

Queer as Vienna Coffee by Timothy Collard

It was the last day of school. A swarm of Year 12s had descended on the Gold Coast, lured by the honeypot of all things bacchanal and libidinous. Noah and I stayed in Brisbane and saw a movie at Hoyts in the Myer Centre. It was *The Exorcist III*. *The Courier-Mail* had crucified it with a one-star review, but being horror aficionados we had to go and see for ourselves.

And we loved it. There were only four others in the vast auditorium and we all screamed in unison at the end of the nurse-station scene.

'The best jump-scare ever!' Noah declared as we emerged ninety minutes later giggling and giddy.

It was only eight thirty. The Hoyts foyer buzzed with schoolkids queuing for tickets and popcorn. Noah scrunched up his nose like he'd inhaled something fetid. 'They'll be seeing *Ghost* or *Days of Thunder*.'

Outside, Queen Street Mall was a torrent of Friday-night shoppers and revellers. We stood for a moment under the eaves of the Myer Centre, transfixed by the maelstrom. I found myself saying, 'What do we do now?'

'Shall we go to The Hague for coffee?'

Noah was pointing to a sign a few doors up. *Café The Hague*, it read. My experience of coffee was limited to *Nescafé*, or *Moccona* if Mum and Dad had visitors.

Further down the mall a scuffle broke out in the queue for Hungry Jacks.

'Coffee sounds great!' I said.

The door closed behind us. Couples were huddled over round wooden tables under stained-glass lampshades and an ambient jazz track wove its way through muted conversations. Above the counter hung the menu, an intriguing tableau of double consonants and odd vowel placements: *Cappuccino*, *Espresso*, *Ristretto*... A hiss of steam escaped from somewhere behind the counter.

I nudged Noah. 'Do you know what to order?'

'I haven't a fucking clue.'

There was one thing on the menu we could at least pronounce with conviction.

Noah strode up to the counter. 'Two Vienna Coffees, please.'

We found a table in a recess at the back. The drinks were brought to us in tall glasses with a generous swirl of whipped cream rising Matterhorn-like above the rim. Mixed into the aromatic coffee the taste was indulgent, luxuriant. Like drinking velvet. And we loved it.

A silence brewed between us as we stirred and sipped. From the speakers a saxophone wailed a lament.

'So here we are,' said Noah eventually, a smile playing across his lips. 'Now we're no longer schoolboys, does that mean we're men?'

I laughed and felt my cheeks redden. 'What sort of question is that?'

He held my gaze and cocked an eyebrow. 'When can we say we're no longer boys? What has to happen? An eighteenth birthday? Getting pissed and laid down at Surfers?'

'You're so crass.'

'Well, I'm excited.'

'About manhood?'

'About what happens next.' Noah took another sip of velvet. 'We have possibilities now, choices. I could go and study in Melbourne.'

I regarded him quizzically. 'But we've applied to UQ.'

'I know, but one day, who knows?'

And for the first time I countenanced a possibility of life without Noah. The guy with whom I bonded on the first day of high school over a mutual adoration of *Doctor Who* and *The Kenny Everett Video Show*. The guy who introduced me to the pop-rapture of Stock Aitken Waterman and who squealed with me on rides at the Ekka. The guy who never called me names.

Noah raised his glass. His smile was warm. 'To men. With choice.'

These days Noah prefers a double-shot macchiato. I prefer wine. I have grey hair, he has none. *Hoyts* has gone; it's a *Target* now. And *Café The Hague* is a kebab shop.

But we did make a point of ordering Vienna Coffee in *The Hague* on our honeymoon.