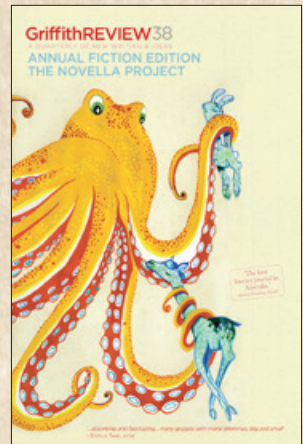


GriffithREVIEW

— S E L E C T I O N S —

Glad Lyndel Caffrey

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FICTION

Glad

Lyndel Caffrey

HEADING NORTH

SS *BOMBALA*, 1924

WHEN PHIL PORTER started getting restless at the mills and talking of the opportunities up north, Bird was the first to listen, the first to say I'm in, the first to lay down his eight pounds for the three week trip up the coast on the *Bombala*. He'd not come back, damned if he would. Nothing to keep him here.

Everything had been fine. Her face, the fire glaring off it.

Next year, Bird had said, I'm tired of waiting.

Yes, she'd said.

Let's do it when the summer comes, said Bird. When it gets hot, let's marry the first hot day, and Yes and yes, said Glad.

So what is there for it now but to step on board a coastal steamer and put to sea, aged twenty like his father, like his father's father? It was always meant to be this way. And oh, the blazing dullness of every day and lying in the sun, and burning up, and hearing the stories thrown around on snatches of wind, and taking them in with the tar of the tobacco. Dolphins sometimes,

jumping along with the boat, stealing the bait off the wake lines. Every day card games and, after Sydney, day after day of electric blue skies and fresh fish to eat. The lines hooked and baited out behind the boat and the clean salt taste of the sharp-nosed, scar-toothed fish eaters jumping *splish splash* straight out of the deep blue sea onto the deck and into the pan. From there the white oily charcoal sear of them *flip flap* straight down his pelican throat and into his belly.

When there's nothing else to think of Bird thinks of her, how Glad would like it, what Glad would say. Glad, Glad, if you could see this now. Townsville the port of call, the tide stretching out backward until the water drops sixteen feet and the sand is alive with the shine and scupper of hermit crabs. The *Bombala* on a list, rocking, easing herself down, arthritic old woman, settling onto the ocean bed a half a mile out from the coast.

The sun falls breakneck into the seething crabs, a perfect ember, a mouthful of colour spilling across the retreating sea. The stars are slow to come out. Across the strand Townsville lights up. There's so little of it. So much dark. A hot wind blows across the ship, into the cabins with their portholes fixed open, along the narrow passageways, round tight corners, up and down the steep stairwells. It carries the smell of fish curry and stale oil and overcooked rice up the steps from the galley, across the salt-dried timbers and out to sea. Bird lies down on the deck with the other men and props his arms under his neck. The ship aches and sighs all along his back. He counts the stars. They lean reluctant in the sky. He sleeps lightly, opens his eyes, breathes stars, makes out their gradual warping through the night as the constellations shift and web. He dreams of the *Bombala* keeling over, settling sideways onto the sand and the crabs swarming in.

Come morning, the rising tide wakes him, the rollicking as the keel lifts off the sea bottom and rights itself. He opens his eyes and yesterday's colour is all gone. There is only grey. A light rain scatters over the deck, barely touching him before it blows away and in just that moment he knows that Glad has left him for good. The rain passes and it carries her away. The world shrinks, it shrinks with her, it shrinks without her, it shrinks at the touch, and

leaves nothing behind.

GOLD DUST

MELBOURNE, 1921

GOLD DUST IS suspended in the small room. It hangs all around Bird like sunlight, is caught in the light falling through the small high window, drifts in and out of the narrow beam like ordinary dust. He's Midas, his breath has turned the air to gold.

He thought printing would be good, was all ready to sign up for his indentures. The press, the small clink of type, the careful selection of letter by letter from the shallow trays. The orderliness of it. The unspoiled copy, printing over and over, the same sure shape of the words repeating with the clarity of a dream, the constancy of the print –

Better Buy Bests

Better Buy Bests

Better Buy Bests

The thicknesses of the liquid enamels, the creams, the blacks, the browns, pouring from the spouts onto the rollers, the fineness of the backward-looking typeset – *Have the Pleasure of Inviting* – the friendly promise of the rounded stencils – *KIWI SHOE POLISH*.

The gold-room scared him off. The order was for invitation cards. Gold leaf borders. Slow work. Tapping the ribbon into place. Peeling it back. The gold lying there, adhering to the card. He first noticed it on his hands, the delicate shine of a fingerprint gilding the card's creamery. That was carelessness. Examined his hands. Gold traced the whorls of his fingertips. Leaked down, knuckle by knuckle, along those narrow verticals. Edged under his short clipped nails. Was caught in the half moon above the cuticle. He felt it on his lips. He was turning into gold, like the air he breathed.

After work he walked from the printer's shop in Spencer Street to Elizabeth Street feeling like a thousand pounds. The gold glinted in his hair, was caught in the light, turned the tips the colour of the sunset. As he made the

long jump onto the moving tram, as his hand grasped the rail, he felt the sudden shock of the tram turning yellow. Took care to avoid touching the other passengers, travelled on the footboard, the cold twilight air slapping his face. At Albert Street he jumped off as it slowed, half a block before it cruised into the Victoria Street stop, ran across the road without looking, charmed. The pavement splashed yellow under his feet, shining in the lamplight as if there'd just been a cloudburst.

His sister Fynn was sitting on the front door step with another girl. Behind them, his brother Shep with his homework book.

Oh, Bird, cried Fynn.

He skidded to a stop before them. She could see the gold on him. It was clinging to his eyelashes, shining out at her. He hesitated, his hands spread before them. They looked up at him.

Glad, he said. He stared at the girl beside Fynn.

Glad Strongman, he repeated. What are you doing here?

The girl put her arms around her knees, hooking down the hem of her skirt in a defensive gesture to just above her ankles.

Gladys, she said. She waited a minute to be sure he'd got that.

We're moving here, she said. My Ma's going to make things for your Ma. She looked up into his face direct, at the glint of his short tufted hair, at his dark eyes. Her hair was drawn back tight behind her ears. She looked from his eyes down his arms. He felt...undersized. Like she was going to throw him back. He looked sideways at Fynn, then reached both hands forward, awkward, childish. He tapped the tips of his fingers against both their faces, left a stain of gold clinging to their cheeks. Fynn laughed and Gladys turned back into Glad. She blushed. She lifted her hand to her face, touched where he'd touched and he felt a terrible tug. Like a terror, like he was watching them turn to gold.

He dropped down onto the step next to her and started telling her about his day. He stumbled like a kid. Let me see, said Fynn and reached across Glad, took his hands into the pool of shadowy porch light. Look at that, she said, holding them out to Glad's cooling gaze. Why, it's in his hair as well. She brushed her hand across the crown of his head. Glad's eyes followed.

His father happened to be in that night. He was less than impressed.

Gold blocks up the pores, Joe Wilson told them over dinner. It suffocates,

it won't let the skin breathe. Is there no ventilation?

He offered to go down with Bird the next day and have a word with his supervisor.

I'm serious, Bird, he said, it'll kill you quicker than those fumes at Stokes, you may as well be printing those cards with arsenic.

It's all right, Bird said. It'll only be for a couple of days.

But Joe ignored him, looked across at Ma, asked her, Have you signed those damned papers yet?

No, Ma said, and he needn't bring them home now either, he's not going back there.

She got up and started stacking the plates, but admired the look of her golden boy, was distracted a moment, and thought to herself, There's a fortune begging to be told.

After three days breathing in gold dust, it started to pall. Bird became convinced that he was swallowing the little flakes, and when his throat swelled and started aching as if he had tonsillitis, he was unsurprised, and saw it as a sign. He took a day off work, asked around and got a job just up the road, lugging clay tiles across the brickyards under an open sky. It didn't pay as well as the printers', but it was close to home and there was plenty of opportunity for overtime. Over the next few days the gold touch left him but it didn't leave Glad Strongman. Turned out Glad was living just ten minutes away from them. She worked from home for her mother who was a lacemaker. Glad could do lacework but what she really knew about were shoes. She'd inherited several lasts and a complete set of bootmaking tools from her father who'd been a bootmaker in Bay Street, Brighton, during the war. She had the needles, the awls, the groovecutters and little hammers, as well as the sharp heavy knives and scissors for cutting leather. She made soft-soled shoes for babies and children's first walkers that Bird's Ma bought and sold through her shop along with Mrs Strongman's lacework. In fact, the shoes sold better than the lacework.

Glad and Fynn were thick as thieves. Well, they always had been. One way or another Glad was across at the Wilsons' as often as she was in her own home. Always looking at him that same way, half shy, half daring. Bird had to think hard to remember her from their years at Brighton, to connect the

kid who used to hang around with Fynn after school with the dark-haired girl who looked at him sideways through her bob on his mother's front step. Saturdays after work they went out together. Fynn had got a job spinning at the Sherwood Mills and she was good. She was so fast they put her on piece-work. The money she made was catching fire in her pocket, she used to say. Glad had the money her mother passed back to her from Ma's shop, her leather pennies she called them. The three of them walked up Sydney Road feeling like millionaires. They spent their money – whatever money their mothers let them have once the bills were paid and board deducted – on scarves and hats and cheap tie pins and brooches, on movie tickets and buttered popcorn and hot cordials, on acid drops and bullseyes: they were still that close to childhood.

At the brickworks Bird graduated pretty quickly from running the barrows across the yard to shovelling coal. The works manager called him over one day when they were short a man.

You'd be small for your age? he suggested. The thing is, we can't put you on shovelling unless you're over eighteen. It's a hard, hot job, eight hours a day, six days a week. Three pound a week. Saturday afternoons off if we get ahead on orders.

I'm nineteen, Bird said, adding on two and a half years.

The works manager smiled. All right, lad, he said. Start shovelling.

The shovels were what they call banjos. Twelve inches wide, a deep pan, long heavy handles. Every honest shovelful lifted up a quarter of a hundred weight. Bird worked down in the trough with a boy called Marty, scarcely any bigger than himself. They took turns throwing the coal into the oven's big orange mouth. There was no lunch break. Instead Bird would stop at the pie stand near the station on his way to work and buy two or three little pies which he'd set on the brick ledge of the kiln once he got to work. That kept them warm, and he'd take a bite or two, as the day progressed, to keep him going. The only lip he had to take was from Fat Irish, the foreman who stood above them, his great obscene belly rubbering out over his belt buckle, calling out Fill your shoo-vel, fill your shoo-vel, late in the day when they were just about done for and the coal scuttle near empty.

When the eight hours were up, Bird scooped icy water from a bucket to

extract the worst of the black and ease the blazing in his skin. He pushbiked home at six each night, his skin red, his legs like elastic, turning weightless circles, his upper body leaning through his arms like dead weight onto the handlebars. He rode home thinking of Glad, looking out for her. More and more through the day as he scraped the coal against the metal and swung it around, as he burnt up in front of the open kiln, it was her he was thinking about. He thought stupid things. He kept the image of her in his head. It was all for her he was firing up the kilns. He cast her as the boss's daughter who suddenly tripped and fell and there he was to lift her up and brush the coal dust off her. He told himself she was standing up above the trough watching. He thought of her raising her arm above her head. He'd seen her do it once, reaching for a book up high on a shelf. It made her chest go up in a way that it never occurred to him was possible. That little sticking out chest like a pigeon strutting. Since then he couldn't stop thinking about those white button-up blouses she wore, the long dark skirts cut high at the waist. What was he to do with that?

There wasn't anything he could do, so he just kept thinking it through when he was working, bringing it back over and over as he shovelled the coal. He thought about that line of buttons reaching from waist to collar until he was just about crazy. It's not like he could have unbuttoned even one, not even in his head. It's not like he didn't know what was under there. He had sisters after all. None of it was new to him. Still he couldn't stop himself.

Back home on the front step between Glad and Fynn it didn't let up. He felt the coal dust under his collar, no matter how he'd scrubbed, when he looked at her pale skin. He liked it when his clothes brushed hers, and he liked listening to her voice and Fynn's together. She had that way of talking, Glad, like no other girl Bird knew, not even Fynn. Glad talked to a purpose. She looked you in the eye and dared you all the time that she was talking. Bird couldn't help it, he had to accept the dare. He couldn't resist talking back to Glad. Stirring her up. Giving her something to think about. Move over, he said, and sat in between the two of them, and pushed his fingers through his hair, feeling the grit of coal dust and powdered clay all through it.

They talked about their schooldays back in Brighton. They talked about anything and everything, but it always came back to Brighton. They were

veterans, Glad said, of that great war between the teachers and the kids. She didn't look like any old soldier Bird had ever come across on the street, and he told her so. You're an idiot, she said, and leant back smiling.

Those days, said Bird, like it was a thousand years ago, not two or three.

Fynn said, What about that time Miss Metcalfe laid into the kid with the strap, and he grabbed it off her and ran straight for the police?

Glad said, What about Lenny Gaster?

He did my homework for a sixpence, said Bird. More than once.

Tipcat, said Glad.

Mungo, said Fynn.

Oh no, not me, said Bird, putting on a high falsetto squeak. I'm never coming back here. Take that, take that, take that, you awful man!

The three of them burst out laughing. Glad laughed so hard she bashed her head into Bird's and he had a bruise over his ear for days, painful to touch. That was reward enough for him.

For six months that was how it went. Bird worked and slept, collected his three quid a week, joked around with Fynn and Glad. He put on two inches and muscled up and started broadening out. He turned seventeen. He could feel himself stretching out day by day, the ache starting up in his shoulders and spreading right down to his calves. Then one Saturday they worked so hard and fast down by the kiln, and Fat Irish above them calling out more coal, more coal, that there was no time to think of Glad. He forgot to eat until late afternoon. By then he felt as roasted as a narrow flanked rabbit, crisped and browned to perfection. He stopped, leaned the shovel against the bricks and reached up onto the ledge for the meat pie he'd sat there first thing, biting into its flaky crust and bolting it, feeling the thin sauce scald him all the way down. Back to work, the scrape of metal against coal, and not Glad but Fat Irish glaring down.

Get up your pace, you mongrels.

Some day I'll take a head butt to you, you dirty mick, thought Bird. I'll hit you straight in that bloody gut.

He'd thought the very same thing every day since he'd started shovelling, but today the thought kept circling around him in the heat. When the whistle blew an hour later he knew today was the day, come

hell or high water. He felt himself retching as he looked at that big belly not even half covered with a grimy blue singlet. It didn't come to him that he was getting sick already, that the overheated meaty sauce had bred god knows what sitting there by the kiln and that it was percolating through his system.

I'll do it now, he told Cal with a kind of drunken detachment, swaying back against the kiln. By Christ, today's the day.

Steady on Bird, said Marty, his lips hardly moving. He'll hear you. Jeez, Bird, he'll mash you to a pulp.

Fat Irish had just hooked the test plate out of the kiln and was lowering it into a bucket of cold water when Bird launched headfirst into his great womanly belly. Irish folded backward, his head whacking against the ridge of the kiln door. The bucket crashed over and water poured across the floor where he landed. The plate flicked off the hook and smashed on the concrete floor.

Irish lifted his head. His gaze focused on the shards of hard-baked clay around him.

Done, he gasped. His head dropped back down on the floor. He blinked a couple of times, then shut his eyes.

Bird bounced back into Marty's arms, who lifted him up and pushed him out the door.

Go on Bird, get out of here, he said. He'll be up in a minute. He'll kill you. Go on and don't come back.

Bird's legs rubbered, they straightened, and he started a kind of weaving stagger up Union Street that steadied after half a block. The rest of the way home alternated hot and cold, bright and dark, it coming to him that he'd left his bike back there against the fence, and shouldn't he go fetch it?

BIRD WAS BAD, real bad, for three weeks. The doctor said ptomaine poisoning, something he ate. He prescribed Chloromel drops in water, but didn't recommend hospital. In his opinion, any additional infections could be fatal.

Ma hived off her room for Bird and pulled up a mattress next to the bed so she could watch him through the night. Every hour, she tipped the drops down his throat, and twice a day spoonfed him stewed apples. After a week,

she cooked up a thin broth, all water and salt and precious little chicken, to build his strength. The rest of the family got short shrift. Fynn helped out when she got home from work, Shep didn't hinder, and Annie Lane, who was barely ten, stayed home from school, swept the floor, wiped the dishes and minded the neighbour's child that Ma had taken on.

After three weeks, the fever passed. Ma woke up one morning and he was breathing steady. He was skinny, his bones sticking out, but calm, and she saw with a start that he had the look of a man about him. There were creases around his eyes and his mouth, cut into his brown skin, and he needed shaving. When he woke up in the afternoon he said he was hungry. Ma got a bowl of hot water, sat him up against the pillows, lathered and shaved him. He complained the water was too hot. I want you to feel it, said Ma. She slapped the boiling cloth against his chin and held it there.

She kept him in bed another week or so, then started letting him up now and then to mind the shop. He tired quickly, had no appetite. His bike that Shep had retrieved for him from the brickworks was padlocked to the front fence. He couldn't imagine, right now, ever riding it again. Glad Strongman, who'd been asking after him, coming around with the lacework and children's shoes instead of her mother, always forgetting something she'd have to bring by the next day, stopped looking for excuses to drop by. How's Bird? she said without preamble now, when she came in. Would he like a visitor, do you think?

Bird sat up in bed like Robert Louis Stevenson, a stack of books by his side, imagining counterpane soldiers knocked flat among the folds of the cheap spun blankets. He watched the door. The room around him was like a second skin. His ancestors glared balefully from either side of the mantle clock and Ma had the curtains in front of the balcony doors pulled to within an inch of their lives. He understood how it was someone could take to their bed and never get up again. There was almost nothing that merited getting out of bed.

Bird waited for the clock to strike the hour. He watched for the minute hand to move. He listened for the shop bell downstairs, he listened for the till to slam shut. He waited on the creak of the floorboard at the foot of the stairs, and the hush of his mother's long skirts as she stepped up to check on him. He waited on Glad. When she came, time started up again.

He always knew by the way Glad stepped up that it had to be her. There was the clack of Glad's heels on each step, much stronger and faster than his mother, just about running. She was up and in before he could think of a smart opening line, calling out, I can't see a thing! Where are you? What time of the day do you think it is?, walking straight past him and breaking the curtains in two so that the daylight flooded across the bed. She brought him books from the lending library. She brought him books to order, Mark Twain and Henry Kendall and Rolf Boldrewood, but then they latched onto Charles Dickens, and nothing else would do. *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Sometimes they barely said hello, she'd just open up her satchel and pull out the day's books. He'd reach for the Dickens and drop in right away. She was a reader like he was, and she never got offended but would take up another book herself. When they finished one they'd swap over right away. There'd be silence for a minute, an hour, then one of them would burst out laughing, and read out what it was. She even gave him a little battered copy of Adam Lindsay Gordon she'd found in a second-hand shop. Write something in it, he said, so I remember, but she laughed and never did. His father had got him some old *Bulletins* but he'd gone over most of them already, and they got put aside once he'd finished skimming them for any Henry Lawson. After he'd read a sketch of HL's, he'd stare at the byline, trying to match it with the shambling image of Henry he held in his mind, sunk in the old armchair back in Brighton, his long hands shaking. When he told Glad about their walk, she said, you're that lucky, you ought to write down what he said, and he meant to, but.

At times the neighbour's baby, the foster child, would wake up, make a fuss, and Glad'd go play with her, whisper, clap her hands, even crawl about after her on the floor. Then Ma would come and fetch her and they'd be alone again. Or she'd put down her book and take up the bit of lace she was working on. By and by the words would slow down on Bird's page. His eyes would tip up from the words on the page and there she was, Glad Strongman, head bent, one leg twisted behind the other, biting her lip as she twisted the lace hook. He'd watch sleepily, his eyes opening and shutting, trying to memorise all the different parts so that he could recall the sum of her when she was gone.

Look – arm.

Look – waist.

Look – the shape of her boot.

What about the foot inside it?

His sister Fynn came and sat with him every day after work. She always got him laughing. She was on piecework at the Sherwood Mills, overseeing one, then two, then three spinning machines, setting up the yarns first thing every morning, watching over the weft and the warp, catching out twisted threads, gnarls and knots without ever losing a finger or having to stop a loom. How her feet ached when she got home. She sat up on Glad's wooden chair next to his pillow and lifted her feet up, set them on the padded footstool, unlaced her boots. Luxury, she sighed.

I'll look out for a place for you, she said. Something will come up soon. There's a thousand people working there, more. It's a good place to work. The people there, they look out for you. That made sense to Bird. He'd have to get a job. He'd have to go back to work. Just not yet. For now just sitting out in the sun on the balcony for the hour or two that the sun showed its face was enough for him. Then one lunchtime Fynn's boots rang along the pavement, the shop bell yelped, the clatter of her running up the stairs as she'd never run in her life, all in the time it took Ma to lift a cup and saucer to Bird's hand, the tea shimmering close to the rim. Fynn, standing in the doorway, wheezing, leaning forward, her hands on her legs.

There's a job going at the Mills, she gasped. They've just put off a boy for some misdemeanour. She stopped a minute, breathed in.

I asked Mr Binny, he said he'd hold it for you. He said were you a tall lad, and I said yes, you were.

She stopped again, gasping.

Now, Bird, you have to come now, or he'll give it to somebody else. I told him I'd fetch you on my lunch break.

Bird jumped off the bed. His mother was reaching a pair of pressed trousers, a clean shirt, out of the airing cupboard. She was looking for his boots.

I saved my tram fare, Fynn gasped, pushing it into his hand.

Catch your breath, Fynn, said Ma. Let him go on ahead.

No, I've only got half an hour.

Blow the tram, said Bird as they ran down the stairs two by two, let's go on me bike. There was the key on the hook beside the front door, a minute's fumbling and off the padlock flew. They rocketed through the back streets of Brunswick and Coburg, him light-headed as his feet turned the pedals, Fynn up on the handlebars, twisting her head back and filling him in.

They'll start you off pushing the baskets around, she said. They're big wicker baskets on wheels, you have to take all the different colours and plies of yarns between the departments. They'll try you out for a while, and if you're any good, they'll get you something better. This is it, this is Gaffney Street, turn left here.

Next thing they were crossing the railway line and the red brick chimney of the mills was in plain view. Bird skidded his bike to a stop and chained it to the fence with dozens of others. Follow me, Fynn shouted and they ran across the yard between the buildings. The whistle blew as they came in to the yarn store. There was a big spare man sitting at a work table in the open, holding lengths of yarn up at arms length and studying them. When Bird stepped between him and the light, he squinted at him without enthusiasm.

Who's this you've brought me? he asked Fynn. Your baby cousin?

My brother, sir, said Fynn, or gasped it. He's a good – he's a good, hard worker sir, I promise.

Mr Binny kept his eyes on Bird, and Bird looked back.

Well, if you can work half as hard as your sister, you'll earn your pay.

Yes, sir, said Bird.

She tells me you've been sick, he said.

I'm better now, said Bird.

You'd better be. This ain't no home for convalescents.

No, sir, said Bird.

All right then. Let's get to work.

THE MILLS

THAT WAS HIS first day at the Sherwood Knitting and Spinning Mills. He started that afternoon, pushing wicker baskets between the yarn store and the

knitting mills just like Fynn said, skidding on the greasy floors and taking the women's shyacking along with the cheeses, the big rounds of wound and ticketed wool bound first for the dye house and then, once they were coloured, on to the knitting mills for winding into tops and labelling, and from there to the warehouses for despatch. Back then, the Sherwood Knitting and Spinning Mills was family. Everybody in Coburg knew someone who worked at the Sherwood, every mother sent a son or daughter along there to beg a job. Once you were in, you were set, and you went out of your way to stay in, hold the advantage. The streets around the Mills were named for the Sherwood wool brands, Wattle, Daphne, Waratah, Acacia, and the cottages in those streets had all sprung up to house the Sherwood workers. If the owners had their way, not just the worker's station stop but the whole of Coburg would have its name changed to Sherwood by council decree.

Bird graduated pretty fast from errand boy and basket pusher. Soon he was weighing the baskets on the big clock-face scales and reading the gross weight and taking off the tare. When Mr Binny worked out how fast he was with his calculations he got him helping with the accounts and filling out the records for the whole of the yarn store. Six months went by and then a year, and then another. He got a pay rise and a promotion, and then another. When he wasn't adding up numbers of tops by colour and ply or walking from workroom to workroom tracing back the location of a particular batch of yarn, double checking the dye lots, matching their name and their number, he took to calculating his weekly wage, working out what it came to for the year, adding on overtime and bonuses. If Bird married while he was still at the Sherwood, he would make his way into one of those little cottages with new seeded lawns and flowers flaring up along the front fence. That was the way of it and, strangely enough, the thought appealed.

BRIGHTON BEACH

IT WAS TOO early on a Sunday for anyone but Ma and she looked at him as she set the teapot on the table between them as if she could see right through him.

Back later, muttered Bird and dodged away out the door.

Glad was at the tram stop already and looked around as he crossed the road. Her face relaxed when she saw it was him and she pulled herself up straight. She was wearing a dark narrow skirt with a long loose winter coat over the top of it. Bird told her she looked nice. Anytime he told her that he always got a reaction. He couldn't resist.

On the tram she took the window seat and he paid their fares. She leaned back in the seat, her arm against the window frame and looked him over. The air was blowing in fresh from behind the blind, moving her hair around. We've done it, she said. He sat himself down beside her, pocketing the change. At Flinders Street they got a combined rail and tram fare: train to St Kilda and then the railway tram along as far as Beach Road. It was slower with the connection, but they had a view of the sea just about the whole of the last leg.

She said she liked the sea better in this cold weather.

It looks more, she said. More to it when it's cutting up rough this way.

All right when you're not out in it, he replied. Remember that storm?

The waves came rushing up across Beach Road, she said. I remember. There were houses standing there with the walls ripped off, you could look inside them and see what colour the wallpaper was. That's not something you forget.

They looked at each other and then she looked away.

We haven't chosen much of a day for it, she admitted, but I know it'll soon clear.

Miss Strongman ordains, said Bird as he pulled the cord half way along Beach Road and they both stood up. There is to be no rain, he said, and she kicked him hard in the shin, looking straight at him, daring him to do something back.

Here was a Brighton they both knew, shrunk a little in the cold weather, the primary colours of sea and sand faded back to shades of grey. But the air, the salty oxygen taste of it, and the wind picking up sheets of sand and running the length of the beach with them, swerving out across the water and dropping them into the sea, that hadn't changed at all. Right away Bird's toes started itching for the feel of the beach and he had to stop, unlace his boots and sling them over his shoulder. He stepped over the railing and ran straight through the powdered sand

down to the tide line, letting the icy spring tide brush at his feet.

Glad watched him, frowning. She looked across the gently shelving beach at the roughness of water, Bird in the foreground with his bare feet and the clear water shimmering across them, and then down at her own shoes as if she would like to do the same. Instead she made her way further along to the steps and hop, step, jumped down to where the sand was packed and firm, stood waiting for him to catch her up.

Come and take a look here, he said, and she came up close enough that Bird could get his arm around her shoulder, and she let him. At first it was a joke, to try and get her feet wet in the surf, but then they forgot the joke, it passed, and his arm stayed around her shoulder and they walked on, as far as the war memorial at Green Point. They sat there for a while out of the wind, then went on along the Esplanade. They argued over the best beach and the best stretch of sand and where to go for the best fish and chips, now that Bird's mother no longer ran the supper rooms on Bay Street. When they reached Middle Brighton they argued over the merits of the open sea and the enclosed baths. They walked along the pier to the end, past the fishermen casting their lines against the gusting winds, his arm still around her and her head still tilted down onto his shoulder.

Will you come back in the summer? Bird asked her.

What, to swim?

Would you?

Oh, I will, she said. I will if Fynn will.

They wandered the old haunts after that, walked up Bay Street to see what had changed, cut into Wilson Street and walked past the old school, then looped around the Inner and Outer Crescents until they came to Brighton Grammar still with the old knotty mulberries along the back fence. They'd come stealing mulberries here as kids in the summer when school was out. They walked a little further on, found the place where they used to get in, stopped a minute, looked at each other.

After you, he said.

Glad and Bird on the dry grass under the mulberries. Did she remember? asked Bird.

Remember? said Glad. I could still climb this tree if I wanted, and in

this skirt too.

Dare, said Bird, leaning back propped on his elbows.

Just try me, said Glad, but she didn't move either.

She was sitting against the trunk of the tree with her skirt pulled down over her knees, unhooking her bootlaces and getting the boots off and emptying the sand onto the ground at her feet. She brushed the sand from her black stockings and stretched her toes. They were out of the wind now, right underneath it, looking up to where it shook the green mulberry branches. There was plenty of fruit, clustered like silkworm grubs, green to pinky white and yet to make anything of itself.

Remember those billy tins? asked Glad. Did we ever fill one?

Those billies full of crushed and bruised black berries, more syrup than fruit by the time they got back to Ma to be poured into her saucepan and made into jam.

The taste of that fruit...said Bird.

Go and fetch me some mulberries children, I've got some apples and I want to make some jam...said Glad.

Ma's recipe...fifty-fifty jam...

They went on, talking across each other.

One mulberry to one apple...

Palest mulberry jam I ever saw.

The way they stained your hands as you picked them off...

A penny a pound...

Did we ever get our pennies?

I liked the taste too much...

Warm summer mulberries straight off the tree...

The winter sun had cut a hole in the clouds, and Glad rolled onto her side to get out of the shade. Aren't your feet ice? she asked him. His boots were cushioning his head, the shoe laces were still knotted together and his socks crammed inside. He lifted up one bare foot and rubbed it against the stocking black of her ankle. He thought she'd move her foot away at once, but she didn't. She looked away from him, up into the thatching branches of the mulberries.

That cold? he asked her.

No, she said, like she was really thinking about it, like she wasn't quite sure what hot was or cold, had to have it demonstrated. She lay back like she was a trapped bird, like his foot rubbing through the thick stocking wool had paralysed her. She shut her eyes and tried to think of a question to ask him. His voice rambled on, it moved along at the same slow easy pace of his foot rubbing across from her ankle to her calf, the strange texture of his toes spreading and curling together and never stopping, the heat it generated all through her body.

Why don't I remember you? he asked. You ought to be there, you ought to be saying something, doing something.

But you remember us with the mulberries.

Not really, said Bird. Not really you.

The storm, she said. You must remember that day we got caught in the storm.

That I remember, he said. I thought we were going to fly right off the beach. I thought we'd land in these trees.

But we didn't, she said.

No, he said. No we didn't.

Don't you remember me with Fynn? she asked.

I remember someone with Fynn, some girl with a long dark plait down her back, that's all. Even the way you left school, it's like it was some other person, some kid, not you.

That plait was long gone. Her hair stopped above her shoulders now, thick and loose and shiny. The way it moved in the wind made him lean up on one elbow and reached his hand out. He brushed it back away from her face, and as he did his knuckles touched her skin.

I remember you, she said. I remember seeing you starting out on your rounds as I walked to school, and what they called you when you came in late. I remember Fynn keeping me late at your place one night so I could watch your pigeons home.

The way you picked them up and petted them, she didn't say, the way they trusted you and nestled in.

He put his hand back up to her cheek and she looked at him, her eyes afire. Hungry? he said.

She nodded. Her eyes never left his.

Let's get our boots back on then, he said, before some master comes and hunts us off the grounds.

WHY DO THEY call you that? he asked as they waited for the tram in the late afternoon, picking through the last of their fish and chips.

What?

What sort of a name is Gladys? It makes you out to be some kind of flower.

Gladys is not any kind of flower, she said.

Still, he said.

It's my name.

He was laughing at her. She got angry.

You're one to talk. What sort of a name is yours? What would you have me called?

I don't know, said Bird. I'll think about it.

She stood up from the bench, clenched her fists.

Call me what you like, she said, and moved away a couple of steps, turned her back on him.

He watched her for a minute. When she didn't turn around he got up and went after her, put his hand on her shoulder, turned her around.

I say you're Glad, he said. That's what you're called.

And with her dark eyes looking straight at him as the dusk fell he had to go on.

My Glad, that's who you are.

He squashed her sticky salty hands together in his and found her salty lips against his mouth and held on until her head pulled back and she took a great breath of cold air.

If anyone asks you your name, you tell them you're Bird's Glad, that's who you are, he said.

Her eyes even darker, just about falling into his. That's what you'll always be was racing in his pulse, but how could he say that, no matter how he knew it. Him and Glad. That's how it'd be. Nothing surer. All he could do was reach for her narrow shoulders through the soft giving winter weight

of her long coat, dig his fingers into her and feel her doing the same, her hard fingers up and down his arms, her salt-and-vinegar mouth, the bite of her thin girl's lips careening forward and hitting the side of his face, his neck, the collar of his shirt. There in the dark on the esplanade, leaning up against the bench, the two of them pushing or fighting or holding on, shaking off the last sharp cutting bits of eggshell, only halfway out of their rag-tag sweaty dirty faced child bodies, slam, slap, give, get, wriggling their way out up against each other.

BOOTS REPAIRED

THE SIGN TAPED inside the window said Boots Repaired. Shoes Made to Order. From the pavement when the blinds were up you could see the wooden work bench under the window. Glad had taken it from her father's shop in Brighton, you could see his old tools laid out in a neat row, the rasp and chisel, the claw head pincers for pulling leather and the pointy pincers for pulling nails. There was a heavy knife for cutting leather, a flat head hammer, and other tools he didn't recognise, ones she had to explain to him once he got in there with her, the awls, the groove cutter, the leather smoother, the fluting tools. There was a big block of beeswax and a lump of resin she used for waxing the laces. There were three different lasts that were made of wood and set in heavy stands and the surface of them was smooth and worn. The one she used most often she kept at the front. He liked to put his hand onto it, feel the grain faint against his skin and the smallness of it.

Glad lived with her mother in Gatehouse Street. It was a quiet street with little through traffic and she got most of her custom through Bird's mother's shop in Brunswick. She had a notice taped there as well, and people could leave shoes for repair with Ma who passed them on to her. She didn't get many orders for adult shoes or boots but easily sold the soft baby's shoes, the first walkers and children's boots that Ma put in her window. The shoes and boots for repair were rarely more than a day standing at her workbench before she took them back to Ma, but she always had new leather cut out on the table or half stitched up on a last, soles tacked onto inners, two or three pairs of shoes at different stages of manufacture.

Under the other tall window, a heavy duty Singer sewing machine, thirty years old, sat on a small table. Just by it was a big ball of leather-stitching string and a row of large steel needles folded into a bit of offcut leather.

If the front of the room was a cobbler's workshop out of a fairytale, Glad's mother did her best to keep the back of the room a neat little drawing room. There was a rosewood mantelpiece with two or three books on the mantle and under it a little coal grate always full of embers or made up and ready to light. There was a stuffed armchair to one side of the grate, and an old cast-iron daybed with upholstered cushions on it to the other side. This is where Bird sat, where he swung his feet up and leant back against the cushions, his arms behind his neck as he watched Glad working. He did that on a Saturday afternoon before they went out, came round early just to sit and watch her. He'd buy a paper on his way over and rifle through it without reading anything. Her mother would make them cups of tea and bring them in on a tray. Sometimes he'd go down the hall to the kitchen and scrounge the makings of cheese on toast from her mother, bring it back on a bread board then pace about until she put down her work and stood up.

She had a sturdy wooden chair she sat at, it was her father's too, and when she got up she pushed it under the table, untied her leather apron and laid it over the back of the chair. She stood a minute then looking out the window as if he were not there, stretching her arms above her head and he would watch her from the other side of the room, watch the way her white blouse rode up as she did it, and the way her dark skirt stayed so straight and even, right down to her calves. Then she would reach one hand back and pull off the band she kept her short hair tied back with while she worked, and the hair would fall down and hide the smooth skin of her pale neck above the collar. She'd turn around smiling at him and they'd sit on the rug in front of the fire and grill the toast and cheese. She'd pull the hot toast off the fork and push it into his mouth. He'd take a bite and pass it back, and they'd share the first piece between them like that while the second piece toasted. They didn't always talk. Sometimes they talked too much and sometimes not at all and he couldn't tell which he liked better.

As it got dark she went and pulled the blinds down on the front windows, lit up the lights, heaped in more coal and when they'd eaten enough and their hands and mouths were greasy and there were toast crumbs on her lips he'd put his hand up behind her head where they sat on the floor and pull her face up close to his and she'd open her mouth and it would be covering over his in a way that surprised and excited him every time it happened. He would lick his tongue over her lips and into her mouth and she would move her head from side to side and make small noises, both her hands on his shoulders and pulling him close and his hands at her shoulders, at her waist, pulling at the white cloth of her shirt, rubbing over the heavy material of her skirt. They might get ten minutes or so of that, never as much as they wanted, before they heard her mother in the passage with another pot of tea and they were stumbling back, up off the carpet and into their chairs, brushing their clothes, arms crossed and looking away from each other by the time Mrs Strongman came into the room, glancing from one to the other of them and frowning. Then Bird would get up and look into the fire and ask did she want to catch the 7.30 session at the Lyric and she would say, What is it? He would rifle through the paper and tell her, and she would say, That sounds all right.

Don't you be late, Mrs Strongman would say as they went out the door and Glad would say, Oh Mum, I'm never late, and pull the front door shut behind them. Out in the fresh cold dark they would laugh and he would hug her and she would pull away.

We'll be late, she'd say. Come on, I don't want to miss the start.

They'd walk from Gatehouse Street onto Royal Parade, him pushing his bike beside her, and at Royal Parade she'd turn sideways and sit herself on the crossbar of his bike and he'd get on and start pedalling. They'd ride through Princes Park and Carlton, up Lygon Street into Brunswick and stop at Bird's place to drop off the bike and pick up Fynn and take her with them. The night was theirs after that, every Saturday night the same, and it was brightly lit and loud and candy coloured and sweet and shiny. And this, this was the time of their lives, and if they only knew it.

THERE'S SOMETHING IRRESISTIBLE about the racetrack. Three quid a week Bird got working in the yarn store, good money, but it was nothing to the five pound he could earn of a Saturday afternoon at the racetrack as a bookie's runner and general dogsbody. He filled out the betting tickets with a stub of grey lead pencil on the tote, or wrote up the scratchings and odds on the blackboard as the bookie called them. As the bookie took the bets he scribbled the odds on the punter's ticket and called the earnings up – Ten bob Bonus – Five bob Pharoah – Tanner for Golden Boy – Here's a quid, a quid, a quid on Coolamarra – and Bird scrawled them across the big open blackboard for everyone to see and carried it on and the money going with each horse set out plain and underneath that the tally of what the bookie'd pay out if it won.

Bird made out pretty fast that the way the game was played the bookmaker couldn't lose. The secret to all betting, the main chance, the sure thing, was sewn up tight inside the bookie's pocket and it all came to the way he played the odds and how he backed the horses. If things went well for the bookie, they went well for Bird, for what good it did him – it only went back on the racetrack. When he liked the odds and despite what he knew he'd give it all back to his own boss almost before he'd earned it. He counted himself lucky if he picked up something more substantial – a new hat, say, or a part for his bike, or something for his mother or Fynn or Glad – out of his extra earnings. He couldn't resist shuffling around the numbers. He couldn't resist having a go at working the odds.

Bird didn't take a job off course but once. A Sydney Road hotel, a Saturday afternoon, the windows shuttered, the front door locked and bolted. When he showed up for work the barman said, how'd you get here? By bike? Where'd you leave it? For Chrissake go and bring it round the back. I do my own advertising. I didn't employ you for promotional purposes. For weeks afterwards Bird could still feel the bruise where the cop grabbed his arm as he jumped the fence out the back of the pub when the police raided just as they were calling it a day. That was enough for him. Glad laughed and dug the splinters from the fence out of his arm and said she'd mend his shirtsleeve. She asked how he'd go about collecting his afternoon's pay. She didn't seem to care; it didn't worry her the way he

expected it to. He couldn't help telling her about it. Something about her unlocked his throat and every story he'd ever heard, every bit of gossip from down the mills, every tall tale and, what's more, word after word of pure unblemished gospel truth came tumbling out of his mouth like he was a pipe and she was the player.

She had him all right, she'd taken him in her net and he bumped up against it like a young kestrel, sharp beak open trying to get at her, and all she could do was laugh and smile and turn her head sideways, glance back at him. So he took her to the races when he wasn't working and they put their money down and it flew away. It didn't matter. Without even noticing their new young adult life became habit. Weekdays at the mills, weeknights on his bike training with the Harriers, then a bite to eat and a cup of tea with Glad at his ma's or hers. Friday nights stepping out with Fynn and Glad, his brother Shep as well if he behaved himself. Saturday afternoons at the races, Saturday nights the Star Theatre or the Lyric with its roof that rolled open on starlit nights and was always jamming up when the clouds came over and the rain started spitting. Sundays bike racing or walking out with Glad and Monday morning, fresh and early, rolling around, over and over, and he and Fynn sitting up at the kitchen table with their big deep cups of tea, Annie Lane and Shep still snoring, and pushing sticks of kindling into the stove.

His mother looked at him these days with care in her eyes, taking the money he gave her from his pay packet, frowning over it, saying, no, I've done well this week, you take back a little. She could see him splitting open and easing away from her, she could see he was more than half gone already, far and away beyond her reckoning. The only thing that eased her frown was any mention of Glad.

Whatever you do, Bird, said Ma, hold onto Glad Strongman. She's a lovely girl, Ma said across the table in the early morning and Fynn there right beside him, and Annie Lane and Shep too, all ears, glancing from one to the other of them, and him red faced and bending himself over his tea, immobile with embarrassment

You could not do better, she would say. Treat her well, Bird. Take care of her. She wouldn't be at all easy to replace.

Until one morning he had to spit it out.

I'm going to ask her, Ma, I'm going to ask her.

Ma was lifting the kettle and filling the trough with hot water, blinking into clouds of steam.

Ma, he said, and she set it down and wiped her hands and turned around to face him.

And so you should, Bird, so you should, said Ma, and went back to her work.

BRITISH INITIATIVE

ALL BIRD, GLAD and half of Coburg were waiting for was a wind, a good north wind to blow up off Gaffney Street and in and out through the windows that were just ajar, a wind that would not drop to nothing at night, a wind that dallied, kept count, waited, slipped up and down the street snatching at faded newspapers, turning glass bottles over in the gutter, tossing dead leaves about, a desultory, easily pleased wind that bided, bided, until the sun lowered itself, leant glowering at the end of Gaffney Street, touched its cap, tapped its nose, gave the nod through the streets from the west for the wind to lift, and leap, and roar.

They all knew the knitting mill at the Sherwood was going up. They'd watched the old stock carted across from the knitting mill day by day, the superseded filigree yarn once it had been picked over, the old round knitting machines, that had to make way for the flat knitters that would produce the glorious straight-seamed stockings the women all wanted. Mr Feathers and Mr Flim had come out specially from the mother mill in Nottingham, England, to assess what might be done for the Australians. The British shareholders had expressed to the Melbourne manager, Mr Gowan, a blunt and fatherly concern about the state of the mills. They had told him to put everything in the hands of Mr Feathers.

The British shareholders had always been the sort of fathers that were best kept at a distance. The better part of the Atlantic and Indian oceans, one might have thought, would be sufficient. Now Mr Feathers had stalked across those oceans to offer guidance to the colonial progeny. He was a thin, quick man; he walked, he talked, he flapped, he fluttered. Mr Flim walked one,

two, three paces behind him. He looked around. He glanced at windows. He paid attention to roof space, rafters, ventilation shafts. He carried a short blunt knife, and lifted, absently, thick splinters of wood from beams, door frames, sills, pocketing the splinters, rubbing the raw wood against his thick-skinned thumb like a medical man considering symptoms in the patient's presence. Mr Flim was a specialist.

There was Bird, taken off his usual duties for the duration, trailing along behind him, taking notes on every stick of superseded stock and its location.

It has to be right up to date, Mr Feathers told him. Everything above board. We have to be sure the premiums will cover it all. This is a business proposition, after all.

You'll go far, Bird, Mr Feathers said.

Do you have a girl? he asked him. Are you thinking of getting married? Security, Bird, security and capital. Look around you.

There they were, just after dark, in the knitting mill, doing the final stocktake.

Money, Bird, money, said Mr Feathers in his Nottingham brogue. We're standing square inside the counting house.

Mr Feathers had had them shifting and restacking for weeks. The knitting mill was a storehouse now, crammed with old stock. The old knitters hunched along one wall, displaced ahead of time by the gleaming new machines sitting in a crate on a British wharf waiting for their ship to come in. Next to the knitters, half-empty two hundredweight cases were stacked nine inches apart in rows. Mothballs were scattered over the boxes and lay thick along the narrow corridors between them, Mr Feathers having expressed some concern about vermin.

Steady on, a storeman told him. Didn't he know how easily naphthalene took fire?

Is that what they put in mothballs? murmured Mr Feathers, meditatively, and walked away in another direction, musing over it.

BIRD COLLECTED GLAD and they arrived at the mills with her balanced on the front of his bike. It was nearly dark, one of those sharp sudden winter sunfalls, a flare across the paddocks to the west and a crowd

gathering.

What will happen, Bird? she asked, and then told him, the way she usually did.

It's as good as closing half the mills, she said. I don't see why everyone thinks it so funny. Half the people here tonight will be out of a job this time tomorrow.

The wind was blowing across their faces. People stood about in overcoats. Some of them had brought along thermoses. Some of the neighbours in the houses facing onto the mills brought out chairs and sat down with blankets over their knees. Couples like Bird and Glad leant into each other. Fynn stepped across to say hello, they talked about nothing much for five minutes or so, then she detached herself, went back to stand with the other women she worked with.

Firstly, said Bird, taking up where Glad had left off. We're going to be all right. My job's secure, he told her. So's Fynn's. She could get a job at any mill in Melbourne anyway. Now listen to me. This is the way it is. The place is going bust, nothing surer. I've been listening, I've heard what these people have to say. I've seen the books. Why do you think Mr Feathers came out here in the first place? They wouldn't have sent him out with his broom and dustpan if things weren't disastrous. Secondly, they have no choice. If they let the knitting mill carry on, it'll go bust, and the spinning mill will go down with it, nothing surer. They'd have to sell it up to pay the creditors. If things go that way we're all out of a job. It's got to burn.

Mr Flim stood, saw, silent. He walked a pace and a half behind Mr Feathers and kept his lips in a thin straight line. On the night of the fire he wiped the kerosene from his hands and stood in the courtyard glancing up at the whispers of smoke slipping like secret messages in narrow breathy lines, searing out from under locked doors and at the edges of the window casings. He heard a rattle that might have been ghost fingers, and little cries, sighs and squeakings from inside, a brushing, dusting, showering, suppressed roaring from within the mill. He smiled. His thin straight lips opened, curved, burst outward. He bolted the door shut and snapped the padlock over it. He walked away from the door into the centre of the yard between the two mills. He stood in the same place he had the first day he arrived from England and

looked up at the same loft window. He saw a faint yellow, a slight, reflected sunset shimmer there.

There, someone says, and the crowd are all calling, a lighted edge, the shine, the sound, the woomp of it. The smoke pouring. The sound of windows shattering. Then the flames are at the windows, pouring out of them. More people come out from the houses nearby, stand out on the street arms crossed, the heat hitting their faces and rolling past. It's a good half hour before the fire trucks get there, a good half hour too late. Bird has Glad wrapped under his shoulder. They watch the men going through their paces, unrolling the hoses, manning the pumps, running for vantage points, the hoses playing on the blaze, the water swallowed up, consumed by fire. A fireman charges along one wall, training a hose through a window, retreating back, a stocky figure black against the flames, leaping for the ground before the whole thing flares and tumbles.

Let's marry, Bird calls out to Glad.

He shouts into her ear, and turns her around to look into her shining eyes. She opens her mouth and he thinks that it is yes.

Did you hear me? he shouts, and, Yes, she shouts. Let's marry.

EVERYTHING GOOD

THEY SPENT THOSE short winter afternoons, between work and tea, walking Coburg and making plans. Evenings they sat close by the fire at her place. June, July, August. The last of winter. The two of them huddled up next to the coal burner.

Next year, Bird said. I'm tired of waiting. Let's do it when the summer comes. When it gets hot, let's marry the first hot day.

I'm all for that, said Glad.

The winter had been hard on her. She always looked cold. She was always putting on an extra layer, slapping her hands against her arms and complaining about the meanness of the fire. She was always longing for the sun. But Bird had been right about his prospects. Mr Binny stepped up to him in the yarn store a week after the fire.

Now young Wilson, he said, we need to tidy up these figures. We've been making an inventory and we find there is more wool missing than we

thought. All those baskets of dyed tops that were shifted out of the knitting mills must have been shifted back in by some clown. Then there's the wheeled baskets. They were all lined up along the outside wall of the spinning mills that night of the fire – do you remember? Anyway, they're gone as well. A spark must have flown. The cane would have gone up like. He stopped and looked at Bird a minute. Sizing him up. Then he went on.

The problem is we need to update your records. You're the one who has to alter, date and sign for them. Back date them I mean. You understand me? If it's not done just right, the insurers will get nervy. That's all we need after this disaster.

It'll mean staying back late, Bird, Mr Binny said, but I've never known you to be afraid of an honest hour's work. You're a good hard worker, Bird, said Mr Binny, and you'll deserve a bonus.

Sliding five pound notes across the table at him.

And more where that came from, said Mr Binny.

THE LAST TIME he saw her she was throaty and bad tempered. It was at her mother's place, and they sat by a mediocre August fire taking tea instead of going out.

Can't you see I'm sick? she said in a forced whisper. Do you really intend to take me out in this weather?

He laughed at her hoarseness, whispered in reply, she snapped his head off and put her face in her hands. Nothing he said helped. Bird got up with his tea half-finished and made for the door. She said she was sorry, but he didn't forgive her right away. That never was the way he went about things.

Get into bed and get yourself better, he told her. You're no sort of company like this.

I'll call by on Wednesday, he said. I'm working late the other nights.

He must have kissed her. Why couldn't he remember? Her forehead must have been hot. He couldn't have walked out without saying goodbye.

GLAD'S MOTHER WAS sitting with his Ma at the kitchen table when he got in late Tuesday night. Fynn was still up and standing next to the range, a strange expression on her face. Bird had a glimpse of Mrs Strongman's face,

red and ugly, before Ma was up and crossed to his side of the table, shielding her from view. She put her thin hands to his shoulders as if she wanted to shake him and said Glad's got worse Bird, and they've put her into hospital this morning. You can't go now Bird, they won't let you in. Even her mother has got to wait until morning. And anyway they're not allowing any visitors. The best you can do is go after work tomorrow. We'll know by then. The worst will be over.

There is everything about that night. There are the promises made to no one, to nothing, all the impossible undertakings. There is Fynn at his side and the way he feels that he must comfort her. The two of them sitting there on the steps out the front with their coats rugged up about them. The quiet of it. The moments when the fear seizes him, moments when it all seems like nothing and they will laugh about it in the years to come. Just five minutes, he tells himself, just five minutes at her side, and rehearses the things he will say. There is not so much the lightening of the sky as the street lamps dimming and blinking out and Bird watching it done and asking himself why? What does it have to do with Glad?

Then Ma was standing in the doorway with two mugs of strong black tea, and Bird wondered again, what has it to do with her? Then on his bike and off to work. Everything about that morning like but unlike every other day. As if he were looking at it through glass. Riding to work he freewheeled across the rail line just ahead of the workers' train, almost clipped it, never even saw it, just kept riding on, through the gates, into the mill, going on with the same duties of every other day. Adding up figures, checking dye lots, filling out requisitions.

By lunch time he thought she must be through the worst of it, the fever broken, the danger past. He went and stood by the burned-out mill, smoked under the eaves there where the last standing wall had been propped up to stop it collapsing before the wrecking crew came. He looked back toward the city. He rehearsed the fastest route to the Women's Hospital and what he would say when he got there. Tell her at last or just take a hold of her hands and press the strength back into them. He thought of the way she had sat by him as he recovered from that fever and realised it was his turn now, of course, that was it, to sit by her side and see her out of it. All through the afternoon he

was almost giddy with relief now that he understood. Just a matter of hours and the ride into the city separating them.

Before he could get to her she was dead. She'd died in the night, while Mrs Strongman and Ma sat up with the light burning at the kitchen table and Bird and Fynn sat out on the front step saying nothing. They had her home already and she was laid out in Mrs Strongman's front room, and Ma was there at the mill gates when the whistle blew and the workers all came out to stop Bird and Fynn in their tracks and take them to her. They walked together, the three of them, Bird pushing his bike past the workers cottages and the last of the market gardens, from Gaffney to Albion Street and then across to Sydney Road where Ma and Fynn caught a tram and Bird got onto his bike. There was nothing about the day to suggest anything had changed. Men were still shouting across the street at each other, and Ma and Fynn had run for the tram when they saw it, Fynn calling behind, we'll meet you there. Bird freewheeled into Royal Parade, the wind behind him, thinking it isn't so. People make mistakes like this all the time. It happens every day of the week.

It can't be right, he said aloud as he turned into Gatehouse Street, and again at Mrs Strongman's cast-iron fence. It can't be right, as he leant his bike against the front wall and reached for the knocker. The blinds at the front windows were pulled down on the inside and Glad's hand-lettered sign still showed through in the lower right hand corner of the window pane.

When he got inside he was taken first to the drawing room where he could not sit but had to stand, there were so many people there already. Then Mrs Strongman came and took him by the hand, pressed his hand hard in both of hers and made him come after her. She took him across the hall into Glad's workroom, opened the door and took him in, did it so fast, without speaking, that at first he did not realise what she was doing and had no time to pull away before he was inside and the door shut behind them. There were her tools lined up in order at the workbench under the window, pieces of leather laid out and a partially finished shoe on the last. He shook his head, stood leaning against the door and looking at her things and Mrs Strongman could not at first bring him to the other side of the room where she lay on the daybed. Then the desire to see her again became so terrible that his whole body began shaking and he let Mrs Strongman guide his steps.

When he saw her he saw at once that the gold was gone from her skin and he wanted to rub it, pinch it, push it back into her cheek. Her hair fell back behind her ears and the skin of her throat was pale, paler than he had ever seen it. He fell onto his knees and her name just then disappeared inside him and was gone despite his lips stretching and the awful ache and him wanting to say it. It was her hand, her hand he was holding, and the ring he'd given her gone off it too. He looked from the face to the hand to the throat, again and again. For a second the resemblance was gone, and he was unsure who it was he'd come to see. If he could just have remembered who in that second, he could have argued her back to life.

Gladys, said her mother from behind him. Gladys.

It was her hand he was holding, her hand that would not colour up as he pressed it, her hand brushing death across him and waving him away and out of Melbourne.

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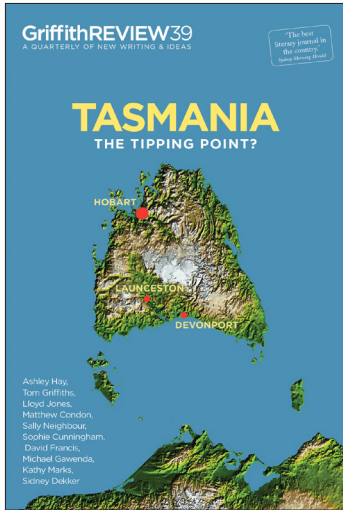
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