

## ≡ *The Ukelele Club* ≡

**A**fter Grant Hackett beat Kieren Perkins on Saturday afternoon, our suburb was very still. The air was warm, motionless, dense with spring. The pittosporum hedge of the Hispanic kindergarten threaded its subtle perfume between the houses. Doves were calling. On the other side of my back fence a neighbour rummaged quietly in his shed.

What does one wear, on such a mild evening, to a meeting of the Ukelele Club? None of the outfits I assembled seemed right: too light, too thick, too short, too pale. I dragged out my ripple-soled sandals from last summer, and buckled them on over little white socks. Was I mutton dressed as lamb? Sitting on the floor to reflect, I noticed something hard and round wedged between the treads of the left sandal. *A cherry pip.* At the sight of it I leapt into a linen dress and cardy,

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grabbed my uke and sheet music, and rushed out the front door.

By the time I got to Sally's place, evening was falling. Patrick, our baritone player, was up in the Mallee, she said, on family business. While we waited for our sister Marie to arrive with the food, we sprawled on the couch and inspected the athletes on the Olympic channel.

'How can they run, in all that weighty gold jewellery?' said Sally.

'And what about that swimmer in the lane next to Susie O'Neill, who had great big hoop ear-rings sticking out under her cap? Two in each ear!'

We shook our heads and clicked our tongues.

The doorbell rang. Marie made an entrance, carrying her Kamaka and a white plastic bag. 'There was a huge queue at Thy Thy,' she said, arranging twelve rice paper rolls in a cartwheel, with the sauce in the middle. We fell upon them.

Marie announced, with her mouth full, that she was thinking seriously of changing her name, and asked us which we liked best out of Margaux, Marion or Madeleine. We said we'd give it some thought as the meeting progressed.

While we were tuning up, I reported having received an inquiry on my answering machine from a bloke who was interested in joining the Ukelele Club.

'Whaaaat?' gasped Margaux. 'Has he got any idea how hopeless we are?'

'How did he hear about it, anyway?' said Sally, running off a clumsy little riff.

## The *feel* of steel

‘Remember that cute and efficient guy I bought our Kamakas off,’ I said, ‘at Zenith Music in Perth? Well he told this man there was a club in Melbourne, and gave him my number.’

‘Where does he live?’ said Madeleine.

‘Sydney,’ I said.

They stared at me.

‘Is there such a thing as a ukelele nerd?’ said Sally.

‘It can get pretty lonely,’ I said, ‘playing the ukelele. He probably just wants some human contact.’

Marion’s even more of a beginner than we are, so we warmed up with ‘Our Boys Will Shine Tonight’, ‘My Darling Clementine’, ‘The Marines’ Hymn’ and ‘Camptown Races’. Every time we made it to the end of a song we fell about, laughing incredulously. Then we got serious. Sally, who’s a real musician, transposed ‘After the Ball’ and ‘Don’t Get Around Much Any More’ into a girls’ singing key, but we had to keep breaking off to watch a race.

‘He’s going to *run* in those rigid-looking golden shoes?’ said Sally. ‘I thought they were just for show.’

We sat in a row with the ukes on our knees, swept away by the lurchy, bejewelled prayerfulness of the black sprinters, but all the while mechanically forming chords with our left hands and strumming softly with our right.

Around 10 p.m. Madeleine/Marion/Margaux displayed with pride her ridged fingertips. She was exhausted from learning *at this age*, she declared, and was going home, even if her name-change was still unresolved. When she’d kissed us goodnight and driven away, Sally

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and I tackled the old standard 'All of Me', with what we thought of as some success. Then I produced the Beatles' songbook and we chopped a path through 'With a Little Help from My Friends' and 'When I'm Sixty-four'. But our *pièce de résistance*, we agreed, was 'I Will'. We played it twice.

'What a pretty melody,' said Sally with a sigh. 'They really knew how to write a tune.'

'Let's sing it one more time,' I said.

And as we laboured over the chords, struggling to make the song sound sweet and light, it seemed to me that what the three of us had been making, that evening in early spring, might almost pass (at least on some distant, benevolent, tone-deaf planet) for the phenomenon known to us hopeful earthlings as music.