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PICADOR

S.

Here was this stain on the carpet, a wet patch big as a coffee table. He had no idea what it was or how it got there. But the sight of it put the wind right up him.

Until now Thursday hadn't seemed quite so threatening.

It was a simple enough thing, waking late and at liberty to the peals of the town hall clock below. Eight, nine, maybe ten in the a.m. – Keely lacked the will to count. All that stern, Calvinist tolling gave him the yips. Even closed, his eyes felt wine-sapped. He hung on a while delaying the inevitable, wondering just how much grief lay in wait. The tiny flat was hot already. Thick and heady with the fags and showers and fry-ups and dish-suds of others. The smells of his good neighbours. Which is to say the

stench of strangers, for his fellow tower-dwellers were alien to him in the most satisfying way imaginable, anonymous and reassuringly disconnected, mere thuds and throat-clearings behind bare brick walls, laugh tracks and pongs he needn't put a face to. Least of all – and strangest of any – the madwoman next door. In all these months he'd never seen her. All he knew was that she invested a good portion of each day fending off the wiles of Satan. Which was honest work, granted, but hard on the nerves. Especially his. For the moment she was mercifully silent, asleep or maybe holding Beelzebub to a nil-all draw between breakfast and lunch, and God bless her for that. Also for keeping it down while the poisonous afterglow of all that Barossa shiraz had its wicked way with him.

The building twitched in the wind, gave off its perpetual clank and moan of pipes, letting out the odd muffled scream. Ah, *Mirador*, what a homely pile she was.

He peeled back the lids with a gospel gasp and levered himself upright and bipedal if not immediately ambulatory. Teetered a moment in the bad weather and shapeless mortification of something like waking consciousness. Which was heinous. Though in the scheme of things today's discomfort was the least of his troubles. He should be glad of the distraction. This little malaise was only fleeting. Well, temporary. Just a bloody hangover. But for all that a pearler anyway, a real swine-choker. Even his feet hurt. And one leg was still intoxicated.

The real pain was yet to stir. A pillar of dust in the distance.

In the bathroom, before a scalding block of sunlight, he tilted at the mirror to see how far the eyes had retreated from the battlefield of his face. Above the wildman beard he was all gullies and flaky shale. Badlands. His wine-blackened teeth the ruins of a scorched-earth retreat.

He took himself hand over hand to the mouldy shower recess,

stood under a cold and profligate cataract until all prospects of revival were exhausted.

The towel not remotely fresh. Pressed to his face, it brought to mind the honest, plain, mildewy scent of hippies. Not to be judgemental, comrades. But while definitely on the nose, it hadn't quite graduated to the full gorgonzola. Life in it yet. If you were a man unmolested by romance. Having let yourself go to this extent.

He tied the rag about his softening waist, sloped into the living-room with its floor-to-ceiling window, and beheld the unstinting clarity of the western frontier: the shining sea, iron rooftops, flagpoles, Norfolk Island pines. All gathering up their cruel, wince-making sheen in the dregs of morning.

Port of Fremantle, gateway to the booming state of Western Australia. Which was, you could say, like Texas. Only it was big. Not to mention thin-skinned. And rich beyond dreaming. The greatest ore deposit in the world. The nation's quarry, China's swaggering enabler. A philistine giant eager to pass off its good fortune as virtue, quick to explain its shortcomings as east-coast conspiracies, always at the point of seceding from the Federation. Leviathan with an irritable bowel.

The great beast's shining teeth were visible in the east, through the kitchen window. Not that he was looking. But he could feel it at his back, the state capital looming out there on the plain in its sterile Windexed penumbra. It was only half an hour up the Swan River, as close and as incomprehensible as a sibling. For while Perth had bulldozed its past and buried its doubts in bluster, Fremantle nursed its grievances and scratched its arse.

And there she was at his feet. Good old Freo. Lying dazed and forsaken at the rivermouth, the addled wharfside slapper whose good bones showed through despite the ravages of age and bad living. She was low-rise but high-rent, defiant and deluded in equal measure, her Georgian warehouses, Victorian pubs, limestone

cottages and lacy verandahs spared only by a century of political neglect. Hunkered in the desert wind, cowering beneath the austral sun.

By God, didn't a man come over all prosy the morning after. These days he was pure bullshit and noise, just another flannel-tongued Jeremiah with neither mission nor prophecy, no tribe to claim him but family. His thoughts spluttered on, maudlin, grievous, fitful, lacking proper administration, useless for anything more than goading the pain the vicious light had set off already. And, Christ, it was beyond anything the booze could induce. Here it came, the smoke and thunder, the welling percussion in his skull. Like hoofbeats. Two riders approaching. And the wind set to howl.

In the kitchen he scabbled for ammunition, pre-emptive relief. Any bottle or packet would do. Said the joker to the thief. Lucky dip and rattle them blind from the knife drawer. Gurn them down like bullets. And reload. Or at least stand to. Sprawled against the countertop. Sweating through his soapy freshness in a few seconds. Think of something else.

He reached for the radio. Checked himself. Many, many months now, and he still struggled to master the impulse, as if some ruined bit of him yearned for the ritual of the pre-dawn recce, scouting for bad news before the phone began pinging. Because there'd always be a whisper, a Cabinet leak, a buried press release about another government cave-in, fresh permission to drill, strip, fill or blast. The industrial momentum was feverish. Oil, gas, iron, gold, lead, bauxite and nickel – it was the boom of all booms, and in a decade it had taken hostage every institution from government to education. The media were bedazzled. There was pentecostal ecstasy in the air, and to resist it was heresy. But that had been his gig, to meet the stampede head-on every morning, beginning in the dark, trolling across the frequencies half asleep while the basin

filled with shave water and the still functional face took shape in the mirror at roughly the same speed as his thoughts. Part of it was simple triage, belching out soundbites like a spiv's PR flak. All the while trying to hold to the long view, the greater hopes he'd begun with. Like appealing to people's higher nature. And getting Nature itself a fair hearing. Which was, of course, in this state, at such a moment in history, like catching farts in a butterfly net.

No easy thing to unwind from. The toxic adrenaline, the ceaseless performance, the monastic discipline. Sucking in trouble every day before sun-up, preparing a full day's strategy in the shower. Finding yourself in the office at midnight, after the final, fi e-way phone hook-up, shaking with rage, caffeine and fatigue. But a year's bitter liberty should have done the trick. Really. For a bloke who was half smart. Getting sacked? That was a mercy, a cold-turkey intervention. For which a man should be grateful. He was well out of it. What had it all been anyway but one long fighting retreat? Mere pageantry and panto. He'd just been something for the cowboys and their wild-eyed cattle to wheel past, a procedural obstacle set in their path while they yahooped on towards the spoils.

So screw it. Don't touch that dial. Not the radio, nor the telly. Least of all the laptop. Leave it shut there on the table like a silt-sifting mussel beside the mobile. He was no longer relevant. And he didn't give a shit about any of it now. He just couldn't. Would not. Didn't even read the papers anymore. Tried not to, at least. Had no need of more stories about 'clean coal'. The national daily prosecuting its long war against climate science. Didn't matter which rag you read, it would be another instalment about the triumph of capital. One more fawning profile of a self-made iron heiress and he'd mix himself a Harpic Wallbanger and be done with it. Just to get the fucking taste out of his mouth. You didn't even need to look. You knew what to expect. The summer ration of shark stories and prissy scandals about the same coked-up

footballer between episodes of soul-searching about shopping hours. Made your kidneys boil for shame.

Nah, the news only upheld what you understood already. What you feared and hated. How things were and would be. It was no help. Neither was the plonk, of course – only fair to concede that. Like the news, drinking offered more confirmation than consolation. And it was so much easier to fill a void than to contemplate it.

Still gnashing at that meatless bone. Let it go. Concentrate on choking down the morning's free-range analgesics. And stay vertical. Think up.

Well, the upside was he hadn't died in the night. He was free and unencumbered. Which is to say alone and unemployed. And he was in urgent need of a healing breakfast. Soon as all his bits booted up. Just give it a mo.

At the sliding door to the balcony he looked down beyond the forecourt across the flaring iron rooftops to the harbour. Cranes, containers on the quay in savage yellows, reds, blues; the hectic green superstructure of a tanker's bridge. Searing flash of sun on canted glass. Everything vivid enough to bring on an ambush.

The sea beyond the breakwater was flat, the islands suspended in brothy haze. An orange pilot boat surged past the moles and out into open water, twin plumes of diesel smoke flagging from its stacks, the wake like a whitening wound on the skin of the sea. Which seemed all very lyrical and seafaring until you cracked the door a little and felt the red-plain wind. More hellish updraught than pastoral uplift. Harsh, pitiless. Laden with grit sharp enough to flay a baby-boomer to the bone.

Retreat. Snap the slider back in its slot. And stand there like a mouth-breathing moron. In your rancid towel.

Still. The real estate agent was right: it was a hell of a view for the money. *That* was the upside. Not just surviving the night but waking to this, an unparalleled prospect of the great Indian

Ocean. The champagne outlook for a homebrew outlay. The Mirador wasn't just the tallest building in town, it was the ugliest by quite a margin. You had to smile at the lovely deluded aspirational romance of the name. When local worthies could have just settled for Aqua Vista or Island Vue they plumped for Mirador: bolthole for the quaking matador, the sex-free paramour, sad, sorry and head-sore. Where you had, despite your fears, the unsought luxury of looking out from on high. Out and down. Like a prince. From your seedy little eyrie. On all the strange doings and stranger beings below. All those folks, booted and suited, still in the game. Trying to give a shit. While keeping the wolf from the door. As if that were even possible.

Keely rested his brow against the warm glass of the door. A ship's horn set the pane thrumming against his skull. The first blast sent a zizz through his brainpan, down his jaw to the base of his neck. The second was longer and stronger, rooting so deeply into him he recoiled and backpedalled with a grunt.

And that was when he registered the strange sensation underfoot. The carpet. It was wet. And not just wet, it was sodden.

The stain was a metre long. It squelched as he stepped out of it. He noted, for what it was worth, that there were two distinct wet patches – one large, the other small – like the elements of an exclamation mark. Like two blasts of a horn, which at least had the courtesy of signifying something.

Keely's place was ten storeys up, top floor; this was unlikely to be a plumbing issue or an overflowing bath. A leak in the roof? The last time a decent spot of rain graced this city, he'd been in a job and not quite so comprehensively divorced. Anyhow, there were no watermarks on the nasty stucco ceiling. It was low enough to reach on tiptoe. The surface wasn't simply arid, it felt powdery, left white grit on his fingertips. And the rest of the flat – galley kitchen, bedroom – was normal. Floor, walls, ceiling. Even the

kitchen sink was dry. The only other wet surface in the place was the grout-sick shower stall he'd just left.

Keely slumped into the solitary armchair and looked out across the balcony with its coralline aggregations of dove shit. No reason to panic about a bit of damp carpet, he knew that, but his heart knocked like a sick diesel. And it was with him again, that evil shimmer. Fucking head. All these weeks. Mersyndols, codeines the size of bullsharks; they'd kick in soon. Surely. But he couldn't even feel them in the water yet. Swim, you bastards. It was an effort to think straight, to glance past his hairy knees at the gun-metal carpet and find a reason for such provocation as this wet floor, to reason on it and not panic.

With a single big toe, he dabbed at the nylon weave. Positively marshy. He stood again. Pressed his foot into the disturbing lushness of it. The towel fell away and there he was, naked, flabby, heat-blotched. He was a long way up, but knowing his luck some unsuspecting ratepayer was getting an eyeful. Hoary morning glory, ahoy! He kicked the towel against the wall, swayed a moment from the effort. And then an awful thought reached him, as if on relay. The room swam a little.

What if he'd made this stain himself? Had he done things last night he didn't remember? Had it come to that? He'd hit it hard lately but he didn't drink to the point of passing out. Well, not *blacking* out, that wasn't his form. He got hammered, not crazy. But who else could have spilt something here in his livingroom? And spilt what, exactly? He hoped to Heaven, and by all that was green and holy, that he hadn't found a new means of disgracing himself. Couldn't endure it.

But he had to know.

So he knelt on the carpet and sniffed. He dabbed at the fibres, smelt his fingers – delicately, tentatively at first, and then more boldly – pressing his palms into the dampness, snuffling, rubbing,

squinting. Until he thought of the picture he made, truffling about on all fours, date in the air, tackle adrift, whiffing out his own spoor like a lost mutt in full view of whichever bionic parking inspector happened to look skyward at this awful moment. Which – yes – seemed funny enough in its way, just didn't feel very amusing. Not yet, not while he was trapped in the dread of not knowing, with shame looming behind the flashes of colour in his head. He'd laugh later. Right now he had to make sure.

Safe. All he wanted. Was to be safe. In his flat. In himself. So he kept at it. Until he was satisfied. Reasonably, moderately sure. Unable, at least, to detect a hint of urine. Or faint notes of puke. Or any other bodily fluid.

Thank God. Thank Ralph Nader, Peter Singer – the entire sandal-wearing pantheon. Comrades, he was in the clear. Which solved nothing, of course, but you had to hold onto any little triumph that came your way, didn't you? Yes. Yes, yes, yes. For three seconds Keely was exultant. Until the thought sank in. There he was. A middle-aged man of moderate intelligence, nuddied up and egregiously hungover. Almost high-kicking and spangle-tossing at the prospect that he had *probably* not gotten up in the night, off his chops on the fruit of the Barossa, and pissed on his own floor.

So. Elation departed in haste. And dear God. Here it was. Whatever it happened to be. There on the carpet. Evidence that his inner Elvis had surely left the building.

And now, next door, as if feeling his misery in the ether, the demoniac started up for the day. No you don't, she said through the thin wall. No, you won't. Never!

No, he muttered bitterly. Probably not.

He was hungry.

He poured himself a bowl of muesli and champed away penitently, not taking his eyes from the stain. Nah, that wasn't

urine. But if he was wrong, on a February day like this, his sanctuary would soon reek like a Marseilles pissoir.

After two spoonfuls of Swiss chaff he gagged and conceded defeat. He required an improper breakfast.

Regardless.

Immediately.

Along the open walkway of the tenth floor, on the eastern face of the building, all doors were shut and most curtains drawn against the sun, so there was no one to greet, nothing to be said as Keely made his way towards the lifts in the roasting wind. To steady himself he gripped the iron balustrade. The metal was lumpy from decades of paint, as scaled and lime-caked as the taff-rail of a tramp steamer. Hauling himself along it he felt the full span of uprights begin to vibrate in weird sympathy, humming louder with every step until it seemed the building and the surrounding streets were speaking across each other. Down there it was a mash of idling buses, cooling stacks, car alarms and feral screamers. Behind, below, before him, the air sawed and seethed. Good Christ, the heat, the cacophony – they were insupportable.

But he had to get out, pull his mind away from what he didn't understand, couldn't fix, had to let slide.

At the lifts he hunted a bit of shade, which meant the grungy stairwell. While he waited, the croon and chirp of little kids rose from the convent playground across the side street. Rugrats having at it – this was the sort of noise a man should never tire of. But in truth it was getting old. Even child's play sounded sinister after a while, something else to steel yourself against.

And now his heart was in his neck again.

And where was the bloody lift?

He wondered if it was possible he'd left his door open last night, just flaked out and left it ajar in the smothering heat. Maybe some nutjob had snuck in for a laugh, to mess with him, give him a fright. No shortage of scumbags in the building. But the door was closed when he went to bed. Wasn't it? Pissed or sober, he was very particular about locking up. Anyway, it was shut when he woke. If someone had crept in, seizing the moment, taking advantage of his temporary lapse or possible derangement, they'd pulled the door to on their way out. From what – good breeding, pity, regret? There was no sign of any other mischief. They'd taken nothing. Not that there was much to take. He had no enemies here. That he knew of. He kept to himself. Studiously. No one, not even family, had crossed the threshold. So the thought of a lurker there while he slept, someone hovering in the hot darkness, watching – it went through him like a colonic twitch.

The lift was mercifully empty. He travelled unseen and uninterrupted to the ground floor. Let the lobby doors roll back. Took it full in the face. All that hideous light. Walked out like a halfwit into a bushfire.

He didn't even know where he was headed. Discovered himself walking the wrong way, for one thing. It was hot enough to kill an asbestos sparrow. The concrete forecourt livid, the street branding,

blinding, breath-sucking. Acid light plashed white underfoot, swashing wall to wall, window upon window, and he waded in it a moment, tilting spastic and helpless, so suddenly porous and chalky it was all behind his eyes in an instant, fizzing within his skull until it rendered everything outside him in flashes and flickers. No gentling tones out here, only abyssal shadows or colours so saturated they looked carcinogenic. Keely glimpsed, gasped, fought off the dread and gimped on gamely, but he didn't see the bodies on the pavement outside the Chinese joint until he'd almost trampled them.

A girl hunkered in the busy foot-traffic beneath an audience of women who bickered with such conviction they had to be relatives. All of them fat and angry, red-faced, sniping. The girl herself was changing a baby's nappy in the street; a hot, shrieking girl-child on the bare concrete. And as he pulled up, sculling a moment, disoriented as much as obstructed, he felt the clan stiffen, saw them scowl as if preparing to fend him off. He hesitated, sought a course around them, as the oldest, a stout and ugly woman, bunched a Kmart bag and shoved it beneath the infant's head. In nearly the same moment the squatting mother shot a glance upwards that seemed directed solely at him. It may only have been a glance of shame or even defiance but to Keely it felt like hatred and he turned aside as if struck.

He angled away into an oncoming torrent of pedestrians, all boiled faces and beetling sunglasses, a surge of elbows, phones, smoke-puckers and semi-syllables within a fug of sweat and warring perfumes. He yielded towards the road's edge where buses shuddered and gulped at the kerb. A skateboarder swept past. The street pulsed and roared as he fought for a bearing. Target, pharmacy, real estate agent, bank. Fuck, he was listing, yawing, hopelessly self-correcting. It was more than he could manage. Any second he'd capsize.

So he lurched into the closest entry. Coles. Safe harbour. Obedient glass doors, airconditioning, muzak. Went deep, headed instinctively for the fluorescent headwaters, seeking cool air and cooler still, until he found himself in the produce section, staring at spears of Peruvian asparagus in slender, uniform lines of pale green. They were only cut vegetables, for Christ's sake, and cheap imports at that, but there was something lovely and clement about their serried ranks and pastel colour, and now that he noticed it, the entire refrigerated colonnade had over it a misty sheen cool enough to make a Celt weep. Moist, clean, unending blur. Beneath the muzak, a special kind of quiet. Silent gusts of respite. And such calm, such unpeopled order. He caught himself fighting the urge to lie down there in the lee of these wafting cabinets and sleep till dark. Just him and poor Karen Carpenter. Him and the clean pine crates and the Pine O Clean disinfectant and those vegetables to which clung the last faint odour of something like life itself. He imagined it, thought better of it, then discovered himself on the lino, being stood over by a woman with spectacles and brown fists. She seemed distressed, even angry, but she was being perturbed in a language he didn't speak yet. She pointed at him excitedly, bleating and toothbaring a little before she began to hammer with some emphasis at the steel cradle of the impressive tomato display. But his cheek was cool against the floor and he couldn't quite feel the immediacy of her concern. And then she was yanking at him without fear or favour, and he was on his feet, alone.

Maybe this was what it was like to die a little, to feel shriven, rescued, redeemed. Having your collar pulled, your fucking beard tugged by the roots until there you were, upright and guiltless, watching your irritated saviour scuff away in Third World footwear, pushing a loaded trolley.

Becalmed. Adrift. Summoning a bit of puff.

He ghosted through the aisles accompanied by the sad, sweet

Carpenters – who he hoped were now both safely dead. For his peace of mind. For their own good.

Finally, for the sake of propriety, to feel in charge of himself once more, he made a few purchases. The steadying force of retail.

This. This. That, whatever it was. Couldn't afford any but he bought them all.

Going through the motions at the checkout helped a little, but it occurred to him – winked like an oil light on the dash – that he really could be losing his mind. And that couldn't be all his fault. Surely.

The change. Which he accepted graciously. Along with the girl's limp smile of boredom.

And there he was, successfully transacted, having paid dearly for his little digression, his minutes of stunned mullethood, hoisting this clammy bag of unnecessaries, suddenly aware again of how eerily hungry he was and why he'd ventured out in the first place.

He craved a couple of Bub's fluffy double-shots. But he'd never make it to the Strip. He lacked the loins, pure and simple. Only a trek of three hundred metres or so, but out of range today. He was rogered. Unless he chanced his arm somewhere here in the refrigerated mini-mall. There was a nook of sorts beside the Cut and Blow. Yes, here it was. With malarial bain-marie and plastic tables. Open to the polished concourse, so the muzak was free and endless, and the smells of burning cheese and scorched hair roiled like confluences about the vinyl palm tree separating the two establishments. What the hell. Time to experiment. Necessity being the motherfucker of whatever is in its way.

Took a little round table. Pressed his thumbs, like his very own executioner, to his temples. Ordered something that sounded safe enough. And took stock.

Usually – on his standard wasted day – he'd walk an hour, take a swim, lounge at Bub's and dodge certain faces by judicious use

of the menu or a reiki tract left by some wide-eyed chump. All the while convincing himself that despite appearances his days retained a certain functional coherence. That was an effort, and today such feats were beyond him. He felt peeled, without defences. He was not himself, not even the remnant self he'd been yesterday afternoon. Maybe it was just the bad start. The nasty fright. Which, of course, would turn out to have a simple explanation. But the town felt hostile this morning and the world past its modest boundaries without pity. He could feel it pressing hot and breathless against the glass doors in the distance. Or perhaps that was just weather.

Besides, it was pension day. The fortnightly full moon. Twelve hours of tidal chaos. So if he really wanted to press on further from home in search of better fare and more congenial surrounds, then he'd have to run the payday gauntlet between this little granny mall and Bub's. And that was a lot of crazy shit to get through. For that you needed skin. Ramrod will. And funds. Because before you even got to the corner there were toothless winos and humbugging Aborigines, each with a case to make and a cloud of misery and body odour to drive it home. Once you'd fought your way clear of the bottlo and the junkie park, you'd need to penetrate the phalanx of charity-tin rattlers skulking soulfully in the trinket alleys and shady arcades. And what could you do but honour their efforts, sign their petitions, fork out the shekels while seething? He gave bogus addresses, snail and email, and hated himself for it. Their causes were just but doomed.

Thank God they were all so fresh and endlessly replaceable, these kids, because they almost never recognized him. What could you tell them, these smiley elves from Oxfam, Greenpeace, or Friends of the Forest, what could you honestly say? It killed you, the bright-eyed marsupial innocence of their faces. No. No sir. Not today.

And even if he did make it that far without falling over again or yacking on someone, he'd still have the buskers to deal with. They were worse than any charity picket, more offensive and evil-smelling than any derro or waistcoated do-gooder. These talentless nitwits were the final obstacle between you and a fistful of arabica beans. And by the time you reached them you were already punch-drunk and desperate. Without discrimination or pride. So there you went, most days, creeping past the tattoo dens and incense emporia where they lurked, steeling yourself to stride by solemnly but almost always ending up shelling out like a man envious of the higher gifts. Just to get by, just to be left alone, just because you felt sorry for the same three chords about the usual damage done.

After all that he'd finally totter onto the little avenue of self-congratulation that everyone called the Cappuccino Strip. Fifty umbrellas around which a certain civic pride once rallied. In the seventies the Strip had been a beacon of homely cosmopolitanism, a refuge from the desolate franchise dispensation stretching from sea to hazy hills. But that was before it calcified into smugness. Somewhere along the way the good folks of the port settled in the wisdom that coffee was all the culture and industry a town required. Butcher shops, hardware stores, chandlers and bakeries had steadily been squeezed out and supplanted by yet more cafés, new spaghetti barns. Rents were extortionate, house prices absurd. The city had become a boho theme park perched on a real estate bubble, and behind every neglected goldrush façade and vacant shopfront was a slum landlord counting pennies, lord-ing it over family and bitching about refugees.

Freo, *mon amour*. It gave him five kinds of sulphuric reflux to think of it. Didn't know how he could still love it so. Tried to tell himself at least it wasn't Perth, that pastel toy town upriver. But, Christ, that wasn't saying much, was it?

No, this sad little caff would have to be it today. He was physically

infirm and psychically unable to go any further. He'd sit tight and watch the trolley-boys trundle by, the parched oldsters wheezing in from Centrelink and Culley's on their walkers, the rat-tailed infants chucking tantrums on the shiny tiles. He could bear this. Couldn't he? He was here already, he'd made his order. He was all set. And yet he could not rest. For the mind charged on, cataloguing the horrors he'd spared himself. The manky footpath jewellers, the already drunk Irish backpackers, the mouthy schoolkids.

Still, when he beheld his breakfast on its sunny yellow plate, his resolve began to decay. He couldn't help but think of properly fried bacon, of hash browns and fluffy free-rangers, of a coffee upon whose bronzed *crema* a spoonful of sugar might wallow, like a cherub upon a cloud. As he struggled with some aberrant species of ham-and-cheese croissant that clung to his gums like denture glue, he began to wonder if he might just man up after all and make a dash to Bub's. Well, perhaps not a dash. A power shuffle, a wilful creep.

Hell, yes. And he was bracing against the sticky plastic in preparation for a slow-motion getaway when he remembered the time. It was witching hour on the Strip. That meant yummy mummies. Über-matrons. He couldn't abide them. Or resist them. They'd see him off in a heartbeat. Without even noticing him. Without registering his feeble presence. With their hulking all-terrain strollers and jogging sheen, their kooky ethnic headscarves and gleaming thighs, they were enough to make a man kick a Buddhist. Late morning they ran in packs, descending upon the quarter to circle their wagons and colonize entire cafés for cistern-sized lattes and teeny-cutesy babyminos. There was something loathsome and luscious about their fruity chirrups, their sweet-smelling sweat, their mist of satisfaction. Not content to be healthy and handsome, they had to be cruelly ravishing. And Jesus, even Leni Riefenstahl had spared us lycra.

Keely's contempt and lust were no match for them. Which was why he usually went early. To save himself the suffering. So that was that. Here he stood. Sat. Wrestling his greasy bolus. Sipping this bituminous brew. Having barely gotten change from a tenner. Let no man say he didn't keep an open mind.

Nothing for it but to suck it up and beat a ginger retreat.

Home was only forty metres away, sixty at the most. But something of a challenge given the blurred vision and the intermittent sparks of lightning in his head. Twice he needed to steady himself. First against a jacaranda. Then by high-tackling a molten parking meter. And in these restorative pauses he leaned back like a tranquilized pole-dancer to take in the brutal monolith that rose above trees, chimneys and whining wires.

The Mirador. Not much of the winsome Spanish turret about it, that's for sure. It was a classic shitbox: beige bricks, raw concrete galleries, ironbar railings, doors and windows like prison slots. Hard to credit that fifty years ago some nabob thought it a grand idea, a harbinger of progress. The place had grown old and grim within months of its completion and the subsequent years had not been gentle. Locals despised it. But it had been a haven for old folks, retired lumpers and clerks, invalid pensioners, transients, drunks and welfare mothers. They were still there, many of them, lately joined by the first gentrifying hopefuls and middle-class casualties like himself. Keely looked up at its meagre balconies. The drying mop, the ruined telly, the Dockers flag, the jaunty sunflower in a pot, the wheelchair flashing in the sun.

He swayed against the meter and felt a little flutter of affection for the old hulk. Like him, the building was a product of the sixties. And like him it was too large a mistake to be undone.

I'm not much, he told himself on the caustic forecourt, but I'm home.