

## Molly's Man

A man of sixty or so is showing a young couple the site of a long-deserted mining settlement in inland Cape York. Trees have sprung up everywhere and the guide, Ernie, is not finding it easy to pick up his bearings.

Ernie           Round about here, I think ...  
Thomas        Are you looking for that lake?  
Ernie           I'm looking for the track ...  
Thomas        It'd be over this way, wouldn't it?  
Ernie           We'll give it a go.

They walk through scrub until they find themselves looking at a lake which has formed as the backwater to a stream.

Marg           What a lovely stretch of water!  
Ernie           Well!  
Thomas        (to Margaret) Apparently it has a story to it ...  
Ernie           'All who went there, stayed there.' It could tell you a story, if it spoke.  
Marg           What would it say?  
Ernie           Gunshots. Yells. Screams of the dying.  
Marg           (rejecting this) It's so peaceful here today.  
Thomas        Wasn't always that way, apparently ...

Their thoughts are disturbed by voices, murmuring quietly, all about them, but emerging from the water.

Voices        Whitefella hunt on our land, where they no belong. Chinee feller too. Go everywhere lookin. We drive'em out but they shoot us. Lose all our men. Coupla fights, all over. Guns. Bang, bang, bang.

Ernie        They're talking about the Sniders.  
Marg        You can hear them too?  
Ernie        You can hear them everywhere, but this is one of the best places.  
Thomas      Meaning the worst, I take it?  
Ernie        Things that happened ... they happened a long, long time ago.  
Marg        I don't think that makes me feel any better.  
Ernie        You and I can't do anything about what happened.  
Thomas      It puts a nasty shade on things though, doesn't it.

We hear more shots, screams and yells. We hear the curses of white miners and the frustration of black men fighting for their land but unable to rid themselves of the invaders.

Marg        (rushing suddenly to the edge of the lake) Oh no more! No more! Please, peace! No more!

The scene becomes silent again.

Ernie        You're quite a peacemaker, young lady.  
Marg        This is supposed to be a peaceful land. That's how I want it to be.

Ernie           The bush is deceptive, isn't it. That's because it's so unlike us. It's humans that           make all the trouble, when we arrive.

Thomas        We're part of nature ...

Ernie           A pretty wild part, at times. I've got a lot more to show you yet. (He leads them away from the still-murmuring lake, to a cleft between two rocks.) The Gap. One of the most famous places in the whole area. Miners heading for the Palmer used to take a cut through here. Might've been better to find another way ...

Thomas        The natives, again?

Ernie           They kept themselves well hidden, then, when the miners were in single file, down came the spears! I forget how many men died here. There were quite a few attacks.

Marg           So the war went on a long time?

Ernie           The miners kept on coming, and every time the blacks did something to hurt them, they retaliated. Bodies in the bush. Bodies in the water. Bodies down a shaft. Bang, bang, bang. It took a few years to break them, but what happened was inevitable.

Marg           At school we were taught to honour those who opened up the country.

Ernie           Lies, lies, lies.

Thomas        What should we think?

Ernie           The Snider beat the spear. It was never going to be otherwise.

Marg           Weren't there native troopers?

Thomas        Protecting the white man?

Ernie           Nasty bits of work. They liked to dress up, have a horse, and shoot their own kind. They made war on other blacks with all the advantage of being white.

Marg           They shot their own kind?

Ernie           Whenever they got the chance. There wasn't much love lost between the blacks. Some tribes were friendly, others not.

Thomas        I'd like to see this place you call Battle Camp.

Ernie           Tomorrow, with any luck. I'll show you something else.

The three of them push their way through the bush, then stop where a few posts rise out of the ground.

Ernie           A man called Jack McLean was bringing supplies through here. Flour, tea, sugar, treacle, and bully beef in tins ...

Marg           What a diet!

Ernie           That's what the miners thought. They wanted beef! They told Jack to kill his bullocks. They'd pay him in gold but if he didn't, they'd shoot them anyhow. He started to argue, but they pulled out guns ...

Marg           Wasn't there any law?

Ernie           (chuckling) Now and then!

Thomas        Finish your story ...

Ernie           Forty head of cattle. And ten times that many men. Ten men to eat a beast. It wouldn't have taken them

long. Then they bought Jack's other stuff. He took his money, left his wagon, and set up somewhere else.

Marg Mister Taylor, why do you spend your life talking about these things?

Ernie Call me Ernie. People who don't like me call me Mister Taylor. (answering her question) Because it fascinates me. I grew up in this area. I can't get it out of my system, no matter how often I tell the stories I know.

Thomas How do people react?

Ernie Can't get enough of it. They want to see the bullet, the spear, the very spot where something happened. The truth's got some magic!

Marg The truth? That's the last thing we'll ever find.

Ernie All the places I'm telling you about, there's remnants, there's no doubt about people having been there.

Marg That's not the truth I mean.

Thomas What do you mean, Marg?

Marg I hardly know. I want to feel at peace with my country. Killing and armed hold-ups, and shootings and spears ... they make me full of hate, and then despair. If that's our past, what sort of future have we got?

Thomas The future's in our hands, surely? It's up to us.

Marg We're strung out on a long line between the future and the past. We don't have much room to move. We only connect the two.

Ernie That's a funny way to look at it.

Marg It's how I look at it, and it's your problem now, because you know about it. You've been telling stories; now you can deal with the effect they have.

Thomas The effect they have?

Ernie The effect they have?

Marg You're a prisoner of your past. You turn yourself into a guide, so you can tell people what happened. You're handing the problem to us. It's a burden I'd rather be without.

Ernie I admit there's ghastly bits, but the past is as rich, to me, as any bags of gold.

Thomas Really?

Ernie Otherwise, I wouldn't be here ... with you.

Thomas (testing what he's saying) We wanted to hear it all, and that's why we came?

Ernie You're unusual because you're upset. Most people say, Gee, Gosh, Amazing! They're protected by surprise. They think it's nothing to do with them.

Marg When they've listened to a story about themselves!

Ernie Or maybe it's not. There's another lake I'll show you, attached to a little stream. An Irish girl lived there with her man and baby, and she nursed the child beneath the trees that were as big, back then, as they are today. And they're big! The baby's grown up, and died, but the place where its mother watched it play is still there, and it'll be there forever, as fresh

and delightful as it was when she and her baby were young. Their memory lives in that water, and it's available to anyone who knows. So you see, we get a choice of what to remember, and what to forget. It's as if we drink from the past, and we fill up our minds, so that what's in our imagination is what we chose, and the choices we make are the truest way you can judge us for the sort of people we are!

Thomas I'd never thought of that!

Marg Nicely said, Ernie. Where does that leave us now?

Ernie You take over, Miss Margaret. You've seen my map, and my plans for the trip. Where are we going now?

Thomas (as Margaret thinks) That second lake. Where the mother kissed her child.

They disappear for a few moments, then reappear, beside another stretch of water.

Ernie They had their dwelling in front of those rocks. There's a cave, and they used it as a room.

Marg There's nothing there.

Ernie Long gone. You'll find bits of glass, bits of china. I once found a knife. I hid it under a rock.

Thomas Do you think it's still there?

Ernie I hope so, but I don't want to look.

Marg (interested) You don't want to look?

Ernie If someone took it away, I'd feel wretched. This place is sacred to me.

Thomas Were they (he points to where the dwelling stood) connected with your family?

Ernie Only the way we're all connected ...

Marg How are we all connected?

Thomas We're all human, not animals. Human.

Marg The worst animals.

Thomas And the best. We dominate ...

Ernie ... even when we don't deserve to.

Marg This is your place of peace, isn't it?

Ernie Nobody knows how peaceful the Kokjobididji people were before the whitefellas came. Or how warlike. They fought so well against the miners they must have had experience of battle. I suppose they fought other tribes ...

Marg Embodying death, so they could dish it out to others ...

Thomas ... and cop it for themselves. There are people who'd rather die than live. There always have been. I can't understand it. In a beautiful place like this, how could you consider killing? Dying?

Ernie It's in us all, and it's hard to control.

Marg It's stronger in men.

Ernie It is, but it's in women too. There are women who like men to fight over them. It gives them value, like a jewel.

Marg (staring at the water) A mother's love for her child.

Thomas The father's love for his son.

Ernie Nobody knows when they left, or why. They just did, leaving their dwelling behind. For years, people passing through slept in it, feeling safe from attack, and then the inevitable happened. It got burned down.

Thomas Leaving the cave!

Marg The cave!

Ernie The cave!

Marg Some things last forever.

Thomas Very few!

Ernie What does last forever? Tell me that!

Thomas The bush will burn; that doesn't change. Beyond that ... human nature lasts forever, always the same.

Marg Trying to get the best out of ourselves, and keeping the lid on what's worst.

Ernie You can only do that for a little while, then the evil gets loose ...

Thomas ... all over again. What a world!

Marg We're the pinnacle of nature, or so we think. This means the problem's most urgent in ourselves.

Thomas Too true, I'm afraid.

Ernie We've seen a lot today. Will we make our camp here, for the night?

Marg Yes. I'd like that. We can think of the little child at play.

Thomas I'll light a fire.

Ernie In front of the cave. We can sleep in there tonight.

Thomas We can play mother, father, child ...

Marg Who's the child?

All 3 (laughing) Not me!

Marg Maybe it's best to be the child. You can be natural, and never know the bad that's in you.

Thomas You have to wake up one day.

Ernie That's when you're not a child any more.

Thomas lights the fire in front of the room-sized cave in the rock.

Marg Do we know the names of the people who lived here?

Ernie Molly was Irish. That's all we know.

Thomas What about him?

Ernie Nothing at all. Just a miner.

Thomas They pushed into the blackfellas' land. They took it off them. Both sides were ready for a fight.

Marg And fight they did. But what's it got to do with us? I didn't shoot anybody. I didn't throw any spears.

Ernie What's it got to do with us? That's the question I can't get out of my head.

Thomas We know it's got something to do with us. We know that for sure. Do you want to say I'm wrong?

There is a silence, and then we hear again the shots, the shouts, the screaming of warriors and the groans of the dying.

Ernie It won't go away. Even here, it comes to haunt us.

Thomas That means we're accepting. We know it's always there.

Marg It's changed us then, hasn't it?  
 Thomas I have a feeling we came here wanting to be changed.  
 Why else would we come?  
 Marg Have you seen people change before, Ernie, like  
 we're changing now?  
 Ernie No. But I get letters occasionally, and I don't know  
 what they mean.  
 Thomas Letters?  
 Ernie From people I've shown around. They say they can't  
 get these places out of their minds ... but what do  
 they mean by that?  
 Marg They don't know themselves. They want to hand the  
 problem back to you.  
 Ernie And I pick up more tourists and I take them on the  
 usual round.  
 Thomas And nobody's any the wiser ...  
 Ernie When I stop here I want to see the Irish girl, and her  
 child. I want to ask questions ...  
 Marg ... which she wouldn't be able to answer. She doesn't  
 know about us, and we know about her. The advan-  
 tage is ours.  
 Ernie Mm. That's the end of that, then.  
 Thomas No, it's the beginning ...  
 Marg ... though the black people were earlier still ...  
 Thomas ... but they had to start somewhere, sometime, so far  
 back we can't see it any more ...  
 Ernie So we talk as if they were always here, when they  
 weren't.

Marg So we can't see the start any more, and we certainly  
 can't see the end ...  
 Thomas ... we're drifting in a stream of time ...  
 Marg ... and events ...  
 Ernie ... and ideas ...  
 Marg Does the stream have an end?  
 Thomas Does the stream pass a soft, inviting bank, where the  
 swimmer can get out?  
 Ernie It does. We're on the bank, our feet are dry ...  
 Marg Hello, Irish girl!  
 Molly comes out of the cave, considering them.  
 Molly You're a funny-looking lot!  
 Ernie You wretch! You've never come out before! All the  
 times I've been here, calling, and you've stayed out of  
 sight!  
 Molly I heard ya talking ...  
 Thomas ... and ...  
 Molly ... it made me rack my brains, and I wanted to see  
 who could think of such silly ideas.  
 Marg What do you think, Molly?  
 Molly I think life is short, and you need to stay active ...  
 Thomas Because if you don't?  
 Molly ... ya get tangled up in ideas. Like your hair getting  
 so wild and woolly you can't drag a comb through it.  
 That's what I think.  
 Thomas Can we camp in your cave tonight? Close to you?  
 Molly You can camp in the cave for sure, but I won't be  
 there.

Marg           Where will you be, Molly?  
Molly           (pointing) Over there.  
Thomas         Over there?  
Molly           Where Brian my husband died with a spear in his  
neck. By the time I got to him he'd gone. We never  
said goodbye, so I say it to him, every night.  
Thomas         And your child?  
Molly           He grew up. He went to sea. There came a day when  
I knew I'd hear no more of him, so I brought myself  
back here. I thought if he wanted to find me, he'd  
know where to come. That's how you found me. But  
don't tell any others. I'd rather the place to myself.  
Ernie           Do you want us to go?  
Molly           I don't mind you being here. Stay away from the  
place where Brian died. That belongs to me.  
Thomas         And the black people?  
Molly           They were doing what they had to. The place we  
took was theirs.  
Marg           You bear them no ill will?  
Molly           They killed my husband. I find that hard to love. But  
we killed their people, so why should they love us?  
Ernie           Will you let us sleep, if we put our bedding in your  
cave?  
Molly           I won't be sighing nor moaning. It shouldn't be hard  
to sleep.  
Marg           When do you sleep, Molly, if you're up all night look-  
ing for the ones you lost?

Molly           I don't need it any more. Clouds don't sleep, wind  
and water, they don't need to sleep.  
Thomas         Do you miss being alive, Molly? Do you stick around  
in hope of being called back?  
Molly           (wandering towards the water) I had my turn.  
You've got yours. Use it well.  
Ernie           Let's put our bedding in the cave. She said we  
could.  
Marg           I'm sorry she won't be with us, through the dark  
reaches of the night ...  
Thomas         She will. She said she would be, in her way.

This libretto is a response to a reading of *Chasing the rainbow: the golden gullies of the Palmer*, by Glenville Pike, Pinevale Publications, PO box 822 Mareeba, Queensland 4880, published 1993.