

# AS IF OVERNIGHT

Gary Dunne



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‘Until last year, we were like *Peter Pan and the Lost Boys*. Now we are blatantly mortal. It’s as if we’ve changed overnight and will never be that young again.’

THE BIG W, legendary transvestite glamour star, invites four friends for lunch atop Centerpoint Tower. There’s her sultry seamstress Lauren, Darlo boys Simon and Mike plus Tom, the homecoming queen, just back from LA. It’s a prelude to a year when everything changes. This is the story of what happens to their world.

Gary Dunne writes about the arrival of AIDS with the same honesty, dry humour and insight that characterised his first book, *If Blood Should Stain the Lino*.



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Gary Dunne

BlackWattle Press  
Sydney Australia  
1990

For Perry Standerwick  
1961-1990

*'What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror, it is also a map, a geography of the mind ... We need to know about here because here is where we live.'*

**Margaret Atwood**

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## A SYDNEY DIARY

Yesterday, THE BIG W gave me this blank journal. “Now you’ve got something less tacky for when you’re pissed off with sitting around being a non-smoker,” she said. I thanked her. A diary would be genuinely useful and one can only knit so many woollen scarves. I wondered just when she’d noticed how much I hate waiting. Her insight hasn’t made her any more prompt, she promised to be here with a hired ute at midday. It’s now 2 pm and everything’s been packed and ready to go for hours. At least there’s something I can do, start *My Day*, (her title, not mine).

To begin ... Today is Wednesday. My name is Simon. I’m 28. I live in Sydney ... I sometimes wonder if Sydney’s worth the effort it takes to live in. It’s a blur of streets and houses. For the past ten years, they’ve been connected by multiple trips in hired utes to ferry mountains of belongings from one home to the next. They’ll illustrate my biography with pages 1-28 of the Gregory’s street directory or snap-shots of milk-crates full of dead kitchen appliances.

Enough about me having to move, yet again, and on to gossip. Tom’s back in Sydney. He flew in last week and yesterday we headed up to the top of Centrepont Tower for a lunch to toast the homecoming queen. There were five of us, Mike and THE BIG W, my two closest friends, plus Tom and me. THE BIG W had also invited LAUREN, her sultry seamstress. “It’ll do her good. She doesn’t get out much.”

LAUREN arrived late, in muted drag and sunglasses, looking like

a young Ingrid Bergman on phenobarb. Beyond complaining about the excessive sunlight, she added little to the event. Being honest, she didn't get much of a chance. Both THE BIG W and Mike tend to see conversation as a form of loud monologue.

The restaurant slowly revolved. Most views included at least one of the houses Mike's lived in during the two years Tom has been in the U.S. There was a long, melodramatic story to go with each address. Mike's domestic affairs are highly entertaining unless you happen to be caught up in them. Even the North Shore, where none of us would ever live, didn't silence him. He told fabulous tales of one night stands and sunrise G&Ts on balconies overlooking the harbour and city.

None of my moving stories could rival his, so I didn't compete; nor did Tom, who simply looked on edge. Two years of concentrated Sydney soap, in one sitting, probably constitutes an overdose.

THE BIG W continually interrupted him with gossip and tales of her own more memorable performances both on and off the stages of several of the tackier Darlo venues. No-one tells stories like she does. The most monstrous of them concerned a rival drag diva who is still trying to get Workers' Comp for injuries received when the left arm broke off her crucifix while performing in the *Easter Bonnet Spectacular* at The Clone Club. Even Mike couldn't top that one.

We told Tom three different versions of exactly why our Mardi Gras float last year was a grand flop. The only details we agreed on related to what happened after the big gust of wind hit the truck on Glebe Island Bridge.

"Simon and Mike looked just like princes out of Arabian Nights," said THE BIG W. "So cute in their leather G strings, chasing the boxes and tat all over the road."

"It took courage," I said. "Some of the cars were full of rude people."

"And she, of course, had a perfect view of it all," said Mike, pointing at THE BIG W. "She and her early-hideous velvet armchair were the only things left upright on the back of the truck. And she was too busy playing Queen-Mother-On-Tour to actually get down and help."

"So much for depending on the kindness of friends," she replied and ordered more wine.

LAUREN took off her sunglasses, made a great show of inserting

eyedrops then put the shades back on.

I talked about finally leaving Darlo for Lilyfield, THE BIG W scoring me a job in the gay pub near there and how I still hate moving house.

Downstairs, we agreed that the ladies-who-lunch notion is a good one and we agreed to do it again, soon, maybe a lunchtime harbour cruise. Then we drifted off in separate directions, window shopping the afternoon's passing trade.

THE BIG W is now three hours late. I'm leaving the flat to do some serious telephoning. I'll end this first diary entry by stating that even though she's my *oldest friend* (she hates that title), she'd better have a really good excuse this time. The problem is, I know she will, and like her story about SONIA MAC's crucifix, if it isn't true, it probably ought to be.



## A DARLO STORY

THE BIG W enjoys dropping in on LAUREN B. She likens it to visiting the poor. You somehow feel richer yourself for doing it. Not that MISS B lives in abject poverty – in many ways she is now doing much better than THE BIG W. But that feeling is always there.

LAUREN is working. Another set of dresses for Claudia Pitti to hang \$400 tags onto and sell to the ladies of Double Bay. THE BIG W tells her friends that LAUREN is skilled, almost gifted, when it comes to dress-making. Then she adds that you'd never know it to look at what she designs and wears herself – long black dresses, hats with veils, gloves to the elbows and the most atrocious shoes. She's sure that MISS LAUREN believes the result is alluring. It possibly is. She often tells LAUREN how she wastes her triple blessings of slim figure, high cheekbones and dark eyes. LAUREN sighs patiently. Like THE BIG W's suggestion that she have a sex change, these latest ideas on image improvement have nothing to do with MISS LAUREN's notions of looking fabulous. They are heard out with the kind of distant resignation generally only found between sisters or long term lovers. She makes all of THE BIG W's 'seventies chic' garments with the same kind of resignation. For all their differences, THE BIG W is both a good friend and a good customer.

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"I'll have it finished soon."

"I need it for the show Thursday night," says THE BIG W.

"No worries." She stops working and walks over to the sink to fill

the jug. "I think I'm very much in love."

"Someone I know?"

"No. A boy I met last night. I was waiting on the corner trying to get a taxi and this group of skin-heads went by. He was with them. He kind of lingered till they got round the corner, then comes over and goes, 'Hi.' I said, 'Do I know you?' And he goes, 'Not yet.' Real cute. Looked just like James Dean, same kind of hair, tight jeans, boots and a western shirt. Rough looking but relaxed. Well, he offered me a cigarette which was great as I'd just run out ..."

THE BIG W smiles. LAUREN is noted for having just run out of cigarettes.

"... He put two in his mouth, lit them and gave me one. I liked that. Plus he had this great American accent."

THE BIG W clears a space on the table for the teapot and cups. Like the whole bedsit, the table is cluttered. "So you brought him back here?"

"No. I was taking some stock over to *Pitti's*. But he's coming over tomorrow night."

LAUREN spends the rest of the night working, sleeps for four hours, pops a pill, then heads into the city to buy various bits and pieces. There's a mad woman shouting on the bus. The first shop assistant she speaks to snubs her. *Joan Barrie's* no longer stocks the sequins she wants.

She dines at McDonald's on three bitter coffees and a sickly apple turnover. She hasn't given up, she's merely pausing to revise the list of things to be done, putting off the non-essentials for next time. People like THE BIG W who tell her to expand her business, employ someone to help and take more orders in, have no idea just how difficult her current level of work can be. By day, the city is like a huge vat of baker's dough. You have to push and struggle to make the slightest impression. Sometimes, merely finding buttons that match or the right coloured material is impossible. A night business suits her perfectly. Most of her orders are from people who drop in 'of an evening' or at least can be visited for a drink at a sociable hour. The less she sees of daylight and the less days like this one, the better.

She reads *The Mirror*. It's quite the thing to do when visiting McDonald's. The news is all either stale or irrelevant. She worked out

months ago, when Claudia started ordering less, that the economy must be sinking. And for as long as she's lived in Darlo there's been a pox problem. Like most of life's little dramas it's nothing pills or injections can't fix. *The Mirror's* hype on AIDS is as unreal as the rest of the major news: a war, a famine and a hole somewhere over the Antarctic. If they were real they'd involve her in some tangible, personal way. They'd spill over from the daytime headlines, crowds and big business. They'd touch everything else, even the night. She'd sense anything important long before it was mentioned in the papers.

She swallows the last of the metallic-tasting coffee and heads back out. Macker and *The Mirror* always leave her feeling brittle.

Just after 2 am LAUREN slides out of bed, finds her black silk dressing gown and heads for the sink. "Tea?"

"Coffee, if you've got it."

She watches him sit up and light a cigarette. She likes him. Most men lose their cool when they fuck. You find out a lot more about them. He fucks like he lights cigarettes. With certainty. Like they've done it many times before and he knows what he's doing. She moves slowly, deliberately, giving nothing away.

"Why'd you jump ship?" Silence would be OK but she likes to hear the sound of his voice.

"Sick of it. Sick of the orders and all that. Last time I was here I made friends. This time I've got places to stay till they stop looking for me. They don't try that hard."

"Where else have you been?"

"Round the Pacific. Hawaii is OK. You make all these clothes?"

"Mostly." She checks her minimal mascara in the small bespeckled mirror above the sink, turns and finishes making the tea and coffee in silence, head lowered, eyelids at half-mast. At times like this, the look is what counts.

Back in bed she begins lightly tracing shapes on his hairless chest.

"Don't."

"Sorry." She moves back.

"What's on TV? Any good movies?"

"Only seventies shit. I checked earlier."

“I might as well fuck you again.”

“Anytime.” She immediately regrets saying it. The more passive she is, the more he’ll take advantage of her. He could do anything. She thinks about it for a moment. The idea’s exciting but she knows that if she lets him gain that control, he’ll never come back. She feels fragile but decides that it takes guts and class to get what you want in this world. She rolls onto her side and this time slides her hand straight down to his groin.

“That’s better.” He bites her neck.

She makes all the moves and stays on top. It’s even better than the first time. She knows he’ll be back.

“Stop fidgeting.” LAUREN finishes pinning the hem. “How’s that?”

“Fuck knows. You should have a big mirror here. They don’t cost much,” replies THE BIG W.

“I don’t like them. I don’t need a mirror to tell me when I look good. I go out.”

“Well. How do *I* look? Forget the face and imagine it with that curly wig.”

“Great. Perfect fit. What number are you doing in it?”

“*The Rose.*”

“Suits you. Very seventies. And perfect for THE DIVINE MISS M.”

“You know, you should consider doing a number one night. I’d see you got paid. And you could buy a decent mirror with the money ...” A very old proposition. Part of their friendship.

“I couldn’t handle the lights. When I go nightclubbing, I take pills, sit up the back and sip cocktails. Subtle lighting, no mirrors. It suits my features. But if Jimmy doesn’t drop over tonight, I’ll come and catch the last show.”

“You’d sit here all evening waiting for him ... ?”

“Something like that ...”

“He must be good.”

Miss LAUREN B smiles distantly, touching the red marks on her neck and shoulders.

When THE BIG W joins them LAUREN finds praising the show an easy task. It was much better than she expected it to be. She wasn’t sure about bringing Jimmy along but he and THE BIG W are chatting easily. It

looks like being a good night.

THE BIG W is impressed: She likes the way he smokes LAUREN's cigarettes, the way they dance together and his telegraphic pseudo-American conversation. It brings out the smouldering best in LAUREN. His accent slips from time to time but she decides not to ask questions.

At 5 am they say good-night to THE BIG W and head down Oxford Street to buy hamburgers. The sky has dull gold in its mouth. "More trouble in the Middle East," she comments, glancing at the headlines.

"Time to send in the marines."

She looks him up and down, trying to imagine a uniform and a rifle.

"Or nuke the lot of them," he concludes.

She takes his arm. Someone once asked if the end of the world would come at night-time. She doubts it.

"Let's get home. I hate Darlington mornings."



## AN EROTIC NOSTALGIA

Simon smiles as *Nutbush City Limits* begins. Fifteen minutes till the lights are on full, forty-five till the bar is cleaned up and he can go. It's a great number, pure seventies revival. Sometimes, like tonight, the energy is palpable. He puts the tray of glasses on the bar and looks at the dance floor. It still needs more younger ones to learn the steps before it can achieve dance-cult status. And maybe it's too defined, too predictable for their kind of image. The new generation gap. Meanwhile, sweating suburban gay men, the respectable side of thirty, bounce forward and back, between enthusiasm and embarrassment at remembering the routine so well.

He moves on, collecting glasses from the back shelf, flirting with several of the regular 'raging wallflowers'. He's hot, but not serious. Attention without intention. A pick-up while working is poor politics. Especially in the only gay pub west of the Glebe Island Bridge, where new faces are noticed and gossip is an art form. Anyway, in tonight's mood, he'd prefer to score purely on physical grounds and not as a result of bar-staff banter, a style he'd have to keep going all night.

The lights finally come on full. The doorway is crowded, noisy goodnights and tentative plans for the weekend. The last half hour takes forever to pass. Then he's heading over the Bridge towards the neon pop-up city. Sydney ...

Rows of benches are lit from the huge video screen in the nave of the old Darlinghurst building. Simon sits at the end of the front row. One

video is ending and another starts. This one has sound but the actors look the same. They are young and extra fit. There's a smooth-skin-close-up of a taut stomach with a thin line of hair from navel to pubes below a perfect hairless chest. Both boys are about eighteen. They talk to each other, but the soundtrack is very loud, distorted by too much bass and anyway the words are unintelligible. They strip off their wet Speedos. One breathes loudly. Simon hears it as if through a stethoscope. His partner reacts as greasy fingers go to work. A kind of 'yes' grunt almost echoes and the first actor sighs, making the loudspeaker shudder.

Simon moves from next to the speaker to directly in front of it. The picture looms above. It all looks so easy, so perfect, like a Coke ad. Slow motion athleticism, no lust, just two carefree young men making casual bliss. Greasy fingers dial in further. He hears the second actor inhale sharply. It must have hurt. Fingers ease out to a sigh then a moan as they are replaced by a tongue. The camera zooms back and they are in a garden next to a swimming pool. A plane goes overhead and the loudspeaker shudders again. They change positions to the squeak of knees on vinyl. There's a dog barking in the distance then a squelch, in and out. A heavy breath from the first actor and the dog barks again. A larger than life closeup of his face show beads of sweat on his upper lip and a look of blank concentration. He breathes out loudly.

A cough and Simon looks behind at the half lit rows of solo and mutual masturbators. It's all safe sex except for the video. An audience of voyeurs is watching easy action, as remote as a forbidden planet.

It's tempting to simply stare up at the screen and jerk off, remembering when he was that young, imagining that's how it was, free of all uncertainty and zits. Another nostalgia number. But tonight it's unsettling, the distance seems too great.

He wanders out the back to see what's happening. Not much is made all the more surreal by the video soundtrack played at lower volume throughout the building. Returning, this time to the middle of the back row, he sits, settles back and relaxes, legs spread. A different perspective and less deafening.

The actors have changed positions yet again. The one being fucked is on his back, knees up near his ears, and looks uncomfortable. Cut to a concise rear view. Short grunts keep time with the efficient piston-like

thrusts.

A hand gently touches Simon's crotch. He responds, sliding his hand over the other man's thigh and firmly feeling the outlined cock and balls through tight denim. Both have erections. Simon manages the guy's belt, metal button, zip and undies with ease, a routine he fondly recalls from school days. Soon they are wanking each other off at twice the speed of the screen action. The guy blows quickly and keeps going until Simon comes.

Then the film reaches its climax. Deeper groans from below but the close-up focuses on the top actor's sweaty determination. Head back and mouth wide open.

Simon's neighbour squeezes his leg, "Thanks mate," "Anytime," "See ya," and goes.

The top actor withdraws and begins a well lubricated, showy wank. There is much husky breathing and his distorted voice booms. A moderate amount of semen arcs in slow motion onto the still body beneath. A deep sigh. The End. No credits.

Simon leaves to the sound of musak, still with too much bass.



## A MIDNIGHT SHIFT

Inside the nightclub it's hot. The Kiwi cloakroom clerk flirts, claiming to be a film-maker. Simon decides it's a pleasant change from unemployable fashion designer, an ex-Auckland cliché around innovative Darlo. He leaves his jacket and pushes through the crowd.

In the usual corner, Mike, in ragged denim, all fringes artificially bleached, looks bored.

"You're late," he pronounces. "And tonight's dead."

"No one interested, hey?"

"Nothing fuckable. Prehistoric clones. Hens dressed up as chicken. And fucking yuppies," gesturing at a pair of post-Country Road college boys, "Probably from Melbourne."

"Bigot."

Simon doesn't stay. He's spotted Glen, the seduction of whom, over a number of weeks, is turning into a surprisingly enjoyable soapie. Glen is next to the bar, pretty as a picture. Simon orders drinks. Glen says he's well. So is Simon. There's this predictable pattern to the conversation. Simon runs through some of the things they have in common, paying particular attention to Glen's sixties sensibilities. Glen replies, adds a bit here and there, smiles when flattered and shows interest.

When they first met, Simon casually invited him home to examine his prophylactic collection. "Not on the first date," was the reply and

Simon at first thought he was joking. He wasn't. That seems like ages ago. Now things are cooler. THE BIG W says GLENBOY is a prick-teaser. Simon disagrees. He likes the measured responses, enough to keep him hanging on and a bit more. It's constant and that's OK.

They hit the dance floor. Much eye contact and limited but fluid movement. Nearby, a pair of gym queens with matching shorts and moustaches are sharing a bottle of amyl. Not such an anachronism given the music being played. Glen seems equally amused. Once upon a time there was a theory connecting amyl use with AIDS. It always seemed to Simon that it only caused premature shirt removal.

Back at the bar, the conversation is unusually brief. Glen has to go. He wants to start work early tomorrow. His fascination with a computer's varied functions is one of the things they don't have in common. Simon suggests dinner one night. Glen likes the idea but won't be specific. He leaves, promising to ring during the coming week. Simon heads back to Mike.

"How is GLEN-BOY?"

"My favourite waste of time."

"No man is worth that much bother," replies Mike. All he can see is an inexplicable persistence, a lusting for the nearly impossible.

"It's not like that," says Simon, not sure how to put it into words.

"Just lay your cards on the table. 'I don't suppose a fuck would be out of the question.' Or something like that. Get things moving."

"I don't know. So far we've only moved things as far as the coffee shop over the road. He knows I'm keen. I'm not going to make a fool of myself. There are new rules. The next move is his."

"Or yours," says Mike, unconvinced.

Tall and imposing, in what looks like a polyester sari, THE BIG W, pushy transvestite glamour star, parts the crowd to join them carrying a round of drinks.

"Let's welcome our new contestant on *Blankety Blanks*," announces Simon, his best Graham Kennedy impersonation, "THE BIG W herself, Miss Margaret Whitlam."

Mike claps.

THE BIG W bows, then sits, beaming. No-one's done this number

in ages and it's her favourite piece of seventies baggage.

"Tell us the Margaret Whitlam story," continues Simon.

"Well, Graham. I'm over 21. I live in Darlinghurst. I like meeting men."

"Triple tragedy," mutters Mike.

"A or B, Margaret?"

"I'll take B, GRA-GRA."

"You always take B," says Mike.

"A limited range of options."

"Maybe we should try something more up to date one night. For a change. Like *Perfect Match*. They do *Perfect Match* in Newtown."

"Nothing they do in Newtown surprises me anymore ... I don't care if it dates me. I am what I am. And anyway, I don't like *Perfect Match*. The contestants overact."

They settle back to dish. 'Dishing' is an American word Mike picked up from Tom. It means bitching. And in L.A., 'bitching' means something else again. In the current climate it's less likely Mike will sleep with an American and thus get a chance to show off his knowledge of their lexicon. Still, he keeps it filed with the details on Willard's toupee, the chance may yet arise.

After a couple of rounds of drinks, Mike begins to look flat. "My life," his voice slurs, "is in Tupperware containers. Work. Sex. Health. Here. The pub. All separate."

He's Simon's best friend, but once he's on to talking neurotic, he's like a cracked record.

"All separate. The problem is keeping it together. Making connections. Otherwise it's all too fragmented."

Simon says nothing. He's known Mike too long. Obsessions aren't changed by well meant advice. His optimism, from talking with Glen, is fading.

"I mean dealing with things. Like Scott being positive. It worries me."

"Probably worries him too," says THE BIG W filing her nails. A bad

sign.

him.

Simon tries to remember who Scott is and wonders if he slept with

"You have to keep the lid on. Like it might all explode or something."

"I didn't know you were such good friends with those Double Bay

socialites,” says THE BIG W.

Simon places Scott. A aerobic airhead. Not his type at all. “Tom told me. He knows them better than I do. After he rang me I couldn’t sleep. I went walking. At four am. Walked miles. There was this storm. Thunder, lightning, wind. Real drama queen stuff. Anyway, near Ultimo, I stopped, looked around and thought, ‘Shit. A girl could get mugged out here.’ So I got a taxi back home.”

“You should have stayed home, popped two valium and taken a bubble bath. That’s what I do on those kind of nights.” THE BIG W has never believed in leaving emotions churning around in a blender.

“Did you get off with him?” asks Simon.

“I’m not sure ... I don’t know ... It’s the big picture ... Back rooms. But we don’t do that anymore, do we, Simon? We get here on time ... And we sit and we put lids on it. Tupperware lids ... Not much else to do ... My life in Tupperware ... “

“Try wanking,” suggests Simon sharply. “But not in the bubble bath. The cum goes all stringy.”

“Or a pick-up. Just use a love-glove if you’re worried about them getting deep and meaningful.” THE BIG W gestures at the bar line-up. “There’s plenty to choose from. You could get lucky. At this late hour they ain’t so fussy.”

“Safe sex or a wank,” Mike slurs, unimpressed.

“I’d take B,” says Simon. “A looks awfully jaded tonight.” He nods at the closing rush of stressed denim.

“So does THE PHARMACEUTICAL KID,” says THE BIG W as Mike’s head gently lands on the table.

“I’ll walk him home,” Simon finishes Mike’s drink. “It’s OK. I will. It’s on my way.”

“Did you two end up going for tests?” asks THE BIG W as they reach the street. Mike shows signs of reviving in the cold, fresh air. He spews in the gutter.

“I’m going. Mike’s not sure. CLEOPATRA, the queen of denial. Reckons she’s neurotic enough already.”

“I’m like you. I’d rather know.”

“I’d rather know as long as it is negative.”



### A RENTAL CRISIS

Simon sits at the front table sipping coffee and looking at street scenery. At 3 am there's usually something of passing interest on Oxford Street. There's a red-head at the bus stop under the street lamp. He's about eighteen, thin and freckled. Bankstown-blue – looks warm and practical, thinks

Simon, who's cold, fashionable and wondering why he bothers.

The boy enters the coffee shop. "Can I bludge a cig?"

"OK." It's too easy to be cynical. One of Simon's New Year resolutions was to commit one uncalled-for niceness a day. He's already at least a month behind. "Long wait for a bus," he adds.

"Nothing better to do." Smiling.

"Want a coffee?" Niceness number two.

"Sure." The kid sits.

Simon is not in the habit of offering coffee to cigarette scrounging youths. But it's been a long night and his resistance is low. At \$1.20 a cup, conversation is a cheap way to wind down before heading home and beats staring out the window, trying to appear pensive or bohemian.

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He looks at the kid. A lot of possibilities but he's probably just a prostitute from around the corner trying the one-eyed chequebook on Oxford Street bar remnants. Simon has never paid for sex, something more to do with his ego than his morals.

“You live round here?” the kid asks.

“No. Lilyfield.”

“Where’s that?”

“Out West.”

“Do you want that?” He points to Simon’s half-eaten bagel.

“No.”

“May I,” he says as he takes a bite from it.

Manners, thinks Simon, certainly maketh the man, but nothing impresses like cash. He toys with the idea of buying him some food. Then decides he’s not a public charity. Nor so sure he wants to impress.

“What about you, do you live around here?” he asks.

“I’m from Melbourne. I got here last week. Supposed to meet a friend and stay with him. But he’s moved. I’ll find him but.”

It’s predictable. It explains the bag at his feet but not why he’s here at three am. Maybe the competition is too fierce, too competitive around the corner. This is the soft, social touch.

“My name’s Rick. What’s yours?” Offering a hand.

Rick starts wheezing as Simon goes to pay the bill. “I’m picking up a paper then heading home.”

“Can I crash at your place. Just for tonight.” He takes a puff on a Ventolin inhaler.

“You’d do better at THE WALL. I’m not your type,” Simon politely tells him. And you’re not mine, he thinks. Then reconsiders, all too aware of the weeks spent chatting up unobtainable blondes like Glen.

“Please.” An innocent enough appeal.

The flat’s its usual mess. While Rick’s having a shower, Simon hides his own cash and cards, then goes through Rick’s jeans and shirt pockets. His name is Gavin Richard Maughan. Born 17.8.70 and he does come from Melbourne. He’s got no cash. His bag contains another Target jumper, a tourist map of Sydney, underwear, shorts, a spare Ventolin, a SF novel about a stainless steel rat and a letter from a Janice McNeil of Nunawading. She takes five pages to say that she loves him and wants him back.

Rick, in shorts, gets into bed and turns on the TV. He’s fast asleep when Simon joins him after a shower.

The next day, as he climbs the stairs to his flat, Simon can hear his record player. It's a good omen, meaning it's still there. The one bedroom is spotless, vacuumed and neat. Rick's wearing Simon's clothes. His own hang damply around the balcony like a Paddington cocktail party. Rick says dinner's cooking, it's nearly time for *Perfect Match* and did he have a good day at work. Simon is not ready for instant suburbia but he is hungry.

The TV's still going, music videos, at 11 pm when Simon rolls over in bed and slides an arm around Rick.

"You bi?" Rick asks.

"No. I haven't slept with a woman for years. I wouldn't say I was bi. You?"

"Only if I have to be."

Which is enough to make Simon remove his arm. So much for romance, let alone hot, raunchy sex.

"It's not compulsory," he tells Rick.

"I'll wank you off if you like." It sounds a mildly disagreeable task, akin to washing the dishes.

"No thanks. I don't need wanking at the moment." Simon pauses, unused to the high moral ground, then asks, "Do you often live like this with other people?"

"I guess so. Since I left home I've lived about. Never enough cash for rent."

Simon briefly thinks he has enough cynicism to say yes. Anything's possible, even a marriage of convenience, in a world where temporary erections can lead to permanent dwellings. He has a vision of eternity spent accommodating Rick. A safe suburban cocoon where the dishes get washed nightly. It makes him feel old, very quickly.



### A RARE MONTH FOR BOYS

The regulars at the pub told Simon that THE BIG W was becoming a depressing queen at heart. “She loves a bit of tragedy that one does,” they said. “Look how she went on about Mike’s funeral.” And aware that Simon knew both THE LATE MIKE and THE BIG W well, they waited for his views on the subject.

But Simon didn’t know how to reply. He vaguely nodded and moved on, collecting glasses and wiping down the next table. Until October, death, for him at least, had been something that occurred to other people’s distant grandparents. All the associated social processes were as new to him as the waves of raw emotion he kept experiencing like hot flushes. He’d learnt to say “Thanks” when someone offered condolences and “Fine” when asked how he was. Any other answer seemed out of place, somehow self-indulgent given the recency of Mike’s real suffering.

The intensity of his emotions disturbed him. His own blood tests were negative so what was he neurotic about?

Perhaps it was an awareness of his own mortality, but at 29 that seemed morbid.

Or guilt. A case of why him and not me. Back when they’d flatted together they’d both slept about, swapping blow by blow descriptions the next morning over coffee.

Or simply grief. The sudden loss of his best friend. But grief was bland cards with lilies on them and Jackie Kennedy in black, an image he liked but couldn't personally relate to.

It was the same with the funeral. He'd never been to one before and even afterwards wasn't so sure what to make of it all. He visited Tom at Prince Henry Hospital then walked the five kilometres to the crematorium. A scenic stroll overlooking the view often photographed for its 'dark satanic mills' quality - graves, factories, industrial wastelands and garish petrol tanks. It was his most vivid memory of the day.

Outside the chapel he joined the people on the left. Mike's family stood on the right. It was like the photos on Tom's bedside wall; the family and the friends, separate but together. In a movie they'd talk to each other but here they didn't. Beyond politeness and a few small legalities there was no reason. They hadn't been interested in each other when Mike was alive.

The friends, a larger scattered group, carried on forms of quiet banter, all low key pomp and serepax. Simon noted the arrival of THE BLACK WIDOW SPIDER.

"She's only come to make sure he's dead," said LAUREN, herself a dark victory in black with a veil.

"At least she's here," replied THE BIG W. "Unlike some I could name."

The funeral itself was an anticlimax. The nylon curtains closed and they all went back to Darlinghurst.

"It's all a matter of style," THE BIG W told Simon a week later. Now, a month later, watching the southern suburbs of Sydney through the bus window, he decides that she was right. It was part of a conversation they had while cleaning out Mike's flat - kitchen utensils to Rick and Mark, the hallway mirrors to LAUREN, lounge suite to St Vincent de Paul 'from whence it must have come' and so on.

The bedroom was the hardest - private stuff, from clothes to letters and porn. THE BIG W put on a Julie London record, raised her eyes to heaven in apology and began reading papers and letters before

throwing them into the garbage bag in the comer.

The bus jolts and Simon looks up. Another village-suburb he once only knew of from minor events on the news. The next stop is the gaol. The young girls with tatts will get off, leaving him and the old girls with baskets going on to the hospital at the end of the line.

The first visit to Prince Henry's had been difficult, he'd been scared. "You can wear a gown if you want to," said a nurse who didn't. So he'd said 'No' and felt totally exposed. Tom, pale and thin even then, was propped up in bed. They'd chatted like a pair of English grand dames awaiting cucumber sandwiches. These days it's more relaxed. Tom grumbles and Simon talks about the past week. Trivialities and gossip. THE BIG W's latest feud or GLEN-BOY's preference for boxer shorts in bed. The premises for the bitchy jokes no longer apply but they still tell them. Then he tells Simon about the latest tests, sometimes talking about the pain, as if words could turn an experience into something more distant and abstract.

Simon walks slowly, still managing to pass the pensioner women on their trek from the bus stop down to the wards. He's learnt a lot since that first visit. It's no longer Tom's fight. No matter what his attitude, the illness prospers. Sometimes he looks better on days when he's depressed, other times he seems optimistic but looks finished. How he's going - the classic question - has little to do with either his appearance or his mood. Their answer comes from printouts of blood and other tests. They own the 'fight' and their 'weapons' are equally devastating. Tom said several times that it wasn't a matter of throwing in the towel or not. There was nowhere to throw it. It took a while for that to make sense.

Told Tom is sleeping, he waits in the corridor listening to the conversation in the next room. It's not difficult. Both Jack and his visiting wife are half-deaf. There's a comment about what's on TV, then silence. Jack isn't saying much today. Simon understands. Sometimes when Tom's bombed on painkillers, conversations fade in and out like stations up the FM band. Plus some days there's not much to say.

Simon grows tired of waiting and leaves the building, strolling downhill to watch the sea awhile. A gentle afternoon heading towards

sunset. A great view. A few boats, seagulls, and to the north-east, low hills perhaps. An illusion. He smiles. There's nothing but sea till America. And it lies somewhere over the horizon.

He remembers how he and THE BIG W left Mike's porn collection until last. Agreeing it would be tacky to fight over it, they tried to divide it in two. She would score the heavier butch magazines and Simon could have the young blond spunks. "A matter of style," THE BIG W said. "That's what's lacking in all this AIDS business. I can't stand the tragic Darryl and Bruce scenes. Droopy eyes to match the moustaches. *Love Story* is a lousy plot to copy."

"What's the alternative?" Simon asked, browsing heavily through the remaining magazines.

"I don't know ... Being practical. Sensible shoes. Condoms. This sort of thing really. Cleaning up." She snatched two magazines from his heap while he was engrossed. "Otherwise we're just RSL Queens. Getting pissed and nostalgic about fallen comrades and the good old days. They weren't so hot really."

Cigarette finished, Simon trudges back up the hill to the ward where the awful *Simon Townsend's Wonder World* whispers from every headphone. They say Tom is awake so he knocks and goes in.



### A RELENTLESS ACCOMMODATION

It feels like this diary was begun half a lifetime ago, but actually it's only been about eighteen months. On re-reading it, I keep noticing how differently I saw things back then.

A good example is the celebrated 'five queens who lunch'. My diary entry is dominated by THE BIG W and Mike, all banter and wit atop Centrepoint Tower. I mention in passing that Tom seemed on edge, as if being Tom took lots of energy. I thought he was still jet-lagged from the flight home. I remember someone asking him about AIDS. His terse description of San Francisco didn't fit with the Sydney gossip and splendid views, so I didn't write about it. Yet that's the moment that's now with me, Tom's craggy face and the revolving postcard scenery.

It's a memory, a bit of footage, as clear as yesterday, but that lunch was so long ago, back in our 'before' days. I don't know just how reliable I am when writing about back then. It's all too easy to edit in terms of what later happened. What gets left out is our sheer innocence. Until last year, we were like *Peter Pan and the Lost Boys*. Now we're blatantly mortal. It's as if we've changed overnight and will never be that young again. The only real certainties I have are a limited assortment of moments, each one remembered with the same intense clarity of that unsettling exchange over lunch.

For the past six months, mental snapshots, like 'Tom over lunch' have become a quiet obsession, something I can't help picking up, but don't know what to do with. There's 'Mike's death', 'the first funeral', 'the

blood test', 'Tom in hospital' and many more. Some are easy to write down. Like last week, straight after Tom's funeral, when we all drove to Lady Jane. A couple of us were out in the deep water, lazily clinging to a huge blown-up tyre ring. One by one, the rest of the group swam out. We kept making room until eventually a whole cluster of friends was bobbing up and down in the unclear waters of Sydney Harbour.

Others are written with difficulty. Like the night THE BIG W rang to tell me about Tom. "He's lying there, out of it on Morph, dying, and the silly bitch wants to get dressed and go dancing. So me and this sister get his jeans on and are trying to do the boots, but his feet are all swollen up. And he dies. And his last words were, 'Get my fuckin' boots on. I wanna go to the Shift."

Somehow, it doesn't feel right, putting that paragraph into my diary; as if I've been strip-mining Tom's nights and days for snapshots and found 'Mistah Kurtz - she dead'. But I'm no death-bed groupie or bearer of black gossip. It's just that the phonecall from THE BIG W is part of my luggage and I can't let go of it. Not yet. I don't know exactly what I'm feeling now. On the surface, there's this impotent fury, everything has to be done right away but none of it really matters. Underneath I seem numb, like there's a coldness in my bones that warm clothes won't cure.

I remember feeling the same way when Mike died and that's what makes this time different. This time we know what has to be done and what it will be like. It's not easier, just familiar.

Today we finished distributing Tom's possessions and returned the keys to the agent. Over the past decade we've all helped each other move house so many times. It seems typically Sydney that even after death there's a hired ute, overloaded, ready to ferry everything from one home to the next.

THE BIG W has booked herself, LAUREN and me in for lunch next Tuesday at the Centrepont Tower Restaurant. None of us has been back there since that day so long ago, probably because of limited finances. She says, bugger the expense, we're going, partly to say goodbye to Mike and Tom, and partly because on a clear day the view is always quite dazzling.



### **About the Author**

Gary Dunne was born in the Adelaide Hills in 1954. His short stories, reviews and interviews have been appearing in magazines and anthologies since 1978. In the early eighties he co-edited and published the seminal magazine *inVersions* and the first (so far the only) Australian lesbian and gay anthology *Edge City on two different plans*. A collection of his own interconnected short stories *If Blood Should Stain the Lino* was released in 1984.

Since then he has ‘dabbled in the fillum industry’, taught English in Thailand, chased publishers, promoted friends’ literary achievements and changed address too often for his liking. (Biography dated 1990)

### **About the Publisher**

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