Casually Over the Balcony: Memoirs of a Bloke

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Abstract
It comes on to September of 1989 and Arthur’s cows are out on the road again. I’ve been looking after a dozen of them on my property (fifty acres of heavily mortgaged stringy bark scrub surrounding about ten acres of undulating pasture), but with the mellower airs of spring, the lushness underfoot, and the roaring of randy bulls each night in the perfumed darkness, two of these beasts have turned maverick and won’t stay behind the wire.

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Plate XII: Blokes on the Bar Room Wall
Casually Over the Balcony: Memoirs of a Bloke

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It’s very tiresome trying to make cattle go where you want them to. They are at least as dopey as sheep and, while capable of thundering sprints which reduce everything in their path to mulch and fractures, they resort at other times to a dogged four-square immobility, a heavy-lidded ruminating recalcitrance which neither well-aimed clods of dirt, alliterative obscenities nor the flailing of battered Akubras will easily overcome.

Once before I was reduced to pursuing them at Grand Prix pace down the track in my rattling old ute, heading off their lumbering charge and then high-speeding them back to my gate which they Light-Brigaded past with eyes red and mouths frothing and so I chased them down the other way.

This time it’s all fairly routine. The two of them are sleepily swathed in languid camouflage of roadside banksia, half-grown wattle and native ti-tree. Their sleek, generous flanks are tight with the morning’s illicit grazing. It is merely a passing and tolerable irritation for them when I insist that they lollygaggle home; so moodily back we all go, through the white-painted post and rail gateway where, having shoed them back down the paddock, I close off the entrance with a temporary gate. This is mostly for show because, while I have stopped their access to the road, only more robust and extensive fencing will keep them from random sallies into the ‘home’ paddock where they prune the roses, lean on and snap the young fruit trees, juice the burgeoning vegetables under dogmatic hooves, and shit everywhere with that lava spreading *plop* for which they are famous in joke and story.

As a city boy from the backstreets of Melbourne’s West St Kilda, I
brought no knowledge, experience or expertise whatsoever when I walked on to this wild tract of fragrant, flower-strewn wilderness twenty odd years ago (‘One for the Conservationist’ the advertisement had promised, with as much of a forlorn, defeated sigh as real estate prose can muster). It was beautiful, peaceful and cheap. It was a mad thing to do, buying this property, and ensuing experiences with house-building, neighbours’ sheep and cattle, our sheep and cattle, sagging fences, disputed boundaries, blackberries, African Daisy, marauding foxes, garden-razing goats, cataclysmic storms, the worst drought on record followed by the worst fires in living memory all underlined the original lunacy. While keeping my day job, I worked on that farm till I had muscles of iron and skin like bark; my decrepit yellow ute could be seen waiting for me in the pub carpark on luminous Saturday evenings in summer while I, still grimy from the day’s fencing or digging or woodcutting, yarnd with the other rurals in the bar. When a shearer I’d hired looked me up and down and said, ‘Well Brian, whadya do for a livin’, mate? I’ve got you down as a long distance truck-driver’, I felt I’d crossed some critical divide, and I was glad.

II

Talk about down among the women. I grew up among droves of them, my mother and grandmother in the bustling foreground of a large, volatile group which in later life I would characterise as ‘my innumerable aunts’. They weren’t really aunts, not all of them anyway. There was my Aunty Jean – slim, dark and flighty – who was a real aunt, being my mother’s younger sister. But then there was Aunt Bet and Aunty Tilly and Aunt Vina and Aunty Annie and Aunty Pat and Aunt Kitty and Aunty Letty and many others. All of these women were under the iron rule of two formidable matriarchs – Annie Murray, my maternal grandmother, and Agatha Cavanagh, her long-time best friend. They’d all grown up in Glasgow’s infamous Gorbals where Annie, an Irish migrant who’d gone over to Scotland to marry, and Agatha were left to fend off the dangerous world after losing their young husbands in the trenches. With stunning resilience, they gathered up their few possessions and the nine fatherless children they had between them and went steerage on the SS Balranald to Australia.

Landing in Melbourne, they homed in on the cheapest rents and set up a little enclave in west St Kilda, a gangster ridden, smokey and furtive purrleiu that seems in memory to have been always foggy and half-lit just as, on its boundary, the Esplanade and St Kilda beach seem always smiling with sun and blue sky and Port Phillip Bay’s dazzle of flat water.

I was a small boy when all the males in this burgeoning Caledonian corner were suddenly drawn back into that same troubled Europe that
Annie and Agatha had fled. Along with them soon after went my Australian father – to New Guinea. And there I was, among the women, a Feather Boa of aunts. They cleaned offices, pulled beer, worked in the Collingwood boot factory, sewed, mended, served behind counters, polished and scrubbed. They would gather for a drink and a smoke together in Annie’s Havelock Street house, or at Agatha’s in nearby Clive Street; they laughed a lot and alternated between spoiling me and treating me, unwittingly, like a flunky. I remember once, when I was about six or seven, confiding to a friend who lived next door that I’d been ‘born to run messages’. The shops were close by – Rollason’s for milk, bread, smokes (and a bet on the SP) and Armstrong’s (‘the wee grocer’s’, as my Grandmother called him in delicate reference to his hunchbacked stature) for just about everything else. Up the other way, to Ackland Street and the beach were the butchers and the Village Belle market – far more interesting but forbidden territory for me until much later.

I was taught by nuns when I started school, had no brothers and, effectively, no father. I saw few men and many of those I did see – the drunks around the Prince Charles on the corner of Fawkner Street – scared me witless with their shouting, swearing and random violence. I followed the sad misfortunes of the St Kilda Football Club in the Victorian Football League, but only from afar, having no one to take me even to their home games at the Junction Oval. Mr Armstrong, the ‘wee grocer’, whom I got to know well because I ran so many errands, was always threatening to take me to see Brighton in the Association, but somehow we never made the trip.

I felt different, hard done by and – because I was a loudly reluctant messenger boy frequently chastised for carelessness – I accepted I was irredeemably ‘bad’. I was embarrassed by the swarms of women who seemed to be always buzzing round me. Other kids had their fathers more or less at home. Dennis O’Reilly’s father was in a ‘reserved occupation’; Keith Carter’s was a drunk, Ray Waller’s was in and out of gaol and the Finnegan boys’ father was a journalist. There was not much cachet in having a father and uncles at the war because you didn’t know where they were or what they were doing; mail was infrequent and the thud of a battered, much-travelled letter into the tin letterbox on the gate was an occasion not for joy but tense anxiety followed by tearful relief.

These misanthropies were exacerbated by my growing conviction that, because I had temporarily no father, or anyone who could possibly stand in for him (even if we had gone to see Brighton in the Association, Mr Armstrong would never have done, he was too small and too strange looking), I was somehow not as tough as the other kids. When we played footy in the street with a ‘ball’ made of old socks or tightly rolled newspaper held together by elastic bands, I seemed to
be more easily hurt than the others. I would crash to the ground or reel into the cobbled gutter or become espaliered on the Millers' front fence as the momentum of various ill-judged lunges, dashes and leaps carried me on to disaster. In summer, when our activities switched from kicking up and down the road to bowling as fast as we could across it, I would get hit in the testicles or on the nose - the latter producing merely lots of blood, the former an agony undreamt of in our philosophies. Worse, I would often cry after such encounters.

I see now that some of my more bizarre juvenile exploits were efforts to assert in some other, more manageable way, the emotionless grittiness the street required. One day when the great Joe Louis was in the news, I boasted to Ray Waller, as we dawdled outside Mrs Murphy's Penny Library in Grey Street, that I was tough enough to take any blow anyone could dish out. 'Go on,' I said, 'hit me on the jaw. It won't hurt me. Go on!' Waller, who was as tough as a jumps jockey's bum, obliged with a smashing thump that knocked me over and relieved my lopsided jaw of a couple of baby teeth. Another time, discovering that to jump off the high balcony at school was something even Waller jibbed at, I sauntered casually up to the rail and leapt over it. When I hit the ground with both feet, my legs doubled like lorry springs and rebounded me into a spiral of continuous somersaults that seemed to go on forever. I should have broken both ankles at least; but in fact I came eventually to sprawling rest and had the presence of mind to dust myself off with a great show of nonchalance, sensing as I did so the shrill note of sensation rising through the schoolyard babble.

In the shelter shed at the other end of that pokey school playground behind Sacred Heart School, St Kilda, I fought Dennis O'Gorman, a rangy ten year old who, however, I intuitively knew was all talk and bluster. This fixture was precipitated by a clash in the yard at playtime and arranged during the day's lessons by means of clandestine notes, significant glances and sibilant whispers. As always, I went into the contest with such exaggerated determination and displays of force and will that I was beating the shit out of O'Gorman before his superior reach could avail him anything. Being basically a crybaby (it took one to know one), O'Gorman, bloodied and grazed, was capitulating early in the contest (though he landed two blows which respectively split my lip and blacked my eye) when his seconds, with a mastery of bureaucratic authoritarianism which I resent every time I think of it, had the fight stopped and a draw declared before my more plebeian backers realised what was happening. This all sounds very sturdy but I was crying at the end and shaking before it started. Ray Waller, conversely, shaped up to such encounters, which were much more numerous in his way of life, with a genuine insouciance which I envied, aspired to but would never attain.

'Why do you always cry, Brian Matthews?' This question was
addressed to me by a girl in my class at Sacred Heart who even then I could see was hard and tartish. I can’t remember her name and I have no idea what became of her, but it was a good question. She asked it just after I’d been hit square in the right eye by a rock-hard, ink-soaked paper pellet fired from a shanghai across the classroom, so maybe even she wouldn’t have been so stoic if hers had been the eye in question. The pellet wasn’t actually intended for me, but I’d turned round in my front desk to survey the pandemonium induced by the temporary absence of nuns and was characteristically just in time to cop the winging missile at the height of its velocity. It hurt like hell and I felt surely blinded. Possibly a glass eye looming. Nothing I could do – leaping publicly from no matter what heights, pounding no matter which better-equipped opponents, jumping from no matter what speeding trams – could apparently obscure the truth unerringly apparent to the tactless and precocious eye of youth: I was a crybaby; there was something suspiciously, well, soft in there.

About that tram: one day, Sister Mary Burkman deputed me to take a large, round biscuit tin full of unconsecrated hosts over to the convent on the Esplanade in Middle Park. She gave me the tram fare and off I went. On the tram, the conductor and one of his mates started teasing me. I was wearing my school blazer the breast pocket of which proclaimed, in heraldic mode, SHS for Sacred Heart School. ‘What’s that stand for?’ asked the conductor, ‘Sheila’s High School?’ You see! Somehow, he was on to me, instantly. I employed my usual physically exhibitionist method of countering reflections on my toughness. When the tram was approaching the convent stop, I jumped off with great bravado before it stopped. Long before it stopped, as it turned out, so that I went cartwheeling along the road while the biscuit tin, having survived a ricochet off the footplate, hit the tarmac and burst open like a grenade. Unconsecrated hosts, their original explosive momentum added to by a slick sea breeze, blew and wheeled and rolled over most of Middle Park. The conductor laughed and laughed and his mate, fascinated by my now revealed burden, said ‘Those little buggers’d be bloody handy for cards, wouldn’t they Bert!’ I picked every last one of them up. The tram driver, though equally convulsed, graciously refrained from moving till I’d levered fifty or so out of the tramlines, thus avoiding blasphemy and eternal damnation.

At secondary school I started inventing brothers. My two best friends both had an endless supply of brothers. It took me no time at all to realise that, at my school, it was a huge advantage to have had an older brother, or preferably several, come through before you. This was a sign not only of a possibly large Catholic family – a sure way to pre-empt approval from a De La Salle Brother who’d never before set eyes on you – but also of a sort of male continuity and solidarity. I felt convinced then and I remain persuaded now that my inability to cite a
brother or two was a severe drawback, a subversion of any chance I had to impress myself on that intensely male world. Though I could now endure as well as the toughest of my classmates and much better than some the hundreds of strappings that attended our efforts to master French and Latin vocabulary and geometric theorems and so on, I failed to make a rugged mark. Years among the women seemed to have placed an insignia on me as readily visible as the scarlet letter. So, to those who couldn’t possibly know the truth I started to represent myself as having from two to four brothers, depending on need and what I could get away with at the time.

Gradually, it seemed to become less fraught. I turned out to be a more than handy cricketer, a pretty good footballer, later on, an excellent squash player, a finisher in five marathons, a part-time farmer who really did get his hands dirty. The need for conscious emphasis on physical attainment seemed to diminish; it was now coming naturally. A broad Australian accent, a capacity to mix as easily with the local farmers as with my academic colleagues and a penchant for old utes and fishing trips added the finishing touches to the picture I’d been trying to paint all my life. In the end, I went too far. Despite having a wide circle of women friends, I became known as an archetypal bloke.

The truth, I have now decided, lies as so often somewhere wimpishly in the middle. I’m utterly at home in the world of men but I’m not tough. I’d rather not go out in the boat in rough weather and I don’t ever want to go too far, even in glassy calm. I’d run a mile rather than fight. When a commentator on my fiction and biography detected a ‘strong feminine sensibility beneath the unmistakably male voice’, I was momentarily shocked. But she was right and I took to accepting such insights as compliments. What else can a bloke do?

III

I am winding along the track home admiring glimpses of the distant Southern Ocean flickering through the lattice work of roadside scrub. I’m thinking about running out the irrigation pipes because the weather’s warming up, and I’m pondering a lecture I have to write on Gissing’s New Grub Street and tutorials I have to give on Patrick White, and whether or not I should apply for a job at the Australian Studies Centre in London.

Round the last corner and – the narrow roadway is blocked by cows. Arthur’s cows, looking as soulful and as loopy and as ponderous as ever. Nothing’s changed.

Or has it?