

ATTEMPTS TO DRAW JESUS

Attempts to Draw Jesus is Stephen Orr's first novel and was a runner-up in the 2000 *Australian/Vogel* Literary Award. It is based on a play he wrote and directed in 1993. He lives in Adelaide with his wife and two sons, teaching science and horticulture between bouts of writing. He is currently working on a novel about a religious cult in the Barossa Valley of the 1950s.

ATTEMPTS TO DRAW JESUS

STEPHEN ORR


ALLEN & UNWIN

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PART ONE

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THE LOU STUBBS MEMORIAL HALL

Jack signed his initials—JA—and as the punch dribbled down to nothing he thought about this fascination for leaving a mark. Dogs did it, of course, but that was territorial. Graffiti, he'd seen a lot of that in Adelaide. Graffiti was a statement, an affirmation. 'I was here'. I'll fade away, but you can see I was here. The young offenders can come with their cleaning brushes, or the mighty septic with its flush, but *I know* I was here.

His name ran, blended, then disappeared down the drain. The bridegroom entered and Jack flushed quickly.

'Hey, Jack, that uh, what's her name, out the front?'

'Anna.'

'Yeah.'

Jack washed his hands, the groom smiled at him. 'Had much luck yet?' As if luck was everything in a small country town, in the Lou Stubbs Memorial Dunny.

‘No.’

He held his hands under the blower, studying them, flecked with pigment and the small red hairs he recognised from his father’s hands. He’d also inherited his father’s mop of uncontrollable red hair, his deep brown eyes and long, lanky legs, but luckily, according to his mum anyway, not his father’s face. The machine stopped and he walked out into the hallway and saw Anna standing on the front porch with Warren.

Warren was a fuckwit, an eyebrow raiser, the gawking Sandshoe King who harped like a moron: ‘Really? No!’ But he was two years out of school and drove a Commodore. Jack had gone to great lengths to point out to Anna that it was Warren’s father who’d bought him the car, but she still seemed to be impressed. Warren made a joke and held her arm, she laughed. Jack’s eyes surveyed the same low-cut dinner dress she’d worn to the year twelve social with him six months earlier. She’d bought it especially, or so she’d said. Her broad shoulders, long neck and soft, hazelnut hair, gathered in a bun, set off the dress just as perfectly as that night.

Jack went into the Lou Stubbs Memorial Hall and sat with his parents and Gran. The old mother Alber was stout and hard and loved to laugh. Country weddings, and there were many in Jamestown, were her forte. She would be up dancing with her son, Kevin, at two o’clock when Jack was slumped in his chair, dreaming of a sordid encounter with Anna on the Lou Stubbs Memorial Creche floor—Mr Potato Head trying to keep a straight face.

His Gran leaned over and whispered in his ear. He smiled. She got up and headed for the toilet. Jack scanned the Lou Stubbs Memorial Honour Board, mounted high on the wall above a bust of Queen Elizabeth. SERVICE TO THE CLUB. There was his dad’s name, in gold: KEVIN ALBER, 1963.

KEVIN ALBER, 1964. He'd slipped out of the picture in 1965, but both of his parents had come back strongly the following year. KEVIN AND MIRRIE ALBER, 1966.

'Dad, what's service to the club?'

'We were on the committee.'

'How come Mum—'

Kevin smiled, reluctantly. 'The ladies weren't admitted till sixty-six.'

Jack sat back and reminisced about the Jamestown Surf Life-Saving Club. He'd always seen it as a strange and sinister organisation, like the Freemasons or the Order of Buffaloes, going on about surfboards and zinc cream in the heat of a mid-north summer. He imagined one of the committee meetings his parents had been disappearing to every Wednesday night since he was a child. Lou Stubbs (before his death in a tractor accident) would sit at the front wearing a strange, green velvet hat shaped like a fish.

'Quiet . . . I call this meeting to order. Kev . . . any outstanding business?'

'Lou, construction of the new pool is set to begin next month.'

The construction of the pool. The hole was *still* there, thirteen years later. A sewer in winter and a rubbish dump in summer. As it turned out, the fortunes of Lou Stubbs had never been quite sufficient to build the pool. Lou had made his fortune running tuna boats out of Port Lincoln. When his chest slowly began to cave in (he was still a young man) doctors advised a drier climate. So Lou sold off his boats and moved inland. Such an upstanding addition to the community was acknowledged by the local council with an invitation for Lou to sit as an honorary member. Although Kevin still insisted that this hadn't been done with an eye to Lou's tuna fortune, the

move soon had the desired effect. The great Tuna King gave two hundred thousand dollars towards the construction of a community hall. At the grand opening (the whole town was present, the smell of naphthalene heavy in the air) a long, muted moan had fallen over the crowd when Lou unfurled the club's new name: The Jamestown Surf Life-Saving Club. Why a surf club when the nearest coast was four hundred kilometres a way? Lou said it was because he'd seen the good this type of club had done back at the Port: community, involvement and exercise.

Only one problem.

So straight away he put Kevin in charge of the Pool Committee. Excavations were barely complete when Lou was crushed underneath his tractor. The Public Trustee grabbed the money and insisted that Lou had left no directions regarding bequests to charity. Bequests! Another hundred thousand of his dirty tuna money and they'd have been in business. Still, Lou's memory shined brightly for most in Jamestown. The council erected a statue just down the road from the war memorial. It turned out to be a postmodern 'representation'. The council had a falling out with the artist and in a rage he smashed off one of Lou's arms (in the form of a fishing pole wrapped with barbed wire).

And now, all these years later in Lou's hall, Kev and Mirrie were up dancing. Back at the table Gran was scraping off the dishes and putting them into piles. Jack frowned. 'Gran, they'll do it.'

'Can't stand to see dirty dishes just sitting there.'

'Relax.'

'Idle hands . . .'

He laughed. 'Not Moses again . . . come on.' He took her by the hand and led her to the dance floor. The speakers belted

out a tune with all the repetition of a header at work. Jack showed her how to dance to the beat and she made a good show of it for a woman nearing ninety. Later on there was a waltz and although he couldn't understand the movement of her feet he let himself be moved by the silent poetry of age.

The dim-witted bridegroom sat smiling as the local Anglican priest spoke to the assembled. Jack realised, after only seventeen years of sheltered innocence, that priests, like councillors, MPs, Buffaloes and Lou Stubbs, were people that liked to own other people. You could hear it in the gentle mish-mash of words they rubbed their toes in, forming new ideas and senses, inviting others to follow. There was always an end to it—God or votes—they were really just bullshit artists. Anyway, he thought, people are so dense today (a generation raised on Brad, Angel and the rest of the mental heavyweights) that you don't even have to be a very good speaker to fool them.

Warren sauntered in and sat with his father, whose sandshoe business rivalled Lou Stubbs' Tuna Empire in its magnificence. He'd bought his son the Commodore to enable him to drive from town to town through the wheatbelt, flogging crappy sneakers to shoe stores that pretended to be boutiques while contending with the ever present threat of bulldust blowing in the front door. Jack could see Warren for what he was—a phoney—just like anyone who gets things given to them. Jack knew that his dad wouldn't leave him a job, he'd have to find one for himself.

The priest droned on in the background, smirking, thinking he was funny. 'It was Michel de Montaigne who pointed out that marriage is like a cage: one sees the birds outside desperate to get in and those inside equally desperate to get out.'

Jack groaned to himself, 'You're so bloody funny.' He watched as Anna walked in and sat by herself. She seemed to have been crying. He looked at his mother and indicated that he was moving. She tried to disagree, grabbing her husband's arm to tell him, but he was too busy rehearsing the notes for his speech.

Jack sat down next to Anna. And an uneaten prawn cocktail to boot—he couldn't believe his luck. She frowned at him. 'Where have you been all night?'

'I've been looking for you . . . you all right?'

She smiled and looked back at the priest. Jack looked over at Warren whose harelippped frown cut between them.

'You know, Warren hasn't been the same since ugg boots came in.'

Although she kept looking forward he noticed she couldn't help but smile. Warren started talking to his father. There were only two shrimps left in the bowl when Jack felt Anna's hand cover his; he squeezed it. Just then everything would've been perfect, except for the fact that he saw his father approaching the microphone. He braced himself for impending doom.

'I've been invited by Leo here to say a few words about his youngest lad, Bill, who I've seen grow up from a tot to, uh . . . what you see here tonight.' He smiled. Jack finished the shrimps and slumped. He looked at Bill and his pregnant young bride and at last understood why country towns were so good at organising weddings at short notice. Jack hadn't seen the bride before but he distrusted her from the beginning because of her close-set eyes, so smug, so in-charge. He smiled to himself. *She wasn't so bloody in-charge that time.* The bride had a fetish for pigs. Piggy-banks, pig earrings, and pig socks underneath her gaudy dress, bought second-hand from

Joyrene's Frock Salon, barely whipped off the back of the last forty-eight hour bride. The CWA ladies smiled to her face, but whispered behind her back during her frequent trips to the Lou Stubbs Memorial Dunny.

'Leo always believed Bill would carry on with the farm,' Kevin continued, still confused about why no one had laughed at his heifer joke. 'The new house is underway out back at Leo's and we've even got a new pool we can sell 'em cheap.'

It was his best line but still no one laughed. Jack slipped deeper into his chair. The best man rose to toast the bridesmaids and read the telegrams. 'From Uncle Sid, Coonalpyn—"Many a good hanging prevents a bad marriage".'

Jack muttered, 'Apparently Shakespeare agreed', remembering a high school text.

An anonymous father of four with untamed sideburns stared across the table at him. 'You okay there?' Jack shrugged, zipping his mouth, knowing it would all get back to his father eventually.

'From Uncle Robert, Melbourne—he couldn't be here tonight 'cos he died two years ago.'

Yeah, good, very original . . . funny.

"Dear Bill and Lisa, all the best for your new life together. P.S. Bill, don't forget to collect all those front door keys". On cue, ten women rose and returned their keys to Bill on the bridal table. Jack bowed his head and moaned. And then the crowning moment. His dad approached the table and returned *his* key.

Jack whispered in Anna's ear: 'Please tell me that wasn't my father.'

Soon the cake was cut and the music recommenced. Gran danced with her son, all flushed with his great success for the

evening, as Mirrie discussed the price of weddings with the bridegroom. Warren came and stood behind Jack and Anna, peering down at her. 'Anna, wanna dance?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

She looked at him and sighed. He put his hand on Jack's shoulder and grinned. 'How are you, Jack?'

'Yeah.'

'Still at the BP?'

Jack nodded. Warren smiled at Anna and then returned to his prey. 'Any prospects, Jack?'

'Nothin' much around. Thoughta joinin' the army.'

'Oh yeah, what as?'

'Whatever they'll let me do.'

'Wanna be careful, they'll make you into a shitkicker. Take orders for the rest of your life. No thank you. Thought about town?'

'Doing what?'

'Didn't you wanna go to uni?'

Jack ground his heel into the well-worn floorboards. 'Warren, science class was a long time ago.'

'So?'

Anna folded her arms and looked up at him. 'Warren.'

'See yers later then.'

He returned and sat with his father. Jack sneered after him. 'No, and I bet you don't take orders from him, shitkicker.' Anna touched his hand again. 'Don't worry about Warren. He's very competitive.'

'Yeah . . . right.'

She shrugged. 'Come on, I want to go home.'

'What about your aunt?'

'Fuck my aunt.'

They looked at her aunt, torn between two pig farmers and her sixth stubby of Cooper's Sparkling Ale. Jack smiled. 'Okay.' He told his mother he was walking Anna home and disappeared before she could fetch his father to drive them.

Jack and Anna headed around Boston's Corner and down Ayr Street. Crossing the park they saluted the war memorial and stopped to pay their respects to the immortal Lou Stubbs. Anna arranged a couple of sticks to look like horns growing from his head and Jack shoved petunias up his flaring nostrils. She hummed the national anthem as Jack began to recite: 'We the people of Jamestown stop to give thanks to you, oh great one . . . your strength and your tuna, they comfort us; yea though I pass you every day I shall never cease to respect you, for you brought the surf to the mallee—'

'Nearly,' Anna interjected.

'—for all this we thank you, and we shall attend weddings in your hall for ever and ever, amen.'

They passed Webb's Tyres and Johnston's Bakery, Boston's Car Park and the CWA rooms. In front of the rooms a few of the local dogs sniffed a bitch in season and one, a bulldog with a nasty cut to his face, mounted her. Of all the blasphemies committed tonight this was the worst. If Madge, the local CWA President, were here she'd make an example of this loose bitch.

They passed the RSL clubrooms, its cannon rusted weary, and the Masonic Lodge Hall with its single towering palm—a statement which echoed down the main street: 'We are different, we are not of the white clover, we are the bank managers and school teachers, sent here from far-away cities to serve our term.'

They continued on past Webb's Greengrocery and Norrie Carmichael's shop. Norrie had been the town's hairdresser and

tobacconist for forty years before he died, his shop taken over by John Reed's Automotive Parts. Norrie cut the hair of Jamestown's gentlemen for all those years, the same style on the same heads and he'd never needed an apprenticeship. The sons of the fathers and the sons of the sons had been here. Jack remembered being propped up on an old leather seat by a wooden board laid across the arm rests. He remembered Norrie's scissors, razor sharp, like his words: 'See those bastards pass through last Saturday, Kev? Set up their tent in the car park. Me and John Reed went over and pulled it down.' He laughed. 'Geez, they didn't like us much.'

The smell of poppy seed and tobacco, the *Australian Post* on the table, a *Playboy*, covered when the younger lads entered; the smoke; the drawling conversation about Angus and Poll Hereford, Sir Thomas Playford, George Wallace and Roy Rene, who they all insisted they'd seen. Meanwhile, the ladies would drive to Georgetown to get their hair set.

Norrie was the convenor of a council of war that rivalled anything happening in the town hall. In fact, this was the cabinet room of council, where decisions were made, or at least where they were deferred to tradition. There was a story about a fellow from Adelaide who'd come in once, asking for a perm. Norrie looked at the fellows reading the funny pages and they smiled. As they held him down Norrie shaved his head clean, free of charge.

'My dad told me that,' said Jack.

Anna smiled. 'They do like to brag . . . when there's so little they've achieved.'

On past Bowey's Chemist. Sid Bowey, with his white shirt and black tie, had an encyclopaedic knowledge of pharmaceuticals. He would concoct his remedies from a series of bottles which he had neatly lined up on a shelf, each precisely

labelled in the same typeface. He would avoid 'anything they've knocked together in a factory', such as Panadol, Disprin, laxatives, and almost anything else people needed on a regular basis. Those 'lolly pills', as he called them, were kept underneath the counter with the condoms (Jack was aware of this but had bought a packet from the machine in the truckstop men's room instead). If you had a headache, Mr Bowey would prefer to concoct than dispense; it was this gentle loving kindness of mixing (and talking about your ailment in front of the rest of the shop) that he sensed, subconsciously, was the key to cure.

O'Leary's Butcher—the sawdust still on the floor, a slice of fritz for the kiddies—was sandwiched between the old stone edifice of the ANZ Bank and the Savings Bank of South Australia (the locals still knew it by its old name, although it had changed several times since).

Jack had seen photos of these older buildings in their prime, the 1910s and twenties, and they seemed to sparkle and shine, like the great stone buildings on London's Strand. The Jamestown Hotel, with its wide, open, bullnosed verandahs, the Bank of NSW, the Black and White Cafe, Elders, Southern Farmers, Dalgetys, the Belalie Hotel and the Salvation Army Hall, all seemed more romantic and noble in the sepia photos his Gran showed him. Ayr Street was lined with oak trees and grass where the car park now stood, the streets were dirt, not bitumen, the stonework hadn't been painted grey and orange and blue, the gentlemen wore suits and hats and ties instead of T-shirts and thongs, and in one photo there was snow all the way down the main street. Children were throwing snowballs, adults were looking proud, as though their long-promised white Christmas had finally arrived. Gran told him that the snow had completely melted when they got up the next morning and for years afterwards

no one had mentioned it—as if it had all been some warm, communal dream they'd concocted among themselves, like one of Mr Bowey's cures.

Jack and Anna cut across town and followed the creek where it began to flow into Anna's parents' property. 'So what now?' she asked.

'Eh?'

'You wanna stay at the servo?'

'It's money.'

She shrugged.

'Listen,' he continued, 'I know I'll never be the Sandshoe King.'

She smiled, amused. 'And you think I'll be the Sandshoe Queen?'

He laughed. 'That's such a beautiful thought.'

She slapped him, playfully. 'I'm gonna become the town whore . . . Have we got one already?'

'Ask Warren.'

They both laughed. She sat down on the bank where the soil formed a natural seat, lined by kangaroo grass and clover. He sat opposite her. As the slow trickle of the creek passed underneath their feet she took off her shoes and dipped her toes in. The moon's rays, dissected through an ancient eucalyptus, settled upon them as the crickets became vocal and a pair of galahs started to argue.

She looked at him and smiled, deciding whether she should trust him with a secret; her willpower wasn't strong enough to resist. 'I found it.'

He knew at once what she was talking about, the stick video her father had hidden away. 'You're kidding, where?'

'In an old set of drawers, in the shed.'

'Did you watch it?'

She smiled. 'Of course.'

'Christ!' He threw his head back and then looked at her. 'Well?'

'It turns out, these cheerleaders, they have to raise money for a football trip . . . so they decide to do these . . . odd jobs.'

He smiled. 'How odd?'

'For example, they're washing this fella's car and he comes out and they say to him: "Is there anything *else* we can do for you?"'

Jack threw his head back again, biting his knuckles. 'And . . . ?'

'Yep . . . it's uh . . . all there.'

He stared at her, she stared at the moon. His eyes moved down again, over her body. She could only mean one thing by bringing this up now . . . here. He thanked God he'd gone to the truckstop. He waited for some sign: a smile, the slow closing and opening of her eyes, a body movement in his direction. But she just lay there, staring at the moon.

'It was silly really . . .'

No it wasn't.

'I saw *Gone with the Wind* again last week. Now that's a great movie.'

What! What happened to the cheerleaders?

'So,' he smiled, 'what other sorts of things did they uh . . . ?'

She frowned, confused. 'You know.'

No.

'Lots of smelly dicks. Best block it out or you'll go crazy.'

He sat back and sighed, breathing deeply. His pride slowly deflated as she continued to dissect *Gone with the Wind*. He looked at her. Did she do this sort of thing intentionally? (His father had often described this type of feminine behaviour.) After a while they headed up across the fallow paddocks

towards Anna's house. With her parents away he thought she might invite him in for a private screening, but she left him at the door.

Bloody hell! Why? What's so . . . *so* wrong with smelly dicks? Maybe I should've grabbed her when she still had that dirty look on her face. She wanted me to . . . sure she did . . . He kicked himself. Once again, Alber, you let it slip through your fingers.

Jack pulled up outside Haskell's Deli in Glasgow Street. He killed the lights and engine of his father's ute and went into the shop. 'Anna.'

She emerged from the back room. 'Could you lock the door . . . I've got to count the till.'

Jack put up the closed sign and locked the door. He began to look through the cheap books and magazines on the rack. Weeklies such as the *Stock Journal* and the *Grain Growers' Journal* figured prominently alongside the other essential reading: *Dolly* for the young ladies, the *Woman's Day*, *Weekly* and *Monthly* as well as the 'gentlemen's' preferred reading.

'Will you be long? I gotta pick Gran up from her crochet group at ten-thirty.'

'Won't be a minute.'

The same old tapes—Conway Twitty and the truckie set, Slim Dusty, Garth and all of the other yodelling cowboys, their diesel serenades primed for long-distance entertainment—all the repetition of their love lyrics and thirty-six wheel vamps.

Jack looked around, she was out the back with the money. He gingerly picked up a copy of *Mayfair* and flicked through it. The centre spread, 'Police on Patrol', showed a collection of healthy young policewomen baring all for the law, their

handcuffs and truncheons strategically positioned to scare off intruders. 'Linda', from Perth, insisted that nudity was just part of a healthy lifestyle we all needed to re-invent. I'm all for that, thought Jack. Linda leaned forward, invitingly, across a playground monkey-bar, she seemed to be whispering to him—

'I'm sure they're really police.' Anna stood at his shoulder, grinning.

'Anna.' He grabbed her arm, not thinking. He paused to get his breath. 'She believes in the natural lifestyle.' Anna raised her eyebrows. 'Really?'

It's now or never, he thought. He dropped the magazine, grabbing both of her arms firmly, kissing her. He was waiting for her to push him away but she didn't. He was shocked when he felt her legs giving way; they dropped to the ground together. The kissing continued, their heads moving at every conceivable angle. After a few minutes of this, bringing their bodies together, ensuring she could feel him, he wondered what must inevitably come next. He paused, swallowing. 'Maybe we shouldn't.'

'Come on, you're not gonna stop now.'

He pulled himself off and sat there. 'You're not gonna believe this . . . but I think it's already happened . . .'

She looked at him, incredulous. 'No . . . ?'

He smiled, lost for words.

'So that's it? You can't . . .'

He shrugged. 'I better take you home.' He went out to the toilet and, as he stared into the mirror, he whispered to himself, 'Once again, Alber . . .'

Jack got back into his ute. Behind the BP's green and gold exterior, neon hummed and fridge motors chugged quietly.

He looked at his Gran who was still crocheting. 'They've taken me off the roster.' She looked back at him, confused. 'I'm unemployed, Gran.'

'Why?'

'Says he has to cut back on hours.' He leaned forward onto the steering wheel and stared into the night.

His Gran shook her head. 'Mongrels.'

'What'll Dad say?'

'Don't you worry about him.'

He dropped his head into his hands, hanging over the wheel. 'Jesus . . .'

'Can't blame yourself, 's not your doing.'

'Andrew's still on.'

'His people are pig farmers . . . he hasn't got anything else. You do.'

'Like what?'

She was quiet. In her day, jobs weren't a problem. Jack's shoulders began to shake. She put her hand on his head, absolving him, messing his hair like she had since he was a child, since the beginning of time when all of God's curses began to descend upon him. 'You can only do your best, Jack. 's all anyone can ask.'

He looked up at her, wiped his eyes and smiled. 'Benzine's a carcinogen, anyway.'

'Eh?'

'The stuff in petrol, gives you cancer.'

'Well there you are. So why don't you just drive us home and we'll have a cup of tea to celebrate.'

'Celebrate what?'

She smiled as a halo of BP neon surrounded her head. 'Tomorrow of course.'

THE ALDRIDGE VAULT

Grenfell Street, Adelaide. Clive Rollins passed a bus stop, a young couple kissing as an old man sat staring into office windows. He descended stairs into the basement of a music store, standing in front of the Beatles discs, deciding what else his dole money couldn't stretch to. Further down, in the sheet-music section, an old school friend—now with dreadlocks and a beard, wearing a hessian T-shirt and baggy pants—copied the chord progression of a Bob Marley song onto the back of his hand. The manager walked by, stopping to look at him, and coughed. His friend turned his hand over and kept scanning the music, singing to himself. The manager passed on muttering, 'How am I expected to make a living?'

The friend looked up and smiled. 'Rolly.' He approached him and extended his hand. Rolly shook but couldn't remember his name. 'Hi.'

'What you been up to?'

Rolly shrugged. 'Still got the government looking after me.'

'Way to go. The way I figure, they buy me a recording studio, I'll work. Otherwise . . . hey, hold this.' He handed Rolly the song book. 'The chorus.'

Rolly read out the chords as his friend finished getting them down, replacing the book as though it were a sacred scroll, ready for some other new-age scribe to come and make his copy. 'Thirty songs in our line-up and I haven't had to buy a thing.'

'What you called?'

'Whatever we think of on the night. You should come hear us . . . Governor Hindmarsh, next Friday.'

Store security sauntered down into the basement. His friend put something in Rolly's hand and whispered close to his ear, 'Stay cool', before grabbing his backpack and jumping up the stairs, four at a time. Rolly looked at the joint in his hand and smiled. He stood in front of the 'Sacred and Spiritual' section, trying to look innocent. The security guard sauntered past as he grabbed the nearest book, *McAuley's Sunday School Classics*, and skimmed. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the guard watching him. He smiled. He looked at the song in front of him and he was suddenly taken back ten years.

*Jesus loves me, this I know,
for the Bible tells me so;
little ones to him belong,
they are weak, but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me . . .*

What was her name, the Sunday school teacher with her hair in a bun, sounding every bit a liar. 'And then children, the

most amazing thing happened, Moses raised his arms and the sea parted and all of his people were saved.'

He remembered thinking, now that *would* be fantastic. Was the world *really* like that in the time of Moses? Could Jesus feed so many from so little, turn water into wine and heal the sick? Could Jonah live in the belly of a whale? Yes, things must have been mighty grand, just like Charlton Heston carrying the commandments, as massed violins sounded from the heavens.

'Now, Clive, what do you think Jesus looked like?'

He remembered shrugging.

'Sally?'

'I think he looks like Father Christmas: fat and happy with lots of good things for everyone.'

Rolly sat back and looked at her, thinking she was feeble-minded. Robert, the child of a family of local ferals, looked at Sally with a scowl. 'There ain't no Father Christmas, it's your mum and dad what gives you presents.'

She put her head down. 'No it's not . . . I've seen him.'

'Where?'

'David Jones.'

'That's an actor.'

Rolly had wondered whether Jesus was just a character, playing a part in a book, this book, this thing they tried to brainwash him with every Sunday.

The teacher took control and quietened them. 'In fact, children, Jesus and Santa do exist, but in a funny sort of way they exist in here.' She placed her hand over her chest. Rolly grinned—show us then.

Robert sat up. 'Prove it.'

'It's all in here, a very ancient and wise book.'

Robert frowned.

‘Right.’ Rolly thought, he’s right, you’ll have to do better than that. Standing there years later, he thought how McAuley’s song book and the teacher hadn’t been up to the job of explaining the cosmos. What was she by day, an uninspiring teacher? an accountant? a secretary? As it turned out the world was a positively unbiblical place: lawnmowers and terrorism, the song of the dentist’s drill, and fathers who left you in the lurch. How could Jesus explain that? He knew then and he knew now: Robert was right.

The teacher continued. ‘We have to believe, deep down in here . . . and share . . . that’s why we come together, on the Sabbath, to praise the Lord.’

‘No we don’t.’

The teacher looked at Robert, trying to smile. ‘What was that, Robert?’

‘Today isn’t the Sabbath.’

‘Yes it is.’

‘In the Old Testament the Jews worshipped on the seventh day, Saturday, the Sabbath. Today is Sunday, that’s what the *Christians* called the Lord’s Day.’

She looked at him, there was silence. Rolly remembered liking Robert at once, he was pretty smart for a feral’s kid.

‘Hayley,’ the teacher continued, ‘how would you describe Jesus?’

But Hayley just sat there, unquestioning, content to become a Christian. She strained with every muscle to smile until it looked as though her eyes would pop out.

‘Hayley?’

And then the piddle began to ooze across the floor from underneath her dress. There was silence as they all pretended it wasn’t happening, as the teacher tried to work out what to do. Robert was the first to speak. ‘She’s pissed herself.’

The teacher got up, leaned down and grabbed him by the shirt. Rolly remembered the first *truly* religious experience of his life, in the form of an undone shirt button and the curve of a breast . . . all the good bits come when you grow up.

The following Sunday, Robert wasn't at Sunday school. Rolly asked after him but the teacher just said they'd put him into a more advanced class. So Rolly never saw Robert again. In the same way he never saw his own father again, after one of those early summers of his life—bright, contented and full of revelations. The next time she asked Rolly to describe Jesus he sketched the picture he remembered of his father: 'Jesus tells the funniest jokes. He sits on the verandah with a beer and watches the grass grow. That's what he says, "I like to watch the grass grow . . ."'

Rolly headed down the mall, past the Panizza fruit stall, the newsstand (manned, as usual, by a retard on good behaviour), past the Hare Krishnas, one of them wearing jeans, and past the Singing Can-Man.

*I made love to the dustman's daughter,
Smiling the smile that her mother taught her . . .*

He smiled at Rolly, 'Good afternoon, sir', before delving in and retrieving another can from the bin. Once he had it, he crushed it underfoot and put it in one of his ever-full hessian bags.

On his many long, meandering walks around the square mile of the city (he preferred to call them his meditations), Rolly had many opportunities to observe the human waste of Adelaide—wandering through parks like lost dogs or asleep in hidden doorways, away from the boots of a rogue skinhead or footballers on an end of season trip. At home, in a rigid, yellow notebook, he compiled his 'Compendium of Human Waste'.

Under entry number four in his compendium he'd written, '... he sings out so that all of us can hear, loudly and clearly, taking particular pride in his diction, his memory for lyric, his vibrato and, most importantly, the emotion he can put into the interpretation of the songs. Maybe each has a meaning for him, learnt over years of sitting in idle loneliness, listening to his pocket tranny.'

Rolly guessed that most of what he wrote was probably wrong. Once he'd even seen a newspaper article about entry number seven ('Karim of the Gilbert Place bins'), which explained that 'Karim' had once been a professor of chemical engineering at the university. Still, who needed facts. In this, his greatest (and only) fiction, people became who he imagined them to be. Just like the Bible, he guessed. A reality more interesting than the daily grind of the CES and job applications he never got around to writing.

He continued on down Hindley Street. A few girls slouched in the doorway of Klub Amerika. He wondered if they were prossies, or just checkout chicks, dreaming away their lunch hour. On past the amusement arcades, full of kids whose dreams were becoming increasingly neon, their school bags empty at their feet as they wrestled with a foe more challenging (and rewarding) than teachers. Past the fastfood stores and the greasy little yiros shops where groups of Greek men sat about talking and smoking (he reckoned they'd pop into McDonald's for *their* lunch).

Down Currie Street, across Light Square and right along Morphett Street until he got to Whitmore Square. The winos and the Aborigines, mates in the square, lay about on the grass, drying out. They didn't have to be back at the hostels until six. The Salvation Army, St Lukes Mission, their grimy facades facing onto but locked away from the square. The

Sallies was a white brick monstrosity from the fifties, complete with an ornamental fence and a rose garden, overgrown with weeds, full of good intentions and sweet scents turned cat-pissy. They could sleep up to a hundred and twenty but seldom had this many, especially in summer when most chose the square or the parklands for their beds.

Smelling the once-were-hops from Lewis' Southern Cross Hotel, Rolly skipped across the arterial to West Terrace Cemetery where he found his Uncle Frank mowing between rows.

'How's about a haircut?' he called over the din of the mower.

Frank smiled, waving his hand and stalling in front of the Aldridge family vault. 'Wait,' he whispered, removing his goggles and letting the dust settle. 'If you listen very closely you can hear the sap in the pine-needles crackling . . .' They both listened as the trucks and buses roared past. 'Further back, towards the Catholic section,' he promised, rising from his mower and collecting a posy of weeds. 'Grab me some wild oats,' he said, indicating, and then he asked after his sister.

'Mum's fine,' Rolly replied. 'Well, occupied at least.'

Frank took a posy of exotics from the fake Grecian urn before the Aldridge vault, replacing them with his assorted weeds: soursobbs, oats and potato-weed. He started humming as Rolly read the inscription, 'George Percy Grainger, World Famous Composer and Pianist'.

Rolly surveyed centuries of headstones hemmed in by bulldust, listened for the simmering of pine-sap and smelt more carbon-monoxide than anything. History. So what. Dead people. And so what if you could write a few tunes?

Either way, he'd only come for a haircut. They moved into the office and Frank extracted his scissors and clippers from a pile of paperwork on his desk (these notes and a small ceramic

badge on his overalls were the only things to give him away as the cemetery caretaker). He set to Rolly's head, his tongue between his teeth, thankful for the chance to stay in practice (since the decline of men's barbery and his Mile End shop—a red and white pole still in storage, packed in plastic—and the end of a fine career at the hands of a shopping mall). But the beginning of another career, among dead people, with whom he still made conversation.

'What's on the horizon?' he asked Rolly, tinkering with a bakelite radio which still managed Schubert.

And as though by fate, Rolly stopped at the page of the magazine he was skimming, whispering, 'A Jackaroo's Life'.

Frank laughed. 'You'd be the first outback Rollins,' switching on his clippers and starting in on Rolly's mop of hair, going slowly around a pair of virgin sideburns and moving on to the fringe he never got straight. Rolly blew hair from his face and nose, his father's nose, as they used to tell him all the time—small and stumpy, like a ski-jump from the Winter Olympics. And finally, his mother's cheek bones, high and Scandinavian—as she'd like to say, a little bit of the Aryan in there somewhere.

Rolly read, 'Brad and his mates sure got a surprise when they arrived at the vast Kidman property in WA's northeast for a period of work as jackaroos. Said Brad, "This place is as big as Tassie, we could make our own state."'

Frank put down his clippers and started to snip around Rolly's ears. 'Real estate, that's the go,' he offered, 'minimum effort, maximum return.'

'Pretty soon they had us riding horses and trailbikes and I even learnt to fly an ultra-light.' Rolly scanned a picture of Brad flying the ultra-light over a herd of cattle, kicking up dust, running for their lives. Another picture showed a group of boys fighting with a big steer and a hot-iron brand, and yet

another showed them standing around a barbecue at night with a beer and the unmistakable leers of achievement.

He finished the article and read a footnote: 'The Rural Employment Agency (REA) is keen to hear from anyone with a love of hard work and adventure. There is a high demand for jackaroos and jillaroos on stations throughout WA and the Territory.' And then there was a phone number and an invitation to escape from the familiarities which had led him nowhere since leaving school. 'Frank, can I rip out this article?' He nodded, busy on a part he could stake his reputation on. Rolly pocketed the article next to the reefer and his neck began to tingle with the feeling of escape.

Rolly walked and walked, on through the back streets of southwest Adelaide, past things which had become familiar to him on his walkabouts, following the cobbled songlines. There were deserted factories and rows of rundown workers' cottages, some still with their original inhabitants (clinging to life, with the remnants of a once-loved vegie patch) and some with a couple of renovating-mad accountants. Sometimes he'd walk these streets at night, the loneliest time of all, when the uni students were asleep (or paralytic) and the pubs were waiting for the last drinkers to leave.

He walked down a side street with a small stone church, a giant white banner obscuring its ancient stonework: 'The Bible declares Russia will rise and invade Israel'. He made a note of the date in his notebook and continued on into Morphet Street. He stopped outside the window of Shirer's Toy Agency. Wimpy the Snoring Panda Bear was asleep in the window, his snore amplified, his chest rising and falling mechanically with the rhythm of his breathing.

He cut through a back alley, past an old cottage converted

into a Moslem temple, its four great spires rising out of the ground where someone's citrus tree and gas meter used to be. He arrived in the South Parklands, skirting past the Japanese Gardens, hastily built to curry trade favours with visiting Sushi-Barons. He sat on a bench overlooking the roses of Veale Gardens and the infamous toilet block where Adelaide's lonelier homosexuals held court after dark, a sort of Lonely Hearts' Club, but much messier, stickier and more tragic.

He reached into his pocket for the article. He produced it along with the reefer; it sat there staring at him, tempting him. A ten-cent box of matches was all that it took to send him into a dream. As the music drifted across and the sweet smell of gum mixed with dope, he lay back and smiled. The jackaroos lifted their beers and toasted him. The pictures in the article took on a translucent quality, like a vision, a roughly sketched drawing, a revelation. He felt as though he was floating just above the Parklands, looking down. The article slipped from his fingers; he'd always known he could escape . . . so now he'd discovered a destination.

The sun had just finished setting—slowly and by degrees. A few IT specialists, scrambling home at dusk, gathered at the bus stops (waiting for the few, slow buses that crawled down Currie Street like so many giant slugs) and complained to each other, 'If this is what we pay thirty-two cents in the dollar for . . .'

Rolly had often imagined himself in a suit, carrying his own imitation leather case, mumbling something into a mobile phone, saying something that probably could've waited. In his case it would all be an act: writing healthcare policy or selling futures, things distant from his own concerns and passions, whatever they'd turn out to be. Drifting and becoming. Playing the game. Everyone, he guessed, played the game at some

point. Even *he'd* played the game. There were applications and interviews: a tie, polished shoes and a hastily cobbled CV. But when they started asking questions he knew it would be the same old story. 'Listen, Clive, I can't see any evidence of work experience. Nursery work isn't something you just drift into. You gotta know yer plants. And disease. Root rot. How would you go about treating root rot?' So they could stick their begonias and starvation wages.

The next stage of the night, when the sun had gone, was an emptying of the streets. This is when he reappeared, recovered from the Parklands. He came down Currie Street, along a side alley and through the doors of the Pancake Kitchen. The sign on the front window, painted in big, red-gold Victorian letters, was a promise of friendship which had never let him down: OPEN 24 HOURS. The mural on the wall (a penny-farthing race, gentlemen with handlebar moustaches) was another sacred site on his walkabout.

There was a collection of six or seven rooms, interconnecting, where a wide range of individuals attempted to escape the city: playing piano, strumming guitars and clicking their Gothic heels together. There was a room for children's parties (ironically decorated with a photo-mural of *Oliver Twist's* London) and a room with a pair of giant elephant tusks which could only seat four, where couples went after late-night movies to have it out, or to hint at having it in.

Rolly stared at the tusks and smiled. The smoke from Greek cigarettes hung heavy against the low ceiling. He surveyed the menu (a caricature of Mr Pickwick guiding his choices) but he already knew what he was going to have. He started reading the paper but Amanda, the swing-shift waitress, his porky Mistress of Benevolence, appeared with her pad and smiled. 'Same again Fatso?'

‘Right on heavyweight.’

And she moved her tongue around inside her mouth. ‘Suck my tits.’

‘Kiss my dick.’

‘Lick my map.’

And she passed back through the ‘Alice in Wonderland’ room to fetch his double-stack and a mug of Vienna coffee. He looked at the newspaper: ‘Interest Rates at a Twelve Year Low’. So what, he thought, they can keep their brick veneer, the desert will be different. Kentucky Blue so unwatered it’d died long before anyone could remember.

THE ARABIAN BAZAAR

‘**K**evin, it’s hardly his fault.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to have him sitting around here all day on his arse.’

‘Kevin.’

Jack awoke to the sound of Gran arguing with her son in the kitchen. He could hear Kevin throwing down his plate, throwing his toast across the table, letting his tea cup crash down into its saucer. He chose to stay in bed, listening, hopefully falling back to sleep, as Gran tried to smooth over another sore point in his life.

Mirrie piped up. ‘Kev, what’s there for ’em to do in a town like this?’

Kevin stirred his tea, slowly. There must be hundreds of jobs for those who want to work. The Co-op . . . they’d stopped hiring when the orders dropped. Plenty of stores in town, one of them must need someone . . . then again, it only took one

Sid Bowey to mix a cough syrup, one Robert O'Leary to cut up a carcass; and these were old men, known to the town, their places firm and secure in the scheme of things. Well, maybe they wouldn't have jobs, but someone must.

'I'll talk to Fred.'

Mirrie looked at him. 'And what will that achieve?'

'He might have a few hours spare, someone to fix up the books.'

'Fred, the Jew of Malta, isn't about to give our son any work.'

'He might.'

'Of course.'

'At least I'm gonna try.'

And then they were quiet. Gran sipped her tea, slowing the pace. 'It's not the end of the world, no one's gonna be thrown out onto the streets. Just gotta have some patience. Something will come up.'

Kev looked sourly over at Mirrie. 'Didn't say it was the end of the world.'

Mirrie shot back. 'I'm not having him sit around here all day on his arse,' echoing her husband's earlier comment.

The tea cup crashed back into the saucer. He set them both in his gaze, firmly. He whispered, 'It happens at that age, they develop this "why should I care" attitude.'

'Why should they?' Mirrie replied.

Gran looked at her son again. 'Give him time . . .'

'All I'm saying . . .'

He stopped short, not sure himself anymore. He sighed and gently picked up his tea. 'I'll have a word to Fred.'

'You never know,' Gran added.

And then more silence, this time as they read, or at least pretended to. Gran would be studying the 'hatched, matched

and dispatched', Mirrie the world news (Ethiopia was so distant, so tragic and yet so compelling over the 8 a.m. Weeties). Kevin would be reading the national headlines, looking for evidence to support his views of the world: Labor building better cities, catering to the Yuppies and the Greenies, one of their kids pictured clinging to a gum tree, crying, her parents pleading with the police to stop the tractors. Yes, Kevin thought, we've been doing something wrong. Every morning, there in the paper, right in front of our eyes, the proof.

Jack tossed and turned in his bed. He looked at his clock, ten past eight, his father would be going now. Back at the table Gran smiled at Kevin, now calmed, taken up with bigger problems. 'Anyway,' she said, 'petrol gives you cancer.'

Kevin frowned. 'Eh?'

'The stuff in petrol, you sniff it too much you get cancer.'

Kevin stood, grabbing his lunch and coat. Cancer had always seemed the easy way out, *had* seemed, less so since John Cooper, accountant at the Co-op, had disappeared in its chemical induced haze. He often imagined John's suffering, the pain of the rotten prostate—why couldn't they just pull it out? Of course you couldn't expect your plumbing to be quite the same, but Christ, at least he'd be alive. Poor John, he used to drive a tractor like a fucking madman, and now . . . they burnt him up, like so much old offal, like something Bob O'Leary left out the back of his shop—the dogs sniffing, the blowflies laying their maggots. Old John, a week in hospital and it was all over. They'd done National Service together, drank in the pub for so many years, cross-referencing their opinions of the world via the paper: politicians deserting the bush, the Greenies in their ear. What for, a bita sinew turned rotten . . . Christ.

The door slammed and Kevin was gone. Jack listened as his mum and Gran cleared the breakfast dishes. 'He doesn't realise,' Gran began, 'they took him on at the Co-op when he was fifteen.'

Jack had finished year twelve, as they'd wanted, but his marks just weren't good enough for uni. The local TAFE offered hospitality and hairdressing, but that was as good as admitting you'd been a failure. There was the city, of course, more jobs but more competition, and the Albers were country folks, he'd have to start out by himself. And so there was the familiar: Jamestown and Ayr Street, the Commercial Hotel, and beyond that, endless mallee.

'Jack'll be all right,' Mirrie began.

'Of course.'

'Lot of 'em go to town now.'

'Prob'ly just as well.'

'Here, listen, they can go in the dishwasher.'

'Not as long as I've got a pair of hands.'

Jack heard his Gran filling the sink with hot water. He could see her adding the detergent, pulling up her sleeves, as his mother stood nearby, defeated, searching for a towel to wipe up, her beloved example of twentieth-century sparkle deferring (once again) to the hard brown hands of Kevin's mother.

Jack lay back in bed and closed his eyes. He would wait until they'd nearly finished and then get up, innocently, pretending. They would play along and soon the conversation would turn to the town, its shops and people, and the world beyond. If Kevin crept into their conversation he would be a different Kevin: the lovable man who sat in the corner on Christmas day with a paper hat on his head, drowsy dreams of Christmas lunch calling to him. Jack imagined this is what

happened when people died; you remembered them with their silly hats, their smiles and their noble attempts to claw through life. Still, when Kevin came through the door tonight Jack wouldn't be there; he would come in later, as if he'd been busy somewhere else. Then they could all choose to believe in their uneasy harmony until the grind of life dragged the truth, resentments and all, from one of them again.

Like the previous Saturday: Jack stretched out on the lounge, visions of small town America flickering in hues of pastel green and red Buicks. Kevin storming in, muddy boots and all. 'You spare a minute from your busy day?'

Jack looking up, shrugging. 'I didn't know . . .'

And the inevitable lecture. 'How could you let your mother do the floors, aggravating her rheumy while you sit in here? And yer Gran, y' seen what she's doing?'

'I just sat down!'

Kevin turning and walking off, leaving the conversation unfinished, a trail of mud down the Axminster Mirrie had bought on credit soon after the Vietnamese war. Jack drifting out to the laundry, taking the mop from his mum and saying, 'All you gotta do's ask.'

'I'll finish it.'

'No, come on.' Stopping to think. 'Does the bathroom need doing?' Passing on to chipped and cracking aquamarine tiles, staring out of the window across paddocks in hues of honey-coloured grass rustling in light autumn breezes.

Jack left his mum and Gran to the washing and cups of coffee and Bert Newton. He put his hands in his pockets as he set off down the road for the long walk into town. His mother watched him going from the kitchen window and wondered if things would have been different with a daughter. At least it would have been respectable for her to stay at home and help

out with the washing—not that she needed help—Gran had already taken all of the clothes out of ‘that damned stupid machine’ and loaded them into the trough where she was lathering up the Lux for a long, stinging battle with cow shit and Cadbury smeared down the front of someone’s jarmies.

Jack kept off the gravel and walked in a roadside irrigation ditch, dried and overgrown with Salvation Jane, its purple flowers bristling in the southern breeze (already smelling of clean washing and the lemon-scented floors of bathrooms, the lemon-scented vision of wheat, miles and miles of it, stretching out to the horizon and beyond).

Nikos, the grocer from Georgetown, drove past and tooted. Jack waved as the lettuce leaves flew off the back of the truck onto the road. Nikos braked and pulled over onto the gravel. He opened his door, got out and looked back at Jack. ‘Wanna ride?’

‘No. I need the exercise.’

He waved and got back into his truck, disappearing in a cloud of dust. Jack looked off at the silos in the distance. He remembered the long trains, their carriages covered in green canvas, loading their bellies full of wheat to take to some distant location. Where? A city? Another silo, a wharf, a giant freighter from the Middle East? As a child he wondered if he could stow away. The clack of the wheels on the tracks, the night descending and sleep; but when he awoke the next morning he would peep from underneath the canvas and see (like *Oliver Twist*’s arrival in London, but better) a Persian market, a bazaar full of camels and suit-sellers and men with Rolex watches charming snakes—the smell of incense in his nostrils, the sight of robed Arabs bartering for one of Nikos’ lettuces; Nikos, his five o’clock shadow and murderous smile, his gold-capped tooth and greasy hair. Nikos looks up at him

and the whole market stares—swords are drawn and Jack pulls the green canvas back down over his head. He wakes up in bed but keeps seeing that train, all through his childhood, inviting him on to places he would only ever imagine . . .

He stood on the gravel next to the T-junction that led into town. There were no cars. He turned around, staring up at the sky, filling his head with blue and stumbling onto the road as a car flew past, abusing him. He climbed an old gum tree which stood above the T of the junction. Hidden up in the leaves he stared down at the roads, deserted as far as he could see in all directions, and then began to feel the comforting sensation of loneliness, or more precisely, of being all alone. He'd first climbed up here as a child, learning the feeling of being happy and sad all at the same time, sensing, in the absence of shopping malls and BMX tracks, the consolation of small things: beer bottles smashed on fence posts, oranges left on the road, atomised by semis headed north in a hurry.

He looked back at the wheat silos. The real journeys of his life had never been so exciting. Dad would plan it for weeks. It was all marked out on maps. The journey would take precisely as long as he said it would and they took no wrong turns (except one or two, for which he let rip at Mirrie). They arrived at the caravan park precisely on time and spent exactly five days on the beach between the flags.

But this was a different journey to the one he'd planned for himself. He would be alone. He would choose the route and walk it himself. He didn't care where he arrived as long as it wasn't anywhere near Jamestown, although he feared this new place would always be Jamestown.

When he was in scouts he would climb up here in uniform, that would make it official. He would use his compass to try

and work out which way London lay. He would look out to the northwest horizon and squint, figuring he might just be able to see it.

Jack was brought out of his trance by the sound of a familiar melody, at first barely perceptible but then growing louder, which accompanied the approach of a black Commodore. The car began to brake, indicate and then turn down the stem of the T-junction towards town. Its stereo belched distortion into the tranquillity of Jack's personal desert. He stared down from his tree—the tinted window on the passenger's side was half down. He saw Anna, her bare feet on the dashboard, laughing as Warren skidded out on the corner and disappeared in a haze of dust.

'Fuck,' he muttered, breaking off a branch. 'Fucking typical.' He jumped down from his nest, limb by limb, knowing and trusting each familiar foothold. The thoughts spiralled through his head—he saw her talking to him, at school, the shop, a hundred different times and places—and all of the confidences they shared suddenly seemed to mean nothing. What was she doing in there—her bare feet temptingly displayed for him? Where were they going? Why was she laughing at his jokes (or were they laughing about *him*?) and why was that weak-chinned, feeble-minded bastard playing her tape, *their* tape, Christ, *he'd* bought it for her.

His mind, hot with rage, forgot to communicate a message to his feet and he missed the lowest limb, slipping and falling hard to the gravel below. He sat up, a tear in his eye, mostly from the dust but possibly, as he was sure it was, from the feeling of betrayal. He ran towards town, following the Commodore, but slowed to a walk before he'd gone a few hundred metres. He stamped his feet down heavily on the gravel. A horse in a state of dreamy agistment walked over to say hello, but Jack just

kept walking, his eyes set firmly on the road, his mind set firmly on those feet. Nikos passed him again, returning to Georgetown, his truck empty. He waved to Jack, but Jack didn't see him, he could only see her laughing, Warren smiling at her, encouraging her adoration with stupid, predictable jokes uttered from that pathetically, horrendously disfigured harelip. How could she bear looking at such a horrible affliction? How could she ever dream of kissing it?

He kept on, his ears immune to the sounds of sulphur-crested cockatoos flying overhead; all he could hear was *that* guitar, synth and drums, *that* melody. He passed the sign, carved in local timber, 'The Lions Club welcomes you to Jamestown', past the showgrounds (the fresh smell of cow shit in his nose) and across his old primary school oval to Ayr Street.

He slammed the shop door behind him. She looked up and smiled (*oh so innocent*). 'Jack.'

'So?'

She looked at him, confused.

'Did he give you back your tape?'

'Yeah.'

'Good.' He paused, speechless. He looked at the Co-op's fruit stand and could've bit his lip: so, where do I go from here? 'What is it with Warren?'

'He offered me a lift.'

'Nice little taxi service.'

'Jack, you don't seriously think . . . he pulls up and offers me a lift, it saves Mum bringing me in.'

He stared at her, lost for words. It sorta made sense. But if she loved him she should've made a sacrifice, stood firm. 'No, sorry Warren, I don't think it's right, Jack wouldn't approve.' Well, she could've done that . . . perhaps. Oh dear . . . Last

ditch approach—counter-attack, bluff. ‘Looked like you were enjoying yourself.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Jack, I was wearing my chastity belt. I bring the tape to play at work.’

Retreat, but how, without looking like a complete dick-head? He looked into her deep brown eyes and his stare dropped to the ground. He knew this was something he’d inherited from his father: flying off the handle, making accusations, asking questions later. And then the inability to apologise, substituting muffled comments like, ‘Oh, I see,’ and quickly changing the subject. Slowly, he realised that the Commodore laugh belonged to everyone, not just him, not Warren. He looked up at her, ashamed, like his father in the morning when he grabbed his lunch and left the house, escaping another aborted conversation.

‘I thought . . .’

And then there was silence. A customer entered and he took advantage of the open door to slip out. Pensively he headed down Ayr Street, crossed over to Lou Stubbs and stood staring into the great man’s eyes: ‘. . . your strength and your tuna they comfort us . . .’

He planted a big kiss on Lou’s lips and laughed. A few ladies, gathered in front of the CWA, stared at him, shocked. He waved and headed off across the road to the CES. He felt like screaming out, ‘Madge, you should watch that randy bitch, she’ll be giving us all a bad name.’

That night Jack sat watching television with his family. His mum flicked through an old mag while Gran, frustrated, continued with her crochet. *Trial by Media* had just uncovered another crook in Queensland. He’d been selling child pornography through a vast network of Commonwealth public servants.

‘Typical,’ Kevin muttered, as he was presented with a gallery of clean, empty souls, of soap-sud personalities. ‘It’s what I shoulda got into, had I half a brain.’

Mirrie smiled. ‘Child pornography, you’re much too old.’

And Jack, smiling. ‘The older the better.’

Mirrie looked at Gran, but she was too engrossed in her handiwork. Kevin looked at his son. ‘No change a mind down the servo?’

‘No.’

Mirrie piped up. ‘No luck with Fred?’

He looked ahead, sternly. ‘Fred’s a complete . . .’

‘Didn’t think so . . . that man’s the Jew of Malta.’

‘Who the hell is the Jew of Malta?’

She shrugged. ‘Read it somewhere.’

Jack, mollified by his father’s softer mood, maybe even by his humbling at the shop, took out a piece of paper. ‘Found this down the CES.’ He read: ‘“Rural Employment Agency—work as station hands for 16–21 year olds. Must be strong, fit and willing to work.” There’s a number.’

All three looked at him, somewhat taken aback. ‘You gonna try it?’ his father asked.

‘Don’t see why not.’

His mother stared at him. ‘Those stations, they’re big.’

He smiled. ‘Mum, you forget, I was a Queen’s Scout. Me and the bush, we’re like that.’ He was wishing, his fingers contorted like old barbed wire. Gran looked at him, smiled and returned to her crochet. Mirrie continued. ‘If that’s what you’ve got your mind set on . . . there was nothing else?’

‘Crappy jobs. Dishwasher at the pub. Mowing lawns. Till someone else puts me off. This is a real job.’

His father’s eyes returned to *Trial by Media*. ‘If that’s what you want.’

Jack shrugged. 'Why not?' Gran looked at him again. She misthreaded and sighed, but this was the least of her displeasure. She looked at her son. If that's what *who* wants, Kevin?

Later that night Gran came into his room when he was nearly asleep. She sat on the end of his bed and handed him a small crocheted patch, about five centimetres square. It was crocheted in all different colours with his initials, JA, in grey. From the moment he saw it he knew it was a special thing, a talisman, more important than all the bedsocks and jumpers he'd ever got. He stroked it and knew—like his name, carved into the T-junction gum tree, or pissed in punch on the Lou Stubbs Memorial Urinal—that it would stand as proof, to him if no one else, that 'I was here'. His Gran was one of the few people who could testify to his reality, his substance. She whispered, 'You sure it's what you wanna do?'

'Gran, it's not 'cos of that . . .'

She smiled and crept from his room, but until the day she died she was never convinced that he wasn't acting, just a bit, in much the same way as her son always did.

THE TOMATO POLISHER

The house in Fisher Street, Grange, was a brown double brick veneer which had been built across the road from the factory where Rolly's father had worked. For most of those years since his father had left (for a young school teacher with a fetish for strong, brutal men) the grass had grown to waist height in the front and back yards. The neighbours had complained to the council, but nothing much had ever been done as Jean, Rolly's mother, preferred to put the milk money into her telephone betting account.

Today, surprisingly, the grass was cut short, the edges trimmed and the garden almost completely weeded. Arthur, Jean's lodger, had only been there a month but he'd been itching for this day. Jean left for town with her shopping bag at eight-thirty. He watched through the venetians until she disappeared down the street and then he whipped off his shirt and put on his wellingtons, an unusual sight for such a warm day. He took

the hand-mower (obtained from a recent garage sale for ten dollars) out of the shed and set to the yard.

Two Glad Bags and an hour later he came inside and stood in the living room, trying to decide where to start. Those stinking rotten cats, his asthma. He ran the bath and chased them around the house, but they wouldn't be had. It was an instinct, to stay dirty, the smell of dead rat down your chin was a badge of honour. He chased them in and out of every room: the kitchen (he'd bought the cleaners, hidden away, ready to attack that later), the living room and Rolly's room, where the vicious Persian hid in his bookcase, licking her arse on a pile of unread Keneally.

He stopped to look at Rolly's books, an unusual collection for a seventeen year old: Virginia Andrews, Kazantzakis-does-Christ, Jean Genet, and a soiled *Playboy* hidden beneath the 1979 *Australian Almanac*. He remembered that for later.

Eventually he trapped them out back in the garden, in a corner, hiding behind a giant maidenhair fern. Although he had a few scratches to show for it he caught them, threw them in another Glad Bag and then dumped them into the bath. Once there, they settled down and began to develop a new respect for him, succumbing to the inevitable.

He smiled. 'You'll never be the same cats again.'

After Tom and Tit were dry and back at the neighbourhood rats, Arthur got out the Handy Andy, a mop and bucket and started on the kitchen, bathroom, toilet and laundry. He worked like a Trojan, all the while aware that she might come back early, spelling the end to all of his good works. As the washing churned he started on the living room and bedrooms, tidying, throwing out all of the things she couldn't possibly want anymore. At about one o'clock he took a break, reclining in her favourite Jason, stretching out

his cramped muscles, breathing in the soothing air of her Babylonian Garden.

The garden was enclosed within a sleep out of corrugated green plastic, its walls made from old tin off-cuts salvaged from the factory across the road where *he* used to work. She called it her Babylonian Garden because it was full of hanging ferns and luscious, colourful plants reminiscent of her childhood, such as hibiscus and frangipani, wisteria and morning glory, perennials that climbed and wove their way through her waking dreams. There were orchids and miniature roses as well as daisies and petunias and herbs in a spot out the back where they got the sun in the morning. Every day she carefully watered her 'little ones', just the right amount, as she examined them for insects and disease.

She loved her garden and it loved her back; she spent most of her afternoons out here listening to talkback radio, ringing in a few bets and sometimes, in the heat of summer, sipping a shandy. The garden soothed her. It was her desert made green. The birds that flitted in through the glassless windows allowed her to imagine she was in some exotic place, a tropical forest in Sarawak (minus its spider monkeys) or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Arthur thought himself lucky. After a somewhat uneasy month as the new lodger ('. . . those fags will kill me, Jean, my asthma') he'd only just been welcomed into her garden. Of an afternoon he'd drag his chair out here from the living room.

'Do we have to listen to those fools raving on?' he said, pointing at the radio. There was no reply. 'They just try to get people whipped up . . . know what they say's wrong. This fella reckons we should start hanging people off the scoreboard at Adelaide Oval. Public hangings! Bring your children! Your kid stole a Mars Bar? String him up! What we need these days is

more law and order! Matthew seven, verse fifteen: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." May God forgive him.'

She looked at him. 'Listen, Arthur, I thought we agreed, the Bible stays in your room. In *my* garden it's a different . . .'

He smiled. 'Discourse.'

She closed her eyes and reclined. 'Just shut up and listen, Arthur.'

Arthur took off his gloves and relaxed, thinking about how she'd react to her new house. His foot twitched and he began to snore. His mouth fell open as the sound of the washing machine—clean, monotonous, predictable—churned away behind him.

He'd been an Anglican priest until well into his forties. This is what had worried Jean most at first. 'We've had a wide variety of people here, most have kept to themselves, most were out during the day, with jobs.'

'I won't disturb you much.'

'Yes . . . a priest?'

'Years ago.'

Of course religion did have its place: grace on Chrissie day, the Bible (best kept in the bookcase) and of course she had sent Rolly to St Michaels, but the fees had been the government's problem. Thankfully, Rolly wasn't much interested in the religion they gave him and if he ever brought any home it was in the form of a joke. No, the one who spoke from on high now was good ol' King Bob on 5TU.

'Listen, John,' said King Bob, 'if we hadn't let those Asians in we'd have a better society now. Clean. Whole. United.'

And every day Arthur had to sit there listening, grinding his teeth. 'If only someone hadn't let *him* in.'

Arthur had left the Church outright after an accusation had been levelled at him. She was seventeen and he'd taken her for Religion Education, but she insisted he'd taken her for something else. There was a hearing and a finding was brought down in his favour, but when he returned to school things were different.

'Arthur . . . good to have you back.'

But they wouldn't talk to him like they used to. He called it the 'Incredible Code of Teachers': thou shalt pretend *not* to desire that which is desirable, thou shalt not be completely honest with thyself, thou shalt struggle with thyself. To this day he still loved the Old Testament and yearned to be back with his kids. *His* kids he called them, but they always had and always would belong to the buggers of human honesty.

He'd gone on to be a fruit picker, a clerk, and even for a time a wharfie down at Port Adelaide. He would do anything except return to the Church which had dragged his name through the mud and then pretended to rinse it clean. He'd stayed in rented rooms in a hundred different suburbs until they'd got sick of him and his Bible, until they'd started going to the pub or flicks or the seclusion of their own rooms to avoid him.

But he was happy here. At least Jean was honest, if a little misguided, and honesty was the most important thing he could hope for. If he quoted Exodus she'd tell him to shut up and listen to King Bob. 'You might learn something about the real world!' Maybe, he thought, this is how the scribes of the Old Testament got started, the critical observers of folklore, the idea that thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand and foot for foot.

But she'd let him into her garden now and he'd learnt to tolerate her fags. That had to be a good beginning, after all,

he'd have to settle down somewhere some day. A thorough house cleaning was the least he could do to repay her kindness.

Jean approached the house and her mouth dropped open. She stopped just short of the fence and let her parcels fall to the ground.

'You . . .' Her forehead creased and she shook her head. 'Bugged if I'm gonna let him . . .' She grabbed her parcels and stormed up the driveway (the bastard's weeded!) and blew through the front door like a cyclone.

'Arthur!'

No reply. She looked around her scarred house, slowly, disbelieving, as though she'd been violated by a robber (or a cast-down priest). Her bedroom, like something from a doll's house, was neat and airy, a curtain she couldn't remember was blowing in the wind. And on her dresser . . . where were they? He'd been through her personal things! Her shop-a-dockets, all gone, her knickers and pantyhose put away god-knows-where. That bastard, down to the smallest detail—he'd cleaned her hairbrush, inserted the comb and laid it out in a perfect geometric pattern next to her glasses (cleaned) and a neat little picture of Rolly she had hidden away in a drawer.

'Arthur!'

The living room was worse. Three years' worth of the *Weekly* and *New Idea* were gone, gone, wiped from the face of the earth, replaced by a copy of A.D. Hope's *Selected Poems* left on her smoker's stand (ashless, lemon-scented). Where was that bastard?

The kitchen . . . no, the kitchen would *never* recover; the spices had gone from the window sill, her plastic bread was in the bin. He'd actually found somewhere to stack twenty years' of unused dishes, pots, pans, mugs and barbecue tongs

(where, she would never know). The fridge looked like something from a vegetarian nightmare and the leaking drip tray was as dry as a nun's nasty. Tom and Tit came into the kitchen and stood there looking up at her, as if to say 'look what he did to us'.

'Arthur!'

She found him asleep, on *her* recliner, in *her* garden. 'Get those bloody boots off my rocker!' She threw his legs off the footrest and he woke up, smiling at her. 'Jean.' His expression turned positively childish, in anticipation of his reward. 'So?'

'You've got a bloody nerve.'

'Eh?'

'What the hell have you done to my house?'

'What's it look like?'

'You had no right.'

'But, Jean, I only thought . . .'

She stared him down. 'You didn't think.' She turned on him and headed out into the laundry, determined to discover the full extent of the damage. 'What, are y' tryin' to reform me? Clean me up so I'm ready for heaven. Then you hit me with your Bible.'

He followed her through the house. 'Jean, it had to be done, when was the last time?'

She looked at him, incredulous. 'Mind your own bloody business.'

'Well I've gotta live here too.'

'No one's forcing you.'

'Cripes. Okay, *I want to*, but think about my asthma.' He knew he shouldn't have said that, he always thought of Piggy, the school nerd in *Lord of the Flies*, always getting picked on when he mentioned his 'assmar', and he knew if life were a novel people might be laughing at him.

‘Your bloody asthma.’

She picked up Tom and started to stroke him. ‘Maybe he’s allergic to you too!’

Arthur stared at her, lost for words, at a loss to understand why she would shun his gift.

‘Sorry.’

‘So you bloody should be.’

His head dropped and for a moment she felt remorse. Well, s’pose he didn’t mean bad, still, I know what he’s trying to do. ‘I won’t be singing hymns for you Arthur Tate.’

‘Jean . . .’

‘Well?’

And then the tension was suddenly broken by the arrival of an odd-looking figure with a freshly cut but crooked fringe showing beneath an Akubra. He walked in the front door, tipped his hat and smiled. In a slow country drawl he said, ‘Got me some work up north, with a whole heap of cows.’ Jean looked at Arthur and they both began to laugh. All of a sudden, surrounded by her two outlaws, the clean house didn’t seem to bother her so much.

Rolly found Darren at the end of Grange jetty. He was Rolly’s age but looked much older. He wore a parka and a pair of blue jeans which had turned black with grime. Rolly stood next to him. ‘Catch anything?’

Darren just stared out at the sea and shrugged, engrossed in his own meditation. Was it *that* thing which had led him to leave school so early, so suddenly, without a word of explanation to friends of so many years? Rolly looked at his empty bucket and knew there’d be no fire burning under Grange jetty tonight. Darren often called his fishing pole his only friend, but Rolly thought that was unfair. Lots of people still

tried to get through to him but he wouldn't let them past his gaze, his memory, his grudge.

He lived on the rough, sleeping under the jetty or on the rotten timbers of the Grange Palace Dance Hall, disused since the sixties when community dancing took its biggest dive. There were others who Rolly didn't know: older, younger, with more or less of that look of resignation in their eyes—human waste he'd invented lives for in his compendium. He saw them walking along the esplanade, sheltering behind the grass in the dunes, feasting on the glutinous rice the cook at the North China Sea gave away at the end of another quiet night.

Darren had his own entry in Rolly's compendium: 'This one gave up a perfectly good future in accounting, or maybe politics. There was a path his parents had laid out for him, but in the end this came to nothing.'

They just stood there, staring out, talking about the old days at St Michaels ('Mr Thomas retired . . . yeh, ten years too late') and other things.

'Hey, Darren, I got a job as a jackaroo, up north.'

'How far north?'

'All the way, somewhere near Halls Creek.'

'Geez, hard work. Pay well?'

'Didn't ask.'

'Didn't ask! Fifty degrees every day and you didn't ask?'

Rolly *did* feel sorry for him but this was a particularly nasty habit—bringing everything down. Why? Rolly's father had gone too, but you get on with it. But maybe there was something else; remember what they said at Sunday school, 'Treat others how you would have them treat you.'

'Anyway, something different.' He smiled. 'Bit of an adventure, get away from home for a while.'

'What's the rush?'

‘There isn’t.’

‘I always thought you’d go to uni.’

Rolly leaned over the side and spat into the ocean. ‘Why? So I can stand here in three years with a head full of shit?’

‘Couldn’t get the marks?’

‘I could, if I wanted to.’

‘Bullshit. At one stage you were going to be a pilot.’

‘You need a heap of money to learn how to fly.’

‘Unless you get the marks for the air force.’

Rolly was about to walk off but something made him stay. He remembered how Darren had described the night his prospects had ended—his mother’s new boyfriend throwing his things onto the front lawn: his clothes, his model tanks, his fishing pole. And Darren just screaming out, ‘Fuck you’, grabbing his pole and heading for the beach. Rolly looked at him again. ‘You should try, they need people.’

‘No thanks.’

‘Earn some money.’

For the first time that night Darren smiled and looked at him. ‘I’m not ready for the house deposit quite yet.’ And then stared back out.

Rolly moved. ‘I’ll see you ’round.’

‘Yeah.’

He walked back towards the beach, turning and looking occasionally at his friend bathed beneath the yellow light of the jetty. His friend who had had so many plans—who was going to live among the gentle, green luxuriance of the Adelaide Hills—who just stared, through the night, like a zombie, singing to the music of the Pistols on his Walkman as everyone else slept. He hardly ever caught a fish but that was the least of it—you could always eat boiled rice if nothing swam in from the horizon to meet you.

Rolly sat on a bench and peeled off his shoes and socks. He looked up at the distant figure and smiled; his friend's head sat on the horizon where the sun had just disappeared. The golden-red rays of the sunset, so intense at that spot, enveloped his head in an imperfect halo.

He buried his shoes and socks in the sand, the usual place in the dunes behind the Mazzone Beach Cafe. It was open on summer weekends and occasionally on a Sunday in winter when the massive Mazzone Vegetable Empire could spare a pair of women's hands (once he'd seen Grandpa Mazzone serving but there'd been some talk about a fall-out between the old man and his son-in-law). The Mazzones served iceblocks and drinks and the greasiest steak sandwiches in Adelaide.

Rolly walked along the hard, wet part of the beach, heading south. It was deserted at this time of day, the popular opinion being that only pervers, bums and deviant nude bathers ventured out after dark. For all of these reasons it was his favourite time of day. As he walked along—the cold, fresh breeze riffing through his hair—his head was full of images of the outback: the desert, the saltbush, the huge herds of cattle trailing dust as Chips Rafferty, reins tightly in hand, surveyed them and said, 'Buggered if the Japs are gonna get this mob.' He knew these were the worst sorts of clichés. In reality there would be a few old, half-starved cows which he would have to feed and water while the owner of the station spent his days on the phone to his accountant. He would have other jobs, more menial and pointless, such as washing the farm vehicles, mending fences, feeding chooks, sweeping up and having to laugh at jokes about Aborigines and roo-bars. He wondered whether Arthur would come with him as a sort of moral mentor.

'For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.'

Yeah, he'd go down well in the front bar of the local, drinking short blacks, reading Camus and scribbling bad poetry. In reality he'd at least have to pretend to be one of them, assuming they were any different. He didn't see this as a problem, except perhaps over a longer period, when you might easily forget the difference between who you were and who you'd become. He thought of what he risked losing . . . there was no one living on the rough out there, except perhaps spiritually, no humanity to observe, no lives to invent. Still, he was willing to risk it. If he started finding their jokes funny he could always turn around and come home.

'Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?'

Arthur's voice stayed in his ears. They were both from this place, of it, they could not leave it as much as Darren could not leave his jetty, his fishing pole, his meditation. He took out an old jam jar which he'd filled with St Aggie stolen from Arthur's secret stash (it was only fair as by now Arthur would have tracked down his *Playboy* and retired to his room for forty winks). He sipped as he walked, the warmth of the spirit beginning to merge with the warmth of the sun's dying rays.

He thought about how the pair of them would fare with him gone. Would they just continue arguing or would some form of conversion take place? Would she actually start listening to what he had to say or would Arthur start agreeing with the views of King Bob? Or would they find some mutual ground, possibly hidden away in the depths of her Babylonian Garden?

'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.'

Would a telegram arrive at the station inviting him home

for a wedding, or would it just be a letter from her, with a hastily scribbled PS at the bottom: 'By the way, I threw that miserable old bugger out, couldn't stand him anymore.'

Jean was a refugee from Arthur's reality of world politics, philosophy and artistic criticism. Once he'd overheard them in the garden: 'Where would you rate Giotto, Jean, up there with the great masters?'

A pause then Jean's voice, clipped, annoyed at being interrupted. 'Arthur, you're the only person in Adelaide who knows what Giotto is.'

'I beg to differ.'

'You're full of shit.'

Rolly stood smiling, waiting for them to continue. In her honesty, Jean was his hero, saying what needed to be said in a world full of shit, trying to redeem the Arthurs of the planet with a philosophy more Chips Rafferty than Sartre.

He looked down the beach and saw a couple of figures moving about in the grainy light. Two girls stood in the wash with their jeans turned up, throwing a frisbee. He walked back into the dunes and further south behind a ridge until he was almost directly behind them, hidden behind the grass. They were both about seventeen. The blonde one was beautiful—he sighed as the warmth of the brandy travelled up from his fingers, through his arms and shoulders and into his head. For a moment they came together and whispered something. The blonde started to take off her clothes. He couldn't believe his luck; he crawled higher onto the ridge, struggling for a better view. She just stood there, naked, looking about like an amateur house-breaker. He drank the rest of the brandy without shifting his gaze from his Venus as she waited for her friend to gather courage, follow her lead and strip off. Eventually he rolled onto his back and tried to focus on certain

patterns in the stars. Below him the two girls stopped playing, floating in a sea streaked with moonlight.

Rolly continued on down the beach; nothing could worry him now. The cold breeze still worked on his face, entering his nose and ears and drying out his eyes. He cried, he was so dry he cried. His tears were for the blonde skinny-dipper, transformed into his future, frisbee-throwing wife. She would have a Dutch accent (he'd always imagined his dreamboat with a Dutch accent), just like the funny foreign teacher when she leaned over to grab Robert, the Sabbath Kid. He could see her naked in the moonlight, grabbing him, demanding all sorts of humiliating punishments in the sand. 'Write a hundred times, the Sabbath has *always* fallen on a Sunday.' And he would write it for her, although he knew it wasn't true.

He stumbled down the beach crushing sponges underfoot; his hair flicked into his face but he didn't care, he just stood there smiling, staring out, meditating. What if *he* threw off his clothes and jumped into the water? And what if . . . what if he kept swimming until his arms seized up, and he could feel his body sinking? What if he started swallowing water and slipping out of consciousness, no one even knowing he was there? They'd shed tears for him the next morning, when his bloated body was washed up on the beach. Jean and Arthur would come down crying, like a chorus of old Greek women, Arthur reassuring her from his Bible, 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither; the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'

But in his meditation the drowning was a pleasant thing, like a hundred jars of brandy and a hundred seedy orgasms all at once. He would surrender to it and his body would become the least of his concerns. His mind would enter a cloudy vista of release and he would forget who he was, what he was. As his

body sank his spirit would centre itself in a place too small, making the sensation unbearably intense and beautiful; this pin-prick of spirit would be the sum of all he had been, but he was still not sure where it would go after leaving his body.

He opened his eyes to the worst realisation of all: he was getting sober. He stumbled back up the beach and lay down in the niche of a flat dune, staring up at what he thought was a saucepan in the sky. He felt in his pocket and retrieved what was left of the reefer. He cupped his hands and after a few attempts managed to light up. He stared up, his head still spinning as he dragged on the cigarette and inhaled the sweet-smelling smoke, deeply, holding it there until his lungs had savoured every part of it, exhaling slowly.

He closed his eyes again and, unsure if he was dreaming or changing form, he rose up out of his body and began to float. The breeze carried him, in rising thermals, back down the beach. He saw Darren with his fishing pole, hitting it against the handrail of the jetty (although he hadn't even cast out his nylon line). His friend was surrounded by clothes and toys and books and papers. They blew up around him, into the sea, where they floated and drifted further out. He drifted inland, over the cramped, junk-strewn yards of a row of old workers' cottages. In one, an old man sat in his pyjamas, holding a torch, polishing the tomatoes on his bushes. His wife stood nearby, stoking an old copper, preparing to wash a box of dirty overalls.

Rolly reached higher towards the sky and kicked, as though he was at the bottom of the sea trying to come up. He kicked and kicked but didn't come up; he just floated over the tops of houses and factories and roads. In his own yard, Arthur was floating on an Antarctic breeze, crucified on the Hills Hoist like so many old socks. Is that what the big J. looked like,

Rolly wondered ('... yes, Jesus loves me, the Hills Hoist tells me so...'). A pair of his mother's potato-sack knickers bristled in the breeze close to Arthur's nose but he resisted the temptation to grab them.

Suddenly his body started to fall; he trod water to stay up but it didn't help. He fell down, down, towards a car-salvage yard. Thump! He landed on top of a tower of crushed car bodies, thirty or forty, which moved in the wind in an uneasy truce between two worlds. He clung to a smashed Mazda. Looking down at the black, oily ground far below he saw two German shepherds barking up at him, their teeth bared. The tower started to take bigger and bigger swings in the wind; he held on for dear life. Eventually the tower began to topple and he was thrown off. He hit the ground with a dull thud and looked up to see the two dogs running towards him. The tower was still falling, as if in slow motion. He covered his head with his arms and screamed as it fell on top of him. He opened his eyes and a German shepherd was sniffing his feet. The owner, further down the beach, called and it ran away. Rolly sat up and felt his head aching. The girls were gone. Darren was gone. There was nothing left for him but to head home.

He came in the back way, through the garden. Jean and Arthur had fallen asleep in their chairs. The radio was playing classical music and Arthur's Bible was open to Genesis in Jean's lap. He frowned, wondering. Had she been pointing out its faults or following his praises? And how had the radio got onto *that* station? Did she allow it or did he do it after she was asleep? He decided not to wake them. When he got back to his room he discovered his *Playboy* had been put back in the wrong spot.

THE MRS WILLIAM JUDELL

Jack walked into Judell's Shop. It was empty except for a few blowflies. On the wall was a gallery of Jamestown's history. Its curator, the Mrs William Judell, was the owner of the shop. The Mrs William was the heir to the Judell Empire, inherited from her poor, dead husband and his father, its founder, Sydney Morris Judell. Jack stopped to look at some of the pictures: there was the Mrs William Judell, known to only a few as Emma, standing around the boot of an old Holden with three other ladies, loading food. The caption read: 'Inaugural Meals on Wheels Service, June 1970—Mesdames J. Redden, L. O'Leary, B. Williams and E. Judell'. The good ladies smiled at the camera: they all wore their black-framed National Health standards, clung to their cardies and feigned niceness.

This was the Mrs William Judell Jack knew, variously described as benevolent, kind, caring and community-minded.

He had other words. It had been said by some that she was the ladies' Norrie Carmichael: central to the life of the town, supplying it with all it needed from her emporium, correction, shop. She'd never agreed with William's decision to change over to a 'shop' in 1965. Shops were something Italian immigrants kept in the city; shops were full of anonymous people *buying* things. The Mrs William had always kept her finger on the town's pulse—this is why the ex-mayor's wife, Frederina Humphris, had urged her to get it all down or, more precisely, to pin it all up. Of course there was a difference between her 'interest' and mere gossip. At a town council meeting in 1958 (William was mayor at the time, so she always faithfully attended) a councillor had the gall to call her a gossip-monger. William stood up and demanded a retraction to 'this insult to the honour of my good lady'. The comment, made by one of those horrid Dawes' boys, was retracted but never forgotten by her.

But Emma Judell *was* Jamestown. After William died in 1967 she took over the mantle of responsibility for the Judell Empire. She was free to—her plumbing had never been quite right for children and such a tawdry affair as adoption was out of the question. People came and went from her shop, leaving bits of their life behind, leaving much too much of their money behind. The distribution network for her 'information of interest' included the CWA (she had groomed Madge, her successor, as president, taught her everything she knew), the bowls club, the Annual Show Committee, the ladies' golf group, the Methodist tennis team and Meals on Wheels (her proudest creation). Often, walking past the single towering palm of the Masonic Lodge Hall, she berated them for not granting her access to its inner sanctum; the only consolation was that *they* kept to themselves, most choosing to do their parcels in Clare.

The largest photo in her gallery was one of Sydney Morris—at a sprightly twenty-six he was the youngest ever mayor of Jamestown—standing on the balcony of their emporium reading a telegram announcing the Armistice on November 12, 1918. The ladies and gents assembled below were wearing suits and formal jackets, crinoline dresses and hats. Jack squinted . . . they were all dressed the same! Was it the tyranny of black and white photography or possibly Judell's monopoly on the Jamestown fashion market? The look in Sydney Morris' eyes suggested that he knew another good killing when he saw it.

There was a picture of a brass band (1900), in which all six gentlemen seemed to be playing euphonium, and a photo of a garden party (1960) with women and children dressed like something from a Shirley Temple film. The 1960s—the Beatles were in leather but Jamestown was still entirely corseted. Pictures of floats in a VP Day celebration. Wars, so distant and far off, had always taken a severe toll on Jamestown's boys. Although some couldn't fully understand the reason for going, the Judell's had always been there, their store bedecked with Union Jacks, urging them on for the good of the greater white race.

There was a photo of his grandfather being farewelled by Sydney Morris in 1917: 'F. Alber, J. Dawes, C. Cameron, W.G. Rosie, Jamestown's Third Quota, AIF, 1917'. Secretly, the old Mrs William had never liked the photo because Fred Alber and *that* Dawes' boy were the only ones to return; Dawes' son and grandsons had always been troublemakers, to this very day. Only last year she had one of their ferals charged for shoplifting.

And then she appeared. She looked Jack up and down and said, 'Jack, how are your parents?'

'Good, they're meant to be meeting me here.'

‘Very good, be nice to see them. Been some time, I hope they haven’t gone over to the opposition.’

But there was no opposition to Judell’s in Jamestown; in a town like this there could only be one Norrie Carmichael, one Lou Stubbs and one Sid Bowey. There were not enough heads of hair or headaches or wedding receptions, and simply not enough little feet to be kept in Bata Scouts.

Jack couldn’t think of anything that Judells didn’t sell. At the front of the store there was a line of groceries. Of course, you could buy them at the Black and White (‘such an American monstrosity, but sadly inevitable’), you could . . . but Emma stocked all the necessities for the everyday shopper: bread, milk, the local and city papers—enough to trap the secrets of the unwary. Down the side wall, bordered by a giant oak counter, handcrafted by Sydney Morris, was the general merchandise: light globes, nails, stationery, weed killers, wheelbarrows, knitting wool, bowls caps, stockings, sheet music (no chord copying here), novels, CDs and everything else in between. Towards the back there was a small shoe section and a flight of stairs leading up to clothes and millinery (housing the requisite R.M. Williams) and, extending out under the bull-nosed balcony of the Armistice (now a glassed in meeting room), the sporting goods, cosmetics and a tourist information bureau.

‘Hear you’re leaving us,’ she said, looking at him.

‘How did you know?’

But she just smiled. Innocent lamb.

He continued looking at the photos as the Mrs William told off a young assistant for ‘spending your whole day on the throne’. Jack smiled as he looked at a picture of the Jamestown Ladies’ Hockey Team (1912), sucking on orange quarters and laughing.

Kev and Mirrie entered the shop and the Mrs William almost jumped on them. 'Kevin, Mrs Alber, how are you both?'

Kevin smiled. 'Fine thanks, Emma.'

The Mrs William grimaced, that intimacy was a bit uncalled for. 'And how's Mary-Anne, haven't seen her for so long?'

'Fine.'

'You'll never believe it but I just discovered the most amazing photo.' She came forward and dragged them over to her gallery. She pointed out a photo of a group of schoolgirls dressed in the (post-colonial) style of the 1920s. The caption read: 'Jamestown Primary, 1926'.

'There, that's Mary-Anne, and guess, this one with the pigtails?'

Kevin feigned. 'No!'

The Mrs William smiled. 'Yes. I always remember her picking her nose.' She looked at Jack and said, only half-jokingly, 'I hope it's not a family trait.'

Jack smiled. 'Only when I'm hungry.'

William's wife smiled again. It wasn't proper to laugh at *that* sort of joke. 'And this one here,' she continued. 'I bet you can't pick the faces.'

The Albers squinted and looked at the picture. It showed a row of eleven men (two of them barely out of their teens) standing in a long line on a large oval behind their respective lawnmowers. They all wore shorts, some of them T-shirts and some were bare-chested. The caption, in Emma's classic copperplate, 'First Mowing of Turf Oval, 1961'. The Mrs William broke in, 'Everybody did their bit back then . . . before the council could afford a ride-on.'

Jack squinted in amazement. 'How often?'

'Every Sunday fortnight.'

Mirrie was the first to recognise him. 'That's William.'

The Mrs William was all aglow. 'Yes, he was there of course.' She giggled. 'Them Victas were meant to be demonstrators but he figured he could put them to better use.'

Jack looked at William with his handle-bar moustache and his pompous expression and felt like saying, 'Look at the size of that gut.' Instead he said, 'Granddad.'

Mirrie squinted. 'Oh, it is too. Often wondered why he used to take the mower for a walk down the street.' Leaving his wife (Mirrie's mum) at home.

There was an uneasy silence as they all stopped to remember her. Grandma would walk down Ayr Street wearing nothing. She would hold her hands in front of her face and blow on them. More than once Sidney Morris had to rush out with a rug to cover her, and then the young William was told to hold her hand and lead her home. Grandma could be seen in the background of the photo, taken a year before she was put away, a town secret even the Mrs William kept beneath the counter (with the gentlemen's health accessories). She had flaming red hair which leapt from her skull like so many exclamation marks. Jack looked closer. She had *his* hair. She had *his* eyes . . . she was mad and yet beautiful.

'Mrs Judell,' Kevin began, 'we're after some clothes for Jack. Something sturdy. Outback.'

He smiled; they all smiled and looked at Jack. He felt like a five year old again, arriving here for his first pair of shoes and pants and a blue school shirt. He almost expected someone to take his cheek and stretch it.

'There, there, hasn't he grown up to be a big boy; how old are you now, Jack?'

'Pardon?'

The old dame was talking to him. 'How old?'

'Seventeen.'

‘My my, I remember . . . but then, you don’t want to hear that. Come this way.’

She led them to the clothing department and the inevitable moleskins. ‘All the young ones go for them these days. Mind you, they’re a good pair of pants. They wear them tight. Sexy.’

Oh please! Jack’s eyeballs rolled skywards. The Mrs William took out a pair of pants and held them against him. It was the same thing she’d done with the undies when he was a kid, as all the girls from kindy stood about laughing.

‘Yes, medium.’

He thought, I could have told you that if you’d asked. Of course it still wasn’t proper in some circles to think of young people as having their own mind. He went into the change rooms to try them on as the old storekeeper set to his mother, like a hyena at a zebra’s carcass.

‘Mirrie, noticed you going into Dr Haskell’s the other day, nothing serious, I hope?’

Jack thought, nothing you don’t want Jamestown to know, Mum.

‘No, just my spider-webs.’

‘Oh, wait till you get to my age. I’ve had them done in town. Dr Haskell, isn’t he the best?’

His mother was silent behind the screen, possibly trying to avoid any further slips. Her spider-webs would be cast the length of Ayr Street by next Tuesday. She could see the old tart now, squealing: ‘Yes, strange, Mirrie’s got that too. Must be us modern women on our feet all day.’

Jack drew the curtain and came out. The Mrs W. grabbed the pants by the belt-buckle and pulled them up and down as though she was trying to get a watermelon into the bottom of a stocking. ‘Fine fit. Next I s’pose is your boots?’

Mirrie smiled. Kevin adjusted his collar, uneasily, noticing

the price, the infamous Judell mark-up which had kept them in business so long. He thought of the old boots he had at home, surely . . . but there was no stopping the Mrs W. once she got going. She wrestled the RMs onto his feet. 'Nice boot. Cow could step on your foot and you wouldn't know. Suppose you're very proud, Kevin?' And once again Jack was cast as the mute five year old. Kevin looked at his son.

'He'll be okay. Sets his mind to it he'll be a success.'

Please! he thought, I didn't choose it for your fucking benefit. And then he looked down at his boots, uneasy, scared of the idea that it *was* for his benefit. All of the mornings he'd spent lying in bed, waiting for his father to leave for work, ashamed at being the first of the Alber men left at home with the women. No, it wasn't his fault. Every time he tried it was someone else screwing him around—or was it? The store-keeper knew it was tough for the kids these days, but she also had her opinions about which ones were lazy. Jack looked at her and wondered what she thought about him.

'And what about you, Mirrie?'

'If it's what he wants.'

Why would I want it? What else is there? Three months a year at the Co-op? He put his head down and sighed.

'There.'

They all looked at him, seeking approval. He thought, the boots are the least of it.

'Well?'

'They're great.'

As he stared at the boots he felt his destiny was elsewhere. If he'd been born in the city he might have realised it: a scientist, a musician, a writer. But no, this was Jamestown and things were decided for you here. At present, the options, according to the CES, consisted of a part-time sales position

at Dempsey and Brockmans, a delivery boy for the drycleaner (although he didn't have a car) or a labourer at the sawmill. Piss weak, all of them. Jobs you could learn in a week and repeat, day in day out, for the following fifty years—like most people did in Jamestown.

He'd long since realised it was a town of Norrie Carmichaels and Sid Boweys. In his eyes, anyone who'd made anything of themselves had had to leave first. Which made it simple. He too would go—dressed by Mrs Judell in Bata Scouts and school pants—into the desert, to find himself. And in the end he would be the one to push his lawnmower further than the rest, and not because it was the neighbourly thing to do.

He was determined to be positive. As the three of them walked down Ayr Street the good folks of Jamestown, having heard the news via Emma, stopped them, tried to ruffle Jack's hair and wish him good luck. 'Thanks, I've heard they've got these cows . . .' and he smiled, indicating.

It was a beautiful night, the air crisp with the smell of fresh cut hay. The stores were open late on Thursday and a few lights had already popped on. He looked back at Judell's, glowing with the promise of Iceroy Tea and endless linoleum.

A family of silo welders listened as Kevin, in fine form, tweaked his son's muscles. 'Yes, I'm sure he'll show them how it's done.'

One of them smiled. 'Maybe we got another Sid Kidman on our hands.'

'Yes.' Kevin smiled and winked at his son. Jack grasped the handle of the Judell's Shop bag; the plastic was sweaty, the dye coming off in his hands. As the old folks gabbed he stared out at the distant sunset: it was a long, painful dusk. He knew that waiting for darkness could be agonising on a night like

this. He looked off to the east, to where the imperfect, grainy light cast a shadow from Ayr Street's solitary date palm half-way to the showground.

As his parents climbed into their car he stopped and looked up the street. 'I'll be home later.'

'Eh?'

'Don't worry, I'll get a ride.'

'Who with?'

But before they could protest he was gone. He walked towards the shop, dragging his feet in the gutters, bowing his head in respect as he passed the war memorial.

The shop was overflowing with Little Emus. They were the local Under 12s, their terry-towelling caps embossed with an obese emu eating gum leaves. They sat around outside the shop sucking iceblocks and battling each other on their preferred medium, Nintendo. Through the window he could see Anna fighting with a couple of them; she wiped the sweat off her brow and looked up. Their eyes met but the violin glissando turned sour; she clenched her jaw and returned to the freezer and the victorious Emus, all the time pretending to smile. He looked at Ben Carmichael, Norrie's grandson. 'How did you go?'

'Killed 'em.'

Ah, and that's what matters. He remembered back to when he was a Little Emu. The coach was Warren's father, the Sandshoe King. He would get up in his tracksuit, a stopwatch around his neck, 'Boys, it's not winning that matters, it's how you play the game.' But that had never been the case. Warren hadn't got his competitive streak out of the air. Jack remembered finding it strange that the coach could say one thing and, standing on the edge of the oval with a host of other maniacal parents, spur them on to another.

‘G’day, Jack.’

It was him, the Sandshoe King, wearing a new tracksuit, fluoro green, as though his king-sized ego had exploded down his front. ‘They’ve done it again, crushed the Lameroo Lions.’

He pounded his fist, slapped Jack on the shoulder and smiled. ‘Good to see they’re upholding the tradition, eh?’

Jack cringed inwardly and remembered; while Warren was impressing them with his fast bowling *he* was marooned in the outfield. Every time he fumbled a catch Wazza ‘Lillee’ Smith would hit his forehead and mutter the same thing as his father on the sidelines: ‘Jesus, where *can* we put Alber?’ At the nets Warren would always throw them too fast; once he’d missed the ball and dislocated his jaw.

He looked at an anaemic, short-legged Emu and recognised himself. The one inside at the magazine stand, showing the others a cricket mag, that was Warren—he was always there, surviving across the generations in a barely altered form. Still, even if Wazza had been king with a cricket ball, *he’d* been the Queen’s Scout.

He went inside and approached her. ‘Anna.’ Of course, she was too busy to look at him. He stood back and flicked through a *Stock Journal* until the last of the Emus had gone. ‘Hi.’

She looked at him with a blank expression and then returned to stocking the freezer with iceblocks.

‘How’s things?’

But still no reply. He knew he was in trouble. Why? Hadn’t he humbled himself enough for the Commodore incident? ‘Looks like you could use some help.’

She changed sides, stocking up on the Paddle Pops. ‘I’m fine. Gotta earn my six bucks an hour.’

‘When do you finish?’

'Too late for you; you've gotta get home to bed. Big day tomorrow I hear.'

'That's what I came to tell you.'

'Ah, thanks.'

The little Lillee Smith popped his head up between them. 'Sherbet.'

'Please,' Anna corrected.

He twisted his head. '*Please*.' He returned to his mag and his followers, the great outfielders of life, leaving his money on the counter. Anna scooped it into her hands, stopped and looked up at him. 'I'm sure you've had other things on your mind.'

'C'mon.'

'What?'

'You want me to stay?'

'Of course.'

'What would I do? Pull beers?'

'That's right.'

'You wanna be with someone who . . . ' He stopped and shrugged. 'The bus leaves at ten.'

'Be early for a good seat.'

'Coming?'

But all her eyes said to him was, *go, I'll stay, that's the end of it*. She closed the freezer, opened a box of chips and started to stack them. Mounted on the stand a cardboard cricket player shared promises of a luxury trip for two to the Gold Coast. Jack realised that sometimes competitions were just too little to cling to, the consolation of a thousand randy meter maids lost in the bulldust of Ayr Street. He made for the door, past the sea of Little Emus. The Sandshoe King smiled and slapped him on the shoulder. He looked back one last time before he left, the sound of crinkling plastic made him sick. As he walked down the road it was no darker.

They had a slap-up breakfast in the Black and White Cafe. Kevin shouted ham and eggs all round. They got bacon and it was mainly fat, the googs under-poached so they bled like a headless chook. Kevin was so proud: everyone in the cafe heard the story of how Jack, his son, off up north, was such a good scout he'd single-handedly led his troop on a long hike through the Flinders Ranges. His Gran presented him with three packets of barley sugar for the trip as well as a pair of bed-socks she'd knitted. Later on, out the front of the Commercial Hotel, Kevin cracked a bottle of champagne and they all toasted him with little plastic cups his mother had brought. Jack forgot everything and gave in to his family's wash; he knew he was doing 'the right thing'. His Gran gave him a bear hug (whispering in his ear, 'The door's always open') and he wasn't in the least bit embarrassed.

As the driver put the last bags on the bus things became solemn: the handshake with his dad, the kisses, the hugs. He went to board the bus; he looked down the length of Ayr Street but she wasn't there. When the bus pulled out with him on board he felt sure he'd done the wrong thing.

The crowd had dispersed when she arrived, late, humbling herself for a reconciliation. She saw his family get into their car. She wanted to go and explain; she planned her words, but she couldn't do it. Instead she walked across the road to the bust of Lou Stubbs and covered his head with her apron. The Mrs William Judell walked past and smiled at her, 'Anna.' Her parents were good people but new to the town. What a strange thing to do, she must be missing him already.

K I N G J I M

Camelot Motors, like its namesake, sat on top of a hill with views down to the rolling plains—Gilles Plains—studded with farmland—that is, quarter-acre blocks. The Knights of the Card Table wore tartan ties and corduroy jackets and had names like (Sir) Gary and (Sir) Ralph. The ruler of this realm was King Jim who, it was rumoured, could smoke a carton of B and H in two days as well as tell a VK from a VJ by the shape of its radiator cap. On this particular Tuesday afternoon the Knights sat around the card table in a transportable the government had written off as uninhabitable.

Arthur and Rolly started to stroll around the yard, looking at a couple of utes they'd noticed. Rolly still wore his Akubra and Arthur was robed in his religious vestments, a somewhat illegal if not immoral move, but one that was calculated to bring out the true Christian in any car yard knight. They sat there, these knights, staring out, somewhat surprised.

‘That’s not a fucking priest,’ Gary mumbled. Jim stroked his beard and placed his key-set on a hook. ‘Why d’ you say that? Don’t they like little boys?’

They all laughed. Ralph peered out more closely. ‘*Current Affairs*.’ He was looking concerned. But concern was something your more experienced dealer had learnt to overcome, stepping out to do battle on a ten by fifteen metre patch of asphalt, littered with the ghost-bodies of those slain by Jim and his knights. Jim called them ‘the unwary ones’, choosing to mispronounce the saying he’d learnt from his father; *caviar emperor*, let the bastards beware of Jim.

Ralph shook his head. ‘Remember that red Mazda I sold that journalist last week?’

‘Christ!’ Jim exclaimed. ‘Will you stop going on about that Mazda. It still runs doesn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well?’

‘Not gonna be your picture on the front page of *The Mail*.’

‘Ralph, there’s laws about those sorts of things.’

There were laws about everything in this world, and Jim knew them all. He’d learnt to cover himself to the nth degree with a new code of chivalry known as the Second Hand Motor Vehicles Act, 1983. The yellow Contract for Sale, incorporating the particulars required by Section 19 of the Act, was his statement of integrity. Every time he put his mark on one he was saying something about himself, what he stood for and what he stood to gain. Closest to his heart was the Method of Payment section: deposit, trade-in allowance, less pay-out, equity (deficiency), less refund to purchaser, nett equity (or deficiency), total deposit and trade-in, payable on delivery. It was a ledger of the soul. Saint Peter would have these yellow forms in his hand when Jim arrived at the Pearly Gates; but he

wasn't worried, he would be judged worthy of the Camelot name. People in their second-hand Camelots would talk about him long after he was gone. They would talk about the magic and mystery of his place on the hill and of how they would like to return there one day very soon.

So the priest was just too much of a challenge for him; if he could nail this bastard he'd be through those gates like a shot.

'They seem t' be lookin' at that Toyota ute.'

Ralph smiled. 'One with the hand-crafted carby.'

Jim rose, putting his hand on Ralph's shoulder. 'Remember, it's not our job to re-build motors. We just sell 'em to the punters.'

And with this he made his way out through the sliding door, dropping the sunvisor on his glasses and crunching Funmint. Behind him Ralph slid the door shut and cranked the Kelvinator to full. 'He could sell sand to an Arab,' he said, coughing on regurgitated smoke.

Sir Gary shifted in his seat. 'Learnt everything he knows from his dad, Marvin. You should have seen *him* at work.'

'G'day, name's Jim.' He extended his hand and they shook. This was his first point of attack; he knew the fate of those with a weak hand shake.

'Arthur . . . this is Clive.'

'Ah, you with the Paddies, Arthur?'

'Anglican.'

Oh well, surely that carried some clout. 'Noticed you showing some interest in this one.'

'Yes, Clive's off up north, working, so we're after something reliable.'

'Where you going, Clive?'

'Cattle station. Jackaroo.'

'Yeah?' It was always good to seem interested in their

kiddies, they lapped it up. The kids were caught up in backseat dreams of sticky desire (if she laid that way and I . . .) but the parents were grist for the mill. They could try their best ('It's done a fair few k's, Jim . . . this paintwork's wearing thin . . . maybe if you could drop a couple a hundred . . . we're talking cash') but he would always be the eventual victor ('A hundred isn't unusual for a car this age, if this is what you're after . . . the paint's just been done, 'cos we got it in the sun . . . can't really move on this price, already dropped it five hundred'). They would all fight the valiant fight, each thinking they were the toughest customer ever. Jim knew that if they really wanted the car they'd buy it, he could see the look in their eyes, especially the young ones. If he could convince them that this was the best deal they'd find he had them. He saw the look in Rolly's eyes and knew the struggle was almost over. 'New radiator, tyres last year . . . listen, I'll be completely honest with you. I'll flog this by the end of the week either way. You can keep driving the length of North-East Road and you won't find another ute more recent for this price.'

Arthur eyed him suspiciously. You bloody leech. I coulda been the Pope and you wouldn't a cared.

'Okay,' he said, fingering his crucifix. 'Let's start at the beginning. Why don't you pop the hood for us, Jim.'

Jim eyed him back. Wants a fight, eh?

'Of course, Father, Your Eminence, what is it?'

'Arthur.'

'Of course.'

As the verbal jousting continued beneath the bonnet, Rolly sat behind the wheel and imagined the desert. How far would it stretch out beyond his bonnet? What sort of things would be sitting in the tray in six months' time? Barbed wire and fencing posts? A saddle? Or would there be a rug spread out under the

wide, open outback sky, chip packets from the local RSL car park blowing around them? Yes, them, *her*, a frisbee under his dusty boots. He looked at the cracking dashboard; there were *always* flaws in his dreams.

'This radiator's *new*?' Arthur flicked off a chip of rust where it had been painted over.

'Reconditioned, good as new.'

'And what about down there?' He pointed out a small oil stain towards the front of the engine block.

'Arthur, we all get a few small leaks after a couple of years.' He smiled. 'Take my wife for instance, no one else will.'

Arthur smiled and whispered, almost audibly, 'I wouldn't be so sure.'

Jim still smiled. 'Sorry, Arthur?'

Arthur turned to Rolly. 'Okay, turn it over.'

The car roared to life and Jim stood back with his arms crossed, an expectant look in his eyes. 'Smooth, eh?'

Arthur had to agree. 'Sounds okay.'

Jim slammed down the bonnet, putting in the sword for what must be the final thrust and twisting it. 'Listen, the Japs built these cars to keep going forever.'

Arthur inspected the body more closely. 'No rust?'

'Nah, someone musta kept it in a shed.' Either that or their 'mechanic' was just too good.

'What about a ride?'

Jim smiled. He had his head on a hook. Was it *really* this easy to bullshit your way into heaven?

'No problems, I'll just back it out of the yard.'

With a couple of professionally executed hairpin turns he had it out on the street, the first time in months it had seen the road, the first time a buyer hadn't asked for a mechanic's inspection. As they headed down Wandana, past the Moslem school,

Rolly looked at Arthur and smiled. 'Quite a bit a pickup.'

Jim, sitting in the middle, placed a hand on each of their knees and said, 'Of course, those Japs are in a hurry t' get around Tokyo.' He looked at Arthur, but he was too busy scanning the rego disk.

'Only two weeks left.'

Jim shrugged, squeezing their knees paternally. 'Small beans.' He tuned the radio to Classic FM (which proved his breeding) and said to Arthur, 'So, where's yer parish?'

'Parish . . . oh, out south.'

'Do many christenings?'

'Yeah.'

'Might be able to throw some business your way. Just got the good news myself.' He smiled, patting his yiros belly.

'Talking brass tacks,' Arthur continued, 'it's gonna have to be a rushed sale, he's off tomorrow. Of course the other side of that is we're talking cash.'

'Ah.'

'So, I don't know what that's worth to us.'

'As I said, Arthur, I'll hardly be makin' money on this as it is.'

'But surely cash saves you a lot of time and red tape.'

'I dunno.' He fingered his right earlobe. 'All right, two-eight, best I can do.'

Arthur looked at Rolly. 'Well?'

He smiled back. 'Sounds good to me.'

Jim extended his hand to Arthur and they shook. Innocent lambs, he thought, didn't even put up a struggle.

Arthur and Rolly went back into his office and made small talk with the knights as Jim weighed his soul on another yellow form. 'So, what's this job?' Ralph asked Rolly and Rolly thought, as if you'd care.

'Jackaroo,' he half whispered, barely audible over the Kelvinator.

'No bullshit?' Ralph smiled. 'I once thought about that.'

For about five seconds, Rolly thought, wondering about his own motivations. But as the contract was finally signed he realised it was too late to turn back now. 'It's a change,' he continued, defiant. 'Stay in one place you go stale.' Like old ciggie smoke rattling through broken plastic fins.

Arthur smiled, full of misplaced confidence. Although he felt he'd driven Jim down he was far from the truth. The Toyota ute used to belong to a brickie from Geelong—*used to*, until a rainy Saturday afternoon when he came out of Woolies with his bread, milk and nappies, stared at the empty car park and muttered, 'Fuck!'

Arthur stared at Jim as Gary fixed him a rancid coffee. Got y', y' rotten little mongrel. Jim looked up at the priest, suck that y' smug bastard.

Rolly suspected that a suitcase was a bit formal for a cattle station, but it was all they had, so it would have to do. He could see his big arrival: the ute grinding to a halt in the gravel, a dog coming over to sniff him. There would be a couple of jackaroos, Slim and Wombat, leaning up against a fence watching him. He would take his mother's tartan suitcase out of the ute and Slim would mutter, 'Cripes!'

He would wave to them. 'G'day.' That meant hello.

'You the new fella?' Wombat would ask, wiping his nose with his sleeve.

'Yep.'

Wombat would look at Slim. 'Yep?' And then at Rolly. 'What you got in there, your winter wardrobe?'

'I wasn't sure how much to pack.'

And they would laugh between themselves. 'Long as you brought your thermal underwear.'

Rolly would smile (*Christ, it's Dad and Dave*), go over to them, talk like them and ask them such things as, 'How many cattle?' Meanwhile the dog would be pissing on his suitcase.

Jean, for all her apparent lack of organisation, knew exactly where to go for what. As he sat at his desk filling out the change of registration for his ute, she started his packing: socks and undies, plenty of T-shirts, jeans, slacks ('for when you all go into town'), a business shirt, jumpers, windcheaters, a jacket, baseball caps and his beloved Akubra. 'They actually wear these?' she asked, holding up the hat.

'Hope so or I'm gonna look like a real dickhead. I was thinking of rubbing something into it, make it look used.'

She smiled. 'I suspect they'll know.'

He knew she was right. Slim and Wombat looked up at the Akubra and smiled. 'You been rubbing that in your vacuum bag?'

'No . . . why?'

He could see the lines of dry sweat on *their* hats. From now on he would wear his 49 'ers cap (or at least until they started calling him Kanga or Emu). Jean wedged a pair of leather shoes, sandshoes and slippers into the case.

'Mum, I don't want slippers.'

'What if you have to go to the wash-house?'

'Wash-house?'

He could see himself treading the old wooden boards, pulling on his freshly ironed jarmies, his slippers slapping against his heels, and then approaching the mirror and starting to brush his teeth. The toilet would flush and Slim would appear wearing nothing but a pair of old boots and his 'Come and Get it' undies.

‘Cripes, where you stayin’ tonight, the Hilton?’

Rolly stood firm against his mum. ‘No, put in my thongs, they’ll do.’

He finished the registration and put it in an envelope. ‘Can you post this for me?’

She nodded. ‘Now what about a few personal things?’ She opened his bedside drawer and pulled out the holy card he’d won at Sunday school. ‘Isn’t that beautiful?’

It was a picture of Jesus on the cross, St John at his feet, aiming for a little damage control; an assortment of heavily robed Jews sat below the cross crying. Maybe their tears were shed for the fluorescent blood handpainted onto the nail marks, or maybe for the strange way the Messiah’s eyes followed them around the desert as they flitted between crosses, soliciting memorable quotations. Rolly sat on the bed and took the card from his mother. ‘Tacky.’

He’d won it for memorising the Lord’s Prayer. He wasn’t sure if Jesus would approve of this sort of bribery, but he thought that if he did he should at least make allowances for better prizes.

‘Do you think he really looked like that?’

‘Of course.’

‘But he was a Jew.’

‘No he wasn’t, he was one of us.’

Rolly looked at the picture and knew it was wrong. This was the image of Jesus that Arthur’s lot had created: Anglo, blond, a bit poofy with a sad and pathetic expression—the butcher-paper Jesus he’d endlessly drawn in crayon at Sunday school, surrounded by copied Bible quotes in his best hand, Hallmark sentiments which failed to make the picture any more real. ‘Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature —’ which made about as much sense as long division.

His Jesus would be different: a sack of cans on his back, grimy clothes and a mouldy overcoat.

'I'm not taking that.' He handed the card back. She refused it, adding for good measure, 'Go on, it'll keep you clean and moral.'

'Clean and moral?' He thought, does that mean that all dirty people are immoral? How on earth had he survived such a strange upbringing? A mother who disinfected coins she'd got as change from the Chinese takeaway.

'I don't even believe in God.'

'Yes you do.'

'No I don't.'

She had that look of 'I know better'. Still, he was undaunted. 'See, there was this fella called Charles Darwin—'

'I didn't send you to the Baptists every Sunday for nothing.'

Well, if you put it that way, he thought. After all, they wouldn't have been lying, would they? At least not intentionally.

'So how come you never came with me?'

'I was past help.'

'Rubbish. You couldn't be bothered.'

'No. You'll see when you've got your own kids.'

But she sensed he'd already guessed: a dose of Revelations and free babysitting to boot. Homilies filling the air like so many diesel fumes in a world quickly becoming a vacuum of morality. God instead of the trots. Still, he guessed, she'd meant well. Other mothers would have just let their kids roam wild, smashing the local fruiterer's window. He looked at the card again. 'It's a cattle station, not Bible college.'

But her eyes wouldn't retreat. He threw the card into the bag. 'All right, I'll kiss it every night.' He could see Slim and Wombat standing at his door, watching as he knelt in prayer. 'God bless Mum and Arthur . . . Jesus . . . God help the Catholics . . .

God help the steer in the north paddock fight his infection.'

And then he would kiss the bleeding Christ. Slim would turn to his mate and laugh. 'What a fuckin' sheila!' Rolly would turn to them and say, 'I was severely damaged by a Baptist upbringing, an over-zealous Sunday school teacher and a mother who believed cleanliness is next to Baptism.'

His mother continued on through his drawer. She held up his pocket knife; he took it from her and opened out the blades. An inscription on the handle read: 'Covalex Trophy, 1980, Runner-Up'. A runner-up in a running competition. It was one of the few reminders of a childhood barren of achievement. It taunted him, it said: 'Hey sheila, is this all you've got to show for things?' But he'd never been an achiever, not even a participator. He'd preferred the silence of his bedroom, his records, his books, his 'scribbling' as he liked to call them.

He stared at the blade. It could be useful. He imagined Slim pinned down on the ground, he was holding the knife to his throat, 'Listen, John Boy, if I hear another smart-arse comment from you I'll push your fucking head up a steer's arse, got it?' Slim nodded, shaking, feeling the warm river of piss down his leg.

Rolly closed the knife and threw it into the case. Later, he would take out his ragged yellow notebook and *Playboy* and pack them in the bottom, away from the prying eyes of Slim and Wombat. He couldn't risk triggering an eruption of hormones or a feast of humiliation if they got their hands on a poem. Poems were best kept hidden away, especially from mothers who saw them as a threat to their sovereignty.

She took out a picture of her and the old man standing in front of the church on their wedding day. 'Here, you better take this.'

He looked at the picture and put it in his top pocket. He

knew it was hard for her to lose someone again, that's why he would never argue with her, that's why he must show proof of his promise to return. She took out a school photo, her son beaming in the front row.

'You keep it,' he said.

She did, putting it in the smoker's stand in her Babylonian Garden to sustain her through the long, hot days when there was no word from him, between letters, between phone calls, between times.

That night they sipped shandies in the Garden. He was glad Arthur would remain, to sustain her. He was determined to send him back the money he'd borrowed for the ute. The old priest sat there all night baiting her, laughing at the inanities of King Bob and challenging *him* to match the words of the old Jewish scribes.

Rolly would never be far from them. He realised this more than ever the next morning when he stopped at Port Wakefield for a drink. In the glovebox he found a brand new copy of the Old Testament. Inside the front cover was a photo of Arthur and Jean: they were smiling and laughing, sucking the spoons of Dandies, wrestling each other inside an instant photo-booth. Jean was wearing a frock she'd bought from St Vinnies, her boobs barely contained in a frenzy of faded polyester. Wrinkles had cut deeply into her forehead, trailing down her temples and across her cheeks. Her hair, a patchy brown and white, hung loosely across her face in counterpoint to the hardness of her features. All at once, Rolly realised he was already missing them. It was then he realised the importance of having a home to return to.

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PART TWO

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MORE CHOPS

The highway, miraculously, gave way to Alice Springs. It was like, Rolly thought, trying to mow Adelaide Oval with a push-mower—if you stuck at it long enough you'd get there. Endless purple bitumen fading in an unforgiving sun, distant hills growing bigger and then receding in the rear-vision mirror. An eternity of driving.

He waited at a roundabout in front of Anzac Hill High. The grass, brown and mottled like his mother's hair, was barely alive. The students poured out through the front gate, the girls in skimpy dresses and rolled socks, the boys stripping back their school shirts to reveal T-shirt faces of Morrison and Cobain. Rolly wondered if there was any point rebelling in a place like this; what was there to rebel against? The sun, the desert winds, the tyranny of drab melaleuca? Still, it was everybody's duty to rebel. They probably copied chords onto their palms too.

He passed rows of red- and cream-brick houses, their gardens dead except for an heroic acacia here and there. Here the lifestyle programmes only made it as far as the living room. Susie, Monica, Tweedle-Dee and the gang could suggest all the makeovers they wanted. Although these homes strained to contain the same domestic dreams as those in the south, here you had to contend with bulldust in your windows, blowflies threatening your marinated pork chops and dreams of surf lapping the shore growing more distant with each passing year.

The green and white signs kept leading him on: to the city centre, to civilisation. The streets were neat and precise, no doubt planned by a public servant. The windows of government buildings stared back, reflecting, like the eyes of a blowfly, its brain assessing you like a million little dots.

Alice Springs had the three signs of its coming of age—the things which allow (minor) towns to think of themselves as (great) cities: a Woolies, a Coles and a Kmart. There was a mall and a McDonald's, stop lights and P-platers with their tail-gating grins, an Olympic pool, a golf course, a bowling alley and a skating rink. And if you *really* wanted to be fussy they had a museum and a gallery specialising in Aboriginal art. And of course, the requisite Arts and Cultural Centre; every *city* had to have one, to assure itself that it was as cultured as the next. Mostly it just showed teen-flicks and celluloid heroes with high calibre weapons—but even that was a bit much. Most nights the centre was dark.

By pure fluke he saw the motel, executed a professional hairpin turn (thank you very much, Sir Jim) and reversed into a gap he *knew* the locals wouldn't even consider. He checked in. She was American. Her husband was from the 'base'. They'd invested everything in their baby—the Del Rae Motor

Inn—and although it meant a lot of time apart they knew it was the right thing to do. Alice was their home now and they had to put down roots, even if it entailed changing the motel's name from the Drover's Inn to a place they'd learnt to love 'just outta Fort Worth . . . that's Texas'.

Rolly mounted the stairs and found room thirty-one. Soon he was lying back on the crisp, lemon-scented sheets, thinking of Arthur as the cleaning fairy his mother detested. Arthur with his latex gloves and frilly apron, standing in the doorway like a vision: 'All finished, Mr Rollins, you'll sleep better with Lux.' Arthur at the window, marvelling at how they could get it so clean (and all that nasty red dust); Arthur running his hands through the sheets as his mind drifts back to the seminary and the Brothers and his Hilton prison cell, barren except for a crucifix, the Messiah's eyes following him around the room, making sure he kept everything neat and tidy.

He flicked through a leaflet on the history of Alice, smiling as he read. He sat up and looked out of the window, struck by a thought. A carriage pulled up in front of Woolies: Sir Charles Todd, Postmaster General and Government Astronomer, stepped down in his satin waistcoat and hat, adjusting his cravat, blocking a nostril and snuffing against the smell of frying horse shit. Lady Alice Todd opened her umbrella and surveyed the street, thinking, oh Charles, that we should come to this. Her husband helped her down from the carriage, holding the pleats of her muslin dress back against the dry, hot wind blowing in from the desert. As he crossed the road, holding his wife's hand, dodging the utes, he had reason to be proud: towns would be named after him, or more likely, in a typically modest deferral, after his wife.

Sir Charles and Lady Alice crossed the car park of the Del Rae, past Rolly's ute, its radiator steaming in the first cool of

the evening. That's where Rolly lost them. He looked back down the street, the shadows of post-boxes stretching out across the footpath, the casuarinas looking sorry after another hot day in the planter box. He followed the progress of a middle-aged couple—it could have been his mum and dad—as they made their way down the street, window shopping. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, belted business shorts, long white socks and sandals. She was wearing a frock. Rolly squinted and imagined his beach, Grange beach, in the 1950s, the friendly folks out for an evening stroll. They didn't seem to notice a couple of Aborigines recovering on a bench, or the bottles, wrapped in brown paper bags, bleeding their last drop of claret into the gutter. But they did notice double-strapped sandals on sale at Frankie's.

Rolly closed his eyes and all he could see was the road rolling out before him, all he could hear was the hum of petrol bowsters, all he could taste was the grease of flyblown truck-stops. He stripped off and stepped into the shower. The cold water was a revelation as the dust and sweat slowly peeled off. The little bars of soap in the plastic packets were a joy; they felt smooth lathering up against his scrotum, so sad when they slipped from his hand, desperately scrambling for the sink. The towel was warm and inviting. He went to hang it up but thought, no, they're paying, and threw it on the ground.

He walked back into the room naked, and stood at the window. The lights came on along the street. He pulled the curtain and sat on his bed; the fresh sheets felt smooth against his skin. He pulled back the cover and hopped in, realising he could sleep like this now, his mother wasn't around. He could watch dirty movies or bring home a friendly local. He could eat hamburgers and pizzas and fish and chips (would they have fish?) and he could piddle all over the toilet seat without having

to wipe it off. He could do anything, there were no eyes to follow him around the room.

Crumpled in with the motel receipt he noticed an envelope with the initials REA stamped across the front. He opened it and read the letter: it confirmed his arrival at Ningunna and set out a map. It gave an initial point of contact and, hastily scribbled on the bottom, it asked a favour: 'Dear Clive, the chap you'll be working with is also put up at the Del Rae. He has no transport. We were wondering if we could rely on you? His name is Jack Alber, room thirty-two. Regards, Barry T., Placements, REA.'

Rolly folded the letter and looked out at the dying light of the far-off desert. The plumed horses of Sir Charles' carriage whined and moved around uneasily on the bitumen. A thousand images of Jack Alber passed through his head: Darren minus fishing pole, photos of his father as a young man, a younger Mel Gibson, or maybe a computer nerd, adrift from the city like him.

It was the Tropicana's usual Friday night crowd: public servant with new double-strapped sandals, his wife, a couple of young secretaries who worked for the Education Department, as well as a small group from Aboriginal Legal Rights. And then there were the Del Rae tourists: a pair of young backpackers from Finland, a retired couple from Brisbane, and a couple of hemp farmers from the backblocks of Byron. Rolly had seen them pull in, their Kombi spewing fumes. One side of their van was covered in a giant mural of a rainforest and on the other side were the words 'Smile, Be Happy, Your Pants Are On Fire!'

Jack and Rolly sipped their beers. They'd got away with *that*. Jack had answered his door reluctantly, looking Rolly up and down as though he was selling something.

'Can I help you?'

'Are you Jack?'

'Yeah.'

'My name's Rolly, Clive Rollins, Rolly.' He held up the note from the REA. Jack smiled. 'Ah, you going to . . .'

'Ningunna, yes.'

'Got a lift?'

'Ute, new one.'

Jack let him in and started stressing straight away. He led him into the bathroom and showed him his empty bag, propped up under a running shower. 'You'll never believe this, but my shampoo's gone everywhere. Fucking typical, look at the top of it.' It was the slightest of latches. Jack opened and closed it maniacally before disappearing into the bathroom, scrubbing away at his case with a little pre-moistened, lemon-scented flannelette. Rolly looked at his clothes, all covered with green shampoo.

'You want a hand?'

'Well . . .'

So there they were, sitting in the laundry, four machines full of clothes churning away as they got to know each other. 'The bus driver,' Jack began, 'I knew it when he threw it in the bus, like a sack o' potatoes.'

'You gotta write a letter,' Rolly conferred.

'What good would that do?'

Rolly explained who Arthur was and how he kept a diary of who he'd rung about what, names, departments, and when they promised to get back to him. But still Jack said, 'What good's that?'

'What harm is it?' as he wondered if Jack wasn't some sort of universal know-all. 'The thing is,' he continued, 'if people get away with things for long enough . . .'

At last Jack nodded, and smiled, thinking of Warren. 'Yer absofuckin'lutely right.'

From the washing machine into the drier and back to Jack's room. They shared his electric shaver and piled on the Brut 33, just in case.

'May as well use it now,' Jack began, 'all those bloody cows won't appreciate it.'

Rolly stopped to think. 'You know, I was in high school before I'd seen a cow. Went with school to a hobby farm. Fella got up and talked . . . real . . . slow. We all laughed and the teacher clipped our ears.'

Jack smiled. 'We're not all like that.'

'But what about,' he began to laugh, 'Ningunna?'

Jack echoed, in his slowest country drawl. 'Nin . . . gunna.'

'Where the hell did they get that name?'

'It's the Aboriginal word for fella who likes to spend time with livestock.'

They laughed, there together in the Tropicana as the thinness of veneers quickly peeled away. Jack looked around at the posters. One extolled the pleasures of boating in Central Park, another the beaches of Florida. There was a laminate poster of Dallas/Fort Worth from the air at night. Rolly frowned. 'I wonder if the real Del Rae's like this?'

A waitress approached them. She pointed to the specials board. 'Hi. Specials tonight, Cajun chicken,' and with a sarky Yankee accent, 'that's poultry à la New Orleans.' The boys smiled but she continued with her consummate performance, switching her accent from Southern to New York Yiddish. 'Then we got East Side pork chops. You tell me you want pork, I get you pork.' And then genteel. 'New England clam chowder. Recommended. Really.'

The boys nearly laughed, but she wasn't going to let her

performance slip. Her accent switched to an Australian sheila. 'Then we got chops, piles and piles of bloody chops. You want chops?' She raised her eyebrows.

'What comes with them?' Jack asked.

'With the chops? More chops.'

Rolly looked at the menu. 'Make mine the chicken schnitzel.' Jack frowned. 'Ah, what the hell, make that two.' She looked at Jack, gently twisting her upper torso to and fro on her sturdy hips. He was in love, again. It was Anna with a sense of humour, of style, with promises of secrets hidden, awaiting and yet, he guessed, eluding him. She reminded Rolly of Amanda, the swing-shift waitress of his Pancake Kitchen-home in the city. In the end she'd pass by like another float at the Christmas pageant: colourful and vibrant enough, fully formed, three dimensional and yet not a part of his life. Someone he could lie in bed and think about, form fantasies around, waking with the sense that she was off somewhere else with some other prick who wouldn't love her half as much as he could.

She returned to earth. 'You're obviously not local.'

Jack stroked his glass. 'Jamestown. Heard of it?'

Her smile turned sarky again. 'No, I live in a cave.' She looked at Rolly. 'You too?'

'Adelaide.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'So you two big blokes travelling together? Sharing a room?'

Jack smiled, feeling himself blush, sweating, his pulse racing. 'No, we're jackaroos, out on the town, like. Lookin' for a sheila.'

She shook her head. 'Looks like you need your mothers.' She fixed him with a merciless stare; he squirmed in his seat. He could see her tongue moving in her mouth as she fought to keep back an indecent smile. 'So, two chicken schnitzels. Sauce?'

Jack pursued her relentlessly. 'What sort you got?'

'Red and brown. Brown one's got mushrooms and looks like diarrhoea.'

Rolly smiled. 'They should have you in sales.'

She kissed him through the air. 'I twilight at Lasseters. We get those big Japs with the body odour and a fist full of dollars. You ought to see me then.'

'I'll go for the red,' Jack said.

'Make that two.'

'I'll see to that myself.'

She walked away, twisting her hips playfully, waving back at them. Rolly grabbed Jack's arm. 'You're in.' All of a sudden Jack looked scared. 'Christ, I didn't even know what I was saying.'

'So . . . ?'

Jack smiled, twisting in his seat. 'Well, if she uh . . .'

They sat back and laughed, sipping their beers as though everything was suddenly within their grasp. Jack spun his knife on the table. 'You got a girlfriend?'

'No. You?'

'Ah, did, sorta, her name was Anna, but it's no great loss. She's always got Warren, he's the Sandshoe King.' He sighed, his shoulders dropped like a deflating balloon. He spun the knife again. 'Why did I say that?' He imagined her sitting in the dry creek bed, alone, crying. Or was she with Warren, on the floor of the deli, singing along to the melodic hum of the freezer motor? Either way he felt bad. 'Ah, who cares. You know, country towns.'

'Not really.'

'Well, it's like, marriage, babies, lots of them. Then things start to turn . . .'

'I must admit,' Rolly added, 'I've led a rather sheltered life.'

There was this girl, she was in year eight and I was in year nine. She got her friends to carry messages, cards. You know, "couldn't we go somewhere, sometime, please!" But year eights were like death.'

Jack smiled. 'Nah. You should have got in while the going was good.'

'Right. What do you do? Pash?' He rolled his eyes and licked his lips with passion.

'Well,' Jack smiled, draining his beer, 'I can remember a few hot afternoons behind the music suite. It's amazing what you can achieve with a tongue and a pair of wet lips.'

'Coupla dogs.'

'No, they just get straight down to it.'

Rolly smiled and thought of something he'd seen when he was driving north out of Adelaide. Two horses in a paddock, no mucking about thank you very much. He'd laughed and nearly ran off the road. What a farewell from the City of Churches.

'Ever heard of Johnny Holmes?' Jack asked and, without waiting for a reply, explained the plots from a few of the porno star's better known films. 'Honest to God, down to his knees,' he smirked.

'Bullshit.'

'Any woman he wanted, could you imagine that?'

Rolly grinned. 'Maybe not, you gotta have some standards.'

'Rubbish. Leave the nappies and lawnmowers till later.'

'Only you're not Johnny Holmes.'

'He had to start somewhere.'

The Legal Rights' workers got up from their table and went over to pay their bill. Jack eyed them suspiciously. 'Strange, hardly ever saw one in Jamestown.' Rolly thought of the Aborigines of Whitmore Square, their heads lowered, lolling,

passing through the Sallie's front gate as the sun set. The waitress put their meals down on the table. 'Eat up. Make you big and strong.' She felt Jack's arm. 'You call them muscles?' Jack frowned. 'I got muscles where I need them. Now listen wench, what about some more beer?'

'Where's your manners?'

Jack stood up suddenly. 'That's it, I wanna speak to the manager.'

'Sit down and shut up or I'll dip your head in the sauce.' She walked away, smiling smugly. Rolly looked across the table. 'What you gonna do?'

Jack shrugged. 'What am I meant to do?'

Rolly took out a pen and wrote Jack's room number on a paper napkin. Jack smiled. 'Perfect, we'll leave it with the money.'

They spent the next half hour talking about the bits of lives they'd left behind, Rolly explaining how he'd made an art form of inventing jobs for his dole claim, how he'd been nearly everything from a carpenter to an air-frame mechanic. Explaining, with unmistakable dramatic flair, his greatest achievement: putting down that he'd applied to be a CES case worker, which they hadn't even checked. 'The thing is, they don't check anything. And it's not like I would've actually got the job . . . if I'd applied . . . if it'd existed.'

Eventually the conversation turned to the future, and Ningunna. At one point Jack (almost completely drunk, the napkin weighing heavily on his mind) pretended to be the boss. 'Listen boys, it's easy to deliver a calf, just grease up your arms, close your eyes and whoop.'

By ten-thirty they had the Tropicana to themselves. The room was spinning in a nightmarish mish-mash of tropical fruit, ukulele music and coloured lights. The waitress stood

before them with her arms crossed. 'You two gonna stay here all night? I knocked off half an hour ago. Place is startin' to smell.'

Jack looked at Rolly. 'I might need a hand.' Rolly laughed. 'Me too.' Jack looked at the girl. 'Can you charge it to our rooms?'

'Yeah, but what about the tip?'

Jack smiled. 'Look both ways before you cross the road.' The boys laughed. She helped them up from their chairs. 'Thirty-two . . . did you need this for something?' She held up the napkin and smiled. Jack grabbed it back, his bilious expression hiding the disappointment. 'Case I run outa dunny wrap.'

'Ah.'

And he could only see Anna standing there, that night at the creek, dreams of Texan cheerleaders urging him on. She started to clean their table. 'You should be more careful, someone could break in during the night.'

Jack just smiled. 'With my luck?'

They returned to their rooms and Rolly exhumed his tattered yellow notebook from his case. He took a while to think and then wrote: 'Arrival. Done more today than the whole of last year. Met Jack, who I'll be working with. Thank God he knows as little as me. Country boy, tho', so I suppose he'll fit in right away. He says he was told no experience necessary as well. Good. More to come. R.' He sat up, stripped and stood before the open window, watching dusty utes cruising deserted streets under blinking, fluorescent lights.

TRUCKSTOP FOOD

The laddered, beige stockings led up from a pair of sequined loafers towards her crowning glory: a knee-length dress, the petticoat showing, pleated all the way up to the neck, culminating in a priest's dog collar inlaid with golden wattle emboss. Then there was the jacket, again in beige, this time more conventional.

She had a cold, waxy face with an expression of death, her eyebrows shaved and pencilled on in a more flattering design. She sat and listened to her friend talking; she never spoke herself. Her deep, intense eyes were blinking incessantly. She tightened her facial muscles and grimaced as she snatched at an imaginary blowie.

Her friend, an old Italian pasta cook in a heavy black dress, did all the talking. The fly-lady *appeared* to be listening (perhaps—the words were in Italian and there was no response). But the Italian was not put off; she just kept talking.

Jack and Rolly sat in a booth next to them at the Coolabah Road House on the outskirts of Alice Springs, just on from the speedway. Jack sat with his back to the Italian; he leaned over and whispered to Rolly, 'I reckon they should have to learn English.' Rolly smiled and leaned forward so he couldn't be seen by the fly-lady. He started to snatch at the flies in front of his face. They both laughed.

The Italian managed to scrape together a few words in English, 'Your sister, where in Darwin?'

The fly-lady's eyes lit up. 'In Darwin, yes.'

'Where in Darwin?'

But there was no reply. The Italian continued: 'I hope we don't drive all this way for nothing.'

Jack started snatching at the flies, whispering in his thickest Italian accent, 'I hope *we* don't drive all this way for nothing.'

The cook scratched his arse and threw a couple of blistered hot dogs down in front of them. He looked at Jack: 'How would you feel if it was your mother, eh?'

Jack tried not to smile. 'Sorry.'

The cook returned to his dim sim paradise and left them with the bill. They burst out laughing but he ignored them, thinking of the long, hot hours ahead of him, leaning over a chip-fryer, preparing truckstop food: fritters, chips, burgers, hot dogs, a host of battered shapes which promised nutrition, a motley collection bubbling on the surface of the golden-brown fat, floating like so many malformed dog stools in a puddle.

The Italian looked at her friend, hoping to God she did have a sister in Darwin. 'You tell me where, you got an address?'

No reply. Was the sister as real as the flies? Either way, she consoled herself with the fact that it had been a necessary

pilgrimage for her too: a final laying to rest of the pasta strainer after her husband's death.

'You didn't write it down?'

With his best Godfather impersonation, Jack whispered, 'You didn't write it down?'

They laughed. The cook looked out from the kitchen and scowled, sighed . . . Christ, they don't pay me enough. He burped some vomit into the back of his throat and drew back into his own self-disgust. Jack waited until he was busy and then wrote in sugar on the table, 'it is my fucking mother'. He nodded his head, grabbed his hot dog and stood. 'Come on.'

'We haven't paid.'

'Come on.'

They made for the door, leaving behind the odd couple, the stars of a road movie no one would ever make. It felt good—excitement and guilt tinged with relief. Biology truants turned outlaws. All they left behind was a fist full of dust and a few broken hearts. The highway beckoned.

It was Rolly's turn to drive. He sat there with his Coke between his legs, wrestling with his hot dog, grinning. Jack, with his feet up on the dashboard, put his head back on the bucket seat and laughed. 'Suck on that arsehole.' He took the sausage out of his roll and waved it about in the air like an aristocrat's head. 'Death to the establishment!'

Rolly grinned at him. 'You're crazy.'

'I try my best.'

Jack was quickly discovering that rebellion was more fun on the open road in a friend's Toyota ute. The horizon seemed endless, the possibilities infinite. The back roads of Jamestown peeled away to the soundtrack of a cheap, Korean stereo in full distortion. It didn't matter anymore that there was nowhere to go or nothing to do except sit beside the Belalie Creek and

watch tourists coming to terms with the boredom of the place. He had fleeting visions of driving down Ayr Street, shattering Lou Stubbs' head into a million pieces, kicking in the Mrs William's front door. 'All your money, you old bitch.' A family, including several small children, were cowering in the corner. The Mrs William had just been fitting the eldest with her first trainer-bra. Jack looked at the old dame. 'How would you like it?' He grabbed a box of bras and began to hold them up to *her* chest. 'No, dear, what do you think, Z-cup?'

The young girls laughed. He grabbed the eldest by the hair. 'How would you like to be a gangster's moll?'

She nodded adoringly. Jack grabbed a fishing-knife from the General Merchandise and with a single, swift action removed the Mrs William's head from her shoulders. He put it in a stocking and hung it in her Gallery of Jamestown's Greatest Moments. It would be her crowning achievement—people would come from miles around to see it. A caption, scribbled in her best copper-plate, would read: 'Something *I* should've kept under the counter'.

An hour or so out of Alice, the bitumen ran out. Jack laughed at his friend as he winced, imagining the gravel eating away at the paintwork of his faultless Camelot carriage. They stopped at Yuendumu and Rolly filled one of his dad's old jerry-cans with petrol. He checked the radiator, which had come good, and filled up while Jack marooned himself in the men's room. Some time later he appeared, smiling. 'Go see what someone's stuck on the back of the toilet door.' Jack finished filling while Rolly went to check out a gallery of vintage centrefolds.

Heading northwest out of Yuendumu the boredom set in. Jack, still with his feet on the dashboard, surveyed the landscape. 'Trees?'

'No.'

‘... ah ... a tapering road?’

‘No.’

‘Termite mounds?’

‘I haven’t seen any termite mounds.’

‘T. You’re shittin’ me, there’s nothin’ out here starts with T.’

Rolly smiled, smugly. Jack sighed. ‘T?’ And then smiled.

‘I got it, tea-tree?’

‘No.’

‘I give up.’

‘Sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

Rolly was beaming. ‘Tank.’

‘What?’

‘Tank. We passed a water tank.’

‘Passed? But you gotta be able to see it all the time.’

‘You didn’t say that.’

‘Yes, but this is I-spy, it’s obvious. Otherwise it’d be *I-spied* with my little eye ...’

‘Your turn.’

‘Stupid fucking game. Got any music?’

They thundered on across the plains, singing the choruses to Robert Palmer’s greatest hits, mouthing the verses and playing the lead breaks on their invisible guitars. Between them there was a communion of openness. The breeze played chaos with their hair as they moved at speeds they’d never imagined on city roads or the back streets of Jamestown. It almost seemed inevitable that someone would come and stop them; *that* was the pattern of life—or had been—before the promise of the open road. Jack thought of his T-junction and how few options for escape it had really provided. These were roads that had no final destination, only possibilities. They both wondered why their freedom had seemed so elusive for so long. Deep down

they knew—comfortable, familiar routines—and the fear that if things changed they'd change for the worse. But at the same time, they knew that they couldn't go on in the ways of childhood forever: stray pieces of lego trapped behind cupboards gathering inches of dust, beanies and scout socks which were too small by years, but too difficult to discard. They both knew they were right to have escaped.

Jack stared out at the mulga which came up to meet them, his singing fading under the grind of the motor. The dense olive monotony which had so marked his childhood suddenly gave way to the bristling yellow flowers of the acacia and a brilliant pink carpet of everlasting daisies, covering the ground which was normally so bare, inviting him to take off his shoes and come walking.

The thought had occurred to Rolly too. Their destination might be the pools of scummy water, left behind by recent rains, but the journey was the thing that mattered. Rolly could imagine burying his shoes in the orange sand and walking, like a messianic vision, across a sea of yellow Billy Buttons. Arriving on the other side a bustard and a galah would take flight but he would walk into the water and baptise the carcass of a bloated, floating fox. But there was not enough water to drown. Soon the waterhole would be dry and his vision would evaporate with it. Then there would be Ningunna to face up to.

Jack began to beat the drum of his love-addiction on the glovebox. It popped open and he reached in to retrieve the Bible, smiling.

'I didn't know you were religious.'

'I'm not. Arthur put it there.'

Jack flicked through the pages. 'Arthur the de-frocked priest?'

'No, no, I think he left.'

‘Right.’

‘There’s a photo of him and mum in the front.’

Jack stared at the photo and smiled. ‘Nah, he was guilty. How old was she?’ He pretended to pat a pretty, young girl on the head. ‘Listen, my dear, the Lord is worshipped in many different ways. Some choose to go to church and some . . .’ He started pulling on the top of his jeans, as if they were a pair of cotton-tails. ‘Yes my dear, the Lord is pleased.’

Rolly pretended to hit him. ‘Shut up, I left my mother at home with him.’

‘She’ll be all right. He looks strictly Catholic schoolgirl.’

Jack turned to the first page of Genesis and in his best priest voice began. ‘In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate.’ He looked about at the mulga. ‘I don’t think he ever got past that.’ He turned the page and kept following the words with his finger, improvising. ‘And then Adam said to Eve, I shall give ye all type of electrical appliance and ye shall not complain, my socks and my undies shall comfort ye, yea though you leave toenail clippings in bed I shall love thee, at least until I get a better offer.’

Rolly smiled and grabbed the Bible off his friend. ‘It’ll make good dunny-wrap when we’re stuck in the desert.’

‘Speak for yourself. You’re going straight to hell.’

The engine began to cough and Rolly lost power underfoot. ‘Shit, I knew it. King Arthur.’

‘Eh?’

Rolly shook his head disbelievingly and pulled over into a large gravel rest area beside the road. ‘No, not that Arthur. This one was a *real* crook.’

The baked bean cans sat in the fire that refused to burn. Jack and Rolly stared at them, deflated.

‘Of course I’ve got a warranty, but I don’t think Camelot Motors are gonna pay for the tow.’

‘You didn’t even have it inspected?’

‘Arthur reckoned he knew a good engine when he heard it.’

‘Arthur should stick to schoolgirls.’

Jack got up, broke some wood and threw it on the fire. ‘At least your mum’s well organised.’

‘I’m still hungry.’ He looked at Jack who turned to pee in the bush. ‘We’ve got yoghurt.’

‘Uck. Let’s break out the beer.’

‘It’s only light.’

‘We’ll have to drink a lot of it then, won’t we.’

Rolly went to the back of the ute and retrieved a six-pack of Cooper’s Light. He threw one to Jack, cracked his own and put the rest back in the esky. They sat down on a big log they’d dragged out of the mulga. Jack gulped greedily at the beer and wiped his lips. ‘Why the hell d’you buy light?’

‘I’s driving.’

Jack stared into the now-glowing embers. The night was getting cold. He turned up his collar and spat into the fire. ‘It’s like Burke and Wills.’

‘Maybe I should get the Bible and we can pray.’

‘Right.’

Rolly sung, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know . . .’

After the first verse Jack joined in and they formed a sandbox band to explore a host of interpretations: ballad, hard rock, heavy metal and even Italian, complete with Jack swatting flies. They sat and laughed. Light beer was more than enough to set them off. They *had* felt defeated, like a test-crash car striking a wall, but it would take more than that to stop them now. Together they felt arsey—there’d be something just around the corner. Perhaps. In fact, no one had stopped at all.

For the first hour or two they paced, occasionally sticking their heads under the bonnet. Of course they knew it wasn't the radiator, oil or battery terminals, so after checking those they were washed up. What was left? All of the other wires and connections and cables and . . . stuff. At one point, Jack even checked the water level for the wipers. No, wasn't that. After the sun started to fade they got a bit worried. They went over to the road and tried to thumb someone down. Nothing. Except for a Thorny Devil who sat on a rock watching, bemused. Eventually they gave up and lit a fire. There was always baked beans, yoghurt and their swags. Someone would have to stop eventually.

Jack burped, still staring into the embers. 'Generally speaking, people are cunts.'

'Assume everything that can go wrong will.'

'And you'll never be disappointed.'

'QED.'

'Eh?'

Rolly tried for a bigger burp. 'Point proven.'

The lights of a big truck cut into their camp. They heard the squeal of exhaust brakes, the hiss of compressed air and the grind of gravel as the truck skidded to a halt. It just sat there, metres from their fire, chugging. Jack and Rolly shielded their eyes from the light.

'What the fuck's his problem?'

An air-horn blasted the night with a chorus of Stephen Foster's 'Camptown Races'. As their eyes acclimatised to the headlights they could see an old truckie—wearing a singlet, grizzled, sixty-something—clinging to the steering wheel, laughing. A younger man, nearly identical in every respect, sat next to him sounding the air-horn, laughing and bouncing around on his seat. The older truckie killed the lights and the

engine died, sighing with a long hiss of compressed air, giving way to the sounds of the night: the rustling of acacia in the breeze and the squawking of galahs. The young man was still laughing.

The older one jumped down from the cabin and approached the boys. 'G'day, name's Roy, this is my son Jerry.' He looked back at his son who was still sitting in the cabin, watching, reluctant to come forward. 'Jerry's a bit slow, dropped on his head at birth.' He laughed. Jack and Rolly weren't quite sure if he was joking. He wiped his hands on his singlet where it had gone shiny, stretched out of shape by his pot-belly. 'Oy, Jerry, get the fuck down here.' He stepped forward and shook hands with Jack and Rolly. 'He accompanies me on my trips, keeps him out of his mother's hair.' The old truckie encouraged his son to approach. 'Come on, they won't bite.'

Jerry timidly extended his hand. 'Hello.'

'Hi, I'm Jack.'

'I'm Rolly.'

Roy continued wiping his hands on his singlet. 'So, you run into trouble?'

Rolly led him over to the ute. 'Just started coughing, then lost power.'

Roy looked under the bonnet and checked the plugs, the oil and air filters and fuel line. 'Dunno. Seems okay. Let's hear it.'

Rolly tried to start the ute. It coughed, spluttered and died. Roy ran his hand over his grizzled whiskers and spoke deliberately. 'Dunno. Maybe the carby. I'll have a look at it later.'

He looked up and smiled at them both, or more precisely, at the beer in their hands. 'Geez, that looks good.'

Rolly cracked another six-pack and the three of them sat

around the fire drinking. Jerry returned to Waylon Jennings and the cabin of his father's truck; together this country pair formed a memorable duet—the cabin rocked through the choruses, the air-horn sounded through the refrains. Roy sat drinking, swapping his beer from one hand to the other, wiping the dregs on his singlet. 'Nah, can't make a living out of trucks anymore,' he observed. 'Jerry wanted to drive but I said nah.'

Jerry sounded the air-horn. Rolly nearly crushed the bottle in his hand. *Maybe it's just as well, Roy, as much as I'd like to see him behind the wheel of a twenty-tonne rig.*

'Companies used t' give you a good price. Not today. Plus,' he sat forward and pointed at them, 'it's the fucking attitude people have got towards truckies. Cuttin' in front of us, stickin' up the finger, sittin' on our tails. Nah . . .' He sat back. 'Best the number one lad stays out of it.'

The air-horn sounded again. Rolly took another swig and moved back from the growing fire. 'He sure likes that air-horn.'

Roy looked at his son and smiled. 'Yeah. Good lad. Never a bother. Don't know what I'd do without him along. Be bored shitless. Me and Waylon. Fancy that.'

As Jean would have said, it was *nice* that Roy should see his son as a faultless angel. Roy knew that all you needed was a good heart and a stomach for truckstop food.

Rolly didn't know whether it was the beer or the fire that reassured him. It was good to know the world wasn't full of achievers. It was good to know the runners-up in life were just as important to someone.

'So, where you boys off to?'

Jack burped. 'We got some work on a cattle station.'

Roy finished his beer and threw the bottle into the bush. He pulled open the six-pack and rescued another luke-warm

coldie. Rolly shifted his bum on the log and fluffed. Why doesn't he fix my ute, he thought, *then* he can drink as much as he wants.

Roy looked at them both. 'Muster. That's hard work. Hope you're both ready for it.'

Jack shrugged. 'Ah, just another job.' After operating a console everything else was easy, or was it, he wondered. 'Learn as you go I s'pose.'

'Yeah, that's right. No one's born knowing everything. You'll be all right.'

The air-horn sounded again. Roy smiled. 'Friend a mine's got one that plays "A Pub With No Beer". Jerry goes crazy. We're a big Slim Dusty family.'

Jack had no doubts about that. They talked for another hour or so. At the heart of everything seemed to be Chairman Roy's simple philosophy. Rolly recognised it from the Bible but couldn't give it a name. Jack could recognise it; it was almost as though this was his Gran's long lost brother. By the time Roy had canvassed the national agenda Rolly's esky was empty. Roy, like his son, was a strange dynamo. In his world everything was made as simple as possible.

Culture: 'There was Mo and there was the rest. Saw him in Sydney once. He walked on stage and everybody else could go home. He just opened his mouth and people laughed. The stuff you see on TV these days, that's not funny. Got what they call canned laughter. Mo didn't need any canned laughter. The thought of it. Yep, there was Mo and all the rest of 'em was mugs.'

Religion: 'Bloody Micks, they're the problem. Me and my Else, we're C. of E., well, to speak of, we haven't been for some time now. But the Micks, they're what's to blame for the world's overpopulation.'

He began to laugh. 'Got this joke about the Pope.'

Jack and Rolly sat like a pair of statues in front of the fire. It was after midnight and they were either dead drunk or dead tired. Rolly clutched his stomach and hung his head over the log. Roy looked at Jack. 'Think your friend's gonna chuck.'

Jack shrugged and looked at the pile of empty bottles. 'We seem to have had a few.'

He smiled and Roy laughed, kicking him playfully. 'Look a bit green round the gills yourself.'

'Yeah?'

Roy clung to the last Cooper's Light. 'Beer's like sex, you develop a certain immunity.'

High in the cabin of the truck Jerry had fallen asleep in an awkward position. Roy stood up and screamed towards his rig. 'Oy, Jerry, play us some more.'

Jerry leaned forward, smiled and switched on another cassette. Rolly knew it was imminent; all it took was another chorus of 'Camptown Races' to set him off.

Roy frowned. 'Christ, what's he been eating?'

'Baked beans.'

'Anyway, joke goes like this: why's the Pope wear his undies in the shower?'

Jack shrugged.

'Cos he doesn't like to look down on the unemployed!' Roy broke up in howls of laughter, oblivious to the fact that no one else joined in.

By 2 a.m. Rolly was asleep and Jack had just found out that Roy was a poet, of sorts. 'Trick is, you gotta write about what you know best.' He stood, staring upwards, motioning with his hands.

*All those bloody horizons,
 Dancin' in the heat like tinsel, or jelly, or a fat woman's tit;
 A road that cuts through the earth:
 A hot scar on leather, a brand on a cow's arse—ssh!
 Carrying me along,
 To the horizon that's never there . . .*

After a few minutes of reciting he stood there, his hands suspended, holding his breath. Jack stared at him and wondered, through the haze of drink, how he could write something like that. 'It's great, Roy.'

'Reckon? Must write 'em all down one day. Anyway, gotta be up early.'

He turned away and walked back to his truck. He woke his son and together they crawled into the sleeper cabin. Jack lay back and stared up at the stars. All of a sudden he felt as though he had so far to go.

Rolly shook his friend's shoulder. 'Wake up, Jack.'

Jack lifted his head to discover he had a splitting headache. He leaned back against the log. The sun was already hot on his face.

'He's gone!'

Rolly paced. Jack looked but the truck had gone, tyre marks and all. He rubbed his head. 'Musta been a dream.'

'I knew it. Drunk all my beer then pissed off.' Rolly sat on the log and wrestled with another can of baked beans.

Jack managed to get himself up. He stumbled through a sea of empty bottles and approached the ute. Sitting in the driver's seat, holding the ignition key, he didn't doubt for a moment that it would start. As the engine idled he got out of the car

and returned to Rolly, sitting on the log, stunned, defeated by the can opener.

Jack smiled. 'I still reckon it was a dream.'

As they drove, Rolly put words together in his head, in the exact form he'd write them in his notebook. 'Abbott and Costello. Who's the fat funny one? Neither of us. Both just trying to make this work. If they put us in with ten other fellas I'm sure we'll still be mates. Altho, J. would latch on easier to others. Still, whether he'd piss me off? He seems okay, but you never know. Arriving soon. Write more later. R.'

THE GREAT MUSTERER

Rolly lay half asleep, dreaming of sirloin steak, listening to King Bob (syndicated in the network of his mind, there was absolutely no escape): 'If they spent less on roads and more on law and order . . .' By now he was *almost* sure his ute wouldn't fall apart; the corrugated track seemed to shake the life out of everything, but his suspension just seemed to revel in it.

Jack looked over the steering wheel at a pile of stones which used to be a homestead. He was tempted to reconstruct their lives, these pioneers. What could have driven them? Was it the promise of great wealth or were they just escaping their own Jamestowns, trying to prove something to their own Kevs and Mirries? The spinifex grassland reached out to the horizon, but there was nothing there, or at least nothing beyond what you could see. All the rest of it was a dream. The sand-ridges rose and fell like a sea of orange ice, the tussocks of spinifex clung tenuously against the spot-fires of the black fellas and

the failed schemes of the white fellas—bearded, clothed in calico, wives with babies balanced on hips.

The sand ridges came down to this plain, from which someone had carved a road. Underneath the water of this ancient sea there were only the stony corrugations and the consolation of endless clumps of desert myrtle with its masses of tiny pink flowers. It was the last thing a drowning man would see. The green bird-flower, marking the top of the ridges, or the violent flare of a yellow Ranji bush—burning like a lava-lamp, feeding and dying off the desert's most bitter pill, salt.

Although Jack realised by now that Rolly could sleep through anything, he tried to keep to the softer part of the road. In the rear-vision mirror his tracks disappeared in the dust but in places there was more permanence. In the hottest part of the afternoon he stopped the ute in a siding and climbed out. Rolly slept. He climbed a sand ridge and looked out at the landscape: before him there was a giant salt lake, dry, white and scaly against the desert. The tracks of a car ran across it like a giant gouge; they'd been there for years, since a couple of hippies went crazy on magic mushies and tried to run themselves into this most ancient part of their homeland. Shaking his leg he crawled back down the ridge and emptied most of the jerry-can into the tank. When he sat back behind the wheel Rolly was still asleep. He turned the key in the ignition and dreamt of the limitless stem of his T-junction—how far from the gum tree where *he'd* first left his mark.

During the day they passed through a series of Aboriginal settlements: what would normally be thought of as the bad side of town, but in this instance, the only side of town. Somewhere in Jamestown's history of plantation timber, Hereford steers and cricket on the high school oval, the black

fellas had been removed and forgotten, left out of the Mrs William's gallery and excised from their collective consciousness. To Jack they were as strange and exotic as eskimoos. Unsure of what to think of them he'd sat on the fence, observing them like guinea pigs on a treadmill. He slowed down and looked, intrigued by the humpies made of blue tarpaulin and corrugated iron. One of the locals met his eyes and they stared at each other; before he knew it he was being chased by an old man hurling tins. He planted his foot on the accelerator and gritted his teeth, but Rolly still hadn't woken.

He tried to calculate the distance to Ningunna. There was a sign: 'Halls Creek 55'. The map from the REA said fifty clicks before town. He drove on slowly, watching the side roads for a sign. The evening was still young but the sun hadn't lost its bite. He crunched on a barley sugar and swigged on a warm, flat Coke.

'There we go.'

He took the turn-off and headed down a side road in the direction of a handpainted sign. He nudged his friend in the side. 'Oy, Rolly, we're here.'

Rolly sat up and looked around. 'How long I been asleep?'

Jack patted him on the face, playfully. 'Who needs his beauty sleep?'

Rolly grabbed the Coke and finished it. They both sat silently, anticipating the view of their new home. Rolly was the first to see it. 'There, through the trees,' he said, pointing.

Jack pulled over and stopped. He squinted and saw the house in the distance. He sighed. 'I hope he likes us.'

Rolly burped. 'But Jack, we're charming. Such grace and elegance. A joy to have around any home.'

'We should mix with only the nice cows,' Jack lisped.

'Steers.'

Jack the beautician. 'Sorry sweetie?'

'Blokes with their balls cut off.'

Jack the neurotic. 'We don't have to do that?'

Rolly cringed. 'They didn't mention it.'

They slowly drove up the driveway and stopped in front of the house. Jack killed the engine and blasted the horn a couple of times.

'Don't,' Rolly frowned, covering the wheel.

'Why?'

'It's not a drive-through. We should go knock on the door . . . politely.'

Jack smiled and in an accent joked, 'We've come for your women and children.'

They climbed from the ute, laughing, and surveyed the deserted area. The driveway went about in a loop, joining up with itself near a gate. To the left it passed an out-building with glassless windows covered in flyscreen. The little hut stood on stilts, allowing the night breezes to cool its underside. By day it created a cool retreat for Mary II (the cat) and the ghosts of long dead steers. The weatherboards were peeling, but it still retained a certain charm, a charm of independence, of separation. Behind the hut was a set of yards. An old bay gelding stood staring at them with complete indifference, frozen against a fence post like an icy pole, occasionally mustering enough energy to scratch his mangy shoulder. The driveway led into a large set of sheds, closed against the fine dust of the desert which could clog a fuel line in minutes.

A long, wide open porch led into the house: a small, brown brick veneer which could have been at home in the suburbs. A barbecue sat on the porch; there were a couple of old sausages the flies had mulled over and left behind. The bitches of Ayr Street would've been glad of them. There was a table covered

with a couple of women's magazines—the five-day diet—but who could desire you out here? There were some chairs gathered around where people had sat talking and even a stubby of Southwark Bitter someone had left unfinished. There was the hull of a model boat, looking distinctly out of place, and a tube of glue which had leaked onto someone's overalls and set hard. There were also a couple of roses from an unseen garden, drooping in the heat, the water knocked out from under them.

They stood on the porch and knocked on the door. No reply. Jack opened the flyscreen and saw the door was open. 'Come on.' Rolly stopped him. 'Just can't go in. How'd it look if they came back and . . .' He looked towards the shed; there was someone singing. They gingerly walked over and pulled back the big iron door.

The boy, he looked like a boy but he was older than they were, was wearing a Walkman and singing along with the Rolling Stones. Jack was struck by his greasy, black, curly hair. Surely that could be a problem with flies.

He was filling a trailbike with fuel. When Jack touched his shoulder he dropped the can and petrol went everywhere. 'Shit.'

'Sorry.'

He picked up the can and took off his headphones. 'Scared the crap outta me.'

Jack smiled and extended his hand. 'We're the new jackaroos . . . Jack . . . Rolly.'

'Alf.'

They exchanged greetings. Alf smiled. 'Jackaroos, eh?'

Rolly sat back on a bench. 'What are we called then?'

'For the first couple of weeks, various things, then they'll settle on a name for you.'

‘Who’s they?’

‘No, no, I don’t want to spoil anything. Follow me. I’ll show you where you’re gonna live.’ The walked out of the shed and back towards the out-building. Alf looked them over as they went. ‘Expecting you a while back.’

Rolly kicked a tyre as Jack wrestled their bags from the back of the ute. ‘It was this lump of shit.’

‘You shouldn’t get it upset,’ Alf laughed, ‘or it might really let you down.’

But Jack was the eternal harper. ‘So uh, did the boss . . .?’

‘Sid. Don’t worry, shouldn’t expect there’ll be a problem.’

They went into the hut. Alf lay down on his camp stretcher as Jack and Rolly threw their bags onto the bunk, as markers, JA and CR. ‘No, Sid’s okay,’ he continued, stretching out with his hands behind his head. ‘Of course, it takes a while to warm to him.’

Jack sat on the lower bunk and frowned. ‘Yeah?’

‘Took a good six months before I felt welcome in the house.’

Jack began to empty the sand from his RMs. He was aware that Alf was looking at his boots. He wished they didn’t look so new, *his* looked like something from the goldfields. ‘How long you been here?’

‘Year and a half, bit more. Worked a few other places before that. As things go, believe me, this ain’t so bad. You’ll like Elly, Sid’s daughter.’ And then his thoughts began to wander, momentarily. At length he bit his lip and kicked the wall. ‘Anyway, hour or two they’ll be back from town. I got some fences to do. Go in the kitchen and fix yourselves something.’

Jack emptied his second boot. ‘We can just . . .?’

‘Course. Nice boots.’

Jack slipped the boot back on. 'Yeah, last pair just wore out.'

Alf smiled. 'Catch up with you at tea.' And with that he was gone.

For a while the boys just sat there, silent, staring down at the floorboards, cemented together with the finest red dust. Rolly stood up and unzipped his bag. 'Glad I didn't bring my slippers.'

Jack looked at his friend, disbelievingly. 'Six months before they let him in the house? I bet the dog gets better.'

Rolly sat down, staring into the moveable eyes of his laminate Jesus. 'Before he felt *welcome* in the house.'

'Reassuring. Lotta good that's gonna do you here.'

Rolly moved the card about and stared into the tormented eyes of the Messiah. 'The Great Musterer went forth in search of lost stock. For forty days and nights he wandered, returning to Ningunna empty handed.' He smiled.

Jack shook his head and almost laughed. 'How much we gettin' paid?'

They sat around a table of fake Norwegian spruce, coconut esters (via Honolulu) gone stale beside gym boots, eating microwaved pizza tasting distinctly factory-Sicilian.

Rolly looked at a photo of the family: he was in his fifties, pot-bellied and grey-haired, with the expression of a man who hardly ever smiled. His wife was Asian, in her forties, her dark olive skin flecked with black pigment. There was a son, probably in his early twenties, who grinned like his father, and who stared at the great man obliquely. There was a daughter, still in her late teens, with long, brown hair, brown eyes and an expression which seemed to say, 'All very cosy, can we go now?' Rolly stood up and took the photo from the bookshelf. 'They aren't *hers*.'

He showed Jack the photo. 'No,' his friend agreed, 'she's one of those . . . Filipinos.' He stood up and took another photo from the bookshelf. 'Maybe this is her.'

But Rolly was caught up in the daughter's eyes: deep brown, he fancied he could see inside her head.

Jack sat down next to him. 'Must be Sid.' They both looked at their new boss. 'At least we know he can smile,' Jack continued. Rolly pushed the photo away. In a way he was scared of the unknown, especially the smaller fragments of uncertainty: mathematics, column shift, the people who lived on the rough, the Bible, a new boss. He was only reassured by his attempts to come to new understandings: his ragged, yellow notebook was full of these.

He stared at the few books on the shelves as he ate his pizza: *Livestock Management in the Arid Zone*, the memoirs of Weary Dunlop, *Strength to Strength* (for the pioneering ladies, bringing the beautiful suburbs to the outback), Stephen King and E.M. Forster (recently escaped from their daughter's year twelve reading list). A tattered pile of *Australasian Posts* (with half-finished crosswords) fought for shelf space with a collection of plaster saints.

The house itself had the touch of a newly monied hand. The scars of suburbia, of the gaudy, had begun to make an appearance. The pastel colours of a handknitted cushion cover struggled to reconcile themselves with the drab brown lounge; an old mulga stump carved into the shape of an outback dunny, lacquered, with the words *Draughty in Winter* burnt into it; an arrangement of bright, silk flowers in an Asiatic vase, set in black gravel; mirrors, lots and lots of mirrors; a collection of 'rare' beer coasters tacked up on the wall, as well as an old Chinaman's pipe which had never been smoked.

Meanwhile Jack had censored a basket of washing left on

the floor. He held up a pair of skimpy cotton-tails and stretched them out of shape. 'I wonder if they're hers?'

Rolly looked at the picture of the daughter and sighed. 'Doesn't leave much to the imagination.'

Jack the beautician pursed his lips. 'Turn you on, eh?' He stood up and slipped the cotton-tails over the Mrs William's moleskins. He held a hand behind his head and in his most seductive voice said, 'Today Jacqui is wearing something sure to liven up your love-life.' Rolly sat back, laughing, chewing on a leathery slice of Siciliana. Jack picked out a petticoat and slipped it over his head. 'This is for the more mature woman: full, yes, but complementing every curve.' And then slipped on a frock. 'And for the lady out and about at Halls Creek, Tropical Nights. You'll set tongues wagging with this little number from the Judell's Dress Emporium. But be quick ladies, we have limited stock and with quality like this . . .'

He displayed his not-so-shapely curves to best effect. Rolly laughed so much he started to cough on the pizza. Jack went limp-wristed. 'See, I do it to all the men. Of course they desire me but they can't have me. I'm saving myself for that special man.' And with that he winked at Rolly. 'Aren't I beautiful?' He started to chase his friend around the table. Rolly moved so quickly that chairs flew everywhere. 'Come on sweetie, just a peck.'

The grind of gravel in the driveway was the first sign of trouble.

'Shit!' Jack fought with the frock and petticoat as Rolly cleaned up the table. He had the pizza box in the bin and the dishes in the sink before he heard car doors slamming. He went back to the dining room table and sat with Jack. They breathed deeply, gathering themselves, practising their very best Sunday-school smiles.

The door slammed. 'Who's there?'

Rolly looked across at Jack and feigned a look of terror. The pot-bellied husband appeared in the doorway and surveyed them. 'You the new fellas?'

Rolly gulped. 'Yes, sir . . . Mr Smith.'

'For a start you can't leave your bloody ute in the middle of the driveway.'

Jack grabbed the keys. 'I'll move it.' He pushed his chair back and stood up. The boss looked at the cotton-tails and his jaw slowly dropped. 'You some sorta bloody smart arse?'

Jack sighed. 'We were just muckin' around.'

'Get 'em off, now, unless y' wannna . . .' He stopped short, turned and walked off, slamming a door behind him.

As the others unpacked, Egg, the grinning son, showed them around. First there was the yard where the gelding lived; Egg called him Jake. 'My bleeding heart sister looks after him.' He patted the horse on the muzzle. 'Otherwise it would've been the glue factory, eh, Jake?'

He smiled at them but Jack and Rolly didn't see the humour. He took a last bite from the apple he was eating and offered it to the horse; as soon as Jake showed an interest he threw it to the other side of the yard. Jake slowly turned and walked over to it. Egg wiped his hands on his moleskins. 'You two ride?'

Rolly shook his head. Jack thought of the time his troop had tried. Did that count? No. He didn't want to set himself up for failure. 'Well . . .'

'Don't matter, horses are obsolete now, eh, Jake? Just for the cowboy fans.'

Jake returned to them. Jack stepped forward and stroked his muzzle. 'What does your sister use him for?'

'National Velvet. Dreams of winning the Grand National.' They walked towards the shed. 'So what about trailbikes?'

'No.'

'Tried one.'

'They're easy.' He pulled open the door to the shed. 'That's my ute, Dad's ute, Elly's trailbike, Alf's out. Freezers.' He indicated a row of three freezers where the food was kept. 'All the power runs off the generator. Follow me.' He took them out behind the shed and showed them the generator and a bore. 'Generator's the heart of everything. You're gonna have to know how to fix it in the dark. Bores, scattered all round the place, you're gonna spend a lotta time looking after them. Them things with four legs . . . ?' He lifted his eyebrows. 'Yeah . . . ? They're called cattle. They like to drink occasionally. That's where you two come into it. Follow me.'

He turned and led them back behind the house where a cool, fragrant garden hid from the desert. A small, cowry-encrusted bust of Saint Francis encouraged water to flow into a fountain-cum-stock trough. Jack stroked his head and said, 'This could become a major site for pilgrimage.'

Egg smiled and replied, 'For crabs,' quickly moving on. 'This is Mary's garden. If no one's about you could probably give it some water. Run a hose from the tap near the bore. God help us all if you let her roses wilt.' He smiled again but the moment was lost. 'Up there,' he continued, pointing towards the fence where they'd first come in, 'is the satellite dish. Takes care of itself. Follow me.'

The open porch was a place of retreat from the outside world and the house. Rolly thought of his mum and her Babylonian Garden and imagined their yard as endless desert. As he sat down the family, summoned by Sid to meet them, fell silent and looked him over. It was the first time in his

odyssey he'd felt homesick, longing to see the faces of Arthur and his mum, Darren, or the naked geriatric on the West Terrace billboard ('naked I come, naked I return', pointing towards Uncle Frank's freshly mown plots).

Instead, there was just Sid (the boss, his face lined with a permanent scowl) and Mary, his Filipino wife (a lot chubbier than her photo), who, it seemed, wouldn't hear a bad word said about her husband. Later, Elly was to tell Rolly that Mary wasn't completely docile, starting arguments with him which would last for days. One concerned a four-page telephone bill (her Aunt in Mindanao) which saw them both tight-lipped for the best part of a week, much to everyone's amusement. In the end, he had to apologise—a difficult task, but necessary. And then there was Elly herself, with whom Sid shared an uneasy truce, sometimes sparking off like dry, overgrown bush in the depths of summer. And Egg, hanging off Sid's every word, backing him up in arguments and always trying to make stock talk small talk. Again, Elly was to tell him afterwards, Egg had only once strayed, packing his bags and moving into town. Two days later he was back, pretending it hadn't happened.

And Alf, the veteran jackaroo of a dozen-plus stations, comfortably moored at Ningunna; listening, watching and taking everything in, but revealing nothing. After the introductions there were beers all round, a brandy and Coke for Mary and a mineral water for Elly, who just stared at the new arrivals, mostly grinning. After a small thaw Mary, desperate to impress them with her knowledge of civilisation, asked where they were from. She smiled at Rolly. 'I'm just back from town. Had to see a specialist about my shoulder. Ligaments. Nice place, Alice.'

Ah, *that* town, Rolly thought.

She looked at Sid. 'What's the name of that place we stayed?'

He looked up from reading the boys' papers. 'Eh? . . . oh, the Del Rae.'

'Yes. Fancy place, if ever you get the chance.'

Jack looked at Rolly and smiled. Sid pushed his reading glasses back up the length of his nose and looked across the rim at the new boys. 'REA told me you two'd be here on Thursdee.'

Rolly sat forward. *Ah well, of course, you see, I just bought this ute . . .* but then realised he shouldn't start making excuses yet. Jack, always the practical one, piped up. 'Carby spat the dummy.'

Sid looked down at the papers. 'Not surprised, drivin' that heap of shit around up here.'

Rolly shrugged. 'Reckon it should be okay, the amount of money I paid for it.'

Sid's eyebrows seemed to jump, almost imperceptibly. 'You wanna be a bit more sure than that.' And then paused, looking at both of them. 'If we lost two days . . . still, I can't pay you for them.'

There was silence. Rolly looked at Elly. She smiled and mimicked her father's words: *I can't pay you for them*. Rolly began to laugh but put down his head and hid his smile behind his beer. Sid continued ruffling the papers. 'So it looks like we've got a lot to teach you. Would've preferred they sent us someone with experience. There goes another week.'

Alf chirped in. 'I can show 'em things.'

Sid looked at him sternly. 'You got your own work.'

'In my spare time.'

The boss swigged his beer. 'Egg, you'll have to help too.'

'You wanted me to check the north boundary.'

'Leave it a couple a days.' He looked up and surveyed the boys, disbelievingly. 'You never even fixed a fence?'

'When I applied,' Rolly began, 'it wasn't mentioned. Just assumed we'd learn.'

Sid nodded his head. 'Think we'll try a new agency next time.'

But Mary was there to smooth it all over. 'Don't worry, boys, you'll get there. Now, if there's anything else you want, extra rugs, don't be scared to knock.' Elly just grinned. 'Anything, underwear?'

The boys began to laugh but were cut short by Sid. 'We eat at seven, twelve and six, if we're here. Come late, you go hungry.'

Elly shook her head. 'Dad, it's not Colditz.'

Sid's face turned to marble, but it was Egg who spoke. 'If we need advice we'll let you know.'

'Thanks, Noah, you'll be the first I come to.'

Mary waved her hands about like a cowry-encrusted saint. 'Don't start you two.'

Elly smiled and looked at Rolly. 'You'll have to excuse my brother, it's one of his dual personality days.'

'Elly!' Sid barked, looking up again over his reading glasses.

Elly smiled and returned to her mineral water. Sid gave back the boys' papers. 'I'll give you your money every fortnight after I do my banking in town. If you run short, cut you a loan. One last thing. You won't be used to the distances. No risks. If you go somewhere, tell us. Okay?'

The boys agreed. Elly stared into Rolly's eyes. She knew she had him by the short and curlies. She silently mouthed off her father: *If you go somewhere, tell us, okay?*

Rolly started to laugh but pulled himself back. Sid saw him and attacked. 'What's so funny?'

He was lost for words. 'Nothing.'

'Listen, you, both of yers, ya wanna take this job seriously, or just don't bother.'

Elly chirped up in his defence. 'Dad, Rolly and I are in love, I'm having his baby.'

Sid took off his glasses, gathered his beer and left the table. 'That's what I get for a hundred thousand dollar college education.'

Elly sat back. 'They throw in a free set of glasses.'

Sid went into the loungeroom, to the box he shared with his wife as a kind of salvation from the desert. As Mary gathered the empties she searched the boys' eyes, hoping they were impressed with her home. 'We get Alice on the box, any time you fancy. Of course, Sid won't have a bar of Impaja.'

She went in. Elly burped and sat forward. 'And we go to the opera twice a week.'

Egg stood. 'You should feed your fucking horse occasionally.' He went in, taking the 1/72nd scale Graf Spree model with him, its funnels and decks sanded smooth in anticipation of grey paint. He slammed the door and there was silence.

All at once Elly was looking at the three of them—Jack, Rolly and Alf. 'He has this thing about boats. Thinks there's gonna be another flood and he'll be the only one ready.'

'Don't think he'll let you on board,' Alf smiled.

She took Alf's bottle of beer and drank from it. 'No, just Sid and Mary, and the telly. Don't know about your chances, Alf.' He shrugged. She concentrated on the two new boys. 'So what is it with you two, how desperate were you for a job?'

Rolly sat forward and met her gaze, again. He began with his most polite sarcasm. 'No, no, this has been my dream for a very long time.'

'Bullshit artist. You musta been hard up.' She swigged the

beer and Alf took it back off her, continuing from Rolly. 'You don't understand how it is with us jackaroos, we're driven by a love of the outback.' They all broke up. Elly eyed Jack. 'And women's clothing.'

At midnight they were still there and Sid had to come out and tell them to go to bed. Jack and Alf went first, but Rolly wouldn't budge; there was a lot he had to tell her, a lot he thought she should know. In the end she wasn't as interested as he thought she'd be, smiling as he described the polished granite headstones of the Roman Catholic quarter of his uncle's cemetery. At two o'clock they were still there, sitting in the dark, their whispers disappearing into the stillness of the desert.

Back in the hut, before he fell asleep, he took out his notebook and started writing: 'Sid. Boss. The Great Musterer. The Napoleon of Ningunna. Important to keep a straight face (or do I need to grow up, no, really?). Sid sired Egg, *aka* 'Noah' (according to Elly, the angst-ridden daughter), builder of plastic arks (and battleships). Anyway, day one survived (just). R'.

Egg chipped the dirt with his shovel. 'Okay, what we want to do is run the fence up to the road, put in a strainer and do the same on the other side.' He took off his shirt. Rolly gulped—if this was Manpower then he was the odd one out. Although the sun was already biting he'd remain a good Baptist, compromising by undoing his top button, let down by a premature pot-belly (via Chez's pizza and a fetish for dark chocolate). They both wore their new Akubras. Jack was self-conscious—as usual he was the Akubra virgin—as if he'd emerged clean from his Gran's sudsy wash.

'There, we need to go down at least a metre.'

Egg offered the post-hole digger to the boys. Rolly took it, spat on his hands and attacked the chipped dirt. The metal teeth slipped about on the baked earth as Egg smiled and began to laugh. Rolly stopped and looked at him squarely. 'Am I doing something wrong?'

Egg walked over to his ute and returned with a jerry-can full of water. He tipped some over the scorched earth and stepped back, 'Don't always need it,' before retreating into the shade of a lone wattle with his water bottle. 'Jack, why don't you have a try?'

And so they continued like this—spacing the posts every five metres apart—as the morning drew on and dreams of Chips Rafferty dissolved.

'Come on boys.'

Mary appeared with a jug of cold water, sitting them in the shade and plying them for news of the outside world. Egg was unimpressed. Been there, done that. Sipping coffee with all the bullshit artists down Rundle Street. 'Try hards,' he explained to Mary, glancing at the new boys and adding, 'Talk a lot, can't do much.'

'Different world,' Mary consoled, trying as always to find common ground. Egg looked her in the eyes and said, 'That time we all went south, you were the one itching to get home'.

'Didn't say I'd prefer it.'

'What it sounds like.'

He'd studied at Roseworthy Agricultural College, just outside of Adelaide. 'Paying to hear what I don't need to know.' That's how he looked at it. He lasted six months and then came home for the muster, for good. 'Best thing about it,' he said, smiling, 'were the horse tarts.'

Mary touched his arm. 'You didn't give it a chance.'

He pulled himself free and continued drinking. 'They

wanted us to farm rabbits and emu. Wasn't gonna spend four years listening to that crap. City farmers. Hopeless.'

Jack and Rolly were both wondering what that made them: a BP attendant and an amateur dope addict. Maybe they were somehow exempt from his scheme of things; after all, they had come to him, to learn.

As they continued boring holes towards the road the sun picked up. Jack threw caution to the wind and took off his shirt. Rolly, standing back, waiting for his turn, noticed his friend's juvenile pot-belly and felt embarrassed for them both: unskilled, fat, lily-white and inclined to hop into women's underwear. His one consolation was that after today they could start to see themselves as veterans. They could dig post-holes, that was a beginning. Tomorrow they would learn about strain-ers and droppers and eleven gauge wire and the best way to make a four-lined, barbed-wire, high-tensile suspension fence. Who knows, after that might come the muscles and tanned bodies, dexterity in generator maintenance and the grit and determination of getting hot-iron brands onto steers' arses.

About mid-afternoon, when they'd just started the posts on the opposite side of the road, they heard a scream from the house. 'You promised!'

And then there was nothing. Egg got up and slipped his shirt on. 'My bloody sister again.' He quickly walked back towards the house. Rolly put down the post-hole digger and retreated into the shade. 'C'mon, might be our only chance for a break.' They laid down under the lone wattle and sipped his water.

Jack looked at his red arms. 'Gonna be sore tonight.'

Rolly stared back at the house. 'We coulda stayed home and been shitkickers.'

'It's gotta get better.'

'Reckon?'

'Day one, you know, try 'em out and see if they're gonna last. Probably all getting a big kick out of it.'

'That's nice . . . not as though they're actually paying us much.' He looked directly at Jack. 'This Noah's gonna be a problem.'

'Like to get one of those ships and shove it up his arse.'

'No no, Sid wouldn't like that; there are *rules* you gotta learn round here.'

As they sat laughing, chaos ensued in the laundry. Sid had filled the trough with water and put Mary II's six kittens in one of Mary I's old stockings. Elly had only recently saved Mary II (nosy, named in honour of her stepmother) from a Halls Creek gutter. Outside, banging on the locked door, Elly screamed. 'I will find a home for them Dad.'

Mary stood behind her. 'Elly, no one's gonna take them.' Sid submerged the noisy kittens in the water and there was silence.

Elly beat her fists on the door. 'Fuck you!' As Egg walked in she turned and said, 'And you', and stormed down the hallway into her room.

Sid opened the laundry door and held the weighted, dripping stocking towards Egg. 'Dig a hole for us would y', Egg.'

'Why me, they're her cats.'

'Go on.'

Mary II rubbed up against the laundry door and slinked outside. Egg took the stocking and followed. Jack and Rolly saw him coming and got back to work. He threw the stocking into one of the post-holes, picked up the fence post and rammed it down hard. He muttered, time and time again, 'Fuck you', as he continued ramming the pole.

The boys looked at each other, perplexed, but just kept working. Jack muttered, 'This is like a psycho ward.' A few

moments later Egg returned to the shade of the lone wattle and laid down. Jack and Rolly watched as Elly stormed from the house, took her trailbike out of the shed and drove off towards town. Ten minutes later, Mary emerged from the house with a tray of iced-tea. As they all sat in the shade, Jack watched her pour, swatting flies from her face as she adjusted a silk hibiscus flower in a pinch pot, spilling out over a cotton doily, embroidered with scenes of the Swiss Alps. 'Keeping up with it?' she smiled.

'Yes.'

'Of course, it's not always this hot. Still, can't stop for the sun.'

THE BLACK ROSE

That night they had a barbecue. The Great Musterer and his son made a fire on the bare ground where Sid had once tried to grow grass. It was to be a love-present to Mary, an extension of her garden, but in the end they just couldn't spare the water. When the flames died down and the embers were glowing the two Horsemen carried over some bricks and a hotplate from the house and built a primitive oven around the fire. They brought over seats and a card table. Just as the sun was beginning to fade Mary brought out the meat: curried sausages, chops, chicken shaslicks and drumsticks for Egg.

After they'd cooked the meat and eaten they sat about in an uneasy circle, dragging out fragments of conversation, throwing them about, letting them settle back into the fire. Rolly still didn't feel at home but he could at least start to sense a new beginning. 'He wasn't defrocked as such, I don't think.'

Elly clapped her hands and laughed. 'But he was asked to leave?'

'Yes. Something to do with one of his students.'

Sid moved the dirt around with the tip of his boot. 'Cos they lock 'em up and won't let 'em near a woman.'

Elly corrected him. 'That's the Catholics.'

Rolly smiled. 'Arthur hates the Catholics.'

Mary blushed and fingered the crucifix around her neck. She thought of Sister Mary Stanley and Father del Castillo, the only real parents she'd known growing up in a Filipino orphanage. Between them they'd taught her everything she knew about living in the world, about civilisation. There'd been many less fortunate—a distant cousin whose parents had found her a job, at fourteen, dancing in a Manila club called Co-Co's. Or others she'd only heard about doing twelve-hour shifts in unventilated sheds, trying to keep their fingers from mechanical looms. Others had taken jobs, further out of town, sifting mercury out of mud for twenty cents a day. So in the end she had nothing to complain about, except the little things (washing ruined by the dust, food spoiled in the heat)—things which everyone had to contend with.

Rolly looked at the dust on his boots and started to feel pride. 'I think my mum likes having him around, although they argue. But that seems to be for show.'

Sid smiled; he grinned at Mary and then looked around at the assembled group. 'Believe me, it's not for show.'

Mary took an old chop bone from her plate and threw it at him; he threw it back. Egg started to laugh. 'Don't know why anyone'd bother.'

Elly rolled her eyes. 'Coupla reasons I can think of.'

'Yeah, but apart from that.'

'Isn't that enough?'

'I don't know, is it?'

She put her hand on his shoulder and smiled. 'You just need the right woman, then everything'll change.'

He shrugged her off. 'Yeah, right.'

Meanwhile, Sid finished another beer and looked around at the group. 'Anyone got a ghost story?'

'I gotta horror story,' Elly volunteered, taunting them.

Mary looked up and smiled, whispering. 'It'll give us all dreams.'

Egg grinned. 'What's the story called, "Jake's Visit to the Glue Factory?"'

She kicked him. 'No, 's about Geoffrey Damer, the mass murderer. He cut up his victims' bodies and stored them in his freezer. There was this one kid, about eighteen, tattoo of a black rose on his bum. Damer straps him into a chair and tortures him. But when he's out making a coffee the kid escapes. Goes to the police. They think he's making it all up so they tell him to piss off.'

Egg burped. 'Very lady-like.'

'So Damer finds this kid and grabs him again, takes him back to his place. A year later after they've caught Damer, the cops get around to looking in his freezer. They open it up and there it is, chopped up in a little freezer bag, the black rose.'

'Elly!' Mary shook her head and pretended to cover her ears.

'What? It happened, honest.'

Sid grinned. 'Imagine his barbies.'

Elly poked her brother in the ribs. 'Bout your age, Egg, took a fancy to handsome young men.'

Rolly sat forward. 'You'd think they'd put up a struggle.'

'Ah, but they never knew till it was too late, then, agh!'

Mary took out the flyspray and did a round of the

assembled. 'One thing about living out here, keep away from the sickos.' Elly looked at Rolly and grinned. For the next hour or so the conversation ranged widely.

'Bone chewing.' Egg sat forward and eyed the new boys seriously. 'This sorta country, the cattle can't always get what they need from the grass. Chew bones for the phosphorus. If they're really low you can see 'em chewing sticks, stones, wire.' He smiled and nodded his head. 'Eh, Dad, remember that time we saw one lickin' acid off a battery?'

Sid bowed his head and smiled. 'Yeah.' Elly watched her father's expression—embarrassed that his son couldn't get beyond castration, de-horning and model boats. Mary looked at him also but understood something different: pride—*their* son, perfectly attuned to the desert, to the needs of beef cattle—pride in the fact that no one could come close to Egg when it came to bone chewing.

Mary, too, felt a certain amount of pride when it came to domestic resourcefulness. She saw herself as a classy Sara Henderson: stockman's wife, able to get a steer into a crush in thirty seconds flat, able to arrange silk flowers. 'I'm halfway through cooking a cheesecake and then I find, no lemons. Can't just pop down to the local shop. Learn to improvise.'

Elly cringed. 'Vinegar!'

Mary eyed her sternly. 'That was a mistake. Didn't make anyone eat it.'

Sid laughed. 'Thank God.'

'See, Jack, this is what I've gotta put up with.' She looked at Sid and thought, you should try cooking in that miserable little kitchen. Meanwhile, Alf looked over at Elly and caught her staring at Rolly. 'Cos he's new, I suppose, he thought. But suspected it might be something more.

As the night grew cold, Egg threw a bloodwood log on the

fire. Alf decided it was time for Red Rover and they all drifted over to a stretch of open ground in a haze of fermented hops. Mary sat on a stool and watched, contented, as the others gathered in a single straight line in front of Alf and waited for the word. 'Go.' They all began to move forward. Alf chose Elly as his most likely bet and began to case her. She knew he'd choose her and was determined to get past. In one quick sprint the lot of them were through. Alf lay in the dust with Elly pinned down beneath his arms. 'You're it.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Always pick on the women.'

The game continued until everyone except Rolly had been in. Jack was it; he knew he couldn't let this challenge go unanswered. 'Go.'

They chose to sprint across as a group. Jack launched himself at Rolly's legs and the two of them came down with a dull thud. The others stopped themselves, gathering in the pale glow of the fire, but Sid ran on into a shadow. The ground gave way beneath his foot and he fell. 'Jesus Christ!' He pulled his leg out of the freshly dug post-hole and leaned over to rub his ankle. Mary came over to him and the others followed.

'Strained it.' He stood up and tried to put his weight onto it. Mary supported him under the arm. 'Nah, should be all right.'

His face was full of pain. 'Jesus, Egg, why didn't you cover it, or put the post back in?'

'But . . .' Egg was about to shift the blame to the new boys, but he thought better of it. He'd learnt that much from his dad: leadership, the buck stops with you. He was silent.

Mary helped Sid back inside the house and the game continued. Rolly stood in the centre, pausing. The others lined up: Elly and Jack grinning, Alf surveying his best route,

Egg gritting his teeth and staring at the smug expression on the new boy's face.

'Come on,' Elly teased, 'scared we might get through?'

'Gotta pick my victim.' He stared at her and smiled. Egg fixed him more closely.

'Go.'

They all shot forward from the barrier. Egg put down his head and charged. Rolly got Elly around the waist and hung on for dear life. The three of them came crashing to the ground as Egg's head caught Rolly square in the back.

Elly stood up and kicked her brother who was still on the ground. 'Jesus, Noah, what's your fucking problem?'

Egg stood up and brushed off the dirt. He looked at Rolly and grinned. 'We play rough out here.'

Elly stood with her face next to his. 'Why don't you just go and sink the Tirpitz.'

Egg smiled at Rolly and Jack as he returned to the house. The others sat around the fire and continued drinking. Elly leaned forward, her arms on her knees. 'You'll have to forgive Egg, he has a narrow range of social skills.'

Jack smiled. 'He seems okay.'

Rolly looked at Elly, grinned, and back at Jack. 'Compared with?'

'I resigned as his sister about eight years ago,' she continued. 'I remember writing this in a letter and giving it to him, and him laughing, and me saying, why are you laughing, and him saying, I don't know.'

'Is he really that bad?' Jack asked.

'Yes. Other places you can choose your friends.' She looked at Rolly. 'Don't you find him creepy? All of Mary's bullshit's just, let's pretend. I can't. He calls me a stuck-up bitch, but so what?'

From inside his darkened room Egg looked out at them. He sighed deeply as he slid the window open to listen. In time, he laid back on his bed and tried to make sense of the words and the laughing that drifted in. He knew they were laughing at him. He picked up a Panzer tank and stared down the barrel. The image of a black rose tattooed onto a mutilated arse formed in his mind. Some time later Alf must have fetched his guitar and he could hear them all singing. Elly was the loudest, drunk as usual. She was always the loudest. Gathered around the organ with their *real* mother she would always outshine the others. Sid would sit in his armchair and listen to them; often he would fall asleep without anyone noticing.

Between the four of them they worked out a two-part harmony for *Khe Sanh*. Alf's fingers wrestled with the chords, but the music always seemed to get ahead of him. Jack and Rolly stood up and tried to create some choreographed moves. Elly fell out of her chair laughing, then got up and joined them. Through the levitating sparks of the dying bloodwood, Egg watched them dance. He smiled, thinking about how much he had grown apart from his sister.

The night was cold and empty, as though a black hole had opened and sucked the day skyward. Elly felt contented: maybe it was something spiritual (an angel come to carry her across the threshold) or maybe just the hops. Either way the cold felt good and she put her arm around Rolly to keep warm. Jack stared down into the fire and pretended not to see. Alf stopped playing—no one spoke for a full thirty seconds.

Eventually Rolly leaned forward and said, 'Fuck, I feel sick.'

Jack looked at him and spoke, his voice without its usual softness. 'You're turning into a bloody alcoholic.'

'No I'm not.'

Jack shook his head. Rolly's temper got the better of him. 'Sorry, Dad.'

Jack frowned. 'Calm down.'

Rolly mimicked. 'Calm down.'

Jack stood up. 'Night, Alf, Elly.' He walked back towards the out-building.

Rolly called after him. 'Night, Dad.'

There was no reply. Elly looked at him suspiciously. 'Maybe you should go to bed.'

Rolly shrugged his shoulders, sat there and kept drinking. Some time later Alf went to bed and the two of them were left alone. They sat on the ground in front of the fire and moved their bodies closer together. Later he was to remember soft, warm lips, less than perfect breath and the furriness of a strange tongue.

'So, what do you make of this place?' she began.

Rolly shrugged.

'Things used to be okay,' she continued, 'when Mum was around. It was just me and her, you know?' She stopped short and Rolly looked at her. 'We were always in Halls Creek, at the shops, the few there are. Dad and Noah were happy with their cows. But now . . .'

Rolly had no idea what to say. Lost for words, like at the few family funerals he'd been to—standing in the background and letting his mum do the talking. One time, everyone gushing for some uncle he could barely remember, and him thinking, so what? But this time, *wanting* to say something, but not knowing what, or how to express it.

Eventually, when there was nothing left of the fire, they went back to their rooms. Egg, his eyes wide like an owl, could just make them out together, their heads highlighted against the distant hummocks.

I N T I M A T E S

Rolly shielded his eyes against the bright morning light. 'I'm sorry. I gotta stop. That's how many times in the last week?'

'You always say that. You've got the taste for it.'

They went inside and sat at the dining room table. Mary put orange juice down in front of them. 'Toast?'

Rolly held his stomach. 'Just tea please.'

'Mary!' Elly's voice broke the breakfast dawn like a piping-shrike. Mary threw down her tea towel, sighed, 'What's wrong now?' and disappeared down the hallway. Sid adjusted his glasses and looked at them, slowly, deliberately, and looked at his watch.

'I think we might need to borrow an alarm clock,' Jack apologised.

'I think so,' Sid mumbled, 'if you expect us to feed yer. It's not the Adelaide bloody Hilton you know.'

'Sorry,' Jack continued, as Sid shook his head. They sipped their orange juice. Egg appeared and sat at the table, pulling on his boots. 'Might check those fences today, Dad.'

'I want you to show these two around.'

Egg looked at his father but didn't say a word. He forced on his left boot by hitting it hard on the floor. The table shook and Sid looked at him. 'Okay?'

'Okay.'

Jack finished his orange juice and licked his lips. 'How's the foot, Mr Smith?'

'Sid . . . 's Okay.'

Sid returned to his balance sheet and Egg to his toast. Jack looked at Rolly and a silent communication passed between them. From the bedrooms they could hear raised voices. Elly stood at her window, arms crossed, smirking. 'So you have to fold up every single pair of undies, a nice little crease.' She imitated Mary's technique on a pair of cotton-tails, 'and put, just so, in the drawer?'

Mary sat on the bed with her hands folded in her lap. 'If you like I can leave it for you, as well as the washing and the folding.'

Elly held up her diary. 'And the reading?'

Mary shook her head, stood and made for the door. 'There goes the toast.' The smell of carbon was heavy in the air. Sid sent Egg to rescue it. Mary stopped and looked back. 'If I's that desperate I'd much prefer the drearies.'

'Nothing like the real thing. Still, if it's any consolation, you're prob'ly not the only one.' She called out loudly. 'Eh, Egg?'

Egg's fingers dropped the toast onto the woven pattern of Mary's cheapest crockery (the best was kept for visitors). He called back loudly to his sister. 'Stuff off!'

And, in echo, Sid's voice from the table. 'Egg.'

‘What?’

Mary returned to the kitchen and her half-kneaded scone dough. Elly came out and sat at the table. ‘Morning all.’

Sid looked up from his finances, his eyes underlined by the metal rim of his reading glasses. ‘What’s wrong now?’

Elly sipped her orange juice. ‘Nothing.’

Sid returned to his ledger as Elly smiled at Rolly. ‘Feeling okay?’

He only smiled, uneasily.

‘I was thinking of taking you out,’ she continued, ‘showing you round the place.’

‘I got Egg on it,’ Sid mumbled.

She fought back calmly. ‘But didn’t you want him to check the north boundary?’

There was no reply.

‘Hello, Father, anyone home?’

He looked up, abruptly. ‘I changed my mind.’

‘Why? I’m quite capable of doing such a simple, little task. They won’t rape me, will you boys?’

Rolly smiled. Jack looked closely at something floating in his Weet-Bix. Sid looked up for what seemed to be the last time. ‘If you must know, Mary asked for some help defrosting the freezers.’

‘Ah, of course, woman equals kitchen.’ She called out to the kitchen. ‘You all right out there, Mary?’

Sid stared at her briefly, took off his glasses and left the room. Outside, Alf pulled up on his trailbike and Sid talked to him. Inside, Elly looked at Rolly and Jack and said, ‘It’s all right, you can talk now.’ Her eyes seemed to pin down Rolly. ‘You really should say what’s on your mind, otherwise you’ll end up like . . .’ She stared at Egg. ‘I could’ve done it.’

But he just stared into the butter. ‘You’re welcome to it.’

And then firmly fixed the new boys. 'I work better by myself.'

Rolly looked at Elly as if to say, what about last night? Apparently she'd changed overnight, something Arthur had warned him could happen—women are fine if things are going their way, he'd whispered, but otherwise, it's out with the claws. Maybe, he thought, she was expecting him to stand up to Sid. Maybe she was worried he was some sort of sop. Either way, he was hardly in a position to take on the boss, at least not yet.

Alf came in through the kitchen and sat with them. He smiled. 'Looks like I got the day off.' The other four looked at him but no one said a word.

The track between Ningunna and Dry Creek Station passed through stony country. The track—pebbly, its corrugations baked hard in the sun—was difficult to navigate. Jack and Rolly held on to the dashboard. Egg bit his lip as he drove, but didn't let up on the accelerator. Jack sat next to him, squeezed in the middle, Rolly at the window, staring out, sometimes squinting to see something he knew he was only imagining.

It seemed a strange place to build a road, or more correctly, to allow it to evolve—under the cartwheels and rubber tyres of generations of crazy white fellas. The low, rocky hills and ranges gave way in the middle distance to more of the same: flat, red, monotonous desert and spinifex. Rolly was thinking how it might be a stunning landscape, in a *National Geographic* foldout, or seen from the safety of a city living room; but moving among it, it just seemed like lots and lots of nothing. Poetry could romanticise it, but to him it was no different from being in the world's biggest car park, asphalt stretching out to the interstate.

Off to their left an almost sheer rock wall seemed to emerge

from a depression in the landscape. Underneath an overhang, growing out from a long, moist crevice which closed itself against the sun, a desert fig cowered in the shade. Its roots wrapped around an ancient rock, reaching down to a shaded pool which didn't want to share its last few drops. Pig-face grew around the pool, desperate for life. There was spinifex, green, a sight to behold in the desert. Egg pulled up in front of the wall and they all got out. He walked over to a dwarf minni-ritchi and took a piss; the delicate acacia had survived quite well so far, nestled in with the pig-face.

'Have a look up there.'

With a flick of his hand he indicated a shaded area towards the top of the overhang. Jack and Rolly climbed up and saw a series of faint lines carved into the quartz sandstone.

'Abo rock carvings. These Abos came to our place a couple of years ago and told us we had to look after them.' It was an X-ray of a kangaroo with a few hand paintings. 'Been here all those years but we come along and they assume we're gonna paint over it.' He stood behind them, looking at the picture. 'I did better than that in kindy.' He eyed it suspiciously. 'Now there's an idea; what if we painted Ningunna up there, few cattle, out-station, eh?'

He smiled at them. Jack climbed down. 'They'd have you put away.' Egg climbed up to the rock painting, spat on the kangaroo and rubbed at it. 'See, comes off. Twenty-thousand years my foot.' He turned to Rolly. 'Here, try it.'

'No, 's okay.'

'Go on.'

Rolly rubbed the paint lightly. 'Crushed up rocks, would've taken forever.' But retreated, feeling every bit a vandal, intrigued by the black fella's attempts to do on stone what he'd done on butcher's paper.

Jack stared out across the distant gibber plains and squinted. 'So, all this yours?'

Egg came down. 'Yeah. Gonna stay that way.' He looked at the painting. 'Less those bastards get their hands on it.'

Jack smiled. 'They'd just sell it off to the highest bidder.' Straight away he cringed at what he'd said.

They drove on along the impossible road to Dry Creek Station. Jack flicked a pair of fluffy footballs hanging from the rear-vision mirror. He turned to Egg and spoke in what Rolly thought was a drawl. 'You play?'

Egg smiled. 'Used to.' He thought back to his last Saturday, playing with the Under 14 Halls Creek Maulers. His dad, as usual, was standing on the sidelines. Every time the ball came near he could hear his father screaming, 'Get him, Egg, get him.' And if he missed the ball, just once, there was the inevitable post-mortem on the way home. 'It wasn't a hard mark, Egg.'

'The ball was slippery.'

'Still, we'll get you out, practise.'

And Egg, sighing, Sid looking up from the road. 'What?'

'All right, I'll practise.'

'If you don't want to play.'

'I'll practise.'

And then silence, as stony as the gibber plains. And silence too in Egg's ute, as they moved through the desert. Rolly moved about in his seat. 'Never liked football,' he offered, still staring forward. 'Spent my Saturdays watching *Thunderbirds*. Lazy, I s'pose.'

Egg smiled. 'I woulda preferred it.'

Rolly sighed and thought, I could be there now, stuffing my face with popcorn and watching the midday movie. So what am I doing here? Am I trying to prove something to

someone? Who? Ah, maybe I'll get used to it . . . maybe.

They fell back into a silence which was broken only by the ute's valiant struggle, its tyres spinning out on lighter than air dust. Egg and Jack could both hear their father's voices from the sidelines: Kevin was the more constructive of the two, pointing out the opposition's weaknesses to Jack. But when Jack failed to act on his advice he transmogrified into Sid, shouting orders across a jam-packed stockyard. And when they thought back about it now, they could both remember the feeling of never having done well enough. Jack wondered why he'd bothered. Egg thought how he'd just have to do better.

As they drove into the warmest part of the day Jack let go of the dashboard and held on to the underside of his seat with his fingers. Rolly gripped the door where Egg's window no longer closed, where sand filled the crevice like a freshly ripped warren. He thought of the desert's emptiness, and how his notebook would remain closed for some time: Darren, his town, the Babylonian Garden, Robert the Sabbath Kid, reading Revelations, interrupting their Dutch Bible-mistress: 'What does this mean, "So the angel swung his sickle on earth, cut the grapes from the vine, and threw them into the wine-press of God's furious anger?"'

'It describes the judgement, Robert.'

'And who ends up in the press?'

'The sinners, the unrepentant.'

Robert closed his Bible, thinking about how this affected his family. 'Crushed like bugs'—as if what he'd suspected was real. 'What sort of religion's that?'

Something Rolly had asked himself ever since. There was ample proof that his mother's claim that it was all 'good for him' was bullshit. Robert was proof of this. He wanted to try

and remember how it ended, but Egg wanted to talk. 'So what do you think about my sister?'

'She's okay,' Rolly ventured.

Egg looked at him. 'Okay? Fucking nuts. Be warned, she lives on another planet.' He rolled his eyes and smiled. 'Mark my words, one day the real world will catch up with her.'

'Mark my words'—Jack and Rolly both recognised Sid's voice. 'Mark my words, twenty years' time the government'll wish they'd taken better care of the farmers.'

But this was Egg, just.

'Once she went to this B and S ball, picked up with a school teacher from Alice.' He leaned forward, grabbing the wheel. 'She thinks I don't know about it.' He looked at the new boys and smiled . . . *mark my words!* 'That night she never came home. Dad cracked a shit. Three days later we get a phone call from this Yankee bitch in Alice: "Your daughter's here, can't pay her bill." Geez, did Dad spew.'

Images of the Del Rae came into their heads. Jack could only remember his room number on a napkin, Rolly the sounds of Elvis on a ukulele.

'Anyway,' Egg continued, 'she comes home—black eye, scratches, bruises—but she wouldn't tell us a thing. Stupid, she's on another planet, don't know what it's gonna take.'

Jack stared at Egg's hands on the wheel and could only see Sid's prominent veins. He looked into the side of his eyes and caught a glimpse of the cold, hard expression behind the old man's reading glasses. *Sons as ghosts of their fathers.* He caught a glimpse of ankle on the dashboard, the boombox, the laughing, the photocopied son of the Sandshoe King mouthing his father's sayings across the mid-north. Kevin, for all of his moaning and inability to let things rest, was his own man. In a moment of lightness, Jack remembered him in a silly

paper hat on Christmas day. He smiled and the rest of the silent journey was nothing to him.

When they arrived at the out-station, Egg showed them around. A hut, smaller than their own, stood with a flyscreen door, half off its hinges, banging in the wind that blew in from the desert, lifting sand in small eddies and depositing it inside the hut. Along the perimeter, Egg noticed some broken fence wires. 'Jack, you can get that eleven gauge from the ute and make a start here.'

As Jack started to remove the old wire and re-string the fence he noticed Egg take Rolly back to the ute. They sat in the cabin, talking. At one point, Egg put on a tape and started to play drums on the dashboard. Rolly sat and listened, uneasy, looking back at Jack. 'Maybe I should go help him.'

'No no, I was going to start showing you how to read maps.'

But they didn't. Instead the conversation followed other paths. Rolly soon worked out that it wasn't so much Egg's dislike of Jack that had led to this situation, as his desire to talk down his sister. 'She'll wake up one day . . . pow!' He slammed his fist in his hand. 'Just try not to, uh, encourage her too much.' He laughed and slapped Rolly on the shoulder.

Jack straightened his back; he looked over at them and shook his head.

Rolly was trying to hide his frustration. 'He looks pretty hot out there.'

Egg smiled. 'This is a desert, it's meant to be hot.'

Looking around the station Rolly thought he might be in one of Arthur's Old Testament stories: Jesus might walk from the out-building at any moment, Mary Magdalene languishing within. All the deserts of Israel could blow up around them, but it would still be Ningunna. There was a bore which fed a long, concrete trough. There was a single room on

stubby stilts—this was the closest thing they had to an ark, designed to float off into the Apocalypse.

Egg got Rolly to help him take his trailbike off the back of his ute. He climbed on and kicked it to life. ‘Why don’t you go help him for a while.’

Once Egg had disappeared in a cloud of dust, Jack came over and sat with Rolly on the porch of the out-building. ‘He’s got it in for me.’

‘I asked if I could help.’

They sat and kicked the dust and spat and complained about how life never went right. ‘No wonder he hasn’t got any friends,’ Rolly observed. ‘Could you imagine that. “My best mate Egg.”’ They laughed. ‘He’s beyond bad,’ Jack continued, slowly calming down. ‘Fuck. Y’ wonder what y’ got yerself into. I had this picture of an air-conditioned dorm, cafeteria.’

‘You were dreaming.’

They sat there for half an hour while they should have been working. It felt natural; it felt as though there was no rush. After all, the desert was so big, so old, so empty—and where were all the cows? Egg caught them unaware. He took off his goggles, killed the engine and spat the bulldust out of his mouth. ‘Smoko?’

Rolly smiled. ‘Sorta.’

‘We got a lot to get through.’ He looked at Jack who quickly got the message. As he finished the fence he noticed Egg showing Rolly how to ride the trailbike. When he’d tied off the last wire he threw the tools in the back of the ute and lined up for his turn. Egg just patted him on the shoulder, looking out at Rolly. ‘We just gotta check none of that iron’s loose.’

Jack cocked his head. ‘Me?’

‘Shouldn’t be any problems.’

Jack climbed onto the roof with a hammer. The sun

reflected back at him, washing him with light. He slipped, grasping at the iron for security. In the distance he saw a road of sorts but he couldn't imagine it led anywhere. He tried to spit but his lips were dry. Down below, Egg was adjusting the throttle control for Rolly. 'We should take a couple of bikes and go into town one night.'

Rolly shrugged, indifferent. 'Yeah, I'll just go round once more.' He looked up at Jack and their eyes met. Jack massaged an imaginary dick protruding from his forehead; Rolly accelerated away so Egg couldn't see him laugh. While he was gone, Jack jumped down off the roof and came over to Egg. 'Finished.'

'Okay.' Egg paused, still watching after Rolly. Jack was always the optimist. 'How does she handle?'

'Haven't got time, I'll have to show you later. Can you get that jerry-can out of the ute and fix up the bore. Not quite to the top.'

Jack dropped his shoulders. 'You want me to do it again?'

Rolly pulled up in front of them, smiling. Egg pulled a finger across his throat and Rolly cut the engine. Egg intensified his efforts on Jack. 'Remember, Bob for a Job, you work, we pay, now, not quite to the top.'

Rolly got off the trailbike. 'What is it? I can do it.'

Jack paused, sighed and walked away. Rolly wheeled the bike back to the ute. Egg stood looking after them, his mouth open, contemptuously, catching flies. Jack saw Rolly coming up behind him and waited. Jack didn't say a word, just lifted his eyebrows as if to say, 'see what I mean'.

Rolly smiled and whispered loudly. 'How long?'

But Jack just nodded his head in disgust.

CANEGRASS CREEK

The two trailbikes dropped into the dry creek bed. Jack and Alf killed their engines and sat down on a mat of flattened canegrass. Alf took out a packet of cigarettes, hidden under a rock crevice, and offered them to Jack. They lay back and smoked. Neither spoke. They were both elsewhere—Jack was on a bus back to Jamestown, Alf caught up in the inevitable sunset.

‘Canegrass Creek’, as Alf called it, was where he came when he needed to escape: the out-building was still considered part of Sid’s domain. Alf’d often fantasised about living here as a recluse: a small thatched hut, his own private bore. He could see himself sitting in the shade of a giant River Red, smoking cigarettes as the sun set around him. Maybe one day he’d go to town and bring back a woman; but, no, that would mean the end of freedom. She’d try to arrange things her way: flowers, Pears’ prints and lavender in his underwear drawer.

Anyway, things were only made desirable through their impossibility. For instance, he'd never even thought about inviting Elly here.

'It's where I come to think,' he'd say.

She'd look at him and roll her eyes. 'You can think anywhere, Alf. Don't you mean you come here to . . .' And then she'd smile, looking about for evidence. That's why he'd decided against it. This was his last retreat from Ningunna, from everyone who would try to crucify him in their own private little ways.

Jack picked at some shrubby twin-leaf which grew down towards the creek bed and he smiled. Alf took a beer from his backpack and gave one to him. 'What you smilin' about?'

'Anna.'

'Yeah?'

Jack sat up. 'It was in a spot just like this, I came that close.' He slowly moved two fingers together. Suddenly he was taken back to Jamestown, and Ayr Street, and an image of Anna walking past the shops before work, contemplating another long day of fried chips and Paddle Pops, and wondering why Jack had gone. He thought, it's not too late, the sooner I get back, the sooner we can get together. Perhaps. And felt for a moment that he didn't want to talk to Alf, right now.

Alf cracked his beer and drank, wiping the mud from his lips. 'So what happened, a flash flood?' Another one of Alf's fantasies: asleep in his hut of thatched canegrass, awoken by a rumble, sitting up and listening closely, but too late. He felt himself rising, his hut breaking up around him. He floated down the river in the moonlight, his bed the perfect ark. Egg drifted past him in a 1/48th reconstruction of the Mayflower. He had a nice girl and almost two of everything: Shorthorn, Angus, Brahman and Red Poll. And then there were the animals

he'd left behind: Mary II, Jake and a stocking full of screaming kittens with their skulls bashed in.

He looked at Jack. 'So?'

Jack drew back too deeply and started to cough. 'We're sittin' there, alone at night, and she starts tellin' me about this stick video she's just seen. The way she talked about it, it was like, "Wouldn't mind a bit myself."'

'So you thought . . .'

'Then it's like, "What's the weather gonna be like tomorrow?"'

Jack shook his head in disgust as Alf laughed, stubbing out his cigarette and throwing it into the creek bed. 'Maybe she just wanted you to take the initiative.'

'Didn't sound like it.'

'What they say and what they think . . .'

Jack wasn't in the mood for advice from Alf, the outback monk, but he just kept intoning: 'Shoulda just grabbed her.'

Jack thought of their tussle on the greasy floor; it was *Paradise Lost*, just. He wondered whether he should give Alf the whole story, confessing to endless fantasies about garden weddings and children, uninhibited sex on lonely beaches and Thai curries they'd improvise disastrously. About stability and an old age spent snoring in a cottage overgrown with jasmine. About how, in the end, he'd either been too demanding or too impatient. Either way, giving it up for cows and star droppers receding towards a distant horizon. He looked at Alf. 'Anyway, who gives a shit?'

'You do.'

'Rubbish.'

Alf nodded his head. 'If I had a lady I'd be off tomorrow.'

'Maybe.'

'I would. This place won't hold you for long.' He smiled at Jack, beginning to realise he was okay. He lifted a large piece

of sandstone and retrieved an almost new copy of *Double Fists*. He threw it to Jack and smiled. 'As I said, it's a good place to come and think.'

It had taken a while, but at last Rolly had finished his first letter home.

Dear Mum (and Arthur),

I hope you're both behaving yourself (or at least haven't murdered each other yet). Sorry it's taken a while to get in touch, but there's been a lot happening, to say the least.

Yes, Arthur, it did happen, the ute broke down. We (I refer to Jack, the other 'newy') were in the middle of nowhere and no one would stop. Luckily this truckie came past and helped us. Feel free to send Jim a letterbomb. Seems the costume didn't work.

We are living in this poky little out-building and are learning the ropes (fixing fences, looking after bores, etc.). The boss, Sid, likes to let us know he's in charge (you'd get along well with him, Arthur). I think maybe he's spent too long living by himself. We come along and it's like, all right, listen up, here's the rules! He has a Chinky wife who I suspect he got in the mail. She always agrees with him (as does his son, Egg—don't ask me where he got the name). There's also Elly (his daughter) and Alf (an REA vet.).

We work hard and it is extremely hot. When I come home I should have some more luck on the beach. Anyway, write and tell me how you both are. The address is 'Ningunna', RMB 64, via Halls Creek, WA. It should get here.

Hope to hear soon, love, R.

P.S. Just as well I didn't bring my slippers.

He started to read back over the letter but a hand came from behind him and snatched it. He turned and saw Elly, in a pair of silk jarmies and slippers, holding his letter by the corner. She held a finger to her lips and said, 'Ssh, follow me.' She led him outside, through the shadows of Ningunna, towards a secluded depression in the desert. They sat with their backs against a wall of sand. She smiled at him. 'We can talk now. It's like escape from Stalag seventeen. I had to stuff clothes under the sheets to fool them.'

Rolly lifted his eyebrows, disbelieving. She frowned. 'Well nearly. This is sinful, we could be up to anything.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know, I'm young and innocent.'

Elly unfolded the letter. She loved secret communications, having just finished one of her own. 'Dear Diary, I couldn't wait. He wanted it as bad as me. At first it hurt, but then you learn to sit back and just enjoy the ride. Now I feel my life has begun. I hope Mary or Dad don't find out—I think I hid the proof pretty well.' She had visions of Mary standing outside in the middle of the night, riffling through the rubbish bin, sure she'd pick up the scent. Then again, maybe leaving the diary out next to her bed would make it too obvious. Either way, it couldn't hurt. Her master stroke was leaving the identity of the perpetrator a secret. She could imagine Mary's eyes looking around the breakfast table . . . *which one of you dirty little animals* . . .

She looked up from the letter. 'Do you mind?'

Rolly frowned. 'I don't know.'

'Believe me, it's no worse than what I think.' She started to read the letter as he looked back towards the house, uneasily.

'Arthur's our lodger. He helped me pick out the ute.'

She read on, picking out a quote here and there. "Sid likes

to let us know he's in charge . . .” She stared at him. ‘To say the least.’ Rolly felt relieved. She liked it . . . he couldn't have known how much. “‘He has a Chinky wife who I suspect he got in the mail.’” She looked at him and he laughed along. ‘He actually had to buy the ticket over and back. It was so funny, one seat over and two back. He had it pre-booked. I said to him, “You're hopeful” and he said, “No, it's all taken care of.”’

Rolly ventured. ‘Mark my words.’ They both broke up. ‘Mark my words, mark my words!’ he harped. She continued throwing her hands about in the air, disbelieving. ‘I mean, is that totally bloody stupid or what? And he tells *me* I've got problems. At least I don't buy my friends like livestock.’

She finished the letter as they laughed together. “‘When I come home I should have some more luck on the beach.’” She went off again, but he didn't feel in the least bit embarrassed. In fact, it was quite the opposite; as he grinned and stared back into her eyes he felt glad he'd made his willingness understood. As she continued to fall forward, laughing, he swallowed and tried to think of his next move. The only thing he could think of were the horses he'd seen on his way out of town.

‘Assistant Patrol Leader.’

‘Queen's Scout.’

‘You're kidding?’

Jack proudly shook his head as he continued skimming through the magazine. ‘No, they took us to Government House to get our awards. Met the governor. Shakes my hand and says, “I've heard good things about you and the stars.”’

Alf drank the dregs and burped. He threw the bottle into the canegrass and opened another. Jack looked at a photo and cringed: ‘That's sick. Nah, touch-up.’

Alf nodded. 'It's real, I've seen a video of it. They can do a lot better than that.'

Jack looked at him and frowned. 'What?'

Alf brushed him off. 'So, great things about you and the stars?'

'You don't wanna hear.'

'Go on.'

'We had this Troop Leader, took us out on a bushwalk. Anyway, it's a long story, but we end up lost. Turns out he was drunk or stoned. So, I got us out of it. No compass, just the stars.'

'Bullshit.'

'True. Southern Cross, see.'

He indicated the great marker in the sky. Alf followed his hand. 'Bullshit. That's just Burke and Wills. You prob'ly had a . . .'

'Okay, it was a copy of *Double Fists*, if that's what you want to hear.' He smiled. 'We followed the two-pronged bosom constellation, it pointed due south.'

'And squirted milk.'

Jack lay back with his mouth open. 'Didn't help Burke and Wills.' Apart from a couple of galahs, skylarking northward, there was silence. Jack imagined he could hear the stream start to trickle, but these were memories he'd brought from other places.

'I got a bushcraft badge,' Alf began, 'because I could build a fire without matches. That's been of great use to me throughout life.'

But Jack was elsewhere. 'I wonder what it was like for Burke and Wills . . . when they realised they'd been deserted. Geez, you'd kick yourself, wouldn't yer?'

Alf smiled. 'They should have had you there.'

The desert lapsed back into silence. Jack spoke very slowly, as though he were someone else. 'My dear wife, I can barely lift my pen to write—I hope all of our efforts will amount to something. All of my love to you and the children, Jack.'

Elly kicked off her slippers and stood up. She started to dance the Can-Can across the desert, kicking fine, red sand into Rolly's face. She grabbed him by the arm and dragged him up; they linked arms and kicked a chorus line. He put a finger over his lips. 'Ssh.' She just laughed and kept kicking. He tried to kick even higher but his boot went flying off into the dark desert and they could hardly sing for laughing.

Jack lay back in silence and imagined the two famous explorers in their death-throes. Enter Egg. He approaches them and kicks them to see if they're alive. 'Come on, get up you lazy bastards, we got ten miles of fence to fix.'

With his last ounce of energy Robert O' Hara Burke grabs his musket and points it at Egg. 'Mark my words, young man, you can't build a fence around a desert.' And then pulls the trigger. Egg falls into the earth and his blood blots the sand. Burke (read Jack) pulls himself into the shade of the DIG tree and sits up against it to have the pleasure of seeing the flies start to swarm. And just then Jack smiled. Alf still thought he was thinking of the magazine.

Sid flicked over onto Impaja Television and cringed. An Aboriginal elder stood in front of a vast pastoral lease and motioned with her hands as she spoke of the land.

He sat back, scowling. 'Bullshit,' and looked over to Mary. 'How d' they get money to make this crap.' He didn't doubt that at least some of the black fellas believed this stuff, but he

couldn't see that it justified taking back productive land. Especially considering that when this had happened the land had been let go. Still, it was impossible to stop. The people who made *those* decisions lived a long way off and his voice could never reach them. He'd tried a few letters to the editor of the *Centralian Advocate*, and one to the *Advertiser*, but the groundswell of support he'd anticipated had never eventuated. 'Dear Ed., what will it take . . .' Later he wondered if he'd been too negative, unwittingly portraying himself as a redneck. But was it his fault if everybody else was too gutless to say what they really felt? And they must have felt it—it was natural, it was part of their history, their culture—the way *they* understood the world had come about.

He flicked over and Julie Andrews was just starting to run over the hills. Mary looked at him and smiled. 'Sid . . .?'

He sighed. 'Two hours of movie and ninety minutes of dog food ads.'

She smiled at him. 'Come on, it'll do you good.'

Stretching back in his Jason he resigned himself to raindrops on roses and whiskers on (dead) kittens. By the time Maria had arrived back in the abbey he was actually watching. He could remember an evening when they'd all sat around watching this; Heather had the piano score, she knew every word and sang along. Elly was only a child but she knew bits and pieces too. Egg just watched, fascinated by the Austrian countryside. There was hot chocolate and cups of tea and Arnotts' biscuits. There was an extended curfew, and jarmies warming in front of the heater as marshmallows dirtied clean singlets.

The snow had triggered memories for Mary too. Of the Christmas Eve she and Elly drove to St Finbars, Halls Creek, stopping to pick up a Filipino friend and her baby, the baby Jesus, Cabeza Vasquez. A steamy hall, a flat guitar and the

little drummer boy with a cut down Castrol tin. And St Elly of the back pew cacking herself, holding on to Mary's knee and saying, 'Mary, you should be up there with Joseph.'

'I didn't bring a bedsheet.'

Elly eyed off a crocheted rug hanging from the rafters: *In Excelsis Deo* . . .

Mary took her arm, 'No.'

Elly gave in. 'Wasn't there a whore in this story?'

Mary patted her knee, 'That comes later.'

Elly smiled, 'I hope they'll bear me in mind.'

Now, Mary looked up at Sid. 'Maybe Elly'd like to watch it?'

He shrugged. 'Hardly.'

She got up from her chair and walked past him, touching him on the shoulder. 'Sid.'

She left him sitting there, with a dog food commercial (after all, he figured, that was real life). Mary knocked on Elly's door and popped her head in. 'Elly, love, you awake?' She went over and sat on the bed. The bedsheets were ruffled but she hadn't attempted to fool her guards. Mary walked over to the open window and looked out; the flyscreen had been carefully removed and placed up against the house. She sat on the bed and switched on the lamp. She saw the diary and opened it to the final page. She read the hastily scribbled entry and knew it was for her benefit.

Sighing deeply she slammed it shut. What else could she do? Her orbit could be Sid but that would always amount to partial failure. After all, he'd found her in a photo-book in a Manila agency and courted her over a single pre-arranged meal in the hotel restaurant. He'd already bought her ticket home. She needed someone to choose her for different reasons. Turning off the light she closed the door behind her and returned to the living room. 'She's asleep.'

Sid shrugged. 'Yeah.'

It was inevitable: communion was more than communication, but communication was more than the roughly remembered words of a musical. 'Wanna cuppa?'

'Ta.'

Alf opened the magazine, revealing a Madonna more Gold Coast than biblical. Both of them stared at her. 'If this was Anna, you're tellin' me you wouldn't return?'

Jack traced her curves with his finger. 'She's probably on with some fuckwit too.'

Alf's mind went back over a string of girls he'd liked, but never really gone out with. Girls who'd been nice to him—one he'd met at a TAFE course, ringing her on and off for weeks, talking about livestock and where and when and with whom they'd worked, until he worked out that it was he who was doing all the calling. Until he held off to see if she ever called, which she didn't, of course. Typical. Still, there was only so much you could do. Not as though I'm the world's ugliest man, he'd thought at the time. Which led to personality. Not flash enough, not quick enough with the one-liners, he'd thought. Ah, so what, you can't work it out. Who the hell knows what they're after.

Elly moved her feet through the sand, searching for Rolly's toes and finding them. 'You know anything about farming, Rollins?'

'No.'

'How you gonna muster cattle?'

He clicked his fingers. 'Here, Rover.'

She looked at him and smiled. 'Do you know what a heifer is?'

‘Give me some credit.’

She turned her body at right angles and lay her legs across his. ‘This muster’s gonna be a whole lotta fun.’

Mary went out to the kitchen and put the kettle on. She passed out through the front door into the darkness of the desert. She could hear them off in the distance somewhere, singing. But then the voices stopped and there was nothing. Rolly had lost another boot, and had slipped and pulled her down with him. She landed on top of him, not entirely deliberately. He held her head in his hands and kissed her. Their bodies started to rub about in the sand like snakes, leaving trails, marks of where they’d been and what they might have done. Soon he was on top of her; their bodies moved together closely, firmly, like a desert fig working its way into a crevice. His hand charted its own course and before long caution was thrown to the cooling breeze which blew up around them.

Inside, the kettle started boiling and Mary walked back in. Sid called out from the living room, ‘Make mine a coffee,’ as he laughed at the antics of the nun, Maria starting to find her way in the world.

Rolly clawed and fumbled his way too, straining to hear the tunes from the telly in the distance.

'THERE BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD . . . '

Some days Darren wished he could die. The sea was always there, inviting him to jump in, to swim out. But he couldn't; he didn't know why he couldn't. Maybe it was what they said at St Michaels: suicide was a sin. He'd drop straight down through the salty brine to Hell. It would be on the floor of the sea, cluttered with rubbish. Fish hooks would float down, hovering above his head, tempting him back. And if he took the bait the Brothers would be standing there, holding the poles, ready to ensure his eternal repentance.

An old can-man, dressed rather formally, moved about from bin to bin under the soft, yellow light of the jetty. He approached Darren and nodded. Darren handed him a can, half smiled, and reached into his bag of worms. Jean and Arthur walked past the collector; he was headed back to land, they were headed out to sea.

'How's business?' Arthur enquired. The can-man nodded,

smiled and tipped his imaginary hat with his finger, making his way back to the kiosk. Arthur turned and looked after him. 'There but for the grace of God . . .'

Jean nodded her head. 'Rubbish. There's good money in it. Look how he's dressed.'

'Habits formed in an earlier life.'

'Yeah.'

'Look, he's old enough to get the pension. It's not something you'd choose to do.'

'Dunno. See a hell of a lot of 'em round these days. Must be somethin' in it.'

Arthur smiled. 'Right, same reason prozzies keep it up. Get yer ticket, do the hours, pay the bills. We should be careful not to over-romanticise these things, Jean.'

'Yes, your Holiness, I'm sorry.' She looked back at Arthur—at his polished leather shoes and his pressed slacks, at his business shirt, the sleeves turned up two rolls like any busy accountant. She knew she was right, King Bob had told her so. Still, there was no point arguing with the silly old bugger, he'd only start up on the Bible.

'The voice of one crying in the wilderness.'

Christ, it was too late!

Arthur went over and peeped into Darren's bucket. 'Any luck my friend?'

'No.'

Arthur looked up at the light-pole spider webs blowing in the wind and spoke, as though with the wisdom of a sage. 'Maybe Torrens Island, judging by the tides.'

Darren cast his gaze out to sea and ignored the old bugger. There was no point fishing anywhere except Grange. Jean's thoughts drifted out across the southern ocean, dissipating as they became more distant. Rolly was a world away—the feel

of his hand, the smell of his breath replaced with a telephone call or letter. Now she couldn't raise her voice and call him, 'Clive, love, pop on the kettle would yer?' Or sit with him in her garden at dusk, listening to birds prepare for the night, smelling chips and yiros from the Grange fish shop. Still, he'd come back a better person: stronger, more extroverted, which was a good thing, surely.

The rains had swollen the creek so that water splashed over the rim like a bathtub. The creek had never flowed; it was blocked at either end by the landscape, like an elongated sewer slowly working its way to the sea. It started out as a pool and then flowed into a series of lesser depressions; soon the water formed a chain which stretched out for a few hundred metres. Droplets jumped from the leaves of the lonely River Redgum and hit the water's surface like ripples on scummy bathwater.

Elly held tightly to the handlebars of her trailbike as she navigated the slippery banks of the creek. At times she was only inches from where the water lapped up. Rolly held on for dear life, burying his head in her shoulders, imagining the wheels giving way underneath them. As they moved along a pair of bustards took flight, but returned once they'd passed. She pulled up opposite the gum tree and searched the bank. As the engine idled Rolly loosened his grip. She looked at the carpet of pig-face (surely pinker after the rains, a touch of Barbie amid the desolation) and decided. She killed the engine and they got off, Rolly nearly slipping into the water. In the new silence that surrounded them she took a deep breath and held it. She looked at him. 'Smell it, it's one of the few consolations.'

Rolly took a deep breath and held it. It was like suburbia after rain, only sweeter and more intense. After the sea-borne

rains of Grange had subsided (which wasn't long, it never rained more than ten minutes) the natives reclined with their bellies full of water. Factory residues were washed away and the trees' natural perfumes were brought to life, parading their scents like so many society dames: Eucalyptus No. 5, Banksia *pour homme*. In the morning air each scent would waft in his window, clamouring for attention.

But when the rains came to Ningunna they came to stay. The black clouds had rolled in during the night. There was a great display of fork lightning and the crashing of drums before the overture: a gentle pattering of flutes on the roof. The tempo began to pick up with the rest of the woodwind, the strings, the brass, and finally full percussion. Elly sat at her window and looked out at Jake, sheltering under the lean-to which faced onto the yards. She started to smell the desert and felt sentimental towards the land which had always been her life. In a way she could never think of being away from here, but neither could she think of staying. She imagined there might be some compromise further down the line.

The next morning, much to Jack's and Rolly's relief, Sid decided to put back the muster. The boys awoke to Sid's alarm, to the air heavy with moisture, making it hard to breathe. Although it was only a couple of metres to the house, they were soaked by the time they reached the kitchen door. Mary reminded them to leave their dirty boots on the verandah and they went in for breakfast. When Sid broke the good news Rolly almost kicked the floor with joy. He listened to the rain pounding on the roof and asked, 'What can we do today?'

'Amuse yourselves.'

They both had to look into their Weeties to hide their smiles. Rolly was the first with the spoon in his mouth. 'What

do you do for fun around here?’ He looked at Mary and Elly and smiled.

‘There’s a museum tour at twelve,’ Elly offered.

Sid leaned forward and slipped on his elastic-sided RMs. ‘I gotta drive into town.’

Egg walked into the room. ‘I’ll come.’

‘No no, I want to see a few people.’

He pulled up his daks, grabbed his keys, kissed his wife and made for the door.

It was a long, lingering breakfast. As Mary cleared up Elly stretched back in her seat and looked at Egg. ‘Why don’t you show ’em your models?’

Egg eyed her suspiciously. She leaned forward and seemed to be sincere with the new boys. ‘They are good, I gotta give him that.’

Egg led them into his room with only a little reluctance. There was a small, lonely bed with a plain quilt, unmade, awaiting the domestic discipline of Mary. A cupboard stood open, revealing a mass of moleskins and check shirts, a pile of boots in the bottom and a pair of slippers—a present from Mary in her first year, when she was still learning. There was a bedside cabinet, again open, packed full of *Stock Journals* (and other reading matter, Rolly imagined). There was a desk covered in paper and pieces of cut plastic, partially stuck together.

Elly sat on the bed, the new boys sat next to her, and together they formed a sort of audience. Egg went through his collection, starting with the German battleships and working his way back to sail. ‘The Graf Spree, German pocket battle cruiser, you can really see the detail.’ He handed it to Jack, who sat in the middle. The three of them stepped aboard. It was faultless. A couple of sailors were polishing the guns, Elly

could see every detail of their uniforms—a sock slipping down to the ankle, a shiny belt buckle, scuffed boots and a singlet. One of them was unshaven and seemed to be laughing; he was telling the other one about his kids and how they pee'd in the bath. A series of carefully painted navigation flags were being folded: the creases were sharp, the margins white, the buckles gold and the ropes grey. The ship's metal was rusting in spots and an officer stood behind two recruits as they painted. On the bridge the captain was peering out through a pair of shiny new binoculars and one of the ratings was sipping a coffee.

Jack shook his head and looked at Egg. 'They're alive.'

Elly had never seen his 'arks' so closely before. She looked up at her brother. 'Bloody hell, you're in the wrong profession.'

But Egg couldn't speak. He shifted uneasily on his feet and shrugged. Elly looked back at the ship but wasn't thinking about naval warfare, she was thinking about him . . . why did he let us in? She remembered how they used to be close, how they'd hide from their parents in the shed, their dad calling in the distance, 'Elly! Egg!' But they just huddled together and laughed, confident that no one would ever find them.

Rolly looked up at him and was reminded of Darren. You could see only parts of people, parts they agreed to show—or let slip—parts that, in the end, probably described them best. He wondered how *he* would've ended up if he'd been in Egg's position, trading bookstores and libraries for empty stockyards. 'You should be doing this, I bet you'd prefer it?'

Egg smiled. 'It's a hobby,' he shrugged. 'No money in models.' But Elly knew that it was more than his hobby: it was a diary, a personal testament, something to leave behind in the desert to say 'I was here'.

After lunch Elly faked chords on the piano as Alf accom-

panied her in a sing-along through the golden years of the musical. In the way his words gelled with her simple harmonies and ridiculous vamps, Rolly sensed a little of the Rodgers and Hammerstein between them—a simple giving and receiving in which one complemented the other. Eventually Egg produced the score to *Oklahoma!* (pointing out that its writer knew nothing about farming) and took a solo on *Kansas City* and for a while, in the midst of it, he didn't care if he never saw another model.

In the middle of the afternoon, as the rain continued beating down, Elly cooked scones and they had a tea party. She remembered how she'd subjected Egg to a hundred such parties, drinking cordial tea and eating Yo-Yo scones. He was still as patient as ever; he was glad the rain hadn't trapped him inside as he dreaded it would. The scones tasted exactly as he remembered.

She threw the dishes in the sink and looked out of the kitchen window as the rain eased off. Mary was already half asleep in Sid's recliner, torn between the drearies and images in her head. Elly filled the sink with hot water and suds and Rolly grabbed a tea towel: just how it would be on their oasis. By the time the last dishes were put away Alf and Jack had disappeared to the out-house, to tapes of screaming heavy metal and wailing guitars. Egg was asleep on the lounge. Mary had decided against the less believable of the two worlds.

Elly took Rolly out to the shed. She wheeled the trailbike out of earshot and kicked it to life. As they set off, Rolly clung, desperately, unsure of his balance. After a while he felt he could trust her—he rode with the sway of her body and didn't fight when it felt like he might come off.

Elly and Rolly sat with their feet in the biggest pool of water along Canegrass Creek, paddling, their pants rolled up around

their knees. In the stillness after the storm the afternoon had become hot and sticky; air bubbled up from the bottom of the pool like something drowning in a sewerage aerator.

'I can't believe it,' she said, 'we used to play St Michaels all the time.'

They'd discovered another common thread to their lives: her Catholic education. Arthur would be in his element. He could explain how they'd been buggered by the powers that be—he would be sure to have some suitable (draconian) remedies. *The girl* had boarded at St Dominic's Priory—'My God,' (Rolly could hear his voice) 'what could be worse, a bloody convent education with a bunch of knackered old nuns telling you how a young lady should behave.'

They kicked their feet in the water, harder and harder, like a Whirlpool stuck on fast-spin. After they were both wet they stopped and the pool became still again. 'Did you ever debate?' she asked.

'No, I was one of the, uh, backward set. I tried tennis but it gave me the willies. All those freaks with their trophies and six million ribbons.'

'You could avoid that with debating.'

'Someone still has to win.'

'No, it's not winning or losing.'

Rolly smiled. 'Pituitaries always say that, but why else would you play?'

'It helps develop . . .'

'Please, Mr Speaker, I would like to propose that if we all got together afterwards, in some of my little dress-up clothes . . .'

'Right.' She punched him.

'Ow,' and he smiled. 'All there in your little tunics, pretending to be politicians. I used to watch them, it was all, "Look at me."'

'You're so cynical.'

'Me?'

'I wasn't even like that, I was a rogue debater. I put forward my own opinions.'

'I can just see that: year ten debating, "Is birth control desirable?" To kick off the affirmative . . .'

Elly pinched her chin in her fingers. 'Father Philip, let's be frank, the Pope seems to have it all wrong. Ever since the mass production of latex . . .'

'Silence! The terms of this debate are unreasonable. Instead we shall argue, "Should the host be placed in the mouth or in the hand?"' He smiled at her. 'You could turn that into something just as bad.'

'Father Philip, many have argued that it is unhygienic to go poking about in someone's mouth with a host, with the symbol of Christ's flesh mind you, but I am here today to argue that the big JC would have no objection.'

'Silence! There is no hope for you young lady. Twelve Hail Marys and two Glory Be's.'

'Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee—' And together, '—blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.'

Rolly continued reciting as Elly took a dead branch, knelt on all fours and started to absolve herself. 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.'

Rolly rose and approached her. 'I, John the Baptist, have come to wash away your sins.'

Elly shielded her eyes from the truth. 'No.'

'Come my daughter, the Lord calls you.'

Rolly grabbed her by the arms and dragged her towards the

water. They wrestled each other, laughing. Elly slipped on the mud, lost her balance and dragged him in. They splashed about for a moment before Rolly cradled her head. 'Evil child, with your dirty mouth, I absolve you of all sins. Hail Mary, full of grace . . .'

As he began his second Hail Mary he pushed her head under the water. She came back up, spitting. 'Thanks.'

Rolly backstroked across the pool. 'It's my Christian duty. Now you're a lamb of God.'

She sat on a submerged crevice and lay back. She could see the rain, still dropping from the leaves, and stuck out her tongue to catch some. 'I was never a lamb of God.'

'Yes, you were.'

'I was with this sort of, gang, we were all boarders. I'm sure Sister Margaret would have liked to see us dead.'

'Did she have the power?'

'Possibly. We were proper little problems. Once we broke into her room and put a franger over *his* head.' She laughed. 'She could never prove it was us.'

Rolly swam back towards her. 'But you were still little angels, I'm sure.'

Elly didn't reply, she just stared at him grinning. 'You reckon?'

'Of course.'

She slipped into the water, struggling with her T-shirt, eventually throwing it onto the pig-face. 'There are some things a good Catholic girl just wouldn't do.'

'Let me guess.'

He rolled on top of her and they washed underneath the water. Soon there was a small pile of clothes on the pig-face. Their bodies clung together, symbiotically, as they explored each other and kissed and swam in the cold, clear pool. And

then she whispered, only inches from his ear, 'I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell . . .'

Rolly held tightly for dear life, the host firm in his hands. 'I firmly resolve,' he whispered, 'with the help of Your Grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life.' Considering she had the potential to lead him in this direction, wiping away past disasters and setting the foundations of a new life, brick veneer or otherwise.

They swam for some time before drifting apart. All at once she was serious. 'Should we tell anyone?'

'What?'

She stopped to think. 'Maybe not, huh?'

He pushed off from the other side of the creek and glided back to her. He held her closely as they trod water. He stared at the reflections of light off her skin; her nose, curved like a parabola from an old maths text; her eyes, deep brown, a tunnel into the back of her head. And then he smiled. 'Are we in lurv?'

Her smile creased her cheeks and she blushed. 'I'm in lurv. Bad like. I want yer lovin'.'

They laughed. He dived down and grabbed her by the legs, pushing upwards and throwing her into the air. She screamed loudly and he went back for another go. She beat him off with the palms of her hands but it didn't help. She splashed back into the water and he was there again, lifting her up.

'Elly!' Sid screamed from the bank.

Elly turned away and covered herself, Rolly just bit his lip, trying to look innocent. He submerged his head and wondered if this was the end of his jackaroo days, over before they'd begun, but then thought, so what, as he guessed how much he'd get for his ute. Sid grabbed their muddy clothes, threw them into the water and walked back to his idling ute.

Rolly shook his head. 'Ten Hail Marys.'

Elly smiled and started to laugh. 'Well, they'll all know now.' And she felt glad.

Rolly climbed up the bank, using the pig-face as a rope ladder. Elly could see his little dick—dangling between his legs, deflated—and she knew nothing could stop them now. The pig-face pulled away from the bank and Rolly fell into the water. She broke up laughing as he struggled to gather his clothes, eventually shrugging and breaking into a wide grin. As they dressed, Rolly remembered Sid's words, 'seven, twelve and six'. Still, punctuality was the least of his problems now. Her body, silhouetted between a couple of small date palms, was his one consolation.

They slowly walked back towards the ute, watching Sid in the passenger's seat, the door open. When he heard them he came towards them and said, 'Yer both as bad as each other.' Singling out his daughter and raising his voice, 'This isn't how we brought you up!'

'Who brought me up? You and . . .'

'Watch what you say.'

'Why? Rolly already knows . . .'

'Elizabeth.'

She spoke slowly, dwelling on each word. 'He . . . knows . . . what . . . you're . . . like.'

Sid went around to the driver's side. 'Get in the car, both of yers.'

Elly followed him. 'If Mum was here . . .'

'Stop it.' He raised his hand in the air and Rolly stepped forward. Sid looked at him. 'You wanna say something?'

There was silence as they rode back to Ningunna, dripping, crammed into the front of Sid's ute. Tempers calmed and soon there was just the sound of the road beneath their feet. Elly

looked at Rolly but didn't meet his eyes. He was staring down at a package on the passenger-side floor; he wondered what it was. Sid looked at him and then at Elly. With his eyes he indicated the package. 'Go on then, open it.' As she tore it open Sid felt as though this was the most he could do. He didn't know whether he was shocked or just disappointed. She opened the package which contained her favourite perfume.

'Now I feel bad,' she said.

'So you should.'

She tried the perfume, inhaling deeply. Sid's thoughts moved through the warm, steamy desert. He hoped to God that Rolly wasn't as rampant as he was at that age. 'In my day,' he began, 'a fella would ask a girl's father.'

Right now, Elly dared not say what she was thinking. Rolly whispered, 'Maybe, I would've.'

'It's a sign of respect, otherwise it's just, bugger you, I'll do what I want.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Smith.'

'Sid.' As he drove he thought of church picnics in Halls Creek's Civic Park—the fellas in ties, sticking together until they thought it was safe to approach the girls. As parents watched. But then he returned to Streisand in the cab, a broken tacho and the glass fallen out of his rear-vision. And what can you do anyway, it was just a matter of time.

The one consolation, although Rolly didn't know, was that it could have been worse. As they drove back Alf's magazine bobbed up from its hiding place and exposed the feats of a young Californian to the world. The corners of the pages turned up as it floated in the canegrass, awaiting some Pharaoh's daughter to come and rediscover the world's latest saviour. Streisand hit a high D as Elly slid her hand under Rolly's leg and squeezed his finger.

S T E W

The crockpot was chipped and starting to crack. It was the product (along with a set of ceramic, pastel ducks) of a six-week craft course she'd done with the mother of Baby Jesus. Since then it'd held nothing but stew, tonnes and tonnes of stew. She put it into the middle of the table and they all helped themselves. Egg avoided the turnips. Mary scowled and he almost smiled: 'You know I hate them.'

'They're good for you.'

With a twist of her head Elly flicked back her wet hair. 'I could never work out what that meant.'

They all stared at her, wondering, silently. Mary sat down and started to cut the bread. 'What?'

'It's good for you.'

Sid spoke with his mouth half full. 'What?'

'How do you know turnips don't give you cancer?' She looked at her brother. 'I think it's just as well, something that tastes that bad.'

They ate quietly. Rolly stared into his stew. Sid stared at a fly crawling across the laminate. They both tried desperately to avoid eye contact, but at one point it happened. Sid returned to his stew and Rolly swallowed uneasily. For a while they all avoided the obvious question, but at length Egg couldn't resist. He looked at his sister and smiled, 'You two go for a swim?'

Elly was ready for him. 'Skinny-dipping.'

He lifted his eyebrows and cleared his throat. Elly considered the gallery of faces. 'Everyone was invited.'

Sid was scooping gravy with his bread, but stopped. 'Think that's clever?'

She pointed at Egg. 'He asked.'

Sid just nodded in disgust and returned to his gravy, unsure again if he was much of a parent. Heather had a way of dealing with these situations which was beyond him. Of course back then it was just a minor squabble: Elly wouldn't get off Egg's bike, Egg wouldn't let Elly ride Jake. He drained a glass of water and retired to the living room, to the news. As he went he looked back at Rolly: you had to assume the worst when there was so much at stake.

Egg stared at his sister as she pushed away her plate.

'What you smiling at?'

He waved his finger at her, 'Tch tch tch.'

'Fuck off.'

And from the living room. 'Elly.'

Egg looked at Rolly. 'You'll go straight to hell.'

Rolly looked back with a patronising smile he knew he wouldn't have got away with a couple of days ago. Elly found her brother's leg and kicked it. Mary put her napkin down on the table. Jack noticed that it was the same design as the Tropicana's with palm-leaves, coconuts and toucans. With the napkin grasped in her hand Mary was reaching for new

heights of autocracy. She bobbed her head from side to side between her stepchildren. 'Will you two ever stop?' she whispered. 'I'm sick of hearing it all day.'

Egg got up from the table and leaned towards his step-mother. 'Did I strip off in front of a total stranger?'

Elly burst out laughing. 'I'm sure they wouldn't mind, Noah.'

He slammed his chair and disappeared into his room. Jack watched him go and thought how he'd like to get him alone, to pin him in a corner and say all the things he should've said to Warren. 'People like you fuck me off no end you arrogant, little fucker.' Instead he just sat and wiped his mouth and said, 'Nice, Mary,' as she took the crockpot and began to clear the dishes.

When the others had left she ran the water and went to Sid. 'So?'

He shrugged, straining to hear the weather. She sat down next to him and put her hand on his. 'I think it's a case of infatuation.'

He took his hand back.

She stared at him. 'So . . .?'

'So what?' He paused and listened to the scripted one-liners at the end of the bulletin. It made him even more depressed.

She harped at him. 'What we gonna do?'

'Should drown the buggers.'

She smiled. 'What about the castrator rings?'

He grinned, caught with the idea. 'I'll hold 'em down, you slip 'em on.'

She reached over, put her arm around his neck and buried her head in his shoulders. It took the sound of dishwater splashing onto the kitchen floor to pull her away.

Outside Elly stood under the lean-to, brushing down Jake.

Alf approached her and sat on the fence. 'Us black fellas, we're thinking of going into town for a drink.'

'I don't think so.' She stroked Jake's legs with a firm hand and his nerves twitched. 'Considering . . .'

'Oh.' Alf looked more closely at the horse. 'His nerves are bad.'

She looked at the house. 'Comes from all those years living with *him*.'

He couldn't get her talking anymore. There was a time, before, when she'd come out especially to talk to him. But now she hardly even looked at him. How it is with Rolly, that's how it used to be. Last year she'd talked him into doing a TAFE course with her in Halls Creek. Every Wednesday night they'd drive in together, their conversation drifting back to the inevitable. 'You stand up to Egg, he'll back off,' she promised. 'Cleaning those out-houses, that's not your job.'

'My job's what Sid says.'

'Not Egg though.'

'You tell Dad when we get home, I'll come with you.' As she clutched the wheel and looked over the dash, spitting dust from her mouth.

Alf watched her with Jake, relishing the simplicity of her touch. At length he said, 'That out-house stinks. Jack's got something wrong with his bowels.'

She just kept brushing, mutely. A dollop of hot, yellow shit dropped from Jake's arse but he didn't even blink. Elly smiled. 'He's not the only one.' She glanced at him but quickly returned to the horse. That was the look he remembered. He searched for it again. 'Rolly's not much better.'

'I've heard him.' She started on Jake's mane. 'He even has this trick with a match.'

Alf smiled. 'I can do that.'

‘He burnt the hair off his . . .’ She stopped, unsure whether he was really safe anymore.

He pursued her, determined to know what she was thinking. ‘So what was it, a competition?’

‘No,’ she whispered, dismissively, thinking of the promise of going to town and of more time with Rolly. She could easily beat him at pool; she could show him how lucky he was, a room full of farmer’s sons howling. ‘No, I better leave it,’ she said. ‘But just watch him, make sure he keeps his pants on.’

Alf bowed his head and sighed. At least it was good to know where you stood, even if it was at the back of the bus. He went back to the out-house and, in time, she switched off the light in the lean-to and went back to her room.

As Sid’s snores passed out into the garden, Mary II, nestled underneath the sweet-smelling roses on the little bit of green lawn they tried to keep watered, drank from a puddle of scummy water and jumped over a half-broken fence. Sid was deep in a dream, re-cast as a seven year old standing next to his father. Sid senior was leaning under the bonnet of his car fixing his engine. ‘Damn!’

He looked at his son. ‘You know the spanners?’

Sid junior nodded and made for the shed. Sid senior nursed a bleeding finger, and sucked it as a big Shorthorn steer wandered over to the fence and watched him. Sid picked up a handful of dirt and threw it. ‘G’ off.’ The steer moved a few steps and kept munching. Sid junior returned from the shed with a set of screwdrivers and held them up to his father.

‘Jesus!’ Sid senior shook his head. ‘I ask you to do one simple thing.’ His pot-bellied father stormed off into the shed, returning with a spanner which he waved in his face. ‘See, can you remember that?’

Sid junior nodded. He looked down at the ground as his

father wrestled with the plugs. The flyscreen door slammed and his mother appeared with a tin of Ajax in her hand. She held up a piece of broken tile and looked at them both. 'I found this stuffed in the vanity.' They looked at him. He turned and ran as far as he could, as fast as he could. He ran so fast his temples beat and he felt like his heart might explode. Eventually he stopped underneath a big gum, climbed up and sat among the lemon-scented leaves, looking back at his parents. They were just a couple of small dots talking, probably about him.

'You shouldn't be so hard on him, Sid.'

'Jesus, just hand me the spanner.'

She was unsure but she handed him something. 'You know how he hangs off your every word.'

Sid senior finished tightening the plugs and looked up. 'Remind me to get some grout next time we're in town.' His finger kept bleeding, he sucked it.

Mary was asleep with her arms across Sid's chest. She was also a child, wearing no clothes, running through a rice paddy. There was someone chasing her, breathing heavily in the dark, hot tropical night. As she ran, her legs sank into the mud, almost up to her knees. Away in the distance, on top of a hill, the lights of the orphanage burnt brightly. All of the kids stood about in the courtyard, calling to her, shaking the mesh fence. Some of them held streamers on the end of long sticks, some of them held Chinese lanterns. She watched one catch fire and flare up. She couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but she could see and hear that they were screaming themselves hoarse. All of a sudden the fence came down and they poured forth towards her. She put out her hand, symbolically. They got to the edge of the paddy but just stood there screaming, 'Mines! Mines!'

She woke up and blinked a few times. Sid was still snoring. She tried to swallow but her mouth was too dry. She sighed as she smelt the scent of her roses blowing in through the window on the cool desert breeze. She decided it was best to go back to sleep and hoped that by morning she would have forgotten it.

Mary II nudged her nose into the flyscreen door and came inside. She sniffed around in the kitchen, licking some spilt stew on the floor. She stuck her head in the bin but could only find some broken bits of plastic, turnips, an old paint bottle and some dried-up glue on newspaper. She moved down the hallway. There was a light on in Egg's room. She entered, brushing up against his leg, and he dropped a rating into the partially completed hull of a destroyer. 'Shit!' He dropped the boat, reached down, grabbed Mary II and threw her out of his room, slamming the door. She sauntered into Elly's room, smelling of lavender: Elly, the soother of mange, the provider of soggy beef-bits.

Elly was dreaming about her oasis. She was climbing up a hill towards the house, a bucket of water in her hands. She walked on a brick path that wound its way through a garden. There were ferns, lots of ferns, as well as fuchsias, rhododendrons, daisies, foxglove, honeysuckle, and a host of smaller shrubs hidden in the cool shade of an ancient oak. She had planted anything that offered smell, food or the poetry of form—anything except roses. It was an English country garden, but it was still an oasis, marooned in the middle of a desert. She walked into the house and went through to the kitchen. He was there at the sink peeling potatoes. She came up behind him and put her arms around him.

He took her hand and kissed it, speaking softly, 'Best get to those lettuces before they go to seed.'

They both looked out at the vegetable garden with its tomatoes, lettuces, chillies, pumpkins and broad-beans. They wanted to plant more but there was no room. A hose dribbled into an old glass jar, irrigating their dreams like so many rice paddies. The potential was always there for things to sour, for the underground water to dry up, for termites to eat their wood (in a place where no builder would venture).

‘What’s for tea?’ she whispered.

He turned around. She covered her mouth and stepped back, falling into a chair. ‘Jack . . . where’s Rolly?’

‘Who?’

‘Rolly, my husband.’

He continued peeling potatoes. ‘You’ve got the strangest sense of humour. Could you get the water boiling?’

‘Jack, has he gone?’

He smiled. ‘I’ve often mistaken you for your mother. Come on, these potatoes are done.’

She took the saucepan and filled it with water. After tea she searched the house for a trace of him, but there was none. What had been his undies were Jack’s. What had been his yellow notebook was now a soggy copy of *Double Fists*. In the evening she went and sat next to him in front of the fire. Even the pictures on the wall were different. She didn’t know whether to get up and run from the house, from her oasis, or to stay and get used to it. After all, this is what she’d wanted.

Rolly was dreaming he was at a barbecue. He sat with a beer in his hand facing an old man who never seemed to stop talking. He often had this dream. It was always the same old man—he’d never met him or at least couldn’t remember him. He poked his scaly, old brown finger at Rolly as he lectured. ‘It’s the unions that did it to this bloody country. They got organised and it became more, more, more. One time the

unions were good for the working man. Nah, not anymore. You take Hawkey. When he was in the ACTU no one could touch him. You had a problem? On the phone and it'd be fixed like that. But when he got into Canberra.' He rubbed two fingers together. 'What d' you reckon?'

'S'pose.'

'Of course. They got their cars and their free travel and their swimming pools in Parliament House. Eh? Can you believe that? Didn't give us a bloody pool at the smelters. That Bob fella on the radio, you listen to him?'

'No.'

'He reckons they should be given the same as a tradesman. Imagine what's-his-face on a plumber's wage! That'd sort out whether they really want to be there, bloody criminals.'

Rolly took out his notebook and started to write entry number sixty-four: 'Silly Old Bugger. He sits there like a burst sewer, spewing out—' He kept writing as the old man moved onto crime and punishment.

'In our day you had a real police force. They were there on the beat, you knew you were safe. Now, just think, when's the last time you saw any coppers on the beat down your street? Nah. All they want's more pay rises. Like the bloody teachers; they're off home at three o'clock every day, half the bloody year they got holidays, but nah . . .'

Meanwhile, Jack, snoring loudly, was in the desert, walking across the dry, cracked bed of a salt lake. Heat haze danced in front of him. He thought he could make out two figures in the distance, approaching; one was carrying the other on his back.

Sid walked beside him, 'explaining things'. 'See, the government gave the Abos some of the best properties—Page's Bore, Mount Paterson—and said, "Nah, don't pay no tax, you can still keep gettin' your welfare."'

After what seemed like an hour of Sid's lecturing they approached Roy, the truckie they'd met on the roadside, carrying his half-dead son on his back. 'G'day, Jack, how are you?'

'Good. You?'

Roy shrugged. 'Never been better. Beautiful day, eh? Gotta get the youngest home to his mother.' Jerry lifted his head and started to sing his familiar air-horn serenade.

Sid started to shake his head. 'Who are you?'

'Name's Roy . . . left my rig some way back.'

'I didn't give you permission to come onto my property.'

Roy laughed. 'Yours, huh? This is blackfellas' country. You don't own it mister.'

'I'll give you . . .' Sid was off after them. Roy was quickly away, with Jerry laughing and whipping him on. As they made their way across the desert Sid couldn't catch them. Jack sat down and started to laugh.

Alf woke and then drifted back to sleep, back into a giant athletics stadium filled with thousands of spectators, spilling down from the seating onto the central oval. Towards the front of the stadium there was a stage set up: rows of dignitaries, politicians, celebrities and sports stars waited for their turn at the microphone. Alf was standing on the grass in the middle of the oval. He really wanted to know what was happening. He had to know. The crowd was talking and cheering so loudly that he couldn't make sense of the words. He had to find out. He fought his way through the crowd and up onto the stage. He sat in an empty chair and spoke to a rather vague-looking sportsman. 'What's going on?'

'You don't know?'

Alf shook his head.

'Where you been? You missed a good show.'

Alf explained that he'd been away working on a cattle

station. The sportsman patted him on the back. 'Bad luck, but at least you arrived in time for the main event.'

'What's that?'

'Any minute now, the end.'

'The end?'

The crowd applauded wildly and the previous speaker dragged Alf up to say a few words. He stood there, mute, staring out at them. By degrees they fell silent. His brow creased and he only managed to utter three words, 'What's the end?' The crowd wondered what he meant. Was it a trick question? Everyone, especially the celebrities, knew about the end.

Off in the distance they heard an explosion and everybody turned to look. A giant mushroom cloud began to grow skywards. A hushed moan of amazement spread through the audience. A journalist with a tape recorder moved about on the stage interviewing celebrities: 'And what do you think about the Apocalypse?'

A politician spoke, 'Well, it's been a long time coming but I think people will find it's been well worth the wait.'

'And you, sir, what do you think?'

A beggar with a sandwich board ('Are you destined for the winepress?') was weighing up his chances. 'The cockroach is blessed with the perfect outer shell, but nothing can protect him from a wayward size fourteen.'

'And you madam?'

A teen soap idol: 'What can I say? And to think my character just got pregnant!' She laughed and showed the journalist her T-shirt: it was a picture of people being melted by high temperature radiation. They had smiles on their faces and kept dancing as they burnt. They drank a popular soda drink which tasted like crushed ants mixed with sugar. The picture suggested that everything would be okay in the end.

‘And you, sir?’

A sportsman: ‘About time people had some real entertainment. When they built this stadium they said we’d never look back. And look at that.’ He pointed at the rapidly approaching cloud.

An old man with a beard jumped onto the stage and grabbed the journalist’s microphone. ‘It’s not true. We shouldn’t have let our guard down. It’s just what they wanted.’ He went over to the podium, pushed Alf out of the way and spoke to the crowd. ‘Now look what we’ve got! It’s all over.’

The crowd cheered and started to chant. ‘We want the end! We want the end!’

The ground started to shake violently and before he knew it Alf felt the hot wind pick him up and throw him around by the ankles. He woke up. The desert outside was still after the shrillness of the stadium.

THE DONKEY HUNT

The four of them stood on a sand ridge looking out across the spinifex. A mob of cattle spread out below them for miles, moving about slowly, ripping at clumps of Mitchell grass. The two utes were parked behind them: Sid's with a bloodied roo-bar from a dazed Euro who wouldn't get out of his way, and Rolly's with a steaming radiator—the news just kept getting better from Camelot.

Sid stepped forward and used his hands to describe the landscape. 'So what we wanna do is bring this lot in.'

Rolly ground his boot into the dust. 'Quite a job.'

'And it's our first year without the Abos, so it could be interesting.'

'You ever tried a muster with a helicopter?' Jack asked, unsure if he was out of his league.

Egg, the boss's delegate, explained. 'When we win the Lotto, Jacky boy.'

Jack stared at him, grinding his teeth.

'So,' Sid continued, 'once we get 'em into the yards we wean the calves.'

'Put 'em in separate,' Egg continued, 'get 'em used to being handled.' He surveyed the new boys with the indifference of a complete professional. Sid looked at him and sighed, picking up his train of thought, 'Then we're gonna take off their horns, check 'em over, vaccinate and brand.'

Egg smiled. 'And of course, turn the little boys into steers, eh, Dad?'

'Yeah.'

Rolly frowned. 'How do we do that?'

Egg explained with relish. 'Little elastic band we put around the top o' their balls. Cuts off the blood supply.'

Jack frowned. 'Ow.' Rolly was wondering if all this would be within their grasp: the vast distances, the muster, the half-crazed bulls and protective mothers they'd have to handle, fiddling around with sweaty old balls. He wondered whether he would've been better off at McDonald's; at least he could get the bus home after work. And there was always the Parklands.

Egg was thinking the same thing. 'Dunno, Dad, can't see how we're gonna do it without Les and the boys.'

Sid looked at Egg with a blank, detached expression. 'You're up to it, Egg.'

'Yeah, right.'

'And these two fellas learn quickly.' He looked at them both. 'Think what you've picked up already.'

Jack stepped forward and squinted to make out the numbers. 'These are all Shorthorn?'

Sid moved up behind him. 'We've always had Shorthorn. Thrive in these conditions.'

Egg shook his head. 'Everybody else got into Brahman years ago.'

Sid grinned. 'Like you said, Egg, when we win the Lotto. If you wanna buy a couple I'm more than happy to try 'em out. Make it my birthday prezzie.'

'Right.'

Sid faced towards the plains again, speaking to the new boys. 'All that time at college wasn't wasted.'

Jack squinted. 'They're not cows.'

They all stepped forward to the edge of the ridge. Egg smiled. 'Donkeys!' There was a group of six or seven, running towards them. Egg thought that all his birthdays had come at once. He climbed onto the back of his dad's ute, sat down in the red dust and started to load his rifle. Sid kicked the engine to life and made off down the sand ridge. Just as quickly, Jack was in the passenger's seat of Rolly's ute as he engaged the clutch and slid off down the red hill.

Rolly had his foot to the floor, swerving to avoid clumps of Mitchell grass. Sid wasn't concerned about that, he just pointed his ute in a straight line and let the desert make way for him. Rolly couldn't keep up with him, and as a cloud of fine, red dust settled around him he slowed to try to navigate his way out of it. A couple of hundred metres in the distance Egg was taking aim at the first of the donkeys. He squeezed the trigger, the animal's legs gave way and it dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes. He took aim at another one, fired and missed. Rolly stopped his ute and Jack jumped up onto the back. As Rolly gunned the accelerator, Jack wound the strap of the rifle around his arm and bent over to take aim.

Meanwhile, Egg had dropped another donkey. They were a perfect team: Egg shouted directions to his dad and they cut across the plains in pursuit of one they'd singled out. They

chased it, in and out, back on its own tracks, over sand ridges, until Egg got a shot through the back of its head.

‘Hundred and eighty, hard left. Closer.’

Rolly saw how they were working and took the lead. He called out to Jack, ‘Give me some bloody directions!’

‘There’s one on its own.’

‘Where?’

‘Uh, eleven o’clock.’

Rolly turned the wheel and gunned the accelerator, determined to go home with blood on his windscreen. He came up behind the donkey and held a firm course. Jack took aim and squeezed the trigger but didn’t even come close. He took aim again, and squeezed the trigger, the animal tumbled and fell. It tried to get up but its legs wouldn’t hold it. Jack hit the top of the ute. ‘Go round.’

They pulled up, got out of the ute and went over to the donkey. There was a bullet hole in its hind leg. ‘Good shot,’ Rolly smiled. Jack went over and put the rifle to the animal’s head. He stopped before pulling the trigger. For a moment Rolly wondered whether he really would. It was a dull spit, like the air-guns Rolly remembered from Semaphore’s side-show alley. The donkey stopped kicking. Jack handed his mate the rifle and said, ‘Want a go?’ Rolly took the rifle, jumped onto the back and they set off. Soon there was another one in their sights, a young one. He couldn’t run as fast as the others and Rolly wondered whether it was unsporting. But by now the adrenalin was pumping and the rush of the hunt was driving him forward.

He thumped on the roof. ‘One-eighty.’ Jack turned the wheel hard, straightened up and planted his foot, leaving a cloud of dust behind him. The animal turned around, doubled back past the ute and disappeared into the dustcloud. Rolly

hit the roof again. 'One-eighty.' Jack repeated his manoeuvre and accelerated straight into the dust. Rolly closed his eyes and pursed his lips, looking every now and then to see if they were through. Inside the cabin Jack couldn't see a thing but he kept his foot planted. At last they appeared from the dust. Rolly moved the gun to his shoulder. For only a second Jack saw Sid's face coming straight for him; he'd rehearsed this moment in his mind a hundred times but it didn't help. He kept his foot to the floor, shocked.

Sid swerved to avoid him. Egg went flying from the back of the ute and landed shoulder first in a tuft of grass. He looked up and spat the sand out of his mouth. Sid was braking hard but it was too late: the front wheels of his ute dropped into a ditch and he stopped with a dull thud. Jack braked and Rolly's ute rolled quietly to a stop.

'You fucking idiot.' Egg stood up and walked over to Jack. He opened the door and pulled him out of the cabin. 'What were you doing?' Jack was lost for words. Egg pushed him with both hands and he fell into the sand. 'Nearly killed us!' He picked him up by the arm and held him against the ute by the scruff of his T-shirt. 'Nearly broke my fucking neck.'

But Jack just stood there. Sid crawled up from the ditch and surveyed the situation. He called out loudly, 'Egg!' Egg released his grip and walked back to his dad's ute. They stood there together, looking at the damage.

Rolly jumped down from the back of his ute and stood next to his friend, 'You okay?' Jack sighed, they smiled at each other and slowly walked over to Sid. The little donkey caught up with his mother and they stood looking back into the dust cloud. They turned and ran off, looking for the other survivors. There was nothing to say.

Sid looked at the two boys. 'Somethin' with you two every day, eh?'

Jack stepped forward. 'C'mon, if we'd stayed put you woulda complained. We can't win.'

Sid stepped towards him and pointed his finger at his chest. 'If you got a problem workin' for me . . .'

Jack shook his head and looked down at the ground. Rolly looked out towards the donkeys. After a while he got organised and pulled Sid out with a rope. There didn't seem to be much damage: the engine was running and it drove. As they helped him, Sid just kept shaking his head, occasionally looking up at them, 'Pair o' bloody idiots.'

Rolly could sense it was about more than donkeys. As visions of *The Overlanders* faded he realised that it was only a matter of time before Sid spat the dummy completely. He was dreading the muster more each day, as was Jack, trying to avoid Egg's stare as they stood about. He looked up and Egg mouthed some words he couldn't make out, shaking his head and finally laughing a dismissive sort of laugh.

Sid and Egg drove home slowly, in silence. At one point the boss looked at his son, spitting dust from his mouth. 'No need to go on like y' did.'

Egg was incredulous. 'They just about killed us.'

'Looked like a bloody thug in a pub fight.'

He rolled his eyes and looked at his father disbelievingly. 'I's the one thrown over.'

'And I's the one in the ditch, doesn't make no difference. When you're in charge you keep your head. Deal with things later.'

They drove on in silence. At one point Egg muttered, 'I'm sorry', with more than a touch of sarcasm.

'What happens if there's a real emergency? Gotta keep your head. Pair o' bloody idiots, I know, but it doesn't change things.'

There was nothing more to say.

DANNY BOY

They sat in the out-house, on Alf's bed, playing Scrabble. The long words were hers, the little ones his. A revelation—a five-letter word! He laid them out carefully: p (+) a n d a. 'There, that's three, four, one (triple letter) . . .'

'That's seven.'

'Thank you, seven, eight, nine, ten.'

He scribbled his score onto the notepaper and took another four tiles.

'Congratulations.' She smiled and lifted her eyebrows sarcastically. 'Unfortunately for you, the God of Scrabble seems to be sending me the right letters today.' She laid them out proudly: f (+) a s t e r. 'Now, let me see, that's four (double letter), eight, nine . . . one (double letter), eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen.' She took some more markers as Rolly reluctantly wrote down her score. He searched his letters. Nothing.

She searched his face for something more important. 'I wouldn't give him a cent.'

Rolly shrugged. 'What can I do?'

Elly tapped on the Scrabble board. 'You were out there working for him. Is it your fault?'

'Well.' He looked up from his letters. 'It sort of was, the way we were driving.'

'Of course. You should have known.' She paused and stared at him.

'How d' you think I feel? I gotta send Arthur money for that clapped out loada shit and now this.' She smiled at him and even finance seemed to have a lighter side. 'I'll have to cut the balls off plenty of cows to pay for this.'

She started to laugh. 'Steers, my good boy.'

'Sorry, sir, Sid, boss.'

She lifted her head and stared down her nose at him. 'Not only will you and that friend of yours pay for the repairs, but you can also report to my room every night at seven o'clock to kiss my arse.'

'Can I? Please?'

But that's not quite how it happened. Sid sat at the dining room table with Egg standing behind him. The two boys stood opposite with their hands behind their backs.

'It was stupid,' he began. Mary came and set a coffee in front of him, quiet so as not to disturb the men's business. 'You had no right doin' wheelies.'

'We weren't,' Jack said, meekly. 'This donkey kept weaving around, I was just trying to get him.'

It was no good. The verdict was final. He pointed his finger at them and said, 'You can both work it off between yers.'

Jack shook his head, sighed, looked down at the ground and kicked his foot into the carpet. Rolly just stared at him,

resolute. He wished they'd never seen the bloody donkeys.

'And what's more,' Elly continued, her hands on her hips, 'you will be confined to Gulag Ningunna under the supervision of Comrade Egg. Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Here he is now.'

Egg came up the steps and into the out-house. He stood at the door. Elly looked at him and saluted. 'Comrade, your prisoner is ready, take him away.'

'Fuck you.' He eyed them both suspiciously. 'Have you seen Dad?'

Elly dropped back into her motherly, pandering mode. 'No, but he'll be home soon. In the meantime let's sing the Sid song.'

Egg slammed the door and made for the shed. Jack and Alf were busy stripping Elly's trailbike. 'Either of you two seen Dad?'

They both sat there, silent. Alf shrugged. Egg looked at the smart one and then at the fender on his dad's ute. 'Not as bad as I thought, luckily.'

Alf spoke, only half-heartedly. 'Yeah, 's lucky, Egg.'

Egg continued, still looking at Jack. 'Y' oughta seen it, Alf. Coulda broke my bloody neck.'

Alf didn't reply. Jack looked up from the rusty manifold and eyed Egg with disgust. 'Lucky you didn't, eh?'

Egg went outside to the rose garden where his father was watering the roses. Alf continued stripping as Jack cleaned off the grease with an oily rag. 'I'd just like to get him alone.'

'No, you wouldn't. He's a strong bastard. You should see how he can throw a steer.'

'Yeah? Maybe I could wait till he's asleep.' Jack smothered the manifold with his oily rag. 'We could say it was all that model glue.'

Alf smiled as the seed of an impossible plot was sown between them.

Back in the out-house Elly was still waiting for Rolly to make a word. 'Come on, there's over a million words in the English language.'

'None with these letters.'

She continued flicking through the notebook he'd given her. She guessed it was very private by the way he'd hidden it in the sleeve of his case, packed under a small mountain of undies. When he handed it to her she knew she was entering another part of his life, perhaps the most private of all. She could already recognise parts of him in its corniness (describing himself as a lost Lassie) and humour (an unfunny sequence in an Indian restaurant). In other sections she could fathom parts of him she hadn't yet seen (a scene in which his body was cut in a hundred places by the scalpel of a lost father named Reg). She told him about how her privacy had been violated over the years, starting with the time Mary, just a few weeks after her arrival, had tidied her room, rummaging through everything from her tampons to her angst-ridden poetry. She'd caused a scene, and Sid had tried to break it up and make everyone happy, Mary vowing that it wouldn't happen again. Later on Mary came into her room. 'Elly,' she said, holding her hand, 'I don't want to get off to a bad start.'

'Mary, it's okay, I forgive you. It's just, some of the things in here are . . . private.'

'I know. Truce?' They shook hands. Mary smiled and hugged her. Elly explained that she'd felt like she was in some awful soapie where everything worked out just peachy. She described to Rolly how the whole period after Mary's arrival had seemed surreal. 'I'd turn around and she'd be standing at my door. "Hello, Elizabeth, do you want to go for a walk?"'

‘Where to?’

Mary had tried so hard it was embarrassing for everyone, even Sid. ‘In the end he must have said something to her, ’cos she just kept to herself.’ Elly stopped talking and looked at his tortured face. ‘D’ you want a hand?’

‘No, what am I, King Idiot?’

She smiled, flicking through the notebook. ‘Isn’t there a time limit on moves? Like an hour or something?’

He smiled his most patronising smile. ‘If you had letters like these.’

‘So you said.’ She squinted, reading, ‘The Singing Can-Man,’ as Rolly started to sing, ‘“I made love to the dustman’s daughter . . .”’

‘Please, don’t tax your mind, we’ll be here all night.’

‘I know at least ten of his songs.’ And then came a medley of ‘Danny Boy’, ‘Love Me Tender’, and some lesser known Sinatra.

‘Christ!’ She closed her eyes, blocked her ears and screamed loudly, adopting a cockney accent. ‘Leave it to them what knows, eh?’

‘He’s a friendly can-man. Some of the homeless are quite anti-social.’

‘But this is so, so scientific.’

‘What d’ you mean?’

‘I mean it’s very well written, but it’s like you’re cataloguing a new species of cockroach.’

‘No, not at all, I do this ’cos I’m interested in them. No one else cares about them—but they’re unique.’

‘Unique?’

‘Unique.’

‘Exactly. Like a new species of cockroach.’

‘No, it’s ’cos I feel for them.’

‘Oh, God bless you, Mahatma.’

'It's just as well you weren't married to Shakespeare, he wouldn't have dared write a word.'

'He would've written his best sonnets for me.'

And Rolly knew she was right. His compendium was a love poem, of sorts, for her. He knew it wasn't really adequate, but he'd never pretended to be more than just a scribbler.

She slammed the book shut. 'What about . . . car . . . or dog?'

'Just another minute.' He studied his letters even more closely as she leaned back against the wall and sighed.

'Ah!' Her eyes lit up; it was Alf's wallet, left on the ledge above his bed. She picked it up and eyed it mischievously.

'Don't even think about it,' Rolly admonished. 'Who was complaining about a lack of privacy?'

She looked so innocent. 'Dunno. Not me.' She opened it up and started to look through it: driver's licence, credit cards and, in the zipper, a phonecard and a passport-sized photo. She pulled it out and looked at the face. It was the duplicate from her licence; she was wearing her hair up and smiling. All at once *she* felt like a cockroach, pinned onto a display board—collected, labelled, observed by strangers' eyes in the darkness of a humming laboratory. She put the photo back, closed his wallet and put it on the ledge.

'Yes!' Rolly arranged the tiles on the board. P (+) o t.

She looked at the board and frowned. 'That's it?'

'Yep.'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sid junior sat in a squeaky leather chair, looking over the bank manager's desk. A single marble unit held an inkwell, two fountain pens and a set of little tablets which gave the date: JAN. 28, 1942. There was a paper blotter, bound with leather on the corners, imprinted with the words SAVINGS BANK OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA. There was a large folder holding a pile of documents, his name, SMITH, written across the front in thick black text.

His father and the sweaty manager were talking about repayments, deadlines and money 'in the red'. The manager kept prefacing everything with the words, 'The bank would *like* to help if at all possible . . .'

At one point Sid senior leaned forward on his squeaky chair. He cupped his hands on the edge of the desk, in much the same way Sid junior prayed beside his bed each night ('Dear God, please send Dad some money'). But Sid senior

was appealing to a higher authority. 'Listen, if we could just arrange to stagger the payments . . .'

The manager tapped his pen on the blotter and tossed a persistent clump of hair out of his eyes. Sid junior could see the scars of California-poppy on his forehead, reflected in the light from a long, clear window—similar to the windows at church but without the picture of Jesus. The little hand on the Swiss-movement clock clicked over to three. 'I'm sorry.' He started to gather the papers and put them back in the Smith file. Sid senior said nothing. He grabbed his son by the hand and they walked out of the office, out of the bank, and down the main street—ignoring the greetings and conversation starters of the townsfolk. As Sid junior skipped to keep up he looked at his father, he knew the look: something had broken the camel's back. They got into the car and drove home in silence.

Sid moved onto his side. Half awake, he scratched his belly and farted. Mary waited for the bouquet and wasn't disappointed. Where there was gas there was life. It was late on a Wednesday afternoon, still steamy and too wet to work, as Mary joined Sid in a twilight nap, falling, weightlessly, towards the orphanage of Sister Stanley, her Mary of the Plaster Representation. It was she who'd arrange midnight snacks and birthday parties, a library of favourite books and visits from her brother, the puppeteer. And it was she who held the key to the first-aid box, but dispensed much more than swabs or bandages.

'Mary, how on earth? Did you fall?'

She could remember shrugging. Sister Mary Stanley took her grazed arm and kissed it. The relief of a hundred silver bon-bons settled upon her. But Sister Stanley could be tough. At meal times she walked around the room with a wooden

spoon, hitting it on the palm of her hand. She would look at everybody's plate and make sure they'd eaten all their stew.

'Mary, your turnips.'

At the end of each meal the plates were clean. They *all* grew up liking turnips. Sister Stanley never got to use her wooden spoon. It was just another form of the crucifix which hung around her neck; it was just another manifestation of God's love.

As the children lay asleep in their dormitory the curtains blew in and the smells of the orphanage overtook them—roses, the strong, sweet scent of roses, fresh from Sister Stanley's treasured garden.

Elly, asleep in her cotton-tails and a boob-tube, forced her head back into the pillow and smiled. It was her wedding. In the bottom of an old quarry a large group of strangers gathered to watch. There were rusted pieces of mining machinery scattered about. The guests had to be careful to avoid old loading platforms, scraps of metal and pools of scummy water filled with volatile oils.

Sid held her arm and led her down a length of plush, purple axminster which passed for the aisle. At the front, a priest stood in a crushed car body, smiling, waiting for them. An orchestra, off to the side, played the wedding march from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the music echoed off the scarred cliffs. They approached the priest and Rolly stepped forward, flanked by Jack, his best man. She had no bridesmaids. Sid handed her over, grinning, and retreated back into the crowd. Mary adjusted the lace on her bonnet, wiped a tear with her hanky and took his arm.

The priest spoke softly, knowing his voice would be amplified. 'Dearly beloved, much has been said concerning the merits of different breeds: on the one hand Shorthorn are docile and

high yielding, on the other hand Brahman are hardy and dependable . . .’

After the ceremony they sat at long, decorated tables and ate. The orchestra played ‘The Dance of the Clowns’ as a group of wedding-midgets moved around a maypole, weaving together lengths of cattle rope decorated with tinsel. Occasionally they jumped in the air and played bell-tunes on their tinkling, velvet shoes; other times they linked arms and danced about like so many Morris men.

When the nocturne began Elly and Rolly came forward for the bridal waltz. As they danced, a tribe of fairies, Puck in the lead, flew down from the cliffs and sprinkled the red bulldust of their dreams. Soon Titania and Oberon were dancing, their wards flitting about at their feet like a quintet of twittering flutes. The rude mechanicals, unusually sombre, marched forward to the strains of the funeral march. They carried a decorated coffin, made to look like a wedding car. Elly and Rolly climbed in and the mechanicals set off towards Ningunna.

As they were being carried down the hallway of her house, the wedding guests crammed in through the front door, spilling into Mary’s kitchen and dining room, tussling for a better view of the newlyweds. They were carried into the bedroom and the coffin was laid on her bed. The cotton-tailed Elly smiled with joy.

Egg’s bike pulled up outside and he got off. Rain had left the air with the smell of wet grass, with stillness and humidity hovering under dark clouds. In silence, a distant airliner scratched an arc across the roof of the sky. Back inside, Elly opened her eyes and sighed; it was always the way. Egg came in through the front door and stood in the kitchen going through the mail: a pile for his father, a pile for him, a pile for the others. There was one addressed to Mr Clive ‘Chips’

Rollins. He felt like tearing it in two, but instead he put it in the bin and covered it with some old lettuce leaves.

That night it was left to the girls to fix the salads. Mary used to insist that these things be done from scratch. It had taken Elly a while to convince her of the merits of the superior, Australian way: the can opener. Elly slopped a load of bean salad into a bowl. Next to her, Mary was icing a cake for Sid. On the top, in hundreds and thousands, she'd written, HAPPY 53rd OLD MAN! Elly listened as Sid read to the others in the dining room. He was an avid follower of, and sometimes contributor to, the *Advocate's* Letters to the Editor.

'Dear Editor, When will Alice ever get a decent airport? Flying in last week I felt as though I was taking my life into my own hands.' Sid looked up at the gallery of expectant faces, wearing party hats. He laughed. 'Not as long as all the bloody pollies live in Sydney.'

Mary took the leg from the oven and started to poke it with a fork. Her eyes were on the job but her mind was elsewhere. 'Sid says they're learning quick.'

'As long as he doesn't let them near a steer.'

She laughed. 'Rubbish. That's all gotta be learnt. Young fellas like them.'

Elly had no doubts they could do it, but whether they were inclined to stick to it was another thing. Not that she'd say this to Mary. She splashed around in a dry potato salad, adding water and mixing. Mary moved over and pinched her arm; she smiled and almost winked. 'Either way, bet you're glad of the company, eh?'

'Why's that, Mary?'

'You know!'

Elly pinched her back. 'Oh, Mary, it's just like Summer Bay!'

Mary slapped her playfully, picking up a baking tray with an oven mitt and making for the dining room. Elly went to throw the empty cans in the bin but stopped short when she saw what was in there. When she emerged with the beans, Sid was still lecturing his captive audience.

‘This guy deserves a bloody medal. Everybody else is too bloody scared to speak up. “Dear Editor, The Todd’s a disgrace. When I grew up in Brisbane the police used to lock people away for public drunkenness. Now it’s a feature of our town. Tourists come just to have a look. It’s up there with the rock and the Olgas. When are we going to act?”’ He looked around at his family and the boys. ‘Spot on.’

Elly sat contemplating the leg of lamb and her father’s comments. She looked at each of them and wondered who was guilty. Her dad? No. It was unlike him to do things in an underhanded way. Mary? Possibly. She pretended to like Rolly, but kept her distance. ‘They’re here to work and we should treat them properly . . . still, with so many coming and going, it is hard, isn’t it?’ And as for what she’d think of him as a son-in-law . . . And Egg? She was almost willing to put money on it.

They all started to eat but Sid continued nibbling at the fruits of his consolation. “Dear Editor, Of course crime’s at an all time high. It’s simple. If the punishment’s not there, what is there to deter people? Longer gaol terms don’t seem to work. String ’em up.” Sid started to take some beans. ‘I should write in again.’

Elly munched on a chunk of potato and eyed him suspiciously. ‘What would you say this time?’

‘Tell ’em what the Abos have done to the stations they’ve been given.’

‘And what would be your solution?’

‘Give ’em back.’

Egg wrestled with a piece of bleeding lamb. ‘The Abos couldn’t run a bingo game.’

Mary looked at the lamb. ‘At least another half hour.’

But Elly was on a hunt of her own. She pursued her father with a look of death in her eyes. ‘And I suppose we should bring back hangings?’

‘Of course.’

‘It doesn’t work, you know.’

‘It does, years ago . . .’

‘Years ago everyone had jobs.’

He put his paper down on the table. ‘Years ago people wouldn’t dare, they knew what would happen.’

‘In America, when they brought it back, the crime rate just kept going up.’

‘Where d’ you hear that?’

‘They did *research*. They published a *book*. It costs four times more in legal fees to execute someone than to keep them in prison.’

‘Rope’s cheap.’

‘Not as cheap as the *Advocate*.’

Mary put down her knife and fork. ‘Elly.’

But the donkey wasn’t down yet. She leaned forward, speaking loudly, ‘It takes up to two minutes to die when you’re hanging there—two minutes—you wouldn’t let a steer suffer that long’.

‘If he raped someone, or killed a kiddy.’

She laughed. ‘Rapist steer . . . stupid.’

He leaned forward and pointed at her. ‘Watch your bloody lip.’

Egg looked at her and sneered. ‘What’s your problem?’

‘Fuck you.’

Sid threw the paper to the ground and stood up. 'Get to your room!'

She took Rolly's letter out of her pocket and handed it to him. 'This is for you. Someone threw it in the bin.'

Rolly took the letter, swallowing. There was silence. Sid's hand hovered in the air, pointing to her room. Elly looked at him and his hand dropped. 'You didn't accidentally let it slip in there?' she asked.

'Go on!' He pointed again. She looked at Mary and then at Egg. 'Of course I know how these things can happen. Diaries become so boring on the second reading.'

Mary shook her head. 'And on your father's birthday.'

'Can't I stay for the cake?'

Alf looked at her, pleading, *Elly, don't.*

Rolly slipped the letter into his pocket as Jack played with his potato salad. Christ, Jack thought, it's beyond a bloody joke. If I'd wanted this drama I could've stayed at home. He felt like he'd entered some new version of his own family—things said and not said as food was dutifully eaten, semi-digested in everyone's rush to leave the table. Either we work, or we go, he thought, looking at Rolly.

Elly stood up and quietly pushed in her chair. She looked at the two new boys, 'Excuse me, I've been a very naughty girl.' She left the room, gracefully, taking an apple, and went to sit on the porch. There was very little talk as they returned to the leg. At one point Egg looked at his father and said, 'Eh, Dad, what about I shout you a birthday drink in town? Gotta celebrate being a geriatric.'

Mary looked at the writing on the cake and wondered if it had been the right thing to do. Sid shifted in his chair and fingered the whiskers on his chin. 'Yeah, all right. Alf?'

Alf wasn't ready for it. He'd planned on talking to Elly, but

would it do any good? He thought of the name she'd once given him, 'Alf, the seeker of smooth things.'

'What's that mean?' he asked, knowing quite well.

She shrugged. 'You should have been a marriage guidance counsellor.'

But he still wanted to see her. His mind was off elsewhere, drifting through to the porch in search of an opportunity to console Elly or ingratiate himself to the new boys. That was Alf. A lot of the follower but none of the leader. Still, that's what made him such a good jackaroo.

Sid and Egg were both staring at him, expectantly. 'Yeah, I'll come.'

Sid looked at the new boys. Jack was quick on the save. 'Got a mountain of washing we want to get through.'

Rolly sighed with relief. Sid, Egg and Alf grabbed their keys and wallets and made for the door as Mary started to clear the dishes. Passing Elly on the porch, Sid and Egg ignored her Cheshire grin. Alf, passing out last, looked at her. 'We're just poppin' into town.'

Without saying a word she stopped smiling and bit into her apple, raising her eyebrows as if to say, so what?

After they heard the ute pull out Jack and Rolly went and sat with Elly on the porch. As Mary started the dishes she tried not to look out, to catch their eyes. Although no one would have known it, she felt like crying.

The picture of Jean and Arthur popped out from between Hagar and Ishmael and an old Jewish scribe's description of circumcision, the Sign of the Covenant. The old black and white of his mum and dad on their wedding day was inserted further in, just before the point where Moses and Aaron came before the King of Egypt. A big blowie jumped from the core of a half-eaten apple and landed on Arthur's smiling face.

Elly grabbed the picture, looked at Arthur and seemed satisfied. 'He musta done something right.'

Jack looked up from the page he was writing and grinned. 'That's what I said. And he trusts his mum with him.'

Rolly smiled. He filled their glasses with orange juice and Elly topped them up with Mary's vodka, stolen from its hiding place behind the Ajax and mop-heads in the laundry. Elly put the photo down and pretended to cover herself, like a cardboard heroine in a silent movie. She spoke with a southern-American accent, blinked a lot and kept flicking the hair back out of her eyes. 'Oh Father, what are you doing, I'm too young.'

She looked at the other photo, cross-referencing it against Rolly as he drank. 'Your father's eyes and nose.'

'What about my mum?'

Elly shrugged. 'Maybe your ears.'

Rolly smiled. 'I bet she'd be glad to hear that; a living legacy to my father.'

Elly leaned forward and scratched him under the chin. 'I'm sure mummy still loves her little snookums anyway.'

Rolly grabbed her fingers and tried to twist them off. She punched him, moaning under her breath. Jack stopped writing. 'Come on kiddies, enough of that.'

Rolly let go. She fell back into her chair, shaking her fingers and staring at him. 'I'd have to be very careful of you.'

He looked incredulous. '*You'd* have to be careful.'

Elly faked indifference and hearing Mary heading towards them from the kitchen, she grabbed the bottle and held it under the table.

'Everything all right?' Mary asked, standing in the doorway.

'Just peachy,' Elly replied, smiling. Mary turned and went back inside. Elly raised her eyebrows with relief and placed the bottle back on the floor. 'Nearly.'

Rolly noticed the level in the bottle. 'Can we add water?'

Elly nodded. 'It doesn't matter. She doesn't mention her stash to anyone. Can you imagine when she finds it?'

Jack took his part of the letter to Rolly's mum and read it aloud: "'Dear Jean and Arthur, How are you both? I'm happy to report that Rolly is behaving himself and working (mostly) very hard (apart from an incident where the boss found him without his clothes, swimming in a creek with an un-named person).'"

Rolly put his head in his hands. Elly's jaw dropped. 'You can't write that.'

Jack was enjoying himself. 'Why not?' He looked at Rolly, who shrugged. 'I don't think anything would shock Mum anymore.'

Elly shook her head. 'No, she'll think I'm a tart.' She got up and chased Jack around the table. He waved the letter in her face and laughed, pretending, 'Oy, Arfur, this young lady sounds like a real strumpet!'

Rolly shook his head as his fingers tapped out a morse code of contentment on the table. Eventually Elly gave up, exhausted. Rolly topped up the orange juice as she continued to lace their drinks.

Beyond them the desert had become dark and cool. As Rolly sat back and sipped his drink he contemplated the glow which had overtaken him: it was a game of Scrabble where all the letters fit the gaps; it was an oasis, for now, until *they* returned. He wished he could take Elly and Jack and return to town, re-inventing his life in a new, but familiar way. Looking at Elly he thought, we could just lie in bed together, all day, talking and fucking and eating stale chips, watching the midday movie. And then when we're sick of it, getting Jack and driving to the city for no reason, except that it's something to do.

Jack started to read Elly's contribution to the letter home.

Dear Jean and Arthur,

It's a strange way to meet, a few words in a letter, but hello anyway. My name is Elly and I am what Rolly refers to as 'the boss's daughter'. What shall I tell you? I am seventeen, educated in Adelaide (St Dominics, sorry, Arthur) and stranded on a cattle station in the middle of nowhere.

I would like to come to town one day, maybe live by the sea. Grange sounds especially peachy from Rolly's description. Anyway, perhaps it'll be soon. I'd like to go to uni and study. Maybe teaching. Anything but cows. For now there's the muster and then, we'll see. Rolly promises to introduce us. He says he has a spot ready for me in Babylon. He won't explain. I've never met a retired(?) priest. All this and more, soon I hope. All the best, Elizabeth Margaret Smith.

Rolly looked at her. 'She'll like that.' He took the letter off Jack and started to read his own reply:

Dear Mum and Arthur,

We're still waiting for the muster. The rain has set things back a bit. I must say, I'm not in any rush.

Arthur, please find enclosed my first repayment of fifty dollars. I am a working man now. Unfortunately I may have to send less than I thought as we had a little run-in with the boss's ute (in the middle of the desert!) and he seems to think it was our fault. We can't really argue.

'Cop out!' Elly gulped from her vodka. 'Be a man, Clive Rollins, put your foot down.'

Rolly returned to the letter:

I'm glad to hear that you've allowed Arthur to keep the lawn mowed.

(. . . you'll never guess, we've taken up Tai Chi, on the front lawn every morning at seven. Mrs Davies from number seven thinks we've flipped.)

It's the usual round of jobs here: bores, bores, bores—including Sid and Egg.

Elly clapped and started to whistle.

Mary lowered the volume, listening. She was used to it by now. At first it was like a slap in the face—the first time she came across Elly's diary in the bottom of a drawer. She'd been on the scene for less than a month: 'D.D., Mary continues to pretend she's something she's not. It's all to keep him happy. This whole thing is so disgusting. I just want to leave. Today she watched over us as we cleaned our rooms. *There's dust here, Elly, what about folding those pants?* What a pose!' Mary turned up the volume and submerged herself in thought.

Rolly continued as Elly topped up the orange juice with the last of the vodka.

Anyway, Mum, it's good to hear the lodger's behaving himself.

(. . . we've decided to make it all up front: every Thursday afternoon I go to the bingo while he cleans the house. I couldn't bear to watch it. In return, I give him ten dollars off his rent and equal time on the radio. In return for this he promises no

more quoting the Bible. So far this has proved difficult for him. Last week he cooked a green Thai curry. I told him I wouldn't touch it. He made it mild and I relented. Not bad. Looks like I may have to get used to it. He can't eat the counter-meals at the Grange Hotel. Chops, he says, remind him of burns victims. Strange . . .)

I'll sign off for now but the others want to say hello. Look after yourselves, lots and lots of Lurv, Rolly

Rolly smiled. 'As long as I don't think about what else they might be up to.' The others laughed and Jack drained the vodka as if it were cordial. Rolly folded the letter and put it in an envelope. 'You know, this is a bloody fine night, I think I might walk down to the corner and post it.'

Elly filled the vodka bottle with water and replaced it. Rolly took the photos of his family, took his extended family, and together they got into the ute and set off for town.

Back inside Mary felt no consolation. They hadn't asked her. A fly buzzed by and she swatted it with a TV guide. She got up, more resolute, and made for the laundry, for the vodka she needed now more than ever.

They were only a hundred metres short of the main road when Elly looked at Rolly and smiled. 'Bulldust stays in the air for hours.'

'Yeah?' he grinned. Jack held his head in his hands and moaned. 'No.'

Elly punched his leg, 'Shut up!' and then smiled at Rolly. He didn't take any encouraging. 'I've seen them do this on the main strip at Semaphore.'

Jack nodded his head. 'This isn't Semaphore.'

She looked at him. 'Stop worrying, he's not around.'

Jack rolled his eyes, as if to say, I wouldn't be so sure. When Rolly had their attention he smiled proudly, gunned the accelerator and pulled the handbrake tight. She started to scream and drum on the dashboard. Jack wanted to get out. The tyres threw up a cloud of dust that came into the cabin, getting into every pore (like the smell of sheep suet from the tallow factory on Ayr Street East).

He lifted his foot and they sat there, blindly, as the engine happily hummed away. Rolly was the first to speak. 'It's like a fog, like some nights on the beach when you can just make out the lights of a freighter off somewhere.' The headlights cast a red glow of diffused light all around them, like a science experiment with magnesium and sulphur he remembered from school. He stared at Jack and Elly, smiling proudly. 'Let's see if it's here when we come back.' He put his foot down, slowly, but the tyres just kept spinning. He eased off and looked at them both, biting his bottom lip. 'Oops!'

Half an hour later they were still there, trying to get out. Elly was gunning the accelerator as she watched them in the rear-vision mirror. The red and white sticker on the back window was still visible through the bulldust: CAMELOT MOTORS. There was a knight's helmet with the visor opened, revealing the broad smile of a dozen perfect teeth. Jack called out 'okay' and the pair of them started pushing. As Elly put the pedal to the floor more bulldust came up and they nearly choked. 'Stop!' Jack covered his eyes, coughed and stepped away from the ute. Rolly kicked the back tyre and looked at the vision of King Jim: every bit as much a sham as King Jim Jones and his Tropicana cordial. Jack came back from the mulga with a couple of small logs. Rolly helped him jam them in behind the tyres and they tried again. 'Okay, Elly, go!'

She lowered her foot as the boys gave it everything they had. She kept shaking her head and thinking, why did it have to happen here?

'Keep going,' Jack screamed, noticing the wheels lifting. She eased her foot down a little more as the boys mustered their last ounce of energy. 'Keep going,' Jack urged, louder.

But just then the wheels stopped turning and the car sank back into the trap. Elly looked up at the headlights coming towards her, cutting through the dust. She recognised the loud hum of her dad's ute, like the Norse god of death she remembered Kirk Douglas describing in *The Vikings*. She lowered her head onto the steering wheel and punched the dashboard as Jack's voice echoed in her ears, 'Why d' you stop?'

It took the grind of brakes and the slamming of doors to make her look up. Sid walked around to the back of the ute and surveyed the damage. She could just make out Egg smiling at her through the dust as he took the tow-rope from his dad's ute. Alf walked over with his hands in his pockets. She got out and approached her father. 'It's this bloody road.'

He eyed her suspiciously. 'I've never had any problems.'

Egg was attaching the tow-rope to the front of Rolly's ute. 'Geez, you're down deep, didn't you ever watch Harry Butler?'

Sid just sighed and looked at the two new boys. 'You two really have no idea, do y'?'

Jack frowned. 'Sorry?'

'Shoulda been able to get outta this.'

'We were just about . . .'

Sid became louder. 'You were just diggin' yourselves in.'

There was an uneasy pause. Egg started his dad's ute and turned it around. Elly folded her arms and spoke softly. 'Maybe you should have taught them.'

But Sid wasn't listening. He looked at the bogged tyres and then at Jack. 'What were you gonna do next?'

'It was just about out.'

'And what if . . .?' He kicked the mulga and it fell apart. Jack was lost for words. Egg got out of his dad's ute and attached the rope.

Alf stepped forward. 'I can show 'em, Sid. Problem is they haven't got any tackle.'

Elly continued staring at her father fiercely and repeated, 'The problem is they've never been shown.'

Egg stepped forward, wiping the dust on his trousers. 'All done.' He looked at Jack and Rolly and smiled. 'Shoulda tried calling the RAA.'

Sid kicked the mulga again and then looked at Elly. 'What?'

She lifted her eyebrows. Sid looked at the new boys. 'I've been thinking . . .'

Ah, of course, it's a wonder he took so long.

'You two still haven't found your feet. I got these two outstations need lookin' after.'

Elly unfolded her arms and stepped forward. 'You've gotta be kidding.'

Sid continued with the new boys. 'Just for a while, till the muster starts.'

Elly spoke louder. 'Haven't found their feet? You're meant to teach them.'

Jack spoke up. 'We weren't told, when we applied. I thought it'd be like an apprenticeship.'

Sid smiled. 'Here, you learn as you go.'

Alf shrugged again. 'Maybe if I went with 'em.'

Sid was adamant. 'Get your stuff together and I'll take you out in the morning.'

Jack shook his head in disgust as Rolly looked around disbelievingly. Tell him now, he told himself, tell him you've had enough and you're off. Tell him no reasonable person would put up with all this. Tell him, if it had've been in the city, you would've had Austudy and job support and blocks off for study and some sort of life to make up for all the sacrifice. Instead of endless criticism for trying your best, whether it's good enough or not. Go on, tell him, Rollins. Tell him. But of course he didn't, couldn't, assuming that things would have to start improving.

Even Sid didn't know whether he was doing the right thing. 'Listen, I'll show you everything you need to know. It'll be good for y'.'

Elly tried one last time. 'Good for who?'

Sid looked at her. 'Y' gotta make everything hard?'

'If they go, I go.'

Egg smiled. 'What is this, primary school?'

Elly kissed her middle finger and stuck it up. 'Rotate, Egg.' She turned and walked off into the spinifex, the long way home. The others got into their utes as the dust finally started to settle around them.

'So what do we do?' Rolly asked Jack, on the way back to Ningunna.

Jack looked at him and nodded. 'I'll set up a picket line and you organise the banners.'

'Christ, now I wish I'd brought a good book.'

Jack opened the glovebox and took out the Old Testament. 'I reckon you could get through this in a week.'

'What about you?'

He shrugged. 'There's always a couple of cows to mess about with.'

Later that night Sid awoke in a sweat, with a dry mouth.

He walked into the hallway and Elly's light was on. He'd been dreaming. There was something in his mind he couldn't resolve. The image of the little girl at the piano, smiling at him; the image of her earlier that night, dusty, hot and sweaty, looking just like Heather bent over the copper in the middle of a heavy wash.

He knocked on her door softly. 'Elly.' There was no reply. He tried the handle but it was locked. He knocked a little louder. 'Elly.' But there was still no reply. He walked back into his room and sat at the window, staring out. Mary, in her nightie, walked on the soft, green grass he kept watered for her, smelling the roses, staring up into the sky.

'Hey!'

She walked over to him and looked in the window. He could just see her silhouette through the flywire. He tried to touch her skin through the grill but it was metallic and tinny. 'I think I'm in the dog house,' he muttered.

He could see her smile. 'I'm used to it.'

For a while he didn't speak, but thought of taking off the screen and crawling out of the window to be with her. At length, he spoke softly, 'This garden of yours, what's the secret?'

'No secret.'

He looked at the hose, dribbling slowly into the bird bath. He sat back and took a deep breath—beyond their oasis was only bulldust.

Rolly tried to imagine the out-station as something like Semaphore beach—seagulls circling in search of stray chips, ocean breezes and no one to annoy you. The opportunity to work on making bad poetry mediocre in between bouts of generator maintenance. In reality, he guessed it'd be like an endless game of Monopoly in which he was the only player.

Jack's thoughts weren't so different, substituting endless stretches of desert for the wheat fields and pine forests of the mid-north. Eventually they drifted off to sleep without conversation.

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PART THREE

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JIM - JAM GUN SLINGERS

Simpson out-station was on the track north out of Ningunna. It was dry and dusty and lacking even the little bit of soul Ningunna had. It was really just a bore which fed into a series of troughs which fed into a series of yards. The cattle could be moved in (without too much persuasion) and thirty to forty head could be watered at one time.

When Rolly arrived he looked around and guessed he wasn't the first caretaker. He wondered if there should be a gallery of fame, hanging in the out-house—Sid's Suckers: Chips (anon. 1974), Ginger (L.D. 1982 Cottosloe) and Bluey (C. McD. 1984 Laun.). Where had they all ended up? The managers of vast pastoral leases? Agronomists, Hi-Fert reps, Elders consultants, or back at McDonald's?

In the near distance, an old delivery truck sat rusted out, half full of sand, its big red and white letters still visible: 'Spray 'em and Slay 'em with Shelltox'. Jack smiled and said, 'Maybe

you could do it up.' Rolly looked around and sighed, defeated, 'Why does he need someone here?'

Jack shrugged. 'He doesn't.'

As they got out of his ute Jack nearly started laughing. 'Imagine what my place looks like.' Their hosts arrived and the task of settling in began. As Mary started to clean out Rolly's new home, Sid revised the key points of bore maintenance: topping up petrol and oil, keeping the covers on (bulldust was the cause of most problems out here), undoing and checking the linkages, replacing piping and most important of all, what to do if the water doesn't come up.

He took them back inside. Mary had almost finished; she'd swept and mopped the floors, cleaned down the walls, made up the bed (a rusted camp stretcher Rolly was sure they'd salvaged from a tip) and sprayed the room with air freshener.

She stood sniffing. 'It smells like something's died in here.'

They all stood and waited for the smell to come back up through the floorboards. Sid looked at Rolly. 'You might want to take care of that.' He turned and looked about the room, smiling. 'Apart from that, it looks like you're in for a nice little holiday. Maybe I shoulda moved in myself.' He grinned at Mary and she slapped him with a wet mop-head. Rolly didn't feel like smiling. He knew Sid would never be able to live without the satellite dish and three cold showers a day. He had a big blue esky full of the essentials: bread, butter, milk, cold meats, a pile of burnt snags and chops, cold casseroles, cereals, Vegemite and a huge container of stew Mary had purged of all turnips (a minor consolation).

And that's how they left him: alone with his poofy suitcase and the promise of a return visit in a couple of days. He watched them drive off with Jack in the back of their ute, becoming smaller until they were a pin-prick, and then nothing. All at

once he felt alone. He crossed his arms and scanned the various, empty horizons, as though he were waiting for something or someone to appear. A blue and empty sky. Even Robinson Crusoe had a few trees, he thought. At my age people should be in nightclubs and coffee shops, being stimulated by new ideas. He imagined a lecture theatre and missed opportunities; a lecturer trying to explain Hitler's psyche. Instead, he had bulldust, lots and lots of bulldust.

Jack was destined for his own exile at Dry Creek Station—another hut on stilts in a sea of red sand. When they arrived he asked them if there was a radio and Sid said, 'What d' you want a radio for?'

'What if I get sick? I haven't got transport.'

'I'll be by every so often.'

Which, he guessed, meant as often as Sid liked. 'Anyway,' he asked before leaving, 'where you gonna go?'

Back at Simpson out-station Rolly got a stick and removed the mostly decomposed cat. He buried it away from the out-house where it couldn't return to haunt him. 'Hail Mary, full of grace.' He made the sign of the cross in the air and prayed. 'Dear Lord, take the soul of this dear little pussy, even the shade of the out-house couldn't save him from the desert. Give him wings and a halo and feed him only soggy food.' He felt as though there should be a hymn. The stuff from Wednesday chapel seemed too heavy for a cat. Instead he sang what any God-fearing Christian should have at his funeral, 'Jesus loves me, this I know . . .'

He spent the rest of that day and the next with a post-hole digger fixing a length of fence around the yards. On day three at Simpson Station (Sid named it after the war hero, but *not* his donkey) he decided it was time to relax. He started the bore, blocked a trough at each end with an old calico sack,

stripped off, put on his Akubra (which by now had become a second skin) and started to soak in the cool, artesian water.

As he looked out across the desert he imagined an endless Grange, minus the Golden Gaytimes. He closed his eyes and could see the two girls of his brandy-jar stroll. As he submerged his head in the mineral bath a rip began to pull him under; he reached up for the girls and dragged them down with him as he threw himself about in the trough like a dying fish. It was a seedy sort of release but he imagined he could handle them both. Eventually they swam back to the shore, running up onto the beach naked. He saw them pass a quartet of figures, walking down the beach in the glow of dusk: his mum held Arthur's hand and he held Elly's. He couldn't hear what they were talking about, but he could see them laughing, kicking sand at each other, occasionally going down to test the water with their toes. He wondered if he could swim out to them through the ocean of his trough. Maybe, he guessed, *this* was the type of vision which appeared to Jesus: reclining with Mary Magdalene in a Mediterranean garden of olive trees and lemon-scented gums, their children playing at their feet.

He thought of Elly, and what she'd be doing—sitting behind the main shed in the shade of a summer not yet hot, ploughing through the T.S. Eliot she'd been working on for weeks—looking up, maybe, and thinking about him. Looking out west through a desert devoid of landmarks, sensing his presence somewhere on a featureless horizon. As he sensed hers, filling a void of oxygen and nothingness with the smell of her skin and breath and deodorant. After an hour or so he could feel the sun biting him through the water. He got out, put on his clothes and headed for the sanctuary of his cave.

As Rolly was bathing, Jack was practising his targets. There

were six cans lined up on the fence at Dry Creek: Warren, his daddy the Sandshoe King, Anna (although if he searched his soul, he realised he felt bad whenever he hit her), Sid, Egg and Mary. He kept shooting until he had them all down, and then went back for another round. He lined up Warren in his sights: Warren, parked in a dark side street, his radio blaring, his Commodore shifting about. Jack the hunter approached stealthily, put his rifle in the window, aimed and squeezed the trigger. Warren sighed and fell back into his seat, Anna jumped out of the car, covering herself. Jack the hunter lifted the gun to his shoulder and took aim. She stared at him, pleading, 'I never liked him, he was just a taxi. I wanted you, there, beside the glow of the stale Twisties. You didn't want me. I couldn't wait forever. I thought you were lost in the desert.'

He moved on to the next can. The Sandshoe King stood on the sidelines shouting, 'Run, Alber, run!' Jack approached him and lifted the gun. The Mrs Judell, Vennings, the silo people, Alan, the tonneaus man, and all of the parents started screaming. They made for the showgrounds as a flock of Little Emus ran from the oval, deserting their wickets and stumps. He was on his knees, pleading, 'No, you wouldn't have thanked me if I'd put you in B-grade.' Jack squeezed the trigger and the can went flying. It didn't matter that they were all still there, bustling for importance in the Jamestown scheme of things, creating a world as measured and unchangeable as one of Norrie's haircuts. At least he was out of it now. The only way to get some respect. At last Kevin would be able to stand on the main street and boast about his son, portraying the harshness of the desert in Leyland-like prose. He'd smile when people replied, 'Jack, I never thought he'd have it in him.'

He moved on. Sid was reading from the paper: "Dear Editor, I've just mixed up a special batch of 1080 poison and

sent it to Canberra. Let's keep this a secret, we want them all to eat heartily in the parliamentary cafe tomorrow." From under the table Jack raised his rifle and aimed at Sid. It took two shots to bring him down. Before long the three of them lay hunched over the table, Sid's last lung of air gurgling up through a mouthful of Mary's stew. Rolly and Elly got up from the table with him and together they went into the lounge-room to celebrate over a bottle of Mary's vodka.

There was just Anna remaining. In the form of a tin can she was no harder to take out than Warren himself. In a more corporeal form he would have to decide about the flash of ankle. Either way, there she lay, bleeding beside his Commadore. As the last shot died away there was silence all around him. A gentle breeze blew up through his hair and on into the out-house. It blew a letter to the ground, a letter he'd been writing to his family, to all of them but really to his father.

Dear Mum, Dad and Gran,

How are you all? At present I'm on an out-station called Dry Creek. I don't know how it got its name as there isn't even a creek. You'd all be proud. I've been working real hard and I've learnt a lot (fencing, fixing engines, looking after cows, etc.). Certainly a step up from the BP. Out here there's always a challenge.

Now that the realisation had overtaken him Rolly opened his notebook. Like one of Mary's stews, the clues and observations had simmered for long enough. At last he felt he was able to make sense of Ningunna.

The Outback Family Smith—Sid, the father, is fifty-ish and pot-bellied. How should I describe him? Let me pick

an incident. We were sitting around the table and Sid was cutting the cheesecake. It was like jelly. Sid couldn't serve it up. He asked Mary (his wife) to get him a spatula. She went into the kitchen and returned with an egg-flip. He looked at her severely. 'Did I ask for that?'

'It's the same thing,' Mary replied.

He shook his head, looked away, got up and walked into the kitchen. 'If I'd wanted an egg-flip I would've asked for an egg-flip. Christ!'

Mary shrugged and sat down. We all listened silently as Sid banged about in the utensils' drawer. Mary looked like she was going to cry. He came back in, sat down and served the cheesecake with the spatula. We watched. He thought (I thought) he'd taught us all another lesson: if a man asks for a spatula he doesn't want an egg-flip. The thing is, Sid can snap over the smallest things. Today it's a spatula, tomorrow it's a set of lost keys. Mary always tries to keep him happy (it's her job, she married him, or more correctly, he married her) and when she slips up she tries to make light of it: happy families.

Elly, the daughter, doesn't try to please him anymore. I'm not quite sure when she stopped. I suspect it was after she came back from school, from town, and realised (unlike Egg, the son) that he wasn't the man he claimed to be. Poor Egg. He's just lost. Slowly collapsing under the weight of Sid's expectations, taking his frustrations out on others (i.e., us and Alf, the other jackaroo). I think dispositions are inherited from parents just as surely as big noses and red hair.

After we finished the cheesecake and Mary had put on the kettle, Sid was quieter. He was thinking. I fancy he was (at least a little) ashamed of his outburst. But what could

he do? When it snapped it snapped. Somedays, I think, he pushes himself to try harder.

He stopped writing. Somewhere in his head, just beyond his grasp, a realisation was simmering.

Jack walked around the inside of the perimeter fence, like a powerboat stuck in a pond. In his head he'd created a feudal manor house, complete with smithy and cattle shed. He moved among the peasants, talking and breaking bread. As with most of his fantasies it ended with him meeting a girl who looked a lot like Anna, who'd smile at him and take him by the hand and lead him away. Jack was bored. Over and over again, he'd thought, enough of this and I'll end up loopy. Remembering Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, endless snow replacing the bulldust. Axes, wild beards and imaginary friends. Redrum. Not that there was anyone to redrum.

On the third day, when the work was all done, he went for a walk to a low hummock he'd noticed just to see what was behind it, which, as he expected, was nothing. Just after he arrived he heard a ute. It was Egg. Why the Christ? The minute he saw him pull up he remembered the letter. Egg took the esky off the back of the ute and went inside as Jack came running. The *letter*, there on his camp-stretcher, the first thing he'd see.

Egg was standing there, smirking. He looked at Jack, waved the letter about in the air and said, 'Very nice.'

Jack realised how stupid he'd been. It was all right to think something, even to suggest it with a lifted eyebrow, but to present the proof like this? He tried to save himself. 'What?'

Egg walked around the room, reading aloud: '... if Sid says jump, Egg asks how high? I think he once had an opinion of his own but he lost it. As you can imagine, I don't enjoy

having him hanging over me all the time, I thought I'd got away from that with BP. At least out here I can do things at my own pace . . .'

As Exhibit A was read aloud Jack could feel his heart sinking. When Egg sat on the bed the thought of a clear shot occurred to him; he could feel the rifle in his hand and Egg's head started to resemble an empty tin can. As Jack stood there, like a misfit in the principal's office, a strange thought occurred to him: Mary and Sid arriving at Dry Creek to look for their lost son, smelling something horrible under the floorboards and Mary going wild with her air freshener.

Egg looked up at him and smiled curtly. 'Am I surprised?'

Jack frowned, 'Shouldn't be. I'm on the roof and you're off giving trailbike . . .'

'So?'

Egg stood his ground. Jack looked at the floorboards. The boss's son had rehearsed this role, at least in his head, many times. 'You're gonna be a real help with the muster.'

And then there was a suspension of time . . . Who would draw first? As they stood silently, there was a clinking of spurs on the floorboards; each was unsure of the other's intentions—neither knew what they should pretend to do next. Jack realised he could still save himself, the way was easy: inaction. He always erred on the side of caution, that's what he'd got from his dad. He leaned his rifle against the wall, sighed and looked at Egg.

Egg kicked the esky towards him. 'That's for you.' He shook his head and walked from the room, mumbling, 'Very nice.' As Jack heard his wheels churning up the dust he opened the esky to more of the same: stew, curried egg sandwiches, and sausages to cook on a hotplate that hadn't been cleaned in his lifetime. Strange to think that the minimum of

thought was going into keeping him alive. In the end, he guessed, he was as much a liability as he'd been at the BP.

When Egg got home he told his father about the letter. Elly nearly spat on him. 'Why were you reading it anyway?' But Egg was too concerned with Sid's reply. When it came it wasn't what he expected.

'What are we, Egg, a pack a flamin' housewives? If that's what he wants to think let him think it. As long as he does his bloody job.'

After tea Egg went to his room but didn't feel like starting on his models. The smell of glue and paint wafted up like suet, hinting at realisations of his own, thoughts that fizzled like a pile of damp sulphur. This was Jack's realisation: more of the same.

F R O C K S

Halls Creek could have had its own Judells. If the Mrs William had got organised and engaged lawyers, accountants, marketing firms and stockbrokers. She could have had her emporium on the main street of every country town, in every shopping mall in every slab of suburbia, penny-tight mortgagees saving for that special pair of moleskins. There would have been fake windmills and corrugated iron aplenty, RMs displayed in neatly arranged piles of bulldust. All her personal touches would have been replicated, down to the local Gallery of Fame, pictures of Newton and Buttrose in checked flannel-ette flirting with the matriarch. There would have been whole new generations of young men, measured up, down, over and across by the Mrs W's patented technique, taught as carefully as origami by a team of corporate training specialists. There would have been secrets under the counter, but these new Mrs Williams' would have known how to be discreet.

‘Twenty-four pack, Stockman’s Best Friend.’

There would have been toys, handmade Aussie jarrah toys, the Mrs William would settle for no less. There would have been magazines like the *Stock Journal* and *Header Review*, but these would have been the ones out for show. And of course there would have been frocks, every branch (especially Halls Creek, branch number sixty-nine) deserving of the same choice as the good ladies of Jamestown: lightweight cotton, shoulder pads (her concession to the modern age) and a range of summery patterns, from the ever faithful black and white polka-dots through to the colourful, but tasteful, hot tropical nights. There would have been jumpers and cardies, festooned with the faces of laughing koalas and ‘G’day Mate’, knitted from real Aussie wool. But these would have been for the tourists; the locals would come for the frocks, the Mrs William’s frocks.

In fact the Mrs William had thought of expanding her empire once. Her first idea was to open a branch in Georgetown, but she eventually rejected that—they could always come to her. Her next idea was to cast slightly further afield—Clare, Burra, Moonta—but they all had their own (lesser) emporiums. There was nothing more sordid than competition and she refused to lower herself. So eventually the idea came to nothing. In the end she thought it was just as well: there could only be one Judell’s and she would never find another Ayr Street.

Except maybe for Halls Creek. The search for Elly’s gift had started off promisingly at C.W. Thompson’s ‘All and Everything’. Elly beside the CD rack with a fist full of Seattle grunge. ‘I can choose anything, Mary?’

‘Anything.’

Elly sampled a few tracks beside the glow of a vintage Coke

machine, passing the headphones to Mary who started playing air guitar and singing along. Elly snatched the headphones and turned away as Mary gravitated towards the frocks.

Elly hung up the headphones. 'Mary, you said . . .'

'What about this one?' Mary took it off the rack: there were roses, hundreds and hundreds of roses, photocopied pink and pale apricot, climbing on a trellis that diminished into the steam-cloud of a Country Women's tea urn.

'I'd rather eat my own vomit.'

Mary put it back on the rack and continued browsing, encouraging her, but really trying to persuade herself that the rugged North did have its very own brand of civilisation.

'Surely one of these, Elly?'

'Mary, I'm not a dress person.'

Mary whispered loudly, continuing to browse. 'We'll get you a nice pair of sandals.'

'Nice, what's *nice*, roadkill?'

'Elly.' She held up a print of sunflowers on a background of mustard, autumn leaves. 'Here, this is modern.'

'Oh Lord! I'm sure they're wearing it in Paris, Mary.'

Mary held the dress up against her and took a step back. 'That'd be fine. Why don't you try it on?'

Elly sighed. 'Yeh, I'll try it on. Come in handy during the muster.'

Moments later Mary opened the curtain to look in. Elly just stood there as a couple of young girls stared in. 'Mary, would you like to sell tickets?' She pulled the curtain closed and slipped into the dress.

But Mary was undefeated. 'If you had a nice dress you might get out more.'

'That'd go down a treat in the front bar of the Commercial.'

'There are other places to go.'

‘Where?’

‘Clubs, social groups, sporting groups.’

‘What about the CWA, I’m sure they all buy their frocks here.’

‘Plenty to do, you just haven’t tried.’

Elly pulled the curtain and stepped out, ‘That’s not true; things were starting to look up . . .’

Luckily Mary could choose to ignore her. She adjusted Elly’s bust as the little girls watched on, giggling. Elly pushed her away and wriggled about uneasily. ‘I couldn’t stay in this for more than five minutes.’

‘Nonsense. If we could just let this bust out.’

Elly eyed her with disbelief. ‘You just want to hitch me onto some cocky’s son.’

‘It’s a nice thought but I’ve given up.’

‘No you haven’t.’

Mary stood up. ‘I think it’s lovely.’

But Elly hadn’t finished. ‘I could do a cooking class at the WEA. Imagine the sort of people I’d meet in the cafeteria. “My name’s Barry. I’m doin’ spreadsheets and stuff to keep track of the stock. Gotta keep up with things, eh? Guffaw guffaw.”’

The two little girls laughed. Elly stuck out her bust and lectured them sternly. ‘If you eat your Weet-Bix, maybe you could meet Mr Right.’

They ran off around the corner, past the Kodak stand. As Mary looked at Elly she thought (and not for the first time) of her Splendid Inheritance. If only someone could see her like this. But it all meant nothing to Elly; she’d had a glimpse of Nirvana, a smelly, ratty pin-prick of spirit which lay just beyond her grasp.

Mary looked at Elly’s holey grey socks and her stubbly legs.

She was determined to do something. There was a shiny potential she could see emerging. Elly could be happy. She was beautiful: she had the face of a plaster Madonna, the dignity of an icon, the body of a bathing nun disturbed at dawn. But she would need work and a frock was just the start of it.

‘I think we should buy it.’

‘You think! Isn’t this meant to be my birthday present?’

‘Well, what else is there?’

Elly couldn’t believe it; she could at least have asked. Be damned! She would never do a cookery course. She would never marry a cocky’s son. She would never back away from the feeling that was overtaking her. It was something more than just experience, more than just sensual, more, even, than her first experience of two-handed Mozart or the miraculous birth of an albino Shorthorn. It was the realisation that her future was beyond this place: beyond a social life of football and a culture of wet beer towels. She bit her lip. ‘Listen, Mary, there’s nothing, least of all anything you could buy in here.’

Clarry Thompson was serving a tourist at the film-bar when he heard these words. He looked at the young girl and thought, well take off my bloody dress then. And she did. She pulled it up over her shoulders and threw it on the ground. Clarry couldn’t believe it—Sid’s girl! The two little girls reappeared with their parents. Everybody looked at her dismal bikini-line, a cluster of scruff escaping her cotton-tails.

Elly kicked the dress and stared at Mary. ‘Why don’t you ask what I *really* want? That’s what my mum used to do.’ Mary stared at her, breathless, then walked off towards the front of the shop. Elly called after her, ‘It’s *my* birthday, Mary.’ She went back into the cubicle, pulling the curtain behind her. Sid came into the shop, passing Mary going out of the front door.

He surveyed the scene and asked, ‘What’s up, Clarry?’

Clarry didn't speak; he just shook his head and pointed towards the cubicle. From behind the curtain there was a voice. 'Dad, we couldn't find a frock, but do you know what I'd *really* like for my birthday?'

Sid recognised the tone. He shook his head, turned and walked from the shop. If this had been the Mrs William's shop things might have been different. As it was the witnesses were all discreet or easily convinced. Clarry's only scar was the image of a pair of dark areola which stuck in his head and stopped him from getting to sleep that night. When the tourists got back to the Bushman's Inn they would write about it on their postcards. The little girls would see their image of the fairy princess temporarily altered, but in time the truth would be set right.

L E N N Y

Naismith's rule: an average walker takes one hour to walk five kilometres in easy country, three kilometres in hilly country and one and a half kilometres in rough country.

It was all coming back to him, like it was yesterday. Jack looked at his map, neatly folded and stuck onto an old piece of cardboard, and worked out how long he'd need. He had left at seven in the morning (after hiding the post-hole digger under the hut and writing a note saying he was out fixing fences) and started walking due west. The line he'd ruled on the map between Dry Creek and Manson's Well had '6 km' scribbled underneath it. That would be (at most) three hours walking, so he figured that he'd get there around ten at the latest. The second leg of his Great Expedition, from Manson's Well to the Freidmann Homestead ruins, would take at least another three hours, so allowing a half an hour rest he'd arrive at two-thirty at the latest. Including the time for the final leg

back to Dry Creek he'd still be home in time for tea and no one would have missed him.

Whether he'd decided to undertake his expedition out of boredom, or to prove something to himself, even he wasn't sure; but he felt he had to do it. It was more than 'finding his feet'. The experience of new things (even small things, an old petrol cap or bones) could only do him good, teasing out threads that he'd forgotten or never found: the curiosity of the naturalist, the confidence and self reliance of the bush guide—qualities which had taken a battering in recent years.

He did know how to get his directions from the sun. Once he'd led a three-day hike through the Flinders' Ranges without a compass. But he knew that the Flinders was a bushcraft paradise compared to the desert and he had a compass now. You just *couldn't* make a mistake out here. A couple of degrees off and you'd keep walking, probably in circles, until you dropped. Your bones would be dry within a fortnight, covered by the drift within a month—forgotten by the desert without a scream to mark the silence.

He looked at his watch; it was ten past eight. He lifted his compass, adjusted the dial to 270 and looked up. There was a little bump on the horizon that he thought might be the well, but could just as easily have been a pile of old rocks. Holding the compass carefully by the edges he moved around until the magnetic needle came to point north. He looked up. It was still there, directly in front of him. He kept walking, reminding himself that he couldn't go more than another ten minutes without checking. As he walked he observed, like all good scouts should. His expedition wouldn't yield much, an occasional clump of Mitchell grass was the only thing to break the monotony. No birds, no animals, no natural features.

He remembered the Flinders: he earnt his Explorer badge that weekend. He conquered the art of bushcraft: his troops all wore good footwear, had the proper garb, and they knew the Country Code (e.g., be sure to leave gates exactly as found, etc.). They'd done their planning with map and compass and had even spent a few weeknights practising how to find their direction by the stars. They knew everything: knife sharpening, recipes (salmon and rice with cheese sauce, Welsh rarebit, donuts and apple fritters), fire building and tent pitching. Each detail had been planned and anticipated. So when they arrived in the Flinders it was child's play. The first hour out, in charge of seven twelve year olds, was all apprehension; the last hour, on the way back in, was pure bliss.

'I can see my dad's car.'

'My mum, she's waving.'

And Jack just leading the pack, smiling. All the dads had shaken his hand when he walked back into the campground and in a ceremony later that night everybody applauded when he was presented with his badge. He grinned at his dad and dared to wink at his mum; after all, he was the centre of all things now. None of those other Activity badges for him (Technician, Sportsman or Agriculturalist). He had the only badge that mattered: Explorer.

He arrived at Manson's Well ahead of time and sat in the shade of an old stone wall to have a drink. He threw a rock into the old well and it hit dirt. He started to wonder why these people had come out here so unprepared. He stood up, put his pack and rifle over his shoulder and dropped his compass on a stone. Fumbling with it he was relieved to see the needle seek north. Not that it was a problem: he had a spare. There were also two bottles of water and a change of warm clothing, cans of food and a can opener. He'd put in a box of bullets, a spare

magazine and he'd stuck a cloth in the end of the muzzle to keep the dust out. There was a knife—with a kangaroo, his troop emblem, burnt into the handle—and among all this, a little square of crocheted six-ply from his Gran. So there was always the option of extending his expedition if he wanted to. The esky express wasn't due for a couple of days and he couldn't think what else needed doing around Dry Creek. By now he just saw it as a prison term he had to serve out.

He arrived at the old ruins just before two-thirty. He stepped across a pile of rubble that might've been a dining room or nursery. There was some plaster left on the wall; he looked for graffiti but there was none. Maybe he was the first one here since the Freidmanns gave up and rode their horses back to town, caught the train to the coast and boarded the boat back to England. Jack thought they must have been misguided to come all this way and to set up here. But then he wondered whether they'd been driven by one of those persistent itches you couldn't get rid of unless you actually scratched it (bound for South Australia with only a couple of Shorthorns for company, a well worn King James and Bach on an old recorder).

But then the cows had wandered off into the desert and died. One afternoon Mr Freidmann just gave into his wife. He sighed, put down the trowel and stopped plastering the walls.

Jack took out his knife and carved his initials—JA—into the chalky plaster. He looked around the property and wondered if their spirits still lingered here, floating through the half finished, half timbered stockyards. He stood beside the remains of an old plough and shouted, 'Why the fuck did you bother, eh?' His voice faded in the near distance and he mumbled, as if trying to set them straight, 'It's not like there was nowhere else, closer in', with even this dying to a thought

... couldn't a been all there. Although he acknowledged that others had succeeded spectacularly.

He walked through a hallway into a smaller room (bedroom, kitchen, laundry?). It was only a crumbling wall—a window, still intact, looking out to the northwest, to a stony beach on the Northumbrian coast.

He came out and sat down on what was left of the porch, opening a can of baked beans and sausages and eating them cold, washing them down with tepid water. On the horizon, barely visible through the haze, there were two small pin-pricks. He squinted. They seemed to be moving, but he guessed it was only an illusion. As he kept eating the two points grew larger until his brain was forced to accept that they were real, whatever they were. He put the can and the water back into his pack and stood up. He grabbed his rifle, uncorked the muzzle and slipped in the magazine.

They were ... *human*. He could start to make out their form, running towards him through the heat, sand and haze of the desert. One was a big, black man with a kangaroo over his shoulder; he wore a singlet and shorts and a pair of old sand-shoes. He was chasing the other one, calling something to him. The other was also dressed in a singlet, but he was a tall, sickly, pallid-looking white man with fierce, long, red hair which came down past his shoulders. He carried a stick which he would raise to his shoulder like a gun, pausing to take aim, scream something and keep running. The old black man could barely keep up with him.

When they came closer Jack walked out to meet them. The white man saw him, or more precisely his rifle, and ran towards him. He gabbled loudly, in a thick European accent, waving his hands about. 'Quick, give me your rifle, before he gets away.'

Jack was just a little confused. 'Before what gets away?'

The white man described the empty desert with his hands, 'Lenny'.

'Lenny?'

'Quick.'

The black man ran up and dropped his kangaroo. He looked at Jack and smiled. 'G'day.'

'Hi.'

'Don't s'pose you got a microwave?'

Jack looked confused. 'No.'

Les laughed and slapped him on the shoulder. 'Name's Les, this is Egon, we're re-enacting Stuart's trip,' and laughing again, continued in what passed for being serious. 'It's an *Aborigine* walkabout.'

Jack smiled. 'Ah.'

Les continued, warily, unsure of what the young boy with the Akubra was thinking of them. 'Really just a good chance to get away from Balgoa. You know Balgoa?'

'No.'

'It's a mission.'

Egon stared at Jack and spoke pleadingly. 'Please.' Jack looked at Les, who decided they should join in on Egon's game. 'You can give it to him.'

Jack handed Egon the rifle. Les spoke quietly. 'Okay, young fella, you go round that side, I'll go round here. Egon, you go down the middle. Where is he?'

Egon faced due north and stared. When they were all in position Les said, 'Okay, move up, slowly.'

Jack found himself joining in on the game. They all walked forward slowly, shoulders hunched, looking out into the desert at something that wasn't there.

'Okay,' Les asked, 'how we goin' Egon?'

Egon put the rifle to his shoulder. 'I can get a clear shot from here. Stop . . . quiet.'

They all stopped, silently staring ahead. Jack wondered whether he should grab his pack and make for Dry Creek at a run. But he was intrigued; whatever was going on, it wouldn't happen on Ayr Street.

'Jesus, he's going.' Egon sprinted off across the desert after Lenny. Les just laughed, walked over to Jack and shook his hand. 'Didn't catch your name.'

'Jack. Work for Sid Smith, Ningunna.'

'Sid?'

'Lookin' after Dry Creek.'

'I used t' work for Sid one time. How is the old bastard?'

Jack shrugged.

'What's he payin' yer?'

'Not much.'

'I bet. Listen, if you haven't got dinner booked anywhere, we've got this roo to get through.'

Far out in the desert Egon stopped running and stood still, staring at his elusive quarry. Slowly he turned around and started to walk back towards them, shoulders slumped, staring into the sand. Les looked at him and shook his head. 'Looks like Lenny's got away again.'

Jack surveyed his heavily chiselled face and grey whiskers and said, 'Who's Lenny?'

Les winked. 'An emu.'

Egon sat on one of Mr Freidmann's old fence posts, whispering something to himself. Jack looked at him through the flames, his hair leaping up like so many exclamation marks. He was reminded of the photo of his grandmother in the Mrs William's gallery: the same vacant expression, the same look of

inward nagging (in her case, the feeling that someone was pouring boiling water over her hands). He sat kicking the sand; Jack could just make out a few words.

‘... Helium, Neon, Argon, Krypton, Xenon, Radon . . .’

The kangaroo’s singed tail emerged from beneath the fire. Les poked at the coals with a stick and looked at Egon. ‘Has he gone back down? How long y’ reckon?’

But Egon just looked at him. Jack could recognise his grandmother’s fine features in Egon’s face, maybe even the curve of his own nose, the set of his cheeks, the little fat chin that always grew pimples. ‘How much longer?’ he asked.

Les poked at the coals again. ‘Nearly there.’

It was a good fire. Jack did have matches, but he wanted to prove he could do better. He started with some torn paper from his notebook, piled on the tinder-dry spinifex and then slowly added the kindling and mutilated splinters from the old fence posts. He rubbed a couple of twigs together and the paper caught.

‘Cripes,’ Les exclaimed. But Egon just sat there, oblivious. Jack passed the water to him and he drank greedily, wiping the dregs which spilt over his stubbly face, down his long, exposed neck and onto his singlet. Les looked at his old friend with softness in his eyes. He moved his gaze to Jack and smiled. ‘In my tribe, what’s left of ’em, we got this story about Lenny.’

Jack tried to look interested. ‘The Dreamtime?’

Les looked disappointed. ‘Yeah, maybe, if there ain’t much on telly. Anyway, story goes, there’s this emu called Lenny. He’s a rogue emu. One day he goes up to this other emu and says, “Listen, if you jump off that big cliff, cross your legs and whistle you’ll take off and fly—anywhere you like.” Now this other emu ain’t too smart, so he tries it.’ With his hand Les indicated the path of a falling emu. ‘So this poor fella dies, but all his family,

they find out who's behind it and chase Lenny down. They say to him, "So you can't cause no more trouble we're throwing you out into the desert. So you can't get around we'll cut off your wings. So you can't trick no one else we'll cut out your tongue."

He waited for Jack's reaction. Jack was waiting for the punchline. 'So, he's like a . . . Dream-emu?'

Egon continued drinking, muttering, 'Yeah, that's it.'

Les shook his head. 'Lenny's still around. But whenever he smells trouble, POW! back down into the ground. Only, he leads you on first . . . it's almost as if he's enjoying it.'

'Christ!' Egon called, more to himself. 'No wonder you bloody Abos didn't get past the stone age.'

Jack stared at Egon's flaming red hair and wanted to cover him with a rug, to lead him home. Would one of Mr Bowey's potions cure him? It hadn't done his grandmother any good (although Mr Bowey believed he could've fixed her, with time). But Lenny made far less sense than a childhood scalding for unruly behaviour.

Les looked at his flaming red hair. 'Maybe he'll come back tomorrow?'

Egon stood up and regarded Les angrily. 'Jesus, Les, would you stop goin' on.' He stopped short, guilty. If not his friendship with Les, then what?

Jack thought he was about to apologise, but he didn't. He stared at Egon's beard and face and wondered how anyone could find anything so alarming out here. Later, Les would try and trace it back to a classroom in Rotterdam. As a science teacher, facts had been important to Egon. The students listened, the students learnt, but they didn't care. After the second year in that cold, dark room he found it starting to close in on him—the children's voices adding to a choir of

sound that echoed and amplified in his head. The narrow, old streets of his neighbourhood didn't seem wide enough to contain his mind. He felt himself spilling over, into the sky.

So Egon escaped to where there was more room than anywhere: Australia. The desert was the first place that beckoned; here he felt he could do some good. The government sent him to Balgoa with a box full of textbooks and a St Vincent's suit. As it turned out he didn't need either—all the kids wanted to know about was life according to the telly in the old wash house. Les had got the kids together, but it was Gladdy, his wife, who kept them in the schoolroom.

But after a time it was the same. They listened and tried to learn but didn't really care. *He* didn't care anymore; he'd discovered to his horror that the desert itself was starting to close in around him—now there were voices which spoke of transfigured Christs living in old EH Holdens.

Soon the lessons fell off and there was a government doctor, a diagnosis and medication he refused to take. Sometimes he felt good and sometimes there were voices. Les, a mate, agreed with him about the voices: it was a low-pitched squall, like a chook being strangled. But then when Egon's head was calm he had trouble explaining things to himself. Les kept saying, 'He's gone back into the ground.'

Who had? What had it been? What did he do? When would it happen again?

Some days he just felt as though he was running out of patience.

Egon looked at Les. 'We should get back. I want to start classes again.' He walked off into the glowing desert and stood by himself, staring out.

Les had heard it all before; it wouldn't be long until Lenny returned. He grabbed the kangaroo by the tail and pulled

it out of the fire. Jack's amazing creation collapsed in on itself and sighed, glowing even more intensely. Les took his knife from a leather sheath and held it towards Jack. 'Just don't puncture the bowels. Takes half an hour for the air to clear.'

Jack declined and Les started the operation. Jack smiled, thinking of Mary and her can of air freshener.

Les took off the animal's tail and started an incision down the front. 'Sid work you fellas hard?'

'Well . . .'

'Worked us like bloody slaves, him and that rotten kid of his.'

'Egg?'

'Bad bloody egg if you ask me.'

Jack smiled. 'Scrambled egg.'

Les started to hack off a few pieces of meat. 'How'd he get a stupid name like that anyway?' He gave a piece to Jack and he tasted it.

'Not bad. Maybe Egg, it's like their Dreaming, maybe he hatched out of an emu's egg.'

Les laughed. 'Maybe his shell's a bit delicate.'

Further out in the dying glow Egon started to pace; Les looked at him and then continued. 'These fellas came down from Darwin to see all the station owners. Told 'em we had to be paid a minimum wage. Sid and all his mates said they couldn't afford it. So, here we are, unemployed again. But you should be thankful.'

'You reckon? Think maybe I should just go home before the muster. You know why he's got us out on these out-stations?'

'I could imagine.'

'Rolly, me mate, started getting on with his daughter.'

Les smiled. 'Getting on?'

Jack shrugged. 'Well, I dunno how far it went, but far enough.'

'Maybe Sid knows how far.'

'I doubt it.' He smiled. 'Rolly would've told me. The thing is, he's got it in his head that we're both useless.'

'Sid thinks that about everyone.'

Jack started making ridges in the sand with his foot. 'There were a few things happened.'

Les smiled and slapped his knee. 'Go on.' Jack described the donkey hunt and the other small disasters from their time at Ningunna. By the time they were full of kangaroo, Les had decided he liked him. He asked him to come walk-about with them—after all, he said, 'Sometimes Egon ain't the best company.'

At first Jack refused, but then Les told him about a stash of beer he had buried not six clicks as the crow flies. 'Come on, y' said you had a couple of days.'

Jack thought of the note and the hidden post-hole digger and the temptation was too great. He felt like being a child and misbehaving again. The weight of responsibility he carried, neatly packed in the bottom of his pack, was getting him down. He looked at Egon, still pacing through Mr Freidmann's cattleyards, and everything fell into place. Being drunk was more fun than being prepared; laughing was more fun than madness; a muster wasn't necessarily an adventure.

THE HANDBAG OF MANY SURPRISES

Narelle and Elly lay back on a pair of beach towels dreaming they were on the Gold Coast. It was a balmy day, the temperature in the high thirties, and they were camped out on their own private beach of fine, red bulldust just beyond one of Ningunna's concessions to the modern age, the satellite dish.

It cost Sid an arm and a leg but it was worth it. Before, there'd just been a few flickering images of the outside world. Elly had watched them intently as a child—as if someone on a different planet were trying to communicate—and her inability to make them out had only added to her sense of isolation. Back then, as far as Sid was concerned, it was all a 'giant dose of drench'. But after Heather's death things changed. Now Sid had come to rely upon the outside world's consolations (even cooking shows could be addictive).

At St Dominic's television was frowned upon; not because

he didn't like it but because young ladies could always find something more useful to do. Narelle had been at St Dominic's too. Her parents had fronted with the fees for a 'proper education', but Narelle had been a disappointment. Come time to return for her final year she wouldn't go. As it turned out, the reason was a lesser public servant she'd met in Halls Creek. After a couple of weeks squabbling with her parents she moved in with him and they started a life of sorts: he as a sorter of Aboriginal welfare claims, she as a watcher of television, a trier of fad diets, a drinker of cold beer.

Elly finished smearing on her suncream, put on her sunglasses and adjusted the beach umbrella. She took a swig from a bottle of Mary's vodka and handed it to Narelle.

'Thanks mate. Just between us two, I got some pictures . . . interested?'

Elly nodded, grabbed the bottle and swigged. Narelle took a wad of pictures from her handbag and handed them to her. They were pictures of him, the welfare sorter, and her, skinny-dipping in a backyard pool.

'Isn't he beautiful?' she asked.

Elly squinted. 'Is that a nipple ring?'

'Yes, but he is a good Catholic.'

'Apart from not going to church . . .'

'Or believing in God.'

'Of course.' She thought of the creek and *their* little swim. These small run-ins were amusing for a while, but you had to move beyond it. Narelle and her pot-bellied man had stood up, spoken their minds, made their choices and settled down to a life of pleasurable sin. For a moment she wondered if it was possible for her and Rolly.

She handed the photos back and said, jokingly, 'Got a spare room?'

But Narelle was quite serious. 'Yeah.'

Elly lay down on her towel and drained the bottle, straight, like milk from a glass tit. 'I don't know, you wouldn't find beaches like this.'

Narelle put the photos back in her handbag. 'Why not? It's the best thing I ever did. If I were still living with my parents I would've murdered them by now.'

Elly laughed and described the scenario. Sid and Egg bleeding into Mary's precious wool-blend, Mary running about the house, slamming doors, trying to open windows. She gets out of the bedroom, but Elly is there waiting for her in the rose garden, knife in hand, dripping blood.

But Narelle herself was a worry. She'd written off her parents' car when she was just learning; she'd been twice suspended from school for smoking; she'd even hung a giant picture of Adolf Hitler in her living room with the caption, in thick black texta, 'This man had trouble getting it up'. Elly guessed that *she* had more to lose. If she acted now she might regret it; but she was sick of regret.

Narelle hung over her. 'Man, you ever heard of a razor blade?'

Elly looked down at her bikini-line and smiled. 'Earth Mother is as wild and free as the breeze.'

'And look at this.' Narelle pinched her fat and started tickling her.

'Get off!' Elly screamed, laughing. Soon there was sand and blankets everywhere. Elly knocked over the umbrella and they were left in a mess. When it was all over they lay back, exhausted, and called a truce. 'When I leave home,' she continued, 'it'll be as far away as I can get. No telephone, no forwarding address. Eat my dust.'

Narelle looked impressed. 'But will you do it?'

‘Of course I’ll do it.’

‘It’d be more permanent than you think.’

‘Not permanent enough.’

This time Narelle’s face was featureless. ‘Good luck.’

‘I’ll do it.’

‘Okay then.’ She grinned deviously, opening her handbag and taking out paper and pen. ‘Come on, if you don’t do it now you never will.’

As Elly re-established their oasis, Narelle spread the paper out and wrote, reading to Elly as she went: ‘Dear Rolly, My name is Narelle and I am a friend of Elly’s from Halls Creek. We have been talking and we’ve made a decision. You’re both to come and live with me and my boyfriend. I hope this is what you want, if not, sorry, it’s been decided. It’s a simple house with very little furniture but we have a spare bedroom with a bed and that’s really all you’ll need.’ Narelle looked up and smiled. ‘Well?’

‘I’m sure he’d be impressed.’

Narelle finished the letter, folded it and put it into an envelope. She wrote his name on the front, boldly, as if it were a ransom demand and not an invitation. ‘There.’

Elly looked at her, unsure (again) if she was serious. She cocked her head and smiled. ‘Narelle.’

‘What?’

‘Give it here.’ She held out her hand, wondering if she should stop pretending and let the letter do its work. But it was decided for her. Mary was walking towards them, calling, ‘Coming in?’

Elly covered the bottle with sand and the last precious drops soaked into the earth. Narelle put the letter inside her bathers and sat up, smiling, practising the fake innocence she’d had to fall back on so often.

Mary came up to them and stood there, smiling. 'Party time.' They stood up, slipped on their T-shirts and went with her.

There were party hats, casseroles, cool drinks and a birthday cake. They sat down and Mary fell quiet—she'd smelt it on their breath, now she knew for sure who the culprit was. Elly opened her presents in an appropriate way for a young lady: slowly, as if everything was an unexpected surprise which was 'much too expensive' and starting with the card first, as if all those phoney sentiments were real.

'Thanks, Brother, you're quite a poet.' She read Egg's card aloud: 'Roses are red, violets are blue, I'm twenty-one and you're nearly two.'

Narelle would never be so diplomatic; in that sense she was one of St Dominic's resounding failures. But Elly could always be the young lady when she needed to be and, after all, he'd given her a couple of tapes she'd been after. 'Thanks, Brother.' She stood up and hugged him, briefly. Sid could've sighed. *See what I've done, Heather . . . they're both just full of wind.*

In a moment of suspended disbelief she felt as though they could've been a different family all together: Sid and Mary more along the lines of Mike and Carol Brady, with Egg, the over-protective brother. She could even hear them speaking, Sid explaining how he couldn't believe she was all grown up. Fantasies they could indulge in for an hour here and there before returning to their neighbourhood without any streets.

She got a saddle-rug from Alf and a box of cosmetics from Narelle: skin cleanser, foundation, powder, Vitamin E cream and a shampoo made from tropical fruit.

'I was going to get you aromatherapy oils,' her friend began, 'but I didn't know . . . hangin' out with all those cows. Mighta been a waste.'

'It'll take more than oils.' She showed everyone what she claimed was her first wrinkle. 'At seventeen, huh? Why?'

And then there was a card from her 'mum' and dad. Surprisingly, it was in her father's best copperplate, written slowly, as though he'd taken the time to think about it. 'Dear Elly, Here's hoping it all falls into place this year. We both love you. Mum and Dad.'

She looked up at him and smiled: at least he was willing to say that. She guessed he was still searching for his own expression of love; he didn't know where it was or what it would look like, but his words amounted to a silent plea which said, 'I am trying, believe me.'

She looked at the two hundred dollars and smiled. 'Oh . . . as much as I wanted that frock.'

Mary shook her head. 'I give up with presents for you; from now on . . .'

Elly stood up and hugged them both. 'Thank you, Father, Mother.'

Alf watched her and wondered if she was overcome by the spirit of celebration; was it that smell of vodka or Narelle's bad influence? Or was Elly a sort of plaster, gift-shop angel? Egg was thinking something similar, but more in the vein of Elly as a child, a sister, someone who had changed in many ways but stayed essentially the same.

After they'd toasted her with some cheap wine Sid stood up to leave. 'I just wanted to check on those two lads.'

Elly could feel the chill down her spine; the minute he spoke she knew it. Narelle pulled out the letter and handed it to Sid. 'Elly was wondering whether you could give this to Rolly.'

Sid took the letter and there was an uneasy silence. Egg looked at his sister and smiled. 'It's not a love letter, is it?'

Narelle butted in, adopting her school marm persona. 'Actually, she wants to shack up with him and live in sin.' They were all quiet, unsure.

At length, Mary smiled and said, 'Don't know what they're going to live on.'

The others smiled but Elly was caught up in a thought of her own, staring down at her father's best cursive. Sid pocketed the letter and was about to offer to take some cake but thought better of it: cake was only a distraction to finding your feet. As he drove towards Simpson out-station he held the letter in his hand and thought of opening it: *this* was the biggest distraction of all. Eventually he replaced it in his pocket—after all, he wanted things to start improving.

Elly and Narelle returned to their oasis and shared a reefer from Narelle's Handbag of Many Surprises. Elly would've killed to have a look through it: it was black and leather and smelt of sin. As the evening lengthened they lay back and dreamt their dope-induced dreams. Narelle drifted off into a friend's backyard pool as Elly rose up out of her skin, floating above Ningunna. Alf was in his room, reading, and Egg was in the shed fixing his ute. Mary was hanging washing on the line. As she drifted out into the desert she called and waved to her step-mum: 'I'll be back for breakfast.' She overtook her father's ute and waved to him. 'I'll race you.' Sid was thinking of molasses in drums and how they used to feed it to the horses. He didn't hear her but, as always, could sense her presence around him.

Sid was glad all the work had been done at Simpson out-station. In view of the success of the party he even felt a bit guilty. To alleviate it he grabbed a couple of coldies from the esky in his ute and they sat on the porch, drinking and talking. In the glow of everything he felt increasingly confused. As he

stared at Rolly, absent-mindedly picking at the label on his coldie, he wondered whether a city kid could ever become a bushie. Or whether he really wanted to steal his daughter away—to the city, to the surf and the pale, sickly-looking sand he remembered.

‘When I was a kid we’d go to Adelaide for holidays. Stayed down at the sea. So much bloody water, we couldn’t believe our eyes.’

‘Where’d you stay?’

‘Grange Hotel.’

Rolly smiled. ‘Yeah? That’s just near us.’

But Sid didn’t reply, he was there at the Grange Hotel, staring out from their second-floor room. ‘Only thing we’d seen that much of was wheat.’

Rolly’s brow slowly creased. ‘Always wondered why they knocked *all* the trees down.’

And Sid, returning to the desert. ‘Eh?’

‘Those wheat paddocks, and right in the middle, a single gum tree.’

Sid scratched his chin. ‘When you’re pullin’ a harvester behind a horse you don’t wanna be dodging trees all day.’

‘Why leave just one?’

‘Yeah . . . well.’ Sid looked at him and realised that they *were* a different sort of person. This one had been brought up on sitcoms and plastic wombats in his Weet-Bix. Still, even if he was a little green he wasn’t beyond help. All he had to do was study the letters to the editor and he’d be on the right track.

‘Cripes,’ Sid continued, smiling, ‘I remember my sister thinking the sea was gonna break loose and drown us all. Just the way it moved. You laugh, but to us . . .’

Rolly remembered the first time he saw red dust. There was

a pause as they both contemplated strange landscapes. Sid saw the ocean's waves, like wheat blowing in the wind, carrying the tide out to sea; Rolly just saw the cloud of bulldust rising around him, like a form of drowning. He was the first to speak. 'So the party went well?'

Sid's reply was slow and monotonous; he was still at the window. 'Yeah.'

'Must get her a present, when I get into town.'

Sid stared at him and Rolly wondered whether he should've mentioned presents. 'By the way, Elly sent you this.' Sid put down his beer and took out the letter. Rolly accepted it, looked at the front and smiled. 'Whose handwriting?'

Sid shrugged. 'She's got a friend over.'

'Yeah?'

'Narelle.'

Rolly folded the letter and put it in his pocket. Sid swigged and looked at him. 'Aren't you anxious to read it?'

'Well . . .' Rolly put down his bottle, opened the letter and read. A smile came across his face, he didn't know if he was dreaming or being had. Either way it was a sticky situation. He scratched his head and looked up. Elly looked down from on high and laughed. 'So?'

Sid burped. 'What's she got to say?'

Rolly bit his lip. He'd already seen it . . . it was a test. Still, what to say? "Dear Rolly, How are you? How are you coping with the heat?" Then it says she's got her friend over for her birthday and they're uh . . .'

'Sunbaking.'

'Yeah, sunbaking.'

Elly doubled over with laughter as she fell about the sky. She waved to him. 'All we need is a bed and a stockman's "Best Friend!"'

‘Then she talks about what’s been going on.’

‘What’s she say?’

‘You know, looking after Jake, helping Mary.’ He looked at Sid and smiled. ‘Stuff like that, boring really.’

Elly made a low sweep past them and sand blew up. ‘Just read him the bloody letter!’

Narelle flicked the elastic on her best friend’s bathers. ‘We could get up to some kinky things,’ she whispered, in her most natural, devious tone. ‘Like year ten music—duets, trios and quartets.’

Elly laughed and started treading water, not ten metres from them. ‘Dad, Rolly’s got something to tell you.’

She woke up on the towel as Narelle blew smoke into her ears. ‘What y’ thinkin’?’

Rolly folded the letter and placed it in his pocket. ‘That’s about all.’ Sid wasn’t at all surprised; he guessed it had been censored, at least just a little bit.

Elly looked at her friend. ‘Dad’s prob’ly reading it right now.’

Narelle looked almost proud. ‘So?’

Sometimes Elly wondered why she kept her as a friend; perhaps it was her ability to pull fingernails back to the quick. As it was, her father was blissfully unaware. When he got home that night Elly knew she was safe. Of course, Narelle couldn’t stop being Narelle. Just before dessert she said, ‘Mr Smith, did Rolly say anything about the letter?’

Sid looked up. ‘Why’s that?’

Elly kicked her under the table.

‘I better not say, Mr Smith.’

Sid looked at Elly. ‘What?’

‘Narelle’s giving us one of her little performances.’

Sid lifted his eyebrows and contemplated his bread and

butter pudding. After tea he showed Mary the note he'd found at Dry Creek out-station. She insisted he was out working. 'But why,' Sid asked, 'did he leave the post-hole digger under the hut?' Mary tried to smooth things over but when they went to bed that night there were still unanswered questions in his head.

'Maybe bring them back,' she suggested.

'Then it'd all start again.'

'So?'

He would wait for the muster, that was the best thing to do.

As Elly lay in her bed she looked over at her friend, asleep on a mattress, snoring. She wondered just how perfect their house together would be. Miles away, Rolly was thinking that it must have been a joke. But even so, why would her friend have written it if Elly wasn't at least intrigued by the idea?

THE PERIODIC TABLE OF ELEMENTS

Jack awoke the next morning in Mr Freidmann's living room. Les was asleep next to him. Egon sat in the corner on a pile of rocks. Jack could see the Mrs Freidmann knocking and entering with their breakfast.

'Gentlemen, when you're ready my husband would like to see you outside.' And then placed the tray on the floor, averting her eyes from their half-naked bodies. He could imagine her: chubby, corseted, laced into a thick muslin dress.

'Would he like to start the muster today?' Jack would ask.

She'd laugh. 'Goodness, Mr Alber, we've only got two cows. Well, none now. They seem to have gone missing.'

And then they would be outside an hour later, with Mr Freidmann already off in the distance, searching, lost himself. They would set off after him on their own Great Expedition: Jack in search of his Explorer badge, Egon in search of Lenny, Les just happy to escape Balgoa.

And as the shadows stretched, their own personal searches would lead them in very separate directions. Mr Freidmann would kick the dust and spit and eventually return to his house; Les would dig up his buried treasure and sit in the shade of an old stockshed, consoling himself; Jack would be busy with a compass as Egon raved in the distance.

In time Mr Freidmann would stop by and share in Les' consolation. 'A fine pair of cows, Mr . . .?'

'Les.'

'And the grass out here, so rich in protein. Still, I could fetch a couple more from the markets perhaps.'

'Mr Freidmann . . .'

'Jim.'

'Jim, I'd happily help you.'

'I couldn't pay much.'

'I know, still, the thing is, it's just sand, a tree wouldn't grow out here. What makes you think?'

But Mr Freidmann wouldn't hear it. 'Les, if I could build up a good herd. There's feed enough for thousands.'

And Les, looking out into the desert. 'Well, good luck to you. We gave up on it years ago.' And looking at Mr Freidmann strangely. 'You should farm kangaroos; nice bloody tucker.'

'And always hopping away.'

Like his dreamy Shorthorns. Les shrugged; it wasn't his job to convince him, the desert would do that soon enough. But the seeds of discontent had been sown in Mr Freidmann. Jack looked at the half-plastered wall and realised that he was no more permanent than the crumbling bricks.

Egon was mumbling something under his breath. Jack could recognise a few names: it was chemistry, what he could vaguely remember as the periodic table. He smiled at Egon. 'I remember that stuff. Elements.'

Egon stopped mumbling and looked at him. 'You should try to remember it; it's a good thing to keep in your head.'

To keep other things out. Although Egon started mumbling again Jack sat up and persisted. 'What is an element?'

Egon kept staring ahead and recited, like a schooled parrot, 'An element is a substance which cannot be decomposed chemically.' And then returned to the periodic table.

Jack smiled again and tried to penetrate Egon's skin. 'Chemistry gave me the gripes. Chemistry and physics. Biology wasn't so bad, at least you could see what they were talking about.'

Egon held his head in his hands and started to kick stones. Les turned over but kept snoring. Jack pulled on his boots. 'I bet when you tell people you're Dutch they go on about clogs and tulips and windmills.'

Egon stopped kicking and looked at him. There was almost a glimmer of communication between them. 'And dykes.'

'My favourite painter was Van Gogh. Gogh, how do you pronounce that?'

But Egon just started kicking again, this time crushing stones under his boot. Jack sat up against the plaster wall. 'He, uh, did the best pictures.'

How to bring him out of it? . . . Gran could've, with one of her poems . . .

*I'm glad to be alive, today the world begins,
I'll start on my diosma, the hedge and other things . . .*

'I liked the one with the stars. Do you know that one?'

'Chromium, Manganese, Iron, Cobalt, Nickel, Copper, Zinc, Gallium . . .' He kicked at the wall and some plaster crumbled off. All of those starry nights in the desert hadn't

done much to relieve his head. Jack stared at him and thought of another picture by Vincent: the self-portrait, number two. It could have been Egon with his strange red hair, his unshaven face and furrowed brow. Rogue genes. The mind as a burden. Jerry and his air-horn. Weight. Roy. Les.

Egon got up and walked from Mr Freidmann's house, grabbing Jack's rifle and slinging it over his shoulder. He walked out into the desert, searching for his two lost cows. Jack watched from the sturdy window frame which Mr Freidmann had built; it had lost its wall but it was still there, staring out towards England. As soon as he was clear of the walls of civilisation Egon started to flit. He took the rifle from his shoulder, postured, shouted at a phantom and then chased it. But each time the emu got away.

He stopped, stamped his feet and screamed even louder. 'Come on then, come on!' At one point he took aim and started firing. Jack winced, thinking of his limited supplies. As he sat watching—sometimes laughing, sometimes bemused, sometimes feeling a little dark and pessimistic—he took out a can of baked beans and opened them. He ate them with a couple of fingers, scooping out the sauce.

Egon lifted his head to the sky and screamed. 'Lenny!' He dropped to his knees, his shoulders slumped, and he bowed his head. He sat there for five, ten minutes, with the rifle across his lap, as Les kept snoring, dreaming of a rogue black-fellas' raid on the Freidmann homestead: a spear into Jimmy's pot-belly and a chase around the house for his wife. He corners her in the kitchen but it's too late—she's already got the bread knife half way into her liver.

Fifteen minutes later Egon is still there, kneeling, like a seedling growing out of the desert, unaffected by the harsh sun. Even science couldn't explain a universe broken down

into elements smaller than grains of bulldust. There was nothing left—no trees, no people, no God. Jack opened a can of peaches and ate them. As he tipped it up to drink the juice he missed the muzzle being slipped into Egon's mouth. There was a short, sharp crack and he looked, the juice trailing down his chin. Egon slumped over, still grasping Jack's rifle. Jack put the empty can onto Mr Freidmann's windowsill and kicked Les with his leg.

'Oy, Les.'

Les sat up and shielded his eyes from the sun. 'What?'

Egon's body didn't stir. Jack wasn't sure if it was a nightmare. Les got up and followed his gaze out of the window. 'Christ.' He bowed his head, leaned up against the wall and breathed deeply. 'She warned me.'

'Eh?'

Les looked back at Jack. 'Gladdy, she said not to let him near a gun.'

'Jesus,' Jack muttered, trying to think of someone or something he'd seen dead, apart from roadkill. The life gone from something. But this time not neatly and cleanly, like Perren's Chapel on Ayr Street—finished off with a hymn and a half-cold Earl Grey. This time an actual body, solid and real, minus its ability to think and sing and feel pain and shit and fuck and figure things mathematically.

He sighed, his head, strangely, filling with the image of Perren's before it became a chapel, selling half-cases of fruit, a till from the time of Napoleon forever ringing in his ear as his Gran felt nectarines for firmness.

They walked out into the desert. Mr Freidmann's two Short-horns could be heard braying in the distance. Mr Freidmann walked with them, consoling, 'You just can't talk to some people.'

FAT ROLLS AND STAR CHILD

It was dark and cold, just before midnight, when Egg went out to the horse yard, switched on the single, glowing bulb under the shelter, and started brushing down Jake. Elly would be asleep; he could dream of independence and a country practice. He'd often thought of becoming a vet. Animals (not just cows) needed the healing touch of an expert. His place of importance in some far off town would be assured: the 'Egg' Smith Memorial Hall, the 'Egg' Smith Bar, where the great man used to drink every night. He could help a bitch with her pups, a ram with bloat or maybe put down the beloved family pet.

'Come on son, he's very old. It's just like falling asleep.'

And so he would become an invaluable part of their lives. Sid would talk about him in the front bar at Halls Creek. 'Rakin' it in. His practice covers seven hundred square kilometres.' Staring into his beer, proud that Egg had become everything he knew he could.

But that was just the problem. He switched off the globe and sat back on a bale of hay, watching Jake's twitching muscles. For a while Jake stared at him but then moved out into the yard. Egg knew that his problems began at home. The first task was to persuade yourself that you could do it. He'd got the marks, but he'd never been able to explain to his dad that he'd chosen something else, that Ningunna would just have to cope without him. He knew it was possible, but how, without the inevitable let down? The second problem was doing it, actually leaving. Who else could be trusted to help with the muster, to teach the new people, to run things, to co-ordinate the yards, the branding and sorting and separation of calves? Sid was getting old and wouldn't want to see Ningunna as a museum piece.

Jake returned to the shelter and nuzzled him. It was a reminder that he was needed elsewhere. He'd staged the scene in his head a hundred times.

'Dad, there's plenty of people around who want work.'

And Sid sitting in his chair. 'So, can you come back for the muster?'

Egg shaking his head. 'I'll be piled down with study.'

'Well, we'll get through.'

The remote control, the telly and no more words. He'd deserted his father, no better than *her*; he was the one thing that kept his dad going and now he was walking away. He'd be too consumed to open a book.

Elly walked from the darkened house and slipped into the shed. She re-emerged wheeling her trailbike, looking about, concealing something in her shirt. Egg got up and walked from the yards, closing the gate behind him, following her. When she was some distance beyond the satellite dish, out of earshot, she hopped on the bike and kicked it to life. Egg walked up behind her and pressed the kill switch. 'Who's a naughty girl?'

‘You better run in and tell them.’

There was a stand-off briefly, but the man who would be a vet couldn’t find the will to keep arguing. She started the bike and rode off. He returned to the house, kicking great clouds of sand into the air, trying to convince himself that there was no one who could run a muster like him: not a hundred Abos or a thousand vets or a million and one Rolly Rollinses.

He knocked on Sid’s door. ‘Dad, you awake?’

Amid the creaking of the bed, the rustling of sheets he heard a loud, agitated, ‘What?’

‘Guess who’s just gone off on her bike?’

‘Shit.’ Sid looked at the time. ‘Let her go.’ He sat up and looked at Mary. ‘That’s it.’

‘What?’

He didn’t reply. Egg went into his room and closed the door. He took off his boots and realised he’d brought horse shit into the house. Tomorrow morning he’d be in trouble again.

Sid opened his window and looked out at Mary’s Icebergs, losing their petals to the cool desert breezes. She sat up in bed. ‘What?’

He shrugged. ‘We gotta get on with the muster. I’ll call the vet tomorrow.’

Elly stood in the middle of Rolly’s room and screamed at him. ‘I can’t believe you were going to go without telling me.’

Rolly sat forward on the bed. ‘If you’ll give me a chance to explain.’

She sat down next to him and he handed her a letter with her name written boldly across the front in thick black text: Ms Elizabeth Smith.

She looked at it and smiled. 'Does this mean you don't lurv me anymore?'

He tried to strangle her. 'I was going to give it to Jack, and if he came with me I was going to send it to you.'

She looked at the sender's name on the back: Narelle, Loveshack, Halls Creek. She smiled. 'You clever little dick.'

'Open it.'

She joked. 'Dear Elizabeth, Somewhere our lurv has gone wrong. I need someone who'll understand me better.'

'Open it.'

As she opened his letter and read it he looked around the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. His poofy bag was packed and stood at the door, ready to go. Apart from that the room was empty, ready for Sid's next victim in the Ningunna Gallery of Fame. She smiled as she read:

Elly (Ms Smith, Sir, Your Highness, etc.),

I have spent most of today (Tue.) thinking and I've decided the cowboys' life ain't for me. I am trying not to see this as another one of the major cop-outs of my life, but whether it really is or not, I am going back to Adelaide. I am going by Dry 'Crik' to see what Jack wants to do. I don't think he likes it any more than me (my reasons for all this are complex—more than Einstein's 'Theory About Relatives', which takes some understanding—anyway, I'll explain when I see you next).

So, if Jack decides to come with me we'll make tracks straight away. I'm sure we'll find work in town—something, anything, even McDonald's. The muster scares me more than the thought of chopping off my own legs (this *is* starting to sound like a cop-out, isn't it?).

When I/we get back to town I/we am/are going to get a flat. Will you come? I would almost stay for your sake, but I'm afraid your dad (and brother) have made it impossible. Anyway, you'll get a job really easy and everything will be just peachy. If you haven't heard from me within a fortnight call my mum on the number I gave you.

I hope you like this idea. I'm sorry, but more than anything I just can't stay any longer. I've thought it over and I'm sure things can work out. I lurv you. I need you. I want you. If you don't come I'll come back for you (burn down Ningunna, murder the folks and commit the most unspeakable, depraved acts—sound nice?).

Anyway, Moscow, tonnes of lurv (and other stuff!), R.

He looked at her eagerly. 'Well?'

She folded the letter, put it in her pocket and looked a little confused. 'You really hate it out here that much?'

'Yep.'

'I didn't think . . .'

'Well?'

She took a moment then smiled, thinking of her birthday money. 'How much for a bus ticket?'

Rolly smiled, pushing her down onto the bed, 'I really tried to stick it out but . . .'

'Dad's gonna spew.'

'D' you care?'

She turned serious. 'Listen Dad, as much as I'd love to stay and continue cooking for you, I think Mary's more than up to the task. I should be back every eight to ten years to visit.' She stopped. 'Promise me you'll find somewhere by the sea.'

'Of course.'

She looked at him. 'It's not like I'm Egg; they need him . . .'

‘Just the three of us.’

She lifted her eyebrows. ‘Oh, a *ménage à trois*?’

‘Eh?’

She tried to strangle him. ‘You dirty little thing.’

It ended in another one of their wrestling matches, half a bottle of Mary’s best vodka and their own expedition out into the desert. They made a bed of Mitchell grass and lay together staring up at the sky as he tried to explain (without really explaining, using only fragments of thoughts) the reasons for his cop-out.

‘I was going through my stuff and I found this picture of my parents on their wedding day. They were standing in front of St Lukes in Whitmore Square and everyone was throwing confetti over them. In the background, in the square, with his sack of cans, riding his Malvern Star . . .’

Elly’s face lit up. ‘Leonard, entry number fourteen?’

‘Exactly. And I thought, what the hell am I doing *here*? I can’t do the job, I don’t like it, I don’t like where I am . . .’

‘Or who I’m with?’

‘That’s okay. I mean, I can’t even remember why I decided to come. Was I absolutely desperate?’

Elly smiled. ‘Yes.’

He smiled back. ‘I was. But there are other options, eh?’

‘City options?’

‘Exactly. Putting steering wheels on Commodores—they train monkeys to do that. And I came to Ningunna!’

‘To prove you were a man.’

‘Well . . .’

They retreated into the silence of the desert, broken only by the imagined braying of cows. After a while he rolled on top of her, entwining his legs around hers, as if she might try to escape; the sand was still warm and moved to the rhythm

of their bodies. As the night drew on they finished Mary's vodka, becoming a single organic body, as much Dreamtime as Compendium, desert as Whitmore Square. At 3 a.m. the night was cold and still and they pulled on their clothes after cleaning themselves with Mitchell grass. After a time it was almost as though it hadn't happened. He was thinking about going home again.

'It was *really* because of this note of yours.'

'Narelle wrote it.'

He studied her, smiling. 'So it was entirely her idea?'

'Yes.'

'I see.'

Elly feigned. 'She got out a pen and paper and wrote it, as simple as that. I didn't ask her to.'

'Entirely her idea?'

'Well . . .'

'Yes? If only your father could see you now.'

She lay back and smiled. 'I'll send him a photo of me, barefoot and pregnant. "Dear Dad, Rolly is still on the dole but it's okay 'cos now he's getting it under three different names. Our fourth kid is on the way; it's a girl and we were thinking of naming her Osiris. Please don't be too upset about all this, you know how me and Fat Rolls feel about marriage. Anyway, say hello to the cows (oh, and Mary and Egg). Love, Elizabeth Starchild. P.S. Could you please loan us another thousand? Ta.'"

Rolly poked around her baby fat. 'That would be for all the drugs?'

'No, the housebreaking does that. We need more money for the TAB.'

And again they sat back soaking in the silence, contemplating. At length he asked, 'You don't really think you could stay?'

'No.'

'That's what I guessed.'

'Will Jack come?'

Rolly shrugged. 'We can get him to mow the lawns.'

Just before sunrise he loaded his bag in the ute and they headed off towards Ningunna. At the turn-off they kissed as their engines idled. 'If you don't get in that ute,' she smiled, 'you'll regret it. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow . . .'

'What?'

'Go. I'll see you soon.'

'Soon.'

She walked back to her bike, kicked it to life and rode off without so much as a gesture. Just before the satellite dish she killed the engine and walked her bike into the shed. Inside the house Mary was on her knees scrubbing the carpet. Elly walked in, red-eyed, wet, dusty and triumphant. Mary stood up and spoke quietly. 'Where have you been?'

Elly shrugged. 'Are you going to tell Dad?'

'No I'm not going to tell him, but I should.'

There was a a pause as Mary fought back a yawn; she'd been up since two o'clock, scrubbing, worrying. 'Is that vodka on your breath?'

Elly burped. 'No.'

Mary looked incredulous; Elly could've blushed. 'Okay, sorry, I'll pay you back.'

'You finished the whole bottle?'

'Yeah.'

Mary smiled. 'You little piss-pot.'

Elly moved to avoid some horse shit. 'You gotta find a better hiding spot.'

Mary shook her head, laughed and returned to the carpet. 'Go on, get to bed.'

Elly staggered down the hallway, whispering, 'We were making a pressed plant collection.'

And Mary, squeezing her sponge, 'Not where it's wet.'

Elly looked back at her and smiled. 'I'll give you a daisy when they're done.'

EXODUS

Egon was still breathing: he was taking long, slow, difficult breaths. His eyes were closed and he was unconscious. When Les saw him he was reminded of his sister-in-law, Skye, hanging from a bed sheet in the toilet block. He knew the struggle would be over soon. Egon was bleeding from his mouth and from the back of his head into the sand. Les had to turn away from the blood flowing from his mouth in a froth.

Fractured images passed through Jack's head: Clint Eastwood in a car showroom, his scout handbook, DR ABC, headless, quivering chooks and a distant uncle laughing with a bloodied tomahawk. Jack turned to walk away but Les said, 'Jesus, Jack, do somethin'.'

'What?'

'You know first aid.'

'Bee stings.'

'Do something.'

He breathed deeply. DR ABC. *Danger*. He looked around the empty desert. No fallen power lines, oncoming traffic or stampeding cattle. *Response*. He shook Egon's legs and body. 'Can you hear me?'

Les sat down and put his head between his knees. 'Christ, what'd you go and do that for?'

But a good scout always keeps his head. Jack ignored him and dropped to his knees.

Airway. He rolled him onto his side and blood spewed out of his mouth, forming bubbles which burst as they blotted into the sand. He scooped the blood from Egon's mouth, but it just kept coming.

'Is he dead?' Les asked.

Jack noticed how the wound had clotted, full of red sand. He had to keep his head, even if it meant pretending. 'Does he take any medication?'

'Medication? He's got a bullet in his head.' He approached Egon warily and shook his leg. 'Oy, can you hear me?'

'He's unconscious.'

Breathing. Jack held his hand to Egon's mouth and felt a faint, warm breath. 'You never know, maybe it missed the important bits.'

Circulation. He felt Egon's pulse and it was there, just. He sat back and surveyed the scene. What to do next? Egon was still bleeding from his mouth into the sand. 'What do we do, Les?'

'You're the expert.'

'That's about all I can remember.' They sat watching, thinking; Jack started to bite his lip. 'How far's Balgoa? I could run for help.' He remembered the compass and felt good about being prepared.

Les just lowered his head. 'Shit.' And looked at Jack. 'I shouldn't be surprised.'

Jack moved closer to Egon. 'Maybe . . . There was this fella with a spear through his head; they just pulled it out. Now he's back at work.'

There was another gap of silence; a spear was heroic, or at least humorous. He looked at Les. 'He's stopped breathing.' He checked his pulse and felt the last faint beats die to nothing. 'Help me get him on his back.' They turned him over. Jack stopped to think. 'Ten and five, or five and two?'

They kept it up for a couple of minutes. It was Les who sat back first, putting his head between his legs, refusing to dignify the act.

'C'mon, Les.'

Jack continued with a few more rounds—five pumps, two breaths—but then he sat up and forced himself to slip back into reality; there were some things the handbook couldn't do for you.

Les looked up. 'Good work, Jack.'

Jack just nodded his head and turned away. 'I swear, a spear, right through the head.'

After they got too hot, sitting there in the middle of the desert, Les stood up and suggested they carry him back. They left his body in Mr Freidmann's living room and went to dig up Les' treasure. It was sitting in the bottom of a still, full well. Les pulled at the rope which was a lifeline to *his* salvation. As they reclined in the shade of a yellow Ranji bush, drinking their coldies, there seemed to be some consolation. 'Gladly thought he was spooky.'

'Yeah?'

'She'll turn on the tears for a couple of days, but then it'll be the same old story.' He moulded his face into his best school-marm. 'Les, sweep this place out. Les, go into town for me. Les this, Les that.' He sighed. 'It's gonna be hard to find

an excuse to get away.' He smiled at Jack. 'Maybe I should get myself a girlfriend in town.'

Jack almost laughed. 'Have they got one of those places?'

'No, a proper girlfriend.' But a girlfriend wouldn't go bush with you; a girlfriend wouldn't permit strange visions or quote Marx in the front bar at Halls Creek or identify any one of sixteen genera of *Protea* as he stood laughing in someone's old frock.

Back at the Freidmann homestead they propped him up against the wall and put a coldie in his hand. They sat around together, the three of them, having one last drink.

'Eh, Egon,' Les began, 'remember the first time you took a class?' He looked at Jack. 'He was done up in these strides and a clean white shirt and,' he looked at Egon, 'I think you were wearing a tie, weren't you?'

He was wearing a tie. He stood at the front in the old tin shed which had since become a drinking spot for the fellas. There were eighteen kids, all in various stages of undress—shoeless, bookless and clueless. They were crowded four at a desk and didn't know exactly why they were there. Gladdy sat at the back of the room with her arms crossed, smiling. Les sat next to her, fumbling with his collar, scared of what he might inadvertently learn.

After the introductions Egon handed each student a sheet and started to read aloud: 'Uses of Cattle. The cattle we see around us are used not only for meat but also for a series of by-products: hides and hair, fats, blood, offal, horns and hooves, bones . . .' He stopped reading and looked at his carefully prepared class list. 'Now, Alan, why don't you tell us about the uses of the hide.'

But Alan just sat there, staring at him, picking his nose.

'Alan?'

Gladdy stood up. 'Hey, listen, these kids can't read.'

'Not at all?'

'Who'd you think was gonna teach 'em?' She sat down, shaking her head. Les smiled and looked at the new fella, sweating profusely, re-thinking things on his feet. Why don't y' work some miracles, mister?

Egon took a handful of pens and asked Alan to distribute them. Then he started to write the alphabet on the board in thick, white, unmistakable letters. When he was finished he turned to the class and said, 'Okay, let's start at the beginning. This is a pen. You hold it between your thumb and first finger, like so.'

He demonstrated. The kids tried to follow him, but it took nearly the whole afternoon before he had them making recognisable marks on the paper. When they knocked off for the day Gladdy looked at Les and said, 'He'll do.'

By the end of the next afternoon they could all write the letters A to G and within the first fortnight they could scribble something that looked like the alphabet, recognise the ten most common joining words and realise the importance of wearing shoes to school. And so he'd become a sort of saint, discussed around the campfire as a figure of Dreamtime proportions. By the time he'd finished with them they could read Genesis for themselves and understand all of those stupid letters the government kept sending them.

Les sat forward and touched Jack's foot. 'I sat through every class. He taught me everything I know . . . in a school sorta sense.'

'Like adult education.'

'Yeah, though, let's face it—no insult, Egon—but most of what you really need to know in life you don't learn at school, eh?'

Jack shrugged, looking at Egon's coldie. 'D' you think he's gonna drink that?'

'Yeah, shame to see it go to waste.' Les leaned forward and took the drink from Egon's hand. 'Sorry, Egon, but you never liked the stuff anyway.'

As the afternoon drew on they buried him under a pile of rocks which had been Mr Freidmann's lounge room wall. He would lie there forever, if the dingoes didn't get him. If the ghosts of the Freidmanns or their two lost cows or even Lenny came back to look they would find him there. Maybe, after all, and with their bodies gone, there would be a meeting of minds and a mixing of spirits—their souls in the desert, diluting, like some of Mary's vodka mixed with water.

At length they went their separate ways. Les was reluctant to leave Egon but he realised this was a spot he would return to often, to leave a coldie or a desert daisy or another one of his treasures between the stones. It would be the destination of all his future walkabouts, alone or with a phantom companion. One day ghosts might start to haunt him too, but he decided that might be pleasant in its own way.

They shook hands. 'If you're passing by, stop in and say hello.'

Jack put on his pack and grasped his compass and map. 'I will.'

They turned and walked into the desert. Jack thought about how he'd describe his journey to Rolly: highlighted moments like shorts from some film that'd changed his life, impossible to describe to anyone who wasn't there. And Kevin, how would he react? 'What were you doing out there anyway?'

In the end you just had to work it out for yourself: why people turned their own lives into disasters. After all, there was no one else to blame.

He followed a bearing of forty-five degrees but Les just followed his nose—one of the important skills he'd had to learn for himself. Egon was left alone; at last the desert opened up to him and there was space enough to breathe.

Rolly walked into Dry Creek Station mid-morning, into an eerie silence. Recent signs of life. His DIG tree was a sweeter consolation—Jack was still around, his things strewn across the room. Rolly settled on his bed and waited. He started reading about a different Exodus in Arthur's Bible: 'So the Egyptians put slave drivers over them to crush their spirits with hard labour.' He could see Egg and his father in Egyptian dress, stockwhips in hand, urging them on. 'Take the bloody steer by the horns and pull it over. All right, now hold it down.'

'They made them work on their building projects and in their fields, and they had no mercy on them.' There were fences, miles and miles of fences, stretching out forever into the Egyptian desert. And the pair of them with a post-hole digger and a strainer. He read about the birth of Moses and his covenant with God, Aaron and his stick, and about the disasters which befell Egypt—blood, frogs, gnats, flies, hail and locusts. But the worst of these plagues was darkness—the feeling of being alone and unseen, invisible before the eyes of everyone except God. This was exactly how they'd described it at Sunday school, how it would be if you shunned the Big Boy, or if you gave him reason to shun you. In the desert he was invisible, beyond the touch and voices of those who cared for him. Eventually he fell asleep with images of a gold bull in his head. It was hot; he tossed and turned and dreamt of his own escape from the Pharaoh's muster.

Sometime in the early evening Jack came into the room and threw his pack on the ground. Rolly jumped from the

bed, holding his heart. 'Christ, I thought you were Sid.'

Jack sat on the ground and opened his pack; he took out a couple of warm beers and gave one to Rolly. 'Compliments of Les.'

'Les?'

'This fella I met in the desert . . . Abo.'

'Yeah, what's he doing out there?'

The word 'lost' came to mind. 'On walkabout with one of his mates.'

Rolly looked at his Bible, open to Exodus, and thought about the original walkabout, or at least the best known. Jack went on to explain it to him: Lenny, Les and Egon.

'They were just walking around out there. And this fella: "Hydrogen, Helium . . ." Shoulda been in the nut-house. I mean, it was terrible, but he needed help.' Rolly thought of Glenside, the old converted mansion his bus passed on the way to school; and the folks out the front on the grass in their jarmies and dressing gowns waving, as bus windows were wound down and a chorus of 'Spastics!' sounded across Glen Osmond Road.

He looked at Jack. 'They stop takin' their pills.'

'That's what must've happened.' At least in part, he guessed. And then he described the suicide, although his manner of speaking suggested it was something more merciful.

Rolly said, 'Christ, was he a . . . mess?'

Jack nodded assent, showing him dry blood on his hands.

'Fuck. Won't you have to go to the cops?'

'Dunno.'

Rolly frowned, pausing, trying to make sense of it, as if this sort of thing only happened in books. 'Are you shittin' me?'

'No, I'm not.'

'He was dead?'

‘Yes.’

‘Bloody hell.’

After a while, after Jack had cooled down, he told him about Les’ offer and Rolly smiled. ‘Might take him up on it.’

‘What d’ you mean?’

‘I’m going home.’

Jack looked stunned. ‘Bullshit.’

‘If I’m gonna be a shitkicker I may as well do it at home.’ And then he looked at Jack, as if to say, what about you?

‘I don’t know.’

‘C’mon, what’s keepin’ us here?’

Jack smiled.

‘Yeah, that’s under control. She’s comin’ down too.’

Jack shifted about uneasily. ‘You really think she’ll . . .’

‘Why not?’

‘And you and her, you’ll just . . .’

‘What’s the choice?’

‘Things might get better.’

‘Rubbish.’ He grilled him for an answer. Jack could only think of the negatives: the backpay they were owed, their parents’ response . . .

But Rolly had a vision of his oasis, a *ménage à trois*. ‘So we get a job—what are they gonna care if it’s McDonald’s or stickin’ our hands up a cow’s arse?’ He smiled.

It was at that time that Jack started to see the merit of it. He was too far away to hear his dad’s complaining voice, the silences, the slamming door. There would be news of a new life, a job, of achievement. His mum would tell the whole town and they’d all be envious (especially Anna and her milk-bar cronies).

Rolly explained his vision more fully: a flat by the sea, drunken nights sharing Darren’s fire (and soggy rice) under

the Grange jetty, the pictures, any picture in the world you wanted.

And then Jack said, 'Ah, that sounds good, we got one movie a month at the Jamestown Institute, generally crap.' He stretched out on the floor, thinking for a few moments. 'Yeah, why not?' He looked at his boots and smiled. 'Why the bloody fuckin' shittin' Christ not?' He jumped onto the bed and held his beer in the air. 'Here's to you Sidney fucking Smith, and Egg'—and playing with his crotch—'sinking the fucking Tirpitz. And Mary, God knows we loved your stews!'

Rolly stood up next to him. 'The Smiths and Ningunna!' Jack took his rifle, loaded a magazine, and started to shoot out the glass in the windows, handing it to Rolly who headed out onto the porch and started firing into the distance. The floor was a mess of glass and they jumped around, crushing it, singing, 'Here we go, here we go, here we go.'

For the first time since they'd met in Alice Springs things felt just right; now they could control their own lives. After they finished at Dry Creek they loaded the ute and set off for Balgoa. On the way, as the glow overtook them, Jack sat back to think of everything in his life that was now possible.

'We should stop at the Del Rae on the way home.'

'Yeah?'

And then, in a thick American accent, he said, 'I got me some unfinished business, partner.'

As they drove they talked about jobs and the possibility of living on the dole if they really had to. Jack could always tell his dad he'd joined the public service—or become a pimp—that would go down a treat across the counter at Mrs Judell's.

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PART FOUR

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NIGHT BY A CAMPFIRE

As Sid drove towards Simpson out-station he thought about all the other city jackaroos he'd had: more trouble than they're worth; teach 'em everything and the minute the muster's over, that's it . . . gone. At least the Abos were always there next time. There was Alf, of course, and a kid from Perth who showed a real interest, asked questions, even spent his spare time out working. But he'd gone like the rest; it was just something about the place. It was true, they weren't going to end up owning it, no matter what, but had that ever deterred the black fellas?

Maybe he'd been too soft. Maybe he should've had them sign contracts; maybe he should've used lawyers and accountants; maybe he should've made his expectations clearer. He rehearsed it in his mind as he drove. 'Right, you, Rollins, you take the left flank, and your mate there, the right flank; and check there ain't no calves left down behind the creek.' He'd

lost a couple once; unlike Mr Freidmann it didn't send him under, but it did break his heart to find them later, dead of thirst, still sucking the dew from pebbles. He imagined the two city kids going around behind them, but instead of mustering them, driving right through the middle and scattering them. And him lecturing them like a pair of truants. 'You two got any bloody sense, eh? Why would you do that?' And the smart one, grinning. 'Wipe that smile off your face or I'll . . .'

He looked ahead at the horizon, always the horizon. Maybe it was the best way to handle them. 'Listen, Mary, they can stay in the out-house for all I care; why should we feed them? They turned three hours work into six today. If it wasn't for Egg . . .'

(Egg, asleep in front of the telly, while Jack and Rolly were out in the dog house, thinking about their mistake.)

In the old days things were simpler—the muster was a community thing, like an Amish barn-raising. People would come from other properties to help you out; the women would do a giant spread (Heather's potato salad was payment enough for a morning of castrator rings). And at night it would be everyone around a bonfire, as the stock grizzled and bristled their sore rumps together in the yards. He often tried to recreate these moments, but they were gone. Nothing he did seemed to bring them back; everything was just an imitation of before.

He pulled up outside Simpson out-station and went inside. Nothing. He searched under the bed, under the hut—nothing. He'd taken his ute, the lot, and gone. Sid didn't know if it was the unthinkable or just a trip to visit his mate. He stood on the porch and scanned the horizon. Nothing. He kicked the wall so hard the dry wood shattered. *They wouldn't let me down again . . .* He got in his ute and drove the two

hours to Dry Creek. As he surveyed his shattered out-house he felt like crying. He sat on the bed and read Jack's graffiti, smeared in thick, raspberry jam on the wall: TAKE ME BACK TO NINGUNNA.

A whole kaleidoscope of thoughts passed through his head—take a photo, no, get the coppers out from the Creek (he could imagine himself wearing a suit, in the dock, the accused standing silently, awaiting their sentence); talk to Les, bit a extra money for 'em to keep quiet; good workers, screw the REA and their commissions, have a proper muster . . . The muster, ring the vet, put it back (again!); but when, the calves were already five months, but who could get here in time?

He looked at the room again and felt, at last, defeated. There was only so much God could throw at you. Or am I just soft? He remembered his father and the bank and how they'd survived; dripping spread thinly on a piece of bread, apple juice until your belly ached, shoes that *could* last longer if you treated them right. No, screwed if I'm gonna let those little shits beat me! He started gathering the rubbish and throwing it in the back of his ute. You could talk sense with Les, and he was a real worker. Or at least he had been, all those years ago.

Alf waded through the puddles of water in the bottom of his creek. His jeans were rolled up, his boots, mostly full of sand, languished on the bank. As he felt the mud squeeze between his toes he closed his eyes and looked up at the sky; under the shade of his favourite gum it was a well earned release. Laying back on the canegrass he thought of Elly, her legs crossed, sitting forward on the torn lounge like a lovesick puppy. 'Can you keep a secret?'

'Of course.'

'You're the only one I trust.'

The only one. He looked at the freckles under her eyes and guessed that he was reading too much into it (again); after all, what could he do ('*Oh, Alf, but will you take care of me?*' and laughing so hard she falls off the lounge).

'I'm going to move to Adelaide, with Rolly.'

'When?'

'Coupla weeks.'

Alf was just as confused as he had been an hour ago.

'He's already gone,' she continued.

'What about Jack?'

She was distracted by the ute in the drive, the slamming door and Sid storming into the house. 'Where have they gone?'

'Sorry?'

Sid shook his head. 'Christ! You'll be happy to know they wrecked Dry Creek before they left.'

'Not Jack and Rolly. I'm gonna miss them. Still . . .'

At which point Alf snuck out and left them to it, hijacking Egg's ute.

Back on the canegrass he heard a bike approaching and sat up. She was still on the bank when he said, '*Now* he may become unreasonable.'

'Nonsense,' she replied, clambering down.

He lay back on the canegrass. 'Christ, Elly, I know Sid's difficult, but . . .'

'So what?'

'I know what he'll do.'

'What?'

'C'mon . . . the cops. He might even follow them to Adelaide.'

'Nonsense.' She paused, parting the reeds with her feet.

'They'll be gone, I'll be gone. He'll forget.' She picked at the grass, stripping it in parallel threads as an ibis took flight. 'And Alfred?'

'He'll be messin' about with cows.'

'We'd see you all the time.'

Or hardly ever. Now she was starting to sound patronising. Alf sighed. 'I sorta like the work, and the country.'

'You could still like the country somewhere else,' she continued, picking at the pig-face.

'No,' he shook his head. 'This'll do,' choosing to remain the seeker of smooth things. 'This'll do.'

The Church had given up on Balgoa years ago, pulling out a pair of priests the black fellas had ignored for years—the community living separately and hardly talking to them, laughing about them around the campfire, about how they couldn't get another job and how there must've been a bit of man-love between them. Balgoa had become a ruin, the locals refusing to inhabit buildings full of their unappeased ancestors. The old ways gone—crafts, language, song. Balgoa was like a paddock, cleared for agriculture, but then deserted, native trees and shrubs slowly moving back in.

Rolly sighed, breathing deeply. He signed his name in the dust—CR—as the beer dribbled down to nothing (after minutes of searching he realised that an acacia would have to do as a dunny). He saw a little girl, her nose clogged with snot, sitting under a juvenile Coolibah, doing a wee. Gladdy, an old lady, as black as ink, grabbed her and dragged her into a room, wiping her nose and hitting her playfully on the bum. 'Haven't I told you about this? Where's your mother?' And inside the house, 'You gotta look after her, Frieda.'

'Gladdy, piss off.'

And Gladdy re-emerging, 'I swear, Frieda, I'll get Les onto ya.' And then disappearing somewhere else, on another mission.

Rolly guessed she might have been a truckie in another life: broad-shouldered, heavy set, with a permanently moulded 'cut the bullshit' expression.

'G'day, Gladdy.'

'Rolly, it's not usually like this.' But she didn't say it apologetically, more as a matter of fact.

He zipped himself up and decided to take the long way back to the party. He noticed the shell of an old asbestos building which was once the church, the wooden roof long since fallen victim to bonfires. The building stood open to the night like some divine observatory, open to the stars and heavens which had promised so much but delivered so little. There were the remains of a few pews; those that hadn't been used for firewood were gathered into drinking spots. An inlaid wooden cross had fallen off the wall and they'd even started in on that. A giant tapestry still hung, intact, if not a little faded by the monotony of bulldust and three score, or more, wet seasons. It read: 'There are seven things which the Lord hates: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that kill innocent people, a mind that thinks up wicked plans, feet that hurry off to do evil . . .' The rest was torn beyond recognition.

But there was one thing which was still intact, on what had been the altar (now, instead of incense, the smell of dog piss, instead of sweet altar wine, the stains of claret, instead of a host, a fly-blown Chiko roll), on what *had* been the altar, a large gold cross on a small lace doily, polished meticulously until it reflected every star in the universe. Rolly walked up and touched it. Beside it was a fresh posy of yellow Billy Buttons left in an old jam jar full of water, with the Glen Ewin sticker still on. And a note, scrawled in the clumsy copper-

plate Egon had taught him, 'To Egon, God bless you, let's hope the old fella's home.' Rolly picked up the flowers and smelt them. Like his mother's golden diosma they were bland, unperfumed, but essential—not just in the garden scheme of things, but in the universal scheme of things.

He walked out of the church past a few smaller, deserted, buildings which had also given up their roofs to the fire. Les had explained how two dozen white fellas had come and built them. A fella from the government had come with the newspapers to cut the ribbon, promising 'reconciliation through re-building'. Gladdy reckoned he should've made his metaphors a little less obvious. Balgoa was to have a nurse, a hospital and new sources of fresh water. He said things like, 'For too long our indigenous peoples have had to live in conditions like these. Our re-building programme . . .' Rolly saw a picture of Les—tribal chief, sage, soothsayer and elder—shaking hands with him as the community looked on suspiciously.

Les explained how after the workmen had gone and the cameras had stopped clicking they knew they'd been had again. Walking through a 'self-contained unit', Les observed that, 'You'd bloody well suffocate in here.' So they knocked out the windows and removed the doors (lockable doors, they had a laugh over that), but it was still like living in a prison cell. They lit a fire and almost suffocated. They brought in the dogs, but they wouldn't have a bar of it. At one point Les pointed out to his mates, 'If you were locked in here you'd wanna hang yourself.'

One day, he explained, the white fellas would be back with their cameras to see how much the black fellas' lives had improved. They'd return to town with photos and publish them in the paper. There would be a nodding of heads and a flood of letters to the editor. But out at Balgoa they'd hear none of this. They were still camped out in their humpies of

tin roofs and gunny-sack walls, closed in the day and opened at night to let the cool desert breezes pass over them.

Rolly looked through the derelict buildings, built years after the church and the parsonage (now just a pile of crumbling rocks). He wondered if one day these units would be re-built, or maybe just demolished. He stood in Egon's old classroom, a sea of bottles at his feet, and looked out at dark, blurry figures moving about in a humpy. What were they doing? Screwing, arguing, staring up at the sky with contented tummies full of dead chook? Sid had never paid them enough for their own satellite dish; that was one consolation.

He went back to the campfire and sat on the pew next to Jack. 'What'd I miss?'

Jack smiled. 'Nothin'. I think you're just in time.'

Gladdy sat across from Les, screaming at him through the flames. 'Christ, Les, I never said I hated him.'

'The way you went on.'

'What did you expect, you were never here.'

'So?'

Les sat forward, playing with his beer; Gladdy had a long, cold glass of water. As they continued jousting the assembled encouraged them, without any apparent loyalty, 'Go on, Gladdy, you tell him.'

And Gladdy, shaking her head. 'You live in a bloody dream world, Les.' She smiled. 'You should go to that place in Queensland, fit right in.'

They laughed; but Les was up to it. 'This is what I mean, it's a female instinct.'

The girls jeered; someone threw an empty can at him. He lifted his hand to quieten them. 'No, no, seriously, women feel the need to, to . . . own a man. It's not enough that you live together—they have to manipulate, and push, and pull—'

'It's 'cos yer all so bloody lazy,' Gladdy laughed.

'Ah.' Les put his beer down; he needed both hands to explain this one. 'Men aren't lazy.'

'Says you!'

'No no, the problem is that men's natural role, as the hunter, has been lost. Years ago, that was it. You were out there all day, blood on your hands; you know what I mean, hormones, virility?'

'Christ!' Gladdy slapped her knee. 'Is that what went wrong?'

And a chorus of laughter; she seemed to be winning. Jack suspected that Les was just getting himself in deeper.

'No, listen,' he said, waiting until everyone was quiet. 'You laugh, but it wasn't our fault. We were made obsolete by that supermarket in town. And look at us now.' He smiled. 'Of course some of us still retain our virility.'

One point to Les. Jack broke in. 'It's all those musters, Les, gave you muscles.'

'Yeah, see, he knows. Anyway, there's something more behind this.'

A chorus of disapproval. Another empty can.

'I'm surprised nobody can see it, it's the guvment. They want us to be a bunch of bloody snivelling dogs. They don't want someone like Martin Luther King risin' up outa Balgoa. They give us our welfare and a bit a land, if the cockies don't want it, but what *don't* they give us?'

And then there was an unearthly silence. 'Exactly. You're all bloody ignorant. That's what they *don't* want us to do, use our minds, get an education. When y' got education y' got understanding—though I got mine through thinking, not school—and when you understand how things work you can change 'em.'

The silence was deafening. He had them; he milked the

pause for dramatic effect. 'Think about it: once you've got power you can achieve anything. Look at ol' Charlie Perkins. Didn't like him, did they? But he made some changes, eh?'

They were silent because they were surprised; for once he seemed to have a point. But Gladdy was always the thorn in his side. 'What about Thelma's lad, he went to university.'

'Yeah, and what did he study, glassblowing.'

'Fine arts.'

'Same thing. How many glassblowers we had as prime minister?'

No one could argue with that. If the government was worried about a black glassblower in the Lodge it wasn't showing it.

'So what we gotta do is get educated. That's why I asked 'em for Egon.'

'Who asked them?'

'I did.'

'He'd been here a week before you got back from walk-about.'

'Doesn't change things.'

'Then you turned him into your drinking buddy.'

Les put his hands on his knees and leaned forward, pleading, hoarsely. 'Gladdy, how many times do I gotta tell you, he was a sick, sick man.'

'Yeah.'

'I's just trying to help him.'

'We shouldn't speak ill of the dead, should we?'

'No.'

Les raised his beer. 'I propose a toast to Egon. God bless you son, *Riposa in pace*.' Gladdy frowned; Les plunged in the sword. 'It's eyetie y' ignorant woman.'

They drank to Egon. There was another long pause as they

all stared into the fire, thinking. Les was trying to remember the time, sitting here, when he first told Egon the story of Lenny. 'Once, long time ago, there was this emu . . .' By the end of it Egon was sitting transfixed, a glow in his eyes. They were all aware of his outbursts, the missed lessons, the fragments of unfinished conversation—'We have this story about a little boy who puts his finger in a dyke . . .' But that was all; they waited for him to finish, but he only lowered his head and started mumbling something in wog.

Les looked up. 'We need something. Times like this we need Father Heydrich.'

Jack nudged Rolly in the ribs. 'Go on.'

Rolly sat forward. 'I know something.' He struggled to remember. It was still there in his head; he'd won a copy of the *Good News Bible* for remembering this one. 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . .'

They all joined in, bit by bit, until there was a chorus of remembered fragments—words which were on the surface meaningless, but which underneath were a warm and soothing consolation.

'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

When they finished reciting the prayer of their first rebuilding, they all gazed silently back into the fire. 'And I shall dwell in the Lord's roofless house until I die.' There should have been a song, but no one could remember the words to any. Instead they let the fire die down as they sprawled out on rugs and blankets across the desert. In time, the shadows of the flames stopped flickering against Father Heydrich's asbestos folly.

Les awoke with someone kicking his leg. He sat up and squinted, wiping the sleep from his eyes. 'Sid.'

'G'day, Les, how are you?'

'Fine, haven't seen you for a while.'

'Keepin' busy.' Sid looked around at the bodies and the empty bottles—so this is how the government prefers it. In a strange way, his philosophy was similar to Les'; if their views shared a common ground then it was from a different perspective—how the government had tried to screw them.

Les crawled from a blanket and sat on a pew. He looked around and saw the boys obscured, still asleep. Or so he thought. Rolly covered his head with a blanket, turning away. He kicked Jack in the back of the leg and whispered, 'You awake?'

'Yep.'

'What should we . . .'

'Quiet.'

Sid sat next to Les and eyed him warily. 'Reason why I came, Les . . . wanted to know if you're interested in some work.'

Les didn't need to think; he shook his head. 'Nah. Sorry, Sid, you remember what the fella said.'

'I know, but let's be realistic. I can't afford that. But I'll pay you what I can. They needn't find out, eh?' Les glanced at the boys and back at Sid—wondering which was his greatest dilemma. 'Some of these fellas,' Sid continued, 'I'm sure they'd be happy for a bit a extra money on the side.'

'Nah, this fella said we can't; he looks after us now, Sid.'

'What y' mean, these fellas used to enjoy it.'

'Did they?'

'You did.'

'Did.' Les patted his beer belly. 'That was quite some time ago, Sid.'

'So what . . . won't you at least ask them?'

Les lowered his head and nodded. 'I dunno.' Deep down he knew it just didn't interest him anymore. For a moment he

wondered whether it might be just the thing that he and the others needed; to get their hormones pumping, to re-awaken old instincts. But then again, his joints troubled him now (Gladdy diagnosed arthritis) and he could barely bend over to pick up a stubby. No. The mustering was history. They were good days but they were over now. Now he just wanted to sit back and remember. As for the others, they wouldn't work in an iron lung anymore, especially for Sid.

'I dunno, Sid. I don't think so.'

'All the beer you want, and bonuses.'

'And who's running things now?'

'Me.'

Les looked suspicious.

'And Egg, but he's harmless.'

'Some of these fellas don't like takin' orders from . . .'

'I've got the last word.'

Jack pulled the sheet further over his head. Rolly kicked him again, smiling. 'Moo, moo, screw you.' Jack had to stop himself from laughing. Rolly continued. 'Tell him where to stick it, Les.'

'Tell you what, Sid, I'll have a word to them. No promises. Okay?'

'Good on y', Les. When could you let me know, time's against us.'

Les put his hand on Sid's shoulder. 'Leave it to me.' He stood up, ready to walk Sid to his car. Sid leaned back, stretching his arms out on the pew. 'How's Gladdy?'

'Fine.'

'Those bloody government fellas want to cause trouble, eh?'

'Yeah, that's right, Sid; but I just do what I'm told . . . by these fellas.'

Sid slapped his leg and laughed. 'And Gladdy.'

Les wasn't amused. 'Yeah, that's right.'

And another long pause. Les knew he should've asked about Ningunna, but realised that would draw things out interminably.

Jack couldn't stop laughing. 'Tell him to fuck off, Les.'

And Rolly. 'Hey, I've got an idea.'

'Shut up!'

At last Sid took the hint, got up and walked over to his ute with Les. 'Maybe you could ring me sometime today?'

'Sure, Sid.'

As Sid drove off towards Ningunna he sensed he wouldn't hear anything; they'd all been made lazy and useless by the government. At least *he'd* given them an opportunity. Maybe he'd write a letter to the *Advocate*, saying how he'd offered them opportunities, and how they hadn't even responded—exactly what you'd expect.

When Les returned to the pew the boys were sitting there, laughing. Jack shook his head, 'Nice performance, Les.' Gladly appeared from a distant humpy and shouted at him. 'Les, bring the first-aid box.' Les set off on the start of another busy day, his first without his old drinking mate, determined (at least for now) to prove his virility, determined also not to mention Sid's offer to anyone.

THE ALL ALONE REALISATION

As Alf sat alone in the Tropicana, playing with his keys and waiting to order, he wondered if anyone had missed him yet. They had, but not by much. Elly had only just found his note under her pillow. 'Dear Elly, sorry . . .' And that's how it continued, regretful to the end.

. . . tell Sid if it causes any trouble he should keep my backpay. As you might notice from this letter, it's not the money that worries me . . .

The Tony Stringer Orchestra played their finest rendition of 'Blue Moon'. Alf started to sing along, his mind weaving the words and sounds into a realisation, the 'All Alone Realisation': everything Tony sang was true, and might have been believable if not so corny. An old couple sat in the corner sipping shandies. He noticed that they just kept looking

around the room, hardly speaking, as if the boating in Central Park and the Florida beaches were more interesting. Well, that's one consolation, he thought. If that's how it all ends up.

I suppose I've got nothing to lose, so here goes. I think we're very different sorts of people. I don't always come out with what I'm thinking (I can be self critical), whereas you generally always do (unless you don't want to hurt someone's feelings). Still, I don't think this should've mattered. But, as my mum used to say, 'You buy your ticket, you take your chances.' I find it hard to believe, now, that you didn't know how I felt about you.

He put the photo of her into the ashtray and wondered whether he should leave it there forever.

'Hi.' The waitress smiled and pointed to the specials board. 'Specials tonight, Cajun chicken,' and with the Yankee accent she turned on for everyone, 'that's poultry à la New Orleans.' And then Yiddish. 'Then we got east-side pork chops. You tell me you want pork, I get you pork.' Alf smiled, like they all smiled. She hoped he wasn't just another horny cowboy. 'Where you from?'

'A, a station.'

'What, a railway station?'

He smiled. 'No, Ningunna, heard of it?'

'No.'

'Ninety-eight thousand square kilometres and you haven't heard of it?'

'That's as big as Texas.'

'Bigger.'

'Couldn't be.'

'It is.'

'Food?'

'What else you got?'

'Chops. We got chops. Piles and piles of bloody chops. Ningunna chops. You want chops?'

'What comes with 'em?'

'More chops.'

'Give me a huge plate of chops.'

'With sauce?'

'No sauce, just chops.'

The old man in the corner stared at them, confused. With so little to say, his wife wasn't going to miss the opportunity to make conversation. 'What is it?'

Alf met the old man's eyes and he looked away. 'That was nice piece of steak, eh, Myrtle?'

'Eh?'

The waitress disappeared into the kitchen. Alf looked at the photo in the ashtray as Myrtle assessed the Tropicana's tiling, imagining the New Australian responsible: tall, shadowy and reeking of garlic. As she drifted off into his arms, Alf fought off premonitions of another let down. At length the waitress re-emerged with his chops and salad and threw them down in front of him.

'There you go, eat your greens.' She wrote something on a pad.

He wondered if it was going to be a phone number.

'That your girlfriend?' she asked.

'Hey? No, it was in there.'

Uh uh, she always left the table clean. She finished scribbling the bill and thought, not another one. It was hard to strike up a friendship with so many lonely people around. No one wanted to be intellectual anymore—they all wanted commitment, sticky fumlings and a quickie in the Registry office. She smiled. 'So you come to town for some human company, eh?'

'No, I quit.'

She lifted her eyebrows. 'Ah.'

He read it as a positive sign. She put the bill on the table and he looked at it. Time Served: 9.05; Table: 7; Chops \$9.95. That was somewhat less encouraging, but still . . . He guessed it was time for his own re-building: it was now or never. 'So, you wanna get a drink later?'

'I'd like to, but my boyfriend's picking me up.'

'Ah.'

He looked at his chops and Ningunna's consolation seemed, again, hollow. She looked at his bowed head and wondered why people were so highly strung. As for the girlfriend, he could keep her; she was a cute little thing anyway. She went back into the kitchen and the old couple went up to their room, to plan their next leg to Broome, via 'Sale of the Century' and a sanitised crapper.

Alf looked down from the night skies of Dallas and wished someone would assassinate him. He took the photo of Elly, put it back in his wallet and ate his chops, quickly, leaving his money on the table. When she checked there wasn't a tip. Typical.

Meanwhile, he settled into a night of television more static than image: 'Hardcastle and McCormack' followed by the ABC's 'Classic Britain'. Eventually there were just infomercials and ads for phone-a-fantasies for all the losers with their boxes of tissues. Soft porn starlets promised him the love he craved and for a while he even thought about ringing. Eventually he gave up and lay on his bed, unable to fall asleep. Tomorrow he'd check in with the REA. Tomorrow night he'd find somewhere else to eat.

Elly ploughed through her socks drawer until she found the matches, hidden next to the reefer Narelle had left behind.

‘When it’s all a bit much, sneak out and light up.’ But that was Narelle. Although Elly didn’t want to be like that, sometimes it was nice to pretend. She held the letter out of her window and lit the edges. It caught and burnt quickly: the words (‘I’ve got nothing to lose . . .’) turned from blue to black as the paper turned to crepe, to tissue, then to dust.

She could just imagine life with Alf: comfortably provided for, maybe a deceased estate, a couple of acres closer to town—but he’d always be working for someone else. There’d be a table full of food that he’d provided and the freedom for her to do anything she wanted, go anywhere she pleased. But where could she go? It was limiting. When he arrived home from work he’d be adoring (spontaneous? bringing her a bunch of wild daisies?), but over tea the conversation would be stilted.

‘What you got planned for tomorrow?’

‘Narelle’s asked me to look after her kids.’

‘Ah.’

And that would be it: there’d be no exams on Hegelian philosophy, papers on the bacteriophage, or cappuccinos in the shade of city cafes. She dropped the last fragments before they burnt her fingers. Sitting back on her bed she wondered where he’d end up: back home with his parents, or did he really love the desert as much as he said?

Sid stood at her door, swigged and wiped the beer from his mouth. ‘Something burning?’

She shrugged. He stepped inside her room, something he’d never do if he were sober. ‘Smells strong in here.’ She remained silent, took a book (the heavily underscored *Devotions* by John Donne), sat back on her bed and started reading. Sid sat down next to her, staring silently at the floor. ‘He didn’t say anything to you?’

She frowned. ‘What?’

'About his plans?'

'No.'

She read. Sid breathed deeply and sighed; he knew he shouldn't go on when he was like this, but what could he do? Les hadn't rung, of course, but he had no intention of chasing him up, of begging. He felt helpless, betrayed—he always tried to be fair—and angry.

'I'm gonna lay charges.'

Elly looked up, frowning. 'What?'

'Gonna make 'em pay for that damage.'

'That's very smart, what's it gonna achieve?'

He smiled. 'Make me feel better.'

'That's what's important. Long as it all works out for you.'

'Not so funny now, is it?'

She scowled. 'Right . . . if you've finished.' She looked at the door, but he just sat there smiling, defiant.

'Well, if you wanna stay . . .' She got up to leave but he grabbed her arm. He nudged her ribs with the bottle as he spoke. 'I've had it, being screwed.'

With a heavy pull she broke free. She stared at him: she felt like calling him pathetic, but she knew she had something better to throw at him. 'Alf's gone.'

He smiled; he wouldn't be fooled again. 'Yeah?'

'Left me a note.' She picked up the box of matches and shook them. Sid was still smiling. 'So they've all deserted me, huh?'

She nodded. Outside the phone rang and Mary answered it. 'Looks like you've got bigger problems than Dry Creek.'

'Perhaps.'

She wondered why he was still smiling. Either he didn't believe her or he was stupid. 'Go out and check for yourself,' she continued.

‘No need for that.’

Mary came to the door. ‘For you Elly.’ She looked at Sid. ‘It’s Narelle.’

Elly made for the phone as Mary looked at her husband suspiciously. He dropped his shoulders and sighed. ‘You seen Alf around anywhere?’

Elly answered the phone. She smiled, bit her lip and spoke in a whisper. From the other end of the line she could hear his voice, faintly, with the sound of a didgeridoo and electric guitar competing in the background. ‘Mary didn’t say anything?’

‘No.’

‘There’s a party at Balgoa tonight, wanna come?’

‘Is the Pope a rancid Cath’lic?’

It could have been Carnegie Hall, it could have been the Royal Albert, it might have been something alternative from an arts festival. It could have been the foyer of the Globe or a quarry set out for some day-long Indian epic. It could have been there, at any of the great moments of theatre history—if only the critics had come, if only there was a culture of remembrance. But this was a culture of fleeting images, of stories, handed down by word of mouth, where heroes became cowards, storylines simplified, smart-arses and con-men became mythologised into emus and wombats, headlands and giant outcrops of rocks.

Balgoa’s culture had become a trifle—bits of the old ways set hard in a jelly of the new: Old Testament, *New Idea*, Kylie Minogue and Stallone. The Miss Gladdy’s School of Dance and Drama was in there somewhere, a stale piece of cake drowned in custard. Miss Gladdy and her youthful troupe (an innovation they owed to Egon) had workshopped the classics—from *Alice in Wonderland* through to the most memorable scenes of Shakespeare (Hamlet’s desert soliloquy,

the Government Housing Authority balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* and, with a little help from Les as Prospero, the storm scene from *The Tempest*). No, she'd tried them, but her audience just hadn't responded. So here they were, gathered in the old church, preparing to play out their Dreamtime once again. It was the story of Lenny the emu. The irony of the setting wouldn't have been lost on Egon.

Rolly was excited and anxious as he waited for the players to appear. His hand was sweaty as it held hers tight, lost in the darkness. Jack sat next to Les and his mates on a couple of hastily resurrected pews, drinking, stroking their chins with the age-old expression of the amateur theatregoer: go on, impress me!

Gladdy was in the wings, the crumbled ruins of Father Heydrich's robing room, urging her nervous Lenny to take to the stage.

'No one's gonna laugh at you.'

'I can't remember what I gotta say.'

'Act nasty.' And with a shove from the stage manager (director, costumier, cook, nursemaid and prompt), the career of a reluctant star was born.

Rolly looked at Elly and smiled. 'What's he meant to be?'

She nudged him in the ribs. 'An emu.'

'Ah.'

'Hence the lack of arms.'

As the applause (men hitting ale bottles on the back of pews) died down, Elly returned to the performance, but Rolly dwelt on her face. He wondered what the highlight of their farewell night had been. Les' tender roast roo? Gladdy losing her potato salad in the fire (she almost cried, Les laughed, she stormed off, 'Looks like I'm sleepin' alone again'). Or had it been the grind of her trailbike in the distance? Her face as she

wiped her brow and smiled? Stale cheese and salami laid out lovingly on a paper plate?

The orchestra played Wagner (again, thanks to Egon), the song of another tribe they'd adopted as their own. When the show got exciting they would resort to 'The Ride of the Valkyries'—the didgeridoos splurting, the rhythm sticks out of control, the electric guitar, fully distorted, playing the chords off the back of someone's hand.

The victim (another emu, clad in the proceeds of two dozen violated mop-heads) walked towards Lenny, his shoulders rising and falling. Lenny lifted his head and smiled, 'Hello young man and what's your name?'

The victim tried to recall his first line. Damn! He *had* remembered it; he thought of the hours he'd spent in the corner of his parents' humpy, studying, learning, emoting.

Gladdy whispered loudly from the wings. 'My name is Dennis.'

The victim lifted his head and picked at the air. 'My name is Dennis.'

A giant howl of laughter came up from the cheap seats. Les laughed the loudest, doubled over, spilling beer on the ground between his legs. 'Dennis!'

Gladdy heard his voice but bit her lip; she wanted to step out on the stage, arms on hips, and lecture them. 'What *is* his bloody name then?'

And Les. 'I dunno . . . but Dennis!' Laughing again.

But she wouldn't do that: it'd ruin it for the kids, and it just wasn't show biz. Her fingers started to twitch, as if in a dream, as if they were practising with the tools of revenge.

As it turned out, Lenny was quite an actor. 'Well, Dennis, I'm going to share a secret with you, a secret I've never shared with anyone.'

Dennis went blank again. Damn! He ad libbed, 'Yes?'

'See that cliff over there?'

'Yes.'

'It's a magic cliff. If you jump off you'll grow tremendous wings and fly, up into the heavens, anywhere you want in the world.'

Dennis tried to think but nothing came into his head. Elly turned and whispered into Rolly's ear, perhaps nibbling it, perhaps just tempting him with her breath. 'Poor thing.'

Rolly smiled and squeezed her hand. He was tempted to tell her about *his* great theatrical triumph: Miss White in the wings, encouraging him with her smile. His mum, and a hundred other parents and friends, gathered in the body of the church proper (Sunday school was usually relegated to the netball shed). His Mary, also wrapped in miles of linen bedsheets, handed him an armless, plastic Tiny Terri which was supposed to pass as Baby Jesus. He held the baby in the air and recited the lines he'd practised, 'Mary, this child we give to the world, in the name of God Almighty; we shall call him Jesus and he shall dwell in men's hearts forever.' And then applause, the feel of lights dying around him . . . triumph. But then, with an unwary step backwards, Joseph and Baby Jesus were in the Baptismal pool and the applause turned to laughter, the victory to humiliation. Miss White comforted him with a towel and a smile; the floating, plastic corpse of Jesus soon filled with water and sank. They would have to drag the bottom before afternoon service.

But memories were imperfect things: maybe it hadn't happened like that, maybe he'd just been a cyprus in a Palestinian forest or a seed merchant at the temple. Maybe, he guessed, he was no different to anyone else in choosing to believe in the fantastic over the ordinary, in Moses over mathe-

matics, in the absence of Lenny's tongue as more than just evolution. He thought of the face of his own plastic Tiny Terri, touched up with lip-gloss and blush, and realised that if magic were sacrificed to logic then no one could ever attempt to know Jesus.

Meanwhile Dennis was still blank. There was an uneasy silence; the assembled, in the torch-lit ruins, could hear Gladdy's whispers getting louder and louder. 'You mean anywhere in the world?' But Dennis couldn't hear. Oh he was horrified, retreating back to the only place in the world he wanted to be right now: the cool, cosy corner of his parents' humpy. This time Gladdy almost screamed. 'You mean anywhere in the world?'

And Les just couldn't resist it. 'Yeah, anywhere you like.'

His disciples broke up and there was a clatter of beer bottles against pews. Gladdy couldn't take it any longer. She stepped out onto the stage, hiding her eyes from the lights, and waited until she had absolute silence. 'Lesley H. Clayton, I hope you're bloody proud.'

Les bowed his head and mumbled. 'Jesus, save me, Jack.'

Gladdy turned and put her arm around Dennis, but this once great emu, either through the embarrassment of drying up or the overawing presence of Lenny the emu, had piddled on the burgundy carpet where Father Heydrich had once celebrated mass.

During the hastily convened intermission Les sat quietly on his pew, contemplating the fallen cross. 'Forgive me Father for I have sinned . . .'

Jack looked at him and smiled. 'You're gonna need more than that.'

Les sighed. 'You could have a word to her, Jack.'

'Uh uh, as much as I'd like to.'

And then he tried the daughter, the good Smith. 'Elly, you women can all talk to each other.'

'Les, how long have they spent puttin' this together?' But he just looked up at her, like a sad dog. 'How would you feel?' she continued.

'I'd laugh.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'Give me your beer.'

Les handed her a freshly opened bottle and she poured it onto the ground. 'How long, Les?'

'Coupla weeks.'

'Okay, so you can abstain for a coupla weeks.'

Les was quiet. The thing was, Elly had been enjoying the performance. This was something she expected from her brother, not Les, the funny black clown king of dozens of musters.

He got up and walked behind the curtain, into the robing room. Gladdy had just cleaned up Dennis' great disaster and now she was trying to squeeze on an emu costume which was five sizes too small.

'Gladdy.'

She ignored him.

'Listen, I'm sorry, I didn't think it was any big deal.'

She breathed in and pulled the costume on, barely. 'It is to them, Les.'

She placed the now confident Lenny in his prompt, stood behind him and motioned to the orchestra. The lights dropped and the music began to drone again.

'Out of the way, Les.'

She wasn't going to let anyone stand in the way of their big moment. Les stood back in the wings behind a flock of lesser

emus as Lenny and Dennis took to the stage. Les watched his partner's performance from a different perspective; he thought how, in full flight, she was nothing short of miraculous.

'So let me get it right,' she ad libbed, 'I jump off the cliff, cross my legs, whistle and then . . .'

'You'll fly, as high as you like.'

'Well that sounds like fun, I think I'll try it.'

She climbed onto the altar, knocking over the Father's golden cross, crushing Les' daisies (it didn't matter, Egon couldn't have taken Lenny so lightly). She crossed her legs, whistled a few notes (to the accompaniment of solo rhythm sticks) and jumped. She crashed to the floor like a sack of old potatoes and lay motionless as the dust rose around her. Silence overtook the assembled and there were a few mutterings. Les stepped forward and looked at her still body—breathless, spent, all spirit and no substance, like a soft, black, flightless angel. Even Lenny looked worried. A few of the assembled frowned and someone even stood up to see more clearly.

Les slowly walked onto the stage and knelt beside her. He took her big shoulders in his hands and shook her. 'Gladdy, you okay?'

A tense, expectant hush overtook the audience. He shook her more fiercely. 'Bloody hell, Gladdy.' And, looking up, 'Somebody do something.'

A group of women gathered around her and Elly came to the front, feeling for a pulse. Les, shocked, moved back and sat in the front row; a few of his mates gathered around, consoling him.

Gladdy opened her eyes and winked at Elly. 'Tell him I'm dead.'

Elly suppressed a smile and turned to Les. 'I don't think there's much I can do.'

‘What d’ you mean?’

‘Les, she broke her neck.’

‘Aw Jesus.’ He put his head in his hands and rocked back and forth. ‘It’s bloody punishment.’ And looking up. ‘I was just havin’ a laugh.’

Gladdy looked at Elly again and smiled. Elly, always the better part of any duo, turned to Les. ‘Hold on, she’s getting better.’

‘What?’

‘Actually, I think she’s gonna be okay.’

He got up, made his way past the assembled and looked at her. She muttered, ‘I have become the breath of God, floating earthward again.’

Elly looked at him, seriously. ‘You know, God’s just exhaled, she’s returned to us.’

Gladdy slowly opened her eyes and saw him there; she couldn’t help but smile. Elly broke up and rolled around on the burgundy carpet.

‘Les, he told me to return to you.’ And then she nearly cacked herself laughing.

By the time of the final curtain—Lenny de-tongued and de-winged, exiled to the desert, his Helpmann-esque soliloquy noted by many, ‘The desert is hot and lonely, woe to me; I have lost all those whom I loved so dearly’—it was generally agreed that the most theatrical part of the evening wasn’t the children’s performance. Elly didn’t think much of the audience’s staying power (twelve minutes of drama, eighty minutes of breaks) and wondered how they would’ve handled the uncut Lear.

All of this didn’t worry Gladdy as much as it might have. On the great scoreboard of their relationship she’d notched up another few points; one for the expression on his face, one for

the monotonous apology he kept droning after the show and one for the fact that she'd got him to work (helping the kids with their costumes, cleaning up the empty stubbies, storing the gear, making the teas and coffees—in her giant lobster apron—and serving cake to the parents).

Elly had taken hers white with two, and just a 'tidly sliver of cake'. He bowed his head and tried to ignore her gaze. Still, she was persistent. 'Actually, a little bit more please, boy.'

He looked at her and sighed. 'This is why a man shouldn't get married.'

'Why?'

Gladdy approached and he was suddenly a different woman. 'That the lot, Elly?'

She just grinned. 'I suppose, for now.'

But after the circus was over and they all went out hunting together (Jack was determined to get a roo before he left the desert), Elly started to crawl under his skin like no woman ever had—or after tonight, ever would again. At least Gladdy could be pacified with his narrow repertoire of redeeming gestures: work, grovelling and a tickle on the back of her legs.

But Elly was different. 'Why's it her job, Les? You're just as responsible, if not more, for the kids.'

'Not my kids.'

'Not hers either.'

'If she wants to be Mother Teresa . . . I do what I can but a man only lives once. I don't see why I should . . .'

'And I'm sure Gladdy would rather be off wherever too.'

Les looked at Rolly and smiled. 'See, this is why you shouldn't get married.'

Elly threw her hands in the air. 'Oh Lord, why? 'Cos you might have to hang out the washing occasionally?'

'No, see, you're puttin' words into my mouth.'

'Les, haven't you noticed, the world doesn't run itself. While you're off on walkabout Gladdy has to . . .'

'It's what she likes to do.'

'And you don't?'

'Exactly.'

'Cos you couldn't be bothered?'

'Yes, no . . .'

Rolly smiled; he enjoyed watching her steamroller him. She was the best the Catholic education system could produce, not barring the fact that they'd turned her into an atheist.

'She picks up the saucepan, starts a meal, what am I supposed to do?'

Elly smiled. 'Les, that's lame, you don't really believe . . .'

'Course I do, mostly.'

'Mostly?'

'I think . . .'

Rolly, on the other hand, knew to keep his distance. He didn't know if it was love, or his habit of agreeing, or both which drew them together. All he knew was that it worked. Like Les and Gladdy, the whole was greater than the parts on which they disagreed.

They sat down in a garden of Mitchell grass. Jack continued on, surveying the near distance by starlight and a one-eighth moon. Les, like all great religious charlatans, abided by the dictum, 'When they won't go for common sense (read, my opinion) just give 'em a serving of folklore.'

'Now listen, I'll explain, we got this Dreamtime story.'

Elly rolled her eyes. 'Les, it's over, twentieth century now.'

'No, you white fellas don't listen, that's why you're all so mixed up.'

She laughed. '*We're* so mixed up! Les, please don't point the bone at me!'

Rolly joined in, if only half-heartedly.

'Listen,' Les continued, firmly, 'this is how the whole thing got started: one man, one woman. They meet, he says, "You got anyone?" She says, "No." That's it, simple.'

Rolly lay back, his hands behind his head. 'Adam and Eve.'

Les shook his finger in the air. 'We thought of it first. Anyway, they get together and agree, in the day he goes out hunting and she collects grubs and vegetables.'

Elly shook her head. 'You mean, he thinks of it and she agrees.'

'No, can you imagine her out hunting?'

'Yes.'

'And when she's pregnant?'

She sat back, stunned. 'This is so absurd that I don't even know where to start arguing.'

Les smiled; he knew he had her now. 'See.'

Elly kicked Rolly's leg. 'Feel free to add something . . . anything.'

'No, you're doing just fine.'

'So,' Les continued, summing up, 'there you have it. That's how the whole man-woman thing got started. Worked well for two million years.' He looked at Elly. 'Until now.'

Jack came walking up the hill towards them. He sat in the sand and for a while there was a silent calm as they all opened their senses to the night. There was a stillness Rolly suspected he wouldn't experience again, even at the end of Grange jetty.

'There's a road down there,' Jack mentioned, casually. Rolly sat up and looked but couldn't see it. 'Why would anyone want to build a road out here?'

Les squinted to see, but his eyes were worse than anyone's. 'The mining companies. They used to test drill out here, before they stopped 'em.'

‘Who stopped them?’ Elly asked.

‘Same fellas that mucked up the musters.’

Elly looked at the boys and smiled. ‘Les was the supervisor, gave the orders. Do you find that surprising?’

Les grabbed her arm and twisted it playfully. ‘You didn’t see me at work when I was a young man.’

‘I don’t think *anyone’s* seen you at work, Les.’

They all laughed. Eventually Les continued in his most serious tone. ‘Believe you me, them survey tracks . . .’

Jack, peering out into the distance, closed the bolt of his rifle. ‘Come on.’ He was off down the hill like a shot. Elly and Rolly followed. She stumbled, dragging him down with her, kissing him as they rolled in the sand and the grass. They laughed and chased Jack into the darkness of the desert. Les followed, almost out of breath, glad that there was one last chance for a walkabout. Together they would spend the night lost in the desert. Their one consolation would be the hidden treasure they’d find.

PART FIVE

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T U R N I N G S

In the life of Ningunna, Gladly had seen a lot of white people come and go. Some had done something useful (the flying doctor, Sister Mary R., the parish angel), some had been mere spectators (Jack and Rolly), and some had been a giant pain in the arse (the fella who'd stopped their men working, sent away the mining companies and left them with a lifestyle no one really wanted). So, she suspected, a couple of young jackaroos would be quickly forgotten. This was probably just as well for Les had already started to adopt the redhead as his new disciple. With them gone, things could only improve. It was true, he did have a stable of drinking partners, but they'd all heard his grand theories a million times.

So there was always the chance that Les would have to dig up his minefield of hidden treasures and bring them home: a walkabout was nothing without a willing ear. Still, time would tell. As Gladly held his arm and waved goodbye to the

jackaroos that morning she could only hope. Les felt uncomfortable being possessed, so soon, but his mind was already working on new schemes. Permanence was a fate worse than death, his old Holden was a testament to that—deserted in the back paddock, rusty, useless and forgotten, stranded on blocks until the forces of nature rusted it away to nothing.

Elly had left as the sun was rising. She and Rolly had struggled with each other's bodies not far from where Jack's trophy lay. Tomorrow the flies would get into it, but by then the proud hunter would be a hundred miles away. When Elly left she guessed she wouldn't make it home before *he* got up, but it didn't seem to worry her. Rolly almost had to pull on her clothes and take her out to her bike.

'I wish I was coming too,' she said.

'I'll ring. Try to answer the phone first.'

So in the morning, when the sun was already hot, this was all that was left. Gladdy, in her nightie, clinging desperately to Les; Les, in his second-skin singlet, squirming. As they pulled away, Jack waved and saw a few of the Miss Gladdy's students gathering around their teacher, waving. He wondered how she coped with it all; he guessed she must have devised some sort of foolproof system. Lenny, still glowing, looked positively human without his costume of mop heads. Jack remembered back to when he was a Little Emu and wondered if the Sandshoe King had heard the story of Lenny somewhere.

They drove for a solid hour, singing, Rolly playing the dashboard drums. As the moods of the desert played with them they might have passed for a married couple, running hot and cold, gushing and silent, lovers and fighters, or just plain bored. Rolly was staring out at the desert, squinting. Jack was talking, postulating ideas in the way his father used to, when he was still an idealist.

'I figure, first up, I might try for an apprenticeship.'

And Rolly, only half-listening. 'Yeah?'

'Maybe a cabinetmaker. I always preferred working with wood at school. You could shape it, it smelt good. Not like metal, that was just clang, clang, weld. Or plastic.' He screwed up his nose, 'any bloody machine can mould plastic. But wood.' He looked at Rolly. 'What d' you reckon?'

'You can try,' Rolly replied half-heartedly.

'If there aren't any apprenticeships, what you do is get into a factory at the bottom, shitkicker, and make your intentions known.' He looked at Rolly again, smiled and waved his finger in the air like the ghost of Kevin. 'So what about you?'

Rolly looked at him and shrugged. 'See what they've got at the CES.'

Kevin wouldn't have stood for that. Jack smiled and held firmly to the wheel—he was determined to show them what he could do. 'Yeah, Dad? Hello . . . No, we're all set up. I got a job at Holden, well it's only on the line, bodyworks, boring as hell, but they reckon if you stick it for a year, they're gonna take on a new bunch of fitters.'

But Rolly had never set out to impress anyone. As Jack looked at him he guessed he *would* end up at McDonald's. Still, as long as he could pay his part of the rent.

'Hey, we should apply somewhere together.'

Rolly sighed. 'Yeah.' He would never lose sleep over a job. His mum would encourage him no matter what he did, short of pedalling child pornography. After so much shit she agreed that the government would always be there—this, in the absence of a father to keep him on edge, to keep him acting responsibly.

Rolly blinked, guiding Jack's stare back into the desert. 'It's so fucking big. Just imagine . . .' He touched the dashboard,

but Jack knew exactly what he meant. On their shortcut through the desert the only thing that would keep them alive was the burning of petrol, the grinding of engine parts and the turning of wheels. Like Sid said, you had to be sure of your vehicle. Maybe I should've got a loan, he thought, bought something decent. But who's gonna lend me money? What could I put up for security? My book collection? Mostly taken from public libraries.

They stopped at a T-junction, the engine idling. Jack looked at him. 'Les didn't mention anything about this.'

Rolly looked blank. He'd given up on the myth of knowing, or at least pretending to know—that was the domain of the blokes he'd left behind at Ningunna. But Jack was still his father's son and a Queen's Scout to boot. 'I think left, the main Alice road is to our north, so . . .?'

Rolly shrugged. 'Sounds good.'

They turned left and kept driving. Half an hour later the same thing happened, another T-junction. This time Rolly wasn't so sure. 'You'd think they'd have a sign or something.'

Jack just sat there, gunning the accelerator, thinking. 'I reckon we keep heading north, that way we have to come out on the main road eventually.'

Rolly breathed deeply, sighed, then agreed. After another twenty minutes there was another intersection and Jack convinced him again, this time not sounding so sure himself.

'We'll come out on it soon. Look, these roads are well travelled.'

Rolly had to agree.

'So what d' you think?'

'Okay.'

And left again. Over the next hour the intersections became more frequent but Jack managed to stay convincing, just.

Eventually, and with a growing sense of frustration, he stopped and let the engine idle. 'So what should we do?'

'This road must lead somewhere.'

Jack was about to say, 'Not necessarily', but stopped himself. He was still Patrol Leader and he still had responsibility. 'You'd think, wouldn't you, if we kept heading north . . .'

'If we kept heading north.'

'What d' you think?'

'You don't sound so sure anymore.'

'No, in theory . . .'

'Maybe we should head back.'

'You think?'

Rolly nodded his head and Jack swung wide to complete a U-turn. The back wheels became bogged in the soft sand on the side of the track. He knew better than to keep gunning it, so he put it in neutral, got out of the ute and placed a sturdy log (brought on Les' advice, for just such an eventuality) under the back wheels. He got back in and slowly put his foot down on the accelerator. The grip took and the ute started to move forward out of its ditch; he had to give it extra power to get it free and this was the thing that did it. The engine spluttered a few times, cut out, and the ute rolled back into the ditch. Jack tried to re-start it but there was nothing there. As he got out of the ute and looked under the bonnet Rolly's mind drifted back to Camelot. Of course it was the carby. It would have cost King Jim \$19.90 to replace, but he guessed (as he always did) that the repairs could wait until the owner noticed them. Then they would be 'daily wear and tear', beyond his concern.

When Arthur came to hear of the carburettor he would kick himself for having rushed things; it seemed that every day he had reason to reduce his faith in human nature. In the end,

all that was left were the words of the prophets and the more realistic goal of saving a single soul, not the dilemma of the tribal many. He hadn't got her off the fags ('a hundred and twenty chemicals: arsenic, tar, like the stuff they lay on roads') or the TAB ('it's a mug's game . . . go on then, give 'em your money, they need a new Merc'). But he had got her doubting some of the things Sir Bob was preaching.

Rolly stood on the dipping tray of his ute and scribbled in thick, black texta on top of the cabin: SOS. He jumped down and did the same on the bonnet, adding an appendix, CR, JA. He looked out across the desert and saw a bore in the distance. Jack was walking towards it, stopping occasionally to check his compass. Rolly guessed he was about half way there. He put the texta in his pocket and crawled back under the ute, where they'd slept the long, hot afternoon. It was the only shade around—there was a skeleton of an old melaleuca, but that had fallen years ago, possibly the victim of Mr Freidmann's axe, a lonely night-time fire, the vigil for his two lost cows.

Rolly lay on his stomach against the cool earth and opened his Bible. Again it fell open to Exodus. He read, 'Moses held out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind. It blew all night and turned the sea into dry land. The water was divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground . . .' He looked up and saw Jack off in the distance. Moses with a compass—such little faith in the Lord. What would he ever deliver in the absence of faith? The Miraculous Regeneration of the Carby? St Jeremy of the Desert Patrol? Or maybe just a reliable transition back to Israel, their return to Ningunna?

He flicked through the Bible and saw the photos: his parents on their wedding day (Leonard in the background in

the act of crushing a can, his Malvern Star leaning against the men's toilet block), a happy Jean and Arthur, and his ever present holy card. HIS eyes were still following him; at least that was a good sign. He wondered if all that praying, the adoration of the Dutch lady's bosoms, his faithful rendition of Joseph, would really help him out here. He didn't know why, but he found himself kissing the card, holding it against his cheek and sighing. Then he put it in his breast pocket, close to his heart, and hoped to hell it'd do some good.

He took out his texta and there, inside the front cover, opposite a dedication ('Presented to Clive Rollins, Grange Baptist Sunday School, May 1979'), drew a cheekbone, and then another, a chin and a nose. Elly was foremost in his mind, but it could have been one of a gallery of faces: part Darren, part grade five English teacher, Jack's mouth, his mum's greengrocer's lip, sketched out on butcher's paper, refined, worked up. But then he stopped; it was a pointless exercise. He gathered the photos and put them all in his top pocket. He half jokingly imagined his memorial service: a tribute to the Great Scribbler, his texta-portrait enlarged and displayed on the wall of the church for all to see. They would all be trying to guess who it was meant to be and he would be floating above them, laughing. 'I couldn't decide if it was Leonard or Jesus, and then when I started drawing it, it looked like everyone, all at once.' Like a box of old photos without names—uncles becoming distant cousins, old friends becoming someone Mum used to know. People drifting away, but still part of your life, somehow. As the desert air started to cool around him, the Bible blew open in the wind and the smell of texta in his nostrils was comforting as he nodded off.

Meanwhile Jack had arrived at the old bore shed to discover his own DIG tree. There were parts of a motor (those

which hadn't been stripped for spares) but they were rusted and broken. There was an old bucket which sat there, saying, 'Go on, fill me.' He climbed on top of the shed and looked back towards Rolly. There was the ute, that was one hope, one way out, like the trains he'd seen as a child, pulling away from the silos. From the comfort of his tin gum, perched overlooking a thousand intersections, he surveyed all of the possible ways out. They all seemed to converge, go somewhere else and meet again. He longed for the appearance of Wazza's black Commodore, the loud music, Anna's fleshy ankle. That, at least, would show him a path back.

He looked at his compass; as he remembered from orienteering, direction was meaningless without a reference point. He squinted and surveyed the horizon, but there was nothing. He conjured up his vision of Roy, dragging Jerry through the desert on his back, and tried desperately to remember the truckie's song-line of the desert.

At last Roy looked up at him. 'G'day, Jack.'

'Isn't he getting heavy yet?'

'A little, but I promised his mother I'd get him home.'

'Roy,' he said, climbing down from the shed, 'how did it go, the one about the horizon?'

'Ah, you remember?'

'Of course.'

But then Jack found himself repeating the words, staring out at the moveable horizon, hypnotised.

*All those bloody horizons,
Dancin' in the heat like tinsel, or jelly, or a fat woman's tit;
A road that cuts through the earth:
A hot scar on leather . . .*

He forgot the rest. Roy and Jerry had gone. He fixed his compass and started walking back towards Rolly. A distant airliner arced the horizon with a line of vapour. He looked up and waved and yelled, 'Hey!', imagining a trail of lettuce leaves falling from the sky and Nikos pulling up in his ute, 'Wanna lift?'

Rolly opened his eyes and watched Jack approaching. It could have been Lenny himself, if not for his compass and his inability to retreat back into the ground (unless Kevin was around). He thought how his friend looked like a little boy lost, perhaps in the outback, perhaps in a crowded city street. He remembered how *his* gran had taken him to town on the 272 bus as a child. His first impression of King William Street had been intimidating: cars, lorries, tall buildings and people, people everywhere. Everything was just so big. But he realised now, in retrospect, that it had all been pre-determined. As he grew up he learnt, by degrees, how to survive in this big place. At fourteen, he had tried the experience by himself for the first time, by fifteen he did it nearly every Saturday and, by seventeen, he had become part of the city, its people, its myths.

But that had all taken time, time he didn't have to learn about the *big*-ness of this place; there was no one here holding his hand, introducing him to its mysteries. The 272 realisation dawned on him. What was he going to do? Were their grans going to appear to lead them out of it? Was the desert going to reveal its secrets of survival, of food and water, in three easy steps? He pulled himself out from under the ute, sitting on the bonnet and calling to Jack. 'We should walk at night, huh?'

Jack leaned on the bonnet and smiled. 'You been watchin' the Leylands?'

'It's a long way from the Big fucking Lobster.'

‘The Big Sid.’

They both fell quiet for a full minute. At length Jack said, ‘We got plenty of water.’

‘Some.’

And again a pause, as they both searched for something positive. ‘We turn right,’ Jack began, ‘where we just turned left. That’ll get us back to Balgoa.’

Rolly wasn’t confident. Sand wasn’t much of a marker of direction. They gathered their stuff and started walking. Rolly left his Bible in the glovebox, where at least that version of events would be safe.

Back at Balgoa, before the appearance of Jack’s roo, Les was just about to tell Jack and Rolly about the survey tracks—how they crossed like a spider’s web, ultimately going nowhere. How a couple of English tourists had got lost years before in the hot, monotonous sameness of a million square kilometres; how it took two years and an accidental satellite image before they were found; how they’d kept driving, believing the road would come out somewhere (having fudged their way across the English countryside a thousand times); how the roads had become tracks, the tracks gentle scars which the desert had almost reclaimed—and then nothing; how they’d put up their beach umbrella, cracked their last Möet and waited to die.

ST ELLY OF THE NETBALL SHED

The satellite dish brought the best and the worst of the world into their living room. Elly went crazy when *they'd* sit around watching the cricket or golf or when *she'd* watch her drearies (beautifully resolved love triangles) or those even drearier personalities pushing ab-shapers. But she didn't mind it when the satellite dish did her some good. Today it was a documentary on modern art. She sat with her legs crossed as the narrator led her through an illustrated monologue on the styles of Klein, Boyce, Lichtenstein and Warhol. She was intrigued to think that there were such oblique minds in the universe—minds that could see things for what they really were.

Egg looked up from his *Stock Journal* and frowned at the mass-produced Marilyns, and soup cans, and media reports of race riots that were so de-contextualised that they'd ceased to make sense, at least until Andy had translated their meaning to the viewers.

'What a complete load of crap.'

'Do you know what it means?'

'Soup cans.'

'I thought as much.'

'Eight-thirty.'

'Yes, Egg.'

He returned to his magazine. Sid came into the room, sat in his Jason and almost smiled. 'It's all settled, they'll try t' have 'em here by Friday.'

Egg frowned again. 'Next Friday?'

'Best they can do . . . have to pull 'em off other stations.'

Egg threw the magazine on the ground. 'Hope they send us someone half decent this time,' and looked at his sister.

Elly stared him straight in the face. 'You'll be able to show them your models. Won't that be nice?'

'And you can give them swimming lessons.'

Mary, sitting in the diningroom, under Heather's watchful gaze, sighed and looked up from her needlepoint: a simple, white desert daisy she'd designed herself. 'You two.'

But Sid couldn't hear them. He reclined, putting his hands behind his head. 'Shouldn't put us back too much, dependin' on who they send.'

The clerk who'd promised a replacement sat behind a desk, far away in Alice Springs, combing through the vacancy files. Alf's face appeared and he thought he was on to something, until he read, 'Any station except Ningunna'.

Sid thought of Alf too. He knew that if he could just talk to him he could get to the bottom of things. Alf could always see sense.

On the telly they all watched as a giant penis, wrapped in cellophane, was lowered by a crew of burly men into an enclosed exhibition space. Sid tried to suppress a frown: maybe

that's why he left. Egg shook his head. 'Explain that one to us, sister.'

She smiled, lips together, teeth apart. 'Brother, if you don't know by now.'

'What does it mean?'

'You tell me, I haven't had a lot of experience.'

'I bet.'

'Noah.' She stuck up a finger.

Mary pricked her finger. 'You two.'

But Sid didn't attempt to play boss. He watched his daughter as she returned to the telly. Looking at the floating sculpture he wondered what she was thinking. She smiled as the men lost control and the big dick floated up into the rafters of the warehouse. He wondered if it was an amused or a contented smile.

Egg reached over for the remote. 'That's it, eight-thirty.'

Elly held on to it. 'It's nearly over.'

'Elly.'

'Noah.'

Sid looked at her. 'That's what you said, eight-thirty.'

'Yeah, right, so he can watch Barbie, the bosom killer-queen.'

Egg smiled. 'My tastes aren't any different to yours.'

'Y' reckon?'

Sid frowned. 'Elly.' And went off to answer the phone.

She clung to the remote; sometimes it was her only lifeline. Egg retreated, sat back and sighed. They all listened to Sid's conversation; this was a minor ritual at Ningunna, where isolation had sharpened their sense of curiosity.

'Hello?'

'Is this Sid, Sid Smith?'

'Speaking.'

'My name's Kevin Alber, Jack's dad.'

'Ah . . .' Sid took the phone and moved away from the door, talking quietly into the receiver. 'What can I do for you, Kevin?'

'We're after some news about Jack. We haven't heard for some time.'

Elly handed Egg the remote and he changed channel. Soon he was engrossed in the trials and tribulations of the sexually magnificent film-star, chasing rogues, discharging her weapon. Mary watched as Elly sat on her father's Jason, straining to hear.

'Well, Kevin, let me tell you what happened. Him and the fella he came up with left me in the lurch.'

'How do you mean?'

'What do you reckon? Took their stuff, pissed off and left me with no one for the muster.'

'And why'd they do that?'

'You tell me.'

'They didn't like the work?'

'Apparently not.'

'Listen, Jack wouldn't just . . .'

Mary put down her needlepoint. Egg was distracted by his sister shaking her head.

'Those two little boys are going to be in a lot of trouble when they get home.'

She just stared at him.

Kevin covered the receiver and turned to his wife. 'He's left.'

'Where's he gone?'

Kevin shrugged; Gran put her crochet in her lap and listened.

'So, Kevin, I'm sorry but I've got no idea.'

'Well, you *should* have some bloody idea.'

Elly walked into the kitchen and extended her hand for the phone. Slowly and deliberately Sid hung up, then left the receiver on the bench next to a pile of breadcrumbs Mary had forgotten to wipe up. Elly stared at him. 'Clever, Dad.'

He shrugged. 'You think it bothers me?' And then he went back to his Jason, joining in with Egg's silent communion.

Kevin held the phone in his hand, shocked. 'He hung up on me . . . a real bloody pig.'

Gran and Mirrie shook their heads in unison. Kevin tried again but the line was engaged. He looked at Mirrie. 'Says they left him in the lurch.'

Gran started to shake her head. 'I bet! Try again, I want to have a word with this fella.'

But the line was still busy. Elly had gone to her room to get Rolly's letter and had returned to the living room. She stood in front of the TV, blocking their view. 'Just so we all understand, let me read from one of Rolly's letters.'

They stared at the telly (or needlepoint), but they were listening. They didn't ask her to move or to shut-up; they just listened, curious themselves.

'I would almost stay for your sake,' she read, 'but I'm afraid your dad (and brother) have made it impossible.' She stopped reading and looked at them. 'Just so you all understand, okay?'

They didn't say another word. Barbie culled another criminal and stood over him, gloating, lost in her own bosomic heaven. 'Take that you sonofabitch.'

Elly turned and went into her room, slamming the door behind her.

No matter what Jack might say, the fact of the matter was, he *needed* to be reassured. A fact was not quite a fact until someone could confer. 'Look.' They stopped in the middle of

the road; there was a shredded, blown-out tyre resting in a clump of Mitchell grass. 'I remember that.'

'Yeah?'

'Don't you?'

Rolly shook his head. Jack stepped forward, mumbling, 'I'm sure . . .' He lined up his compass, looked up at the horizon and bit his lip. 'This is heading north . . . sort of.' He looked back at Rolly, 'Either way, the main road or Balgoa.'

And Rolly believed him—what option did he have? As they walked another long stretch Jack continued talking, pointing to the sky, often looking to his friend for reassurance. 'The two bright ones are the pointers of the Southern Cross. Follow the arm and just to the right of it, can you see?'

'Yeah.'

'That's the fly, then the Southern Triangle. That's how you can tell it's not the false cross, over there.' He lined his friend's gaze up to his arm. 'See, if we followed that one, we could end up anywhere.'

Rolly didn't feel like making a comment. He wasn't in the mood for celestial navigation, for having his fortune told by the stars. They should have been in the Tropicana, trying their luck one last time. Instead, Jack was starting to grind.

'So, this is how you can check yourself. Imagine a line, okay, drawn through the long arm of the cross. Continue it out, straight, or as straight as you can. Now, that's the South Celestial Pole.'

'Yeah?'

'Yep.'

And, in place of the left turnings, there were more and more right turnings.

Christ! Still, Rolly tried to treat it as a pleasurable new experience. Although the 272 Realisation weighed heavily

upon him, there was a lot to commend this place: the stillness, the quiet—the things he'd looked for in deserted corners of his city, late at night, away from people and their cars and their houses. Out here the most private things about you were public—thoughts were like cool breezes rustling through the Mitchell grass. Screams died quickly and were gone.

'Fuck!' Rolly screamed until he was hoarse. 'Fuck fuck fuck fuck!' And then laughed.

Jack smiled and broke with the stars (those embarrassing cosmic yearnings). 'Moo moo, screw you! Moo moo, screw you!'

And together, louder still. 'Moo moo, screw you!'

Jack was down on his knees, screaming so hard Rolly could imagine the flesh tearing in his throat. 'Take me back to Ningunna. Sid, I want to have your babies!' And then rolling in the sand, laughing.

Rolly kicked him. 'Eh, an impression, Egg and his favourite steer.' He rode around the desert-rodeo, struggling to control his caricature, his laughter, his horny hips which had a life of their own.

He staggered and sat down next to Jack. Then, stopping as suddenly as rain on an old tin roof, he looked at his friend and said, 'We are going to be okay, eh?'

'Of course, listen, haven't you remembered anything? Good scout you'd make. All those sandridges, that salt-pan, those old bores?'

Rolly ran his hand through the sand. 'Seen a lotta bores, all look the same to me.'

'Someone once went to all the trouble of making this road. It must come out somewhere.' Jack attempted a last gasp of credibility. 'If we pace ourselves we'll be okay. Les'll have a roo waiting, and a coldie.' Which reminded him of the need for

water, although with so little left he kept quiet. 'Maybe we should keep walking.'

The rest of the night was spent in silence, punctuated by occasional fragments of dialogue. Of these, Jack's were the most practical observations. 'Wood. The more I think of it, the thing is, people are sick of crappy plastic things which are always falling apart. I betcha people would be willing to pay that extra bit more for quality. Not a lot more, but you could still make a good living without ripping people off.' He cupped his hands in frustration. 'Think of all the crappy things . . . I got a camera last Christmas and it's never worked properly.' He checked his compass; he'd got that when he was ten and it had never let him down. 'I reckon what you gotta do is make things that people want.' He was thinking of a fork handle he'd turned on the lathe at school; it was perfectly shaped, smooth, sweet-smelling. It had been a shame to stain it; yes, stain too was overrated. 'Or maybe coat stands. That's something people don't have anymore. And where do they put their wet coats?' He was thinking of the shape of a coat stand; so easy, just like a long fork handle. 'See, it's ideas that matter. No point doing it if people aren't going to buy it.'

But Rolly had heard almost none of this. As the road became less recognisable and as the bulldust became deeper and deeper, his tired legs struggled to keep moving. He was used to walking, but not this sort of walking: concrete and grass were different things all together—they gave your feet (and mind) a firm place to fix upon. As the night progressed Jack's endless monologue became an incomprehensible buzz in his ears, like a blowie he couldn't be bothered swatting anymore. He was thinking about distant things, past and future: yiros off a spit from a Hindley Street deli; stuck at the top of the Semaphore ferris-wheel buffeted by the sea breezes

as Jean threw Jaffas on people's heads. Things from a photo album: black and white, distant, over too soon, stuck in his memory like a splinter from one of Jack's coat stands.

'Eh, Jack,' he began breathless, as they struggled on through the sand. 'Remember that night, out on the porch, with Mary's vodka?'

'Yeah.'

It was a great night but it was past, gone, just like the Semaphore ferris-wheel. In the same way Ningunna and its unmustered steers were already behind them.

When the sun came up they staggered into a deserted bore shed to rest for the day. Jack's water bottle was almost empty. 'We may as well, it can't be too much further.'

Rolly looked unsure, but as always, agreed.

They stayed inside the shed for most of the day, half sleeping, half awake. About an hour after lunch (which was just another vision), Rolly stepped outside and sat down in the shade of the shed. His stomach was sore and his head was pounding. It was a different quality of headache from the ones he knew (lack of sleep, excessive alcohol, sleeping with a crick in his neck). It was as though a metal band had been fastened around his skull and someone was slowly tightening it. He took out his holy card and stared at it: Christ's face didn't seem to express pain so much as a corny, Hollywood-style 'woe to me' angst. His wounds didn't even look painful; maybe he'd been given a local or maybe it was an optical illusion. He wondered how Robert, the Sabbath Kid, would have handled this dilemma. 'Logically, you should have turned back at the first intersection.'

'I know, but it's too late now, so what can I do?'

'Generally, I wouldn't recommend praying, but in this case . . .'

Or Darren. 'Sit it out. Whatever's gonna happen's gonna happen. Why worry?'

Or the Singing Can-Man. "'I'll take you home again, Kathleen . . ." Say, you finished with that?'

Rolly handed him his can. 'How much do you get for these?'

'Five cents a can.'

And frowned, figuring. 'But you'd have to collect hundreds.'

'Hey, listen, this is drinking money. I'm not aiming to buy a Mercedes.'

Rolly smiled. 'Of course. You go almost anywhere for a can.'

'We're nature's little termites, eating away at the rotten wood.'

Rolly held up the laminate and shook his head. 'You know, the resemblance is amazing.'

'Who's that fella?'

'Jesus.'

The can-man smiled and sang, 'Jesus blood never failed me yet.'

Rolly stood up. 'Of course. "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so . . ."'

The old man kept on collecting cans as they continued their separate soliloquies in a slightly oblique cacophony that, in time, developed its own resonances. The old man smiled at him. 'I only know of Jesus through what I've been told, by the fellas at St Vinnies. I don't profess to be religious; religion's for folks with time on their hands.' He laughed. 'The idle class. Me, I gotta work for a living.'

And then he turned and walked away, looking for cans, singing. Rolly called after him. 'Hey, I was gonna ask you, where's out?'

But he only waved, and laughed. 'That comes soon enough, when you turn up your toes.'

Rolly settled down again and stared out into the desert; there was no one there. He looked at his laminate and thought about Miss White and her lost button; he had given her the honorary title, St Elly of the Netball Shed. He closed his mouth and drifted off into semi-consciousness.

Jack awoke, took his rifle and walked out of the shed. He went up onto a high sandridge and surveyed the desert. His compass was in his pocket but he didn't use it. The roads had come to nothing, just sand, reclaimed by the desert. He could kick himself. Kevin would really be proud. He sighed and pushed his hair back into the pool of sweat on his head. He sat down and squinted against the harsh, bright light. He was convinced they were lost. His scouting instincts were still urging him to do something. Tonight they would have to try to retrace their steps back to the ute; it was the only way. He knew Rolly would have to be convinced—but first, he'd have to convince himself. He'd never imagined, sitting in his gum tree at the T-junction, that he would take a wrong turn. You never realised it until it was done, until you had got it wrong, and then it was too late.

He pulled the sheets up over his head and listened to his dad finishing breakfast. 'So he's just gonna walk around in the desert forever?'

He lifted his rifle to his shoulder and scanned the desert. He took aim at Rolly and imagined a mercy killing; he'd read about that. A shot to the back of the head, it was best for everyone. A merciful death wasn't so bad (Mary II had soon recovered from the stocking massacre). He moved his sights out into the desert and fixed Roy, looking at him, smiling, sweating.

‘Hey, Jack, you wouldn’t shoot an old cobber, would you?’ Roy hoisted Jerry—his cheeks sunken, his eyes hollow—higher onto his back and kept walking, mumbling, ‘Good lad, go a long way . . . if he doesn’t murder someone.’

Jack moved the sight around and there was Lenny, staring at him, off in the distance. He put down the rifle and Lenny disappeared into the ground; he lifted the rifle and he was there again. He was determined not to let him out of his sights; he charged down the ridge, out into the desert, screaming, ‘Come on you bastard, I got you now.’

Rolly woke up and watched him running away; he wondered if he was off after phantom water again.

W O M A N , T R U C K A N D H O M E

Les came into the humpy where Gladdy was bandaging Dennis' foot, cut by the smashed bottles left in Father Heydrich's 'desert'.

'I thought you cleaned it all up.'

'I missed some.'

And then there was silence as she shook her head. Les guessed it wasn't the best time to broach the subject, but it was now or never. 'Gladdy, the boys.'

'What?'

'Jack and Rolly . . . they were meant to call, to check in, from Alice.'

'So?'

'They haven't.'

But she just laughed. 'How irresponsible, Les, they musta been round you too long.'

'Yeah, okay, but I was wondering whether we should . . .'

She looked at his face and read it immediately. 'Don't even think about it, Les.'

'But what if . . .'

"What if", that's what I say every time you piss off.'

And that was the end of it, at least until he could devise another strategy.

Conversation stopped. Rolly noticed Jack withdrawing into a sort of autistic state, saying things at him but not to him. 'Plenty of drinking water, huh? Remember what the Handbook said, "One litre per person for use between camp sites, always conserve water by . . ." Fuck, something like that.' Walking off into the desert, standing alone for a few minutes, muttering, 'Keep in mind how far you have to go before your stocks can be replenished.' The words were still clear, boldface in his memory, warning him. There was even a section for those who got it wrong: how to get water using a leafy eucalyptus branch—but there were no leafy branches, no sheets of plastic, cups or spades.

As time became unbound from the reference of hours and minutes, Jack continued to spiral downwards. At one point he took his flask, ran off and threw it down the well, disgusted. It clunked—dust, rocks, the skulls of two dead cows—a muffled sound echoed back, eaten by the old stone walls of ever diminishing circumference. ' . . . before your stocks can be replenished, Jack.' He leaned into the well and screamed at the top of his lungs, 'Lenny!' But the name just came back, broken and indistinct. He thought of leaving a bowl of milk, to tempt him out. 'Lenny . . .'

He sat gathering his senses in the shade of the well. Water, two hydrogen, one oxygen; found in giant underground aquifers; how should I become a myth and retreat underground?

Jack had carried his friend through the desert, resting in the day and walking another night. It was nearly dawn now and he had no reason to believe that today would be any cooler than the others. So they would rest today, and tonight, more roads.

‘. . . before your stocks can be replenished, Jack.’ It was a nagging voice; this time it sounded like his father. He stood up and leaned into the well again, ‘Shut the fuck up!’ Again, diminishing with the circumference.

He sat down in the shade of the well, toying with his compass, wondering. He was leading his troop back through the Flinders Ranges. He knew there’d be a delegation of anxious parents waiting for them, for him, to discharge his responsibilities, to do what he promised he would—bring them home. But as he sat by the wall, nursing his blistering head, he closed his eyes and saw a different version of things—a vision in reverse. He was standing in the middle of the mulga staring at his compass, when a cold, lonely feeling overtook him, possibly the loneliest feeling he’d ever known.

His assistant patrol leader stared at him, ‘What’s wrong, Jack?’

Jack just whispered, slowly, so the rest of his troop couldn’t hear. ‘I’ve forgotten the direction, does any of this look familiar to you?’

His assistant shrugged. Jack turned and squinted through the mulga. ‘Maybe that way . . . I think we came up a hill, didn’t we?’

But his deputy only smiled. Jack turned the other way and squinted. ‘Or maybe it was that hill.’

The rest of the troop started mumbling. He knew for the first time that he was alone, completely alone. One of the younger boys approached him. ‘What’s wrong, Jack?’

‘Nothing.’ He stepped forward, as if to feel alone, physically. He toyed with the compass but it was just a piece of plastic, plastic would always let you down in the end. He thought of broken models, vitamisers and tellies, so, in the end, you only had yourself. He could imagine the parents, anxious, looking at their watches, asking Kevin if ‘Jack mighta struck problems?’

And Kevin, looking off into the ranges. ‘Nah, he’ll be okay. It’s a hot day, you walk slower when it’s hot.’

‘. . . before your stocks can be replenished, Jack.’

But if they didn’t believe Kevin they certainly didn’t believe Jack. His APL sighed and stared at him, ‘Jack, what d’ you reckon we should do?’

He shouted down his own private well, ‘Give me a minute!’ He felt cold and his breathing was fast. ‘Shit.’ And then with one final burst of confidence, maybe even one that would lead them out, ‘Come on, it’s this way.’

He stood up and threw his compass down the well; there wasn’t even a sound as it hit the bottom. It was probably still pointing north, but what north was didn’t matter anymore: north could be anywhere—it could be one of a million sand ridges, a thousand intersecting tracks. It should have been the main road, but as things turned out (and as he now realised) his confidence had let him down.

Roy appeared behind him, clearing his throat. ‘Eh, Jack?’

Jack turned around and backed up against the well. ‘Roy.’

‘I was wondering . . . your friend over there. Seein’ as I was returning home with young Jerry here.’

Jack thought he could smell the boy; his body was draped like a sack of rotten tomatoes. There was something baked dry against his leg—maybe shit, maybe truckstop food.

Roy continued. ‘I thought that maybe I could take Rolly

along with me. After all, two ain't much heavier than one, if y' get my meaning.' He smiled and winked.

Jack stood alone, cold, sighing into a vacuum. 'No, we're going back to the . . .' and stopped.

Roy pulled his 'you gotta be shittin' me' face. 'Listen, Jack, if I told you where your ute really was.'

But Jack was back in the Flinders, returning to his troop, his desperate assistant. The sun was peeping over the eastern horizon, flooding around his mate's head like a halo. Another burst of confidence—maybe this time.

Roy hitched Jerry back onto his shoulder, farted and confided in his son, 'What d' you reckon's gettin' him?' And then walked off into the desert, directionless, not admitting any thoughts into his head except for those of woman, truck and home.

Rolly staggered, sinking into the sand, lifting his foot, stepping again. It was slow going but Jack had convinced him it would get them there. Like the Scorpion troop, Rolly had no cause to doubt Jack, his track record had been fine up to now. If they were sometimes worried it was more because of those minor stumblings (an incongruous word, a moment of indecision, a shaking hand) that even the greatest leaders had.

Rolly felt like a fish out of water; for a while he flipped and struggled in Darren's bucket but after a time he stopped and became calmer. His headaches had come and gone but it was just a kind of dull monotony now, circling his skull like a halo Miss White had forgotten to mention. There was nothing left in his stomach to chuck and even thirst had become a persistent thing he'd got used to: a ringing in his ears, the blur of a test-pattern lulling him to sleep.

'Another hour before it gets hot,' Jack explained. 'If we can just keep walking we can find somewhere.'

And this was the most persistent litany of all: like the way they used to harp on 'the Lord' at church. Rolly was back in the netball shed, singing, '... for the Bible tells me so'. He stumbled to the ground and sat in the growing shade of a sandridge. How dare they, he thought. I have to believe 'cos the *Bible* tells me so? So what! Screw the Bible! What about what I believe? I believe in Jesus, but he isn't a man in robes with a beard: he is an old man with a Malvern Star who collects cans; he is an old man, living on the rough, who sings songs to me. And Mary (a hooker?) could never look as pure as the Mary of the Laminates; Mary is a girl who serves pancakes for a living, who smiles at me and calls me 'Fatso'. Mary is a girl, trapped, whose bikini line is out of control, who loves the occasional vodka and who is in your face, but wouldn't be if she had her own orbit to circle in. And as for the rest of the *dramatis personae* of that holy book . . .

One such Bible story, as he wrote it in his mind, ran something like this: he walks into his house (a Federation villa, c. 1910, weatherboards, on the beach, overgrown with Morning Glory) and his de facto lover is there, the cast of his life is there: Darren, Arthur, Mum . . . Dad, Robert, Miss White, Jack. They sit down for a game of Scrabble, but it is really just him versus her—the rest act as disciples. She makes a word (it's unimportant what it is) and although he and his followers put their minds together they can't make anything from their letters. All at once he becomes aware of the Scrabble Realisation—that there are some things which can never be understood. This is also the enigma of the desert, the riddle Mr Freidmann (and in time, Jack) came to understand. This is why he was calm, this is why he didn't argue with Jack, or cry, or scream down empty wells.

But Jack was still leading his troop. 'Les would've raised the

alarm by now, for sure. If we can just get back to the ute.' He was unsure whether he still had Rolly's trust. They walked some more and at the next turning went right. He continued discussing his own small business (if he could finance even just a couple of lathes), but whether he'd even convinced himself was questionable.

They walked on and after a while there was another block of silence. They were both admiring the morning: the stillness, the peace, the emptiness. It was as if they hadn't quite woken from a dream and were longing to return to their slumber.

Far away Elly watched the sun rising across the desert as she stroked Mary II and struggled to remember *her* dream. She was back in the garden of their house. Rolly was weeding the vegetable patch, but her dad was helping him. They were getting on famously. This was a sort of enigma she struggled with but couldn't resolve.

SHRUBBY TWIN-LEAF

Just the four of them around the tea table, together at last in their own little orbits. Elly played with her stew (now cooked without turnips), but put her fork down and pushed the plate away.

‘Not hungry?’ Mary smiled at her.

Elly had other things on her mind. She looked at Sid but he had other things on his mind. ‘Hey, listen to my horoscope.’ He moved his empty plate and laid the paper out on the table. ‘Something that’s been troubling you will finally be resolved . . . in the end this will be to your financial benefit.’ He looked up and smiled.

Mary playfully slapped him on the arm. ‘Any other time you don’t believe it.’

‘Well, when they get it right.’

‘What’s mine say?’

Sid looked. ‘Gemini. This week will be full of challenges

you might not feel up to. If you take the bull by the horns you'll be pleasantly surprised by your own abilities.'

'Load a rubbish.'

Sid smiled at his children. 'No, why?'

Egg caught his eye. 'What about mine?'

'Taurus. This week you'll come in for a much deserved windfall.'

Egg smiled. 'Sounds good to me.'

Sid agreed, looking at Mary. 'See, looks like you just gotta take the bull by the horns.'

She shook her head, looking at Egg. 'And what is this windfall?'

He shrugged. She smiled. 'Maybe you should buy a lottery ticket.' And looking at Elly although, as always, communicating with Sid. 'What's Elly's?'

Elly looked at her grimly. 'I don't care what it is, Mary. It's a load of drivel, only idiots believe drivel.'

Egg finished his stew and started to mop it up with the gravy. 'Well excuse us idiots.'

Mary looked at him. 'Egg.'

And Egg, indignant. 'What? She . . .'

Sid stroked his chin. 'Egg.' He searched the paper and found her horoscope. 'Capricorn. Don't expect things to turn out exactly as planned.'

'I don't want to hear it!'

There was a long, silent pause. She stared at her father. 'Les rang me today.'

'Balgoa Les? Rang you?'

'Jack and Rolly stopped off there, on the way through.'

Sid looked at his paper. 'So?'

'Then they left, never rang back to check in with him.'

Egg sat forward. 'Elly, think about it, why should we care?'

Sid was like a biblical pillar of salt. She stared at him, but he didn't flinch from the commodity prices.

'They're still your responsibility, Dad.'

'Bullshit. They're the ones who got up and left.' He gathered his newspaper and walked out of the house towards the shed: his barrel of almonds, his alligator nutcracker, time to think, as he filled a bowl of almonds for Mary's fruitcake.

Egg looked at Elly and grinned. 'You really think . . .' And then followed his father out into the shed.

Mary looked at her, not ungraciously. 'Les thinks they could be in trouble?'

Elly nodded. 'I rang Rolly's mum to check. I talked to Arthur, her boyfriend.'

It had taken a while to get through. The three of them had gone out only for a while so she had to act quickly. Arthur was sitting in Adelaide hogging the line, reading from a list of numbers Jean had scribbled on the back of an envelope before she'd gone shopping.

'Adelaide race seven, number four,' he muttered, 'ten units each way.' In fact, he'd become quite an expert, even if he had to grind his teeth and bite his lip. 'Trifecta, Brisbane race eight, one first, seven, eight second, two, three, nine third.' And then, as part of his better judgement, 'No no, make that two, three, *six* for third.'

At length he hung up and noticed the volume of A.D. Hope on her smoker's table. He flicked through it and it seemed as though she'd read fifteen pages since yesterday. He thought about how he could devise a test to make sure she was upholding her part of the arrangement.

'What did you think about "Pyramus", Jean?'

'Pyramus?'

'Yeah, you're past that one, aren't you?'

And her smiling, uneasy. 'Past it, yes, but I skipped that one. I like the simpler ones.'

And then he'd know. He'd refuse to clean the house, put on her bets or listen to *that* rotten mongrel. Just as he was slipping on his gloves, to tackle the mildew which seemed to thrive in their shower, the damn phone rang.

'This is . . . Arthur?'

'Yes.' (He'd never been known for his phone manner, especially to the ladies at Telebet.)

'My name's Elly, I'm calling from . . .'

'Yes, yes, Elizabeth, we read your letter. It's nice to put a voice to the words. How's Clive?'

'Actually, Arthur, that's why I rang.' And then she explained the whole saga, down to the three days without a phone call.

'I'm sure they're okay.'

'Still . . .'

'Listen, why don't I get Jean to ring you back?'

'No, no, I'll call, tonight?'

Elly looked at Mary across the table, the stew. Mary sighed and smiled. 'Go on then, but hurry.' She grabbed the phone and dialled.

'Hello, Jean?'

'Elly?'

Mary watched on quietly, resigned, as another version of motherhood paraded itself. It was eventually decided they'd call the police; Jean could do that from Adelaide.

As for Elly, she had other plans. 'I'll call you back as soon as I know something . . . when I get there.' She rang off and sat down opposite Mary. The tainted, struggling angel of Ningunna *still* didn't think she'd been given enough credit.

'Soon as you get where?'

‘Balgoa.’

‘Elly.’

‘What else can I do?’

But at least she’d been told; a month ago that would have been unthinkable. So, like Sister Mary Stanley and her roses, you had to take one day at a time—watering, feeding, nurturing—the rest, as the horoscopes told her, was out of her hands.

There was a loud shout from the shed. ‘We’ll what do you expect?’ And the crashing of a gate. The two girls listened intently as the two men of the house fought it out with their own horoscopes.

‘Egg, I don’t want to hear it.’

There was an expectant silence broken only by the crunching of gravel as Egg walked from the shed to the house, came in and went into his room. He closed the door, sat down at his desk and contemplated tears. A sweet smell blew in from Mary’s garden but it wasn’t enough. The battleship sat before him, almost complete, needing only a couple of transfers. He took it in his hands and twisted it until it snapped in half. The funnels came off, the lifeboats dropped and there were sailors everywhere, swimming for their lives. The delicate glue-work in the hull was exposed. He threw it in the bin, blowing the plastic dust from his desk.

Jack sat on the crest of a sandridge, his legs crossed, sliding the bolt of his rifle in and out, in and out, this time quickly, this time slowly—incessantly. He stared out into the blistering heat of the afternoon desert. He raised his rifle to his shoulder, but this time there were no mirages, no visions.

In and out, slowly, quickly, thinking.

He felt the end of the muzzle with his finger and wondered

how a metal so smooth, cool and inviting could make such a mess of someone.

In and out, slowly, quickly.

What if it *was* a rogue gene? Red hair and insanity. They'd touched on genetics at school, it seemed that some traits could be linked to others. There was ample proof apart from the mad Albers and Egon. What about Vincent and his starry night? What did *he* see? He hadn't tried to navigate by the stars, he'd just accepted them for what they were, tiny little pin-pricks of light whose essence couldn't be captured in paint.

In and out, slowly, quickly.

Still, no matter what else, it was reassuring to think of how people were remembered: Vincent was a tortured genius; Kevin was a jovial, pot-bellied man, laughing at his own jokes on Christmas day as the poppyseed oil soaked through his paper hat. So how would *he* be remembered? What moments of lightness would stay in their minds? One thing he did know was that Kevin would remember him in uniform and Gran would remember him in the bedsocks she'd knitted.

A couple of metres away Rolly lay in the sand. His eyes stared out into the desert too, but he didn't see anything; instead there was a vision, 'I made love to the dustman's daughter . . .'

As King Bob played the music for his homecoming, Jean and Arthur led him into the garden. Darren was there; he shook hands with him and gave him a present. Elly appeared from behind a giant maiden-hair fern with drinks and kissed him, flush on the lips. They sat down in the garden and Rolly couldn't work out whether it was his birthday or something else. He opened Darren's present: it was a pen set, so he could 'keep on scribbling'. Elly, who it seemed was to stay with him after the others left, still claimed his compendium was patronising.

Darren stood up in defence of his old school friend. 'So, what harm's it do?'

His mum and Arthur gave him another present and he opened it. It was a pocket-sized copy of the New Testament. Arthur, patting his knee, but looking mainly at Jean, said, 'In the great school of life, Rolly, we all have to move along sometime. This little book's full of strange images . . . you'll have fun trying to work them out. Plus it's small, you can carry it with you, that's important.'

'Thanks.'

But Arthur hadn't finished. 'Listen, Rolly, I've been meaning to talk to you about the ute. I feel so bad . . .'

'Arthur, I was the one in a rush; plus, I've only re-paid fifty bucks.'

'Nonsense, forget it. As those old wogs used to say, *quid pro quo*, eh?'

And then there was a cake, and singing, and eventually the night.

When it came, Jack loaded a bullet into the breech one last time. He got up, walked over to Rolly and put the gun against his head. And then he pulled the trigger. It was as simple as that. He put the rifle over his shoulder and walked off into the desert. As Rolly lingered momentarily, a couple of swallows flitted around him in a balletic, figure-eight movement. *Strange, swallows in the desert . . .*

Still, they were harmless, and they sang, and they would protect his body against the ravages of the desert.

It was 3 a.m. and he'd been walking around his city all night. He stopped in at the Pancake Kitchen and Amanda was there. They were alone—he and St Elly of the swing-shift. She looked at him and smiled, 'Same again, fatso?'

In the darkness Elly crawled out of her window, past the guard dog (Mary II) and went into the shed. There, on top of the tool chest, he'd left the alligator and a pile of almond husks. He'd taken the fresh nuts in just after dark as a sort of present to his wife. On the floor, screwed up, she found the letter Rolly had written to her, outlining their plans, their dreams. If she felt violated again it wasn't like the diary incident; it seemed that the proof had been presented by the public prosecutor but rejected by the judge. When the three of them sat drinking coffee earlier that evening, nothing had been said (she was well within ear shot, watching a documentary about Rose and Percy Grainger—Uncle Frank, with his unmistakable Rollins' nose, snorting as he explained the posy of weeds).

Elly flattened out the letter and read it again, wondering. As she folded it, putting it in her pocket, she looked at the tool box and imagined Sid sitting there, defensive, shrugging off his son. Was Mary doing some good after all or was this just too much to hope for? Maybe it was Heather, hovering over Ningunna, blessing St Elly of the Reefer, warning others off through the medium of their dreams.

She wheeled her bike out of the shed, down the path towards the main gate; it was the fence she remembered them making on their first day out, under the yoke of comrade Egg. As she passed she noticed that the gate to Jake's yard had been left open. She stood her bike against the fence and stepped inside. Nothing. She came out of the yards, past the house, and looked out into the desert. Nothing. She was about to get on her bike and go looking, but then stopped. Squinting out into the desert she sensed that Jake, like Mr Freidmann's two lost cows, had gone forever. She sat on her bike and looked back at the porch; Egg disappeared inside, tripping as he went.

So, it was all a matter of choice. She kicked her bike to life, revved it loudly and set off towards Balgoa.

As the sun rose the next morning a couple of galahs flew high overhead. Jack watched them, his head craning, as they flew off into the distance. His knees weakened and he collapsed into a bed of Mitchell grass. The thought of another day was too much. He breathed slowly and deeply. A casual observer might have thought he was savouring the smells of the desert—the smell of sand, or woody-weed, the unperfumed poetry of a shrubby twin-leaf—their smells only noticeable (and treasured) by those who lived out here. The black fellas and their desperate need for a walkabout, following the sweet-smelling songlines of the desert, reading the messages left for them by prophetic borers on the trunks of scribbly gums.

Jack, the Little Emu, walked into the deli wearing his terry-towelling hat, clutching a sweaty fist full of change. He approached the freezer and dropped the money on the icy plastic. The girl (so radiant, so desirable) smiled at him and pushed the change back. She took out a Paddle Pop and gave it to him. He smiled, 'Thank you.' She knew it was the only thing he ever wanted (the boy with the change, who came in after all of the Little Lennies had gone home).

He pocketed the change and looked into her eyes, whispering, 'I'm sorry.'

There could have been a wedding—the Mrs William would have been there with her box brownie—the photos would have been in her gallery. Would have . . . there was a whole gallery of moments which were never captured, which never happened. Some of them came oh so close (Myrna Norton's lost baby) and this, the Mrs William believed, was a kind of tragedy. Other moments were never to be, for a whole host of reasons: some-

thing that wasn't said—an apology, a humbling—and this was every bit as much a tragedy. But the Mrs William, with her infamous gallery, would have encouraged them to see this too as a part of the scheme of things: drowned kittens and turf ovals which had long ago turned weedy, the grass dead, the memorials (and whoever cared for memorials?) rusted.

Jack walked from the shop and Anna was left alone. He was overcome by a peace, a contentment, and all at once the deli, with its single, lonely figure, seemed no less an empty place than his desert.

He took the crocheted monogram from his pocket—JA—and held it against his cheek. He remembered the initiation. He'd earned a host of awards since then, not all of which he'd worn with honour. He took out his knife and started carving into the soft, wooden butt of his rifle: JA—MUM, DAD, GRAN, I LOVE YOU. And then thinking of his father, but not so overcome as he thought he might be. MY FOLLT. He carved a small circle with a dot in the middle. In bushcraft code this was a message (like the DIG tree) for those who might follow you: 'going home'.

And then the image of the oily paper hat reappeared: we all had to be remembered as, at best, comedians and, at worst, tragic figures. He slowly carved, under the dry sweat of Egon's trembling hand, 'I FOUND PEECE', as if this might be some consolation, a smiling, plastic Mickey in a Christmas bon-bon.

He wondered how those other rogue redheads had ended up. Poor Vincent with his ear and his bungled suicide: that would never do. And then, smiling, he wrote 'TAKE ME BACK TO NINGUNNA'. He could already see Sid's expression.

He looked at the rising sun and although there was a halo there was no angel. It was bright and intense and even now

held promises of lathes and flats and the sweet smell of freshly turned wood. He lay back and stretched out . . . *if there is a God, please . . .*

He closed his eyes and his Gran was there. She held out her hand and smiled, 'It's all right, Jack, c'mon.' And so he got up and walked out into the desert with her, the breeze smelling of poppy oil from Norrie Carmichael's shop and hot doughnuts from the Black and White Cafe.

EPILOGUE: SCRIBBLINGS

Ms Elizabeth Smith
14 Simpson Street
Halls Creek WA 6770

Dear Elly,

How are you (and Narelle and what's-his-name, her fella)? Let me start out by saying that I'm the world's worst letter writer, but Arthur insists (like the rest of his romantic notions—i.e., his latest indulgences, Robert Graves and Gustav Mahler, horrid!)—he insists I keep at it. I would prefer the telephone but he keeps on at me, calling it an evil instrument (with which the government robs you blind).

If you remember in our last conversation you asked if Arthur was Catholic. He's asked me once again to explain that he's not (he claims you're baiting him). He believes the Pope is the anti-Christ (maybe that's a bit extreme) whose sole aim in life is to distort and destroy the true meaning of the Bible.

Talking about Bibles, did you see the picture they published in the papers—Rolly's part-portrait? Arthur insists it's meant to be me (unlikely), but after having received your photo I think I know who it really is. Just the same, it is vague, isn't it? The police have told us that we can have the Bible back after their next (and last, but they keep saying that) enquiry.

So, how are *you*? The attention has got a bit much, hasn't it? Me and Arthur have decided to withdraw a little more from the world. After all, Rolly meant more than a few newspapers. Anyway, this is why we've decided not to join in with Kevin Alber and his lawsuit against your dad. What good would it do? We're not after his money. Let sleeping dogs lie, I reckon (Arthur expresses it differently, 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning').

So now I just keep him next to me always, in my garden, my Babylonian Garden (who started that, Rolly, me, Arthur?). Your spot's still here, it's reserved. Come and see me and I'll show you the cutest photo of our boy you could imagine: twelve, or so, standing at the front of the class beaming. This is how I remember him, how I'll choose to remember him. In time (when the government and papers are through with us), this is all we'll need, don't you think? As Arthur always says, the flesh is the least of us. I think he is right. He has brought me God and I have given him the trots—this seems like a fair swap to me.

Anyway, I must go as it is time for our beach walk. Arthur says it will help my newly reformed lungs (little does he know I still have a stash I get into when he's at the library).

Write soon, God bless, Jean