

Stick with what you know

I knew it was Mum on Saturday morning before I picked up the phone. And I knew exactly what she was going to say before she said it. I put down the spliff and lifted the receiver to my ear.

She was crying and I heard myself say in a voice that didn't sound like mine, *It's okay, Mum*. We made arrangements to get together later in the morning and I hung the phone back up on the kitchen wall. I went to the back porch, sat on my deckchair and looked at the clouds shifting around above the bare plum tree. I sat there, the spliff useless in my hands, and I thought about Mum. About all the things she'd done for Syd.

My father's name was Cedric, but everyone called him Syd. For weeks Mum had been turning up at the hospital, sitting in the chair next to his bed and doing her duty. She reckoned it wasn't just about 'doing the right thing'. But whenever I saw her in his hospital room she had a half smile on her face and her voice was flat. And that's how she sounded last Wednesday afternoon.

'Syd, do you want anything?'

He looked at her, his eyes half open, his grey hair sweaty and sticking to his wrinkly forehead.

'Nah, nah, I'm right Lil . . . I'll be right.'

He looked like shit that was still sliding down the side of a dunny bowl. He wriggled a bit further down in his bedclothes and I wondered how much longer I'd sit there. It was my lunch hour; they'd be looking for me at the nursery before long, thinking I was hiding down in the rubber plant row, stacking an extra ten minutes onto my break.

'Gunna head off now Syd,' I said. I never called him Dad.

His eyes went bright like I'd turned into something that shone and sparkled. And sure enough I had.

'No worries son. You're a gem for comin in.'

I stood up and stuck my hands into my overall pockets. Fiddled with my keys and chewy packet, but didn't pull anything out. I was about to say seeya later to the back of Mum's head when Syd piped up again.

'Nath, did ya hear Gazza's comin in to see me?'

I looked at his tired head.

‘No, I haven’t heard that . . .’

Even though Syd was the ex-president of the footy club Gary Ablett played with when he was a boy, it was next to bloody impossible that Ablett would come in and visit him. The ‘great man’, as Syd often called him, was up to his ears in training for the second semi-final against West Coast.

‘Yep, Spider Thompson gave me a tingle and said Gazza’d be in later in the week, maybe early next . . . Best player ever to pull on the boots, don’t you worry . . .’

Fucken Gary Ablett. The way Syd carried on you’d think he was the saviour of mankind. And with that religion crap Ablett went on about, thanking Jesus left, right and centre, maybe the old man believed it. But if you had to have that God bothering stuff, give me Mum sitting there turning rosary beads over in her fingers without any bastard noticing. Not even Syd, no doubt.

‘Yeah, that’ll be great,’ I said and looked at Mum. She was up and fiddling around in Syd’s bedside drawers.

‘Seeya Mum, thanks for comin in.’

The first few times I’d said that, Mum had taken the bait and given me a spiel about Syd being her ex-husband and of course she was going to come in, what else was she going to do? Later she got jack of me saying it and ignored me. Then she changed tack again.

‘No worries Nath,’ she said, smiling and rearranging the get well cards on Syd’s dresser that were in perfectly good order before.

The nursery that afternoon was empty except for an old couple wandering up the Australian natives row. I sat on a plastic milk crate, hidden by a bunch of rubber plants, and stuck my Nirvana tape, *Nevermind*, into my Walkman. I’d seen them at the Big Day Out with Scotty Collins back in January and Scotty had taped their album for me. Their fucken music blew me away.

Polly wants a cracker, think I should get off her first . . . Oh well, whatever, nevermind . . . I’m on a plain, I can’t explain . . .

After listening to that album me and Scotty put a band together. He could play about three and a half chords and I yelled. Syd got wind of it before he ended up in hospital with the cancer and he let loose with his usual crap: stick with what you know.

Christ, how many times had I heard that or some other bloody thing like it? There was a recession on that that goose Keating reckoned we had to have and it gave Syd license to badger me: *No good carrying on with that music bullshit; you can't pay the bills with that. And what about if you get a woman?*

So there I was sticking with what I knew, which wasn't a hell of a lot. And the main reason I didn't know much was because of Syd. About the only thing he ever taught me to do was kick a footy and he didn't even do that well because I played under 16 Bs and hardly ever got a touch. I used to run around the backline with my jumper hanging out, watching other blokes pounce on the ball like cats that hadn't got a feed that morning. I was bloody useless and, as far as I could find out, Syd hadn't been much better.

A little rover he was. Mum said he used to get in and under the packs. But, like he'd been with her, I don't think he could have done more than shirk a few issues while the hard men got their hands dirty. My old man was a bloke who once leant me his car, a fucken Magna, on the proviso that I put some bloody air in the tyres because he didn't know how to do it! And now, I thought, he can't even die properly.

I listened to the thick chords of 'In Bloom' and looked at my watch but I didn't care what it said.

Scotty pushed a double-decker trolley under the rubber plants with his Yankees baseball cap on backwards and stopped right in front of me. I pulled my earphones out as he spoke.

'How's ya old man?'

'Same.'

Scotty leant on the trolley handle. The load of herbs and seedlings wobbled a bit.

'*Same?* Shit, he's been the same for weeks.'

'Yeah,' I said, noticing that one of the laces on my gym boots was undone. I left it like that. Scotty looked down at me, his eyes crinkling a bit. Then he looked away.

'Gotta get these herbs to their brothers and sisters,' he said, fingering the leaves on a basil bush. 'Are yours right for tonight?'

I put the plugs into my ears but didn't turn on the tape.

'When are they not right?'

Scotty smiled.

'Never.'

'Well, I'll seeya tonight then.'

Mull's from the earth, bro, so it's gotta be good. Fuck all the other drugs off. Smack might come from a poppy but it gets fucked up by bikies and whoever else and you don't get nature's best. The rest of them? All bullshit. If they're made in a lab, they'll cook your grey matter, leave you feeling like a cockatoo without any feathers.

I knew how to turn nature's herb into cash and I did it by making sure I didn't smoke too much of the shit myself. I was down to a choof a week and it was usually only three cones, sometimes less. Daily bucket bongos, hash pipes and massive spliffs were a thing of the past for me. Like 'The End' by The Doors.

I listened to that song too many times. So often that, when me and Scotty drove around the factories with their own big spliffs chucking smoke into the night, I could hear it with the stereo off. I could even hear the rotor blades from *Apocalypse Now* above that ugly bastard's guitar picking. And Jim Morrison's voice felt like it was coming out of my mouth.

Too much dope one night and I saw Jesus pull every nail out of the cross he was hanging on; fuck knows how when he was totally stuck there. Couldn't really shake that picture and, truth be told, I shouldn't have been getting hallucinations on grass anyway, unless it was laced, and how could it have been laced when I was the freakin dealer?

I wanted to tell Mum about that night and, if she'd known I smoked dope, I would have. That Jesus trip didn't exactly make me religious, but I looked at the crosses in her house different and I didn't get pissed off when she span her rosary. And I didn't want as much green.

On the Friday, before work, I got a call from Mum.

'You better come to the hossy.'

It was the fourth time in two weeks she'd rung me and asked me to go. And every time I went in it was the same: Syd was sleeping more than usual and his heart rate was down. Then a few hours later he was up and at 'em and not dying at all.

Fucking useless.

'He'll be right,' I said.

'The doctor isn't so sure, Nathan.'

She always used my full name when something was important. Or when she *thought* something was important. Lil was a good woman, no doubt, but she had a tendency to work herself up. And that was lucky in one way or she'd never have got up the guts she needed to leave Syd and live a half-decent life.

'Syd'll be right. You can't get rid of the old bastard that quick.'

Mum didn't say anything. For far too long.

'You all right Mum?'

She still didn't say anything. I didn't know where to look and there was nothing to look at really, just my Dark Side of the Moon album poster. It was coming loose at one end, the bluetac had lost its stick and I was pretty sure Mum had started crying.

'Come on Mum . . . *Fuck.*'

'He's your father.'

'Don't remind me.'

Another silence that I didn't get to end.

'And he's going to die.'

'Not at this rate.'

I needed to get to work. The digital clock on my kitchen bench said 9.37. I had a ten o'clock start. Mum said something I couldn't catch, whispering like she was blowing out birthday candles but trying to leave some lit for a kid to have a go at.

I did the right thing by her and turned up at the hospital later on Friday. Syd looked crap. I put my hands in my overall pockets and then took them out. I looked at the cream walls, the blue curtains that hung on one side of his bed, Mum's back; anywhere I could. But then I looked closer at Syd.

He was a skeleton with skin on it. He hadn't exactly been firing, but he couldn't have turned to shit so badly in a couple of days, could he? He was just a lump under some sheets.

I looked at that lump and wanted to look away and I did, through the door to the nurse's station, the pale blue uniforms and hair in buns, laughing about last night's episode of Sylvania Waters. Then I looked back at Syd. The bags under his eyes were like the ones you shove into the plughole when you're finished jangling them in your mug.

Bugger this. Deadshit or not, I thought, I can't stand around and do nothing. The bloke was in pain, heaps of it, and I knew I could give him a bit of relief. Even the bastards at the hospital didn't seem to know how.

'Syd, I reckon I—

'—He came in mate . . .'

Syd's eyes lost their tea bags. They went wide open and white, and the old bugger grinned. It was so sudden after his half-asleep moping that his head was scary to look at. It was like I was tripping. Or he was.

'Who Syd?'

'Gazza. The great man.'

Mum looked up from Syd's blood pressure chart to the subject of it.

'What are you talking about? I've been here all week . . .'

'He was in last night, Lil.'

Syd's eyes were still bright like a campfire had lit up behind them. I didn't know what to say to him.

'He came in and he was wearing a big long coat.'

Oh yeah, I thought. And it was white and he had a halo on his noggin I suppose.

Syd slapped on his bed. 'He came right up here and sat down and said, *Syd, we're lookin after ya.*'

'You sure you weren't dreaming Syd?' Mum asked.

'Nah, Lil. I had me eyes open the whole time.'

Jesus, I thought. Gary Ablett: the ghost of Christmases yet to come. I was about to ask Syd to find out if Ablett thought Geelong would get over West Coast – thought I could put a few bucks on them – when Syd's eyes narrowed. His face looked shithouse again. I wasn't sure if he was breathing or not. Mum had the tears on. Even if it was only for her, which I wasn't sure about anymore, I had to do something.

'Syd, I reckon I can make things a bit easier . . .'

I said it loud enough so that he at least turned his head. He let out a quiet whistle that was probably him trying to say, *She'll be right, get back to work.*

I went to the nurse's station and bailed up the doctor. He said he wasn't in charge of Syd and I said where's the bloke who is and he said it's a she, and I said where is she? This bloke in glasses, who was built like a centre-half-back, said she wasn't around because she was a specialist. I told him I wanted to see her tomorrow and he said he'd see what he could do.

‘Mate, listen,’ I said. ‘I definitely have to see her tomorrow. The old man’s dying. Or giving it a crack. He needs a bit of relief, you know?’

He gave me a look like I was about to tackle him.

‘All right,’ he said, quiet to his chart. “I’ll see what I can do.”

It was one of those dreams when you know you’re dreaming but you’re bugged if you can wake up. And I was too stunned to try anyway.

Kurt Cobain was on the cross, blood pissing out from his side. He was mumbling lyrics I couldn’t understand, so I went up closer and then it was *Stick with what you know* and Syd’s face, much younger, hair sort of the same colour as Kurt’s only a bit less yellow. Like it was when he was still with Mum. Blood was pissing out from his feet and hands. His dick was hanging there, too, and he was smiling.

‘Sallright,’ he said.

Blood was gushing around everywhere and I thought, *No it’s not alright*. I tried to say it to him, but my mouth wouldn’t get started.

‘It’s okay, mate. I’m free as a bird, happy as a lark,’ he said.

I can’t remember if it was in the dream or later that I thought ‘happy’ was never a word you’d use to describe Syd. From trying to be something like a Dad on our weekends with him, cooking mashed spuds that got to the table cold and lumpy, to picking me up from parties when I was pissed and stoned and saying nothing to me, Dad never exactly had a smile on his face. Maybe it had to be in the dream because even though I wasn’t saying it, I was definitely thinking it.

Dad.

Hanging there, he talked me through a heap of stuff, but I couldn’t remember it afterwards. It all came out in that mixed up, stupid way that dreams have of telling you heaps, but then the next morning it’s all just a feeling. But I remember guards came to give him a belting. I tried to pull them away, but Syd just smiled and said let them keep at it. Those guards whacking Dad had Grandad’s mottly old face. But they were getting whacked themselves with the butt-ends of rifles swung by soldiers in full uniform. And Dad just kept smiling, his hands nailed down. So I didn’t know how they ended up around me, and I couldn’t tell what was on my face, blood or tears.

Mine or his.

I woke up on Saturday morning and I wasn't crying or sweating or anything. I sat up in bed and I felt like I'd been swimming in a river, and now I was just kicking back on the banks, drying off in the sun, the day blue and shiny. Out my window it was blue and shiny too, but with powerlines against the sky instead of trees.

I got out of bed nice and casual, no rush, smoothed my doona and headed to the false drawer in my dresser and took out the driest, best batch of head I could find. I went to the lounge and put it on the coffee table and started sweeping it into a sweet pile that would make a king spliff. I wondered how I could keep the smoke from getting out under Dad's hospital door.

I picked up Syd's joint. It was a perfect piece of engineering. I almost wanted to smoke it myself. Maybe we could share it.