

## Sunburnt Country

The first time I met Andrew I could easily have forgotten him.

It was Orientation Week. The film society were hosting their annual Welcome Night at the local over the road. If my conscientiously selected attire wasn't indicative of my youthfulness, then my helpless submission to alcohol certainly was. I got talked into joining a socialist student organisation and argued with the film society president about Australia's cinematic identity – an epic debate that ended abruptly with me spilling Young Henrys down my shirtfront. Andrew was sitting down the opposite end of the table, making familiar conversation with the older faces. As I finally staggered from my stool to the front door, he introduced himself, saying it was a pleasure to welcome me to the society.

“You too,” I said, like an idiot.

I learned very little about Andrew's life from him directly; his humility made it difficult to ask questions without feeling intrusive. Throughout the year I unearthed his character through observations alone.

He was far older than most in the society, and the only member no longer studying. While the rest of us were revelling in the nightlife of Oxford St, he was travelling to Brisbane to celebrate old friends' weddings. He was aware of every small theatre and special screening in the city, but only flaunted such knowledge inadvertently, usually while aiding the cinematic endeavours of someone less informed, which was everyone. Andrew was exempt from the ridicule usually bestowed upon devoted cinephiles. He carried his love of the art in a way that demanded admiration. I always assumed this to be the result of his good morals - the rare marriage between expertise and genuine altruism. Andrew, however, downplayed these virtues. He joked that cinema was his way of eluding “the real world.” I often took a moment to wonder what the world looked like to him.

In November, Andrew broke his ankle trying to repair his Hills Hoist. Ellie, the club secretary, and I extended the society's good wishes, driving to his house with a bouquet of flowers and a hamper full of cinema snacks.

“Look,” she said. I followed her gaze to a Eureka Flag hanging in the back window of a Holden Commodore. “It’s a quiet Australian.”

I chuckled politely as she turned us onto a highway, tuning in to the whirring of tyres on tarmac. Neighbouring pillars of brick and concrete declined in numbers, replaced by strips of sundried bush. I let my mind wander, opening my mouth before it could catch up.

“Do you know what Andrew’s politics are?” I asked.

“Honestly, dunno. He used to be part of the student union though,” Ellie responded. She paused for a moment. “I think I’ve heard him talk more about what he doesn’t like than what he does.”

“And what doesn’t he like?”

“Trump. Pauline Hanson. England.”

“I thought Andrew was a monarchist?”

“No, I think he’s just interested in the monarchy.”

This was confusing, but it didn’t surprise me. Andrew was the kind of character who mastered every trade he took a liking too. I could imagine him hunched before a computer at midnight, feverishly consuming the names and reigns of various British royalty, motivated more by passion than logic. He was a joy in that way. I’d seen him engage with every topic of conversation, from State of Origin to the Book of Mormon, discussing each like it were a point of personal interest. His cultural awareness was nothing short of inspiring, with a foot in all things Slavic, Arabic and east Asian. Such eclectic knowledge is almost overwhelming, until you learn to embrace it with appreciation.

Andrew lived alone, in his childhood home on the outskirts of the city. These were the suburbs in which grassy front yards extended beyond front fences, creeping out over the rugged bitumen. Gardens backed onto dry shrubs and eucalypt, and neighbourhoods were held together by an air of familiarity long since evicted from inner-Sydney.

He was standing in the doorway when we arrived, on crutches, in a moonboot. Ellie gave him a kiss on the cheek. I feigned kicking his ankle. The musk in the hallway made my head buzz.

Andrew was everywhere around his house – firstly in the photographs: younger Andrew, slimmer Andrew, chubby infant Andrew sandwiched between two parents – then in everything else: the framed vintage film

posters, the sports memorabilia, the arrangement of cups and saucers according to cultural provenance, sitting in the cupboard above a sink full of dirty, dry dishes. The living room was adorned with family treasures and dust, lit only by the cushioned glow of daylight beyond thick velvet curtains, undrawn since days of family. A wooden plaque quoting Dorothea McKellar hung beside doorway. Honeymoon photos hung adjacent to three edges: the only images devoid of his face.

Andrew showed us all of this, hobbling us through each room, noting the rack of playbills, the CD and videotape collections, pointing out framed holiday photos. Every artefact was introduced with an animated tone, an excited preamble that led us to the object in question, before suddenly fading into a distant smile. It was as if he remembered each item differently to how he saw it with us in the room. He followed these threads of wonder which he had woven together over the years, only to remember where they had led him.

Andrew stood on the porch as we pulled out of the driveway, disappearing behind a wall of wax plants. Andrew and his home preserved in the past, slowly concealed by bushes, brick houses, highways and bottle-Os, as the city gradually rebuilt itself.

“Pretty weird, hey?” said Ellie.

Another Commodore raced past, white light glinting off the windscreen. The country was sunburnt, and I could feel it’s skin sagging.