Gary’s mother thought she was cheap then, did she? He wouldn’t admit she’d said it, but Debbie had distinctly heard the woman say it. Just the other night.

It was the very first time Debbie had actually gone inside Gary’s house, although she’d walked past or ridden past it on her bike plenty enough times, pretending to be heading somewhere else. And occasionally, if he was feeling too knackered to come all the way to her place, he’d ask her to come and wait for him outside his front fence on one of their date nights. She knew well enough, then, what that house looked like from the outside and once or twice she’d glimpsed one of his parents watering the front lawn.

But last Friday, the two of them were on their way to the drive-in when Gary remembered he’d forgotten the you-know-whats and they’d had to circle back to his place. She just assumed she was expected to wait in the car while he ran in to get them and was already fishing in her bag for her nail file when Gary had said ‘Come in and meet Mum’. So she did. And she heard it.

All smiles to her face of course. All ‘dears and ‘loves’. For a few ecstatic minutes Debbie thought she’d actually passed the test. Then, ‘a bit cheap,’ she heard the woman whisper behind her back as Gary followed her out the door. Debbie’s first reflex was to hitch up and cover her bra strap, but it was a pretty one and straps were allowed to show nowadays weren’t they? Even her own mother admitted that things had changed as far as what could be revealed or not. Was it her gapped-tooth smile? Hardly her fault.

They walked back out to the car, Gary’s mother waving pleasantly from the front door. Two-faced bitch, Debbie thought. Who did she think she was, anyway, in her pre-fab trust home in a street where not one single house was detached? In Debbie’s parents’ street there were four houses that weren’t even trust homes.

After those three words and despite all the satisfied grunts and groans emitted at the drive-in that night, she’d taken for granted it was all over. If his mother didn’t like her, Gary was going to drop her, for sure. Debbie’s mascara had been more smudged than usual most of the week.

Even at work the customers had picked up on it. ‘Out of sorts, Deb?’ one regular had said as she topped up the woman’s drink. ‘A case of the doldrums, sweetheart? Maybe you should have a shot of this yourself.’ ‘Come on love, plenty of fish in the sea.’ ‘Do you want me to go and punch him in the nose for you?’ Male or female, young or old, every drinker in the front bar seemed to have guessed what she was sniffing about, which only made the mascara run thicker.

That was the thing with Gary. Everybody in the pub scene knew him. Or knew about him. He was Mister Never-a-dull-moment. Wherever he sat down at the bar, a circle would form around him and then hoots of laughter would start coming from that direction. Gary was always on to something. Or up to something.

Just last week, things had got close to a riot with Gary and his lot and the manager had threatened to kick them out if they didn’t rein it in a bit. Debbie had been too busy running to and from the beer garden to suss out all that was going on.

‘Colonel Light’s Footprint,’ Janet Kaye Garrick.
She’d just caught something about a dare. Then someone said: ‘Put your money where your mouth is!’ And later she’d heard: ‘Three witnesses or it doesn’t count.’

There seemed to be a lot of money flying around and as far as she could tell Gary’s mate Dave had been filling out some kind of data sheet, but when she asked about it later, Gary said it was just a joke and he’d been too wasted to remember much about it himself. That was him all over.

Debbie’s makeup was still running Friday morning, as she was mopping up the beer slops from the night before. Suddenly her phone screeched. And her stomach dropped. Bastard, she thought, not even going to have the guts to tell me to my face. Slowly she ran out the cloth she’d been wiping the counter with, folded it into the sink and went over to her bag.

‘Hi.’ She sighed. With her left hand she put the phone to her ear, with the right she felt for her tissues.

But Gary’s tone flowed through the receiver, unusually warm, and he wasn’t saying anything about cooling off or wanting a break — he was talking about driving down to Glenelg beach on Saturday afternoon.

Debbie put the tissues down and pressed the phone harder to her ear. With one of his parents’ cousins, and the cousin needed to be picked up on the other side of town. Would she like to come along for the ride?

She had to ask him to repeat himself — and he did, patiently and good-naturedly.

‘Sure,’ she answered, once she finally made sense of what he was asking. ‘I’ll come.’

‘Great. Pick you up from work at two.’ He hesitated. ‘Oh and Deb, don’t make it too obvious you and me are… you know…’

‘Cool.’

Debbie hung up, put her hand over her mouth and squealed. For the rest of the day she danced around the bar, more excited than the first time he’d asked her out.

Well actually, he hadn’t exactly asked her out, he’d just said, ‘you coming too, gorgeous?’ when the pub was closing and a whole group of half-pissed customers were moving on to a disco. But no one else had thought of inviting her — only he had, the cool guy with the wicked grin who always had a ‘hi sexy’ for her when he walked into the front bar.

It’d been two whole months since that night and he still never really asked her out on a date. Most often he’d just give her a wink from over the counter when he was in and say: ‘You doing anything after work?’ or ‘Meet you later on in front of my place?’

But a weekend afternoon drive to Glenelg beach with a relative; that sounded pretty serious, didn’t it?

The cousin turned out to be a quite elderly man introduced to her only as Cyril, so Debbie didn’t overly mind when she was asked to give up her usual seat and climb in the back. She did her best to get settled on the broken springs.

It was weird seeing the car from this angle. What was even weirder was that it was all clean and tidy. There were no crumbs anywhere, the cigarette butt tray had been emptied and the hologram card — the one with a picture of a very tanned blond woman who bared her top and winked whenever the car moved — wasn’t hanging
from the rear-view mirror.

The men chatted away in the front as they drove back towards the city. Debbie was keen to join in, but most of their words were drowned out by the music and talk from the radio. She hoped she didn’t look cheap today. Bra straps and tattoo were out of sight. Maybe she should avoid smiling in front of the cousin.

‘That Colonel Light, he had a few clues, I’m telling you.’ The car had stopped at a red light and Cyril’s voice finally rose loud enough for her to hear.

This was as good a time as any. ‘Who’s he when he’s at home?’ Debbie leant forward.

There was an embarrassed pause.

‘Who’s Colonel Light?’ Cyril frowned. ‘Only one of the founding fathers of our beautiful city.’ He shook his head. ‘And the one most deserving of our respect if you ask me!’

Debbie felt her cheeks burn. She leaned back again.

‘Oh don’t mind her,’ Gary quipped. ‘She’s damaged her hearing from too many discos.’

He met her eyes in the rear-view mirror. It did look blank today without that woman winking and flashing away. ‘Debbie,’ He squinted at her meaningfully. ‘You remember enquiring about Colonel Light and why he chose this site for Adelaide and all that, don’t you?’

‘Oh right, him.’ She nodded. ‘I just couldn’t hear properly over the radio.’

Gary gave her a slight nod of approval. She bit her lip.

‘Well’ confessed Cyril, relenting, ‘even an old geezer like myself had never heard about the footprint before Gary here told me about it.’

‘Footprint?’ Debbie mouthed silently to the rear-view mirror. But the light had turned green and Gary shifted his eyes back to the road.

The car moved smoothly forward.

‘I’ve always admired that man,’ Cyril went on.

‘Oh yeah, why’s that?’ Gary focussed on the road.

‘For a start,’ Cyril pointed one finger. ‘There’s the site. Anyone will grant you that the choice of site for the capital city of our state was just A1.’

‘That’s for sure,’ put in Debbie.

‘I mean try and picture Adelaide without those hills or without the Torrens. Try and imagine Adelaide where Port Lincoln is — now where would we have put the paddle boats? Just try and imagine that!’

‘What?’ Gary turned his head for a second then looked where he was going again, but he was listening. Debbie made an effort to follow, too, despite the radio.

‘Well,’ Cyril sat upright in his seat, half-turned towards the driver. ‘Not many people know it, but back in the early 19th century, some blokes at the top, who didn’t have the foggiest, who’d never come within several thousand miles of the place, were pushing for Adelaide to be built down on Eyre Pensinsula. Eyre Pensinsula, try and picture that.’

He looked at Gary then turned around and looked at Debbie, making sure it had sunk in. Debbie stared at him.

‘But old Colonel Light, he wouldn’t have a bar of it. That man had vision and he had character. He stuck to his guns and we got this wonderful spot “twixt hill and sea”.’
‘No bullshit!’ Gary was genuinely impressed.
‘Yeah, that is hard to imagine,’ agreed Debbie.
Cyril relaxed, enjoying the effect he’d had.
‘Geez, everything would have been different,’ mused Gary. ‘No devil’s elbow to tear around driving up to the hills, no gooey German cakes from Hahndorf.’
‘Why? Don’t they have cakes on Eyre Peninsula?’ Debbie wondered, but neither of the men bothered to answer.

They’d now reached the inner city area and the roads were busier. Gary was driving very courteously, today.

After a while Cyril picked up where he’d left off. ‘But in my humble opinion — he articulated very clearly for Debbie’s sake — ‘while the site is undoubtedly unique, the real genius was in the grid layout.’

Gary and Debbie exchanged a private puzzled glance that sent a tingle through her.

Their elderly passenger gestured towards the wide, straight, tree-lined road they were driving along. ‘I mean just look at it. It’s beautiful: East Terrace, North Terrace, West Terrace, South Terrace. A perfect square mile and not one corner that isn’t a right angle! Pure and utter orderliness.’

‘You’re right, Cyril,’ nodded Gary. ‘Nothing beats that.’

Debbie gave up trying to understand what the old guy was on about. Maybe he was just mental and Gary was too polite to say so. In that case, it went to show what a decent person he was deep down, taking a half-wit relative out for a drive on a Saturday afternoon. She sat back in her lumpy seat and let herself daydream.

Obviously things had never been better between her and Gary, whatever his mum thought of her. Her insides filled with a warm glow at the idea that he cared enough about her to stand up to his own mother and introduce her to other members of the family. Up until now he’d never stuck up for her, not even the time Dave had made that ‘Have you ever got it stuck between the gap in her teeth, mate?’ crack at the pub when he thought she was still in the toilet.

That time she’d really tried to be mad at Gary, long enough to make him realise he had just better start treating her different or else. She sulked all the way to the dark alley near the pub where he always parked. But he’d only laughed it off. ‘Come on, it was just a joke, he didn’t mean it.’ He slipped a hand under her top. And when she pushed it away: ‘You know what? I reckon he’s jealous. He’s never had a girlfriend anywhere near as spunky as you.’ At that point he unclasped her bra.

‘You think so? For real?’
‘Dead certain.’ His hand moved around to the front, doing exactly what she fantasised about him doing all week long. She’d relented.

Now she was glad she had or they wouldn’t have got to where they were today: on an official date. Debbie closed her eyes and imagined what it would be like having Gary tell her he loved her. She rode a giant wave of bliss at the thought. And then one day, not too far away, suggesting they move in together.

‘And that’s what makes Adelaidians so… straight-thinking, so clear-headed, you know what I mean?’
‘Totally agree with you, Cyril. And my mate says, you get a real straight kind of buzz out of the footprint, like the earth’s been marked with it.’
‘Incredible!’
‘Apparently it can even effect change in a person. It’s that powerful.’
‘God almighty!’
‘What’s this about a footprint?’ Debbie couldn’t help asking.
‘Oh, isn’t she on the pilgrimage?’ Cyril looked confused.
‘Course she is. Wake up, young Debs! Forgotten we’re off to see Colonel Light’s footprint in my mate Dave’s backyard?’

Debbie’s mouth opened. They were going to Dave’s place? ‘Right, yeah, I didn’t connect,’ she finally mumbled.

All three fell silent as they cruised down Anzac Highway, fluid as always with its double lanes and grassy tree-lined medium strip leading all the way down to the coast. Near the end of the road, Gary eased his foot on the pedal and began checking the names of the streets running onto it from the left. Debbie sensed a tension in him she’d never seen before.
‘This is it,’ he announced, deftly veering around a corner, not far the beach. He drove the car half way down the street, pulled up under a shady tree and turned the ignition off. For a moment nobody moved.
‘Out you climb then, people. Need a hand, Cyril?’
‘No thank you very much, I can manage.’ Cyril sounded nervous, too.

Gary left them standing under the tree and ran ahead. ‘I’ll just make sure he’s ready for us,’ he called, disappearing up the drive.

Debbie and the old man waited together on the footpath in the shade. Dave’s front yard was pretty messy, but the house was one of those nice stone cottages with a veranda and wrought-iron railing. Just the sort she could see her and Gary in later on.

Cyril tapped his foot. Gary was taking his time.
‘So, who’s cousin are you exactly, Gary’s mum’s or dad’s? Or one of his grandparents’?’ she asked.

Cyril frowned at her, took a second to answer.
‘We’re not related at all. Who gave you that idea?’

Debbie stared at him. ‘Oh, no one. I just thought…’
‘No, not at all. We simply got talking at the pub last week and young Gary made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.’

She stared at him some more, then smiled her gap-toothed smile. ‘I get it.’
‘I mean $100 for a privilege like this. I wasn’t about to pass that up. Forked it out on the spot.’

She blinked.
‘I don’t mind telling you, I was a bit concerned he wouldn’t show up. I mean how was I to know he wasn’t just going to pocket the money and leave me in the lurch? But I didn’t have to worry; he was true to his word. He’s an honest bloke.’

She managed a nod.
‘Look, I probably shouldn’t ask you this,’ Cyril lowered his voice, glanced over his shoulder to make sure Gary wasn’t in hearing distance. ‘But how much did you pay? I gather you two are already acquainted.’

‘Oh, um… same as you.’ The gap between her teeth showed again. ‘It’s a bargain after all for what it is.’

‘Alrightee!’ Gary hailed them from the veranda. ‘In you come.’

Debbie trailed up the path behind Cyril. She recognised Dave standing on the veranda with his usual blood-shot eyes and puffy face. He muttered a few words of
greeting, then turned around and led them through the house down a passage where
doors on both sides were shut tight, and out onto the back yard.

At the end of the garden stood a huge jacaranda and behind it something like a
table-cloth was fixed to a broken clothes-line. They were motioned in that direction.
Gary cleared his throat. ‘Dave’s a bit emotional when it comes to Colonel
Light, so I’ll do the explaining.’
‘Too right,’ admitted Dave, rubbing his eyes. ‘Sorry, can’t control it.’
‘As we all know’ Gary began, ‘the Glenelgites have always made a big deal
about the old gum tree on the spot where Governor Hindmarsh declared the state of
South Australia.’
‘And fair enough,’ interrupted Cyril. ‘We should respect all our founding
fathers.’
Debbie gazed at Gary, just realising what was so different about him today: he
was closely shaven. And he looked even spunkier than usual.
‘But unfortunately for them, they’ve overlooked an even more important
landmark: the exact point where Colonel Light stood surveying the bay and making
his momentous decision. And that point just happens to be behind the jacaranda here.’

Cyril turned to Dave. ‘And how did you come to know…?’
‘Sorry,’ Gary cut in. ‘Top secret.’
‘Yeah, sorry mate,’ Dave shrugged his shoulders. ‘Private family business.’
‘Anyway, we don’t want too many people finding out about it or they’ll come
flocking here and spoil it — or even steal it, for that matter’
‘Steal it?’ repeated Debbie, but she was ignored again.
‘So’ Gary rubbed his hands together, ‘let’s get on with it. If each of you’ll take
off your right shoe, you can come round behind the curtain, one at a time, wash your
foot in the bucket here first, dry it well and place it in Colonel Light’s footprint that
history has preserved for us right here. Be very careful not to alter it in any way
though.’

‘Is there a time limit?’ asked Cyril.
‘Nope, take as long as you like, mate.’
Debbie stepped back to let the elderly stranger go in front. She couldn’t take
her eyes off Gary. This guy could move mountains with a smile and a few clever
words. ‘Is it filming?’ she heard him whisper to Dave, who gave a quick nod.
Cyril disappeared behind the strung-up table-cloth. ‘Good grief!’ they heard
him exclaim almost immediately. ‘Unbelievable…’
Dave’s body shook silently. Gary winked at Debbie and gave her that wicked
grin she’d fallen for the first time he’d wandered into the front bar. She finally
dropped her gaze and drew circles on the ground with her toe.

After a few minutes, Cyril emerged from behind the curtain, beaming. He
hobbled over to Gary, still with one shoe off and one shoe on, and grasped his hand
warmly.

‘Bloody amazing,’ he shook his head. ‘It was like an electric current — a wave
of sheer integrity emitted from the earth and running all through my body. The
essence of that great man concentrated in one print of his foot.
‘Absolutely out of this world. Mind if I sit down? I’m a bit wobbly after that.’
Dave pulled him up a rusty garden chair. He dropped down onto it, breathing
deeply.
‘Come on, Debbie, your go,’ said Gary.
‘You won’t regret it, missy,’ Cyril’s voice trembled.
Debbie looked up, stared at each one of them in turn, ending with Cyril. For a moment she couldn’t take her eyes off the trembling, grateful old man. Gary coughed loudly.
She snapped to attention and trotted over to the bucket. The tears were welling up in her eyes and she had to go through the motions quickly so she could get behind that towel fast before they started running down her cheeks.
Gary had caught on. ‘Ah, Deb’s emotional about it too. She’s a sensitive kind of…’
‘Shit!’ Debbie’s voice shot over the curtain. ‘Oh SHIT!’
The men smiled at each other. ‘Works every time,’ nodded Gary.
‘Not sure old Colonel Light would have approved of the language, though.’ Cyril grinned.
But before Gary could answer, Debbie came stomping out from behind the tree, almost twisting the ankle of her left foot, still in its high heel.
‘I can’t do this,’ she was saying to no one in particular. ‘This isn’t right. It isn’t straight.’
All three men froze. Gary stepped forward. ‘Now look Debs…’
She swung around to him. ‘You know what you are?’ She met his gaze. ‘A fucking conman.’
Cyril’s face fell.
‘Hey, does this thing actually work?’ muttered Dave, screwing up his nose.
‘Cyril, you listen to me.’ She turned to the white-faced old man, and her voice was clear and steady. ‘Gary’s just one big bullshit artist. I’m not on any pilgrimage. I’m the barmaid from the British that he screws in the back of his station wagon three times a week. He didn’t know who Colonel Light was a week ago, not any more than I did. You make him give you your money back.’
‘It’s all been a bit too much for her,’ Gary said quietly.
‘It’ll be too much for you if you don’t give him his hundred dollars back. You want everyone in every front bar of every hang-out in Adelaide to hear how you rip off decent people you meet in pubs? Old age pensioners, too.’
She limped over to her right shoe, shoved it on and pranced back into the house. ‘I’m taking the tram back into town. You want to come with me Cyril?’ she called from inside. ‘I’ll be waiting out the front for you.’