

For you, anything!

Helen Lyne

Chapter 1 The End of Term Party

Melbourne, April 1973

Faced with a catastrophic kitchen, Clair felt overwhelmed. Conservative middle class parents and an older sister who'd been engaged for three years hadn't prepared her for social life at university. This afternoon she'd given in to pressure from Sandra, a fellow student, who'd obviously wanted a less attractive girl to accompany her to an end-of-term party. Clair had retreated from loneliness and loud music to the tiny kitchen. Trying not to tip congealed leftovers onto the floor, she lifted torn pizza boxes with one finger in the hunt for a sink and tap. She wanted to rinse her mouth. Whisky and Coke had formed a sweet scum over the fat from salami and mozzarella. Menthol cigarettes had given her a scratchy throat. She'd taken up smoking in rebellion against her parents, although she never smoked in their presence.

“Looking for something?”

The deep voice made her jump.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. Difficult to hear anything with the music.

What're you looking for?”

“Water,” Clair said, waving her half-full glass. The brown eyes behind the John Lennon spectacles put her at ease. This man was the oldest person at the party. The host's father perhaps? She didn't know who the host was, but she felt reassured by the presence of a smiling adult. He was also the only male who appeared to be sober. The end of his cigarette smouldered as he swept some pizza boxes onto the floor.

“Leave it,” he said, forestalling her impulse to pick them up. “I'll deal with them tomorrow morning. Can I tip that out for you?”

He gestured towards her glass. Such carelessness about housekeeping filled Clair with admiration. Her study of philosophy and Russian literature confirmed her long-held belief that there were more important things in life than a clean house and the appearance of respectability.

“Thank you,” she said, handing him the glass. The warm eyes were level with hers. If she took off her platform shoes, the man would be only a little taller than she. Tension melted from her shoulders. He emptied her glass over the others piled in the sink, swished it with water, filled it and handed it back to her. There being no clear space to lean against, he stood comfortably with his feet apart, smoking and watching her as she drank.

How different from the youths in the living room! They performed Mick Jagger jerks out of time with the beat crackling through the tinny speakers. They pawed females, thumped on the bathroom door or couldn't wait and vomited over the balcony railing. One had fumbled with his fly and she'd turned away when she realised he was going to piss into a plant pot overflowing with cigarette butts and smeared paper plates.

The man in the kitchen stubbed his cigarette in the wet cardboard of a pizza box. "I'm Hugh. And you're ...?"

"Clair."

"This flat has a second balcony which is quieter. We can get some fresh air, or as fresh as the air can be in Carlton, and talk without having to shout. This way. It's through one of the bedrooms. Sorry about that."

Clair wondered why he was sorry. He escorted her past the bodies leaning against the wall outside the bathroom and knocked at a door at the end of the hallway. "Just checking," he smiled reassuringly at her. She guessed what might be happening behind the door and knew she must head for the balcony without gawping. This, she thought, was the way a discreet and sophisticated adult behaved.

The one body passed out on the bed didn't require abstention from staring. Clair therefore reached the balcony both relieved at not having to exercise discretion and disappointed at not having to ignore the intimacies that nineteenth century Russian authors alluded to but failed to describe in informative detail

The moonlit balcony was just big enough to hold a church pew and a litter-free plant pot. Hugh lounged against the iron lace balustrade, his face in shadow. Clair was pleased to sit down. Her feet hurt from the platform shoes and she felt more at ease than she would have standing next to him. She noticed he looked at her legs when she crossed them. She was used to that. In the tram and on the street men of all ages looked at her legs. Miniskirts suited her. On days when she wanted to be comfortable or inconspicuous, she wore a long peasant skirt and embroidered white blouse with a draw string around the neck. At university, the string would gradually loosen and the male lecturers stared at her cleavage. If her day was going well, she enjoyed their gaze. If not, she'd tighten the string.

"What are you studying?"

She was disappointed he asked the same question as the male students who'd spoken to her. Soon, however, she was expounding enthusiastically on the philosophy behind *Crime and Punishment*. Hugh chain-smoked and nodded, listening to her so attentively he made her think she sounded inspired and original. Eventually, becoming aware of the one-sidedness of

the conversation, she stopped and they listened to the rustlings in the tree near the balcony. Birds? Possums?

“Are you...?” She didn’t know how to go on. She wanted to ask, “Who are you” and “Why are you giving this party?” but felt too shy. There was a crash from the living room and Mick Jagger’s voice was cut off mid-shriek.

“It sounds as if the speakers have fallen off the mantelpiece,” she said.

“That too I’ll deal with tomorrow.”

Clair felt a surge of pleasure. He wasn’t going to investigate; he was staying with her.

“It’ll take hours to clean the mess.” How banal she sounded! A minute ago she was talking about Nietzsche’s superman and now she was blathering about cleanliness. At least he’d see she was both philosophical and practical. She still didn’t know who he was.

A sudden light from the bedroom behind her hit his glasses, turning them into silver-black mirrors. Someone had opened the door from the hallway and giggling voices headed towards the bed.

“I’d better deal with that now. We don’t want the lovers falling onto the drunk, do we?” There was laughter in his voice.

Hugh stepped through the French windows into the bedroom. Clair followed and stood awkwardly as he shooed the lovers away and bent over the body on the bed.

“He’ll sleep ‘til morning. Useless to try to turf him out. The couch for me tonight. Better go and see what’s happening out there.”

So this was his bedroom. She’d guessed as much. She’d never been alone with a man in his bedroom. Well, not quite alone. The drunk had slept through the Stones, Nietzsche, possums, the crash of the speakers and the lovers’ invasion and retreat.

By the time she reached the hallway, Hugh had disappeared amongst the youths lounging around the bathroom. They were all taller than he.

“Clair, where’ve you been?” Sandra’s tone was aggrieved. “I’ve been looking everywhere. Someone saw you in the hall and said you were sick in the bathroom. Are you okay? Let’s go.”

Sandra’s dress clung to her in wet patches, her beehive hairdo had toppled to one side and her mascara had smudged, so she looked like a panda. Clair was happy to agree. The conversation with Hugh was over and no one else interested her.

“Someone said you were with the old guy who owns the place.”

Clair started to protest and decided not to. She felt protective. Hugh wasn’t old.

“Why is he having this party?” She couldn’t help asking.

“You two didn’t do much talking, did you?” Sandra’s voice oozed innuendo but her eyes were glassy. “He’s a Geography lecturer. Everyone says he gives the best end-of-term parties.”

So he wasn’t just someone’s father. Clair felt like skipping down the stairs to the street. She could run into him at university. She knew the Geography building. People used it as a short cut to a grassy area with outdoor tables and chairs. She wouldn’t look conspicuous if she strolled through the short cut too.