

14.

Helen and I took the train into the city every day. The St Kilda line still had the old red rattlers, back then; I didn't know what era they were from, but I remember thinking that whoever built them must have come straight from the horse-drawn omnibus department.

We parted at Flinders Street. After giving me a quick peck on the cheek Helen would head off in the direction of Myer's, and I would head west towards King Street. I used to stand on the footpath for a moment and watch as she crossed at the lights, with her slim figure fitted snugly into a tight skirt and crisp white blouse. And every day I'd think how lucky I was.

Helen was well aware of the effect her neat bod had on me, and she would play up to it: at home on a warm day she would quite happily get around the house in a simple thin cotton dress, with no bra, and not much else either. She said the dress was called a shift; and when I asked why it was called that she said, 'Darned if I know, Nick, that's just how it is.'

The sight of her nipples jiggling about under a thin layer of cotton was something I found quite disconcerting. It wasn't until a decade or so later that I came across an adequate description of it: *like a couple of ferrets in a sack*.

I said to Helen, 'I bet you wouldn't be game to walk down the street dressed like that,' and she was quite offended that I would even think such a thing. 'Of course I wouldn't,' she said. 'That wouldn't be decent – and someone might call the police.' And they might have done too, back then.

Alison used to do it as well: I remember thinking that maybe they were deliberately ganging up on me. In hot weather Allie would often wear a tiny pair of shorts around the house with a loose-fitting cotton top. She didn't wear a bra either, at home, which I also found quite upsetting. And with Alison, of course, there was rather more ferret to get upset about.

I was very aware of how lucky we all were, for that golden year. The three of us got along very well, in our little house, and life was a lot of fun: Sammy was talking about getting a recording contract for the Warehouse Three, and we were pretty much idolised at every gig we played. Things could hardly have been better.

Sometimes on a weekday morning I would buy *The Sun* at St Kilda station. Helen could get quite sniffy about my choice of newspaper: 'God, that *comic*,' she used to say. But I was from Perth where there was only one morning paper, a tabloid, so I didn't know any better.

There was one morning, it must have been some time in February because I was feeling pretty down about summer being nearly over, when I decided to have a look at the

Holiday Accommodation column in the classified ads. I was thinking that maybe we could all take a week off and have a holiday by the sea. ‘It says here,’ I said to Helen, ‘there’s an on-site caravan for rent. In Blairgowrie.’

‘Well, is there now,’ Helen said. ‘We used to drive through there on our way to Portsea – I remember it as rather ordinary.’

‘Yes, well you would,’ I said. ‘And I daresay Portsea is very nice. After all, the PM’s got a place there, right on the beach – I read about that, in the paper.’

‘It *is* very nice,’ Helen said. ‘Mum and Dad know them quite well, actually. The Holts, I mean.’

It hadn’t been all that long since the Prime Minister’s *‘All the way with LBJ’* speech in Washington, about sending more troops to fight in Vietnam. I was pretty unimpressed by that, and so were a lot of other people. ‘Well Harold bloody Holt can get stuffed,’ I said, and I read the ad again. ‘But this is something we can actually afford. I reckon I might phone up about it.’

Sammy wasn’t exactly pleased when I told him we wanted a week with no gigs, so I said, ‘Sammy, we’re going to be bigger than Peter, Paul and Mary, remember? So we need a bit of a break to get ourselves ready for it.’

Sammy grumbled, but he got things sorted out in the end. He had other acts on his books who could stand in for us, though the crowds at our regular gigs, we heard later, weren’t too happy about us not being there.

Blairgowrie lies on a narrow stretch of the peninsula that separates Port Phillip Bay from Bass Strait, so our caravan was pretty close to both. It was only a few hundred yards from the bay beach on one side, where it's safe to swim, and a bit over a mile to the ocean beach, where it isn't, on the other. We had the caravan park almost entirely to ourselves; the school holidays were well over by then, so most people were back at work. And the weather was warm, which suited us very well.

On our first day, when we'd barely had time to get our gear out of the wagon and into the caravan, Alison said to me, 'Well, Mr Surfer from WA, what's it to be – bay or ocean?'

'I reckon it'll be the back beach for me,' I said. 'After all, I used to swim at Cottesloe, and that's the Indian Ocean. So piddly old Bass Strait'll be a pushover.'

But when we got out of the car and looked down from the top of the cliff at wild surf crashing on the rocks below, I wasn't quite so relaxed about it. 'You know,' I said, 'you might not believe this, but back in Perth I used to swim in the river, as well.'

The girls rather laboured the point as we headed back to the caravan park, and the words *piddly* and *pushover* were mentioned frequently, along with *Mr Surfer*. I just concentrated on driving the car.

We ended up spending most of our time at the bay beach, though I did get over to the Bass Strait side a couple of times

to try some body surfing. It was pretty scary, and Helen and Alison refused outright to go in the water there at all. 'It wouldn't be so bad if it was a proper sandy beach,' Helen said, 'but it's all rocks, and hardly any sand.'

There was one small problem with the three of us sharing a caravan, and it became apparent when we finally switched out the lights and went to bed on that first night. The van had three beds that folded out from the wall: a double, which Hel and I claimed, and two singles for Alison to choose between. The trouble was, the caravan had just the one room, with only a curtain to separate the double bed from the others. And that certainly put a dampener on anything to do with screwing. 'I think we're going to have to give up on the idea,' Helen whispered to me in the dark. 'Unless we invite Allie to join us.'

I was pretty shocked, to start with. *Jesus, these Melbourne girls*, I said to myself. And the thought of having Hel and Allie at the same time was quite a turn-on, to say the least, but I had the sense to be cautious. After all, I'd turned twenty a couple of weeks earlier, so I wasn't a teenager any more, and it was high time, I told myself, to start behaving like a grown-up. Helen wasn't due to turn twenty for another three weeks, so it was up to me, I figured, to be the mature and responsible one.

It occurred to me it might be a trap. But Hel was so hopelessly honest I didn't think she was capable of it. Also,

she was moving her body against mine in that particular way of hers, and she never did that unless she meant it.

I had a think about the possible future complications: like what it might do to our friendship, and what it would mean for the Warehouse Three. In other words, I was being unusually sensible. So I whispered back: 'I don't want to sound like a bastion of morality, my sweet, but perhaps we'd better just forget about it and go to sleep.'

In the end we got round our problem by going for a walk every day, just the two of us, and having a quick and sweaty screw in the sand dunes.

On the second day we were there, as we were heading back to the caravan park from our tryst in the dunes, Helen said to me, 'I was talking to Allie this morning. She's decided she wants to learn how to drive.'

'Oh, does she now,' I said.

'Yes.' Helen gave me a quick look. 'I was telling her about my idea that she could hop into bed with us.'

'Oh, were you just. Well I can't say the connection between that and learning to drive is entirely obvious.'

'No, I suppose it isn't. I told her you said no.'

'Um. Right. So what did Allie say to that?'

'She thanked me for my generous offer, but said she was quite capable of finding her own bronzed sex god.'

I had to smile at that, but I kept my mouth firmly shut.

'And then she said, "Anyway, if your mate Nicko doesn't want to root me, he can teach me to drive instead."'

So I did, and we started that afternoon. Blairgowrie was pretty much deserted and there was hardly any traffic on the streets, so I thought it would be safe enough. For the first lesson I decided I'd better drive the car out of the caravan park myself, then I pulled over into the shade of the tea-trees and switched off the engine. Helen and Alison were both in the back seat. They seemed to be pretty excited about the idea.

'Okay, so who's first,' I said. 'Hel or Allie?'

Helen immediately said, 'Oh no, this is nothing to do with me, Allie's the one who wants to learn how to drive. I'm just coming along for the ride.'

So I slid across to the passenger seat and Alison got in behind the wheel.

'Right, then,' I said. 'First things first. I guess you know what the steering wheel's for, and this lever is the column shift. You use that to change gears.'

'Okay,' Alison said. 'Steering wheel. Column shift. Got it.'

Next I pointed to the pedals on the floor. 'Left foot for the clutch pedal, and right foot for the brake and the accelerator. But not at the same time.'

Alison frowned. 'But what happens when I *do* need to press them both down at the same time?' she said.

'Well if that ever happens,' I said, 'then God help us.'

Alison got the hang of it very quickly, after a few minor hiccups. Her initial attempt to take off had the car leaping along the road in a violent series of jumps that had Helen laughing hysterically in the back seat.

'This is actually a motor car,' I said to Alison. 'It is not a motorised kangaroo. Kindly bear that in mind.' But it was good to hear Hel laughing like that, she wasn't a laugh-out-loud sort of girl, generally.

Allie just gave me a long look and poked her tongue out at me. 'Don't be rude, Nicko,' she said. 'Rome wasn't built in a day.'

Pretty soon Alison was driving around the block, over and over, doing left turns only. 'We won't bother with right-hand turns yet,' I said. 'We'll get on to them later, and then we'll start on hand signals.'

'My God, *hand signals?*' Alison said. 'So how the hell do you steer, when you're changing gear with your left hand, and you've got your right arm hanging out the window?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I've never thought about it. You just do it, somehow.'

After a couple more circuits Alison was feeling confident enough to talk about other things. 'So I really don't need you guys to be worrying about *poor Allie's sex life*,' she said. 'For a start, I do actually have a boyfriend.'

This was news to me, and it seemed to surprise Helen as well, because she said, 'Since when? You haven't said anything to me about a boyfriend, and you can't be talking about Mitch.'

Alison changed down to second and pulled the car into a left turn. 'God no, it's certainly not Mitch,' she said. 'I first met this guy a few weeks ago, when I made him a steak

sandwich.' She smiled a little and added, 'A pretty romantic beginning.'

'And you never *told* me!' Helen said. 'I don't believe it.'

'Well it was only in the last couple of days – before our holiday, I mean – that it started getting at all serious. His name's Robert, and he's probably nothing like what you expect. So I wasn't sure if I should tell you about him.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Why's that?'

'Well for a start, he's quite wealthy, I think. He's got a very flash Mercedes Sports, and he wears expensive suits.'

'My God,' Helen said. 'How old is this guy?'

Alison accelerated to get up a steep hill and then changed back up to third. She was looking directly ahead and concentrating on her driving. 'Well he's a bit older than we are,' she said. 'He's thirty-six, he says.'

Hel and I were both shocked. To us, thirty-six was almost unimaginably old. 'Bloody hell, Allie,' I said, 'that makes him twice as old as you are. You've gone and got yourself a *sugar daddy*.'

On Sunday we headed back to Melbourne. We were all cheerful, and for most of the drive we were singing. Having to compete with the hum of the engine and the road noise is good practice for getting vocal parts right, especially when it's hot and all the windows are down.

It had been a good holiday; we all had impressive suntans, and Alison was getting pretty good at driving. But we weren't

unhappy to be heading home again, and I think we were all looking forward to getting back into our normal routine. I decided that a week in a caravan was all very well, but you wouldn't want to overdo it.

There was a postcard and a gas bill waiting for us in the letterbox when we got back. The card featured kangaroos and koalas set against an improbably blue sky, and it bore a Puckapunyal postmark. All it said was, '*Guess what, I'm in the Army. Straight up. See you when I get leave.*'

There was no mention of who it was from, but it could hardly have been anyone but Mitch. I wasn't all that pleased about the prospect of him coming to visit. *Mitch knows about Allie and me*, I was thinking, *and it would be better if he didn't.*