"She's allowed to," Sue said.

"One of them had a T-shirt ..." She choked. "Filth. All holes ... And a bleeding head."

"The noise they made. It's not music. And the words ... Four letters. Obscene." The male crone frothed at the mouth.

"So we put a stop to that," the female crone said.

Sue checked the house for sounds of conversation. "Where did they go?" she asked.

"Don't ask us."

"Anywhere, provided it's not here."

Sue went into the kitchen. There was a note on the table.

AT NICOLE'S.

A.

Sue stabbed out a number on the phone.

"Is Amanda there?"

There was a scuffle, then a voice came on the line. "Hi, Mum."

"I thought you didn't like Death Metal," Sue said.

There was a giggle. "I don't. But they don't, either."

"Are you planning to come back for dinner?"

"Preferably not ... If you don't mind."

"Okay. Just so I know."

"One thing, Mum. They're not going to wreck my birthday party, are they?"

"We'll have to think of something," Sue said.

She put down the phone and went back to the lounge room door.

“I’m going out,” she said. “There’s some of last night’s pumpkin curry in the fridge, if you want it.”

“Where are you going?” the female crone demanded.

The male crone began to pull himself to his feet, propping himself on his stick. “We’ll come with you,” he said.

Sue shook her head, stroked the cat again, and closed the door behind her.

* * *

Salami picked her way across Petra’s living room floor, dodging compact discs, discarded jumpers and empty coffee cups, and jumped up onto Sue’s knee.

“At least she doesn’t disapprove,” Sue said, her voice almost drowned by the purring.

“If your parents don’t like it, why do they come?” Petra asked.

“They’re loving it. Glare. Grump. Grouch. Suffer. Suffer. Don’t know what the world’s coming to. The younger generation ... tut! And Amanda’s living proof.”

“I thought she was looking forward to seeing them.”

“She was. She even dressed up for it. The blue skirt ...” Sue brought her hand down about half way down her thigh. “... and a lacy white top. She’s all legs at the moment, but she looked good. My father called her a slut. Flaunting herself, he said. I made him apologise, but since then it’s been war.”

“What’s she been doing?”

“I did a deal with her, ages ago, that she’d do most of the cooking. So she’s suddenly decided that she’s a vegetarian. So it’s eggplant parmigiana, spinach quiche, leek omelette, ratatouille — you name it.” Sue laughed. “It’s actually very good. Even Michael’s prepared to eat it, and you know what little brothers are like about big sisters’ cooking. But my parents loathe it. You can see them gagging on every forkfull. And my mother keeps explaining to Amanda, oh so carefully, as if she was mentally retarded or something, how to roast a leg of lamb, and how to make a beef ragout, and how good meat is for you, and how civilisation would never have happened if we’d stayed in the trees and kept eating berries.”

“Why don’t your parents cook for themselves? Or for you?”

“Because they are guests in my house, and expect to be treated as such.”

“How much longer are you going to be stuck with them?”

“They say another couple of weeks.” Sue grimaced. “They pretend that they came to see us, but I’ve found out that they’re having their house redecorated, and needed somewhere to stay. Mum couldn’t resist comparing their new colour scheme with my dated cliched decor.”

“Can’t you offload them somewhere else?”

“I’ve been trying. It’s Amanda’s sixteenth birthday party next weekend, and they are ... not ... going ... to ... cope.” Sue’s voice dragged over the last few words.

* * *

There was a light on in Amanda's room when Sue arrived home. She put her head around the door. The cat was curled up on the bed, looking pleased with itself. Sue wondered how deep it had dug its claws in, and whether there would be demands that it be put down.

Amanda looked up from a magazine full of spunky male pop stars and smiled. "I think I've solved your parent problem," she said.

"How?"

"I rang Dad. You know that place of his on the river?"

Sue nodded.

"Well, I told him your father was mad about fishing, and asked if they could stay there for a week or so. He wasn't exactly keen, but when I explained about the party ..."

"And what do my parents say?"

"I oversold it a bit. Secluded country cottage by limpid stream. That sort of stuff. But I think they got the message."

"When are they going?"

"Friday. I told them it wasn't free till then. I don't want them going any earlier, or they might have time to get back before the party." Amanda thought for a moment. "Would they come back if they didn't like it?"

Sue shook her head. "They'd lose face if they did. But they'll find something to complain about. Loudly. For the next ten years."

"I think they will," Amanda said, smiling. "You see, Dad says there was a break-in a few weeks ago. They took everything. All that's left is a bin full of sprouting potatoes and a pile of his girlfriend's Death Metal records."

Bulk Learning

Kathy slid a brochure across the table. It was so glossy that the spilt coffee flowed off it, leaving it dry and unwrinkled. It showed a lone figure in an academic gown standing on a hill, behind it cloistered halls of learning, in front, distant mountains, where a rainbow ended on a pot of gold. A twenty-lane freeway stretched across the intervening valley. The caption read:

Exploring the Information Highway Together,
through

LUDWIG LEICHHARDT UNIVERSITY

Australia's Education Achiever

"Leichhardt," Emma said reflectively. "Australian explorer who was so incompetent that he got lost."

"That's why he's a national hero," Sue said.

"There's a guy in our department wants to enrol in a course there," Kathy said. "I've got to approve it. But I get different stories, everybody I talk to."

"I applied for a job there," Sue said. "It's a beautiful campus. Tennis courts, eighteen hole golf course, olympic size swimming pool, gourmet restaurant ..."

"I think I've seen it," Kathy said. "There's just the one building. A forty-storey tower at one end. Concave, curving, so the sunlight focusses on the houses in the next suburb, and sets them on fire."

"That's the administration building," Sue said. "The carpet on the top floor's so deep you have to hack your way through the pile with a machete."

"So where are the students and the academics?"

"There aren't any," Sue said. "There are signs at the front gate. Someone reading, with a big red line through them. Someone else in a gown and mortar board, with a line through them."

"Though there is The Tomb of the Unknown Academic," Emma said. "Down by the river. It's a bit overgrown. The story is that he tried to fail a student with a rich daddy. For a while, he was chained to a rock, while a vulture ate at his liver, but then the vulture died, and they decided not to replace it as an economy measure."

"But if there's no staff and no students, what does the university do?"

"It buys its courses in," Sue said, "and delivers them electronically. The students download lectures and reading material, then do tests and assignments on the computer. All the marking's automated, so you can get an entire degree without talking to a living soul."

"I've heard one or two disaster stories," Emma said. "Like the Dry Land Farming unit from Arica University in Chile, that turned out to be in Spanish. And the Yak Grooming course from Lhasa University, which had been dubbed into English by someone that thought that a yak was a grade of Tibetan monk."

“There’s also the successes,” Sue said. “There’s been a boom in imports of both pins and dolls since they ran the University of Haiti’s course on A Model-based Approach to Interpersonal Relations.”

“The courses are all imported, then?” Kathy asked.

“What do you expect,” Sue said. “It costs too much to make them here. We’ve got unions, remember. And working conditions. We’ve always imported text books, so it’s not much of a change. And the market will soon sort out the good courses from the bad.”

“What about the Australian universities?” Kathy asked

“They’re inefficient. They’ve been protected for too long. They’ve got to learn to compete.”

“Even if the imported stuff is made by some Burmese barefoot doctor of philosophy with five hundred words of English?”

“It’s probably more intelligible than some Australian academic who knows five hundred thousand words, all of them ten syllables,” Sue said.

“So you don’t care if the Australian universities are wiped out?” Kathy said.

“Why should I?” Sue said. “They can compete if they try. Reform work practices. Move labour intensive activities offshore. Sell their own courses in the world market.” She paused. “There’ll always be scope for boutique universities, of course, for people who want to pay. But we can’t go on subsidising some bottomless pit.”

“This doesn’t really help me with this guy’s application,” Kathy said.

Emma smiled. “I don’t think you should look at in isolation,” she said. “Remember that you’re training officer for a large department. Use your buying power.”

“So I should shop around different universities?”

“Make them fly you round the world to see their facilities. First class, of course. And wine you and dine you, and give you elephant rides and tickets to bull fights and olympic games and civil wars ...”

“Ugh.”

“See, you’ve got a selection criterion already. Anyone associated with bloodsports — out!”

“And that includes external examinations,” Kathy said.

“You could go out to tender,” Emma suggested.

Kathy wrinkled her nose. “Sounds pretty tedious. All those specifications.”

Emma smirked. “If you do it properly, it’s fun. Think of how often you were given a hard time at university. How often some stupid rule stopped you doing what you really wanted to. And how there was no way they would bend it or change it, because they had ‘standards’ to uphold.

“So now’s your chance to institute a measured response. Give them a hundred page checklist of quantified outcomes, and require every one of them to three decimal places. Demand a graph of student stupidity versus time to finish, and specify guaranteed completion rates of ninety eight percent on students randomly selected by you. Ask for recognition of prior learning for messengers, filing

clerks and canteen cleaners. Produce productivity rankings in cents per processed public servant. Don't forget to ask for the table of big bulk discounts.

“And if they make one tiny slip, reject the entire tender.”

“I'll probably be left with nothing,” Kathy said.

“That's okay. You can then select on some arbitrary, irrational and irrelevant grounds, just like they do when deciding who to admit.”

“Such as?”

Emma flicked Leichhardt University's waterproof piece of paper with disdain. “Like who has the best brochure for mopping up spilled coffee,” she said.

Dead Heat

Emma hefted a pile of verbiage towards the Pending Tray, and wished for a desktop fork lift truck. She scribbled a connected set of four letter words on a pad, then looked around before reaching for the next bundle of briefing papers. A sea of leather lounges stretched into the distance, cut off abruptly by a wood grain bar.

The phone buzzed, then two massive male figures, one in a suit, the other in overalls, stalked through the door, parking themselves at each end of the desk, hunched, ready to sell insurance. Emma's personal assistant, a well-built blonde, hovered tentatively near the door.

Emma signalled him forward. "Charles, I'd like you to meet Des and Robbie. I've got no idea why they're here." Charles' outstretched hand slipped from Des's limp offering, to be caught and crushed by Robbie.

"We need some information," Des said, straightening his tie.

"Facts," said Robbie. "Real information. Not some pissfarting position paper."

Emma waited.

"Have you heard of Milbi?" Des asked.

Emma nodded. "Mother-in-Law's Birthday Island. In the middle of the Indian Ocean. Named by some unliberated explorer who'd run out of saints days."

"They're contracting out their police force," Robbie said.

"Robbie'll make a great police chief," Des said.

"You mean, built like a brick shithouse, and talks real slow ..." Emma suggested.

"Me mates'll make great cops," Robbie said.

"Half of them've got bikes, and they're all looking for work," Des said.

"And what's your role?" Emma asked.

"Organising equipment," Des said. "Helicopters, loud hailers, flashing lights, fluorescent yellow vests ... And I've got a line on those big armoured cars with the squillion litre tear gas tanks like they've got in South Africa."

"So what do you want from me?" Emma asked.

"Background," Des said.

"So we write our application right," added Robbie.

Emma looked at Charles, her eyes narrowing a little. "The first question you need to ask," she said, "is 'What happened to the last police force?'"

"We were told that they'd been disbanded for corruption," Des said.

"That's one way of putting it," Emma said, "though dismember, disembowel or disembody might be more accurate."

Robbie frowned. "So what did they do to them?"

“You’ve got to understand,” Charles said, “that the island is in a strategically important location. The port is a transshipment point for all the world’s major value added cargoes — arms, drugs, toxic waste... There has been a long association with American democratic institutions, so there is a powerful and active death squad movement. Soviet influence has resulted in the death penalty for economic crimes like buying, selling, having money, not having money... And a British sense of fair play has resulted in an impressive and totally ineffective set of checks and balances, the most important of which is the Independent Commissioner for Evaluation of Executions, with its own private police...”

Robbie was starting to twitch, and Des had made at least two lunges towards his mobile phone.

“Listen,” Emma said. “Charles might be a bore, but he knows his stuff.”

Charles continued, oblivious of the interruption. “The commission’s job is to examine all court cases that have resulted in a death penalty, and see whether the verdict was sound ...”

“A sort of appeal process,” Des said.

“Only posthumous,” Emma said. “So that their neutrality is not compromised by political or public pressure. They’re a kind of legal pathologist.”

“And what happens if the verdict wasn’t sound?”

“Then everybody involved in the trial — police, witnesses, lawyers, judge, jury — is guilty of murdering an innocent person, and is summarily executed.”

“An’ that’s what happened to the cops,” Robbie said. “Don’t like the sound of that.”

“Is that what happened?” Des asked.

“Sort of,” Emma said. “But let Charles finish the story.”

“You’ve got to remember,” Charles said, “Milbi’s a pretty small place. Okay, it’s multicultural, rich expatriates and grinding poverty for the locals, but really it’s run by one family, called Kavanagh. Aldo was the Mayor, Alvin was the Police Chief, and Alaric ran the bank. They’re quads, but the fourth one’s a girl, Alice, who’s retarded. They reckon there was a vicious piece of perinatal bullying. The boys stepped on her umbilical cord, trying to get out first, so she was oxygen starved and brain damaged. She’s as bright as a button, but her mental age is about eight.

“And up in the big house on the hill was the mother, Gabrielle, big and fat and like a spider.”

“She was murdered, wasn’t she?” Des said. “A cyanide laden custard pie in the face at a literary luncheon... It was on the News.”

“She wrote reviews in the local paper,” Emma said. “All of them nasty. She didn’t ever read anything. Just flick through it until she found something she didn’t like, then write the review on that.”

“She did over Aldo’s collected poems Odes to the Municipal Tip. Either she didn’t realise they were his, or didn’t care,” Charles said.

“So Aldo pied her,” Robbie said.

“That’s the problem. The three brothers are identical, and they dress the same. They thought it was Aldo. And his alibi was that he was at his desk, playing a car racing computer game from a town called Edselburg in the US. But they take long lunches in the Mayor’s office, and there was no-one

else there. And when they got the times back from the US and converted them, it was half an hour different from what he claimed, and didn't cover him at all. So chop."

Des looked at him. "And ..."

"It'd been a pretty rough old trial. Witnesses vanishing, witnesses changing their minds, Aldo's secretary claiming to be in bed with two people at once, police records of interview changing faster than airport departure boards, police burning their notebooks in courtroom corridors... But Alvin reckoned he was safe because they'd fixed the Independent Commission for Evaluation of Executions. They'd made Alice, their sister, the Commissioner. And there was no way that she'd see anything wrong with what they'd done. She never had before."

"Alvin — the Police Chief — did it then?" Des asked.

Charles nodded his head. "Him or Alaric. We can't be sure. They both wanted to be Mayor. And Alaric gave evidence at the trial."

"So what went wrong?" Des asked.

"What are eight year olds good at?" Emma asked.

Des scratched his head.

"Facts," Robbie said. "How many warts on a cane toad. What's the period of rotation of Jupiter's thirteenth moon. What's the furthest anyone has fallen from an aeroplane and lived."

Emma nodded. "And she knew about Edselburg, where Aldo's game was."

"Knew what?"

"Edsel. Ford Edsel. Cars. It's not on the local Standard Time. Because standard time's railway time, and the railway didn't come to Edselburg. It went down the next valley, and they've never forgiven it. The first freeway in the world was in Edselburg, five miles from the Town Hall to the drive-in theatre. They tore down the whole main street, so now they've got to drive eighty miles to buy a carton of milk. But noon in Edselburg is when the sun's overhead, and that's that."

"How different is it from the Standard Time?" Des asked.

"Twenty six minutes and thirty five seconds."

"And that proves Aldo's alibi?"

Emma nodded.

"And so Alice had everybody involved in the trial executed?" Des said.

Charles nodded. "That's what she was supposed to do. But since all police look alike in their uniforms, and all lawyers in their wigs, she did a bit of a clean sweep." He smiled. "Though I hear that she was a bit puzzled the following day, when the looting started in the main street, and the police didn't come."

"So there's no Kavanaghs left," Des said.

"Except for Alice," Charles said.

Robbie looked at Des. "Maybe you'd better go for Mayor," he said.

Emma shook her head. “You’ve been gazumped,” she said. She picked up a fax from her In tray. “Alice has decided it’s her turn,” she said. “And she’s going to be Police Commissioner, and run the bank too.”

Playing for Keeps

Robbie, an orang-utan in army fatigues and a sky blue helmet, slouched through the door of Emma's office. Blonde stubble glistened in the black-streaked face. He glared at Des, who strode past him and stood tall in the middle of the floor, every inch the successful salesman, confident in his pretence that the restrained sparkle of his suit hadn't gone missing, and that the pile of the carpet hid his scuffed shoes. Charles, Emma's personal assistant, unshaven, his off-white jumper more off-white than usual, waited by the door.

Robbie looked hopefully towards the soft chairs and the wood-panelled refrigerator. Emma, as big as any of them in her maroon business suit with the shoulder-located helicopter pads, signalled towards the hard chairs in front of her quarter-acre desk.

Robbie scowled at her. "What is this? A court martial?"

Emma shook her head. "Not yet, but it could be, if you haven't got a good story. That's why I asked Charles to bring you here, straight off the plane." She inspected Robbie's uniform. "Don't get me wrong," she said. "I don't mind that you've blown up a parliamentary delegation. Most of us are tempted to, at some time or other. We usually resist it." She leaned forward. "But this delegation was the responsibility of my department. Escorted by my personal assistant."

She waved towards Charles, who said, in a voice of doom, "They were from marginal seats, every one of them."

Emma pointed to the sky. "There are people up there who are not happy."

Robbie scowled at her again. "You can't blame us if they blunder into a minefield," he said.

"We can, if you laid it."

"Well, I didn't. Gave up that game ages ago. Too bloody hard to find the winning side, and too bloody uncomfortable if you're not on it. I'm in to sports administration now. For the UN."

Emma looked at the army fatigues again. "What's the sport?"

"Genocide," Robbie said. "It's really catching on. Be in the olympics in no time. Proper team game. Requires real managerial ability." He looked at Emma's padded shoulders. "You'd love it."

"What are the rules?"

"To get it going," Robbie said. "you gotta have a facilitator. Find somewhere where there's two lots of people living together who are different somehow. You know, one lot short, one lot tall. One lot talks posh, the other doesn't. One lot been there longer. And they start digging, and soon enough, it all starts spilling out — they pinched our land, they took our jobs, they stood on Aunt Mabel's corns, they...they...they... The further back it goes, the more everybody thinks it's forgotten, then better the game. Then you sort of stir the pot a bit, and its on for one and all."

"It's action packed," Des said. "Made for TV. No need for replays, it's all happening. Biggest problem is fitting in the ads. And lots of tension, because getting points on the board's really hard. Like soccer."

"You got to totally wipe the other side out before you score," Robbie said. "Mostly you get a nil all draw. So Milbi was great. One all."

“Milbi,” Emma said. “Island in the Indian Ocean. That’s what I want to know about. How the pollies got theirs.”

“They weren’t part of the game,” Robbie said. “It was over by then.”

“So what was the game?”

“Campbells versus Macdonalds,” Robbie said. “Old Scottish brawl. Massacre of Glencoe, 13th February, 1692. And that wasn’t the start of it.”

Charles put on his Information Database expression. “Milbi was settled from western Scotland, as a result of the Highland Clearances,” he said. “Beginning of last century. Problem was, the first boat load was Macdonalds, the second Campbells.”

“No problem, really,” Robbie said. “Jesus, they even intermarried. But there’s always a guy on one side with a chip on his shoulder and one on the other with bricks in his head. And the local paper never minded a beat-up to go with its page three boobs. Then, the three hundredth anniversary of the massacre, someone put a can of soup through the window of the hamburger joint ...

“The cops kept them quiet for a while,” Robbie said, “The odd knifing after the pub or the splash of kero on the front verandah, but that was all. Then the cops managed to execute the wrong guy, and got put down, and it was on for one and all.”

“Only safe place was the Presidential Palace,” Des said. “Alice Kavanagh is Irish, so she was out of it.”

Emma looked down her nose at Robbie with a disapproving frown. “And you were the facilitator?”

Robbie stared back in horror. “Christ, no! I’m no bloody politician.”

“Then what were you doing there?” Emma asked.

“Observer,” Robbie said. “If there’s UN personnel, it stops the do-gooders interfering, trying to stop the game. We get a bit of flak, but what referee doesn’t ...”

Emma looked at Des. “And why were you there? That doesn’t look like a UN issue suit.”

Des look smug. “Business,” he said.

Emma’s eyes narrowed. “Second-hand tanks?”

“Mines,” Des said. “Great deal. Super-light. Easy to carry. Thousand to a one-man pack ...”

“And bloody useless,” Robbie said. “Gust of wind, they blow away. If you want a mine in your mush, buy Des.”

“We achieved excellent coverage,” Des said. “There’s nowhere on the island that we didn’t reach. Even the reef, and that’s inaccessible.”

“Anyway,” Robbie said, “the game was finished. We’d checked it out, made sure the score was right, and gone back to the airport. Down the back road, because Des knew the batch of mines they’d used there were duds. Arms fair display stuff. And just when we got there, this dirty great jumbo jet comes thundering in, and who gets off but Charlie here and his mates.”

“They appeared to be interested in business activities, in the personal services industry ...” Des said.

“We told them Milbi was no sexual free trade zone, and most of the residents had had better things to do with their daughters,” Robbie said, “but they’d heard some story from some sex tour operator. Trying to get them off his back, I reckon. So they were going in, mines or no mines.”

“We explained the survival contingencies associated with any transportation beyond the immediate vicinity of the airport,” Des said, “but they insisted that airport/hotel transfers had been paid for.”

“Their bloody tongues were hanging out, they were that keen,” Robbie said. “Guy on one side was banging me in the ribs, saying ‘Where’s the action?’, guy on the other was foaming at the mouth, shouting ‘You’re a pander, sir’, and me thinking I’d had a good night’s sleep.”

“They thought that Des and Robbie were covering up,” Charles said.

“So we told them to take the armoured car, and off they went, straight down the freeway,” Robbie said. “Best we could do, in the circumstances.”

He grinned. “Sounded like cracker night. Pop, pop, pop-pop-pop, pop, pop-pop, fading slowly into the distance. Then BOOM! when they hit the big one. Good thing Des and I didn’t go that way, because that was no dud, for sure. Charles wanted to go and rescue them, but we told him not to bother, not unless he had a big vacuum cleaner.

“Then we commandeered the jumbo, and here we are,” Robbie said.

“Our problem is,” Emma said, “Charles was supposed to be looking after them. I don’t want him demoted to base-grade and transferred to Innamincka.”

“We could get Alice to give him diplomatic immunity,” Robbie suggested. “She mightn’t have any citizens, but she’s still President. And a Milbi passport’ll get you into a couple of countries, at least.”

“Why not shop around the TV Current Affairs programmes?” Des said. “‘I was death pollies minder’. That’ll go great. He’ll get more than enough to tell the public service where to go.”

“Why don’t we send Robbie or Des to Innamincka instead?” Charles suggested.

The telephone rang. Emma picked it up. “Hmm ... I see ... Yes ... That does make a difference ... Certainly, I’ll do that. ... Thank you.”

She put the receiver down, looked at Charles, and grinned. “It’s okay,” she said. “That was the Speaker. He says he’d refused permission for the trip. He’d told them that a parliamentary delegation looking at sex tourism in foreign countries might be misinterpreted.”

“So they ignored him, too,” Charles said.

Robbie pointed at Charles. “Sounds like it’s you that’s in trouble then, for helping them.”

Emma shook her head. “They conned everybody. Enough, anyway, so they’ve got to keep it quiet. Even the plane was booked up to the Parliamentary account.”

“So what now?” Charles asked.

“The Speaker’s making sure the journos know that it was a private trip. That means you weren’t there. Not on official business.”

“I’ll fill in a leave form,” Charles said.

Emma smiled at him. A that's a good dog smile. "Did you have a good holiday?" she asked.

Party Time

Kathy sipped at a lemon, lime and double bitters, making a face as if she enjoyed it. The bags under her eyes reached almost to her chin. Her election candidate's garb of crisp natural fibre white blouse and pure cotton denim skirt was scrunched and streaked with sweat. Above the rattle of poker machines, victory celebrations blared out from the TV on the wall. Kathy glared at them, wishing that they would go away.

Emma twirled an inch of whisky in a square glass, the maroon all power to the boss business suit clashing with the beer-soaked tartan carpet. "You ran a good campaign," she said.

Kathy smiled weakly. "It's easy when you're a green," she said. "All your lies are sustainable, your Taj Mahals are solar passive, your ego trips are by bicycle, and if you can't see the forest for the trees that's a plus, because they haven't been woodchipped yet."

She frowned "It's not so much that I mind losing," she said. "I knew the footballer, the snake charmer and the Vroom Vroom Hoon party were going to do as well as me, or better. It's the way the major parties swapped preferences. The bastards wiped us all out."

Emma nodded towards the gorilla with the ill-fitting grey suit and dazzling white work boots leaning on the bar. "There's a reason," she said.

The gorilla caught her eye and lumbered across, escorted by a craggy vision of after-shave whose suit fitted perfectly.

"You know Robbie?" Emma said. "And Des?"

Kathy nodded. Robbie broke three bones in her hand. Des pulled up a chair, behind her, so she couldn't see him.

"Robbie's got a new job. He's the Central Executive of the Labural Party," Emma said. "And Des is the Marketing Manager."

"Labural?"

"L-A-B-U-R-A-L," Robbie said.

"We put the u in so that neither Labor nor Liberal had too many consecutive letters," Des said.

"It's a merger," Robbie said. "Economies of scale, recognition that there's no bloody difference,"

"Of course, there's a lot of brand-name loyalty in the electorate," Des said dismissively, "so the old party names still encompass validity for the purpose of campaigning ..."

"But it means, it doesn't matter who you vote for, one of our guys'll get in," Robbie added.

"You can always vote for minor parties. Or independents," Kathy said.

"Yeah. But we can handle that," Robbie said. "Got our own Independent how to vote cards, for one."

"Our booth workers have extensively counselled on the techniques of communication of the need for stable government," Des said. "And sometimes they have to explain to people who have dif-

faculty following our ticket the more subtle features of the voting system — like that a 4 means four votes, a 3 is three votes, and if they give us a 1, that means they’ve put us last — that sort of thing.”

“And if they’re still so thick they don’t get the message,” Robbie said, “then we tell them the stories about how the greenie has it off with crocodiles, how the kids won’t learn to write because there’ll be no paper, and how they’ll open the immigration floodgates for the little green men from Mars, and how the Hoons are going to give cash prizes for running kids down on school crossings.”

“It sure worked this time,” Kathy said.

“You shouldn’t be bitter about it,” Des said. “It’s a learning experience. Maybe, next time, you’d like to be on our ticket. I’m sure that one of the factions could fit you in.”

“You’ve still got factions?” Kathy’s voice had a note of incredulity.

“Pollies gotta have someone to yell and scream at,” Robbie said. “Keep it inside the party, they can be as nasty as they like.”

“There’s three factions,” Des said. “Right dry. Damp centre unity. And wet left. Wet left’d probably suit you best. Unless you want to grab a few wets and form a sloshy green group.”

“Sort of rainforest faction,” Robbie said, and laughed.

“It’s the only way you’ll get elected,” Des said.

Kathy glanced at Emma, who was busy watching her reflection in the whisky. Emma smiled, just slightly.

“What would I have to do?” Kathy asked.

“Join up. You’d have to agree to the party rules, of course.”

“Which are?”

“Shut up and do what you’re told,” Robbie said.

“I think I’ve got an alternative strategy,” Kathy said.

“Don’t bother with the Trade Practices Act,” Robbie said. “Provided we don’t offer goods or services, we’re clear. And nobody can accuse pollies of doing that.”

Kathy smirked. “I was thinking more of your booth workers’ counselling of would-be voters that I was a bankrupt lesbian mafioso who barbequed her sister’s kids for breakfast,” she said.

“What’s wrong with that?” Robbie said. “It’s all part of the game.”

“That’s what you think,” Kathy said. “We got it on tape. Not just one booth. Every booth. Both parties. And we got your briefing documents. On letterhead. We passed them on ...”

The shouting and cheering on the TV suddenly changed to hisses and boos. Bodies surged, leaped, fought. Glasses smashed, tables crashed, a chair came flying at the camera.

The Chief Electoral Officer pushed to the front of the crowd, surrounded by a phalanx of police in riot gear. Blood flowed from a cut on his forehead. His shirt was torn. He raised a piece of paper containing a preprepared statement.

Emma grinned at Kathy. “Looks like you might have made it.”

A victory smile appeared for an instant on Kathy's face, to be quickly lost in a look of ever-increasing gloom.

"What's the matter?" Emma said.

"Have you ever been in coalition with a footballer, snake-charmer and a couple of Vroom Vroom Hoons?" Kathy asked in a tone of despair.

A Bit of a Waste

“The Martians have landed,” Kathy said.

Emma joined her at the executive picture window of her executive office suite, and looked out over the lift towers and rooftop air-conditioning huts for the flying saucer. “Where?”

Kathy pointed down to the street, where two humanoid figures in steely-grey space suits stalked past lines of parked cars, their single flat glass eyes staring fixedly to the front as the paving stones shattered under their booted feet.

“Probably cosmonauts, fund-raising to get their mates off some space-station,” Emma said.

Emma’s personal assistant joined them at the window, blocking off the remaining light. “You know them,” he said. “The one on the left’s Des. Used-car salesman with the shiny metallic suits. The other’s Robbie. Thug in overalls. Looks like they’ve found a sartorial compromise.” He glanced at a slip of paper. “They’ve got an appointment.”

The figures turned into the building. Kathy grabbed a thick report as she headed for the panelling that hid the executive toilet.

Dust mites scrunched into oblivion as Des and Robbie’s boots shredded the thick pile carpet on their way from the lift. Des held his helmet under his arm, chest thrust forward displaying the glowing blue slogan “Milbi — Nuclear Wasteland”.

“Won’t shake hands,” Robbie said, holding up a motorised gauntlet. “Makes too much mess on the floor.” He sounded like Darth Vader.

“What can I do for you?” Emma asked.

“We’ve got a job on Milbi,” Des said. “Indian ocean island, almost uninhabited. We thought you might like a report.”

“Building a theme park,” Robbie said. “Nuclear disaster. Burnt out reactors, blasted heath, two-headed cows, harbour full of decaying nuclear submarines. If we can find a good fault line, we’ll try for a working nuclear power station.”

“We couldn’t get Chernobyl,” Des said, “but we’ve got our eye on one like it in Latvia.”

“Where’s the money coming from?” Emma asked.

“Part of the island’s been leased as a waste dump,” Des said. “We thought it would set the tone.”

“What sort of waste?”

“Nuclear. Toxic. You name it.”

“The island is an extinct volcano,” Des said. “It’s even got its own mushroom cloud, right round the peak. You just tip the waste into the crater, and let it soak in. We’re going to build a pipeline from the wharf.”

“Sounds a bit iffy.”

“The waste’s all short-lived,” Des said. “Quarter of a million years, that sort of thing. Geologically, that’s nothing.”

“We’re gunna use the old army barracks for the tourists,” Robbie said. “Twenty to a room, barbed wire, land mines. And we’re gunna let ‘em let off their own bombs. Found out how to make them off the Internet, and Des speaks enough Russian — you know, ‘Lada’, ‘Zil’, ‘Nyot possible’ — so plutonium’s no problem.”

“Do those suits keep out the radiation?” Emma asked.

“They’re not bad,” Robbie said.

“We’re not planning to supply them to the guests,” Des said. “It would detract from the experience. And we wouldn’t be able to tell who’s staff,”

Emma said. “Why would anyone come?”

Robbie snorted. “Course they’ll come. New experience.”

“Have a look at Tahiti, Mururoa,” Des said. “Flotillas of boats. Tens of thousands rioting in the streets. And that’s with no advertising, the authorities trying to keep them out ...”

“Okay,” Emma said. “You make it sound like good business. But why should I want a report from you?”

“Inside info. So when they ask a question in parliament, you’ve already got the dope.”

“It’s not exactly independent.”

“We haven’t got two heads, but I reckon we can manage two faces,” Robbie said. “We’ll pour a bit of shit on it, sound impartial, no worries.”

“How much?”

“Twenty grand. Or if you want an enquiry, three million.”

“I’ll think about it.”

The boots scrunched into the distance. Kathy slipped out of the executive toilet and replaced the unopened report on Emma’s desk. “I hope we’re not going to be on the same plane,” she said.

“You’re not going there too?” Emma said.

Kathy nodded. “Do you want a report?”

“What on?”

“That crater’s a joke, for one thing. The rock’s so fragmented it’s like gravel. Put anything in the top, it spurts out the sides. And if you want to postpone global warming, you’ll get dust enough if they ever let off a bomb.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“We’re trying to make sure the waste never arrives.” She fished on her handbag and pulled out a sheaf of photographs of rusty, leaking drums.

Emma shuddered.

“Look good, don’t they?” Kathy said. “The gunk’s spray-on. They’re full of water. Clean water. Or as clean as you get, these days.”

“How does it work?”

“It’s easy. You’ve got to be a bit of a crook to ship toxic waste. So if someone offers you a bit extra to make a switch, it’s not going to be on your conscience. And nobody’s going to look too closely at the other end. The big risk is that they’ll triple cross us.”

“What happens to the real waste?”

“It goes back where it belongs. Cyanide tailings into the head office drinking water. Nuclear waste onto the President’s rose garden or the eighteenth green.”

“And what about the theme park?”

Emma’s personal assistant placed a sheaf of leaflets on her desk. She picked them up and leafed through them.

ARIZONA INGESTION

Picnic on radioactive glass from a real nuclear test.

MARALINGA MEANDER

Jump the fence, get plutonium on your shoes, and stroll through a real nuclear waste.

ARMAGEDDON TO GO

Thousands of nuclear reactors all over the world are only a minor mishap from meltdown. Be there when it happens, and experience the panic and chaos of the end of the world.

GROUND ZERO ENTERPRISES
BRINGING YOU TO THE BLUE GLOW

“I got these at the Travel Agency downstairs,” her assistant said. “I think Des and Robbie may be have been gazumped.”

Emma gazed admiringly on a photograph of a radioactive dust storm. “I suppose these guys have their uses,” she said.

“Why’s that?” Kathy snapped.

“They keep our minds off global warming.”

Jet Lag

They sat in a semicircle at a black iron table, glancing across the square, then at the two vacant chairs. An ill-assorted combination, waiting. Des, dark suit, dark moustache, black attache case, green shirt, loud tie. Charles, restrained in white shirt and cream tie. Petra, red shirt and grey face, yawning. The sun was out, now that summer had ended. The pigeons clustered expectantly at a respectful distance.

Petra yawned again.

“Not sleeping?” Charles asked.

“Jet lag,” Petra said.

Des sat up. “Been OS?” he asked. “Bangkok? Borneo? Barcelona?”

“Nowhere.” Petra growled. “Somebody’s been frigging with the clocks.”

“It’s only by an hour,” Charles said. “You’ll adapt.”

“I might.” Petra yawned again. “But will the cat? Nobody’s told it that seven a.m.’s suddenly become six a.m. and it’s not supposed to jump up, yowl or get fed for another hour.”

Des leaned forward, sales pitch gushing. “They should have,” he said. “It’s a Government responsibility. They changed the clocks. However, we do have some courses ...”

Petra looked at him as if he’d just escaped from a madhouse. “Courses? For animals?”

“Our horological awareness course is highly popular,” Des said. “It features a special feeding bowl, whose shape changes with time. Like a sunflower. When it is fully open, it is feeding time. Your cat is trained to understand that. You adjust the clock in the bowl when you adjust the other clocks.”

“Not my cat,” Petra said. “Salami understands technology. She’d assume that the bowl’s batteries were flat.”

“Then you might try our stimulus substitution course, in which we teach your animal to ignore the primitive cues of light, warmth, birds screeching and people moving for something more subtle.”

“Like opening a tin?” Petra asked, voice heavy with irony.

“You might prefer your temporal adaptation course,” Des said, “which is a one week residential course in which we slowly move the times of simulated sunrise and of feeding to encourage the animal to adjust to the new time regime.”

“Don’t waste your money,” Charles said, rather abruptly. “We’re looking at better solutions.”

“We?” Des said.

“Emma’s giving evidence to a parliamentary committee.”

“The one Kathy’s on?” Petra asked.

Charles nodded.

“You’re not going to have a referendum?” Petra said. “Actually ask the people?”

Charles shook his head. "Doesn't work. You get 51% for, 49% against, or the other way round, all for the wrong reasons. That way, nobody's happy. We're looking for solutions that actually solve the problem."

"Such as?" Des said.

"The reason why people say they want daylight saving is for the long evenings," Charles said. "So they reckon daylight at 4 a.m. is a waste. But they don't like getting up in the dark. So, we've got this enormous fudge where we change the clocks by an arbitrary amount twice a year, but because it's a fudge, we can't agree on when, or if we do it at all."

"It's dangerous, too," Petra said. "There's some Canadian figures that say there's eight percent more road accidents the Monday morning after the clocks go forward, because everybody's sleepy."

"But we do wake up earlier in summer," Charles said. "because it gets light earlier. I do, anyway."

Petra nodded.

"So what's wrong with gearing the system to our natural rhythms, and saying that the sun rises at six o'clock in the morning, every day of the year?"

"That's not possible," Des said.

"Only because we've said that midday is the thing that stays constant," Charles said. "And even that doesn't, really."

"You'd have to change your clocks every day," Petra said.

"Mechanical ones, perhaps, but how many of them are left? We can build electronic ones that are bright enough to change automatically." Charles smiled. "Think of the boost that'd give to the electronics industry."

"How'd you know what time it was anywhere else," Des said. "Times'd change as you went north and south, as well as east and west."

"They do now," Charles said. "Northern hemisphere's on daylight saving when we're not, Queensland doesn't have it, Tasmania starts at a different time from the mainland. Nobody knows where's when, and it's damned hard to find out. This way we'd have square time zones that wouldn't change, so they'd be on maps, same as borders and postcodes. Anywhere pretty close'd be on a similar time to you. No sudden jumps of an hour. And your watch'd tell you what time it was, anywhere in the world."

"The airlines won't like it. Or the TV stations," Des said.

"They'll manage. And if it stops the broadcasters networking everything from Sydney, great."

"I think time should be privatised," Des said. "That way, if you want it to be eight o'clock in the morning, you go to a provider that says it's eight o'clock in the morning. No hassle. No argument."

"How do I know what provider you're using?" Petra asked.

Des grinned. "I tell you. Or I don't. Whichever I prefer."

The sun was blotted out for a moment. Emma thumped down in one of the spare seats. "Bloody committees. Kathy's on her way."

“Did they decide on anything?” Charles asked.

“From the tone of the questions, they’re going abolitionist,” Emma said. “If you can’t agree on what time it should be, then get rid of it altogether. And all the associated clobber. Criminal sanctions for owning a watch. Gaol for selling them. Life for slogans like ‘It’s Time’.”

“It has its merits,” Charles said. “Flexible work patterns, reduced stress through no deadlines, no mid-life crises, ...”

“We’d miss Emma’s birthday parties,” Petra said.

“I wouldn’t,” Emma said. “At my age, they’re an act of defiance.”

The pigeons scattered, then began to regroup. Kathy stood for a moment by the table, swaying, then sat down. “They changed their minds,” she said, looking at Emma. “After you left.”

“You mean, we still have time,” Emma said.

“They realised, nobody would know when to pay them,” Kathy said.

“So what are they doing instead?”

“Compromise,” Kathy said. “Purely for local use. They’re going to floodlight the place, so the days are the same length, all year round.”

Corporate Body

The first sign of trouble was the Vroom Vroom of a purple ute, its tyres scrunching on Petra's drive. There was a bundle wrapped in a tarpaulin in the tray. A gorilla in overalls hammered on the door. Petra opened it before it splintered.

It was Robbie, Petra's least favourite person.

He jerked a thumb at the ute. "I need to dump a body," he said. "Can I use your garage for a couple of weeks?"

Petra winced. "Does it smell?"

"Nah. It's perfectly preserved."

"When do I expect the cops?"

"You don't. It's been dead fifteen hundred years."

Petra frowned. "That doesn't make sense. How do you have a perfectly preserved body that old? Even the maggots are gone by then. All you've got is a skeleton."

"Not the way we do it. It's in suspended animation. Until he's needed again."

"Who's he?"

"England's greatest hero."

"David Beckham's still alive. Unless Posh Spice has finally got sick of him."

"Different ratings agency. This one's King Arthur."

"So what's he doing half way around the world?"

"You know he went to the Isle of Avalon. To be healed and wait for his time?"

"So I'm told"

"Problem is, Avalon was a wetland. They drained it centuries ago. So he had to be moved. It's a real problem. Not just him. Most of the hidden kings are in trouble. Suburban development, mining, freeways, caves open to tourism. Only one that's doing okay is Qin Shihuang Di, first emperor of China. He's such a nasty piece of work that they're scared to open his tomb, even now."

"Haven't they dug up his army?"

"Yeah. But they're not ours. Terracotta, not real bodies. What's in the tomb, that's another story."

"Ours? Who are you working for?"

"Mob called Stasis. Specialises in heroes that want to hide away for a while. Does disappearing businessmen too, who want to do a Rip van Winkle. There's even an 'away with the fairies package' where you go dancing and come back seven years later."

"So what's Arthur doing here?"

"Came in case of an invasion."

“Boat people?”

“No, way back.”

“Japanese?”

“No way. Japan wasn’t on the map in those days.” Robbie paused. “Though maybe this guy might have known about them.”

“So who?”

“French. Eighteen hundreds. He knows about them. They built forts around the coast to keep them out.”

“So why’s he in your truck?”

“He was down at Avalon. Near Melbourne. Where he’s at is always called Avalon. That’s why there’s so many of them. Nice bit of swamp. There’s an airport there now, but that doesn’t bother him. But they’re doing drainage works, so we had to shift him for a while. Then we’ll put him back — unless they find a new place for him.”

“So you’ve got a great hero in your truck. I’ve never seen a great hero. What does he look like?”

Robbie grinned. “Bit of a surprise,” he said.

He pulled back the tarpaulin. Petra gasped. The body was short and stocky, with a fearsome grin and mongoloid features.

“You sure you haven’t mixed him up with Atilla the Hun or Genghis Khan?”

Robbie shook his head. “No way. Both accounted for. This one’s for real.”

“How can it be King Arthur, the great hero of the British resistance against the Angles and Saxons?”

Robbie’s grin was almost as wide as the body’s. “Easy. Remember this was a time of great migrations. The more adventurous you were, the further you went. If you believe the legends, the British were helpless. No Roman legions. Four hundred years of not having to fight. They even hired Saxons like Hengist and Horsa, who double crossed them. So why not someone from even further away with no conflict of interest?”

“Then why didn’t the legends say he was a foreigner?”

“If it was your great hero, who just saved your country, would you?”

Underground Agency

Kathy gazed out over the wasteland, a huge depression of tumbled earth between two main roads, where the big new ASIO building had been. At one end the corner of a broken building stuck out at an odd angle. The lake glinted in the background. Beyond it, the flag on Parliament House flapped defiantly.

“What happened?” Kathy asked in her best authoritative MLA voice. “How did you manage to get rid of that incredible, unwanted eyesore? They wouldn’t listen to us. To them, we’re just a tinpot local government.”

“The spooks got nervous,” Robbie said. “Suddenly realised that their ginormous new building made them a target. Stood out like a sore thumb. Everybody hated it. Everybody could see who went in and out, so everybody’s cover was blown. But they’d just built it and didn’t want to move. So we offered them a deal. Give us a trillion dollars, and we’ll dig a great hole under it and lower the building down. Twenty metre cover of soil, for a park or a new suburb, so nobody will know it’s there. They loved it. Top security, so no palaver over tenders. And there we were.”

He jerked a thumb towards a new mountain rising from the airport.

“Did a few mates a favour there, too,” he said. “The city planners loved it when we blocked off the new office complex the airport had built because they didn’t need planning permission, and we got a big kickback from a guy who wanted to build houses under the flight path.”

“Didn’t the airport owners object?”

“Course they did. But when it’s a matter of national security ...”

Kathy pointed to the projecting building corner.

“So what went wrong?”

“Ratshit construction. Building couldn’t stand on its own two feet.”

“Did you expect it to?”

Robbie held up a ball of string. “We reinforced it. Had jacks under the columns so we could lower it gradually. We’d just about got the hole done and one of them slipped, and boom! The building’s down there, but it sort of came to bits.”

“Any casualties?”

“None of our guys. We’re big on OH&S. Them, they’re not saying, but it was a weekday, and the place was probably chocka.”

Kathy looked around. There was nobody except a few curious passers by. The site wasn’t even fenced. “Where are the search parties?”

“There aren’t any. They might find something.”

He gestured to the depression where the building had been. “All I’ve got left to do is landscape the site. No grave markers or memorials. Just trees. Maybe a pond.”

“How will they explain the missing building?”

“How they always were going to — they’ve relocated. Where, is, of course, secret.”

“So the job was a success. Will you get paid?”

Robbie grinned. “I already have been. You have to get it in advance on jobs like this, or they’ll deny that you did anything, on grounds of national security.”

Rogue Wave

Robbie had already heard Des's latest get rich quick scheme fifteen times, and he still wasn't convinced, so he settled on a diversion.

"How did the race fixing scam at the Yacht club turn out?" he asked.

Des was diverted. He bridled, slopping his cocktail. "It wasn't the Yacht Club. It was the Sydney to Hobart yacht race." A much lesser operation.

"So what's the story?" Robbie already knew, but Des had no problem with repeating himself.

"Rogue wave. Wiped out the three leading yachts. All maxis, very fast. They were in a bunch, level pegging. Thunderclap disappeared, lost with all hands. Sabine Warrior capsized. Pasternak was dismayed. Creepy Crawly was far enough back to miss it. It stopped to pick up the survivors from Sabine Warrior, then went on to Hobart. Took line honours."

"So what was the problem? Isn't boats getting wrecked a normal feature of the race?"

"There was a big betting plunge on Creepy Crawly just before the wave hit."

"So somebody had access to a satellite."

"It was an organised plunge. Lots of punters, no one huge bet. That needs time to set up."

"So they reckoned that Creepy Crawly knew the wave was coming, and hung back."

"That's why they tried to disqualify it. The Commodore was foaming at the mouth. But someone pointed out that it really is slower, and couldn't have kept up."

"So they found another scapegoat?"

"Guy called Ladislaus Bernoulli. Works for the University of Eastern Australia. Runs experiments on wave formation. Sets up huge gadgets at the head of narrow inlets to push forward a wall of water, then sees how it propagates over open ocean. Does pretty well, apparently. Stays together and doesn't dissipate."

"But isn't it like a tsunami? Just a ripple in the open ocean. Doesn't do anything until it hits shallow water."

"These are bigger. And if you choose more than one inlet, pointing to the same place, and time it right, they combine into one huge wave."

"Just where the race leaders were."

"That's the theory. Bernoulli denies it. Says it was an accident. He does the experiments at predetermined times, and he'd warned the weather forecasters of the risk, but they ignored him and didn't pass it on."

"Did his assistants place bets?"

"Some of them. And they've got a different story. They reckon that Bernoulli thought that nobody would believe that he had produced a rogue wave until it did what rogue waves do, which was to sink a ship. This wasn't a big oil tanker, but it was the best he could find. With enough live TV coverage to prove that he did it."

“Has he been arrested?”

“There’s no laws against producing rogue waves. And anyway, it was outside territorial waters, so noone has jurisdiction. The University sacked him.”

“Good of them. What was their excuse? Bringing it into disrepute?”

“No way. There were people on those boats, so it fell into the domain of human experimentation. He hadn’t had it approved by the Ethics Committee.”

Mappa Tuesdi

“Turns out that the Portuguese really did reach Australia first,” Emma said, waving a photocopy of a crudely drawn map of the world.

“But they reckoned it was a secret and didn’t tell anybody, and all their records were lost because Lisbon was burned down in the 1755 earthquake,” Kathy said.

“They must have told some people, or I wouldn’t have this,” Emma said. “It’s been mouldering in the archives of the University of Eastern Australia. It was donated, along with all her papers, by a rich widow that had too much clout for them to refuse. The PR guys want to call it Mappa Tuesdi, because it’s later than Mappa Mundi, but not by much. Hopefully we’ll be able to squash them.”

“So how come it’s surfaced now?”

“Ph.D. student. Mining for new data on the European settlement of western Victoria. Since the papers were from a squatter family, on the coast near Warrnambool, she thought there might be something there, though this isn’t quite what she expected.”

“Warrnambool,” Kathy said. “Mahogany ship. Wreck that some people think was a Portuguese caravel. Was this from that?”

“Could have been. It ‘s Portuguese. It’s been dated to the early sixteenth century. It’s got fragments of America, and most of the East coast of Australia.”

“Then how come it’s in a squatter’s personal papers hundreds of years later?”

“That coast is shipwreck alley. You’re sailing along on a nice westerly breeze, then this sticky out bit of land turns up. Set course a bit further south, another bit. Go even further south, Tasmania. If you survive the wreck, you’ve got to live. So you hook up with the locals. Don’t underestimate them. They were pretty organised. Channels to manage water. Stone fish traps. Stone platforms for huts.”

“So there was somewhere you could put a bit of paper and find it years later?”

“Apparently. And it wasn’t just one wreck. There were lots. Portuguese. Dutch. French. Lots of whalers. Some survivors were picked up by other ships, but not all of them. So they weren’t totally cut off. When the squatters came, everybody had a good idea about what was happening. I reckon a few nicked some sheep and claimed they were there first.”

“But wasn’t the local Aboriginal population wiped out by the squatters?”

“A lot of them. But they fought back.”

Emma looked at her watch. “The PR people are planning a big launch. I’m supposed to go.”

“Will people believe you? That the Portuguese were here first?”

Emma gritted her teeth. “Our experts say we have a good case. No doubt others will claim it’s nonsense. The argument should last a good few years and hundreds of peer-reviewed papers, so everybody should be happy, but won’t be.”

She grimaced. “The joke is, until about forty years ago, a copy of the map was on public display. On a rock face. In ochre. Had been there forever. But nobody took it seriously. Not enough dragons. The Country Roads Board wanted to widen the road, decided it was graffiti, ignored the few protests

there were and dynamited it. There's now a big roadside poster there, telling you to Discover Victoria."

Hot Water

Sue had always owned a four-wheel drive. In her words, the ideal vehicle for the rough and tumble of driving the kids to school. But today it wasn't its usual pristine self. Mud-splattered, as if for the first time in its life it had gone off-road.

"It's your blasted desalination scheme," Sue said to Kathy, gesturing at the dirt.

"It's not mine," Kathy said. "It's the Commonwealth's."

"You were in favour of it."

"I was initially. It seemed like a good idea. The Murrumbidgee irrigation area needs water. Our only spare water is in the sea. So build a solar powered desalination plant on the coast, then pump the water inland, using sustainable power options like wind and solar, then dump it in the river. Problem was, they didn't think it through."

"Too right they didn't. They didn't even know they had to pump it when the sun was shining, then store it until they needed it. But why store it here?"

"It's Commonwealth land. No need to fight the states."

"So first they tell us that it'll be a bit soggy underfoot. Then they jack up our houses, so they don't flood, then they start building levees that wipe out our backyards and block the roads. You'd think that they could make up their mind, not chuck good money after bad."

"There's lots of money because it's seen as a win-win option," Kathy said. "Keeps the farmers and the environmentalists happy. Though I'm not sure where the new fleet of white hovercraft to ferry the pollies to Parliament House is supposed to fit in."

"Okay. It gives me a swimming pool. But now they're saying we've got to move out. They're building a big dam wall around the whole city, so the water can go hundreds of metres deep." Sue pointed at a grey monolith linking two hills.

Kathy nodded. "They're building it, but they'll never fill it," she said.

"Why not? Have the pollies realised that it'll flood their Taj Mahal?"

"They don't care. That gives them an excuse to meet in Sydney. But the water's too expensive. By the time it's delivered, it's hundreds of dollars a litre. The farmers won't use it. They're going for dry land crops."

"Yeah, but they'll still fill the dam. Keep it as an investment. The higher the price the better. They'll probably roof the dam so it won't evaporate."

"That assumes there is any water."

Sue snorted.

"Where do you build a desalination plant?" Kathy asked.

"On the coast. Close to the water."

"And what's happening on the coast?"

“Rising sea level. But that’s years away. They must have allowed for that. Built it high. Pump the seawater up.”

“They did. Built it on a headland. But you see the news? What’s happened down there.”

“Big storm. Lots of erosion. Beaches washed away.”

“It got the headland, too. The plant’s got the whole Pacific Ocean to work on now, but it seems to have lost the urge.”

Deserted Village

“I think I’ve found myself a new house,” Sue said. “Bit out of town, but it’s spectacular. Modern, lots of glass, enclosed courtyard, brilliant views. Quiet area, but seems to be popular. Lots of recent sales listed on the Web. This one’s a deceased estate, so the price is good.”

“Have you asked why the area’s so popular?” Kathy asked.

“I know they filmed a TV series there,” Sue said. “Maybe that’s why people know about it.”

“Have you seen the TV series?” Kathy asked, a slightly ominous tone in her voice.

Sue shook her head.

“Have you asked why it’s a deceased estate?” Kathy asked. “Or whether the other sales were deceased estates too?”

Sue shook her head again. She couldn’t see what Kathy was on about.

Kathy persisted. “You said it was quiet. Did you see anybody? Was anybody driving around? Were there any shops? Were they open?”

Sue was angry. “What’s going on? What’s the secret?”

“Who showed you the place?” Kathy said. “A legitimate estate agent, or a TV extra pretending to be an estate agent?”

“It was supposed to be an open house, but I was the only one there, except for the agent.”

“And a stack of hidden cameras, I bet.”

“You think it was a setup?” Sue said.

“If the name of the place is Beltane, it certainly is. It’s the archetypal deserted village. Started with a reality TV series based on murder mysteries. Lights go out. When they go back on, dead body in living room. Who dunnit? As it went on, the plots got more elaborate, the methods more devious. Tree falls on house, killing residents. Villain was a possum, making its hole bigger. But who egged the possum on? Who substituted cyanide for the fluoride in the town water supply? Who put the acid in the garden sprinkler? Who managed the hit-run using a float in the middle of the annual procession? Who spiked the umpire’s orange?

“But even then, new scenarios were getting thin on the ground, so they threw it open to the viewers, with prizes for the best plots. Some of them were spectacular, like the tunnel under the main street (an escape bid by council workers or an attempted bank robbery — which it wasn’t clear) that caves in causing a ten vehicle pile-up with lots of fatalities, the mass koala hunt in the national park which wiped out the hunters, or the scavenger hunt for the maximum number of bodies, while others relied on the more usual motivations of money, rage and jealousy.

“Problem was, some of the viewers didn’t understand the rules and thought they actually had to do the murders to qualify. That’s what got rid of the last few residents.”

“So has the series finished now?”

“No way. The emphasis now is on the new residents. Who they are. What’s going to happen to them.”

“So that’s why the house was so cheap.”

“And that’s why there would have been cameras at the open house.”

Sue clenched her teeth. “There should be warnings,” she hissed.

“Beltane Murders is a big ratings success,” Kathy said. “They say they need to repopulate for the next series.”

“They’re trying to kill me. I should kill them.”

“Delegate it. Put in a plot proposal.”

Sue grinned suddenly. “You mean, like someone creates a big earthquake which brings down a high rise TV building that wasn’t designed for earthquakes, crushing all the occupants.”

Kathy nodded. “Spread it around a few of the fan sites. Somebody will do it for you, for sure.”

Chlorophyll Haven

The site looked like a dome farm. One huge transparent dome housing a network of dozens of smaller domes, each packed with greenery, some of it concealing small, scattered buildings. Next to it a sea of churned earth, home to a new cluster of half-finished domes, surrounded by a foundation trench for a second huge dome. The air was filled with whining, scraping and banging as solar powered excavators and fluorescent overalled ants scurried over the new domes.

Robbie cast a critical eye over the work in progress. “The official name is Stalag Carbon 10,” he said. “It’s for the guys that have blown their lifetime carbon emission quota. You know, like the coal mining magnates where they’re deemed to have burnt every gram they dig up, the economists who bagged renewable energy and the climate change sceptic pollies who are seen as responsible for every emission they should have stopped.”

“So this is where they finished up,” Kathy said. “We stopped hearing about them, but we couldn’t find out why.”

“That was for operational reasons,” Robbie said. “A lot of them thought they wouldn’t be allowed to breathe out any more, and would have their lips sewn up and superglue stuffed up their nostrils, so they tried to run away. Problem was, the places they went to treated them as refugees and did what those guys had been doing to the refugees from those places and sent them straight back. The government wanted someone else to do their dirty work, so they came up with these camps.

“Camps one to nine were hugely successful. Let’s face it, when you herd a random mob of pollies, economists, billionaires and vroom-vroom hoons into a dome, give them a bag of seeds, and tell them they’ve got to be a carbon sink from now on, they’re going to self-destruct. Some of them got into the blame game right way, and massacred each other. Others didn’t begin to fight until the food they were left ran out, but then they ate the seeds. Two lots tried to dig their way out, but found out too late that the outer dome is full of the CO₂ they’re supposed to process.”

Kathy pointed towards the domes full of luxuriant green foliage. “This one seems to have worked,” she said.

Robbie nodded. “That’s the bummer. They got their act together, planted their seeds, managed their air and water, recycled their rubbish. They may not be the best of friends, but they’re still there.”

Kathy looked towards the construction site. “So they need room to expand?”

Robbie shook his head. “No way. Worse than that! The greenies found the place. They’re ecstatic. They want to move in. Means we’ve had to change the name. It’s now Chlorophyll Haven.”

“How do the current inhabitants feel about them?”

“We haven’t asked them. They can see the building work. They can work out what’s happening from that.”

“It could be awkward,” Kathy said. “If they blame what you call the greenies for them being there and the greenies tell them it’s their own fault, it might get nasty.”

“Not our problem,” Robbie said. “What landlord ever worries about whether the new tenants will get on with those in the next flat?”

Pay Parking

“I don’t think you’ve ever met Drongo,” Robbie said. “Des’s cousin. Looks like a Neanderthal. Big bugger. As wide as he’s high. No forehead, but massive brow ridge.” He ran the side of his hand across his face above his eyes. “Sticky out jaw. Big teeth. Rugby League star, but big on the punk rock scene, too. Looked the part. Been in gaol the last twenty years, but they’ve just had to let him out.”

“What was he in for?” Kathy asked.

“Bumped off a parking inspector. Squashed her between the bull bars of two four wheel drives parked in a big public car park. They’d just put in pay parking. There was lots of resentment, so they reckon it was deliberate. They took one look at Drongo, said ‘He’s our man,’ and that was it. He said he was off buying a ticket from a machine that had swallowed his money, but they didn’t believe him. If anything, that gave him a motive.

“The trial was a total farce. The prosecution spent days on DNA evidence, establishing that Drongo had been in the car, which was obvious, because he owned it and had driven it there, but it didn’t prove that he was in it when the accident happened. The jury lapped it up. Then the prosecution forgot to tell the defence that the police knew that it had never really been a free car park. There were no signs, but it was run by a mob called National Motoring Services, which is a branch of the Mafia. Ran a protection racket. No pay, big dint. They’d reserve a spot for you if you wanted, wave away anyone who tried to park there. Anyone who ignored them and took it had their car nicked. The owner of the other car in the sandwich was a known Mafia hit man, but he wasn’t even interviewed.

“The judge said that interference in the proper management of car parking was an attack on the lifeblood of our society, and when done by a punk rocking Rugby League star, was particularly heinous. Gave Drongo life, never to be released.”

“So how did he get out?”

“Boss of National Motoring Services wrote his memoirs from his remote hacienda in Paraguay. Boasted about bumping off interfering parking inspectors, and how there were wrongly convicted patsies in gaol all over the world. So, after much noise, there was an enquiry.”

“And now Drongo’s after millions in compensation for wrongful imprisonment and lost earnings?”

“Yeah. But there’s a snag. The guy who reviewed the case had a good look at the DNA evidence. What he thought at first was that it had been planted by the cops, it looked so odd, so he tested Drongo again. Turns out, he really is a Neanderthal.”

“What difference does that make?”

“The Director of Public Prosecutions is claiming that he doesn’t qualify for compensation because he’s not human.”

Dead Cert

Kathy watched her glass of sparkling mineral water, waiting to see where the next bubble appeared. Des grasped an oily cocktail, gazing fixedly at the far financial horizon.

“There’s a rumour that you are being investigated by the Sporting Anti-Corruption Commission,” Kathy said.

“They’re wasting their time,” Des said.

“Something to do with a betting operation called Des’s Dead Certs. They reckon that if it’s a dead cert, it must be a fix.”

“It’s a tipping service. What that means is that we have good information. You’ve got to be positive, or nobody will take any notice.”

“What about spot fixing? No ball on the fifth ball of the sixth over. Giving away a penalty in the third minute. Isn’t that the current fashion?”

“No way. The moment they see the bet, it’s obvious what’s happening, and too easy to nail the guy who’s doing it. Last thing you want is a life ban on your best sources.”

“What about the soccer match you tipped. International championship where the top team got thumped 8-nil by a total outsider. You’re not telling me that wasn’t fixed?”

“The coach was a foul-mouthed thug. Mates with the local Football Federation. The only way the players could get him sacked was an embarrassing loss. So that’s what they produced. I tipped it because I’d talked to them.”

“What about the cricket test where you’d correctly tipped a spectacular third innings collapse to blow away a winning position?”

“Coach, again. He’d been having a go at them about being too defensive. Told them, ‘Now’s your opportunity to cut loose.’ So they did. All I had to do was listen.”

“What about the Marathon you said wouldn’t finish?”

“That was easy. New organising committee decided on a new route along a causeway, at the last minute so nobody could bomb it. Just didn’t check the tide tables. I did.”

“But didn’t tell them.”

“Why should I?”

“So you’ve covered your back?”

“Doesn’t need covering. It’s all psychology. And knowing the right people. It’s tipping, not betting.”

“So where does the money come from?”

“Fee for service. Commission from the punters. No obligation. Except if they don’t pay, no more tips.” Des smirked. “But it looks like there’s a new prospect.”

“What?”

“Watch any sports telecast, listen to the commentators get stuck into the referee or umpire, pointing out the mistakes. Okay, they’ve got video umpires, but they’ve got the wrong approach. They take ages,. They’re trying to work out what happened, and half the time that’s not possible because the camera angles are wrong or someone was in the way, so they say because they didn’t see it it didn’t happen. That makes the fans and the players really mad. They need a kind of fifth umpire, who can take a more holistic approach, identifying what should have happened, based on the run of the game, giving a probable, justifiable and satisfying outcome for the watching public, in the ear of the official on the field, so it’s quick.”

Kathy was unimpressed. “Sounds like a spec for the Lord High Match fixer.”

“That’s always a risk,” Des admitted. “That’s why they decided they wanted someone from outside the usual sports hierarchy.”

“Is the job well paid?”

“Of course.”

“I suppose it has to be. The integrity of sport is beyond price, but it wouldn’t do to create vulnerabilities in that area, would it?”

Des nodded happily. Buying him was obviously going to be very expensive.

Solar Wind

“Global warming is caused by the sun,” Sue said. “It’s pretty stupid, really, having a heater you can’t turn down.”

This was obviously a rehearsed speech, derived from a known unreliable source, designed by him to make a quick buck, but Kathy listened politely, interested to find out what his new line was. “What are you going to do about it?” she asked.

“What they do with a proper nuclear reactor is use a moderator — rods the operators slide in and out — but this one doesn’t have them and there’s no way of fitting them.”

Maybe it’s a bit big and a bit far away, Kathy thought, or maybe it hadn’t been thought of when the Sun was built. She looked encouraging, waiting for the next gem.

“There’s been a suggestion that we move the earth a bit further away from the Sun,” Sue said.

“Won’t that start a new ice age?” Kathy asked.

“Not if it’s just a little bit,” Sue said, “but apparently it’s too hard. The rockets we’ve got aren’t powerful enough. So they tried to build a big sunshade, in orbit, to block out some of the sunlight. But it seems that there’s this strong solar wind that blew it away. It’s already out past Jupiter.”

“So that’s why Pluto is so cold,” Kathy said. The climax was obviously still to come.

Sue nodded. “So what we have to do is give the Sun a taste of it’s own medicine — reflect the sunlight back. It’s called albedo. Snow and ice does it naturally — that’s why the poles and the ski fields are so cold — but now we can all contribute.”

To Kathy, the combination of impressive words and factoids confirmed it as a typical Des sales pitch, dating back to when he sold unroadworthy rust buckets as classic cars needing a little TLC, but then Sue had always been a sucker for Des’s schemes.

Sue pointed to the roof of her house, where workmen were installing what Kathy had assumed were solar panels. As one of them was being jockeyed into position, it flashed in the sun.

“What are they?” Kathy asked.

“Mirrors,” Sue said, her voice dripping with condescension. “There’s a new government subsidy scheme for them, instead of for old hat solar panels.”

“When did this start?”

“Today,” Sue said proudly. “I’m one of the first domestic installations. The really big ones are out in the deserts. Simpson Desert. Nullarbor Plain.”

Kathy had a bad feeling. “How big?”

“Totally big. Covers the whole area.” Sue caught Kathy’s expression and corrected herself. “There’s small gaps between the mirrors. Enough for the lizards to get through.”

“Is there any evidence that it will work?”

“It’s got to. It’s obvious.”

“How long have the panels been there?”

“A few days.”

“Have you seen the news?”

Sue shook her head. “I know there’s been some vandalism,” she said, “though it might be a meteor shower.”

“I doubt it,” Kathy said. “I was looking at the satellite pictures. There’s a dirty great dust storm covering the whole area. They reckon that there’s a huge updraught, which will be the hot air from the mirrors, pulling gale force winds in from every direction. Give it a few days and your mirrors will be buried under a deep layer of rocks and dirt. But don’t try to walk on them in bare feet. They won’t be intact. Nature’s good at getting it’s own back.”

Positive Intervention

A procession of figures in full academic dress — black gown, black hood, black balaclava — filed into the glass box that was the Great Hall of the local campus of the University of Eastern Australia, marching to the syncopated strains of *Guadeamus Igitur*.

“They’re the latest graduates of the Collateral Degree in Positive Intervention,” Robbie said. “Our latest and greatest export opportunity. The course teaches them the ideology and all the skills needed for fomenting and participating in civil disturbance.”

“Why are their faces covered?” Kathy asked.

“They don’t want people to know who they are. It might make it hard for them to get into the places where they’re going.”

“Which are?”

“All over the world. Any place where there’s a bit of a barney and they want to take part. Middle East is obvious, but there’s millions of places where there’s simmering resentments that can do with a bit of stirring. The Basques, Brittany, Burma, Burundi, Catalonia, Chechnya, you name it. The course includes a survey of potential and actual hot spots, so they can choose where to go. There’s one guy wants to go to the US and take out the annual conference of the National Rifle Association.”

“Aren’t there laws against this kind of travel?”

“Not that matter. The Government realised that they couldn’t stop people going, and recognised that there are plusses. Less people on the dole. Much less if you organise it.” Robbie jerked a thumb at the queue of graduands. “Saves them a packet. Particularly since none of them come back.”

“Because they’re dead?”

“Most of them. But they couldn’t anyway. The degree gives them Ruritanian citizenship, which means they lose their Australian citizenship. They get a week to leave the country.” Robbie pointed to a portly figure in a dazzling white uniform, loaded with medals and epaulettes. “That’s the Ruritanian Ambassador.”

“So why do they do the course?”

“They don’t have much option. If they can’t prove that they have a job and are paying tax on it or are doing an approved course, they are deemed to be earning millions in the black economy and owe tax on that. This happens to be the only course most of them are eligible for that they haven’t already done.”

“How many of them finish?”

“All of them. It’s a short course. Residential. They’re only allowed out under escort.”

Kathy frowned. “If we’re getting rid of all the young people, how do we manage the ageing population?”

“Easy. The students have a final week project. Most of them choose the recommended option of knocking off a retirement village or an old peoples’ home. That’s why there’s been so many fires and so much food poisoning. One group even infected a carer with ebola.”

“How do we stop them?” Kathy asked.

“No need,” Robbie said. “I think this is going to be the last ever graduating class.”

“Why?”

“Bright idea from the Minister for Educational Economies. Decided to bring in fee-paying overseas students to help cover the cost of the courses. One group whose relatives died when their refugee boat was turned back borrowed the idea from the guy who wanted to take out the National Rifle Association and used it for their final week project. Flooded Parliament House with carbon dioxide while it was in session, using the airconditioning system. Their Facebook post described it as a double dissolution.”

“What makes you think that the new mob of MPs will think or behave any differently?”

“They won’t. That’s why they’ll need to shut the course down — for their own safety.”

Offplanet Processing

“I’ve received this totally weird email,” Kathy said, showing Emma a printout. “I thought that, being in Immigration, you might know something about it.”

Emma glanced at the email.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Please note that the place that you call Tau Ceti maintains strict border controls to prevent the introduction of socially transmitted pathogens such as anger, avarice, envy, gluttony, lust, pride and sloth. Any incoming craft carrying lifeforms harbouring these pathogens will be turned back.

“You’re not the only one to get it,” Emma said. “It’s in every inbox all over the world. It’s bypassed every spam filter, is in the recipient’s preferred language, and contains no trace of who sent it except the reference to Tau Ceti.”

“So what’s it about?”

“That I can tell you,” Emma said, “because in five minutes it will be public knowledge.” She paused. “You know that our lords and masters claim that there is a refugee crisis ...”

“... caused by the arrival of boatloads of people who want to be here and who, in the past we would have welcomed as good citizens,” Kathy said.

“Precisely. The problem is that the polities have run out of countries who can be bribed to take refugees, so they started looking for new places to send them. The original idea was to establish colonies on the moon or Mars. It worked with Australia, so they thought it was worth a try. Then they decided that it would be kinder to send them somewhere more earthlike, so they decided on the closest potentially habitable exoplanet, which is Tau Ceti e. It’s pretty close. Under twelve light years away.”

“Is it really habitable?”

“Nobody knows. It was detected by measuring the wobbles it creates by orbiting the star.”

“What happens if it isn’t habitable?”

“They’ve got a little list. They try the next one.”

“When is all of this supposed to happen?”

“Today. They had the First Fleet lined up. Ten space shuttle look-alikes each with built in life-support systems and hydroponics to support a thousand people sustainably for an indefinite time. They were going to load up the refugees and launch them today.”

“Do they want to go?”

“No.”

“What is going to stop them turning back?”

“The guidance system is preprogrammed. When they get there they can manage the landing, but not before then.”

“What happens if they find themselves heading straight at a lump of rock?”

“There is a built in collision avoidance system that then puts them back on course.”

“What went wrong? You said they were going to load them up today.”

Emma smiled. “There has been a minor accident. The pollies and their minders were inspecting the flagship. Mobs of journos and hangers on were milling around the control room. Someone must have pressed a button.” She pointed to the sky. “The Prime Minister, the Minister for Defence, the Minister for Immigration and the Minister for Multicultural Affairs are all up there, escorted by nine empty ships. If they make it back, it won’t be for at least twenty four years.”

Kathy looked at the email again. “So what we’ve done is sent them a plague ship,” she said.

New Atlantis

It looked like a toy village — a cluster of brightly coloured plastic houses climbing up a hill beside a wide river. Filling the space where there should have been a street was a grey plastic tube.

“It’s a pilot project of the Submersible Cities Research Centre at the University of Eastern Australia,” Robbie said. “You know the way most of the cities of the world will be underwater within a century because of rising sea levels. The idea is, rather than having to move, they can adapt to the new water levels, and enjoy the amenity of an aquatic environment.” The phrasing sounded very rehearsed and not Robbie, but Kathy knew why.

“I gather this is one of Des’s projects?” she said.

Robbie nodded. “He wanted to call it Desville, but I think it’s going to be New Atlantis.”

“Why’s he involved?”

“He’s trying to shift a stack of land on the coast where the local council has banned building because of the higher sea levels. This is to prove to them that building there will be okay, even if it does flood.”

“But using someone else’s money.”

“Of course.”

Kathy looked up the hill. “Why here? It’s dry land.”

“Now it is. In a few hours, it won’t be.” Robbie pointed down at the river, where the current was starting to flow upstream and the water was lapping at the lowest houses. “There’s a big tidal range here. When it’s up, it’ll cover most of the houses.”

“Won’t they leak?”

“That’s why they’re plastic. It’s waterproof. Carbon-fibre reinforced, so it’s strong and will take knocks from any debris the river brings down. And that’s why the road is enclosed, so people can get up the hill without drowning.”

“Do the houses have to be so garish?” Kathy said, grimacing at the bright colours.

“That was a design decision,” Robbie said. “We could have faked brick or stone or anything else, but we wanted people to see that it was a new, exciting material with great potential.”

Kathy frowned as she inspected a nearby yellow wall — not smooth and glossy but dull and pitted. There was a high tide mark further up where the pitting stopped. She ran a finger down the wall and looked at the resulting yellow powder. “So why the stucco effect?”

Robbie looked embarrassed and tried to turn away, but Kathy fixed him with a glare.

“We don’t know what it is,” he said reluctantly. “It’s not in the design. We think it must be acid or something in the water. We’ve done dozens of tests, but we can’t find anything. It’s probably not important.”

Kathy shook her head. “I think it is important,” she said. “I don’t think your plastic housing will work.”

Robbie glared. “Why?”

Kathy grinned. “Submersible Cities isn’t the only research centre at the university. There’s another one, just upstream from here. For biological control of aquatic waste. The plastic bags and bottles that are endlessly chucked into waterways and then choke the birds and fish. They’re developing bacteria that eat plastic. They’ve been testing them in this river before going world wide.” She inspected the pitted wall again. “Looks as if they’re doing a good job.”

Trojan Crocodile

Des was smug. “Turns out, I’m really rich,” he said. “Three point seven trillion dollars.”

Robbie inspected Des’s suit, its silver magnificence weathered to a faded grey. “Means you can buy a new suit,” he said.

Des continued on. “And there’s thirteen thousand eight hundred and thirty two stunning women all lusting after my body.”

“They’re probably after your money.”

Des shrugged. “That’s always a risk if you’re wealthy,” he said. “Provided they come good, who cares.”

“How come you’ve only just found out about all of this?” Robbie asked.

“There’s this nifty little app,” Des said. “Pulls together all the data on all your different devices, from emails to investments. I was surprised how much it added up to.”

“Where’s all the money?”

“There’s a lot of big lottery wins, but most of it is legacies from deceased philanthropists, managed by reputable Nigerian law firms.”

Robbie snorted. “They’re all scams. Make-believe money, to get money out of you. You pay them to release the money, which never appears. Or you give them details of an account to send it to, but instead they hack into it and empty it.”

Des nodded. “Yeah. But that assumes an unsuspecting victim. I’m not unsuspecting. What we need to do is to set up a fake account, give them the details, then when they raid it, track them back to where they stash their money. That way they’re the victim, not me.”

“But you need help?”

Des nodded.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

* * *

Des was down in the dumps. There was no new suit. “How did it go?” he asked.

Robbie shrugged. “Fifty-fifty,” he said. “We found a few cash stashes, but we haven’t emptied them yet. What we’ve done is ring-fenced them, so we divert any incoming cash. We got one lump of fifty thousand. Some poor idiot’s life savings, probably.”

“So how much have you made? I haven’t seen any of it.”

Robbie clenched his teeth. “You won’t have. It’s that nifty little app of yours. It’s a Trojan crocodile. Hides, then grabs any money that goes past and eats it. Everything we’ve tried to send you has vanished.”

“Where to? Another scammer?”

Robbie nodded. “The biggest one of all,” he said. “The Tax Office. It took us a while to suss it out. Turns out that it’s their way of dealing with multinational companies and offshore tax havens. Grab everything they can, whenever and wherever they find it. It’s up to you to convince them it’s not theirs if you want any of it back.”

“That explains this,” Des said, pushing across a sheet of paper. It was a tax demand for three point seven trillion dollars, less a payment credit of a bit over fifty thousand dollars.

Robbie nodded. “They’ve obviously decided that, as you’re getting real money from your legacies and lottery wins, they must all be real. And if it’s real, it’s taxable.”

Telling Lies

Kathy glanced away from the live coverage on the dedicated Royal Commission channel with a smile. “What I love about party machine men is the way they think that the numbers justify the means,” she said, “even if what happened is ancient history. Provided, of course, that it’s not their history.”

On screen, Counsel Assisting was grilling a squirming former Prime Minister. “Is it true that you told your first lie at three, when you denied ripping off the head of your sister’s doll?”

“I have no recollection of the incident,” the former Prime Minister said. “If the doll wasn’t covered by a warranty, then it was obviously a bad buy.”

Counsel Assisting persisted. “Is it true that, at age twelve, you volunteered to divide a punnet of strawberries fairly among the members of the family, but when one was left over, you ate it yourself in secret?”

“That is clearly not correct. Punnets, boxes of chocolate and buckets of chips always come with exactly divisible numbers of items. I have proved that through successful management of such sharing operations over many years.”

“Is it true that, at age eighteen, you falsely attributed a large scrape on you father’s car to an incident in a car park while you were not present?”

The former Prime Minister scowled. “I am finding this line of questioning to be both intrusive and offensive, as well as irrelevant. What is the source of your so-called information?”

“You are a believer in an omnipotent, omnipresent God that keeps extensive records of even the most trivial thoughts and acts, so that He may make a final judgement upon you, are you not?”

“I am not sure that I would phrase it in exactly that way.”

“Has it never occurred to you that such records may, on occasion, be strategically leaked? Or do you see the Supreme Being as being subject to some Divine Secrets Act?”

Sue gazed up at the screen, puzzled. “Why are they grilling this guy, now he’s been dumped. But then, why on earth did he ever set up a Royal Commission into political lies in the first place?”

Kathy smiled. “That was us. When you’ve got a hung parliament and you’re desperate to find a few extra votes, you’ll agree to all sorts of wacky proposals from your target minnows. They saw this as a good way of discrediting the opposition. They appointed what they saw as a totally partisan commissioner, even though we’d recommended her. They thought she’d get stuck into the opposition over all their lies and broken promises. She has, but she decided to apply the same standards to both sides, which is why it’s so much fun.”

“But aren’t you going to be in the firing line too? You must have made an election promise some time?”

Kathy grinned. “Lots of them. But they’re all aspirational. Aspirations may not necessarily be achievable, but they’re not lies. The Commissioner is well aware of that. That’s why she got the job.”

Publication Credits

The Daisy Chain Theory of the Universe — first read at Kimbos on 16/7/90. Published in *Rescuing Beached Mondays*.

Not a Bad Drop — first read at Kimbos on 12/8/90

A Birthday Gift — first read at Kimbos on 22/10/90

Exmas — first read at Kimbos on 3/12/90. Published in *The Canberra Times* on 23/12/00

Ratings War — first read at Kimbos on 25/2/91

Medisave — first read at Kimbos on 25/3/91. Published in ACTCOSS Newsletter, April 1991

Genes — first read at Kimbos on 1/7/91

Dressing Up — first read at Tilleys in April 1992

Permanent Residence — first read at Tilleys on 31/5/92

Steamed Up — first read at Tilleys on 14/6/92. This story was written in honour of the expresso machine at Tilleys. The machine obliged by going off at exactly the right moment.

Catnap — first read at Tilleys in July 1992

The Big Spill — first read at Dorettes on 9/5/93

Personal Assistance — first read at Dorettes on 13/6/93

Trade In — first read at Dorettes on 11/7/93

Does it Take After Its Father? — first read at Dorettes on 12/9/93. Published in *The Canberra Times* on 30/12/00.

On Course — first read at Dorettes on 9/1/94

Lost Love — first read at Dorettes on 13/2/94. Published in *Off the Edge*.

Generation Gulf — first read at Dorettes on 1/3/94

Bulk Learning — first read at Dorettes on 5/4/94

Dead Heat — first read at Dorettes on 10/7/94

Playing for Keeps — first read at Dorettes late 1994

Party Time — first read at Dorettes on 7/5/95

A Bit of a Waste — first read at PEN reading *Protesting the Testing* at Tilleys on 3/10/95. Published in PEN Anthology *Protesting the Testing*.

Jet Lag — first read at Moois on 16/4/96

Corporate Body — first read 29/10/09. Published in AntipodeanSF no 174, December 2012

Underground Agency — Published in AntipodeanSF no 184, October 2013

Rogue Wave — Published in AntipodeanSF no 187, January 2014

Mappa Tuesdi — Published in AntipodeanSF no 190, April 2014

Hot Water — Published in AntipodeanSF no 196, October 2014

Deserted Village — Published in AntipodeanSF no 198, December 2014

Chlorophyll Haven — Published in AntipodeanSF no 200, February 2015

Pay Parking — Published in AntipodeanSF no 203, June 2015

Dead Cert — Published in AntipodeanSF no 207, October 2015

Solar Wind — Published in AntipodeanSF no 209, December 2015

Positive Intervention — Published in AntipodeanSF no 213, March 2016

Offplanet Processing — Published in AntipodeanSF no 214, May, 2016

New Atlantis — Published in AntipodeanSF no 218, September 2016

Trojan Crocodile — Published in AntipodeanSF no 225, April 2017

Telling Lies — Published in The Ampersand no 1, April 2021

Many of these stories were read on Canberra Stereo Public Radio (now Artsound FM) in 1993—6. Those published in AntipodeanSF were recorded and read on community radio 2NVR..

The books referred to above are:

Writers at Kimbos, *Rescuing Beached Mondays* (Canberra: Writers at Kimbos, 1990)

Canberra Performance Poets, *Off the Edge* (Canberra: Boris Books, 1995)

Protesting the Testing: Canberra writers speak out against nuclear testing in the Pacific (Canberra: PEN (ACT) and Left Book Club (ACT), 1995)

The venues where stories were read were:

Kimbos — a small bar in Philip, Canberra. There were set themes which inspired some of the early stories.

Dorettes — a bar and restaurant in Civic, Canberra

Tilleys — a large bar with a stage and microphone, Lyneham, Canberra

Mooi — a small restaurant in Dickson, Canberra

Wig and Pen — a pub in Civic, Canberra

Meetings of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, ACT Branch