

Kenso the Breen side

By Michael Breen

Mike felt tight before he got there. He knew from the dressing, polishing, and re-arranging he was supposed to look good. And his cyclonic hair was always a struggle. The family were off to, if you spoke to his father, “Kenso,” a diminutive for Kensington, 129 Doncaster Avenue where his parents lived. If you spoke to mother, it was to “go over to your father’s place,” words said with a blend of tension, competition and disdain.

The house was a kidney brick federation place in a street, which was a job lot of the same style of dwellings. Going inside was like entering a sepia toned cavern with square sides and suggestions of light from a couple of scarce high windows and a gauze-covered door.

People lurched out of the darkness to greet the visitors. They were like figures, which loom from recesses in a ghost train ride. As they bent down to greet Mike a nearby voice would announce, “This is Aunty Elly...” or “say hello to Nanna”. The voice was like that of an announcer for a line of guests, the voice which declaims, “Sir and Lady Upton,” to remind the hosts of names and boost the newcomers.

Like a reluctant Kamikaze pilot Mike waited for the close encounter. This meant being coerced into planting a kiss on Nanna or some elderly aunt. Mostly they had a sort of Galah colour to them dotted with white bristles. Their faces hurt Mike, and they smelled different.

Only the ladies were for kissing. The men nodded or chuckled and held out a hand. As a left-hander Mike sometimes needed coaching to proffer his right, correct hand. He could not remember his father greeting his parents.

Uncle Ted, a lugubrious man would emerge as if from his kennel. He had a rectangular sagging face and glasses like Mike’s Dad. Mostly Ted looked concerned, had a half smile, and the older Mike got the more he wondered if the worried look and half-smile was the result of a struggle with a base bestial passion in which Ted virtuously won a Pyrrhic, puritanical victory. Ted had entered ‘The Brothers’ and had relinquished the call; or more likely been asked to leave. Mike imagined because of debilitating scrupulosity and galloping pietism. Mike understood that Nanna and Grandfather were very proud of this budding

brother in training and always wore their finest when he was permitted visitors. Later Uncle Ted was considered an embarrassment when Mike's siblings were out to impress a date — when arriving at the Town Hall there was the said Uncle as an obsequious usher.

Grandfather Breen was livelier than his son Ted, not that that was surprising. Mike loved to go out the back down the buffalo grass lawn to Grandpa's workshop. Up the stairs, through the fragile glass paned door and into paradise. Resinous smells from the shavings on the floor mingled with linseed oil, glues and 'mastic' wafts from tins and bottles and the hot water glue pot. His bench was solid oak and inviting, tattered with the cuts, missing chips and splashes of paint and wood stain, which gave it a mature middle-aged patina. Mike couldn't help turning the pipe handle on the bench vice, running his hands over the bench stop square holes, but he never got near a plane or polished chisels. He wanted to be involved with this.

Around the walls the old man had all kinds of penny slot machines. The best was the penny Pianola which would play tunes by itself as it wound its slotted paper roll. Grandfather has some blank penny shapes to trick the machine into thinking that he was feeding it coin and away it would go. Mike loved the excitement, watching the hammers banging away without a pianist and wondered which hammer would strike next.

There were also slot machines of different kinds and ones with a viewer you looked through, if you were tall enough, and a handle on the right-hand side. When you turned the handle, the many photos created a "moving picture". Never was Mike permitted to have a go at these machines. When Mike was older, he fed a penny into a peepshow machine at Walla's Tea Rooms near Figtree Wharf and saw, as if through a keyhole, a heavily corseted lady removing her clothes. He was shocked.

Copyright 2024 by the Michael D Breen. All rights are reserved and the writing may not be reproduced or copied in anyway without permission from Michael D Breen.