

A photograph of a man in a white sweater and blue jeans standing in front of a black metal gate. The gate is flanked by brick pillars. The background shows a brick wall and green trees. The text 'Time To Think' is overlaid in a large, yellow, serif font.

Time
To
Think

Short Stories
by Rigby Taylor

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Time to Think

Eight Short Stories

by
Rigby Taylor

This collection of short stories is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it
are the work of the author's imagination.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Also by **Rigby Taylor**

Rough Justice
Dome of Death
Dancing Bare
Sebastian
Jarek

Cover: Jürgen in Padua. Photo by the author.

Time to think

Sprawled over the lounge on the verandah like one of Henry Moore's gargantuan sculptures, my visitor, who obviously considered his taciturn company sufficient reward for three sugar-laden cups of tea, five cupcakes and my increasingly laboured efforts to entertain, farted softly.

As I could think of no suitable reply, the already lengthy silence lengthened further and I began to wonder if his essential self had slipped away when with a grunt and a shudder he yawned himself back

to the present, hauled up his shirt, scratched sluggishly at an alarmingly distended, hairy white belly and declared, 'You're lucky to be retired.'

'Why?' I sighed, wondering if the great lump was ever going to go.

'All that time to yourself. Doing whatever you want. No deadlines. No pressure to conform. No false expectations...'

'Mmm.'

How long have you been retired?

'Ten years.'

'And you're... what? Sixty?

'Sixty-nine.'

'You see? It shows. You look much younger. It's all that freedom from stress. Having time to keep yourself slim and fit.'

'Perhaps.'

'No need to sound so enthusiastic.'

'OK.'

'It can't be all that bad.'

'You reckon? The trouble with being free of those things you mentioned, is that I'm also free to think.'

'So?'

'Thinking too much is counter productive; one eventually enters a metaphysical maze of insoluble questions such as: Who am I? What am I? Why am I?'

'Serious stuff,' he acknowledged with a ponderous nod.

As that was the extent of his contribution and the sound of my own voice seemed preferable to another prolonged silence, I decided to elaborate on my newfound theory. 'While actively engaged in my career,' I began solemnly, 'pitting my wits against competitors, interacting, planning, preparing and anticipating, I knew exactly who and what I was by observing other people's reactions to me. That why was equally straightforward—to get a better car and house, take holidays, pay off loans and so on. However, now I no longer go to work, the 'mirror' of other people's reactions is no longer available. I'm forced to seek inside myself for proof of my existence.'

'You've got Jon—surely he's your 'mirror', as you call it?'

'He should be, but after forty-four years our reactions to each other are more predictable than our reactions to ourselves. We've reflected each other for so long that sometimes I'm not sure whether I'm talking to Jon or myself. Don't you find that with your wife? You do have a wife I suppose?'

A protracted sigh. 'Twenty-one years. It seems longer. We don't talk much. Sometimes we hardly see each other from one week's end to the next. Margaret's always out doing something or other. Or I am. We're social butterflies,' he added with a smirk.'

I suppressed a smile. Hippopotamus? Yes. Butterfly? No. 'Anyway,' I continued when the desire to laugh had abated, 'thinking has led me to some extremely depressing conclusions.'

'Such as?'

'Well... I imagined that as I grew older I would eventually become the sum of my past actions. If I achieved a string of successes, did the requisite number of good works and produced a few things worth, then in my dotage I could relax—swathed in the splendid 'garment' of my achievement. Contentedly encased in the cocoon of past deeds, so to speak. But it's not like that at all!'

'It isn't?'

'No! I've discovered that we are not a collection of our past successes, not even those of yesterday. We are simply the person we are at the time of thinking about it. Our character and worth are defined by our most recent actions, thoughts and words. Whatever we have done in the past is irrelevant! W

have to proclaim ourselves anew every second of our existence, and...and I'm tired of it!

~~'It certainly sounds exhausting. But the people who knew you before you retired; surely they know your worth?'~~

'It doesn't work like that. Try making a mistake at work on Monday and see who isn't ready to pronounce you no longer capable of running the show. Even after twenty years—or whatever it is you've given them—of faultless service.'

'You're right. Horrible thought.' His gaze drifted from navel to wristwatch, and my spirits rose only to be dashed as he flicked a wad of lint from his navel and settled back.

I was beginning to enjoy this instant philosophising, so elaborated artistically. 'The real horror comes when I think about some of the not so wonderful things I've done, or worse, haven't done. While I was a busy little bee with no time to mope, I told myself I was having a wonderful life. Everything that happened was for the best in the best of all possible worlds—to paraphrase Dr Pangloss.'

'Dr who?' he interjected

'No, Dr Pangloss,' I repeated as if to a slow pupil.

'I mean who's Dr whatshisnamegloss?'

'A character in a story by Voltaire. It doesn't matter, stop interrupting.'

'Sorry.'

'In other words,' I continued pedantically, 'If the bad things didn't happen, then neither would the good.'

'Sounds sensible.'

'Don't be ridiculous! It's a load of crap! To convince myself that my life was all roses I simply blanked out the bad bits—pretending they never happened, or had been good for me. You know. stiffening the backbone, character-building?'

'Well, surely that's true?' My guest failed to stifle a yawn.

'Not always,' I snapped at his rudeness. 'Life's normal hardships prevent us becoming soft, but when the unpleasantness is irrational; when it destroys pleasure in living and forces one to adopt modes of behaviour unsuited to one's character, then it is most decidedly bad!'

'Did that happen to you?'

'Yes! When reviewing my early life I don't like what I see. I reached puberty at the age of eleven—two years before my peers. A small kid with over-developed genitals and a moustache. That was traumatic, especially with a mother who railed against God for making her hairy. Then at high school a couple of slobs in the class above me, sensing I was somehow different, singled me out for abuse. Name calling, dropping bags on my toes, things like that. Not much, but terrifying for someone desperate to blend in.

'For years I faked interest in girls, booze, car racing, footy. I forced myself to laugh when some dick head got drunk and chundered all over his mate's carpet. I male-bonded like a pro. Went to all the parties, suffered the excruciating boredom of feeling up my latest girlfriend for hours in the back seat of a car. Anything to prove I was one of the lads. When thinking about such an appalling waste of my youth I understand terrorists' urges to hurt those who've hurt them!'

'Grist to the mill... grist to the mill.'

Ignoring the fatuous platitude I ploughed on, by now thoroughly aroused. 'The idiotic gay mentality of heterosexual males destroys the uniqueness at the core of every human, replacing it with dreadful conformity. You guys are prepared to sacrifice independence just to be part of the group. That makes you no better than pack animals! You're like wild dogs, empty of individuality because you're so bloody frightened of rejection by your peers. I look like the tough, sporty type, so was expected to love rugby—but team sports with all their macho madness leave me cold. In a tea

environment I feel like a lemon in a bowl of oranges.’

‘A suitably fruity metaphor.’

I granted him a small, sad smile but he was again scrutinising his ostentatious watch.

‘Time to go?’ I asked hopefully.

‘No, no! I’ve just bought this watch—well a chronometer actually, it’s so accurate that...’

I let the fat fellow rave about his technological toy while planning my next move. If I couldn’t get him to leave in the next five minutes then I’d forego the evening meal. When he finally shut up I leaned forward and gazed soulfully into his piggy little eyes. ‘Fear of others led me to deny the existence of the strongest of my natural urges, and by the age of twenty-two I was a sexual cripple with masturbation my sole sexual release. When I attempted sexual relations with any other person, no matter how attractive, I was impotent!’

My guest yawned largely and muttered, ‘Not good.’

‘Not good! Can’t you see?’ I screamed as if teetering on the edge of sanity. ‘It needn’t have been like that! Fear of harassment, violence, and worse from my fellow humans warped my development!’

My visitor was beginning to twitch. Sensing success I turned up the volume and howled, ‘Because I’ve kept my problems to myself, my benighted sister has probably told you I’ve waltzed easily through life. Stupid bitch. Her problems are the only ones that matter to her. The truth is I’ve hobbled along like a cripple! Like everyone else she doesn’t even take my years with Jon seriously—to all you het bastards I’m still a bachelor!’

My listener snorted in disgust. ‘You misunderstand your sister, she’s a....’

‘Crap! She’s a self-centred cow. We had to flee the house at the beach because of a gang of child terrorists. Had to sell the farm... But that’s not the worst. What really drives me crazy is the realisation that we each have only this one life—and mine’s been stuffed up!’

‘Everyone has regrets.’

‘Perhaps,’ I said, allowing a sly smile to linger on my lips as I reached for the sharp little knife we’d used for peeling the mango. ‘But what really hurts is that I can’t undo a single action or inaction from the past and I can’t stop thinking about it—because when you’re retired there’s nothing else to think about, so I’ve decided someone has to pay.’ I stood, ran my finger along the blade and gazed speculatively at his vast belly and sidled around the table towards him, leaving his escape route open.

Eyes wide in disbelief, he hauled himself upright, clutched his shirt to his bosom and fled.

The panicked spinning of the tyres of his ridiculous little sports car nearly had him slithering off the edge of the drive into the trees. He only just missed the gateposts. The fading roar of his exhaust was replaced by the sweet scent of mimosa, the mournful wail of a catbird and the shrill screech of a honey-eater. Across the valley the late afternoon sun was dusting the escarpment with gold. Beside the path, fairy wrens dragged down grass stems and pecked at seeds. Jon wandered down from wherever he’d been hiding.

‘Has fat-guts gone then?’

‘Suddenly remembered an appointment.’

‘I heard shouting.’

‘Mmm... he became somewhat excited. I don’t think he’ll be back.’

‘Who was he?’

‘A friend of my depressed sister. She probably told him to call in as a punishment.’

‘Punishment? What for?’

‘She thinks it’s a sin for people to be happy, especially queers—they’re supposed to be in eternal torment or something. Why do miserable people want to inflict their wretchedness on the few happy ones?’

‘Pass.’

‘Is that latest batch of home brew ready?’

‘Just waiting to be tasted.’

‘I’ll get the glasses.’

Spreading the Word

Sebastian gazed unseeing from the verandah into the sun filled garden. As usual a zillion thoughts jostled aside all attempts to attain a state of Zen-like relaxation. With an impatient sigh he sat up, dusted a few crumbs from the divan, rearranged the pillows then lay back with his hands at his sides. He tried Yogic breathing—that would do the trick. He managed to hold his mind still for at least three seconds before a large spider constructing an intricate web among the rafters caught his attention. He was already on his feet to get a broom when he remembered, and slumped back.

‘Your tendons will never repair if you’re always on the go,’ the slim young doctor had snapped only an hour before. ‘Why can’t you just lie back and relax?’

‘Because it’s not my nature,’ Sebastian had answered with a fetching sigh. ‘Perhaps if you were to massage me...?’

‘And risk Reginald’s wrath? Not bloody likely.’

‘Wouldn’t it be worth a broken arm?’ Sebastian grinned.

‘Not even you are worth that, Sebastian. Shut up and let the sounds of nature lull you into somnolence.’

But Sebastian couldn’t. Time plodded. He began to fidget. Struggled to his feet and leaned over the balcony rail. Turned and smiled at his reflection in the lounge-room windows, then returned to the divan that Reggie had dragged out onto the verandah, and arranged himself in an artistic pose. Not much fun when there was no one to admire the result. Where was Reggie?

The whine of a vehicle crawling up the steep drive sounded promising. Raising himself on an elbow he watched an iridescent blue car turn in under the trees and fall silent. The humid air throbbed to the raucous stridor of a million cicadas.

‘Reggie,’ he called to a rustle in the shrubbery, ‘we have visitors. Stop massacring those plants and make them welcome.’

A few minutes later, virility artlessly accentuated by torn-off jeans and heavy work boots, Reginald was trailed onto the verandah by a middle-aged, portly gentleman in a wide-brimmed straw hat, grey suit, white shirt and dark tie. Scarlet and white trainers on tiny feet rendered the vision ridiculous rather than eccentric. Panting audibly, the man gazed back towards his car and dabbed his forehead with a large, damp handkerchief.

Fallen arches, Sebastian surmised, wondering what surprises were in the briefcase the fellow was clutching to his sweaty bosom.

The flat-footed man’s companion mounted the steps. Sebastian sucked in his stomach, arched his neck ever so slightly and beamed a winning smile at the dark, slim, handsome and hatless youth in white cotton slacks and open-necked shirt, whose sun-dazzled eyes were blind to the apparition in the deep shadow at the rear of the verandah.

Reginald waved the guests to low wicker chairs. Before they could sit, however, a discreet cough from the shadows made them jump and peer into the gloom where a young man sprawled elegantly—the tiny wisp of silk covering his groin fluttering in the light breeze like a turquoise butterfly impatient to escape. As an ornament to accentuate the golden hue of Sebastian’s satiny skin it was

perfect; as a garment it failed exquisitely.

~~‘Lovely weather,’ Sebastian murmured, lavishing a seductive smile on the startled youth. ‘How thoughtful of you to visit us. Forgive my not rising to greet you, but I have a gammy foot. Are you lost? Tourists? Selling something?’~~

‘No... no... we’re...’ Apparently mesmerised by his host’s groin the young man’s voice faded to a whisper.

‘We’re not selling anything—we’re giving it away!’ flatfoot interrupted, eyes studiously avoiding the piece of anatomy from which his companion seemed unable to drag his gaze.

‘Why? Isn’t it any good?’ Sebastian’s smile was innocent.

‘On the contrary! It is the greatest gift ever offered to mankind.’

‘My mother told me never to accept gifts from older men,’ Reggie growled. ‘They always want something in exchange.’ He gestured impatiently. ‘Please! Sit down, both of you.’

The youth failed to conceal a grin and plonked himself down.

The older man lowered himself suspiciously into his chair, coughed twice, stood up and gazed around as if checking the exits, appeared satisfied, sat again heavily, clutched his briefcase to his chest, stared fixedly at Reginald and announced, ‘I am referring to the gift of joy one experiences when one truly knows and lives with God.’

‘That must be you,’ burbled Sebastian to the handsome adolescent. ‘You’re like a young god.’

‘No... No I’m only William.’

‘Well, Only William, I’m Sebastian and this is Reggie. Do you live with God, William?’

‘Yes... No... I mean... yes but... I live with Dad.’ He nodded towards the older man.

‘Your mother must be exceptionally good looking?’

‘Why?’

‘You bear no resemblance to your father.’

William had time to flash a smile before succumbing to an apparently serious cough.

‘My name is Henry Shatter,’ the homely and sweating father announced brusquely, ‘and we are here to offer you everlasting happiness.’

‘How nice of you, Henry.’

.....

‘Now, let’s see if I’ve understood everything,’ Sebastian said with a frown of concentration when Henry finally stopped talking. ‘When God’s sick of watching us muck everything up, he’ll let us live in peace, love, health and harmony with everyone and everything for ever and ever... as long as we’re part of your gang.’

‘It’s not a gang—it’s a congregation. But...yes.’

‘Imagine, Reggie, you and me—lovers for eternity.’

Reginald’s expression was enigmatic.

Henry turned an unattractive shade of grey. ‘No, no! There will be none of that!’

‘What?’

‘Sodom and Gomorrah!’

‘Blessed if I know them.’

‘Cities of evil punished by God!’

Sebastian leaned forward and patted the old man’s knee. ‘No worries, Henry, we’re not evil. You’ll be hard put to find anyone more law-abiding and honest than us. Isn’t that so, Reggie?’

Reginald rumbled assent.

‘You may be honest and law-abiding, but you’ve just admitted you are a homosexual!’ Henry paused and pulled a face that suggested merely saying the word had somehow polluted his throat. ‘It

against God's law.'

'So god hates us?'

'No! He loves you but hates your actions.'

'Goodness! Then why did he make us like this?'

'To test you. To see if you could overcome your affliction and be worthy of his love.'

'I don't feel afflicted.'

'God sends troubles to test our worth.'

'Like plagues, pestilence, war and death?' Sebastian smiled brightly.

'Yes.'

Sebastian's smile dissolved into a frown. 'Are you sure he's a loving god, Henry? Maiming, laming, murdering and spreading dread-diseases—just to test us? To see if we are worthy of his love?'

'Well....'

'Did you hear that, Reggie. God sits up in heaven organising his own snuff-movies.' Sebastian turned to a drop-jawed William. 'Doesn't it strike you as the teeniest little bit perverted, Only William?'

'I...don't think it is meant to be... '

'We are not here to question God's works!' thundered Henry. 'The bible says that homosexuals may never go to heaven.'

'Homosexual is an adjective, not a noun, Henry, and it carries such a lot of baggage. Reggie and I are same-sex-oriented men.' He smiled winningly. 'And remarkably fine specimens—don't you think?' He stretched and the wisp of blue silk trembled precariously. 'Also, Henry, a statement that begins 'All homosexuals...' will be both false and meaningless

'It won't.'

'No? Are you the same as all heterosexual men?'

'Of course I am!'

'Most murderers and child molesters are heterosexual.'

'Well... yes.'

'That one word, heterosexual. Does it adequately describe you, Henry Shatter?'

'I repeat, God hates the sin, but loves the sinner.'

'Parried like a politician. So, you love me, but hate what you think I do?'

'Yes.'

'What do I do?'

'All homosexuals are unhappy because they reject god's love, subvert young boys into their forbidden practices, undermine family values, indulge in promiscuous sex with multiple partners like...like dogs!' Henry glared at his silent hosts, paused indecisively, then, drawing strength from faces which were the picture of concentrated interest and credulity, He dared the final lunge—'and then God punishes them with AIDS.'

An appreciative silence, then....

'Does that describe us, Reggie?'

'Nope! Always preferred it from the front, myself. Never cared for the 'doggy' position. Like to see who's doing what to whom.'

A thoughtful silence followed this revelation.

'You will never attain eternal life and happiness unless you renounce your evil ways and beg God for forgiveness,' Henry asserted with only slightly less conviction.

'Oh, Reggie, we can't go to heaven,' Sebastian wailed, whipping off the tiny bit of silk and dabbing at his eyes. 'It's unfair, Henry. You must have misunderstood God's intentions.'

Henry shrivelled back into his seat. William slithered forward.

‘Cover yourself!’ Henry ordered. ‘God hates perverts!’

‘Oh, but so do I! We only indulge in good clean fun, don’t we, Reggie?’

‘Sexual congress with another man is unnatural!’

‘It’s perfectly natural for me! Don’t forget Christians were stoning left-handed people not so long ago and burning women who spoke in church.’

‘Sex between men is wrong!’

‘Poor Henry. You’re obsessed with sex! Don’t you know the Bible has no sexual ethic? But it does have a ‘love’ ethic. What do you mean when you say you ‘love’ me, Henry?’

‘I love you as Jesus loves—in purity.’

‘According to Luke, Jesus told us ‘to judge for ourselves what is right.’

‘You think that you, a sinner, can ever know God’s intentions?’

‘Know thy enemy, Henry.’

‘God’s purpose for sexual union is children.’

‘Is William your youngest?’

‘Yes.’

Sebastian turned his brilliant smile on William. ‘How old are you, William?’

‘Nineteen.’

‘Then, Henry,’ gasped Sebastian in horror, ‘you haven’t had sex for over nineteen years! Poor darling!’

Henry’s eyes glazed. ‘William! We are going.’

‘But, you can’t go! You came to save us!’

‘You must want to be saved.’

‘I do!’ cried Sebastian, leaping to his feet. ‘I do! I do!’

Henry struggled to his feet.

‘I insist you save me,’ ordered Sebastian petulantly, placing both hands on Henry’s shoulders and pressing him firmly back into the chair. ‘Especially since you have accepted our hospitality.’

Positioned directly in front of the older man, hands on slim, evenly bronzed hips, Sebastian stared sorrowfully at the averted eyes of his guest. ‘Do you realise, Henry, that hundreds of people regularly pay a great deal of money to see me like this, and you are turning away your gaze? What on earth’s the matter with you? Don’t you like God’s handiwork?’

‘You have sold yourself to the devil and are perverting God’s plan. A good man would cover his unclean parts.’

‘Speak for yourself! I showered minutes before you arrived. You despise God’s handiwork and are obsessed by sex, whereas I am content with the life God gave me.’

‘You twist my meaning. God doesn’t hate you, he hates your actions.’

‘I am my actions, just as you are yours.’

‘No! You can be changed. You can become like me, pure in mind and body.’

‘Quite frankly, the offer doesn’t appeal. I think I enjoy this world rather more than you and certainly do less harm to my fellow men.’

‘How dare you!’

‘How dare you? Your assertion that my life is evil, is an attempt to destroy my self-respect, contentment and love of life!’

Sebastian’s voice had attained the cutting edge of a practiced tub-thumper. In vain did Henry plug his ears. ‘Everyone is different. You surely didn’t choose to be a creepy fat maggot. Reggie didn’t choose to be a gorgeous hunk and William was born cute, curious and lively. Unless you accept people as they are you are doomed to die as you live - a moral and mental cripple.’

Sebastian paused for effect, threw himself onto the divan in a pose evoking Michelangelo’s Adam

receiving the gift of life, and beamed a winning smile. ‘No offence, Henry, but I hope you rot in hell for a thousand years for every young man who kills himself because of your mind-poisoning lies and malignant dissemination of guilt.’ He sighed sorrowfully into the ensuing silence and, with a sensual stroke of flanks and a fluttering of lashes at William, threw back his head, the better to expose a fine neck.

Henry, as thick-skinned as the next salesman, took up the gauntlet. ‘Guilt is it? The guilt is in wrong action! I point out the action to allow the sinner to meet God!’

‘Let God tell me himself.’

‘I am his messenger.’

‘If God is infinitely smart, then he would choose someone infinitely more attractive than you as his messenger.’

‘St. Paul, in his letters to the Romans...’

‘According to Gore Vidal, St Paul was bonking Timothy and, preferring his young men cut, had him circumcised. A dangerous operation at that age. He made him Bishop of Antioch as a reward. No Don’t interrupt!’

Henry subsided in horror as his inquisitor stood again and leaned over him.

‘Even you, Henry, must know that the Bible’s a tendentious translation from Greek and Hebrew texts. The word homosexuality was invented in the nineteen-fifties. Prurient pastors, no longer able to rail against women and other races, turned their persecutory talents to sexual orientation, rendering millions miserable and causing thousands of suicides.’

With a supreme effort Henry surged forward knocking Sebastian back onto the divan, grabbed his son’s wrist and hauled him down the steps and along the leaf-strewn path to his car.

‘Oh well, can’t convert ’em all,’ sighed Sebastian philosophically. ‘Pity about William, though.’

‘Henry was in such a rush to escape contamination he left his briefcase,’ Reginald observed with a quiet grin.

William ran back and, smiling shyly, bravely faced Sebastian who was standing at the bottom of the steps with the briefcase.

‘One day you may want to talk to someone,’ Sebastian murmured, slipping a card into William’s hand. ‘That’s our address and phone number. We’d be delighted to see you—any time at all.’

William took the briefcase, lightly brushing his host’s fingers before racing back to God’s messenger of mercy and grace.

Free Will

I reckon there’s no such thing as free will. We’re manipulated from birth to be obedient conformists who never rock boats, take risks, or think for ourselves. It doesn’t matter who you talk to, pretty soon you realise their ideas, opinions and actions are copied from videos, TV, newspapers, magazine books... There’s nothing original in their heads. People don’t think—they respond to prodding. When we were kids my best friend and I were always pretending we were heroes from movies or comics. All kids do and it doesn’t matter. What matters is when it doesn’t stop when they grow up. Adults should be independent, clear-thinking role models for kids, but instead they adopt the latest fads, buy all the crap advertisements tell them to, and holiday in places that resemble the resorts of the rich and famous, always hoping they’ll be taken for a celebrity. And old people are no better! Pathetic.

It may seem pretentious for a fifteen year-old to be so cynical, but I reckon I’ve earned the right because I was one of the deluded masses until a tragedy made me realise what a dangerous fool I

become. That I'm able to write this now in my bedroom instead of a Juvenile Detention Centre dormitory is thanks to Robert, Mum's favourite brother. He's twenty-three; twelve years younger than Mum, eight years older than me, but although he's my uncle he never took much notice of me until last summer.

Robert left school at fifteen to be general dogsbody for Mr Bavistok. I was seven, and when we visited them I was a bit frightened because the older man's dark, deep-set eyes made him look sort of mysterious. But he always treated me as if I was important—listening and asking my opinion on all sorts of things, so I liked him more than I was frightened. He was only thirty-eight when he died suddenly last year. Robert got totally depressed and moped around the place, letting it go to rack and ruin, Mum said. When we visited Robert and saw the beautiful old place already looking derelict she got really angry and told him to stop being so selfish and snap out of it because he was only twenty-two, bloody rich now he'd inherited everything, and could have any girl he wanted. Robert told her to shut the fuck up because she didn't know what she was talking about. Then Mum cried, so he had to apologise. She's good at that, crying to get her own way.

Robert finally got his act together and took an extended holiday in Greece, because he's keen on classical ruins and art, then spent the rest of the northern summer hiking in the Balkan Mountains and lazing on the Adriatic coast. Mum and I never mentioned him at home because Dad would only sneer that Robert must have been a very special secretary to be left a fortune after only eight years. Mum would tell him to be nice because I was Robert's only nephew and if I played my cards right, I might inherit something eventually.

'Huh!' he'd snort, 'Pete's not like your precious Robert!'

I had no idea what he was talking about so kept my mouth shut.

Although Robert had more or less ignored me when we visited, he'd always been my hero. Tall and sort of tough and rough, but handsome too, he did all the physical work for Mr Bavistok so he had a great body—like a Greek god people used to say. I figured he'd be looking for a friend when he got home, and was determined to be it! All I had to do was get him to notice me. My plans were well in hand when the letter came with his return flight details.

Robert had left his Mercedes Sportscar for Mum, so we used it to pick him up. It was hot enough so I put the hood down and Mum got her usual wolf whistles along with envious stares from a few guys. Even though she's thirty-five, she's still a looker. I don't know who was more excited, Mum or me, when he appeared through the arrivals door. She gave him a big hug and told him he was too thin—I thought he looked perfect and envied his tan. To my surprise we were the same height—I'd grown more than I realised. He shook my hand and smiled at me, which I took for a good omen.

Back home Dad grunted a minimum welcome before shutting himself in his shed. When Mum finally stopped asking Robert questions and telling all about us, I dragged him to my room. I had exactly fifteen minutes to make him notice me before he left.

While he was away, I'd followed a rigid fitness program that was guaranteed to bulk up chest and shoulders with structured weight lifting and press-ups, and improve my legs by running ten kilometres a day. I used to get really exhausted at the beginning, but after a week I reckon I got addicted. Anyway, it worked and I hoped my plan would be as successful. My bait was Robert's interest in classical art and sculpture. I'd practised posing in the same poses as Ancient Greek statues. All I had to do was get him into my room, close the door and... I stopped thinking at that point. If nothing else he'd have to notice me; acknowledge my existence. Depending on his reaction I'd modify things as they went along. At least he'd realise we had an interest in common—classical art.

I'd prepared the room by closing the windows and curtains, placing a low box draped with a sheet against the far wall and arranging the reading lamp so it threw a sort of spotlight onto it.

‘Phew! It’s like a sauna in here, and dark, open a window.’

‘No, please. I want to show you something. Take off your shirt if you’re too hot. Won’t take long. Just lie on the bed and watch’

Robert grunted something, but didn’t sound irritated, then dragged his shirt over his head and lay on my bed, hands behind his head, grey eyes watching. A tiny gold medallion glinting among the short hairs of his chest, triggered a crisis of confidence—his body was much better than mine! Before I could wimp out I passed him a photo of Praxiteles’ *Apollo Sauroktonos* and while he was distracted I stripped; not difficult as I was only wearing a pair of shorts.

Robert frowned, then heaved himself upright onto his elbow as if to leave. I’d blown it! Before I could move I leaped onto the draped box and took up the well-practised pose. ‘What do you reckon? Have I got it right?’

No response. Hot with shame and embarrassment I moved to jump down but Robert held up his hand.

‘No, don’t move.’ He got off the bed and walked around the room studying me, then threw himself back on the bed with a sort of barking laugh. ‘Where’s the scrawny kid who used to live in this room?’

I’d never felt such an utter idiot. What could he be thinking? ‘Shall I get down?’

‘No. I haven’t finished comparing you yet.’ He got up and for a few more seconds walked around looking from me to the photo, then nodded and said casually, ‘You look better than *Sauroktonos*, I’ve always been a bit disappointed by his wide waist. How old are you? Seventeen? Eighteen?’

‘Fifteen.’

‘The cusp of manhood,’ he said softly. ‘You look and seem much older.’ Robert pulled the curtain back, swung round to look at me, frowned and stood quietly staring for a long minute.

Dreams of friendship faded and I began to feel pretty stupid standing naked on the box, so I jumped down and slipped on my shorts. ‘Should I try to become really muscled like Hermes?’ I asked to break the silence.

‘Definitely not. Slim athletic youth is enchanting; heavy virile manhood merely admirable.’

Suddenly, he stood up to go. I’d failed. At the door he turned, frowned, then asked as if he had no interest in my reply, ‘Wanna spend the summer at my place?’

I choked.

‘Well?’

Mum was thrilled, chattering about clean air, healthy exercise, how good it was of Robert to take an interest in me, telling me to behave, not annoy, do as I was told, not get in the way...

Dad was his usual sour self. ‘Do you really want to go?’ he demanded with curled lip as if no one in their right mind would consider the offer.

‘Yes!’ I almost shouted.

Dad’s smile was twisted. ‘Play your cards right and you could become his private secretary,’ he sneered, and with a snort of derision retreated to his shed as we purred away—hood down, spirits up.

‘You must read ‘*The Vatican Cellars*’ by André Gide,’ Robert said when we stopped beside a river to eat Mum’s sandwiches.

‘What’s it about?’

‘It’s a satire poking ridicule at people who change their morals to suit their desires. The story revolves around Lafcadio, an exceedingly handsome young fellow with whom both men and women fall in love—or lust, and this gives him an exaggerated sense of his own worth. He’s a Romanian who, when he was the same age as you, stayed with his mother and her wealthy lover in a villa near Duino on the Adriatic, where they entertained a stream of guests. Wearing not a stitch of clothing th

entire summer, because it was believed that an all-over tan was essential for both beauty and health. Lafcadio ran wild, spending his days under the pines, among rocks and creeks, or swimming or canoeing in the sea.' Robert's smile was guileless. 'I spent a month in Duino...and I've decided that this summer you'll be Lafcadio!'

'But...'

'No buts!'

We raced each other back to the car and powered away. For the next half hour Robert carefully explained his plans and my part in them. I was nervous, certain I'd fail, but incredibly excited and determined not to disappoint.

The low stone house glowed pale gold in the sunlight. Flanked by towering eucalypts and fronted by sun-slashed lawns, flowering shrubs and ornamental urns, it flickered into view between the giant old trees lining the drive. We pulled up in front and switched off the engine. Country peace. Bird calls, leaf rustles, insect hums were the only things that dared break the silence. With a shout of relief that nothing had changed since my last visit I threw off my clothes, raced for the lake, paddled the kayak till my arms ached, swam till I chilled, then raced back to the house where Robert had thrown the windows wide, placed a substantial meal on the sunny end of the verandah—and hidden my clothes. While we ate he gave me my instructions. I was to have at least five hours of vigorous physical exercise every day, and three hours of mind-enlarging intellectual exercise every evening.

'Intellectual exercise?'

'That's right.'

'With you?'

'The friends I told you we always have to stay during the summer are intellectually stimulating.'

'And I'm to be part of this... this intellectually stimulating social scene...naked...day and night. Like Lafcadio? Are you sure?'

'Absolutely.'

'But...'

'Be yourself'

'But...'

'You're a young god, remember?'

'But...'

'Anyone who is shocked may go.'

As the first guests' cars appeared on the drive I panicked and hid in the forest behind the house watching them. They looked pleasant, chatted with Robert and laughed a lot, and after unloading the car went for a swim. Robert and a couple of the younger guys skinny-dipped and no one protested, so I conquered my fear of ridicule, slipped unnoticed into the far end of the lake and swam to join them.

After sunbathing the others put on their clothes and we wandered back up to the house. I braced myself for some comment but to my relief no one appeared to think I was doing anything strange. Instead I was complimented on my fitness and all-over tan. According to the handsome husband of a pretty blond woman who kept reciting poetry, I was a 'child of nature'. One of the others—a short, fat, hairy bloke kept insisting he had been transported to Arcadia, and I was a sexy satyr. He patted my bum but I didn't mind because he was so pleasant.

During the entire seven weeks, open-mindedness, liberality, and a welcoming acceptance of difference reigned supreme. No one criticised anyone else. There was no gossip, backbiting, bitching or arguments. There were discussions a plenty, sometimes heated, but never did anyone try to score points by unpleasantness. By the end of the first week I was Lafcadio in nature as well as name.

How Robert and Mr. Bavistok had found so many decent, intelligent, easy-going people to visit them every summer remains a mystery. Friends and acquaintances from all over the world arrived to stay and drift through house and grounds throughout the summer. Some remained for days, others for weeks, choosing their own rooms in the vast old house, and bringing their own food; preparing and sharing with everyone else at mealtimes. There was no roster, but it all seemed to work. One bloke spring-cleaned the house for fun. Two old women painted all the shutters. The place ran like clockwork and there was always music, laughter and conversation.

Each morning at sunrise Robert would drag me from our bed and we'd race down to the lake for a dip. He has a great body. Not a wrestler's like me, more a marathon type. Evenly tanned, lean, long-legged, fit and strong. The swim was followed by a long, hard jog, then he'd throw on a pair of shorts for breakfast. Usually I'd spend the morning swimming, tramping, and canoeing—sometimes with Robert, sometimes with one of the younger men—often alone, which I preferred.

It was a long, hot summer with too few daylight hours. The guests did as they pleased. Sometimes I took a group of the younger ones into the rainforest that abutted the rear of the property. One particular stand of ancient eucalypts always silenced them, as did the enormous buttresses of the rainforest giants. Sometimes we saw platypus in the stream that fed our lake, and there were always screeching flocks of parrots in the canopy. The cool damp silence affects people differently—but no one escaped the atmosphere. I could have sat there for hours dreaming away if it wasn't for the mosquitoes. When alone in the forest, exploring the stream or swimming in the lake, I was Narcissus or Pan, a satyr... never one of the big-name gods; I valued my freedom too much to shoulder the responsibility.

Despite all the activity I found time to read *'The Vatican Cellars'*. It excited me; especially Lafcadio's 'motiveless crime'. His 'puzzle for the police'. I loved the idea of living on the brink. I marvelled when, just for the hell of it, he shoved Fleurissoire off the train to his death—a move he couldn't take back, as in chess. I discovered I was surprisingly like Lafcadio, being more curious about myself than events. I couldn't help feeling the book had been written expressly for me. It burned in my heart—too special to talk about, even with Robert.

Afternoons were for artists to sketch and paint, writers to compose, philosophers to think, musicians to practice for the evening recitals. I posed for artists; pretending I was Caravaggio's Amore, Titian's Apollo, Cellini's Perseus.

Directly after the evening meal there'd be a short concert with poetry reading, some acting, instrumentalists, singing accompanied by Robert who played the piano beautifully. One week there were enough musicians to make a small orchestra. It seemed that I was the only one without a talent to perform until they struck up a dance from Petruska. A touring company had brought the ballet school and I was surprised to discover I loved both the dance and Stravinsky's music. As soon as they began to play I couldn't help myself and leaped onto the small stage and danced like the puppet; jerky but athletic and graceful at the same time. At least that's what I aimed at. There was too much spontaneous applause for it to have been motivated entirely by kindness, so at someone's suggestion I made up a short dance most afternoons and performed at night.

The concerts seldom lasted more than an hour and then the evenings became talkfests where everything from morality to monetary policy; ethics to environment, lithographs to literature was argued about, discussed, dissected. I was too over awed to ask questions or offer opinions unless asked, but on the odd occasion I did say something they would consider it seriously. No one ever made me feel foolish or embarrassed, even when artists pinned their drawings of me on the walls of the drawing room, some of which were blatantly sexual. In fact I seemed to spend the entire summer holiday buoyed on a sea of compliments. I was a living artwork—Young Bacchus revelling with the

mortals. Untouchable. Chosen by the gods.

No one told me about hubris.

And suddenly the holiday ended. Guests departed. The house echoed its emptiness and the specter of school loomed. I'm not dumb; schoolwork presented no problems; it was the humans I hated. Never did I feel at ease. Always it seemed that my existence depended on a secret I didn't know. I kept myself apart from everyone as much as possible and was more or less ignored—neither popular nor unpopular, in a sort of limbo with no real friends, knowing no one who was like me, no one I would be able to share thoughts, hopes and desires with—certainly not confide what I'd done this holiday. I begged Robert to let me quit school and stay and help him on the farm as he had with Mr. Bavistok. He shook his head and I felt betrayed. I asked why he'd ignored me all my life.

'Because you were a boy.'

'What do you mean?'

I've never made a secret of the fact that I'm gay, so if I'd been friendly with you everyone would have assumed I was a pederast, when the truth's the opposite; like most gays I'm not sexually interested in boys.'

'So you didn't dislike me?'

'On the contrary, I thought you were a great kid. And now you're a sexy and personable and intelligent and handsome and loveable young man.'

'Legally I'm still a boy.'

'Which is why you've got to keep this under your hat. The law treats all teenagers the same to protect the vulnerable—a good thing too considering some of the fuckwits out there. In a couple of years you'll wonder why you fussed. Physically and mentally you're a man, an attractive and personable young man, as I realised when you took me to your room. I also realised you wanted more than just friendship from me, which is why it took me a while to decide to invite you. At first I thought you were too inexperienced to know what you wanted, then I remembered I was your age when I met Marc Bavistok and fell in love.'

'So...'

'So nothing. I had been kicked out of school. You're oversensitive but there's nothing wrong with your brain, so think about it. This is your first love affair so you need to go away and think deeply before making an irrevocable choice. See how you feel next holidays and if you want to come and stay again, you're welcome. If you decide you want to explore other things, other men...that's fine to me. Understood?'

And so I returned to a silent and sneering father and gossiping mother, becoming again the morose and irritating son of parents too busy to care.

School. Mundane, predictable, drear. Wrapped in a cocoon of summer memories too precious to share, I withdrew completely. My fellow students and teachers were mere mortals. Superficial. Boring!

Nine weeks into the term, increasingly miserable at the monotony of existence, I trudged one afternoon up to the library after a depressing day. Angry at everything. Heart aching for Robert's barking laughter.

The place was empty except for Mr Egas, the ancient Librarian who was standing before an open window gazing down at the ant-like comings and goings two stories below. I stood beside him and peered down. Sunlight reflected dully off the crinkled parchment of his cancer-spotted cranium quivering on a neck seemingly too scrawny to support it. He glanced at me. A death's-head. An insult.

to the living. A cough shook his scrawny frame. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his lips, and mumbled an apology.

Revulsion welled, overflowing into arms and hands. Avoiding his eyes I shoved him through the open window. He made a great sweep with his arm to save himself; his left hand clutched at the smooth framework of the window, while, as he half turned round, he flung out his right. A horrible claw scratched the back of my neck. I gave another push, more impatient than the first. His nails scraped through my flesh. After that, nothing was left for the old man to catch hold of but the air and he fell without uttering a sound, like Fleurissoire.

I left the school by the back gate—unseen—or at least unnoticed, confident that what I'd done was no different from a man stepping on a bug. A natural instinct. I stood to gain nothing from my action, so strictly speaking it wasn't morally wrong, merely the act of someone obeying natural instincts.

By the time I reached home my buoyant mood had dissipated, dissolving into an incomprehensible torpor that lay heavy. Fatigue, perhaps; at any rate I gave up thinking and lay on my bed.

I wasn't intending to go, but Robert insisted I accompany him to the funeral. Mr. Egas, he informed me with great seriousness, was the only teacher who'd shown an interest in him at school, so he was determined to pay his respects. There were hundreds of mourners and I endured the service in a state of expectancy—of vague fear.

Afterwards, Robert shouted me to a meal in a swank restaurant, but I couldn't eat. The need to confide my dreadful secret had become a desperate, silent screaming in my head.

'Robert...'

'Yes?'

'I... I re-read *The Vatican Cellars* ...I'm...I'm Lafcadio.' My voice betrayed me.

Robert stopped eating, put down his fork, wiped his lips carefully, then said quietly, 'So, it was an accident.'

I couldn't speak.

'But don't you remember? I explained that the book is a satire, deriding people who modify the morals to suit their desires?'

Cold dread gripped my guts. I began to shake uncontrollably.

We left the restaurant; my food untouched, and sat in Robert's car. There was no condemnation. No recrimination; only an intolerable silence. Finally, he sighed and told me to do and say nothing to anyone. What was done was done and a confession would only break more hearts. Egas's family had accepted it was an accident because the old man was ill and suffered from dizzy spells. To be told it had been murder would open up a far greater, and possibly incurable emotional wound. And my parents! Why would I put them through the horror of having their cherished only son exposed as a mad murderer? Obviously, I had done wrong, gravely wrong, but clearly I was repentant. My punishment would be to think about it for the rest of my life.

The sentence was too harsh. The rest of my life, I determined, would be very, very short.

Robert drove me home and parked at the gate. We sat in lengthening silence. Several times he started to speak, but the words seemed to choke in his throat. Eventually, unable to bear it any longer he opened my door, tears streaming, willing him to look at me but he continued to stare straight ahead. I got out and turned to close the door. Suddenly, he swung round in his seat and stared, an odd expression in his eyes.

'You can't go back to school,' he said pensively. 'You'll give yourself away.'

'I know,' I whispered, unable to see Robert through my tears. 'I'm sorry, Robert, so sorry.'

'Have you thought about us over the last couple of months?'

'Nothing else.'

‘And?’

‘I still feel the same.’

‘Me too, so go and pack your bags. I need a secretary.’

A Misunderstanding.

At Art School, Marjory discovered she had the skills but not sufficient imagination, dedication or ego to be an artist, so she became a wife and mother. Twenty-five years later when all except her youngest had fled the coop, she set up a studio in her basement and gave classes to people who had always wanted to draw but never got around to it. Her ‘Life’ classes proved the most popular, but this evening the model hadn’t arrived and the students watched with concern as Marjory’s fragile self-confidence unravelled.

Her son, who sometimes joined the class, offered to telephone and sort out the problem. He sprinted upstairs, stood quietly at the top and counted to a hundred, then ran back down to inform his mother that the model had left town leaving no forwarding address.

‘Oh my goodness! It’s too late to find another! What on earth shall I do?’

‘I’ll model—but I choose my own poses.’

‘You’re too young! I need a professional!’

‘Mum, I know what to do.’

With ill-concealed nervousness Marjory apologised to the class while Antony slipped behind the screen, stripped, checked that everything was as it should be, pulled his nervous penis back to normal size, stepped onto the podium and adopted a series of athletic three-minute poses that kept the would-be artists delighted and very busy.

Marjory gazed at her son in apprehensive awe. Bringing up three previous teenagers had taught her to interfere as little as possible in Antony’s life, and she’d always assumed his lack of close friends, avoidance of group activities and preference for solo pursuits like computing, karate, swimming and reading meant he was a bit of a nerd. But under the spotlight her son was transformed into a personable young man with all the charms of youth, including very acceptable muscle definition and manhood jutting almost too proudly from its nest of pubic hair. She gazed nervously around. No one seemed perturbed—the busy scratching of pencils and charcoal the only sound.

She felt dizzy and sat down. This morning Antony had been her baby. Tonight he was a man! Where had it happened? A chunk of her life was missing! She’d been too busy to notice. The realisation was bleakly depressing.

For the twenty-minute poses Antony chose difficult positions, yet remained utterly still, exuding confidence she’d never guessed he possessed. Close-cropped hair emphasised his fine head and smooth young neck. And such well shaped legs! In the two-minute breaks between poses he wandered naked among the easels and stools to look at drawings, and charm the students with praise, questions and ingenuous smiles. Marjory’s heart missed several beats. What must her students be thinking? Models should never mingle with students when naked!

Antony had been practising for two weeks; since intercepting the model’s phone call saying he was moving interstate. He told himself he was doing it as a social experiment. People didn’t question a nude man posing for an art class, but what if he wandered around naked between poses and during the break? If he could charm everyone into accepting him doing that, it would prove taboos against nudity were not inherent in human nature. There was also another, perhaps more truthful reason that he kept tucked away at the back of his brain in case anyone found out; the idea of being naked in a room full of dressed strangers was a turn-on and had so fuelled his nightly wanking sessions he was starting

worry about the loss of sleep.

Most artists' models are lazy, keep their legs together and avoid difficult positions. Antony did karate kicks, gymnastic exercises, handstands... complicated and powerful positions that often left him exposed and vulnerable. But he wasn't stupid. If the students guessed he was getting a thrill out of it they'd despise him. It was essential to appear naïvely innocent. Luckily, difficult poses required constant monitoring to avoid sagging; this, combined with the discomfort, ensured any arousal remained cerebral. Time passed quickly.

At tea break Antony jumped from the podium and began handing round biscuits and beverages with such friendly, guileless naiveté that everyone assumed he was unaware of the extraordinary effect he was having. The atmosphere had never been so relaxed and informal. Gone were the usual strained politenesses. The students chatted easily like old friends, bubbling with enthusiasm. An air of suppressed excitement pervaded the studio and for a change everyone was impatient to resume drawing. Marjory couldn't decide if she was embarrassed, jealous or pleased. A unanimous vote booked him for the next five sessions, and his mother agreed to use him for her two other Life classes.

'You're braver than me,' his father grunted when told of his son's success.

Antony didn't consider himself brave; he'd been enjoying the most liberating experience of his life. And that made him wonder if anyone was really brave. Perhaps skydivers and mountain climbers were just like him—doing what they wanted.

Deirdre, his mother's divorced school friend, had recently joined an evening class in the vain hope of meeting someone who appreciated her. She wasn't talented and found it difficult to finish drawings in the time available. Would Antony pose privately?

It wasn't only the generous payment she offered that enticed him after school the following day to recline naked over an antique divan in Deirdre's Spanish-style duplex. For harmless exhibitionists who want to be admired—not to shock, being naked and praised among people who are dressed is like a drug. Unlike a narcotic, however, it does no one any harm and as long as the intention is never to disgust or offend, it frequently has a positive effect in liberating the viewer from religion-inspired fears.

Barefoot in a flimsy sun frock, Deirdre stood at her easel muttering. 'Oh! It's so difficult. Come and tell me what I'm doing wrong.'

Bored and pleased to stretch his muscles, Antony stood beside her. A smooth hand caressed his buttocks.

'Looks OK to me,' he muttered, moving away to hide his annoyance.

'Let's change the pose,' she said, taking his hand.

He pulled away but she held firm.

'You're tense,' she said with a coquettish smile. 'I'll give you a massage.'

Antony stared in astonishment at the woman. She was old! As old as his mother! There was no way he wanted her touching him. He spluttered incoherently but Deirdre just laughed.

'You young men are all the same, pretend you don't want it just to make us poor women plead.'

It wasn't her strength but her extra weight and Antony's reluctance to physically hurt a female that did for him. Suddenly he was face down enduring an amateurish pummeling. It was unpleasant and the carpet wasn't particularly clean, so after several seconds he rolled over to tell the woman to lay off—he was going home. The words never made it into the air. Before he could clamber to his feet she straddled his knees, pressed him back onto the carpet and begun sucking on his penis. No one had ever touched him there before, let alone taken it into their mouth!

He stared in fascinated horror at Deirdre's head bobbing up and down, both astonished and appalled at his mounting erection! He wanted to scream and pound her head with his fists—but was terrified

she'd bite it off, so watched in frozen disbelief as his tormentor lifted her head and grinned, saliva dribbling from slack, lipstick-smudged lips. The dreadful nightmare continued as she slid forward, rose onto her knees, reached behind, grasped his erection and lowered herself onto it, at the same time drawing her flimsy garment over her head and tossing it aside.

As if drugged he stared at a soft white belly, a patch of hair and long brown nipples on fat tits that bounced and swayed inches from his face. He thrust them away, repelled by the softness. She didn't notice; just kept riding him; grunting, moaning, muttering, 'Yes, yes, yes...'

Anger and revulsion anaesthetised all sensation. How dare she!

After an age, a series of ecstatic moans signalled his release. Deirdre rolled off and sprawled on her back. 'Ah! I needed that!'

Antony gazed down at his rapidly shrinking penis and realised he'd ejaculated but felt nothing. Silently he replaced his shorts and T-shirt.

'Fancy a coffee?' Deidre asked brightly.

Antony shook his head, walked silently to the door and let himself out.

At home he stood in the shower scrubbing his genitals till they hurt. He felt unclean. Used. Why hadn't he stopped her? She'd treated him like a blow-up doll! What was wrong with him? Why hadn't he enjoyed it? Why hadn't he shoved her off and left? Why hadn't he ripped shit out of her before going home? He couldn't face her again. No one must ever find out! The shame! He couldn't modulate again. The bitch had ruined everything!

He muddled through the next day at school earning reprimands for inattention, but didn't care; he deserved punishment for being such a useless wimp. Pocketing a Stanley knife from the art class he hid himself in the toilets and made small cuts on his forearms. It hurt, but he wanted it to. Then he realised people would ask questions. There was nowhere he could cut himself because the following night, unless he could think of an excuse, he'd be naked in front of a drawing class. The thought made him feel sick.

Alone in his room self-hatred mushroomed, inhibiting sleep. In the morning he refused to get up.

His father came to investigate. 'You OK?'

Antony remained facing the wall.'

'Want to talk about it?'

Shame took a back seat to anger and tears. 'Deirdre raped me! You have to prosecute her!'

'What happened?'

If Antony left out any detail it was unintentional.

His father thought for a while, then said softly, 'I watched you the other evening. You looked mature and confident. I was proud of you. During the breaks you wandered around, completely at ease and, astonishingly, everyone else was equally relaxed. That's quite an achievement!'

'But no reason for...'

'You visited Deirdre, accepted a massage, and got an erection. What was the woman to think?'

'But... I couldn't help it!'

'Yes, I remember... always stiff at the most inopportune moments. Enjoy it while it lasts.' His smile was perplexed. 'Didn't you enjoy any of it?'

'I hated all of it!'

'She's a good looking woman.'

'I felt sick when she touched me—and when I touched her.'

'Did you ask her to stop?'

'I couldn't. It was like I was frozen.'

‘Did she hurt anything—apart from your aesthetic sensibilities and pride?’

‘No, but that’s not the point!’

‘Remember a couple of years ago I took you to the Grand Prix and you endured a day of noise and fumes and racing cars going round and round and you swore it was the worst day of your life?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought I was giving you a treat. Perhaps this was a similar misunderstanding.’

‘She didn’t give a stuff about me!’

‘Most men would be jealous.’

‘And probably the kids at school too! But I hated it!’

‘Does she know?’

‘Don’t think so.’

‘If you lay charges everyone will find out. Is that what you want?’

‘No!’

‘Then just file it under ‘Lessons-Learned’.’

‘What lesson? Stay away from randy old bitches?’

‘No. Only be naked alone with people you would like to have sex with.’

‘So I was stupid.’

‘Innocent.’

‘And now I’m soiled goods.’ Antony dredged up a smile. ‘Thanks, Dad.’

‘Thank you.’

‘What for?’

‘Making me feel useful.’

To Antony’s relief, as soon as he stepped onto the podium that evening the exhilaration returned. During supper, instead of mingling with everyone he stood chatting to Stephen, a first-year Art School student he’d never dared to speak to during previous sessions because he seemed so self-confident and aloof. But the experience with Deirdre had changed Antony. Paradoxically, perhaps, he felt more sure of himself, less nervous about making friends. It turned out that Stephen had not dared talk to him for similar reasons. Their tête à tête had reached the stage of mutual compliments when Deirdre sidled up and handed Antony an envelope.

‘You forgot your fee,’ she said roguishly, patting him lightly on the bum.

Anger had been transformed into benign contempt. Unsmilingly, Antony took the envelope, nodded vaguely and deliberately turned his attention back to Stephen.

‘Your fee?’ asked Stephen with a friendly leer. ‘Don’t tell me you...’

‘Hardly! She’s an old bag. I just sat for her at home.’

‘That’s what I need, I was sick for a while and missed most of the life drawing classes at Uni.’

As if in a trance Antony heard himself saying, ‘I’d really love to see your stuff and...If you like...I could model for you.’

‘Just joking. Can’t afford it anyway.’

‘No charge—I’d really like to.’

‘You sure? It’d be fantastic!’

‘Sure I’m sure.’

‘When?’

‘After school tomorrow?’

The two young men shook hands, gazed into each other’s eyes to make certain neither had misunderstood, and smiled shyly.

Useless things

The jacaranda tree's miserly shade had moved on, leaving the three men behind. Sweat dripped from eyebrows and trickled down furrowed cheeks, necks and chests.

'Jeeze it's hot! My mouth's as dry as a nun's tit.'

'It seems no one gives a stuff in this place, Charlie. I'll never get used to it. Why couldn't I have had a lethal heart attack instead of a bloody stroke?'

'We all feel like that, Mal. These places are no-exit traps. I always vowed they'd never get me in one—but they did it while I was weak and muddle-headed after a heart attack, and now I'm the prisoner—not even allowed to die if there's a medical procedure that'll bring me back from a peaceful death. Suffering's good for the soul, a religious nutter told me the other day. I told him I hoped he rot in a nursing home for twenty years screaming for release from pain and nausea.'

'Good one. What did he say?'

'Nothing. Just walked away. But it's interesting that women don't seem to mind this purgatory.'

'It's different for them, Charlie, they're used to being looked after, having things done to and for them. My wife nearly bankrupted me before we divorced with her massages, hairdresser, manicures—it seemed she wanted nothing more than to be fiddled with by another woman. You'd never find a bloke wanting that sort of treatment. And deep down most old tarts are religious so they're shit scared of dying and want to put it off as long as possible.'

'If I had the keys to the medicine cupboard I'd be sleeping the beautiful sleep tomorrow.'

'Leaving me behind. Some mate you are.'

'Don't worry, I'd take you with me, Mal.'

At that moment a delivery van pulled in and parked at the main doors, belching diesel fumes. The men coughed and cursed impotently.

'Seriously, Charlie, is it normal procedure in this place to dump us out in the car park and forget us?'

'Relax, Mal, someone will be out soon. Come on, what's really bothering you? Someone pinch your chocolates?'

'Among other things, yes!'

'Bloody thieving bitches. They pinch everyone's.'

'It's not only that, it's...'

'In the shower?'

Malcolm blushed and looked away.

'Who was it?'

'I...I forget their names, there are so many of them and...and they change all the time.'

'This morning?'

'Yes.'

'Yeah, that'll be right.' Charlie wriggled into a less uncomfortable position. 'I overheard the girl sniggering about someone with a huge dick in the shower.'

'Ugly cow! She wagged it around and reckoned I should have it lopped off because it was useless to me now I couldn't get an erection. When I got mad she said I should get a sense of humour. I get so angry it feels as if my head's going to burst. But there's nothing I can do. We're at their mercy. Sartre was right, Hell is other people—especially if the other people are female staff in a nursing home.'

John, whose mind had developed a tendency to wander, snapped to attention and whispered

‘Yesterday, one of them... You know, that red haired one, told Jeff, to lift a full bag of laundry. Much too heavy. When he couldn’t she called him a useless poof.’ John’s right arm began to twitch. He stared at it for a couple of seconds as if unsure to whom it belonged before grabbing it with his left hand to prevent it slamming against the side of his wheelchair. By the time he’d returned it to his lap he was breathless.

Charlie placed his good hand on top of John’s, staring belligerently at the still-twitching limb and though daring it to move. ‘That’s Gloria! She’s gotta go! Jeff’s the best nurse we’ve had in ages. He buys me smokes and gives the greatest rubdowns I’ve had in this place. Most of the tarts here couldn’t give a tinker’s cuss if we all broke out in bedsores.’

‘Jeff...’ John paused, marshalling his forces. ‘Jeff took me...’ his gaunt frame began to shake and it was several seconds before he could speak, ‘...to the shops... in his own time.’ Muscle tension suddenly collapsed, the handsome face slumped, his head drooped forward and slack lips spilled saliva.

Charlie pulled John’s head back against the headrest and wiped the chin with his bib. ‘We bloody have to do something—Jeff’s the only man left. No decent bloke will stay the way those bitches treat them.’

Mal shook his head. ‘Surely they’re not all bad.’

‘Name one who isn’t!’

‘Sister Sue seems nice.’

‘OK. But she’s the only one.’

‘Brenda,’ John whispered. ‘We’d never get out of this place if she didn’t arrange trips.’

‘OK, Brenda.’

By the time Marge came to collect them only five of the staff had failed to earn a reprieve from execution. As she backed towards the heavy door, dragging Malcolm’s chair, Charlie called, ‘You’ll get fat, Mal unless you push yourself around. One arm’s no excuse.’

Malcolm looked contrite. ‘I try, Charlie, but I just go round in circles, and this thing,’ he tapped his left leg, ‘sticks out and bangs into everything.’

‘If it shrivels any more it’ll look like you’re sitting there with a boner. Get ‘em to hack it off like mine. Less weight to shove around.’

‘Good old Charlie,’ Marge laughed. ‘The only man who’s legless before he starts drinking.’

‘I could drink you under the table, any time.’

‘I’ll take you up on that one day.’

‘You can take me to bed if you like.’

John’s laughter triggered a general strike of synapses and his stranded head lunged forward.

‘Marge!’ Charlie bellowed.

Calmly efficient, Marge rescued John, turned to Charlie, tightened his harness, chucked him under the chin, kissed him on the forehead and grinned, ‘Who’s in a bad mood, then?’

Charlie brushed irritably at the spot. ‘Stupid cow,’ he muttered. ‘I’m not a fucking child!’

‘No, you’re a sweet little cherub.’ She pinched his cheek roughly, pulled him and Mal inside, set John on track then wheeled Mal off to the dining room. Charlie followed slowly, a smouldering bundle of frustration.

Weak tea and a slice of dry chocolate cake did little to quell the rebellious spirit. ‘I’ll give you yours, John, when I’ve downed this tepid muck,’ he growled, but Marge returned to hold cup and call until John’s errant nerves sent the signals; chew, swallow, open...

In the dead time before lunch, Malcolm practised moving his chair in a straight line, Charl

dragged irritably on half a dozen cigarettes in the smoking room, and Brenda took John to the Physiotherapist. On the way he tried to tell her about Malcolm, but his vocal chords had gone on strike. He'd learned not to waste precious energy fretting. When there's nothing you can do about something, you've no choice but to accept, so he allowed his mind to float free.

An afternoon concert had been arranged and the lounge was filling with the murmur of perfume and painted old women carefully dressed in their faded best, scrupulously choosing who was fit to sit next to. Nursing staff wheeled in those who couldn't walk or shuffle, and an awkward scattering of visitors hovered. The few men in evidence sagged in their chairs as though left over from the last show.

Charlie checked the blackboard. 'It's those bloody Singing Senior Sits again. I'm not going to watch a bunch of old tarts flashing their varicose veins.' He wheeled himself away.

Malcolm, whose eardrums had taken a bashing from the banjo the previous week, pushed himself around in circles in the corridor and John slumped nearby until a couple of nursing assistants tipped both men's chairs back at an alarming angle and raced each other through the corridors. By the time they skidded to halt in the courtyard, Malcolm was a trembling wreck and John was pop-eyed with shock. Charlie was puffing irritably on a cigarette.

'Look what you've done, you stupid bitch!'

John's urine bag had come adrift, the end of his catheter tube dragged along the floor leaving a white trail.

'Shit,' she muttered, dragging John's shirt up and trousers down. She heaved a sigh of relief. 'You're in luck, Johnno, nearly pulled your plug. Another centimetre and your essential self would have drained away.' She laughed nervously, retrieved and re-hung the bag under the wheelchair, reconnected the tube and roughly adjusted his clothes while the other woman hosed the urine away.

John began to shake.

Malcolm breathed deeply to quell his nausea. It was the first time he'd seen a white plastic tube sticking out of someone's belly as though it was growing there.

'That's her!' he managed to blurt.

'Fucking Ishbel!' Charlie hissed.

Ishbel turned at the door. 'I hope you're not going to be a sooky girl, Johnno, and go crying to the Matron.'

'Arghhh!' Charlie slumped forward, gasping as though in agony.

Ishbel hurried across and lifted his sunken head.

He slapped her hard across the face.

She leapt back, hand pressed against her cheek. 'How dare you!'

'How dare you waggle Malcolm's penis and tell him to have it cut off because it's useless?'

'It was a joke.'

'How many old women have you told to have their vaginas sewn up?'

'Don't be disgusting! That's a woman's...'

'Exactly! We put up with bits falling off, leaky bladders, shit in the pants, having to be washed and fed...because there's nothing we can do about it. We don't even feel sorry for ourselves. But we don't have to put up with being treated like half-witted kids! We're men!'

'All men are babies.'

'We think, feel, have opinions, and try to retain our self-respect—but how the hell can we do that when you make decisions for us.'

'We do not!'

'Yesterday you said only fools watched that crap, and changed my television channel to something'

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