

## The Hills District Croquet Club

By John Larkin

He glanced at the *Herald* on the St. Vincent's waiting room floor (some curious and uniquely Australian juxtaposition about terrorism and cricket). Perhaps that's where asylum seekers went wrong. Maybe they shouldn't bother renouncing this regime or that religion, but instead learn how to bowl a googly or appreciate the value of a forward defensive stroke.

No matter what the headlines screamed, today would be etched in his mind for eternity. One of those defining moments that locked you in time and space, like remembering where you were when JFK was shot; the Twin Towers fell; or that time Phillip Ruddock simultaneously lost his mind and his passport and was dragged kicking and screaming off to Baxter.

The doctor said there was nothing they could do. She was seventy-five. It was her time. The social worker brought out her belongings. Not much to show for a life really. Her wedding, engagement and navel rings, her clothes, and makeup case, which she never went anywhere without. How could she face the great

beyond without her eyeliner? How could *he* face life without her?

They'd met the previous year when he joined the Hills District Croquet Club. She had just buried her twelfth husband and was on her last warning for dress code violation. (Although there was nothing in the club rulebook about wearing lycra during matches, some of the more senior members had taken exception to the outfit's colour – a potentially optic fibre damaging shade of pink). Arthur had been in the club office signing his lifetime membership forms (he'd received a significant discount due to a sudden drop in membership following the club's end of season party. A faultily wired strobe-light had sent several members casualty and a couple more to church claiming that they'd seen God and beyond).

'What are you in for, love?' Isabella had asked, her voice showing the strains of an eighty a day habit.

'Nothing,' Arthur had mumbled through his awkwardness. 'I'm, er, joining. The club,' he added.

Isabella looked Arthur up and down. 'New talent.' She leaned in conspiratorially. 'Do you know what I like to drape around my neck to make myself more attractive to a man?'

‘No idea,’ said Arthur, quickly covering his mouth with his hand as if trying to catch the words as they spilled out.

‘*A man,*’ said Isabella and winked at him. Arthur’s eyes widened to the size of startled hubcaps. Although he’d been raised in a household full of women, he’d never been any good around them. Always the last to get the bathroom, threatened with capital punishment if he even looked like leaving the toilet seat up, and when menstrual synchronicity had kicked in as his sisters hit their teens he found himself exiled to the shed. If they ever went on long car journeys and trouble broke out in the back amongst his sisters, their mother’s hand would join them in the back seat flapping around like a dangerously wounded fish. He decided quite early that he could do without that; he could do without women.

‘I’m only kidding,’ laughed Isabella at Arthur’s discomfort.

Isabella it transpired was extremely popular amongst the male members of the Hills District Croquet Club, the same, however, could not be said of the women. Rumours circulated wildly, or at least as wildly as they could over tea and scones. Apparently Isabella had *entertained* the troops during the war – though

not in any official capacity. There were also claims that she'd been romantically attached to two members at once, though not at the same time – a subtle but significant difference when you considered the euphemistic possibilities of member.

Although she'd been well into her seventies when they'd met she was still an incredibly sexy woman. Her rebellious and wild formative years had now been replaced by a monastic adherence to fresh fruit, steamed fish, and a daily aerobic session that included a significant number of pelvic floor exercises. And although she'd been unable to give up the ciggies she still managed to outlive the hell out of her husbands - even the female praying mantis could have learnt a thing or two from her.

Four of her ex-husbands had come from the club's ranks, two of them didn't last much beyond the honeymoon – her ninth and tenth weddings following so closely on the heels of one another that for all intents and purposes they were the one event.

Arthur on the other hand had spent most of his life tucked away in the leafy suburbs of the Hills District, and his entire working life as a public servant, so the transition from employment to retirement had been a fairly seamless one. It'd had been a dream of his to join the Bondi Icebergs, but on his first time out he'd

touched the water with his big toe only to experience the unique sensation of his testicles retreating up around his ears like mice up a grandfather clock. It reminded him of his trip to Dublin when life was still awash with the possibilities of youth. A cousin had taken him swimming near Joyce Tower on St. Stephen's day. The general idea was you went for a dip in the near Arctic conditions of the Forty Foot and then repaired to the nearest pub to drink hot whiskey until such time your body had attained room temperature or you were assisted from the premises on a stretcher.

But that seemed like a lifetime ago now; and of course it was – Isabella's.

He looked around the waiting room, though there was nothing to wait for now. The lost, the lonely, the injured, the worried family members; how could they not know that Isabella was gone? That all he had to look forward to was the past.

He was very inexperienced when they'd met; this was due to a combination of shyness and Catholicism. And while he'd managed to divest himself of the Catholicism around his early thirties, his virginity had been harder to shift.

On their first date Isabella had taken him to the Museum of Contemporary Art. He'd learned a lot through Isabella's patient tutelage, though at one point he found himself admiring an exhibit that, lacking a formal name, he christened "The Accoutrements of Contemporary Living". It was only when Isabella had found him that he realised he'd inadvertently wandered into the cloakroom.

Afterwards they'd ended up in McDonald's at The Cross where he watched appalled as the flotsam of humanity drifted past.

'This is not my world,' he'd said to Isabella as two street women swapped facial scratches over just whose handbag it was.

'It's *our* world,' Isabella had gently rebuffed him. 'Closing your eyes to it doesn't make it disappear.' She was perhaps a little more familiar with the Cross than he felt entirely comfortable with, but he let it slide. What did the past matter?

Their relationship had caused quite a stir among their circle; some of the croquet club going so far as to suggest that their getting together was about as likely as Madonna hooking up with Mr Bean. No sooner had they tied the knot than Arthur's life-expectancy was being calculated in hours rather than years. And

although he had returned home from their honeymoon with whiplash, he'd been fine.

Outside St. Vincent's the world carried on as if nothing had happened. What was that Spanish poem that Isabella had taught him? "My feet will want to march to where you are sleeping, but I shall go on living." It sounded so romantic when she'd recited it to him, but now that she'd gone he didn't feel like that at all. He just wanted to march back to the safety of the suburbs and never come out again.

He thought about Isabella and how long it'd taken to meet her and how long it would be before he saw her again. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of chalk left over from the last time he'd played lawn bowls. On the footpath leading up to Oxford Street he bent down and wrote a single, simple word: "Eternity"