

April 2005 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

Everyone Knows Me

By Keith Bennett

Everyone knows me. People stop me in the street to talk, like I was the priest or something. Most of them chat about the team, and the old men give me advice. Even people that I only know by sight, now nod their heads to me as I pass. I nod back. I feel good.

It is a calm clear night after a calm lazy day. And warm too, for an evening in May. The street lights are on, yellow halos in two narrowing lines, as far down as Victoria Crescent. I walk down the street, hands in the pockets of my trousers, sports coat long down my back in the present fashion. The street is broad and littered with factory lunch papers and dead leaves. On each side, near the footpaths, is a row of beech trees, winter bare.

The houses are small and dingy. Here and there, a group of them identically alike, except that the door of each is on the opposite side to that of its neighbour, cramped together to get a maximum number on a minimum frontage. My mother calls them terraces.

It is Monday night. My mate Wally is with me, and we walk slowly, crissing the dead, thin-toasted leaves under the soles of our shoes. We are walking around the block. Tonight there is nothing else to do. There is a crook show on at the pictures, Bette Davis, and there is no dance on either. I am glad. I like walking. Everyone nods to me and says "Hello Johnny", and I like that too. 'In The Mood' was top of

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the Hit Parade last night. Wally is whistling it through his teeth, splitting the sound somehow on the edge of his tongue, until it sounds like two people whistling.

Mrs. Kelly is sitting on her verandah, watching her two small children play in a clothes basket. She is a big woman, grown fat of late, and lazy too. Her fair hair is done in one long braid, then looped around and pinned to the rest of her hair on the top of her head. It reminds me of the way my mother loops a thin roll of pastry around on top of the apple pie she bakes for pudding to have after our Sunday roast. The sleeves of Mrs. Kelly's slack, hand-knitted cardigan are rolled back. She has fat arms and fat red hands, and when she rests a fat hand on a fat knee, there are four baby dimples at the knuckles. She sees us as we pass.

"Hey Johnny!" she calls.

"Yeah?" I answer.

"They tell me you played a good game last Saturday."

"Aw, I got a few kicks."

"I couldn't get there. 'Sides, Footscray's a bit far for me."

"Yeah, it would be, with the kids and that."

"Anyway, see you beat the Blues next week."

"Righto." I laugh and we walk on.

"Hey Wally," she calls after us. "How did youse go?"

Wally answers, "Aw, we won easy."

Wally plays with the seconds. I did too. All last season and right up to the game before last. Last Saturday though, I was promoted and played with the firsts. Everyone says I played a good game and they nod to me now. I am pleased.

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“Now just a minute you two. Don’t go ‘way. Wait there until I go inside.”

She heaves herself from the conquered chair and her thick muscled legs drive beneath a short silk skirt back into the house. Swaying curtains across the passage, halfway down, cover her exit. I look at Wally and shrug my shoulders.

“What the hell,” he says, and we lean on the picket fence, watching the kids at play in the basket. The young one is sucking a toffee. Sticky fingers are wiped on dirty white woollen clothes. Cabbage and baby smells. Mrs. Kelly comes back.

“How much to clean a kid’s coat like this Wally?”

Wally’s mother runs a dry cleaning depot up the street. The family lives in a house at the back of the shop. ‘Most every Saturday morning Wally helps in the shop, and occasionally they ring me into it too. He gives the coat a glance.

“One and ten.”

“Alright,” she says, easing into the chair and dropping the coat on the floor.

“I’ll take it over tomorrow.”

Further on, across Nicholson Street, Sandy is sawing wood on an old fruit case in his sideway. He is working in the light of a small electric globe that swells out from the end of a long lead through the back door. Tiny particles of wood fall from the cut with every bite of the saw and add to the small ridge of sawdust running across the ground out from the end of the box. The sideway is wider than most, almost a drive. My mother says Sandy is lucky to own a house with a wide sideway. Wally thinks Sandy is lucky to own just the house. I suppose it is funny for a bloke to own the house he lives in. I don’t know of anyone else. Sandy bought it when I was ten, the year he won the Stawell Gift. That was a couple of years before the war. He’d be

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in his mid-thirties now, old for an athlete, yet still built with speed. His eyes are small and blue, set wide about a big flat nose that has a remarkable growth of short hair from the pores. It looks like a broad pale strawberry.

We open the low gate and walk in, watching him work.

“What’s the wood for, Sir Christopher?” I ask.

He looks up from the box. His eyes are laughing.

“Hello Johnny, Wal. Nice game last Saturday boy. You’re pretty fast at times.”

“Were you out there?”

“You know I never miss a game. Oh, I’m building a shed out the back.”

We can just see it now, in the dim light. It is only half finished, but the corner near Carter’s, the lolly shop, leans forward and out. Wally looks at Sandy for a moment.

“Christ,” he says, “You ain’t so marvellous with the spirit level, are you?”

Sandy laughs and makes a sharp hard cut with the saw. It touches Wally’s trousers and he jumps back.

“Or with the saw either. You nearly cut the leg of my tweeds then.”

“A lot you’d care. As it is I’ll bet you they’re a pair left at the shop to be cleaned.”

Wally saunters to the gate without being sore.

“Ah, pull you head in!”

We walk along the footpath across the front of the house, Wally and me, and through the curtains we can see Mrs. Sandy moving about the bedroom in her nightgown. It is not like the one my mother wears, either. Wally looks at me and

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mouths a silent whistle. She stops in front of the mirror for a moment, side on, sort of, and puts her hands to the back of her neck, shaking out her hair. Suddenly I realize she is still a young woman, and I wonder why Sandy is outside sawing wood. She moves to the light switch. Inside darkness, and I imagine her slipping in between the sheets.

“C’mon Johnny.”

“Yeah,” is all I say. What else is there?

Wally nudges me and I look up from watching my trouser cuffs every now and then hiding the toecaps of my shoes as I walk. In the glow of the street lights I can see two girls walking down the street towards us. One is a redhead and the other is mousy. I have seen them over the dance at the Town Hall on Saturday nights. The boys reckon that the redhead is a good sort. She has on a dress of kind of rusty floral, and it goes well with her hair. I don’t even look at Mousy. They draw near and I take out my handkerchief and wipe my nose, even though it doesn’t need wiping.

“Hello Johnny,” says Redhead. She smiles at me and her eyes crinkle up in a nice funny way. I like her.

I say “Hello” because I don’t know her name. This is the first time I’ve spoken to her.

“Saw you play on Saturday.”

“Barrack for the Pies, do you?” I ask, knowing the answer.

“Too right! Haven’t missed a game, ‘cept Geelong.”

She tilts her head and smiles out of the crinkles again. A wave of her hair falls over her forehead and she leaves it there. I want to reach out a hand and put it back into place.

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“Will you be playing again next Saturday?”

I’m trying to be modest. “If I’m picked,” I say.

“Aw, you’ll be picked alright. You played a slashing game on Saturday.”

“Hey, cut it out,” I say lamely, but my shirt is tight about my chest, and I’m smiling a lot. I find that Wally has been looking at her too.

He asks, “Going over to the dance next Saturday night?”

But I race in ahead of him. “Will you save us number seven?”

“And me number nine?” hastens Wally.

“Sure,” returns Redhead, slow and easy like. She moves off along the gutter. “See you there.”

“Sure,” mimics Wally, but it passes her. She takes a long last look at me, and I look right back until she smiles again. I realize that Mousy hasn’t said a word. I don’t mind at all. We walk on.

“Nice girl!” I say.

“Yeah, she’s all right.”

I begin to think that Wally and Mousy could make a four if ever I get to take the redhead out.

“Her cobber ain’t so bad either, Wal.”

He looks at me sideways and laughs from his belly. I know again that he can read me like a book of big print.

“What you trying to give me boy? She’s got more holes in her face than a crumpet!”

I shrug my shoulders.

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The next day is Tuesday and I call for Wally after work, on the way over to training.

“A good night for it mate,” he says as he slams the gate.

“Yeah.”

At the ground Wally goes into the seconds’ rooms. I keep going. Tonight I strip in the big rooms and train with the firsts.

“I’ll see you out there,” I call.

“OK.” I hear his reply as I climb the rise around the old stand. I notice on the hoarding that Alan Ladd is on this week and I promise myself that we’ll go up and see it one night. Alan Ladd shows are always good.

The ground is big and quiet. The green turf and the white fence and the scarred rise all around the outer. The two big stands are empty, like two giant mouths, open in silent toothless grins. The sun, slanting in between the western goalposts, reflects from the white background of the scoreboard and from the upper windows of the two-storied houses across the street outside. There are a few fellas out already, and the dull thump of them kicking the ball comes across the ground. There are a few watching too, and as I walk around the asphalt slope to the race, they nod and say “Hello” to me.

In the rooms I am quiet. In with the seconds I was a bit of a noise, calling for soap and towel, and joking with the trainers. Here I am different. I realize that big football is big business. There are players stripping by their lockers and white-trousered trainers moving about, putting pillows and white starched sheets on the rubbing-down tables. Hot baths are already filling. I find a locker without a name and hang my coat inside. This isn’t the first time I have been in the rooms, but I can’t help looking around me again. Clean as my mother’s kitchen and big enough to hold

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a dance in. And they do too, I remind myself. Every month or so, just for the players and their girls, and for the privileged few of the social club. Pulling on my shorts I pause, and think maybe now I'll be getting an invite. I muse pleasantly, thinking that maybe I could ask the redhead.

There is that smell of eucalyptus and pungent oils in the air, and a queer hollow feeling in my stomach, like first you sit in the dentist's chair. I look up at the enormous honour boards of polished cedar wood on the high walls, with the names of famous men upon them. I wonder if I'll ever get my name up there, in letters of gold. That makes my stomach feel even worse. Danny comes over to me, togged and ready to go out. Danny won the Brownlow last year.

"How are you, son?"

There are two gaps in his teeth and they spoil his mile. I bend to lace my last boot.

"Alright Danny. Ball o' muscle."

"Coming out?"

"Yeah."

It is Saturday and I'm playing in the big side again. We're playing Carlton at home. They're second and we're third, and the tippers in the papers are about fifty-fifty. I've been jumpy ever since I saw my name on the forward flank in yesterday's paper. Now I'm worse. Maybe I'll never get to be a good player with this nervousness all the time. But then maybe the others get like it too. I laugh to myself. I can't imagine Danny or Buzz or Alby ever being nervous over a football match. Always as cool as a morning shower. I envy them.

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The one big boom from the Town Hall clock tells me it is time to walk over to the ground. Wally is playing up at Carlton today and he called in here on his way there some time ago. Mum and Dad have been gone this last hour. They like to get a front seat in the stand and watch the kids playing in the curtain raiser. There are a lot of people walking over to the ground too. Everyone knows me. They nod and ask me how we'll go. I tell them we'll win.

At the ground itself there are queues waiting to get in through the turnstiles. I go in through the 'Players and Officials' gate, and walk around through the crowd to the wired race. There must be twenty thousand here already. The kids are playing out on the ground and every now and again the trill of the umpire's whistle comes over the heads of the waiting crowd. Blue tobacco smoke rises everywhere in the still air, contrasting with the white of newspapers in the people's hands and the hats of sailors. Here and there the sun flashes from the higher black helmets of policemen. Small boys run up with autograph books and pencils, and bigger girls too. One kid, sandy-haired and grinning through his freckles, carries my bag as I sign, embarrassed, yet glad somehow.

Inside the rooms is the smell of eucalyptus again and my stomach does a pivot. My legs feel sort of weak at the knees, like the bolt that joins the thigh to the calf has been taken out. I look around. Tom the head trainer comes over.

"Feeling fit Johnny?"

"Right as rain Tom." But there's that in my belly and legs that I don't tell him about.

"I've made up that locker for you," he says, pointing.

On the door is my name and I breathe in deep. "Thank you," I say.

"That's the way son. You'll do son."

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Over on one of the rubbing-down tables, the coach and the sec. are talking with Alby, the captain. Discussing tactics, no doubt. I keep on stripping. Alby leaves the table and comes over to me. I look up from lacing my right boot. My belly gets worse.

“How you feeling kid?”

“Alright,” I murmur. I’d like to tell him about my troubles though. Alby’d understand, but I don’t.

“Jack’s got the ‘flu and can’t play. We think you can hold down centre half-forward in his place. Anyway, we’ve put you there. Do your best son.”

He rests his hand on my shoulder for a moment. I nod. What else can I do? And his confidence in me is getting rid of some of my nervousness, until I feel almost cocky by the time the coach calls us over to the tables. He gives a speech, just about the same one he gave us out at Footscray last week. I wonder does he give the same one every week? The players don’t seem to be taking much notice, but they clap when he has finished and we move away from the tables.

Alby yells, “C’mon you blokes, STIR UP THE STOVE.”

“STIR UP THE STOVE” we all yell back.

And that pleasant smell is there, still, but there is no panic in my stomach anymore. I smile across at Alby who is up at the head of the line, waiting to run out. And there he goes now, out to the race. The line strings out and I feel the matting slipping under my feet as the stops dig in. Alby is in the race now and a great shout goes up all around the ground. Above it all though, I hear the clatter of stops on the concrete floor as the players run down the race onto the ground, high stepping as soon as they hit the turf.

I hear a high voice calling “Johnny, Johnny.”

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I take a quick look around and see Redhead pressed against the wire, the crowd thick behind her. She finger waves at me. I smile back. I am happy.

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