

BACKWATER

- *Adrian M. McGlinchey*

MATT breathed a sigh of relief as he composed himself in the driver's seat of his old EH Holden station wagon. He had just cleared the lights at the last major intersection on Sydney Road. He was out of the busy suburban traffic and on the open highway. From here on it would be steady cruising up the Hume until they reached Nagambie, '*they*' being he, his sister Sarah and her partner Graeme with his children. Sarah and the children were in the vehicle ahead, a Nissan Patrol towing a boat on a trailer, being driven by Graeme. Matt was tailing the Nissan because Graeme knew the way to their destination.

Sarah did not have any children of her own yet. She was going steady with Graeme, who's wife had ran off and left him to look after the children. Graeme's ex, whose name was Joan, was a broken-down junkie who was incapable of meeting her maternal responsibilities but, seeing that Joan was out of the picture, Sarah had taken a liking to Graeme Hunter and had even began to bond with his children, Shannon, his nine year old son, and Jacqui, Graeme's six year old daughter.

Matt and Sarah's parents, Jack and Marie Byrne, strongly disapproved of the relationship between Sarah and Graeme. The Byrnes were a very staunch Catholic family and they did not want their daughter running off with a man from a broken marriage who was at least ten years older than their little girl. This, in their view was a casual relationship that could not last. The only lasting thing might be the complications it would certainly bring. Matt knew this was what his parents thought on the matter. As the highway sped by he remembered those first awkward moments when Sarah brought her new boyfriend home to meet the folks.

The vehicle up ahead flashed its left indicator and Matt surmised they were pulling into The Roadhouse for a late breakfast come early lunch before driving any further. He had stopped here himself on previous trips via this route and he

recognised the place he was approaching by the semi-trailer rigs parked out the front. The Roadhouse was a popular resting place for interstate truck drivers to freshen up and take a meal break. Other people liked to stop here too, before proceeding onto their favourite fishing spot or camping ground.

Matt parked the car, stepped out and stretched himself as he looked over to Graeme's vehicle and waited for the others to get out.

"Thought we'd stop for a bite to eat," Sarah yelled over the clamour of slamming car doors and the playful chatter of the two children, Shannon and Jacqui.

"Fine by me," replied Matt.

They all made their way to the diner.

Graeme and Matt ordered and paid for the food while Sarah and the kids found a table. No one had eaten much breakfast that morning so they all greedily hoed into the burgers and fries; all except the little girl Jacqui, who just pecked at the handful of French-fries that Sarah put aside for her. To Matt she looked like such a sad and lonely creature as she chewed on a solitary fry, staring out of a pair of big brown eyes and saying nothing. Jacqui wasn't used to Matt yet and so she was still shy in his presence. Matt himself felt slightly nervous and uncomfortable around young children. He hadn't much experience communicating with them.

Shannon looked up from his half devoured burger, faced his father and asked, "Dad, how come uncle Mel didn't come with us?"

"He wanted to but he couldn't make it this time, son. Maybe next time," replied Graeme.

Then Shannon looked toward Matt and stated, "We call him Smelly Mel!"

"Don't say *that*," interrupted Sarah, trying to sound parental but at the same time suppressing her desire to laugh.

Matt just grinned but didn't say anything. He was more preoccupied with his observations of how different young Shannon and Jacqui were to each other in their physical features. He figured that Shannon, with his fair hair and bright blue eyes probably took after his father, who had light sandy hair and blue-grey eyes. But Shannon's sister Jacqui had much darker features. Perhaps she got this more from the mother's side; not that Matt had ever met Joan Hunter, the woman who was said to have walked out on Graeme.

Graeme took his last gulp of Coke, wiped his full moustache with his fingertips and, peering through his wire-rimmed spectacles, said, "Well, I think we should be moving on. If we can reach the campsite by mid-afternoon we'll still have enough daylight left to set up camp and put the yabby nets out."

"Let's go," said Matt.

"Come on guys... we're going," Sarah called out, rallying the children.

THE BACKWATER

Shannon and Jacqui were the first to charge out of the door and into the car park, followed close behind by the *oldies*. Matt went to his own car, ready to follow Graeme's Nissan again. After all, Graeme new the turn-off to his own favourite yabbing spot and was quite an enthusiast. He had been yabbing on the Goulburn Weir many times before. *'For the sake of our weekend trip, at least, Graeme can be our tribal elder,'* thought Matt.

Once again they were back on the Hume and Matt's thoughts returned to where he had left off just before approaching The Roadhouse. He recalled that Sunday afternoon when he entered the lounge room of his parents' house to find Sarah and Graeme sitting next to each other on the couch and having a conversation with the folks, Mr and Mrs Byrne. Matt was slightly taken aback. He knew from overhearing previous arguments between Sarah and her parents that this was going to be a sticky situation. Too late to run for cover... he'd already been seen.

"Hi Matt," called Sarah. "Come and talk to us. I want you to meet Graeme."

"Hi Sis. How've you been?" Matt replied.

"I'm well thank you." She turned to Graeme and made the introductions.

Matt reached over the coffee table to shake hands with Graeme. Then he sat back in the only remaining armchair in the room, trying to keep a cool, calm appearance but wishing he were somewhere else. Thankfully, Matt's father, Jack Byrne, picked up the threads of the discussion he had been having with Graeme. Matt felt relieved that he didn't have to carry any of the conversation by himself.

"How do you think the 'Woods will go for the season?" Jack asked Graeme.

"They're strong enough to get through to the finals but it will be a close call if they have to play off against the Blues," said Graeme.

Mr Byrne and Graeme continued talking serious footy talk while they sipped on their beers.

Matt was bored. He didn't follow the football much and so he didn't care for an in-depth games analysis from two armchair experts.

"I have to visit the town library for an hour or so. See you again sometime." he waved to Graeme as he began to leave the room.

"You'll have to come on a yabbing trip with us," said Graeme. "We're planning one for next month, actually."

"Terrific idea," Sarah chimed in. "I'll let Matt know when we've decided on a date. You must come with us Matty. Graeme knows the spots where you can catch yabbies as big as they come."

“Great! I’ll look forward to it,” replied Matt. At least Matt did enjoy camping and fishing trips even though he was not too enthused about the footy. “Bye for now.”

While he was at the library that afternoon, it occurred to Matt that he didn’t quite understand why his father only made small talk with Graeme and why his mother said nothing much at all. Even before this occasion, he had heard them, his parents, speaking to each other about Sarah and Graeme as they expressed their deep reservations about their daughter getting involved with a man on the rebound from a broken marriage. Perhaps Mr and Mrs Byrne were not ready to pre-empt the situation. Maybe they were waiting to see whether this was only an infatuation of Sara’s that would soon wear off before it went much further. Either way, they knew only too well the rebellious temperament of their girl Sarah, who had left home at seventeen to escape the constraints of her parents. Sarah was always one to be coming home in the small hours from late-night parties, much to Mrs Byrne’s dismay. At any rate, Matt’s parents had not raised any objections to his going away on this weekend fishing trip with Graeme and Sarah; so Matt thought, *‘Why not? It might help to break the ice a little.’*

Up ahead, Graeme’s Nissan Patrol veered left onto the Goulburn Valley route. Matt followed suite. Noting the roadside markers, he estimated they were about half an hour away from Lake Nagambie. He passed another road marker that read, *Nagambie – 2km*. Graeme’s vehicle began slowing down in preparation for another left hand turn, this time onto Vickers Lane. This road led straight to the southern banks of the lake without having to drive into the main town centre of Nagambie.

The road gradually headed away from the lakeside that was no longer visible from the car and it headed into deeper and deeper bush land until no waterway was in sight. By this stage Matt was unsure of where they were heading and really *had* to trust that Graeme knew the way. It wasn’t long before Matt caught a glimpse of more waterways up ahead and he thought, *‘This must be the Backwater of Goulburn Weir.’* A brief mental picture of the chain of lakes and weirs came to mind as he had seen it on the map. Next they took a low-grade gravel track, which led them to the lakeside. Graeme led them to a quiet spot that was suitable to set up camp and have easy access to the banks for launching the boat.

The children kept themselves amused as Matt and Graeme pitched the tents and set up the campfire. It was only three o’clock in the afternoon but they wanted to have everything prepared, knowing it would be dusk by the time they returned from the lake. Sarah stayed by the vehicles and the tents, unpacking supplies and putting a billy of water on the fire, while the men lowered the boat into the water. This part wasn’t as difficult as Matt had first envisaged because Graeme’s proud *‘boat’* was really only a three-metre-long

THE BACKWATER

aluminium dinghy fitted with a small outboard motor. They easily dragged it off the trailer and slid it over the edge of the bank, mooring it to a trustworthy gum tree.

“Let’s go see if tea’s ready,” said Graeme.

“I hope Sarah brought something decent to eat. I’m starved,” said Matt.

“Haven’t you got things organised yet, woman?” yelled Graeme in a jocular manner.

“Of course! I could have done it seven times over in the time I waited for you two guys to get back. Don’t tell me you’ve lost the boat already, my fearless captain,” Sarah quipped as she swept back her long auburn hair and put out the trays of tuna-tomato bread rolls and the lamingtons, ready to have with the billy tea.

The sun was still shining as they sat around eating their meal and sipping their tea but Matt sensed a subtle change in the air. There was no detectable breeze; the air was quite still but it was becoming perceptibly cooler and crisper. He was aware that the nights tended to get quite chilly, as it was now late autumn. He remembered Graeme explaining to him that this was the best time of year to catch the big ones. The adult yabbies have grown to their largest possible size and laid their eggs before winter sets in. The oldest of the species begin to die out during the cold season. Then spring returns, dormant eggs are hatched and the cycle starts again. Something like that.

Graeme threw out the dregs of his tea, sending them spitting into the fire.

“I think we’ll take the boat out now. Put your life jackets on, lads,” he said in a calm but authoritative tone.

‘*Our Master and Commander,*’ thought Matt as he donned his jacket and helped Shannon into his.

“I’ll stay here with Jacqui. See you in a couple of hours,” said Sarah.

Matt, Graeme and Shannon stepped into the boat that was loaded with four large hoop-nets, each one baited with strips of cheap red meat. Each hoop-net had an empty plastic fruit juice bottle tied to it with a long nylon rope. The plastic bottles were to function as marker buoys so the nets can still be found after being thrown to the bottom. Matt loosed the mooring rope and pushed away from the bank while Graeme started the outboard, throttled up and they were on their way.

After travelling a few kilometres up the backwater, Graeme eased off the throttle and patrolled slowly to a quiet bend that didn’t get much heavy traffic because of the many snarled old tree trunks sticking out of the water. You had to negotiate these parts cautiously or you might rip your hull on a hefty unseen snag hiding only inches under the surface. The boat came to a complete stop and Graeme slowly stood up to gently

cast the hoop-nets into the water. The nets with their steel hoop frames sunk quickly but silently into the murky depths of the lake. Only the floating plastic fruit juice bottles remained visible to mark the spot.

By now the sky had turned overcast, although there were no signs of wind or storm... just a silvery greyness all around them. Graeme started up the motor again, using a very low throttle to move clear of the baited area without causing too much disturbance in the water. He stopped the boat again. There they all were, in a boat on a lake in the grey stillness. To Matt it seemed almost a sin if he were to speak and ruffle the silence.

“Care to try out a line?” Graeme whispered as he reached for the fishing rods that were laid out in the bottom of the boat.

Matt took a rod without saying anything. They both baited and cast a line. Graeme then helped his boy Shannon bait up a line on a hand-held reel. The three of them didn't converse much. For the next hour they took in the serenity that was around them. Matt's thoughts did, for a brief moment, turn to the ill sentiments that he'd witnessed between his sister and their parents. He wasn't sure whether to tackle Graeme head-on regarding some of these issues or to stay neutral. Either way, he wasn't ready to deal with this. So he held his peace.

“Looks like there's not much biting here,” murmured Graeme.

“I hope we have better luck with the nets,” said Matt.

“We'll have to be more patient with that,” said Graeme. “It's best to leave them out overnight and check them the next morning. Let's call it a day.”

Graeme started up the outboard and piloted the boat out of the snags, picking up speed as they found more open waters.

As expected, it was getting on dusk by the time they returned to camp. Sarah and the little girl Jacqui were there on the bank to greet them.

“Did you catch anything?” yelled Sarah.

“Not a cracker,” responded Matt. “We'll check the nets in the morning, though.”

They moored the boat and all walked together to the campfire, which Sarah had kept burning in their absence.

Matt then set about cooking some food on the campfire while Graeme broke out the beers from the eskie. Matt wrapped up some jacket potatoes in cooking foil and rested them in the low embers. Then he took the stubby of beer that Graeme handed him, sat back on a nearby log and rested for twenty minutes. Graeme, Sarah and the children gathered around the fire and snuggled up. Matt reached for a second beer and thought it was about time he got the meat started. He began grilling the chops, burgers and snags while slowly imbibing the ale. Eventually he prodded the jacket spuds to

THE BACKWATER

test them for readiness. They seemed OK. He lifted them out of the embers and placed them into a steel dish to keep warm on the grill rack.

“It’s ready. Come and get it,” Matt called out.

They all began to pick their own pieces of food from the grill. Matt ate slowly and contemplatively. He wasn’t as hungry as he had been earlier in the day but it was good to savour the flavour of warm food, now that the evening was growing cold.

When their meal was finished Sarah and Graeme drew themselves under the same blanket as they sat there and whispered sweet nothings in each other’s ears. Matt was unable to hear what was being said. The children were dozing off beside them.

Then Sarah stirred herself and said, “Well, I’d better get these two rug rats off to bed and turn in myself.” She roused Shannon and Jacqui, taking them to the patrol vehicle to bed them down on the backboard for the night. Sarah retired to the tent that she would be sharing with Graeme.

“Goodnight,” she said as she drew the tent flap.

“Goodnight,” both Graeme and Matt murmured simultaneously.

Matt and Graeme stayed up for another hour longer while they drank their fill of beer.

Now Matt was really feeling the evening chill. As he huddled closer to the fire his face and hands felt warm but his back was a block of ice. He could barely hold his beer steady in his trembling hands and his teeth were chattering. He clenched his jaw down hard and flexed his arm muscles in an attempt to disguise the trembling. He didn’t want Graeme to notice.

“This is the life, eh Graeme,” Matt blurted out. “You’ve really got it all worked out, haven’t you?”

Graeme gave a slight grin but chose not to reply.

After a long silence Graeme said, “I’m ready to hit the sack. See you in the morning.”

Graeme went to Sarah’s tent.

Matt sat there alone for a few moments, trying to decide whether Graeme would take the innuendo seriously or forget about it by morning. Matt could not believe his own tactlessness. He was ostensibly referring to Graeme’s ability to lead the good life, but was also, in the tone of his voice, implying that Graeme is only using Sarah to make life more comfortable for himself seeing his ex-wife had ran away and left him to look after the children. Matt admitted to himself that he *was* harbouring some resentment about the situation but he didn’t think he would have confronted Graeme with such sarcasm. It just slipped out while he had let his guard down. Matt dragged himself to his own tent, crawled into his sleeping bag and promptly fell asleep.

ADRIAN M. M^cGLINCHEY

The next morning Sarah was the first up. She stoked the old embers in the fireplace and cooked eggs and bacon for breakfast. It was not long before Graeme and Matt stumbled out into the cold light of day and took their seats by the fire. Sarah had left the children to sleep in for a while longer. A few gruff ‘*good mornings*’ were exchanged and they ate their breakfast in silence. Nobody brought up last night’s topic of discussion, so Matt hoped this was the end of the matter.

Graeme and Matt went back out in the boat to pull the nets up. They didn’t spend long on this trip. As soon as the nets were hauled up and out of the water they knew it was a good catch. At least six decent sized yabbies in each net. Graeme turned the boat around immediately and headed back to camp with a catch fit to boast about. As they cruised along Matt gingerly kept his distance from biggest yabbies. He was afraid they might give him an awful nip with their pincers.

Sarah, Shannon and Jacqui were excited as they watched the boat come in. When it reached the lakeside they gazed down into the boat and saw that it was crawling with live crustaceans.

“Good one,” cried Sarah.

Jacqui was jumping up and down, yelling, “I want the biggest one.”

Shannon retorted, “No, I’ll have the biggest. You can have the baby one.”

When all the excitement had subsided they broke camp and headed for home.

Both vehicles pulled into the driveway of Graeme’s home. Sarah unpacked the luggage and settled the children while Matt helped Graeme secure the boat and trailer in the back yard. Then Matt looked on as Graeme boiled up a forty-gallon drum of water that he had mounted on top of the garden incinerator. This would be for the purpose of immersing the yabbies in scalding water to kill them after they had been in the deep freeze to numb their senses. The yabbies still made faint squealing noises as they were plunged into the seething water.

Once the yabbies had been scalded and were cool enough to touch, Graeme always preferred to snap the heads off and discard them before putting the tail pieces back into cold storage for keeping. After all, this is where most of the edible flesh is to be found... in the tails.

As they worked together to clean the yabbies Graeme looked up from his pile of intestines and decapitated heads and said to Matt, “It gets quite messy, doesn’t it?”

“Especially for the yabbies,” Matt jested.

They rinsed their hands in a bucket of clean water.

Matt said, “I think I’ll be getting on home now.”

They both shook hands and said so long.

THE BACKWATER

Matt went through the house to say good-bye to Sarah and the children then left for his parent's home, where he still lived.

Some time later that day it occurred to Matt that Graeme had not even offered him any fresh yabbies to take home. *'Sure, it was through Graeme's know-how that we got such a good catch,'* thought Matt, *'but he could have spared me a couple of yabbies at least. That was rather stingy of him!'*