

A Bout of Mortality

'The child is the father of the man'

William Wordsworth

Tom Dooley feared that the bastardry of his life would catch him some time. He was born over a grave. We all are.

He showed his future colours from his first days of school. Artful dodger is an apt description of young Tom. He wheedled someone else to do whatever he didn't want to do. He would slink under a desk instead of helping the other kids tidy up after craft. If the teacher caught him at it, his reply was always that he was grabbing craft scraps from under there. In fact, there was nothing ever under the desks. Craft was always done at the craft table.

He was last in line in the emu parade that picked up playground rubbish. He hardly picked up anything. Why would you when the other kids were happy to do it all? Especially if you whimpered. He hid his cunning nature by looking adults in the eye, charming them with bright eyes and a broad smile, innocence itself.

If he were Buddhist, there would be no future for him. He had never practiced a single step on the middle path to nirvana. He bled others for his own gain.

As a Hindu, the bad karma in his circle of life would bring him back as a grub. Hindus conceive of time as a circle. You can rotate

it at any time to explore the present, unencumbered by the future or the past. This story dwells in the mind, its remembering fluid, its telling just another hour on the clock. If at times the result appears incongruous, reposition yourself wherever and accept the lightheartedness of it all. Just shift yourself around your mental time dial to make it work. After all, we are not bothered that electrons can't have a definite position and direction of motion at the same time.

Tom's Christian self would have only a slim hope of reaching the afterlife, more likely burn in hell. What happens to a total heathen like Tom? He too had to put his foot somewhere, this way or that, any way but not no way, surely. Redemption? Or resignation? Or condemnation? Tom was caught. How could he repay what he had borrowed from his future?

We are all born over our graves. Our start and finish lines are all in the same place. How many people know that? It's what happens in between birth and death that matters. Nobody fears that previous time and place where you hovered for an eternity. Your parents released you from that one through their act of love. You did the same for your kids. Still, we fear the next eternity, quite forgetting that we had survived a previous one. Rituals, superstitions, and religions have been invented to make the prospect – dare one say it – inviting?

What were Tom's debts to society? It was smooth if devious sailing until he was thirteen. Then a shadow sailed over his moon. The devil poked him with his pitchfork. Yesterday's rainbow bird turned into a raven. Tom was done. Hang down your head, Tom Dooley.

Easy Pickings

Eva Rumford was a sweet young thing. Tom Dooley was a handsome boy, charming to a fault. Life lit the fuse to their juvenile hormones, right on cue. Their age of innocence was drawing to a close. They started to know everything. In their pubescent mindsets, their parents started to know less and less.

No jukebox played any danger signal inside their 1950s heads. Maybe only the top eight hits registered. And then Tom would take his lawnmowing money down to the record shop with Eva. Together they would flick along the vinyl offerings. It was quick and easy, as the discs were arranged in sections by genre and alphabet. The music their parents listened to was in fuddy duddy corner, away from pop. Rock and roll came along with Bill Haley. Crooners like Frank Sinatra, jazz, classical – yuk.

Big was better, but Tom could never afford full-sized albums. Too much diameter, too, for that old record player of his. For Tom, those 45s were more affordable in summer. That was busy season for the lawnmower. Tom could even afford to shout Eva a spider drink in the Greek café. The best was creaming soda with a scoop of vanilla ice cream on top and raspberry flavour concentrate spilled over. Once halfway, the drink straw mashed what was left. That bubbling pink was perfect to relish off a long-handled spoon. Then it was off to the record shop.

Kids will be kids. Boys, feet laden with mysterious teenage smell-hormone, were the worst. Their shoes had to live outdoors when not on feet. Mums saw to that. Mums were not to be messed

with. Boys were loud, pushy, strong enough to hurt, weak enough to avoid older boys. Not wise enough to learn the obvious. Some hung out with girls, like Tom did. Most hung out in obnoxious boy gangs. Tom also hung out with boys who swaggered just as he did. They egged each other on, and society did not always agree with the outcome. Neither did parents and police. It seems nothing ever changes. We see that this is still so, a quarter way through century twenty-one.

One of Tom's swagger pals had lots of 45s at home. He didn't even mow lawns or wash cars or do a paper run. What the? Eddie Murray just gave a sly wink. Tom's jealousy knew no bounds. He decided to follow Eddie's example.

Eva was his first recruit. She swished into the long seat at the Greek cafe, backing on another such bench, separated from it by a high, brown, polished plywood panel, with big tables completing the dining settings. The booths stretched the length of the sidewall, punctuated by the side entrance. Eva's swish came from her long white coat, the one with the big inside pocket. She had sewn that herself. The creaming soda spider never tasted so good. The sugar hit was good for bravery and bravado as well.

Tom selected the fast-rising number seven from the top eight hits, and took it to the counter, mower money in hand. The till was at right angles to the counter. That way there was some room on the counter to place purchases. That counter was not very big. Neither was the record shop. The distraction was complete. Eva joined Tom to complete his transaction. They walked out, Eva with a flat reinforcement where the secret pocket was. When they got to the park, Tom invited Eva over to listen to the top of the pops that came out of that pocket.

A long journey starts with the first step. For Tom, not for Eva. She stopped after a few such expeditions, as her upbringing caught up with her. The thrill was not strong enough to overcome the guilt.

Grandparents learn so much from their kids. When the next generation comes into their purview, grandpa knows what that child will be like in later life. Grandma does even better with her female intuition. Mum and dad not so much. They are too busy acquiring their own knowledge about human pups. The grandparents judged correctly that Eva had admirable qualities of honesty and a sense of fairness. Her face was an open book. It lit up like a beacon with anger or surprise or confidence or disappointment or embarrassment. Other kids have antennae too, and they were pulled into Eva's orbit because of the empathy that she exuded.

Small wonder then that Tom's behaviour generated sufficient velocity to escape from Eva's gravity. He was so self-centred that he never noticed that he was being flung into outer space. His triumph was, 'Always get someone else to do your dirty work for you.' That became his mantra of life. No use advising him to listen to his conscience. His inner voice was an arsehole. That rubber never hit the road. If ever he wrestled with his conscience, and that's doubtful, he never lost. His life was never ravished by virtue. He talked so much he could break an auctioneer.

As a baby he must have been rocked all wrongly, his potty training all askew, perhaps even dropped on his head.

Horse Talk

*'There was movement at the station,
For the word had passed around
That the colt from Old Regret had got away
And joined the wild bush horses – he was worth a thousand pounds,
So all the cracks had gathered to the fray.'*

Banjo Paterson

Today's savvy youth could easily date Martin O'Hanlon without carbon dating: he ate his meals without first photographing them on a mobile. And by the clothes that he wore every day. Who's that western dude then? Long and lean, his face hide tanned by too much sun, he rocked as he walked with bowlegs that you could drive a horse through. That is how he got them in the first place, or should that be, over years astride one. Spurs tinkled in his head, his tinnitus. He snuffled as he ate, like the beasts he loved so.

On the rare occasions that a roll-your-own durry did not droop from his lips, as he rocked evenings to 'n' fro on his chair suspended on arcs, there was an inadvertent nostril whistle and a snail trail of chin dribble. He wore lazy stubble before it became fashionable. Unruly nose hairs vibrated in sympathy and tickled. From time to time he had to scratch them. Momentarily that put paid to the whistle that his wife hated so. As did she his tobacco

breath and brown bent teeth. She seemed not bothered as Martin got sick. And sicker.

Jennifer née Spring wondered what in the world had she been thinking that 1959 spring day in Jindabyne, when she said, 'I do.' She mused that she must have thought that any man who loved horses must love her the same. Any man who whispered sweet nothings in a horse's ear, patted it lovingly, fed it daily with nothing but the best, scraped the post-hosing warm water off it even when it had not been ridden that day, made sure its feet were shod with the best shoes that farrier kingdom could produce, that called in the equine tooth fairy twice a year just to make sure, such a man would love her too. That was then. This was now.

She had adored horses. Then. Not now; they were too much competition. It didn't take long for her to realise that after the horse, there was no love left over for her. On the contrary, he expected to be treated like he treated his horses. And had made it perfectly clear that the horse came first, that she was last in a very big horse field, if she were a horse. Which she wasn't. That made her all but invisible to him. He did look good on a horse's back. Upright he sat astride his mount as he rode it like a ramrod. But his grace dismounted at workday's end, posture compromised by a stoop. With him around, the house was steeped in horse dung smell.

She snapped into his clear focus for any perceived mistake: eggs not fried just so, the bacon not crackling crisp enough at the rind, any hint of cancer-inducing burn on his toast, and coffee in his favourite mug at not precise steaming hot. Two sugars, and served at exactly five a.m.. After all, there was a lot of horse-whispering to do that day.

About eight years into this match made in hell, Jen went to Jindabyne's only solicitor, Lasseter & Co. She stated her business. Harry L raised his shaggy, unruly, over-eighty-year-old right eyebrow, revealing a pale blue, intelligent, not unfriendly,

rheumy eye. The other eye was all but hidden by a drooping, uncouth, left side, ungroomed brow mess. He was still spry. He sat down to pee but still was able to stand on one leg to pull on his underpants. Weekends he hiked the bush, shorter tramping now than before.

Without comment Harry set about fulfilling her request. Business not so brisk, he volunteered to do it on the spot. Jen watched his splotchy, black-veined, long-fingered, nail-manicured hands write out a proforma for her, sign and stamp it. 'There, it's done.'

Job over, he let his right eyebrow migrate south, back into place, and his head resumed the look of a walrus half asleep on some rocky winter beach, with a droopy moustache.

Jen had a short chat with the receptionist at front office on the way out, paid, and threw the receipt into the bin in the street. Skiing would soon change that hamlet forever. She extracted the precious document and burned its Lasseter envelope in the fireplace. She put the form in a plain envelope with her birth certificate and ditto marriage, and hid it in her secret place. She didn't want Martin to see that signed and Lasseter-sealed document with its legal title, 'Change of Name by Deed Poll'. It requested a change to Mary Flamboya. He had noted her birth certificate details. It was a bit unusual, but Harry's lips were sealed.

Martin had enjoyed his wedded bliss for one half-score years – felt like of a full score to Jen – when Martin met Eva Rumford's former classmate Tom Dooley. It was a fitting match, shifty, swaggering Tom up to his amoral tricks, and the bow-legged man from Snowy River, well-honed in selling dodgy horses. It did not matter that they were not even his own. He never told Jen that.

She found out about that *officially* when the Jindabyne constabulary came calling in early 1969. It did not come as a surprise; she already suspected, but had said nothing, had known

nothing, had feigned surprise, and was not called as a witness at Martin's horse thief trial. Banjo could well have had a Tom and Martin in mind as he penned his iconic poems about the goings-on in the bush.

Martin O'Hanlon got six months at Her Majesty's pleasure in the Cooma lockup, good-behavioured after four. Tom Dooley got none. He made sure that he had hired someone else to do his dirty work. Eddie Murray had taken the place of Tom's first apprentice, the beautiful Eva Rumford, from all those years ago. Get others to do your dirty work.

For Jen that sentence was manna from heaven. She was nobody's servant now. Freed slave. What's the feminine of freeman? She was clever too, though Martin was too thick to know that. Horses had drugged and stupefied his any empathy toward fellow man. Closest woman too. By the time he got out, she would be gone. She let it be known she was off to Bega to stay with an aunt.

She packed a big case with clothing essentials. That still left a couple of drawers full of tired, jaded garments fit for no woman. There was no lace, nothing pretty, nothing for best, no hat, only a beanie minus its pompom. Not that the big case contents were much better.

Quickly she took one last cruise around the stables, the tool shed, the tack room, the feed shed. At the back of the round yard, the farther side from the road, Jen absently picked up a notebook, black, covered in sawdust and dried horse dribble. She slapped it against her bum on the way back to the house. It too went into her shoulder bag, her survival kit, full of things that menfolk do not know and wives do not tell. In the haste of it all, 'rummage bag' would be a better description. Over the coming months, essentials rose to the surface, and things that might come in handy one day gradually sank, the notebook with them.

She had already gotten rid of their stock of horses at heavily bargained prices. Cash only. No duplicates of written receipts.

No names and addresses. There was no record left behind to show that the horses had even been sold. Maybe they had just run away to the bush brumby herds from whence they had come. Bugger Martin, he would just have to go and catch some more once he got out.

Jen stuffed the shoulder bag with crisp new bank notes, lots of them. As she had never received any mail, there was no address of hers to cancel at the Post Office. No forwarding address. No bank account to close. Martin had been the dole-master. There were no tracks of hers anywhere. The only papers she packed along with the dollars with Caroline Chisholm's head on them were in her plain envelope. She would need those for divorce proceedings (if necessary) and name change (tick).

She also very carefully packed a sizeable suede leather pouch with draw strings, into that shoulder bag. It held quite a collection of her grandmother's jewels, bequeathed to her. Grandma came from a wealthy grazing family, and Mum had said that these stones are your security if you ever need to call on them. Never ever tell anyone you have them. They are your business.

Jen pictured Martin splashing cold water on his face, shaving it every once in a while, and then cooking breakfast for himself and brewing coffee, precise specifications forgotten. Unable to blame anyone else, he would just have to eat his own fare, without demur, without complaint, without retribution, though he would know that he would never qualify for a job at any café in town. She smiled to herself and hoped that Martin would still have enough energy left to go cuddle his horse.