

Aggie stayed awake for hours, weighing up the risks and excitement of meeting a stranger the following day. Kate had told her she and her brother John would meet Aggie outside the Coffee Palace just before midday and they would be near at hand. "Come on, Aggie, go for it," Kate insisted. Aggie was not sure it was that simple but as she finally drifted off to sleep the vision of a blonde lock of hair sweeping over one eye and a smile to melt any heart floated into her dreams.

And now, having told her mother she was seeing Kate in town, here she was in a quiet corner waiting for Francis to bring them drinks, with Kate and John sitting discreetly out of their sight. Aggie had felt a little more certain about this date after talking to John earlier. John said he knew Francis, they both played football for Bairnsdale. "He's new to town," said John. "Seems like a good bloke, Aggie. You'll be right."

Francis sauntered over with a smile and handed Aggie a lemonade. She took the glass, wishing the butterflies in her stomach would settle. If her parents could see her now, they would have a conniption fit. Aggie couldn't help enjoying this act of rebellion as she sipped her drink.

Francis pulled up a chair close beside her, turning to her. Aggie glanced at Francis' handsome face and quickly looked away, feeling a rush of heat in her body. How far should she take this rebellion, she wondered, and why was she so attracted to this man she knew nothing about.

Francis ran a hand through his blonde hair and smiled. "Don't you look lovely," he said. Aggie took another quick sip of her drink to hide her unease.

Francis leaned back, gazing at her. "Charlotte," he said and in a soft inviting tone, "Tell me about you."

"I'm Charlotte but everyone calls me Aggie. There's not much to tell really," said Aggie.

"Go on, try me," said Francis, flashing that winning smile that Aggie could barely look at without losing her breath.

Aggie shrugged. "We live on a farm at Moormurng. On the Sale Road just out of town. Do you know Buchanan's Lane?"

He nodded and she continued. "I'm a middle child, I suppose. Four brothers, six sisters. My eldest sister is 13 years older than me, and my youngest sister is 12 years younger than me. She's only 7 years old. Very sweet. Her name is Frances."

"A fine name, I must say," he said laughing quietly.

"Yes, a fine name." Aggie looked at him shyly and seeing his unflinching gaze she looked quickly away, focusing on the check tablecloth. She traced the square pattern with her finger feeling overly aware of her body, her face, her movements.

"Do you like living on the farm?" he asked. The soft tone of his voice was pulling Aggie in.

"Yes...yes, I do..."

"But...?"

"I don't know. It seems there must be more to life perhaps."

"What is it that you dream of?"

Aggie looked up at him in surprise at this intimate question. Who was he? How could he ask such a thing? He raised his eyebrows and gave her a quirky smile. Before she knew it, it was all pouring out.

"Bairnsdale is fine, the farm is fine. But all I've ever known are these remote places so far from anywhere. I was born at Tarraville, grew up in a pub at Stockyard Creek, and now we're here. My three eldest sisters have skedaddled out of the place, gone to Tasmania and married some fellows over there. Good luck to them but still too remote for my liking. It's Melbourne I want to see, maybe live there one day..." Aggie stopped, astonished by her own admission. She had never said such a thing out loud before, never even thought such a thing. Was this truly her dream?

Francis leaned toward her and his eyes twinkled with delight. "Melbourne is such a place. I could show you such things."

Aggie was not so easily swayed and she looked him directly in the eye. "How is it you know Melbourne? And why then are you here?"

Francis sat back in his chair, disconcerted.

"I'm sorry, Aggie. Did I offend you?"

Aggie was embarrassed by her abrupt response. She looked at Francis and softened her tone.

"I'm the one who should be sorry. I'm just nervous. I'm not in the habit of meeting up with strangers. It's just that I know nothing about you."

"Oh, for a moment, I thought that you..." Francis stopped and looked at her, his eyes earnestly seeking her approval. "...that you weren't interested."

Aggie laughed quietly. She laid her hand over his, quickly removing it as that momentary touch was enough to start her heart racing.

"Tell me about you," she said softly.