The Winning Side

By the same author

The Dying Trade
White Meat
The Marvellous Boy
The Empty Beach
Heroin Annie

PETER CORRIS

The Winning Side

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For Peter Kerr

YOUNG CHARLIE

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THERE was a lot of fighting in the camp, between the young men and between them and the women. But it was usually when they were drunk and it was push-and-shove fighting. There wasn't any stand-up fighting. We kids wrestled. I wasn't much of a wrestler; I was skinny and light and mostly finished up underneath the other kid.

This year, sometime in the late-1920s, some kanaka families came to live a bit further up the creek. There were about thirty of them, all with this tight, woolly hair and with names like Oba and Tanna. They had bicycles and good clothes — suits and clean dresses — which they wore to the Salvation Army hall on weekends. There were no bikes or good clothes in the camp. We didn't go to school, the kanaka kids did. There was a school in town for the white people. How the kanakas got in I don't know; something to do with the Salvos I suppose.

We ignored the kanakas until we heard that their mothers were telling them to hurry straight home from school or the blackfellows would get them. They were blacker than us, some of them; certainly blacker than me who was only a quarter-caste *Gandju*.

Ernie Hogan, using the language, said: 'We oughta throw them in the bloody river, those kids.'

'You ever see them swim?' I said. I made a rippling movement with my hand. It was true. Those kanakas could swim. We agreed we'd do something though, Ernie, Sam Gulimbi, Kenny and me. The right thing seemed to be to get them on the way home from school, like their mothers said.

It was a hot day that had been wet in the morning and had cleared. Mist came up off the grass and bushes under the

fierce sun. The four of us waited near a big fallen gum tree just where the track turned to run along by the river. You couldn't be seen down there from the road or from the camp.

We were nervous, chewing on grass and picking our scabs.

'A couple of 'em are big', Kenny said.

'Fat, I'd say', I said, although I was thinking that I wouldn't like to get one of those fat kanakas on top of me. We looked for grubs in the tree and let a group of big boys go by. A mob of girls came along and we hardly looked at them. When we were sure we were down to the stragglers we moved out to block them. The track was narrow just there, with the river on one side and the thick bush on the other.

'Who's a blackfeller?' Kenny said. He spat on the ground on front of one kanaka who tried to push past him. We insulted and bullied them, pushed them, rubbed dirt on their clothes. The smallest one cried, the biggest went wild and knocked Kenny down with his fist. That action thrilled me and I jumped forward and hit him in the same way but he didn't go down. It must have been as crude as a dog fight: we stood toe-to-toe, swinging and missing and hitting. The others cheered us on. It didn't hurt when he hit me; he got me on the ear and the nose and it didn't hurt. I kept on punching until part of his face felt squelchy, and when he'd had enough of that he reached to grab me and wrestle. I stepped back, punched him hard and clean on the nose, and he went down. Then it hurt; my stomach hurt and my breath was coming in gasps. My left ear felt huge and there was blood and snot on my face. My eye was closing.

The word spread fast that I'd flattened the biggest of the kanakas. They'd challenged us, of course. My mother didn't believe it.

'They go to church', she said. 'They pray and sing hymns. They don't fight.'

'One of the buggers fought', my father said. 'Look at Charlie's eye.'

I wondered if my father would talk like that, with pride in his voice, if I beat a kanaka to pulp everyday. He was

working then, and off the grog. He had the loan of a pair of boots and tramped off each day to cut cane. At night he was exhausted; he ate whatever there was, drank a lot of hot, sweet tea and went to sleep.

I had a lot of fights after I beat the kanaka, mostly with other boys in the camp. For a while everyone, especially the older kids, wanted to try me out. I dodged as many of them as I could, but some I couldn't dodge. I won the fights or got a draw, which just meant that one of the men decided we'd had enough and pulled us apart. Harry Sellars did this pretty often. One day he came between me and Sam Gulimbi. Both my eyes were puffed up and Harry had to lead me down to the water to clean me up.

'You'll end up like Jerry Jerome', he said.

'Who?'

'Jerry Jerome. Never heard of Jerry Jerome?'

'No.'

'He was a fighter, good one too. Blackfellow. Jerry used to walk through the other bloke's punches, walk through 'em. I seen him do it lots of times. Then he'd whack. But he got hit so bad, so many times that it did for his eyes. Near blind when he finished.'

I nodded, but I couldn't see what it had to do with me.

'You have to learn to block the bloody punches', Harry went on. 'Or you duck them, or move back or get them on the arms. Every punch that hits you means you're a mug.'

'Can you show me how to do all that?'

He did, in secret training sessions in the bush. We sparred; and I learned about slipping leads, counter-punching and what to do in close. Harry had been a tent and stadium fighter, so he told me, but his wind was gone and pretty soon I could outlast him. Once I hit him a bit hard and he went over. He pulled himself up slowly, gasping. He sat, rolled a thin cigarette and spoke through the smoke.

'It's a bugger of a life, young Charlie.'

I looked down at his thin, disappointed face and squatted. 'Why d'you say that?'

He rolled up his trouser leg and showed me a long furrow up the shin bone, white against his mahogany skin. 'See that? Got that in the bloody war, fighting for me country.'

'Yeah?' I was cautiously interested, I'd heard about the war.

'They didn't take many blackfellows, dunno why they took me. I got that in France. German shell landed in the trench, killed three blokes. They sent me home. Know what they told me?'

I shook my head.

'Told me I'd get some land and a pension.' He looked around him; we were on a flat spot near a dried up billabong; the earth was sandy and dead, and a few grey stumps stuck up out of it. 'Land', he said. 'I never got a bloody inch.'

'What's a pension?'

'Money from the government—regular.'

I didn't know what the government was. 'Did you get it?'

'No. Went to the office in Townsville; they reckoned I was a special case, being a blackfellow. They had to ask higher up.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing. I went back and they kept shoving papers at me. Wanted to know when me mum and dad was born and all that. I never knew any of that stuff. Couldn't understand it anyway. I gave it away. Can you read, Charlie?'

I looked down at my feet, they were scarred from bites, scores and cuts, and dirty. My toenails were horny and ragged. 'No.'

'Write?'

'No.'

'What you should be learnin', not all this shit.' He stubbed his cigarette in the sand. 'You won't, though. Let's get on with it.'

We went back to the sparring, but my heart wasn't in it. I kept thinking of reading and writing. School was for kanakas. But hadn't I beaten the shit out of the biggest one? But other words—pension, government, France—were clicking in my head.

I lost interest in fighting; refused to be in it a few times, and got beaten by a big Chinese kid down by the river one day. I suddenly stopped being a hero. I found some tattered magazines in the camp and spent hours poring over them, wondering what the print said.

My mother looked at me slyly. 'Yer grandad used to read a bit', she said.

'Why didn't he show you how?'

'Did, but I forgot.' She forgot everything; lost things, and would look puzzled when the words of a song would desert her halfway through. Her father was Welsh, I knew that, an ex-miner who sang. That was all I knew.

My father was a moody man, a quarreller, not liked. There were five of us, and we kept out of his way as much as we could. That got easier, because he came home less and less. One night he came reeling in and collapsed on to the mattress. My mother eased two of the small kids aside and pulled the bottle out of his pocket. She held it up; it was about one-third full. She pulled the cork, sniffed and put it carefully back by the mattress.

I was the only one awake. 'Where'd he get the money?' she said to me.

We found out two days later, when the police came to the camp to arrest him and two other men. They'd been knocking down drunks in the town and taking their money. The police were huge men in khaki uniforms and broad-brimmed hats. My father went quietly, but Wally Hogan struggled. He tore the starched shirt of one of the policemen.

'You black cunt', the policeman said. He had an axe handle, and he turned it and laid the flat terribly hard against the side of Wally Hogan's head. You could tell that he'd done it before.

The women and the kids cried, and the policemen poked around in the humpies. When they came out they cleared their throats and spat, which I thought was dirty. They took the men away and after a while we heard that they all got ten years gaol. A week later two policemen came with a big dray.

One of them was the man who'd used the axe handle. He sat up on the dray and yelled out my mother's name. She went across to him with her hands halfway up, as if she was going to protect her head.

'Pack up', he said. 'You're going to the mission.'

2

THE women's part of the mission was up the creek, away from the dunes. At least that was the idea. Down by the sandhills were the two teachers' houses, the school building, the church and the humpies. Up the creek there were more humpies, the wash house and the infirmary. Most of the women and the young girls slept up there during the week. They did the mission washing and a good bit of the gardening. The girls came down for lessons through the week, and stayed down at the weekends.

There were two missionaries, Germans. The Reverend Schmidt had a wife and spinster sister and they ran the women's camp; the main base was run by Dr Höfer and his wife. The separation didn't work too well; some of the women took their sons up the creek with them and let them stay, and some of the girls stuck with their fathers down at the dunes.

The worst part of it was the prayers. There were prayers three times a day and I dodged them and mumbled jokes in the language rather than say grace before meals. The best part was the schooling. We'd sit there, sniffling with colds and scratching at sores and fleas, and Höfer would take us through the old primers. I was a beggar for it. I caught on fast to reading and writing. I learned yards of poetry by heart, especially poems about war and fighting.

Höfer was a tall, thin man with a pale face and a heavy, dark beard. He wore black clothes—the full get-up—whatever the weather, and he never sweated. He had a German accent and a foreign way of arranging words which some of us picked up. Once I answered a question that had stumped everyone—I identified the words 'my ancient clay' in a poem as a clay pipe.

'We have with us a scholar', Höfer said.

My youngest sister died, a lot of the young ones died, and we didn't hear anything about my father. But my mother took to the mission life well. She did as little work as she could, and ate everything she could get. The food was crook; a sort of porridge and dry bread in the morning, bread and jam with tea for lunch, and rice or potatoes with a bit of meat for dinner. We grew potatoes, pumpkins and melons. I hated the food and stayed thin and stringy, my mother ate a lot and smoked a lot. She sat in the sun and smoked her pipe and hummed snatches of the Welsh songs she learned from my drunk of a grandfather. There was a weekly tobacco ration for everyone over fourteen. I was about twelve when I started taking mine, maybe eleven.

My best mate was Nol Pratt, who was part-Chinese and part-*Turrbal* from the south. Nol didn't share my enthusiasm for the books, his great interest in life was sex.

'What's it like, Nol?' I asked him after he boasted about a night in the bush with the Cooktown blacks.

'Great.'

'But how? Like pulling it?'

'Better. Lasts longer. Better.'

I was too shy to try it. The Cooktown blacks were the missionaries' biggest problem. They came after the women and brought grog with them. Some of the mission women just up and left with them. They used opium too, and there were cracked heads and great, gaping cuts from the brawls in the bush over the women.

I was lost in the land of books, away with the heroes of Gallipoli, with Deerfoot, with Dick on Coral Island. There were two pea rifles on the mission and a very limited supply of bullets. I became a good shot, and was often allotted a rifle to go after wallabies and rabbits. Creeping through the bush and over the rocks I imagined myself a hero, a bushman, pulling off impossible shots. The mission reserve ran along the coast for a couple of miles and I spent time in the water as

Tarzan, diving deep and driving the knife up into the shark's belly.

In the real world I was keen on football, and I saw that the boozers and girl-chasers got flabby and slow. I preferred to do the fast wing-running and avoid the tackles. I envied the others the girls, but not their soft bellies and bloodshot eyes.

Jackie Hesse lived up the creek most of the time. He always had his eye on one girl or another. He was about fourteen years old, a big kid, and nearly full-blood. He'd started going to the grog sessions, but he still played hard football as if his idea was to break bones. He tried to break mine but I could outrun him. He picked on me for reading books and going around with Nol. He called us yeller-fellers.

Jackie was always fighting and I knew I'd have to fight him one day, so I watched his style. He didn't know a thing about boxing but he could bore in and hit hard and often. He was two stone heavier than me, and always trying to push me into a free-for-all. I tried to carry the rifle or a knife whenever he was around.

One day he caught me as I was coming back with two rabbits I'd shot.

'You're a gutless yeller-feller', he said 'You're a fuckin' sissie.'

I had no bullets left, but he didn't know that, and I just moved the .22 into position a little and kept walking.

He kicked dust at me. 'Too gutless to fight', he jeered. 'Hey, gutless Charlie, I fucked your sister last night.'

He hadn't, I knew, but it was the limit. I walked back and prodded him in the stomach with the rifle.

'You want to fight?' I said.

'Yes, you shitface.'

A few other kids had drifted up and I waved a few more in. When there were a dozen or so standing round, I collected a big gob of spittle and spat it into Hesse's face. He roared and moved forward, but I held him off with the rifle.

'I'll take you on', I said. 'Boxing rules, okay?'

'I just wanna fight', he said thickly.

'You'll get a fight.' I looked around the group. 'Wanna see a fight?'

They crowded close, and it was easy to persuade them that a proper fight at five o'clock in a quiet place was what they wanted. Hesse didn't like it but he was too dumb to change it.

'Nol's my second', I said.

'Jackie Hesse looked puzzled and furious; he knew he should have walloped me there and then.

I was too smart to turn up at the time and place we'd arranged. Nol and I came out of the scrub half an hour late and a good mile up the beach from Hesse and the mob. I fired a shot in the air and they all came tramping through the sand towards us. We kept moving back slowly, staying on the firm sand. We stopped, and Nol put down a small oil drum and I sat on it while he marked out a square on the sand. When the rest of them came up they were sweating and leg-weary. I asked the smartest of them if he'd be referee.

'Who needs a fucking referee?' Jackie shouted.

'You will', I said.

Jackie spat on his hands and shaped up very square and stiff. I had to stifle a laugh and I stayed on the drum.

'Let's near the rules', I said.

The referee looked at me uncertainly. 'No biting', I prompted. 'No kicking, no hitting when the other man's down.'

We had no way of marking three minute rounds, so we agreed on rests to the count of a hundred when the shadows touched certain places on the beach. The crowd was getting restless, and Hesse was so angry I knew I couldn't hold things up any longer. I handed the rifle to Nol and moved out.

'Go 'im Jackie! Flatten the flash bugger!'

Jackie landed a clumsy swing which I took on the shoulder but he hardly got a look in after that. He was built all wrong for fist fighting — short arms and legs, stiff, slow trunk. I peppered his face with straight lefts, the way Harry Sellars had taught me. Everything I'd picked up from Harry came back in the next twenty minutes — feints and hard, stinging hooks; head combinations and deep gut-punches. Jackie

soaked it all up, getting slower but still swinging. The watchers were quiet, and I got angry when I couldn't knock him out. I belted him in the belly to bring his hands down and swung into his dark bloody face; the flesh was squelchy and pulped, but he stood there swaying and taking it.

I started to tire from punching so often but his eyes were closing and there was no chance left for him. I sucked air in deep, moved in, and straightened him with a left to his nose that was soggy with blood, then I put my shoulder and all my weight behind a right to the side of his jaw; his mouth flew open and I gave him a little push and he crumpled down.

My knuckles were sore, my legs were tired, and my breath was coming in short gasps as I stood over him. He didn't look big at all lying on his back with his legs drawn up; the blood glistened on his skin and spittle drooled from his mouth. Suddenly I hated myself. I wanted to comfort Jackie and tell him how game he was.

'He's had enough, Charlie', someone in the crowd said. It got a few laughs.

'Shut your face.' I croaked. I wanted to fight them all and get beaten and crawl away into the bush.

Then the Reverend Schmidt came, pushing bodies aside to get to me. He had a walking stick and was jabbing and thrusting with it. His pale face was scrubbed pink and his eyes were pink. His clothes were snowy white, almost blue. He lifted the stick.

'Fighting', he cried. 'You animal, sinner ...'

I hit him as hard as I could, just above the belt; my bloody fist made a dirty red smear on his white shirt. I whipped his head with a backhand swing that shattered his glasses and split the clean pink skin. Then I ducked back, grabbed the rifle from Nol, and ran along the beach with my dirty, scarred feet flying.

3

DON'T believe anyone who tells you that it never gets cold in Brisbane. After running away from the mission I slogged my way south, catching rides on goods trains, fruit picking and doing a lot of walking. After three years in Brisbane I'd decided that the winters were getting colder. Part of the problem was the thin clothes I wore and the cheap room in the valley I lived in. It seemed to stand directly in the way of the cold winds that blew in the winter and spring. I was saving money.

No one knew that I was part-Aborigine. My features owed as much to my Welsh blood and I was light-skinned, especially in the winter. I had a job cleaning railway carriages, and stayed out of the sun as much as I could. Some people suspected, but no one knew. It was hard, boring work cleaning the carriages; but it had perks, like the money, cigarettes and half-empty bottles you found. And the books and papers; I jumped on the interstate papers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the Melbourne *Age*. I read them from end to end, and promised myself that I'd get to those cities one day.

Meantime I was stuck in Queensland, but I had a purpose. I was moving towards getting a seaman's ticket which meant first, papers, and second, a union ticket. Both meant money. I needed a driver's licence, a reference from the railway job and a birth certificate, all available for cash. I was going to wipe the fact that I was a reserve Aborigine off the slate, that was essential, especially for the union ticket, which was the costliest thing of all.

I stayed well away from the blacks, out of the pubs where they drank and I deliberately spent my time where they were never to be found — the art gallery and public library, in

bookshops and sedate city cafes. I missed the smells and warm, moist air of my childhood and came to hate the grey, sluggish river that reminded me painfully of the clean streams up north. I read Conrad and Louis Becke and lived in the future.

The nearest thing I had to a friend was old Sam McBride, a retired sea captain who claimed to have been a blackbirder.

'They were wild heathens, Charlie', he said. 'The blacks used to cut them out and eat them.' He glanced at me shrewdly more than once as we talked, he was an observant old coot. We'd sit out in the shade and I'd smoke cigarettes while he puffed his pipe. I prompted him for stories about the islands and he responded endlessly.

'The Solomons, now; black clouds, black hearts.'

I looked down at my hands. 'Had a fight with one once'.

'Fist fight?'

'Yes'.

'I never saw a kanaka fight with his fists. Unbeatable with a cane knife, take your arm off.'

A car clipped me and I spent some time in hospital. I met Gloria there, a trainee nurse and she became my part-time girlfriend, fitting me in between shifts and young doctors. We wrestled on my bed with layers of clothing between us. We went, frustrated, to the pictures—'The Great Ziegfeld', 'Boystown', 'The Good Earth'.

Gloria was curious about me; she read nothing and gaped at the piles of books in my room. Books were my only indulgence; I didn't spend much money on her. After one wrestling match my shirt hung open, and she looked at my brown skin.

'You Spanish or something, Charlie?'

'Could be, I'm an orphan. Could be Italian or Portuguese.'

'Well, we're all different. My Dad's Dutch.'

Her name was Sluyssen. 'I know', I said.

One night, a warm one, I took Gloria to a film and we went back to my room where I had a half-bottle of brandy I'd found on a train. We mixed it with ginger beer. Pretty soon we were

on the bed and her thin summer dress was riding up. We went on and she giggled, and I thrust myself up inside her without grace or coordination.

After, we sat on the bed and drank the rest of the brandy while the city went quiet around us. Six weeks later she told me she was pregnant. We were sitting in a park near the river, and I looked out over the grey water and felt the fear rising from my feet.

'We'll have to get married', she sobbed.

'I can't get married', I blurted. 'I'm seventeen.'

She went stiff beside me and the tears stopped suddenly. I'd told her I was twenty, the same as herself. I looked twenty, and she was desperate.

'You're an orphan. You don't need no one's permission. I've got parents to worry about.'

Parents, I thought, one in gaol somewhere, the other in a tobacco haze up north.

'You'll have to do it, Charlie. My parents'll help, I think.'

She'd thought it out in the six weeks, and I could feel the trap closing.

'They won't help, Gloria', I said harshly. 'I'm an Aborigine.'

It was like hitting her with a hammer. She slid away on the seat and moaned.

'Take a good look.'

She did, and the tears started again as her fantasies evaporated. I could imagine old man Sluyssen on his farm a couple of hundred miles to the west with his pale eyes and lips, his thin nose. He wouldn't give her a slice of bread.

'What can I do?'

I felt nothing for her; I wanted to get up and walk away along the river, around the first bend and the next and the next. She was small and pale, with a puffy, tear-stained face. All the nurses' confidence had drained away. I reached over and patted her shoulder.

'It could be worse. You know some doctors. You'll be able to get someone to help.'

There was hate in her eyes now. 'It's horrible', she said.

I wondered what she meant; what was horrible? But I didn't say anything.

I went to work depressed and miserable. Confessing to Gloria had damaged me, and I wanted to go all the way; to go into the pubs and booze with the darkies, to go to the stadium and cheer for the black boys against the white. I didn't, but I lay on my bed, and let my mind wander back to the camp and murmured half-forgotten words in the language and tried to remember things my old blind uncle had told me.

I met Gloria in the park again. She wore a severe dress buttoned up high and her sensible shoes. She had no make-up and was paler than I'd ever seen her.

'I know a doctor who'll do it', she said.

'Good.'

'He wants money.'

'How much?'

'Two hundred pounds.'

I almost smiled, it was all I had. 'I've got it. I'll give it to you.'

I saw relief and colour flood into her face.

'Didn't think an Abo could have two hundred quid did you?'

'No', she whispered.

I drew out the money, hand-delivered it that day to the nurses' hostel, and never saw her again.

I drifted, I drank. I spent my money on women—tough old pros, the darker the better. I had white ones when I was drunkest; I always told them I was an Aborigine and they never gave a damn.

I moved to Paddington and started to drink with the blacks in the pubs and around the rooming houses. I took on their hoarse, slurry speech and gave up regular reading. My work suffered, word went around about me and my job was shaky.

Easter came, a break from work and I went to the Show after spending all morning in the pub. Four of us, all black, all drunk, ended up in front of the boxing tent. Six or seven

men were lined up on a trestle in front of a grey canvas tent. A man in a singlet with a cigarette stub in his mouth was ringing a bell and shouting: 'Roll up! Roll up! Who'll take a glove?'

The fighters stood stony-faced, looking out at the crowd. They wore dressing gowns, although it was hot, and they were all shapes and sizes. And colours—two were white, there was a lean, very dark Aborigine with heavy brows and a sloping forehead and three other coloureds, one of whom looked like a Maori. The spruiker was offering a fiver to anyone who could stay three rounds, and a tenner for knocking one of his men out.

'Good money', I muttered.

One of my mates laughed. 'You must be pissed. They'd knock your fuckin' head off.'

'He doesn't look so tough.' I pointed to a middle-sized sandy man in the centre of the row. He was the only one around my weight. His face was a bit battered and he had a mild, abstracted look as if he might be simple.

'You going to have a go, Charlie?'

I considered. I'd had a lot of beer but I felt pretty steady. I was almost out of money, and payday was a long way off.

'Why not?' I pushed through the crowd and shouted my challenge.

'What weight, son?' The cigarette stub jiggled.

'Ten stone, near enough.' I pointed to the sandy man. 'He'll do.'

'Righto'. He rang the bell vigorously. 'Challenger ladies and gentlemen, lightweight contest. Who'll fill the bill? Who'll take a glove?'

I'd broken the ice and a few other takers pushed forward. Nobody challenged the thin Aborigine with the heavy brows, he looked too tough. Inside the tent, the boss threw him a skipping rope.

'Give 'em a show Jack.'

The dressing gown came off to show sloping shoulders with great packs of muscle up near the neck. He twirled the rope

and did stylish double jumps and cross-overs, not really trying. When there were a couple of hundred people in the tent the bell rang again.

'You get a good fight in Sharkey's tent. Good clean fights. Let's go!'

The Maori knocked a big man who looked like a wharfie over in about thirty seconds. Two other challengers failed to stay the three rounds.

The gloves felt strange, but I slapped them together the way William Holden had in 'Golden Boy'. Someone in the crowd called out 'A quid on the Abo'. I'd been out in the sun, had put on weight around the face with the beer, and there was no hiding it. Sharkey was referee, time-keeper and master of ceremonies. He called us to the centre of the square of stained, grimy canvas stretched over the dirt.

'Know the rules, boy?' he growled.

I was very nervous. 'Yeah, does he?'

'Smart coon', my opponent said. He wore his shorts pulled well up and I could see the soft well of his belly. I promised him one there. Sharkey made a show of pushing us apart.

'No grudges', he roared. 'No grudge matches in my tent.'

He waved us together and I had a glove in my face the next instant. I staggered back and he moved up and chopped me in the ribs. He was fast, in and out, and he landed most of his punches cleanly. I retreated and put out my left, trying to get the range. He brushed it aside and belted me. I didn't hurt as much as it should have; I bored in and swung one into his gut that made him gasp and swear. Sharkey hit the bell.

I did better in the next round. For some reason he couldn't hit hard. I remembered what Harry Sellars had told me—stand on his foot, spit at him, hit him more than he hits you. He didn't like it in close; I claimed him with my left and whipped a right up into his face. I butted him and swung to his belly again: I was amazed to see him falling away from me. Sharkey gave him a slow count and whispered harshly to him in between the numbers. He got up at eight and circled away for the rest of the round.

The crowd was yelling and I gave my mates a thumbs up. I felt wonderful. Sharkey came across and gave a towel to wipe my face.

'My boy's crook', he said. 'Go easy eh?'

'I want the tenner. I'll flatten him.'

'Go easy. You'll get the tenner. Just see out the round and I'll fix you up. He's sick; he shouldn't be fighting.'

I was confused when I came out. He didn't look good, very pale, almost shaky and he seemed to be dragging his leg. I remembered reading that Jack Haines's leg had gone funny on him just before he'd had a stroke that nearly killed him when he was fighting Palmer. I pulled my punches and went gently with him in close. I heard the crowd shouting at me to knock him out. I gave him a couple of light punches that seemed to shake him. Next thing I knew I was flat on my back with a cold, numb feeling in my legs. I tried to get up, everything went cloudy, and I couldn't stand. Sharkey raced through the count and helped me up.

'Good try, son.' He shoved a note into my hand. One pound.

'You tricked me, you bastard.'

He was grinning, and so was my opponent who bounced and slapped his gloves. 'All part of the game, son. One side now.'

I collected my shirt and stuffed the money in my pocket.

'Thought you had 'im, Charlie. Come on, lets get a drink.'

'Hold on.' I went over to the rope-skipper who was jigging and doing fancy steps.

'How long are you here?' I asked.

'Week here, week at south Brisbane.'

I didn't spend the pound on beer. I bought some sandshoes, and did some running through the streets. I skipped and shadow-boxed. I let my beard grow, and said at work that I had a face rash. After ten days I had a respectable beard; I'd worn my hair long as part of the Spanish-Italian pose but now I had it cut brutally short. I stopped drinking and went out in the sun. Bearded, thinner, darker and with my hair

cropped I turned up in front of Sharkey's tent at a small carnival in south Brisbane.

I challenged the same man, whose name I learned was Willy Jones. I was on my own and wore different clothes. Before we started I took out a pound note and waved it.

'I'll knock him out', I yelled. 'Who'll get on him?'

Hands and voices were raised. I got two bets down to win ten pounds if I stopped him.

The fight followed the same pattern, but I was more aggressive from the start. At the end of the second round Sharkey propositioned me again. I nodded. I went up to Jones, slamming with both hands. He dropped his guard; my gloves felt as light as fairy floss. I ripped him under the heart and brought across a right with everything in it. He took it flush on the chin and went down hard. Sharkey slowed the count down to a crawl, but Jones was out. I took off the gloves, collected from the punters in the crowd and stuck my hand out at Sharkey.

'Ten quid.'

He paid me. 'Stick around', he said. 'Wanna talk to you.'

I shrugged and stayed to watch the rest of the fights which weren't up to much until the rope-twirler got in with a nuggety tattooed white kid. He was a whirlwind, and had his man on the ground and giving up inside a minute. When the show was over Sharkey ambled over to me.

'What's your name, son?'

'Charlie Thomas.'

'Haven't I seen you before?'

I nodded. 'Brisbane Show. You pulled that crook fighter trick on me.'

I folded the money carefully and put it away while he looked at me. 'Done much fighting?'

'You've seen it all.'

'How'd you like a job?'

'Doing what?'

'Fighting, what else? You've got the makings, boy.'

'I don't know.'

'Four quid a week, and everything found. Fifty-fifty split on the showers'.

I scratched my beard, I was sick of railway carriages, sick of Brisbane.

'You get to travel', he said quickly. 'I go everywhere—the Alice, Broken Hill, Kalgoorlie.'

I had to smile at that, so it was to be the Alice and Broken Hill instead of Honolulu and Pago Pago.

'All right. When do I start?'

'Tomorrow. We're leaving for Gympie. Be here around six on the morning.'

He looked pleased with himself, and lit his cigarette end. We shook hands and he walked away. A battered old blue heeler followed him closely.

I paid my rent and packed some books and clothes into a bag. I didn't tell them anything at the railways, I just didn't turn up.

At a quarter to six the air was crisp, and there was a light breeze which I felt sharply against my freshly shaved face. Sharkey, wearing a ragged cardigan over his singlet, gave me a wave and the heeler gave me a growl. The fighters were standing around an old Bedford truck and Sharkey introduced me—Flash Jack (the rope man), Arch Teal, Flinty Bell, Snowy Flynn, Eddie Bunker, Reg Pollitt. They all nodded in a neutral way and swarmed up into the back of the truck.

'Where's Jones?' I asked Sharkey.

'Dropped him.'

'Why?'

'You're a better man.'

4

We were heading for Normanton, north Queensland. Me, Arch, Chloe, Dopey Reg and Flash Jack were crammed in the back of the truck and we were hot and touchy. Especially Arch; he was sitting on the rolled-up canvas that made the ring floor, with his eyes bleary from last night's grog. He also had the beginnings of a shiner from a left hook he'd copped from a drover in Burketown. Arch was the heaviest man in Sharkey's troup, but he was only a blown-up middleweight really—this fourteen-stone drover had got him with a lucky punch.

But Dopey Reg was always good for a laugh and when he put his hand on Arch's wife's leg, Arch grinned.

'Give him a kiss Chloe,' he said and she did.

Sharkey hit a bump and the truck veered off the road and bucked. I finished up between Arch and Reg while Chloe landed fair on top of Flash Jack.

We sorted ourselves out; I yelled at Sharkey to take it easy and Arch kidded Chloe on being sweet on a half-wit, which Reg was of course. He was good for knocking in tent pegs, handling the buckets, playing the mouth organ and not much else. He was punchy.

Jack was a full-blood from the north-west. He took on anyone up to twelve stone and I never saw him lose. He was unmarked, and a bit of a fancy pants in clean moleskins and a white shirt. He untangled from Chloe and muttered apologies. Chloe handed Reg back his hat. I rolled a smoke, and Jack tapped me on the knee.

'You don't want to do that, Charlie', he said. 'Bad for the wind.'

'I'm not after a title, Jack', I said. 'This is just wages for me.'

'Yeah', Arch sneered. 'Charlie's moving south, aren't you, Charlie?'

I didn't bite. I'd been south and liked it; but south had meant stadium boxing and I didn't like that. Somehow I always drifted back to Sharkey's but I'd really had enough—five years of tents and stadiums was plenty. Sharkey always knew that I'd come back to fight for him, but it was different this time—for me, at least the others seemed to be as they always had been.

Jack brushed his moleskins down with his clean, pink palms. I rolled one for Reg and Chloe took my matches to light it for him. Arch touched his eye gingerly and I knew what he was thinking—Normanton was full of meat workers and cattle men; it'd be tough.

The hot air smelt of sweat, canvas and tobacco. The road was like a steel ruler glimmering with heat haze under the sun, and the bare earth stretched away for miles on either side. There was a bit of light cloud billowing up in the east, but we were in the middle of the dry.

We had about an hour of daylight left when we reached Normanton and Sharkey used it to pick a good level spot for the show tent, somewhere for the sleeping tent and to find firewood. He stalked around, bald as an egg and with his dirty face creased and shining with sweat. The old .22, the one he used to shoot cigarettes out of Chloe's mouth as an added attraction, was on his shoulder and his wicked old blue heeler was following him step by step.

Bell, Flynn and Bunker were behind us in the ute and due in half an hour.

'Keep an eye out for those buggers, Charlie', Sharkey told me. 'They'll duck the work if they can.'

They were late; we had the camp pretty well set up when they drove in and you could tell that they'd had a few already. Flinty was a Maori, Eddie was black, both old stadium fighters; Snowy was a real mongrel—black, Jap, Islander and other things. He wasn't much of a fighter but he idolished Flinty and Eddie and fetched and carried for them.

Flinty swung down out of the ute. 'Have a beer, Tom', he said, full of cheek.

'I'll Tom you, you black bastard.' Sharkey unslung the .22 and fired one right over Flinty's hat. Flinty grinned and snapped the top off a beer bottle with his clasp knife.

'Have a beer, Mr Sharkey.'

Sharkey took it and drank a bit. 'Help Arch get the fire going', he said quietly. He took another drink and gave the bottle back to Flinty, who passed it to Snowy, right beside him.

Chloe was the cook officially, but Arch did a lot of the work. Chloe had always been a good-looker; her skin was brown from the sun and she had a lot of wavy, fair hair. I'd seen her swimming nude in a creek once, and I wasn't surprised that Arch was so jealous of her. She was a prize for a gaol-bird like him. That's where he learned to cook, in Darwin gaol, doing five years for manslaughter. He picked up Chloe somewhere and she'd played straight with him until she started this bullshit with the Dopey. She was with him now, pulling on a guy rope. I took a load of wood over to Arch.

'A man ought to brain that loony,' Arch said as I dumped the wood.

'Take it easy, Arch. Reg's harmless. Chloe's just mucking around.'

'You reckon?' In the light from the fire there was a fierceness in his face I hadn't seen before. 'I'm a bloody jealous man, can't help it. Ever wonder why I like her to be in the tent, Charlie?'

I shrugged. 'Natural I suppose.'

'No. It's because I don't want her getting ideas. I can flatten anyone in these tin-pot towns and Reg and Sharkey are the only other whites around. No offence, Charlie.'

I didn't take offence. I just thought about Sydney and how much money I'd have in the bank after this spell with Sharkey. Snowy brought some more wood, and Chloe heaved over a food bag. Arch started peeling potatoes, using a long knife that had been sharpened so often its blade was thin and worn

back in a curve.

We had the meal around the fire; Flinty had brought back half a dozen bottles and we got into them; all except Jack who drank tea. He hadn't done much camp work and his shirt was still fairly clean. He ate neatly too, wiping up with bread and not belching like the rest of us. We were tired after the drive and the work: Chloe got Reg to play a few tunes, but no one was very interested. Arch and Chloe bedded down in the truck, the rest of us crawled into blankets in the sleeping tent, along with the heeler.

The next day was a scorcher. The sun seemed to climb extra fast and there was this gritty, south-wester blowing. We were in business by ten o'clock, with Sharkey ringing the bell and doing his spiel out of a sandpaper throat. It was the standard agricultural show, with animal judging and the like. There were coconut shies, a fortune teller, a duck-shoot and a couple of other daggy tents.

Sharkey spruiked hard and we half-filled the tent for the first session. Some of the meat workers had been coming up for a go year after year. They were keen on fighting and making a quid. The admission was only a bob, and sixpence for kids, but it was a fair take. Arch was on first and he went easy on a big meat worker—let him go the three rounds. Reg was in Arch's corner but Chloe wasn't around. Arch was worried and asked Reg if he knew where she was but all he got was Dopey's foolish grin.

'Go and have a look for her will you, Charlie?' Arch gurgled water and looked across at his next opponent.

I wandered out of the tent, looked around and spotted Chloe heading for the truck. I went over but stopped when I heard voices from the truck. Flash Jack was in there with Chloe, and they weren't playing euchre.

I went back to the tent, gave a shrug to Arch's enquiring look, and got ready to do my stint. Sharkey decided it was time to let the mugs make a few bob and I was the bunny. I didn't mind. I went down to a big stockman black enough to

be my grandfather on my father's side. I gave him a wink from the canvas and he banged his gloves together in front of his face to hide his smile.

I was too worried to fight properly, anyway, until I saw Jack come in to do his rope-skipping. He wore silk trunks and a superior smile. Sharkey usually saved Jack for the evening show; by then half the drunks in the crowd would reckon they could take the flash Abo. It never failed.

Sharkey was pretty pleased with himself at lunch-time and he shouted for some pies and cold milk. Arch was relaxed and happy; he'd had an easy morning and we hadn't heard about anyone in Normanton gunning for him. I wondered what excuse Chloe had given him for not being in the tent; it must have been good because he was very chipper.

It must have been over a hundred in the shade when the afternoon session got going. Arch was first on, as usual, and once the crowd was in, Sharkey told Reg to lay open a side of the tent to get a bit of breeze. Arch fronted up to a bloke who looked like a cook. Arch ducked under a wild swing and then he sort of stiffened and lost his balance. I was off to one side and couldn't follow his eyes, but he was looking straight through the opening in the tent. Next minute the cook landed a hay-maker on Arch's jaw and he went down hard. Sharkey applied the count, taking it slow, trying to string it out, but Arch just lay there without moving. At ten he sat up and waved Reg away. I was in the ring then, close up and I could see the spittle frothing around the sides of his mouth. He didn't look good, but he'd taken a hard punch and there was blood on him from a split lip. He pulled off his gloves and swore at Reg, who was trying to look in his eyes.

That was all I had time for because the crowd wasn't happy with what they'd seen. They wanted Arch to go on again but Sharkey shooed me in fast and I found myself up on my toes with this cocky little half-caste who had some idea of it. I got on the bike and kept away for two of Sharkey's long rounds, and flattened him in the third when his legs had gone. Then it was a drover who wore a blue singlet and wouldn't go down

no matter what I hit him with. I was worried about my hands by the end of it and he was still on his feet. I felt sorry for my third bloke; he was a bit full and held his hands like he was climbing a ladder. I belted him two hard, clean ones and put him out of business.

I got the gloves off and as Jack hadn't turned up to skip, Sharkey put Eddie on.

'Go and get Jack', Sharkey rasped and I ran out of the tent.

I raced over to the tent and pulled back the canvas that hung down like a tent flap. It was sticky to the touch. They were in there: blood had soaked everything, the mattress, the bedding, the clothes lying about—in the half-light Jack's moleskins looked as if they'd been painted black. His face was a pulpy mess and the flies were gathering around a big, dark wound in his chest. Chloe was lying on her back with one leg out at a crazy angle. The worn old potato knife was sticking straight up between her breasts.

It was a madhouse after that. The police said that Chloe must have been a whore, Sharkey said something about Jack's sweet left and how he could have won the lightweight title. There was a lot of sympathy for Arch and Sharkey was on his side until he found the heeler with its head caved in. The dog had been guarding the rifle which was gone. Sharkey didn't have a good word to say for Arch after he found that.

They found Arch in the scrub three days later. He'd used the .22; the dogs and birds had been at him, and he wasn't too pretty.

CHARLIE'S WAR

Sydney Herald 1 May 1940
'MY COLUMN'

by Sean Fennessy

Among new recruits to the Second AIF I spoke to today outside the Pitt Street recruiting centre, was Mr Charlie Thomas, 23, of Erskineville. Mr Thomas is an Aborigine from Queensland who left Tom Sharkey's boxing troupe to join up. When asked whether he thought all able-bodied Aborigines should enlist Mr Thomas said, 'It's up to them'. His own reasons for shouldering the rifle and putting on the army khaki? 'I want to travel and see the world.'

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1

THEY were scattered over the sandy plain like vegetation trying to take root. But there was movement: bits broke off and clumps divided and merged. The canvas of the tents was a harsh green, the uniforms were a soft dun, and here and there was a flash of white, exposed skin. The encampment was made untidy by the men despite the alignment of tents and vehicles. The soldiers strolled about, did jobs in groups, sat and smoked.

Charlie Thomas, corporal in the 17th Infantry Training Brigade of the Second AIF, sat outside his tent cleaning a .303 rifle. He pulled the cleaner through, squinted down the barrel and pulled it through again. A tall, sandy-haired man pushed out through the tent flap behind Thomas.

'That rifle's as clean as a squatter's boots, Charlie.'

'I can still see dust in it.' Thomas said.

'Abos! You're the only Abo in the Brigade so you're the only bastard who'd be able to see it.'

Thomas wound the pull-through up and wrapped it in a chamois cloth. 'Maybe you're right, Cec. Don't suppose a bit of dust'd make it shoot crooked, anyhow.'

'That's right'. Cec Meredith lowered his six foot two inches into a squat. 'You know what it is? You're nervous about Greece.'

Thomas grunted.

'Why does Greece worry you, Charlie?'

'Hills and islands', Thomas said quietly. 'I don't care for them. I'd rather fight in the desert, like here.'

'You're mad. There's trees and rocks in Greece, things to hide behind, camouflage. Not like here.'

'Yeah, well, I just don't feel lucky about it.'

'Lucky! I'm talking about cover and tactics.'

'I say it all comes down to luck.'

They'd had the discussion before and always reached the same point. Meredith had joined up in 1939; he'd held Sergeant's rank three times and lost it for breaches of discipline, but he thought like a soldier. Thomas had enlisted later and resisted his promotion. He believed that the generals were fools, a point which Meredith accepted, and argued that the outcome of battles was determined by luck. Meredith disagreed. They were about to settle into the comfortable routine of point-scoring when they heard shouts from behind the row of tents opposite. A short, burly man came marching towards them from the direction of the noise.

'Corporal Thomas', he shouted.

Thomas groaned.

'Disturbance at the clink, corporal', the man rapped. 'Be glad if you'd lend a hand.'

'I wish you blokes'd learn to do your own bloody fighting. Who is it?'

'Bluey Parker.'

'Christ! Drunk?'

'Was, worn off now I'd say.'

The man, who wore sergeant's stripes, turned smartly and marched off. Thomas and Meredith ambled after him.

The clink was a hastily constructed timber building; a high barbed wire fence ran around it and there was a small patch of bare earth in front of it. About twenty soldiers grouped outside the wire; inside, a big man held a smaller man up off his feet against the wire. The barbs had bitten in and rivulets of blood ran down the man's back. He was weeping. Some spectators murmured 'Go easy', and the big man was yelling.

'You dobbed me in, you mongrel'! he roared. 'You put me in it! What fuckin' business was it of yours?'

Thomas joined the men at the wire. 'What's it about?'

'Blue went AWL', one soldier said. 'Got three days in the box. He reckons Willy Carr dobbed him in. Willy went in to clean the box, and Blue grabbed him.'

'Did Willy dob him?' Meredith asked.

The soldier shrugged. 'He reckons he didn't. Can't see him going near the box if he did. Ask me, Blue's pissed his brains away.'

Thomas walked around the wire. 'Let him go, Blue. He didn't dob you.'

'Shut up, King Billy, what would you know? He dobbed me and I'm going to skin him.' Parker moved the man sideways a little on the wire.

'I'm coming in, Blue', Thomas said. 'Let him go or I'll stick a bayonet up your arse. Try me instead.'

'I'll skin him and do you too!' Parker yelled.

Thomas took off his shirt; his skin was copper-coloured, his ribs showed and the muscles were defined on his flat stomach. He got a bayonet from one of the soldiers and kicked open the fragile gate to the enclosure. As the vibrations ran along the wire Carr screamed, and Parker dropped him. He turned around to face Thomas, his hands automatically going up into the sparring position. Thomas tossed the bayonet through the wire and moved up towards Parker. He crouched a little and kept his hands uncommitted. Parker lumbered forward and swung, Thomas swayed away and landed a light punch on the big man's cheek. Parker rushed but Thomas side-stepped and tapped him again.

'Give it away, Blue,' Thomas said.

'Fuck you!' Parker swung again and Thomas dropped under the blow; he straightened up and drove his right fist into Parker's stomach, grunting as he landed. Parker's hands came down and Thomas cracked him two rights to the head. There was a cheer from the soldiers, and Carr scrambled under the bottom strand of wire. Parker saw him go, and aimed a kick at Thomas's knee. The dark man dodged it and hooked hard. Parker went down with blood flowing from his mouth.

'Good one, Charlie!' a soldier yelled.

Thomas looked at him furiously. Meredith came through the gate, and he and Thomas carried Parker into the wooden

hut.

'Didn't touch you,' Meredith said.

'He never did it for a living.'

'Coming for a beer?'

'No, I'm due to play cricket, us against the 19th. You want to go easy on the beer, Cec.'

'It's a drinking country', Meredith said. 'Hot and dry, like home.'

'The wogs don't drink.'

'Wogs'. Meredith spat in the sand.

Later, Thomas was reading in the tent when Meredith lurched in. Gusts of beery breath came from him as he spoke: 'Stoush down there, Charlie, coulda done with you.'

'Turning in, Cec?'

'No, not yet. I want to talk to you, Charlie, seriously. Oh God, I'm drunk.'

'Leave it till tomorrow.'

'No', Meredith said urgently. 'Gotta be tonight, while I'm pissed. I'm scared, Charlie.'

'What of?'

'Greece. Don't wanna go. I've got a bad feeling about it like you. I'm going to die there.'

Meredith was standing, casting a giant shadow on the canvas. He swayed like a huge tree.

'It'll be all right', Thomas said carefully. 'You were right, there's cover there. It'll be cushy.'

'No', Meredith said fiercely. 'I've got a feeling.' He collapsed on to his bunk and Thomas could see the sweat standing put on his red face. He tore at his neck to loosen his collar, and fought for breath. What he said was unintelligible.

'It'll be all right,' Thomas said again. But Meredith was asleep.

But three weeks later it was not all right. Thomas crouched down behind a sand hill fifty yards back from the water. His shoulder was numb, but the morphine was starting to wear thin and little stabs of pain got through. The wound was deep

and ragged, and he'd screamed when the medical orderly had applied the field dressing. Cec Meredith was beside him with an identical wound. They'd been in file, moving along the road when the mortar shells fell. They thumped and burst on the road, and a steel fragment passed through the shoulders of Meredith and Thomas, and killed the man behind them.

They fell out; the platoon marched on, and Thomas and Meredith leaned their backs against an olive tree while they waited for the medic. The tree was sparsely leaved, with an oily smell to it; Thomas disliked it, he thought it was an excuse for a tree. The medic came and Meredith gritted his teeth when the dressing went on. The medic told them what to do and they nodded. When he had gone Meredith reached back with his good arm and pulled out a flask. They drank the raw Greek brandy like water, and hummed as they headed back towards the road that would take them to the beach and evacuation.

But it had been a long wait on the beach. Thomas craned his head up over the sand and looked out to sea; the light was fading and the division between the sky and the water was blurring.

'Soon,' he said.

Meredith moaned. 'Bloody better be. You feel it yet?'

'No.'

'You lying black bastard, you can feel it.'

'I'm not as much of a piss-pot as you, I'm still drunk from the brandy.'

'Bullshit. Christ, I could do with a schooner now.'

'Soon, Cec.'

'How d'you reckon our arms'll be, Charlie?'

Thomas suddenly felt cold, and the stabs of pain blended into one long thrust. A *one-armed Aborigine,* he thought. What could be more useless? 'They'll be all right', he said. 'Went through didn't it?'

'Your left jab'll be fucked.'

'Wasn't that good anyway.' He felt drowsy, as if his strength was slipping away. Along with the pain there was a

warm, sweet feeling that he distrusted. Meredith's usually red skin was paper white, framed by dark, caked blood. Thomas wondered how the blood looked on his own face. *Wouldn't show,* he thought. So many advantages to a brown skin, suntan, white teeth ... He realised that he was wandering and struggled to pull himself together. What had Meredith said? Left jab ...

'Did you ever see Carroll, Cec? That was a jab. And fast? Bloody wonder that man.'

'Not a welter, though', Meredith said.

'Well, they say that. I don't know. I knew a bloke who knew him, and he reckoned he made the weight fair dinkum by drying out, and then he'd eat and he'd be eleven stone for the fight.'

'He looked it', Meredith said. 'Saw him in the second go against Henneberry. Christ, he out-boxed him, out-fought him, everything ...'

'There's the boats, Cec', Thomas said quietly.

The wide, shallow-bottomed boats came in close; the light dimmed as a cloud passed across the setting sun and the boats bumped on to the sand. All along the dunes men stood up and crossed the beach; they limped and shuffled and clung to each other. The boats crews helped the men in, apologising when the jolting made them groan and swear. Blood flowed and reddened the shallow water; blood streaked the sides of the boats.

Thomas accepted a cigarette from the boatman, took a puff and passed it to Meredith, who drew on it greedily.

'Bad, mate?' the boatman asked.

Meredith smiled around the cigarette. 'No, mate, not too bad.'

Then the cloud cleared, the light strengthened and the planes came. The boats, turned broadside to the beach and strung out like beads, were impossible to miss. The planes came low and opened up methodically along the line. The bullets hit like hail, thunking into the boats and bodies and hissing and spitting into the water. The treacherous light

faded; the planes flew off after three passes.

The men were swearing and shouting and Thomas heard weeping in a high, girlish keen off to his left. Orders were barked and the worst hit boats were cleared. The boatman crouched beside Thomas lifted his head.

'Anyone hit?'

Meredith sat at the back of the boat: the cigarette still burned in his mouth, his jaw jutted but there was a dark, pulpy hole the size of a cricket ball at the base of his throat.

'My mate', Thomas said.

2

IAN 'Blue' Parker was drunk. There was a roaring in his head and he squinted out of wet, burning eyes. The negro rushed at him and Parker lurched out of his way; he brought his knee up and felt it sink into the man's groin. The negro stopped suddenly and his eyes swung up wildly. Parker gathered his strength and crashed his right fist against the dark, sweaty temple. The negro collapsed on to the stones.

Parker's chest heaved as he watched the black sergeant's two friends check him over.

'You're a dirty fighter, Aussie', one of them said.

Parker's eyes were glazed and he was having difficulty keeping upright. 'He picked me', he muttered. 'Fuckin' Yank.'

'He was Golden Gloves, this guy', one of the Americans said. He was a squat, black man, with folds of fat on the back of his neck. He looked up at Parker as if he was weighing him, ounce by ounce.

'What's that mean?' Parker was frightened by his own fury and lack of control. He wanted to talk to prove to himself that he was human.

'Boxing', the negro said. 'This baby got to the Golden Gloves final in New York. Light-heavy. He's a hell of a fighter.'

'He was a push-over', Parker said although he knew it wasn't true. The American had hurt him and only his drunken rage had carried him through.

'Drunk, white boy', the sergeant slurred from where he lay. 'Too drunk; fight you again any day.'

The other American was a white man, tall and lean with an experienced but smooth face. He took out a packet of

Camel cigarettes and shook one out towards Parker. Parker took it and the American flicked his lighter.

'Say man, why don't we have us a little boxin' match?'

'Why?' Parker said.

'Why, we could get a few bets down, and have a little fun. I got twenty pounds says Gordon here can knock you out.'

A small group of Australian soldiers had gathered in the lane beside the hotel. They still held their glasses and they looked down contentedly at the American on the ground.

'Take him up, Blue', one said. 'You coulda killed that darkie.'

The beer was still fuddling Parker's brain as they made an arrangement for him to fight Sergeant Gordon Green over ten rounds at Murphy's gymnasium in ten day's time.

Next day, sober, Parker took stock. He had a bruise on his face like a birthmark and his ribs felt as if they'd been bent and straightened out again. *That nigger could thump,* he thought. He could only remember the action dimly, but he thought he might have used his knee at one point; with both of them sober and the Queensberry rules operating the outcome was uncertain at best.

Parker had fought in Sharman's tent and had had a few preliminary fights at Leichhardt stadium; he knew what a rough, mediocre semi-professional knew. The words 'Golden Gloves' came back to him. He had to find out what sort of contest that was; it sounded ominous, classy.

The problem was that the only man he could think of who might know was Charlie Thomas. He hadn't spoken to Thomas since their fight in Egypt, but he'd seen him fighting in the Greek gullies and weeping over Cec Meredith's body on the evacuation ship. Parker had had dysentery, a stubborn case, and he had opportunities to watch Thomas in hospital and after. The Aborigine exercised remorselessly to build strength back into his shoulder. He also read—newspapers, books, magazines. A non-reader, Parker was impressed.

Life in the barracks in Brisbane was boring and the men struggled to find ways to divert themselves in off-duty hours.

Two days after he'd agreed to fight the American, Parker hit on a way to break the ice with Thomas. He could no more have walked straight up to him than he could have written him a letter. So he recruited Ted Bennett, and they went over to where Thomas's unit was housed to arrange a competition shoot. Parker had a reputation as a good shot; so, when Jack Bradford responded to the challenge, he made the proviso that he would only be in it if he could get Charlie Thomas to shoot with him. Thomas agreed.

The four men drew targets and ammunition and tramped across the muddy barracks yard to the rifle range. They marked up the targets and shot. Parker and Bennett won although Thomas had the highest individual score. The competition eased the tension in Parker and produced an atmosphere he could handle.

'Shoulder doesn't bother you shooting, then?' he asked Thomas.

'Not much, not at targets anyway.'

Parker nodded, he'd been under fire and knew the difference. 'Coming for a beer?'

After the first round, Parker felt comfortable enough to broach his problem. 'You know anything about boxing in America?'

'Not much. It's where the best men are.'

Thomas bought his round and Parker put the question direct. 'What's the Golden Gloves, Charlie?'

'Amateur tournament in the States.'

Parker looked relieved. 'Amateur eh?'

'Well, that's what they call it. A lot in it are pros with changed names. The ones who win usually turn pro straight away.'

'Do they do any good?'

'Christ, yes.' Thomas sipped his beer. 'A couple of them are world champs now. Louis won the Golden Gloves, I think'. He drank, and looked at Parker's worried face. 'What's your interest, Blue? You have to be a Yank to go in the Gloves.'

The other two shooters had drifted away, so Parker told

Thomas about his arrangement. He kept drinking after Thomas had stopped and was slurring his words when he finished.

'Big trouble is this, Charlie; some of the blocks have put money on me. Plenty. You know those fuckin' Yanks, money to burn. I don't mind taking a belting, but I don't like the idea of my mates gettin' done by the Yanks.'

Thomas nodded. 'You say he got to the final? That means he's got to be good. Light-heavy you reckon? What d'you weigh, Blue?'

' 'Bout thirteen stone', Parker said. 'But some of it's beer fat.' He took a grip on a roll of flesh at his waist.

'That'd come off if you knocked off the grog. Smoke a bit too, don't you?'

'Yeah, what're you saying?'

'Well, you're a tough bastard, Blue, and I suppose you're not a complete donkey when it comes to fighting. If you do some training you'll stand a chance; that is, if this Yank's not a real Joe Louis.'

Parker rubbed his jaw. 'I don't reckon he's that. Training, I never did any. How d'you go about it?'

For the next seven days Parker followed the punishing routine drawn up by Thomas. He stopped drinking and smoking and went to bed early. During the day, when duties allowed, he ran in heavy boots around the streets and parks of the city. Thomas took him to Stone's gym, where they sparred and worked on the bags. Thomas, fitter and evasive, out-boxed Parker at first, but then the big man caught on to his style and did better. Thomas's left was now only a range-finder and a defensive weapon; the shoulder injury had robbed it of power. Parker improved; he boxed a few rounds with a ranked heavyweight and held his own.

Two days before the fight, he threw aside the medicine ball he'd been using in sit-ups. 'I gotta have a drink tonight, Charlie. I'm going crazy.'

'I wouldn't, Blue', Thomas said.

'Why not? I feel good, I can beat him.'

Thomas beckoned to a small man who lounged near the gym door. He strolled over.

'Blue Parker, Mouse Callahan. Tell Blue what you told me, Mousey.'

The man took the cigarette butt out of the corner of his mouth, pinched it out into a matchbox, and spoke in a high, reedy voice. ' 'Bout the Yank? I seen him at Murphy's. No one there'll spar with 'im. Too bloody good.'

'Fit?' Thomas asked.

Callahan looked at the lines of fat on Parker's stomach. 'Fit', he said.

'Mouse tells me he's got a weakness, though.' Thomas retrieved the medicine ball.

'Yeah?' Parker said. 'What would that be?'

Thomas threw the ball to him. 'Tell you on the night.'

Parker swore. 'I hope you're getting ready to point the fuckin' bone, Charlie.'

It was November and steamy; moisture rose off the hot Brisbane footpaths in short, curling wisps and tempers were frayed. The military police had got wind of the boxing match within hours of its arrangement and, at a high level meeting, the authorities had considered prohibiting it. Relations between the Australian and American servicemen were not good—Parker and Green were not the only ones to have fought in a laneway—but the brass decided that the fight might clear the air. Besides, some of them wanted to see it.

In the morning Thomas coaxed a nervous Parker through a light breakfast and went off to the city to meet Green's representatives. The tall American with the smooth manner was waiting outside Murphy's gym. He introduced himself as Peter Abraham, offered his Camels to Thomas, and lit them up.

'As I see it, the big question's the referee', he said.

'That's right. Our rules're a bit different, I hear, about hitting in clinches and that.'

'I got just the man', Abraham said.

Inside the gym he introduced Thomas to a dark, stocky

thirtyish man wearing the uniform of a lieutenant in the Signals Corps.

'Charlie Thomas, Paul Brusso. Paul's a Canadian, Charlie; spent a bit of time in England.'

'Brusso?' Thomas said. 'Any relation to Tommy Burns?'

'Nephew', Brusso said. They shook hands.

'Paul's done some refereeing and seen some fights in England', Abraham said. 'I thought he might be sort of neutral, you know? Being Canadian and all.'

'I don't know', Thomas said slowly. 'His uncle lost his world title here.'

'That's right', Brusso drawled. 'But it was a nigger took it off him, remember.'

Abrahams smiled, and Thomas looked away impatiently. He was aware of the irony of his situation, representing a white man to representatives of a black man. *A fair deal,* he thought, that's what I'm here for—to get Blue a fair shake. They got down to terms: a ten-round bout, three-minute rounds with one minute between them. Brusso was to be the sole judge and scorekeeper. Abraham said he had boxed in college, and he and Thomas mimed a few moves to establish ground rules on holding and hitting, claiming, kidney punches and hitting on the break. Thomas was satisfied that Brusso could oversee a clean fight.

'What'll your man weigh, Chas?' Abraham asked.

'What'll yours?'

' 'Bout one eighty-five.'

Thomas did the calculation—thirteen stone three pounds. 'Christ', he said. 'I thought he was a light-heavy.'

'He's grown', Abraham said.

Thomas thought that he might conceal this fact from Blue Parker.

There was a cloudburst at six p.m., and the gutters were overflowing when Thomas arrived at the gym by taxi. Parker stepped into calf-deep water, and swore. A big crowd of soldiers and civilians was milling about outside the gym.

'Here's Blue', a red-headed lance corporal yelled. 'Three

cheers for Blue. Do 'im, mate.'

The crowd booed and cheered raggedly, and opened for Thomas and Parker to go through. The gym was crowded with men in uniform, sitting and standing. The air was humid and thick with smoke.

'Shit', Parker said. 'I've seen smaller crowds at Leichhardt.'

'Don't go getting stage fright', Thomas murmured. 'Ninety per cent of them know bugger-all about it.'

American and Australian MPs were controlling the crowd, and a sergeant with a slow Queensland drawl helped Thomas and his man through to the dressing room.

'How long've they been here?' Thomas asked.

'Over an hour', the MP said. 'We herded 'em in, roughly equal, Yanks and Aussies. No bloody civilians. Should I put a quid on Parker?'

'Yeah, get on him', Thomas said.

Green was already stripped and ready in the partitioned-off area at the back of the gym. His dark skin shone under the shabby light, but Thomas was relieved to see that he was carrying some weight around his waist and neck. He looked to be about six foot two, an inch taller than Parker, who gave him the briefest of glances before stripping. Parker cranked his arms over, flicked out a few punches and dropped over loosely to touch his toes. Green did a little side-to-side dance step.

'Hey, Yank', Parker said suddenly.

Green looked up.

'Been in this war yet, Yank?' Parker growled.

Green scowled and attended to a boot lace.

'That's what I thought', Parker said in a loud whisper.

The noise level in the gym was mounting, with shouts and foot stamping. Abraham stuck his crew-cut head around the corner of the partition.

'C'mon, you guys!'

There was no aisle to the ring and Parker, Thomas, Green and the chunky negro who'd been in the laneway had to side-step and bulldoze their way through the crowd. Through

the smoke Thomas could see Paul Brusso in the ring, holding two pairs of boxing gloves.

Green wore a white dressing gown, and had a towel draped over his head. Parker wore an army pullover, football shorts and sandshoes. Green's smart boxing boots rose almost to the skirts of his dressing gown.

In the ring, Brusso tried to shout out the details of the contest but the crowd noise drowned him out. He held up ten fingers, then one finger, mimed writing and rapped himself on the chest. The crowd got the message and a long, resounding boo showed that they were in the mood. Green climbed into the ring and let the top strand snap back; Thomas was ready for the trick, he caught the rope, lifted it high and Parker climbed through. The Australians roared.

The canvas of the ring in Murphy's gym was stained by water, sweat and blood; the support posts were rickety and the ropes were blackened by handling. There was no resin box but there were stools in the corners. Brusso tossed a set of gloves to Thomas who taped-up Parker's hands and slipped them into the gloves. When the glove tapes were tied, Brusso called them to the centre: Albie Murphy banged furiously on the bell until the noise dipped enough for Brusso to be heard.

'... and keep your heads still in close; break when I tell you; clean fight, okay? Shake, come out fighting!'

'Feel him out, mate', Thomas said.

Parker came out purposefully in an upright stance without frills. He led a left, highly conventional, and zipped over a right that took the negro high on the right side of the head. Encouraged, Parker moved up, tried a hook, and was sent reeling beck by a lightning series of jabs.

'Oh, Christ', Thomas said.

Parker recovered his balance and boxed cautiously, moving well and keeping his guard up. Towards the end of the three minutes he landed a long right and a light left rip, but for aggression and the successful combinations in the early exchanges it was the American's round.

'He's bloody good, Charlie.' Parker swilled water.

'Yeah. Those jabs hurt?'

'Stung more, but I'd like to know about that weakness.'

'Not sure about it now.'

'Jesus!'

The next few rounds were uneventful, with the American scoring more freely but taking some hard, shrewd punches in return.

'Can you last the distance, Blue?' Thomas asked after the fifth.

'Yeah, easy; me legs're all right and he doesn't hit that hard. But I can't seem to do anything with him. He's that fast; if I go in, I'm scared he'll nail me.'

'Try this—lead your left and let your guard down a bit; I think he'll hook at your chin. He sort of sets himself for the hook. If he does, move your head back and uppercut him. You'll have to be sharp, but he definitely hesitates before the hook; should give you time.'

Parker went out, boxed quietly for a minute and then led the left. Green's attempted hook and the uppercut followed. Parker was accurate with the punch and Green sagged back. The Australian was confused as Green covered up and clinched. The American took a rest in the clinch and boxed the round out.

'It worked', Parker said in the break.

'Yeah, you mug, but you let him off—whack him when he goes back.'

Parker repeated the manoeuvre, and this time put his weight behind the punch. Green sat abruptly on the canvas and took a six count. Near the end of the round, Parker did it again, with the same result.

'Yanks score big for knockdowns, Blue', Thomas said. 'Do it a few more times and stay out of trouble yourself and you've got it won.'

Parker knocked Green down twice in the eighth, and once in the ninth. The negro recovered but he had slowed down; the two slugged at the end of the round, with Parker landing his punches more cleanly and heavily.

'I reckon you're there, Blue', Thomas said. 'Oh, Christ!' An Australian major and an American colonel appeared at ringside, and beckoned to Brusso. The referee went over and the noise which had been high and steady dropped as the referee bent down to listen to the officers.

'They're going to stop it', Parker said. 'It'd be my way, wouldn't it?'

'I don't know.' Thomas looked across and saw the colonel running a finger along his eyebrow. 'They're worried about your cut eye.' Parker had a deep, one inch gash over the right eye, which Thomas had been mopping and closing with Collodion. 'Might stop it.'

'No!' Parker roared. He stood up, but the bell rang and Brusso waved the fighters in, brought their gloves together in the token touch and stepped back. Science went out the window; both men flailed and swung. Parker reeled back to the ropes and the American pummelled his ribs. Thomas gripped the ringpost and shouted; Abraham, his cool manners forgotten, shook with tension and ducked and weaved dementedly.

Arm and leg weary, the two men met at centre ring. They swung, blocked and countered mechanically. Murphy hit the bell. The crowd rose to its feet and roared as Brusso parted the two and lifted both right hands in the air.

'Draw', Thomas gasped.

The crowd subsided and Parker and Green stood in the ring with their arms around each other. Thomas shook hands with Abraham. 'Great fight', they said simultaneously.

Back in the dressing room both fighters showered, and afterwards Parker smoked a cigarette.

'A beer'll be good, Charlie', he said.

Albie Murphy whispered in Thomas's ear and Thomas nodded. The old trainer produced a needle, gut, alcohol and cotton wool, and with his horny hands neatly stitched Parker's eye.

Paul Brusso came in, smoking a cigar. He took a sheet of paper from his pocket and tore it into small pieces over a

rubbish bin in the corner. He let the pieces fall.

'Say, Paul', Abraham said. 'What did the brass want after the ninth. What the hell did they say?'

Brusso dusted his hands disgustedly. 'What they said was, quote—'Lieutenant, this fight is a draw.'

3

'Jesus, Charlie, I can feel it coming on again.'

Sergeant Charlie Thomas of the 7th Infantry Brigade looked down at the big man stretched out on the grass beside him.

'Been taking the stuff, Blue?'

'Yeah, course.' Parker's teeth chattered violently. 'Christ, there it goes. Yeah, course I've been taking it. Hasn't made a fuckin' bit of difference. You said it was the grog, I haven't had a drink in weeks.'

'I might have been wrong about that.'

'Wrong? Shit, a man dies of thirst and you say you might be wrong!'

'This shithouse food's probably got something to do with it. Look, we won't be moving again today. I'll blanket you up and you can sweat it out.'

'Blokes die that way', Parker complained.

'You'll die all right if you can't move out with us.'

Thomas rolled a cigarette and lit it; when he lifted his head he blew smoke in the direction of the blue and green mountains to the south. The New Guinea sky seemed to press down towards the hot, wet earth. He didn't like New Guinea, hadn't liked it for almost a year.

Parker's teeth clattered again and his eyes closed.

'Take it easy, Blue. I'll get the blankets.'

Parker nodded, with his eyes still shut. He could feel the sweat jumping out on his skin. It wasn't like the sweat they'd lived in every day since coming across the mountains; but more like the sudden sweat of fear. *Funny,* he thought, bloody German and Jap bullets hadn't touched him, but the dysentery and now malaria had flattened him. He'd seen men

so weak with the malaria that they'd stuck their heads up at the wrong time. *Not me,* he thought.

Thomas checked with the lieutenant before bringing the blankets back for Parker. He'd been right, they'd rest for the night before pressing on against the Japanese who were retreating in front of them. Thomas had a grudging respect for the Japanese; they were losing and they knew it, but they were still fighting. A retreating party could turn suddenly and hit back furiously, or lie in wait and make a suicidal stand. It was nervy work following them.

When Thomas returned with a groundsheet and three blankets the sun had gone and the short twilight was beginning. Parker was asleep; he spread the groundsheet and rolled the big man on to it, then he put the blankets over him and tucked them in at the side leaving one arm free. He shook Parker awake.

'Have a drink, Blue, and try to relax.'

Parker hoisted himself up on the free allow and drank deeply from the tin cup. 'Thanks, Charlie; you're a mate. When do we move?'

'Sun-up. You'll be right. Get to sleep.'

Thomas sipped water and smoked; the day's sweat was drying on his shirt, making it stiff and itchy. He scratched, and the shoulder penetrated by the shell fragment in Greece, ached. Sometimes it got stiff and he had to rub and manipulate it; if he slept on it the wrong way it could be agony in the morning. An orderly came around with a billy of hot tea and Thomas dipped in. He opened a tin of beans and ate them with a hard, dry biscuit. The tea was hot and strong, but they'd had very little hot food for three weeks. Supply lines were stretched thin, and fuel and time were always short. He lay back, smoking and thinking of hot dinners. Beside him Parker groaned and thrashed. Thomas repacked the blankets and wiped the sweat from Parker's face.

From old habit, Thomas rolled out of his blankets at first light. He stretched, coughed and spat; and rolled a cigarette which he smoked while scratching himself. The horizon told

him that Parker had about forty-five minutes before he'd have to be on his feet and moving. He was still sleeping, peacefully now; he was pale and his hair was stiff with dried sweat. Thomas touched his forehead and found it cool. He shook Parker's shoulder gently.

'Blue, Blue.'

Parker sat up. 'Christ, me jaw aches. Hullo, Charlie, are we dead or alive?'

'Alive for now', Thomas grinned. 'Your fever broke in the night. How do you feel?'

Parker wobbled his chin. 'Okay, except for this bloody jaw.'

'Must've clenched it when the fever had you. I'll look up the medical term for it for you in Lae.'

'Thanks a lot.' Parker pushed back the blankets, stood and fell straight down. 'Christ, I'm weak as water. Give us a hand.'

Thomas supported him while he took a few tentative steps.

'I'll be right, when do you reckon we'll get to Lae?'

'Two more days of this', Thomas said grimly. 'After that.'

'The tea came around, and Parker poured an inch of sugar into his and drank it scalding. They ate the usual biscuit and tinned meat. The carriers hawked, spat, grumbled and lifted their loads. The air was warming up fast after the cool night and Thomas' shoulder was stiff. He swung his arms over before shrugging on his pack. Parker watched him. Thomas was five foot ten, thin and hollow-cheeked. He'd weigh about nine and a half stone, Parker judged.

'You going back into the fight game, Charlie, when this is over?'

'Christ, no!'

'What, then?'

Thomas thought of his diary, and the pleasure he got from trying to set the words down right to get the feeling and meaning he intended. But he knew that explanation would embarrass Parker; he didn't fully understand the experience himself.

'I dunno', he said. 'Job on the wharf, maybe.'

Parker nodded. 'That'll do me. I'll be in that.'

Thomas wondered whether Parker would be so happy about having an Abo for a mate back in Australia. There were a lot of things in the future to wonder about. He wondered about going on the land in Queensland and about going south to Tasmania to get pale in the southern latitudes, and be a white man.

'We've got these bloody Japs to worry about, first', he said.

Captain Beverage, a veteran of Europe and the Solomons, explained to the platoon sergeants that the objective was a ridge about half a day's march away. It was expected to be strongly defended by the retreating Japanese.

'It's a long, wavy, bloody ridge', Beverage said. 'Any number of machine gun possies, and we'll have to thin out to cover it. We've been given the eastern slope; it's not the hardest, but it's not the best. When we get there, I don't want any bloody heroes. We'll put heavy fire into it, advance a bit and pour it on again. They might pull back.'

'What if they don't?' a sergeant asked.

'We sneak up, spot where they are, and hit them.'

'Any air support?'

'No.'

'Thank Christ for that', Thomas said, and they all laughed.

Parker stood up well to the morning's march, but they were all sweating and leg-weary by mid-morning when the clouds boiled up above, gathering for the regular rain. They stopped, covered the food, equip and weapons with groundsheets, stripped and sluiced themselves in the heavy, warm rain.

'I'd hate to go to heaven with a dirty neck', Parker said.

After the break, as the rain faded away to the east, they checked and oiled their weapons, and pressed on. The jungle paths were narrow, muddy and root-strewn, but not too steep. Beverage, out in front, made a west-turning motion and the carriers cut a path through the pulpy bush. This took them to the base of the ridge, forward from where the track ran. Beverage summoned the platoon leaders, and they grouped

under damp foliage where the ground began to rise.

'The movement starts at 1300 hours', Beverage said. 'We break up into fives and use brens and rifles in the first hit. We'll move a hundred yards up the slope from here. Let 'er rip at 1300, and for Christ ssake try to spot where any return fire comes from.'

'How long does the shooting last?' one of the sergeants asked.

'Six minutes. Then move up another two hundred feet. Fire at 1320, and concentrate it where you saw return fire. The word'll come up to move in and take the ridge. Questions?'

'What's the terrain like at the top?' Thomas asked.

Beverage studied his survey map. 'Nasty. Gullies, light timber. They could be dug in like rabbits.'

'Terrific. Do we get mortars?'

'Short supply. Light use just before the last move.'

Thomas moved back to where his men were sitting on their groundsheets. Parker was chewing a stick, which meant that he wanted to smoke. He filled them in on the plans; and they watched the signals men checking their gear, and the black carriers falling back along the track they'd cut with their knives.

There was no response from the ridge to the first attack, and only sporadic return fire after 1320. Thomas waited edgily under cover, with Parker beside him. Parker made sure, yet again, that his bayonet came easily away from his rifle. Thomas carried an Owen gun and had a bayonet in a sheath at his belt.

'Those fuckin' things jam, Charlie', Parker said.

'Not this one.'

A message came down the line that there would be mortar fire and they were to move up on to the ridge after it stopped.

'I hope they've all pissed off', Parker said.

'Don't get your hopes up. There'll be a few there at least. Look out for the machine gun posts, you know how they like shooting machine guns.'

The *thunk, thunk* of the mortars started, and stopped

almost immediately.

'Wouldn't have got a snake', Parker said.

The ground ahead of Thomas sloped gently and was covered ankle deep in creeper vine; there were irregular solid trees and saplings, and then a thinning out towards a flatter section where the vegetation stopped. Away to the right of the bare ground was a patch of dark shadow. Thomas pointed it out to his group.

'Gully', he said. 'Let's take this one thing at a time. We'll go up using the cover, and split to check the gully from both sides. Could be a gun there. If you're shooting go down into the gully, not across it. Blue, Horrie.'

The party split and they sprinted and ducked and zigzagged up the slope. They heard heavy rifle and machine gun fire below and to the right of them.

Thomas's party circled wide to the left and came in towards the gully about fifty yards up from its mouth. Nothing moved. They bent low and advanced to the edge; about twenty feet further back before the gully twisted right there was a machine gun with its muzzle pointing down into the mud. A paper cigarette packet lay beside it. Parker peered at the gully bed.

'Shot through', he said.

'What's that?' Horrie Andersen pointed.

'Badge.'

'There'a another one.' Two of the men jumped down and were immediately jerked off their feet and tossed about crazily as the bullets ripped into them.

'Trap', Thomas yelled and threw himself down. Bullets whistled down the gully and hummed along the tops of its banks on both sides. One of the Australians shouted, and collapsed with the top half of his body hanging into the gully. A bullet hit him in the head and he hung there, suddenly still.

Thomas sprinted for the trees, bent over the weaving. Parker pumped shots fast and methodically up the gully. Thomas worked his way through the trees back to where the fire

had come from. When he judged that he'd reached that point he slipped the safety catch off the Owen gun and charged the gully. A small Japanese man stood on the edge, and turned towards Thomas as he broke cover; Thomas sprayed him with a short burst and he toppled back out of sight. A head poked up and Thomas shot at it and saw dirt and blood fly. He dropped into the gully, twenty feet behind the two soldiers who tried to swing the machine gun around. Thomas fired the rest of the clip on the Owen into the face of one of the Japanese. He reached for his bayonet: Parker jumped down and drove his bayonet through the back of the Japanese, spitting him. He wore no shirt and Thomas saw the metal come through the thin, stretched chest. He vomited as the Japanese fell towards him.

4

In Lae, Parker went down with a shattering attack of malaria that left him weak and uncertain for days. Thomas judged that Blue had had enough war. He knew he had himself.

When he recovered, Parker went on the booze. Queensland beer flowed in the canteen and the Americans had unlimited supplies of spirits. Parker mixed them, and was often carried back to his tent at night.

'You've got to ease up, Blue', Thomas told him, 'specially in this bloody climate. You'll do your liver in.'

Parker looked at him slyly; it was early evening, but he was half-drunk already from an afternoon session with some Americans.

'You ever play craps, Charlie?'

'No.'

'Great game, you wanna try it. Tell you what, come and have a few with me tonight, and I'll swear off it after. Might even go in for a bit of the old boxing training again; see if I'm any good. What d'you say?'

Thomas looked at Parker's yellowish complexion and the puffiness around his half-focussed eyes, and agreed. After the evening meal they went to the canteen, and Parker drank furiously; Thomas drank more than he usually did, so as not to upset him.

'What's the matter, Blue?' Thomas asked. 'You're as jumpy as hell. Malaria coming on again?'

Parker looked past Thomas to the door. 'No, son', he slurred. 'Last night on it, start training tomorrow. Lick 'em all. Bloody Yanks. Lick 'em all.' He started singing the words to the tune of 'Bless 'em all.'

Thomas quietened him and bought another round, instructing the barman to water the whisky. When he got back to the table, Parker was struggling to light a cigarette; his eyes rolled in their sockets and seemed to be trying to look at both doors at once.

'Christ, you've drowned it', Parker complained. 'Bloody drowned it.' He tossed off the drink in two swallows. 'What about a swim, Charlie boy?'

'It's ten o'clock.'

'There's a bloody good moon, big moon. Last drink, then a swim. Train tomorrow. Do us good.'

Thomas considered; the swimming pool was at the far end of the airstrip, perhaps a mile away. He needed the air.

'Right, swim it is. Let's go.'

Parker got up and weaved to the bar. 'One for the frog 'n toad.' He poured the drink down, and lurched off for the door with Thomas following.

'Didn't show', Parker said when they got outside. 'Fuckin' cowards.'

'*Who* didn't show?'

'Bloody Yanks. Lick 'em all.'

'Didn't show *where*?'

But Parker was singing again.

Planes stood on the airfield, their paint gleaming under the almost full moon. A few hundred yards away the sea lapped noisily. There was a light, salty breeze and Thomas felt his head begin to clear. The pool was a rough concrete construction, fed and drained by the sea. The Japanese had neglected the sluices and pumps, and the pool was stagnant and foul when Lae was liberated. It had been cleaned and restored immediately, and the water Thomas and Parker dived into was clear and almost cool. Parker floundered and then started to swim the width of the pool, about thirty feet. Thomas pushed off from the end and started to swim a length, fifty yards, in a slow, relaxed crawl. He reached the end, turned and stroked back. At the deep end there was no sign of Parker.

Christ, Thomas thought. He's gone under. Swimming pissed, what a pair of mugs. 'Blue!' he shouted. 'Blue, where are you?' He got ready to dive when he heard a groan from the other side of the pool. He thrashed across.

'Blue?' The groan came again; Thomas grabbed the edge and hoisted himself out of the water. He felt hands grab his arms, and then his legs were swept out from under him. He lifted his head, said 'What?' and a fist hit him in the face. A boot took him in the ribs. He said, 'Blue?' and a grating American voice said, 'We don't like welshers, Aussie.' Then a boot crashed into his face, and he flopped down and lost consciousness.

It was still dark when Thomas woke, and a cool dew had settled on him. His ribs sent stabs of pain through him when he moved. His face was numb. His mouth filled with blood suddenly as he probed a gap in his teeth with his tongue. His jaw hung loose and bone grated on bone when he tried to move it. No sound came when he tried to speak.

Parker was lying on the grass on his back. He was breathing shallowly, and one side of his face was black with blood. One eye socket was filled with blood and one ear was pulpy and dripping onto the grass. There was a beer bottle lying beside Parker and Thomas picked it up and raised it to his mouth; it was nearly full and the beer rushed into his battered mouth, stinging, bringing back the feeling and blinding him with pain. He staggered off down the airfield, towards the lights glowing nearly a mile away.

Halfway there, two shapes loomed up in front of him, and the hard, round end of a baton poked him in the chest.

'What's this?' An Australian voice—thin vowels and a nasal drawl.

'It's a native.' Another Australian voice.

Thomas was suddenly aware of his dark nakedness; his wet hair would be crisply curled, his mouth mashed and shapeless. He tried to talk, but only grunts came.

'He shouldn't be here, this is out-of-bounds for the boongs.

Hey, you-fella, what for you stop long here?'

Thomas waved his arms and gibbered. The bottle glinted.

'Hey, he's pissed. Come on, fuzzy—piss off!'

Thomas turned and tried to point behind him; his arm swung up and the bottle hit one of the MPs on the ear.

'You black bastard!' There was a swishing sound, and Thomas felt his head explode.

Later, he felt the cold, hard concrete against his skin. He rolled on it and felt it rough and dusty. He squirmed on to his back and saw light coming in through a small, barred window.

The cells, he thought. Shit, they've put me in the cells.

He struggled to his feet and lurched over to sit on the hard wooden bench under the window. His stomach heaved and he vomited bile; every movement sent shrieking pain through his head. His tongue was burning and lacerated where he'd bitten it, and his jaw seemed to be hanging to his knees. *I can see though,* he thought. I can hear. I'll be all right. Oh, Christ, Blue. He reeled across to the door making small barking sounds and intending to pound on it with his fist. The door swung open.

'Come on, fuzzy', a big corporal said. 'It's your lucky day. A big mob of Japs have packed it in. War's just about won. What do you think of that?'

Thomas drove his raised fist straight at the corporal's face but the punch ended in a week, nerveless tap. The soldier shoved him roughly back into the cell.

He said, 'You silly bugger.' He slammed the door.

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RINGSIDE CHARLIE

Australian Journalists' Guild
100 Kippax St
Surry Hills
1 April 1947

Mr Charles Thomas
c/o Editor, *The Worker's Journal*
23 Hay St
Sydney

Dear Sir,
The AJG is happy to admit you as a member (classified 'Casual'). The annual membership fee is one guinea, on receipt of which you will be sent your membership card.

Yours faithfully,

E.E. Tracey
Hon. Sec.

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1

GETTING the *Workers' Journal* to press that week was a bastard. Some of the unions were getting restless about what they'd had to put up with during wartime—security checks, military manpower control on essential jobs, that kind of thing. We had a lot of gripe letters to print and articles critical of the government. Money was short; the printer hadn't been paid for weeks and we were all on starvation wages.

It was the closest thing I'd been able to get to a journalist's job after I was demobbed. No education, no experience. And it took a bit of pull from an officer to get it. I was learning about reporting and sub-editing, slowly. I was putting the lights out, the ones with bulbs, when Sam Tollman, the editor, beckoned me up to his cubicle with a tired hand. The strain was telling on Sam.

'Come for a drink, Charlie', he said. 'I can't do another tap tonight.'

I was dubious, I had the thirst but no money for beer. My deferred pay had gone on travelling around Australia, some useless correspondence courses and books. I had the thirst, but no money to go drinking.

'My shout', Sam said. 'I won two quid on the horses.'

I doubted it: he'd probably wrung it out of someone, somehow; but the thought of a few beers going down removed the doubt.

It was cold out on George Street, windy and wet. We hunched down into our coats and pulled our brims low. Sam said we were heading for a club he knew. It'd be seedy, with foreign waiters, but no Yanks. Sam had a thing about Yanks—he accused them of every rape in the papers, every

child molestation, and he lectured us on the way the world would go now that the war was over.

'Stars and stripes dunny paper', he'd said, 'and you'll be a traitor if you wipe your arse on anything else.'

There were still plenty of Americans around town. They had lightweight coats that the rain seemed to slide off, and it was good shoe leather hitting the pavement when they walked.

Sam hissed an obscenity when we passed a couple hugged up tight in a doorway.

'See that tart', he snarled. 'Probably married. Those bloody Yanks are fathering Australians.'

'Take it easy, Sam, it was them or the Japs.'

'Jesus, how did we get to that? The Yanks or the Japs?' The wind flicked his words away and the ragged red woollen scarf he always wore muffled the words. But I didn't have to catch them, I'd heard it all before.

'American is the new Rome', he'd say. 'Best legions, best ships, most gold, the lot. She's come out of this war with a bloody empire, and it'll be the ruin of her in the end.'

He was grunting away something like this now into the wind and rain, and I made non-committal responses. Truth was, I was unhappy at the paper and with the city, and torn. I was at it again, passing for white, but Sydney wasn't far enough south for me to get really pale. I was tempted to go to Melbourne, where they had fewer Aborigines and more Italians. In Sydney, too many people could pick me. Against that, I wanted to go north, to work the land, do something in the sun. My *Gandju* ancestry was a close secret from Sam. Aborigines were well up on his list of dislikes. He'd seen them used as strike-breakers in the west, and there was a story around that he'd got a dose of clap off a black girl in Broken Hill.

The rain got heavier and we took shelter in a doorway; water streamed off our hats, down our coats and dripped on to our shoes. I wanted to go north.

'What's the matter, Charlie?' Sam cocked an eye at me and

spoke out of the corner of his mouth as he tried to get a cigarette lit. 'You crook? You look yellow.'

'It's the light', I muttered.

'Bugger-all light.' He puffed smoke. 'It's blacker than an Abo's bum.'

It was like standing under a waterfall; the rain roared on the roof and sprayed up off the pavement. Suddenly, I felt I could do without the beer and Sam's company.

'When does this joint close, Sam?' I ventured.

'Doesn't. Goes round the clock.'

'Illegal?'

'Yeah, but it's been going since my old man's time. He took me there. It's a bit of old Australia, this place; you want to enjoy it while you can. We've got bloody little in the way of tradition and there's going to be less still. You mark my words.'

I was up north in my mind, smelling the fruit and the other scents on the wind. I could hear the slow voices.

'Abos have got traditions', I said.

He glanced at me sharply. 'Dying race', he said. 'Come on, it's eased up.'

We tramped on up George Street and turned right before the Town Hall. My thin shoes were sodden and I slipped on a squashed orange near the shut-up fruit barrow on the corner. I went down hard on one knee, tearing my pants and the skin. I swore.

'Up you get, boy', Sam's arm was strong. I wondered what sort of a drinker he was.

A fit of coughing stopped him at Castlereagh Street. He was near sixty, wounded at Lone Pine and batoned in Port Adelaide in 1931, and he sucked down Turf corktips non-stop. I grabbed him and felt how thin his arm was through his old tweed coat, his ribs were unpadded too. When the spasm passed, he spat into the streaming gutter and lit another Turf.

'You fit, Charlie?' he gasped.

'Not bad, I walk a lot.'

'Yeah', he wheezed and pounded his chest. 'So do I. You look fit, brown. Got an Eye-tie back there have you?'

'Could be', I grunted. 'Where to now?'

'Up here.' He pointed, and following the line of his arm I saw some movement in a lane beside a pub on the other side of the street. It was hours after closing but a dim, yellow light was oozing out of the door of the pub. I saw an arm moving up and down quickly, I heard a thud and a cry and I was yelling and running before I could think. It was the army training, I suppose.

There were three of them doing the bashing; I saw white faces and white hands. One of them staggered and fell, and then a tall, thin man in a light-coloured coat came flying from nowhere and sailed straight into the bashers. He pulled one of the attackers back and got in a good punch. I was nearly there when the one who'd been knocked down got up and smashed his fist into the dark, shapeless lump by the wall. Then he swung around, and the bloke in the light coat flattened him. I shoved one of them back towards the wall, but they didn't like the odds any more, and two of them pelted off into the dark. The third one lay still with his face in the shallow gutter that ran down the middle of the lane.

I squelched across to the wall and eased the victim up into a sitting position. As soon as the light fell on him I knew him, thousands would. The top of his head seemed to hang thickly over the rest and the skin around his eyes glistened with scar tissue. But he was still the man who'd won three Australian boxing titles, and knocked out the number four light-heavyweight in the world in the first round.

Then I became aware of the thin man; he wore a US service poplin coat and his accent was slow and soft.

'Say, that's terrible thing. Why would they beat up on him like that?'

'For fun', I said. 'To say they knocked him out.'

'That's terrible', he said, then recognition hit him. 'Oh, I get it. Say, did you see him fight Lesnevitch? What a hitter!'

'Yes, I saw it.'

Then Sam came up, blowing hard. He looked at us—the dark, blood-smeared ruin by the wall, me, yellow-faced beside him; and the crew-cut Yank in the poplin coat all ready to shake his hand and call him sir.

I said something, but Sam ignored me. The basher stirred in the gutter. He felt his chin. 'Gawd, me bloody jaw's broken.'

Sam's coat was open, his red scarf hung to his knees. The Yank brushed off his hands and straightened his tie. He stood a foot taller than Sam.

'I don't know', Sam shook his head slowly as he spoke. 'This country, I don't know.'

2

'You look like you done a bit of fighting.' He jostled me as he got his beer and the remark was his way of apologising.

I grunted that I had and drank. I didn't want to talk, just to drink. That was how I did my fighting now—against the craving for it and the nausea in the morning before the first one. But he wouldn't let me alone: his big, beery face hung over the schooner he'd parked near mine. The closeness of the glasses seemed to force some kind of relationship between us. He wasn't drunk, he wasn't condescending, he wasn't just trying his hand at talking to an Abo; he was being friendly.

'Where did you fight?'

'Here and there, Leichhardt a couple of times. Tents mostly.'

'Whose tent?'

'Sharkey's, know it?' It had happened now, I was talking to him and I swung around to face him just in case his sight was bad. Now he could see my dark skin and heavy eyebrows. It didn't worry him.

'Sharkey's, yeah, I seen it. I'm a bushie myself. Must've seen Sharkey's show up north half a dozen places—Bourketown and that.'

'That'd be right; we went through Queensland mostly.'

Just saying that brought a lot of it back—the smells of the travelling troupe, the heat and the blood and the strange, elated feeling of winning the occasional real fight.

'Who'd you fight in town?'

'Alby Roberts. Remember him?'

'I'll say, he was good. Real tough. How'd you go?'

'He beat me. Were you a fighter?'

'No, just keen on it. You going on Friday?'

He meant to the Butten–Campbell fight. I knew it was on but I hadn't thought of going. I didn't go out much. I'd been in Sydney four, nearly five, years since the war and I'd had a few jobs and a few problems. Being white hadn't worked, but then I had trouble being black. I felt the ties, but the pull always felt like a downward pull. I didn't know what to do about it. I drank a lot.

'Hey', he put his hand on my shoulder. 'You'd be going to see Butten wouldn't you?'

That was another thing, I could say 'Why?' in a hostile way and force him to say something about me being an Aborigine and we could get into a fight. I'd done it too often, I didn't want to do it anymore.

'Let me get you another beer', he said.

'No, it's all right', I said. 'I'm going slow, got to work tonight.' That was half-true, I could work if I wanted to—night subbing on the *News*. A phone call, a bath and a shave and I could do it.

'Get you a seven', he said. It came, along with his fresh schooner, and he emptied it into my half-full glass. I thought perhaps I'd make the effort, just put this beer down slowly and buy him one and make the phone call. The pub was filling up and he was pushed closer to me at the bar.

'Tommy Cossey', he said and stuck out his hand. I gave my name and we shook.

'You should've seen the welterweight I saw at the Stadium a coupla years ago, during the war it was. He was a negro, near six foot and shoulders like this. Beautiful.'

It didn't sound like anyone I knew, O'Neill Bell maybe, but he was after the war. I asked him if it was Bell.

'Nah, not him. Nothing like him. This bloke was so black and he was bigger, and his waist', he made a circle of his thumbs and forefingers, 'was like that. Beautiful.'

'Who'd he fight?'

'Can't remember, it was a four rounder.'

That was a surprise and I took another look at him. He was

well-worn, with cropped sandy hair, faded eyes and pale freckles on his big hands. He didn't look simple. Except I'd never heard a fight fan enthuse about a four round fighter before. They hardly notice them as a rule; they're out having a piss, or talking to their mates or working out which corner to back. I was interested: a black Yank, six foot, welterweight, I might get a par or two out of it for the sports page. I hadn't written anything for a while.

'What happened?' I said.

'Well, it was him and this stocky bloke. I don't think they even gave the negro's name, they were just four round prelims. He had this dressing gown on that was too small for him, looked like he'd just picked it up in the dressing room. Well, he came out and his skin was shiny and smooth, like ...' He rubbed his battered fist on top of the bar.

'Satin?' I said.

'Yeah, that'll do. He had about six inches reach on our bloke and he just put his left in his face twice, hardly seemed to be hitting him at all, but his head snapped back.' He demonstrated the movement and drank some beer.

'And then ... ?'

'Then he crossed with the right and the other bloke just came apart. His knees went on him, sort of buckled, and he went down slow on his face. He didn't move. I reckon he could have made him go sideways or any bloody way he liked.'

'What happened then?'

'Negro went back to his corner, didn't even wait for the count. Put the dressing gown back on. There wasn't a drop of sweat on him. He didn't even have a shower.'

'How d'you know that?' I asked quickly.

'Eddie Miller told me later. You know Eddie Miller?'

I said I knew Eddie.

'According to Eddie, he came in off the street and said he wanted a fight. Eddie said okay and offered him five quid for the four rounds, and the negro said that was a good deal. Turned out he did about fifteen seconds work so I suppose it was. Anyway, Eddie said he collected the fiver and went off

without a shower.'

'And he never came back?'

'Eddie says he never saw him again.'

'His name must have been in the paper.'

'I never thought of that. But I'll tell you this, it wouldn't be his real name.'

'Why? Who do you reckon he was?' I signalled for another beer, I'd hardly touched mine. He thanked me when the schooner came and leaned down close to my ear.

'Sugar Ray Robinson', he whispered.

I stared at him and he gave me a wink and took a big pull on his schooner. Then somebody called out to him from the other side of the bar and he nodded to me and moved off. I got up, left my beer, and made the phone call.

I checked in with the chief sub at about eight, did a few quick jobs and then dived behind a typewriter. It didn't come easy and I threw a few false starts away, but then it began to flow. I put together a sort of insider's view of the boxing game during the war, harked back to the negro fighters of earlier days—Jackson and Felix and 'Tiger' Payne—and then I told Tommy Cossey's story. I made it humorous but put it up as a semi-serious proposition—that Sugar Ray had been in town.

I dropped the piece in Lenny Evans's basket and went back to work feeling good. After knocking off around three a.m. the night subs usually went to the Journalists' Club, but I gave it a miss and went home.

Lenny ran it the next afternoon under the head: Did Sugar Ray Robinson fight in Sydney? He dressed it up with some pictures of Robinson and it looked pretty good. With the Butten fight coming up there was a good deal of interest in boxing again, so the timing was right. I was living in Chippendale; it was a small and hot room and the woman who ran the house didn't like coming up the stairs with telephone messages. I had quite a few that afternoon. I called a few people back and we kidded about things, and before I knew it it was well past six o'clock and I hadn't had a drink. I had an

appointment next day with Rolly Meares, the deputy editor of the paper, and I decided to stay dry. I didn't work often and money was short; I sometimes tossed up between eating and drinking. That night I went out and had a good meal.

In the early afternoon the next day I went for a walk around Victoria Park. It was good to be sober and steady and feel the wind on my face; I sat on a bench and smoked. For no reason I looked under the seat and saw six wine bottles lying there, scattered at funny angles like dead bodies on a battlefield. I jammed my hat down and ran for the bus.

Rolly sat me down in front of his desk, gave me a smoke, and looked me over.

'Good piece.' He stroked the fringe of hair around his bald head and peered at me over his specs.

'Thanks', I said.

'I hear you've been on the piss for a while, Charlie.'

I nodded and smoked.

'Woman trouble, too?'

'A bit.'

'Are you off the grog now?' I could feel him taking in the details of my appearance—eyes, shirt collar, shave.

'Yes.'

'Good. Look, we've had a bit of a reaction to that story of yours—blokes phoning in about checking with the US military records, a couple saying it was bullshit, and one character swears he met Robinson in Brisbane in 1944.'

I laughed with him, but I was feeling very nervous; he was going to offer me something, and I didn't know whether I was up to it.

'D'you know Robinson's real name, Charlie?'

'Walker Smith Junior', I said automatically.

He nodded. 'Thought you might. The thing is this, I need to do an interview with Butten and to cover the fight. Reckon you can handle it?'

The room was hot and smokey; the typewriters were hammering and a telephone was ringing insistently and being ignored. It was the world I'd struggled hard to get into and

which had given me some satisfaction, but which I'd found confusing in the end. I'd written stories about the problems of Aborigines in the city and the bush, and seen them put on the spike and forgotten. 'Too strong, Charlie' I'd been told. 'Not yet, Charlie.' But the world still attracted me, and that day the sounds of work were good.

'I can do it, Rolly', I said. 'Thanks.'

'Right.' He was all business now. 'I'll put you on three days casual from today, and you can get some money for expenses. Set up the interview and sniff around a bit on Butten. Do a good job, Charlie, and we'll look after you. See Brenda, she'll give you a desk.'

It went like a dream after that. I arranged to interview Butten, and talked on the phone to his manager. I read what they had on him in the library, and rang up everyone I could think of who could give me some background. I had a couple of full notebooks when I went out to see Butten.

He lived in St Peters with his wife, in a pretty neat little house. We had a lot in common, the tent fighting, Queensland and the Aboriginal thing. We talked about the tents. Of course he'd have picked me as a quarter-caste in a second, but we didn't get on to that. He'd read the Sugar Ray piece and we had a laugh about that. He knew a bit about the game in America from talking to some of the imported fighters. He said it was controlled by gangsters and he didn't think an Australian would get a title shot. It didn't seem to worry him; his ambition was to own a dairy farm and he reckoned he was well on the way. He was pretty smart, Butten, and I meant it when I wished him luck.

I went back and wrote the piece using the gangster angle and it scrubbed up pretty well. I went to the pictures on the Thursday night, and when fight night came I still hadn't had a drink since the time in the pub with Tommy Cossey.

It was a capacity crowd, they had the signs out before the prelims started and everyone was saying it was like the old days. The fight was to decide the lightweight championship

which Vic Patrick had left vacant when he retired. He'd been the best home-grown lightweight since Hughie Dwyer and it was hard for anyone to follow him, but Butten had the colour and the punch to do it.

I got a few helloes from the other press men on account of the pieces I'd written, and I was feeling pretty good when I got to my seat. The stadium had a big fight atmosphere—the bleachers were shrouded in smoke and there were a lot of women around, all dressed up to the nines.

Stripped, Campbell and Butten just didn't go together at all. Jim was tall for a lightweight, about five ten, with all the weight in his chest and shoulders. His legs were stick-thin. Campbell was just plain unimpressive: he was well-enough proportioned, but there was something fragile about him. He was part-Chinese and you could see it in his features and straight, black hair—they were a pair of mongrels all right.

I was three rows back, nicely centered, and Knobby Barnes from the *Globe* dropped into the seat beside me just as they were booing Joe Wallace, the ref.

'Who d'you like, Charlie?'

I wanted to say that I didn't like the look of either of them; Butten looked trained down too fine to me. He looked edgy and Campbell looked the way most Melbourne boys looked at Rushcutters Bay—pale and a long way from home.

'Jack', I said.

'Blood brother, eh?'

I sighed and let it pass. I'd had it said to me about Freddie Dawson and Chief Little Wolf.

Wallace beckoned them in, they touched gloves and got down to it. I'd seen Butten fight a few times before and he was always the same, flat-footed, but with a good range of punches. He hit hard at long and short range and the hitting didn't seem to take much out of him which meant he was doing it right. Campbell was a lot faster though, and a better boxer. He used the ring well, cut Jim off a couple of times and made him look green. He outboxed him for the first seven or eight rounds but didn't hurt him one bit. With that plodding

style and economical punching, Jim was still fresh in the ninth when Arch started to slow up. He took a few hard ones and didn't look good in the break. He was hanging on a bit in the tenth and Wallace bulldozed them apart with that great fat gut of his.

Campbell looked sick when he came out for the eleventh and a few people were saying Wallace should stop it.

Knobby Barnes grinned. 'Wallace wouldn't stop a fight unless the blood was knee deep.'

Campbell was only trying to stay out of the way now, but he was slow and awkward. He kept waving that neat little Oriental-looking head around and Jim couldn't get a shot at it. Eventually Butten was sure he wasn't foxing and he caught him in a corner and ripped him hard. Jim let out grunts with the punches which was unusual for him. Archie Campbell looked as if a giant hand had gone down his throat and pulled his guts out. He looked empty. Most of us were on our feet shouting at Wallace, and Jim looked at him to ask him the same thing. Wallace waved Butten on as Campbell came lurching off the ropes; Butten landed two rights on Campbell's head which wasn't weaving anymore and then he hung a wicked left on his jaw. Arch went over backwards and his head thumped on the ring floor. Wallace counted him out. Then the ring filled up with people—the seconds, stadium officials and the ambulance men. The ring doctor straightened up and shook his head.

Knobby Barnes was on his feet, craning to look into the ring and chomping on a cigar. 'Great fight, Charlie', he bubbled. 'He'll be the first Abo to be world champ.'

Butten was standing near his corner; his handlers were paying more attention to Campbell than to him. Jim's long face was set and worried. The gloves looked big and lumpy at the ends of his skinny arms. He didn't look like a world champ, he looked frightened.

I went back to the office and tried to write about the fight but I couldn't. I wanted to write about the yellow man stretched on the canvas, with blood oozing from his mouth

and one leg rucked up and the oscenely fat white man counting over him, and the lean dark man breathing hard and looking scared. But I couldn't write it. I kept phoning the hospital through the night and in the morning they announced that Mr Campbell had died without regaining consciousness.

I tore up the paper I'd written on and dumped it. Then I went to the club and got blind, stinking, Darwin drunk.

3

MARSDEN was worse than I'd expected; the air seemed to hold a hundred different smells, all of them suggesting hot, unpleasant work. There was a grittiness from the limestone quarries and a sulphurous tang that came from the match factory. I'd heard that the area supported timber mills and fishing but those clean, natural smells weren't on the wind.

As I lifted my bag I noticed that the arm I'd had out of the window for a good part of the way from Sydney had darkened with the sun. I was darkening as I got older anyway, and my eyebrows, which were a bit thickened from boxing cuts, seemed to be growing heavier. It was funny, there'd be no more chance of pretending to be white as I'd done in my younger days. And Marsden would be the place to underline the fact, the place where I'd get a boot sole on my flash city shoes and no apology; where I'd have to speak very politely to get a drink. And I didn't want to be within five hundred miles of the bloody place anyway.

I was there because of Tony Moondi; and he was there because he shot a man. After the war I'd written to the Queensland Aboriginal Affairs Department to find out what had happened to my family. My mother had died on the mission and my father at Palm Island. I got the address of my sister Margaret and wrote to her occasionally. Through Margaret I got in touch with Thomases and Bentons and a whole network of Aboriginal families in Queensland and northern New South Wales. Tony Moondi was a sort of cousin of mine who shot a man he found in bed with his wife. He shot the wife too, but she lived, the man didn't. He'd been fairly wild, Tony, a bit of a drunk and a bit of a thief; nothing serious

though. But his wife and the man he'd killed were white and they gave him twenty years with hard labour.

He started it at the Bay, was transferred to Goulburn and from there to Marsden, where he was classified as an intractable. Prison life would have been hell to Tony and, if what I'd heard was right, he wasn't prepared to put up with hell much longer.

I tramped into the town. It was near midday and hot. The bar of the Commercial Hotel was cool and the temperature went down a bit further when I ordered a beer. The barman took in my haircut, shave, tie, clean sports clothes, and pulled the beer.

'Thanks', I said. 'Who do I see about a room?'

'All taken', he grunted.

'I see.' I drank some beer and looked around. Midday drinkers have their own problems, the other men in the bar weren't paying me any particular attention. I finished the drink and put the glass back on the bar. The barman didn't leap to pull me another.

'Where can I find Bill Oliver?' I kept my voice quiet and neutral.

'Why d'you want him?'

I didn't answer and he flushed; he wasn't used to word games with Abos, but he decided to play it safe. 'He'll be over at the Longhurst', he muttered.

The Longhurst Hotel was across the street and almost a replica of the Commercial, except that it was doing better business. The man I asked pointed out a burly giant who was standing as close to the bar as his gut would let him. He was bald, his hat was on the bar beside his schooner and a pile of notes and coins. I stood beside the two men he was drinking with, and when there was a pause in their conversation I stuck my hand out.

'Bill Oliver?'

'Yeah.'

'Charlie Thomas, up from Sydney, friend of Jim Swan.'

He shook my hand. 'Gidday, Charlie—Perc Brown, Ernie

Darby. Beer?'

When it was my shout I handed over Swan's note along with the schooner. Oliver unfolded it and read while he sipped. He sighed and stuck the paper in his pocket. 'Great man, Jim Swan', he said. 'Bloody hero in the Depression. What can I do for you, Charlie?'

'I want a room in the Commercial; barman says they're full.'

He grinned and showed a mouthful of cracked, stained teeth.

'Come on, you blokes.' Perc and Ernie picked up their glasses and the four of us walked out through the bar door on to the footpath. Oliver cleared his throat, and roared in a voice like a bull-horn:

'Harry!'

After a minute or so a man appeared on the balcony of the Commercial; Oliver raised his glass to him, and then mimed sleeping by laying his head sideways on his hand. He rested the hand holding his glass on my shoulder. The man on the balcony nodded then disappeared inside. We went back into the bar.

'Drink up, Charlie', Oliver said. 'Anything else I can do, just let me know.'

I thanked him, finished the beer, and went across to book a room in the Commercial Hotel.

The next day I had an appointment to see my cousin for the first time in eight years. I shaved carefully, put on a fresh shirt, combed my springy hair down and ate breakfast with the six other guests in the hotel. None of them spoke to me; Bill Oliver could get an Abo a room in a hotel, but he couldn't make people like it. After being ignored on the street a couple of times, I found the taxi rank. The driver looked dubious when I told him I wanted to go to the gaol. He drove nervously the whole way and barely gave me time to get out of the car.

The place was smaller than I'd expected, a compact, stone-

walled fortress with a few shrubs showing a defiant green against the greyness. It was an overcast day with a low, grey sky that seemed to settle protectively over the prison walls. Inside, I signed the book and declared myself as Tony's cousin. I submitted to a search and followed a six foot, beefy guard down a flag-stoned corridor, on which his heavy boots rang like steam hammers. We went through grilles and heavy, metal-bound doors. I addressed a few questions to the guard, who slammed bolts and banged doors by way of reply. But I got to him in the end.

'Tony popular here, is he?'

'He laughed, and the keys on his belt jangled. 'Oh yeah, he's popular all right.'

The room we went into was dark and smelled of dust; there was one light bulb burning, no natural light. Three chairs, set a few feet apart, faced a six foot high partition; in front of the chairs were sections of heavy metal mesh, about eighteen inches square. The guard waved me into the middle chair. I peered through the mesh into dimness; a door opened and a man shuffled forward. The shock was as if the guard had belted me with his nightstick. Tony had shrunk and got much darker; looking at his seamed face was like looking back into our past—to some old full-blood tribesman. It was partly a trick of the light and the signs of weather, work and misery in the face, sickness too.

'Gidday, Charlie', Tony rasped. 'Got a smoke?'

I rolled a cigarette and pushed it through the mesh. An inch of it came back through the wire, the other end was held in his puffy, blueish lips. I lit it.

'Thanks. How's everyone at home?'

'All right.'

'You haven't said how well I'm lookin'.'

'You look bloody awful. What's happened to you?'

'I've been crook', he said. 'Tried a hunger strike, didn't work.'

'That'll be enough of that, Moondi', the guard said.

Tony put his cigarette in his mouth and spoke around it.

'Remember any of the language, Charlie?'

'Not much.'

'Neither do I. This bastard probably wouldn't let us talk it anyhow.'

We said a few childish words, and the guard leaned closer to listen. My temper went and I pushed my chair back.

'Listen you', I snarled. 'I've got a paper here that says private visit. Fuck off!'

'I don't leave this room.'

'Then get over in the bloody corner and stop flapping your ears.'

He flushed, and was ready to reply when Tony spoke up.

'I hear you're matey with Bill Oliver, Charlie?'

'Right', I said.

The guard scowled and moved back a few feet; I sat down and swivelled my chair so that all he could see of me was the back of my head.

Tony grinned. 'Good on you. 'Course, I'll probably get a bashin' for it.'

'Shit! I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry. Way it is in here.' He kept the cigarette squarely in the middle of his mouth like a circus performer waiting for it to be shot away. His mouth scarcely moved when he spoke.

'Well, Charlie?'

'You know why I'm here, Tony.'

'I can guess.' The cigarette jiggled, and ash dropped off it. His voice was a whisper.

'Don't be in it.'

He laughed, the guard looked up sharply, then away. 'I'm the leader', he said.

'You're a mug then. How d'you reckon I heard about it?'

His mouth twisted ironically around the butt. 'Someone must've thought you might help. But you was always out for number one, Charlie.'

We sat quietly for a while. He could say what he liked, I felt very close to him. 'They'll kill you', I said.

'Look at me. I've got ten years to do. They're killing me now.'

'One minute', the guard said.

'We're goin' tomorrow, Charlie. See you around. Give us another smoke.'

I rolled it, poked it through, our fingers touched. His skin was hard and shiny, like enamel.

I said good luck, and he pushed his chair back and shuffled away. The guard and I went back through all the doors and devices of the big cage.

'He reckons he's got ten years to do', I said. 'How come? He's done eight of twenty. Nobody serves twenty.'

'He will', the guard said. 'He's picked up more along the way. He's an animal, I don't think he'll ever get out.'

They called me a taxi from the office; I had to pay for the call and for the taxi — both ways. I thought about what the guard had said on the drive back to town. It was Bert Sargent who'd whispered in my ear about Tony coming out of Marsden the short way. He'd done it as we were going out after the Dupas-Mazzinghi fight, which was a good fight.

Bert has served time almost everywhere for almost everything, and the one matter he's an expert on is prisons. This was a few months back; it takes time to arrange to see an intractable prisoner, and when I'd seen Bert again he'd told me that the break was soon. But I'd been bluffing when I tried to make Tony anxious about his security—Bert was safe.

So there I was, in Marsden, knowing the break was on and wondering what to do. Tony didn't have any money so far as I knew, and I never heard of a successful prison break without it. Sometimes they break them out to do a job or a series of jobs, but I couldn't see that in Tony's case. Before that one bad night the only shooting he'd ever done had been at rabbits.

Back in town I had a few beers and wandered about; the town moved along at a slow, steady pace but there seemed to be a slight grimness about it. Maybe it was the presence of

the gaol, maybe it was my imagination. I ended up at the local newspaper office yarning to a sub-editor, a fellow worker. We went to the pub, and I asked him what he knew about the gaol.

'Not a thing', he said.

'Paper ever do a story on it?'

'Never.'

'Why not?'

'Why d'you ask?'

'Just interested. I visited someone out there today. It looked like a real shit-hole to me.'

His name was Clive Allen; he had the desk man's beer belly and the journós tired, suspicious mind. 'It's not meant to be Luna Park', he said.

'Do they bash them?'

'Lets talk about something else.'

'All right. What's there to see around here? I don't want to go back to Sydney with the sight and smell of that place in my head.'

'Good scenery up river. You could go down the coast too—beaches are worth a look.'

The following day I hired a Holden and drove around; I looked at the scenery up river and at the beaches. I looked at the mines and the roads, and the whole time I was wondering how the hell Tony planned to get clear of the area. The roads were out; they could block them quick and easy—it had to be the river. The main road was back from the river a mile or so, but there were dirt tracks leading down to it every couple of miles. I bought a map of the district and plotted the shortest course from the gaol to the river. I drove down the lumpy, over-grown track to where the remains of a wooden jetty stuck out into the water. A humpy stood a little way back in the scrub; it looked as if it had been built with scraps from the ruined jetty. I got out of the car and made a cigarette. A thin, dark man, darker than me, sauntered across from the humpy.

'Gidday', I said.

He nodded.

I pointed with my cigarette at the worm-eaten piles and cross timbers. 'What was that?'

'Ferry wharf, long time back.' He got out a packet of Craven A and a lighter, and lit up. His clothes were old and worn like himself and carried oily stains. I could smell fresh beer on his breath.

'You lookin' for someone?'

'No, just having a look around. Came up from Sydney to get away from the smoke for a bit.'

'Yeah? Where you from?'

I said Queensland, and mentioned that I had some people on the north coast. I gave him a few names and he nodded at some of them. I didn't mention the Moondis, and he didn't give his name. He didn't give me a cup of tea either, and I could feel his discomfort. I wandered down to the water, squatted, squinted about a bit, and straightened up. He had another cigarette going.

'Nice country', I said. 'Well, better get back.'

He stood in the middle of the track and watched me out of sight. When I'd rounded a few bends I stopped, and sat in the car thinking. The dark, tarpaulin-covered shape under the old ferry wharf had rocked gently up and down in the water, and the stains on the custodian's clothes were from diesel fuel.

That left me with a full hand for the role of police informer and I could rationalise that by saying that I'd be doing Tony a favour by stopping the break-out. I couldn't do it of course: everything, the blood, the code, more than thirty years' suspicion of the people, was against it. I couldn't help in any way either: if it was planned right any interference could screw it up, and if it wasn't well planned it'd be a dangerous shambles. All I could do was watch.

In town I bought a torch and some batteries, a couple of packets of cigarettes, matches and a bottle of whisky. I stood outside a sporting goods store, looking at the armoury and thinking, *Christ. I hope there won't be any guns.* I didn't have

a drink all day and I felt edgy and strained when I drove out of town at around eight p.m. I took the road that went close to the river, turned down the track, but pulled off it into the bush after a couple of hundred yards. It was a nice night, with a light wind and a moon. With the help of the moon and a few flashes of the torch I picked my way carefully through the bush to a point a little up the river from the ruined jetty. The bank stuck out in a slight promontory into the stream: I had a good view of the wharf, the boat and the humpy.

There was no one around, no fire, no smoke, no coughing. I settled down to wait and risked a couple of cigarettes, carefully cupped. It got cooler and darker when the clouds came over; I had a couple of nips of the whisky. The bush hummed and scraped and scratched itself around me and I remembered the river bank in Queensland that had been home. I suppose I was hoping I'd see Tony come loping out of the bush, hop into the boat and go up the river to freedom.

It wasn't like that. He came out of the bush, but he was bent over, coughing and dragging one leg. He collapsed twice, the second time the top half of him went into the water and I had to run down and get him out. I dragged him up the bank and my hands came away sticky with his blood. He looked up at me and coughed as if his insides were coming up. Blood trickled out of his mouth.

'Charlie', he said. 'They shot me.'

'Is it bad, Tony?'

'It's everywhere, leg, guts everywhere. Jesus.'

'Where're your mates?'

'Split up outside, I think they shot one. Monty, I think ... Oh, Christ.'

'Easy, I've got a car a mile away. I'll get it, get you to a doctor.' He touched my arm and stopped me.

'No, Charlie, please, I can't go back. Please.'

'You'll die.'

'I know. It's all right. It's not too bad. It won't be long.' I shone the torch on him long enough to show that he was right: his shirt was open and there were black punctures in

his abdomen from bullets that had gone in there and a great chunk of his thigh was blown away where one had come out. His back had to be a mess, and the blood welling out and soaking the earth said so.

'I feel weak', he said. 'Hurts, but it's not so bad ... just gettin' weak.'

'I've got some whisky. I'll get it.'

I ran for the whisky and the cigarettes; the cloud cleared and I could see Tony's face plainly when I got back. It seemed to be folded and crumpled, and one of his ears was half shot away. I filled the bottle cap with whisky and tipped half of it into his mouth; he held it and then let it trickle down.

'Shit. That's good. More.'

I gave him more and lit him a cigarette, he tried to draw on it but couldn't.

'Leave it in me mouth, I like the smell. Did you grow up by a river, Charlie?'

'Yes.'

'Me too. Sorry I said you were a selfish bastard, sorry ...'

'It's all right.'

'Sorry. Put me in the river, Charlie.'

I gave him more whisky and kept on giving it to him until he died.

I smoked and drank whisky and looked at him until I didn't need to look anymore. I stripped naked and carried him across to the boat; he used to be a good weight Tony, an amateur middleweight, but he felt more like a lightweight now. There were metal jerry cans on the boat, heavy with fuel. I passed a length of clothes line I found behind the humpy through the handles of the cans and wound it around Tony. I poled the boat out into the middle of the river and put him in the water. I washed the blood off the boat and myself, put the boat back and set off back to my car. I drank whisky as I went, and felt pretty light-headed when I got back. I put my hand on the door and a voice shouted 'Don't move!' from the darkness. I flashed the torch; and there was a bang and something hit me in the chest, and I went down. I heard the

bottle break.

When the police found that I was going to mend up all right, they started in on me in long, exhaustive sessions. *What was I doing there? Where was Tony? How far up the river had I taken him? Where was the money? Who else was in it? Where was the gun?* I told them nothing but it was hard going, repeating that I'd gone out into the bush for a quiet drink and saying 'No', 'No' and 'I don't know' over and over again. They had bloodstained tracks to the river and nothing else; they knew I was lying but they had nothing on me. When I made threats about a legal action for being shot while unarmed and minding my own business an uneasy, unspoken pact developed. Eventually, they left me alone. I was told my hospital bill would be paid. Another escapee was dead and a third was back in custody. Anthony John Moondi was presumed dead. Case closed.

I was in the Marsden hospital for almost a month while the ribs and flesh healed. Bill Oliver visited me, no one else. Rolly Meares wrote from the *News* to say that my job was still waiting. My flat in Bondi was waiting.

I got off the train at Kempsey and caught a bus and walked until I got to the mission on the Macleay river where Tony's mother lived. My relationship to the Moondis was through my mother to her and we got that straightened out over tea and stale cake. She was dark and fat, and had been jolly once. She cried as I told her what had happened, but she said she was glad I'd been there.

'Did you bury him?' Something urgent in the way she said it made me lie.

'Yes, I buried him.'

'That's good', she sobbed. 'That's good. I had two kids drowned in the river. I wouldn't like to think of him in the river.'

Office of the Chief Secretary of
New South Wales
11 November 1954

Mr Charles Thomas
11 Rose St.
Chippendale NSW

Dear Mr Thomas,
This is to notify you that your application to be licenced as a trainer/manager of professional prize fighters has been approved. Your guarantors have been notified and further correspondence respecting your obligations under the Worker's Compensation Act and other statutes will be forwarded from this office.

Yours faithfully,

V.E. Thornton
(for the Chief Secretary)

4

'THE trouble with come-backs, Speedy', I said, 'is that they don't work.'

'That's bull', he cut in. 'Look at Bert Spargo and that Stumpy Butwell.'

'Statistically, I was going to say. Statistically, they don't work. That's two, look at all the rest.'

Speedy scratched the scarred skin above his left eye. 'I still reckon I can do it, Charlie. Spargo and Butwell—they won titles.'

'All right.' I could feel myself starting to get impatient, and that was no way to handle Speedy. 'All right, let's look at Spargo and Butwell. Little men, mate, feather and fly, that makes a difference. And they came back in the same division, you'd be a lightweight coming back as what? A welter? It's an old story, Speedy, it's got disaster written all over it.'

He smiled then and I knew that I'd lost the argument. We were sitting on a bench in Henry Gallagher's gym in Chippendale; it was late afternoon and the boys were drifting in from work for training. Most of them were labourers and they didn't need to warm up; they put their togs on and got straight into it. I could remember the feeling, starting tired, getting a second wind and finishing flattened. It was a good feeling, and probably only boxers had it. Speedy had asked me to meet him there, and as I was working at night and had nothing much to do at that time of day but drink, I agreed. I wasn't too happy about being around boxers again, though. It reminded me too much of the old travelling life before the war and some of the ups and downs since then. I was settling for a quiet life—a night job in the paper, a few beers, books.

Speedy pulled his shirt open and stood up; what he had to

show was a flat stomach quilted with muscle. He turned around, there were no pads of flesh above his hip bones where the fat builds up when an athletic body declines.

'Nine ten, Charlie', he gave his wheezy fighter's laugh. 'I can make lightweight easy. What do you think of that?'

I was impressed. 'How'd you do it?'

He stripped the shirt off and bent down smoothly to pick up his togs bag. 'Not by starvin' meself. I'm eating good.'

'How then?'

'No grog, not a drop, and ten miles a day roadwork. I looked up this old clipping see? I was fighting Teddy Rosenbloom and the paper had our measurements. Me waist was thirty inches then. I cut a piece of string thirty inches long and tried it around me middle. It came about six inches short. I knocked off the grog, started running and doing exercises. The ends of that bit of string touch easy now. I'm fair dinkum, Charlie.'

Speedy had been a top lightweight three years before. He'd had two shots at the title and lost narrowly on points both times. After the second time he went on the grog, and lost three of his next four fights. Then he retired: he was twenty-six. I used to see him in the pub from time to time, lifting schooners, blocking punches and laughing. I hadn't seen him for a while, and then I got a message at the paper to meet him at Henry's. I thought he might want to have a beer and talk about the old days or try to persuade me to write a piece about him for a quid or two, although I knew he had a job on the wharves and had hung on to a bit of his money. He'd had more than fifty fights but he'd been clever and he wasn't too battered; he'd been cut a bit. When I looked closer at him I could see that his eyes were clear and that the bone structure was showing through his skin. He was fit all right.

'Why, Speedy?' I asked. 'Do you need the money?'

'Yeah.' He swung his bag. 'I want to get out of the city, go up north near Taree and do some farming. That's my country.'

I knew what he meant. Speedy was part *Geawegal* on his mother's side, not that much and he didn't talk about it, but I

knew. I liked the idea of Speedy Kinnane with a freehold on a couple of hundred acres of *Geawegal* land.

'What else?' I said.

'I want to get married.' He said this quietly, without flamboyance; this wasn't the laughing schooner-lifter, this was a man with a purpose. But I still didn't like it; he was only four or five years younger than me and he must have slowed up, no matter how fit he was. There was more to it, but before I could ask him what he skipped away.

'Watch me go a few rounds', he said.

He spoke briefly to Henry, and went off to change. I rolled a cigarette and watched the boys pounding the bags and flicking the ropes, crossing hands; it was nice to watch until I thought about the other side of it, the cuts that made you think your eye was going to fall out and the low punches.

Speedy came out wearing a singlet, shorts and a helmet. He got into the ring and danced around while Ernie Roberts got ready. Ernie was a tough prelim boy who won or lost according to whether his Sunday punch got home. He was about four shades darker than Speedy and ten years younger. Henry sent them out and they got on with it, no frills. Speedy was up on his toes, jabbing and Ernie was moving forward punching but it was no contest. Speedy seemed to have got it all back, the quickness, the ring sense and the thump. He tied Ernie up and sent his dark head jerking back with the jabs. They went three rounds and Speedy wasn't even blowing.

Henry came across while Speedy was showering. 'Sweet', he said.

'I'll say, he's been doing a bit, has he?'

'Broke two of Johnny Mack's ribs last week—we had to cancel.'

I whistled, Mack was a main event welterweight; I'd read about the postponement of his fight, but no reason had been given. Speedy came out with his hair slicked down and a big smile on his olive-skinned face. He gave Henry some money.

'You don't have to', Henry said.

'Yes, I do. Thanks, Henry. Come on, Charlie.' I followed him out of the gym, down the street past the pub and into the coffee shop. Speedy ordered milk for himself and coffee for me. When it came he paid and watched me roll a smoke.

'Haven't had one for four months.'

'All right, Speedy, you're shining bright. What's on your mind?'

'I want you to manage me, Charlie.'

I took my hat off to give myself something to do while I thought about how to say no. Speedy looked at me eagerly; his left eye framed with scar tissue.

'No, Speedy, no.'

'Why not?'

'I told you.'

'And I showed you you was wrong.'

'I haven't got a licence', I said weakly.

'Easy fixed. You can do it, Charlie. What else're you doin'?'

That swung it, truth was, I wasn't doing much. I wrote an occasional piece for the paper, sporting stuff mostly, and thought about writing a novel. I drank a bit.

We settled down to talk about it and it became clear that Speedy had thought it all out. He didn't have a high opinion of Pat Rourke, the current lightweight champion and I had to agree with him. Rourke was a good boxer, but he'd never met anyone who could box *and* hit. He had a long, skinny neck and it was impossible to believe that he'd take a good punch. But it'd take a really good boxer to set him up for the punch. The other contenders weren't much: Fred Flanagan, who'd held the title before Rourke, was the best of them. He was a rugged, crowd-pleasing slugger, but he wouldn't have lived with the old Speedy Kinnane. There was a young Victorian Aborigine on the way up, but not ready yet.

'I want a warm-up', Speedy said, 'then Flanagan, then Rourke. Beat them and I'm out in front. I could get a shot at the Empire title.'

'Why not go for the world?'

He laughed. 'Carter? No fear. No, Charlie, I'm not doin'

this for fun, not like the last time. Five fights—warm-up, Flanagan, Rourke, Empire title and a defence—and then I chuck it and grow fruit, with Pattie.'

The way he put it, it sounded just feasible and I wavered and he talked me around. In fact, I had some ideas about training fighters, ideas that had never been tried because the trainers were too greedy or stupid. Psychological things, to do with building confidence and well-being, rather than sending your man in edgy and resentful.

I went to work in a better frame of mind than I'd been in for a long time. It was good having something to plan for. I had an hour of doubt in bed, but my confidence came back when I met Speedy at noon the next day for roadwork. We ran around the park and he lapped me; he was sharp and fit and I was heavy and slow. He looked wonderful, inexhaustible.

We fixed up the licence and made arrangements with Henry to use his gym. I ran nearly every day with Speedy and got back into some sort of condition. I even sparred with him; my left was slow and stiff from the shoulder wound and I'd never been anything but a trial horse as a boxer. But I'd been in there with some good ones—Speedy was as elusive as Kid Young, he was faster than Hassen and a much better boxer, but he couldn't hit as hard. He looked better in the ring than Vic Patrick but he was orthodox, even plain, in style; his defence was oyster tight.

We didn't have a contract; I paid fifty per cent of the expenses and was on twenty-five per cent of the winnings. The chance for some winnings came after six weeks when we made a match with Wally Cassidy and I used my press contacts to get some coverage of Speedy's come-back in the newspapers and on radio. Speedy had had a falling-out with the Stadiums Ltd management, so we got on the bill at Leichhardt. That was all right by Speedy, who said he'd never lost a fight there. I looked up his record in *Read's Annual* and found he was right; he'd won twenty-eight fights there. This went over well with the press boys.

A week before the fight I met Pattie Downer, Speedy's girl.

She was part-Maori, slim, pretty and soft-spoken. We sat in a Kings Cross cafe, Polynesian, Aboriginal, Welsh and God knows what else, and had a hell of a good night. It was a sly grog joint, you could have beer or wine in your tea cup and anything you liked in your coffee, but we kept it dry. Speedy was in good form; he joked about meeting the new Queen when he won the Empire title and what he'd say to Bob Menzies.

It was Summer when the Cassidy fight came off, and the old Leichhardt stadium was like a steam bath. The come-back of a name fighter always draws a big crowd—the first time. Alby Morrison the promoter had put together a pretty good bill, and by the time the prelims had finished there was a full house, all sweating and betting and smelling of beer. Speedy didn't even look at the crowd from his corner. He had a job to do.

He was a master that night; he out-boxed Cassidy in the first round and out-fought him in the second. He took it a bit quiet for the next few, just earning the points and getting the feeling of being back in the ring, and then he cut loose again. In the sixth Cassidy looked gone, so Speedy carried him for two more. But he made it so good that Cassidy really thought he was doing better. In the ninth Speedy showed him how wrong he was with a left and right combination that dumped Wally on the seat of his pants for keeps.

Speedy's cut of the gate was £320, so I took home £80, plus £20 I'd won in a bet. Speedy told me he'd put £100 on himself at good odds. It was a good start.

We signed to meet Flanagan in January, and Speedy stepped up the training until I was afraid he'd leave his form in the gym or on the road. I advised him to ease up and he did; he was a marvel to train, a tiger for punishment but willing to listen to reason. He could have trained himself, almost did, but he needed me for the business end. They'd put anything over you if they could—penalties for this and that, waivers of rights, cheat you on the film fees, the lot. But my strongest

point was the publicity; I'd stopped drinking and was able to cruise through my job, which left me plenty of time for talking to sports writers and promoters. One thing Speedy banned: there was to be no mention of Pattie in the stories about him, no pictures of her, nothing. I worried about that, he was so proud of her privately you'd have thought he'd want to show her off a bit.

We had a few quiet nights out before the Flanagan fight. Now that I wasn't pissing my money up against a wall and with a bit extra coming in I was able to buy a second-hand car and get around a bit. I started going out with a woman who lived in the same block of flats as me in Bondi. Her name was Nelly Cooper. She was separated from her husband who was a rugby player and she worked part-time as a commercial artist. The four of us went out for an Italian meal a couple of times, and to the pictures. We went on picnics to Newport. We all had better suntans than Nelly.

Then it was Melbourne, and Flanagan. I never liked Melbourne, lousy climate, early closing. Now the pub hours didn't worry me, and there was a balmy weather spell on. We ran from Richmond where we were staying to the gym at Fitzroy—the way we went made it six miles on the flat and most of that was through parks. It was pretty nice. When I said so, Speedy said he missed Pattie. Two days before the fight he turned thirty.

'I can beat Flanagan', he told me. 'I've seen him a couple of times. Work him to left and his balance goes, you can come inside and get him.'

'You', I said. 'Not me.'

'That's right. I'll get inside and knock his block off.'

And that's pretty much the way it happened. Flanagan came out swinging, as he always did, and Speedy sidestepped and back-pedalled and made him look foolish. When Fred lost his temper he was an easy mark for Speedy's jabs. Flanagan settled down a bit in the middle rounds but he was tired by then and the flaw Speedy had noticed in his technique became more pronounced. Speedy stepped inside a shaky

left and landed three head punches; one of them ripped Flanagan's eye open and it was goodnight. Fred was game for more but the referee stopped it in the tenth. The photo in the *Argus* the next day showed both men covered in blood.

'Look at that', Speedy said. 'I didn't have a scratch on me and it looks like I've gone through an abbattoir. They allowed to do that, Charlie?'

I said they were and told him it'd be good for the next gate, which was true; Rourke was susceptible to cuts.

Speedy must have taken nearly a thousand quid away from Melbourne, I had a good few hundred myself. But he was quiet, even surly on the train back to Sydney, and he stayed that way for the rest of the week.

Back in Sydney, we issued the challenge to Rourke, and the newspapers backed us up. Stadiums Ltd weren't happy about it; Speedy Kinnane hadn't figured in their plans, but there was nothing the firm could do about it. Rourke vs Kinnane was the fight the public wanted to see.

Speedy should have been on top of the world but he was just the opposite—he plodded on the road, seemed to have lost his timing in the ring and was mechanical about his exercises. He'd been a natural for my confidence-building approach and I hadn't anticipated any let-downs, creeping doubts. The first few times I asked him what was wrong he shook the questions off but eventually he opened up.

'It's Pattie', he said. 'She wants to come to the bloody fight.'

'What's wrong with that? It's natural, let her. It might do you some good having her there. You need something.'

'I don't need that! Will you talk to her. Charlie? Tell her how I feel.'

'How can I? I don't know how you feel. I don't understand.'

'Maybe I should've let her come to the other fights', he muttered. 'Might've put her off.'

'You superstitious or something?'

'Naw. Hey, maybe that's it. You could tell her she'd jinx me.'

'Oh yeah, she'd love that!'

'You have to do something. You're my manager—manage it!'

So I went to see Pattie. I thought I'd be able to talk her round, but it was hopeless; she was as determined to see the fight as he was to prevent her. But at least she told me her reasons.

'He doesn't really want to fight, you know, Charlie. He hates it, he's doing it to give us a start, that's all.'

'Well then, why not let him do his way?'

'No!' For her, she said it loud. 'I want to know what it's like, so I can appreciate what he's doing.'

I worked away at her but she stuck right there; in the end we worked out a solution—she'd go to the fight, but Speedy wouldn't know she was there. She'd see her man make his sacrifice and he'd keep his peace of mind or whatever it was he was protecting. We went for a walk down near the water at Bondi.

'Have you got a farm in mind?'

'Yes', she said. 'Speedy says we'll have it soon.'

'Soon? What's he mean, soon? He's got three fights to go at least.'

She shrugged. 'He said soon. How's Nelly?'

'All right.'

I told Speedy that Pattie had agreed to give the fight a miss, and he was a new man. There was bounce in his running and zip in his punches. We signed with Rourke, they put the prices up, and with all the publicity we were getting a full house looked like a certainty. We tailed off the training and went out as a foursome two nights before the fight. We ate fish at Watson's Bay out in the open, down near the water. Nelly put a bone carefully on the side of her plate and asked Speedy if he'd be able to give up boxing for good when he had the farm.

'Just watch me.'

'I'd like to see the match', she ventured. She couldn't bring herself to say 'fight'.

Speedy looked alarmed. 'No, don't!'

I'd had a bit of wine for a change, and felt belligerent. 'The way you bloody talk', I said, 'you'd be happier if no one came, if you fought in a bloody empty stadium.'

Speedy said something non-committal.

'Where'd your bloody farm be then?' I went on.

He stopped me there with one look; under the shaggy eyebrows, with the white scar lines through them, his eyes sliced into me. I felt clumsy, drunk, although I wasn't. Nelly and Pattie started chatting and the moment passed. Later Nelly told me that Pattie was going to the fight.

'I know', I said. 'I fixed it up.'

'Speedy'll never forgive you if he finds out.'

'He won't find out.'

'I want to go too.'

I swore, and said no, but she persisted. It wasn't easy that late, the fight was a sell-out. Everyone knew that Rourke was a classy boxer and a shot at the Empire title wasn't out of his reach, or Speedy's, if he beat him. The publicity was no problem. I'd arranged all the usual things, and the one Speedy really liked was the old physical statistics comparison—the side by side photographs with the arms outstretched and the measurements. Speedy's waist measured twenty-nine and a half inches.

Sydney hadn't had a fight night like it since Burns and Barnes which of course was the greatest since Patrick and Dawson and so on. The 'House Full' sign was out before the preliminaries were over and the taxi drivers, who sometimes got in for free by showing their badges, were being turned away. The scalpers were flat out.

Pattie and Nelly's seats were near the back of the ringside section, not good seats and not together. Even Speedy, who scarcely looked at the crowd, might have spotted them in a pair. I was nervous, but Speedy was ice cool; although we'd looked at films of Rourke in action and hadn't been able to come up with a strategy. He was a better fighter than he appeared, I decided. His defence was good and he was very fast with his hands and feet. He didn't seem to punch hard

and most of his fights went the distance, but I noticed that he had his opponents' knees sagging pretty often. Truth was, I wasn't sure Speedy could beat him.

The prelims weren't much, which meant that the tension built up for the main bout. The noise dropped when the referee called them into the centre. I sneaked a look out into the crowd and spotted Nelly and Pattie; a little beyond them no face was visible through a grey haze of smoke. The referee said the usual things and it was on.

The first round was one of the prettiest boxing exhibitions I've ever seen. It was so good that even the mugs in the crowd liked it. There was a lot of jabbing and feinting which the bleachers drunks usually hate, but it was all so fast that no one got bored. In the first break I congratulated Speedy on a good start; he spat and said nothing. The next couple of rounds were even, with Rourke doing just a little better, scoring once or twice more in the important exchanges. I mentioned this to Speedy after the fourth and he grinned as well as you can grin around a mouthguard. In the sixth, Speedy walked into a left hook and he went down; he was up straightaway and steady, but through the gloom I saw Pattie's face go pale with shock. Speedy lost that round and the next. He was going well for the first minute then trailing off, and Rourke was doing all the work in the last minute before the referee marked up his card. I told Speedy to pace himself better.

He spat into the bucket and waited until the other second had got down.

'Don't be a mug, Charlie', he said.

My stomach lurched. 'What're you saying?'

'I'm throwing it.' The bell went and he got up and did a Griffo for half a minute, then Rourke got him on the ropes and pounded him. Speedy took most of the punches on his arms and it looked worse than it was. He saw out the round.

'Why?'

'Wipe me face. Half of Rourke tonight, two hundred and fifty quid on him, ten percent of his title shot and all de-

fences. Easy street.'

He lost another round; Rourke was slowing up a bit and Speedy had to use all his skill to stay behind. He went down again near the end of the tenth and came back to the corner rubber-legged.

'This is the hard bit', he said.

'I saw then why he hadn't wanted the women at the fight; he took some punches to the head and body that must have hurt. His eye was cut wide open. Pattie stood up and screamed but she was pulled down. Speedy went in and took some more, he even landed a few, but he could hardly see for the blood and Rourke couldn't let him go. I was thinking, *Why the hell shouldn't he?* as the punches were hitting him, but I felt empty and sick. The referee counted Speedy out and when he lifted his face off the canvas you'd have sworn someone had worked on it with a hammer.

The doctor stitched him back together in the dressing room. He had a shower, got through the commiserations and didn't look too bad.

'I'll get the farm', he said.

'Yes.'

'Charlie, come on. What's the matter? Did you lose on me? I'll fix you up.'

'Get stuffed.'

'Charlie, it's a racket. I just got on the winning side for a change.'

'I know, I know. I just thought this was different.'

'No', he said. 'Not different. Just the same.'

FIGHTING CHARLIE

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1

I still had nearly £900 in the bank a year after Speedy Kinnane dissolved our partnership. I was healthy and fit, I had a good Austin A40 and I was sick of Sydney. Under pressure from the deputy editor, I wrote an article on boxing for the *News* that was so full of lies I resigned my job when it was published. When I went in to pick up my pay a week or so later they handed me a letter along with the money.

The letter was from Allan Benton, a cousin. I'd met him once when I'd gone travelling after the war, and we'd got on well. Allan was about my age, the oldest son of one of my mother's sisters. He'd been in the army. The letter was short: he was running a fishing boat out of Coburg Heads and he needed a partner.

Coburg Heads had been a special place for me ever since I spent a weekend there during the war. The ocean rolls in and the hills rise up behind, and there are so many trees it feels as if the town has grown up in the middle of a forest. I gave Allan's offer about half a minute's thought. A friend at the paper took over the flat; I packed my books and clothes into the car, filled up with petrol and headed north.

I made Port Macquarie, about halfway between Sydney and Coburg Heads, in the late afternoon. Being out of the city felt good and staying in New South Wales felt safe. I was uneasy about going as far as Queensland—too many memories, too many knocks. It was October, getting warm but before the real heat set in with the flies and mosquitoes and fires. I made camp beside the car off the road a bit north of Port Macquarie. I had basic camping gear—a groundsheet, blankets, tin plates, water in a jerry can, tea in a jar. I made a fire and ate beans and sausages, drank tea with rum in it.

After the meal I smoked in the dark and listened to the sea. The bush buzzed and squeaked around me but the sound of the sea was strongest. I felt good about going to work on the water.

I started early, sailed along in the A40; and drove into Coburg Heads in the middle of the afternoon. All the trees I remembered were there; there was an avenue of cedars on the way in, trees along the main street, trees in the back and front yards of the houses. It was Wednesday and the town was quiet. I drove to the pub and felt the old, tender feelings when I got out of the car. A group of men were sitting and standing near the doorway; a couple of them moved over closer so I couldn't walk straight into the bar. I locked the car carefully; it was dusty but a good car. I'd shaved and my clothes were clean. I took off my sunglasses, polished them on a clean handkerchief, put them back on and jumped up over the gutter on to the footpath.

'Afternoon, gents.'

Two of them looked down into their glasses, one gazed out past me to the road. The oldest of them, a wide block of a man with sparse red hair and a flaming drinker's face, looked at me as if I had a bone through my nose. He wore an RSL badge on the lapel of his tweed sports coat.

I looked directly at the badge. 'Charlie Thomas', I said. 'Sergeant, Seventh Infantry—Egypt, Greece, New Guinea. I've driven up from Sydney and I want a drink.'

He was still hostile, but he moved aside.

'We don't serve Abos', the barman said.

I put a fiver on the bar. 'I'm not an Abo, mate, I'm an Indonesian student. Give us a beer and I'll tell you about the whores in Jakarta.'

He looked puzzled but he pulled the beer. I drank it quickly and ordered another. Two men standing on the other side of the bar watched me as I pocketed my change. There was a sign over the bar advertising Craven Filter cigarettes. I'd never smoked a filter tip. I beckoned the barman over and bought a packet. He watched me light up; the smoke was dry

but smooth.

'By the way', I said. 'Can you tell me where I can find Allan Benton?'

He snapped his fingers. 'That's it! That's who you reminded me of. More trouble.'

'Why trouble?'

He wouldn't answer that, but told me I could find Allan on his boat about half a mile up the river.

'What's the boat's name?'

'*Koori*.'

'Up the river ? Not at the town jetty?'

'Right.'

'Why?'

'You'll see.'

The *Koori* was a beaten-up old fishing smack that had had a lot of loving care recently. The fresh paint, the new rope and the polished metal couldn't disguise her old timbers though, or her old-fashioned lines. A longer name had been painted out and her new one stencilled in big and bold on both bows and across her stern. She was tied up at a small jetty along with some other old boats, less well-cared for.

'Allan! Allan Benton!'

He came up on to the deck from below and when I saw him plainly I got an enormous shock. We hadn't met since a couple of years after the war, twelve or thirteen years back, and we'd both changed. The result was that we were like twins. He was a bit taller and heavier than me but about the same colour and with very similar features—broken, flattened noses and heavy eyebrows. He stopped wiping his hands and stood with the rag flopping loosely.

'Shit', he said. 'Charlie.'

'Got your letter.'

'You didn't waste any bloody time.'

'You got me at the right moment. Can I come aboard or whatever you call it?'

'Shit. Yeah, sorry. Come on. Gawd, do you know we look like bloody twins?'

I hopped down on to the boat and we shook hands. The deck was almost fussily tidy, which worried me a little, I wondered whether a working boat should look like that. There was only a faint smell of fish.

Allan seemed a bit tongue-tied as he showed me over the boat, and we got settled in chairs near the stern.

There was a makeshift canvas awning over the rear section and I could see nets tidied away, gaffs and other equipment neatly stacked. We sat for a minute without speaking, and then Allan muttered something about tea and dived below. I climbed back on to the jetty and went to the car. When Allan came back with two mugs of tea I had the rum bottle ready. I put two good slugs in and we touched mugs.

'Up the ninth divvy', Allan said.

I gave him one of my Craven Filters and he took it warily.

'Let's skip all the shit about how well we look and how the aunties are doing, Allan. Why aren't you out fishing?'

'Can't.'

'Why not? Licence trouble?'

He shook his head. 'Can't get into the co-op. Can't get the fuckin' fish processed, iced-up and all that.'

'Why?'

'No Abos.'

'How long've you been at this game?'

'Few years.'

'Get along all right before?'

'Yeah.'

'Well?'

'Changed the name of the boat, took on a few of our blokes as crew.'

'Shoved it up them you mean?'

'If you like.'

I shrugged. 'You're a mug. Give it away. You won't do any good.'

He finished the cigarette, and stubbed it out carefully on a much-painted metal fitting. He set it down beside his mug, all very stubborn and deliberate.

'No', he said quietly. 'I've got to make a go of it this way. I reckon we can do it. Just take a bit of time and some fucking brains.'

And that was it. Allan's idea was that I could put up some money to tide him over and work on the fishermen to accept him.

'Use influence', he said. 'Get something going with the local rag.'

'Allan, I was a sub-editor in Sydney. I wrote a bit of sports stuff occasionally.'

'You know the game, speak the language. Politics.'

Just before dark the two crewmen came on board carrying dinner—a big tailer that they'd caught up river. Colin and Bob were in their early twenties; fifteen years younger than Allan and me. Colin had had a year at a teacher's college on an Aboriginal scholarship and he was full bottle on the Aboriginal struggle.

'It'll be the issue of the sixties', he told me.

'More like the eighties', I said. 'If then.'

'The war's been over a long time', he said. 'What did you blokes fight for anyway?'

I looked across at Allan, who was cleaning the fish, tipping the guts over the side. He slid the knife expertly through the flesh and I was thinking that this was why I'd come, to fish and talk like middle-aged men. Allan said 'Good point', and my temper went up.

'What's good about it?' I snapped. 'The war was something else, international.' I felt the weakness of my position. 'These things take time.'

Bob was fat, and had already drunk more than his share of the rum. He seemed keen to back Colin up on everything.

'Thought you said this bloke'd help, Allan', he growled.

'Thought he might', Allan said quietly.

Allan fried the fish on a primus stove, and we ate bread with it and drank more laced tea. It got dark, the river slapped the boat and she rocked gently.

'What do the people in the town reckon?' I asked Allan.

'Not that many of them. Fishing people are against, butter factory people don't care. The rest run the holiday side of things — boats, shops and that.'

'What about them?'

'They don't mind a few boongs around for local colour', Colin said. 'But they don't want us to be part of things.'

'Right', Bob said.

'Have you got anyone on your side at all?'

'School teacher', Allan said. 'Good bloke.' They exchanged looks, and I sighed and felt irritated. It was a familiar situation. They knew things they wouldn't tell you. You were supposed to prove yourself by guessing or finding out. Mostly, I couldn't be bothered. But it was a wonderful night, mild and filled with comforting sounds and smells. I couldn't go back to the city and I still wanted to work with Allan.

'I'll snoop around', I said. 'Might come up with something. Can I sleep on the boat tonight?'

'You can', Allan said.

I spent several frustrating hours the next day in Coburg Heads and the bigger town across the river, Bustard Bay. I used the telephone to get appointments with the editor of the local paper, the head of the fisherman's co-operative and the top man in the union that covered the fishermen. I described myself as a journalist from Sydney, and got a polite reception until we came face to face. Then I got the freeze.

I was unlocking my car in the main street when a policeman approached me.

'Is this your car?'

'Yes.'

'Let's see the registration papers.'

I showed it to him, along with my licence. He scrutinised the papers and then dropped them on the bonnet. The licence slid off on to the ground. He ignored it and walked around the car. He lifted one of the windscreen wipers and twisted it around.

'That looks crook', he said. 'Let's see your spare.'

I opened the boot and he looked in at the tyre.

'Bit bare. I'm putting an unroadworthy order on this vehicle.'

'Can I drive it to a garage?'

'I don't think you'll find a garage here with what you want.'

'What do I do then?'

'Suit yourself, but if I see you driving that crate around here I'll arrest you.'

I stood in the street tossing the keys up in my hand. It was rougher than the other things, the slow service in the shops, refusals in pubs, the looks. I realised how little I came up against the problem since my days in the army, mainly because I kept my head down. In Bondi, where I lived, there were lots of Maoris and Greeks, I worked in a tolerant trade and I had no kids at school. I felt angry and vulnerable, and a long way from the safety of home.

A man walked across the street towards me; he was coughing and looking at the ground. *This'll be the schoolie*, I thought, and reluctant isn't the word.

'Mr Thomas?' It was the first 'Mr' that day.

'Yes.'

He held out his hand. 'Ian Harry, I'm ...'

'School teacher', I said.

'Right. How'd you know?'

'Guessed.' I put the keys away, and looked at the twisted windscreen wiper.

'Thought I might be able to help.'

'If you know somewhere a man could get a bloody drink that'd be a big help.'

'Football club', he said. 'My car's over here.'

I followed him across the street to a Morris Minor. He was tall, about six feet, and thin. His hair was wavy and he wore it pretty long for a man of about thirty. It had a reddish tinge. His clothes were the standard school teacher's gear—slacks and a sports coat. They were gingery like his hair and the general effect was of a man trying to tone himself down.

He was a bad driver, like me, and couldn't spare any

attention for talking. Near the edge of the town, fringed by trees, was a football ground. The season was over but the posts were still up. Harry drove to a low, wooden building with peeling paint like the goal posts and fence.

'Serve darkies here, do they?'

He flushed. 'Some. Have to.'

There were a few cars parked around, a couple of utes and two or three motor bikes. The building held the meeting rooms, a rough gym and the watering hole.

There was a trestle table with a bench seat under the window and I sat there while Harry went to the bar. The men nodded at him and concentrated on their beer. They were all leaning in the traditional way; a couple of them studied a racing form guide pinned to the wall, the rest looked out over the greying football ground. Harry came back with a jug and two middy glasses. He poured the beer and I gave him my last Craven Filter.

I studied him while we drank. He had deep-sunk, worried eyes, a broad nose and a good suntan with odd-looking white flecks across his face, like freckles in reverse. He drank fast, nervously.

'How did you go at the newspaper?' he asked.

'Not interested.'

He nodded. 'Thought not. What did Collins want—the copper?'

'To see the last of me I reckon. Warning.'

I drank some beer. It was a good keg; cold, with the gas just right. 'I don't see what I can do. I think Allan's going about it the wrong way.'

'What's the right way?' He sounded bitter and hostile, involved.

I shrugged. 'I don't know. Take it quietly.'

'Allan took it quietly for years. He was everyone's favourite Abo.'

I shrugged again. 'What's it to you?'

He didn't answer and we kept on drinking. It went on like that for over an hour. We talked about Allan in short bursts;

I got rude and he went quiet. I hadn't eaten anything all day and by the third jug I was suddenly drunk. He got drunk too, and when we staggered out of the club it was dark and he crashed into me.

'Black bastard', he slurred. 'Can't see you. You see me, Charlie?'

'Not clear.'

He let out a bellow of drunken laughter. 'That's right', he roared. 'I can't see you, you can't see me. Too bloody black to see.'

He was too drunk to drive, but I was too drunk to stop him. He told me his house was only a mile away. It was a long mile; he wove through the streets like a man who'd forgotten the way. I wondered why I was going to his house.

He missed the driveway, and I bumped my head on the car roof as we jumped over the gutter. He missed the fence though. We sat in the stalled car and laughed and then a light came on in the house.

'Ian! Ian, is that you?'

'The wife', he muttered.

The door opened and an outside light went on. It was a small fibro house, set up on unimpressive stilts. In the lights from the house and car I could see an unkempt garden and a pile of bottles under the porch. The woman was small and pale with dark hair; her face was pinched and tight. Her nightgown floated around her and she raised her fists to her face as we climbed out of the little car.

Harry said, 'Mary ...'

Her voice sliced through the still night like a bird shrieking. 'You bloody boong', she screamed. 'Oh, you dirty boong.' I turned to look at Harry who stood still, dark and hunched just out of the light. A child came out of the door and she clutched it against her legs. 'What about the children?' she yelled. 'How dare you bring your darkie mates here, you bloody boong.'

2

I was sitting in the bar of Young & Jackson's Hotel in Melbourne when Ernie Evans came in with the news.

'Rose is fighting a Jap', he said.

I bought him a beer. 'So what?' I said.

'Harada's a Jap, it means they're setting Lionel for the world title.'

I laughed. 'They'll have to hold it in Drouin.'

'Ah, you're a knocker, Charlie, always were. You be goin' to the fight?'

'I don't know. I've got my hands full just now.'

'How's it going?'

'Fair.'

We had another beer, and then Ernie hunched his shoulders up inside his jacket and tramped off into the cold Melbourne night. I nursed my dregs and thought back over the downhill slide that had got me there—the riot in Coburg Heads and the three months in gaol had started it. Allan lost his boat and I lost all my money. Back in Sydney I got involved with one lost cause after another. I was drinking hard, and confused a lot of the time. Finally I heard that the police had lined me up for a solid receiving charge. I hardly knew who or what was in my flat from one day to the next—crims, ex-crims, would-be crims, black, white and brindle. I had to get out of Sydney, and when the chance of a job in Melbourne came up I jumped at it.

It was the old army network that produced the job. An officer I'd served under spoke to someone who spoke to someone else. There was still an interview to get through after I arrived in Melbourne. I presented respectably and the desk man looked me over critically.

'Have to be tough', he said. 'What did you do before the war, newspaper work?'

'No, I was a boxer—tents and stadiums.'

'Ideal', he said.

I was given a list of eight names with addresses and a file on each person. Eight young men, eight different kinds of trouble. My job was to nursemaid them, to find them jobs and places to live and keep them from being violent and dishonest. It was an experimental programme, funded for six months at a time, and I had to put in monthly reports on my clients. In the first couple of months I'd made one trip to the South Australian border to bring back one of the kids, whose idea of fun was to steal a car, drive to Mount Gambier, wreck it and drive another one back. I got to him before he'd wrecked the car. I found two of them jobs, gave driving lessons to one, and did what I could for the rest of them. That night I had two problems needing attention. I finished the beer and went out into the rain to catch a tram to South Melbourne.

The old ex-army barracks huddled near the lake; the mud and the discomfort of them—the wind whistled through cracks and they were subject to electrical failures—brought back memories. I tramped through the drizzle and felt the old shoulder wound stiffen.

Rusty Fenton greeted me with his wide, white smile.

'You hear about Lionel, Charlie?'

'Yeah, I heard. If you can beat one Jap you can beat them all.'

Irony wasn't Rusty's strong point. 'Me cousin', he said. He danced in his singlet, shorts and sandshoes, flicking punches. 'I've got the blood.'

'Lionel must have a thousand cousins', I muttered. I shook water off my coat on to the rough board floor and watched Rusty dance and punch. He was light-skinned, with incongruous reddish hair. I liked him. I moved up, blocked one of his punches and claimed him. I clipped him on the chin with a left as I thought of my promise to his mother to look after him. Rusty had stolen cars and narrowly escaped a GBH

charge; he was keen on boxing and this was my way of reaching him. His mother hated boxing; she was a fat, complacent woman who doubted that my influence on Rusty would be a good one. I felt I was performing a balancing act as far as Rusty was concerned, but I particularly wanted to succeed with him.

'Three rounds with you in a minute', I told him. I went to the partitioned-off locker area to strip. Lucky Cafarella was sitting there smoking a cigarette.

'Sparring, Luck?'

He blew smoke contemptuously. 'No, waiting.'

'Who for?'

'What's it to you?'

'Why don't you piss off and leave him alone.'

Cafarella grinned, and I knew better than to argue with him. He had only girls and money on his mind, and he was incapable of talking about anything else. He had a dark, thin face under a tumbling mop of hair. His whispy moustache, white suits and sleek accessories made him a glamorous figure at the Lakeside Athletic Club. Five of the kids on my list had joined the club; Cafarella wasn't on anybody's list, probably because he was smarter than most.

I had no doubt as to who he was waiting for, Solly Rockman and that meant trouble. Rockman was one of my biggest headaches; he was a tough Jewish kid whose father was the black sheep of a very prosperous family. Rockman was intelligent and a promising footballer for South Melbourne under 19s. He came to the club and boxed for fitness; he'd spent three years in reform school for knifing a schoolteacher.

I changed into boxing gear and went out to the gym, hoping to head Rockman off. Fenton grabbed me and wrestled; Rockman strode through to the lockers. I sparred with Fenton and a few of the others, and felt how smoking had shortened my wind and beer drinking had put fat on me. Rockman did a bit, lackadaisically and left with Cafarella.

'I wonder what they're up to', I said to Rusty who was doing

sit-ups while I held his feet.

'Find out if you like, Charlie', he grunted.

'How?'

'Follow 'em.'

The remark didn't surprise me, the kids betrayed each other in subtle ways all the time. He meant it, but I treated it as a joke.

'No', I said. 'Get dressed, and we'll talk about this six rounder over some coffee.'

The rain had stopped and we tramped a mile to the bright lights of St Kilda. We got cappuccino, Dusty Springfield was on the juke box, and I lit a guilty cigarette.

Rusty sipped noisily. 'Is it a big difference, a six rounder?'

He'd had two four rounders at Festival Hall and won them. He'd gone six two-minute rounds at a suburban stadium, but his next fight was at West Melbourne, and it was six threes.

'Bloody oath it is', I said. 'Especially if he's any good and keeps you moving. You could be buggered at four.'

He looked hurt. 'I can train ten or twelve, you know that.'

'Training's not fighting like wanking's not fucking.'

'More fun', Fenton grinned.

'Yeah, but harder work.'

We discussed tactics and the referee for a bit. I noticed that he put two heaped spoons of sugar in his coffee and I asked him if he had any weight trouble.

'Bit', he said.

'Knock off the sugar, and do four miles a day, every day.' I was thinking that I should take the advice myself.

'Right', he said.

It was cold on the tram up Bourke Street towards Fitzroy; it was only April, so it was a foretaste of things to come. I missed Sydney, but I was determined to stick it out for a year. *Keep them all out of trouble for a year and get myself off the grog*, I thought. Then I might give Brisbane a go. Meanwhile, Rusty had given me an idea.

At six o'clock the next day, I was sitting in the department

car I was entitled to but seldom used. I liked the trams, and hated driving; but I couldn't follow Lucky Cafarella in a tram. His irridescent blue Falcon was parked across the street. I'd resisted the temptation to bring along some brandy and I'd thrown away my cigarettes. It was going to be nervy work, and I decided to let my nerves take the full strain.

Cafarella sauntered out at around seven o'clock, wearing a dark suit and a light poplin coat hung about with straps and buckles. I followed him while he stopped for a bottle and cigarettes and then drove to Richmond. Cafarella picked Solly Rockman up from a small house in a narrow street, and then drove to a parking area east of Melbourne University where they stopped for a good hour. I waited in my car getting cold and imagining the bottle being passed and the cigarettes being smoked.

I'm a nervous driver and Cafarella was a good, confident one so I had trouble keeping him in sight as he roared back to the city. He went into Lonsdale Street and up the ramp into the Silver Circle car park, although there was plenty of parking space on the street. I waited for them to walk out but they didn't. After an hour or so the Falcon boomed out on to the street again and Cafarella retraced the route—back to Richmond where he dropped Rockman and then back to Lucan Grove, St Kilda. He parked the car carefully, and locked it like a man not intending to go out again. I waited an hour and then drove home.

The next day I met Ernie Evans in Young & Jacksons and nursed a beer for an hour. After discussing Rose's prospects again I described Cafarella's movements to Ernie.

'What do you make of it, Ern? Two young blokes in a car park for an hour?'

'Not very hard to work out, Charlie. They're going to do the place over. You ever see the security in those places? Hopeless. They go in, take care of the blokes on duty, wouldn't be more 'n one or two. People leave all sorts of things in their cars, bags, purses, cameras, all that. Then one of them drives his car away, making sure he gets his ticket and the other

pinches the best car in the place. Change of plates and they're interstate in a few hours.'

'Sounds as if you know a bit about it.'

'It's happened often enough. What're you going to do, Charlie?'

'Don't know. Talk to Solly, I suppose.'

Rockman didn't come to the club that week and I knew he wouldn't welcome a visit at home, so I went off to see him play football.

Moorabbin was one of the worst places I'd ever seen, so far from the city and a great big nothing. I went out there by train, and Caulfield was the last place on the line that seemed to have any life. I joined the crowd that tramped in the bitter wind to the football ground. I'd seen Australian Rules on television once or twice, but it was a mystery to me. Rockman was playing when I got there; he was in the play a lot and got frequent cheers for his efforts. There were five points between the teams when Rockman jumped high and took the ball in the air in front of his goal. Then the siren sounded and the crowd fell silent as he went back to take his kick. The ball passed between one high post and a low post beside it, and the crowd groaned.

'Bloody Jew boy', a man near me said.

The players jogged off and I waited near the dressing room exit for Rockman. After half an hour he came out with his head hung low.

'Bad luck with the conversion', I said.

'What the fuck does that mean?'

I fumbled. 'You know, the last kick. I don't know what you call it.'

'Call it a sitter', he said bitterly. 'What're you doing here anyway?'

'I want to talk to you.'

'Make a fucking appointment for me, then.'

'Not like that, informal. Come and have some coffee.'

'Fuck coffee. I want a drink.'

We walked past the railway station and some shops to a big, impersonal pub. Most of the drinkers were watching a race on television in the bar. I ordered beers, and Rockman sneered when the drinks arrived. He bought a scotch.

'Cheers', I said.

'Look, Charlie, I'm not in the mood for a cheery ale. I'm getting pissed, starting now. What's on your mind? You better tell me while I can still focus.'

'Lucky Cafarella.'

He sipped the whisky and took a swill of beer. 'Yes?'

'You think he's pretty smart, don't you?'

'Smart enough. He doesn't run himself rooted on a football field.'

'Not so smart', I said. 'I know about the garage.'

He gaped at me, and covered up quickly by drinking. 'Garage? What're you talking about?'

'The Silver Circle. The one you're going to knock over.'

'Who says?'

'Never mind. Point is, Cafarella's leading you straight into trouble.'

'He seemed to regain his confidence. He tossed back the whisky and finished the beer. 'Want another, Mr Thomas?'

'No.'

'I think I will.' He was cocky suddenly and I knew I'd slipped somewhere. He ordered two beers and a scotch, and when they came he slapped his forehead.

'Oh, sorry, you said no. Never mind, drink up.'

What the hell, I thought, they're only sevens.

'You've got it wrong', Rockman said. 'Lucky's not going to rob his own uncle's fucking car park.'

'Uncle?'

'Sure, his uncle owns the place. Lucky goes there to do a bit of business for him from time to time. I've been with him.'

'What's the uncle's name?'

'I dunno. Kornblum or something.'

'*Kornblum*?'

'Yeah. Lucky's Italian on one side and Jewish on the other.

Didn't you know that?'

'No.' I was deflated, and Solly smiled a winner's smile. He seemed to have got over the football blues. He stroked the dark stubble on his cheeks. 'Well, it's been nice, but I've got to run. Going out. You going out tonight, Mr Thomas, sir?'

'No.'

He walked out, and I finished the beer and bought another. *Italian on one side and Jewish on the other*, I thought, he'd do well in New York. He'll probably wind up with his own car park—Lucky Cafarella's car park, Jews welcome, eye-talians welcome, no blacks.

It was all true: Morris Kornblum was the proprietor of the Silver Circle and the brother of Fortunato Cafarella's mother, Sylvie. I did my job: I visited, talked to employers, gave advice; and was in Rusty Fenton's corner for his six rounder against Terry O'Reilly who was the son of a former state champion.

O'Reilly creamed Rusty, never let him get set to find the range or pace, beat him to the punch, out-manoeuvred him for the whole six. The big contingent of Gippsland Aborigines who'd turned up to see Rusty was quiet. He was in tears after the fight.

'Everyone loses a few along the way', I said. 'Doug Brown beat Dave Sands twice—out-pointed him clean.'

'He made me look silly.'

'His Dad did, not him. He knows too much, that's all.'

'You reckon I can improve?'

I looked at his smooth, eager face—a few bruises that'd worry Mum, but nothing to speak of. The cuts and thickening would come later if he kept on with it. If he didn't, it would be hot cars and hot girls again. I worried about it.

Melbourne surrendered to winter; grey skies loomed over the city all day and the wind cut through my clothes. Rain lashed faces and darkened buildings. It was miserable; I burned coal in the grate in my room in Fitzroy and coughed. I had debts in Sydney, I had to watch my money. I stopped smoking, but

by late afternoon fingers were plucking at my sleeve and flies were buzzing in my brain and I had to drink.

Rockman came to the club very rarely. One night he turned up in a sports car which he locked carefully before going into the gym. He looked back at it proudly.

'Nice car', I said.

He shrugged. There were marks on his face from his football and heavy bruises on his legs. He did a little stiff training and left looking sour. There'd been no reports of thefts at the car park, but I wondered about the car.

After one of these sessions I was longing for a drink, when three of my kids approached me. Steve Kimonides, Russell Power and Ian McDonald had their hair slicked down from the shower and wore good-boy expressions.

'Can we have a word?' McDonald's accent was thick Glasgow; he was lantern-jawed, nuggety and had done three years in reform school for breaking and entering.

I nodded, and thought what an odd trio they made. Kimonides' handsome face was tight with strain; he was six months into a drug cure; Power was husky and cheerful, a little simple and he'd been easily led into an attempted service station hold-up.

'We want you to approach the government for us.' McDonald said.

'Christ, what about?'

'We want to fight in the army, you see.'

'We want to fight the communists, the chinks', Kimonides said.

'Veet Cong', McDonald said thickly.

'Same thing', Kimonides said.

'You're crazy', I said. 'I was in the last one. It's bloody awful.'

'My Dad was in it, too', Power said.

'My Dah was killed in it.' McDonald looked at Kimonides. 'In Greece.'

'I lost a good mate in Greece', I said.

'You were in it', Kimonides said. 'We want to be in it, too.'

'It's a bad war. It's all wrong. We shouldn't be there at all.'

'We want to go', McDonald said.

'What's stopping you?'

'Criminal records. You can't get into the army with a record', McDonald said, his accent even thicker. 'We want you to put in a word, say we're straight now, and that.'

'Do you realise the feeling against this war? Look, it can't be won. People are going to gaol over it.'

'Cowards', McDonald said.

'It's what me Dad wants', Power said.

'Your father wants you to go to Vietnam?'

'Yes.'

'Shit. I can't believe it.'

'Bugger his father', McDonald snarled. 'Will you do it; yes or no?'

I wondered at their motives—on the face of it, McDonald wanted to emulate his father, Kimonides might want to get into the Saigon heroin trade and Power would always follow the leader. I tried to remember my own motives for going to war and couldn't. Did I regret going? I didn't know.

'I'll do what I can', I said.

I spoke to the department officer and he said there was no chance. 'Put it on their files, though', he said. 'It'll be a plus for them. You can tell them that.'

I did, with apologies. McDonald spat on the floor and walked away. Kimonides looked dreamy, Power didn't seem to really care. I went after McDonald, who could build his frustration into violence.

'Ian', I said, 'enlist anyway. Change your name. Keep the details vague. I knew blokes in the army who took four years to learn their names. I'll cover for you if anything comes up.'

The struggle was visible on his raw-boned face. 'Thanks', he said awkwardly. 'Thanks, I'll do it.'

Rusty was booked to fight on the Rose-Tamoaka bill. In a rare show of responsibility, the promoters had demoted him to the four rounders; still, he was delighted to get the fight.'

'It's against some foreigner', he told me. 'Jeez, I thought

they'd drop me after O'Reilly.'

'Don't kid yourself. It's because you're an Abo. Lionel's made it fashionable—enjoy it while you can.'

'Dragovic; what kind of name's that, Charlie?'

'Yugoslav. Tough buggers, some of them.'

He worked like a demon and was very sharp. His only problem was his mother, who didn't want him to take the fight. He came to me, close to tears.

'She won't listen', he said. 'She doesn't understand.'

'I'll talk to her.' I phoned Mrs Fenton, and made an appointment to see her at home in Alphington the following evening.

It was May, but this wasn't one of the bleak days. The sky was yellowish and streaked pale blue, rather than grey. The appointment was for half past five and I decided to walk there. I calculated I'd be with her for an hour drinking tea; that'd take me past the six o'clock horrors and I might be able to get through the day without a drink.

I walked out along Alexandra Parade as it got dark and the early evening traffic streamed past. The river was slow and muddy as ever, but some of the old Victorian buildings looked well in the fading light.

Neat was the word for Mrs Fenton's home. It was a narrow-fronted, weatherboard cottage with a small, manicured front lawn and symmetrical flower beds. I'd met Mrs Fenton just once, in official surroundings, where she was just a little unsure of herself. Here, in her pavilion of respectability, I could expect something different. She came quickly to the door after I rang; she was fat but dignified in a neat dress and stylish cardigan. I wiped my feet carefully.

'Some tea, Mr Thomas?'

'Thank you.' The room she took me to was over-burdened by a crystal cabinet, heavily-framed family photographs and stodgy furniture. She wheeled the tea in on a chrome and glass auto-tray. I juggled the cup and scone nervously, feeling as if I was in a play on opening night and unsure of my lines.

'A better night', she said.

'Yes. I walked across from Fitzroy.'

'Oh.'

Wrong, all wrong, I thought. Wrong suburb and no car.

'Rusty's a good boy', I said. 'Reports on his work at the post office are fine.'

'I should hope so. I trust Ronald has learned his lesson. The important thing now is the company he keeps.'

'I agree, but so is his sense of purpose. And his ambitions.'

'The job in the post office has good prospects.'

'Not really, Mrs Fenton. Not without qualifications, and then very slowly. It's safe, I grant you.'

'And honest', she snapped. 'Not like boxing, hanging around with gamblers and drinkers, and punch-drunk half-wits.'

I wondered how much she'd seen and how much was straight prejudice. 'I had more than thirty fights myself', I said steadily. 'Hundreds in the tents. Am I punch-drunk? D'you think I'm a half-wit?'

'Do you drink?'

'A bit.'

'Gamble?'

'Occasionally.'

She sighed. 'I want a clean life for him.'

'So do I. That's my job, and I like the boy. I don't think boxing will harm him. He's very serious about the training as you must have seen—doesn't drink or smoke. How does he look to you—physically?'

She didn't reply.

I went on quickly. 'He doesn't go into the pubs, that cuts out most of the chances for trouble. He has prestige, respect; sportsmen do. That matters. I don't think he'll become a champion boxer, but he might. If he does, he'll need people's support and advice. If he doesn't, he'll have earned some money and picked up some useful experience.' *You liar*, I thought. He might get his brains scrambled and go on the grog, finish in the tents, go all the way back from this parlour

to the humpy.

The big woman sat silent and unhappy. I drank my tea and she poured some more. I ate another scone.

'Give it a little while, Mrs Fenton. It's terribly important to him and it's keeping him straight. If it was taken away now, he could be lost.'

'Lost' seemed to hit her; she nodded slowly. 'You're a good talker, Mr Thomas.'

'I'm Welsh', I said.

She laughed. The front door bell rang and she excused herself from the room. I had a desperate need for a cigarette.

Mrs Fenton came back into the room and with her was a younger woman. I pulled in my stomach and stood up.

'Mr Thomas, this is Kelly Christian, my niece. Mr Thomas is Ronald's counsellor, Kell.'

Kelly Christian was tall, with an athletic figure. She wore a dark sweater and a short, tight skirt. She had fine bones, a light brown skin and long, elegant hands. The women chatted for a minute and I tried to think of something to say to her. Eventually there was a silence and I felt her eyes on me.

'Rusty's your cousin then', I ventured.

'Sort of.' She gave Mrs Fenton a glance. 'Our mothers are very old friends.'

'He's a good kid.' *Brilliant*, I thought, brilliant stuff, Charlie. I got up. 'I must go, Mrs Fenton. Will you try it my way for a while?'

'I'll think about it.'

'I'm going, Auntie. I was just passing, really.'

I bumped into her in the narrow hall, said I was sorry and then found myself out on the street with her. She wore shoes with low heels and was the same height as me; her legs were long and beautiful.

'Where are you going?' she said.

'Fitzroy. Sorry, haven't got a car. I'm walking.'

'So'm I. Clifton Hill.'

It was dark and we walked down the quiet street, giving each other room. When we reached the main road I looked at

her; under the yellow light her face glowed like old gold.

'What did you mean about doing it your way?' she asked.

'It's about Rusty's boxing. I'm for it, she's not sure.'

'Why are you for it?'

I told her in similar terms as the ones I'd used for Mrs Fenton, trying not to sound pompous.

'Is it fun, boxing?'

'Sometimes; it's exciting, anyhow.'

'He should have fun.'

You could read a lot into that. I swallowed and clenched my fists inside my overcoat pockets.

'Would you like to come to see him. To the fight?'

She paused. 'When is it?'

I told her and waited; my heart was racing.

'Yes, I'll come. Thank you.'

The blood was pounding in my head. 'Good, good. Ah, Miss Christian is it? I ...'

She smiled. 'Yes, not married. Kelly.'

'Kelly. Where do you live? I'll pick you up. I'll have a car.' The words rushed from me and I felt as if I could fight the four rounder myself.

She reached into her handbag, pulled out a pen and a notepad and scribbled. I took the paper.

'Will Rusty win?' she said.

'Yes.' *God*, I thought, I'm crazy. He might get killed.

We crossed the divided road: I wanted to touch her, take her arm, but I didn't. She smiled at me and headed off down Smith Street. I walked home, made a meal, read a book and didn't drink.

At the next training session, four days before the fight, I mentioned her to Rusty.

'Cousin? More like an auntie. She'd be near thirty.'

I skipped hard and looked down at my body; a bit soft but not bad for forty plus. A month off the grog and I'd be a welterweight. I asked Rusty what his old cousin did for a living but he was vague about it.

'She's a nurse or something. A teacher maybe. I dunno.'

On fight night I was as nervous as if I was going in against Rose. I shaved carefully long before I needed to and brushed my teeth three times. Usually I'd have gone to the stadium in my corner clothes—jeans and a sweatshirt—but tonight I packed them in a bag and wore slacks and a blazer. No tie, though; I couldn't come at that.

I parked the department car outside the big, white terrace in Clifton Hill. As I rang the bell I panicked at the thought that she might have forgotten the engagement, but she opened the door and looked pleased to see me. She leaned close, and craned her neck to look over my shoulder.

'Not raining?'

'No. Cold, though.'

'I'll get a coat.' She was wearing the same clothes as before, and she went down the hall to a coatstand where she got a dark car coat and a black and white scarf.

I crashed the gears and swore.

'Sorry.'

'Don't worry. Hear it every day.'

'What work do you do, Kelly?'

'I'm a nurse educator they call it. Nearly anyway. I'm still studying. Too old for it, but there it is.'

I steered carefully. 'You're ancient all right. Rusty thinks of you as an aunt. God knows what he thinks of me—grandfather most likely.'

She laughed. 'I doubt it. Did you teach him to box?'

'More or less.'

'Who taught you?'

I thought about it. 'Lots of people.'

She reached over and touched my eyebrow. 'You've got a few scars there.'

'Cuts. We bettle-browed Abos cut easily.'

She retreated back to her side. 'I say something wrong?' I said.

'No.' She forced a lighter tone. 'Where are you from?'

'Queensland originally. Sydney more recently.'

'Do you know much about your people, the *kooris*, I mean?'

'Yeah, a bit. You?'

'Nothing', she said. 'Nothing at all.'

Our seats were at ringside, a few rows back. I put her next to the aisle, and dropped my coat over the next seat.

'I'm looking after Rusty. He's in the second fight. Then I'll come back. Okay?'

She nodded. I could see three familiar faces within a few feet and I acknowledged them. 'You'll be all right. I've got friends here.'

She settled herself in the seat. 'I'll be fine.' She sniffed. 'Is it always so smoky?'

'Fraid so.'

Fenton was in the dressing room, stripped and nervous. I told him I had Kelly with me and he smiled and looked more relaxed.

'That's great, Charlie. You keen on her?'

'Let's get on with it.'

The first preliminary was stopped in the second round, and we shuffled down the aisle through the buzzing crowd. I deferred to old Jack Kearney, who was Rusty's nominal trainer-manager, in the corner. He was a survivor from the old days, just coping. We looked across the ring at Dragovic who was a stocky, pale-skinned youth with tattoos on his upper arms. Hard, dark bristle stood out threatingly on his pale cheeks and chin.

Baffen, the referee, raced through the formalities, and Dragovic rushed out and tried to bullock Rusty into a corner. He stepped aside neatly and the Yugoslav blundered into the ropes. Rusty prepared him with fast lefts and stayed away from his wild swings.

In the break I looked across at Kelly whose face was tight, but interested. She waved and Rusty grinned through the mouthguard. She shook her fist at him.

'Those swings hurt?' I said.

'No, no bloody steam in them.'

'Don't let him get the range then, eh Jack?' Kearney nodded. 'Give 'im a tap', he said. 'Hook him.'

Rusty did it beautifully; he baulked Dragovic twice until he was almost spinning and then he brought in a short, hard hook. Dragovic's feet slid away and he went down. Fenton danced in his corner while Baffen counted eight, then he went in with two spearing lefts and Dragovic went down and stayed there.

'Bloody dingo', Rusty said.

'No', I said. 'Smart, you had him beaten. He'll think about next time.'

I rejoined Kelly after Rusty had showered and gone off to watch the rest of the fights with a friend. A dull six rounder was in progress. She clutched my arm.

'Is he all right?'

I grinned at her. 'Rusty? He's floating.'

'No. The other boy. Is he all right?'

God, I thought, I forgot all about him. 'He wasn't hurt', I said stiffly.

'I can't say I like it much.'

'Do you want to go?'

'No, I want to see Rose. Is he very good?' She was still holding my arm, and I took the opportunity to get hold of her hand.

'It sounds disloyal', I said. 'But I've never thought Rose was as good as everyone says. There seems to be something ... I can't put my finger on it. I'm probably wrong.'

She didn't take her hand away, and she squeezed mine when Rose came into the ring after the prelims. She clapped hard and then took my hand again. The Gippslanders were jumping in their seats and the white Australians were shouting their support for Rose. Two Japanese, middle-aged, bespectacled and in suits watched impassively from the row in front of us. I thought that they were old enough to have been in New Guinea. I might have shot at them and they at me. It was odd; I felt nothing about them. They weren't Japanese in the same sense.

Tamaoka had won twenty-five of his twenty-nine fights and Rose had won twenty of his twenty-two. The Japanese

looked slight, almost spindly compared with Rose, who had heavily-muscled arms and a deep chest. He was bristly, almost bearded, and he looked a lot older than eighteen.

In the first round Tamaoka was fast to not much purpose; he put in some light rights to the head and Rose took a while to adjust to the southpaw stance. When he did, he connected several times to the head of the Japanese, who did not change expression or seem to be affected. He kept coming in and Rose kept hitting him. The pattern didn't change much in the next few rounds, and I thought Rose was starting to look a little weary. I shook my head.

'What's he doing wrong?' Kelly whispered.

'Hitting his head. Looks to me as if he's wasting his time. Should go for the body.'

Rose did that in the fifth and stepped up the pace. He caught Tamaoka coming off the ropes, got him hard and low, but fair. Kelly gripped my hand as the anguished gasp from Tamaoka cut through the noise at ringside. He went down and lay still for the court. Rose jumped in the air, and the Gippslanders roared.

Fenton pushed through the crowd towards us.

'Wasn't he great!' he shouted. 'Hello, Kelly. Wasn't he great!'

'You were good too, Rusty', he said.

He grinned. 'You two coming to the party?'

We both nodded together.

The address was in Fitzroy, off Gertrude Street. Kelly sat close to me as I drove, hesitantly as always. I stopped outside a hotel where a dim light was showing.

'Sly grog', I said. 'Hang on.'

I bought beer and lemonade. 'I'll try to keep Rusty on shandies. Do you drink, Kelly?'

She shook her head. 'My question—do you like driving?'

'Hate it.'

'Shove over then.'

The party was in a three storey terrace and was going strong when Kelly slipped the car into a tight spot outside.

She was a good driver. We pushed our way down to the kitchen. Most of the people there were dark; I recognised a white TV-commentator and a football player. There were a couple of young, white girls. The kitchen table was covered with cans, flagons and bottles. I opened a bottle for myself and found some orange juice for Kelly. Loud rock music was being played in the front of the house, and the dancing made the whole floor shake.

'This all looks a bit rough', I said in Kelly's ear. 'Let's find Rusty.'

We threaded through the mob, checked the front rooms, couldn't locate him, and went upstairs. A cheer came up from below and I saw Rose come in the front door. He'd shaved, was unmarked and looked very happy.

Rusty was sitting in a chair in a middle room drinking and tapping his feet. A girl sat on the arm of the chair and played with his hair. He beamed at me, raised his glass and drank. The girl reached up a bottle from the floor, filled his glass again, sipped and gave it back to him. Her fingers went back to his hair.

'Having a good time?' Rusty yelled.

I nodded. 'Take it easy. It was only a four rounder.'

'Yeah, yeah, you see Lionel?'

'He just arrived.'

'Wanna see him.' He got up, swayed, and pulled the girl off the chair. 'C'mon, let's see the champ.' The girl bent down for the bottle, and let him pull her out of the room.

A man slumped down heavily into the chair and cradled a flagon on his lap. He squinted up at Kelly. 'Want a fuck, love?' he said.

More people pushed into the room and we squeezed past them out on to the building. I put my arm around Kelly and held her close in the crush of bodies. The music got louder. Another cheer went up as Rose left the house. I saw Fenton raise the bottle to his mouth. Then there was a crash of glass and the music stopped. Shouting started and women's voices went up hysterically. More glass broke and a man came out

of the front room backwards, staggering, out of control. He crashed into the people in the hall and went down. Another man came out weaving and with his fists up; one of the men who'd been pushed hit him full in the face. They locked together, thrashing and fell back into the front room. I hurried Kelly down the stairs towards the front door. A woman was screaming on a single, steady note, and I heard a boot hit flesh. Someone loomed up in front of us and reached for Kelly's shoulder; I chopped the arm down and shoved him back up the passage.

We got to the street and almost ran across to the car. I drove away jerkily, a siren screamed behind us and a blue light filled the street. I drove a careful half mile and stopped. Kelly was pressed hard into the corner, crying quietly. I put my arms around her and stroked her thick, dark hair.

'Why is it always like that?' she sobbed.

'The grog mostly and ...'

'What?' she said fiercely.

'You must know', I said. 'It's being black. Letting off steam.'

We huddled together quietly, then I kissed her and she kissed back hard. We kissed until we were breathless; I touched her face, which was smooth and still wet. I gave her a handkerchief.

'Have you got somewhere we can go?' she said.

'Yes', I said. 'You drive.'

Fenton was contrite the next time I saw him at the club, and I punished him in the sparring session. I moved him around the ring both ways using all the tricks I'd picked up in the stadiums and tents. I roughed him up in close, and put in sly punches on what would have been the referee's blind side in a real match.

He was panting hard when we stopped.

'Good eight-round boy'd kill you', I said. 'You're telegraphing the right hand, and you've got into bad habits with

your feet. It's a wonder you don't trip over them.'

He took it silently. I hadn't had a drink in five days and felt the benefit. We launched into a brutal skipping and sit-ups routine, and the sweat was running on us when we stopped.

After the shower I said, 'If you want to be a playboy, be a playboy. If you want to be a boxer, keep away from it.'

'Lionel likes a drink', he muttered.

'He's a fool if he does. It'll slow him up and put weight on him. One day he'll have to boil down, and he'll get his ears knocked off.' I worked the towel vigorously. 'He's a bloody featherweight anyway, you just have to look at him. He's a mug to fight bantam.'

With Kelly, I discovered Melbourne: we ate in Carlton restaurants and walked in the parks. Kelly was a keen Collingwood supporter, and we went to the football; I even learned some of the finer points of the game. I read *Power without Glory*. In bed, under layers of blankets, we exchanged edited versions of our lives. Kelly's mother had been born in the Western District and had grown up in an orphanage.

'What about your Dad?'

'American', she said. 'Not a white man. Just passing through.'

She had no siblings; Mrs Christian, as her mother styled herself, had worked all her life as a clerk in a city department store. Kelly had attended a convent school in Caulfield.

'I had three uniforms', she said. 'So there'd always be a clean one, no matter what.'

'And what's she like, your mother?'

'You met Aunt Rose Fenton—like her.'

'She wouldn't think much of me, then.'

'No. Too old, too black, you drink, you're a boxer, you're from Sydney.'

'I've got a job. I'm a war hero.'

'She doesn't like to hear about the war. That's what brought Abner Jones Junior, or whatever his bloody name was, out her.'

I dreaded having to do the scone and tea routine with Mrs Christian, and Kelly didn't seem to be in a hurry about it. She was working hard teaching, doing hospital rounds, studying at technical college. She played competition basketball and trained two nights a week. The house at Clifton Hill was shared with other nurses, and we used my room for love-making.

One night I sat looking at her while she poked the fire in the grate; in reality her features were longish, well-shaped, but the shadow of her face on the wall was distorted, flat-looking.

'Did you ever want to be white?' I asked.

'Not really. I didn't know I was anything different till I was seventeen.'

'How come?'

'Well, Mum's very light, you know? She could almost pass. She stays out of the sun, all that. She used to say that my father was a coloured gentleman. Just that. So I was coloured, but everyone's coloured something. There were even a couple of girls from Ceylon in the school, and a Filipino. I was the star athlete. I didn't know anything about Aborigines. They weren't in the school books. It was all explorers and governors, you remember.'

I nodded.

'It was like growing up with no mirrors to look in.'

'Was it bad when you got to know about it. Worse?'

'It was gradual—at nursing school, at the dances. It was pretty bad. You were expected to be slow to pick things up, easy to get drunk, easy to get your legs open.'

'Black velvet.'

'Mmm. So I came second in the state, didn't drink and didn't open my legs. Didn't have much fun either. Do you want to hear about the men in my life?'

'Yes.'

'Two. First one was a doctor. Married. Got me pregnant and did the abortion himself. Beaut bloke. Second was an artist; well, an illustrator, really. He drew for newspapers

and books. He was a sweetie. He drank a lot, and killed himself in a car.'

'When?'

'Five years ago. Have you had many women, Charlie?'

'Very few.'

'Why?'

'Shy.'

'Kids?'

'No. Why did you agree to come out with me? I've often wondered.'

'You talked about young Rusty, not about yourself. Men usually talk about themselves. And you were so eager; pathetic, it was.' She got the fire leaping up, and came over and wrapped her arms around my legs.

'What's your ambition in life?'

'To marry you.'

She laughed. 'Forget it. What else?'

'I don't know. To write a book.'

'What about?'

'I don't know.'

The more time we spent together the better it got, in bed and out. I got my drinking down to three beers a day and I lost weight. I trained hard with the kids and ran for miles around the Melbourne parks. Sometimes it seemed that Kelly and I were the only people in town without colds. One bleak July Saturday, we travelled out to Moorabbin to see St Kilda play Collingwood. Leafing through the *Record* I noticed that Solly Rockman had slipped right down the list of under-19 grade goal kickers. I asked a Collingwood supporter about it.

'Dropped, mate', the man said.

I fretted about it through the match, which Collingwood won easily.

'You're worried about this boy', Kelly said as we waited in a long line of cars in the car park.

'Yeah. I've lost touch with him.' I'd told her about Rockman.

'We'd better skip what I had in mind, then.'

'Skip what?'

'I was going to take you to Caulfield to meet me Mum.'

'Oh, shit.'

'You'll have to cut that out, for a start.'

'God. What will I say?'

'No pointers. Just be yourself, only don't swear.'

'It's got to happen sometime, I suppose. All right. Let's do it. How do I look?'

I had on suede shoes, corduroys, a heavy sweater and a car coat. My hair was crisp and short, my cheeks were beard-shadowed and hollow.

'Yummy.' She slipped into gear and zipped into the traffic.

Mrs Christian lived, not in one of the Victorian buildings I had admired from the train, but in a new block of flats, red-brick and harsh, surrounded by concrete. The front door mat and all around it were excessively clean and the door itself was unscratched. Kelly muttered an introduction as she took off her coat.

'Charles.' Mrs Christian rolled the name approvingly. 'Come in, you must be frozen. How you can stand in the cold for hours I do not understand.' She was tall and full-bodied, pale and with expert make-up. Her black hair shone like the polished surfaces in her flat. Her voice was careful with what sounded like a faint Scots burr; it made her seem briefly exotic, an impression which she quickly countered with the totally conventional tea and biscuits.

'A social worker', she purred. 'Now that's nice, goodness knows there are enough young people in need of help these days. But can you understand them, Charles? I mean, you're more my generation than theirs?'

'I do my best', I said. 'I'm strongest on practical help, not the psychological side.'

'Practical, yes. Do you have a degree?'

'Mum!' Kelly snarled.

'No, Mrs Christian, no degree. But I've had a lot of experience with people who haven't been able to help themselves.'

Her well-shaped mouth settled into a hard line and I could guess at her thoughts—drunks, blacks, whores, goal-birds.

'More tea?'

Somehow we got through it. Outside I felt like sitting in the gutter, pissing against a wall, doing anything to dispel the respectability.

'Christ, I need a drink.'

'Coffee', Kelly said firmly. 'Think like that and you're still on the piss, bad as ever.' She started the car.

'You'd know', I muttered.

'I do. I tried it after Michael died. Drunk all day and drunk all night. Port mostly, didn't eat, finished up in hospital. I was almost at the pink elephant stage. Never again.'

'Let's go home.'

On the next working day I looked down my list of charges—Fenton, okay; Kimonides, okay; McDonald, in the army; Mattioli, okay. I made phone calls, checked with employers. I arranged to see a couple of them, conscious that I'd let things slide a bit since meeting Kelly. I had a question mark against Rockman's name. He'd left his job with the South Melbourne council, and I didn't want to risk complicating his life by contacting his parents. I rang the secretary of the football club and asked why Rockman was no longer on South's list.

'Missed training', he said.

'Is that all? I thought he was a bit of a star. It'd take more than that, surely?'

'No press?' he snapped.

'No fear.'

'Bad influence. Pissed, betting big. He organised a big party the night before a match—grog, girls, the lot. We got licked.'

'Have you, what d'you call it? Cleared him?'

'No one'll touch him. He's finished.'

'If I can straighten him out will you give him another chance?'

'Not a hope. He's wiped. Wasn't that good anyway.'

'You're a gentleman.' I hung up and doodled on the paper. Rockman—no job; no club; I wondered if he still had the flash car. That afternoon, I waited in Lucan Grove. Rockman arrived in the sports car about an hour after Cafarella got home. I got out and hailed him. He looked at me nervously.

'Hello, Solly.'

He leaned back against his car and didn't reply.

'How's things?'

'All right.'

'Little talk? Live here now, do you?'

'That's right.'

'You're supposed to notify a change of address.'

'Well, I didn't. You notify them', he snarled. 'That all?'

'No. I want to talk to you. Inside, or the pub?'

'I don't want to go anywhere with you. Piss off.'

I fought the anger down. 'You've got no choice. Here or somewhere else.'

'Here then.' He pulled cigarettes out and lit one with a gold lighter. The coat was camel hair, elaborately stitched.

'Have you got another job?'

'Sort of.' He blew smoke smoothly.

'What does that mean?'

'I'm working with Lucky.'

'Doing what?'

'Selling things.'

'Jesus, I can imagine. What about the football?'

'I tossed it in.'

'I heard they dropped you.'

He shrugged. 'Who cares?'

'I do. You're headed for trouble. You smell of it already.'

'How could a fuckin' Abo smell anything.'

I was assailed by smells—the wine on the boy's breath along with the tobacco, the smell of fuel from his car, a scent from the expensive fabric of his coat now getting wet in the drizzle. I felt the rain cold as the sweat started out on my forehead.

'You report to the office, twice a week', I said evenly.

'Midday, Monday and Thursday.'

He side-stepped me, and walked off towards the gate. I sat in the car, trembling and longing for alcohol and tobacco. All I could feel satisfied about in the encounter was that I hadn't hit him. At least I hadn't done that.

'You know, Mum was right, in a dreadful sort of way', Kelly said later when I told her about it. 'It's so hard to understand kids like him. I feel like asking is there any good in him. And that's such a silly thing to say.'

'That's right', I said. 'It doesn't mean anything. I suppose he's confused and angry about his family problems, but there's nothing anyone can do there. It's as if you have to just sit back and hope good things happen to him. Not much of a job.'

'The football should have helped—having that talent.'

'Yes, that worries me. That could have been his chance. My feeling is that Cafarella is the other side of the coin.'

'Will seeing him every week help?'

'Probably not, probably just put his back up more. But you never know, he's not stupid, I just might get through to him somehow. But what can an Abo teach a Jew, really?'

She laughed. 'That's where I've got an edge see, with my African blood. Africans were civilised before Welshmen.'

'All your African blood does', I said, 'is make you a shit-hot basketball player'.

Rockman reported, regular and sullen. He smoked, and responded only when he had to. He was vague about his income but he parked the sports car ostentatiously outside the office. He was always well-dressed, with expensive accessories. He put on some weight, and when I commented on it he went dark with anger.

Vain, I thought, perhaps I can use that. Then I was repelled by that sort of manipulation. Compared with the dark clouds over Rockman, Fenton's life was simple and clear.

Lionel Rose won five more fights, and signed to defend his title against Rocky Gatellari in Sydney in December. Rusty fought twice on the same bill as Rose, and won both times.

The sports writers coupled them up and the promoters of the Rose-Gatellari match persuaded Jack Kearney to put Rusty into an eight round preliminary.

'I'm not sure you're ready', I told him. 'Eight threes is a hell of a long way to go.'

'I can do it Charlie. And the way I'm going, it won't last eight.'

'You have to plan on eight, though. Who is it?'

'O'Reilly again.'

'Oh, God. How's he been doing?'

'He's won three, same as me.'

'Six rounders?'

'One eight.'

'I don't like it.'

'I have to take it, Charlie. A title bill, it's a big chance. You'll come up, won't you?'

'Yeah, I'll come.' *I can bring Kelly*, I thought. A few days off. Sydney in December. 'You'll have to train like a bastard.'

'I will.' He did. He ran five miles a day and put in long, gruelling sessions in the gym. After a while he weighed nine six and couldn't keep still.

Summer hit Melbourne late, but hard. By early December the days were hot and dry with a north wind unlike any I'd met, except in the desert. I missed the breezes of Sydney, the light winds that lifted off the water and cooled the evenings. I arranged a week's leave and Kelly did the same. We flew to Sydney on the morning of the fight. Fenton had gone up a week before to acclimatise.

'You'd think he was fighting for the world title in Mexico City', Kelly said.

'That's how he feels about it. Gatellari fought for the world title, and I reckon Rose will. It feels like the big time to Rusty.'

We were circling over Sydney; Kelly looked down and I leaned across her to look myself. The landscape was untidy, the wide and narrow waterways straggled in from the coast.

'Will he win?' she asked.

'I don't know. He's as fit and keen as he can get. If he doesn't it means he's not good enough, but I don't know whether he'll see it that way.'

'Is that what happened to you? You saw the light?'

'Christ, no. I hung about, fought in the stadiums and tents at the same time. Won and lost. I couldn't fight any more after the war, which was just as well. I could have finished up in a bad way.'

The plane flashed over the water and on to the runway, but the water was still there, vast, blue and clean, away to the east.

'You love this place', Kelly said softly.

'Yeah. How'd you know?'

'Your face. You're usually not a great one for smiling.'

I was flush on my good salary and abstinent habits; we rented a car at the airport and Kelly drove to the hotel at the Cross.

'Suppose you came here for dirty weekends', she said as we followed the porter up the stairs.

'Always wanted to, never did.'

We passed a middle-aged couple on the stairs who smiled at us. I smiled back, and heard the woman say 'Indians' after she'd passed.

The room was big and airy with a view east to Rushcutters Bay. We looked out briefly on the streets, park and water, and took off our clothes.

Rusty was staying in Newton, and I phoned him to ask about his condition.

'I'll kill him', he said.

'Just box. Lefts and rights, stop when the bell rings. It's a job.'

We walked through the Cross and down Park Street to the city. Sydney was foreign territory to Kelly; I guided her around but I didn't know the answers to most of her questions—How old's that? What's this called? At about six o'clock we went to a Spanish restaurant. Kelly pointed across

the road to a pub.

'Get some wine, Charlie.'

'What?'

'Go on. I'll have a glass.'

I bought the wine and we sat on a bench at a rough wooden table with a big basket of crusty bread on it. The place smelled of chicken and fish, oil and garlic. I poured the wine.

'I don't want to turn you teetotal Charlie, and I don't want to be teetotal myself. I think I can manage a glass of wine or two these days.'

It was the first time she'd acknowledged that our relationship had made any difference to her fundamentally. I drank my wine, feeling her presence like a warm, soft wind around me. We ate prawns and chicken.

'We'll be popular.' She let garlic waft across as she mopped up oil with bread.

'Audience'll be three-quarters Italian, remember. Who'll notice?'

Cars were parked solid for miles around the showground which was lit up bright and harsh. Kelly looked nervously up at the dark, starry sky.

I smiled. 'This is Sydney, love. It isn't going to rain.'

I used my pass to get Kelly to a seat in the moderately-priced section before I went off to the dressing room. She looked up from the programme which showed Gatellari, darkly handsome and perfectly groomed, posing elegantly in his boxing gear; and Rose in a half-body shot, unshaven and wild-looking. 'Tell Rusty good luck from me', she said.

Fenton was sitting on a bench, tapping his feet. He jumped up when I came into the room.

'What's wrong?' I said.

'He's too light', Kearney muttered. 'Nine four, he's spotting the other kid five pounds.'

'It's all right', Rusty swung his arms and danced.

'O'Reilly was nine nine dead, he could be more when he gets in the ring.' Kearney looked unhappy.

'Let's hope it's fat', I said. The crowd roared as something

happened in the six rounder.

'Dagoes', Kearney said scornfully.

I looked at him. 'Fidel la Barba, Graziano, La Motta, Marciano—fancy your chances with any of them, Jack?'

Rusty's ribs showed through his brown skin. *He's down too fine*, I thought, but better than the reverse. 'Just box him', I said. 'Stay out of trouble. A lot can happen in eight rounds. Right, Jack?'

Kearney grunted.

The ring was in the centre of the showgrounds, under heavy lighting which washed out over the tightly packed banks of seats. There were no large gaps, and the crowd was building towards an emotional height for Rose and Rocky. O'Reilly reached the ring first and moved around confidently. Rusty was nervous in the middle of the big crowd. I studied O'Reilly carefully, but there was no sign of fat. He looked hard-muscled and dangerous. He also looked a lot older than Rusty, although they were the same age. This alarmed me; in my experience, that's the look of a winner.

That's the way it was. The fight was almost a repeat of the previous one, with O'Reilly perhaps showing some improvement. Fenton had improved too, but his opponent's awkward, disconcerting style kept him off-balance and neutralised his skills.

'Look at him', Kearney said in the first break. 'He must be ten stone.'

'Yes', I said, 'and he's smart and fast with it'.

O'Reilly boxed Rusty's ears off in the third, and near the end of the round I picked up the towel.

'Let him go another round', Kearney said. 'He'll never forgive you.'

'Fuck you', I said. O'Reilly caught Rusty on the ropes and belted him with a heavy right; I saw Rusty's eyes go out of focus and one knee sag. I threw the towel at the referee's feet and slipped through the ropes. O'Reilly's glove was in the air in the victory wave and the tears were starting in Rusty's eyes when I reached him.

'I'm sorry, Charlie', he said. 'He's too good.'

Thank Christ you know it, I thought.

Fenton walked over and touched O'Reilly's glove. 'Good luck, mate', he said.

O'Reilly looked suspiciously at him as he slipped his big, white arms into the dressing gown. 'Yeah, you too', he muttered.

I watched Rusty closely on the way back to the dressing room and after looking for the vagueness or numbness that meant trouble, but he seemed to be all right. He showered, dressed quickly and examined his swollen jaw in a mirror.

His grin was grotesque. 'My last punch', he said.

'You mean that?'

'He out-classed me, and I was scared.'

I hugged him. 'It takes brains to know it', I said. 'And guts to say it. C'mon. Let's see how Lionel goes.'

We went out and sat with Kelly. She said comforting things and Rusty grinned lop-sidedly at her. The noise has risen and it drowned out speech as Gatellari got into the ring. He was very pale, and I wondered why he hadn't been out in the sun. He looked fit and frail at the same time. Rose got a big hand from the WASPS and respect from the Latins. Not very many blacks had been able to afford the prices. He bounced around in the ring, looking young and keen, despite the dark bristle on his cheeks and jaw and his pouched, shadowed old man's eyes.

Vic Patrick whipped quickly through the instructions and Kelly gripped my arm as they moved into centre ring. Rose connected with a crisp left lead, and Gatellari moved back. Rose crowded him and the Italian seemed unsure of which way to move. Rose scored with a left-right combination, rangefinding punches that he hadn't really expected to land. He boxed briskly for the rest of the round and skipped back to his corner. Gatellari settled down a little in the next few rounds, but he didn't inconvenience Rose, who dictated the pace of the fight. In the fourth Gatellari, bobbing, moved his head directly into a short right and smothered up.

'What's wrong with Rocky?' Fenton said.

'Burruni', I said.

The Italians became quieter as the fight went on; they shouted encouragement to Rocky and cheered him when he did something, but the tide was with Rose, and they knew it. It looked to me as if Rose could have stopped him in any round after the seventh, and after the tenth I stood up.

'Let's go, Kelly', I said. 'This is going to be nasty. I don't want to see it.' Fenton watched intently as the trainers clustered around Gatellari. He hardly saw us go.

We filed out and the bell rang. Outside the air was warm and still as we walked through the tangle of cars to the road.

'Isn't Gatellari good enough?' Kelly asked.

I was stridingly angrily and she had to trot to keep up. 'It's not that', I said harshly. 'He's all right, or he was. He was over-matched with the world champ and he got thrashed. Now he's in with the best bantam in Australia and he's still thinking about Burruni. I hope they stop it before Rose hurts him.'

'What do you really think about boxing, Charlie?' She tugged at my arm, slowing me.

'Don't know. Love-hate. Doesn't matter much, it's finished. I give it five years, ten at the most. Rusty says he's giving it away.' I knew that meant I was giving it away too.

We walked towards the city. Kelly talked about the flower scents on the wind. They were rich, almost tropical and they came from single pots on front porches and wild, tangled fence vines.

'Would you like to come back to Sydney?'

'Yes.'

'Where do you think we should live?'

I stopped and put my arms around her. 'Anywhere.'

Back in Melbourne life had an insubstantiality. I was waiting out my year of service, waiting to move to Sydney with Kelly. Waiting for that. Rusty went into summer training with the Richmond football club. The bad beating Gatellari

had taken from Rose had confirmed his feelings about the lack of prospects in boxing. His mother was pleased, and she transferred some of her approval of me to Mrs Christian. Things got a little warmer there. Rose signed to fight Harada for the world title.

As the summer holidays set in, Kelly and I went to the bayside beaches, which I found insipid, and then to the surf beaches further out. There were some good surf beaches, but they had a desperate, tuned-up air which made me uncomfortable. I liked Sydney's relaxed acceptance of the surf. We made love in motels and our skins went dark.

'It's not really black though, is it?' Kelly said once, contemplating her long, brown leg.

'What about this?' I said.

'Very nearly.'

A couple of my charges went away on holidays, but I tried to keep an eye on them, and checked them in back at their jobs in the new year. I worked hard at it, making up for earlier slackness, and the department took my resignation hard.

'You're doing a great job, Charlie', my boss said. 'Eight kids, whole year almost and no trouble. I think it's a record. You sure about this?'

'I'm sure. We want to go to Sydney. There's others here who can do the job if you back them up.'

'Maybe. Don't like to say this, but have you thought you might be letting the kids down?'

'Yes. I'll probably do something the same in Sydney though, and with the blacks. Sorry if it sounds selfish, that's the way it is.'

'Good luck.'

The day before I finished, I was sitting in the office working late on a final report. I'd concealed McDonald's enlistment and was now trying to put the best construction on it. The phone rang and I answered it in the dull, routine way you do in offices.

'Sergeant Smith, police, Mr Thomas. I wonder if you could get down to Russell Street?'

'Why?'

'We're holding a Solomon Rockman on a serious charge.'

'Jesus. He asked you to call me?'

'Sort of.'

'What does that mean?'

'He said to get hold of the Abo.'

I took a taxi to the police station, trying to recall any difference in Rockman the last time I'd seen him. None; as prosperous-looking and full of resentment as ever. *I should have checked on all that bloody money*, I thought. Cafarella had opened a shop in St Kilda—I'd looked at it once, flashy clothes and shoes. I'd assumed it was making money, but I should have checked.

At Russell Street, they told me that Rockman was being held on a number of charges of thefts from homes and of cars.

'Break and enter?'

'Not exactly. Seems he got copies of the keys to cars and houses and then lifted the stuff. Got a Jag and a couple of Mercs away. It took the bulls quite a while to put the case together, but it's tight.'

'Where was he arrested?'

'At home, St Kilda.'

'Him and who else?'

'Just him.'

Rockman was too well-dressed for the cells. He was in a cream suit and polished shoes, but the tie was askew and the neck of his shirt was grubby where his sweaty fingers had pawed at it. His face was pale and there was a raw smoking-sore on his bottom lip.

'Bad trouble', I said.

'Yeah. I'll go up for a while for this. You're the only one I can think of who can help me.'

'What d'you want me to do?'

'See my old woman. I wouldn't give the cops the address. Go and see her and break it gently somehow. If a couple of

cops land on her doorstep, she could drop dead. She's got a crook heart.'

'All right. Is that all?'

Rockman lit another cigarette with fingers stained the colour of his boots. 'Yeah, what else is there to say?'

'Where's Cafarella?'

He blew smoke at the ceiling. 'He went to New York, yesterday.'

I nodded goodbye and started back past a block of three cells. There was a roar, a blast of static and then a wild, up-country yell. A dark face appeared at the bars, he spotted me and whooped again.

'What? What is it?' I said.

He stuck his hand out for me to shake. 'It's Lionel, mate! He won! Our Lionel's the champion of the world!'

3

'RIGHT up your alley, Charlie. Shit, sorry. Christ, I don't know what to say.' Max wiped sweat off the bare skin that had had a respectable covering of dark hair when I'd first known him, here on the *News*, years ago.

'Just tell me what it is, Max', I said. 'But if it's another bloody Abo winger, fast as lightning, I'll start chucking things through windows.'

'It's not.'

I'd been back in Sydney almost a year, and was back working on the paper. Still mostly sport with an occasional straight story, even a political one. I was regarded as something of a specialist though, and I could type 'Aboriginal' in the dark with my hands tied behind my back. Not ideal, but Kelly was pregnant and there were the payments on the house. It was all right, most of the time.

'It's this Damien Franklin bloke', Max said. 'The painter, you know?'

'I know.'

Max skimmed the scribble on a bit of copy paper. 'This kid up there's been talking to him. Reckons Franklin knows about a big massacre.'

'When?'

'Kid doesn't say. Long time ago, I guess.'

'Well?'

Max leaned back in his chair. 'It's too big for the kid, he wants help. Big story, Charlie; flight up, expenses, big feature. What d'you say?'

I was on four days casual at the *News*, plus some subbing and book reviews for the other papers. Kelly taught part-time at the nurses' college, but that'd stop when the baby

came. There was no sense in standing still.

'Okay, Max, thanks.' That was diplomacy in return for his—he could have just said 'Go'. 'Where does Franklin live? I've forgotten.'

'Little dump up there. Absalom.'

'Fuck.' It was in *Gandju* country.

'What?'

'Nothing. It's a hell of a long way up.'

Max smiled. Diplomatic again.

'When do you want me to go?'

'Now.'

I went home, packed, wrote a note for Kelly when I couldn't find her by phone and got a taxi to Mascot. Sydney-Brisbane-Townsville-Cairns was a slow grind that left me wrung-out and smelly. I checked into the motel that the Brisbane office had booked and collapsed.

I didn't hear the breakfast arrive and the food was cold and congealed when I got to it. I sat in the anonymous room, thinking: I hadn't been in Queensland since the war, not on the streets, in the shops, asking for things. If there'd been looks and remarks the night before I'd been too tired to notice. Drinking the cold coffee I decided to play it that way—not to notice unless I had to.

The policy collapsed within seconds, when I asked the motel manager about hiring a vehicle to get out to Absalom. He was an over-padded, under-exercised type, relishing the too-cold air-conditioning.

'You don't want to go out there.' His pale eyes looked sceptical and then, I thought, suspicious. I pulled myself together and focused on what I was doing—massacre, bones, old skeletons in graziers' cupboards.

'Why not?'

'It's to see old Damien, eh? He's a lunatic, you want to leave him alone. Anyway, no one'll take you out there.'

'I don't want to be taken, I'll take myself.'

'Oh, well, I don't know about that.'

I had a lot of money on me and I used it to hire a Land Rover and pay through the nose for a sleeping bag, food, water bags. I drove the vehicle gingerly around the streets to get the feel of it before parking outside the Ocean View Hotel. Two Aborigines were sitting under a tree beside the pub. They jumped up and hurried across when they saw me locking the Land Rover. I waited for them. They came up, bringing flies. They wore singlets and shorts; their hides were encrusted with dirt. I had on clean jeans, a new shirt and R.M. Williams boots.

The taller of them, a middle-aged man with white stubble and a convulsively twitching face, held out a two dollar note.

'Get us a flagon, mate.' His voice was thin and toneless.

'Why can't you get your own?'

'White man banned us.'

'Why?' But I could see why in the wild, hating eyes and the scarred, horny knuckles. He'd be a glass-smasher, a chair thrower. His mate was stockier, had once been powerful in the chest and shoulders before it had all slid away into a soft, swelling belly. Fat and skinny, they were like a comedy pair, but not one bit funny.

'I dunno why.' The fat one said.

But I had a job to do, and buying piss for these two was no way to start. 'I'm sorry', I said. 'I can't help you.'

The thin one spat at my feet. 'Fuck you then, you yellow bastard.'

According to the cuts in the *News* library, Damien Franklin was fond of whisky, so I bought two bottles of good scotch. The next step was to contact the stringer who'd put us on to the story. I found him in a house a long way from the flash part of town. The lady of the house, a frowsy old bottle-blonde, sent me around the back of the house to his door. Some of the stilts had given way and Brian Rivers's room had a warped wall and a twisted floor. He yelled 'Come in' and I twisted the knob, lifted and wrestled the door open. Rivers jumped up off the bed and came over with his hand out. He was tall and thin, wearing pyjama bottoms. His hair was

straight and black, his features were broad with slanted eyes and he had a mid-brown skin. The racial mix made it hard to guess his age—twenty-five?

I looked around the room which was sparsely furnished, scrupulously clean and over-loaded with books. It reminded me of rooms I'd lived in in Brisbane thirty years before. We shook hands and Rivers went off to make tea. When we were drinking it I asked him how he'd got on to the story.

'Went out to see him to talk about his painting.'

'The Queensland stuff?'

'Right. All my people come from up there—white, Aborigine and Jap. That's me, the lot. He's got all of them in the pictures. Great pictures.'

'Yeah, they are.'

'Well, I thought he might name some names, tell a few yarns and I could get a piece out of it.'

'And ...?'

He drank some tea and looked cautious. He was a bright young man whose colour must have been a handicap until then. Now it was suddenly an asset and here was some southern yeller-feller on the scene. He was right to be cautious.

'I'm not going to pinch your story', I said. 'If we do it, your name goes first.'

He nodded, put down his mug and started collecting folded clothes from a chair. 'I'll have a shower and think about it. Excuse me.'

I'd come a long way to be thought about under the shower, and in other circumstances I might have got angry. But I liked Rivers. He came back, shaved and spruce, and asked me where I was from. I told him.

'But I haven't been back here in thirty years.'

'How'd you get away in the first place?'

I fingered my scarred right eyebrow. 'Luck, then boxing, then the war. What about you?'

'Japanese family in Brisbane took me in. Good school, all that.'

'But you came back?'

'Yeah, I wanted to be a writer, still do. I went to Japan.' He gave a short, barking laugh. 'No joy there. My white folks came from Scotland but I don't feel much pull to Scotland. Ended up here.'

'How's it been going?'

'No good. Till now.'

That made it tougher, he had a big investment in the story, but I convinced him that I would collaborate and not take over. He was apprehensive about his ability to handle Franklin and the story. I was apprehensive too, but I didn't tell him that. He had an open invitation to talk with Franklin, and when I told him I had a Land Rover ready he stuffed a spare shirt and pants in a duffel bag, grabbed a pen and pad, a camera and a broad-brimmed hat and we got going.

Absalom, Rivers told me, was a crossroads and a creek. The creek feeds into the Normanby, like the one I lived beside fifty years before. At Absalom the reasonable road and the telephone line ended. Franklin had sought it out as the remotest place he could find and still stay in touch with civilisation. After a few miles, Rivers offered to drive and I let him. He did it a lot better than me and we had nearly two hundred miles to travel.

We took the coast road to Port Douglas, travelling through the sugar country with its heavy, gritty-sweet air, then pushed west towards the head waters of the Normanby. Lush grass and fringes of forest on the horizon.

Several hours of jolting loosened us up emotionally. Rivers felt he had a novel in him but was having trouble with every aspect of producing it—characters, setting, period. He'd looked into the history of the Chinese on the Palmer river goldfield and the pearl divers of Thursday Island, had soaked up large doses of racial injustice and inhumanity, but hadn't fixed on a story. In Franklin and his massacre he felt he might have the theme.

We got to Absalom in the late afternoon; the tarred road

stopped outside the pub; long slanting shadows from a big mango tree blurred the spot where the tar gave way to dirt. The pub was a long, low white building, with a fierce iron roof. A deep verandah ran along the street side and the sign 'BAR' hung at the end of it.

There was a hitching post outside with two horses tied to it. They stamped in the thick, white dust as Rivers swung the Land Rover in beside them.

'Publican lives here', he said. 'Pub's the last few feet of his bloody house.'

'Who drinks here?'

'Stockmen, tin gougers, passers-through.'

'And Damien Franklin?' It was time to get down to tin tracks, if Franklin was a drunken fantasist where were we?

Rivers nodded. 'And him. Two beers a day, the publican tells me.'

'What about at home?'

'No bottles around, that I saw. Stone sober when he talked to me, and that was after six.'

I nodded, in that country they were good credentials for temperance.

'Custom here is to have a beer when you arrive', Rivers said.

'All right.'

The horsemen, one black and one white, were in the bar along with a little, wizened character who was studying a map which had a small beer parked in the middle of it.

'Gidday, young feller.' The barman pulled two beers without taking an order. Rivers reached for his pocket but I had my money down first. We saluted and drank. 'Up to see Damien again.'

Rivers nodded.

'Brings in a bit of trade one way or another', the barman said. 'Had a television mob through once. Shit, those blokes could drink. Not only blokes; there was a sheila who could put it away too.'

I was sipping, clearly not in the same class.

We finished the ritual beer and went back outside, where the light was failing fast. Rivers drove on to the dirt; we passed a couple of houses which were nearly buried in deep, straggling vines. We turned off the road towards a creek marked by a line of trees. A couple of minutes driving brought us to a gap-toothed picket fence which was being pulled down by wisteria. A few yards back from the fence was a squat building, oddly-angled and with a strangely shaped roof.

'What's that?'

'Old joss house', Rivers said. 'Franklin's place.'

Massive bits of wood dominated. Big slices sunk in the dirt formed a path to the huge chunk which was the door. The slab walls were caulked with iron-hard mud. Rivers knocked on the door, and when it swung open I got my first look at Damien Franklin in the flesh—I'd seen his photograph dozens of times. He had a wreath of fluffy silvery hair and a furrowed, experienced face, dark as mine in the gloom. He was tall and spare, wearing a flannel shirt and moleskins.

'Aar, it's you. Come in son, come in. Who's your mate?' His voice was parade-ground harsh, with a sing-song lilt to it as if he had absorbed Oriental inflexions from his house.

'This is Charlie Thomas, Mr Franklin. He writes for the Sydney paper. He's going to help—make sure the story goes national.'

'Good. What paper? Come in, come in.'

We went in, and I gave him the name of the paper.

'There's worse,' he grunted. 'Gave me last show a good notice, as I recall.'

We walked on rough planks and between raw, knobby walls to a room near the back lit by a hurricane lamp. I had an impression of austerity—bare surfaces, spartan fittings. Franklin announced that he had soup cooking and that we'd stay to eat with him.

Franklin's Queensland series is a big, sprawling spread of paintings about the Queensland gulf country. Franklin painted them through the 1960s, weathered the complaint

that some of them were obscene, and had recently got acclaim for them in the right circles. They were angry paintings, which showed the rape of the land and the people and the beauty of both. I studied Franklin closely; he was near seventy, but could have been fifteen years younger. His hands were scarred and thick and the muscle in his shoulders and arms had been built by work. His speech was blunt with a lot of swearing, all delivered in that curious sing-song.

When he doled out the soup, I pulled one of the bottles of scotch out. He took it and nodded appreciatively.

'After', he said and set it down on the floor.

The soup was more like a stew; we scoffed it and used Franklin's home-baked bread to sop it up. He poured three hefty scotches as the last of the light went and insects started knocking on the windows.

'Well, Charlie', Franklin said, 'what d'you know about massacres of blacks?'

'Not much. Myall Creek and that one in the Territory in the 1920s. The old men in the camp used to talk about them but we reckoned they were just stories.'

'They weren't. This puts Myall Creek in the bloody shade. I reckon there might be a hundred bloody skeletons out there.'

'Shit', Rivers said. 'Whose land is it, Mr Franklin?'

'Owned by some Pommy mob that makes soap or perfume or something. Wasn't always, though.'

'Any of the original owners still around?' Rivers had his pad out.

Franklin took a pull on his whisky. 'Yeah.'

'You're sure it's a white job?' I said. 'I know we didn't go in much for battles, but there could be exceptions.'

'Charlie, most of the skulls've got bullet holes in them', Franklin said. 'The adults, that is.'

'Jesus', Rivers said. He scribbled. 'And how did you find the place?'

'You'll see when I take you out there. Vegetation's all different in this spot. I'd say it was a clearing, mustering yard or something, that's been left to grow back. Decent sort

of fire through it at one time.'

I persisted. 'Could they have been Chinese? There were a hell of a lot of them around. No one knows how many. A party could have been cut out and killed for some reason.'

'I know a bit about bones', Franklin said. 'I did couple of years of doctoring study a long time back. I reckon nearly half the skeletons I've seen would be of women.'

That settled it, and he didn't want to tell us too much more about it. He thought we should come to the place fresh, without his impressions affecting our own. There was no arguing with that. He told us about his treks in the bush though—long prowls that used to range over scores of miles, but were lessening now that he was old. He fed off the landscape; it inspired him in every way from prompting the right colours to providing images. He couldn't explain it clearly, but he didn't have to; it was all demonstrated in his pictures. The land itself is a capricious, challenging actor in the drama of his Queensland series. He deliberately set about exposing himself to physical settings, like a diver experimenting with greater depths, to extend his grasp on things. I listened; Rivers made notes and I wondered what he was thinking. It was heady stuff for an aspiring writer.

He didn't offer to pour us more whisky and we didn't ask. He was a disciplined old man, well in charge of himself and good for many years yet. My fears that the massacre could be a geriatric fantasy evaporated and another feeling intruded—a kind of dread of what we were getting into. He built it up in the few references he made to the place as he circled back to it while talking about the country. He gave us our headline: 'The dying ground' he called it.

We slept on bunks in a bare room. Franklin roused us early, advising us to go for a dip in the creek as he had already done. When we came back from the cool, clear water the weird Oriental structure smelled of coffee and toast.

Ten miles up the dirt road, going north, we turned off and the Land Rover bounced along a track that had been beaten out by animal hooves, pounded by rain and baked and split

by the sun and wind.

There was a line of hills off to the east that showed redder as the sun rose higher. Franklin saw me squinting at them.

'Full of caves', he said. 'Paintings, you should see 'em—horses, guns.'

'What was this tribe called?' Rivers asked.

'Don't go much on tribes', Franklin said.

'What was their territory, then?'

The old man sighed. 'You've been reading the wrong stuff. Seems to me the people around here didn't have any precise territories. They had a special interest in a few places.' He waved his arm out of the window. 'Cross there in the hills, and way over beyond them and up north where the river rises. Lots of other places too. They moved around to those places and other people crossed tracks with 'em. It wasn't like a lot of bloody cattle runs with fences.'

'Sacred sites', Rivers said.

'That's what they call 'em now. All over the bloody place, they were. We ploughed 'em under, and built roads on 'em.'

We bounced along in the dust for ten minutes or so and I was thinking what a hell of a long way it was for an old man to walk when Franklin told Rivers to slow down.

'The place we're going to is over there', he said, pointing. 'You want to look around now, get the feel of it.'

We were in flat country with the red hills rising up ahead; there were ragged trees marking some kind of watercourse off to the east. Little gullies ran down towards it from the track. The grass and scrub were low and dry but half a mile or so ahead was a patch of yellowish green. It seemed to begin abruptly and to have defined edges; from where we were it looked like a field of maize that had gone to seed. As we got closer it looked less regular; it straggled off to the right a bit and there were gaps in it like bald patches. We stopped a hundred yards short, and Franklin squatted down and inclined his head.

'See here', he said. 'Look along there and you can see that they've swung the stock around to miss that place. For don-

key's years.'

Rivers circled around, aiming his camera and clicking. I scuffed my boots in the dust and waited; I didn't want to face it. The warm air with its scents of the bush, the climbing, slanting sun and the feel of the sweat on my body all took me back to the old camp. I'd never pieced the images together in this way before, but now I realised that there'd been a lot of death in that camp—I remembered old, shrivelled men and women disappearing suddenly and kids, coughing and coughing and never playing again. I'd always thought of the camp as a place bursting with life and it was shock to know that it wasn't, not completely. The dying ground was working on me already.

We walked up to it and Franklin motioned for us to go in where the scrub was thinnest. The trees and low, salty bushes hid a reddish earth, pitted with ant's nests and unaccountably bare in patches. There were animal tracks through it and a couple of deep, flash-flood gullies. Franklin pointed down into one of them.

'Jump down there and have a squizz.'

The gully walls went up sheer and shoulder high, the bottom was narrow and rocky. I tottered a few steps in the new boots and nearly fell; I reached to steady myself against the wall and then snatched my hand away. Fragile, delicate bones were sticking out of the earth. I turned towards Rivers, but he was looking at a skull exposed in the opposite wall. I moved on carefully, keeping my balance: for thirty feet there was a display of skulls, finger bones and ribs on both sides of the gully. My mind raced to make comparisons and analogies—it was like the hand that stuck out of the trench at Gallipoli, the one the soldiers shook; it was like some trendy display in a modern art gallery, designed to shock and please. Cleverly done.

Brian Rivers stopped half way along; he was transfixed there with his camera held in front of him like a shield. Franklin stood above him with his hands on his hips.

'See the dark layer above the bones? Fire. Water cut right

through the middle of the burial.'

'That means more bones would've been carried along', I said.

'Right. Take a look down there where she bends.'

I walked along the gully to where a boulder had diverted the water. The bones were caught between the rock and the gully wall. I counted six skulls, large and small, and saw the bullet holes. Other bones were lying criss-crossed and jumbled like pick-up-sticks.

Rivers had got past the first boneyard and was sitting on the gully bottom.

'You've got to see it all', I said.

'I don't think I can.' He held up his hand with the thumb and forefinger separated a few inches. 'There's a little hand back there. Like this. A baby.' Tears were running down through the layer of white dust that coated his flat, brown face.

'It happened', I said harshly. 'Get some pictures and make them good. We'll shove this right up them.'

I climbed out of the gully, and joined Franklin who was squatting in the dust, doing some of his atmosphere-soaking.

'Is this all?'

'No. There's more of the same in the other gully. Bit less. And something else across the way. How's the young feller?'

'Bad', I said. 'What's this something else?'

'Show you.' He got up and I followed him over an ant hill and through a thicket of stringy gums. There was a big old gum, its trunk a couple of yards around, standing near a lumpy bare patch. Fire had eaten away at the base of the tree but it had survived. The bare patch was roughly square with about twelve foot sides. In the middle was a long, deep tear in the earth and Franklin knelt down near it.

'Animals digging', he said. 'Take a look at this.'

Half-scratched out of the earth was a skull, and the upper part of a skeleton. The body had been thrown into the grave face down; the bones of the arms lay at an odd angle on top of the spine. Even against the surrounding dirt, a reddish band

around the bones above the remaining finger joints was easy to see.

'What's that?' I pointed to the red band.

Franklin picked up a stick and scraped bone. The red material held some spidery strands but was mostly like fine ash.

'Rust', he said. 'From wire.'

'It's hard to say how many', Franklin said. 'But my guess is there could be ten or so like this in this patch. Maybe more.'

I looked up at the tree that had withstood the fire. There was a sturdy, horizontal branch extending out about eight feet and about the same distance up from the ground. Rivers looked up too and nodded.

'That'd be it. A bad, slow way to die.'

We took a lot of photographs—Franklin's painter's eye helped with those. He also helped Rivers on background material and present-day flavour. The result was a brilliant three-part series that the *News* gave the full treatment. Rivers was launched on his successful free-lance career and his book, *The Dying Ground*, was a best-seller. The story produced three questions in federal parliament, figured in a land claim and inspired Damien Franklin's best-known painting—'Wire'.

4

I like Friday night in Forest Lodge. The dog track is lit up and the people are having a good time. Some of them get drunk and a lot of them lose money, but they don't care. My street and all the streets around get parked-in solid, but we non-car-owners don't care. People get together at the end of a couple of streets over the track with their flagons and radios, and make a party of it.

This night Kelly and I walked down to watch a race and we took our son Peter, who was awake. He was a bugger to keep asleep, Peter. I won a few dollars on the race and we went back to have a drink to celebrate. It was a nice night; I was feeling good but I almost dropped the baby when Lennie Collins stepped out of the shadows and touched me on the arm.

'Charlie', he whispered.

'Christ, Lennie. You want to turn me white?'

'Sorry, Charlie. Gidday, Kelly. Look, I want a word.'

Kelly put her key in the lock. 'Charlie's just won eight dollars, Lennie. Come in and have a drink.'

We went into the house, which is a narrow, two-storey terrace. Kelly borrowed from her mother, I scraped some up and we bought it cheap. It's scheduled to have a freeway through the living room, but the bank that gave us the mortgage didn't seem to care, so it doesn't worry us.

Kelly took Peter upstairs, and I got the flagon out of the fridge.

'What's on your mind, Lennie?'

He took a big gulp of wine and then remembered, and had a small sip. Lennie had been a *goommee*, a bad one, but he'd reformed with a lot of help from me and others.

'We've got two young blokes down at Bunya Street, draft dodgers.'

'*Koories*?'

'One is, one isn't.'

'What about it?'

'We're worried about them. They're political types, you know? Fuck the capitalists, you know?'

I nodded.

'There's the money to think of. If the government finds out we've got these blokes there, revolutionaries and that. Most of us reckon Bunya Street comes first.'

I was on a committee in charge of restoring six old derelict houses in Bunya Street, Glebe. A Jewish lawyer, who said his grandfather had made all his money from blacks' land, had given us the houses. The government gave us a grant, doling it out in little lots like gold dust.

'What does Dick Stuart think?'

'He said to come and get you.'

'What d'you make of the kids, Lennie?'

'The dark bloke's all right; the gubbah? Can't understand a bloody word he says—black power, imperialism, all sound like Yank bullshit to me.'

Kelly came down, and poured herself one of her thimble-sized glasses of wine.

'Did I hear politics?' she said.

'Yeah. Let's see, I'm working tomorrow. We could go down to Bunya Street tomorrow night, couldn't we?'

Kelly nodded, and Lennie finished his wine.

'Will Dick Stuart be there?' Kelly said.

'He sent Lennie here.'

Kelly raised her eyebrows. She mimed throwing and ducking a punch, and I laughed.

'Right, Lennie. Tell Dick tomorrow evening. See you.'

Lennie left, and we went upstairs and looked in on Peter, who was fast asleep. He was part-African slave, part-Aboriginal tribesman, part-Scots shepherd and part-Welsh miner. He was ten months old, and just starting to walk. His

brown hand on the pillow was curled up into a fist. Kelly and I made love while the crowd roared for the last race.

I was writing a sporting column for the *News*, light stuff, no strain. I went out to Randwick to talk to some gentlemen of the turf and the copy wasn't due in for a couple of days; so after the interviews I collected Kelly and Peter and we went off to Bunya Street. We took some fast food and soft drink; no grog was allowed.

It was after seven when we got there, still light, but with a coolness in the wind that was being offset by a couple of decent-sized fires in the large space which had been formed by knocking out the dividing fences between the houses at the back. They were big houses, three-storey jobs, worth a hell of a lot of money. Our plan was to use two for the *goommees*, a couple for womens' refuges and the rest for temporary accommodation and meetings. The work was about halfway through; there was a lot of plumbing and glazing and carpentry to do and pay for. Some of the workers camped in the houses, which the neighbours didn't like.

There was always plenty of rubbish timber to burn, and there were guitars and singers and good nights. The women sat with the men, something both sides had had to work hard at at first. It made some of the older people uneasy, but it was working. Once they got their confidence the women contributed strongly to the decision-making meetings, thrashing out every point. It meant some long meetings sometimes.

There was no avoiding it; I went straight up to Dick Stuart, who was squatting by a fire getting a light for his smoke.

'G'day, Dick. How's it going?'

'Charlie. All right, or was till now.'

Dick was in his late-fifties, a few years up on me. He was grey and burly, with a heavy, impressive head. That head had taken a lot of punches in the ring, more than mine. He'd held a state title, which was more than I'd done, but we'd got to where we were in 1972 by much the same route. We didn't always agree, and a month before we'd quarrelled over the

way to spend some money and had landed one punch each. We'd both been shocked, and stepped back immediately. I hadn't been to Bunya Street since.

'What d'you reckon about this, Charlie?'

'Have to hear the arguments first.'

He spat into the fire. 'You sound like the bloody women. You're a returned man aren't you?'

'You know I am. This is different.'

'So you're for these bloody shirkers?'

'I didn't say that, Dick.'

He used his fire-stick to carve a big X in the dusty ground. 'This is what matters, this place.'

It was going to be heavy work if Dick had made his mind up already, and I wondered why he'd called me in. I asked him and he stared into the fire.

'Bloody big argument coming up; thought you might back me. But the kid's a relation of mine. Bloody difficult.'

It would be. If Dick was caught between his dream for Bunya Street and kinship responsibilities, he was in deep trouble. Also, Dick could be pig-stubborn at times.

'Well, we'll see', I said. 'Looks like the work's going all right.'

'Bloody quarrelling about that, too. I want to move through doing the same thing six times, some of them want to do one place completely at a time.'

'You're right there.'

'Too right I am.' He seemed to be happy to get that measure of agreement. 'Better get this meeting going. Hello, Kelly; how's the nipper?'

'Good, Dick.' Kelly was wary of Dick as he was of her. He was a *Bandjalang* from the north-east, where the people have kept a fair bit of the old ways as well as taking on board a lot of ratbag Christianity. He found Kelly's *Gourniditjmara*—American negro mix a bit hard to take, along with her education. Old yeller-feller *Gandju* Charlie, graduate of Sharkey's tent, he reckoned he could handle.

Dick drew the thirty people standing and sitting around

the fires into a group—he had that ability. I held Peter while Kelly got some food for us. It felt good, standing there with my son in my arms.

'We've got a few things to talk about', Dick rasped. 'And if you're agreeable I'll start off.' There were nods all round, which was how Dick liked it. He wasn't a compelling orator though, and my mind drifted away from his spiel about the right way to do the re-building.

Looking around I thought that we in no way resembled those old-time photographs of the blacks on the mission. How they got that popped look into their eyes I'll never know. There was none of your decent broadcloth here— most of the men and some of the women wore jeans and shirts and there was none of that bolt upright, stuffed-chook look the mission blacks always seemed to have. There were sitters and kneelers, standers and crawlers and grizzlers. There were smokers and coffee drinkers but, by order, no drinkers or spitters.

I spotted the *gubbah* with two other kids, one of whom I didn't know. He was tall and thin, with shoulder-length hair. In tight jeans and high-heeled boots he looked more Queensland than New South Wales, but I guessed he was Dick's kinsman. The three of them were in the shadows, talking quietly while Dick took a straw vote on the building procedure. As I raised my hand to vote for Dick's assembly-line method I saw something that jolted me like a stiff, straight left: the *gub* passed his cigarette to the tall kid, who took a drag, and passed it on.

Christ, I thought, *Dick'll murder them.*

'I won't make the boys do a song and dance', Dick said. 'Most of you know 'em by now—Willie Richards who's my sister's grandson and his mate, Kevin O'Connor. You're from down Griffith way, Kevin, that right?'

The voice came from the shadows, educated and confident, 'That's right, Mr Stuart.'

'Dick'll do', he growled. 'I understand both of you blokes registered for the draft. Why'd you do that if you were so against it?'

I could see Dick's tactics, to show that the boys were weak reeds, not worth risking the future of the houses over. 'Why'd you sign up if you never meant to fight?' Dick snarled.

'Too bloody silly to do anything else', the tall boy said. He ended on a high, nervous note, almost a giggle, and I wondered how much grass he'd smoked.

'More to it than that, Dick', O'Connor said. 'I don't want to make a speech ...'

Like hell you don't.

'... but we got politicised after we'd registered. And now we're carrying on the process. We're looking for support from organisations like yours—from the feminists, the gay rights people.'

Dick almost exploded, he drew smoke in the wrong way and coughed helplessly for what seemed like five minutes.

'There's no bloody organisation here', he croaked. 'We're doin' a job, that's all.'

There was a bit of muttering around the fires, and I felt Kelly stirring beside me. O'Connor had the politician's instinct for saying the right thing at the right time.

'With respect, Dick, I wouldn't say that. Bunya Street and you are identified, for one thing. The project's had a lot of media coverage.'

'And you want to trade on it', Stuart blazed at him. 'You want to fuckin' ride your hobby-horse ...'

'Easy, Dick.' May Stuart had her hand on his arm and Dick subsided, but he'd drawn the lines and he glared around the gathering for support. One of the young women stood up and said that Aborigines had to fight for justice right across the board. She was for helping draft dodgers any way she could. Dick signalled to me to speak; his eyes were begging and angry at the same time.

'There's two issues', I said. 'The one of sheltering Kevin and Willie and, another one of where people stand on the draft and the war. Take them separately, and there's room for some differences.'

O'Connor shot me a look that was hard to interpret—

respect or dislike?

'You old conciliator you', Kelly murmured.

'Dick'll have a coronary if we don't watch it', I said.

We took the second issue first and argued it back and forth, with the usual speakers having their say. There was no conclusion, some people hadn't even thought about it and wanted some time. We agreed to have another meeting on it. After all the ideology and analysis, it was pretty straightforward to get agreement for the boys to stay at Bunya Street for a while. They agreed to work and stick to the rules.

'How hot are youse?' Lennie asked.

'Pretty hot', O'Connor said. 'I've written a lot of stuff. They'd be glad to get me.'

Willie was scuffing his boots in the dirt, and May Stuart snapped a question at him.

'We pinched a car to get here', he muttered. 'They'll be after us for that, too.'

The boys' stay was to be indefinite, like the date of the meeting to discuss the war. That's the way it was—when it felt right it got done. Dick Stuart and May left immediately, and Kelly and I hung around chatting, drinking coffee and showing off Peter. I was tired after the day's work and the tension of the meeting and I was a bit short with O'Connor when I got him aside.

'Better get rid of the pot', I said.

'I didn't hear it mentioned in the rules.' He was a nuggety, black-haired type with a broad, pugnacious face. He looked tough as well as smart.

'This is a building site', I said. 'Drugs are dangerous—things fall and get thrown around here, bricks, timber. Get rid of it.'

On the way home Kelly asked me what I'd said to O'Connor and I told her.

'Not like you to threaten anyone, love.'

'I'm worried.'

'I thought you said there was room for differences of opinion?'

'If I know our Kev, he'll be out lining up the votes tomorrow.'

I kept in touch with developments at Bunya Street but not too closely. Dick Stuart was jealous of his authority, and on most things his judgement was sound. I heard that O'Connor and Richards caused trouble from the start. They had a big influence on the younger people and Lennie was critical.

'That *gubbah* goes about as if he's pissed half the time', he said. 'Grinning all over his fucking face.'

'What does Dick say?' We were in a pub on Broadway, Lennie was drinking a shandy. The walls were ringed around with pictures of fighters from Larry Foley to Paul Ferreri; Dick Stuart was up there along with all the others—Jerome, Richards, Hassen, Sands, Rose.

'He's gettin' everyone's back up—slave-drivin' on the job. There's a rumour that some of the suppliers have been kickin' back to him.'

'Come on, Lennie. No way!'

'I don't say it meself, but it's bein' said.'

When I got home, Dick was sitting uneasily in the kitchen with Kelly. They were eking out a pot of tea. It looked as if there'd been some long silences. Kelly's face loosened with relief when I came in. I kissed her properly, not caring a damn about Dick Stuart or anyone else. She pushed me away, a bit embarrassed.

'Dick's here on business, I gather', she said. 'Peter's next door, I'll get him. Will you stay to eat, Dick?'

'No, Kelly, thanks. I'll have my say and get on.'

I made more tea and sat down, while Dick rolled a careful smoke.

'I hear the plumbing's finished', I said.

'And the money's run out.'

'Shit. That last lot didn't go far.'

This was a bit close to the bone of our last dispute and Dick glanced across at me angrily but he let it ride.

'There's more coming if we pass the next vetting.'

'When's that?'

'Next week. Two of the department blokes coming out to look over the site, see the books and that.'

I poured the tea. 'How're the books?'

'In the red, of course. You can't just stop. I've punted on the money coming through.'

'Be right, won't it?'

He dug into the side pocket of his jacket and pulled out a crumpled envelope. I expected difficult business correspondence, but he held the paper in his fist like something dirty. 'It would be right', he said. 'Except for this. Know what this is?' He spilled the stuff out on to the table—it looked like chaff mixed with dried lawn clippings. I rubbed some between my thumb and fingers and sniffed.

'Yeah. I know what it is.'

'It's pot!' He thumped his fist on the table; cups, teapot and marijuana jumped. 'That little white prick's been smoking reefers at Bunya Street; handing it round, too.'

'That's how they do it', I murmured.

'What?'

'They share it. No one smokes it on his own.'

'I don't give a fuck! You must've seen it in the war? Those niggers all out of their bloody minds, dancing...'

'I think it was different stuff, then. I understand this just makes them sleepy and happy. It's better than booze, Dick.'

'It's against the law, and it's against our rules.'

I looked at him and didn't say anything. Veins were bulging in his forehead and his shoulders were twitching.

'I've got a mind to turn them in.'

'You can't do that, Dick. Not to Willie. And it'd involve Bunya Street.'

'I could knock that bastard out and dump him in Dubbo', he said grimly. 'One phone call'd fix him.'

'No, Dick, it's not the way.'

'They're fucking everything, Charlie.' Kelly came in with Peter, and Dick swept up the marijuana stalks and strands quickly as if they were dirty pictures.

'Have you fronted them?' I asked.

'Yeah, did no good. Some of the young ones are with them. Anyway, there's a meeting tomorrow, and I wanted to ask you to come and support me.'

I could see what an effort it took him to ask, especially in front of Kelly. He looked unwell and desperate; it was his determination which had got the house project off the ground, and he still had the capacity to wreck it completely. I wondered if he made any distinction between his own future and that of Bunya Street—I doubted it.

'I'll be there, Dick', I said.

After he left, Kelly and I had one of our rare disagreements. She told me I couldn't sit on the fence any longer.

'It's cold', she said. 'Bloodless. What do you *feel* about the Vietnam war and the draft? You're against it in a theoretical sort of way, but where do you *stand*? What do you *believe*? What will you *do*?'

Peter was waving a half-chewed rusk in the air and I grinned at him. If he threw it on the floor and the cat licked it and we put it in the garbage it wouldn't matter. Back on the river bank to waste food meant a clip on the ear.

'Where do you stand?' I said.

'Against, totally. I'm angry. If there's another march, I'll march. If there's a riot, I'll riot.'

I got the flagon out and poured wine for us both while I tried to think what to say. She was right, I didn't feel much about the war. It was like a long-running film to me, a horror film, but not quite real. I thought perhaps I'd seen all the death and pain I could cope with up close, but it'd have sounded pompous to say so. I kissed her and she didn't react.

'I'm am optimist', I said. 'I put some hope in Whitlam.'

'Whitlam!'

'I know. I know. Politicians. But I think he'll pull us right out. End of problem as far as we're concerned. Practical, see?'

'He couldn't do it overnight.'

'I think he could. I've talked to some of the party blokes. They say he'd sit down the day after the election with a list and fix up things, there and then. They say the draft is top of

the list.'

'Bullshit.'

I shrugged. 'I'm sorry, love, but I don't think it is. I saw Whitlam once, met him. Arrogant bastard, but he made the others look like shifty kids. I think he's game. I think he'll stop the draft, and do a lot for land rights.'

'Vote ALP!'

'That's right. I tell you what though, I *do* feel something about the houses. I don't want it all screwed-up by some hot-headed kids. Greenwood and Fraser and the others 'll go down fighting. I know Dick's a pain in some ways, but I'm more for him than against him.'

'Well, your hero's on telly tonight—policy speech.'

Kelly went out and registered to vote the next day—it was that impressive. 'My government will end conscription and all proceedings against those who have resisted the conscription tyranny.' Sydney was the place to be that night—it felt like the centre of the world.

The euphoria lasted until I got to the meeting at the houses the next night. It was a mild night and there were no fires, just a couple of hurricane lamps burning. Under one of the lamps a big group was sitting with Kelvin O'Connor at its centre. He was playing the guitar, playing it well, and singing in a sweet, tuneful voice:

Shoot me like an Irish soldier

The others joined in the chorus, swaying their heads.

Dick and the older hands were muttering in a clutch over near the back of the end house. They looked to be on the defensive. He had a lovely voice, O'Connor, and I listened for a minute until I realised I was standing exactly mid-way between the two groups. I hurried over to Dick's lot. May Stuart's face was streaked where tears had run through the dust; she was younger than Dick and always did a full day's work on the site.

'What's wrong?'

'They stacked the meeting', Dick said. 'It's all over. You're

late, Charlie.'

'What d'you mean, late? There was no fixed time. I thought we'd just get down to it when we were ready, like always.'

'So did I', Dick said. 'Shows what a mug I was. Willie and O'Conner have organised. Got the meeting started on a show of hands.'

'What happened?'

'I started to talk about the drugs. Suppose I was a bit long-winded ...'

'The young ones shouted him down', May said bitterly. 'And you know what? They've voted to march in a group from here on the Vietnam rally next week.'

'Jesus!'

'I don't know what to do, Charlie', Dick said quietly. 'I wish you'd been here.'

'Wouldn't have made no difference', Lennie said. 'The place is fucked. Sorry, May.'

'It's not!' Dick said fiercely. I remembered his threat, and this looked like the provocation that would spark it off. I put my hand on his shoulder and pulled him a litle away from his wife and Lennie.

'You can't inform on your own, Dick. If you do the place'll be finished for sure. No one'll touch it except the *gooms*. You don't want that.'

He shook my hand down. 'I don't know. What else can I do?'

'Wait and see.'

'You gutless wonder! These kids are fanatics!'

'Yeah, well, they mightn't have anything to be fanatical about soon.'

'What d'you mean?'

'If Labour wins the election, the whole shooting match's over.'

'No way', he said, but I could see he was thinking about it.

'Talk to a few people, Dick. And don't do anything stupid. Are the department blokes coming before the march?'

'Yeah.'

'Try and get the kids out of the way. Sweet talk them and

get the money through. You're a past master at that. Worry about the rest later.'

'You're a cunning bastard, Charlie. I heard you never got knocked out in the ring. That right?'

'That's right.'

'Doesn't surprise me. I'll think it over.'

The youngsters had got on to American anti-war songs. O'Connor was singing and playing and teaching them the words. As I left I took a good look at the buildings; the back sections had been wood and iron lean-to's which had been left to rot. We'd cleared them away. From being shabby, decaying wrecks the houses had now begun to look solid and purposeful. The bricks were old, but seasoned and sound.

I brought Kelly up to date on the problem, and slept on it. The papers were full of the election campaign; with the government on the retreat and the ALP looking better every day. There were also long reports on the Vietnam war, and on plans for an all-capitals street march. I sat at my typewriter and tried to clear my head to write about a racehorse, but I couldn't. I kept thinking back to my days in the tents and the stadiums, to Hassen and Kemp, Blue Parker and Speedy Kinnane. I got out the files on Richards and Elley Bennett and Dave Sands. In their bulky suits, heavy shoes and short haircuts they looked extra-terrestrial. The newspaper photography had a flat, square-on style that made everyone and everything look plain and uncomplicated. Reading idly, I saw that Dick Stuart had boxed an exhibition with Richards and had, in the writer's opinion, clearly beaten him. Dick had always claimed he could beat Dave Sands in the gym and there were people who backed him up. I put the files away and wrote the column about Dick—about how he'd come down to Sydney from the bush in a church football team and flattened everyone in sight; how he'd won the state amateur title and turned pro and looked set for the top when the war came. Dick served in the Pacific, he was unscathed and much-decorated, but he lost his religion during the war and was aimless after it.

He was still a good fighter; he beat Richards in the exhibition by moving him around the way he didn't want to go so Ron couldn't get set for his counter-punching. Of course, Richards was over the hill then, but Sands wasn't. Dick used to step inside Dave's swings and thump him on the whiskers. He was a light-heavy by then and never got a big fight with Dave, although heavier men did.

When he finished fighting, Dick went bush—the usual thing, timber cutting, road building. He drifted back to the city for the sake of his kids' schooling and he'd found politics and the Aboriginal cause. A new religion. It was a good, lively piece, and I knew it'd please Dick. I went to the pub and borrowed the picture of Dick in his boxing gear and I hunted out another picture from a story on Bunya Street that showed Dick shovelling sand. I put the copy in and felt pleased with myself.

And that's all I did: I was so involved with Kelly and Peter that my communal feelings were diminished. I paid my mortgage, read my books and drank my wine. The present was more or less comfortable, and when I thought analytically and questioningly it was usually about the past. So I was alarmed when Kelly told me that she was going on the Vietnam march.

'You'll have to look after Peter', she said. 'You can watch it on telly. Hold him up near the screen and see if he recognises me.'

The authorities' mood was ugly, as if they knew they were on the way out. The demonstrations often turned violent, but I knew there was no dissuading Kelly.

'Make sure he doesn't see his Mum getting trampled by a horse. Are you marching with the feminists or the nurses?'

'From Bunya Street', she said.

'God. Is that going ahead?'

'You're out of touch, Charlie love. We're marching from Bunya Street up Broadway and right on through.'

My first thought, after Kelly's safety, was for Dick and his funding. I hadn't checked whether it had come through. I

rang him; he thanked me for the write-up and told me that the inspection had been made, and he was waiting on the decision. I didn't have the courage to mention the march.

On the day, Kelly dressed in jeans and sneakers and a T-shirt that said 'Give peace' on the front and 'A chance' on the back. Having Peter hadn't damaged her figure one bit; she was still as slim and straight as the first time I'd seen her in Mrs Fenton's dreadful parlour and the cosy, comfortable side of me hated to see her step out on to the street. I was sure that some pervy camera man would fill the screen with her for the folks at home.

The marches and moratoriums were news. The radio and TV moguls could sense the change in the air too, and they weren't going to be out of step.

I picked Peter up from his play school and took him home on foot and by bus. He was walking now, and resisting the pusher mightily. I fed him and liberated him from his clothes, he liked to play naked and I liked to see him that way; he was a smooth, light brown all over with a golden down on his limbs. He looked dashing and beautiful. I told him his mother was going to be on TV, but when she wasn't on screen there and then he looked sceptical, and wandered off to play with the cat.

At first, the march was peaceful. There were flare-ups and skirmishes on the edges but that was all. It reminded me of fighting in Greece. The police were there in force, horses and all, but they were playing it very cool which comforted me. I went out to make tea and check on Peter and when I got back the scene had changed. The police had prevented the marchers from following their intended George Street route and had diverted them north. It was ugly; a swirl of bodies and raids by the uniformed men picking off individual demonstrators. The marchers kept order in their ranks despite the police action and settled down into a skittish progress. The camera moved in on the Bunya Street mob who marched under a sign which read 'Australia for the Aborigines—Vietnam for the Vietnamese—Out Yanks'. Willie Richards

and Kevin O'Connor were out in front wearing white head-bands as they raised their fists and shouted. I could almost hear the spooks' cameras clicking. Kelly was in the middle of the group, tall and striding along. Sure enough, a camera zoomed in on her breasts and shoulders and face. Peter strolled in carrying the cat and I pointed.

'Kelly', I said. 'Mummy.'

He looked at the screen with screwed-up, sun-dazed eyes. 'No', he said and attempted to drop-kick the cat.

'Peter denies you were there', I told Kelly when she got back. 'Sorry, no medal.'

She grinned and took off her sneakers; big white blisters stood out on her dark skin. 'Christ, it's a long way that. I've got sore feet from walking and a sore throat from shouting.'

'How did it feel?' I was immensely relieved to see her, but careful.

'Pretty good. They're good kids, most of them.'

'Not all?'

She looked up and the young, keen glow had gone from her face. 'A couple of them're talking about guns at Bunya Street. I think they've got them already.'

'Guns! Why?'

'They've got a whole mob of draft resisters there now. They've just about taken it over. I didn't see the guns, but I saw other things.'

'Like what?'

'Food—tins, big jerry cans of water. Petrol and bottles.'

'Dick and Lennie?'

'Not there, given up. May's still there, trying to talk sense.'

'Somebody should be putting water in the petrol.'

'I'll tell May. Let's have something to eat. I'm starved.'

I worried about it in the week leading up to the election. I walked past the Bunya Street houses, and noted all the white head-bands and battle dress outfits. There was still some work going on, some new scaffolding but the place had a strategic air. A good third of the people around looked about as Aboriginal as Billy McMahon.

I voted at the Public School and chatted with the Labor card handers-out, who were very chipper. Peter was asleep and Kelly and I were in front of the TV watching the first election returns when there was a heavy knock at the front door. I answered it and a big, sweating uniformed copper filled the doorway.

'Mr Thomas? I'd like you to come with us, sir; there's trouble down at Bunya Street. We have Mr Stuart in the car.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'Violence.'

'Anyone hurt?'

'Not bad, not yet. Hurry, please.'

I told Kelly what was up and went out to the car. Dick was huddled up in the back; he looked smaller, diminished, and his greeting was a tiny nod.

'What's going on Dick?'

'Don't know.'

The siren came on and we screamed through the streets. When we turned into Bunya Street it was like landing on a foreign planet; the houses had their lights on and the blue police lights were flashing eerily. A police car was slewed around in the middle of the road, with its windscreen milky and starred. I pointed to it.

'Anyone hurt there?'

'Flesh wound', the cop growled.

We were surrounded by police all talking at once. After a while a plainclothesman got them quietened down and put us in the picture.

'An attempt was made to arrest some draft resisters', he said. 'Kevin O'Connor and William Richards, Brian Mayhew and a couple of others. Bottles and other missiles were thrown at the police and a shot was fired. Maybe several shots. You've seen the car.'

'Has there been any talking?' I asked.

'Kevin O'Connor says he is willing to die in the fight against imperialism. William Richards says he's an Aborigine, and not subject to the racist laws of white Australia.'

'What d'you want us to do?'

'We've got a loud hailer here, Mr Thomas; hasn't done us any good, but we'd like you and Mr Stuart to talk to them. Try and get them to see reason.'

'I'll talk to them', Dick said.

'Go easy, Mr Stuart; they're in a nasty mood.'

'Whose idea was it to make arrests tonight?' I said.

'I don't know.'

'Good night for it.'

He ignored me and spoke to Dick. 'We'd like to get an idea of who's in there. If there's any women and kids.'

'You'll go in hard if not, will you?'

He flushed. 'This is a serious matter, Mr Thomas. We thought you might be able to help.'

'I don't see any wounded', I said. 'Your blokes write off a car or two every day. Why don't you just go home. Watch the election.'

He didn't answer and handed the bull-roarer to Dick.

'Got a warrant to go in there?' I said.

'Do what you can, Mr Stuart.'

'Willie', Dick bellowed. 'Come out of there and don't be a bloody fool.'

'That's subtle.'

The cop's patience snapped. 'Just shut up you ...'

'Black what?'

Dick did some more shouting but there was no response from the house. I pulled the lid off a dustbin and scooted past the broken gate. The cop yelled but I ignored him and walked up to the front of the house on the end of the row. Something came flying down from the balcony and I warded it off with the lid; then I was under cover. The door was old and rotted around the edge. I kicked it down and went into the house.

One of the white headband, battle-dress brigade came down the stairs with a .22 in his hand. I slammed the tin lid down and he jumped a foot.

'They make a bigger noise than that, sonny', I said. 'Tell Kevin and Willie I want to see them. Quick!'

They gathered on the stairs, a mob of eight or nine with two or three rifles. In the gloom two of them looked like women. I went into the front room and they trooped down the stairs and followed me in.

'What are you playing at here?' I barked.

'We're not playing', O'Connor said. 'This is resistance.'

'To what?'

'White Australia and Capitalism.'

'What about this place? You're going to wreck it.'

'It's a bandaid', he muttered. 'It's tokenism.'

'You bastard! This is the first place those *gooms* have had to sleep in where they didn't get rained on in ten years. Did you know that? The pregnant women, ever think of them? They don't have to hawk their forks at the Cross for food. Say bandaid again, you little shit, and I'll break your jaw!' I realised that I was doing what Dick had done and I struggled for control. O'Connor had a big, angry red pimple on his face, and it infuriated me. I thought of Dick with his old, seamed, experienced dial, and May with the wisdom in her eyes.

'Let's calm it down', I said. 'You won't get anywhere like this. They'll sling you in gaol and forget about you.'

'What do you suggest?' Richards said.

That was the hard part. I went across to the window and peered out and the answer was right there on four wheels.

'Do you want to get tear-gassed and carried out of here like garbage?'

One of the women spoke up quickly. 'No, we don't want that.'

'Okay, let's make a demonstration. There's a TV crew out there, I just saw the truck. You can all stand on the balcony. You can make a bloody speech if you want to, Willie. It's a great story, they'll snap it up. They'll cut it in with the election which everyone's watching. Audience of millions. What d'you say?'

They started to talk excitedly, with O'Connor arguing against it, and most of the others strongly for. There were six blacks and three whites and the blacks carried the day.

'We'll do it', the woman who'd spoken before said.

'Good. Where's the phone?'

I got patched through to the police and made the arrangements.

'The house is surrounded', the police spokesman said.

'Good. A few sharp shooters around?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Don't get in the way of the TV blokes, will you?'

They didn't like it, but they had no choice. I told them that there were women in the house and children, which was a lie. I told the kids that they had about a quarter of an hour to decide what they wanted to do and that they'd get about the same time in the spotlight if they were lucky. O'Connor sulked for a bit, but then the politician in him took over and he joined in while they tossed ideas around. I felt the need of a drink rather severely and asked them about their provisions but there was no alcohol. One of the women offered me marijuana in a friendly fashion.

Eventually they decided to line up on the balcony while Willie Richards delivered a short speech about the Vietnam war, the draft and Aboriginal land rights. Then they'd give a black power salute and march outside.

I waited in the front room behind them while they did it. Richards had a good, clear voice, and he used it to say that oppressed people everywhere were fighting the same fight against the same enemy. He kept it pretty simple, and then they sang a land rights song and gave the salute. I sat on an old chair in the bare room while this was going on, and hoped that the next part would go smoothly. They came through from the balcony and Richards said, 'What happens next?'

'Gaol', O'Connor said. One of the women started to cry and I fidgeted and felt guilty. Then I noticed the old TV set in the corner of the room.

'Does that work?' I said.

'One channel', one of them said.

I turned it on and a snow-filled, staticky, blurred image of Gough Whitlam filled the screen. He was standing outside

the tally room where the mob of journalists and TV people and hangers-on and citizens had stopped him. Smiling faces, jumping bodies and an excited roar when Whitlam held up his hands for quiet. Someone held up a huge 'It's Time' placard. Whitlam gave a big V for victory sign, and everyone cheered.

'See that', I said. 'See that! You'll be out of gaol tomorrow.'

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OBITUARY

Sydney Herald 29 September 1973

The death occurred today of Aboriginal activist Mr Charles (Charlie) Thomas, 53, of Glebe. Mr Thomas died of head injuries he received while attempting to stop a brawl outside a hotel in Glebe on Saturday night.

Charlie Thomas had been a tent and stadium boxer, journalist, author and spokesman for Aboriginal causes. He served with distinction in World War II in the Middle East and New Guinea, and attained the rank of sergeant.

Born in Queensland, Charlie Thomas spent his early years on an Aboriginal mission, but in his autobiographical novel published earlier this year, *The Winning Side*, he describes his flight from the mission, attempts to pass as white, and his self-education.

Tributes were paid to him today by former boxers, journalists and members of the Aboriginal community. He is survived by his wife, Kelly, and son, Peter, aged two.