

MARY GRIMBEEK

GARY

There is a colour photo of Gary, his long hair blowing out in the wind, holding his small nephew in his arms. It is in all his family's homes. I still miss him greatly.

I first met him when we were both fifteen years old. He was the uncle of my best friend Micky, they both being members of a large aboriginal family. We often went out together with a group of other young people. Nights would find us sitting around the table at Micky's place, drinking hot milky tea out of tin mugs. Various aunts, uncles and cousins would be there including Gary's mother who was then in her sixties, Gary being her thirteenth and last child. We would hear stories about life out west, living on the reserves in tin sheds with dirt floors; about Uncle Brother, sometimes known as Shadow, the second child born to Gary's mother, on the banks of a river, and never registered. He drank metho and would cut his chest with a razor blade and did magic tricks for the kids and sang country and western songs while he played spoons.

When Gary was ten years old, his father died – he was bashed about the head in the Brisbane City Watch House after being picked up for drunkenness. He passed out and wasn't given medical attention. He was found dead in his cell the next morning. His mother remarried but it was not a happy time for Gary. He was very close to his brother Michael and looked forward to his visits to Queensland very much.

Everyone liked Gary. He was gentle and sensitive. He was extremely attractive and his face was classically beautiful. Although his nose was wide spreading it did not take away the fineness of it. When we first made love it was tender and secretive, and when I think of it now, twelve years later, it is with a sweetness and I wonder at the awkwardness of it. I was in love and the world was fine. One day I arrived at Gary's place to find everyone crying; there had been some trouble and Gary, easily distressed, had taken an overdose of his mother's sleeping tablets. He was not dead but was in a coma for thirty-six hours.

After a stay in hospital he went south to stay with Michael for a while.

I started my nursing training and when he came back we would see each other from time to time but not as often as I would have liked. When we were nineteen Gary had gone south again, and had a job as a male model. He came back to Queensland when his mother had a stroke. Again he attempted suicide, again unsuccessfully.

The last time I saw Gary was at a street demonstration. We saw each other in the crowd, we embraced and I was happy when he smiled into my eyes. Michael was in Melbourne by this time and Gary went down there to live with him. I heard he was hanging out in gay bars and still got an occasional job modelling.

It was a clear crisp morning in May when, twenty one years old, I was married and had my first child. I was at some friends' place and someone said, "Mary, did you know that Gary is dead?" I said "No — no I didn't know that." I went straight to Micky's place. Gary had taken an overdose and they had found him dead on the lounge room floor. His body was flown back to Brisbane, and he had a big funeral. There was a wailing in the church as if it were the one cry from us all. There was a white priest and he looked very uncomfortable. At the graveyard an old black urban tribesman stepped forward and everyone remained quiet and he threw in a clod of earth and made the sign of the cross over the coffin. As he stepped back the wailing started again. I couldn't hear what the priest was saying.