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The surgeon who took out the bullet that had nearly killed me told me that I needed to lead a quieter life. Interesting choice of words. After the death of Lily Truscott, my partner of several years, a heart attack and bypass surgery and a near fatal bullet wound, I agreed that I needed something. But what? A new profession? I'd been a private detective for most of my adult life, and although that was closed to me after losing my licence for various infringements, the work, for better or worse, had become part of me and I couldn't imagine doing anything different. A new location? I'd been in Glebe so long that it felt like my habitat, my natural environment.

I'd inherited a lot of money from Lily. Guilt came with it because I hadn't put the same faith in the relationship. I helped my daughter Megan out, fixed up the house, paid some overdue debts and lived on the capital. I didn't really need—that word again—to work, but I didn't know how else

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to occupy myself. I didn't fish or play golf and you can only read so many books, see so many films, listen to so much music.

The solution was no solution at all, just an interim measure—a holiday. The idea gave me something to think about. The problem with inactivity is not just the inactivity itself but its accompaniment—having nothing to think about. I was used to having my head full of assumptions, misgivings, theories to do with whatever I was working on. I'd mentally trawl through cases for similarities and differences and process lists of names to help or obstruct. I missed all that.

Reading brochures and the travel sections of newspapers and magazines, recalling books set in exotic places, checking the posters in travel agency windows wasn't a substitute for my kind of investigation, but it occupied some brain cells. Talking to people was better, tapping their memories good and bad.

'I wouldn't advise Iran or Iraq,' Ian Sangster, my friend and GP, said. 'In fact I wouldn't leave Australia with your recent medical history. You seem to be totally recovered, very fit in fact, given what you've been through. But you never know, and if something went wrong your medicos'd need your bloody medical records.'

'Thanks a lot, Ian. You reckon I should think about somewhere close and calming, like Hobart.'

We were sitting at a table outside the Toxteth Hotel having a late morning drink. Ian was smoking and already

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well into his first of the two packets he'd smoked every day for thirty years.

'You might think about it. You could look for the graves of your convict ancestors.'

'Did that once, or someone did it for me. A couple ended up in Camperdown cemetery, so they're now under the sod where dogs shit and people do tai chi.'

'Just a suggestion.' He butted his cigarette and stood. 'And another thing, don't go off on your own. Find someone to go with you.'

That was a problem. I had other friends and I had a daughter, but no one I could think of who'd want to up stakes and take off as a travelling companion to someone who'd been knocked about as much as me. Even though I could pay.

I remembered what my mother—a hard-drinking, heavy-smoking, piano-thumping descendant of Irish gypsies—used to say when my father, a dour, sober man, bemoaned a difficult circumstance: 'Never you mind, boyo. Something'll turn up.' For her, it mostly did, and right then it did for me when I met my cousin, Patrick.

He'd tracked me down somehow on the internet and when he rang me I was struck by the similarity in our voices. 'I'm your cousin, Cliff,' he said. 'My grandad was your grandma's brother.'

'That right?' I said. 'She had a sister or two, I know, but I never heard of a brother.'

'Yeah, well I gather Grandad was a bit of a black sheep.'

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‘The way I heard it they were all black sheep. Gypsies.’

‘They weren’t gypsies.’ He sounded annoyed. ‘They were Irish Travellers.’

That was interesting and news to me. I’d only met my grandmother a few times when I was a kid. She was old, very dark, very wrinkled. I remembered that she shook her head and told my mother that I’d have an interesting life but wouldn’t make any money. I guess she was right on both scores. I hadn’t *made* the money. My mother always referred to herself as a gypsy and played up to it with scarves and rings and bracelets.

‘Sorry to be so abrupt,’ he said. ‘Look, why don’t we get together and have a drink and a yarn? I can fill you in a bit about the Travellers if you’re interested. To tell you the truth, you’re the only relative I’ve got left in the world.’

*Why not?* I thought. I asked a few questions and learned that his surname was Malloy. That figured. It was my grandmother’s name and my mother’s, her being illegitimate. He told me his age. He was a year younger than me. We agreed to meet the following day in the late afternoon at Kelly’s Hotel in King Street, Newtown.

‘I’ll shout you a Guinness,’ he said in exactly the kind of mock Irish accent I used to put on to the annoyance of my ex-wife, Cyn.

With time on my hands and not wanting to appear too ignorant, I did some quick web research on the Irish Travellers.

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Not Romany at all, it appeared, but indigenous Irish, the descendants of people who took to the roads centuries ago, no one quite knows when or why. Nomadic like the gypsies, followers of appropriate trades—like dog and horse breeding and selling, holding market stalls, dealers in second-hand goods. They apparently had their own language and customs and there was a strong musical tradition among them. That fitted Granny Malloy all right, who could sing like a bird in old age and play the fiddle. My mother had the same talents and I remembered her using odd words that she said she picked up from her mother. I'd assumed this was Romany talk, but maybe not.

Kelly's Hotel has an unusual history. It's on the site of the only known failure of a McDonald's franchise in Sydney. There's too much good food at reasonable prices along King Street for the cheap burger joint to flourish. The area has become so gentrified that a booth there recorded the highest Green vote in the state. Greenies don't go to Macca's.

The place has a cosy feel, with a ramp sloping gently up to the bar and tables and seats on either side. It handles the Irish theme well: there's the imitation snug and the barrels, but it's mostly a matter of tasteful photographs of Irish scenes—not a shillelagh in sight. It does light lunches and dinners and has the inevitable trivia competition one night a week. Lily and I went in for it once with Frank Parker, my ex-cop mate, and his wife Hilde, and got cleaned up by a table of youngsters who knew all about TV stars and bands later than Dire Straits.

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When I arrived there were only two tables occupied—one up near the bar and one near the front. I told the barmaid I was waiting for someone and took a seat in the middle of the space, off to one side. It's an old habit of mine to try to get a good look at someone I haven't met before he, or she, sees me. You can learn a bit from body language and mannerisms. I also try to be early for the same reason and because it can give you an insight into the habit of the other person: early might mean anxious, on time might mean obsessive; late might mean slack. Or not.

A lot of people passed in the street and a few came in and settled down to their drinks. I looked at my watch and about two minutes after the appointed time a man walked in with the air of someone unfamiliar with the place and hoping to be met. Two minutes late didn't mean anything in my analysis. But it wasn't the timing or his manner that caught my attention. This man was tall, well built, with dark hair going grey. He looked fit. He also had a beaked nose that had been broken at least once and white scar tissue from boxing threaded through his heavy eyebrows. In other words, he was a mirror image of me.