



CHAPTER 6

DWELLINGUP

Simon! Throw the ball to Davo! Good! Good! And good catch Davo! Okay Simon, he's throwing it back to you! Get it! Get it!" Simon tried to catch the ball but missed and went awkwardly running after it laughing.

We were on the way to Francine's home and stopped in Mandurah to visit some friends of hers who lived in a large two story house. I hadn't played catch in a while but was holding my own with Simon. It was a good way to interact with him and gave me something constructive to do. After a while we went back inside and drank hot chocolate. Simon showed Francine some drawings he'd done. She responded with genuine interest and once again made my heart melt to see how naturally kind she was—and patient. Not that his art wasn't good. I liked it—simple line drawings. Simon is a big, good natured fellow. He's forty years old and has Down Syndrome. He was one of a dozen patients living in Man-

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durah House, a home for the intellectually challenged—the brain damaged and retarded. This is one of the places where she works.

“It’s a busman’s holiday,” I told her.

“Bushmen don’t have holidays, do they?” she replied.

“And neither do Bodhisattvas.”

Her job is not always as easy as throwing a ball. Some of the people she works with at other places can’t take care of themselves at all—like Mark whom she tended to in Sonoma County. Some are a lot harder than Mark who didn’t give her any major trouble. She says she prefers working with people who can take care of themselves at least a little and who are somewhat socialized and cooperative. Sometimes her wards can be feisty and cantankerous, opposing her every move as she changes their diaper—jerking around or spitting on her face. “Spit is okay, but phlegm’s awful. It’s the worst. I’ve had ‘em vomit on my head and piss on me and shit on me, but the worst is phlegm,” she says. That series of images stuck with me. What an occupation.

But nobody was spitting phlegm on her or anything else unpleasant. She’s popular, eliciting big smiles from staff and patients alike. Her dream she said is to help this home out with a substantial gift. The government is pretty good at providing for unfortunate people in Australia, but of course it’s never enough. I asked her what specifically she’d want money to go toward and she said if it’s a small amount she could buy more games, recreation equipment, furniture, and create a bigger lawn. If there’s more money after that, the plumbing could be re-done and a new roof and they could buy the house next door and the lot behind and she continued to innumerate ways to help out till I realized she’d have all the retarded, brain damaged, and otherwise mentally or physically disadvantaged people in Australia well taken care of if she could—and then she’d extend her largess to the rest of the orb and all its suffering beings one degree of latitude at a time. Bodhisattva.

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Back in the car, continuing on rural roads, Frannie talked about her mother.

“It’s not easy to be there at home with her. She just sits in the dark. She’s not the same. I can’t help. I want to but I can’t. I go out and work in the yard and do little things but...” and she couldn’t talk anymore. There was nothing I could do but feel sad with her.

After driving along silently for a while we entered the little town of Dwellingup, population 452, and parked in front of a hotel and pub.

“Dwellingup’s a one pub town,” she said.

I didn’t know it was so small. Considering its prominence on the map I thought it would be much, much bigger. Just shows how sparsely populated Australia is—twenty million in an area larger than the US.

After introducing me to the bartender and the other five people in the pub, she got us a couple of beers—an Emu Draft for her and an Emu Bitter for me.

“No Fosters? I thought it was Australian for beer.”

“I never had one. And what do they come in?” she asked, holding her beer up to prominently display the foam sleeve.

“Stubby holders,” I said proudly.

“That’s right.”

The friendly locals called me mate and Davo and her, mate and Frannie. I love the way Aussie’s talk, the way she talks. The inflections go up. It’s got a cheerful, positive feeling. But it’s not always clear to me. It’s not like they’re slurring their words but they do cut off a lot of consonants. And they tend to talk so fast—like trying to keep up with any foreign language I guess. I remember the first time I took Frannie to a bar in California. After we’d had a couple pints of Guinness she got somewhat garrulous and was going on and I just sat there and stared at her and finally said I loved listening to her but that I couldn’t understand anything she was saying.

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The background noise didn't help. I came to understand her better and better as time went by.

Time to go. Frannie ordered a six pack for Ron. Ah, company I guess. Then it was a short drive to her home on the edge of the national forest. That's not such a big deal in Dwellingup where everything's on or almost on the edge of the national forest.

"Here's the front yard," she gestured dramatically at the brownish green semi-hibernating lawn bordered by a picket fence and dirt clod beds with bulbs and flowers planted and some still in pots. "And here's the front porch with rocking chair for keeping up with the neighborhood. This bed (complete with pillow and covers) is for sloshed friends who need a place to crash, mainly Freddy who comes at times in the middle of the night and is often gone by the time I'm up."

A quick tour through the living room and kitchen, peeking into two small bedrooms. Hers thick with bedding, clothes, a mirror, sculpturettes, paintings, writing on the wall, a dresser, a stand for beads and scarves, a dark wood armoire with doors half opened and coats and blouses spilling out. The next bedroom has less going on but is piled with paintings, some half done.

"Mary's an artist."

So is Frannie. Or maybe she's more of a craftist. A step down from the kitchen into the ante-room off of which are a small stuffed storage room for her art and craft supplies and bathroom with tub. It's a small house but plenty for her and a friend.

There are little touches of her neo-Aussie baroque artistry on the walls, the floors, the ceilings, the doors. She opens the back one.

"And here's the patio and backyard and laundry hut and that building used to be a garage and that's firewood on the right side of it and the left side's just got junk. It's to be my studio."

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A nice size back yard. It's a great place. God, I can't believe Francine has her own home. Someone with her type of employment and lifestyle would be unlikely to own a home in my parts. She bought it for \$5000 down with payments of \$200 a month—where I live it would be more like \$50,000 down and \$2000 a month.

“And here comes Stubby! Hi Stubby!” she calls out.

Oh my gosh, there's a pit bull coming at me full bore. Nice doggy. Lick, lick, lick—good doggy. Relief, he's friendly.

“Stubby's Mary's dog,” she says as he turns his attention to her.

She opens a couple of beers and puts them into stubby holders—oh, I see what they're named for. She designates one stubby holder to be mine, not only for the duration of my stay but to take with me as a souvie. It's got that funny little furry animal on it that was at The Maze museum—a quokka, she reminds me.

“But hey—I thought those beers were for Ron,” I said.

“They *were* for Ron—later on. And that's now.”

“Ron's coming later on which is now?”

“You're dense.”

I thought for a minute, then, “Sorry, sorry. I get it. Later on—late Ron. Here's to Ron.”

We built a fire in the iron stove with a glass door as the light outside the living room window went from blue to black. Stubby snuggled up to us in turns. It made me miss Lola. I looked at the fire and at the paisley fabric on the yard-sale couches and walls decorated with home-made paintings, day off dabbings, a string of tiny colored lights, and masks staring down at us. On the end tables and shelves are knick-knacks, rocks of interest, twigs and twine and darn and heck she's made and collected. I looked at her and admired her innocence and purity and mystery. Sometimes she seemed to shapeshift from one appearance to another. She was thirty-seven but could look like a teenager, then like a crone.

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I went to my suitcase and retrieved some gifts I gave to her in the warmth of the fire. One was the *Botany of Desire*. Another a bag of lint I'd saved from the dryer. When she taught the kids to make paper back home she'd commented that laundry lint made the best. So I saved it. While she was inspecting it, there came a knock at the door. Some mates dropped by and the intimate spell was broken as more wine and beer flowed and smoke rose. One mate was Banger, a former boyfriend. He came staggering in and gave me a big booze smelling hug, said he was dying to meet me. I excused myself in time and went back to her absent roommate's bed and crashed.

Next morning I was up early, amazed at where I found myself, built a new fire in the living room, using waxy cubes to get it going, and sat zazen floating in the flame, a delicious special effect not found in any meditation hall I know of. Stubby came in from his round soft bed by the back door and sat with me. An hour later Francine got up and made tea that we sipped quietly by the morning's hopping flames.

In the anteroom I watched as she split a short piece of firewood into smaller pieces for—for what? The water heater! My gosh, she has a wood-burner. When it was done heating, we took showers, put on fresh clothes, ate granola, and drank black tea with cream. Doing the dishes in her small sink, I studied the crystal bobbles, purple doo-dads on the window sill, rainbow spiral painting, and impromptu guest poem scrawled on the wall, a patchwork of blues and greens.

“Now that you're here on my turf,” Francine said while combing back her long light brown hair, “I reckon it's my turn to show you some of my favorite spots for hangin' out.”

From the dirt alley behind her house we took a narrow path that led into the national forest. It smelled superb. She said that's mainly the jarrah—it's a jarrah forest. I asked her if there's an unfriendly plant there like poison oak or poison ivy in the States. Nothing round here like that. On-

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ward into the bush, Stubby running up ahead and returning at her command to be leashed as a guy with a Labrador approached.

“You’re dog friendly?” she asked.

“Yeah, yours?”

“Yeah. What sex?”

“Female.”

“Good. Mine’s male.”

We chatted while Stubby and lab romped around. We’ve got to be careful with Stubby because the fine for having a loose pit bull is \$5000 Australian, which I multiply by two-thirds to get the easy Yank equiv—threes forever. She’s required to have “Dangerous Dog” signs posted on the fence.

Continuing down the path Francine taught me plant names and uses. There was a red kangaroo paw and it did look like that and then there was a green one. Some flowers were out—yellow buttercups blooming from a shrub and blue leschenaultia with its white center and blue landing platform for the bees, "the floor of the sky" to the Aborigines. To me it’s all just plants and trees and flowers. But to her there is much finer delineation. I’ve had that relation to other people in my life. I meet them and learn all the names. My vocabulary goes from plant and flower to ficus and narcissus. Then we go our separate ways and I revert to plant and flower.

We came to an area where junk resided between the trees—a totally rusted Austin Healy with no doors or windows or tires—overgrown with vines, a broken and molded easy chair, a mattress mostly reduced to springs, little stuff such as marbles and a shoe horn. She mined for something useful or ornamental—a trophy of our walk to bring home—and selected a tarnished serving spoon.

We came to a cemetery. She pointed out a tombstone inset with a glass case holding a chromed motorcycle engine

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—enshrined there by the son of the woman biker who loved doing what she died.

Back home we got in Francine's wounded car and visited a few of her favorite further flung outdoor haunts—a high bluff overlooking a vast plain extending flat to the horizon. There was something man-made, running along for miles. Then to a walk along the Murray River with swimming holes and white water flowing over and around large rocks. Here's where she frolics in the summer and where she saw the deadly tiger snake in January.

“Where are the deadly tiger snakes now?” I asked.

“Oh they don't come out till spring,” she said.

“Spring? There are flowers blooming and it's feeling a little springish,” I said glancing around at the ground.

“They don't always kill you,” she said reassuringly.

She took me into the woods a ways and showed me a large sprawling tree with enough room in its lap for us to sit for a spell. She said one day she'd walked way over here and gone swimming by herself and it got dark with not enough moon to see her way back so she curled up and slept in the lap of this tree. Wow. Like Johnny Appleseed.

We visited a friend of hers at his small fruit winery and admired his wood carvings, went to a local art gallery where she talked to the luscious owner about doing a crafts workshop there for kids. I was tempted to inquire about the woman's availability but I knew there probably wouldn't be any opportunity.

The Forest Heritage Centre was jarrah leaf-shaped with three large rooms in the form of rounded sections that narrowed to sharp points, the middle one the largest. There was a treewalk on a railed platform that extends sixty meters into the canopy of the forest that surrounds the center. Most the trees around here seem to be jarrah. One of the blades of the building is an active woodworking shop.

Here I learned the meaning of the name of the town. “Up” is an Aboriginal ending used in a lot of Australian place names because it means “place.” So I assumed Dwellingup

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meant a dwelling place. Wrong. To quote from the Forest Heritage Centre's literature: "This prime location, near the Murray River, was a traditional Aboriginal camping place long before European settlement. In fact, the Aboriginal meaning of Dwellingup is 'place nearby water'." The most memorable item in the forestry center was the Snotty Gobble, a glob of a plant the Aborigines used for chewing gum.

At the Dwellingup Museum I learned this was a logging town. The logging was coming to an end as the forest now is mostly protected. There was a big fire in 1916 that just about burned everything down but the town got rebuilt and it turned out jarrah has a large swelling under it in the ground that stores carbohydrates so that it can come back strong after a fire. The genus of the jarrah is *Eucalyptus* and the species *marginata*. Now I see why there are so many types of Eucs—it's a genus. And *Marginata* is the name of the street Frannie's house is on—129 *Marginata* Crescent. I see we can take the "timber route" on the Hotham Valley Railway and hoped we would have time to get to it.

There was a mine nearby. We drove under the sluice, the conveyor belt that runs for miles from the mine to the processing plant. Francine says it's the longest of its kind in the world. Ah, we saw that from the bluff.

When we got back home her roommate Mary had returned. She's talkative and funny and part Maori from New Zealand. Mary brought some more Emu Beer. I told Mary I saw the roller-blader with turban and guitar at Venice Beach she'd mentioned when Francine had put her on the phone some months back to introduce us. I learn she's about to go to Scotland for half a year. Before long they decided to go to the pub. I begged off.

I determined to make myself useful. After some snooping, I found rags under the sink and got to cleaning. Right away I was content in a labor of love, which made my passions smaller and the invisible world large.

Moving along the kitchen surfaces I read the messages chalked on the front of the fridge painted with olive

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blackboard paint. There was my flight number and time. I drew a square by it and checked it. Then I made two more little squares and wrote “vacuum” and “dust” next to them. Then I wrote “finish off wine” by another square and uncorked a partially full bottle of red and soon checked that one off. “Good to have one completed,” I said to myself and wonder about the habit of saying out loud what has just silently gone through one's mind.

I searched around but there was no more booze. Then in cleaning I come across a maroon, waxed, cardboard container with spigot atop the fridge—booze in a box, wino stuff. I gulped the cheap, challenging port and wiped and vacuumed and gulped more till Frannie and Mary came home at two. After expressing disgust I could actually drink the port in a box that's been sitting there since forever, Mary retired. Francine was already in bed. I stoked the fire, crawled under a blanket on the couch, Stubby curled up next to me, I petted him for a moment then got up and went to the fridge and marked checks in the squares by vacuum and dust.

Frannie made Indonesian food for lunch. She marveled at how clean and tidy everything was. She'd been up early helping the man across the street with a sick dog.

“You look tired,” I said.

She feigned staggering. “If I can just last long enough to serve out one last meal before I drop.”

Mary sat down as Frannie put the food on the table.

“Thank god. I'm starving,” I said before gratefully taking my first bite. “Haven't eaten since lunch yesterday.”

“Poor dear. I run off and party while you stay home famished and cleaning,” said Frannie.

“Hey, I got to finish off your booze and a free place to stay and I ain't here to cramp your style. Anyway, you're usually off being Florence Nightingale to the brain damaged. Actually, their union paid me to come here and tidy up as a small way of saying thanks.”

“You've done well.”

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“That’s the secret to life—serve women, listen to women.”

“How many exes do you have?” Mary asked.

“Depends on how you count ‘em.”

“Should we ask them how good a job you’ve done on this obedience or is it more likely disobedience?”

“That would indeed cast another light on the issue. I may fail to live up to my ideals, but, however feebly, I aim to be up to them. It’s not just serving women. Men have female in them—it’s the female side of things that I strive to serve. It’s like Lao Tsu saying that the mysterious female is the only door to the Tao—or something close to that.”

“Sounds good,” said Frannie.

“Sounds like the same as when people say Jesus is the only way,” said Mary.

“Same thing,” I said.

Mary looks up. “Jesus is a mystic female?”

“Sure. Like saying Christ consciousness is the only way to union with God. Or we must get beyond conceptual mind in order to realize the absolute, know our true nature. Just different metaphors and myths to help us wake up out of our little painful worlds.”

“Food for thought,” said Mary.

“Booze for thought,” I said, “As in the opium of the masses.”

“Boobs for thought,” said Francine.

“As in sexual sublimation,” Mary said.

“Back to the food,” concluded Francine.

“Amen,” said Mary.

“Looks like you need more sleep,” I told Francine when we were done. “I’ll clean up.”

“I thought I was the boss,” she said with half closed eyes.

“That’s my feminine side talking to your masculine side.”

She complied. Sauntered to her room.

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Mary went out to do errands and took Stubby. I peeked into Francine's bedroom, saw her sleeping peacefully and sighed, wandered around, and realized I'd better get these idle hands doing something. I went to the woodshed out back, started rolling rounds into the sun, sharpened an axe with a rusted file, found a sledgehammer and splitting wedge, and got to it. By late afternoon there were dark clouds overhead and a mountain of firewood all ready to burn. Francine had been back with the living for a while, expanding a nearby garden bed, transplanting. She and I stacked the fresh firewood in the shed and set aside the shortest stuff under the back steps for the water heater.

"It smells like rain," I said.

"Looks like rain," she said looking up.

"Feels like rain," I said, hand on head.

We taped plastic over the open window in her car just in time. It rained hard. We sat out on the back patio and watched the sky spill into the jarrah trees, on the shed roof, into the yard—in sheets and blankets. Thunder and lightning!

The cement at my feet was charred. She said it's from a fire made by some ruffians who snuck in one night when no one was home. They left a bunch of empty bottles and burned her firewood and two of her wicker chairs to keep warm. They almost burned the house down—as indicated by a blackened area on the wooden siding.

The fiberglass roof was leaking behind the wicker couch down the line where it met the steeper-pitched composition shingle roof. We watched the rain and smelled the pungent air snug under blankets while sipping red wine and eating Brie smeared on French bread. As we sat there I wrote down a poem and read it to her.

*I picture you walking into the woods alone at night
High grass and unpicked flowers
Running between your fingers
After circling around an opening
And greeting the spirits of that spot*

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*You curl up in the hollow of an old quiet tree
And fall asleep
You dream of flying over the branches
I dream I'm the tree
Without grasping, cradling your gently breathing body
That has come for a while to be within mine.*

That night a woman named Della who lives down the street came over. Francine put on some Afro-European music and they made masks and painted them and glued on sequins and whatever they fished up in their little boxes of ornaments. Francine showed Della the lint I brought and they laughed. Mary returned with Stubby and joined in by painting post cards for later use. I lay back exhausted from a day of swinging axe and sledge and looked on in admiration, happy to be doing nothing on the far side of the world with mellow gals, snoring canine, and gracious fire.