

Bottomless River



Anthony J. Langford

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For Rohan

I

I suppose the three of us were in love. I don't think I'm changing history by saying that. It may sound a little provocative, but it certainly didn't last. But what if it had? Could it have been sustained? Would I go back to that one summer night in particular and do things differently? I guess we'd all like to go back to some aspect of our past and change it if we could. I know many people say that you should live life with no regrets, but how can that be? Are they perfect? Do they not make mistakes? Recognise missed opportunities? It seems that my entire life since those early days have been filled with regret. It's hard to believe I was once such a positive person.

It was over sixteen years ago now, when tomorrow was a bright and flawless artwork just waiting for the brush strokes and all that mattered was that very moment. I think most people feel that at seventeen. The only thing in the world that meant anything was the friendship between Tom and Jen and I. She was beautiful, in a tomboyish, country way. Yet she was only just becoming aware of how striking she was. Tom and I had stirrings for her for some time, but we had not given voice to it for fear it would tarnish our

three-way friendship. As though it was a secret too great to risk sharing. Little did we know that by the simple act of suppressing our adolescent desires, only made them flourish. It was like trying to hold back a wave of greedy shoppers at a stocktake sale. When our desire was finally released, we were trampled underfoot.

I remember riding my bike along the dusty road which crept along the edge of the steep river bank. In another year I would have my car license and I couldn't wait. Yet I never felt as free as I did then, the wheels whirling by my feet, the breeze in my hair, sunlight flickering between sea green leaves. The bank was high off the water. Many years before, over a period of decades, major parts of the river had been dredged by mining companies for gold. Where the river made a sharp bend was said to be bottomless. We tried many times to find it through the tan murk, but failed. But curiosity can be a terrible thing and the challenge was set. We made numerous plunges, mostly feet first. But all we discovered was a cold world, pitch black and terrifying. Swimming on the surface was enough to fill me with dread. The bank rose swiftly to the road, as though victim of a massive collapse. When I was very young a car had driven off it. The occupants were only teenagers themselves. They hadn't even landed in the deepest section but it still took

almost a week to get that car out of the water. The boys were still inside. I don't think the town ever really recovered.

I rode down the dirt slope that led to the grassy incline by the bottomless corner, *Tynan's Bend*. And for the briefest of times, that piece of turf was ours.

Jenny was running late and so was Tom. I was usually the first to arrive for our pre planned hook ups. I sometimes wondered if the pair of them hadn't met further up the track and scuttled into the trees. I would check their faces for any signs of indiscretion, but I couldn't find anything. I was glad to be wrong and would forget all about it. Until the next time. Perhaps I knew what I would do if it was me who was further up the track.

I'd let my bike fall to the ground with a groaning clang and plunged into the cool water. Sometimes there would be other kids there, usually younger. Because we were older, they paid us a kind of respect. We were deemed *cool*. It was the way of things. We had been like them once and they would replace us. I wonder if it's still that way now.

On other occasions, there was no one around at all. That was the way I preferred it. In those fleeting, glorious hours the whole world was ours. Part of me is still there, locked

into a loop, for eternity. It's easy to hang onto the good memories, but harder to forget the bad ones.

On this day, a Saturday, there were a group of rowdy brats, running down the steep incline that we called *The Cliff* and leaping into the river. It was a little outcrop of hardened clay that jutted out from the wall of the bank. I haven't been back for many years but it seemed very high. There was no danger of hitting the bottom as it was positioned over the unfathomable hole. There was no sandbank either. You swam to the edge, felt the mud wall going down like the inside of deep swimming pool from where it had been dredged and pushed yourself up onto the bank. Many chickened out from completing the jump once they had scrambled to the top and looked down. It was quite intimidating and demanded a high level of recklessness. I remember one day a kid ran down the natural ramp but changed his mind at the last second. He had been running too fast to stop and toppled over the edge. He landed partly in the water and the rest of him on the edge of the grass. He was in a lot of pain and screaming. He was badly scraped and I don't know how he didn't break his back, but he limped away. He never tried it again.

Often, I would swim in the soothing, slow moving current, watching the kids do their thing. It's funny how I never

thought of myself as a kid. Later, when Tom arrived, we would show them how it was really done. Tom could soar from the *Cliff* and do a somersault in the air, penetrating the water with his feet. I wasn't quite that skilled, but I wanted to show off just as much. Jenny would watch with disinterest. Of course, when she was around, we did it to impress her. The more indifferent she was, the harder we tried.

There was little doubt that all that bravado would come later, but for now, I was alone on the grass, drying off until I heard; 'Hey dickhead!' Tom always addressed me that way. It drove me crazy.

'Up yours,' I said.

He leapt from his bike while it was still in motion and it continued off into the thick grass before collapsing. That was his regular dismount too. 'Bitch not here?'

'Nope.'

'Coming for a swim?'

Couldn't he see I'd just gotten out? 'Yeah, okay.'

I bolted and dove off the bank before he could kick his thongs off but then he was right behind me. We raced to the opposite side of the river and the *Cliff*. One of the kids bombed us.

Tom said, 'Hey you little shits! You wanna fuckin die?'

‘Sorry. Didn’t mean it.’

‘Yeah, well do it again and I’ll fuckin drown ya!’

‘Sorry Tom.’

The kids loved him really. He was tough with his mouth but if something ever went wrong Tom would be there like a loyal dog. He was like that with everyone, but watch out if you ever crossed him. Our relationship was slightly different. You’ll see what I mean later on.

‘Out of the way ya little turds. I’ll show ya how it’s done,’ Tom said, climbing out of the water.

‘You gunna do the somersault Tom?’

‘You’ll have to wait won’t ya?’

And of course, he did. He even impressed me, his tanned form glistening as he spun, droplets shooting off him like a puppy after a hose down, before plunging into the water with grace. The boys clapped. I hated going after him, especially if Jenny was around. I never mentioned it, never said, *let me go first*. It was Tom’s show and he knew it. Just before I leapt, literally with one foot in the air, I saw her. Her presence impacted on the entire landscape, and especially on me. I floundered, off balance. I knew it was going to hurt. I hit the water on an awkward angle, a full body slap. I screamed underwater, so I wouldn’t have the humiliation of doing it on the surface. When I did rise Tom

asked me if I was all right. Jenny, still on the bank, appeared concerned too. Sweet thing. But I was deeply embarrassed at my old-fashioned belly whacker, especially as a couple of the boys behind me began to giggle.

‘Want me to kick your arse?’ Tom said to my defence.

More giggles followed.

Tom began to swim in their direction, but they scurried further up the cliff, offering multiple apologies each. Tom pointed at them and silence fell.

I breast stroked painfully towards Jenny, dying to be somewhere else.

‘You okay?’ she said, compassion in her face. It was almost worth it, just for that look.

‘Yeah, it’s cool,’ I lied, climbing out of the water, the side of my body like sunburn.

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, don’t worry about it. How you going?’

‘Couldn’t get away on time. Had to do the dishes. Sucked.’

‘That sucks all right. I’ll have plenty of shit to do when I get home.’

Tom was emerging from the river like a fucking commercial and he knew it. He was built better than me.

‘Mate if you wanna do a shit, go into the bushes.’

Jen giggled.

I squinted. ‘Fuckin funny. You know what I said.’

‘Sure mate. What’s going on Jennifer?’

‘What does it look like Tommy?’

‘Don’t call me Tommy.’

‘Don’t call me Jennifer!’

‘Jennifer.’

‘Tommy.’

‘All right you two. You’re embarrassing yourselves.’ I hated it when they flirted.

‘Mate, no one embarrassed themselves more than you just then,’ Tom said.

‘Shut up.’

‘Stop trying to copy the master. Just jump like the other girls.’

I turned to Jen. ‘He’s only trying to suck up to you. You know that don’t you?’

Now it was her turn to go red. ‘Bullshit.’

‘Yeah mate,’ said Tom. ‘So, sit down if you can. On your beetroot arse.’

I checked. He was right. My thigh and arse was like a tomato. ‘Okay, it bloody hurts. You happy?’

They laughed and I couldn’t do anything but laugh along.

II

A week later we were back at the river, discussing our future.

‘It’s weird even talking about this,’ she said.

‘I know. No more High School.’

‘Good,’ Tom said. ‘It sucked.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘but it’s still weird.’

‘It won’t be the same without you two. What am I going to do?’ She was genuine.

‘You don’t have to do your final year if you don’t want to. Come and get jobs with us.’

‘I can’t,’ she moaned. ‘My parents would kill me.’

‘Even if I could go back I wouldn’t,’ Tom said.

‘Mate, you were lucky they didn’t throw you out earlier.’

‘They can all suck my dick.’

Jen said, ‘I don’t know how you got away with half the stuff you did. Remember that time you were on the roof?’ I beamed. ‘That was the funniest, Mr Brown screaming at you to come down.’

‘That was his fault! If his name wasn’t Brown, I wouldn’t have mooned him.’

I slapped the ground, remembering. ‘Half the school saw your nuts!’

Jen was there too. ‘Including all my friends! Thanks a lot!’
‘Hey! You should have paid me for that!’

‘Half of those Year Seven girls were traumatised for life!’

Now Tom started chuckling too. ‘For that whole year I got weird looks from those girls.’

Jen fell onto Tom's shoulder, giggling, and placed her hand onto his chest. It grated me, but then something happened.

Tom shot me the tiniest of looks, a hint of something beyond, something buried in his eyes, but I knew what it was. He was communicating to me, saying; *Look at her. She's touching me. I know you want her too but she's with me now.*

I lowered my head. When I looked up again, my smile was gone. I could have despised Tom, but I didn't. We both wanted her, wanted to share her, if there could be such a way. We were young. Why couldn't we do what we wanted? We didn't owe anybody anything. That's when I got the idea. ‘Let's get drunk.’

It took them a few seconds to register what I'd said.

‘How's that going to happen?’ Jen asked.

We were still under aged and looked it. ‘I don’t know. Go hang out near the pub and see if we can get someone to go in.’

‘Like who?’ Jen said.

‘I don’t know. Gotta be worth a shot.’

Tom pondered. ‘Why the fuck not?’

Jen wasn’t so sure. ‘You guys don’t have any money.’

Determined I said, ‘No. But you do.’

‘No chance.’

‘Don’t be like that Jen.’

‘Yeah, you can afford it,’ said Tom.

‘Why is it always me?’

‘You get such great pocket money that’s why!’

Tom backed me up. ‘And we pay you back!’

‘Eventually. Maybe. I’m sure you still owe me something.’

‘No way José,’ Tom said.

‘I should start charging you guys a bloody fee!’

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘We’ll have jobs soon while you’re still playing school girl and then it’ll be the other way around.’

‘Yeah!’ Tom burst, wishing he’d thought of it first. ‘You’ll be begging us and I’ll have to seriously think about it.’ He crossed his arms. ‘I will. I’ll have to think about it.’

‘You guys are so mean to me.’

‘No, we’re not,’ I softened. ‘Come on Jen, it’ll be fun.’

So that's how Tom and I ended up loitering near the back of the local pub. There was only two in town, but the one in the main street was the one that younger people went to and offered the best chance for us to score. The other pub on the edge of town was for old farts and farmers.

Without waiting too long, Tom saw someone he knew, a friend of his dad's. Tom targeted him, herding him off before he could go inside. There was a hurried, secret conversation. The man didn't seem keen. I grew worried. He could just as easily dob us in. My parents would kill me. Jen was so scared that she hadn't even come. Suddenly the man went inside and Tom sauntered back, trying a bit too hard to act cool, like a junior James Bond. Beer, not shaken or stirred. 'We're screwed,' he said.

'Shit,' I whispered, still in secret service mode. 'I knew it.'

'Nah, only joshing. He's gunna do it for us.'

'Come on Tom. Are you serious or not?'

'Yeah man. Chill out. I got it all sorted.'

'You bastard. My heart's going a million miles.'

'Where's ya faith mate? He's gunna have a couple of drinks and meet us on the way out.'

Those couple of drinks turned into the longest ninety-five minutes of my young life. I was positive everyone knew what we were up to. The problem with small towns is that

everyone knows who you are. Mrs Hunter, the wife of a primary school teacher who had once taught me walked past and saw us. Mr Lewis worked at the post office and spotted us as he crossed the road. I swore they had scrutinised every detail and then ran off to make phone calls. Every car that went past was driven by my parents. I must have filled a dozen beer bottles in sweat.

Finally, the man emerged with a case of beer. He met us around the corner, and took our money, but then he lingered. His face was grimy and hard. I thought he was going to charge us extra for providing a service, but instead he said; 'You cunts shouldn't be drinkin. You get caught and I'll fuckin kill ya's!' He meant it.

'Don't worry mate. We'll be far away,' said Tom. 'Thanks a lot. Appreciate it.'

'Next time, get somebody else to do ya dirty work. Stupid little cunts!' But as he walked away, he had a smirk. He'd probably done the same thing.

We took the beers to the river, the long way. It took twice the amount of time, but we were able to steer clear of the road. We trekked around trees and through long golden grass, keeping an eye out for snakes, but excited that we had our prize. Tom was so pumped he wanted to crack one right then and there. 'Come on, just one!'

‘No. We promised Jen.’

‘She can’t stop us!’

‘It’s her money. We’ll wait.’

‘You’re a fuckin bore.’

‘You’re a selfish prick.’ Remember I said earlier that Tom and I had a different relationship? If anyone else spoke to Tom like that he would have smashed their nose in. I was aware of his strength and I knew if I ever took things too far, he could turn on me. But I trusted our bond. He would often defer to me, even though he was the more popular guy. I was broader with my attitude on certain things, but there was more to it than that. I can’t really explain why, it was simply how Tom and I worked.

‘All right,’ he finally said. ‘We can put them in the river to keep cool.’

When we got there, Jen leapt to her feet. She looked all around her. She couldn’t have acted guiltier if she tried. I suspect if she had chosen a career as a criminal it would have been brief. The irony was that the place was deserted. It was late afternoon and the youngies had gone.

‘What took you so long? I thought you must have been caught!’ she said.

‘Nah, we had it under control.’

She scanned us. ‘Where’s my coolers?’

Tom looked away, picking out something more interesting in the river. ‘They said they were out.’

‘What? Oh Tom! I hate beer!’

‘It’s not my fault. Do I look like I run a pub?’

‘You didn’t even try!’

‘I bloody well did! Course I did!’

‘Sorry Jen,’ I backed him up. ‘They were out.’ We all knew that Tom hadn’t bothered, but I covered him anyway. I don’t know why.

She fell silent. I remember that look on her face. Rejected, almost betrayed, a hurt little girl who didn’t get a birthday present. I still wish I could walk up to her with an arm full of coolers just to make her happy. I hoped by nightfall that she’d be more accepting of the idea. The afternoon had worn on and we all had to go home for dinner with our families. The plan was to sneak out late that night.

‘Well, I’m going to bring pure cordial then,’ she moaned.

‘What for? The beers?’ Tom said. ‘You can’t do that! That’s sacrilege!’

‘Beer tastes like cat’s piss.’

‘You’ve tasted cat’s piss have ya?’

She gave him the evil eye.

‘Just hold your nose and you won’t be able to taste it,’ I suggested.

‘That doesn’t work.’

‘Yes, it does. Try it tonight. You’ll see.’

III

Roughly eight hours later, Jen sat on the blanket of grass with the moonlight creating a near mirror on the river. She held her nose and awkwardly drank from the stubbie.

Two seconds later she spluttered. 'It's cat's piss!'

'You gotta hold your nose completely closed! Watch.' I did it. Swallowed. I was so right. 'See?'

'That doesn't work!'

'I just did it!'

'You're just saying that so you'll be right! I'm putting cordial in.' She withdrew a little plastic flask and before we could stop her, she'd poured some of her beer onto the grass.

'Man, what a waste.' Tom cried. 'You could have let me drink that!'

Jen topped up her stubbie with cordial. It began to froth everywhere.

Tom reached out, snatched it and slurped at the burgeoning white bubbles like he was dying of thirst.

'Oh thanks. Now I'll have to wash it!'

'You saying I got germs? Nothing wrong with these lips sweetheart!'

‘Yuck.’

‘You should be so lucky bitch.’

She took her beer back with a sly grin, cute as can be. ‘In your dreams.’

They were flirting again. I wanted in. ‘I’m the one in your dreams, isn’t that right Jen?’

‘Yeah! It is!’ But she was still sneering at Tom.

‘I don’t care,’ Tom said. ‘If I wanted you, you wouldn’t be able to resist.’

She sneered. ‘You’re pretty sure of yourself, aren’t you?’

‘Take it easy Jen. I know I’m irresistible but just try and control yourself, all right?’

‘If you really want to know, I wouldn’t waste my dreams on either of you.’ She looked to the water, an unreadable expression on her face. I thought she was hiding her feelings, though it was more likely that we simply couldn’t interpret them.

Tom turned to me. I had no answers. My eyes signalled a shrug. Jen was averting our gaze but it was already out there. For the first time, the three of us had acknowledged *that* sexual question. It was innocent enough in of itself, but it set in motion an ugly fate, like a slow roast, destined to burn.

We watched her. She knew she had an audience. So, she drank. Instead of trying to appear cool or rebellious like many would in that situation, she left a frothy moustache. I chuckled. 'It suits you.' She had a brilliant sense of humour.

She wiped it off with her forearm. 'I don't care what you say. It tastes much better this way. I don't know how you guys can drink beer. It's like...'

'Cat's piss,' Tom said. 'Yeah, so you said a hundred times.' 'If it does the trick it doesn't matter,' I said, beginning to feel the effects. I was hardly a seasoned drinker. Half a beer and I was on my way.

'Beer is perfect just the way it is,' Tom stated.

'My uncle said it's an acquired taste,' I said.

'I already like it. I'd put it on my cereal. Give me yours if you don't want it.'

'Shut up you two and drink,' said Jen. She meant business. She gurgled. I don't know why she was so keen to get drunk. She seemed to have an agenda that night, as though she was trying to prove something. But what? As far as Tom and I knew, nothing was wrong in her family situation other than the normal teen torment. I think it was understood that I was the most adjusted, in that my emotional peaks and troughs were more on the horizontal

than the others. On the surface anyway. In the context of our three-way friendship, it really didn't mean anything. We were equal. At least it had been up until that night. It was all about to change.

After a bunch of empty beer bottles lay scattered around us, we again looked to the future. At that so called tender age, which feels more like a jagged age, many contemplations are based on looking ahead. By some miracle we knew what our lives would become. We would escape our small prison town and go off into great careers. We would end up with the right houses, cars and partners. We never once thought how these dreams might come about, nor that they could, but that it was a certainty. Jen rose to her feet, swaying in the night like a drugged princess. She had a trail of cordial tainted beer down her T-shirt. Even in my haze, perhaps because of it, I could see how gorgeous she was. 'I'm never comin' back,' she said. 'Everyone in this town can kiss my arse.'

'Yeah, fuck em all!' Tom said too loudly, his voice echoing across the water and bouncing off the cliff face.

'I'm comin too,' I said, standing and swaggering on a joyful cloud of dreams and promise.

Jen flung her arm around my shoulders. 'You come with me.'

Tom stood. It was the Mexican stand-off. 'I'm not hangin' round here on my own. Fuck that!'

Jen laughed. 'Don't be a bum. You're coming too.' She hooked her arm around his neck, drew him in and kissed him on the lips. Just like that. It wasn't long or overly passionate but before I knew what was going on, she had disengaged. Maybe she knew what I was thinking because she turned, her arms still around the both of us and kissed me too. Her mouth was awkward and in my drunken state I knew she was drunk too but it was also wet and warm and the most glorious thing I had ever felt. And then it was over. It had been too quick. Her head slumped on my chest and Tom looked at me. It was that gaze again. Waves of alcohol washed through my senses. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, but I was certain I was thinking it too. She tossed her head back again, but went too far and dragged us back. She was really wasted. I was too drunk to support her and the three of us fell onto the grass. Jen cracked up as though it was the most hysterical thing she had ever done. I didn't think it was funny at all. I was too busy trying to steady myself, the world slowing down like a rotating coin that's running out of spin. I eventually

managed to push myself into a sitting position. Tom was across from me. He seemed fine. He did have more experience with alcohol, but he could not have been unaffected. It was Jen, still lying on the ground, who continued to surprise me. She squirmed, struggling to take her shirt off. She raised it to her head, revealing a plain bra, but it was Jen's bra and therefore, magnificent. Her breasts were average size, small even, but I didn't care. I was awestruck.

'Get this faarrckin... ' She couldn't get the T-shirt past her head.

Tom didn't require further incentive. He leant down and yanked it off in a flash. Jen screwed up her face. 'Don't rip my bloody arms off!'

'Sorry.' He looked at me and shrugged.

I smiled but I knew I looked stupid with my drunken grin. I looked around for my beer, completely forgetting where I'd put it.

Tom was drinking his. As far as I knew, it never left his hand, even though he had fallen over too. Those respectful of beer will never lose a drop.

'Help!' Jen had rolled onto her side and was trying to take her bra off. 'Want. It. Off.'

I leant down to help, but my fingers were fat and clumsy with booze. Tom pushed me aside and I fell next to her. He rummaged around for what seemed an age, but he managed to remove her bra and held it up like the catch of the day. Jen scrambled to her feet and yahooped with joy, holding her arms to the stars in praise. 'I love you!' I had no idea who she was talking to. She spun around, her breasts defying gravity and description. I rubbed at my eyes. Everything was in soft focus and with her titties out, the timing couldn't have been worse. She came at me then, like a fantasy and fell on top of me, collapsing me hard into the ground. 'I love you guys.' She cuddled into my neck, her hair over my face. 'You're the best.'

She felt so good, her snug, soft body against me, except mine wasn't so soft anymore. I was aware of the rising tide, and for a second I felt guilty. This was my friend, my *mate*. But then the second was over and all reasoning went aside. I clasped her with a frenzy of opportunity, my hand caressing her bare back to her jeans and over the curvatures of her feminine form. No mate ever felt this good.

Then there was Tom. He was next to us, looking at me with that *knowing* look, as if to say, this is *that* moment, the moment we always wanted, the moment we knew would come. His arm was stirring. His hand was suddenly on

mine, guiding it further down over Jen's bum, between her legs. A perverse grin that seemed to belong to someone else crept over him. I'll never forget that look. It grew to disgust me, but that came much later. Right then I imagine I probably resembled him.

Jen was silent. We took that as a sign of acceptance, that this was okay.

Now Tom was using his hand on her too, both of us together wandering and rubbing. It felt natural and I was much too drunk to query it.

Tom leant in, too close to me to be comfortable and lifted Jen's head. Her eyes were semi closed. She was either in a state of total euphoria or had passed out. She had become a piece of dough for us to mould. We impressed our needs onto her and thought nothing of it. Tom leant in and kissed her, but she didn't respond. It didn't stop him from eating her lips hungrily, his tongue everywhere. This was only a couple of inches from my face. I struggled to move out from under her. If there had been doubt before, there was no hiding it now. Jen had passed out.

Tom helped roll Jen off me and onto the grass.

I sat up. It must have taken me a while to do so because when I looked back to Tom, he was playing with her breasts, an animal hungry in the wild. I stared for a while. I

don't know what was going through my brain. Obviously not a lot. I was drunk, I was young and stupid, but worst of all, I was indifferent.

Tom began taking her jeans off. There was no discussion between us. No more of those looks. We had already passed through that door. He was having trouble getting them off her. 'Gimme a hand.'

So, I did. I don't like to think of it now, but I guess if I'm writing this memoir or confession or whatever it is, I am thinking about it all. But I have trained myself to skip over the details. I haven't blocked it out. I'm not sure how people can do that. I guess this didn't happen to me as such, but to someone else. Perhaps I didn't really want to forget. I didn't deserve to get off that easily.

Tom went first. There was nothing exciting about it. He simply lay on top. She never moved. He didn't even seem to enjoy it that much. He didn't make any noise. He simply rolled off after a while. I don't know if he came or not. He looked to me. It was my turn.

If there was ever a moment to make a defining decision, this was it. This was the time to be morally responsible. To speak up. To have at least battled with the idea. But there was nothing. It's almost worse than the act itself. Maybe it is, I don't know. I lay on my back and struggle to get my

jeans down but then they were off. I scrambled on top of her. I was far too drunk to actually do anything. I couldn't get it up fully. Yet I kept trying. I got in partly in but it was a failure. I was more worried about what Tom might think of me than any misgivings I may have had about what I was doing. He didn't even care. He was more interested in opening another beer.

I stroked her hair. I enjoyed being this close to her. I had dreamt of such a moment for a long time. I spoke to her, pretending she was awake. I whispered how I felt about her, kissed her, as though we were in love. I know I was. I don't know how long I lay there. All I knew was that Tom was shaking my shoulder, telling me that I should finish up. It was like being jolted from a violent dream. I jumped up like she had the plague. I looked to Tom in horror, wondering what the fuck was going on and hoping he would rescue me from myself but he was retrieving her T-shirt. 'Help me dress her,' he said. After I put my jeans on, I helped him. He never looked at me. In fact, he didn't look at me for the rest of the night. We had already seen too much of each other.

We carried her down to the water's edge. He never said what we were doing, but the thought did cross my mind. Did he want to throw her in? It was an insane thought, but

just for that moment it seemed ordinary. Anything could have happened that night and it wouldn't have fazed us. We were alone in the world, without rules, or any real feelings at all. There was only the moonlight and the silent river, our eternal witness.

We splashed water onto her face. She barely came around. It was time to go.

We struggled for a long time to get her home. We walked along the road. It was really late, or really early. All I know is that it was dark and there was no one to witness us. By the time we got to her place I was almost sober. We decided to leave her propped up against a tree in her front yard. We must have made some noise because an inside light came on and we bolted.

Five minutes later we were on a corner, about to head in different directions. We lingered. I looked towards the stars as I often did, the milky way a cluster of tiny eyes. They had changed position in the sky. They were the morning stars. The night was over. What had transpired by the river had already slipped into history, forever entrenched. Of course, I didn't fully realise that then. I was doing my best to forget it, as though I could.

'I'll see you tomorrow,' Tom said.

'Yeah.'

The next day I returned to the river. The young boys were playing by the *Cliff*, but I wasn't interested in chatting with them. I looked to where *it* had happened. I stared at the grass as though our forms were imprinted there. I looked to the trees and the bank and the bend in the river that was bottomless. But it all seemed so ordinary. As though it had never happened at all. I had imagined it. A shared dream. A mere blur. Just a teenage fantasy that was a little perverted. Best to carry on as normal. But it wasn't normal. I was on my own. Tom was nowhere to be seen. And I felt very alone.

I waited for my friends to show, but neither of them did. I went home with growing dread. I couldn't forget it. Something had changed. It wasn't their absence that scared me the most; it was the change in me. I had ruined some part of me. Even now, after sixteen years of trying, I know I can never get it back.

IV

The first time I saw Jen after that night I was instantly terrified. It was in the main street. There were only a dozen shops or so in town so you couldn't really avoid anyone for long. It was too late to hide. I said hi. She was warm in return but I was wary. I thought she'd be different. I tried to be normal. I bought her a soft drink. We sat at a table outside the bakery. She was a little quieter, but it was the same old Jen. I was the one who was uncomfortable. While we small talked, I realised I sounded like an idiot. I couldn't help but think, *does she know what happened?* I looked for signs that might give her away, a chink in her shell, but if she knew, she was doing a great job in maintaining the facade. She even *thanked* me for taking her home that night. I almost caved in then and there, dropped to my knees and begged her for forgiveness. But I just nodded. I couldn't bare it. She was so nice. So, I made some excuse and left.

After that it was my turn to avoid the river and the main street. I just couldn't face her again.

Sometime later I ran into Tom by the post office, which was half a block away from the main shops in a rundown brick building. Apart from its marble steps it had a wide concrete access ramp where kids sometimes skateboarded. It also had a stretch of grass next to it built up a little from the pavement and I liked to sit on the edge and watch the world go by, what there was of it in our dead-end town. We chatted a little about nothing and then he revealed that he'd been back to the river and wondered why I hadn't. I could only shrug. I didn't have an answer. He didn't ask me to come back. I could tell that he was actually *relieved* that I wasn't there. I understood that. I couldn't bear to be around him either. It was a reminder we both didn't want. I just wished things could go back to how they were. But that could never be.

We nodded our disinterest and went on our way. The rest of the summer was like that. Avoidance. The main street became the infected zone. Jen went so far as to ring me up once, but I wormed out of any face-to-face contact. She told me she was still hanging out with Tom occasionally, but it wasn't the same without me, or so she said. I didn't believe her. I began to imagine all sorts of things; that the two of them were in a relationship now and were laughing at me. Or that she and Tom had staged the whole event, just

to get at me. Or that Tom had told her that I was the one who had raped her and he would help get the police onto me. All sorts of crazy shit went through my head. I tried to forget, but it was like a beeping alarm in my brain. Like a nightmare you try to switch off but it's out of reach. I spent too much time in my room. I began to hate Jen. It made no sense. I had loved her, still loved her in some way, but there was a sick hostility too. It was all her fault. What was she doing taking her clothes off? Why had she kissed us? Kissed me? She was the girl. She had all the power. We were only boys with dicks, slaves to our lust. And then there was all that emotion. She must have known we loved her. How could *she* let this happen?

Thinking this way only made me hate myself more.

I did anything I could to get a job. It wasn't easy without full school qualifications, so my options were limited. It was to be manual labour for me and I hated that type of work. Eventually I found work in a furniture warehouse in the next town, a town much bigger than ours which attracted lots of people from around the area, particularly the young. It didn't take long for me to despise furniture, but I used all my mental strength to immerse myself in the job. I became obsessed. I realised I could get lost in it. The boss thought I was a great worker, but he didn't know that I

would have done anything to forget. I drank more too. A lot more, but I avoided the local pubs. Since we had all come of age, there was a chance, even a small one that Jen or Tom could be there. So, I drank at night, locked in my room. I would eat then disappear and not come out until morning. I was desperate to avoid all human contact. I would even piss out the window.

Mum was blissfully ignorant, perhaps deliberately so, but dad was onto me. He even helped dispose of my empties, keeping it from mum. He liked a drink too and had apparently been a big drinker when he was younger but I never asked him about it and he never said anything.

Winter came and went like one long day. Everything the same. It was warm again and summer was close but I was still locked in winter mode. I didn't feel that euphoria that people do when the weather changes for the better. It wasn't better for me. I was settled into my routine. Dull but safe. And that was all I wanted. Seclusion and dullness. But it was a small town. The drink couldn't hide me forever. It was a case of *when* rather than *if*. Ironically, I saw them both on the same day. It was a Saturday. I had run out of alcohol. I usually brought it back home after work, or got dad to get it, but there had been a communication breakdown. Basically, I had stuffed up so I was forced to go

to the local pub. A big no no. Risky but I needed my booze, especially on weekends. I thought if I went early enough there would be no risk of seeing them.

I walked in through the lounge to the small rear bar. The jukebox was playing the Red Hot Chilli Peppers song 'Under the Bridge'. A song which still makes me sad, especially as the lyrics are so apt. A big Italian guy was the only occupant. He was dirty and jagged. But not that old. Maybe thirty. A labourer, a fruit picker, I didn't know or care. Just another small-town drunk. I disliked him instantly. I had to stand close to him in order to be served but I avoided eye contact. He was sizing me up. What else was he going to do? There's only so much interest in the bottles against the wall, the colours of the drink towels on the bar and the rising bubbles in his glass of beer.

Something I would learn all about in time. I ordered what I came for, wishing I could make the bartender work faster. He was a middle-aged man who ran the place. He was always working. It couldn't have been much of a life. I rarely saw him drinking so he wasn't a piss head. He had no sense of urgency, like most people in the country. I wanted to kick his arse into gear. Couldn't he tell I was on edge?

To my left, only a couple of metres away, a door opened. The ladies toilet. A young woman emerged. *Jen*. Oh God. I wanted to run, but I was trapped. I should have realised with the Chilli Peppers song. I shouldn't have come in. I was so fucking stupid. My stomach seized. My mouth iced over. I couldn't move. She hesitated too. I hadn't spoken to her for months. She'd stopped calling. She had gotten the hint. The tension was so thick it was like a truckload of jelly. She walked slowly, heading toward me. No hiding now. But she wasn't walking to me. It was to the filthy dirt bag next to me. I couldn't look her in the eye. I just nodded in her direction.

'Hello stranger,' she said.

'Hi.'

'Long time.'

'Guess so.'

She looked me up and down as though she had to remind herself what I looked like. 'So,' she said. 'Wanna buy me a drink?'

The dirt bag tensed.

I looked at my feet. 'Um, I'm kind of in a hurry.'

'On a Saturday? Where to?'

I shrugged. 'Got stuff to do at home. Oldies on my back. Dad wants his beer. You know how it is.'

She didn't nod or anything, as though she knew I was lying. I'm not a very good liar. Once the sharpness of the initial shock smoothed out, I noticed the details in her appearance. She looked different. Slightly harder. Less attractive. Jagged around the edges. I think she was a bit drunk. It was only midday. She didn't seem like the Jen I knew, but then again, I wasn't the same either. I forgave her for changing.

But still I wondered. *Did she know what had happened that night?*

The bartender returned with my saviour pack. I was never so happy to see him. But fuck him for not being faster.

'Seen Tom lately?' I asked rather stupidly. I had everything I came for. I should have just left.

The Italian spoke. 'Is this him?'

Terror ripped through my guts. *Is this him?* Oh shit, he knew! I wanted to puke. Which meant that she knew.

Whether she had realised or Tom had told her, it didn't matter now. I was dead. I was going to jail. Geppetto here was about to throttle me and end my pathetic life. Maybe it was a blessing. I deserved it. I did. But I didn't want the pain either. I definitely didn't fancy checking out with those thick mucky fingers around my gullet.

'Forget it,' Jen said. 'Just go.'

I picked up my beers.

‘I think you need to say sorry mate,’ said dirt bag.

Oh Jesus, he knew all right. I wasn’t being paranoid. This was worse than any scenario I could have imagined. This was all my fucking father’s fault. Why didn’t I just get the booze myself the night before? ‘Um, not sure what you mean.’

‘I’ll see you around,’ she muttered, picking up Geppetto’s beer and draining it. Hang on; she *hated* beer!

‘Say sorry to the lady,’ Geppetto said in his Neanderthal tone.

‘I’m... sorry.’ I sounded weak, desperate. Any moment he would pound my skull in with that fat fist. Or the police would rush in, the whole confession videotaped.

Geppetto raised his head, acting up for the cameras. ‘You upset my girl. You used to be friends. Dunno why. You look like a pretty fuckin sad case to me!’

What? I was confused. Why wasn’t he talking about *that* incident?

She stepped in. ‘Well, we were at school then I guess. I suppose people change.’

I nodded. I was wrong. I was glad. The relief was like an injection of morphine. I felt high. Clearly Geppetto didn’t like me, but at least he didn’t know what had happened to

her that night. Which also meant that there was a good chance that she didn't know either.

I said, 'Are you still in school?'

'No. It's all over.'

My God, it was coming up on a year. Had it really been that long?

'So, what are you up to then?' I was genuinely interested. Did she pass school? She didn't seem very together. Had we changed her by what we had done? But I never got to find out. Geppetto took a half step closer. 'Only her friends find that out and you're not one. No one upsets my girl, you little fuckin maggot!'

I didn't look at her and I didn't say goodbye. I turned and scurried out like a little thing. Geppetto wasn't far wrong. I was little in all sense of the word. But I thought maggot was a bit harsh.

Before I got a dozen steps a car pulled into the gutter. Two young men got out. One was a local, Blake. The other was Tom. This had to be a joke. Both of them, one after another? Was I being set up? But I could see that Tom was dirty, like he had been out picking tomatoes. There was work in the area for that kind of thing, but not for me. I had tried it once. It was backbreaking, even for a fit sixteen-year-old. Fit but not particularly strong. And I felt

incredibly weak at that moment. I don't know if Tom saw it but I'm fairly certain I was as pale as chalk. I'm not sure if that was attributable to him or to my encounter with Jen and Mussolini's mongoloid cousin. It was a double blow. I just wanted the fuck out of there. The beers were getting heavier too and I badly wanted a drink.

'What's goin on?' Tom said, but his tone suggested he wasn't really interested in a response. The pair were heading toward the pub, a liquid lunch. A not uncommon practice in our town.

'Um...' I looked back to the pub. 'She... I just came out.' I wanted to warn him to not go in there, in case he didn't want to see her either but I was afraid of mentioning anything in front of Blake.

Tom barely acknowledged that I had spoken. I could tell that he was annoyed to see me. Can't say I blamed him. I had avoided him too. I think he was glad of it. He wasn't about to offer anything now that might alter the status quo. 'Take it easy,' was all he said and he was gone.

My anger towards him wouldn't really surface until after I had skipped town. Until I had put some distance between them and I. Until I could find someone else to blame other than myself. Tom had been the only one to go all the way. And he had gone first. It was his casual acceptance that led

to my involvement. Self-imposed hatred is taxing and I didn't want to kill myself, so for a long time, my blame fluctuated between the three of us.

Tom was in the pub. He and Jen would be together. I wanted to go back in and find out what the mood was like. Were they still friends? But I was too chicken shit. I scampered home as fast as I could, nursing my precious booze, despite how crap I felt. I thought I would faint before I got there. The sun was hot and I was out of breath. My mum was there when I walked in the back door and into the kitchen. My mum is one of those old-fashioned mums, or she was then. I must have looked like shit because she began fussing. I darted past her, blocking her remarks of worry, still carrying the case of beer and buried myself in my hole. She followed me almost to my room and began going on about the drinking and how she knew all about it and that I wasn't hiding anything and that it was all so serious and dangerous for my health. I knew my days at home were numbered. Not that she would have wanted me to leave, but that I couldn't put up with the fact that someone was concerned about me. And that it also wouldn't be long before they put the pressure on me to clean my act up. I didn't want to deal with any of that.

I got trashed as quickly as I could. It was the day I hit new lows. I hadn't eaten and didn't try, only wanting to forget the double encounters at the pub and not analyse it. Of course, I replayed both conversations, if you could call them that, particularly the one with Jenny, all throughout my drunken froth. Each time I changed what I had said and done in a wish fulfilment fantasy. I ultimately changed the events of that summer night altogether, where I was the hero and saved Jen from a rampaging sex beast that was Tom transformed. I swayed in the centre of my room to the sounds of the new Smashing Pumpkins album, *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, my head back beneath the light, eyes closed, shapes moving in the red behind my eye lids. I think it was during the song *1979* when I puked. Mum must have heard. She burst in and slapped me across the head. I felt about twelve. I was too wasted to talk to her or apologise or even clean up. She had to do it. I crumbled sobbing against the wall. She said some more things but I wasn't listening. I was humiliated. I was insignificant. By the time I woke next morning, I knew something had to change, beginning that very day. I decided to leave, never to return. And I did. I ran. But I was wrong. I did return, but not for another sixteen years. There was something I had to do.

I immediately found the most available unit in the bigger town where I worked. Before I had been living there a month, I realised I hated it. I was also sick of my job. I was sick of the same environment. I was tired of country life. With little plans but a burning need to get away I moved all the way to Perth on the other side of the country. My poor mother was beside herself. I had to live in a dodgy ‘men’s home for a week until I could get my shit together. It was horrible but it was either that or sleep on the streets. I had no friends and not a lot of money. I did have my own room but had to share the bathroom and kitchen. It was cold and rundown. It was a great incentive to get proactive. Looking back, it was an interesting experience. There were a couple of drunks there, not as many as I thought, but they were mainly failures like me. Life’s rejects. People who had once had something but now had nothing. They were all a lot older than me and gave me weird looks. Some of them weren’t right in the head. One guy scared me. He was in his thirties with a large build and a ponytail. He muttered to himself constantly. I never saw him talk to anyone. He just walked around smoking. I stayed clear of him. Another

man in his fifties with a huge belly but slim body was friendly and actually quite smart. He'd once owned a house with a family and a good job. He'd had it all. I felt sorry for him. Especially as he always seemed happy. I wonder if he was faking it.

I got organised quickly. My mum was fussing like always, but from thousands of kilometres away. I refused to come back, even for a short visit. She knew something had happened, quizzed me numerous times, but I insisted it was nothing. I told her I had to find my own place in the world, or some such drivel. Perhaps there was some truth to that. Years later my parents moved to be close to their only son. Dad never quite forgave me for that. He loved that small town. They had moved there from the suburbs of Melbourne when mum was pregnant. Country life suited him. Or he had adapted to it. He'd had a rough time as a teenager in the western suburbs and didn't want his child growing up in a similar environment. Apparently, I should have been more grateful. It's not like they had moved to the city again, they were an hour away on the fringe but dad was a stubborn bastard and I knew he would never truly forgive me. At least mum was more content. Even though she'd only had one kid, family life meant a lot to her. And it wasn't their fault I'd screwed things up for myself. I made

sure I saw them often. I'm glad I did. Not long after mum became sick. She's still unwell, not the woman she was. Now I've got to carry the extra burden of that too. Maybe that's the real reason why dad is so pissed at me. If she had never moved, maybe she would be okay. I don't know. I avoid talking to him about it. Isn't it funny how one bad situation leads to another? Like an expanding slick of oil on the ocean.

In the meantime, I became busy. I hadn't finished my final year at school so I couldn't qualify for university, but I did manage to complete a real estate course. I became good at it. It was a wise choice as there was never a shortage of work. You need to be confident about a property in order to sell it, even if it's a turd. You got to polish that sucker until it's at least shiny. Sometimes you have to fabricate information. Oh, I was an expert in that field. With a whole new set of people around me, it was easy to design a portfolio of lies around my persona, especially around my past. I had managed to bury what had happened, though I had to get on top of my drinking in order to operate. Some people can drink every night and get up early without a hangover. It's probably a blessing that I'm not wired that way. Yet I still drank heavily on

weekends. I think the drinking was always in my make-up. I don't blame one night for all of my flaws. I'm pretty sure I would have ended up being a part-time drunk no matter what. Saturdays were turning into a bitch. I would be showing clients through a house and while they were investigating a particular room I would race around the side of the house and throw up. Not very professional. It was a pity as I think Friday night is the best night of the week. Everyone is so pumped up. It's a celebration that the working week is over. Not for me unfortunately but the vibe was too attractive. A mini New Year's Eve. You can feel the essence of life. It's all there, the highs and lows, the laughter, the sex, the fights, all the drama on the one night. Eventually I had to shift my drinking nights to Saturday and Sunday. But I didn't stop. Before I knew it, I was back into another routine. The safety of the familiar, where I didn't have to think, just do. Life as a distraction. A life not fully lived.

I suppose it would be easy to imagine that I became a fuck-up. Perhaps it would have been right if I had. But much to my disappointment I actually became proficient at the real estate game. I had good relations with those at work. My colleagues looked up to me, almost like it had

been years before, with the three of us. We may have *loved* Jen, but I was the one they admired.

Romance though, was not a game I could get comfortable with. Too fucking personal. Sure, there were some women, especially on those early risqué Friday nights when caution was hurled high. Most were only after the thrill of the moment, an escape from banality of things, but occasionally a woman wouldn't rush off first thing in the morning, despite me puking and going off to work. I think they were attracted to my confidence. Couldn't they tell it was fake? Still, I didn't want to let them in. The apple cart was better off not upset, but sturdy on four wheels thanks. So, I usually managed to destroy any affair before it really got going. To be honest I was scared of women. I felt as though I didn't deserve them. I had wronged their sex. Sometimes I wished I was gay so I would never have to face them, but I just wasn't built that way. More's the pity. It was a curse. I wanted women. I was attracted to them in every way. But I just couldn't have them. It was somebody's idea of a gross joke and I had to deliver the payoff.

I'm skipping many details but life wasn't always miserable of course. I hid my issues. On the surface you wouldn't know. I actually had a lot of fun. Drunks

generally do. I should tell you a funny story about how I lost my virginity. You see, I wouldn't accept that I had lost it with Jen. What quantifies sex? As far as I was concerned it was a failed attempt. Whether it was or not, I remained a virgin in notion, until the ripe old age of twenty. I had been avoiding it, but even conservative mamma's boys get laid sooner or later. Actually, they usually turn out to be the perverted ones. Whips, lips and nappies.

I was at a party of a friend of someone I worked with. I was drunk. Surprise surprise. As the haze settled in, pushing out reason, I found myself upstairs with an unfortunate girl who was a fringe acquaintance. For some reason she was keen on me. It was lusty and fumbling. I knew it was time I got laid and I didn't give a fuck if it was special or not. Just as it was about to finally happen, I called her Jen. Don't ask me what I was thinking, I wasn't. Needless to say, she didn't take it too well. She took off downstairs and must have blurted it out. God knows what she said, but I was so embarrassed I didn't bother getting up. I stared at the ceiling and tried to find the humour in it. And I did. I didn't take anything seriously anymore. I thought I had moved on. I thought I was stronger. It had been a long time since I'd thought about those days at Tynan's Bend. I guess it was fate getting back at me. I'd managed to fuck it up again.

Before I could get dressed there was a knock at the door. Here we go, I thought, I'm about to get beaten up by a spurned jealous hero in waiting. Instead, another young woman walked in. She was chubby but with a pretty face. She asked me if I wanted to see her. I didn't know what she was talking about. Until she said, 'I'm Jenny.'

I started laughing. I couldn't help it. She was confused and began getting frustrated but I signalled for her to come closer. It wasn't that I wanted to make a move, I just felt sorry for her for having laughed. Maybe it was my old friend the guilt. We've been close for years.

Cut to fifteen minutes later and this not so petite nurse had mounted me like a rodeo attraction and took my virginity with the glee of winning the bingo. I let it happen. I resigned myself to the universe, convinced it was going to play another trick on me. It didn't and that was that. The fact that her name was Jenny still brings a smirk.

And that's how I began a new trend, one I still follow. I enjoyed the experience of being mounted. That nurse was well versed in the gratifications of the flesh and wasn't afraid to take them. I have to say, it was something new for me. I found it intoxicating. I became drawn to dominant women. Not always in a physical sense, though

that excites me too, but strong characters who know what they want and aren't hesitant in taking it. I needed that. Feminists, I like feminists. Isn't that ridiculous? Another cosmic joke. Sure, some of them are man haters, a cliché I guess but there's truth to that. Still, I don't mind man haters. Maybe I wanted to be hated. Fucked and hated. I suppose, if you want to get all Freudian about it, I became Jen. Not the charismatic girl I had known, but the one from that night, lying there, available, unable to resist. A thing to impress needs on.

And yet most of these women grew bored with me. I was too compliant. Some of them I really liked and yet no matter how I felt, I didn't show enough interest. I slowly pushed them away. Each time they dumped me, and it was always them leaving me, I was devastated. I literally couldn't function for a fortnight. I'd go into a trance like state and binge drink to near oblivion. But that's what I wanted. Deep down, I'm sure I sought it out. It was my punishment. I'd set it up each time so I could inflict this damage upon myself. It was a form of self-flagellation like an old monk walking through the dusty streets with his cat-o-nine-tails.

It was one such woman who ultimately rescued me. She was strong but not as selfish as some of the others. She was

wise enough to know what I was up to. She wouldn't let me force her out. So, I married her. Perhaps it's a touch melodramatic but she probably saved my arse. She's a remarkable person. She's definitely too good for me. She was patient and in time I guess she changed me. Maybe I wanted to change too. It took a few attempts but I gave up the drink. I became stronger. I had grown up. Finally. Men are slow to mature. It had taken me until my thirties. Miranda knew there was something in my past with its hooks in me, but she didn't press it. She knew I would come to it in time, when I was ready. But the years have a way of slipping by. Eventually though, it came back to haunt me, whether I was ready or not. It was the night I almost fell off the wagon.

VI

Miranda's younger sister Susan had been over. We didn't see her very often, and for good reason. She had a thing for me. It sounds conceited but it was there from the moment we met. Whatever attracted Miranda to me might also exist in her sister. Who really knows how these things work? It had never been enacted upon and was never spoken about. There was no way on this earth that I was going there. Some things just can't be. I assumed Susan felt the same. Therein lay the problem. We hadn't addressed it. We were walking around with different perceptions. Don't ever assume someone thinks the same way you do. I walked straight into a trap of my own design. That old chestnut. It was how I dealt with things.

Susan was over for a BBQ with her newlywed. She had an announcement to make. She was hardly the innovative type. We all knew what it was. The four of us were sitting at the outside table. It was autumn and the weather was overcast but it was warm. When her husband stood to make the speech, Susan's eyes narrowed in on me. I could feel them, like an accusation. She had never been so obvious before. I refused to acknowledge it. Sure enough, Susan

was pregnant. I was happy for them but I knew this would cause an issue. Miranda wanted kids, wanted them desperately. I had been evasive. I wasn't scared of commitment, if only it were that easy. You see I couldn't consciously bring a child into the world with the knowledge of what I had done. The world, my world, was too corrupt. It sounds ridiculous but it was like a little bit of poison in the well. Maybe not so little. I thought I would somehow sort it out later, always later. But Susan had beaten her older sister to the punch. God, I was going to hear about it tonight. I wasn't looking forward to it. After the obligatory hugs, I went into the laundry. The small sink was full of ice. I wanted another can of soft drink. On social occasions such as this it was not uncommon for me to polish off half a dozen cans of the lolly water. Some habits refuse to let us go. Miranda was after some more wine too. Susan usually drank with her and the fact that she hadn't today had already given her away. She's attractive and has a great body but she's really a scatterbrain. Not a bimbo, but with more than a splash of the fool.

The door opened. It was Susan.

'Oh, I thought you were Miranda,' I said.

She closed the door behind her. She was stealth like, moving toward me with a sense of purpose. I knew immediately. Fear bubbled up like a sickness.

‘I’m bringing the wine out,’ I said.

She was half-smiling with a suggestion on her face that could not hide her intent. ‘Do you want to feel it?’ She reached for my hand but I plunged it into the ice.

‘Um, you’re not showing yet,’ I said.

She whispered, ‘You know, it could have been yours.’

She took my elbow and lifted it away from the ice. My hand dripped water. She rubbed the droplets from them.

‘You’ll have to warm them up first.’

Was she insane? ‘Susan, it’s okay. I’ll wait till you have a proper bump.’

But she was dominant, like her sister and I folded. She placed my hand on her lower stomach, too low to be feeling for any life signs. She was guiding my hand south. I could not believe that this was happening, especially after her husband, yes her husband, who was only metres away, had announced to the world that Susan was having his child.

Maybe she was drunk after all. It was the only thing that made any sense even though I knew she was sober. Perhaps she was on medication or high on hormones or something.

Her fingers were all over mine, pushing my hand down

over her pubic bone. This was precisely the type of behaviour I fell for, the woman taking charge. I was compliant, even though it was wrong. My hand was between her legs and she was rubbing it back and forth. I was transfixed like a store window dummy. To my disgust I was as hard as one too. I certainly had the brain to match. If she hadn't have spoken then, I'm not sure what would have happened.

'This could still be yours.'

Her voice brought me back. I took repossession of my hand. 'Susan, this can't happen. This isn't right.' Christ, she was a fresh wife and pregnant to boot. What the hell was going through her head?

'I know. I just thought, maybe we could once. Before it's too late.' She didn't sound confident however. She was regretting it already and looked like she might break down. I couldn't afford that either, draw too much attention.

'Look, I understand, I get it. This is my fault as much as yours. But let's just forget it happened okay? You're going to have a baby. It's wonderful! You're going to be really happy!'

'I am happy.'

‘Of course, you are. It’s wonderful news. You’re probably just a little overexcited. Maybe it’s the heat or something.’
It wasn’t hot.

I gave her an out and she took it. ‘You know I have been getting flushes. I’m pretty hormonal.’

‘Of course. You’re body’s changing. You’re not yourself. So, let’s forget it now and get back.’ Thankfully she relaxed. So, I gave her a hug. I grabbed the drinks and turned to leave. Miranda was looking through the window. An accusing statue. I couldn’t move either.

Susan lowered her head and went outside.

Before I could move, Miranda disappeared too. I had no idea how much she had seen, but I knew that the rest of the afternoon would be like sitting on thorns. I went outside.

The rest of the afternoon was tense. I felt sick, but it only got worse when the visitors left. Miranda began shrieking before the sound of her sister’s car had left the street. ‘I saw you two, so don’t fucking lie to me!’

‘Nothing happened Miranda. It was nothing.’

‘She’s fucking pregnant! Do you know that? Do you grasp that in your thick head?’

I felt hard done by. I was innocent this time. ‘I felt her tummy, that’s all. I don’t know what you think you saw, but you’re wrong.’

She was steaming. ‘That’s total bullshit! I’m not blind.

You’ve always preferred her over me!’

‘That’s not true.’ I walked into the lounge room and sat on the couch, but Miranda followed me. This was far from over. She was pacing and still drinking. She had demolished two bottles of fine New Zealand white after the laundry incident. ‘You want to fuck her, don’t you?’

I sighed. ‘Oh please. I’m only interested in you. Always have been.’ It was the truth. Okay, I was a little curious about Susan but I would never have enacted upon it.

‘Why don’t you run off with her so you can fuck her?’

‘What do you think you saw? I told you, I was just congratulating her.’

‘Yes, because she’s fucking pregnant and I’m not! She’ll have three kids and I’ll still be waiting for you to make up your fucking mind!’ She stamped on the carpet. Her temper was shocking. And once she got going it was almost impossible to calm her down.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Things will change.’

‘When that’s going to happen? You don’t want kids! You lied! I’m wasting my time with you!’

‘What are you talking about? I do want kids. I just....’

‘What? Why don’t you tell me what the real fucking problem is?’

‘Can you stop swearing please? The neighbours can hear you.’

‘You don’t want kids with me. I’m not enough for you.’

I just sighed and shook my head. Despite her strength she still had insecurities like anybody else.

‘Why don’t you have the balls to tell me what’s going on for once?’

I couldn’t answer.

‘I am so sick of this... whatever this is, between us. I don’t even know what it is, but I’m not putting up with it anymore. If you’re not prepared to have children then I’m getting a divorce.’

A huge bucket of arctic water dumped all over me. ‘What?’

‘I mean it. I want it dealt with. Or I’m leaving. Arsehole!’

She left the room and the tears began.

I frowned. I felt like I weighed a ton. She meant it. She was really serious this time. This thing she referred to was the ghost of my sin. It was actually still alive and had been living with us the entire time. God how I hated myself then.

I went straight to the laundry sink with the melted ice and freezing water. I pulled out the last bottle of white and stared at it, the bottle dripping. I hated wine. I wanted the alcohol but I wasn’t going off the wagon for white. Had it been beer or bourbon it would have been a different story.

Down the hatch it would have gone. Thankfully the hesitation was enough. Alcohol wasn't going to solve anything. I had hurt Miranda. It was my fault. My personal stain had spread. I had to stop it. If not now, then when? It was something I thought I would fix tomorrow, but I had finally run out of them.

VII

The thought of going ahead with my plan was terrifying. I had spent my entire adult life away from where I had grown up. I was only eighteen when I left. I had been nothing more than a stupid, naive boy. I've often fantasised that I had journeyed back in time prior to that night, my adult self-confronting the young fool. I shake him hard and shout in his face, '*your lack of control will ruin your life!*' But no matter what I say, the end result is always the same. The young fool knows more than I, as all youth do, and goes ahead regardless. As if it could be any different. Sometimes I imagine that I'm killing Tom. I drag him to the river and force his head under the water, holding it there, watching the bubbles pop on the surface and then diminish. His final breath. I let him drift and he journeys out to the horizon. For some reason there's always a horizon though in reality there's another bend about 600 metres away. Jen and I stand on the bank holding hands as his body glides downstream. We are sad to see him go and there are tears in her eyes. She is blissfully unaware of that other future, but I know better. I did what had to be done in order to protect her. I embrace her and she looks up at me

and I touch her face, knowing that soon, she will come to love me.

Sometimes I think the most enjoyable parts of our lives are lived in such fantasies.

Miranda sanctioned my trip. I scraped together my courage and took a flight across the country. There was serious turbulence. It scared me shitless. I've hardly flown so maybe it wasn't that bad but at least it kept my mind focused on the present. Before long I was on a bus. Landscapes greeted me as though I had never left but I wasn't happy to see them again. I wondered what I was doing. Surely someone might recognise me. Country faces. Stereotypes. But I didn't know them. It was hard to relax. I pretended to read and the pages did go by but I didn't take any of the words in. The story was lost. I gave up and looked out the window. Finally, I disembarked and picked up a hire car that I had booked. I drove into familiar terrain, layers of flattened paddocks with golden hair, but it didn't feel right. It was like an old movie that you had loved as a kid but now that you were grown up it didn't perform its magic the way it used to.

I glided unnoticed into the larger town where I landed my first job years before. I have forgotten much of what

happened there. The streets were the same but some buildings had changed. I passed the place where the old chicken shop was. I used to go there every second lunch. It was a shoe shop now. Many businesses were still there, the car yard, the fruit place, the bank, but a lot of new ones. The town was growing, but not like the speed of a city. I knew where a few cheap motels were and I checked into one that was the most convenient to pull into. It was simple and without character. It was fitting I thought. I lay on the bed and sighed, but I was not relieved to be there. Now what? I hadn't really thought about *how* I was going to tackle this. I wasn't even sure I'd get this far, and gave myself an out at every step of the trip. It was probably the only way I could ensure that I'd actually make it. Was Jen even living locally anymore? I had made a big assumption. Perhaps she had fled years before, not being able to stand the place. After all, she had more reason to hate it than I did. There was no trace of her on the internet and the town we had grown up in was a good place to start. I was sure that at least some of her family still lived there. I ordered pizza and crashed out early, preferring to sleep than to think about it anymore. I felt better the next day. I went to a cafe. I had some fairly average coffee. Some things never change. The local paper was there but I

couldn't bring myself to read it. It would have been another vivid reminder of where I was. I had to get this over with. So, before my fear got the better of me, I drove out of the big town towards home. Strange that I still thought of it as home. I was getting nervous now. I was surprised it had taken me this long. I had the radio up loud, trying to drown out my thoughts with no success. The local station still played shit music. When I pulled onto the bridge that crossed the river, yes that river, I switched the music off. The sun was bright and I could hear the crickets. The town was quiet, had always been so, though I hadn't noticed just how much before. It was also full of trees. It was quite beautiful really. It was just too familiar for me, that's all. It wasn't the town's fault.

As I inched into the main street, I realised it would always be home. Even if after today, I never went back. I saw the same table out the front of the bakery where the three of us had hung out. Perhaps not *the* same table, but in the same position. It didn't matter. I could still see her there, rocking back and forth in her chair, perfectly balanced on two legs, with that gorgeous smile. God how I loved those days.

I parked. It took an age to let go of the steering wheel. I don't know if my heart was racing but I felt strange. Almost out of body. And yet, very much in the moment. When I got

out, I felt a hundred accusing eyes. *They all knew.* Except there were only a few people around. There never was many at any given time, except maybe for a Saturday morning. I somehow managed to reach the door of the pub, when I was suddenly struck by an urge to turn and run. Why was I back here, the most detested place in the whole universe? Had I lost it? I didn't need to do this. I was fine. I had a life on the other side of the country for god's sake. Miranda. It was her fault. She talked me into it. Just because she's jealous of her stupid dumb arse nympho sister. The past is over with anyway. It's too late to change anything.

But the niggling persisted. I still had questions. Really just one question. Did Jen know what had happened that night? I had to know. It had been burning inside me all these years. I wanted it over with. Had Tom told her or not? Had she remembered? And what if she had? What then? Say sorry, pat her on the head and walk away? I had no concept of what I would say or how she might respond. If I could find her. *If.*

I was inside the pub. What immediately struck me was the smell. A mixture of beer-stained wood and stale smoke. It took me straight back sixteen years.

‘Yes mate?’ said the bartender, not acting like I was his mate at all. I didn’t know him. I scanned around. I didn’t know anybody. ‘Just a squash thanks.’

‘We don’t do squash,’ he said.

‘Ah leave it out,’ someone sniggered.

The bartender grinned and wandered away to get my lemon drink.

I didn’t find it slightly funny, so I decided to wait a while before I asked any questions. I sipped on the drink, too full of ice and tried to make small talk. He wasn’t interested, nor was anyone else. So, I just came out and asked if anyone knew Jen. I should have known better. Country people don’t talk about others with strangers. It’s a closed circuit. But they’ll happily gossip amongst themselves. I’d been away too long. I was no longer a part of that clique. I probably wouldn’t have received any help even if they did remember me. I had skipped town, a form of betrayal. I don’t know if they knew Jen or not but, in a way, I was relieved that I had discovered nothing. That way I wouldn’t have to confront her, yet knowing I had tried. But that was hollow. I couldn’t deceive myself.

I drove around the block. By habit I ended up driving to my old house. Someone had given it a new paint job. The yard was trimmed up too. A couple of minor additions. It looked

surprisingly good. It was a lot smaller than I remembered it. But I had been miserable when I was last there and I felt a distinct residue. I had ruined it all. I couldn't get past it. It was a shame really as my childhood was in there somewhere. But it was lost to me.

I had to get this over with. Twenty minutes and I wanted to be back over that bridge. I went to Jen's house. I pulled up across the road. I turned the engine off. It was a weekday and all was quiet. The local kids would have been in school. Her house hadn't changed much though there was a crappy brown car in the yard that I didn't recognise. I opened the door. And then closed it again. 'Dickhead.' I opened it and got it. I slammed the door, hoping to kill off my anxiety but left it unlocked. It was a small town and I wasn't planning on staying long. I went into the yard. Now my heart was racing. So much so that I was breathing fast just to keep up. I went to the door. Just do it. Fucking do it. I knocked. What if Jen comes out? What if her dad comes out instead? With a shotgun? Some people still had guns, especially in the bush. I bet if he knew what I had done to his daughter he would shoot me. *Nobody messes with my girl!* Could I honestly blame him?

The door opened. It was an older Jen. No, it wasn't. God, for a second I thought it was. It's a woman not that much

older than me though, maybe forty. She was country, pure country. ‘Yes? Who are you? Are you selling something?’

‘No, I’m just...’

‘You’re not from around here, are you?’

‘Um, no. I was looking for the people who used to live here. Do you know them or where they may have gone to?’ I was hoping she’d say no and she did. My secret wish to fail came true. And then I was disappointed. Turned out that she and her husband were only renters. And the house was empty before they moved in. She invited me in for coffee as her kids were at school. I may be wrong and I hope I am but I think she wanted to give me more than coffee. All part of the cosmic joke no doubt.

I got out of there quick. I was ecstatic to get back over that bridge. I drove around for the next few hours, following old school bus routes and wallowing in some kind of nostalgic pipe dream over a glorious childhood only partly based in reality. I was deluding myself. It was over. I didn’t belong here anymore. And the trail of Jen was dead.

VIII

I'm back in my motel room. I feel like a drink, a real one, not flat squash. I open the bar fridge. Cold beers are lined up like statuettes of gold. *Just take one and down it. You deserve it! Fuck the lot of them!*

I lick my teeth. I grind them. I swallow. I close my eyes and somehow shut the fridge door. Miranda asked me to call her if I had such a moment. She knows me far too well. But I can't do that. That would be the mark of a true failure. But haven't I already failed? I haven't discovered a single thing. And there was that moment at Jen's house where I wanted to fail. Be careful what you wish for. But I'm being unfair to myself. I did want to find out where she was. And I had gone to all this trouble. But where else could I go? I'd hit a dead end. I had no idea what to do. Except go home. Maybe get some counselling and stop fucking wallowing. Give Miranda what she wants. Put my own needs aside for once. Start again. Again.

Now I'm angry. Too angry to eat. And I know those beers are just sitting there. I decide to go for a walk, maybe ration off some of the loathing that rattles inside me. It's cool and it's getting dark. Unlike my little town, these streets have

changed. God forbid they've discovered progress. Everything appears cleaner. I stroll to the centre of town, mind mapping each street; not through nostalgia, I'm indifferent to the place, but to create a form of logic to my scattered thoughts. It's an old trick I used to deal with alcohol cravings but it's still avoidance. I don't know how I should be feeling. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm thirsty. I know it's my body trying to trick me into booze. This isn't good. I need to steer well clear of pubs. Restaurants too. Maybe I'll get a bottle of soft drink from the supermarket, get some frozen crap and bread and take it back to my room.

I'm know where to go and I'm soon there. It's familiar like all big supermarkets but I'm still surprised by the shininess. From memory everything was lacklustre. Again, I'm looking around for faces I might know, or worse still, who might know me. I've been doing it ever since the plane landed. I try to shut them all out and enter zombie mode like the other shoppers. Pretence. I could give courses on it. I barely register the signs over the aisles; *Milk, Pasta, Spices, Coffee* ... What am I looking for? I'm wasting time. I just want to be back in my room, sprawled on the bed, watching bad television. Maybe I'll just get a dip and a pack of Doritos and demolish the lot.

I find the aisle with the chips and snacks. There's a woman there with a young girl, maybe eight, who is forcing the patience out of her mother, wanting everything.

'One. Just pick one,' she says to her daughter annoyed.

I assume it's her daughter. You can never be too sure. I look for the Doritos. I walk past the woman who seems familiar. God, she looks a lot like Jen. Or maybe how I imagine Jen to look. I really wouldn't know. She could be fat and bald for all I know. I'm scanning the brands but I'm not really looking. I take another glance. That figure. That hair. That face. My God, it could be her. It really could. Is that Jen? There's something really familiar about her, but maybe I just want it to be her because I know I've thrown the towel in and intend to head back to the city tomorrow. Chips, Doritos, no name brands, prices, grams, I don't know which one to take. I look again. I can't be positive, but if I had to say one way or the other, I'd have to say it is. It's fucking her isn't it? No longer the fresh-faced teen, but a woman. Jen, a mother. Within an instant I know that all of my old feelings are still there, rusted over by time, tainted by too much booze, edges smoothed over by other experiences, but despite it all, the emotions are still there. I feel sick. I have to walk away or I'll vomit. I'm walk to the end and duck into the next aisle. I'm really thirsty now and

I feel dehydrated. I'm getting a headache. God, I don't want to be here. I stare blankly at recycled paper kitchen towels. I pick one up. I pretend to read but I can't focus on the words. That was Jen. It can be no other person. I know it like I know my wife. I am in a supermarket with Jen in the aisle next to me. I have to talk to her, though I really don't want to. For all I know it might open a can of shit and she could press charges. I could totally fuck my life up. Maybe she's over it. Time heals all. After all. Doesn't it? But I know that's not true. I'd read a lot over the years. Some people can't. Some people don't survive. And yet, here she is. How can I go back to my life knowing that I had been this close and passed up the opportunity? My nerves are killing me but this isn't some adolescent crush or married wandering eye. This is a person that I had wronged. I have to correct that mistake. I owe her that much, no matter the cost to me.

I hold my breath and walk back to the aisle. She's gone. Of course. *Idiot!* I scamper across to the adjoining aisle. There are people milling about but not her. I enter into a barely restrained jog, dodging them. Their cold stares condemn me but I press on. I reach the end of the aisle, looking every which way. Nothing. The hopelessness boils in my stomach. I dash past the freezers and check every aisle.

She's eluded me. Did she even exist? I'm so ratty right now that maybe I imagined it. I mean, I'm sure I saw someone, but it just wasn't her. So why am I still jogging? I gotta know. I run towards the checkouts, passing through the fresh produce section and almost knocking over an older middle-aged couple. I rightly receive a prompt curse, apologise and race to the row of tired faces at the mini conveyor belts. There! Going out the doors, Jen and the girl. God it looks like her. *It must be!*

Sometimes intuition is very strong. I can't explain it but I know that this chance won't come again. If that's true, I will be haunted into an early booze soaked grave. It's got to be now or I'm screwed.

The queues are small but queues nonetheless. One of the checkouts is closed. I dash to it and without hesitation leap over the barrier. I expect the alarm to go off and someone to shout, 'Stop thief!' but the nearby checkout girl barely registers any interest. They don't pay her enough for that. The sliding doors open with the speed of a sloth on its day off and I squeeze through and bolt into the car park. It's dark, conspiring against me. There are some overhead lights but they're not enough. Cost cutting no doubt. I hunt around in the shadows unlit by the floodlights and see shapes but no faces. In the distance, a familiar outline. The

woman. She's lowering, obviously getting into a car but I can't see the car. I run, with everything I have, weaving between rows of metal. I can't see her anymore. How will I know which car she's in? I've already lost the position. My heart hammers and I curse how unfit I'd let myself become. At this rate, I'm not going to make it.

I emerge into a driving lane. There's a flash of light and something large and powerful smashes into me. I'm suddenly lifted up as though on wires, carrying me diagonally through the air. It's the weirdest feeling, until I crash onto the road, crumpling. I'm winded and can't breathe. I don't feel pain but I don't know what's happened. Or where I am. Concentrate on breathing. There is light and dark. I'm on the road. I've been hit by a car. Jesus. It didn't even hurt that much. Maybe I'm in shock. Maybe I'm seriously injured. Internal bleeding. I wouldn't know. The road is hard. My arm begins to throb. It's definitely bruised, maybe broken. I must have used to break my fall. I sit up and nurse it. It's sore but I don't think it's broken. I think I'm okay. The vehicle hadn't been travelling fast; it had just given me a small but determined push. It felt like I was flying through the air but it was only a couple of feet. I wobble to my feet like in my drinking days. I wait for a

form of shock to hit me. I've heard of that happening, but it doesn't come.

'Oh my God, are you all right?'

I turn to the female voice. All I see is white. I squint and a shape dissolves out of the car lights. Before I get a good look, I already know it's her. 'I think so.'

'I'm so sorry!' Now there's some irony. Here she is, apologising to me! She slows as she nears. She is a giant silhouette in slow motion. It's almost ethereal. I'm sure my mouth is hanging open. Is this real? My throbbing arm reminds me that it is. As her face comes into full view, she hesitates.

'Hello Jen.'

She says nothing, but I can see her now. It's definitely her. Older. Crow's feet at the eyes. She was always a smiler. Still attractive. But not a girl anymore. A woman. A mature adult.

'I'm not hurt,' I say. I flex my elbow. I rub my forearm.

'Just some bruising. I'm all right.'

'I didn't see you! Where were you going?'

Oh shit. Busted. 'Doesn't matter. It was my fault, not yours.' Ain't that the whole truth of it all right there? 'But it's good to see you. Even if you did just run me over.'

'No, I didn't I....'

‘It’s okay, just kidding. I’m perfectly fine. How have you been?’ I ask like I’d only seen her a month ago.

‘Fine. Just fine. What are you doing here?’

I look to the girl in the car but all I can see is a fuzzy image through the headlights. I look to Jen. She’s confused. I decide to clear that up and lie in the process. ‘I’m just here in town. I came to see a relative.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yeah. Not that close or anything. I was kind of...’ In the area? Don’t say that. It’s dumb. God, I sound awkward. I have to get to the point, right here and now, before it’s too late. ‘Listen, um...’ How to say it though? Maybe I won’t. Maybe I’ll I back out.

‘It’s been such a long time,’ she says. ‘Where have you been?’

She seems sincere. It eats at me. ‘Around. Not here. I’m in Perth now.’

‘Oh. Okay.’

‘You look good. I mean, you seem well.’ The years had been good to her. Apart from her attractiveness she holds an air of maturity and sophistication. Two qualities I lacked.

‘I am. I mean, I’m...’ She looks back at the car.

‘A mum.’

‘Yes. Twice over actually. Timothy’s with his dad.’

‘Oh. Is that a shared arrangement?’

‘No, no, I meant he’s at home. I just needed a couple of things for dinner. My husband’s cooking tonight.’

‘Oh.’ Wishful thinking had turned me into the village idiot. Why did I assume her marriage had failed? I clearly wasn’t content to leave it there. ‘Your husband isn’t Tom by any chance?’

Her face alters. ‘Tom... ’

‘Sorry,’ I say, nursing my forearm. ‘You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to. I mean, it’s been such a long time. It’s none of my business.’

‘You didn’t hear?’ I shake my head, but I’ve already guessed.

‘Tom died. God this is awful. He’s been dead for years now. I thought you deliberately didn’t go to the funeral.’
I shake my head.

‘He drove into a tree. Drunk. It was terrible. He was drunk a lot then.’

‘He was?’

‘Some people think he would have done it even if he was sober.’

‘He was depressed? Doesn’t sound like Tom.’

She half shrugged and looked beautiful doing it. ‘He wasn’t the same person you remember. He couldn’t get over it.’

I can barely speak. ‘Over... what?’

She gives me a teacher look. ‘You don’t have to pretend. I know. Tom and I were together for a while.’

Does she mean it? Of course, she does. She’s referring to it. *It*. And she’s brought it up. I can’t comprehend what I’m hearing. I want to dive into a well and have someone weld it shut.

‘I forgave him,’ she says, ‘but he couldn’t deal with it.’

‘Jen, I... came here ...’

‘It’s okay Danny. I forgive you too.’

I’m trembling. My throat seizes. I want to say so many things, had rehearsed some of them, had fantasised over a thousand scenarios but now that it’s actually here, nothing comes out. It suddenly seems pointless. A few words cannot explain away what I had done. But there is a genuine light in her eyes. She’s not trying to make me feel better. She had climbed above it, conquered it, while Tom and I had sunk beneath.

‘Tom wanted me to be happy. That’s all he wanted, nothing for himself. So, after he died, I made a promise not to waste another second. Not one. And I haven’t. Neither should you.’

And my tears finally come. Deep from the gut. Dredged up as though from the river itself, from that bottomless pit that

was my miserable spent soul. I groaned and sobbed hard, knowing I sounded like a traumatised child but I couldn't make it stop.

Jen comes forward to comfort me. That's the sort of person she is. She slips her arms around me and I rest my wet cheek upon her shoulder.

The End

The background to Bottomless River



Anthony J. Langford

I cannot recall exactly why I began writing this story, other than wishing to explore physical territory that was familiar to me, in other words, where I grew up. I was also interested in the nature of guilt. Yet I let the characters take their own paths. I was also along for the ride.

The story takes place in the 1980's, when I was a teenager. The small town is based on Murchison in Victoria where I grew up and the bigger town is Shepparton, where I was born. The river is the Goulburn River and Tynan's Bend is actually Campbell's Bend, a real place. The river has sadly changed a lot since I was a kid. (see my video poem *The Way it Was* under the tab *Video* on my website.

www.anthonyjlangford.com)

The character of Tom is loosely based on a good friend of mine to whom the book is dedicated. Tragically, he passed away at the young age of 21. Like many a decent fiction, much of it is true. The Cliff where the kids jumped from was real, and so was the incident where the teenage boy fell onto the bank. Also the incident where the boys were caught buying the booze. I drank a lot as a young man and did many silly things as did many of us who grew up in rural areas. And yet we had great adventures. It wasn't much of a stretch going from reality to the events in the book.

The man having an affair with his brother's wife was also based on a real situation.

The drunken three with their risky behaviour by the river that night also took place but was embellished for this book.

Parts of the main character are based on me, and others fictionalised. I think its best left to the imagination exactly which elements of the book are true.

I hope you enjoyed reading it, and perhaps may read it again in future. Please tell your friends and family, as word of mouth is really the best form of advertising. *Bottomless River* is not in bookstores and won't be promoted the way the 'big boys' can afford to. It's literally down to the readers. You. Perhaps it would make a great Birthday or Christmas present. Unlike most things in our disposable society, books seem to last forever.

The writing of
Bottomless River



A novella
Anthony J. Langford

The initial draft of *Bottomless River* was hand written on a train going to and from work over several days in 2006. It was simply a short story then. I tend to get enthused about most things I write, but I let them sit for a while before typing them up and begin the redrafting process. It's then that I can determine whether it's any good or not. I liked the story. It was personal and there was something emotional and raw about it. I spent more time on it and it grew. I let my partner read it and she liked it, and she is quite critical of my writing. She pushed me to get it out there. I searched around for somewhere to publish it but it was too long to qualify as a short story and too short for a novel. Most publishers don't print novellas, for reasons unknown. You're guess is as good as mine. Perhaps the cost

of printing them makes them expensive and they don't believe that people will invest in something with a limited amount of pages. I disagree. I think in this time strapped age that they're due for a major comeback. (A novella is usually between 10,000 and 40,000 words). Some famous writers wrote novellas, including Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and *Fyodor Dostoyevsky*. *Did you know that Animal Farm, Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde, The Old Man and the Sea, Breakfast at Tiffany's and Of Mice and Men were all novellas?*

Every year I would give Bottomless River another draft until finally in 2011 I came across Ginninderra Press. I gave it one last polish and submitted it in May. A month later they came back with a yes. And it's taken a further 11 months to get it released.

A long genesis for a little book with a big heart.

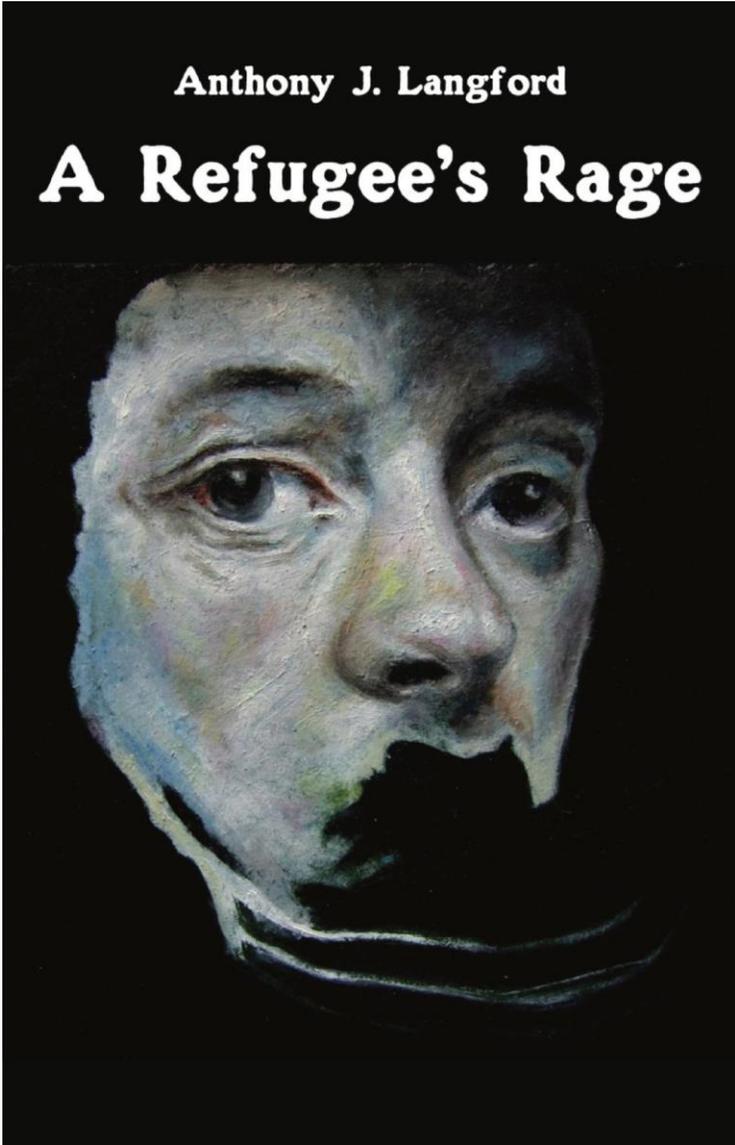
Anthony J. Langford grew up in a working-class town of 600 by the Goulburn River in country Victoria, Australia. This setting was the basis for his first published book, *Bottomless River*, a novella. Other novellas, a story collection and poetry collections followed. Many stories and poems have been published around the world, particularly the U.S. He currently lives in Sydney with his daughter Tilly.

He spent thirty years working in television in a variety of creative capacities, mostly as an editor. He spent five years working in Aged Care as a recreational therapist. He has also made a variety of videos and short films, some of which have screened internationally. Many videos, poems, stories, short films and free downloads are available at anthonyjlangfordbooks.com

Also by Anthony J. Langford

Anthony J. Langford

A Refugee's Rage



A Refugee's Rage

Unseen. Unwanted. Under the radar.

A teenage boy lives in a park in Central Rome. He's not the only one. There are other homeless foreigners on the streets and many of them are young. Yet an encounter with a Syrian girl will have a powerful impact on his tumultuous life. They are still only two halves of nothing, yet their union will alter both of their lives forever.

Two Novellas in One Book.

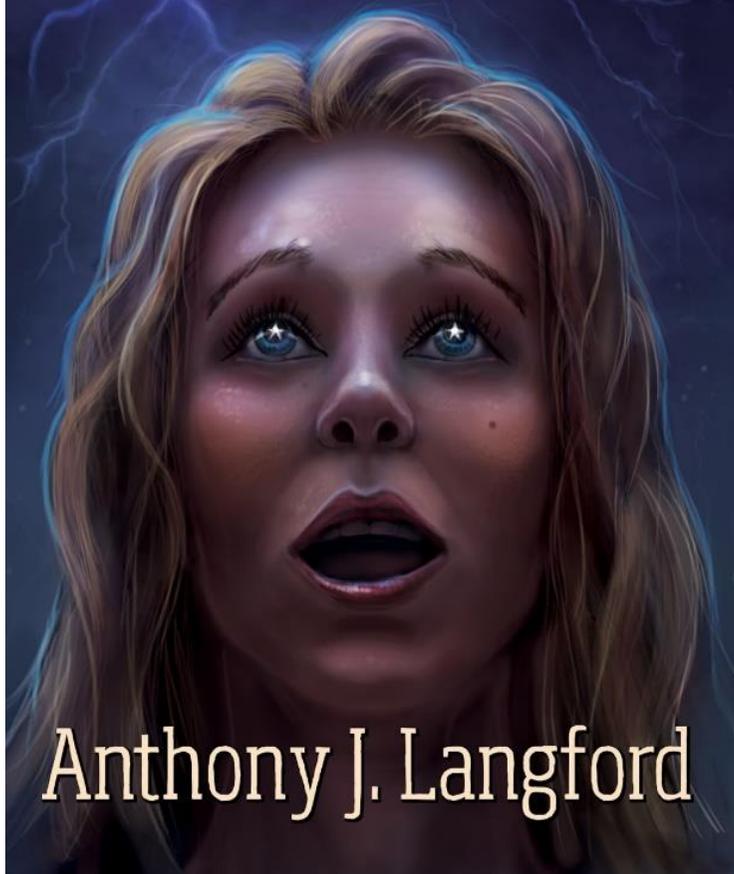
Caught... between love and loss

Richard's dream is to get out of the city and build a house in the country. When he meets Rachel, there's suddenly a reason to stay. Can he convince her to live amongst the beauty of nature? Rachel takes her first step towards this new life, still uncertain of how she feels, until Richard is diagnosed with cancer. Are we bound by destiny, or is the future unwritten?

Gininderra Press
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Pseudo Stars

Stories of the Deluded



Anthony J. Langford

Pseudo Stars!

‘They came with stars in their eyes,
But not with their feet on the ground.’

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Dr Bale is an entrepreneur. And a serial masturbator. He’s built a plush resort on the Southern polar caps, or what’s left of them. It’s opening weekend. It’s bound to be a doozy.

Undercover environmental terrorists have other ideas.

Fabulous Flaw Finding Phil

Phil’s on a mission. And he’s not afraid to get into a few faces.

Her Waterfall Tears

A teenager and an older man form a precarious sexual relationship. Told in reverse.

Officer Material

Has he got what it takes? Set in a brutal war zone on a bleak alien world. Inspired by an actual soldier’s diary from WWI.

Creatures of Habitual

Her entire life has been one big routine. Until Fernando her cat goes missing, and she hits the streets. In her nightie. On a wild Saturday night.

The Long Jetty

An old man remembers his wife, but a custom must end.

First and Last Time

A successful gay porn star's special phone call. There's just one problem. He's not gay.

The Loop

A young man has an unexpected experience on a city bound train and receives a life lesson in the process.

anthony j. langford

Lone Wolf World



He will
be heard.

Lone Wolf World

A Novel

There is no place lonelier than the inner city. No place more fitting to make observations on the fallibility of human beings and the easiest to design their downfall. Ideology isn't his motivation. He hates everyone, equally. His voice is unique. And he will be heard.

'Some soldiers say that War is the only reality that made them feel alive. Feasibly they didn't want it, but they got it. They can never go back. Neither can I.'

This bravely ambitious novel is like a modern *American Psycho*. A triumphant literary work exploring tragic and often inhumanly-human consequences. Highly intelligent and socially inappropriate, Langford's nameless, misanthropic narrator is an arrogant, rebellious loner, who sees the world around him through a dark, dystopian lens. The new modern condition. Heartbreaking, complex and masterful. – *Dominic Kirwan, Poet, Author.*

Langford's protagonist, a cynical anti-hero, manages to make Chuck Palahniuk look like a motivational speaker. There are so many quotable barbs and brutal, uncensored observations that you could easily use *Lone Wolf World* as the basis of a side-splitting book of insults. But beneath this merciless surface, there is something deeply raw and honest at work. Langford proves that he has a tongue even Oscar Wilde would have described as "sharp". This is a bloody good read. – *Pete Malicki – Author, Playwright.*

Anthony J. Langford

Caged Without Walls



Caged Without Walls

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