

Don't be a Stranger

Marco hadn't seen anyone for more than three weeks. Not another person anyway. Only the dogs.

He was drying the fry pan, listening to *Norman the Quiz* when the phone hollered. Three right so far, not as good as when the Brains Trust was around, but three's the best he'd got in months. Marco hesitated. Ten minutes of quiz still to go, his cup and plate still on the drainer, benches needing a wipe-down. But it was after dark. He answered, on the eighth ring.

'So you are there,' Jim said.

'Course I am, you idiot, where else am I gonna be?'

'Just had a call from Mrs Malley wanting to know if I'd heard from you.'

Marco clenched his free fist. 'So she rings you, eight hundred ks away?'

'She didn't want to intrude.'

'She should mind her own bloody business.'

'At least she didn't bowl up with a fruitcake.' Jim laughed down the phone.

Marco forced a low chuckle from his chest. 'Chooks would've been grateful.'

'Yeah but not for the pink frosting,' Jim said, a frown in his voice. 'Just go down the hall on Friday, mate. Catch up with some of the locals. Do me a favour.'

'Jesus, Jim.'

'Look, it's not just Mrs Malley who worries. I stopped at the Jones' on my way out last time. They said they never see you, said they wouldn't know if you was dead or

alive.' He paused. 'Look, I hate to see you doing this to yourself. Just go down the Hall on Friday night.'

'You're not gonna let up are you?'

'Nah. And I'm gonna ring up next week, just to check you went.'

'You're not my bloody keeper, Jim.' Marco said before he hung up.

It wasn't new, this conversation. Jim had gone on about it when he'd visited last Christmas.

'Dogs don't have conversations,' he'd said. 'You're forgetting how to talk.'

Marco had said nothing, just swigged his beer. Thing was, Jim could be right. Just seemed there wasn't much worth saying.

'Next step is you start talking to yourself,' Jim said. 'I've seen it happen. Martin Modjeski. Polish bloke, the one I told you about, who found that black opal. Couldn't tell you if it was the sun or the loneliness but he'd walk down Main street discussing bloody world politics with himself.'

Marco had closed his eyes and rocked the chair back and forth, listening to its creak, to the blur of Jim's words. He said nothing. He liked the early evenings, after the sun dipped and the heat started going out of the day.

'You listening, Marco? Or am I talking to myself?' Jim said.

'I'm listening. You just got a lot to say.' He paused. 'Like your Polish friend.'

'You'll go troppo out here on your own.'

'More chance of that before she left.' Marco stood up.

Jim had lasted two days and two nights. Then he'd said he better get back to the family.

Friday after Jim's phone call, Marco went to town. Usual jobs – horse mix, pollard, dog biscuits and bones, UHT milk, bread, tins of spaghetti, baked beans, frozen peas, onions, potatoes, some apples. In the supermarket, he ran into Mrs Malley who stretched up on her orthopaedic shoes and planted her coral lips against his cheek.

‘See you down the Hall tonight, Marco?’ she asked. ‘We all miss you, you know.’

Seemed everyone was telling him to get down the Hall. Everyone except her of course, except Suanne. He'd call in just to shut Jim up. Or he'd be ringing up twice a week, savaging his chances on *Norman the Quiz*. And he would, he'd keep ringing, hassling like he used to when he was a snotty nosed kid. Every day, ten times a day, about a go on the tractor, checking the rabbit traps or about a ride on Marco's Suzuki 250. Marco pushed the trolley towards the cashier. Nothing like that bike, black with flames down the side. And baby, she could go. Hit 140 on the open road. What a beauty. Mrs Malley waved to him from the next check-out; she mouthed a ‘see you later’ or something and he nodded.

Her and Jim. That kind of folks don't ever let up.

So Marco lingered in town and stopped in at the Hall on his way home. He counted five trucks up on the grassy verge. Didn't recognize any of them as that bastard's car. He pulled in next to the lime tree. It was fruiting now. Thanks to that woman from the Salvos who pruned it back after the fires.

It was early, the BBQ hadn't been lit yet, the girls were still in the kitchen shredding cabbage and carrots and boiling red potatoes. Usual blokes were holding up the bar. Old Jonesie shook Marco's hand and stamped his back. Johnno stretched his arm out across the wooden counter to shake his hand. Marco pulled up a stool and ordered a

Tooheys. People came in and slapped his back or shook his hand. He felt like a celebrity, everyone smiled at him, nodded at him, said how pleased they were to see him. The old blokes all wanted to talk. About the price of cattle, about the sale that day, about how many head he was running at the moment. 'Reckon it's the worst season in twenty years,' they said to him and he nodded and shrugged his left shoulder and swigged on beer after beer that someone else bought him.

When Suanne came in with that bastard fencing contractor, he felt a hush and a parting of the Red Sea of people as they moved towards the bar. He hadn't seen her since that day at the solicitor's. She was painted up like a geisha girl with thick black around her eyes and a gaudy lipstick. She smiled and stood beside him. She'd left her buttons undone so low the bulge of her breast was there for all to see. Marco looked away. She still smelled of patchouli. It had taken him a good year to get that smell out of the house. And now he was swamped by it all over again.

'Hello Marco,' she said. 'It's nice to see you.'

The fencer stood beside her, 'Good to see you mate,' he said, his right eye and cheek twitching like they always did when he spoke. It was a mystery what Suanne saw in the bloke.

Marco kept his head down, hunched over his beer. He didn't have anything to say to Suanne or the fencer. They trickled away and someone else was beside him at the bar, like waves on the shoreline he thought, one moves out, another comes in. He couldn't count how many people said, 'Good to see you.' Their words washed over him, around him, he had to get up for air.

Johnno drew the Regulars' board. Marco won.

‘Hey, that’s not fair,’ Smithy said. ‘He’s not a regular no more, we haven’t seen him in years.’

‘He got the draw, it’s his number,’ old Jonesie said. ‘That’s the rules.’

‘Smithy’s right, I’m no regular, draw again.’

‘Name’s still up on the board,’ Mrs Malley said and winked at him with her old lady droopy eyelids.

The way everyone was acting toward him felt like they’d rigged it to make him win. ‘Put the winnings on the bar for everyone,’ Marco said.

‘Thanks mate,’ Johnno said from behind the counter. ‘Call it in honour of Steve.’

Marco nodded. He didn’t have a clue what Johnno was talking about.

Johnno called out, ‘Drinks on the house everyone. For Steve.’ He paused and holding up his stubby, he said, ‘To a good man.’

Marco looked around the room at the raised glasses and stubbies. Mrs Malley smiled at him and then he met Suanne’s eyes, then the fencer, his arm tight around Suanne, smiled at him, nodded at him. Marco dropped his eyes as voices echoed around the hall, ‘To Steve, to Steve.’

‘Steve?’ Marco said to Jonesie, sitting down at the table with a plate loaded with buttered white bread, coleslaw and steak.

‘Dozer driver from Brizzie, got the place up on the corner of Mountain Road. Used to be a weekender til they moved down here, about a year ago,’ Jonesie said.

‘What happened to him?’

Jonesie caught Marco’s eyes, ‘You haven’t heard?’

Marco laughed. ‘Me?’

‘He hung himself, matey,’ Jonesie said, his voice soft, his eyes on Marco. ‘In his shed. They found him Sunday.’

‘No shit.’

‘Poor bastard. Almost finished building. Place big enough for six people, air con, the works. And then the wife took off, about three months ago. Friendly bloke too. Joined the brigade, came to jam sessions. Here every Hall night. Johnno found him. Went up there to see about fixing that bottom dam.’

Marco didn't know what to do with his stubby, whether to take it up to his mouth and drink or put it down on the table. So he held it right where it was, his elbow dangling in mid air and stared straight ahead.

‘Sorry to break it to you,’ old Jonesie said. ‘Bit of a shock.’

Marco shrugged his shoulder. ‘Hardly knew the bloke.’

But he knew him enough. Big guy, button over his belly usually popped open, strong skinny legs like one of those stick figures his niece drew. He and his wife had come over and had a few drinks with him and Suanne when they first bought the block. He remembered that visit, probably the last visitors they had before she left. Suanne had arranged Ritz crackers with chunks of cheddar and her pickled gherkins on her mother's china plate with the chooks laced around the edge.

He'd made some comment about it all being very fancy and she'd snapped at him about there being more to life than beer and three meat and veg around the Jones' table.

Steve had been planning a steel frame shed, same as Marco's. They'd walked around Marco's shed and he'd told Steve if he had his time again, he'd put in a window at the back and an extra bay. Steve had taken the number for the guys who'd built it.

Marco remembered Steve's wife with her ferret face, so short she came up to his chest. She kept harping on in a Pommie voice about the simple life in the country, how they'd bought the block real cheap, planned on using it for short breaks and then building in the next few years. She'd said, 'But only after we finish our round Australia trip.'

Suanne had snorted, giving Marco one of her withering looks. 'Marco doesn't believe in travelling,' she said. 'Ask him when last he left this place for a night.'

Maybe if he'd bought her bloody dream caravan and they'd gone across Australia she wouldn't have left him for a Pommie fencer with super and paid annual leave.

'You want anotherie?' Jonesie said, leaning on the table as he straightened up.

Just then, Suanne's bastard fencing contractor walked over to the table.

'Tooheys,' he said, setting a stubby down in front of Marco.

Marco didn't answer, he didn't take the beer, just left it sitting beside his empty bottle and looked away. Over at the bar a little blonde girl tugged at her mother's hand. He's got nothing to say to the idiot fencing contractor. Not as though he even paid for it; it's courtesy of his win on the Regulars' board. The fencing contractor shrugged and walked outside. Marco watched him go over to Suanne, say something, then she looked back towards the Hall. Marco looked away. The kid had slouched down onto the floor beside her mother now, buried her head in her elbows, sobbing.

Marco felt the penny drop inside him with a thud. Steve's death is why they're all coming on so strong. Mrs Malley ringing up Jim, Jim hassling about him coming down the Hall, Suanne and the fencer shoving an olive branch at him. Steve's death got them all worried. What do they call it? Copy-cat suicides or something.

‘Copper said there might be some questions asked,’ Jonesie said as he sat back down. ‘Bloody waste of time. Sounds like suicide to me. What with the wife leaving, price of cattle worse than it’s been in years.’

Marco could see Steve setting up the ladder, choosing a thick rope, lassoing it over that central beam, same as the central beam in his own shed. He could see Steve climbing up the ladder and knotting the rope over the beam, pulling up on it to check it’d hold him. He’d have had to kick the ladder away once he looped the rope round his neck.

‘Sounds like it,’ Marco said because Jonesie was waiting for him to say something.

But it didn’t sound like anything to him. Except a man without a wife swinging from the beam of his shed, his dogs whimpering.

Jonesie cracked a chop bone in two. Is that how Steve’s neck would’ve sounded after he kicked the ladder away.

Marco sat looking around the Hall, at the ‘community’. Blokes with big beards and beanies. Women who wore petticoats over their jeans. Mrs Malley and the huddle of older girls around the fire with their knitting. Suanne smoking joints outside, throwing the butts into the burning forty-four. The older blokes out at the BBQ, rolling cigarettes and coughing, barefoot kids playing chase, teenagers at the pool table sipping coke and acting drunk.

Stupid idiots, Jim and Mrs Malley. What, they think him coming down here, talking to folks is going to help him stay alive? Didn’t help Steve. All these people and their stupid sympathetic ‘don’t kill yourself, don’t do it too’ glances, thinking they were subtle, that he didn’t realize what was going on. Suanne and the fencer acting pleased to

see him. Of course they were, even their dark souls would feel guilt if he topped himself. All these idiots buying him a beer so he'd know he's got mates. As if that made it worth carrying on with life.

He had to get out quick. He was in a sweat. Too much beer, too much thinking, too lonely here. Didn't make any sense to him, why Steve was dead, why he was still alive. He pushed back his plastic chair from the table. Its legs screeched against the tiled floor and then it toppled backwards.

'You forgot your Tooheys,' Jonesie said, holding up the bastard fencer's gift.

Marco turned away, his heart pounding hard, he took a step towards the wide doorway. He was in a tunnel, his hands stretched out to feel the way through the dark, the voices around him muffled, except for Jonesie calling out from somewhere, 'Don't be a stranger, matey. Don't be a stranger.'