

First Place Fiction Prize
~ In the 24th Consecutive NMW Awards ~

Stephen Irwin
Tail the Barney

I'm not partial to travel. I'm a home body. But when Florey told me the bloke had died, I did the ring around. We three decided, out of neighbourliness and out of friendship for a chap less fortunate than us, that we'd duck out and fetch Florey's blessed thing back. But if truth be told, we didn't do it for Florey. We did it for peace and quiet.

Florey was quite the whinger.* But he was our whinger, our neighbour. That's why we nipped out that night: to flog back Florey's trinket from the dead man.

I suppose it was my dart. But let me tell you about Florey and you'll understand why Reed, the girl and I went a-thieving.

Florey moved into our block some thirty-odd years ago. It was a council relocation; he had no one to look after him. At first I was pleased to have someone new to yarn with. Florey had been around the ridges, and I don't mind a listen. But cripes, talk! This and that; war and women; won so much, lost so much. I guess we got used to it, we neighbours. Fat Reed on my left. The young girl Lisa over the road (she's new). Dimity next door: my age. We got used to Florey's deepest scratch, the one about the chap who stole his thing. His brooch, his good luck charm, the loss of which sent his whole life down the box. Yes, we'd say, that's terrible; what a scoundrel, we'd say; let it go, we'd say. Dimity suggested telling Florey to plug it, but Dimity was more of a home body than me and she was always maggoty about something. And another chap you would have a go at, but Florey had been in the war and he'd lost his legs in the flood, so I guess we just took pity. But what would we do for a bit of shush! Well, I guess this is about just what we'd do. What we *did* do. What a night.

*

I'd had the daughter and her kids around that day. Little bastards. A chap reaches an age and I think that permits some frankness. I love my daughter, but her children are diseased little monkeys. Running around, throwing rocks, jumping the fence into Dimity's place and throwing more rocks (thank Christ Dimity's a deep sleeper or there'd have been hell to pay). They'd been swimming at Southbank, she said. Lauren talked and talked, lovely girl, but emotional. But you only get one family, so I listened politely, nodding in the right spots, tuning out of the babble and

enjoying the view across the river. Finally Lauren took off taking her Godless little marmosets with her, but then Reed's family came to visit him and I had to hear all their nonsense. Why can't people speak softly anymore? You'd think with mobile telephones and all this guff people would have evolved out of yelling, but no. Anyway, come evening all I wanted was an early kip.* That's when Florey started up.

The chap who stole his brooch had died. I don't know how Florey knew this, but he come across so certain that I didn't doubt him. He'd died just this night, said Florey. He still had the brooch, said Florey. My brooch, said Florey. My good luck brooch. And the thief's family would get it now, and there was no hope then—no hope at all!—of getting it back. Woe was Florey. I patted Florey on his bony shoulders and *there-there'd* him and sent him home with the firm intention of doing nothing.

It was a beautiful night, and I would have been content to have sat out smelling the cinnamon of jacaranda bark and the tang of camphor laurel and watching flying foxes sweep like flakes of ash across the sky and watching the slow stars climb before retiring... but an idea caught me. I couldn't rest. I couldn't sleep. It niggled. It itched so I felt like ants were crawling inside me. I had a plan. I went next door to see Reed.

"Reed!" I called.

He rubbed his eyes (him tired, too, from *his* family's yammerings) and listened to my plan to go and fetch Florey's tail-the-barney brooch from the dead man. Reed hummed and nodded and rubbed his feet. "I'm not too svelte," suggested Reed, blushing. He was very worried about his weight. "And you're, well, you're not so young..."

"Fine," I said. "We'll get Lisa."

"Lesia," corrected Reed.

"Fine," I repeated, and we went across to get Lisa.

Lisa was maybe thirty and had moved in a few years ago. I may be old, and I may not quite have the air to fill the balloon, but I am not blind, and the thought of watching Lisa wriggling through a window was the better part of my plan, and I congratulated myself on it.

"It'll shut Florey up?" asked Lisa. Smiles never landed on Lisa's face.

I said I thought it would.

"Let's do it, then," she said. "I'll just do my face."

"No time!" I cried. "The dead bloke's family are probably there already, pawing through his things! Let's go!"

None of us thought to invite Dimity. Dimity would talk us out of it. And this was far too nice a night to be talked out of anything. So Reed, Lisa/Lesia and I went out to steal some peace.

*

In the early spring, the city's air is at once loose and tight, cool and warm, clear and full. In the pocket of the hill climbing Annerley Road one can feel toasty and pleasantly assaulted by fragrance of potato vine, cut grass and distant tweak of diesel. Crest the hill and glimpse the sparkling night time spires of the city, and suddenly you feel cold air rattling your bones, and the wind stealing all scent away to the wide, dark river, to be wicked jealously away.

And that was as far as we three got—the top of Annerley Road, looking one way North to the city and one way South to the river and all of us feeling the chill wind tugging like children—when we realised we didn't know where we were going.

We three sat in the park there to discuss notes on Florey, his bibelot, and the tormentor who stole it. Reed, puffing heavily, said he'd heard the chap who stole it lived in Taringa. I (not

puffing at all) recalled hearing the dastard's name was Richard someone-or-other, and Florey was upset because the tail-the-barney was lucky.

"What do you remember, Lisa?" I asked.

"Lesia," she snarled, looking around nervously and already wanting to go home.

I said we couldn't go home. Or, we could, but we'd be condemned to years of whining and we should see this through.

She nodded nervously, hoping no one would see her with her face not made up, and explained that Florey told *her* the treasure was a pendant made in the *taille d'épargne** style, and was given to him by a grateful gypsy when he had entered Bergen Belsen with the British at the end of the war.

That rang a bell with Reed and me.

"And also," she snipped, "the scoundrel's surname was Richard. His first name was something dull and boring."

"Bill!" cried Reed, remembering, and I grew offended because my name is Bill.

Still, we had something to start with: William Richards, Taringa, thief of a gypsy's magical tail-the-barney pendant.

Taringa, as the crow flew (and as flying foxes now did, black leather brackets arcing silently west, winking out the cool stars as they passed) was not far. But for old bones like mine, it was a fair trot. "Let's catch a cab!" I suggested, and tottered out of the deep shadows of the pergola toward the whirring headlights and flitting shadows of Annerley road. "Who's got some Oscar?"

Reed and Lisa looked at me blankly.

"Oscar Asche?" I asked.

Still the round, empty stares.

"Cash!" I shouted.

"Oh," they said, looking sideways at each other. *We're a bit younger than you, Bill*. It transpired that Reed didn't bring any cash—he thought we were out for a stroll which was a good idea because he was feeling heavy and unsightly. Lisa didn't have any because she didn't even have time to do her lips fergodsake let alone hunt around for her purse. And I am old, and old people in Dutton Park don't carry money—everyone knew that.

"Looks like we walk," I said.

Reed looked at his fat feet. Lisa looked up at the fingernail moon.

"What?" I asked.

Reed mumbled something about Saturday night and young ladies on their way to night clubs laughing at him, and Lisa/Lesia sneered something else about anyone going anywhere pointing at her and thinking she looked like a trollop.

I sat beside them. "You," I said to Reed, putting one arm around him, "worry too much. You've been fat. I remember when you first arrived, you looked big. But I think you've got so used to thinking you're fat, you don't realize how sporty you look. And you," I said, wanting to put my arm around Lisa but instead just patting her thin knee once. "This is a beautiful night, and it is only more beautiful with you in it, not at home sulking."

My inspiring talk did nothing whatsoever, and they both suggested they might go home.

"Well, you're not!" I snapped. "Let's walk!"

"Which way?" groaned Lisa.

"There's a new bridge across to the University," suggested fatso.

"No way, I don't do bridges," venomous Lisa.

"Well it's that bridge, or it's the Gray Street Bridge, or that other new bridge, or it's a ferry where you can have half the population laughing at you, you fat-thin miseries."

So we started back the way we came, behind the thin black shadows, behind streetlights and the thick black shadows under a clear night sky toward the new bridge.

*

Years pass fast. You think you know a place, you think you know what kind of people live here, and what kind are drawn there, but if you stay still too long, the truth washes past like a tide, carrying new things past your tired eyes. When you break free of your reef and drift with the current, you see that nothing has stayed still except you—everything is different. Hills have been subtly reshaped. Roads widened. Trees cut down or planted. People cut down or planted or transplanted. Only the stars are fixed, and they are cold and far, far away. But some things, mercifully, change slowly. Once upon a time, one wouldn't go about on foot around Dutton Park at night for fear of violent drunks. I discovered one *still* should not go about on foot around Dutton Park at night for fear of violent drunks.

"Yo yo yo!" said the young man who looked, in silhouette at least, like a penguin—all baggy britches, billed cap and swagging arms. "Wassup wasdown wattavwehe-ya?"

I turned to Lisa and Reed, hoping for a translation. They each shrugged and took a subtle step behind me. We had been walking downhill through the park, talking about favourite foods (mine: shepherd's pie; Lisa/Lesia's: caffeine tablets; Reed's: anything starting with a letter of the alphabet) and didn't see the huddle of penguins on its park bench ice floe until we heard the voice. Then, the vapour wash of hot malcontent ran over us. The emperor strutted a bit closer. Only a circle of streetlight separated him from me.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"You a bit croaky old man," said the emperor, pronouncing the last word *main*. "You need a drink."

"Tell him to drink this!" shouted one of the shadow penguins, and I heard a fly unzip and laughter. I glanced back at Reed and Lisa. They were magically ten feet back already. I scowled.

"I don't like your attitude, boy," I said. They laughed louder. I heard metal. Once, years ago, I'd been pretty fearless. As a tar boy I'd fought one of Brophy's boys* in Charleville, and lost with great dignity. Then I grew older and scared. Why not tonight? I couldn't explain it. It was too nice a night to be scared. And I knew I would be all right. I had something to do: I had Florey's treasure to rescue, and nothing was going to stop me. All five penguins detached themselves from their nest and waddled up behind their leader.

"Righto," I said. "Rafferty rules with louts." I shaped up and stepped into the light. A siren sounded somewhere, growing louder. The boys all looked at me from under their shadow bills. Their faces were all white as sand, their eyes dark as soil. The siren grew louder. They ran.

Pleased, I looked back to Reed and Lisa. They were amazed. "Still cut quite the figure," I said, throwing a punch at the air and wincing at the grinding joints. Reed cocked his head and looked at me, then looked at his own arms. Lisa looked at me and almost—not a word of a lie—almost smiled, I swear. The bridge was ahead, arcing batwings with steel veins soaring across the river into the night.

*

We were midway across the bridge when Lisa collapsed into a tight, shrieking ball. I tried to move her, but her arms and legs spat out like snakes, one hard knuckled thing striking me in the shin. I swore aloud (which I *never* do) and limped back along the bridge, leaving Reed to the hissing viper's nest. I was cranky. At this rate we'd never get to Bill Richard's house—certainly not before his peregrine-eyed beneficiaries began their greedy sucking of things.

“What’s the matter with her?” I asked Reed.

“She says she... what did you say?” He listened to her sizzle a moment. “She says she jumped off a bridge and that’s why she hates them.”

I rolled my eyes, put my hands on the cold rails, and looked out across the river.

It was a beaut. In my time I’d see the Yarra, the Torrens, the Margaret, the Gordon and the Mary. This wasn’t a pretty blue brook, or a wild rapid antelope. This was wide and stately and slow to anger. She glimmered in the moonlight, a grand diva hiding her bulk behind shimmering silver and twinkling ice blue. Her mangrove flanks smelled like tears. I could just make out the cemetery, and the new galvanized steel rails of the roadside that separated the graveyard’s ivory tombstone teeth from the black, plunging banks. There. That must have been where Florey lost his legs. Where he lost his trinket, and his luck.

As the river mumbled quietly below me, I let my mind drift back with it. Ten, twenty, thirty years. Back to ‘seventy four. And the floods. I remember the council men, wandering about, digging new holes while the rain thundered down. Laughing and occasionally vomiting, stomachs disgorging as their trucks disgorged. The river had swollen with the rain, rain, rain, and she’d grown very fat and hungry. She’d broken the banks in some spots, eaten the banks in others, one of them here at the cemetery. She’d risen up to the level of the tombstones and started chewing into the cemetery soil. You’ve seen film of icebergs shedding their sides and crashing into the sea? This was like that, only brown not blue. Slabs of soil, undermined by the racing brown-gray water, suddenly fell away into the current, exposing new, raw banks. From these began to poke caskets. The fierce rain would trouble the rotting flanks of coffins until they fell away, exposing the rotten linen and gray bones of corpses. Some caskets fell whole into the torrent and bobbed away, to be found days later caught by mangrove fingers or bouncing expectantly against flooded doorways in Eagle Street. But most simply filled with water and snatched shriveled cadavers into hurried and unwelcome baptisms. The council were alerted to this problem. It wasn’t a health problem; not compared to the bloated cows and bloated dogs among the flotsam. But it was a problem of perception. Bony hands and spidery legs and surprised skulls peeking out from the riverbank was unattractive to nose and eye. They got in teams to exhume swiftly, and relocate the bodies before the river could. They were only half in time for Kenneth Dougal Florey. His coffin happened to be aligned in such a way that his feet hung out over the new drop created by the voracious waters. He lay there, pants ripped away, embarrassed as hell, half hoping to be saved and half hoping to be spared the shame by being pulled into the current. As was Florey’s lot in life, he got half what he wanted. His white phalanges, then metatarsals, then talus bones, then left fibula and right tibia then both femurs were sucked away before the two council workers got to him. It was William Richard who knelt on the bank, reached down, and yanked what was left of Florey up and out of his second, fetid womb. “He pongs!” shouted Richard, tossing the half-skeleton to his co-worker Dennis Chee, who giggled and caught Florey in an army surplus body bag. Florey was, naturally, doubly embarrassed by his aroma.

“Wait a second,” shouted Richard over the rain, and Chee stopped zipping. Richard sloshed over and reached down.

“No no no!” Florey told me he shouted, but the rain was too loud. Richard plucked the necklace and the beautifully wrought pendant from Florey’s neck, snapping the silver chain.

“You a dobber,* Chee?”

Chee said Florey shook his head. “No, Mr Richard.”

Richard winked, and—for Florey—everything went black.

Others in their stygian cocoons in the back of the lorry told the fluttering and incensed Florey that the bloke’s first name was Bill—that’s what the chink called him when he wasn’t in strife, said one—then a furious argument over racial invectives drowned Florey’s pleading for

help to regain his *taille d'épargne* pendant. The next day, Florey was moved into the row opposite mine, high on the hill. He'd been an insufferable whinger ever since....

"Here, Bill!" Reed's voice pulled me back into the cold night. He'd somehow gotten Lisa/Lesia to her white feet, and had one arm thrown around her thin shoulders.

A silly wave of envy wriggled through me.

"Here!"

I hurried over, my own feet tack-tacking on the hard bridge surface.

Lisa was shaking, sounding like a dozen frozen, chattering jaws. Reed and I exchanged a nod, and I put my arm around her too, my bones creaking as we took her weight.

"It's all right, Lesia," I said. "We'll have you off here in a jiff."

"Story Bridge," she whispered. "Story Bridge. Story Bridge..."

I remembered, now, what Dimity had told me when Lesia had first moved in. She'd jumped from the Story Bridge, but the tide had been out and she'd landed head first in salty mud. She'd suffocated to death. It was rude, but one day he'd glanced at her stone:

Beautiful daughter
Loving sister
Taken too soon

"Here we go," I said, and we were over. But I kept a hold of her long after we were back on land, until she stopped shaking.

*

We walked through the university grounds, three unlikely haystacks of white shuffling between pools of light, footsteps echoing like dice rolls off the hard stone walls. I stared up at the buildings, feeling the wind tickle inside me. Till now, I thought I'd seen a bit and done a bit. But all these big square buildings, filled with books and those computers and God-knows-what else, made me feel like I hadn't done a tap. I felt small.

"We need a phone book," said Reed.

"Oh! I should call my sister!" suggested Lisa.

Reed explained we had no money, and Lisa nodded glumly.

We tick-ticked through the sandstone canyons. We only saw one lad, one hand on one hip, gently swaying while he relieved himself against something that was either a rubbish bin or a sculpture.

"Fella!" I called. "We need a telephone directory."

He turned, saw us, grinned and held his head, and went back to contemplating his stream. "Fuck me," he giggled.

We found a bank of glass booths near shuttered doors. The directory was chained to it, a ragged and beaten dog of a thing, and looked up *Richards, W*. There was only one in Taringa, in Pike Avenue. We'd get directions as we got closer. We kept walking, and I was pleased to be out of that dismal mausoleum place.

*

We passed houses glowing prettily and warm as Tilley lamps. The Methodist church was dark. The Catholic church was lit, and singing came from within. I slowed. Human voices carried on the soft breeze, rising like fresh tide and falling like clean rain. How long had it been since I

heard music? How long since I heard voices in joy, voices other than Dimity's or Florey's or Reed's, or my daughter's dripping weariness or my grandchildren's bored snatchings? How long since I'd heard voices talking without bitterness or confusion, with hope and brightness?

"Bill?" said Reed, tapping his wrist. I nodded and we pressed on. The she-oaks in the school yard whispered as we passed.

"Look!" said Lisa, delighted.

On the bitumen parade ground, two dogs chased each other, tumbling. The smaller one grabbed one of the bigger one's ribs and ran off with it. The bigger one scooted after, bones and nails clicking. Lisa laughed and jumped the fence to chase the dogs, throwing the errant rib. Reed and I leaned on the fence, watching her.

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it," said Reed.

"About what?"

Reed's dark sockets were thoughtful. "What happens to us. After we die."

I watched him. "This comes next," I said.

He looked at me. "Oh. Yes," he nodded. "Forgot."

I called to Lisa: "Come on, sunshine."

She was grinning, breathing hard. Her smile was as lovely as I'd imagined it would be, and that made me a bit glum. "Come on."

*

The smells! One becomes so used to the back palate of fresh cut grass, the front palate of fresh flowers, the mid-palate of distant salt or distant exhaust fumes. One forgets the smells of life. We passed houses, and we three sniffed, grinning at each other:

"Wood smoke," said Reed.

"Mosquito coils," said Lisa/Lesia.

"Rissoles!" I moaned, licking airy lip. Oh, rissoles and fresh beans and butter! And here: steak and chips! (Porterhouse, specified Reed, and Lisa and I believed him). Lamb and Brussels sprouts. Coffee. Muscat.

We floated on aromas, nudging each other. Reed shook his head. I saw him run white fingers down a belly he remembered, growing sad.

"Don't worry," I said. "This is window shopping. It's free!"

He nodded gloomily, and I looked at Lisa. She shook her head. I changed the subject.

"So, why do you think Florey misses this bauble so much?"

We compared notes, each digging into our lightly whistling heads for memories of mostly-ignored, one-way conversations with Florey. The pendant was beautiful, rose gold with black enamel tracery. When he and the other Brits had stumbled stiff-legged through the gates of Bergen Belsen, some of the walking skeletons had stared, some simply died with the shock of the horror ending, some had wrapped leather and bone arms around the soldiers. One had simply walked up to Florey and pressed the curio into his hand. Florey hadn't known if the naked thing was a man or a woman

"Once, once!" the creature had said, and winked, its smile revealing two teeth. "Romani. Yes? Good, good." And held up one twig finger—once! This we agreed.

The second thing we agreed was recalling that Florey had wondered how long the thing had been in the gypsy's arse.

The third was that, when he'd been demobilised, he went to a jewelers in Suffolk and talked a deal on a gold chain.

That day—that very day he put it on!—had been the luckiest day of his life. In one day he, first, met the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen (who, ahem, became his wife); second, was feeling so lively at meeting Imogene that he put one pound neat on a horse named—can you believe it?—Lucky Day, on the nose, at fifty-to-one and it *won!* And third, he took that money, wandered into a card game in The Old Bell and got a straight and won the keys to a very posh Ford Anglia de Luxe and a handful of petrol coupons! Happiest day, happiest day...

"And then what happened?" asked Lisa/Lesia.

We didn't know. He ended up here. He ended up broke. He died alone, buried by the Serviceman's League.

"Here," said Reed, pointing.

An old man was walking up the footpath toward us. Reed elbowed me. Lisa elbowed me. I stepped forward. "Good evening," I said.

The man stopped and looked up. "Evening." He smiled. "Lovely night," he said. He wore a cloth cap and carried a white cane.

I agreed it was, and asked him if he knew where Pike Avenue might be?

Down the way I was heading, left at the corner, one right one left and there we were. Then he straightened.

"You've not come for me, then?"

I heard the tremor in his voice. "What makes you say that?" I asked.

"You three click when you walk, and your voice sounds like wind blowing through old bottles on a forgotten beach. But aside from that, you seem very pleasant."

I told him we were not coming for him, but thanks for the directions. He waved his cane with a cheerio, and kept walking.

*

This was Brisbane as I remembered it. Weatherboard houses with flaking flanks or proud gloss beige and white, hunched on spindle legs with batten skirts and dark tin bonnets, kind-eyed windows winking at a mild night where high-hissing gums and spider-fingered jacarandas scratched at the southern cross, polishing her bright. A wide fig spread her skirts over the whole road, knitting the breeze with her dark leaves. The houses were tucked behind hedges of roses, hedges of geraniums, low wire fences, low white timber fences. We started looking for the house the phone directory told us held the remains of William Richard. We didn't have to look hard.

The house was gray and in darkness. The yard was overgrown, wind-dried grass a foot high crunched like steel wool underfoot. The ancient paint on cottage's fibro shanks flaked like eczema, and the down-pipe was rusted through, hanging like a rotten tooth from the diseased gum of the equally rusted gutter. The place stank of bad luck.

"Well, we beat the family," said Reed.

"Or they beat us," suggested Lisa.

"Here," I said, and pointed to the overgrown path that bled toward the lattice veranda doors. The grass was unbent. We were first.

"Nice work, Sherlock," said Lisa, and winked emptily at me.

I smiled and pressed the doorbell. No sound came from inside... but we all felt the loose air of regret shift around us. I didn't like this too much.

"We could tell Florey it was gone," suggested Reed. His voice shook. Lisa nodded and skipped back toward the street, decided already.

"No," I said. "We ought to try." Bones do not have good grip. The green brass doorknob slipped under my fingers. "Bung idea, this," I said. "Round the back."

Stepping high through grass dry as ash, we crept along the narrow yard under the yawning shadow of the unhappy house. At the back, a low set of sagging stairs rose to a bent landing and a tattered screen door.

Lisa/Lesia nodded at me. *You go first.*

One, two, three steps, and I was rapping softly on the aluminium frame dusted white with age. “Richard?” I whispered. “Bill?”

Lesia and Reed stared back at me, white skulls tiny moons on shrugging shoulder bones.

“Fine.” I pulled the door open and crept inside.

Some homes are graves of the living. They are dust and sorrow. Lost time hangs like a caul, strung by cobwebs. Skittering things hide under dishes unwashed (who will see them?), clothes unfolded (who will mind?), floors unswept (who will visit?). A calendar from 1989 was crucified by one rusty nail to the hallway wall. I crept up, and four clacking feet followed mine. Ahead was the lounge room, a tiny box, a lifeless place split by icy moonlight slivered by dust-caked Venetian blinds. The air smelled of stolen tobacco, mice, and loneliness.

“There,” whispered Reed. Curled like an unanswered question mark on the floorboards was a man evaporated.

“Bill?” I asked.

He blinked, staring with white, already sinking eyes. “Yes?”

“Bill Richard?” asked Reed.

“Jesus, Reed, seriously,” snapped Lesia.

But the dead man answered anyway, “Yes. I can’t move.”

“That’s ‘coz you’re dead,” said Lesia.

Bill strained and turned his head a notch, and saw us. A whiff of rot, of surrendered lungs, a sigh of surprise. “Oh.”

We told him who we were, how we knew Florey, and how we’d come to fetch Florey’s tail-the-barney pendant. As we did, Richard’s dead hand crept like a crab up from the floor, across the broken reef of his chest, to his throat, where it curled around something there on a chain. There it nested, guarding.

“It’s my good luck charm.”

“It’s not yours.”

“It’s mine!”

“You stole it.”

“No!”

“Give it over!”

“Never!”

We all pried at Richard’s closed crab hand.

We all four saw the yellow headlights flash across the front door glass; we all four heard the car door outside slam. A moment later, the front gate creaked. A moment after that, knocking at the front door. Through the dirty rippled glass, the silhouette of the visitor. Reed, Lesia and I were perched above Richard, exchanging looks.

“Ssh!”

“SSSH!”

“*You be quiet!*”

“Quiet!”

We listened. We waited. The visitor knocked again.

“Dad?” she said.

I looked down at Richard. “Oh,” he whispered. “Oh, no.”

At the front door, keys jangled.

“Hide!”

With an ivory clatter, we scurried. Lesia ducked behind the dusty genoa lounge. Reed cried “I’m too fat! I’m too fat!” and ran down the hall to the toilet. I stood quietly, and crept back, back, back into the dark corner of the room. The front door groaned open, and the woman slipped inside.

“Dad?” She clicked the light switch, on-off, on-off. “Dad...” she whispered, disappointed, unsurprised. She stepped deeper into the musty, hollow coffin room. And saw the curled rag figure on the dusty floor. Her breath sucked in sharply, and her steps were fast. She knelt over the body, hands fluttering like birds... then perching still. “Oh, Dad...”

She was maybe thirty, maybe a bit more. She wore a skirt and jacket and shoes slender like calligraphy on her feet. Her hair had been worried by the wind. Her face was in shadow. She sighed, and it sounded like relief. “Hello,” she said, quietly.

No, no! I thought.

She touched his covetous clam hand and uncurled it easily. Again, her breath sucked in, and—had I lungs—mine would have, too. For even from across the room I could see the tail-the-barney, and it was beautiful. It was gold, dark gold with a hint of sunset and warm as fire. Its surface stretched with sensuous curls of black enamel, fine as hair mussed in love, but in the shapes of delicate vines that wrapped around a cunning gate that would, if gently pushed, open to a summer garden so breathtakingly lovely one would never, ever leave.

“Daaad...,” she whispered, and reached for the clasp.

Then I saw it. She’d put it on. Next day would be a wonder—a day of love and luck and laughter. But the day after would be duller, and poorer. The next, anxious and desperate. The next, worried and angry and clutching. The next, the next, the next... until she was curled in rags, empty as a kettle and alone as a dry well in a desert.

“You can’t have it,” I said, and stepped from the shadows.

She looked up at me. Her eyes widened. Then they rolled back in her head and she fell to the floorboards with a bang and puff of cinnamon dust.

“Nice one, Bill!” said Lesia, rising from behind the couch. “Kill her?”

“What was that bang?” shouted Reed, scuttling up the hall.

I hurried to the girl. I touched her wrist. I touched her white, soft throat. Reed and Lesia hovered above me. I felt... and found the lovely thudding beneath her skin. “She’s all right.”

“Well, get it, then!”

Her hand was tight around the pendant, just as zealous as her father’s.

“She won’t let it go!” said Richard.

“Shut up, you!” I hissed. “She’s your daughter? Want her to end up like this? You ungrateful man, neglectful, ungrateful...” I stopped a moment, and thought of my beautiful Lauren and her dirty marmosets. “This is not yours,” I whispered.

Then, the girl’s eyes fluttered open, and found a focus. I am guessing what she saw was a bit much: three creamy skulls staring down at her, sockets wide and dark and full of wonder. Because her eyes rolled back again, and she hit the floor with a second solid thud.

“Nice catch, Bill,” said Lesia. But the woman had released her grip. I snatched up the pendant.

“We’ll see you, William Richard,” I said.

“You’re thieves,” he hissed.

I shepherded Reed and Lesia toward the front door. “Wait,” I said. “Reed, here.”

“What?”

I took him by the arm, and led him into Richard’s bedroom.

Against the wall was a duchess, its walnut veneer lifting like tiny tectonic plates, its mirror back smeared with dark melanomas. "Here," I said, and led Reed to it. "Look." I positioned him before the glass, and made him see himself.

For a moment, he was still as a crane, staring. Then, one hand lifted to a double chin that was gone, then slid to a belly that had vanished, then idled to buttocks that had sublimed into history. "I'm not fat," he whispered.

"I know," I said, and Lesia and I smiled.

"It killed me. Heart attack."

I shrugged, "Well, you had to die sometime."

Lesia and I watched the smile dawn on Thin Reed's wide, white face.

"Come on, mate." I tugged his arm, and we flew before the girl could wake again.

*

We rattled down the streets of Taringa, clicked up the footpaths of St Lucia, covered Lesia's eyes with careful fingers and crossed the bridge, and slipped like white wind through the trees to the cemetery.

"Florey?" we cried. "Florey!"

Florey mumbled awake. "What? What?"

"Close your eyes and open your hand," said Lesia.

He scowled and didn't, so she punched him and stalked home. I watched her go.

"Night, Lisa."

"Lesia," she snapped, but when she turned back she was smiling, so that was good.

"Well?" demanded Florey.

"Reed?" I asked, and Reed put the pendant into Florey's hand.

"Oh!" cried Florey. "Oh! OH!!" He clasped his hand tight, he opened it wide, he held the pendant high, he hugged it close. "Isn't it beautiful! Oh, it's beautiful! Did I tell you how I found it? It was 1945, and I was with the Eleventh—"

"Tomorrow, Florey," I said.

"Yes, yes, tomorrow," he fluted, spinning in the moonlight.

I stepped away and looked at Reed.

He smiled at me. "Thank you, Bill," he said.

"Maybe next week? Another trot?" I suggested.

He nodded. "I'll tell Lesia."

"Good night, Reed." "Good night, Bill."

Dimity was waiting. "Well, husband?" she demanded.

"Well indeed," I replied, and kissed her and we held hands and watched the stars do their slow wheel, and sank into the cool earth to sleep.