

STEPHEN NEWMAN COLLISION



Stephen Newman

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PART ONE

1.

The road from Hamilton to Melbourne has nothing to recommend it. Most of the time it's the heat. It seeps and the wind, dry, ruins thoughts. It glints out over horizons, like a youngster peering through his neighbour's window, but with sinister intent, to prize open pores and exhaust prior options. Grass screams for rain, earth begs for seed and the eucalypts and iron barks tilt against the wind and against the flattened nothingness of the land that they fete, to renounce former allegiances to protect the earth, that has, to this point, given them life. It's where the omega light of morning stalks the unsuspecting like the jesting fiddler, playing tricks with his audience.

There's a stop along the way at the Lake Bolac pub, for a cold one, if it's that time of day, (it's always that time of day in Lake Bolac) a pub noteworthy for the black half tailed low slung testicled cattle dog with pavement cracked paws and scarified right ear. He rests on the bar, panting, beneath the adorned walls of the glory days of the Bolac First Eleven and the names of the eight who answered the call to the Great War, looking down on the blue singlet line of sweat and carnivore, where lunch is served their way and no consideration is given to phoney culinary altruisms because that's just the way they like it.

You'll get a stare. You'll get a stare alright, the dog will look up, bare shoulders inside blue singlets will shift and turn. Eyes will roll, if you're dumb enough to want for the dressing, or the salt. You might be lucky and get a 'it's over here mate', from a patron, who has seen plenty of your lot before.

The Soldier Settlement Farms scattered throughout the region, from that Great War, either passed down through the generations, or sold, or liquidated, serve as reminders of the rural ruggedness that was exported to a time passed grimness.

Further east there is Ballarat, flatulent flat, where its people walk slowly along grey bleached streets with grey gold smiles on orange wrinkled faces, wondering what on earth they're doing there. It's a place known exclusively for what occurred in the past and where the fall guy for being unable to move on from it is the present. To drive through the town, they call it a city, to the other side, is to celebrate a kind of restrained liberty. Then there is Bacchus Marsh, all cauliflower cornered and cobbled together by the Master's bad hand. Ricked, sprained and set in a rural regalia of the most needless kind.

This screaming stir fry kind of Summer steals your breath, as one tentative attempt to inhale after another is rendered useless and regretful, juiceless, as in skin creeping up on skin to claim the last remnants of moisture the land has to offer, and miserable, like a dog finding no shade from the sun but finding misery in its own shadow. And large-breasted back-packing immigrant girls who find summer work and new found love and expunge their embarrassment by going bra-less and damn the excruciating consequences.

Marty Culhane was on this road, heading for Melbourne, attempting to work out a life that had come undone. He hadn't liked going back to Hamilton, the town of his wasted

upbringing, but he thought it best to pay one more visit there, in case something happened that he would regret missing. He needed to be in Melbourne for an evening flight to London and so the abridged calling in to the family home, by way of attending an old school friend's wedding, was made less stressful by the requirement to be somewhere else. And so he sat, tired and breathing in February, relying on others.

The wedding had served as a reminder for Marty of the summary character afflictions and of the sorry events that had beset him there. Such as being relieved of his teaching position, following a parent of one of his students spotting him late one Friday evening, smoking a joint.

The case exploded into a cause célèbre of the thin lipped and righteous. Other parents rallied to the great anti-joint smoking cause as this obvious threat to their children became exposed. The great anti-joint smoking cause became the great anti-drugs movement, which then gave rise to aggrieved anti-drugs political activists and their crusades. The resisters were put to the sword and thus the great threat averted.

The consequences of being discovered smoking the weed could have been easily forgotten had Marty been, say, a landscape gardener, or had he trained instead, to become a piano tuner. But he was a school teacher and school teachers were sworn to guide and protect. Marty should have known that this calamine fool for a father, the man who spotted him with his lips pursed in readiness for the great inhaling and with whom a joint had been shared on a previous occasion, would dob him in. Marty had given the kid the score he deserved for an English paper and so the bastard parent used the knowledge of a single, social indiscretion to nullify a fledgling, and possibly brilliant, teaching career.

Marty was also reminded, just by being there, of being picked on as a student for all those reasons that teenagers found so easy to assign to either the punishable or the pardoned. Skipping phys. ed. because he didn't get picked for sport teams was punishable. Being able to fight bare-knuckled however – finding himself against the urinal wall, facing a kid twice his size and taking his punishment – getting his face turned to putty by Jim Whittaker, was pardonable, provided he could display enough schoolboy courage to avow the code of silence.

Jim Whittaker, mind you, didn't turn out the way the education system envisaged, being caught every other Friday night by the booze bus, on the way home from the club, with a discernible enough concentration of alcohol in his blood as to make the device used to measure it unnecessary. The local police started to believe that he was actually attempting to get arrested because it was such a regular event.

Poor Jim, confused under his large hat, was actually just sick and tired of arriving home before his wife had finished with whom ever she was yet to be finished with. The police didn't take the hint. And so one evening he arrived home to find his wife engaged in an act of conjugal misalignment. He loaded the .22 calibre that he kept behind the fridge in the garage and blew the poor sod away. Just as he was lining the wife up she was able to prize the gun from his stupored trembling hand. At his trial Jim Whittaker testified that he was aiming for his wife at the time, and, he argued, the wife and her guest looked much the same as each other. He was awarded twenty years for manslaughter. Word was that he had learnt computer languages and was running courses from inside.

Just by being at the wedding also reminded Marty and others, of the pimples that sprang so reliably each Monday. Being there reminded him that even though he could perform, whilst not necessarily with distinction then certainly with some skill, on various sporting fields, he found no favour with those who decided the sporting fate of moderately talented scrappers.

Being there reminded him, teachers in attendance whose sad heads shook in remembrance, of his rebellion against the rules. He once stood outside on the class room balcony, on detention, following one particular mornings roll call, for four-and-a-half hours. The roll master, who was also his Mathematics teacher, with a memory for numbers but not, evidently, for children, told him to go and stand outside and wait for him to come out so that he could explain the concept of moral responsibility to him. Marty had had the temerity to provide his own unique call sign, something akin to a “yo” or a “yep” rather than the requisite “present sir” when his name was called out.

A cry for help? No, just insolence Culhane and I’ll make sure you don’t forget it. Mr. Cruikshank had his own issues, finding it difficult to keep it straight for his own unkempt wife and brain addled children being the least of it, dalliances and the like with men of high persuasion. He forgot about Culhane standing outside on the balcony and Culhane was not shifting without the requisite permission. If Mr. Cruikshank told him to stand outside until Mr. Cruikshank came out to explain the foundations of moral responsibility, and any other piece of wisdom that he had to tender, then Culhane would stand. Having done all to stand, he would continue to stand firm and the longer the standing the greater the victory. Culhane stood and Culhane watched, as one after another, a procession of the collective martyrs of mathematics, from Years 9 and 10, were introduced to the practical applications of the convergence of a series, finding derivatives and understanding limits and continuity. Mr. Cruikshank finally surfaced, at lunch time, to find Culhane leaning on the balcony balustrade.

‘Culhane, what are you doing here?’

‘Well Sir, you told me to go and stand outside and wait for you to come out and explain the importance of exhibiting moral responsibility.’

‘You’re being ridiculous Culhane.’

‘I already know that sir, you enlightened me to that failing four hours ago. I want to learn.’

‘Go and have lunch Culhane.’

‘Thank you Mr. Cruikshank.’

To self-destruct without trying. The kid deserved a smack in the mouth and he would get it, in a time when it was possible for a teacher to belt a kid like Culhane in the mouth, for the blow to leave a bruise, for it to hurt like buggery for a day or two and for nothing more to be said about it.

As a result of his obvious indolence Marty didn’t do as well in Mathematics as he might have done had Cruikshank just smacked him in the mouth. Mind you Cruikshank didn’t do as well in life as he might have done. Cruikshank’s other issues revolved around halitosis and

being into the Doobie Brothers when what people in the playgrounds and common rooms were crying out for was more your Led Zeppelin and for the revolution to somehow be continued so that those on the fringes might yet experience it.

Marty's main problem however, appeared to be that he thought about things too much, about the decisions that are made through one's life, to rebel or to comply, to react or ignore, to hold on or let go, to persevere or give in, to be the idealist or the pragmatist. It was as though the child and then the adolescent and then the adult, who had these thoughts, had no choice but to continually process all the choices. The very fact that these alternatives were present in his mind at all, as part of a never ending mental civil war with no break for detente or level headed evaluation, that went hand in glove with thinking too deeply, meant that, probably, the answers would never be forthcoming.

Maya Shoemaker was at the wedding as well, award-winning journalist and successful single mother, summoning evocations of all the lost summer's sumptuous endings. She reminded Marty - she didn't actually say anything that alluded to it - of how he had passed up the opportunity to take her, for the first and last time, in the dying light of the school graduation party and how that, had Marty taken the opportunity, and her, it would have set him up for life.

Maya was the type of girl who had held on to the four year old in all of us. The type of honesty that made them explain to Mrs Harris that Maya didn't really mean to say that Mrs Harris was ugly and had big feet. It was enough to scare anyone, even without having to deal with the imposition of her self-ordained intellect. Maya would walk straight up to you and ask why you were alone.

For most people, the four year old dissipates, leaking out, year by grown up year, through the Acceptance of Society pores, as they become more fearful, careful, mindful, of what they say. When people are four, if someone is fat we just yank on the nearest parents leg and point; 'that lady's fat, Daddy.'

Or in Maya's grown up state it was, 'you're still fighting the weight I see, Elaine.'

Maya made her name by running an expose on the assorted bullying tactics of various trade unions and could have, had she not been working for the national broadcaster, sold the story to the highest bidder. She followed up with an unmasking of methods used by secret service operatives in silencing disenfranchised adjutants. She always had causes and suitors. Maya had options.

Marty, some years before, during Level 1 English, had tried to borrow Maya's notes from her but didn't have anything to bargain with. He was reminded at the wedding of this by the mere mention of school, although Maya hadn't said anything specifically that touched on it. Maya had the cheek bones. Maya had the sex. She had been reminded, as they all stood waiting for the bride and groom to arrive and people took turns staring at her, of why she had left Hamilton. Reminded by Ernie Trimble, the front row forward and one off graduation celebrations midnight grope.

Ernie had taken over the family farm. With a name such as Ernie Trimble, taking over the farm was probably his only option.

‘Well, well, well. Maya Shoemaker,’ came the greeting from too close to pretend she hadn’t heard.

‘Well, well, well, Ernie Trimble. I’m guessing you’re still in Hamilton and tending to the farm.’

‘Yep. Lot’s happening.’

‘I bet.’

‘You can call me Ern, Maya, we don’t need formalities.’ Maya fell into quick sand and was looking around for someone to drag her out. ‘Dung Beetles are the latest thing,’ he continued, as if Maya had invited him to offer up a soliloquy on the latest farming practices.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Dung beetles. They’re the latest thing we’re working on,’ said Ern, with each word ascending in pitch as if the next would somehow cause his kelpie to snap from its slumber and come running and panting, to sit at his feet and await his instruction. ‘I’ve been using dung beetles to aerate my land.’

‘Of course you have,’ Maya quipped. ‘Do they each have names?’ Maya knew that retreat was now impossible. Her best hope was to just deal with it, take the hit, limit the damage and move away quickly when the opportunity arose.

‘We’ve found that the dung beetles contribute to the new biodiversity of farming, they eat cow dung and aerate the soil. It’s making the land more sustainable. Reduces our blowfly as well. It’s incredible.’

Ern had somehow neglected to account for Maya’s total disinterest in anything he had to say. She had her nose buried in a chardonnay glass and a finger in one ear. But in these parts it was a pre-requisite to be passionate about things such as dung beetles. Ern must have figured that he’d be in with another shot at Maya but she wasn’t going to be taken merely because he knew a thing or two about biodiversity. Maya was one of those unattainable women who also gave the air of wanting to be attained without providing any indication of how one was supposed to go about achieving it. Of all those who never stood a chance, Ern never stood a chance more than anyone.

Maya and Marty brushed by each other early in proceedings, each on their way to differing locations. They each paused momentarily, in silence officially recognising the existence of the other. Maya opened the conversation.

‘I’m so sorry for your loss Marty.’

‘Thanks.’

‘So, how are you otherwise?’ she said.

‘I’m fine, how are you?’

Gordy Ballieu was the friend being prevailed upon to get Marty to Melbourne, providing him with the opportunity to show off his new Z3. The sports car rumbled like an opening night of Stravinsky. Marty would be it's audience. He sucked in his stomach and attempted to appreciate it. The passenger was keen to be somewhere else, the owner eager to engage in not so subtle displays of prosperity. Marty's eighteen year old Nissan was stationed at a local workshop, on some sort of semi-permanent display, and would not have made it to the town's outskirts without having to be towed back for a radiator re-fit.

They talked, these two old friends, about Maya, and wondered why people like Maya, who had clearly maintained her youth, bothered with places like Hamilton. They drew conclusions about why the other girls hadn't quite kept to their promised routines, they wondered to each other whether, of those girls who had let themselves go since leaving Hamilton, any of them would be able to make a comeback, and if, in the unlikely event that they did, would it prove to be ironic or just coincident.

Gordy reeled off names of wedding guests who had decided to stay in Hamilton, those who feared having to come back. The bridegroom, who had decided to stay and work in his parent's hardware store, knowing that he would one day own it. Gordy didn't think that owning a hardware store was an admission of failure but he did think that getting married was. He amused Marty with his rhetorical flourishes and aphorisms, such as where you could go from marriage, with options closed off amidst the ruins of suppressed satisfaction.

Marty's wedding invitation, understandably, recorded his name alone. It was universally understood that it would be just him, and universally accepted that he would be tired of answering questions. The celebration of joy and love that slewed tragically from its intended course.

Gordy, whose invitation recorded the definite option of "Gordon and Guest", drew energy from being able to contribute evidence of what he had achieved and having nothing therefore, to explain. Gordy went all night and into the morning while Marty snuck back to the family home.

The passenger seat of the Z3, nonetheless, provided for pleasant viewing. The arts dealer and gallery owner making the trip back to his Melbourne office and the part time musician, occasional school teacher and flat broke renaissance man both appreciative of each others company. Gordy constantly scratched his cheek, then he would rub it to sooth it, as if to not so much augment his masculine Jewish visage but accentuate it. Marty, on the other hand, merely rested his hands by his sides, waiting for the next topic of conversation.

Marty's attractiveness wasn't in the ruddiness of facial lines or of cheek boned masculinity but in, if ever he was to be described as attractive, the honesty in his eyes. One could tell that there'd once been a physical hardness about him, though, on first inspection you'd recall the salt and pepper hair and the pale skinned durability. Clearly aesthetics did not matter to him. He wasn't short enough to elicit feigned female designs or tall enough to take advantage.

If ever Marty could bring himself to acknowledge the honesty that was apparent to others, he could have passed for a David slaying giants, writing poems and songs by

moonlight streams. Marty elicited an initial sympathy from women, the kind that made mothering suddenly fashionable again.

Whereas Gordy, without pretence or warning, would strip and bed these well-made women of vogue and jewels, weaning them of logic and sense before sending them back to their mothering. Marty had the type of artistic vagueness of someone who would lend out a book and not have the heart to ask for its return, borrow one and not take the trouble to read it.

This then was the next chapter, this ride to Melbourne, the yet to be determined unlocking of mysteries or alternatively, of becoming unstitched. Either could have applied. Marty was used to such unravelling. The kind of reciprocity to delight psychologists, priests and anyone else pursuing a career in the social sciences.

The roughly three hour road trip to the airport was the perfect distance for both men. Long enough for both of them to reveal something new about themselves so that the other would display enough interest to continue the conversation. Short enough so that prolonged periodic silences weren't made awkward.

It was clear that Marty was not, understandably, a good passenger, which made the prospect of a twenty-two hour flight to the other side of the world appear slightly incongruous. The three year hiatus in Anglo-Australian travel made for exaggerated book-ended comparisons between those of us who have made the most of opportunities and those who had managed to get themselves into various spots of bother.

In that three year stretch, people such as Gordy had built businesses, purchased houses and cars and set themselves up for life, whereas Marty had done not quite any of that. It didn't particularly worry him, but people did notice. He was settling into the Z3's leather luxury. It seemed ironic to him, as the Z3 wasn't actually as comfortable as the Nissan - but the air conditioning alone compensated for any perceived lack. That same air conditioning also meant arriving at the airport wearing a shirt unattached to skin, free of the reek of dry, red, outback earth.

Still, his thighs were tense, like barbed wire on a fence tensioning chain about to be tested for the first time. His legs, despite the cool air inside, sweated like creosote oozing from newly struck fence posts. His arms sat uncomfortably on the sides of his seat and tensed muscles rose and fell. He then slept.

Both men were thirty-seven and grew up together chasing cows, footballs and large-breasted girls. They had both been intent on leaving for the bright lights and dull sounds of cities when old enough to realise that staying in Hamilton would afford them not much more than what was obviously on offer in any rural Australian town. It was where the similarities ended.

Marty was homeless, although it wasn't an obvious homelessness. His homelessness was not like the urban double income no kids couple waiting for the inner city terrace they'd been longing for while in the mean time renting the terrace around the corner kind of homelessness. Nor was it the down on his luck and really needing someone to give him a helping hand kind of homelessness. He was homeless only in that, apart from the fact that he wasn't a landowner, he didn't currently have a residential address.

He also thought that for some reason the world had gone mad, wanting to, like a Karl Kraus or Lenny Bruce in their pomp, take some sort of wild satirical swing at the events of the time but feeling at that very moment, impotent in his response. He had once sat in the Hamilton Cinema waiting for a film to start, walked out at the end of forty minutes worth of pre-film commercials and trailers, only to complain to the cinema manager. He had told her that he ‘didn’t bloody well pay to watch half a life of trailers.’

The cinema, in Marty’s opinion, should advertise two starting times. Of course, he knew his advice would never be followed, although if only in his head, his grievance had been noted. He was offered complimentary tickets but wouldn’t be in town long enough to use them. Instead of offering them to someone else to use he handed them back to the cinema manager, telling her that he didn’t wish to sit through any more commercials. It was as if Marty had come out of the womb, hands slapped against his head, surprised that, even though his birth represented a series of fortunate catastrophes, something was still the matter and that it was his job to fix it.

Gordy, on the other hand, viewed the world as magnificent, full of opportunity and limitless in its ability to provide him with lifestyle. Marty was flying to London, economy class, to experience yet more madness whereas Gordy had just come back from Berlin, business class, where he had purchased almost a million dollars worth of art to hang in his St Kilda gallery.

Gordy didn’t appreciate art so much as he appreciated the collection and sale of it. The corresponding lifestyle enhancements both social and financial were what really lit his wick. He had started the art gallery in ninety-seven because he and his family knew too many people of position and wealth to allow them to continue living without finding some way of helping them part with their money.

Marty sprang from his slumber as the wheels of the Z3 returned to the road following a momentary lifting off, a corner taken at controlled speed so as to maximise the investment. Marty blew some air as if it might make some difference, slow things down or act as a buffer. And his eyes opened as wide as they had ever been.

‘What’s the plan once you arrive in London?’ Gordy’s question coming within seconds of the landing, an act of self evident insouciance. He turned on the cruise control just to show Marty another feature of his vehicle. Or to soothe him.

‘The plan.’ Marty didn’t have a plan, not one that immediately sprang to mind anyway. It was a failed apologetic. ‘Not sure that there is one just at the present moment but I’m hoping something will crystalise.’

Gordy didn’t push it. He didn’t push anything with Marty. He knew better than to disrupt his equilibrium, tenuous as it was. Marty, during those moments of prolonged silence, while they looked for a metaphorical hymn they could both sing, was just happy to stare out of the Z3 window. He was attempting to guess whether the next person to sit with Gordy in the seat he was occupying would be blonde or brunette. He knew Gordy, who was physically neither classically aesthetic nor a displeasure, would be spoilt for choice. There was gentility

in the barely visible facial lines betraying the obvious efficiency that appeared to be the Gordy Ballieu hallmark.

Marty's mind didn't focus on any Gordy-like plan, rather it reminisced about other things. He allowed the outside landscape to blur as his thoughts went to the past, childhood in Hamilton, unscheduled adolescence, and unheralded schooling. He was heading for one of the world's great cities and yet his heart lay elsewhere. His mind wandered to a childhood of riding his horse on weekends, something that London living would never afford, the freedom of walking to school alone. Of talking to strangers and shooting at the first magpie of spring with the pellet gun. Of disappearing to the river for the afternoon and seeing if he could spot girls from the senior years sunbaking topless on the riverbank. Of not having to be in contact with headquarters. Of living in seemingly simpler times.

His mind wandered to the weekend paper run, of being shouted at by "Cranky" Smit, the alfoil-skinned, pursed-lipped pensioner fool who came staggering out each Sunday morning, from his should-have-been-condemned house behind the railway line. He used to wear, if that was the word, barely-buttoned pyjamas and reeked of tobacco and whisky. He would shout obscenities Marty didn't understand. Paper boys were always late, according to Smit. Old people were always tight with their money, according to paper boys.

'You're late again boy.'

'Sorry but the papers didn't arrive on time at the shop.' Marty's reply was as sturdy as could be expected from a ten year old facing the tirade of thirty years worth of experience in paper boy abuse.

Marty's mind lingered indulgently on what he had done with the takings from his run. Precisely allocated to a well-kept bank account to be invested as wisely as any ten year old possibly could. Tips from newspaper readers other than pensioners in pyjamas. Tips going into consolidated revenue for better days. The cricket bat on lay-by at Hamilton Sports & General – a dollar a week down and nothing but hope whistling through fingers as the hard earned was placed on the counter. Twenty weeks each Saturday morning until the prize was fully paid for.

Lay-by, when people were prepared to wait for what they could not afford. Less complicated times. Could he have had more, he pondered, than he already had if he had eschewed the notion of wanting things simple? Or was success all about taking the simple by the balls and wringing the life out of it, like Gordy would, until he sat, figuratively, astride the steed of prosperous and lusty cornucopia? How would he know? Grappling with that rumbling metaphor did nothing but frustrate him. He never really owned anything. Never owned a car that couldn't fill a bucket with rust. Never owned a house that he could put his stake into. He owned a sofa, a television, and a bed, of sorts – a futon. He owned a desk, but that was because the person who leant it to him couldn't be bothered asking for it back. And a violin that Ali Hawkes couldn't be bothered using and so was given to him at an end of year function, plus a tax debt, suit, a dinner set, a guitar and a microwave. That was about it. A fairly straightforward register of assets if ever a bankruptcy trustee should require one.

Marty cast his mind, as he sat in silence, with the latest offering from the car sound system fizzling into the background and with Gordy concentrating on listening to the engine, back to the days of rock and roll and simple progressions. Bikes with bells and sugared indulgences for half a buck, climbing the town reservoir with Gordy, “Tiny” Thomas, and Kenny “Bugs” Willetts. Scampering up the ladder on the outside of the reservoir and collecting the coin on offer from each boy for the first to climb to the top. Marty was the only one brave or stupid enough to take the dare. Then he would look down into the waterless pitch and wonder who thought up the idea to build something that served no other apparent purpose than to entertain adventurous youths and provide outlets for spent penny climbers and parental anxiety.

Gordy occasionally glanced sideways at his mate, considered how much he liked Marty, despite their divergent lives. Gordy didn’t get him, but he liked him. Part of the reason for Gordy liking Marty was because Marty reminded him of what he, Gordy, had. He’d feel sorry for him if he had time, but Gordy didn’t think that such thoughts were ever appropriate when inside a friendship.

What Gordy did understand however, was money and how to make it. They had grown up together and did the same things, but learnt differently – from Sunday School, the football team, middle class parents, horny older sisters, and music lessons. From standing outside the bald, fat, incompetent Principal’s office courting fate, waiting for the cane, and smiling at girls in the senior years.

Gordy’s final school years were spent at Melbourne Grammar because that was where one went for your final year when one was a Ballieu. Marty stayed behind in Hamilton to help with the family farm on weekends. Gordy mastered the art of seducing women from the unlimited well of opportunity at Grammar’s sister school while Marty quietly dealt with the trials of unrequited romantic ambition at Hamilton High, where the girls, unfortunately, were just too familiar with Marty to ever be attracted to him.

The Ballieu boy went straight to the Commerce faculty of Monash, the natural crucible for young Jewish business aspirants. By the time he had arrived at the college, he was already well known as moneyed, permanently aroused, and aspiring to a life full of the possibilities that having a leg up provided.

Marty, meanwhile, headed for the unlikely grounds of La Trobe and an abridged and abruptly curtailed flirt with the faculty of Arts, in vain hope that paternal longings so inferred might bring some honour to the Culhane name. This career turn appeared to have the hallmark of an apparent philosophical precept that suggested people were not what they thought they were, but what they thought others made of them.

It was part of Marty’s emotional lacuna that made him feel an education of the formal kind would ease parental anxieties about the future of the boy. That he managed to complete an arts degree and follow up with a teachers diploma, pursued less than enthusiastically, made for a series of sideways glances from those in the family who didn’t dare question what they didn’t understand.

While the Ballieu family were a considerable force everywhere, the Culhane family were merely a strong and reliable presence. Francis Jack Culhane came to Hamilton from stout Irish Scottish farming stock, where the thought of having a day off from work would just about be enough to warrant a visit to the confessional. The town confessional was a dangerous place, where so much could be deduced from merely waiting your turn. Judgements so easily made against the mother of three who must be neglecting the children, or the businessman who wasn't around at the weekends. With the foolery of imagined sins and bugged attempts at slipping through the ecumenical net holding sway over anticipated priestly penance.

Frank's grandfather, Thomas William Culhane, made his way to Australia in the dying days of another century. Farewelling his own ancient land, Oscar Wilde, and the coming bloody battles to decide the fate of the nation, and trailing a particular young immigrant domestic worker destined for the employ of colonial landlords. She found employment among the households of the Melbourne elite and he, an agricultural farmhand in the western upper reaches. Thomas Culhane held Katherine Elizabeth Tynan in his heart as he worked the hard earth, held his nerve, purchased land and found a way to impose his own version of Irish bravura on Katherine. He convinced her to leave the service of the new establishment for the uncertainty of attempting to tame a land that would not yield.

He spent the last year of his life speaking not a single word, Katherine knowing not the cause of it. He would stand in the middle of the room, stiffen up, not able to move, for hours on end. Katherine couldn't budge him, she gave up trying, and then he would come right. But still he wouldn't talk.

Until one day, he stood, centre, in the main living room, giant of a man, with a jaw that flushed out impostors, and waited for his wife to join him there. As she entered, and as she beheld him, he held his right hand out gingerly to her, buttressed like a stooping reed, as if about to give a speech, and uttered the following words: 'It doesn't have to be this way.'

That was it, he said no more. It represented Irish understatement and Australian stoicism in one single, glorious moment. Three days later, Thomas Culhane was dead.

So even though Frank Culhane was third generation Australian, the Irish in him bore through. He was the sort of farmer who would walk from the eastern most point of his property to the western most point and back again in the dead of night. Freezing feet in old R.M. Williams boots, chapped lips, jagged, sun-blotched nose, rolled sleeves, and attitude. Dragging tired and aching limbs, levered legs, and tensile arms, looking for a ewe that he knew was ready to give birth but for some reason had wandered off, as lambing ewes were want to do. Not stopping until he knew its exact whereabouts, he would return triumphantly to the whisky cabinet to celebrate with his friend, the single malt, by the flickering embers of the late evening firelight.

The sort who would hit his horse in the head if it was foolish enough to kick him and address the troops at the table about the times they were living in. The sort of husband who would make sure children were out of the house before commencing marital relations. And the sort of man who would give a helping hand to those in need and, furthermore, threaten injury if said help ever became known. A part of Marty felt compelled to determine, as if a

calling had been visited to him during one of those steel cold evenings looking for ewes, whether such men still existed.

It was nothing for Frank Culhane to fling open Marty's bedroom door at three a.m. summoning him to action if so required. 'Come on mate, give me a hand. Ewe lost somewhere south of the dam.'

'What?' Marty's expected reply came before he even knew he was awake.

'I need your help.'

'What's the time?' It was the best a twelve year old could muster prior to dawn. It has been verified. Exhaustive scientific research has shown it to be the case, that teenagers are incapable of contributory dialogue prior to midday.

'Doesn't matter. Three o'clock. I can't find some sheep. Get up. Won't take long.' Culhane the son knew this was probably a lie and that he wouldn't be back in bed before breakfast. But that was the way Culhane the father operated, and there was no use pleading for the nine hours sleep a schoolboy required.

It didn't matter that Marty, so freckle-faced and frail looking, had Fergus the younger brother in the next bedroom and Landy the older sister down the hall. It was always him the father volunteered for duty. Marty had the kind of look about him that would forever make him the ideal second lead role in the school play. He would certainly never be the hero, but he couldn't be considered for the villain's role either. That left the hero's alter hero, or the villain's trusty and mischievous assistant, too kindly for the lead, but just impish enough for the support. He missed out on the role of *Iago*, probably because he could never really convince anyone that there was trouble afoot. While Gordy had claimed the part of *Othello*.

He served his friend Gordy loyally. Even once making notes for him during fourth year examinations, after Gordy had broken his wrist coming off his push bike on the way home from school. He didn't despise the call to serve Gordy any more than he despised the call to serve Frank. It consolidated his understanding that he was needed. Even at the age of thirteen he knew his father needed him. It wasn't a psychologist's understanding of need, nor a father's appreciation of it. He just wanted it to be so. It was this understanding that made him get out of bed in the middle of the night, because when he arrived bleary eyed at school that same day, eyes full of sleep and fingernails ripped, he knew he had bragging rights. He knew it and Frank Culhane knew it.

As the Z3 approached Melbourne, Marty realised he was enjoying Gordy's company. The driver, full of confidence and élan and the passenger, full of questioning and doubt.

The driver had a genuine if unspoken envy of the passenger. Even if it was an un-melodramatic envy, in much the same manner that a lion might envy a giraffe because the giraffe just walked around stretching its neck all day, eating leaves off branches, whereas the lion went and hunted.

Gordy knew that he was king of the jungle and Marty knew that he was walking around it, picking at leftovers.