

HORSES FOR COURSES

Three Bob Creighton Novellas

By

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**RANSOM
WHITE HORSE WHISKY
RING-IN**

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious.

RANSOM

- i -

There aren't a great many young women in my life. Alas. But I do have two who are a pleasure to know. Terri and Anne get on with their own lives with a lot of enjoyment and goodwill. But in the times our paths cross they always seem delighted to see me. They are friends of my daughter Rachel but they also see me as a friend. Which is a curious thing now that I come to think on it. Because it isn't very often that such friendships can comfortably cross generation-barriers.

Now that I come to think on it, that 'alas' is misplaced.

Because now I have had to wrestle with the idea of a quite different woman in my life. Deborah Semsun née Marrow. And it has been, still is, hard going. I think I could have coped better with the whole thing if we had ever been *friends*. You run out of oomph, physical, sexual, just getting-through-the-day oomph, and the idea of a young trophy wife seems to me one of the most absurd things any older man can ever get himself. More than anything, you just want women you can feel comfortable and relaxed with.

(Some time later I had a letter from my friend in Sydney, Petra Day, in which she said Deb had chosen me as the person to seduce because she wanted a child which "didn't remind her of her abusive husband". Maybe, but other men would have been happy to oblige. And she went on to say that although Deb loved her daughters she could see their father in them. I suppose this is an issue in any case of domestic violence which involve the children of the abusive partner. I had never really given this a lot of thought.)

Terri and Anne were in the class where I had my first, in fact my only, experience of riding. They were a lot better than me. But we often enjoy returning to that time and reminiscing. I take them out to lunch occasionally. They occasionally invite me round for a meal. I like that. There is no sense of obligation, of remembering whose turn it is to do what. But they were quite serious, even glum, this time when I dropped by to say, "Fancy a meal out?"

About a year ago they started a little travel agency which they call Niche Holidays. It's just a tiny shopfront, with a small room out the back for office work and brewing a cup of coffee. I wondered how they would go in a world of big operators who can offer big discounts. But it is such a cheerful happy little place and they are so good with customers and potential customers that people are prepared to pay a little extra to feel they are not just booking a tour or a flight but are getting a plan which is exactly what they have always dreamed of. They decided to specialise in certain areas. They began with an idea of horse holidays.

You want to go to the English Derby or Grand National, you want to go pony-trekking in Norway, you want to see chuck-wagons racing in Calgary or a cattle round-up on the Argentinian pampas or a visit to a top New Zealand stud? Gradually they collected up background information, tips, ideas, as well as practical information on how to get there and where to stay. My own thought that Surfers was hardly the place for people asking for this turned out to be quite wrong. They were flooded with unusual requests (though not all about horses, of course) and soon had regular customers.

So they decided to look into other things they thought might strike a chord. Bridge holidays, golfing tours, bowls, surfing, religious festivals, art exhibitions ... Instead of people being expected to do their own research and just getting their agent to book their seats and rooms, now they could come in and chat over their ideas. It was time-consuming but they didn't see the agency as just a job, more a major part of their life. Their baby, maybe.

This time, though, they gave me a collective smile but said, "Bob, could you eat here with us? We'll send out for a takeaway. We'd like to pick your brains."

"You being the crows and me the dead roo? Sure. Anytime."

— ii —

Their story revolved round agreeing to take a teenage boy into their office on work experience.

"We'd never thought of doing it, Bob, but he came in and asked and we said, well, we haven't got much for him to do but if he would just like to be around and see how things work ... and he said he was really keen to work in the travel business eventually. So we said okay, we'd take him for three days. He told us which school and what class he went to but we said, that's okay, with luck he wouldn't wreck the place in three days ... and it isn't as though we have much cash around. I suppose we should have contacted the school and checked back but he looked like a clean-cut sort of boy, nicely-spoken, that sort of thing. So we took him on trust."

I suspected Terri and Anne took most things on trust, including their customers, airlines, cruise companies, delivery men, and all the rest.

"So we got him to make tea, go out to collect things, post letters, tidy up the stock room, nothing major, and he did everything we asked. He said he was good on email if we needed to send anything, just to dictate it. And he was very fast and professional-looking on a computer. We left him to look after the office a couple of times and we know he sent emails and made phone calls. But when we asked him what he'd been doing he always had a sensible explanation. He was checking prices, changes in details, all that sort of thing. Or sometimes he would say he had been trying someone for us and hadn't got on to them. One time I came back before Terri and he was doing an email and I said to him could he go and put the rubbish out for us and he said he would just finish what he was doing and I said, no, just duck out and do it now. I'll finish off here.

“So he went out and I looked to see what he was doing. And then the phone rang and I answered it, and I was busy then, and he came back and wiped the thing off and I said, who was he sending it to and he said it was a young man he knows who is interested in going to see Formula One racing and I said I didn’t think we had a lot in that area and he said, oh, it’s okay, he knew a bit, enough to help the guy anyway.”

“So we didn’t tackle him on anything else. But we started to watch him more closely on the last day. It’s very hard to pin it down, Bob, but there was just something about him that made us feel uncomfortable. Because we also felt he was watching us, waiting for us to go out or get preoccupied or busy with a demanding client.”

“Anyway, he finished up that afternoon and he thanked us for giving him that opportunity and he said he had been really impressed by the way we ran the business. We said that was nice of him but afterwards we felt he was buttering us up in some way, that he hadn’t *really* liked being there. That he had another agenda. We talked about it all weekend, just trying to decide what had made us feel uncomfortable, and on Monday Terri said, right, that’s it, I’m going to ring the school and just check that everything was hunky-dory that end.”

Terri took up the story, “So I did—and guess what? The school said they had no such student. And, also, they don’t send students out on work experience till a bit later in the year. I described him but it still rang no bells. I thought he just might have changed his name to sound more glamorous or something. His real name might’ve been Cyril Hogg or whatever. But the whole thing came up blank. So I wrote up our experience and sent it to the media because I said someone else might get taken in the way we did—so all employers should be careful to check with the school or ask to see a letter written by the school. But nowhere ran it for us.”

“I suppose they thought we were a couple of dilly women—but when we mentioned it to several other people round here they said they never checked back with the school either. It isn’t something you think of as likely to be a big con.”

“So do you think it might’ve been some sort of prank or hoax, someone out of work, someone testing the waters maybe? And he didn’t touch your petty cash?”

“Nothing like that. But as soon as we’d talked to the school we got on to the bank and changed our passwords.”

I nodded. “Very sensible.”

“And there was something very serious about him. As though he was in our office for a reason. Not just some teenager fooling around. I know that doesn’t really make a lot of sense, Bob, because we couldn’t think of something for him to be serious about . . .”

“When we talked about him, we both found that we had been surprised that he was still at school. And Mary next door when she saw him coming in here said he looked very mature to still be at high school.”

Mary runs the florist’s next door to them in the mall.

I wondered if it was Terri and Anne themselves. They had never had children, they had never had a great deal to do with children. A school student was a school student. They wouldn't necessarily think beyond that. And although it wasn't all *that* long since they'd been in school, things had changed in the interim, not least the Internet had come along.

“So if he came for a reason—what do you think the reason was?”

“That's the thing, Bob, for the life of us we can't really come up with a reason. The only thing we know for sure is that he used our phone and facilities in some private business of his own. It might be that he couldn't afford to do stuff at home. And of course he had easy access to the internet here.”

“The email he sent—do you remember what it said?”

“It looked like ‘Note Sent. All systems go.’ I didn't write it down but I did make a note of the address he was sending it to. It's become second nature as I always follow up on any genuine query. Even if a person doesn't book now there might be some extra information we can provide when they do decide to plan seriously. But when I sent a query email to it, it bounced back. No such address. We also got Telstra to provide us with a list of the numbers rung from our office. There were a couple we didn't recognise but one turned out to be a public phone. One was at a big hospital in Brisbane and they said they couldn't possibly know who might have answered a call that Thursday. And the other was a silent number. So we are not much further forward.”

“But that is very odd. How many teenagers would make three such calls. Did you ask Telstra to provide you with that silent number?”

“Yes, but they said they couldn't. Apparently it doesn't matter who we are or what our business is—it is the person at the other end who is protected.”

“Mmmm ... what about the emails he sent? I heard that emails don't necessarily disappear when you hit the delete button. Not that I'm the person to tell you how to retrieve things on computers ... ”

“Well, we checked the obvious things and we couldn't find any trace. I don't know how we might dig deeper.”

These days I do some occasional freelance work for two computer whizzkids; Mark and Damien spend their life in the dark mysterious depths of computer fraud, computer viruses, all that sort of stuff. I said I thought Terri and Anne needed some expert help. The problem here, of course, was that I was happy to help them for nothing. Or try to. But Mark and Damien might not see it in the same way.

“Are you prepared to pay something for some expert advice?”

“Why not? People come to us for expert advice. And if this guy was up to something we would really like to know what it was.”

“So what was his name?”

“He said his name was James Hillman Crouch. We called him Jim.”

“How odd.” I had thought he would most likely give a common name. John Green. David Anderson. William Smith. Michael Kelly. “And you don’t have any home address or home number?”

“No. Just the school. He always turned right when he went out the door in the afternoon. I don’t know if he was just going down to the bus stop.”

“What about a photograph of him? Anything there?”

“We had no reason to take a picture of him but I think there are two surveillance cameras in the mall. And we did get a not very good picture of him sort of by accident. I was going to take my film to be developed when I realised I still had one frame. So I said to the others, come out to the door, and I just snapped them. But it didn’t come out very clearly. He didn’t face the camera.”

Anne fetched it from the filing cabinet. She was right. It was just one of those unexciting snaps that make you wonder why you bothered. Terri smiled into the camera. Young Jim was slightly turned away. He was a big youth, slightly podgy, wearing a pale blue shirt and jeans and running shoes, brown hair, medium-length.

“Any distinguishing marks on him?”

“Not really. He had a big mole on his jaw near his right ear. He seemed to be a bit self-conscious about it. That’s probably why he turned side on.”

“Or it was a fake mole.”

They both looked slightly startled. Then they nodded. Maybe. You don’t go up to teenage boys and touch their moles to see if they come off on your fingers.

“Well, two things. Get that photo blown up as big as you can. And check with the security people in the mall in case they’ve still got that footage. I don’t know how long they keep it for. But I would really like to have a chance to see it. And as the cost of security is included in your rent I would think they won’t quibble about you having a look at it. I’ll have a chat with Damien and Mark to see if they might be able to offer you some advice.”

— iii —

I caught Damien sitting at his desk with a salad roll and bottle of grapefruit mineral water. When I said I’d be glad of his advice he actually looked pleased to be asked. Did he think it was a compliment to him? I told him the story as I’d heard it and wondered what else the girls should do, both as extra security and to track down the lad’s activities.

“Have they changed all their passwords on their web-sites?”

“Only their bank accounts, I think.”

“Get everything changed today, Bob. Very important. If he’s an experienced hacker he could use their site or sites to hide something else. He could be tagging it on somewhere. Or it could be identity theft.”

I was used to the old idea of people fronting up to a bank counter with a forged or stolen cheque but I wasn’t up with all the ways the new technology can help people hide behind other people’s identities. These days all my ex-colleagues probably get sent on courses to keep them up-to-date while I fall further and

further behind. I didn't mind particularly. It was only in times like this that I felt my ignorance. Old Bob. Wouldn't know a text message from a sow's ear.

“I'll tell them.”

“Tell them it is *urgent*.” Damien lent forward and gave me his intense brown-eyed look. No she'll-be-jake-mate about him. “And tell them to get on to their service provider that hosts their sites. They just might have a list of all the email addresses still. Though there's a good chance they're all spam sites.”

“As in camp pie?”

“As in scrambled up. Sites and addresses that are only used briefly then dropped. Sites that don't lead you to an actual person or business.”

“I see.”

I wasn't absolutely sure I did. But it was getting worse by the minute. Would a teenager who simply wanted to get some free time on the internet be contacting phone numbers that took us nowhere and addresses that made no sense? He might. Kids do strange things. And behind those apparent dead ends might be other teenagers doing other strange things. There might be whole gangs of them doing strange things.

“I assume they've checked out their recycle bins in case the messages didn't get completely wiped.”

“They said they'd done the obvious. I assume that would be obvious but I can't say for absolute certain.”

It reminded me of an appliance bloke I knew years ago; he said he could never get over the number of people who brought in vacuum-cleaners that didn't work ... only to find they hadn't emptied the bag. There are probably differing degrees of obvious.

I asked him if he could spare them a few minutes just to run over the obvious. He got out his electronic diary and checked the rest of his day. I still find this habit amazing. I take the position that if I forget something I was supposed to be doing—well, I forgot and that's that. It's not the end of the world. But then I will never be a millionaire, let alone Police Commissioner.

He said he could drop by at about six on his way round to see someone. He could probably give them ten minutes. I said I was sure they'd appreciate that.

Then I went round to the travel agency, handed Terri a hastily-scribbled note as she was busy with a customer, and went out again. It was now Friday. They had found out that the student was bogus on Monday. So what had ‘all systems go’ referred to? Was Niche Holidays already compromised beyond repair? Would they have to change *everything* including their name?

— iv —

I thought of going home. There didn't really seem to be anything else for me to do. I couldn't chase down obscure messages through the inner workings of a computer. But it was a pleasant day, mild, just a little ruffling breeze, so I thought I would do what the retired gradually learn to do with greater aplomb as their years

of businesslike habits fade inexorably into the distance. I would go and sit on a seat and watch the world go by.

I had got Terri to get me a colour copy of their snap. This was even less clear than the original. It didn't seem much point in standing somewhere busy and showing it to busy people. But if I got the chance it just might be worth handing round. Or if all other lines of enquiry failed. I also thought it was just possible the school might remember him if they actually saw a picture. No guarantee. But if the youngster had gone to school anywhere round here someone just might remember.

There was also the small hope that the CCTV film might give other clues. His posture. The way he walked. That seemed even less likely. My experience with such films is of the 'well, at least we know the perp exists' kind, that sort of level. I am always astonished when someone does actually get identified that way.

I found an empty seat and sat down. The feeling of having nothing to do was quite pleasant. More people, other than unemployed youths, should try it. In fact, we've got the whole thing round the wrong way. Unemployed youths are the last people who should be trying it on a regular basis. We deserve a lot of the petty crime we get.

And that was the puzzle with all this. The mysterious James Hillman Crouch did not seem to fit that image. That sort of impulsive taking advantage of a place with trusting people and poor security. I had looked in the phone book. At least fourteen under Crouch. I could ring them all. I could ... I let the sun warm my head. It always strikes me as the ultimate irony that a place geared to holidays and lazing round isn't a lazy sit-in-the-sun sort of place. People are busy, occupied, bustling, planning, sounding definite. Buildings are going up or being torn down. Cars are everywhere. I thought I would probably look less obvious in a sleepy country town.

But as I sat there musing on the possible motives behind the teenager's actions, and coming up pretty blank, an elderly man came over and sat down.

"Nice day, eh?"

"Pretty good."

He wasn't untidy or derelict, nothing like that, but there was something curiously disengaged, sort of lost, about him. I wasn't sure what I meant by that. Someone who has been left behind in the rush.

"I remember this place when I was a kiddie," he said after a while. "Came through here with my parents. They'd got their first car, it was a 1926 Chev. My dad treated it like a baby, always patting and polishing it. But there was almost nothing here. Just a few shops and houses in Southport. It was nice, just a sleepy little seaside town. And now look at it."

"That's life. Nothing stands still." Bob the Philosopher.

He shot me a sour look. "Don't tell me we fought for this."

"No, not really. We didn't have a crystal ball. Where were you in the war?"

I didn't imagine he would run into a lot of old mates with time to chew the fat. Unless he haunted the local RSL. But there must be some here. Or were all the old retirees getting pushed further out by short-term tenants? Or by rising prices and only the pension to keep things on track.

"New Guinea mainly. You'd be too young."

I agreed. "My dad was up there. Had a tough time with ulcers and dysentery, that sort of stuff, but he had a charmed life when it came to getting shot at."

This got him started off and I let him ramble on for the next ten minutes and I occasionally added in a few passed-on stories that my father Frank had told us year in year out. None of this tight-lipped post-traumatic stress stuff for Frank. He didn't mind curling our hair with his horror stories. When it wasn't the Japanese it was local customs, animals, insects, mud, storms, cliff-faces, vines bigger and fiercer than anything Tarzan ever had to face, mozzies, fevers, floods ... my sister Kaye and I got the lot. I don't know if she ever felt that he should be more circumspect but I have often thought part of the reason my dad was so sane and healthy and down-to-earth was because he had dumped all his own nightmares on to his kids.

I got the impression that this old bloke belonged in the opposite camp. He had never talked about it when it would do him the most good. Now he was reduced to the hope he would occasionally run into a sympathetic stranger with the time to listen. I wondered if he'd married and had children when he'd come home from the war.

As New Guinea, however interesting, and I have sometimes thought I wouldn't mind to visit, wasn't going to solve the mystery of the secret 'hacker' I took out the picture and handed it across, asking him if he'd ever seen a kid who looked like this.

He looked at it for a long time. But then he said, "I don't take much notice of kids these days. Pain in the arse, most of 'em. Conscription. That's what'd do 'em good. They say they all come here because they know there's no jobs. Don't want to work, the little buggers."

I have heard that complaint quite often, in Sydney but more so here, and there is some truth in it. I nodded.

He handed the picture back. "Why do you want to know? Ran away from home, did he?"

"I have no idea. But he seems to be running some sort of scam with unsuspecting shopkeepers."

"You undercover or something?" He looked disapproving. I don't think he objected to the undercover part, it was more the image of me sitting round enjoying the sun when I should be out doing something undercover.

"Retired. I'm just helping out on this case."

"Got a name for the little bugger?"

“His name, so he has apparently been telling people, is James Hillman Crouch.”

“As in the car? Had a Hillman once. Fairly reliable.”

“It could be. But I don’t think many teenagers would have had anything to do with a Hillman these days.”

“S’pose not. Met someone called Crouch once. He was six foot two. The name didn’t fit.”

“Here? Or in the Army?”

This seemed to give him pause. He ruminated on the question for quite a while before saying, “D’you know, I reckon he was in New Guinea. I’d forgotten all about him. He was an MO I think. Bit of a crank, if you ask me. Reckoned castor oil’d cure just about everything. Not just inside you, he used to whack it on cuts and scratches, ulcers, insect bites—”

“Did it work?”

“Hard to say. He was always running out of supplies. But it was quite good for keeping insects away I’d reckon. Don’t know if it was the smell or the greasy part. There were some pretty awful insects’d get you. Not us, so much, we were on the move. And we had this Crouch bloke and a couple of other MOs. But in the villages. You’d see some awful stuff.”

“So you haven’t met a Crouch here?”

“Might’ve. Most people don’t tell me their names.”

I hesitated then gave him one of my cards. “Just if you ever happen to see a kid like that—it’s only a small chance.”

Still, I wasn’t in a position to overlook small chances. And he, at least, had time on his hands. I reckoned he’d be in his late eighties. I didn’t really want to hear him rambling on about PNG any more. Maybe that was a serious miscalculation but I wasn’t to know it, not then …

He took it with what might have been a sigh.

I went home and got out the phone book. Did I want to ring every Crouch? Not really. And there was a good chance that the name was false. But if he took a false name did it contain some kind of unrealised symbolism? The choices people make can be far more revealing to investigators than simply sticking with their real names.

I conjured up the image of a little Hillman Minx. It made me feel old. I hadn’t seen one in years. Then I pulled the phone closer and began to work my way through the names. It didn’t really surprise me that I came up blank. A couple of numbers didn’t answer. I either left a message or rang back later. It wasn’t a very useful exercise.

I cooked myself some rissoles and threw some frozen vegetables in some hot water. I got out the bottle of tomato sauce. I usually smother my cooking in sauce or chutney. It gives me the illusion it is well-cooked. Not that you can go far wrong

with frozen peas and some readymade rissoles. I hoped that Terri and Anne were having more luck with Damien ...

Then I indulged in a bowl of ice cream with chocolate topping.

— v —

The travel agency was open on Saturdays so I wandered round there after an unremarkable breakfast. I could try schools next Monday. But time was passing. I just hoped that kid's messages referred to buying video games or playing some sort of round-robin thing over the internet.

In a way the only thing that was suspicious was the kid giving the name of a school he didn't attend. And he might've been expelled or dropped out just long enough ago to have dropped off their radar screen. Was I right to take anything else as suspicious? The young women's assessment of him? The scrambled emails? His message? The strange choice of phone calls he'd made?

Why a hospital? Did he have a relative there? A friend? I might try ringing later to ask for a Mr Crouch or a Mr Hillman. And was it significant that it was the Princess Alex Hospital he had rung? I have never needed, touch wood, to know anything about Brisbane hospitals. Old soldiers. I thought of that old geezer ... and wondered why a *young* person would ring a Brisbane hospital. A girlfriend nursing there? Maybe.

Terri and Anne were busy so I helped myself to a cup of coffee and sat myself down with a brochure full of exciting Canadian holidays. I enjoyed listening to them. They seemed to enter completely into their customers plans. Most places I've been into scribble you a few notes and then you're on your own. Or expect you to book immediately; no time to think things over. But I could almost imagine these two going out to the airport with previously-untravelled people to help them with everything. I wondered if they were there waiting when the novice came home again and whether they got invited round to see the holiday snaps.

Finally Terri gave me the thumbs-up. "No luck with the messages, Bob, but we've got the actual addresses, only trouble is, they're all rubbish sites. Just set up for that. We tried them all. No luck."

"That sounds suspicious."

"Well, it probably is. But those sites are also used for selling some pretty iffy things. They have to keep moving on, you know. They don't want non-buyers looking too closely."

"Porn sites, you mean?"

"Anything. You can even buy pharmaceuticals that aren't approved in Australia via some of them. Rare things. Antiques. Hard-to-get car parts. Stuff that's been pinched. You name it."

I preferred not to. But Damien had obviously been a learning experience.

She handed me a paper with four email addresses on it. I could see what she meant. There seemed to be a lot of x's and z's.

But I wondered if any kind of symbolism also kicked in when you choose something like this or whether they just get scrambled automatically. A sort of Enigma machine in your home PC.

I set all the letters out and looked at them. Did they say anything? Not obviously. I took out all the z's and x's. What about w's? I left them in and got a word. Screw. Or maybe crews. Or wercs if someone couldn't spell. Screw—as in screw you. Screw as in nuts and bolts, some kind of rhyming slang. Screw as in broken-down racehorse. As in screwing the system, as in screwing Terri and Anne ... I didn't particularly like any of my conjectures. I fiddled round with the letters for ages. I couldn't come up with any word that seemed equally 'ordinary'. So did that make 'screw' or 'crews' significant?

So far as I knew they hadn't suffered in any way but what if that young man had been pinching identities, of them as people, of the business. What if even as I fiddled a site called Niche Holidays was being set up to run guns or peddle porn. It didn't matter if I merely fiddled so long as the fire brigade was out there ...

But I had the impression Terri and Anne just wanted their business to be safe so they could get on with what they enjoyed and did well. I didn't know what Damien thought.

Terri brought me another cup of coffee and a macaroon. "What do you think, Bob? Any good ideas?" I showed her my doodles.

"Screw? Well, I suppose he did. But we don't seem to have suffered, financially, I mean."

"You just won't take any more students?"

"Probably not. So what else should we do?"

"Your list of phonecalls? Can you get me a copy. I'd like to know exactly when he rang the hospital. And if he didn't go through the main switchboard but direct to one of the wards or clinics or something ... that might suggest he was ringing someone he knew well there. Did you find out where the public phone was situated?"

"Yes, it's further south. Mermaid Beach. But he must've known someone would be hanging round there at a set time ... but I don't see how he could've worked it because he didn't know what time we would be out of the office."

"Do you keep an appointments diary in the office, for the two of you?"

"Yes." She suddenly looked glum. "I suppose it would be a piece of cake to flip through it for those two days and see if we were both going to be out at all. Even so ... "

"Yes. It still looks tricky. But it might be a phone just outside a shop. If the people there heard it ringing they would naturally come out and check what was going on. If it was the person wanted—bingo! If not—you can just say, sorry, wrong number."

Terri nodded. "The thing we hate most is the way he's made us start to be suspicious of little ordinary things, ordinary people, ordinary conversations ... he's sort of spoiled things for us."

In one way it might be good that they had become a little more security-conscious. Not every potential traveller is as pure as driven snow.

"I know. But I am going to nail young James for you, if it's humanly possible. If he's just a young jerk then he can come in and apologise for all the trouble he's put you to. If he's something more vicious then I'd like to catch him before he gets confident enough to bring a business to its knees."

Terri bent over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I like being kissed by nice women like Terri. The only trouble was—I didn't know how to make good this brave boast. Nail him? Hah!

She got me the list of numbers rung from their business. And according to this he had rung the hospital at 3.22 pm. I borrowed their Brisbane directory. It was the number for the hospital's dermatology ward. Curious. Did the lad believe he was suffering from some mysterious complaint with rashes or lumps? Eboli fever or Lassa or elephantiasis or Ross River or dengue ... I ran out of suitably exotic things ... but if he did believe this then why was he messing round in a travel agency instead of hotfooting it to a doctor? Or did he want to travel to somewhere exotic and was scared to risk his miserable hide ...

It didn't somehow seem to fit the image I had. This was a cool customer; not some nervous hypochondriac. I finally gave up on getting in their way and went home again. The company that ran the CCTV surveillance had told them the films would be available for viewing on Monday.

So Monday I could watch poor quality film. Monday I also thought might be a time to ring round a wider selection of schools. Obviously the kid had to have gone to school somewhere—so unless he was a recent blow-in then there was a chance he had gone to a school somewhere along the spreading strip which is the Gold Coast. I didn't know how many schools that might come to but I could probably drop off all the primary schools, all girls only schools, and just go for secondary schools. Even so ...

I made myself a tomato and ham sandwich and sat out on my balcony and tried to think myself into the mind of a youth who was probably either totally weird or an A-grade turd. Either way I didn't really want to know how his mind worked. James Hillman Crouch. What kid goes around saying 'I am James Hillman Crouch'? Or was it simply that Terri and Anne concerned about insurance, workers' compo, that sort of thing, had asked him for his full name? Maybe I should go and wander round the area. Was there somewhere that used those names and he had simply nabbed them and plonked them on the form one of the women was carefully filling out?

There was also another vague possibility. I had come upon a young man, back in Sydney, who had given us a long strange name. The upshot of the whole case

was that he was being pressured by an older brother to engage in a sophisticated burglary ring; he was a small skinny kid and he was being used to fit into small openings, narrow windows, that sort of thing. It wasn't his name but his choice of it led us to the brother and the ring and their ways of selling on the stuff he nicked for them.

Was 'James Hillman Crouch' actually a cry for help? Was he too being pressured to do something he didn't want to do? I decided not to run this idea past Terri and Anne. Kind and goodhearted they might be—but they were a bit frazzled and angry right this minute.

And the hospital. Three-twenty-two pm would be visiting hours most likely. So a request to catch up with someone who was in to visit ... or in the bustle of visitors and flowers and people asking the nurses questions—maybe it would be easy for someone to nip into the nurse's station. But again the timing raised questions. Either some one was asked for and brought to the phone—or it was someone who could be expected to be manning the station at that time of the afternoon. What would happen if I went to Brisbane tomorrow afternoon and asked if they could check who was on duty at that time? It wouldn't hurt. Except that I didn't want to go to Brisbane. Nor did I really want to go down to Mermaid Beach this afternoon ...

But I couldn't plead a prior engagement. I rarely can.

— vi —

I mooched around the streets and shops and malls ... I stood around public phones waiting for people to quit them and hoping I didn't look like the traditional 'dirty old man'. I got a couple of suspicious glances.

But I suppose it was worthwhile. There was the phone. There was a seat nearby. Shops. People passing. I plonked down on the seat and looked around. A pretty young woman was also sitting there eating a salad roll. She didn't welcome my presence. But cops get used to not being welcomed with open arms. That old idea of women loving blokes in uniforms doesn't really translate into much. They just want to know why you weren't there when they were getting raped or mugged.

It didn't matter. I just sat there and watched the phone and how regularly it got used. This was Saturday and weekdays might be different. But it looked to me as if just about every kid these days has a mobile phone. Even stuck in board shorts and thrust into tote bags. I would be scared of getting sand into its inner workings or sea water or something ... and what about when they actually went in for a swim ... did phones get pinched regularly on beaches ...

The young woman got up, moved on. Two giggling little girls came and sat down beside me. They seemed to be intrigued by me. One of them finally got up the courage to ask me what I was doing. I said I was watching the phone. They both turned and stared at the public phone. Maybe they thought it might turn into something else. Then they turned back to me and said why was I watching it. I said

it had been used by a criminal a week ago. I just wanted to see what kind of people used it.

Now they stared at me with open mouths. What kind of criminal? This was a facer. I said it was being used by a blackmailer. For a moment they didn't seem to know what to say. Then one of them rose energetically to the occasion. What did he want to do to someone? I said he was like all blackmailers and wanted to make money by scaring someone. They wanted to know what he might look like.

Well, I had embarked on a fairy tale so I thought I might as well stick with it. He was quite young, he was fairly tall, he was a bit overweight, he had brown hair, he was very serious. He might work somewhere around here.

I didn't want to frighten them. So I added, "But don't go worrying about him. He's probably moved on by now. This was more than a week ago."

Then these two, who both looked about nine or ten, and who had that indefinable look of superiority that comes to kids who live in holiday resorts as opposed to those who come for a week, surprised me. They said they had seen someone who looked just like that and that he often sat on this seat and watched the phone.

I thought they were making up a story to please me but they said they knew where he worked. They pointed to a little café a few doors along rejoicing in the name of Babe's; did this mean it specialised in pork things, pies, roast crackling, ham rolls—or anything but pork? This was a possibility. And the time young Jim had rung was well after the lunch rush. Possibly his callee came out and enjoyed a cigarette here in mid-afternoon. But why ring a public phone instead of the café's number? Because he didn't want to be linked to Jim in any way? If he owned the place, if he'd worked there for years ... And what about my description of Jim? Was his callee a brother or something?

I took out my wallet and showed the girls my identity. It gave them a buzz. They wanted to know if I wanted them to do something, like following him. They had obviously read some Detective Fiction for Young Readers. What do small girls read now? Nancy Drew? Or her latest reincarnation? I had a vague idea Nancy Drew stories were still being published.

I said no, I didn't want them to do anything, not even talk about it. But I said did they happen to know the young man's name. They said they didn't. But they could find out. I said no, not even that. But I would like to give them each enough to buy an ice cream or whatever they fancied. They seemed pleased about that part but disappointed that I didn't want to recruit a couple of eagle-eyed young sleuths.

I said I would come and sit here next Saturday afternoon and if they came by I just might have some news for them. They liked that. They said they would most definitely be here waiting. I took out a five dollar note for them to share. I hoped no one would tape me as an ageing pedophile. But no one seemed to be particularly interested in us. Better things to do of a Saturday arve. They got up and went away. I sat on for several minutes, yawned, got up, strolled over to Babe's

and went in. It had cute pink pigs bouncing over almost everything. A young woman in a pink bib-overall gave me a smile.

I looked at the price list and asked if I could get a toasted ham sandwich with coleslaw.

“To go?”

“No, I’ll have it here. That sun is getting pretty hot.”

“A drink?”

I got myself a sickly pink ice cream soda and went over to a table which would give me a good view of people coming and going behind the counter. All very well, but no one else came out to help her and as it was the quietest part of the afternoon she only got three other customers over the next half hour. I bought myself a slab of chocolate and a packet of licorice and asked her, her overall had ‘Tanya’ embroidered on the bib part, if the movie had put people off buying pork and ham. She said she didn’t think so, that people didn’t really connect the two. She said she had once read about some disease wild pigs got but people seemed to think pork just came from factories not from real animals. She said maybe it was just as well.

“Mmmm. Do you remember what the disease was?”

She said she didn’t. It was a long name. But I didn’t need to worry. Everything here was very clean and well-cooked. Then she seemed to think maybe she shouldn’t have said any of this. A customer hardly wants to hear about diseases in a food place. Maybe it was my nice kind face that had led her into that unwise statement.

I said, “Yes, it does look nice. Whose idea was it to call it Babe’s? Did you love the movie?”

“I liked the sequel better I think. More things happened. But it was already here when I moved up here last year. Bryan named it. He owns the place. But he usually goes out in the afternoon for a swim or just to wander round giving out flyers or just sitting round out there. He often gets people to come in like that.”

“That’s a good idea. There are so many places to choose from it’s hard to decide but if someone comes up and says something friendly that can make a difference.”

“He’s pretty serious but he’s quite good at talking to people. He always make it sound like he’s really interested in them.”

I longed to ask her “Bryan who?”

“Well, good on him. I’d much rather eat in a locally-owned place than somewhere owned by some big American company.”

She agreed with that. She said he had lived here for quite a while. I said I’d moved to Surfers about eight years ago from Sydney. She said there were a lot of people like me. I said was Bryan another old Sydneysider and she said no, she thought he’d come from up north originally, maybe even PNG, she’d heard him say something in pidgin English one day when some people came in from that part

of the world. I said that was very interesting and that my dad was up there in the war and was always telling us stories about the place. Bored us silly, I said, which wasn't true. Frank was an accomplished storyteller. Freeze your blood, make you laugh till your sides ached; it was all in a day's work. I suddenly felt a kind of nostalgia and affection for my dead father. I didn't go round thinking on it much but getting parents you want to remember is just about the best hand a kid can get in that great cosmic card game ...

"Did he speak pidgin?" this young woman asked. I had both fingers crossed that no one would come in.

"A few words. I'm afraid I don't remember them. Is Bryan pretty hot stuff?"

She reached down under the counter. "He bought this. He said maybe we might start getting more Pacific customers if we promoted ourselves the right way—because they all love roast pork."

'This' was a phrase book. Learn Pidgin.

"I think he's right. You could be on to something." Though I have an idea there is some variation between Pacific countries but maybe not enough to make much difference.

I flipped through it. Unfortunately he hadn't thought to write his name on it. I handed it back.

The phone rang. She said, "Babe's. Can I help you?" Someone asked for her boss. She said, "Sorry, he's not here now. He should be back by four."

She hung up. I said I would come back again sometime. She waved. I waved and went out.

— vii —

It was quite breezy when I got home again and trudged upstairs. Was it purely coincidence. Or was it significant that everything seemed to push me gently in the direction of PNG. I let the idea germinate. I rang the travel agency and asked Anne if they had any material on PNG and holidays there. She said they had some brochures and a travel guide. I said could she see if it had some tips on health problems. She asked me to ring back in about ten minutes. She was with a customer and she would need to hunt out the stuff.

I went and poured myself a very small measure of Glenmorangie and looked in my kitchen for something to go with it. Some Vita Wheat. Time to shop. I sat back and closed my eyes briefly.

Maybe I was jumping to conclusions but it would make a simple easy way to blackmail something, someone, a company, a government. PNG had various nasty tropical diseases, diseases of people, of animals, of plants. How easy to say: Pay me a million dollars or I will release ... whatever.

The trouble with this was that paying wouldn't get you off the hook. If they succeeded once they could raise the same threat any time they found their million hadn't gone as far as they expected. Not unless they were stopped in their tracks.

At least twenty minutes had gone by when I rang back.

“Bob!” Anne sounded pleased to hear from me. As though those twenty minutes had dragged. “Yes, I’ve pulled out a couple of guides and leaflets. What did you have in mind?”

“Either diseases that people need to watch out for, vaccinate for, let the authorities know if they have been in contact with a sufferer … or the other way round, any things that are a no-no for bringing back to Australia from PNG.”

“There’s quite a long list. Malaria is at the top but I haven’t even heard of some of them.”

She read down a long list of nasty things tourists needed to watch out for, where to go for medical help; maybe that’s why PNG is rarely at the top of most tourists’ ‘must see’ destinations, a Thousand Places to See Before You Die, that sort of razzmatazz.

Then she said with a sort of sharp intake: “Bob, there’s something on their lists called the screw worm fly. I’ve never heard of it but it sounds horrible. It lays its eggs in scratches and cuts. You have to be careful about washing out and disinfecting …”

“Is it on their list of things to watch out for when you return?”

“Yes, you can’t bring back any animal products, no cultural artifacts made from animals.”

“I wonder … could screw possibly refer to screw worm … It would be a doddle to sneak it in. A couple of pupae slipped into a bottle of tablets. Encourage them to hatch out, feed them on … whatever, some raw meat maybe. Then threaten to let them go.”

Anne was silent for a long pregnant moment. “Yes,” she said on a long breath. “Yes, that is something a young person might do. How easy to send a threat like that. But how would you go about collecting the money?”

“Yes, that’s where most ransoms come unstuck. You’ve got to collect your money without being seen. You’ve got to bank it or spend it without being obvious about it. You’ve got to stick your head up above the wall. But maybe it is easier these days with money whizzing round the internet at the speed of light. Or disappearing into these sites that are here one minute and gone the next.”

“Yes. And if it did come back to a site it might come back to a place like us, someone completely unaware of what was going on, or how their business was being used. And then immediately transferred on to another site. Bob, I’m getting cold shivers up my spine. Should we tell … I don’t really know, the police, or quarantine …”

“Yes. I think I might try ringing. Leave it with me though I don’t suppose a lot of government departments are on the ball on a Saturday afternoon. But I assume police and customs are answering their phones.”

“Bob, we’d be terribly grateful. I hope you’re completely wrong. But I think, just maybe, we were taken for a ride and didn’t even know it.”

It's one thing to sound decisive. It's another to ring around, getting answering services or people who say they have no idea but if I would leave my name and number ...

Still, when I finally sat back, I had left messages for Health, DPI, Customs, Plant Quarantine, Government Veterinary Services, Immigration and Police. It might be overkill. It might be jumping to ridiculous conclusions. All of that. But I had covered Terri's and Anne's backs. No one could say they hadn't done everything possible.

— viii —

No one rang me back. No doubt I had been written off as another crank call. I can't say I was surprised. So I set out next day, unenthusiastically, to drive to Brisbane. It took me ages to find the ward I wanted. People were busy. Visitors wandered round looking lost. Nurses avoided my eye. At least that was my impression. Maybe I didn't look like a visitor. I finally managed to get a middleaged woman and showed her my list of calls. I said, "I understand that is your number. Would you have records for that afternoon and who might've taken the call?"

"Why do you want to know?"

She sounded suspicious. I showed her my wallet with my ID. "It is a private enquiry. The call was made from a business without their knowledge or permission."

She laughed rather unpleasantly. "Tell me about it!"

"I think the call is linked to some sort of blackmail or extortion attempt. I would really appreciate your co-operation."

She pursed her lips but pulled out the previous week's records of treatments. "It would've been Briony, Cath, Daniel ... Megan."

"Can you give me their surnames? Or indicate who would be most likely to have taken the call at that time?"

She didn't stop looking suspicious. But she turned to her roster records. "It would most likely have been Daniel."

"How could I contact him? I would really like to know what the caller asked for, if it is not confidential information about a patient."

"Do you know the name of the person who called here?"

"He gave his name as James Hillman Crouch. It may be a false name."

"No. Daniel is a Crouch. I assume a brother or relative was ringing him. I disapprove of staff taking private calls. But it is impossible to prevent. And he may have been asking about a relative who is or was a patient here. I'm not going to leap to conclusions."

"Do you have a Hillman or a Crouch here at the moment?"

"No. But I'm not going to check back for you. Do you want me to leave a message for him to contact you?"

"No. Not yet. Have you ever had any problems with him?"

“No. And if we had I couldn’t tell you.”

“Well, if he would like to ring Niche Holidays,” I gave her the number, “because I think the women who run it deserve an explanation and an apology for the way they were used.”

She still didn’t look convinced.

But I now had three potential youngish men who might be in this together. Bryan, James, Daniel. I thanked her and went out. If it really was what I’d originally thought: a youngster taking advantage to get free time on computers and phones, then I wanted him to get a big talking to. But that wasn’t the same as seeing him as someone who should be listed with INTERPOL.

I was sick of driving when I got home and it isn’t what you’d call a Scenic Drive. My neighbour, Russ Taylor, came round with a video and a pizza. I put blackmail and maggots out of my mind. But we weren’t to be allowed our usual peaceful evening.

— ix —

A man came knocking at my door about seven. He said he was with Quarantine and Inspection. He wanted to talk to me. I took his identity, asked him where I would be able to get in touch with his boss, and left him to chat with Russ. Needless to say I couldn’t get on to his boss in the office of a Sunday evening. I came back and gave his details back to him. I’d jotted them down. A good habit to keep ...

“So what’s going on?”

“You might like to tell us.”

He was a very dour sort of character. About fifty. Not given to smiling. I suppose you get soured and hardened in the job. All those sneaky shifty-eyed people trying to get things past you. All those lies. All those people who don’t read their forms before they disembark.

“It’s no good asking me exactly what’s going on. I don’t yet know. But I wanted to warn you to watch out. But I assume you watch out anyway.”

“So you’re wasting our time?”

I had a headmaster used to take that tone of voice.

“I don’t know. If you’ve got the time I can tell you where I’m coming from.”

He sat back. “Okay. Shoot.”

It was Russ who sat forward, keenly interested. This man made a couple of notes. But other than that he said nothing.

At the end of it he nodded slowly. “Maybe. Well, thanks for letting us know.”

“So is there a problem, do you think?”

“Probably not. We’ll check.”

The way he said it didn’t give me a lot of hope. But there didn’t seem to be anything more I could do. He, after all, had the funds and the facilities. I could do some more ringing round. But I hoped he would do the hard yards. After all, he was supposed to be keeping Queensland safe.

I saw him out. I hoped he was genuine. The sort who suspects everybody. I would ring tomorrow. I've known plenty of bureaucrats who make noises in lieu of doing anything. Some of them inhabit police stations. I hoped it wasn't yet another case of shutting stable doors too late.

— X —

But he rang me midway through Monday morning. No messing round with this bloke. He said straight up, "Thanks for the tip-off."

"What's happened?"

"We picked up the man at the hospital this morning. He returned from PNG three weeks ago. He was breeding screw worm maggots in his flat. His older brother sent a ransom note to the Premier. The younger brother sounds like their messenger boy. He may have done it from the travel agency and other business premises as a way of making sure no messages came back to any relevant addresses."

"This was about making some quick money?"

"Looks like it. But we are going to keep the whole thing under wraps if possible. We don't want some other bright sparks picking up on the idea."

"No. But I assume I can tell the two women?"

"If they know how to keep their mouths shut." I didn't like his tone but he'd possibly been soured by a wife or daughters. Who knew?

"I'd say so. They just want to put the whole thing behind them. But if they hadn't taken the youth's odd behaviour seriously ... "

"Point taken."

He was right about wraps. Or he had clout where it counted. No word of the extortion attempt leaked out. Not so much as a tiny paragraph in the paper. I wondered what had happened to those three young men. But it didn't really bother me that I would probably never know.

I went down to Mermaid Beach the following weekend. Babe's was still in business. I don't know what I had expected to find. A 'For Lease' sign maybe. I went in and got a packet of chips and a can of bitter lemon. The cheerful young woman was still there. I smiled and said, "How's your pidgin coming along?"

She smiled too and said that Bryan had thrown out the phrase book because he reckoned it was too much of a hassle trying to learn. I wanted to ask if anyone had come to see Bryan; any dour men in dark glasses. But it had ceased to be my question. I did wonder, though, if he had hoyed the book before or after ... any such visit. And was he seen not as a gang member but just as collateral damage—or were they letting him stay free in case there were other gang members?

I also met up with the two little girls. I told them the police had cracked a major case but it turned out not to be anything to do with the café ... but it did have something to do with pigs, after all, and they had given me a very useful idea which I had passed along. This wasn't all hogwash. The ransom note young James sent off *had* threatened to introduce screw worm maggots into Queensland's

massive population of wild pigs. And once in—it probably would've been impossible to eradicate because the fly is not fussy about what it lays its eggs on: pigs, cattle, dogs, people, horses ... who knows.

I offered to get them a little thank you gift if they thought their parents wouldn't mind. You have to be extra cautious these days. Even ten-year-olds know what 'inappropriate' means now. But they were not the sort of shrinking violets of my era. Before I knew where I was I had bought one a t-shirt with a fluorescent pink mermaid on it (a rather sexy mermaid too) and the other a bracelet with various sea creatures (including more mermaids) dangling from it. I wondered how they would explain it to their parents ... or if they had the sorts of parents which notice new t-shirts ...

And Terri and Anne, though I had probably added to their worries rather than reduced them, asked me if I would like to have a free weekend away somewhere courtesy of the agency. I said I thought I would pass on PNG this week. I had seen graphic pictures, in full colour, of what the screw worm fly can do, courtesy of Quarantine ...

They laughed at that.

And Damien said, "I'm glad you're on our 'side', Bob. I really thought it was just some kid wanting to get free access to some iffy sites."

I said I had had an extra thirty years to grow sour and cynical. He laughed at that. I seemed to be making everyone happy this week.

— xi —

It wasn't until some time later that I found out why the kid had given that name. Mr My-Lips-Are-Sealed relented sufficiently to give me a few hints, then left me to join the dots. Daniel was a Crouch. Bryan was a Hillman. Their mother had remarried. Young James was apparently tired of being told what to do by two older brothers who weren't exactly nice to him. All he wanted to do was be left alone to be the ultimate computer nerd. It maybe *was*, in an obscure way, his cry for help.

His brothers had told him to use the name Ben and a common surname every time he went into a potential business as a student seeking work experience ... And I wondered if anything, e-mail, phone call, had ever gone from that café. I hoped Babe would survive for the sake of that nice young woman and her young customers ...

But it was a grim case. Not least because these young men seemed to have no conception of the disaster they were so casually threatening to cause. They didn't seem to be capable of seeing beyond a quick and easy way to make big bucks. A total blindness to the wider implications ...

The idea of time away, a short holiday to put the whole thing aside struck me as not such a bad idea after all.

A weekend for me, maybe, and a couple of years for them.

- end -

WHITE HORSE WHISKY

- i -

Russ Taylor has the other upstairs unit in this old block of four flats. He used to be a rep for a big agricultural chemical firm. But he's been retired here for ten years or more. So he's older, though not necessarily less active than me.

We go to and fro, share each other's grog, have a game of tennis together now and then; and he likes to hear about what I've been up to. A sort of vicarious enjoyment of other people's lives and problems. He is the sort of calm slow-moving person who rarely has problems himself and can't really imagine some of the messes other people 'out there' get themselves into.

He's got grown up boys, one in north Queensland, one in Dubbo, and a grand total of five grandkids. I don't envy him them; not least because he hardly ever sees them. Surfers might be a magnet for a lot of people but these boys are serious middle-aged men who look down, vaguely, on their father. Something rather pathetic in a sagging old dad in his bathers maybe. Far from dreaming of becoming beach bums themselves they seem, from the little I've seen of them, to look with faint contempt on their father's laidback lifestyle.

When he asked me point-blank if Deborah's baby was mine I felt there was nothing for it but to say yes. Russ slapped me on the back and told me I was a sly old dog. A sly old dog, I thought drily, was the one thing I wasn't. But I couldn't really explain this to Russ. And he went on believing that pretty women throw themselves into my arms every time I go out on a 'case' ...

It seemed easiest to leave it at that. But he's now got into the habit of saying, "That Deb, she was a looker all right. I'm surprised you're not thinking about getting hitched again, Bob. Imagine having her around day and night."

Deb had sent me some photos of the baby but I hadn't shown them to anyone. The baby had inherited Deb's dark-blue eyes. So I could only hope he could make a living in twenty years' time as a hearth throb because he wasn't going to inherit much from me. I had left my worldly goods to Rachel but I thought it was probably time I changed that. I could trust Rachel to do the right thing by him but I believe it's always better to spell things out and then get them signed and witnessed.

Russ also thought I was lucky to have Terri and Anne dropping round every so often. As if I might give him some tips on how to reinvent himself as a honey jar.

I didn't really want to imagine it. Not Deb with all her problems. But I knew it had slightly changed Russ's attitude to me. I was no longer just another old retired slob sitting round with a glass at his elbow. In a curious way he seemed to start treating me as a much younger man. Instead of being five or six years younger he started giving me digs about how come I was content to sit around here doing nothing when I could be out making 'real money'.

This went on for weeks; then it just seemed to drop. I thought I understood why when he asked one day if he could pick my brains. I'm sick of people picking my brains. They're getting a bit shredded. But of course if I was out there making 'real money' I wouldn't be hanging round here waiting to give Russ advice and help, gratis. Simple as that.

— ii —

Still it didn't seem to be more than a passing curiosity. His dad was long since dead but he still had an old uncle, now in his nineties, and this uncle, a man named Phil Taylor, was packing up some family stuff before finally heading off obediently to a retirement home. Phil had found a lot of old photographs his father, Russ's granddad, had taken and kept. He had been thinking of donating them to an historical society but when he went through them he found some which seemed to suggest that that old granddad hadn't been the admirable patriarch the whole family had been brought up to believe in. Something along those lines ...

This old bloke's first thought was simply to dump some of the pictures but then he thought maybe he should get some independent advice.

"Oh no, no way, Russ. One thing I don't know anything about is old photos. Get an expert."

"We don't want that kind of person sticking his nose into the family, asking questions we can't answer, talking about the blooming 'integrity' of the collection and how we mustn't break it up, that sort o' nonsense." He sounded gloomy. He refilled his glass right to the top. "You know what our family is like, well, some of them ... "

I had been slightly involved with some distant relatives of his years ago—but I saw in this a kind of blackmail: 'I know what your family is like too, I know what you get up to when you go out on these so-called 'cases' of yours.' I had the odd thought that Russ didn't really believe that I went out to try and help other people,

a sort of uncaped Superman, that he secretly believed I went away to make whoopee and seduce innocent country girls like Deborah ... that, in fact, I was doing exactly what Russ had probably done years ago when he gave his long-dead wife pathetic excuses about being held up by floodwater or broken axles ... and I just wouldn't admit it.

His idea was to go up to Toowoomba and stay a night or two with a cousin then drive on down to his old uncle's ancestral place near Texas. His granddad had come from somewhere over the border, somewhere on the Tablelands but I can't really say I wanted to know the family permutations. His second idea was that I might like to come with him. Company. A pleasant drive in the country. It sounded like the sort of thing I said to my wife when I bought my first car, a Morris Minor I got secondhand; it didn't bring us happiness or harmony, probably because we were worn out with petty arguments even before we managed to get out of Sydney and find some 'country'.

But then I thought I could maybe take this as a chance to drop by and see Cecily Holmes on my way back through Toowoomba. I'd been meaning to drop her a line ever since Peter Atkins had told me she was now living in the 'Garden City'. So, in the end, we drove up separately to Toowoomba, I left my car in the cousin's backyard alongside a number of cannibalised wrecks (I just hoped the cousin would keep his mitts off mine) and got into Russ's old Datsun for the long drive south-west to Texas.

It was actually quite pleasant. I do so much driving on 'cases' that it was nice to be able to sit back and relax and let Russ do the hard work. Russ isn't a great talker, preferring instead to turn on his car radio, so I didn't have to be sociable.

The word Texas immediately summons up images of great cattle-covered plains, the Panhandle or whatever, but the property when Russ finally found it two hours later was in quite rough timbered country. We followed a narrow rutty road in. It didn't look as if old Phil was particularly sociable either. I didn't mind.

About half a kilometre in we came to a big ramshackle old weatherboard house. Phil had a good crop of thistles and weeds in the front yard as well as a couple of magnificent Moreton Bay figs and some scrubby-looking oleanders. I began to think it probably was time for the poor old coot to retire to an armchair and get told by women in white uniforms to take his medicine.

— iii —

Phil came out to meet us, a long lean withered sort of bloke, covered in sunspots and with several teeth missing, but I felt that maybe he wasn't ready to hang up his boots just yet. Just something about him.

"So you're Bob? Heard a lot about you, young fella. Come on in and have a bite."

The curious thing about it all was to watch this old codger treat Russ like some boy home from school or Scout camp; not a seasoned old campaigner of about sixty-eight. I half expected Phil to tell Russ kids shouldn't smoke and to eat

up his greens. I couldn't hide a grin. This old fellow turned around and said, "So, young fella, you're going to help me sort out all my old photos, heh? Well, I reckon I need a hand getting this place tidied up and on to the market." He fixed me with a beady stare. "I s'pose you think I'm past it, same as Russ is always telling me."

I said I thought he seemed to be pretty much on the ball.

He chortled at that.

"Wait till you see the bloody house." I wasn't sure what he meant by this but it didn't take me long to realise Phil Taylor had probably never thrown away a thing in his life; not just his stuff but everything that had ever belonged to his parents, grandparents, wife, kids ... I wasn't sure exactly what was his alone but I didn't think he would go round wearing the sky-blue overcoat with mother-o'-pearl buttons still hanging on the coat rack in the hallway.

He wasn't a bad cook either; of the good plain variety. A big damper hot from the oven with homemade butter melting into it. Some slices off a big hunk of corned beef. Some vegetables boiled up in a big saucepan and dripping with pepper and salt, more melted butter and some chopped parsley. In one way it was a wonder Phil had got to ninety-four. On the other his hardworking brand of self-sufficiency had probably burned the fat out of his arteries, like someone cleaning out your pistons.

And he could yarn the hind leg of a donkey. I wondered why he chose to live alone. He had a son and two granddaughters living in Melbourne. Unfortunately his son had motor neurone disease and was now in a wheelchair. But this old codger had no intention of moving to Melbourne. In fact a retirement home was only bearable if it looked out on paddocks and cattle. He had been looking at places round country towns and put his name down for a couple he thought might be, just, bearable. I could see the doubts written all over him and I thought he would hang on here as long as he could.

The winter nights here were quite chilly and he had dragged out a swag of blankets to make up a couple of stretchers for us. I have spent more comfortable nights. The thin horsehair mattress was the sort of thing people took out and burned when the inner-spring revolution arrived. But I couldn't very well complain when the old bloke thought nothing of lowering his ancient bones to such a mattress and seemed none the worse for it.

He also got up with the magpies and kookaburras to go out and milk his house cow and seemed to regard us as two effete townies; I half-expected him to start talking about the failings of our generation.

Russ said, as we found our way down to a rather grubby bathroom at the end of the verandah, "Now you know why I wanted some company. He goes out of his way to make me feel like a naughty little kid that can't get out of bed in time for school. Like Greenbottle in 'Yes What' ... and I always come away feeling like some sort of soft city-slicker."

I knew exactly what he meant. “Still, he seems like an interesting old sod. Pity you can’t get him to write his memoirs.”

“Oh, I reckon, get him into a home, and he’ll get stuck into ‘em like a shot. I wish I had half as good a memory.”

“So what’s he going to do with all this stuff?”

“I said to him, have a clearing sale. You usually get more that way. Sell off all the contents of the house and sheds. Then sell the property separately. He’s got some good stuff in the house. I saw a box of old Christmas cards sell at an auction out West one time for five hundred dollars! Most people just hoy ‘em. But this family had kept them from the 1890s or something. So you never know what sort of gold mine he might be sitting on here. I’m hoping to get an idea of how best to market his old rubbish for him. But he’s quite willing to donate stuff to museums and historical societies if I can go through it first and help him keep anything the family might like to have down the track.”

“So what’s the problem?” This was my way of saying ‘what am I doing here?’

“When my granddad was a boy they all lived just over the border a bit. Pretty wild country. Near a little place called Tumbalumba. It had a post office, few shops, Cobb & Co office, telegraph station, a school. You know the sort of place. Granddad and his older brothers bought a horse-drawn fire-engine, really just a big water cart, and they bred some top-notch horses. So they always had a couple of good fast horses on hand if it did get called out. Because all the buildings were wood and people were still using lanterns, kerosene lamps, even candles. But granddad had a hobby. He was absolutely mad keen on photography. He never went anywhere without all his paraphernalia … even to fires. Phil inherited them all. That’s what I think is bothering him. There’s something in the collection that’s maybe a bit suss.”

We spruced ourselves up with cold water. Phil’s dunny was down the back yard and behind a shed. I wouldn’t want to have to come down here at night—though he had provided us with a torch apiece. But the sheds were also bursting with old machinery, old vehicles. Not for Phil the seduction of the trade-in. I thought this place was almost a museum in itself. It just needed someone to sort and catalogue and label and dust. Would people drive out here to see around? Maybe not. If it’d been closer to town, to a highway …

Phil put on some chops and eggs for us. Then he said “How about an egg-nog?” and was whisking them up almost before we could say, “Not this morning, Phil.” Maybe an egg a day was his secret of a vigorous long life.

But by the time we’d got on to toast and some homemade grape jam I thought it was time to start moving the mystery along. “So, Phil, just what is it about these photos that’s got you worried?”

“Not worried, young Bob. No, I’ve never been much of a one for worrying. Not even in the War.” I could well believe this. But the War got him right off the

track and next thing I was hearing about how he'd been a mechanic up in the Northern Territory. "Always could turn my hand to anything."

Half-an-hour later he seemed to glimpse the original route on the map and do a sharp turn. "Photos, yeah, those photos. You'd remember the Sandy Simpsons, wouldn't you, Russ?"

"A bit. But they were on their last legs by then. Thank goodness. They weren't the best of neighbours. In fact I've used them as my benchmark for bastards ever since."

"What was it about them?"

I was still hoping to move things along. But I was no match for Russ and Phil combined.

"There was the original Sandy and his wife and they had fourteen kids—was it fourteen? Might've been more."

"I heard it was twelve."

"Doesn't matter. There was a heck of a lot of kids over there. And they were all short the full quid. And the whole blooming lot of 'em were albinos."

"How strange." Though it does run in families.

They didn't mind me interjecting. They just didn't want me to bring the conversation back to the straight and narrow.

"Strange is nothing, Bob. That was one weird family. And not just weird. Remember the story about the old bloke putting kids down the log."

They got stuck into this sort of story-telling. Like waves beating up the shore. I didn't get to find out what all the stories referred to. Nor could I decide if they were actually leading up to some light-bringing climax. But the picture they built up was not only very strange but seriously criminal and abusive. Yet the family was left alone. Mainly because they rarely bothered anyone else. Their violence was turned inward on themselves, their stock, any wildlife ... and an occasional person unwise enough to call in to their property.

To most people they were the stuff of evil dreams and hard-to-believe gossip but rarely seen and even more rarely spoken to. The children didn't go to school. Which didn't seem to bother anyone very much back in 1910 ... or else teachers had tried to persuade the parents to send the children and had been seen off the Simpson property with some birdshot up the backside. Occasionally they came into town and stocked up on flour and sugar but as they rarely paid their bills people believed they were given supplies free of charge as a way to hasten them out of town. They were a lawless and unpleasant element. But most people could, no doubt with a relieved sigh, forget them for months at a time.

The problem for the Taylor family, it seemed, was that they shared a boundary fence. It gets much harder to forget someone who is not a good neighbour and doesn't believe in fixing anything. Even more so, if the fixing requires things like buying rolls of wire. The Taylor family certainly weren't rich. But they worked hard, did their best to breed the best stock, and were generally go

ahead people in the farming line. At least that was the impression Phil gave ... Biased maybe but from what I knew of Russ and Phil I could believe it.

But Phil's dad and his primitive camera went everywhere and took pictures of everything round about that small town and its neighbouring farms ... though not, probably, its fences.

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Phil gave us a guided tour of the farm, or the area round the house. I can't say a quick tour. He only had to see some old piece of junk sitting on the shed floor or the tool bench or out the back under some head-high weeds and off he'd go again. In a way I didn't mind too much. The junk was interesting junk. There were several old vehicles out there in the weeds that a collector would give his eye teeth for. The trouble is—promise me a mystery and then not get stuck into it and I get seriously distracted and edgy. I kept wondering just what it was they wanted me to do. I don't object to giving a bit of advice. I even get quite chuffed when people hang on my ums and ahs. But in my experience it never stops there. It always involves me in long drives, tiring walks, going without dinner, even occasionally someone treating me or my car a bit nastily.

We finally came through the most distant shed and up the back of it, in the morning shadows, we came upon Phil's showpiece. The old fire 'engine'. And it was worth coming some distance to see. He'd kept the brass rubbed up. He showed me just how the harness worked for the two horses that pulled it, how the hoses and taps fitted, how they refilled the oversize barrel from an overhead tank at the farm. And he showed me the little padded drum underneath where his dad had carried his photographic equipment.

"I'm impressed, Phil. I'd say any museum would be glad to have it."

"Yeah, got to thinking that. Times have changed. Folk want to see some of this old stuff."

It occurred to me about then that the whole thing was a beat-up. This is what we'd been brought to see, not some old photos. Phil might manage to squeeze out an old mystery from something, Russ might exaggerate something to do with the photos, but I was just along for the ride. Some company. Russ worrying that the old boy was seriously past it. The puzzle on what to do with a lifetime's junk. All that sort of thing. 'Bring young Bob along, three heads are always better than two'; that kind of thinking.

I didn't really mind. It wasn't keeping me away from making my first million or running the country or seriously influencing world history. I might as well be enjoying myself here.

And the old water cart was worth seeing. I'd think kids would love school excursions just to see it. Well, kids love school excursions to see all kinds of things ... so long as they don't have to write long essays on what they've seen afterwards.

But after we'd been fed some more corned beef, some mildly undercooked spuds, a tin of corn niblets and a few other odds and ends as lunch Phil said, "Now, about those pics. I'll just haul 'em out."

Russ turned and gave me a look which might be 'told you so' and might be 'didn't believe in them myself'. Old Phil came back some minutes later with a dusty suitcase.

"Not full of photos, is it, Phil?" I said, suddenly dismayed.

"Is, as a matter of fact. But there's just a couple I'd like an opinion on."

He opened this thing up. A great blast of mothballs hit us. I felt I shouldn't complain. It wouldn't have surprised me in the least if the moths and silverfish and mice had been in to Phil's hoard. He reached in and took out a brown paper packet. "Didn't think you'd want to go through the lot, Bob. And as for young Russ, never was able to get him interested. Even if he family."

He carried the packet over to the table. "It was a heck of a long time ago. My dad was a good photographer. Really knew his stuff. But still, cameras weren't what they are now." I suppose I had been picturing someone with his head under a black cloth, his subjects with their chins clamped, and saying 'watch the birdie'. But Phil's dad had been a step on from there. A portable camera with a sort of concertina lens. He did all his own developing as there was nowhere locally to send things. He knew his business from go to whoa.

Phil took out the pictures. They were quite good photographs, quite clear, and all pasted on to some grey lengths of cardboard.

"It was the Simpsons next door. Place got on fire one night. Knocked over a kerosene lamp or something. One of them came riding for dad and the cart. Dad always kept it topped up, didn't take him long to harness up and he and my older brother Bernie went galloping off into the night. Bernie would drive. My dad would sit there with the camera on his lap and he'd shoot off a couple of pictures as they came into the fire and Bernie'd park and put the brake on. Then dad'd put the camera away and run the hose out. They had it down to a fine art. Even when there wasn't a fire my dad'd make us all go out and practice."

I looked carefully at the top couple of pictures the old man had snapped. It wasn't night. More like about five o'clock in the afternoon maybe. But it was the fire lighting up the scene, not the late sun. The end of the house and a shed nearby both seemed to be on fire.

The pictures were blurry but I was sure about what it was showing. Two fires. One lamp?

"Keep going with the lot," Phil said. "Dad always claimed he only took the two. But when he developed the film there was more on it."

The next ones were even worse. Very hard to tell what was going on. But they had been taken up much closer to the fire. It was a solid weatherboard house, well alright, and both Bernie and the old man could be seen in the picture spraying the end of it. None of your modern high pressure hoses. But they were doing their best.

The shed nearby was a big open-fronted thing with some hay inside. Not bails. Not rolls. Just old fashioned stacked stuff.

“Now, look closely at all of those.”

I did. I wouldn’t swear to it. Not here. Not anywhere. But it looked as if Mr Simpson was herding his kids *into* the shed not out of it. And then there was the man, strangely pale in the dark photographs with a pitchfork in his hands. I didn’t like what I was thinking one bit. It looked to me as if he was forcing those kids up close to the fire.

I finally put the pictures down.

“I can try them with a magnifying glass. But what do you reckon? That the kids had set the fires and he was punishing them. Trying to bring home to them the horror of what a fire could do. Before he sent them out to get buckets. Something like that.”

“No one knows, Bob. Several kids died that night. Old Sandy reckoned that was bullshit, that talk of his kids being in that burning shed. And there was no proof. The police were never called in, no one investigated. The shed burnt to the ground. Dad and Bernie saved the house. They ran out of water. But there were people all around the place with wet bags. There’d been kids screaming, people yelling, chaos. You can imagine the mess. And of course it got dark and there was no power to see by—except the fire itself.”

The old man poured himself another cup of tea and seemed to ruminate on the distant past.

“So what do you think, young Bob. A crime or not?”

“Going by the photos I’d say so. No one in their right minds pushes kids up against burning hay like that. Chances are their clothes would catch fire, their hair.”

“I thought so.” Phil nodded slowly. “I’ve always thought so. That bastard got rid of some of his own kids like that.”

“But why?”

“Fewer mouths to feed.”

Put like that it sounds like something out of Hansel and Gretel. The abandoned children. But it does happen. These days parents are just more sophisticated. Sleeping pills. Wrong medicine. Accidents with machinery. Took their eyes off the kids swimming. Always hard to sift through and determine what was a genuine and unforeseeable accident, what was negligence, what was sheer stupidity, and what was a premeditated crime. I’d say this came into the last category. A knocked over lamp would not have set two buildings nearly sixty yards apart on fire.

“So who took those extra photographs, Phil?”

“That’s just it, Bob. Buggered if I know.”

I spent the rest of the afternoon on those pictures. Under different lights, clear sunshine, at an angle. With a magnifying glass. Looking at them in different sequences.

I always came back to the same grim conclusion. Sandy Simpson had forced at least three and probably four kids up against a burning haystack.

But taking it any further obviously was a non-starter. Sandy had been dead for nearly sixty years. Some of the surviving kids had stayed on there. But one by one they either died or moved away. Finally, just a couple of years ago, there were no Simpsons left and the property was sold.

No one to question. No one to charge. No one to tell the truth of what happened that night.

Except for whatever truth was in these photographs.

“Like to come for a trip,” Phil said that night as we sat down to another of his scratch meals; roast with potato and pumpkin, some gravy thick enough to cut slices. “Wouldn’t take us long to go down and see the old place over the border, if you’d care to. It’s not that far.”

I wasn’t wild about the treat they were offering. But they weren’t really thinking: yep, show Bob where it happened and he’ll know who did it. They were just being interested and nostalgic and things like that. After telling me the story they naturally assumed I would want to visit the ‘scene of the crime’. Up to a point, the point this time being Russ driving, I didn’t mind. I could sit back, see the countryside, hear old Phil tell some more yarns …

“If you both feel up to it. How about your stock, Phil, won’t they need you?”

“We’ll be down and back in the day. Leave straight after breakfast. Be there about half nine, ten, show you our old place, go next door, see what the new family has done to the Simpsons’ place … have lunch in Tumbalumba. Have a look around the old place, see if much has changed, show you where I went to school, quite a nice little one horse town. Be back here in time for tea.”

Put like that—how could I refuse?

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In fact it was a pleasant day, not hot, not cold, no howling south-westerlies. Phil milked his cow. I cooked us some chops and eggs. Russ whacked some sandwiches and a Thermos into an Esky. We were on the road soon after eight. I didn’t know this area at all and it was quite interesting to drive through it. Cattle country. So I s’pose it had something in common with its namesake. I think, if there’s one thing I’ve learnt in my retirement, it’s what a big place Australia is. You never get to know all its nooks and crannies no matter how many hours you put in on its roads. The days when Sydney was my world, a trip to the Blue Mountains or down to Shellharbour seemed like ‘seeing Australia’.

Tumbalumba was a nice little place. Just some shops along each side of the road through. A primary school. Two small churches. A playground. A little park sloping down to a creek which was almost dry but there were some trees along it.

Native bush. Some wattle flowering. And some leafless things. Poplars. Willows. Don't ask me for the details.

But we drove straight on through and turned sharp right and wound our way down over a wooden bridge and up a long slope and then we were into the timber, stringybark type of stuff, not thick, for the next couple of ks and then Russ pulled up in front of a metal gate.

"The old sod," Phil said cheerfully. "But I see they've given it a new name."

A nice board said 'Wilgowrie'. "We called it Folkestone," Phil said, "that's where my granddad hailed from. He was a sailor but decided the land was better if you had kiddies. And wives usually like to see their menfolk more often than once in six months. You'll remember the old man, Russ, always gave you a jelly bean when you were just a nipper, this high." Russ grimaced. "But he's been dead sixty years. Still, if nothing goes wrong, we usually manage to hang on pretty well."

"I didn't know the property had a name," Russ said. "I never heard that."

"Couldn't afford any of these fancy boards. All we could do to keep the place fenced, keep the roof on, food on the table. But I've heard people say we were lucky because we ate beef. Breakfast, dinner and tea. Put meat on our bones. Not prime country though. Couldn't afford anything better in the early days."

He shrugged and added philosophically, "S'pose luck comes in all shapes and sizes."

I opened the gate and we drove through and up a winding track. The old Taylor house was gone. A nice brick ranch-style place, fairly new, greeted us. The garden wasn't looking too good. But then it wasn't that time of year anyway. Two nice-looking grey horses watched us drive in and park near the front gate. They pricked their ears and seemed to find us interesting.

A woman of about thirty in slacks and light jumper came hurrying out. With her came a lively fox terrier. "Not today, thanks," she said as I got out. Then, "Oh, it's you, Phil. I haven't seen you in a while."

"Getting on, Paula. Can't go jaunting round the place much these days."

She nodded. She seemed to be quite pleased to see him. Possibly she found his yarns about life here in the 'old days' interesting. A kind of walking provenance for the house. He introduced us and she said, "Come inside and I'll put the kettle on. Michael's out somewhere. But I'll tell him you came by."

She bustled round and got us tea and a fruitcake and asked if we would like to stay to lunch. We said no, we were on our way over to what used to be the old Simpson place when we left here.

"I've been telling Bob what the Simpsons were like," Phil said cheerfully.

"Oh yes? The neighbours from hell is the way some people have described them to us. I've heard some really weird stories. But the strangest thing about them, from our point of view, is that all their horses were albinos too. It is very strange to have both people and horses like that ... "

"I don't think I've ever seen an albino horse," I said.

“Oh, I’ll show you some pictures. The new people there, the Davisons, were going to send the last of them off for petmeat but we persuaded them to let us have the two best ones. We had to do a lot of work on them but they’re not too bad to ride.”

“You mean—those horses at the front?” They had looked grey to me, not white with pink noses.

She smiled and said, “No, they’re out the back. We brought the two greys with us.”

I was glad it was only pictures. I didn’t want to charge about through long prickly grass hunting some strange horses. She took out some colour photographs and passed them across. I can’t say I thought they looked particularly attractive, that pink skin reminded me of guinea pigs or rabbits or ferrets; all of which are quite okay in their own way, but not blown up into horse-size.

“The interesting thing about them,” Paula said as she put the photos back and sat down again, “is that the horses are very rare and unusual in that they were completely inbred, much like the Simpsons I guess, because they had never bought in any other horses. And so there is interest in testing their DNA to see if it can be found out where they originated. Because people didn’t usually export albinos to hot countries. There would be no point in paying all that money to bring them from England or South Africa or Chile or the USA if they weren’t going to handle the climate very well. So it will be interesting to see if they come up with an origin just from that. We should get the results in a few weeks.”

“Let us know. Pity we can’t test the Simpsons to find out where monsters like old Sandy originated. Then we can say, no more of his bloodline, thanks.”

Phil laughed at his own wit.

“Maybe. But I think it just suddenly pops up in a family. But she must’ve been albino as well or some of the kids would’ve turned out ...”

I s’pose she was trying to decide whether to say ‘normal’ or not.

“That is an odd one. But when you come to think about it—probably makes sense. Here’s two people got teased, got called names, so they get hitched.”

“I’ll bet she had her doubts later. Don’t reckon she had much of a life with the old coot. All work. And having babies all the time ... She must’ve been pregnant every year if it’s true she had fourteen.”

“We used to assume Sandy meant he was a Scotsman but I don’t know that he was. I think just him being fair and probably being fed up being called Whitey and things like that. Can’t remember what he sounded like. Pretty much like other old bushmen, I reckon,” Phil said. “Didn’t say much, I don’t reckon, but he could be pretty foul-mouthed. And not just that, he was a strange bloke all round. And there was something about him ... always watching you. I think it was that that gave me the creeps. Those pale eyes sort of following you all the time.”

“Yes, I heard a story about how he ran one of the kids into a hollow log,” Paula said. “He was going to belt the kid. But he got up into the middle of the log.

So the old man called for his wife to come at the other end and he got this long branch with a sharp end and started stabbing it along the log, trying to get the kid to move. But the boy went along a bit further and his dad couldn't reach him. So the old man says he'll get the axe and split the log open. And then he thinks about it a bit and decides that's too much like hard work so he goes back to the house and gets his rifle. And he comes back down and he gets right down on the ground and shoots up the log and the bullet or birdshot or whatever it was misses the boy and catches his wife's ear. They reckon she lost the ear because he said he'd soon stop the bleeding and he pulled one of those old irons off the stove and slapped it up against her ear."

Paula apologised to us for telling that awful old story. "And it mightn't be true."

"Oh, it was. Yeah, I remember seeing her like that. That big mess on the side of her head. Poor bloody woman. I don't know if she had any family, I never heard of any. And it would be hard for anyone local to help her. Old Sandy'd see anyone who tried to interfere off with his shotgun."

"You hear bad things still," Russ said. "But rarely that bad." I hoped he wasn't going to tell her the story of the fire. Though she had probably heard versions ...

"I know," I said. "People with no checks and balances aren't necessarily noble savages. Sometimes they're just plain old sod-awful bastards."

Paula nodded. "I was so glad when the last ones went. They must've been really old and they certainly didn't bother us. It was just something about them. It probably sounds silly but if I ever saw them in town there I would avoid them. The evil eye or something. And I don't suppose the parents had done much to bring them up as good citizens."

Eventually we went on our way and in another fifteen minutes we were parked in front of the old house where the Simpsons had lived. It too wasn't the original house. But it was at least fifty years old. Just a weatherboard place with sheds around it. It had been spruced up, repainted a few years ago, but it was almost as though the spirit of the Simpsons refused to let the place go. There was something brooding and ramshackle about it even in the mild day.

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There was no one around so we went over to the house to knock and then over to walk around the sheds.

"The old shed was about here," Phil said as he stood in a space of open ground. There was an old truck and a rather shabby caravan parked there now. Beyond them was a big woodpile.

"And about where would the fire engine have been parked?"

"Not too close. You can't get horses to go near fires, not unless they're specially trained."

Phil mooched to and fro in his bandy-legged way, putting up his hands as though to measure distances.

“Maybe about here,” he said in a while. “And I’d say the old house was a bit closer up this way. So maybe dad and Bernie pulled up here, ran the hoses out there. So the camera would’ve been round the other side of the cart. They wouldn’t of noticed if anyone got it out and took a picture or two.”

Maybe the whole lot of them came by and took a picture or two.

“So how about the kids. How old would the oldest have been?”

“Fifteen maybe, sixteen. Hard to tell. They were all pretty skinny and scrawny. I don’t reckon there was enough food to go round ... and I don’t reckon the old man ever went hungry. Just the rest of the family. I’m only guessing though. I reckon, fast as she pushed out one bub, he was at her again, the old goat. I don’t know if they lost any kids. Could’ve. Things like diphteria and whooping cough were around then and I don’t reckon they ever went near a doctor.”

I’m not sure I would want to buy a farm owned by the Simpsons; not without fumigating it first. Or that business with the incense sticks and prayers. An exorcism. Something to make you feel good about the place. A bit of champagne in a marquee in the garden might banish memories. Or a brand new bungalow out by the road.

“So ... that’s about it, Bob. And I reckon to get those pictures of the shed, you’d need to be standing about here.”

Phil looked around as though to see the farm from every angle. I wondered what the owners would think if they could see our peculiar gyrations outside their house. They might be watching from somewhere wondering if it was safe to approach ...

“What d’you say now, Bob. Who do you think could’ve taken those extra pics?” Russ sounded cheerful. I don’t know where he gets his optimism from ... about me, I mean. I didn’t have a clue.

“If it wasn’t the old bloke, then it’s the wife or one of the children. Or did they have anyone staying there with them at that time. Relatives. Friends.”

“Don’t know what relatives they had. But I don’t reckon their friends were thick on the ground.”

“So your dad and Bernie were flat as a strap with the fire. The dad and probably four kids, maybe more, were over at the shed. That leaves say eight to ten kids around. I s’pose some of them were too small to be taking cameras out of boxes. But at least six kids. Hard to choose one but hand me a pin and I’ll give it a go.”

The two of them laughed. “Well, it wasn’t the horses,” Phil said cheerily.

“Which leaves the missus,” Russ said.

“Who has been dead a long time. But if it was one of the kids ... I wonder if any of them ever did say anything to anyone? A teacher later on? Someone in town?”

“And did your dad ever show the pictures around?”

Phil ruminated on this and finally said he didn’t think so. Of course he’d only been a little nipper then and not privy to anything the grown-ups might have said or done. “If the pictures had been clearer,” he said at last, “and if he’d known who took them but I’d only be guessing. He used to talk about it sometimes but I don’t remember him saying anything like ‘I went to the cops’ and there weren’t any cops here to go to ...”

‘Your guess ... ‘ Yes, as good as ...

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It wasn’t as if either Phil or Russ genuinely believed I could solve this curious question. But I had the feeling this was the one mystery Phil had resigned himself to never solving, not in this life anyway. I didn’t know if he had any hopes beyond this world and I wasn’t going to ask.

I suddenly wished I could help him. That there was some way to bring the past back to life.

“Phil,” I said, “where’s the old camera your dad used. Did you keep it?”

“It’s on the box right beside you.”

“Oh? I thought that was more food.”

“No. I thought I’d get Russ to take a photo of me holding it. Sort of bring it back to the scene of its great mystery. I wish the bloody thing could talk.”

Yes. Phil had always wanted to solve that little puzzle. It was only a ridiculously long shot but a vague idea was forming in my mind. So I left them to mess around taking photographs of Phil with the old camera while I went over to the car, got out my mobile, and tried to ring my friend in Sydney, Petra Day. I didn’t really expect to be able to get on to her at this time of day though I hoped it might coincide with lunch.

But, next moment, I heard her enthusiastic voice in my ear. “Must be Bob! No one else ever wants me at such awkward times.”

“How did you guess?”

“Your number showed up as my caller, of course. I’m not psychic. Bob, how are you and what can I do for you?”

“You know me too well. But this is just a quick call. I’m way out in the bush and I do need a psychic. Something in that area. Do you have any idea where I can find one? I could come to Sydney but it would be wonderful if I could find one up here.”

“Here being?”

“Tiny place called Tumbalumba. Armidale, Warwick, Goodiwindi. That area.”

“I didn’t think you believed in psychics, Bob. Too wishy-washy and New Age for hard-headed old coppers.”

“You’re probably right. But I cannot think of another way to go back seventy years and perhaps get a hint.”

“What you want is a psychometrist—and good ones are few and far between. Let me do some calling and I’ll ring you back. I’m just having lunch. Can’t you hear the racket? But I know someone who just might be able to suggest someone. You’re not in a desperate hurry?”

“Gosh no! Well, except that Phil Taylor is ninety-four. But he looks like someone good for another ten years.”

“I’ll see what I can do. And don’t forget to come and stay sometime.”

I was deeply relieved that she hadn’t asked me about Deborah Marrow and my son Aidan. (I was deeply relieved she hadn’t allowed it to spoil our friendship even if she did think I was a bit irresponsible when it came to woman.) Because I had let them move westwards out of my life without a murmur. Not precisely out of my life but not making a major impact in it. I sometimes wondered what Petra thought about me allowing Deborah to depart without so much as a promise to ‘see you soon’, if anything, but I didn’t like to ask. She believes passionately in sisterhood and I don’t think she quite believes that Deborah might have done the seducing and leaving …

Phil and Russ managed to persuade me to line up and hold the old camera. I noticed there were some holes in it. It probably should be in a camera museum under careful lighting and a controlled temperature—not being carted round the countryside in an old box. Then we headed back to Tumbalumba and had lunch in the little park by the creek. The town was very quiet. Only about four cars passed through while we ate. And the only person on the street was an old man pushing a walking frame with a small Border Collie tied to it. But they seemed to be enjoying their slow progress in the sunny afternoon.

“Hasn’t even got a pub,” Russ said vaguely. “Amazing really. Not a pub with no beer but a town with no pub.”

“Did have,” Phil said, “but it got burnt down.”

“A lot of things seemed to get burned down around here.” I said. A bit drily maybe.

“Probably the Simpsons.” Russ sounded flippant.

“Probably was. Folk get a liking for starting fires … can’t stop ’em noways.”

Phil suddenly sounded more sober.

“You’re right. If people start a fire deliberately and it is taken as an accident—chances are they get more confident. I imagine the pub was insured. But I don’t s’pose the Simpsons could afford insurance.”

“Probably didn’t know what it was. These were seriously under … whatever. Don’t think any of ’em could read or write.” Phil tapped his forehead. “Not unless an agent called by and explained it in words of one syllable … and even then I doubt they could ever afford it. Not until towards the end, long after old Sandy … and they probably would’ve seen him off with a flea in his ear.”

“Or some buckshot in his backside,” Russ put in.

Phil seemed to have lost his earlier incisive enthusiasm. I wondered if he was just tired or whether he regretted coming back, stirring up old memories. There's sense in 'letting sleeping dogs lie'.

My phone rang. I got up and walked over towards the car. "Petra?"

"Got a name for you, boyo, so it better be a good story. Didn't go over very well with a colleague when I said I was just off to find a psychic. He said he thought I had brains. Anyway, here it is."

She read out a name and address in Warwick. "She doesn't do any public stuff but she is usually willing to look quietly at people's problems. She just might be able to help. If not ask her to recommend someone up that way."

I wondered, later, how she had found the woman. Was there a register of psychics. Did they advertise in some esoteric journal or web-site. I had no idea and the main thing was to have a name and a phone number. She might be a charlatan but it was worth a try.

"Love you, Petra. We can but try."

I put my notebook with the address back into my pocket.

"Don't forget to let me know the juicy details."

Then I went back to the others and said I'd like to take the camera and the photos to a woman in Warwick. She just might be able to get a feel for the person who took them, held them, whatever.

"Mumbo-jumbo? Voodoo? That sort of stuff?" Phil looked sceptical. I don't know where he'd got his ideas on psychic stuff from. "Wants a couple of my toenails while she's at it?"

"I've no idea, Phil. And they're your pictures, your camera. If you don't want to show them to anyone I'm not going to try and change your mind. I just thought we're down to long shots."

"Well, why not," Russ said cheerfully. "Can't hurt. I've never seen such people strut their stuff. Only stage magic. Woman sown in half, rabbit turned into a cabbage, that sort of thing."

In the end we got the car filled at the bowser next to an all-purpose shop and bought a few things to nibble on the way home. It was about four when we came up Phil's lane. The old house looked very peaceful and for a minute I was tempted to say, "Phil, don't bother any more about all this. It's too long ago. It really *doesn't* matter any more."

The odd thing about it all was that Phil Taylor didn't strike me as the sort of person to stew over ancient stories, photographs, possibilities, old sorrows. So was it because he lived alone? Or because the older you get the more your thoughts return to your childhood? I couldn't make a stab.

I managed to ring the woman in Warwick in the evening. Her name was Sheila Ramsey. I explained roughly what we had in mind. A bit tricky trying to ask for help without telling her what answer would suit us. Though, come to think of it, with everyone dead except Phil I couldn't really decide on an answer to suit us. I

half expected her to shy off. But she said, "Well, come and see me tomorrow. I can't offer any guarantees, you know. But if you're willing to give it a try ... "

I said there would be three of us and that, yes, we were willing to give it a try.

No one spoke about it over a dinner of more chops and some rather burnt potato chips and some French fried toast. Phil brought out some chocolate-chip ice cream and filled some bowls. But for two talkative men they were both rather unnaturally silent.

It didn't occur to me till later that Phil really did believe that we were going for a session involving some peculiar cult and that 'they' would probably come out later and browbeat him into joining ...

— ix —

Sheila Ramsay was a plump woman with grey hair and a blue cardigan and grey slacks. Mid-fifties maybe. We found her house at about ten next morning. I hadn't been in Warwick since I was at that riding school and even then, apart from knowing where the hospital and a pub and the cop shop were, I couldn't say I *knew* Warwick.

And Phil and Russ carried the camera and pictures tenderly up to her door. I hadn't asked her what she normally charged, whether it was pay-by-results or what. I wasn't up in these things. And up till quite recently I'd been a confirmed sceptic too. Then I had gone to Tasmania and been presented with a puzzle I couldn't explain: the sound of a horse galloping where no horse obviously was and with no obvious sign of any trickery either.

She took us into a small cosy sitting room and invited us to sit down in the armchairs scattered round the room. She took the camera carefully out of its box and the old photographs carefully out of their packet. She didn't ask us any questions about either the camera or the photos. Then she sat for a little while looking through the pictures.

I could feel their critical thoughts: 'If she's going to *look* at them first—it'll just be a guessing game.'

At last she selected out one old photograph and said, "You might like to close your eyes. Just try to let your minds go blank so I don't go picking up on your thoughts and ideas."

In my case this picking up would be rather hard. I genuinely had no idea who had taken those photographs. But presumably Phil and Russ had meditated on this question over the years and might have more definite ideas than they'd let on to me.

In some ways it was an anti-climax. I'm not sure what I expected. I s'pose those galloping hooves had made me believe in dramatic background stories. She simply sat there for a long time just rubbing her fingers very gently over the surface. I wasn't even sure if this was part of it or just a nervous mannerism she had acquired. Or it impressed some clients.

But at last she said very quietly, "She doesn't know what she's doing. But she has seen a camera used. She does have some faith in it. She is crying. There is a kind of terrible despair in these pictures."

She was silent then for a long time. I wondered if she was making this all up so that we would feel we hadn't wasted a morning.

"She couldn't save her children. All the things that happened to them. But she hoped ... she hoped ..." Tears began to run silently down Mrs Ramsey's cheeks.

I think I understood then. A glimmer. "Who is *she*?"

"Mrs Simpson. But you always knew that."

But how did *she* know that? There was nothing written on the photographs. That grey cardboard didn't invite little notes scrawled on the back. And I hadn't noticed anything written on the packet. Nor had we mentioned the Simpsons. So not unless she'd overheard Russ and Phil saying something but I was pretty sure they hadn't said anything as we came inside.

I sat there filled with a kind of vague guilt. I should've told Phil there was no going back, no way to know, the past is the past ... Because this image of Mrs Simpson making a desperate plea for those doomed children, to stop her husband, was profoundly unsettling. Maybe she had heard somewhere that 'the camera never lies', that a photograph of the cruelty and abuse would make people do something, maybe she did it on an impulse knowing her husband had set the fires and he wouldn't burn up all that hay, not unless there was some kind of payoff ... who knows ...

"I knew it was her," Russ said suddenly. "Not the kids. Or I think I did."

Mrs Ramsey turned to him. "Yes, I think you did."

But the idea then seemed to embarrass Russ. What it implied ...

"What do we do now?" old Phil cleared his throat.

"It is much too late to do anything for their bodies. But we can pray that their souls are now able to put all that behind them, to find peace."

I think we all looked startled. Three old codgers who hardly knew what going to church meant. She smiled at us. "Don't look so worried. If you would prefer I'll just say a little prayer and you can feel you are sharing it."

We nodded. She said a few words though I didn't really take them in and we all said 'Amen' and she gave us a slight smile, rather a nice smile.

Then she said more firmly, "The one thing you mustn't do is go home and feel guilty or stew over things, no asking yourselves why didn't someone do something way back then. There are times to get up and fight against all sorts of injustices. But there are also times to simply accept. This is one of them."

As we got up I said, "How much do we owe you?"

"Oh, nothing. I work at my sister's toy and souvenir shop. But this always comes first, an appeal for help."

It is an odd thing but you run into people worth remembering for their kindness and generosity in the most unexpected places and in the most unexpected

ways. If anyone had told me two days ago that I would be visiting a psychic in Warwick I would've said a brisk 'Rubbish, I don't go to psychics.'

I think we were all pretty silent on the drive back to Phil's place. And pretty quiet through a very late lunch.

— X —

Then Phil said suddenly, "Well, there's a heck of a lot of work waiting to be done around the place if I really am going to have this clearing sale you're so keen on, young Russ."

And suddenly it was as though the Simpsons had never existed. This was just the old chirpy Phil, getting on with life.

He asked me if I'd be willing to give them a hand sorting things out, cleaning things up a bit. I said I would. It was a temptation to nip off before the hard yakka kicked in. But I enjoyed being here. And I was curious to see what other strange things Phil might have tucked away. Somewhere at the back of my mind was a fainter thought. Was Phil okay? I didn't think he was worrying or stewing away. I didn't really think he was that kind of person. But I didn't know him well enough to be absolutely sure.

I spent another week there. A bloke came out from the agency to see about auctioning off some of Phil's antiques and seemed to be knocked for six. He kept saying, "You're sure you want to sell?" Phil said he wanted to find a permanent habitation for a few 'historic' things but most might as well go to a 'good home'.

The old bloke told us he was most likely going to go into a retirement home in Goodiwindi. "The best of a bad lot," he said gloomily. So he was thinking of offering the fire engine and a few of his favourite things to somewhere there; that way he could still go round and enjoy them. I thought this was very sensible.

He gave piles of stuff to Russ. I couldn't guess where he was going to put it all, not in a two-bedroom Gold Coast unit, that's for sure. But he said, "Bob, I'll worry about that later. Gotta keep the old bugger happy for now."

So far as I could see Phil was happy enough, in his element, bossing us round, making decisions, talking about what he wanted to take, telling us yarns and tall stories as we pulled out all sorts of incredible and mostly useless junk from cupboards and boxes and sheds. He got us climbing up into the attic, down under the house ... I could feel it in my knees at night.

Among this junk were boxes of old letters, broken kitchen things, old meat labels, bags and bags of bits of string. Things that 'might come in handy' in the way people particularly in the country used to save things. And then Russ pulled out yet another old mice-nibbled shoe box. And in it was hundreds and hundreds of those tiny white horses that came with a certain brand of Scotch whisky.

Russ and I stared at them. "Didn't know you liked a dram, Phil? Been keeping it under wraps?"

He came over and looked down. Then he said to me, "I don't. Never did. That was my brother Bernie. Got to knock it back pretty hard in his last years. He lived

with me till he died. After my son had joined the Army ... back then, you know, when he was fit and well."

"Yeah, I remember," Russ said vaguely.

"Poor old Bernie," Phil said, also vaguely.

Russ went out with another box of rubbish for the bonfire he'd made in the backyard.

"Why poor," I said to Phil. "Did it get him down?"

Looking in this box and making a rough estimate it came to a heck of a lot of bottles of Scotch for Bernie.

"It got to him when he had time to sit around, Bob. I said to myself then, I'm never going to sit around. Wild horses won't get me ... You don't know what'll come back to bother you. Bernie was only a lad when he went to that fire. And he, we all made silly jokes about the Simpsons ... and dad used to call them awful names 'the scrapings of the barrel', that sort of thing, but later, after dad died, and Bernie had time to ponder on things ... well, it got to him as I said. He always felt there was something he should of seen, should of done, something there. It got him down. Made him feel ... bad about himself."

He put his hands into the box and hundreds of little white horses went cascading through them. "I s'pose I just wanted to know ... for Bernie's sake. Poor old sod. But I left it a bit late, didn't I? Still ... there it is ... "

I thought of the fire horses, the Simpsons' albinos, the ones that woman was going to have tested. These tiny plastic ones.

"What're you going to do with them, Phil?"

"Hell if I know. They're about all I've got left to remember Bernie by. Some old photos of the lot of us. But ... " He went on putting his hands into the box and letting them run through like sand at the beach. There was something detached in his expression. I had seen photos of Bernie but I think Phil was seeing the real man sitting in his kitchen.

Then he said, "Hell if I know," again. There was a minute of silence then he said more briskly, "Some little kiddies might like them."

- end -

RING-IN

- i -

Cecily Holmes was not quite as I remembered her. I had rung, being in the vicinity and she being in the phone book, and she had said, "Oh, yes, do come round. It would be nice to see you again, Bob."

As I had accused her husband of serial murder this seemed a very forgiving response. And to be honest I didn't have a strong memory of her; she wasn't memorable in the way her daughter was.

She now lived just outside of Toowoomba on the road to Pittsworth. A small weatherboard house with a row of lemon and cumquat trees along one side, some hydrangea bushes in the front yard and a small paddock behind the house with two small rather shaggy-looking ponies in it. Not very exciting, but it all looked neat and spruce and comfortable. I had half-expected Cissy Holmes to have moved into a little brick unit with a tub of petunias but she obviously wasn't yet willing to let go of her image of herself as a countrywoman. And perhaps she had been fonder of horses than I'd ever taken into account.

As I pulled into her drive the wire-netting door at the back clanged and she came round past the tankstand and said, "Bob! How nice to see you."

I told her she was looking well. Then I didn't really know what to do. Give her a peck. Shake hands. Merely stand there smiling. I did nothing. She had burned herself on my brain as a rather nondescript and colourless person; well, not 'burned' precisely. But now I thought that was an unfair assessment. True, she still had nondescript hair and a rather self-effacing manner but she was wearing lipstick and a red top and grey slacks. The new Cissy was really quite striking. By comparison anyway ...

She took me into the small sunroom at the back and put out coffee and caramel slice and crackers with tomato on them. She sat down gracefully and poured. "Sheree tells me you still keep busy with 'cases'. I hope they aren't all as dramatic as ours."

"Sometimes. Not all the time or I would be a nervous wreck. How is Sheree these days? Is she still with Leif?" I had mixed feelings about Leif.

"Oh yes. They are planning to get married. She would've liked to have gone on to teaching but they are very strict these days, you know how it is. Police checks and everything. So she has got a job with the University Press, you know—proof-reading and general secretarial work, that sort of thing. She quite likes it and she hopes to become an editor some day."

Maybe I could dust off my old ambition to write a book about early Australian crime fiction and send it off to Sheree for some pointers? I had always planned to call it 'Three Men in a Cab' but a title and some pages of notes were as

far as I had ever got. Too many other things seemed to get in the way. I suppose every failed writer says that.

“And you,” I said more carefully, “how is life with you these days?”

“That is a major question, Bob. Because, really, it isn’t a process, a neat progression, not the way they say you should work through things. Some days I feel all that is past and done with. Other days I still feel bowed down with guilt. I feel sure everyone who knew me must be looking at me and thinking ‘she must’ve known, she must’ve guessed—and she did nothing’ and I feel I can’t look anyone in the face, not even myself. Because I should’ve known, shouldn’t I, Bob? I knew our life together was not much good but I just felt it was my fault, Risdon had got tired of me. He didn’t know how to get out of it all. We never seemed to get good enough seasons to sell out. And other days I feel angry at the world, at you even, at Rhonda and Peter Atkins, at Risdon’s mother … I feel as if I want to stand out in the back yard and let out some sort of long howl. I’m a mess inside really. But life goes on. I just hope things will work out nicely for Sheree.”

“You make it sound as though you’re in your nineties when you’re younger than me. I’m sure there are still good things waiting round to happen—”

But then she wouldn’t be the first mother to think that the only thing left to her was to live life vicariously through her daughter, vaguely hoping for grandchildren …

I haven’t had a lot of practice in this kind of bolstering Pollyanna stuff and it came out sounding pretty unnatural. And yet the basic premise was true.

“If you mean another man in my life, Bob, no thank you. Nothing personal. But I don’t think I could ever feel that kind of trust again. To share a house, a bedroom, a life … and always thinking ‘have I misunderstood this person too?’ … no.”

“It doesn’t have to be a man. Travel. Train for a new career. A new hobby. I’m sure you’ve got plenty of ideas.”

“I do quite a lot of volunteer work. The CWA. I’ve taken up going to church again. I help with Riding for the Disabled. I help out in an op-shop. I make jam. I’ve started a vegetable garden. I’m not a total basket case, Bob. But somehow, I don’t know how to describe it, but there’s something dead at the heart of my life. I suppose I was very naïve but I really did believe that people were basically good … and certainly the people around me. Nasty things might happen in big cities but they didn’t happen in our little quiet community.”

“Then maybe you should move further away. You’re still too physically close to it all.” Though just how far was far enough I couldn’t decide.

“I did think of that. But I don’t think I had enough confidence. Here, I can still see people I know, like Jean and Margaret London. Sheree comes home some weekends. I’m not sure how I would cope in a place where I was a complete stranger.”

She urged more coffee on me and asked me about some of the things I had been doing. After about half-an-hour I said, "And the ponies behind your house—are they yours or you're just looking after them for someone?" I couldn't picture Sheree riding them; her legs would scrape along the ground.

"No, they belong to Angie Fellows, my next-door-neighbour. She breaks in and trains ponies to sell as reliable mounts for children. She is very good. I got a place with a paddock because I thought Sheree might like to keep on a horse to ride at weekends but she decided not to. So the grass was just going to waste. So I said I'd be delighted to have them there and I give her a bit of help when she's very busy."

"What happened to Sheree's two horses?"

I couldn't dredge up the names of Sheree's horses though I had a vague idea that one had something to do with *Star Trek*. Not Dr Spock but someone else.

It seemed Nimmo had been sold on to a young man in NSW, Gudrun she had kept for a while, then loaned to someone; a loan that ended up as a gift. The new owner had done quite well with the mare. I hoped that Sheree felt that books and writers made up for the loss of her horses. But she was still in her twenties. She could go back to horses someday if the passion was still there.

— ii —

Cissy took me out to see her bit of garden and the two ponies, which came over in the hope of some sort of treat. One black, one grey.

"An odd thing happened a while ago," Cissy said as she patted their noses. "With Angie, I mean." I didn't leap in with an enthusiastic "tell me more!" I just mumbled something like "oh yes" and waited. "Yes, you might like to come over and see her ponies and she can tell you all about it."

I suppose I should have stepped in then and there and said, "Cissy, I really don't want to know any more." But I let her lead me across the small paddock and in a side gate to where there were some yards and more small paddocks. Somewhere chooks cackled and a little terrier came racing out of some secret hideyhole and began jumping up and barking. A square rather dull-looking brick house was off to one side. But everything looked organised and prosperous.

The terrier was followed by a middle-aged woman wearing jeans and a yellow top. She was very brown, with short bleached hair, and a no-nonsense air. I wasn't sure whether I would want to be one of her ponies or not.

Hullos all round. Then she invited us in for coffee and cake. I really didn't want more food just now. But I went along with Cissy. I felt vaguely sorry for the woman though I don't know that she really wanted or needed my pity. And then she said cheerfully, "I was just telling Bob that an odd thing happened a while back, when you had your ponies at that fête." She turned to me. "Angie takes her ponies along to fêtes and fairs so kids can have rides."

Angie nodded briskly. "It helps out. Lets me see how they're getting along in their training. Gets me known. Makes a bit of money for charity. It's really quite a pleasant day out. But this time it definitely wasn't."

"It was the strangest thing," Cissy put in. I got the impression that Angie didn't really like Cissy butting in. Angie saw herself as being quite capable of telling her story from Go to Whoa. "The way that man just appeared ... "

"What man?" I wanted to hustle the story along so I could get on the road home again.

"I had taken two ponies," Angie said, "so I took the two-horse float and it was parked at the side of the paddock where the kids were going around. Cissy was leading one pony for me. There was a lull. This is getting on towards the end of things and most people were trying to get a few last minute bargains round the stalls. I took Trooper back to the float—and there was a man lying inside it."

"A quiet place to kip?"

"Maybe." She didn't seem to relish the memory. "But he was absolutely out to it, stinking of alcohol, filthy dirty, old ragged clothes. I didn't want to even touch him."

"So what did you do?"

"When Cissy came back with Bimbo I said, either we can just turf him out and leave him by the fence to sleep it off ... but I didn't really like to do that because there were children still wandering around ... or we can see if he has a name or an address and dump him off somewhere. So we hunted for a wallet," she screwed up her leathery face in disgust, "and found one in his shirt pocket. It gave him a name and an address. So I said to Cissy if she would just mind the ponies I'd close the float, drive him down, dump him off and come back for the ponies. Which I did."

"So he lived locally?"

"Yes, it was a boarding-house, in one of those streets up behind Myers, a big old house where they let a few rooms. I let down the tailgate, hoping he might've woken up but he was still out to it. I went to the door and said, I've got one of your boarders, and the woman there was very surprised. I said, if you don't believe me, come and look. I want him out of my float, I've got two ponies to cart home."

"So she came out with Angie—" Cissy put in.

"I said, give me a hand with him so I can get the old bugger out, not that he was very big or heavy ... still. But she had a look at him and said she had never seen him before in her life. Well, did I get mad! I thought this is all I need, some dame who doesn't want to admit that this disgusting old wreck lives in her house." Angie seemed to be enjoying milking the story for all it was worth. "So I said, I don't bloody well care who he is, but he's got your address in his wallet so here he's going to stay. I haven't got all day to waste."

I was not surprised that the woman at the boarding-house was overwhelmed. Ms Fellowes obviously wasn't the sort to suffer fools gladly.

“I got him by both arms and dragged him down the ramp and said, where do you want him. She said she didn’t want him so I dumped him on her garden seat and left him there. But the funny thing was, she had gone all peculiar when she saw the wallet and the name in it. I reckon she did know the bloke and she just wasn’t letting on.”

“But it *was* odd ... ” Cissy ventured in again, “it was a good wallet and it had money in it. But to look at him you’d think he didn’t have a penny in the world.”

“An alcoholic? He’d just started on drinking that week’s pension away?”

I was inclined to think that Angie had helped herself to some of the money to cover ‘expenses’ but I didn’t say so. Cissy seemed to admire the other woman. I suppose if you can’t look up to your husband then a neighbour is next best thing. And I am not sure why I felt that about Ms Fellowes. But then a lot of people would not charge to take a couple of ponies along to a fete for little kids to ride.

They both nodded. Maybe. But Angie said, “Still, it was odd the way she said she’d never seen him before. Why would she do that? If she just said, the stupid bloody old sod—well, I would’ve commiserated, wouldn’t you?”

“Probably.”

Angie pressed more cake on me. I waved it away and said, “So the woman who didn’t want him, what was she and her place like?”

“Well, to tell the truth, I was surprised he would be living there. It was an old place, closed in verandahs, couple of old bottle trees, but it was smart. She obviously kept things nice. There was a bird bath and a little pond out the front and some gnomes, and she’d put down white pebbles. It wasn’t the sort of place you’d want an old sod like that coming in drunk and falling over everything. I told her if this wasn’t her bloke then she’d better ring the police. She said she would. I thought he might be a dementia patient, maybe wandered away.”

“And picked up the wallet somewhere?”

“Yes, something like that. He’d obviously been drinking. Lots of people are careless in pubs.”

“So this was a Saturday afternoon?”

“Yes. All very odd. But at least he was out of our hair, so then we loaded the ponies and went home.”

“And you never heard any more about it?”

“Not really. I ran into the woman a few weeks later and she said she went in to ring and when she came out again he was gone. She thought he must’ve woken up and staggered off. She was very glad he was gone. She said the police drove round a bit. But she didn’t know if they ever found him. But the funny thing about the wallet was that the man who’d owned it had left the week before, then he’d written to her to say he wouldn’t be coming back, so not to keep his room. She said she had advertised that very Saturday and now had another old man living there.” There was something about the way she said this; as though it was meant as the clincher. Had I been looking doubting and she felt she needed to bolster her case?

Or was it for Cissy's sake? A sort of effort to comfort. Everything possible had been done. Don't go worrying about the old sod. It's in the safe hands of the police now. That sort of thing.

Angie shrugged. "So there you are. It was a bit odd. But odd things happen now and then."

"But I was just glad he was gone," Cissy put in. "He really wasn't nice. I wouldn't want him in my house."

Usually people twist my arm to get me to give them 'a hand'. This time, fortunately, no such request was forthcoming. Neither Cissy nor Angie showed the slightest interest in knowing anything more about this old man. All it was to them was 'odd' and obviously still a talking point with them both.

The strange thing was—I found the story disturbing. He could, as they thought, be a light-fingered dementia patient. But had he finally fetched up safely in his lair, whatever and wherever that lair might be? I hoped so. The day might come when I am in the same boat. And I would like to think that some kind person, even if they want to put a handkerchief over their nose, will look out for me.

— iii —

I had thought to get home tonight but as I said goodbye to Cissy and asked her to give my best wishes to Sheree (and she said, "Oh, I'm sure they'll send you a wedding invitation"; something I didn't really want) it was at the back of my mind to just drive round and see if I could check up on the story. It was always possible that the woman had not wanted to admit to someone as unsympathetic as Angie Fellowes that this was her poor old dad, or granddad. Ms Fellowes was obviously very capable, very businesslike, very down-to-earth. But sympathy was probably not her strong point.

I should of course have had the sense to drive straight on by and be halfway home by sundown.

Although I can't claim to know Toowoomba well it's hard to miss the Myers 'bunker'. So I drove vaguely up and down various streets. And quite soon found a place that looked likely. It was called Thallon House and a small sign said 'No Vacancies'. The big old-fashioned place looked well-kept and I thought if you didn't have a nice wife to cook for you this might be an acceptable alternative to a unit and takeaway food.

I drew in and parked. Then I hesitated. What to say? If this question had struck me as a large enough problem I might've simply driven on again. But I am used to thinking on my feet. Pity.

I rang the bell. The proprietor might think I was looking for a room if she mainly took 'men of a certain age'. I hoped she was a gentler soul than some of the tartars I have run across; one I remember in Sydney actually had a thing attached to her tenant's flat to measure decibels. Whenever it went over something, I forget what but quite a modest level, she would bang on the door and make threats or, if

she got no immediate grovelling, she would ring us. Needless to say she wasn't popular. With us. I can't speak for her tenants.

I heard footsteps in the hall, then the big wooden front door with a frosted glass panel opened and I was looking at a man of about seventy. I hadn't prepared a spiel for anyone but the lady of the house.

He looked a bit suspicious. What was I collecting for? I said, "Sorry to bother you but I heard you had an odd thing with a man dumped off in your yard some time ago. I was just wondering if it all got sorted out okay?"

"And what's it to you?" He was wearing his slippers and I had the feeling I had interrupted his afternoon snooze.

"It's nothing to me. You are under absolutely no obligation to tell me anything and I will turn around and go away again."

This response seemed to worry him. "Nah, don't do that. Bev's out but I can tell you a bit about it. Not that any of us have ever worked out what the bloody heck was going on. But you might see something we missed."

It is a curious thing that most people, men and women, enjoy talking about the things which are neither too personal nor too contentious. I had the feeling this bloke was one of this mass. He had spun it dry here. Now, suddenly, up pops a totally new person wanting to hear about it. Bully for him! And the story has been honed by the constant re-telling. It hardly needs any mental sorting-out.

"Might as well come in." He opened the door wider and I stepped inside.

The house was just very faintly musty. Probably needed a new strip of hall carpet. But the big square room he took me into had an unused fireplace and lots of big armchairs strewn around, newspapers, a clock just donging the hour on the mantelpiece, a high ceiling with a big central light fitting, and a large fluffy white cat asleep on a chintzy window seat. Really quite a pleasant spot to while away your golden years ...

"Take a pew." He seemed to debate something, maybe whether to offer me a cold drink, a hot drink, no drink at all, then he settled with a groan into one of the big firm chairs. "Bad back," he said by way of explanation. "So where do you come into it?"

"I don't. I was visiting a friend who introduced me to her next neighbour who told me about dropping some old bloke off here and being told they'd never set eyes on him before. I was curious only. But I wondered if he might've been a patient—"

"One of the sods from Wilsonton? Yeah, we thought of that. But how come he had Jim's wallet? That was the thing that puzzled us. And how come he disappeared so quick when Bev said he was out like a light? Didn't make sense."

"Could he have met Jim in the pub and just picked up his wallet?"

"Don't reckon so. I won't say Jim never went to the pub, but I'd have to say he was a bit of a wowser. Don't take that the wrong way. Pretty decent sort of bloke. Always put himself out for you. But not much of a one for the grog,

reckoned his doc had warned him off. Could be too, he had some sort of chronic thing, diabetes, one of those sorts o' things."

"Picked it up on the street, in a shop, on a bus, maybe even knew Jim from way back?"

This old fellow, who said his name was Les Weindorfer, shrugged and said my guess was as good as anyone else's.

"And when he just disappeared—what do you reckon about that?"

He nodded to himself a bit. "Bev says he was out like a light ... and she used to be a nurse. But what I reckon is—this old bloke's just been carted round in a horse float, been hauled out and dumped on a garden seat ..." I had looked around the front garden here; the most likely seat was just by the front gate, one of those things of white-painted iron lace, but well set into a lump of concrete to stop folk making off with it. There were little round and heart-shaped pieces of lawn scattered through the pebbles. The place would be a nightmare to keep clipped and spruce ... and it didn't fit the old house, it would've been better as the yard of something more Mediterranean.

"I reckon," Les went on, "that he was just coming to himself when Bev went inside to ring the police to see if they had any missing people that might fit. I reckon he just up and staggered off. She says she looked up and down the street and couldn't see him anywhere so either he got a wriggle on or he staggered into someone else's yard and fell down again. I think she was just relieved he was gone. I didn't see him myself but she told me he stank to high heaven."

"And did the police actually come?"

"Yeah, about half-an-hour later. Well, you know what Saturday arve is like, mate, so I reckon they were out at things."

"And they couldn't find him?"

"They drove round a bit. So far as I know they didn't pick him up. He might've gone back where he belonged and no one told us."

"Is it possible someone, his family maybe, was out looking for him?"

"We-ell, s'pose they could've been driving round town. But it's a bit of a coincidence, isn't it? Dame dumps him off. They come by couple of minutes later. Might've happened like that. You do hear of strange coincidences."

I had the same problem with that idea. Of course if the family had friends and relatives fanned out all over town to search ... just possible.

There was another possibility: that Angie Fellowes realised after Bev had gone inside to ring that she did know who the old tosser was and had bundled him back into the float and driven off, maybe not wanting to let on that she had suddenly recognised him. But this didn't fit either. She had apparently driven straight back up to the fête area and, with Cissy's help, loaded her two ponies. The two women had given me the impression that Angie had only been gone a very short time, twenty minutes maybe. Having managed to get 'rid' of him I very much doubted whether either woman wanted him back in their lives.

The other puzzle was Jim's wallet. How had the old fellow got hold of it? And where was it now?

"It's here," Les said cheerfully. "The dame showed it to Bev and she said, that's Jim, he lives here! And so Bev took it."

"But Jim had just left."

"Yeah, that's the funny thing about it. He'd gone about a week before. He'd written to Bev and told her he wouldn't be coming back as his cousin needed some help. He sent her two weeks rent I think. So she advertised his room and Eric moved in."

"What about his things?"

"He'd taken them, all except a few old bits and pieces. I think he told her to dump them. I reckon he always knew it was on the cards he mightn't be coming back. But when the wallet turned up like that, Bev dropped him a line to say it was here and would he like to pick it up or have her post it. But the funny thing about that was—the letter came back to her. Return to Sender. She thought that was very odd. But I think she just put the wallet in a drawer assuming Jim'd turn up one day. But he never did."

"Was there anything valuable in it, do you know?"

"Couple of credit cards. But maybe when he realised he'd lost it somewhere he just cancelled them anyway so it wasn't worth getting it back. Don't know. I'm not much into paper and plastic."

"And cash?"

He said he didn't know.

Anyway that seemed the most likely explanation, that it wasn't worth him wanting it back. In fact everything seemed to have a reasonable explanation. I could go home. So why did I have this vague niggling feeling that something wasn't right? It beat me. And if I'd ever had a nose for sniffing out such things surely retirement had let it fade away ...

— iv —

"This sounds like Bev now," Les said. I think he was reluctant to let me go. Best listener he'd had in years maybe.

Bev turned out to be a brisk little woman in her late fifties, short dark hair curling round her ears, little dark rather beady eyes, a ready smile over little teeth, dimples in her smooth round cheeks; she radiated a kind of warm pleasure in meeting me. Unless she was an appalling cook I thought these blokes were on a pretty good wicket.

Les explained that he had been telling me all about the mysterious old coot dumped on them with Jim's wallet in his pocket.

"It was all very odd," she said immediately. "Just one of those mysterious little things that never get solved, I suppose. But as I had called the police and there was no sign of him there really wasn't anything more I could do."

"I told Bob about Jim's letter getting sent back."

“That was odd too. But I put the wallet away safely. I just hope he wasn’t in an accident or something.”

“And when you went indoors to ring could you still hear or see what was going on outside?”

“Not really, no. Come and I’ll show you. Les, your stuff is still in the car if you’d like to get it.”

I had the curious feeling that she wanted me to herself for a couple of minutes. Les got up with an exaggerated groan and went out.

I went down the hall with this chirpy little woman and there was a sort of dog-leg where it turned into a big old-fashioned kitchen. Just there was a table with a telephone and book on it, also a tin labeled ‘PHONE MONEY’. I hoped she could trust her boarders. But it was true; standing here trying to get on to police on a Saturday afternoon was not the best way to watch the front yard.

“I had the radio on in the kitchen as I was taking advantage of them all being out to get on and do some baking. But I did hear the sound of the woman closing up the tailgate of the float I’m pretty sure. Then she must’ve driven off. It took me about ten minutes, maybe a bit less, to get on to someone willing to come by and check for me. I checked my cake in the oven, then I came back outside just to check that the old fellow was all right, not vomiting or anything. And he wasn’t there. I went out on to the street but I couldn’t see him. I didn’t want to have to go looking for him when I was busy in the kitchen so I hoped the cops would be along soon.”

“But they didn’t find him either?”

“Not as far as I know. I rang that evening and they hadn’t found anyone. He may have turned up but I didn’t really think it was my business any more.”

“Fair enough. And the business with Jim?”

“I don’t know what to think about that either. But I was glad he was gone. All of them seemed to get on with him but I never liked him very much. I always felt he looked down on them, on me too. And his political views were more extreme than the others. When you live in a place like this you really do have to be willing to give and take a bit. It’s not fair to the others if you’re disagreeing all the time. I don’t mean Jim argued a lot but he used to say things like ‘you poor stupid fool’ to young David whenever he said anything a bit, you know, a bit green. He’s a very shy lad and I think he felt very awkward with Jim.”

“And what did you think when your letter came back?”

“Well, I thought that’s funny. Jim must’ve moved on already. But I didn’t see why they couldn’t simply send it on to him. I wondered if he’d told them he’d be dropping back here to see us sometime. But he never did.”

“And the wallet?”

“I’ll show you.” She took me into a little office with some shelves and a big wooden desk, very heavy and old-fashioned. She opened a drawer and took out her spurned letter and a brownish leather wallet. She unclipped it to show me what it

held: a Bankcard, a library card, a couple of tradesmen's cards, and several cards Jim himself had obviously had from his working life which contained a not very clear picture of him, along with a previous address in Roma, and the words 'Roofing Contractor' 'No Job Too Small'. The wallet also contained a list on a scrap of paper: get stamps, calamine, razor blades, pay Sam. There were two five dollar notes, a five cent piece, a paper clip, and what looked to be a shop label off a shirt.

"Did he still drive?"

"He kept his car on. It was a white Mazda."

"And a healthcare card of some kind?"

"I would think so. I know he went to Dr Kuhl because I dropped him off there one time and picked him up later. He had a plantar wart on his right foot so he wasn't supposed to drive after they took it off."

"So this is an expendable wallet really. Take away ten dollars and there's nothing worth keeping in it."

"No, I suppose you're right. Do you think Jim might've tossed the wallet—or given it to that old fellow who was so obviously down on his luck?"

"It's possible." But there was still something niggling away at me. For the moment I couldn't catch whatever was sticking like an unwanted grass seed.

Bev turned and looked at me. "Are you a friend of Les's?"

"No. I only met him this afternoon. I heard the story via the woman who dropped the old bloke off to you—her next door neighbour is a friend of mine." Did my unease have something to do with Cissy? I couldn't see how.

I took out my own wallet. "This is just to reassure you. Don't mention it to Les." She looked at my cards; my own card, and my more recent card that says I am part of Botti and Van Deen Investigative Services. Her eyes widened. "You mean—you're here—officially?"

"No. Nothing of that sort. There was just something about it all which is a bit off ..." Put like that it would hardly reassure her.

Bev the landlady suddenly put an impulsive hand on my arm. "That's exactly what it is! It is somehow ... off."

"Do you remember what the old man looked like?"

"He was bald, just a few long strands of greasy grey hair. He didn't seem to have any teeth though I didn't look very closely. He was wearing one of those plaid shirts and some old grey trousers but he smelled like someone who had soiled himself. And his boots ... he made me think back to those pictures you see of the men who were on the roads way back in the Depression years. He had a mark on his lips like someone who's had a skin cancer taken off. He had very fair skin. He was obviously a drinker. I wondered if he might be mentally ill. It worries me that there are people out on the streets who really aren't coping at all well."

"And when he disappeared—what did you think?"

“Well, I felt he must’ve come to and staggered out. The front gate was open. And yet I could swear he was still completely out to it.”

“Would anyone have been around the street at that time who might’ve seen him leave?”

“No. I didn’t see anyone. And the only house which looks on to our front yard is the one directly opposite. I have an idea they’d gone to the coast that weekend. They sometimes go down to Redcliffe. Someone might’ve come by but I don’t remember seeing or hearing anyone until the police turned up. You don’t think he might’ve staggered down there towards the railway? There’s places that if he fell down no one might see him straight away.”

“That’s possible too. Would you say Jim was an honest person—apart from his views?”

“I … s’pose so, reasonably. He paid his board on time but I always felt it was a wrench for him. Parting with money. And the others … they go out somewhere and they quite often bring back something to share. Les brought back a big bag of navel oranges the other day and David’s mum sometimes sends him back with a cake to share around when he’s had a weekend home. That sort of thing. But Jim, no, never. But I never really thought about it before. I just take people the way they are. It makes life easier. And most of my boarders are older men and pretty set in their ways.”

We heard Les come back up the steps at the end of the verandah. Bev said quickly, “Bob, would you be willing to … I don’t know about these things, but just a little look around, just to feel everything is okay. Reassure us. You are welcome to stay here for a couple of days, meals, that sort of thing if it would be a help.”

The temptation to say we were probably turning a molehill into a mountain and that I had much better be on my way rose strongly. But there was no one waiting for me at the other end—unless I count Russ—so I said, “Why not? Just a day or two.”

— v —

It amazed me that they were so willing to accept this stranger just turning up on their doorstep and interrogating them all. But we all sat down to dinner at about seven; Bev, Les, young Dave, a spotty lad of about seventeen doing three-months-training in Toowoomba, Eric, a man of about my age who worked in a menswear shop, and Sid who would have been touching eighty by the look and sound of it. Sid was a little wiry spry man who said he had been a jockey sixty years ago but he’d had a bad fall and gone into the taxi business instead. He turned to me and said, “went till I was seventy-five then I said, that’s it, I’ve had enough, time to put the old hoofs up.”

Everyone laughed. He was that sort of man. He would milk everything for a laugh. Eric, on the other hand, seemed a bit finicky and fastidious. And Les said he’d been a dairy farmer out near Acland but as he had no family and everyone was being pushed ‘to get big or get out’ he decided to sell the farm and buy a place

in Toowoomba and live quietly off 'investments'. But he stayed a week or two here while he looked round and he decided he would much rather stay on here than live on his own. It often sounds as though the old-fashioned boarding-house has had its day, everyone's gone into flats and units, but places like this still exist, tucked away quietly. And from what I had seen I thought these blokes were in clover. I was tempted to ask what they paid per week.

Every so often the conversation shifted back to the mysterious stranger. I wasn't precisely pushing it back, just giving it an occasional nudge. Though none of the men had seen the old bloke they all had ideas on where he'd gone. And it was a pity Sid hadn't been here because he probably knew a lot of people, at least by sight. I got the names of the two closest pubs to the sports ground where the man had crawled into a horsefloat and gone to sleep. If nothing else I could drop by for a drink and packet of chips.

The thing, of course, was—how long to stay and work on what was probably a mystery with no resolution. Bev did me up a bed in her store-room-cum-sewing-room and I slept in the company of shelves and shelves of jam and soup. Quite comfortable. And she insisted on providing me with a towel, soap, toothpaste etc so I wouldn't need to bother about unpacking. I said this was kind of her; though I might have stepped unwittingly into Sweeney Todd's establishment and in real life Bev had got rid of Jim Brown and the old drunk ... probably because they didn't pay on time or had complained about her rice pudding ...

Next morning Eric and Dave hustled off to work while I breakfasted and then got Bev to give me some directions to Hodgson Vale. She gave me the letter Jim had sent her, the returned letter she had sent, and Jim's wallet. I said maybe she shouldn't trust me, a total stranger, with it.

But she just laughed and said, "Bob, I really am quite a good judge of people. I think, maybe, I made a mistake with Jim but it's a hard thing to pin down, just that vague feeling someone's not being quite straight with you. It isn't like he pinched things or upset the others or made noise or left his things lying around."

I nodded. I knew the feeling.

Then she gave me instructions on, roughly, how to find the place Jim had put on his letter. It looked to me like 'Harrowmore' and Bev said the place had been there as long as she could remember though she didn't know who owned it now. In fact I had no trouble finding it. I headed south out of Toowoomba and it eventually turned up as a sign on a gate on my left. The area seemed to have lots of hobby farms but this one looked more 'settled'. I bumped over a grid and found a substantial old house with Bunya pines around it. But it wasn't clear what kind of farming was carried on here; the place seemed to be home to every animal ever domesticated by Man ... or Woman. I could see goats, pigs, cows, ponies, turkeys, bantams, even guinea pigs ... But the place provided me with Woman in the shape of a large female in a shady hat wearing dirty jeans and carrying a tool box.

I said I was sorry to bother her but if I could just ask her whether someone called Jim Brown had ever lived here. I took out the letter she, or someone, had returned.

“Oh that!” she had a noisy voice with a slightly grating quality; I wondered if she ever whispered sweet nothings to the love of her life. “Heck no, I’ve never heard of anyone of that name and I’ve been here fifteen years.”

“You didn’t buy the place from the Browns?”

“Nup. People called Saville. And I couldn’t think of a Jim Brown round the district though I don’t pretend to know everyone.”

I took out the letter he’d written to Bev. This woman looked at it long and hard. I felt a strong streak of suspicion in her. She still wasn’t sure this wasn’t some kind of con, some way to get her to let her guard down and in ten minutes she would’ve signed up for something she’d never wanted, a set of encyclopaedias maybe.

She shook her head. “Certainly looks like Harrowmore. The only other place I can think of that’s remotely similar is Garryowen, the appaloosa stud ...” She waved a hefty arm in the vague direction of south. Of course it was possible that Jim wrote the letter in a hurry and he’d passed Harrowmore and thought, there’s the old place, still there, or something like that, and it translated into a name on the page without thinking ...

I took out the wallet and told her that this Jim character had left some personal stuff behind and his landlady was trying to track him down and showed her one of the cards that Jim had had made to promote his business. I can’t say I’d want to try recognising Jim in a crowd with only that mug shot to go by—though it surprised me that he’d even bothered. Most older men aren’t keen on having their photos taken—unless they’re standing for parliament. In the picture Jim was wearing an Akubra pushed back enough to see his face, also a shirt and tie. But beyond that it was hard to say. His jaw was slightly wider than the average, I thought, but that was about the only thing which might possibly distinguish him from the *hoi polloi*.

The woman took the card and stared at it for a minute or two. Then she said, “Well, if he’s ever been here or stayed here, or called in, I’m blowed if I remember him.”

“And yet?”

I felt a curious sort of hesitation in her.

She pursed her mouth and shook her head slowly. “Funny, but it does remind me of someone. Probably just someone I saw in a shop or at some function. Can’t pin it down. And I wouldn’t like to be definite from that photo anyway. It’s pretty awful.”

I agreed with her. It was a puzzle in itself. If you’re going to put a mug-shot on your business card why put one that looks like something a two-year-old took after a long day without a nap? It didn’t make sense. Or had the print shop put the

wrong one on or in some way made a muck-up? Which might explain ... but it wasn't the puzzle of the business cards left in the wallet. Most people, including myself, scatter them around like confetti on the principle that one might land in the right spot. However I might choose to interpret 'right spot' ...

In the end there was nothing more to be gained here so I asked her for directions to Garryowen; I didn't really want to go on what was certain to be a wild-goose-chase. But having come this far I thought I'd better run the few kilometres further. Just in case.

I turned off on to a side road and went about a kilometre and came to a big board which said this was an Appaloosa Stud. I didn't know what to expect. I hadn't even been sure what form of livestock appaloosas might prove to be. But now I could see that they were a peculiar type of horse. At least the horse part looked perfectly normal except for their strangely marked hides. Some in the paddocks looked as if someone had had a bad accident with a bucket of whitewash. Interesting. But not precisely *attractive* to my uneducated eye. But now that I thought on it I realised I had seen horses like this in some Western films and TV shows. Maybe that was their attraction. You could pretend to be Wyatt Earp or the folk on 'Bonanza'.

I drove into the open space near some sheds and looked around. There didn't seem to be a lot of money in Appaloosas by the look of the place. No frills. An old station-wagon, a blue Falcon, was parked by the back gate. There were horses and some cows in the paddocks. But no sign of humans. I took out the bottle of ginger beer and the packet of sandwiches Bev had given me and stoked up. The day was warm with a dry breeze blowing.

They might all be out for the day if they had another vehicle or went for long rides ... But I thought I would give them another ten minutes. It wasn't as though I was in a big hurry. I hadn't decided what to do next. I could try the bank with the credit card. But whether they would deign to tell me anything was another matter. I could take a walk around the streets near Thallon House. I could go on a short pub crawl. I didn't feel inspired. And yet—the more I thought about it the more the whole thing puzzled me.

Did Jim not want to be found? And if not—why not? And was there any connection between Jim and the old alcoholic. Maybe Jim knew his old dad or uncle had hit town and would be around shortly to put the hard word on him? He might've thrust his wallet at the old man and said, use what's there, but that's the last you're getting out of me.

While I was sitting eating cheese and tomato with relish I saw two horses and riders appear over the crest of the hill beyond the yards and sheds. I finished up my sandwich, wiped my mouth, shoved the bottle back into the small Esky and got out of the car.

A couple of minutes later they came clattering up to me, their horses blowing, and dismounted with that ease which never fails to impress me. They appeared to

be a young couple, late twenties maybe, both dressed in jeans and plaid shirts. I wondered if they felt they had to look vaguely like cowboys when they rode their horses or whether this was what ever horseperson was wearing this year.

I gave them my spiel and they said, no, they'd never had a Jim Brown come here, as far as they knew; occasionally a group of people would come in to see the horses and they had invited people out from the Riding for the Disabled group a couple of times but not recently. But they, like the woman at Harrowmore, looked carefully at the card before saying they didn't think they'd ever seen him.

“But?”

What was it about the picture that made people think ... something ...

“It's odd but there is something—” The young woman turned to her partner. “Don't you think there's something familiar, Rog?”

“Hard to say.”

But in the end they both agreed that no, they had never seen the man.

“It must be a family likeness that got me there,” the young woman said rather apologetically. “Does he have any family living around here ... or something to do with horses maybe?”

“Not as far as I know.” And yet I felt they did have someone in mind; it just didn't fit the facts of the case. I took out one of my own cards, which definitely *doesn't* sport my plain old mug, and jotted Bev's phone number and address on the back, telling them I was staying there for a few days. They both got rather excited by the fact that they were talking with a real live detective-inspector, albeit one that got hung out to dry, and said they would really do everything they could to narrow down the likeness. I wondered if I should've given one to the woman at Harrowmore but my main feeling there had been her hope that I would finish up and be gone.

These two began to speak with animation of all the various places they might've seen this person. But without any apparent result. I asked them a couple of questions about their horses, without necessarily wanting to know the answers, and they turned out to be longtime buffs of shows like 'Bonanza' and the 'Lone Ranger'. Then I said to them, “So is this some kind of Western bridle you're using?” I could remember my awkwardness trying to shove a hunk of metal into the mouth of the poor long-suffering horse which had given me my first riding-lessons. Their bridles had no bits at all—which seemed to me a recipe for disaster. Possibly what they were lacking in capital they made up for in circus-riding skills.

“Oh, this is a hackamore,” the woman said. “Most Western riders use them. But they don't work the same way as a bridle with a bit.”

She seemed quite willing to give me a long lecture on the difference, possibly to be followed by the offer to leap up and try it out around the yard. I excused myself saying I wouldn't keep them any longer but just to let me know if anything came to them. They both said eagerly they were sure to think of something. I hoped they were right. It might make up for the black holes in my own thinking.

It was well after lunch when I got back to Thallon House but Bev Caldicott had kept a plate of ham, salad, and jacket potatoes for me.

As I was finishing up with a cup of tea and a slice of fruit cake she came in and sat down. "Any luck, Bob?"

"Nothing definite. But both people I showed Jim's card to seemed to think they might've seen him somewhere. Do you know if he ever lived down that way?"

"Not as far as I know. But he'd only been here six months. He talked a bit about living in Roma."

"You felt sure he had actually lived there?"

"Pretty sure. But I don't think he'd always lived there. So he could've lived anywhere before that. And the woman at 'Harrowmore' was definite that he'd never been there?"

I nodded. "I also tried a place called Garryowen, just in case we were misreading something. But no luck there either. And yet both lots of people looked at his business card for a long while ... Bev, I know it's a very bad photo but is it definitely Jim?"

"It's very hard to say. He grew a bit of a moustache while he was here. But he did have rather a broad jaw. It's not quite Jim. But it's the picture that's the problem, I'm sure."

As for me, I was sure of only one thing—I wasn't going all the way to Roma to run the card past people who might've known Jim out there.

Instead I tidied up and made my way downtown to Jim's bank. I'd got Bev to look up the exact dates that Jim had moved in and moved out, the date of the old man's 'arrival', and the date she got the letter from Jim. It had arrived on the Thursday, Jim had left the previous Monday, and the old man turned up on Saturday.

I explained to the middle-aged woman on the enquiries desk that Jim Brown appeared to have gone missing. I assumed he had cancelled this card and had a new one issued. I said I knew she couldn't give out any addresses but Jim's landlady still had some of his personal belongings which she would like to return to him if he could be found. She seemed to be reassured by my identity and looked to see whether this credit card had been cancelled in which case it could be cut up and disposed of. She returned a few minutes later to say that Jim had contacted them about the lost card and had it cancelled. She gave me the date when the old one was cancelled and a new one issued.

It was at least two weeks before Jim Brown left Thallon House. I said, "In that case you would not have any address for him after he left his old address?" I gave out Bev's address. She nodded. "That's the address we have for him. No, that can't be right surely. They would be getting his monthly accounts." She seemed to

be talking to herself. "No, I see he didn't get sent accounts. He had moved all his banking on-line three months ago."

"So he no longer needed a home address. He took his address with him."

"Yes, I'm sorry I can't help more than that. And I can't give you his on-line details."

"Well, if he does contact you, could you ask him to contact Bev Caldicott back at Thallon House. She is very worried about him."

She made a note but I didn't really expect anything to come of it. My impression was that Jim Brown had deliberately covered his tracks. But why? So far as we all knew he was a law-abiding man who had never committed anything worse than a parking offence, if that.

Was it that he was planning something? Or was he trying to distance himself from someone? A vengeful wife who had discovered he was in Toowoomba after abandoning her in Roma?

I spent another half hour driving round the vicinity of Thallon House before returning to tell Bev that the card had been cancelled while Jim was still living with her. If the old man had found the wallet he could not have used the old card. If Jim had given it to him—same result. But would the old man have left any money? The price of a meal? Or had there been more money and Angie Fellowes had helped herself in annoyance at the trouble the old man was putting her too?

But these days fairs usually have at least a First Aid person on the grounds. If it is a big affair there might be an ambulance, a school medical officer, a matron ... Why did Angie Fellowes take it upon herself to deliver the old man to his supposed home? And how had she known? I took everything out of the wallet again.

Of course! One of the cards had this address scribbled on the back.

"Bev, are you sure that's Jim's writing—on the card, on that letter you got sent?"

"Pretty sure." She got up and went out and came back a minute later with her book in which her boarders, as well as herself, entered notes about mail, times out, forwarding details, health details, next of kin, all sorts of useful details in case someone died or got sick here. This looked like a treasure trove. Except ... I soon saw that Jim was the least forthcoming of her boarders. No next of kin listed, no doctor, lawyer, or funeral director.

"Of course Jim was only in his fifties. I don't suppose he wanted to start thinking about sickness. And he was fit and healthy. I don't remember him ever going to a doctor except that one time with his foot."

"Pity."

But I asked her for a magnifying glass and spent several minutes going over the scribbled address, Jim's letter, and the entries in Bev's book of useful knowledge. At the end of it I felt reasonably sure that Jim had written the letter but not the address on the back of his card.

Did he write one in very difficult circumstances, dragging out his card in a pub, finding a pen, avoiding spilt beer, giving it to someone? No. Your writing might be more untidy and hard to read in such circumstances but you would not change the loop on your r's.

Of course he might've handed over a card and then said, "I'm staying at Thallon House for a few months, I'd better give you the address." And the other person copied it down. Fair enough.

"So what do you think, Bob? Where do you think Jim has gone?"

"I haven't got a clue where Jim is, quite possibly still in Toowoomba. But I am beginning to think your Jim was a very odd bod indeed ... and it is possible he was running away from something that threatened to catch up with him."

"I wish I knew more about him. But I never pry into people's lives. And I really don't think he talked a lot to the others when I wasn't there. Not the life of the party sort of person."

"Do you know if he had any hobbies?"

"He was quite a keen reader. He went to the library regularly and bought things. Books and magazines, I mean. He sometimes went out for a walk. He occasionally went to the races or the cricket, he went to the movies now and again. He asked me once about getting a dog so he could take it for walks. I said it would need to be a small dog. But he never did anything about it. He seemed a bit of a loner to me. But maybe it was just men of that age. They don't make friends easily if they move. Well, some don't ... "

"Did he ever have any connection to horses, riding them, keeping them ... anything at all."

"Only when he said he was going to the races. I assume he had a bet. But he never discussed them with Les who's quite keen on following form. And he didn't seem to like Sid much. I won't say he avoided him exactly but he never went out of his way to talk or anything."

"And what about his personal life? Do you know if he was ever married?"

"He never mentioned any woman. He had no photographs in his room, unless he kept them in his drawers."

"I wonder if Jim Brown was his real name?"

Bev looked startled. But she finally accepted that she couldn't say for sure. Jim was like a piece of information that refuses to come up properly on a computer screen. "Where to now?" She gave me her cheerful inquiring glance.

"Bev, over dinner tonight, gently encourage them all to chat about Jim. It's just possible someone saw or heard or remembered or overheard ... I don't know, anything at all, any gossip, doesn't matter how small."

She dropped her voice. "You sound just like a detective in a book, Bob." She seemed to find the idea amusing. I wanted to say something sour but Bev wasn't the person to dump my sarcasm on. She had a naturally upbeat and optimistic outlook on life.

She shared my frustration with the others over a decent dinner of roast and potatoes and peas, followed by sherry trifle. I might not want to go back to my usual fare. Was it wise to share everything? But the chance that someone here was either in league with Jim in *something*, and I couldn't guess at the something, or was the reason he had left was minimal. They all said, in various ways, they were blown. They'd always taken Jim to be a pretty normal sort of sod, not very talkative, but not the stuff of investigation.

That was the real problem. Was Jim becoming someone who should be investigated? It's not a crime to disappear without trace if it's voluntary. It's not even a crime, I didn't think, to use someone else's address unless you're using it to solicit or defraud or impersonate ... and I couldn't guarantee that the woman at 'Harrowmore' had levelled with me. Or indeed the people at that stud ...

So far as we all knew Jim was doing none of those things. I think they all enjoyed chewing it over. In their quiet lives no one burst in with mysteries, not even small ones like this. But I didn't appear to be getting anywhere. We were pretty much going over the same ground. The only thing I wondered about was David. He hardly said a word, tucking into his food with gusto, but letting the older men do most of the talking. I thought it might be worth drawing him aside later. If Bev was right he was the one most likely to have seen Jim at his least friendly and hail-fellow-well-met.

Most of them settled down in front of a big TV screen with the sound well turned up. Bev trundled the trolley out to the kitchen. David turned to go to his room but I gently cut him off and steered him out into the back yard.

"You didn't have much to say in there. Was that because you didn't trust yourself to say nice things about Jim?"

"I never talk much." I thought that was probably the truth. "Have you ever sucked these?" He pulled a couple of orange flowers off the tecoma bush near the double garage. "You have to look out for ants though." He stood there sucking the tiny drops of sweet nectar. I had a go at it. But it was hard to find a flower that didn't have small black ants in it.

Then he turned back to me. "I'm glad he's gone. Jim. He was ... sneaky. He was always watching, always keeping an eye on everything."

"Like what? Any particular thing?"

"Like when everyone did everything. I saw Les and Sid going out one Saturday afternoon and Jim looked at his watch to see what time it was. I thought that was a bit weird. But after that I noticed he quite often did it. Like he was timing us all. And he never went to the races with them. He always went out in his own car. I think people should share cars, not just go like that with one person."

"Maybe he had a secret woman in his life?"

"Maybe. And I think maybe he did go somewhere to visit someone. Like about two weeks before he left my mum came into town to see me and take me out

to see my nan at Southbrook in the afternoon. We were driving out there, along Anzac Avenue, and Jim came past us. I don't think he realised it was me in the car. I was going to say I'd seen him then I didn't. He would just say 'So what?' or something a bit sarcastic."

"What time would it have been?"

"Mmmm, say two o'clock, a bit earlier."

"So he would say he was going to something like the races—"

"Sometimes it would be the cricket."

"And he would go a bit earlier and go to see someone."

"I think so. I can't prove it."

"Do you think he just wouldn't like to have the others teasing him, asking questions, that sort of thing?"

"I just think he didn't want anyone to know anything about his private life. He always closed his door here. I don't know if he locked it. But the others leave theirs open. It wasn't any big deal. I don't mean he got round like a crook or anything."

Most crooks don't get round like crooks. They wouldn't last long if they did.

I thanked young David and went to my room. It was only a very small thing but I remembered driving out Anzac Avenue on my way to visit Cissy ...

— viii —

After pondering on the whole thing for a while I thought I might try a long shot. One of the simplest yet most effective ways I have found to help solve problems now that I don't have the resources, funds, and powers of a police force behind me is that people's connections can yield unexpectedly good results. I have a friend in Brisbane who runs a service for people. I call him 'the walking encyclopaedia'. He just laughs. He makes his bread and butter from people who want his genealogical services to draw up family trees. He also does some work for lawyers trying to trace missing relatives and beneficiaries. I had what I hoped was a simple question. Could he trace James Brown through the electoral rolls?

I used my fairly new mobile to try him at his office. I knew he often worked at night, coming in later than most office people in the morning. If I couldn't catch him there I thought I would try him at home and he might be able to look it up first thing in the morning. It might help. On the other hand there would undoubtedly be dozens of James Browns. But I had his Roma address and his Toowoomba address. One of them might strike lucky.

And when he answered his phone, sounding cheerful and friendly and just the person to find your long-lost Uncle Alfred, I decided to go the whole hog. Could he find out anything about one Angie Fellowes, probably Angela, married or unmarried, I wasn't sure. She hadn't worn a wedding ring but a lot of people who deal with young horses avoid any sort of jewellery I've noticed. It might get expensive but I didn't begrudge the money to him.

“Another case, Bob, or you’ve decided to relax and catch up with some distant rellies?”

“A case. My relatives have a way of keeping in touch. I s’pose they think they’d better in case they ever need me.”

He chuckled at that. Then he said more soberly, “Don’t keep your fingers crossed on Brown—unless he stayed put a while.”

“I know. He appears to have gone missing. But as it appears to be a voluntary disappearance there probably isn’t much to be done about it.”

“And who is Angela? The new love in your life? You shouldn’t be so suspicious of all the women you meet, Bob, I’m sure it puts them off.”

I was tempted to tell him about Deborah and my new grandson but it seemed too complicated, and our friendly interaction was professional rather than ‘best buddies’. “You know what an old cop is like. He always reads a come-on all crooked.”

“Ha, ha. And do you want to know if she is rich and famous?”

It was my turn to say ‘ha, ha’. And then it suddenly struck me what an extraordinary question that was: who is Angela? We ask things like that so often it hardly registers. Who is Bob? Oh, this old geezer I met on the beach the other day, think he moved up here from Sydney. That sort of thing.

Because all the key decisions had been hers. There were simple sensible alternatives. If anything they were more sensible than the decisions she had taken. She had made the assumption that the old man had no right to be there on the grounds. But he might just as easily have belonged to a family or been seeking some kind of help. If he was an elderly relative with dementia then by taking him away and dumping him at Thallon House she might’ve caused a lot of worry and distress to someone else. If he had wandered away from his home and got lost then it was more likely that his home was close to the place where the fête was held, not downtown. It was almost as though Angie had wanted to get him away as quickly as possible before ...

Before what?

Kids might find him disgusting but an old man asleep was in no way threatening. And I would go bail that if any of the kids *had* seen him they would enjoy telling all their friends about seeing this really gross old guy ...

It was Angie who wanted him away from there as quickly and secretly as possible. Why? No really good explanation came to me. And it might be that she was the only person there to find him disgusting and to want to get him well away from the grounds where the fete was being held. Or did she think he would upset her ponies?

“Anything you can get me on Angie Fellowes would be a god-send. Spare no expense, etc, etc. Well, not quite. But you know what I mean. I’ll fix you up in a day or two.”

That was another problem. I was getting bed and board here at Bev's but I was now going out on to a distinctly more expensive limb. Was it justified? I couldn't guess. My mother is fond of saying 'time will tell' but I wasn't sure if it would. In this case.

— ix —

Then I sat a while doing diagrams and time-lines. I had two clear thoughts now. Jim Brown had planned his leaving so that he wouldn't be found easily. I couldn't think why. But I was inclined to think he was no longer in Toowoomba, not unless he was lying very very low. It simply isn't big enough to be sure you wouldn't be spotted. And Angie Fellowes had been over keen to remove some poor old sod who mightn't be a shining example in the hygiene department but didn't appear to offer any threat to anyone. The only thing connecting the two was the wallet.

The folk here in Thallon House had not been wild about Jim Brown. I had not been wild about Angie Fellowes but as Cissy seemed to like her and appreciate her company I had not tried to define what it was about her that bothered me slightly. I had felt a hardness about her. But it still isn't easy for women to run a successful small business or farm. They are expected to be as tough as a man. Tougher even. Instead of just being themselves ...

I think Cissy respected that toughness simply because she felt it was her own weakness and spinelessness which had led to disaster. She could lean a little on Angie and feel safe and supported.

But was it simply Angie as a go-getter, as a tough country person, as someone who had her way to make and wasn't going to give quarter or credit? Maybe. But that wasn't quite my impression. It was something too nebulous to be pinned down. Les had not been happy with the way Jim treated young David. I had felt vaguely that Angie looked down on Cissy. The ponies in Cissy's paddock. I would bet my bottom dollar (which is what I may soon be reduced to) that Angie didn't pay Cissy, that it was presented as Angie helping Cissy out. Oh, you don't want to have all that long dry grass round the house. It's a fire hazard if I ever saw one. My ponies will soon mow it down for you ... Something like that. Still, that was hardly a crime. If anything Cissy might've been grateful.

But you do get a 'nose' for picking up on things that aren't quite right. I was never surprised when my fellow sleuths would point the finger at the beginning of an investigation, long before all the evidence was in, and say virtually 'it's him'. Ninety-five per cent of the time they would be right. Of course if the other five per cent got made public there was always a stink. Cops hassling an innocent passer-by. That sort of thing. Of course it was very hard on that five per cent when corners got cut and the wrong page in the wrong book got chucked at them. But that ninety-five per cent did represent the fruit of long experience. A nose.

Of course when you start looking for evidence to back up your nose there is always the danger of shoving and screwing and generally hammering things to fit

your original feel in the case. You can start seeing suspicious behaviour where there's not much evidence to back it up.

I hauled myself back to the nuts and bolts, such as they were. The old drunk, apparently heavily asleep, had got himself up, gone out the gate, and disappeared down the road. No one had seen him. He had not stopped to vomit. He had not weaved and wandered. Bev had not heard any other vehicle apart from Angie's four-wheel-drive and horsefloat. Angie had walked out the gate, put up the tailgate with a slam and driven off.

She could've come back into the front yard, picked up the old man and hauled him out and dumped him in her car and driven off. The risks were minimal. The road was deserted. The people across the road, if they were home, would probably not have noticed what was going on behind the float. And if Bev had turned around and come back out for any reason Angie could say he was looking worse and she thought maybe she should take him to the emergency ward instead of leaving him here ...

I doodled a car and float on a clean page. How long would the exercise take. A couple of minutes at most. And I had seen a float parked in the shed at the appaloosa stud. As well as the main entrance for the horses it looked to have a small door up the front. No doubt people put harness or hay or something in there. Was it an actual separate compartment or just separated from the horses by a rail? These are the sorts of questions which stump me ...

And she could simply draw in somewhere and dump the old man on her way back to the fairground. But if it was a compartment ... why not simply leave the old man in there? Maybe cover him over with a horse blanket or something. If he was snoring it was just possible someone else, Cissy or a fête-goer might hear, but fêtes are usually noisy places; little merry-go-rounds are tinkling away, people are talking and laughing, someone is telling you, via a poor quality tannoy, to come and see the pet parade or get a last bargain at the cake stall. And Cissy could be directed to pack up the lunch basket and put it in the jeep while Angie loaded the ponies ...

Cissy was a very biddable person. And Angie wasn't the sort of person you would argue with. Something very decided about her. It wouldn't be hard to take the old man away in the float again. But why? Every time I stuck on the question. Why take him all the way down? Why cart him all the way back? Why take him ... but I couldn't guess where he might've ended up.

Unless it was true that somewhere along the way she had recognised him. Recognised him as what?

— x —

I went back to join Bev. I asked her if she had ever thought of contacting the hospitals about either Jim or the old man.

“Oh yes, I did. Nothing. No one who met their descriptions. But I couldn’t take it any further. It was really for my own peace of mind. But I couldn’t list them as missing.”

“No. Of course not. And one other question—although you are probably sick of them.”

She assured me she wasn’t.

“When the lady turned up on your doorstep with the old bloke—how did she show you how she’d found you? I mean did she take out the wallet and hand it to you? Or the card? Or just say she’d found this address on him?”

“Well, she took him out of the float and brought him into the yard even before she came to the door. She was obviously quite strong and he wasn’t very big, sort of a bit shrunk, and maybe a bit malnourished. She said she’d found the wallet in his pocket and she showed me the card and I sort of looked at the old man then asked to see the wallet. And I think I said, ‘Oh, but that’s Jim’s wallet! Where did you find it?’ And she sort of stood there with her hand out as though she expected me to give it back. But I didn’t. I said I wondered how the old man had got hold of it. And she said he might’ve found it or Jim had left it in a pub and the old man had helped himself to it … and then she said, I think the police will need to be called if you don’t recognise him, because he’s in no fit state to get himself home.

“She seemed to expect me to immediately go and ring them. She said she had two ponies to pick up and she didn’t like to leave them. But I wanted to be sure the old fellow was safe lying there on the garden seat. I didn’t want him choking or anything. I sort of bent over him and turned his head side on. This might not be exact. But I think she was sort of undecided about going and leaving him there. She sort of looked at the wallet in my hand. Then she said something about leaving him in good hands and then she said, well, I’ll be off then, thanks for getting help for him, and she walked out the gate and I went inside. And I was just looking for the number for the police when I heard the noise of the tailgate closing. Then you know how they always keep you waiting and put you on to someone else and I really didn’t take much more notice. I’m sure I didn’t hear another vehicle stop but I couldn’t swear to it … and that’s about it.”

“So you felt she wanted to give you the card but not the wallet?”

“I don’t really think she wanted to give me either. I had seen a couple of cards on Jim’s table but I hadn’t looked closely. I never do. I wondered afterwards if she felt she should’ve been paid something for bringing what she thought was one of my boarders all the way home.”

“And when you said it wasn’t Jim was she very surprised?”

“She said, are you sure? Or something like that. And I said, of course I’m sure. He’s lived here for quite a while. I didn’t say anything about Jim leaving. Then she said, oh, what a bloody nuisance, or something like that. She seemed more annoyed than surprised.”

“And all through this the old bloke was out like a light?”

“Absolutely. Never stirred. But it was a funny thing, Bob. To get so completely blotto I expected him to reek of alcohol and he didn’t really. I wondered if he might be on some kind of medication and had some sort of bad reaction. Or maybe even a diabetic. But then when I came out and found him gone ... well, I thought it must’ve been alcohol, you know, that it had gradually been wearing off.”

“Could it have been a bump on his head? Sometimes people come to and stagger away and fall again. Concussion maybe.”

“I didn’t feel a lump or cut or anything when I turned his head side on ... and he didn’t have much hair.”

Without a body, alive or dead, this question was probably destined to remain academic.

“Where to next, Bob?”

I felt like saying “Good question” because I had followed up all the most obvious leads. I could go back and talk with Cissy Holmes but I was very reluctant to do that; it wasn’t only what Cissy herself had been through but also that if I was barking up a completely wrong tree then I might damage a friendship which she had come to depend on. I didn’t owe Cissy anything but I did feel a degree of sympathy for her.

“I could go to the police but it is still very circumstantial. Let me sleep on it and I’ll decide tomorrow if we should try to activate the old bloke as a missing persons case.”

She agreed with that. She wasn’t to know that I do quite a lot of sleeping on problems; both investigative and personal. I am like Elizabeth the First. I always hope the problem will disappear if I sleep long enough.

— xi —

I cannot honestly say that I woke up next morning with a brain full of ideas. Although the bed was comfortable I didn’t really want to spend another night surrounded by Bev Caldicott’s larder. But I realised I had got myself into a right pickle. I couldn’t really see a way to resolve the various questions I had set up. But neither would anyone here feel enthusiastic if I simply upped and went home. I could tell them to keep a look out for Jim Brown. I could go and ask round at those pubs. But if Bev was right the old man might not have been drinking in a pub at all. And I didn’t have a picture of him. Asking around to see if anyone remembered ‘some old geezer’ might not be very productive. I yawned and lay back again. Of all the messes to get myself into ... I regretted not saying ‘well, that is a bit odd,’ to Cissy, and then going on to say it hardly seemed to be anyone’s problem now

And I wasn’t even going to get paid at the end of it.

But I finally levered myself up and went along for a spot of breakfast.

“Looks like you’ve put some cats in with the pigeons, Bob,” Les said to me over breakfast.

I shook my head. I didn't think I'd found any pigeons, even less some cats. "Don't know about that. I think I've made you all more curious without necessarily being able to solve any of your little mysteries."

"Well, it's a funny thing ... but I always think most things resolve themselves one way or another. I remember my dad had an old mate, went off to the war, went missing. Dad was pretty cut up about it. Best friend he'd ever had, he reckoned. Never a peep. Then, about five years later, this poor old sod comes up our lane. He was a wreck and a half. He'd been blown up, lost a fair few bits and pieces, could hardly do anything. But they'd finally let him out of hospital, reckoned they couldn't do anything more for him, and the poor old coot was thinking of topping himself. But he thought he'd just make his way up to see Dad one more time. And he walked in there and Dad said, about time, mate. Perked him up no end. Next thing he found a job with a neighbour and lived there for years. He always reckoned it was the cows that helped him get back on his feet. They just took him as he was, didn't care that he looked like the back end of a bus. Yeah, it's a funny old world. But I'd say most things work out one or another."

"Could be. But did you have any particular cats in mind?"

"Amazing what we come up with—once we put our thinking caps on. David told us about seeing Jim driving back when he'd told us he was going to the races and Sid said, yeah, that's a funny thing because I'd keep an eye out for him but I'd never see him there. And we started to wonder if Jim did have a dame here. Not our business but you know how it is when you start thinking about someone in a different way."

I was hoping for some sort of revelation: oh yeah, I saw Jim down a dark alley and he was talking with this bloke in a big black coat. Furtive, they were, definitely furtive. But Les didn't have anything beyond more speculation. And when it comes to mere speculation I can usually do my own.

So much for hoping someone would drop a neat solution into my lap. I didn't hurry through breakfast, which included bacon and eggs, as I hadn't decided what to do after it.

It was Bev who came in to get me. "Bob, you're wanted on the phone."

As almost nobody knew I was staying here this was hopeful.

"Yes, Bob Creighton here."

It was the young woman with the appaloosas I had spoken with yesterday. I thought back to those two youngsters on their strange-patterned horses and the grassy slope behind them and their eagerness to help. She said they had spent their evening trying to tie down a vague memory. I was tempted to say I hoped they hadn't lost any sleep over it.

"And the strange thing is ... we both felt sure we had seen someone like that. But it wasn't a man, it was a woman. I know you'll think this is quite mad. But it was that last time we had a little group that came out here to visit from the Riding for the Disabled group. There were five or six kids and about three women with

them. They came in a minibus. Mary White was the person we had organised it with and the kids were really happy to come and see our horses and they had a picnic and we led them around the yard on our quietest horses. We were introduced to the other women but I don't remember their names. But one of them reminded us of that picture. It's a while ago but there was just a likeness. I remember she criticised us for using hackamores."

"Would the women who came be called Angie Fellowes and Cissy or Cecily Holmes by any chance?"

"Do you know, Mr Creighton—that rings a bit of a bell. Wait a minute and I'll ask Roger."

I could hear conversation going on. Then she came back. "We wouldn't swear to it—but we think it could well be ... Do you think it is important?"

"Very important. I think it might be a key to the problem. But I can't be more definite yet."

"Could you let us know what happens? We've never been in any sort of mystery before."

I took their phone number. I also said firmly, "But don't hold your breath. Missing people can be notoriously hard to find—if they don't want to be found."

The question though was whether the picture on the cards was Jim who happened to look a bit like Angie—or whether the picture was Angie herself.

Was that why Bev had trouble with the picture? I had assumed it had to do with the moustache. But it might also be that this was a different person, a person without a clear adam's apple ... a person who would just sow that small seed of doubt.

I shared the information with Les and Sid and Bev; the others had gone to work.

"I'm beginning to feel like Alice in Wonderland," Bev said, shaking her head. "But why, Bob? That's the thing that doesn't make any sense."

"Can you remember any kind of news story which featured an old man, a vagrant maybe, any kind of story. Theft, hurt, trespass, any sort of public nuisance. Found dead."

"You mean—recently?"

"Say, this year."

But although they discussed it for a while they couldn't come up with anything definite.

"Not just here. Maybe further afield. Something which might have been seen as an accident."

They still looked blank. Bev topped up everyone's coffee cups. Then she put down the pot and stared at me. "Do you know—there was that old man they thought had fallen off the train and hit his head. I don't remember the date but a couple of months ago I think."

And suddenly the others remembered it too. Just a paragraph in *The Chronicle*. No identity. Police hoping family might come forward if any elderly relative had gone missing.

“Where did it happen?”

“Not here. It must’ve been the train to Warwick because they found him near the line somewhere just south of Cambooya. We didn’t hear any more about it. I suppose the family came forward. I don’t know what they do when they can’t find any family.”

“Oh, the poor old sod would get labelled John Doe. The body would get kept a reasonable length of time in case the relatives were away or in hospital or something at the time. And then finally, somewhere down the track, the body would get buried.”

“It isn’t something I’ve ever thought about,” Bev said slowly. “But what if the old fellow did stagger off down towards the tracks there and manage to climb into a wagon … and then maybe he went to sleep again and woke up and didn’t realise he was on a moving train … Something like that.” They all came up with variations on this theme.

“Yes. It’s possible. I don’t know what railway security is like here but I don’t suppose it’s very fierce.”

“In a way it would be a relief,” Bev said slowly. “I don’t mean that he died. But that it was all just a series of unfortunate happenings. Something that could happen to any poor old homeless person who drinks and maybe doesn’t take care with medication … just an accident.”

“I know. But I’m afraid I don’t think any of it was accidental. There’s something too organised about everything.”

“But he couldn’t have had anything anyone wanted, Bob. No money, maybe not even a home. He looked like someone who probably slept rough. You don’t think of swaggies these days but he might’ve gone tramping from place to place. He didn’t have teeth. He was really dirty.”

“Not surprising if the police just reckoned he had no one,” Sid said.

I said I might go and see the cops later, just see if there might be a link between Thallon House and that poor old sod. I asked them if there was any chance of narrowing the date down at all. They all tried to link it with some other news, something they were doing, something else that happened round that time.

While this long discussion, with frequent digressions, was going on the phone rang. It was my researcher in Brisbane. “You’re in luck, Bob,” he said straight off. “I’ve got a young assistant in at the moment to computerise all my old scrapbooks. She’s indexing all the births, deaths, and marriages I got from newspapers. I’m still missing a few small country papers but I’ve got the main ones for Queensland. And she found an Angela Brown marrying a Reid Fellowes twenty-five years ago in Warwick. Don’t ask me if the marriage lasted. But you are in extra luck. They had their photo in the paper and several of the family and guests were also

mentioned by name. It includes a James Brown. Her father was given as Matthew Brown."

"Spot on! Couldn't be better news. And any addresses for James?"

"There is a James Brown still listed for that address in Roma. Don't ask me if it is your James Brown. They're thick on the ground. I'd need to have your chap's second name to be certain."

"You're worth your weight in gold," I told him.

I was already pretty sure we were looking at brother and sister. Now we had a father's name. Had the old chap come up to Toowoomba and Angie, disgusted at the state he was in, hoped to fob him off on her brother ... and the old bloke had woken up in the garden here with the idea of getting back home to his daughter ... No, there was malice in this equation, I felt sure.

I passed this information on to the others. Then I asked Bev if I could use her typewriter. I wanted to try and put all this into some sort of order. Police, understandably, don't take kindly to people coming in with something that sounds more like some sort of weird avant-garde novel.

"You can, Bob, or there's my new computer."

With her help I managed to get the basic bits set out in chronological order.

And then it struck me. Why would two people go to such lengths to be seen leaving the old man safely here? There had to be the question of alibis.

If they planned to drop him off beside the railway line later on they would not know when he might be found. But there was always the possibility he would be found the same evening. So he had to be dead as soon as possible after Bev had seen him alive.

Was it possible that Angie Fellowes had waited till Bev was inside, picked up the old man again, dumped him in the front of the float, whacked him on the head with something indistinct, thrown a rug over him, and driven off? There would be no problem that way with snoring. Cissy would swear that Angie had only been gone a very short time. Bev would swear he was alive when Angie drove off. And somewhere else Jim Brown, too, was setting himself up a nice alibi for this time. He would probably be with friends or acquaintances right through to the time when Angie might need him to help set the old man in a pre-chosen suitable place along the railway line.

If the pathologist managed to tie the time down to the half-hour after Angie had dropped him off it would be assumed he had either been hit as he weaved and staggered along the street and the panicked driver had got rid of him by slipping him unnoticed into a carriage or wagon where he came loose on a curve and slipped to the ground. Or, equally possible, he had staggered into the line of a passing train and got caught up in it, hanging off a coupling or under a carriage and coming loose on a bend. It wasn't hard to picture that kind of small tragedy. The police themselves might've linked Bev's call and puzzlement over the old man's disappearance to the body found later.

But no one was responsible. If anything, people had gone out of their way to try and help the poor old bloke ...

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It never gets any easier: trying to persuade cynical old men that you aren't some sort of crank who got put out to pasture precisely because you've lost the plot.

But they were willing to admit that they had tentatively linked the man who had gone missing from the front yard at Thallon House with the man who had fallen off the train. They had a good description from Bev Caldicott which matched what he was found wearing.

The man had not been found till the following day so time of death was rubbery. But they were inclined to think he had been hit on the head before falling from the train. The weapon could have been a rock but possibly a piece of metal or even wood. There was dirt in the wound which suggested it had been further damaged in the fall.

“And are you absolutely sure he fell from the train?”

“Can’t be sure, mate. But it certainly looks like it.”

“He could’ve been carried there and hurled down the small embankment.”

“He could. But who the heck would go to all that trouble for some old dosser?”

“So you don’t have a name for him?”

“No. Not yet. Can you help us on that?”

“I think his name may have been Matthew Brown. At some stage he lived in Warwick. He had at least two children, Angela who is now known as Angie Fellowes, and James, known as Jim. I doubt if either of them will admit to him being their father though. You may have to resort to DNA testing.”

“Tricky.”

“If he lived in Warwick long term he may have friends there, old mates, who could identify him for you. If you’ve got a firm identification it may make it easier when you tackle his son and daughter. I don’t know where Jim Brown is now. But I can give you an address for Angela.”

They sat there shaking their heads. “Sounds bizarre. And why would they want to bump off their poor old dad?”

“Happens all the time. He was a nuisance, an embarrassment, something to do with his will. Maybe he owned property which he’d let go to the dogs. Maybe he had a mental illness which was causing them all sorts of private problems, maybe he was a Peeping Tom ... I’m only guessing.”

They didn’t sound enthusiastic but said to leave it with them while they got on to Warwick. I said I’d stay on another day or two at Thallon House.

I felt weary as I walked out and drove away, not because I’d been doing all that much hard physical labour, but because at some moment in the near future I would probably have to wrench away another prop from Cissy Holmes’ fragile

structure ... a friend who had provided her with renewed interest in life, useful things to do, a way to meet new people ...

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Two cops called by that same evening. They looked round at the circle of curious faces and asked me if I wanted to talk in private. I said no, everyone here knew something of what had been going on. They deserved to hear whatever kind of solution was on offer. If any.

“Well, you were right. We got an old guy up from Warwick this afternoon. Stan Thorne. He said it was Matt soon as he saw him. He’s been in cold storage for quite a while and would probably have got buried in the next few weeks. But he was shocked at the state he was in. He said Matt had left Warwick a couple of months ago saying he was coming up to Toowoomba to live with his daughter. Stan was a bit surprised because he didn’t think Matt got along with his kids any too good. But this is the part where it all goes whacky. Matt Brown had a big win a few years ago. Several hundred thousand, at least, in the Golden Casket or one of those. The kids wanted him to give most of it to them. But he said he was going to give it away. It seems he had got some sort of bee in his bonnet in his later years about recreating the men who humped a swag in the hard times. Every so often, this Stan reckons, he’d pack a swag and off he’d go. He wouldn’t go far, usually just out to Leyburn, but now and then he’d head up to Allora or down to Dalveen or somewhere.”

“This Stan bloke says he was thinking of writing a book some day about his experience, about how his old dad always told him there was more goodwill and kindness along the roads in the hard times than there ever is now, something along those lines. Seems like he was going to try and prove it one way or another.”

“So he’d let himself go ... or his clothes were just window-dressing?”

“Stan reckons he was still—” he tapped his forehead. “Still had it all up here. Nothing dirty or ragged about him. Just an old hat and jeans and a shirt and his swag. Stan reckons he might’ve thought of coming up to Toowoomba as a trial, just see how it went on his long tramps, see if he got along with his daughter ... and then when he didn’t hear any more he assumed it must be working out okay.”

“So what happened about the money?”

“He gave it all away. Every penny apparently. He used to have a plumbing business in Warwick. He sold that. He sold his house. He was just renting one of those little granny flats that someone had to spare.”

“So we’re not looking at relatives trying to get their fingers on his money?”

“Don’t reckon so. He probably kept some of it but just enough to get by.”

“And the charities he gave the money to?”

“Just the usual sort of thing. Lifeline. Red Cross. Mainstream charities. Nothing way out. This Stan reckons he just wanted to live very simply, just allowing himself so much per week. No frills. So he could understand what it was like not owning things. S’pose it wasn’t really like being poor. He wasn’t

desperate. But he reckons the old guy wanted to come as close as he could to the real thing.”

“I can imagine the son and daughter being very cheesed off—but enough to kill him?”

“Revenge, do you think?” Eric put in quietly. “One minute they had dreams of being rich. Next minute it was all gone again.”

I nodded. Yes, I would go along with that. I had not warmed to Angie Fellowes though I could see her as sensible and competent. But I don’t think she would find compromise and tolerance easy. I am no horse-trainer but I remember feeling faintly chilled when she said of her ponies: “You never let them have a win.” Maybe this is good psychology when working with animals. I don’t know. But I just came away feeling sorry for the ponies. And someone who uses it with animals might find it easier to transfer it to their human relationships.

But it wasn’t my business any more. The police would go to see Angela Fellowes. They would ask her to identify the old man. They would ask her why she had carted him down to Thallon House and dumped him there, claiming not to know him. They would ask her for Jim’s address … I could go home.

After the two men had departed the others all started talking at once. It was Bev who came over and sat down beside me. “I’m sorry, Bob, I’m so sorry that there couldn’t be a happy ending.”

“So am I. But thank you, all of you, for being so open and helpful. Without you all the old man might never even have been identified.”

“It was you, Bob. We’d still be talking about it in ten years and not be one whit the closer to a solution …”

Bev got up and went over to a corner cupboard and took out a couple of bottles. “It’s not exactly a celebration but I think we all need a drink.” She poured out sherry and handed it around. “What about you, Bob? Are you a sherry drinker? I’ve also got a bottle of Johnnie Walker and a bottle of Irish Cream.” I accepted a finger of Johnnie Walker.

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I left them still talking and drove out to see Cissy Holmes. She had already had her supper and settled down to watch some TV when I came knocking. She was startled to see me back.

I apologised for bothering her again. “I’m afraid it’s your bad penny back, Cissy. I’m afraid the police are round at Angie’s place. I wanted you to have a bit of warning if Angie is arrested.”

She simply stared at me, opening and shutting her mouth, but making no sound.

Then she turned and led the way in to her sitting room and turned off the TV. “What has Angie done, Bob?”

“The old man you found sleeping in the horsefloat at the fête was her father.”

“Her father! Oh no, Bob, he couldn’t have been. She had absolutely no idea who he was.”

“I’m afraid Angie is not the nice person you thought of her as. Cissy, I’m so terribly sorry. I didn’t want to give you more grief.”

At that she looked up at me. She shook her head slowly. Then she seemed to pull herself together. “Should I go over to see her? She might need some support.”

“I don’t think she’ll want to see you particularly. But if they do arrest her she might need someone to mind the horses.”

“Oh! Of course. But why wouldn’t she want to see me? We’ve been friends.”

“Because I am the person who took information to the police. They are over there now. I assume they are looking for some men’s clothing, also possibly two sets of false teeth.” I didn’t say anything about stains in the float. And it had probably been thoroughly scrubbed.

She sat down on the couch. “I don’t believe … not Angie.” She put her face in her hands. “It is like some terrible curse on me. I seem to bring bad luck everywhere I go.”

“No, Cissy. Risdon made his choices. Angie made her choices. And Angie was using you. You would’ve been willing to swear on a stack of Bibles that she didn’t know the old man, that she was only gone for a few minutes, that he was dirty and disgusting and obviously some sort of homeless derelict. You were her insurance.”

I didn’t know for sure what Angie knew about Cissy’s past. It may be that Cissy wasn’t the best insurance she could provide herself with. But then she had Bev as well. Except that Angie hadn’t run into Bev weeks later, I felt certain. That was Angie giving in to the very human impulse to embellish her story. Bev didn’t know that story because I hadn’t thought to mention it. So Angie would need to be very careful how she ever used Bev in some distant future. She needed to keep Bev on side—and I didn’t think Angie was good at keeping people on side.

But she had ceased to worry. She was safe. No one had come calling. No one had asked awkward questions. She could afford to be expansive …

And that other puzzle; the business cards. I think they were to link Jim with Roma. Anyone asking around would naturally have tried to find him there. Whereas Jim was most likely in … Brisbane, Surfers, Ipswich, somewhere in the other direction …

I didn’t tell Cissy that she had probably been driven home and dropped off by a woman with a dead body in her float. And the body was transferred to her four-wheel-drive for a short run out of town and the rendezvous with Jim. I could only guess at the precise details but I felt certain Angie and Jim had gone over the route and final drop very carefully. Jim had driven right past Harrowmore …

And it had all come to pieces because Cissy had endless time to be mulling over something ‘strange’, because Les had constantly referred to ‘fellows’, and because Bev was the sort of practical and conscientious person who would not put

a wallet with ten dollars in it away and forget about it. It was natural for her to assume that Jim would be glad to get it back ...

There is a lesson in there somewhere. Something about using honest people in your schemes.

I sat down beside Cissy for a while and put an arm round her shoulders.

After a while she said, "The ponies in my paddock ... they'll have to be sold, won't they?"

It didn't seem the most pressing question. After all, it might take months to put together a case against Angie and Jim. And there would be a house, property, contents, all of that, to deal with if Angie was convicted.

"How did you come to get them in the first place? Did she offer to pay you for the use of your paddock?"

"Oh no, no, she said, seeing as I had so much grass going to waste it would be a good idea for me to take her ponies to eat it. She was sort of doing me a favour. I had been keeping it in case Sheree changed her mind about getting another horse ... I always hoped she would. She was such a promising young rider, you know."

There was a long silence. I thought of Sheree on horseback. It was a nice thought but maybe there was some sadness in it. We could hear voices very faintly in the distance.

Then Cissy said quietly, "Maybe I didn't like Angie all that much."

- The End -

