

DIXIELAND

Friday night in a West Australian basement, and the six-man jazz band is playing Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans to sixty people who entered through a red phone box, ready to drink and dance like they were other people, and it was a different time and place. All the heat of the day is trapped in that room, and the place smells like sweat and brass. When the band members introduce the numbers, their accents are broad Australian, but when they sing it's pure Dixieland.

The elderly doorman is dancing slow swing with a young woman in a sequined dress. Then the girl in the polka-dot dress, and the girl in the red lace dress. He switches girls after every song. All the girls are big-calved and soft-looking, and he moves them around the old floorboards with a sad grace.

He still wears his wedding ring, and when the band plays Sweet Lorraine he stops dancing. He always sits out for Sweet Lorraine and watches the band from a small table that he and his wife donated to the club in the eighties. The table once contained an antique sewing machine, but the sewing machine is gone and all that remains is the wrought-iron foot pedal, and an iron wheel that is beautiful and useless. He presses the foot pedal in time with the music and the wheel spins around but it isn't connected to anything. Sometimes he opens and closes the small drawers at the sides of the table, but there is nothing in the drawers now except for bottle caps and ticket stubs from the weekly raffle.

When Sweet Lorraine is over he stands again and goes back to the dance floor to dance with Lana, who is twenty-three and moves with the same elegant sadness. The elegance is something she picked up recently, but she was born with that sadness. They dance together for Louisiana Fairytale and Mack the Knife. They go wild for Tiger Rag. When Lana comes back to your table she is flushed and breathless. She laughs and kicks off her cork wedge sandals and you wish you could take her to Miami, drag her into the early retirement you always threaten when she wears those tacky shoes. You wish you could take her anywhere, that she'd let you make her happy.

The old tin signs on the walls advertise cigarettes and fountain pens that have been out of production for decades, and chewing gum and soft drinks that Australia got a taste for in the forties when the Yanks swept through

with easy money and Coca-Cola. You're there in your plaid Texan shirt. Your best friend in her Florida retirement heels. Everyone in the low-ceilinged room dreaming America.