

BROWN PAPER DOESN'T BURN WELL

Brown paper doesn't burn well, so old Joe pulled some of the newspaper from under his thin flannelette shirt to get the flame started. He drew in a sharp breath as the small amount of heat from the little fire slapped around his face. Marie, dear Marie, 40 hitting 100 years old, came stomping across the wet grass of the park where she and a group of other homeless derelict aboriginals lived, holding a bundle of sticks and leaves, a blanket under her arm. "Oh Christ mate it's cold; here this should get her going." She put the sticks and leaves on top of the fire, spread out her blanket and sitting down pulled and ran her hand over it, feeling its newness. She had got it from the Saint Vincent de Paul that afternoon. "How's about a game of poker to get the blood warming?" The fire crackled and spat and Joe sat silent, rocking gently to and fro, staring into the fire. Marie wasn't worried by this, their silences as well as their talk was comfortable.

Then they heard a singing, and somebody stumbling over the rise where the park meets the road. "Oh it's lonesome away from my kindred an' all by the. . . Well well you got a fire going, needs a bit of help don't it?" It was Eddie, one of the park's oldest inhabitants, his spirits were high tonight, but could plunge to the depths of despair if he thought that he wasn't liked. If his mates wanted to stir they would say, "You're no good Eddie, what do ya want to hang about here for Eddie, nobody wants ya here Eddie, nobody likes ya." Then sit back as he went into one of his crying spells, and get up breaking one of his metho bottles and cut his wrists and chest with the glass, till someone would take him up to the Vinney's to get fixed up.

Tonight though his interest was on the fire, he had been drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Joe nodded to him and raised his hand. Marie smiled a broad grin. "Where did you get the money for that, old timer?" she said, nodding to the bottle of plonk in the brown paper bag under his arm. "You want to watch out for the cops coming along, singing up real big like

that, we don't want them bastards to know where we're hiding tonight, they'll run us in to the watch house for sure."

"They ain't nowheres around mother, don't you worry about that or this piddling little fire," he said and poured some of his plonk into the flames. The fire gave a sudden flare and Joe stretched out his hands to warm them. Eddie threw himself onto the ground beside his mate, put his arm around his shoulders and offered his bottle to him. "Here you go Bud, deal them cards Marie, I've had a win and I'm feelin' lucky." Eddie patted his pocket and they heard the change jingle.

Marie dealt the cards for the three of them, the men moved closer and on to the blanket. "Wonder where them other buggers are tonight? Probably gone to the Vinneys, too cold for the buggers." The words came almost reluctantly from Joe. "I can remember out West, in winters colder than this, we lit a fire and sat around it with a billy and had our damper, trouble with some of them sissies is that they haven't done a day's work in their lives. They want to go and do some droving for a while like my boys have done." He fell silent and looked closely at his cards. Marie threw down one card and picked up another. She picked up the bottle that sat between them now and took a drink. She felt it warm her stomach and felt the warmth creep up her spine to the back of her head. She passed it and they each in turn took a deep drink. The moon was rising and the breeze that had sprung up blew at the now dwindling fire. Marie heaved herself to her feet, went up the rise to a pile of dead wood the council hadn't taken away. She dragged a couple of the bigger bits back and put them on the fire. Eddie had now lain down so that he rested on one elbow and he cradled the bottle against his chest so that he could look into the red liquid. The firelight danced in the bottle creating a multiplicity of colours and he was hypnotized, so that he nodded and his eyes felt heavy. "Hey you gonna play or what?" shouted Marie. "Sure I am," and Eddie grabbed up his cards and looked at them fiercely.

"Rather be here than in a hostel any time," said Joe and almost laughed as Eddie fell over flat on his face, the bottle still grasped in his elbow, his hand to the ground. Marie reached over and lifted the bottle from his arm. "That's him for the

night." Joe nodded and a grunt came from his lips, his face crinkled up into a thousand lines, he rubbed his hand over his eyes, watery now from the flames and the wine.

A low hum came from him and he broke into an old song in the lingo of his father's tongue, he swayed and rocked, staring into the fire. Marie lay down and fell asleep and dreamt of the old days when she ran free of clothes and felt the sun warm on her body. Joe too fell asleep eventually, close to the fire.

They all slept restlessly till early morning, still dark, when Marie got up and poked at the dead white ash of the fire. She was stiff and sore. It was freezing cold. She tore up the brown paper bag from the bottle of plonk, and got some more twigs from the pile of wood. She tried to light it but was not successful. Old Joe got up and pulled some more of the newspaper from his shirt. Brown paper doesn't burn well.

