



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Kunapipi

Volume 8 | Issue 3

Article 11

1986

lebratya

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Recommended Citation

Halligan, Marion, lebratya, *Kunapipi*, 8(3), 1986.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol8/iss3/11>

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Abstract

Richard came home from work one evening and found Martha filUng in a survey about friends. A woman had brought it, an hour ago, she said. It was designed to find out what sorts of networks of support people had, what were the patterns of caring; Martha had to write in the names of their good friends, people they could turn to in times of accident, trouble, difficulty; borrow money from, that sort of thing. Possibly people they had already turned to in the past.

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Richard scoffed. A trick, he said. A device of burglars and blackmailers. Exploiting gullible people.

— No, said Martha. It's genuine. She described the official identity of the woman who had brought it, showed him the survey booklet, marked with the logo of the Capital Territory Health Commission Social Psychology Unit, produced by the government printer. All above suspicion.

— The government playing big brother, eh. I suppose it's legitimate enough.

— Of course it is, said Martha. It's all part of this business of people in Canberra coming from somewhere else. No grandparents, no family support systems. Total isolation. Archetypal nuclear families. You remember what it was like when Jimmy was born. I mean we had plenty of good friends, but it wasn't like family. Especially as lots of them didn't have children, and didn't understand at all what you were up against. Remember that nice clinic sister in Ainslie, what was her name, sister Neville, telling me about the couple who had twins, and the wife couldn't stand it; they went back to Sydney because it was too much for her on her own.

— I remember you ringing up your father and panicking, said Richard. Telling him you couldn't survive without your mother coming down to give you moral support.

— Yes, said Martha. It even worked. He let her come down for a whole fortnight, leaving him all alone and deserted with only Alison a hundred yards away to save him from himself. And it was terrific, she got me through that awful slough at the beginning.

Martha fell silent, thinking about her tyrant father, whom she'd loved and been irritated by, and whom she thought about a great deal now that he was dead. She often had a melancholy sense of his absence.

— Anyway, she said, after a bit, what friends shall we write down on this jolly list?

— Write down, or do in?

— When you think of it, we don't call on people much. We're really rather self-contained. These days. Touch wood.

— Mm. I suppose you could say they sometimes call on us. Like Jule. Or Jenny. Not that she asks, but you worry.

— And Frances. But Frances is family. So I expect she doesn't count.

Really rather self-contained, thought Richard. Sufficient unto ourselves is the evil of us. Yet we have friends, we know a lot of people, and there they'll be on a government list to prove it.

After dinner, he was sitting at the study table trying to make the cheque book balance with the bank's statement, so dull and difficult a job that he began doodling instead. He found himself making a pattern of words, in the red and green and blue and black of the four colour biro that he used for money matters. He decorated them with snakes whose forked tongues flickered, and garlands of leaves and fruits. The pattern of the words went like this:

	Friends	
Trust		Love
Faith		Honour
Doubt		Despair
	Betrayal	

Good words. Noble. Implying the ancient virtues. And the ancient sins. Not like *networks of support*. *Patterns of caring*. *The accumulation of distress experiences*. The language gets its own back when it's being conned, he thought. Jargon is its own revenge.

He chucked the chequebook aside and went downstairs to Jimmy doing his homework. Here, he said. You're good at puzzles. Unscramble this. I should warn you, it's rather famously difficult.

He handed him a sheet of paper with the letters lebratya printed on it.

— Many a good brain has foundered on that. See what you make of it.

— An anagram, is it, said Jimmy. Can't be that difficult. He knew he was good at puzzles. How long have I got?

— However long it takes. Get Harriet to help, when you get stuck, said Richard wickedly. She was two years younger, and had no pretensions to being a puzzle expert.

Richard came downstairs next morning to the sound of Martha singing as she poured boiling water through the coffee filter. She didn't sing very well, was a bit flat and wobbly, and had a fondness for hymns; they were so familiar to her from a youth spent church-going that she was reasonably confident of the tunes, and the words helped. She remembered them and the tunes sort of followed.

There's a Friend for little children
Above the bright blue sky
A Friend who never changeth
Whose love can never die

— Are you putting Him on the list? asked Richard. Martha jumped. The family had so long groaned over her hymns (Mum's ill, they said, she's in terrible pain...) that she generally made sure they weren't in hearing when she gave voice. It was one of the sorrows of her life that she couldn't sing; she'd have liked a voice to soar above banality, to create its daily minor works of art. The hymns were an indulgence; she could pretend that she was making music. But only when there was no one around to groan.

— Blame Ian Warden, she said, pointing to the newspaper; he was the local satirist. I've been reading his complaints about that particular hymn being dropped from the new hymnal. First the bowdlerisation of the Lord's Prayer, now the suppression of the great old hymns. Religion isn't what it was.

And defiantly, and loudly, and quite off key, she sang on:

Unlike our friends by nature
Who change with changing years
This Friend is always worthy
The precious name he bears

— Hardly deathless verse, said Richard. I doubt it'll be much missed by the next generation.

— I enjoyed it, said Martha. It's the tradition that counts.

Richard went out into the cold morning. The frost was blue on the grass, the gaudy cones of the liquidambars looked self-conscious in the thin light, which was pale and exhausted by its struggle with the fog. He was irritated to find himself humming Martha's hymn as he drove to work. He turned on the radio and the car filled with the pellucid civilized notes of Corelli. He thought, how Leonardo da Vinci would have enjoyed this, speeding along in a self-propelled vehicle with apparently a full chamber orchestra aboard. Not Corelli, of course, though who? He was rather vague about Leonardo's musical contemporaries — that was something he should look up.

He had a meeting first thing and when he got back to his office at half past ten his secretary stopped him, her face gleaming with horror. Pretty Mrs Beadle, young and efficient, failed by words, or what they stood for.

— Mr Martin ... he telephoned ... at nine o'clock ... he won't be in ... he rang to say ... his daughter ...

Portent was too much for her. She babbled. Her round pink face trembled, and she cried and dwelt on her words, and showed an ugly peeping pleasure in the dreadfulness of her news. Richard was slow to understand her. But the news demanded that. Sense flinched before it, and took cover.

This was what she was saying. Martin's daughter had been murdered by her brother in the night. That was why Martin had rung to say that he would not be in today.

Richard sat in his office and wrote up his report of the meeting. He liked his job; he could use his mind in it. He wondered if he always used all of it, since now part of it went on dealing with Mrs Beadle's news even as he made methodical headings and points and comments providing the careful advice the minister expected. He'd met Sally Martin, once, at a barbecue; she and Harriet were much the same age (twelve now), had got on well, had played all day; there'd been talk of them getting together, but they never had. Now Harriet, if asked, would hardly recall her; oh yes, the fair-haired girl with the long plaits, yes, she thought she remembered her. Richard didn't at all, there was just a blurred mental snapshot of the two little girls piling stones across a creek to make a dam — or perhaps it was a real photograph, stuck in an album, destined to be the mindless *memorabilia* of another generation.

Yet Richard could not stop picturing that unremembered face, mouth square and gasping, the cord tightening, the dying flesh turning purple...

He felt ashamed when he found himself thinking, thank god Joe Martin isn't actually a friend of mine. A colleague. A giver of dinner

parties dutifully but not quickly returned. What could you offer a friend to comfort such disaster? Such tragedy, really tragedy, pity and terror, not the car accident kind. But not cathartic, not offering any relief like that. When you thought of turning it into a play you saw how unbearable it was. Think of the 17th century finding the death of Cordelia too much to bear, writing in a happy ending; later times knew better, and exulted in the poetry of her death and Lear dying perhaps of joy. But could any art be found to deal with the death of a girl at the hands of her brother? Two children destroyed by a single act, for the boy was lost as surely as his sister, the nuclear family blasted out of existence. And what sort of a life, a world, would have to be created in which such deeds could have their place?

Joe Martin wasn't a friend of his, but he was a colleague ... what could you offer a colleague? The usual words of condolence, the half-mumbled politenesses accepted half-offered, the unbitten coin of grief passed from hand to hand, legal tender and familiar in the palm, never tested ... that would ring false here. Once you could have mentioned God, trusting in the currency of at least lip-service paid to His Will Being Done. Could have shelved the pain and the blame, trusted. But even the church had given up the idea of a Friend for little children above the bright blue sky. And the most ardent faith could well not be comforted by a God who watched over such an event. That was a cliché of course. It was a favourite maxim of his that clichés exist because they are true.

Suppose it were Harriet? Jimmy? He could not bear the thought, had to shrug his shoulders, wriggle his body away from it. And the reality? That was what Joe Martin was facing, not the imagination. Richard's eyes filled with tears. He telephoned Martha, to invoke his children in their mother.

Mrs Ambrose was in class. Did he care to leave a message?

It was Joe Martin he ought to be ringing. Joe who needed help. Or the offer of it. He stretched his hand out to the phone, touched it with his finger. Sat noiselessly and slowly drumming his fingers along the plastic handset. Like a child awkwardly playing scales, trying to make his fingers function.

Perhaps it would be an intrusion. He was not a friend. He might be seen as butting in. Prying. Disturbing the privacy that grief needed.

Or perhaps these scruples were cowardice. An excuse not to do something difficult. His fingers continued to play clumsy silent scales on the slippery plastic of the telephone.

Ring up Joe Martin equals intrusion.

Not ringing up Joe Martin equals cowardice.

He examined these two statements with all the sharpness and subtlety of his mind. And with welling fear. He simply didn't know. Could not by thinking tell.

Perhaps face to face would be better. Made easier (but better? better and easier weren't synonymous) — made more bearable then for both by ... *body language*. Jargon is its own revenge.

It was lunchtime. He stood at his window and watched the joggers streaming out of the building as though drawn by some lemming call to seek a necessary doom. As he leaned his head against the window, staring down at them until they were twinkling bifurcations receding, he caught the shadow of his face in the glass. The silver curve of the spectacles, the pored skin, the dark nose craters.

He rubbed his hands over it. *I come forward pointing to my mask*, said the actor in a Roman play. *Larvatus prodeō*. There was a word in English, *larvate*, it meant masked. Not exactly in common use. In the Roman plays the shapes of the masks were highly exaggerated, so that the audience in the distant heights of an amphitheatre could understand what they signified. That way you knew the actor's role exactly. The romantic notion of sincerity did not apply.

Suppose he and Joe Martin could meet, each wearing the grinning eyeless mask of tragedy, without the need to find in their own feeble faces the lineaments of anguish. Pointing like dancers, powerful and mute. Safe in the formal roles of grief.

He was still trying to take comfort from art. Experience transmuted by a kindly alchemy. In its base form there was none.

The lemmings had gone, well away into the lunch-time's trajectories. Around the lake, under the trees, not seeing the vast public buildings, nor hearing the wind-shredded chimes of the carillon, crossing the bridges, the inimical motorways, finishing the loop back at the office. His brother-in-law Stephen was a keen runner. He reckoned that running altered the consciousness, gave you a high; he perceived the world anew when he ran, he said. Richard, thinking of the grunting and thumping and sweating, found it hard to believe; yet did so. Who knew where grace might be achieved? But he could not resist saying to Stephen that Dr Johnston would certainly have understood:

— You know what he said about hanging, that it concentrates the mind wonderfully? I expect jogging has much the same effect.

And like the runners drawn to doom, he came back to his colleague, his associate, his workmate, and the impossible burden of grief. Impossible to imagine a network of support strong enough to stand that strain.

In the lift that evening he heard a man say:

— Incest of course. Stands to reason. Couldn't be anything else. Not with kids that age.

Richard could see this man's face in the mirror on the lift wall, but the man couldn't, he was speaking from himself unobserved, his self unstolen by reflection. He was grave, and courteous to horror, but smug: he understood. And he was excited. His face in the mirror rippled. Vicarious disaster enlivened his dreary round of days. Richard thought of turning round, of grabbing him by the ear, of slamming his glib head into the mirror, which would shatter into a star pattern, its radiating fragments framing his head like a hellish halo. And the same pattern would bubble in lines of blood through his flesh. Dripping down on to his soft camel coloured overcoat.

He felt sick with the violence of this thought. In the mirror the man rounded his eyes, pursed his lips and shook his head, an image of pained understanding.

— A sort of game, do you see. Would have got out of hand, and ... he sliced his hand across his throat.

Richard didn't know who he was. He hoped he would never see him again.

When he got home Martha was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for soup. Its spicy warm smell filled the room. He put his arms round her and hugged her, instead of just dabbing her cheek with his lips. Harriet left playing the piano and Jimmy lighting the fire and he hugged them too, feeling their shoulders pushing up under his armpits, the strong thrust of their separate growing.

Martha said, Wow, what have we done to deserve this!

Richard poured himself a large whisky, waved the bottle at Martha.

— God no. I'll stick to wine. Can't afford to wipe out the night.

Harriet fed the cats that were milling underfoot. Martha, red-faced and fuzzy-haired from the steam, dropped the last of the vegetables in the soup. Dinner in 10 minutes, she said.

— Well, what's news? asked Richard. Jimmy brought an essay that had got a high mark. Martha said, The Hoffmans have invited us for dinner. Saturday week.

Vivienne Hoffman was a teacher at Martha's school. They didn't know her very well. Her husband worked in Treasury.

He couldn't tell Martha about Sally Martin yet. Later, when the children were in bed. He thought of not telling her at all, of not having to take on the burden of her horror.

She ladled the soup into shallow bowls that had belonged to her grand-

mother. They were faded pink and worn, beautiful. The family watched, smiling with pleasure. Their four heads bent to drink the soup out of big European spoons. Don't slurp, Martha said to Harriet. Soup should be silent. She passed Richard a blue and white plate with slices of bread. The butter was in a chipped faience bowl that Martha had bought at a Prisunic in Paris, when they were first married. It was really meant for drinking morning coffee.

Perhaps it was all a pretty picture. As frail as cardboard, easily bent or burnt or torn or turned to mush. Surely I can have faith in the stability and security of my life, he thought. He imagined the Martin family, last night, heads bent over the table, eating dinner. The boy proud of a high-marked essay, the girl slurping soup. He didn't actually know how true that picture could be, wasn't close enough to Joe Martin to have seen the forms let along the realities of his life. Could only recall an apparent absence of *Angst*.

He wanted to think that there had been something wrong. He put mustard on a slice of the pickled pork that had made the soup broth, poured red wine. Otherwise, what was he doing to keep chaos at bay? Just depending on luck? Hopefully ... a great anonymous hoper hoping all would be well.

Perhaps he ought to envy the glibness of the man in the lift. A sin, a fault, a label, and the whole incident stored away in some filing cabinet of the brain. To be taken out when some contained contemplation of horror was needed.

— You're quiet, said Martha.

He shook his head like a swimmer surfacing. Tired, he said. Busy day.

After dinner Jimmy came and sat beside him on the sofa with the puzzle, the nonsense word *lebratya* turned into a dozen more nonsense words in his attempt to crack its code.

— It's bloody difficult.

— Pardon?

— It's hard.

— That's the point.

— How about a clue? How about telling me what letter it starts with?

— Well, if I tell you that, it'll make it too easy.

— Huh. No it won't. Just the first letter.

— Has Harriet tried yet?

— What do you think? *She* can't do it.

— You're giving in then?

— No. Just the first letter.

— B.

— Does it end with *ly*?

— No.

— What about *al*!

— Who's doing this puzzle? Any more hints and you'll have the lot.

Jimmy wrote down *b* and *al* with a space between. Harriet looked over his shoulder.

— *Beratyal*. That's a good word. All your own work.

— Shut up, said Jimmy. You couldn't have done it in a thousand fits.

It was funny that an anagram should be so hard. Richard had given it to all sorts of clever people, and they hadn't been able to do it. He regretted he'd never been able to try — he'd known the answer before he started. He liked to think he'd have worked it out, but he'd never know.