

Tim Winton

*“Breath”*

I’M AMAZED at how long it took me to become properly inquisitive about Sandra and Eva. Anybody older might have been more than merely curious about their circumstances. For one thing, they seemed to be free agents. They lived like no other people I’d ever met. It was hardly abnormal in those years for longhairs to avoid all talk of work and money except to condemn them in proper Aquarian terms, but these two never even bothered to bring the subject up. They never spoke about making a living the way locals did; it was as if the concept never occurred to them. They thought and lived and carried themselves differently to other people. They were few townsfolk who lived as comfortably as they did yet I didn’t ask why. I was mere schoolboy. I wouldn’t say that I was under anyone’s spell exactly, but I did feel that there was something special about Sando and I had no interest in how people paid their bills. Of what importance are the material details of adult life when you’re adolescent? I didn’t think to ask how he got what he had or even how he got to be what he was. I put all my efforts into trying to be like him. I could take or leave his prickly wife, but I watched Sando; I hung on his every word. I was content to just be with him. There were afternoons out there with Loonie and Eva and him when we swung in hammocks while the weather piled up towards the forest from the broad sweep of the bay, as roos grazed on the grassy slope and the wind chimes stirred around us, that I had a sense I’d been singled out somehow, chosen.

Then there were those rare days, the times we returned from a session so huge, surf so terrifying as to render us incoherent. It was hard to find words for the things we’d just seen and done. The events themselves resonated in your limbs. You felt shot full and the sensation burned for hours – for days, sometimes – yet you couldn’t make it real for anybody else. You couldn’t and you weren’t sure you wanted to. Eva was impatient with our giggling nonsense. Yet now and then I caught her listening, especially to Sando, in a way that made her wonder about her.