

Michael Wilding

You Are Writer

The downside of early retirement was that in not going to work anywhere, you did not regularly and automatically meet any fellow wage-slaves, eager to rush off and have a long lunch with you. Or even a short one. Pawley was spending more and more time on his lantana farm up in the bush. And Dr Bee, who knew what Dr Bee was doing? The last time Henry had seen him had been from the window of a bus down the seedy end of town, standing outside a shop whose window declared 'All Your Oriental Needs Supplied.' All of them? Really? And then the bus had shuddered forward and Henry never knew whether Dr Bee had remained standing outside like an ageing Heathcliff, or had entered and been supplied.

He phoned Dr Bee and delivered his lament.

'Bad as employment was,' he said, 'it was at least a place to meet.'

'Ah, meat!' said Dr Bee. 'You are missing the young flesh that university supplied.'

'It's not that,' said Henry.

'Of course it is,' said Dr Bee. 'We are still human even if retired. We still have our desires and needs to fulfil.'

'Oriental ones?'

'Whatever turns you on,' said Dr Bee.

'I don't think of university as a flesh market.'

'Oh, yes, you do,' said Dr Bee. 'Or did. It was our equivalent of Hollywood. "A business that would feel lost if it didn't have a dozen or so women to 'introduce' every year." I quote,' he added, meticulous as ever in attribution, no point courting the opprobrium of plagiarism charges.

'You quote? What from?'

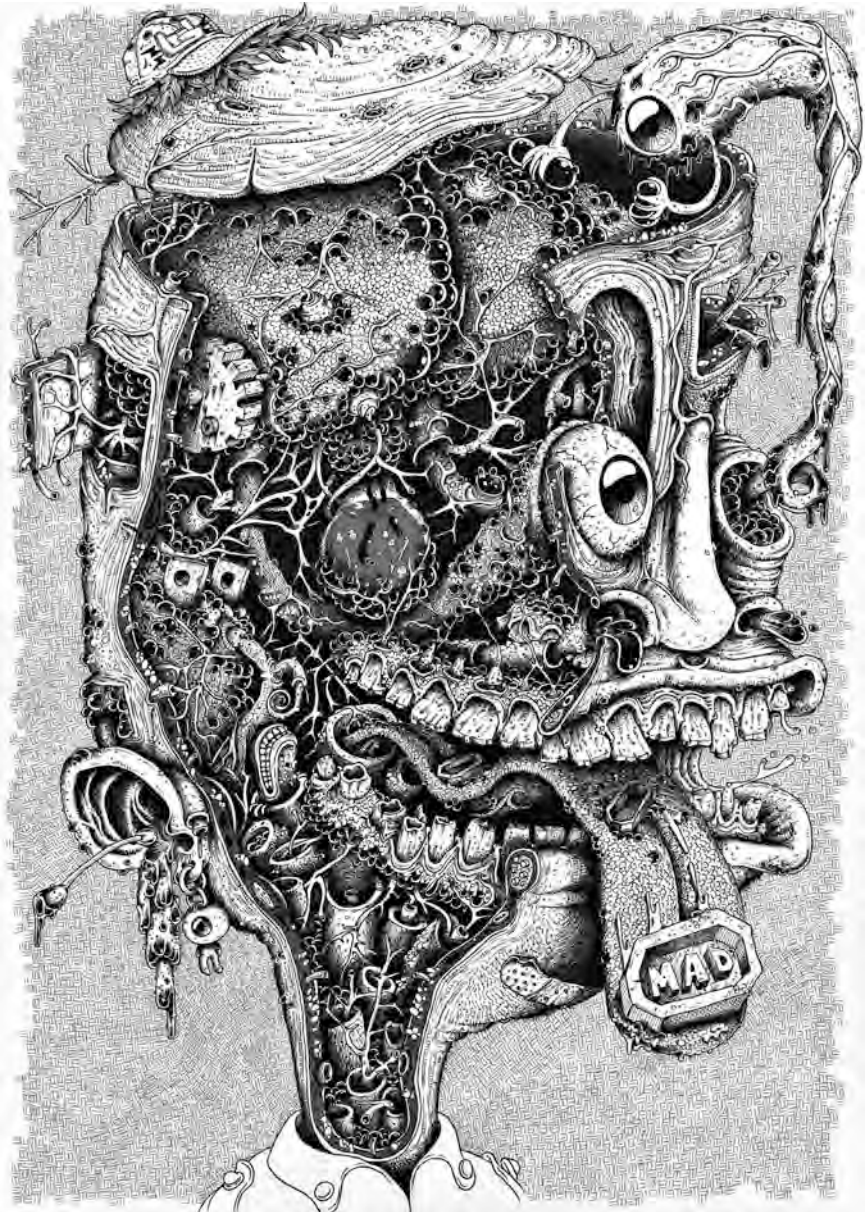
'The life of Nicole Kidman.'

'What on earth are you reading that for?'

'Media studies,' said Dr Bee.

'What media studies?'

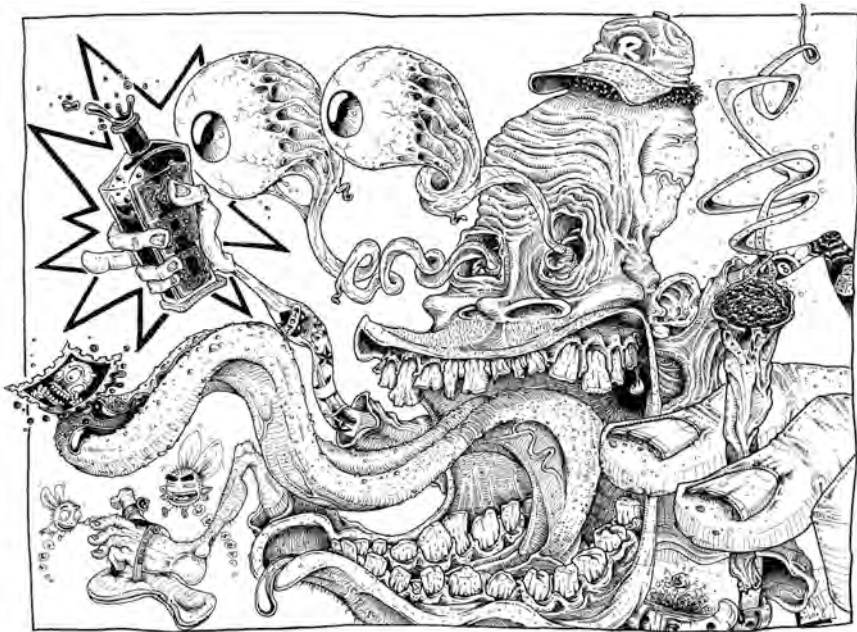
'Our former Department of English Language and Literature, you



may not have noticed since you claim no longer to enter its portals, is now designated the School of Letters, Art and Media. On the lam as hardened criminals used to say in those quaint old Pinewood movies. Or perhaps So-laam, to court our Islamic brethren and the oil producers.'

'And you're conscientiously keeping up to date with advances in the discipline by buying biographies of movie stars.'

'Who said anything about buying?' Dr Bee asked. 'I settle on a sofa at the local chain store book emporium. A cup of tea beside me. A recipe book open to transcribe anything that looks interesting. A biography of a movie star, as you put it, to stir up the testosterone. And I survey the mid-morning trade. Mid-afternoon, too, if it's good.'



'A boulevardier of the shopping malls,' said Henry.

'It has its rewards,' said Dr Bee.

'I don't believe you.'

'There are also the satisfactions of prurience. I quote again: "gingery pubic hair, small breasts, and boyish hips." Not being a vegetarian I omit the reference to the beanpole figure. Unappealing to us carnivores.'

'I didn't know she was ginger.'

'Gingery,' Dr Bee corrected him. 'A slight but subtle difference. Just that little more salaciously suggestive, don't you feel?'

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'I wouldn't know,' said Henry.

'Oh, yes, you would. It is your trade, after all.'

'Trade? What trade?'

'Trade, what trade? Methinks you do protest too much. I was merely referring to the writer's trade. But your reaction suggests an anxiety about accusations of other trades. Traders in the flesh, perhaps.'

'I have no interest in flesh,' said Henry.

'I find that hard to believe,' said Dr Bee.

'You reach a certain age and you ask yourself, what for? You look at those sad old men compulsively chasing after young women. Year after year. And you know how it's going to turn out. Boredom. Recrimination. Parting. Retribution. Every time. Sometimes one aspect more painful than the others. Or more expensive. It's not worth it. Apart from the condoms with all the safe sex stuff. I don't see the appeal.'

'How sad,' said Dr Bee. 'Those young unformed minds and fully formed bodies no longer turn you on?'

'Their fatuous sentiments. Ill-informed beliefs. Cultural ignorance. Wanton prejudice. I can't go through hearing all that again.'

'Get foreign ones.'

'Foreign what?'

'Sex-workers. Then you don't have to take any notice of what they say because it's in some language you can't understand.'

'What sort of language?'

'You don't need to know. Indeed you probably wouldn't want to know.'

'I certainly don't want to know,' said Henry.

'The sad words of a sad old man.'

'I am not sad.'

'Old, anyway. You're certainly old, Henry. Acting old. Prematurely old, from my experience,' Dr Bee added. 'You're not too old to give it a try. Phone up one of those import agencies. Immigration lawyers. Put them on the books of the Writers' Clinic. Casual staff. Personal trainers. Surrogate therapy. Pay them. Strictly a cash transaction. You just call them up when you need them. They've

They've got enough English to understand that.'

'But not much more.'

'Not a lot, no.'

'I find the whole topic distasteful.'

'There you are then,' said Dr Bee. 'Go for it.'

He was not available for lunch. 'Pressing business,' he added, leaving Henry to brood on what it might be that waited to be pressed.

He tried dropping in at the Writers' Centre, but the Director shooed

him off even as he entered the door.

'I have a deadline,' she announced, 'I'm frightfully busy, what is it you want, Henry?'

What he wanted was relaxed companionship over a glass or two of wine, a light lunch, gossip, chit-chat, the novelist's raw material, but she sat there determinedly with her apple and banana and some plastic box of bean-sprouts and green leaves beside her.

He drove off in some irritation. How could everybody be so busy? Even when he was writing a novel he had never been that busy. Indeed, especially when writing a novel, he liked to get out of the house as soon as he'd done his day's quota of words. Rush off for relaxation. He knew the rushing wasn't good, but the relaxation was. Even though his acupuncturist complained about that, too. 'One glass of wine perhaps, Henry, but more than that, no.' He didn't agree. In fact he would reward himself today with a bottle to himself. And a good one. None of this half carafe of house wine. And buying it by the glass was ridiculously expensive. A bottle was the only way to go. That was why wine was supplied in bottles. The natural measure.

The Casa Nostra had been one of the Director's discoveries. Even so the food was surprisingly good. The Director tended to go more for ambience than the food and the wine list. Lithe young waiters, waiters of the sort from when the word was gender specific. Not out of work actors, either, but real waiters. The sort who used to be at your side lighting your cigarette as soon as you'd taken out your packet, in those days before lighting a cigarette was a \$5,000 offence. Now they just stood behind her and squeezed her shoulders in some quasi-massage. All your oriental needs supplied.

He was a little uncertain about the Casa Nostra. More the Godfather than the Master's Golden Bowl. He was a little uncertain about many things, anyway, so he felt no more than the usual apprehension that characterized most life experiences: death ones too, probably. The Maseratis and Ferraris occasionally parked outside, the men with gold chains and designer sunglasses inside. Even so, he was happy to have them there as local colour. Though the table of retired police chiefs one Friday he had found a bit alarming. Similarly the group of prison officers the Director had pointed out to him, familiar to her from the writing classes she had taught in jail. It was the combination. Crime and punishment, organized crime one day, organized crime prevention another. There was a fearful symmetry to it.

'They have no choice,' the padrone told him, when one table of regulars disappeared. 'Nice fellows. Hundred dollar tips. But the police -.' He shrugged. 'They won't let them give up.'

Now they were locked away, their table empty, preserved with a permanent reserved sign, waiting for their release.

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'Anywhere, Henry,' the padrone called out, standing behind the espresso machine. Henry found himself a table in a corner. On his own he tended to go for corners. Dr Bee and Pawley preferred the window and a

