

We went to Orewa for a week, over New Year, four of us, Loomis boys, Mt. Albert Grammar boys, with our tent and our groundsheets and our blankets, our baked beans and beer, our frenchies and our troubling virginity. I'm not going to write of attempts and failures and consummations, sex is private, and nothing would induce me to go into detail. All that I will write down is that I came away from the holiday no longer troubled in that way, and very pleased about it, and pleased to find in myself no need to boast – I had thought I would be boastful – while Rex came away a virgin still...

Les Petley dropped us off in his truck, and drove away winking, and we pitched our tent on our allotted site on the other side of the toilets from the family part of the camp, and set out looking for adventure: Rex Petley, Jack Skeat, Tony Jameson, Mark Bunce. We thought ourselves interesting, manly, attractive; but I stand at a distance of forty years and realise how ordinary we were. We were not even especially noticeable. There were bands of young men more accomplished than us in noise and cheekiness all over Orewa that year; in the camp, on the beach, at the nightly dances. They outnumbered the girls three to one, and the girls were mostly with their families. One had to work in those days and have a lot of luck...

My girl and Rex's – I'm suspicious of possessives – were Diocesan sixth formers and once they opened their mouths Rex and I concealed our Loomis vowels. Sarah fell to me. She was a lively pug-faced girl. I fell to Sarah, and I'd like to hear the adjectives she would choose. Some relatively-pleasing-in-the-face word, I would guess, but never lively. Rex danced with her then moved in on her friend, who had just refused a dance with me. They tipped us at each other, and that was our good luck, for later on, down in the sand dunes, although we didn't do it exactly right, Sarah was just as pleased as I. (It wasn't quite her first time.) We walked on the beach afterwards, back and forth. She told me things about being a girl that I had never suspected – that they were individual not collective, for a start. I made better sense of them after that.

I told Rex I had never known you could talk with girls. It was nearly dawn. We sat cross-legged on the flat-topped hedge. The lemon-squeezer tents lay all below us and the sea washed and gloomed beyond the dunes. My nightful of achievements was nothing to Rex. He shone, he twitched, with what had happened to him.

She, the lovely one – and she was lovely, I don't remember her name but remember her face – had let him go nearly all the way... They peeled off from Sarah and me and found a place (the dunes accommodated dozens of couples), and there, for a long while, they kissed and stroked and fondled...

I listened to him tell it, and tell it again in better words; and I sat smiling to myself. I had words of my own, but no need to say them. I was contented.