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We four shall nevermore

Pressed, Thompson would probably say it—or 'they'—ended sometime in the 80s, but he couldn't put a date on it, let alone a definite cause, although the effect was obvious: they simply stopped being a foursome. They had for nearly twenty years made a kind of music together, and then—the quartet stopped.

Often, in the structure of a piece of music, or in the shape of a story, an artist will strive for a certain symmetry. This can be quite formal: a phrase used in the opening sequence is repeated, quoted, reprised (with or without modification) in the closing moments of the work. Sometimes the symmetry is more metaphoric, or simply structural: the work opens and closes with a reference to, say, transport, or the weather. (One imagines a fat historical epic opening with the arrival of a horse-drawn buggy and closing with the image of a car speeding down the freeway. A dull novel to be sure, but a strategy oft employed. Thompson recalled an early essay on *The Tree of Man*, that he wrote for Sally to submit to her Aus. Lit. class back in '76, and he seemed to recall something of this kind of metaphoric structural symmetry in the opening and closing of that great, dull novel. Long before his formal withdrawal from his English major, Thompson knew he preferred trash to literature. Now, 30 years later, he had no need to apologise, and flopped, fat and sweaty by the pool, reading Koontz and Kellerman, untroubled by his early formal encounters with 17th century English poetry or the early works of Melville. This was one of the secrets of the Quartet: they all enjoyed trash. Martina had read—and re-read, tiresomely—all the works of Georgette Heyer; not so long ago, Sally had queued for an hour to get Ian Rankin's signature on a vast pile of tatty paperbacks. Thompson and Klein continued to read the piles of adolescent space opera and cod-Celtic fantasy they swapped back when dope cost \$30 an ounce and their hair was black, long and greasy. As Thompson recalled, Sally picked up a comfortable Credit for the *Tree of Man* essay, an achievement in which he felt some pride, given that he never did get around to finishing the bloody book. So much for symmetry.)

In real life, narratives are rarely so structured. It is obvious, of course, that our lives are narratives, unfolding stories, relentlessly linear plots woven about with memory, elision, forgettings and repetitions. Indeed, it is of these latter that our happy foursome made their music: the repetition of common memories, each sub story revised through endless retellings at weekends away, at dinners, on picnics, over the course of long journeys, on shared camping holidays, at the beach, in bed. Fully separate and autonomous, they did so much

together, as a foursome, as odd couples, that their lives seemed forever bound together. Even the things they did alone or with others were later shared—Sally asked Thompson for advice on sex (not with him, but with others: the foursome remained chaste), Martina and Klein related the hilarious adventures of their shared homelessness to the other two when they met after winter break, and even when three of the group did something without the fourth (like spend Easter camping in the mountains while Klein worked over the break on his thesis), they would later Tell All, and after a while, Klein was hard pressed to remember he wasn't there when Sally and Martina stumbled upon Thompson and his then girlfriend—the unfortunate Kirsten—screwing on the rocks. Well, not screwing really—it was hot, the rocks, of course, were hard and all in all they agreed conditions were adverse for actually doing the nasty. But Sally and Martina insisted that Kirsten was indeed handling Thompson intimately, visibly and with some vigour. By the twentieth retelling—over dinner in some cheap suburban eatery—Thompson had long since given up blushing, let alone arguing (he recalled Kirsten's hand was under a towel). Thompson's wife had also long since ceased to be concerned—she had heard it all before, and was used to it—it was just the four of them who did things when they got together. (On their first trip to Europe, Thompson and his wife had gone to visit Kirsten, who was by then, not quite so unfortunate: she had 'married well'—to an investment banker of bohemian disposition—and was something wonderful in publishing. They got drunk together, and while they made no mention of the screwing-on-the-rocks incident, Kirsten made it abundantly clear that she had no time for the Quartet, as such. Or more bluntly, she thought Klein was a bore, Martina a bossy bitch and Sally, stuck up. Thompson protested, briefly, laughing: maybe it was true, but what the fuck, she had married a bloody banker for fucks sake! He 'retired early', while Erica and Kirsten opened another bottle. The next morning Erica felt dreadful, but Kirsten seemed unaffected, hardened by a decade of long lunches and writers' festivals. Ghostly. Next time he had lunch with the Quartet, Thompson recounted the meeting. 'She always was a bitch' said Sally, happily. 'And there was no towel', said Martina.)

And so it went on, and it seemed that it would continue forever that way. They rang each other. They went away together, with families now, husbands and wives and kids of course, late in the piece. But less and less often. And then, one day, it simply stopped. That music. That story. They were no longer a foursome, the Quartet.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Tony MacGregor.