

BRONWYN MEHAN

Down and Out in Alice

1. Coq au vin

We walk out of the TAFE canteen. Hot chips with chicken salt. Gav had eaten most of them while I stood there reading the ice cream ads behind his head. *Bubble-O Bill*, *Cornetto*, *Golden Gaytime*.

Outside, on the verandah of C Block, we find a spot where we can watch Nathan and the other Hort students unloading bushrock from a box trailer.

“If we three were Streets ice creams,” I say, “I’d be a *Heart* and you and Nathan, you’d both be *Paddlepops*. Caramel and Banana.”

Gav lights up. “No way, Teneale. Nathan might be an ordinary old *Paddlepop*. But if you’re a *Heart*, then I’m definitely *Heaven on a Stick*.”

What I was talking about was skin colour. And I was thinking about a pool on a mountain top that was a million miles from here. Gav, he was off on a completely different trip, with falsetto voice and fluttering eyelashes. It didn’t matter. At least he was back to his normal self.

Below us, Nathan has his broad-brimmed straw hat off and is using it to fan his face. Gav is older by a year, yet Nathan, who is the same age as me, 16, looks more grown up. For a start, Nathan’s been shaving since he was fourteen. He’s tall, tanned and fit. Gav prefers to wax. He has fine, ginger hair all over his body and pale freckled skin that burns easily. Me, I don’t shave or wax. Anywhere. They both live at home with their mum, Deb and lots of littlies. Deb fosters some of the kids and some are her own. I’m staying there too, until I find somewhere else.

Nathan shakes his head when he sees us. We’re sneaking a ciggie below the *No Smoking* sign. Gav holds the ciggie in his cupped hand and turns his face away to blow out the smoke so Millsy, Nathan’s teacher won’t see. He flips it, filter-end to

me. I take it in my cupped hand – dark-chocolate coating on the outside and creamy on the inside with streaks of caramel.

Nathan calls out. “Hey, what’s on the menu today?”

Millsy, who was showing the boys where to position the rocks, immediately looks up at us. The rest of the class stops working and looks up at us, too.

“Nathan, you dickhead,” says Gav. He takes a long drag then exhales. “*Cock oh Van*. Try getting your lips around that.”

There is lots of giggling and loud muttering amongst the gardening squad. Millsy just stands there, looking up at Gav and me. He’s got big, beetle-eyed Cancer Council sunglasses on, so you can’t see what he’s thinking. But I can read his body English easily enough. He wants to mouth off at us, for smoking and whatever else rules he thinks we’ve broken. But he doesn’t because he knows Gav and me are STARS (Students At Risk). Plus Gav’s just come out of hospital and Millsy’s a real busybody so he would have grilled Nathan all about that. *Righto, you lot, get on with it*. They get back to the rocks. Gav throws his head back and lets out a crazy whoop like he’s won a prize. His mouth is laughing but his eyes aren’t. Deb calls it his Dr Jekyll laugh. I tell her that in the movie it’s Mr Hyde who is the mad one not Dr Jekyll but she doesn’t believe me. Nathan puts his hat back on and pulls the string tight under his chin.

“It’s French,” I call out to Nat. “The dish we’re cooking. Chicken in Wine.”

Nathan nods, gets back to work.

2. *Golden Gaytimes*

Two weeks ago, Gav did win a prize. At the Todd Tavern. There was a drag competition in the back room of the pub put on by the Gay Pride people. Gav did a few turns on the tiny stage, all done up in the gold dress and high heels that Deb had found for him at the Op Shop. *Piss weak prize*, Gav said. All the finalists were given a Golden Gaytime ice cream. He tore off the wrapper and took a vicious bite of it. At 10.30, as Prickly Pair, the Country & Western duo were starting their first set, he became restless. *Those chicks are crap at singing*, he said. They were alright. They’d changed the words to make the songs about gays. I preferred the originals but the

singers reminded me of Yvette with their check shirts and moleskins, so I stayed. Gav said he was hungry and would get some chips from the machine. But when the set was over and Gav still hadn't come back, I went to look for him. I had a feeling he might have gone into the front bar where all the hoons and football heads congregated. Sure enough, there he was, surrounded by a mob of blokes on the other side of the room. As I made my way through the crowd, I caught glimpses of Gav's ginger curls and his gold dress. He was being roughed up but I could see he wasn't trying to get away. He was swaying like one of those blow-up figurines with sand in the bottom – the more you push them away, the more they come bouncing back. Then suddenly the door onto the street opened and he was gone.

By the time I reached him he was sitting in the gutter, his face streaked with mascara and lipstick. His dress was split up one side, right up to his shaven armpits. There were wolf whistles and horns beeping from passing cars and somebody threw a beer can that hit him between the shoulders. Gav was bent over and sobbing, but it wasn't because of the beer can.

I raced back into the hotel to look for Nathan. He was with his mates playing pool and as soon as he heard his brother was in trouble he dropped the pool cue and ran out to him.

“Call Mum, for us, T.”

“My poor baby”, Deb said. “Listen, tell Nathan I'll send a taxi, okay? I can't leave the kids. And give them both a big hug for me, Teneale.”

Hearing Deb made me think about the time Mum came to visit me in Juvie. There was no *My poor baby* for me. She spent most of the visit talking about how awful the bus trip had been, what a handful the twins were and about the problems she had getting the Department to come and fix things around the house. She only came that once.

I told Nathan about the taxi. *You coming home with us?* I looked at the two step-brothers; the straight one had his hand on the queer one's shoulder. *Nah, I'll stay for a bit.* I watched from the pub door as Nathan helped Gav out of the gutter and took him into Macca's to wait. Then I went inside and stood at the door of the back bar. I scanned the room for The Prickly Pair singers. They were sitting near the stage listening to a woman with a pink Mohawk who stood at the mic, reading poetry.

Without their hats on, they didn't look like cowgirls anymore. It was all just an act for them.

In the middle bar, I saw some people I knew from Tennant. *Hey Sis*, they said, *where you been?* They were in town for the races. So I ended up spending the rest of the weekend with them – drinking, smoking and getting out of it.

When I finally got a lift back to Deb's it was late on Sunday night. The place was quiet and Rhonda from next-door was sitting alone at the kitchen table.

"Shit, Teneale. Where the fuck have you been? You should've called. Deb's been real worried about you."

"Yeah?"

"They're all over at the hospital now."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Gav took an overdose this morning."

"Yeah?"

"He's gonna be okay, but."

I kept shuffling, through the kitchen, into the hallway and towards the room where the children would be asleep and my mattress would be waiting for me on the floor, against the wall. I'd heard what Rhonda had said, but I couldn't feel anything just then. All I could think about was getting my head onto that pillow.

3. *Circle of Friends*

There is still quarter of an hour before we needed to be back in the kitchen to the check on the *coq au vin* and put the rice on. We've got English homework to talk over but Gav has suddenly gone dark.

"Come on," I say, getting up. We walk to other end of the building where I lean on the verandah rail. I look over at Alice Springs sprawled beneath a clear blue sky and nestled in the rust-coloured mountain range. That big old caterpillar curled itself and settled down there long ago, they reckon. *Here*, it said, *you mob come and live here and I'll look out for you*. It's not bad, Alice. But Deb's place is way over on the other side. Away from the main street and the river bed where all the action is. Still,

much better than Tennant Creek. I was a house mother like Deb when I was living in Tennant. Only I wasn't getting paid by the government. I was supposed to be at school, not at home on my own in charge of five kids. Best times were afternoons. The twins would be asleep and I'd take the older ones for a walk up the shops. Icy poles for them. Chocolate Heart for me.

The white college ute with the box trailer crosses the car park and heads towards the main road. Some of the students are in the twin cab with Millsy. Nathan squats in the flatbed amongst the tools. He takes off his gardener's hat and makes a long-armed wave to us. I wave back.

Their navy work gear with the reflector stripes, reminds me of being back in Juvie. And Millsy, he's just like one of those screws I knew. Acts all kind and fatherly, but you wouldn't want to be left in a room alone with him. I've told Nathan to be careful of Millsy, but he just shrugs. Which is fair enough. No sense him getting sour on people like I am. Nathan's happy in his little world. His dreams are small. P-plates and a flat-screen TV and he'd be set.

Gav and me, we are the opposite. Forever dreaming. Forever talking about getting out of here and heading for the city. The latest plan was we'd get a job in a restaurant like the one in Perth our Cooking teacher used to work in. Fancy place where the waiters wear long white aprons and the kitchen hands don't shred, they *chiffonnade*. We'd live in an apartment with a white leather lounge and a balcony with a view of the city.

But that was before the OD. I'm not sure about Gav's dreams right now.

There is squawking and dust is flying over near the gum trees. Two butcher birds are rounding on a blue and yellow parrot.

"Bloody bullies."

"Just fighting over food," says Gav.

"Nah. They like to throw their weight around. Besides, Butchers are meat eaters. Parrots are veg-o."

"Girl, you're a walking Wikipedia, you know that? Speaking of food, feck I'm hungry. What's this dish we're making called again?"

“Gav, you’re completely see-thru. I know you just want to hear me say *cock*. Happy now?” He passes me a ciggie and I take a drag. “You’re a stupid article, Gavin Sharkey, you know that?”

“How about this fecking essay, T?”

Earlier in the week, we watched *Circle of Friends* in English and now we are supposed to write about it for homework.

“You should have taken the extension from Mrs A, Gav. Why didn’t you?”

Gav blows out a stream of blue smoke. “Oh, shut your hole, T.”

“We should watch it again. Blockbusters might have it.”

“You just want to perv on Bennie, don’t you, T?”

“And you just want to perv on Jack.”

“Feck, yes,” says Gav. “Jack’s a real honey. And isn’t *feck* a great word?”

Gav pats the cement beside him and we both sit with our backs against warm brick, our trouser legs making hounds-tooth Vs in front of us. He takes a piece of paper from his pocket and smooths it out on his lap. We both stare at the question for ages.

“An essay!” He blows on the end of his fag so the embers glow fiercely. “How the feck would we know what to put in an essay, T?”

“I was just thinking about the ending,” I say. “When Jack says to her: *Bernadette, you’re solid*. Remember?”

“No.”

“Yes you do. And she says. *Oh, great. Solid, like beef cattle*. And you think they’re going to kiss, but instead Jack goes quiet. For ages.”

“Well, he did sleep with her best friend. He’s most probably got the guilts.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Me, Jack eventually said to Bernadette, *I feel like I’m hardly there*. I was shocked to hear him say that. Jack Foley, the good-looking guy from the well-off family who’s got a girlfriend who loves him, no matter what. I think Gav, underneath the Big, Loud Queen act of his, feels like Jack Foley a lot of the time. Like he is hardly there.

4. “*Friendship, sexual behaviour and growing up are three important themes in Maeve Binchy’s Circle of Friends. Discuss.*”

(Dear Mrs Allison, I tried writing the essay but it didn’t work so instead I wrote to my journal about what I want to discuss about the movie. Sorry, Teneale.)

Benny. Bernadette. A.K.A. Minnie Driver. She is hot, yes. But she doesn’t come close to Yvette, the Jillaroo. My first girlfriend. The day we went swimming at Edith Falls, that has to be the best day of my life.

I’d tagged along for the day with some jackeroos who I knew from the pub. We travelled in a convoy of three Toyotas, drinking all the way, and it was midday by the time we reached the Falls. Once we finally arrived all I wanted to do was stagger across the lawns and dive into the green waters. But Yvette grabbed my wrist and squeezed it. *Come on, Teneale*, she said, pointing to a steep mountain track. *It’s magic up there, trust me.* Yvette was the only female hand on the station and she was Steve’s girlfriend, we all knew that. My head was aching and I was hot and tired. I wanted to stay at the bottom waterhole with the esky and the lilos. But I also wanted to be with Yvette. And the hard squeeze she gave my wrist, the way she jerked me towards her and spoke low and urgently, looking over my shoulder to the others ahead of us – all of these things told me she wanted to be with me too.

We trudged up the rocky track into the bright, hot sky, past huge grey boulders as hot as stones in a fire. Yvette was used to spending days out in the heat jackhammering star pickets, stringing up miles and miles of barbed wire fences. She was incredibly fit and she bounded ahead of me in her black Rossi workboots and thick khaki socks. I had on my thongs and mum’s good sarong that she’d bought up in Darwin. In Tennant all I used to do was hang around home or walk to the shops along a tarred road. I mostly wore shoes. Climbing up that hill, my legs were soon dusty and my feet sore from the rough ground. I had to stop every so often to shake the pebbles which kept getting caught between the thongs and the soles of my feet. Why hadn’t I worn Nikes and jean shorts? *Come on, you slowpoke.* The more Yvette teased, the more I was determined to push myself to keep up. So I tucked the sarong into my

undies, ignored my stinging feet, dry mouth, my aching head and pushed on. I focussed my thoughts on the backs of Yvette's legs; the buttoned-down pockets of her work shorts and her smooth, pale thighs.

Once we reached the top, the air was thick and the shoulder-high yellow grasses sizzled with cicadas. The ground was flatter up there and the path sandy and wide enough for us to walk side by side. Yvette took hold of my hand. My breathing was returning to normal but my heart was knocking out a beat that I could feel all the way down to my tummy. Further.

We heard voices and then saw two khaki hats flopping above the shrubs ahead of us. Yvette squeezed my hand then let it go. *Lovely down there, girls. Well worth the climb.* They carried metal water bottles and small towels the size of a man's handkerchief. We felt the breeze first, next came the sound of rushing water and then, as we reached the ridge, we saw the waterfall itself and the bedspread of foam it sent across the still pool. There was nobody else around as we slipped out of our clothes and slid into the black water. The pool was deep and cold and our bodies juddered at first. We both ducked under and quickly moved off in different directions. Then, turning back, we glided towards each other. We were getting accustomed to the temperature and to the new forms our bodies took in the water. Yvette's was pale and borderless like a vanilla ice cream melting beneath the dark waters. I flung my head back, spread my arms and let my body rise to the surface so it was stretched out and glistening in the sunlight. Yvette placed her hand beneath the small of my back and I let her, and not the water, bear my weight. *Beautiful*, she said. *Like glazed chocolate.*

The jackaroos were either stuck on the station doing repairs or off somewhere with the cattle. They only came into Tennant once a fortnight, for supplies and down time. Yvette promised she'd call me but she never did. She reckoned she was never alone. I found that hard to believe. But she just got pissed at me if I went on about it, so I didn't. *Let's just enjoy what we have*, she used to say. In the end, what we had didn't amount to much. I'd sneak up to the Roadhouse on the weekends that the jackaroos were in town. I'd tell Mum I was going to Maccas. There was one time, when Mum was away visiting in Katherine, that Yvette came to my house. I had this plan that we could lock ourselves in the bathroom while the kids had pizza and watched a DVD. But it never happened. The babies wouldn't settle and anyway we

didn't have a lock on the bathroom door so someone was bound to barge in while we were at it.

Mostly, I'd see Yvette at the Roadhouse. There we'd be, sitting around with the locals and the jackaroos, waiting until they got so wrapped up in a pool game or Foxtel that they wouldn't notice Yvette and I had slipped out to the beer garden to sit by ourselves. And if we were in luck, Steve and the others would go off to someone's cabin and smoke a joint. Those nights we'd spend a lot of time in the Ladies. (It's amazing what fun you can have around a handbasin.)

But the fun didn't last. Someone told Steve that I was coming onto Yvette. I reckon it was Andy, the old perv of a barman. He never liked me on account of some business between him and Mum. Or, it could have been one of jackaroos that told on us. They were dirty about Steve getting with the jillaroo in the first place, so spreading the word that she was a lezzie, well that solved a few problems for them, didn't it. Or, maybe dumb old Steve worked it out all by himself.

I figured we'd get caught out sooner or later. I mean, it was pretty obvious. I'd walk into the pub and the usual calling out would begin. *Get real, Teneale*. Teasing me about being underage and about how I should be home babysitting. Half joking, half serious. I'd give them the finger, or just ignore them. But when Yvette was there, she'd tell them shut up and leave me alone. You'd have to be blind not to see she was really sweet on me.

So, in the end, Steve catching us out wasn't what came as a surprise. It was how Yvette reacted when he did that rocked me.

It was the night the mob of bikers showed up with some Adelaide Brown. There was this huge guy with the tattoo of a snake on his bald head. He took Steve and the others with him to where they had their tents set up around a huge bonfire. It looked cool. But Yvette and me, we saw it as a chance to sneak off together. There was this spot, between the ablution block and the overnight cabins, and we crawled under there and settled in. We'd been there for maybe fifteen minutes, pashing like mad in the dark. Really got into it. Our tops were open, our jeans were undone. It was beautiful, just like at Edith Falls.

Then we heard the crunch of footsteps on gravel. Followed by voices. It was the jackaroos. All six of them, it sounded like. And they weren't passing by, on their way

back into the hotel. They were standing there, so close, we would have touched their legs if we'd have put our arms out. No way were we doing that.

I was really scared. So was Yvette. I could see her eyes, wide in the darkness. She was completely still. Not even allowing herself to breathe. Hoping, like me, they'd get bored and move on. I thought, maybe they had stopped for some reason unconnected with us. I was wrong. *Yvette, you out there?* It was Steve and he was pacing up and down. We could see his tall cowboy boots. Then someone cracked a whip. We both jumped in fright. *Yvette!* Closer this time and louder. Suddenly, a hand covered my mouth. I thought one of the jackaroos must have snuck up behind me. But it was Yvette. She spun me around, hooking her strong forearm around my neck. I couldn't work out what she was doing and then I felt a sharp pain. She'd thrust her knee into my back and the kick sent me flying. It was like I was a poddy calf and she was shoving me down a shute.

I scabbled in the dark on all fours along the crawl space underneath the row of cabins. I kept moving until I reached the corner where the hornets and spiders lived; where there was only my hot breathing and the pulse in my forehead. *Yvette.* I heard Steve calling. *You're not out here with that little slag, Teneale, are ya?* I stayed there for ages, well after they'd all gone back inside the pub.

Two weeks later, Yvette and the jackaroos were back at the Roadhouse. I waited in the beer garden. The bruise across the middle of my back had just about faded along with my hurt feelings. When Yvette finally came outside to the Ladies, I followed her inside so we could talk. But she freaked out when she saw me. *Piss off, you sicko. Leave me alone.* I thought she was just saying that for the blokes' benefit but she started punching me and pulling my hair. I held my arms in front of my face. *I'll do whatever you say, Yvette. I'll stay away from the pub. I won't even talk to you when the others are around. Promise.* But Yvette just walked off, leaving me on the floor of the toilet, crying.

I cleaned myself up and snuck around the back of the pub, to the hatch where people buy takeaways. I waited until old Andy was busy serving customers inside then I reached in through the bars and grabbed a bottle from a nearest shelf. Southern Comfort. I walked up the road a bit, took a couple of big gulps and zipped the bottle inside my hoodie. Then I started hitching. I was heading for Adelaide. I would have made it too, if it hadn't been for that truckie dobbing me in at Alice Springs.

I might have got off if it was just the Southern Comfort, but I had the truckie's wallet too, so I ended up in Juvie. But even that turned out okay. I met Jaylene in there and life was alright with her to look out for me. But then she was let out. And she dumped me, even though I only had a couple of months left myself. She was going straight back to that prick of a boyfriend. *I gotta think of me kid, Teneale.*

After that, I got really upset about Yvette again and when they found the cuts I was sent to therapy with Dr Lia. She's the one who started me writing a journal. Dr Lia made me do IQ tests which said I was smart. She wanted me to get on with my education. *No way I'm going to school*, I said. *I want to get a job*. I thought if I could earn some money I could get somewhere of my own, a place big enough for all my brothers and sisters. Then Dr Lia told me about the STAR program where I could train for a job (I chose Commercial Cookery) plus study school subjects. So that's what I did. And, if you ask me the best thing I've learnt so far? It's *chiffonnade*.

PS I know I didn't get around to discussing the film, but if you give me an extension, Mrs A, I'll give it another try. T.