

Wayne Murphy

SOMETHING AVOIDED

Gripping at its hem with both her hands, Gabby Egan shook the floral tablecloth through the kitchen window, out at the dark. And now with the middle of its longest side pinned between chin and bosom, she manipulated matching corners in the air in front of her. Finally tucking it into a comfortable rectangle, she drew in her midriff as she passed between the back of her husband's occupied chair and the china cabinet, and secured the cloth on the bottom shelf of the linen cupboard.

"Well, that's that then."

She frowned towards her husband who sat almost bolt upright in his chair at the head of the table. He was squinting at a school exercise book open on the table in front of him.

"Tommy, Come an' put ya book away!" The father's voice sounded gruff against the quiet country-town dining room with its adjoining assembly of kitchen cupboards and shadowy corners.

"Yeah, righto Dad," returned a boy's voice from the lounge room.

Tommy came in and looked at the still open page in front of his father. He glanced quickly at his father's face before looking towards his mother.

"What am I gonna do with it then?" He paused, feeling awkward, still looking at his mother but half expecting his father should answer. Both hesitated, seeming to just stare ahead into the shadows.

"Can I rub Auntie Fee's name out of it and just fill the rest in like Miss showed us on the board?"

"No, just leave it like that for now an' put it away in yer port. We'll...I'll write yer teacher a note, you know, and tell her you haven't got your homework done. Anyway, you'd better get yerself off to bed now it's getting late. Have yer had yer bath yet?"

"Yeah. Before tea when Dad tol' me to. Goodnight."

"Night night Tom. See yer in the morning."

"See ya in the mornin' mate," his father called as Tommy left the room.

"They got no right, them teachers," Mrs Egan pronounced to her husband who was still sitting in his chair. "People should be allowed to keep their fam'ly business private."

"Why of they gotta learn the kids about fam'ly trees for anyway?" Ted Egan tried to take up on his wife's indignation.

"No right at all, them teachers. Yer know, they prob'ly wanta pry into people's business, just so they got something..." She faded out of conversation, cataloguing all those certain somethings about other townfolk that she'd heard and hoarded over the years. Well, you do get to know about these things if you live in a place long enough. Almost ranking them for shame against her own certain something.

"Funny, them teachers," said her husband, breaking the reverie. "We was all down the Excelsior last Friday night after work an' ya could see 'em in there through the door behind the bar. You know, in the private lounge."

"Who? The Teachers?"

"Yeah. Oh, musta been a dozen or more of 'em all in the private lounge, even the blokes too. Never seem ta come in the public bar them blokes. Anyway they was all laughin' an' goin' on an' then one of 'em gets up on a char an' he stands up there an' he starts talkin' at the rest of 'em, ya know, real proper like. Well I don't know what he was sayin' but they all laughed an' clapped an' went on.

"No respect for people's decency that lot, comin' ta town an' thinking they own the place an' wantin' to know people's business."

"It mighta been a pome ya know, 'cos I couldn't understand it, an' I s'pose them bein' teachers an' that, well, they'd go in for pomes a bit more than the avrige bloke would."

Ted Egan sat back now, almost relaxed, as if he might be dredging memory for fragments of school-days rhyme half remembered yet barely understood. His wife had taken to her crochet, sitting in the chair opposite him, rummaging through her sewing basket for threads. A half-finished doiley and pattern were laid out on the table and she peered intently over the top of her glasses holding a thread reverently in fingertips and trailing it against the doiley's colours.

"Can you see that Teddy? Is it the same colour or is it darker? I can't tell anymore with these glasses."

"Looks the same ta me, Gab," Ted announced after a slight squint.

Silence settled in for half an hour as Gabby picked at her crochet with flicking silver hook-needle and Ted sat there for the company. But Ted was like that. Even before they were married, Gabby remembered, he was happy just to sit there in company, late into the night with her and Fee on the front verandah of their father's house, amid patches of conversation. That was just Ted, so she'd never bothered to intrude, nor even simply wonder what his thoughts were. He was just Ted. Her husband. There was nothing else needed to constitute the relationship either then in the shadows of the veranda, or here, now, in their own home. It wouldn't have occurred to her that Ted might roll thoughts around in his head. Even back then, with Fee there, young and girlish in the shadows.

"Teddy, do yer want a cuppa tea?" She signalled that the evening's company keeping was coming to a close.

Nah, don't think so Gab. Think I'll just go and give me boots a bit of a polish for the mornin' before I go to bed.

Yeah I'm just about ready ter go meself. Can hardly see a darn thing with these glasses. And she stuffed the crochet things back into their basket and closed the lid.

Think I'll just slip down the back first Ted, she called to him as she headed for the back door, down the stairs towards the lavatory under the big mango tree that fed on the septic tank. And sure enough, there it was, hidden in the shadows, the almost flatulent squelch of over-ripe mango underfoot. Childhood in bare feet would have trapped it, mashed between her toes, warm, rich and sticky. Must wipe these slippers well before going back upstairs, she thought.

Gabby Egan sat on the old wooden seat in the dark and would have contemplated the still night but something nagged at her as she reached to tear paper from the wire bracket Ted had fastened to the wall. They didn't used to learn about family trees at school in her day. All these new ideas in teaching they'd talked about at the parent night, about school being relevant, but she could find no sense in it. Just need to be able to read and write a bit. And even recite a bit of poetry because it was the proper thing to do. She'd write a note. That'd fix it. They did say on parent night that parents' views were always welcome. Find the words in the morning. No, on second thoughts, better get it done tonight and just give it to Tommy to take to school. No discussion needed. She pulled the chain and walked back to the house through the fallen mangoes.

Tuesday

Dear Teacher

Please excuse Tommy s homework as he done it but has then lorst his book with it in and I would like to see them doing some more poetry fairly soon.

Yours very sincerely

G. Egan (Mrs.)

Ted was in bed but still awake as she found when he patted her on the leg, just above the knee. His signal for those nights. She half wondered if this talk of Fee had aroused him, but she simply settled herself on her back; by now she had got past resenting her younger sister.

In the morning, amid fried eggs and kitchen apron, she folded the letter and gave it to Tommy.

Here Tommy, put this in yer pocket and then give it to the teacher when yer get to school. An leave yer book home with me.