

Craig Billingham

A Brief Summation

At the end of semester he flew from Adelaide to Sydney and from the airport caught a train to Central, changing there for Bamberg, in the Blue Mountains. From the station he took a cab to the holiday cottage, at which he'd arranged to meet the owner. The cottage was small and tight, more so than the photographs on the web had suggested. At the back a north-facing deck, amply stocked with outdoor furniture, overlooked a bush garden.

"Good for native birds," the owner said, and everything about her seemed to quicken.

He'd calculated he could afford to leave his Adelaide flat unoccupied during the summer break, after which, should the need arise, he could easily find a tenant; it was a desirable area, especially for graduate students and visiting academics.

It was a seventeen-minute walk from the cottage to the centre of Bamberg. On the first two mornings it was cold and raining, and on the third it was cold and raining and windy. He wore an overcoat he'd bought in England, a rare chance to derive the utility he'd paid for.

The atmosphere of Bamberg's main drag had changed immensely: the air of gentrification, like expensive perfume bought on credit. For their part, the shops had coloured awnings and large windows to entice a steady flow of domestic and international travellers, day-trippers mostly, and the number of real estate agencies was bettered only by cafés. His initial thought was to try each of them in turn, but in practice he chose one and stuck with it—in his case, habits were more powerful than intentions.

On the fourth morning it was fine and warm, so warm that he could do the walk in shirtsleeves. When he reached the village, he sat on a wooden bench to cool. The cherry trees had dropped the last of their bloom—who'd cleaned away the petals? So much happens in the background.

He entered the café and introduced himself to the man who'd made the coffee on each of his three visits. From his appearance he guessed Nic was the owner—butcher's apron over skinny jeans, expensive sneakers, tattooed forearms, shaved head, attentive but unhurried.

"On holiday?" Nic asked.

"Not exactly," he replied, worried he hadn't quite lost the accent he'd acquired in York.

At the beginning of his second week he hired a car. Embarrassingly—at least that’s how it seemed to him—he carried a camera, two if you count the one built into his phone. He was a tourist in both time and place, trying to summon a childhood to attention, trying to give it form. Standing at an unobtrusive lookout on Cliff Drive, he found the view towards Mt Solitary struck something deep inside, though he wouldn’t describe it as a chord—a dampened drum, perhaps, or some other form of muffled detonation.

The following day he drove to the street where he grew up. He could have walked—Bamberg was still small enough to walk from one side to the other—but something told him to make the trip in the shortest possible time, to minimise the likelihood for a change of mind.

He stopped outside the house, parking in the shade of the enormous Liquidambar. Entering through the arbour he could see the front yard, by now well established—even the magnolia tree had flourished. Unexpectedly, he felt pride at what the garden had become. He paused on the paving stones, looked behind, and then pushed on.

There was a new doorbell—in fact, it was a whole new door—but he used the brass knocker, of which Mick had always been so fond. It was Anne who came to the door.

“Brendan?” she said, because that was what she called him; she cupped her mouth.

He’d prepared a short speech, casting and recasting it for several months, but before he could start Anne had gathered him into her arms. Returning the embrace, he looked down at the ridgeline of scars that were visible through her thinning hair; years ago she’d fallen while bushwalking, breaking her left collarbone and gashing her crown.

He followed Anne into the house. It was dark and cool, just as he recalled. In the hallway several floorboards sagged noticeably underfoot, struggling with the advent of his girth. In contrast, Anne had gotten smaller, so much so that overall there seemed too little of her. Entering the lounge room through a set of narrow French doors, he had to be mindful of his shoulders. For several years, as a boy, his size had been a curiosity, a point of difference, like a redhead in a family of blondes, but by the time he turned fourteen, it had become a wedge.

“Sit down, sit down,” Anne said. “Here, sit here.”

He sat where he was told, on one of two opposing sofas, and waited as Anne took a position on the other. He looked around the room, an open cache of familiar objects: the black mantel clock, for example, and the sideboard.

Anne took several moments to collect herself, to draw comfort from the sofa, and then offered tea. She stood, breaking her once fluid movements into practised, constituent parts, ensuring always that her feet were positioned squarely beneath her hips. Segmenting time and movement—was that one of the skills required for old age?

“Let me help,” he said.

“You don’t have to,” Anne replied, but, as she straightened and began to move towards the kitchen, he fell closely into line, shortening his gait, as though following a horse that had lost a shoe.

As Anne made tea, he sat at the table that had been in the house since his childhood, a thick slab of mahogany, with stout legs. In one, he’d once gouged a divot with his sister’s penknife. Anne had filled and polished the hole before Mick got home, not that Mick’s temper was any worse than hers. In fact, both were mild-mannered; though Mick tended to demonstrate his disappointment with marathons of withheld emotion. More than anyone else, he’d hated Mick’s bouts of seemingly endless chill.

“Here you are.” Anne placed a mug of tea before him on the table.

From the bench-top she retrieved a small milk jug, of which he had no recollection, followed by the matching sugar bowl that he remembered clearly.

“Do you still take sugar?” she asked.

“Five,” he said. “But don’t stir it—I don’t like it too sweet.”

Anne smiled at that, his first reference to Mick—it was just something Mick used to say, one among his many turns of phrase, passed down from a Cockney father.

“In that case,” she replied, handing the teaspoon to him, “you’d better do it for yourself.”

The tea was too hot to drink, but to camouflage his not knowing what to say he held the mug close to his lips, felt the steam against his eyes.

“Have you called Elise?” Anne asked.

Elise was his sister, Anne and Mick’s youngest child, the only one of three to still live in Bamberg. It had been Elise who’d tracked him down five years earlier, to let him know that Mick had died. He was easy to find, once Anne had told her his other name. His telephone number and e-mail address were listed on the faculty website, along with a headshot in which he looked preposterously academic.

“You have a beard,” Elise had said during their second conversation. ‘Is that mandatory?’

“Advisable,” he replied.

If not part of a uniform, neither was the beard a mask nor a disguise; he was not in hiding. He’d grown it for the first time in 2004 while a postdoc at The University of York, and other than a brief interlude, during which his ruddy face looked like a spanked pig, it had become a staple of his appearance.

“No,” he said to Anne, “I haven’t called Elise. I wanted to see you first.”

“She said you’d promised to come to your father’s funeral. Is that true?”

“Yes,” he said. “That was wrong of me.”

“Wrong of you to promise, or wrong of you not to come?”

It was a question he could not answer, not without being hurtful. In his defence, his attendance at Mick’s funeral would have caused distress to numerous people. Things would have been said—they always are.

“I can make up your room,” Anne suggested.

“It’s fine,” he replied. “I have a house on Leichhardt Street, for a month or so. I thought it best.”

Elise called the following morning at 9am. She wanted to meet straight away, as he knew she would—that was Elise’s way, her muscles buzzing with enthusiasm, laundering the rancour from her blood. He suggested Nic’s café, which Elise informed him was called *The Shed*.

“Do you need a lift?” she asked.

He explained he had a hire car, but also that he preferred to walk; he didn’t mention it being on Doctor’s orders.

Elise was waiting outside as he approached, propped on the balls of her feet. Still small; still dyed her hair; still wore jeans, a t-shirt, and *Converse* sneakers.

“Brendan,” she said, and broke into a run.

Catching her was unavoidable, but the decision to twirl her around came from some deep recess he seldom accessed. When he put her down, she punched his arm.

“Prick,” she said.

Elise was the sibling he’d been closest to before running away to Sydney, aged sixteen, most likely because they were just five months apart. A tomboy, that’s what people called her, and certainly she was a more accomplished skate-boarder than was he—he couldn’t keep

his balance even when the board was on the grass; neither of his first two foster homes had been much into sport.

As they entered the café, it was clear that Nic and Elise knew each other. He should have realised this would be the case—there were fewer than 2000 people in Bamberg.

“This is my brother,” Elise said.

“Good to meet you,” Nic replied, holding out his hand; he did not mention the past eight days.

They sat at a small table by the window and ordered breakfast. Elise had brought an iPad on which she had photographs of her children, two boys and a girl.

“They’re cute,” he said, but it felt like he was doing a crossword puzzle.

“And the dog’s called Budgie,” Elise said. “Which makes sense, if you know my kids.”

They spoke briefly about Elise’s husband; she was separated but not divorced. She told him that Michael, her eldest son, had been in Canada for seven months, as part of an extended break between school and university.

“Next year he’ll be twenty-one,” she said. “I don’t want it to get too late.”

He would have liked to say something to make Elise feel more assured—wasn’t that something he should do? —but it was not his area of expertise.

A moment later, Elise said, “Can I ask about your other family?”

He’d known that it was coming, but even so, the gaze felt hot.

“My birth mother died two years ago,” he said.

“And your birth father?”

“There was no birth father. Technically yes, of course, but Jean—my birth mother—never talked about him. She was seventeen. It’s all a bit murky, even now.”

For a long time he’d considered what kind of story he would tell about himself, which parts of his life since leaving Bamberg to put in and which parts to set aside: it had been more than twenty years. On the one hand there were too many details, too many facts, even without those he did not remember, but, on the other, so few seemed to matter, let alone cohere. At least he thought he knew where to start: the fight with Mick on the evening before his last exam, and the envelope that Anne had given to him, with “Jean Edgar” and an address in Sydney written on the back.

With his school bag and a holdall stuffed with clothes he caught a train to Liverpool, and from a phone-box at the station dialled the number he'd found in the *White Pages*. To Jean he said who he was and what he had done. She called him Benjamin.

“Well it's too late to go back,” she'd said.

Her unit wasn't far from the station. The block was brick veneer and looked anaemic in the streetlight. She lived on the second floor.

There were no hugs and no tears. Jean made him a cheese sandwich and offered him a glass of beer, which he declined. On the first evening, she said he could take her room but he did not, and for the next six weeks he slept on the sofa. Soon he was cleaning offices with Pedro, one of Jean's colleagues from the spoon factory. Pedro would pick him up each afternoon at five, an hour after finishing his day job, and they'd work until nine and sometimes ten pm, vacuuming, disinfecting, and dusting computer screens and desks. Unbeknown to him, Jean spoke most weeks with Anne.

With the extra money they could afford to rent a two-bedroom garden unit in Cabramatta. Pedro borrowed a van from the factory and brought his eldest son to help, then cooked a paella big enough for eight, though they were only four—Pedro's wife and their two daughters were in Spain, visiting family. They ate with brand-new spoons.

At the end of January his HSC results came through and Jean persuaded him to make a late application to university; he was accepted on an equity scholarship. Throughout his studies he lived with Jean and worked with Pedro, even taking on extra responsibility when Pedro had problems with his thyroid.

“One proper job won't kill you,” Jean said, already certain from his results that he'd have a career at the university.

And she was right: after his degree he enrolled for a PhD, again with a scholarship. In his second year, around which time Pedro and his family moved back to Spain, he started tutoring in the English department, introducing first years to literary theory. He bought a third hand Honda Civic. After graduation he went to England as a postdoc and, in his third year, Jean visited him in York. They hired a car and drove through the Lakes District and up to Scotland: it was the only time Jean left Australia. Two years later she was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease, which is when he returned to Sydney. They lived together in Glebe for almost three years, close to the university and the Royal Prince Alfred hospital. He nursed

her as best he could, and unwrapped small parcels of himself whenever he could manage. Two months after she died, he was offered a position in Adelaide.

That was the story he could have told, over poached eggs and roasted tomatoes, but it didn't seem quite right. The brief summation was not his style. Better to say less, always, which is what he would have done had Elise not pressed a little.

"I don't understand why you left," she said. "I mean, so suddenly, after twelve years."

"There was a fight," he said.

"With dad?"

"He said he wished it were me who'd died, instead of Travis. Instead of his real son."

Elise wanted to hear more but he clammed up, and she did not attempt to prise him open; it was something he would do, as a child. She excused herself and went to the bathroom.

When she came back she said, "It'll be good to have you here for Christmas. To catch up properly."

Later that night he sat out on the deck with a bottle of good Barossa wine, trying to think why he'd come back to Bamberg. Not to get drunk alone, which he could do just as well in Adelaide. Perhaps to show that he belonged?

The next day he booked a flight and left.

About the author: Craig Billingham is a Doctor of Arts candidate at the University of Sydney. His poems, stories and reviews have appeared widely, most recently in *Southerly*, *Verity La*, *Australian Book Review*, and *Westerly*. He lives in Katoomba, New South Wales, Australia.