

DON GRIBBLE

SIGNS OF LIFE

Mr Aguib is a wizened, nut-brown Pharaoh in a baseball cap. He lives across the street with a black-stockinged wife and a black-faced Doberman. The wife is a dumpy, screeching myna bird, the dog all scrabbling paws and slavering jaws and endless, mindless baying at the world.

Mr Aguib presides over this cacophony of sound like an orchestra conductor, coaxing it to new heights, each fresh outburst seeming to reaffirm his existence, to announce to the world that here is a man in charge of his destiny.

I have never been to Egypt, but I can imagine the narrow streets and dusty bazaars and the constant twenty-four hour bedlam. Melbourne's eastern suburbs must seem like the grave to Mr Aguib.

Mr Aguib has a stereo in his garage — the Myer Music Bowl with a roller door. Mr Aguib likes The Fox at ninety decibels at seven in the morning.

The little girl from Number Seventeen kneels in front of his peeling picket fence and pokes twigs through the gaps, chortling happily to herself when Mr Aguib's hell-hound comes loping across the yard, and launches itself at the flimsy barricade which separates it from all that *dimpled* pink child-flesh.

Mr Aguib's wife hangs her great white bloomers on a line along the front porch where they spin voluminously in the breeze.

Mr Aguib is an Eastern Maori. He grows vegetables in his front garden while his back yard lies stark and vacant. His is a frustrated sense of community, swallowed up by the suburbs.

Mr Aguib's influence is extra-dimensional. He seeks to occupy every element of his personal space, to possess the air itself. Behind the fence his foul-smelling incinerator belches smoke signals at the sky, day and night, like some backyard Belsen.

Mr Aguib is into "lawn-scaping", a highly skilled craft based loosely on the principle of crop rotation in agriculture. By mowing only a small patch of grass each day, he ensures that it will have regrown and be ready to mow again by the time he has worked his way around the rest of the lawn. This procedure lends legitimacy to the seven o'clock starts when the Vic is left revving sweetly in the early morning sunlight while Mr Aguib

sors through his collection of trimming and edging attachments for the one which will make just that right sort of fingernail-by-down-the-blackboard noise as it scrapes its way centimetre by centimetre along the front kerb.

Sometimes Mr Aguib sits at the kerb in a torn Target banana lounge. Sometimes he struts bare-chested in the morning sunlit street, singing of the Land Down Under and Vegemite sandwiches, and ex-Man-at-Work, beating his chest at the world.

According to Mr Aguib, his wife is an Egyptian princess lured from a life of splendour to share his humble home Down Under. According to Mr Aguib, theirs was a passion which set the Red Sea afire. Perhaps they just don't make Egyptian princesses like they used to. Perhaps there was an oil slick from a crippled tanker that day.

Mr Aguib seems to need publicity, as though to lure into the open those who would deny his right to belong in the Lucky Country. He shows a wallet stuffed with fifty-dollar notes to any passerby — the only citizenship papers he deems worthy of recognition.

Mr Aguib's wife is slowly shrinking. The pauses in her Cursing of his forefathers get longer. He drives her to the hospital twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays. She grows sharper and more darkly defined each day.

Far from having no feel for machinery, Mr Aguib takes the basic actions of operating a car and twists them back upon themselves into some sort of "anti-drive" — the darker side of motoring.

He guns his bottle-green Datsun into reluctant life before the oil has a chance to stir from the sump. He pumps the pedals like a manic church-organist. He plays "Chopsticks" with the gear lever.

When Mr Aguib's wife finally disappears altogether, the dog howls like an air-raid siren; nature's cock-crow of death. Two station wagons park out the front, one with a basinet, the other with a coffin. Neither stays for very long. Mr Aguib returns to the garage and his American Top Forty.

The music thumps desolately through the closed roller door. The lawn develops a f.i.v.e. o'clock shadow. The Datsun is wallpapered in rust-red leaves.

The man from Number Seventeen telephones the police. Mr Aguib's /d/o/g/h/a/s/f/o/u/n/d/ a way /t/h/r/o/u/g/h/t/h/e/f/e/n/c/e/. Mr Aguib shoots the dog, once, twice, through the head. It dies on its feet, its jaws open in mid-snarl.

Mr Aguib points the rifle at the police, who bluster and backtrack and call him "mate" in exaggerated tones. Mr Aguib retreats to his garage and "The High Noon Hit Parade" at pain-threshold.



Suburban commandos with armalite accessories (sold separately) seal off the street and set up command posts around neighbourhood refrigerators. The station wagon with the basinet reappears and the young Mr Aguib (now Mr Anderson) shouts half-hearted platitudes across twelve years of filial neglect.

During the "Midnight to Dawn Show" a hollow "Boomp!" adds an extra beat to Men At Work's "Land Down Under". Mr Aguib is found with a chip off the old block, living but lifeless, and gone to ground deep behind staring, red-rimmed eyes.

Middle class spread sees the area zoned "£a\$hionable" and the price of the house inflated accordingly. There is enough from the sale for a three-bedroom brick-and-tile for Mr Anderson and family, nestled amongst the sewerred sandhills of the Woodland Pastures housing estate.

There is also (just) enough for a one-bedroom lino-and-porcelain for Mr Aguib, with cauliflower-cheese on Sundays and unlimited access to Canasta facilities (Feeding Times 12-1 & 6.30-7pm weekdays).

The nurses hide Mr Aguib's stereo and buy him a (Walkman) radio, but not before he extracts a roll of hundreds from amongst the woofers and tweeters and pockets the one truly graphic equalizer.

Mr Aguib has a friend in the local groundsman, who has a soft spot for Sir Douglas Mawson. Once a week he gives Mr Aguib the keys to the ride-on Victa and watches him recede to a speck in the oceanic waist-high playing field.

Alone under a yoke-yellow sun in a clear blue bowl of sky, Mr Aguib bares his chest and begins to mow, the music pounding in his ears and his screeching dumpy wife and yowling braying hound competing for air-time in his head.

He sings of Vegemite sandwiches and the Land Down Under in a loud abandoned voice, the Victa jumping and jerking beneath him as he raises and lowers the blades, and slowly, row by ragged row, he shears his epitaph across the seed-blown fleece of land.

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