

Andy

Mark Clough

ALL DAY BREAKFAST, a strong flat white, and the moving feast of Brunswick Street made The Deli the perfect place to sit and watch the world go by. I'm pretty sure I saw Elvis wander past one day. Nothing to write home about there, at a guess half the population has strolled Brunswick Street at some time or another. The Deli was home to an eclectic mix of staff and regulars: *Big Issue* sellers, fashionistas, urban grunge and future Oscar winners were indistinguishable from one another. Age, sex and occupation dissolved into lattes, short blacks and macchiatos. Conversation started with a smile and a 'hello', and some enduring friendships grew from those chance encounters.

Across the road from my posi' at The Deli is the Black Cat, and next to the Black Cat, there's a sort of jungle. Not your deepest darkest variety, just an unexpected tangle of feral greenery. In front of the jungle, there's one of those old cast iron and red gum seats, and tucked into the corner of the seat – was Andy.

My walk to The Deli took me past the Black Cat, past the jungle and most days past Andy. The only acknowledgement I gave him was the smidgeon my pace quickened as I walked on by. Andy was just another Brunswick St fixture. His dishevelled existence was ingrained with the dirt and grime of his tenuous hold on the day. Every crease and pore was tattooed onto his being. His three-day growth might have been trendy under different circumstance, but the ginger grey stubble only served to mask a bruise or graze from who knows what scrap or stumble. Nicotine-muddied fingers gripped the brown paper bag he nursed.

The innocent promise of my morning coffee now came with the not so sweet after-taste of that life.

What the hell! Every second street corner of every Fitzroy on the planet has some guy feeling sorry for himself, thinking the world

owes him a living, or simply making a choice. Watching the passing parade is a spectator sport – isn't it? What position am I supposed to be playing here? Why me? Why now? The Deli was my oasis of comfort food and good cheer, which along with the occasional glass or two of something wet and red made it the perfect place to escape from the world, to read, to write, and to yaffle the hours away.

I closed my book, finished my coffee, crossed the road and walked past Andy, past the jungle, past the Black Cat and stopped. I stopped pretending to be oblivious to the reality I was so desperately trying to ignore. I stopped telling myself there was nothing I could do. I walked the few steps back to Andy's seat and sat down. Brilliant ...

What was it Voltaire said? 'Every man is guilty, of all the good, he did(n't) do.' A couple of locals smiled me a quizzical 'hi' and that was it ...

'People going by, saying how do you do, they're really saying ...'

My 'g'day' was met by the barest hint of a nod from the man at the other end of the seat, who simply said, 'Andy'.

His glance across at me said it all. We both knew in that blink that I was out of my depth: 'drowning not waving', with no clue what it was I was doing. When he turned back, to what I assumed would be his silent gaze, the gentle drift of Andy's words stilled my unease. The only thread connecting the chapters of Andy's life was the soft lilt of his accent and the constant reference to 'd dare divorced wife'. Once upon a time married, working, and enjoying family and friends. There was mention of a 'dare daughta', an accident, drinking, losing his job ... drinking. When he passed the paper bag to me ... how could I not break bread with this man? He'd loved and lost, worked and bled ... just like me. And he had a name ... just like me.

Whenever I saw Andy after that, I'd say 'hi' and occasionally sit and listen to another dulcet toned instalment of 'd dare divorced wife'. We didn't share any more tipples, of what had turned out to be a not so bad McWilliam's Dry Sherry, which I was assured is, 'a top buy on special'. I walked with him once, back to the boarding house in Gertrude Street. A few months after sitting with Andy that first time, I came across him apologising to the air. The familiar ebb and flow of

his voice had flattened into a mumbled slur that hid all but the words, 'sorry' and 'you're in'. When I leant over to try to make out what it was he was saying, there was no doubting, he really was very sorry – about the urine.

Over the next year or so Andy's vigil became more spasmodic. He didn't always acknowledge my 'g'day'. He didn't have to.

And then – Andy wasn't there.

When I tried to track him down, I was told he'd been in and out of St V's. His room had been let to another 'Andy', minus the melodic brogue. No one on the street knew what had become of him.

The Deli's still my home café. I still sit and scribble and watch the world go by. Andy's seat and the jungle alongside the Black Cat are still there and from time to time my thoughts drift back to Andy's story. The picture that most often comes to mind is a faded approximation of the hand-painted life I'd sat with. The aqua-marine eyes still on the verge of tearing up, and just as his eye catches mine, there's that momentary flash of memory – of 'd dare divorced wife' and a life that once was.

I doubt that I'll ever know the truth of what became of Andy – other than assuming the inevitable.

A broken heart'll do that ... every time.