

## **AWAY**

*Story from 'Away and Other Stories':*

**LEIGH SWINBOURNE**

Balmoral Beach. How could she forget? Someone had just opened a door in her mind. The island, the boats, the beautiful people, but above all the light. What was the word Spencer had used, perhaps coined? 'Glyster'. And what was the line? She had said to James, in all seriousness, stroking the sweat pooled on his breastbone, close to a third false nipple she loved to kiss: 'The greatest pleasures in my life to date have not come from sex or music, but from poetry'. Why did that sound so undergraduate? Poetry, another closed door, had not read a poem since she couldn't remember when. And in all likelihood would not pick it up again, or any serious reading, until she was a toothless crone. An old gummy shark. *'Hot Titans beames, which then did glyster fayre'*. Sydney. Her youth. Another Stephanie, Connell not Whitehouse. Had it been so long ago? No. A decade.

When she had been a beautiful person, and all that implied. Which was, she supposed, the weight of a certain set of expectations: the lifestyle to be lived, and the wherewithal to make it happen. She had failed them, these sleek bronzed moneyed divines. Not that she'd ever really felt like one of them (maybe that was the trick). Yes, she had bid them all fond farewell and descended to earth, by necessity, but also by choice. She gazed at the scene now as though it were a movie screen, feeling no connection, and curiously, no envy. One last sip, her coffee was finished. Time to pay-up and piss-off, collect her ditzzy little red valise, and stroll up the hill to James' and Denise's, where no doubt everything would be in full swing.

Toil up the hill more like. Little wonder they all had a view. She felt like a child trailing a toy as she passed these serried forbidding adult abodes, glass

and concrete, serious money, until she stood apprehensively before one she remembered only too well, despite being like all the others, 'modern Roman', a big box with pilasters, but elegant nevertheless. Back in Hobart she owned a fine freestanding weatherboard with a backyard into which she could easily fit this townhouse which she would never ever be able to afford. Once you cut your ties with this, forget it.

She was steeling herself to knock, when in anticipation the oversized front-door was swung open by Peter, James' older brother, whom she had also totally forgotten, but now dimly recalled that at one stage had also fancied. Although looking at him how, she couldn't imagine why.

'Steph! Amazing! Great! I had no idea! You look totally fabulous!'

He was pissed, lucky bugger. And still he recognised her; that was good. In fact she could drink a bit, she was only catching a damn plane after all. Perhaps she should have picked up a bottle, but then what the hell would you buy for this lot? Back home she generally made do with chateau cardboard. Vince, her husband, didn't drink. ('Since when is water not a drink?')

Two brothers, but they were so different, the products of dissimilar parents she was recalling. Peter was blonde and phlegmatic, a big baby, he'd put on a ton of weight, careful, deliberate. What was he? An engineer, that's right. Had to be married by now, plus kids. Whereas James was dark and quicksilver, easy-going, although with an occasionally violent temper. She tried to look past Peter to catch sight of him.

'What's with the suitcase? You moving in?'

Ouch! But he couldn't possibly know. Or could he?

'In transit. I have an uncle in Penrith who's just retired and hired me to help him out with his papers. I'm on my way back home. I have a taxi booked in an hour. Just got wind of this at the last moment. Good chance to catch up with a few bods.'

'Hey, you should have extended. It's been years.'

'Couldn't manage it.'

'Anyway, fantastic to see you! Give us a kiss. Can't believe it. Tuck that over here and come in. What's your poison?'

'A still white would be fine.'

She stepped tentatively onto the marble flagstones. The party was down the end of the hallway. No-one else had noticed her yet. Suddenly she couldn't face them.

'Peter, I'll just duck up to the loo. Be back in a tick.'

'I'll have your drink.'

'Thanks.'

She examined herself in the designer mirror. Looked fine. Didn't need to pee. Everything's OK, just try and take it easy. She gulped down a glass of water, and as she was leaving the bathroom, there it was, just across the corridor, the door slightly ajar, the bed, the plain innocent queen-size bed where she'd made wild passionate love, had wild passionate sex rather, with her best friend's husband, not once, not twice, but God only knows. Not such an innocent bed. Don't blame the bed Steph.

Fascinated, she crept into the room. A neat functional space, a few cosmetics, uncreased Penguin Classic, Business Review Weekly, but it was not so difficult for her to re-conjure the images. His long lean body.

The smell. Let's not go there. She remembered how at Jacobson's, at odd moments of intense stress, she'd imagined putting his cock in her mouth, once very vividly during a particularly fraught settlement.

This was before it actually happened, when it was him that did her over like a thorough pro. Even while she was abandoning herself, throwing herself into the role, there was a hollow forming in her heart.

She wasn't special like he'd led her to believe, like she'd led herself to believe, he'd done this before with other women, regularly, knew the rigmarole down pat. She'd then returned to the scene of the crime, like a typical criminal, and also the crime itself, to try and deal with the shock of it, how all the tangle in her mind about him leaving Denise and what that would mean for everyone, actually meant nothing. And then he became a drug, an anodyne. Then finally she couldn't take it anymore, and Denise surely had to find out sooner or later.

Peter was dutifully waiting at the foot of the stairs.

'Thanks, I think I need this.'

She did. It tasted good, really good. Chateau cardboard was chateau cardboard. It would either help her relax or put her further on edge, but either way it would get her through the next hour. Peter watched her closely, then took a long reciprocal swig of his red.

'So,' he said, 'how's life in Tassie? Married with kids?'

Then, standing somewhat formally in the lobby, or whatever the hell it was, Stephanie and this man she could hardly remember, in whom she had not the remotest interest, proceeded to have a detailed, lengthy conversation about spouses and children and houses and schooling of a kind that would have bored her utterly ten years back but which she actually found

quite absorbing. They did run out after a while, probably just as well she considered, and then he ushered her down the hall to the lip of the waiting cauldron.

‘Stephanie Connell! Ohmahgahd!’

Valley-speak. You didn’t hear it in Hobart. This was, who, Sally Miller, on whom Father Time had also made his mark. A chain smoker, OK it kept the figure down, but it wrecked your skin, and then sometime down the track it killed you. Not worth it. Better off with the booze. They’d gone through Law School together, but she looked six, seven years older easily. Of course she worked harder too, much harder. Stunning dress though, that’s what it could get you.

‘...but aren’t they all bogans down there dahling? Don’t know how you can stand it, and the quiet, although somebody told me you have one hunk of a husband.’

The smoke from Sally’s menthol was making her eyes smart. Where was James? There! As soon as she spied him, he looked across and winked. He’d always been psychic. Why he was such a good trader. What was Sally babbling about? She tried to focus.

‘...and then he just strolled out. Left all his gear. Didn’t give a shit. So if anyone needs some barbells and old Chuck Norris D.V.D.s. Jesus!’

‘Excuse me Sally. Better say hi to the host.’

Beard the lion in his den or face the music or whatever.

‘Steph! Great you could make it!’

A full juicy one on the lips. He remembered, no matter how many there’d been in between. Realistically, quite a few.

'You're looking good. Same as ever.'

Glad-handling, but she had taken the trouble to keep her figure after both kids, all that pelvic floor folderol, no slacking back into tracky-dacks, although God knows she'd been tempted. Looking good. Yep.

So was he. Actually, if anything, he looked better. Figure slim, face unlined (fucking men), and now a lick of grey about the temples to add that essential touch of gravitas, dignitas, some shit. Twelve hour days must agree with him, which wouldn't surprise her. They certainly hadn't agreed with her, she remembered how incredibly wasted she was by the weekend, wondering how she'd ever manage to stagger into the office Monday to face another five sometimes six high-octane days of it. Resisting the temptation to hit the bottle, and worse. Well, James had been worse. Wage slave, they took their pound of flesh, but they paid. The Faustian pact. But she couldn't hack it. You needed more than brains and ambition, you needed the constitution of an Olympian, mental and physical. So she'd taken the money and run, all the way back to where she'd sworn blind she'd never return.

'So what have you been doing for ten years?'

Good question. Well, firstly she had forced herself to chase up the somewhat pathetically grateful schoolboy sweetheart, whose letters she had not answered, and then settled for the duller doable job, in time living just for the family like all the other mugs. Making the family, actually, although childbirth for her had been surprisingly, relatively, easy. Young kids were demanding and difficult, sure, but nothing like wage-slave. And with Vince, the incredible rock he'd always been and always would be, nothing could go wrong, ever. Except maybe her.

What if they were alone now, her and James? What if they were alone and he was touching her? Her glass was empty. That was quick. He'd been

a bit more thorough with his touching than other men, perhaps a bit too thorough. But it had only worried her in retrospect.

'Here, try some of this.'

Oh she'd tried it alright. Bitten the fruit and ...

'Thanks.'

Christ, this wine...

'Family life must agree with you. You're still missed up here you know,'

'I would've thought by now I'd be totally forgotten.'

'Not at all. I must get around to Hobart some time. Find an excuse. What's life like down there?'

'No, you tell me what life's like up here. What have you and Denise been up to recently.' Mention Denise. Remind herself.

'Well, recently, let's see ...'

And as he talked it all came back to her, swept over her like a drug rush, the life without kids and with disposable income, with all the varied opportunities for self-indulgence and enjoyment, self-improvement too: the cutting-edge films and theatre, the blockbuster art exhibitions, the glamorous opera, the fabulous visiting artists, the international shows, the read-about restaurants, the parties, the gossip, the high-blown social and political scandals and dramas of a big metropolitan centre, somewhere that mattered, somewhere important. What had Keating said? 'If you're not in Sydney, you're kidding'. Sydney or the bush. She'd chosen the bush, and as she sipped the wine, felt the bustle, took in the vibe, and a cigarette from Sally, let the menthol and nicotine drift to her head (she couldn't remember the last time) with the alcohol and everything else, the bush was looking pretty drab and grey.

Then all at once she was having the time of her life, right in the thick of it, laughing, jabbering on like a maniac, the old gang, how had she done without them? Yeah, the old gang. Fantastic. And at the centre of it all, radiating charisma like a Medici Prince at his court: James. One of those types that never respected personal space, put his face too close, you either stepped back or your took it in. What was the old song? 'Too close for comfort'.

'You know, Steph. We've got to get you back here...'

This was Denise, of all people. Although she had been her best friend. At one time.

'James could make a few calls, couldn't you darls. We'd get you set up again. No worries. I'm sure Jacobsen's would have you back in a flash. Good job, great place. How would your husband take it?'

Not well. Not an option.

'Vince has never lived out of Tassie. His whole extended family is there. As, I've got to say, is mine. It's totally different.' To put it mildly.

'Don't you want to come back?'

This was James. Too close for comfort.

Just now, right now, she did, she really did. She was glowing with it, like yellow-cake. All this stuff she'd thought she'd got out of her system, eons ago. Come on Steph. Wake up. You went through this shit a million times and every time came up with the same equation. Same answer that is. But from here the answer wasn't looking like a solution. So what was. Life is bullshit. Vince, your model new-age male, they didn't come any nicer, and also pretty easy on the eye. Stocky country good looks, even a cowlick. She was the envy of her female colleagues. She had it all. What was wrong with her? Why didn't Vince attract her as much as James? The whiff of danger, of risk? The excitement of transgression?

But if she were ever settled with him that would disappear, maybe replaced by desperation as to what he was actually up to. Did Denise ever suspect? Had she made a bargain with herself? She knew he'd never leave her. Which Stephanie had cottoned onto pretty quickly ten years back.

But forget about James. Maybe she could do it anyway. Maybe it was possible. Alright, they couldn't afford a house up here. No-one could. But a nice unit like this? Sure, probably, in time. The kids would think it was a buzz. It was a buzz. Alright, Vince had never been out of Tassie but he could adjust, make new friends. He was such an easy-going guy. And when the kids got their degrees, which admittedly was a long time off, they could find themselves good professional jobs without moving away. Yes, maybe it was possible. A few phone calls Denise had said. James the operator.

Her mobile was jingling inanely. People grabbed for their hips and handbags but she knew it was hers. Midnight had arrived. Her coach-soon-to-be-a-pumpkin was due.

'That's me folks. Gotta go.'

Huge collective sigh of disappointment. James came right up to her. Aftershave and fresh sweat. A Proustian time-bomb.

'Delay your flight,' he said sotto voce, and shielding other eyes with his body pressed a note into her hand, which automatically curled round it, despite her shock.

'I've got to take this flight James. Vince and the kids will be waiting at the other end.'

'Your uncle in Penrith needs you a little longer. It's not such a big deal, surely.'

'I'm taking that taxi.'

'Take the taxi. Read my note. You'll have plenty of time at the airport to think it over.'

Kisses and hugs all round and then she was out on the street, valise in hand, more uncomfortably self-aware than since adolescence, the note, whatever it said, burning into her palm like a sci-fi tablet of identification. Lamborghinis and Ghias whooshed past too quickly on this once elegant now insufferable through-way. Where were they in such a hurry to get to? Throw it in the gutter. Now, before you read it and it's too late. Surely she owed him the decency of at least reading it. Decency? Throw it in the gutter. What if he came out and saw it there? She'll throw it away later. She knows it's bullshit. Tell it to yourself again Steph. It's bullshit. The real world awaits her. Vince and Josie and Sam. Lock it in. Lock it in. The real world. Vince and Josie and Sam. Here's the cab.

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