

Soft-eyed Sita

With this still unfamiliar bed beneath me I turn over again and look upon her in the half-glimmer reaching us from a distant streetlight. It's the third occasion I've discovered myself beside her. I know few of the characters who inhabit our conversations as she speaks of her work and nothing else, paying no regard for my life outside her sphere. Her unrelenting verbosity doesn't afford me the opportunity to contribute more than the occasional nod or 'hmm'. Twice before the light of dawn has brought illumination upon regrets and promises to myself that this should never happen again. As this weekend came around I didn't picture myself here, but an invitation comes and it's hard to decline when the alternative is another night alone. This I ponder as the night churns on toward another reluctantly approaching dawn.

Facing her in this dull cold fluorescent glint my body becomes more aware of her beside me. The ache in my heart moves southward, becomes an aching urge somewhere else. Slave to my physical needs I move myself against her, gently waking her. She responds drearily, moving closer nonetheless. In time she opens to me and a torrent of ache gushes through floodgates from my loins back deeper into my heart.

Nestling herself under my arm with her head resting uncomfortably on my shoulder she drifts back to whatever dreamscape such a person travels as I lay back and focus once again on a noise in the distance. Though far away, one anxious canine stands out among all others, its vocal qualities a momentary reminder of a dear friend lost to the road some months before. I wonder if it might be my little buddy, Pumpkin by name, kidnapped and in bondage at a Silky Terrier stud. His body I'd never retrieved, you see the news had come second-hand. Though no worthy rationale would suggest somebody fabricated his death, denial lingers still. Where matters of the heart are concerned we often lose sight of better judgement.

Another hour closer to daybreak I tumble quietly into my clothes. Stepping

carefully into the night on an impromptu escapade I set forth in the apparent direction this painful cue came from. My boots move over bitumen as softly as possible while maintaining an adequate pace. Dutiful canines bark now and then from every direction across this suburban scape. Down at the main road a solitary vehicle trundles wearily into the distance, and the only other sound audible is the occasional squeak and flutter where upon my intrusion a lone bat takes flight over these deserted streets. I recall a long since forgotten notion I'd had that bats appear more often over streets at night than over gardens, drawn by a gourmet menagerie of airborne arthropods dizzily worshipping fluorescent sun-gods.

Nearing the area where I estimate the dog is I whistle loudly, rousing all mean hombre tail-waggers in a two mile radius. I don't hear the one I'm after. Three minutes and one block further along I launch into another boisterous toot. Seven or eight nearby replies but still not the one I want to hear. Has the dog packed it away for the night or is he stunned by the recollection of my call? Somebody nearby is lying in their bed cursing quietly to themselves as I prepare to whistle again. Suddenly the dog responds. I tune in, I'm close. I no longer whistle but my boots dully resonate with heavier step. I come to the house where the little dog is broadcasting. It's at the dead end of a dead-end street, a two-storey place perched high above me on a dramatically sloping block, surrounded by bushland on one side and at the back, and heavily gardened toward the house next door. Diabolically secluded - perfect for the stowing of a dognappee. An exterior light is on, I can't go near. I can't loiter here in the street for too long either. I must abandon this escapade for the night, go away and prepare tactics sbefore coming back to take a closer look.

A week passes. A new weekend is upon us as I set forth on my mission. My back-pack is prepared - a drink bottle of green cordial, a mustard sandwich, some music from *Roachford* and *REM*, a beach towel, a pair of opera glasses someone gave me on a sightseeing trip, a copy of the 1917 reprint of Romesh Dutt's 1899 translation of the *Ramayana* and 1898 translation of the *Maha-Bharata*, published by J.M Dent

& Sons in London and E.P Dutton & Co in New York. I explode out the back door toward the garage to grab my push-bike but pause after only a few steps. Turning, I reach inside the greenhouse and take hold of a dog leash. I hesitate a moment before taking it from the nail where it's hung these past months and stuffing it into my bag I swivel and stomp forth.

The garage door is reefed skyward with a clean-and-jerk. I take hold of the seat and handle-bars and wheel my bike into the sunlight.

My bike is a rough and tumble joy, born of sturdy mountain stock. This thought comforts me as I get a taste of the hill I must first climb by road then traverse by scrub in order to approach from behind the castellation which I am now convinced is the sinister locale of my Pumpkin's captivity.

Steep and tall, it is a tough hill standing stubbornly defiant against the ocean lapping at its feet. Scenic, the road provides residents of this suburban extremity an expensive panorama of coastline, and open plain toward the inland mountains. But I won't be pausing to take it in, the only view I'm seeing is my legs pumping downward aggressively, spurred by my anger at this injustice perpetrated against a loved one. The hill is a worthy challenge to the avid mountain-biker and thus provides the perfect cover for my mission.

I reach the point where bitumen gives way to gravel - not the stony dirt this mountain is made of. I assume this is a service road to the television translator perched mightily at the summit. It stands strong and straight and pure and tall like *Christ the Redeemer* of Rio de Janeiro, arms wide, casting its almighty message out upon the eyes and ears of the inhabitants of this part of the world, mostly believers.

My back wheel spins, shooting rocks and dust behind me as I strain hard against the steepness of this incline, no longer surrounded by mansions but enveloped in dense forest. So dense in fact that I begin to wonder if I will have to leave my bike and cover some ground on foot. Thankfully I come to a track that veers away from the road to the left, the general direction in which I'm heading.

Though the track consists of two parallel ruts in the dirt which each seem unwilling to sustain the dry brown hardy grass that covers the ground on either side and down its centre (with explosive combustibility a ravaging bushfire in waiting) I'm sure no vehicle has passed through here in many a day, and don't imagine this could have been more than an access for the solid vehicle of the survey team. Like ulcerous scars upon the hill these two strips of bare ground expose the earth to the elements, where the wound ulcerates further and deeper each time it's soaked in moisture. Twigs and leaves broken from eucalypt crackle viciously under my tumbling wheels.

Strangely the forest feels more open now, trees seem smaller and further between. Perhaps this was a timber-getter's track? And through the bush I'm starting to make out a building. Somehow I know this track is meandering toward it. I don't recall seeing either this track or that building on the map as I did my research at home last night. A battered sign attached to a precariously leaning post on the side of the road issues a warning. Enter what? I ask intrigued. The building is some way off yet and there is no fence or other line of demarcation.

Finally I round a bend which dips heavily into the clearing where it stands. It's not a shack, as one might expect out here, not even a cottage. It's a house, not so small, not so big, its size exaggerated by the fact that it rests atop high stilts. Fibro clad, a light timber veranda girdling two sides, and with the stilts it is of a style associated around here with the immediate post-war period. A simple tin roofed timber out-house stands to one side and a corrugated iron water tank sits beneath a corroding downpipe at the other. Might it have been the weekend hideaway of an affluent couple from the city? It's hard to imagine anybody living permanently at the end of a goat track. And yet there appeared to be something like a carport amid the stilts beneath the house. Apart from the access problem this must have been a very peaceful and lovely retreat.

I park my bike against a tree surveying a scene of tranquillity. The peace is broken by a sudden acute pain on my calf muscle, a burning bite - a sting. One of the

bigger variety of ant, gleaming dark metallic blue has decided to take me home to the family for dinner, its jaws engineered in miniature on the same blue-print as the next generation of hydraulic car-crushing machinery. I flick it into the bush hoping spitefully it will manage to drop the tiny chunk of me it tore away. The sting intensifies a few moments then stabilises at its peak when the red blemish grows the size of a two dollar coin. I can live with it.

Taking out my opera glasses I mount the stairs to the balcony. The house reverberates with my footstep, as if the whole construction sways with each stair I step beneath me. It surely creaks from every corner. Nobody has trod these stairs in a very long time. I walk into the middle of the verandah and cast my eye out over the magnificent view. This is on the landward side of the hill, no blue ocean in sight but through the trees a rolling plain stretches out beneath me toward the inland mountains. The view must look so different now from when this house was built, much of the bushland denuded, the seaside settlement spread across the plain in quarter acre cells of red-roofed nuclei.

The edge of my beloved suburb is no more than a hundred metres away. I place the opera glasses to my eyes and fix on the back-yard I've come to see. This is an excellent vantage point from which to observe any activity around the captor's stronghold. Should anyone spot me up here I might be labelled a Peeping Tom. My story would be that I am merely taking in the view. I do not see the dog.

I move forward to rest my elbows on the railing and steady the glasses. So intense is my concentration on things in the distance ahead that I neglect to account things immediately before me. Weak and weathered timber gives way beneath me as I plunge forward over the edge of the balcony dropping like dead weight into the bush on the down hill side. Unconscious I lay for who knows how many hours? Resting and at peace, or tortured with sub-conscious anguish I do not know. What I do know is that I am awoken suddenly and extraordinarily.

"I'm here," the voice says playfully, reaching me in a semi-conscious state. I

immediately sit bolt upright, catching a flash of pale-blue and white the length of a full-grown person dashing behind the tank stand. I squint a moment then blink a few times as I feel myself start to sway. Slumping back to the ground I tell myself someone is here, without attaching any particular relevance. Some time passes until I'm roused again by a giggle from the same voice, the voice of a nubile young female.

This time I decide to rise to my feet, which I do without ease or haste. Fortunately I hadn't bothered to take off my helmet when I left the bike. Otherwise, looking up now at the broken railing I reckon I'd have cracked open my skull.

I cast my eye around expecting it will land upon the girl. No sign of her. I walk around to see where she is, dusting myself off as I go. Without any luck I decide to get on with my mission. Perhaps it was a dream, a hallucination brought on by the bump on my head.

Staggering toward my bike I come across my towel in the grass. I look over and see my bag wide open and the contents strewn across the ground. *Roachford*, brown tape glistened by the sun is unwound stretched out tangled amongst the twigs and grass, shimmering in the wind. My drink bottle is tipped onto the ground, the mustard sandwich is mangled as though someone has considered eating it but chosen to play with it instead. A page is torn from the *Ramayana*. Possum?

Gathering my things I gingerly remount, pedaling away less aggressively now. Whereas before part of the adventure would have entailed thrashing my bike down through the bush, now it's all I can do to let the bike carry me forward as I gently guide it across the contours of the hill. As I near the fence I'm planning to peek over I notice some people watching from the back step next door. They don't seem used to intrusion from this direction, as their eyes follow me fixated. I move on past, around the corner of a tall fence where I'm out of their sight.

I take special note of this fence. Brown colourbond box steel posts are straddled by rails of the same brown colourbond, framing six-foot sheets of corrugated steel colourbond in beige. This type of fence represents heavy fortification around here.

Not surprising since it's the back corner of the local equivalent of the *Bastille*. Once again I'm neglecting things immediately before me as I'm almost thrown off the bike when the front wheel plonks into a ditch. This time my maleness takes the impact. I take the only course of action open to me as I dismount and sit down gently in the ditch to have a break, forgetting about the mission some minutes.

Eventually the discomfort subsides and I once again begin to take note of the world around me. As my senses return I realise I'm shaken. I need to be at my best before tackling the next and most perilous part of my mission. Though I've come so close I must once again abandon the exercise for the day. The bike has decided it is in my best interest to take me in the direction of home. In no state to argue I sit back into a gentle ride. Before departing I whistle, partly because I want to hear Pumpkin's voice and partly because I want him to know I am on his scent and have not forsaken him. When he doesn't call back I whistle again. Then again to no avail.

On the ride home I begin to question the degree of sanity my actions would demonstrate to an impartial onlooker. These brief moments of lucidity become more frequent until an internal struggle consumes my every waking hour by the end of the following week. My dreams, however, are even more messed up.

I lay in bed one night, slowly drifting to sleep.

"I'm here," she calls, jolting me suddenly back toward consciousness. Was I awake when I heard that? No, must have been a dream. I roll over, lay face down on top of my pillow.

Dozing off I am again scared back to life by voices in my head, this time a martial band and choir beams a nationalist sounding anthem in Afrikaans. It comes across as a sort of *Transvaal Uber Alles*. You can imagine the terror.

The next time I'm woken by the unmistakable intonations of a TV journalist, female in this instance, reporting in a very authoritative style using bucket-loads of magnificent and memorable words which, while sounding very important, collectively fail to communicate any substance whatsoever in the message. This is not a

subjective analysis of television journalism, merely the accurate reporting of what took place in my dream.

"I'm here." Frolicsomenly *she* has returned to my dreams only this time I see her. I roll over in my bed and an image meets my eye of a beautiful young woman, ankle length fine cotton dress of pale blue and white, hair tied up beneath a bonnet of matching hue. Though the image is only knee-high her relative proportions suggest a creature perhaps as young as fifteen, perhaps as old as nineteen. The colour of her hair and eyes are not accurately discernible. She floats mid-air at roughly eye level beside my bed, surrounded by a dull green glow like the dash-lights of a 1972 Chrysler, turning steadily like a rotiserating hologram. She reminds me of a photograph I've seen of my great-grandmother and her sister taken around 1916, only they were Catholics and their Sunday-best comprised much darker shades. No, this young woman wears the fashion of a time further back than that, around the turn of the century perhaps. A more accurate reference might be *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

Saturday comes again. Luckily I landed on my head last week when I crashed through that railing. If I'd come away with a broken limb or sprained ankle or something like that it would have disabled me from conducting a second sortie. The objective this time is not quite so bold, I have left the leash behind.

I scream into the clearing, jamming the brakes and tossing the back wheel outward with a spray of dirt and mulch flung at the balcony. Stomping heavily to the top of the stairs I pick the spot and set down my things on paint-peeled timber. A bigger bag vomits twenty four hours worth of supplies.

The sun descends upon Long Ridge as a mat rolls out onto the timber. Not exactly a mat, more like a piece of second-hand carpet 2m by 1m, dusty beige tattered around three edges, found in a corner of my late grandfather's shed (very dusty). Why he had collected such an un-magic carpet, such a piece somebody's rubbish I will certainly never know. Why I had retrieved it when his shed had been cleared out is an equally significant mystery. But then he was a man of very few excesses. So many

of the problems of the world today are because someone thought somebody was what they were not. That's what he used to believe.

This time the refreshing chill of the drink bottle is replaced by the life sustaining heat of *Stanley's* stainless steel flagship - a thermos built like a 120mm round of artillery, a 1.9 litre vessel of gun-powderish coffee. It came laid snugly between the carpet and the rug I'm pulling out now. The rug lays like jungle litter against the mat which seems made of and part of the earth. Upon this I place an old quilt - a piece of bedding I have carried with me through eight years of torturous night, my mother having carried it for me before that. Kermit-green in colour with broadly spaced cream diagonal bands, reversible, the other side the cream spaced by Kermit-green bands, bordered with wide Kermit-green frills. Strange the things that remain dependable through all life's challenges.

Finally, having rolled out a brand new gunmetal-grey nylon/gortex sleeping bag, I notice my hunger and drop down to enjoy white bread sandwiches, roast beef and cheese now accompanying the mustard, washed down with strong sugarless coffee - a transitory man's meal. A small crisp apple and coconut macaroon become sumptuous sweets. I close the lid of a tool-box sized plastic lunch container holding all sorts of provisions. A large chequered dark blue and grey woollen blanket of 1950s vintage, tasselled and worn is spread across the whole of my bedding. No pocket-knife nor band-aid in foresight. My opera glasses are extracted from a side pouch.

I stand, step cautiously forward to view the backyard before reclining again on the rug.

I didn't bring the *Ramayana* this time. The night before last weekend's adventure I'd read the IVth canto of the *Awa-Medha* and made an attempt at the next entitled "Sita Lost", falling only a few couplets short of the end before taken by sleep. But I'd made no progress since I lost page 178.

Settling in I pull out the only thing remaining in my bag - Volume 2 (*Ameri* -

Assin) of "*Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclo-pedia*", published MCMLXXXVI. First paragraph to meet my eye begins: "**ARISTOPHANES** (c. 448-385 BC),.." Soon I forget the world beyond the page. A half hour passes by torchlight before the silken timbre of her voice falls dreamily upon my ear..

*"If in truth unto my husband I have proved a faithfull wife,
Mother Earth! relieve thy Sita from the Burden of this life!"*

Then the earth was rent and parted, and a golden throne arose,
Held aloft by jewelled *Nagas* as the leaves enfold the rose,

She stands near where my head lay just a moment ago, pale blue and white so un-adulterated by green glow. In the darkness her bright form seems a charm, a 4:1 enlargement of the maiden by my bed. "What comes next?" I gasp in awe. "Tell me."

She stares at me blankly then turns and looking out over field of suburban night - of randomly patterned artery and branch of cold streetlight, spaces filled and warmed between with orange glow from household windows lit.

And the Mother in embraces held her spotless sinless Child,
Saintly Janak's saintly daughter, pure and true and undefiled,

Gods and men proclaim her virtue! But fair Sita is no more,
Lone is Rama's loveless bosom and his days of bliss are o'er!

Cast your eye toward the newly sun set Western sky where intense orange fades upward yet through shades of blue and green and purple to black. From where in the black and speckled heavens do my phantasmagoria come? I did not notice her

climbing the stairs so perfect logic would suggest she came through the front door from inside the house - a house shut tight. I did not hear the weathered lock turn nor the old door creak. No footsteps announced her arrival, no motion inside the house had alerted me to her presence the hour or so I'd been here. She turns back to me, her eyes hold mine in silence a few moments, each of us unsure of the other.

"You're here," I mutter stunned. "You... you surprised me. Is this your home? I'm sorry I thought it was deserted."

"Welcome," she says with the feigned panache of a teenager mimicking a screen idol, stepping out across the balcony in matronly posture obviously emboldened by my illness of ease.

"You're here." I repeat.

"That's what I said," she replies. "I'm here."

"I dreamt about you. Do I know you from somewhere?"

"Do I know you?"

"How? I... Have we met before?"

She looks out again across the valley and answers vaguely "No, I don't believe we have."

I'm on my feet, still keeping a healthy distance, stealing glances at her figure while her eyes are not on mine. She is about average height, slim though nicely rounded, amply breasted, clear white skin, her hair a fine and lustrous blonde, and in the darkness I can only tell that her eyes are softly coloured perhaps a blue or green. To find myself alone with such a beauty is an extraordinary event. I'm not sure how to deal with it.

"Aah... listen, sorry about the intrusion." I say, reaching down gathering my things. "I'd better go."

"Please don't leave," she frowns, "I'm so lonely, please stay."

Who me? Had I all my faculties I'd drop my things and run, but to defy allurements by such sweet entreaty? I shiver.

"Are you cold?" she asks.

"No. Yes I mean. Are you?"

"No." The conversation pauses again as I sit inside the sleeping bag and zip myself tight from hood to toe, leaving only my face exposed to the elements, to her scrutiny. Her attention is divided between the suburb below and me fumbling inside my cocoon.

"Did you help me when I fell?" I ask. She looks at me vacantly. Is she a squatter, a runaway, or a street kid with a friend hiding somewhere ready to roll me? She's a bit weird. I don't believe this is her home. Pointing at the broken railing, "Over there," I clarify.

"I wish I could help you," she says. "Do you drive?"

"Yes but I left my car at home. Where do you live?"

"Live? I wish I could live with you."

I laugh. "What did you say your name was?"

"My name was..." she trails off. "Do you have a television?"

"Two," I nod, displaying absolute certainty in this fact.

"Do you have any sweets, the ones on television?"

Definitely a nutter.

"I have some chocolate," I reply, grabbing my lunch container and rummaging.

"Would you like some?"

"Yes please." Her smile momentarily disguises the general air of melancholia around her. She sits on the rug beside me. I see her close up for the first time but there's more of her than I can see.

"So it wasn't you who helped me when I fell off the balcony?"

"No, I didn't help you." She shakes her head, gobbling chocolate like an Easter weekend death-wish.

"Then how come you know the *Ramayana*? I heard you reciting it before. You tore that page from my book before you woke me."

She laughs. "If you believe it means I helped you then you have an unusual idea of what help is. Perhaps if I stole your bike I'd be doing you a great favour."

I smile. "Do you go to school?"

"Yes," she answers a little too briefly

"Which school do you go to?" I ask.

"Blue Gum Flat." Something about the name sounds familiar but I don't know of such a school around here.

"Where are you from?"

"What do you mean?" she responds. I don't think my question is that cryptic.

"Where do you live? I mean, are you from Sydney or somewhere in the country, or the Fiji Islands, British Guyana... planet Venus? I don't know, you know?!"

She smiles and rests her lovely chin upon her bended knee - sitting with her thighs now tucked up toward her breast, arms clasped around the front of her shins.

"I live down there." She points toward the lakeside suburb just a little to the North of my own, historically two neighbouring settlements now each a part of the same town.

She again evades a direct answer to my question as I ask her for her name. She looks away in silence a while before responding

"My father runs the ferry across the lake."

This time I can offer only silence. I'm unable to conjure any more questions for some time. I think back to something my grandmother told me once about a ferry that ran across to Tuggerah and Wyong. But that was long before I was born. Now it is a road journey. There was a period I had to catch the bus daily to get to the train station over there. The bus weaves through a hundred bone-shaking back-streets taking well over an hour to cover what takes some people fifteen minutes by car. A ferry sounds like a great idea.

As though the gods announced a halt to our world's forward temporal advance, here on the balcony eons of silence are punctuated now and then by brief moments of

conversation. We familiarise ourselves almost like ordinary people, and I familiarise myself with more than her mind.

Smooth and unblemished skin glows white by moonlight like the canvas on which is painted a face the living image of an angel, a goddess, or Helen of Troy. Two hands sculpted from the same stuff in lovely proportion and texture flash from time to time before my eyes. I see beautifully groomed platinum-blond hair tied up at the back. I see curves pressing against the inside of her antiquated dress, her body ripened fresh and firm cannot be silenced by that veil of another era's prudery. Beauty at its zenith, a magnificent specimen of a creature entering its prime. Wonderstruck I enjoy her company for what seems an eternity. At which moment I fall to sleep and begin to dream I do not know. It's all the same tonight.

Moist grey chill of the half hour before sunlight is my next conscious notion. Perhaps to my dismay but not to my surprise she is gone.

A warm bed lays vacant in the shelter of one of those dwellings down there. Ethereal as my lover am I a wandering spirit part-time inhabitant of that space. How else could I explain lying exposed to the elements on the balcony of this deserted home? It stands on its own outside the final row of backyard fences marking the edge of civilisation, an outcast condemned to a future of voyeuristic futility.

When the sky becomes two notches more pale I sit up, pour some coffee and peel my banana. I place no faith in the existence of metaphysical things. So either she's a dream or I'm insane. Pondering my motivations for coming here I worry the latter is more true. Five minutes later I'm trudging toward the tall fence determined to get some answers. Light is swiftly filling a grey-black marbled sky.

Walking along the outside of the fence I find a point where I believe I won't be seen climbing over. Reaching up I take hold of the top rail with both hands, aware of a piece of plant from the other side inadvertently dragged somewhere also into my grasp. It's not until my grasp tightens to take the full weight of my body that I realise

it's a plant bearing thorns, by which time it's too late to let go as my legs on the upward swing would result in an equal and opposite reaction seeing my head travelling once again groundward.

I balance precariously a split second on the three inch wide rail at the top of the fence until my reflexes finally kick in and let go with my hands before crashing through a nicely manicured Climbing Rose, pink of course, and sweetly scented.

My groan rouses the dog who's been sitting quietly atop another elevated verandah. The bark is followed by the pitter-patter of little pads on timber decking. I have been battered, bruised, concussed, almost garrotted, poisoned, splintered, thirsted, bled and frustrated in this quest. Now I lay in the coma position amid a well composted bed of Gardenias. Turning my head painfully toward the verandah, the dog, I finally see him. As I stare eye to eye with the proud little creature in whose honour I have faced such travails crystal clarity fades to a blur while moisture wells in that same eye. Tear of joy or sadness you may ask. Holding his chest out boastfully he directs a tirade of abuse toward me, when all along I'd pictured tail wagging and tongue lapping. Silky Terrier he is, but with darker coat and pointier ear than my Pumpkin.

Am I surprised, am I disappointed? I don't know what I am. I am numb. Just then I hear a sliding door open somewhere above me. A pair of slippers flip-flap heavily across the balcony beneath a great clod-hopping pair of feet. The feet are attached to a beefy baritone whose first rasping notes this morning growl "What are y' fuckin' barkin' at now?" A pair of enormous hairy arms lean across the railing above as I prepare to be pulled like a weed from this garden at any moment. The flip-flapping starts again. It's not till I hear the door slide shut that I realise he is not coming to get me. It seems I'm not the only one with a habit of searching in the distance for that which is right at their feet.

A long hot bath fails to remove the blight which I have discovered lingers yet in

my mind. Much to my dismay the denial remains. I tell myself I'm crazy but I can't dispel the possibility that Pumpkin is captive in that fortress. Though I have seen the dog who lives there and accepted it's not him, you never know, Pumpkin may be tied up under the house. What a stinking catastrophe.

The following weekend I attempt a short-cut to the house in the clearing. Travelling through an area which is dark green on the map (described as 'reserve') I feel almost invincible on my bike, which is just as well because this trek is about as tough as it gets. Bulldozing my way through bush and grass and eucalypt eking out their meagre existence in this stony dirt, they in turn pose a limit to visibility. This small collection of hills is an anomaly here in the middle of an otherwise fertile stretch of coastline.

Up hill and down gully I pound through the bush. I come off the bike one time when descending into a huge gully - a great cleft between two rugged hills. Decades, even centuries of rainfall has furrowed deep into the hillside until hitting solid bedrock, progress slowed but not halted, it now grinds deeper still. Unbridled vegetation gives way to open air and a sandstone platform juts out into the middle of the narrow nowhere-land between the two hills before dropping away four metres straight down to where a few trickles meander over the green-stained sandstone bottom of the mighty cleft. I burst through the edge of the bush into unrestricted visibility and realise I have three metres to pull-up before I'm thrown into the abyss.

Reflexes are at a premium today, I'm hyped. I jam both brakes tight and throw the back wheel sideways. The left crank along with the adjacent piece of leg from boot to knee, and my left arm from elbow to shoulder with the adjacent pieces of shoulder-blade and ribcage bounce and scrape along the jagged surface. I am confident I will stop before the edge but not so sure about my bike. My knuckles glow white as I clench the handle-bars tight. Still I hold them as the rest of my bike separates from me like a discarded lunar rocket segment condemned to space-junk. If it goes it could take me with it but we're talking about the most precious piece of

metal that I own.

Thankfully when I come to a halt only the back quarter of my bike hangs over the edge. I lay in shock unable to move some moments before finding the strength to raise myself and run a quick damage report. Fortunately no major structural damage has been sustained by either me or the bike. We've both lost a little bit of bark. Left crank is slightly bent but still serviceable, complementing some bruising or tendon damage in the areas of my left ankle and left armpit - the full extent of which I won't know until I sit down in front of the TV tonight.

Ten minutes of rest and a few gulps of weak lemon cordial later I'm carrying my bike down the rock-face then back up the other side. I plan to push it some of the way up the next hill until I'm high enough to traverse around to the clearing where the deserted house stands. It is on this final stretch that my trajectory dissects what appears to be another forgotten track, this one even more forsaken than the other as the grass has managed to re-invade in most places.

I follow the meandering track upward until with the sun too high in the mid-day sky I've become a little disoriented. Taking a break I shovel down a couple of sandwiches, swill some more cordial and consider the options. They present themselves to me thus: I can back-track and hope I come across something that will help me better locate myself; I can climb a tree and take a bit of a look around; or as long as I'm still travelling toward the summit, regardless of which direction I'm heading I'll eventually reach a point where the tower comes into view and the house will be a quick downhill dash.

Going backwards carries connotations of delay back into my mission so the latter two of the aforementioned options are taken respectively, but the tree-climbing exercise fails to locate anything of note other than a well established nest of blue ants.

Slowly and steadily I pedal ever upward. The tower is not coming into view and doubts begin to enter and leave my mind with increasing regularity. I reckon I've done close to three kilometres of solid up-hill riding when finally I ride into a clearing

on a lower peak on the ocean side of the hill. The tower stands on the upper peak not two hundred metres to the South. A shallow dip, almost a gully, lays densely vegetated between the two peaks. This I must cross to reach the house. Another break is in order before I tackle it.

In the process of finding myself a suitable patch of ground on which to lunch I stumble across something very peculiar hidden amid the tall grass. Something which tears at the very foundation of the comfortable scepticism I enjoy.

Two slabs of granite - a type not found in these parts stand upright side by side. Though they now show no sign of it I know they had once been polished. Many seasons have washed over them since then until now they are just smooth, not lustrous. The inscriptions on these headstones, however, are no less legible:

"Baby Joseph Tyler

Born 21st of September 1899

Died tragically upon the rocks at the base of this treacherous cliff

18th of April 1903.

The Lord hath taken him to a better place."

"Elisabeth Tyler

Blue Bonnet Betty

Born 18th of April 1886

Died 18th of April 1903

Ever the heroine tried to save her little brother.

May she never be forgotten."

"Her birthday," I mumble softly to myself, contemplating the tragic end to what must have been a special family outing. In these few words I hear the echoes of a mother's anguished cry, of a father's quiet tear, of a toddling play-mate's confusion, and a first-love's disbelief.

An association registers immediately, but true sceptic I am a tangible explanation is soon forthcoming. For all can be reduced to and explained by realities existing exclusively within the realms of the physical world. No mystic crap need provide an answer to the question seating cumbersomely on my mind. I stand mute, looking down at the second headstone. Then realising I'm standing over the young lady's grave I swiftly bound aside.

I no longer wish to eat my lunch here. I saddle-up and push off for the house. It's heavy going again but I meet the rutted track and pull into the clearing inside ten minutes. Sitting on the balcony munching into a ham and mustard sandwich I take some comfort in being within eyesight of my beloved suburb below. I do my best to

stay focussed on the backyard of infamy but my thoughts are a litany of confusion. Then a flash of pale blue appears in the corner of my eye and things seem suddenly much more certain.

For the first time I get a good look at her in full daylight. Notwithstanding her unusual mode of dress and her soft-eyed beauty she's almost like any other young woman. Though certainly fair in colour, she doesn't look so pale now. Her hair not goldened by the sun's rays seems a very appropriate hue nonetheless - a true and natural platinum blonde, rare and precious. Unashamedly I take a very big glance all over her. There is no perfect shape. Hers for example is a type you would never see in a fashion magazine, yet her curves and proportions are as lovely as they come. She smiles, a little self-conscious but flattered nonetheless by what she must see as a bold and obvious gesture of admiration, but what in truth is the brutish urge of a testosterone surge.

That I, having forever been so taken by frizzle-headed Bohemiennes, should find myself now smitten by this picture of prim and ordered femininity. Perhaps in my time *she* is the exotic and remote.

"Hello," she finally says. "Mind if I join you?" I smile back at her as she moves closer to sit down beside me.

"I don't mind. I was kind of hoping I'd see you here."

"Kind of?" she retorts abruptly, pulling back and frowning down upon me. I frown too. Then a quick burst of laughter reassures me she is jesting and I can't help but grin. And thus we begin to re-acquaint ourselves with soft and friendly banter, sometimes punctuated by important snippets of information about personal likes and dislikes, beliefs and hopes. She sits by my side at the edge of the balcony, our legs dangling over the edge. She is within touching distance.

If she were the ghost of that unfortunate girl whose grave lays forgotten over the hill then communication could not be this easy. This conversation would display all the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. The society and custom, the

language she grew up with would have been at least a little different from my own. In some ways very different. And why would she be here at this house of a different period altogether? Ridiculous notion, I must be going funny in the head.

"How old are you," she asks. I tell her to guess. "Mmh, now let me see. Twenty... two?" I tell her she's close and she giggles.

"Older? Younger?"

"I'm twenty five."

"Oh dear," she teases. "That's so old." She leans back, laying across the deck with her legs still dangling. Then unable to find a comfortable position she sits again, unties her hair so I see it's full length resting softly over her shoulders and most of the way down her back. She lays across the deck again. I swivel and on one outstretched arm lean toward her.

"Well, when I was seventeen I thought twenty five was old too, but now I'm here I don't feel much different." Looking down into her eyes, an unusual pale grey-green, I notice the expression on her face suddenly change. She rises, forcing me to straighten and turn away.

"How did you know I was seventeen?"

"I just... guessed. I mean I didn't know." How did I know?

It takes a minute for the conversation to warm again. She tells me a little about her family. I tell her a little about mine. The conversation goes around in circles until, becoming banal it continues to go around. I have something on my mind very difficult to set free. I nearly do it several times but shy away unsure, worried always that she'll get up at any moment and tell me she has to go home. I do my best to drag the conversation out, waiting for the right moment. Despite all this preparation it feels strangely spontaneous when it finally occurs.

Out of the blue I take hold of her, draw close her pink lips and upon them place a lingering kiss. I watch them as I move in, closing my eyes just before contact, one arm around the back of her shoulder and the other hand on her waist. I can feel her,

she is real - soft and smooth, moist and warm. The fluidity with which she holds herself firm against me despatches all my fears - she does want me after all. I feel her breast against me.

Ten, fifteen, thirty seconds? I don't know. Time and space are mere abstractions existing in another dimension. The entire world is contained in this kiss. But when I open my eyes this dear apparition, to my sorrow, she is gone. And I know that my Pumpkin is too.

It seems she was just a dream and so I cast her from my mind.

But like a hyper-realistic TV goddess will I settle for anything less?

In the info-confusion have my brains been fried like all the rest?

In such a world you're lucky if you can forget your hopes and dreams,

For these were the essence of humanity, long since forgotten theme.

Now they're manufactured subtly to greed's chaotic plan.

And we'll always follow blindly, a vicarious zombie clan.

END
