

Andante

Another lovely autumn day; there had been a string of them lately. Sun on the blinds also meant that Robert had slept in. Not that a boss or institution was ready to reproach – Robert was master of his own time – but it was a discipline thing. Stuff discipline. The bed was so keen for him to stay on. No. He swung his legs out from under the doona.

And almost placed his foot on a large bull ant that was moving towards a shoe.

Jane had sent several messages before she walked to work. Which was, if she took her time, ten minutes door to door. Did she count it as exercise or as part of the work component under the restrictions? Work for her was being the one staff member who was not doing it from home, co-ordinating a large council department. She found the building spooky on her own. Robert rang her but she didn't answer.

‘Working at the desk, gazing out at the street, does give you a good idea of how this virus is changing patterns of life around here.’ In lieu of Jane he had rung Eleanor, his eldest daughter. ‘Are people buying dogs deliberately?’

‘What?’ Eleanor sometimes found her father's leaps in logic hard to follow. And he was getting worse.

‘I've never seen so many people walking dogs.’

‘Buying them for companionship, I suppose.’

‘Nope’, said her father. ‘As an excuse for getting out of the house. Nobody's going to pull you up if you're walking your dog, are they?’

‘You should try coming back to Melbourne . . . ’

‘ . . . can't afford to live in Melbourne. That was a one way ticket up here . . . ’

‘ . . . because I got questioned by a bloody policewoman yesterday. Mind you, I *was* ducking out for a takeaway coffee. But I did have a dog. Quite a big one too.’ After their call concluded, Eleanor realised she had forgotten to ask her father how he was surviving the

lockdown. Robert didn't know that Eleanor had acquired a dog. He thought she disliked animals. They must have rung back at the same time and they couldn't get through.

On the last day before the boom dropped and visitors were excluded Robert rushed out to the veranda to haul the clothes-horse in. The rain had come and all the washing he had forgotten to fetch the night before was probably dry. As he lifted the horse, which was heavy with jumpers and towels, he glanced at the open door of Nero's bedroom-cum-study. Out of it was emerging Robert's dentist, a competent enough professional but with the personality of bathroom tiles. Nero was encouraging this friend to dare the torrent and get on his bicycle. He had his priorities. Nero's sex life, and sex it was, more romantic designations were inappropriate, was impressive, but once his attention switched to his plates and his vases and his bowls, it was often like this. Shoo shoo, go home. Robert felt he had been standing there a little too long.

'Are you going to permit yourself a glass of wine?'

'I am going to permit myself a glass of wine. I won't be working this afternoon unless you count editing the exhibition catalogue as work. I don't.'

Robert was hosting his landlord to lunch which meant Nero left the workshop, walked up the back steps and into the house. Nero lived in what they generally called 'the annexe', which had in its original state been a garage and three ramshackle sheds. He had moved there to fashion his ceramics while his tenant had taken over the house. When Robert moved to Ballarat this was a temporary relationship, a comfortable rental, until he got his finances into order, and sorted out several other messes in the city. Now all sorted but Robert was settled and kept deferring house purchase. How was he supposed to do it anyway; he was only allowed to look online at the few houses still on the market. For the duration of the social restrictions they would treat themselves as a couple with a couple's rights. Nero and Robert were sharing meals, sometimes lunch, sometimes dinner, occasionally in the annexe, more often in the house. Robert was an excellent cook and Nero's cuisine could best be described as austere. Lunch, dinner, even the occasional morning or afternoon tea, all these were fine but breakfast was never shared. It was a pity though. When he was married, breakfast had been Robert's favourite meal and, before the virus had placed invisible road blocks on the

railway line to Melbourne, he had enjoyed sharing it with Jane while deploring her habit of speed reading the online newspapers and reading the choice bits out aloud.

‘You know that bloke.’ Robert was serving their dinner.

‘The one you took a really good look at.’

‘I did not. I was busy getting the clothes in, including some of yours by the way. Anyway, he caught my attention because he’s my dentist.’

‘That’s right. He said you were a complete coward in the chair.’

‘I am not. Did he really say that?’

Nero was cutting his chicken into bite sized pieces before consuming any of it. An irritating habit.

‘I said, did he really say that?’

‘No, he didn’t. The first time I met him and he admitted he was a dentist I changed the subject.’ Nero poked his tongue out. ‘I *am* scared of dentists. This chicken looks wonderful.’

‘How could you tell? You haven’t eaten any yet. It must be stone cold.’

Having completed the surgery on his meal Nero ate rapidly.

‘John rang today. He rang yesterday too.’

‘My throat is sore, I’ve been on the phone so much.’

‘Well, you have to stay in contact with Jane. Great timing - start a new relationship when you can’t visit her.’

‘Funnily enough, Nero, that had occurred to me too. Jane, yes. There’s more chicken if you want it. I’m cooking way too much these days. Not only Jane though but my brothers, my daughters, people I never used to see much. Sorry, who’s John?’

‘I wondered if you were going to ask me that. Your dentist.’

‘Talking of names. Is Nero a common first name in Brazil?’

‘Not at all’, said Nero. ‘My father thought that giving me this name was funny. He was a violinist, you see. Nero fiddling, la la la. Only he could think it was amusing.’

‘I’ll give you this. You don’t behave like a Nero.’

‘No? There were times I really wanted to murder my mother but I got over that. Just too gay to have that sort of mother hang-up.’ They both called an end to their drinking. The lunch had gone on.

A new relationship with a Brunswick resident was not the same as being back in Brunswick but it had given Robert an excuse for taking the train to the city and damaging his budget if he waved Jane down and paid for their lunches. They hadn’t always met in Brunswick but it was nice to know it was nearby. When Jane rang these days and mentioned any of his former haunts it hurt. Silly really. She couldn’t visit them either.

Robert’s legs were aching. Daily exercise was now as popular as communication at a distance and unfunny memes on the internet. Nero’s house was perched on the top of a hill overlooking the rest of Ballarat so Robert’s walks left him hot and winded. Sleep. He was stuffed. Phone.

‘Dad.’

‘Yes, Eleanor.’ Something was wrong.

‘Sorry for the late hour. I wasn’t going to tell you until tomorrow but I made the mistake of ringing Emily, didn’t I?’

As always, Eleanor spoke at a slow, deliberate pace but she was biting down on her words.

‘Did you know that I’m personally responsible for bringing the virus to Australia?’

‘Christ, where did this happen?’

‘Wuhan, of course.’

‘Very funny. Somebody’s obviously said something to you.’

‘Not far from my place. I was walking the dog. I don’t even know the name of the street. Some guy in a car slowed down, I thought he was going to ask me for directions then it’s “Go

back home and take the fucking virus with you”. I think I’d do that if we were allowed to fly anywhere.’

Eleanor couldn’t speak five words of her mother’s birth language but resembled her closely. Her younger sister, Emily, spoke that language like a native, or at least like a native who had somehow acquired an Australian accent, but looked like she had been adopted.

‘Anyway, I didn’t crack the shits until I rang dear little sister. I should have known what her reaction would be. “Don’t be so supersensitive. People are scared.” ’

The next day Robert finished Chapter 3 after a morning of interrupted work. First off, Emily rang suggesting Eleanor should grow some balls. Then Eleanor called, asking if Emily had called. She was angrier than the night before. Robert decided to go for a brief walk, down the slope between the deserted car parks of the Gold Museum and Sovereign Hill. His daughters’ disputes, while brief, were becoming more frequent and were often conducted via their unwilling father. And he seemed to have been working on Chapter 3 since the beginning of recorded history.

As he might have reasonably expected texts of contrition criss-crossed each other in the early afternoon. He agreed to a Zoom lovefest later in the day and returned to Chapter 3. Which dealt with Stoicism. It seemed to be trendy at present. He wasn’t fooled by the peace treaty. In recent years the three of them had shifted residences several times, and on each occasion the points of their triangle were further apart.

Jane was proving hard to catch.

Robert wasn’t a big drinker but it might have been better if he had stuck to the wine in the evening rather than switch to coffee. He had never been very good at making it – he didn’t think Estelle was joking when she said the quality of his coffee was one good reason for leaving him – and tonight it was too strong. But as the links dropped in and out on his Zoom session with the kids he drank a tureen of it without noticing. His irritated bladder woke him twice on the cold night and the second time marooned him on an island in the Central Highlands where like Alexander Selkirk he had plenty of time for his thoughts. The three ‘E’s’ – Eleanor, Emily and Estelle, the name his wife had adopted when leaving Malaysia.

Why the silly pattern? He shut his eyes just to pass the time. When he opened them it was bright, post daylight saving morning. A miracle but he didn't feel refreshed.

He felt the wave fall upon his island. Nobody had left anybody; they had all left each other. He took his boiled egg to the table. Poor bull ant. Why hadn't he tried to take it to the garden? He wasn't allergic to insect stings. Life still in it even when cut in two. The egg Robert had been looking forward to now repulsed him. He swallowed the small portion in his mouth and stood up as his throat contracted then widened. Not going to be sick, surely? No, worse, he was going to cry which he did noisily. Relief did not come though, Nero did. He was saying something about a blocked toilet.

'What is it, Rob?'

'A bull ant.'

'It can't hurt that much?' He sounded disgusted at such weakness.

This made Robert laugh. He choked as snot and the last tears ran down his throat.

'Don't try and philosophise about it. It's what I do or did for a living, remember, philosophy. Besides that, being gay, being x, y, z, whatever, is a sexual preference, not some esoteric cult, a superior way of life, the ultimate expression of something.' Robert had taught philosophy on a sessional basis at Federation University for two years after relocating from Melbourne where he had taught it for two decades. He thought that whoever had established philosophy as a subject at Fed had either been very persuasive or had compromising photographs of the Dean.

Nero took all this good-naturedly. Jacko so often rose to the bait.

'You don't like the fact that I have multiple partners.'

'You don't have partners. You don't do partners in any form or fashion. You just have the next one.'

This got home to Nero. Robert was ashamed of himself. He knew John was on the phone every day. They were about to watch *Broadway Danny Rose* and, until Mia Farrow made her first appearance, they didn't talk to each other.

Nero was raging against everything Brazilian, starting with the wax. ‘Thongs disappearing up our arses, racing car drivers as national heroes though they’ve gone now, footballers with dickhead names like Fred, and now Bolsonaro. We’re a fucking joke so why doesn’t everybody laugh at us? We think we’re sexy but we don’t fuck each other, we shoot each other.’ His peroration was reaching its climax. ‘And some foreigners actually want to travel there. Christ almighty.’

‘Nobody’s doing much travelling at the moment.’

Nero snorted. ‘Shit, it’s autumn, isn’t it, not winter. Look at the rain out there.’

‘I know, I thought I saw Captain Oates out there this morning.’

‘Who’s Captain Oates for Christ’ sake?’

Proficient in English, prolific even, Nero’s knowledge of Anglo-Saxon culture and history was limited. Robert didn’t bother to inform him about the soldier lost in the snows.

‘Why the stuff about Brazil right now? Stupid question, I suppose. Their government’s idiot response to the virus.’

‘Yes. No. Nah, nothing to do with that stupid country.’

‘It’s John, isn’t it?’

‘I was calling him Jack. Not any more.’

Robert searched for consolations like somebody looking for the right knife in the cutlery drawer.

‘Jane told this funny story.’

‘I’m not in the mood for laughing.’

Robert bored on regardless. Into the blizzard. ‘She and a group of friends decided to have a virtual night out at that place in Brunswick. You know.’ He named the place in Lygon Street. Even Nero, who had to be dragged to restaurants, had heard of it.

‘Everybody ordered a couple of courses. Jane ordered risotto and a side salad. She doesn’t eat dessert.’

Nero went over to the fruit bowl. ‘If you don’t stop talking – now – I shall throw this mandarin at you.’

‘So, drivers take off all over Brunswick and Coburg with these cardboard cartons of food, and bottles of wine too.’

‘Ah, the middle class find another way to wreck the environment now they can’t fly.’

‘Don’t be tiresome, Nero and let me finish. They all get their dinners, I suppose they had to put their mains in the oven or a microwave or something. I don’t know . . . ’

‘On with it or it’s mandarin time.’

‘When they’re all settled, Jane raises her glass and “ says to us”. They all say “to us”, and then one of her friends says, “you started early, Janie, that bottle’s half empty.” Jane says she didn’t order wine from the Trocadero – she just used a bottle she’d opened before.’

Robert paused for dramatic effect. Hard to tell with Nero but he seemed to be listening.

‘They start eating and then another of Jane’s friends says “Janie, you can’t drink that wine. The Trocadero doesn’t allow BYO.” ’

Boom boom.

‘You could smile at least.’

‘I’m smiling inside. Here, in my spleen.’

‘That’s your liver, idiot. Your spleen’s on the other side.’

‘Catch.’ Nero threw the mandarin. ‘Well done. I’m going out the back to ruin some more masterpieces.’

‘I have bugger all to offer but do you want dinner tonight?’

‘Not tonight, Robert. I’m looking forward to being miserable on my own.’

‘Breakfast tomorrow?’

‘You’re still going on. Yes, that will be great. Ring Jane. Give her my love.’

‘To somebody you’ve never met?’

‘Sign of the times.’