

Autumn, May 1990, in Brisbane

SIPPING CLARET AT THE BAR of the Beat nightclub, I was wondering whether the dancer enjoyed his job.

He was covered from toe to tip in oil and not much else – one leather-and-feather anklet, a G-string and a cowboy hat.

The Beat's moniker pretty much tells the story: a gay nightclub in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley.

My Cucumber Natalie believes that gays bear sole responsibility for the evolution of Madonna, Japanese restaurants in Australia, and twentieth-century drama, all of which she holds very dear. Nat feels obliged to participate in the gay social scene on an irregular basis. I could not get Nat to any my cultural shrines, the major metropolitan racetracks on Australia's east coast, before I was barred from them all. But, somehow, I have to tag along with her for the occasional evening of disco music accompanied by the smell of amyl nitrate. I tried to spot her in the thick, heaving Friday night crowd. Nat likes talking with strangers. I noticed a bloke watching me.

I turned my attention back to the television above my head. Queensland Treasurer Keith De Lacey was announcing that the social-democratic Labor Party would honour some of the financial promises of defeated conservative National Party Treasurer Mike Ahern. Labor was elected in December, mainly as a result of the police corruption uncovered by the Fitzgerald Inquiry. Tax relief for religious organisations and religious education were two of Ahern's budgetary measures that Labor would keep. I was kind of getting the gist of his concession through the din, with Treasurer De Lacey chanting some mantra about education being sacred, as Queensland was becoming the Smart State.

A voice, belonging to the bloke who had been eyeing me off, spoke close to my ear.

'Hello,' he said.

He was about fifty, grey suit, greying hair, thin furrowed greying face, medium build. What Americans might call distinguished. As far as I know, distinguished people are like eccentrics; we don't have any in Australia.

'Gooday,' I said, nodding.

'I'm not looking to pick you up,' he said. 'My name is Joseph Lavinsky.'

I gave my name as Steele Hill, as I do most of the time.

'I'm a professor at the university,' Lavinsky said. He also said which university, but to protect the innocent, I won't repeat it. The guilty don't need protecting, as they usually have a mob of lawyers on retainer.

Oh, all right then. It was the University of Queensland, which I believe is the State's oldest. You might have guessed, anyway, as there are not many unis in Brisbane. The way the professor was referring to it as the university, it looks like its academics think of it as the only fair-dinkum one. I suppose if you can't have snobbery in places of higher learning, where does it belong?

Lavinsky asked what I was drinking, and I tapped the last pickings of my red grape. It looked like his tale was to unfold leisurely.

'I'm worried about my students,' the prof began.

'Who isn't? They tell me the three Rs are up to ess.'

Lavinsky either didn't know or didn't care I was taking the piss. 'They are so sheltered these days, my students,' he continued.

He turned away from me when a barman approached, and he ordered a bottle of the club's best red. The barman said they sold wine by the glass.

'Fine,' replied the professor. 'I'll have five and a one fifth glasses of wine. In the bottle. Thank you.'

The barman went to consult with another bloke, and Lavinsky began to sing in a harsh Irish accent while he awaited the decision.

Now that my ladder's gone,

I must lie down where all the ladders start,

In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the human heart.

The barman returned with a bottle of red, from which Lavinsky poured a glass for me and a thimbleful for himself.

'Driving,' he muttered.

I asked him if the song he had sung was from the Irish folk-rock band The Pogues, because he sang it in the rough and ragged style of the band's lead singer Shane MacGowan.

'William Butler Yeats,' Lavinsky said. 'Great poet. As far as I know, he was never in a popular musical group.'

The professor changed the subject. 'I'm looking for someone like you, somewhat representative of the underclass. I hope you are not offended by that term. I find "underclass" less patronising than "lower working class".' He opened his eyes wide and nodded three times at me. 'Do you agree?'

'Very much so,' I answered. Always agree with whackos: first rule of life on the streets.

'From looking at you, I feel you fit to a tee,' he decided. 'Sharp, inquisitive, but wary, looking out for the next obstacle in your path.'

I took a swig of my wine and thought the well could dry up with my next comment. 'Look, Mr Lavinsky, I don't know what two-legged lab mouse you want for your students, or what that mouse is supposed to do, but you're knocking on the wrong maze here.'

On cue to my maze metaphor, the Beat's speaker system pumped out the chorus of the Go-Betweens' Your Town .

Round and round, up and down

Through the streets of your town.

Every day I make my way

Through the streets of your town.

The rumours of the previous summer proved right. The Go-Betweens did announce their break-up in the first half of 1990. Everyone said it was a shame. By everyone, I mean the small fraction of the Australian population who had heard of them.

‘Sorry,’ said Lavinsky. I had clearly declined his offer and he moved his chair back, as you would when you’re leaving.

Only, he was just making himself more comfortable. ‘I did not even tell you what I teach. It’s Cultural Studies.’

‘Yogurt?’ I asked, which puzzled him till the penny dropped. Then he laughed more heartily than the quip deserved.

I continued. ‘I don’t know what Cultural Studies is; I don’t know what an underclass is, and it’s odds-on I won’t know whatever else it is you have to tell me.’

I guess you need persistence to end up as a professor. ‘That’s just it, Steele. You speak a different language to my students. All I want you to do is to talk them through your lifestyle.’

‘You don’t even know me, Joseph. I might be an accountant in bank.’ I stood up and started to walk away, to find My Cucumber.

‘As a guest speaker, you could earn probably \$500, maybe a thousand.’

Now he had sparked my intellectual curiosity. ‘Can you write down all the details, and tell me if I need to wear a silly cap?’

It turned out that Joseph Lavinsky wasn’t a bad style of bloke. All he wanted was for some youngish, street-smart person, with a few run-ins with the coppers, to lay it on thick for his students. He told me this in a lot of big words, but I figured, if the truth were known, he was boring his students shitless with his enriched brain fodder. All he wanted from me was a few half-lies to keep them awake for an hour or two. I could do that.

To show I was giving value for money, I told him about the subsequently defrocked nun from the orphanage where I was raised. She insisted I was John Lennon’s lovechild. I added I did not believe it myself but shrugged my shoulders to suggest it could be true. It was an old routine of mine and it worked best out on the street when I could raise my granny sunglasses to reveal my honest eyes as I also raised my shoulders to indicate impartial scepticism. The bit had a reasonable indoor strike rate as well.

Lavinsky looked closely into my face. ‘Your disbelief is wise,’ he said. ‘You look nothing like John Lennon.’

I quickly changed the subject, or, more precisely, I allowed Lavinsky to leap from topic to topic. Then I made a mistake. During one of his raves, I said he was wasting all his philosophical musings on me; that he should talk to my SP bookie mate, the Gooroo. The professor perked up.

He wanted to know whether the Gooroo was a convert to Hinduism. I told him I had given Gooroo the moniker, derived from an Aboriginal word for ‘deep place’ or something like that. Lavinsky wanted Gooroo’s phone number. I thought I had just talked myself out of the gig, but Lavinsky assured me that I was still the pea for the job.

When I told Nat about my uni gig, she was keen on the notion of my placing myself in a room full of students. I think she hoped some of that erudition might rub off on me. She said she would take the day off work to sneak into the lecture but I made her promise not to do that.