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Dirty Work at The Crossroads: The First Bit



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Version History.

Various incarnations of this text have appeared on the Little House of Concrete website over the past decade.

Call them Versions 1.0 to 1.whatever.

Version 2.0 had several improvements.

For a start, the whole text has been fed through the Grammarly proofreading app, which has suggested numerous changes.

The result should be significantly more readable.

However, these things take time.

A lengthy pause in work on the next section prompted a re-read here. A few superficial changes arrive in Version 2.1.

So, with the later stages still going through the process, here is the *who, what, where* and *why* that sets up the remainder of the narrative.

ORIGINS

Our story dates back to the days when I was drinking at the Grand View, engaging in whimsical character assassination in the company, among others, of the late John Lester.

As a diversion from more serious topics of conversation, the discussion frequently turned to the consequences should Lester achieve his long-held ambition to take out the Lotto.

Being of a speculative nature, I began to suggest various likely scenarios, some of which found their way into **Dirty Work At The Crossroads**.

While there isn't that much actual Dirty Work at the old Crossroads Motel per se, the title suggests sequels about Desperate Days, Dire Deeds or Damnable Degeneracy.

Readers familiar with the various individuals who frequented that establishment at the time may notice similarities between some of those individuals and characters in this work of fiction.

The most notable of those was, of course, the late Lester.

Unlike Gordon Jeffrey, Lester went to his grave with his lifelong ambition of winning the Lotto entirely unfulfilled.

Unlike David Herston, I have also failed in that quest.

I haven't bought a motel with a view of converting it into a place of residence either.

All the characters and events in the story are tailored to fit the requirements of the plotline.

They should in no way be regarded as having any basis in actual reality.

Issues surrounding characterisation are discussed at length in **On Conception, Characterisation and Consistency**.

AFTER IT WAS ALL OVER

"We all deserve," remarked Jeffrey, "to be kneed in the knackers."

The blue tin in his right hand resumed its northward journey. Another mouthful went down.

No further comment followed.

I gazed thoughtfully into the depths of my glass of red and nodded in agreement.

It had been a close-run thing.

Through good luck rather than good management, the pair of us had, in the end, successfully avoided the dread chains of matrimony.

Not that I was particularly concerned by Jeffrey's escape from the matrimonial noose.

Marriage was probably no more and certainly no less than he deserved.

Many of our married acquaintances would have found this latest escape from the institution of marriage unsettling.

Why they would have asked, should he be happy, footloose and fancy-free?

More than one drinker at the Palace, faced with discord at home while Jeffrey carried on his merry way at the other end of the bar, hoped *some real bitch settles that little prick down and gives him a tough time. He bloody deserves it.*

It was hard to say whether the opinion stemmed from a desire to see *the bastard suffer*, as Captain Headrush might have put it.

It may have been a wish to see Jeffrey become a victim of the gynocratic oppression that amused him when some other poor bastard copped it.

Though he'd sailed perilously close to the wind many times, he always seemed to extricate himself at the last minute.

This most recent effort had been closer to the breeze than most.

I would not, of course, have ventured to express such an opinion aloud.

I knew my companion's views on the subject too well to mention the idea, even as a joke.

The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the overhead greenery as Jeffrey reached took another swig from the ever-present tin *brewed in the land of the Southern Cross*.

No further comment was immediately forthcoming.

As my mind tracked back at some length over the preceding fortnight. I shuddered.

It had been too close for comfort, but it seemed that the affair of the Old Flame, the Lovely Bernelle, assorted Dipsomaniacs and the Mafia had reached a satisfactory conclusion.

I was retracing the events that took the pair of us to the brink of the matrimonial abyss when Jeffrey spoke again.

"Yep. Kneed in the knackers. The lot of us."

This was too much to pass without comment.

If anyone had been responsible for landing the pair of us in the crisis from which we had only just escaped, it was the individual advocating the disciplinary knee to the groin.

My part in the proceedings had been exemplary.

"The lot of us be buggered. *You're* the one who landed us in the shit. If anyone's balls are going to be on the firing line, yours are the ones that should be in pride of place. You keep bloody Olga coming around here while you're rooting the Terrible Twins, and you expect nothing to happen? Olga gets her daughter involved and nearly lands me in the shit. No mate, if anyone's knackers deserve the knee, it's bloody yours."

Jeffrey was obviously surprised.

In a way, he should have been.

More than one acquaintance had remarked on my apparent calm in the face of chaos about me.

Years of dealing with fractious students and disagreeable parents can leave a lasting effect.

I sat back and pondered the current form reversal.

Jeffrey did the same for a moment.

Then he sprang to his feet with a cry of *It's empty again!* and disappeared indoors in search of a replacement.

Knowledge of past performances in the face of criticism suggested it was unlikely he'd be sighted for at least half an hour.

The other occupants of our *menage a plenty* were out and about in the course of their employment-related activities, so I had time to reflect.

It may, at times, appear that I have no time for women.

That would be a complete misunderstanding.

Over the years, I have enjoyed a more than convivial relationship with any number of women.

If I took the time to identify an assortment of bar attendants, music shop employees, waitresses, and the local TAB staff, the count would have stretched past twenty or thirty.

Add wives and girlfriends of friends who blamed their late arrival home on their own inadequacies rather than the incipient alcoholism of others. You'd be heading towards three dozen.

Add in former colleagues who needed a reviver after a hard day at the work face, and the total would cruise towards the fifties.

Plenty of female colleagues arrived at the Palace seeking treatment for emotional trauma.

In other words, I get along perfectly well with those of my female acquaintances with whom I have been privileged to share some common interest.

Equally obviously, over the years, I have encountered assorted wowsers and prudes.

The odd acquaintances may blame their late arrival home on their companions at the Palace.

Faced with a roast placed in the freezer or a salad relocated to the oven, diplomacy might require a bit of blame-shifting.

I've even encountered the odd female colleague who considered a reviver at the end of a hard day at the work face as a sign of personal weakness or severe degeneracy.

I felt sorry for their husbands and boyfriends.

But with several thorny entanglements behind me, I've concluded that it is wise to avoid things which you perform poorly.

It's best to stick to things which you do well.

The events of the preceding fortnight seemed to reinforce the notion that it's best to avoid emotional entanglements.

On the other hand, I reckon I can drink beer (and other beverages) rather well.

IN THE BEGINNING

But let's not start at the end.

Let's go back to that Saturday afternoon when a Greyhound Bus pulled up in front of Denison Travel, and a nervous teacher alighted, uncertain what the future held in store.

Having spent ten years at the same school, I thought I'd found a niche that would do me for the duration.

A change of principal and the decision to open a new school in a nearby suburb put the kibosh on that.

It also created a situation where current staff allocations were overgenerous.

Though the precise impact on numbers was still to be determined, the staffing inspector decided to relocate some of the current staff sooner rather than later.

In this, he was aided, I suspect, by a recently arrived principal intent on remodelling the school into something substantially different from the well-oiled machine he'd inherited.

Once he'd changed the office furniture and redesigned the report card, he turned his attention to the staff.

"Let's put it this way, Mr Herston," he remarked as he handed me the transfer papers. "*At least you'll know where you're going next year.* There may be seven or eight of your colleagues who'll be faced with a much more, shall we say, *sudden* relocation in February or March."

Yeah, I thought, and more than likely, they'll be the silly bastards who thought you were joking when you suggested that their classrooms needed a little brightening up. Curtains? Nice vases of flowers? I'll give you a nice bunch of something.

"And I'm assured," he went on, "that there will be a comfortable duplex in teacher accommodation when you arrive there to take up your new responsibilities."

Pompous, sanctimonious prick.

A phone call the next day established that he was correct in that regard.

My new flatmate was a Rugby-playing physical education teacher who would take a drink.

Under the circumstances, I had no choice but to set the removalists loose among my goods and chattels and head off on holidays.

A mate had inveigled me into joining the regional primary schools' cricket team at the state championships.

My plan was to start there and adjourn to my parents' place.

I'd return to Townsville two weeks before school was due to resume.

A further phone call suggested there was no need to hurry.

Those who lived in teacher accommodation would be unlikely to be back before the second-last weekend of the holidays.

It was diplomatic to delay my arrival anyway because it would *make it easier to sort out how you're going to run things in the flat.*

"So," I suggested, "bearing in mind that there are pupil-free days on the 24th and 25th and Australia Day is on Friday I'd be best off turning up around the Saturday. The 20th?"

"That'd be right. If you're coming on the bus, I'll drop down to pick you up and drop you round to the accommodation. If Roger isn't back by then, I'll have a set of keys for you, but I wouldn't be in any hurry to get your gear down here until the pupil-free days. You can take half a day off to unpack if you need to. We're pretty flexible down this way."

I booked a seat on a bus, rang the removalists and proceeded on my merry way through the vacation period.

I wasn't feeling well when I boarded the bus just before lunchtime on a Saturday in mid-January.

That was probably due more to a mild dose of apprehension rather than anything I'd drunk or not eaten the night before.

A substantial brunch did something to remedy that, and I was only semiconscious for most of the two-and-a-half-hour journey.

I'd had a brief glance at the form for the races but decided not to have a bet.

As the coach swept past the salt works, I prepared to do my best to make a favourable first impression.

When the bus came to a stop, there was nothing for it but to launch myself into the unknown.

I landed on the footpath to find my suitcase and the carton containing the boom box waiting for me. The driver had disappeared inside the travel agency.

Fine, I thought, there's supposed to be a Principal round here. Mind you, he did suggest a degree of flexibility.

Up and down the street, nothing stirred.

Behind me, the travel agency door opened.

The driver emerged, followed by an elderly gentleman who appeared to have recently been employed as a gardener. He looked over in my direction.

"You Mr Herston?" he inquired.

I nodded.

The Principal had indicated *a degree of flexibility*.

Still, I doubted that flexibility would transform an educational administrator into a groundsman.

This bloke, I decided, *wasn't* my new boss.

"Got a message for you from Mr Bridger," the horticulturist went on. "He's been called out of town suddenly. His Mum's seriously ill, and we've just managed to get him onto a plane out of Prossie. Only found out this morning. He said to tell you he's booked you into the Palace Hotel until Monday. If you turn up at school, then someone will be able to fix you up for the teacher accommodation. Your accommodation at the Palace will be at the right price, so you're going to be out of pocket."

This bloke, it seemed, was either the local travel agent or his official representative.

"Fine," I said. "Point me in the right direction, and I'll be off..."

"No need for that. Give it a minute or two after the bus has gone so I can lock up the office and I'll drop you down there. Throw your bag in the ute over there."

After a short trip along the main street and a right-hand turn, the ancient vehicle ground to a halt.

The building on the corner could be described as a *big old North Queensland country pub*.

"There you go," the driver said. "Head in the side door and look for Mr Jeffrey. He'll look after you. The owners are away on holidays, and he's looking after the place."

I retrieved my suitcase, sat the boom box carton on my shoulder, crossed the footpath and walked through the open door into an angled side bar.

Through the doorway on my right was an L-shaped public bar.

To my left, a lounge area opened onto what looked like a dining room.

The only sign of life was a figure sitting at the bar with his back to me.

A transistor beside his right elbow and several newspapers suggested he was studying the racing form and might not appreciate interruptions.

I walked past him and looked around in the manner of a thirsty traveller in search of refreshment. The figure at the bar looked up.

"You Herston?" he asked.

I nodded.

"You're just in time. Tonight we've got the semifinals of the boot-throwing and a round of international hog-calling karaoke. You'll have a ringside seat. *Magpie!*"

A woman in her late thirties or early forties appeared round the corner of the public bar.

If this was Magpie, I guessed, the nickname probably came from a prominent beak-like nose.

"It's no good, Jeffrey, You know what they said before they left yesterday. No rum until an hour before closing time."

She turned in my direction.

"He keeps on trying it on, but he knows I won't give it to him. What can I do for you?"

Her voice suggested a crow with a leg caught in a barbed-wire fence rather than anything human.

The nickname was apparently based on more than mere physical appearance.

"This," the bloke at the bar interjected, "is Mr Herston, Magpie. He'll need a beer and the keys to Number Twelve. The school rang this morning and asked us to look after him for the weekend. Bridger's been called away, and this bloke can't get into teacher accommodation till Monday, so it's the right price. They'll get their money back from him over the next year or so by the looks. Fix him up with that stuff. I'm off to the chaff cutter to fill up His Lordship's account."

He turned towards me.

"You a punter? Got a phone account? If not, slip us twenty bucks, and I'll shoot it into His Lordship's account to save you a walk."

As I handed over a twenty, I started to believe that if *we're pretty flexible down here* wasn't the town motto, it should be.

Pocketing the money, Jeffrey headed off through the public bar, disappearing through the door on the other side.

I looked towards Magpie and indicated that a pot of Cascade would be fine if they had it on tap.

Otherwise, a stubby would do.

While she headed off, I reflected on my venture into the unknown. I had, it seemed, landed on my feet, at least for the time being.

Magpie returned with beer, keys and directions to my room.

"Up the stairs, then it's left, right, left."

She waved towards the stairwell as she spoke.

"You'll find it's right down the end on the main street side. That way you can sit on the veranda in the morning. There's some stuff in the wardrobe, but if you don't have anything that needs hanging up that shouldn't bother you. The door isn't locked at the moment, but if you want to be on the safe side."

"Left, right, left," I replied. "Like marching, eh?"

"That's the sort of thing he'd come up with."

She nodded towards the door.

A trip upstairs to deposit my suitcase was indicated before what would likely degenerate into a lengthy session.

Forewarned is forearmed. There is an obvious advantage in knowing where you're going to be sleeping. It helps you to find the location when bedtime approaches.

Upstairs the directions were easy enough.

Left took me onto a veranda overlooking an internal courtyard.

Right led towards the veranda, which looked out over the main street.

Left took me down a corridor, odd numbers on the left, even on the right.

Opening the unlocked door, I found what I expected.

There was a basin, a bed, a chair and a wardrobe.

A set of doors led onto the veranda. However, thick curtains meant there was no way to enjoy the view.

I lifted the curtain, peered through the glass and sighted a table and several chairs outside.

Judging by the ashtrays, the spot was a popular rendezvous outside trading hours and either the domestic staff didn't work on weekends, or the veranda was outside their jurisdiction.

The bed, however, had been made.

I opened the wardrobe and found a collection of overalls and work-related apparel hanging there.

Fine, I thought, as I heaved the suitcase onto the bed. The regular occupant is obviously away for the weekend, and that's the reason for the right price. No drama, I can live out of this.

I extracted the toiletries bag, placed it on the washbasin, closed the suitcase, shifted it to the chair, and shoved the boom box under the bed.

There was no point hanging around.

With the form guide in the back pocket, I closed the door, thought about locking it, decided discretion was the better part of valour and headed downstairs.

I was halfway down the stairs when Jeffrey emerged from the public bar.

He looked up, remarked that they were up to Race Five at Randwick and turned, indicating that I should follow.

The public bar was L-shaped. Since he was five metres in front of me, by the time I reached the point of the L, I could see Jeffrey's back disappearing into what was probably the office.

Once I'd secured liquid refreshment, I headed in the same direction and discovered my guess was correct.

The office was spacious, with a couple of armchairs, a desk and office chair, a set of speakers and a TV showing the betting market for Randwick race five.

Jeffrey pointed towards the other armchair.

"Make yourself comfortable. I don't usually get in here on a Saturday afternoon, but His Lordship's away on the Gold Coast and this way I don't have to walk to the phone."

He stood up, walked to the doorway, peered around the corner, and disappeared momentarily into the space behind the bar, emerging with a tin of Fosters in his hand.

"She does a good job with the glasses, that Magpie. Cleanest beer glasses in town. 'Course, while she's busy with the glasses, there's plenty of opportunity for a smart lad who's quick on his feet."

He glanced towards the stubby in my hand.

"Lesson Number One, in case you haven't worked it out for yourself. Draught beer may taste better, but it's hard to find at the right price. Unless His Lordship's shouting, of course. You shouldn't find it necessary to be paying for many more of those this afternoon. Like anything in the next? No? Well, excuse me. You didn't hear this, by the way."

He picked up the phone, pressed a button, paused for a moment, and rattled off "234043... BHLB... SR 5 Horse 6 five the win ... SR5 Trifecta box 1, 4, 6 and 9 for a half... No, thank *you* very much."

He hung up, turned towards me and continued.

"Most Saturdays I have to listen to the tranny and watch on the TV in the bar, but this way Magpie can watch what she likes until it gets busy. I can save myself a walk, and the drinks are at the right price, provided you're quick enough on your feet".

"And if it gets too busy?" I asked. "Or if Magpie's standing between you and the fridge door?"

"In that case, I have to walk a little further. There's a cold room on the other side of the kitchen. I have to make sure it's properly stocked, so I do if you follow what I mean. Sometime over the next hour or so she'll ask me to bring up a couple of cartons for the bar. That's about the time when the little esky in the corner behind you will magically receive enough to keep us going for the rest of the afternoon, You're on Cascade? Right, I'll make sure I get a few more of them when I do that run. Anything left will come in handy when I clean the kitchen tomorrow morning..."

"And no one's the wiser?"

"Well," Jeffrey replied, "stock control isn't His Lordship's strong point, so you're right provided you drink slowly, stay out of shouts and pay for every second or third beer. 'Course, since cans aren't transparent, it makes it harder for 'em to keep track of what you're doing."

"You're not worried about telling me all this? What if I went and blabbed the details to the boss?"

"Then it'd take me a day or two to work out a new system. They can't operate without me. Or rather they *could*, but His Lordship would have to do more work, and the Duchess would have to drop the kids off at school in the morning, pick them up in the afternoon, pay someone to clean the kitchen on a Sunday. Double time that'd be, and they're not keen on paying double time. If they weren't on holidays, His Lordship would be looking after the bar himself unless it started to get busy. If it did, then he'd be on the blower to Magpie to get her to start early."

"So you're pretty much indispensable," I suggested.

"No one's *actually* indispensable, but dispensing with some of us might be highly inconvenient."

"What about the phone account? Won't he notice what's going on?"

"As long as what's in there when he gets back on Tuesday is about what it was on Thursday he won't be too worried. He'll be at the track this afternoon so he won't be using the account himself."

"So, if you run out of money, I guess you can use some of his as long as you top it up on Monday..."

"Which is, of course, payday."

"What happens if you win?"

On the screen, the field was moving into the barriers for Race 5 at Randwick. What if you get that trifecta you just put on? How do you get that out before he notices?"

"Well, I know where his swipe card is kept for safekeeping, and I know where I can get a couple of withdrawal slips with his signature. If I can't get my hands on one, I can do a fair approximation anyway. If he happens to get a big trifecta up, I usually have to head up and get the money before she notices and decides she needs a new outfit or a necklace or something."

"Sort of like the episode of Fawlty Towers where Basil's backed the horse, and he doesn't want Sybil to find out about it..."

"Pretty much. Not that Fawlty Towers has anything on this place. Or the whole town. Welcome to the only open asylum in the world run by the inmates. Anyway, enough of that. What's your story?"

There was a pause while they went around at Randwick.

As they hurtled down the straight, Jeffrey's selection hit the lead, only to be claimed by the top weight in the shadows of the post. The judge called for the photo to determine third.

The runner needed for the trifecta ended up beaten a nose into fourth.

While I waited for expressions of disgust to subside, I consulted the form guide, picked two runners to could be backed for a fiver each way.

When calm was restored, I gave a summary of my career and interests.

Halfway through, Magpie's head appeared in the doorway, indicating the time to replenish the eskies in the bar was at hand.

Despite assurances that assistance was unnecessary, I finished the tale as cartons were ferried from the cold room to the bar.

With the task accomplished, the rest of the afternoon passed quietly enough.

One of my selections saluted at Sandown, so I could have an interest in the last.

The lead-up to that race saw the office returned to its normal state with empties transferred to the bin out the back.

Jeffrey and I relocated to the bar where I had met him in time to switch the television in the bar over to Sky Channel.

"Good spot, this," remarked Jeffrey. "Gives you a good view of both entrances and it's close enough to the till to make sure you can always get a drink. You'll see what I mean in a couple of hours. 'Course, it also makes you easy to find, but that's all part of the deal."

At that moment, the field headed off.

Our attention was diverted for long enough to establish that, again, our selections had finished first, second and fourth.

While we missed the trifecta, our saver in the quinella paid reasonably. I picked up a place dividend for the second.

Once correct weight was posted, I held the fort while Jeffrey restored His Lordship's account to something approximating its Saturday morning state.

Things were quiet, and I learnt there was every possibility I would come across Magpie's offspring if I found myself teaching Year Five or Six.

Jeffrey's return delivered a small dividend, and with that tucked away in the wallet, I settled back to see what the evening had in store.

From five-thirty onwards, the pub filled. We were joined just after six by a bloke wearing a T-shirt advertising a well-known rock festival (*Three days of love, peace and happiness*).

He walked with a limp and introduced himself as Jack Cassidy.

"No relation, of course, to the well-known bass player from the Jefferson Airplane, who, of course, played there," I suggested, with a nod towards the shirt.

"You mean *Morning maniac music*? No. Different spelling too. Backing a winner Jeffrey?"

The response suggested that, while the afternoon's proceedings had been reasonably profitable, the right result in a certain photo finish would have been very helpful.

"But you know you'll never win, Jeffrey. Everyone knows the races are rigged. Taxation by stealth, that's what it is. Bastards have been doing it for years. The TAB's just another ploy by money-hungry governments to rip off the workers."

"As you keep suggesting, and there might well be something in it. We'd be all right if we knew someone who worked for the *Sunday Mail*. Clark Kent's talking about applying for a job down there. We'll be all right if he gets that. Clark Kent's the boy wonder reporter on the paper," Jeffrey explained.

"So how do you figure that?" Cassidy seemed unconvinced.

"Ever been to the pictures in Brisbane on a Saturday night?" Cassidy replied he had but expressed puzzlement regarding the point being made. "So you've noticed when you walk out of the pictures on a Saturday night you can buy the Sunday morning papers even though it's Saturday night?"

"True..."

"How long do you think it takes to print a paper that size. Takes 'em three hours to print the local rag, at least that's what Catfish down at the printery reckons. Three hours for the *Sleepy Hollow Sausage Wrapper*, so the *Sunday Mail* would need at least double that."

The response seemed to indicate agreement.

"Which means," Jeffrey continued, "if they're going to have the paper on the streets by ten-thirty, they'd have to start the print run about four-thirty..."

"True."

"The last race on a Saturday arvo is usually some time around five. The Lotto draw isn't till eight-thirty, and those results are all in the paper you can buy at half-past ten."

"Right."

"So if you knew someone who works on the paper, you could get those results before they happen."

"Of course," Cassidy concurred, "but it'd never work because all those bastards would have to sign a confidentiality agreement. Face it, Jeffrey, you can't win. The system won't let you."

He wandered towards a group of drinkers at an adjacent table, shaking his head.

"Bastard," Jeffrey muttered. "Fetch me the chain saw. Leave the mongrel without a leg to stand on."

My expression must have indicated I had no idea what he was talking about.

"That gentleman is widely known as Hopalong Cassidy. Due largely to the fact he drove his panel van into one of the coconut palms on the way into town. Left his right leg in the wreckage. Been nuts ever since. Spends all his time scoffing at anyone who comes up with a way to make a quid. Lives upstairs in the servo next door. If you need your car fixed, he's the bloke to do it. Does a great job, but that's no excuse."

He paused as a couple inveigled their way between us in an attempt to acquire liquid refreshment.

"Pot of Fourex and a glass of white wine for an old digger, please Magpie," the male half of the combo requested. "RSL prices, of course. Evening, Jeffrey. Sorry to intrude but were rapidly dehydrating."

"This, Herston, is the incomparable Merry Frockster, otherwise known as James Winsome, or Dagwood. This," indicating the female waiting patiently behind her other half, "is the lovely Jane, widely known, for obvious reasons, as Blondie."

The resemblance to the singer of *Heart Of Glass* was quite remarkable.

"I'd buy all my outfits from their boutique, but they cater to the younger set and don't have a great range for the more mature figure."

Once their refreshments had arrived, I learned the arrivals operated a ladies' fashion outlet.

With the introductions complete, the idle conversation continued until we were rejoined by Mr Cassidy and another gentleman named Captain Headrush.

"The head rush is on," he informed us. "Had two winners at Home Hill this afternoon."

So, Captain Headrush was connected to the racing industry.

Hobby training rarely pays well enough to take the place of regular work. As a taxi driver, he needed to register zero blood alcohol if tested while behind the wheel.

As a result, he rarely had more than one beer when he called into the Palace unless circumstances permitted him to let his head go.

A head rush of considerable proportions ensued over the next couple of hours.

As things unwound, I concluded the Palace provided a hub for the local nightlife. Jeffrey seemed to be permanently on call.

Under the circumstances, his habit of awarding himself fringe benefits was probably fair enough given the impossibility of accurately entering his working hours on a timesheet.

The crowd began to thin as the clock rolled towards ten.

After the premises cleared, I found myself on the veranda with a bottle of red, Jeffrey, Magpie and the Frenchman responsible for the evening's culinary delights.

He was apparently known as D'Artagnan.

Apart from Jeffrey, whose official job description involved dishwashing, the rest of the regular kitchen staff comprised three apprentices named Athos, Porthos and D'Aramis.

There was also the predictable assortment of wait staff and associated hangers-on.

They tended to come and go, often before they'd been on the premises long enough to collect a new moniker.

Once Magpie had decided her offspring needed a mother's attention and D'Artagnan departed, I helped Jeffery drain the bottle.

The still of the night was occasionally interrupted by a car heading along the main street.

With the bottle empty, it was time to hit the sack.

As I lay in bed, I reflected on the day's events.

Despite the variety of voices, thumps, bangs, crashes and other nightly noises that seemed to have started as soon as I turned off the light, I eventually nodded off.

SUNDAY

I woke the following day to the sound of someone banging on the hall-side door.

The room was pitch black, except for a beam of light creeping through the gap between the blackout curtains and the veranda door. I had no idea what the time might be.

"Yeah?" I inquired. "What's up?"

Jeffrey's voice came from the other side of the door.

"There's breakfast down in the kitchen if you want it in the next half-hour. After that, look after yourself."

Ten minutes later, showered but neither bright-eyed nor bushy-tailed, I found my way into the kitchen.

Half a dozen individuals were demolishing plates of bacon and eggs. Jeffrey hovered nearby.

"This, gentlemen, is Mr Herston. First name David, school teacher to the stars and newly arrived in Denison. These gentlemen, Herston, are the crew from one of the tugs tied up over there."

He pointed vaguely in what I later learned was the direction of the jetty.

"Allow me to introduce The Doctor, Red Rodney, Mumbles, Shuffles, Staggers and Curses. You probably heard them come in last night just after we decided to call it quits. I try to sit up till the bastards get back from the tugs, but they get me every time."

"Yeah," the Doctor remarked. "We sit down there on the jetty till we see the lights in the pub go off, don't we fellas?"

There was general agreement that the hour of their arrival was utterly unrelated to shipping schedules, tides, or any other considerations.

"You know, Jeffrey, we're only down here on a Sunday morning," Red Rodney added, "so we can add a few more things to the pile of shit you've got to wash up when you clean the kitchen. We'd never dream of lifting a finger to help out."

"Actually," he turned in my direction, "the cafe in the main street doesn't open on Sunday. Otherwise, we'd be perving on Sandra, but it's shut. So we've got to put up with this grumpy old bastard."

"We'll be nice and give him a hand with the cleaning till the one-dayer at the Gabba starts," The Doctor added. "Least we can do since he's been kind enough to fix us this

spread of bacon and eggs. Plenty there if you're that way inclined. There's cereal, fruit juice in the fridge and the bread's right beside the toaster."

While I helped myself, the others, having broken their fasts to their hearts' content, started to clear the debris.

When I'd finished, the washing up was done, and my new acquaintances were engaged in various activities around the workspace. This was a regular Sunday ritual unless the tugs were required to assist with the shipping at the bulk coal terminal north of town.

"If we're on call," Red Rodney explained, "we get brekky in the galley, and Jeffrey gets to clean the kitchen by himself, but if we're here we give him a hand. His Lordship and the Duchess and the kids would join us after church if they were here. Works out fine for everyone."

My suggestion that I lend a hand was rejected because, as Mumbles put it, "We know what we're doing. If we stop to explain something to you, we're going to miss the start of the cricket."

There were four crews for two tugs that worked on two weeks on, two weeks off.

As Union delegate, Red Rodney had negotiated an arrangement where permanent bookings accommodated the crews from each tug at the Palace, although several had homes in town.

"It usually takes a day to a day-and-a-half for them to load," The Doctor explained, "and since the wharf can only handle one ship, once they've docked and we're back, that's it till the following day. Those blokes can go home to the wife and kids. The rest of us hang around here if there's nothing that needs to be done on board. If they're only loading twenty thousand ton, it's easier to have everyone here, particularly if it's late at night."

"So," Red Rodney explained, "it was better to find accommodation for everyone. Everyone pays a share, and since we drink plenty of his piss, His Lordship gives us a cut on the rooms as long as we pay cash. You're in the one where we keep spare gear so if you can't get the washing done there's something that'll probably fit. That's why the door isn't locked."

I expressed the hope my presence wasn't causing inconvenience.

"That's fine. They're loading a hundred and twenty-thousand ton, starting last night so they won't be done before lunchtime Monday. Once this one's gone, we're not due for another till the following week. So you're not keeping anyone out of a room."

Ten minutes later, except for Jeffrey, all hands downed tools.

I joined them in the upstairs lounge since the pub didn't officially open its doors for another hour or so.

It wouldn't be right for us to be sitting in the bar sucking piss and watching TV while the general public was hanging 'round outside, waiting for the doors to open.

Jeffrey was dismantling and cleaning the stove.

The task was best performed uninterrupted, so we headed upstairs, where, by coincidence, a well-stocked esky waited.

I spent most of the day with the tug crew, adjourning downstairs at opening time, reconvening after lunch and wandering back down for the afternoon session.

Once the evening session was over, hunger prompted a stroll across the road to the pizza parlour.

The resulting purchase was consumed on the veranda, washed down with a couple of glasses of red.

SETTLING IN

Eight o'clock on Monday morning found me showered, shaved, shampooed and standing outside the cafe in search of something substantial for breakfast.

Once that was out of the way, a stroll gave me a chance to familiarise myself with local geography and get some much-needed exercise.

Over the preceding days, I'd walked no more than a hundred metres on the rare occasions I'd needed to leave my seat.

With locations of the newsagent, Post Office, Supermarket, liquor barn and TAB agency etched in my memory, I headed up to make myself known at school.

After a brief wait, I was ushered into the Deputy Principal's workspace, where the predictable orientation package awaited, along with keys to my accommodation.

"Sorry about the stuff up," was the apology Nick Davidson offered. "I was out on the boat all weekend and only found out you'd been left in the lurch when I got home last night and found the message on my answering machine."

"No drama. The bloke down at the travel agency took me down to the Palace. I had a reasonable couple of days there. Better than arriving somewhere on the outskirts of town and sitting around on your own."

"You'd probably have ended up at the Palace if you'd been able to get into the accommodation. It's only a block away. Might be different when they finish the new places near the cemetery, but that'll take six months or so. They'll be nice units, though you might be just as happy down where you're going."

"You might find me taking a rain check on that. I don't drive, and if the flat's a block away from the pub, that will make it, what, maybe ten minutes' walk from here? Downtown in between? Couldn't be more centrally located. Still, I guess we cross that bridge when we come to it. Speaking of crossing bridges when we come to them, it's about time I found out what you've got in store for me."

"Year Six. We'd heard you were loud, so you're going into a demountable down by the tennis courts. Our numbers have dropped, so you'll have the block to yourself. Should suit you as far as the cricket's concerned since you're right beside the oval and the nets. We've got you pencilled in to take the District cricket side. It'll free up the bloke who has been doing it to look after the League."

"No worries. I'm looking forward to crossing swords with some of my mates when the Regional trials come around. This Year Six, though, wouldn't have Magpie from the Palace's kid in it, by any chance?"

Mr Davidson paused, shuffled through a pile of papers, extracted one and scanned it quickly.

"Looks like you got lucky. There's no sign of the Year Six one on here. Must be with Dennis or Sharon. I won't give you this just yet. The names'll all be Greek to you anyway so we won't worry about that till the Pupil Free Day Wednesday, Now as far as that goes."

Ten minutes or so later, the introductions and orientation were out of the way.

"If you don't mind waiting a quarter of an hour or so, I'll be able to drop you down at the Palace and give you a lift down to the flat with your suitcase. There's an appointment for an enrolment coming up. I should be here for that. Normally, Jim or I could look after the enrolment, but since he's not here."

Assuring him my reconnaissance had given me an idea of the distance involved. I should be capable of lugging a suitcase that far. I pocketed the keys, wandered down the hill, and retrieved my bag and boom box.

I was in the process of handing over the key to Number 12 before heading off when Jeffrey appeared from the kitchen.

"Hang on a sec. Grab a beer, and I'll save you a walk. I've got to head around to the Supermarket so I can drop you wherever you're going when D'Artagnan has made up the shopping list."

It may have been a reflection on the fitness level, but I weakened at the mention of beer.

Jeffrey emerged from the kitchen just after it arrived, decided the sun was over the yardarm, and I was forced to weaken again.

Unsurprisingly, Jeffrey knew the location since the local Rugby club was based at the Palace.

Jeffrey had needed to assist my new flatmate on the homeward journey when inebriation prevented him from negotiating the obstacle course by himself.

"Nice spot, across the road from the pool. Low set maisonette. Ramjet's not a bad bloke either. Bit quiet during the week, but he lets his hair down on weekends. From the form you've shown you'll be able to keep up with him. Ready to go? The truck's out the front."

The truck pulled up outside two low set units.

I retrieved my suitcase from the back, confirmed that I was looking at the unit on the left and headed for the door.

The truck disappeared towards the Supermarket as I turned the key.

The front door led into a lounge, which in turn became a dining room, or at least a dining table, which in turn became a kitchen.

Doors on the left obviously took you into the bedrooms, and I guessed the bathroom and laundry would be behind the kitchen.

Right, I thought to myself, which room? If I had the choice, I'd go for the front one. The back one would have fewer problems with traffic noise, not that there'd be much. The front one would have a better view and probably catch the sea breeze. So I'll be in the back one.

I was.

A bed, a mattress, built-in wardrobes that would handle what the removalists would be delivering, a set of bedside drawers and a work table.

Since there was room to fit my bookcases and the record collection, I'd be able to sustain a self-contained lifestyle once I'd got an air-conditioner for the window.

Throwing the suitcase onto the bed, I was about halfway through unpacking when a car pulled into the driveway. I emerged to find an imposing figure walking through the door.

"Roger Edmunds. Most of the buggers around here know me as Roger Ramjet. Dunno why."

"Dave Herston. Too many bloody Dave's in the world, so I'm happy to answer to Herston."

There was a six-pack in the fridge, and it was demolished as we sorted out arrangements, not that there was much to arrange. A cleaner came in once a week, and Roger's diet was based on takeaways and counter meals.

So, with the domestic arrangements sorted and a couple of beers under the belt, it was time to set up the room.

That entailed liberating the boom box from its carton, shifting the clothing into the wardrobe and drawers.

Locating the bed linen and placing the CDs I'd brought with me beside the boom box took about fifteen minutes.

I had a couple of hours of rest while I thought over various issues. Now I knew, more or less, where I was and what I was likely to be doing.

Around four, I decided to stroll to the Palace with a detour to investigate the options as far as the air conditioning was concerned.

Initial inquiries suggested an air-conditioner would punch a large hole in the credit card balance or entail a substantial commitment on the never-never.

I retreated to the Palace to consider the options.

There was no sign of Jeffrey when I walked in, but his spot was occupied by Hopalong Cassidy and someone I hadn't previously met.

Magically, a beer appeared.

Magpie was eager to discover whether either of her brood was going to have the dubious pleasure of my company through the school year.

A conversation about class allocations allowed Hopalong's companion to work out my occupation.

As Magpie departed to supply thirst-quenching materials, he looked in my direction.

"High or primary? I'm Gilhooley. You're an educated man. Have you read **Puckoon**, by any chance?"

"Dave Herston. I'm up the hill at the State School."

"And on the important question of **Puckoon**?"

"A novel by Spike Milligan. Yeah, I've read it. Good stuff."

"*Good stuff?* It's, without doubt, the single greatest achievement in the annals of English literature! A work of unsurpassed genius. We'll continue this discussion when I return from a nervous pee."

He headed through the public bar towards the gents'.

"Who's that?" I asked as Jeffrey emerged from the kitchen. "Seems a man with definite opinions."

"Definite opinions? Gilhooley? Mad as a cut snake."

"That description could be applied to us all," Jeffrey stated. "All the world is mad except thee and me."

"Yeah," I added, "and even thee is a little strange. So who's this Gilhooley? What's his story?"

"Like I said," Hopalong continued, "he's mad as a cut snake. No wonder, since he's married to the senior nurse up at the Hospital. Reckons she's next in line to take over from the Matron. She's been rehearsing the bitch routine as if it's signed, sealed and delivered. You'll hear him refer to her as The Iron Maiden. Makes Maggie Thatcher look like Florence Nightingale."

"Or Atilla the Hun look like Christopher Robin" Jeffrey took over.

"When Gilhooley's in town he's hiding out in his workshop out the back of the house or sneaking off to a pub where he hopes she can't track him down. He invents stuff. Got a pile of patents about a foot high. If he's not inventing gadgets in the shed, he's fixing machinery in a mine or writing computer programs. Works for one of those agencies who find people to fix stuff when it carks it. They reckon he's so good the people he works for are happy to overlook a few foibles."

"Which you're suggesting he has plenty of."

"You'll see," was the sage reply.

I subsequently discovered he was right. After weaving his way back through the public bar, as Gilhooley resumed his seat, he continued the conversation.

"As I was saying before, there's no doubt in my mind **Puckoon** delivers unparalleled insights into the human." He glanced towards the door. "Oh shit, the Iron Maiden. Catch you later."

He drained his glass, turned, and headed towards the passage that led towards the main street.

Thirty seconds later, a blonde in a nurse's uniform came through the door, headed straight to where we were sitting.

"Where is he, Jeffrey? Since I had to work, he's supposed to be at home for Rosalind's birthday party, not carousing with his alcoholic friends. I've already checked at the Bowls Club. They said he was headed this way, so don't try to pull the wool over my eyes."

"Margaret, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to provide you with the information you request. However, until thirty seconds ago, I was in the kitchen, so I'm unable to be of any help. Isn't that right, fellas? Herston here is just new in town and wouldn't know Gilbert if he bit him in the leg. You haven't sighted the gentleman in question have you, Cassidy?"

Hopalong's expression of regret as he shook his head was worthy of an Oscar nomination.

"Well, in that case, I'll keep looking. Suppose he does manage to materialise from wherever he's been hiding. I hope you'd be good enough to inform him his presence at Rosalind's birthday party, however belated, may just be enough to save me from presenting him with his genitalia on a silver platter."

"Nothing," Jeffrey replied, "would give me greater pleasure."

The searcher turned on her heels and headed out through the door.

"Ironic, isn't it?" Jeffrey remarked. "There we have Mrs Margaret Hoolihan, a member of the nursing profession, who just happens to share the same name as a character from MASH. Not that anyone would be likely to refer to her as Hot Lips. Particularly if there's any likelihood of lobbing into the Hospital and needing a blood test."

"Hoolihan?" I asked. "I thought his name was Gilhooley?"

"Gilhooley," Hopalong explained, "belongs to the same club as you pair. He can't stand people using his first name, which is hardly surprising since his first name is Gilbert. Hell, if my first name was Gilbert, I'd be beating a path to the Deed Poll Commissioner's door faster than you can say, Jack Robinson. Gilbert Hoolihan. Run it together, and Gilhooley sounds enough like a reasonable name to pass muster."

Ensuing conversation revealed Jeffrey's full name was Gordon Walter Jeffrey.

A dislike of his given name and a dread of being greeted as Wally meant his preference for his surname was predictable.

The discussion moved onto nicknames until Hopalong announced the time had come for him to depart. There was a dog that needed to be fed.

He was keen to put on the nosebag himself.

That made me think of dinner.

A glance at the menu produced an order for a medium-rare pepper steak with mushroom sauce to the kitchen.

Jeffrey liberated an order book from the kitchen, completed the paperwork for his dinner and delivered it in person, thus preventing the necessity of money changing hands.

Around eight, with dinner and a couple of post-prandial cold ones under the belt, I excused myself. I wandered off, planning to spend about ten hours pushing up zeds.

I was about to open the front door when the sound of voices made me pause. I listened to ensure the conversation could be interrupted without embarrassment then walked inside.

Roger Ramjet and a woman of considerable pneumatic charm were seated at the table sharing fish and chips.

Introductions were followed by a brief conversation before I wandered off, careful to arrange music to drown out any audible amatory activities, should events develop along those lines.

Once the school year started, I settled into a routine.

I'd wander off to work around seven-thirty, put in a day at the coal face, and spend an hour or so marking books and dealing with whatever else needed to be done.

Then I'd take a stroll down the hill to the Palace between four-thirty and five for a few beers before dinner.

As time passed, the corner bar at the Palace became the meeting place for a group of like-minded individuals.

While the membership varied from day to day, it invariably included Jeffrey, Hopalong Cassidy and I.

The rest of the circle varied but regularly included the proprietors, Bryan Barron (a.k.a. His Lordship), his consort Elizabeth (The Duchess), Dagwood and Blondie.

Gilhooley joined us on infrequent occasions when he could evade the Iron Maiden's supervision.

Other regulars included used car salesman and leviathan punter Scott Waddington, assorted teachers, the owner of Luciano's Pizza Palace, a gentleman of Maltese extraction known as The Falcon and a gentleman known throughout the town, though not to his face, as Boris the Backdooring Bastard.

The strategic location allowed us to interact with much of the town's population as they passed through the adjacent Quick Service area.

However, most females were not amused if some degenerate suggested they had popped in for *a quick service*.

Six months after my arrival, the new teacher accommodation offered me the chance to relocate.

Roger Ramjet availed himself of the opportunity.

The new housing was closer to the rugby field and within walking distance of the High School.

I was happy to remain where I was, within walking distance of both work and the Palace.

Once Roger had relocated, of course, I was free to switch to the front bedroom.

Over the next few years, I had the place, more or less, to myself.

The occasional flatmate assigned to keep me company seemed happy to move towards the cemetery when a vacancy occurred.

The two units in the block were unofficially designated as accommodation for those who *preferred to be by themselves*.

THE MONEY GAME

A couple of Februarys later, I walked into the Palace on a Wednesday afternoon to find Captain Headrush ensconced in our regular location.

"Well, well," I remarked as Magpie set about fetching the chilled article, "we're a day or two early. What's the occasion? A quiet drink or the full head rush? Inquiring livers need to know."

"New routine. You'll be finding me here every Wednesday from now on. Mark Wednesdays down in the diary as Polocrosse mini-Lotto night. Now, can I interest you in a ticket?"

As I filled out a couple, the Captain explained that, of the \$2 fee, half went straight to the Polocrosse club, half to the prize pool.

"You pick six numbers out of twenty. Winner takes all if we have a ticket with the six numbers we draw in the public bar each Wednesday. If there's no winner, the prize pool jackpots. If it gets over ten grand, we cut it back by taking out a number each week. Pick six out of nineteen, six out of eighteen et cetera until someone finally picks up the pool."

"How far are you going to take it down? You're not going to end up asking people to pick six out of eight or anything like that?"

"Six out of twelve is as far as we're going,"

From the outskirts of the conversation, a passing Red Rodney voiced the opinion that some bastard was sure to win it by covering all the combinations.

So Wednesday night mini-Lotto draws were added to the routine.

Though winners were notable by their absence, the interest continued. After six months, the prize pool passed ten thousand.

Predictably, interest rose as the number of ping pong balls dropped and the prize pool grew.

Unsurprisingly, conversations turned to the possibility of taking out the jackpot.

It didn't take long before we were reflecting on Red Rodney's opinion.

It took no time at all to decide if some bastard was going to scoop the pool by covering all the combinations, some bastard was going to be us.

As the midyear holidays loomed, we started to give serious thought to ways this could be achieved.

The first difficulty lay in obtaining tickets to cover the multitude of combinations.

As the weeks passed and the jackpot marched upwards, we were in the habit of contributing to the prize pool each week.

So it wasn't difficult to start the stockpile by grabbing double the number of tickets we needed.

Grabbing a handful when one of us passed an outlet where they were available helped. When we were ready to swing into action, the drawer in my desk contained a couple of hundred.

The second problem was to generate a list of all the combinations.

Figuring it would be wise to start before the deadline, I dedicated the Queen's Birthday long weekend to the task.

Once I started, it was just as well I could cut and paste using the computer. If I couldn't, there was no way I would have had the patience to complete the exercise without consigning the concept to the too hard basket.

I was three-quarters of the way through the process on Sunday afternoon when Jeffrey wandered in to check on progress.

For the hell of it, I decided to print out what I'd generated.

As the pages of the incomplete list spewed forth, it was apparent there wouldn't be many others indulging in a similar exercise.

Once the list had been completed, we needed some way to cut the number of possibilities down to something more manageable.

We suspected there was little chance of a combination being drawn more than once, so we'd persuaded Captain Headrush to supply a list of combinations drawn so far.

Mathematicians would argue with that, but you have to start somewhere when you're looking to make a cut.

A glance at the results was enough to establish that, while consecutive numbers often appeared in the draw, it was rare to find more than three consecutive numbers in a single draw.

On that basis, out came the highlight pens and a couple of rulers.

It took some time, but we eliminated every combination with more than three consecutive numbers.

From there, we went on to eliminate every combination already drawn. Then we turned our attention to combinations with five out of the six numbers that had come out in a draw.

The remaining list of combinations was still too extensive for the pile of entries we had accumulated and, at \$2 per time, way beyond our financial capabilities.

The midyear school holidays arrived just before the first of the twelve-number draws. So, on a Sunday afternoon, we sat down to prepare our pile of entries.

Jeffrey, to the consternation of the management, had created a minor sensation by demanding a week's holiday from his duties at the Palace.

The initial reaction was to ask where he was planning to go for his holiday. When informed there were no travel plans, His Lordship rejected the request out of hand.

Jeffrey responded by announcing he'd been offered a greenkeeper's position and accommodation at the Bowls Club.

This threat left His Lordship with no alternative but to grant leave on the understanding Jeffrey would be available to carry out any particularly urgent errands.

Much to the consternation of the other members of the kitchen contingent, there was no way he would be spending the next two Sundays stripping and cleaning the stove.

That Friday evening's celebrations were considerably more boisterous than usual. While he was officially on vacation, Jeffrey consented to perform a couple of minor errands on the Saturday before arriving on my doorstep just after nine on Sunday morning.

"I think," he remarked as he slipped through the door, "I might have given the bastards the slip. Sure as eggs, if I'd stayed down there they'd have been looking for me to help out with the stove, so I got out before they started and His Lordship and the Duchess are at church."

"Won't be much use if you've been spotted on the way here," I suggested.

"Which is why I went the long way round via the newsagent. I usually do the paper run on a Sunday morning, so they've got the paper to read when they get back from church, so I figured anyone looking for me would head there first. I dropped in for a packet of smokes. Instead of taking the paper with me, I told them if anyone was looking for me, I'd be at Chookie Little's in Plymouth Street."

"Who's Chookie Little?"

It wasn't a name I was familiar with.

"Dunno," was the reply. "But if there's anyone with that surname in Plymouth Street he'll be thinking the sky's falling on his head when the bastards turn up looking for me. Now, what's for breakfast? Bacon and eggs? Chuck us a plateful while I aim Archie at the Armitage."

"Right," said Jeffrey once breakfast had been attended to and we surveyed the pile of pages I'd printed out, "there are still too many of the bastards. Each week, you'll notice there are a couple of numbers that turned up in the previous week's draw. So we take every combination that hasn't been highlighted that has no more than three of last week's numbers."

That gave us a pile of possible combinations that was still far more than our financial capacity.

"OK," I suggested, "my turn. We start by taking every third combination that's still on the list. We mark the ones we've taken. Once we've covered the whole list that way, we go back to the top and take every fourth combo. And we keep on going that way until we've either run out of tickets or funds to cover the bastards."

We ended up maintaining security by working through the morning session. By the time the afternoon session was due to start, two hundred and forty tickets were filled out, ready to go and sealed in a couple of envelopes.

The smaller one, with forty tickets, would be handed over at the start of proceedings. It represented a sizable increase in our regular contribution.

Still, it would not be substantial enough to draw anyone's attention to our real purpose.

As we reached the corner opposite the Palace, since the pub doors remained resolutely closed, Mickey's big hand obviously hadn't quite reached its apogee at the top of the hour.

A glance across the street also confirmed there was nobody on the pub veranda.

"You head across and wait outside the door. I'll do a dogleg up to the corner, come down the other side of the street, head upstairs to stash these in my room and catch you downstairs. Remember, if they ask you haven't seen me all day."

I arrived outside the door just as His Lordship opened it.

"Where is he?" was the question, as soon as I was inside and before I had a chance to organize refreshment.

"Dunno," I replied. "I've been cleaning all day. Had to be done some time. Anyway if you've been looking for him, you won't need to look much further because here he comes."

"What's happening?" Jeffrey inquired as he pulled up a stool. "Chookie wanted a hand with his gazebo, and when I saw him in the supermarket last week, he said he was ready to start. That's why I wanted the holidays."

"So if we need to get hold of you in a hurry," His Lordship interposed.

"That's where I'll be. Chookie Little's place. Right next door to Buster Virgin's. The gazebo's right down the back of his yard, so you can't see it from the street, but that's where I'll be."

His Lordship wandered off, seemingly satisfied.

"In reality," Jeffrey confided as His Lordship receded into the distance, "if they want to find me they'll need to wander down your way. I'm planning on some serious research into the Lotto. After we pick up that sixteen grand on Wednesday my share will give me a big enough bank to have a red hot go at the Lotto over the next few weeks. That's why I wanted this week's holiday."

"If they turn up looking for you at my place?" I asked.

"I'll spot the car as it pulls into the driveway and duck into the laundry till they've gone. Lucky your front door doesn't look straight down that passageway to the back door. Very handy,. Noticed it from the first time I called in there delivering the Ramjet home when he was incapable of finding his own way. Ah, Mr Cassidy, Greetings and salutations."

He paused as Hopalong pulled up a stool.

"May the fleas of a thousand camels," he went on once Hopalong was seated and sipping what we assumed was his first beer of the afternoon, "nest in your pubic hair and your offspring develop boils on their genital organs. Gotcha!"

A shower of beer sprayed the area in front of the well-known scoffer.

"You bastard," Hopalong opined once he had regained his composure. "You did that on purpose. That's a beer you owe me."

"A debt that will be paid in full when my Uncle Cyril is sighted playing the electric violin on the balcony of the Council Chambers. Which is highly unlikely since the bastard's been dead for thirty years. Either that or when we pick up the Polocrosse mini-lotto on Wednesday."

That remark led to a discussion of the likelihood of that event before the subject moved elsewhere.

Before we knew it, His Lordship was informing us the bar had closed. Our presence could lead to inconvenient inquiries if a constabulary member dropped by, so those considerations put a somewhat effective kibosh on further liquid refreshment.

I turned my attention to the evening meal.

"In that case, I think it might be time to wander across the road and see if Luciano could be persuaded to knock up something in a Marinara. Would either of you bastards care to join me?"

Hopalong indicated he had leftovers from the roast dinner his mother had prepared at the family mansion at lunchtime. So he declined the offer, stating that if we were inclined to waste our money on takeaways, that was our problem.

"For my part," he concluded, "I'll be sticking with good simple, nutritious home cooking rather than the overpriced product Luciano knocks out. Evening, gents. Catch you in the spring."

He drained his glass, headed towards the door. Jeffrey and I did much the same, turning left where Hopalong veered to the right.

"If you happen to be getting up for a nervous pee around sparrow fart," Jeffrey suggested as we crossed the median strip, "would you mind unlocking the front door? I'll be heading out around six-thirty with my research materials. I reckon if I call in for another packet of smokes as soon as they've opened the newsagency I can keep this Chookie Little diversion going..."

Our entry into Luciano's was the signal for jubilation from the proprietor.

While I was a regular visitor, Jeffrey's visits to this temple of Italian cuisine were less frequent. He could extract meals from the Palace's kitchen without the mundane necessity of money changing hands.

"Jeffrey! Profess'! 'Ow the hell are you! Me, I'm busier than a one-leg man in the arse-kicking contest, but enough of that. Profess? Your usual? The Marinara? Or perhaps the Vesuvio? The Marinara? Good, good. Jeffrey? The Margherita? Of course. Maria!"

He turned his attention to his partner, conveniently hovering at his side. "You please prepare a Marinara for my friend the Mad Profess' and a Margherita for my good friend Mr Jeffrey! Gentlemen, you would care, perhaps, for a little glass of your vino?"

The Sunday evening rush had, it seemed, been and gone.

Luciano felt safe to delegate pizza preparation to his better five-eighths and escort us to a table at the rear of the premises.

While his establishment wasn't licensed to sell alcohol, a refrigerator in the kitchen contained wine casks.

According to the official version of the story, the casks arrived with customers intending to dine in. Some of them preferred to leave their supplies with Luciano for next time.

Names prominently marked on the outside supported those notions.

The practice actually stemmed from a school cricket carnival when we had accommodated the visiting officials at the Palace.

Considering His Lordship's observance of ten o'clock closing, we needed a venue for late-night deliberations on selection policy. Discussions upstairs would disturb the Palace's other guests.

Luciano's remained open into the small hours. There was an area at the rear of the premises where we would be able to sit and argue to our heart's content, or until Luciano decided to call stumps.

On a Friday or Saturday night, that would be around two in the morning.

Luciano's lack of a liquor licence could have been a problem.

I suggested he look after a small (say ten litres?) quantity of red wine.

"If there's anything left at the end of the weekend we can gradually knock it over when I come in for a pizza."

A couple of weeks after the carnival, I was greeted with the news that the cask had been drained.

Since Luciano had, from time to time, felt the need to recharge his glass from that source, he'd felt obliged to replace it.

He'd chosen a more modestly sized container than the original ten-litre cask.

Subsequent investigations revealed some relevant side issues.

Maria kept a watch on Luciano's intake. A supplementary source allowed him to sneak extra refreshment while her back was turned.

Negotiations on one of Jeffrey's late-night excursions in search of conversation, refreshment and a snack had resulted in a new system.

Casks arrived from time to time in the course of his various errands around town.

In the official version, these had been paid for when Jeffrey or I realized the supply was running dangerously low.

On this particular Sunday evening, after a glass or two and a round of cheerful badinage with Luciano, I headed homeward around nine.

For some reason, possibly associated with holidays, I slept extra-soundly.

The following day a cursory glance through the curtains revealed the eastern sky beginning to lighten when I wandered off towards the kitchen searching for a cure for dehydration.

Remembering the previous night's mid-street conversation, I unlocked the front door on my way back to bed.

Rousing myself several hours later, I found the kitchen table occupied by Jeffrey. He'd arrived with a quantity of research material accumulated during his quest for a winning combination of Lotto numbers.

Such activity warranted a minimal disturbance policy, so I was careful to leave Jeffrey undisturbed.

The morning's music selections came from the quieter end of the spectrum. I spent the morning reading, pottering around, and only speaking when some remark indicated Jeffrey was temporarily able to relax the intense concentration.

Towards midday, I took a stroll around town via the newsagent, calling into the Palace for a counter lunch because I could.

I had just placed my order for the daily special when a certain high-profile publican joined me.

"Herston. Got a minute?" His Lordship asked as I collected my change, pocketed the meal docket and reached for the obligatory beer.

"Sure," I replied, moving towards a nearby vacant table and motioning that he should join me.

"Jeffrey. This Chookie Little. Would you happen to know where he lives? I needed to catch up with Jeffrey this morning, so I asked around. No one seems to know anybody called Chookie Little."

"Including me. All I know is what Jeffrey told you yesterday. Chookie Little lives next door to Buster Virgin. I've never heard of him either. Sorry, mate, but I'm as much in the dark as you are. Maybe he's doing a bit of shagging he doesn't want anyone to know about."

Seated with my back to the kitchen, I had failed to notice the arrival of His Lordship's consort.

Jeffrey's whereabouts was obviously a matter of considerable interest to more than one party.

"That'd be right, the rattlesnake," came a voice behind my shoulder. "He's taken a week off so he can screw some floozy behind her unsuspecting husband's back. Wouldn't surprise me in the slightest."

I hastened to reassure everyone present my suggestion had been idle speculation. I was totally in the dark when it came to explanations of the gentleman's activities.

"On the other hand, if you were going to do a bit of work around the house you could do a lot worse than getting Jeffrey to help. From what I've picked up, he's turned his hand to all sorts of jobs. No, if he's got some mate from the bowls club or somewhere with a spot of bother with a gazebo he's the sort of bloke who'd volunteer to help out. Look at what he does around here."

"Yes, but that's the point, isn't it? He does things around here without telling Betty or me what he's done, and now, when we need to check up on a few minor details, he's nowhere to be found."

Despite his financially secure family background, His Lordship had a reputation for frugality in many areas.

This fact sprang to mind as I considered a response.

"Well, maybe what you need is to fit him out with a mobile phone or something."

His Lordship's Scots ancestry would tend to discourage such profligate behaviour. I was also aware of the disdain with which Jeffrey treated both mobile communication devices and those who used them.

"That'd be no good," The Duchess pointed out. "You know he doesn't like those things. If we wasted a hundred dollars fitting him out with one, he'd leave it turned off on purpose. Or he'd leave it on the bedside table all day. Oh, here's your lunch. Enjoy."

With that, as the most junior member of the catering department presented me with my plate, his supervisor disappeared into the kitchen.

His Lordship hesitated, then, having decided his presence was required elsewhere, left.

With the meal out of the way and suitably washed down, I pointed myself towards my sleeping quarters.

My arrival at the front door caused a brief interruption to Mr Jeffrey's research activities.

"We're going to have a bit of fun with this," I suggested before reporting on conversations and the possibilities they raised.

We discussed them for a while until I pointed out that the interruption to important research activities had lasted long enough and wandered off for a nap. I emerged from my room around four to find my guest bundling up his papers.

"Right. I'm off like grandma's knickers. I'll be heading around the long way to pick up a few snippets I can use when they get out the arc lamps and rubber truncheons."

I paused, then decided it would be a good idea to be present when the interrogation started. So I grabbed the wallet and headed towards the Palace via the most direct route.

My arrival brought further inquiries about the whereabouts of a particular party before the party in question hove into view, descending the stairs from the residential section.

His Lordship was straight into interrogator mode.

"Look," came the reply, "I told you. All this week I'm up at Chookie Little's in Plymouth Street..."

"You never mentioned Plymouth Street," His Lordship countered.

"Didn't I? Mentioned it to someone. Richie at the paper shop? Was it you Herston?"

He scratched his head in bewilderment at his own forgetfulness.

"So if you're looking for me, that's where I'll be. Chookie Little's in Plymouth Street. Halfway down the block from the main street. Masonry block place with garden gnomes on the front lawn. Dunno the number, Chookie told me to look for the garden gnomes. If you miss them, you're sure to spot Buster's place. Queenslander with a shit load of bougainvillea out the front. Sticks out like dogs' balls."

His curiosity temporarily satisfied, His Lordship moved off.

"Of course," Jeffrey went on, "no buildings match either description in that part of Plymouth Street. I checked on the way. And the Duchess thinks I'm backdooring some poor bastard on the side? Wait till they go looking for me tomorrow, and they will. Sure as God made little apples. Doesn't matter whether they need to find me, they'll be up and down that street a dozen times trying to figure this one out."

"Won't be much good," I pointed out, "if they follow you when you leave tomorrow morning."

"No chance," I was informed. "I've got it all covered. There's no way they'll be on deck before six. I'll be gone by five-thirty. I've already got my disguise figured out."

When I awoke the following morning, I discovered Jeffrey seated at the dining table engaged in further research.

As I entered the room, he looked up. "Not a problem in the world," he gloated. "Have a look outside. Not at the front, have a gander 'round the corner..."

Following these directions, I exited to investigate.

Beside the building, I discovered a bicycle, a cyclist's racing-style helmet, a backpack and the kind of safety jacket used to ensure the wearer is clearly visible to all and sundry.

I turned and wandered back inside.

"If you'd been out and about just after dawn this morning," Jeffrey began. "Not that any bastard in his right mind would be, but just supposing you were. You might have sighted a cyclist leaving the garage where the Duchess parks the Audi and heading off on his morning ride."

"I'll believe you, though thousands wouldn't."

"Had you been any one of the three or four silly bastards who were out and about, you would have seen the same cyclist all over the streets over the next ten or fifteen minutes. I was totally knackered by the time I got here, I can tell you. I reckon if anyone had noticed they wouldn't have had a chance to work out where I was going. Cruised past here about three times before I was satisfied the coast was clear and I could pull in,"

"What'll you do this afternoon?" I wondered.

"I'll ride up to somewhere near Chookie's nonexistent place, stash the stack hat in the backpack, and walk the bike back to the pub. If anyone asks I'll explain young Jason, who's away on that school footy trip, left his bike at his mate's place last weekend and asked me to bring it back home, so it's there for him when he gets back Friday arvo."

"You'll pull the same trick tomorrow," I ventured.

"That," Jeffrey countered, "would be a mistake. When you head there for lunch today, you'll discover His Lordship has been up and down Plymouth Street without finding anything resembling Chookie's place. Which, of course, doesn't exist, so there's no shock there..."

"But he'll be asking questions again this afternoon," I suggested.

"When I'll inform him I'd made a mistake. It wasn't Plymouth Street at all. Now, he won't believe me when I say that it's the same description, but in Dover Street rather than Plymouth Street."

"So he'll be up and about early tomorrow morning," I guessed.

"Looking out to see where I go. He won't be getting any joy in that department either because I'll have left around midnight and crashed in your spare room. Assuming that's cool with you."

"No dramas whatsoever," I replied. "How about I just give you the spare key, so we're not relying on my memory in the leaving the door open department."

At lunchtime, I found Jeffrey's scenario spot on. I placed my order, grabbed a beer, sat in the same location as the previous day and was joined by His Lordship and the Duchess.

Both of them had an urgent need to contact Jeffrey.

Some evil individual had removed their son and heir's bike and school bag from their usual locations in the garage and the flat upstairs.

This, I thought to myself, is going to let Tabby loose among the feathered fraternity.

Once I had disposed of lunch and a post-prandial pot, I hastened homewards to see what effect this bombshell might have.

"No problem at all," I was informed. "I'll stick to this afternoon's plan."

"If they manage to get something to contradict your story out of Young Jase when he gets back from the footy trip?"

I thought it was a possibility worth considering.

"Since I'll be back on duty by lunchtime Friday that should be no problem whatsoever. About two-thirty, she'll announce she's got some pressing appointment and can I go and collect the kid when the bus gets back. Those things are never on time, and there's no way she's going to want to sit around waiting. There are a couple of things Young Jase would prefer his parents didn't know about. I don't think we'll be having any troubles in that regard."

That afternoon I headed out as a cyclist started on the street circuit.

I arrived at the Palace to find both His Lordship and the Duchess awaiting the return of the prodigal.

Where I'd assumed Jeffrey would quietly return the bicycle to the garage at the rear of the premises, I spotted him wheeling the chariot through the pub, having entered through the side door.

Certain backs were conveniently facing the direction from which he was approaching in evident anticipation of his entering through one of the main doors.

"And here he comes," I pointed out, giving them enough time to turn around.

"Well," remarked Jeffrey, "that's one little job we won't have to worry about between now and Friday."

Facial expressions suggested bewilderment.

"Young Jase told me last weekend, he'd left his bike and school gear at Baldy's place. You remember he rode to school last Friday because Maddy had that dental appointment.

Janice dropped them at football practice and brought him here afterwards. He asked me on Saturday if I could pick it up and sneak it back before you noticed. He reckoned you'd crack if you thought he'd left a couple of hundred dollars of pushbike lying around for someone to knock off. You didn't hear any of this from me, by the way. Kids."

Shaking his head, he continued on his way towards the beer garden and garage before anyone could contribute anything to the discussion.

In his wake, a couple of parents seemed impressed by their offspring's responsibility in correcting his own mistakes.

I thought I could add a little to the effect.

"Don't see much of that these days, Most of my class would have acted dumb and denied all knowledge if you'd sprung them with something like that. Bloke last week filed his homework book in the garden bed outside the classroom. One of the cleaners found it and brought it to me. You should have seen the performance the next morning. Yes, he'd done his homework, and no, he had no idea what happened to the book. When I waved it in front of his nose, he claimed his mum must have delivered it to school in the morning. When I asked him where he'd done it, he reckoned someone must've torn it out. Probably his mum, since it was a bit messy. No, you've got a good one there."

The parental feel-good factor that resulted from this convenient fiction.

My supporting remarks drew attention away from the matter of Jeffrey's whereabouts since, once he'd restored the recovered property to its rightful locations, the subject was completely ignored.

After the Duchess had wandered off to supervise preparations in the kitchen, and His Lordship disappeared into the inner sanctum, I remarked on the success of the subterfuge.

"Well, that's it, isn't it? I'll bet you thought I'd just sneak that stuff inside and hope nobody noticed. But you can bet your bottom dollar she's been sounding off to all her mates about it. At least one of them will have spotted me on the way so now if anyone asks her about the bike they'll get a testimonial about how responsible the kid is. And I've still got Dover Street up my sleeve in case I need it in the future."

Dinner time found Mine Host and Hostess in an expansive mood.

The two of us were invited to join them, and I headed homewards just after nine feeling no pain whatsoever.

Rising later than usual the following day, I found the research activities underway.

After a stroll to the newsagent to collect my copy of the **Denison Argus** (a.k.a the **Sleepy Hollow Sausage Wrapper**) returned to base for breakfast.

A pause in the research provided an opportunity to inquire how it was going.

"Well," I was informed, "it's going as well as possible under the circumstances. I've been checking whether there's a trend towards numbers that came out last week turning up again this week. Believe it or not, it seems you should always have at least one of last week's eight numbers in your entries for the next draw. Doesn't help you get the other numbers, of course, but..."

"So how much more research time will you need?" I asked.

I doubted he'd be able to wangle another week's holiday.

While I was quite happy for him to continue to use the premises for research, his activities were placing constraints on my enjoyment of the holidays.

"Won't need to do too much after today. In any case, I don't know how much longer I can keep Chookie Little going, but he might be useful in the future, so if I give him a break for a while."

"They're bound to keep on getting curious," I suggested.

"That's right. No good pushing my luck. I think this afternoon I'll be informing them Chookie's work has proceeded much quicker than anticipated. I'll be able to carry out one or two little jobs round the place if they've got anything that needs doing for the rest of the week."

The lunchtime circuit down to the Palace passed without excitement, except for a pleasant chilli con carne and the opportunity to kill another hour while I waited for the evening's proceedings.

Returning to the flat, I found the research activities wound up, so we sat around for an hour, shooting the breeze.

Around three, my companion gathered up his belongings. He indicated he was returning to home base since we've finished Chookie's gazebo. I thought there might be an odd job that needs looking after now I've got this unexpected time on my hands.

Before he departed, we confirmed plans for the evening.

For a start, there was no way the list of combinations used to develop our entries would be aired in public.

Once we knew the numbers, I would walk home to check the result against the master list.

"The place should be packed to the gunwales so if I claim to be heading off for a piss, there's every chance no one will notice me heading out the door. Once we know the result, we can work the rest out as we go along. Now, about handing the entries in."

"Best," Jeffrey suggested, "to put the first eighty bucks in early. That's as much as anyone else would be likely to invest in advance. So if we slip Captain Headrush that amount right at the start, we can find out whether anyone else has done anything similar to date."

"If we play our cards right, we might," I suggested, "be able to find out if anyone else plonks a pile of entries in before we hit them with the big bundle."

"They'll want to get the draw done as soon as possible after seven, so I'll bring down the big pile about a quarter to. Catch you down there just before five."

Once the planning was complete, I devoted the rest of the afternoon to meditation on ways financial windfalls could be used.

I meditated so intently I was alarmed to discover it was almost five when consciousness returned. Arriving at the Palace, I found Jeffrey in position, tickets at the ready with Hopalong Cassidy also present in full scoffing mode.

Eighty dollars? You bastards are mad. More money than sense were typical of the remarks issuing from that quarter as I walked in to join the already-substantial throng in the bar.

Shortly after that, the arrival of Captain Headrush meant we could hand over the initial batch.

"Looks like you're giving it a red hot go," was the remark as he added eighty dollars to the money bag, and the tickets found their way onto the pile.

Around a quarter to seven, Jeffrey disappeared upstairs.

Given the number of tickets, the process of checking there was exactly four hundred dollars' worth in the pile delayed the draw by about ten minutes.

The late plunge did not slip under Cassidy's guard.

During the infrequent pauses between derisive comments, I explained the pile of entries resulted from hours of research, and great care had been taken to avoid duplication in entries submitted.

I was careful not to mention the form that thorough scientific research had actually taken.

At a quarter past seven with a list of numbers in my pocket, I took the stroll to check if we had it and discovered we did.

On the way back, I pondered the approach for the next half hour while Captain Headrush and his colleagues checked the entries to find the winners.

I knew there was at least one, so the question was how many ways the prize money would end up being shared.

An absence of emotion was appropriate, and so, pokerfaced, I reentered the pub and wound my way through the crowd.

As I approached, Jeffrey looked up, anxious for an indication. There were, however, others present.

"So, Herston," Hopalong inquired, "now you've had your piss, how did you go? Did you get it? Or are you pissed off at wasting a couple of hundred hard-earned dollars? By your expression, no. Told you it'd never work. This scientific approach bullshit is just that. Bullshit."

Just wait, you bastard," I thought. With a bit of luck, we'll have the only live entry, and we'll see what your expression is when you discover we've picked up between sixteen and seventeen grand.

"You win some, and you lose some," I shrugged, hoping the facial expression was suitably stoic in the face of adversity.

The air of gloom that opinion brought with it did nothing to diminish the scoffing.

I could see Captain Headrush moving through the Public Bar.

"I thought I'd put you out of your misery," was the Captain's opening remark as he joined us. "We've got to go through and double-check the whole pile again, but we've only found one live ticket."

"There you go," Cassidy interjected. "One ticket and it's someone sensible who's put in one ticket for two dollars instead of wasting close to five hundred like you silly bastards. Whose was it?"

Beer was in the process of being transferred to his mouth when the reply came.

"Theirs," said Captain Headrush.

There was a pause as bystanders regained their composure after being sprayed with amber fluid.

"Obviously," Captain Headrush continued after mopping up operations, "we're not going to be able to hand over the sixteen and a half grand tonight. You probably wouldn't want it right now, anyway. If you go to see Ziggy tomorrow arvo, he'll have it there for you. I assume you'll be wanting it in cash."

"So," I suggested, "while we can wait till tomorrow for the big bickies, I don't suppose there's a chance of getting, say, five hundred out of it right now? A celebration seems to be in order."

As the Captain headed back to collect the money for us, word of our success spread around the bar.

Our success was not, it seemed, greeted with universal acclamation.

"OK Magpie," I instructed once the money had been delivered. "There's a hundred here. Any drink bought in the bar comes out of this."

"And when it runs out?" Magpie asked.

"It comes out of here," Jeffrey interjected. "Except for this scoffing prick," he added with a nod in Hopalong's direction. "He can buy his own."

In the end, Hopalong was allowed to participate in the celebrations. Not that there was any softening of the scoffing.

As time passed, the atmosphere lightened, thanks to the positive influence of copious amounts of free alcohol, and His Lordship was announcing the time for Last Drinks had passed.

The clientele was advised to make their way homewards when Captain Headrush returned, accompanied by a gentleman we'd noticed around the premises over the preceding day or two.

"So, fellas," the Captain inquired, "everything under control? Anyway. I don't know if you've met this bloke, but I think you'll be interested in hearing what he's got to tell you."

It would have been a gross exaggeration to suggest we were disposed to listen to very much by that stage.

Still, as the individual introduced himself, something told me attentiveness was imperative. Perhaps it was an official-looking identity card.

"I won't interrupt your celebrations for long, gentlemen. In fact, I'd expect your preference would be that I didn't interrupt them at all. My name is Arthur Slaughter. I'm from the Justice Department."

By this stage, regardless of inebriation, he had our complete attention.

"Over the past month, matters have been brought to our attention regarding the fund-raising exercise the Denison Polocrosse Association has been conducting. That's the one which you have, most fortunately, benefited from."

"I don't like the sound of this," Jeffrey muttered.

"When we learned the Association was referring to this exercise as a Mini-Lotto, certain legal issues were raised, and I was instructed to travel to Denison to investigate."

The bar had emptied, and His Lordship had arrived, presumably intending to point out there were no exceptions to the rules.

A glance from the speaker stopped him in his tracks.

"My investigations," Slaughter continued in the same mirthless tone evident from the start, "have resulted in an official injunction being issued to the Polocrosse Association. They are to cease and desist from conducting this activity immediately and forthwith. Had this evening's proceedings failed to produce a winner, the Justice Department would have been forced to take action. That would have been a great source of embarrassment to several local identities."

"No kidding," the Captain interjected. "It could have meant jail."

"However, the jackpot has been won, and I have an undertaking the Association will not be conducting other activities of this nature. So the Department is disinclined to carry the matter any further."

"And the money?" I asked. I had a nasty feeling we were about to be reclassified under the heading of Severely out-of-pocket.

"Still goes to you. The Department would, under other circumstances, have been forced to impound the proceeds of the activity and attempt to return the funds to the people it came from. Having consulted my superiors, I have come to the conclusion things have reached a satisfactory outcome for all concerned. The Association was unaware of the breach of the Lotteries Act. It can be excused provided we have a written undertaking they will not be conducting any further activities along these lines. The means which I understand you gentlemen employed to win the money."

"I knew it. Here comes the crunch," Jeffrey remarked.

"While not in itself illegal, provides the Association with an excuse to offer the public to explain the demise of the activity without having to admit they have been in breach of significant legislation."

"In other words," Captain Headrush explained, "if anyone asks why we stopped doing it, we can blame you bastards and Herston's computer."

"And you gentlemen," Slaughter concluded, "have found yourselves considerably enriched from the experience. Should you wish to attempt to repeat the exercise through the official Lotto I would point out that sixteen thousand dollars would not be anywhere near the amount necessary to cover all the combinations."

With that, Mr Slaughter turned on his heels and was gone.

In other circumstances, His Lordship might have been inclined to offer us a chance to take a bottle of something and partake of a few drinks on the verandah.

Given the recent presence of officialdom likely to be in close cooperation with the Licensing authorities, he was quick to point out this option was not open to us that particular evening.

Which explains why, ten minutes later, we were seated in the back room of a pizza establishment, wondering whether the same approach could be used on a Saturday night.

GOING FOR THE BIG ONE

The following day the sun had been up for a couple of hours before I deigned to join it.

Actually, if I hadn't needed to void the bladder, I would have been quite happy to remain in hibernation till late afternoon.

Once I had emerged, further sleep was unlikely to help the recuperative process.

I needed breakfast, paracetamol and something resembling the hair of the dog.

Bacon, baked beans and eggs filled the first category. A couple of tablets took care of the second.

After a spell under the shower, I set off Palace-wards to see what adventures the day might produce.

I arrived to find Jeffrey, significantly the worse for overnight wear, in consultation with the inimitable Gilhooley.

"So," I was greeted, "Jeffrey tells me you bastards had a collect last night. Wish I'd been here to see it, but I was halfway between Copabella and Middlemount."

"When'd you get in?" I asked. I knew his presence would be required at home almost immediately on arrival in Denison.

"Five minutes ago," was the reply. "The Iron Maiden's on day shift, so I'm safe in that regard, thank you very much. Called in just this side of Mackay to tell her I was broken down out near Nebo and wouldn't be home till later this afternoon. She won't be able to check on that, so I parked the chariot in a discreet location behind Hopalong Cassidy's. I reckon I can take my time here, get home just before four and be seated on the settee, beer in hand and suitably shagged out after a long and eventful day when she gets home. Now, Jeffrey was telling me how you bastards snagged the jackpot."

"Pity we couldn't do the same thing with the Lotto. Then we'd really have something to celebrate. If you'd seen the printout that Herston came up with to cover the combinations of twelve numbers."

"But," countered Gilhooley, "it could be done. In fact, I've got a good idea of how you could generate a complete list of all the combinations. That'd be straightforward. Now, what were you saying about deleting combinations just before Herston strolled by?"

We explained, at some length, the process we'd undertaken while Gilhooley made notes on a handy coaster.

After half an hour's discussion, Gilhooley rose to his feet, placing an empty glass on the bar.

"I think," he announced, "we have something worth investigating. Not for me, thanks Magpie. I'll be off. Gentlemen, I think we have a project worth investigating. All we need to do before I depart is to negotiate a suitable form of remuneration for my valuable intellectual property."

"Which means?" Jeffrey ventured.

"I am departing forthwith in anticipation of spending the afternoon working on the software solution that will meet your requirements. I'm guessing you'll probably need to get a new computer to handle the quantity of data involved so don't go spending your ill-gotten gains yet."

"Fine," I stated. "What's this going to cost us?"

"Initially, nothing. I'll get started on it this afternoon and let you know if it doesn't look feasible. I'm in town till Monday and won't have much time between now and then, except for this afternoon. I'm back out at the mines for ten days after that, so I'll be able to work on the finer details while I'm out there. If you like what I come up with it's yours, but it'll cost you ten per cent of the profit when you use it. Sound fair?"

A quick glance in Jeffrey's direction produced a nod, hands were shaken, and Gilhooley departed.

'So that might have just addressed the question of how we dispose of sixteen grand.'

"The computer," Jeffrey countered, "won't cost that much..."

"We don't know what it'll cost until Gilhooley lets us know how much memory we'll need to run the program and how big the hard drive needs to be to hold the data. But, and I'm guessing here, it's unlikely to be the whole sixteen grand. Say we've got ten grand left. We could invest, say a grand each week for ten weeks before the cash ran out and if it doesn't return a cent in ten weeks, it's not worth persevering with. After three months, we could look at the bank and figure out our weekly investment for the next three months."

With that course of action agreed to, we shifted the discussion to other matters.

A week later, I was in my regular spot when the phone rang.

It rang frequently throughout the day and well into the night but was rarely a matter of concern. So I was nonplussed when His Lordship emerged from the Inner Sanctum holding the cordless handset.

"For you," he indicated as he handed over the handset. "Gilhooley..."

"What's up?" I asked as I placed the phone to my ear. "What's going on?"

"Nothing is going on. Nothing's coming off, either, but there you undoubtedly go. However, I do have some news I wanted to pass on. Rang your place but got the answering machine, so I tried the logical alternative."

"Right. Fire away."

"I've got your program written and coded. That's the first thing. There is, however, a slight problem."

"Which is?"

"You won't be able to run it on a standard computer like the one that's sitting in your flat."

"So I need a new computer. Fine. Let me know the specifications, and I'll buy something that fits."

"It's not, that simple. It rarely is. The program generates huge amounts of data and handles it in a way your regular desktop can't. Handle it, that is."

"So, in other words, we're stuffed. We've got a computer program that won't run on a computer."

"On the contrary. It will run on a computer, but it won't run on a mere smear common or garden computer. I'm going to have to build you one specifically to run this program."

"Which will," I replied, "probably cost us an arm and a leg..."

"Like hell, it will. I can get the components to run this software and put it together myself, so it won't cost you more than three grand at the outside. I'll be in contact with suppliers tomorrow. I should have the parts a day or two after that. I can have the thing built and test-driven by the time I get back to Sleepy Hollow the week after next. The Iron Maiden's not very happy about it, but they need me out there for a bit longer than originally planned. When I get back, I'll make a flying visit to drop it off at your place before I head anywhere else. We don't want the Board of Control getting a whiff of what's going on. Might be a good idea for you to be sick that day. I'll call to let you know when that'll be. So you can see why I wasn't interested in leaving a message on your answering machine."

"Point taken," I agreed.

"So, if it's fine with you I'll order the bits and pieces and start putting this infernal machine together."

"Fine. A ballpark figure for the budget?"

You could almost hear the clanking as the cogs of Gilhooley's brain struggled to bring forth the required information from the murky depths of his memory banks.

"I think that I mentioned the figure of three grand when I spoke to you and Jeffrey."

This figure coincided with my own recall of the relevant conversation.

"You can probably halve that, but I won't know till I've got my hands on all the components. I might be able to pick up a few odds and ends at the right price if you know what I mean."

"That's cool," I replied. "We've got three grand set aside, and there's no problem if we need to spend a little more, so go right ahead. I'll be looking forward to the phone call. "

True to his word, about a fortnight later, I returned to find the red light blinking on the answering machine.

The next day Gilhooley pulled into the driveway.

A phone call to the Palace summoned Jeffrey while the computer was unpacked, assembled and installed. I watched the process with some interest.

While the object in question looked like a computer with a monitor, a keyboard, a familiar-looking case and a printer, there was no sign of another external input.

The assembly was almost finished when Jeffrey arrived, announcing he'd given the buggers the slip.

Still, he didn't have much more than half an hour before his absence would be noticed.

"Right," said Gilhooley, standing back and waiting for the startup process to finish. "There are four icons you can see on the screen here. They're all the machine needs to do its job. It won't be capable of doing anything else. No e-mail, nothing. Won't even connect to the internet."

"Fine," I remarked. "We only want it to do one job."

"Here's the way it works. This icon here," pointing to the screen, "is your List Generator. Run it and you'll have a full list of all the combinations of forty-five numbers in groups of eight. That's your starting point. The list is saved automatically with the date you created the file as the file name, so you can work with more than one file if you want to try different approaches. It's a big file. Once you get onto the second program, the file size should shrink dramatically."

We nodded in agreement though neither of us had the slightest idea what he was on about.

Repeated exposure to the curious paths down which Gilhooley's mind wanders meant this was not an unfamiliar situation.

"So, once you've run the Generator and saved the file, you start up the Deleter, which is this second icon. From what you were telling me when we started on this, you wanted to cut out combinations with too many consecutive numbers, right?"

This was familiar territory and produced affirmative nods all around.

"So first up here in Actions you have the option to delete combinations with so many consecutive numbers. So you can start off with, say seven consecutive numbers, and see how many combinations you have left. If you want to thin it out further, you can choose four or five or six numbers."

"You wouldn't need to go to eight," I suggested, "because those combinations would have seven consecutive numbers..."

"Exactly. When you're happy with the size of the file you've generated, you click here to save it as Working with today's date in the file name so you can come back to it. Once you've done that, you go to this next one under Actions. That will delete all the combinations left which have three or four or five or whatever numbers from a draw from this History list. That's all the combinations that had been drawn until last Saturday's draw. I got that from the Lotto results web site, so it should be accurate."

"If we want more recent results?" Jeffrey asked.

"You go to this next bit, where you can add the results from each week's draw. I'm guessing you're only looking at Saturday nights."

"If we want to include other nights?"

"That's covered by choosing another History list. So you'd start with all the combinations, cut out the combos with too many consecutive numbers. Go from there to taking out combinations already drawn, and you'll end up with a list you can make your selection from for the next draw. You save the file you're working on, and you go to this program, which is the Selector."

This was, at the time, as clear as mud, but still, we nodded.

"Where you click on the option to Find all combinations with these 'so many' numbers. Pick two, three, four or whatever, click, enter the numbers and there you are, Bob's your uncle. Hopefully, there's a winning combination in there."

"So," I asked, "what do we owe you?"

"For time and effort, nothing as yet, but you'll be up for ten per cent of whatever return you get. Fair enough? For the computer, I can give you a detailed account, but call it fourteen hundred all up. I managed to scrounge a few bits and pieces. Otherwise, it would have been a bit more."

"Ten per cent. Where does that go?" Jeffrey wanted to know.

"I'll give you the account details when you're ready to hand something over. I've got an account the Iron Maiden doesn't know about. You'll a direct transfer from whatever

account you're using to bank the dividend cheques. How are you pair going to work that side of things?"

That side of things had been the subject of discussion over the intervening fortnight.

We'd assumed we'd have a starting bank of ten thousand.

We'd be investing around a thousand each week in eight number combinations so that any entry with more than four out of eight brought a return.

The plan had been to run for three months. Then we'd review the situation and adjust accordingly, repeating every three months until either the money ran out or we became so used to collecting that the novelty wore off.

Once we'd outlined that Gilhooley was quite happy.

"So, when you sit down to figure out what you're doing for the next three months, the first thing you'll be looking at will be the balance in your slush fund, right?"

"Correct."

"So you look at the balance three months ago, subtract it from the new balance, deduct ten per cent of the difference and deposit it in this bank account."

"If there are any questions asked?"

"They're going to be asking them at my end, so you'll have nothing to worry about. The Iron Maiden's been issuing dire threats involving divorce courts."

"So you've told us," Jeffrey interposed.

"More than once," I added.

"She'll probably keep making them, and every time she makes them they come with an announcement that she plans to take me for every cent I've got."

I nodded.

It was an indication to continue with the explanation rather than agreement with the sentiment expressed.

"So I've been getting to know a couple of bank johnnies out near the mines. I've set up an account to safeguard the money I make from cash in hand jobs like this. As far as the bank's concerned, deposits that go into the account from a bank transfer will be royalty payments for the intellectual property of Dan Milligan, a name with which you're undoubtedly familiar."

"From a certain literary work whose virtues you've been known to extol," I added.

"Precisely. Anyway, I've spun them a story I've sold the rights to this software package, and the royalty payments will be made every three months or so. So you've got nothing to worry about. Now if you'd like to take a seat, I'll watch and talk you through the process of generating your first batch of information before I head off to face the wrath of the Iron Maiden."

"I'll head back," Jeffrey interjected. "Herston can take me through the process once he's graduated from his training wheels."

With that, he was gone.

Half an hour later, so was Gilhooley, but snuggled away in the hard drive was the beginnings of what we hoped would be a substantial income stream.

Unsurprisingly, that stream did not come online immediately. Apart from the first batch of entries, each week generally produced a return.

After the first three months, the balance in the slush fund had risen from twelve thousand to twenty-one thousand, and Gilhooley was nine hundred dollars better off.

The following three month period also produced a substantial increase over the previous balance.

As the New Year dawned, I looked forward to the prospect of my last, or perhaps second-last, year in the classroom.

NEW FACES

Towards the end of the previous year, I was told that the vacant room in my accommodation was unlikely to be occupied.

Still, these arrangements were always liable to change.

The flat next door would be acquiring a brace of female tenants.

Fine, I thought. The newcomers would be a change from the God-botherers who'd been there for the last two years.

The previous neighbours were now off to devote themselves to missionary work in some corner of the Third World.

Not that their presence had caused any friction, you understand. They went about their business. I went about mine.

At the same time, neighbours likely to take offence at certain forms of expression tended to cast a shadow over proceedings when acquaintances dropped by. Especially if we ended up in the carport to avail ourselves of the prevailing zephyrs.

The possibility of being allocated a flatmate, on the other hand, was pounced on by certain members of the scoffing fraternity with considerable glee.

I suspected there weren't many heavily tattooed gay activist Islamic militant cross-dressing vegetarians in the community.

While I was aware of suggestions that standards had slipped in the profession, but even if they had, actually, declined, it was unlikely they'd dropped that far.

A Tuesday morning in mid-January saw a removals van arrive next door. It was closely followed by cars containing a blonde of considerable pneumatic charm and parents concerned about their daughter's well-being.

That was the impression I gathered when I wandered outside to scope out the new neighbour.

The daughter was Jonelle Carter, a keen netballer and recent graduate. She would be sharing the unit with Carol Kensington, one of her friends from university.

Mr and Mrs Carter were experiencing serious misgivings as their offspring left home and ventured into the cruel world.

I retreated indoors while Jonelle's worldly possessions were relocated into next door. The process was almost complete when a new pair of vehicles pulled up.

A second figure of pneumatic charm emerged from one, along with the requisite parental escort.

I surmised this would be Ms Kensington. Her surname, along with the development of the mammary glands, meant she would become known around town as *Mangoes*.

In an uncharacteristic flurry of activity, five minutes later, two more cars pulled up. One of them was the preferred chariot of my deputy principal.

I headed outside while Nick Davidson joined the gathering throng, followed by a gentleman who bore a more-than-superficial resemblance to Indian all-rounder Kapil Dev.

However, his accent when he spoke suggested a trans-Tasman influence.

Mr Davidson had already met the neighbours and, after checking that the accommodation next door was to their liking, turned to me.

"David Herston, your period of sole occupancy has come to an end. Meet Alex MacNab. Someone at the High School made a typo in the incoming list. We thought the new English/History teacher was an Alexandra MacNab and allocated her to one of the flats near the cemetery. When this gentleman lobbed on the doorstep, I realized someone had blundered. You're the only bloke in accommodation who's got a spare room, so you've drawn the short straw."

"No worries. There's likely to be something unexpected to upset the apple cart at the start of the school year, so I had Bronnie give the spare room the once over. It mightn't be quite up to standard if you're inclined to be picky, but it has been dusted, vacuumed and aired since the new year, which is more than you can say for some places around here. Come in..."

My new flatmate travelled light.

Once a couple of suitcases, a box of teaching resources, an acoustic guitar and a stereo had been placed in the spare room, Mr Davidson wandered off.

I gave the new bloke time to unpack and went about my own business until he emerged from the room.

The sun was sufficiently far above the yardarm to suggest a beer while discussing various matters of mutual interest.

Mr MacNab was of Anglo-Indian descent, spent his school days in New Zealand, then moved across The Ditch to study.

An uncomfortably recent marriage breakup explained his relatively meagre possessions. An offer of a second beer was accepted.

Once negotiations were complete, it was lunchtime. That provided the excuse to stroll down to check the lunch special at the Palace.

Tuesday lunchtimes at the end of the Christmas holidays tend to be subdued affairs at the Palace.

After lunch, we wandered back, arriving around the time the occupants emerged from next door, obviously farewelling concerned parents.

After opening the front door, I wandered out into the carport on the pretext of checking the mail. I ended up level with the new neighbours as the cars turned the corner and the not-quite tearful farewells concluded.

As the neighbours turned to head inside, I suggested coffee or something stronger.

The offer wasn't immediately accepted, but there was the possibility of the girls dropping in later.

With MacNab engaged in similar pursuits, I was reading with John Fahey playing in the background about an hour later.

A verbal knock suggested next-door had decided to accept the offer. Coffee was the preferred beverage at this stage of the afternoon.

Given my preference for large quantities of potent caffeine infusions on a Saturday morning, the plunger lived in a convenient location on the bench-top rather than tucked away at the back of a cupboard.

I was able to prepare a brew of coffee while indulging in the sort of small-talk that comes when you don't know your visitors very well.

Sandy joined us. Before long, we were seated around the table discussing various matters of interest to three recent arrivals in town.

Sandy, I already knew to be a recently separated guitar playing father of two, relocated from Townsville.

He planned to make a new start while maintaining links with kids aged three and five. However, his former partner seemed to be doing everything in her power to minimize contact while extracting the maximum possible child support.

He'd taught in Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Townsville for ten years before his marital situation prompted him to ask for a transfer.

His wife's new interest had been an occupant of the same staff room at his last school. Things would be more comfortable if there weren't constant reminders of his change in circumstances.

Ms Carter and Ms Kensington were recent graduates from university, had previously lived at home. They were looking forward to the freedom that came with an escape from the parental domain.

"So," I asked, "why Denison? I'd have thought the southeast corner would offer greater opportunities."

"It would, but if we'd ended up in BrisVegas, Mum and Dad expect us to live at home until they'd married us off to some doctor, accountant or corporate lawyer. So we had to get out."

"Sure," I countered, "but why Denison?"

"Two words," was Carole's response. "Frank Dooley."

Mr Dooley, a former Deputy Principal of the Teachers College in Townsville, had moved into Education Department Human Resources when the college was merged with James Cook University.

"Not Brutally Frank?"

The gentleman was legendary for his blunt delivery of unfavourable Practice Teaching assessments. He'd ended up as Director of Human Resources.

He had a reputation for a continuing lack of sympathy for anyone whose lifestyle choices were likely to reflect unfavourably on the profession.

"Yes, Uncle Frank. He's Mum's brother-in-law," was Jonelle's explanation. "When we both had graduation coming up, Mum asked him for some advice about schools."

"He came back saying Brisbane schools were hard to get into unless you're willing to go into a less desirable area. While he might be able to pull a few strings for us, he didn't think it was a good idea for us to have people saying we got into a school because of his influence."

"Fair enough," I remarked, "but surely you'd still be able to land a good spot in the southeast corner."

"Within easy driving distance for concerned Mums," Jonelle pointed out. "No, thanks. Everywhere between Gympie and the border has people queued up trying to get into the good schools. So we suggested to Uncle Frank that we'd rather go somewhere else where we could find our feet before we went looking to get back into Brisbane."

"Sounds logical," I concurred.

"So Uncle Frank did a bit of research and came back with a couple of possibilities that might have been excellent schools. But there's the same problem in all the major centres.

We're not interested in anything away from the coast, so there weren't too many serious possibilities."

"Only one of them was an hour or so north of Airlie Beach," Carole pointed out. "We could have gone for Proserpine, but we're safer if we're further away."

"So, when the pupil-free days are over we're off to Airlie to see if we've made the right call. We'll be busy with work during the week, and head away to let our hair down on weekends."

From that, I concluded there'd be many highly disillusioned single males around town. "If we can find the odd six-foot blond Swedish backpacker in the process, so much the better."

We passed the next hour chatting before the girls announced they had things to do. If I was planning to dine at the Palace, they were inclined to sample the cuisine.

Despite an earlier intention to dine at home, Sandy decided to join us.

The four of us wandered pubwards slightly before six. As we arrived on the doorstep, Sandy reached for the handle, holding the door open for the girls before I stepped inside to find Jonelle and Carole surveying the scene.

Jeffrey was seated in our usual position, tapping the face of his watch. His Lordship was stationed behind the bar.

"Where," His Lordship inquired, "is your note?"

"Right here," was the reply as I gestured towards the two new faces. "Surely you wouldn't expect gentlemen to leave these two damsels to walk unescorted from the flat next door to my place to your august establishment? No? I thought not. Allow me to introduce. Jonelle Carter. His Lordship, Bryan Barron. Mr Jeffrey. Carole Kensington. His Lordship, Bryan Barron. Mr Jeffrey, and of course you're already acquainted with my new flatmate Mr McNab. So now what are we drinking?"

Once the orders had been placed and His Lordship was engaged in supplying the liquid requisites, Jeffrey turned to Miss Carter.

"Around your eyes," he asked, "what is that? It sparkles."

"Makeup," Jonelle replied. "Plus, of course, a touch of glitter."

"Ah," was Jeffrey's response. "Bright Eyes."

The name stuck. It took a bit longer before her flatmate became widely known as Mangoes, but from Day One, Jonelle Carter was known as *Bright Eyes*.

From there, the conversation followed the same lines as the afternoon version.

This time, however, the Airlie Beach backpacker-seduction theme received more emphasis. It sparked a lengthy discussion of the physical attributes attributed to males of various northern European nations.

When the two of them headed towards the Ladies', Jeffrey turned to me.

"Well, Herston," he observed, "what you've got there is either a prime brace of buffaloes or a couple of party girls. Either way, they won't be interested in anything in trousers they're likely to find in these parts. Not that you could call them prick-teasers, mind you. They've made it fairly obvious they're not available to the general public if you catch my drift."

Which I did.

Over the next ten months, they proved to be friendly neighbours, celebrating payday by lobbing into the Palace on a Wednesday afternoon and disappearing southwards on a Friday afternoon.

Their return was usually brought tales of debauchery to curl the short hairs of a credulous bystander.

For my part, I was disinclined to believe much of what I heard. I suspected the descriptions were intended to deflect amatory intentions lurking in the population.

Later that year, I found my suspicions were correct.

We'd developed a comfortable routine to select the cricket squad to go to the regional selection trials.

When the selection occurred in Denison, I booked the Proserpine delegation into the Palace. We conducted our preliminary negotiations over dinner the night before the trials.

When the venue was Proserpine, the same thing happened in Airlie Beach.

Towards the end of the year, with the trials at the southern end of the zone, I found myself propping up the bar in a quiet corner of an Airlie Beach nightspot.

Fellow-selector Norm Trevelyn was occasionally employed there as a security operative. We'd completed preliminary negotiations before the trial match the following day.

We'd wandered in early, transacted the business smoothly while the place was relatively quiet.

We were about to make our departure as the premises filled when, to my not-entirely-considerable surprise, I sighted Bright Eyes and Mangoes on the dance floor.

"The thick," I remarked to Norm as he completed the shout, "plottens."

Norm raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Over there on the dance floor, we have my neighbours, who seem to head down to these parts every weekend for a lifestyle of unbridled debauchery with the Swedish backpacker fraternity. Know them?"

He did, pointing out that, as far as the bar and security staff could tell, they were party girls who were rarely seen dancing with anyone apart from each other.

"A couple of stunners like that would normally have every bloke in the place trying to win on, particularly after they're half full of piss and, more than likely, bad manners. The two girlfriend routine seems to keep most of them at bay, though."

Back in Denison, on a quiet night over a glass of wine, I found that was the way it was.

Advice from Uncle Brutally Frank suggested teachers in a small town were invariably the subject of gossip.

I knew a large percentage of the population believed I lived upstairs at the Palace. As the reader will be well aware, my actual home was a block away down the road.

"So he told us," Mangoes elucidated, "if we wanted to party we'd best do it out of town. In a couple of years when we get into a larger centre that won't be so important, but you've got to admit we've been able to keep things quiet."

LIFE GOES ON

In the morning, Sandy informed me finances would not permit frequent repetitions of the previous day's expenditures, and he'd be adopting a quieter lifestyle.

After giving the options a quiet working over, we arrived at an arrangement that seemed workable.

Once the school year started, life settled into a steady routine.

It wasn't, however, quite the routine I'd become accustomed to.

Since it was far cheaper to eat and drink at home, while Sandy might stop in at the Palace for a quiet drink at the end of the day, he'd be better off heading home for dinner rather than opting for a counter meal.

He also proposed to grow his own vegetables in a plot behind the flat once the growing season rolled around and could turn out a good curry given the appropriate fresh herbs and spices.

As he pointed out, if I was inclined to sample the results and contribute to the costs, I might as well benefit financially.

Under those circumstances, it only fair I should do some cooking.

So we ended up with Sandy cooking on Tuesdays and Sundays while I looked after Mondays and Thursdays.

On Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, we'd make our own arrangements.

Sandy would be able to use the leftovers from Wednesday on Friday night.

Before long, we found Hopalong turning up on the doorstep around mealtimes.

Since Jeffrey needed to drop by to work out the Lotto entries, it seemed logical to include him in the arrangements.

His appearance was usually accompanied by something that could be included in the catering over the next couple of days.

Every month or so, there was a Saturday night dinner with contributions from all involved.

Sandy's consultations with his colleagues from the Agriculture Department produced significant results.

The plot behind the flat had tomatoes, chillies and leafy vegetables in abundance, with an ensuing reduction in the grocery bill.

As things settled down, I found myself with disposable income to spare for the first time in years. So I was back buying music after a couple of years when lack of funds rather than lack of interest had limited purchases.

Part of the financial surplus was channelled into reading matter, and I built up a useful collection of tracts about gambling.

A couple of trifectas boosted the balance of my phone account at the TAB to the point where I was withdrawing rather than contributing regular financial transfusions.

The slush fund for the Lotto project continued to grow to the point where the balance was enough to cover the number of combinations the computer was throwing out from week to week.

That prompted an intriguing possibility.

"Should we," I suggested to Jeffrey one Thursday evening as we sat at the table filling out and checking a pile of entries, "be looking at operating on a Wednesday night? Wednesday nights' results are going into the computer already. We can assume the patterns we've spotted on Saturday nights should apply there as well."

So, much to Hopalong's amusement, we diversified our investment profile and doubled the number of entries being filled in each week.

"It won't last, you know," was the frequent remark as he wandered into the flat during one of the paperwork sessions.

That happened with increasing frequency in the wake of a Saturday afternoon in the middle of the year.

We'd been sitting in our usual spot when an attractive woman with an English accent walked through the door, looking for a payphone.

The phone on the corner opposite the pub was, apparently, once again out of order.

With nothing else to occupy our attention, there was idle speculation about her occupation.

She was, according to Jeffrey, obviously either a nuclear physicist or a recently qualified brain surgeon.

I thought her manner reminded me of some of my colleagues.

So she was probably a teacher, doing the world trip thing before settling down with her fiancé. He'd be an accountant or quantity surveyor from somewhere like Bexleyheath.

Sandy thought her shoulders reminded him of female teachers he'd known and cast his ballot for a Phys. Ed. teacher, or perhaps a physiotherapist.

Hopalong, claiming the most likely occupations had been covered, thought she might be a nurse. He had no sooner come to that conclusion than the lady under consideration replaced the phone and turned towards us.

"Go on," Jeffrey suggested. "You just finished making up your mind she's a nurse. Ask her what she does for a crust."

The inquiry was made, and the rest, as they say in the classics, was history.

However, the exact details of the newcomer's professional status were not immediately forthcoming.

She accepted an offer to join us for a cold drink and must have found the company enjoyable.

She was back the following afternoon.

When His Lordship called time at the end of the afternoon session, she joined us in an excursion across the road for Pizza and the odd snifter. In a gross reversal of form, Hopalong also joined the party.

We were obviously better company than the denizens of the backpacker hostel where she was staying.

By Monday evening, on her third visit to the Palace, she was expressing interest in an unoccupied room upstairs in the old servo next door.

She departed with Hopalong for a guided tour of the premises on Tuesday afternoon. Significantly, both parties failed to return to the corner bar at the end of the tour.

That development raised a few eyebrows. The odd speculative comment on Wednesday evening seemed to go right through to the 'keeper.

By Thursday, suspicions were mounting, and on Friday, they were confirmed. Hopalong and Liz were officially an item.

That's when the newcomer announced changes to her plans for the remainder of her Australian sojourn and filled in some previously undisclosed details.

According to her version of the story, she was a member of the Royal Marines employed as an unarmed combat instructress.

Her presence in Denison came from an interest in scuba diving and a desire to upgrade her qualifications to the highest level of accreditation.

Once she decided Hopalong was the man of her dreams, the decision to spend the rest of her stay in Australia diving in the local area was hardly surprising.

The lack of an appropriate visa prevented a permanent arrangement. It required a return to duty in the United Kingdom at the end of August.

Hopalong's finances didn't stretch to the point where he could accompany her.

So they decided when her current enlistment was complete, she'd be heading to Denison to continue the relationship.

While Liz had no objection to his drinking, she had indicated he would need to change his spending patterns.

On that basis, it made sense to moderate his intake.

That would have been fine if he'd been able to stay at home and amuse himself. But he found the living quarters above the Old Servo sadly lacking once she'd departed.

As he wandered next door to the Palace, he found his drinking companions increasingly conspicuous by their absence.

Which was not to suggest that we'd signed The Pledge.

The High School Ag. Department, apart from providing a source of seedlings, were keen homebrewers.

Sandy's need to keep an eye on his finances meant that he caught the homebrew bug.

A couple of fermenters in the laundry turned out a steady stream of liquid to be bottled, labelled and stored in the hall cupboard.

Hopalong developed a taste for the results, and he was a regular visitor.

Jeffrey's visits to assist with the Lotto meant there were frequent opportunities for Hopalong to give voice to his scoffing proclivities.

He was in the process of advising us our run of good luck was bound to come to an end when something finally snapped.

"Listen, you bastard," Jeffrey interposed as he crumpled up an incorrectly completed entry, "that may be true. On the other hand, instead of sitting swilling free piss, you could be doing something useful with your life."

Jeffrey and I had commandeered the dining table to complete our paperwork. The lack of suitable workspaces was not a source of friction in the ranks but was definitely an inconvenience.

"Yeah," I added. "You're always telling us how good you are with your hands. You would have been a cabinetmaker if your old man hadn't dropped off his perch after you finished your apprenticeship. But your mum needed someone to run the servo. How about you knock us up some shelving and workspace here?"

The suggestion gave Hopalong and Sandy something to discuss. At the same time, the pile of entries were filled out and cross-checked against the printout of Saturday night's number combos.

When we were finished, the four of us returned to the subject.

"The first thing we need," I pointed out, "is workspace big enough for two people to get themselves set up and stuck into whatever they're doing. Without having to take up the whole of the kitchen table. It doesn't have to be me and Jeffrey with the Lotto stuff. Sandy and I could both use some workspace for marking and report cards and that shit. If we had shelving above the workspace, everyone who used it would be able to keep their stuff in order without having to leave it lying 'round all over the cookshop..."

"A couple of bookshelves would be handy too," Sandy added. "Maybe we could get something to keep this bastard's records CDs and music magazines in order. How about a wall unit to hold the TV and stereo as well?"

"So," I went on, "how about I drop into the hardware store tomorrow arvo and set up an account? You can buy whatever you need there and, if necessary we can use the slush fund to pay for it. Sandy can keep you supplied with piss to keep you going while you're working. With all that on your plate, you won't be hanging 'round here like a spaniel with a face that's been trodden on."

"But," Hopalong interjected, "what if you move? What then?"

I suspected he was clutching at straws.

"Simple," I said. "You make everything modular. If each bit's about a metre wide, they'd be no problem to shift when we've collected the big win."

"As if that's likely to happen."

The Scoffer was back in full force.

"And if that is the case," Jeffrey remarked, "not that it will be because we're going to snag this bastard, but suppose it is. Herston's going to be living here till he retires or they carry him out in a pine box, at which point in time he won't have to worry about what to do with the living room furniture."

"Anyway," I was starting to get intrigued by the possibilities, "we'll need two workspaces about a metre wide with storage shelves above along this wall."

I stood and moved around the appropriate areas of the living room as I went on.

"The whole thing would need to stretch from here," indicating a space adjacent to the front door, "right along the wall to about a metre short of the kitchen. The entertainment unit would go along the opposite wall and dogleg along the front of the flat. That way we can stick the TV where we can see it from the kitchen table. The armchairs would go here and here. The lounge would go there. Draw us up a plan along those lines over the weekend. We'll have a look at it and fine-tune the bastard on Tuesday night over dinner."

So, over the next couple of months, Hopalong had something to keep his mind off certain subjects.

The new working and storage space was helpful when the business end of the school year came around.

As the year went on, there were a few adjustments in Jeffrey's arrangements.

Frequent visits to what was becoming known as The Command Bunker meant, increasingly, he was nowhere to be found when the proprietors of the Palace needed something attended to.

"Really, Jeffrey, it's not good enough," His Lordship stated one afternoon when no one else was about. "Every time we need you to do something, you're off somewhere."

"Fine," Jeffrey responded. "You can have my notice. I'll take up that offer of the greenkeeper's job at the bowls club. Shorty keeps pointing out how much he'd like to retire. The job comes with a caravan behind the clubhouse so I wouldn't need to pay any rent."

"That won't be necessary." His Lordship reportedly responded. "As long as we know where to find you when we need you. How about a pager or something."

"No way," was the response. "I'll tell you what, though. How about I stick around here till six or six-thirty in the evening? You've got me on the premises from sparrow-fart till then, and by that time there's every chance I'll be over the limit if it's a matter of driving anywhere."

"Fine, but..."

"There is the small matter of the rent, of course. If you did a time and motion study of hours I do put in around here, you'd be bound to find I should be getting a fair bit more than you're putting my way so I can give most of it back across the bar."

"Yes, but."

"I know what you're going to say. I do very nicely out of the arrangement we have at the moment. True. On the other hand, if I head up to the bowls club, the bar prices are much lower. I reckon the money I'd save by not having to worry about rent would just about

cover the week's grocery bill. Of course, Herston and his mate don't mind if I eat there, either. No, all things considered, I think it'd be better if."

"I decided to scrub the rent on the room upstairs," His Lordship volunteered.

"And I was able to move to the one on the corner. Much bigger than the cubbyhole you've got me in at the moment. There's that bar fridge in the garage that's not doing much at the moment. Be just the thing to keep a six-pack cool at night without the need to walk downstairs for a refill."

"Which is what you do at the moment."

"Only because there's no powerpoint in my room. If I moved to the one on the corner, there is a powerpoint in there. I know because I've checked these things."

"I suppose, you'd like it air-conditioned as well," His Lordship added sarcastically.

"Won't be necessary. The sea breeze is all the air-conditioning I'll need. Beautiful breeze up there on that corner. Much cooler than where I am now. Reverse-cycle would be an unnecessary luxury. We have rum for circumstances where you'd be looking at that sort of thing."

"So that hasn't been a bad day's work," Jeffrey remarked as he recounted the day's events. "They're not going to be out looking for me after six. 'Course if I'm in the bar, I'll be only too happy to run a couple of little errands, provided, of course, I don't have to drive. Glad I thought of that angle. I'm eighty bucks a week better off in the kick and in a better room."

"What about the fridge?" I asked. "How're you going to manage that one?"

"Won't be a problem," Jeffrey pointed out. ""There won't be any more than a six-pack in there if he bothers to check. Oh, and a bit of milk and a few other odds and ends, of course. The empties won't be anywhere obvious around the neighbourhood. When he looks in the fridge, which he will, from time to time, he won't be able to help himself, and sees a six-pack, he won't be able to tell whether it's the same six-pack he saw yesterday. That's the secret in this sort of thing. Little things often, rather than big things from time to time..."

"It helps to be a move or two ahead of the opposition."

"True. Now about this Saturday's numbers..."

THE BIG COLLECT

At the end of the school year, the community dispersed.

Sandy based himself in Townsville to maximize quality-time access to his offspring, and I headed off to the cricket carnival. I was back in time for Christmas festivities.

Christmas morning found me in Dagwood and Blondie's back yard as a stream of visitors passed through.

Boxing Day was, predictably, spent on the couch in front of the television as the Melbourne Test and the Sydney to Hobart Yacht race got underway, and the recovery process kicked in.

When Saturday rolled around, I found Jeffrey in the corner bar as the racing focus switching to Perth.

They were still going around at Ascot when we sat down to eat and await the Lotto draw.

Various celebrations were still in progress and, in many cases, had developed into a night out at the Palace rather than a family member's back yard or living room.

The draw could easily have passed unnoticed.

I was in the process of negotiating a fresh bottle at the bar when the balls started dropping.

Jeffrey was in the middle of a discussion with Dagwood and Blondie, but punters can be relied on to carry a pen.

Both of us independently noted the numbers before a lull in the conversation allowed us to compare notes.

"There's something uncannily familiar about these eight numbers," I remarked. "Under different circumstances, I might almost be inclined to take a stroll down the road to check them out, but there's a full bottle in front of me. If I head off into the dark, some bastard might try to give me a frontal lobotomy, so I'm not going anywhere in a hurry."

Needless to add, by the time I found my way through the door, consulting the printout was the last thing on my mind.

I awoke nine hours later to the sound of someone pounding on the front door.

The pounder was, predictably, Jeffrey.

Once I'd emerged from the cave, it was time to investigate the convergence between the numbers scrawled on the beer coaster and the printout.

With that done, it was time to locate the relevant tickets from the bundle stored in the shelving.

Somewhere in the pile, there were tickets with enough correct numbers to qualify us for assorted minor prizes.

And one entry, which we found without too much difficulty, with eight out of eight.

Under normal circumstances, you might head towards the newsagent to ask for an indication of the size of the windfall.

But we'd been involved in this activity for almost eighteen months.

So we were immune to the Whoopee! Factor.

I reached for the Lotto Systems guide book, the calculator and the ballpark figure printout from the spreadsheet I'd developed to keep track of the dividends resulting from each draw.

"OK," I remarked. "We can bank on Division Four paying somewhere between forty-two and forty-eight dollars. Say forty-five. Times fifteen. That's six hundred and seventy-five. Plus Division Two a dozen times. Let's be pessimistic and go for the bottom of the range. Eight thousand times twelve's ninety-six thousand. Plus whatever Division One pays."

The Lotto authorities had designated last night a Super Draw. There was a guaranteed first division pool of twenty million dollars.

"Of course," Jeffrey pointed out, "this will turn out to be the week when they've got a record number of Division One winners."

"Doesn't matter. We know we've got a hundred grand. You never know. Not many birthdays there."

The majority of numbers were outside the range from one to twelve, and three were more than thirty-one. When this occurred, dividends tended towards the upper end of the scale.

By this stage, Jeffrey was almost finished dialling the newsagent's phone number.

"Richie, old buddy old pal old china."

He'd undoubtedly succeeded in establishing contact.

"A top of the morning to you too," he continued. "First things first. You wouldn't have received anything about winning entries in last night's Lotto? Not yet? Well, don't go shouting it from the rooftops, but I'm sure you'll be finding there's at least one. You'll let us know when you do hear? Excellent. Herston's place until the pub opens and then I think you'll find there's a small celebration in progress."

"Might be better if we could persuade him not to shout it from the rooftops," I suggested. "Might be better to let things sink in slowly unless we want every man and his dog wanting to join in the party."

When the phone rang about ten minutes later, we'd worked out a basic plan for the next couple of weeks.

With the call complete, there was an extra consideration. According to Richie, there was only one winning entry.

"If you wouldn't mind, mate," I'd asked once the news had been passed on, "since there's around twenty million involved, we'd appreciate it if you could keep it quiet for a couple of days. We're still going to be operating the same way as before. I assume you're going to be wanting the business. Cool? Yeah, well there's nothing that says lightning can't strike twice. Thanks, mate."

Turning my attention to breakfast, I considered the possibilities.

At the same time, Jeffrey entered the previous night's results in Gilhooley's machine.

Then he began generating the data for Wednesday night, which coincidentally happened to be New Year's Eve.

By the time breakfast was ready, I'd clarified my thoughts enough to start canvassing the possibilities.

"First up," I pointed out between mouthfuls of toast, fried egg, bacon and baked beans, "we're not handing that ticket in here, are we? They'll be announcing Richie sold the winning ticket, and, more than likely there'll be people guessing who he sold it to, but it's best if the ticket gets handed in in Brisbane. It'll take about six weeks before they can come through with the money, in any case."

When we'd started on the project, the first thing Jeffrey had insisted on was no link to the cards that prospective investors were being encouraged to use.

There had been difficulties with the Deputy Commissioner of Taxation at some point in the past.

"So, we drop into Which Bank on Monday and lodge the ticket there for safekeeping. Then we see if we can negotiate bridging finance to get us over the six weeks until we get the money. From there, we find a couple of excuses to get out of town. I'll need to see Bridger and see what I need to do about getting out of teaching and I guess you've washed your last dish."

"In the meantime, who really does need to know? His Lordship, for a start. He can put it around that I've been called away. Uncle Cyril's not a well man..."

"Thought he died years ago," I pointed out.

"He did, but it's not exactly general knowledge. A phone call from my sister will give the perfect excuse for handing in my notice without arousing suspicion."

"If the state cricket team needed some extra assistance, that'd give me an excuse for heading out of town. So who else needs the real story? More importantly, how do we keep the Lotto thing going while we're away? It's not like we're going to lug Gilhooley's Gadget with us..."

"Which means we're going to have to leave someone in charge here."

"And the only one we can trust," I suggested.

"Would, in the absence of Mr McNab, be that one-legged scoffing bastard. Now, we can train him to enter the results and generate the printout. You trained me, so it's not exactly rocket science."

"It'll be nicely ironic to have him administering the project while we're away."

"At least as far as generating the printout and faxing us the results. We can fill in the entries down there. At least that way if anything stuffs up it's going to be our fault."

Once the cover story had been worked out, it was time to head off for a low-key celebration.

The doors weren't open when we arrived. So we used the long-established alternative of using the door that provides access to the upstairs accommodation to beard His Lordship in his office.

"Listen," Jeffrey started as soon as we'd walked in, "what you're hearing isn't going any further. Not if you're looking to maintain a healthy cash-flow through the place."

"But..." His Lordship began.

"No buts and no maybes," Jeffrey went on. I suspected he was enjoying this. "Any word of this leaks out before we want it to and we'll be drinking at the Bowls Club. First up, you've got my notice. Effective immediately. If you ask nicely, I might finish cleaning the kitchen this afternoon. The tug boys are out, and I had to pop down to see Herston before I got it all done this morning."

"But."

"Like I said. But me no buts. Herston and I have taken out the Lotto overnight, and there are a few changes on the horizon. Now, as far as everyone is concerned, The Duchess

included, I've been called to my Uncle Cyril's death bed and I don't know when I'll be back. So you've decided I need to be replaced. Tell every bugger I'm likely to end up at the Bowls Club when I get back if they're worried about my welfare. Herston's going to be disappearing for a bit as well."

"If you can keep it under your hat, once we've got things sorted out we'll be back, larger than life and twice as dangerous. Alternatively, we could just relocate to Airlie or Mission Beach or somewhere and the publicans there can."

"I get the picture," His Lordship had surrendered to the inevitable.

"If we decide to stay in these parts, we're going to be able to look after our friends if you catch my drift. In the meantime, as far as you're concerned, I've had bad news and don't feel like socializing. Can't get onto a flight till Tuesday so you can explain the drinking that way if you like. Since it's time for you to open up, we might grab a couple of beers and disappear to the beer garden. If Cassidy wanders in, point him in our direction. Now, while you're opening up, we'll look after this esky."

A quarter of an hour later, we were in conference mode, throwing options around when Hopalong hove into view. The expression on his face suggested His Lordship was spreading the cover story.

"Sorry to hear about your uncle," was the opening remark.

"My uncle be stuffed," was the unexpected response. "Sit down, listen and remember. What you're about to hear goes no further."

"The long and short of it is it looks like we've picked up the twenty million from last night. We need to slip out of town to make a few arrangements."

"We need someone to look after things while we're gone. We could have grabbed someone else, but they're all out of town. So for the next few weeks, you're going to have a few jobs to look after."

"For which you'll be well remunerated," I pointed out. "Now here's what we're looking at."

Various individuals wandered past over the next few hours.

They might have been tempted to join us.

However, His Lordship made sure all and sundry were informed of serious news from the south, suggesting our discussions were best left uninterrupted.

By the end of the afternoon, the arrangements had been made.

Travel arrangements and financial matters would be completed in the morning. In the interval between making the bookings and the actual departure, Hopalong's training would occur.

Once we'd picked up the loot, we'd head back, basing ourselves in Airlie Beach until suitable accommodation was arranged. While that was happening, Hopalong and Captain Headrush were going to ferry us back and forth.

There would be several matters to be addressed in the morning, so, once the esky had been drained, we adjourned to Luciano's for supper. Then we wandered off towards my soon-to-be-former home, where Jeffrey planned to camp overnight.

"I could stay at the pub for the night. As long as no bugger's let the cat out of the bag things would be OK. But it's safer if I crash here. I hope Sandy won't be too put out if I use his room."

"What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over. Since he's going to be featuring in changes to the arrangements when we relocate, I don't think he'd raise any violent objections."

In the morning, once breakfast was out of the way, I sat down at the workspace and switched on the non-Lotto computer.

"Right, I know we went through all this yesterday but let's put this stuff in writing to make sure we don't miss anything. Might be important to put things in the right order. Might be tricky paying for airline tickets until we've been to see the bank, for instance."

"There are places where it wouldn't be advisable to be sighted together. If the two of us front at the bank, for instance. Get the list done, then we get them in order and work out who does what."

Once we'd brainstormed the list, the first round of leg work was best carried out by one person.

Since it included arrangements regarding my departure from the teaching profession, I was the logical choice.

"After you've seen Bridger and broken the news, you'll be on time to lob through the doors at Which Bank and inform Darby about our requirements. I'll put the other entries through at the newsagent and continue the cover story. Might head back to the Palace and help out in the kitchen until you've got that stuff sorted out. His Lordship won't object if I borrow the truck for the next round of jobs, At least if he knows what's good for him, he won't."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," I pointed out as I started dialling the number allocated to the Principal's residence.

"Hello Jim? I've got a bit of news you need to hear ASAP. Would it be OK if I called around to see you in about half an hour? An hour would be better? No worries. No, need to open your office. Holidays, remember? Catch you then."

I arrived to find Jim Bridger sitting in an armchair on the veranda.

"You're not," he started, "going to tell me you won the Lotto on the weekend, are you?"

"I am, actually, Was that a guess or has someone broken security already?"

"You wouldn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out. What else could it be? So, how much does it look like?"

"As far as we can tell, it looks like the whole twenty million. When we checked at the newsagent, Richie reckoned there was only one live ticket. We've got one, so unless they've made a mistake..."

"So what are you thinking? I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry to burn bridges."

"Depends on what I can actually do. I gather I can just give a fortnight's notice if I want to quit. They've always asked for six months notice for anything like long service. So, what are the other options?"

"There's Emergent Leave - the kind you take when you've had a death in the family, which I think could apply in this case. If we play your cards right, we can wangle leave without pay for you until you've decided you don't want to come back. You'd have to keep your Registration up to date, of course, but if you've just picked up a couple of million that won't break the bank, and if you do decide to come back, you won't have burnt any bridges."

I left with the name of a contact at Education House in my pocket.

An Emergent Leave form would be down there within a week, so I could negotiate directly with the power brokers, including, I suspected, Brutally Frank.

Still, I thought as I headed down the hill, I had three weeks before the crunch came and school resumed. I'd started on the right foot by giving them a warning of my intentions at the earliest opportunity.

As I was passing the newsagent, a voice boomed out.

"Herston, you bastard. It was you, wasn't it?"

I halted in my tracks, turned, and entered the shop.

There, large as life and almost as ugly was Dan Campbell. He was a member of the High School teaching fraternity.

"Dunno. Depends on what I'm supposed to have done."

"Richie here," Campbell explained, "has just been explaining that whoever it was that's taken out the twenty mill, it wasn't you."

I made a mental note to do something to acknowledge the attempted disinformation.

At the same time, I noted two people who'd broached the subject had made the same accusation.

"Jeffrey's already been in here to cash in a couple of tickets from Saturday night. None were worth anywhere near twenty million."

Which was true. Cashing in the minor dividends had been a part of Operation Disinformation, but Campbell was having none of it.

"On the other hand, Richie doesn't share a staff room with Sandy McNab. I do, and I've heard about the pile of entries you bastards put in every week, and when I asked about your strike rate, he reckoned it was surprisingly good."

I affirmed that, indeed, seemed to be the case.

"So I asked him a few months ago what would happen if and when you took out the big one."

"And?" I asked.

"His reply seemed to fit in with what I found when I wandered through the Palace yesterday."

I recalled sighting the gentleman in transit between the main building and the beer garden toilets during the afternoon.

"So?"

"So, in the opinion of Sandy McNab, rather than yelling it from the rooftops and hiring Albert Einstein wigs while you threw money around like confetti."

I noted the reference to a frequently discussed scenario.

"You'd be more likely to keep mum about it until you'd collected. Then you'd let the cat out of the bag. Yesterday afternoon when I walked through the pub, what did I find? You and Jeffrey in your usual spot at the bar? The spot where every bugger knows they can find you at any hour of the day or night?"

"You're exaggerating a little. We're not there twenty-four seven. There are working hours for a start."

"You don't sleep there either. But yesterday, for the first time in living memory, both of you were skulking at the arse end of the beer garden with an esky full of piss in deep conference mode with Hopalong Cassidy."

"Hardly surprising since Jeffrey's got a serious illness in the family," Richie suggested. "If it was me I wouldn't be talking about it to every Tom Dick or Harry that wandered through the bar."

"But you're not these bastards. You're normal. Well, maybe not quite. But as close as you'd expect someone silly enough to buy into a newsagency to be. So Herston, what was it?"

"Simple."

I refused to concede anything, regardless of the accuracy of his surmises.

"Jeffrey's had some bad news. I've been thinking of heading back to Brisbane. Some of the NQ kids made the state cricket team and the cash Jeffrey collected this morning will cover those expenses very nicely, thank you. I've organized Hopalong to look after things while I'm away. Like the computer stuff we use to generate the Lotto entries which Sandy's obviously told you about as well, So that's it."

"You still haven't answered the question."

Campbell wasn't giving up. I was glad his facial resemblance to a bulldog didn't extend beyond physical dimensions.

"Mate," I replied as I headed towards the door. "The first bloke I'd be talking to if we win the Lotto will be Sandy. To let him know he'll be facing a change of flatmate if he stays in accommodation. And I'd be suggesting he might consider relocating to wherever we decide to relocate to, even if he still needs to work for a living. Least I could do."

"And?"

"Since that hasn't happened, I think you can put your mind at rest."

I conveniently neglected to mention the uncertain nature of the gentleman's holiday plans. He'd advised me not to try contacting him, even in the event of the direst emergency.

"The only emergency that would be dire enough would be if something happened to my kids. Since I'll be with them most of the time, that's not going to be a consideration," had been his summary of the situation.

There was a substantial crowd gathered outside the doors when I reached the bank.

However, most of them were more interested in withdrawing cash than contacting branch manager Darby Dunning.

There was going to be a slight delay before I could see him. I was offered the option of seeing one of his underlings instead if I didn't feel like waiting.

"I'll wait, provided I can get in to see him within the next hour. I don't think he'll be too happy if he finds out I took my banking business elsewhere because I couldn't get in to see him."

"So," the girl on the information desk suggested, "I should say *you've won the Lotto or something.*"

So, despite our attempts to maintain security, that made three references to the subject in the space of forty minutes.

She was back ninety seconds later, announcing *Mr Dunning will be able to see you immediately.*

"So, David, you've won the Lotto or something, That's what Carly said when she told me you were looking for an unscheduled appointment. So which one is it? The Lotto? Or the something? I called into the newsagent at the Plaza on the way in. They were talking about the winning ticket from Saturday's Lotto being sold in Denison."

"So there's not much point in denying anything," I said, producing the ticket.

"This might best be kept somewhere secure for the time being. I see you've got the paper on your desk, so you'll be able to verify the numbers are correct. We're not too keen on publicizing the result until we've got our hands on the cash if you catch my drift. So we'd appreciate it if that news didn't travel any further. I guess there'd be plenty of financial institutions that'd like a slice of the action. Now what we're looking at."

"Will be an account separate to the one you and Jeffrey have been operating over the past few years."

"A little more than that. There's plenty in that account, but what we need right now is enough to cover us for the next few weeks. I could do with a substantial lift in the credit limit on my credit card so we can get down to Brisbane to collect the cash. We'll be only too happy to invest the money with you if you've done the right thing by us in the interim."

There were forms to be filled out and procedures to be followed before the other arrangements could be completed.

Still, it took virtually no time at all to boost the limit on my credit card. I was promised a visit later in the afternoon with all the paperwork that needed to be signed.

With that out of the way, I headed to the travel agency, emerging twenty minutes later with two one-way tickets from Proserpine Airport to Brisbane on Tuesday afternoon.

We'd get down there on the airport shuttle bus, and those details had also been taken care of.

By this time, it was eleven. I was undecided whether to head homewards and go to ground for the rest of the day or maintain something resembling the regular day to day routine.

Considering earlier comments, I realized the familiar routine might do something to quell the rising wave of interest in our financial affairs.

I had a ready-made cover story to cover my impending absence from town, so I headed for the pub. The Duchess greeted me as I made my way into the corner bar.

There were the usual scattered array of barflies in the public bar, but my favourite spot was vacant.

"So," the Duchess asked as a beer appeared in front of me. "How does it feel to be a multimillionaire?"

"Dunno," I replied.

I wouldn't *actually* know until I had my share of the dividend in cold hard cash.

"Come off it." She entered theatrical mode, declaiming for the edification of the public bar. "Cut out the bullshit, Herston. You're off to Brisbane tomorrow, and Jeffrey's heading south as well. Everyone around town wants to know who took out the Lotto dividend and everyone I know has you and Jeffrey pencilled in as odds-on favourites."

"Makes a change. I thought the general opinion was the two of us were mad."

"Which is true. No doubt about it, and you're mad if you reckon anyone's going to swallow this bullshit story you're putting around."

"Hang on. How about taking a few minor considerations into account before you go jumping to any conclusions?"

By now, the full and frank exchange of views had the full and undivided attention of the public bar.

This was, I decided, an ideal opportunity for Operation Obscure-the-Real-Facts-Without-Telling-An-Actual-Lie.

"Where did I go for the first part of the holidays? A cricket carnival in Toowoomba? You were talking about how cold the place gets. Reckoned I'd come back singing in the soprano section of the brass monkey choir. Even if it was December. If you recall, I came back pointing out we'd missed a place in the final by that much."

I indicated a suitable interval between my fingers.

"And, if you recall, I countered suggestions I was exaggerating by pointing out that we ended up with three kids in the Queensland team. The national challenge starts in Brisbane on Friday."

All of which was, conveniently, true.

"I haven't been to one of these national challenges before. They only get to Brisbane every four or five years. By the time I get back here just before Christmas, I've usually got just enough left from the holiday pay to tide me over till school goes back. Correct? Check the subs book for the past couple of years 'round mid-January if you don't remember."

By this stage, the Duchess's pose had morphed into a sceptical onlooker weighing the evidence. It seemed my explanation wasn't generating instant disbelief.

"So when we had a pickup on Saturday night, it made me able to do something I hadn't been able to do before. Unless I'm very much mistaken, Jeffrey fronted the newsagent to cash in a ticket worth a tad over four grand. I reckon my share might as well go into an airfare. We've got three NQ kids in what looks like a strong Queensland team. They're a good chance to win the national title again. For the first time, I can afford to go. What do you reckon I'm going to do?"

As I paused, I sensed someone approaching from the general direction of the kitchen. I turned.

Jeffrey, sporting a cabbage leaf on his head, was approaching, brandishing a piece of paper.

"Got anything you want to add to the shopping list?" he asked.

The question was directed to the Duchess rather than the lesser mortals nearby.

For my benefit, he turned to advise the visit to the newsagent hadn't been totally successful since the amount on the ticket was more than Richie's cash reserves could cover.

"Asked me if I would take a cheque," he continued as the Duchess studied the shopping list. "Under normal circumstances, with the money going into the slush fund I would've. But you want two grand for the cricket trip, and I need about the same to get me to Uncle Cyril, so he asked me to drop back on the grocery run when he'd be able to give it to me in cash. If you want to come along for the ride, I can drop you at your place after. Give you time to pack."

"You're not," the Duchess instructed, "leaving here and going about in public with that on your head."

While perfectly acceptable in the kitchen, Jeffrey's version of the cabbage tree hat did not feature on this year's version of what the best-dressed dishwashers are wearing.

"And kidney beans on this. I want to do a Mexican thing later on this week. Dried, not canned."

The shopping list was handed back.

"Speaking of which," Jeffrey rejoined, "you might be needing to call the ambulance. Remember half an hour or so when that song about not putting beans in your ears was on the radio? You told Brendon not to pay attention. If he wants to put beans in his ears, you said, he should. So he did."

Brendon was the apprentice chef in the kitchen. Self-restraint was not his strong point.

"Been spending the last half hour trying to get them out with a toothpick," Jeffrey went on. "All he seems to have managed to do is push them further in. Finished? Then we're off like granny's knickers."

The latter remark referred to the empty stubby in front of me, signalling an excuse for departure.

Once we were safely on the road, I handed over an air ticket and reported on the morning's events.

"Darby'll be round at my place between two and three this arvo," I concluded. "According to him, the way to go was to transfer ten grand from the slush fund to a new account linked to a couple of debit cards. Like credit cards, but the money comes out of an account instead of going on the never-never. We can put it back into the slush fund once we've got the payout. He'll have all the stuff that needs to be signed then. Reckons we'll be able to pick up the debit cards in Brisbane while we're down there."

On Conception, Characterization and Consistency

Since this story took around twenty years to develop from a vague idea to a complete work of fiction, it's hardly surprising to find things that don't add up.

For example, no one had heard of the internet when I started on the story.

If they existed at all, mobile phones were regarded as yuppie toys rather than the almost ubiquitous items they are today.

Various parts of this story were written at different times over twenty years.

It should not be surprising to find the odd inconsistency in the text.

A nit-picker might, for example, take issue with the sires of a specific string of racehorses.

Still, those were moderately successful sires when that part was being composed, so there they are.

The story originates from a series of conversations in the corner bar at the Grandview.

Anyone familiar with my social circle at the time may be able to identify several characters in the story.

Obviously, Gordon Jeffrey equates pretty well to the late John Lester. David Herston shares interests and character traits with the author.

There are reasonably obvious real-life equivalents for Hopalong Cassidy, Sandy McNab, His Lordship and The Duchess, Dagwood and Blondie and various other characters scattered through the narrative.

How those characters are portrayed reflects an entirely fictional plotline's needs.

Conversations about winning the Lotto were commonplace in that particular environment.

The means through which it happens in the plotline was one that I floated as a possibility at the time.

A lack of computer programming skills stopped that concept in its tracks. Still, the idea was there and started me wondering what would happen if such a mechanism had paid off.

Those thoughts led to a scenario that owes a great deal to the Blandings novels of P.G. Wodehouse.

Additional alcoholic elements come from a series of paperback titles, **MASH Goes To (Insert Exotic Location Here)**, which found their way into my library during the seventies.

Having worked out a basic premise, fleshing things out by turning to familiar figures would probably be no great surprise.

In most cases, their roles are incidental to the unfolding narrative.

However, I should note some significant departures from anything resembling reality.

Given the two blokes with a pile of money scenario, it's easy to develop two or more parties interested in getting a share of it.

In this case, a mother and daughter are looking at a double wedding.

In a future instalment, it could be a pair of lesbians intending to take over The Crossroads and establish a wymmins cooperative.

They would look to expropriate a large part of the Jeffrey/Herston fortune to fund the enterprise.

Some characters who turn up along the way are inserted to see what happens.

For example, the crew from the tug boat get far more coverage than they need. However, they were part of some intrigues I'd pencilled in.

At one point, I thought that Jeffrey might avoid the wrath of a vengeful Olga by escaping to sea as an unofficial passenger on a tug.

They also provide an excuse for Jeffrey to overhear certain confidences.

Sascha and The Butch, the duo that plays in the Palace Beer Garden, have real-life models.

To my knowledge, those models have never actually performed together.

A possible Herston-Sascha-Boris The Backdooring Bastard tussle for Bernelle's affections was shelved so Boris could host a sea-borne party (because someone needed to).

Boris, the Backdooring Bastard, was initially meant to add three-way intrigue to the musical beds' side of things.

The inspiration for the original version was a character from the **MASH Goes To** books.

A Russian opera singer, Boris Alexandrovitch Korsky-Rimsakov, is a backdooring bastard of the first, second, and possibly third water.

I envisaged an imposing bearded figure with a rich baritone and an unctuous manner that would almost cause women's underwear to slide themselves down.

I was slightly bemused when an acquaintance claimed the character was based on him.

He did not appear to have any difficulty with that, so the character changed slightly to fit that supposition.

Of course, he may have changed his mind over the intervening period. If that is the case, those details will disappear, and he'll be replaced by someone entirely different.

Readers may well have suspicions about Olga and Bernelle's identities. I can categorically state that there aren't any, at least not in a mother-and-daughter combination.

You could find the prototype for Bernelle in a couple of blonde students in Hughesy's classes over the years.

Anyone looking for an actual model should start with a Jean Kittson character from the mid-eighties' ***The Big Gig***.

Candida has morphed into someone with a fair resemblance to a Lara Bingle (and not necessarily *the* Lara Bingle).

If any of my ex-students now resemble that amalgam, I'd like to have met them around thirty years ago.

To the best of my knowledge or recollection, Olga is entirely fictional.

The northern European extraction throws in the genetic material that produces the daughter.

It also allows the daughter to change her name by deed poll from Bernelle Butler to Marilyn Mundsén.

Mundsén is Mum's maiden name. Echoes of Hollywood identities would be a marketing tool for an emerging media personality.

I also found echoes of Marilyn Manson amusing.

Then there are the Terrible Twins.

As players in a musical bed tug of war, they needed an occupation that would allow them to appear and disappear from the stage.

The mid-week publication schedule of the local paper worked nicely.

They needed to work together, and regular shift work didn't quite fit with its week-by-week schedule.

The Twins' journalistic role could have added another plotline to the intrigue.

While that didn't turn up this time, it's always a possibility in a sequel.

It always helps to have a semi-domesticated journo hanging around a fictional environment.

Two would be even better.

Make them female, with a taste for the high life, and the possibilities open up further.

The reader may also come up with a model for D'Artagnan, and the reader would probably be wrong.

He is an amalgam of various professional kitchen operatives I've known with personality traits boosted to the particular situations' requirements.

A dogmatic approach to the culinary arts would bring him into frequent conflict with an assertive supervisor with her own version of those issues and an inclination towards an eclectic or fusion cuisine.

Making him a French chef and giving him three apprentices in the kitchen bring the Three Musketeer references.

It may also open opportunities for various subplots in subsequent instalments.

There's a reasonably apparent real-life model for Gilhooley.

However, he never mastered the art of computer programming to the best of my knowledge.

His wife was the long-suffering, almost diametrical opposite of the character who appears here as The Iron Maiden.

That character needed to be a shift worker so Gilhooley could slip surreptitiously back into town in daylight hours without fear of being detected.

The Iron Maiden side also offered possibilities to complicate the plotline, which was unnecessary this time.

Forensic accountants working through Gilhooley's financial records at her behest is a highly likely element in any sequel to this effort.

Anyone familiar with the times may identify a prototype for Scott Waddington.

The character who appears here combines traits of four or five would-be high-profile punters I have known in a body large enough to incorporate at least three of them.

His entirely fictional relocation to Sydney provides a source for a used red Mercedes convertible who could accompany our protagonists to the races at Randwick.

Wally Matthews, the jockey, is an incidental character who needed a name.

Little Tony, the Mafia man, is an imaginary construct. I based him on an account by a car salesman who had done a little commission betting for a Townsville businessman.

The latter was part of the template from which Scott Waddington was cut. However, Waddles has a much more substantial physiognomy.

Throughout the story, the reader will encounter references to several of Herston's erstwhile cricket acquaintances, convenient ways of explaining things away and resolving side issues.

I've borrowed from real, life and modified it to fit whatever the circumstances require in such cases.

The two cricket teams have the odd real-life equivalent but have undergone several transformations.

Like all the major elements of the plot line, the events within the game are entirely fictional.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ian Hughes is a retired primary school teacher who resides in Bowen, North Queensland. This work, set in a fictional *almost Bowen* in roughly the same geographic location as his adopted home town, is his first novel.

