

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

A short story

With both of their boys grown into young men now, neither of them had spent yesterday's Christmas dinner with Alison – his ex-wife; their own mother.

Having flown back from America, to share time with each of his sons across the festive season, Peter Reid remained surprised even now.

“Oh, but we all agreed to make our own arrangements weeks ago – the boys both live their own lives these days,” Alison had sighed, when he phoned her from the baggage claim area on arrival. “Do you think we should still bend over backwards to suit you, even though you left us all behind years ago?” As Christmas welcomes went, her conclusion left the jet-lagged journalist speechless: “Remember, Petey Boy, we don't call you our foreign correspondent for nothing ...”

After a difficult flight across the Pacific – crammed with passengers; buffeted by turbulence; three hours behind schedule – Peter Reid gave qualified thanks for one blessing: his eldest son. For a flight that ended up landing in Melbourne at noon on Christmas Eve, only Phillip – taller than ever, his blond hair cut modishly short – had made it out to the airport to pick up his dad. Even if he wasn't there quite on time. Despite the plane being long overdue.

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

By way of apology, all Phillip said was that other things had cropped up. On hearing his father bristle at his mother's rudeness, the younger man's only reply was to point out the benefits – in this family – that could arise from turning up late.

Things improved by mid-afternoon, however, when Phillip's new girlfriend Helene – with a shy smile peeping through wisps of red hair – invited Peter to join her family in Carlton for Christmas dinner the next day. The much feted feature-writer was glad he had bought a bottle of perfume as a spare gift duty-free (in case the permafrost with his ex-wife ever thawed).

Generous in spirit, Helene's parents Kate and Jonathon then shared a grand Christmas feast with Peter. The champagne he'd also picked up at the airport did no harm at all in return.

Except that a wicked throbbing in his frontal lobes had persisted since waking on this Boxing Day morning, despite mineral water and orange juice, croissants and paracetamol.

With his brain bruised further by each jolt from this metropolitan train, Peter Reid catalogued other surprises to have emerged on the home-front.

At the head of the list was the failure to hear from – much less see – his second son Anthony ... No reply whatsoever, regardless of seasonal greetings left by voice message and text. With overtures since relayed via Phillip, then even by Alison. From touchdown at midday on Christmas Eve, right through till now, here at 9.30 on Boxing Day morning. Nothing. Despite the passing of that one unimportant little date that seemed to have gone unnoticed in between.

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Speaking of the calendar, and time differences, and making contact, he must call San Francisco ... Once Peter had found those seats at the cricket ground for Phillip and himself.

Not that he'd imagined sharing Alison's table on Christmas Day anyway, especially now that she'd moved south of the river. Not after everything that had been said and done and regretted. But he hadn't even been given the chance to gracefully decline. Whether or not she might have invited him, for the two boys' sake, *for auld lang syne*, Peter had been staggered to learn she no longer hosted Christmas dinner – an agonising, magnificent ritual over which his ex-wife had laboured and complained and prided herself for as long as he cared to recall.

All her anguish about roasting turkeys; preparing steamed puddings; decorating the table – the Christmas tree – the entire house – *just so* ... Recalling the whole lavish operetta made Peter unsure as to whether he should shudder or laugh or weep.

With this carriage overcrowded, after the cancellation of previous trains, Peter Reid found himself gagging on a cocktail of lingering cigarette smoke, stale drinker's breath and fresh body-odour. Had all these youngsters – swaying from their overhead grips – stretched their Christmas celebrations into marathon all-nighters? Not that he could cast the first stone ...

According to her mother, Helene was being recruited by Peter's ex-wife for more than simply a joint assault on Boxing Day clearance sales in the city today: Phillip's new girlfriend was in danger of being adopted as the daughter that Peter had never let Alison have. Jolted by past grief as much as by this shuddering train, Peter sensed Kate had spoken so crisply for reasons beyond being a speech therapist by profession. Grinding teeth, he wondered if the bedraggled youngsters in his carriage were also trying to fill some old gap, not just pick up a bargain ...

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Peter eased himself sideways down the cramped aisle, ready to alight at Jolimont station.

When the train doors opened, he was shoved onto the platform by a surge of bodies pressing forward. Shielding his pockets with his hands, Peter was furious with himself for feeling alarmed. Having spent so much time as a news reporter in the Middle East, he still hated how edgy he could feel when crushed in a crowd.

Yet surrounding him now were harmless people, Peter assured himself – family groups; sets of old friends – out to enjoy Boxing Day. At an Ashes Test match. Against Australia's oldest rival, the English. In perfect weather. At the famous Melbourne Cricket Ground. Mopping his thinning grey brow, the international journalist felt his cheeks grow warm from embarrassment as much as from sunshine – surely the risk of a terrorist attack was minimal.

Given the thousands of people streaming towards the MCG from all directions, Peter Reid was pleased he had gone against his son Phillip's advice in making a pair of reservations online in advance, instead of taking pot-luck with finding good seats going spare. Yet as a father who had not always proven to be much of a role model, he did value his son's good sense in worrying about the cost of booking tickets, pledging to pay his own frugal way instead. Peter's solution was to meet Phillip outside the ground, as if happy with general admission. Instead, good old Dad would present his number-one-son with a pre-booked ticket as a bonus Christmas gift. Maybe for once even the boy's dear mother would approve ...

Proudly independent as he was, Phillip would surely appreciate having his monthly allowance increased, his father reflected. Fresh from first-class honours grades in third-year architecture, the kid deserved a financial reward.

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Perhaps he could then give up that part-time job as a coffee waiter, to devote himself all the more to the final phase of his studies. Except that the trendy little coffee bar concerned was where Phillip had met Helene, a weekend barista who was studying optometry.

After sighing wistfully about his own lost youth, Peter Reid shifted his pangs of regret to the present. Apart from Phillip, no one else from the family was helping to swell this huge crowd here today. Back in happier times, Alison herself – all blonde elegance, languid and slim in summer cotton – had accompanied him and the boys, armed with picnic hampers full of ham sandwiches, fruit-mince pies and Christmas cake ... Plus that ever-present camera of hers.

Anthony used to be a regular here too, Peter reminded himself. Before giving up on most things decent, to dedicate his energies to re-inventing himself. Becoming different through growing difficult. His brown dreadlocks had made way for a harshly shaven skull. And then *Whatever* had appeared in blue ink on the back of that same bare scalp. Prior to Anthony himself making a different kind of appearance. In front of a magistrate's court ...

The trill of lorikeets overhead made Peter Reid raise his eyes. Parkland elm trees had been protected from possum damage by gunmetal cladding: in world hotspots from which he'd reported, such shielding would have had far more literal a purpose.

The journalist checked his new wrist-watch: no, Phillip wasn't late as such – not quite yet. Peter clapped his hands over his wallet and phone, making sure once again that his pocket had not been picked back there on the platform. Surely a coffee from that stall opposite the ticket box would do wonders for his recovery, he blinked. As would another painkiller.

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

His first sniff, his first sip of caffeine was not the only thing to give Peter Reid a boost. The prospect of seeing Phillip again so soon promised to make top-flight Ashes cricket at best a bonus, at worst a distraction. For the chance to see his two boys had made this seagull dad of theirs flap weary old wings all the way down here from San Francisco Bay. So far from his new love, at this of all times. Yet she'd sworn she understood. Even if – despite his best efforts – Peter had not managed to exchange one word with that younger son of his as yet ...

The journalist glanced again at his new Rolex, silently thanking Juanita; a colleague at his news agency in the States; the last love of his life. Peter confirmed that Phillip was by now indeed late, only to hear a text message come through on his phone: *Held up. Pls save me seat. Will call asap. Meet inside. Sorry!*

If he'd just let Phillip buy his own ticket, Peter Reid stomped, everything would have been fine. He could hear Alison berating him: "Orchestrating events to suit yourself," she would say, "but messing things up instead!" And not for the first time, he conceded, she'd be right.

Collecting the expensive tickets he'd so foolishly reserved, the foreign correspondent sensed that Phillip would probably end up paying for his own admission anyway. The older man hoped his beloved boy had a really good reason for creating all this heart-burn. Hating how he was letting himself help to murder the language through using digital abbreviations, Peter Reid sent the curtest of texts in reply: *Ring me b 4 u come in.* He drew the line at *cum*.

Making his way up the stairs inside the stadium, Peter Reid surveyed the vast green checker-board below. This vantage point on the second level of the Great Southern Stand – directly

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

behind the pitch – would provide him and Phillip with the clearest possible view of whether bowlers were making the cricket ball deviate or not. It was a relief to take his seat.

A cheer from the MCG crowd opened Peter's eyes with a shudder. The electronic scoreboard showed that the Australian captain had won the toss of the coin and elected to bat.

With play about to commence, Peter still found himself alone. Was he being stood up by the only family member on whom he'd thought he could rely? Another check of his phone showed no further word from Phillip. Patience, Peter reminded himself, patience – wasn't that what five straight days of Test match cricket demanded?

Soon the two umpires had taken their places on the field, followed closely by the players, all sparkling in white. Peter Reid swallowed harder now, hoping that everything was okay for his son. Especially with Helene's family. As a father, he felt a jab of fear. Could he have caused some tension himself? By becoming too drunk at her parents' place yesterday? Making Jonathon and Kate think less of Phillip as a result? Heaven forbid.

Maybe the champagne had done damage to more than just Peter's credit card. Quite apart from the fact that he'd lost all track of that third bottle, amid the bevy of drinks on offer.

As much as Peter could recall, he'd pushed his own boat out way too far only once he'd taken a cab back to his hotel. Starting with a few snifters of port from a bottle that Jonathon had insisted he take. Plus – dare he admit it – a cigar or two on the balcony outside. Prior to making a heavy raid on the bar fridge in his room. Solo. Always a terminal move. But it was

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Christmas night, after all, and there he had been, alone, missing his darling Juanita. Thank heavens he hadn't phoned her.

Crossing time zones, his body-clock was right out of whack. Despite alcohol and exhaustion, sleep had proved a restless guest.

Of course he was paying for all that foolishness now. Apart from getting the chance to see both his sons, the one wish Peter Reid would make to Santa Claus – he decided – was for his headache to subside.

If he had learnt anything from this divorce with Alison, he went on to reflect, it had been not to take the good grace of others for granted. These days he could never be sure how he came across to strangers. Even lately – at a point when his career was outwardly at its peak – he had lost a little confidence in himself. But with age advancing remorselessly, there was still so much more to achieve ...

Peter felt his eyes pop open again in alarm at another outburst from the crowd – one of the Australian openers was out. To a delivery that cut back sharply off the seam, as the big-screen replay showed. A surprise success at the top of the batting order until now, the tall all-rounder had had his off-stump flattened ... Peter swatted angrily at a fly as if it were the ball.

Even more oblivious to the game than the journalist had been himself, another spectator nearby – heavily tattooed – was poring over the city's best-selling tabloid. Its front-page headline shouted that a church had been packed to its spire by crims and cops alike, for the

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

funeral of the latest victim of Melbourne's underworld feud. Peter wondered if the chap with all the ink had helped make up that mixed congregation.

Reflecting yet again upon the intrusiveness for which his own profession was notorious, this reporter on foreign affairs found himself recalling another scenario that could also have ended up on a front page, had he seen fit to report on it himself.

A few years back, Peter Reid had held an Iraqi man's son mortally wounded in his arms, under bombardment from British tanks in the city of Basra, only to have the boy's last words – in Arabic – be lost on his unschooled ear. The plea in the youngster's tearful gaze had spoken a language all too universal.

On this Boxing Day – amid a huge crowd, all colourful and rowdy – Peter Reid sat alone, in so famous a stadium in his old hometown, quietly weeping, these tears far from his first for that lost son of Basra; not his last for the boy's poor father either, likewise left sobbing ...

The Australian captain – currently rated the best in the world to bat at number three – swivelled onto his back foot, hooking a sharp bouncer for six runs over one of the longest boundaries in international cricket.

Still no message from Phillip: Peter wondered whether perhaps he should just phone him. “No,” Alison would have admonished, “let the boy take responsibility! Especially when you're never around now. Particularly if your concern is really for yourself ...”

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Remaining firmly seated during a passing eruption of the Mexican Wave, Peter assured himself that at least the values which drove his work were worthy.

He would always feel proud, for instance, that he had investigated southern Sudanese being taken as slaves, without intervention from the northern government, despite a treaty allegedly ending their civil war. His journalistic enquiries had been acute enough to bring Peter threats from police and security operatives in the Sudan.

So who would have thought the trading of human livestock could still thrive, into the twenty-first century? His provocative account had won Peter a major international media award as the best investigative feature of the year.

That prize had seen his new love show a pride in him never matched by Alison. If only he could count on hearing Juanita's voice, amidst all this clapping and whistling and chanting, Peter would have phoned her in Berkeley right then and there.

A sizzler of a delivery from the tall English speedster exploded from short of a length, thumping Australia's experimental selection as opening bat square in the chest.

As his gaze ranged across the crowd, Peter Reid found himself almost nudging a son who was yet to fill that empty seat alongside. In modernising its grandstands – making them more uniform, while increasing their capacity – its architectural team had potentially done this great ground a disservice. The father looked forward to debating this with the family's architectural rising star, should he ever turn up.

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Disaster. A second wicket down. Both in the first hour of play. The unorthodox New South Welshman had been well caught down low by the English skipper fielding at first slip – so much for sparring awkwardly at a ball that the batsman need never have played.

Still no message. Peter wondered whom he should call first, Phillip or Juanita? Earlier, he'd felt too seedy to wish her merry Christmas from afar. But no, he'd leave both calls till the drinks break, when this hubbub would surely diminish.

While he did need to show Alison that he was trying to do things differently, his challenge was not with their eldest: “A classic first-born son, our Phillip. Good looking. Warm and conversational. Responsible. Clever and hard-working and successful. Holding down a solid job. Blessed by good friends. All topped off by finding himself this gorgeous new girlfriend.”

In their last decent telephone conversation – six months before – the boys' mother had had to admit things weren't quite so positive for Anthony: “Better at sport than his brother, yes. Good with his hands. An outdoor type. Still prepared to help me out around the place. But not the first girl, in being second born. Just the kid brother. Never really competing with Phillip, either at school or in other ways. Meaning at times he's felt driven,” his mother murmured sadly, “to go looking down dark alleys, for walls to spray his name on ...”

The woman who had been the journalist's first real love had paused to sniff back tears.

“He always needed a stronger bond with you as his dad, Peter, did our Anthony,” Alison had continued, “yet he forever let you down. So that made him push you away. All sullen and

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

silent. In trouble at school – later, with police. Till his beloved old man up and left altogether. Not just the family, but the country as well.” Alison still could not conceal old distress.

“Pursuing dreams I’d had all my life,” Peter Reid defended himself.

“Driven by your personal demons!” came his ex-wife’s sharp retort. “You’ve never seen the failings in our younger son for what they really are, Peter – insecurities just like your own! Such that poor Anthony could never gain the one thing he wanted – not his father’s approval for some triumph, like his big brother. Just a few minutes chatting with Poppa Bear, who was always too busy to talk. Needing his father’s attention, only for a moment or two – Reid, you self-centred bastard! – just every once in a while ...”

Alison’s pause was for impact as much as for breath: “Don’t you know – Peter Gilbert Reid, you fool – what that censor’s rating of PGR means: *Parental Guidance Recommended!*”

By now the mother of his sons had the international correspondent sobbing into the mouthpiece. Later he might have rated it as the best chat he’d had with her in years. On the telephone or face-to-face. Regardless of their divorce. Despite being separated by an ocean.

Except that Alison – audibly taking yet another sip of wine – then chose to spoil it all. By hurling daggers at Juanita instead: “But how’s your Foreign Co-respondent – that cute little Hispanic expert on international affairs?”

Blinking hard, Peter Reid was taken aback by the sight of the drinks cart making its way onto

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

the MCG. Still two wickets down, according to the scoreboard. With both Australian openers gone. The team total only modest. And each of the English front-line bowlers successful.

But no sign of Phillip even yet. Peter bit his lip: there came a time when he had to conduct his own relationship, with his own son, in his own way. Through simply making a call. To find out what in the hell Phillip had been doing. How on earth he'd been delayed. Yet again.

Except that no sooner had Peter reached for his phone than it began to ring. With Phillip breathless. Anxious to meet his father outside. Reminding Peter to collect a pass-out.

“Soon you'll understand everything, Dad,” Phillip promised, before abruptly hanging up.

Barely had Peter made his way out the agreed exit than his son took him by the elbow and whisked him away along the concourse. Bemused, Peter found himself squinting down the steps, only to spot a marquee erected between four-wheel-drives on the edge of the car-park below. Beneath its shade were folding chairs and an extended picnic table, bearing a lavish spread of food, bedecked with bon-bons and Christmas streamers.

From behind an adjacent vehicle stepped a pair of shapely women, one much younger than the other, each stylishly dressed. Like Helene, Alison held out her arms in welcome. Even here, everything was arranged (as her favourite old saying would have put it) *just so* ...

Yet before Peter could respond, a further pair emerged from behind the second car: Helene's parents, Kate and Jonathon.

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Even in this moment of surprise, the international journalist could not quell his sense of disappointment at the fact that the fifth figure to appear was a middle-aged man with thick dark hair: right, so still no sign of Anthony, then ...

“Peter, you will have to forgive Phillip for being late,” Alison announced. “The poor boy was born three weeks overdue, after all.” With a flirtatious grin not bestowed on her ex-husband for fully a decade, she added, “I do just have to say I’m jealous as all get-out, what with beautiful Helene here being favoured with that bottle of Chanel perfume ...”

Now Alison beckoned for her black-haired companion to move up alongside her. Aged in his late forties, his face was handsome in a way that reminded Peter of photographs of male models wearing fair-isle sweaters in knitting books, with only a hint of grey in his close-cropped beard. So he used hair dye, then, the feature writer decided.

Introducing himself as Stuart, Alison’s new partner explained that he worked in radio, for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. “The ABC,” Peter corrected him, his smile at its thinnest. A jealousy which surprised even him had been piqued all the more through hearing that special timbre in this man’s voice so strongly cultivated by the national broadcaster.

As they shook hands rather limply, Stuart was gracious enough to murmur, “I did admire your piece about the Sudan.”

In turning to greet Helene’s parents, the journalist’s fears about yesterday’s excesses were allayed when the auburn-haired Kate hugged him warmly, while the lawyer Jonathon – acting

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

as a beaming, balding magician – conjured from behind his back that elusive third bottle of Veuve Clicquot.

“So we are to fight these hangovers of ours with the hair of the dog that bit us,” Peter joked.

“A breed of canine that comes with its costs,” quipped Helene in reply.

In a further sleight-of-hand, a camera (high in quality and price, her ex-husband could not help but note) suddenly materialised in Alison’s hands. While others chatted freely – as Peter sucked air through flared nostrils – she proceeded to take a host of shots. As with the most acute of war-zone snipers, her targets – including fellow escapees from the cricket wandering past – largely remained unaware.

Leaning in close, Stuart confided to Peter: “It’s a shame you can’t stay on here past New Year – you’d be a guest of honour at the launch of Alison’s first solo exhibition.”

With everyone shooed into their seats by the sweep of a telephoto lens, it was Kate who served up fragrant roast vegetables – kept warm in a covered dish – while her daughter apportioned out crisp garden salad.

“These fresh cucumbers and lettuces and tomatoes, all delicious, they were grown by Anthony,” Alison beamed, “in the no-dig hydroponic vegie plot he’s set up at my new place in St Kilda. Not that he lives with me anymore, now that he’s found a pan of his own to fry with ...”

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Shooting a nervous glance at Phillip, who inhaled deeply in rolling his eyes skyward, Alison hastily added that Anthony had just completed a traineeship in horticulture, winning an award as the best in his year, leaving him ready to start up a landscaping service with a friend in January: “So he’s found his calling at last, hey, Father? A real green thumb, you know.”

“If only he’d found his way here as well,” Peter could not help but think, shooing away a fly.

As directed, the journalist had taken a seat at the head of the table, with his eldest son on his right and his ex-wife to his left, while not one but two chairs remained vacant at her side ...

“So much for toasts in honour of absent friends,” Peter Reid dared let himself murmur.

As Stuart traded chit-chat with Helene and her parents at the opposite end of the table, Alison was free to preside over proceedings, serving ham-off-the-bone and cold roast chicken with a flourish. Meanwhile, Phillip moved from guest to guest, pouring chilled champagne into plastic flutes so adroitly that Peter could not help but wonder if his eldest son’s future might reside as much in hospitality as architecture.

With drumsticks picked clean and golden potatoes devoured, Peter Reid turned his awakened appetite towards plates laden with Christmas pudding and fruit cake, protected from flies by serviettes decorated with reindeer.

Stage-managing affairs as ever, his ex-wife curtly directed Phillip to serve up further drinks, while instructing all guests to hold off for now from commencing their second course: “It will help with digestion, not to rush ...”

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Clicking his fingers in dismay, Peter Reid glanced yet again at this new watch of his, only to curse himself for opening up such a window to Alison.

“I had no idea, sweet Phillip,” she declaimed, exactly as she always had, after her second glass, “that you could afford a Rolex watch for your Time Lord father, just on a student’s income!” Winking broadly at Helene, she added, “The tips folk pay at this coffee shop of yours, they must really be something, sweetie!”

By then Peter felt crippled by panic, with beads of perspiration popping from his forehead:

“Oh, the time, the time – look at it! Everyone, excuse me please! Hate being rude, but I must phone a friend. On the West Coast. Right now. Before it’s too late. Even with the time difference. Because it’s still Christmas night, you know, back there in the States ...”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Peter Gilbert Reid!” his ex-wife spluttered with laughter. “Time Lord or not, you should just ring your sweetheart Juanita without delay. It’s not as if she’s a state secret anyhow – everybody knows all about her! Especially since you sang her praises for half an hour or more yesterday afternoon. Or so a little birdie tweeted. And all on the strength of that second posh bottle of bubbly you smuggled through Customs ...”

“But good luck to you both, old boy!” Jonathon interposed, sensing the need for loyalty.

Relieved by Peter’s nod, he gave such a rakish grin that the journalist fancied he might have clinked glinting teeth, as much as champagne flutes, with Kate his smiling wife.

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

Without warning – after a glance across his father’s shoulder – Phillip suddenly leapt to his feet: “Oh, Mother, thank God! We’re good. He’s here!”

Absently dropping his phone on the table, Peter Reid turned to focus on a young man striding towards him, his gaze every bit as intent as the prizewinning journalist’s own. The older fellow found himself rising from his seat in a way that was neither conscious nor voluntary.

The absentee father they sometimes called PGR – at others the Time Lord; and at others again their foreign correspondent – saw that his second son might not have grown too much taller since last they had met.

Yet the thick-set young man coming to a halt at arm’s length before him stood straighter and stronger than ever before, his brown locks of old restored, enhanced by streaks of blond.

“Oh, my good, good boy,” the journalist murmured, as if in prayer, his sweaty brow tilting upwards, his eyelids clamped tight against tears: “A very merry Christmas to you, my dearest Anthony. Thank you so much, my son, yes, thanks.” And with that, Peter Reid pivoted: “But Phillip too – huge thanks to you as well. And to you, too, Alison – indeed, old girl, *just so.*”

Without hesitation, he blew her a kiss – again, he realised later, the first in ten years.

Afterwards, the expatriate feature-writer could never be sure who had blushed most of all, his ex-wife Alison or Peter himself; Phillip’s girlfriend Helene or her mother Kate.

Moist-eyed now too, a muscular Anthony Reid embraced his father firmly, before turning to make a gesture with an outstretched hand that would have been seen as a bid at an auction.

SixFold_short story_Foreign Correspondent

In response, a slender young man – tall and pale, his hair so black it looked blue – stepped out from behind a tree nearby.

“Daniel, this is my father ...” Anthony began, before correcting himself: “No, he’s my dad ... But you can call him Peter. And Fa ... Dad, this ... this is Dan – he’s my ... my friend.”

On that note, this last guest for Boxing Day lunch – his metallic hairstyle glinting in the sun – raised an outstretched hand himself. Yet this time it was not directed at any imaginary auctioneer, nor even offered as a handshake. Perhaps it was a greeting; possibly it was a warning. Again, ever after in Peter Reid’s mind, such distinctions remained unclear.

“No, he’s not just a friend, Dad,” came a second self-correction from Anthony Reid. “Dan here, he’s my ... my partner ...”

“Your partner? What, in this new landscaping business you’ve got planned?”

“No, no, Dad, he’s my love.”

And with that the crowd from the MCG roared.