

Chapter 42

Life on the Central Coast

The dickhead in the townhouse opposite hits his midlife crisis and buys a Harley-Davidson. He starts it at 7 am, metres from my bedroom window. He lets it idle, blating huge decibels, for fifteen minutes to warm up, before taking off for work with a shattering blast. My noisy fan can't cope with this. Neither can I. I remonstrate.

'Sorry mate, gotta do it. Harleys are very sensitive pieces of machinery, the oil's gotta reach 256.7°C before you apply torque. Very fuckin' technical, believe me.'

That's it. My top priority is to move from my Wamberal townhouse as fast as I fuckin' can.

Here was my mistake in buying that townhouse in Wamberal. Noise. The traffic roared past until late at night, starting again at six in the morning. In the bedroom doorway, I planted a large noisy fan, its regular, white noise masking the irregularities of traffic noise, making it just possible to sleep. The Harley opposite was the *coup de grace*.

The Central Coast is a sociological salad, ranging from fabulous seaside areas, such as Killcare, Terrigal and Avoca, where superannuated retirees like me go, to areas like Wyong and Gosford, where a lot of young people on the dole went because living there was cheaper than living in Sydney. You had to choose your area of residence carefully.

The Central Coast is wonderfully endowed with walking trails. I made a point of running at least twice a week, and bushwalking for half a day at least once a week. The jogging trails in Killcare were Hong Kong-esque in their variety of heart-stopping scenery. One trail wound through angophoras, those beautiful, burnt-orange coloured twisted trees, peculiar to the Central Coast, then onto a string of beaches, separated by rocks and caverns into which the surf crashed, then onto a headland, the southernmost tip of Bouddi Park, Box Head, on top of which you stared straight at Barrenjoey Head. The Central Coast itself was just marvellous. Living too close to its other residents was the problem.

And not only wankers with Harley Davidsons.

I saw an ad in the local paper for a place to rent at Killcare, with 'views to die for'. It certainly had. I wouldn't repeat the Wamberal mistake of buying in a hurry, without thoroughly checking

out the potential problems, so I took out a year's lease. That should give me plenty of time to buy something suitable.

The house was adjacent to Bouddi National Park and Killcare Beach, a wild surfing beach one side, quiet, pretty Hardy's Bay the other side, but the house itself was itself ugly and top heavy. The sole redeeming feature was that on the hastily built top floor there were balconies both sides: superb views all down the coast to Sydney's CBD on one side, across Brisbane Water on the other. The house was on a steep hill. My deeply aggrieved neighbour on the high side was in hospital when that top floor on my house was hurriedly added: the neighbour couldn't object from his hospital bed, you see. In Killcare, houses grew like trees in a rainforest, each trying to outdo the others to steal the views for itself.

On that top floor was the living room, a large dining room, which became my magnificent study, and beside that a kitchen with a million dollar view overlooking the sea, Bombara Reef and the Sydney CBD. I put my desk in a corner of the dining room with the views of Brisbane Water. But it also overlooked two townhouses.

The nearer had a yapping puppy that drove me crazy, the further townhouse presented an even more challenging problem. One day, sitting at my desk writing away, I looked up. A young lady with a perfect golden body was sunbathing topless and nearly bottomless in her back garden, in direct line of sight. She reappeared the following day. No, I wasn't driven crazy by lust but by the social implications.

Here was I, an elderly male living on my own. She, lying on her back, was likely to look up at my window, where she would discern a vague, shadowy figure, motionless, seemingly staring at her. But only seemingly; I had better things to do.

Bugger her! This was my study where I worked most days. Who was harrasing who, that's what I wanted to know. Common sense told me to move my desk. Then keep away from the windows. Better, draw the curtains. I warned myself to be careful not to go outside on my lovely balcony in case ninety-nine per cent of a very shapely, tanned body was on display only metres away. A tricky problem. How would you handle that?

I should have stood openly on my balcony and shouted across: 'Hi! I'm John. I'm a writer and I work here all day. Look, I don't mind if you don't mind...'

But that's not me. Feeling threatened, I kept those curtains drawn and made as if the world beyond my balcony was of no interest whatsoever.

I used to walk down the hill to the shop and post office. A couple of times, I passed the lady, fully clothed on these occasions. I greeted her. She froze me off with a look that was very terrible.

It seemed she'd drawn that unfair conclusion I was afraid she might draw.

Catherine used to visit me at Killcare during vacations. One afternoon as I drove the car into the garage, we noticed a cop car parked outside Ron and Fran's house, my neighbour on the down side of the hill.

Next day, Ron explained. He and Fran had been in the back garden for no more ten minutes, nearer eight, he thought, when someone ran inside their open garage, up the stairs, into their bedroom, where he nicked credit cards and lots of expensive jewellery.

'What rotten luck! Dead cheeky, too.'

'Yes,' Ron said, 'we reckon it had to be done by a team. One did the job, the other watched, so's he could signal by mobile when we were outside...'

'How? You can't see your back garden from the street.'

'Right. Had to be from a height, didn't it, where you could see into our back garden. Like from a balcony...'

Hey, what's he implying? 'Well, we were out last Saturday afternoon...'

'Of course, it could be any balcony. It's just funny, that's all...'

Very bloody funny.

One of the endearing things about Killcare was the bird life, the feathered variety I mean. I counted thirteen different kinds of parrot on one of my balconies where I regularly used to place birdseed and birdbells. It was interesting to see how they sorted out the pecking order. It seemed to be based on size. The white crested cockatoos had first call, then followed the galahs, the rosellas of umpteen kinds, and finally the crested pigeons who were beaten off until all the rest had had their fill.

What I didn't know was that mice used to clean up what the crested pigeons had left. There were mice lurking everywhere.

The night of Catherine's last visit to Killcare was hot. It was late, the windows wide open. She went into the kitchen, with that wonderful view of the sea. She approached the toaster to prepare a late night snack.

A mouse leapt from the toaster.

Catherine screamed and fled into the living room.

The mouse panicked and scuttled into living room after her.

So Catherine ran back into the kitchen to escape this monster, emptying her lungs forcefully into the still warm night.

The mouse turned and also ran back into the kitchen.

Catherine clasped her hands over her ears and SCREAMED.

Next morning she returned to Hong Kong. We drove to the airport, laughing over the silly incident.

But from then on, Ron and Fran looked with narrowed eyes at this coordinator of thievery, this Peeping Tom, this *voyeur*, this foul creature who did God knows what to Asian women in the dead of night, who were then to be seen no more.

Otherwise, Killcare was a dream.