

Nobody's Girl

By MJ MacNamara

I hadn't seen Andrew in a decade. He was still in Perth then, hauling himself upright amid the wreckage of a divorce. Julie got the home and the four-wheel-drive, he hung onto his Monaro and the business he'd built from nothing, which he was trying to sell at the time. He'd been a nurseryman since he left school. It was sad to see old Andrew in such unhappy circumstances.

A couple of years ago I ran into Andrew's dad back in our home town. Andrew was doing well, his dad said. He was back in New South Wales, with a new lady. Third time lucky apparently. They had a nice place down the coast, two lovely kids and a third on the way. I sent Andrew and family a Christmas card and I got one back. I had it in mind to catch up with him one day.

Stuck at my laptop one rainy Sunday, procrastinating over the honorary treasurer's report for the local RSL youth club, I came across an old high school friend, Sarah, on Facebook. I hadn't seen *her* in two decades. I had a soft spot for Sarah back then. Sarah's sister, Melanie, had dated Andrew in the old days.

Sarah and I chatted about things we used to get up to, our old circle, and we filled each other in as much as we could about what had become of people. I began to follow Sarah's life on Facebook, threw in a comment now and then, often an anecdote that meant nothing to anyone who hadn't been there.

Kicking back one Friday night with a few beers and a laptop at the kitchen table, sharing YouTube songs and pithy memes on social media, like some sad cybernetic party for the middle-aged, I noticed Sarah's big sister among her Facebook friends. Melanie and my old mate Andrew had dated for at least a couple of years, so we'd hung out together a bit. I went into her profile to see where life had taken her. Not far

geographically, it turned out. She'd followed her dad onto the family farm, breeding horses and running a few cattle. She still had the same straight dark brown hairstyle and becalming blue eyes.

All those times back then when it was just me and Andrew and Mel. She drove Andrew and me up the mountain to the starting line in the back of that green Ford ute of hers the day we won the Beechwood Billycart Bash. We dressed up as the Good, the Bad and the Ugly at Sarah's eighteenth. People had mixed ideas about who was meant to be the Good and who the Bad - Melanie or Andrew? After all these years I still felt a tribal connection.

According to Facebook, Melanie had also raised a magnificent daughter, tall and beautiful, and a pretty handy horsewoman like her mum. Melanie's daughter was away in Newcastle studying to be a school teacher, like her grandmother. As I looked at photos of her daughter I could see Melanie herself. More than just a physical resemblance, she radiated the same spirit, a quiet and glowing confidence you sometimes find in country women. I felt warmth and compassion for that young woman. She probably didn't even know I existed.

I sent Melanie a friend request, though I could see she wasn't a Facebook regular, which seemed natural. Melanie was an old fashioned girl. She and Andrew had been well matched in that respect. I wasn't surprised he never turned up whenever I searched for him online. He was averse to fashionable technology, particularly if it was for communicating. Still, there Mel was, posting photos of her country home, her horses, and mostly of her daughter.

I came home from work one Friday, stuck dinner in the microwave, and fired up the computer to check my emails and run my daydreams over the classic car market. Melanie had accepted my friend request. I dispatched a few emails and settled into the

Facebook stuff while running searches for 354 Hemis and Valiant hardtops on e-bay, in between scoops of roast lamb and gravy straight off the plastic tray. I poked around in Melanie's Facebook profile a bit more, though there wasn't much to it. The greater part of it was indeed about her daughter. I guess sometimes I post a fair bit about my boy's exploits on the rugby pitch and saxophone.

It took a while to realise, but Melanie's infrequent updates and few dozen photographs contained no evidence of a father to this Amazonian offspring. Something else dawned on me. I began to look closer at the girl, clicking back and forth between photos, squinting at first thoughtfully and then in amazement.

She sat tall in the saddle like her mum, but wasn't as strongly built. She was leaner, and far more glamorous in an evening dress. It's funny how kids can be an uncanny morphism of both their parents, so that I could look at her and see almost the same person as Melanie, and I could look at her again and see almost the same person as somebody else.

I went into the girl's profile to look even more closely. Just like I could find no trace of a partner in Melanie's life, there was no trace of a father in the girl's. All the while I was conscious of a date, one of the first details I'd noticed. She'd recently turned twenty. She must've been conceived in the last months of the 1980s. The timing was astonishing.

I recall the moment Andrew suggested it. I'd spent a couple of years drifting by then, and returned home for Christmas, and New Year's 1990. Andrew and I were sunning ourselves on the front porch of the Macquarie Hotel with a schooner and a kebab, when he said he'd decided to move to Perth, and why didn't I come with him? Perth was ever a land of opportunity. Go west, people did, and great stories came back.

I marvel at the freedom we had when we were twenty. I went back to Sydney, quit my job, and traded my Commodore for an old ute I could load all my gear onto for the long drive west.

A month later in punishing February weather, Andrew and I drove in convoy across the parched gravelly Nullarbor. In hindsight it was as far away from home as we could have possibly imagined. Twenty odd years later I'm looking at a picture of a young woman on Facebook and I'm seeing those events in a whole new light. I couldn't recall exactly when Andrew and Melanie went their separate ways, but it all became thick with meaning. Oh Andrew, were you running away from this? Do you even know she exists?

I wondered if Melanie did it all on her own by choice these past twenty years. She was an old fashioned country girl, and a fiercely independent type. There's a widespread prejudice among certain sections of society toward young women who have children to men who don't commit to marriage or partnership. These types will tell you she has children for the government handouts and child support payments from rejected fathers. So-and-so's sons are invariably cast as victims of these greedy young mothers and a complicit judiciary. Could a desire not to be seen as such a woman lead one of their own to shun the financial support due to her for raising a child who is equally the creation of someone else? Remembering Melanie as I did, if such a woman existed, then she was a likely candidate.

Perhaps whatever caused them to go their separate ways made her determined that he would never be part of the girl's life. Perhaps she kept the girl from him as a means of punishment or payback.

I laboured over my first Facebook message to Melanie. I wanted to quiz her without seeming to pry. Or pry without seeming to quiz. When I did send it I think I

managed to separate reminiscences of old times with her and Andrew, and compliments on her beautiful and talented daughter. Melanie was circumspect, saying only that she'd raised the girl on her own 'almost' from birth. In a judiciously separated part of the message she thanked me for rekindling old memories, and of Andrew said she couldn't remember exactly when she last saw him.

Perhaps it was just too much of a leap in logic on my part, putting two and two together and coming up twenty-two. Perhaps my suspicions had turned out to be untrue.

I looked again at the pictures of the girl. There was something Melanie hadn't considered. She'd been deeply in love with Andrew, I knew. He was handsome, with the brooding gentleness of some Hollywood beau, except Andrew was the real thing. Ladies from our home town still swooned a bit at the mention of his name. Yet he was all hers. It was inconceivable she could be so vague and dismissive about their parting. She was trying to throw me off her scent. There could only be one reason.

What to do? What should I do? What right did I have anyway? Despite the years I still considered Andrew my best mate. I myself could claim a stake in this story, for if Andrew had run away with me to Perth it had changed the course of my life too. I had folded a life being mapped out for me in Sydney, taken off on this adventure on what seemed ever after a whim. Western Australia had turned out to be a taxing year, a lost year, and a difficult year for me. From my year's travail in the west I'd left him and come back east tattered, then struggled half a decade to get a bearing on my future. Wasn't I therefore a stakeholder?

More compelling was what my heart did whenever I looked into that promising young digitised face. No matter what secrets the past held, surely she had a right to her father, whether he'd run from her or he'd been kept from her. If Andrew hadn't

fulfilled his obligation then wasn't I as his best friend just the person, obliged even, to tell him? And if he didn't know she existed wasn't that my obligation too?

Going about it would not be straightforward. It had been almost eleven years since I we'd caught up. Just phoning for a chat was unthinkable. I had to go down there and see him. A five hour drive would take some planning, it's not as though I could just slip away for a weekend and skip a visitation with my son. I decided to combine this into a school holiday camping trip with my boy.

Then there was Andrew's new family. What would I say to him, and how would it affect them? As I pondered over the following weeks, I flicked back one time to the girl's profile on Facebook. As I looked into her eyes, serene and self-assured, I could sense that something was missing.

A camping trip was planned for the New Year, down at Narooma near where Andrew lived. Not too close though, didn't want to make it look like I was coming especially. I looked up his phone number, confirming he was still at the same place, and with a sense of foreboding, put it into my contacts.

With a Christmas card that year I included a short letter. In a time when people shoot quick emails or text messages and few if any write letters, it still seemed an appropriate way to communicate with this fella'. Or maybe I just remembered him as he was. Times change and people with them.

The card read –

To Andrew and family

Happy wishes for the festive season

And in it I put a little one page note.

Andrew,

Think of you from time to time and every so often I bore my boy with tales of our adventures. He seems to respond so maybe these are great stories to re-tell. I tell him you're my best mate.

We'll be holidaying down your way in the New Year and if you're around it would be great to catch up. When I think back it was about the same time of year last time I saw you, 11 years ago. I ended up marrying that lady I brought with me back then, and you've seen our son in the photo on the Christmas cards. I heard you've got a bunch of ankle-biters yourself. I would be honoured to meet your wife, if you'll be around in early January.

Sincerely, warm wishes

J.R.

I heard from Andrew with a similarly brief letter enclosed in a Christmas card in return.

Dear Jerry,

Great to hear from you old mate. Has it really been that long? Yes I got hitched, three kids – Andy Jr 8, Leah 5, Aria 2, and number four is on the way. Who would have think it hey? My wife Rachel says no more after this one.

We'll be home throughout January. It's a busy time of year in the nursery. I've enclosed a business card with the home number on the back. Give me a call and let me know when you're in our neck of the woods.

Regards,

Andrew

Come January the drive down the coast was surreal, driving through towns I'd last seen half my life ago. I'd driven this road many times when I was younger, once or twice on surfing trips with Andrew.

We set up camp at Narooma, half an hour's drive from Andrews's home in Bermagui. After two days of fishing and surfing, campfires and tent bedtime chatter with my boy, with some trepidation I phoned Andrew's place. His wife answered. I didn't recall her name, which got the conversation off to an awkward start. I explained who I was, though the term 'best mate' sounded hollow in the circumstances. "Hi Jerry," she said. "Andrew said you might call. I'm Rache' by the way. He's down in the nursery. Can I get him to call you back?"

"Sure," I said.

"When were you thinking of coming over?" she asked.

"Well we're free today."

I left Rache' with a promise I was looking forward to meeting her, though again it sounded hollow. It was hard to get a reading on her. Would I be an unwelcome intrusion, or was I overly sensitive because of the nature of the news I was bringing into her household?

On the drive down to Andrew's my boy must've noticed my distraction, as I went over in my mind what I was going to say. It was big news. I was determined to get it right. I owed it to Andrew, and to the girl who took his eyes and wore them as though something in the distance might light them up at any moment. Shuffling through the photos in my memory, it seemed that moment had been coming all her life. I was determined, for her even more than for Andrew, who I convinced myself would be overjoyed. To have such a fabulous daughter, what could really compare, right?

Despite my fears we arrived to a heartfelt greeting from a soundly pregnant Rache', mustering a brood of three scallywags who welcomed my own son as though fraternity was a congenital trait. Rache' offered us tea, coffee, soft drink and beer, with a warm and open smile. She was a country girl who'd strayed away from it long enough to take a peek at the wide world, and decided the country was where she belonged, a natural woman who seemed invigorated by pregnancy.

Andrew was down in the nursery, a business they'd bought already established, along with this home. She'd take us down to him as soon as she'd plied us with drinks and nibbles. I could see how Andrew had gone for her, homely and giving, yet confident and strong, a contrast to his first wife who'd been a party girl and a fragile go-getter.

Seeing Andrew with a broad toothy smile, elbow deep in manure-ish soil, contented in the work he loved, I knew he had finally found happiness. The joy this brought me I could barely contain, as an enthusiastic handshake gave way to a bearish

hug, something which had only happened once before in the three decades I'd known him.

A lunch invitation turned into a long relaxed afternoon. I was shown around the nursery and the home while the kids played games both in and outside. Rachel's garden was expansive but simple, and punctuated by the sweet summer scent of frangipani in every colour. When he came up from work the kids climbed all over their father and pestered him for promises of walks to the beach and Mr Whippy ice creams.

A relaxed afternoon turned into a dinner invitation and the barbecue was fired. Over the meal memories were rekindled. Rachel teased Andrew by plying me for confirmation on this fact or that. Melanie was mentioned but it was not the right moment. New stories were shared and being made as naturally as they had years ago.

In the evening, with the kids in bed, Rache' put her feet up in front of a romantic movie on TV. Andrew and I retired to his broad front veranda, cool and peaceful respite from the high summer heat, overlooking Rachel's happy garden, with their few acres of nursery spread before us to the north, and vast glimpses of the Pacific and the sound of the surf from the east.

I closed my eyes and breathed it all in, here where there were no girls from back home.