

Five years on another planet

By Jim Pike

Edited Version

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About the Author

Jim Pike sold his first script to the legendary Mavis Bramston Show while still in High School. The following years took him through the ranks of the Post Office, a failed motorcycle shop and the music industry as both a player and a record company rep and PR man. This led him into radio, writing commercials and then doing breakfast show comedy, DJing, producing and every other job right up to programme director. He was 2GB Sydney's first Creative Director while at the same time furthering his on going career as a voice over artist on literally hundreds of thousands of commercials, promos and documentaries. He was a regular on the Midday Show for eight years doing his instant poetry which produced two best selling poetry books and he helped to pioneer lifestyle reporting as a regular on Burke's Backyard for 13 years. His comedy writing has covered newspapers and magazines, stage, screen, radio and tv from the Muppets to Graham Kennedy right up to international corporate events. He's recently returned to songwriting, releasing an album of original material recorded with his son Morgan. He lives on Sydney's Northern Beaches until the money runs out.

Introduction

The years 1967 to 1972 were momentous ones in the history of the world. The Vietnam war, Woodstock, Civil Rights, new drugs that weren't for headaches or tinia, radical social change and the end of the Beatles are just some of the fond memories for a certain generation. However, I'm sure it was the latent effects of number four on that short list that began nibbling away on my fading memory like a hippy with a packet of Monte Carlos. It was time to put in writing tales of drugs, rock and roll, motor cycle gangs, secret workings of the Post Office and a sub culture rarely seen by the world outside of my place. All the events are true, all the characters real, although the odd name has been changed here and there just in case some still carry weapons. These tales are dedicated to every teacher what taught me English and to my wife Karen who didn't find out about much of my past till later, but stayed with me anyway.

Tales

(Possibly in the order of how they happened)

NOTE: This is a Heavily edited version

1. Johnny Pallin and the Lonelies
2. Mum, I'm going to be a Postman
3. And then The Coot moved in.
4. The Haunting of number 8
5. Nights of the Southern Cross
6. Died and gone to Heaven
7. Half alright

JOHNNY PALLIN AND THE LONELIES.

For a start his name wasn't Johnny, it was Joe. In fact it wasn't even Joe, it was Giuseppe. His surname was one of those wonderful vowel packed Italian efforts that resemble a ricochet in a B grade Western. Joe spoke with a thick lazy accent that made him sound like an insomniac with a mouthful of marshmallows. Naturally he was the lead singer in what we were naive enough to call our band. Joe was older than us and therefore had more experience but it didn't mean he had paid attention while that experience was occurring. Joe was quite short for his hair, which was arranged into a sort of Fonz meets Ronald Reagan creation. He had a certain laid back charm about him which dissipated when you realised he was just dopey. His claim to fame was that he'd been the front man for Johnny Pallin and the Lonelies, which wasn't all that impressive since I (and the rest of the world) had never heard of them. I'd been with a band we put together at school called The Intersection and this was my first time playing drums out in the *real* world. Yes, I was a drummer...one of those guys that hangs around with musicians.

The Intersection was actually pretty fair musically. Tony played lead guitar and got us gigs at Jewish functions round the Eastern Suburbs, mainly because he knew how to play Hava Nagilah and we worked cheap. He played a Gibson Hummingbird acoustic similar to John Lennon's and he was actually quite good despite looking as if he was appearing for the plaintiff.

Gary was and still is a brilliant rhythm guitarist, he also sang lead and worried about the fact that at 17 he was getting too old to rock and roll. Bruce was our bass player and a very fine one even though he had a tendency to dribble on the instruments he borrowed from others of the widely unappreciated genus 'bass guitarist'. He had to buy his own in the end when the borrowees noticed the saliva was dissolving the paint on their instruments. Bruce was the only one who went on to be a pop star and the only one who couldn't have cared less.

For reasons I can't remember, we broke up and I teamed up with a

new bass player called Jack and so we found ourselves auditioning for the artist formerly known as Johnny Pallin. Apart from his smoky, or perhaps smoggy vocal style, Joe also sang with a tentative grip on the English language. As our repertoire of 12 bar and occasionally 11 and a half bar blues based songs came together, I found myself being called upon more and more to sing harmonies. This was good except I didn't have a microphone. Interestingly, the microphone was why Joe always got to be lead singer in bands. He owned one, but rarest of all in the mid sixties he possessed a PA system. If you've ever been to a rock gig in the past 20 years you could be forgiven for thinking that a PA was an enormous high-rise of speakers looking like low cost housing for the deaf. Ours, however, wasn't. Though it was coveted by the other bands that had to put their vocals through their guitar amps it wasn't much to look at. It was an Australian made Maton amp about the size of a medium bar fridge and featured a magnet on its single speaker that weighed approximately the same as a pregnant Shetland pony; the disposition of which it emulated almost every time it was switched on.

Joe's language problem first came to my attention when we reached the chorus of the old standard, Gloria. You know, the bit that goes: "...and I spell G, L,O,R etc". The song began to fall apart round about here because Joe actually *couldn't* spell Gloria.

It was often G...A, sometimes G...I and occasionally G...R, which led to me singing this bit for him by yelling maniacally over the guitars from behind my thumping drum kit. Joe thought this made the song more of a feature number and so we turned our music books to the page marked DOOMED. On several songs Joe also played guitar, although it seemed to provide more of a distraction from his singing than adding to his overall lexicon of musical credibility.

I was that most inconvenient of drummers, one without a car and so I depended on Jack to pick me up and bring me home. Jack was part Greek and part French, which possibly explained why he chose to drive a Simca. Back in those days you didn't see too many Simcas around and even now, gold plated, diamond studded and topped with rum and raisin ice cream they have somehow failed to become collectors items.

Jack was such a totally passionate musician he had taken out the car's back seat to fit in all our gear. This was true dedication because even in 1968 very few girls would opt for a lift in a car that looked abandoned by gypsies and waiting to be set

alight. Jack was great company and he loved his eccentric car. He also loved it when we went cruising for chicks, none of which we ever attracted due to his habit of hanging out the window and banging his hand on the door while calling out: "woo hoo baby, wanna come for a ride" in a voice that would make a Doberman wary. Jack had a manic sense of humour and a temper to go with it. His tirades were accompanied by copious striding up and down, flinging arms about and occasional lapses into French. The veins on the side of his neck would swell to a size capable of convincing passers-by that someone had inserted balloon animals into his vascular system. By the time his face reached Roma Tomato Red he would begin to snort. This invariably evolved into a snigger and then a roar of laughter and more striding up and down as his confused Gallic emotions fought themselves to a standstill and formed a consensus that a cold beer was the only sane option.

Jack was one of the most unique people I've ever met. He died when his 250 Suzuki slid across the road in front of an oncoming car and he couldn't get his boot out from under the fairing. His funeral took place in a Greek Orthodox Church with much wailing amid incense that smelled like his aftershave. I remember thinking what a waste it all was. Jack couldn't speak Greek.

The truly depressing thing about drummers and bass players is that at the end of the night their chances of going home with anything even vaguely female and/or bipedal are virtually zero. The lead singer has all night to make unimpeded eye contact with the top talent in the room (while at the same time ensuring they don't have boyfriends keen on vivisection).

The lead guitarist can zero in on those who enjoy thrusting and sweat. The guitar-god image is really a two edged sword for him at the end of the night because what the skin tight trousers attract they invariably disappoint since their ability to emphasise bulges actually cuts off supply of blood to the region for a good 24 hours. However *our* lead guitarist had never been plagued with that problem. His name was Col and his persona on stage was that of an overweight Postal Clerk.

He was quite a good player except on those odd occasions when he didn't notice that his lead break was in a different key to everyone else and I had to remind him by flinging a tympani stick at the back of his head. I didn't have a tympani in my drum kit, but the sticks were big and hard and came in handy when punters felt the need to drag the band off the stage.

This was not because they hated us you understand, it was just because it

was Saturday night for the desperately dateless. Unfortunately the prime role of the *bass* player is to try and not get in the way and this can make striking a convincing babe-magnet pose a little difficult. However on a good night Jack could manage an enormous pout that was almost clitoral. It was all in vain because in the few years we played together I don't recall either of us ever getting lucky.

Since Jack owned the car that carried our gear and I had the most gear to pack we were always the last to leave the hall and by that time the music had well and truly died and tumbleweeds were blowing across the deserted dance floor.

Two important points I learned very early are; when you're playing a licensed gig always buy the bouncers a beer before you start and when a large drunken Maori wants to play your drums during the break, hand over the sticks with a smile. The rationale of a Saturday night audience in the Eastern Suburbs always intrigued me. There were guys who wanted to beat up the band simply because they didn't like the music, those who just liked beating up bands and those who wanted to teach us a lesson because their girlfriends were looking at us and therefore we were 'poofers'.

This last group always confused me because at a dance there isn't much else to look at except the band and if we were indeed 'poofers' then the fumbling and grunting they were hoping for on the way home with their bored girlfriends would more than likely remain uncompromised.

The disgruntled punters were always a danger for Jack and me. On one memorable occasion we were playing at the Coronation Hall at Mascot. Jack's car was parked out the back directly behind the stage. From the small laneway there was an old steep, narrow, wooden set of stairs with a landing outside the stage door, the sort you see clumsy cowboys fall down after being shot in movies. Inside the hall, up the back in the shadows, lurked the members of a gang called Big Charo. Now Big Charo came from Charing Cross and consisted of chaps in their 20's who were either out on parole, waiting for their cases to come up or researching their next conviction. They weren't making any 'blade across the throat' signs at us so I was pretty sure they were going to restrict themselves to bumping people with drinks and saying: "what are you looking at mate?" to guys who had turned to look at them because they'd been asked what is they were looking at by someone at whom they currently weren't looking.

Obviously it is confusion like this that leads the unintelligent into the

violence of frustration, but you never think of that when you just want to maim someone because you don't like his shirt. Gary was playing rhythm guitar for us on that particular night and had latched onto the daughter of the Crown Sergeant from Mascot Police Station which meant he was safe. When the last song ended, the crowd parted as they walked through and like Moses he headed for the Promised Land...until the Sergeant caught them coming out of the wilderness later that night. Within minutes you could feel the violence swirling in the dark near the door, but since Big Charo were wary of having their ID's checked and because the Newmarket Pub would still be open if they were quick, they faded beerwards to the percussive beat of metal garbage bin lids and slow cats. We were safe until the cry went up that Little Charo were only ten minutes away. The hall cleared within seconds because what Little Charo lacked in size they made up for in numbers. There were usually forty of them, give or take a headful of pimples.

Most of them had records and were between 14 and 18, that age for boys when everyone is against you except a girl and for this injustice the world must pay. We have no shortage of Little Charos today, they're the window smashers and car trashers and bus shelter breakers who just need society to understand that they're merely confused victims of the erections their mothers could never achieve. Or they could just be dumb bastards.

Joe and Col knew what this meant and panicked accordingly. Col's car was a black Vanguard Spacemaster, a strangely shaped vehicle reminiscent of an unlanced boil on a dung beetle. He refused to carry anyone's gear but his own and together they loaded it in 15 seconds flat and were gone just as Little Charo came into view down the aptly named Coward Street. Jack and I locked the doors of the hall and stacked our packed up gear against the stage door. Within minutes they were bashing on it and inviting us to have our livers removed before breakfast, but the dim bore easily and soon everything went quiet...a very bad sign. Then we heard a noise not unlike a brass bed being dropped from a third floor window; they were bouncing Jack's car under the stairs at the back. This was too much for even Jack's highly developed sense of self preservation and besides if they wrecked the car we had no band.

I kept all the drum and cymbal stands in an old hard suitcase and at the bottom, wrapped in a pillowslip, was the emergency escape kit which we were about to use for the first time. It consisted of a very large blunt Bowie knife with an eight

inch blade and a machete. The machete was also blunt because after all, we didn't want to kill anybody...not quickly anyway. After this, as they say, it seemed like we were in a movie.

I opened the stage door slowly and we peeked out to see them bouncing the Simca so enthusiastically it appeared to be going faster vertically than it ever had horizontally. The stairs were empty as we moved out onto the landing. I had the machete and Jack was getting ready to use the large brass butt of the Bowie knife on whoever got past me. The leader, obviously bored with the display of colour and movement, looked up and saw us. You can always tell the leader of a mob because he's the one that yells:" There they are, get 'em", while making way for the willingly stupid. The sight of the machete slowed them, but half a dozen were on the narrow stairs and couldn't go anywhere but up because of the mob behind. The first guy was spotty with a leather jacket that took a lot of the impact when I brought the machete down on his collar bone. As he fell backwards, the next guy came up underneath him and I made the tip of his nose acquainted with the toe of my boot. Jack managed to get a solid kick into the next guy and I made a particularly ugly one even uglier with the flat of the blade. It was then that I noticed how desperate violence and cries for blood can bring out good manners in even the most unruly. The mob now adopted a policy of :” After you. No after you. No after you, I insist”, or words to that effect. A final kick to a T-shirt that featured the Japanese rising sun sent one of them crashing down the stairs and taking the rest with him.

Before they could re-group the police arrived and while Jack tossed the knife inside, I slid the machete down my trousers and covered the handle with my shirt. When the gendarmes saw how we were outnumbered and what a bumper crop of good behaviour bond-breakers they were reaping, they ceased to ask too many questions and accidentally banged lots of Little Charo heads as they loaded them into the bum wagons. The Sergeant seemed quite happy to accept the premise that his guests for the night were intrinsically clumsy when it came to climbing stairs.

We knew that next time we played the Coronation Hall we wouldn't be so lucky, which is why we welcomed the Greek Boys as our travelling fan club.

The Atlantics were a big band at the time and because Jack knew one of them they hired us to play at a relative's wedding. Fortunately Col was very adept at playing Zorba's Dance and they loved us despite it being the only Greek song we knew. The fact that we played it about 15 times during the night only seemed to

increase their need to ply us with more souvlaki and ouzo.

So it was that the Greek Boys came to every gig (for free of course) and became our unofficial roadies and body guards...except for our last night at the Coronation Hall. The Boys had to leave early for a party and some of the crowd stayed around to see what would happen to us. It was all going pretty well and we loaded up the car out the front on Botany Road where the cops might happen to cruise past. Everything was packed except the bass drum and as I was carrying it out, one of the handful of Little Charo's who had decided to show up opened the conversation with that perennial ice breaker: "Where do you think you're going?" As I stood there holding my bass drum with both hands, several episodes of The Three Stooges flashed through my desperate brain. Before I could work out the deep inner significance of this I chose a routine and went for it. Turning to my would-be assailant I said: "Here hold this" and held out the bass drum...and he took it. I realised that since it was he that now had his hands full it was an opportune time for me to insinuate my fist between his eyes. This I did and was off and running with the drum before he hit the ground. Jack had the back door of the car open and the drum and I went straight in without touching the sides, although it was a few hundred meters before I was dragged all the way in and the door slammed on Mascot forever. For many years afterward whenever I was asked (which wasn't often) I was always happy to acknowledge that the greatest influence on my music had been Larry, Curly and Moe.

End

Mum, I'm going to be a Postman.

Jack had a face like a fat lady's cushion; by the way it was folded you could tell God wasn't much good at Origami. He felt the need to explain things to you at close range while the gap between his top front teeth allowed ample opportunity to irrigate your lapels. He smelled of beer, sweat and the horses he lost money on and I thought he was a pretty interesting guy, but even though I was young I knew enough not to lend him money. Those in the Postman's Room who had loaned him money did so when it was pounds, shillings and pence and decimalisation hadn't increased their chances of ever seeing it again. Jack was a relief Postie..."yeah it's a fuckin' relief when he's gone", Eric would quip. Eric was the Union Rep and stood up firmly for the rights of everyone named Eric while at the same time making a nice living from the black market by selling extra pairs of his special issue socks. He had approximately three hundred and ten caps for sale as well, probably because brains didn't wear things out in the Post Office as quickly as feet. That was the main difference between Eric and Jack... Jack would have tried to convince you to wear the caps on your feet.

I was thrust into this bizarre world of big leather bags and paper cuts thanks to Andy's mother's whisky. In year 11 my school friend Andy had a Christmas job working at Eastlakes Post Office as an assistant postie. The fulltime posties gave him all the heavy stuff and odd sized articles to deliver and sent him on his way with the traditional advice of:"Don't take anything off the people at 27 Florence Avenue you little shit. All the tips are mine and bring back any bottles of piss 'cause you're too young to drink".

I helped Andy out that year by breaking road rules that hadn't even been written yet and by tossing friendly parcels over front fences from a sidecar on a borrowed AJS 500 while he steered. It was a method based more on panache than any kind of accuracy. When he worked solo he sometimes rode his ex-Army '42 Harley on the footpath to deliver the letters. A large and terrifying sight for oncoming

pensioners but I like to think he pioneered the present system of Honda postie bikes.

Twelve months later we were sitting for the first Higher School Certificate. I wasn't much good at maths and had been coached all year, which entailed sitting in a freezing cold room at the Petersham Masonic Hall every Saturday morning and hoping that the blood which had left my feet was engorging my brain with mental bigness. But it wasn't. The Sunday before the Monday exam we studied at Andy's place. As everyone knows, this can get very boring after a few minutes and it was then Andy turned our attention to one of those enormous 50 litre swivel bottles of whisky that you sometimes see at clubs. His mum had won it in a raffle and since there was so much of it we reasoned she'd never miss a dram or two, especially if we topped it up with water. The only flaw in the plan was drinking whisky and dry ginger from schooner glasses; and so it was that the next day, with a hangover you could paint and call an awning, I failed Level Three maths so badly the school refused to even think about a recount. When the temporary Christmas job began (with a failure in Maths but twenty second in the State in English) it looked like a postman's life was the only job I was going to get. But I hadn't counted on my mother and her very personal attachment to the forces of righteous evil.

My mum had been trained in music and had enough degrees after her name to be an honorary thermometer but there wasn't a lot of call for a concert pianist around Zetland so she worked for importer/exporters called Abel Lemon and gave some spare time to helping out mates in the Labor party. Zetland is jammed in between Redfern, Alexandria and Waterloo and Liberal candidates didn't even bother showing up unless it was to get their shoes shined. In fact you could always spot Liberal voters in the area because they were the only ones who could afford cars.

That year the local member approached my mother to independently audit the electorate results of a recent election. She was very thorough in this and was intrigued by how many dead people had turned up to show their loyalty to the ALP. It was difficult enough for those who had been buried but for the ones who'd been cremated it must have proved not only inconvenient but awkward as well. It was at about this time that I received the not unexpected refusal of a University scholarship and also a 'don't hold your breath' for Teachers College which didn't bother me because I couldn't really see myself as a Mr Chips dispensing literary Mogadons to the bored, restless and latently deviant. But my mother was already one large magnifying glass and a deer stalker hat into her investigating mode." What happens to

the Teachers College scholarships that aren't taken up if the recipients get a Uni one as well and choose that instead?", she asked the local member. He found out they weren't reallocated and were just dropped into the bin marked 'Saving the Government Money'.

At this my mother put dead voters and unscholarshipped son together and came up with a solution for my future which the uncharitable might call blackmail. She made copies of all those dead voters efforts, approached the local member and suggested that these hundreds of deceased but obviously dedicated Labor people would definitely be in favour of an immediate change to the system whereby unwanted Teachers College scholarships would be re-allocated to worthy students to save them from, say, ending up in the Post Office. Anyone not in favour of this would be the Liberal Party and every newspaper journalist who could tell the smell of a scandal from that of a urinal cake. And so it was that my mother gave our Labor member back his testicles, handed him the only copy of the records she swore she had and put the other one in her dressing table drawer for future negotiations. But it was too late, even before she could lay-by me a sports jacket to keep my chalk in, I had decided to embrace the big red vans and scratchy grey uniforms of the Postmaster Generals Department. We didn't speak for a week.

My Post Office career began at Redfern with a 5am start and by the time I'd ridden my 1939 BSA there with the wind blowing up my shorts I was well awake and incapable of reproduction. The world of postmen (because then it was a man's job) was a rich and fascinating one. Among the staff was the aforementioned Jack and Eric, Geoff, a fully qualified meteorologist who had discovered that the opportunities for people who could guess the weather were limited, George, an ex-sailor whose sense of humour was so dry you could have it drought declared and Vic who had been a baker and was now almost completely deaf because of the flour. Apparently it used to cake on the inside of your ear and turn into concrete over time when mixed with the wax. I bet they wouldn't be so jolly in Baker's Delight if they knew that. My introduction to the friendly camaraderie of postalness began with Eric, who warned me that if I didn't join the Union my life would get very difficult, very quickly and then tried to sell me some socks.

I soon learned from the others to treat him with the particular mixture of patience and contempt that discerning chaps have been using on short people and Silky Terriers since time immemorial. George was my mentor for my first week and

imparted valuable information, such as never give the local cops accurate directions to anywhere. Either they didn't hold a grudge or couldn't tell they'd been regularly misled because they gave him a lift home one night when he flagged down a cop car thinking it was a cab. Like many postmen, drinking wasn't a problem for George...he'd virtually perfected it. He was a lanky guy who carried his mailbag with a sliding kind of lope, so from a distance he looked like Goofy coming home from shopping. One thing George couldn't stand was dogs, which is like a dentist being upset by bad breath. On the western corner of George and Cleveland Sts in Redfern stood an old block of flats that was home to two blue heelers and in lieu of any passing cattle they thought it was great fun to round up George on the odd occasions when he couldn't sneak by. As he walked past the large open side gate one would tear out and bail him up while the other came out of the front gate so they could nip at him from both sides. George was a patient man and had put up with them for years, wearing double socks to ward off the nips and trying everything from splashing them with water to handfuls of pepper but all to no avail.

My first week was to be George's last week (he was retiring) and after we were bailed up on Monday and then again on Wednesday he decided to do me a favour. As we left on the Friday morning he put a one metre length of galvanised steel water pipe into his bag and stepped out onto Redfern Street with a serene smile. I didn't ask about the pipe because I didn't want to seem ungracious but I had a suspicion that any dog who might have wanted to play 'head 'em up and move 'em out' with George that day would be making the sort of error that would increase donations to the RSPCA.

I watched as he walked past the back gate and the first of the dogs attacked hoping for a spot of ankle brunch, but of course George was ready. As the blue heeler went for his calf muscle he stepped to one side, swept the length of pipe from his mail bag like a plain clothes samurai and brought it down on the back of the dog's neck. It was dead before its taste buds could identify trouser leg. George then took up a baseball stance, the pipe back over his shoulder as he waited for the second wave to round the corner. It was the first and only time I have ever seen a look of genuine surprise on a dog's face, a split second mixture of: "What the?" and "Uh oh". The pipe swept through a galvanised arc, faintly burnished by the midday twilight of endless exhaust smoke and caught the second dog under the chin sending it spinning backwards through the air into the arms of Jesus or Scooby Doo, or whoever it is that

gathers in the souls of critter and varmint.

The owner of the dogs (who used to enjoy his mutts playing pin-the-postman-to-the-footpath) saw his last vicious pet hit the ground and went ever so slightly berserk. In his usual cool manner George spun the water pipe like the offspring of a plumber and a drum majorette, looked the ex-dog owner in the eye and said quietly: "You're next".

Now today, this would mean two undersized indecisive police persons in baseball caps would be called in to go: "Hmm, I don't know Jocelyn, what do you think?", but back then they leaned more towards extremely affirmative action. The police arrived, congratulated George on finishing off two well known menaces to the community and took the screaming, drunken owner off to Redfern Police Station for a cup of tea and an unfortunate tumble down the stairs.

When we got back to the Post Office George offered me the pipe as a parting gift, which I gratefully accepted and dumped in the back lane. Five months later, working at Kensington I wished I had kept it. In general, dogs and I have always gotten along pretty well. I am a dog person, and by dog I don't mean the inbred upholstered tampons favoured by certain sad levels of society, these are little more than lobotomized cats and only serve the purpose of making an excellent lunch for proper dogs. By proper dogs I don't mean pit bulls or similar breeds whose good looks can only come from head butting tow trucks or providing a level surface for their owners cans of YeeHah bourbon. A proper dog is one that is no lower than your knee but no higher than your hip. This space should contain nothing fluffier than a Red Heeler and definitely nothing dumber than a Dalmation. Any combination of Alsatian, Labrador, Ridgeback, Kelpie, Blue Heeler, Staffie, bitzer, mongrel and all round agreeable mutt is acceptable.

I encountered most of these on my postal strolls around inner Sydney and for three mornings in a row in a small street in Kensington, a German Shepherd would lay on the grass footpath and blink at me lazily as I walked past and gave him that 'good dog' wink and click of the mouth. On the fourth day I must have accidentally splashed on the "Old T Bone" after-shave by mistake. As I walked past having winked successfully, I couldn't help noticing teeth sinking into my wrist and sensed our unspoken casual acquaintance was over.

I'd love to know what it is that makes us react to situations in whatever way we do. I had never been bitten before so maybe it was surprise or just what I

would have done to a human, but I punched the dog in the nose. Many years later a diver friend told me he employed this same method quite successfully with sharks, which is another excellent reason for not having learned to swim. By the expression on the dog's face I could tell this had never happened to him before and he let go, hunkered down and began to growl in eye watering confusion. At this point I did something which in retrospect was probably a tad stupid. I dropped my bag, got down on all fours and edged towards the dog softly (and obviously insanely) murmuring: "Come on you bastard, you wanna have a go?"

I think it surprised us both when he began to back away slowly and then made a break for the driveway of his lair. I followed; my postman's right to go quietly about his business now in the highest of dudgeons.

The dog came to a gap in the bottom of the paling fence and began to wriggle under to the safety of its yard. Being a male dog, his most sensitive bits were dragging out the back for all to see as he squirmed through the small space. Ever since that day I have tried to have a conscience about the brick I found near the hole...but I can't. I have never seen a dog that size do laps of a yard so quickly and for so long. In answer to the question: "why do dogs lick their balls?" sometimes the answer is ...because they really must. The yelping brought out the dog's owner who was quite unsympathetic to my bleeding wrist and was convinced I was a sadistic dog-bricker stalking the backyards of Kensington. She called the police who just missed the mark in calming her down by offering to shoot her dog if it ever showed up on the street again. This method worked extremely well in curbing errant mutts, although now with our much more enlightened ways, they have to eat at least two children before they're made to wear a collar. Officers Jocelyn and Damien would have arrested me for assault with a gaping wound.

Four days later, delivering to a horse racing stable, a Boxer and a Labrador got their own back, forcing me up against a wall and taking alternate bites. On their own they were fine, but together they would have been a match for even the great George. The cops couldn't help out with this one because it was, after all, a racing stable and they needed all the tips for Saturday they could get.

I consequently looked up the rule book for this situation and with the Postmaster's blessing withheld all of the stable's substantial mail at the Post Office until they sorted out their dogs. Naturally, since their mail began cluttering up my desk I had no choice but to toss it out after seven days. A bastard act perhaps, but

nothing to compare with the annual Christmas parcel kicking competition held enthusiastically at Rosebery Post Office under the auspices of the Head Postman Dave and his pin-headed son who had spent way too much time in the tantalising vicinity of stamp glue. Actually this is being way too kind. For them the wheels on their bikes went round and round but there was no concept that pushing the pedals might have any connection with the resultant forward motion. “I’ll give ‘em fucking Fragile“, he’d yell as he kicked the well packed Dresden porcelain doll from Aunt Hilda in Dusseldorf across the room to Pinhead. It may have survived all the jack bootied bastards in the German Post Office but it was no match for the home grown bastards at Rosebery. Pinhead would laugh, then shake it to make sure no two pieces were still clinging together. That word ‘Fragile’ seemed to send them into a frenzy of anger and confusion, much like ‘please’ and thank you’. “Handle with care” usually involved the item in a soccer game and “photos, do not bend” resulted in the sort of knife edge creases you only see in a Grenadier Guardsman’s trousers. If I’d been Mrs. Dave I would have avoided novelty aprons with any sort of instructions on them.

As the assistant junior postman I kept my head down and enjoyed the entertainment provided by the collection of eccentrics who seemed to be drawn to this life of fresh air, strange behaviour and very little supervision. My local postie tells me that these days they have to leave at exact times and take exact times to do their rounds with spot checks being made to ensure they return at an exact time. No fun there; and the boys in my district liked their fun.

Nick was Greek with a philosopher’s sense of humour. He was convinced every woman on his run was in love with him yet he was fiercely loyal to his wife. This of course was an excellent excuse for not testing the affections of the customers, but it didn’t stop him from applying enough Brut 33 to cure AIDS in the knowledge that on Tuesdays and Thursdays Mrs. Weston in Dunning Ave hosed the lawn in her tanktop and cut offs. He had two favourite games. One was to wait until Dave was relaxed and affable and then ask him how his daughter was and whether she had a boyfriend. This never failed to unleash a storm of ethnic abuse which caused Dave’s head to become so red and swollen his veins looked as if they were trying to escape and strangle not only the nearest Greek but the animals his mother slept with.

While Dave screamed and his complexion forced its way through the spectrum, they both knew that was as far as he would go since Nick could punch his lights out at the drop of a bazouki. This is an excellent position to occupy when

dealing with the Dave's of the world. While Dave-baiting brought Nick endless pleasure it ran a poor second to saddling up Horst.

Horst was our practising Christian and with six children he was quite happy to practise until he got it right. This was one of Nick's favourite jokes, which Horst would counter with: "Oh you are a silly man." Horst was the right age to have fought for Germany in World War 2 but was the kind of guy they'd have arrested for 'niceness under fire.' Horst had a heart of gold and put up with jokes about his religion, his country, Hitler, his Art Garfunkel hair, and anything else they could think of from the Book of Job. I could still remember my High School German, and he enjoyed correcting me very politely during our stilted conversations. Whenever the teasing started in earnest it was inevitably Dave who would take it too far, with the result that everyone would circle the wagons round Horst until Dave snapped and played the Head Postman Card, waving his authority around like a tiny penis. Horst would get his own back at Christmas by spreading whole hearted joy and good will until the veins on Dave's temples throbbed like an illuminated map of the London Underground.

Christmas tips and presents were critical to Santa's postal helpers and were often their undoing. On one particularly unprofitable season for Wally he was given a goldfish in a bowl and had to juggle it on the carrier of his push bike all the way back to the office. Luckily he was drunk at the time so he coped quite well. Wally resembled a failed and slightly trampled jockey and had the truly short man's temper which produced a collection of phrases so colourful that on canvas they'd look like a Ken Fucking Done.

That same Christmas a dotting customer gave him a home made cake smothered in thick chocolate icing. To anyone else this would have seemed like a nice gesture but Wally was a little disgruntled since he was hoping for a bottle of a certain liquid one might use to de-grease a particularly chunky sporran. It was 40 degrees that day and the icing melted into the bottom of his bag so that in minutes all his letters looked like the Creature from the Black Lagoon's toilet paper. For weeks afterwards regiments of sugar ants would follow his push bike into the sorting room for a bit of desert, which allowed him ample opportunity to indulge in his favourite hobby of moaning. Some people are whingers and others whiners, but on a good day you'd get more moans out of Wally than a Porno Film Festival.

While bicycle beats were looked upon as the ideal runs because of the

provision of transport I could never understand the attraction. Even though I had a motorcycle licence, I never learned to ride a bicycle because we lived on a main road and my parents thought it too dangerous. Luckily my mother was never aware of how dangerous it could be at 200ks an hour pissed mindless on a Harley Sportster at 2 am. on the Southern Cross Drive. For me, riding a bicycle for fun is like inserting a broomstick up the ginger to do a little dusting. It is without doubt the world's most uncomfortable mode of transport, with the possible exception of a runaway camel. Yet every Sunday morning hoards of otherwise intelligent people dress up like assorted boiled lollies, insert a leather tipped pole in their rectums and attach themselves to a machine whose sole purpose is to drive that pole into the vicinity of their rib cage. Spectacular though the Tour de France may be, its one positive is that the competitors come away from it so hideously chaffed that sexual activity is virtually impossible, thereby thinning the ranks of those desperately in need of a good feed and someone to love them.

Naturally a Post Office bicycle is as far removed from these racing machines as the space shuttle from a duck and after they'd been regularly maintained by hitting them with a spanner and throwing them against a fence, they became a personal source of pride for those who rode them. Ted was the Head Postman at Botany and apart from not being well liked by the other postmen he was loathed by everyone else. The Post Office looked directly at a laneway next to the Fire Station and up that laneway thoughtful Council workers had put a barricade because of a burst water main and a very deep hole. Ted came back at lunchtime, full of Christmas spirit and yuletide abuse and then wobbled off to do the rest of his run, which coincidentally ended with him cycling down the aforementioned laneway.

Apart from being chumless in the Office, the Council workers weren't fussed with him and the firemen had been cool towards him since he kept rubbing in their trouble with a prank call a few months previous. Someone had called them out to a false alarm then ducked into the empty station and set fire to the spare hoses...there wasn't a lot to do in Botany. With this long list of suspects it's almost impossible to say who removed the barricade just before Ted turned into the laneway. The firemen were quietly watching over the fence and the counter area of the Post Office was packed with spectators as he turned the corner...and yes, I'm delighted to say bets were taken. Completely oblivious, Ted was so drunk that his feet were only pedalling in an effort to get away from him. I can't remember whether he was whistling or

singing as he lurched into the abyss, but the ambulance guys (who had been put on standby by the fireys) said he was still humming when they diagnosed a broken rib, sprained ankle and various lacerations.

While inspiring to watch at Botany, the true artistry of booze on a bicycle reached it's zenith at Waterloo Post Office. Out the back in the wooden postman's sheds worked some of the truly spectacular drunks of this or any age; men with livers the size of life rafts and brain cells from which every imprisoned thought had escaped save the ability to use a bottle opener, cork screw or teeth...or in one case tooth.

Danny was the head postman and he lived across the road from the Office, the only man I've ever met whose bicycle smelled of alcohol. In fact while you could detect it on a normal person's breath, it even wafted out of Danny when he blinked.

It was about 5.45 and still dark when I arrived on my first morning. The gates were locked and Danny saw me waiting outside and called me across to his home. It was a two storey terrace typical of the area. The whole downstairs was covered in easy-to-hose lino and over the mantle piece hung a framed photo of the Queen flanked by two milk bottles containing small examples of the Australian flag and the Union Jack. I was humble in the presence of a true patriot. "Do you want some breakfast son?" he asked, and before I could answer, pulled open the door of the Kelvinator and said: "There you go, take your pick. KB or DA." There was nothing in the fridge but large bottles of beer. When I declined he became suspicious. "You're not a wowser are you?" I assured him I was born in Zetland but it was a bit early for me and I wouldn't mind a cup of tea. "Righto" he said, "I'll whack a bit of rum in it. Good for you. Perfect heart starter."

With that he opened a large bottle of beer and downed it while boiling the kettle. He made us both hot rum with two tea leaves in it, then gathered up his post bag, put three beers and the rum bottle in it and introduced me to the most entertaining four months of my working life. As we walked into the yard I noticed hundreds of beer bottles stacked under the brick piers of the posties shed and when he opened the deep drawer on his desk another three empty bottles clinked forward. By the time the other postmen had arrived he was onto his second bottle of beer and cup of tea and tossing the empties out the window to join the pile below.

First in was Johnnie, in his late twenties with an Elvis ducktail hairdo and a

Brando style leather jacket. He refused a beer but had tea with rum, white and two and began to go about his work in between bouts of checking his appearance in any reflective surface and putting the kettle on again.

“Chicka should be here soon” said Danny and within seconds I heard a muttered chant of “fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck” getting closer and closer until something crashed against the door and began hammering to push it open, the chant growing louder as the door became more stubborn.

In a spirit of helpful camaraderie Danny called out:” *Pull* it open you fuckwit, how long you been workin’ here?” The chant changed to “Ohyeahyeahyeahyeah” as a pile of dirty clothes with a heartbeat fell through the doorway. He was broad, short and stocky and gave you a fairly accurate impression of how a Bantam chook might look in shorts.

Chicka’s hair was a shade of red that doesn’t occur in nature...a colourful mix of dried blood in a rusty radiator. His complexion was that of an albino hit with a shotgun full of paprika and his desk also clinked when he opened it. Chicka was already a bona fide legend. It didn’t take long for me to learn that he had once been a proud, highly trained drunk in the Royal Australian Army. He held the rank of corporal and in that time-proven public service manner of finding the right man for the right job, he drove tanks. Nobody seemed to notice he was a drunk because tanks had trouble travelling in a straight line anyway. That is until the eventful night when he became bored with being confined to barracks and stole a tank to go and see his girlfriend in Bateman’s Bay. This seemed to go pretty well until he ran out of fuel on the bridge into town and then fell asleep with the hatch shut. The local police found it a little underwhelming waving their 38 calibre revolvers so resorted to knocking on the hull in a serious manner and calling out intimidating threats such as: ” Hello, are you there?” and “You’re blocking the bridge you know”...which is just about all you can safely say to someone with a 40 tonne cannon.

The excuse that spies must have knocked him out and locked him in the tank failed to create a panic within Military Security, who found it more beneficial to use him for training purposes and then hand him over to the local police who were much less understanding. After a sojourn in military prison he was surprised to find the Army no longer required his services and naturally he ended up in Waterloo Post Office, where his formidable reputation was seriously challenged by Danny’s breakfast fridge and growing bottle collection.

A beautiful sunset, the Mona Lisa, your first child; there are some images that stay in your mind forever. So it came to pass that one Thursday night Johnnie, no mean drinker himself, accompanied Chicka on a tour of several dozen hostelrys after which they came straight to work. When I arrived in the gathering glow of morning I found Chicka unconscious against the cyclone wire gate with a minor scalp wound where he'd tried to head butt the lock off the chain in lieu of finding the key in his back pocket. He would have made a wonderful poster for the Salvation Army, the sort of thing the Devil would graffiti with "Christian Soldiers arrested for war crimes".

But the truly memorable spectacle hung from the top of the fence off to Chicka's left. Johnnie had tried to climb over the tall cyclone fence and might have made it but for the 23 schooners and the barbed wire. He slipped, and the back of his half undone Post Office bomber jacket caught in the wire, twisted, collected up under his arms and in a slow and impossibly graceful Catherine wheel, turned him upside down two metres in the air. In the early morning light the scene resembled Goya's little known painting, "The Crucifixion of the Inverted Postman".

It was hard to know what to do so I raced to Danny's place and was soon awed by his inspired rescue plan of laughing so much he needed a beer. He hosed both of them off before he found a ladder to unhook Johnnie in a manner that allowed him to fall on his head so he could learn a lesson. Strangely, the only lesson either of them learned from this was that Danny was a bastard who had to be gotten even with.

Chicka was a well meaning easy going type who knew that the scars of his misfortunes were self inflicted, but for all of this he did quite a nice line in creative revenge. Word reached us that on a particular Friday morning Nev the District Inspector would be dropping in. Any other Head Postman would have made him a nice cup of tea and stuck to his routine, but Danny stayed up all Thursday night drinking and brooding that the bastards were checking up on him. When we arrived for work Danny was drunker than anything Chicka had ever seen looking back at him in a lifetime of mirrors. In a bizarre defiance of gravity Danny's flailing arms seemed to act as a counter balance to keep him upright. After attempting to sort his mail by throwing it against the wall he passed out and swore in his sleep.

We sorted his mail and organised his run because one of us would either have to do it, or split it three ways. Our plan was to get everything done ahead of time and be gone from the Office before Nev got there, leaving Danny to greet him

with a slowly forming puddle of drool and farts that were causing consternation at the Seismographic Office in Canberra. As we gathered our bags, Danny woke up more aggressive than ever. He threatened us with everything from the sack to castration, neither of which was in his power. "It's my run you bastards. You're tryin' to make me look bad. I'm bloody doin' my run I tell ya." He screamed as he passed out again. Well that just about made up everyone's minds.

How could we turn our backs on that kind of dedication? We loaded Danny onto his bicycle, put all his mail in the bag on the front, got him evenly balanced and then taped his hands to the handlebars. It was just a short stroll past the shops to the beginning of Wellington Street hill and the sight of him being wheeled along by his loyal subjects drew the attention of the early morning shopkeepers who were well used to his regular abuse. No doubt concerned for his welfare, they joined our small procession. As he sat poised at the top of the hill completely unconscious, bets were taken in the time honoured manner; the butcher and Joe from the fruit shop opting for twenty yards and fifty yards respectively. I had more faith. I put \$5 on Danny making it to the first cross street before injuries set in. It was the second time in a year I had seen this sort of jolly jape unfold and the simple wonder of it still held magic. A small crowd gathered as we sent him on his way. It would have annoyed him to see how popular he had suddenly become. He passed the twenty mark, then the fifty and would have made it to the cross street except he woke up and began to pedal. It was then we realised he was a much better cyclist unconscious than he was drunk and terrified. He went into a huge wobble and corrected it. We cheered. His legs flew off the pedals but he stayed on. We cheered. He veered onto the wrong side of the road in front of an oncoming car. We closed our eyes, there was a thump, we opened our eyes, watched for movement. We cheered. The Police Sergeant from Redfern began his investigation with: "What Danny? Sorry I missed it." Danny was quite pleased in the end.

He spent two weeks in hospital and was off on compo for a month on full pay *and* they gave him a new bike. I left Waterloo not long after Danny returned to work. It was a good time to be there. Half of my run was hundred year old slums that were being pulled down and the other half was tower blocks under construction to become the slums of a brave new tomorrow. With luck I could get the run finished in just over an hour and be home to watch TV; unless there was mail for the pubs. At the Duke of Wellington, the Lord Raglan, the Cauliflower and the George they had a beer

waiting for you when you dropped the mail on the counter. No wonder they were all drunks.

I worked with Chicka one last time, at Vaocluse Post Office. The Posties room was upstairs and the end window looked down onto the roof of the Postmaster's Office. It was Christmas again and Chicka had celebrated by not being quite dead yet. It was late afternoon when he staggered through the door, greeted me with an expansive wave, dropped his bag on his desk, spun round, smiled and fell out the window. My last memory of him is laying spreadeagled on the Postmaster's roof giggling. He had taught me many things but up till that moment I didn't think it was possible for anyone to laugh in a coma.

End.

And then the Coot moved in.

It was another magnificent morning in Regent Street Redfern, the birds were coughing their merry tune as the sun filtered through the broken window, its remaining shards tinted opaquely brown by the diesel fumes of trucks forcing their way through this clogged inner city artery like cholesterol en route to a heart of lard.

(*Please note this opening sentence was recently entered in the annual Bulwer-Lytton competition. If you don't know what that is allow me to apologise for all them pesky syllables I've been using...but then it follows you won't know what *they* are either).

It was a cheerless room. Bare floorboards, a double bed, a bedside table, nothing on the walls but insinuating stains and dark red curtains made from dyed hessian, but at least it didn't bubble. Not like the Coot's room. The Coot's rooms always had a chemical reaction happening somewhere in the furniture and fittings. He was quite foppishly particular with his own personal hygiene but when you combined his housekeeping skills with his indefinable muskiness it tended to create mould in confined spaces and anyone, mostly women, who entered that space would most definitely have to be confined. Many of us had house sharing experiences with the Coot and such was our tenuous bond of camaraderie that we preferred to watch the tableau unfold than pass on any warning to others.

He first moved into a large sprawling house on South Dowling St Kensington. It had been a horse racing area serving three race courses so the property had some brick stables out the back. Its 1920's charm has now been replaced by a large acoustic wall that keeps motorway noise away from homes by making it ugly. The house was already inhabited by Steve and The Toad and a parade of ne'er-dowells with migrating sleeping bags. Steve, at that stage, was working at Eastern Suburbs Crematorium so the door knocker, light pulls and towel rails were all attractive gold plated crucifixes and coffin handles souvenired from the containers of departed combustibles.

It's wonderful how practical and useful that image of Jesus has become. Light pulls, T shirts, clocks, bottle openers, wall hangings, door knockers, key rings, truly an icon for any millennium. Not like Mohammad. No one knows what he looked like so Islam misses out on a fantastic marketing opportunity. He could have been as big as Che Guevara or Homer Simpson, an image known, loved and purchased around the world...and what about his family? The Catholic Church has been raking it in for a thousand years with the Virgin Mary, the only female image more widely known than Paris Hilton and the only one who's slept with someone Paris hasn't. Islam could be doing big business with T shirts of Mohammad's wife or mother; just a simple black T shirt with a white slot and two eyes on the front...brilliant. Think of the money they could make from images of the Prophet air-brushed onto countless bonnets of Nissan Skyline GTs. Even Buddha gets to be used as a door stop or incense holder and the Dalai Lama's done more world tours than the Rolling Stones. It really is a shame that Islam has no catchy tunes because the born again Christian meetings are really pumping out groovy rock hymns for the future cardigan wearers of a new generation. Just one hit should do it...'Allah Akbar in the Casbah' or maybe 'Islamama Wamma Bamma Baby Let's kick off that Burqa tonight '.

All it takes is a little thought and the desire to make a difference, both of which were missing from South Dowling Street the day they let the Coot move in.

He arrived with a bicycle that wasn't his and two large saucepans full of dried things. For some reason the Coot was very proud of his cooking, which mostly consisted of heating items in the flames of ignorance until they were no longer recognisable. So long as one kept adding measures of water and wine he thought this perfectly acceptable and left the whole lot simmering away in a large pot until you couldn't tell if it was a chicken or a pineapple. If the U.N. were to send it to third world countries small children would still opt for a bowl of sand and twigs. However since everyone was working and the Coot was at home he became the chef de merde and not too many questions were asked about what was in the constantly bubbling pot. Some days the house smelled of gravy beef and carrots and other days there was obviously a fire at the tyre factory.

Despite his cold blooded name the Toad was quite a warm hearted person with a keen love of animals. He was an expert on tropical fish, but due to his temporary transient state had foregone the burden of tanks, pumps and thermometers and opted instead for raising two cute and fluffy ducklings which he christened

Hewey and Dewey, so if you're a step ahead of me and an animal lover then skipping the next paragraph might be for the best. It began with jokes about the Coot, his pot and it's contents until we noticed that look in his eye; the same look Jack the Ripper had when he mused that midnight sidewalk surgery might be an interesting challenge. As the ducklings grew older and potentially more delicious, the mood evolved to warnings from the Toad and a calm self-assuredness from the Coot while Hewey and Dewey pecked about the backyard oblivious to their pending promotion from pet to pot. Every day the Toad would come home with a bag of breadcrumbs, walk to the backdoor and call their names as they lovingly waddled up to commune with their very best friend...until the day they didn't.

Everyone in the house knew that he'd done it. They didn't know how he'd done it or even if he'd plucked them before they took their last dive below the froth and carrots, but no one except The Coot was particularly hungry. The Toad arrived home, the house went quiet and he walked into the yard calling: "Here Hewey, here Dewey, duck, duck, duck". There was no reply save the soft bubbling in the kitchen. The Coot stood over the pot stirring with a large wooden spoon and (as any forensic expert would tell you) contaminating the crime scene. Before he could finish the question," Where are my ducks?" the Toad's nostrils caught the uncharacteristically delicious aroma wafting from the stove. At this point The Coot shrugged, dipped in his spoon, tasted the wanton loss of life, looked thoughtfully at the ceiling and observed to no one in particular: "Needs a little salt".

The Toad had been working hard all day and was still wearing his police uniform and his police revolver and he'd seen enough guilty bastards in his time to work out exactly where his ducks were. Either the Coot hadn't figured the Toad might be upset or he just didn't care, either way he wasn't expecting the words: "You're fucking dead" as the revolver left its holster. With a quick splash of essence of departed friends into the Toads face by way of a distraction, the Coot was out the back door and into the night. It was a very long back yard and we couldn't decide whether the Toad was a bad shot or he didn't really want chalk outlines on the grass as the three rounds slammed into the old stable doors.

The Coot jumped the fence, leaving behind his saucepans and stolen bicycle. The Toad buried the Hewey and Dewey bouillabaisse in the backyard, replaced the ammunition from his private stock and within weeks (after complaints from the neighbours about loud noises) they moved into a large two storey terrace in Glenmore

Rd near the Five Ways in Paddington.

Life went on, things were forgotten, events became legend...and then the Coot moved in again. Like a slug in a hurry he'd failed to cover his tracks to his new address and two Hell's Angels who wanted either the money he owed them or body parts in lieu thereof caught up with him. By way of payment he traded the address of a stealable Harley Sportster, details of any security arrangements and the work habits of its owner; the bike being worth approximately four times what he owed them, it seemed like a fair deal...except that it was my Harley Sportster. The whole thing came up casually in a kitchen conversation on Friday night. There was no point asking: "How could you do this to me?" because he didn't think he'd done anything. If the bike happened to disappear it had nothing to do with him. Silence fell like a feather bomb as his housemates pondered that even for the Coot this was lower than a basement in a mine shaft. Oblivious to their simmering contempt he strolled to the fridge and chose from a selection of other people's beer. He was outraged and indignant when I countered by advising him that if my bike disappeared his Triumph Trident would also become a fond memory in a puddle of oil. I knew I'd struck a nerve when Steve rang to tell me the Coot had bought a high tech motion-sensor alarm system and an equally expensive chain to secure his bike to the steel picket fence. Steve actually saw the sales receipts for \$400 dollars so we knew that somewhere in the past few evenings a one night stand or two must have wondered how their apartments were mysteriously completely cleansed of valuables. The Coot wasn't used to taking threats seriously, just as the bubonic plague wasn't all that fussed by the attachment of leeches, so I reasoned that if I kept my Harley securely locked away we could all sit back and enjoy the show.

Motion sensor alarms, no matter what they cost, were in their early stages of development and the Coot's went to work on one of the windiest nights of the year. Every few minutes its piercing shriek would awake surrounding neighbours and send him hurtling down two flights of stairs to switch it off and re set it...and then it began to rain. At first The Toad and the other inmates found this quite entertaining but by 3am the glitter of show biz had tarnished to dull contempt. In the morning they advised him, by means of threats and holding him up against the wall that either he or the alarm would have to go. So he traded the alarm in, stole a few more female hearts and their unattached valuables and upgraded the system to one that sent a signal to a receiver he kept by his bed.

In the mean time, either by accident or design, someone stole my Harley Sportster. It was my own fault. I'd left it parked outside of my bike shop for ten minutes on a Sunday night. The shop was at the bottom of a small hill and since the starter motor was shot on the Harley I at least had the satisfaction of knowing they must have popped a few tennis balls in the groin pushing the thing away. In despair I walked up to Redfern Police Station to give a detailed description of the bike, one of only two in Sydney at the time. I gave them engine and frame numbers, identifying scratches and marks, rego, make of tyres, everything necessary to make a flawless ID...but this was Redfern Police Station. The Sergeant wrote down Bike / Stolen / Blue / and I wandered home in a light drizzle suddenly understanding why the local Aboriginal population helpfully tried to burn the place down so often.

For no particular reason I kept on walking up behind our street past a deep hole where the state government was excavating something that would eventually inconvenience rail commuters and baffle road users. I trudged on in my bike deprived depression feeling as if I was wading through porridge, when suddenly there occurred what can only be called a Spielberg moment. From the bottom of the hole, under a pile of old galvanised iron sheets lit by work lights, came a flash of chrome.

The badly built gate in the cyclone mesh fence had been badly closed, so badly that it was in fact open. I slid down into the hole and found my Harley covered with tin obviously waiting for the thieves to come back with a truck and pick it up. I dragged it out, got it going, replaced the tin, locked it in the back of the shop and returned with Gilso and a crowbar and some steel pipe to effectively welcome the Harley collectors back to the scene of their crime. We crouched down in the rain and waited. It was a good plan...until they arrived. An old Ford F150 ute pulled up and out jumped two large swarthy types with sawn off shotguns and they weren't happy to find their trinket missing. Deftly calculating that pipe and crowbar go into two shotguns not at all, we viciously poked our tongues out at them from the cover of darkness and crept back to the shop for a nice cup of tea. I couldn't know for sure if the Coot was directly responsible or if it was just a spur of the moment purloining by two passing thugs, either way Justice must have peeked under her blindfold and figured I was due for some light entertainment.

This event, while inconvenient, gave me an excellent opportunity to drag my nails down the blackboard of the Coot's paranoia. I let him know that vengeance

would be mine and then indulged in the sort of suspicious lack of action that always brings twitches to the guilty. It wasn't long before the flaw in the Coot's new alarm began to make him enemies. He rigged it up on a Friday night, a .22 rifle beside his bed and all his hooks cranked up to maximum tension. At around 10.30 it went off. He leapt for the rifle and lunged out the window like a Lee Harvey Oswald who'd slept in...but there was no one there. His Triumph was perfectly safe but he thundered downstairs to re-set the alarm and make sure. Twenty minutes later it went off again, more thundering and re-setting. Ten minutes later it went off again and so it went on all through the night until, in dawn's early light his housemates put the alarm out of its misery with a pair of wire cutters. The alarm shop wouldn't give him his money back because of the damaged wires but did helpfully inform him that the problem was due to the fact that the alarm and the receiver in his room were tuned to the same frequency as one of Sydney's biggest cab companies so every time a taxi went past it triggered his expensive ear splitting siren. As friends do, we enjoyed his misfortune for several weeks and someone nailed the alarm to the lounge room wall as a playful reminder.

But the Coot rarely dwelt on these minor defeats and turned his attention to The Toad's latest pet, a young English bull terrier named, in a late night explosion of clarity, Bully. The Coot hated Bully but Bully never got the message and came whenever he called, not seeming to mind when drinks were spilt on him or his head was accidentally slammed in a door. He was, after all, a bull terrier, the only creature who, by a quirk of nature, appears to have been fired out of the womb into a brick wall. White Pointers have actually been known to spit out bull terriers on the sound reasoning that even the French find them inedible (and you'll recall these are people who happily scoff garden pests by the shovel full).

The Toad, however, loved Bully and every afternoon he would come home from work, open the kitchen window onto the side passage and call :” Here Bully, Bully, Bully” and his faithful hound would bound up for a welcoming pat.

If you sense that we're about to wander down a tragically familiar path, you're dead right. So it came to pass that The Toad arrived home from work full of the joy of canine companionship and was somewhat puzzled when Bully failed to answer his master's voice. It wasn't the only thing that was strange that day. The Coot, though broke, seemed to have found himself a second hand surfboard.

This was doubly strange because the Coot couldn't have cared less

about the beach but was happy to add it to his collection of things he might do one day in the future, like his bow and arrows, pogo stick and knitting machine. The Toad called for Bully again and then ventured into the yard to find the Coot standing on his board balanced between two house bricks practising manoeuvres against the day that the tide might come in a really long way.

“Where’s Bully?” he asked. “I’ve got a new surfboard”, the Coot replied. The Toad put two and two together and came up with the lingering aroma of duck stew. His service revolver was upstairs so he did the next best thing and suspended the Coot against the back wall, paying particular attention to the diminishing width of his hand around the Coot’s throat. “Gak, cuk, gockle “, offered the Coot, by way of explanation. Their fascinated housemates looked on as the Coot began to turn a seasonal plum colour. His eyes bulged and his mouth gaped open struggling for air. If they’d had a red jacket handy they could have installed him at the Easter Show where people could pop ping pong balls in and perhaps win a nice prize. But all good things must come to an end, even murder, so the Coot was revived enough to explain that he had swapped Bully for the surfboard, but he knew where the guy lived and promised to recover Toad’s best friend. Unfortunately Bully’s new owner was happy with the deal and even set the dog onto him, Bully now having finally realized his own canine worth and gleaned the important knowledge that someone who empties ashtrays on you and slams your head in a door may taste better than they smell.

It was probably fear rather than guilt which made the Coot realise that he couldn’t go home with an unencumbered leash and so he was visibly put out by The Toad’s reaction to his brilliant alternative. Parts of this alternative had fur, parts had skin and other bits had scabs that seemed to move about of their own volition. It stood slightly below thigh height and appeared the result of a love tryst between Benji, a consumptive hyena and a garbage compactor. It gave the impression of seeping rather than panting and one eye drooped in a glassy stare, like a boxer who’d stepped into the ring one too many times. At Cruft’s it would have been arrested as a terrorist. The Coot beamed with pride, it wasn’t beautiful but the flies seemed to prefer it to the kitchen and he’d named it Buster. It was an apt name because that’s what happened to one of The Toad’s blood vessels when the leash was handed over. Their always tentative relationship never recovered and the Coot’s entertainment versus inconvenience quotient had peaked amongst the few acquaintances he had left.

The last time I saw the Coot was at a school reunion 15 years later. He

had a degree in architecture and some other unused occupation and was living on a mattress in a squat with two 16 year old girls. We didn't reminisce much that night, his nostrils were sniffing the air for money and if it could be liberated from a distant chum with an edible pet, so much the better.

End.

The Haunting of Number 8

Rose Terrace is a strange little V shaped cul-de-sac that runs off South Dowling Street just before it minces coyly against Oxford Street in Darlington. It had many convenient and endearing features. It was very central to the city, within stumbling distance of several excellent pubs, it was cheap, small enough to allow two not very eligible bachelors to keep it clean by opening the front and back doors and letting the breeze blow through... and it was haunted.

For the three of us it was the first time we'd moved out of home. Gilso was a surveyor, I was working for the Post Office and Stan did something that always made his back sore. It was a great arrangement, Gilso and I actually lived there while Stan told people he lived there, paid rent but lived at home where the cook and washing machine were and occasionally popped in with one of his mum's casseroles or cottage pies. This was just as well because the house was so small you would have to swing the cat by its ears to avoid staining the paintwork. Rose Terrace consisted of eight small terraces on each side of its V with a vacant patch of native weeds, beer bottles and shopping trolleys beautifying the middle. The houses were all painted Matt White and Mission Brown (two of my favourite blues singers) and the interiors all shared the same decorating DNA.

The front step was on the footpath and you walked up straight into a tiny lounge room about 2 metres by 3 metres. Once we installed a TV we had to sit outside to watch it so we weren't too close to the screen. Stepping up again, one was enchanted by an even more metrically challenged dining room, the front and rear walls of which featured large windowless openings that allowed you to see straight through the house. On one side of the dining room was a raised fireplace that would at one time have cradled a small fuel stove and on the other a stairway so narrow that any foot larger than a size six had to tippy toe to the top. One step further to the rear took you into the kitchen, which also featured the toilet boxed in next to the fridge. Today it would probably send Four Corners into an expose on council development

applications but back then it encouraged comments like: "Wow man, you've got a dunny inside the house. You can have a crap and smell what's for dinner at the same time." Naturally this worked both ways, so if you happened to be in the kitchen preparing dinner during someone's toilet enjoyment this handy proximity made boiling cabbage a positive bonus.

The stairway led straight up into a landing bedroom. To the right of this was the front bedroom and to the left a bathroom so small it only allowed up and down elbow movement when cleaning your teeth. There was barely room to turn around in the shower and the floor sloped away so badly that with wet feet you slid slowly towards the taps until your forehead pressed against the wall. At least it allowed the run-off to bypass the historically interesting drain and fall efficiently and illegally into the yard. At the end of this tiny yard (which we couldn't get into because the step was 3 metres below the back door) loomed the rear wall of what was then the Mandala Theatre. This was the dawning of the 70's when down and out theatres would run non-stop hippie/head movies in the hope the dope smoke would kill off the fleas in the seats while the acid distracted the clientele's attention from the patched screen and appalling sound. It was a very effective theory and with the speakers just meters from our back wall it was also very loud.

And so we became way too familiar with the soundtracks to 2001, Zachariah, Morning of the Earth and Don't Look Back.

I was recently fascinated to discover that 2001 is even more boring viewed straight than it was when tripping. I can only conclude that either I was ripped off on the acid or I'm cinematically bereft of taste, but since the acid always seemed to work *outside* the purple haze of the Mandala it's reasonable to assume that it was Kubrick's fault.

The natural ambience of Rose Terrace was enhanced by the brothel at its entrance. Always friendly, the welcomer (who looked like his face had been set alight and then stamped out with a golf shoe) ensured quiet departures by the customers and easy parking access for the residents, surely a bonus for the modern city dweller. Pride and lack of funds excused us from asking about discounts for neighbours. We didn't need the parking anyway because Gilso had his 650 BSA Lightning and I was currently riding a 175 Bultaco Lobito. My Harley Sportster was off the road for yet more repairs and I was laying low after an altercation with police who thought it should have actually been registered while I was riding it, especially since they were

also in possession of my licence at the time. The Harley stood out wherever it went, and even if you weren't in the same street you could hear it annoying passers-by several postcodes away. I dressed accordingly to ride the little Bultaco, daggiest helmet possible, desert boots, a green Canadian jacket and an air of starving student who doesn't know any better. I rode unlicensed at maximum speed completely invisible to the law having shed the dangerous bikey stereotype in favour of the gormless twerp running late for Bible College.

So life away from home began for Gilso and I. In very short order we made close friends with the barman at the Beauchamp Hotel across the way, established a line of credit with a Turkish greengrocer who thought we could pay and most importantly, had our address and phone number attached to the noticeboard in the nurses home at St Vincent's Hospital. This was a hopeful act to say the least. On one of these hopeful nights that bore no fruit (or veg) we began to notice the other occupant of Number 8. Stan was visiting this particular night and the three of us were playing cards when the stairs began to squeak. We didn't notice at first but then it became obvious that invisible feet were slowly making their way to the top every hour or so. I've always been reasonably sensitive to haunted places, in fact often responsible for inexplicable smells and noises, but this had the definite feeling of non-bottle related spirits. Stan declared himself to be completely unaffected by this, grabbed his winnings and strode off into the night like a Marathon walker who needed to whistle very loudly in a breathlessly nonchalant fashion.

Our visitor became a regular and although Gilso and I would check upstairs now and then, there was no apparent apparition. A couple of weeks later I was sitting on the front step musing on the ability of broken glass to provide such effective fertiliser for this seasons weed crop on the vacant land, when I stumbled into a conversation with our neighbour in number 10.

Being young lads from a Boy's School we'd never had much to do with lesbians and since we had a trouser leg full of the wrong chromosomes we'd have to wait for someone to invent porno videos and the VCR to find out. This particular pleasant, shy practitioner I thought of as Costello and her partner as Abbot, although she dressed like Boadicea at a Harley Swap Meet. Costello would clean the house and cook the meals while Abbot would stride off into the night at about 9 o'clock and return loudly at 4am yelling at anything that dared to look her in the eye, like bricks and downpipes. She did look very fetching in her tight leather and rubber outfits but

the thought of her hanging by her toenails from a rafter, latex wings folded around her just a wall's thickness away made conversations with Costello the safest option for lesbianic shoulder rubbing.

Costello was keen to know how we were settling in and whether we'd had any unusual problems. In going through the pleasantries of 'where did you live before this' I learned that A&C had actually lived in our house and had moved next door when supernatural goings-on began to rattle her nerves. She recommended we try some experiments and over the next few nights Gilso and I amused ourselves while waiting for our employers to deposit the beer money in our accounts.

The investigations went as follows:

1. The coolest place in the house (not our bedrooms, obviously). This was an excellent ploy for hot summer days. All you had to do was sit at the bottom of the stairs and a slight breeze blew through the solid wall. It was amazing how many people tried it and were happy to accept this breach of the laws of nature in favour of occult summer comfort.

2. The candle trick. If you stuffed towels under the doors at both front and back to stop any drafts and lit a candle at the bottom of the stairs you could watch the breeze blow through the wall and move the flame in its path.

3. The forbidden thing. Don't ever sleep in the bed on the landing. According to Costello it could be a very unpleasant experience. Naturally we tried to talk Stan into giving it a go but his reaction was measured in more whistling and Olympic striding. Since neither of us used the landing bedroom it was unlikely to be a problem, besides it had one of those double mattresses with a whirlpool in the middle. No matter how hard you clung to the edge, sooner or later you'd be sucked down into a morass of receding horse hair and limp springs.

Like all good ghost stories, we now reach the crucial point known as 'enter the mysterious stranger' (in fact I'm misleading you a bit here since there were actually two of them and they came from Inverell, which isn't mysterious at all unless you count trying to figure out why anyone would live there in the first place).

Julie and Marie were our neighbours across the rubbish patch and naturally when we first met them we thought we were in with a chance. It didn't take long for us to appreciate the friendship and footwork of girls who were much smarter than us. Once they've herded you into that corral marked 'big brother/ best friend' there's just no going back despite many futile attempts at applied psychology and pathetic

drunken pleading. But the gathering twilight of the unloved began to lighten when Sian and Bethan stepped off the train from Inverell and into the legend of Number 8.

As luck would have it, Julie and Marie only had room for one of their visitors, so like the gentlemen we were, we quickly washed some underwear, burned our garbage in the sink and gallantly offered the use of the landing bedroom. Our uncharacteristic altruism had an ulterior motive which we hoped might deliver us one of two results. If the ghost tried to absorb her flesh in the middle of the night amid piercing screams and scantily clad flailings then one of us could be officially anointed as hero with all the attendant perks and benefits...or we could wait downstairs whistling loudly with our eyes shut. This latter we dubbed the Stan Solution.

Bethan drew the short straw and moved her things into Room 1 at the Spookotel. Bethan was tall and willowy with sandy blonde hair and a disconcerting way of treating Gilso and I as if we were slightly dim witted poodles who might just be trusted not to soil the carpet. But she smelled nice, was good to look at and after all, any kind of derisory attention was acceptable recognition for a desperate bachelor. It was this superior air that led us to forget to mention the fact that her room was being shared by Mr. O'Blivion the Boarder from Beyond. As the behavioural scientist feels no compunction to inform the mouse that if it doesn't make it to the cheese in the middle of the maze it may have to gnaw on its own leg to ward off starvation, so we made up the bed for her and offered an extra fluffy pillow. It was this sort of purely scientific interest that led to the unusual end of an evening when a good looking woman says: "I think I'll go to bed now" and two unattached heterosexual men make no attempt to slither their way up her staircase (as it were).

About an hour later the stairs creaked and a few minutes after, the screaming began. We ran upstairs to see a smoky figure in a military uniform standing at the foot of the bed. The room was freezing and we both had steam on our breath. As I moved closer the figure backed away and began to dissolve, a little like Bethan did when we tried to settle her down. It was with a mixture of relief and disappointment that we scientifically noted: a) she was unharmed and b) she didn't sleep naked but wore a long cotton nightshirt. It turned out she wasn't screaming about the figure at the foot of the bed, in fact she was quite relieved to see him go, but at the fact that only seconds before he had been in the bed next to her and seemed to suck all the air out of the room while applying a heavy weight to her chest. This was serious. It obviously ruined any future chance we might have of getting even

half a Star in the Michelin B&B guide, although things were looking up for two Tombstones in Dead In Sydney on Five Dollars a day.

Bethan moved into the upstairs front bedroom and all went back to the way it usually is in a haunted house until one brain-addled night I decided to check out what it was that attracted our transparent lodger to this particular bed. The mattress and its central vortex were worse than I'd remembered and it was best to wrap yourself in Octopus straps and hook onto the edge of the bed to avoid rolling into that parallel dimension of horsehair and springs. After a while the stairs each creaked in turn, then the temperature headed towards winter and I began to think this may not have been a top contender for Idea of the Year. The grey mist commenced to form in the room and with a closer look I could see our visitor was definitely in an old military uniform with a plumed hat and a heavy great coat, I was grateful he wasn't wearing pyjamas. Even if I'd been named Mr. Gay Mardi Gras three years in a row I still would have had trouble firing up the spook pump for a night of stirring the ectoplasm.

Bethan was right, when he climbed into bed the air began to leave the general vicinity. The bed became cold and clammy, like begin tucked in on the Titanic. Then I felt a weight on my chest pressing me down into the quicksand mattress. I suddenly realised this was actually happening and it was actually happening to me. Panic nibbled at my temples as the weight and cold increased. There was no happy ending. As attractive as he was to a certain type of passed-on punter I struggled out of the mattress and left him to whatever it is unquiet

Army types dream of. He didn't seem to mind sharing the bed with someone but you certainly got the impression that he assumed his company had left their pulse at the door. So we left him to his bedroom and he left us to the rest of the house and it would have ended there if we hadn't gone to Gilso's grandparents place for a Sunday lunch.

Grampa Gilso had been an architect and had collected cabinets full of old plans and drawings from colonial Sydney. One of these featured Rose Terrace. It had at one time been Officers Quarters for nearby Victoria Barracks. The plans showed a doorway at the bottom of the stairs in each house running right through the entire terrace. It had obviously later been bricked up to turn them into houses but the breeze from the Twilight Zone still blew through the wall at our place.

A trip to the library turned up an illustration of an officer in our

guests uniform dating to around the time of the Boer War. I suppose somewhere there'd be a record of who had died there and since Victoria Barracks is one of the most haunted places in Sydney it's reasonable to assume that he still works the day shift and pops home for some shut eye. It was the first of several haunted houses I ended up living in and every time I drive past I get the urge to knock on the door and ask if anyone sleeps in the landing bed room.

My second haunted house was where I grew up in Zetland, but it didn't happen until my mother died. I rented the place to friends and late at night they'd see a white clad figure ducking into the bathroom. Then they noticed that she would appear whenever they made radical changes (like painting the hallway black). There were also people she didn't approve of. Margaret and Terry lived there and one day Margaret was talking to one of those ex-friends who go out of their way to track you down at your new address. As the pest went to sit down she found herself perched about 20 cms above the chair suspended on an invisible lap. Margaret said she saw two arms wrap around the pest just before she fainted and hit the floor. The figure was wearing a red cardigan with coloured checks in panels down the front just like the one my mum was wearing in the photo I showed her later.

I think my mother would probably like what the current owners have done with it, although I'm glad I didn't stay there on the weekend we repainted the inside in a working bee fuelled by two flagons of Southern Comfort and a dozen Buddha sticks. There are some things your parents will just never understand, especially if they're dead.

End.

Nights of the Southern Cross

Their house was last at the high end of a row of two storey terraces perched on a curious steep hill in Elizabeth Street, clinging like geriatric vultures to their broken bricks and tiles waiting to one day plummet onto a passing busful of commuting doomed.

I knew motorcycle types lived there because of the Triumphs and BSA's parked out the front and they were quite polite when I knocked on the door once they knew I wasn't a Police chappie. I had a Certified mail item which had to be signed for, probably a summons or similar piffing paperwork that they deemed beyond their acceptance so they made me a deal. If I simply endorsed any future official looking correspondence with the bona fide Post Office 'Left Address' stamp and sent it back, I would be welcome at all their soirees and entitled to free beer. Now naturally I had signed the Commonwealth document of loyalty when I joined the Post Office, but since I couldn't recall any mention of refusing fermented beverages I showed up the next Saturday night with a clear conscience.

When you're a postman you see all sorts of strange things, the mad old woman whose dog would eat her mail as soon as it went through the door slot; the Lebanese guy in Great Buckingham St Redfern who would wander around in his underpants insisting on signing for things; the little guy in Wellington St Waterloo who stalked the Navy wives flats with a small transistor radio up to his ear flicking a lighter that didn't work and the loonie who welded the letter box slot in his door shut so he wouldn't get any bills... and then there was Rockdale Bob.

He opened the door, revealing a duck tail hairdo supported by a pair of stretch jeans, work boots and a large silky shirt in a shade of blue that Elvis would have rejected as being a tad too loud. He was obviously under the influence of something other than good taste and ushered me in with the furtiveness of a serial bigamist meeting the parents. Rockdale Bob looked the part, but in three years I never saw him actually start, let alone ride a bike. In his spare time (which was mostly

between waking up and falling asleep) he performed pimping duties at Kings Cross. Occasionally, in moments of entrepreneurial clarity he would assault the customers and steal their wallets while their backs were turned...unless of course his girl was performing a service where the front would also benefit from being turned. It was a low act he was particularly proud of until he left one victim conscious enough to call the police. It took him a few weeks to work out how they found him, but the description of : ” about 6 foot, tight leather pants, lime green pirate shirt and greasy purple spangled dinner jacket” seemed sufficient for even the Kings Cross police. He took me through the misnamed lounge room to the packed backyard to meet the keg and Hairy and other founding members of Hell’s Angels.

Hairy was a large balding chap with one leg and a long beard, not unlike how Santa may have looked if he’d eaten the reindeer and gone to sea. He’d lost the leg when his ‘66 Harley Sportster parted company with the Cahill Expressway and slammed him into a light stanchion. He was quite proud of a large detailed colour photo stuck up behind his bed and was still undergoing occasional surgery to “make it beautiful”. In the ebb and flow of the evening I met Dubbo Bill, Pedro and Atlas, all good lads, the latter being the approximate of six good lads as his name suggests.

Atlas rode a bright red BSA Spitfire and took conspicuous to new heights. In his home town of Wellington NZ he was renowned for a night that involved particularly quick thinking considering how much he’d drunk. Not feeling the need to pull over for the sirens gaining in volume behind him, he led the constabulary on a chase around the waterfront and pulled so far ahead he made it home, parked his bike and ran upstairs to bed. When the plods arrived he convinced none with his acting prowess and was forced to lead them downstairs to the (alleged) offending vehicle. Hurtful accusations flew until Atlas proffered the challenge:” I’ve been here all night, if you don’t believe me, feel the exhaust pipes”. Apparently the screams woke up the neighbours in the next street and the additional screams when the ambulance crew peeled the hand off the hot pipe ten minutes later were equally unsettling. Far from acknowledging that Atlas had indeed given them a choice they took to tenderising him with their night sticks...and then they called for reinforcements. Several weeks later, still smarting somewhat he saw the wisdom of transporting himself to Australia and duly shipped out labelled ‘Raw Meat for Export’.

The night went pretty well until whatever Rockdale Bob had been dissolving in his rum and coke worked its way up to where a brain would normally

be. His paranoia prompted him to ask himself:” What if the cops knock on the door, we won’t know it’s them. We need a peephole man, we need a peep hole”. One quick squiz at the guest list would tell you that none of those present had ever felt the need for a peephole unless it had something to do with voyeurism. With a sound like a breaking clock spring Rockdale’s brain came up with an obvious solution. The door needed a hole so he reached under his bed and prepared his 12 gauge Winchester hole puter-innerer. Up until then the police were totally unaware of a party in progress, but once the front door was ventilated they showed a healthy interest in unlicensed weapons-grade renovations. They arrived in force with guns drawn and an awkward moment ensued. I don’t suppose they were used to confronting a crowd who kept calmly drinking while staring down the barrel of a service revolver.

“Whose bit of handiwork is this?” asked the Crown Sergeant, pointing at the shattered door. As it turned out, no one at the party actually liked Rockdale Bob and since he was the sort of fool not even a politician would suffer gladly, a forest of arms with outstretched fingers silently turned in his direction. It was beautifully done and quite picturesque thanks to the tattoos. “The guns under his bed”, someone offered and the police gratefully dragged him away to experience the range of accidents that were offered to guests of Redfern Police Station. Thanks to a recent court case, the public became aware that ‘falling down the stairs’ was enjoying a little too much popularity and so the cops switched to the slightly less plausible:” I accidentally sat on him your honour”, but decided to keep their mouths shut and their blinds drawn when the brilliant: “I was brushing some sandwich crumbs off his shirt when I accidentally broke his ribs “was laughed out of court.

Several weeks and a new front door later I was back at another party where Rockdale Bob claimed the title of Mayor of Crazytown. He’d been feeling the need for a higher profile, but without a bike and being slightly less convivial than a rattlesnake with leprosy, his chances were not good; until he hit upon the tale of “the guys” who were after him. He didn’t know who they were and hinted at why they were by saying ”Well...” and raising an eyebrow, but his display of constant nervousness was very convincing. The new front door was as peephole free as the last one and since he slept in that front room it made him very twitchy indeed.

Then one night he arrived home with his shirt torn and blood on his face, “the guys” had tried to get him. The others in the house now began to take him seriously, except Hairy, who knew from experience that Rockdale was so slippery he had to

staple on his underpants. On the night of this party Rockdale retired to bed early and around an hour later we heard screams. After a few minutes of trying to drown them out with the music, our well pacified curiosity led us to Rockdale's room where he lay on the floor in the customary pool of blood clutching at multiple stab wounds. Ensuring that all incriminating substances were securely stored they called the ambulance and then perused the crime scene.

It was a dead set sitter for Sherlock Holmes. The front door was locked from the inside and didn't appear to have been opened. The stab wounds were shallow and not at all like the ones you'd expect from the blood thirsty gorilla rapers he assured us were after him. The room had no window and the only other way in was over the back wall and through the crowd of assembled drinkers. He might have gotten away with it except for the detailed account of how he fought off his attackers. Apparently he knocked one out, took the knife off the other and stabbed him but allowed him to drag his accomplice out the door so they could get the message to Mr Big that messing with Rockdale Bob was a bad idea. The ambulance guy summed it up best when he said: "Looks like self inflicted wounds to me." "It's a shame he didn't put up more of a fight," someone observed as we turned back to the keg.

But brain death wasn't finished with Rockdale yet. A few months later he stole my wallet and when the others found it empty in a basket in his room they treated him to a broken leg and another ride in an ambulance. However, Rockdale's existence wasn't completely pointless because through his lack of a motorcycle I met Judd. She was probably six years older than me and serenely beautiful. She had been a school teacher but quit to pursue a career she genuinely found more interesting and unfortunately all she required from me was a lift to her place of work at Woolloomooloo. "There's a Chinese ship in", she explained. "I'd really appreciate it if you could wait for me. It shouldn't take long. You can watch the line move." I waited and watched the line of Asian seamen which snaked from the laneway round the corner and up the back stairs to a rear bedroom. They shuffled inscrutably, their imported libidos barely controlled by the thought of how close they were to sailor's heaven...and the scary thing was you *could* actually see the line move. Some would come down the stairs and rejoin the end of the queue, others formed into small smoking groups discussing their experience. Judd's description of the same experience was that each one would screw up his eyes, bare his teeth, grunt three times, slide off barely touching her, nod politely and leave the money under the

pillow. It reminded her of going to a new but highly recommended dentist, a little daunting at first but after a minute or two you didn't even know he was there. An hour and fifteen minutes later she emerged freshly showered and smelling of Pears soap. She threw her leg over the Harley, I dropped her home and she made me a cup of tea. It was a lot to take in for a 19 year old postman.

We saw her infrequently and she rarely came to The Southern Cross, but it seemed most people rarely came to the Southern Cross at beautiful, convivial Tempe. It was a bikies pub but there was very little trouble because it was where The Angel's drank and there was an understood agreement that drunken harmony would prevail so long as the rules were obeyed.

I didn't know the rules but I was happy to learn and observe in a spirit of understated self preservation. One rule was that girlfriends were understood to be the property of whoever claimed them but they were open to negotiation between stakeholders. Wives, however were sacrosanct and to be respected even when not tattooed with a deed of ownership. It was unfortunate that the night this rule was ignored it should involve Mrs. Big Jimmy.

She was at the bar ordering a drink when a guy who would soon be handed the title of Ugliest Australian offered to buy her a drink He'd obviously had a few himself and thought it only fair that his offered generosity, even when refused, gave him an unopposed running start at Mrs. Big Jimmy. It was at this stage she mentioned her marital status and introduced the hubby. He fobbed Big Jimmy off and dribbled a little closer onto her shirt. It was one of those moments in an old western when the Homicidal Kid walks through the door, everyone moves back and the piano player dives into the spittoon.

Allow me to introduce you to Big Jimmy. He was around six foot four and resembled two Vinnie Jones's welded together. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke, he took no drugs, rarely swore and was very slow to anger. He was widely respected by all who knew him. He always carefully considered his actions and had spent many years learning how to kill things without leaving a mark. But the guy at the bar hadn't read this paragraph so he pressed on and began to maul Mrs. Big Jimmy. He was warned once in a quiet and forthright manner but he pressed on. He was warned twice and Jimmy told the guy he was being let off because he was too drunk to know what he was doing. At this he began abusing Mrs. Big Jimmy and so claimed the Ugly title. Jimmy pulled his wife away gently, smashed a schooner glass on the edge of the bar

and ground what was left into the guys face until the bottom was level with his cheekbones. That night many patrons were seen to make note of the fact that on rare occasions Jimmy may be prone to leave a mark.

The next time I met Jimmy was at the house in Avon St. Glebe. It was one of those turn of the century two storey terraces and he was sitting on top of the large sandstone gatepost at the front steps nursing a brick. Several metres below on the foot path was a saucer of milk. He was breathing soft and slow as he waited motionless for a cat. Think of it as training. When the Finks had their regular kegs Jimmy was on the door and there was never any trouble, despite the attendance of many types who would make Viking raiders look like Jehovah's Witnesses. He lived in a small terrace in Wattle St Ultimo where he would train the occasional falcon and Doberman guard dogs (truly). At his funeral I learned that he and his wife couldn't have kids but they had fostered 32 children and were very highly thought of by Community Services. There were many successful young people there that day and all were grateful that Jimmy's narrowest and straightest of straight and narrow had got them where they were in life.

Like many of the others, Big Jimmy was, in the old school Australian way, a true gentleman...and a sportsman to boot. Part of his legend was the famous fight at Sofala. My mate Gilso had a slightly loopy friend called Geoff and for some reason he and Big Jimmy came to a disagreement and a well organised fight ensued. The crowds gathered out back of the Sofala Pub, bets were laid, three minute rounds organised, referees appointed and away they went. For the first hour they appeared evenly matched and as darkness fell three hours later they were still toe to toe.

Not enough light could be shed on the proceedings so at around 8pm a halt was called to a very even contest and the two combatants paused for refreshment. In the meantime lights were found and they continued on into the approaching dawn long after most of the spectators had fallen into the waiting arms of alcohol and gravity. After a pause for breakfast they continued until round about lunchtime when it was agreed to call the event a draw.

By then they couldn't remember what the original disagreement had been about but were quite sure they'd forged a mutual respect and friendship that would last forever and no one was about to argue with them. Big Jimmy was tougher than a saddle sandwich.

One day while I was at my bike shop tuning something with a hammer he

called me for some advice and I dropped over to his home to find him bent over a do-it-yourself blacksmith's hearth in the kitchen heating up a length of brass pipe. "I'm making a manifold", he said, looking up at me in thick glasses and a big leather apron. He wore no shirt and the sweat was running down his body. He wiped his brow with the thick gloves and I had a sudden vision of preliminaries at the Spanish Inquisition. As the brass pipe glowed bright red he took a glass medium size Coke bottle and screwed the top of into the pipe until the brass began to open up. "That looks about right", he called out and then brazed a brass plate over the end for the carburettor. It was all for his latest creation which he wanted me to sell for him in the shop. He had taken a 1970 R75/5 BMW bike and squeezed a 1500cc VW engine into it and since he was Big Jimmy there was no electric start, you had to kick it over. It wasn't pretty to look at and bristled with bits from other bikes as well as Holden and Fiat electrical things. When you sat on it at the lights the monster rocked from side to side like a train about to leave the rails. If you were booting it through a right hand corner you had to open the throttle on the left hand stroke of the engine so it would lift you up, get it wrong and the horizontally firing pistons tried to bury you.

Big Jimmy handed it over with a smile saying: "I'd like \$500 for it and you can ride it if you like, but if you drop it I'll kill you." It was fair enough. Unfortunately a week later I forgot. I left a friend's home in Balmain much too drunk to walk and succumbed to the invitation to: "Show us what she'll do". The power of the bike was such that Big Jimmy's only riding instruction was to take off in 3rd gear and even then slip the clutch "because she wheel stands easy". He was a man who knew his machinery but I was not and I was suicidally drunk.

I took off in first gear and the front wheel shot immediately past my face so I changed into second, then third and it was still up on one wheel. I didn't fear falling off because the only thing I could see was Big Jimmy's fist exiting the back of my head. By the end of the street I was cold sober, moist trousered and riding the bike sedately home at 60kph. I eventually sold it for \$950 and Big Jimmy was a very happy man. I never told him what happened because I knew that at some time in my life having the back of my head in one piece might prove useful.

Big Jimmy's favoured bike was a Triumph Bonneville but he seemed to have bad luck with them because every two years or so the current one would be stolen and disappear without trace. If the insurance companies had bothered to look they would have found a small pile of Bonneville's rapidly forming a reef at the end of one of the

wharves in Balmain. Around about this time a breakaway group of young (remembering I was 19 at the time) next generation Angels showed up in Kensington and proceeded to invite the Press to their weekend parties. Several Sundays in a row the papers were full of Bikie Sex Orgy Expose shots and the cops began paying regular visits to the Southern Cross. These new social descenders hung out at the Oxford Tavern in Taylor Square and were subsequently christened the Oxford Angels. The irony was that while most of them had the leather jackets, not many actually owned bikes and the observation went round that you could tell when they'd been out on a run by their bus tickets. The quiet life at the Southern Cross was all but over, but not before Scunge, in an uncharacteristic display of drunken clumsiness dropped his bike and broke his collarbone. While he was laying semi-conscious by the road, one of the Oxford Angels pulled up and stole the leather jacket off his back. This was a mistake.

Scunge was a legend. He had a young Kirk Douglas Vikingness about him, could pull women like fluff from a navel and was the best road rider I've ever seen. He was once chased through Kogarah by a very keen local bike cop who couldn't quite catch him and in the morning I checked out his bike.

He'd laid his Sportster down so low in the corners that both mufflers were flattened against the frame...what a guy! He once rode his standard and very well used 66 Sportster to the Bathurst races with his girlfriend on the back. He then removed her and the saddlebags, taped up the lights, borrowed some leather pants and rode it to 4th place in the Australian Open against some of the best racers (and race bikes) in the country. Not bad considering he'd never raced before and was sitting bolt upright with buckhorn handlebars. There's a photo of him waving to the crowd at Skyline at 100mph. It was also the same bike that had been straightened and rebuilt after Hairy had turned it into a banana against that inconvenient light stanchion. Scunge often attracted the attractive in search of adventure and was currently enjoying the company of a very well educated and co-incidentally gorgeous journalist. I know this to be true because one night, in a rare moment of suit and ties I took a girlfriend to the theatre to see Hadrian VII, a stage adaptation of Morris West's novel Shoes of the Fisherman. It was memorable for two reasons; one was Frank Thring's outrageous portrayal of the Pope. Some actors could Camp it Up, but Frank was a convoy of Winnebagos. The other reason was the arrival of Scunge in his usual tattered leathers and greasy jeans together with Margarite, the beautiful drama critic

for The Australian. They sat right in front of us and when he saw me, was fulsome in his greetings and introduced me to the audience around us to the bafflement and embarrassment of all but ourselves. As the lights went down he was busy complimenting his neighbour on her jewellery and obviously checking her out for a possible threesome should her husband leave early.

He certainly wasn't the violent type but was aware that he had a reputation to maintain so, once released from hospital, he decided to pay a visit to the Oxford Tavern to retrieve his jacket. The place was packed that night and a few of us stayed by the door as he strolled in with his arm in a sling. Technically we were outnumbered ten to one but luckily there were very few in attendance who could stretch to that level of calculation. The roar of a Saturday night drained away like adjectives through a detective novel cliché as Scunge's reputation preceded him across the fermenting room. The guy with Scunge's jacket just sat there staring...then he blinked and looked away. It was over before it began. He stood up and handed Scunge his jacket. Scunge put it on, knocked him out with his good arm and honour was satisfied. I could almost hear the bowler-hatted piany player start up as tumbleweeds blowed in through them swingin' doors.

End.

Died and Gone to Heaven.

I first met Scunge at Redfern Motor Cycles in William Street Redfern, a shed that had grown into a backyard with a roof over it to become a motorcycling landmark. I'll miss it for the rest of my life. Anyone who owned a Harley in Sydney knew Jack and Johnno Johnson. Jack was the father of everything Harley, including Johnno. He always reminded me of a cross between the old actor Ward Bond and a philosophical gorilla. Even into his early 70's Jack was winning arm wrestles against 30 year olds. He kept a 1949 Chev ute but preferred to ride everywhere on his mid 1940's 1200 Harley and side box and lived in the tiny weatherboard house amid hundreds of tons of Harley parts and steel capped cockroaches. Old Jack didn't suffer fools gladly and was known to not sell parts to someone just because he'd taken a dislike to them, which was bad for that particular customer but very entertaining to watch. Redfern Motor Cycles attracted an interesting clientele long before Harleys were trendy or even heard of by most of the mid life crisis cases longing to ride off into an art directed sunset in matching his and her leathers.

In 1967 you had trouble giving a Harley away. If you wanted speed and style it was British bikes or nothing. They went fast, they handled well and they stopped OK, assets which often eluded the ex Army 1942 WLA Harleys that were just about the only model you could get. The WLA was readily available from the Army auctions at Holdsworthy and while still at school my mate Andy picked one up for \$50, registered it and rode it to school the next day to the admiration of many. It was still in its Army khaki paint with leather saddle bags, an enormous Perspex windscreen and a rifle scabbard on the front forks. Its operation was as eccentric as its looks. It boasted a three speed gearbox (when everything else had four speeds), a foot clutch and hand gear change (when everything else was the other way round) and a 750 side valve V twin engine whose roots stretched back to 1920 and beyond, but they were cheap, reliable and parts were plentiful. Low income earners, students, the annoyingly practical and the practically eccentric bought and rode WLAs and they all

showed up at Redfern Motor Cycles.

The pick of this bunch was a guy who Jack christened “The Flying Circus”. He had a khaki WLA and side car and rode everywhere with either a military style cap held on with a chin strap or a leather flying helmet. He had many uniforms which he would don from time to time, all of which were too big for him and only accentuated his tiny head, Coke bottle glasses and an Adams apple which appeared to contain a real apple. His great delight was festooning the bike and sidecar in flashing lights. Some were on tall poles, others wired into the windscreen and still more stuck to the sidecar. He had switches that could make them flash, or flick to red flashing, red and blue revolving, just blue winking or the whole out of control Christmas tree effect.

He also had some sort of ham radio set up at home and was tuned into the police and fire frequencies so that whenever there was suburban mayhem he would slip into the appropriate uniform and zoom out of the Dingbat Cave with all lights flashing. He was (as they say in the trade) ‘known to the authorities’, who took a bemused interest in his appearances until he fitted several sirens to “The Circus” and began producing home made badges. One day he quietly disappeared from the scene and we could only assume it had become difficult to change gear in a straight jacket..

Through the roller door of Redfern Motor Cycles came Hamburger Head, Hairy, Doc, Richard Cranium, Fang, Billy Van, Pig, Stony Burke and hundreds more whose names and occupations were linked by the grease under their fingernails and the shared cups of tea boiled in Jack’s old stained Billy.

Jack and Johnno thought they’d seen it all until up the laneway, in a fine mist of oil and unattached spring washers came Scunge. He’d ridden all the way from Adelaide on a bike that was obviously last weeks special at Frankenstein Motors & Junkatorium. In the animal world it was the equivalent of sending a train crash full of zoo creatures off to a short sighted taxidermist. Let’s start at the back shall we? It’s easier there because the rear part of the mudguard had fallen off, which is understandable because fencing wire, while tough, isn’t forever. The frame had come from what’s known as a plunger rear end BSA and what was left had quite obviously plunged its last long before Scunge’s tender caresses. It still had a BSA seat held on with two occy straps but down below, the muffler had been replaced with two beetroot tins soldered quite unsuccessfully together. There was still a BSA gearbox attached and it only worked because BSA had made tanks, rifles and cannons for

many years and did 'tough' better than most. The engine had been replaced with a WLA Harley which had more leaks than a Confidential Police Department Memo. The engine didn't quite fit so he'd hack-sawed the two front down tubes off the frame, jammed in the engine and then bent (with a hammer) two lengths of old water pipe which he welded onto the frame and painted with a black Texta pen. The petrol tank above it was from a different type of BSA and was also held on with two occy straps (not unlike how a sheltered workshop might attempt welding with spaghetti). The headlight was actually a bed lamp taken from Scunge's mum's garage in Norwood SA. It contained a six volt light bulb glued in place and of course (being a bed lamp) no glass lens. The front suspension was on its last legs, the tyres were bald and the brakes worked best if you closed your eyes and screamed: "Don't let me die like this". None of this seemed to bother the South Australian motor registry people who happily registered it and allowed Scunge to paint his own number plate. Just to be on the safe side he painted half a dozen different ones to cover all contingencies.

He stepped off the bike, brushed the dead bugs from his tattered jacket, ran his hand through thick blonde hair and flashed a smile that could power a small town. Beside him the bike groaned and pinged as it cooled down and a foot-peg fell into the gutter with a soft clunk of relief. "You rode this thing from Adelaide to Sydney?" Johnno asked. "Yeah" replied Scunge. "Non-stop...after the back guard fell off". He was always happy, always positive and always kept that little bit of extra information about who he really was and where he'd been, safely tucked away out of sight. However, we did know that he'd just come straight from his own wedding. He and the little lady had been living together for a few years and had decided to tie the knot. After the three day party ended he woke up on the front lawn with a dark but practical conscience yelling: "What the fuck are you doing?" in his beer encrusted ear and departed immediately for the less responsible climes of the east coast.

He was a man of many talents and one of those was once being a lineman for the Electricity Commission so naturally he stole any of their tools which might come in handy elsewhere. One of these leapt to the fore when he and other disreputables moved into an old run down convict built mansion up behind Balmain Bowling Club. They decided to clean the once magnificent place up a bit and part of this involved weeding its old tennis court back to life. Since none of them had much of a credit reference, getting the electricity connected was a bit of a problem, until Scunge dug out his industrial size jumper leads. It was obvious from the way he climbed the

power pole and hooked things up to bypass the system that this wasn't his first foray into bringing free power to the people. Pretty soon the floodlights for the tennis court were fixed and he rented it out for night games to the rest of the street, all of whom knew what was going on, but a tennis court is a tennis court.

All his worldly possessions were carried in a stained duffle bag that resembled a tampon plucked from the elephants graveyard so maybe the bride wasn't too distressed by the loss of a dowry that even St. Vincent de Paul would set fire to. Among these possessions was something that had at one time been a helmet. He loaned it to me once and when I put it on it completely covered my eyes and was six sizes too big. This was confusing because he had occasionally borrowed my helmet and it fitted him perfectly. This particular Tardis of headware was merely a tool to facilitate one of his profitable side lines. In an excitement packed life he had driven a lot of trucks and knew lots of truck drivers. These were hard working types who needed hard working pills to fuel their non-stop jaunts between Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Mars

To do this successfully even *he* realised that he'd need a bike that was a little less conspicuous, but not before I had to ride it from Redfern to Manly. Having been a drummer, I knew the art of controlling things that were going in four different directions at the same time and on Scunge's bike this came in very handy. I soon learned not to try to catch bits as they fell off but my percussive skills became critical on the southern side of the Spit Hill. I backed off prior to heading down the steep tight bends simply because the wheels couldn't agree on a common path and the brake linings had gone on holidays and left what felt like bread and butter pudding to look after things. Just as I backed off, the engine backfired and jettisoned yet another victim of the conquest of vibration over transportation. The back spark plug flew straight out of the engine, grazed my right testicle, parted an eyebrow and disappeared over my shoulder. Scunge thought it was pretty funny, in fact he told the story to the guy who bought the bike off him... and threw in a spare set of spark plugs as an act of good faith. He used the cash to buy a 1940's UL (1200 sv) Harley with buckhorn handlebars. Like the WLA's these also had foot clutch and hand gears, but straddled by the capable riding bits of Scunge it went considerably faster and more dangerously than most other bikes around. I made the mistake of following him at speed up the middle of a line of stationery traffic in Cleveland Street Redfern, forgetting that while his bike had narrow buckhorn handlebars, my Sportster didn't. Luckily I got jammed

between a bus and a GPO van so the drivers couldn't have cared less, although the mail van guy did seem to enjoy my equatorial loss of cool.

I really shouldn't have had the Sportster, I was 19 years old and felt I just didn't have enough miles under my bum to deserve such a speed machine, but I was keen enough to leap face first into massive hire purchase straight out of school so I was obviously a bit dim as well. Old Jack more or less talked me into it in between cups of tea. I was his postman and I'd often park my 1939 M21 BSA outside the shop when I did my rounds.

A shipment of new bikes had arrived and the owner of one had put down a deposit and then changed his mind, so I could have a brand new Electric Blue 1968 XLH Harley Sportster complete with free saddlebags, tacho, touring tank, crash bars, big seat and back rest (thanks to that forfeited deposit) for only \$1860 cash. Or \$2300 as it turned out on hire purchase. Then as now, you could buy a new car cheaper than you could buy a new Harley, in fact you could also pick up a holiday shack at Woy Woy for a similar price and pocket a bit of cash. I helped to uncrate it direct from Milwaukee and it was magnificent. Because Harleys cost a fortune (a Triumph Bonneville was around 900 to a grand) very few new ones came into NSW. Jack didn't import any larger models because they were too expensive and he had no loan facilities, so in 1968 there was a handful of new Harleys imported into NSW; six 125cc Rapidos, four 250cc Sprints and five Sportsters (2 XLHs in Electric Blue and 3 XLCHS in Electric Burgundy) and even though I gained the instant cachet of a Sportster it was tainted somewhat because mine had an electric starter!!

Back then only Japanese bikes had electric starters and even though they were practical, functional and sensible they were, to some, the sure sign of a limp wristed, tiny testicled, junket eating tool who probably sipped brightly coloured drinks with little umbrellas in them. I could live with this and get away with it, because it was after all a Sportster and there was much satisfaction on those cold nights when a push of the button got things thumping while others would be kicking away amid a cloud of colourful blue adjectives and fiercely gnawed nouns.

To be honest, my riding skills weren't up to the challenge and with the big white touring seat my toes barely touched the ground, which made looking cool at the traffic lights precarious at best. I hadn't even ridden my BSA much because my old school friend Andy had 'borrowed' it extensively and I had to actually steal it out of his backyard to get some miles up... and this was how I met the Angel from

Birmingham.

It was a night so cold and damp that polar bears were knitting beanies for brass monkeys and my boots squelched in the mud of the driveway in Florence Ave.

Eastlakes. There was no one home, but the time had come to reclaim by BSA. I had only ridden it a few times with Andy on the back (L platers could carry full licence riders) and it wasn't a great night to go solo. I kicked it till I was wetter inside my jacket than out, clunked it into gear and set off into the gloom. To get back to Zetland I would have to traverse the building site that was Eastlakes shopping centre and its surrounding complex of Housing Commission flats. Only a few blocks had been built and the whole area which had once been Rosebery Racecourse was now dotted with piles of bricks, sand and unfinished streets. While wobbling through the half light and contemplating that architects are the only species who recognise the cube as a desirable recurring theme in nature, I took a wrong turn way too fast and clicked down a gear instead of up. Cut to slow motion. As I dropped the clutch the rear wheel entered a large patch of sand, up ahead was more sand in a neat pile about a metre high. Up onto that pile some local kiddies had placed two boards to make a ramp for their bicycles. By this time I was panic stricken, confused and no longer in control of a) the bike and b) my bodily functions. The poor old BSA hit the ramp at what for it was break neck speed (probably about 50 kph). Being the heavier of us, the bike fell to ground soon after the ramp's end while I described a graceful ark of flailing limbs wrapped in a khaki Army great coat. From a distance it must have looked like something monumental had fallen from an aircraft toilet.

There was a loud muddy thud and an exhalation of air not unlike a member of the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders putting bagpipes in his pocket. Helmets weren't compulsory but in this kind of accident death often was. I wasn't wearing a helmet but fortunately, as it so often did when the coyote missed the roadrunner, the ground broke my fall.

I don't know how long I was unconscious but it was definitely preferable to embarrassment. When I finally woke up it was to the pungent smell of cheap perfume. Being concussed but not stupid, the first thing I focused on was a pair of welcome breasts peeking out of a ruffled V line blouse like two fresh bread rolls. My gaze took in the black miniskirt, black tights, high boots and concerned dimples topped with a Cilla Black hairdo. I had obviously died and gone to Heaven a Go Go. But then the vision of loveliness spoke.

“Are you orright then pal or what?” she cooed in an accent like chewing on Alfoil. She could have been the same age as me or ten years older, it was that kind of fashion choice but I was too addled to consider my chances. I was just happy that my arms and legs worked and I’d worry about the other bits as the need arose. Slowly I got to my feet to survey the damage, but the bike wasn’t there. It was now upright on its stand squinting at me with a cracked headlight glass.

“You were lucky there love, that could have been nasty. Would you like a cuppa tea or soomfing?” I was hoping she’d mistake my embarrassed blushing for gravel rash and thanked her but had to press on. The drizzle had picked up and I trudged to the BSA and began to kick it over with little enthusiasm and things got worse when it just wouldn’t start. I went over it, picked out the mud and tinkered with protrusions I knew nothing about hoping she thought I was fixing the problem.

Another ten or so kicks and I was ready to lie down in the mud and drown and then events presented themselves with new improved worseness. She walked around the bike and said: “Oh, an old Army Beeza, my dad used to have one of these.” With that she tickled the carbie, adjusted the advance/retard lever, eased it over compression and kicked it into life. I felt I’d lost my balls with a pair of nail clippers. I was numb for days and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t mention this to anyone else.

It wasn’t the last time the Beeza and I would part company. Once the back wheel wedged itself in a tram line and on another occasion the gearbox locked between third and fourth and threw me into the gutter while the Beeza span into the middle of the road and a bus hurtled between us. It was probably just getting even for a trip Andy and I once did out to Picton. He was riding and I was on the back and chugging up a steep, winding hill we found ourselves behind the last truck in a circus convoy. That’s right folks it’s that scene from Funniest Home Videos that you’ve always wanted to see. In that last truck was an elephant. Not just any elephant but one that had its legs crossed for way too long. Andy saw it coming but I didn’t so he ducked down onto the tank...and I didn’t. In case you’re interested, an elephant in full relief mode is not unlike standing in front of a fire hose. No matter how long you hold you’re breath you have to inhale sometime even though you know the moisture to air ratio is not in your favour. Long story short, it doesn’t taste like chicken nor can you get the smell out of your clothes even when you’re burning them. I still have the Beeza today and it’s only just starting to smell like metal again so leave us draw a veil over this unseemly episode.

The Beeza was slow and sensible, but in 1968, I needed, no, lusted after that H model Sportster. So allow me to introduce you to AX 798. When the CH models came out of their crates they were sleek and slim with their small tanks and shapely spine crusher seats and it was a little disappointing what a large touring tank, crash bars and big white long distance dual seat can do to the groove of a machine, still it was mine and I loved it.

Redfern Motor Cycles had grown from a backyard shed and its floor was solid dirt compacted with years of old oil and grease. It smelled like old sheds ought to as the afternoon light filtered in through the fading green Alsynite roof. Jack boiled a billy of tea to celebrate my purchase and I gazed in awe at my new bike as it sat surrounded by generations of Harley history and piles of ancient parts disappearing into the dimness. It was rumoured that Jack and Johnno had literally hundreds of Harleys but the estimates were in fact on the low side.

They had half a dozen storage places dotted around inner Sydney, from garages to a major warehouse. I went to help get some parts from a converted small factory in Redfern once, stepped through the door in the shutter and came face to handlebar with rows of bikes jammed against each other right to the back wall with two more layers stacked on top of them all the way to the rafters. There was just enough room in the middle to shuffle to the back and hope that a steel sponge cake of WLA's, 1200s and sidecars didn't topple and take you to Harley heaven. Redfern's bread and butter was refurbishing ex Army WLA's and Jack knew that every one on the road meant an ongoing demand for his enormous store of new parts. And what a bargain they were, in 1968 you could pick up a rebuilt WLA in your choice of colour scheme (red, blue, green, black, mostly combined with white) including hand applied pin striping (chroming extra) for around \$380 registered. Add a matching sidecar and you were cruising around \$500.

The pin striping came courtesy of a genius known as Slack Jack who mostly spent his time quite conveniently in the saloon bar of the nearby Redfern Hotel. They didn't have a front door at the shop just a big open roller shutter and Johnno would get Slack Jack settled in the doorway with a pile of painted mudguards and a comfy 15 gallon drum with sugar bag cushion to sit on. Slack Jack was a little fuzzy until midday and then the shakes would set in. A simple handshake was like trying to grab a ferret on a spring. But who was I to question an artist gripped by his muse? Slack Jack would mix his paint in a small tin, get his dagger brushes ready,

reach for a mudguard and take a swig from a bottle of Flag Ale as Richter scale tremors rattled from his wrists to the tips of his fingers. But when he picked up those brushes it was magic. The shakes disappeared and beautiful flowing coachwork lines and curlicues blossomed up and down the valances of mudguards that instantly became works of art.

I never saw him botch a job or go back over a line. These days they can do it with stickers, but of course there's no soul (or Flag Ale) in a sticker. Redfern Motor Cycles was probably single-handedly responsible for the number of WLA's and ten horses still on the road today. Old Jack had a few tricks he'd use at the Army auctions before the hammer came down. If it was a particularly good batch he'd often go along the line of machines and turn in all the mixture screws on the carbies so they wouldn't start when potential buyers leapt on them. "I don't want these blokes kicking my bikes over", he once told me, "you don't know where they've been".

Old Jack made a few enemies among some of the average punters who would turn up at the Army auctions with their \$50 when the auctioneer would start with: "Well gentlemen, what'll it be? One, or the lot?" I suppose I was privy to a bit of Harley history when he and Johnno bought the last ever lot from the Army. I helped to unload two semi trailers full of WLA's, some just stacked on top of the others, 65 in all. Jack pointed one out and looked at me. "This'll be a good one," he said. When I asked how he knew he winked and said. "Chrome gas caps and speedo cowl. Someone cared a lot for this one, probably an officer's toy".

He was rarely wrong when it came to Harleys. Many's the afternoon I spent drinking tea with him and Johnno as Jack sat behind the counter, his old leather cap pushed back up on his head as he packed tobacco into his pipe and told me what was wrong with modern Harleys or in fact anything else that wasn't an old Harley. One time I found him tapping a crushed head light shell back to perfection with a series of small panel beating hammers.

He had hundreds of new headlights out the back but he just needed to keep his skills up; the same reason he hand-stitched the windscreen apron for my WLA. I even spent the odd evening hour playing guitar with him as he talked about the old days. He played an early 50's Epiphone Emperor Regent in case you're interested, made in America of course.

While Jack dealt with punters and mail orders, Johnno kept the wheels of industry quite literally turning. He could identify many customers just by the

exhaust note as they came up the hill in the lane. They were truckies, accountants, petrol driven backpackers, students, a couple of lawyers and doctors, cops, crooks and numerous others who just came for the smells and the sounds.

The chopper craze hit just after Easy Rider and it didn't sit well with Jack or Johnno, who had no problem with improving the breed just so long as you didn't change the parents. Backyard cowboys were making extended forks that bent when you slammed on the brakes and sissy bars that wouldn't take the weight of a passing breeze. All of these bits were usually bolted onto a frame that had its sprung seat removed, (the only form of rear suspension) and sent every pot hole in the road straight up your spine like a rectal jackhammer. Hurling down the road on one of these behind a set of Come-to-Jesus handlebars at 100ks an hour was an experience that could definitely thin out the gene pool. What worked passably well on the sweeping, well made highways of America was, in NSW, like taking a tractor on the Paris-Dakar. I rode a 1936 WL chopper halfway to Bathurst one Easter and for 24 hours my groinal region identified closely with those Phillipino divas that bring egg beaters to orgasm.

Occasionally my Sportster would join the queue for repairs like dent bashing or handlebar straightening. I never once fell off while drunk which means I must have been pretty crap when sober. It's first dent came when Andy and I decided to ride to Armidale in the middle of Winter to see our mate Rodney who was teaching at a small school in Ebor (north on the New England Highway). Rodney's letter had described the Ebor pub in glowing terms and it had accommodation, so late drinking was a welcome probability. When we arrived in Armidale everything was still open and we could have had any number of comfortable pubs to choose from but after a couple of beers decided to press on into the freezing night to find Rodney. We had a vague idea of where Ebor was but not how far and buoyed by an inane she'll-be-rightness, didn't bother to ask or check on fuel.

Hmmm, possibly more than a couple of beers in retrospect then. In any case we'd no doubt get there before the Ebor pub shut and would still be warmly swaddled in the wintry bosom of New England. Ebor was further than we thought and unbeknownst to us, a place so miserably cold that even migrating Arctic Geese logged an amended flight plan. We crawled along through fog so thick I found bits peas and ham in it. Every bend in the road was a new surprise as ice formed on my beard and sheep wandered into our headlight like giant suicidal tampons. Finally the yellow fog

lights of Ebor welcomed us to the pile of ashes and charred framework that had, until four days previous, been the pub. Apart from the besser block petrol station/store... that was Ebor. We called Rodney for directions to the farm he was staying at and one hour of fog and sheep later we were met at the gate by snarling dogs and the welcoming cry of the farmer who offered: "Get the fuck off my property or I'll blow your head off".

Obviously a communication breakdown not to be sorted out at the wrong end of a shotgun so we rode back into what there was of the town and parked at the petrol station, because, well, where else? We could fill up our near empty tank in the morning but it was around zero degrees and the thermometer was falling like an unbunjeed elephant. We were both wearing leather jackets but between us there was only one Army greatcoat and the only shelter was the toilet, so we tossed a coin.

Whoever got the greatcoat would sleep on the concrete floor, the other would sleep on the dunny and every few hours we'd swap around; probably not unlike the way Scott or Amundsen would have done it on their way to the Poles. The only flaw in the plan was that it assumed sleep was possible. Ebor had lovely acoustics and you could hear the semis changing up and down the gears for half an hour either side of the town. It's a shame the servo/store was all besser block because by sunrise I would have sent it to join the smouldering pub in Out-of-the-Way-Dump Heaven. While we tossed and turned inside, the Sportster, being parked on its side stand on wet grass, began to sink slowly into the turf, bringing the shiny new front mudguard into ever increasing contact with the side wall. When the store opened we had: "Shit, fuck, arsehole, bastard" for breakfast, filled up and left, never setting eyes on Rodney in his natural environment.

The next time the Sportster became scuffed it was much more spectacular. It was a sunny December twenty-second kind of Sunday afternoon and my then girlfriend Lin and I were heading back to Sydney through the Royal National Park. We met a guy named Jimmy and his girl coming the other way and he told us he hoped he'd get to the next petrol station because he was low on fuel. Being a nice chap (which in this case translates as wrong guy in the wrong place at the wrong time) I offered to follow him and give him some of mine should he run out. Well you see I had a Harley Sportster and he had a Norton SS and as we travelled the speed increased and the bends became tighter until we came to a quick downhill stretch that featured a thick carpet of sand tucked around a bend. This was the moment I

discovered how flickable Nortons were and why it's Featherbed frame was so legendary. Jimmy just made it around the edge of the sand and powered away, but flicking the Sportster at speed in a small space was like paddling a kayak through treacle with a spoon. The back wheel began to break away and I yelled at Lin to jump...which she did at around 90 kph. Let's pause now and freeze the frame as we consider the situation.

It was a warm summer day and Lin and I were wearing T shirts, jeans and boots and um...that's it. If you look closely you'll see the Sportster's rear wheel has become completely disinterested in any sort of communion with the tarmac and Lin is suspended in mid air heading towards a huge pile of sand on the side of the road. Her arms are outstretched towards an impending moment that evoked another bad day for Wile E Coyote. Meanwhile back on the bike my right flying boot had become caught between the crash bar and the highway peg, no doubt hoping for the chance to be airborne one last time.

We'll start the picture again now so just blur your eyes over this next bit if you're the squeamish type. (A nice word squeamish, it's often made me wonder whether there once was a race of easily upset Norsemen called the Squeam...perhaps the ones who didn't put to sea very often.) Where was I? Ah yes, attached to a bike about to use its crash bar to fling me high into the air in a barrel roll.

So into the first roll we went, then it landed on the thick alloy grab rail of the seat and took off again, on the third revolution my foot came out of the boot and the rest of my attached bits parted company with the bike. My foot must have knocked the gear lever into neutral and as the Sportster flipped for the last time the side stand came down and it landed on its wheels idling away as if I'd parked it there to look at the view.

Unfortunately the view included blood and bits of skin and the spectacle of Lin spread eagled face down in the side of a three metre high pile of sand. I tried to get up to go to her but couldn't help noticing that the right leg which was once happily pivoting in my hip joint now appeared to be growing from my groin. Gravel was firmly embedded in my arms and down the right side of my face and there seemed to be a large patch of blood forming below my knee which contributed to the growing trickle along the roadside. While I was gathering what senses I had left, Lin pulled herself out of the sand pile, did a quick personal inventory and realised that everything worked as required. We were both alive, no thanks to me. An old friend,

Keith Miller, happened to be coming the other way on his WLA outfit and went to call the usual authorities while I tied my belt around my leg to stop the bleeding and hoped the ambulance arrived before the shock wore off. Lin was fine, but I spent two and a half months in traction with a dislocated hip and crushed leg while the Sportster suffered \$24 worth of damage, which mostly consisted of straightening the grab rail and chroming the front mudguard. The one positive note was that when my marble came out of the barrel for the National Service draft, my present address of Third Floor, East Wing, Sutherland Hospital made the Government lose interest in sending me off on the Vietnam by Shot and Shrapnel Tour.

I was obviously going through the ‘some people never learn ‘ phase of my life because just a week after leaving hospital Runaway Tom asked if I wanted to have a go riding his work’s WLA outfit. The ‘works’ in this case wasn’t the Harley Racing Department, but a printing company called Wallace and Knox who used the bikes with big side boxes as delivery vehicles. It was a quiet Saturday afternoon in Rosebery in one of those streets that had lots of warehouses and very little weekend traffic. Tom sat on top of the sidebox, I settled into the saddle and off we went. This old Harley had been attached to this old sidecar chassis for maybe 30 years without mishap...but nothing lasts forever. So I suppose a back street in Rosebery was as good a place as any for a sidecar chassis to snap.

I can only imagine that for the next 40 seconds we could have been mistaken for one of those clown acts in the circus where they all drive in in a wobbly car and commence to fall off in entertaining ways.

Technically, it happened like this. When the chassis broke it fell inwards towards the bike, which knocked the handlebars violently to the right thus causing the whole outfit to do likewise and mount the kerb, which threw Tom majestically from his perch atop the sidebox and sent me half off the seat. Unencumbered by human intervention, it straightened up and headed down the footpath at about 30kph, in doing this it threw me over between the bike and the long brick wall of a factory. Again my foot had been caught in the crash bar and while my left arm clung to the saddle, trying to pull my body onto the bike, my right arm protected my head and face as it was being dragged at speed along an unnecessarily rough textured brick wall.

Let’s briefly look at the lessons we can learn from a major motorcycle accident, shall we? In my very recent big one, was I wearing a helmet or a leather jacket? Answer: no. In my defence, it was a bike and sidecar! Why would I

need a helmet and jacket? What could possibly go wrong? What I learned from this new experience is how quickly speeding bricks can pare the skin from an unprotected forearm back to the bone. About a six months supply of unused adrenaline helped me to drag myself back onto the seat and push the gear lever into neutral. As the outfit slowed, the handlebars bumped again and turned us into a recessed plate glass door. Fortunately it ended in a musical boink as the front tyre caressed the glass and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Tom was bruised but unhurt, but my right forearm was a mess. I was confronted by the dilemma of every tough 20 year old bikie who lived at home. What would my mother say?

She had been sick in bed with the flu for a couple of days so naturally I didn't want to go into her room and disturb her but asked what we had that I could put on "a bit of a graze". My mother being no fool and having trained at the Lets teach 'Em a Lesson School of Mercy called out:" Just pour some medicated Metho over it". It was then I did my audition for the Not Giving Her the Satisfaction of a Scream School of Pain Management. As soon as the wound had healed enough not to stick to the lining, I began to wear my jacket and even lashed out on a new helmet even though they weren't compulsory. Six months later I got my moneys worth.

It was one of those nights when I couldn't sleep. It was autumn so purely to keep myself warm I put on my helmet and Army great coat and pointed the Sportster westward. At around 1 am on Parramatta Rd at Homebush a guy in an FB Holden station wagon decided he needed to be in my lane instantly to do a right hand turn and stopped dead in front of me. With three metres in which to stop, Harley drum brakes and a nanosecond of reaction time, physics took over and used my body as a means of arresting all forward motion. It's funny the things you remember and I remembered a TV show where they talked about how in wartime and in motor racing accidents it was better to leave the helmet on in the event of an injury because the bones began to knit almost immediately. So I can understand how the cop may have been bemused by me waking up and grabbing onto the helmet straps yelling "Don't take it off" as blood streamed down my face. The cop was a local who assured me he'd put my bike in his front yard and gave me his address as they bundled me into the ambulance.

Like most city hospitals of the time, Western Suburbs Casualty wasn't too fussed with motor bike riders. They told me it was just a split scalp and a fractured collarbone, strapped me up and sent me to sit out on the back step to clear my head. They left me the helmet as a souvenir; it was split down the middle. Two days later a

mate gave me a lift to the cop's place to pick up the Sportster. We caught him as he was leaving for work and he informed me he pushed it into the gutter but another call came in and he didn't get a chance to take it to his house. By the time he came back later the bike was gone. Helpfully, he reported it for me. He suggested I check out the two car yards and panel beating shops that bracketed the accident corner. "Yeah, no worries", said one of the panel beaters, "accident out the front the other night and the bike's out the back. It's a blue Norton Commando".

I told him it was a Harley, he told me it was a Norton, I told him it was a Harley and then he took me out the back. It was a Norton. There were two accidents with blue bikes on the same corner on the same night. The Sportster had been stolen and was gone for good. My life was now in a gloom so dark it attracted bats.

It got worse. I was supposed to go to Bathurst for the Easter races. Luckily Gilso and Bob Cuts were going so I rode pillion on Bob's BSA Thunderbolt. Every bump went straight up my collarbone but at least it took my mind off the Sportster and introduced me for the first time to the joys of the O'Connell Pub. It appeared I knew more dirty songs than most people and was sat on the mantelpiece and given beers all night, my recitation of "T'was the Night of the King's Castration" proving very popular. The Pub was occupied largely by a bunch called The Mob Shitters, a name I've always quite liked for its lack of ambiguity. Another gang showed up and demanded precedence; harsh words were spoken, bottles and threats were thrown and the next thing I knew I was helping to barricade the front of the pub with mattresses, barrels and hay bales in readiness for a promised Molotov attack by night. Wherever they were they must have drunk as much as we did because nothing happened except the lucky people with rooms at the Pub had to sleep on bed springs.

A week after I returned I had a call from the Redfern Police asking if I lived at a certain address in Burwood. "No" I replied. "Well that's where your bike is" they said helpfully and hung up; and that's where it was, sitting in the front yard of an elderly gent's home. Whoever stole it had a mate who stole a car on the same night. They ended up drag racing down this particular street and the Harley didn't make the sharp bend at the end and came to rest in the bushes outside the house.

The seat was bent, the heavy headlight cowl gouged and crash bar well scraped but I rode it home. The paint work was fine. The Sportster had a charmed life. I replaced the seat with a spare I had, straightened the handlebar, re-chromed the crash bar and kept on riding. But, as a Tasmanian friend once said of sex with a hedgehog:

“as much as I loved it, it was becoming a pain”. Its electric start and carby were often in moody collusion and the front brake hub was really only good for holding the spokes in. Over the ensuing years the Sportster came on and off the road with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Then, thirty four years after picking it up from Redfern Motor Cycles, with no pangs of sentimentality at all, I sold it back to Johnno. He’d retired and closed the business and was adding to his private collection. Since old dealers never really stop dealing, two months later he sold the Sportster quite coincidentally to Mad Pete who’d provided the gelignite for The Great Idea all those years ago. It remains the first and last XLH Harley Sportster ever sold by Redfern Motor Cycles... and no, I’m not pining for the clank and rumble. Although I can sell you a bent seat if you’d like one.

End.

Half Alright

Welcome to a cautionary tale of three brothers, Honest John, Ben and The King. The King, in that quaint Australian tradition of contradictory nicknames, wasn't. He had several degrees in mathematics, understood what made the universe expand while intellects contract and still chose to focus all his attention on a method for picking winners in that pastime where racehorses orbit your wallet until it collapses into a black hole. The middle brother, Ben, had a remarkable eye for anything antique and could tune in to a deceased estate with an undertakers sense of a faltering pulse. Once, in the dead of night as we were driving down a back alley, he suddenly jammed on the brakes and ran up a side lane to a pile of rubbish and rummaged through it with the sort of satisfied snuffle that pigs reserve for truffles. He pulled out an old antique copper kettle and ran back to the car whooping with joy. He soldered up a hole, polished it and sold it for \$50. It gave him five grands worth of glee, which is good value in anyone's currency.

Honest John on the other hand was, as you might expect from his name, a second hand car dealer. He hadn't always been attracted to rust, initially it was burnt wiring as he was an electrician by trade. His last job in that field had been replacing the neon tubes in the Cahill Expressway tunnel and he'd been very diligent. I could tell because once I went with him to a garage he used for storage and observed the thousand or so fluorescent tubes that tax payers had forked out for which hadn't quite made it to their sockets. He kept them:" Just in case", even though they didn't fit

anything else but the enormous lights in the tunnel. In fact Honest John kept quite a few things, 'just in case'.

I was not long out of High school and I met Honest John when he inadvertently took over a local tradition. In the next block up from my home in Bourke St was an old battered weatherboard house. It had never been painted and the tin roof had long ceased to feature on the table of elements. It sat on the corner of a lane and its front and back yards were completely packed with what some might recognise as cars. They were pre and post World War 2 models like Ford Pilots and maple leaf Chevs and at night when the street light played on their faded black and rust red bodies you'd swear the house was being attacked by giant undiscerning beetles. Ugly as it was, it was the pride of a man all we kids called Bomb Brady. He always wore a long black overcoat and was ever vigilant about neighbourhood brats jumping on his running boards. There were no signs or banners up or lights at night, but he called himself a car dealer although I never saw any of them actually move. It was only later that I learned we all owed some of our freedoms to Bomb Brady. Apparently his hobby was constant litigation, usually against local and State governments, and his record for winning his self defended cases made sure that all attempts to force him to clean up his little patch of paradise and termites were destined to die beneath his vehicles like so many penguins in an oil spill. However, like others in the vehicle shuffling trade his sense of fair play applied only to himself; which is how he came to be there one night and gone the next, happily exchanging cash for a property, which, when painted all white and nice would only serve to make it easier for a bulldozer driver to hit.

Honest John was quite pleased with the deal and he did indeed paint it all white and nice; quite a few shades of white actually, since it had been applied from several unmarked tins he'd bought at an auction just in case. It was the sort of job

done by a man who would paint half a window pane to save on curtains. Next day, with most of the paint already sucked into the desiccated weatherboards, he strung some little coloured flags from poles, painted prices on his four vehicles and waited for his first short sighted dimwit. What he got was a council bloke informing him that : "...as per the letter sent to this address three months previous, the Council will be resuming one and a half yards of this property down the Northern side to facilitate widening of the lane way. See you tomorrow at 7am." Honest John looked on the bright side; at least he'd get a new fence. Actually he got a second hand one; the Council were no fools either. Undaunted, he tried to sell a Ford Zephyr to their keen road workers who were busy stippling it with wayward bitumen even as they spoke.

Let's pause to adjust the picture a little, lest you see Honest John clutching a cigar while patting a stomach built for watermelon smuggling. Honest was average height, slim, with a head of thinning curly hair that shaded his disarming smile. He dressed simply in shirt and jeans, drove whatever car was most likely to get him home and back and was a strict vegetarian. Basically he was a nice guy who just happened to be a sociopath when it came to selling cars. This wasn't really his fault because regulations were pretty slack and could be adjusted on the spot with a personal donation to whoever showed up from the Motor Squad. Honest took his responsibilities with the Police very seriously and one afternoon I watched in amazement as he sold a gold coloured Hillman Imp to a Crown Sergeant as the perfect car for his wife. The engine blew no smoke and it drove well so the cop was quite pleased. What he didn't see were the three cans of STP oil treatment that went into the motor the night before. Just one can usually does the trick of hiding tell tale signs of a worn out engine but three gives you some idea that the Hillman would have out-smoked Thomas the tank engine on a particularly steep hill. Luckily the cop knew less about cars than he did about being conned and Honest never heard from him again,

after all, the cop did look the type who might blame the car's rapid deterioration on his wife's inability to function in a male domain.

Around about this time his apprentice henchmen showed up. Woody was tall and underfed with a slightly maniacal look in his eyes, traits which didn't detract from his later success in the bona fide motor trade. Fatcat on the other hand was every image that name might paint, but you could also throw in infrequently washed, invariably sweaty and no stranger to tomato sauce running down his arm. Honest was entertained by their efforts to find him a good deal and scrounge out a small commission for themselves, bearing in mind that small is all they would ever get from Honest. The newest car on the lot was a mid 60's Toyota Corolla, white in colour," long reg, no rust, mech A1" as his ads innocently read. At this time the Australian motoring mindset was firmly Ford, Holden and maybe British; Japanese rice burners were way down the list even though they featured novel items like windscreen wipers, heaters and demisters that actually worked. All this paled however once Honest focused on its main attribute: 'It's got a good stereo," he beamed. "Wog's will love it". And so they did. Four young Greek lads showed up, Honest cranked up the cassette player and whisked them around the block to the tunes of Creedence Clearwater. Sold! As he pocketed the cash and waved them off, Honest turned to me with a wistful smile and said: "Nothing like a good stereo for covering up the engine noise".

Honest was a fan of the car auctions, a quaint ritual which provided employment and entertainment for the desperately eccentric and the downright dangerous. Punters ranged from genuine dealers looking for "half alright" stock, to back yard operators who would buy something, sleep in it for a few nights, hose it out and sell it in the Herald the following Saturday. Their methods in deciphering which car to buy were equally diverse. The methodical took notes and looked for signs of

recent repair, one slammed the bonnet and boot to see if the body was straight .Another would open and close all four doors :” You can tell a lot from the sound of the doors” he confided to me, while several actually walked round and kicked the tyres. Bert, a regular, engulfed in a beige cardigan obviously knitted for a bear, would only ever bid on the third last car no matter what it was, on the strange assumption that everyone had spent their money and he’d get it cheap. My favourite was known as Mr.Blue who would only ever bid on light blue cars; confirming the great strength of the used car market is that there’s always someone out there sillier than you.

This was true even for Honest John, particularly when he proudly drove into the lot in an immaculate EK Holden station wagon. It was light grey and blue and a sight to behold. Honest had been all over it before he bought it and it was tidy, and most importantly, rust free. But on driving it away he noticed a distinct lack of power. He pumped the brakes, which were fine, though the engine did run a little hot but there was no dreaded STP in evidence and it didn’t use oil, so what could it be? Puzzled, he drove it onto the hoist and pushed the button. The ancient hydraulics groaned into life and the Holden lifted 20 centimetres off the ground and stopped, accompanied by all those unpleasant sounds a hoist makes when it’s having a hernia. We could see that the underneath of the car was immaculate, perfectly rust free and coated in tar based paint. Honest fretted over his new prize and checked brakes and wheel bearings again while, curious, I tapped the underside of the car with a screwdriver handle. I was expecting a metallic thung, thung. What I got was an earthy dunk, dunk.

“Honest”, I enquired, not wishing to enbriefen further his moment of joy;” This bloke you bought the car off...what did he do for a living?” “He had one of those trucks that sprays concrete” he replied.” Why?” Hmmm, is there ever a right time to laugh in these situations? No visible rust was inevitable in a car that had been treated

to a ton of beautifully applied rust concealing concrete. It cost more to repair the hoist than he paid for the EK and the unsaleable vehicle became his own drive (slowly) to work car. Immaculate it may have been but it could barely pull the weight of its own paint.

For Honest, the scales of karmic justice often swung both ways. On one occasion he bought a seemingly immaculate Morris Major Elite in its original (and strangely British) colour scheme of dusty pink and light grey. It drove quite well for about a week until the big end bearings began to make a noise that can only cost money. We put the Morris up on the hoist, dropped off the sump and discovered that some dastardly operator had replaced the big end bearings with slices of beautifully fitted cardboard. This, along with banana skins in the diff, was an old dealer trick designed to save *their* money while taking your money. Honest was suitably incensed and did the only thing he felt morally justified in doing...fitted new cardboard big ends and had Fatcat sell it on to a rival dealer. Result? One hundred dollars profit with only a side of his Corn Flakes packet for outgoings.

A month later another immaculate Morris Major Elite drove into view, this time light grey with mid blue panels. Honest snapped it up and happily drove it around for a week until déjà vu came knocking at the big ends. Smelling a repainted rat, Honest checked the engine numbers and realised that, via his rival dealers own flunkie he had indeed bought a re-sprayed incarnation of the vehicle he had so recently farewelled. Honest was now one hundred dollars out of pocket and running out of breakfast cereal. Disappointed he may have been but daunted, never.

When his brother Ben was trying to save money and establish his antique business he moved into a bedroom of the alleged house in the car yard. Ben's wife was not too happy about this as Honest was rather cavalier about where he stacked oil drums, tossed greasy rags and arranged ancillary items such as wheels,

tyres and gearboxes. It was not ideal for newly-wed bliss, especially when Honest realised he needed a quick way to communicate with Fatcat out back in the greasatorium if he was out front on the lot. The cost of an intercom was out of the question, so while Mr and Mrs Ben were away for the weekend he carefully marked out a square at roughly head height on the front wall, took a chainsaw and cut more or less corresponding holes through all necessary further walls until he had reached the backyard. This did nothing for Mrs. Bens' need for privacy or indeed the marriage in general. Honest was genuinely confused by her lack of appreciation for his resourcefulness and his suggestion that she might like to hang some curtains over the holes at night.

The backyard of the house had been roofed over for storage and a work area and it also contained the free-standing outside toilet. This was traditionally constructed in the genre of a merry brick broom cupboard. The wooden door didn't quite reach to the top and so didn't feel the need to reach to the bottom either. The concrete cistern was suspended above the visitor on two pipes and the flushing chain hung down conveniently just above head level...all these small details will prove to be important quite shortly.

It was the night of Honest's birthday party and everyone who was anyone had chosen to attend somewhere less rat infested. Nevertheless, Woody and Fatcat had invited *their* friends, so the rats had a good run for their money. Much alcohol and substances flowed and wafted until, uncharmed by the mostly male company, I went out to the work bench and began to loosely assemble the bits of a 1936 Harley Honest had prised from a punter who knew less about bikes than he did. It's amazing how, at the end of a bottle of Tequila, this can seem like a good night out...but mine was better than what was about to happen to the birthday boy.

As a strict vegetarian, Honest was often happy to revel in the

experience of meat free alcohol, but bladders can only hold so much research and he stumbled past me on an imposing lurch towards the outdoor dunny. What was about to occur would never have happened if Honest had not grown up in rural Victoria. Where they lived was apparently lover's lane for every redback spider in the state, so in an understandable attempt to ward off a nasty genital fanging, the family adopted what was known as the Kangaroo Squat. This involved lifting the seat, removing all trouser and underpantage, climbing up onto the bowl and squatting. It was a method that had stayed with Honest and enjoyed his daily patronage, and his birthday was no exception. He was a man who relished a good squat, but he was also a man in no position to judge balance, skill or gravity. In addition he was a modest man, so he closed the door behind him, went through the disrobing ritual, lifted the seat, mounted the porcelain grunticle and worked his way into a satisfied sigh. Seconds later he noticed that the small building seemed to be set inside a gyroscope and had begun to spin erratically, not unlike the Tardis off on a new adventure.

As the spinning increased, Honest sought for a safe mooring point and found the chain hanging above his head. He grabbed hold just as he fell forward. Now bear in mind that if the house had never been well maintained then the out of sight and mind toilet would be even less so. This is why the pipes holding the heavy concrete cistern made an agreement with the bricks that it was time to escape the possible clutches of the National Trust and help Honest on his journey. The cistern, indebted for so many years to both pipes and bricks, went out in sympathy. So it was that these irresistible forces crashed through the splintering door in this order: Honest, cistern, pipes, bricks, water and whatever was left in the bowl after the walls had demolished it. This should have been funny to watch but it was more like observing an earthquake in slow motion (if you'll pardon the pun). The entire party poured out into the yard and that's when everyone thought it was funny. It was funny

when we pulled the bricks off him, it was funny when he was unconscious and it was funny when the ambulance arrived and then took him away. It was a birthday he would never forget or indeed remember. Cars come and go, but scars are forever.