

THE STRANGER

I am six. We're outside the shop with all the toys in it. I ask Mum if I can have the train that's whizzing round and round, past little trees and black and white cows and a station and a signal box. She says no, I've got enough toys. We're waiting for the tram to take us to the city. There's a man looking at the train too. He says to Mum, "Can I buy your little chap a toy?" and she must have said yes, because he asks me to pick anything I like.

"Just a small one," says Mum. I want the train. Mum says we're going to the city and we're not taking a great box with us. So I pick a little roller, like the one Dad uses when he's finished cutting the lawn. We go inside the shop and the owner says we can pick it up when we go home.

When we get back Dad shows me how to fit the handle to the roller and then he fills the empty drum with sand. I go up and down the lawn, pushing it. I'm in the desert and I'm taking water to people dying of thirst. I'm very hot and I'm very tired but I know how happy the people will be when they see me coming to save them. I put gravel from the path in my sandals and it hurts me to walk. I don't mind the pain. I have to reach the people. They all say "Thank you, Phil, for saving us." I think about the man outside the toyshop. He must have wished he had a boy like me, Mum said.

It's 1975 and I'm 25. Everyone in the street is married. They've got kids. And it dawns on me that I'll never have kids because no girl will ever want me. I've got a nothing sort of face. Perhaps I should get glasses, little round ones, and get my hair permed. I could look like Bob Dylan.

The girls at "The Age", where I work in Obituaries, think I'm a bit of a joke.

The thing that really worries me is that I'll vanish without a trace when I die. Mum's always saying I'll make my mark one day, but I know I'm useless. I'm no good at sport. When I'm dead no-one's going to say, "I knew him. I remember when he ..."

Like I remember the man who bought me the roller. I can see him clearly. He had a moustache and he was wearing an overcoat. Grey. And a scarf and a hat. He could be dead for all I know, but he'll always be alive to me. And I didn't even know his name. Perhaps that's why I remember him. If it had been an uncle it wouldn't have been the same.

And then it strikes me. A way to be remembered, I mean.

My first attempts are failures. Each pay day I stand outside the hobby shop in Swanston Street, ready to re-enact that childhood scene. Not too many kids come and look and I never ask a boy on his own to pick a present in case he gets the wrong idea. The people who stop to look in the window are nearly all men, or couples. I stand there for an hour sometimes, while the model trains whiz around behind me.

I'm a year older, and I've changed tactics. It's a cold August day. I stand on the corner at Hoddle Street waiting for a break in the traffic. The kid is about nine and he's holding on to his Heralds for grim death as the wind ruffles and tugs at them. I'm wearing an overcoat but this kid's bony little arms are sticking out of a thin T-shirt. The traffic stops and I dart over to him. He holds out a paper to me.

"How many have you got there?" I ask. He looks wary. Probably thinks I'm an inspector from Welfare."

"About ten." He counts quickly. "Fifteen."

"And how many in the pile?" He knows without counting.

"Fifty," he says. I take out my calculator and my wallet and say "I'll take the lot, thanks." He looks at me with suspicion. Am I nuts, or what? I hand over the money and say "There's an extra five dollars there, to cover your tips. Now go home and get warm."

He calls after me, “Thanks, mister!” as I sprint back to the side of the road with the bundle of papers. I look back. He’s counting his money before he goes back to the newsagent. I go past the nearby high rise units and dump the papers in the entrance. They can have a free read.

I feel a warm glow all over. The kid will never forget that incident. When he’s about seventy he’ll tell people about that tall, skinny bloke who bought all his papers. That’s the way to do it. I’ll be a saint to the paper boys.

Christmas week and today’s my 30th birthday. I’m planning a big one. Today I go and pick it up. I’ve put a bit aside from my pay each fortnight to pay off the lay-by. I wheel it away from the shop. A blue and white BMX. I wheel it down to Hoddle Street. Whoever happens to be there is in for a surprise.

I’m the one who gets the surprise. It’s a girl who’s selling papers. No good, I’m afraid, kid. On the other side of the intersection there’s a boy. About nine. He’s working like a dog, weaving in and out of the traffic, titillating the motorists by showing only part of the headline about the latest disaster. I wheel the bike over to him when the lights change. The kid relaxes as the cars sweep by. He’s counting his papers.

“Have you got a bike?” I ask him.

“No,” he says, eyeing the BMX. “It’s not mine.” He thinks I found it somewhere.

“Listen,” I say. “I had a boy like you, but he died. And he never got the bike I bought him for Christmas. Would you like to have it?” He looks stunned.

“Yeah!” he says. I can see he thinks I’m having him on.

“Go on,” I say. “It’s yours. Take it home with you.” He can’t believe it. He takes it by the handlebars and drops his papers. The lights change and I say “Tat-ta” and run off through the cars. I look back.

Car horns are blasting at him. Drivers' arms are waving out of windows. He doesn't see them. He's still looking at the bike. He'll never see me again. But he'll remember me. Forever.

I get home and Mum's made a cake for my birthday. We sit and watch a Bogart movie and soon it's eleven o'clock. Mum brings cups of Horlicks, to make us all sleep. I finish mine and sit back and think about the kid and the bike and all the other kids. Perhaps they'll have old paper boy reunions and they'll compare notes about the mysterious stranger. I think of the stranger who inspired me.

"Mum, do you remember that man who bought me a roller from the toy shop in Whitehorse Road?"

"What man? She says.

"You know, he asked if he could buy me a toy. I was about six. He was a complete stranger. Why did you let him? He could have been a deviate."

Mum says "You must have dreamt it, there was no man." I start describing him but she gets up quickly and I'm surprised to see she's going red, from her neck up. She picks up the empty cups and goes to the kitchen.

"About six, were you?" asks Dad. I nod. He counts on his fingers. He calls over his shoulder to Mum.

"That would have been my charge hand, wouldn't it? Alec Newton?"

She doesn't answer. Dad looks at me and winks.

END