Andrew Milson

WINNING THE MEAT TRAY

I hold the meat tray in front of me, both hands underneath as if it were an opened book or an unfolded map.

It is now just Big John and I, standing on the road outside the recently closed public bar of the Highlander Hotel, beneath a streetlight whose illumination is constantly interrupted by the waving branches of a fir tree. The wind has strengthened and blows form the south carrying fresh memories of snow-topped hills and barren night paddocks. Big John abandons his attempts to light a cigarette. “I guess we should be heading home,” he says.

“Suppose so,” I reply.

Such an exchange is misleading for once the public bar has shut on a Saturday night in this town, going home is the only option available to men such as us. But I’m feeling triumphant about winning the meat tray. It’s raffled every Saturday by Willy; throughout the afternoon he shuffles around the public bar selling tickets for a dollar and collecting the money in a fawn bag that bears the name of bank that once held a prime position on the town’s main street. Since it is winter, proceeds are directed to the local football team; if it were late spring or summer then the money would filter through to the cricketers after Willy had taken a small percentage to supplement his pension. Willy is 82 years old and was highly decorated for his efforts against Rommel in North Africa but now the once-a-week walk from his house to the pub — a distance of approximately two hundred metres — stretches him to the limits of his physical capacity. He lives alone, his house has been in the family for four generations but the family has not prospered and Willy is the only known remnant. Moss covers the cracks in the roof tiles. Dandelions grow with confidence in the lawn. Ivy is making a play for the front door.

Willy picks the meat-tray up for free from the butcher on Saturday morning, its make up being contingent on what has not sold during the preceding week. Mine contains two sporadically crumbed chicken drumsticks, the flesh of which appears a suspicious metallic colour; deflated lambs’ kidneys; a lone T-bone and a collection of sausages, compressed by the cellophane and squeezed tight by their skins so that the innards flower out both ends. But I don’t allow the quality of the prize to concern me, instead I focus on the fact that I was victorious. Victories must be savoured, regardless of their composition or magnitude.
Andrew Milson, "Winning The Meat Tray"

There are two bars in the Highlander Hotel; the public and the residents' lounge. The use of the latter is strictly reserved for people who are staying in the hotel's recently renovated accommodation. The majority of these people are down from the city on a weekend escape; they come to sample the fresh air, admire the cottage gardens and take leisurely walks along the sandstone cliff lines. Management of the Highlander has spared no expense in furbishing the residents' lounge; velvet lounges surround a deep granite fireplace, the windows are stained glass and for entertainment there's a full size snooker table in a connecting room. Hanging on the walls are a number of gold framed paintings; a salmon leaping from a churning stream, a bagpiper in full ceremonial dress, a still life of grouse and pheasants. To further entrench the Scottish theme, a wide range of single malt whiskey is available.

But in the public bar, decorations are not based on any ancestral connections. The cigarette machine is in a corner beneath a poster displaying women in beer-sponsored swimsuits. The pinball has a cracked screen, an indirect result of the continually jamming right flipper.

"You know why this place is called 'The Highlander'?" Dougie Peterson had asked rhetorically once on a quiet midweek evening. "It's because somewhere in the Highlands — wherever they are — there's a bunch of men as ugly as us telling exactly the same jokes in a bar as seedy as this!"

He said these last words chuckling, hen coughing.

Big John and I pass the residents' lounge which has also closed for the evening. This is fortunate because the previous weekend we almost became involved in an incident. The law permits management to keep the residents' lounge open indefinitely, by virtue of the fact that the patrons are staying in-house and last Saturday night it was still lively as Big John and I made our way home. We stopped outside and although the stained glass windows prevented us from clearly viewing the revelry, we could hear jazz music and laughter, often from women. And earlier that evening one of the female guests had wandered into the public bar. She had tied-back auburn hair and was elegantly dressed, perhaps twenty-five years old. You have to understand that this is not a common sight in our bar and her sudden presence was met with silence from the patrons.

"Party is in the other bar, Luv," said Alice the barmaid eventually. "Straight down the corridor."

"Thanks," said the girl, looking slightly embarrassed, and making an immediate exit.
“Alice,” said Dougie Peterson once the visitor was beyond earshot, “why did ya get rid of her? Maybe she was coming in to meet some real men.”

Alice was the owner’s younger sister. She had three kids and an AVO out on her ex-husband. She was working at the Highlander to get her feet back on the ground, put some money away. Most weekends her girlfriend came up from Canberra to visit.

She took one tray of glasses out from the washer and put another tray in. Without looking up she said;

“Jeez you boys have yourselves on.”

So there we were, Big John and I, in a trance on the lawn speckled by the light of festivities flowing through stained glass windows, when we heard a laughing from the floor above, where the guests’ rooms are located. I looked up and saw two men standing at the balcony railing. One was doubled over with laughter, the other inhaling tightly on what appeared to be a marijuana joint.

“Hey!” Big John shouted. There was a pause.

“Hey what?” one of the men responded dismissively.

Big John took a step towards the building. “Ya fucking poofers!” he yelled.

Big John’s got a nasty side and when he gets into a fight, he fights with the handbrake off. But fortunately neither of the men bothered to respond. Perhaps they were aware that management was on their side and would come down hard on any local who infringed on the enjoyment of the Hotel’s overnight guests. Such behaviour would result in offenders being banned from the premises and such a threat held considerable weight given that it was a thirty minute drive to the next pub, where the barman would have to be told what beer you were drinking and the evening’s jokes would be based around people of whom you lacked any knowledge. It would be a lonely night and a dark drive home.

Or perhaps the two men were perceptive enough to realize that Big John did not mean to abuse them, or question their sexuality. Perhaps they knew that what he meant to say was, Why are you doing that up there when there is so much for you downstairs? Downstairs is an open bar and music and beautiful, laughing women. Downstairs are things I’ve never had, a world the door to which I’ve never found, a room I’ve only been permitted to enter in dreams. What I’d give to be in your shoes and be able to walk downstairs.
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But this week there is no scope for such drama and we continue on our way, taking a short cut across the town’s picket-fenced oval. The football season and the morning frosts have rubbed the oval’s surface clear but with spring the grass will return and by the first ball of the cricket season, it will be like carpet — indeed it’s a fine wicket.

You could watch this oval through the seasons and believe that things were perpetual but if you stayed long enough you would see before you the town’s boys turn into men, her men grow and then slow down, fall behind the pace of the play, start to limp and grimace as they remove their boots. Eventually you would see them clapped from the field for the last time and assume a position in the concrete stand.

Old Willy bowled his leg spinners until he could no longer see the opposing batsman. Dougie Peterson still packs down in the town’s front row despite being fifty-five. The men in this town display a fearful reluctance to surrender their place on the oval.

We reach the other side, hop the fence and rejoin the road which has begun to steepen. Automatically our stride length increases and upper bodies tighten. We are descending into Coachman’s Gully from which rises a stand of massive Bluegums; moonlight catches the upper limbs and they appear strong and smooth. But the lower limbs are draped with discarded, dangling bark and webbed by stranglers and noxious weeds. It is a dark gully that appears to repel the sun, a haven for leeches and toadstools. At the base Coachman’s Creek flows beneath the road, its water polluted and swollen by the town’s street drainage and septic overflow. Tangled amongst the creek’s alluvium are chip packets, plastic bottles and ice cream wrappers — this section of the town does not feature on the tourist drive. One must live here for some duration to become aware of such a place.

The road rises gradually once the creek is crossed and our gasps become momentarily visible and Big John walks with hands on his head. The surrounding scrub gives way to houses, and we pass that of Miss Henderson. For twenty five years she was the principal of the local primary school, but then someone in a government administration department did the sums and the school was labelled non-viable due to dwindling enrolments. Now the children take the half hour bus ride to the next town and Miss Henderson devotes her time to gardening — she’s achieved much acclaim for her roses at the local show — and drinking cheap scotch. I passed her house one recent afternoon and saw her lying unconscious in the garden, face to the soil and her dress hitched high over her vein-blotted thighs. She’s a big woman and I worked up a sweat dragging her onto the verandah. I positioned her behind the petunia.
pots so that she might not lose any further dignity and it was strange, but I had a sense of guilt, as though somehow I bore a degree of responsibility for this incident. I walked quickly out of her yard, noticed that the daisies were flattened where she'd laid and the ground furrowed by the dragging of her feet.

The glow of the TV is reflected in Miss Henderson's living room window. It changes from a mellow blue to a jolting red, then darkness, then returns once more to blue. But I doubt that Miss Henderson would be sufficiently coherent to enjoy such late night viewing.

Big John and I complete our journey in silence. We turn in through the rusted front gate, the house belongs to him and I've been a tenant since his mother was moved into the nursing home. Once inside he makes straight for the bathroom and I take my meat-tray into the kitchen. I place it in the fridge and then see that the palm of my hand is covered in a reddish liquid — the meat tray has been seeping through the cellophane. I notice a couple of drops on the vinyl floor, and with further investigation, identify a trail down the corridor. The trail must go back, I fear, past the house of Miss Henderson, through Coachman's gully, and across the oval to the hotel. It's most likely that the tray was dripping in the public bar and maybe even before. It's probable that the entire town has been stained by the bleeding of the meat tray.

The yelling of Big John interrupts my thoughts.

"Where the hell are the mags?" He is referring to the sizeable collection of pornographic magazines that we jointly own.

"Next to the TV," I answer.

"No they're not — where re they?" I can tell from his voice that he is searching my room with a degree of agitation.

"Where they always are when they're not by your bed — out by the TV. Open ya eyes you dickhead!" I yell back.

There's the sound of Big John's stomping feet as he travels back to the living room. "Got 'em," he calls somewhat sheepishly.

This is not the first time that our Saturday night has concluded in such a manner.