

## chapter 16

# a pair of bogans

*"Punk rock and disco combined."*

After about fifteen minutes, Sheila turned onto a narrow side street in what I would call the rough part of town. Trash littered the street, and the sidewalks were broken and somewhat treacherous. We drove past a group of youngsters who were kicking a ball around in an alley near a seedy bar, where a couple of rough-looking patrons were smoking outside. Virtually every house and storefront within sight had iron bars on the windows and doors. All the yards had tall iron or chain-link fences around them. The entire neighborhood made me just a little bit nervous.

"Is this where Esther has been living?" I wondered to myself as we slowly coasted down the street.

"Oh, crikey," I heard Sheila mutter under her breath as she jammed on the brakes and quickly maneuvered the car sharply left to the curb, behind a couple of parked vehicles.

"What's up? Are we there?" I asked.

"Yeah, nah," she replied in a sort of loud whisper as she turned the engine off. "It's about half a block up on the right. Let's just wait here for a wee bit, though."

"Why?" I asked.

"They're here," she mumbled in a hushed tone as she leaned over next to me and looked warily up ahead and across the street.

"Who is?" I asked.

"Polly and Cass," she replied. "They're a couple of old chums of ours, but this isn't the best time right now."

“Time for what?” I asked, still confused.

“Oh, nothing, bro,” she replied as she peeked around the parked cars in front of us at whoever it was up the street.

I peered out the window with Sheila as we waited for the two ruffians to make an appearance. Sheila didn’t say anything else, and I didn’t ask any more questions. About five car-lengths ahead, I could see what appeared to be a souped-up hotrod, parked on the other side of the street. It was parked backwards and facing away from us. I could hear a vaguely familiar rock song blaring out of the open windows. Two young men were sitting inside the vehicle as it rumbled loudly and shook like a Formula One racecar. A few seconds later, the music stopped, but the car kept on rumbling.

As Sheila nervously eyed the car and the two sitting inside it, I suddenly realized that I’d heard the names Polly and Cass before. Esther had talked about them the previous summer. She mentioned them in her letters too. From what she said, I had already drawn up a picture of them in my mind. It wasn’t very flattering. They seemed like a couple of dim-witted city-bred hicks to me. Even back then, I’d felt uneasy about the way she described them. Esther seemed to admire them, but I had a gut feeling that I wouldn’t.

The car looked like an old Gremlin to me – a ‘70s model, maybe a ‘72 or ‘73. It was bright silver, and giant flames had been hand-painted on the sides, apparently, by a bunch of grade school kids in art class. It looked like a toy racecar with rooster tails. The tails (or spoiler) on the back appeared to have been glued on with Super Glue and reinforced with a fistful of large screws. It stuck up so high you could have used it as a coat hanger. The muffler underneath had been split in two, and the fat noisy tailpipes rumbled just like my grandpa coughing when he had a nasty chest cold.

I studied the car and the two young men sitting inside it with their glossy shades pulled down over their eyes. I tried not to laugh, but I couldn’t help it. Smoke poured out of the open windows as the pair of bogans sat there smoking, seemingly oblivious to their peculiar state of affairs. I really didn’t know what they were like, but it was pretty easy to make an educated guess. They sounded exactly like some of the guys

I had grown up with back in Iowa – the kind that cruise around on Saturday nights in huge jacked-up trucks with spray can paint jobs, large flags attached to the sides, and giant mufflers sticking straight up out of the beds in the back.

I had an idea of what to expect, but still, I hoped that they were actually nice and that we would get along. I was sadly disappointed when it didn't turn out that way. It's okay. I can't be friends with everyone, especially when they're trying to hone in on my girlfriend, or at least, the one I was hoping would be my girl or friend...or something like that. Whatever.

We watched as the two guys finally jumped out of the tricked-out hotrod. It continued to rumble and shake as they sauntered over to the broken sidewalk and looked around for a few seconds. The taller one was wearing a black bandana on his arm. The shorter one had a baseball cap cocked sideways on top of his head.

"Oh no, they're gonna see us," Sheila whispered as she crouched down lower in her seat and tried to hide.

"No, don't worry," I said as I continued to eye the two of them. "They're not even looking this way."

They both kept right on puffing on their cigarettes as they glanced warily up and down the street. They were having some sort of a conversation – a somewhat loud one, and they both appeared to be talking at the same time. They didn't seem to be listening to each other, though. Thankfully, they didn't notice us parked up the street and behind the other cars.

Suddenly, the taller of the two shouted something that I couldn't understand, and then he slapped the shorter one on the back of his head and laughed. Then, he walked over and kicked open an iron gate that led to a two-story building. It looked like the back of a large brick warehouse to me, but there were bicycles leaning up against the wall and an array of toys littering the yard.

The young men had a peculiar look to them – sort of like punk rock and disco combined. They kept right on smoking as they casually strolled up the weedy walkway toward the old building. They reminded me of some characters I'd seen on TV a long time ago. I couldn't place

it at first, but eventually, it came to me: Lenny and Squiggy from the *Lavern and Shirley* show. I hadn't seen an episode of it in years, but they certainly had the look.

Both of them were wearing white T-shirts rolled up at the sleeves, with flakey screen-printed artwork on the fronts. The shorter one was sporting a long ratty mullet that had been dyed red or maybe deep orange. The taller of the two had a buzz cut around the sides, with blond spiked tips on the top. Both of them were wearing large gold chain necklaces along with matching bracelets. They looked like twins to me, except for the fact that one of them was taller. I seemed to recall Esther mentioning that the taller one was Cass and the shorter one was Polly, but I wasn't absolutely sure.

It was easy to see that Cass was the leader of the dynamic duo. He led the way up the sidewalk as Polly followed along behind like a nervous dog on a shock collar. Cass had a pack of cigarettes tucked in his front shirt pocket, while Polly was sporting a tub of chew that had worn a weathered circle in his back left pants pocket. Both of them had thick wallets attached to chains that dangled loosely by their sides. As Cass walked along, he pulled out his wallet and began leafing through it. Polly kept puffing on his cigarette and glanced around nervously, as if a drug deal was about to go down.

"Oh no," Sheila whispered again from her hiding spot next to me. "They're gonna go and see if Esther is home."

"What? You guys live there?" I asked in shock.

"Yeah, mate, the upper flat is ours," she replied as she clenched the steering wheel and watched the two ruffians approach the stairs.

I studied the old building again with new eyes. There was a steep metal stairway that led to the apartment on the second level. The entire building was painted gray, and there were thick iron bars on all the windows. It didn't look like an apartment building. It looked more like a prison to me. Had Esther actually been living there for the past year? I couldn't believe it. It looked like a place for stray dogs and sick cats, not a home for actual human beings. I'd lived a sheltered life, I know, but at that moment, I had an uneasy feeling that something was terribly wrong with the entire situation.

Suddenly, Cass stopped in his tracks and spun back around. He smacked Polly on the back of the head again and shouted something indistinguishable, which made Polly throw his arms out wide and whine about the rude reprimand. The two pit bulls argued together at the bottom of the stairway for a few seconds, and then Cass blew by Polly and stomped back out to the car. Polly stumbled along behind, still complaining or whining about whatever it was that had caused the sudden turn of events.

The two of them climbed back into the car as they continued to talk over each other about whatever disagreement they were having. The loud rock music blared to life again as Cass revved the engine, slipped the hotrod into gear, and raced off down the street, leaving a smoky blue haze in its wake. We watched as they cruised all the way to the end of the block, where they hung a right and squealed off into the distance. Suddenly, the street became quiet and still again. Sheila slid back up in her seat and breathed a long sigh of relief. I did too, but I wasn't exactly sure why.

"All right, let's go and see if Esther is about," Sheila said as she grabbed her purse and opened the door.

"No, how about I go to the door by myself," I suggested. "I'd really like to surprise her."

"Sure, bro," Sheila said, pulling her door shut. "Go ahead and have yourself a squiz. I'll wait here for you."

"Thanks," I said, eyeing the building. "So, where is your place again? Is it the one at the top of the stairs, right there?"

"Totally, mate," she said, rummaging through her purse for something. "The door is probably locked, though. I reckon you'll need to borrow my key to get in."

"No, that's okay. I'll just knock," I said.

"All right, I'll hang out here, then," she replied, giving me a friendly nod of approval.

Sheila turned on the radio and leaned her seat all the way back, as if preparing to take a long winter's nap. I opened the door and let out a heavy sigh. A few seconds later, I slid out of the seat and stood up next to the car. My mind began to spin with all sorts of questions and doubts

as the reality of the occasion hit me like a ton of bricks. Suddenly, I wasn't so sure of the well-conceived plan I had concocted in my head over the past few weeks. I was about to see Esther after an entire year apart. What would she say when she saw me? What would she do? What should I say to her? What would I do if she didn't want to talk to me? I had no idea!

I walked nervously up the sidewalk as second thoughts raced through my head. I stopped at the metal gate in front of Esther's apartment and stood there frozen in fear. I thought about everything I had endured over the past year. It made me angry to think of how our relationship had been so easily snuffed out. I wasn't about to roll over and just take it. That's why I was there in New Zealand. That's why I was standing in front of her apartment. I had to follow through with my plan and fight for Esther.

"What the hell," I thought to myself with renewed determination. "What do I have to lose anyway?"

I stepped forward and kicked open the gate, just as Cass had done earlier. Then, I picked my way through the minefield of toys that littered the broken sidewalk and made my way up the long metal stairway to the landing at the top. When I got there, I glanced back down at Sheila in the car. Her head was tilted back against the headrest, and it looked as if she was already asleep. I slowly turned back to the door and let out a sigh. I couldn't believe that I was actually standing there, about to see Esther again. I took one final breath, and then I knocked on the door.

It was the moment of truth.