

A Short Short Story by Agnes Elizabeth Remay (Eliza)

One FIFTY YEARS Sainter

As Autumn captivates Melbourne City, you begin the countdown to Game Day. You imagine the roar of the crowd, ‘Carn the Mighty Saints*₁...’ Breathing these words into the deepest part of your belly, the hope of success for your Australian Football League (AFL) team is ignited all over again. Australian poet, Bruce Dawe captures the atmosphere. You can easily imagine booming from the stands that “pure flood of sound...scarfed with light, a voice like the voice of God.” With the 2018 AFL Season about ‘to turn a corner’, now in Winter, many pilgrims will head to the birthplace of AFL, the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG/The G) on Sunday 1 July, to ‘contemplate’ the Saints and the Demons. Those of us with passion for the Red, White and Black, are cautioned after only two wins and one draw, to take a reality check; invest weekend libido into learning club history instead of attending matches for sports entertainment. But after snaring a win at Metricon Stadium, in a fourth quarter bonanza, on 14 June, discouragement does not deter the one-eyed Sainter.

What does it mean to be a supporter of fifty years for a football team that has had eight Grand Final appearances and won only one Premiership since 1873, in 1966? The memory of Barry Breen kicking the winning point and Coach Allan Jeans saying, “We’d had such a good year in 1965, the year we moved out to Moorabbin. Everything seemed to fall into place” now vividly suggests endless possibility, to the devoted Sainter for the remainder of the Season. Since in March 2018, Saints moved back to a completely refurbished home ground in Moorabbin, a state of the art facility; bell chimes surpassed only by sirens; sound with absolute hope of success not only for this Sunday and the following nine games before Finals, but for 2019, just as it did in 1965 and 1966. ‘Yabbie’ Jeans is fondly remembered for his famous words: “In every game there’s gonna be a crossroad and when ya get to that crossroad, ya either step up or ya step down. It is all up to you. You make the decision not me.” You are ready, invigorated to hold hands with every Christian Brother, Windsor Woman*₂, Jewish Mother, Heathen Sister, Muslim Aunt and Buddhist Father. Game on for a Grand Final berth this Sunday!

For some, the idea of weekly football attendance is a ritual similar to attending weekly Mass on Sunday; supporters like parishioners are ‘fed’ their ‘Homily’ and ‘Host’. Expect fabulous footy, fun with family, food galore, alcoholic beverages, a place of belonging with friends and acquaintances. However, those embittered by the amount of ‘screen time’ this sport occupies, might argue, the ‘devout’ are ‘drugged’, because after all, in Melbourne, more so than any other part of Australia, Footy, known as Aussie Rules, is indeed the “opium of the masses,” the place where it is religiously believed, that “all people need opium to keep them from suffering too much.” Those like me, ‘married’ to The Saints, ‘for better or for worse,’ have incurable passion.

The so called ‘mad’ ones, the oft labelled ‘insane’ ones; Tom Batzmarowsky is another example, who “married [Tara] in 2005 wearing his Nick Riewoldt-signed St

Kilda jumper...and [their wedding cake] was a replica Saints' jumper" (Critchley, 2010, p.107). Such behaviour, qualifying that support, turned addiction, for AFL, is a dangerous 'drug', that incites mindless boganism, fretful fanaticism, not to mention, seditious uncouth swearing, if you're unlucky enough to be seated next to someone from 'the other side' in your very own cheer squad. Yet a view that AFL is a contemptible all-consuming pastime, does not prevent a Saintly 'lamb'*₃ from taking her seat next to a ferocious 'tiger' on Game Day.

On Saturday afternoon, 8 July 2017, when St Kilda legend Nick Riewoldt stamped his name in history books as the most prolific marker the game has known, I was there as usual, in my reserved Level 1, Aisle 19, Row A seat. I arrived to learn that Dustin Martin, Richmond's celebrated midfielder, the young man referred to by most, as having an attitude of "Don't Argue", had been a Saints supporter from childhood. 'Done and Dustyd' I consoled myself. 'We had this won'. For there is no more certain truth, than what Jesus had said, "Do not stop him...for whoever is not against us is for us." It was also the time when player negotiations were in place and much talk had already unfolded, about Dusty's possible future at the Saints. I was thrilled. Many around me worrying, "he's a criminal, he comes from a family of criminals." I replied, "if he plays for us, we'd love and convert him." I did have one real fear about him being in our squad, which was, 'How will he get along with our own tattooed men?' I was happy enough to reconsider my single concern later. For now I was on a 'mission' with Dusty's publicly known 'sin'. Allegedly, heavily intoxicated, he had threatened to murder an annoying fan, a Channel 7 female producer, at Mr Miyagi's Japanese Restaurant, in Windsor on 15 December 2015, with a chopstick.

Sledging is of course forbidden at matches and while I do have an extremely high pitched operatic voice, that can shrill and travel through every 'nook and cranny', even at The G, potentially very aggravating for the opposition; the words that would follow this day were surely worse than that. I don't ever swear at matches and I am normally not rude. This day was different. I was so desperate for a win here, for Rooley and Joey, as Nick Riewoldt and Leigh Montagna are fondly known by the 'inner sanctum'; two veterans, who would be asked to leave in 2017; and my two favourite players over the last decade. I wanted a Premiership for them and knew, that if we beat the Tiges this day, we would with my ongoing 'sheepish manoeuvrings', be contenders for the Premiership Flag at last. I made a 'sacrifice', took a risk. Rooley kicked the opening goal and two more during Maddie's Match*₄, only bettered by Tim Membrey's five goals; Saints led by an 82 point margin at half time. The absolutely stunning jinx was helped along by me. Each time a purring Tige stood to stage a goal, that sweetest Lamb did baaahh: "Remember your treatment of women Richmond. Kick between the chopsticks son". My incantation led to them fumbling, fretting and finally failing. Richmond's picture perfect mould for the year was shattered, leaving them as tiny shards of glass. Not merely amounting to their humiliation, losing by 67 points that day; it brought the Saints a sniff away from their second ever premiership, having won four games in a row for the first time since 2011. We were now in fifth spot, only trailing the Tiges by one spot, with seven chances left at 'Gold'.

So sadly, very unfortunately, mysteriously and tragically, for me and them it seems, the Season was FINISHED. Compounded by a series of less exciting, but hindering events in my life during the month, I had what would be my first, and dare I say it

only major meltdown. My three hundred, not one hundred percent effort that day, prevented further attendance and may have been the reason our Grand Final victory 'dribbled away'. Supporters like me are sorely missed. I could not be with the team again that year. Instead of building towards jubilant thanks for years of devoted service to my two favourite 'sons', Rooney and Joey with a Grand Final berth and a Premiership to show for it, I could not even say goodbye to either of them. The Devil dealt the card of death. I died. It was time to quit or 'rise from the dead.' I could not do either.

There are those more benign supporters involved in the sale of Footy Records, or prayer in the MCG's Prayer Room on level three near aisle eight. Really, after a massive win like the one against Richmond in July last year, prayer is fitting. Some supporters, instead of dreading fibrillation after such a feat, or bandages after being bloodied, by a disgruntled Richmond supporter, may feel safer in the prayer room, either to praise God in thanks, or to simply pass out, as I just about did. Those more tender hearted Sainters, on the other hand, encased in the footy friendly body, who do not feel comfortable waving their team's flag after a goal, jumping high, throwing their Saints' beanie to the sky, blasting the eardrums of other spectators sitting close by with, "Lookatthescoreboardyafuckenmangymongrel.

Seewhatyafuckendonetousyaturd," when an umpire makes a 'wrong' call, or suspends 'Mad Dog' Robbie Muir for a gentle kiss on the umpire's cheek, may well be better off with a brief visit, or longer stay, in the prayer room, watching the football game from the television screen, also in that room. The respectful, reserved supporter, afraid of being caught in the throng of mass hysteria, which can certainly border on violence at times, may quietly wander away from the crowd, to think and pray in this quiet space. Each time the umpire gets a verbal jab, or one of 'our boys' is injured or booed, that bamboozled supporter may just prefer to wrap their frustration and pain in their footy scarf and absent themselves to the prayer room.

Every single year I tell myself, I'm not going to the Footy this year and what happens apart from a serious dent to my credibility when I utter these words in public, is that I turn up day one to do my duty. I remember the giant crepe paper banners, run through by players on Game Day with slogans like, 'Australia and St. Kilda Always Come First' and floggers which resemble giant red, white and black pom poms on sticks. I am lured as by the smell of incense. This year, eerie grey clouds of smoke suggestive of Saints' Heaven, adds further allure as Saints boys run out onto the field.

I cannot keep away from the "footy field [that] one place where black and white legends stand alongside one another in a spirit of comradeship." (Flanagan, 2004, p.241). On the dew touched and verdure grass, with delicious aromas from the chilled winter air, there's promise for my Indigenous brothers; their personal dream of acceptance and belonging is my own. The spectacle of what Saints' legend Nicky Winmar did in Round 4 at Victoria Park in 1993, in front of a belligerent Collingwood crowd is not in vain, its brilliance and significance firmly rooted in my Saints' soul, realised and celebrated like any religious Feast Day in May, every Indigenous Round. One "watershed moment where the national discussion about Indigenous involvement in football and racism took root." (Gorman, 2011, p.124). His beacon of hope, like my Saints' flag held high, carried with pride in 2014 by Sydney Swans footballer Adam Goodes, as Australian of the Year, and today, by Saints' footballers

Bennie Long and Brownlow Medallist hopeful, Jade Gresham. My duty of course, is to support 'my men'. That cycle of Adam, thrilling and brave, significant Saints, 'bridging the gap' all over again, is a powerful reason for bearing the Red, White and Black.



Nicky Winmar's proud moment on 17 April 1993

Belonging to Saints Footy is not just about acknowledging and striving to overcome racial tension, or better understand the committed efforts of inspiring CEO Matt Finnis to include LGBT supporters; or even to represent ecumenical religious fervour at games; my support of the St Kilda Football Club is a celebration of place. The suburb I was born into is the name of my football team, which honours its vibrant Judeo-Christian founders. Temple Beth Israel on Alma Road, established in 1920, where my Catholic boyfriend insisted we visit; Whisky-A Go-Go, where my Olympian and also Catholic father, too late arriving to participate in the Melbourne Olympics after the Hungarian Uprising, secured his first job as a bouncer; now known as the St Kilda Baths, where our Saints men train. Across the road is the Novotel, but from 1939-1982 it was St Moritz Ice Skating rink, where I spent years of dedicated practice in the 70s as a hopeful Olympian figure skater.

I'm back there living every moment of that drawn 2010 Grand Final. BJ climbs his opponent's shoulder to clutch that coveted leather lark. I morph into a religious zealot, almost on my knees, praying to every Saint in and under Heaven, begging, "pleeeeeeeeeaaasse". Perspiration trickles down my temples and I start to cry. Three older teenage girls from Collingwood laugh at me out loud. "Look at that mad woman, she stinks from her sweat." The incongruity of my dress now beaming. Red, white and black knee high socks are not a perfect match for the stylish hugging black jacket, tailored knee length black skirt and stiletto shoes that I am wearing. Respectful of this historical day, I'm dressed for the occasion. Deeply humiliated, I am still praying. Tears fall fast and firm like rocks on concrete. A voice, "**What does it all mean to you, Agnes?**" springs from Heaven. My tears flood the cold concrete everywhere. It is Grand Final Day and I am crying. Because, THIS TIME we would make it? Spiritual, so surreal. Brendon Goddard would save the day. Number 18 our 'Saviour'.

"Goddard's mark came at a crucial juncture of the match.

The scores were locked at 61 points apiece at the 20-minute mark of the final term when the rangy midfielder leapt for the grab.

He brought the house down as he soared over Magpies Harry O'Brien and Luke Ball about 25m from goal.

With his knees perched on O'Brien's shoulders, he snared the ball overhead with a single grab.

And he followed up by kicking a goal which put the Saints in front for the first time in the game." (deKretser, 2013)



Whatever does a game like this mean to a 'Little Match Girl', that migrant child; working woman; politically dispossessed and saddened man; all from St Kilda? You know your roots and do not forget them. You go home to untangle and mend them. 16 Jervis Street, East St Kilda, The Saints, Johnny Farnham and Adventure Island. An assortment of loved cultural icons; and another missed Saints' Grand Final.

From Autumn's 'Hors d'oeuvres', to Winter's succulent 'feast'; the 2018 Season is an emerging Beast. It's essentially a winter game and not for the faint hearted. You remember the hurt of getting hit by the hailstones when Port met St Kilda at AAMI Stadium in 2007; the men digging trenches with their limbs in filthy mud and the hostile stench. You're a True Believer not deterred. Clad in raincoat and Saints' umbrella, you're always ready to brace inclement weather. In full readiness, days from today, what will it be Lord, glorious sunshine or pelting rain? Tumultuous thunder, whirling wind, Melbourne's Weather Wizard to wave her wand. This Sunday 'arvo' when Saints battle Demons, "Up there Cazaly in there and fight," you'll scream out with others, "show 'em your might." *₃ Like them or loathe them for their actions that day, you're Faithful; you A.R. ABLE won't stay away. Hail Mary full of Grace, pray for us sinners and your fearless Saints. You do not understand the intensity of this fervour. Is it healthy passion or fanatical fundamentalism? The one

mind 'football fever', that ecstatic Saints' love; you're hooked to a drug; at times downcast by disease. This fervent zeal transcends every other, revealing destructive aspects of our God given humanity. Love turned hate. Hate turned love. You're a sledging Saint, that spellbound Tigers; shuddered and shamed them in their filthy shoes. To be a supporter that kills for their team, or bawls on the train, is not at all normal; it is clearly insane, to live each Game with intense pleasure or horrible pain.

But to sing without stopping, with 'Johnny unlikely' in the pouring rain: "Oh when the

S A I N T S, go marchin' in; oh when the Saints go marchin' in; oh how I want to be in St Kilda, when the

S A I N T S go marchin' in^{*5}, is to know that whatever the outcome this Sunday, be it tremendous pleasure, or just more pain, your efforts at loving are never in vain.

Notes*

- ^{*1}Supporters of The St Kilda Football Club are referred to as The Saints, Sainters and supporters of The Richmond Football Club are referred to as The Tigers, Tiges.
- ^{*2} Windsor Woman refers to the students of Presentation College Windsor, the Roman Catholic school I attended for 12 years.
- ^{*3} Lamb is a religious term for child of Jesus and happens to be the meaning of my name, Agnes. It is also part of a poem's title by William Blake, *The Lamb and The Tiger*.
- ^{*4} Maddie's Match refers to The Maddie Riewoldt Foundation <https://www.mrv.org.au/> Game, which will again be celebrated on 20 July 2018. The Riewoldt family lost their loved sister and daughter, Madeleine Riewoldt, aged 26 to Bone Marrow Disease in 2015. The family have been seeking a cure for this rare medical condition through the foundation.
- ^{*5} A famous, well-loved footy song that is often celebrated around the nation. This song can be viewed as a post on my (Eliza Remy) Facebook Page for 27 June 2018.
- ^{*6} The St Kilda Football Club's theme song as adapted by players of the last decade.