

Travelling Henry

by Mark Gallagher

The day had come and the ute was loaded. Within the hour Henry would be on the road, leaving behind the last twelve months of his life. He had many fond memories of this shining city, The Gold Coast. The friends, the fun times, the not so hidden beauty beneath the shining lights of the plastic jungle towers. But so often it's the fond ones that hurt the most.

He could not stay here, not right now. The sights and places, friendly faces that once reminded him how happy he was, now they only taunted. For these are the things he had shared with Carla. And now the sharing was over.

He pulled into Mike's to say his good-byes to the dear friends that he'd soon be missing. There was Mike with wise words of advice, Mark and Stewy with the words of a larikan mentality, Mrs Stout shed a tear, and Karen and Megan were there for a kiss. And of course there was David, in knowing near-silence. Dave was wise to Henry's ways. He had seen the trails of dust from behind Henry's ute before. They were the oldest of friends, growing up as they had in the same fairytale town down the coast.

The thoughts that flickered and never faded as he drove down that all too familiar highway were, as always, his only companion. "What are you moving *there* for?" They had all said. Perhaps he was looking for the right environment to tend to the wounds within. But he'd travelled down this road before and he knew it was no real escape. More like popping from one cage back into another more familiar one.

It comes as no surprise to us that young Henry travels alone. The ghosts that follow him are the regrets of his very existence. "On th' floor, bitch," was a pick-up line he'd used. "This may sound funny but my aunty is opening a lingerie shop and she asked me what girls are wearing these days..". Oh what a fool he had been.

Once, in a frenzy of unbridled romanticism he had told a girlfriend how lucky he felt, for her skin was "as smooth as silk, and soft as.. as mashed potato". A charmer of ladies he's not. There had been no-one worth mention since her. Never for more than a week or two anyway.

But mum and dad and family and friends saw him as Casanova. A bad-boy bachelor-pad homemaker.

"Yeah I'm a swingin' guy," he is known to have said, though nobody knew his sarcasm. A hipster, a shaker, a mover, and heartbreaker. If only he'd seen through their eyes. If only they knew whose heart he had broke.

So he established himself in the thriving metropolis. He worked as a landscape gardener. He mowed the fields and cleaned the public barbecues for the weekend playtime of the city's inhabitants. And he dug holes. The beauty he saw in the land, the trees, the buildings, and the people - the environment he became part of, was matched by the destruction, decay, and despondency he also discovered.

Flicking through the pages of *The Local Rag* one day, he chanced upon an advertisement for "Adult Education" at a local college. Though immediately writing it off as more playtime for the bored masses, it did spark some interest in him. He ran down the list of courses, stopping to ponder a few:

BEING ASSERTIVE - Why, what for, he wondered?

CREATIVE WRITING - For pompous bastards, he thought, who are really there to let other people know how clever they are, and not to catch gain some creative edge.

DESKTOP PUBLISHING - What is that?

FLOWER ARRANGING - He pictured red roses.

PHOTOGRAPHY - Wow, just imagine some of the pictures I'd get at work.

TYPING

SECRETARIAL STUDIES

WORD PROCESSING

- All for those yet to find their niche, he supposed.

Henry started his photography course on the first of August. Two nights a week he'd have an excuse to get away from the house. What a hassled household it was. The drugs and booze were his only shelter from the pain of loneliness. But things were looking up.

There was a girl. Her name was Jenny. She was a rock'n'roll musician, had a passion for exploring caves. With her caving group she would travel on weekends. She was drawn to the course for budding snappers. Within a couple of weeks Henry found himself working alongside Jenny most Tuesday and Thursday nights. They sat together in photography classes. Her dark hair and eyes were so different from the blue-eyed blondes who'd hurt the boy before. And she was so sweet. Yet mysterious.

Jenny would need to know the time so often every night. She wore no watch. Instead she would take Henry's arm and move it closer to her to spy his battered timepiece. It took him some time, but eventually he began to wonder why she didn't simply ask the time. Whenever she touched his arm or hand, excitement rushed his veins and charged his fragile heart.

As these things go, it was on the first date they kissed. Jenny had a boyfriend, though he was overseas. She was going through a bust-up and needed a little company.

Henry came to be talking to Dave on the phone.

"How's my girlfriend treating you?" Henry asked, tongue planted firmly in cheek.

"Yeah, in your dreams, mate. "

Henry smiled. He thought for a moment then he said

"Well there is this one girl. She's a honey. Funny thing is, I think she likes me too."

"You're kidding?! I'll have to have a word with her then, poor misguided thing."

"Yeah, I can't work it out either."

The laughs they shared did not numb Henry's fears. The day was growing near when Jenny's boyfriend would return from overseas.

With Nick's arrival imminent, Jenny was faced with a dilemma. How should she let Henry down? They had been dating for over a month, though they hadn't slept together. She knew he was falling in love with her, but what could she do, it wasn't her fault?

"We can still be friends," she told him on the phone that night. "I'm sorry."

"Huh, story of my life, babe," he told her, "but don't you worry now, 'cause I expected nothing. I'm disappointed but there's no need for sorrow. *We are* friends, and that is an honour I would die for."

The week of graduation for the photo-hogs came. It was the week of Nick's return from overseas. And it was the night of a big party at Jenny's.

"So this is Henry?" Nick said when introduced. "How's it going, stud?"

Henry avoided Nick throughout the night. As the numbers slowly dwindled, and most had left for the pubs and clubs, Henry began to wonder what he was still doing there. Perhaps it was Natalie playing DJ at the stereo?

By this time, Nick was suffering the effects of over-indulgence. He had become quite objectionable.

"Harry, Harry," he yelled as he bounded across the room. "How's it going old buddy?" Plonking himself next to Henry he said, "Tell me about you and Jenny."

Henry stiffened as dread filled his mind.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh come on. I know you two had some thing happening. Did you sleep with her?"

"No." Henry's limbs went tight. So did his gut.

"What are you doing here? I don't want you here, Jen' doesn't want you here, nobody's interested in your stories here. Do you hear?"

Henry looked silently into Nick's eyes. Why was it they found Nick's stories more interesting? Was it because he was tall and handsome? Maybe because he was an accountant and not a common old garden variety gardener? He drove a new Commodore, not a dirty old ute? His wealthy parents? He'd been to Brussels and not Bundaberg? It seemed to Henry the values they learned from their magazines and television dramas were a little unsound. Like "Bradley's a lawyer, isn't he great?" And "William sells shoes in the street, but he does it in London so that makes him a special kind'a guy." Wake up, Australia, for a cultural binge.

His thoughts fell back to earth.

"Listen, hero, just leave me alone. You're laughing, pal. You're lucky, she's special. Treat her civil and just forget I ever existed."

Henry left, with Nick and one of Jenny's friends arguing behind him. He walked into the early hours of the morning. It was the first of November. The rain that washed the rubbish onto the streets before him was cold. It was about thirteen kilometres to his home. Alone he walked. The thoughts that drove his legs ever forward were the same ones that made him feel like giving up, collapsing in the gutter.

"There goes another stack of daydreams out the window," he mumbled to the heavens.

These people are so uptight, he thought as he looked out over the suburbs. Why? If only he had the security and sureness which they all enjoyed. If only he had something to soften the blows of day to day life. Someone he could lay his weary head upon, who'd touch him and say "Everything will be alright". He had nothing to look forward to at the end of the day, end of the week, the month.

One thing was certain in his mind as he rounded the corner to his street. He had found himself on the road again. A beloved ute was waiting, and there were highways to behold. Time and space are of no consequence, in the quest for a little romance.

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