

CHRISTOPHER BROWNE

Passage

Rob sips his Coopers and listens. Lars says he knows a place. Local bands and cheap drinks, a proper Sydney experience. Live music has always been something Rob has paid lip service to; he knows he's supposed to care, but he's never been able to shake the feeling that it's just a bunch of nancies playing with themselves on a stage. Still, the Swedes are his mates, right up until the moment they check out of the hostel, and his mates are talking about cheap drinks, and that's enough for Rob.

They drain their glasses and stand. Rob lurches slightly and realises that his legs have been drinking. He glances from Swede to Swede and observes that they all seem completely unaffected. Bastards. He keeps forgetting that they're a decade younger than him. The buildings on the western side of the road are silhouetted against the last remnant of dusk's glow. At sunset he always pictures the sun sinking below the horizon and circling around behind the world in time for the dawn. His inner scientist is perpetually ashamed to be carrying around such a bullshit notion, but still that's how he pictures it.

He follows three pairs of jeans along the footpath, forcing his legs to mimic their easy movement. By the time they reach the main road, he's confident that he's moving fluidly, soberly. They wait at the lights, then cross over into the park. Between two throbbing intestines that carry knotty globs of traffic, it's a rolling wedge of land, an oddly quiet canopied valley of bronze leaves and strutting ibises. He's spent plenty of time here, but never walked through it at night before. In the strange, thickening stillness, the quartet passes a large pond covered in green. Rob wonders whether it's algae or just weeds. A black labrador swims across the pond, breaking the green surface and leaving a black wake that spreads behind it and consumes the green. Rob looks down into the water and sees a few coins lying in the shallows. He watches the Swedes' three heads watching the dog. They pass under an immense old tree with knotted roots and spreading branches that looks like a child's drawing. Circles of light ripple out from white lanterns the size of pomegranates hanging from its branches, and Rob wonders how they're powered. Candles? No, batteries, surely. He counts nine of them. Something about their still beauty saddens him. Lars navigates confidently through the park, and soon they pop out on the far side next to a T-intersection buzzing angrily with traffic. Sven presses the button for the lights, and they watch the

unchanging little red man, waiting. There's a gap in the traffic and Lars makes a run for it. Gustav and Rob follow, sprinting, and a taxi swings around the corner and nearly clips Rob. He reaches the shelter of the footpath and looks back. Sven is still waiting for the lights to change, holding his moral superiority high in his shoulders.

Lars starts walking; Sven will catch up. Lars leads them down the secondary road to another intersection with a pub on the corner. Rob wonders if this is the venue, but Lars turns left and keeps walking, and Rob looks wistfully at the animated rings of people inside as he passes. The street they're walking down has terrace houses on the left and converted warehouses on the right. The footpath is cracked by twists of tree root. This feels like a residential neighbourhood, and Rob begins to wonder whether Lars might be lost, but then they come to a roundabout, and he sees it.

The Swedes have been talking about the pub they're going to – Lars and Gustav have been to gigs there before – but whenever they say the name it skates out of Rob's brain and he can't quite focus on it. The Three-ring Circus, maybe? Or the Three Sheets? That's the kind of mission statement he's hoping for. Arriving at a brick bunker on the corner of two backstreets, walled with grubby brown tiles up to shoulder height and some disused scaffolding against the wall to the left of the door, Rob sees the painted round wooden disc hanging above the entrance, and comprehension dawns. The sign shows a dead tree with two gnarled branches on the left and one on the right: the Three Branches. As they get closer, Rob sees that the tree is painted in a greyish blue, and he begins to wonder whether maybe it's not a tree, but a river. Still, as long as the pub has beer, he really doesn't care what it's called. Gustav pushes the door open and they follow him into the dim space beyond. As Rob's eyes adjust to a murk that seems to have more to do with gases than with an absence of light, he tastes the heavy air. Paint, stale beer and the faintest hint of urine. He emits a quiet, approving grunt.

They're in an antechamber. In front of them is a high desk giving shelter to a large red beard and a checked shirt which could be any colour in the dimness. On the desk, an upturned hat with a Sydney Ferries logo holds a pile of coins. To the left is a closed door. The walls, the door, the desk are all painted black. To the right is an open door leading into a lighter space. Sound and light tumble out into the antechamber, an undulating mess of chatter and clinks. Rob can see congenial clumps of shaggy drinkers enjoying themselves, and he yearns to be with them, rather than jammed behind the Swedes as they negotiate with the beard. He

doesn't understand this hold-up. Why is there a gatekeeper? Why aren't they in the welcoming glow with the drinks?

The door on the left swings open and spits out a soul, a short young woman with a bright pink fringe and an armful of empty glasses. She deftly sidesteps Rob and his mates. Rob sees a necklace of Chinese characters tattooed above her black singlet, but it's the twenty inches of skin, glistening with sweat between her denim shorts and her plimsolls, that captures his attention. She disappears into the bar area, and Rob sadly turns to the left again. The door is swinging slowly closed. Behind it is a red glow, and Rob can feel heat welling from the room. He glimpses a staircase heading downward. The door clicks shut.

'Ten bucks.'

'You what?' Rob is confused. He's not quite sure what Lars is saying.

'Give me ten dollars. It's the cover charge.' He flicks his head in the direction of the bearded hipster behind the desk. Rob pulls out his wallet and grimly extracts a blue note. No-one mentioned any cover charge. He just came to drink. Lars passes Rob's tenner to the beard, who puts it in a metal box and then holds up a stamp, looking expectantly at Rob. Rob stares back dumbly. Lars takes Rob's left wrist and slaps it down on the desk, underside up, and the beard brands the white skin with a picture of two coins.

The eyes above the beard show concern behind their black-rimmed spectacles. 'Is he okay?'

'Yes, yes. He is fine,' says Lars, 'He just doesn't speak English.'

They lead Rob away while the beard makes marks in a ledger. They choose the door to the right, the bar, and he is grateful. Sven buys a round. But the bar area is so full that they can only stand in a thoroughfare, where passing sociopaths nudge their elbows and spill their drinks. The music is due to begin, so the Swedes decide that it's time to migrate to the red room. Rob grips his schooner and follows them, out of the bar and into the antechamber and through the black door.