

Interstate

Paul South

THE AUTOPSY occurs between friends in a chain of telephone calls.

Mick—that's right—hit by a car in Prahran.

They imagine him standing on Dandenong Road, glaring into the sun.

Poor guy. Of course, he wasn't very happy.

Wasn't he?

You know he was using again.

Those who don't know, pause to consider.

Well, he certainly has been isolated for a while. I haven't had a call from him in months.

They talk about him as if he'd gone interstate.

In the following days the focus changes to who has been told, and exactly how much. His daughters are organising the funeral. Daughters? I didn't know he had daughters, they say. Everything seems to be up in the air.

The phone calls finally peter out, but the awareness remains. At moments throughout the day they stop to look at the pen in their hand, or the car in front of them at the lights, or the train they are on takes a sudden bend and the land drops away. All that is left are rooftops and a faded sky. They share a deep sigh.

By mid-week the world is returning to normal. The city has no time for death; the flow of life pulls everyone forward, along corridors, down escalators, along loud and busy streets. There are moments brimming with activity, even joy.

There are moments, too, where an inexpressible shame overtakes them. They feel guilty for enjoying the small moments of their day. But when they stop and unpack these feelings, they realise that it's not that they don't

care about Mick, but that his death has made them see life's vibrancy and colour.

A text is received late in the week:

FUNERAL ON SUNDAY—DETAILS TO FOLLOW.

There is no sender's name attached. The week is now weighted toward Sunday, and everything stumbles forward. Carpooling is discussed. It's at the Holy Trinity in Cheltenham. Jesus—*Cheltenham*? Some begin organising babysitters; others simply can't afford the time. It should be in St. Kilda; that's the general opinion. I mean, he's lived here for—what—twenty years? More like thirty, say a few older heads.

Sunday morning is a dim time. Bodies groan, scratch around—now where is my shirt? Finally everything is ready. A lull follows: it's too late to do anything, yet too early to leave. All across St. Kilda, bodies hunch on couches, wearing cheap microfibre suits and job interview clothes. Throats reflux; mouths taste of toothpaste. Although their minds are quite muddled, they keep returning to the same kind of thoughts. What use am I? How does my presence make any of this better? The man was a junkie all his life. He was not a happy man. And now I'm going to meet his daughters.

But when the time finally comes and they drive down Brighton Road with the sun streaming down and the windows open, it doesn't really feel so awkward or unpleasant. In fact, it doesn't feel like they are attending a funeral at all. They are going somewhere, into the blue, a car-full of old friends going on some long-awaited holiday.