

As Time Goes By

Jane Downing

THERE'S A LOW intake of breath. I can see that the woman behind the checkout has punched in zucchini when it is clearly a cucumber rolling to a stop on the scales. The shopper in front of me has every right to be irritated, so it is inevitable. The Earthly Contentment employee sways out from behind the grocery conveyer belt, hoisting her skirt on the way. A patch of mutual masturbation will diffuse the potential conflict.

The tall woman behind me can sense my frustration rising at the delay. I only came in for Earthly Contentment pasta and Earthly Contentment olives and the latest *Truth* gazette. I'd thought the Ten Items or Fewer lane looked tension-free.

'Do you need to?' the tall woman asks.

I calm my breathing, smile compassion.

'Not a problem,' I lie. So she turns to the next person in the queue. He's on the edge of fractious so they go to it, her sitting on the conveyer belt, him standing. I see him rifle through the obligatory basket of E.C. condoms. He takes three, pocketing two banana-flavoured. He must anticipate a few points of negotiation through the day. He's pretty fat, but well exercised. He has good thigh muscles: his rhythm is pneumatic. The tall woman's knee knocks against me. I reach over and move the enviro bags that have become wedged under her buttocks. She smiles thanks over the man's shoulder. They can believe it is consideration on my part and not any anal hang-up with hygiene.

I put myself somewhere else while they all finish up and the checkout operator returns to her side of the transactions. I can remove myself

in mind at least. I think about the research paper I have to write when I get home.

I walk home. It's quicker these days. Driving on the freeways is generally hassle-free with traffic lights and abundant signage but once you get into the narrow roads, keeping a steady speed becomes problematic. Disputes over parking and right of way congest the streets, with a knock-on effect as others ease their impatience while the argumentative drivers screw through to orgasm and solution. I pass a couple of kids on hover scooters, or rather off them. One of the kids has a tattoo of a bonobo on his left rump cheek. They were all the rage a few years ago, in the spirit of the *make love not war* ethos our species share. This one is quite clever, placed over one of the larger gluteus muscles of the cheek so the monkey dances at each thrust. A perfect illustration of rumpy-pumpy.

An old school mate comes around the corner at this moment. I look up from the dancing tattoo and see her with just enough time to duck out of the way. The Earthly Contentment Sushi Bar is closest. I don't want the mock salmon—celery and mayonnaise—sushi roll I'm obliged to buy but neither can I stand the thought of another handshake. She was always more of a grinder than a groper and this was one of those days of the month when my balls felt tender and sensitive. I'd heard on Facebook that she'd got into film school. She'd probably want to console me on my History course too.

Back on the street I can't help but notice the graffiti on the pavement near the corner. ENNUI. The word is stark in khaki letters a foot high. It has been turning up on walls and pavements all over town. The *Truth* runs letters to the editor expressing concern for the misguided criminal. There's been the suggestion that a cathartic orgy should be organized once the culprit is identified. To suck the deluded psychopath back into the community.

I purposefully relax my facial features in case anyone is watching me read the graffiti. I hope he can stay underground, the poor sod.

It's a quiet neighbourhood once you get a few blocks from the Friendly Chain Stores. It's amazing how many people have taken to foot. The air is cleaner. I've only been here a few years, coming in from the 'burbs to study, but I've noticed a difference in that time. I'm glad I came. My research supervisor is calm and measured. A good woman. A bit of comfort nuzzling was called for at first when I was anxious

about starting the course but there've been no hitches since so our relationship is remarkably hands-free. I don't know if she can tell how much I appreciate this.

The vid room of the group apartment is empty so I don't have to actively negotiate time and space. *This could be my lucky day*, I joke to myself. Not aloud. No one wants to be labelled a deviant or a throwback.

My supervisor has assigned some old pornographic—as they were apparently once called—films. Pre-History is not a popular area of research these days, but she said *Debbie Does Dallas* and *Edward Penis-hands* and their ilk are indicative of the more primitive cultures.

The vids have been copied and burnt and ripped across and through so many mediums and platforms over the century that the footage is grainy, almost frayed around the digital edges. The past *is* another planet, like the philosophers say. The colours are dull (where were the UHD hues then?) and the people, though they look like us, move differently. They quickstep. They jerk. The sex is hilarious. What did this lot have about penetration?

After the eponymous Debbie had done Dallas, the name of another crumbling old city appears on the vid screen. The accompanying music is rousing. Casablanca. That translates into White House in Universal. It's an old seat of power. I wonder how what I assume is a political drama from the Empire Era has got into the batch of vids, and only sit there watching because of the normal biorhythm lethargy of late afternoon. I find I am wrong about the White House translation.

The film is shocking. There are guns everywhere. The narrative is set in a time of war, one of those great global conflicts, though I am not a competent enough historian to identify which century. Within minutes a man is shot in the street. No wonder the Gen-ethicists developed drugs to genetically trigger the next Great Leap Forward in evolution. The evils of testosterone are being made to manifest in front of me. I can only sit there and thank goodness that the bonobo experiments suggested cortisol as a gene motivator.

And I do sit there, though I think maybe I should turn the vid off. I'm not entirely sure this narrative is even legal. Violence has so long been banned that the laws are hazy in public memory. It's not something I'll be asking the Silverbacks about.

The colours have completely leached out of the picture in front of me but somehow the experience remains vibrant and vivid. I do not

want to turn the film off. I wait for the sexual imagery and here is more shock. There is none beyond chaste lip-kisses that never drop to the genitals. Nothing else. At one point when a perfectly sound exchange of sexual favours is negotiated in return for travel opportunities, the barter is thwarted by the dour protagonist. It is inexplicable.

I watch a beautiful, pale woman torn between this dour man and another, neither of whom she conspicuously fornicates with despite testiness and even open anger being displayed. There is some deep underlying emotion I do not understand. I have no words in my vocabulary to describe it. They talk of *love* and *nobility*. The word *sacrifice* arrives in my head.

I can hear my apartment mates rustling around in the kitchen now and vaguely remember my pasta and olives. Still I sit alone in a room that is now dark except for the black and white flickering images.

My heart feels heavy, like there is a lead weight sitting on my chest. An unpleasant feeling, an irresolvable ache, and yet I keep watching to the very end. One man sacrifices his needs for the other. The woman gets on a silver jet with wings. It lifts into the sky. I lift my hand and am surprised to feel a tear on my cheek.

Tilly flashes on the overhead light. She picks up on my distress instantly and comes over. Her hands and lips are on me to release the ache, but I do not want to let it go. All I want is for someone to really see me and say, *here's looking at you kid*.