

My parents loved each other between punches. That's what I told the doctor when she asked me about my childhood. I don't know if you have ever been in a psychiatric ward. It's full of crazy people and I was one of them. Not total crazy but mad enough. That was me. One guy stole my underpants. The nurses got them back but I didn't want to wear them again. He was a violent son of a bitch and was always threatening the other patients so I didn't want to catch his crazy germs. They said they would wash them but I wouldn't have it so they sent out for some new ones. In the end it all came down to my daughter.

Melissa was the psychiatrist's name. She was a nice lady and said I should call her Mel. I imagined having sex with her often during our sessions. I hadn't had any experiences with a psychiatrist before, I don't mean sexually, just talking, you know, so I don't know if she was good or bad as psychiatrists go. Like I said, she was a nice lady and I didn't mind having to talk to her. It broke up the boredom of the days. She explained that she practised Gestalt theory but I didn't really care. Gestalt was new to me but I'd heard of Freud and Jung and all those other Germanic types but it was all hogwash as far as I could tell. I'm not sure how long I was in the actual psych ward, maybe it was only days, maybe it was weeks. I was in the hospital first so things are a bit fuzzy in my mind as to when exactly they put me in with the crazies. It really was a cuckoo's nest. When I think about it I shouldn't really have been there. All I needed was a rest. I shouldn't have been put in a ward where old men and women continually pissed their pants. That was the problem with the general ward it was a unisex dumping ground for the disturbed. I'm not angry about it, it's just a process and I can't really blame anybody for thinking I was nuts. I must have seemed pretty insane on that day. Finally, Mel decided I wasn't so crazy and arranged for me to be sent

interstate, to a place in the country. It was a boarding house at the base of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Maryland and it was full of people like me and some who were still a bit crazy like the guy who stared at walls. He said the walls had their own energy and if you stood real close you could feel its power. I stood with him one time, my nose nearly touching the plaster, and felt nothing except for the strain of going a bit cross-eyed. I suppose he was harmless enough.

A middle-aged couple ran the place and had a teenage son who helped with odd jobs when he wasn't at college. We all had our own rooms and could wander about the town pretty freely, not that there was much to it. Mostly I looked at the mountains.

A doctor would visit during the day and ask a few questions and scribble on a sheet of paper that was held on the clipboard he carried. He would nod and smile and chat to Mr and Mrs Smethurst, that was the couple I just mentioned, and give them the prescriptions for various people to be dispensed by the local pharmacist. I had to take little orange capsules which he said would keep me calm. Some times I did and some times I couldn't be bothered.

The town was made up of quaint old white weatherboard houses mixed with Georgian styled red brick buildings. It had patriotic lawns with little American flags planted in them. I spent a lot of time sitting outside in the backyard which sloped down to a dirt road that ran up the mountain. Apparently Yankee soldiers marched up the road in their thousands during the civil war to fight the rebels holding the mountain passes. I liked to sit looking at the cornfields that filled the fenceless fields across the road. The shimmering of the stalks in the evening breeze had a calming effect; I didn't need my pills when I sat in that old wicker chair. It was a bit magical sitting into the night watching the blinking fluorescent yellow light of the fireflies that

floated fairy like in the trees. When I closed my eyes I could hear the tramping feet of passing legions. Burkittsville is the name of the town and there are still musket ball holes in some of the house walls. It's a lovely place to visit. I'm staying here until my wife or son, or maybe both, come to collect me.

2.

I suppose the day I lost it had to start somewhere and I figure my last day at work was as good a place as any for it to begin. It was a Friday I remember that clearly as we all went to the football that night. It was raining too, a fine rain that threatened to thicken as the evening wore on. It wasn't cold though, not until later. We all went to a bar after work for my send off. There was maybe a dozen of us most of whom, when I stopped and thought about it, I couldn't care less if I never saw them again.

I had been working for an employment agency placing freshly graduated students in jobs. Firms registered their vacancies with us and we made it happen. That was the company's slogan. You might have seen the ad on T.V. "Hamer, makes it happen, a graduate's best friend." Old man Hamer had been a politician of some sort and set up this gig after he retired or was voted out. I can't quite remember the circumstances of how he came to be. I sort of fell into the job after the liquor shop I'd been working in was taken over by one of the big corporations. It had been run by three brothers and I'd enjoyed working there. The younger brother, much younger than the other two but older than me, was a bit of a character. He liked a drink, fast cars and speed boats. He was always coming to work with black eyes and cuts after brawling week-ends. The middle brother was from another era with eyebrows that stuck up like a tarantula's legs and eyes that bulged. He was always telling corny

jokes and talked in riddles using Australian slang. “Haven’t you ever heard that one.” he’d cackle. “We used to use that one all the time. Brown eyed mullet. You never heard it? You know, a floating turd, at the beach?”

“Nope.”

He’d roll his eyes and with that he’d wander off laughing to himself, repeating “Brown eyed mullet, brown eyed mullet” or whatever his phrase of the day happened to be. The older brother carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. He was always shaking his big bulldog head over something. With two brothers like that you could understand why. He’d stand at the cash register and wave his club hands about procrastinating and worrying about every little thing. They argued a lot. For all that it was fun working for them. They were a family business and paid me a Christmas bonus in my first year even though I’d only been there a few months and smashed up the delivery van backing down a driveway in my first week. It was never the same after the corporation took over. Signs had to be exactly the same, the place was decked out in gaudy yellow, red and orange bunting and we had to wear ties. I was moved into another store, a supermarket, and one day forgot my tie. You would have thought I’d committed a murder the way the boss carried on. He was a fat ex-army guy with a pock marked face that looked like an aerial photograph of a First World War battlefield that I’d once seen.

“Come with me” he demanded and I followed him. I was led to the store manager who was an old Dutch guy with a heavy Nazi sounding accent. He gave me a lecture about standards and respect while I lounged back in my chair trying to affect as bored an attitude as I could. I was dismissed with a formal warning. I walked out of the place that night and never bothered going back.

Anyway, like I said, after drinks there were about seven or eight of us left and we decided to go to the football. We debouched from the bar onto Spring Street from where you could see the dome of blue light from the floodlights glowing over the stadium like a force field. We more or less staggered through the park sending wide-eyed possums scurrying into the higher branches to escape the sticks we threw. Macca, sometimes Dazza, Daryl MacKinley was his name, stopped and took a piss in the fountain outside the Conservatory, right in the water, in the open, right in front of that stature of the woman with the hounds. Her naked bronze breasts seemed to inspire a bout of lustful indecency in him as he began accosting women all the way down the park pathway. A couple of us did our best to steer him away from them. Macca used to stand at our office window on the seventeenth floor and look into the hotel rooms across the road with a pair of binoculars. He'd stand there for ages, hoping for some cheap thrill. When I thought about that it made me glad I was leaving. By the time we had queued and got our tickets Macca had lurched off with the drunken Geordie who worked on the floor above us draped around his shoulders.

“Ah forget ‘em” said Molly Taylor when I went to go after them.

Molly was a lanky stretch of a guy. Molly wasn't his real name and I had never thought to ask what was. It didn't seem important. He was a decent enough bloke. We walked through the turnstiles and up the stairs and stood looking at the ground. The rain showed up like black lined silver dashes against the shadowed light. The game was about to start and the players were walking and jogging to their positions. The man on the loud speaker was still blathering away trying to gee up the crowd. I wished he would shut-up. It was annoying and with the noise and the alcohol I began to get angry. I hated the game anyway. It seemed designed for some Neanderthal need and the crowd adorned in their tribal colours appeared oddly

ridiculous. I mean, grown men with painted faces. I used to play as a kid. I loved it then but now it just seemed pointless. The others had begun making their way up to the back of the grandstand. I watched them snake haltingly up the aisle then I turned and left. Like I said, I didn't really care if I never saw any of them again.

Outside the rain had gotten heavier. You could see the thick drops exploding on the concrete causeway. A cold breeze was starting to blow up as well. I didn't have a coat, just a light sweater. I flicked my shirt collar up and dug my hands deep into my pants pockets and began to run. It was about two hundred yards to the railway station and after fifty I pulled up to get my breath. A burning pain spread through my lungs and crawled savagely up my throat. I realised then that I hadn't done a bit of physical exertion for near on fifteen years, just sat on my arse in an air-conditioned office. I half ran, half walked the rest of the way. It was really bucketing down by the time I reached the station gates. The ticket inspectors were huddled under the awning that protected the ticket windows, standing wrapped inside their long navy blue coats. Right then I wish I had one. One of them nodded at me as I hurried into the dry of the subway where the ramps to the platform beckoned. I leaned back against the cool grimy cream and bottle green tiles that lined the walls trying to gain some breath. I pushed off the wall and walked a small circle with my hands on my hips, gasping wretchedly. After a bit I headed down the subway. A bearded man with a crown of matted curly hair was playing a violin with the case open on the ground begging. His eyes were closed as he raked the bow over the strings filling the cavernous tunnel with awful screeching. I hurried past him to Platform 5.

My train left from Platform 9 so what the hell was I doing boarding a Frankston train? Somewhere between the football ground and the railway station the thought of visiting my old football coach had jumped into my head. My Dad had

stayed in touch for a few years after I had stopped playing and I'd visited a couple of times with him. I easily remember where he lived. The clinker brick house on the corner of the first street past the station on the right heading toward the city. It had a big apple tree in the front yard. Doug Farrell was a great coach. He always made us laugh. He used to train with us in a red and white sleeveless jumper that didn't quite fit over his beer belly and revealed his pimply shoulders. His wife was a big lady who wore black horn-rimmed glasses and wobbled like a jelly when she laughed. I couldn't tell you why I wanted to visit Doug Farrell, I just did. Maybe it was because it was still early. Maybe it was because I didn't want to go home yet. Anyway, the idea just sought of popped into my head and became fixed in my mind and not even the cat-o-wailing violin could dislodge it.

Within a minute of stepping on to the platform the train pulled up. That hardly ever happens so I was relieved to get out of the cold and rain. It was one of those slick modern trains, silver, with plastic seats. They were really uncomfortable and I flopped down on a seat by the window. I thought about reading the discarded newspaper that was folded on the seat opposite but instead rested my head against the glass and stared outside. Rain flecked the window and lights reflected off the passing streets making it hard to see much at all. During the day you could see right into everybody's backyards and study the city's raggedy arse. I could see nothing but black punctuated by streaky lines of yellow and orange light. Soon my eyelids closed with the jerking and rolling movement of the train. I jolted awake feeling sick in the stomach a couple of stations from Mordiallic. It was still raining so I snatched the newspaper off the seat and covered my head as I walked briskly away from the train.

I found the house easily enough and stood inspecting it in the dark. The smell of brine lay heavy in the night air, the salt swept up off the ocean by an Antarctic

driven wind. There was no car in the driveway. The light of the main window was on, framing the curtains and the tell tale pulsing blue light of a television flickered above the pelmet. Down the driveway side of the house a square yellow light shone dimly. It was probably the dunny. The front red brick fence had a long diagonal crack that stepped along the dried cement filling. It was tilted back precariously and in danger of falling over completely. Low rusty immovable gates were bent back on their hinges leaving the driveway open. I walked down the cracked path to the front door. On my left was an overgrown circle of bricks and wire with a jagged grey weather-worn stump in its heart. Apple trees couldn't live forever, I supposed, but why leave its corpse like that? There was no light on the porch and no cover. Water was cascading freely from the blocked gutter above the doorway making it impossible to stand close to the door. I knew right then, right there that this was a dumb idea but I reached my right hand through the waterfall and pressed the doorbell. I must have stood in that rain with the newspaper turning to mush on my head for a couple of minutes. I pushed the bell again and waited some more. I could hear the television clearly. Someone was in there and I was determined to make them answer. I rapped ferociously on the metal wire grilled door. It was one of those heavy security doors. The telly was turned down and I rapped again. Suddenly a bare light bulb above the door lit up and I instinctively brought my hand up to shield my eyes from its glare. I felt like I had been shoved into an interrogation cubicle what with the bright light and water running down my neck.

“Can I help you?” said a croaky but even and unfamiliar voice. It didn't sound a bit like Doug Farrell, at least not how I remembered him. And why should it? It must have been over thirty years since I last saw him. He had probably moved ages ago.

“I was looking for Doug Farrell.” I said without confidence.

The man was invisible behind the screen.

“That’s me.”

“Hi Doug. It’s me. Carol Ebden. Remember?”

I was standing there like a drowned rat. What the hell was wrong with him? Invite me in for Christ’s sake. The rain was steady and the gushing gutter still overflowing. I felt like bolting. I felt peculiar standing there. But more than anything I wanted to get dry.

“Under sixteens. You coached me. Remember? And Tank, and Stopher; Scrote and Cowboy and that crazy unco Polish kid. Remember?”

More silence, more rain and then the door was pushed open causing me to step back.

“You better come in.” he said.

3

The hallway was dimly lit by a single lamp on a pedestal that cast a pallid light. The house reeked of boiled vegetables. I hated that smell. It reminded me of the old people’s home where my in-laws lived. Doug Farrell looked like he should be there too. He was wearing an old woollen dressing gown, maroon, over a white t-shirt and a pair of green paint splattered track suit pants. They were hitched up high, revealing his white bony ankles sticking up out of a threadbare pair of blue corduroy slippers. The t-shirt was soiled and sank into his concave chest but then blossomed out and hung over an incongruous fat gut. His shoulders seemed to have been squeezed inward, giving him a stooped look. His hair, once jet black, was now a steely blue-grey with rogue strands of pure white. He would have been satisfied with its thickness. A lot of

guys his age are bald as badgers. I couldn't work out how old he was but he was older than he should have been. I was staring hard at him, dripping, trying to see something of the old coach in him. The only reminder was the gold filling in his eye tooth.

"There's a towel in the bathroom." he said pointing to a door midway up.

"Thanks Doug, that would be great."

He stood aside to allow me to pass. The door to the front room was open and a woman in a wheel chair sat watching the football on the telly, slack jawed and gaping. It was the game I had left, a delayed coverage. A red tartan blanket was laid across her lap. She had wispy grey hair that hung lankly to her shoulders. Her head was tilted to one side, her left, and a pair of glasses on a chain hung around her neck, resting on her chest. It didn't look like his wife. Maybe it wasn't but if he wasn't going to mention her, then I wasn't going to ask. I patted myself down with a natty faded pink towel and caught sight of myself in the mirror. I stared at my reflection, looking for signs of decay, wondering when I too, would become unrecognisable. Maybe they had both had cancer or something. Sick people made my skin crawl, that's why I hate going to the doctor, the waiting room is always full of them.

"We'll talk in the kitchen." called Doug.

The kitchen was at the end of the passage way. There was another room between it and the bathroom. The door was slightly ajar and I paused and looked in. It was a study of sorts with sporting pictures all over its walls and a table stacked high with papers and books. There was a tall bookshelf crammed full. Doug motioned for me to sit at the kitchen table. It was a marble patterned laminate with vinyl covered chairs. I drew a chair out and slid into it resting my crossed arms on the table. Doug reached for a bottle of whisky from the bench by the stove. He waved it at me.

"Drink?"

“Ah no thanks Doug. I’ve had enough tonight I think.”

“Fair enough. Suit yourself.” he shrugged and returned the bottle to its place,
“A man should never drink alone.”

He smiled weakly and sat down. We looked at each other in one of those awkward silences that make you want to shrink up and die. He repeated my name a couple of times as if trying to awaken some memory. It felt pretty damn ordinary having your favourite old coach not remember your name.

“Carol Ebden.” he said again, “Carol Ebden.”

He closed his eyes.

“Carol Ebden.”

This time it was more of a murmur. That was my name for sure. He’d said it more than anyone had said my name in my whole life. I hated my name if the truth be known. It was a girl’s name. I used to tell people my name was David when I met them for the first time. I still hate it but you can get used to just about anything in this world. It was my mother’s idea apparently. It had been the name of an old Scottish boyfriend of hers who had died of a brain tumour. He wasn’t that old. Only about thirty she once told me. It wasn’t a particularly Scottish name either. He probably hated it too.

“Albert! Albert was your Dad’s name wasn’t it? Albert Ebden. Hated being called Bert.” said Doug Farrell.

His eyes opened and life’s light seemed to flicker. I nodded.

“I’ve gotcha now. Carol Ebden, yes.”

He banged the table delightedly with both hands. For a moment I could see the old coach returned.

“A decent sort of a half-back. You couldn’t mark the ball over your head to save yourself but you had good anticipation.”

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes but this time there was a hint of a smile on his thin grey lips.

“That wasn’t a bad side, not a bad side at all.”

He leaned forward suddenly and peered at me.

“You had blonde hair and you’ve grown.”

That was true. I was about six two now, maybe three or four inches taller than I was at sixteen and my hair was more a light brown.

“Well Ebden.” he said leaning forward. “Why? Why did you come here?”

I didn’t answer straight away. I was looking at his pale stick arms, bony like his ankles but bruised with blotches of pink and purple.

“I don’t really know Doug. I left my job and...” I was aware of my voice trailing off. “I dunno.” I added almost as an apology.

I really wished I hadn’t come and wanted to get up and leave. Doug Farrell had been a good memory but this visit had trashed that.

“Left your job. Why?”

I hated it when people repeated what you have just said. I know he didn’t mean anything by it, it was just annoying.

“Well. It was either I left or they would probably have sacked me. I ‘d sort of lost interest.”

Doug Farrell grunted. It was a kind of disapproving grunt and that annoyed me too.

“Well as Vince Lombardi once said, if you aren’t fired with enthusiasm, you’ll be fired with enthusiasm. You got a family?”

I told him I did and he told me I needed a job. Now I really wanted to go because I could sense a lecture coming on. Not as bad as the Dutch guy's probably but still, a telling off.

"A man's gotta work Ebden. You worried about your future?"

I said I was but that something would turn up. That didn't seem to wash too well with him and he said I had to have a plan, follow a passion, make life work for me.

"Wait here." he said and with that he shuffled down to the room with the books that I mentioned.

He came back with a photograph and a book. He pushed the photograph at me and I picked it up. It was a team photograph of the old side. And there I was grinning, pushing my pathetic teenage biceps out as much as I could in the back row.

"What was your dream back then Ebden?"

He posed the question almost accusingly, as if whatever I said would be evidence of a total failure. I remembered though, it was my biggest fantasy.

"I wanted to play League."

"And did you?"

Well no, it was just a dream I wanted to say. I wasn't serious about it. I just shook my head.

"You didn't because you didn't have the drive Ebden. You didn't have the fire in the belly."

He tapped a finger on the face of Brian Winston. Brian had a blonde mop top and suffered white line fever. He was one of our best players and there wasn't a game when he didn't come off the field with tears in his eyes and his face red with rage, even when we won which was most times.

“Only one of you had the fire. And he only nearly made it. It takes a special talent Ebden but he had a go.”

I was a bit taken aback really. It was as if our failures counted against Doug Farrell somehow. But we were only kids, dreaming. What did he expect? He opened the book. It was a biography of Vince Lombardi. It still had the dust jacket, much torn, and it had heaps of post-it notes marking various pages. I could tell it was his bible.

“You know who Vince Lombardi was?” he asked.

I said I did.

“Good.” he continued. “Greatest coach of any sport. Three Superbowls in a row. That takes some beating. This is something he said Ebden. You should take it on board. Apply it to your life. You were a handy player Ebden, could have been better if you worked on your game. You had good anticipation though. You read the game well and took a risk. Not many kids were game enough to leave their opponents the way you did, to take a risk.”

I blushed a little at this. It made me feel pretty good. I remember one night Doug Farrell pulled me out in front of the other kids and said much the same thing. I blushed then, too.

“So you’ve left your job. You’ve taken a risk. Football is a great metaphor for life Ebden. You’ve taken a risk and now you have to act decisively or else the play will pass you by. You can’t afford to be left stranded in No Man’s Land you have to act. You owe it to your family, to yourself. This is what Lombardi said.”

He opened the book and cleared his throat and commenced to read, his voice still gravelly.

“A man can be as great as he wants to be. If you believe in yourself and have the courage, the determination, the dedication, the competitive drive and if you are willing to sacrifice the little things in life and pay the price for the things that are worthwhile, it can be done.”

He looked up snapping the book shut.

“Find your passion Ebden. Build the fire.”

“Thanks Doug. I’ll try. I really will, I’ll try.”

As lectures go it wasn’t so bad but I was still anxious to leave. It was getting on and it would take me forever to get home.

“I’ve really got to go Doug. I’m sorry I dropped in unexpectedly. I didn’t mean to intrude. I was just thinking about you, that’s all. About the old days I guess and it seemed like a good idea.”

I stood to go and he stood up too. He must have stood up too quick or something because he started coughing violently. Spit sprayed everywhere and I stepped back a bit. He spread his hands on the table to steady himself. After a bit he looked up, his eyes rimmed watery red and lifted a hand limply to wave me away.

“See yourself out son. My back isn’t so good.” he croaked. “Say hello to your Dad for me.”

“I will Doug. Thanks again. Bye.”

I walked down the hall. The lady in the wheelchair was still in the front room. She hadn’t moved except for her head had fallen forward now. I could see the top of her scalp, bald, sweaty and scabby. I looked back and saw Doug, with his back to me, reaching for the whisky. I closed the front door behind me. It had stopped raining. I breathed in the salt air, savouring its freshness, glad to be out of that rotting house.

Once, at a party, I told a guy I was a paratrooper. I was wearing an old camouflage jacket and had a crew cut. He asked me what I did, so I told him. I'd never jumped out of a plane in my life and never would. Maybe if my life depended on it, otherwise, why would you? Anyway this guy, he was a bit younger than me, wanted to know all about it. So I told him. I told him about how scary it was first time, how you get used to it and how to land. I used to read lots of comics and war books. He was thinking about joining the army, maybe he did. A little later I told everybody the story about the cat that ran out of petrol. About how this kitten had been found in a freezer and how the guy that found it rubbed petrol into it to try and revive it. And how it came to life and staggered a few steps and died because it had run out of petrol. They hung on every word and laughed and groaned at the punch line, even the good looking girls listened to me. The reason I was thinking about those things was because I like telling stories. Doug Farrell had got to me. Find your passion he had said and I wondered whether I had ever really had one.

When I got back to Richmond station the violinist had gone and there were lots of disconsolate looking football supporters in blue and white scarves waiting around glumly. The wet and cold just made them look sadder. The game was still going but they had opted for the early train. I really did wish I had a coat and curled into as much of a ball as I could in one of the corner seats when I got on the carriage. All the way home I was thinking about stuff. When I was a kid, before personal computers, we used to write stories all the time. If it was raining or it was too hot outside we'd sprawl all over the lounge room floor with sheets of paper, writing stories, drawing pictures and reading comics. Mostly I wrote war stories. I imagined

myself as a kind of Sergeant, like Vic Morrow in *Combat*. When I wasn't playing football, I would roam around the neighbourhood with our little platoon of kids, armed with whatever toy weapons we could muster. We'd take it in turns to wear the only plastic GI helmet we had. The half built houses of the neighbourhood made excellent bombed out buildings and the surrounding paddocks and creek that cut through the bottom of our street made a perfect battlefield. We'd load up our leather school bags with biscuits, worn on our back like army packs, and disappear for the day killing Germans. I felt sorry for the Germans, in a way, all those fire bombings. They had the coolest uniforms and some pretty snappy looking planes, ships and tanks. The Holocaust made it hard though, to feel too sorry for them I mean. I wondered if I could write something, a best seller that would turn my life around. I didn't read just war stories. I used to read novels too. It was just that I stopped. I think it was Thomas Hardy that killed it. We had to read him in Form Five, he and those Russian writers that took ten pages to describe a chair. I couldn't stand all that descriptive stuff. I was an impatient reader, always rushing to get to the end of the story. A chair's a chair. I'd skip the big words too.

It was nearly midnight when I got home. Where I live is on the outer edge of the city, in the hills. It's quite a lovely spot really. That's why we moved there. On garbage night I often just stand at the top of the driveway looking at the sky. I arrange the bins carefully, wheels aligned, each spaced apart. I like the precision and down the street the neighbours' bins stand like rows of plastic green clad soldiers, silent and erect sentinels watching, waiting for the dawn. Sometimes it makes me feel sad when I think of us all sitting like ants in our cosy lit houses. On a clear night, not like this night, the sky was like a sweep of spilt milk dotted with winking crystals, the stars like diamonds and the little kid in me wants to reach up and grab them. They are

unreachable, of course, for window shoppers only. You can't see the city, just its throbbing glow blotting out the horizon. It's like standing on the edge of the world watching the towers of Babylon catch fire and burning at the hemline of night's fraying black curtain. I was suddenly glad I was no longer one of those poor bastards working in the concrete and glass jungle.

The stink of cigarette smoke turned my nose as I walked through the door. I could hear music, Jethro Tull. Fuck, they sounded so awful now. Why are they listening to my records, I wondered? I walked down the hallway stairs to the lounge room where I found my son and his friend Travis. Travis was lying back on the couch, the pillows stacked behind him, looking at one of my old LPs, the Velvet Underground, the album with the banana on the cover. I walked over and took the fag from his mouth and butted it out in an empty beer can on the coffee table.

"I've told you before. No smoking inside."

Travis looked a bit startled. I'm not sure if it was the smoking or the fact that he was in my spot on the couch that annoyed me the most.

"Sorry bro." he said.

Travis called everybody bro. He was from New Zealand and spoke in a squeaky voice. I couldn't understand much of anything he said when he got excited. The way he murdered those vowels was hilarious. I looked at my son, one of those what the fuck are you doing looks.

"What?" he said, as if I didn't have a right to ask.

"Don't let people smoke in the house, man. Your mum hates it and I hate it. Where is your mum anyway?"

"Gone to Kate's." said Travis.

That was something else that annoyed me about Travis, he was always answering questions that weren't directed at him as well as sitting on the arms of our lounge chairs. With him flattening the arms out and the cats clawing them to pieces because they were too stupid to use the scratching post, well together it gave me the shits. I didn't hate Travis; he was just a kid. It was just annoying having him around all the time. His parents had split up and left him in the care of an Auntie and then she decided to go back to New Zealand so Travis ended up on the floor of my son's room. I don't know when he is leaving, my wife loves him.

"When did she go?" I said placing a finger to my lips in a sign to Travis not to say anything.

"Dunno. She rang and said she was staying the night."

I mulled that information over for a moment. It wasn't unusual. Kate was a childhood friend whose life seemed to be in perpetual crisis. If it wasn't one thing it was another. I tried not to get involved.

"What are you guys still here for anyway?" I asked, "I thought you were going to see a band?"

"Couldn't be bothered, too wet."

I snatched the album cover from Travis's hands.

"Hold it by the edges man. Not with your fingers all over it. Like this."

I showed him how to rest the edge of the album cover against the flat of my hands.

"Same when you are handling the record."

I tilted the cover so that the inner sleeve slid from it. I laid the cover on the coffee table and tipped the vinyl half out of the protective sleeve, so that the hole rested on the tip of my middle finger and the edge of the record against my thumb.

“See. No need to put fingerprints all over it.”

“Cool, bro.” said Travis as he carefully replicated my demonstration.

I was tired and announced I was going to bed.

“Keep it down will you. ’Night.” I said as I pushed my bedroom door open.

“Hey Dad? Can I borrow your suit tomorrow night? The double breasted one?”

“I don’t think so. That’s a thousand-dollar suit. It would hang like a sack cloth on you anyway.”

He was a couple of inches shorter than me with a teenage chest. It would have looked stupid.

“Why that one?”

“Got a gangster party to go to.”

“Sorry. No.”

Lately my son had taken to wearing my shirts and he was always taking my good belt. You don’t know how annoying that is until you are getting ready to go out and the damn thing is missing. And you can’t find a thing in his bedroom which is like a rubbish dump. I lay down on the bed.

‘What’s with your ol’ man bro?’ I heard Travis ask.

It always felt strange sleeping alone. The good thing was you got to stretch out and didn’t have to be snored at. For all that it was still nice to feel somebody next to you. My wife used to be a pretty good fuck but all that stuff just sought of petered out after our daughter died; she just sort of freezed on me. It used to really piss me off but I stopped worrying about it ages ago. I figured she blamed me but she never said anything. I had to admit that was pretty big of her, to never say anything. She had every right to, of course. I blamed myself and still live with the guilt and one

recurring nightmare but over the years I managed to stuff it away into some sealed corner of my mind. At night my wife prefers the company of her i-phone. You can do just about anything on an i-phone. She likes to play scrabble. Her greatest driving passion is to get QUEAZY as a triple word score. It's not the highest score but it would be up there.

5

I fell in love with Sally Jones in sixth grade. I think she may have been in my class the year before. I can't remember. I never stopped loving her, not outright besotted Romeo and Juliet stuff, just a soft ache that never quite went away. She used to wear a pink, grey, and white patterned jumper with horses or dogs or some kind of animal. They were outlined in red. I'd have to check my old school photographs which I have somewhere to tell you exactly. They are black and white but I remember the colours of that jumper. I'd like to say I remember its smell too. It would have been nice to have smelled Sally Jones in that jumper, to have known her that well that we could have curled up upon a couch and watched TV together.

Sally and her friend Julie Marshall came round to my house after school one day. When I say they came around I mean they hung about in the street out front. I was watching TV and could see them but I never budged. My mother told me not to be stupid but I was. Sally Jones came to my house and I didn't move, like it was too uncool to hang out with girls even though I thought about her all the time. I still think about that time and it still kills me. At high school when Sally was fourteen or fifteen, in third form, she had the body of a twenty-eight year-old. I think she liked me. Once, on the bus home from the school swimming sports she asked me if she could wear my

ribbons. That was a good sign but I was hopeless at reading signs. I'd swum in the 100 metres and the relay. They were red ribbons, second, with gold lettering and Sally Jones still wanted to wear mine. That had to be a good sign. I was a sports junkie and proud of my ribbons. I said no. That kills me too. When Sally smiled the corners of her mouth folded into two symmetric dimples and her perfect white teeth would flash like a starburst. And her green eyes would glitter. It killed me every time she smiled, it really did. I never asked her to 'go' with me. I should have but in my mind she was an untouchable princess and I just felt goofy. I look at my old school photographs and I wonder why. There were plenty of uglier dorkier kids than me. I thought my nose was too big and hadn't grown into my front teeth yet. And I had pimples and freckles too. There was no way Sally Jones would go out with me. My best mate at school did ask her in fourth form and they went together for about two weeks. I used to follow them home with Ricky Hess, another mate, messing around making her laugh. It was probably another sign. Eventually she started going out with a sixth form kid. He was a French exchange student. We called him Froggy. I think his name was Pierre. They would sit together during morning recess and lunch time on the walkway near the tennis courts, he with his arm over her shoulder making me sick every time I passed them on my endless, aimless circuits of the schoolyard. One time at the end of third term, Pierre had gone back to France, she told me a dirty joke in class. I don't remember the joke exactly but it was about a girl kissing a guy up telling him she loved him and he was saying "lower, lower" and Sally repeated the punch line, "I love you" three times, her voice getting lower, and huskier and sultrier with each utterance. It was as sexy as all hell and probably another sign. That summer I decided that when fifth form started I would make Sally Jones mine. I would ask her to go steady,

“Damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead.” I never saw her again. She never returned from the summer break and I never knew what became of her.

The reason I am telling you about Sally Jones is because of Jimmy Creighton. Jimmy went to the same schools as me and Sally. In grade six he was this tall fat blonde kid. He had thick snow white hair, a button nose and azure eyes that looked like crystal pools. He was always laughing and always skiting about stuff he said he knew. He once told us that girls bled from their vaginas. I can tell you that that was a bit of a shock and I can tell you some of the girls were pretty pissed off when I asked them about it. It was from Jimmy that I first learned about masturbation. We all knew about stiffies, I mean Sally Jones only had to look at me and I got a hard on. None of us had any idea about spoof though. Of course Jimmy Creighton knew all about it and said he could blow and that he'd show us. One day after school Jimmy and me and a new kid Rusty Handley crowded into a cubicle in the boys' toilet block. Rusty hoisted himself up on the cistern so he could keep a look out and get a birds-eye view. I leaned against the door while Jimmy hauled his pants down to his knees and sat on the toilet lid and started wanking. There are lots of different methods you can use for wanking and Jimmy was going with long slow strokes. Every so often he would start at some imagined noise and in a panic try and pull his trousers up. Rusty, who was a bit of a joker, didn't help matters by constantly whispering “Somebody's coming.” It wasn't Jimmy though. I don't remember him having any pubic hairs even. He did have a fatter cock than me.

I was pretty annoyed when the phone rang at around seven thirty in the morning. My wife wasn't home yet and I'd been hoping to have a sleep in. I got up and answered it. The phone was in the lounge-room and the lounge-room stunk of

stale cigarettes and beer. Travis hadn't stopped smoking and so that made me angrier. I probably wasn't too pleasant when I picked up.

“Hey Carol. How are you mate? It's Jimmy.”

He didn't even apologize, just sailed right into it. No I hope I didn't wake you, nothing.

“I was hoping to catch you mate. It's been ages. Can we meet up?”

“Sure.” I said, “When were you thinking?”

“How about lunch today? You got anything on?”

Like I said I'd known Jimmy pretty much forever. I wouldn't call him a friend though. It was all one-way traffic with Jimmy, his way. He was okay in a group but one on one he could be a pain in the arse. The trouble was he was so vain. You could have a good time with Jimmy if all you wanted to do was talk about him.

“Yeah, sure.” I said, “Do you want to come up?”

There was a pause and I knew that pause well. He was always saying it was too far to come up to my place. “Why don't you come down here?” he would say. Of course it's the same fucking distance. That used to really annoy me. We used to see more of him when he was married. His wife was a girl from Dublin and a real sweetheart. She got on well with my wife. Like all women my wife loved Jimmy. I don't know what it was about Jimmy but he was a chick magnet. I don't know why, he used to treat all his girlfriends like shit. They were all just trophies to him. He was always bragging about his conquests and finally his missus found out and that was that. I've never understood why people have to tell you about their affairs. I mean people can't keep anything to themselves, they just have to blab so eventually everybody knows. It served the cheating bastard right, though I did feel sorry for his wife. She was a good sort.

At state school and into high school Jimmy was kind of fat, like I said. Sometime between fourth and fifth form the Greek Roman god of whatever waved its magic wand or did whatever Greek Roman gods do and turned Jimmy Creighton into an Adonis. The puppy fat evaporated from his face leaving him with a square jaw that sported a large dimple in the middle of his chin. His straight hair crimped and turned into wavy golden locks. He still had those crazy blue eyes and button nose but mounted on a torso that was shaped like an anvil. From that point on there was no stopping him. I hated him with a passion and it was probably lucky Sally Jones had left or she may have fallen victim to his God ordained charm. Jimmy was saying something about having to be somewhere else for some bullshit reason and could I come down and of course I said yes. It was like there was some great debt that I had to be his slave for life on account of his having saved my life or something. There was some truth to that. One day in the city, I must have been about nineteen, maybe twenty, and I stepped in front of a tram. I was totally zoned out, concentrating on the second-hand record store I was going to. Anyway all I heard was the clanging of the tram's bells as I was yanked backward and there behind me was Jimmy Creighton, grinning. I mean, how's that? He appeared out of nowhere just like some goddamn guardian angel.

“Oh great mate. I've got some big news and need to ask a favour. See you oneish” he said and hung up.

That annoyed me. He was always making times and assuming that was okay. It was but that's not the point. Jimmy lived on the south side of the city. In fact, he lived only a few suburbs up from Doug Farrell. He'd rented a bachelor pad after he split up with his wife. I'd helped him move in, of course. It was an art deco place, very stylish and he'd furnished it with authentic gear from the 30's and 40's. I could

see myself living there, in my double-breasted suit. He worked in customs and they had some racket going on with unclaimed goods and so he got his hands on some pretty nice furniture at a cheap rate. Jimmy was always telling crazy stories about his job, about getting pissed on vodka with Russian ship captains, and I remember him saying once that he and his colleague, a certified gun nut apparently, had confiscated a .44 Magnum from a sailor. He said they had to get it approved and would return it later. Anyway they took it down to St Kilda beach early in the morning and fired a round into the water. Jimmy said it made a massive splash. He was always doing stuff like that. He never seemed to think about consequences, just did stuff because he could. I have to admit that Jimmy is a pretty good looking guy. I was jealous, I have to be honest, I mean, he didn't even have to try. Apart from his good looks he was also always well dressed. I remember in primary school he was the only one who ever wore a tie to birthday parties, bow ties if I remember right. He always wore the best shirts too. His parents were loaded. In sixth form he used to wear a dinner jacket with tails and a cummerbund. He was a total poser. I mean who wears a dinner suit to school. The teachers loved him though.

I was thinking of all these things as I drove off the mountain. I'd left about midday. My wife wasn't home so I left a note. GONE TO JIMMY C'S, it said. The boys were still asleep and would be until mid afternoon. I hoped she would be home to clean up their mess.

The street where Jimmy lived had bluestone curbs and gutters. It was full of old flats and units with red tiled rooves. The thin nature strips held large gnarled misshapen elm trees that had been pruned back over the years to avoid tangling in the power lines. I found a park a few houses down from Jimmy's. He lived on the second level of his block and was standing on the shared balcony overlooking the black

wrought iron gate as I arrived. He waved and smiled. He was wearing a metal grey shark skin suit, a white shirt, cuff-links and a thin deep plum tie. I felt instantly self conscious as all I was wearing was a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and a sad pair of white runners.

“Wait there, mate, I’ll come down.” he called.

The gate clicked open and Jimmy appeared a few moments later. He shook my hand and slapped me on the shoulder.

“How are you mate?” he enthused but didn’t wait for an answer.

“I thought we could go down to the pub on the esplanade.” he said as he walked to the passenger door of my car.

That was another annoying thing about Jimmy, he never drove, didn’t even offer, just assumed I was happy to drive him. I steered the car into the main drag that led to the esplanade with Jimmy talking all the time. He told me how he had nailed some exotic dancer last weekend, how much he was making off his share port folio, how that would change because the divorce was going to ruin him and what a money grabbing bitch his missus was.

In one of his rare silences I asked, “So what’s this big news you’ve got for me? And the favour?”

“Don’t worry about that just yet. I’ll fill you in when we get inside. It’s gonna blow your mind. Here, you need to turn here.” he said leaning forward and pointing out a driveway obscured by a large tea tree.

“This’ll take you into the back car park.”

The pub was a sprawling open planned modern affair. The original building was still standing. The new bistro planed off the original and ran parallel to the highway. It had massive glass windows that looked out to the bay. We were led to a

table for two and a young girl took our drinks order. She had bleached blonde hair and a full slightly chubby figure. A bit of a surfer chick I thought. She smiled at Jimmy and ignored me completely. That annoyed me. Nothing had changed.

“So?” I said, leaning back in my chair, “This news?”

I had been studying Jimmy’s face. The eyes were still disarming, the button nose still buttony and his lips full. He was clean shaven, a slight sheen to his face from the after shave he had slapped on. I could smell it. It was good, an earthy mint. His hair was streaked with silver now but looked quite distinguished and the wave was still there giving him a raffish look and maintaining that boyishness to his face that had never quite gone away. His neck was a bit puffy and his jaw line too but for all that he was still in pretty good shape I had to admit, even if he was sporting a few extra pounds.

“You remember Sally Jones?”

He leered at me a little as he said it. He knew damn well I remembered her.

“Of course, who could forget Sally?”

I faked an uncaring laugh.

“Yeah that’s a fact, who could? What was it we used to call her?”

“Sunny.” I answered trying to affect indifference.

I had a sick feeling building in my stomach.

“That’s right, on account of her sunny smile. She used to smile all the time. Fuck she was gorgeous.” he intoned. “Remember how she always seemed older looking than the other girls? Wow what a stunner. The thing is mate I ran into her at a party last week. And you wouldn’t believe it, she looks exactly the same. Fuck I’d like to get into her pants. So we got talking about old times, at school and all and I’m meeting her for a drink tonight. Whaddaya reckon?”

He wanted me to say what a lucky bastard he was. He wanted me to be envious of his good fortune and I was. Not in a friendly way though. This news had rocked me. I had been dreaming of a chance meeting with Sally Jones for years. I'd driven down her street, hung out at the shops near her parents' place and trawled the internet trying to find some hint of where she was, looking for anything that would offer a half chance of meeting her again. Not a thing. There are a million Sally Jones' on Facebook. I remember doing much the same thing with my friend, Stewart Blakely. He's the mate I mentioned who did ask her to 'go' with him. He was a Scottish guy whose family had emigrated to Nova Scotia and from there to here. None of us had ever heard of the place and I've never met another person from there since. He's dead now, committed suicide. We used to hang out at the playground at the primary school that overlooked her house hoping to catch a glimpse. One day, Sally came out into her yard. She was wearing a yellow summer dress and she climbed the side fence and sat on top, like a sophisticated lady riding side saddle. I remember how the breeze caught her long dark hair and she just sat, not looking at us but teasing the hell out of us. Now Jimmy fucking Creighton had a shot. I wanted to get up right there, right then and tell him what a cunt I thought he was but I didn't. The waitress returned with our drinks and took our food orders.

"Did she mention me?" I asked once the girl had gone.

I realized just how pathetic I must have sounded.

"Hell yeah." cried Jimmy. "That was practically the first thing that came out of her mouth. 'How's that Carol Ebden?' she said."

"What did she say?" I asked failing to check my eagerness.

Jimmy laughed and took a long pull on his beer.

"Nah mate. She never mentioned you."

“You didn’t mention me to her?” I responded lamely.

Of course he didn’t. Like I said before Jimmy Creighton only ever talked about himself. I stared at my wine and took a sip.

“So, where are you meeting her?” I only asked because I hoped he would offer some morsel of information that would fill in the lost years.

“In Malthouse Lane. There’s a bar there, do you know it?”

I did. I went there all the time. It was a great bar, dimly lit and always playing great jazz and blues. It had little booths, very intimate, where lovers could hide themselves away. The thought of Jimmy Creighton let loose in a place like that with Sally Jones just about killed me. I know I’m jealous and all but even being kind you couldn’t say Jimmy wasn’t a bit of a moron and he had this caveman thing going on. I don’t get how women fall for guys like him. We stopped talking about Sally Jones when our meals arrived and Jimmy asked that favour he had in mind.

“You still in recruitment?” he asked.

I told him not anymore, that I had just left. He didn’t even ask why. Didn’t even ask what I was going to do just sailed right along being Jimmy.

“You still know all about writing resumes though? I need a new resume. I’m gonna put in for this mining job out west. Tons of money. I need it done by Friday. Can you do it?”

Yeah I could do it, I thought. But why the hell should I? The only reason I would, would be so as I could get Jimmy Creighton as far away from Sally Jones as possible. I played it cool, told him maybe, I’d see. I had a lot on having just left my job and all. When I dropped Jimmy off he winked at me and said:

“Wish me luck. I’ll let you know how I go.”

I was mad as a cut snake as I drove home, seriously angry, tropical cyclone mad, if you get my drift. All I could think of was Jimmy being all over Sally like some vile Bunny Munro. I nearly ran up the back of a station wagon full of kids stopped at a set of traffic lights. You'd have thought that would have straightened me up but it didn't. By the time I got home I had decided I was going to go to that bar, I was practically a regular there anyhow, just to see Sally Jones, just to try and mess up any chance Jimmy had with her. I'd thought about Sally for years. Wondered what she looked like and resigned myself to the comforting thought that she was probably about twenty stone after pumping out a few kids and that I wasn't missing out on anything. But no, according to Jimmy she was as beautiful as ever. She was the kind of girl that made you feel like a movie star, if you were with her that is. I'd have to look sharp to compete with Jimmy though. I'd wear my double breasted suit. It had padded shoulders that made me look bigger than I was and tapered in at the waist. It was dark olive green. I have to admit I look pretty good in that suit. I'm fairly tall and probably a bit skinny for my height but suits kind of hide all that. It was mid afternoon when I got home. The place was still a mess. My wife was still out and the boys still asleep. I had a mind to go downstairs and wake them but I lay down on the couch and fell asleep amidst the stink of beer and cigarette ash. When I woke my wife was cleaning up.

“Back from the dead, are we?” she said. “How was Jimmy?”

I sat up, rubbed my neck which was stiff and tried to stretch my back a little. My back was always sore. Part of getting old my doctor says. Getting old sucks, I can tell you.

“Jimmy’s Jimmy, you know.” I shrugged. “Thought we might meet up again a bit later in town, have a proper drink with a couple of his mates. You don’t mind do you?”

“No. That’s okay we haven’t anything planned.” she replied.

I felt a bit guilty putting it like that but I could hardly tell her why? I mean how do you tell your wife about some hang up you have over a girl from school for Christ’s sake? It was a bit crazy, a bit sick even. But I couldn’t help it. I mean my wife is a pretty good looking woman but she wasn’t Sally Jones.

“The boys up yet?” I asked

“They’ve gone to a friend’s place and then they’re going to some party later on. Joe borrowed your suit. He said he asked you.”

“Yeah he did. And I said no!” I exclaimed

Well that just tore things to bits. There was no way I could face Sally Jones without that suit. Fucking teenagers and fuck Jimmy Creighton.

6

My wife insisted we go out for dinner. I agreed. I was up for anything that would get Sally and Jimmy out of my mind. We went to a local restaurant. It was a converted railway carriage and only five minutes away. The menu hadn’t changed for thirty years and I don’t think the chef had either. I’d seen him once sucking on a fag at the back door. He was an ex-Navy guy with a faded fouled anchor on his forearm. We pretty much ate in silence crunching on the undercooked broccoli, carrots and potato. It was raining outside and a strong wind was blowing up. Beginning as a belly deep groan it transformed into a howling whistle in the treetops. Rain lashed the windows

and I was reminded of my visit to Doug Farrell's as I peered into the dark. A set of headlights reflected off the wet road as a car wound up the hill.

"How's Kate?" I asked absently.

"She's okay. I am worried about her though. You know how she gets. I thought I might drive down and see her after dinner. Make sure she's okay. You don't mind do you?"

I shook my head. She had just spent a whole day with the woman but I didn't protest. If I did it wouldn't have mattered anyway. The dinner had filled a hole but done nothing to quash my irritation. Left alone I decided I needed to go out. I rang Reuben Epstein. He was an old university friend and we'd stayed in touch. He knew Jimmy too as we'd all gone to college together. None of us finished but we had a good time. Reuben wasn't Jewish. His Dad was from a Jewish family but wasn't a practising Jew and married Reuben's mum whose family had been among Tasmania's first settlers. She was an austere woman who didn't suffer fools gladly. I liked her. She always said what she thought. They had already divorced by the time I met Reuben.

Reuben lived by himself about half an hour off the mountain. He said there was a band playing at his local and that we could check them out. Reuben loved music. He'd been in a punk band. They were called the Vegetables and Reuben adopted the stage name of Brussell Sprout. He sang. They weren't much good but at least they had a go. Casper Carrot played bass and Billy Turnip was the drummer but I forget the guitarist's name. Reuben had a bit of a Jimmy Creighton spurt while he was in the band. Women loved him and he had some gorgeous girlfriends but those days were gone. It was hard to imagine Reuben as that guy anymore. He wore neat clothes that made him look like a Dad from an old American sitcom. He'd really been

quite out there when I first met him. If you didn't know him you'd never have guessed. Maybe he was glad. He had kids from some of those relationships and he was a good Dad. He had a sister too and I was almost Sally Jones besotted by her for a couple of years.

“Good to see you man.” enthused Reuben when he greeted me at his door.

We hugged.

“Likewise.” I replied.

Whenever we caught up we trawled the same ground, said the same old things, told the same old jokes, remembered the same old people. There was something comforting about it, something safe. I told him I'd seen Jimmy and he laughed.

“How is Uncle?” he asked.

He always called Jimmy uncle and I never knew why, I didn't need to know. It was nice.

“Same old Jimmy.” I smiled. “He's thinking of heading out west.”

“What for?”

“Chasing the money I suppose?”

Reuben nodded.

“Maureen left him, you know.”

“I'd heard that. Don't know anything about this band. Do you?” said Reuben.

I shook my head. I hadn't seen a band for ages. Before I was married we used to watch live bands all the time. Once, when I was with Reuben, we spilled into the street with the crowd after a punk gig and a guy, I hadn't seen him before, started shouting, “Who wants to start a band? Who wants to start a band? Come on let's do it now. Who wants to start a band?” And he did. One guy stepped forward and another after a bit more cajoling. I so wanted to join them but I was terrified. Terrified of

taking the chance, terrified of being laughed at, terrified of failure. All the same reasons that stopped me asking out Sally Jones.

We watched the band set up. They were young. The first chords crashed through the front bar. They were a thrash metal outfit. I leaned into Reuben's ear.

"Fuck they're loud."

He nodded and smiled and drew a pair of foam ear plugs from his pocket and cork-screwed them into his ears. I lasted two and a half songs and tapped Reuben on the shoulder and jerked my head toward the back bar. He nodded and followed. We sat at a table. The music was reduced to a muffled rumble through the walls.

"That's better." I sighed

"Getting old, man"

"True." I admitted. "Don't tell me you enjoyed that though?"

Reuben smiled and nodded, "Not really."

We talked on a little while about this and that. Reuben ordered some steamed dim sims from the bar menu and smothered them in soy sauce. I helped myself to one.

"You remember Brenton Ashby?" asked Reuben.

"The painter guy that used to go out with Jenny Manson? Yeah, sure. What about him?"

"Necked himself, the other day. I ran into Jenny. She told me. She'd kept in touch."

"Well that's a bummer. Any reason?"

Reuben shrugged.

"Is there ever?"

I drained my drink.

"No, I suppose not. There's a lot of that these days."

That pretty much put a dampener on further conversation. I'm not sure who stifled the first yawn but I was home by eleven. My wife was asleep in bed, on her back snoring. I'd left a note to say I was going out. I didn't feel tired enough for bed. I stoked up the fire and hauled a chair in front of it and sat with my feet upon the hearth and my computer on my lap. The news of Brenton Ashby's death had saddened me and made me think of my mate Stewart Blakely. Stewie had everything to live for. He was a gun soccer player, had a good job, and married a solid girl. He was a real happy go lucky guy who loved a beer. It happened in the city, on the sixteenth floor in the office building where he worked. He used to ride a motorbike, a big bastard road bike that I could hardly hold up. I'd kicked the stand out once to hold it and nearly collapsed under its weight. Stewie thought it was hilarious. It was a Honda 900. No-one had any idea at his work. He came out of the lift one morning and walked to his desk. He took his boots off and folded his leather jacket. He placed his helmet back on his head and sprinted across the room, through the open office doors near the lift and launched himself past one of the girls sitting at her desk. The window behind her exploded and Stewie disappeared. The girl was a wreck. They said the wind pounded his body against the building all the way down. He landed on top of a taxi. There was no viewing. It took me a long time to get over Stewie's death. It was so meaningless, so random. No goodbyes, just right, I'm off. It left me angry. I kicked my car doors in one day, left dents in each one. I couldn't explain it. I smashed up my garden furniture another time, just took to it with an axe raging over Stewie. Can things ever be that bad, I wondered? His parents were shattered and his brothers glowered through the whole service. I wondered if Sally Jones ever knew. I never got that mad about my daughter. All I remember was feeling numb and standing on the church steps holding that little white coffin.

I checked my emails and there was a message from Jimmy. SALLY JONES. UBER BITCH was all it said. It was marked 10.32pm and had an attachment. I opened the file and it was a scan of the newspaper advertisement for the job he wanted to apply for. I smiled. Sally was safe. I decided there and then that I'd write that resume. I'd make it the best damn resume I'd ever written. I'd make sure Jimmy Creighton had every chance of winning that fucking position. And when he did, Hell, I'd be the one to drive him to the airport.

7

Vince Lombardi came to me in a dream that night. I didn't know what he looked like but in my dream his face was that of Doug Farrell. He was wearing my double-breasted suit with Jimmy Creighton's plum tie. He smiled at me and his gold eye tooth flashed like an ingot, its dazzle matched only by the sheen on his patent leather black brogues. Then, in the peculiar metamorphosis of dreams he turned into John Wayne and intoned "Go west young man, go west". I'm not even sure if John Wayne ever said those words. He was sitting in a covered wagon jerking his thumb to the right and chewing tobacco. Then he morphed again and the wagon was taken over by that dream of my daughter and her sweet high pitched voice singing the words from her favourite song. Mother duck said quack, quack, quack, quack and all of the little ducks came back. Except they didn't! I woke with a start in a cold sweat and with that and the red mist of Sally Jones I decided I needed to go to America.

Going to America wasn't an easy thing, at least not like in the olden days, you know. In my mind the thought of going to the docks and boarding a tramp steamer held great appeal. You wouldn't even need a passport. I could just leave a letter on the

mantelpiece. Those days were long gone. You couldn't just piss off under an assumed name, though God knows that would have made the whole thing easier. The real problem was how I could afford to having just quit my job and how did I tell my wife. It was a hair brained scheme I knew but I couldn't get it out of my head. It was a bit like having a song stuck in your brain looping over and over, an earworm that my mind just kept coming back to. I told my wife that night. It wasn't so much of a telling her that I was going, more of a suggesting a what if. I didn't tell her about Doug Farrell or Vince Lombardi or Sally Jones, just that I sort of needed a break after finishing work and that I needed to get away by myself. Naturally she wanted to know why and the only thing I could come up with was that the dreams of our daughter had started again. They had. I hated having said that because that dream had caused us years of fucked up nights. She had wanted me to go and talk to somebody about it and I said I could handle it and that the dream would go away. Eventually it did but it took years. My wife never said anything about them stopping. I suppose she figured mentioning it might have caused it to start again and she needed to move on us much as me. I always had a nagging thought that she was pissed off with me for not seeing someone, that if I had then maybe we wouldn't have had so many bad nights. But she never said anything, you know, she was like that. Mel said that I had never grieved properly and that you couldn't expect to forget shit like that, that it had to come out eventually. She also said that about the infatuation I had for Sally Jones, infatuation was her word, I had argued I was only curious. I wasn't grieving for Sally just annoyed that I had never had the balls to ask her out, I suppose. Anyway Mel reckoned this infatuation had triggered off guilt about being unfaithful and that that guilt triggered off unresolved grief and blame about my daughter's death and that seeing the little girl standing alone on the curb had set everything off. That's why I

flipped out. And when you are sort of sitting in a nuthouse thinking about all that sort of stuff it kind of seems obvious. At least it did on some days. On others I refused to believe it. My wife didn't say much after I told her and I just lay staring at the ceiling. Later I heard her sobbing and I lay there, frozen, unable to reach across and comfort her. I just let her cry and felt a total heel for being such a cold hearted bastard. The next morning, I awoke to a fully cooked breakfast, bacon, eggs, mushrooms, onions, toast and coffee. I must have looked a bit stunned.

My wife simply said "We need to sort a ticket for you...and a visa".

I must have looked more stunned and she just kissed me on the forehead.

"It's okay honey. If you need to go to America, then you need to go. I need you to be happy".

She was like that, my wife, you know. She could suck up pain like an industrial vacuum cleaner did dust. I'd seen it before with friends, work colleagues and family. They'd slight her, she who was the emotional rock for all of them, she who fought for what was best all the time and who always put others before herself. It had given me the shits for years and I just wanted to smash the pricks that did it to her but she would just smile and repeat her father's mantra, the bigger man is the one who can walk away. And now here I was in the line and she probably wished deep down that she could smash me. It wasn't how I had imagined things at all. I had seen myself slumped in a New York phone booth making a tortured long distance call confessing to my whereabouts while an impatient New Yorker rapped on the glass with the rain pouring down. My son arrived for breakfast. He opened the fridge and guzzled a pint of orange juice.

"Don't drink out of the bottle." chided my wife.

He grinned and filled a bowl to overflowing with cornflakes slopping milk on top.

“Your mum has made a cooked breakfast. Give the cornflakes a miss mate.”

“Nah, this’ll do.”

“Your Dad is going to America.”

He nodded.

“Cool”.

And that was about it really. I was going to America.

8

The dream followed me to America. Not so much on the plane but once I got there. I hate flying, always have but, you know, you sort of have to if you want to get anywhere. My fear of flying overrode the dream. It’s hard to sleep on a plane anyway. I go into a kind of fatalistic trance just waiting for the plane to explode or crash or whatever. It’s the same feeling I used to get when I went to the dentist as a kid just a gut churning sense of entrapment. I’d be consumed by an all pervading dread for days beforehand knowing I couldn’t get out of it. It was the same with flying only worse because every time I fly planes seem to start falling out of the sky for one reason or another. Either they disappear into thin air or are shot down by missiles or some deranged pilot decides to nose dive the fucking thing into a mountain because his missus has left him or something. I always check the pilot out to see if he looks normal, not that you could tell anyway or do anything about it if he wasn’t. I mean what if he had been up all night sniffing cocaine, how would you know? I liked to fly in the day too because I feel better if the pilot can see what’s coming. Anyway I was

going to America and my wife and son took me to the airport. It was a sunny morning so I felt better for that. We kissed and hugged and shook hands and then I walked through the gates with that grim resignation that I just told you about. I didn't look back.

You think of lots of stuff when you are alone and I remember thinking what was I really doing going overseas. What did I really expect to do? I wasn't a writer who was I kidding? I was running away I knew that. The dream, so as you know, because I've mentioned it a bit already, is this. It begins with my daughter's face. She's three with big brown eyes and blonde hair but its just her face, her perfect skin and demure stare and her face turns to that of a china doll with a small pink kissed mouth and the eyes are just black hollow holes and from them spew ribbons of seaweed thickening into a twisted curling mass and upon her alabaster face grey veins begin to form darkening to black and spreading in a myriad of fine jagging lines as the snaking tendrils begin to envelop the head squeezing around it tightly until it explodes into a cloud of fine smoking black and I wake up, sweating and breathless. It's the same all the time and with it, I'm never sure exactly when, at the beginning or the end or somewhere in between, her sweet high pitched voice is singing a mournful lament.

Five little ducks went out one day
Over the hills and far away
Mother duck said, "Quack, quack, quack, quack,"
but only four little ducks came back...

But as I said the dream didn't affect me on the plane. On long flights you just try to settle into some sort of mindless existence, hoping the hours won't stretch too long, trying to punctuate the journey into survivable segments, lunch, movie, a walk down the aisle, brush your teeth, dinner, read a book, try to sleep, watch another movie. It works for awhile but then your eyes get gritty and it's hard to do anything. The lady

next to me, she was from Coventry but lived in France and was married to, of all things, a dentist, anyway she popped a pill and slept for fourteen hours. It made it really awkward to try and get out and do anything and I was busting for a leak by the time she woke up.

I had to pass through immigration in Los Angeles and the young guy at the desk had Hollywood good looks and asked where I was staying. I told him. It was a one room apartment on 116th Street, East Harlem. He smiled and returned my passport.

“Just be careful. It can be a bit edgy there. You should be right up to about 120th. Enjoy your stay”.

Five hours later I was standing on the curb at La Guardia waiting at the taxi rank for a cab. The usher, if that’s what you call him, asked me where I was going so I told him. He clicked his tongue and with a note of caution suggested that I should not stray too far into the one twenties. I wondered what I had let myself into but I was filled with a sense of excitement as I threw myself into the city.

9

I’d been to New York once before. It was a long time ago when I was my son’s age. I remember flying in from London on one of those cheap and nasty airline deals. It was the start of the discount wars on international flights. We had to wait on the tarmac for ages at Heathrow while they repaired one of the doors that wouldn’t close properly. That didn’t fill me with great hope nor did the chief flight attendant when he crossed himself as we prepared for take off. When I arrived in New York a tall girl with blue streaked hair asked me if I wanted to share a cab into town. I agreed and wished I had

have asked her to catch up later but I didn't know how. She said she was a publicist for the Ramones and I figured I wouldn't have had a hope in Hell anyway. The Ramones were pretty cool. We didn't talk much but I remember her pointing out Citi Field home of the Mets and Flushing Meadows where the tennis was played. We got let out downtown somewhere. I couldn't tell you what street or avenue it was on. I remember the Greyhound terminal was close by and so was an old run down YMCA where I decided to stay.

The YMCA was about five storeys and the man at the desk gave me a key to a room on the second floor. I had to pass two black guys playing splits on the stairwell with a Bowie knife. I remember my back cold with fear as I passed them, avoiding all eye contact. The key was a large skeleton type one that you'd expect to fit the front door of a haunted mansion. The attendant had assured me there was a shared bathroom facility. There was but the bath had a thick tongue of rust running its length and the taps spun freely on the shredded spindles. The smell of mould was so pungent it almost burned my throat. I found my room which was a converted bathroom or laundry with the shapes of the old plumbing still visible from where the pipes had been torn off the walls. The mattress stank of stale piss and overhung the single bed on which it was thrown. Bed ticking leaked from it where a spring had protruded through. I remember throwing my bag on the bed and going straight to the window to plan an escape route in case I needed one. There was a ledge on which I could step and grasp a downpipe which at a pinch I reckon I could monkey down. Anyway it never came to that as I went to sleep as soon as I lay down. I woke at first light and lit out of that joint as fast as I could. I spent the day walking the streets until I could get a bus out of town in the evening.

The city still jumped at you and smelled of boiled cabbage and rotten lettuce. That was the smell that wafted up from the basements through the metal and wooden entrance covers which were flung open during the day. I was gob smacked by the brazenness of its people. I remember watching a tall muscular copper who looked like a storm-trooper adorned with baton, gun and handcuffs arguing with a guy. The copper had his legs spread with his hands on his hips looking down on the guy who was pressing his face upward so that their noses almost touched and swearing at each other over something while another guy, as bold as brass, was walking quickly up the street shouting “Reds, yellas, uppers, downers.” and flashing a handful of pills to all passers by. A bit farther along I crossed the street and a slim black woman cupped my crotch and asked if I was looking for a girl. I declined as politely as I could and she gave my balls a squeeze and asked if I was sure. I scuttled away mumbling that I was and wishing that I wasn’t. I stopped at a burger place and sat on a bar stool next to a guy about my age. We got talking about music and stuff and he seemed okay. He said he was going over to Alphabet City and asked if I wanted to come. I said I would and we ended up in a run down back street full of junkies. The guy was there to score and I followed him to a bombed out looking place. It was worse than the YMCA with boarded up windows. Some guy appeared in the shadows behind the boarded doorway and told us to wait there. Soon after a bucket was lowered from the third floor and the guy I was with placed some notes in it. I remember watching the bucket sway and twirl as it was hauled up. A minute later it was lowered again with a small clear plastic bag of white powder. The guy took it and said hang on as he had to get some needles and he disappeared around the corner. By that stage I was starting to freak out. A group of guys in hooded jackets had walked into the alley and paused opposite me. I clutched my bag a little tighter and turned and headed back from where I’d

come. I remember not looking back until I found a bench to sit on. It was near a main intersection and I felt a little safer. I waited a bit to see if the guy reappeared but I never saw him again. I found a subway and got myself back to the Greyhound terminal by dusk as the man at the ticket office had advised me to get home by then. I figured he must have known I was scared. The place was a madhouse then but it's a lot cleaner and safer these days, well at least I thought it was.

At the airport I gave the cab driver the address and climbed into the front seat. He sat crouched forward at the wheel with his head cocked toward the radio. A baseball game was in progress and the driver was a fan. He told me he was from Armenia and had migrated ten years ago and that baseball was the best game in the world. Between small talk he would shush me with his hand as he leaned closer to the console. After the play he would resume conversation explaining one time how the next batter had an average in the high three hundreds. That didn't mean much to me but apparently it was a big deal.

It took about forty-five minutes to get to my apartment. I paid the driver and stood on the pavement hoping that it was the right place and that there wouldn't be any problems with the entry code I'd been given. The apartment was a modest affair. To enter you had to walk down five steps from the street pavement. A security door let you into a small lobby and hallway. My room was the first on the left. It was a single room with a kitchenette, really just a single bench with a small bar fridge set below it, and bathroom at one end and a double bed set against the bathroom wall. The forward part of the room, opposite the door, was set up as a lounge with a coffee table and settee and a small television. Two small bay windows looked out up to the pavement which was fenced off by a spiked wrought iron palisade. One of the windows had old shutters coated with one too many layers of paint. Both were barred.

One had a metal grill on the outside while the other had the grill on the inside meaning I could only open one window. The sounds of the city flowed in quite unrestricted which was quite pleasant. It was interesting to hear snatches of New York conversation float in at all hours. They'd hang in the air above me and then drift off as the people moved on. I didn't understand much of what was said. Español Mexicano and mother fucking Black English mostly. Sitting curled in the old armchair that was set next to the windows was a bit like sitting hunched over an old bakerlite radio twiddling the knobs to see what you can tune into. It had the same randomness without the tactile pleasure. I spent the early hours of most mornings curled up in the armchair's comforting shabbiness after waking from the dream and then listening to those dangling New York conversations.

There is an underlying tension in New York. It's real not imagined. You hear it in the exaggerated conversations, the tooting of car horns and the openly expressed indignation that folk relay to all around them when their sensibilities have been jarred. The African Americans inject a fair dose into the mix. They functioned at a level beyond my own inhibitions and seemed to be testing the limits. They have this cultivated aggression that is full of machismo, one that teeters on the absurd at times but one that you try to avoid in case it turns on you. The place is not quite tinderbox dry but it wouldn't take much I suspect to set off a wildfire. It all makes for a pretty volatile atmosphere, I reckon. New Yorkers seem to accept it as some weird extension of democratic freedom. Sitting there, eavesdropping, I figured it wouldn't take long to gather some interesting stuff to write about and I remember thinking I would try and take this writing thing seriously. I was on a bit of budget time line. My wife had given me a month. Still I figured four weeks was long enough to get to know the city, to imbibe it. How to do that was the question. I could be a tourist and it would be silly

not to take a look at some of the regular sights or I could do a Bukowski and find a bar somewhere and live a month looking through a whisky glass. Of course he'd done LA but Shepard, Burroughs and Kerouac had done much the same thing at the Chelsea Hotel. They'd all had a stint there. Dee Dee Ramone had stayed there too and churned out *Chelsea Horror Hotel*. I made a point of visiting the place but not before I bought an exercise book and a pen from the mini-mart around the corner.

10

The section of East Harlem I was staying was 116th East midway between 1st and 2nd Avenue and was a vibrant little place. Across the road was an Italian bakery, Morrone's, with a plant box hanging off the second floor balcony. A high cyclone wire fence enclosed basketball courts around the corner which marked the place as a real 'hood' as my son would have said. Near the courts there was a laundromat and an excellent little Mexican restaurant that had the most delicious home made tacos and between 117th and 118th there were lots of little grocery stores. A few doors down there was a funeral parlour and just past that a sports bar. I don't do death well. I don't just mean my daughter, Brenton Ashby and Stewie Blakely. I mean everybody. My mother, my friends' parents, blokes I'd played football with, just everybody.

If there was one downer of where I was staying it was that bloody funeral parlour. I'd hurry past it and try to pretend not to see it. It wasn't so bad if I was catching the underground as that was the other way but other times I couldn't avoid it. And trying to not think about it only made me think about it more, you know. It being there just dragged up all these ghosts from my past that would sit in my head until something else happened that washed them away. I don't think I have anymore ghosts

than anybody else really. The funeral parlour sort of made me take stock and indulge in some macabre accounting. I mean I even thought about Benny Bradman. He was a kid who came to our school in Form one. He was English, of slight build, with a pasty white face, red-rimmed eyes and longish lank brown hair. He was quiet, probably just shy being at a new school and all. What I remember most about him was this half smile that would curl one corner of his mouth. Like I said he didn't say much but he'd have this smile going and you always thought he was thinking stuff, like he knew something that you didn't. Anyway I only knew him four weeks. After one weekend he never came to school again. He just disappeared. At Monday morning assembly the headmaster announced that Benny had been killed on the weekend while riding his push bike. It was an odd feeling knowing I'd never see him again. Not that we were close friends or anything. Apart from my grand fathers I suppose Benny was one of the first people I knew that had died and he being my age freaked me out.

I could give you a day by day description of my time in New York I suppose but I reckon that would be pretty boring, you know. But I will mention a couple of things because they were kind of neat. The first few days I did spend doing the tourist thing. I'd take the 6 Train downtown to Grand Central and traipse up 5th Avenue looking at shop fronts, Trump Towers, Harry Winston, Tiffany's and then head up to Central Park for a stroll. One day I was touched for twenty by a couple of silver tongued Rap artists.

“What's your name?”

“Carol”

“Then I'm going to call you MC Hurricane ok”.

Anyway they banged on a bit. I suppose it was worth the show and I did get a CD though I still felt a little ripped off. A few days later I was sitting on a bench in the park and four teenage girls walked past and one of them was saying.

"That's the worst thing I've ever done, ever. Why didn't you stop me paying for it? I hate myself. Ugh!"

And there in her hand was the instrument of her grief - a signed CD by the rapper Mo Pain, Prince of Thieves, and his friend DJ Infamous! I wondered what moniker they had given her.

I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The museum houses some big names, Degas, Monet, Latrec, Picasso. Pollock, too many, you know, as you can't really concentrate enough on a particular artist. They had a Civil War exhibition featuring some of Winslow Homer's sketches which was pretty cool. On another day I took the 6 Train downtown and then the N to Coney Island. The track passes over the Manhattan Bridge which virtually parallels the Brooklyn Bridge so gives some great views of the city as well as the rooftops of Brooklyn. There's hardly an inch of Brooklyn untouched by graffiti. The Brooklyn Cyclones' stadium is close by and backs on to the boardwalk. The Mermaid Festival was on so I thought it would be worth a look. There was a trio of Cuban guys leaning on the railing of the boardwalk slurping down some drink in plastic cups trying to schmooze up the girls walking by. They were loud and obnoxious and thought they were funny but the girls' faces told a different tale. After meandering along the boardwalk for a while I took position under the shade of the railway entrance and watched the crowd build. People of all hues were coming in from all points of the city in all manner of garb. It was a serious lava flow of humanity spewing into the street.

That same night I headed to Little Italy which is a restaurant strip that stretches two or three blocks. It's very touristy but the food's good and I scored a nice table on a small balcony overlooking Mulberry Street. Then one of those things happened that you dream of happening but only ever happen in the movies, you know, like the hope you have on a plane that you will be sitting next to some drop dead gorgeous girl but only ever cop fat sweaty business men whose guts overlap the arm rests. They really should be charged more for their tickets. Anyway I was about halfway through my spaghetti amatriciana which is my all time favourite Italian meal when I noticed a woman talking to one of the waiters. She was gorgeous. If I wanted to be critical I'd say her hair was a bit too Farah Fawcett which is a problem with American girls generally, they all like their hair big. But like I said she was gorgeous, at least down to her ankles where she spoiled the effect of her little black dress by wearing a pair of hot pink lined tennis shoes. That's another thing American girls do, they carry their dress shoes with them and walk in their more comfortable ones. It makes a lot of sense but like I said, you know, it spoils the fashion aesthetic. I was trying not to stare and then she and the waiter looked my way and I was caught like a rabbit in headlights. You know that moment when they look and you look away but know that they have seen you looking at them. I started into the amatriciana again. The next thing I know is the waiter is standing in front of me asking if I would mind if the lady shared my table as the restaurant was full. She was looking hopeful. I nodded and he nodded at her and she came up with a thankful smile. Her name was Laura and she worked on Staten Island and caught the ferry every day. She lived down near Battery Point which was pretty good for someone who had to catch the ferry each day. She was a customer service agent with a hire car company and she was going to a jazz night. There was a little place over on Mott that she wanted to check out but she

hadn't eaten all day so was starving and she just loved Italian food. I bought her a drink, a Dolcetto and ordered myself another. She thought my accent was cute and said she'd be happy to take me to the gig if I wanted to go. I said that would be lovely and we walked the short distance to the bar where the gig was being held. She slipped on a pair of stilettos before we went in.

I've got to say I felt pretty chuffed walking into the place next to Laura. She was a stunner. The bar was pretty nondescript from the outside. You stepped through a beaded curtain then another door and there it was. The noise was ridiculous. You could just hear the band which was tucked in a corner. There was a small dance floor but no-one dancing. There was one stool available at the bar so I guided Laura to it and stood next to her. I ordered our drinks. She asked for something I'd never heard of before, a cocktail of some sort that was a specialty of the house. I settled for a Canadian Club on ice. Conversation was difficult and required lots of close whispering in the ear which I didn't mind as she smelled nice. Laura laughed a lot. I don't know if it was my accent or my repartee. She was also one of those girls that touches you all the time, you know, a hand on your sleeve or resting on your shoulder as she spoke. I didn't mind, of course. Two couples had got up to dance and had no clue really. Laura nudged me and I leant down to her. She held my shirt lightly.

“Can you dance?”

I grimaced.

“A little rock ‘n’ roll but nothing great.”

She nodded and cast a glance at the two couples.

“Better than that?”

I laughed.

“I think so.”

“Come on.”

She took my hand and led me to the dance floor. We squeezed past some people and I guided her into the corner closest to the band. I'm pretty limited with what I could do but I could tell she knew how to dance and she masked some of my clumsiness. It was an up tempo number so I rolled her out, tucked her in and turned her a few times keeping it as tight as I could. We lasted two dances before being crowded off the floor by a few other dancers. We resumed our spot at the bar and I ordered another round. We were getting along fine. Sally Jones was light years away. Then it happened, that moment when most guys would kill it but not me. Laura paused and pulled me toward her and lifted her head to me. It had all the hallmarks of a movie star kiss. A magic moment but I blanched. Not just your subtle back off blanch but like I'd been jolted with a cattle prod. To say she was a bit shocked is an understatement. Her face went from wide eyed surprise to frowning scowl in an instant. I held up my ring finger as some sort of lame symbol of explanation. She pursed her lips a little and nodded as if to say I get it. I mumbled an apology. She half laughed and said no it was her fault, I had said I was married and please not to think of her as some sort of Jezebel. I said I wouldn't and things kind of got awkward. She declined another drink and then said she had to get going. I offered to walk her to wherever. She said she was fine and I stayed for another. World's greatest lover I thought and had another.

I lurched from the bar and sucked in the evening air and in something of a daze found the subway and headed home watching the walls and lights flash by. I walked past my apartment straight past the funeral parlour with no thought of dead people. The sports bar was relatively unpopulated. There were three different games of soccer on each of the large televisions above the bar. A bonus was that the sound

was turned down and soul music was playing throughout the joint. The fellow a few stools along to my right was singing along with a sweet voice and another brother behind me somewhere was given to breaking into song as well. I got into a conversation with a young Jewish guy one stool along to my left and was regaling him with my take on the comparative success and failure of Italian and German fascism. He had raised the topic. I mean you don't just go into a bar and start talking about fascism even if you have had a skinful. He had a conflicted family history as his father was German, not of Jewish origins, and his mother an Israeli. After two margaritas, a burger and fries and half way into a cosmopolitan I was taking him to task on the merits of Obamacare and America's failure in its duty of care over gun control. He had voted for Obama but changed to the Republicans last election and was expressing the standard view that guns don't kill, people do - he wasn't a gun owner but his brother-in-law had six - and that why should his taxes pay for other people's health care. I explained with drunken lucidity that societies are judged on how well they looked after the poor, that it was in his best interests to narrow the gap as those folk he wanted to deny would be jumping his back fence come the revolution. He declared he hated me as I had nearly convinced him.

I made my way home and sat on my bed with my head heavy and swimming. My laptop was still on and there was a message from Jimmy Creighton. I opened it and read. THANKS MATE. I GOT THE JOB. I'M STOKED AND BY THE WAY, SALLY JONES NEVER STOPPED TALKING ABOUT YOU. HERE'S HER NUMBER. I couldn't believe it. Sally Jones had remembered me and there was her number. Then I passed out.

There was nothing remarkable about the day that I lost it. I say nothing remarkable but of course you can't get an email like I had from Jimmy and not be unaffected. I mean fucking Sally Jones had asked about me, after all those years, and now I had her number. I had to check in the morning when I woke as I thought I must have been dreaming or imagining it as I was pretty pissed. But no, there it was, Sally Jones' number. I copied it into the corner of a page from my exercise book and tore it carefully into a long strip and slipped it into the front pocket of my jeans. With that gold in my possession I headed downtown. All I could think of on the train was what time I could ring and what on earth I should say. I mean the last time I'd tried a conversation with someone from my past it hadn't gone so well. Visiting Doug Farrell was the reason I was here. I suppose I had wanted to have some sort of an affair with Sally, I mean what would be the point of contacting her if I didn't? And then I thought how nuts that would be. I was married and I had no idea what her circumstances might be though she must have been single or separated or something to have agreed to meet Jimmy. Then I thought back to the jazz bar and how feeble my efforts had been there and figured I would never be able to follow through even if I wanted to. But Hell this was Sally Jones and I had to do something. And of course I was placing a lot of trust in Jimmy. The number probably wasn't real anyway.

I got out at 42nd and found a pay phone. I took the number from my pocket and placed it on the top of the phone and stuffed some coins into the slot. My heart was in my mouth as I punched in the international and area codes before entering the number. I waited with my whole body a twitter, the ends of my fingertips a tingle, there was silence and then I could here the number being dialled in that odd electronic

sing song tone, there was a connecting click and the phone began to ring. I pressed the receiver hard against my ear to cut out the traffic noise counting the ring tones. Seven. Was it too late to ring? Eight. No it was only evening back home. Nine. Late, but not too late. Ten. Shit I should hang up.

“Hello.”

It was a woman’s voice and not one I knew. I pressed the receiver down and replaced the phone. I heaved an enormous sigh and swore to myself. I picked up the number and stuffed it into my back pocket. Jimmy wasn’t bull shitting. I couldn’t say what I was really thinking then. My mind was awash with a thousand thoughts. I walked down to 5th Avenue and then up to Central Park where I bought a hot dog with mustard. After that I sort of just wandered aimlessly around the park. It’s a massive place and you can spend all day there. It’s full of places that have featured in the movies and I ended up on that bridge near the boathouse. For one brief melodramatic moment I thought of dropping that scrap of paper in the lake but thought with my luck I’d probably get done for littering so I slipped it back into my pocket.

I hadn’t meant to take the train to 125th it just sort of happened. I kind of blanked out on the train just thinking about Sally Jones and when I realized I had overshot 116th I had to get out at 125th and come back but then I thought I’d have a look, you know. They’d all said don’t go beyond 120th and I thought seeing as I was here I may as well take a look. To tell the truth I don’t remember too much about it. I remember the blue of the sky as I emerged from the shade of the subway. It was busy, lots of traffic, the usual New York stink but there was nothing remarkable about the place. There were two female police officers talking to a person in a car across the road. They weren’t particularly tall but both had massive arses that were accentuated

by the tight pants they were wearing or maybe their trousers weren't so tight it was just their arses were so big, I dunno.

The thing that caught my eye though was a little girl. She was only about three and her hair was braided. She was holding a soft toy, a giraffe, I think. Anyway I was about to cross the street and she was just standing there by herself, right on the curb with all that traffic and I went over to her and took her hand and said:

“Hi Sweetie, come away from there. You're a bit too close to the road.”

She didn't say anything, just looked at me and then a woman rushed up to me, a big aggressive African-American lady shouting at me:

“What you doing with my child?”

I tried to explain that I wasn't doing anything with her kid I just didn't want her to get run over. The woman snatched up the girl and was looking around at everybody saying, “He tried to take my baby.”

This was total bullshit, of course. I just didn't want the little girl to get run over. People started to crowd around and the mother was going crazy and the press of people forced me onto the road and then somebody called me ‘whitey’ which sort of incensed me and I yelled back something about how dare they say that as I don't call them ‘nigger’. And in that moment while surrounded by this shouting mob my mind flashed back to the swimming pool and my daughter's birthday party and there I was like Mother Duck leading a line of ducklings through the wading pool back to the seats to give out the lolly bags, laughing and looking back to make sure every one was in tow and I thought they were except they weren't and then there was the realisation that my daughter wasn't with me. I remember being gripped by a mild panic but nothing too bad until the life guard's whistle started to pierce the chattering noise.

The guard was a young bloke with a sunburnt nose and he came rushing with splashing high steps through the crowd and scooped up my daughter. She was limp, her fair skin gleaming and dripping. The young guy laid her on the ground and tried to resuscitate her. They called an ambulance and I held her cold little fingers as they wheeled her out. The ambos continued working on her but by the time we reached the hospital it was over. She was gone. You can't explain that pain to anybody. I can't now and I guess I never will. You just want to curl up and die.

Anyway all that was messing with my head and the people were yelling and the two cops came over and I saw them and remember having read something about how gun happy New York cops were. So I told them there was no need to shoot, that these people were crazy. The next thing I remember I was thrashing around on the ground like a speared fish unable to open my mouth and an excruciating pain coursing through me. The fuckers had tazered me. Me, like I was the problem. I mean it wasn't me who had left my kid unattended standing on the curb of a busy intersection.

I suppose I should feel lucky that they hadn't actually shot me. I've read a lot of stories in the newspapers about itchy fingered coppers shooting first and asking questions later. It's true that most often it's coppers shooting black people but it seemed to me there was a fair bit of white hate going on at that curb and who could have blamed them for wanting to get even.

Apart from noticing that the policewoman who handcuffed me had really small feet and really shiny shoes I can't say I remember anything else. Mel said it took them a few days to work out who I was. The reason for that was that I preferred to leave my wallet and passport in the room before I went out as I was pretty paranoid about getting robbed. I'd hide them under the mattress. Sometimes I'd take my credit card but most times I kept some small change and notes in my pants pocket with my

metro card. I'd stuff a twenty down my socks as insurance in case I did get mugged. All they had to go on was that slip of paper with Sally Jones' phone number. I can only guess what might have happened. The New York cops probably rang Sally or got the Australian Feds to ring her and ask if she knew anybody in New York matching my description. She probably wouldn't have had any idea about what they were talking about and they would have asked if she had given her number out to anyone recently and she would have said, yes, Jimmy fucking Creighton and then they would have asked if she had his number and she probably did because she had met him for drinks. Then they would have got in touch with Jimmy and he would have twigged it was me they were chasing down. And then Jimmy would probably have figured he had an opportunity to have another crack at Sally before he headed west. You know, play the shocked friend and look for consolation sort of thing. Of course, Sally might have become curious and rung fucking Jimmy trying to find out why the hell she was being rung up by the cops. She might have even felt compelled to try and get a message to me. But why would she? She hadn't seen me for thirty plus years. Anyway, Jimmy was probably bull-shitting me about her having asked about me. And why would she? I was nothing. Nobody. Then of course my wife would have been contacted and God only knows what she was told, probably the hamburger with the lot.

It doesn't seem to matter how many fire flies I count while sitting in this wicker chair. As relaxing as it can be it doesn't do anything for the twisted knot in my stomach. How the fuck am I going to explain Sally Jones?