Strange

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STRANGE

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ABSTRACT

Strange is a work of biographical fiction, memoir and critical interpretation divided into three parts: Strange Past, Strange Present and Strange Extrapolations.

Strange Past introduces the author’s ancestors and explores the ways in which they negotiated cultural and location change as new settlers and, later, as mixed-race identities within the dangerously unstable colonial-racial environment of the 19C Swan-River colony. Although the names belonged to real people and the text is based on facts drawn from public records and the author’s oral family history, the actions and dialogue in Strange Past are fictional.

In Strange Present the author introduces himself as memoir subject and, through his perspective as a descendant of the central Strange Past protagonists, the theme of mixed-race cultural negotiation continues within a late Twentieth-Century environment. The memoir also relies on fiction to tell the fundamentally factual stories.

Strange Past and Strange Present form the body text.

Strange Extrapolations is a critical interpretation of the body text structured around a research focus on cultural, textual and discursive/linguistic hybridity. Informed and supported by post-colonial, post-structural and post-modern discourse on identity and belonging within racial multiplicities, Strange Extrapolations attempts to illuminate the instability of static cultures, ideologies or notions of identity wherever hybridity exists. Indeed, Strange Extrapolations infers that hybridity exists everywhere in an infinite multitude of incarnations and thus remains as a permanently destabilising influence upon every human status quo.
DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that the thesis entitled *Strange* is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other university or institution. I certify to the best of my knowledge that all sources of reference have been acknowledged in the references section of the work.

Signed:

Date:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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For Family
## CONTENTS

*Strange Past* Title Page ................................................................. 1  
Chapter One ............................................................................................................ 2  
Chapter Two ........................................................................................................... 11  
Chapter Three ....................................................................................................... 19  
Chapter Four ......................................................................................................... 31  
Chapter Five .......................................................................................................... 43  
Chapter Six ............................................................................................................ 56  
Chapter Seven ...................................................................................................... 70  
Chapter Eight ........................................................................................................ 92  
Chapter Nine ......................................................................................................... 103  
Chapter Ten .......................................................................................................... 134  
Chapter Eleven .................................................................................................... 140  
Epilogue ................................................................................................................ 152

*Strange Present* Title Page ................................................................. 154  
1965 ..................................................................................................................... 155  
1967 ..................................................................................................................... 158  
1968 ..................................................................................................................... 161  
1973 ..................................................................................................................... 168  
1975 ..................................................................................................................... 176  
1976 ..................................................................................................................... 180  
1977 ..................................................................................................................... 182  
1979 ..................................................................................................................... 185  
1982 ..................................................................................................................... 200  
1983 ..................................................................................................................... 212  
1984 ..................................................................................................................... 221  
1985 ..................................................................................................................... 231  
1986 ..................................................................................................................... 236  
2004 ..................................................................................................................... 239

*Strange Extrapolations* Title Page ................................................................. 242  
Chapter One, ‘The Author: A Eulogy’ ................................................................. 243  
Chapter Two, ‘Intents & Purposes’ ...................................................................... 248  
Chapter Three, ‘How Did That Happen?’ ......................................................... 249  
Chapter Four, ‘Hybrid Analogues: History, Memory & Dialogic Relations’ .... 256  
Chapter Five, ‘Writing Identity: The Heritage Players’ ....................................... 264  
Chapter Six, ‘Conclusion’ .................................................................................... 280

Endnotes .............................................................................................................. 290

Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 297
STRANGE PAST
CHAPTER ONE

Calne Manor, Bremhill, Wiltshire, England 1838

‘Ah, Strange. Prompt fellow. Outstanding.’

A summons to the manor house is unusual for Richard Strange - his employer, the gentleman Doctor Samuel Waterman Viveash, typically conducts farm business outside the pristine luxury of the Calne Manor. After five minutes of cold appraisal by the manor servants, five minutes of comparing the mud that is his constant passenger with the polished, shining cleanliness of his immediate surrounds, Richard decides that he prefers it that way.

Viveash stands in his study doorway and, curious to Richard, strokes the rich timber of the door. ‘Do you know this wood, Strange?’

‘No sir. Fine wood, though.’

‘It is, it is. It’s called Jarrah and … come in, man!’ Viveash leads his shepherd across a book-lined and beautifully paneled study. He grabs a small, intricately carved box from his desktop and shoves it under Richard’s nose. ‘This is sandalwood. Smell.’

Richard obliges. ‘Smells good. Like a lady, sir.’

Viveash laughs. ‘Not like a lady you’d be likely to find in Wiltshire, Strange. Not too many Orientals in Wiltshire.’

‘Box is oriental then sir?’

‘The box yes, the box, but damn the box! Perceive the wood! The door, the box – irrelevant Strange! Perceive the wood!’

‘Nice wood in both, sir.’

‘Expensive wood, Strange! Rare in Wiltshire. Rare in England, by God! Worth a fortune this “nice wood” and I know where to get it!’

Viveash appraises Richard carefully. ‘You’re wondering what this has to do with you. Perhaps thinking I might be more comfortable in one of our fine asylums. Thinking the good doctor needs a better doctor.’

Richard is thinking about the contents of a fine crystal decanter on the desk, but he does not correct the man. He shrugs instead. Viveash sweeps a hand toward a scrolled mahogany chair opposite his desk and smiles for his head-shepherd to sit. ‘Our flocks are healthy?’

‘Never better, sir.’

Viveash sits on his desk. ‘Your apprentice? An able lad?’

‘Grown past a lad. Keeps up.’
‘Could he fill your boots?’
Richard frowns. ‘D’you mean could he take over my job, Doctor?’
‘Exactly.’
‘What have I done wrong?’
Viveash chuckles and casually stretches over his desk to turn the stopper in the decanter.
‘Nothing, Strange. Quite the contrary. I have some big plans that include you, but I need to be assured of your replacement. Can he fill your boots?’
Richard nods. ‘He can, sir. Alfred’s a fine shepherd and well-respected by those as he needs respect from hereabouts.’
Viveash smiles softly in his beard and pulls out the stopper. ‘An important consideration, densely uttered. Are you a drinking man, Strange?’
Richard’s neck itches. Port glows in the decanter. ‘I like a quiet ale, but I wouldn’t say as I’m a hard drinking man.’
‘Hard enough for the contents of the crystal?’
Richard smiles at the decanter. ‘Reckon I could bear it, Doctor.’

The port is delicious and Richard Strange fights the desire to empty his glass in a single hot gulp. He knows the doctor is biding his time, savouring both the fiery Tawny and the moment in which he will share his ‘big plan’. Richard wants a refill and the news in equal measure, decides that the news is assured but that the refill will only be offered to an empty glass. He swallows the last of his port and stares at his empty glass.
Viveash reclines behind his desk and gently inhales the contents of his cut-crystal glass. ‘Not as soft as you thought you were.’
Richard forces himself not to slump as Viveash silently replaces the crystal on the decanter.
‘The Viveash brothers leave within the month for the colonies. We want you with us.’
‘The colonies?’ Richard gasps.
‘I pay the fare,’ says Viveash, ‘you work indentured to me until the fare’s paid back.’
‘Indentured, sir?’
‘Exactly. I want a single man. I want a five-year commitment. I want a strong, adaptable fellow with the skills to grow sheep in harsh country. You’re the man I want.’
‘Which country?’
‘The land is hot, roads non-existent, company dangerous. Wild primitives, poisonous snakes, thick scrub, more land than you can imagine and as many sheep as you can grow.’
‘Land and sheep?’
'And timber! The oriental lady, Strange! An acre of forest buys two of stock. Two birds with one stone, in a land of one's own.'

‘Is it Australia?’

‘It is Australia.’

‘I read there's those would choose the rope over transportation.’

Viveash nods. 'Hardly fiction, either. Some choose to suffer a teenaged Queen and the corruptions of her elder statesmen. I prefer opportunity and experience, excitement and challenge. What do you want?'

Richard decides to stop hedging. 'What every man wants. Land. But I don't want to go to Botany Bay or Hobart to get it.'

Viveash smiles and leans back in his chair. 'I'm trying to escape corruption, Strange, not immerse myself in it. Robert and I – and, of course, our families – are going to Swan River. Western Australia. California with slightly darker Indians.'

‘Natives.’

' Cannibals, I've read, but they won't scalp you.' Viveash taps his temple. 'The hair keeps the flavour in the pot.'

Richard grimaces and Viveash studies his fingernails. 'But the cannibals are a mere distraction, Strange. The griffins and the seven-headed dragons are a full time occupation.'

Richard hears the sarcasm and blushes. He scratches his neck instead of swearing at his employer and returns to a more practical subject. ‘I don’t know much about timber.’

‘We’ll learn together! Chopping down a few thousand trees – how hard can that be?’

Richard wants to laugh, but he changes the subject again. ‘When do we leave?’

Viveash grins. ‘The _Britomart_ sails in three weeks. Enough time to get your house in order?’

Richard is surprised, but responds with an ironic smile. ‘My house is your house, Doctor.’

‘So it is and so it will be again.’ Viveash holds his hand out across the desk. ‘Australia.’

Richard Strange grasps it firmly. ‘Land and sheep, Sir.’

Doctor Viveash's great migration requires detailed planning. The colonising party for whom he has paid passage includes his wife Susan and his infant daughter Mary, Eliza Kent the maid, Quarterman the head stableman, Mrs Quarterman the head housekeeper, Richard Strange the head shepherd and Bannister the gardener. Those who paid their own passage include long-time friends Mr & Mrs Pethers, and the doctor's business partners: his brother Robert Viveash and brother-in-law John Smith.
Strange is ordered to hire a freight wagon and stock it with wine, flour, stable tack and tools. He will allow the doctor, his family and partners a two day head start before proceeding to Portsmouth and the Britomart. He will be accompanied by Mrs Pethers and Mrs Quarterman, whose husbands and Bannister will travel by horse. The entire party is scheduled to rendezvous at the King's Head Inn in Portsmouth on June 29th, 1838, the day after Queen Victoria's coronation.

Portsmouth, England, 1838

Richard flicks the reins and the tired draught horse snorts irritably. 'Not far, old girl. Just get us through town and it's oats and apples and a good night's rest.'

Mrs Quarterman shifts uncomfortably between two wine casks in the back of the large freight wagon. 'Did you say something, Richard?'

Richard doesn't turn, his attention on the thick traffic. The traffic stops and he pulls on the reins, sighing to yet another delay in the human-clogged streets of Portsmouth.

'Just talking to the horse, Mrs Quarterman. Are you comfortable?'

Mrs Quarterman huffs. 'Not in the slightest.'

Perched on a stack of flour sacks, Mrs Pethers chuckles. 'I'm a bit numb in the bum myself.'

'Decorum, please,' snaps Mrs Quarterman.

Richard shakes his head, wondering how the woman could possibly expect courtly manners in the back of a glorified dray. Mrs Pethers voices his unspoken question. 'Seems like they put the crown on the wrong head yesterday.'

'Language distinguishes the upper from the lower class, Mrs Pethers.'

'Sense of humour distinguishes the gracious from the proud, Mrs Quarterman.'

'Vulgarity is humour without intellect.'

Mrs Pethers crosses her arms. 'Are you saying I've got a vulgar bum?'

Richard laughs aloud. Mrs Quarterman sniffs and turns away.

'Not too hard to see which class is which in Portsmouth, ladies,' Richard says lightly, nodding at the throng of pedestrians as they navigate footpaths and weave through the stalled traffic on the road. They stand in groups outside the numerous, oddly-named taverns, or browse store windows and hastily erected stalls. Richard sees well-fed gentlemen of middle years, eyes stern over formal beards, brows down in permanent reprimand of humanity's penchant for decrepitude. He smiles at the street women and knows that if he were within their nimble grasp, his meager purse would soon be gone, his coin spent in the taverns by their avaricious blade-wielding dandy protectors just visible in the shadowed doorways. Mrs Quarterman shakes her head at the antics of two shabbily-dressed urchins. She watches them beg for coin, meet each refusal with abuse.
then nimbly dodge the cuffs and blows of each outraged subject. Mrs Pethers empathises with a harried matron, whose small, exquisitely coiffed charges tug against her grip, trying for every puddle and every patch of obvious grime on the footpath. Richard eyes three proud, strutting militiamen warily, sees their predatory expressions and knows they seek any hint of offence, hoping for reasons to justify violence, to practice their craft. In front of Richard's wagon, Mrs Quarterman's urchins approach the driver of a cask-laden brewers dray.

'Coin for a sausage, your majesty?' says one urchin, lisping through two broken front teeth.

'Starvin' we are,' the other urchin whines, scratching his lousy crotch.

'Out of it, you lot,' growls the driver.

The militiamen pause on the footpath and Richard tenses.

'One a them casks'd be nice then,' sneers broken teeth.

'Just a sip, squire,' louse-crotch wheedles. He grins. 'Ya cheap, fat bastard.'

The driver raises his whip and flicks it at the boys. Broken teeth jumps clear, but louse-crotch feels the sting on his neck and squeals. The militiamen step off the footpath and Richard hopes they have targeted the boys. If the soldiers go for the driver, the street could be blocked for hours.

'You!' bellows a militiaman.

The urchins freeze, raise their heads almost simultaneously and, seeing the approaching militia, bolt into the crowd. The driver squares his shoulders and grips his whip harder.

The first militiaman, a beefy sergeant, glares at the driver. 'Whippings in the streets, is it?' He turns to the corporal on his left. 'In my Portsmouth, corporal!'

'Shocking it is, sergeant.'

'Aye, shocking.' The sergeant turns to the corporal on his right. 'By what authority, corporal?'

'Not yours, sergeant.'

'No. Not mine. Most definitely not mine.' The sergeant crosses his arms on his chest. 'Praps I should ask you, driver? Should I ask him, corporals?'

The corporals respond together. 'Aye, sergeant.'

Richard sees the driver's shoulders slump and then notices a rotund, impeccably dressed gentleman step from the footpath and march determinedly towards the confrontation.

'I will then,' the sergeant continues, unaware of the gent approaching from behind. 'Public whipping without a trial, I saw. By whose authority, driver?'

'By mine.' The sergeant spins on his heel to meet the gentleman’s severe glare. A corporal moves, but the sergeant grabs his arm. 'Hold fast, corporal.' The sergeant nods at the interloper. 'A good day to you, your worship.'
The gentleman's expression does not change. 'A better day for all without this traffic, sergeant. Let the man be on his way.'

The sergeant reddens, realising that all eyes in the vicinity are on the tableau and all souls, rich and poor, beggared and bejeweled are enjoying his instant loss of authority. He rallies. 'Can't have willy-nilly whippings, now can we?'

The gentleman’s lips thin dangerously. 'Title, Sergeant.'

The sergeant’s blush deepens to scarlet. ‘Apologies, your worship. Can’t have whippings in the street, your worship.'

'Not in the sergeant's city,' says a corporal.

'Shit your hole,' snaps the sergeant.

The justice ignores the militiamen and speaks to the driver. 'Move along, driver.'

The driver does not pause. He flicks his whip over his bullock team and the great dray moves down the now carriage-free road. Richard flicks his reins.

Mrs Quarterman sniffs as they leave the scene. 'The sergeant was correct. The driver had no authority.'

'Those lads deserved a whack or two, Mrs Quarterman,' says Richard. 'Driver deserves a pat on the back, I say.'

'I don't care,' says Mrs Pethers. 'I want the inn. I want some blood back in my vulgar parts.'

Doctor Viveash stands in shade under the entrance awning of the King's Head Inn and impatiently checks his fob watch. It is dusk and he had expected his servants by noon at the latest. Their tardiness does not improve a mood already soured by a night of mediocre accommodations, bad attendance and poor food. Mrs Viveash's quarrel with the maid about baby Mary's pudding had certainly not helped.

Viveash wants to inspect his freight and assure himself that it is intact. In Australia the items he intends to take with him are worth nearly their weight in gold, particularly the tack and tools. The wine is his family's shortcut to social acceptance, especially that society of decision-makers and power-brokers to which he knows he must belong if his personal empire is to flourish.

Viveash remembers the horses brought by Pethers and the two servant men. Two fine arab stallions and three fat mares, all shining with health, essential to his plans. He closes his eyes and quietly speaks to his God, praying for safe deliverance of his stock and stable to the new land.

Richard pulls the reins and the freight wagon stops outside the stable beside the King's Head Inn. He does not notice the doctor under the awning. 'That's it, ladies – the King's Head.'
Viveash hears his shepherd and turns to see Richard secure the reins and Mrs Pethers alight from the back of the wagon to stretch an obviously aching back.

'Finally!' Mrs Quarterman says loudly, clumsily pushing herself up between the wine-casks. 'What a thoroughly awful journey. The doctor should be ashamed treating ladies like common drudges. A thoroughly thoughtless man!'

'Madam!' snaps Viveash. Mrs Quarterman jumps in fright and knocks a cask. It topples, instantly rolling behind her legs to flip her on to her back in the wagon. The cask continues its roll off the wagon to smash on the Broad Street cobbles and wine explodes in all directions, soaking Mrs Pethers and one unfortunate pedestrian. The flour sacks are sprayed and Mrs Quarterman's skirt receives an ample dousing. Viveash freezes and watches dumbfounded as a thin, scruffy sot literally dives into what is left of the broken cask and slurps enthusiastically at the small pools of remaining claret. Richard hustles around the wagon and boots the sot in the arse.

The sot scuttles through the cask shards, up and away clutching his backside, but with a satisfied expression. Richard turns towards Mrs Pethers' loud laugh, then looks from the silent doctor under the awning to the now howling woman in the wagon bed. 'Are you alright, Mrs Quarterman?'

Mrs Quarterman stays on her back and cries gustily. Richard jumps up into the wagon and squats beside her. 'You alright, luv?'

'I'm wet,' she blubbers.

'Aye,' says Richard gaily, 'just a bit of claret on your clothes, missus. Let's get you sitting up now.'

Mrs Quarterman allows Richard to take her arms and pull her into a sitting position. 'I broke a whole cask, Richard.' Her nose runs and Richard offers her a suspicious handkerchief. 'That's two months wages for Quarterman and I.'

'Twas an accident.'

'We can't afford ...'

'The doctor is a thoughtful man, Mrs Quarterman.'

Under the awning, Viveash raises an eyebrow.

'Can I help?' asks Mrs Pethers, her hair dripping claret.

Richard coaxes the stunned Mrs Quarterman from the wagon and as she stands, still sobbing, Mrs Pethers takes her hand and leads her under the King's Head awning.

Viveash does not move and says nothing until the two women are inside the Inn.

'That was my best cask claret, Strange.'
Richard licks wet fingers. 'Aye, doctor. It's a fine drop.'

Viveash stares. 'I imagine that ruffian will have quite a head tomorrow.'

Richard checks the damp flour sacks, a flicker of a smile quivering at the sides of his mouth. 'Aye, and quite an arse to match it.'

Viveash laughs aloud and Richard joins him as, suddenly, flares explode into colour over Portsmouth harbour and the second night of coronation celebrations begin.

Victoria has been queen for a day.

A light wind ruffles the oily, black water of Portsmouth harbour into phosphorescent flashes that seem to break like fine crystal under the cutting bows of the Britomart.

With the second-mate manning the wheel at the bow, Captain MacDonald stands on the forecastle deck, his eyes cast ahead of the silently moving ship, watching the night-black harbour for unexpected traffic. The first-mate eyes him cautiously.

‘Fine night for sailin’, Captain.’

MacDonald nods brusquely. ‘Report?’

The first mate clears his throat. ‘Twenty-four in cabin, fourteen steerage besides the Charity boys bound for Good Hope … there’s twenty three o’ them. Nineteen ship’s company.’

‘Total on-board?’

‘Eighty-four souls, Captain. We’re bulgin’ at the seams.’

‘Stow the comments, mate. Problems?’

‘Aye, Captain. Mr Pethers and the good Doctor want the cabins they paid for.’

MacDonald nods. ‘I’ve heard, but we can’t provide what doesn’t exist.’

‘Told ‘em somethin’ similar, Captain. But Pethers says that if he’s to be stuck in steerage then he’ll have his money back … or, at least, the difference ‘tween steerage fare and cabin fare.’

‘Tell him to take that up with the ship’s owner.’

‘Didn’t know Captain Mangles was aboard, sir,’ the first-mate says wryly.

MacDonald turns with a glare. ‘Stow that, man.’

The first mate feigns a sheepish expression. ‘Apologies, Captain, but Pethers says twas Mangles sold him the cabin in the first place. Doctor Viveash says the same about the extra cabin he bought for his man.’

‘The owner’s shady business is not my concern and nor is it yours. Our responsibility is to see these people safely ashore in Australia, and that is exactly what we will do. If they have to sacrifice a few small, luxuries, then so be it.’ Captain MacDonald faces his first-mate and stares meaningfully. ‘Mark me well, mate.’
The first-mate nods. ‘Marked and plotted, Captain.’

MacDonald turns his attention back to the water. ‘Dismissed.’

The first-mate steps down from the forecastle with a frown and negotiates a passage down the full length of the deck to stand beside the second-mate at the Britomart’s wheel.

‘Fine night for it, first,’ says the second-mate.

‘Aye,’ replies the first-mate, ‘but there’s bad weather coming and t’aint coming from above decks, neither.’
CHAPTER TWO

The Britomart, 400 miles South of the Canary Islands, 1838

Although the Britomart barely moves across the flat, eerily calm ocean, Captain MacDonald is unconcerned about the lack of wind and his affected schedule. His thoughts are set hard on the constant complaints of his cabin passengers, his unruly and nearly mutinous crew and the two Cape boys standing stripped before him. The boys are thieving vandals and will be punished, but if this were any other more civilised voyage where the word of the captain was not constantly questioned, where the crew set to their tasks without argument or shared surly, meaning-filled glances, Macdonald knows that his sentence would be far more lenient. He has decided to make an example of the two insolent lads with a flogging and has ordered all male passengers and crew to the deck to witness the punishment.

He scans the passengers’ faces and silently counts off a list of infractions.

There is Hardy, the pompous fool unable to control his wife’s tongue or his servant’s insolence. MacDonald remembers the mysterious floating barrel and his failed attempt to reclaim it from the sea. The servant had called him weak and worse, laughed when Hardy’s wife had suggested that it was little wonder if the captain was as poorly fed as his passengers. When MacDonald had chastised the woman and servant, Hardy had stepped up in their defense and undermined the good captain’s righteous authority. Blood will teach the man respect, thinks Captain MacDonald.

Standing beside Hardy is John Smith, a man always ready to start an argument with his mouth and finish with his fists, the ring-leader of the younger men on-board. Under Smith’s brash tutelage they have learned to ignore the captain’s orders. Blood will clear their minds, thinks the worthy Captain.

There is Lochee, the fancy-mouthed scoundrel and worst of the food whiners. He complains about dust on the biscuit, fat on the pork and too much salt in the mutton. He has set the entire cabin contingent to complaining about the lack of soft bread. MacDonald wonders whether the twit knows that he is on a ship, far from comfortable London and expected to make a few small culinary sacrifices. Blood will steal his appetite, thinks the seething MacDonald.

‘Captain?’

MacDonald snaps out of his musings and quickly softens his glare as he recognises the speaker. ‘Doctor?’
Doctor Viveash raises an eyebrow. ‘Some here are still feeling the effects of last night’s weather … myself included. Perhaps we could begin?’

MacDonald nods brusquely. ‘Second Mate! Read the charges!’

Second-mate Cunningham frowns at his captain and speaks in a hard-edged monotone. ‘William Knott and Jack Hay, eight lashes each for stealing peas, two lashes each for cutting rope.’

‘I cut nothin’,’ the taller boy protests. ‘What’d I want rope for?’

‘Silence!’ shouts MacDonald, staring knowingly at John Smith. ‘Rope was cut. If you didn’t cut it, who did?’

‘I cut nothin’,’ says the boy, folding his arms across his chest.

‘Me neither,’ says the second boy.

‘Captain?’

MacDonald turns to the new voice and is surprised to see it comes from the group of steerage passengers. ‘I cut rope, Captain,’ says Richard Strange. ‘But it was rope from the Doctor’s bales for tying the Billy-goat in the forecastle.’

MacDonald is momentarily confused by the man’s statement, but quickly realises that the rope in question must be the rope the boys are accused of cutting. ‘In the forecastle?’

‘Aye,’ says Richard.

‘Told ye,’ says the tall boy.

‘Quiet,’ says the first-mate half-heartedly, a slight grin beginning at the corners of his mouth.

MacDonald shakes his head. ‘The rope found cut in the forecastle was Britomart rope.’

Richard folds his arms. ‘Only cut rope in the forecastle came from the Doctor’s bales – two bales, two lengths of rope - and it was only cut where I cut it from those bales. Boys didn’t cut it, I did.’

MacDonald silently marks Richard as a new offender to be added to his growing list.

‘Captain?’ Viveash interrupts. ‘Perhaps we should suspend the rope-cutting punishment until this issue is resolved?’

‘Ask the bloody goat!’ yells an unseen wit in the crew.

MacDonald clenches his jaw. ‘Second Mate. Read the first charge again – the second to be suspended.’

Cunningham grins openly. ‘William Knott and Jack Hay, eight lashes each for stealing peas. Brace to the rail, lads.’

The Cape boys nervously eye each other, the smaller fellow blinking sudden tears.
‘Brace to the rail or ye’ll be tied to the mast!’ shouts the first-mate, now relishing the coming spectacle.

The tall boy steps over and places his hands apart on the rail, his back to the now noisy crowd of Cape boys, passengers and crew.

‘Spit in his eye, Jack Hay!’ from the Cape-boys.

‘Good courage, lad!’ from the crew.

‘C’mon Knotty,’ Jack, the tall boy, calls in a gentle voice. ‘Don’t make the bastards tie ye like that goat.’

The crowd laughs and even Doctor Viveash smiles at the boy’s jest.

The small boy hangs his head and shuffles over to join his friend at the rail.

‘Lay on, second!’ barks the Captain, hoping the sudden violence will quell the mutinous noise.

‘One,’ says Mrs Hardy in the Cuddy. ‘Damn the Captain!’

Susan Viveash flinches. ‘Please, Mrs Hardy! The boys have stolen from the stores and it’s the Captain’s place to punish them for it.

‘I’m not damning him for the flogging, woman,’ Mrs Hardy snorts. ‘I’m damning him for banishing us to this miserable Cuddy.’

Mrs Quarterman purses her lips. ‘He is simply protecting our delicate sensibilities, Mrs Hardy.’

Mrs Pethers and Mrs Hardy look at each other and laugh aloud. ‘Delicate?’ asks Mrs Pethers rhetorically. ‘I feel about as delicate as last night’s weather.’

‘Or this morning’s bread,’ says Mrs Hardy. ‘Five! Curse his eyes.’

‘Must you count?’ asks Mrs Quarterman.

Mrs Hardy simply nods, her mind preoccupied with visions of half naked, lithe young men bleeding under the cat’s lash. ‘Seven.’

‘Oh stop it!’ snaps Mrs Viveash. ‘It’s making me quite ill.’

Mrs Pethers jerks her head upwards. ‘Not half as ill as it must be making them.’

**The Britomart, 50 miles off Ascension Island, 1838**

Richard Strange is starving. He and Bannister have received less than a quarter of their normal rations for the last two months and although they’ve been assured by Viveash that their complaints have been passed to the Captain, the bloody-minded man has done nothing. Viveash has promised rum on Saturdays, a half-pound of rice and two rolls a day and mutton or ham three times a week, but since his promise the daily ration of three potatoes and hard biscuit has not
changed. Richard is growing weaker and fears that he will be dead before he reaches Cape Town, let alone survive the long passage to the Swan. He curses the Captain, knowing that the rope fiasco is the cause of his current dilemma.

To add to his misery, the seas are the roughest they’ve been yet and the smell in steerage is appalling. He decides to brave the elements rather than risk losing the little food he has in his groaning gut.

He staggers on to the heaving deck and barely grabs a handhold as the ship plummets into a trough and a huge wash of foaming water engulfs him. The ship performs a gut-wrenching swoop through the trough and speeds to the top of the next wave. Richard stands, soaked and spitting seawater, but invigorated and refreshed, glad to be out of the cramped steerage section with its moaning, vomiting inhabitants and close, foul air. He watches the choppy green face of the massive wave pass under the ship and feels the eerie pause before the frightening descent into the next trough. He braces his legs for the wild ride and shouts into the wind as the ship drops again, tightening his grip and holding his breath when the wash surges toward him.

The hatch to the cabins and Cuddy opens and the cook’s mate appears with a slops bucket, lazily approaches the rail and empties the bucket over the side. He spies Richard and laughs just as the ship tops another huge wave. Richard stares at the man and suddenly realises that he is unprepared for the plunge. ‘Grab the rail, man,’ he screams, but the Britomart is falling and the mate’s feet leave the deck. The man is momentarily suspended in mid-air and Richard watches in horror as the ship drops into the trough and the man falls to his face on the deck. The wave flushes the now screaming cook’s mate under the rail and, without thinking, Richard dives along the churning deck to grab his ankle before he disappears.

‘Hold that man!’ yells a voice from somewhere behind Richard’s precarious, belly-down position.

The Britomart flies up the next wave and Richard tries desperately to pull the man back, but gravity makes him twice as heavy. The ship pauses at the wave’s apex and, knowing that the pause is his only chance to bring the man in, Richard heaves. The cook’s mate flops back onto the Britomart like a landed seal as the ship drops again.

As he pulls at the inert figure, Richard feels an iron-hard grip on his ankle and a shout. ‘Hold fast. Wait for …’

The ship drops into the trough, the wash floods the deck.

‘Now!’ shouts the welcome voice and Richard leaps to his feet. He throws open the Cuddy door and grabs the cook’s mate by one leg as the ship climbs. Richard’s saviour grabs the other
leg and the two men fall through the Cuddy door dragging their now-moaning burden behind them. The sailor slams the door closed as the ship drops again.

‘Thanks, mate,’ says Richard Strange.

The sailor laughs and points at the soaking lump between them. ‘He’s the mate. I’m the bloody cook.’

Richard grins. ‘Then you’re just the man I need to see.’

**The Britomart, off Swan River estuary, 1838**

Richard Strange stares across the sand-bar and towards the tempting green of land, relishing the thought that soon he’ll have his feet back on good earth, his lungs breathing the gloriously tainted air of civilisation and his legs stretching to walk more than the frustrating few paces allowed on the ship. He decides that although he has enjoyed the odd brush with the ocean’s wilder moments, he is first a man of the land and last a sailor.

He cannot see any sign of a town and begins to share the doubts of many of his fellow passengers that the Captain is completely lost – doubts which began yesterday when, for the first time in over two months, all aboard saw land but no settlement, wilderness without civilisation.

Since the three-week Cape Town layover, The *Britomart*’s population had enjoyed only two days of harmony until the quarreling, drunkenness, fights and declamations on the Captain’s abilities began again. Some even whispered their fears of the Captain’s intention to maroon his passengers on an uncharted part of the barely touched land then sail away to the real colony with a concocted story about their sad fates. In the past fortnight, a group of passengers and crew have been close to actual mutiny and if it were not for the merchant Tanner, Captain MacDonald’s ship would now be in that group’s control.

The group approached Tanner insisting that the Captain actually wanted to relinquish his authority, but Tanner, a clever and careful negotiator, demanded the Captain’s resignation in writing. Captain MacDonald’s agenda was unclear, but there was no doubt that he mirrored the acrimony felt towards him by many aboard and Tanner became suspicious when the Captain told him that he had written his resignation, but also that he did not intend it to be seen by persons other than the proper authorities. Tanner refused to support the group’s takeover bid and instead formed his own delegation which included Doctor Viveash, Mr Lochee and Mr Hardy and demanded that the Captain complete his contract and sail the ship to its destination.

Richard stands beside a red-bearded sailor at the rail. ‘I can’t see the town, Red.’

The sailor points forward, past the bow towards land. ‘Look there. See the river-mouth?’
Richard peers at the coast. ‘I see rocks and waves and … aye, I see a river-mouth.’
‘Look on the south-side of the mouth. See the headland next to that long white beach?’
‘Aye.’
‘Look sharp. See the smoke?’
Richard scans the area and finally sees a thin plume of smoke rising above the headland to disperse quickly in the brisk wind. ‘I see it.’
‘That’s Fremantle and the whaler’s company. You’ll see civilisation when we’re past the mouth.’
‘Is that where we dock?’
Red-beard laughs. ‘We don’t dock, mate … at least not in this ship. We anchor off the mouth.’
‘Anchor out here? Why don’t we just sail?’
‘Ship draws sixteen feet,’ Red-beard points at the churning, white-capped river-mouth. ‘That water and the Swan anchorage ain’t more than nine deep. We drop the longboats, then we row straight at them rocks.’
Richard’s mouth drops and Red-beard nudges him. ‘Plenty of flies here … I’d keep me mouth closed unless you’re starvin’. The sailor points at the rocky river-mouth. ‘Look at the water. There’s foam in the parts that’ll see us to hell, there’s one pretty green stripe that’ll float us through to the promised-land.’
Richard squints his eyes, desperate to see the safe channel. ‘I can’t see the stripe. Why don’t we just land the boats on the beach?’
Red-beard shakes his head. ‘And slog a mile over sand with all the cargo? We’re not soldiers or Chinamen. We land civilised. Besides, you’re not booked to Fremantle, you’re booked to Perth and you won’t see that ‘til we’re ten miles upriver.’

The long-boats with their wide-eyed, frightened passengers find Red’s pretty green stripe and, one by one, pass the deadly rocks with the swift, inrushing tide. Past the disappointingly utilitarian Fremantle settlement the narrow, rock-bound mouth of the Swan bends and the passengers collectively sigh as the river widens, inspired by the magnificent high timber on both shores and, in the shallows, their first sight of the beautiful river’s namesakes, the graceful black swans of Western Australia.

Still further along the clear-flowing green of their pristine course, the passengers exclaim again in delight at another widening in the river, offhandedly called Melville Water by one of the crew. The travelers see low timber above pretty white beaches and are mesmerised by the turbulent violence of the Canning/Swan confluence until the land once again demands their
combined attentions. The river narrows again suddenly and proud Mount Eliza appears, a high ridge of limestone sloping down to the water and their destination in rough, nature-sculpted patterns. Finally, after six long, harrowing months at sea, the Britomart travellers face the unofficial capital of their new colony and all is silent aboard the longboats, save for the heavy huffing of the oarsmen and, against the boat’s hulls, the liquid slap of the glorious Swan.

Compared to even the smallest of English cities, Perth is tiny, and many of the passengers laugh at the notion that this rough, sparsely populated little town just happens to be the largest town in Western Australia. As the Britomart passengers wander off down the wharf, Doctor Viveash laughs at what he reads as his shepherd’s skeptical expression. ‘Not much to it yet, Strange, a half dozen main streets, some finished houses with a few nice villas among them and two rather large parks. But you might be glad to know that there are a few solid buildings here. Just like you’d find at home, I’m told.’

‘What buildings?’
Viveash smiles wryly. ‘The first marks of any budding civilisation, Richard. A barracks, a gaol, a courthouse and a church.’

Richard Strange shrugs. ‘A nice tavern would have done me, Doctor. That would have done me fine.’

After securing the services of a lounging dray-man to transport the Viveash’s small personal trunks, the entire Viveash party makes its way up Hay Street to Leader’s boarding house where the Doctor finds a messenger waiting.

‘Dr Samuel Viveash?’ asks the gaunt faced old man officiously.
‘I am.’
‘I’m from Governor Stirling, Doctor.’
‘Ah,’ smiles Viveash, ‘and you have a message for me?’
The gaunt man puffs up importantly. ‘An invitation. His excellency the governor requests the company of Doctor Samuel Viveash, Mrs Samuel Viveash and Mr Robert Viveash tonight at his excellency’s farewell ball.’ The man hands Viveash an envelope. ‘Your invitation, sir.’ He nods once, turns and struts away.

Viveash raises an eyebrow. ‘Unusual fellow.’ He breaks the governor’s wax seal on the envelope and removes an embossed sheet. He reads and then turns to his wife. ‘Off you go, dear. Marshall your maid. We’ve a ball to attend.’
Mrs Viveash flushes in instant panic. ‘I’m a complete mess! My trunk, Mr Quarterman! Quickly Eliza!’ She scurries into the boarding house, followed by Eliza and Quarterman, huffing under the weight of the trunk.

Viveash turns to Richard and Bannister. ‘Well, social obligations have changed my plans, men. We’ve stock to buy yet and I had intended to spend the rest of the day bargain-hunting with the both of you.’ He pauses, considering his options. ‘Very well,’ he says decisively, ‘we shall adapt. I’ve organised to lease a cottage and a small pasture at Guildford from Mr Samuel Moore. That will be our base of operations while we reconnoitre the colony for land, stock and opportunity. I hope we’ll be on our own soil within a month, but until we are, you’ll treat Mr Moore as your temporary employer. He needs reliable men and I need a temporary base. I trust that you have no complaints about this arrangement?’

Richard shrugs. ‘I’ll do what needs doing.’

Bannister nods. ‘Aye.’

‘Excellent!’ chuffs Viveash. He opens his purse, removes two guineas and hands them to Richard. ‘Captain MacDonald told me that it’s only two hours from here to Guildford by boat, so, instead of lounging about, you might just as well get a head-start. Go back to the docks, hire a boatman and go directly to Moore’s. Remember that name! Mr Samuel Moore. You’ll have to find him in Guildford.’ Viveash stares at both men, nods, turns and walks into the boarding house. Richard and Bannister share a resigned look.

‘Only two hours, he says,’ groans Bannister.

‘Aye,’ says Richard, jerking his head towards the boarding house. ‘They get the ball and we get the boat.’
CHAPTER THREE

York, Western Australia, 1840

Richard Strange has always been a hard worker, his years in England working with sheep and the grain crops required to keep the sheep fed have put callus on his hands and strong muscle on his body, but the last eighteen months in the colony have taught him to revise his former notions about the meaning of hard work.

In England, the pastures were cleared centuries before Richard’s birth and land was utilised in a traditional manner, here a sheep pasture, there a town, here a game forest and all with rich soil in abundance and constant rain to grow whatever was needed. In Australia, the land is full of contradictions. In a single virgin acre one might find massive Karri and Jarrah forests interspersed with stunted scrub, swamp, occasional patches of fertile alluvium and sand, or rock-strewn hills dotted with the weirdly human-shaped grass-trees. In the Guildford area Richard was at first inspired by the vast red-loam and alluvial flats that, after only ten years of colonial influence, already supported healthy wheat, prolific vineyards and fruitful orchards. He soon discovered that even in Guildford those treasures were not easy to come by.

While Doctor Viveash traveled almost manically around the colony buying sheep, goats, horses and bullocks, Richard worked for the temporary landlord, Samuel Moore. Moore made sure that he got the best out of his bargain with Viveash, which, in the wide, never-developed land, meant setting Viveash’s men to the brutally difficult task of land-clearing. Richard soon discovered the true, physical cost of Guildford’s treasures.

To his constant irritation, Richard had to maintain the Doctor’s newly-purchased and ever-growing flock, keep a sharp eye on the erratic and far-ranging goats and tend to the horses. These tasks would not normally have troubled him, but Moore demanded every spare minute from Richard and he found himself either straining on one end of the huge felling saw or grubbing stumps and rocks with shovel, crow-bar and tenaciously stubborn bullock team. Viveash, too, demanded his pound of flesh and Richard often walked the long hot miles across the colony to collect the Doctor’s most recent purchases.

Three months passed until Doctor Viveash met William Burgess, a man with a large, untouched land grant near York, sixty miles east of Perth and aptly called Woodlands. Burgess had offered the doctor free use of Woodlands, ostensibly to fulfill the location duties required by the crown of all grant-holders and the Doctor, who had been negotiating for the promising Yangedine, a property not more than two hours travel south from Burgess’ land, jumped at the
opportunity. A month later the entire Viveash party crossed the hills from Guildford to Woodlands. They worked from dawn until past sundown every day for another two months building huts and sheep-folds, clearing forest for pasture and planting the barley, wheat, rye, cabbage and potato crops they would need to supplement their spare human and stock diets.

In June, 1839, Viveash purchased Yangedine. Over the following year, the men traveled constantly, splitting their efforts between the Woodlands enterprise and the burgeoning new Yangedine settlement.

Viveash has lost his old world pallor and the skin above his thick, grey beard has turned to light-brown leather. He feels a strength in his legs that he never enjoyed in England and he takes pride in the hard-won callus on his once soft hands. Richard’s callus is like granite and his once merely strong muscles have tempered to sinewy iron on his long, fat-free body. His beard covers his face and neck in a dark, bushy mat and new, deep squint-lines from the unrelenting sun have eroded the skin around his eyes like runnel marks in soil after heavy rain.

The two men stroll from the shade of a sandalwood grove and Viveash gestures casually back at the trees. ‘A year or two before we touch those lovely ladies, I think.’

Richard nods. ‘Nice to know they’ll be waiting when we get here, Doctor.’

‘Indeed, Strange,’ Viveash replies, as he walks on towards a low, ridge. ‘Yangedine has many nice attributes. I’m as much pleased by its future potential as I am by our past efforts.’

‘What about Woodlands?’

Viveash gives his head a slight shake. ‘Woodlands was never ours – it belongs to Mr Burgess. Initially, the arrangement I had with Burgess was beneficial to the both of us. His location duties were fulfilled and we’ve managed to build our flocks, maintain our food supply and remain solvent while we established this property. But it seems that our successes have inspired a certain resentment in the fellow.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means, Strange,’ says Viveash, huffing as he steps over a large rock to begin the ascent of the ridge, ‘that he wants rent. He knows that we profit from his land, and he wants a share.’

‘Are you going to pay?’

‘For a short time, yes.’ Viveash pauses and turns to look his shepherd in the eyes. ‘But when the Yangedine barn and cottage are finished, when the pastures are fenced and when the first basket is filled with Yangedine vegetables, we’ll leave Woodlands to its owner and spend the rent here.’

‘You angry, Doctor?’
‘Not angry, Strange … just a lot more determined.’

Viveash strains to the crest of the ridge and as he reaches the point where he can see the other side, he suddenly freezes and holds up a warning hand. Behind and below his position, Richard stops. Viveash ducks and turns to speak in a low voice. ‘Ready your rifle.’

Richard’s eyebrows lift in excitement and he grins. ‘Kangaroos?’

Viveash shakes his head. ‘Natives.’

Richard frowns as he recalls the recent events that have inspired every white settler in the York district to fear the blacks. A local woman and her three-year-old child were found murdered beside the road less than ten miles from *Yangedine*’s northern boundary. Two native men, Borabung and Dujup, were blamed for the killings, quickly sentenced to death by hanging and subsequently executed. Within a day, not a single native could be found on any homestead in the district, they had returned to their camps and foraging areas and, Richard had heard, refused all contact and conversation with the whites. When, on the following day, a local shepherd disappeared without trace, the rumour among the whites insisted that he had been murdered in retribution for the executions. Now, the night threatens and white fingers stroke hair-triggers as every shadow is thought to contain a waiting native with murderous intent.

Richard clenches his jaw and shakes off the effects of his recollection. ‘Any we know?’ he whispers.

Viveash steps down from the crest to stand beside his shepherd. ‘I think I saw old Mignet, but I can’t be sure.’

‘I’ll see.’

Viveash looks at Richard questioningly. ‘Perhaps a tactical withdrawal instead, eh?’

Richard shakes his head. ‘I won’t live scared, Doctor.’ He taps his rifle. ‘I think the odds are about even.’

He scrambles up to the top of the ridge and peers cautiously over the crest. He sees a small group of natives beside a thin creek that runs into a large patch of reedy swamp. There is a laughing old man, probably, Richard thinks, the one Viveash mistook for old Mignet, a regular visitor to *Yangedine*. The old man is accompanied by two young, bare-chested girls, a bare-chested woman Richard judges to be in her mid-thirties, and two men, one bearing the beginnings of a middle-aged paunch and the other lithe and well-muscled, probably no more than twenty-years-old. Richard does not comprehend the actions of the old man as he laughs and chatters at the girls picking through the swamp vegetation, or the woman peering into the creek or the middle-aged man scanning the tree-tops, but he understands exactly what the younger man is doing. The young man is a sentry.
Richard wants to stand and raise his hand, to reassure the sentry against threat, but he does not know how any action on his part might be construed and chooses instead to remain still. Although he has conversed and worked with quite a number of aboriginals in the past eighteen months, he is yet to discover the things that truly motivate them.

As he watches he considers the things he does know.

In England, tradition is imbued in every facet of a human’s existence. Law, class, rights, and morality are determined by the crown and the Church. Class position and division of property is determined by an individual’s ancestry. The only traditions Richard recognises here, in these people, are in movement; the natives’ seasonal shift across vast distances to gather food, mix clan blood and perform incomprehensible ceremonies. As far as Richard can determine from his limited experience with the natives, they do not understand the concept of property, unless the item is a weapon or hunting implement fashioned by an individual for personal use. But any other thing that is not being used in any given moment is public property and therefore meant to be shared.

Richard suddenly smiles at the conflicting terminologies – what the natives call sharing, the colonists call theft. He experiences an instant epiphany, realising that the natives’ capacity to share mirrors the ideal of Christian charity and he smiles again at the irony.

‘Give to him that asketh thee,’ he whispers aloud, ‘and from him that would borrow of thee turn thou not away.’ He stands and raises his hand.

Richard Strange sees the young native stiffen before him and hears his employer’s shocked hiss behind, but ignores both of the implied warnings and steps over the crest to calmly descend towards the now tense group at the creek. Viveash scurries up to the crest and crouches on the opposite side of the ridge, his rifle ready, his lips poised to mouth a curse and his eyes flicking between the silent natives and his shepherd’s back.

Richard walks slowly until he is within ten yards of the old man, where he stops, squats and lays his rifle on the ground at his feet.

Viveash realises that he is holding his breath and he exhales, only to inhale again sharply as the old man nods and the rest of the group suddenly converges on Richard Strange.

Viveash quickly lifts his rifle and takes a shaky aim at the youngest native in the group, deciding instantly that his youth equates to the greater threat, but the doctor pauses, noting that Richard has not reacted at all to the group’s movement. Instead, Richard sits on his backside, crosses his legs and pulls something from his shirt pocket. Viveash shakes his head as the old man nods and the entire group suddenly joins the shepherd to sit cross-legged beside the creek.
Richard Strange crests the ridge, re-joins his employer and chuckles at Viveash’s half-angry, half-bemused expression.

‘What was that all about?’ squeaks Viveash and then points a shaking finger at a large native dilly-bag in Strange’s hand. ‘And what the devil is that?’

Richard squats beside Viveash and grins. ‘This is what I think you’d call enterprise, Doctor. I swapped my tobacco for these.’ He opens the bag and Viveash peers inside to see three, large freshwater crayfish. ‘They call them Marron and they say that they’re quite tasty.’

‘You were shopping?’ gasps Viveash, incredulous.

‘Aye.’

‘But I was about to shoot someone.’

‘Well, I’m for sure glad you didn’t,’ Richard replies with a twinkling eye. ‘Blessed hard to get a bargain if you go shooting the storekeeper!’

York, Western Australia, 1841

‘He becometh poor that dealeth with a slack hand: but the hand of the diligent maketh rich.’ Reverend Mears scans the small gathering meaningfully then deliberately stares out through the window at the group of curious natives gathered on the verandah. He shakes his head slightly, looks back at his flock and smiles wryly. ‘We have many burdens, my friends. The Lord tries us with hardship and toil, and through the example of the naked savage tempts us to sloth, indolence and depravity. As the Lord’s shepherds, we must at once show mercy and compassion for our black sheep, while keeping a firm and diligent hand on the crook of righteousness. Does the shepherd become like the sheep? No. Does he ignore duty, shirk responsibility and graze in forbidden fields? No, not in God’s good grace, not with the support of any civilised Christian, never righteous.’ Mears pauses to let his warning sink in, and then continues with his real agenda. ‘“Ask of me and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession”. With faith, we ask, and for our faith, the Lord gives.

‘Our faith inspired us to this land and the Lord brought us here safely and gave us a special purpose. Yes, He wants us to thrive and enjoy the fruits of our labours, He wants our diligent hands to maketh rich. These are the gifts He gives in return for His simple, special duty. His duty of faith. And what is this duty? What does the Lord ask in return for his blessings? Why, nothing more than the spiritual determination to spread His word!’ He points towards the window and the gathered natives. ‘Heed your inheritance, friends. Heed your responsibility. Heed your spiritual duty! The Lord’s black sheep run wild in this land, friends, and the Lord has brought us here to gather those sheep and bring them to His glorious fold.’
Richard Strange suppresses a yawn. The Reverend Mears’ monthly services at Yangedine are a ‘burden’ he could do without, and today’s sermon is particularly annoying because while Mears prattles on about the Lord’s sheep running wild in analogy, Richard knows that his own sheep are probably running wild in reality. He is also slightly discomfited at the Reverend’s opinion of the blacks. In Richard’s experience, the natives are constantly occupied in the business of survival, never indolent, and he has learned that their society – however incomprehensible – is bound by its own taboos, strictures, licenses and laws. They are hardly the wild, depraved mob the Reverend describes.

Richard breaks his musing at a soft, stifled giggle from one of the Brown’s maids. It is Sarah and, over the past two months, Richard has been both pleased and frustrated with their friendly moments. Although they have yet to enjoy an actual conversation, there is a warmth between them that he would love to ignite. He sees that the young woman has been looking through the window at the natives and turns his head to check the cause of her amusement. He smiles at a small, black face squashed against the glass. The Reverend smirks.

“For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry”. God’s reminders are everywhere, good people, and I thank our Lord for His sign today. Only a child playing at a window, you say? Look further, I reply. Study the child’s influence and you will know your Christian duty. Bring the black sheep to the Lord and their little lambs will soon follow. Now, let us bring in the sheaves and through the glory of our hymn, enervate the rebellious and inspire the industrious.’

Richard grates his way through the hymn and notes that the blacks are still at the window, beaming with pleasure, not an enervated rebel among them. They must be industrious types, he thinks sardonically.

‘Penny for your thoughts, Mr Strange?’

Richard turns to the soft, familiar voice and his expression wanders between smiling pleasure and frowning discomfort. ‘Miss Stevens … oh … just thinking about the land and …,’ he points vaguely across the Yangedine property, ‘it looks good, don’t it?’

The Brown’s maid, Sarah, gives Richard an amused look and nods. ‘It looks good and I notice that you’re looking good, too.’

Richard’s mouth drops. ‘Beg pardon?’

Sarah’s eyes have not left Richard’s face. ‘Sunday best, Mr Strange.’
Richard almost laughs – his Sunday best is hardly better than his Monday worst – but instead he looks into Sarah Stevens’ eyes and speaks before he can change his mind. ‘You always look good, Sarah.’

Sarah doesn’t blink. ‘Then we must make a good-looking couple.’ She turns to gaze across Yangedine as Strange nearly swallows his tongue. Sarah is attracted to this tall, rough-faced man and she wants the attraction to be mutual. She knows that he is clumsy and unsophisticated, probably afraid of women and that she will have to initiate all the moves. ‘I like Yangedine, but I love Grassdale. We’ve got our own little mountain, called Mount Matilda and it’s covered in pink right now. The spring flowers are so beautiful.’

Richard doesn’t pay much attention to flowers, but he recalls the bright flora of Cape Town and, knowing that Sarah made the crossing from England relatively recently, decides to submit his recollection and, hopefully, explore the unfamiliar concept of initiating a conversation. ‘The Cape Town flowers were pretty.’

‘Oh yes!’ Sarah exclaims excitedly and Richard feels a happy rush of accomplishment. ‘We had a picnic at Table Mountain and did you see that cone-shaped hill?’

Richard nods. ‘Lion’s Head.’

‘Did you see the rump?’

Richard forgets his contentment, nearly swallows his tongue again and grunts: ‘Rump.’

Sarah stifles a giggle and feigns a frown. ‘We were supposed to see a Lion’s rump in the mountains, but I couldn’t see it.’

‘I didn’t see your rump,’ Richard blurts without thinking.

Sarah Stevens has to bite the insides of her cheeks to keep from laughing aloud.

In that moment she makes a silent resolution: ‘This man is mine.’

‘A picnic,’ she says aloud.

Richard gives her a quizzical look. The conversation has gone completely out of his control, not, he thinks, that he ever had control. He is constantly trying to keep up with this maddeningly attractive woman’s twists and turns. ‘A picnic?’

‘Yes, Richard. A picnic! Next month after services. You can show me Yangedine.’

Richard smiles at Sarah, not quite knowing how he has managed to get so lucky, but not ready to throw such fortune away. ‘Next month after services.’

Sarah returns the smile. ‘That would be lovely, Mr Strange … and perhaps, if we’re lucky, we’ll find our own Australian rump.’

* * *
The month passes quickly and now Richard Strange is a content man as he approaches his hut. It has been a fine Sunday for him and, he hopes, for his new love, Sarah.

The day began with a rather boring Mears sermon, in which Richard, his mind set on the afternoon’s rendezvous, had been as fidgety as a schoolboy until Sarah gripped his hand. Richard didn’t care if the grip was remonstrance or affection, the contact was enough and Sarah maintained it until hymns.

Strolling arm-in-arm from the house, Sarah had chatted to Richard about her excitement at the prospect of new beginnings in the new colony, her mixed feelings of fear and curiosity about the natives and life in general on the Brown’s slowly growing Grassdale property. She marveled at the magnificent blue, golden and lilac floral display in the bush and sighed with joy, when, finally, they reached a perfect picnic spot. As Sarah laid out the picnic, Richard named the trees that circled the area, pointing out the amber mimosa and jam trees from their shady haven under a stately, towering redgum.

Richard pauses at his hut door and recalls their conversation after the delicious lunch.

‘Are you a serious man, Richard.’
‘Aye, serious about the serious things.’
‘What are the serious things?’
‘God, work, being true to what’s right, family.’
‘In that order?’
‘For the moment I only have the first three, Sarah.’

Richard remembers his surprise at Sarah’s sudden blush and almost angry response.
‘I don’t go traipsing off into the wilderness with just anyone, Richard Strange!’
Richard laughs as he remembers his panicked reaction.
‘I didn’t mean … I’m here because … damn it … I want to be with you.’
Sarah had glared.
‘Not like that,’ he had almost shouted. ‘I want … I want the third serious thing. I want a family. I want a wife.’
Sarah had literally thrown herself into Richard’s arms and, after kissing him passionately on the mouth, pushed him away and stared intently into his eyes.
‘Are you asking me to marry you, Richard?’
‘I can’t ask you that now. I’m indentured for another year and the work’s hard and long. There’ll be no time for family until I’m free of the Doctor.’
‘I’m indentured for another year,’ Sarah said, her expression thoughtful.
‘Then we have the same problem.’

‘Do you love me, Richard?’

Richard had studied the woman, tracing the shape of her face with his eyes, inhaling her sweet, earthy scent, recalling her laugh, her joy over simple beauty and, overall, her unaffected enthusiasm for life. ‘Aye,’ he said, surprising himself. ‘Reckon I do.’

‘Then I’ll hold my breath until next year.’

Sarah had taken Richard’s face in her hands, put her lips to his ear and whispered. ‘That’s the year I’ll become a Strange.’

Richard Strange enters his hut, wondering for the hundredth time since Grassdale how he’d managed to turn a simple picnic into a complicated betrothal to a woman he barely knew. He laughs suddenly at the realisation that he has so quickly forgotten the subject of the day’s sermon. Mears had spent the morning reminding his flock to be grateful for the Lord’s blessings. ‘Tender mercies,’ says Richard Strange aloud and chuckles, closing the hut door behind him.

**York, Western Australia, 1842**

As he approaches, Richard Strange studies the large stone house with a warm sense of pride. His hand-prints, his sweat and his blood mark every stone in the impressive new Viveash residence and Richard often stares at it in wonder, constantly surprised that he was able to transcend his humble role as shepherd to become, at least for a short time, a much vaunted stonemason. In England that would never happen. In England, a shepherd born is a shepherd to the grave.

The house was originally intended to be a barn, but as the men toiled and bled to gather stone from the surrounding country, as the walls rose like pieced-together sculptures from the bare, flat sand, Doctor Viveash saw a castle for his family rather than a shelter for his stock and changed both its purpose and its title. Strangely, the work seemed easier and enthusiasm rose after the men began to call their construction ‘the manor’ instead of ‘the barn’.

Now, as Richard goes to answer his employer’s formal summons, the front door opens and the glossed Jarrah reflects warm lamplight to surround the good Doctor Viveash in a soft golden mantle.

‘Ah Strange, excellent,’ says Viveash, both his tone and his cheeks jolly with claret.

Richard pauses as the doctor steps from the house and softly closes the door behind him.

‘Can’t invite you in, Richard. Dear Polly’s teeth make conversation quite impossible. Let’s stroll the grounds, shall we?’
Richard Strange had been looking forward to a sip or two from the doctor’s cellar and is a little disappointed until Viveash produces and offers a small, silver flask. ‘This should soothe your aches and pains, good fellow.’

Richard takes the flask eagerly and unscrews the burnished cap. He lifts it to his lips, sips, swallows and feels a fast, eye-watering rush of heat imbue his torso with pleasant pins and needles. ‘Whisky,’ he sighs throatily.

Viveash steps out into the moonlit yard before the manor, leaving the flask in Richard’s hands. Richard is torn between his desire to gulp down another quick swallow of the delicious spirit and the staid, responsible action of re-capping the flask, but again the doctor exercises his beneficent power. ‘Enjoy, man. I only ask that you return the flask.’

Richard takes another sip, but as he again begins to luxuriate in the hot, welcome tingle, he remembers that Viveash’s rare moments of generosity with alcohol always end with life-changing ultimatums and the whisky’s heat suddenly rises one or two dangerous degrees. Richard caps the flask. ‘What’s going on, Doctor?’

Viveash looks ready to dissemble, but Richard’s expression is set and, based on years of experience with his shepherd’s firm resolve on important issues, the doctor decides for directness. ‘You’re a sharp fellow, Strange, so I’ll not dither about. I’ve made a decision to dissolve the Viveash/Smith partnership.’

Richard is stunned. ‘Why?’

Viveash studies the yard, the new fences, the healthy gardens and finally the giant, yellow moon. ‘I could tell you that our profits are beyond expectation. I could say that we’ve achieved what we came here to achieve and that I’m satisfied. It would not be untrue to say that Smith’s nature and habits influenced my decision. But the simple fact is that I am a doctor in a land without doctors. I should be close to where I’m needed, not out here, beyond the majority.’

Richard stays silent as the urbane doctor’s normally mellifluous tone changes to the anguished plea of a desperate man. ‘Two women buried their babies because I did not arrive in time. How many more will suffer if I stay out here? What price will others pay while I play farmer?’

‘You’re not playing farmer,’ says Richard, slightly outraged. ‘You’re a damned good farmer and as hard a working man as I’ve seen.’

Viveash flicks his hand in annoyance. ‘You can work, Richard. My brother, Bannister … Lord, even Smith can work, but who among you can deliver a child, or prescribe for fever, or drain a green wound? Who among you can heal?’

Richard’s outrage burns lower now and instead he feels the old, useless smouldering anger of the peasant dismissed by the gentry. ‘A couple among us never had the chance to find out.’
Viveash waves a hand in irritation. ‘I’m not putting you down, Richard. I’m not speaking of your intelligence at all. I’m speaking of my abilities. As you say, you never had the chance to become a doctor, but I did and that’s all the more reason why I should be doing it. I simply don’t have the right to be out here.’

Richard realises that he was too quick to judge an implication in Viveash’s questions and is mollified and slightly shamed by the doctor’s latest revelation. That his employer would even consider turning his back on four brutal years of fine accomplishment, would sacrifice his dream for the needs of others, humbles the shepherd and Richard shakes his head in wonder. He reaches out to grip the doctor’s shoulder. ‘You’re a good man, Doctor Viveash.’

Viveash stiffens for a second, but the unfamiliar contact is a catalyst and his shoulders slump. ‘Thank you, Richard, but I think a good man would be happy with his choices.’

Richard maintains his grip. ‘A good man does good no matter how he feels about what he’s doing.’ He drops his hand and forces enthusiasm into his tone. ‘So where are we going and what’s my job when we get there?’

Viveash hears the strained joy and silently thanks his aware employee. ‘We go to the Swan. I’ve agreed to buy Wexcombe next year, so in the interim I’ll practice from Houghton and you’ll rebuild the flocks at Wexcombe.’

This is a night for stunning revelations, Richard thinks. ‘Tanner’s selling Wexcombe?’

Viveash nods and Richard instantly thinks of Sarah Stevens. Wexcombe is on the Swan near Perth, sixty hard miles from Grassdale and Sarah. Richard knows that he will never see his betrothed unless the doctor is willing to make a specific concession. ‘I’ll need a favour, doctor.’

‘A favour? Ask it, Strange.’

‘Does Mrs Viveash need another good, loyal, hard-working maid?’

Viveash smiles slightly – Richard and Sarah’s romance is hardly a secret. ‘You’re speaking of Mrs Brown’s maid, I hope?’

Richard nods. ‘Sarah.’

‘You’re a fortunate man, Strange. It happens that the Brown’s servants are becoming a burden to the Brown’s purse and it also happens that Mrs Viveash will need some extra assistance on the new estate. You think Miss Stevens will suffice?’

Richard gives Viveash a rueful glance. ‘I hope so, or my life won’t be worth tuppence.’

Viveash laughs. ‘I think I’ll have to have a word with Mr Brown, see if he’ll put his maid in your … in our capable hands. You were worth far more than tuppence when I first engaged you, Richard, and you know how I hate to see valuable stock deteriorate.’
Though he feels a resentful twinge at the doctor’s stock jest, Richard is half relieved. Now all he has to do is convince Sarah that his negotiations on her behalf were justified. He is not particularly confident. ‘Can I ask another favour, doctor?’

‘Ask.’

‘Do you think you can convince Reverend Mears to do a special sermon next Sunday?’

Viveash gives Richard a surprised look. ‘Possibly. What did you have in mind?’

Richard shrugs. ‘I was thinking that I might need one about women obeying their men.’

* * *

In June, 1842, the co-partnership of Doctor Samuel Waterman Viveash, Robert Viveash and John Smith dissolved and the doctor, ever good to his word, took his family to Houghton on the Middle Swan. His services were sorely needed in the growing colony and his practice stretched from Fremantle on the coast through busy Perth to Guildford and back over the hills to York and Toodyay in the untamed east. With grateful patients of all classes, his influence grew and, because of his frequent travels, because of his education, his proclaimed Christian morality and his grammatical ability to correspond in succinct, no-nonsense language he was offered the position of magistrate to the outer-districts. By the end of his year at Houghton, Doctor Viveash was magistrate, medical man and excited new land-holder. He uprooted his family for the last time and joined his shepherd at Wexcombe near Guildford. Richard Strange married Sarah Stevens in July, 1843, at Wexcombe. Doctor Viveash brought the wine.
CHAPTER FOUR

Gilgering area, Western Australia 1850

Nganka watches the white man. He is not Nyungar, not really human, and she knows how savage his kind can be, but his skin shines and his quiet whistle softens the hard edge of fear she has been taught to trust. He ties his horse to a tree and squats beside the creek from which she had hoped to pull a few fat Marron. She wonders if the white man has the same idea, then grins as he dips his hat into the water, proceeds to drink from it and wets his shirt-front. She is amused that he would use a sweaty hat to drink clean water when he has two good hands. The horse snorts and Nganka jumps, rustling the bush. The white man turns quickly to her noise, but his foot slips on the creek-bank and he falls back into the shallow water. Nganka runs, terrified, expecting to hear the sounds of pursuit, wishing she had listened to the voices of her Elders. She hears nothing, no voice, no curse, no Elder, no white-man. The bush is silent save for a single snort – the white-man’s horse.

Nganka stops and crouches. She is torn between flight toward the relative safety of her people’s camp or a return to investigate the strange silence. She listens, hears only the restless stamp of the intemperate horse and succumbs to her own curiosity, cautiously retracing her steps, until, seeing the tied horse, she stops and again crouches, searching the surrounding bush for sign of the unusually quiet white-man. Nganka’s gaze moves back to the horse, then down to where the white-man had been drinking. His body lies face-up in the creek, his legs do not move, and, without considering the possible consequences, Nganka stands and walks towards him.

The white-man leaks blood into the water and red streamers eddy around a sharp rock under his head. His eyes are closed, but Nganka notes the movement of his chest and realises that he still lives. She grabs his ankles and drags him out of the water.

Nganka contemplates the unconscious thing at her feet. If it were not white-skinned, if it did not cover itself in cloth and leather and if it were not such an awful danger to the real people, it might be a man. It must be nearly a man, like the snake is nearly a lizard or the yabby is nearly a Marron. But, like the snake, it kills and, like the yabby, it has extra claws. Nganka wonders if she should kill it.

Kuljak slings the Koormul over his shoulder and holds it by the tail. It is a large, well fed specimen and Kuljak thinks it will make a fine offering for his people’s fire. He wanted to contribute more than the usual fare – the Gilgies, Marron or fish that made up his people’s main
Bunuru season diet. *Koormul* required extra effort - first the climb to the high, hollow branch; then the difficult process of extracting the savage, sharp-clawed possum from its lair. Kuljak thinks he might need all the kudos he can get, for many within his clan are opposed to his walks-with-the-whites and this latest walk has lasted a full turn of seasons. Kuljak is not assured of a fond welcome.

He knows the whites are very dangerous; has experienced their viciousness in a multitude of ways. But it is their mercurial passions, their obsession with changing a few simple things into complex things (sometimes useful, often ridiculous) and, especially, their ability to create food that make them a constant fascination for Kuljak. The power to shape both the land and animals into a constant food supply amazes him and, as he rubs at a long Koormul scratch on his arm, he is reminded that it is a power he covets for himself.

Now he knows their language (enough to be understood) and can copy many of their processes. He believes that this knowledge can only be good for his people, for he knows that the whites value the ability to make change. He also knows that they consume or destroy anything without that ability. His people would have to learn the white way or become like the Koormul now dripping blood down his back.

He ponders these complexities and how he might express them to his people as he walks beside the creek that leads to the Whadjuk wetland’s camp. He hears a familiar snort and squats, peering intently towards the area from which it came. Through the thick, green scrub he spies a patch of moving white – a horse – steps softly into the creek and squats again. Now he can see the entire horse, tied to a tree near the creek bank. He also sees a whitefella, lying face up in the creek. His caution turns to confusion as he spies a young Whadjuk girl appear beside the whitefella and drag him feet-first from the water. Kuljak knows the girl, is about to warn her to run and keep running, but he is silenced by the white-man’s sudden movement.

Richard opens his eyes, instantly aware of the sharp pain at the back of his head. He grimaces and rolls on to his side, lifting his hand to the pain’s source. Small, black feet fill his vision and without thinking, he grabs an ankle. A girl falls beside him and kicks out with her free foot. The kick connects with Richard’s hand, but he keeps his grip and pulls the now desperately struggling girl towards him.

Kuljak of the Whadjuk squats in the creek and watches the white man and the black girl wrestle on the creek-bank. Neither makes a sound, save a grunt or huff of exertion. Kuljak sees the white man hug Nganka, then wrap his legs around her knees.

‘Stop kicking, damn ye!’ shouts the white.
Kuljak stands against his own caution, suddenly determined to stop this battle, this possible rape. He drops the possum and steps from his concealment. ‘Let go, baas!’

Richard Strange hears the shout from behind him, turns his head and quickly contemplates his predicament. A rangy looking native approaches from the scrub near the creek, his hand gripping the native equivalent of a knobkerrie. Richard releases his grip on the girl and rolls towards his horse. As he stands to grab the rifle from its saddle-scabbard, he is not surprised to see the girl tear off into the bush but he is surprised to see the rangy native drop his weapon and raise his arms. ‘No trouble, baas!’

Richard takes his hand from the rifle, but stays close to the scabbard and motions toward the place where the girl disappeared. ‘What about her?’

Kuljak shakes his head. ‘She pull you out that creek.’

Richard frowns, vaguely recalling his slip into the creek, pain, then nothing until his awakening.

Kuljak squats and points at the water. ‘You there, not movin’. She come, pull you out.’

‘She pulled me out?’

Kuljak grins.

‘She saved me?’

Kuljak shrugs. ‘Dat shallow creek. Who knows?’

Nganka hears the Whadjuk call her name. Her heart is beating so hard from exertion and fear that she has had to stop her flight to grab a breath. She knows that many of her people frown upon Kuljak, but he has saved her from the white man and now she fears for him. She wants to run and keep running, but Kuljak calls her name and may need her help. She grabs a short, thick fallen branch and cautiously retraces the steps of her escape, until, still screened by undergrowth, she sees the Whadjuk and the white man squatting together near the creek.

Kuljak becomes aware of her still-hidden presence and speaks to the bush in the Whadjuk language. ‘The white man knows you saved him. He wants to thank you. Come out and he might give you gifts.’

Nganka is still hesitant – she has never heard of whites giving gifts.

‘What did you say?’ asks Richard.

‘I tell her you give her dat ‘ward.’

‘Ward?’

‘Like dat food or blanket or somethin’. ‘Ward for savin’ you.’

‘Reward? Yes! I will if she comes back, but I was a bit rough on her. I think she’s long gone.’
Kuljak shakes his head. ‘She here.’
Richard stares into the surrounding bush. ‘I can’t see her.’
‘She watchin’.’
‘Tell her “thank you”.’
‘The white man thanks you.’
‘Tell her she can choose her reward. Anything except the rifle.’
‘The white man says you can take what you want, but not his weapon.’
Nganka steps from her hiding place, enticed more by the promise of conversation with the strange white than his offer of gifts. Richard draws a breath as the girl appears, for with his first full view of his young saviour, he is reminded of an old image from his childhood painted on the side of a carnival wagon that once rolled through Wiltshire. The picture was of a beautiful and exotic woman wearing a gold and turquoise head-dress. A caption under the painting read: ‘Cleopatra, the Egyptian Cat Woman’.
‘Cleopatra,’ Richard murmurs, staring at the native girl.
‘Nganka, baas,’ says Kuljak, helpfully.
Richard ignores his new acquaintance and nods at the girl. ‘You are beautiful.’
‘He says you’re beautiful.’
Nganka flushes and considers running again.
‘Like an Egyptian queen,’ says Richard.
Kuljak shrugs. ‘Very beautiful.’
Nganka stares at the white for a long moment and then quickly turns and runs back into the bush.
‘Wait!’ Richard rises and stalks after her, rubbing at the bloody gash in his head.
‘She gone, baas.’
Richard is annoyed. ‘Why? What did I do?’
Kuljak grins. ‘You got dat hungry-fella face, baas. Real hungry-fella.’
‘I want to talk to her.’
Richard’s sharp tone reminds Kuljak that white friendliness is fleeting, that no matter how kindly this man seems, he is still a member of a particularly demanding, prone-to-violence race. Kuljak shrugs and this only adds to Richard’s frustration. ‘Catch her!’
Kuljak eyes the bush and nods but Richard senses his intent. ‘Wait.’
Kuljak pauses.
‘You’ll run off too, won’t you?’
Kuljak stares hard into Richard’s eyes. ‘Yeah baas.’
‘Why? I’ll reward you well if you bring her back.’

Kuljak shakes his head sullenly. ‘Don’t want nothin’. You leave ‘er be.’

Richard is suddenly enraged, both by the native’s obvious rebellion and by the fact that the man’s inference about Richard’s intentions towards the girl is too close to truth for comfort. ‘I wouldn’t touch her, damn you!’

Kuljak edges toward the bush, weighing the chance of escape against Richard’s ability to reach and fire his rifle. Richard senses the man’s fear and is instantly shamed by the realisation that the fear is justified. He raises his hands in a placating gesture. ‘Wait. I’m sorry, fellow. I mean you no harm.’ Richard offers his hand. ‘Please – let’s start again. My name is Richard. Richard Strange.’

Kuljak eyes the hand suspiciously; before this moment no white has ever offered to shake his hand and although not a tradition of his own people, he understands its significance to the whites. He reaches forward tentatively and grasps the hand. ‘My name Kuljak.’

‘Cull-jeck?’

Kuljak nods, smiling at the notion that a white man can speak his name with something other than contempt in his tone. ‘You Richidstrenj?’

Richard smiles. ‘Close enough, Kuljak.’

Kuljak looks at his hand, expecting a white mark, finding a red. He holds his hand out again and nods at the mark on his palm. ‘You bleedin’, Richidstrenj.’

**Gilgering area, Western Australia 1851**

Richard Strange stirs the fire and rubs the back of his head. He recalls his first visit to this place, his fall into the creek and the rock that damaged him. He also remembers the girl, she has been a regular inhabitant of his memories since that first cathartic meeting and she is the primary reason for this night’s visit and the half-dozen other nights over the past year. The girl is an icon, an elusive representation of Richard’s unexplored desire and, regardless of his own need to maintain normality, the need to see her and communicate with her remains. His wife, his children, his responsibilities and the weight of his race’s history are irrelevant to this most quiet, yet intensely insistent obsession.

The fire flares as sap ignites and a native is momentarily illuminated at the edge of the firelight. Richard freezes and peers into the night black bush, senses tuned for the sight or sound of others. He glares at the silent, waiting native. ‘You alone?’ The figure does not move or respond so Richard switches to Whadjuk.

‘Alone?’
‘Yes.’
Richard is suddenly elated. The voice is a woman’s.
‘Come into the light.’
The woman takes one, small, tentative step and Richard gasps. ‘Nganka?’
She nods and Richard is aware of her fear. He reminds himself of their first meeting and decides to proceed cautiously. He is also aware of her beauty and silently congratulates himself on his accurate memory hoping that it doesn’t fail him now as he tries to access Kuljak’s Whadjuk teachings.
Richard gestures toward the creek. ‘I come here Bunuru season every year.’
Nganka nods again. ‘I watch you every year.’
Richard’s mouth opens. He cannot believe that the object of his visits has been close, but invisible to him. ‘Why you watch me?’
Nganka shrugs ‘Why do you come?’
Richard stares into the fire and shakes his head. ‘I come for you’ he says in English then continues in Whadjuk. ‘You.’
Nganka appraises the whiteman. She has watched him for a year, first convincing herself that his visits were connected to his unfathomable whiteman reality, then, after tracking him back along the straight-line path he always used, realising that he came here deliberately, for no obvious reason other than to come to this particular place. Now she remembers the expression on his face, the expression that informed her first flight from this man, but a year ago she felt like a girl. Now she feels like a woman and she wants to see that hungry expression again.

**Whadjuk Country, Gilgering Area 1852**

A hot, perilous wind blows from the North-East. The storm is a dark-grey mass of roiling cloud above a soft, seemingly harmless, light grey sheet of rain, but Nganka watches the lightning, the brilliant, vicious spears preceding the storm, presaging danger. The surrounding bush is dry, the ground thickly littered with brittle brown leaves and tinder-dry sticks, the creeks barely moving, big fire country.

Nganka reclines against the trunk of a ghost gum, the birthing tree, its smooth bark like cool skin, white skin soothing her black, surrogate Richard. Her upper-body tenses to another savage ripple, her womb contracting and cervix dilating another millimetre to her child’s insistent struggle for release. She grunts and feels the old Whadjuk woman’s hands on her feet, rubbing and squeezing to redirect her attention from pain to pleasure.
The air is suddenly charged with static, raising the hairs on Nganka’s arms. She looks into her midwife’s eyes and sees fear, and worse, knowledge. They both know that Nganka is too weak to move now and that the old woman is too weak to carry her.

They know that two killers have been approaching and that one has just arrived. The fire is here, right above them in the charged air, hiding in the lightning. The flood broods in the fat, blackening clouds, still too far to fall upon them, but threatening with low, angry rumbles.

Nganka screams to full dilation and the child surges into the opening, its head touching air for the first time. The old woman grabs Nganka’s arms and pulls her into a squat. Her body shudders massively and the child descends until its face is fully exposed.

Lightning strikes and the fire escapes with a roar to ignite the crown of a nearby eucalypt, the aerated foliage turned instantly to a blazing, ember-dripping torch. Spots of fire flare around the base of the eucalypt and grey serpents rise and writhe into a poisonous, sinuous mass of smoke. The mass drifts towards the ghost-gum.

The old Whadjuk grabs the child’s head as Nganka pushes; the two women desperate to see the child out and away in the old woman’s arms. Nganka breathes a gust of smoke and coughs. The child surges again and the old woman gathers him in as he is born. She sucks the blood and mucus from the baby’s nose, spits, and opens the tiny mouth to check for obstructions. The baby hiccuphs, inhales and the two women jump as he exhales with a loud bawling yell. He coughs.

The old woman quickly leans down and bites the umbilical cord, severing it from the still-enclosed placenta.

Nganka slumps back against the tree, pain and exhaustion working in counter-point to her recognition of the living wonder in the old woman’s arms and the flames rising less than a hundred metres behind her. ‘Run,’ she says.

The old woman turns to glance at the fire and shock forces a sob up from her belly. She looks once more at Nganka, eyes wet, sorrow etching her features.

‘Run!’ Nganka screams angrily and the old woman is suddenly gone, the baby safely cradled in her arms.

The fire burns two metres high, but the wind dies and the flames seem to pause, as if waiting for the old woman to reach safety. Nganka breathes smoke, watches the strangely beautiful burning and wills the wind to wait. Her chest and throat constrict and she cannot cough. Her eyes are inflamed, but she battles fiercely to keep them open, squinting through the thickening smoke to watch the fire. She feels suspended, floating between euphoria and nausea, unaware of the chemical processes occurring in her brain as, unable to detoxify, it begins to manufacture chloral hydrate, a knock-out last defense for its host. Carbon monoxide swamps her system and her brain
manufactures something else, a vision, a dream awake, a last gift to her fading senses. Before her, the white smoke solidifies into a familiar, loved form. ‘I saved you,’ she says and smiles as her white lover envelops her.

The first rain-drop should excite Nganka, should ignite hope in a mind despairing of burning death. It drops into an uncaring, unseeing eye and trickles down over blue, oxygen-starved lips to rest in a tiny pool above breasts that will never know the touch of an infant’s mouth.

The old Whadjuk woman crosses the creek and feels the first, large drops of water fall on her bare shoulders. She hugs the baby closer as the clouds burst and almost-solid rain engulfs her. She pauses and looks back through the bush, wondering if the rain came in time, if fire succumbed to water, if the girl might still be safe and unburned against the tree. She looks at the tawny-skinned baby in her arms and nods. ‘We’ll go and get your mother, eh?’ The baby is silent.

**Gilgering area, Western Australia 1852**

Richard contemplates his various fortunes. His life in this new country promises more than the mere existence his station allowed him in the old and his dreams of land, of becoming a property-owning equal to his employer are less than a decade from reality. His son and three daughters are as healthy as his beautiful and patient wife, and though the sadness still hangs over her, he feels confident that she will soon recover from the recent stillbirth. He recalls the tiny, blue body in his arms and Sarah weeping quietly as he carried it out of the shack to bury it under the black wattle’s shade.

He looks at the callus on his hands and wonders at his own calm acceptance of the baby’s death. Perhaps, he thinks, everything grows callus in this land; perhaps I’ve grown callus on my soul.

He gazes around this now familiar place and forces his thoughts to the reason he came, trying to dilute the ache of loss with the promise of Nganka. Guilt washes through him instead and concentrates his pain. A week ago he would have hoped that these forbidden rendezvous’ would continue until he was too withered with age to make the journey, but the thought of his wife, alone in her grief, the thought of his unnamed child, cold in her grave, turns the thrill of his passion into a crime against everything he most adores. He does not think Nganka would understand his guilt, to him she is more myth than human and the notion of her morality is beyond his imagining.

A shadow suddenly appears in the scrub before him, but he sees instantly that it is not Nganka and he tenses, his guilt fading slightly to disappointment mixed with the slight fear all unrecognised natives engender.
‘Just me, baas.’ Kuljak grins and lays a wrapped bundle in the dust. ‘An’ your fella.’

At his words the bundle shifts and Richard frowns. ‘What’s that?’

‘Your fella. She fella. She gone, you take ‘im.’

Richard shakes his head, unable to decipher the other man’s answer. ‘I don’t understand you.’

Kuljak looks at the bundle. ‘Your son, baas.’

Richard’s thoughts become voices in his head, arguing truth against denial, realisation against … nothing. Nganka is dead. The voice, insistent, insidious, cold: Nganka is dead.

‘She’s dead?’

Kuljak nods. ‘Smoke killed her.’

‘Smoke?’

‘She birthin’, dat lightnin’ hit, dat fire come, dat smoke kill her.’

Richard squeezes his eyes shut against the image of Nganka dying in fire, alone as she gave life to the contents of the bundle in the dust. His eyes open to stare at the bundle and two little hands now visible and grasping restlessly at the air. ‘I killed her.’

Kuljak shrugs. ‘You kill that baby too?’

Kill the baby? What was this savage saying?

‘Why would I kill the baby?’

‘You take ‘im or you kill ‘im.’

‘You take him. Take him to your people. Let him be a black man.’

Kuljak looks away. ‘He too white, baas. He trouble. Whitefella trouble.’

Richard understands and suddenly loathes himself and his people for that understanding. Too many would say that this was a white baby. Too many would accuse the native and his people of stealing this white baby. Too many would kill on the whisper of such an accusation. He knows he could never kill this tiny life, regardless of its lineage, regardless of the problems its kind represented in this age, this country. He stares at Kuljak, his expression at once beseeching and incensed. ‘He’ll die if I take him. I can’t feed him. My wife certainly won’t.’

The native grins, realising that his purpose may soon be served. ‘Born time back, too early. He off the bibbi moula, baas. Eatin’ tucker now.’

Bibbi, Richard thinks, breast; bibbi moula, nipple. ‘You … your women kept him alive?’

The native nods. ‘Keep him alive, but can’t keep him no more. Now you take ‘im, make ‘im whitefella. Make ‘im like you.’

* * *
The Strange family home began as a one-roomed, slab-sided shack, hastily constructed by Richard in the month before his now eight-year-old marriage. Over the years, Richard has expanded the dwelling to incorporate a marital bedroom, a room for Andrew, his eldest child, a slightly larger room for first one, then two, then three daughters to share and a proper kitchen with a stone fireplace extending from the original living area. He has nearly finished a third bedroom for Mary, his eldest daughter.

Eight-year-old Andrew Strange walks beside his mother as Richard rides towards them. Five-year-old Mary picks up Susannah, her year-old sister and waves the toddler’s hand. ‘It’s fa, Sanny. Wave to fa.’

‘Ifa. Wayfa,’ says the little one, flapping her wrists at the approaching rider.

‘Fiona! You come here,’ Sarah Strange commands, as the boisterous three-year-old runs straight at the horse, squealing. She stops and shuffles back to stand beside her mother, her expression petulant but her eyes bright with joy.

Andrew looks forward to his father’s reaction to the roofing bark stacked beside the shack, ready to cover the shack’s new room. He is proud of his ten-hours of hard labour, excited at the prospect of his father’s admiration for the unexpected, unasked-for job. Richard sits the horse awkwardly and Andrew is momentarily confused until he sees the bundle held in his father’s left arm. Andrew’s excitement grows. ‘Is it a new lamb, Fa?’

Richard shakes his head tersely and Andrew stops in his tracks. There is an expression on his father’s face that Andrew has never seen before, an expression almost like fear.

‘Not a lamb, boy.’
‘Is it a goat?’ asks Mary, hoping it is. Mary loves goats.
‘Go,’ says Susannah.
‘It’s a present,’ declares Fiona.

Richard reins in the horse and holds the bundle towards his smiling wife. ‘Come take this one, Sarah.’

Sarah Strange takes the bundle without question, assuming that her man has returned with a young animal to add to their slowly growing stock.

‘Is it a goat, Mum?’ asks Mary.
‘It’s a present for Mum,’ says Fiona, only slightly disappointed that the bundle was not passed to her.

Sarah looks at the bundle and then up at her husband. ‘It’s a baby.’

Richard nods. ‘He’s a baby.’
‘Whose baby?’ demands Andrew.
Richard looks at his eldest son. ‘He’s your brother.’

Andrew Strange feels the stirrings of a cold, quiet rage as he remembers seeing the colour drain from his mother’s face and her odd, formal stiffness through the afternoon and evening. He feigns sleep and, over his sisters’ quiet breathing, listens to his parents’ tense conversation.

‘I’ve been a good wife, Richard.’
‘Sarah …’
‘Be quiet! There’s nothing you can say will change what you’ve done.’

Andrew hears soft wind and a log popping on the fire.

‘You’ll take it back,’ says his mother, finally.
‘I won’t,’ says his father in a defeated voice.
‘Tomorrow,’ says his mother, as if his father had not spoken.
‘I can’t. They’ll kill him.’
‘I don’t care.’

Andrew draws a shocked breath. He has never heard such savagery in his mother’s voice, but as her words register, he mouths a ‘Yes’.

‘I don’t believe you mean that,’ says his father.

Andrew’s mother says nothing and the silence stretches until Andrew hears a sudden scrape and his father’s heavy footsteps.
‘Where are you going?’ his mother asks.

His father does not reply, but Andrew hears a gurgling whimper.
‘What are you doing?’ his mother asks in a fraying voice.

Andrew hears the front door squeak open.
‘I’ll put him in the river,’ rasps his father.
‘No!’

‘He’s my son. If he’s to die, let it be my hands that kill him.’
‘No!’

Andrew hears the door swing closed and holds his breath, praying that his father has ignored the protests and taken the thing out to kill it. He clenches his fists in frustration at his father’s voice.

‘His mother is dead. The blacks won’t have him. He’s my responsibility.’

‘What do you want from me, Richard?’ Andrew flinches at the venom in his mother’s tone.
‘Keep it or kill it, you say it’s your responsibility, but I have to suffer the consequences of your
choices if you make them for my wishes. I can’t kill a baby and I can’t let you kill a baby because of me! But I can’t stand the thought of keeping it.’

‘I’m sorry, Sarah. Sorry for everything … but maybe this is God’s work.’

‘God’s work! You lay with some … black whore and you dump your filthy get in my lap … how is this God’s work?’

Andrew hears his father’s anger. ‘She wasn’t a whore, Sarah. I loved her.’

‘No,’ shouts Sarah Strange.

‘Yes, but in a different way than I love you. She … there was something … I can’t explain it. But look at this baby … we lost a child and God, or fate, or something past understanding has given us another one. If we don’t give him a name, a family, then what’s his future? Can you damn him for my foolishness?’

Andrew waits through another silence, ‘Kill it’ a mantra in his mind. When his mother speaks again her voice is flat.

‘I’ll be a dutiful wife to you, Richard, and I’ll care for this baby and pretend to the world that he’s mine, but I’ll never take him to the heart you’ve so carelessly broken.’

Andrew Strange is gripped by his hate. He wants to scream at his father and damn his mother for her surrender; he wants to crush the small, dark cause of his parent’s misery. He stares into the darkness until a restless, murder-filled sleep claims him.
CHAPTER FIVE

‘Wexcombe’, Swan District, Western Australia 1861

Doctor Viveash is pleased with his beans. The thickly-vined trellis extends along the entire length of the healthy garden and literally sags under the weight of Viveash’s vitamin-rich broad-bean crop. He is content because the beans will not only provide a delicious addition to his kitchen, they will also earn him bragging rights at the next meeting of the Agricultural Society. He recalls the skepticism of some society members, their imperious assertions that broad-beans would never flourish in the harsh soils of Western Australia and he grins gleefully at the thought that while he eats beans, those same prissy nay-sayers would be eating crow.

‘Lot of beans, Doctor.’

Startled out of his musings, Viveash turns with a frown to meet the curious gaze of his head shepherd’s discomfiting dark son. ‘Don’t creep, lad!’ he snaps.

The boy’s brows drop and Viveash is startled again. He sees fire, not fear in the boy’s expression. ‘I don’t creep,’ Pharaoh Strange snaps back. ‘I just walked up.’

Despite the boy’s insolence, Viveash smiles. ‘When you walk up behind a person without making a sound, you are creeping.’

Pharaoh bends at the waist and raises his arms in front of his body, forming both of his hands into claws. He sets his face into an expression of evil intent and tiptoes in a circle before the Doctor. ‘This is creeping.’ He straightens, drops his arms and marches the same circle. ‘This is walking.’ He stops and faces the Doctor. ‘I was walking.’

Viveash is thoroughly amused. ‘But you still weren’t making a sound.’

Viveash is surprised at the boy’s sudden laugh. ‘Why are you laughing?’

‘Just thinking,’ says Pharaoh with a grin. ‘I’m thinking about everyone walking around saying “Look out, I’m coming” so that other people don’t think they’re creeping.’

Viveash chuckles. ‘They could whistle.’

Pharaoh laughs louder and Viveash joins him, both overcome by the imagined vision of a world of walking whistlers. As their laughter subsides, their eyes lock in a silent, mutual recognition of shared joy and, although neither individual can express it, they both know that the sharing constitutes the first of friendship’s fine bonds. ‘So you like my beans, Alfred?’

‘Pharaoh please, Doctor.’

Viveash raises an eyebrow. ‘Very well – Pharaoh.’

Pharaoh smiles. ‘I like your beans.’ He studies Viveash curiously. ‘Is Doctor your name?’
Viveash chuckles and shakes his head. ‘No, lad. Doctor is my title. I am a Doctor.’

Pharaoh frowns. ‘Doctor’s your work name?’

‘Quite right.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘What don’t you ‘get’?’

‘People don’t call my fa ‘shepherd’ or Mr Early ‘farrier’, so why do people call you ‘doctor’ instead of Mr Viveash or … what’s your real name?’

‘Samuel.’

Pharaoh grins. ‘Samuel?’

‘That’s my Christian name, but I seldom hear it.’ Viveash is instantly bemused. ‘I seldom hear my own name. How odd!’ He stares at Pharaoh. ‘Say my name again, lad.’

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘Pharaoh.’

Viveash’s jaw drops in mock-shock. ‘Cheeky bugger!’

Pharaoh crosses his arms, happy to play the game. ‘I’m not saying yours if you don’t say mine.’

Viveash bows. ‘Please do accept my humble apologies, Pharaoh. I will, Pharaoh, say your name – Pharaoh – whenever you allow me to bask in the warmth of your stellar company … Pharaoh.’

‘See that you do … Samuel.’

Viveash flushes as a huge laugh erupts from his mouth. Pharaoh’s response was dangerously close to being a perfect rendition of Mrs Viveash’s tone, style and delivery. But the lad is wrong, he thinks, I call my wife Mrs Viveash and she calls me Doctor.

The Doctor’s humour is suddenly invested with a deeper, far more poignant understanding as he realises that formality is the ruling force in his life and that simple freedoms - like the sound of a name lost to childhood – are his sacrifices to that force. He gazes at the dark boy in instant and stunning gratitude. ‘Do you read, Pharaoh Strange?’

Pharaoh looks at his feet. ‘Not very well, Samuel.’

Viveash grins, loving his name. ‘Then I’ll make you a deal. I’ll provide the books, you read them here, in my garden, to me. I’ll help you through the hard parts. All I ask is that you keep my Christian name our secret. You must promise not to call me by my first name in front of anybody else, but you must call me by my first name when nobody else is around.’ Viveash offers his hand. ‘Deal?’

Pharaoh shakes. ‘Deal! And I’ll be a really good reader after I start school.’
Viveash keeps the smile on his face, but he feels his stomach drop at the boy’s latest revelation. He decides not to pursue the topic and says instead: ‘Good. Well you’re here and strong by the cut of you, so let us fill buckets with beans and I’ll tell you all about your first book.’

‘What’s it called, Samuel?’

‘I think you’ll like it, Pharaoh. It’s called Last of the Mohicans and it’s a very big adventure.’

* * *

The fire reflects off crystal into the two content, bearded faces of two men with a shared history. The air in this small timber and stone study is warm and close with the familiarity of a friendship forged in sweat, blood and constant toil. The two men do not speak of past challenges for this land has never allowed them the luxury of reminiscence. They have adapted their minds to horizons beyond, not trails traversed and this night marks the fork in a path traveled together for the past forty years. Doctor Samuel Waterman Viveash raises his glass. ‘It’s been a fine adventure, Richard.’

Richard returns the gesture. ‘Aye, doctor, and everything you promised. We found the oriental lady.’

Viveash laughs. ‘That we did … and wooed her and won her.’

The two men look into their glasses, pondering the future.

Viveash reclines in his chair. ‘You’ll be wooing her again, I trust?’

Richard nods. ‘Withnell hasn’t touched the sandalwood on Hillside and I’ve extra saved to buy horses enough to get it out to Guildford.’

‘His price was fair?’

‘Fair enough,’ Richard shrugs. ‘Hillside’s 300 acres and Withnell’s only cleared about twenty. He sees no value in the uncleared land – I see the means to a fine flock.’

Viveash tops Richard’s port glass. ‘I know more than any man what you can do with sheep and timber, Richard, but I also know that you’ll probably not show a profit for a few years. Labour costs will eat at your savings and I hope you’ve considered that.’

Richard nods. ‘You know Andrew, my eldest? He’s only seventeen, but strong and a born shepherd. He’s also more than capable in the timber and keen to see it through.’

‘That’s two.’

‘Old Kuljak says he’d like to settle with us. He can always find food if the larder’s bare.’

‘Three.’
‘Don’t forget the boy. He’s coming up real well and he’s a natural marvel with the horses.’

Viveash frowns slightly. ‘The boy.’ He pauses, wondering at first how best to broach the uncomfortable subject, then silently chastising his momentary cowardice. He clears his throat. ‘The boy sticks in a lot of local craws, Richard. The blacks talk openly and it’s common knowledge that Sarah is not his real mother.’

‘Nobody’s business but ours,’ says Richard, his tone clipped.

‘You’re right, of course,’ Viveash presses, ‘and while you’ve been my man, it hasn’t mattered … local opinions haven’t mattered. But you’re embarking on a future in business and a successful business depends on a good reputation. You’ll be dealing with some to whom the boy is an outrage, with some to whom he is an abomination.’

Richard stiffens and his hand clenches on his glass. ‘I’m his father … if he’s an abomination, then so am I.’

Viveash huffs. ‘We’ve always spoken plainly, Richard, so I expect you to take no offense when I speak plainly now. I don’t care where the boy comes from, but others do – influential others. I simply ask you to consider keeping him at a very low profile. Let the narrow-minded believe that you treat him as you would any other black, regardless of how you treat him at home.’

‘And how am I supposed to make the narrow-minded believe that?’

Viveash shrugs. ‘He’s of school age, yes?’

‘Aye, he’s nine this year and itching to get there.’

Viveash shakes his head. ‘He can’t go.’

Richard glares but Viveash holds up a placatory hand. ‘Teach him at home and teach him well, but he cannot be put with the white children. Accept this, Richard. He will not be tolerated and the blame for the discomfort of this intolerance will be placed upon your shoulders. You will become as outcast as your unfortunate son.’

Richard shakes his head and sips his port. The grape sours in his mouth. ‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Do that.’ Viveash forces a hearty grin. ‘So … one man, two sons and a wandering black. This is how you intend to tame Hillside and make your fortune?’

Strange looks up slyly and strokes his bushy beard. ‘You’ve forgotten the rest of the Strange family, Doctor. Hillside will be tamed by one white man, one wife, three daughters, two sons, one wandering black and as many of the second son’s half-cousins as the white man can find.’

Viveash nearly drops his glass.

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Richard Strange enters his family’s small house and kisses his wife’s cheek. ‘The Doctor sends his blessings.’

Sarah smiles. ‘I can smell the doctor’s blessings, Richard Strange.’

Richard’s laugh is cut short when a small, dark head appears through the curtains separating the bedrooms from the living area.

‘Hello, fa.’

Sarah Strange purses her lips. ‘Back to bed, Pharaoh.’

‘No,’ says Richard tersely, surprising both his wife and the boy. ‘Come in and sit to the table, boy.’

Pharaoh Strange searches his memory for infractions, but cannot think of any. He sits opposite Sarah and stares guiltily at his father. Richard joins them at the table. ‘After we’re settled at Hillside,’ he says, ‘you’ll be coming out to the timber-camp and working with me, boy. Andrew will tend to the flocks at home.’

Pharaoh is excited at the thought of working with his father without his half-brother. ‘Will I come out after school?’

‘No school.’

Pharaoh stares at his father and is about to protest when Richard cuts him off. ‘It’s about time you faced the facts, lad. You can’t go to a white school because you’re a half-caste. You can go to the same school I went to.’

‘What school did you go to?’

‘Life, boy. The school of life.’

‘Hillside’, West Dale, Western Australia 1866

Pharaoh Strange pulls another branch from the woodpile and sets it upon the chopping block. He grabs the log-splitter – a long-handled tool with a solid iron weighted blade – and swings it back over his shoulder. The branch splits cleanly, but there is no satisfaction on Pharaoh’s face. He is angry.

Richard, Sarah and the girls left for Guildford five hours ago, but Andrew barely let them out of sight before the torture began. Andrew hated his half-brother, but Pharaoh knew how carefully he kept that hatred hidden from his parents. They never saw the small acts of viciousness, never heard the vitriolic abuse and Pharaoh doubted whether they would believe him if he spoke of it. In their presence, Andrew was quiet and courteous, away from it, he was a bullying monster. What confused Pharaoh most was the fact that Andrew and Kuljak were firm friends – indeed,
Andrew often visited the black’s seasonal camp and stayed for hours. Andrew seemed to love every black except his own half-brother.

Pharaoh stretches his aching shoulders, sets the next round and looks at the huge pile of firewood his brother had insisted he cut. The pile is four times its usual size and Pharaoh knows that his father would not want it so close to the house. It is a perfect snake haven. Andrew strolls from the house and appraises the woodpile. He frowns at his brother. ‘Are you bloody stupid, abo?’

Pharaoh glares. ‘What? You told me to chop wood, I chopped wood. You told me to keep chopping until you told me to stop. You didn’t tell me to stop.’

‘I didn’t tell you to stack it all there either, did I?’

‘You didn’t tell me to stack it anywhere else.’

‘You are bloody stupid then. Can’t you do anything without me telling you how to do it?’

Pharaoh drops the splitter handle. ‘Yeah. I can stop chopping bloody wood.’

‘You keep your dirty black tongue civil, boy.’ Andrew advances quickly to deliver a short, hard punch to Pharaoh’s stomach. Pharaoh folds over, steps back, but does not fall.

‘Sorry brother,’ he snarls.

Andrew advances again and grabs Pharaoh by the hair. ‘You’re not my stinkin’ brother. You don’t belong in this family - you’re a piece of black shit my father scraped off his boot.’ Andrew pulls the hair forward and brings Pharaoh to his knees. ‘And you’re lucky I don’t make you lick the shit off mine.’

Pharaoh’s head is bowed as he waits for the kick, but it does not come. ‘I remember,’ Andrew says instead, his voice vicious, ‘the night you came. My mother cursed you then – she cursed father too. He was gonna throw you in the river, but he didn’t have the guts. I would’ve.’ Andrew stalks away and then turns to snarl: ‘I want five even woodpiles. One here and one every ten yards along the fence-line. You get it done by dark or you don’t eat.’ Andrew walks back towards the dunny, a small outhouse built fifty yards behind the house.

Pharaoh rises to his feet, seething. She cursed you, he thinks, Andrew’s words like a cold clamp on his heart. He looks at the splitter and imagines killing his brother, but quickly remembers his father’s story about the two blacks they hanged in Guildford. He recalls Richard’s gory description of dark bodies jerking on rope, popping eyeballs and protruding tongues and discounts murder as a viable option. He is the wrong colour for any crime.

He has no illusions about his place in this world. His mother tolerates him because he came from another womb. His brother hates him and his sisters are embarrassed by him because he is a bastard. He is excluded from his sibling’s school and, as his brother frequently reminds him, he
may well be excluded from future land and title because of the unacceptable blood in his veins. He knows his blood is a type too readily spilled by the disapproving majority.

He tightens his jaw and steps to the back of the woodpile, swapping thoughts of the things he cannot change with actions over the things he can. He reaches for a piece of wood, when a sudden, sinuous movement freezes him in place. Not more than three feet from his hand, he spies a brown, reptilian head in the stack. ‘King Brown,’ he thinks, slowly stepping back towards the splitter and watching as seven feet of mean and deadly snake slides out of the wood to stretch full-length on the ground before the woodpile.

The snake is not yet aware of Pharaoh, but he is careful to watch it’s every move as he gently takes up the splitter and raises it above his head. He judges the distance to the snake and realises that he will have to take at least one step to make the fatal cut. The snake is still calm, but Pharaoh knows how fast its kind can strike and briefly reconsiders his intentions. Before he loses all resolve, he takes the step.

The snake turns impossibly quickly and Pharaoh stops thinking as, eyes locked on to his target, he strikes the heavy blade directly behind the snake’s head. The huge head flies straight up into the air, fanged mouth gaping, severed from a body left writhing and coiling in the dust. As the head hits the ground at his feet, Pharaoh crushes it into the earth with the weighted splitter, wary of the still deadly fangs. He remembers his father’s words: ‘The first and last thing on his mind is to get his fangs into your flesh and death won’t stop him, so don’t ever touch a snake’s head, boy. Crush him into paste, bury him deep and send him back to hell.’

Using a thin piece of wood from the pile, Pharaoh digs a small hole in the dirt and buries the crushed head. He considers riding over to the blacks’ camp with the long, fat body, knowing they will savour the meat and find a good use for the large skin, but then he remembers his brother. This day, Andrew forbade him from the blacks’ camp, even though his father is a regular and willing visitor, even though both Pharaoh and Richard speak the language and count the blacks as friends. Pharaoh looks over at the dunny, remembers his earlier thoughts of murder and wishes that he had found the courage to take the snake alive. He laughs at a small poetic thought, a picture of Andrew’s headstone in his mind:

*Here lies Andrew Strange,*

*Sittin’, Shittin’, Bitten.*

Pharaoh stands beside the woodpile, stares out over the fence and wishes for the kind, simple acceptance offered by his black friends. His humour sours quickly as he ponders the miserable days ahead until his father returns. He spies his horse and thinks how easy it would be to escape
on the broad, sweaty back. He looks again at the coiled brown body in the dust and, suddenly, grins.

Andrew Strange screams like one of his sisters when the massive King Brown flies through the dunny door. Pharaoh runs to his prepared horse and leaps lithely into the saddle. He kicks his heels hard and the horse bolts past the woodpile, between the garden-beds and out through the front gate. A huge bellow erupts from the dunny, the door slams open and Andrew stumbles through, his face a furious red, his pants around his ankles. ‘I’ll kill ya, ya black mongrel bastard!’

Fifty yards out from the gate, Pharaoh laughs and pulls back on the reins until the horse slides to a jittery halt. He wishes he could have seen the expression on Andrew’s face, but is gleefully satisfied with his brother’s girlish scream and instantly overjoyed to see Andrew trip face-first into the dirt. He kicks again and rides away to the sound of his all-white half-brother’s curses.

Pharaoh stands in the scrub watching the house. He has hidden for the past two hours, waiting for dark, intent on reclaiming the snake’s body. He saw Andrew stand at the gate for a few minutes, stalk back to the woodpile, grab the splitter and head for the dunny. He watched his brother gingerly open the dunny door, check the interior, then straighten as he realised that the snake was headless, harmless. Andrew carried the snake to the fence and threw it angrily out into the horses paddock. Pharaoh prayed that the crows did not find it before he had a chance to get it back. He amused himself for hours watching as his brother stacked five neat piles from the great stack of chopped wood until the daylight dimmed and Andrew finally left his work and went inside the house.

Pharaoh leaves the scrub and cautiously crosses the horse paddock to the point where he thinks the snake might be. He smells food, probably the huge pot of lamb stew his mother left, and longs for a bowl. He shakes off the thought and tells himself that the snake will taste much sweeter.

The snake’s body is exactly where he thought it would be and Pharaoh lifts it up to drape across his shoulders. A stinging pain on his neck almost makes him cry out, but he quickly bites down on the scream and drops the snake. Another pain hits his cheek and he brushes frantically at the spot, suddenly aware of the tickling sensations around his face and neck. ‘Ants,’ he thinks, then, peering through the twilight gloom, sees the hostile, red movement on the snake’s body. The crows did not claim the snake, the savage, giant bull-ants did. Pharaoh retreats quickly, slapping at his upper-body until assured that he is free of his vicious attackers. He will not contest
The natives have moved on, the only sign of their passing a black patch of cold charcoal and a slightly scuffed circle of dirt. Pharaoh checks the old fire for heat and realises that they have been gone for at least a day. He wishes he could follow his friends, but he lacks their skill even at day-tracking – finding their tracks at night would be impossible.

He sits in the dust beside the cold fire and considers his options. The natives respect his father and seem content to work *Hillside* whenever their seasonal route brings them this way, but Richard is usually present at this part of the season and they usually stay at least a month longer than they have this time. Now that Richard has gone to Guildford, the natives have deserted the camp and Pharaoh suddenly understands the tenuous, impermanent nature of the relationship between black and white in this place.

He wonders if the relationship will be the same beyond *Hillside’s* borders, beyond his father’s influence.

If he is lucky enough to find the tracks and follow them, will he be welcome at a different camp? Is it possible that the blacks merely tolerate him because this camp is on his father’s land? Richard has often reminded him, almost apologetically, that his half-white, half-native blood makes him a little of both but neither completely one nor the other and that there are those with whom he will come into conflict, those to whom racial purity is a vital pre-condition of acceptance. Pharaoh has always assumed that his father spoke only of whites in his warnings, but now the boy considers the possibility that the warnings were meant to include both races. He has visited the blacks many times without his father, but never without Kuljak. What if Kuljak has taken a different path than the rest of the clan? Pharaoh suddenly understands that, for all his notions of friendship, he is afraid of his place with the black people and for the first time in his fourteen years of life, he faces the certainty that he will never be more than an acquaintance, a curiosity, half-white and, therefore, a possible threat. He cannot hunt with native weapons, he cannot track with native eyes. He knows nothing of their rituals, their hierarchy or their law. He knows nothing of their God, or even if they have a God. He only knows their language and that they are good company around a fire; kind, courteous and outwardly accepting whenever he chooses to visit. He has worked with the blacks, but never done black-man’s work.

He listens to the light wind in the dark bush and thinks about his whiteness. He wears white clothes, speaks and writes white words, eats white food, lives in a white house by white laws and
wishes for a white future full of white accomplishments in the whites’ world. The only God he knows had a white son.

‘I have to be white,’ Pharaoh says aloud, the black night his only witness.

The mist hangs in ghostly wisps above the dew-damp forest-floor to slowly fade in the rising morning heat. As the last tiny drops of sweet water are claimed by the vast, warming sky, Pharaoh waits and watches until, finally, the wagon bearing the Strange family rolls down the home track and passes through the front gate. He mounts his horse, casually rides in to greet his father and deliberately ignores Andrew who appears from inside the house. Richard smiles at his dark son. ‘Out riding, boy?’

Pharaoh nods. ‘Just checking the boundaries, fa.’

‘Hillside’, West Dale, Western Australia 1867

Richard Strange lifts the rifle to his shoulder, takes aim and squeezes the trigger.

‘Good shot, man!’ exclaims Viveash, as a young buck roo drops where it stands, a neat hole through its left eye.

The two men stroll through stubble across a recently harvested wheat field to stand beside the dead buck and Richard slides his thin-bladed skinning-knife from a sheath on his belt. He grabs one of the roo’s legs and slices a line where leg meets body then repeats the process on the other leg. At the juncture of the two slices, he inserts the tip of the blade into the roo’s anus and carefully cuts another line up to the throat, where, with a few deft flicks, he cuts the skin around both sides of the head. As he begins the laborious process of separating skin from bloody carcass, he hears Viveash clear his throat.

Richard continues his work, but says, ‘I wondered why you were so keen to go on a shoot, Doctor. This is a bit out of the ordinary for one of your visits. What’s on your mind?’

Viveash stands with his hands behind his back. Although he is unfazed by Richard’s grisly chore, he is discomfited by the topic he wants to discuss. ‘There’s much on my mind, of course,’ he begins, ‘always. But I do have something rather delicate … an issue that I think your … well, with which your particular class would not normally be concerned.’

Richard pauses, his bloodied arms still upon the steaming, red carcass. ‘My class?’

Viveash huffs uncomfortably. ‘Not as it exists today, Richard. Not here. Rather it’s the legacy of knowledge I enjoy that you do not …’

‘Just say what you mean, for God’s sake.’
Viveash drops his shoulders. ‘Yes, of course, do forgive me. It’s about your son; more specifically, your second son.’

Richard frowns. ‘Pharaoh?’

‘Yes.’ Viveash clears his throat. ‘You see, traditionally, the second son has no claim on the father’s estate but, also traditionally, the father usually makes sure that the second son will have the opportunity to make a decent life for himself. Second sons often wear the cloth, or take a commission or begin an apprenticeship in a worthwhile trade.’ Viveash studies Richard’s stare.

‘Can you see Pharaoh as a man of God?’

Richard chuckles, shakes his head and rises. ‘Not Pharaoh. Can’t see him in a uniform either.’

‘No.’ Viveash smiles weakly. ‘And I think you must face the fact that even if he wanted a commission and even if you bought one for him, he would never be accepted. I just wonder if you’ve considered this.’

‘Have I thought about Pharaoh’s future?’

Viveash nods. ‘You’re not getting any younger, Richard, and, I assume that Andrew will take Hillside after your death. What happens to your half-caste son?’

Richard shrugs. ‘I assumed he’d stay on with Andrew.’

Viveash’s eyes widen in disbelief. ‘Are you blind, man?’

‘What?’

‘Andrew detests Pharaoh! Actually, Andrew hates Pharaoh with a passion!’

‘Rubbish!’

‘Quite the contrary, Strange,’ says Viveash imperiously. ‘Ask your wife. Ask Andrew. Ask Pharaoh.’

‘Andrew hates his brother?’

Viveash nods tiredly. ‘And the feeling is mutual, whether you choose to accept it or not. The fact is: if you make the wrong choice, you’ll be damning a fine young man to a sad and desperate future. Have you not heard the rumours from the north country?’

‘No.’

‘Slavery, Richard. Blacks chained and forced to work the pastures. Tales of torture, wholesale murder and imprisonment for absconders.’

‘Full bloods, then?’

‘Black or brown, full blood or half-caste – it matters little to the masters. They are starved for labour and our governors give them carte blanche with any non-white.’ Viveash stares out across the stubbled field for a moment until, sighing, he faces his old friend. ‘All the things we’ve accomplished here, Richard, and yet so much more that needs to be done. Our lives are physical,’

53
he points at the carcass, ‘blood, death, sweat,’ he sweeps his arm across the field, ‘and work … always work. But with every slash and burn and cut, we have removed another facet of our spiritual selves; we have swapped the present man for the coming man; we have lost our humility and our humanity to progress and profit. Your son, that marvelous boy with so much potential … I fear for him. I fear desperately for him.’

‘I don’t understand what you’re saying, Doctor.’

‘Call me Samuel, Richard … for God’s sake, call me Samuel!’

Richard Strange gulps in shock. ‘I can’t.’

Viveash laughs, a mournful sound that sends a shiver up Richard’s spine. ‘No, you can’t,’ murmurs Viveash, but his voice suddenly rises. ‘You can’t because I wouldn’t allow it … because I couldn’t allow it! It is not proper. It is not proper for a servant to be familiar with his master. It is not proper for a white man to enjoy the company of a black man. It is not proper for a half-caste boy to have a future in a white world!’ Viveash steps forward and pokes Richard in the chest, completely surprising the already dumb-struck man. ‘I’ll tell you what’s not proper! A father not taking responsibility for his own flesh and blood. But you must do it, Richard. You must see to that boy. You must see to it that he has the necessary knowledge to make something more of himself than landless, homeless half-caste – or worse, another man’s slave.’

‘How?’

Viveash takes a deep breath. ‘Capitalise on his talents. Find him an apprenticeship. Give him a trade. Give him independence.’

Richard gazes at the doctor and shrugs. ‘I don’t know what else I can teach him.’

‘Not you, Richard,’ says Viveash with the beginnings of a gentle smile. ‘You’ve taught him all you can.’

‘You have an idea, then?’

‘I do.’

‘Are you going to tell me what it is?’

Viveash frowns. ‘It’s hardly my place.’

Richard shakes his head and huffs. ‘If I live a thousand years, I’ll never understand the upper-class. You can tell me I have a problem, you can tell me that I have to do something about it, but it’s not your place to give me any suggestions, it’s not your place to get your hands dirty and actually help me!’

Viveash’s eyes widen in sudden comprehension. ‘By God, that’s it!’ He shakes his head. ‘I can’t believe that it’s so obvious! Thank you, Richard! That’s just what I needed!’

‘What?’
Viveash laughs aloud. ‘The ties that bind, Richard, the ties that bind. I am bound to the expectations of my class. I am bound to designate every responsibility, every final solution to your class. I create the problem, the challenge, but you carry the weight, you bear the burden, I use your sweat and blood and life to see my dreams become realities.’ Viveash squats beside his old friend. ‘Do you remember our first days here? Do you remember that we worked alongside one another, that I shared your labours, that we compared our blisters and our cuts and our callus and laughed about them?’

Richard smiles. ‘I remember.’

‘But after the work, when you returned to your hut, you did not change. You wore your scars proudly. When I returned to my manor, I hid my scars. I hid my pride. I hid the man I was at work and became the man my wife and my class expected me to be. Over the past few years, my callus has softened and my scars have disappeared and the man of the manor has almost consumed the proud worker. I say almost because your son, that unusual little brown fellow, laughs in the face of the manor man. He connects me to the passion of those early days. He calls me Samuel.’ Viveash stands decisively. ‘I think Pharaoh should go to York and apprentice to Mr Early.’

‘The farrier?’

‘Indeed.’

Richard stands and nods thoughtfully. ‘Pharaoh loves his horses.’

‘He does.’

‘Do you think Early will take him on?’

Viveash raises an eyebrow. ‘The man of the manor has some uses, Richard. I think it’s time he exercised them, don’t you?’

Richard glances at the doctor with a glinting eye. ‘I do, Samuel, indeed I do.’
Beverly, Western Australia 1872

Constable Ricketts hates Beverley and silently curses the stupid deed that had him sent here. How was he to know that the woman he’d forced into the park was some toff’s maid? She was black, wasn’t she? Anyway, she liked it. The screams were pleasure, not pain, and that damned chief inspector should have realised that fact instead of pulling a man’s collar and kicking a man across the park and up the street like a dog. Sent to purgatory for a filthy black! Ricketts fumes at the perceived injustice.

He pulls at his itching collar, brushes a fly from his face and watches Beverley’s baking main street. He peers along the street to see the heat haze shimmer above the ground all the way out to the tree-line. The trees are motionless, not the slightest of breezes moves the dry, pale-green branches and the bush seems to wait in torpid misery for the sweet succour of rain. The entire district waits for the same thing.

A horse approaches and the Constable squints to try and recognise its rider.

Pharaoh Strange straightens in his saddle and jigs his horse to a jaunty trot. Although it has been a long ride from the Dale to this brand new town of Beverley, his weariness is easily assuaged by his excitement.

The past five years have seen him grow from a lithe lad into a hard-bodied youth and his apprenticeship with the York farrier has given him the knowledge and experience to make his own way in the world. Richard Strange’s parting gifts of a full set of farrier’s tools, a small anvil, a portable, cast-iron forge, a wagon and two draught-horses will make that journey much simpler.

Heeding his father’s advice, Pharaoh decided that his colour would be a burden in the larger towns, so he set his sights on the new township of Beverley, hoping to establish his own farrier business in town and thereby service the thriving farms in the surrounding district. Pharaoh has left the bulk of his father’s legacy well outside town at his river camp, responding to a vague suspicion that he may not be welcomed and might therefore need to make a quick exit. He does not know that a blacksmith with some knowledge of the farrier’s trade has already set his forge on Beverley soil.

Jim Whittington stalks from the blacksmith’s’s shop with cheeks aflame and beard bristling.
‘Damn the fool!’ he grits through clenched teeth, furious that his horse seems to have suddenly, inexplicably gone lame in both front legs. On his aborted journey home, Whittington barely made it past the tree-line before the horse’s gait faltered and Whittington had to dismount and lead the poor animal back into town. The blacksmith denied any wrongdoing, claiming that the horse must have already been lame.

Whittington has spent the last two days selling his timber and he must return home as quickly as he can to honour the guarantees he gave his buyers. He knows his men will take advantage of his absence and only accomplish half the work they would without him there toprod them on. He stalks across the main street, totally oblivious to everything except the problem of finding alternate transportation home.

Constable Ricketts frowns and heads into the street. He does not know why the young half-caste is on the fully-saddled and fair seeming bay, or why the fellow is brash enough to trot his horse like some Perth dandy instead of skulking in the shadows like the thief he must surely be, but the over-heated Constable intends to find out.

He spies Jim Whittington moving speedily across the street, head down and looking furious, and the trajectories of both walking man and trotting horse meet in the Constable’s mind. He opens his mouth to shout a warning, but the dark rider suddenly heaves on the right rein and the horses head snaps back to face in the opposite direction.

Ricketts is stunned to see both horse and rider drop to the street less than a foot from the still unaware Whittington.

Pharaoh flicks his left foot from the stirrup and nimbly rolls clear of his horse before it thumps to the ground. He sits in the dust, rubbing a slightly jarred shoulder and curses the man he nearly rode down. ‘Idiot! Are you blind?’

Whittington has stopped dead in his tracks, his face set in a comical expression of surprise at the dark boy cursing in perfect English, the horse struggling on the ground, and the dawning realisation that he has somehow been the cause of it all.

Pharaoh sees the expression and his anger evaporates. The bushy grey beard, the red cheeks and the wide open eyes remind him of a terrified possum. He laughs. ‘You should see the look on your face. You look like a shot possum.’

Whittington is still speechless, but the beginnings of a smile twitch inside his beard. The black … no, brown lad on the ground, is covered in dust, probably aching from his fall and yet laughs like he hasn’t a care in the world. Whittington realises that he is the cause of the youth’s humour
and should, perhaps, be insulted, but suddenly remembers the birth of his first child and his exhausted wife’s laughter. She had said his expression reminded her of a shocked possum and they had laughed together.

He holds his hand out and is gratified to see the lad reach out to take it.

‘Grab that thief, Jim!’

Whittington turns to the voice as Pharaoh snatches his hand back and pushes himself to his feet. He sees the Constable marching straight at him with a hard, set expression and almost turns to flee, but quickly decides to stand his ground. He is no thief, he has committed no crime and he is white. ‘I’m no thief.’

The Constable does not pause. He grabs Pharaoh’s aching shoulder, shakes him and points at Whittington. ‘You nearly killed this man, darkie.’

‘Constable …,’ Whittington begins.

Ricketts cuffs Pharaoh behind the head. ‘What’ve you got to say, shit?’

Pharaoh struggles. ‘Let me go, bastard!’

Ricketts is momentarily stunned. ‘What did you call me?’

‘I said let me go! I haven’t done anything!’

‘Let him go, Ricketts,’ says Whittington forcefully, stepping forward. ‘I wasn’t paying attention and without his quick wits I’d be lying in the street right now.’ He steps up to grasp Pharaoh’s right shoulder. ‘That was fine riding, lad.’

Ricketts maintains his grip on Pharaoh’s left shoulder. ‘Did you hear what he called me?’ His voice is strained high with unbelieving fury.

Whittington pulls at Pharaoh’s right shoulder as if to claim him. ‘You hit him for no reason and I think he called you a bastard. If you’d done the same to me, I might have said the same thing.’

Ricketts pulls at Pharaoh’s left shoulder wanting to keep his prize. ‘Where’d he get a saddled horse, then?’

Pharaoh explodes. ‘It’s my horse and my saddle!’

Ricketts ignores him and glares at Whittington. ‘How many honest blacks you see riding good horses with good saddles?’

‘I earned them and I’m not black. Let me go!’

‘Not black, my arse,’ Ricketts grunts.

Whittington reaches over and grabs the Constable’s hand. ‘Let him go, Constable.’
Ricketts tightens his grip and Pharaoh yells in pain, but Whittington applies his timber-cutter’s strength and pulls the Constable’s hand away. The two men square off as Pharaoh steps back a pace to rub his throbbing shoulder.

‘You’re interfering with the law, Jim Whittington.’
‘I’m interfering with a fool, John Ricketts.’
‘I could arrest you for laying a hand on me.’
‘You could try.’

The Constable realises that he is no match for the hard-handed timber-man and tries a different tack. ‘How do you know he’s not a damned thief?’

Whittington looks at Pharaoh, who stands unmoving near the two men. ‘I don’t, but I think we should hear his story before we judge his guilt, don’t you?’

The Constable sneers at Whittington. ‘I don’t waste my time with blacks’ lies.’

Pharaoh bristles again. ‘I’m not black. My name’s Alfred Pharaoh Strange. My father owns Hillside on the Dale.’

Whittington turns, his expression suddenly curious. ‘Richard Strange is your father?’

Pharaoh nods. Ricketts pauses, aware that Whittington has somehow gained an advantage with the youth’s revelation. Whittington faces the Constable. ‘Richard Strange does indeed own Hillside. Before that, he was Doctor Viveash’s man for twenty-odd years.’

The Constable blushes. ‘Doctor Viveash the magistrate?’

‘The same.’ Whittington smiles slyly. ‘And Strange is one of the best shepherds and timber-men in the colony.’

‘All well and good, Whittington,’ Ricketts rallies jabbing a finger at Pharaoh, ‘but how do we know this is his son?’

‘Your mother’s name?’

Pharaoh looks at his feet. ‘Sarah.’
‘See?’ snaps Ricketts. ‘He’s lying.’

‘Shut up, Ricketts,’ growls Whittington, aware of something deceptive in the lad’s cautious response, but sensing that the caution is somehow colour-related. He looks carefully at the lad.

‘Did your father ever tell you how he came to Western Australia?’

Pharaoh nods. ‘He came from England with the Doctor.’

‘When?’
‘1838.’

‘What ship?’

‘The Britomart.’
Whittington nods. ‘That’s good enough for me.’ He faces the Constable. ‘Not one wrong answer. Are you satisfied, Ricketts?’

Constable Ricketts is far from satisfied. ‘He could have got that information anywhere. I’ll need to do some checking around and I’m going to hold him until I know the truth.’

‘No, you’re not.’ Whittington shakes his head. ‘You do your checking around, but this fellow’s coming with me. If it turns out he’s lying, you’ll know where to find him.’ Whittington turns to Pharaoh. ‘You know timber, lad?’

Pharaoh grins. ‘Timber and sheep, but I’m trained to horses.’

‘Horses?’

Pharaoh nods. ‘I’m a farrier. Just finished five years with Mr Early in York.’

Whittington eyes Pharaoh appraisingly. ‘You looking for work?’

‘Yes, sir. That’s why I’m here.’

‘We’ve got a farrier,’ says Ricketts. ‘A white farrier.’

Ricketts is gratified to see the sudden crestfallen expression on Pharaoh’s face, but Whittington interrupts. ‘We’re done with you, Constable, you can run along now and bother someone else.’

Ricketts glares at Whittington. ‘I’ll be in touch.’ He faces Pharaoh. ‘And I’ll be watching you like a hawk.’

The Constable storms back up the street as Pharaoh turns to his saviour. Whittington smiles and shakes his head. ‘You don’t know who I am, do you son?’

Pharaoh shrugs. ‘That mongrel called you Whittington, so I guess you’re Mr Whittington.’

‘And that name means nothing to you?’

‘No. Are you important?’

Whittington laughs. ‘No. I’m your brother’s father-in-law.’

‘Andrew?’

‘Yes. Andrew married my Elizabeth last year. Surely you knew?’

Whittington is shocked at the sudden, obvious rage in Pharaoh’s expression. ‘Heard something about a wedding,’ says Pharaoh in a dangerous monotone, ‘but it’s not my business.’

Whittington decides to leave it and instead, points towards the Settlers Arms Hotel. ‘Grab your horse, lad, I might just have something for you that is your business.’

Pharaoh’s horse has wandered over to a nearby water-trough. He walks over, grabs the reins and leads the animal back to Whittington’s side. ‘Business in the hotel?’

There is a hint of steel in Whittington’s smile as he says, ‘Behind the hotel. That’s where the cove who calls himself a farrier lurks.’
As they walk around back of the hotel, Pharaoh nods towards the stiff figure of Constable Ricketts, now back in his fly-swatting position outside the Beverley police-station. ‘Thanks for helping me, Mr Whittington.’

‘Thanks for turning your horse, Alfred.’

Pharaoh laughs. ‘Nobody calls me Alfred. I’m Pharaoh.’

Whittington raises an eyebrow and nods. ‘A noble name … but an unfortunate one.’

Pharaoh frowns. ‘Why?’

‘Your father teach you the bible?’

‘A bit.’

‘Do you remember the story of Moses?’

Pharaoh shakes his head.

Whittington pauses, scratches his beard and closes his eyes, searching for a fitting passage. ‘Ah yes, old testament, Exodus I’m sure, can’t remember the numbers.’ He looks intently at the youth. ‘For Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel they are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in, and I will harden Pharaoh’s heart that he shall follow after them; and I will be honoured upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host …’

‘What does it mean?’

Whittington’s stare does not waver. ‘Pharaoh hardened his heart against the Hebrews. He wouldn’t set them free. God punished him for it.’

‘Who was he?’

‘Pharaoh was the king of the Egyptians, the Hebrews were their slaves, a different tribe with a different God.’

Pharaoh first looks at his feet, then glances questioningly at Whittington. ‘Were the Hebrews black?’

Whittington laughs. ‘No, I think not.’ He points at the now visible open-front of the blacksmith’s shop and gestures Pharaoh towards it. As the youth passes, Whittington gently grasps his shoulder. ‘But I think you’re aptly named, Pharaoh. You’re the right colour for an Egyptian and I think you’ll need some hardness in your heart before your time is done.’

‘I know,’ says Pharaoh, staring up at the kindly man. Whittington is almost dismayed to see such a depth of sad wisdom in his new charge’s eyes.

Whittington watches as Pharaoh steps back from the horse to study its front hooves and completely ignore the tense blacksmith standing nearby.

‘Low hoof angle,’ says Pharaoh.
He steps forward, squats and lifts a front hoof. ‘Short shoes. No bloody wonder.’

Pharaoh raises flashing eyes to the unmoving blacksmith and Whittington nearly gasps at the sudden fury in the lad’s face. ‘He’s pressing on the frog every time he steps,’ Pharaoh growls.

The blacksmith nods. ‘That’s right.’
‘French cut.’
‘That’s right.’
‘Bloody stupid! French cut lames more horses than you’ve had hot dinners!’

The blacksmith unfolds his arms, but remains where he stands. The lad obviously knows something about farrier’s work. ‘How do you know?’ he asks, not yet willing to pit his limited knowledge against the half-caste’s in fear that the half-caste might best him in front of the influential Jim Whittington.

Pharaoh turns to Whittington. ‘Some mad French bugger came up with this idea that since the frog supports the flexor tendon, short shoes and hooves cut at a low angle will force the horse to use its legs more naturally. It might work on one out of every ten horses, but the other nine suffer if it’s done.’

Whittington glares at the blacksmith. ‘Did you know this?’

The blacksmith flushes and points at the horse’s front hooves. ‘I asked a farrier and that’s what he taught me … said it was the modern method.’

‘Modern?’ Pharaoh sneers. ‘Modern sixty-years ago.’

The blacksmith throws up his hands. ‘Well, how would I know? I’m a blacksmith, not a bloody farrier!’

Pharaoh freezes. ‘Did you hear that, Mr Whittington?’

Whittington smiles. ‘I heard, Pharaoh. Looks like Beverley is going to need a real farrier after all.’

Pharaoh grins. ‘Looks like it.’

‘I do have one question, though,’ says Whittington.
Pharaoh raises an eyebrow. ‘Yes, sir?’
‘Can you fix my horse?’

* * *

Before Jim Whittington rushed off to his home and responsibilities, he offered sound advice and a tempting option. Now, as Pharaoh settles in for a quiet night at his river camp, he ponders his
new friendship and the positive start to his new life, remembering their parting conversation with rising excitement.

‘You could ask that fellow,’ Whittington had said, flicking a hand at the blacksmith’s shop, ‘if he’d be willing to rent you some space, or even split his business with you. You fixed his mistake, so he already knows that you’re the better farrier. But I wouldn’t do that if I were you.’

‘Do you think I should build my own place?’

‘No, Pharaoh. I don’t think you need a place at all. Think about it – most of the settlers in this district have at least half a dozen horses. We’d all much prefer to have our animals serviced on the farm than face herding the entire mob from farm to town and back again. Hell, the only stock I want in town is the stock I don’t want to take back. I think the best possible way for you to provide the best possible service is to stay mobile.’

‘That’s a great idea!’

‘Yes, I think so, and it would work, too, but you’ll still need a home camp. If you’d agree to keep my horses fit, you’d be very welcome at Rosedale and I can give you some other paid work. You’ll need to earn a few quid because you’ll have to spend a few before you start your traveling farrier show.’

‘My father set me up already. I’ve got a wagon, horses, an anvil, all my tools. I’ve got a great little forge. I’ve got everything I need except horseshoes.’

‘Horseshoes?’ Whittington had winked and looked meaningfully at the blacksmith’s shop. ‘I think I might know where you’ll find plenty of horseshoes, Pharaoh … and at bargain prices, too.’

**Settlers Arms Hotel, Beverley, Western Australia, 1872**

Tom and Horace are in their late twenties. They lounge at the bar of the Settlers Arms, enjoying both the rum and the brief respite from hard days in the high Jarrah.

‘What about that stray Whittington brought in?’ asks Tom, picking at a splinter in his thumb.

‘Half-caste, I reckon,’ says Horace.

‘Does good with the nags but.’

Horace nods.

‘D’ja hear about Ricketts?’ asks Tom.

‘Nuh.’

Tom forgets his splinter and gulps his rum. ‘Jesus!’ he exhales loudly at the sudden explosion of heat in his gut. He shakes his head as if to clear it then turns conspiratorially to his friend. ‘Ricketts had the stray bailed up; reckoned he stole that nice lookin’ stallion he’s got.
Whittington told Ricketts to back off, but the stray put him legs up in the horse’s trough outside the pub.’

Horace shakes his head. ‘Didn’t happen.’

Tom nods emphatically. ‘I swear. That’s what Curly told me.’

‘Curly’s full of it. Oi Bill!’ Horace calls to the publican who sits at the other end of the bar quietly conversing with another man from Jim Whittington’s weary timber-crew. When Bill raises a questioning eyebrow, Horace continues: ‘Did Ricketts get dumped in your horse trough?’

‘Nuh,’ says Bill. ‘A lot of blokes’d be walkin’ home if he had.’

‘Why, Bill?’ asks Horace, looking forward to Bill’s ubiquitous punchline.

Bill winks. ‘That bastard would’ve poisoned the water.’

Tom and Horace laugh and reach for their drinks. After a shared fiery exhalation, Tom holds up his hand. ‘I got a good one!’

Horace grins and waits patiently for his friend to speak.

Tom stands, clears his throat theatrically and the other men in the bar turn to listen.

‘The Darkie sniffed the Constable,
and couldn’t stand the stink,
So he grabbed him by his business bits
And dumped him in the drink
We timber-men came into town
And blamed the bloody black
Cause our horses are all corpses now
And we’re all walkin’ back.’

The drinkers applaud and Tom bows. As he sits he turns to Horace and asks, ‘Is he black?’

‘Who?’

‘The stray.’

‘Dunno,’ Horace shrugs. ‘Don’t care. He’s bloody good with the horses and he speaks English good as you and me.’

‘Some white coulda taught him but.’

‘Some white taught us, ya bloody twit.’

‘Rosedale’, Beverley, Western Australia, 1872

Julia Whittington half fills a bottle with boiled, unpeeled potatoes, boiled hops, sugar and flour. She ties one end of a piece of string to the bottle’s neck and the other end to a cork, shoves the
cork into the bottle and carries it into the pantry. In a day or so, the yeast will work, the cork will pop and the bread-making will begin. For now, though, damper will have to suffice, but the Rosedale men never complain. Everybody treats real bread as a rare luxury, not an expected, daily victual. Especially Pharaoh, thinks Julia, smiling.

‘You look like the cat that licked the cream, my girl,’ says Margaret Whittington, breaking the girl’s reverie.

Julia shrugs and purses her lips. Her mother seems to become more annoying every day. ‘Can’t I smile?’

Margaret feels the urge to shake her daughter. ‘Can’t I enjoy my children’s expressions in my own way?’

‘If your way wasn’t so much like nagging.’

Margaret knows where this will lead. ‘Oh, just go outside, Julia. I’m not wasting my day arguing about nothing with you.’ Julia heads for the door, but Margaret stops her before she can disappear. ‘You’re not wasting your day either. I want that old rooster plucked and ready by midday.’

Julia’s expression turns sulky. ‘I hate killing the chickens.’

Margaret wonders for the thousandth time how the pouting, irascible monster standing before her possessed her sweet, little girl. ‘Then get that Pharaoh you’re always mooning over to kill it for you.’

Julia flushes and seems about to respond, but her mother has won this round. She stalks through the door and slams it behind her.

Pharaoh Strange holds the cranky mare’s back hoof firmly and is just setting the shoe when the gun-shot sound of the Whittington’s front door shocks the calm morning air. The mare kicks, its flying hoof breaking Pharaoh’s grip and glancing off his wrist. He curses at the sharp pain and curses again at the mares shivering flank. The mare took ten minutes to soothe, ready for the shoe. He hopes he won’t have to waste another ten calming it again.

He takes a breath and moves to the horse’s neck so that the animal can see him. He murmurs endearments in a low, kindly tone and the horse begins to quiet, so he softly returns to its back leg and gently lifts its hoof. He firms his grip, sets the warm shoe and reaches into his farrier’s box for a nail. The horse is still as Pharaoh places the nail and reaches for his hammer.

‘Pharaoh?’

The horse quivers and Pharaoh stiffens, gripping the hoof tightly.

‘Pharaoh!’
The horse kicks out again, but Pharaoh is ready this time and jumps back quickly before the flying hoof connects. Although he is untouched, he curses, knowing that he won’t be able to keep his promise to deliver three freshly shod horses to the timber camp by noon.

Julia Whittington stalks into the barn. ‘There you are! Didn’t you hear me calling you?’

Pharaoh puts his hands on his hips and glares at Julia Whittington. ‘Everybody in the bloody district heard you calling me.’

‘Don’t be rude.’

Pharaoh’s temperature rises, but he knows that he would have more success trying to catch a wild rabbit with his hands than he will trying to win an argument with Julia. He swallows his anger and absently begins to stroke the intemperate mare. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘You have to help me.’

Pharaoh glares again, losing the battle to keep his temper. ‘I have to help you? I have to take this horse and two more out to your father which means I have to finish this horse. I can’t finish this horse until it’s calm. I can’t keep it calm with you running around the yard squawking like a bloody chicken.’

‘Did you just call me a bloody chicken?’

Pharaoh shakes his head in frustration. He can see his coming defeat as clear as daylight. ‘I said you were like a bloody chicken.’

‘If I’m like a chicken, you might as well say I am a chicken.’

Pharaoh throws up his hands and the horse shifts nervously. ‘I give up. What do you want me for?’

The rooster is a sly old bird, a tough battle-scarred patriarch and lord of his feathered domain, but his age belies his speed. Pharaoh soon discovers that trying to catch the fowl is even harder than trying to win an argument with Julia, much to Julia’s amusement.

The bird jinks, jumps and even flies to escape Pharaoh’s grabbing hands. When Pharaoh falls and the bird gains ground, it stops, fluffs its neck feathers and gets out as much of a crow as it can until one or the other human is nearly upon it. When the human hands descend, the rooster is off again.

‘Don’t just stand there laughing, get around in front of him.’

Julia complies, her giggles turning her efforts into a comical farce rather than a successful hunting maneuver and Pharaoh’s frustration evaporates. Now he starts to giggle.

‘Throw something at it!’ says Julia, red-faced from exertion and laughter.

Pharaoh picks up a rock.
‘No, don’t, I wasn’t serious!’
Pharaoh drops the rock and stops. ‘I’ve got an idea.’
Julia stops.
‘Just pretend we’re not interested anymore,’ says Pharaoh.
Julia nods and what was farcical is now absurd, with two whistling humans, nonchalantly strolling, looking at the sky, the trees, the house, everything except the very wary rooster. The rooster looks at opportunity, lowers its head and bolts across the yard towards the bean trellis. The humans instantly drop all pretense and rush after the fowl.

The rooster flaps its wings and leaves the ground, obviously aiming to clear the thickly-vined trellis and land free on the other side. The trellis is too high.

Pharaoh gently turns the old roosters head under its wing and holds it still for a few moments.
‘Grab the axe for me, will you?’

Julia purses her lips and hands the axe to Pharaoh. ‘I hate this part,’ she says.
Pharaoh lifts the wing slightly and, seeing that the rooster’s eyes are closed, lowers the dozing bird to stretch its limp head across the block. He raises the axe and quickly drops the sharp blade on to the rooster’s neck, neatly severing the sleeping head. The body kicks in his hands and bleeds into the thirsty ground.
‘Poor old thing,’ says Julia.
‘Tasty,’ says Pharaoh, handing the body across. ‘I’ve got to finish the horse.’
Julia takes the bird and nods. ‘Thanks.’
Pharaoh shrugs. ‘We make a pretty good team.’
Julia Whittington smiles. ‘I’ll hold you to that, Pharaoh Strange.’

Settlers Arms Hotel, Beverley, Western Australia, 1878

Bill smiles as his two red-eyed patrons slump onto their regular stools. ‘Hair o’ the dog, boys?’
‘I’m bloody crook, Bill,’ moans Tom. ‘Hurry up and give us a rum before I keel over.’
Bill chuckles and sets two half-filled tankards in front of the bedraggled men. ‘Must’ve been a good wedding.’

Horace gulps his rum gratefully and nods. ‘A broadaxe wouldn’t have cut the grin off Darkie’s face and the bride looked like a princess.’
Tom grunts. ‘Whittington didn’t look too happy.’
‘Bullshit,’ says Horace, not unkindly.
‘Not bullshit, mate,’ Tom intones. ‘I saw him standin’ by himself near the rum keg and he had a frown that’d scare years off a prizefighter. I reckon he doesn’t like the idea of his little girl marryin’ a half-black, even if he did give her away to the bugger.’

Horace shakes his head and chuckles. ‘You’re more full of it than a flash-flood. Just cause you don’t like to see a beauty like Julia get snapped up by a rough-nut like Pharaoh, doesn’t mean that Whittington’s got a problem with it. If he had a bloody problem, he wouldn’t have let the Darkie anywhere near his kid.’

Tom sets his jaw. ‘I saw him frownin’.

‘He might’ve been frownin’,’ Horace replies in a tired voice, ‘but that’s only cause the keg was bloody near empty and the night was only half over. I don’t reckon he was mad at Darkie; I reckon he was bloody ropable at the priest.’

Bill has been quietly listening to the conversation and his interest is suddenly piqued by Horace’s curious comment. ‘Why would he be angry at the Reverend?’

Horace smirks. ‘Why do you reckon the cask was half-empty?’

**Beverly, Western Australia, 1882**

Pharaoh stands on a ridge, his horse tied to a tall, dead gum, ring-barked long ago and pointing its empty, skeletal limbs towards the overcast sky. He watches the silent crowd below, gathered one-hundred strong, and the coffin, slowly lowered into the freshly dug hole, the final resting place of his father, Richard Strange.

Pharaoh studies the mourners and he sees his half-sisters, their arms linked, gathered in their grief. He spies the familiar beards of his father’s old hands, men who shared Richard’s struggle to tame the land long before the old shepherd’s first child took its first breath. He swallows old, bitter enmity as he recognises the man that child became, his half-brother, resolute, unmoving and somehow still threatening in his stance beside the ruptured soil. Pharaoh flicks his eyes from the scene to stare at another headstone in the corner of the cemetery. He knows the simple stone and he remembers its inscription too well, the three names and six dates, bare scratches on granite that are supposed to represent the three other, precious, irreplaceable and lost lives of his own wife, Julia, and their two stillborn daughters.

He searches the cemetery again and rests his gaze on a stone angel, a fitting figure of mercy to mark the good doctor’s passage, wings spread as if to shade the bones of his old friend.

Tears shiver in Pharaoh’s eyes and two salty drops fall to hang, glistening like morbid diamonds in his beard. He watches the gathering, sees heads bow, and listens for the brutality of the crowd’s ‘amen’, borne dirge-like on the tense, rain-laden air to buzz threatening in his ears.
As the minister closes his bible, Pharaoh turns his back, unties his horse’s reins from the dead tree and mounts to ride away forever from ceremony, the last of his true family and God.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Jarrahdale, Western Australia, 1886

In this year of 1886, Jarrahdale belongs mainly to The Rockingham Jarrah Timber Company. The Company thrives on the proceeds of the rich-toned Jarrah timber cut from the region’s massive forests, milled in either the Gooralong Creek No. 1 mill or the relatively new Wogong Brook No. 2, then hauled by rail to the Rockingham ocean jetties. Of the town’s 400 inhabitants, 190 are company-employed and their wives and children make up for a major slice of the remainder. Those not connected to the company survive by providing the multitude of services any prosperous gathering of humans requires. They are the tinkerers, the priests, the educators, the farriers, the grog-sellers and the cooks.

Fanny Woods’ days in Jarrahdale follow an unerring pattern. She wakes to the sound of the Number One mill, its huge saws cutting the sandalwood bound for Melbourne and Botany Bay. Her daughter, Emily is usually up and busy reading her primer, making tea or putting together a breakfast with what food she can find – and little enough there is of that.

After a quick, lively breakfast, Emily skips off to school while Fanny negotiates the mud to her own place of work – a cut-slab stew shack across from the recently finished Mechanics Institute. Fanny spends her working hours cooking for the mainly single men of Jarrahdale. She also spends those hours fending off the groping hands of the less-conservative customers, feigning amusement at their often-obscene attempts at humour and suffering the foul breath and equally foul temper of her employer, Mr. Munday.

Her day begins normally, but deteriorates rapidly. Munday has bought a sack of cheap potatoes from the Station-Master (obviously fallen from the side of a freight carriage). The potatoes are mostly rotten and, after his initial burst of swearing, Munday insists that Fanny should cut out the rotten parts and serve the rest. Fanny complies and completes the dirty job, but the flavour of rot permeates the potatoes and she is made to bear the customer’s dissatisfactions. She also discovers weevils in the flour and maggots in some of the mutton, but this is fairly typical of Munday’s stores.

By noon, Fanny has been abused and heckled to the point where she can bear no more and one particularly loud-mouthed protagonist wears his stew back to work. His threats are drowned out by the laughter of his peers, but Munday insists that the price of his lost patronage (a bowl of stew per day) will be deducted from Fanny’s wages. He also makes Fanny apologise, much to the general amusement of his patrons. Fanny thinks of Little Em and complies.
At three o’clock, the real trouble starts.

The lunch crowd has dispersed and there are only three other customers in the shack. A short, dark man enters and sits a couple of seats away from his closest neighbour at the long trestle table. He carries a bundle and Fanny’s curiosity is aroused by the way he carries it – like he is carrying a baby. He smiles at Fanny, his expression unusually soft. ‘Some extra bread with my bowl?’

Munday hears and calls from his chair at the back. ‘Extra bread’s an extra ha’penny.’

The man nods and, by his expression when he looks down at the bundle in his arms, Fanny is suddenly enraged. ‘You brought a baby in here?’

The man nods again. ‘He’s hungry. So am I.’

After one look at the bundle, the dark man’s neighbour nearly chokes on the lump of bread in his mouth. ‘It’s a bloody abo and his brat!’ he splutters, pieces of half chewed bread flying across the trestle.

Fanny watches the dark man’s eyes, once soft brown turn a glittering black. He faces the beefy patron. ‘He’s my son, so you shut your fat face.’ He glares at Fanny. ‘And you … will you feed us or not?’

Fanny nods, her concern for the child over-riding her resentment of the father. The beefy patron rises angrily as Munday stalks from the back room and declares, ‘No bloody savages in here. Get that monkey out of it.’

The dark man stands and pushes the bundle towards Fanny. She does not hesitate, grabbing the baby just as the beefy patron swings a fist. It connects with the dark man’s cheek and he stumbles over the chair to his left. He shakes off the punch and somehow regains his balance, bringing the same chair around in a swift and deadly arc to knock the patron across the trestle where he lands in an unconscious heap at Munday’s feet. The dark man vaults the trestle, grabs Munday’s filthy shirt-front with one gnarled fist and pistons a hard punch to the point of Munday’s nose with the other. As Munday squeals and faints, the baby jerks in Fanny’s arms and bellows. The dark man turns to the two remaining patrons. ‘Anyone else?’

One of the two men rises quickly and scurries out through the door. The other man, barely a teenager, looks at Fanny and says, ‘Wouldn’t mind a bit more bread, please.’ He looks back at the dark man and holds out his hand. ‘Name’s Jack Pearce.’

The dark man nods and shakes the offered hand. ‘Pharaoh Strange.’

Fanny rocks the baby. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Richard.’ Pharaoh stares intently at the woman. ‘After his grandfather.’
Jack Pearce nods at the door. ‘The little weasel that did a runner – he’s a mouth. Prob’ly talking to the Sergeant right now. You should get out of here.’

‘Take him,’ says Fanny, passing the baby to Pharaoh. ‘I’ll get you some bread.’

Pharaoh gently takes his son while Fanny gets the bread. Jack places some coins on the table and says, ‘I’ve got a shack near the Number Two Mill. You comin’?’

‘Thanks to both of you,’ says Pharaoh as Fanny hands him four slices of damper bread.

Fanny sees the two men and baby out the door and turns to the mess they have left behind. The beefy patron groans and begins to rise, but Munday is still out cold. Fanny has just begun to clean the mush of stew and bread from the table, when she hears a commotion outside the shack. The police Sergeant strides in, followed by a Constable and Jack Pearce’s ‘weasel’. The beefy patron shakes his head groggily and squints painfully at the police.

‘What happened here, fellow?’ the sergeant demands.

Fanny points at the beefy patron. ‘He attacked a man, Sergeant. The man fought back and knocked some sense into him.’

The Sergeant glares at Fanny. ‘If I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it.’

‘It’s not an opinion. It’s what happened.’

‘You keep a civil tongue, woman,’ snaps the Constable.

‘When my tongue stops being civil, Constable, you’ll be the first to know.’

The Sergeant puts up his hand. ‘Enough!’ He points at the now stirring Munday and looks at Fanny. ‘What about him?’

Fanny sneers. ‘He slipped on his own maggoty stew and cracked his nose on the trestle.’

‘He did not!’ cries the weasel. ‘The little fella with the abo baby punched him on the nose.’

Fanny laughs. ‘A little fella with an abo baby? I think you’ve been dipping your nose too deep in the rum pot, mister.’ She faces the Sergeant squarely and points at the beefy patron. ‘The fella who hit him with the chair had red hair and a huge, dirty beard. You can’t miss him – he’s probably still covered in bits of stew.’

Munday moans, pushes himself up to a sitting position and holds his hands to his bloody nose.

‘It’s agody. Mah dose is broken.’ He glares savagely at Fanny. ‘Ged oud. You’re sacked.’

Fanny’s mouth drops. ‘What for?’

‘Ip you hadn’ held da bunky, ’e could’n ab ‘it me.’

The Sergeant shakes his head. ‘I’m satisfied.’ He flicks a hand at Munday. ‘I can’t comprehend this one, so I’ll take your version missy. Constable?’

The police leave. The weasel slinks out behind them. The beefy patron pushes rudely past Fanny and follows the weasel. Fanny walks quietly to the back room and lifts the drum of
discarded, rotten potato. Munday is still on the floor when she tips the contents of the drum over his head.

Emily Woods is surprised to find her mother waiting outside the school.

‘You’re here, Mum.’

Fanny forces a grin. ‘Missed you too much.’

Emily frowns. ‘What really happened?’

Fanny shakes her head but cannot maintain the lie in the face of her daughter’s obvious understanding. ‘I held a baby and got the sack.’

‘What baby?’

Fanny looks away toward the cluster of shacks near the number one mill. ‘Poor little bugger who’s bound for an interesting life.’

‘Sandalwood.’

Pharaoh raises an eyebrow. ‘Long way east, Jack. Lotta tough country out there.’

Jack Pearce is curious. ‘You know that country well?’

‘Pretty well. I’m a farrier. Spent the last two years following rivers and finding farms.’

‘You heard of Wandering?’

‘I know it. Nothing fancy like Jarrahdale, though. Reckon you can live rough?’

Jack holds out his hands. ‘Not a blister among ‘em.’

Pharaoh nods, impressed to see hard callous on such young hands. ‘How old are you?’

‘Nearly sixteen I reckon. Been on my own since I was twelve.’

‘And your people?’

‘Both in Fremantle. Both in the ground.’

Pharaoh looks toward his sleeping son and makes a decision. ‘A fella I know out on the Dale River’s been in sandalwood for years. You seem likely, Jack, I’ll ask him to give you a start, if you’re interested.’

Jack is suddenly formal. ‘I’d be grateful, Mr Strange.’

Pharaoh grins. ‘Don’t let anyone hear you calling me mister, mate. There’s some who’d sooner shoot the man that respects the darkie, than shoot the darkie himself.’

‘So you are an abo?’

Pharaoh’s eyes glint dangerously. ‘I’m a man, boy.’

Jack straightens. ‘I meant no offense, Pharaoh.’ Jack pauses and locks eyes with Strange. ‘And I won’t call you abo if you don’t call me boy.’

Pharaoh laughs. ‘Fair enough, I reckon.’
Jack relaxes. ‘So who’s this Dale River bloke?’
‘His name’s Jim Whittington. He’s … was my father-in-law.’
‘You got a wife then?’
‘Had a wife. She died.’

Jack looks at the baby but Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘That one’s not hers. Our two didn’t make it past birth and my wife died with the second.’ Pharaoh stares at his son’s tiny hand and feels a profound melancholy rush to the centre of his body. He closes his eyes and pictures fine boned, strawberry brushed cheeks turned alabaster, sparkling green eyes dulled in death. His guts rip again at the memory of promise and joy turned to desolation and overwhelming grief. He fights the memory of Julia, his wife and beloved; fights the vision of a hand achingly similar to the one he watches now, different only in its lack of warm, grasping life.

‘Where’s his mum, then?’ When Jack speaks, Pharaoh tightens his jaw against the rushing memory.

‘York. She wasn’t allowed to keep him, I wasn’t allowed to stay.’

‘Who is she?’

Pharaoh scratches his head and grins ruefully. ‘She’s the daughter of a farmer with a mean temper and no eye for moving targets.’

Pharaoh laughs aloud at Jack’s bemused expression and the baby’s eyes open. He gives a soft gurgling sigh and Pharaoh lifts the child from Jack’s makeshift bunk.

‘Think I might find that woman from the stew-shack, get some advice about this one.’

Fanny stands in her doorway and stares sardonically at her two male visitors and the crying bundle in the dark one’s arms. She faces the dark man. ‘We’re as hungry as that baby, mate, so if its food you’re after this isn’t the place you’re looking for.’

Pharaoh stiffens. ‘I’ve got money for tucker. I’m just not sure what to buy or where to buy it.’

Fanny is unrelenting. ‘Well for a start you should keep the hell away from that hovel I used to work in. That muck Munday passes off as food’d kill a brown dog.’

‘What do you mean “used to work in”?’

Fanny explodes. ‘I keep my bloody temper through the worst you men can dish out, then get sacked because you can’t keep yours. And with a baby no less! You’ve got a thick hide coming here, mister.’

Pharaoh shakes his head and steps back a pace. ‘I’m sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to cause you trouble.’
‘Well you did. And now where do you think you’re off to? You get that baby in here and bring that money too. Emily?’

Emily, who has been peering out from behind her mother’s skirts, straightens and shouts ‘I’m here, Mum.’

‘Take this man’s money to Dixon’s. We want flour, sugar, tea, eggs and milk. You check for weevils in the flour and make sure the eggs and milk are fresh … and get a haunch of mutton if it’s not green or a couple of rabbits if it is.’ Fanny glares at Jack, who has been standing quietly behind Pharaoh. ‘You think you can give my girl a hand?’

Jack nods as Pharaoh speaks up. ‘I’ve had my fill of rabbit and mutton. How about some civilised ham? Your Dixon’s have a nice leg, you reckon?’

Fanny raises her eyebrows. ‘It’s your money.’

‘Couple of quid, do it?’ He flips two one-pound notes out of his shirt’s top pocket and proceeds to pass them to Jack. Fanny steps forward, grabs the money and tucks it into Emily’s hand. ‘You hold this tight and don’t let go. You also tell that swindler I want him to write down the prices of everything you buy.’

Emily nods and runs for the muddy street, calling to Jack over her shoulder ‘Come on, mister. I’m starving.’

Fanny Woods’ lives in a two-roomed, Company-timbered shack furnished only with two unfinished timber beds, hessian & straw mattresses, a meat-safe, a set of shelves, two slab bench seats, a three-slab table and a mud-brick fire-place. She is protected from the elements by a corrugated-iron roof that makes conversation impossible when the rain does fall. The shack belongs to The Rockingham Jarrah Timber Company and costs Fanny sixpence a week to rent.

Jack reads quietly to an enraptured Emily as Pharaoh rests his elbows on the three-slab table and watches Fanny coddle his new son. Fanny is aware of her visitor’s scrutiny, but studiously ignores it regardless of the flush rising up her neck. The tiny dark boy in her arms yawns, eyes drooping and Fanny smiles softly.

Pharaoh clears his throat. ‘So what are your plans?’

The baby surrenders to sleep and Fanny takes him through the curtain into the bedroom she shares with her daughter. She returns and strokes Emily’s head. ‘Off to bed, Em.’

Emily groans. ‘But the story’s not finished.’

‘You’ve heard it before.’

‘But he says it different.’ Jack shrugs.

Fanny taps Emily on the shoulder. ‘Bed.’
Emily groans again, but rises. ‘Can I sleep with the baby?’

‘You leave that baby be, miss. Say your goodnights and off you go.’

Emily complies, quickly hugs her mother and kisses a surprised Jack on the cheek. She turns to Pharaoh, says formally ‘Goodnight, Mr Strange’ and pushes through the curtain to her bed.

Fanny sits opposite Pharaoh and looks at him frankly. ‘I don’t have any plans yet. What are yours?’

Pharaoh nods at Jack. ‘The young fella’s heading east for the sandalwood. Thought I’d make sure he doesn’t get lost.’

‘You’re a farrier, yes?’

‘It’s what I do now.’

‘You have to move to work?’

‘Mostly.’

‘Does that child have a mother?’

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘Does yours have a father?’

‘No.’

‘You’re a fine cook.’

Fanny frowns. ‘But no man’s wife.’

Pharaoh frowns back. ‘I don’t want another wife.’

‘What are you after, then?’

Pharaoh places both his hands flat on the table. ‘Same as you. Solutions.’

**Beverley, Western Australia, 1886**

Jim Whittington takes off his hat and runs his fingers through his sweat-soaked hair. He sits on a stump and watches curiously as the unusual group approaches through the half-cleared, recently logged bush. Although they are still a few hundred yards away, he recognises the lead rider and Jim is uncertain of his feelings. Pharaoh was always an interesting lad and a hard worker, but he became a difficult man, as fractious and temperamental as his equine charges and ever ready to take offense about his origins.

Jim recalls his daughter Julia’s devotion to the intense young man and almost smiles at the memory of her single-minded determination to woo him, win him and tame him. For the most part she succeeded, and despite the protests of the local purists and black-haters, Julia married Pharaoh in church, under God and with her father’s blessing.
Had God allowed just one of their children to live, had God been merciful and allowed Julia to survive the last heart-breaking stillbirth, Jim knows that Pharaoh would probably be sitting beside him right now, a son-in-law, a father and a contented husband.

Jim rises from the stump to stand and study the closing group. Pharaoh sits well in the saddle, a natural horseman, but Jim notes that his hard-edge has not softened over the years, that he still glares out at the world as if everything around him might be a threat.

The other horseman is young, not more than a teen, but by the way he sits the horse and handles the rein Jim recognises both the firmness in his posture and clear strength in his hands that mark him a capable lad. A pair of healthy draught horses pulls a well-kept wagon, with a vaguely familiar, youngish, dust-covered woman at the reins and a little girl beside her. The girl holds a baby.

‘G’day, Jim,’ says Pharaoh, finally cracking a smile as he lithely dismounts and marches towards Whittington. Pharaoh offers his hand and Jim grasps it firmly, his tentative contemplations reduced to nothing by his abiding love for the volatile man.

‘Good to finally see you again, Alfred.’

When he sees the slightly raised eyebrow and familiar glint of humour in his old benefactor’s eye Pharaoh swallows an instant retort and winks. ‘Good to see you too, old possum.’

Jim looks questioningly between Pharaoh and his eclectic group.

‘This young fella is Jack Pearce,’ Pharaoh begins, nodding towards the still-mounted youth. ‘Come down and meet Mr Whittington, Jack.’ As the boy dismounts, Pharaoh steps to the draught-team, grabs a halter and holds it firmly. ‘The ladies are Fanny Woods and her daughter Em. Ladies? Mr Jim Whittington.’

Fanny nods and smiles tiredly. ‘Mr Whittington and I have already met. It’s nice to see you again, sir.’

Whittington winks at Fanny. ‘No need for a Woods girl to call me sir, young Fanny. You’ll visit your father I hope?’

Fanny stares into her lap. ‘Probably not until I’m invited, Mr Whittington.’

Whittington looks suddenly embarrassed. ‘Ah, yes, I’d forgotten …’ He turns to Fanny’s daughter and smiles. ‘So this is the cause of all the fuss? Emily Woods.’

Emily lifts her chin proudly and holds the baby aloft. ‘And this is Dick.’

‘A pleasure ladies … and Dick,’ says Jim. He turns to grasp the strong hand of the lad. ‘And Jack, good to meet you.’ Whittington has noticed the baby’s complexion and he faces Pharaoh. ‘Your new family, Pharaoh?’
Pharaoh is confused. Fanny has not told him that she knows Whittington, or that she has family near Beverly. She hasn’t told me much at all, he thinks, not that I’ve ever asked. He looks at Whittington and shrugs. ‘Family? Something like that. Jack here wants to work the sandalwood, so I brought him to you. Fanny’s a fine cook and little Em’s dandy with a needle so I brought them with me for Dick. Dick’s my first-born son, so I’m keeping him close. I haven’t forgotten your bible, Jim.’

Jim Whittington bristles at the old argument. ‘It’s your bible too, Pharaoh.’

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘Not my bible anymore, not my God either, but I reckon the ladies are tired and we all need a feed, so maybe we can do this later?’

Whittington glares at the infuriating man, still tempted to push the point, but also aware of the futility of the action. A part of him is compassionate, willing to concede that any man who had been so unmercifully treated by God would naturally be angry with Him, but Whittington relies on his faith to overcome the trials and tribulations of his hard bush life and Pharaoh has a particular gift for testing Jim’s patience by denouncing that faith. Pharaoh stands unmoving, his eyes locked on the older man. Jim relents.

‘We’re about three miles from home, we’d better get a push on.’

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘I don’t want to trouble your home, Jim. I was wondering if that old shepherd’s hut was still empty?’

Jim nods. ‘It’s empty, but the bush has just about taken it back now.’

‘That’s nothing a bit of work won’t fix. Can we use it? I can pay you in regular horse work and Fanny says she’ll cook for your timber camps if you front the tucker.’

Jim Whittington regards the conflicted dark man and has an idea. He knows he cannot pressure Pharaoh back to God in a single argument, but with Pharaoh living on the property, influenced by mothers and children, he can see a way to at least get Pharaoh back through the church’s front door. If he can accomplish that, he thinks, God will do the rest. He turns to Fanny, who is still seated in the dray. ‘Do you still enjoy Sunday services, Mrs … Strange?’

‘It’s Miss Woods, Mr Whittington, and yes I do.’ Fanny tilts her chin up at Pharaoh. ‘Regardless of this heathen.’

Now Pharaoh begins to bristle, but Whittington faces him in feigned innocence. ‘The hut’s yours, Pharaoh Strange, and I’m sure we’ll come to some mutually beneficial arrangement as regards the rent, but for now, you’re all coming home with me. Mrs Whittington would have my hide if I did not bring her these ladies and I’m also sure that some inconceivably foolish part of her nature would appreciate a second or two of your savage company.’ Whittington appraises the youth. ‘You want to work timber, do you son?’
Jack Pearce stands a little straighter and meets the timber-man’s eyes. ‘I do, sir.’
‘Think you’re tough enough?’
‘I am.’
Whittington offers his hand. ‘Then Mr Jack Pearce, you’re hired.’
The Whittington home is finally quiet after a festive night of good food, hymn singing, chat and laughter. The children are comfortable and fast asleep with the Whittington brood, having giggled themselves into exhaustion. Jack Pearce has left with the timber-cutters, and is now camped somewhere deep in the bush, dreaming of his new life as a timber-man. Pharaoh Strange sits on the verandah and lights his pipe while Fanny Woods stares at the stars.
‘So your family’s all in Beverly?’ asks Pharaoh, conversationally.
‘Hmmm.’
‘I didn’t know.’
Fanny shrugs.
‘Don’t you want to talk about it?’
Fanny turns and pins Pharaoh with a brutally intense expression. He cannot decide if she is furious or just deeply hurt, but he cannot speak for the force of her stare.
‘You want to know about me, Pharaoh Strange?’ she asks finally in a harsh, low murmur.
‘You want to know about my family?’
Pharaoh holds her gaze and responds gently. ‘Not if you don’t want to talk about it, Fanny.’
Fanny’s shoulders slump and she looks back to the sky and the billion stars over this dark, wild world. ‘My father and his brother met my mother and her sister on the ship that brought them all to the Swan. My father obviously married my mother and his brother married her sister. My parents had me five years after they arrived, my uncle and aunt had their son nine years after I was born. His name was Andrew. He died the year Em was born.’
Fanny has quietly started crying and Pharaoh is at a loss. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says gently. ‘How did he die?’
Fanny grips her skirt and clenches her fists. ‘Starvation, thirst, lost in the bush, that’s what the Constable said. But it was me that killed him, just as if I’d shot him between the eyes.’
‘How could you kill him if he was lost in the bush?’
‘He was only thirteen, but I loved him, Pharaoh. I was 22, I was lonely and I dreamed of men touching me … doing things to me, but we lived a long way out and the only men were the blacks and the Woods men. One day Andrew stopped being my boy cousin. He came to me as a man and I let him … I wanted him.’ Fanny turns to the frowning Pharaoh, her arm pointing into the night. ‘He ran away and he died out there.’
Pharaoh cannot comprehend Fanny’s story, he only has one question. ‘Why?’

Fanny laughs, an ugly, mocking sound that sends a spike through Pharaoh’s gut. ‘Why? Why did he run away? Why did he die? Why what?’

‘Why did he run away?’

Fanny turns back towards the darkness. ‘I got pregnant and Andrew was the father. There was no-one else.’

Pharaoh is silent as he absorbs this, but after a moment Fanny quietly continues. ‘When I started to show and couldn’t hide it anymore, I told him and he was actually happy. Can you imagine? This sweet boy making plans about our future, chatting about weddings and how we’d own the richest property in Western Australia and visit England every year to hobnob with Dukes and Earls. Dreams!’ Fanny stands and crosses her arms. ‘He went straight to my father and told him. My father beat him so badly I had to carry him home in the dray. When my uncle saw what my father had done he jumped straight on his horse and rode back to my place. I panicked. I was afraid that either my uncle or my father would end up dead, so I took Andrew’s horse and rode home. I didn’t know that father had come after me.

‘Halfway home I found my father and my uncle fighting and I think they would have beaten each other to death if I hadn’t knocked my uncle senseless with a tree-branch.’

Fanny stops speaking and Pharaoh waits, but when it seems that she will say no more, he prompts her. ‘But why did your cousin run away?’

‘My uncle woke up and rode off without a word. I went home with father and our families stopped speaking. Andrew couldn’t come near our place and I couldn’t go near his. Father forbade me from seeing him and said that if I went against him I’d be put out of our home forever.’ Fanny sits back on the verandah step. ‘What choice did I have? Pregnant, no husband and alone in the bush – was I supposed to take my chances with a thirteen-year-old boy? I couldn’t.’ She inhales deeply and then sighs.

‘On the first Sunday of every month,’ she continues in a monotone, ‘we all used to go to town together for services, but when it was time for services again our families went separately. When we arrived, everyone noticed the separation and the pastor asked my aunt why. My aunt lied.’

Pharaoh sees a dangerous glint appear in Fanny’s eyes and knows enough about her to understand that it is the first sign of her lashing temper. He realises that this is probably the first time Fanny has ever told the tragic tale and that he must do whatever is necessary to squeeze every detail, every painful memory out of her. ‘What did she say?’ he asks softly.

Fanny’s temper suddenly flares. ‘Bitch! She killed our family! She killed Andrew!’

‘What did she say?’ Pharaoh prods more forcefully.
‘She didn’t just tell the pastor, she spoke so everyone could hear. She told them I was pregnant, she told them that my father blamed her son, a child, because of his own guilt. She told them my father was the father of my child.’

Pharaoh is shocked. ‘What did your father do?’

‘Nothing!’ Fanny spits. ‘Nothing. He just stood there with his mouth hanging open. Even after my aunt ran up and slapped his face and called him filthy names, he just stood there. My mother screamed and went at my aunt like a mad woman and some men of the congregation had to pull her off. That’s when father moved – when he saw other men wrestling my mother. He punched a man and then they all turned on him and beat him into the ground. My mother kept trying for her sister, but the pastor slapped her and she stopped and I saw her face go blank. She couldn’t believe that the pastor had slapped her.

‘My uncle shouted so loud that everything stopped for a moment and everyone looked at him. He told the truth. He told my aunt to shut-up and he told the truth, but it was too late.’

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘What do you mean?’

Fanny turns to him and he swallows. The anguish and grief in her tear-filled eyes is heart-wrenching. ‘Nobody saw Andrew go. He just ran off. They didn’t find his body for nearly a month.’ A sob bursts from Fanny’s throat, and another, until she finally releases her pain and cries openly, innocently, like a baby.

Pharaoh places his hand on her head and strokes her hair, and although she does not fall into his arms, she is soothed by his touch, his silence and his close, safe, warm presence.

Fanny Woods cries away her past as the billion stars track their cold paths across the endless Australian sky.

Wandering, Western Australia, 1886

Jim Whittington’s description of the shepherd’s hut had been too generous and after one look at the decrepit, over-run wreck, Fanny Woods simply shakes her head and says ‘I won’t raise my daughter in a woodheap.’

Pharaoh is ambivalent. He knows that his only ties to Whittington’s land are in memories of past comforts and joys that cannot be relived. Jack is squared away with Whittington and farrier’s work is needed everywhere in Western Australia, so Pharaoh decides to try a completely new start in a different place with his ready-made new family. Pharaoh also knows that Fanny’s past wounds are still raw and there is no mistaking Fanny’s relief when Beverly is at last behind them.
Emily has sulked for days on the journey south. She had not wanted to leave Jack Pearce and is disconsolate until the day they pass the tiny Wandering schoolhouse.

‘Can I go there, ma?’ she asks, showing the first real enthusiasm Fanny has seen in days. Fanny raises an eyebrow at Pharaoh, he shrugs and the new family rolls into Wandering, hoping for opportunity and a place to settle.

Pharaoh points at a sign that simply reads ‘Farrier’, with an arrow directing customers down a lane beside the Wandering General Merchandise Emporium.

‘He might need extra hands,’ says Fanny, shifting her buttocks on the wagon seat to more comfortably accommodate the squirming baby, Dick.

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘I won’t work for wages. I earn more on the road.’

Fanny frowns, but she nods, resigned to the sacrifices their partnership will require. ‘We’ll need a place.’

Pharaoh points at the Emporium. ‘I’ll ask in there.’

With her mind occupied on patterns, thread-colours and the prohibitive price of cotton, Lucy Dowsett exits the Emporium. She jumps as, directly in front of her, a short, dark stranger steps back just in time to avoid a collision. ‘Sorry, madam,’ he says with a slight bow.

‘Not your fault, sir,’ she responds quickly. He shrugs and as he looks at her, she sees amusement slowly infuse his expression. ‘Something funny?’ she asks brusquely.

He shrugs again without dropping his gaze and she feels a faint tickle of annoyance. ‘Do you intend to stand and stare and smile all day, sir?’

‘Depends.’

She frowns. ‘Upon what?’

His smile broadens. ‘Depends on how long you’re going to stand there and block the doorway.’

Lucy Dowsett does not think of herself as the blushing type, so when she feels the heat rise up her neck and toward her cheeks, she is instantly angry. She glares at the man and is about to snap, when she notices the wagon and its passengers. She takes a breath and steps aside. ‘How foolish of me,’ she says with a steely smile.

As Pharaoh steps past her with a jolly ‘Excuse me’, she faces the wagon and raises her hand to wave at the weary-looking woman on the wagon-seat. The woman simply nods, unable to take her hands from the restless infant on her lap. Lucy walks purposefully to stand beside the wagon and hold out her arms. ‘Give the baby to me, dear. You jump down and have a good stretch.’
Fanny is caught between relief and slight outrage, wanting to take the woman’s offer but a little annoyed at her rather pushy approach. Emily sits in the wagon-bed, excitedly watching the comings-and-goings of the busy main street and Fanny almost hands her the baby, but thinks that by doing so she might alienate a possible ally in the brisk woman that now stands before her. Lucy immediately empathises with the tired woman’s hesitation. ‘I’m sorry. You must think me a complete busy-body.’

‘No,’ Fanny shrills, but the volume of her response belies her words and Lucy Dowsett laughs.

‘I don’t blame you,’ says Lucy, finally allowing her blush to surface. ‘I am sorry. I just don’t get into town very often and I forget the rules.’

Fanny nods with a light smile. ‘I’ve spent so much time in male company, I forgot decorum long ago.’ Dick complains noisily in her arms and both women laugh. Fanny holds him out. ‘Will you take him?’

Lucy lifts the baby down and props him on her hip where he instantly quietens, happy to be in a position from which he can better view the fascinating world surrounding him. Fanny alights and stretches with a sigh. ‘Thank you so much.’ She offers her hand. ‘I’m Fanny Woods.’

Lucy takes the offered hand and squeezes warmly. ‘Lucy Dowsett.’

‘You’ve done that before,’ says Fanny, nodding at Dick.

‘Three times. All walking, talking tearaways now, though.’ Lucy jiggles Dick on her hip and makes a face at him. He gurgles happily. ‘I think I prefer them at this age.’

Fanny shrugs. ‘I love ‘em all.’

‘Your little girl’s a quiet one,’ Lucy remarks, glancing at the wagon.

‘Dreamer,’ says Fanny. ‘She lives in a pretty, little world all of her own making.’

Lucy sighs. ‘We all did once.’

‘Before men.’

Lucy laughs. ‘I think I’m going to like you, Fanny Woods.’

Pharaoh strides from the Emporium with a thunderous frown on his brow and a curse on the tip of his tongue. The fool behind the counter had come perilously close to experiencing the sharp-end of Pharaoh’s anger by first declaring that half-castes were not welcome in his store, then extending the exile by insisting that according to law, half-castes were not even allowed in town. Pharaoh had insisted that he was white, but if not quite white enough to suit the town he would happily leave if given an idea about where he might go. The fool’s idea was undiplomatic and Pharaoh stormed out before he could respond with a far more volatile undiplomatic gesture.
By the wagon, he sees the woman from the earlier encounter holding his son and is about to explode when he notices Fanny’s smile. ‘Any luck?’ she asks and the other woman turns.

Pharaoh walks over to stand beside her and shakes his head, choosing to keep his opinion of the Emporium fool for a later, more private conversation. Fanny recognises the rage in her partner. ‘What happened?’

‘Same as usual.’

Fanny shakes her head and Lucy watches a flush creep up her neck. Lucy faces Pharaoh. ‘Was he rude to you?’

Pharaoh unsuccessfully tries to soften his glare. ‘Yes. He was rude to me.’

‘Were you rude to him?’

Pharaoh holds out his arms. ‘This is rude, isn’t it?’ He roughly strokes his face. ‘And this?’ Lucy looks confused until Pharaoh snarls, ‘I don’t have to say a word, lady. I’ve got rude skin.’

‘Pharaoh,’ says Fanny with a warning tone.

Lucy Dowsett’s eyes flare suddenly and, much to Pharaoh and Fanny’s surprise, she straightens her back and marches directly back into the Emporium. She still carries Dick.

‘Where’s she going with Dick?’ Pharaoh demands of Fanny.

Fanny shrugs. ‘I don’t know. I think she just took him along for the ride.’

Pharaoh is about to follow the woman, when she reappears, marching back through the Emporium doorway to rejoin them by the wagon. Pharaoh gives her a quizzical look. ‘What was that all about?’

Lucy Dowsett raises her head imperiously. ‘I told him to read his bible. I told him I was taking my business elsewhere.’

Pharaoh and Fanny exchange bemused glances. ‘Why?’ asks Pharaoh.

‘Because first, I told him you were my guests and unless you intend to make a liar of me, I hope you’ll bring your wagon around to the farrier’s and meet my Jack. We’ll go on home from there.’

‘Are you sure, Lucy?’ asks Fanny.

‘Absolutely certain, dear. Not only do I need intelligent company with a female mind, I also need to show you both that this is a good, Christian district, with good, Christian ideals.’ She points a stiff finger at the Emporium her eyes still sparkling with righteous indignation. ‘That rogue sets a bad example. I intend to set a good one.’

Fanny and Pharaoh exchange glances again and Pharaoh shrugs. Fanny turns back to Lucy. ‘You set a good example just by making the offer and I … we would appreciate the company, but we’re not destitute and we can pay our way …’
‘Good,’ says Lucy. ‘You can help me in the kitchen and I’m sure Jack will find a use for your husband.’

Fanny does not correct her. ‘That sounds lovely. What do you think, Pharaoh?’

‘Your man’s at the farrier’s?’ asks Pharaoh.

Lucy nods. ‘Yes, but we may be there a while. There’s usually quite a queue and we have four horses to fit.’

Pharaoh grins. ‘Reckon we won’t be waiting as long as you think, lady.’

With Emily, Dick and the three happily truant Dowsett children on the back, Lucy and Fanny take charge of Pharaoh’s wagon and leave town well before the first of the Dowsett horses feels Pharaoh’s hammer. By the time Pharaoh has finished shoeing all four Dowsett horses; Pharaoh decides that Jack Dowsett is an easy man to like. Jack has accepted his wife’s plans with a casual smile and meets Pharaoh and Fanny with an affable kindness that makes the usually reticent Pharaoh instantly comfortable.

Jack’s good nature is also enjoyed by the townsfolk. Jack leads his well-kept horses from the farrier’s stalls with such devilish cheer that Pete the farrier actually grins, regardless of the lost business. Pharaoh shoes the horses in the lane outside the farrier’s shop and Pete also laughs at Jack’s light jests about Pharaoh’s superior speed and workmanship. When Pete offers a job, Jack senses Pharaoh’s discomfort and says, ‘Lucy saw him first, Pete, and I saw him second. You might even have to wait as long as one of your customers before you get him.’ Pete even laughs at that and Pharaoh credits the farrier’s good humour to Jack’s bright charm.

Jack and Pharaoh drive out of town to a smile and a wave from the harried farrier and a few friendly nods from various locals on Wandering’s main street.

‘Neat as a pin, Jack,’ says Pharaoh in admiration as the wagon glides through the open gate and along the track towards the Dowsett’s cozy stone and timber house.

Jack grins. ‘Three-hundred acres all up. I’ve got wheat in fifteen, oats in two and barley in two.’

‘Sheep?’

‘Plenty, but they’re not mine. I lease grazing rights to a fella from York for twenty per-cent of the flock profit and after I’ve milled my wheat, he buys the bulk of the bran and pollard.’ Jack maneuvers his team and wagon under the bark-shingled roof of a large open-fronted shed and gently pulls at the reins. The wagon stops and both men alight, moving immediately to unhitch
the team from the light-timber traces. Pharaoh nods approvingly at the four, clean stalls built into one side of the shed and the practical tack-room and feed-bins built into the other.

‘You don’t want your own sheep?’ asks Pharaoh, absently plucking a grass seed from the gums of a lead horse as he removes the bit.

‘I’m no shepherd, Pharaoh. I like my farming and my timber, but I can’t stand those wooly mongrels.’

‘Who’s the shepherd?’

Jack points vaguely east. ‘George Hill from the next farm along. The York fella pays him twenty per-cent to mind the flock here and wages to the shearers in season.’

‘Sounds like this York fella wouldn’t have much left after all that pay-out.’

Jack laughs. ‘He’s swimming in quids. He’s got flocks on dozens of farms; makes a small profit on each and never gets his hands dirty – other fellas do that for him.’

‘Smart cove.’

‘Very smart – but he’s a gambler. Thin profit margin means that one bad drought, a couple of slack shepherds or a drop in the wool price could put him in the red.’

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘Not my game. I’d rather do my work and collect my pay.’

‘Same here – only I’d rather plant my seed and eat my bread.’

Jack and Pharaoh lead each horse into a separate stall and Jack begins to mix feed from the bins. ‘What’s your mix?’ asks Pharaoh, ever interested in the topic of equine management.

‘Twenty-five pounds of wheaten-chaff, ten-pounds of oaten hay each for this lot.’

Pharaoh nods approvingly. ‘That’ll either keep them healthy if they’re working … or make them fat, if they’re not.’

Jack grins. ‘They won’t get fat. They earn their grain, believe me.’ He stands and looks fondly at the four, huge draught-geldings. ‘I’d be buggered without these lads. They’re not just plough and wagon horses – I use them up in the timber and they snig out trunks big enough to build houses.’

Pharaoh frowns. ‘Perth’s nearly a hundred miles from here and there’s plenty of timber a hell of a lot closer. I can’t see you selling much timber for houses – especially not when every fella who wants a house can chop down his own trees to build it. Where’s your market?’

Jack lugs a bucket of mixed-feed to the first stall and pours it into a long timber trough. He points to two empty buckets as the horse begins to feed. ‘Pump’s in front of the house. You fill those and I’ll tell you all about it.’

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Pharaoh empties a bucket into the last horse’s water trough. Their chores finished, the two men stroll from the shed to the house verandah, where Jack gestures Pharaoh into a hand-made rocking chair. Pharaoh sighs, surprised that the bulky rocker affords such comfort and Jack enters the house. Pharaoh is pleased to see him return with a bottle and two tin mugs. As Jack deposits himself into the empty rocker beside Pharaoh, he says: ‘Sorry about the mugs. Lucy won’t let her glasses out of the house.’ He pauses and gives Pharaoh a wry look. ‘I forgot to ask if you like rum.’

Pharaoh grins. ‘No need to ask, mate. Just pour before my tongue falls out.’

The two men raise their half-full mugs and sip in simultaneous satisfaction. Pharaoh allows the dark spirit to send its unique warm ripple through his system, until, smacking his lips contentedly, he says: ‘So, the timber market?’

Jack nods, rocking slightly in his chair and savouring the pungent bite of his own drink. ‘They’re calling it the Great Southern Railway and the line’ll run from Beverley to Albany – about two-hundred-and-fifty miles. That’s two-hundred-and-fifty-miles with a timber sleeper every four feet.’

Pharaoh sips. ‘That’s a lot of sleepers.’

‘Yes and it’s a shilling apiece for white-gum, a shilling and sixpence for jarrah.’

‘You cut them here?’

Jack sips. ‘I do the lot. Fell the trees, snig them out of the bush then cut the sleepers. I’ve got a camp in the bush for when I’m felling and another camp on the flat where I cut out the sleepers. I’ve got about five-hundred cut ready for when the line gets closer.’

‘Sounds like you’ve got the bull by the horns.’

Jack takes another sip and eyes Pharaoh with a contemplative look. ‘I’ve been thinking about a couple of possibilities since town. Will you hear me out?’

Pharaoh holds up his mug. ‘You invite us to your home, you warm me up with the good juice – I’d be some kind of a low bastard if I didn’t.’

Jack chuckles. ‘Alright then.’ He leans forward to top both mugs, then settles back in his rocker to present a proposal that will change Pharaoh’s life.

‘There’s close water and enough timber and stone at the flat camp to build a fair-sized cottage. You’re looking for a place to set up, right?’

‘I’m looking,’ says Pharaoh slowly, ‘but you look like you’ve got things pretty much under control here. Why would you want my mob on your farm?’

Jack sips. ‘I’ve often thought about getting another man in to work the sleepers with me because I figure that part of nothing is nothing, but part of something is better than nothing at all.'
See, the line won’t run through here – it’ll run through Pingelly and that’s only twenty miles east of Wandering. I reckon they’ll use Pingelly as a depot, collect the sleepers there and rail them down to the unfinished track. When the line gets too far from Pingelly, they’ll put the depot somewhere further down the line. If the line gets too far for a train to cart sleepers, then the new depot will definitely be too far for me so I want to get stuck in and make a bloody good quid while I’ve got the opportunity, but I’ve still got a farm to run. With a man on the timber and me working between helping him and running my farm, I reckon we’d both win. He’d get free lodgings and a chance to make a profit on my timber, I’d make my usual money on the wheat, plus a profit on the sleepers and I’d also get more land cleared for farming and grazing.’

‘Sounds like a fair deal for both of you.’ Pharaoh feigns nonchalance. ‘What’s the split on the sleepers?’

Jack grins. ‘I want the full quid for the ones I’ve already cut, but I’d be happy with a sixty-forty split on any we cut together. That’s forty to me, sixty to the other bloke.’

Pharaoh sips. ‘Seventy-thirty and I’ll work free on your horses.’

Jack raises his mug. ‘Welcome to Wandering, Pharaoh.’

* * *

Lucy holds the goat, while Fanny squeezes the last drops of rich milk from its teats. ‘Good girl,’ says Fanny as she nods approvingly at the half-full bucket and gives the goat an affectionate scratch. Lucy releases her grip and the relieved goat skips out of human range to join the other nannies in the small, fenced goat-fold.

‘Scones for the boys, luv?’ asks Lucy.

Fanny rises with the bucket and the two women stroll back towards the fold gate.

‘I think they deserve a treat,’ she agrees. ‘Pharaoh reckons they’ll be finished by lunchtime.’

Lucy opens the gate and as they step through, she nods. ‘Jack says the same.’ She closes the gate and pauses to smile at Fanny. ‘I’m almost jealous. It’s such a sweet little cottage.’

Fanny feels guilty. ‘It’s a very sweet little cottage and I don’t know how to thank you, Lucy. You and Jack have been too good to us.’

Lucy steps forward and wraps Fanny in a surprising hug. ‘Your family is a gift from God, dear. I’m happier than I’ve been in years and Jack’s positively glowing. We are both so very glad to have you here.’
Fanny cannot move her arms in the other woman’s embrace, so she cannot wipe away the solitary tear that tracks down her cheek to drop on the back of Lucy’s neck. Lucy feels the slight wet warmth and steps back. ‘You’re crying?’

Fanny nods and sees a sudden sheen of moisture appear in the older woman’s eyes. Lucy laughs in a sob and soon Fanny joins her.

Emily Woods rocks on the Dowsett verandah with baby Dick snoring softly in her arms. She watches the two grown women sobbing and laughing out by the goat-fold and shakes her head. She thinks she will never understand old people.

**Wandering Hotel, Wandering, Western Australia, 1886**

The publican gives the two strangers a welcoming smile as they settle on stools and lay money on the bar. ‘What you havin’, gents?’

‘Two big rums, mate,’ says Horace.

‘And two for me as well,’ says Tom.

The publican laughs as he serves the drinks. ‘Bit thirsty, eh?’

Horace nods. ‘Bit of a ride.’

Tom grimaces. ‘I reckon I’ll dab a bit of me rum on me arse. Bloody saddle’s like ironbark.’

The publican laughs again, but he secretly hopes that the rough-looking middle-aged man doesn’t act on his reckoning. ‘What brings you blokes to Wandering?’

Horace shrugs. ‘Just followin’ the timber. Lotta work ’tween here and Narrogin.’

‘Yep, that’s the new railway for ya,’ says the publican. ‘It’s bringin’ all types out of the woodwork.’

Tom frowns. ‘What’s that s’posed to mean?’

The publican quickly holds up his hands. ‘Not you blokes! I mean, at least you blokes are white.’ He leans on the bar and drops his voice. ‘One local bloke I know has got a bloody half-caste cuttin’ sleepers with him and livin’ with a white woman on his property.’

Horace shows no expression. ‘So?’

‘Well,’ says the publican righteously, ‘where does it all end? You let one in and pretty soon you’ll have a whole stinkin’ tribe camped in your yard. Nothin’ worse than a half-black pretendin’ he’s all white, you ask me.’

‘I didn’t ask,’ says Horace quietly. ‘But what’s so bad about the fella cuttin’ a few sleepers? That’s bloody hard work and good on ‘im if he can do it, I reckon.’
‘Maybe,’ says the publican, slightly peeved that his opinion has not been instantly supported, ‘but it’s not just the sleepers. This bloke also reckons he knows one end of a horse from another – he even stole some business from the local farrier and, mark me, there’s plenty in this town’d like to see the cheeky black bugger get a knock for it.’

Horace and Tom share an amused look.
‘A half-caste farrier, you reckon?’ asks Tom.
‘A half-caste who thinks he’s a farrier, yes,’ the publican replies.
Horace sips his rum and smacks his lips. ‘If his name’s Pharaoh Strange then he doesn’t just think he’s a farrier, mate. He’s the best bloody farrier in West Australia.’
The publican stands upright, crosses his arms and gives Horace a skeptical look, but Horace is unfazed.
‘He also thinks he’s white,’ Horace continues, ‘so if I was you, I’d be real careful spoutin’ your bullshit if he’s close enough to hear it.’
‘What’s he gunna do?’ the publican sneers. ‘Spear me?’
Tom raises his eyes to meet the publican’s and smiles nastily. ‘I opened my mouth once and said a bloody stupid thing about Pharaoh Strange. He heard it.’ Tom sips his rum, swallows and opens his mouth to show the publican his gap. ‘Four teeth hit the dirt quicker than a crow on a carcass.’
‘Was he charged?’ asks the publican in shock.
Horace and Tom share another look. Horace ignores the publican’s question and asks Tom, ‘Is there another pub in this bloody town, mate?’
Tom glances at his rum and shakes his head. ‘This is it.’
Horace turns back to the publican. ‘We’ll buy your rum, mister, but if you say another word against our mate, you’ll have a gap twice as big as Tom’s and it’ll be two white fists that give it to ya.’
The publican stares at Tom. ‘How can the bla … the fella be your mate? You just said that he knocked your flamin’ teeth out!’
‘I deserved it,’ says Tom, ‘and I said sorry and he bought me a bottle and we bloody well drank it together. I reckon that makes him a good man and I reckon it taught me how to be a better one. Now, either kick us out or fill us back up – all this yabber’s makin’ me thirsty.’
The publican stands undecided. He does not want to test these men, but he values his own opinion too much to simply surrender without an argument. ‘Give me one good reason why I should serve you pair?’
Horace puts his tankard on the bar and stares at the publican. Without shifting his eyes, he motions his head towards Tom. ‘This bloke’s the West Australian version of Banjo bloody Paterson, mate. You know Banjo, don’t cha?’

The publican nods.
‘Read him in the Gazette, did ya?’
The publican nods again.
‘Show ‘im, Tom.’
Tom closes his eyes and then suddenly begins to recite:
‘If you love rum, don’t go to Wandering
I’d give that pub a miss
‘Cause the publican loves darkies
And he uses darkie piss
To dilute the precious liquid
That should set our lips a’smackin’
And he only says it tastes good
Cause that publican’s a black’n.’
The publican’s mouth drops in shock as Horace winks. ‘How’d you like to read that in the Gazette, mate?’
CHAPTER EIGHT

Wandering, Western Australia, 1891

He’s such an unsettled man, thinks Fanny Woods as she waves again, but Pharaoh does not turn. She often longs for a return to the lifestyle they enjoyed in those first years before the railway passed by, when Pharaoh came home to family every night from the timber to share a meal, a talk and the sweeter joys behind their bedroom door. She knows that he was never satisfied cutting sleepers, that he longed to be back on the road mending horses and although she is resigned to his work travels, his wandering nature, she still feels frustrated and an empty gut-sense of loss when he goes. She places her hand on her belly and nearly succumbs to the tears the emptiness inspires – an inspiration fed further by the too-recent memory of the life that used to throb right under the spot her hand now covers.

Little Mary didn’t last a day in the world and Fanny still has trouble swallowing the debilitating grief of her second child’s passing. She looks at Dick and thinks ‘Third.’

Dick Strange wipes the tears from his eyes and watches his father ride away.

‘It’s not fair, Mum,’ he whines, frowning at the slowly fading silhouette of horse and rider.

‘Why does fa always go?’

She wants to say ‘Your father is never completely here’ but, instead, Fanny Woods takes the boy’s hand and leads him towards the jarrah forest. ‘You know fa has to work, Dicky … and so do we. We’ll go and find that old Billy, eh?’

Dick glances at Fanny, and then peers after his father once more. ‘Can’t see him no more.’

‘No more?’

‘Anymore.’

‘He’ll be back in a couple of days and he’ll be very happy if we find that old Billy.’

Dick suddenly drops Fanny’s hand and runs to the edge of the forest. He turns. ‘Bet I can find him first.’

Fanny smiles, stops and places her hands on her hips. ‘How much will you bet?’

‘A shilling?’

Fanny raises an eyebrow. ‘Only a shilling?’

‘A hundred shillings! A whole pound!’

Fanny laughs. ‘I’ll give you a pound for a hundred shillings, Dicky.’

Dick looks confused but Fanny shakes her head and walks to him. She puts her hands to the sides of his head and kisses him on the crown. ‘A pound then. Let’s go get that goat.’
The ancient gum is dying from within. It has tasted the blood of warring clans in its roots, sheltered generations of weary, heat-savaged humans under its vast limbs, been home and sanctuary to countless thousands of warm and cold blooded creatures. It has lived through a quarter-millennia of storm, fire and wind. When the first English boat landed on the Western Australian shore, the tree stood - a proud elder in an old land. Now nature will punish its pride by reclaiming to rot and dust that which would rise above the humility of its beginnings. The termites inside the ancient gum will achieve what the most violent of nature’s forces could not and now, as slowly as it stretched its limbs above the Earth, it begins to drop them, one by one, back to the hungry soil.

Dick Strange spies his prey under the ancient gum. He is just about to rush up and grab the goat when Fanny gently takes his arm. ‘Don’t run at him, Dicky,’ she says softly. ‘We don’t want to scare him.’ Fanny knows very well that the stubborn old beast would barely acknowledge Dick, let alone be scared by him, but the animal is rank with musk and she wants to stop the boy from handling its stinking fur. Fanny’s home-made lavender and lye soap is no match for Billy-goat musk.

She unties a length of red sash-cord from around her waist and winks at the boy. ‘Grab a big stick for me, Dicky, and I’ll sneak up and tie a halter.’ Dick grins conspiratorially and creeps off in the opposite direction to search for a suitable goat-prodder.

Fanny approaches the bark-chewing goat, unaware that high above her where a fat limb meets the trunk of the ancient gum, a single termite is ingesting one final, fatal bite of wood, the last chip in the rotting branch’s tenuous eroded connection to the tree. The branch cracks at the join and slowly, majestically tips towards the ground until gravity finds its weight of leaves and wood and literally pulls it off the tree.

Dick turns to a terrifying crash, but instead of Fanny and the goat, he sees only the shivering leaves of the fallen, half-ton branch and a glimpse of red cord, lying like a bright, coiled snake at the foot of the tree. He stands frozen, waiting for the familiar and loved voice to speak from the massed, quaking green pile. Suddenly, he hears a short, strangely guttural noise and feels his guts swoop in relief. ‘Mum?’ he calls nervously.

He hears the noise again and he runs towards the now-stilling branch to stop next to the coiled cord. ‘Mum?’ he almost shouts, desperate now to touch or hear or simply see Fanny Woods.

There is a rustle, followed by a longer version of the strange noise and Dick jumps in fright as the fallen foliage suddenly parts before him. His relieved smile is instantly replaced by anguish as
the bleeding Billy-goat pushes dazedly out of the green to stand and croak its complaint at Dick. He panics and plunges into the slight gap left by the goat.

Dick Strange sits in the dappled green cover of the fallen branch, holds the cold lifeless hand of the woman he calls mother and cries himself to sleep. He does not hear the approach of the Nyungar family, drawn by the goat’s plaintive neighing and his own soft keening. He does not feel the strong, black, sinewy arms lift him from his heart-wrenching repose to carry him back through the Jarrah to the safety of home. He knows nothing of the tiny termite blindly making its way back up into the severed limb to continue its innocent, oblivious feeding.

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‘Father, into thy hands we commend the spirit of Fanny …,’ the Reverend pauses to glance quickly at Pharaoh. When their eyes lock the Reverend blushes in sudden fear at the rage he sees in the stiff, dark face. ‘Fanny Woods. Her house could not last forever and, like a lamb she is laid in the grave. Though death shall feed upon her and though her beauty shall be consumed, we pray that you, O Lord, will receive her. We pray that you, O Lord, will redeem her soul from the power of the grave.’ A slight commotion stops the Reverend and he raises his head to see the frightening half-caste shrug off a restraining hand to turn his back on the small funeral gathering and walk away. The Reverend is about to continue when the dark man turns.

‘She wasn’t a bloody sheep,’ snarls Pharaoh Strange and glaring directly at the nervous Reverend continues: ‘She was a woman, a damned fine woman and her beauty will never be consumed. You tell that to your invisible God, mate.’

As the Reverend’s mouth opens in outrage, Pharaoh turns again to stomp away across the sparsely filled cemetery.

With Emily, Dick and the three Dowsett children riding quietly in the back of the wagon and Pharaoh sharing the driver’s seat with Jack and Lucy the mood is tense on the journey home. Pharaoh has not uttered a sound since his outburst at the gravesite and, while Lucy fights her own internal battle, Jack fumes with an anger that is rare for him.

‘I apologised to the Reverend for you,’ he says finally, his eyes fixed firmly on a spot between the rumps of the two draught horses.

‘I make my own apologies,’ growls Pharaoh. ‘He didn’t deserve one.’

‘Like hell, he didn’t.’
‘Pharaoh is right, Jack,’ says Lucy, surprising both men although neither of them express it.

‘The Reverend chose a psalm that’s meant to chastise the wealthy; to remind greedy people that the soul is more important than possessions. Was Fanny greedy?’

Jack does not respond and he jumps when she suddenly snaps: ‘Was she greedy?’

‘No,’ he says, flushing red at the neck.

‘Was she wealthy?’

‘No.’

‘Was she a good person, Jack? Did she have a beautiful soul? Would she ever put things before kindness and generosity and love and …,’ Lucy drops her head into her hands and lets the grief overwhelm her.

A crow complains loudly in a nearby gum, but its noise cannot compete with the sounds coming from the passing wagon. As all the humans, adults and children, cry their sorrow into the still bush, the crow flies away.

The three adults stand in an uncomfortable circle on the Dowsett’s verandah, none quite knowing what to do or say. The day has drained them of all emotion and they all silently share the same desire to find a quiet place and be alone with their thoughts. ‘I’d like a week to get squared away before we push on,’ Pharaoh says finally.

‘What do you mean?’ asks Jack.

Pharaoh shrugs. ‘Fanny’s gone, but I still have two kids to feed. They’ll have to come on the road with me until Em’s old enough to look after a place by herself. Plus, you’ll be able to get someone decent to work your crops and you’ll need the cottage.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Pharaoh,’ says Lucy firmly. ‘You’re not taking those children anywhere. You go and do what you do, the children can stay with us while you’re gone and the cottage will be there for you whenever you get back. I’ve lost Fanny, but I’m not losing those children.’

Pharaoh’s usual stubbornness is easily overcome by the sudden rush of love he feels for the dynamic little woman standing resolutely beside him. ‘Are you sure, Lucy?’

‘We’re both sure,’ says Jack. ‘I’m surprised you even asked.’

‘I’m not,’ says Lucy. ‘Proud men are always tripping over their own foolish ideas.’ Lucy places a hand on Pharaoh’s arm and when his eyes meet hers, she winks. ‘It’s in the bible, Pharaoh – you should read it sometime.’
Collie, Western Australia, 1896

As the sun drops below the horizon, Pharaoh Strange stretches the kinks from his back and gives the day’s last horse an affectionate scratch. He has been shoeing draught-horses and donkeys and repairing the cracked hooves of countless bullock teams since sunrise and, although he is exhausted, he is also happy at his bulging purse and the possibilities this brand new town of Collie will provide in the future.

After years of desperate searching and constant public pleas in the colony’s few newspapers, coal has finally been discovered a viable distance from Perth. As to who actually discovered the vital treasure, the local opinions are divided – some believe that a local landholder, Arthur Perrin found the industrialist’s most precious mineral, while others credit the find to Perrin’s shepherd, the taciturn George Hall.

In deference to his father, Pharaoh leans towards Hall, but he really does not care. The coal means a railway, the railway means sleepers and the sleepers mean heavy wagons regularly arriving from the timber camps. Heavy wagons need horses and bullocks and that makes Collie a farrier’s dream.

Pharaoh longs for his quiet bush-camp out past the constant bustle of the raw, new town. He packs his tools on his wagon and is about to climb up on to the driver’s seat, when a harsh voice stops him: ‘You!’

Pharaoh turns to see a hard-eyed police constable eyeing him with a sadly familiar hostility. ‘Where are you off to?’ asks Constable Ricketts.

Pharaoh tries a gracious smile. ‘Been a long day, mate. I’m off to my camp.’

‘I’m not your mate.’

Pharaoh swallows his instant ire. ‘Sorry Constable. It is still Constable, right?’

‘Where’s your camp?’ sneers Ricketts, ignoring Pharaoh’s jibe. ‘Out with the other illegal blacks, I suppose?’

Pharaoh drops the diplomacy. ‘You know me, Ricketts. Don’t pretend you don’t.’

Ricketts nods. ‘I know you, Strange. I know you’re a half-bred mongrel who pretends he’s white. I also know that I’ve got every right to arrest you right now.’

Pharaoh laughs nastily. ‘For what? Shoeing horses?’

Ricketts is unfazed. ‘Where’s your pass?’

‘What pass?’

‘Half-castes need a pass to travel. It’s the law. Where’s yours?’

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘I never heard of that law.’
‘Aborigine Protection Act, darkie. You show your pass or I see you in a cell.’

‘I’m not a half-caste and I can prove it.’

Ricketts grins. ‘You can’t prove anything. One look at you is proof enough that you’re a dirty half-black.’

Pharaoh wants blood, but he restrains himself. ‘Looks aren’t proof, mate, priest’s records are. My parents were Sarah and Richard Strange and I was baptised by Reverend Mears – it says so in his births book. I’d tell you to go and read it, but you probably can’t read.’

‘I can read, darkie,’ snarls Ricketts.

Pharaoh nods. ‘Then do it before you come anywhere near me again.’

‘Or what?’

Pharaoh grins, his glinting eyes contradicting his passive response. ‘Or I’ll have to make an official complaint to the local magistrate – and you can be damned sure that he’ll check the record. He won’t be too pleased to have his time wasted and you might find yourself annoying real blacks in the desert. I reckon they’d love you in that new gold town … what’s it called?’

Ricketts does not answer, but he knows that Pharaoh refers to Coolgardie, a hard, waterless, nightmare of a place from the rumours. ‘I’ll be watching you, darkie,’ Ricketts grates, turning to stalk back to the security of the police-station.

‘I know,’ calls Pharaoh, ‘like a hawk.’

Pharaoh Strange stokes his small fire and contemplates his run in with Ricketts. The constable is not important, but his revelation that half-castes could not travel without a pass demands much thought. Pharaoh considers his future and realises that the frequent slurs he has learned to accept in his travels could soon evolve into far more sinister and dangerous actions. His fists are no match for a now government-sponsored army of half-caste haters and, against his own feelings of resentment and rage, he accepts the fact that soon he will have to find a way to blend into a static population, rather than continue risking his sudden appearances in towns full of strangers – some of whom may not be as easily swayed as the dreadful Constable Ricketts.

‘Selection,’ he says aloud into the flames, but he pauses thinking, then shakes his head. ‘Not farming. Not for me.’

A curlew cries and Pharaoh feels a tingle up his spine at the mournful sound. ‘Town farrier?’ he asks himself and again shakes his head. ‘I need a place where no-one cares what I am.’

The curlew cries.

‘I need a place without their God.’

A slight breeze touches his camp and the fire flares. ‘I need Hell with horses.’
The curlew’s third cry is cut short at Pharaoh’s sudden laugh. ‘Coolgardie,’ he calls into the darkness. ‘Pharaoh’s coming.’

The fire hisses suddenly as a fat raindrop turns to steam in the flames. Pharaoh tenses as the bush and the night seem to pause around him, then, with a shocking boom, the clouds open and the deluge begins.

**Wandering, Western Australia, 1896**

Emily Woods shoves the hatchet blade under the hard brown bark of the Jarrah log and pushes along the trunk to peel away a long, broad shingle. As she adds the shingle to a stack beside the log, a huge centipede runs across her blistered hand and she flicks it away with a squeal. She feels the urge to cry at the unfairness of her situation.

The Dowsetts are away in Perth, Lucy reluctantly surrendering to Emily’s insistence that she is old enough to mind Dick for a day until Pharaoh returns. But the rain has not stopped for three days, the cottage roof has more than a dozen leaks and Pharaoh Strange is two days late. If she does not cut and lay new shingles, she and Dick will have to spend another night in dripping wet misery, but the work is hard and she has no tar to seal the patches. She has thought of an alternative – a mortar of mud and ash – but even though Dick is enthusiastic in his mud-collecting duty, Emily is not sure that her planned patching will solve the problem.

‘This enough, Em?’ calls Dick, pointing at his filthy concoction pooled beside the shack.

Emily pushes a strand of sopping hair from her eyes and shrugs. ‘Go grab the bucket and fill it. I’ll get the ladder.’

An exhausted Pharaoh Strange flicks the reins. The last week’s rain has turned every track to a quagmire, and made every creek-crossing a dangerous gamble, every river-crossing almost suicidal stupidity. Patch, one of Pharaoh’s two draught-horses, died, its heart literally bursting from the strain of pulling the wagon through clinging mud and icy torrents. The wagon is too heavy for Pharaoh’s remaining draught-horse to pull alone, but his temperamental stallion is a saddle-horse, never trained to the traces and it makes a difficult and unwilling replacement for stolid, reliable Patch.

At least we’re on the last leg, Pharaoh thinks with relief. ‘Only a half-mile more, fellas,’ he says aloud to the drenched, cantankerous horses. He slaps the reins across the horses’ wet flanks and they drag the wagon through yet another soft patch of red mud to top a low rise in the dripping bush. Finally, he faces the welcome sight of home.
The horses snort, smelling woodsmoke, connecting the familiar scent with the memory of good oats and Pharaoh has to take a firmer grip on the reins to curb their sudden enthusiasm. He peers toward the cottage and frowns. Emily is trying to drag a long piece of bark up a ladder as Dick pushes from below. To Pharaoh, the ladder looks precarious and the kid’s methods downright dangerous. ‘Emily!’ he shouts.

As soon as the shout leaves his mouth, Pharaoh realises his mistake. Emily looks up too quickly and Dick turns, their combined motions causing the bark to twist out of Emily’s hands and into the side of the ladder. Pharaoh watches in shock as the ladder slowly topples to one side, dumping Emily into an unfamiliar black pool beside the shack and dropping the bark directly on top of Dick. Pharaoh drops quickly from the wagon and runs.

Pharaoh ruffles his son’s hair. ‘You’ll live, I reckon.’ Dick is unfazed by the slight graze on his cheek, too excited at his father’s return. Pharaoh turns to Emily and is about to speak, when he has to take a sharp, surprised breath. The person that stands before him covered in filthy mud and ash should be a girl, but the drenched dress clings to the body of a woman and the hard anger in her eyes instantly reminds Pharaoh of one woman in particular. He swallows his immediate sorrow at the memory of Fanny, but the sudden desire stays with him and he feels the blood rushing to his neck as he faces her.

‘Where were you?’ she shouts.

Pharaoh is too stunned by the conflicting emotions within him to be angry. He could tell her that he has nearly died a dozen times trying to get home, that she and Dick are not the only ones to have suffered in the foul weather. ‘Patch died,’ he says instead.

Emily Woods is dry and clean, but far from comfortable; something has changed between her and Pharaoh and she isn’t sure what it is. She has an idea, but refuses to accept it, even though a growing part of her is curious and quietly willing to explore it further.

Since her mother’s death, Pharaoh has been the closest thing to a father Emily could expect and although not a particularly loving man, he has nevertheless provided for her, seen to her education and brought her up as if she were his own daughter. But since his return this morning, something in his expression and in his manner is different.

She, Dick and Pharaoh worked all day together to repair the leaking roof and, even though he laughed at her mortar, Pharaoh complimented Emily on her shingles. When the work was done, after Emily had washed and changed, Pharaoh told her how pretty she looked and when Emily prepared a fairly basic mutton broth, Pharaoh said it was delicious, the best he’d ever had. One
compliment would have been a shock, three was a revelation. In all the time she had known him, she could not remember Pharaoh ever complimenting anyone.

Now Emily looks at the man she calls father to find him staring at her with an expression she recognises. She is fifteen years-old and understands the simple wants of the few local boys she knows, and she has kissed a couple of times, but she has never let any of them go under her clothing, has always managed to overcome their clumsy advances and her own maddening flush of desire. The intent, awkward expression in Pharaoh’s face is almost frightening, but at the same time it fills her with a disquieting sense of pride and she quickly begins to feel that mysterious heat flood through her untouched, private parts to become a deep physical longing, an urge to open herself to this man’s most primal impulses.

She holds Pharaoh’s stare and speaks before she can change her mind. ‘Dick’s asleep.’

Pharaoh nods. ‘He worked hard today – you both did. You must be tired.’

‘Not really.’

Pharaoh drops his gaze to stare at the table-top. ‘You’d better go to bed.’

‘I’m not tired.’

‘Go to bed, Em.’

‘Are you tired?’

Pharaoh shakes his head without speaking.

‘What are you going to do then?’ she asks.

Pharaoh shrugs. ‘Smoke a pipe. Think.’

‘Think about what, Pharaoh?’

Pharaoh is shocked to hear his name come from her lips. His eyes meet hers. ‘Go to bed, girl.’

‘I’m not a girl.’

‘Stop it.’

Emily blushes. ‘Do you love me?’

‘Please, Emily. Go to bed.’

‘No. I want to know. Do you love me?’

When he responds, his voice is half-growl, half-sob. ‘I love you.’

Emily rises and lifts her dress over her head to stand naked before the conflicted man. He gazes at her young body, the pink nipples on her small breasts already erect, the skin at her throat flushed red with rising passion. His eyes travel down to the small, innocent patch of downy hair that covers her sex and his face crumples into a mask of anguish. ‘I’m your father,’ he croaks.

Emily shakes her head and steps forward to take his face in her hands. ‘No, you’re not.’
As she pulls his head into her belly and as he envelopes her in his powerful, dark arms, Emily sighs. ‘I’ll never call you father again. I promise.’

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In a small clearing beside the creek that skirts the Dowsett’s land, two young people lie on a blanket and watch water ripple over rock. A horse crops grass contentedly as the fifteen-year-old girl buttons her blouse, blushing under the approving gaze of the twenty-seven-year-old man. Emily Woods kisses her lover on the lips and places his hand on her belly. ‘I’m late,’ she says, biting her bottom lip.

Jack Pearce drops his jaw. ‘You’re pregnant?’

Emily flushes and nods as the young man vainly tries to swallow his shock. ‘But I thought …?’

‘You thought I was a virgin?’

Jack nods dumbly.

‘Virgins bleed, Jack Pearce. Can you see any blood on this blanket?’

Jack’s stunned surprise slowly gives way to anger and Emily watches the change in his expression. ‘Don’t you dare get angry with me! You got what you wanted.’

Jack’s jaw drops again. ‘I got what I wanted? Is that what this was?’

Emily shrugs. ‘What else?’

‘You just gave me what I wanted … is that it? How many other blokes get what they want from you?’

Emily’s shoulders suddenly slump and she stares into her lap. ‘Only one,’ she says softly.

Jack is still furious. ‘Who?’

‘None of your business.’

‘You think I won’t find out? What about when the baby’s born? You have to say who the father is or the kid won’t get christened. I’ll know then.’

Emily raises her eyes to Jack’s and, though he is tempted to turn away, he holds her gaze.

‘Pharaoh,’ she says finally.

Jack’s eyes nearly pop from their sockets. ‘He’s your father!’

‘He’s not my father!’ snaps Emily. ‘He was my mother’s lover and then, once, he was mine.’

Suddenly Emily starts to cry and Jack shifts uncomfortably as she stares back into her lap and continues. ‘I only gave him what I wanted to give him, and we only ever did it once. After that
time we both knew we didn’t love each other like that. He loved my mother and I’m not her, I’ve always loved you and you’re not him.’

Jack Pearce absorbs her words. ‘You love me?’

Emily raises tear-filled eyes and nods. ‘Always have.’

‘What about the baby?’

‘Can you say Mrs Jack Pearce?’
CHAPTER NINE

Wandering, Western Australia, 1897

Pharaoh Strange dismounts and ties his horse to the top rail of the Dowsett’s yard fence. His wagon and draught horses are safely secured at the cottage and now he looks forward to a pleasant visit with his friends. He also knows that since Emily moved to town, Dick will not go back to the cottage after school. He will come here, to the Dowsett’s home, his home while Pharaoh is on the road.

Pharaoh absently pats the stallion’s nose as he watches his friend chop.

Jack Dowsett hefts the log-splitter and seems to allow it to drop on the thick fire-destined round. The round splits cleanly.

‘Haven’t lost your touch, mate,’ Pharaoh calls.

Pharaoh sees a flash of white on Jack’s face and knows his friend is smiling.

‘See you’re still riding that bloody white mongrel,’ Jack calls back, grabbing another round without looking up. ‘Surprised that bastard hasn’t killed you by now.’

Pharaoh chuckles as he recalls Jack’s one disastrous experience with Tucker the stallion. Jack still bore Tucker’s bite scars and a grudge to go with them.

‘Dick home?’

‘Soon.’

‘How’s Em?’

Jack sets his splitter against the softwood chopping-block and stretches his arms. ‘She likes her job and she’s gettin’ real popular round here. Lucy reckons she’s the best seamstress in the bush and she’s finally got young Jack Pearce roped and tied.’

Pharaoh offers an uncomfortable smile. ‘She’s tracked him in her sights since she was a flea.’

Jack nods and though both men are aware of the unspoken element to this particular subject, neither chooses to pursue it. John Frederick, Emily’s child, only lived for three short days, but his legacy lives on and in many local minds, Pharaoh Strange has become a pariah, branded as an incestuous half-caste heretic and a thoroughly unwelcome presence in the district. The local pastor has publicly railed against his ‘uncivilising influence’, the schoolmaster refers to him as ‘that thug Strange’ and more than a few of the Dowsett’s neighbours heckle Jack and Lucy about their ongoing association with him. Although she says nothing to promote the notion, Emily is perceived as Pharaoh’s innocent victim, a figure to be pitied rather than vilified. Dick Strange is simply ignored.
‘How’s the work?’ asks Jack Dowsett, deliberately changing the subject. Pharaoh’s eyes glint. ‘All good. I’ve got a wad of cash for me and Dick and a wad for you and Lucy.’

Jack raises an eyebrow. ‘Good trip, eh?’

‘Real good.’ Pharaoh scuffs dust on to his friend’s boots. ‘Where’s the rum?’

Jack laughs and nods towards his house. Already beginning to savour his first hard drink in a month, Pharaoh turns and sees the real reason for Jack’s laughter.

‘Good afternoon, Mr Strange. Little early for alcohol, don’t you think?’

Pharaoh rallies quickly. ‘Alcohol, Mrs Dowsett? Who said anything about alcohol?’

‘“Where’s the rum”, Mr Strange?’

‘Not ‘rum’, Mrs Dowsett, mum … just asking after your health.’

Lucy Dowsett purses her lips and frowns ‘I have real children to keep me occupied and healthy, Mr Strange.’ She switches her gaze from Pharaoh to Jack. ‘That your story, Jack Dowsett? You refer to me as ‘mum’ too, do you?’

Jack Dowsett laughs again. ‘Didn’t get much chance to refer to you at all, love. Sounds like you and Pharaoh are telling all the stories.’

Lucy looks questioningly at Pharaoh. ‘Not thirsty at all then, Pharaoh?’

The sudden change in tone and title takes Pharaoh by surprise and he shakes his head before the question registers.

She bites the inside of her cheek to stifle a grin. ‘And here I thought we’d all share a little sip and swap news. Jack?’

‘Wouldn’t say no to a tot.’

‘I’ll join you. How about a nice cup of tea, Pharaoh?’

Pharaoh leans back from the Dowsett’s kitchen table, sips his rum and smiles appreciatively at Lucy. ‘Way to a man’s heart, Lucy.’

She shakes her head. ‘Most men can’t find their hearts. I don’t see why a woman should spend a lifetime helping them look.’ She corks the rum flask. ‘Enough of this – the children will be home shortly. You two sit on the verandah, I’ve got chores.’

Jack leads Pharaoh out to the front verandah and gestures towards two sturdy, rough-hewn rocking-chairs. As Pharaoh sits, he hands Jack a roll of bills. ‘That’s three-hundred.’

Jack’s eyes widen as he stares at the fat roll. ‘You strike it rich?’ he asks, handing the money back.

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘That’s yours, mate and no arguments.’
‘I can’t take three-hundred quid, Pharaoh!’
‘You just did and you’re keeping it.’
‘How’d you come by this much spare cash?’
‘I’ll drink to Paddy Hannan.’
‘Who?’
‘Irish fella. Found new gold near Coolgardie. They used to call the place ‘Hannans Rush’, but now it’s a real town called Kalgoorlie and it’s one of the biggest towns in Western Australia.’
Jack gestures with the roll. ‘You did strike it rich then …’
‘Not with a bloody shovel, I didn’t. Couple of thousand men means a couple of hundred horses. I worked solid for three months, got paid in gold and got out when I sold my last donkey.’
Jack looks confused.
‘I bought twenty of the mongrels in York. Twenty quid each.’
Jack frowns, doing the math. ‘You had four-hundred quid?’
Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘I didn’t have forty quid, but the bloke with the donkeys is an old customer of mine. He gave me credit.’
‘How did you get them all out there?’
Pharaoh laughs. ‘Well, first I thought I could drive them like any other stock. Ever tried to drive twenty donkeys? You can’t. Some wouldn’t move, some started fighting and biting, one just said ‘thank you very much’ and took off for the bush.’
Jack joins Pharaoh in a chuckle.
‘So,’ Pharaoh continues, ‘I rounded them all up and was standing outside their pen just staring, thinking that I might’ve bitten off more than I could chew, when I hear this Godawful mooing racket behind me. I turn around and there’s ten of the biggest bullocks you’ve ever seen pulling a massive bloody freight wagon. It’s a bullocky, right? I’ve seen it a million times and here I am, dumber than dirt, wondering how I’m going to get a few mangy donkeys to the desert.’
Jack nods. ‘You hitched ‘em.’
‘Yep. I gave my horses a holiday, hitched every one of the flop-eared, stubborn bastards in front of my wagon and drove like Lord-bloody-muck all the way to the goldfields.’
‘They pulled alright?’
Pharaoh grins. ‘They pulled alright. I bought a stock-whip from the bullocky.’
The two men laugh aloud. ‘I can see it, mate,’ says Jack. ‘It must have scared the hell out of those miners to see a crazy black bugger roll in with twenty half-dead, flogged donkeys.’
Pharaoh pretends to be insulted. ‘Half-dead? Not my donkeys, mate! I’ll have you know that by the time I arrived, my donkeys were the fittest, most well-behaved donkeys in Western Australia. My donkeys brought fifty-quid each.’

Jack does the math again. ‘You made six-hundred quid on donkeys?’

Pharaoh shrugs, embarrassed. ‘Five hundred.’

‘Did you lose a couple?’

‘No.’

Jack frowns. ‘You should have made six-hundred profit after the four they cost you.’

‘I had to keep a couple.’

‘Why? That meant you’d have to bring them all the way back.’

Pharaoh shrugs again. ‘I liked them.’

Jack shakes his head and laughs. ‘It only has to look like a bloody horse and you’ll fall in love with it.’ He looks at his friend and decides not to press the point. ‘Anyway, you made a fortune on donkeys. Find any gold?’

‘Didn’t have time to look. I was too busy charging triple my usual rates shoeing the donkeys I’d just sold and those blokes still thought I was the most generous fella in the country. Donkeys aren’t the only overpriced things in that territory, mate and that’s why I’m heading straight back out there. I’m taking Dick with me.’

Lucy Dowsett swipes angrily at the tears in her eyes. She has heard every word of the men’s conversation and, although she has always known that Pharaoh would one day come to take his son away, she has held to a quiet, unspoken wish that he would wait until the boy was no longer a boy.

Fanny’s death hurt more than Lucy could ever have imagined, but she rose to the shocking situation by embracing the children as if they were her own. Now, since her own children are grown and even Emily has moved to start her life in town, Dick is the only child left on the Dowsett farm. The idea of life without children scares Lucy more than drought, more than snakes, more than fire and more than flood and, as she stands in her kitchen, work-toughened hands clenched against the tempest of her own emotions, she realises that with Dick’s departure, her one, true purpose for existing will also be removed. Extending the house, expanding the gardens, compounding profit, these are simply means to a more comfortable physical reality. Children comfort her soul, soften the edges of hardship and turn toils into labours of love. Without children, she fears that she will exist only to work and work only to exist, knowing that
the man she loves and calls husband will never need her and depend upon her as much as children have.

She places a clenched fist on her belly and squeezes her eyes shut, willing her body to re-ignite it’s most precious and sacred fire. She imagines the heat of fertility, the warm, ready earth of her womb laid fallow but now aching for the vital seed. Lucy Dowsett prays for life as the men drink rum and talk money.

‘No,’ she says aloud, as she suddenly straightens, lifts her chin and strides determinedly out to confront Pharaoh Strange.

The fly-screen door slams against the exterior wall and the two men turn shocked faces to the enraged woman. ‘What’s wrong, luv?’ asks Jack, beginning to rise from his rocker. He pauses when he sees that Lucy’s glare is focused squarely on Pharaoh.

Pharaoh raises his eyebrows. ‘You heard, then?’ he asks with a touch of nervous humour.

‘I heard,’ says Lucy in a cold, brutally clipped voice. ‘I heard a foolish man talk nonsense. I heard a man with no education say oh, so casually that he intends to drag a brilliant young mind into the desert and teach him … what? What will he learn, Pharaoh? What will you teach him that his school and his life here can’t?’

‘I’ve got education,’ growls Pharaoh, instantly bristling at Lucy’s pre-emptive strike. ‘I’ve got a chest full of books and I’ve read every one. I know my times table by heart. I know my adding and my take aways. I can give him that much of school learning.’

Lucy opens her mouth, but Pharaoh stands suddenly and holds up his hand. ‘No! You asked, Lucy, so I’m answering. I want the same thing for Dick that my fa wanted for me. I want him in a good trade and I reckon he’s got the makings of a damned fine timber-man.’ Pharaoh looks at Jack. ‘I know he could learn here with you, Jack, but I want him with me now.’

‘Selfish!’ snaps Lucy.

‘Yep,’ says Pharaoh. ‘That’s true. I am being selfish. I want my son with me.’ Pharaoh stops suddenly and eyes Lucy knowingly. He does not ask the obvious question, but Lucy understands his expression. Lucy realises that if Pharaoh is selfish for wanting to take Dick, then she must be equally as selfish for wanting to keep him. Both men shiver at the stark, lost, defeated expression that suddenly drops over her face like cold, dawn mist. ‘Books?’ she asks vaguely. ‘What books? I didn’t even know you could read.’

* * *
‘Get up, Darkie.’

Dick wipes blood from his broken lip. The punch was unexpected and Dick did not want to fight, especially not with Titch Hill. Titch is huge, a year older than Dick and known in the Williams bush school as a particularly vicious protagonist. But if his mocking grin is a minor prod, his reference to Dick’s skin-colour is a bullwhip. Dick clenches his fists and rises to his feet.

‘Come’n fight, abo.’

A ring of excited kids suddenly forms and their exclamations expose their alliances. Most, Dick realises sadly, seem to favour the bully.

Titch stands with his legs apart and his arms by his sides, totally confident in his size and prowess. Dick remembers his father’s lessons: ‘Keep your feet moving all the time. Let him swing at you, but keep ducking and weaving so he can’t hit you. Keep your left fist up – that’s your jabber and your swiper. Keep your right fist cocked behind – that’s your straight shot. Jab his nose to hurt him, shoot his jaw to knock him down. If he goes down, don’t kick him – that’s for cowards and coppers – let him get up, get set, then knock him right back on his arse. If you beat him fair, he won’t come back and his mates’ll leave you alone.’

Titch laughs at Dick’s pugilist pose and gestures at the crowd. ‘Lookit ‘im. Thinks he’s a boxer.’ The crowd laughs.

‘Lookit ‘im,’ shouts Dick. ‘Knows he’s a fat pile of shit.’

The crowd roars and Titch comes in swinging. Dick ducks back from a wild punch and snaps a jab straight on to the point of Titch’s nose. Blood flies and the bully looks surprised. His surprise turns to shock as Dick’s right fist connects cleanly with the side of his jaw. Titch goes down to one knee as Dick jumps back. Dick is as surprised as his enemy, and silently thanks his Dad for the good advice.

Titch rises, red-faced and bloody. His left fist comes up, his right fist cocks back and Dick knows that he is in serious trouble. Dad had not said anything about what to do if the other bloke knew the game. Either Titch knows, or he’s learning pretty bloody quickly.

The crowd noise drops as the kids sense a serious turn to the excitement.

Titch steps forward and throws a few exploratory jabs. Dick weaves easily out of range and circles his opponent. ‘He’s flat-footed. Punches slow,’ thinks Dick.

Titch tries to connect again, but Dick manages to land a short jab on his opponent’s cheek before ducking away.

The crowd is silent.
Titch changes tactics and attacks with a flurry of hard punches. Dick takes the attack on his arms, backs away and realises that Titch’s belly is totally unprotected. Dad had said that a good belly shot could win a fight but so could a good belly. If Dick goes for the shot and it doesn’t hurt his opponent, Dick will have to be quick to get his guard back up. If he isn’t quick enough, the taller, stronger boy will be all over him.

Dick’s eyes narrow as his focus sharpens and he goes for the belly shot. His right fist sinks deep into unmuscled fat and Titch drops like a wheat sack to instantly vomit all over Dick’s shoes.

The crowd is hardly appreciative; a chorus of groans accompanies Dick’s victory instead of the jubilant rejoicing he might have expected. But Dick expects nothing – he is too relieved to be alive and in one piece, and he just wants to get the disgusting vomit off his shoes.

‘Richard Strange!’

The crowd scatters at the familiar and dreaded roar. ‘All this for this,’ Dick says aloud, slumping resignedly.

Mr Myles does not need much of an excuse to make life a living hell for kids, especially not Dick’s life. The battle between the schoolmaster and the Strange family began when Pharaoh Strange first brought Dick and Emily to attend the Wandering school. Myles had suggested that ‘Dick might be better off at a school that caters to abo kids’ and Pharaoh had nearly burst a blood vessel. Dick remembered his father’s yell ‘Do I look abo?’ and the look of terror on the schoolmaster’s face when Pharaoh grabbed his shirtfront and asked ‘Do you think you’re about to be thrashed by abo hands, then?’

Myles capitulated, thinking that yes, Pharaoh did look like an abo but not really caring at that particular moment where the hands came from, just as long as they did not stay where they were. The first round went to the Strange family.

Three months later, schoolmaster Myles decided to speak ill of Dick’s half-sister Emily and Dick had not approved. He showed his disapproval by throwing an ink-pot which shattered on the schoolmaster’s ear, nearly severing it completely. A local doctor had fixed the ear, but could not get the ink stain out of the wound, leaving a permanent and unwanted tattoo on the side of the schoolmaster’s head. With two rounds in favour of the Strange family, this current infraction is a godsend for Myles.

‘I fell over, sir.’ Titch Hill groans as he stands shakily and catches Dick’s eye. Dick is momentarily confused, but quickly understands that Titch is no longer his enemy – both boys are now allied against a common foe.

‘Rubbish, Hill.’
Titch faces the schoolmaster, wipes blood and vomit with his sleeve and sneers. ‘Not rubbish, sir. I fell.’
Myles glares at both boys and turns to Dick. ‘That your story, Strange?’
‘Yes, sir. He fell.’
Myles looks at Dick’s swelling, bloody lip. ‘I suppose you also fell?’
‘No, sir.’
Titch inhales sharply and Myles raises his eyebrows. ‘How do you explain that lip then?’
‘Mean horse, sir.’
‘Horse?’
‘Yes, sir.’
The schoolmaster’s eyebrows drop. ‘What damned horse?’
‘Went that way, sir.’ Dick points vaguely west.
Titch groans as he fights between a giggle and the ache in his abused belly.
Myles’ tattooed ear is purpling. ‘A horse was in the schoolyard? A horse came into my schoolyard just to kick you in the face?’
‘Didn’t kick me, sir.’
‘Then what happened to your blasted lip?’ Myles shouts.
‘Bit me, sir. Real mean horse, sir.’
‘Black, sir.’
‘What?’
‘Black horse, sir,’ offers Titch, grinning painfully at Dick. ‘Yes, sir, real Darkie-horse, it was.’
Dick returns the grin.
‘Black as ink,’ say both boys together.

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‘How’s your hands, abo?’
Dick turns angrily, but grins when he sees his questioner. ‘The cane hurts but you hit harder.’
Titch blushes. ‘Didn’t make you spew your guts out though, did I?’
‘Made Mylesy spew though.’
Titch giggles. ‘Thought he was gunna keel over.’
The boys laugh together for a few moments then both become quiet.
‘Good fight, eh?’
‘Yeah Titch, good fight.’

Titch blushes again and offers his hand. ‘Shake, mate?’

Dick grabs the offered hand firmly. ‘Don’t call me abo.’

Titch frowns and squeezes. ‘What are you then?’

Dick squeezes back. ‘I dunno. My dad’s a bit brown. Don’t know about my mum.’

Titch stops squeezing Dick’s hand, shakes it once and lets go. ‘What colour’s your mum then?’

Dick glares. ‘I don’t know about my mum.’

Titch pauses to consider. ‘Your Dad’s pretty close to white, though. Talks white.’ He nods.

‘You must be white too.’

Dick wonders how much white makes him white. He points to his arm. ‘I’m this colour.’

Titch laughs. ‘Shit brown.’

Dick grins. ‘Least I don’t look like a big boiled spud with freckles.’

Titch tries to look indignant, but fails and giggles. ‘You’re a mad bugger, Darkie.’

Dick is silent for a beat. ‘Wanna get some yabbies?’

Titch nods. ‘I know the best spot.’

‘No, I know the best spot.’

‘Got your ruler?’

Dick reaches into his satchel. ‘Flats or numbers?’

‘Flats.’

Dick flips the ruler into the air. It spins rapidly and lands flat side down. Dick shrugs. ‘Guess you win’

Titch smiles innocently. ‘Don’t I always?’ He jabs at Dick’s arm and lumbers off toward the line of thick eucalypt that surrounds the Wandering school. Dick runs after him.

As the boys charge through thin underbrush, Dick notices scorch marks on the mature trees.

‘That from the bush fire?’ he pants.

Titch stops and gulps air. ‘Yep. But it wasn’t a wildfire, it was a backburn.’

‘What’s the difference?’

Titch sneers. ‘You a city-boy, or what?’

‘No. Just don’t know what you’re talking about. You probably don’t either.’

Titch reddens. ‘My Dad’s in the brigade. He did all the bush around here and I helped sometimes.’

‘You mean the fire brigade?’

Titch nods proudly. ‘My Dad’s the Captain.’
Dick is impressed. ‘So what’s a wildfire?’

‘When a fire’s out of control. A backburn is a fire lit by the brigade.’

‘The fire brigade lights fires?’

‘Fire,’ Titch lectures as he continues walking through the bush, ‘is a comical reaction. It inquires three elephants: air, heat and fuel. If you remove one elephant the fire goes out. If you want to stop a fire from starting the easiest elephant to remove is fuel. The best way to remove the fuel elephant is to burn it.’

Dick giggles. ‘So your Dad burns elephants?’

‘Not those kind of elephants; the other elephants – air, heat and fuel.’

The boys suddenly break through the scrub above a healthy running creek and Titch points upstream. As they clamber down the bank, Dick thinks of his father and remembers his advice. ‘You’re luckier than most bush kids,’ his father had said. ‘Mum Fanny made sure you and your sister got a start on your reading and writing and now you have what’s called a broad vocabulary – it’s up to you to keep building on it. Your sister’s allowed to show it off, because most people appreciate a smart girl. You have to keep yours under your shirt, Dick, because most bush blokes put hard work in front of learning letters. You’ll find yourself in a few scrapes if you speak in language simpler blokes don’t understand. Don’t correct a man’s language, either – unless he’s a good mate you trust or a complete fool you want to embarrass.’

Dick does not want to embarrass the hard-hitting Titch and isn’t sure if Titch can be called a ‘good mate’, so he pauses before he offers a correction to the big fellow’s grammar.

Titch stops near a willow overhang and points into the water under the curtain of branches. ‘Million yabbies in there.’

Dick nods appreciatively. ‘Bloody good spot.’ He lifts his lunch tin out of his satchel and places it at his feet, then rummages around in the satchel for his yabby string. Titch quietly investigates his immediate surrounds for any unsuspecting locust, caterpillar, spider or grub he might use as bait. Dick joins the search and ponders the ramifications of keeping his mouth shut. He realises that if he and Titch are to be real mates, they will have to accept each other’s abilities, shortcomings and well-meant advice.

‘Elements, Titch, not elephants.’

Titch frowns and Dick stands uncomfortably, waiting for the explosion that will herald the end of their potential friendship. Finally, Titch shrugs. ‘Sounds about right.’ He nods. ‘Yeah, that’s the word. Elements.’

Dick is still uncomfortable. He wonders if Titch is embarrassed, but Titch simply looks at him curiously. ‘Heard Mylesy talking to your mum about how brainy you are.’
‘Mrs Dowsett isn’t my mum, but what did Mylesy say?’

Titch purses his lips. ‘She may not be your real mum – like, the one who had you – but she sure bloody acts like a mum. And she sure treats you like a real son.’

Dick knows that there is mostly truth in Titch’s statement, but feels annoyed for reasons he cannot name. ‘How do you know how she treats me?’

‘Cause of what she said to Mylesy.’

‘What did she say?’

Titch glares. ‘I was trying to tell you what Mylesy said so I could tell you what she said, but you opened your stupid abo mouth and butted in before I could.’

Dick glares back. ‘I’m not stupid.’

‘No … and that’s what Mylesy said.’

Dick is very frustrated. ‘What did Mylesy say?’

‘I was trying to tell you that,’ Titch says in a low, sulky mumble.

Dick sighs dramatically. ‘Alright, I won’t interrupt. Tell me.’

Titch bends down at the base of a huge, ancient Jarrah, pushes aside leaf litter and begins to dig into the soil around the roots. ‘Mylesy was talking to your mu… Mrs Dowsett … about Kitty. You know how Kitty Dowsett stopped coming to school ‘cause George Lewis got her pregnant? Well, either Mylesy was the only person in about a thousand miles who didn’t know what happened to Kitty, or he was just being a smartarse and wanted to hear Mrs Dowsett say it.’ Titch grabs something buried in the black dirt and slides a huge, fat, yellow-white grub out of the soil.

‘Witchetty! Bewdy! Grab your lunch tin.’

Dick complies and, with the Witchetty grub safely captured, Titch continues. ‘Anyway, Mrs Dowsett told Mylesy to mind his own business as far as Kitty was concerned and get on with the important business of agitating her other children.’

‘Educating.’

‘Yeah, educating. So anyway, Mylesy says Timothy’s work is etiquette …’

‘Adequate.’

‘Yeah. Peter needs to be more … attentive?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Elsie needs improvement with her sums. Then Mrs Dowsett asks “How is my dear young Richard shaping up?”’

‘She said dear?’

‘Yep, and Mylesy goes “He is my most intelligent pupil and he has the ponsh … potency …’

‘Potential.’
‘Yeah. He has the potential to choose just about any trade inquiring a knowledge of letters.’
‘Requiring.’
‘Yeah. So Mrs Dowsett goes “Yes, he is a remarkable lad” and Mylesy goes “A pity he is also remarkably undisciplined’. That right? Undisciplined?’

Dick nods and Titch grins as he continues. ‘So Mrs Dowsett gets angry and says “Richard is a polite, charming, helpful young man. If any attitude needs discipline, it’s yours, Sir” and she walked off. Mylesy was really shitty.’

‘How did you hear all this? Where were you?’

Titch stops digging and looks slyly at Dick. ‘Remember last Christmas when we had that Supper at the School thing?’

‘Yeah, but I didn’t go. My Dad was home.’

‘Oh. Well anyway, there was a big bowl of fruit punch that they wouldn’t let the kids drink and we all had to drink Mrs bloody Morgan’s pissweak sour lemonade.’

Dick makes a face. ‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah … and I put three live yabbies in the fruit punch.’

Dick giggles. ‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah … and Mylesy got one in his cup.’

Dick laughs. ‘Did it nip his lip?’

Titch grins gleefully. ‘No, but I think Mylesy was interested in that woman from the Williams school, cause he invited her to the party. I was standing just inside the schoolhouse watching the punchbowl and along comes Mylesy, looking all slicked-back and soaped-up, chatting up this schoolteacher. They walk up to the punchbowl and grab these fancy glass cups and she’s doing this honky sort of laugh while he’s yabbering away and dipping his cup into the punch. When he lifts the cup to his mouth, she sees the yabby. He’s blabbing bullshit and doesn’t realise that the bloody yabby’s about an inch away from his beard. She sort-of scream honks really loud and it scares the shit outta Mylesy. He jumps about a foot straight up into the air, the punch goes all over his beard and the yabby gets a real good grip. He gets this dumb-looking grin on his face ’cause he’s spilled the punch and he’s embarrassed, but she’s honking even louder. He doesn’t even know he’s got a yabby hangin’ off his face.’

Dick looks ready to explode. ‘Did she tell him?’

Titch gulps air. ‘No. She grabbed the yabby and damn near pulled his beard off.’

The boys laugh until their bellies hurt and Dick asks, ‘But what’s that got to do with you hearing what you heard?’
Titch looks up with a twinkling eye. ‘I went and got my yabbies back, but Mylesy saw me. He made me stay after school for three months and clean the school windows.’

Dick strolls contentedly up the dirt track towards home, pondering a successful day. He has a dozen large yabbies in his satchel, he has once again jerked the tail of his school-master nemesis and he has turned a bullying rival into an adventure-sharing friend. A good day suddenly made better by the sight of his father’s horse. Dick runs.

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‘Keep your hat on in the daytime.’
Dick nods.
‘Stay warm at night.’
Dick nods.
‘Read your father’s books. Times-table every day.’
Dick nods as Pharaoh flicks the reins and the wagon starts to roll. Lucy walks alongside. ‘Will you write me as soon as you can?’
‘Yes,’ says Dick.
‘Promise?’ Lucy demands, stopping by a gatepost.
‘Promise,’ Dick smiles. ‘Bye, Mrs Dowsett!’
Pharaoh raises his hand. ‘I’ll keep him safe. Bye, Lucy.’
The wagon turns out through the Dowsett’s front gate and rolls north, its driver looking towards the road ahead, its passenger turning once to farewell the life behind.
As the hard ground sucks greedily at her tears, Lucy Dowsett’s arm stays in the air until the forest swallows the wagon and her grief swallows her strength.

‘Books, fa?’ asks Dick Strange a few miles further up the road. ‘What books?’

**Coolgardie Track, Western Australia, 1898**

Dick Strange is far from exhaustion, despite the long days of travel, ever-eastward across the wide, endless Western Australian plains to Southern Cross. He is still too excited to be tired, but his father has warned him that the worst is still to come on this last leg of their journey across to Coolgardie then on to the place once called Hannan’s Rush, now known as Kalgoorlie. His
father’s warning came in a poem, repeated, Pharaoh insisted, by every poor teamster who ever completed the Southern Cross to Coolgardie leg.

Damn Coolgardie! Damn the track!
Damn the goldfields, there and back!
Damn the flies and damn the weather
Damn the country altogether!

Dick shares the unknown poet’s disdain for the flies which cover his back in a moving blanket to suck the sweat from his shirt, force him from heat-inspired lethargy to constantly flick them away as they crawl on sticky legs into his eyes, nose, mouth and ears and inhabit the vast land in such countless billions as to fill the air with a hungry, mind-numbing hum.

He also agrees with the poet’s damnation of the weather. He tries to describe it to himself and thinks of the nightly campfire: too close and the eyelids droop and the bones turn soft under the skin which dries and tightens in the heat until the entire body is like a blister ready to burst. Too far from the fire and the chill begins in the feet and the hands, then, like creeping death, moves relentlessly through the bones to settle in the kidneys. The teeth chatter and the body shivers and the mind retreats into desperate memories of the day, the sun and the glorious heat. Dick decides that despite the wide, visible expanses that surround him, the days are too close and despite the small fire-lit space enclosed by walls of darkness, the night is too far.

Dick laughs and, beside him on the wagon seat, Pharaoh gives him a glance. ‘What’s funny, boy? I need a laugh.’

Dick shrugs. ‘Just thinking that when it’s day, I wish it was night and when it’s night, I wish it was day.’

Pharaoh chuckles, but there is an uncomfortable under-tone in the sound. ‘That’s life, I s’pose. Can’t be two opposites at the same time.’

‘Chalk or cheese,’ says Dick.

‘Young or old, smart or stupid.’

‘Good or evil.’ Dick stares at his father and raises an eyebrow. ‘What about black or white? We’re both, aren’t we?’

Pharaoh flicks the reins and shakes his head. ‘Black and white’ve got nothing to do with colour, Dick. We’re both and neither, so we have to choose which one we want to pretend to be. I chose white.’

‘Bugger that, fa,’ says Dick with a sniff, ‘I’m not pretending. I choose brown.’
Pharaoh flicks the reins again and says nothing.

The sun commands the western horizon, a giant red-orange sphere that paints the cloudless sky the colour of boiled marron. Dick drops a bundle of dry, brittle mulga beside the fire and props himself on a kerosene tin to watch his father gently rub down one of his beloved draught-horses. Although he has never said as much, he knows he does not share Pharaoh’s obsession with the animals. Dick loves the timber, the rich, almost sweet sap-scent, the beautiful and intricate shapes and flows in the grain, the satisfaction of deciphering the grain-puzzle to make the perfect cut.

Dick gazes out over the flat, red landscape and thinks of all the small signs he has noticed in the changing flora, the tall timbers shrinking and losing their stately postures to become cringing, gnarled mulga and stunted eucalypt, the glitter and music of running watercourses fading to the drab dun and mournful tones of windblown gullies, the gradual shift from green abundance to red-brown desolation.

To Dick, this country is oppressively wide, and he misses the implied protection of forest with its walls of rough bark, its canopy of green and the dappled cool shelter of shade. The trees here stand alone, separate, stark, guardians of their private shade, under siege by sun and saltbush.

Pharaoh finishes with the horse and joins his son at the fire, sitting with a contented growl on a kero-tin of his own. ‘Lot easier without those bloody donkeys,’ he says, adding a small branch to the flames. ‘Still, I hope I haven’t made a mistake.’

‘What mistake, fa?’

Pharaoh sniffs. ‘I got the first lot of donkeys from a bloke called Baker. Made a good quid. We were going to take out another lot, but Baker told me about these Ashkan blokes and their bloody camels.’ Pharaoh shakes his head and chuckles. ‘Anyway, Baker reckons those blokes have taken hundreds of the ugly buggers out to the goldfields and he reckons that the prospectors love ‘em.’

Dick shakes his head. ‘I reckon I’d rather have a donkey than one of those things, fa. They look dangerous to me.’

‘They are dangerous! They kick, they bite, they’re bad-tempered and if you load ‘em just a little bit heavy, it takes a bullock team to shift ‘em.’

‘What’s the good of them, then?’

‘Water, son. Bloody things can go a week without a drop and with water at a shilling a gallon out here, they’re the only things a prospector can afford.’ Pharaoh pokes the fire again. ‘That’s why we’re carting so much water and that’s why we’re not taking donkeys.’
Dick looks at his father’s frown. ‘What’s the trouble, then? Donkeys wouldn’t be any good to us if we couldn’t sell them so why do you think you’ve made a mistake?’

Pharaoh scuffs the ground with his boot. ‘It’s not the donkeys we’re not taking that worry me. It’s the ones I already sold.’

‘What are you worried about?’

‘Water. I just hope those bastards have been giving them enough to drink.’

Dick smiles. ‘You love your animals, don’t you, fa?’

‘Yep.’

‘I love the timber.’

‘Yep.’

Dick raises his eyebrows. ‘You knew?’

Pharaoh nods. ‘Couldn’t keep you out of it when Jack and I worked the sleepers … and I’ve seen you cut enough times to know that you’re a bloody natural with the axe. I reckon you have to love the wood to cut it right.’

‘Not much out here, though - and not much call for cutters, I reckon.’

Pharaoh grins and looks wide-eyed at his son. ‘That right? What about railway lines and head-works and houses? What did you think you’d be doing while I was working my trade? You think you were just going to sit at the camp and wait for me to come home and feed you?’

Dick shrugs. ‘I thought you’d want me helping you.’

‘I do … but not with the horses, Dick. You stick to what you do best. There’s thousands out here that can throw a shovel and dig a bloody hole, but how many of ‘em can cut a sleeper or a beam? How many of ‘em know how to carve good structural studs out of a log? How many want to? These blokes out here have got gold on the brain, son, and to find it they’ll stop doing everything they should be doing to survive. The funny thing is that it’s not the ones who find the gold that make the quids because the ones who find it have to give it away to the ones who cart the water, work the iron, sell the food and cut the timber. Without your timber, their holes would cave in, their railways wouldn’t be built and they’d be drinkin’ their rums in the sun.’

Dick is stunned. ‘You want me to work timber?’ He sweeps his arms out as if to touch the horizon. ‘Out here?’

Pharaoh shrugs. ‘I don’t care if the horse is sway-backed, spindly-legged and blind in both eyes; I’ll still do a proper job on it. Why do you care what the tree’s like? A log’s a log and your job’s your job – unless you’re thinking about digging bloody holes?’

Dick flushes. ‘I thought about it.’

Pharaoh shakes his head and chuckles. ‘Well, that’s something I’d like to see.’
‘What?’
‘You digging holes with your broad-axe. You’d have to – we didn’t bring a pick and if you want one made by me it’ll cost you two quid.’

‘Two quid?’
‘That’s the going rate out here.’ Pharaoh places his hand on Dick’s shoulder and gives it an affectionate squeeze. ‘Stick to the timber, son. Stick to doing what you love to do and keep learning how to do it better. You might never have a pocket full of yellow stuff, but you’ll be as satisfied as blokes like us can ever be.’

Dick studies his father’s face and feels a rush of warm love for the fiery little man. ‘I love you, fa.’

Pharaoh clears his throat. ‘You’d bloody well better! There’s only two in this … brown tribe … so we better bloody love each other!’

Dick grins and opens his mouth to reply, but jumps as Pharaoh suddenly grabs his arm in a tight grip. ‘Quiet,’ Pharaoh hisses, his body tense and his eyes glinting fiercely. He removes his hand from Dick’s arm and speaks in a low, barely audible tone. ‘Don’t turn around, walk to the wagon, rifle’s in the scabbard behind the backboard. Get it, slide under the wagon and be ready. Don’t shoot unless I tell you.’

Dick does not argue. His father has explained the dangers of the Coolgardie track and although most of the other travellers they’ve met have seemed amicable and harmless, Dick chooses instantly to follow his father’s instructions and assume the worst about the as yet unseen visitor.

He walks to the wagon, hoping that he appears casual and scanning his memory of the day’s passing acquaintances to try and put a suspicious face to the guest. He visualises the swampers, walking beside their overloaded drays, the barrow-pushing prospectors, sweating and cursing east-bound along the wheel-ruts, their eyes feverish with hunger and gold-lust. He recalls the west-bound, the defeated ones, trudging penniless and exhausted away from their dreams.

As he deftly slides the rifle from its scabbard and rolls under the wagon to lie on his belly, he remembers a recent face, a defeated prospector with a misplaced smile that did not touch his eyes. He could have back-tracked, Dick thinks and slides his finger over the rifle’s trigger to aim out into the darkness behind the still, sitting figure of his father.

‘Hallo the camp!’
Pharaoh rises and turns towards the voice. ‘Walk in, mister.’

The darkness coalesces into the shape of a man and, under the wagon, Dick’s eyes narrow in recognition. It is the smiler.
‘Spare a bit o’ water, can ye?’ asks the smiler, his voice fruity with bonhomie.
‘I can spare some,’ Pharaoh replies as he gestures for the stranger to sit on Dick’s kero tin and reaches down beside his own for the damp waterbag.

The smiler sits and grabs the offered waterbag. He screws off the lid in a rush and pours water greedily into his mouth, spilling as much as he drinks.

‘Bit thirsty, fella?’

The smiler turns a drenched face towards his host, all glistening beard under sun-blistered skin, his pale eyes shifting from Pharaoh to the wagon and back again. He smiles as he nods. ‘First drink since this mornin’. Ran out and no bastard’d help. No bastard.’

‘Long way to Southern Cross with no water.’

The smiler nods again, but his expression suddenly changes and he glares at Pharaoh suspiciously. ‘I never said which way I’m goin’.’

Pharaoh shrugs. ‘Saw you headed west a couple of hours back.’

The smile re-appears. ‘Changed me mind.’

Pharaoh turns to stare into the smiler’s eyes. ‘Long way back to Coolgardie, too.’

‘Bugger Coolgardie!’ snarls the smiler, unsmiling. ‘Post Office! ‘Lectricity! Twenty-seven pubs without a decent drink between ‘em!’

‘Sounds civilised.’

‘Civilised me arse! A bloke can’t make a quid workin’ for companies and it’s all companies now! Bastard companies popping up quicker than a nigger on a dropped shillin’.’

Dick tenses under the wagon, but loosens his finger at Pharaoh’s slight head-shake.

The smiler gulps down more water and then turns to Pharaoh again, his eyes manic. ‘You’re no miner. No prospector neither.’ His smile turns to a half-sneer. ‘I reckon you’re goin’ to trade. Sell whatever’s on that there,’ he points to the wagon, ‘and run back to the green country with a pocket full ‘o the good dust.’

‘Could be,’ says Pharaoh.

The smiler cackles harshly. ‘Companies’ll have ya for breakfast, mate. I was you I’d skip bloody Coolgardie and head straight out to Kal.’

The smiler casually scratches at a point above his belt and Dick tenses again at a sudden glint beneath the man’s shirt.

‘But I’m not you and you’re not me, are ye?’ the smiler asks rhetorically. ‘You’ll go to bloody Coolgardie and get nothin’. I won’t.’

The smiler moves quickly, but Pharaoh rolls off his tin and grabs a thick mulga branch from Dick’s pile of firewood. ‘Don’t shoot!’ he yells and each man in the triangle reacts instantly to
the hard command in his tone. The smiler freezes, his hand slowly surrendering its grip on the knife not more than half drawn from behind his belt. ‘I forgot about the other one,’ he says.

Dick’s finger loosens on the trigger and he stares in shock at the man he nearly killed. Pharaoh brandishes the branch. ‘Dick?’ he growls. ‘If he moves, shoot him down.’

The smiler tries a weak smile, opens his hands and holds his arms above his head.

‘Dick?’ Pharaoh says. ‘If he smiles …’

The smiler stops smiling.

The smiler is tied to a wheel on the Strange’s wagon. Dick and Pharaoh sit on their kero tins and watch him across the fire.

‘What’s your name?’ growls Pharaoh.

The smiler glances at his captors, the little dark man with the dangerous eyes and the big beard, and the hard-eyed youth with the rifle. ‘Bill Wicks.’

‘My boy’s ready to shoot you, Bill Wicks,’ says Pharaoh without expression. ‘Why don’t you tell him why he shouldn’t?’

Bill forces a smile at Dick, but Dick’s eyes flash and the terrified prospector drops all pretense. ‘I been starvin’. I been dyin’ o’ thirst. I’m mad, lad. I don’t know what I’m doin’ or why I’m doin’ it.’ His face shifts again to form an expression somewhere between rage and anguish. ‘I been there since early days. I seen the typhoid. I seen murder. I seen nuggets big as me fist.’ His eyes widen and his sudden grin is frightening in its intensity. ‘Found nuggets, too. Found that good dust. Found a fortune, but spent it all. Spent it all, every beautiful bit.’ He stares at Dick. ‘Too many people, see? Not enough tucker, not enough water an’ never enough gold to pay for what is there.’ He shakes his head and frowns. ‘Coulda worked for the companies, but you can’t get rich workin’ for the companies. Gold’s never yours, see? I find it, it’s mine, I reckon. Bugger the companies!’

‘He’s mad, fa,’ says Dick.

‘Could be,’ Pharaoh replies, ‘but he’s not lying.’ Pharaoh turns to his captive. ‘How long since you’ve eaten?’

‘Coolgardie. Last of me good dust for a tin of beef.’

Pharaoh looks at his son. ‘About three days and he said his water ran out this morning. I don’t know if he’s always mad, son. I think he’s just gone as low as a man can go and he’s not thinking straight.’ Pharaoh turns quickly and glares at Bill Wicks. ‘You killed before?’

Wicks slumps against the wheel and his chin drops to his chest. His sobs are barely audible as he shakes his head without speaking.
‘I asked you a question!’

‘No,’ Wicks mumbles.

‘Why’d you try for me then?’

‘I’m a fool. I gave in.’ Wicks is crying openly now. ‘I’m not a murderer. I’m not. I just don’t wanna die and I can feel meself dyin’. I seen corpses on the track, seen ‘em on the diggings, seen ‘em behind the fancy buildings in Coolgardie an’ I done what every other bastard done – I walked past and forgot ‘em. I seen meself dead and bastards walkin’ past and that scares me white. Scares me white.’

Pharaoh rises and walks across to grab something from a wooden crate in the rear of the wagon. He steps to Wicks and stands over him. ‘Eat,’ he says.

Wicks raises his eyes to see his captor holding out an open tin of beef with one hand and a spoon with the other. Wicks shakes his head in disbelief. ‘I was gunna kill ya and rob ya.’

‘Yep,’ says Pharaoh, setting the tin and the spoon on the ground between Wicks’ legs and stepping forward to untie the man from the wheel.

In desperation, Wicks eyes the tin, the dark man and the youth with the rifle. ‘What are you gunna do?’

‘Unto others, mate, like I want done to me,’ says Pharaoh, turning his back on the cringing, defeated Wicks to walk over and take his place on the kero-tin.

The wagon rolls on towards Coolgardie and Pharaoh eyes his son. ‘You’re quiet, Dick.’

Dick shrugs then suddenly glares at his father. ‘Why’d you let him go? He would’ve murdered you.’

Pharaoh nods. ‘Probably, but he wasn’t a murderer.’

‘That doesn’t make sense.’

‘A real murderer would’ve waited until we were asleep then slit our throats where we lay. That poor sod wasn’t a rabid dog, son, just a starving one. Who knows what a bloke’ll do to stay alive? Who says you or me wouldn’t do exactly the same thing if we were in the same shit as he was?’

‘I wouldn’t try to kill just for a feed.’

Pharaoh frowns. ‘To keep us alive, you would have shot him. To keep himself alive, he would have stabbed me. A death for a life any way you look at it.’

Dick hears the truth in his father’s words and resentment gives way to shame. ‘I would have killed him.’
Pharaoh nods. ‘Don’t worry about it, son. If he’d come any closer with that knife, I would have let you.’

Wicks had been right. With over 700 companies scrabbling for land, gold and cheap labour, Coolgardie was now undoubtedly a company city and the new railway put commerce squarely in the hands of the big business operators. Pharaoh realised immediately that his dreams of high profit on his food and water supplies would only become reality on the uncontrolled frontiers of the goldfields.

From the bustling, modern streets of Coolgardie, with its countless hotels, its breweries and churches and government buildings, Pharaoh and Dick drive through a massive tent city where thousands of small campfires cast an eerie orange glow over a wasteland of piled rubble and ink-black holes dug deep into the parched earth. The wagon crosses an invisible boundary and, suddenly, the glow and furor is behind them, replaced by cool moonlight and the soft moan of desert wind.

They travel through the night, the stars a billion untouchable treasures above them and, as the darkness turns to grey and the grey succumbs to golden dawn, they see the first fires from the tent city outside Kalgoorlie.

‘That’s home, boy,’ says Pharaoh Strange and the last star fades to invisibility in the vast Western Australian sky.

Kurrawang, Western Australia, 1900

Dick Strange grabs his brand new pencil and opens his brand new journal, both purchased from a grinning hawker for the exorbitant sum of a pound. The open page is empty space and Dick aches to fill it.

_I was chopping wood, he writes, and a funny, little man from the newspaper was standing close by watching me and writing in a book. I asked him what he was up to and he said that he was writing an editorial about the hard working men from the east. He said they came to Western Australia to help Western Australians modernise the country. I told him that I came from Western Australia and he closed his book and just about ran away. I didn’t care much for the little man but I thought the book and the writing was a good idea._

Dick reads the first non-compulsory words he has ever written and frowns. The words seem clumsy and childish compared to the clever, sophisticated text he reads in his father’s books or in the newspaper. Leave it, he thinks, you’ll improve.
I cut firewood, he writes. Father was only half right when he said there would be plenty of work here for me. The railway has its own gangs, brought all the way from England as immigrants to lay the lines and cut the sleepers. They’ll all get land when they’re done.

The companies have their men, too, so the shoring timber and the timber for headworks and buildings is cut by those fellows. I could have worked for the companies, but the pay is bad, so we came out to the high forests of Kurrawang and set up camp. Even though there are more timber-cutters out here than prospectors and there is a lot more room to move, and even though I make three times more chopping firewood than I would cutting for the companies, I still hate the goldfields.

I hate the stink of filth and death in town. Everyone is dirty because we save our water for drinking and men die every day from sickness. The smiler I almost killed told us about the bodies and now I’ve seen them, too.

Dick feels a sudden surge of rage and presses his pencil harder into the page.

I hate being treated like a camp mongrel. People have always called me names, but I’ve heard some new ones out here. Jigaboo. Monkey. Ape. The one I hate most sounds like another word for hate when men say it. Nigger.

Dick Strange reads his written rage and something new, something that promises an almost terrifying power, begins to form in his mind. He reads his words again and the unformed idea crystallises into a huge concept with vast possibilities.

I speak, he writes, and my words are gone. But unless I’m speaking to myself, my words don’t just disappear. My words go into the person I’m speaking to. ‘Preposition,’ he says aloud, scribbling over his last sentence. My words go into the person with whom I am speaking and that person might understand my words to mean something other than what I meant when I spoke them. I write and the words stay put, so that I can speak to myself with the words I’ve written a long time after I wrote them. I can speak to anyone, even after I’m long dead.

Dick reads again and frowns. This, he writes, is going to take longer than I thought.

Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, 1900

The bullocky soon tires of watching the hard, little farrier work on his team and, finally, surrenders himself to the flow of the crowd joining the packed, shouting mob on Kalgoorlie’s main street. Pharaoh ignores the bullocky’s departure, but shakes his head at the massed crowd. ‘T’othersiders,’ he growls under his breath. He shakes his head again to rid himself of the useless anger the interfering Easterners inspire and, instead, sets his thoughts to the job at hand and to a silent, discomfiting review of the clumsy state of his business on the goldfields.
Each day, Pharaoh travels the ten miles from Kurrawang to Kalgoorlie, and on that particular route he is never desperate for custom. Kalgoorlie needs a constant supply of firewood and Kurrawang is the main source, so, while Dick spends his days cutting wood, Pharaoh maintains the animals that transport it. Pharaoh counts his dissatisfactions: his tedious daily route, the rudeness of t’othersiders, Dick’s loathing for the artless business of cutting timber destined only for the fire and the fact that although their mutual profits are higher than they would be anywhere else in Western Australia, the same applies to all the other vendors, and the cost of simple living soon consumes the cream of their combined enterprises. Better off away from here, he thinks, better off in a West Australia with West Australians and water and fair country …

A sudden hush interrupts his thoughts and, as he pauses to stand and check the reason for the quiet, a booming voice shocks the dusty air.

‘Do we want fair representation, boys?’

The massive crowd of unwashed, bearded men roars. ‘Yes!’

‘Yes!’ bellows the speaker, his bright red beard bristling, his eyes alive with anger and excitement. ‘Have we got fair representation?’

‘No!’ roars the crowd.

‘Tell us, Governor Forrest! Tell us, Western Australia! Tell us how many constituencies twenty thousand men who know how to work deserve. Tell us how many constituencies twenty thousand men who’ve made Western Australia the wealthiest place in the entire country deserve. Tell us where you got the money to build railways and roads and telegraph lines and strong, lasting industry. What are they likely to say, boys?’

The crowd waits for the speaker to answer his own question.

‘I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you what they already said. Enough of pick and shovel representation! That was their answer!’

The crowd screams in anger.

‘Picks and shovels built Coolgardie. Picks and shovels built Kalgoorlie. Picks and shovels put fifty towns on an empty map. Picks and shovels made Western Australia rich! Whose picks, boys?’

‘Ours!’

‘Whose shovels?’

‘Ours!’

‘Who pays for the government?’

‘We do,’ yelled the crowd.

‘Is it the fat farmers?’
‘No!’
Pharaoh nods.
‘Is it the shepherds?’
‘No!’
Pharaoh nods again.
‘Is it the miners?’
‘Yes!’
Pharaoh shrugs.
The speaker nods. ‘Yes! But can we force Forrest’s mob to do the right thing? Yes, I say! We did it last year with the Amendments Act, but this year we’ve got to push the bastards! This year we’ve got to bring Western Australia into line with the forward thinking men of the East. Men just like us!’

There are one or two half-hearted cat-calls, but the majority of the crowd screams its support.
‘But what can we do to link West to East? What one single, solitary thing can we do to make the Western Australian governors do the only single, solitary right thing?’
The crowd roars again, although for what reason most of the men are unsure.
‘One word, lads! One word that’ll drag Western Australia kicking and screaming into a future fit for every man. One word that’ll let you,’ he points to a scruffy fellow at the front of the crowd, ‘and you,’ he points to another, ‘and all of you choose your destiny instead of having it chosen for you.’ The speaker pauses and the crowd waits expectantly. ‘Yes!’ he bellows suddenly. ‘That’s the word that counts! Yes to one nation! Yes to representative democracy! Yes to Federation!’

‘Yes!’ screams the crowd.
‘One people, one flag, one destiny! That’s our slogan, but what’s the word, boys?’
‘Yes!’
‘What’s your vote, boys?’
‘Yes!’
‘Yes!’ yells the speaker.
The crowd erupts, the speaker bows and Pharaoh Strange spits in the dust.

Despite his one small act of protest, Pharaoh keeps his opinion to himself and silently finishes tarring the last cracked hoof on the last bullock of the bullocky’s team. The teamster strides back from the now dispersing crowd with a face florid from the yelling and excitement. ‘Did you hear that?’ he booms at Pharaoh.
Pharaoh nods. ‘Heard it.’ He points at the ten-strong team of bullocks. ‘Job’s right, but go easy on these buggers. There’s not a one of them without cracks. Five quid’ll fix it.’

The teamster counts the notes into Pharaoh’s palm and eyes the farrier suspiciously. ‘You don’t look too happy, fella. Not a ‘no’ man, are ye?’

Pharaoh pockets the cash. ‘What’s that?’

The teamster throws his arms in the air. ‘What’s that, he says! Federation! The vote! ‘Yes’ to drop the British, ‘No’ to let the bastards keep tellin’ us what we can and can’t do. ‘Yes’ for one nation. ‘No’ to keep the colonies the way they are.’

Pharaoh shrugs. ‘Can’t see much wrong with Western Australia the way it is.’ He deliberately refrains from mentioning his feelings about the half-caste laws. ‘What difference will it make?’

‘Let me guess,’ sneers the teamster. ‘You were born West Australian, right?’

‘Yep.’

‘Well, you’re a dyin’ breed, mate. You bloody West Australians wouldn’t know a good thing if it come up and bit ya.’

‘Sounds about right.’

‘What does?’

‘T’othersiders going to show us how something that bites us is a good thing.’

The teamster flushes angrily. ‘Funny bloke, but you’re outnumbered here, mate and when the votes are counted you’ll be outnumbered there, too.’

‘Don’t care much, mister, but if anything does come up and bite me, I’ll kill it quicker than a t’othersider on a dropped shilling.’

‘What happened then?’ asks Dick, chuckling at his father’s story.

‘Dunno. I got out of it before the silly Victorian bastard could find himself a mob.’ Pharaoh looks intently at the strong, young man beside him. ‘I reckon it’s time we got out of here altogether.’

Dick nods. ‘I’ve been waiting for you to say that for months.’

Pharaoh is surprised. ‘Have you now?’

‘Yep,’ says Dick. ‘I want to go back to good timber, good water and good land, fa. I’m sick of bloody miners, I’m sick of bloody politics, I’m sick of cutting stringy, green eucalypt and I’m sick of sleeping in a fly-blown, wet, dirty hovel of a tent.’

Pharaoh laughs. ‘Fair enough. You got a plan?’

Dick nods eagerly. ‘I read it in the newspaper. Government’s offering one-hundred and sixty acres per man for selection down near the Arthur River.’
Pharaoh raises his eyebrows. ‘That’s just south of Williams. Good sandalwood country.’
‘Yep, and the paper reckons there’s a railway going through in the next couple of years.’
‘Railway?’ Pharaoh grins at his son. ‘That’s the magic word, Dick. Let’s get the bloody hell out of hell and get the hell back home to heaven.’

Dick’s eyes widen and he stands quickly to rush over and grab something from inside his tent.
‘Say that again, fa!’ he exclaims.
‘What’s that you’ve got?’
‘Sort of a diary, but quick, say what you just said before.’
‘What? Let’s get the hell out of hell and get the hell back to heaven?’
‘That’s it!’
‘Why?’

Dick scribbles in his book and raises pleased eyes to his father. ‘Now you can talk to me after you’re dead.’

Tarwonga Inn, Albany Highway, Western Australia, 1900

‘Now when did that old bugger suddenly turn tinker?’
Tom sets his rum on the bar and glances curiously at his old mate. ‘Who?’

Horace has his back to the bar and he nods towards the inn’s front windows. Tom turns to look out the windows. He sees a large fully-loaded wagon drawn by four draught-horses and driven by a familiar, dark man. A similarly dark youth jumps from the wagon, grabs a bucket hanging from the side of the wagon and fills it at the horse-trough. Tom shakes his head as the youth waters the horses and the dark man jumps from the wagon.
‘Looks like a man with a plan,’ says Horace before Tom can comment.
Tom winks at Horace. ‘Let’s find out.’

While Dick finishes his chore with the horses, Pharaoh Strange steps into the busy Tarwonga Inn and moves towards the bar.
‘Bloody darkies’re takin’ over the bloody country, I reckon.’

Pharaoh stiffens at the shout and turns with his most savage glare, but his expression changes instantly into surprised pleasure when he recognises both the speaker and the man propped on the stool beside him. ‘You old bastards!’

Horace crosses his arms and feigns a frown. ‘Thought you was a farrier, mate.’
Pharaoh stops and crosses his arms to meet Horace’s challenge and join the game. ‘Not was, am.’
Horace looks deliberately out through the window and points at the wagon. ‘Tinker too, by the look of that.’

Tom nods sagely. ‘Have to start callin’ ya Rajah instead of Pharaoh.’

‘Yeah,’ quips Horace. ‘Got any nice pots, Rajah?’

‘Yeah,’ says Tom, warming to the theme. ‘And I need some nice silk undie-drawers and a coupla fluffy pillows for me harem. Can ya help me out, mate?’

‘I can help you out on your arse,’ says Pharaoh with a laugh.

Tom holds up his hands in mock fear. ‘I give ya four teeth already, ya gotta leave me a couple for me meat.’

Pharaoh looks guiltily at Tom, but the older man laughs and steps forward to grab Pharaoh’s hand and give it a hearty shake. ‘Good ta see ya, darkie. Heard you was gone to the gold an’ never comin’ back.’

‘Nuh,’ says Pharaoh, ‘We’ve got our own patch now. I’ll be a proper gent next time you see me.’

‘Can’t polish a turd,’ Horace intones, grasping Pharaoh’s hand, his eyes glinting with a humour that disarms his words. Dick walks in to approach the men and stand beside Pharaoh. ‘This is my boy Dick,’ says Pharaoh. ‘Dick? These rough looking mongrels are Horace and Tom.’

Dick shakes hands with the rough looking mongrels while Pharaoh orders a round of rums from Fleay, the smiling bartender, a man who has served Pharaoh many times on his travels up and down the Albany Highway.

‘Where’s your patch?’ asks Horace.

‘Darkan,’ Pharaoh replies.

Tom laughs. ‘Now that’s just bloody perfect! Hang on …’

As Tom closes his eyes in concentration, Horace and Pharaoh pause expectantly, familiar with Tom’s rough poetic gift.

Tom suddenly opens his eyes and recites:

‘If you want the bloody darkie,
I know which way he went,
The Darkie went to Darkan,
To make himself a gent!’

Horace and Pharaoh laugh, but Tom holds up a hand.

‘The Darkie went to Darkan,
Least that’s what I heard,
Even though they told him
You can’t polish a turd!’
‘You old bastard,’ says Pharaoh laughing. ‘That’s going to cost you a couple more teeth!’
‘Done!’ Tom grins. ‘You can collect ‘em when I’m dead.’

Dick suddenly runs out through the door.
The three men laugh together. ‘Your lad knows when to get out of the way,’ says Tom.

Pharaoh shakes his head. ‘He’s not shy of a blue, mate. He had to chop down a couple of big Victorians to keep his timber camp on the ‘fields and I wasn’t there to help him. He does alright.’

Dick re-joins the men, opens his journal on the bar and offers his pencil to Tom. ‘Can you write that poem in here?’

As Horace stares open-mouthed between Tom and Dick and Pharaoh nearly chokes on his drink, Tom stares at the pencil. ‘That’s the smallest bloody sleeper I’ve ever seen,’ he says.

Dickflushes, half angry that the man does not readily share his creation. ‘He’s not bad with a ballad, son,’ says Pharaoh, recognising the ire in Dick’s expression, ‘but he’s useless with a pencil. He can’t write a bloody word.’

Tom grins and shrugs. ‘Can’t read one neither.’

The three older men laugh at Dick’s instant embarrassment. ‘I’m sorry.’

Tom shakes his head. ‘No worries, young Dick.’ He taps his temple. ‘Got all the words I need in here.’

The company settles in to drink and chat.
‘Good timber round Darkan?’ asks Horace, sipping rum.

‘Sandalwood,’ says Pharaoh, ‘but not far west there’s bloody thousands of acres of Jarrah and they’ve planned an east-west line. It’ll run from Bunbury through Collie to Narrogin and join the Great Southern to the coast. It’ll go right past Darkan. We’re getting in quick to grab the land and the sandalwood. We’ll be nice and close to the Jarrah when they start the line.’ He eyes the two old timber-men shrewdly. ‘Coupla smart cutters could make good money if they hooked up with us.’

Horace nods. ‘I know a coupla smart cutters.’

Pharaoh looks meaningfully at his son. ‘I know three.’

**Hillman River, Darkan, Western Australia, 1900**

Gibbs, the land guide, is a local settler paid one pound by the government to guide new selectors to their ‘free’ 160 acre properties. He is also responsible for making sure that the new selectors understand the conditions they must meet to keep their ‘free’ land.
He halts his horse beside a wide pool in the Hillman River and waits for the little dark man and his son to bring up their wagon and stop.

‘Call this Boyerdine Pool,’ says Gibbs, ‘buggered if I know what that means … but it’s perfect for the sheep washin’.‘ He points across the river. ‘See that big gum?’

Pharaoh and Dick note the huge, old tree on the opposite bank and nod simultaneously.

‘Make that the north-east point of your selection. Your boundaries are exactly a quarter-mile. North boundary runs a quarter-mile due east of the tree. West boundary’s the river. South boundary starts a quarter-mile down river, runs a quarter-mile due east. Join your north to your south a quarter-mile in and you’ve got your east boundary. River runs a bit west from here, so your north boundary’ll go a bit further east than your south boundary. Got that?’

Pharaoh and Dick exchange a bemused glance. ‘Can you draw us a picture?’ asks Pharaoh.

Gibbs chuckles. ‘Later. Let’s get across on to your land first. We’ll have a look around and I’ll get the official business over with before I start drawin’ pictures.’ He points to a wide, rippling area in the river. ‘We’ll cross there.’

As Pharaoh and Dick jump down from the glistening, wet wagon, Gibbs ties his horse to a tree and turns to make his official speech.

‘Selectors are given 160 acres or a quarter square-mile of homestead land – no conditions apply. Selectors who want more land can get it under what’s called conditional purchase, which means that you pay no money, but you have to meet the land improvement condition. Now this is important, so pay attention. The government only classes two things as valid improvements. One: the land must be completely fenced within five years. Two: all trees must be either ringbarked or cleared within five years. Remember, no matter what else you do, they’re the only two things the government calls improvements.’

Dick opens his mouth to interrupt, but Gibbs holds up his hand. ‘Just let me get through this and then I’ll answer all your questions.’

Dick shrugs and closes his mouth.

‘Improvements,’ Gibbs continues, ‘don’t include gates, roads, wells, buildings of any type, or even poison grubbin’, which you’ll be doing plenty of if you want a single one of your sheep to live past a week in this country. You are planning sheep, I s’pose?’

Pharaoh shrugs, but Dick nods eagerly. ‘Sheep, wheat, veges … it’ll be a proper farm.’

Gibbs smiles at the youth’s enthusiasm. ‘Bit of work to do before that happens, lad.’ He eyes Pharaoh carefully. ‘Know sheep, do you?’

Pharaoh nods. ‘Brought up with the bloody things.’
Gibbs grins wryly. ‘Then you’ll know that every bush is prob’ly a poison bush and every second weed’s prob’ly poison, too. Until you grub out all the poison, you likely won’t be eatin’ lamb for at least six months.’

Pharaoh grins back at the terse, but good-humoured guide. ‘Reckon we won’t be eatin’ lamb for at least a year, Mr Gibbs. We’re not botherin’ with pasture straight off.’

Gibbs frowns. ‘Mind if I ask what you are botherin’ with?’

‘Timber,’ says Dick. ‘I’ve seen plenty of sandalwood.’ He turns to his father. ‘I reckon that’s enough to keep me and the old fella’s happy.’

Pharaoh nods and speaks to Gibbs. ‘I’m a farrier. I’ll be on the road while Dick works the selection.’

‘On the road, eh?’ Gibbs raises his eyebrows. ‘Well, you won’t have to go far. Lot of work for a good farrier in the district.’ He eyes Dick. ‘And you’ve got plenty to keep you busy. The sandalwood market’s fair and …,’ he points at the draught-horses, ‘you’ve got the team to get your logs out. Closest railway-siding’s at Wagin.’ He points east. ‘Bit north of east, about 25 mile and good road most of the way. You cut sleepers?’

Dick nods.

‘Well,’ Gibbs continues, ‘when the bloody government finally decides to start the Narrogin to Darkan line, you’ll only need a permit and a tent to get into the good sleeper timber.’

‘Where is it?’ asks Dick.

‘Bout ten mile west and you’ll find big jarrah. Wandoo’s on the ridges.’

‘Thanks,’ says Dick.

‘Well, that’s it, I s’pose,’ Gibbs smiles, offering his hand to Pharaoh. ‘Welcome to the Darkan Agricultural District, gentlemen.’

‘Nice to be here,’ says Pharaoh, taking the guide’s hand in a firm grip then turning to Dick. ‘Go find a sharp stick for Mr Gibbs, son.’

Both Gibbs and Dick look confused. Pharaoh winks. ‘I’m still waiting for that picture you promised me, mate. Wanna see if you’re better at drawing maps than you are explaining ‘em.’

‘Won’t need a stick,’ says Dick. He steps across to the wagon, reaches behind the seat and pulls out his journal. ‘I’ve got a better idea.’

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Pharaoh squats beside the fire and stirs the steaming pot, his mouth watering at the aroma of his stew – a mixture of rich roo-meat, wild yams and broad-beans and cabbage bought from an Indian hawker at Tarwonga.

‘Smells good, eh?’ he asks Dick, whose eyes are riveted to the slowly stirring wooden-spoon.

‘Smells great.’

‘Our first feed at our own place. Thought I’d better make it one to remember.’

Dick nods then looks at his father’s face until Pharaoh raises his eyes and their gazes meet.

‘What are you thinking about, son?’

Dick lowers his gaze to the fire, takes a breath, then meets Pharaoh’s eyes again. ‘You don’t really want to be a farmer, do you, fa?’

Pharaoh smiles slightly. ‘Not really.’

Dick shakes his head. ‘Then why this? Why are we here?’

Pharaoh returns his attention to the stew-pot, but still responds, his voice low and contemplative. ‘My father set me up so that I could stand alone in the world. Sometimes I think he did it so that I’d drift out of his life; so that he wouldn’t have me around to embarrass the family. Sometimes I wonder if he just had to find a way to separate me and Andrew, ‘cause sure as shit stinks, one of us would’ve killed the other if I’d stayed. Sometimes I think old Viveash put him up to it, but whatever the reason, it’s the best thing fa ever did for me.’

Pharaoh pushes a thick stick through the pot handle, lifts and sets the pot down away from the fire to cool. ‘I was happy when fa sent me off to Early’s to learn my trade. I was happy to finish my apprenticeship and go home to Hillside because I thought I’d be working for fa. But when I got home, before I even had a chance to cuddle my half-sisters or get in a row with Andrew, fa took me to the big barn and gave me a present. He gave me a wagon, a forge, farrier’s tools and good horses to pull it all.’

‘Nice present,’ says Dick.

Pharaoh nods. ‘Very nice. That’s not what he called it, though. He didn’t call it a present. He sat me down on a bale, looked me in the eyes and said “You’re my son and this is your legacy”.’

Pharaoh stands and turns, placing both his hands on Dick’s shoulders. ‘I could wander off any time. I could get bored and disappear for years. But it doesn’t matter what I do, now or tomorrow. What matters is that you’ve got a trade in the timber, cash to stay alive while you turn this place into a home and the gear and tools to do it with. You’re my son, and this is your legacy.’
CHAPTER TEN

Darkan, Western Australia: Dick’s Journal

October 11, 1902: After three-month’s absence, father returned this morning with incredible news. He is betrothed to a Cottesloe widow and he will leave our farm for city life.

I was shocked at first, but when I thought more about it, I realised that apart from his good company, he will not otherwise be missed here. The road owns Pharaoh Strange and it always will. I hope, for the poor widow’s sake, that she is capable of adapting to my will ‘o the wisp father’s wanderings, as I have done my entire life.

Father says her name is Elizabeth Rae, she has two sons from her previous husband and that she owns and runs a boarding house near Cottesloe Beach. Cottesloe, he says, is Perth’s favourite holiday spot and in the hot months, thousands of respectable citizens disrobe and jump around in the water like lambs at a sheep wash. I’d like to see that.

Father also told me that he intends to set up a permanent shop in the widow’s old stables. I laughed. I didn’t think the word ‘permanent’ existed in my father’s vocabulary.

Tom offered a poetic comment:

The Darkie went to Cottesloe
He had a little wish
To throw a little line in
And catch a little fish
The Darkie went to Cottesloe
And now he’ll have to stay
He didn’t catch a little fish
He caught a little Rae.

December 20, 1902: I have just returned from Cottesloe and father’s wedding. I was much amused by the antics on the beach and even shed my own clothes for a quick dip in the salty waves. I prefer the sweet taste and clean feeling of fresh water, though, and fail to see the point of shedding one set of clothes only to don another for swimming. City people!

I like my new stepmother, but her sons (should I ever meet them), deserve a sharp knock or two.

Elizabeth put on a brave front, helped assuredly by the presence of her brother Job and his large, boisterous family, but it was obvious to all present that her sons’ opinion of the union,
made apparent by their absence, affected her grievously. Thunder-clouds hovered over my father’s brow all the afternoon. The Rae sons, I think, would do well to maintain their absence – at least until father feels the urge to explore the horizon again.

For the most part, though, I thought the wedding went well and much fun was had by all.

Job Symonds is certainly an interesting fellow. His tales of a life as lighthouse-keeper, ships-pilot and demolition-diver enthralled us all, but I did notice a slight tension in his hardy, little wife. I asked, casually, if she enjoyed the adventurous existence as much as her husband seemed to, and she replied, too casually, that the best adventure she could imagine would be that which came from life on a farm of her own. I did not disabuse her of the notion.

I did, however, recommend Hillman Junction, should Job ever consent to beating his sextant into a ploughshare. I made this recommendation with my own, selfish interests in mind, after a strangely uncomfortable, but equally warming conversation with Job’s lovely daughter, Ella. Ella Bessie. Bell to those she knows and loves. I called her Bell before I left and she did not correct me.

August 2, 1904: Tom and Horace returned from the Darkan pub last night with interesting news. It seems that brown mallet bark is better than manna gum for tanning leather and the tanners will pay four quid a ton for the bark. We have plenty of mallet and with the irritating fluctuations in the sandalwood price, I think we’ll change our caps and become bark-men for awhile.

My wheat is well and the sheep seem content, but I doubt we’ll make much from either this year. Transport costs consume profits and I’d be better off eating my own sheep, spinning my own wool and turning my wheat-fields back to pasture than I am trying to sell what I produce.

It is still a constant source of irritation to me that the railway we were promised is yet to begin. Instead of a reality, the railway is little more than an idea, a point upon which our Roads Board and our government invest words rather than pounds.

The wandoo (white-gum) and jarrah forests are about ten miles west of here, but I’ll be ready with my permit to cut on crown land when the line-construction finally begins. The government foresters have yet to mark the trees they judge fit for the saw, but I have made a few casual forays into the high timber and I can almost count the sleeper-yield just by looking at the unmarked trees. Tom says he’ll probably die before he has a chance to cut another sleeper. Horace says he’s forgotten how.
August 6, 1904: I look at my last entry and a shiver runs up my spine. Good old Tom must have had the gift of prophecy.

Horace and I had just dropped our first Mallet and we were pleased with the fall. The trunk split well and the tree landed on its top, leaving the bark above ground where we could easily ring it off and strip it completely. Tom sat in the shade until the tree dropped, waiting to take over and give us a spell while he started stripping bark.

I saw him pick up his hat and put it on his head. Then I saw his face clench in sudden agony. Then I saw him fall.

I reached poor old Tom in time to hear his final words and then he was gone.

Horace and I were baffled until we saw the nasty, purple mark on his left temple. I checked his hat, which had fallen from his head when he dropped, and there, still curled behind the inner-band, I saw the centipede. It was one of the huge, three-inch long bastards that we see often in the timber, and, although I’ve been stung before, and the poison is excruciating, I still can’t believe that it killed a man as strong as Tom.

Tom always said ‘Never lived in a town, buggered if I want to be dead in one.’ He said that graveyards were too crowded, ‘too full’, as he put it, ‘of noisy bloody strangers turnin’ over and messin’ up a man’s rest’. If he hadn’t removed his hat, the centipede could not have crawled in, but he only removed his hat because he didn’t need it where he sat, so Horace and I buried him under the same tree that made the shade that killed him.

I have kept many of Tom’s poems in my journals, so I think it only fitting that I record his final words. ‘Should’ve knocked me bloody hat out,’ he said.

April 27, 1905: After much ado and years of squabbling, the railway is finally begun, and although only the line to connect Darkan with the Narrogin-Williams spur and not, as we all hoped, the Collie-Darkan connection, my neighbours and I are yet gratified. I am, of course, especially happy, for my dormant sleeper-business is now active and I am again doing the work I most love to do.

I have not lost my touch and, despite his fears, Horace can still cut a perfect sleeper. The sleepers have to be nearly perfect, because the yard inspector at the Williams siding has a very critical eye. If a sleeper is not exactly seven feet long, nine inches wide and four-and-a-half inches thick, the inspector will reject it. If the sleeper wood has dry-rot, pin-holes or large knots, the inspector will reject it. If the sleeper is not cut square, the inspector will reject it.

Because the costs of transporting rejected sleepers back to their point of origin is prohibitive to the cutters, the haulage contractors make profit on the side by selling the rejects for fence-posts.
and firewood. Our contractor frequently suggests that we cut with a rougher hand and cross our eyes when we measure-up. We have yet to experiment with his suggestion.

When I consider the completed line, I am reminded of a thought I shared with father on the despicable Coolgardie track. I wished for cold night in the heat of the day and hot sun during the freezing nights. The completed line will present a similar contradiction of wishes, for as my sleeper business stops, the cheaper transport costs provided by the railway will allow me to expand my flock and, hopefully, the farm profit.

Before I do expand, however, I must practice with the clippers and develop my bale-handling skills. My closest neighbour is Chinnery, and he shakes his head at my efforts on the shear – he says I’d fare better with a broad-axe than a set of clippers and that if I did use the former, maybe one or two of my sheep would live to remember the experience. As for the bale-handling, he says I remind him of a piss-ant with a chop-bone. He exaggerates on both counts, but I take his point. I admit that I will never be more than an amateur shepherd. I admit that I do prefer sap to blood, the odd centipede under the bark to masses of writhing maggots under the undocked tail and the stoic company of timbermen to the frenetic, obtrusive noise brought by the shearsers.

Despite these admissions, I will persevere. The pastures should be used, the sheep provide food and some profit, and I intend to make the most of my father’s legacy.

September 6, 1906: The Darkan-Williams-Narrogin line opened today and our tiny slice of Western Australia is now connected to the Great Southern line. This links us to the long-developed and civilised northern towns, which in turn are linked by rail to Perth in the west and the goldfields in the east. We also link to the port city of Albany, which, thanks to the train, is now little more than a leisurely day or two’s ride south of Narrogin. My neighbours are ecstatic and I am equally so, if for a different reason. The eastern line from Darkan to Collie is now under construction.

Damn the sheep! Chinnery has moved on, but a recent arrival to the area by name of Indian Brown and with whom I share certain obvious characteristics, has gladly consented to take over the maintenance of my flock on a profit-sharing basis. This will free me up to do (as Pharaoh once put it) what I do best.

The forests to the west are barely touched and I admit to a certain guilty pleasure at leaving my selection to camp in the high timbers and cut profit from crown wood.

In addition to the sleepers, I’ll enjoy a fair profit from my own scrub timber, providing firewood until the line to Collie and the coalfields is complete. The steam-engines on the rails
have been using wood instead of the preferred coal, since it is cheaper to get the wood from local suppliers than it is to transport coal from Collie by wagon.

I do miss Horace in the bush, but his rheumatism has virtually crippled his hands and I think he enjoys his role as head overseer of the Strange selection. Despite his physical handicap, he also manages to keep a fair vegetable garden, for which I (and my ever-ravenous appetite) am extremely grateful. He says that he is content to stay if I am content to allow him and, of course, I am.

**February 9, 1907:** Horace died today and I put him in beside Tom. Indian Brown and I sat beneath the tree and shared a bottle of rum with the two old timber-men. I poured a tot on each grave and, although Brown frowned at the waste, he spoke not a word.

  Cheers, Horace! Cheers, Tom!

**October 7, 1908:** The trains are running, the Darkan-Collie section is complete and I have pulled down my camp in the crown Jarrah. I gave Indian Brown a third of my flock in lieu of this year’s profit share and he is quite satisfied with the arrangement. I share his satisfaction, for thanks to his efforts, my flock is healthy and well-maintained and I should enjoy an excellent wool-yield this year.

I also gave Brown a third of my stored grains, for although I ploughed the ground and planted the crops, I was away in the timber while they grew. Without Brown’s careful tending my barley and maize corn, my oats and my lucerne, even my wheat, would not have survived.

Tomorrow, I will set my mind to father’s legacy and put my energy into the business of the farm. I will miss the timber, but it is well past time for me to take up the farming challenge. I often think that the railway was as much a stone around my neck as it was a boon. I spent many of my early years here only half-interested in the farming business because the other half of my attention was always waiting in the timber for the next line to begin.

I fear that I share my father’s fear of commitment to permanence and the possibility that this might be true is unacceptable. It seems that there are hidden depths to every father’s legacy.

**April 2, 1909:** I love Bell Symonds.

I stood in my garden this afternoon and beheld a marvelous sight. I saw Job Symonds and his family on the road, pushing fully laden barrows. I stepped out to greet them and welcome them to my home, caring not why they came, but only that they were here. I was overjoyed to have visitors. My joy soon turned to amazement when Job gave me his news.
The Symonds family has taken up the selection directly across from mine and is now my closest neighbour. Job seems confident in his new enterprise, without any obvious misgivings about leaving his adventurous sea-life for the challenges of the land. Alice, his wife, is glowing with happiness; the boys, Harry and Joe, are eager to learn the axe and the plough; the youngest daughter, Rose, seems content, and Bell, beautiful Bell, puts the sun to shame with the brightness of her smile.

I may be as short in stature as my father, but compared to Bell, I am a giant. She is so tiny, and yet it seems that every inch of her vibrates with gleeful energy. Her eyes are green and, like the high canopy after rain, they glitter with a million sun-shot sparks.

She gripped my arm once in her excitement and I felt the pulsing strength in her hand, I felt her life and every hair on my arm stood, my spine tingled and my face burned. I thought of lightning in the eucalypt.

I have read the word so many times and I thought I understood what it meant. I did not. Now I am sure. I love Bell Symonds.

I am also sure that no matter how long it takes, no matter what I have to do to prove my love, I will change her name to Strange.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Noreuil, France, 1917

My Dearest Bell,

The sun sinks, but I am comfortably warm in my cozy abode and I thought what perfect conditions to inspire a letter for my love.

I am in fair company here (none so fair as yours) and our opponents are lazy sods – they seldom correspond, for which I am grateful, and when they do it is monosyllabic; a thump here and a shot there, probably directed at birds or their own officers.

We do fight, and men die, but though I participate in the former I refuse to join the latter and despite the gruesome nature of this war, the worst horror I have experienced thus far is the daily horror of being three thousand miles away from you and my darling children.

I trust young Ted is shaping fine and sweet Dorothy Eva still rosy-cheeked and bursting with life? And our delightful Gracie – how I envy her, so close at night to the warmth and comfort of you. Is she English rose like her mother, or native Banksia like me? I regret not being there to see our newest addition.

I can’t wait to return to our new selection at Boddington, my hands itch for the axe and I daydream about the fine house I will build for you beside the river. I also dream of you and I gazing across acres of golden wheat and watching our fat sheep graze green slopes that stretch to the horizon.

I do not regret our move from Darkan and I hope you are content with my decision to take on the new selection. I know your brother Joe was happy to purchase my Darkan acres and I hope his expansion goes as well for him and his young family as I intend the Boddington land to go for ours. Please pass on my gratitude to your fine brother for I know that he will keep you all safe and well until I return. Have you any word from your wandering father? I have heard nothing from mine. Funny how both our fathers find movement more attractive than settlement, although you might flinch at my hypocrisy, writing, as I do, from this far-flung foreign land.

Do you remember the sense of right and justice, the pride we all felt about our state’s participation in this war? Does that pride still fill the newspaper columns at home? Does it still pervade the minds of my countrymen and set the tone of every conversation?

I barely remember the euphoria, the feeling of being swept along by an unstoppable force, of surrendering myself to that awesome, all-encompassing pride. Strangely, all I can remember is your tears as I boarded the ship that took me to war and my fathers silence when I told him I was
going. I also remember that fateful passage in Proverbs: ‘Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished’. Many nations fight here, Bell, and all are proud in heart, hand in hand, but I do not think God punishes proud warriors. I think God lets us choose our pride and through it, punish ourselves.

‘It must be close’, thinks Dick, ‘the Howitzers’ll start soon.’ He closes his eyes for thinking time, hoping to squeeze a few minutes of mental calm before the bombardment begins. Like every man on the field, Dick knows that the Howitzer’s noise is of much less concern than the events which always follow – the urgent whistle, the roaring charge toward the enemy, the gunfire, the death – but, like every man on the field, Dick fights a constant, private battle for sanity against the pounding, nerve-tearing slam of the mortars.

A rat slinks across the duckboards near Dick’s feet and he lifts his head to watch it perch on its hind legs and sniff the air. He knows the rat probably enjoys the pungent promise of rotting flesh that seeps down from no-man’s land, the two-hundred yard wide killing ground between King and Kaiser. Rat paradise, he thinks and then glances at his gas-mask and smiles grimly as he recalls the perfume no living thing could ever appreciate. The stink of the dead is not the only thing to pool in the low places; the lung-corroding chlorine-gas, the blinding phosgene or the skin-stripping mustard gas force every organism above the surface and not even the rats are spared. Dick thinks that even the rats have learned to fear the sound of bells and the cry of ‘Gas, Gas, Gas’ as the wicked shells unleash their poison payloads.

It is a grim justice that the slightest change of wind can send the dreaded stuff straight back into the eyes, throats and lungs of the senders, but both sides use it, so the scales are well – if unfortunately – balanced.

Dick scratches his scalp and picks out a fat louse. Back home, if he found a tick on one of his dogs, he would make the dog swallow it. Back home it was commonly thought that dogs built up resistance to tick bites by eating the very ticks that were eating them. He grips the louse between thumb and finger, wondering if he should pop it into his mouth, wondering if he could ever build up a resistance to its maddening kind.

He gazes along the trench and studies his French home. Every man owns a piece of the trench, each boundary marked by a man’s possessions – his Lee Enfield .303 propped ready against the no-man’s land wall, his canteen hanging with his gas-mask on the opposite wall and his kerosene-tin seat, for the anxious waiting hours between attack, counter-attack and defense. He shakes his head, grasps his pencil stub and bends to his journal.
I remember my excitement when I first heard that France was to be my new battalion’s destination. The good Corporal Simms, one of my ‘new’ friends (now just a bloody, screaming face in my memory), owned a postcard. Cézanne, he said. I thought it sophisticated, beyond bare Perth or functional Fremantle, beyond the horrors of Egypt. I thought the postcard promised sublime new experiences in passionate Paris.

Now I exist unwashed in another trench and all I’ve experienced in this particular romantic foreign affair is mud, barbed wire and murder. I’ve learned to hate barbed wire, a hate I’ll have to forgive if I make it home.

I have put my hands to many professions, call myself a timber-man but intend to combine sheep, cattle and wheat on my own farm and permanently re-name myself farmer if I survive this mess. I’ll still need barbed-wire regardless of its equally barbed reminders.

The city-lads here call me a farmer, but my bush-mates (lads like ‘Foxy’ Wiley) understand that there are too many titles for country folk, that country professions are as diverse and class-fraught as city ones.

At home, the wheat-farmers are unpopular for using healthy sheep and cattle land to grow the fodder necessary to maintain healthy sheep and cattle when the used healthy sheep and cattle land is no longer healthy. Cattle producers scoff sheep producers when the sheep are too plentiful to command a good price; sheep producers do the same when the converse is true.

The service and demand workers, the timber-cutters, farriers, merchants, miners, tanners and inn-keepers, provide necessities to the supply and demand farmers, but seldom agree with their politics. Our lands are divided by more than barbed-wire and yet I still wish all people understood that there is only one just choice between diversity and discrimination.

I wonder if our petty, provincial conflicts could ever lead us to this type of war at home. I can’t imagine doing this to my land, my country, my people, but here I contribute daily to the destruction of this land and the murder of strangers from a place not much further away than Albany is from Perth.

What am I to those I kill? What am I to this land? What am I at home? I think I am all possible things to others – darkie, timber-man, enemy, farmer, Christian – and no matter what I proclaim about myself, I am subject to others’ interpretations. But here in hell, only two interpretations are important – am I friend or foe? Am I threat or ally?

I once told my father that I was neither black or white, thinking that brown was possible. But what am I here, where brown does not exist? Black or white? Both, I think. Grey. We are all grey men.
‘Think I’ll take up writing.’

Dick raises his head from the journal to face Private Wiley, one of the few men to survive from Dick’s original battalion and now Dick’s closest companion in the trenches. ‘Why’s that, Foxy?’

‘You’ve been inside that bloody thing for half an hour and you haven’t taken a breath. Haven’t rolled a smoke even. Seems like a good way to get away.’

‘Away from what?’

‘War.’

Dick nods and closes his journal. ‘What would you write about?’

Wiley grins. ‘Buggered if I know. War, probably.’

‘Sounds like you wouldn’t get far.’

Wiley shrugs. ‘Smoke?’

‘You giving or asking?’

‘Giving.’

‘Ta.’

‘What are you writing?’

‘About home. Wondering why I’m here.’

‘Staying alive. Shooting the bloody Hun.’

Dick does not smile. ‘Why are they the enemy?’

‘Cause they’re the ones we’re fightin’.’

‘Why are we fighting them?’

‘Cause they’re fightin’ back.’

He stares at the oozing trench wall. ‘I miss sand,’ Dick thinks, ironically, because he used to curse it. He does not see the officer approach and pause.

‘Pondering, Strange?’

‘Mud and sand, sir.’

‘Ah, yes, you served in Egypt prior to our little French party, didn’t you? Lot of sand there, I expect.’ The British Lieutenant looks uncomfortable. The Gallipoli debacle is still fresh in many Australian minds and the new 51st Battalion, raised in Tel-el-Kabir from the 28th and survivors of the famous 11th, is full of Gallipoli veterans. He knows Private Strange was not part of the revered 11th landing force, but he is still ex-11th and that means ex-Gallipoli. ‘Gallipoli mud, Egyptian sand. Yes, quite understandable. Stay alive, lad. Shoot the bloody Hun.’ He throws a vague salute and hurries away along the trench.
Dick returns the salute to his superior’s back and grins sardonically. Wiley, another ex-11th, winks at Strange and nods at the departing Lieutenant. ‘Probably never heard of West Australian sand.’

Dick closes his journal. ‘Probably never heard of West Australia.’

Wiley laughs. ‘You should write that one down.’

Dick returns a grin and nods. He looks at his journal and considers losing himself again in the act of writing, but Wiley is still watching him with an expectant, almost pleading expression. ‘How are you, mate?’ Dick asks, knowing that Wiley needs to talk out his growing fear.

‘Big push today they reckon,’ said Wiley in feigned nonchalance.

Dick spits at a rat. ‘I hate that whistle.’

Wiley nods and stares at his rifle. ‘Me too. Reckon when I get home I won’t go near the trains. Some stationmaster’ll blow his bloody whistle and I’ll be up and runnin’.’

The two men share a sad smile, thinking of home and the simple normality of trains.

‘How’s your leg?’ asks Wiley.

‘Fine. The doc said it was a nice clean shot, through and through, he said.’

‘Did you feel it when it hit?’

Dick knows Wiley wants to hear that a clean shot means a painless shot. Every man in the trenches has heard the screams and most fear pain more than death. In a world where courage, fortitude and strength have to be maintained, pain and screaming instantly remove a man’s brave mask and reduce him to mere flesh and blood. No man in the trenches can afford to remember his human vulnerability, despite the daily reminders.

‘No worse than a splinter off a block, mate,’ says Strange.

Wiley blushes, hearing the lie, but grateful for it. ‘Hospital must have been a bit of all right, hey? All them nurses and good tucker?’

Dick thinks of the previous year – 1916 – and the massive battle in the Somme, but cannot speak of how it felt to drag himself back through the dead and flying bullets into the ANZAC’s Pozieres trench, his leg a useless, bloody mess. He cannot speak of his three day stretcher and cart journey across the French wasteland with the other crying, dying, hysterical and constantly screaming wounded or the stinking carnage of his destination, the field hospital. He chooses not to mention the terror of the channel crossing aboard the overfull red-cross ship or his painful seven-month convalescence in the clinical brutality of Northampton Hospital. He does not speak of his return to the line, where most of the 51st Battalion men he had fought and bled with were dead and replaced by strangers. He was wounded in the first days of the battle and had heard that
the French/British assaults had continued for two long, bloody months, sacrificing over a million
men for a gain of only five miles on the German trench-line. He cannot speak of that either.

‘Saw Old Blighty,’ he says, ‘bit of all right, alright.’

*Yesterday I killed two men and returned proud to my trench. Today, as I wait for the whistles, as*
*I wait to kill again or die in this hell, I am sickened by my pride. Although I would kill to protect*
*my family, killing is not reasonable or fair or righteous to me and never will be. But is that true?*
*Would I kill to protect my land? Would I kill to protect a horse? A lamb? A favoured axe? As*
*things I own, as things I have earned, are they not symbols of my achievement? Are they not*
*symbols of my pride? And am I not ready to kill right now for my country, my empire? What are*
*they? Can I ride them, or eat them or use them in the timber? Can they be seen, or touched or felt*
*beyond the mere emotions pride excites? No. Country and Empire are ideas grown from the seed*
*of pride and pride is not a reason to kill – it is an excuse.*

*I will kill today and every day until this war is finished or I am, but no longer for country, no*
*more for Empire, never again for pride. I will kill so that I might live.*

There is a boom, a long whine, a ground-shaking thud, a scream and a German curse. The
Howitzers have started and that signals the trench-mortar crews to their concussive tasks.
Duckboards rattle, mud slides down trench walls, smoke, filth and fear envelops the 51st Infantry
Battalion. Men scream and die in the Kaiser’s trenches, some buried under grave-stinking ooze,
some literally blown to ragged, red pieces of unrecognisable flesh and many, though relatively
untouched, dead from the massive, rupturing pressure of exploding shells, the only sign that they
are truly dead their bulging eyes and the clown-like stripes of blood that decorate those shocked,
abused orbs. The German’s bellow in pain, fear, anguish and rage; the ANZAC’s groan, cry, pray
and stare at each other, waiting for the whistles, waiting for the moment in which they will
commit themselves to fate, luck or God.

‘You right, mate?’

‘I’m right,’ says Wiley as he grabs Dick’s shoulders and stares into his eyes. ‘You right?’

Dick puts his own hands on the shoulders of his friend and nods. The two men huddle against
the no-man’s land wall to wait for the shouted orders that always precede the whistles. Dick’s
eyes are intent as he grips his friend harder and gives him a slight shake. ‘Remember Sergeant
Bastard?’

Wiley grins shakily. ‘He never got his French tart.’

Dick’s expression does not soften. ‘Remember what he told us about the Tommies?’
Wiley stops grinning. ‘Tommies are using old tactics for a new war.’
Dick nods urgently. ‘Remember what he told us to do?’
Wiley frowns. ‘I can’t remember.’
‘Stay low, find cover, shoot, advance. Don’t charge …’
‘Ignore the tea-swillin’ bastards.’
Dick grins. ‘That’s it. Stay low?’
‘Find cover, shoot, advance. Don’t charge and ignore the tea-swillin’ bastards if they tell you to.’
‘Fix bayonets!’
Dick and Wiley jump at the sudden shouted order.
Dick fixes his bayonet to the end of his rifle and leans against the no-man’s land wall.
‘First positions!’
Dick Strange and a thousand of his countrymen crawl over the lip of the trench to lay behind the sand-bag defenses on the edge of no-man’s land.
A sharp, drawn-out whistle shrills across the prone Australians and, like a khaki wave, they rise roaring and run towards the waiting Germans.
With Wiley beside him, Dick runs in a crouch through a gap in the King’s wire, his mind focused upon the terrain immediately before him, his eyes ready to pick out any small gap in the Kaiser’s wire. He knows that men tangled in wire on no-man’s land are dead men but he thinks of nothing except running, firing his rifle at the pointed helmets poking above the enemy sand-bags and listening for the three short whistle blasts that signal retreat.
The Germans are firing all along the line and men fall all around Dick and Wiley, but they run on, hurdle the fallen and duck and jig as if they might dodge the locust-swarm of bullets. Halfway to the German line, Dick dives into a shell-crater and Wiley lands beside him with a grunt. Dick glances at his friend. ‘Wait for a close mortar then we’ll pop up and see if we can find a gap.’
Wiley nods and the two men stay low in the crater, trying desperately to block the human sounds of battle, listening for the short whine of a trench-mortar shell. Without warning a mortar lands in front of the crater and the two ANZACs spring up into the smoke like rabbits from a warren, quickly investigate the German wire and pop back down before a single German can see them.
‘I found a gap,’ yells Dick, ‘I’ll go first.’ He is up and out of the crater before Wiley can respond, but Foxy Wiley does not hesitate and the two men veer across the field towards the gap.
Dead ANZACs hang like gory fruit on a savage barbed vine and litter the ground between the gap and the lip of the German trench but Dick is focused only on the entrance to the thin passage.
through the German wire. A pointed-helmet suddenly appears above the trench and Dick falls to lay behind a dead sergeant. He takes aim, fires and as the helmet flies, Dick sees the hair on his enemy’s head. He fires again and the head explodes, but he does not have time to think about it, as the dead sergeant’s body suddenly shudders under a storm of bullets.

Wiley has dropped beside Dick and both men burrow their faces into the stinking mud and blood to escape the barrage. His face half-buried, Strange turns to Wiley. ‘Go when the body stops moving. You right?’

Wiley spits mud and nods once. ‘Go for the gap?’

‘Yeah. Don’t get caught in the wire and listen for the whistles.’

Wiley nods again and, as the German fire shifts to moving targets, the two men rise from the mud and stagger towards the gap. Suddenly, a long whistle shrills and the German line heaves with a cursing roar. The German’s pour out of their trench to charge in a furious counter-attack and the remaining ANZACS have their pick of targets for a brief moment until the two forces collide.

Bullets give way to bayonets and rifle stocks as King’s men meet Kaiser’s at the edge of the German wire. Dick parries the thrust of a skinny youth and shoots the boy in the throat only to hear the raging roar of a fat, bespectacled corporal and see the man lift his own rifle to fire. Wiley shoots the fat man in the groin and Dick suddenly realises that the precious gap in the German wire is now clear of defenders. He bolts towards the German trench, but turns at a familiar shout to see Wiley kick a limp body off his bloody bayonet then scream something. Dick runs back the few paces to his mate. ‘Come on!’ he yells, pointing at the gap in the wire.

‘Whistles!’ bellows Wiley.

Dick freezes and looks along the line. Apart from a few ANZACS still fighting near the German wire, the bulk of his battalion is rapidly retreating back to the King’s trench with the bulk of the German battalion in hot pursuit. Dick knows that the Germans will fight near the King’s wire until the defenders see them off, but he also realises that he and the stragglers will have to fight through the soon-to-be retreating Germans to make it back to the ANZAC line.

Dick and Wiley run, firing into the backs of the attacking Germans as every man on the field rushes for the same line. ‘Down!’ yells another straggler, another wild-eyed ANZAC Private. Dick and Wiley drop mere seconds before the ANZAC defenders, now safely propped behind their sand-bags, open up on the Germans. Another swarm of bullets shoots by over the straggler’s heads, but this time the deadly lead is all British-made.
Once again, Dick and Wiley are sheltered behind the dead, a bayoneted German and a machine-gunned Aussie tangled together in a macabre embrace. They form a perfect firing platform for the two West Australians and the wild-eyed Private.

The German whistle shrills and the Germans turn from the King’s line. The wild-eyed Private sights on a panicked German soldier, but does not get a chance to fire – a ground-hugging bullet, probably British, bores a black, steaming hole between his eyes and he freezes, dead, his sights still on the rapidly approaching German, his last earthly image a man he intended to kill. Dick shoots the dead Private’s target and sights another, but Wiley pulls him down behind the bodies. ‘Play dead, mate, or they’ll cut us to ribbons.’

Dick stares at his friend, then nods and both men sprawl out in the mud, mouths and eyes wide open in a mocking mimicry of death.

The Germans pass by in a stumbling, cursing wave, no different, Dick thinks, than we sound when we’re desperate for our line. The shooting dwindles, stops and Dick listens to the relative quiet, hearing only the screams of the wounded and the crackle of flames from fires left over by the mortars. He nudges Wiley softly. ‘You alive?’

Wiley moves his head slightly and faces his friend. ‘Wanna crawl or run?’

Dick flicks his eyes towards the German line. ‘They’re still getting their breath back. Let’s bolt.’

Wiley squints his eyes shut, takes three deep breaths and re-opens them to stare at his friend. ‘Ready?’

‘Set,’ says Dick.

‘Go,’ rasp the two ANZACS together, launching to their feet and sprinting for the King’s line.

A lone German takes a hasty shot and misses, but the activity causes both lines to stir and heads pop above trenches on both sides of no-man’s land. More shots explode from the Kaiser’s line as the ANZACS roar encouragement to the two sprinting Privates.

‘Go, you beauty!’ yells a South Australian sergeant.

‘Go!’ bellows the ANZAC line.

Dick runs and keeps his eyes on the gap through his own wire, his mind totally focused on that thin, muddy passage to his kerosene tin, his gas-mask, his canteen, his journal, his fat rats, his lice and all the comforts of his latest French home.

The ANZAC trench roars as the two men tumble over the lip of the King’s trench. Wiley lands beside Dick and they stare at each other. ‘Jesus,’ huffs Wiley.

‘He couldn’t make it,’ breathes Dick. ‘But I think he just sent us his regards.’
Dear Father,

Trench life. I can’t see the horizon from below ground and I would not see beyond it from above. Still, I know beyond is there, and I think of the humanity upon it; the inhumanity upon it. I thought I was fighting to protect something, but I destroy just as effectively as those I am protecting the something from.

Our forebears and the Huns have much in common. I know The Huns want Europe and I don’t want them to have it, but I don’t know why. Europe includes Britain and Britain expanded into our birth country 120-odd years ago - if Britain had not expanded, we would not be here. I fight to protect Britain, because Britain’s expansion made my conception possible. Surely, ‘expansion’ is simply another word for ‘conquest’?

I know that conquest is one result of war, but is war always obvious? I think not. I think that sometimes it is quiet, hidden and wrapped neatly inside words and ideas. I think that noise and death and chaos are the ends of war. Grand ideas for the betterment of man are war’s beginnings. And what about us, father? Do we only exist because of war?

Dick smiles wryly at the words he has written to his father. He is fairly sure of Pharaoh’s response to such a letter should it ever be sent and should Dick survive to discuss it; his father would brusquely tell him to stop over-thinking life and simply live it as it happened. His father would tell him that God lived in books and words, man lived by actions and that philosophy was a luxury for priests and princes, not Privates and paupers. Dick would disagree and they would argue until one or the other stormed off in a frustrated temper.

Dick Strange frowns, quietly plotting the argument, then, as his mind turns inward and the letter becomes a blur on the page, laughs aloud at the fact that he can still find a way to fight with his father though the man is thousands of miles and another world away.

There are only a few pages left in the book and paper is valuable in the trenches - history and reminiscence make way for warmth and tobacco - but although Dick curses his diminishing paper supply, he does not regret writing the letter. The words transport him to warm evenings on rough chairs, ghost-gums translucent in the dark, wood-smoke without a hint of kerosene and the assured loving company and banter of family. The letter takes him home to his own land.

He thinks of the land they fight upon and considers the ways in which humanity turns nature’s benign elements against itself. ‘Mud,’ he muses silently. ‘I should see grazing sheep or wheat fields.’ He remembers his crown camp. ‘Or the high timber.’ He opens his journal.

This land is sliced and scored, burned and defoliated, a wasteland of mud and I’ve concluded that Nature and human nature are locked in a conflict begun by humans.
Nature fights with wind, water, fire and the instinct of the beast. Conflict comes with the high branch falling to a termite’s final bite; the iron-hard knot deep in the trunk that stops the axe and sprains the wrists; the shift of wind that turns a smoldering line into a roaring wall; the innocent pop in a quiet camp that blisters the skin with a white hot coal. Nature fights with the snapping stallion; the stinging insect; the drowsy adder, disturbed.

Nature drowns, parches and uproots the weak and the unprepared. Nature turns upon nature, destroying, reviving, destroying in a ceaseless cycle.

I fight nature always, resigned to the inevitability of the conflict.

Human nature is a sloppy mockery of nature.

I have fought for pride, protecting my name, my colour and my questionable human values from voiced perceptions and snap judgments. I have drawn blood for mere words and it sickens me to think of it.

The Bible lists pride as a sin, but I remember my father’s frequent references to ‘his’ chapter and, especially, how it always struck me that the biblical Pharaoh’s pride was minuscule compared to God’s. If God is proud, is he not a sinner? Pharaoh had a strong army, but the Hebrews had an infinitely stronger and far more horrifically vengeful warrior God. In the book that teaches millions it is written that God – ‘whose name is JEALOUS’ - killed a thousand first-born sons to punish one man. What is the lesson for humanity? I don’t know, but in this field of corpses, a killer in a trench of ten-thousand killers, I know we’ve learned it too well. We better God’s tally by the hour and we are not satisfied with the petty sacrifice of first-borns – we righteous men, we band of brothers, we demand every son, every father.

I fight human nature in flashes and moments of unbelieving terror, outraged that bloody violence so easily replaces reason.

The mortars are pounding again.

Dick Strange ignores the hot, stunning wind of a passing bullet, leaps over a screaming, blood-drenched Captain and keeps running. Wiley charges in front, heading directly towards the gap in the Kaiser’s line that has become their mutual goal. Wiley has named it The Schoolmaster’s Crotch in mocking tribute to the bespectacled German Corporal.

Dick is right behind his friend, when the man suddenly lifts off his feet, body twitching in mid-air as dozens of Gatling-gun rounds rip him apart. Dick is punched in the cheek and thrown on to his back, face to the sky, completely stunned by the savage force of the blow. He raises his left arm to touch the throbbing wound and another bullet glances off his elbow. He screams at the vicious, white-hot agony and rolls on to his belly to slither back towards the King’s line. The
bullet storm subsides and he jerks to his feet, making a dozen more staggered yards until a third bullet finds his right hip and spins him into a fourth, which burns straight through his left thigh. He drops into the French mud and his senses begin to shut down. The battle noise becomes slowly muted and pain gives way to numbness.

As he watches calmly, a fat, muddy rat scurries across his arm to perch beside his face and nonchalantly appraise him. Dick tries to bare his teeth and growl, but he is suddenly amused at the rat’s incredible gall and he chokes out a pained laugh instead. The rat bounds away and Dick laughs again until he realises that the beast will simply search for easier pickings – dead men don’t laugh, he thinks and remembers Foxy Wiley.

Dick Strange closes his eyes and, for the second time that day, does not hear the whistle.

**Perham Downs, England, 1917**

*My Darling Bell,*

*I have survived and I will be home soon. I am a little the worse for wear and will not immediately be able to rise to the challenge of our farm, but we shall not starve.*

*After my discharge, I have been promised light work on the Perth trams by a kindly Major I met in hospital. I hope you will accept city life until I am fit enough to carve out our Boddington dream.*

*I am happy to tell you that my war journal is lost forever under French mud. Happy, because I have concluded that it is words that brought us to this awful conflict; words misconstrued and misinterpreted; words strung together to inspire good men to evil deeds; words that maligned the better purposes of man and turned us into unreasoning savages.*

*Words, dearest, have such power and I have loved them. Through words I thought I had written myself, discovered myself, and carved myself from the trunk of wild nature into a perfectly measured form. But words deceive, words beguile and here, now, a stranger in the mirror, I stare at my hands and remember their deeds, and any words I might use to defend those hands, those deeds, that stranger are mere excuses. God is not alone in the Word – his opposite resides there, too.*

*It is fitting that the last words I ever set to paper, these words, belong to you, for you know my heart, you know my intention, you know my love and I need no words to describe these things to you.*

*I cannot wait to hold you; I cannot wait to be held. We belong together.*

*Your loving Dick.*
Epilogue

Dick Strange returned safely from England and the First World War on the twenty-fifth of December, 1917. He remained in the army and worked light duties until he was finally discharged from the Australian Imperial Force on the tenth of July, 1918.

After a year in Perth working on the Perth trams, he returned with his family to his selection at Boddington, where he took up another thousand acres and became a wheat and sheep farmer.

Dick never lost his love for the timber and until the great timber-mills came to the wheat-belt in the late 1920’s and made the old human sleeper-cutters obsolete, Dick often returned to the wandoo groves and the jarrah forests to supplement his growing family’s income.

Dick props his axe on the splitting-block and knocks his hat out before putting it on his head. The chop hasn’t really helped, but, he thinks, at least there’s another week of wood to burn - wish everything was so cut and dried simple.

Bell stands in the Strange doorway and watches her man with total love. ‘Come on, old man,’ she calls finally. ‘Come in out of the sun.’

Dick nods and moves towards the house. ‘Just acclimatising, love. They reckon it’s pretty hot up there.’

Bell closes her eyes against sudden, hot tears. ‘You’re going?’

As Dick reaches the doorway, he lifts a hand to stroke his wife’s hair. ‘I’m going.’

‘Why?’

‘For us, love. Japs are getting close and I’d rather be fighting on someone else’s land than on ours.’

‘You said you wouldn’t be in the fighting.’

Dick enfolds his woman and she rests her head on his chest. ‘I won’t be pulling the trigger, Bell, but I’ll be making life easier for the blokes that will. I reckon helping the killing is the same as doing it.’

Bell suddenly pushes against Dick’s embrace and looks into his eyes. ‘You don’t want to go. You hate the idea of going. Don’t go!’

Dick smiles sadly. ‘I hate the dunny-tin, too, but I empty it. This is just another dirty job that needs doing, love. Best to get it done, I reckon.’

Dick returned to the army and war in 1941, aged 56 years. He was stationed on Melville Island in the Timor Sea until 1944, when he returned to Western Australia, Boddington and life on the farm.
Dick’s beloved wife Ella Bessie Strange (nee Symonds) died in 1966.

One year after Bell died, an old German bullet, left in Dick’s leg by the British surgeons, shifted from its benign position to lodge behind Dick’s knee, where it quickly went septic. Surgeons, unborn when the first injury occurred, amputated Dick’s leg nearly fifty years later.

Dick Strange was splitting firewood for the stove when he died of a heart-attack on the thirteenth of March, 1968.

Dick and Bell Strange had eight children: Richard Edward (Ted), Dorothy Eva (Eva), Grace May, Emily Ellen, Doris, Douglas, Horace Joseph (Joe) and Alice Lydia.

Grace May Prussian (nee Strange) was my grandmother and the details of Dick’s post-war years are hers to tell. In 1982, two years before her death, Grace participated in the Australia 1938 Oral History Project (Ferrell J. 1983) and completed Dick Strange’s story in over eight-hours of taped recordings. She also told her own story and the story of her immediate family. Her voice cannot be improved upon.

Alfred Richard Pharaoh Strange lies alone in Fremantle cemetery. His grave is unmarked.
STRANGE PRESENT
The earthquake may be exciting, but the butterfly is profound. 
The earthquake is present and, therefore, beyond reminiscence. 
The butterfly is past, cause, catalyst, home-ground. 
This is the flap of the butterfly’s wing. 

1965

I remember Frankston. We lived in brick veneer. 
Santa brought me a huge plastic truck, large enough to ride down the driveway. I put a coat hanger in my mouth and it got stuck inside my cheek. My brother tried to pull it out and it came through and I bled. 
Mrs Tutt lived across the road. Mrs Tutt had a son called King. King was fat and nine.

‘You can’t give in to his tantrums, Pat,’ said Dad, rolling his shirt sleeves. 
Mum was angry and frustrated. ‘He does this every morning, Ray. I don’t know what’s wrong with him.’

I was howling on the floor. Dad lifted me by one arm and tried to set me on my feet, but I bent my knees and would not stand. Dad lost his temper and shook me like a rag doll. ‘Stand on your feet.’

His grip hurt and I was scared, but I was absolutely terrified of the alternative.

‘I don’t wanna go across the road.’

My sister Julie stood nearby, crying.
Dad grabbed my other arm and carried me to the front door. I kicked my feet, kicked my father. ‘Open the bloody door, Pat,’ he yelled.

‘I don’t wanna go across the road.’
‘Stop it,’ Dad screamed.
‘Stop, Denny,’ Mum screamed.
‘I don’t wanna go across the road,’ I screamed.
‘He doesn’t wanna go across the road,’ screamed Julie.

Everyone froze. Julie never screamed.
Mum had her hand on the doorknob. Dad had his hands on my wrists. I put my feet on the floor.
Mum looked at Julie. ‘Why doesn’t he like going there, Jule?’
‘She makes him poo his pants.’

I silently thanked my sister. I’d spent four days suffering at Mrs Tutt’s house and four nights crying at my own. Dad said I was acting, Mum said I was attention-seeking, Dad said it was the same thing. I suddenly felt a red, molten fury.

‘I can’t reach the doorknob and she tells me to hold it, but she won’t come and I can’t hold it any more.’

Mum looked at Dad and shook her head. ‘His pants have been clean all week.’
‘She washes my pants! She hangs them near the heater and I have no pants all day!’
Mum’s mouth dropped and Dad gave me a hard frown. ‘Why didn’t you tell us?’
I snarled at my father. ‘I did. I tried.’
Julie sobbed aloud. ‘She called him a nigger’
‘And a wog,’ I growled.
‘And she told King to punch him,’ said Julie.
‘Who’s King?’ Dad snapped at Mum. ‘She called him a what?’
‘King’s her son, Ray.’ Mum’s voice was flat and hard.

‘King Tutt? Are you bloody serious? Who is this woman? What’s this nigger wog business?’

Dad was totally flustered, but he paused and looked straight into my eyes. ‘You tell me what’s going on right now, Denny.’

I told my father that Mrs Tutt would only open the toilet door after my pants were soiled, off and in the wash. She never smacked me with my pants on, but once they were gone, she smacked my backside and jerked my genitals until I screamed.

I told my father that I had spent most of the last four days standing in the corner of Mrs Tutt’s bathroom staring at green tiles and waiting for my next punishment.

I told my father that I dreaded King’s return.

Mrs Tutt would dress me, smacking and jerking as she pulled my underwear and pants back on, then grab my arm and push me to the front door.

When King arrived, she would hug him and squeeze him and kiss his lips, then point to me and say things like ‘Look at the dirty nigger, King. That’s a dirty, black niggerwog that poos in its pants. Give that wog a punch for Mummy.’

My mother walked straight out, across the road and up to Mrs Tutt’s front door.

Dad was right behind her. Julie and I stood on our driveway and watched.
Mum slammed her hand on the door and kept slamming until the curtains twitched and a face appeared at the front window.

‘You coons get off my property,’ yelled Mrs Tutt, my first babysitter.
I remember Croydon.

*Mum found a paddock of daffodils and we filled the house with yellow.*

*Santa brought Ajax the rocking-horse.*

*Dad made a nipple for Yusef the calf. Dad made a brilliant Billy Cart.*

*I remember our first family ride in the brand-new Zephyr, my first fist fight, my first kiss and my first blackberry tummy-ache.*

*Frisky the half-bred Corgi joined our family. She hated kid’s feet.*

*I watched ‘The Blob’ with Auntie Chris and had nightmares for months.*

*I laughed when Uncle Rob shot at the trespassing mushroom pickers.*

My uncle Rob shot a crow and yelled 'Beauty!'

Some hours later, I found the wounded crow down in the cypress-grove, near the out-of-bounds mouldy haystack. The crow couldn't fly, instead it hopped and gargled the rude word and tried to get as far away from me as it could. I followed it across the paddock, up the dirt track and back into our yard.

I'd been carrying an iron bar - a piece left over from Dad's brilliant Billy-Cart. The bar was better than a stick; smoother, heavier and resonating with potential power.

The crow hopped into our yard, I heard my uncle laugh. I connected the memory of his excitement at shooting the bird with the iron bar in my hands and acted instantly.

I had to hit the crow three times before it stopped the awful noise.

That night at the dinner table, I could not eat my peas. I 'd mixed my carrots and cauliflower with my mashed potato and successfully completed most of the vege eating chore, and I'd just swallowed my last bite of roast chicken when Uncle Rob pointed at my plate.

'How's the crow, boy?'

I couldn't change my glistening eyes, but I said nothing. Uncle Rob saw the moisture, but he wanted a louder response. He turned to my dad.

'Boy's got a mean swing, Ray. Hits like Bradman.'

Dad looked at me and I felt my lips quiver. 'What've you been up to?'

I didn't speak.

'What are you crying about?'

'I'm not,' I said.
'All I can say,' said Uncle Rob, 'is don't let him near the chooks.'

Dad frowned hard. 'What've you done to the chooks?'

'Nothing.'

'Don't bloody lie to me, Denny. What've you done to the chooks?'

I felt my face change into the loose distorted mask of anguish that accompanies uncontrollable crying and felt, inside, a terrible rage at myself for the loss of control. I knew how my father would interpret my reaction. I would be judged guilty of the unknown crime and then judged a liar for denying its existence. The rage became the truth.

'I killed a crow with a bar. It had a bleeding wing. Uncle Rob shot it.'

Dad wasn't satisfied. His anger was awake and he'd committed himself to either reprimanding me for something or apologising for calling me 'liar'. He glared at me and I knew that he had seen me recognise his dilemma. We sat for a moment, both frustrated, both enraged. Uncle Rob broke the seething status quo.

'Gave it a hiding. He's a bloodthirsty little bugger.'

I hated my uncle. I thought about school and the similarities between his expression and the expressions of friends suddenly turned to accusers, of the group constructing the outsider. I thought about the bar and what it could do to his smirking face. I thought about what it did to the crow and felt sick. I stared at my peas.

'Eat your peas,' said Dad.

'I can't.'

Dad had his crime.

'You'll eat what your mother cooked.' Dad created my victim.

I looked at Mum and noticed a tension in her, but she said nothing.

'I'm full.'

Dad focussed. 'You'll sit there until that plate's clean.'

I looked at my brother Mark. His neck was red and he probably did not want to get involved, but my glance tweaked his sense of outrage.

'Uncle Rob shot a finch, too,' he said, his tone so sharp with honesty and knowledge that everybody had to believe him.

Uncle Rob glared at my brother. Dad looked relieved. Mum took advantage of the breach.

'You didn't shoot a finch?'

Rob shrugged. 'Thought it was a starling.'

Rob looked around the table and watched the rest of the family stare.

'Finches don't look anything like starlings,' said Mark.
'Was it a finch?' my excellent sister Julie demanded.
'A red and yellow baby finch,' said Mark.
Julie glared at Rob. 'Finches don't look anything like starlings, Uncle Rob.'
Mum frowned at Dad. 'Ray, I don't like guns around the kids.' I ate a pea.
Rob crossed his arms. 'I'm not bloody stupid. The kids were behind me.'
'I wasn't,' said my clever brother. I ate another pea.
Dad stared hard at his brother. Rob looked at his plate.
'I want that rifle put up,' said Dad. 'No more shooting around the property unless I'm with you.'
I scooped a forkful of peas into my mouth.
Rob frowned at his peas. Dad mopped bread through his gravy. Mum speared her last piece of chicken. Mark finished his cauliflower. Julie pushed her plate hard enough for the cutlery to clank.
'I ate my peas, Mum,' I said.
I remember Croydon.
School.

I was six years old. I knew that because my seven year old brother kept on and on about it. 'You're only si-ix, I-I'm se-ven. You're only si-ix, I-I'm se-ven.' Like that. My brother was a little prick in those days, but then again so was my sister — it's the new millenium, I can call a girl a prick if I want to (and it's probably safer than the alternative). Anyway, I was six and it was my first day at primary school.

Having a seven-year-old brother and eight-year-old sister definitely affects a six-year-old's preconceptions about the big things in life.

Knowledge comes in snippets to one so young, to one so similar to an extra large kitchen sponge on the bench-top of experience. Seven and Eight year old knowledge about school sounds like this:

'Got in trouble …'
'Had to learn …'
'Wasn't allowed to …'
'Mrs. Flounder got real mad …'

This school stuff didn't sound like much fun. At home when the adults turned rabid, you'd squeal a bit until they were really crazy and then run outside. After a suitable cooling off period you'd run back inside to see just how close to homicide you could get the old things, then run outside. It was an all day occupation that did not finish until you were just too damned tired to torture them anymore.

But school? From what I'd heard you couldn't run outside when the old farts finally went ballistic. You weren't ALLOWED, it was AGAINST THE RULES, you might even have to go to the PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE. Knowing I was to be imprisoned in the same room with one of these alien, psychotic big hairy monster people with no means of escape was bad enough. Knowing that if I behaved as I'd enjoyed behaving for the past six years might have me sent to the King of the alien, psychotic big hairy monster people for PUNISHMENT was absolutely terrifying.

I was about to enter the realm of the gods, and I was pretty damned sure I wouldn't make it out alive.
I won't go into details about the superb series of brilliantly dramatic and painfully loud tantrums in which I indulged myself on the morning of the big first day. I won't harp on the deep satisfaction I felt at seeing the looks other kid's parents gave my poor demented mother.

Looks that seemed to say 'You bitch, what have you been doing to that little boy?' or 'Listen to the kid, you savage hussy! He doesn't want to go.' Looks that were probably saying 'I bet you can't wait to get rid of the little bastard.'

I will mention the look of deep satisfaction on my mother's face as she satirically said, 'Goodbye, Den. Have a nice day.' Yeah right. My best performance in six years had no hope against the adult agenda. I was now part of the evil machine, grist for the mill of maturity, a sacrifice upon the altar of the god EDUCATION.

My first grade teacher was from some obscure part of Melbourne and only recently arrived at North Croydon School for the Soon To Be Sacrificed. We, the petrified, snotty-nosed, snivelling, want-my-mummying sub-species sat. She, the eight foot tall, blue-eye-shadowed, Cher look-alike Nazi Gas Oven Attendant spoke.

'My name is …' She grinned evilly. 'Mrs. Constanopolopolous.'

'Yeah, right, sure. We're six-years-old and we can’t even say Kakadu (and the way things are going, we probably won’t ever have to).

She grabbed a piece of orange chalk and wrote a line of chicken-scratchy shit on the blackboard. I was annoyed. Apart from the fact that even the thought of chalk makes me feel like a cat combed backwards, why did she bother to write down her name? Not a single one of us could read, for God's sake! 'Trees', 'cubbyhouse', 'I like birdys', 'Bike', random thoughts and fleeting fascinations, 'she doesn't know we can't read, poor thing.'

'Can you say my name, chiiiidreeeen?'

So much for the benefit of the doubt. The sub-species, always keen to be humiliated, tried for the verbal brass-ring in a tepid, muddled group bleat. 'Missus ConSonPopsonoctopus.' Instant smell of urine from the back row — the little red haired kid just pissed that extra Golden Circle Tropical Fruit Juice right into the new cord overalls Nana bought him for his sixth birthday and Mrs. Whatever-Her-Name-Is claimed her first victim.

She crooned: 'What's the matter, daaarling?' Oh, she was good.

She knew exactly what was wrong. You'd have to be nose-less not to know. The kid was bawling his head off, nearly drowning in fruity piss, but was that enough for Mrs. Constipated Octopus? No way. She just had to hear the humiliation. She wanted the magic words.
'Yes Mrs. Constanopolopolous. I've just pissed my extra Golden Circle Tropical Fruit Juice into the cord overalls Nana bought me for my sixth birthday. I feel so humiliated. Please forgive me … etc, etc.'

I was glad when the kid ran screaming from the classroom. Maybe, I thought, they'll sacrifice his pissy little arse to the king of the monsters and I'll live to live another day. The chalk-wielding troll-queen followed Mr Wiss Pants out into the corridor (which, by the way, has much in common with corridors found in hospital morgues and dental surgeries, although I didn't actually realise that fact until about five minutes ago) and we, the surviving members of a rapidly declining, soon-to-be-extinct, minor flaw in the evolutionary fabric of humanity, all exhaled together. Imagine twenty wussy little people holding their breaths for ten minutes, waiting for someone else to screw up first. Imagine what their combined exhalation would smell like if you added a generous dribble of fruit-scented piddle, vegemite, peanut butter, cheap nazi-bitch perfume (Eau De Auschwitz) and the faint, but definitely lingering pong of dog-shit one of the little monkeys had stepped in. The adults might be big arseholes, but in that microcosmic moment of olfactory recognition, we sure smelled like one.

We looked at each other and one bright spark stated the obvious: 'That kid peed in his pants.' We all giggled.

Another little mongrel opined: 'He peed his pants.' We giggled.

The dog-shit boy said sagely: 'I could smell it.'

We waited until he worked out the punch-line. 'Pee.' Still waiting. 'In his pants.' We giggled some more.

There was a lull while we looked at each other for confirmation that the joke was still alive and thriving and then we giggled again. I decided a little cheek squeezing might be in order, so I tested the crowd with a short burst.

At this point, I'd like to share one of my pre-pubescent habits with you. You obviously will not be able to experience the sheer annoying wonder of the real thing, but hopefully this explanation will suffice. I used to make high-pitched squirty noises by squeezing spit between my gums and the insides of my cheeks. Imagine stepping on a very large maggot and amplifying the sound to 100 decibels. That's pretty much what it sounds like. I did it for fun. I did it because, let's face it, I was six years old and there wasn't that much else I could lay claim to in the skills department. Mostly, though, I did it because it had a really weird effect on any person older than six. Have you ever seen what a dog-whistle does to a dog? You get the idea.
So there we were, waiting for God-knows, and I'm squeaking and squeezing my passionate little cheeks for all I'm worth. I was making music for my peers, an orchestra of orange cordial induced spitty, squirty sounds for six year olds, and they loved it. I upped the volume and gained an as yet unsurpassed satisfaction in the response from my fellow ex-ferals (face it, that's what we had been up until that day). The pee giggling turned to cheek squirty laughter. Then the door opened and the Bride of Satan walked back into the room.

Try this with a friend: take the Oxford Complete Dictionary (Hardcover) and slam it down on top of your friend's head as quickly and violently as you possibly can. Now watch what happens. Your friend will have an instant embolism and die. That's nearly exactly what happened to every kid in Mrs Calldaporkpolice's first grade class when she re-entered the room. Instant death ('Don't worry, Mrs.Payne, little Wayne Junior didn't feel a thing. He's happy with Jesus now').

Mr Wiss Pants was gone. I knew where. The eight foot tall psycho-babe was glaring at me. I knew why. I'd just had to give that old dog-whistle one more blow, hadn't I? The squirty squeeze that soaked the carnivore's back. I was screwed. She knew it, I knew it, and nineteen other vegemite-ridden little ingrates knew it. When she smiled, all fang and Alpine stain, I nearly joined Mr Wiss Pants in the wissed pants sub-genre that he had been so unfortunate to create for himself. I just managed to stay dry (apart from a very minor squirt which was definitely not part of my cheek squeezing repertoire, and which I only mention here to lighten Mr Wiss Pants' load).

'Was that you making that disgusting noise?' she asked, fangs gnashing, knowing it was.

'No,' I replied, resorting to the most used word in the language of my kind when replying to any adult's interrogation about anything ever.

When her eyebrows drew together, a strange dimple appeared on her forehead, much like a set of lips in a moue. If you'd looked at her upside down she would have been the spitting image of Josef Stalin.

'Are you lying to me, young man?' she asked, stupidly.

'No,' I replied (this kind of uncooperative response works a treat in a fair and ultimately gormless judicial system, but definitely not in the feudal monarchy that was the contemporary late-60's primary school).

'I want to hear the sound you were making. I want to know why it's so funny.' Clever bitch, appealing to my ego, inferring that there was a slight chance she might giggle too. I squeezed my cheeks.

'So you were lying to me,' she growled. I ducked, half expecting a six-foot gush of green vomit to spew from her soon to revolve head.
'You can stay …' she paused perfectly, relishing my fear, savouring the sentence, 'after school.'

That's it, I thought, you're eaten. She's going to beat you, then eat you. She's a whacked-out psycho nut-bag and you're nothing but an afternoon snack. My life was over and all the other kids could do was exhale. Pricks.

I was a brave little boy. I made the best of a totally horrifying day, utilising all the available physical elements for my own special little satisfactions. I was going to die later anyway, so why not do as much as I possibly could to annoy the big bitch before I got chewed?

Mrs Conalollabridgida gave us plastic scissors and some boring coloured paper. I managed to make a few surgical changes to her Women's Weekly and a completely nauseating Jane/Spot book before Godzilla-woman caught me. I said sorry. Mrs Copalottaposthumous gave us plasticine. I fashioned a fairly reasonable facsimile of a penis and stuck it on the queen. Elizabeth II looks funky with a dick, but Mrs Chainsaw-Massacre was not amused. I said sorry. Throughout the day, every time the silence lasted too long, I squeezed my cheeks. I got caught, I said sorry.

I knew I was working Mrs Costablockortwoahash up into a major feeding frenzy, but I think I must have figured that if you're going to be eaten it might as well be quickly. Storms were raging way up there on top of her head and that gave me a grim, cynical little satisfaction. I intended to squeeze my damned cheeks all the way to the bottom of her small intestine and hopefully give her severe indigestion. I even practised my famous farting-on-call ability, hoping to let one loose right up her nose as she swallowed my bottom. I was one cookie this monster would never forget.

Mr Wiss Pants came back, but I knew they'd done something disgusting to his mind. His cheeks were red, his eyes blank and he was wearing the ugliest, most ill-fitting pair of orange pants I'd ever seen. Maybe, I thought, that's what they make you wear when you BREAK THE RULES. I felt a small relief knowing that at least I was going to be dead and would not have to suffer the ultimate humiliation of the orange pants.

Have you ever seen one of those nature documentaries where the plummy talking English type goes out at night and films hyenas? If you have, you'll remember the evil, tittering sound they make and the way lights reflect off their vicious red eyes. When Mr Wiss Pants re-entered the classroom, he faced twenty tittering, red-eyed hyenas and I guess, in that first moment of awareness, he resigned himself to the position of post-tied goat. Mrs Complimentarypotapiss roared. This was her kill, and no mangy bunch of dwarf hyenas was going to take it away. We retreated into the primeval primary shadows, knowing that we'd still get to chew up whatever she left behind. Poor Mr Wiss Pants, I heard later that he married a Greek giantess from the Athenian
circus and went into medicine, specialising in disorders of the prostate. His doctoral thesis is legendary: 'Fruit Juice, Your Prostate and You'.

I watched the clock (even though I had no idea how to tell time) and the hands moved slowly, inexorably towards my doom. When the going-home bell rang I started phase one of the sometimes-adults-forget based escape plan. I bolted for the exit. Do you think the Queen of the Damned forgot? Not a chance.

'Young man!!' I heard, all hope lost. 'Sit down.'

I squeezed my cheeks defiantly and did what The Blob demanded. Mr Wiss Pants and the nineteen hyenas filed out, eyeing me with a Nya Nya Nya Nya Nya relish.

I was alone with Mrs Killthefrigginpopulous. I held my water.

Monster-gal approached my desk, wafting Eau De Auschwitz and doing her upside-down Stalin impression. 'You've been quite naughty today, young man,' she drawled, sitting on one of the too-small hyena seats.

She was very close. Too close. I could smell the musky, predator sweat under her bad perfume. I could see the crusty brown make-up, peeling off her face like rotting skin. Her eyes were full of little red lines and her breath was Alpine smoky-sour.

'What am I going to do with you?' she asked, as if she didn't already know. I replied by squeezing my cheeks. What the hell, I figured, there's still a chance that she might giggle and realise how thoroughly entertaining the cheek squeezing sounds really are. She didn't giggle.

Stalin's mouth suddenly grew teeth and Madam Lash stood. I was too terrified to even think about working up a fart and my poor little cheeks were fast running out of spit.

'You can just sit there for a while and think about things,' she rumbled, sparks flying from the bolts in her neck. She moved back toward her desk, rummaged around in a rather large tapestried bag for a second and began to extract something from it.


Reality shifted into slow motion as I recognised the colour and texture of the thing she was about to expose. It was pink and hairy.

A head? Some poor little bastard's head? I was about to piss.

She placed the pink thing on the floor and quickly produced another identical pink thing. Something shorted in my synapses. She took off her shoes. Smoke began to drift from my ears. She slid her feet into the two pink things.

I might have been keening, dog-whistle high. Then it all came together in my ratty little mind – feet, pink things, feet in pink things. Slippers. Fluffy Slippers.
Mrs Condakiduntilhepiss sighed as her feet were enveloped and I sighed as my pants were soaked by a huge gush of urine. Fear had made me hold on, relief always makes me let go.

I couldn't believe it. Fluffy slippers? On the Litch-Queen? Mummy-things on the taloned feet of my arch-nemesis?

'Yes,' spoke the voice of the anti-authoritarian man I would become, 'Fluffy Mummy things that make her human.' I gave my cheeks a tremendous squeeze and looked up at the teacher. 'Hey lady,' I yelled triumphantly, 'I wised my pants!'
I remember Harrisfield.

I had a silver low-rider, three speed dragster with a high sissy-bar and I cruised the concrete creeks from the Olympic Pool to the Sandown Speedway.

I wagged home with a tin of baked-beans and my best friend to camp overnight in the deserted house near the school. We spilled sauce from the bean can and told our school mates it was a bad man’s blood.

I sat on a motorcycle and kicked the kick-start. The bike tipped over and the bikie caught me, laughed and took me home on the bike.

I ran from the law.

I opened the bathroom cabinet, paused and examined the contents until I found the new package Mum brought home for Dad. I’d seen Dad open the red box and tear off one silver-foil covered square, watched as he ripped the foil off a thing that looked exactly like a piece of chocolate.

‘What’s that, Dad?’ I’d asked innocently.

‘Not for you kids.’

That wasn’t an answer. As far as I was concerned, that was just Dad’s way of saying ‘this chocolate’s all mine and you can’t have any’. I was annoyed.

My annoyance evolved into cold and calculating rage when Dad conspicuously placed the red box in the bathroom cabinet, an area protected by the spell of parental warnings, where toothpaste was allowed, but everything else meant a taste of Dad’s thin belt.

I told my brother. ‘Dad hides chocolate in the bathroom cabinet.’

Mark gave the must-be-adopted sneer and my cold rage began to warm. ‘He does,’ I insisted. ‘I’ll show you.’

Mark shook his head and walked away. He hated Dad’s thin belt and was obviously not willing to risk it against the unqualified blatherings of a boisterous baby brother.

I was undeterred. I went to the bathroom, opened the cabinet and read words off the red box: Laxettes, constipation, keep out of reach of children. I ignored the last and focussed instead upon the word ‘constipation’. I thought of Dad, pictured him in my mind, but could not draw in any obvious illness. I wondered if Dad might have this constipation thing and, if so, where it might be in his body. I replaced the box and went looking for my brother.
Mark was practising wheelies, trying to keep the front wheel of his dragster in the air over as many concrete footpath slabs as he could. A two-liner equalled one slab and I stood in the driveway and watched him make an impressive five-liner – four slabs. The most I’d ever managed was a three-liner – two lousy slabs.

He grinned. ‘Five-liner.’

‘Nuh,’ I said, unreasonably. ‘Your wheel came down before the line.’

‘Piss off.’

I stared at him. He stopped his dragster and stared back. ‘What?’

‘What’s constipation?’

He gave the definitely-must-be-adopted-super-sneer. ‘Don’t you know?’

‘Nuh.’

He shook his head just to rub my ego into my ignorance and I felt the beginnings of a hard bristle, but my desperate need for chocolate over-rove the scathing comeback that might have been on the tip of my tongue.

‘My wheel didn’t come down,’ Mark pushed.

I shrugged. I knew that his five-liner was a beauty and letting him have the tacit concession cost me nothing.

He looked suspicious. ‘Say it.’

‘What?’

‘Say: your wheel didn’t come down.’

He was going to win and I didn’t like it, but I had no choice. ‘Your bloody wheel didn’t come down.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘I didn’t say say bloody!’

‘Your fuckin wheel didn’t come down.’

‘Little bastard!’

‘Shithead.’

‘Fag.’

I laughed – as far as I knew ‘shithead’ beat ‘cigarette’ any day. Mark pounced. ‘You don’t even know what a fag is either.’

‘I do so.’

‘What is it, then?’

‘A smoke.’

He laughed. ‘It’s a poofta.’
I didn’t want to believe my brother, but when Mark knew he was right, his eyes glinted in a particular way and his expression changed to satisfied cat. I tried to rally. ‘You’re a poofta.’

It was water off a duck’s back. Mark had already won the bout and I watched the satisfied cat stretch languidly in warm and fuzzy pleasure all over my brother’s face. He threw me a scrap. ‘It’s what women take to stop having babies.’

I was confused. ‘What?’

‘Constipation.’

I was very confused. I thought about the writing on the red box and was sure I remembered something about ‘eases constipation’. I looked at my brother. ‘You sure?’

Mark huffed, called me dickhead and rode off.

I walked back into the house and tried to lay out all the facts. Mum doesn’t want any more babies – fair enough - so Mum must take constipation. Dad eats Laxettes to ‘ease constipation’, so, Dad does want more babies and he’s trying to beat Mum’s constipation with his Laxettes. But if that were true, why did Mum buy the Laxettes? Wouldn’t Mum just stop taking her constipation?

I thought I had it figured. Mum’s constipation was painful to Dad.

‘Yuk,’ I said aloud, visualising parental sex.

‘I’ve had constipation, Ray,’ says Mum.

‘Dad smiles bravely and stuffs his face with chocolate. ‘I can take it, darling. I’ve got my Laxettes.’

There was something wrong with the logic, but I couldn’t see it. I mentally sorted the facts again and realised that the problem must lie in my brother’s definition. The realisation shocked me. For all the verbal conflict, for all the sparring and bickering between us, Mark was the wise light in my shadowy youngest child reality and I did not want to believe that one of his facts could be wrong. Questions were the only gifts I had for my knowledgeable brother and, although he feigned annoyance, he enjoyed answering them. His answers were his gifts to me. If he were to discover that one of his gifts was flawed, it might break the fragile exchange of love between us.

I went to my sister’s room. ‘Hi Jule.’

‘Hi.’

‘What’s constipation?’

She laughed. ‘Why?’

I shrugged. ‘Dad hides chocolate in the bathroom cabinet and it says it eases constipation.’

Julie grimaced. ‘Yuk.’
I was relieved. Mark had been right. ‘That’s what I said. Why doesn’t Mum just stop taking it?’

‘Taking what?’
‘Constipation.’

Julie laughed again, her expression half confused half amused. ‘You don’t take constipation. Constipation’s when you can’t go to the toilet.’

‘Yuk.’ Then it hit me: if the chocolate in the bathroom eased constipation, it must make people go to the toilet. Better that I had never gone to my sister’s room – a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

There was a kid at Harrisfield Primary School I often dreamed of mutilating. He had starred as the ripped, shredded, burned and bleeding victim in all of my classroom daydreams and more than a few of my deeper, subconsciously fabricated night dreams. I’ll call him Ted, for safety’s sake.

My first day at Harrisfield Primary School was all Ted.

‘You a wog?’ demanded Ted.
‘Nuh.’
‘Fuckin’ coon?’
‘Nuh.’
‘You’re not from here.’
‘Nuh.’
‘Where ya from then?’
‘North Croydon.’
‘Not where ya from before … where ya from really?’
‘Victoria.’
‘Bullshit. You’re a wog.’
‘I’m Australian.’
‘Wog.’
‘My parents are Australian.’
‘Dago.’
‘My grandparents are Australian.’
‘Eyetie.’
‘My great granddad was an aborigine.’
‘Told ya. Fuckin’ coon. What’s your name?’
‘Denny Prussian.’
‘Dunny Brushin!’

I punched Ted in the mouth and Ted punched me in the mouth. I punched Ted in the eye, Ted punched me on the nose. We punched each other silently, as if punching was a natural thing to do. A crowd gathered, but they brought noise with them. The noise attracted adult law and Ted and I were pulled apart and led off by a tweed-coated playground sentry. Later in the principal’s office we were given six cuts of the strap each. The principal called me a trouble-making worm and loudly wished I’d never come to Harrisfield. He called Ted a juvenile delinquent.

A year went by and, as the Ted/Dunny Brush war continued, my cuts tally rose to second-highest in school. I decided that Ted was everything I wasn’t. He chased footballs, I chased girls. He thought fun meant bashing little kids and anyone who didn’t fit into his image of a real Australian. I thought fun was putting ethyl alcohol into the fish tank to get the guppies pissed, lighting Tom Thumbs and dropping them into the bin under the staffroom, stickytaping ‘Kick Me I’m a Wanker’ notes on Ted’s back.

Everything I’d ever read, watched or heard, every lesson I’d ever learned about life in the human world pointed to the basic principle of opposites, so, as far as I was concerned, my loathing for Ted was righteous. He was Pol Pot, the bad guy, the black hat, the evil vizier in every Phantom comic. I was the screaming kid in the Vietnamese rice paddy, the bloody soldier giving mouth-to-mouth to a dying comrade, the Phantom. It was simple – I was good, Ted was evil, I had to win, Ted had to lose.

I’d also learned that war was a righteous thing – in the late 60’s and early 70’s the Anti-Vietnam Peace movement belonged to the adolescents and the Uni students; those of us born too late caught the sickly orange lava-lamp and televised cleavage aftermath. We saw our adults in clown costumes and silly sideburns. We heard our fathers bemoan the tune in, turn on, dropout generation and warn us against the perils of non-conformism. We watched our mothers cry over returned prisoners of war and we made them our heroes. My war with Ted was as natural and right as everything I saw on the six-o-clock news.

Imagine my glee then to discover the perfect hook-loaded bait for the fat, greedy, loudmouthed, racist prick. I stole the Laxettes and took them to school.

The Marble Pit was the best thing about Harrisfield Primary School, it was like a casino for kids, where, instead of chips and cash, we used marbles. There were the ubiquitous coloureds, the valuable solids and Cats-Eyes, and the much-vaunted Tommies. Tommies were extra-large coloureds. Most prized of all were the large steel ballbearings called, creatively, Steelies.
‘Hit-it-ya-get-it’ was the most popular game and the rules were simple.

A kid willing to risk a Tommy would draw a line in the dirt, step ten large paces and sit down with the Tommy between his legs. Players would then shoot from the line and risk their coloureds on each shot. If a player hit the Tommy, he got the Tommy. The kid risking the Tommy kept all the unsuccessful marbles and it was not unusual to see a Tommy-risker fill his bag with gambled loot.

Steely owners could choose their distance from the line, but the over-cautious faced a hostile crowd if the shot was too impossible. Ted’s dad must have been an engineer or something similar, because Ted always had Steelies and, because Ted was such a huge, violent type, the crowd never complained too loudly about his unfair twenty-pace challenge.

‘Hit it ya get it,’ Ted bellowed over his shiny, tempting Steely. ‘C’mon chicken-shits. Hit it ya get it.’

‘Too far, Ted,’ snarled Nicholas, my best mate. ‘It’s a rip-off.’

Ted glared. ‘Shut up, Dickless, I’ll smack ya head in. Chicken-shit.’

Nicholas flushed red at the neck and looked at me. ‘Nice Steely.’

I shook my head. ‘Too far.’

Nicholas opened his marble bag. ‘I’ll just have one go.’

Ted grinned smugly and I waited, Ted’s foil-wrapped nemesis a hot-spot in my shirt pocket.

Nicholas kneeled on the line, took aim and shot a marble, missing the Steely by an inch. Ted grabbed the marble and laughed. ‘Fucked shot, Dickless.’

Nicholas took another marble from his bag and shot again angrily. Three inches to the left and Ted scooped it in.

‘Don’t waste any more, Nick,’ I said.

‘Shut up, Dunnybrush,’ sneered Ted. ‘Least he’s havin’ a go.’

‘Fuck off, teddybear,’ I snapped back. ‘Whaddaya want for the Steely?’

Ted shrugged. ‘Hit it ya get it.’

I shook my head. ‘Too far. Whaddaya want?’

Nicholas shot another marble. Ted collected.

‘No more,’ I said, frustrated with my friend. Nicholas closed his bag.

I kicked dirt across Ted’s line. ‘Come on, Nick, there’s a kid with a Cats-Eye over there. No-one’s gunna bother with Ted’s rip-off.’

‘Whaddaya got?’ Ted called, obviously realising that his only interested punter was going and curious to see what he could get for the Steely.

‘I’ve got two white solids,’ said Nick, desperate for the Steely.
‘Fuck that,’ said Ted. ‘I’ve got ten at home.’

‘I’ve got a Cat’s-Eye,’ said Nick.

‘Nuh,’ said Ted.

I looked at Ted and shrugged. ‘I’ve got chocolate.’

Ted didn’t make it to the toilet and by morning recess Nick and I were on the green-vinyl seat outside the principal’s office. I’ll never forget the look on Ted’s face as his teacher and the principal led him into our classroom and made him point us out. He was wearing a pair of lost-property-box shorts and, although no-one ever said so, I knew he’d shit in his other pants. That knowledge was enough to quash any qualms I might have felt about getting busted and was, in fact, the inspiration for what happened next.

The principal came out of his office and glared at us. ‘I’ve contacted your parents. You boys will go outside, do bin duty, then come straight back here after the bell.’

‘Nick didn’t do anything,’ I said.

The adult exploded. ‘Get outside right now!’

Nick made for the exit, but I didn’t move. ‘I brought the chocolate. Nick didn’t do anything.’ Nick paused in the doorway and flushed red as the adult spun towards him. ‘Did Denny tell you about the Laxettes?’

Nick looked at his feet and nodded.

‘Did he tell you what they were for?’

‘No,’ I said quickly as Nick nodded again. I could have punched him.

The principal shot me a filthy look then eagle-eyed Nick again. ‘When did he tell you?’

‘This morning.’

‘When this morning, Nicholas? Before he gave them to Ted, or after?’

We all knew Nick wanted to lie, but we all knew that he wouldn’t get away with it. ‘Before.’

The principal nodded. ‘Did you try to stop Ted from taking them?’

Nick shook his head.

‘Then you’re as much at fault as Denny. Now both of you do what you’ve been told to do and there’d better not be any dawdling after the bell.’

I ducked past the principal and followed Nick outside. We each grabbed a handle of the first empty rubbish-bin we found and walked it to the next bin. Nick grabbed the quarter-full bin and up-ended it into our empty. We grabbed the handles and headed for another.

‘I’m fucked,’ said Nick. ‘My dad’s gunna kill me.’

I nodded. ‘My dad’s got a thin belt. Wraps around your legs when he’s belting you.’
‘Reckon we’ll get suspended?’
‘You won’t. I will.’
‘Reckon Ted shit himself?’
I laughed at Nick’s serious expression. ‘You see the shorts?’
Nick giggled and we shared a quiet second of mutual glee. Nick grabbed a bin handle. ‘Come on.’
I looked at the bin and, suddenly, another voice, an old bitter man, spoke through my mouth. ‘I’m not doing it.’
Nick shook the bin. ‘Come on! We have to.’
‘Why?’ snarled the Bitter-Man. ‘What’s gunna happen if we don’t empty the fuckin bins? What’s gunna change if we do? I’m still gunna get a belting. I’m still gunna get kicked out of school.’
Nick didn’t argue. He let go of the bin handle and shrugged. ‘What’ll we do now then?’
‘Let’s fuck off.’

When I ran away from school, I was also running away from home. I was escaping the ever-present possibility of new house, new neighbourhood, new school syndrome with its assured conflicts and tedious, often painful rites-of-belonging. I didn’t know what was happening in my parent’s lives. I didn’t know that they’d recently lost all their savings to a sleaze-bag, piece-of-shit con-man. I didn’t know that we’d moved out of the take-away shop because Dad got suckered by his so-called partner. I didn’t know that Mum was against the shop from the start, that she wanted to invest in a house instead of a business. I didn’t know that the reason I never saw my parents refreshed and happy was because they both worked two jobs to try and save our family from the bankruptcy courts.

I was running away from tired, careworn parents and the joyless, demanding authority of tired, careworn educators. I was fleeing from the justice debt I owed my victim because all penance had to be paid through the parents and educators.

I didn’t know that I was running away from my father’s trust and respect until he picked me up from the tiny village police-station in coastal Victoria and drove two-hours back to our house without saying a single word.

I would have preferred the pain and passion of a belting to the cold comfort of my father’s icy disappointment. His thin belt stayed in the cupboard and I tossed Ted’s steely down a storm drain.
1975

I remember Eagle Junction.
I saw my first episode of Countdown and laughed at the men in tights.
I sat on the Queensland verandah and laughed when Frisky snapped at pedestrian ankles.
I watched Frisky convulse in agony and cried when she died.
I sold The Telegraph on Eagle Junction station and fell in love with five-hundred private-school girls.
I found God, Queen and another country and discarded them all.

In Victoria, I wore my Colonial flares, open-necked paisley and platform-heeled black and slightly brown rock-star shoes to the first term of Year Six. I had a girlfriend with the world’s most infectious laugh and early-onset puberty. I had well-balanced parental guidance – enough old-school to ensure my work and respect ethics and a passion for the written word, enough hippy to broaden my mind beyond the boundaries of sectionalist morality.

At school, the day before our move to Brisbane, I was a relatively well-reformed troublemaker with the schoolyard reputation of ‘interesting but not dangerous’ and the schoolroom reputation of ‘adequately mastered’.

In Brisbane, I kept the Colonial and lost the flare. I heard ‘yuk boys’ and thought the speaker was being facetious until I discovered that the term was a tenet for Eagle Junction’s schoolgirl population. In the schoolyard and the schoolroom, I was an unknown hostile Victorian with TV clothes and no knowledge of Rugby League, the Lord’s Prayer, the Lord, Mulberry stains, Silence in Class or The Cane.

I met Mr Harsh.
‘This is Danny Prooshiian.’
Thirty heads stuck out of thirty blue uniforms. Thirty mouths quirked in anticipation.
I followed a harmless instinct. ‘It’s Denny Prussian.’
Sixty eyes widened in shock.
I gave Harsh the formula. ‘Dee Eee and Russian with a Pee.’
A green-eyed girl giggled and a swarthy, hard boy sat back in his chair. Harsh went through the primary symptoms of a seizure without actually having one. ‘Something funny, little girl? Something wrong with Danny’s name?’
The green-eyed girl made the same expression she probably would have made if a rabid Doberman had minced her twelve Guinea Pigs right in front of her eyes.

‘It’s Denny.’ Mispronunciation is audible misspelling and I had early-onset pedantry.

A ripple went through the uniforms. The hard boy crossed his arms.

Harsh’s pale-blue eyes focussed on something over my left shoulder. I turned to see what the thing was.

Harsh’ tone was virgin oil. ‘Looking for something?’
‘Whatever you were looking at.’
‘I was looking at you.’

Somebody laughed. It wasn’t the green-eyed girl.

‘What’s that you have, Dehhhnii?’

I made the same expression I probably would have made if somebody had asked me if I knew where my legs were. ‘It’s my bag.’

Harsh turned to the uniforms. ‘It’s his …?’

Thirty heads spoke. ‘Port.’

I jumped. I was becoming quite nervous. Queen Elizabeth posed over the blackboard with a frighteningly neutral expression, Harsh was on medication and the class was full of blue kids.

‘What have you brought to us from …?’

His question was a rollercoaster paused at the peak, the ah-ah-ah before the choo. The blue kids held their breaths until I finished the question with my answer. ‘Victoria.’

Mass exhalation as the rollercoaster plunged, the sneeze exploded and the provincial penny dropped.

‘Victoria.’ Harsh nodded as he eyed the blue kids.

The green-eyed girl groaned and the hard boy raised his top lip. I knew which two kids to watch when the bell rang.

Harsh didn’t react. ‘What’s in your port?’

In hindsight, I should have wondered what was in his – it was probably amphetamines and vodka. At that moment, adult communication was a vagary, if not quite a contradiction in terms and I couldn’t have cared less about his motivations or the chemical properties of his muse. I shrugged.

‘Just stuff.’
‘Stuff from Victoria in your bag.’
‘Port.’
Harsh made the same expression he probably always made before he electrocuted his chihuahua’s testicles for pissing on his hush puppies and ordered me to a desk beside the hard boy’s. I shuffled and sat to a rustle and a squeal from a p.a. speaker set over the blackboard next to Queen Elizabeth.

The blue kids stood and, after a confused couple of seconds, I joined them.

A horn section blasted out of the p.a. speaker and I jumped again. Elizabeth didn’t blink.

Harsh and the blue kids suddenly bellowed into song.

God save our gracious Queen
Long live our noble Queen
God save our Queen

Horn section, dead-eyed Queen, key change.

Send her victorious
Happy and glorious
Long to reign over us
God save our Queeeeen.

I laughed.

Harsh pinned me with a homicidal glare.

The p.a. speaker squealed, a woman spoke and Harsh and the blue kids spoke with her.

Our Father, who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done,
On Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
Forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,
Forever and ever,
Amen.

‘Victorian boy, on your feet!’

I had obviously trespassed, but it was equally obvious that the father these people spoke to did not forgive Victorians. I got three strokes of the cane for laughing at the Queen’s little ditty and another three for being bemused and silent during the Lord’s Prayer. I didn’t know it, but that cathartic ten-minute conflict would set my will against all individual and collective authority for many years.

Harsh taught me about power.

He thought he was teaching me not to mess with those who had it.
He actually taught me how to recognise it, covet it and do anything to rip it away from those who abused it. Harsh didn’t know it, but in the space of ten minutes he created his own worst nightmare – a republican atheist anarchist.
1976

I remember the day I lost any notion that I had an identity to lose.

George owned the Eagle Junction newsagency and, every weekday, I sold his papers on the platform of Eagle Junction station. I enjoyed it because the station was always full of girls from the two nearby all-girl Catholic schools. I’ve always appreciated girls, but my adolescent appreciation had the extra tang that only a generous nip of hormones can provide.

My brother Mark sat in the back of George’s VW delivery-Beetle early every Sunday morning, passing George the odd papers that only a small percentage of his customers ever ordered. I did the Saturday run, passing The Australian, and, on the last Saturday of every month, I rode my bike throughout George’s district, collecting the money owed by his delivery customers. George lived opposite the Eagle Junction Primary school and on the last Saturday of every month, I’d drop off my collection money at his house.

The fire-truck almost rolled, but the driver corrected and it made the T-junction turn without tipping. With George’s change bag jingling around my neck and my legs aching from the long, morning ride, I couldn’t catch the screaming truck. I didn’t have to.

As I rounded the T-junction turn, I saw the truck pull up at the entrance to George’s street. I also saw people, reclining on their verandahs, standing at their front gates, wandering the footpaths, all intent on the action up the street.

I figured it must be a fire and I hoped it wasn’t George’s house.

I pedaled up behind the truck, looked up the street and saw the fire. It was Eagle Junction Primary School.

I joined the crowd gathered on the basketball court and we watched the old buildings burn.

I saw Mr Harsh.

He stood alone, his arms hanging by his sides and although it had only been a year since I’d moved on to High School, only a year since I’d seen him, he looked twenty years older.

A woman left the crowd, approached him tentatively and reached out to touch him, but before she made the connection her hand stopped, dropped and she turned with a blush to rejoin the gathering. Harsh had not said a word, but nor had he moved and although tears streamed down
his face, it suddenly became obvious that his eerie stillness signified a frightening, body-locking rage.

I remembered his cool cruelty, but I could not laugh at Mr Harsh. His rage seemed more real than the burning school, more real than the gawking crowd, more real than anything I could ever remember experiencing at Eagle Junction Primary. I realised that Mr Harsh loved that old place. It was his belonging place and his power came from his sense of right when he walked its verandahs, taught in its rooms and stared from its windows. I wondered how it felt for him to have to stand there, impotently, and watch it die.

I suddenly felt angry and, although in that moment I might have blamed my anger on his past persecutions, I think I was angry because I had no place to love.

I pushed my bike out to the footpath and rode back to my family’s latest house.
I remember family ties.

Long days and nights in the back seat of the yellow Datsun 180B, through forest, over ranges and across vast plains, West to my parent’s past, West to Pop and Nanna’s house.

I was sullen 15, Mark was self-righteous 16, Julie stayed home.

Mum enthused about the scenery, shared anecdotes about her most excellent career and spoke thoughtfully through the miles of her cathartic childhood and the saving grace that was my father. Dad spoke affirmatives and filled the infrequent silences with snatches of song, the lyrics mauled by his deliciously droll and strangely gleeful humour. His favourite was ‘The Big Rock-Candy Mountain’, preceded by a long, harmonic ‘Oh’. They were the only lyrics he chose to sing for that particular song – ‘Oh, the big rock-candy mountain’ – and they would come suddenly, warm the mood-chilled Datsun, then stop, leaving a faint ripple in the air, reminding us all that Dad was an infinitely lovable fellow.

Mark and I, imprisoned in the back-seat, brooding over the fact that our long-legs should have trumped Mum’s title and age when it came to front-seat rights, surfaced to share sardonic glances and secret sneers. But our responses were shallow, forced, learned in the crucible of High School, where coolness was measured by one’s level of disdain and adult utterances were always treated with suspicion and contempt. Australia passed outside the Datsun and as much as we tried to retreat to the locked-down safety of feigned personal affront, we could not help but be drawn closer to the two lively, loving people in the front seats.

With Little Red Riding Hood as the buxom star of our adolescent fantasies and the Big Bad Wolf as Nullarbor road-kill, the yellow Datsun transported us over the Big Rock Candy Mountain to Grandma’s house.

Pop Prush was huge in blue singlet and triple-X OS Stubbies, cuddly but untouchable, a human archaeological mound, layered by life and hard experience. He sat over formica, resting on massive arms like the trunks he spent his lifetime cutting and grunted monosyllables that seemed to contain more wisdom and latent knowledge than any ninth or tenth-grade text-book.

Nana whirled through the old farmhouse like a nut-brown willy-willy, magically producing plates of bread-and-butter pudding, freshly killed and plucked chickens, beaming grins and vocal
snippets from the Seventh-Day-Adventist bible. I had never heard meaning in the word ‘God’ until I heard my nana say it.

Mum was strangely tense, Dad was deliberately happy (although he’d stopped singing) and Mark and I were transplanted limbs rejecting the new, but uncomfortably familiar body. We understood the sardonic glances, secret sneers and subtle head-shakes that passed between our parents, but they seemed cruel and mean-spirited and unforgiving and far too close to the techniques we used to resist the adult, our manufactured enemy.

We stayed a week, piled back into the yellow Datsun and headed for home.

Between Southern Cross and Coolgardie, Mum shared the back-seat with me, Dad sat in Mum’s seat and Mark had his first driving lesson.

He was smug and I sulked until Dad relented. Between Coolgardie and Norseman, Dad put me behind the wheel.

The road was dead-straight, the Datsun hummed, I kept the lead from my foot and everything was perfect in our little, metal cage until the red kangaroo decided that he wanted a lift. The beast bounded into the middle of my lane and I swerved as Dad yelled ‘Stop!’ I only ignored Dad because I thought I’d get past the super-sized Skippy, but the mongrel jumped straight into the passenger door, Dad’s door, and we all screamed ‘Shit!’ together.

Lecture, dunce’s cap, back-seat.

The sun dropped, Norseman disappeared in the rear-view mirror and the Nullarbor stretched before us. I wallowed in self-pity and resentment until the wallowing exhausted me and the humming Japanese tyres lullabyed me to sleep. I dreamed an explosion, opened my eyes, looked out through the front-windshield and saw Dad, stark under weirdly-skewed halogen. Mum sat in her seat and repeated the same question. ‘Ray?’

I got out, Mark got out, Mum said, ‘Get back in.’

Dad said nothing.

Mark and I joined Dad in the light. When I saw that the Datsun had changed, when I saw the radiator in the engine-space and the engine squatting, steaming near the firewall, when I saw the blood and the tiny tufts of fur lodged in the mutilated grill, I nearly danced a jig. I nearly sang Dad’s favourite song. I nearly asked, venomously, musically, ‘Why didn’t you stop?’ But my father was too still, too cocooned in rage and I did not want to see the nightmare butterfly that he might become. I went back to my cell and sat quietly, waiting for Dad to make his own peace with the situation. Two seconds later, my brother’s door opened and he did exactly the same thing.
After the midnight roo, the front end of the Datsun was boomerang-shaped and I think that inspired Dad to see that the car made it back home to sunny, provincial Queensland.

We abided at Cocklebiddy, a dry, forlorn Nullarbor roadhouse and while Mum and Dad stayed close to the air-conditioned room, waiting for just the right truck to come along, Mark and I separated to explore the borders of the tiny, mark-on-the-map settlement.

I saw the human traffic and revelled in its impermanence. I loved the idea that all those trucks and cars and caravans were moving towards another place. The desolate landscape, the flies, the heat, the desperate, strife-torn vegetation assured me that Cocklebiddy would never become fashionable or attractive and that it would never be a destination. I decided that it would always be a place of strangers and, because I felt as if I had always been a stranger, Cocklebiddy felt like home.

Dad found a ride. An amphetamine-sponsored truckie hung the Datsun from the back of his car-carrier, stuffed our family into the cars, his sleeper and anywhere else we would fit, and took us all back to Bjelke-Petersen.

I never forgot Cocklebiddy and I promised myself that as soon as I was old enough, I would return and live for the rest of my life, happily ever after on the wide, ancient, lonely Nullarbor.
I remember Mitchelton.
‘Man of Steel’, ‘The Pajama Game’, treading the boards for the first time, applause, freedom.
I drank Tony Holmes’ dad’s home-brew and won the year 12 Melbourne Cup sweep.
I loved a girl with scoliosis and a body-brace.
I joined the work-force.

Mrs Ivy frowned at my feet. ‘Why are you wearing sandals?’
I leaned back in my uncomfortable, metal chair and returned her frown. ‘I always wear sandals.’
‘Where are your shoes?’
‘I hate shoes. They hurt my feet.’
She looked distastefully at my long, broad feet and pursed her lips. ‘I’m sure you could find shoes that didn’t hurt. Those things you’re wearing are not part of your school uniform.’ She looked at my jeans. ‘And neither are they.’
I glanced down at my jeans and my sandals and then slowly raised my eyes to meet hers. ‘The school uniform isn’t compulsory,’ I said. ‘I’m comfortable.’
‘Well, I’m not. Your outfit offends me.’
I had been amused, then slightly annoyed at her strange attack. Mrs Ivy was usually a live-and-let-live type and, I thought, I had worn the same, basic outfit for the last six months, so why the sudden offense? My annoyance unleashed the Bitter-Man. The Bitter-Man was a cold, razor-tongued demon, completely impatient with petty discriminations, cloaked in a red cloud of self-righteous outrage, always ready for bloody, take-no-prisoners war. The Bitter-Man stood and I went with it.
‘Where do you think you’re going?’ snapped Mrs Ivy as the Bitter-Man carried me to the demountable classroom’s door.
‘Library,’ sang the Bitter-Man with an upward lilt that implied a thousand expletives.
‘Sit down.’
‘But I can’t, Mrs Ivy. My presence offends you.’
‘I didn’t say that!’
The Bitter-Man grinned nastily and raised mocking eyebrows, but he kept my mouth shut.
‘I said,’ said Mrs Ivy, ‘that your outfit offends me.’
The Bitter-Man forced my hand towards the top button of my jeans. ‘Do you want me to take my pants off?’

Mrs Ivy’s Harpie took over. ‘Sit down!’ it shrieked, pointing at the metal chair with a crooked, taloned finger.

The Bitter-Man shook my head. ‘I can’t sit here and offend you. I’m going to the library. I’ll even sign in.’

The Bitter-Man drove me out through the door, forced my hand to grab my backpack and stomped me away towards the library. The Harpie shrieked a few more times, until I was out of ear-shot.

The Bitter-Man signed me in to the library and, knowing that my signature also signified my point of no return, sucked itself back into its hateful abode and left me alone.

We gathered every morning in our form-rooms for role-call and school notices. The day after the epic attire war, my form-room teacher found only one notice pertinent to the students of Twelve-A.

‘Denny Prussian to the Principal, immediately.’

I heard my peers.

‘Ivy.’

‘Oooo.’

‘Trouble,’ with a Bitter-Man-like lilt.

I stood, hitched up my jeans, curled my toes in my sandals and shuffled out to meet Mr Blister.

Human shapes moved behind the opaque glass of various offices, the green vinyl seat stuck to my Levi’s and a constant traffic of shuffling teachers, buzzing administrators and tense students stirred the antiseptic air around me as I waited for Blister.

Mr Griffin was the deputy-head and he was the man usually responsible for high-profile discipline. He lounged against his office door-frame and sucked at his teeth, as if trying to remove a stuck piece of chewed perpetrator-flesh.

‘Have you been sent, Prussian?’ he asked, studying me with a disturbingly focused gimlet-eye.

‘Nuh,’ I mumbled and then jerked my head towards Blister’s door.

Griffin sniffed. ‘Then I’ll probably see you later.’ He gave his teeth one last wet suck before turning back inside his office. His door closed and, through the textured glass, I saw his shape. I
waited, expecting to see giant bat-like wing shapes unfurl and flap in gleeful, predatory expectation behind the blocky shape of his body, but it did not happen.

Blister’s door opened and the gnarled, red-faced head of my Principal popped out. ‘Danny Prooshin.’

I did not answer immediately. I’d seen Blister countless times for any number of petty infractions, not the least of which was over eighteen-months earlier, the Saturday night party at my place, when my parents were at Noosa and all the Year Eleven’s got pissed and half the Year Eleven’s vomited on Blister’s front lawn. Being new to town, I only found out that Blister lived across the road from our house after I was summoned to his office at the school. He mispronounced my name that time, too, but I corrected him. I was sick of correcting him and, as I stared at his broken-capillaries, his ear-hair and his watery, muck-green eyes, as I counted the times I’d sat on the sticky green vinyl and waited to hear him deliberately mispronounce my name before his inevitable and tedious and puerile tirades, that sickness became rage. It wasn’t the Bitter-Man’s rage, that sly, self-delusional angst that turned my tongue glib and my actions ludicrous; it was adult rage, my mother’s hand slamming the Tutt’s door, my father’s silence on the long drive home from the police-station, Mr Harsh’s tears as Eagle Junction Primary burned to the ground.

I stood, peeling my arse from the vinyl, and walked away from Mr Blister.

‘Prooshin!’ he yelled.

I turned, stared at his tepid anger and punched Griffin’s glass.

‘It’s Prussian, fuckwit!’ I snarled. I punched the glass again and it cracked. ‘Denny with a fuckin ‘E’, Prussian with a fuckin uh!’

Blister looked like he might look just before a bus hit him.

I saw the shape behind Griffin’s door move and then pause.

The administrators stopped administrating. The teachers stopped shuffling. The students froze.

Blister shouted. ‘You’re out, Prussian!’

‘Hooray!’ I yelled back. ‘You finally got my fuckin name right!’

I walked out of high-school and never went back.

The shopping centre was a fortress of civilisation, protected by antiseptic, Muzak, friendly, helpful staff and the inalienable right to buy. Myer was the temple within the fortress, where both acolytes and worshippers spoke in hushed, reverential tones and blessings materialised in a million and one top quality products. A bulging Myer bag was proudly borne, a symbol of true devotion to all that was right and good with the world. Myer was respectable.
With short hair, an ironed shirt and tie, and a gracious, thoughtful mien, I could become an adult in Myer. As a Myer man, I could enjoy all the trappings of respectability and social belonging simply by association. My father would forget my indiscretions and look at me with pride and love. People would not see my strangeness – they would only see a Myer man.

I met Mr Red.

‘A future!’ he said, freckles flaring. ‘Meyer is only interested in you, if you’re interested in a future!’

‘I’m interested,’ I said, with my best interested expression.

‘Sales!’ he said, ears afire. ‘Meyer will buy you, if you’ll sell Meyer!’

‘I’ll sell …,’ I paused, wanting to chew my lip because the whole selling Meyer thing was a bit beyond me. ‘I’ll sell.’

‘Shirts!’ he said, head blazing. ‘Meyer needs a salesman in shirts.’

‘I can sell shirts.’

‘Meyer!’ he said, Hades personified. ‘Meyer doesn’t sell a scarf without perfume. Meyer doesn’t sell a book without a lamp to read it by. Meyer doesn’t sell a horse without a saddle!’

‘I didn’t know Meyer sold horses,’ I said, grinning.

He stood silent; stared, smouldering.

‘Tie!’ I nearly shouted.

He nodded and a freckle flared.

‘Belt!’ I threw at him.

He smiled and his ears lit up again.

‘Suit, shoes, trousers, singlet … um, watch?’

He nodded vigorously and I waited for the fire alarms to start.

I went home and told Dad that I was a Myer man.

Dad shrugged and said: ‘Wonder how long this is going to last.’

I started in shirts. The customers tried to hide between the racks, but I hunted them down and brutally accessorised every one of them. The air-conditioning made me queasy, the Muzak made me sick, but I was a talented trapper and I enjoyed Mr Red’s glowing pleasure. Within a month, Mr Red summoned. ‘You’re a suit-man now,’ he gushed, ‘and huge commissions are yours for the taking.’

I stalked the suit department, jaw set and ready to snap shut on the tiniest hint of customer information. If he said ‘disco’, I sang a verse from Saturday Night Fever and sold him polyester.
If he said B & S Ball, I baited for Razorback, delivered ‘The Pub With No Beer’ and sold him the high-commission Country Tweed with leather elbow patches that no self-respecting city sophisticate would be seen dead in. I was ruthless and, within another month, Mr Red summoned again.

‘Myer,’ he said, ‘is proud of you. Myer is sending you to a very special sales-training conference in the city – at Head Office.’

In the city, as I walked to Head Office, I saw a man in candy-stripped overalls, white gloves and a candy-stripped hat. ‘Flim Flam’s Singing Telegrams’ was stenciled in red felt on the back of his overalls. He walked purposefully into a coffee shop and, curious, I paused outside and watched him through the windows. He cornered a giggling woman, blew a few notes on a little tuning horn and proceeded to sing an amusing summary of the woman’s life to the tune of Happy Birthday. He walked out to laughter and applause.

I stopped the Flim Flam man and asked for a business card.

At Head Office a smarmy American Myer Man paved my way to Flim Flam’s.

‘The customer is basically stupid,’ said Smarm. ‘He doesn’t know what he wants until you tell him and he doesn’t know that we’ve set it up so that he’ll have to listen. We keep him cold, we anaesthetise him with soft music, we draw him in with the cheap and we push him out with the expensive. When he bleats about his budget, we sniff at his cash and convert him to credit. The second he steps through the door, he belongs to us.’

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I couldn’t believe that the people around me seemed to be lapping it up. I couldn’t ignore the fact that I had been putting his disgusting philosophy into practice.

‘You people are here,’ Smarm continued, ‘because you’re all good. You’ve all proved that you have what it takes to own your customer and make him do what you want him to do while he’s in your department. We’re going to teach you how to own him when he leaves. We’re going to teach you how to convert your man to our credit and our company. We’re going to teach you how to take away his choices, so that when he wants to shop, he’ll always come crawling back to you.’

The smarmy American was telling us to believe that we were special and that our customers were untermenschen. I decided that the smarmy American was a Nazi and that I’d been behaving like one, too. I was inspired by self-loathing.

‘You’re a fuckwit, mate,’ I said and walked out of Head Office. I never went back to Myer.
I called the Flim Flam Singing Telegram office and set up an audition. Delicious Deb puffed on hand-rolled Drum and nodded happily at the sounds into which my cheek-squeezing had evolved. I felt the old, familiar Croydon Primary performance tingle at her pleasure. Two hours after the audition I sang my first telegram in a bright new Flim Flam costume.

Within a month, I stepped out as Mr Flim Flam, Don Juan, a chicken, a gorilla, Dracula and a Dero.

I sang Happy Birthday, Happy Anniversary, Goodbye, Hello, Good Luck and Good Riddance. I sang at parties, in pubs, in discos, in restaurants, at corporate functions, at weddings and any place where people gathered to celebrate a happening.

I was a momentary spasm. I was the rift in the contemporary weave. I was always the perfect stranger. Dad refused to comment, but I think he wondered how his flesh-and-blood son had been transformed into a cartoon character.

One day, as I walked along Queen Street in candy-stripe, calmly accepting the smiles, curious stares and Japanese flashes, a bus passed by and belched diesel-smoke into my face. I instantly recognised the smell and, although already reeling from the carbon-monoxide, my mind reeled again at a massive hit of pure recall. I remembered Cocklebiddy.

Three days after the bus belch, thumb primed, I walked away from Flim Flam, away from perfect strangeness, away from evil commerce, away from the Lord’s Prayer and the Queen, away from Harsh and Ivy and Blister and Bjelke-Petersen, and away from my childhood.

* * *

I'd been propped roadside, flyblown and wind-burned for two scorching days, my thumb like a fat wax candle, my mouth primed for the next expletive when I first saw the Cooniba Mission Boys. They approached from the East in an old Holden utility, some barely clinging to precarious perches in the rear bed, all waving Emu Bitter stubbies and laughing (presumably at the fly-blown roadside city-boy with the sunburned thumb). When the ute pulled up next to my shrivelled, pissed-off lost-boy body, the happy fellow in the passenger seat leaned out and shook his beer at me.

'Wanna beer, blok?'

I really wanted a bourbon, a bath, a brand new Cadillac and twelve hours in a five-star hotel with a svelte black-haired Spanish Flamenco dancer, but I settled for the beer. I thanked him and took it.
'Goin' up dat Nundroo. You comin'?'

I gulped Emu, belched, nodded and climbed into the back of the ute, barely settling my weary rump before the maniac driver put his foot to the floor.

After the obligatory 'How ya goin's' and 'You puckin' crazy blok's', I asked: 'Where's Nundroo?' My saviours laughed and pointed vaguely west.

'Nundroo dat way.'
'Bout tree hour.'
'Local pub, cus.'

The maniac driver drove. We drank. I managed to uphold my end of the conversation until the end of the second beer, but the boys' treble-heavy phonetics finally got the better of me, and by the end of the journey, I had lapsed into the persona of idiot foreigner, blithely trusting in my hosts' good will and the notion that whatever was being said, it was probably not at my expense.

After two-parts beer, one-part dust for three swerving hours we arrived at Nundroo.

Nundroo is indeed a pub; it is also a service station, motel and truck stop. It squats wanly on a patch of desert at the edge of the Nullarbor Plain, but there is no obvious reason for Nundroo being built where it is. Believe me, after I'd lost all feeling in the left side of my body, I was wishing that Nundroo had been built a little closer to where I used to be. I guess that's the 'true' nature of place in long-distance travel - if a place is a long way from the place we're at, it's romantic. But it's a pain having to make the journey.

The utility's maniac driver decided to add a little drama to our laughing, shouting, and obscenity swapping entrance by fishtailing the vehicle through the dust of the truck parking area. There were no casualties, save an unsecured six-pack, which flew out into the saltbush and was never seen again.

We rolled from the vehicle as soon as it stopped, having little faith in the driver's ability to cease and desist from his four-wheeled merrymaking. If you're riding the back of a lunatic dragon and it stops to drink, it's usually best to get off, run to the nearest bush and hide. We got off and ran towards Nundroo's Bushman's Bar instead. The driver went the way of the six-pack and the last we saw of him was red dust (flames of the lunatic dragon) heading North into the desert.

Stepping from the dusty, sun-blasted reality of the South Australian desert into the air-conditioned, Pine-o-Kleen scented environment of a South Australian desert pub should have been a relief, and to the basic senses it was. My skin sucked at the cool air and my arms made involuntary flapping motions, wafting beer and perspiration pong into the closed, white faces of the bar's drinkers. They sat like a bivouacked army and we came in like an invading force.
I could call them redneck racists or black-haters, but I don't believe they were either of those types. The tension in the Nundroo Bushman's Bar was generated between our two groups because we presumed they disliked or did not understand us, and they presumed we disliked or did not understand them. Ironically, the consequences of those presumptions were mutual dislike and deliberate ignorance.

The caring barman of the Nundroo Bushman's Bar cared just long enough – about five minutes – to relieve us of our combined resources. We invested well, procuring our recommended daily allowances of Emu Bitter, Champion Ruby and Arnotts Monte-Carlo biscuits, the items and elements guaranteed to provide profound spiritual experiences and suspicious personal growths. With the money spent, supplies replenished, the flash images of sneering Port Augustan truckie expressions imprinted on our retinas and the atonal echo of the barman's last 'Fuck off' receding in our skulls, we tumbled back out into the real world.

Behind the modern facade of Nundroo's service station cum restaurant cum Euro-centric bar lies a dirt track (the low road) to instant freedom, a tine of the fork in the road of choice. The low tine leads to the mulga ring – a stand of mulga scrub that forms a natural circle around a fairly non-descript patch of dirt. The high tine leads to the Nundroo and Districts Unofficial Rubbish Tip. We took the low tine, leaving the high tine for those who could stand the smell.

No matter how you view it, the mulga ring is a singularly unimpressive natural phenomenon, and no amount of descriptive narrative could ever imbue it with romantic or preternatural properties. It is a gnarly stand of pathetic, desperate scrub that just happens to form a ring, so those inclined to get all moist at the idea of tribal spirit-portals or painted National Geographic types bounding around carved idols circumcising each other should now reach for the nearest towel. It was not the mulga that made magic that night; the mulga just sort of squatted there. We made the party, we made the magic and, to this day, I remain uncircumcised.

For the first time in my life, I felt secure and happy in my brown-ness. I was welcome in this company, all of whom were rejected by the inhabitants of the brick-and-tile, drink-from-a-glass, fear-the-dark reality within which I had previously struggled. The Cooniba Boys were not intent on pulling me apart to see if I was valid or valuable, weak or strong, smart or totally gormless. They were simply existing because they could, and whether they recognised that proclivity in me or not, they happily accepted my existence alongside theirs. I suddenly saw my own difference through the differences I saw and I thought that made us the same. I thought my colour was a golden ticket to belonging. I thought I was, finally, involved in a society. I could have cried with joy, and pissed as I was, I'm not sure I didn't.
In the mulga ring we did basically the same things young people do whenever they get the opportunity, but I know I still carried the western mentality virus throughout the entire experience. I know it because I remember wishing the party would last forever, which suggests that I thought it couldn't, which implies that I knew my future was doomed to be another shadow in the infinity of civilised shadows. Still, I partied hard, virus notwithstanding. We all partied hard and then we all fell down. I don't remember falling down, but I must have because I woke up and the party was definitely over.

I opened my eyes to the guttural obscenity that is the crow call. Dried mucus prevented me from fully recognising my place, but my fungoid tongue, throbbing head and roiling gut certainly helped me remember what I had accomplished there. I did not comprehend the vague form squatting across from me; at first I thought it might be just another misshapen growth of mulga. When it spoke: 'C'mon pella. Goin' up det Yeleta', I was still unconvinced that it wasn't some strange, rather noisy desert-thing best left unexplored by misplaced brown boys like me.

I finally accepted its humanity when it challenged mine: 'You like a puckin' goombi lizid. Layin' up dat sun. Git up, goombi, pore dem puckin crows git ya.'

Wanting to see Mulga-Man in his full, offensive glory, I tried to rip the dried crusts from my eyes, but only succeeded in adding two fingers of desert dust to the revolting concoction already in them. In pain and to the tune of Mulga-Man's cackle, I groped around for any magical item that might restore my sight. Imagine my relief when I touched upon the sun-warmed glass of an Emu Bitter stubby. Still blind, I tipped the contents of the nearly three-quarters full desert gourd into my right hand, rubbed the potent brew into my scummy eyes and let out an almighty yell.

I have never liked wasting alcohol and if my faculties had been intact I would have realised that there would have to be a pretty good reason for me to have left a beer so obviously unfinished. I remembered too late that the night before, for some obscure, civilisation-inspired reason, I had put one of my cigarette butts into my unfinished beer. I was now rubbing the offending butt into my eyes. Mulga-Man thought it was hilarious. I thought Mulga-Man might be a bit of a bastard.

When I finally saw the world (albeit through beer, dust and Champion Ruby coloured lenses), I realised that apart from the rotten bastard squatting and laughing at my expense, I was alone, rejected in the mulga ring. The Cooniba Mission Boys had gone - probably back to the particular heaven that sent them to me - and I was once again bereft of spiritual family. I cannot adequately describe how barren I felt at that moment. The desert was a perfect representation of my inner place - sad, tired, desperate for sustenance and, well … angry. I felt truly deserted.

Mulga-Man interrupted my self-indulgent musings: 'You comin'?
I stared at Mulga-Man and thought: Why should I? I didn’t do anything wrong last night, but I obviously wasn’t good enough for that mob.

Mulga Man grinned as if he could hear my thoughts and thought it ridiculous that I could imagine being anything more than a momentary amusement for his people. I looked at his gnarled feet and imagined the pleasure he must have enjoyed using them to crush my rose-coloured glasses. I stood angrily, deliberately not bothering to dust myself, as if this lack of concern over my presentation would somehow offend him. His grin was inviolate.

'Where are we going?' I asked, for want of a more succinctly cutting remark.

His grin widened maliciously. 'Up Yeleta.'

Either my ears were clogged with dust, or my mind was clogged with the febrile imaginings of the true paranoid.

'Yeah? Well up your arse too, mate!' I gritted.

I think he understood me about as well as I understood him. 'C'mon den,' he said, and walked away.

You have to understand that my options were decidedly limited, and even if this insulting lunatic did think I was a lizard, he might just have been able to re-unite me with my adopted brotherhood. Confused, hung-over, saddened by the loss of my newfound friends and wondering how in hell he knew my name, I followed.

We walked straight out into the desert, away from the relatively secure (if somewhat constrained) reality that constituted The Nundroo Service Station and Bushman's Bar, away from The Nundroo and District's Unofficial Rubbish Tip and away from my precious, bottle-ridden, butt-free mulga ring. We walked for half an hour, until my mouth was as cracked as the landscape and my head held the thumping of a thousand migrating kangaroos.

When we finally reached our destination, Mulga-Man deigned to speak again. 'You gotta push. Dat starta mota pucked.'

For the first time in our unusual relationship, I understood what he was saying. We stood beside yet another Holden Utility, parked (for reasons I will never fathom) precisely in the middle of absolute nowhere. Mulga-Man had dragged me halfway to Darwin just to push his damned car. I was not amused.

'Water,' I croaked.

He grinned. 'No worry. Git dat Jerry up out da beck.'

'Huh?' I asked cleverly.

He laughed and shook his dusty head. 'Puckin goombi lizid.' He walked to the rear of the ute and pointed to a large, battered Jerry can. 'Warda.'
To this day I don't know what was in that Jerry can; suffice to say that I empathise with those poor misguided individuals who think it’s healthy to drink their own urine. I do not understand the reasoning, but I comprehend the taste.

As I poisoned myself Mulga-Man settled into the driver's seat of the vehicle. 'Push 'im,' he said as I gagged.

Some people believe that our stratosphere is sort of a staging area for alien activity, a hovering zone from which our highly evolved inter-galactic neighbours can observe our various and nefarious doings. If this is the actuality, then I am sure that the little big-eyed, baldy being lucky enough to watch me pushing that ute around the Nullarbor was absolutely cacking itself (assuming, of course, that big-eyed, baldy beings are enlightened enough to cack themselves).

I pushed. Mulga-Man laughed.

'Put the fucking clutch in!' I yelled, unaware of how distorted my dusty, brown face had become.

'No puckin clutch!' Mulga-Man yelled back, laughing.

I heaved and miraculously the engine fired … but it didn't quite catch. 'Keep puckin' pushin',

I kept puckin' pushin' and our modern equivalent of the reverse angle beast-drawn buggy began to move.

The first explosion was very convincing. I thought the evil little gnome had let loose with a couple of barrels, deciding I'd make good twelve-gauge bait. I hit the deck and covered my head as the now mobile utility bunny-hopped a few more metres.

The second explosion covered my prostrate form in a cloud of white, oily smoke and I realised that, at least for now, I was not to become just another murder statistic.

'Keep puckin' pushin', screamed the bastard, howling with glee.

I rose from my grave and stumbled after Skippy the Bush Kanga-ute.

As I reached for the pushin' position, Skippy farted again, tremendously, and took off without me. Mulga-Man just had to comment: 'Puckin bewdy.'

Again I thought I would die. Alone, unloved, deserted, with the fading resonance of my murderers final 'puckin bewdy' as my ode. 'Black bastard!' I screamed.

It is amazing how much one can learn about oneself in a single moment of epiphany – I have spent the years since that precious, horrific moment of self-understanding analysing my responses to humanity in all its forms and hues. At times, I still find myself sadly wanting, bereft of
compassion, devoid of appreciation for difference. Even as I abused him, Mulga-Man had been turning the ute. I never apologised.

As Skippy approached, my thoughts turned from self-examination to self-interest. I realised that if Skippy stopped, the whole puckin' pushin' process would have to be repeated; therefore I was required to mount the monster in motion. Mulga-Man sped past and yelled 'No puckin' clutch.' I took stock of the situation.

Mulga-Man sped past again. 'No puckin clutch.' I weighed my options.

Mulga-Man urged Skippy into a fast turn and started his third pass. I ran beside Skippy, placed my hands upon her rusty flank, tripped over a saltbush and fell flat on my face. Skippy farted, Mulga-Man giggled and a certain little big-eyed, baldy alien went down somewhere over Borneo, cacking as it crashed.

I succeeded on the sixth pass. I was still recovering on the fourth and refuse to describe the fifth. The entire alien fleet went down over that one.

It is relatively simple to climb from the back of a moving ute into its front cab, if the ute is gliding smoothly along a freshly tarred super-highway and the climbee is a five-hundred-thousand-dollar a year Hollywood stuntman named Cliff, or Rock, or Granite … whatever. Try it from the back of a farting Kanga-ute, driven by a giggling lunatic. Try it dehydrated, covered in dust, beer and mucus, and recovering from a shocking hangover, two falls, smoke inhalation and the after effects of urine-consumption. I succeeded where so many lesser mortals would have failed. I succeeded for the simplest reason of all. Self-interest. The back of a ute is metal; the back of a desert ute is hot metal; the back of Skippy the Bush Kanga-ute was hot, rusty, bounding metal with gaping holes where the floor should have been. I climbed into the cab with Mulga-Man.

After I removed the seat spring from my general anus area, I actually felt a moment of contentment. Then I made the mistake of checking my new environment. Skippy's dash was awash with dead blowflies, the windshield looked ready to cave in and the needle on the petrol gauge pointed below the E.

'You're nearly out of petrol,' I remarked sagely.

Mulga-Man grinned, but I was used to that. 'Dat gauge pucked,' he said, 'tanks pull.' Imagine my relief.

'Where are we going?' I asked, actually far too exhausted to care anyway.

'Gern up Yeleta,' smiled Mulga-Man, 'gern up ma place. You blok sing dat one 'Yestiday'?

I had an inkling, which became an idea, which became an understanding. At the mulga ring party I had let my voice soar with the spirits (or rather the beer) and run the gamut of my Beatles
lore. The Cooniba Mission Boys had a particular attachment to Beatles songs and I know them all (I don't like them much, but will sing them if the party demands it).

Although I hadn't noticed Mulga-Man at the party, he must have been there, listening, absorbing the Lennon-McCartney magic. Now, bounding across the desert in our own private, dusty little reality he wanted 'Yesterday', so I gave it to him.

'Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away,
Now I need a place to hide away,
Oh, I believe in Yesterday'

Mulga-Man joined in, and accompanied by intermittent Skippy farts we sang the Beatles all the way to Mulga-Man's mansion at Yalata.

Surrounded by the scrubby forest that differentiates the Yalata area from the 'true' Nullarbor, Mulga-Man's home was an alloy-shelled oasis, a caravan with no wheels that once belonged to the South Australian Main Roads Department. We arrived in the early afternoon and Mulga-Man offered tea. I nodded gratefully, but winced when I realised where the water was coming from.

The ubiquitous Jerry can.

I conceded tiredly. To the dehydrated, Skippy pushing, Beatles crooner, urine tea is better than no tea at all.

We sat propped against the van on a pair of suspicious looking car seats, drank unsweetened, ghastly black tea and talked about race.

'You not puckin' white pella, ay?'

'No. I'm brown.'

Mulga-Man laughed. 'Goombi lizid pella.'

I finally relaxed and laughed with him. 'Yeah mate, I might look like a lizard, but you're the one who likes the fuckin Beatles.'

For a second he looked confused, then he got it and laughed louder. 'You bleck pella?'

I shrugged. 'A bit. Way back.'

He nodded, as if that explained everything. 'Not real bleck pella, not real white pella.'

'Like I said,' I said, 'I'm brown.'

He contemplated. 'Dat black snake, he don't hang round long when pellas comin'. He piss right off. Smart bugger.'

He raised his eyebrows and nodded once in my direction.

'Dat brown snake, he wait round all puckin' day jes' to grab a chunk outta ya. Nasty bugger.'

'What about white snakes?' I queried, deliberately ignoring his inference that I was a potentially nasty bugger.
Mulga-Man cackled evilly. 'Out here? Dat white snake gunna last two minutes. Crows git 'im. Dingo git 'im. Bleckpella eat 'im and brownpella step on 'im just for puckin pun.'

I laughed. 'And he'll burn red.'

Mulga-Man nodded soberly 'Like a roo dog's dick.'

'Remember that,' I said seriously, 'next time a white fella calls you a black bastard.'

Mulga-Man roared and fell off the car-seat.

We spent the entire afternoon that way – barely comprehending each other, but finding humour in the cracks of our mutual misunderstanding.

When the Nullarbor sky performed its amazing red/orange sundown ritual, Mulga-Man pointed out towards the desert and said: 'Show ya how blackpella ketch wombat. Tradishnul.'

This intrigued me and I admit to a little personal moistness at the prospect of seeing some traditional indigenous hunting. I imagined spears or boomerangs, quiet stalking through the saltbush and the victory of the food-chain’s finest over the lesser beast.

'Gotta push dat puckin ute pirst.'

I pushed dat puckin ute.

We drove through the dusk, west into the fading glory of the setting sun. Mulga-Man seemed pre-occupied, as if he was working on an idea that he could not or would not articulate.

Suddenly a wombat appeared in front of Skippy, loping unbelievably quickly across the desert floor.

'Wombat!' I screamed.

'Puckin' bewdy!' Mulga-Man screamed back.

Mulga-Man put his foot to the floor, pushing Skippy to her greatest speed.

'Now,' I thought, 'now we stop and the hunt begins. Now I get to see the real Australian native in action.'

The wombat ran on, completely panicked. Mulga-Man turned to me and smiled. 'Hold on, goombi.'

I grabbed the dash, sinking my nails into the dried red vinyl.

The wombat veered left and Mulga-Man spun Skippy's wheel. We slid around in a storm of dust, lost speed and the wombat gained a few precious yards. Mulga-Man floored the accelerator again and Skippy surged forward straight over the terrified animal.

Skippy and the wombat connected at 45 miles per hour, an easily stoppable force meeting a virtually immoveable object. It was like hitting a large lump of granite and I remember wishing that we'd remembered to bring seatbelts. Skippy stalled, Mulga-Man leapt from the cab, reached
into the back of the ute and grabbed the Jerry can. The wombat grunted and growled as Mulga-Man approached and raised the can above his head.

'What are you doing?' I whispered.

I sat stunned as I watched him beat the wounded wombat to death with the can. 'This isn't how it's supposed to be,' fumed my outraged inner-whitesnake.

Mulga-Man dragged the bloody wombat carcass to the rear of the vehicle and heaved the murdered mess into the ute's rusty bed. 'I bet he doesn't even own a fucking boomerang,' I thought petulantly.

Mulga-Man took his position behind Skippy's steering wheel, turned to me and smiled.

'Dat how blackpella ketch wombat. Tradishnul.'

He looked at my face and giggled gleefully. 'Gotta push dat puckin ute.'
I remember Kalgoorlie: violence, fear, rejection and separation.

The giant Swede held a forty-five kilogram gas-bottle above his head in one huge, white miner’s fist and ran towards me. ‘Empty!’ he screamed.

I knew he was a deep bush miner. I knew his camp was an hour’s hard drive across the meanest desert country in Australia. I didn’t know why the damned bottle was empty (I’d filled his gas-bottle three hours earlier and was standing by the gas-refilling tank, refilling somebody else’s), but I did know that he wasn’t going to calmly discuss his issues with me; instead he was going to enunciate his issues on my head with that gas-bottle.

Before he could re-part my hair, I stepped forward and hit him between the eyes with my extra-large shifting spanner; the one I used to release the valve on the refilling tank. The giant Swede collapsed and as his arm dropped, the allegedly empty gas-bottle bounced off the top of his head and on to my forward foot. I yelped and dropped the spanner. As the spanner fell on the Swede’s limp left-hand, I tripped over the gas-bottle and fell on his limp right one. I rolled over, groaning, and got to my feet, still wary of the Swede. He looked like he wasn’t going anywhere in a hurry, but I wasn’t taking any chances, so I picked up my spanner and limped back towards the shop’s rear-door.

My boss opened the door and gaped at me. ‘What did you do?’ he bleated in garlicky soprano. ‘I hit him with the spanner.’

When the police asked my boss what I’d said, he told them. When they asked me what I did, I told them. When they asked me why I’d broken both his hands and bashed a dent into the top of his head after I’d knocked him unconscious by hitting him between the eyes with a very large metal spanner, I knew I was in trouble.

Actually, I knew I was in trouble when I realised the police were going to be involved. My sense of humour metamorphoses in the company of supreme authority types; I become what’s known in the supreme authority jargon as a ‘smart-arse’ (there is a lot of ‘arse’ in supreme authority jargon – ‘get your arse in the car’, ‘I’ll kick your arse’, ‘Your arse is in deep shit’) and the one thing supreme authority types hate more than anything is a person with a cerebrally advanced posterior.

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The ambulance had carted the giant Swede off to the Kalgoorlie/Boulder Hospital, Guido (my boss) had made his pesto-embellished operatic statement to the two, uniformed, red Yowies in charge of eliminating all smart-arses from society and I sat, handcuffed, in the gas storage room, waiting for the chance to be disdainful.

‘Tell us what happened,’ said Sergeant Argent.
‘We know what you did,’ growled Constable Crimson.

I stared at the Sergeant and pointed at the Constable. ‘If he knows, you don’t need me to tell you. Ask him.’

They stared at each other, nodded sagely and said: ‘Smart-arse.’

I shook my head at the Yowies. ‘You guys need a new repertoire.’
‘Smart-arse coon,’ said Crimson.
‘Smart-arse wog,’ said Argent.

They stared at each other, then at me, then at each other.
‘Coon,’ said Argent.
‘Wog,’ said Crimson.

I smiled. ‘Does that mean I’m not a smart-arse anymore?’

They glared at me, then at each other, then back at me.
‘What are you?’ demanded Sergeant Argent.

I shook myuffed wrists. ‘The kind you won’t take home to mother.’
‘What?’
‘The weird guy who never played fuckin football but always got the best girls.’

Crimson glared. ‘Nothin wrong with football.’
I got creative. ‘A redneck’s afternoon snack.’

Crimson’s eyes flared to arctic. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

I shrugged. ‘Rednecks have to eat something.’

Crimson sneered, totally clueless. ‘I pity your family.’
‘You pity my family? You got any sisters?’

Crimson bristled. ‘Why?’

‘I could donate the first new gene your family’s had since the Boer war. If you’ve got a sister.’

Bubba Crimson hit me on the nose.

Argent stepped forward and grabbed Crimson’s shoulder. ‘Leave it, Constable … he might be a blackfella.’

Crimson jerked away, snarling. ‘Coons wouldn’t know what a fuckin gene is.’
I stared at his groin, smiled and slowly shook my head.

Crimson bolted towards me, Yowie fists raised. Argent jumped behind Crimson, threw a silver-haired arm across his chest, and snaked a fat grey hand under his left armpit to hold the back of his neck. ‘Stop it now, Constable.’

‘Give me two minutes with him, Sarge.’

I smeared the blood from my nose all over my face, then down my shirtfront. ‘Guido,’ I yelled, ‘these bastards are bashing me.’

Guido stepped into the storage room and started his manic arm-waving routine. ‘I’ll report. You can’t do this hitting. I’m Rotary member.’

Sergeant Argent pushed Crimson towards the door and said, just loud enough for me to hear: ‘I told you he was a wog.’ Argent shoved Crimson out through the door then turned to Guido and pointed at me. ‘You related to this smart-arse?’

Guido turned scarlet. ‘What difference I’m related? You can’t hit people, you’re the bloody cops!’

Argent grabbed Guido’s arm. ‘Are you related or not?’

Guido spat on the floor of the Kleenheat gas storage room and puffed up like a rabid bantam. ‘He’s employee. You gunna hit me, too?’

Argent puffed up like a pissed-off death-adder and froze Guido in mid-chook impersonation. ‘Constable Crimson will be officially reprimanded, sir, but if you don’t answer my question, you’ll be charged with obstruction. Now, are you related to this bloke, or not?’

I have to give Guido ten points for courage and another twenty for common sense. He said no.

To qualify for detention, one must first go through ‘the process’, a unique genre in the prescription of humiliation and power’s excesses, perfected over the decades by Kalgoorlie police and which even suspects with a perfectly serene and Christ-like demeanour rarely survive unscathed. With me, it began at the ‘scene of the crime’, probably because my serenity and Christ-consciousness were suborned by the ‘I’ll-fuck-your-sister-pig’ inference that Crimson, unfortunately, was just smart enough to comprehend.

I approached the police car staring at the freckles on Argent’s argent neck and held firmly at the back of my brown one by Crimson’s crimson claw. Argent opened the rear-door and ‘the process’ began. I ducked to enter the car, but as Crimson pushed me closer to the gap between roof and seat, he lifted my head. I saw that the top edge of the doorframe and the top front of my head were on a collision course so, naturally, pushed back against Crimson’s crimson claw. As Crimson tried to make me a part of the police-car by bouncing my forehead against the top of the
doorframe, he said the two worst words a detainee hoping for justice will ever hear. ‘You’re resisting.’

Of course I was resisting, but meaning changes between event and evaluation. I meant to resist the damage he was doing to my head, he meant to get the high score up on the old conviction pinball-meter. As the pretty pinball lights competed for attention with the pain of the pinball turning my brain into fungus, I heard Guido lose his Latin cool. ‘Fungool!’ he howled. I agreed, but I was thinking about never being able to think again and the word ‘fungool’ seemed fitting. ‘Animal!’ he sang, in a glorious tenor. Crimson ignored him, but desisted and heaved what was left of me into the car. I was pleased for Guido; his voice had finally broken. Then Guido blew it.

‘Animal’ isn’t so bad and as far as your average Australian redneck knows, ‘Fungool’ could be the word for a rare (although revolting) mushroom; but ‘Pig’ is a no-no and ‘Fuggin pig poofta’ is a verbal red flag to your typically bovine bobby.

‘Fuggin pig poofta!’ squealed Guido and where there was one, now there were two.

Argent let his boy be a boy and made himself comfortable in the front passenger seat while Crimson played with Guido. Fortunately, Guido missed the head-to-doorframe procedure of your textbook ‘process’. I think through some deeply embedded cultural logic that Crimson realised that bouncing the heads of Rotary members off the doorframes of police cars was not a very white thing to do. Consequently, I was surprised when, after Crimson had shoved him into the car beside me, Guido turned, struck out with his leather-loafered foot and booted Crimson’s testicles up into his stomach.

‘That didn’t hurt,’ whispered Crimson and fainted.

Argent swore as Guido launched himself from the car and sprinted back into Kleenheat. ‘I’m calling police,’ he bellowed.

We waited.

‘How long do you reckon?’ asked Argent.

‘Give him another ten seconds,’ I mumbled through the fungool.

Eight seconds later (Argent counted aloud), Guido shuffled forlornly out of Kleenheat and over to the car. He stepped over Crimson and settled, sighing, into the seat beside me. Guido shrugged at me. ‘Who I call?’

We sat, Argent whistling between his teeth, Guido looking at his watch, and me, remembering the first time I ever had my testicles booted into my stomach.

‘Remember the first time you had your testicles booted into your stomach?’ I asked no-one.

Guido and Argent nodded, sharing memory in a synchronised moan.

Crimson didn’t move.
‘How long do you reckon?’ asked Argent.

Guido and I studied Crimson. ‘Two minutes,’ said Guido.

‘No,’ I contended croakily, ‘I heard something pop. Be five at least.’

Argent tilted his seat back a few degrees. ‘I got kicked at a petting zoo.’

I was too busy dying to care about Argent’s scrote stories, but Guido was curious. ‘Who kick you?’

Argent sucked at his teeth. ‘Princess.’

‘Your girlfriend?’

‘Shetland pony.’

Guido looked at me and we giggled together.

‘I slip off my bike seat and on to the bar,’ said Guido.

I grimaced at Guido. ‘Me too.’

We laughed and Argent joined in. ‘Me dad punched the pony,’ he said.

We howled. ‘I kick my bike.’ Guido, wiping tears from his eyes.

‘Me too.’ As I spoke, Crimson groaned.

‘What do you reckon he’s going to do when he gets up?’ Argent cackled wickedly.

Guido stopped laughing.

Guido and I qualified for detention. Argent had applied the authoritarian frown to Crimson, so the new soprano desisted from applying the thoughts behind his nasty eyes to the man with the cast-iron loafer.

Fingerprinting changed the neutral disharmony to the amplified equivalent of the sound the Swede might have heard when the gas-bottle smashed into his skull.

Guido's testosterone levels became stratospheric in too much male company. Imagine Mussolini in loafers and a Gloweave disco shirt being manhandled by a seven-foot tall aryan Obstarnburnfuhrer in a Western Australian police-uniform and you'll be able to imagine drops of Guido's testosterone falling like rain on the moon.

‘I do it. Let go my hand.’

‘Gotta make sure it's a good print, wog.’

‘You poofa, let go my hand!’

I wisely bit down on the plethora of tempting smart-arse comments the fracas inspired, but Guido's inner-bantam chose courage before wisdom. He turned his wrist and wrapped his inky fingers around Crimson's starched khaki sleeve. Crimson bellowed and Guido-the-bantam became Guido-the-electrocuted-cat. He literally jumped on to Crimson, wrapped both arms and
legs around the backpedalling Yowie and hissed (whether in absolute terror or with the remnants
of outrage remains uncertain in my memory). Crimson fell on his arse and suddenly Guido was
presented with the Latin equivalent of macho good fortune – he was on top.

'You want good print, you hoon? Here's a beauty!'

Crimson struggled gamely, but Guido had managed to slide his bony knees up to the classic
Mario Milano Shoulder Pin. In Guido's World Championship Wrestling inspired imagination, the
Yowie was at his mercy and he did manage to create a pretty fair Rorschach puzzle on the red-
cheeked monster before its legs wrapped around his throat and flattened him.

I watched the Yowie disentangle itself from the Italian ink-beast and said none of the things
my jaw ached to say. Smart-arse man's cape was at the dry-cleaners.

* * *

The Kalgoorlie police lock-up used to be a holding pen for travelling circus animals. There are
four concrete cells, each with two distinct areas. The first and largest area in each cell is open to
the elements, with nothing but a lion-proof mesh separating inner turmoil from outer space. It is
the scuffle, bash and loudly-abuse-everything-on-the-planet zone. If the detainee is capable of
extreme violence or believable bluff, he or she can gain access to the vomit, bash, genital-in-peril
zone; it is a sheltered area with a bare metal toilet (no paper), a sink (which doubles as an
alternative urinal) and bench-seating along one wall. Abandon hope all ye who enter there.

Guido and I huddled together under the mesh, even though the sheltered area was unoccupied.
It emanated evil disguised as pong and neither Guido nor I had the courage to venture beyond its
dank portal.

'I can't believe it,' said Guido in the curious tone of the gambler who’s just dumped a paycheck
into a poker machine.

I was aware that I had partially contributed to Guido's current state of affairs, but wondered
what the guy would accept as proof that what was happening was actually happening.

'Believe it, mate,' I said, wisely.

'WhadidIdo?'

I wanted to tell Guido that kicks to the testes, ink attacks and questions regarding the veracity
of a Yowie's acclamation to heterosexuality were definitely major doings. I opted for Australian
understatement.

'Must have pissed them off, mate.'
I waited for just the right blues song to pop into my head and wished for a harmonica. Guido waited for his solicitor and whinged.

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Kalgoorlie will never be a haven for feminists, but, by the same tokens that qualify that statement, the city will never be a centre for the ideals of patriarchy either. Consider a city where alcohol is cheaper than water, where an entire street is dedicated to prostitution, where police procedure is remedial, where there are three pubs on every block. Consider also the effects of shift-work on a community's interpretation of time – the man taught to believe that the best possible post-shift activity is drinking, fighting and fornicating will find or create that activity whether he finishes work at 5pm or 5am. In a community where men outnumber women by 8 to 1, where behavioural codes are long established, where 'local' men lead 'new' men by example, drinking, fighting and fornicating become necessary behavioural elements to belonging. Woe betide the outsider in a city of common men.

By noon, the cells were full. Black men, red men, white men and brown men flooded our cage in a wash of beer and body-odour; the bleating innocents, the bellowing belligerents and the bloodied battlers, all vaguely aware that they belonged together and that this little rest-stop was one of the temples on the belonging pilgrimage. Whoever said that no man is an island? I had never felt so obviously sober before that day and admit here that sobriety in a microcosmic world of booze can be absolutely terrifying.

A slobbish red-head sat next to me and put his clammy hand on my shoulder.

'Seen my keys?' he asked in a rum and vomit scented gush.

I shook my head, but the movement must have made him dizzy because he collapsed back on to a red-eyed black man. Red-eye grunted and shoved the slob back on to me. I had almost decided to let him stay, but his stomach suddenly gurgled like a backed-up sink and strange vapours began to exude from his upper-outlet. I pushed him back on to Red-eye. Red-eye pushed him back on to me. We rallied for awhile, too focused on our contest to carefully consider the effects it might be having on our unwanted guest. When he erupted, Guido squealed, but not quite as loudly as the Red-eye, who caught the full blast of unspeakably horrible sewage that blew out of backed-up sink man's upper-outlet.

'T'm Rotary member,' said Guido, crying.
'You're sacked,' said Guido, outside the Kalgoorlie lock-up. I just nodded, grateful at least that Guido had instructed his solicitor to act for me and spring me from the circus. We still had to contend with court, but the harried legal-genius had spoken confidently about our chances. He stood uncomfortably, eyeing his watch and pretending to ignore his red-cheeked and rather smelly client.

'Can I get a lift back to town?' I asked Guido, not particularly concerned about losing a job I never liked anyway, but very concerned about the three kilometre hike back to my shower.

Guido threw his hands up and blasphemed. The solicitor flinched.

Some people try to keep up with the Joneses, I try to keep ahead and slightly to the left of them. I glared at the solicitor. 'You in the Rotary too, mate?'

He looked at Guido, Guido looked back and after a beat I was satisfied to see Guido's shoulders slump in the defeat known only by those umbilically connected to the civic-duty placenta. Guido nodded and the solicitor shrugged. 'Can't leave you out here, son. We'll take you to town.'

I knew it was Perry Mason's car and that Guido didn't have anything to do with my rights to ride in it, but I had appealed to their mutually understood group ethic, put a hard boot on their shared and vulnerable placenta and threatened to stomp.

I reminded myself to write a thank you note to the Kalgoorlie-Boulder Rotary club for its enlightened policy regarding hitch-hikers. I also reminded myself to consider looking up the word 'sociopath' in my pocket Macquarie. I never did get around to writing the letter or checking the dictionary, but I appreciated the lift and I'm pretty sure that a close colloquial definition of 'sociopath' is 'smart-arse'.

Court was as interesting and baffling as any human-made system can be to those not trained in the functions and mechanics of whatever system they might suddenly find themselves attempting to comprehend. To this day I know less about the inner-workings of the internal combustion engine than the average novice, but remain fairly comfortable with the idea that without power the engine won't run. According to the Oxford Concise Dictionary 'dark' is evil, so before I walk to the closest service station, I always look at my inalcitrant car's battery and carburettor and hope that the problem will be in plain sight, right on top of the engine and that I will be able to quickly and efficiently restore glorious power to its rightful place and be on my way. I thought the same might apply to the 'judicial' system, thought that all I had to do was fuel up the Justice Engine, add a spark and turn the key. My theory was fundamentally sound, but although there
was nothing wrong with the electrics, there was definitely a blockage in the Kalgoorlie Criminal Court’s fuel line. Unfortunately, I was it.

If I had known Gandhi, I might have calmly accepted the Swedish mutilation and proved Gandhi right. In that alternate universe I would have been the exsanguinated, righteous corpse and the Swede would stand before the Public Servant to face the Reductionist Wrath of textually maintained Human Governance. But I hadn't known Gandhi, I hadn't seen the movie and I was rather more partial to violent texts in those days, so I hadn't read Gandhi either.

The Public Servant was an interesting fellow, but I never really got to appreciate his dishevelled, obsessive-kid-smacking pox of a personality. I did hope he'd find an instantaneous and immediate cure, but that was self-interest.

According to the law books, however, reaction is equal to action if the outcomes are equal. Written law relies on the principles of non-reactivity, surrender, compliance and the bravely turned cheek, but if the outcome of non-reaction never exists, it cannot be factually determined and therefore cannot be recorded by the judicial system. The victorious victim cannot exist in written law, because the victorious victim is a paradox of written definitions. It's not that I didn't exist in the Kalgoorlie courtroom, it's that I was not allowed to exist as two polar identities, so, because I was unharmed and the Swede was unconscious, the judge chose my legal identity for me. I was identified as the opposite of victim, which, because I refused to die for the Swede's sins, because I didn't compassionately accept the consequences of his psychotic episode, because I did not attempt to personify the ideals of civilisation, made me the devil.

'Jesus fuckin Christ!' I bellowed, as the Public Servant blithely sent me to prison for six months. He just nodded sagely, as if all his binary notions were confirmed.

I won't dwell on prison life here, except to note that I got hurt sometimes, I cried sometimes and I learned to recognise the latent viciousness in other human beings and, most important to my future choices, in myself. I spent most of my time in the library reading Westerns and wondering why innocent ranchers were allowed to kill as many owlhoots as they liked if I wasn't allowed to snot one lousy psychopathic Swede. I concluded that truth is not stranger than fiction, just far more ridiculous.

Three well-behaved months after my bout with bureaucracy, a rubber-stamp set me free and I bussed to Perth. I looked around, saw khaki uniforms everywhere and realised that to put this horror behind me, I had to take my smart arse as far away from Western Australia as I could without leaving the country.
I had $500, a bus ticket and twelve hours to wait before the five-day ride to Brisbane. I watched Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* in the Perth Village cinema three times in six hours then I went to a pub. I asked for Bourbon.

‘Can’t drink that stuff, lad. Kill a brown dog.’

I gazed at the speaker, a round, red person. His nose was a bushfire. He held up a glass vat of beer. ‘Beer.’

I couldn’t help it, life was still a movie, I gazed at his belly.

He reddened more. I sipped my Bourbon.

A light brown man stood aggressively to the bar and ordered Tequila, salt and lemon.

The red man said nothing.

I watched the brown man lick, grimace, drink, grimace, suck and grimace.

‘Looks painful.’

He tensed at me as if my words were the precursors to inevitable conflict.

‘Try it,’ he challenged.

‘Kill a brown dog,’ the red man muttered.

I set my bourbon aside and asked for Tequila, salt and lemon. The brown man watched me grimace three times. He ordered a beer and the red man left the bar.

‘You an aboriginal?’ I asked the brown man.

‘Noongar,’ he snapped. ‘Why?’

I shrugged. ‘Cause I probably am.’

‘Probably?’

I nodded. ‘From Boddington. Way back in the family.’

He smiled nastily. ‘You’re probably not.’

I sipped bourbon and let the old anger come. ‘How do you know?’

‘You’d know if you were. You’d know your own culture.’

I began to mirror the brown man’s attitude. ‘Is aboriginal culture different to Australian culture?’

‘Aboriginal culture is Australian culture – everything else is either European or Asian. You’d never understand our culture.’

‘Bullshit. I’ve lived in the city and the bush and the desert. I can blend.’

‘Blending isn’t belonging.’

‘Bullshit. You belong when you’re accepted. You’re accepted when you do everything a group expects you to do. If I knew you, I’d learn the rules of your group and sooner or later I’d be accepted by it.’
The light brown man shook his head. ‘You can't know me.’
‘Why?’ I asked, aware of my darker skin, equally aware that he had coloured me white.
‘Because I'm a stranger.’
‘You’re not strange. You’re human.’
‘I’m a different human than you.’
‘Every human is different than me.’
‘I have a different history, a different culture.’
‘Do you live solely within your different culture?’
‘Yes.’
‘What about Tequila, salt and lemon? What about the Levi’s you’re wearing?’
‘My culture’s been infected by yours.’
‘Infected? Do you mean poisoned?’
‘Yes.’
‘You ordered the Tequila.’
‘Yeah, and I bought the Levi’s. The poison is your knowledge.’
‘Cultural knowledge?’
‘Yes.’
‘So … is your culture’s knowledge pure?’
‘Yes.’
‘Even though it’s been infected by my culture’s knowledge?’
‘You can’t understand.’
‘Then teach me.’
‘No.’
‘Why?’
‘The knowledge is secret. It belongs to my culture.’
‘How do I join your culture?’
‘From birth.’
‘No other way?’
‘None.’
‘Bullshit. Origin isn’t as important as adaptation.’
‘I have adapted.’
‘To what?’
‘To the limitations enforced upon me by your culture.’
‘You can’t have your cake and eat it too. You take knowledge from ‘European culture’, but refuse to share your own. You call me ignorant for my ignorance, which you won’t help to inform. You say that your culture is pure, but this purity depends on separation and exclusion. You’re right, you are a stranger.’

The brown man shrugged and walked away to drink alone in a booth. He seemed satisfied, almost refreshed and I noticed that the tension was gone from his shoulders. I focused on my shoulders and realised that he’d either transferred his tension to me or that I’d created my own. I opted for the latter and interrogated my creation over two more bourbons.

As I left the bar for the bus, I paused at the brown man’s booth and pointed at my arm. ‘You might be Noongar, but you’re still a hell of a lot whiter than I am.’

He laughed in my face.
I remember escape.

Brisbane and back to the Flim Flam, but all my soft edges were gone and the happenings left me cold. I scanned the employment sections until I found the ad that promised travel and profit.

The interview was also a training day and I sat with four other people in front of Mr Rolex while he taught us everything we needed to know about pots and pans. When we were all adept at demonstrating the easy, no fuss method of making an upside-down pineapple cake with one (that’s right, one!) revolutionary saucepan, Mr Rolex smiled. ‘I’ve never had a more promising sales team,’ he said. Oh, the shark has pearly teeth, dear …

‘What happens now?’ asked Paul, the skinny guy who had told us that he was some kind of Maori prince.

‘Michelle here,’ crooned Mr Rolex, pointing to the only one in the office with her own car, ‘is your team manager. She’ll be leaving at nine sharp tomorrow morning for Mt Isa in far North-Western Queensland. Those of you with the ambition and the commitment will go home tonight and make the right choice. Tomorrow you’ll be on your way to Mt Isa.’

‘So we got the job then?’ asked Paul.

‘Sometimes, young man,’ drooled Rolex, ‘you just have to reach out and take what you want.’ Paul still looked confused, so I gave him a nudge. ‘If we want it, we’ve got it.’

‘Oh,’ said Paul.

I arrived at the office before nine. Paul, Barry and Dave stood with Michelle beside her Holden panel-van. Mr Rolex did not show, but since the panel-van was half-filled with large cases of demonstration cookware, we all felt pretty certain that the job was right. With room for three on the front bench-seat and two more crammed in the back with the pots and pans, we drove out of Brisbane, content in the knowledge that the first part of the ad was true.

We were supposed to travel together, west through Toowoomba and Roma and then northwest through Longreach and Winton to Mount Isa, but it was illegal for passengers to travel in the back of panel-vans and when Mr Rolex lumbered Michelle with the transport duties, he either had not considered the road-rules, or he just didn’t care. The two Roma Highway Patrol cops had spent their careers considering road-rules and they did care. Michelle got off with a warning, Paul and I just got off.
We promised to meet the rest of the team at the Mt Isa motel Rolex had booked for us, but we couldn’t say when we’d arrive. Hitch-hiking is fraught with uncertainty.

Two days later, broke, starved and smelly, we were less than half-way to our destination and lifts were much harder to get. It wasn’t surprising. We were both just a little too brown and much too dirty and those drivers that were too full of the milk of human kindness to yell ‘Piss in your boots and swim’, or ‘Get a fuckin job ya black bastards’ as they passed, still glanced fearfully at their upholsteries and their fading air-fresheners before putting pedal to metal and watching us dwindle to tiny specks in their rear-view mirrors.

The Augathella Roadhouse did not look very promising. Dozens of road-trains and single-trailer semis idled in the huge parking area, but we had already discovered that the truckies would rarely stop for hitch-hikers. They simply weren’t allowed, because their insurance did not cover passengers.

I didn’t care. I wanted a lift and I was willing to face any kind of abuse to get it.

I walked into the roadhouse, picked out a likely candidate and came straight out with it: ‘We’re pots and pans salesmen and we’re going to Mt Isa.’

When Graham the truckie finally stopped laughing, he said, ‘I’ll take ya, but if I don’t like ya, you’re out. Ya put ya gear in me toolbox and that’s where it stays. There’s a truckie’s shower here – you blokes’ve got half an hour to use it.’

‘We can’t,’ I said.

‘Why not?’

‘It’s a dollar each and we’re broke.’

Graham stared at me for a long time. ‘Can ya change a truck tyre?’ he asked, finally.

I felt total relief. ‘I worked on the Nullarbor,’ I said. ‘I can change a tyre. I can rope off a tarp and tie a tight load. I can drive.’

Graham pointed to Paul. ‘What about him?’

‘He’s a Maori prince,’ I said. ‘He’s my off-sider.’

Graham laughed again and handed me a twenty. ‘Get a shower and a feed. If ya can find the bull-nose Inter with the gal-pipe, you’ve got ya ride.’ He turned back to his meal and chuckled. ‘Fuckin’ pots and pans.’

Graham was from Narrabri in Western New South Wales and he spent his life running road-trains from the Queensland border to Mt Isa and sometimes Darwin in the Northern Territory. His wife, Kerry, had her own rig and did the same run, but she was on her way home and Graham had
expected to make the long journey without her voice on the CB to keep him company. Paul and I were the eclectic alternatives.

As we travelled, Graham filled the cab with stories about his life before trucking, when he spent his years as a Sharman’s tent boxer, setting up the ring in each country town to take on all comers. A challenger fought for a five-hundred dollar prize, won if he could survive three, three-minute rounds with the Sharman’s man. If a Sharman’s man lost three bouts, he was fired. Graham told us that he quit and although I was sceptical, after the Winton pub I realized that my imagination wanted to believe in his pugilistic prowess.

The town of Winton marked the end of the bitumen for travellers on the Landsborough Highway. Those travelling to Mt Isa had two options from Winton, the Boulia track or the Kynuna track, neither of which was very attractive. Drivers faced either of two thin, one-lane dirt tracks with wandering cattle, massive kangaroos and the road-train juggernauts that could not risk straying from the path for risk of bogging down in the thick mud at the sides. Boulia was longer in distance, but sparser in traffic. Kynuna had slightly better driving conditions, but it was very busy. Boulia was merely a grind, Kynuna was a free-for-all, no-holds-barred chicken-run.

Winton was the crossroads; a place to pause and consider the next step; a place where destination suddenly became far less important than journey.

The Winton pub was an old Queenslander, two-storeys high with ornate iron-work decorating its upper verandahs and chiselled-iron pillars supporting the bull-nosed corrugated iron roof that covered the footpath in front of the bar entrance.

The pub was built on the edge of town, right at the crossroads and as Graham manoeuvred his rig in beside the dozen or so other parked road-trains, I noticed that nothing was built further west, as if there was an invisible but important boundary between the civilised pub and the wilds of the road beyond.

‘How come the aborigines are sitting outside?’ Paul asked Graham.

‘Way it is,’ said Graham. ‘Blacks outside, whites inside.’

Paul and I stared at each other. ‘Where do we sit?’ I asked.

We sat in the public bar and drank Queensland beer with over fifty other men. Graham earned our admission by telling our story to his blue-singlet wearing truckie mates and their laughter signified their acceptance. I didn’t trust that acceptance – it was based on our comic value rather than our value as normal individuals. I was also very unsettled by the racial separation, because, regardless of where I sat, I was exposed for what I was not. I could not blend into a comfortable
black/white mix, instead, I felt obvious, strange, patronised and, somehow, constructed. I nursed my beer and kept my mouth shut.

Paul seemed unaffected by the circumstances and happily attempted to join the truckies’ discourse. The only problem, when it came, did not originate with the truckies. A big, florid man in a battered cowboy hat had been eyeing Paul and Graham noticed. ‘What’s your problem, mate?’ he asked quietly. His tone worried me, because Graham was usually quite noisy.

The cowboy looked Graham up and down, frowned and said: ‘Nothin, mate.’

My imagination kicked in and, as I sipped my beer, as the wash of crow-like Australian pub-noise engulfed me, I separated from reality and lived an alternate version. I daydreamed.

The cowboy looked Graham up and down, obviously thinking that Graham’s large belly and short stature were no threat. ‘Why don’t ya tell ya coon boyfriend ta git out in the gutter where he fuckin belongs?’

I hadn’t noticed the huge, black woman carrying beers out to the street but she certainly didn’t miss him.

Before Graham could speak a word or make a move, the black woman had dumped the three full pots of beer on the cowboy, knocked off his hat and grabbed two handfuls of his hair. ‘Puck you!’ she screamed as she dragged him, howling, toward the front doors.

I almost laughed, but another cowboy suddenly stepped into the black woman’s path and knocked her to the floor with a vicious punch. She was a tenacious woman, for instead of trying to stand and meet her attacker, she kept hold of the first cowboy’s hair and wrestled him into a position where she could sink her teeth into his shoulder. Paul’s mouth was wide open and I still had my beer in my hand when Graham waded into the second cowboy and flattened him with a super-fast combination.

The Winton pub paused and I heard a crow call, but that was like a signal, because, suddenly, all the people outside the pub wanted to get inside the pub and all the people inside wanted to get out.

Just before a massive fist connected with the back of my head, I saw Paul go down under yet another cowboy. Paul stayed down, but my head hurt and I wanted to hit the one who hurt it. I aimed under the first cowboy hat I saw, but when I damned near broke my hand on the poor fellow’s face, I opted for discretion. I sat under a table and watched blacks fighting whites, whites fighting blacks, blacks fighting blacks and whites fighting whites. I saw the blue-singlets rally against the cowboy hats, with Graham in the thick of it until the huge, black woman, obviously full of cowboy, suddenly stood and punched him in the back.
‘Puck you!’ she screamed.
Graham turned with his fists cocked, but I saw no more as I was pulled by my ankle out from under the table and stomped on by the cowboy I’d punched earlier.
He managed one or two hard kicks to my ribs, before someone jumped on him and he landed on his face beside me. I reached over and got one good punch in, when a shocking explosion froze every fist, foot, jaw and butting forehead in the Winton pub.
‘Everyone OUT!’ came a bellow with enough force to turn the blackest hair white.
‘Police!’ bellowed the bellower. ‘OUT!’
Nobody disagreed, all fighting ceased, no words or recriminations were exchanged. The monster cop with the terrifying 12-gauge had restored the balance of power and the blacks joined the whites, the blue-singlets joined the cowboy-hats and the only thing missing on the street outside the Winton pub was an all-in rendition of ‘Give Peace a Chance’.
After the broken glass was cleared away and the hat went around for the damage, after the blacks were comfortably re-settled under the bull-nose and the whites were propped happily on bar-stools, we all had a drink or two to celebrate our fun afternoon.

‘You comin’, or not?’
I dropped back into the noisy, but undamaged reality of the Winton pub again and nodded vaguely. Graham gave me a strange look. ‘You crook, or something?’
‘Nuh,’ I said. ‘Just thinking.’
Graham stood. ‘Don’t think too much, boy. Stunts you’re growth.’
I stood and looked down into Graham’s eyes. ‘You must be a bloody rocket-scientist, then.’
Graham laughed and called me a smart-arse.
Graham, Paul, and I pushed through the all-white throng into the all-black one, stepped out from under the bull-nose and climbed back into the truck. ‘Kynuna,’ said Graham with a beer-brave grin.
I took one last look at the Winton pub and wished my imagined war upon it.

Graham set us down right outside the motel in Mt Isa and blew his airhorns as he drove away. He’d told us to visit if we were ever in Narrabri, as long as we didn’t bring our pots and pans. I promised to find him and repay the money he’d spent keeping us alive on the journey. Some years later, I kept that promise, but that’s another story…
We found our room easily enough; Michelle’s van was parked outside, but all was not well in the dazzling world of cookware. After their initial shock at seeing us alive and actually in Mt Isa,
our team-mates filled us in on the pitfalls of pot and pan peddling and their stories did not bode well for the future.

Barry had been attacked by dogs, Michelle had barely escaped from the amorous clutches of a half-naked miner and Dave refused to leave the motel unless it was in Michelle’s van and the van was heading away from Mt Isa.

I was mortified. I had hoped that we’d be regaled with success stories and that my team-mates would already be spending the first of their huge commissions. I had hoped that they might just have a bit left to spend on us. ‘Did you do any demonstrations?’ I asked, hopefully.

‘Fucking pineapple upside-down cake, my arse,’ Dave sneered. ‘I knocked on doors for two straight days and I didn’t get past one of them. They ask you how much and then nearly have a heart attack when you tell them.’

‘We’re not supposed to tell them straight away,’ said Barry.

‘Yeah, right, and they love that, don’t they?’ Dave’s voice was pure venom. ‘How many demonstrations did you do, Barry?’

‘You know I haven’t done any yet,’ Barry whined, defensively.

I looked at Michelle questioningly. She shook her head and said, ‘I hardly get to open my mouth.’

‘Let’s fuck off then,’ said Paul.

I shrugged. ‘So has anyone made any money?’

‘No,’ said Dave.

I looked at Michelle. ‘Any petrol money left?’

Michelle nodded. Barry said, ‘You can’t use that! That’s for getting home after we’ve sold at least two full sets each!’

I glared at Barry. ‘We just hitched from bloody Roma, mate! That petrol money was supposed to get all of us here, but it didn’t, so what’s left belongs to me and Paul.’ I looked at Michelle. ‘We can either use it in your car and then we all get out of here, or you can hand it over and me and Paul will go alone.’

Dave bristled. ‘Bullshit!’

Michelle shrugged. ‘We’ll go in my car.’

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ said Barry.

‘Good,’ Dave said. ‘You can mind the bloody pots and pans.’

We drove the 900 km stretch to Townsville in a little under twelve hours and enjoyed lunch with a sea view. After lunch we stood in a huddle beside the panel-van and discussed our options.
Dave wanted to return to Brisbane. Paul wanted to go and live on a deserted island somewhere in the Barrier Reef. Michelle didn’t care.

‘Let’s split the rest of the money four ways,’ I said.

Nobody disagreed, so we split the money and I took my share and walked away, leaving them to their dreams, their arguments and their choices. I had already decided to hitch south along the coast, read every newspaper in every town that I liked and find myself a job. I had also decided that I was better off alone, but that was a decision I always made.

In Rockhampton, I found another ad.

Colin was my boss and I’d worked with him for three months when we did the Sainsbury job. All we had to do was connect the wall sections to the roof joists; the roof joists to the roof sections and ‘the bloody plumbers’ll do the rest’.

Colin loved building modular homes. ‘Like a fuckin big leggo set, mate,’ he would say, ‘and I get paid to play with it.’

I was never a Leggo kind of kid, but I liked building houses. I liked tangible results; the knowledge that I had helped to create something permanent and valuable with my hands and mind.

“You grab that joist, Prush,” he said on the last day I saw him.

I grabbed the joist, as I’d done countless times before, but for some mysterious physiological reason, my spine instantly revolted and my vertebrae armed themselves and attacked my pain centre. It was a brutally fast victory.

Colin shoved me in the ute and drove me to the Yeppoon hospital. Before he walked out he said, ‘Shoulda bent your knees, mate.’

Doctor Jekyll concurred with Colin’s opinion and then he gave me the pills.

‘These are 5mg Valium. Take two every four hours. They’ll make you feel so much better.’

I took the pills and four hours later I took the pills again. Four hours after that, I woke to a man in white.

The man in white had a hose and I remember his bushy, twitching eyebrows and the intense, gleeful expression on his face as he tried to shove it down my throat. I struggled under fluorescence and sadism. Something slid down my throat.

‘This’ll clean ya out, dickhead,’ the Sadist growled. ‘Ipecac.’ Eyebrow. Twitch.

I became Vesuvius. I was St. Helen’s personified. I purged.
While I did my spectacular impression of homo-eruptus, Jekyll spoke, and although I was rather busy, I heard the snatches of speech most relevant to my immediate future. ‘Observation … Rockhampton psyche ward … Ambulance … attempted suicide.’

I struggled and gurgled while they strapped me up and took me away. After a while, I slept. I woke to a mumbling, gibbering, screaming, sobbing cacophony. It was like a battery-hen house - thousands of abused chickens, eating their own shit and squawking their dissatisfaction to the world. I squinted through the congealed mucus on my eyes and thought, ‘I'm Jack Nicholson and this is the Cuckoo’s Nest’. I wasn't but it was.

I met the first nurse, obviously an ex-TV wrestler who had probably called himself Mr Godzilla or Mungo the Merciless, and asked him politely what the fuck was going on.

‘I hurt my back and they think I'm bloody Norman Bates?’

It was something like that. I noticed that his canines seemed unnaturally sharp as he replied in a squeaky, cemetery gate voice ‘Behave. Be good boy. I slap you up and down’.

I did not think about this and I guess I should have. I spoke creatively about his mother. He slapped me up and down.

When I regained consciousness three days later, I met Doctor Self-Important, Mr. Minor Medical Entity, there to help me learn life according to Freud, the guy who nearly cried when I told him that I thought Freud was a sick little man with a titty obsession. He waved my poetry at me and told me I was Jack Nicholson, he ranted about the preciousness of life, he blubbered about the need for closure of emotional issues. I told him to fuck off and Mungo re-visited my skull.

Every morning the tea-man came to the ward pushing his trolley and looking very nervous. He had to prop the security door open to wheel the trolley through.

On the morning of the fourth day, I opened my eyes as wide as they would go, dropped a little spittle from my bottom lip and did my best Igor impression. ‘Can I help you with the tea?’ I left out the ‘master’, but it wasn’t necessary.

The tea-man gave me a very wide berth and pushed his trolley into the ward without closing the security door. He did not look back and neither did I.

I had to hitch back to Yeppoon in my hospital pajamas, but I had no trouble. People are very weird, they ignore what they can't comprehend (if they can't kill it) and the only thing my first lift said was ‘You must be really late for work, mate’. I went with that.

At my flat, I changed my clothes, grabbed the Valium and ran to the hospital.

‘What are these things?’ I yelled at the Pharmacist.

He took the bottle, dropped a pill into his hand and studied it. ‘50mg Valium,’ he said.
I bared my teeth. ‘Read what it says on the label.’

‘Valium. 5mg.’ He stopped and became a human sprinkler system, all sweat, drool and apologetic spittle.

‘Read the rest, moron,’ said I, Jack Nicholson-like.

He dribbled some more and read, ‘Two …T-T-Two every F-F-Four hours. Oh dear.’

I threatened a law-suit, I demanded his first-born child, I screamed, jumped up and down and generally behaved in the manner of the nut-bag they originally thought I was. I made them call the Psyche-ward to call off the search party and the dogs. Nobody at the Psyche-ward even knew I was missing.
A brave, new world?

George Orwell should have put a little more effort into studying history before he tried to write the future. He should have recognised the great leveler, the one, consistent human agenda that always survives disasters, regimes and ideological eras. He should have remembered commerce.

The repressive, closeting ideologies that informed the actions of the twentieth century’s early movers-and-shakers were squeezed like pus from the public pustule. To heal the scar, a million medicine-men jumped in with a billion salves at once-in-a-lifetime prices. The new age began and it was called Communication and, as the crucifix was replaced by the peace-sign, so the peace-sign gave way to the dollar-sign. Money offered the salvation that governments, philosophies, wars and invisible, untouchable deities had always promised but never delivered. Success was measured in property, possessions and the number of zeros behind the first digit on a bank balance.

Orwell was right on one important point, though, regardless of the fact that he foresaw a media manipulated by government rather than a media driven by the fiscal expediencies of the economic demographic. Orwell was right about the influence of the media on society, he was right about the way people would turn to the impersonal screen for directions and blue-prints in their unceasing efforts to construct valid, belonging social identities.

Advertising sponsors wanted to know that the characters appearing on television would fit the demographic most likely to use their deodorants, drive their cars, shop at their stores and snap up their credit-cards. Television producers stopped taking risks and, like the pretty packages of the products they promoted, opted instead for the safe, harmless, representative middle-class Australian identity. The nudity, homosexuality, swearing and sex that so enlivened seventies productions, disappeared from the Aussie lounge-room to be replaced by a sad, mid-fifties-style rendering of the ideal, morally-correct Australian character, living a clean, insipid suburban life, challenged only by an innate inability to negotiate petty relationship conflicts.

I arrived back in the city to discover that even music, the saving grace of sub-cultural Australia, had become yet another naked Emperor. Punk was alive, but slowly dying and, just as subversive seventies rock performers disappeared under a mountain of make-up and glitter, the Punk’s attempt to destroy fashion and all its implications became fashionable. The angry, raging pierced
human became the squawking, impotent pierced fashion clown. Designer safety-pins sold for sixty bucks at the local markets.

In the mainstream, the tepid lisp had replaced the passionate scream, the gut-cutting guitar solo gave way to soulless techno-synth and the lyrics questioned nothing, protested nothing and stated nothing except the same mindless banalities offered by soap-opera scripts and morning-television cultural-morality gurus.

Here in my car
I feel safest of all
I can lock all my doors
It’s the only way to live
In cars

I fantasised that one day I would see Gary Neumann staring smugly at me from behind the window-glass of his locked car. I imagined using the business end of a ’67 Hendrix Strat on Gary’s window to show him just how safe he really was in his mechanised haven.

I suddenly realised that I was stuck on an island without an obvious soul, so I found a band, grew my hair down to my waist and sold my soul to the rock and roll I remembered. I’d heard about the Sydney squats, heard that there were hundreds of derelict and deserted inner-city houses up for grabs, so I did a quick recon and discovered a gutted refrigerator factory right in the heart of Glebe. Little Black Book moved in to rock the squats.

Chris the keyboardist pounded on the huge, iron door and I could see the tell-tale red flush begin around his ears. I’d known Chris since high school and I knew he had a low outrage threshold, possibly from all the years he’d endured being called the ‘bloody Kiwi’, but most likely for the same reasons I did – he loved to hate authority, middle-class social normalisers, politicians and patience.

The boys were definitely inside the factory, but they were probably tugging cones and too stoned to connect the banging with the idea that somebody might be outside the door. There was no other entrance, so Chris banged again.

‘Piss off, Spaceman,’ I heard Mark bellow from inside, ‘you’re a fuckin psycho.’

‘It’s us,’ yelled Chris and I laughed, thinking about multiple personalities.

I heard Mark unlock the padlock and pull the chain. The door slid sideways on its rollers and we stepped into our home.

Mark had just spent four years at University and earned a Masters in chemistry. The day he got his degree, he went home to his Taxi-driving Anglo dad, handed him the paper, said ‘I’ve
done what you wanted me to do’. He kissed his Japanese mum on the cheek and then promptly drove to Sydney. He bought a second-hand saxophone and a ‘How-to-play-sax’ book on the way. The day he arrived at the factory, the first thing he said was ‘Don’t call me Chinga anymore’.

‘Whatcha get?’ he asked.

‘Cask of port,’ said Chris.
‘Bag of leaf and tip,’ I added.

Mark grinned as his eyes glowed red.

‘You didn’t smoke all the heads didja?’ Chris demanded.
‘We smoked all the heads, we smoked all the heads,’ sang James the lead-guitarist from upstairs, inside the graffiti-covered ex-office space.

‘So get fucked,’ yelled Daryl the bass-player, Chris’ brother, James’ mate, my verbal sparring-partner. Daryl and James were old school chums and completely incomprehensible to me.

Chris began to rose-quartz again.

‘But we didn’t,’ called James and laughed. ‘I’m lighting the last cone right now.’

Chris ran up the iron stairs.

I looked at Mark. ‘You been playing?’

He shook his head. ‘Spaceman was here for ages. You know what he’s like.’

I did. Spaceman insisted that he was from Arcturus 27, left on Earth by accident and now waiting for his people to come and collect him. We were still waiting for the duplicator he promised to build us in return for our food, our grog, our smokes and our dope. He said that the duplicator was Arcturan technology capable of perfectly duplicating any non-organic item, including hundred-dollar bills and we were willing to hedge our bets just in case ET wasn’t a skinned rat with elephantosis, just in case ET was a Glebe-squat fruitloop with halitosis.

Mark and I climbed the stairs and entered the office. I sat in my armchair, next to my mic stand. Chris coughed head-smoke across his keyboard. James sat cross-legged with his Fender, on the floor in front of his speaker. Daryl re-strung his bass and Mark settled down with the port cask.

‘You guys were ages,’ said Daryl.

Chris coughed and nodded. ‘We had to go to Newtown to score off that Rodney dickhead, then we checked out that Redfern place.’

‘What’s it like?’ asked Mark.

‘It’s got a stage and plenty of dance-floor,’ I said, ‘but we’d have to build a loft to live in if we wanted to put on shows.’

‘Why don’t we just stay here?’ asked Daryl. ‘It’s free.’
'What about those fuckin BLF pricks?' snarled Chris.

The Glebe area was earmarked for a massive government-sponsored renovation project and two days earlier a gang of workers had descended violently upon the homes of all our neighbouring squatters to rip up floors, tear down walls, and generally make an entire street of houses unlivable. The workers were not averse to putting a bit of biff in either and Chris had decided that they were definitely part of a grand union-backed conspiracy. He decided that the acronym of his latest authoritarian enemy was BLF, regardless of the veracity of his decision.

Because our factory was impregnable, we were the last of the Derwent Street squatters, but none of us liked the idea that at least one of us would have to remain on sentry duty if we were to hold the fort. The Redfern ‘studio’ offered a viable alternative.

‘We could build a loft with all the timber those BLF pricks pulled up,’ said Mark.
‘How do we get it to Redfern?’ asked James.
‘Fuck it,’ said Mark. ‘I’m gonna buy a van.’

The ‘studio’, once known as ‘Behind Enemy Lines’, squatted above a defunct petrol station on the busiest intersection in Redfern. We had views of the railway line, the city and, across the road, the classic architecture of a Greek Orthodox church. We paid one-hundred dollars per week for the privilege of a stage, floor-space, power, a smashed toilet and no plumbing. We used the toilet at the local pub and once every couple of days, we caught the bus back to Glebe to wash.

Mark bought an electric-blue transit van with fat tyres, mags and a Perspex sun-roof and we redistributed the government’s timber to support the Arts instead of the homeless. We built our loft to fit five mattresses, a couch, two armchairs, a coffee table, a bar fridge and a portable black-and-white television. Little Black Book played nightly behind enemy lines to an audience of dust-balls and passing traffic. After every gig, the band would gather in the monochrome glare of the television like Neanderthals around a cave-fire and chant dreams of the caviar and limousine future waiting somewhere in the tall, bright high-rise landscape just outside the window.

James and Daryl came back from the pub and threw five hundred dollars on the coffee-table.

‘Two Punks want the place next weekend,’ said James. ‘Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, three Melbourne Punk bands, five-hundred now, another five-hundred on Saturday night. They use our gear, we can stay up here in the loft and watch the shows.’

‘Cool,’ said Mark.
‘Excellent,’ I said.
‘Who’s gunna score?’ asked Chris.

The Friday Gig.
Rodney was very pleased with his replica Uzi. He brought it around to the studio on the Friday morning before the first Punk concert and proudly proclaimed that it had only cost him about thirty bucks worth of dope. We were happy to listen to Rodney, because Rodney usually came packing more than a stupid fake gun, he usually had dope and was always willing to share it with anyone interested in listening to his stories. On that particular Friday, Rodney had more than dope – he had speed, trips and a fake submachine gun. We listened, he shared and by the time the first Punk musos arrived, each member of Little Black Book was paranoid about talking too much about all the pretty colours swirling in mandalas across the peeling ceiling.

When the space began to fill with the pierced, spiky-headed denizens of an obviously alien culture, Rodney freaked out until James pulled up the loft’s ladder. We all stayed high and wondered if Spaceman’s people had finally come back to get him. Spaceman didn’t show up.

The first act took the stage and I remembered the sound effects in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. For the aliens, though, the noise was so much like a recharge that I thought they would all begin to glow and possibly coalesce until they became one huge, throbbing, rainbow pin-cushion.

The Punk-band revved up, turned up and roared pure anger into the glowing mass, until the mass became so agitated that it began to attack itself with the martial artform called ‘slam-dancing’.

Rodney lost the plot. Perhaps he thought that he was protecting our space, perhaps physically violent behaviour either scared him enough or excited him enough that his only response was to join the conflict. I’ll never know his motives, but I can record his actions.

Rodney grabbed his pretend Uzi and jumped out of the loft, down into the middle of the slamming Punk mass. ‘Freeze!’ he yelled, waving the Uzi in the face of a sweaty, green-haired slammer.

Somebody screamed, the band played on, somebody yelled ‘Gun’, the band played on, twenty punks bolted for the only exit, the band played, a spike-head in a ‘Punk U’ t-shirt climbed out of one of the windows and a circle formed around the screaming, toy-gun-wielding idiot in the middle of the dance-floor. The band stopped playing and the sudden vacuum filled instantly with yells, curses and the fast-approaching noise of police sirens.

‘Pigs!’ a primary-colour-head shouted and the Punk mass completely disintegrated.
The lead singer stepped off the stage, ripped off his tattered Anarchy Rulz t-shirt and Doc-stomped towards Rodney. ‘Come on, pissant,’ said the Punk, pounding his chest with a huge, scab encrusted paw. ‘Shoot it. I wanna see it shoot.’

Rodney froze, clearly realising that the monster was perfectly willing to call his bluff and pinned by the thought of what the massive alien would do to the gun-wielder if the gun didn’t provide the expected visual entertainment.

The cops came in the nick of time, first causing enough commotion at the entrance/exit bottleneck to allow Rodney to throw the Uzi up into the loft and escape via the ‘Punk U’ guy’s window, then using up valuable seconds bashing stray Punks to the floor while Chris shoved the Uzi under the couch cushions and we all re-arranged our faces to what we thought might be innocent expressions. I stupidly glanced at Daryl to see how innocent he looked and nearly had a full-blown panic attack when all I saw was a poster-boy for the anti-drug movement.

A lumpy plain-clothes detective yelled at us. ‘Where’s the shooter?’

We were all completely trashed and incoherent but Chris managed a response. ‘What?’

‘Where’s the fuckin shooter?’ The detective suddenly realised that we had the higher ground. ‘Where’s the fuckin ladder?’

Chris did a hammy performance trying to pretend that he didn’t know what the cop was talking about and my paranoia meter rose to dangerous levels. ‘Punks took it,’ I squawked, feeling my face melt and holding my breath on a desperate giggle.

‘You’re not punks,’ snarled the detective.

Five stoned, tripping, speeding long-haired heads shook emphatically.

‘Fuckin hippies,’ said the detective in disgust and walked off toward the entrance.

‘We’re a band,’ snarled Mark, but, fortunately the cop didn’t hear him. Chris thumped him anyway.

Within minutes the cops and punks were all outside continuing their war on the streets of Redfern. We sat in our loft and listened to the sirens, the yells, the curses and the screams for the next half-an-hour. None of us dared to move until the abnormal sounds stopped, but even when they did we were too wasted to move anyway.

‘Reckon they’ll want their five-hundred bucks back?’ asked James finally.

The Saturday Gig.
The second band arrived late the next afternoon and after the six-o-clock news report on the Redfern Punk Riots, happy to hear that Friday night had ended with something vaguely similar to their finest anarchic fantasies, the three muso-punks paid the five-hundred dollar balance and
donated some lovely stuff to *Little Black Book’s* recreational stash. We all sat in the loft and got blotted waiting for the Saturday night audience to arrive.

By eight, the studio was full and again it looked like an extra’s lunch-break on a Star Trek shoot. No sign of Spaceman, no sign of Rodney.

Outside, dozens of law-enforcers waited in the alleys and side-streets, but they were disappointed (or perhaps relieved) when the band played, the punks slammed and the studio doors finally closed on an incident-free gig.

The Sunday Gig.

On our side of Wentworth Street, the Sunday punks streamed through the studio entrance, eager to be part of the weekend that would obviously become a legend in Sydney punk history. When the studio was full, the hundred-odd punks left outside stayed to listen and enjoy bottles and bonding on the footpath.

Across the road, the parking lot of the Greek Orthodox Church began to fill with auto blingbling and I was nearly blinded by the diamond and gold-chain reflections bouncing off the drivers. When I saw the fancy Saturday-Night-Fever clothes, the bouffant hairstyles, the open-necked satin over simian chest-hair I thought ‘oh shit, Greek wedding’, but I was wrong.

I had decided earlier that I was too young for tinnitus and too fond of my cerebral cortex for drug-psychosis, so I sat on a milk-crate outside, watching the flows of traffic and punks, absorbing the rich behavioural complexities of urban humanity. When the Greek tsunami washed into my complex river analogy, I knew that ‘rich’ would probably soon be replaced by ‘riotous’.

The Sunday band hit their first all-in power-chord, then machine-gunned through three minutes of terrifying noise that I guess they called a ‘song’. The milling disco-Greeks froze, gold-caps shining as fifty five-thousand-dollar jaws dropped simultaneously. I sank an inch lower on my milk-crate.

The punks ignored the Greeks (which surprised me), but the Greeks could not possibly ignore the punks. I tensed when a black cassock dodged the traffic and made for the studio entrance, politely pushing through the milling punks. They were friendly, so I relaxed, but then I saw a punk point the cassock towards me and paranoia bloomed afresh. I didn’t want to be a mediator. I didn’t want any responsibility. I especially didn’t want to talk to a priest. Priests piss me off.

I rose from my comfy crate and the black cassock gave me a nervous smile. ‘Can we have one hour?’ he yelled above the trench-warfare sounds exploding from upstairs.

I didn’t want to spend one minute with the God-man, let alone a whole hour. ‘Why?’ I yelled back.
'It’s our candlelight parade tonight.' He pointed along Wentworth Street. ‘We walk up there and we walk back. We only need one hour.’

I shrugged and screamed. ‘What do you want me to do?’

I could see by his expression that he didn’t envy me. I could see that he felt very sorry for me. I didn’t know why until he bellowed. ‘Can you stop the band?’

The band that was supposed to play on Sunday never arrived, but the organisers didn’t panic, they simply called in the Friday night band. Since their first gig was never completely consummated, the Friday boys were happy to fill the gap and even happier when I saw them on-stage definitively consummating the Sunday slammers.

Even the black cassock would have been impressed by the bullet-proof lead-singer, because, apart from the Charles-Manson-was-a-Fag t-shirt, he looked like something straight out of Greek mythology. Picture a smoke-snorting, red-eyed minotaur sans horns and you’ll get a vague idea of the monster I was expected to blithely shut down for an hour.

To reach the space in front of the Minotaur, I first tried to shove my way through the bounding, thrashing pack of epileptic aliens, but my timing was way off and I had to retreat under an onslaught of flying elbows, stomping Docs, and sprayed anarchist spit. I realised that I would have to become an integral part of the heaving mass, so I put my hands down by my sides and did my best human-pogo-stick impression, bouncing through the throng until I felt the Minotaur’s noxious breath on my panicked cheeks.

I stared up at the beast and hated the priest. ‘Oi!’ I yelled.

The Minotaur ignored me.

‘Oi!!’ I screamed.

The Minotaur glanced down, saw me, wrote me off.

I tapped the Minotaur’s leg. ‘Oi!!!’

‘Fuck off!’ roared the Minotaur, but I had his attention.

‘You have to have a break!’

‘What?’

‘Have a break!’

‘Fuck off!’

I stepped on the stage and the Minotaur was so stunned at my audacity that he froze just long enough for me to yell an explanation into his ear. ‘Greeks across the road … one hour … cops’ll fuck the gig.’

I got through.
The band was unhappy. The audience was unhappy. The boys in the loft were unhappy. I was totally unhappy and completely paranoid, because everybody did actually hate me. I don’t think I helped myself when I grabbed the microphone and said: ‘Ladies and Gentlemen (what was I thinking?!?), the local priest has asked the band to take a break while the church has its yearly candlelight parade.’ Somebody spat on me and I heard a pitch-perfect chorus of ‘fuck-off’s’ that I still believe caused the tinnitus I suffer from today.

Fortunately, it was hot in the studio and the two-hundred angry aliens lost interest in me, opting instead for the cooler night air and the promise of a parade. The frustrated mob flooded down on to Wentworth Street to watch the Greeks.

The boys and I watched from upstairs as the cops set up roadblocks for the parade. The punks mingled on the footpath directly in front of the studio, quite amiably chatting and sharing casks, bottles and the odd joint as the glossy Greek procession lit up and began to make its waxy way down the traffic-free Wentworth Street.

The parade was rather pretty and to this day, I don’t believe the punks acted with any malicious intent. I didn’t think a few harmless wolf-whistles could be called malicious, but one very large Greek-shotputter type disagreed. He shook his fist, yelling Greek rage at the gathered punks and although nobody understood exactly what he was saying, everybody understood that it wasn’t very nice. Abuse looks and sounds the same in any language, regardless of its specific meaning and that supports my dialectic theory on the most used expletive in the Australian vernacular. In most of its popular contexts ‘fuck’ does not mean ‘fornicate’, instead it has become a generic word with a meta-meaning of ‘mean-spirited intent’ or a simple implied meaning of ‘irritate’.

The punks responded with typical punk empathy and I’ll translate their dialect to support my theory:

‘Get irritated,’ yelled one.
‘Go away irritated,’ yelled another.
‘Mean-spirited, irritating gorilla,’ screamed a third and ran as the shotputter broke ranks to lumber across Wentworth Street and do his best fuckin’ gorilla impression on the first punk he could grab. The first punk had not uttered a whisper, but the maddened Olympian wasn’t fussy - he bashed the poor, skinny little pierced person into the footpath then turned to grab another, but a half-full beer-bottle connected with his temple and he dropped to his knees beside his unconscious victim.
There was a frozen moment as both Greeks and punks rallied their senses to comprehend the situation, until one, lone voice started the Wentworth Street war.

‘Irritate the Wogs!’

The Greeks attacked in a candle-wielding disco wave, but the punks were armed with projectile weapons and many a silk-shirt was bloodied that day behind enemy lines. The Greeks drew first blood, the punks wanted pay-back in more than a few pounds of Greek flesh.

Bottles flew and the Greeks retreated back into the Church parking lot. Bits and pieces of auto bling-bling shattered and I saw the black cassock go down, but the punks were relentless. If there had been a mirror ball and an amplified back-beat, the parking-lot would have looked like one hell of a funky disco as the stylish Greeks bumped, boogaloo-ed and funky-chickened between the flying bottles. I thought it quite fitting that as the Greeks perfectly expressed their favourite music through panicked dance, the punks expressed theirs with raw, savage violence. I silently admitted to myself that I preferred the Greek groove to the punk pandemonium and knew as I watched that the police shared my preference.

They came from every direction in paddy-wagons, sleek patrol cars, four-wheel-drives and on horseback. They came with batons, shields, helmets and a definite cultural alliance to the visual respectability and artifice of the Greek cause. They came to protect the norm from the other and, as far as the news-reader representatives of the general public were concerned, the police did a splendid job. With ‘over 150 punk rioters arrested’, the police minister got his sound-byte, the Premier got his and, of course, the state opposition-leader grabbed a perfect opportunity to crow that it never would have happened if he’d been in charge.

*Little Black Book* endured three days of police and Greek Orthodox hassle – threats of criminal charges and civil suits, Volvo repair bills and the steaming ire of our unfortunately Greek (though religiously lapsed) landlord.

On the fourth day after the Sunday massacre we packed the van and bolted to a punk-free, Greek-free, all-Asian part of the western suburbs. At least our new home had a working toilet and I’d learned a valuable lesson: don’t get stuck between two alien mobs with separate agendas.
I remember creating me.

I sat in Kent’s office and stared sullenly at the heads on his photo wall. The barely-knowns smiled nervously under the semi-famous; the semi-famous grinned painfully up at the well-knowns and the well-knowns seemed to smugly consider the impermanence of the few choose-your-script types framed and secure in the top row. My head was in a drawer.

‘No, darling,’ crooned Kent into the phone that I often thought must be permanently grafted to the side of his head. ‘She’s impossible.’

Kent paused, listened and raised his eyebrows at me. He pointed into the phone and stuck his tongue inside his cheek – the universal symbolic facial expression denoting ‘cocksucker’.

I forced a smile as he continued. ‘No, sweet. She’s not impossible to get … she’s impossible to handle!’ He paused, listened, laughed. ‘I’m sure it’s absolutely huge!! But she’s a tits, tongue and Tassie type, luv.’ Pause, listen, laugh. ‘Only if I can join in … but if you want her, she’s yours. Contracts by Friday?’ Pause. ‘Luv you, too.’ Richard put down the phone and grinned at me. ‘Hi, Prush.’

‘Hi Kent.’
‘You didn’t get it.’
‘I know.’
‘How do you know?’
‘The director’s eyes glazed over as soon as I walked into the room.’
‘I told you.’
‘I know, but I still don’t understand. That role was me! Suburban, Aussie, juvenile delinquent and in a band! It was bloody written for me!’
‘Look in the mirror, Prush.’
‘I do look in the mirror.’
‘What do you see?’
I shrugged.

Kent leaned back in his chair. I was grateful for the genuine concern I saw on his face.

‘I know you’re Australian, Prush. Shit, you’re more Australian than anyone else on my books, but you just don’t look Australian.’

‘What about aboriginal roles?’
Kent laughed. ‘What do you know about aboriginals? You’re not tribal and you’re nowhere near black enough! A little bit of blood doesn’t make you black, Prush.’

‘I know that, but what do they want, Kent?’

‘What do you think Australians think Australians look like?’

I shrugged again. ‘Paul Hogan.’

Kent nodded. ‘That’s what producers think, that’s what directors think and that’s what casting-agents think. They want Paul Hogan for Australian, Gulpilil for Aboriginal and you for Greek, Italian, Turk and every other swarthy ethnic role in their crappy shows.’

‘I’m not ethnic.’

‘Dickhead,’ said Kent. ‘What do they pay you for? Act ethnic!’

Kent reached into his call-out drawer and grabbed a script. ‘This is for Rafferty’s Rules. Italian husband breaks law goes to court kisses wife lives happily ever after.’ He raised his eyebrows and waved the script at me. ‘Want it?’

I took the script. ‘Any word on the big one?’

‘The Vietnam role?’

I nodded.

Kent shook his head. ‘Not yet, Luigi.’

The boys were playing when I got home, but I walked in and I walked straight back out. There was nothing to smoke and the fridge was empty.

Mark set his sax on the stand, grabbed his helmet and followed me out into the warm Villawood night. We had enough cash for two bottles of port and a foil-stick of dope, the Bass Hill pub was a fun, five-minute ride away and I was taking James’ new CX Shadow for a spin. Before I hit the small, black ignition button, I heard the boys count in and start the opening bars of our newest original song. I added the smooth, idling growl of the CX to the mix and grinned inside my helmet. All was right with the world.

We slid out of the driveway, my hands and feet playing the throttle and clutch and gears like John Lord’s intro to Highway Star, Mark locked in behind me, going with the flow of the ride. I flicked a glance at the Villawood Detention Centre, saw dark faces at the gate and knew that they envied my freedom.

The CX rode like a long board on a glassy wave, played like God’s own baby-grand and we left a trail of sparks to wink out behind us like tiny, dying suns at the Bass Hill roundabout.

I gave the throttle another inch as we came off the roundabout and adrenalin pulsed through my body when we hit the hump-backed railway bridge. I knew the wide, dead-straight expanse of
Miller Road waited beyond the bridge and I wanted to compound the gut-dropping thrill of the humpback with speed, speed and more speed.

We hit the bridge crest at 80 kph and Mark whooped as we flew, landed square and I gave the throttle another inch. I checked my rear-view and saw nothing. I checked for traffic and saw parked cars. I was safe. Miller Road was mine. I lay forward over the tank and pulled the throttle home.

The nurse was blonde, she smiled and I thought I was dreaming. Then I saw Kent, my agent, and wondered why he’d be in my dream. Then I wondered if I was on *The Young Doctors* and I looked around for the cameras. I shouldn’t have moved.

The nurse was old and grey. ‘You’re awake,’ she said, and I went back to sleep.

I felt a soft shove and I opened my eyes. The nurse was still old and still grey.

‘Can’t sleep all day, Denny,’ she said.

I frowned, but I had nothing to say. I had nothing at all.

‘Do you remember anything?’ she asked. She was so intense.

‘You were blonde,’ I said. ‘I was on the Young Doctors.’

She laughed and it scared me.

‘Do you remember the accident?’

‘No.’

‘Nothing?’

‘No.’

‘Your friend said that a parked car crossed in front of your motorcycle. You don’t remember?’

‘No. Is Mark okay?’

The old, grey nurse smiled. ‘He broke his foot. He’s fine.’

I suddenly didn’t care that she wasn’t blonde or young. She was beautiful.

My agent, sweet Kent, brought me flowers.

‘Jesus,’ I said.

‘Shut up, Prush, you dickhead. You dickhead.’

‘What are the flowers for?’

‘Dickhead.’

‘Stop calling me a dickhead.’

‘Well, you are.’
I could see tears in his eyes. ‘Why you crying?’
‘Look at yourself! Mr Fucking Self Destruct.’
‘I’m alive.’
‘Your arm isn’t.’
I looked at my left arm. ‘It’ll come back.’
‘The doctor doesn’t think so.’
‘Fuck the doctor.’
A tear dropped down Kent’s cheek. ‘You got a call-back,’ he said.
I grinned. It hurt, but my grin stayed. ‘Which one?’ I almost yelled.
Another tear fell. ‘The big one.’
My mouth dropped. ‘The mini-series? Vietnam?’
Kent nodded. ‘I cancelled.’
‘Bullshit.’
‘Look at you.’
‘Un-cancel.’
‘What about your arm?’
‘Fuck my arm. It’ll come back.’
Kent uncalled.

In October, wearing a neck-brace and with my left arm and right foot in plaster, I hobbled into Kennedy-Miller Productions for the call-back. I got the Vietnam role.

In late-December, two weeks before Vietnam started shooting, I walked into Kennedy-Miller for the last time and shared a glass of red with John, a truly gifted director. We drank a toast to his mini-series. We drank a toast to his new leading lady, gleaned from a hundred hopefuls over two-hundred hours of improvisation auditions. I thanked him for the audition work. We didn’t drink a toast to his new, two-armed leading-man – the guy replacing me.

‘Will you keep acting?’ he asked.
‘I don’t think so.’ I grabbed my atrophied, useless left arm in my right hand and flapped it around. ‘I can’t do action, because I can’t fight. I can’t do romance, because I can’t hug. I can’t take my shirt off or wear T-shirts because it pulls focus.’ I dropped my arm and sipped the spicy red. ‘Richard the Third, maybe?’
John laughed. ‘Don’t get your hopes up.’
John poured. ‘What will you do?’
‘Rock and roll,’ I said, ‘I can prop the arm on a mic-stand and most people won’t even notice.’
‘I’m sorry about your arm,’ he said. ‘I just can’t shoot around it.’

‘It’s alright,’ I said, forcing a grin. ‘I didn’t really want to play a Yugoslavian anyway.’
I remember the illusory man, the broken promise and absolute denial.

‘You need this, Denny,’ said Shannon, my wife.

I looked back into the old church and sneered at the crying, screaming rebirthers as they desperately hyper-ventilated towards that illusive vanishing point they all called ‘shifting’. I pointed at one fellow, his hands formed into claws from tetany, one of the side-effects of over-oxygenated blood. He hacked phlegm into a bowl, held almost lovingly by a young woman sitting cross-legged on a cushion beside his head. She gave him a tissue and he lay back down to continue his breath connection.

‘I need that?’ I snarled. ‘Why the fuck do I need that?’

‘You’re full of stuff. You need to shift.’

‘Stuff’ meant ‘negative energy’ or ‘old patterns’ or ‘regressive tendencies’ or any and all of a multitude of possible psychoses, spiritual lacks, physical ‘dis-eases’ (pronounced with the hyphen) and destructive emotions.

I glared at Shannon, not recognising the gloriously flawed woman I married in the clear-eyed, gentle-voiced nymph before me. When we met, I was a permanently enraged, booze-soaked, mongrel-bred rock-and-roll cripple and she was on smack. We both smoked and drank and ate red meat, we were perfect for each other. I thought we had moved to North Coast New South Wales to disappear inside a bong and, like ant-eaten deadwood, slowly rot in the rainforest until we were unrecognisable brown sludge, compost for better lives to consume.

‘You want me to sit through four more days of this crap?’

I’d agreed to the seven-day workshop, because it was important to her. Suddenly, I realised that it wasn’t her participation that was important to her, it was mine.

She saw the understanding hit me. ‘I can’t be with you the way you are, Denny.’

‘I’m the same as when you met me.’

‘That’s why I can’t be with you.’

I walked away from my wife then. I walked to the bottom of the adjoining paddock and jumped, fully-clothed, into the creek. I swam around in the freezing water and when I began to feel like a fool, I got out and sat in the reeds on the bank.
I thought about the lost years between my accident and my marriage, that vague, shadowy period of shock and anger spent stalking every hard-rock stage from Sydney to Brisbane to Darwin to Adelaide.

I thought about the first time I ever saw Shannon, bent over a pool table in country South-Australia, her green eyes totally focused on the black and yet flashing inside with a deep, aching rage. I remembered what I said to Daryl as I watched her - ‘I’m going to marry that woman’ – and her response when I popped the question two months later: ‘How can you love me?’

I thought about what I should have told her; my true answer to her question: ‘I love you because we’re the same. I love you because we’re both twisted by hate and self-disgust. I love you because you’re no better than I am.’

Then, as I shivered in the reeds, the real truth hit me.

We weren’t the same.

I was twisted by hate, she was just twisted by smack and although I’d maintained my hate, she’d been straight for a very long time.

I was disgusted with every lousy choice I’d ever made, she was only disgusted by one – her choice to try the needle. But she was trying to make positive choices, I was still looking for the catch and the scam and the unhappy ending.

Shannon was much better than I had ever been or would ever be.

I stood in my dripping clothes and walked back up the paddock to re-join the rebirthers.

The Bitter-Man returned on that long walk and filled the empty spaces of my mind with his venom. ‘Why do you always have to change to suit everybody else?’ he whispered. ‘When are they going to accept you as you are?’

I took a deep breath and then exhaled, but now even breathing seemed somehow tainted by a normalising agenda. The hot bile of resentment began to churn in my guts and the Bitter-Man whispered again: ‘If you surrender this time, you’ll surrender every time.’

‘If I don’t,’ I said aloud to no-one, ‘she’ll leave me.’

‘You’ve always been a very skilled actor. Act.’

Two months later, my wife booked me into a thirty-day, live-in rebirthing workshop. I survived the experience and took away some fine ideas, but I protected the old, nasty me by conveniently forgetting my realisations at the creek. I fed my delusions, remained undercover and hid my outrage under a bushel of pretence. I hid in books, I hid in work, I hid from Shannon’s voice and I gave myself permission to resent her for what I secretly called her great manipulation.
Although I came in from the wilderness and began to re-construct myself; although I became a successful, prosperous showman and toured overseas to Sri Lanka, Japan and New Orleans, and although my wife and I stayed together for three more years and made a beautiful son, the day I walked to the creek was the day our marriage was over.

Ironically, my wife taught me to forgive, because I could not forgive her.

I lost, and gained in the losing.
Forgiveness.
Love.
Family.
Identity.
Glorious hybridity.
The permanent and perfect state of grace.

I sit on the lawn reading Lovecraft’s *The Colour from Space* and casually search for four-leaf clovers when his colour becomes too grim. My wasted left arm rests upon my leg, my hard-muscled right arm turns pages, lights cigarettes. Children scream, mine among them, and a black ant explores my toe.

I feel invisible to the people under the awning, but they fascinate me.

I wonder why they gather under there, under tin in this 40-degree heat. I wonder why they don’t realise that the reason there’s never any laughter under the awning is because it’s made of tin and the day is a humid monster with flaming teeth. I think about my left arm, exposed to scrutiny and therefore, because of its relative difference to my right one, taboo to look upon. I decide to walk past the people under the awning, test my theory; see if the reason their social awareness excludes me is because of the discomfort my physical strangeness causes them.

They are all women under the awning, but here they call themselves mothers. Perhaps motherhood is the pre-requisite for under-the-awning membership – no fathers or women-without-children need apply. I still think it’s my gimpy arm that keeps me on the lawn.

The mothers under the awning coalesce as I approach, and it seems that I stroll towards a large, floral entity, morphing in splashes of concerned and self-protecting colour. My book lies on the clover, but Lovecraft is obviously still with me.

I smile at the shifting form as I pass and see the flash of an eye, the shape of a mouth, a blink of dry hair, but nothing instantly recognisable as a character, or a representative upon whom I might pin my judgements. I praise the weather, hoping a bubble of singular humanity separates from the floral entity to dare discourse. Instead, the entity gathers into a thorned bush so I point at the awning. ‘Must be bloody hot under that tin.’

I smile harder and dive into the pool, hoping my splash reaches the people under the awning. I surface and glance back, but the entity is gone, replaced by seven baking women. I wonder that
they don’t swim. I wonder if their bodies embarrass them, if the imperfections they perceive are paid for in a penance of heat. I wonder if it’s some kind of religious legacy and if it is, do they know it? I decide to find out.

I swim to the side of the pool and grin at the people under the awning. ‘Coming in? The water’s wonderful.’

If the fat woman does it, I’m sure the others will follow.

I want to ask the fat woman if the fat on her body embarrasses her, and why - or was she embarrassed before the fat and, if so, about what?

I want to know if she loves her fat, but thinks that others won’t and thinks that by not exposing it she is saving them from embarrassment. I wonder why it’s not ok to have fat.

Does the woman with the mole have similar moles under her sarong and are they her private shame? Is the lithe woman scared that someone might be put off by her hysterectomy scar?

I sink and sit on the bottom of the pool. I think about the human individual, about values placed upon physicality. I want to ask the wrinkled woman if she hates the lines upon her body and if she thinks the lines on her face would be as severe without emotions stimulated by subjective ideas. I want to ask how the unique judges the unique. I rise for air and know I’ll ask no questions.

I swim, one-armed freestyle, and enjoy my right arm.

Then I think about my left arm. Do I wear the difference, the strangeness, anywhere else on my body or in my expression? Is my attitude affected by it? Stupid questions.

I remember how I sought confrontation with the people under the awning, wanting to see the nervous flicker of embarrassed normality, wanting to justify my difference through others’ inability to accept it. I remember other times, doing the same kind of thing for the same kinds of reasons.

I turn away from the people under the awning and, suddenly, feel two little hands grasp my shoulders. I hear my youngest daughter’s laughter in my ear and grab her slick legs.

‘Piggyback!’ she squeals.

My second daughter splashes beside me. ‘Me too!’

I wrap my arm around her and pull her on to my hip. She fits perfectly; she belongs there.

My eldest daughter dives from the side of the pool and swims under water to join us. She surfaces with a grin, her eyes shining with joy and love, all for me.

We laugh together as I glance at my beautiful Rhonda, still dry, testing the water with a tentative toe. I want her in the pool. She belongs with us. We all belong together.
Rhonda slides into the water and gasps dramatically. ‘Come on, mum!’ our children yell, laughing. Rhonda ducks, swims, surfaces and the Jessup-Prussians coalesce; slick, brown and giggling together.

A butterfly flaps along the surface of the pool and then rises over our heads to fly above the awning and disappear.

We bathe in the bright water.
CHAPTER ONE
THE AUTHOR: A EULOGY

I risk being seen by the dominating ... other as unprepared, as just entertainment. Yet their mode of seeing cannot be the factor which determines style of representation or the content of one’s work. Fundamental to the process of decentering the oppressive other and claiming [the] right to subjectivity is the insistence that [I] will not rely on colonising responses to determine [my] legitimacy.

He was a brown person, not half-caste, quarter-caste or mulatto, simply brown, and his colour was merely a genetic product. He knew he was descended from both Anglo-Celtic/Saxon people for he had researched the recorded factual history of those ancestors. He also knew that, at least one of his ancestors was either black or very brown – possibly ‘Aboriginal’, possibly Sri Lankan, possibly African, possibly African-American or any of the plethora of black or very brown races on the planet. He knew this from his grandmother’s photograph and his own features. He did not know anything about either his ‘black’ or ‘white’ heritage before the mid-nineteenth century, before the respective individuals from each colour/culture came together to begin the genetic mix that eventually created him.

His life experience taught him to distrust finite notions of belonging simply because he had never been called Australian, regardless of his heritage, his accent or his efforts to conform to cultural expectations and thereby ‘belong’.

His belonging title was the sum of his features, dependant upon which cultural territory he inhabited or traversed at any given time. He was ‘the wog’, the ‘migrant’, or ‘the coon’.

In his younger days, he naively embraced the notion that ‘Australians’, the amorphous Anglo mass, were xenophobic morons with as little idea of diversity within Australia as most of them had about rocket science, brain surgery or the operating mechanics of the internal combustion engine. Consequently, his school years were turbulent and his development into adulthood sorely affected by his corrupted world-view, even though his yearning for acceptance as an Australian remained.

He became trapped in a paradox of belonging: perceived as alien, but self-identifying as Australian and, by overtly reacting against the discourse of common perception, he alienated himself further.
In his late teens, he discovered the stage and characterisation, through which he re-introduced himself into cultural and social discourse by reducing his knowable identity to zero and his possible identity to infinity. He hid his disdain and contempt for his perception of the common perception in parody, drama and surface-characterisations.

At 40 years-old, he decided that his methods would never subvert or inform the paradigm that he chose as antithesis to his own, that unless he wished to spend his long slide from forty to dust impotently tweaking the unfeeling buttocks of the god Xenophobe, he would have to construct an entirely new, credible and socially valid discursive persona. He swapped the stage for the page and began to write, hoping to submit his identity in words to a world too easily assured by images. His intent: to discover his heritage, explain his brown-ness and write his kind into the Australian-identity landscape.

He began his heritage research, his exploration of his own family history with a few loose and disconnected clues, gleaned from a conversation with his father.

'Mum's maiden name was Strange’ said Ray Prussian. ‘She always said she thought there might be some Spanish in our blood, but you only had to look at her – and especially my Aunty Eva. We all knew we had a touch of the tar, but either nobody knew where it came from, or nobody was talking. My Granddad Dick – that’s my Mum’s Dad - was definitely part blackfella, but again, nobody said where the blackfella came from. I don’t know much about Dick’s family. I think there was a Homer and I vaguely remember hearing about a fella called Pharaoh, but I don’t know how he was connected. I did hear that Dick’s dad married an innkeeper somewhere, but I think Dick was past a boy when that happened and I don’t know the details.’

His only clues to a habituated heritage beyond Dick Strange, therefore, were two Christian names, Homer and Pharaoh, and a vague reference to an unnamed female innkeeper. Since his Dad had seemed more confident with the Homer connection, he tentatively typed Searching for Homer Strange at the top of a blank page and hit all the genealogy sites on the Western-World Wide Web that he could find. His page remained blank.

He set aside the genealogy search and re-set his search parameters to ‘Swan River ships passenger lists’ and, starting with the first arrivals in 1829, scanned scores of names until he found one Richard Strange, arrived 1838, aboard the Britomart.

He re-set again to ‘Britomart Western Australia 1838’ and found no Strange. What he did discover, was a reference to the diary of Dr Samuel Waterman Viveash, a passenger on Richard Strange’s ship.
Even though he did not know whether the Britomart Richard Strange was the Strange he wanted, he followed the link and arrived at the State Library of Western Australia site. The link was merely a reference and Viveash’s text, which seemed so tantalisingly close, remained hidden by a wall of Web\(^3\).

He had a short, but helpful telephone conversation with a librarian at the State Library of Western Australia, during which the librarian first inspired him with two magic words - microfiche records – then deflated his excitement with the assertion that his physical presence would be required if he wished to peruse them. The same applied to the Viveash diary. He revisited the W-WWW and found a cheap flight to Perth.

In Perth, he discovered that his great-great-great grandfather, Richard, was indeed the Britomart Strange – a shepherd indentured to Dr Samuel Waterman Viveash. In Viveash’s diary\(^4\) he found everything he needed to know about Richard Strange’s colonisation experiences; from his last days in England, through his voyage to Australia and to his years as a new settler in the wild country east of the Swan River colony. He learned that Richard had married and had many children. One of those children – Alfred Richard Pharaoh Strange – was born when Richard’s wife, Sarah, was giving birth to another child. Pharaoh was not Sarah’s son, but he was the missing link, he was the great-great-grandfather\(^5\).

Our author dug deeper into the records, found Dick strange – Pharaoh’s son – and turned his mind back to his own father’s recollections about his grandfather.

‘Dick was in World War One,’ said Ray Prussian, ‘and I know he was wounded pretty badly. They cut off his leg in the nineteen-sixties because of a bullet he got in the war. He lived in Boddington most of his life, but I know he lived in Darkan for a while and I think that’s where he met his wife. Everyone called her Bell, but her name was Ella Bessie. Her maiden name was Symonds and I know that her father was a ship’s pilot and a lighthouse keeper, but he took his family out to Darkan and tried to be a farmer. He didn’t stay long – went back to the sea – but his wife and kids didn’t leave Darkan. They were real fair-skinned Poms.’

He discovered research-gold and wept at his long-dead grandmother’s voice, recorded by John Ferrell for The Australia 1938 Oral History Project\(^6\):

‘Granddad – Richard Pharaoh – was a farrier,’ said Grace Prussian, ‘and he used to travel around the countryside shoeing horses. Grandad seemed to have a wandering foot – I suppose the fact that his wife died when the children were
young would leave him unsettled, wouldn’t it? As far as I know, her name was Sarah – I’ve heard them talk of her as Sarah.

‘Dad – that’s Dick Strange – was born in Canning Mills. I’m just not sure what Grandad was doing down in that part of the country, but there was my dad and a girl, Emily. Emily and Dick – my dad – would stay with Jack Dowsett’s family in Wandering. Mrs Dowsett was a wonderful old lady. Although she had a big family of her own, she felt sorry for these two youngsters so they spent a lot of time there. She practically reared them.

‘Grandad Pharaoh and my father – everybody called him Dick – took up land at Darkan and after Granddad married Gran Strange – she was Mrs Rae and she owned a boarding house at Cottesloe – her brother – which was my Mum’s father (he was a lighthouse keeper down at Breaksea Island) – and his family, they came to Darkan and took up land too, and that was how my Mum and Dad met.

‘They were all sleeper-cutting in those days. There was a railway-line going through and there was a big demand for sleepers.’

Slowly, after weeks of digging, sorting, dead-ends, failed assumptions and successful correlations, the story grew, the ancestry developed and our author began to visualise the structure of his heritage. But he knew that structure is merely a skeleton with no blood, no brain, no heart and no guts. He realised that the meat of his ancestors’ lives was in their actions, their skills, their routines and, most importantly, their relationships with both the social and natural environments in which they existed. To begin to comprehend and consequently represent that meat in text, he knew that he would have to explore and possibly even emulate the existence they experienced. He thanked the librarians, hired a car and drove to Boddington, hoping to discover hidden local resources, visit grave-sites and generally feel out the physical environment of the early Strange clan.

Grace’s old, rambling farmhouse – built by Granddad (Pop) Prussian’s hands - was gone; replaced by brick veneer boxes and a tacky, plastic playground called ‘Prussian Park’. But Boddington, sleepy until the huge goldrush of the mid-1980’s, had fallen back into its cozy doze and many of the brick veneers were empty. In the heat shimmer, he could almost imagine a ghostly image of the old farmhouse superimposed over the sere and sad functionality of expedient architecture that grew like a cubic cancer from his Grandparent’s farm.

He walked the open paddocks behind the suburban blight until he reached the timber-line and turned to gaze back over Boddington. As he took in the view, he subtracted modernity and added the imaginary, allowing himself to see the old land through the elements that would most have interested his ancestors. He saw wheat and forest, fence and farm, game and stock, and, in a single, sparkling sliver, the river – the difference between life and death, success and failure in that hot, ancient place.
He drove to Darkan and touched the hardwood walls of his great-grandfather’s hut, still standing after 100 years and now a tourist attraction. He stroked the timber, his hands following the grain, just as he imagined old Dick’s had done a century before; and he made a pact with Dick’s ghost that as soon as he returned to New South Wales, he would begin construction on his own stone hut and build it with his own one-and-a-half hands. Although text had given him some idea of the physical exertions of his forebears, he knew that the experience of actual heavy physical labour would help him to achieve one of his research goals - that of emulating the existence his ancestors experienced. He was also fortunate, in that the land-clearing, gardens and shelter construction needed at home were the precise forms to which his ancestors devoted their own heavy physical labours.

He realised then, that the purpose of his writing had expanded from formulating reasons for his own sense of identity, to breathing life into, and giving identity back to the real people that made his identity possible. He realised that Pharaoh and Dick were not mere vehicles for self-discovery, they were realities deserving of a history rich enough to complement their own existences.

After a few more days exploring locations and Shire libraries, he boarded a plane for home and, after he arrived, began construction on the 21st Century equivalent of his great-grandfather’s hut.

In the mornings and evenings, he dug out the hut foundations, leveled the slab, poured it and layered split blocks into walls around old meranti doors and windows.

During the hottest parts of the day he relaxed in the shade to decipher Dick Strange’s war records and enjoyed the reader’s perspective in three invaluable texts: Viveash’s diary, *Becoming Boddington* and *West of the Arthur*. Consuming those texts and consumed by his own, as if he were the superimposed ghost of their respective futures, he traveled, worked, fought and loved with each of the Strange men - the indentured shepherd, the half-caste farrier and the young timber-man and soldier.

He completed the hut – the first stage of physical research - within three months, built a desk and shelves, inserted a computer and sat down to bring the Strange men out of the imaginary and on to the page. He wrote *Strange* and I was born.
CHAPTER TWO

INTENTS & PURPOSES

Any writer … is simultaneously subjective and objective. He is subjectively engrossed in his work and the quality and intensity of his personal vision will be dictated in a subjective way. At the same time he must be removed from and in control of his material. Thus he is involved in a paradoxical activity: an intellectually creative balancing act in which invention and judgment coalesce or co-ordinate to achieve and preserve equilibrium.

I exist here, now, [if only as ‘the instance writing … the instance saying I’] in hybrid form: inhabiting the new body of reader, performing as new writer transformed by my own Strange text and yet still invested with the memory and intent of my Strange author incarnation. My memory includes the genealogical research, suppositions and assumptions that informed Strange Past and the reminiscences that informed Strange Present. My intent is to contextualise Strange within the broad landscape of hybridity using writings on post-structuralism, ethics, feminism, narratology, colonialism, post-colonialism, metaphor, identity and belonging as my cartographic waypoints.

My aim is to investigate hybridity and expand its conceptual borders across a much broader cultural and social landscape than generic genetic maps define. I will contend that adaptations to new cultural, environmental and ontological influences also become sites of identity-hybridisation, or flux, and conclude that hybridisation occurs, for all identities, wherever such adaptations occur.

I will conclude that once these cognitive processes of identity flux are recognised, once hybridity is mapped to incorporate all, the foundations of ‘other’ dissolve, binary fabrications of belonging are dismantled, assimilation is revealed as a fallacious notion and culture might be re-defined as a frequently updated process of convergence, rather than a distinct and separate idealised group expression of static identity (or, in general terms, cultural subjectification).

I will also conclude that family is the perfect example in microcosm of the hybrid human condition.
CHAPTER THREE

HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

We say the map is different from the territory. But what is the territory? Operationally, somebody went out with a retina or a measuring stick and made representations which were then put on paper. What is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal representation of the man who made the map; and as you push the question back, what you find is an infinite regress, an infinite series of maps. The territory never gets in at all. ... Always, the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps, ad infinitum\textsuperscript{12}.

I replace Bateson’s ‘retinal representation’ with my own ‘cognitive interpretation’ and categorise my primary \textit{Strange} map as a narratology, since its intended function is to contextualise other discursive maps within a re-contextualisation of \textit{Strange}. The first ‘map’ to render is that which locates the ‘writing-I’ in relation to the ‘he’ that wrote \textit{Strange}. I wrote \textit{Strange}, but here, now, I am no longer simply the \textit{Strange} writer – I am also the \textit{Strange} reader and the writer of new stories about the \textit{Strange} writing.

Roland Barthes wrote \textit{Death of the Author}, which, as I read and interpret it, reminds me that the \textit{Strange} Author ‘enter[ed] into his own death’\textsuperscript{13} as soon as he began to write. Since this written reading is still an integral part of \textit{Strange}, the ‘he’ that once was ‘I’ did not die within me, he simply transformed through a kind of osmosis into the ‘me’ writing now. His Authority, however, did not survive the transformation. Barthes suggests that the Author has no authority because although he may be real, his writing is not his reality; it is, instead, an ‘intransitive act [upon] reality’\textsuperscript{14}, and, ultimately, his failure to take a direct object and make it real. Although the \textit{Strange} Author wrote words imbued with unequivocal intent and his own interpretation of their respective purposes, as soon as they fell to his pages, they fell from his control. I say Barthes suggests these notions with my own sense of irony, because, like the \textit{Strange} author and \textit{Strange}, Barthes-the-Author and \textit{The Death of the Author} do not share the same voice. The real Roland Barthes, a person, has his voice; \textit{The Death of the Author}, a structure, a reading, has mine. My voice is the reader’s voice, the interpretive voice and I am ‘simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted’\textsuperscript{15}. In easy terms: the text may be the Author’s structure, but it is only ever the reader’s cognitive, interpreted creation. The act of writing cannot determine its own outcome, which is dependant upon the unknown and unknowable reaction of the reader.
Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made up of a multiple of writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader\textsuperscript{16}.

Barthes warns me to suspect definitives, suspect the analysis of authorial intent and, instead, approach text as a painter without an assured subject might approach a blank canvas, where language is my palette and imagination is my only qualifier.

The conflict between the Authorised, the fixed and the static, and the Interpreted, the fluid and the imaginary has long been debated in Post-Structuralist discourse – debates which (arguably) began when the theorist De Saussure\textsuperscript{17} introduced the signifier (the image or sound) and the signified (the referent or concept) to linguistics studies. The signifier and signified operated from convention rather than any natural, genetic compulsion, e.g. the difference of meaning between the word ‘meaning’ and the word ‘gleaning’ can only be derived from its spelling and its spelling is a convention, not a natural compulsion. De Saussure’s comment that ‘in language there are only differences without positive terms’, rather than fixing his semiotic system\textsuperscript{18}, exposed instead (at least for post-structuralist theorists) the plurality of meaning in language, its disseminations and deferments.

Structured language – the post-authorial written text – enjoys the same plurality potential as the simple sign – a potential which, as stated, can only ever be momentarily realised by the reader through interpretation. As the post-structuralist Jacques Derrida’s \textit{Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences}\textsuperscript{19} explains, any interpretation of structure is discourse lacking a centre: the interpretation of any given text (or structure) is relative only to its interpreter: ‘a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play’\textsuperscript{20}. Derrida describes structure as ‘being neutralized or reduced … by a process of giving it a centre or … a fixed origin’\textsuperscript{21} and then goes on to point out that ‘at the centre, the permutation or transformation of elements (which may of course be structures enclosed within a structure) is forbidden’\textsuperscript{22}.

This not only supports \textit{The Death of the Author} by problematising the veracity of ‘fixed origins’ and the ways in which recognised Authority over a text ‘forbids’ its interpretive ‘transformation’, it also supports my contention that this critical interpretation of one story (\textit{Strange}) is just another story, subjectively constructed from individual knowledge, assumptions and perspective preferences\textsuperscript{23}. Derrida calls the latter denominators of subjective construction ‘inherited concepts’\textsuperscript{24} because they ‘are not elements or atoms’\textsuperscript{25} and ‘they are taken from a syntax and a system [where] every particular borrowing brings with it the whole’\textsuperscript{26}. Pertinent to
this text, the ‘whole’ does not merely refer to Strange, it refers to my entire knowledge inheritance – the lessons and cognitions of my lifetime.

Thus, I perceive that Strange is not the sum of its parts, it is a part of an infinite sum. As ‘a system of signification’, it may be read and interpreted, re-structured and re-contextualised, but all such revisions occur within the general ‘syntax and system’ of inherited knowledge, even those revisions attempting to problematise, denounce or explode the inheritance. Derrida calls these antitheses ‘reductions’ and clarifies my point in two vital sentences: ‘For the paradox is that the metaphysical reduction of the sign needed the opposition it was reducing. The opposition is systematic with the reduction’27.

With this I deduce an explanation of the reading act, Barthes’ ‘focused multiplicity’: the multiplicity is the informed comprehension of the system of signification and the focus is its equally informed apprehension and reduction.

I am warned that imagination is more a result of acquired information than unique cognition; that my canvas can never be completely blank and that, rather, it displays an outline of subject as object, which, by my cognitive labours, I bring to a subjected form.

This text should be ‘neutralized or reduced’ as it is conceived, because the ‘elements’ I used to create Strange were integral to my own ideal structural design of Strange and therefore cannot, according to Derrida’s text, transform in the structural design of this text. But, thanks to Death of the Author, I am assured that when the writing stops, the ‘he’ that once was ‘me’ transformed into the ‘I’ that writes now will also evaporate leaving only the text ‘functioning perfectly without the person of the interlocutors’28.

My structural mappings are not unnecessary digressions. Indeed, both Structuralist and Post-structuralist theories are absolutely essential to my critical interpretation of Strange, because I intend to explore the ways in which culturally produced structures of identity, race and human relationship might be ‘permitted’ their own ‘transformation[s]’ by examining the ways in which such transformations are currently ‘forbidden’. Simply, I will contend that identity is a structure, culturally ‘centred’ in racial language and through ‘inherited concepts’, which can be reconceptualised through the decentralising potential of recognised hybridity.

In Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts, hybridity is summarized as ‘the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation’29 and I contend that such ‘forms’ must transform ‘inherited concepts’ from the dialectical to the analectical. The dialectical [as Dussel’s From Science to the Philosophy of Liberation defines it] is ‘ontological’ and ‘the category proper to the dialectical method is totality’30. Dussel cites Aristotle’s Topics and Marx’ Grundisse to reach the conclusion that ‘dialectic goes through various ontic horizons from totality
to totality until it arrives at the fundamental one … in which all differences (beings, parts, functions) recover their ultimate meaning.’

Dussel suggests that the dialectic always begins with an intact totality comprised of theory or science, which basically means that the ‘fundamental one’, the ‘true’ narrative from which ‘ultimate meaning’ is recovered ‘begins’ with ‘historical, social or economic presuppositions’.

Thus, the totality (or Derrida’s ‘centre’, or Barthes’ ‘furnished signified’) is an ‘inherited concept’, which, ‘systematic with its reduction’ creates its ‘own opposition’ - a known thesis and its equally known antithesis, a One and its Other, ideology reduced into a simple binary equation.

The analectical, or Dussel’s ‘analectical moment’ is not opposed to the dialectical – it is, rather, exterior to it.

The analectical refers to the real human fact by which every person, every group or people is always situated “beyond” (ano-) the horizon of totality … the analectical moment is the affirmation of exteriority, it is not only the denial of the denial of the system from the affirmation of the totality. To affirm exteriority is to realize what is impossible for the system (there being no potency for it); it is to realize the new, what has not been foreseen by the totality, that which arises from freedom that is unconditioned, revolutionary, innovative.

When the point is complex, analogy acts like an opened door in a smoke-filled room, so allow me to examine this analectical moment, this point on potential interpretive transformations of structure through affirmations of exteriority, by opening an analogical door.

I see a tree in a forest. Its exteriority is affirmed because, regardless of its particular species (its presupposed totality), its shape, foliage, external bark pattern and internal knot pattern are distinct from others of its type. It exists in its own space and time. It is unique.

I chop the tree down, strip its bark and foliage away and then cut twenty lengths of timber from the remaining trunk. I cut each length to exactly the same dimensions and now have a stack of structural beams instead of a tree. I build a structure with my beams and begin to analyse it.

At first glance, each beam looks exactly the same and performs an easily explained function within my structure, but then I look closer. Each beam has retained a unique and distinct internal knot pattern.

Thus, when I attempt to explain my structure, I can only explain it in reduced terms – beam, joint, physical dimension, intended purpose – and ignore the abstractions that cannot be reduced. No matter how much I try to shape exactitude and sameness, no matter how ‘perfect’ my ‘finished’ structure, each beam will always retain its difference.

Dussell’s moment illuminates the abstractions – the tree, the elements stripped away, the distinct knot patterns – and affirms the necessity of their inclusion into any investigation of any structure within which their products might be integrated. Effectively, Dussell’s moment affirms
hybridity just as hybridity affirms exteriority because it exemplifies the potential for what
Maritza Montero (referring specifically to Dussel’s analectical moment) calls ‘a differing
otherness … admitting modes of knowing [and] dialogue and relation with an Other in a plane of
equality based in the acceptance of distinction’\(^{35}\).

Madan Sarup’s *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* offers two ‘models of identity’\(^{36}\):
the ‘traditional’, a ‘fixed’ identity determined by external ‘dynamics … such as class, gender,
race’\(^{37}\); and the ‘fabricated’ identity, ‘constructed’ by the individual to conform to or rebel
against specific cultural expectations of character or behaviour. Sarup insists that ‘neither of these
models can fully explain what most people experience’ for such explanations are only ‘identity
narratives … localized in time and space’\(^{38}\). Sarup argues that when constructing identity
narratives, either about ourselves or others, we ‘focus on the concrete effects’\(^{39}\) of identity
dynamics, rather than investigating the reasons for the specific manifestations of identity we are
trying to record (or express) in written narratives (stories) or the narratives we repeat as cultural
subjects. Such investigations ‘are not mentioned because they are taken for granted – it is often
assumed that there is an agreement about those abstract things’\(^{40}\) – just as the tree, the elements
stripped away and the beam’s distinct knot patterns are abstractions to the structure. Can
something exterior to a structure also be an integral part of the structure? The answer must be
‘yes’, because through assumed agreement of its abstract existence (a sort of generic knowledge
that something not-completely-knowable exists) exteriority is deferred in the act of structural
analysis, it is excised from the narrative of the real.

In affirming exteriority through the realisation of the unforeseen, Dussel’s analectical moment
disarticulates such assumptions and agreements, disarticulates Sarup’s ‘process of exclusion,
stress and subordination … carried out in the interests of constituting a story of a particular
kind’\(^{41}\) and yet celebrates Sarup’s question – the question that informs the disarticulated,
redundant process: ‘How did that happen?’\(^{42}\).

How indeed? ‘Exclusion, stress and subordination’ do not guarantee the excision of abstracts
from identity narrative regardless of the narrator’s (or storyteller’s) intention, because the story
does not belong to the storyteller. The story and its ‘abstract things’ (whether deliberately excised
by the storyteller or not) are determined or imagined or constructed through interpretation by the
‘identity’ on the receiving end. I am always asking ‘How did that happen?’, and I carry that
question from my position as identity narrative receiver into my own identity narrative
constructions. The question is irreducible, a hybrid, the flap of the butterfly’s wing because
nothing more than interpretation answers it. Unfortunately, when subject to culture, the
interpreter is often subject to ideologies which reify such poietic liberations as examples of
cultural dysfunctionality, which demand reduction of identity and belonging narratives into simple binary equations. Dussel’s points on ideology bring the question (How did that happen?) back to the cultural subject:

Ideology is the ensemble of semiotic expressions that justify or conceal domination; when they are methodical, they justify it more completely. The ideological function in its essence is the relationship of the sign or signifier as justification of a dominating praxis.\

Feminist discourse contends with the same issues I am tackling here, because the female identity, regardless of the cultural space she inhabits, is a perfect example of cultural subjectification and I choose to interpret ‘woman’, ‘hybrid’ and ‘differing other’ as mutually signified. Margaret Maclaren’s in-depth reading and analysis of Michel Foucault’s works and their ‘force relations’ with feminist theories underlines the seemingly transient nature of Foucault’s position on the ‘general theme’ of his research: the subject.

Maclaren focuses on the ‘compatibility’ between Foucault’s ‘refusal of the subject [as] the refusal of a particular form of historical consciousness’, how this equates with the ‘resistant social subject’ and the feminist ‘aims of capturing the specificity of women’s experience and the political and social transformations necessary to end the oppression of women’.

Maclaren is clearly aware of the contradictions and ‘tensions’ that span the body of Foucault’s work, but just as clearly determines their relative worth to feminist aims because of those contradictions. She implies that Foucault’s recognition of his own inconsistent subjective textual positions equates well with the necessary view that any attempt to ‘articulate the female self contributes to the subjectification’ of that self, thereby undermining the autonomy women strive to acquire.

Maclaren quotes Rosie Braidotti as saying ‘one cannot deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted’, but Foucault (and Maclaren in his defense) questions the notion that subjectivity can be ‘granted’ at all. In her third chapter, ‘The Relational Feminist Subject’, Maclaren parallels Foucault’s work with Nancy Chodorow’s ‘object relations theory’, determining that both Foucault and Chodorow prescribe to the view that ‘moral action arises from within a network of social relations’. When morals, an arbitrary set of binary right/wrong principles (or a reductive binary equation narrative), are ‘related’ and empowered by ‘networked’ repetition, the articulated cultural identity becomes a product of ‘experience which results in a subject’. The narrated cultural subject (or individual made subject by cultural narratives), therefore, is like the stacked beam – arbitrarily cut to specific and conforming dimensions for specific, subjectively determined purposes that will, theoretically, contribute to the ideal structure. Unlike the beam, however, the cultural subject participates in the cutting and this
participation, this ‘moral action’, this desire to fit neatly into an idealised structure is exactly what *Strange* was written to problematise because the hybrid problematises the binary narrative. The hybrid is exterior to the ideal and cannot satisfy the dimensional requirements of the structure. Hybridity, or ‘differing otherness’, challenges the 0/1 structure of binary logic with a metaphorical decimal point and disseminates, defers and decentralises cultural narratives of presupposed whole totality.

My first reaction to Vince Marotta’s concern that ‘the freedom of the other to maintain and construct their identity through the use of social and cultural borders may be denied [by] those who theorise a hybrid identity’ was nervous guilt. Who was I to question a culture’s right to identity autonomy? Who was I to rattle a structured culture’s foundations of tradition, moral certainty and ideological pride simply because I was not allowed in the building? Who was I to question a culture’s right to bar my access?

Post-structural research gave me the answers. Culture cannot be a closed structure and survive, because no closed structure ever has, ever can or ever will survive *within* the infinite variety of forces it attempts to close itself against. Culture never transforms from the centre – its centre transforms *because of exterior forces*. Those exterior forces, which I call hybridisations, effect transformations in a never-ending phenomenon of analectical moments as culture redefines, reinterprets, recognizes and *restructures* itself from the outside in. Marotta is rightly concerned about the cultural identity unwilling or unable to transform simultaneously with his/her culture, but that is precisely why the cultural processes of transformation and hybridisation should be mapped and added to the human knowledge pool. Forty-three-years ago, Bob Dylan tried to tell us *The Times they are-a Changin*; forty-three-years before that, he could have said the same thing and been right; forty-three-years on, now, and it still holds true – whether cultural identities (‘writers’, ‘critics’, ‘senators’, ‘congressmen’, ‘mothers’ or ‘fathers’) want it to or not.

Identity narratives, including those dialectically constructed and interpreted from within cultural borders, are always analectically engaged where such borders converge. *Strange* is an analectical engagement on the borders of the Australian identity narrative and this text is an analectical engagement on the borders of *Strange*.
CHAPTER FOUR

HYBRID ANALOGUES: HISTORY, MEMORY & DIALOGIC RELATIONS

Strange locates six generations descending from a union of cultural opposites, employing two distinct narrative styles in two separate texts to express the history of one family line. Book one, Strange Past is an historical novel: a fictional narrative set within or corresponding with written and recorded historical fact.

In his chapter ‘The Historical Text as Literary Artifact’\(^58\), Hayden White posits the argument that ‘the status of the historical narrative [is as much] invented as found’\(^59\) and that ‘histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles’\(^60\). White supports these claims with the premise that historical information comes to the historian as a formless jumble of seemingly disconnected texts, suppositions from earlier historians and artifacts, from which a story is pieced together to form a written history. He also quite succinctly clarifies the fundamental difference between the poet or fiction writer and the historian – that, unlike the poet or fiction writer, the historian has no ‘unifying form’\(^61\) from which to work and that the historian’s history is judged ‘by the adequacy of his verbal reproduction of his external model’\(^62\).

White’s conclusion is academically mischievous, for he asks that historian’s ‘recognize the fictive element in their narratives’\(^63\) and suggests that ‘such recognition would serve as a potent antidote to [their] tendency to become captive [to] ideological preconceptions’\(^64\). He also suggests that those preconceptions are not recognised as preconceptions, but ‘honoured … as the correct perception of the way things really are’\(^65\). White calls today’s history ‘repressed’\(^66\) and in denial of its literary and fictive basis - its ‘greatest source of strength and renewal’\(^67\).

White’s text appeals to my own sense that past realities - no matter how clear my memories of them or how much ‘fact’ I have gathered about them - are best served in fiction. The idea or opinion or ideology that motivates me today will always colour my recollections and, like White (and in deference to Barthes’ ‘intransitive acts’ notion), I suggest that factual reproductions of the past fall under the same motivational obstinacy or subjective sense of how things actually were.

As fiction built upon a formless jumble of fact, Strange Past resembles the traditional historical novel, but, as I wrote and now interpret it, ‘in a way which renders the idea of self-contained, nationally and ethnically defined historical consciousness somehow outdated and inadequate’\(^68\). The central Strange Past hybrid characters are motivated by ‘progress, enrichment and the expansion of [a] civilising mission’\(^69\) – Colonialism’s ideal themes – but despite their
efforts to achieve those ideals, the hybrids discover that their actions do less to define them than do the words used to describe them. Their descriptions – ‘half-caste’, ‘hybrid’, ‘Darkie’ – exclude them from any history celebrating the realisation of colonial ideals, because the ideals are not ideally realised unless by those belonging to an ethnically defined space. To all intents and purposes, my *Strange Past* history is a celebration of colonial enterprise and, as such, exemplifies the ways in which Colonialist or Settler history survives as historical knowledge. *Strange Past*, however, ignores the condition of ethnicity placed upon the colonial ‘mission’ and allows its hybrid characters to participate in the celebration.

Book two, *Strange Present* is a memoir. According to Oxford, the word ‘memoir’ originates from the French *memoire*, meaning, simply, memory and is defined as ‘a historical account or biography written from personal knowledge’.[70] But, as discussed in the previous chapter, ‘reality’ cannot be created in text, history-as-knowledge cannot be actualized through interpretation and therefore, memory can only recreate analogues of past events or characters. Thus, I define *Strange Present*, my memoir or life-history, as a chronological series of personal anecdotes and stories *analogous to my life experiences*. Denny, the ‘I’ in *Strange Present*, is my analogue and his actions and experiences *analogous* to my memories of my own real actions and experiences. Henceforth, I will refer to my Denny Analogue as DA [Is it mere coincidence that DA is also an acronym for Dead Author and *Death of the Author* (DOA) an acronym for Dead on Arrival?].

When I consciously decided to remember for the purposes of recreating my hybrid-life analogue in text, two questions always initialized the process: ‘Where was I?’ and ‘When was it?’ I realised that my memories always *locate* my experiences in place and time, so I began each *Strange Present* chapter with a place name and either one, or a collage of short reminiscences about that place. Each of the stories is titled according to the year in which it occurred.

Scrolling subjectively through the synapses, I arbitrarily selected a number of my life’s more cathartic ‘othering’ experiences - those which, I hoped, would most effectively reflect my love of Australia and my own wry perspective on Australian cultural relations (informed by the ways in which Australian culture has related to me). Through those experiences, my analogue – my newly realised hybrid-self – is meant to satirise the lazy black-white binary that infuses Australian social discourse and consequently dissolve the resulting light black on one end, heavy white on the other see-saw metaphor implied in such discourse. In *Strange Present* I wanted to illuminate the multi-faceted Australian and, through that illumination, deregulate the terminologies that exclude those of indeterminate colour, or physical features foreign to imagined binary ‘norms’.

To me, the very existence of hybridity implies a roller-coaster metaphor: the petrified, the jubilant, the sick, the mad, strapped in together, expressing individually, yet collectively
connected to the social rail. I concentrated on the characters in my life with which I shared the roller-coaster ride.

If asked, the characters in *Strange Present* might call themselves Australian but only a few would readily identify themselves as either white or black Australian. In most cases, my remembered characters self-identify by their ‘belonging’ places, which may not be actual places at all, but become safe and comfortable zones of influence in the respective character’s imagination. Obvious examples from the text include Mr Harsh of Eagle Junction Primary – ‘it [the school] was his belonging place and his power came from his sense of right when he walked its verandahs, taught in its rooms and stared from its windows’; the patrons of the Nundroo Bushman’s Bar and their ‘opposite’ numbers, the Mulga-Ring crowd; Guido and his solicitor, ‘umbilically connected’ to the philanthropic expectations of the Rotary Club; the ‘light brown man’ safe in his secret culture – ‘You can’t know me’; the ‘blue-singlet truckies’ and the ‘cowboys’, in occupational opposition; Doctor Self-Important, deafened by his own knowledge; Chris ‘the bloody Kiwi’ who ‘loved to hate authority’; ‘don’t call me Chinga anymore’ Mark, conforming to his father’s cultural expectations before satisfying his own desires; Spaceman ‘from Arcturus 27, left on Earth by accident and now waiting for his people to come and collect him’; the Punks versus the Greeks; the re-birthers and the people under the awning.

The stories, although generally written as I remembered them, are embellished. The embellishments are mainly stylistic and dialogistic, where the faithful reproduction of remembered events and voices surrendered to analogy and authorial play.

In 1968, for example, I have made no attempt to give the six-year-old DA a six-year-old voice and nor does he analyse the intent and meaning of events constrained by a six-year-old’s lack of experience and knowledge. Indeed, DA speaks and thinks from my own wry forty-plus perspective – the better, I think, to wring every ounce of humour from the memory.

In my remembered reality, the 1982 Guido was far less physically volatile than his analogue, but, again, the Guido analogue was so much fun to play with and I enjoyed giving him a good whack or two at my unreasonable pair of police analogues.

There are many examples in *Strange Present* (too numerous to mention here) where DA participates in an activity I only remember observing, but I make no apologies for allowing DA to take a more active role in my recollections. DA is not exclusive to *Strange Present* – he has shared my imaginary for many years and, at times, escaped it to become the Bitter-Man and voice my imagined ideal. In difficult, cathartic or discomfitting situations, imagined resolutions
often became imagined participatory narratives for me and this is exemplified in the 1983\textsuperscript{87} Winton bar-fight scene.

I was …very unsettled by the racial separation, because, regardless of where I sat, I was exposed for what I was not. I could not blend into a comfortable black/white mix, instead, I felt obvious, strange, patronised and, somehow, constructed\textsuperscript{88}.

To escape from the emotions engendered by these feelings DA ‘separated from reality and lived an alternate version … daydreamed\textsuperscript{89} and mixed, in a rather dramatic way, the separated blacks, whites, cowboys and truckers.

Since DA and I share the same imagination and I’ve always been partial to old Westerns (which just would not be complete without a rousing all-in bar brawl), I allowed DA to imagine his own event analogue. It is no accidental irony that DA’s ideal, racially-mixed haven is imagined at the centre of racial conflict, for the distinct separation of poles already infers conflict by opposition and, ‘exposed’, he thinks that his allegiance to either pole remains unknown by either pole and therefore, makes him suspect. This reflects my own discomfort in situations where One speaks in derogatory terms about an assumed Other. I cannot count the number of times individuals representing a race or culture pole have actually apologised to me just in case I identified with the ‘Other’ side and took offence at their comments. Such apologies are meaningless, because any acceptance on my part infers an acceptance of the Other side’s nastiness towards the apologist, should it ever occur. If I say, ‘it’s alright to denigrate them’, I infer the statement that ‘it’s alright for them to denigrate you’, and vice-versa. These complexities often escape the apologists, but they form an integral part of any hybrid’s existence. DA’s imagined desire to see the swallowed, hidden contempt seething under the Winton pub’s racial status quo explode into violence, is based on the old-Western inspired notion that any social rift might be closed in the cathartic cleansing of a good, old-fashioned bar-brawl. This supports my assertion that the dramatic imaginary, however pointless or just plain silly, is often embraced by the ‘differing other’ as a means to relieve the stresses and anxieties of disconnectness, assumed suspicion and marginalisation. A further, and most telling irony lies in the fact that the imaginary is so often informed by idealisations belonging to and representing one or the other of the marginalising poles and may ‘perform’, as Docker & Fischer put it, ‘a ventriloquism of new identities’\textsuperscript{90}.

Docker and Fischer’s \textit{Race Colour & Identity in Australia and New Zealand}\textsuperscript{91} is the first volume in a two-volume collection of essays compiled from the 1998 conference \textit{Adventures of Identity – Constructing the Multicultural Subject}. The conference was ‘devoted’ to exploring:
… the urgent topicality and the vitality of the current international debate on matters relating to migration and multiculturalism, to questions of race and ethnic and cultural diversity, to the politics of identity and recognition.

Docker and Fischer, as the conference conveners and editors of its resulting volumes, were first inspired by the question of questionable identity (‘certain writers or painters in Australia who claimed to be, or were held to be indigenous, [but] were not indeed so’93) and Charles Taylor’s notions that although identity ‘crucially depends on … dialogical relations with others’94, the attempt at ‘inwardly derived, personal, original’95 self-definition can fail because of that dependence. Adventures of Identity, Docker and Fischer’s introduction to the first volume, outlines the ways in which that failure manifests through the perspectives on identity construction and maintenance presented in the Race Colour & Identity in Australia and New Zealand essay collection. Particularly relevant to my work is Docker and Fischer’s discovery that, following their call for papers and their subsequent analysis of submissions, ‘the volume began shaping itself around the staging of conversations between ‘race’ and the multicultural, colonialism and migration, post-colonial theory and diaspora theory’96. The Australian identity, it seemed, was always perceived in opposition and, even though I have always attempted to refute such oppositions, Taylor (through Docker and Fischer) underlines my failure to be my own definition of myself simultaneously with ‘my’ externally perceived and dialogically related identity. Thus, I decided to explore the ‘one’ Australian identity to which I have always been perceived and dialogically related to as opposed.

In The Australian Legend, Russell Ward explores early Australian texts to, as he puts it, ‘trace and explain the development of …the Australian self-image’97. For my purposes here, I am particularly interested in how ‘typical’ physical features were impressed upon the reading public of the time. I suggest that those early textually constructed impressions created a primary general ‘knowledge’ about the ‘typical’ Australian appearance and that the present-day media representations of the ‘typical’ Australian are informed by that written history. Ward quotes P. Cunningham’s reference to the general appearance of the second and third generation Australians called Currency Lads and Lasses:

They grow up tall and slender …., and are generally remarkable for that Gothic peculiarity of fair hair and blue eyes which has been noticed by other writers. Their complexions, when young, are of a reddish sallow, and they are for the most part easily distinguishable – even in more advanced years – from those born in England98.
The phrase ‘noticed by other writers’ in the above quote gives credence to my prior suggestion, and the fact that Cunningham deliberately ‘distinguishes’ the Australian-born from the English-born gives credence to his description, for, as Ward writes:

> The strength of the attachment to Australia among working people, and the extent to which it had already begun to affect some members of the middle class, are suggested by the report of a Sydney court case in 1854. A solicitor, who had referred to events in Britain as having occurred ‘at home’, was rebuked by the police magistrate who said: ‘You may call it at home, but we Currency Lads call it abroad and this is my home’.

Cunningham and his ‘other writers’, therefore, would have appealed strongly to the Currency Folk, for the writers’ descriptions offered the Australian-born a tangible (if only textual) ‘proof’ of their difference to the ‘outsider’ English. The fact that their proof discounted the dark features of the race that only a few decades before were the only known Australians, was, by ‘other writers’, conveniently ignored until it was completely forgotten. ‘Tall, slender, fair-haired and blue-eyed’ became the popular template for the ‘typical’ Australian - a template that remains in the mediated Australian perspective.

My Denny Analogue’s experience with the template is explored in 1985, where he faces the facts of his features and how they are inscribed as a visual language within Australia’s mediated imaginary. DA learns that to act on screen (the media, or mediation) and thereby represent a fictional identity, his features will always determine the nationality of the individual he represents and will never allow him to represent an individual from the nation to which he claims to belong. Although his claims are irrefutable, his features ‘describe’ a truth which contradicts the known, the understood and the maintained denotation of Australian ‘type’. The template is just one of the many symptoms of the race disease infecting DA’s existence.

In 1965, my three-year-old DA has his first lesson in racism and learns that his appearance is somehow offensive to certain types of people, although he is too young to understand why it should be so. He is also too young to comprehend the reason why his parents insist on placing him in the care of people his appearance offends.

Because his age prevents him from choosing not to submit to either his parent’s expectations or his misguided babysitter’s abuse, DA becomes an unwilling subject in two distinct expressions of adult power, the first an ‘othering’, intended to instill within him a sense of wrongness and effectively rob him of cultural innocence; the second, a denial of his voice, in which his assertions are interpreted as ‘acting’ and ‘attention-seeking’, rather than real pleas for help and understanding.
When I finished writing the painful memory, I realised that what I had written described a series of events that has informed my marginalised sense of belonging throughout my entire life, but that without historical context, without an exploration of the factors that created the ideologies underpinning the normal/abnormal polarity, my painful memory had no power to inform. I realised that it was not enough to simply recognise a cathartic, cortex-deforming moment, because that moment was merely a distillation of old produce. My task, therefore, was to study the produce back to the seed and pinpoint the locations and moments of actual germination.

At first I thought that the 1965 moment screamed for an investigation into the Australian white/black polarity, but which was I? Again, I could not argue for or against either; I could not even speak with a representative voice, because I could claim no unconditional belonging to either specific genetic pole. I concluded that, as the white cannot objectively write the black and as the black cannot objectively write the white, I, as neither, could not objectively write either. I had to determine my own pole and write about that, or, more succinctly, from that space.

I tried to define my race, but became stuck and smugly refused to budge when I thought about that which has been has been scientifically determined (thus far) from the fossil record. All humans share a common ancestry, beginning with *Australopithecus ramidus* (or *Ardipithecus ramidus*), evolving into *Australopithecus afarensis*, then *Australopithecus africanus*, then into *Homo habilis* and/or *Homo rudolfensis*. *Homo ergaster* was next and, ‘arguably, the first true human’*. All evolved in Africa and, instinctively nomadic, over subsequent millennia, spread to inhabit the rest of the inhabitable world. Basic features and skin pigments evolved to suit the prevailing environments – human biology adapted, but humans remained nomadic. I concluded that as later human expansions and movements converged, the simple biology at the frontiers of convergence would have naturally mixed pigments and re-shaped features. I thought it should be understood, recurring truth that new frontiers would always disappear, the simple biology would remain simply persistent and pigment/feature-defined race would be nothing more than a flawed idea temporarily inhabiting an imaginary space.

It seemed logical. It sang with a harmony I’d love to sing. But it was a reality I had never actually experienced. The flawed idea had somehow become the truth, regardless of any convergences at the frontiers of the imagined space. Klein succinctly suggests that ‘we are essentially indistinguishable in any major respect from people who lived 50,000 years ago. But look what's happened to culture’.*

Racial determination, I decided, was dependant upon an arbitrary point in any so-called race’s cultural history, not upon the genetic history of the entire human species. Cultural and biological
convergence was deliberately ignored, denied, criticised or disdained. As ridiculous as that seemed, I knew that I would have to discover the arbitrary point in my own ancestral history at which my Australian-born ancestors determined and avowed belonging to a specific race. I soon learned that my Australian-born ancestors made no such determination, voiced no such grand claim because, simultaneous with their physical habitations of the continent Australia, they also inhabited a harsh and discomfiting cultural terrain, uncertainly mapped; a broad, trackless wasteland called hybridity. Hybridity is an explicative Imperialist term, a post-colonial discourse and a means by which identity might be articulated across cultural locations. It is also a state of being, a state of knowing and a state of flux between identity, language and cultural evolution. I studied the available maps of hybridity and came to a stunning conclusion: hybridity is a place between two layers of reality, existence without a tangible, quantifiable cultural definition, The Island of Dr Moreau.

In the Australian context, the first grotesque, the Other of the national self, is seen in representations of Aborigines and Asians, but between the self and its others, there flourishes a dangerous and unstable hierarchy of bastard types ... [this] proliferation of hybrid races discloses the instability of the polarisation of Australians into white and black required by the discourse on nation.

I studied the complex map of self that I’ve spent a lifetime drawing and realised that, physically, I was just like one of Moreau’s experiments: genetically human, culturally suburban Australian, an Irish Christian-name and a German surname but not quite white, dark skin and features that suggest Original genes but not quite black. I realised that pigment/feature purists had embraced their flawed idea, used text to make their imaginary space real and my real space imaginary.

The exclusion necessary to the formation of identity at one level is simultaneously a production at the level of the Imaginary ... of a complex hybrid fantasy emerging out of the very attempt to demarcate boundaries, to unite and purify the social collectivity.

I certainly didn’t feel like somebody else’s ‘hybrid fantasy’, so, with a blank page before me, I asked DA for his opinion.

‘Prove the biological you,’ he said. ‘You’ll make yourself real with a history.’

Thus, writing the present became writing the past.
CHAPTER FIVE

WRITING IDENTITY: THE HERITAGE PLAYERS

Since the two Strange texts share the common theme of problematised identity within culturally idealised societies - Pharaoh and Dick Strange in Strange Past and ‘I’ in Strange Present - the preliminary satellite map of the complete Strange territory shows a universal metaphor describing the central theme common to both texts via the forms employed to create it. Simply, the structure of Strange is a metaphor, inferring the ‘Settler voice’ and the ‘Original voice’, separated by time and tense, re-interpreted by ‘my’ hybrid mind and re-voiced from ‘my’ hybrid perspective.

‘I’, the author, am/is/was also the central character in the memoir and the central character am/is/was also the thematic subject. The historical novel qualifies the memoir’s central character’s claim to hybridity and, specifically, provides proof of his difference to subordinating Australian identity norms. Strange Present, therefore, provides the map to Strange Past, which provides the map to Strange Present, since Strange Present is a memoir and a memoir is entirely dependent upon its central character.

The preliminary satellite map, the panoptical view of the complete Strange Present terrain reveals a blurred, unidentifiable I determined only by experiential waypoints. The multi-faceted ‘real’ identity I seek must be located at the points at which those waypoints converge and cross, but in text, as written-identity, it will only ever be a contextualised construct. The location of real identity, therefore, becomes a site of self-determination and self-awareness ascertained through the written self, rather than any perfectly real rendering of such self-determination or self-awareness. A written identity is far more ontologically functional than a real-world identity, because the written identity signifies more than a personal location, it also signifies a point, or principle, or authorial philosophy as a feature upon the metaphorical (or analogical) map that is the text.

Writing my way to identity was cyclic, for in text, I produced the past that produced me even though the past I produced may not be the actual past by which I was produced. Simply, the Strange Past history (in context) was ‘his’, not mine, but since ‘his’ made mine possible, I located ‘his’ within mine. As ‘his’ story was characterised within my characterisation of my own, present and past transformed into place and place became a fluid, reflecting, hybridising pool of identity ideas. Like my Strange Present analogue, I ‘bathe[d] in the bright water’\textsuperscript{110} and pondered a notion that soon became a certainty: hybridity is not simply a genetic state; it also describes a
state of flux which might apply to any human being moving outside cultural familiarity or interpreted by the dominant cultural gaze and articulated or dialogically related by predominant cultural voices. My characters were deliberately designed to enunciate this flux notion, this certainty, as players might act upon a stage to enunciate the plot and theme of a play. Indeed, this certainty is the central theme of Strange and my characters represent as many facets of the Australian identity flux as I could possibly imagine. These facets present as negotiations between characters and their immediate prevailing cultural influences of morality, justice, class, expectation, religion, politics, gender-roles and arbitrary racism. The influences, therefore, maintain fluidity through the characters as examples of cultural hybridity, just as the characters, influenced by and simultaneously re-negotiating the influence of prevailing cultures exemplify individual hybridity. Therefore, every character in Strange Past is intentionally discursive, every character in Strange Past is a hybrid and the primary, thematic discourse is (in a broad term) hybridity.

Richard Strange and Dr Viveash represent the hybridisation of class identity in colonial Australia and the first four chapters of Strange Past explore the notions that pre-settlement civilisation was constructed upon foundations of power and authority, and that identity depended upon how the individual was integrated into the power structure.

Because so much of the early history in Strange, particularly Richard Strange’s history, is drawn from the diary of Doctor Samuel Waterman Viveash and because my fictional Richard’s sense of self, sense of place and sense of social position depended so much upon his relationship with his employer, the opening chapters focus primarily upon these two protagonists. Not only are the first four chapters of Strange Past intended to establish Richard Strange’s subservient position to Viveash and his unquestioning acceptance of this position within the English hierarchical structure, they also explore ways in which that structure (and the unquestioning acceptance of it) begins to transform outside the boundaries of ‘home’ country power-locations. Viveash’s manor, the town of Portsmouth and the Britomart are locations within which the power and authority of pre-settlement culture belong and, consequently, are most successfully engendered. Australian locations, however, add new layers to the Strange Past characters, because new elements of existence within those locations demand adaptations of thought, action and, indeed, interpretation.

Movement up and down the social ladder became easier and the lower class, placed in a strong position to do so by the insatiable demand for labour and by the need for adaptation to new conditions, came more rapidly and trenchantly than in Britain to question the assumptions on which the old society rested.
Richard’s transformation is, for the most part, subtle and the signs that any transformation is occurring at all may be difficult to discern. But over the first four chapters there are departures his Australian-located character makes from his English-located character as he ‘ignores’, ‘resents’ or is ‘discomfited’ by the voices of prevailing authority. When Viveash sees natives over a ridge, Richard ignores Viveash’s plea for ‘a tactical withdrawal’. At Viveash’s joked suggestion that Richard is ‘valuable stock’, Richard ‘feels a resentful twinge’. Richard interprets the Reverend’s sermon as an unfair appraisal of the natives and is ‘discomfited’ by it.

Small signs, but important in context, for this rebelliousness is almost sponsored by the transformations occurring in the Viveash character. The pre-settlement Viveash makes no pleas or suggestions, he simply states his need and expects compliance. The Settler Viveash begins to explore the dichotomies of his old, comfortable identity through a series of recognitions about the person he has become because of the adaptations he has made in the new conditions.

The most telling results of the Strange and Viveash transformations come in their Chapter Five conversations, where both men declare their discomforts with the ‘assumptions on which the old society rested’. It is no coincidence that the catalyst for this revelatory conversation is Pharaoh Strange, but I will return to my points on him in due course and focus instead upon his mother, the first truly fictional character in Strange.

My discussion of Richard Strange’s slow shift from static pre-settlement subject to hybridised ‘new’ Australian must include Nganka, for one of her functions in the text is to act as a symbol of Richard’s digression from the expectations of English culture. Simply, the 19th Century written Original Australian was a sub-human, degenerate, uncivilised savage and the very notion that a civilised member of the Empire would even contemplate sexual dalliance with a native was beyond contemplation.

The world’s written record hardly contains an equivalent to the malicious, unrelenting and unanimous reprobation visited upon the Australian Aborigines. Few national histories contain such odious rationalisation of ugly deeds. Nineteenth-century Australian writers expressed violent and profound loathing for Aborigines, an attitude which remained respectable until late into the twentieth century.

Richard ignores the mediated perceptions and their inferred strictures and chooses instead to perceive Nganka as an object of desire – one more nail in the coffin of the pre-settlement subject. Nganka’s initial perception of Richard inverts his function in Strange to mirror her own as a symbol of the written white:
Nganka contemplates the unconscious thing at her feet. If it were not white-skinned, if it did not cover itself in cloth and leather and if it were not such an awful danger to the real people, it might be a man. It must be nearly a man, like the snake is nearly a lizard or the yabby is nearly a Marron. But, like the snake, it kills and, like the yabby, it has extra claws. Nganka wonders if she should kill it.

*Written*, in the latter case (as I intend it), means constructed by language to become a frequently repeated cultural story or myth and here I infer that the Originals’ written white has much in common with the English written native. Nganka formulates an opinion of ‘the unconscious thing at her feet’ based upon her own cultural knowledge/experience and effectively ‘voices’ an Original perspective similar to, but not instigated by a white voice. Nganka, however, is much more than a functionary object in *Strange*. She also represents the unknown, unknowable blank-spot in my quest for genetic certainty.

Nganka is a fiction based entirely upon two known facts: the first, my family’s physical features and the second, Richard Strange’s location at the time of Pharaoh’s birth. In the sparsely populated Western Australia of 1852, I could not imagine too many other races of ‘Original-featured’ women that might have had sex with Richard, let alone wait around to deliver a baby and blithely hand it to him before conveniently disappearing. With logic as my guide, I decided to ‘make’ Nganka a Noongar girl, but I state categorically that I do not know if Pharaoh’s actual mother was an Original Australian woman.

‘Who is an Aborigine?’ In ‘Mis-Taken Identity: Mudrooroo and Gordon Matthews’, Gerard Fischer explores this question by raising such issues as community acceptance/rejection of an individual’s claim to Original descent, legal qualifications required for provable Originality, the effects of ‘tagging’ based upon skin-colour/features, de-Aboriginalising the mistaken identity and the ethical uncertainties surrounding the deliberately ‘fabricated’ authorial identity. To contextualize these issues, Fischer relates the sad tales of Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson) and Gordon Matthews, who both claimed an Aboriginal heritage that, unbeknownst to them, did not exist *genetically*. My emphasis on the latter word is deliberate, because, as Fischer contends, both Mudrooroo and Matthews had their Aboriginality confirmed by respected, culturally-secure whites - Mudrooroo by Dame Mary Durack, ‘a prominent member of Western Australian society’ and Matthews by Dick Rutenberg, ‘an Australian university lecturer’ – and then re-confirmed by the acceptance of actual indigenous groups and individuals. The discovery that their features were inscribed genetically by a Sri Lankan for Matthews and an African-American for Mudrooroo conflicted with their own written inscriptions (Mudrooroo) or culturally-reinforced assumptions (Matthews) about their ancestries and caused a controversy that
continues today. Regardless of either Mudrooroo’s or Matthews’ initial heritage errors, I do not agree with Gerard Fischer’s ‘methodological caveat’:

We are entering another literary minefield here, namely the critical distinction between fictional and biographical reality, and the need for literary and social critics alike to insist on a strict separation of the two. 

Although Fischer does suggest that because Matthews’ text is a construction of a public persona the ‘methodological caveat is almost impossible to maintain’, I find it difficult to make the ‘biographical reality’ distinction between the textually ‘constructed’ persona and the textually reconstructed person. Fischer’s ‘biographical reality’ is, in the case of my own explorations, impossible to ascertain because a biographical reality can only ever be ascertained through available records and, whether Fischer is aware of his inference or not, he is effectively suggesting that unrecorded events (that assuredly did happen in some way) be excluded from pre-20th Century biographical texts unless such texts include disclaimers such as this one. The effect of this would be, in many cases, to exclude the most unrecorded pre-20th Century historical subjects/persons from biographies. In Australia, the most unrecorded pre-20th Century historical subjects are Original or, as Matthews’ text exemplifies, ‘non-white others’, and, it must be said, their sometimes hybrid offspring. Better, in my view, to represent a real person as a fictional character with a full (albeit ‘constructed’) voice than a biographical ‘mention’ without any voice at all.

So, my unknowable great-great-great grandmother became a Noongar (or Nyungar) and I named her Nganka, meaning ‘mother’ in the Yuat language. Even though she and Kuljak are written as Whadjuk people, I chose the Yuat name for Nganka because I appreciated the ‘vision’ shared with Father Bernard Rooney by Ned Mippy, an elder of the Yuat-Nyoongara people.

Discrimination, racism and so on - those things arise out of ignorance. And he always saw the...the solution as, um, a coming together of the two societies respecting each other and our society, um, appreciating and recognising this culture that's indigenous to the land. Because we'll both benefit by that. He always said, "We've got to move together." Not just Aboriginal people going one way and us going another way. No. Isolation - no. We have to move together and work together.

This ‘vision’, related to the ABC Dreamtime Monk program by a white, Benedictine monk with full knowledge of the Yuat language and full permission of a Yuat elder to record that language in a Yuat-English dictionary was inspirational to me and, I thought, fitting for the woman who ‘moved together’ with Richard Strange. Even though Yuat land is far north of
Nganka’s likely home-country, I took the liberty that fiction always provides based on the fact of Ned Mippy’s vision.

Representations of Original persons by non-Original persons (or those, like me, without a provable claim to Original genes), often ‘contempor[ise] Aboriginality’, as Michele Grossman puts it, ‘in ways that simultaneously mystif[y] Aboriginal identities and reduce them to moral or political instrumentalities’\(^{128}\). Ironically, representations of Colonials or Settlers ‘often’ suffer the same reductive articulations, but that sufferance is the result of an ideologically-informed self-flagellation rather than a dialogical assault imposed from a dominant ‘outside’ by a dominating ‘other’. To articulate this point in Strange Past and, hopefully, infer a complex Original existence beyond the reductive gaze of the weapon-dominant Settler society, I represented the differences in motivation, cognition and perspective about the common-denominator, the bone-of-contention, the one thing both cultures desired: the land.

The Original characters in Strange Past are written into the land, while the Settler characters are written upon it. In Strange Past, therefore, the only deliberate ‘moral or political instrumentalities’ are Settlers because they all have a single, motivating agenda – to settle. The word ‘settlement’, in 19\(^{th}\)-century industrialised England, described a specific and defined relationship between ‘the civilised’ and ‘the land’ (nature) called progress. Progress was (and still is) a culmination of ideas prevalent in Western thinking which began with the primary religious notion that God provided nature for humanity and gave humanity dominion over nature\(^{129}\).

Descartes’ four ‘precepts on which logic is composed’ from his Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences\(^{130}\), had a profound and lasting effect on Western thinking. Arguably, Descartes’ foundationalist epistemology – where all complexities can be reduced to simple propositions and, conversely, simple propositions, once defined, can be built into knowable complexities – became the simple proposition with which the complexities of ‘modern’ philosophy, Enlightenment and Progress were built. Although a long, and perhaps irritating insertion (for some readers), I think it necessary to include Descartes’ four precepts here and include the reductionist notion that Descartes used to support them, for, to me, that notion most effectively conveys the Settler’s ideological perspective of, and approach to the totality Australia:

As a multitude of laws often only hampers justice, so that a state is best governed when, with few laws, these are rigidly administered; in like manner, instead of the great number of precepts of which logic is composed, I believed that the four following would prove perfectly sufficient for me, provided I took the firm and unwavering resolution never in a single instance to fail in observing them. The first was never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitancy and prejudice, and to comprise
nothing more in my judgement than what was presented to my mind so clearly and
distinctly as to exclude all ground of doubt. The second, to divide each of the
difficulties under examination into as many parts as possible, and as might be
necessary for its adequate solution. The third, to conduct my thoughts in such
order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might
ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the
more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in
their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence. And the
last, in every case to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so general, that
I might be assured that nothing was omitted.

Thus, progress demanded a denial of perception – eschewing the multitudinous whole for an
examination of its composite parts – and through ‘adequate solutions’ and ‘complete enumerations’, promised ‘ascension’ to ‘knowledge of the complex’. Nature, the land and,
indeed, any multitudinous whole outside the existent ‘known complex’ would, therefore, have to
be ‘divided’, ‘enumerated’ and ‘solved’ to be ‘known’. I must re-iterate Derrida’s point on
‘inherited concepts’ here ‘as taken from a system or syntax where every particular borrowing
brings with it the whole’, for although the progressive, scientific approach to unknown multitudes required simplicity, no scientific approach could be made unless by those subject to
the complex knowledge underpinning the inherited concept. Simply, those ‘objects easiest to
know’ may be the hardest to know by anyone without prior knowledge about them, without the
cognitive luxury of ‘inherited concepts’.

As technology advanced through Industrialisation, dominion over existent nature evolved into
improvement of existent nature, and the Descartes-inspired reduction of nature as a perceived
‘whole’ into ‘constituent parts’. Referring to early years of Industrialisation, William J. Lines
writes:

Unprecedented demands on the earth’s resources … required a new view of
nature. And the scientific revolution provided one. Progressive thought promoted
the notion of nature as a mechanism – a system of dead, inert particles moved by
external forces, a set of objects, meaningless and valueless in themselves except
insofar as they could be made to serve human interests.

Lines also provides a pertinent example of the ways in which the ‘scientific revolution’
created a cognitive social system of ‘enlightened self-interest and profit’ with Josiah
Wedgwood’s ‘rationalised factory organisation in England’. In essence, Wedgwood’s goal
was to ‘make such machines of men as cannot err’ through strict rules, low pay, fixed hours
and ‘workers educated in the new disciplines from youth’. Re-contextualised, Wedgwood’s
‘reasoned’ approach could be seen as a precursor to the ways in which Settlers approached
settlement ‘under the guidance of a modern outlook, a uniform way of thinking devoted to the
simplification of life and thought and to the formulation of efficacious techniques for the conquest of nature”. ‘Conquest’ suggests, implicitly, conflict and thus, colonisation (or settlement) began with the notion that the land and its Original inhabitants (two unknown multitudes, which, effectively, could not be separated) were automatically in conflict with progress and its representatives, the Settlers.

I wanted also to infer that the colonisation of both land and people in Australia could not be separated into two terms – land-settlement and Original-assimilation – for within this separation lies a denial of a very simple concept.

... it might help if we non-Aboriginal Australians imagined ourselves dispossessed of land we had lived on for 50,000 years – and then imagined ourselves told it had never been ours. Imagine if ours was the oldest culture in the world and we were told it was worthless. Imagine if we had resisted this settlement, suffered and died in the defence of our land, and then were told in history books that we had given up without a fight ... Imagine if our spiritual life was denied and ridiculed. Imagine if we had suffered the injustice and then were blamed for it.

I took Paul Keating’s advice and I did imagine. I looked at my family and the land upon which I have constructed my home. I considered the fact that although I have no fences, I still know the boundaries of my place. I considered a hypothetical: if a horde of strangers crossed my boundaries, dug holes in my land, chained my children and demanded my obeisance to their gods, laws and cultural expectations, would I separate their invasion of us from their invasion of the land? I would not and could not, for their invasion would encompass my home, not an empty space and, whether or not they called it their home, as we would still be us, it would still be ours. So without attempting to satisfy the ideals of progress and define Original identity, I constructed an Original identity landscape through and upon which the definitive non-Original identities (the Settlers) could move and settle, but within which they would never comfortably belong.

I attempted to write the Originals as beyond any need for or understanding of settlement – as I and my family are our home, the Originals in Strange Past are their land and, like my descriptions of trees and rivers and vistas, the Originals are described as features and elements belonging to the landscape. There are only two Originals in the text with audible voices – Nganka and Kuljak – and their perceptions (albeit those I have constructed for them) often refer back to the land.

Two such examples are Nganka’s amusement with Richard’s use of a sweaty hat to drink clean water, and Kuljak’s ‘fascination’ with the Settlers’ ability to ‘shape’ the land to their purposes. Kuljak’s interest in the Settler’s relationship with the natural world is important, because it suggests his affinity with the idea of progress – ‘The power to shape both the land and
animals into a constant food supply amazes him and, as he rubs at a long Koormul scratch on his arm, he is reminded that it is a power he covets for himself\textsuperscript{141}. But Kuljak, as an Original who ‘walks’ between the two cultures, also qualifies his covetousness as a necessity for the survival of his people:

He believes that this knowledge can only be good for his people, for he knows that the whites value the ability to make change. He also knows that they consume or destroy anything without that ability. His people would have to learn the white way or become like the Koormul now dripping blood down his back\textsuperscript{142}.

As the Settlers are hostile to the land and anything that stands in the way of progress, the land becomes hostile to the Settlers, where descriptors such as ‘hard-work’ and ‘physical cost’ apply, where a creek may become deadly, where fear is instilled, ‘the night threatens’, natives murder, snakes strike, ants bite and even the harmless feeding termite can take a life. The Originals, however, glide through this environment without fearing it – instead, when the Settler threatens, the land enfolds and embraces, and the Originals disappear from the Settler’s eye, the progressive gaze.

For Nganka, the land only becomes hostile at the moment of Pharaoh’s birth and this is intentional. Nganka had to die, or become either a symbol of irresponsibility in deserting her son, or a victim of white oppression in having her son stolen away by Richard. I decided to let the land kill her, which served two purposes: she died and the land, that ultimate symbol of Originality, rejected the half-caste birth. Pharaoh thus begins his textual journey as a symbol of the differing other – un-located and exterior to the dominant identity narratives told by the two prevailing cultures.

As the figure who carefully traverses both the Settlers’ and the Originals’ cultural landscapes, Kuljak ‘returns’ Pharaoh to Richard, effectively displacing the infant from within the land to upon the land. Pharaoh’s primary cultural belonging-place, therefore, is negotiated for him, rather than becoming a natural identity extrapolation of his birth-culture and birth-place. Once Pharaoh is delivered, the Originals disappear again into the landscape, and, as is the case for Pharaoh in a later chapter, ‘the only sign of their passing [is] a black patch of cold charcoal and a slightly scuffed circle of dirt’\textsuperscript{143}.

Alfred Richard Pharaoh Strange begins as unwanted baggage – a bundle placed ‘in the dust’ between black and white and ‘adopted’ into a hostile, unwelcoming environment. To Richard, he is a mistake; to Sarah, he is a symbol of infidelity and to Andrew he is a threat to the family. As a ‘too-white’ danger to the blacks, a ‘too-black’ reminder of his father’s transgressions and ‘the small, dark cause of … misery’\textsuperscript{144}, Pharaoh’s infant innocence is ignored. Instead, he is simply
‘wrong’ because, in the perceptions of every other Strange Past character of that time, he does not belong in any of the spaces they comfortably call their own.

Where the natives exist within the landscape and the whites exist upon it, Pharaoh, as the unwanted bundle, is passed across it, which, as Pharaoh matures, marks his chosen method of engagement with the world. At 14, Pharaoh ‘has no illusions about his place in the world’\textsuperscript{145}, but as he grows, his lack of illusions creates a fallacy which, ironically, becomes an illusion and his entire existence depends upon a never-ending ‘rite-of-passage’. According to Jennie Rasband, ‘rites of passage fall into three main phases: separation, transition, and incorporation’\textsuperscript{146}, where ‘separation’ signifies removal from familiar environments (eg: birth), ‘transition’ signifies adaptation to new environments, and ‘incorporation’ (traditionally celebrated in a ceremony or event) signifies ‘formal admittance’ to the new environment or social location. In his early years, Pharaoh is excluded from the traditional incorporating rite-of-passage events of both black and white cultures: from the overt events like Aboriginal initiation rites and Settler school graduation ceremonies, to the most important social incorporations engendered by peer-groups. Forbidden from school, Pharaoh’s early childhood is spent in the company of sisters to whom he is an embarrassment\textsuperscript{147} and a brother who despises him, and thus Pharaoh is effectively denied his own peer-group and all its associated socialisation processes, supports and developmental ideas. John Coleman writes:

…the peer-group has a continuous part to play in the socialisation process [and] there are undoubtedly special factors operating during adolescence that elevate the peer group to a position of unusual prominence … adolescents need to experiment, discovering which of their personality characteristics and possible behaviours will be accepted and admired. This process of discovery, sometimes rewarding, sometimes painful and embarrassing, is dependent on the involvement of the peer-group\textsuperscript{148}.

Until he is 14, Pharaoh’s entire identity experimentation occurs at the timber-camp with his father and during his infrequent visits to the ‘blacks’ camp’. His ‘social’ examples, therefore, are all either adults or members of a society that he might visit, but, uninitiated and unincorporated, one from which he is culturally excluded. Without a peer-group, I denied Pharaoh the ability to ascertain a successful social identity outside the strictures of adult authority. He assumes the role of an adult without enjoying the necessary catharses of adolescence. Belonging, therefore, is never produced from a rite-of-passage for Pharaoh, it becomes instead a result of temporary adaptation to the expectations of authority or need. In simple terms, Pharaoh only belongs where and when he works.
Although Pharaoh does marry and does serve an apprenticeship, which, it might be argued, may be sites of incorporation, they do not remain fixed in Pharaoh’s experience as such. Pharaoh denies incorporation, choosing instead to maintain a transitory existence from one workplace to another. This transience, which, within the text, is Pharaoh’s one constant, begins with his Chapter Five decision ‘to be white’149. Thus, through work, ‘whiteness’ becomes a location to which Pharaoh spends his entire life attempting to prove himself worthy of belonging, against his own certainty that for him it is off-limits. As he moves through the transitions from uncertain youth to independent man, he develops the character and embraces the motivating agendas of ‘white’ (or progressive civilisation) to move safely across the forbidden territory.

Through characters such as Tom and Horace, Jim and Julia Whittington, Fanny Woods and the Dowsetts, Pharaoh’s certainty is illuminated as fallacy, for their unconditional acceptance of Pharaoh suggests that his mixed-blood is, at least to them, irrelevant. Indeed, I have attempted to imply that these characters would willingly incorporate Pharaoh Strange into their respective social locations if only he would allow such incorporation to occur. The ‘partnership’ between Pharaoh and Fanny Woods, as it evolves from practical necessity to familial cohabitation might be read as a temporary incorporation, but with ‘Your father is never completely here’150, even Fanny voices her recognition of Pharaoh’s chosen inability to belong.

Just as the infamous Pharaoh of Exodus ‘hardened his heart’ against the Hebrews’ transition, so does Pharaoh Strange harden his heart against his own incorporation. The biblical Pharaoh is more, however, than just a coincidental namesake, for Exodus, in Docker & Fischer’s terms, has inspired ‘a new anti-colonial theology’151, ‘secularised form[s] of nationalism’152 and, most pertinent to Pharaoh’s perceptions, monotheistic thinking.

Monotheism stimulates ... violent identity formation, accompanied by hostile exclusion or marginalising of the foreigner, the stranger, the impure153.

I imply, through Pharaoh’s consistent denial of acceptance and incorporation, that if exposed to monotheistic, separatist thinking during the first two rites of passage phases, the individual begins to adopt the very same cognitive strategies. Pharaoh certainly exemplifies this implication, for his own ‘violent identity formation’ never ends with a formed identity – it is, instead, an ongoing catharsis, with self-marginalisations, self-exclusions and the ‘impure’ self-image as its catalysts. Thus, Pharaoh becomes and remains a victim of his own unjust thinking.

Like Nganka, however, Pharaoh Strange has a multitude of functions within the text, not the least of which is his role as a vehicle by which factual records might be delivered to the reader. Pharaoh’s various habitations, relationships, associated births, deaths and enterprises are
consistent with available public records and the 19\textsuperscript{th} century colonial history of Western Australia is summarised through these experiential signifiers.

Through Pharaoh’s fictionalised experiences I include information about a wide range of elements pertinent to 19\textsuperscript{th} century colonial life including agricultural, husbandry and timber-felling practices, modes of transportation, the effects of the gold discovery and all the industries these enterprises supported. I also engage with religion, Federation politics and, perhaps most importantly, the injustices and discriminations prevalent in colonial thinking. Pharaoh’s relationships – both sustained and casual – are the frameworks upon which these reminders are constructed.

Constable John Ricketts, unabashedly racist, is banished to the bush for the crime of rape, but he keeps his position of authority and is never charged for the crime. In text, therefore, he is ‘physically’ located in Beverly and ‘narratologically’ located as a representative of colonial and racist oppression. His physical relocation is a punishment, but one far too lenient for his crime and thus, he represents injustice, or, more succinctly, the imbalance of justice between races in 19\textsuperscript{th} century colonial Australia.

Mr Munday, ‘the beefy patron’, ‘the Emporium fool’ and the Wandering Hotel publican react negatively to Pharaoh’s colour without any consideration of the man that may exist under the skin. Their reactions are unanimous and uniform and thus represent learned behaviour. I imply, therefore, that common-knowledge included the ‘fact’ that dark-skin signified inferiority.

I wrote Andrew Strange with different intentions, and he does not belong in the latter ‘group’ even though his opinion of his half-brother’s colour is the most vitriolic of all the characters. He forms an opinion of Pharaoh based on an issue that is not race-related at all – ‘Andrew seemed to love every black except his own half-brother’\textsuperscript{154}. His ire, expressed in racial terms, is directed at his half-brother’s right-to-belong in the Strange family – ‘You’re not my stinkin’ brother. You don’t belong in this family’\textsuperscript{155}. To Andrew, the family symbolises the sacred and Pharaoh, unsanctified by the sacred mother – ‘She cursed you’\textsuperscript{156} – becomes a symbol of corruption.

Jim Whittington, Fanny Woods and the Dowsetts are among the most positive influences in Pharaoh’s life. Fanny initially partners with Pharaoh to solve a mutual problem and this need for partnership illuminates an important social issue of the time: working-class single mothers could barely support themselves on their low wages (if they were lucky enough to find employment at all) and working-class single fathers’ jobs were so demanding that child-minding became an almost insurmountable problem. With an infant son and a means to a reasonable income, Pharaoh needs Fanny and with her own daughter and very limited income options, Fanny needs Pharaoh. Thus, their partnership is initiated from necessity, not romance.
Pharaoh’s relationship with Fanny is by no means unique, because all his adult relationships result from negotiations and necessity – emotional bonds such as love and friendship are mere side-effects to the initial work-ethic prescription.

In Pharaoh’s later years, however, I allow him a slight shift in perspective, which is inspired by his son, Dick Strange. Although Pharaoh’s last words encapsulate the agenda by which he has (I have) contrived his entire life – ‘it doesn’t matter what I do, now or tomorrow. What matters is that you’ve got a trade in the timber, cash to stay alive while you turn this place into a home and the gear and tools to do it with. You’re my son, and this is your legacy’\textsuperscript{157} – his devotion to and love for Dick are not products of necessity. Instead, for Pharaoh Strange, the only location of true belonging he has ever known is with his son:

Dick studies his father’s face and feels a rush of warm love for the fiery little man. ‘I love you, fa.’ Pharaoh clears his throat. ‘You’d bloody well better! There’s only two in this … brown tribe … so we better bloody love each other!’\textsuperscript{158}

Dick Strange is the ‘finished’ hybrid product of all Strange Past’s hybridisations, incorporating all the facets of past characters into one. His love of the land and recognition of his relationship with it suggests a natural affinity that may be construed as a legacy of his grandmother’s blood. His love of language and letters is a legacy of his father’s association with Viveash. His love of progress and work is a legacy afforded to him by Pharaoh, Richard and, indeed, the entire colonial project.

Each of Dick’s predecessors in the text provides Dick with an aspect, attribute or knowledge that they could not fully experience, though they might have become aware of its importance to their own existences. Consider Viveash, the learned man proud of his callus, unable to comfortably locate himself between two perceived opposing worlds; Richard, dreaming of independence, but always subject to the requirements of land, duty and civilised behaviour; Pharaoh, adaptable in all things except his inability to accept belonging. Dick locates himself comfortably between Viveash’s perceived worlds, finds Richard’s independence within the land and through duty and remains as adaptable as Pharaoh, even as he creates his own belonging as Dick Strange.

Through such legacies, Dick Strange is written to encapsulate and represent all the forces that demarcate boundaries of identity, while at the same time representing a single landscape where those boundaries are blurred to the point of non-existence.

With the introduction of Dick’s journal, I wanted to surrender my omniscient authorial power and allow Dick to write himself. Dick’s voice – although still my contrivance – is no longer
separate from the landscape of culture, relationship and human agenda. It does, instead, originate from the landscape of belonging. Hopefully, there is even a sense that Dick belongs because of his hybridity, not in spite of it.

Unlike any of his predecessors (and their influences), Dick is self-aware from a very early age. He enjoys the comforting structure of family, the transitions and incorporations afforded through peer-interactions and, thus, the learned surety that he is worthy of love and acceptance from other human beings. Dick’s self-awareness – voiced clearly in his journal – reflects, therefore, the notion that individuals cannot begin to identify and re-design themselves to fit their individual ideals of identity unless they first experience the unconditional acceptance of family and then negotiate through the restricted acceptance landscape of the peer-group. For Dick, the various peer-groups he encounters at the Wandering school, ‘his timber-camp on the ‘fields’ and on the Darkan selection provide examples, in microcosm, of the ways in which he will have to negotiate his place in the ‘adult’ world. His love for the written word helps him to constantly monitor those negotiations – ‘I can speak to myself with the words I’ve written a long time after I wrote them’ – and his knowledge of his family’s love for him gives him a secure foundation of belonging from which he can build a comfortable and comforting identity.

At the close of Chapter Nine, Dick’s life appears to be idyllic. He is content with himself, his land, his labours, his present family and his prospects for the future. He is also in love. I might even suggest that he represents the most fulfilled character in Strange at that point.

At the beginning of Chapter Ten, I hope the reader’s illusions are quickly shattered, for the familiar landscape has been replaced by a foreign wasteland and harmony has surrendered to war. Dick, the perfectly adapted hybrid identity, becomes a desperately re-adapting victim of circumstance, completely subject to the whims of national authority. Ironically, the national authority is as much Dick’s creation as it is any of the ‘ten-thousand killers’ with whom he shares the national conflict. His awareness of this begins through his own written questions in a letter to his wife:

Do you remember the sense of right and justice, the pride we all felt about our state’s participation in this war? Does that pride still fill the newspaper columns at home? Does it still pervade the minds of my countrymen and set the tone of every conversation?
I barely remember the euphoria, the feeling of being swept along by an unstoppable force, of surrendering myself to that awesome, all-encompassing pride.
Pride, especially ‘national pride’\textsuperscript{163}, and all its ramifications becomes a new and discomfitting identity location for Dick. He begins to perceive an equally discomfitting, and markedly disturbing similarity between pride and the cultural certainty from which he has constructed his own comfortable identity. Existing ‘outside the box’ of familiarity and participating in the horrific ‘necessities’ of war, Dick’s perceptions about ‘country and Empire’\textsuperscript{164} change as, for perhaps the first time in his life, Dick perceives that his true difference is not colour-related at all.

\begin{quote}
What am I to those I kill? What am I to this land? What am I at home? I think I am all possible things to others – darkie, timber-man, enemy, farmer, Christian – and no matter what I proclaim about myself, I am subject to others’ interpretations. But here in hell, only two interpretations are important – am I friend or foe? Am I threat or ally? I once told my father that I was neither black or white, thinking that brown was possible. But what am I here, where brown does not exist? Black or white?\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

Dick Strange realises that his idea of himself is his alone until he surrenders to a common ideal or agenda. He realises that he does not belong to the entire world; that, instead, his entire sense of belonging depends upon arbitrarily chosen ideological and cultural alliances. His resistance to these realisations manifests at the end of the final chapter with his conclusion that words ‘malign the better purposes of man’\textsuperscript{166}.

The end of \textit{Strange Past}, therefore, ends in tragedy, for although Dick survives the war to return and realise his farming dreams and although his family grows and expands, Dick loses his greatest love – ‘words’. Tragedy, to me, occurs at the very moment that comprehension of a perfect certainty becomes comprehension of that perfect certainty’s transformation into an uncertainty.

When I heard that Julie Andrews had lost her singing voice, I cried. Her beautiful tone, perfect pitch and precise enunciation defined her. Julie Andrews \textit{played} a nun and a nanny, but, for me, she \textit{was} her voice.

When I wrote Dick Strange writing himself, I wanted the reader to experience him as I experienced Julie Andrews. I wanted his writing to identify him and become, in the reader’s mind, a certainty about his character – the certainty that although Dick Strange may have ‘played’ a variety of work-related roles, he \textit{was} his written words.

I removed the certainty of Dick Strange, his identifier, his \textit{identity qualifier}, to create tragedy and through it make a brutal point about the ways in which Western thinking has assimilated the notion that everything is reducible, quantifiable and may be made subject to the principles of Descartes ‘scientific method’. Western thinking has forgotten the lessons of classical tragedy by
deifying form and denouncing ecstasy and, as a consequence, has helped to realise Wedgewood’s desire ‘to make such machines of men as cannot err’.

In Greek tragedy, when the Dionysian ecstatic revelry of the chorus challenged Apollonian rigidity, ‘the illusion of culture was wiped away by the primordial image of man’, but through dialogue, Apollo restored balance to disorder by defining its form. Nietzsche concluded that the result for the audience was tragedy, because, although ‘they participated with and as the chorus empathetically’, the ecstatic required symbolic form to be comprehensible and thus, the promise of release from the restrictions of human existence was always illuminated as beyond human comprehension. Simply, humanity (the audience) needs its definitions to comprehend ecstasy, but within definitive comprehension (which is always subject to ecstatic transformation) ecstasy is lost.

As a form, therefore, classical tragedy is a metaphor for the ways in which Dick Strange contends with the dichotomies of his own existence: the ecstasy of pride in his actions versus the comprehension that his actions are the result of pride-instilling words.

For Dick, words and murder become like black and white, where each creates the other in an endless cycle and, although he cannot extract himself from the cycle, he can denounce and rebel against one of the things he does to perpetuate it, which is to write words. Dick realises that the proud warrior identity has been created for him and Dick’s real tragedy is self-awareness, for as much as he might denounce the cycle of identity creation, he knows that he could not know himself without it.

His final, written sentiment to Bell – We belong together – expresses my belief that there is only one landscape that cannot be mapped, reduced, plotted and defined by anyone; there is only one belonging place. It is the source of hybridity: a well to which all individuals might return for identity refreshment. It has the potential to be the flux and simultaneous balance of ecstasy and order. It is family.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

There are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and, to know me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well\textsuperscript{171}.

*Strange*, as functional analogy, through metaphor and as a collection of character/identity driven *stories*, investigates and interrogates Australian cultural relationships and the ways in which identity is written into the Australian imaginary.

Through the *Strange* characters I attempt to express my certainty that cultural distinctions are made by arbitrary choices, not fundamental biological realities and that all distinctions (class distinctions, race distinctions, ideological distinctions etc.) are synonymous because cultural difference, *not genetics* is the primary issue that maintains each specific political agenda informing each distinction.

Here, as *Strange* reader and post-*Strange* writer, my intent is to illuminate the difficulties this presents for all Australians in our search for cultural common-ground, or all-inclusive nationhood. Some might argue that a sense of national commonality is unnecessary, that Australians are happy just being who they are and that most Australians get along pretty well. But this argument ignores the simple fact that many Australians do not know who they are because their cultural identities have either been ploughed under by colonials in a time past living memory, or disallowed by the living majority because of the ‘belonging value’ placed on specific types of physical appearance. The happy Australian argument ignores the magnetic pull of the race poles, which is powered by the language of belonging, the instinctive desire for safe haven and the constructed need to self-identify by comparison to a presumed opposite. Richard White writes:

A national identity is an invention. There is no point asking whether one version of this essential Australia is truer than another because they are all intellectual constructs, neat, tidy, comprehensible – and necessarily false. They have all been artificially imposed upon a diverse landscape and population, and a variety of untidy social relationships, attitudes and emotions. When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve\textsuperscript{172}. 
I agree, but I also suggest that it is well past time for Australians to seek out and define the one element of national identity that we all celebrate and share, that bonds us together as uniquely and joyfully Australian. We must remember that we are all integral to our families and that our families are all integral to Australia. Our families share Australia because our families are Australia. We create the wealth and the poverty, the laws and the crime, the righteousness and the shame, the despair and the hope, the freedoms and restrictions through our family stories – those we tell our children, those we were told and those that represent who we think we are. If our nation shares its family stories, and if we choose to listen as passionately as we narrate, our familial similarities, ironically, will also help us to recognise and appreciate our differences – to me, the most important reason for establishing national common ground and the national recognition that our Australian culture is a culture of unique families.

Here though, I must tread carefully and examine ‘culture’ outside my preferred petrie dish, for it is not my desire to promote ‘policy’. In their research interviews, Susanne Schech and Jane Haggis discover within their white interviewees ‘a strong sense of wanting to acknowledge diversity and difference but also wanting to frame some kind of unity’\(^1\). Although I completely concur with the need for acknowledgement of diversity and difference, I eschew the notion that any such acknowledgement could be effectively ‘framed’ as a universally understood image or reduced social concept. Indeed, any such attempt to politically prescribe cognition, contradicts the original premise – for one family’s ideal of differential autonomy, one family’s shared diversion might be to damn difference and proscribe diversity.

My notion of national common ground, therefore, is not a prescription for regulated normality or cultural sameness – it suggests instead a rethinking of our cultural relationships, where the boundaries of respective cultures are acknowledged and respected as that culture’s right and the celebrations between different cultural groups occur in mutually acknowledged territories of similarity. This is not, as Docker & Fischer write, an:

> optimistic, if not utopian and millenarial vision of the contemporary world as so globalised, so diasporised, that it can be characterised in its totality as hybrid and mixed, as ever hybridising and mixing, so that historical desires for … cultural or ethnic purity must necessarily be disappearing\(^2\).

Certainly, it should be abundantly clear that such totalising characterisations form the antithesis of my Strange inspired conclusions here, even though I do suggest that the world (if not necessarily the ‘contemporary world’) is, indeed, ‘ever hybridising and mixing’ – through genetic and cultural convergence at the borders of established cultures and, more cathartically, through colonisation.

281
To a culture of colonisers, colonisation is a pleasant term which creates an image of intrepid, productive humans braving unknown territories, spreading the knowledge and technologies of their proud cultures with benign good-will and justifiably reaping the rewards of land, opportunity and wealth. To many colonised cultures, colonisation simply means ‘invasion’. Indeed, to some groups in 21st Century Australia (eg. National Action, a pseudo-national-socialist group of ‘Anti-Asian-Invasion’ pamphleteers headquartered in Sydney’s Newtown), the colonisation of Australia continues today – only the perceived colonising cultures/races have changed.

The relationship between coloniser and colonised is an old human conflict with many precedents stretching back over the entire landscape of human history. Australia’s Celtic colonisers could argue that they were the ancestral products of first Roman, then Angle, Jute and Saxon colonisers of what was originally Celtic land. The Anglo-Saxons could claim ancestral ties with colonisers from all parts of Asia minor, Africa, Europe and the Nordic lands. Many non-Original persons argue that colonisation is a natural human activity and that if the British had not colonised Australia, then some other mob would have. I concur with this ‘sooner-or-later’ logic because Australia is land and, as human populations expand, land is, and always has been, the most important thing, but the argument is not relevant to the social realities of Twenty-first Century Australia, it is an argument based on an imagined alternative cultural history, not the results of Australia’s actual cultural history.

In 1991, the Australian parliament set up the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to at least attempt to grapple with ‘Aboriginal affairs’, what Michelle Grattan calls ‘one of the most difficult, traumatic areas of public policy in this country’. Linda Burney writes that ‘the most fundamental prerequisite [of reconciliation] is social justice’ and, to me, one line from her Mick Dodson quote sums up the essence of social justice and the effect true social justice and reconciliation should create now and into the future of Australian inter-cultural relationships.

According to Dodson,

social justice is the ability to nourish your children and send them to a school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and appreciation of their cultural inheritance.

The implications in Dodson’s sentence cannot be ignored, because they not only speak of the unexplored depths of the ‘cultural inheritance’ rift between black and white knowledge producers in this country, they must also resonate with the hybrids and every other culturally marginalised Australian. The ‘school’ Dodson imagines could not be created in a climate of separation to accomplish its ‘cultural inheritance reinforce[ment]’ goals, for no school succeeds without
teachers and, therefore, Dodson’s teachers would have to be drawn from the generation prior to the students generation. This suggests that the teachers would represent those who have embraced the knowledge of a multitude of other cultures, the better to transfer said ‘knowledge’ and, thus, ‘appreciation’ of the multi-cultural ‘inheritance’ shared by their students. Dodson effectively underlines a vital point in the reconciliation process: reconciliation cannot and will not occur in our future generations unless the present generation of educators (including parents as familial knowledge producers and cultural instructors) admits to every facet, evil and good, oppressive and beneficent, shameful and proud, of Australia’s cultural inheritance. I am still concerned, however, that although reconciliation with the sins and outrages of our turbulent colonial history might shorten the gap between the white/black poles, it may also problematise the hybrid’s search for a belonging place in the national identity schema.

Aden Ridgeway says that ‘if achieved, reconciliation can become a crucial factor in giving the gift of national social cohesion’¹⁷⁸ and I agree, for regardless of the fictional form of Strange, my ancestors were real and they actively initiated ‘cohesion’. Like Romeo & Juliet in a colony of Capulets and Montagues, Richard Strange and Nganka crossed the cultural divide, ignored the polarity taboos and began the line that would eventually lead to me and my children. In fact, the entire Strange/Prussian line created from that convergence exemplifies Ridgeway’s ideal achievement and is, insofar as the Strange descendants are concerned, a ‘gift’ indeed. If I damn Richard for his colonising culture, I must also damn Nganka for choosing to become involved with one of its subjects. If I assume that the choice was not hers, that Richard Strange actually raped her, then I disempower her and, effectively, taint my entire hybrid lineage with the stain of forced bastardry. I would not and could not do that to my own family but I also insist that such measured subjectivity merely promotes the notion that black/white cultural cohesion cannot occur outside the landscape of shame.

Raimond Gaita states that ‘the attachment that makes national shame appropriate and sometimes called for is inseparable from the desire to celebrate achievements which shape an historically deep sense of communal identity’¹⁷⁹ and, while I agree that the ‘attachment’ is ‘inseparable’, I contend that the shame is hardly ‘national’. Although I may be ashamed of some of the actions and policies of Richard’s culture, I cannot be ashamed of Richard. My shame is directed at the implications in the texts of writers like Gaita, well-meaning though they may be, who embed their texts with the presumption that the black/white divide is a constant and that the term ‘nation’ belongs solely to the white side. Does Gaita really suggest that ‘shame’ is ‘appropriate’ for Original people? If not, to whom does the term ‘national’ apply? I would also be fascinated to know which ‘achievements’ the ‘nation’ would celebrate that actually did shape a
‘communal identity’ with anything other than a pure white face. I conclude that history which excludes any participating culture replaces the ‘deep sense’ with shallow selective memory.

In Colour Prejudice, Sir Alan Burns contends that because ‘colour is the most outward manifestation of race it has been made the criterion by which men are judged, irrespective of their social or educational attainments’[^180^], and, yet again, I find an embedded presumption. If ‘colour is the criterion by which men are judged’, what colour are the judges? Does the black’s judgment of the white affect white opinion towards whites, or the converse? Did the entire reconciliation project begin with black judgment of white history or white judgment of black? How might the hybrid participate in the reconciliation project, when, by the very nature of his/her hybridity, he/she is both included and excluded from either pole?

Black-White reconciliation is vital to the moral well-being of this country; it is a necessary part of our maturation from disjointed collection of ‘states’ (colonies) to responsible, enlightened multi-coloured nation. But how will the descendants of half-castes and Asians fit in the monochromatic image of Australian identity unless the image is replaced with a colourised version, the deliberate distinctions cease, and the language that defines the image denies finite binary descriptors? Will blacks and whites ever attempt to reconcile with their own mutual creations, the hybrids? Perhaps the key to black and white reconciliation is in recognising the points and products of black/white convergence, rather than focusing on the points and products of black/white separation. Perhaps then, the inclination to define self by constructing the other will be replaced by an inclination to celebrate difference by recognising mutuality.

Mutuality, however, is not normality, for normality is a polarising concept. In Strange, cultural normality is indefinable, unless cultural normality is everything outside the Strange imaginary. There is no one example in the work that points to a thing or person and says: ‘That’s it. That’s normality. That’s the universal identifier.’ Instead, as I intended, everything in the work points to the specific syllables in the word ‘normal’ and draws a hard black line under their respective meanings. According to Oxford, ‘Nor’ means ‘and not’[^181^], and ‘Mal’ originates from the Latin ‘male’, meaning ‘badly’[^182^]. The word ‘normal’, therefore, functions as an oppositional descriptor – one is normal if one is not bad – and, if applied to cultural articulations of belonging, reinforces the assumption that belonging infers ‘good’. Logical deduction, therefore, defines ‘bad’ as an oppositional descriptor to articulations of cultural belonging.

The ideological work necessary to actively disarticulate racism and nationalism … and to win consent from the population at large for this disarticulation has remained undone[^183^].
Ien Ang’s contention (above) is contextualised in what she calls ‘the cultural struggle for a re-imagining of the nation away from White Australia and in the direction of a multicultural/multiracial Australia’\textsuperscript{184}, ironically, for what is ‘White’ if not articulated racial determinism? And what is articulated racial determinism, if not the very articulation Ang suggests that is ‘necessary’ to disarticulate through worked ideologies?

I share Ang’s desire for disarticulation, but suggest that colour descriptors continue to function against it, because the search for a multicultural/multiracial Australian identity mean cannot begin until colour is no longer an acceptable individual, social or cultural descriptor. I also conclude that the qualifiers Australians use to describe Australian belonging ‘value’ (White-, Indigenous-, and the doubly qualified ‘diasporic communities’: Asian-, European-, Chinese-, Italian-, Greek-, etc.), reinforce binary notions of ‘normality’ and make no room for those individuals who wish to be called Australian, but remain between the dominant White and Qualified binary opposites and without a qualification of their own. Perhaps Ang’s work has already begun in the ‘imagining’ minds of the Unqualified, for we are certainly located outside articulations of Australian cultural identity, although our power to disarticulate suffers according to such locations.

My ancestry does not make this argument more relevant or valid than would the same text presented by any other person without ‘known’ hybrid genes, for I contend that ideology evolves from within ideology, that indeed, ideology is the discursive incarnation or form of hybridity. Just as the once firm foundations of Whiteness are sinking and the edifice they supported is being re-designed to house a multi-coloured multitude, so too will all firm, ‘permanent’ foundations of cultural certainty surrender to ideological change and the convergence-flux of evolving ideas.

Strange implies that ancestry is an idea of past belongings and that one ancestry is no more important than another, unless one is willing to construct boundaries using all notions and ideologies that separate and distinguish one group of human beings from another. But Strange does not problematise cultural pride or cultural self-determination – it tackles instead, the boundaries of culture fabricated with overt or implied notions that one culture, colour or human system is more valid, or superior, or permanent than another.

If Homi Bhabha’s ‘range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices’\textsuperscript{185} were alphabetised by title and displayed on a set of library shelves, I would hope to see Strange included in the S’s with Kate Grenville’s recent text Searching for the Secret River. Her work describes a writing journey markedly similar to mine, and her novel The Secret River offers insights into structure, re-characterisation of real historical figures into fictional representatives and, perhaps most importantly, gives me a perfect literary example of what I call peripheralism.
Although the theories of Barthes and Derrida focus primarily on text and authorship, I cannot help but draw remarkable parallels between those theories and my implications about the hybrid being. If I conclude, in simple terms, that Barthes and Derrida expose the reductive effects of definition, recognition and delegation as applied to the written word, I can comfortably assume that the same effects would occur if the same applications were made to the written identity, or, indeed, the written race. If facets of identity are delegated, they can be recognised and such recognition informs definition. Definition is reduction and the first vital process in the construction of certainty.

For example, I am certain that William Thornhill, Kate Grenville’s main protagonist in *The Secret River*, is white, English, working-class and subject to the knowledge and history of his culture. I am equally as certain that Whisker Harry is black, Original to the country white-named Australia and subject to the knowledge and history of his culture. Even the English Blackwood and his Original paramour can be delegated, recognised and defined by their respective cultural associations regardless of their intimacy and de facto relationship. I am not saying that such reductions are true, simply that, as Grenville’s reader, as the cognitive urge to reduce overcomes me, I can easily make such definitions.

Uncertainty, however, plays havoc with my reductive abilities when I meet Grenville’s hidden being, her undefined, peripheral human object.

One of the shadows moved forward and resolved itself into a black woman … she took a few steps and now he saw there was a child behind her, invisible except for a hand like a pale starfish on her black thigh…he caught a glimpse of straw-pale hair and skin the colour of watery tea, shocking against the woman’s black leg. *I find them quiet and peaceable folk*, Blackwood said at last … *I telled her you’ll keep your trap shut. About what you seen here*¹⁸⁶.

Thornhill did ‘keep his trap shut’ and the child retained its initial obscurity in the text. Grenville, therefore, demonstrates the very uncertainty I am attempting to ascertain here, for the hybrid child is ‘invisible’ beyond ‘a glimpse’ and cannot be identified without her parent’s separate, distinct and reduced identifications. Grenville’s hybrid child is merely a discomforting product of a culturally indeterminate union rather than a distinct, recognisable identity. In *Searching for the Secret River* (Grenville’s text on her research, intentions and inspirations for writing *The Secret River*), she explains her motivations behind all her characters’ voices, names and histories, but she makes no mention of the way she *chose to represent* the hybrid child. I suggest the possibility that her choice of representation (which, of course, can only be confirmed or denied by her) was informed by the ‘inherited concept’ of the hybrid (or, in this case, product
of black/white convergence) as being unknown, unknowable and necessarily peripheral to the focused realities of blackness and whiteness.

I do not criticise Grenville’s use of the hybrid child in *The Secret River* to exemplify the perspective differences between Blackwood and Thornhill; indeed, I am grateful to Grenville for her example of the *peripheralised* identity in post-colonial fiction.

‘Peripheralised’ replaces such words as ‘disenfranchised’ and ‘othered’, because, as Grenville shows us, the hybrid has no franchise to lose and no opposite to oppose. The hybrid is merely peripheral and, in text, peripheralised.

I might say that Pharaoh Strange is Grenville’s child given a voice and a story which goes beyond the uncertainty of heritage and into the tailored landscape of definition.

Richard Strange and Nganka are vital identities in *Strange* because they act as representatives of two polarised cultures and ‘act out’ certainties about those cultures. Their most important mutual role, however, is to create an uncertainty – Pharaoh Strange – so that he might be reduced to recognisable features, defined, and thus, given an identity. I thought that if Pharaoh’s identity was ‘ascertained’, then my identity would be assured of a certain certainty in the memoir text. I constructed distinct similarities between Pharaoh and my Denny Analogue, who both exist on the periphery of events and are both drawn unwillingly into conflicts, rather than instigating them. They also share a certain ironic detachment which is, ironically, maintained by the anger they feel at the cultural processes which peripheralise them.

Because Pharaoh and DA are located and *recognised* in the polarised world instead of remaining peripheral to it, the certainty of the polarisation becomes uncertain, the reasoning behind distinct constructions of blackness and whiteness becomes unreasonable. Indeed, the very notion that Australia can be separated into two distinct camps is meant to be illuminated as too simplistic and verging on the fallacious. My intent was to show that the hybrid, regardless of his/her specific genetic ingredients, removes power from the polar fallacy as soon as he/she is seen, recognised and identified by his *location* and that his belonging can only be determined by his ability to successfully remain located, not by some vague condition of heritage or spiritual connection or right by conquest.

Thus cultural recognition, race recognition and colour recognition are replaced as identity qualifiers by the recognition of belonging based upon the logical proposition that if the identity is located, it belongs. For blacks, whites, hybrids and, indeed, any of the human multitudes, location becomes the catalyst for self-recognition, because once located, the identity can begin to construct a perspective of self *in relation to* both similarly and differently featured identity locations. A universal example of this notion is marriage (a binary culture), where two identities
locate each other, recognise each other and engage in a constant series of negotiations and compromises to exist with each other harmoniously. The marriage, as a cultural microcosm, often expands with children – hybrids of the original binary culture – and new recognitions must occur. Indeed, within family cultures, the problems of identity and separatism and polarisation occur most frequently when children – the hybrids – are added to the mix, because the culture originally defined by two must inevitably change to suit new perspectives – perspectives which may be denied by the original mum-and-dad binary culture. Children, as cultural subjects, often refuse to be located in the exact same identity location as the mum-and-dad binary originals (which, in these terms, is illuminated as impossible anyway), and thus stand as perfect examples to support my proposition – if one can embrace the sure certainty that children are the foundations upon which all cultures are constructed.

In this text, I have attempted a paradox: to construct a certainty about the origins of cultural identity and simultaneously disintegrate such identities from the certainty of presupposed culture. This paradox is what I call the hybrid condition: the desire to know origins equally measured with the desire to exist without origins as a precondition of cultural belonging. To ‘build’ my paradox, I have incorporated a wide range of contemporary cultural theories and each adds its own unique beam to my construction. Post-structuralist theories illuminate the impermanence of structure and structured meaning and reinforce the idea that multiplicities cannot be contained within an idea. Ethics theories call for a new approach to perception of assumed paradigms. Feminist theories call for a new approach to the perception of the social subject. Hybridity, identity and belonging theories study the constructed borders of difference and the ways in which identity is culturally determined. Post-colonial theories attempt to replace comforting exclusive fictions about nation founded with the far more discomforting inclusive narratives of nation found. Strange examines the varied manifestations of family: the genetic, or that which is embraced and adopted through similarity of intent, appearance, habit, hobby, occupation, shared conflict or mutual agenda.

Family then – as an ever-changing structure within a multitude of ever-changing structures, as the first location of identity, the birthplace of the subject, the first point from which an individual’s initial perspective on the world originates and the only place to which an individual might safely return when the world threatens – is culture. My conclusion, therefore, aligns with my final Strange Present installment, in that the search for, discovery and locating of identity, the simultaneous celebrations of difference and commonality and the acceptance of hybridity as the permanent flux of humanity all begin (or the converse) with immediate family – an example in microcosm of the macrocosmic multiplicity such family inhabits.
Strangely, paradoxically, the old chicken/egg question remains: is family constructed by culture, or is culture constructed by its families? The very existence of post-modern, post-colonial, post-structural, feminist, ethics, identity, belonging and this – hybridity – discourse favours the latter, as do I. After all, *Strange Extrapolations* is named for and constructed within a discursive culture in which the *Strange Past* and *Strange Present* family resides, and, thus, *Strange Extrapolations* cannot exist without them. Simply: family is the story, culture is the exegesis.
4 Viveash, Samuel Waterman. (1851) *Diary 1838-1851* [Manuscript Call No. 1220A Battye Microfilm], 3rd Fl, J.S. Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia, Perth, W.A.
5 All references to Strange family births, deaths and marriages ascertained from J.S. Battye Library microfiche records, 3rd Fl, State Library of Western Australia, Perth, W.A.
6 Prussian, Grace, interviewed by John Ferrell (1983) for *Australia 1938 Oral History Project*, (Call No. OH812 S/t), 3rd Fl, Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia, Perth, W.A.
13 Barthes, Roland. op. cit. p.142
14 idem
15 Ibid. p.148
16 idem
20 All references in *Strange*, however, are cited from http://www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/sign-play.html [WWW Doc. downloaded 18.11.04]
21 idem
22 idem
23 idem
24 I read Nancie Burns-McMcCoy’s *Water is to Chocolate like Story is to Qualitative Research: Questioning Credibility and Narrative Studies* from The Journal of Critical Pedagogy Vol. 1 1998 (an on-line journal removed from the public gaze in 2003) and was rewarded with a suspicious summation of the deliberately fabricated non-fictional re-voicing of fictional text:
   We compose ornate methodologies designed to surround and stabilize the stories we tell. Supposedly, it is those stories that make our stories real, valid, credible, non-fiction: research. However, with a not-so-powerful magnifying glass, it’s easy to see the cracks in the supposed non-fiction frameworks. When we begin to acknowledge those fissures, we must examine the fictional aspects of research and the traditional notions of credibility and validity (p.1)
25 Burns-McMcCoy’s paper may now be accessed at http://www.paulofreireinstitute.org/Documents/qualitativ_research_by_McCoy.html [WWW Doc. Downloaded 13.02.07]
26 Derrida, Jacques. op. cit.
27 idem
28 idem
29 Barthes Roland. op. cit. p.145
32 Ibid. pp. 5.2.1-5.2.2
33 Ibid. p. 5.2.3
34 Barthes, Roland. op. cit. p.147
35 Dussel, Enrique. op. cit. pp. 5.3.1 – 5.3.4
Come gather round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You’ll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you
Is worth savin’
Then you better start swimmin’
Or you’ll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin’.

Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won’t come again
And don’t speak too soon
For the wheels still in spin
And there’s no tellin’ who
That it’s namin’.
For the loser now
Will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin’.

Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don’t stand in the doorway
Don’t block up the hall
For he that gets hurt
Will be he who has stalled
There’s a battle outside
And it’s ragin’.
It’ll soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin’.
Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don’t criticize
What you can’t understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is
Rapidly agin’.
Please get out of the new one
If you can’t lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin’.

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is
Rapidly fadin’.
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin’.

-Dylan, Bob. (1964) The Times they are-a Changin’ New York: Columbia Records

57 idem
59 Ibid. p.82
60 Ibid. p.83
61 Ibid. p.82
62 Ibid. p.83
63 Ibid. p.99
64 idem
65 idem
66 idem
67 idem
69 Ibid. p.19
71 Strange p.181
72 Ibid. pp.191-192
73 Ibid. p.207
74 Ibid. pp.209-210
75 Ibid. pp.214-216
76 Ibid. p.219
77 Ibid. p.222
78 Ibid. pp.222-223
79 Ibid. p.223
80 Ibid. pp.227-230
81 Ibid. pp.236-237
82 Ibid. pp.239-240
83 Ibid. p.161
84 In my opinion, humour flavoured with irony inspires the reader to positive comparisons of his/her ‘real’ experiences with my narrated ones and thus has far more power to inform than those emotive approaches – anger, woe and melancholy – that push the reader into negative ‘you-think-you’ve-got-it-bad’ comparisons.
85 Strange p.200
86 Ibid. pp.185-186; p.237
87 Ibid. p.212
88 Ibid. pp.214-215
89 Ibid. p.215
choose root-associations. I associate native with natural, natal, nascent and, indeed, nation. Nascent is the only allow Oxford to set the precedent, I make my own associations, but instead of choosing discursive associations, I will...
‘Aboriginal’, however, is a provocative word because it incorporates two roots: the prefix ‘ab-’ (Latin from \textit{ab}-), meaning ‘away from’, and ‘original’ (Latin from \textit{origo}) meaning ‘origin, source, beginning’. Thus, the word, based on its roots, means ‘away from the origin, source or beginning’. Strangely, this meaning is \textit{inferentially} synonymous with the Oxford meaning which is ‘inhabiting or existing in a land … from before the arrival of colonists’ (ibid. p.3). I see that the ab- in the word aboriginal is a \textit{cultural} qualifier that separates those born to a country ‘away from’ those born to a country but descended from European colonists. The country, by inference, changes ‘from before’, while the original inhabitants stay the same. Thus ‘Aboriginal’, by my association, means dispossessed and deserves repudiation, not the seemingly unwitting acceptance it has received. The following is repeated on various web-sites for journalistic protocols involving ‘Aboriginal’ people:

Most Aboriginal people prefer not to be called an Aborigine and it’s preferable to say Aboriginal person or peoples … it is becoming the norm to use only Aboriginal when writing about Aboriginal people … because of the changing times. [European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights (ENIAR)]

Although referenced from the above site, the quote provided is repeated word-for-word on six separate web-sites articulating journalistic protocols with Aboriginal/Indigenous Australians. Ironically, no author is cited. For the word as tree, the times are always changing, but the roots remain the same.

‘Indigenous’, however, is the worst of all offensive descriptors for the original inhabitants of a land and, as it has been so avidly embraced, I can almost imagine a vast and insidious conspiracy operating under the surface of the academic discourse that consistently repeats it. Either that or the moral of The Emperor’s New Clothes [Andersen, Hans Christian. (19\textsuperscript{th} C) in \textit{Stories for Seven-Year-Olds} (adapted by Stephen Corrin) (1964)] has lost its veracity to the hyperbolic frills and wigs of political correctness. I intend to emulate Andersen’s innocent boy and scream ‘Naked!’ at the top of my textual lungs.

The Latin root ‘Indi’ refers specifically to Indians from India and \textit{informs by association} a multitude of Latin words: indigena (native), indigentia (want, need, desire), indigestus (disordered, confused, unarranged). The Latin root ‘gens’ means ‘clan, race, nation, people, tribe’, while ‘gesto/gestum’ means ‘carry about, conduct, having borne’. It would not be unfair for me to suggest that the ancient Romans’ opinion of the ancient Indians might well be construed from the words constructed from the foundation word ‘Indi’ – especially ‘indigestus’, which should mean (based on root translations) ‘Indian conduct or conduct oneself like an Indian’, but instead refers to a disorderly and confused \textit{type} of conduct. Here in 2006, separated by millennia from the ancient Romans, I only have to look at one modern word – indigent – to recognise the presumption of \textit{type} implied in the word ‘indigenous’.

To conclude this rather long endnote, I will only state that the words ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Indigenous’ do not appear as descriptors in the text for which this note is written. They will, however, appear in referenced quotes. Although I can find nothing to negate its use, I will also eschew the word ‘native’ in deference to Oxford’s assertions. Instead, I submit the word ‘Original’ - capitalised in deference to ENIAR protocols - as a completely harmless, implication-free alternative.

\textsuperscript{109} Dixon, Robert. op.cit. p.65
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Strange} p.241
\textsuperscript{111} Ward, Russell. op. cit. p.41
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Strange} p.21
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. pp.29-30
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid. p.24
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid pp.45-55
\textsuperscript{116} Pharaoh Strange obviously had a mother, so perhaps ‘truly fictional’ is an incomplete descriptor for Ngangka as a necessary operative character. But I wanted no hidden inferences about Ngangka, because, as I state in the text for which this note is written, I do not want to repeat the race qualification mistakes of Mudrooroo or Gordon Matthews.
\textsuperscript{117} Ironic, when one considers Neville’s half-caste policy less than a century later which prescribed a ‘breeding out’ of Original blood in hybrid children of that time and created today’s ‘stolen generation’. One must wonder where the hybrids originated, if not from black/white dalliance.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Strange} p.31
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. p.100
\textsuperscript{122} idem
\textsuperscript{123} Matthews blends biography and fiction [see Matthews, Gordon. (1996) \textit{An Australian Son} Sydney: Heinemann] to enunciate how his newly discovered Sri-Lankan heritage ‘disappointed’ his assumed Original identity.
Fischer, Gerard. op cit. p.101

'The sun was a very good person, a female. She was the mother. They called her “ngangka”. And the same name was given to every mother. All Aboriginal mothers were called “ngangka”.’ [Rooney, Bernard (Fr.) & Negus, George. (2003) *Dreamtime Monk* http://www.abc.net.au/gnt/people/Transcripts/s948593.htm (WWW Doc downloaded 12.04.06)]


Mippy, Ned quoted by Rooney, Bernard (Fr.) op. cit.


'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth’ [Genesis 1:27 & 1:28 *Holy Bible* (1989)King James Version Michigan:World Publishing p.1]


idem

Derrida, Jacques. op. cit.


Ibid. p.18

Ibid.

Ibid. p.19

Ibid.

Ibid. p.26


Strange p.32

idem

Ibid. p.51

Ibid. p.42

Ibid. p.48


Strange p.52

Ibid. p.92

Docker, John & Fischer, Gerard. op. cit. p.8

Ibid. p.9 (summarising Schwartz)


Strange p.48

Ibid. p.48

idem

Ibid. p.133

Ibid. p.119

Ibid. p.130

Ibid. p.124

Ibid. p.150

Ibid. p.140

In his chapter ‘Diggers & Heroes’ [*Inventing Australia* (1981) Sydney: Allen & Unwin], Richard White discusses the ways in which Australians were ‘prepared’ for war, long before war was a reality. White suggests that, through mediated perspectives of song, newspaper editorial and political rhetoric, and through ‘school cadet corps’ and boy-
scout training (the latter ideologically underpinned with the “Be Prepared” motto), Australians developed a desire for a ‘trial’ of their National worth – and war was mediated into the Australian identity imaginary, and, indeed, into the ideal of Nation-belonging-to-the-civilized-World as the ultimate trial. As White writes: ‘well before the outbreak of the Great War, the image of the Australian soldier was being sketched in’ (p.127) to meet ‘the ultimate measure of worth by which The Coming Man was judged in the heyday of European imperialism’ (p.125). The following ‘school’ song is cited by White and I think it amply conveys Dick Strange’s ‘sense of pride’:

Thy dormant days are ended
Thy hours of rest are run;
Now rouse thee for a nation’s work,
And keep the Empire won!
Beneath thy bright blue skies,
Australia Fair, arise! (Commonwealth School Paper, 1 June 1910)

164 Strange p.145
165 Ibid. p.142
166 Ibid. p.151
167 Lines, William J. op. cit. p.19
http://www.mala.bc.ca/~Johnstoi/Nietzsche/tragedy_all.htm [WWW Doc. Downloaded 13.09.04]
169 idem
170 Strange p.151
174 Docke, John, & Fischer, Gerard. op. cit. p.12
177 Dodson, Mick. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission 1st Annual Report cited in
182 Ibid p.683
184 idem
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298


299


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