

Jeopardy

The couples met outside the railway station under the high sun. Liza thought their shadows looked like the stick figures children draw, tilting and tottering in pairs on pin legs.

Liza's husband had driven her to the station. The ride saved her legs and kept her white shoes free from the already irritating red dust. The hot season seemed to get longer each year and the days when the grass grew fast and lush were over in a blink of an eye.

In the car, Liza arranged her skirt just so. It pleased her that the flash of her ankle and calf still didn't look like they belonged to someone who might reasonably expect to be a grandmother.

She'd thanked Bunny when he pulled over and said, 'I'll see you on Thursday after lunch.'

He nodded then tapped the steering wheel thoughtfully with his index finger.

'I'll walk round with you. Carry your bag.'

She was about to say that there was no need, but he'd already unclicked his belt and was turning his shoulder away.

Liza adjusted her necklace so the clasp sat properly at the back of her neck then checked her appearance in the mirror before getting out. The shadows under her eyes after a poor night's sleep were less obvious now she had her make-up on, yet the redness in the corners could not be disguised. The excursion to Sydney with her long time friend Delia, which she had been looking forward to, was today something she could have gladly given up.

Delia arrived arm in arm with her husband Jim. His work boots were dusty, as they always were. Liza noticed Delia was wearing her practical beige flats rather than the red pumps she commonly wore with her blue and white suit.

'Ready?' said Delia.

Liza nodded.

The men shook hands.

'G'day, Bunny,' said Jim. 'How's it going?'

'Good. Good.'

Bunny began to slide Liza's bag from his shoulder.

'Don't put it down,' she said, 'It'll get covered in dust.'

'It's already getting everywhere,' said Delia.

Liza noticed her friend look down at her shoes.

‘Gonna’ bring me back some of those cherries,’ said Jim.

Delia didn’t answer. Instead she touched her cheek to his and lightly kissed the air.

‘Have a good time, ladies. Don’t spend too much,’ said Bunny, passing Liza her bag.

He smiled at Delia.

Liza and Delia moved under the station roof into the thick shade. The men remained in the sun. Standing with the hotel behind them and their shoulders almost touching they formed a pose that could have been for a photograph. The hotel had a tin roof like every other building in town and the rendering carried scars from baking summers and poorly applied layers of paint. Its temporary status as the largest building in town a hundred years ago had earned it the name ‘The Grand Hotel,’ but even the current owner referred to the place as a ‘shithole.’ A coarse expression, yet Liza could not disagree with its accuracy. It was a place she entered rarely and never unaccompanied by Bunny.

Glancing back, Liza had the sudden impression that the men were also made of wood and corrugated iron, like two neighbouring houses. The light reflected from the flat surfaces of their foreheads and shoulders. Bunny was stocky with hardly a neck. The slope from his chest to his stomach resembled the steep hills beyond the plateau. Jim was taller, with space to spare inside his clothes.

Silhouetted against the bright archway to the platform she knew Bunny couldn’t see her properly. Liza kept her gaze fixed on Jim, but today there was a sort of limpness to him that Liza suddenly found embarrassing despite her long held private feelings for him.

It was the tiredness she told herself. With her digestion she should have known better than to eat so much meat the evening before.

‘I printed the tickets,’ said Delia.

The close buzz of her friends voice made Liza’s fingers twitch. She disciplined herself to remain composed.

‘You’re so organized,’ she said, turning away from the men.

‘No point not being organized, Liza. Seems an age since we last did this.’

They made their way to the train. It had come from Melbourne and arrived early. Delia walked ahead of Liza counting the carriages until she found the first class coaches.

‘It’s worth a few more dollars...’

‘... except that one time ...’

‘...you mean those children...’

‘...all that squealing...’

‘...and there was that terrible row ...’

‘...said he was a tourist...’

‘... short of dollars for a ticket...’

‘...just like an aboriginal, you couldn’t blame the guard...’

Delia swept her skirt up casually with one hand as she stepped up onto the train – it was a kind of affectation to Liza’s way of thinking to do something like that when it wasn’t necessary when the skirt was not properly long.

Glancing down at the sleepers punctured the brusqueness of Liza’s movements. The gap between the platform and the train was insignificant yet it was cut with shadows in such a way that they seemed to contradict the position of the sun relative to the body of the train. She was disoriented for a moment and once inside moved down the aisle touching the seat tops as if to keep her balance in the motionless train.

‘I’ve found where we are,’ said Delia. ‘Shall I put your bag up next to mine?’

‘Yes, yes. I’ve everything in my handbag,’ said Liza.

‘Shall we get morning tea?’

‘I’m still recovering from last night.’

‘From the barbie? I didn’t see you eat very much. Never mind, we’ll share. I’ll get an extra cuppa.’

Delia placed her bag – a quadrilateral with stiff handles – on the aisle seat and headed in the direction of the buffet car. Liza took the window seat, a copy of ‘Woman’s Weekly’ resting on her lap, observing the platform.

Jim always cooked the meat. Liza admired the way everything was eventually a uniform dark brown. There was something nonchalant about the way he nudged the sausages, turned the steak, some fathomless judgement that had seemed so ... skilful. No, it was more natural than that; it was intuitive.

Delia had supplied drinks and brought out homemade salads, she ferried cooked meat away and brought marinated meat to Jim at the grill outside. Jim was at the centre of it all.

It didn’t matter that Jim was her best friend’s husband. It didn’t matter that they had aged. She loved his soul; he was her perfect match.

The situation had advantages – they saw each other regularly. There was no need to make arrangements to meet. Although, of course it was inconvenient that Delia and Bunny were somewhere nearby, frequently in the same room.

Liza sighed, and turned to look out of the window.

On the platform a pasty-faced man with acne usually reserved for teenagers was pacing up and down, stretching his legs during the half-hour stop. The man strayed into the sunlight by the footbridge and squinted past the station oil tank into the town. Dissatisfied with what he saw he looked down the track then catching Liza off-guard. He stared directly into the window of the train. He blinked, pressed a finger against a particularly inflamed area of chin then turned and walked away. He paused further along the platform to look back up at the footbridge then re-boarded the train.

It would be so easy to unbalance someone descending the footbridge, she thought, simply by catching hold of their bag and giving a sharp tug. It wouldn't be unexpected for women of their age to have a fall.

Liza's heart fluttered.

It was a 'mean thought'. That was how Liza described these impulses to herself.

She had a collection of mean thoughts: upending hot cups of coffee onto Delia's lap, switching the pills in Delia's medicine cabinet, or a giving a gentle push at a pedestrian crossing – this would be much easier to do in Sydney surrounded by all those people. The thought excited her.

Liza had fewer mean thoughts about Bunny, even though he was as much part of the problem as Delia. She had such store of apathy towards him that it undid her ability to make progress in her thoughts whenever he was concerned.

Never, never had she liked the sound of her married name. She hadn't blushed with pleasure or expectation at the best man's toast, 'Ladies and Gents, I give you the bride and groom, Mr and Mrs Hoppit.'

No, it was another impulse that brought blood to her cheeks.

Thirty years later and everyone *still* called him Bunny. And he still fixed electrical appliances. And he still liked to wear a baseball cap on Saturdays and drink three cans of beer watching the footy. He was *not* her soul mate. How could a man like that understand what she needed to grow, how she needed to be nurtured?

The kerlunk-kerlunk of the slamming doors then the shrill sound of a whistle on the platform shook Liza from her reverie.

‘Here we are. Not a minute too soon,’ said Delia, sitting down. ‘The scones are scorching. There’s a decent pat of butter and you’ll take the cream. Cholesterol – Jim’s problem, not mine, I know, but you get in the habit of not having things. Poor Molly Flinders had that big heart attack, now she can’t get out of a chair without getting breathless. I went to see her to drop some old magazines round.’

‘Garden was always neat as a pin,’ said Liza, easing out a polystyrene cup from the tray.

‘She can’t keep on top of it anymore...’

‘... and the glasshouse...’

‘... she put me on to cherry tomatoes...’

‘...very disease resistant ...’

The train lurched forward. The carriage moved as if an animal rather than a mechanical locomotive pulled them along.

They talked, ate their scones, looked out of the window, looked at their magazines.

‘... and the narcissi this year...’

‘... a real treat...’

‘... some to Sissy Morgan after her hysterectomy...’

‘... should have had it done years ago...’

‘... not easy coming off the feel-good pills ...’

The hills already had a sort of bleached-green look as they flowed by, only occasionally were there lush patches along a gully or around a billabong. The shiny black hides of the cattle would be hot to the touch, the animals stressed by the heat. Liza wondered, as she had summer after summer, whether they knew this was only the beginning. She resolutely kept her cardigan on as far into the summer as possible, trying to convince herself that it wasn’t really hot.

The increasing temperature triggered a memory that made her shiver against the back of her seat. She felt Jim’s hands on her shoulders as he patted her cardigan back into place. It was a small familiar gesture she’d seen him use with Delia. Her nipples pressed painfully into her bra.

She’d turned to face him, slightly breathless.

‘There you go.’

‘Thank you – Jim.’

They held each other's gaze. It had been such a tender confirmation in Liza's mind of everything that existed between them. But today, even the 'kiss' might seem different if she allowed herself to think about it.

The conversation began again with Delia.

'... only solution was to get one of their own...'

'...it made of a mess of their leather suite...'

'... never overly fond of animals...'

'... "more discipline," I said...'

At twelve o'clock Delia took their lunch pre-order tickets to the buffet. She returned with chicken pies, served with green vegetables and a plastic cup of fruit salad garnished with a rosette of sweetened cream.

Liza inserted her plastic knife beneath the piecrust and prised open the lid. Steam escaped from the pale pastry. A mean thought came to her. She hid it away and scooped a little of the filling onto her fork to cool.

'... not a proper dessert. Margery will have dinner waiting ...'

'... I'd be happy with a snack...'

'... always hungry after sitting all day. It's a mystery...'

'... lucky to have a sister in Sydney ...'

'...now I worry about leaving Jim ...'

Liza's forkful of greens halted in the air. A bump from an uneven stretch of track almost set them into the underside of her nose.

'Jim? What do you mean?'

'Oh, you know ...'

Delia bent over her meal, concentrating on cutting the coarser stalks of broccoli. She didn't say anything further, just sat there chewing, rather like a camel, Liza thought.

Liza's heartbeat quickened at the sound of Jim's name. Since they first met it had been the same. It was exciting being together in the same room, whatever company they were in, even when the children had been quite young.

'... a bit gluey,' said Delia, 'but it's better than a sandwich. Not eating yours?'

'... a bit hot, I'll just wait ...'

Delia folded her arms across her chest. She turned and looked across the aisle. She hummed quietly as if she was thinking, tapping one foot in time. Liza regarded her for a moment. There was something different about Delia today.

The creamy contents of the pie were sticky and salty. Against her will Liza's thoughts strayed to her kiss with Jim. She remembered its intensity, its gentleness, the weakness that had run through her body and then Jim apologizing, flustered and gentlemanly.

'I'm so sorry,' he had said. 'I thought you were...'

She had placed a finger on his lips.

'No need to apologize.'

He'd blushed. It had never happened again.

Back in the present the glutinous mass at the back of her throat suddenly seemed impossible to swallow. She took a gulp of water and forced the mouthful down. Delia looked away politely as Liza repositioned the dislodged bridge supporting her front teeth. Afterwards, Liza did not return to her meal.

The eucalyptus-fringed farms went by and the afternoon wore on. Outcrops of tilted rocks lined with layers of grey volcanic dust jutted out of the hills. They seemed so at odds with the landscape as to appear recently emerged, tearing through the thin red soil and having only just coming to a standstill shortly before the train rushed by.

The memory of the incident during the barbeque nagged Liza. Jim had been taking a portion of egg salad from a dish on the counter in the kitchen to accompany the pieces of brown meat on his plate. The spoon had tipped. The egg slipped and toppled onto the rim of his plate, splattering mayonnaise onto Jim's shirt and egg and lettuce onto the floor.

He'd held the plate aloft and grabbed a napkin. In doing so he lost a sausage over the other side of his plate. It landed on the cheese board leaving a charcoal stripe on the French brie before also rolling onto the floor. He'd perched his plate on the edge of the sink to rescue the sausage and it had slid into the washing-up basin.

He shook his head and dabbed at the mayonnaise, sausage held aloft in his opposite hand. Liza had noticed that his sunspots were worse than her own. He'd wiped his moustache with the side of his hand then given a sheepish sort of grin.

'I'm bloody useless without Delia.'

He'd looked out onto the verandah where Delia was laughing with Bunny and shook his head.

Liza had taken her slice of beetroot and hurried away, out of sight of the sausage, the grease stain, the sinking plate in the basin.

How could a soul mate be like this?

It was no surprise that her digestion was upset.

A sickly feeling came over her. She pictured Delia tumbling over the upper concourse rail in the Queen Victoria Building, falling down, down onto the historic black and white floor tiles. Then in another scene she imagined Delia toppling backwards into the water at Circular Quay and floating away with the quiet white jellyfish.

Liza's eyes began to close. The taste of chicken pie repeated inside her mouth. She leaned back against the seat. In a few minutes she was asleep.

When she woke dusk was falling. Delia had taken away their lunch trays and had brought fresh tea from the buffet car. They fell into conversation.

'... they've a new television, takes over the whole room...'

'... unsurprising it blew a fuse ...'

'... he's going to fix it ...'

Outside the window the landscape seemed diminished in scale. They passed the scorched trunks of gum trees topped with grey-blue foliage sprouting from the scarred but living trees. Lights winked through the mauve light. The sky, in fact the whole land, was briefly bathed in rich shades of ochre. Then suddenly, as they reached the outskirts of the suburbs; all the colour drained to a queer monochrome.

'... waiting for us. Even though it's not far...'

'... get a taxi...'

'... I suppose you can, never tried ...'

They rose together from their seats as the train slowed. Liza saw their clothes were creased. She was tired from the long journey. There was no need to crowd each other, only a few passengers were not staying on until Sydney Central. Regardless, Liza followed her friend closely and bumped on the back of Delia's knees with her bag as they swayed down the aisle.

Delia insisted Liza alight first. She crossed the gap to the platform and thought about how an accident might happen. She sighed.

Margery was waiting. She waved energetically then hurried towards them.

Despite what had happened at the barbeque Liza suddenly felt she must act. She'd had enough of waiting. There was the train and there was Delia. But Margery was too close, even on the dimly lit platform she would see. The train was already beginning to crawl away from the station. Last night hung in her mind; Jim, how could you be so clumsy? Caught in a moment of indecision Liza hesitated. She wasn't certain at all.

Suddenly, Delia cut across her path in the darkness, nudging against her overnight bag and causing her to stumble towards the track.

'Hello, Delia! Careful there, Liza. Don't want an accident. Here you are. Let me take that bag. I've had some shocking news – quite literally. Liza, at least let me take something. You'll never guess, but it was about Bunny.'

'Bunny?' said Liza.

'Yes, I had a phone call. There's been a terrible accident. He couldn't let go, poor fella. Kept gripped on because of the current. Tried to slide his hand along...'

Liza released the handle of her bag. She noticed that Delia had gone very pale. What was Bunny playing at now? What was Margery saying?

The final carriages sped away from the station. Yes, she *had* been right; Margery had been too close and perhaps Bunny had finally done something right.

'...he couldn't let go.' Margery repeated, staring at Liza. 'They didn't know where to switch the mains off. In the end got a wooden chair and levered him off the television.'

'What?' said Liza.

'Thought I was going to be the bearer of bad news. Sure, he'll be good as gold by the time you get home. A bit scorched here and there. Bunny's a survivor!'

'What a relief,' said Delia.

Liza nodded and did her best to smile. A weak numbness washed through her body. Margery began walking towards the steps down from the platform.

'Car's parked around the side. Tough journey? You both look shattered. By the way how's Jim, Delia?'

'Still can't give him away.'

'Really,' said Liza, 'you shouldn't say that...'

‘Why? Not everyone’s got a Bunny. And I never heard you say a good thing about him in your whole life.’

Delia stopped under the greenish exit light. Liza saw that her friend’s face was flushed, her nostrils flared. She stood, blocking the way forward. Liza remembered her stumble on the platform then all at once she saw everything in a new light.

She thought about Jim floundering at the barbeque while Delia and Bunny sat laughing outside; Bunny tapping his fingers on the steering wheel and walking her to the station. Bunny always there, always coming along: Bunny, Delia, Jim and her. The four of them together and Bunny and Delia left on their own while she was with Jim. But what had Delia ever found to talk about with Bunny?

‘No,’ said Liza. ‘I didn’t think I ever needed to.’