

The Canal

They all remembered him. He remembered them. Even after fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years.

“Good afternoon, Mr Wynn.”

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, Mr Wynn?”

“Oh, yes, I can still remember your history classes, Mr Wynn.”

“Fourth form I believe it was, wasn’t it, Mr Wynn?”

Mr Wynn. Mr Wynn. Where, once, it had been Mr Unwin, Mr No-Win, Mr Can’t Win or Mr Never Win.

And in response he was compelled to say, “Well, well, it’s you, Charlie Fisher. . .” and “Goodness, it’s you, Judy Nisbet, how nice, how nice. . .” and “Jimmy Nichols, that beard, I’d never have recognised. . .”

The classroom in which he had once taught them all needed painting, needed renovating, ventilating. Though it was not a school-day, chalk-dust stuck in his throat. By some improbable miracle, he had already forgotten its dryness, retirement having given him the wherewithal to nurture roses and gladioli and honeydewed carnations. But then in his day, there had been little dust. Every piece of chalk, every duster was in its place. No chart was by as much as a millimetre askew. Perfection itself could not be too perfect. He had demanded much of others, but not without demanding much of himself as well.

Across the blackboard, a large multicoloured “WELCOME OLD BOYS” had been scrawled, conceding nothing to the

girls, and around it were sketches of gargoyles, tombstones, books and scattered epigrams, "Jerker Jenkins slept here", "Clem Diesendorfer swallowed a watch and thus did pass the time", "Class of '56 where a minute was a century and a century interminable" and "Form 4B, *Requiescat in Pace* and forever Amen".

"Three children now, Janice? My! And tell me, you're working?"

"Deserted wives' pension, Mr Wynn."

"But you were always so... so... Who would have believed?"

Along the back wall, on long rectangular cork-boards, he saw faces, multitudes looking out from photographs, black-and-white mementos salvaged from limbo to be returned after the reunion for yet another generation. Over here, the girls' ace basketball team, beside it the inter-school championship football eighteen, beneath them the chess club, the library club, the debating troupe of which he himself had been in charge, and photographs of prefects, form captains, house captains, school dux, school monitors, and group snaps of teachers — funny, haven't seen Dulcie Conlan here today, and poor Dick Rafferty, he's gone now, shan't see him again, nor Jessie Knight, nor Gracie Fegan, oh God, my God — so like puppets, knuckles on thighs, shoulders back, simian smiles to the dictate of the garrulous, scatter-brained photographer with his standard line, "Have camera, will travel."

"The way you debated, Malcolm, I was sure you were headed for parliament."

"Better still, Mr Wynn. Invite me over one evening and I'll sell you insurance."

"And you, Leslie, you too were a very sound speaker."

"Dad's business got me. Carpets and curtains and manchester goods."

One by one, in pairs, in threes, they approached him. He stood by the window where the light was best. But even the best was bleak, for winter respected no reunions, the clouds were turgid with grey-black menace, and rain, not heavy but

none the less audible, was striking against the panes. The green of the lawns quickly acquired a soggy look, the asphalt glistened mercuric, while beyond the fence, the waters of the canal rippled and glittered silvery under the patter.

"I can still remember, Mr Wynn. . . It could have been yesterday. . . But it's all of twenty-two years. . . how you would say, 'History is flow, a river, a tide, like the waters of the canal out there. . .'"

"And so it is, Marion, so it is. Just try to stop its flow. . ."

Stop its flow, he thought. Sixty-eight now. Retired three years. Angina tablets. Blood pressure pills. Forty-four years a teacher. Forty-four times seventy, eighty students. Three thousand, three-and-a-half thousand of them. What had become of them all?

"Children, Barry?"

"Not married, Mr Wynn. The single life for me."

Gay bachelor, eh?"

"It's a long story, sir. Was engaged once. But fell ill for a long time. . ."

"Oh yes, you had four months off school once also. Or was it six? . . ."

"Long enough, sir. On a pension now. . ."

"But you're not forty yet. . ."

"Thirty-eight, sir. Invalid pension. . . Nerves, sir. . . Never worked, sir. . . Could never work, sir. . ."

He saw that it was raining more heavily now, more steadily. Out to the east, above the rooftops, lightning pierced the grey-ness like a jagged yellow splinter. Thunder followed, hollow, booming. People caught in the rain came running into the school. What had before been silvery was now leaden. The level of the water in the canal had risen sharply. Its surface was restless. If character could be given to it, it was turbulent, angry.

"And you wanted to be a philosopher once, Andrew, I remember?"

"Naive the head that sits on the shoulders of a child, as they say in the classics, Mr Wynn."

"And now?"

"An accountant. Five children, the youngest seven weeks. Two mortgages. An overdraft. You know the kind of thing. Try philosophising on that."

"Hello, Roger. You *have* filled out. And this must be Mrs Bennett. . ."

"My friend, Julie, Mr Wynn. My wife and I. . ."

"Yes, yes, I understand. . ."

"I mean, my wife. . . she died. . . leukaemia. . . acute. . . the whole illness took six weeks. . ."

"Yes, yes, I understand. . ."

The water in the canal was rising.

"And Brian Corbett, glad to see you. And you became the doctor you wanted?"

"A chemist, Mr Wynn."

"And your friend. . . what was his name?. . . He sat beside you. . . in that seat. . . Raphael, I believe. . . showed a lot of promise, he did. . ."

"Raphael? Wiped himself off, Mr Wynn. Got himself drunk one night and took a long walk off a short pier, as the saying goes. . . But then he was always so. . . so intense. . ."

"And Jacquie Chamberlain, too, I heard. . . Barbiturates, I was told. . ."

The tree-tops rocked with choreic violence. He heard the wind, a squall whistle and rasp through the branches. Leaping waves splashed vigorously against the concrete reinforcements of the canal.

"Dawn Carmichael!. . .Hello!"

"Carmody, Mr Wynn. . ."

"Yes, yes, Dawn Carmody. Did you keep up the swimming? You were Olympic material. . ."

. "A bun in the oven stopped that, I'm afraid. But my youngest. . . she's twelve. . . *She'll* be a champ. . ."

"So long as she keeps buns out of the oven, eh?"

They continued to come. Some held cups of coffee, others drank cola or lemonade. He recognised Richard Henderson, Norman Clayton, Susan Fogarty. One-time debaters, sports

champions, star pupils, class comedians, would-be poets: now clerks, salesmen, mechanics, secretaries; Colin Tierney a one-horse-town solicitor, Sally Milner a divorcee, Faye Donohue mother of a child dead from tuberosc sclerosis. Their faces once round or oval or square, but ever smooth, now given to sharper edges, deeper crevices, acne scars. And scalps once healthy with dark, dense, youthful hair, now balding, greying, psoriatic and coarsened like his own. The classroom was becoming crowded. They came to escape the storm. Thirty, forty, fifty of them squeezed in. Some with husbands, wives, children, *de factos*, most of them laughing, chatting, reminiscing, exclaiming in greeting, crying out in surprise. The steam of their breaths dispelled the dryness of the chalk-dust. Their wet shoulders rubbed against the blackboard, smudging the welcome, the gargoyles, the tombstones, the epigrams and the books.

Outside, lightning struck at the windows, their frames rattled with the ensuing thunder. The rain now fell in sheets. He saw the water of the canal overflow its banks.

History is flow, he remembered, a river, a tide like the canal out there. . .

"Well, Michael Simpson, did anything I taught you ever prove useful?"

"With all due respect, Mr Wynn, history scarcely helps in running a men's wear store."

Water spilled through the fence, streamed across the asphalt, flooded the lawns. Green and white tongues of foam lapped at the foundations of the classrooms.

"And I always thought that you, Martin, might some day lecture in history."

"Turned to commerce instead."

The water level had risen an inch above ground now, two inches. Quickly, it became ankle-deep. He could no longer make out the canal as a separate entity, nor the asphalt or grass.

"While you, Harold, were such a whiz with dates. . ."

"Oh yes! Still am. James II, 1685, William III, 1688, Mary

II, 1689. . . Cushy job now. . . Collecting figures for the government on the unemployed. . .”

The waste, he thought. The waste! How insipid they are. Had nothing of what he had taught them rubbed off? Had nothing of what he had expected of them come about? History is flow, a river, a tide. . . Small lives, petty lives, ruined lives.

The waters rose higher. Outside, the school seemed surrounded by sea. A seagull skimmed over the surface with outstretched legs. A terrier paddled placidly about. Nearby, the tree-trunks were black with sogginess, while, beyond them, he could see none of the houses that he knew were there. And then the grey-green breakers clamouring at the windows blotted out all view. The first hasty rivulets trickled through cracks around the windows while through the doorway a deluge spilling down the corridor spread swiftly and mightily into every cranny in the room. He felt the wetness in his shoes. His cuffs became heavy. The swell enveloped the legs of his former students who stood crammed together chatting merrily and drinking their coffee, coke and lemonade from their cups. He saw the trouser-legs of the men grow black, saw too the dresses of the women being lifted to swipe at the faces of their children who stood up to their elbows, their shoulders, their necks in the water. Jennifer Armstrong who sold umbrellas at Myer's laughed at some particular joke; Rosalie Urban, the waitress at Leo's, said "Really, you don't say!" to a snippet of gossip. "Spent a year in Pentridge, two more on probation," said Robert Stevens, while Terry Bannister said, "Made a fortune, lost a fortune on the horses."

The heads of the children had now disappeared altogether, the photographs on the walls curled to cylinders, water filled the cups that were being held and entered the mouths of those gathered there. Words emerged as gurgles. There may have been bubbles on the surface, but those were lost in the eddies, the swirls and the lifting waves. Watching all this, he stood upon a chair. Trevor Munro's was the last head to go under. Mr Wynn had hoped that he, at least, who had possessed every

talent and attained every high position — school dux, master debater, prize footballer, house captain, head prefect — would have protested at his consignment to oblivion, but before he went under, he simply looked around, said, “I guess I’ve disappointed you, Mr Wynn. The doctors say I’m an incorrigible drunk”, and vanished quickly as the others had done.

Mr Wynn stepped on to the table; then there was no higher he could go. But the waters continued to swell. He could no longer see the blackboard, nor the corkboards, let alone the windows. The curled sodden photographs were tossed about on the tremulous surface. Also a pennant flag, a school cap, a glove, and, strangely disembodied, an old and frayed school tie.

Not struggling, but in concert with rhetoric, he thrashed his arms about.

“At least they could resist!” he cried out into the diminishing space between sea and ceiling. “They could fight, at least, struggle, try to be free..!”

Billowing surf lapped about his waist, his torso, his throat.

“I taught them history. . . taught them about the great, the illustrious, the mighty, hoping that they too. . . they too. . .”

A backwash lashed at his chin, sprayed his hair. He spat out the water that had swept into his mouth.

“O, the pains I went to. . . the preparations. . . the efforts on their account. . . And yet the waste! The waste! The waste!”

He raised himself on his toes.

“History is flow, is river, is tide. . . Try to stop its flow. . .”

He turned his head from another pitching watery rush.

“One *can't*..! Its flow cannot be stopped. But to try to rise above it at least. . . try to rise out of it. . . Even if nothing else, even if nothing else, even if nothing else..!”

High as he stood, he could not hold back the next vaulting surge. The water swirled into his mouth, filled his lungs. He tried to breathe, but breath was not to be had. Reaching upward, he discovered space beneath the ceiling, but that too filled quickly and all was water, ocean, flood, in the depths of

which still stood all who had come to the reunion, fixed now in waxen postures, and wholly mute, unseeing, deaf. He wanted one last time to call out, to cry, "What has become of you all?" but not a sound emerged now and all he could think of before blackness came upon him was that the classroom needed painting, needed renovating, ventilating, and that in *his* day. . .