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Saturday and I am expecting a visit from my daughter. Feeling a little more ‘upbeat’ than last night. Gave trousers to Nurse Williams, the more decent one around here. Put my name inside the waist band with a biro and hope it doesn’t get dry-cleaned out. All my other clothes have already been ‘tagged’ so I don’t end up with some old geriatric’s underwear. The thought turns the stomach.

This morning at breakfast Clem dropped a fart that would kill a Clydesdale. The sound alone put me right off my porridge. I attempted to take a cup of tea back to my room but was promptly turned around by Nurse Stinson. She grabbed my wheelchair and just spun it around.

‘You must eat with the others,’ she demands.

‘I’m through with eating anything,’ I tell her. But then I’m back at the table and you could cut the foul air with a blunt breadknife.

From my TV notes: Beef cattle in Australia emit anywhere from 50 to 90 kilograms of methane per year – mostly through belching and not farting as many think. In polite circles this action is called ‘eructation’. *Eructation: Belching (Of person or volcano)*. Oxford p. 278. Our breakfast ‘circle’ is neither polite nor free of eructations!

More than one billion cows in the world equals approximately 70 million tonnes of methane per year.

Two-thirds of all ammonia in the world comes from cows.

Termites in mounds emit approximately two kilograms of methane per hectare per year.

Still waiting for Lisa.

Emissions from the human body occur in at least twenty different ways. Here are some of them:

Bleeding, moulting, sweating, coughing, runny nose (i.e. nasal mucus)

Flatulence, respiration, eructation.

People can also –

Defecate

Urinate

Regurgitate

Ejaculate

Menstruate

Lactate

Suppurate

Exudate

Exfoliate

Expectorate



It is now 2 p.m. Lisa arrived at three minutes after 11 a.m., no doubt so she could disappear as soon as the lunch bell went. She looked so much older. Roughly the same build as her mother, thin and a bit scrawny but long hair in a ponytail. She has her mother's freckles as well.

First thing she says: 'Hi Dad, you look fantastic!' I

have not looked ‘fantastic’ in a long while. ‘Great’ would be an overstatement, ‘good’ not very close, ‘OK’ might have been near it. I still have my upset stomach which I think is connected to my gall bladder removal. Also a rash has broken out on my right foot and ankle and there is another one on my inner arm but I do not think the two are related.

‘I’ve got you a present,’ she says. She passes me a small package. ‘A pair of woollen gloves,’ she says before I have a chance to open it. I thank her.

‘Should find some use for them,’ I say. ‘Never know when this place might freeze over.’ She doesn’t catch the drift.

‘Did you bring my other things?’ I ask.

‘What things, Dad?’

‘My box of photos, the digital clock radio, my fishing tackle ...’

‘They must be still in the storage cupboard. Have you looked in your cartons?’

‘They’re not in those. All the things in there are listed on the lid. I marked them myself. Only winter clothes, some books, all my science journals ...’

‘Soon as I get a chance I’ll have a look, Dad, OK? When I ...’

‘You said you would on the phone. You said you’d bring over my box of photos – and my fishing gear as well.’

‘Oh come on, Dad. What on earth would you do with fishing gear in here? What use would it ...’

‘Lisa, it’s my gear. They’re my rods, my reels and there’s a large creel full of expensive tackle ...’

‘I’ll have a look, although I suspect the boys might have used your rods. Don’t you want to hand them on to your grandkids?’

‘Not yet I don’t, Lisa. I want to use them. I’ve got plans. I might see if Joe wants to go fishing.’

‘Joseph is too busy at the moment, sitting his HSC.’

‘Not your Joe, the Joe in here that I sit with at the table.’

Until that moment it hadn’t even remotely crossed my mind to go fishing with anyone, let alone Skeleton Joe. For a brief moment I imagined him shuffling down to the wharf, staring at his slippers while I carry the rods across my wheelchair, giving him a prod in the backside every now and then. I shudder at the thought.

‘You have a *friend!* That’s *fantastic*, Dad.’ (that word again).

‘I don’t have a “friend”. I have nothing in common with any of these people. And I’m thinking of applying for a place with the Housing Commission.’ Again I surprised myself. It has indeed crossed my mind to apply but I’ve done nothing about it. I also thought about looking for part-time work in *The Age* until I realised the absurdity of it.

‘You’re turning over a new leaf.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean.’

‘You want to take control of your life.’

‘And what’s *that* supposed to mean?’

‘Oh come on, Dad. Why don’t you forget about a house and just settle in here and enjoy yourself.’

‘This place is a hole, Lisa, a dirty black cemetery hole that people wait around in until it’s time to throw on the dirt.’

‘Oh Dad, must you be so melodramatic?’

‘Anyway, what about my balls?’

‘What balls?’

‘*You* know what balls.’

‘Your bocce balls.’

‘Not bocce, Lisa, *pétanque*. There’s a difference.’

‘I told you, Dad, the boys play with them.’

‘Well I don’t *want* the boys to play with them.’

‘Oh, don’t be so mean.’

‘They are not toys, Lisa. They’re expensive, professional *pétanque* balls – you can’t even get them in a sports store.’

‘Dad, you can’t use them *here*.’

I just stare at her. I can feel the blood rising in my face and my heart thumping.

‘I’ll have a look Dad, OK?’

‘I’d appreciate it if you could drop them by during the week – you don’t have to stay.’

‘If Carlos gets home early enough, alright?’

‘And my photos?’

‘If they’re available I’ll bring them over.’

‘Available?’

‘If they’re *there*, Dad, you know what I mean. You dumped a lot of stuff on me when you moved out of the boarding house ...’

‘I didn’t move out, I was *moved* out.’

‘You were admitted to St Vincent’s, Dad, to have your operation, remember?’

‘No, Lisa, I don’t remember, it was such a long time ago. Two months is it now?’

‘You’re a hard man, Mr Smythe. You always were.’

Hard to live with would be an understatement.'

Here we go, I thought; another little dig at my marriage.

'You're going to start a diatribe about your mother, aren't you? About her wanting me out. You're going to tell me it was all my fault. If I'd been more easy-going she'd have been happy to ...'

'Easy-going? If you'd been more assertive.'

'Exactly how assertive would you have wanted me to be, Lisa? How many affairs should I have turned a blind ...'

'I did not come over here for you to start slandering my dead mother, Dad. What drove her to it, eh? Behind every situation there's another story, you know.'

We both shut up then. Lisa heard something in the corridor and watched a procession of wheelchairs go past my door. I saw her frown. What was she thinking? I knew it was impossible for us to be close. She was her mother's child, unlike Christopher who took after me. It's odd to have your daughter look at you as if you're a stranger. She didn't see a 'father', she saw an older man that just happened to be connected in some curious way to her own children.

'If you'll just come over next week with my photos, my rods and my pétanque balls, I'll shut up,' I said. 'Never mind the other stuff, just give me those things to begin with, will you?'

'I'll have a look, Dad. I'll have a look.' Then she was gone.



Children. These days people plan to have kids – so they say. But mine just popped into the world in much the same way as a mushroom suddenly appears in your lawn. First there had to be a mother of course but that too arrived unannounced like the morning light – you open your eyes, focus and there it is.

About two years into my new career as a signwriter I was sitting one day outside a department store eating a chicken and cheese sandwich when suddenly a girl appeared. She was standing there right in front of me and she tried to bite me for five shillings. I was pretty flush by then, disposable cash in my pocket, but I suddenly tensed right up. I didn't feel the least bit like forking out to some girl on the street without a job. It's strange how time changes you. Of course I hadn't forgotten when Kitty and I didn't have a cent between us and used to get around with the backside hanging out of our pants. And that day I could easily have chucked the girl five bob. But I just froze. For the life of me I just couldn't imagine myself giving her anything. On impulse I decide to give her half a sandwich. She took it and just stood there staring at me. I started to go red, I don't know why.

'I'm not homeless or anything,' she said. 'I'm not a charity case.'

'Fair enough,' I said.

'What's your name?'

'John. But people call me Jack.'

She just stared at me.

'You doin' anything tonight, Jack? You want to come to a jazz concert? In the park?'

I really didn't know anything about jazz.

‘How much?’

‘Nothing for you. I know how to get in for free.’

The comment immediately took me back to the days of the Daco. Kit was always finding us things to do for free and this girl, though a lot older than we were then, had the same look about her – a leader and a bit of a risk-taker.

I went to the outdoor concert. And that night she decided to have sex with me, right there on the grass. I remember having my backside ground into the turf while the girl, with her slacks still hanging off one leg and lit by the flare of the coloured stage lights, bucked on top like a cowboy. Up over her shoulder I noticed a solitary star. It would have been Neptune, high in the sky and positioned just as I knew it in the southern hemisphere. I suddenly recalled my plans for a *New Theory of Everything*. What happened to that? I’d been taken away by other events. And now this new one: a forthright girl bucking away on my thin white body, my knees trapped in my shucked skin-tight dacks. I tried to concentrate. What was her name? At the time I had no idea – and I tell that now because it explains a lot about my future and the inevitable outcome of an indifferent daughter and a self-absorbed son who probably isn’t mine.



I have found a few more grey hairs. I don’t mind them around my head but there are some on my chest and a couple in my eyebrows. This morning there were two very long ones in my pubic region that were very hard to remove. I think they are appearing because of the stress.

Tonight *The Fishing Report* announced that barramundi up to 28 pounds are being caught on a 16-pound line. I have in the past caught big brown trout in the Goulburn River on a 4 pound line. The secret, or fisherman's skill, is to 'play' the fish rather than reel it in. When a fish is in the water it weighs nothing at all. What you contend with is the 'drag' – the fish's swimming strength plus the water resistance plus the current. At water's edge a net is required. Or the fish is released as I did on the lake near Colac. Another tip – when fishing for trout, point the rod straight at the quarry, that way they see a round dot and not 'a rod' at all. Must see Nurse Williams about getting a pair of tweezers.

Another 'new boy' at the table – Peter. 'Pistol Pete' I shall henceforth call him. First day in the camp and all he can talk about is the size of his penis, his prowess and how many women he has 'on a string'. Strangely, Nurse Williams isn't offended at all – she just laughs as though he's the original Don Juan. Perhaps he's a known sex offender and he has all the staff intimidated. My view is he's just a frustrated bullshitter. In age, I'd put him in his late sixties as he still has all his hair, though a lot more grey than me. Rides a new and shiny wheelchair because he has lost the use of the better part of his right side. His right arm hangs limp which, no doubt, is also the state of his self-proclaimed 'enormous' member.

Fortunately, I have lost nothing in that department. Not a lot of use in here though. At one point I had a little fancy that somewhere around here I might meet a 'friend' but that concept is now ludicrous. Remarkably, the nurses seem to think there might be sexual relations

between these feeble souls and have created a clear demarcation between the men and women. Rarely do you see any talk between the two, mostly because only one in nine can talk at all (11 per cent) and of that a further 50 per cent mutter with a great deal of incoherence – if I may put it kindly. Add to that the average age of eighty and you have, for me, a long and lonely life alone.

I have already observed that the ratio of men to women is decidedly in favour of the latter. A regular head count leaves it at 5:1, which can only mean that women are more determined not to die. They fight the inevitable whereas men just give it up. It means that on average – in this camp at least – the men are healthier in the brains department because they are generally younger. The exception is someone like Jim Southall who is both very old and still with his marbles – all those years in parliament must have preserved his grey matter like peaches in a can.

Like Jim, Pistol Pete seems to have had a stroke, though it has affected the right side of his body. But unlike Jim, he's a few bricks short of a load. Yet at this stage it's hard to say which bricks are missing, one here, another there. If he doesn't stop his rant about the use and description of his penis he is going to drive me as mad as some of my other table buddies, Dooley the Publican for instance.



Heather was not my first sexual experience, nor the last. On the contrary, very early on in my career as a signwriter I met a girl at the Sydney Tech ticket-writing course. That 'affair' did not last long; the girl moved on

to other adventures, but at least it prepared me somewhat for Heather's demands. On the night of the outdoor jazz concert the girl just sat on me, right there on the grass and banged away until I ended up with a serious butt rash. It sounds crude but that is how it was and, in time, that is how it came to be. We were very young and had no cares, and Heather would have a go at anything at all – like doing the horizontal mambo whenever and wherever she felt like it. And like climbing over a ten foot cyclone fence to watch a jazz concert which neither of us knew anything about.

I think that night was the first time I heard Nat Oliver's Jazz Band. And after that I was hooked. Suddenly I moved from being a rocker to a jazzer, stopped with the slicked back hair and worked on a totally different look: stovepipes, slumped hair and pointy-toed shoes.

Heather and I started to see each other regularly. Kit came along sometimes, though she didn't like Heather much. But she was old enough to make her own friends and she began to move in different circles. Even so, Kitty and I never lost our closeness. On the rare occasions that we were both home at Aunty Deb's, we'd always share our stories and counsel each other. I knew the moment she had her first sexual experience and I tried to advise her about men. She listened patiently but she probably knew more about it than I did.

She'd grown into a remarkably beautiful young woman. She knew about hairstyles and the latest fashions and you'd think she was born and bred in some exclusive suburb rather than West Preston. I worried about her then, especially as I wasn't around. Of course there was

no need; her childhood insecurities seemed far behind her. It was my own situation I should have been concentrating on.

About three months into our relationship, Heather and I wound up at *Charlie's Bar and Bistro* on Garner Street, a regular haunt. It was early and there were only a couple of people in the place. Arthur, the half-owner, came past us doubled over and pulling a kelpie by the collar. We liked that place, a real 'local': damp carpet, dart board, open fire and pictures of the Queen. We made our way towards the counter, I ordered drinks and then we took stools at the bar. Marion was cleaning some crap off the pool table and the bar waiter was standing on a chair slapping a ceiling speaker in the vain hope of getting it to deliver music.

We were just settling in when Heather suddenly looked at me and said, *Do you love me?* To be honest, the concept had never occurred to me. I liked her company and we never once fought or argued. We had a good sex life, we rarely ran out of conversation and we liked the same things, the same music, the same food. Does it get any closer than that? *Love*. I really had nothing to compare it to. I loved Kitty of course, I'd eat razor blades for her, I'd starve to death for that sister of mine but she was my sibling, my blood kin, so it didn't count.

'I guess I do, Heather,' I said. The moment I said it I felt good. I clearly remember that distinct warm feeling as I said it – *I guess I do, Heather* – as though it really was the best thing in the world a person could say. It was as if the supreme sacrifice was to love another human being who wasn't related to you. I felt a sudden emotional

release and I knew that I was never going to be the same again.

‘Then why don’t we get married.’

I nearly fell off the stool. I couldn’t think. Did I hear her correctly? *Get married!*? I’d never heard anything like it.

‘If you love me then why don’t we make a proper go of it?’ she said. ‘It’s piss weak just hangin’ around together month after month with no plans. I don’t mean *tomorrow*, naturally. I just mean why don’t we make some plans, some real plans for the future, maybe pick a date for some time at the end of the year?’

My mind was speeding; I tried to catch up.

‘I don’t know, Heather, maybe we should wait until the end of the year and then pick a date.’

She just sat there a long time. She sipped on a straw and stared into space. She wasn’t a bad-looking girl back then, when she was twenty-four. No pin-up but my equal at least. Brown straight hair chopped by her own scissors, freckles aplenty, and a lot of eye makeup, but that never worried me – it was the scene and Heather wanted to be in it. She was thin like me but had a muscular little body that kind of darted rather than walked. She was just sitting there, and then she turned and looked out the window.

‘I think I’m up the duff, Jacko. In fact I know I am. Got a bun in the oven.’

My brain took a new road, my heart went into overdrive. And suddenly I was as scared as hell. They say a father is supposed to be overcome with joy by his partner’s news, but I was terrified. I looked at her. There *was* a bump; come to think of it I had noticed a tight little

bump in her belly before, but her whole body was so hard and unpredictable I took no notice. We never used contraception. No-one carried condoms around in 1961 and the pill wasn't even on the market.

'Bloody hell, Heather. What are you going to do?'

'What are *we* going to do, more like it.' She sipped her drink and stared away some more.

'We don't even have any money,' I said. 'I'm at Debbie's, you're at your stepfather's. Where the hell could we live? You don't even have a job.'

'How am I going to get a job now, in this condition?'

I stared at her but she wouldn't look at me. 'I've heard of doctors who can do a ... you know, give you a ...'

'I'm not getting no abortion. You can end up in jail. And you know how they do it? They get a piece of a wire coat hanger. People *bleed* to death.'

'I heard there are doctors ...'

'That's bullshit. Anyway I'm past that stage. There's a point of no return and I think I've crossed it.'

We just sat there in silence for a long time. John Campbell's 'Rhinestone Cowboy' was coming out of the speakers, *Getting cards and letters from people I don't even know* ... I always thought it was 'Getting *constant* letters'; it was years before someone corrected me. It wouldn't be the first time I got a few things wrong. But one thing Kit and I had made a pact about: we would not mess up when it came to parenting. No way was either of us going to end up like our own parents getting into something they didn't plan and then living with the wreck of it. Well, here I was teetering on the brink of that very same scenario.