

DAMIEN WHITE

AFTER CLOSING TIME

Katie and I lay silently tangled in my three-quarter bed. I had the corner room of a corner house. The window opened to the traffic of St Johns Road, while through the wall just behind our heads came the shouting and singing from the British Lion across the street. Despite the noise we were half-drowsing, with my left arm curling under her neck and onto her breast and her right leg resting over mine. I'd already heard the call for last orders. She unhooked her leg. And wriggled over me to look at her watch, lying with her clothes beside the bed.

I'll have to be going home soon.

Mmm. Wait a bit longer.

We had barely settled again when a key scraped at the front door.

That'll be Nick.

Immediately we heard his voice in confirmation, but there were other voices too, familiar voices, strange voices, raised voices, half-pissed voices, and soon perhaps twenty others had followed Nick into our living-room. Katie and I straightened ourselves, both lying stretched out on our backs now, but still hard together at our shoulders and hips and calves. We could hear Nick gathering glasses and cups in the kitchen, could hear someone fiddling with the stereo, could hear the chairs and divan creaking.

Oh no.

Oh yes, I said. The pub crowd.

Where's David, we heard someone call.

That's Liam Farrow, Katie muttered.

We had known him in SDS, had been with him in any number of demonstrations.

He and Katie went out, Nick said. Don't know when they'll be back.

I winced as the needle was knocked across my Leadbelly. My door was rattled, but we had it locked from the inside. We heard Nick's voice, just outside.

No, you'll never see Katie at the pub. She doesn't drink. I glanced at Katie, but in the uncertainty of streetlamps and

passing headlights I couldn't see what she thought of that, and the laughter that had followed. We lay there straining to make out voices.

That's Frank Punch.

Di Hawthorn.

Both of these we'd met in political groups at the university too, though we didn't see so much of them now that I had a job and that Katie was putting more time into her subjects. Mostly, with the shouting and Leadbelly over that, we couldn't distinguish voices. But I could tell that as usual there were more men than women.

Peter Rodgers, Katie said.

And John the Bogger.

We lay there, hard against each other in that narrow bed. Katie looked at her watch again.

I'm really going to have to leave soon. But I don't feel like going out through that lot.

The window's the only other way to go. And that'd be ridiculous.

Well, let's wait a bit. Maybe they'll all go away.

Don't hold your breath.

We waited. Paul Butterfield was on the stereo now. Though we did hear a couple of them leave, most seemed to be settling in for the night.

This is it, she said eventually, sitting up and reaching for her clothes. My parents'll be sending out a search party soon.

It's a drag you've got to go.

Yes. But you know I can't afford not to live at home. And as long as I'm there then . . .

I watched her until she was almost finished, and then pulled on shorts and a T-shirt myself.

Getting a bit late for a bus, so here's a contribution for a taxi, I said, giving her two dollars.

She earned only a few dollars a week, as an accompanist at a ballet school.

What are you going to do.

Go back to bed. I'm teaching tomorrow, after all.

I hope you can sleep, with all that lot out there.

Oh, I'll be all right.

When she'd finished brushing her hair I unlocked the door. Voices died down as we emerged. The living-room was crowded. Nick met my eye, a little anxiously. He had his arm on the shoulder of a girl I'd never seen before. I looked around, nodding and smiling at the half-dozen or so there that I knew. There were only five women altogether. Liam Farrow called,

Were you two there all along. Why didn't you come out. Too busy, I guess.

And a couple of others joined his laughter. Katie and I reached the door. By then the noise might not have been interrupted at all.

Within a few minutes a taxi came. We kissed hurriedly, and I watched her until the cab turned out of St Johns Road. Before I opened the kitchen door I stood for a moment, listening to the party. Frank was just inside, filling his glass.

Want one.

I hesitated, hesitated and nodded. He found me a middy and filled it from his flagon. Several flagons were still half full. The woman who had been with Nick was now sitting with Liam, looking up at him through her glasses. He had his hand on her knee, but even as I watched she slipped out from under it.

When I was at Cairo University, John the Bogger told me, this professor discovered that scarabs . . .

Nick kept glancing from the group he was with towards that girl.

What I hate about teaching, Di said, is always having to stand over . . .

I put Janis Joplin on, and now, after only a couple of glasses of the Kaiser Stuhl claret, bumped the needle myself.

No, Harvey should've been made captain then, Frank said. Benaud was too . . .

When I met Nick's eye he was still watching me anxiously, even apologetically, but I grinned back at him. That girl was now sitting on the arm of the chair I'd commandeered. Liam was with Di in the corner near the front door. I turned to this girl, only inches away from me now. Wine splashed to the sea-grass matting from the glass she held tilted, and when she spoke I knew she was as drunk as she looked.

Are you really David Maloney.

Really.

I'm Rachel Bentley. You wouldn't know me. But I used to see you around campus last year. When you were in trouble over those demonstrations.

I sipped at my drink. She rested an arm on my shoulder.

They were funny times, I said.

Though I'd often seen other men in the left groups in this situation it had never happened to me before. I sipped again at my drink. Across the room I could see Nick watching us. As I half-shrugged, half-smiled at him he looked away. I asked Rachel where she lived. The street was only a couple of blocks away, but I forgot the number almost immediately. She was about to say something when Peter and some bloke I'd never seen before, who'd been arguing under the stairs, started shouting at each other. They struggled to their feet, knocking over a chair which broke a couple of glasses in its fall. They both still held their own drinks. But when they put these down and shaped up to each other Liam and I and one or two others began moving towards them. Except for Woody Guthrie the rest of the room was quiet. The other bloke turned to Liam, shoving him. A general brawl seemed certain. When I looked around for Nick I couldn't see him.

Until he startled everyone with a shout so that we were all turning to watch as he cartwheeled out of his room wearing a death mask he'd made for his anti-Vietnam street-theatre group, collapsed, stood on his hands until he collapsed again, and untangled himself to start juggling two coffee cups. Again Woody Guthrie's was the only voice in the room. When some of us laughed, though, the mood of the fight was broken, and within five minutes everyone had gone but Liam and Di and Rachel. As I sank back into my chair Rachel again put her arm around my shoulders. Nick was on the divan, opposite us. I was still laughing.

That was brilliant, Nick, brilliant.

He seemed embarrassed at what he'd done, but pleased too.

I've been reading Abbie Hoffman, he said.

Liam and Di were at the other end of the divan from Nick. We all had full glasses again. Rachel slid down the chair until she was sitting in my lap, and I was straining hard against her. She didn't meet my eye. She was facing three-quarters away from

Nick, twisting her head back and forth to follow us.

But Jerry Rubin's better, Nick said. More of a class analysis. And . . .

I undid the top buttons of Rachel's army shirt. She was wearing nothing beneath it. Her nipples were hard when I reached them. At first she drew my hand away and rebuttoned herself, but after I'd undone them a couple more times she let me be. As I stroked and kneaded her breasts she ground her buttocks into my crotch.

Too much class analysis can get in the way, I said. Like when the PLP split from SDS. They haven't got much to recommend . . .

Liam and Di were busy with each other, oblivious to everything else. I wasn't sure how much Nick was seeing, but he didn't take his eyes from us. All it needed was for him to go to bed. Instead he replaced Hendrix with John Mayall.

But the Weathers, he objected. What have they really achieved. Really.

My erection was becoming more and more painful. Rachel's hand slid down inside my T-shirt, moved back to tangle my hair. Nick paused, enough to give me hope. But he hadn't finished yet.

It all comes down to the conflict between anarchism and communism. Now Marx . . .

I knew he'd been thinking of joining the CP. This could've gone on all night. I waited for the next natural break. And then, with an extra squeeze on Rachel's breast, I said,

Well, we might as well go to bed. It's getting late and I've got to work in the morning.

Buttoning herself yet again Rachel swung off me, half-tripping on the step into the kitchen, caroming off the door-frame there as she headed for the bathroom. I started to gather cups and glasses together, keeping myself turned away from Nick so that he wouldn't see that bulge in my shorts.

Leave all that, he said, and we'll fix it in the morning. I'm too bugged now.

He turned to shake Liam and Di.

If you're going to crash here, then you can open that divan out. And there's a sleeping-bag too if you want it.

He was still arranging that when I closed my bedroom door again. The bed was crumpled, the way Katie and I had left it. Rachel peered shakily at me through her glasses. I kissed her, for the first time. She tasted of Kaiser Stuhl claret.

Wait, she said. Wait. Your girlfriend. Does she understand you.

I shrugged, one hand on her buttock, the other on her breast. She was supporting herself on my shoulders.

Yes, I guess so.

Though so far Katie had never taken advantage of our understanding, said she'd never wanted to. Rachel let me unbutton her shirt again, unzip her jeans.

She was as wet as I was hard. I came almost immediately. Within a minute or two she had passed out. And I didn't last much longer.

In the morning I scrabbled for my watch, and then was instantly alert. I would have to leave at once if I wasn't to be late for work. My movements woke Rachel. She stared around her for a moment, obviously trying to place herself.

Where's my glasses, she asked as she sat up. She was holding up the blankets to cover her breasts. I found the glasses.

Listen, I said, looking into her eyes, rather than down her uncovered side, I have to leave for school, but you sleep in if you want to.

Oh God, I feel terrible.

I'd looked away. But now I glanced back sharply, wondering how much she remembered.

It's my head, she said. Wish I hadn't drunk so much. No, I'll go too.

We turned away from each other as we dressed. As we were both doing our hair she said, meeting my eyes in the mirror.

I don't usually do this sort of thing, you know.

No, I said, I don't either.

We both smiled slightly, both looked away.

Though Liam and Di were still asleep, their clothes jumbled together beside the divan, Nick had already cleaned up the living-room. He was drinking coffee in the kitchen.

Gotta rush, I said, or I'll be late for work.

Rachel stood at the kitchen door, looking from me to Nick.

See you later, I said to her, stepping towards her, but then just brushing my hand down her arm.

See you, Nick.

And as I left I heard Nick say,
Do you want coffee, Rachel.
I wondered if he knew her address.

