

The Boys Are Back In Town

by Jack Mercy

1. Brothers, beaches and sad dogs

He had me dead in his sights. Though I dared not look his way, I felt his squint-eyed gaze as he focused on my head down the length of his pistol barrel. I sensed his lips were twisted in a grimace of victory.

I was helpless where I sat on the veranda, the arms of the chair in which I lazily reclined feeling like a captive grip entwining me. The door – and safety – lay less than a quick lurch away yet provided no chance of escape from a speeding bullet.

Still I did not risk looking the gunman's way. Instead, I shifted my gaze a fraction in the opposite direction, tilting my face upwards to stare towards the languid afternoon sun in which I had been basking. So be it, I told myself; I had, after all, been blessed with sixty-one years of life. Not lived them quite to the full, perhaps, but it was nevertheless a decent innings.

My killer had no doubt been stalking me for some time, watching with grim satisfaction whenever I dozed off in the balmy air every few minutes. He'd probably smirked whenever the novel in my hands drooped slowly lower and lower, till its ridge met my chin and I jerked upright again. It was the best time for him to strike.

Any moment now his finger would curl tighter round the trigger, bringing the deadly torture to its end. Would I even hear the final explosion?

'Kapoosh!'

Kapoosh? What kind of gun went 'kapoosh'? I swivelled my head towards the cowboy who leaned nonchalantly across the hedge separating my brother's home from his neighbour's. He had tilted back his hat, was blowing at an imaginary spiral of smoke from his pistol barrel. 'You're dead,' he called out in a squeaky six-something voice, though just to make sure he jerked up his weapon and popped off a further two kapooshes in my direction.

I went 'Argh!' and slumped sideways in my recliner; it was the least I could do. When I opened my eyes my killer had disappeared behind the hedge, though I heard him mutter 'Got the fucker'.

My brother, Sam, obviously thought I'd suffered a heart attack or some similar affliction when he stepped out and saw me slumped across the side of the chair. At least, that's what I gathered from the concern in his voice when he said, 'Byron, are you plastered or something?'

Without moving I said to the veranda deck, 'I've been shot. Three times. Kapooshed, they call it these days. I'm a fucker that's been got.' I pushed myself upright and turned to stare at my brother who was shaking his head in dismay.

'There are times when you worry me,' Sam muttered as he settled into the recliner next to mine. He flashed a malicious grin and added, 'You've been here three days and already you're using foul language. There's hope for you yet.'

I knew what he meant; I'd always been the upright son, the one who opened doors – car and otherwise – for visiting aunts and uncles, who never missed Sunday school and who minded his p's and q's. Sam, eight years younger, has always been my complete opposite. All his life he's been trying – without success – to subvert me. He's still not given up, which is what I suspect is the motive behind his invitation to visit. It was his last shot, and he'd chosen his home ground on which to do it.

His telephone call had been our first contact for almost a year – not an unusual time span without a word between us. 'Happy retirement,' had been his opening words. Then had come the invitation: 'Take a break, depart the city and breathe in some fresh sea air down here with me for a while. Plenty of divorcees and widows in this town to keep you occupied.' He'd laughed; it had always amused him that while he'd been through four (tumultuous) marriages and four (expensive) divorces, his older brother had remained a confirmed and not-especially-eligible bachelor.

These few descriptions should give anyone a fair idea of the differences between us. There's more, though; Sam enjoys highlighting the fact that he's only fifty-three while I'm already sixty-one, but I think it's revenge for that stage of his life when he was nine or ten and not permitted to accompany me on my teenage outings. Then, I like to think of Sam as being short, while I am 'not tall'. It's true ... I tower over him by a whole two hundred and sixty-eight millimetres. His response to such wicked comments is that I'll soon reach the stage where my body begins shrinking and sort of bends over, to which I in turn remind him that our father, Ned, is at eighty-eight as straight as a pole.

I like to think that my mother, rest her soul, sensed that Sam would be a completely different kettle of fish even before he was born. Which perhaps explains why she – Ned was given no say in the matter – burdened her first born with a name like Byron while the latecomer was called Samuel, an obvious contender for shortening to a friendly and informal-sounding Sam. I mean, who's going to refer to a Byron as Bye or Ron? Perhaps her choice of awkward name was due to my having been a difficult birth. At least, that's what Ned thinks. Then again, my father has some very strange thoughts about most things.

I remember tackling my mother about my name shortly after his birth. 'Byron,' she said with an edge to her voice, 'go play cowboys and crooks in the garden.' I was savvy enough to know a rational discussion was not on the cards just then, so went to ask Ned. 'Go ask your mother,' he said. I went into the garden where I promptly ambushed and killed five outlaws – all named Sam. I kapowed them dead. (Our guns went 'kapow' and 'bang' in those days). Then I stuck my six-gun in my mouth, squeezed my eyes shut and pulled the trigger. 'Phhhwow,' it sounded before I collapsed backward and crushed my mother's daisy bush.

There is one other difference between Sam and me which should be mentioned. It's not a big deal, as they say, but whereas until my recent retirement I owned and operated a personnel recruitment agency with a not-so-modest bank overdraft, Sam is stinking rich. From an early age he'd demonstrated the knack of wheeling and dealing and became truly professional at it in his early twenties, when during a tour of Germany he came across a little component which was making its appearance in every telephone. How he managed it

and where the finance came from remains a mystery to this day, but somehow he secured the sole South African distribution rights for the component. When the para-statal company which controlled all things telecommunication in the country woke up to the component's desirability, they had no option but to deal with Sam. He'd once explained it all to me – something simple like a plug fitting – but I'd been too envious of his sudden wealth to listen to the finer details. It was worse when our mother went out and had her telephone bronzed, and Sam confessed to me that that particular model did not have his money-making gizmo inside.

In the years since, Sam's been buying up rights to a wide range of products, most of them highly successful and profitable. That much becomes obvious when one considers his lifestyle: a luxurious mansion close to the main beach in one of the country's most fashionable holiday resorts; exotic cars and other assorted vehicles which seem to be updated according to the weather forecasts; nine months of the year spent doing his favourite things, the remaining three cavorting around the globe buying up other people's ideas.

Where he sat now he wore white trousers, white shoes and a white cotton short-sleeved shirt. All that was missing was a white captain's cap. 'Having a good time, are we?' he asked.

'Marvellous,' I lied. I think perhaps my response had something to do with all the times I've had to protect Sam from harm while he was still a kid. I have one tooth propped up with some kind of plastic, courtesy of an eight-year-old Sam's bragging that 'My brother can beat the shit out of your brother.' I have never believed his claim that he had no idea the other kid's brother was seventeen and played front row prop for the school's first rugby team. Worse still, was that Ned insisted I needed some toughening up after that, and I was forced into boxing classes. Three times a week, two hours per session, all kinds of brothers beat the shit out of me.

'Good,' said Sam. 'This retirement thing ... Well, you know what they say.'

I managed to curb a sigh. 'No I don't.'

'You don't? And you were in personnel? It's supposed to be a shock to your system. You know ... suddenly having nothing to do, feeling worthless and so on.'

'Come on, Sam, it's not as if I worked for some big corporation which sidelined me. Besides, I told you it was the offer I received for the business which prompted me into thinking about retiring.'

'Good price, was it?' He'd already asked me that. Three times.

'A fair price,' I told him again. 'Enough, anyway, to keep me from starving till my retirement policies pay out.'

'Mm,' he said, 'only another four years,' subtly reminding me of my advanced age. 'Anyway, to get back to this retirement thing ... they say the effect sometimes takes time before one, you know, becomes aware of it. Then it hits you, and it hits you hard. That's why I thought it'd be good to spend some time away from your normal surroundings.'

That was my Sam; he could be a pompous prick but he had a genuine nice side to him. When it suited him. So I smiled and said, 'I know, Sam, and I appreciate your concern. But I'll be fine. Really.'

'Mm.'

'A few days here will be as good as a three week holiday back in Johannesburg,' I told him. 'By next week I'll probably be raring to get back to the city. I might even start another business,' I added with a reckless chuckle.

Sam glanced quickly at me and then away. 'Next week? Stay longer. A few more weeks. A month, a year ... fucking well retire here if you want. It's a big house.'

I stared at him, long and hard, but he refused to look my way. What was up? Then I realised – or thought I did – what was wrong: the equilibrium of my baby brother's whimsical life had been disturbed in some way. There he was, constantly going on about the effects of my retirement on me, when perhaps he was more aware of how my own state acted as a harsh reminder of the inevitable passage of time. He, too, retirement annuities be damned, was heading slowly and inevitably towards the other side of the hill. Too subtle a rationalisation for Sam? Yes.

I looked at him some more, and then it struck me: Sam was a lonely man. Four wives who had all loved and then liquidated him, scores of women and friends and toys, and the man suddenly realised he was, at heart, lonely. And so he turned to his family ties as refuge. Oh mush. 'Sam, what are you going on about?'

'It's a big house,' he said again.

'So move into something smaller.'

'I need space to park the cars.'

I shut my eyes in relief; there was nothing wrong with him. A momentary lapse, that's all, perhaps a sudden memory of something he had done which landed me in trouble.

Sam, obviously having decided he'd shown enough of his good and kind side for one day, now turned his attention back to my retired life. 'You still having a thing with whatsername?'

This time I let the sigh out, loud and clear. 'Monica.'

'You still having a thing with her?'

I rue the day – it was Sam's fortieth birthday and he threw a big party up in Johannesburg – when I told him about Monica. Ordinarily I would never have shared my delicate secret with him, but we'd both had too much to drink and were turning rather melancholy. Besides, Sam was just coming out of divorce number three and was displaying his good and kind side. So I told him about the only woman I had truly loved since the time I was twenty-eight. He was doing all right with the information till I divulged she was married when I met her, and was still married to the same man, that ours was a deep-rooted love combined with an intense friendship and romantic overtones. Then he had burst into tears, crying, 'The waste, the fucking waste.' For the first time since we were children I placed my arm about my brother's shoulders and drew him close. 'It's hard to explain, Sam, but just being able to love her has made me very happy all these years.'

Now he said, 'All those years while you and whatsername ... how come she never left her husband for you?'

'Because she loved him, that's why.' It wasn't as simple as that, but Sam wouldn't understand. 'There was a child involved, too.'

Sam rubbed his chin. 'She loved him, but she went on making whoopee with you ... for the past thirty-odd years? Jesus!'

'She loved me too,' I said, knowing that would really get Sam going.

It didn't. He shuffled deeper into his chair before turning to me. 'You're a complicated person, you know that?'

From my position on the veranda I had an uninterrupted view over the beach and the bay, all the way from the small fishing village at its eastern extremity to the larger town in which Sam lived. The rugged mountains which hugged the place into a narrow strip of land lay a few streets behind the house, so that when the setting sun splashed them into red and pink they seemed to creep closer and tower over one.

The autumn sun was hastening westwards now, turning the placid sea into a carpet of glistening crystals. On the far shore I could make out the tall silhouettes of Norfolk Pines which seemed to be a feature of the town. It intrigued me that despite the strong winds the Western Cape suffered in winter and early summer, they all somehow had managed to grow straight.

The town was now ticking over at its normal pace, with merely a trickle of mostly foreign tourists who were hardly noticeable across the stretch of the place. The best time to visit, I thought, when the weather was moderate, one could find place to park one's car, enjoy the uncluttered beaches, or merely make the most of the quaint shops and wide variety of eating spots. There was something like forty restaurants, Sam had told me, and more than sixty estate agencies. Most of the shops, too, seemed to cater to the tourist trade. There appeared to be a healthy service industry, though, catering to all these people who made a living from the tourists and the more affluent city dwellers with holiday homes there.

I liked the town, and wished I could have visited it as just another tourist without a rich brother as a host. I would have rented one of the many self-catering cottages, I thought, enjoyed breakfast in a different coffee shop each day, strolled when I wanted to and felt no need to converse with strangers. Not that Sam had so far tried to organise every moment of my day, but there was a constant stream of visitors to each of whom I had to be introduced as 'my older, retired brother'. And each time there were the same questions, the same answers.

'What have you retired from?'

'I owned a small personnel recruitment agency. In Johannesburg.'

'Really? So, are you much older than Sam?'

'Eight years.'

'That's all? Sam acts so young ...'

'Sam was born young.'

Raised eyebrows. 'Sam never mentioned a wife ... Yours, I mean.'

'I'm not married.'

Eyebrows raised higher. 'Oh.'

The sequence sometimes changed, but in essence those were the kind of tell-me-about-yourself approaches I had to contend with.

I glanced across at Sam, who had closed his eyes and seemed to be dozing. I nudged him and said, 'When we were kids, did our guns go "kapoosh" when we played cowboys and crooks?'

I thought he was going to ignore me, but after a while he blinked and straightened in his chair. 'Mine went "bang", as far as I can remember. With soldiers it was something like "tacka-tacka-tack". Automatic weapons. Then Ned bought me a space gun and it went "zip". Why the hell are you asking anyway? By the time I began playing cowboys and crooks you were into hand jobs.'

Now that I thought about it, he and I had never played together. 'Ned bought you a space gun? When was that?' It had always been Ned to us, not Father or Dad.

'Christ, I don't know. Maybe when I was eight, nine. A big fat thing which worked off two torch batteries. You pulled the trigger and a red light flashed along the barrel.'

'And it made a "zip" sound.'

'At the start it made a sort of "clack-clack" noise, but I broke it after a week and came up with the "zip" sound.'

'The only thing Ned ever bought me was a handkerchief. That was the time he took me to the dentist and I had a tooth pulled. I was bleeding all over my shirt, so he popped into a store and came out with a pack of three handkerchiefs.'

Sam pushed himself upright. 'So? Ned bought me things, Mom spent her household money on you.'

'Only because whenever I asked him for something he'd say "Go ask your mother." I tell you, when I matriculated and proudly flashed my certificate at him, he glanced at it and said "Go ask your mother."'

Sam chuckled. 'At least he sent you to university.'

I laughed with him. 'Only because -'

'Yeah, because you asked Mom. You spoken to him lately?'

I shook my head. Since my mother's death twenty years ago Ned had been living in an upbeat retirement village near Cape Town, courtesy of Sam the second born. He was a sprightly and cranky old man although not quite in charge of all his mental faculties – at least not all the time. He remained a somewhat crusty bugger with a real 'Go ask your mother' attitude to people and the world in general. He still smoked – Winston cigarettes – imbibed whisky freely, and was a dead ringer for George Burns. I could just imagine the complaints the controlling committee received from other residents – especially the widows. Ned had a harsh and rough tongue.

'Does he know you've retired? No? Shame on you ... just because he never bought you a space gun.' He poked me in the ribs and went, 'Zip! Zip!'

I slapped his fingers away, said, 'Clack-clack.' He was such a silly twit.

We sat there some more, Sam telling me how over long weekends and during the December vacation the town changed from a sleepy hollow into a frantic buzz of activity. 'It's a bloody nightmare,' he said. 'God alone knows where they all find place to sleep.'

Vacations. They had always been a depressing time for me – simply because Monica and I would be apart. It was silly, really; throughout the year there were often long periods – weeks, sometimes – when we would not be together or even see each other. Yet I had known she was there, in the same city, a secret telephone call away, or perhaps there being the chance I'd come across her at the local shopping centre we both frequented. Vacations and holidays were somehow a harsh reminder that she was not truly mine, that others laid claim to her. It made me jealous. Most unreasonable, but there it was.

I'd somehow thought the partings would get easier with time, as it should have once our urgent passions of the first few years settled into a more easygoing relationship. Heaven knows, how often over the last ten or more years hadn't we been together with little more than a hug and a kiss ending a night at the theatre or a candlelit dinner at some cosy restaurant? Not for us the constant need to let our bodies confirm the bond between us. Ours was way beyond a squalid affair. Yet, let Monica be beyond my reach and I was

like a petulant schoolboy whose love had been spirited away by parents with no understanding of the pain they caused.

It was not as if I was racked with visions of Monica and her husband, relaxed on their holiday, slipping into each other's arms and bodies. No, that sort of torture had not occurred since the first few years of our relationship. Of course they made love to each other – had done so all the time during my relationship with her. She'd told me so.

Her marriage had never been one of those loveless ones, she was merely one of those women who was truly in love with two men. What was rare though, was that she knew how to handle it. And I had been content to take what I could get. Because I loved her. But, holidays ... those were times I lost perspective of things.

Now I was alone on holiday again, yet for some reason it felt different. As it should: I had finished with a major share of my life when I sold the business, and I'd still had no real time to come to terms with what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

I must have frowned, for Sam gave me a 'zip' in the ribs and said, 'Cheer up! Missing her already, are we? By the way ... were there ever other women?'

'For heaven's sake, Sam, why all the interest in my sex life?'

He grinned. 'Hey, you're my big brother, aren't you? So, were there?'

I hoped my glare made it clear I would not answer him, but I was thinking that, yes, there had been others. I might have been a bachelor, but I was by no means a lonely one. I enjoyed a wide circle of friends, was considered reasonably sophisticated and an interesting conversationalist with a sense of humour. There were many invitations, to private functions where I evened out the pairs, to gallery openings or premieres. Of course there were other women, ones I was physically and cerebrally attracted to. None of those encounters resulted in drawn out affairs, though one or two were repeated from time to time. Perhaps I should also point out that I'm not a bad looking sort, though I must admit Sam is without doubt the handsome one of us.

He had let my silent response to his last question drag on, but now he said, 'Good, I'm happy for you that a few others were graced by your gift of romance. It broadens the mind.'

I laughed. 'Is that why your wives all divorced you? Because you were broadening your mind?'

'Hell, no. At least, not with wives one to three. They threw that irreconcilable differences shit at me.'

'And number four? Carolyn, was it?'

'Heather. Carolyn was number three. I was the one who divorced her. Heather, that is.'

'Was she broadening her mind?'

Sam shook his head, as if it were inconceivable that any woman of his would even look at another man. 'She became a downright bore, that's all; sort of let herself go just because she now had a husband. So I made her an offer she couldn't refuse. I didn't mention the true reason in court, though. That would have been cruel.'

I stared at Sam the gentleman who divorced his wives kindly. 'I think I'll go for a walk on the beach,' I said and pushed myself to my feet. 'You going to join me?'

'Good idea. We can take the Land Cruiser.'

'It's close enough to walk, Sam.'

He stared at me in a strange way. 'Oh,' he said as the penny dropped, 'You're talking physical exercise. Getting sand on your feet and stepping over washed up kelp and dead jellyfish. That sort of thing?'

'That sort of thing, yes.'

'See you later, then,' he said and disappeared inside the house.

I was still shaking my head by the time I reached the garden gate. When I turned to glance back at the house it was a movement from next door which caught my attention. Not the kapoosh killer this time, but a mottled brown cat which had positioned itself on a second storey window sill. As I watched, it strolled back and forth along the sill, studying the ground far below it. 'Careful, kitty,' I murmured seconds before the cat hurled itself from the window sill into space.

'Jesus!' I cried. I rushed towards the fence where my would-be killer had stalked me, praying the animal was not badly injured. I peered over the fence to find the cat sitting quite relaxed on the grass, licking one of its front paws. It became aware of my presence, stopped washing, and stared at me with a 'Something I can help you with?' expression. Then it stood, arched its back, flashed its little pink hole at me and walked languidly off.

'You still here?' came Sam's voice from behind me.

I told him about the cat. 'I thought the fall might hurt him.'

Sam laughed. 'Damn thing didn't fall, it jumped. That's Bungee Ben ... he does it all the time, sort of like bungee jumping without a rope. Cat's off its rocker, if you ask me.'

I glanced back towards where Bungee Ben had stopped to wash his other front paw. Perhaps Sam was right; it had seemed more like a planned leap than a fall. Perhaps even animals living in close proximity to my brother tended to pick up strange ways.

When I started back for the gate Sam had engaged his gardener and general handyman in conversation. A coloured man of indeterminate age but certainly no youngster, he bore a name aptly suited to the exotic nature of his working environment: Afrika Windvogel.

I had been introduced to Afrika Windvogel on my first night there, and afterward had received instructions from Sam that I was to exercise extreme caution in my dealings with him. 'The man's a first class gardener,' Sam had explained, 'when he's sober, that is. He can wash and polish a car like nobody's business ... when he's sober. He's reliable and loyal ... when he's sober.'

'And when he's drunk?'

'He's a raving lunatic. I sometimes lock him in his room for a day or two.'

'Does he get drunk often?'

Sam seemed to think about that. 'Every two weeks or so, usually. More regularly during seasons when there're guests in the house. Windvogel doesn't handle pressure very well.'

'When is his next drunken spell due?' I had asked.

'A day or two's time. He doesn't get violent, if that's what's worrying you. Just makes a total fool of himself.'

'When he does it again,' I asked Sam, 'could I watch? Before you lock him up?' Sam had responded with a 'At your own risk' type of shrug.

Being sober, Afrika Windvogel was dressed now in brown corduroy trousers and a khaki shirt. He wore a battered sweat-stained felt hat. He spotted me and doffed it. 'Mister Byron,' he called out merrily.

My response of, 'Mister Windvogel,' caused a broad, gap-toothed smile and hoarse chuckle of delight before he turned back to my brother, whom I had heard him address as Mister Sam.

Leaving the two exotics to get on with their business, I entered the milkwood forest which lay between Sam's house and the beach. Sandy trails crisscrossed it in all directions, inviting one to explore the cool stretches beneath the trees. All in good time, I thought, removing the beach thongs I wore so I could enjoy the feel of the fine-grained white sand beneath my feet. Tender feet, I realised a few yards further on when I stepped on a stick and yelped with pain. I walked more cautiously after that, stopping to inspect some of the interesting undergrowth and becoming intrigued by the variety of non-flora items such as discarded panties and condoms. Someone had carved 'Fuk' into the bark of a milkwood, a sad sign of the times which heralded illiterate disrespect for a protected tree species. Two trees on, what I gathered to be the same author had attempted to rectify his mistake and expand upon his message by carving 'Good fukk'. I studied each tree after that to learn whether it had been a Babra, Soozin, Alis or Joody who had inspired the author, but he had obviously accepted his limitations and given up.

The trail I followed exited on to a tarred road across which I walked on tiptoe, hoping no one was watching my attempt to prevent the rough surface from punishing my city soles. I could have donned my thongs, of course, but that would have ruined what I thought of as a sense of adventure which had me in its grip. Once across the road I walked over a wooden bridge, erected, Sam had told me when we first drove down there, to protect the sand dunes and their sparse growth from the hordes of tourists who parked their cars on the road and then trampled over everything to get to the beach. Constructed from recycled plastic, he had added, explaining how the first bridges, made of real wood, had been torn apart so that fires could be lit among the milkwoods where people made 'good fukks'.

Recycled plastic or not, the carvers had been busy there as well, but I ignored their messages and stepped on to the soft sand. I also stepped on a bottle top which caused another yelp to burst from my lips. This adventure thing, I thought, was not all it was made out to be.

A sea mist, almost a fog, had developed rapidly since I left the house and now floated in from across the waves, brushing my skin with damp tentacles. It smelled of salt, ozone, and what I thought of as the aroma of youthful holidays. I tried to recall seaside holidays when Sam and I had been children, but the only vision of one I could conjure up was the time Ned and our mother had taken us to Margate on the Natal South Coast. It had rained all ten days we were there, Sam had been an unspeakable little brat, Mom and Ned had quarrelled – rather, Mom had quarrelled with Ned who skulked silently behind his newspaper – and I had been bored out of my skull. I had been fifteen or sixteen then, madly missing my first girlfriend whose parents had remained in Johannesburg for the holidays. The only other thing I could remember from that time was asking Ned when we were going home. 'Go ask your mother,' he had replied.

I wondered what kind of holidays Sam had. Despite his many marriages there was only one child, a daughter, resulting from his marriage to Belinda, wife number two. Or had she been number one? No, that had been the tall one ... Abby, or something like that. That was right, A for Abby, then B for Belinda, followed by C for Carolyn. Then had come

Heather ... Sam would have made things much easier for all concerned if he'd stuck to the alphabet.

Whatever, Sam had got it right with the daughter. I adored Trasi, beautiful, brainy and witty Trasi. I adored her not just because of the kind of person she was, but because she adored me in turn. It had been that way since she'd been a little girl, despite our having seen each other infrequently. My life had brightened considerably when she'd studied in Johannesburg and Sam had called to ask me to keep an eye on her. What a pleasure to discover how the delightful girl had matured into a remarkable young woman. We'd sort of kept an eye on each other, Trasi phoning me at least twice a week, inviting herself around for dinner and even weekends. We enjoyed the same things, avidly shared the same interests. I'd even told her about Monica, and Trasi had cried from the pure romance of it. I'd sometimes wondered, though, what the neighbours thought whenever Trasi stayed overnight. She hadn't made things easier either; she had a mischievous streak and made a point of hanging on to me like a lover whenever we were outside and prying eyes peered through drawn curtains. What probably made it worse was that she always called me by my name – it was never 'Uncle Byron'.

The fun in my life was dramatically diminished when after completing university she had taken up a public relations position in Cape Town. It had been the first time I felt truly lonely, to the point where I began philosophising about the absence of children in my life. It was a fleeting phase, thank heavens, and things improved when Trasi began visiting Johannesburg regularly on business. By then she was romantically involved with a lecturer at the Cape Technical College, and our time together was spent mostly on discussing the intricacies and vagaries of love. I didn't mind; at least I was the one she trusted for advice. It had made me feel superior to Sam who at that stage was busy divorcing the one who bored him.

Then Trasi's romance had gone sour and I'd consoled her at Johannesburg airport where she waited for her flight which would take her to a new position in London. I'd seen her just once in the last twelve months and missed her terribly. I decided I'd talk to Sam about her that night; perhaps we could telephone her.

The fog thickened as I strolled on, passing people out walking their dogs. A plump little dachshund deserted its owner and fell in beside me, accompanying me for a hundred metres or so before its absence was discovered and a cry of 'Eisbein! Here, Eisbein!' cleaved its way through the dense air. The dachshund and I stopped. 'Eisbein?' I said to the dog who whined and looked at me with a 'Now do you understand?' plea in its eye. Its ears seemed to sag to the ground as it turned and waddled reluctantly back to its owner, an elderly woman holding a cane.

Only when poor Eisbein had disappeared into the mist did I walk on. An Alsatian nearly gave me a heart attack when it charged me, but I relaxed when its owner called out 'Heel, Kaiser!' and I realised I was dealing with a well-adjusted dog at peace with itself and merely intent on having a jolly good time on the beach. He circled me a few times and almost broke my leg with a flick of his playful tail, then darted back to do his 'heel' thing.

Over the next two hundred metres I encountered a nameless Bassett, a Jack Russell called Chump, a seagull which, with a sudden burst of inspiration I baptised Nelson, and a jellyfish which I prodded with a stick. There was also an assortment of shells and wriggly things to demand my attention when I rolled up my trouser legs and waded into the icy surf. When my ankles began paining I returned to the dry sand.

Twenty minutes later the fog had lost some of its mystique by turning plain cold and wet, so I decided to abandon my adventure and head for home. I donned my beach thongs when I reached the road and studied the milkwoods hidden in mist. They seemed suddenly eerie, as if all manners of carvers might lurk there. I told myself how silly it was for a sixty-one-year-old man to think such things, then promptly followed the road up and around the hill. It was a much longer walk, but I convinced myself I should explore as much terrain as I could. That was it, of course – it had nothing to do with the spooky appearance of the milkwoods.

Halfway up the hill I turned right into the cul de sac which brought one to Sam's place. I thought I heard Chump the Jack Russell bark from further up the hill, but I could have been mistaken. It might even have been the nameless Bassett; Eisbein, I was sure, never barked.

Afrika Windvogel was still in the garden when I opened the gate. Remembering Sam's warning about 'extreme caution' I tried to pass him undetected, but he spun round suddenly, doffed his hat and called out, 'Mister Byron'. I gave him my nod and said, 'Mister Windvogel', which in turn evoked the gap-toothed smile and hoarse chuckle.

'I have dug a hole,' he announced.

This statement made it difficult to avoid further interaction. I glanced towards the house before approaching the exotic with what I felt were extremely cautionary steps. 'Yes, that's a hole all right,' I said when I stopped beside him. Windvogel, resting his arms on the spade, nodded in agreement. Moving one hand from the spade he pointed to each corner of the rectangular hole, then glanced back at me, his expression indicating some form of response was justified. I tried to determine what the silent finger-pointing exercise implied and decided it had something to do with the precise rectangular measurements with which the hole had been dug.

I stepped closer and peered into the hole. Windvogel and I both peered into the hole. I glanced at him and nodded, which appeared to satisfy him for he grinned and straightened his shoulders proudly. The cloak of adventure descended upon me once more, and I asked, 'Why did you dig this very fine hole, Mister Windvogel?'

Windvogel continued to stare into the hole. After about thirty seconds he raised his eyes and looked off into the mist, a deep frown shaping itself on his features. His final answer was a shrug.

It was time for extreme caution. 'A mighty fine hole,' I murmured and sped for the house.

Sam was in the kitchen, inspecting the evening meal which Diana, the daily help, had prepared for us. 'I think we should eat out,' he said. 'This is not up to scratch.'

'Windvogel's dug a hole,' I told him.

He shut his eyes. 'Not again,' he muttered. 'Damn fool's always digging holes. Means I've got to go out and buy a rose bush or something to stick in it. Where is it?'

'The hole? Down there, near the gate.' I pointed out the window to where Windvogel was studying his hole. Sam did not bother to look, saying only that Windvogel had a passion for digging holes. 'It's no wonder my garden looks like a landscaper's nightmare. At least he's dug his damn hole in a reasonable spot this time. What do you think we should put in it – a shrub?'

'It's your garden.'

'What do I know about gardens? That's Windvogel's baby.'

'Let him put something in there then.'

'What? Send Windvogel into town with money? He'll come back with booze and probably bury the empties in there when he's done.'

'He buys booze anyway,' I reminded him. 'At least, if what you said about his regular drinking bouts is true.'

'It's true – believe me. But, let's not tempt fate. *You* go buy a shrub or something tomorrow.'

'Why don't both of us buy it?'

'Because I'm going to Cape Town. Business, you understand? I'd take you along, but it's going to be meetings and so forth all day long. Please, Byron, you buy the fucking plant or whatever. I'll pay for it, of course. You can use the Porsche.'

I glanced towards the row of garages. Me, driving a Porsche? 'Isn't there something simpler I could use?'

Sam thought about that. 'I like taking the Land Cruiser to the city ... why not use the Merc SLC?'

'Anything simpler still? Like where one actually winds down the windows oneself and moves around that little stick thing on the floor?'

Sam blinked. 'They still make cars like that?'

'What does Windvogel use when he runs errands?'

'A bicycle. You can't fit a shrub on it.'

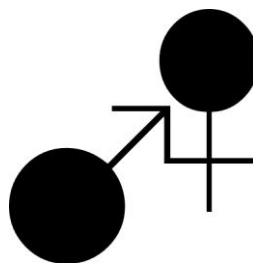
'Nothing else? I count five garages.'

Sam stroked his chin. 'There's a vintage Bentley, but I'm waiting for some chap to fit a thingie that moves up and down in its engine.'

'A piston?'

'Sounds about right. Well, that leaves the ... what the hell is it again? Heather's thingamabob. Don't know why I haven't got round to flogging it yet. She took her Saab convertible when we split, but I suppose she forgot about the ... whatever. Go take a look.'

It turned out to be a fire engine red Mazda MX5. 'I am mobile,' I breathed with relief as I shut the garage door.



[You can get the Kindle version of this novel here.](#)

2. Broads and pub crawling dogs

I managed to persuade Sam his housekeeper's meal looked quite appetizing and that we should eat at home, but by eight o'clock, his stomach full, he was showing signs of becoming ever more restless. I suspected it had something to do with no visitors having pitched up; an older brother's company had just so much to offer.

This was confirmed when he jumped up and said, 'Where the hell is everybody tonight? I'll raise hell if there's something on and I haven't been invited.'

'Aren't there ever nights where people don't drop in?'

Sam blinked at me in amazement. 'I stock only the best Scotch.'

'Anything free is always the best,' I murmured to myself. I'd yet to see anyone arrive with a bottle in hand. I waited till my brother took a temporary seat before suggesting we telephone Trasi. He did not respond at first, but after about half a minute glanced at his watch and said, 'It's around seven in London. She'll probably be having dinner.'

'She might be having it at home,' I prompted.

'Doubt it, she's a popular girl.'

'You're a popular man,' I retorted, 'and you ate at home tonight.'

'Only because I didn't want to hurt Diana's feelings. When last did you speak to her?'

'This afternoon, when I asked about the sauce she was preparing for the meal.'

'Not Diana, you twit.'

I flashed what I hoped was an evil grin – I'd discovered I enjoyed niggling Sam. 'Um, about two months ago.'

Sam nodded. 'It was still the computer programmer then, was it?'

'Yes. Andrew something or other. True love this time.'

'You're out of touch, old son. She's moved on to real estate. Tycoon Terry or something equally devious sounding.'

That hurt; why had Trasi elected to tell Sam but not me? I'd always been the one she turned to for advice on romantic matters. I felt a little better when Sam explained he'd visited her during his last trip to London. Still, she could have called me.

I was about to suggest again that we telephone when the doorbell rang. Sam almost ran to open it. Two women stood there. 'Bloody hell,' said Sam, his face lighting up now there was some action, 'what's with this doorbell ringing nonsense?'

One of the woman, who I recognised from the group who'd descended on the house my first night there, fluttered her hand at me before waltzing up to Sam. I remembered her more clearly now; her name was Evonne – she'd made sure I understood the correct spelling of it – and she'd kept harping on about 'A genuine bachelor? Are you sure?' I'd got the impression she and Sam had quite a thing going between them.

She and Sam kissed wetly and hugged. Then, arm around Sam's neck, she turned and fluttered her hand at me again. 'Gail,' she said to the other woman, 'that's Byron, Sam's brother.'

'Older brother,' added Sam.

'Retired,' I said. I judged Gail to be in her mid-forties, slim and attractive, elegantly dressed. She smiled, stepped forward and extended her hand. I warmed to her

immediately; I've always liked women who are prepared to shake hands. Her grip was strong, and I noticed her forearms were well muscled. Tennis, I guessed.

'Squash,' she said, a twinkle in her eye. I gave an embarrassed laugh and released her hand.

'We thought you boys could do with some company,' Evonne was saying as she steered Sam towards the drinks cabinet, adding that it would be Scotch for her and dry white wine for Gail.

'You arrived like the bloody cavalry,' Sam replied.

Gail and I watched them in awkward silence, standing in the same position as when we'd shaken hands. I felt it was too close for strangers – especially strangers who did not seem to know what to say next. I called on my interesting and witty conversational skills and said, 'So, here we all are.' This I reinforced with a soft clap of my hands. I clapped them again while I searched for my next intellectual line. It came in a flash: 'My mother's name was Gail.'

'Really?'

I nodded. 'She was Sam's mother as well, of course.' I'd hoped a little 'Ha, ha' from her side would round that off nicely, but she merely smiled. 'He's never mentioned that to you?'

There was no doubting the amusement in her eyes when she rescued me by taking a seat on the sofa. 'No, he never did,' she said. Her legs, when she delicately crossed them, were most attractive. This squash thing undoubtedly had its merits.

I took the chair opposite her and immediately felt less apprehensive now that a reasonable space separated us. My response irked me; I seldom felt uncomfortable with women – even when they were as attractive as Gail. Perhaps it had something to do with my being a guest of Sam's; my encounters with the opposite sex had always taken place on what could be described as home ground. 'I'm here on holiday,' I explained unnecessarily. 'It's sort of a retirement present from Sam.'

The woman really had a lovely warm smile. 'I know,' she said, glancing to where Sam and Evonne were pouring the drinks. 'Evonne has already given me the low-down on you, as they say.'

'Oh,' I said and did my hand-clapping thing again. 'Oh.'

'You're eight years older than Sam, which I suppose makes you around –'

'Sixty-one,' I said quickly.

'I also know you're a bachelor, and there's something else ... can't remember what it is.'

'That I'm very different to my brother?'

She laughed. 'That much is obvious.'

I was at ease now, able to look her in the eye. I also looked at the rest of her when Evonne and Sam returned with the drinks and they began talking to her about the latest affair in town. She was a blonde, a natural one I decided. Her hair had obviously been cared for by a professional, yet it looked entirely natural. Some subtle colouring, I guessed, and I liked the way a soft wave seemed slightly out of balance with the rest of it.

I lowered my gaze to my glass when she suddenly turned to me and said, 'You've probably already realised this is a society where we thrive on meaty scandals and rumours. It's no different to the city or anywhere else really, it's just that ... well, little things just seem bigger, that's all. More noticeable, I suppose.'

'That's understandable,' I murmured and took a sip of wine. I wondered what else Evonne had said about me, and got my chance to ask when Sam dragged her off to show her the remains of our dinner, saying, 'This is the kind of stuff Diana dishes up lately. Perhaps you can give her some pointers, old girl.'

Forgetting my intention to delve deeper into the 'me' subject, I said to Gail, 'There was nothing wrong with the meal, Sam just likes to make a fuss.'

'I know.'

'You're a close friend of his?'

She shook her head. 'More of an acquaintance. Evonne and I are friendly, though. I know she appears a bit flighty at first, but she's really a good sort.'

I smiled. 'She seems intrigued by my bachelorhood.'

'So am I. You're a very attractive man, so it's obviously by choice.' She spoke without any embarrassment, and I knew she was not flirting with me, merely saying what she felt. I decided Evonne was a great chum for having brought this delightful woman round to meet me, a real good sort.

I fought the urge to clap my hands together and instead asked a stupid question: 'Are you local?'

She stroked her chin and gazed pensively at the ceiling for a few seconds. 'Um, in the physical sense, yes. For the past three years. It takes a lot longer than that for the real locals, those who've been here longer, to accept you as one. Especially someone like me.'

I realised I was leaning forward and forced myself back in my chair. 'What do you mean, someone like you?'

'Divorced, my dear Byron. There're a few dozen like me who got the old holiday home as part of the settlement. We sort of hang about the place, living off our alimony, doing nothing in particular to warrant the status of "local."'

'Good heavens,' I said in mock amazement, 'Do you mean you're an unemployed socialite? I knew one of those once.'

She gave her delightful little laugh. 'We get together to play bridge, or gather in coffee shops and take the town apart ... verbally, of course. The rest of the time we respond to invitations. It's frightfully challenging being a well-off vagrant, you know.'

Evonne entered the room with Sam in tow. 'Oh, good,' she said, 'it's so nice to see the two of you getting along. You are getting along, aren't you?'

'Oh yes,' replied Gail with a little wink at me, 'I was just telling Byron about my easy life as a successful failure.'

'Oh, rubbish,' snapped Evonne. 'You're not a failure, dear, just an unsuccessful wife. There's a huge difference.'

Gail arched her eyebrows at me. 'The woman's a true philosopher ... I'd never thought of it that way. I've been very successful at being an unsuccessful wife ... my ex husband's a marvellously rich industrialist who's paying handsomely for his indiscretion. A youthful indiscretion, I must add ... she's twenty-two.' Though she had spoken without bitterness, I sensed she had not yet fully come to terms with her new status in life. There had to be suitors, surely? Someone as attractive as Gail would have no difficulty in finding someone else to fill the void in her life. Which reminded me that I was, in a sense at least, her blind date for the night.

This was confirmed when, after finishing our drinks, we all piled into the Land Cruiser and headed for town. 'Don't expect anything dynamic,' warned Sam.

It was the first time I'd been away from the house at night, and I used the ride to study the suburbs we drove through along the way. The area close to Sam's house seemed very dark, identifying it as an area comprising mainly holiday and weekend homes. Gail, seated next to me, noticed my observation. 'The more expensive the property,' she said, 'the less chance of life out of season. That's why there're more lights the further away you get from the seafront. The ordinary locals live there,' she added.

'And you?' I asked with a smile, 'Where does an unsuccessful wife who's not quite local live?'

'Ah, let's keep that one as a surprise, shall we? Till tomorrow at least. I'll give you a call, show you around. That okay with you?'

I nodded that it was fine, then remembered the plant-buying task assigned to me. 'I'll be out for a while in the morning,' I told her. 'Visiting nurseries. Sam wants me to buy a shrub or something.'

'What kind of shrub?'

'Um, something to fit in a hole. I still have to measure it. The hole, I mean.'

'One of Windvogel's?'

'You know about Windvogel's penchant for digging holes?'

'Yes. Don't worry, they're always the same size. A very precise man, is our Windvogel.' She stared out the window then added, 'Tell you what, I'll come by after breakfast, take a look at where his latest hole has been dug, and we can go shopping for the right plant or shrub or whatever. I'm not a bad hand in the garden.'

That suited me down to the ground; my gardening experience extended to replacing pot plants which died every three weeks or so. And the thought of spending a morning with such a delightful woman was most appealing.

'I'm not being too pushy, am I? I mean, just say if you have other plans.'

'No plans,' I assured her.

We had entered the main road leading into town. The street lights were sodium, the remaining fog clinging to them casting their glow in a diffused light. It was quite eerie, especially with the many darkened houses and the occasional car which passed from the front.

There was a bit more life when we reached the town centre and neon signs proclaimed the presence of restaurants, places of accommodation, and sundry commercial messages. 'Where are we headed?' I asked Sam.

'Depends,' came the response.

This led to the Land Cruiser trundling down Main Road, slowing to inspect the parked cars as we passed restaurants and pubs. Sam and Evonne would confer each time the engine revolutions dropped below two thousand per minute. Their conferences took the form of, 'Arthur's car ... not in the mood for the silly bugger,' or 'Looks like Francis and Greg are going public. Could be fun – what do you think?', or 'How dare he show his face here after what happened last week?'

As the conferences were expanded to the side streets, I was again amazed to learn how many eating and drinking establishments there were in such a small town. Nothing seemed to satisfy, however, and we made our way back into Main Road before finally coming to a halt outside a small but cosy looking restaurant at the end of the commercial centre. The sign above the door proclaimed it as:

Aunty M's

'Nothing much happening,' declared Sam as he opened his door. 'Might as well get the action started.'

'We've just eaten, Sam,' I reminded him as I clambered out, pleased to see Gail slide along the seat behind me. It was nice the way she laid her hand on my shoulder as she stepped out of the high vehicle.

'We're not here to eat,' she told me.

I looked at the place again. Yes, definitely a restaurant. Then again, restaurants had pubs.

We had to walk through the dining area to get there, which involved being stopped at the reception desk where a young woman asked whether we required a table for four. Sam gave her a look as if she had just demanded to see his ID. 'No, my dear,' he said, 'we need a bar counter long enough for the four of us to sit at. You had one of those the last time I was here.'

The counter was indeed long enough for the four of us – as well as for the three other patrons already seated there. Three patrons plus a dog, actually, one of those who could claim the influence of a boisterous Beagle somewhere in its family's past.

Sam and the women seemed to know the men there, for as we walked in there was a series of nods followed by the traditional 'How're you?', which in turn was responded to by an 'Okay, thanks. You?' This elicited an 'I'm fine, thanks' from the first party.

Sam herded us towards the first four bar stools, but being a knowledgeable conversationalist and seasoned socialite, I did not sit down and instead rearranged them into a semicircle – a far better situation in which to face my date of the night. I hoped my move would impress Gail; it was the kind of body language employed by a skilled and confident communicator.

It seemed the hound, at least, took note. He lifted himself off the floor and sauntered closer for a better look. He gazed up at me with bleary eyes filled with a 'Jeez, you're weird' expression.

It was worth the rumpus; Gail's legs now faced me, and as I've already mentioned, they were class stompers. She saw me looking at them and smiled. The hound at my feet flapped its ears.

A man with a large white apron tied round his waist waltzed in from around the corner. A bartender. Good. I had noticed there was no one to serve us.

'Evening Sam,' he said.

'Hello, Ivan.'

'How're you?'

'Fine thanks. You?'

'Well, thank you.'

'Good, good!'

Sam and the bartender nodded confirmations at each other before Sam placed an order without consulting any of us, which was fine by me as I expected him to pay for the round. When it came to my turn, I'd display the manners of a true gentleman and at least ask what the others wished to drink. Evonne seemed to be riveted by my brother's masterful ways, for she kept her eyes on him while he supervised the pouring of the drinks. This was also fine by me; Gail and I could now enjoy an uninterrupted conversation.

'I'll be with you in a moment,' she said as I opened my mouth to speak. She slid gracefully off her seat and stepped around the corner which I assumed led to a passage which in turn led to the rooms of relief.

I stared down at the hound. He yawned.

Sam passed me my drink, then ignored me and began flirting with Evonne. Fine by me. I passed the time waiting for Gail's return by studying – discreetly, of course – the other patrons. The owner of the Beagle sort of dog was involved in negotiations with the bartender regarding the purchase of a drink. Nothing out of the ordinary, except that what I identified as a yellow Kraft margarine bowl seemed to play a role in this. The man prodded it forward with his finger. 'I'll drink till that's finished,' he told the bartender, who eyed the yellow bowl suspiciously. Again a long forefinger reached out and tapped it an inch or two further along the counter top.

The bartender sighed and flipped off the container's plastic lid. There was a soft plop as it came free. I leaned closer, as did the bartender who dug inside with his fingers and flicked a pile of coins around before selecting enough for the man's drink. I half expected the bowl to be properly sealed again, but the man left it open in anticipation of it financing another round – the sign of a born optimist. I wondered why on earth he would choose a margarine bowl as a purse; it did not exactly fit snugly inside one's pocket. On the other hand, it would fool most muggers – unless he came up against one with a loaf of dry bread stashed away somewhere.

Gail's return prevented me from dwelling on the idiosyncrasies displayed by many of the town's inhabitants I had encountered so far. She, at least, seemed quite normal, even if she was an unsuccessful wife. I rearranged my posture so that my stomach made a reasonably firm display and smiled at her while I thought up a witty opening line.

She beat me to it. 'I think Monty has taken a fancy to you,' she said.

'Who?'

'Monty.' She indicated the floor with a slight movement of her pert chin.

I stared down into the soulful eyes of the Beagle sort of dog. 'That's Monty?'

'The one and only, the scourge of every pub in town. Mind you, there's one place where I've seen the owners actually allow him behind the bar. He gets to sing for a slice of dried beef.'

'The dog sings?'

'More of an off-tune howl, I'd say. Pretty amusing for about thirty seconds.'

'And he belongs to the man two chairs behind me, the one with the margarine bowl?'

'Keith. He and Monty hang out together, is the way he puts it. The dog starts checking out the pubs in search of him from about five o'clock each afternoon.'

For a brief moment I was tempted to test Monty's singing abilities, then decided I'd had enough of oddball dogs (and their masters) for one day. Besides, becoming better acquainted with the alluring Gail was a far more attractive proposition just then.

Three rounds of drinks later I began wondering whether it wouldn't have been safer going the Monty route. Gail had become more than alluring – by now I found her downright desirable, disproving again the myth that men my age suffer a fading libido. I'm rational enough to admit there has been a certain degree of dwindling in lust over the years, and I'd certainly not claim to be a star bedroom performer. But, my eye is still caught by a flash of thigh or the graceful curve of well rounded calf and my pulse certainly knows how to quicken as a result. Gail's appendages were in the gold star category which

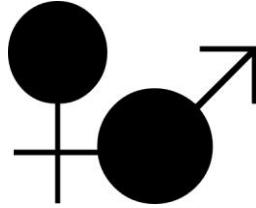
threw the old pulse rate into a frenzy. Clinging to rationality, I told myself I'd had too much to drink.

It didn't help.

I also tried desperately to conjure up thoughts of Monica so that a guilty conscience might help bring matters under control.

To no avail.

When we left the pub shortly before midnight, I was like a little boy who couldn't wait to lay his hands on a promised present. Only problem was, I'd received no such promise except for an arranged glimpse of the packaging the following morning.



[You can get the Kindle version of this novel here.](#)

3. New plants, new arrivals

I am not a big or practised drinker, so when Sam woke me at the crack of dawn with a cup of steaming coffee, I was more than a little slow-witted. Having my brother serve me coffee in bed on any day was enough cause for confusion, but the throbbing pain inside my head and behind my eyelids almost sent me into relapse. The loud groan which escaped my lips sounded as if it had come from a stranger.

My distress seemed to cause Sam great amusement. 'At least you overindulged in one area only,' he said with a smirk. 'Christ, you're a lascivious old fart.'

I made some unintelligible retort which produced a 'Zip! Zip!' response in return. Had my infatuation with the glamorous Gail been that obvious? It must have – I could not recall having placed my hand on her knee or being guilty of some equally forward and ungentlemanly physical display, but I had no doubt I'd worn one of those prominent sheepish expressions men – young and old – don when the target of their physical desires is within touching distance. Which reminded me that Gail had said she'd collect me at around ten that morning. At least I had a few hours to get myself back in shape.

'Off to the big city now,' announced Sam. He turned at the door, leered at me and added, 'Sure you'll manage on your own today?'

I gave a painful nod and heard him go down the passage, leaving the bedroom door open. I felt too weak to get out of bed and close it, so I lay there sipping my coffee while I listened to birds being merry outside. It was damn good coffee, which made me suspect Diana had arrived early that morning. This was confirmed moments later by the whine of the vacuum coming from downstairs. It at least forced me out of bed. I closed the door, opened the windows wider, lit a cigarette and rested my elbows on the windowsill. The air was crisp and invigorating. I puffed leisurely at my Camel, thankful I had not smoked the night before – it would only have added to the thick feeling inside my head. Why did I feel this bad after only a few drinks? Sam and I had had only two with dinner, one before the women arrived, two more before we'd left the house and three at the restaurant pub. Mind you, that made eight in all.

My room was set in one corner of the large house, so that it overlooked both the ocean and the eastern side of the property which also granted me a view of those lovely mountains. It was in that direction I now leaned out the window. I half expected to see Afrika Windvogel digging holes in the garden below, but there was no sign of the old man. There was plenty of movement though; doves and bulbuls and sundry LBJs littered the grass and trees in search of food. Someone – Windvogel? – had sprinkled seeds on the grass, and droves of doves worked their methodical way along, bending and pecking like a bunch of Buddhist monks at prayer.

I spotted a wagtail couple working their beat along the edge of the grass. One of them appeared especially active, till I noticed the poor little chap had just one leg. The other ended in a stump just below his body. I remembered hearing somewhere that small birds sometimes lost their limbs as a result of mosquito bites which went septic, and wondered whether that had been the cause in this instance. He hopped along at quite a rate, showing merely the occasional sign of losing his balance whenever he pecked at a morsel

of food. His mate stayed faithfully within range, constantly calling to him. I decided to name them Hopalong and Sidekick.

They kept me amused till I had finished my cigarette and decided it was time to get my face and body into order. Before pulling my head back inside the room, I checked the house next door to see whether Bungee Ben wasn't around, but he seemed to be doing a normal kitty routine somewhere else just then. I found that a relief.

My room had an en suite shower and wash basin, as did all the rooms in the house. Sam's, of course, also had a Jacuzzi. I thought it wise to set the water to cold, which caused me to utter a wild shriek when I stepped under the spray. I stood firm, though, and after a minute or so actually began to enjoy it. At least, that's what I told myself.

I hopped out as soon as the necessary was done and the last soap washed from my body, plucked a large fluffy towel from the heated rail, and rubbed myself down vigorously. My skin felt all tingly, I was a picture of vigorous health. My beard stubble seemed more grey than usual this morning, as did the hairs on my chest, such of them as there was. At least the hair on my head was still holding its own, in a way at least. I brushed that, then my teeth, and with the towel still in place as protection, padded barefoot into my bedroom. I dressed quickly and went downstairs.

Diana, who I had decided was a mighty fine woman for putting up with my brother, as well as for being able to produce an excellent cup of coffee, was ready to serve me a hearty breakfast of sausage, bacon and eggs and toast. Plus more coffee, all of which made me feel almost new.

I begged another cup which I took out onto the porch. I wondered what Monica was doing just then, but somehow her face kept becoming blurred with that of Gail.

The arrival of Afrika Windvogel at least provided a distraction. He came up the drive, pushing his bicycle. It was an ancient Rudge. None of those fancy gears one found on modern bikes, just a chain of ordinary length and an old-fashioned bell which demanded one use one's thumb for it to work. I almost wished Windvogel would ring it – I couldn't remember when last I had heard the sound, but the exotic was already raising his hat to greet me.

'Mister Byron, sir!'

'Good morning, Mister Windvogel.' There was a rusted carrier affixed to the rear of the bike, one of those things with bars on the side which snapped shut like a bear trap. A parcel wrapped in brown paper was wedged tightly between them. His quota of liquor for the weekend?

'Mister Sam is away,' declared Windvogel.

I nodded; silence, I thought, was a wise precaution – extreme discretion had become my watchword where Windvogel was concerned. I waited for his next remark, but he merely stood there grinning stupidly at me. Grinning and twirling a little windmill attached to the handlebars of his bicycle. I half expected it to make a cluck-cluck noise, but it turned silently.

After a minute or so of twirling and idiotic grinning he raised his hat again, said, 'Mister Byron,' and wheeled his rusted Rudge towards the back of the house from where Diana shouted out some instruction at him through the open kitchen window. The old man gave her the finger which led to a screech of Xhosa from Diana's side; a black woman would not take kindly to rude gestures from a lunatic old coloured man.

Trying to ignore what was going on at the side of the house, I made an intent study of ocean and sky. How did one predict the weather in this place? There was a grey bank resting on the horizon, which I assumed was a front. A passing front, I hoped; Sam had said the first winter storms were usually quite severe.

A jogger passing by in front of the house interrupted my weather forecast. She was in her mid to late twenties, making me wonder why she was not at her place of work. Surely she was too young to be part of the old holiday home settlement routine? Also far too fetching to be dumped, I thought as I watched the cute bobbing of her breasts. They really were very firm. Just the size I liked, too.

God, there was something seriously wrong with me.

I was about to hang my head in shame when the jogger waved at me. At least, that's what it looked like. Back in Johannesburg hundreds – no, thousands – of the energetic fools had passed by me, but no one had ever waved. Certainly not those with pert, deliciously bobbing breasts. What was one expected to do in a situation like this? Wave back?

I flapped my hand near my head, ready to turn it into a face scratch in case I'd misinterpreted her gesture. But no, there it was again – a wave, without a doubt. I flicked open my palm and made a 'queenie' sort of sideways movement with it.

The girl smiled, stopped, turned, and ambled closer. She rested her hands on the low wall. She might have been somewhat out of breath, but her voice sounded lovely when she called out, 'Sorry, I thought it was Sam sitting there.'

'I'm his brother,' I called back, wondering whether one was supposed to get to one's feet when accosted by female joggers. I put my hands on the arm rests and leaned slightly forward, ready to play it either way.

She really had a lovely smile. White, even teeth and crinkly eyes. Although her dark hair was cut very short, she wore a headband. A sweatband, to be precise, but one did not associate such terms with lovely creatures like this. They wore headbands.

'Sam needs a brother to keep him in check,' she said, leaned her forearms on the wall and pushed back her rump. She was wearing one of those silky shorts joggers don when they hit the streets, and now it pulled up tight around the edges of her buttocks. I could tell, for like a truly lascivious old fart I had got to my feet for a better look and could see right over the wall.

'I'm here on holiday,' I told her. 'I doubt I'll exert any influence over Sam.'

'Every bit helps,' she called out with a laugh as she pushed herself from the wall and began running again. I did my queenie flap, even though she did not look back.

I stood there on the porch and watched her white Nikes or whatever and the silky blue jogging shorts disappear down the street.

Gail arrived promptly at ten, which helped to erase from my mind the lingering memory of strange but friendly female joggers who hailed me from the garden perimeter. I don't know what I had expected, but I felt somewhat disappointed when she drove into the driveway in a Toyota hatchback. Perhaps I'd subconsciously assumed that unsuccessful wives who got the holiday home as part of the divorce settlement drove round in those

older model soft top Mercedes Benz sports jobs. They seemed to do that in places like Hollywood. Still, the hatchback had jazzy stripes down the side and seemed quite new.

A second disappointment was that Gail wore khaki slacks. What had I been expecting – jogging shorts? They were neat slacks, to be sure, tight-fitting enough to compliment her nicely rounded derriere. But, they concealed her calves and all the rest that led up to the derriere. 'Hello, you,' she said as she walked towards me.

'Hello you, too.'

'Sleep well?'

'I think so. I had enough to drink last night to ensure I did.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Oh dear, a slight hangover, have we?'

'Had. A cold shower and Diana's breakfast provided the cure.'

She surprised me – pleasantly – by planting a kiss on my cheek. Just a quick peck, but very nice nevertheless. Then she was past, all businesslike when she said, 'Right, let's take a look at Windvogel's latest masterpiece.'

I led the way and pointed to the rectangular hole. 'Sam seems to think it's in a reasonable spot this time.'

Gail let her gaze travel across the disorderly garden layout before nodding in agreement. 'Some kind of shrub, I think. There's a nursery just outside town which is having a sale. We'll try them first.'

'Right,' I agreed just as Windvogel appeared from the side of the house. He stopped and watched us with a concerned look on his face. It struck me that the constant filling of his holes by some plant or shrub might merely prolong the solution to the problem, that if a hole were left untouched it might bring to an end the constant creation of new ones. Perhaps that was what Windvogel needed – a constant visible monument to satisfy whatever obsession his decrepit old mind had for an open hole. But, I couldn't see Sam buying that one.

Gail noticed the old man and waved. Windvogel doffed his hat and nodded. There was, though, no gap-toothed smile. 'Better get going,' she said, 'we can take my car.'

Gail was a fair hand at the wheel of the Toyota, letting the little car zip out the driveway in high speed reverse. None of that time-consuming stuff like checking for joggers, dogs or other vehicles. Then we were off down the road, snapping into second gear even before I had my seat belt clipped into place.

By third gear I forced my fingers to release their frantic grip on the dashboard and stuck them between my thighs before switching them to the seat belt itself as we reached a high-revving fourth. A stop sign rushed into view and was treated to a disrespectful snapping back into third before we were through and in search of fourth gear again, followed by a reluctant fifth as we hurtled down a long, straight road. To my left lay the sea, which was where I thought it best to focus my gaze.

It's not that I am a timid driver myself – certainly not the epitome of the retired head peering above a car's steering wheel. I enjoy a burst of power as much as the next man, but I am proud of my record as a safe and courteous driver. I have never in my life even been cited for a traffic violation because I adhere to signs and traffic instructions. Neither have I ever parked on a yellow line or in a zone designated for the disabled. Sam does that with impunity – I've even been with him when he's parked on the wrong side of the street. My philosophy is that the law is there to prevent chaos on the road, and should be adhered to even when there is little chance of it being policed at that specific point in time.

Which is probably one of the things which makes me such a boring (before I became lascivious) old fart.

I have noticed that many women drivers do not share my philosophy. It is my view that they are in general better drivers than most men, but have scant regard for the rules of the road. One would think, being mothers or at least potential ones, they'd be extra careful when driving. Stop at stop signs and so on. But no ... to the floor with the pedal and to hell with the rest. At least, that's my opinion.

A traffic circle tried to ambush the Toyota, but the thing was repulsed into a mere speck in the rear-view mirror by a scornful flicking into third and then second gear. Its humiliating defeat was amplified by a lingering puff of exhaust smoke as we surged back into third and fourth.

We had now reached the main drag leading into town, so at least the road was broad enough for evasive manoeuvres whenever we encountered drivers silly enough to be trolling along at the legal limit. Just around the next corner Gail was tested to her limits when a dachshund dashed from the side of the road, seeming determined to end it all as he went straight for the Toyota's wheels.

'Eisbein!' came my shrill cry, but my four-footed pal from the misty beach was way out of his league; with a quick touch of the brakes and a single-handed flick-flick of the steering wheel, Gail foiled his attempt at suicide.

As we rushed on I spun round in my seat to glance back, praying old Eisbein would be out of harm's way by the time a normal driver reached him. 'Give it up,' I wanted to say to him, 'there's more to life than being burdened by a silly name.' Hell, I should know. I wondered whether Eisbein had perhaps had a puppy brother called Chappie or something equally cute and friendly.

At least Gail showed some respect for the centre of town where people were going about doing the things people do in towns. Crossing streets and stuff like that. It gave me the opportunity to straighten up in my seat; I have this tendency to slouch when terrified. We passed by Auntie M's where my lust for Gail had been stimulated the night before, and then headed on the road out of town where I surmised the nurseries plied their trade.

There were three of them clustered together around a thatched roof farm stall selling produce fresh from the valley behind the town. I could smell something else fresh as well – the aroma of baked bread. I have always found farm stalls far more interesting than nurseries, but I dutifully followed Gail when she led the way into a maze of flowers and plants with terribly complicated names. I imagined there were quite a few budding Eisbeins among them. Distant cousins, perhaps, of the many plants I had murdered over the years back in my Johannesburg home.

I left Gail to it, my only contribution being the occasional nod or 'Looks just right' when she asked for my opinion. I would have been satisfied with the first decent-sized shrub and asked the attendant how often it needed water. On the other hand, nurserymen usually complicate things by going on about stuff like shade and pruning.

My ultimate contribution to the purchasing process was to open my wallet to pay for Gail's final choice. She told me the shrub was called Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. 'Sounds like some romantic novel' I said as I asked for a cash receipt to hand over to Sam that night.

'Windvogel used to work here,' Gail said as our shrub was carefully loaded into the Toyota. 'Sam employed him when he lost his job.' There was no need for her to elaborate

on the reasons for Windvogel's dismissal – not all plants and shrubs fitted into perfectly rectangular holes.

We headed back into town at what I thought was a pretty sedate pace, probably because Gail did not wish to risk the shrub falling over and messing soil in her car. I actually slung a relaxed arm across the back of my seat and assumed a nonchalant passenger pose. We took the long route home, with Gail intent on showing me the more scenic route along the coastline. We passed by dozens of stately homes looking down on the sea. I guessed their prime location meant they remained empty for most of the year. The road curved sharply to the right just before we reached the centre of town and meandered past two old homes which were being gutted to make way for a high-rise apartment block. Judging by the developments I'd seen, the town seemed determined to fill itself with lightless buildings for eleven months of the year.

'Prime whale watching stretch,' explained Gail. 'They lie just offshore with their calves.'

'I'll have to come back when it's their season,' I said. 'August and September, is it?'

'All the way through to November. There're even a few stragglers at the end of December. How long are you planning on staying?'

'Don't really know,' I replied, recalling Sam's comments of the previous afternoon. 'I'd planned to come for a week, ten days. Maybe two weeks. Sam seems to have other ideas.'

'What sort of ideas?'

I shrugged. 'You know Sam ... his thoughts are never formulated quite clearly. Sort of depends on his mood of the moment. Maybe I'll get clarity over the next few days.'

Gail glanced at me before braking for a sharp corner; she really was taking this plant thing in the back of her car seriously. 'You're obviously pretty flexible about time,' she said.

'I'm unemployed, remember.' But, she was right – I was pretty flexible. Apart from Monica there was nothing demanding my presence back in Johannesburg. My business was in what seemed to be capable new hands, and the plants in my closed up house were probably dead already. I had contracted a garden service – with normal gardeners – to mow the lawn once a week, so it wasn't as if the place would resemble a jungle if I visited with Sam longer than intended. Besides, now I'd met Gail, the prospect of an extended stay was more than appealing. Which made me feel guilty about Monica.

Gail slowed almost to a halt when we rounded a corner and approached what she said was called Market Square. It was actually a large parking area with stalls along its perimeter. What market there was consisted of a motley assembly of hawkers selling leather goods, home-made clothes, and little trinkets which I guessed emanated from Nigeria or Somalia. There was also the required quota of hippie types.

To one side of the square was a restaurant and tea garden and behind it a pub with an outdoor section where one could drink while basking in the sun. It was suddenly terribly appealing. Across the road a stylish centre filled with tourist shops, fast food joints and restaurants, competed vigorously with whatever tourists gravitated towards the market section. I glimpsed another pub there; the folks who left their lights off all year round were obviously a thirsty lot when they hit town.

'We could stop for some tea,' Gail suggested as she kept the Toyota trundling along at an insanely low speed, 'or we could have some at my place.'

'Your place,' I replied without hesitation. Ah, the joys of being a seasoned man of the world.

Her place, as she had put it, turned out to be an elegant house standing alone on an outcrop overlooking a tiny inlet not more than a kilometre from Sam's house. 'So, this is the old holiday home.'

'Was ... It's my full-time domain now. You'll enjoy the view.'

She was right; even from the front door one could look through to the brief stretch of green lawn which merged with the natural coastal vegetation covering the coastline. I could hear the surf lapping below, could smell salt and ozone. The downstairs section benefited from an open plan design, so one could enjoy the view from any angle and position. It was not as impressive as my brother's house, but it made me wonder what Gail's 'main home' back in Johannesburg had been like. The same could be said of most of the holiday homes in town.

She led me outside where I looked back at a broad veranda which straddled the entire upstairs section. 'There're four bedrooms,' Gail told me. I thought it an awfully big place for a woman living alone and tried to visualise the situation over past holidays, when Gail and her family had come down every December to switch on the lights. Which made me ask, 'Children?'

'Two, both at university. They visit three or four times a year.'

'You must look forward to that.'

Her 'Hah!' sounded harsh. 'Your bachelorhood is showing,' she said. 'Today's kids are one big pain. They visit for what they can get out of me, not to spend time with their mother. Their friends are just as bad.'

I sent out the old fishing expedition, saying, 'So, most of the time it's just you alone in the house.'

That lady knew exactly where I was coming from. 'My friend spends most weekends here. Sometimes a day or two in the week as well.' Not only was she smart, she also was sympathetic to my unspoken curiosity regarding the gender of the friend. 'He owns a company in Cape Town, so he's free to come and go as he pleases.'

This piece of news pretty much put paid to my more lascivious ambitions, which I must confess filled me with a certain relief. Those squash-contoured arms and thighs could spell big trouble. So I put on a brave front and said, 'Serious, is it?'

'No. Not at all.' This was said with a knowing little smile which excited and scared the daylights out of me at the same time.

Gail went inside to do her thing with the tea while I poked around the garden. There were some things which I classified as shrubs, but the space seemed to have in the main utilised the natural coastal vegetation, called *fynbos*. It was my kind of garden; the natural stuff knew how to look after themselves – no need for nursery attendants to prattle on about water and shade and technical details like that. You just left them where you found them and watched them grow. Okay, so you lived with fewer colours and *Garden and Home* didn't exactly queue up to take glossy photographs, but all in all it was a lot less trouble.

Gail might have been a terror on the squash court and a dab hand in the garden, but she was useless at the tea-making thing. It was atrocious stuff. But, men of the world know how to fake it and I made suitable 'Mmm' noises. Well, one such noise at the start, at least. After that I tried hard to shift all my concentration away from what was happening to my stomach to what Gail was saying about her friend, the one with his own

company who was free to come and go. I wondered how the man handled the tea side of their relationship. It also made me less curious as to why her husband had divorced her.

'I like Jim,' she was saying while I surreptitiously tried – and failed – to scoop up a layer of congealed milk with a finger. To be technical about it, I succeeded in getting the blob stuck to my finger, but failed miserably in being surreptitious in the way I wiped it off on the rim of my saucer. It took three wipes, and even then there remained a stubborn residue which I was forced to brush off on my trouser leg.

'I've known Jim from the time Gary and I came here for holidays,' she said.

'Gary being your husband, I take it.'

'Ex-husband,' she pointed out with a little smile. 'He and Jim had had some business dealings over the years. I can't say Jim and his wife became family friends, though they visited often and once spent a week with us during a December holiday.'

'Jim's married?'

'Was. In his case it was his wife who opted for a younger partner.'

I was thinking that Jim obviously did not own a holiday home to lay claim to as a divorce settlement, but Gail had already moved on to tell me more of their relationship. 'I'd never, even in those early days, given any thought to him in ... well, in regard to him being ... you know ...'

'A lover?'

'One of those, yes. I mean, I liked him ... I already told you that, didn't I? ... but it wasn't as if I was physically attracted to him. Well, perhaps a little. Jim's one of these tall and distinguished looking types.'

I decided I really hated her tea.

'Anyhow, we met again by chance one weekend, went out for dinner, and ... well, he'd been divorced a month or so and I suppose we both were a little lost and lonely. Well, you know how it goes.'

I did not, but having been in recruitment for many years, I had learned to nod sympathetically when people expect me to understand.

'I think,' continued Gail, 'that Jim takes the whole thing more seriously than I do. Or thinks he does. He's still struggling to find his feet after the divorce, so perhaps he's confusing a sense of security with true affection. It's fine by me for the moment, though. He's good company, and I ... well, I have needs like everyone else, you know.'

My nodding increased in tempo.

Relief came in the form of the ringing telephone. The instrument was somewhere in the kitchen, so I used Gail's absence to pour what remained of my insipid brew into a pot plant. I really was the worst kind of plant killer. Totally ruthless.

'That was Evonne,' she announced upon her return, 'wanting to know what I'm up to. She's awfully intrigued by your presence here.'

I could just imagine Evonne, the 'really good sort', anxiously awaiting Sam's return to inform him of his brother's activities. I'd be teased for days. I watched, intrigued, while Gail daintily finished her tea, making each sip count. Had the woman no stomach lining?

'It's warmed up outside,' she said when she had finished, 'Think I'll change into something lighter before we tackle Windvogel's hole. I'll only be a moment.' She headed for the stairs where she turned and added, 'Want to watch the view while I'm busy?'

I thought she was being deliberately disingenuous regarding which view she meant, so I made a sound in my throat which was a cross between a chuckle and a nervous giggle. It

certainly was not a man of the world sound. 'If you go right to the edge of the garden,' she continued, obviously enjoying herself, "you can see the rocks below. There's a small colony of seals there.'

'How lovely! Think I'll do that.' I waited till she was gone from view before I pushed myself to my feet and ambled down to the bottom of the garden. I spotted the rocks but not seals. So much for *that* view.

At least I was rewarded when I returned to the house a few moments later just as Gail stepped into view, dressed in shorts which did stunning things to her legs. She hadn't gone the route of the older woman trying to look like a teenager by donning ultra short shorts; hers were khaki like her slacks had been, and they stretched to mid-thigh. However, the thighs which made those pants stretch to capacity were magnificent indeed. So were her muscular calves, emphasized by the ankle-length boots and white socks she had donned for the gardening task at hand. She had my attention, and she knew it.

I let my gaze roam from those calves, up towards her thighs, on to where her shorts creased delightfully over her crotch, slowly up across her midriff, her breasts, till I looked her straight in the eye. I couldn't help myself: 'Gail, you are a very, very attractive woman.'

Her smile was almost demure, though it's been my experience that women who've just heard what they wanted to hear find it extremely hard to reach that state. 'Thank you, Byron,' she whispered.

My newfound man of the world state almost made me step closer and seize the moment. Almost, but not quite; I didn't actually do such things, just sometimes wanted to. Which made it nice when she was the one who moved, coming to stand so close that her breasts touched my chest. If asked to describe them, I would probably say they were 'thrusting' breasts. No doubt about it; she stood so close her thrusting breasts touched my chest. My thumping chest.

'Byron,' she whispered, 'we'd better be on our way ... Windvogel's damage awaits us. Or would you like another cup of tea?'

'We'd best get going,' I said and felt my pulse return to normal.

I was rather proud of how I handled myself with Gail for the rest of the morning. In a sort of 'just good fiends with a bit of tension between us' routine. I even offered her a decent cup of tea once we had finished filling Windvogel's hole with the newly acquired shrub. To be honest, she had done most of the filling, though I provided support by asking what I thought were obligatory questions such as how much shade and water and so on. She had stared blankly at me for a long time before saying, 'Just leave it to Windvogel ... he'll know what to do.'

I think my suaveness impressed her, for the kiss I received on my cheek when she left was definitely a blend of respect and fondness. The more I think about it, the more certain I am that it was.

Anyhow, after she'd left I sat on the veranda and watched the shrub, wondering whether I shouldn't pour water on it to help the little thing grow. I wanted to ask Windvogel's advice, but he was nowhere around. So I just watched the shrub, though every now and then I'd shift my gaze to the street in case pretty joggers should pass by and wave.

The pace of things lifted a bit around mid afternoon when I spotted Bungee Ben doing his thing from the upstairs window next door. It was almost as if that cat yelled 'Geronimo!' before he leapt. I didn't even bother getting up to look.

Around five I ventured into the garden and did what I thought of as a security patrol around the shrub. Nothing had changed since the planting of that morning, but I nevertheless stuck my finger in the soil to check that the thing wasn't dying of thirst. Though the ground wasn't exactly muddy, it wasn't quite dust either.

I was almost back in the house when I heard the growl of a powerful engine. Sam's Land Cruiser Station Wagon turned into the driveway. He waved and I waved back, thinking I would immediately introduce him to his new botanical possession. I started for the Land Cruiser, then noticed that Sam was not alone; beside him sat the reincarnation of George Burns.

'Surprise!' shouted Sam as he stepped from the high vehicle and moved to the back to retrieve luggage and whatever he'd bought in the city that day. 'Look who's come to visit.'

I looked. George Burns looked back at me, his wry smile just touching his lips, his eyes large behind the thick lenses of his glasses. He blinked once as I stepped closer. 'Hello, Ned,' I said.

My father stared at me some more, adjusted his hearing aid, stuck his finger out the open window, jabbed it in my direction and said, 'You're the goody goody one.'

'Byron,' I reminded him.

'Whatever. Your mother know you're here?'

This threw me for a moment, till I remembered Ned was eighty-eight; men that age had a right to forget little details such as the death of a spouse. 'Mother's dead,' I told him, feeling it unnecessary to add that this passing on had taken place twenty years ago.

He took it in his stride, blinking only once or twice before saying, 'No wonder my place is in such a mess these days.'

He began fiddling with his seat belt, which I suspected Sam had forcibly clipped into place. He tugged at the thing, slapped it, pushed at it, then waved his hands irritably as if searching for a scissors. I stepped forward, opened the door, leaned across his wiry frame and released the belt.

'Damn baby seat,' muttered Ned as he swung his legs out, kicking me in the stomach.

I grunted, but held out my hand to help him down. He slapped it away. 'Got a light?' he asked once he had struggled down. He pulled out a pack of Winstons from his shirt pocket and jerked a thumb in Sam's direction. 'The little shit wouldn't let me smoke in the car.'

Sam stuck his head around the side of the Toyota. 'Last time he ground the damn butt out on the carpet. Give me a hand here – there's a ton of stuff.'

I counted three suitcases, all of which I assumed were Ned's. 'Was this a spur of the moment thing?' I asked my brother.

He grinned. 'I came up with the idea some days ago. Thought I'd surprise you.'

'I'll bet you surprised Ned as well.'

'Nothing surprises him these days – his mind's somewhat on the dicky side. But, he can still take a shit on his own and stuff like that, so it's not as if we'll have to play nursemaid. I just thought it'd be good to have the family together. For a few days, at least.'

I grabbed two of the suitcases, one of which weighed a ton. 'His ghetto blaster,' explained Sam. 'He knows each room in the house has its own radio and television, but he

insisted on bringing it along. You must see it ... it's got little lights that flash when the music plays. Ned turns off his hearing aid and then lets rip at full volume. He's into jazz now.'

Our father led the way inside, an unlit cigarette dangling between his fingers. 'Nice little pad,' he mumbled.

'You've been here before,' Sam reminded him. The old man ignored him, yet headed straight for one of the downstairs rooms. 'He's playing silly bugger games again,' Sam whispered. 'That's always been his room on visits.'

We followed our father, struggling with the suitcases. Ned pointed to three different spots on the floor. We deposited his luggage as instructed and were then waved from the room and told to 'Go play in the garden.'

Sam and I chuckled as the door was slammed shut behind us. There were a few thumps followed by a lengthy silence during which we both watched the door. Then came the sound of music – high volume jazz. 'The dam ghetto blaster,' muttered Sam. 'He has this collection of old numbers on CD. I'll bet he's sitting there watching those lights flicker up and down the panel. Christ, I need a drink.'

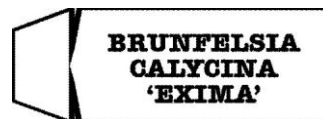
I stopped him on his way to the bar and led him outside to meet his new shrub. I thought it wise to mention that Gail had selected it – just in case he didn't like the thing.

'Nice,' he said. 'What is it?'

'A shrub.'

'I can see that. What I meant was, what is it called?'

This was the part I dreaded. I had tried all afternoon to recall what it was Gail had said the shrub was named – something like the title of a novel. A romantic novel, I suddenly remembered, but that was about the extent of it. I stared at the shrub, willing it to identify itself. It did, by means of a plastic identification tag wrapped round its trunk. I quickly bent forward and whipped the tag up for Sam to see:



'Very impressive,' he said as he came closer, 'but I've never been hot on Latin. Doesn't it have a name for us ordinary folk?'

I just stared at that tag, wishing I'd taken up law. Then it flashed into my brain. 'Morning, Noon and Night,' I cried triumphantly and let the tag fall back into place. 'That's what they call it.'

Sam was frowning. 'Never heard of it.'

'Well, that's what it is.'

'Doesn't grow too tall, I hope?'

He had me there, but I improvised by flapping a hand somewhere between one and two metres high. 'Not too tall. It sort of spreads out sideways as well. Not too much, though. Windvogel will know how to care for it,' I added and started back for the house to avoid more precise information being demanded. I even poured Sam a drink – just in case his mind was trying to come up with trick questions.

While he didn't ask anything (or thank me for the drink), it worried me when he went straight to a bookshelf and began flipping through gardening books. I pretended to ignore him by staring towards the passage where a saxophone blared out vibrant notes from Ned's room. I wondered when my father had acquired an interest in jazz; when I'd been a kid all he'd listened to were Pat Boone records.

When Sam said, 'What did you say it was called?' I knew the moment of truth was upon me.

'Morning, Noon and Night,' I mumbled.

'It's a Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, you twit. There's a picture of it here in this book.'

I shrugged. 'Close enough.' I poured myself a drink – a whisky – and decided I would postpone giving him the receipt for a day or two.

We sat in silence and sipped our drinks. To be more precise, I sipped and Sam gulped. And, for the sake of further precision, it was not exactly silent; jazz melodies thumped and howled their way through the keyhole of Ned's door and slid along the luxuriantly carpeted passage in our direction. I met my brother's eye. He shrugged and held out his empty glass.

While I refreshed his drink I wondered about his motivation in bringing our father there. As a surprise for me, he'd said, but I retained the sneaking suspicion of the previous afternoon that Sam was in a way trying to build a semblance of family life around him. That was fine with me, but it would have been better for him if he did it with his ex-wives and daughter instead of using has-beens like Ned and me. I handed him his drink and said, 'By the way, I met your friendly neighbourhood jogger this morning.'

'The one with the cute arse?'

'She had a neatly rounded rear, yes.'

'Terrific arse. Name's Bobbi. With an I.'

'I suppose she's really a Roberta?'

He shrugged. 'Something like that.' He perked up and gave me a rather quizzical look. 'You're certainly getting around with the women in town. First Gail, now the delightful Bobbi. You placing recruitment ads in the local rag, or what?'

I reminded him that it had been his Evonne who foisted Gail on me, then explained how I'd become aware of Bobbi's existence. 'She thought it was you sitting out there on the veranda.'

He seemed truly taken aback. 'How could she make such a mistake?'

'The road is fifteen shrubs from the veranda, remember.'

'And she just struck up a conversation with you?' Sam wanted to know.

'Not really. We sort of waved at each other.' I demonstrated my queenie wave. 'But,' I said, 'enough about me ... how is that such young ladies are acquainted with you?'

He smirked and pointed to his face, but then gave it up and became more serious. 'She lives just down the road, in that house where the path through the milkwoods begins.'

I wondered whether she'd been watching when I did my tenderfoot thing on the path the previous afternoon. 'It's a big house for a young woman,' I said.

'Belongs to her parents. They retired to some game farm up north, so Bobbi took over their business.'

At least it explained how he came to know her; the parents had obviously been friends. It made me feel better. 'What kind of business?' I asked.

'A clothing boutique in town. Two of them, actually. One caters to the tourists, the other to locals.'

'And she has time to jog in the mornings?'

'Time to wave at strange men as well, it seems. Shop assistants, First Born – trusted ones with keys to the stores.'

We sipped some more, then Sam said, 'Bobbi and Trasi are friends. Knew each other when our girl worked in Cape Town.'

I appreciated the 'our girl' part, so I promptly refreshed his drink. 'Sam,' I said, sensing we were doing some fine bonding here, 'I think Gail demonstrated some interest in me this morning.'

He stared at me a long while. 'Demonstrated some interest in you, is that what you said?'

'Yes.'

'You mean she hit on you?'

I scratched my ear. 'I wouldn't put it that strongly, no.'

He stared some more. 'And you reacted how, exactly?'

'I told her I found her attractive.'

'That's it?'

I sort of squirmed in my chair.

He sighed. 'You're such a bloody wimp, Byron.'

As I said, we were doing some fine bonding.

Sam had flashed one of his credit cards throughout Woolworths while in the city that morning, so the variety of dishes on the dinner table was excellent. So was the wine, courtesy of a local cellar. 'A nice family evening,' he declared.

Ned, who had dressed for dinner in a brightly coloured windbreaker with Fidel Castro's face printed on the back, revealed that he had not only developed a taste for (loud) jazz, but had also taken up reading while eating. He had a large-print novel spread out next to his plate.

'That's really bad manners, Ned,' Sam said huffily. 'Your two sons slaved in the kitchen, heating up all these delicious goodies and slicing up fruit. You could at least look at your food before you gulp it down.'

'We poured wine as well,' I reminded him, 'in-between the heating and the slicing.' To be truthful, we'd poured quite a bit of wine while trying to figure out how the microwave worked. I had the operation of my simple gadget back home down to a fine art, but Sam's newfangled machine had all kinds of confusing buttons which seemed to react to warm flesh whenever one's fingers hovered anywhere near them. Anyway, the wine – really fine stuff – had flowed while we pretended to search for the instruction manual. Reinforced by the drinks we'd had during our earlier 'bonding' session, we were both pretty much on our ear.

Ned ignored us, though he stabbed a finger at the page and pointedly reread a paragraph.

'I think he's switched his hearing aid off,' I said.

'Probably reads better that way. He once slapped my head when I dared read at table. Really hard.'

Ned read on.

'I can't remember Ned ever slapping you?'

'You were out that night.'

'Ah. My partying phase.'

Sam snorted. 'Hell, you were too goody goody for parties. It was some Sunday school function.'

I speared a bright red strawberry on to my fork. 'Well, at least I was allowed out on my own.'

'The hell you were. I remember now ... Mom went with you, that's why Ned slapped my head. He wouldn't dare do that if she was around.'

Our father licked a finger and turned the page.

I said, 'I wonder whether he'd even notice if you slapped his head now.'

'Just let the little shit try,' muttered Ned.

Sam and I swapped smiles. 'I'm getting threatened in my own home,' he muttered. 'Pass the wine.'

'Which? The Pinot Noir or the Cabernet?'

'The heavier.'

Being tanked up, I played the fool and picked up both bottles, pretending to test their weight in my hands before I passed over the Cabernet. I was the only one who caught the joke.

What the hell, I thought – I'd been through a rather challenging day and had a right to lose control. I'd been at close quarters with an alarmingly attractive woman, met a jogger with what my brother described as a tight arse, and planted a shrub. Well, supervised its planting. Sort of, anyway. Plus, my father had kicked me in the stomach. Yes sir, a man had a right to let his hair down and play silly bugger games with wine bottles.

I finished my food. 'Mind if I have a cigarette?' I said to Sam.

'Go ask your mother,' said Ned.

'Fuck,' muttered Sam.

I delayed lighting my Camel and helped him stack the dishes in the dishwasher. At least it was not too far advanced over my model so I managed to get the thing swishing and whooshing. Then I went to relieve the table cloth of the mess in the general area around Ned. He lifted his book and without looking up, let me carry out the task. He was already puffing on a Winston so I brought him an ashtray, though I doubted whether he would even bother to look when he flicked off his ash. I hoped he didn't smoke in bed; a raging house fire in the middle of the night was something I did not need.

I expressed this concern to Sam when he had finished in the kitchen and politely – surprise, surprise – asked if I'd pour him a nightcap. Something simple like a cognac. I joined him in the lounge – and in a cognac – where we both craned our heads back to watch Ned flicking ash on the carpet. 'Perhaps we should body search him when he goes to bed,' I suggested.

Sam shrugged. 'Stop worrying so.'

'Come on, Sam, even you must be doubting the wisdom of having Ned here. Our dear father needs to be in a home of sorts.'

'They have frail care at the retirement village. That's why I chose it.'

'Ned's not frail, he's just sort of ... well, out of it.'

'A break every now and then does him good. He needs to socialise with people other than the old fossils where he lives.'

'You call playing loud jazz on a strobe machine and reading at dinner socializing?'

'He has his lucid moments,' persisted Sam.

That was true; on his arrival he'd had no hesitation in identifying me as 'the goody goody one'. I decided to drop the subject; Sam was obviously the more loyal and caring of us as far as Ned was concerned. Maybe it had something to do with the clack-clack zip-zip space gun.

We sat there and twirled the cognac in our glasses, trying to ignore Ned's hacking cough before he stood up and without a word retired to his room.

Sam's cell phone rang. His face brightened when he answered and said, 'Trasi! Hello, my angel ... no, of course you're not interrupting anything! It's just the family here – me, your ancient uncle and Ned.' Like most people he had started walking around while on the phone, so a few moments later he was out the room and beyond earshot. Every now and then I could glimpse him strolling past the entrance to the dining room, which gave me some clues as to the direction the conversation was going. 'Uh-huh, uh-huh,' he was saying. 'You're better off without him, sweetheart.'

So, Tycoon Terry bites the dust. One thing about my niece, she was hell on men.

'A good idea, my girl. If you've leave due to you, then now's the best time to take a break. A week or two and you'll ... How long? Four weeks?' A smile formed on Sam's lips. 'There'll be a ticket waiting for you at the airport, sweetness. I'll take care of it first thing tomorrow morning and let you know the details. Okay?'

Right, I thought – Sam's new little family grows in leaps and bounds. It would be wonderful seeing Trasi again, but with the way things were going I feared we'd soon have his (not quite alphabetical) collection of ex-wives. I recalled what Sam had said about Afrika Windvogel being unable to handle stress ... it was the kind of situation which might precipitate a week-long binge.

Sam spoke a minute or so longer, said 'See you at the airport, my angel,' then snapped off the phone and dumped it unceremoniously on the dining table. 'Well, did you get the gist of that?' he asked, wringing his hands in satisfaction. 'Our little girl's coming to visit.'

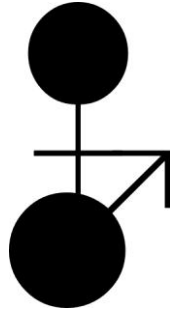
He'd done it again with the 'our girl' part, so I went and refreshed his cognac. Mine as well. 'I got the gist,' I said. 'Tycoon Terry got trashed, I gather.'

'Found out he was married or something. Anyway, I'll get a flight organised first thing tomorrow.' Then he glanced down the passage and added, 'You think we should check on Ned? It's awfully quiet down there.'

I spotted our father's book still lying on the table. 'Well, he's not reading – that much is clear.'

'Maybe he's asleep, or just lying there ...'

We glanced at each other, put down our drinks, and stealthily made our way down the passage. We went to lie flat on our stomachs outside Ned's room, both of us sniffing the crack between the door and the carpet for signs of smoke.



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