

A Cracker of a Game

Damian told me this story a couple of years ago, just the week before he died.

Is the story true? Well, Damian said so, and he had no reason to lie. The chances are that every word is the undiluted truth, a dying man's confession to his best mate and fellow Collingwood supporter.

It was a sod of a day, that first Saturday in October, the day of the 1990 Grand Final.

Then again, almost every day in winter and spring is a sodding day on the stretch of road between Narbethong and Marysville, in that ferny-forested country on the way to nowhere important; the road invariably littered with bark and leaves and unidentifiable bio-sludge.

They were expecting me at Marylands at around eleven that morning with a delivery of a new Rheem heat pump and it was to be my only delivery for the day. I would've loved to go to the Grand Final in the afternoon, but I didn't have a ticket and I wasn't about to shell out \$500 – cash I didn't have anyhow – to a scalper to get myself a hot ticket.

My club, Collingwood, was playing Essendon in their first Grand Final matchup since 1911, decades before I was born, and I fully expected some new history to be made on this day in 1990.

Now, if you've ever been out there on the Narbethong-Marysville road, you'll know that it has more twists than a corkscrew. There I was, with the tall timber looking down on me, cruising cautiously around the bends in the Hilux, and in no particular hurry. Like a little mechanical fly trapped in a huge drum, the drone of the ute hummed its tuneless tune in there among the mighty gums of the Marysville State Forest.

I'd completely given up trying to coax any music into the cab; in that area the reception on the ute's radio had more crackle than a box of Coco Pops. To hell with the radio anyway. I didn't need another serve of Billy Idol's *Cradle of Love* or Maxi Priest's *Close to You*.

The next bend was particularly sharp. I slowed right down, so much so that if I'd been going any slower I'd probably have been going backwards.

And there he was, half across the road, a tall fellow in a full-length japara with a Collingwood beanie pulled down hard over his ears. He held up his right hand in a classic policeman's stop gesture.

In my two second assessment of the situation I saw no vehicle next to the road so naturally I wondered where the hell he'd come from, and I don't mind telling you that I was disinclined to stop. What if the fellow was some sort of nutcase? Remember that scary-as-buggery movie, *The Hitcher*, with Rutger Hauer? Except in the movie, the hitcher was the regular person and the driver, Hauer, was the evil-bastard serial killer.

I almost drove over his foot as I cruised past him, then, three seconds later, just as I was about to follow the road around the twist, I checked the rearview mirror, as you do in such a situation.

The fellow was still there. In the middle of the road.

Eighty or so metres ahead, I turned gently into the next twist. Easy does it. VicRoads should have awards for model drivers like me

I wouldn't say that I'm a bloke who is easily spooked but what I saw next hit me with a fair whack of disbelief. Standing there on the muddy shoulder of the road, hand raised, was japara-man. You

might say that men wearing long, black japeras in winter in Victoria are actually not an unusual sight, but when the wearer is sporting a Collingwood beanie drawn down tightly over his ears, on a remote road, and just a stone's throw from a previous identical sighting, that's enough to activate your what-the-fuck button.

I stopped. My curiosity trumped my recent reluctance to stop, and I justified my curiosity by telling myself that maybe the bloke standing there was really in need of help. Maybe he was one of a tribe of Collingwood supporters hiding there in the Marysville State Forest, looking for a safe habitat from the threat of advancing civilization?

'Oi, mate!' I called over to japara-man. 'You in trouble? Need a hand?'

Never let it be said that a Collingwood supporter will fail to offer the hand of help to a fellow supporter; it just won't happen.

'Yeah, for sure.' And that's all he said. I turned off the ute, pulled the handbrake and offloaded my carcass from my vehicle. Maybe the fellow is shocked, I thought, or dehydrated. Or something. Maybe his car has gone over the edge? Plunged way down into the bottomless fern gullies below?

I stop a couple of paces from the man, 'What's the matter, mate?'

And, staring right past me, he massaged his neck, flexed his shoulders, and answered, 'It's Jennifer. Need help to bury her. The ground is too bloody hard. I don't have a shovel...'

'What? We can't just bury someone here...' Is this fellow serious or completely bonkers? Explain to me how he thinks he can just up and bury someone here among the gumtrees and giant ferns and, to do so, flag down a passing vehicle as casually as looking for help with a blown gasket or a shredded tyre?

I hear myself asking, 'Where's Jennifer?'

Rather than answer me, the seeker-of-help beckons me to follow him and, out of morbid fascination and old-fashioned stupidity, I go, but minding to keep a little distance between us. You can't be too careful, can you?

We stepped off the road at a point where there was a rough track, descended a little, and there, in a tiny clearing, like a discarded doll, lay the crumpled figure of a woman.

I hear myself again. 'What happened?'

'Stupid argument. One of those stupid arguments which come from nowhere...'

Only half listening to beanie-bloke, I step forward to kneel beside the prone figure, take hold of her wrist, check her pulse. She's cold, but... wait now, there's a flicker of a heartbeat!

'She's alive,' I declared as evenly as possible, 'but only just. Do you know CPR?'

'Maybe I do, but maybe I don't,' is the reply. 'What difference does it make? Let's just bury her.'

Then I noticed the wound on the back of her head, noticed the blood oozing through her matted hair while japara-man was just standing there, hands in his pockets if you don't mind, waiting for... waiting for... waiting for I don't know what.

He was still yapping, '... you know, when a woman gets a notion, there's no changing her mind. We were in the car with Eddie when she went off her tree, all because I said we couldn't get to see her

nan in the nursing home today. I said to her, it's the bloody footy final today, for fuck's sake. She started screaming, started clawing at me and carrying on a treat and there was no stopping her, mate. And Eddie, never the most patient bloke, pulled the car over, ordered us to get out. Drove off. Don't think the bastard even looked back. Well, mate, that's when I lost it with her...'

I was thinking what a fine mess I'd gotten myself into. In the middle of nowhere with a half-dead woman and a fellow running around dressed up in a Collingwood beanie like he was thinking of being at the MCG that afternoon. Involuntarily I shivered and it wasn't just from the cold. My brain was numb. What now?

'Stay here,' I ordered the man, 'I'll go for help. Just pray that it's not too late for Jennifer.'

'Let's just bury her, mister. We need to get to Melbourne for this afternoon's game. We need to be there. Need to be there to see Collingwood win.'

'That'll be something,' I can't help saying. 'You know, this could be our best chance for the flag since fifty-eight. Since a frigging lifetime ago.'

Then I heard his voice again, offering me honey from heaven. 'I've got tickets, you know, for Archie and Jennifer and me.'

'Archie?'

'Yeah, Archie, my brother. He's up there by the road somewhere, looking for help. How about you give us a ride to the MCG and you can have Jennifer's ticket? You won't regret it. It'll be a cracker of a game.'

'But what about Jennifer?'

'Well, the way I see it, she didn't want to come anyway. She's a Kiwi, you know, and people like her aren't capable of understanding our game. Over there in Kiwiland, they play that primitive ball sport which they call rugby union, a play of all beef and no brains.'

'I don't have a spade', I offered matter-of-factly. 'What are we gonna do with Jennifer?'

'We'll call triple zero for the ambos from the first available phone box. Then we'll let them know where she is and that she's not feeling too good.'

Short of having a written contract, I'd bought myself into the deal. I needed to get to the MCG. By all calculations it'd be a cracker of a game.

And, yes, it was a memorable Saturday, that first Saturday in October 1990. Collingwood bombed the Bombers into submission and won the game by eight goals. And the Collingwood captain, Tony Shaw, won himself the Norm Smith Medal.

I tell you, it was a cracker of a game.