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# **The Expressionist**

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By

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Signature ..... Date: .....

The greater danger  
for most of us  
is not that our aim is  
too high  
and we miss it,  
but that it is  
too low  
and we reach it.

*Michelangelo* (1475-1564)

## *Dedication*

It has always interested me, when reading a dedication inside the first few pages of a book, album, thesis or exegesis, that the words read in such a way that they don't really say very much about the words.

It seems so obvious to thank my supervisors – Dr David Musgrave and Dr Caroline Webb.

As well as thanking my family – my beautiful wife and my powerful and very cheeky children and the library where all the books came from as well as the people that I discussed the project with and bounced ideas off.

But does it not ever occur to the writer student author, that they should thank the words? Thank the characters, the belief and the energy that parallels the process of creativity in the form of words.

Perhaps not! So it is here that I am going to!

To the words, the characters, the thoughts, the moments of clarity and the inner knowing that all this would be made manifest when I surrendered to the universe, believed and acted on the knowing that is inside of us all.

Belief, belief, belief!

Thank you!

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## ***Abstract***

The novella *The Expressionist* centres on the development of an Australian boy living in rural and regional areas, and his coming of age into a realm of artistic and creative tendencies. The story involves loss, sadness, physical, spiritual and artistic growth. Humour and spiritual conflict associated with the development into an artist, the artistic genre in the framework of the *Bildungsroman* and *Kunstlerroman* as well the desire to participate or be in the world offering so many variables for the individual human being on their chosen journey.

*The Expressionist* is written with the understanding that life, and all it entails, suggests that we as human beings are able and willing to accomplish, overcome and establish an individual path. This is possible despite the many and varied challenges associated with growing up: spirituality, relationships, life choices, artistic practice, emotional stability and the attitude of society towards those who choose 'the path less taken'. The protagonist of *The Expressionist* works towards an understanding of self through conditioned individual experience; however idealistic the notion of truth and hope is in the protagonist's way of thinking, and what is experienced, his aim is to accept and understand better the process by which he lives.

The artist, by embracing rurality in their artistic approach provides the opportunity to express positive interpretations of hope and individuality in its simplest form. Therefore, the argument within this exegesis is that the simple and the rural are uniquely placed within the realm of artistic expression.

## **Chapter 1**

### ***Introduction***

This project is the story of the coming of age and spiritual journey of a young boy in a regional and rural landscape, his education in a remote town, and then his eventual coming of age on a journey to become a writer and artist.

This project undertakes research and writing in the area of self-writing, utilising the literary framework of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education, as well as its sub-genre of the *Kunstlerroman*, the development of an artist. This project also examines the *Bildungsroman* and *Kunstlerroman* genres in Australian literature, as well as examining the concepts of Australian Identity, Regionalism and the Pastoral. For the purpose of this study, rurality and regionalism refer to the areas outside of the major urban capital cities, more specifically Sydney in New South Wales.

*The Expressionist*, the creative element of this project, is a first-person narrative, which offers a remembered and mythologized order of events. According to Abrams, ‘this mode, insofar as it is consistently carried out, limits the matter of the narrative to what the first-person narrator knows, experiences, infers, or finds out by talking to other characters’ (Abrams 274). While a first person narrative is limited in this way, it allows for freer expression of the narrator’s emotional states, insights and interpretations of events, as witnessed by the narrator. The continuous flow of ideas, thoughts, and feelings of the narrator’s consciousness therefore draws a bridge between the ‘fictional’ and ‘real’ worlds, tending towards an illustration of the narrator’s experience of the world, rather than an objective representation of that world. Scholes and Kellogg, in *The Nature of Narrative* (1968), state that:



The connection between the fictional world and the real can be either *representational* or *illustrative*. The images in a narrative may strike us at once as an attempt to create a replica of actuality just as the images in certain paintings or works of sculpture may, or they may strike us as an attempt to merely remind us of an aspect of reality rather than convey a total and convincing impression of the world to us, as certain kinds of visual art also do. (Scholes and Kellogg 84)

In the case of *The Expressionist*, the connection between its fictional world and the real is illustrative, insofar as it explores creativity through the eyes of a young and developing artist's experiences in rural and remote areas. In doing so, my intention is to bring a stronger awareness to the ideal of regionality, connection to Indigenous Australia and the traditional pastoral notion of the 'simple' good life, as being powerful and worthy in relation to creativity and society. William Empson, in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1986), argues that the pastoral is about reducing complex social and economic relations to their simplest form:

The poetic statements of human waste and limitation, whose function is to give strength to see life clearly and so to adopt a fuller attitude to it, usually bring in, or leave room for the reader to bring in, the whole set of pastoral ideas. (Empson 19)

As such, broader questions of a critical nature in *The Expressionist* are related to the emotions, perceptions, and actions, as well as desires, of its protagonist and are fused with the inner thought flow of the protagonist. It is also the aim of this project to deliver a better understanding of the lives and values of those whose experiences

are largely shaped outside of a major city. According to Ruth Brown in *The Country, The City and The Tree Of Man* (1995):

Pastoral has its way of reasserting a fundamental and harmonious sympathy, and of proclaiming that life is the principle, and not decay and death. Faced with the intractability of death and the apparent intractability of global economics, an illusion of immortality and power may be achieved in the apprehension of timeless landscapes.  
(Brown 867)

From this point of view, a ‘coming of age’ narrative allows the reader to see the development of a regional perspective and consciousness, from ‘the ground up’ as it were. This involves examining what could be viewed as the habitual dismissal of, and ignorance towards, regional/rural lives and experiences on the part of city dwellers.

*The Expressionist* belongs to the genre of self-writing; more specifically, it is an example of a *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education, and can be categorised even more accurately as belonging to the sub-genre of the *Kunstlerroman*, which has the development of the artist as the main theme. When this journey began, I set out to explore the genre and perhaps even discover a sense of self that will continue to flow full of hope and belief in the creative process.

With this in mind, the two questions being addressed by my research are whether or not it is possible to de-mythologise the concept of the simple life, as has been depicted in the framework of the pastoral poetic form; and, whether being isolated, relatively ignored, unwanted and marginalised by society provides an individual with an option for true artistic greatness in life.

The interior monologue associated with coming of age, spirituality and myth-making is also an important technique of my novella, as the project reflects the artistic outcomes of an individual, his life experiences and how these are remembered. According to Abrams, ‘voice signifies the equivalent in imaginative literature to Aristotle’s “ethos” in a speech of persuasive rhetoric’ (Abrams 259). As such, the voice I refer to here is a voice which establishes, and is synonymous with, the credibility of the narrator. As well as this, the practical elements of how the story is being told, or more specifically the process by which the protagonist manoeuvres in the narrative, will determine how the reader develops empathy for the character. Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), argues that:

The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement. (Booth 138)

The developing ‘voice’ also assists in dramatising the social comedy of personal suffering, and reveals the fantasising of the main protagonist about what may well happen, through a first person point of view. First person point of view provides the narration with an emotional reality created through individual imagined experiences. According to Faulds Sandefur:

As a form that is characterized by flexibility, immediate first-person narration is fully appropriate for stories that relay the maturation of protagonists who exist in oppressive circumstances. (Faulds Sandefur 7)

According to Booth, there is a sense in which we become aware of a distinct voice beyond that of the narrative voice which is referred to by the term ‘implied

author.’ This term welcomes the reader on a journey of moral sensibility, inviting them to engage with the text on multiple levels (Booth 70-71). However, one consequence of using a first-person narrator to tell the story is that the narrative voice is totally immersed within the story; therefore, the aim of this piece is not to be didactic or too lecturing.

As narrator of *The Expressionist*, the development of the young protagonist Albert Dennis Braun’s voice was of major importance in the novella. It was necessary, in the construction of the narrative, to use a double voiced discourse of events as they’re told through the narrator’s voice. They are also shaped and influenced, in a literary manner, by the voice beyond the actual voice of the character (the authorial voice). I therefore decided to write the novel in the past tense and place any reflections associated with the second voice, that of the developing child, in the narration as speech. As such, within this project, Albert, the protagonist of *The Expressionist* offers a remembered and ordered series of events in the past tense and dialogue in present tense. An example of this is the dream the young boy has, the night after the funeral of his mother:

I see her in the garden pulling out weeds. Her hands look smooth and are covered in fine dirt. She raises her left hand to her forehead and looks at me, squinting from the bright sun.

“Hello my little man. And how was school for you today?”

“Good.”

She stands, brushes herself off, then blows me a kiss with her lips and both of her hands. She smiles strongly at me.

“I’ll make some biscuits, shall I, the ones you love so much?” (*The Expressionist* 32)

The approach of using a present tense discourse and a remembered past places Albert in the text as a character who ages, allowing the protagonist to be a more reliable narrator.

### ***Works in the Field***

The term *Bildungsroman* is ‘literally an “upbringing” or “education” novel widely used by German critics referring to a novel, which is an account of a youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former)’ (Cuddon 81-82). The strongest examples of the coming of age genre are complex, with many of them directed towards the artistic and spiritual reckoning of the main protagonist. In approaching this exegesis, I have considered a wide variety of texts belonging to the genre of the coming of age novel, and more specifically the *Bildungsroman* and the sub-genre of the *Kunstlerroman*.

The novels I have examined are *My Brilliant Career* (1901), an autobiographical novel by Miles Franklin; *The Vivisector* (1970), a novel of artistic development by Patrick White, *My Place* (1987), an Indigenous Australian coming of age story by Sally Morgan and *Johnno* (1975), a coming of age novel by David Malouf. As well as these, I also examined *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) by James Joyce as a major contributor to the coming of age genre. I chose to focus on these significant literary works in the field of developmental literature, or the coming of age genre, as each of these works encompasses the developmental processes of an individual and their growth in both an artistic and spiritual realm.

With the exception of *A Portrait* by James Joyce, these works offer very powerful perspectives of Australia relating directly to isolation, a sense of individuality and community involvement. They also portray a strong approach to

self-discovery through the day-to-day happenings of one's own life, according to the choices that have been made, as well as the process by which a person has overcome and traversed these experiences.

The representation of Indigenous Australia offers this project a further dimension to what it means to be isolated. The exploration of the cultural influences of European Australia is juxtaposed, in my project, with the closeness of regional Australia to Indigenous connections. These include, but are not limited to, the land, spirituality, human nurturing, disconnection and isolation. Therefore, *My Place* by Sally Morgan offers this project an Indigenous perspective of growth and development, displacement and eventual coming of age in the Australian landscape.

In contrast to the Australian examples, the cold and dark density of Ireland depicted in *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* may not be the wide-open spaces of *My Brilliant Career*, *Johnno*, *My Place* and *The Vivisector*; however, the isolation experienced by the protagonist develops over time, as the narrative follows the events of his life. In *The Expressionist*, isolation and creativity are the motivating factors for the development of character.

The freedom and perceived sense of being in the 'lucky country' is also at work in the local Australian context, providing the protagonists of *Johnno* and *The Vivisector* with an individuality, if they choose to embrace it. This theme has been commented on elsewhere by Malouf:

What each of us takes on, at whatever point we enter it, is the whole of what happened here, since it is the whole of our history that has created what now surrounds and sustains us. (Malouf, *A Spirit Of Play* 1998,101)

Here, Malouf sees the individual's participation in, and experience of, history as a totalizing experience, and this is the aspect of history and the historical consciousness which I have tried to follow in *The Expressionist*.

*The Vivisector* by Patrick White presents its protagonist as a saved little soul after being adopted by his new family, and therefore acquiring an instant middle-class status replete with affluence and education. While *My Brilliant Career* portrays an eventually not-so-idyllic life in the rural society of its time, *Johnno* by David Malouf depicts a sense of city in relation to the world, yet at the same time represents issues relating to the peripheral found in many societies. *My Place* by Sally Morgan further emphasises the coming of age genre through the growth, development, isolation and spiritual connection to country, with the protagonist continuously engaging with, and pressing, the boundaries in her life for the discovery of personal and family understandings, and an eventual 'healing' through an Indigenous perspective.

In each of these novels the protagonists are admittedly in need of belief and escape from their circumstances and, at times, not so nurturing environments, which in each text is the protagonist's ultimate endeavour, even if not fully achieved. For example, the moment of absolution and epiphany for the character of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is one of never quite escaping his childhood and never actually fulfilling his perceived creative destiny; indeed, there is a sense in which he seems only to be working towards attaining an escape for his own person. Morris Beja, in *James Joyce: Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: A Casebook* (1973), states that:

Stephen does not, as the careless reader may suppose, become an artist by rejecting church and country. Stephen does not become an artist at all. Country, church and

mission are an inextricable unity, and in rejecting the two that seem to hamper him, he rejects also the one on which he has set his heart. (Beja 134)

As the protagonist Stephen Dedalus states, in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the truest of releases in life is to fly above the circumstances that surround a person:

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight... nationality, language and religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. (Joyce 220)

The argument in this project is that by choosing to create, one may not merely fly *past* the nets but fly *by means* of the nets, that is, to use the very limitations Joyce mentions in order to achieve his aim and live creatively, of his own making, or more specifically, through the *soul* of an artist and the eyes of the young protagonist Albert Dennis Braun.



## Chapter 2

### ***Bildungsroman and Künstlerroman***

Change, or more specifically, the coming of age for the protagonist animates the entirety of *The Expressionist*, and places it squarely in the *Bildungsroman* tradition. This genre often features a major conflict between the protagonist, or main character, and society and an eventual coming into being as a journey of cultural memory and myth associated with an individual's life. M. H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2009), states:

A *Bildungsroman* and *Erziehungsroman* are German terms signifying 'novel of formation' or 'novel of education.' The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied experiences – and often through a spiritual crisis – into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world. (Abrams 229)

According to Abrams, 'the mode began in Germany with K. P. Moritz's *Anton Reiser* (1785-90)' and the arrival of the *Bildungsroman* is 'normally dated to the publication of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-96)' (229). The descriptive 'education' being explored in *The Expressionist* is the development of an individual over time, and the multiple effects of personally experienced circumstances that are placed upon the protagonist throughout his young, fragmented and developing life. In relation to the notion of an individual rising above life's repressions, and their perceived shackles in the coming of age

framework, Daniel Just in *The Modern Novel from a Sociological Perspective* (2008) argues that:

The central principle that brings the novel and the *Bildungsroman* together is their joint attempt to construct a whole out of numerous and unavoidable existential contradictions. The most obvious manifestation of such a whole is a character with an internal sense of coherent identity. (Just 381)

The themes of growth and identity in *The Expressionist* are particularised in the main character's own life journey, such that his understandings occupy a 'particular place in one's soul', and the full exploration of this forms the concept of creatively expressed subjective change. Gregory Castle suggests, in *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (2006), that this is the 'truer form' of the coming of age *Bildungsroman* and its subtype the *Kunstlerroman* (Castle 3).

A *Bildungsroman* narrated in the first person shares aspects of the fictionalised autobiography and according to David McCooey, in *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (1996), the narrative of fictional autobiography is an interpretative process by which the narrative allows for interpretation of the past to represent it through pleasure and the therapy of remembering (McCooey 12). *The Expressionist*, considered from this point of view, aligns a remembered history, or fictionalised autobiography, with the methodology of a *Bildungsroman*, and more specifically, the *Kunstlerroman*.

The framework of the coming of age novel is not without various challenges when associating the text with a compassionate and developmental processing of the main protagonist. As Tobias Boes argues, in his essay 'Beyond the Bildungsroman: Character Development and Communal Legitimation in the Early Fiction of Joseph

Conrad' (2007):

The *Bildungsroman* responds to these challenges by creating narratives of socialization, in which ambitious young protagonists work their way to the inside of the power structures that govern their time, attempt to hew for themselves a position of privilege, and characteristically fail, realizing only too late the fundamentally misguided nature of their social ambitions. (Boes 116)

An individual's grind against socially accepted and mainstream commonality provides a platform for experiencing opportunities that remain at the same time both individualised and collective. In relation to this, Franco Moretti in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987) argues that within the framework of the *Bildungsroman* an undercurrent of transformation engulfs participants and their moral and social application. These opportunities are the eventual physical creative expression of the individual's inner intellectualisation. Moretti maintains that:

Where the transformation principle prevails and youthful dynamism is emphasized, as in the French novelists, youth cannot and does not want to give way to maturity: the youth hero senses in fact in such a 'conclusion' a sort of betrayal, which would *deprive* his youth of its meaning rather than enrich it. Maturity and youth are therefore inversely proportional: the culture that emphasizes the first devalues the second, and vice versa. (Moretti 8)

The emphasis in this project is on the growth of the protagonist within modernity, through conflicted understandings and interpretations. These arise as the

young individual, Albert, traverses everyday society constantly experiencing, engaging with, and eventually undertaking his own interpretations. Therefore, it is the search for a sense of solution and understanding of the processes which is relevant to the individual and their development that is under discussion. Often this takes the form of compromise, as Moretti argues:

.....the enormous and unconscious collective enterprise of the *Bildungsroman* bears witness to a different solution to modern culture's contradictory nature. Far less ambitious than synthesis, this other solution is compromise: which is also, not surprisingly, the novel's most celebrated theme. (Moretti 9)

Albert is constantly 'walking' with the understanding of compromise and expectations, in relation to his own destiny, that have been placed upon him, albeit with good intentions by those around him, in particular Albert's own mother. An example of this is his reflection after reading a poem by his mother:

I always saw myself in this poem, running around the bush like a crazy kid, chasing rabbits and stirring up all the animals.

But every time we finished I would be shaken from my day dreaming because my mother would hold my face, look me straight in the eyes and tell me, "When you are writing write well, like C. J. Dennis or like Patrick White. No half measures Mr Albert. When you paint, you paint like Picasso. You paint with passion, like Albert Tucker and Albert Namatjira. You paint properly, and you create from your heart." After which, she would kiss my head and sigh heavily.

"Nah, I'm just going to play footy for the Dragons and soccer for Australia,' I would answer. (*The Expressionist* 16-17)

In the early stages of *The Expressionist*, the young protagonist experiences non-attachment, and later misunderstood and skewed interpretations of these various events. Although he respects and sympathises with the expectations of those close to him, if not totally convinced of his own abilities, he continuously struggles to fully accept and embrace them. He reflects on this after receiving a letter and some photos from Sally-Pearl, his Indigenous Australian surrogate mother:

As I sat on my bed later that day, looking at the photos, and from my own memories I began trying to piece together an understanding of my life, and of where I was placed in this world. I just wanted to play footy and run in the bush or ride a bike. But it seemed every time I turned around there, was some form of art or writing or creative avenue that was being placed onto my path. It was like the world had other plans for me. I was beginning to really feel that I couldn't escape it. But I wasn't entirely sure what it was that was happening. (96)

### ***Kunstlerroman***

The *Kunstlerroman* is a sub-type of the *Bildungsroman*, and chronicles the development of creative application in, and of, itself by an individual. It usually encompasses a revisiting of childhood, and the journey through to the development of the protagonist's creativity. Abrams states:

An important subtype of the *Bildungsroman* is the *Kunstlerroman* or ('artist novel') which represents the growth of a novelist or other artist from childhood into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of the protagonist's artistic destiny and mastery of an artistic craft. (Abrams 229)

The realm of artistic creativity for an artist is often characterised by a challenging framework, which the artist must navigate, and one quite often fraught with multi-leveled social criticisms and an abrasive nature, often involving ridicule and ‘social friction’. The attainment of a sense of individual identity within society is an initiation only too familiar to the artist, yet in many cases is also one that is pushed back by the individual for fear of what may well be considered a connection to the unexplainable. Roberta Seret, in *Studies in European Thought: Voyage into Creativity – The Modernist Künstlerroman* (1992), states that the artist’s

only choice is flight, and his unquenchable thirst to learn, discover, understand, and create pushes him towards the outer limits of reality. But this is an unknown, which cannot be found in another country, or in a new dream; its location is not external but internal. Ultimately the artist must turn to himself, look into his soul, draw upon his imagination, and create his own world. (Seret 3)

Therefore, the argument for this project is that when the individual artist is determined, and works from within to formalise inner emotional understandings and interpretations devoid of fear, the artist is driven to provide experiences for himself and those around him by a ‘force’, which perpetuates both internally and externally. An example of this is Albert’s experience with art and his eventual drive to create. One powerful instance of such a force occurs while viewing ‘*Blue Poles*’ at the National Gallery during a school excursion:

There were poles in it. I could see that. But what caught my eye most, was the ordered randomness of the shapes and the lines. As I stood there, I remember that it felt like I was

walking through it. I was all giddy and dizzy in the head,  
and I again had that feeling of being outside of myself. A  
weird feeling, I know. But it's what I remember. So clear.  
(110)

The feelings that Albert experiences begin to formulate his place within society and, even more so, his belonging to the realm of artistic creativity. His emotional responses to the constant chatter being offered internally and by external forces ultimately allow him to grow and learn creatively. In relation to the artist of the *Kunstlerroman*, Seret argues

Curious and bored, sensitive and intelligent, he is pushed by internal and abstract forces toward regions of the mysterious and unknown, toward words, colors, and music of inspiration. Due to his gift of sensibility the artist is sometimes viewed as a seer – one who is able to perceive a deeper reality and present a truer understanding of the world. (Seret 3)

*The Expressionist* is situated within the 'deeper reality' that Seret refers to, and is exploring the path of inner belief that Albert, as a creative individual, experiences. Throughout his journey, Albert works within his environment, as well as outside of it, in order to gain a sense of proportional self. This leads us to the following question: does the artist want society to offer up something that looks or feels like interference or just an acceptance that we are what we are, simple as that? Or can it be argued that, when offered in a novelistic or creative form, interpretation, interference and comment on *change* in our lives are seen more subjectively? More specifically, that change and difference are made manifest through an artistic expression of the past. In response to questions of these types, Seret states that:

The process of self-discovery by exploring one's childhood – reviewing parental and religious influences, revisiting friends and schools, and recalling important events and situations – is a well established procedure employed by the authors of the modern *Kunstlerroman*. (Seret 149)

An example of this is the events of *The Expressionist* whereby Albert reflects on the workings of his familial environment, which are of crucial importance to the developmental process of his personal and artistic growth. His reflections show the continual external evolution of his creative path:

Sally-Pearl didn't say very much at all during the whole time we were at the House of Opera. I don't know why, but she looked really scared. I held her hand as we were going into the playhouse part and she smiled at me and seemed to be a little calmer. Maybe it was all the art, or maybe the pictures of the people on the walls that looked like her. When we were leaving to find grandma, my mother held my face and said, "Things like the Opera House building and its exhibitions and performances offer us a rational foundation of feeling Albert, a place to take ourselves.

I thought to myself, 'Whatever that means?'

(*The Expressionist* 27)

The 'rational foundation' and 'place to take ourselves' that is referred to here relies on the individual experiencing the environment, engaging in a creative way, and believing in the process of education that is being played out. Albert's mother gives the young protagonist an opportunity to engage and later reflect. He may well be cheeky, but his level of understanding has been altered. This experience happens



often when he is with his mother in his early, formative years and also later through his own inner knowledge and interpretation of events. Moretti argues that ‘every novel is in effect a great system of events that are potentially crucial but frustrated, and of others that, apparently of little consequence, acquire instead an unexpected importance’ (45). For Albert, it is only when having surrendered to some form of interpretation that he will see clearly, and therefore move forward within himself.

Another example of such change occurs in a spiritual experience that, for the coming-of-age individual, may potentially go unnoticed due to various conditioned circumstances, or just plain fear of the unknown. In direct response to one of the spiritual episodes in *The Expressionist*, Albert states:

That’s the last I remember of being in my seat, until we were all walking out to leave. I’m not completely sure what happened, but I was up on the stage watching everyone as they listened to the man speak as well as some other people. Then I was also sitting next to the big colourful statue of the person they all called Jesus. I was not in a seat like everyone else, but at the same time, I was in the church. It seemed a lot like the time I got to talk to my mum. I just floated about the church until it was time to go, and then I seemed to be able to rise out of my seat and walk out.

I didn’t say a word about it to anyone. (66)

Moretti suggests that ‘the trial of initiation consists precisely in accepting that time stops and that one’s own identity vanishes. It consists of being willing *to die* in order to have the possibility *to be reborn*’ (44). In relation to this, *The Expressionist* provides the reader with an opportunity to experience these events through Albert’s recognition of change over time:

I realised that I was being continuously transformed by others, and also by the conditions of my life. The resentment of being treated poorly by others had something to do with it, I guess...I was all about telling my story. (114)

This later experience is self-driven, and most certainly represents the rumblings of a developing self-awareness, as Albert is taken along by his own interpretations of what life looks like, becoming immersed in his process of ‘coming of age.’ Most importantly, for a creative person, these crucial moments are not to be ignored, as the artist is often considered visionary and possesses an ability and internal scope to express what he feels and knows. Through misunderstanding, fear and, more specifically, the process of acting and sounding ‘normal’, whatever that may be, the artist reacts, responds and interprets.

To transcend public criticism and the often harsher criticism of those closest to them is perhaps a greater skill than relinquishing one’s own power and surrendering to commonality and everyday existence. Speaking of the critic, A. A. Phillips argues in *The Cultural Cringe* (2006), that:

The critical attitude of the intellectual towards community is, of course, not in itself harmful; on the contrary, it could be a healthy, even a creative influence, if the criticism were felt to come from within, if the critic had a sense of identification with its subject, if his irritation came from a sense of shared shame rather than from a disdainful separation. (7)

Even though Phillips is referring to the cultural cringe in general, the statement could be taken to mean any context where attitudes come from without. With this in

mind, the ‘moments’ of potential empowerment for the artist and protagonist to create and explore through the criticism associated with the artist’s individual destiny are made manifest. For example, as a young boy Albert initially struggles to understand or agree with his destiny and in doing so denies, mostly due to inner fear, and criticisms of others (the man they call his father), any recognition of his own ability that he has been consistently informed of by his mother.

Therefore, through the growth and development of the artist both internally and externally, a ‘healthy creative influence’ is available to be engaged with. For example:

“Do I have to go to that school?” I asked.

“Well, Albert Dennis Braun, if you are to fulfill all that is within you, well then, yes you do. And I need to go back to the school in January, to meet with them, as this is the only time they will allow for discussions concerning future enrolments that are a few years away,” she told me firmly.

“What does that mean, to fill?” I added.

“Now you’re just being silly. No more questions about it. This is the right thing. You’ll know it and I know it,” she stated this sternly and confidently, as she took the plates and cups to the sink and lit a candle for the kitchen.

*(The Expressionist 28-29)*

Albert’s mother knows that his destiny lies in the creative area and is determined to allow every opportunity for this to take place. It seems that at a young age the protagonist does not recognise his talent and destiny, however his constant absorption of the creative, aligned with his need to be active, allow for him to eventually flourish creatively. Later, on reflection, he understands and accepts that his destiny lies in the arts. When considered this way, every creative being has at some point been driven by both positive and negative applications in relation to

their individual destination. Early in the narrative, Albert reflects on this when he introduces himself and his mother:

That's what I remember of her. I don't want you to think that she felt sorry for herself.

No fear. My mother just knew that it was my life, because of her own dreams, that would be able to shine if she worked hard and gave me every chance to succeed.

That's what she said to me all the time.

That's what I remember. (*The Expressionist* 6)

Another theme that continually motivates this research relates to the exploration of a metaphorical passage or 'journey to meaning' that is offered to an individual, as well as youth collectively, in various situations. When such meaning is considered in the narrative form of a 'coming-of-age' narrative, the narrator offers the reader the opportunity to feel and know 'difference', such as the simple individual nuances of a particular creative individual. Moretti proposes that a committed internal application of the individual allows for truer creative growth to be honoured, and states that:

It is also necessary that, as a 'free individual', not as a fearful subject but as a convinced citizen, one perceives the social norms as *one's own*. One must *internalize* them and fuse external compulsion and internal impulses into a new unity until the former is no longer distinguishable from the latter. (Moretti 16)

This achievement of 'individuality' through creative meaning is arrived at through an interpretation of circumstance, age, desire and, most certainly, a form of individual truth. This is a dramatic process which draws the reader in to the challenge experienced by the protagonist. In relation to this Seret, argues that:

The creative voyage appears on two levels. Externally the artist-protagonist emerges into the mysterious realms of truth and creativity, travelling through the secret paths of sensitivity, love, desire, death and decay. Surreptitiously the artist-author voyages alongside his protagonist, revisiting his past, re-experiencing his youth, and re-evaluating his artistic talents. (Seret 144)

This idea of the creative journey that Seret is referring to applies to Albert and his journey by way of his own personal quest and reaction to circumstances, experiences and personal hopes. Through Albert's recognition of this journey, and his eventual creative well-being, the end game – that of his coming of age creatively – is achieved. In addition to the dual-level voyage of the artist-protagonist, Seret proposes a third metaphorical voyage:

a motif of the *Kunstlerroman* is the journey through art. The artist's guides are often the messengers of love, death, and immortality. He gropes for inspiration, calls forth the muses, and struggles with fate, having no peace until he achieves self-realization and creates art. (11-12)

With this in mind, Albert begins to realise that he is not in control of his own destiny, nor perhaps ever totally will be, which is his 'self-realization'. He begins to recognise that his journey is solely his, yet at the same time out of his control. After the death of his mother the opportunity for him to experience life and indulge his internal gift arises early in this continuum of creative development. One example is a discussion he has with his mother, after her death, while in a dream state:

We are in the Opera House looking up at the huge ceiling.  
My mother is smiling and laughing, and very excited.

“Quick Albert come here. Quickly, quickly. Can you see the colours that are across that window? The reflection of the light?”

“Yes, I see it.”

“Well, then, tell me how it makes you feel. What does it ask of you Albert?”

“It is telling me to run and jump.”

“Good. Very good Albert. My little mate is wise.” (33)

This process is one of deep realisation, a response to the internal excitement and God-like abilities so often placed upon those viewed as gifted, talented and connected. Therefore creative opportunities for the individual are multiple, when considered through the realms of acceptance, open-mindedness and inspiration. Albert is constantly working towards an understanding and recognition of his life, and is continuously transforming through metaphor, with several themes appearing and reappearing as narrative motifs. Seret argues that ‘the concept of artistic creativity, the destiny of the artist, the artist’s relationship to society, problems the artist encounters by his own mission’ is the journey that needs to be experienced by the creative individual for a full exploration of their destiny (3). Another example of this in *The Expressionist* is a writing activity undertaken in a Year Five class. Having returned to his home from Broken Hill, Albert’s class is asked to write a story about someone who is famous or known for doing something. He reflects on an event that he experienced at a fundraiser he attended:

*It was a nice day. All the people were laughing and smiling and sharing stories about their children and each other and about painting and writing. Nothing like ~~I had~~ Id ever seen before . . . That was a really great memory from Broken Hill. Standing together getting their photo taken was a group of men who were ~~all~~ artists. They*

~~paynted~~ painted all kinds of ~~things scene~~ seen scenes from  
~~round the town of~~ around Broken Hill. ~~Their~~ There was a  
man ~~named~~ whose name was Pro Hart and another called  
Eric Minchin and some others. One of them his last name  
was Pickup. They were called the brushmen of the bush.  
There were five of them... (79-80)

In contrast to this experience is the negative journey Albert undertakes in the house of 'the man they call his father'. He is submitted to ridicule and abusive episodes that shape and work his inner being into knowing that he does not to wish be a part of the examples that are being played out. He offers this in relation to an event when told of the perceived negative elements of his creative and coming of age journey:

"What's this shit?" he asked, as he grabbed the folder  
from under my elbows.

"Homework," I told him.

"That won't toughen you up. You're a Nancy-boy. You  
need to grow some balls. This is a tough world, not some  
airy-fairy arty crap of a place. A Tough World! Got it!"  
He yelled the last part at me and then backhanded me  
across the face. I landed really hard on my bottom near the  
doorway. I was hurt and I was dizzy, but I wasn't going to  
cry. There was no way I was going to give him the  
pleasure of seeing me weak or sad ever again. That much I  
knew! (*The Expressionist* 76-77)

The episode provides Albert with an opportunity to recognise the duality of life's experiences, the very personal inner world of a boy growing up in a complex environment, and the episodic nature of the adult influences surrounding him. Moretti states that these 'novelistic episodes' are 'almost never meaningful' in and

of themselves. Rather, ‘they become so because someone – in the *Bildungsroman* usually the protagonist – gives it meaning. He prolongs the encounter, he probes into the conversation, he recalls it, he puts his hopes into it’ (45). More specifically, it is Albert’s approach to his environment and the expression of those characteristics as he develops ‘creative understanding’ and the identifying features that are to be played out in a positive way.

The insight into the personal identification of the main character through the author’s and the reader’s own experiences, is of importance to this project when considering the elements of a *Kunstlerroman*. According to Seret, identity is an essential element and is an extension of the artist made manifest in written form:

This protagonist is an artist and consequently becomes easily identifiable – being either an extension or revision of the author’s own personality. The use of autobiographical elements for a protagonist who is an artist was a unique method of presenting background data; this method was used consciously or unconsciously by the authors of *Kunstlerroman*. (Seret 23)

Another important question *The Expressionist* asks of the reader is: are the experiences of its characters being portrayed in a direct, unmediated fashion, or are they the limitations of a subjective viewpoint? This is at times referred to as a form of second self or co-consciousness. In relation to this Galya Diment in *The Autobiographical Novel of Co-Consciousness: Goncharov, Woolf and Joyce* (1994) proposes the idea of a ‘literary duality’ (41), which is also referred to by Wayne C. Booth as an ‘implied author’ or awareness of a distinct voice beyond that of the narrative voice (151).



Diment suggests the term 'co-consciousness' to explain the sense of an inner duality which, when externalised in a narrative, creates 'co-consciousness' or moments of dual being for the individual (Diment 41-44). In *The Expressionist*, Albert experiences such a moment of co-consciousness when reflecting on events prior to the attempted suicide by the man they call his father:

That night I was lying in my bed thinking about my very short life. Why was I here in this house? Why was Penny having a baby? Where was Angela going? Why did I feel sick, and how is it that everyone who is close to me dies? And why was the man they called my father not very nice? And why was I stuck here? And what had happened at the church that time? Not very important questions to most people, I guess, but to me they mattered.

I was ten years old and thinking that it was all too much.

Then it happened. (71-72)

For the young Albert, these experiences are a place for his greatest fears and highest learning to be played out, from the times of visiting his mother in a dream state during his journey, his spiritual epiphanic experiences within the church, chapel and nature, to the task of letter writing for the purpose of imaginative expression. As well as these are the negative applications associated with his experiences when living with the man they call his father, which he reflects on as serious events that have occurred in the house. He says:

As I entered from the hallway he told me that he had swallowed a handful of sleeping pills and chased it down with a half bottle of Johnny Walker. It was serapax, he said; thirty-two of them, actually.

He asked me if I was proud of him, then fell to the floor.

I remember landing on my knees and working to cradle his head. I began slapping his face, softly at first. By the seventh time, I was hitting him so hard and screaming, “Wake up!” My hand felt like it had been slammed in a car door. (*The Expressionist* 72-73)

When considering co-consciousness further, one of its purposes in this project of coming of age is to offer the narrative a mindfulness or calmness, if you will, and therefore a surrendered connection to the space in which the individual protagonist operates. The reader’s experience of this double-layered complexity provides for an involvement in Albert’s personal reflective practices. Another example of this is from David Malouf’s *Johnno*:

I sit in my room at the back of the house and let my mind drift away from Cicero’s *Pro Ligario* or a problem in perms and coms. Outside little tree frogs are clinking away under a wall – clink, clink, the sound that stars might make. Behind me my parents are sitting up in bed reading the *Telegraph*, which is full of aggravated assaults and traffic offences, sipping tea which my father makes from his galley at the top of the stairs, listening to an all-night radio station. What do I have to do with this, I wonder?  
I feel odd and independent. (*Johnno* 50)

Malouf’s character engages with his inner-self and the wonderment associated with self-reflection. The simplicity of it all actually masks the layers of complexity associated with quiet contemplation and the creative mind. The movement within this space works to allow for the continued recognition of developing creative ideas, of probing and of belief; that is, belief in the journey. In relation to this notion of ‘independence and difference’, Albert is further discovering himself and

his connection to a duality and ‘the creative’ when he also reflects in quiet moments of contemplation:

I began to notice that artistic thoughts and visions were holding my attention more and more each day. They seemed to fill me with fresh cold chills, regularly. And then a smile would just happen across my face. It was like I had no control (154).

The levels of co-consciousness within narrative are varied and affected in multiple ways; however, the process whereby the protagonist expresses that is defined purely by their personal interpretation and reflection on associated events. Diment proposes that:

There are topics so huge and vague that one often wonders whether they should even be touched. Both duality and autobiography are among them. Yet when careful and craft-conscious writers approach vague and broad themes they inevitably mold them into discernable artistic shapes. (Diment 157)

As such, this level of change effects for the individual a shift to either live fully or to just live with these ‘ah ha moments’ relating to what the protagonist sees, and how that perception dictates their way forward. Sybylla in *My Brilliant Career* further expresses this concept relating to recognition of duality with her reflecting on coming of age at fifteen:

This was life – my life – my career, my brilliant career! I was fifteen – fifteen! A few fleeting hours and I would be old as those around me. I looked at them as they stood there, weary, and turning down the other side of the hill of life. When young, no doubt they had hoped for, and

dreamed of, better things – had even known them. But here they were. This had been their life; this was their career. It was, and in all probability would be, mine too. My life – my career – my brilliant career!

Weariness! Weariness! (Franklin 66)

The ‘weariness’ referred to by Sybylla, her experiences, her recognition of the moment, are very personal and have potential to create for the individual clarity and conscious choice in her own unique situation. This ‘clarity’ I refer to in relation to this project is driven by the choice of a simple life that holds, for Albert in *The Expressionist*, an opportunity to grow and learn without the trauma or complications associated with a busy, rushed and clouded existence. It is therefore a sense of hope that is manifesting for Albert and to which Sybylla refers in *My Brilliant Career*.

### Chapter 3

#### ***The Pastoral Ideal***

The term 'pastoral' denotes the literary genre, which opposes the simple to the complicated life, to the advantage of the former. William Empson in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1986), argues that:

Pastoral usually works like that; it describes the lives of 'simple' low people to an audience of refined wealthy people, so as to make them think first 'this is true about everyone' and then 'this is especially true about us'.

(Empson 195-96)

The pastoral form in poetry offers great opportunity for expression; however, the idea of creating a novella that explores this was certainly a strong motivating factor in the research. In a traditional sense, the simple life that is being referred to may be that of the shepherd, the child or the workingman. The pastoral, according to Abrams, is:

A deliberately conventional poem expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the supposed peace and the simplistic elements of this simpler way of life of a shepherd and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting. (Abrams 240)

Further to this Strand and Boland argue in *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (2001) that the pastoral form as a constant in poetry 'was both an escape and an idea' (208). They also argue that the form offers the realm of artistic creation a 'troubled, troubling, compelling, and crucial' core to be

set against the remembering of the reality of simply living and creating (208). Further to this, Ruth Brown in her essay on Patrick White, 'The Country, The City, and The Tree of Man' (1995), argues that:

However right it may be, a textbook in economics has less authority than romantic tradition in a text where there is obvious affiliation with the pastoral. Traditionally, economics and the pastoral are kept firmly apart: the country represents an original purity with only very primitive social forms, whereas the city is the site of economic relations incompatible with pure country. (Brown 868)

What is being argued here is that engaging with the pastoral form through research and novelistic prose creates an understanding of the relation between the city and the country that does not merely depict the latter as just simple folk on the land. Instead, *The Expressionist* seeks to establish a passionate and driven connection to life's simplest experiences, one that allows for deeper understandings and compassionate motivations toward humanity, and the real salt of the earth people who are creative. The Australian poet Les Murray, through poetry and prose, champions 'a simple life' bush culture by offering what he claims is an authentic voice for those living in the regional and rural areas of Australia, which is supported by the Brown statement above of 'original purity' For Murray, the rural and regional tradition of the poor, the marginalised and the isolated and the 'pure country' referred to by Brown, compared with that of the rich grazier or pastoralist and the big city dweller, provides a voice of two distinct cultures.

Les Murray engages readers with a distinct interpretation of the regional distanced from the city with a perception of their own cultural isolation and self-

imposed remoteness. An example of this is the poem *Driving Through Sawmill Towns* in *Learning Human: New Selected Poems* (2001), with the third stanza:

You glide on through town,  
your mudguards damp with cloud.  
The houses there wear verandahs out of shyness,  
all day in calendared kitchens, women listen  
for cars on the road,  
lost children in the bush,  
a cry from the mill, a footstep –  
nothing happens.

The half heard radio sings  
Its song of sidewalks.

Sometimes a woman, sweeping her front step,  
Or a plain young wife at a tankstand fetching water  
in a metal bucket will turn round and gaze  
at the mountains in wonderment,  
looking for a city. (3)

For Albert, the ‘simple’ that Murray is working with in this poem is the driving force behind his creative journey, in quiet contemplation and reflection amongst the simple environment (geographically) in which he is engaged. It is the ‘wonderment of the mountains’ that he is constantly working with in his artistic coming of age, as well as his personal identity. When the ‘pastoral’ is applied to Australian identity and, more specifically, the regional dweller it is of high importance to consider the simple life as more a choice and strength of mind rather than an imposition placed upon poor bush-folk by those of the bright-light-cities, and popular images portrayed to the masses. Murray states in *A Working Forest* (1997):

They, bush folk hardly ever see their lives presented at all, let alone accurately, in books or newspapers, on TV or film, but they wouldn't expect to, and the concealment can be welcome. (182)

The concealment of the day-to-day images is, for a creative person a mechanism for growth and development, which is possible for Albert through the recognition of his own creative self as a part of the simple life.

It is important also to acknowledge that the simple life could not exist without the complexities of an urban city life, driven by the notions of fame, success and capitalist growth. However, the 'simple' is not less cultured, and nor should it be the last resort. David Day, in *Australian Identities* (1998), argues that

Dictionaries of the Australian idiom often refer to the expression 'Sydney or the Bush.' It is used to refer to the ultimate 'either/or' decision: two extremes, with Sydney or the big city – as the positive eventuality if money is available, and the bush as the negative place to go, the only option for those down on their luck. (Day 122)

The idealisation of either is fraught with danger, as an individual looks to journey through the maze that is life. However, Bill Pritchard and Phil McManus in *Land Of Discontent: The Dynamics of Change in Rural and Regional Australia* (2000), argue that from the 'bush poetry' tradition of Banjo Patterson's 'The Man From Snowy River' to the contemporary 'popularity of period furniture and the Driza-Bone' to the 'filled shops that crowd our tourist districts,' we as Australians and 'our visitors,' are surrounded by the 'association of Australianess with rurality'. While they argue that this is 'not the only' image it is our 'beaches' and our 'diggers



(returned soldiers) ...also writ large', and it is a sense of place and a vision that we need to recognise as an 'undeniably important one.' (17)

As a creative person, the individual is standing on the outside of the realm of their environment, looking for an opportunity, which may come in a variety of forms, and the desire to simplify life to discover that opportunity should never be considered a hindrance. This project has aimed to paint the localized regional and rural perception of connection through a coming of age narrative and an ideal of the 'simple' life being an appropriate and acceptable way of going about one's existence. The notion that those living on the periphery are a simple and uncultured 'mob' is naive, and therefore discriminatory, as well as judgmental. The expectation to conform to the ideals of the mob is one that needs to be challenged consistently. Bruce Bennett in *An Australian Compass: Essays on Place and Direction in Australian Literature* (1991), argues that:

The common expectation of metropolitan cultural elites that centres will conform to their allegedly superior values or styles can only exist if the other centres are prepared for this to happen. (16)

The peripheral dweller is one who offers the larger aspects of society an interpretation and perspective that isn't clouded nor congested with the goings on in the world. A rural and regional dweller has a mind for clarity and a compassion for the little things in life that are simple in form and kind in nature.

It is also the exploration within this project that the area, place and more specifically the 'region' to which the narrator is positioned influences choice. This occurs geographically, culturally and socially as the identification of dual levels of reality are imbedded in the thinking and actions of that individual. Further to this,

Bennett proposes that the identification with the region a person is situated in demonstrates meaning and a metaphorical interpretation when formatted creatively.

He states, when considering 'place', that:

I am interested in particular physical locations, but also in the more ambiguous metaphoric significations of the word summed up in Sally Morgan's autobiography *My Place*, in which issues of human living, identity and socio-cultural position are also implied. (Bennett 11 *An Australian*)

As we lead into considering Australian identity and metaphor, an example that has influenced this project is Sybylla's perspective in *My Brilliant Career*:

I am proud that I am Australian, a daughter of the Southern Cross, a child of the mighty bush. I am thankful that I am a peasant, a part of the bone and muscle of my nation, and earn my bread by the sweat of my brow, as man was to do. I rejoice that I was not born a parasite, one of the bloodsuckers who loll on velvet and satin, crushed from the proceeds of human sweat and blood and souls. (Franklin 259)

## **Chapter 4**

### ***Australian Identity and Regionalism***

The concepts of identity, regionality and more specifically the notion of ‘rural’, are strong elements of *The Expressionist*. With this in mind regionality, or more specifically a sense of place and identity, is also a major feature in each of the texts under discussion which are associated with the growth and development of the young protagonist and his individual journey in a specific area. According to Walker, Porter and Marsh the terms regional, rural and remote apply to the ‘peripheral areas of a culture’, defined in terms of ‘wealth, population density, infrastructure and remoteness’, which are considered ‘less important in the economic, cultural and political sense than the centre’ (Walker, Porter and Marsh 2012, 9-11).

As a rural and regional dweller, I have experienced what it is like to be marginalised, not only in a geographical sense, but also politically, culturally and economically. Patrick White, in David Marr’s *Patrick White: A life* (1992) states:

It all starts with the question of identity. In recent years we have been served up a lot of clap-trap about the need for a national identity. We have been urged to sing imbecile jingles, flex our muscles like the sportsmen from telly commercials, and display hearty optimism totally unconvincing, so superficial and unnatural. (quoted in Marr 633)

The subtle forms of exclusion associated with an at times ill-informed, elitist understanding of society – in other words, those who determine where the margins are, and who dwells in them – its multiple layers of class and the idea of localization

are key themes of this coming of age story and what the project has aimed to explore. It is from this perspective that I am seeking to emphasise the value that can be attached to the rural or regional experience. Sue Ryan-Fazilleau in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* and the 'Pain of Unbelonging' (2007), argues that:

The term identity implies an oscillation between similarity and difference (identity is constructed through a dual movement between assimilation and differentiation), whereby one identifies oneself with others and distinguishes oneself from them. (Ryan-Fazilleau 119)

In *The Expressionist*, the young protagonist, experiences a fearful and anxious society working to overpower and dominate an individual or group through the elements of fear and intimidation. However, he also experiences a resistance to, and challenge from, those who are seen to intimidate and harass. One such experience allows him to gain insight into how the world may well work in some areas:

"Hey look at the big brown coon and the snowflake holding her hand," yelled one of them.

"Yeah, a choc top ice cream," yelled another.

"Coco pops boys. Only dirtier and smellier," a tall boy added.

"Just like a chocolate milkshake only Cruuunchy," yelled another and they all laughed...

"And not as tasty I reckon," said the short one (38)

And then again further:

"Stupid dumb abo," big nose pointed and laughed.

"Go home back to the desert," another called out.

"Back to ya own country, ya lazy black bludger," added another boy.

"You should shut-up big nose and not be so mean," I called out. (*The Expressionist* 38)

Albert's response to these elements of hatred, and then finally confrontation, allow him to reach a point of recognition that he is attached to a group, a place and a journey that is uniquely his own – a moment – one of great clarity. He further narrates:

They were standing around us by now, and one of them pushed me over. Sally-Pearl grabbed a stick, and Grandma came running over and threatened them by holding out her fist and waving a large rock around and swearing. She also told them in her pidgin German that she would be telling the police. They all laughed and walked off, pushing each other and swearing, calling back the names they had used before. I remember it being one of those moments that you realise the world is not a perfect place, and that you have to look after yourself as best as you can. I guess that's what we all did that day at the beach. I didn't have the muscles to beat them, but I did have the people around me to show me that I didn't need to be scared of anything or anyone. (*The Expressionist* 38-39)

Albert strives towards achieving resilience, acceptance and a sense of hope in relation to the many factors that make up his life and play a major role in its creative development. The achievement of a sense of identity and fluid creativity, from Albert's individual perspective, is the purpose and end goal to which he continues to find himself, irrespective of where he resides on the periphery. It needs to be considered that the multiple differentiations pertaining to Australia, and more so the 'regional area', are what work to create significance of 'place', and for Albert this is his process of coming of age.

David Malouf argues that a 'land can bear any number of cultures laid one above the other or set side by side' (Malouf *A Spirit* 51). The understanding that it can be

‘inscribed and written upon many times’ is one that relates directly to identity. One ‘form’ that Malouf refers to is ‘writing to shape the landscape,’ with the ideal that ‘landscape-making is in our bones’ and in the places ‘where humans have made their home the landscape will be a ‘made one’ (Malouf *A Spirit* 51).

To truly recognise that as individuals we are ‘different as well as similar’ and to embrace the path that one is on provides for positive growth and development across the many elements that make up life. Joanne Finkelstein and Lisa Bourke in ‘The Rural and Urban Myth: Snack Foods and Country Life’ (2001), argue that ‘a sense of identity is not only produced from conflict and difference but also from a sense of belonging’ (46). To be ‘Aussie’ living in the regional and rural areas of this nation should be considered a positive strength, not a hindrance.

The major cities of our nation, equate with the multiple levels of culture, education, religion and traditional values that provide the majority of Australians with their day-to-day identity. This is potentially a clouded and anxious space. In response to this, Bennett argues that:

Such issues of definition and redefinition seem particularly urgent for an Australian population consisting principally of immigrants. And with a history of ‘white occupation of just over two hundred years,’ Australia is still a ‘site of enormous personal and cultural disorientation.’ As ‘colonisers’ of a ‘new’ country, white Australians have more often expressed a sense of exile than a sense of place. (Bennett 12 *An Australian*)

Bennett further proposes that when people think of the ‘glamour’ of Sydney’s Kings Cross versus almost any ‘country town, agricultural region, or unsettled area

in Australia's interior' they cringe, and this is one of the 'great concerns' within our psyche (Bennett *Some Dynamics* 101).

It is the 'passive friction' of the simple versus the complicated, which is the rural and the urban, that I have explored in this project. The Australian 'bush' is often represented at the margins of debate or conversation, and is very often viewed as a space of simple folk, plain ideas and limited hope, that has little or no bearing on the imagery, excitement and glamour of the city dweller.

The Australian journalist and poet Henry Lawson argued, in literary form, for an Australian bush relating directly to the struggles reflecting the rural and regional area, not the perception of a civilised city folk with romantic views. According to A.A. Phillips:

Many writers – and Lawson was one of these – are proud declarers of the ideologies of the community to which they belong, defining the forward edge of its movement through time. But every writer of worth is also intensely himself. His artistic conceptions well up from the depths of his own experience and temperament. Often these two sources of influence, the internal and the external, create a tension which can both enrich and confuse the work of writers. (Phillips *Henry* 1970, 86)

The 'tension' referred to by Phillips is the driving force behind the creative influences of the artist in this project. This duality, when an individual enters the artistic realm, is potentially frightening, yet exists as a creative positive. In eventually expressing these dualities, as is the case for Albert, the protagonist surrenders to the knowledge of their own existence. 'Simple' is viewed as powerful, and Albert is working towards this as the catalyst of his individual existence. He sees 'simplicity' in the landscape of which he is placed, hope in himself and the

experience of those who navigate this personal space, no matter what the extremities or challenges are that he faces.

In relation to Lawson's view of this, Christopher Lee, in *An Uncultured Rhymer and His Cultural Critics* (2002), argues that:

Lawson believed that writers needed to abandon popular romantic representations of rural experience so that urban Australians and their political representatives could understand the needs of the bush. (Lee 92- 93)

Such a reality is what Henry Lawson depicted the bush to be and this is evident in much of his poetry and prose work. Lawson wrote of the bush not romantically but as a dark place filled with struggle, extremes, loss, despair, but also of hope in life's daily choices. A. A. Phillips offers in relation to Lawson:

He could, when he liked, be strikingly original and self-reliant in his development of techniques. If he was satisfied to accept the naturalistic mode, it was because he needed it to reflect his attitude to life. His conceptions demanded that he keep within the scale of life-as-it-is-lived. (Phillips 96-97  
*Henry*)

One example of Lawson's actuality in relation to the 'bush' is the first stanza of *The City Bushmen in A Camp Fire Yarn*, (1984) – a response to the Australian poet

A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson – with the lines:

It was pleasant up the country, City Bushman, where you went,  
For you sought the greener patches and you travelled like a gent;  
And you curse the trams and buses and the turmoil and the push,  
Though you know the squalid city needn't keep you from the bush;  
But we lately heard you singing of the "plains where shade is not",  
And you mentioned it was dusty – "all was dry and all was hot".  
(Lawson 234)



A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson romanticised the notion of the bush and rurality through the form of the pastoral. Paterson argued for the continued romantic notion of trees and beauty and a life of simple luxury living in the bush and on the land through an urban vista. One example of Paterson's pastoral ideal is the lines in the second stanza from *Clancy of The Overflow* in *Banjo Paterson: His Poetry and Prose* by Richard Hall (1993):

In my wild erratic fancy visions come to me of  
Clancy  
Gone a-droving 'down the Cooper' where the  
Western drovers go;  
As the stock are slowly stringing, Clancy rides  
behind them singing,  
For the drover's life has pleasures that the towns-  
folk never know.  
And the bush has friends to meet him, and their  
kindly voices greet him  
In the murmur of the breezes and the river on  
its bars,  
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains  
extended,  
And at night the wondrous glory of the ever-lasting stars.  
(Paterson in Hall 47)

By debating the interpretation of the bush from varied points of view in a literary form, both poets offered a unique perspective of life in the rural areas of Australia and a city versus country motif that both glorified and demonised. Hall states:

It is surprising that Paterson's account of how the battle of the ballads between himself and Henry Lawson in 1892 came about has so often been brushed aside. For some critics the conflict has helped towards a tidy categorisation

of the two men; in the left corner, the tribune of the people, Henry Lawson, and in the right corner the languid spokesman for the squatters, A.B. Paterson. (218)

The exchanges between the two men, who were friends and rivals played out for the public in *The Bulletin* magazine in 1892. According to Horgan and Sharkey in 'Vision Splendid or Sandy Blight?' (1996):

The debate was not a simple matter of presenting opposing stereotypes. Each participant saw the bush as an important source of artistic inspiration, and each had sufficient experience of the city and bush life to avoid the simplicities (Horgan and Sharkey 66).

The argument of this project is that the images portrayed by urban society as the 'norm', and how we relate to what is viewed as being acceptable, leads to anxiety and a plethora of 'expectations' mainstream society requires of the individual. It is therefore the mythologisation of what a society is supposed to look like, from the urban perspective, that is of greater concern. In relation to this, Horgan and Sharkey argue that:

Paterson's view served to consolidate the romancing of the bush experience, and Lawson's point that portraying life with all its difficulties was no treason to nation or art seems to have been largely lost upon Paterson and a host of writers and readers of the *Bulletin* who joined the fracas. (Horgan and Sharkey 66)

In reducing social and economic relations to the simple form – the pastoral – potentially powerful tools for change are created through challenging the social

coding that is often very subtle yet so dominant in our society. Horgan and Sharkey propose that:

For early colonial poets, the bush might serve as an anodyne against the woes of the city: it might represent a chance to make a fresh start; or it might prove a place of heartbreaking exile and sudden death. (Horgan and Sharkey 68)

Albert's perception in *The Expressionist* is that gaining ground in life in areas such as creative development, personal freedom and intellectual experiences is a viable process when situated in a rural and regional area. There may well be challenges, however he recognises his desires to be creative need to be on his own terms rather than on those that see his landscape as 'uncultured and filled with heartbreak'. Albert believes that his non-migration to a major city, to the false sense of safety in numbers, in the similar, in constant noise and confinement, is a positive driving force behind his choice of the simple. An example of this, for Albert, is his internal response to the comments made by a visiting artist to the school:

"Albert, you can't possibly want to stay here, or anywhere outside of the city, for that matter. Far too uncultured, young man," he offered, firmly. Then he continued, "It is far too uncultured, this outback post, for the true artist."

It was like it was their own little club. And if you didn't act like them, or live where they were, then it simply wasn't acceptable. Not my go at all. I remember thinking that there is relevance in looking at those places, sure, but the true essence of humanity is in the basic process of day-to-day life. A simple life of human beings, not some big-flash-get-out-of-my-road-city-lifestyle. (*The Expressionist* 114)

By undertaking the choice to not migrate from the bush to live a congested existence within the constant noise of city life has the potential to transform the identity of Australia and offers this project strength in choosing a reduction to the simple as one of 'positive humanity'. That an individual person would somehow be of lesser value to society if they were to embrace the simple life, a life travelled along the extra mile, out where there is a smaller number in population, is total madness and a continual wedge between the understandings and levels of acceptance within our society. In relation to this, Les Murray's poem 'Prime Numbers' in *Conscious and Verbal* (1999) and its first stanza, ask the reader to engage with the content and offers a rural versus city perspective with:

What are you doing now, Les?

Normally I live in the country,  
work, garden, parry thrusts from the *Herald*,  
but two days a week I fly in  
to a cubicle in the Stacked City,  
an every-coloured brick university  
that is built on top of itself  
like a brain's lobes and evolutionary layers  
on the last rock before Botany Bay.  
(Murray *Conscious and Verbal* 38)

Peter Porter, another celebrated Australian poet, portrays an opposite Australian identity to that of Murray's 'Boeotian' view, and his poetry suggests a personal space in a civilised environment is required; that from the outside looking in. One example of this view is to be found in the lines from the second stanza of *On First Looking Into Chapman's Hesiod* in *Australian Poems in Perspective* by P. K. Elkin (1978):

Like a Taree smallholder splitting logs  
And philosophizing on his dangling billies,  
The poet mixes hard agrarian instances  
With sour sucks to his brother. Chapman, too,  
That perpetual motion poetry machine,  
Grinds up the classics like bone meal from  
The abattoirs. And the same blunt patriotism,  
A long-winded, emphatic, kelpie yapping  
About our land, our time, our fate, our strange  
And singular way of moons and showers, lakes  
Filling oddly – yes, Australians are Boeotians,  
Hard as headlands, and, to be fair, with days  
As robust as the Scythian wind on stone.  
(Porter in Elkin 172)

However, Murray's staunch polemical view, argues that as a society Australians, and more specifically city folk, have sold their own self identity to participate in a myth, a trope of misunderstandings, just to mimic those that have been before them and those that stare straight through each other to see only their own wants and desires. According to Murray:

You cannot make an image of any large reality. You can't make an image of Australia and do justice to all its aspects. You will inevitably do great injustice to the parts you think less important, and dismiss or leave out, and you can't even see the reality of the country from all the angles you need to see it from. (Murray *A Working* 348)

The 'city' being debated here does not necessarily always equate to opportunity, and most often the daily existence within a large urban area, when fully recognised from the outside in, lays down a platform for regret and despair potentially laced with anger at the loss of a person's individuality associated with a less complex and

simple rural and regional environment. However contrary this idea may be to the urban dweller, and however foreign, pushing through to get on a public transport vehicle may seem to a 'boy from the bush,' there still has to be an urban for a rural to exist. According to Gray and Phillips:

There can be no rural without the notion of urban, and vice versa. Attempts to specify the characteristics of rurality in terms of contrast with urban society fell into disrepute when both were found to be products of the forces of capitalism. (Gray and Phillips 52)

Therefore, the argument should be for creating identification with acceptance, tolerances, positive hope and a feeling of comfort in a person's own creative skin with David Malouf explaining it this way:

The desire to stand alone, to have a destiny and a history of our own was inevitable of course, and necessary, but it destabilised us, introducing first a resentful sense of being marginal, of being colonial and irrelevant to the main course of things, then an endless worrying back and forth about how we were to ground ourselves and discover a basis for identity (Malouf *A Spirit* 79).

The persistent chasing of an identity or nationhood has worked to compress our trueness in relation to the landscape. We have aspired, in many forms, to being a creatively inspirational and savvy literary nation, with an example of this greatness shared by Bruce Bennett in *Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood* (2006):

With a population base of some 20 million people in the early years of the twenty-first century, Australia is widely recognised as 'punching above its weight' in the field of

international literature in English. When questions of literary merit are raised, Patrick White's Nobel prize for literature in 1973 is often cited together with David Malouf's Impact award, Thomas Keneally's and Peter Carey's Booker prizes, Kate Grenville's Orange prize and the Queens gold medal for poetry to Judith Wright, Les Murray and Peter Porter. (Bennett *Homing In* 1)

The landscape in which *The Expressionist* is set is one of a very unique place, that being Australia, and more specifically the regional and outback areas of New South Wales. With this in mind, the opportunity to discover oneself and create an identity based on history and belief of 'your' contemporary time is an application associated with each person as an individual and its regions. What is being argued in *The Expressionist* is that it is a sense of comfortable consciousness, of place, rather than a drive of being better than the other, that will provide for positive creativity. David Malouf proposes that:

This business of making accessible the richness of the world we are in, of bringing density to ordinary day-to-day living in a place, is the real work of culture. It is a matter, for the most part, of enriching our consciousness – in both senses of the word: but also of taking all that into our consciousness and of giving it a second life, there, so that we possess the world we inhabit imaginatively as well as in fact. (Malouf *A Spirit* 35)

Albert's journey is in direct relation to 'the enrichment of his consciousness' that Malouf refers to and, as such, his transformation over time is driven by imagination and the facts of his life: the death of his mother, his father's negative influence and his best friend drowning. These are the facts that are at play in his life and his

journey is not one of sadness but a place of hope that he discovers through these facts, events and imaginings as a creatively minded active person of the bush. A. A. Phillips claims that:

A country cannot achieve nationhood until it has achieved articulateness. We talk glibly enough of the 'Australian way of life' – indeed we are beginning to be glib about how glib that phrase is. How can we know what it means, whether indeed it means anything, until it is rigorously and coherently expounded. And who can expound it, who can make us intelligently aware of our own meaning, our basic unities, the direction of our movement, so well as the writer, the painter, the musician. (Phillips *On the Cultural* 12)

The experiences we share (or don't share) affects the choices we make on a daily basis and relate directly to the outcomes of lived processes. Therefore, the elements of self-belief, discovery and expression are paramount to the emotional, physical and psychological developmental of the artist's individual self.

In many cases throughout an artist's life, creative interpretations are left unfulfilled riddled with lost opportunity and often, self-destruction. According to Diment, this relates to the fear of the 'dual self' (co-consciousness) and, therefore, a lack of explored awareness; however, it also needs to be considered that in recognition of the duality and being able to express themselves in multiple formats without fear of ridicule, the artist's potential to be 'fully alive' and enjoy continued growth can ensue in all facets of the creative process (49).

With creative duality in mind for the artist, we then turn to the term 'place-making,' which is offered by Bruce Bennett, who argues in *Some Dynamics of Literary Placemaking: An Australian Perspective* (2003), that:



The personal voice, testimony, memoir, or autobiography signify something important about what I call place-making through writings. Emotional and familial relationships to place indicate patterns of belonging and ways in which value is accorded to particular places, regions, cultures, and environments. (Bennett *Some Dynamics* 97-98)

Paramount to the practice by an artist in any form is the expression, exploration and fulfilment according to an interpretation of environment most apparent, accepted and agreeable to that individual. By living free of any anxiety and the loaded descriptions placed upon an individual both by themselves and society at large, it is the separation from and surrendering to interpretation, that allows for the creative journey to be fully experienced. When approached through a creative and developmental perspective it remains uniquely apparent that the creative individual ‘must’ allow themselves, and the influences associated with their lives, to express the internal happenings through creative practice. For this project it is about the embracing of these elements, and the exploration of the ‘hope’ that exists in such places.

## Chapter 5

### *Anxiety*

The question for the creative individual should be: at which point do we find ourselves contemplating our own destinies and the changes that take place around us? And through such reflection, where does the process of growth and development take place in the practical and physical form? According to Malouf, it is about exploration:

Life is always more complex than the means we have for dealing with it. It always has been. We change but not fast enough. That's the way things are. As for our Australianness, that has always been a matter of argument, of experiment. (Malouf *A Spirit* 102)

By neglecting to recognise the accumulative anxiety created by the chaotic nature of urban areas, our society has forced each of us not to go within, but rather to look outside of ourselves for comfort or recognition, and to blame those around us for lost opportunities in relation to our own misunderstandings. This, according to Malouf, relates to:

Anxiety about where we are, what we are to be, an endless fussing and fretting over identity, has been with us now for more than a century. Perhaps it is time we discovered a new shape for the story we have been telling ourselves. Identity can be experienced in two ways. Either as a confident being-in-the-world or as anxiety about our-place-in-the-world, as something we live for ourselves, or as something that demands for its

confirmation the approval of others. (Malouf *A Spirit* 98-99)

Anxiety works to reduce the inspirational motivation to one of complacency, which induces fear of failure; consequently, the process of the mundane life is viewed as a safe and easy option for the individual. Therefore, rather than venturing into the realm of true self-discovery, the individual chooses to stay in the familiar. I argue that it is in the ability to rise each time you fall that a person should view as the truer greatness. Sybylla, the protagonist of Miles Franklin's coming of age novel, *My Brilliant Career*, explains it this way:

Australia can bring forth writers, orators, financiers, singers, musicians, actors, and athletes, which are second to none of any nation under the sun. Why can she not bear sons, men! Of soul, mind, truth, godliness, and patriotism sufficient to rise and cast off the grim shackles which widen round us day by day? (Franklin 129)

The real concern is that when challenging common notions a person is seen as corrupt and antagonistic towards life's normality, to the mainstream and therefore its safety in an already known cultural form. What needs to be offered consistently and with passion, is the challenging of these norms in a positive creative way. We, as Australians, are at most times more concerned with the mighty dollar than the human process of cultural development and a sense of creative identity, our unique landscape and connection to our country. This desperation manifests itself in the form of 'societal anxiety'. It is an anxiety that drives people to the edge of their lives looking for, chasing after and very often not finding a material happiness –

‘the great Australian dream’. Malouf states, in relation to this anxiety and Australians, that:

The desire of ordinary men and women to become property owners was the making of the country. To own a piece of Australia, even if it was only a quarter acre block became the Australian dream. The desperation that lay behind it, the determination of poor men and women to grasp what was offered and raise themselves out of a landless poverty into a new class, was the source of a materialism that is still one of our most obvious characteristics. (Malouf *A Spirit* 16)

The individual has potential to discover and accept that they are both ‘rural’ and also one of many; ‘urban’. This is possible through the continual experience of the simple life that has within it endless opportunities for success and for creativity to blossom. This is a life of non-complication, no waiting in queues and ‘quiet time’ spent contemplating the landscape, the sky and the opportunities that exist, within a rural and regional environment, for creativity and a sense of identity. Les Murray supports this notion and argues that:

In art, imagery and conflict alike are raised beyond embodiment in action to a more perpetual embodiment where their life needs nothing further from the world to feed itself. Art is thus, in Christian terms, effectual but vicarious. It has arrived, without having to find its way there through tyrannies, at the true ambiguity of things, and can let all things, even opposites, be true at once. (Murray *A Working* 349-350)

When offering this concept, in relation to the creative realm, it is also important to reflect on the impact that art and the idea of the opposite has had within the

historical identity of Australia. Terry Smith, in 'The Visual Arts: Imploding Infrastructure, Shifting Frames, Uncertain Futures' (2001) argues that:

The drives to discover an imagery of identity and difference to understand the world newly and truly, to create beautiful, engaging and original art – these goals impel artists working from within inherited European – Australian traditions, from immigrant experience and from within the contemporary Aboriginal art movement, but do so differently in each case. (Smith 68)

In *The Expressionist* Albert experiences a moment of clarity, in relation to creative discovery, when visiting the National Gallery of Australia on a school excursion. The response to Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* he had discussed with his mother and grandmother many years before washes over him and offers his inner artist an insight to where he is headed:

We sat for a while looking at it, Swamp, Frizzy and me. I didn't speak. I was completely fixed on the painting. I found myself swimming around in the spaces of the image, wading through the emotional world of the colours and the shapes. It spoke to me. (*The Expressionist* 110)

This insight to which I refer is possible due only to the recognition of connections an individual has to those around them and to the places they inhabit. The process by which an individual traverses these experiences and interprets their daily life equates to the level at which they operate. Albert discovers this in the same moment as that of the painting speaking to him:

The emotions that I experienced within the gallery, and my feelings towards art in all areas, changed that day. I gotten lost in the painting that Jackson Pollock had done

all those years before. The one that had been the topic of many a heated debate at the dinner table when I was a little boy. I finally realised that my mother was a person of high belief, when it came to the artistic realm. I was grateful to her for all the talks about music, and writing and painting and artists that we had had almost everyday. In that moment I was her son. (*The Expressionist* 110-111)

For Albert, the ‘moment of connection’ of which he is referring to releases the perceived element of anxiety associated with becoming, being or acting as a creative artistic person. He sees himself connected to his culture and the potential that has always been available, the same potential that has been both nurtured and ridiculed over the term of his growth. Albert also sees himself in his mother’s persistent nurturing and his own determination to overcome and experience life in its truest form, free from disbelief and self-doubt.

## Chapter 6

### *Connection to Country*

With an idea of connection acknowledged by the young protagonist, we turn now to the ideal of connection to country, and the distinct approach of Indigenous Australia to the land, spirituality, meaning making and story telling. The very opposite of a white-capitalist approach is the Australian Indigenous concept of connection to country, and the role this plays in developing a cyclical approach to viewing life. Aboriginal elder Nancy Daiyi quoted in *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland* (2002), edited by Deborah Bird Rose states that:

When I travel around my country I won't starve. I know  
I'll find tucker because I have the right sweat for my  
country. It'll look after us, because we are one and the  
same. You only need to call out. Talk to the land, it gives  
us life. (Daiyi in Bird Rose 43)

In *The Expressionist*, Albert's need to learn a sense of meaning is very personal, and he deeply desires to hold onto those who are important in his life and to the landscape, that exists for him in the simplest of forms. In relation to this, David Malouf suggests that:

It might remind us as well of something we need to keep  
in mind: which is the extent to which Aboriginal notions  
of inclusiveness, re-imagining the world to take in all that  
is now in it, has worked to include us. (Malouf *A Spirit* 59)

Albert imagines being connected consistently to the bush, and to those around him. He desires to be connected by his past experiences and to those present to him;

however, his true faith lies in his hope that ‘greatness’, in the form of safety, trust, warmth and expression for those close to him, will be fulfilled by the landscape. In relation to this, Bird Rose in *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland* (2002) further states that:

Country knows people by their history and their presence; and by their sweat, which is manifestation of their unique essence. People work, their sweat goes into the country, and the country knows them. People talk, cry, call out, laugh, and the country comes to know them. (Bird Rose 42)

In *The Expressionist*, Albert imagines his life and those in it to be his version of a life lived powerfully, and not to the rules and consequences of other’s actions.

David Malouf refers to this as the concept of ‘re-imagining’ and suggests that:

The capacity to re-imagine things, to take in and adapt might be something we should learn from, something that comes closer than a nostalgia for lost purity to the way the world actually is, and also to the way it works. (Malouf *A Spirit* 59)

However, what Albert doesn’t recognise fully, until he surrenders to ‘this life’, is his coming of age is about being comfortable in his own skin, in his space and in his own country. An example of this is the experience he reflects on by the river, on his return to Wilcannia many years after his first visit:

I also reflected on my own growing up in the bush, with Grandma and Sally-Pearl on the coast.

I chatted with an elder who painted their country and their stories. The vibrant colours and the strength of the images really moved me. It stirred something inside me as



I sat with them and also while we were travelling back to the hill.

New things, new ideas and multiple levels of thinking about art began to filter into my head. It seemed at the time the world that I knew had taken its own path, and had to be seen through to the end. That's what I felt, and that's what I remember. (*The Expressionist* 150)

In response to the rural landscape the young protagonist discovers a sense of place for himself within his own skin. This defining moment in his journey of death, isolation, racism, survival, abandonment and abusive behaviour, as well as the positive influences to which Albert is exposed, offer him and his creative being the opportunity to recognise his own connection to the space he inhabits, and his own duality. According to Ian Gray and Emily Phillips:

Ever stronger assertions of rural identity, based on differentiation, create ground for ostracism and exclusion, based on notions of cultural superiority and sometimes racism. (Gray and Phillips 59-60)

Albert discovers his own sense of culture and identity from the place he inhabits, and is altered continually by the interpretations associated. A German grandmother, a surrogate Indigenous Australian mother and a Tongan best friend, as well as the negative experiences of time spent with the man they call his father, are examples of the influences he is exposed to in relation to identity and connection to country. This provides Albert with the tools to operate in a personal environment that is dynamic, complex and unique. David Malouf proposes that:

It is our complex fate to be children of two worlds, to have two sources of being, two sides to our head. The desire for something simpler is a temptation to be 'less' than we are.

Our answer on every occasion when we are offered the false choice between this and that, should be, Thank you, I'll take both. (Malouf *A Spirit* 79)

The two-worlds which apply to *The Expressionist* are the factual real world practicalities (such as loss, racism, heartbreak and displacement); and the other, of blissful creative hope that Albert recognises through connection to self and his place within a culture. Within Sally Morgan's *My Place*, the narrator offers an Indigenous Australian interpretation relating not only to growth and development but also to self-discovery and connection to culture. The narrator has been continuously told that her heritage is Indian, rather than the cultural stigma of the time associated with being Aboriginal, and therefore not of this nation. Therefore the spiritual influences of an individual's traditional culture and a person's heritage; the embracing of all things 'you', affords the individual opportunity to surrender to the cultural aspect associated with a connection to country. An example of this is a discussion that the narrator has with her 'Nan':

'Nan,' I said slowly as she looked at me, 'about the call, you weren't frightened when you heard it, were you?'

'Ooh, no.' she scoffed, 'it was the aboriginal bird, Sally. God sent him to tell me I'm going home soon. Home to my own land and my own people. I got a good spot up there, they all waitin' for me.'

A lump formed in my throat so big I couldn't speak, let alone swallow. (Morgan 357)

The perception that your skin colour, height, weight, or even the house that you live in could dictate whether you have anything to offer society is conflicted and congested. To live with the constant nagging of a half lived life, of the internal

mutterings that you aren't good enough because of your heritage; your standing in society or your level of education is what drives the collective creativity of those on the periphery. Over time, Albert begins to recognise his own identity and perceived destiny in many forms in his life and offers one interpretation after visiting with friends to an isolated community as an almost adult:

Laughter. That's what I remember most about those two days. There were all ages, sitting and talking and stirring and roughhousing. We played a game of touch footy on the oval near the big Catholic Church, and we had a huge big feast on the river. The kids were so free, running around and being themselves. I admired that in them. (*The Expressionist* 150)

The elements of living a simple life, away from a major city or urban area, should not be seen as burdensome, but rather as driving forces for creative greatness. The opportunity to create and experience life in simple forms provides the platform for many in the outlying areas of Australian.

## Chapter 7

### *Australian Examples*

*The Expressionist* aims to explore the influence myth-making and place has on the narration of a work in the coming of age genre. Seret proposes that ‘the act of writing his *Kunstlerroman* forces the young artist to voyage into the mysterious and unexplored regions of his unconscious in order to define his own self’ (Seret 91).

It is through Albert’s eyes that the story, the narrative and the voice are being offered in *The Expressionist*. In relation to coming of age, Patrick White’s *The Vivisector* is focalised through the eyes of the young, and eventually old, Hurtle Duffield, as is Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* which is narrated through the developing eye of its protagonist, Sybylla. *Johnno* by David Malouf is a reflective account of youth development, and Sally Morgan in *My Place* offers this project an Australian Indigenous autobiographical account of coming of age.

David McCooey argues, in *Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography* (1996), that one problem associated with fictionalising a subjective developmental approach within a novel relates to the ‘idea of the pastness of the past’, which raises questions such as: Did I really see that? What was it that I actually remember? – as well as the understanding that a child’s perceptions are quite different to those of an adult at the time those events are occurring (McCooey 165). Albert’s interpretation of an incident that occurs between his Grandmother and Sally-Pearl (his surrogate mother) is one such example:

I’d seen them being affectionate to each other before, and sure, at the time it, seemed natural to watch them walking through the bush holding hands. And once when I woke early and went to see if grandma could get rid of the possum

that was in my room, I saw them lying together, asleep, hugging. They both looked so happy sleeping and holding on to each other. Really happy. But a full-on kiss on the lips. That had never happened before. (*The Expressionist* 39-40)

Malouf's character and protagonist in *Johnno* begins from the present moment and reflects on the remembered images of time past. Any remembering in the text is problematic due to the images, emotions and understandings of the person at that time. However, this approach allows for the self-reflective processing of the narrator in relation to the experiences and remembered actions of the past, which define how we live now, and offer the reader an insight into the remembered myth of the main protagonist. Even more predominantly explicitly remembering is the character of Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* offering a third person opinion of the character in a narrative framework, whereby 'the narrator knows everything that needs to be known about the agents, actions and events, and has access to the characters thoughts, feelings and motives' (Abrams 272). An example of this is a moment for the main protagonist in the refectory:

- Sick in your breadbasket, Fleming said, because your face looks white. It will go away.

- O yes, Stephen said.

But he was not sick there. He thought that he was sick in his heart if he could be sick in that place. Fleming was very decent to ask him. He wanted to cry. He leaned his elbows on the table and shut and opened the flaps of his ears. (Joyce 10)

In *The Expressionist*, Albert recognises his own interpretation of 'place', more specifically of 'home', early in his journey through experiences of the 'bush' and

more specifically his 'tree'. After a discussion with his Grandmother, he reflects in a child's way on the place he is habituating:

Back then, you could travel through the little town over the railway line, and then along a dirt track to get to the bush track that ran all the way to our gate.

The place was all grasses, mud and big trees. There were some dairy farms, a few hobby farms and some vegetable farms. Oh and flowers too. And one of the farmers near us used to grow pigs. I never could figure out, how it was that you 'grew' pigs. They're not like carrots or flowers are they. (*The Expressionist* 7)

In relation to place, I acknowledge that the narrator in *Johnno* is depicting an semi-urban area rather than a rural space, however the Brisbane of 1940-50 was a very different Brisbane to the hustle and bustle we know today; therefore, the fictionalisation of the area and the circumstances through the eyes of the main protagonist remain significant for this project. When discussing place, the narrator of *Johnno*, 'Dante', expresses a remembered interpretation of his surroundings and childhood environment:

As for Brisbane, the city I have been born in – well, what can anyone say about *that*? I have been reading Dante. His love for *his* city is immense, it fills his whole life, its streets, its gardens, its people; it is a force that has shaped his whole being. Have I been shaped in any way – fearful prospect! – by Brisbane? Our big country town that is still mostly weather-board and one-storeyed, so little a city that on Friday morning the C.W.A. ladies set their stalls up in Queen Street and sell home-made cakes and jams, and the farmers come in with day-old chicks in wire baskets. (Malouf *Johnno* 51)

Further to the concept of place, the main character in *The Vivisector* recognises early on that it is not only buildings, but also the people, who allow for the acceptance of one into their environment:

He discovered there were periods when the Courtneys who had bought him would not expect his company, when it was like living in a different house, almost in a different part of the town. (White 73)

It need also be argued that it is ‘distance’ from place, and a quiet solitude, that allows for deeper contemplation on loss and that this is what strengthens one’s attachment to places which they are occupying on a rural and regional level. Bruce Scates, in ‘*My Brilliant Career* and Radicalism’ (2002) suggests that in Franklin’s own family’s fall from grace she found a more contemptuous attitude towards society’s pretensions, allowing for the argument as offered above, that it is those who ‘know nothing but work and sleep who are the real heroes of the world’ (372).

*The Vivisector* utilises a similar representation of the pastoral and its regional ideal when Hurtle Duffield is sent a letter by his adopted father, describing his outback surrounds:

Every morning as I stand cleaning my teeth on the verandah, I catch sight of the distant hills...heaped like sapphires...I ask myself what painting could possibly equal this actual picture...Newspapers are stale by the time they reach us, but don’t read any the better for it. (White 152)

In this idyllic view of nature, chaos is all but redundant. This place, it would appear, offers fulfilment and full ‘presence’ for those lucky enough to live there; by contrast, news of life from the city is already ‘stale’ and, by implication, not as valuable as the surrounds Duffield finds himself in (‘hills...heaped like sapphires’).

With this in mind, the development of a narrative voice for *The Expressionist* needed to offer the reader a storyline of distinct uniqueness and sophisticated individuality. This determination to remain with what can be considered as an individual's destiny is evident in *Johnno*:

And still I hung on. I was determined, for some reason, to make life reveal whatever it had to reveal *here*, on home ground, where I would recognize the terms. (Malouf 109 *Johnno*)

Similarly, in *My Brilliant Career* a sense of lost chances and the stifling of any creative outlet for Sybylla is one of knowing. These repressed creative opportunities and the realisation that it is her own-self and her innerness are driving forces that must allow her to propel her abilities. For example, she recalls her internal drive to break free and create with the passage:

As a tiny child I was filled with dreams of the great things I was to do when grown up. My ambition was as boundless as the mighty bush in which I have always lived. (Franklin 78)

The protagonist in *The Vivisector*, Hurtle Duffield, also demonstrates the ability to manipulate his own environment for individual gain, therefore creating his own destiny as well as his own myths. Whilst this is a learnt behaviour, in each text under discussion the reflective movement within the narrative is developed very early on to indicate the characters' awarenesses of their own individual entities.

It is not the intention for this project to identify solely with the manipulation effected by the protagonist, rather, the manipulation of the protagonist is affected by others. What this is seen to create is the sense of co-consciousness and duality that



involves the inner and outer movements of imagination, a sense of belonging, a sense of hope. This relates to the innermost core of all action made manifest where a 'self-represented world' is created through the hero or protagonist embracing their world and its interpretation that develops a 'mythic understanding of the significance of experience' (Castle *Retrospective* 1990, 46-48).

A sense of belonging is offered by Albert when considering his place in the grand scheme of his own life, and the interpretations of those around him. He reflects, humourously, on an incident that occurs when discussing his own demeanour after the death of his mother, and how he has been progressing within the schooling environment:

I was told, back then, that I was quiet and withdrawn.  
Aloof. That was another word the principal had used.  
Aloof. I remember at the time thinking that's what  
grandma might say, when she was yelling at me to go up  
the ladder and get on the loof. (*The Expressionist* 40-41)

The remembered history or, more importantly, the interior life is an effective way of revealing changes in the characters' consciousnesses, and enables the characters' life experiences in different stages to be fully manifested, interlocked and overlapped in a certain limited space, thus displaying the pluralistic and three-dimensional characterization of the story (Diment 49). An example of this, from Sally Morgan's *My Place*, is a moment of discovery and reality in relation to her background and her cultural environment. The protagonist shares this insight:

She lifted her arm and thumped her clenched fist hard on  
the kitchen table. 'You bloody kids don't want me, you  
want a bloody white grandmother, I'm black. Do you hear,  
black, black, black!' With that, Nan pushed back her chair  
and hurried out to her room. I continued to stand in the

doorway, I could feel the strap of my heavy school-bag cutting into my shoulder, but I was too stunned to remove it.

For the first time in my fifteen years, I was conscious of Nan's colouring. She was right, she wasn't white. Well, I thought logically, if she wasn't white, then neither were we. What did that make us, what did that make me? I had never thought of myself as being black before. (Morgan 97)

Albert's interpretation of life around him is one of space, freedom and hope as well as action associated with the people who populate his world. He soon discovers that life is all about change and survival in the environment an individual traverses. An example of this is the episode relating to his father and the violence that Albert becomes constantly aware of and witnesses:

It seemed the only time he ever paid any attention to us was when he was angry about something. Or drunk. Or both.

I just could not understand why he would get drunk every Friday night. It was also a big drinking day on Saturday in Broken Hill as well, so I didn't like the weekends very much. Something always happened that was a little crazy.

Like the Saturday he nailed the door shut and made us sleep on the verandah. On those days he would get very, very drunk and play loud music. The drunker he got, the more he would want to tell us about things from his life. They included us, his work and his parents. Oh, and the fact that there could never be enough beer to drown out the fact that we were 'crap'. There were a few moments in this drunken haze when he was kind, but then he would change, just as quick as it came and he would be back to the mean

and hard man that was always yelling at us to ‘shut the hell up’. (*The Expressionist* 68-69)

Through the creative exploration of disconnection and his environmental factors, as more than just a series of events, Albert experiences artistic coming of age from everyday society. Moretti suggests that through individual personality ‘modern everyday life is no longer reducible to a mere repetition of prescribed, ‘uneventful,’ narratively insignificant events that do not deserve being related’ (43). What I am developing is a novelistic expression of hope and individuality, a positive memorial laced with humour and personal belief in one’s own being and an independent mind that allows for narration of both the positive and perceived negative recollections. When considering the individual’s own growth and development the narrator within *Johnno* states:

Some of my upbringing had begun to wear off. And now that I had stopped being impressed by the honour-boards at school, with their lists of prize-winners and the war dead in indiscriminate gold leaf, I even had some notion of being a rebel. Of sneaking over, as it were, to Johnno’s side. (Malouf *Johnno* 39)

*The Expressionist* aims to offer an account of how an individual experiences and reflects on their life. The protagonist’s hope is for change, understanding, as well as growth and transformation, both for the narrator and the reader; positioned as an ‘honest as possible’ subjective remembering of what has happened. In relation to this, the protagonist in *The Vivisector* reveals his own desires, experiences and need to transform:

He mumbled: ‘I don’t want to be like anybody else.’

‘I’d like to be like other people.’ He couldn’t see her so clearly now; she sounded like some old woman. ‘They like you better,’ she added.

And suddenly something of the same fear got into him. He would have liked to find himself running with the mob of kids down Cox Street, away from everything to do with the Courtneys’. In the street where he belonged. If he belonged. He didn’t belong anywhere: that was what frightened; although he had wanted it this way. (White 79)

The re-remembering of the protagonist is also very close to this project’s main objective, that of myth-making and self-reflection of the past through moments of developmental artistic recollection. This is a dialogue, whether it be internal, oral or creative and is itself gained during a process of living, through and, with the perceived opportunities of circumstance. Tobias Boes writes that:

Realism aims for the typical and for the true, and in an age in which history is regarded as merely an accumulation of individual stories, a novel that transcends contingencies in order to present the general laws uniting everyday experiences provides a valuable skeleton key to historical meaning. (Boes *Apprenticeship* 2008, 272)

The journey for Albert through his inner reflections and re-remembering within *The Expressionist* offer the reader moments of recollection and, I would argue, a sense of hope. The times spent reflecting and also creating are his greatest levels of growth. The trials and tribulations he endures are a journey, uniquely his, but also relevant to others in this world who may well have endured similarly. According to Moretti, ‘Conversation, just like everyday life, is born of the attempt to assimilate

every sort of experience. It presents itself, as that rhetorical form which allows one to talk about everything' (Moretti 50).

The novels that I have focused on as models for my own writing offer the developing ideologies of the protagonist, which work to isolate them from convention and express conflict for the individual both internally and also that which is perpetuated by those immediately around them. As the narrator in *Johnno* states:

I don't know when all this came to seem to me anything less than the gospel truth. Or what part Johnno, with his wildness and not the sign of a filling, had to do with my growing scepticism, my defection from the dogma that if what you *didn't* like doing was good for you what you *did* like was not. (Malouf *Johnno* 38)

Another example is the challenging of convention and the mainstream, which is evident in Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, with the main character challenging tradition and not being subdued by those around her when it comes to her morals, career choices and creative opinions. Moretti supports this, and states that:

A story interwoven with wisdom inevitably presents the 'past' of which it speaks as still relevant, as an ever valid 'eternal yesterday': that is, it presents a world where the difference between factual observations and value judgements does not as yet exist. (Moretti 124)

In *My Brilliant Career*, Sybylla's creativity is the driving force for expression and at every point she is searching for new knowledge, experiences and exceptions to the common rule. This is all set in rural and regional areas of Australia, and

implicitly offers a glimpse of hope by contrasting the simple artistic life in the consciousness of the narrator with expectations that only the 'big smoke' can offer greatness in all areas of culture and opportunity.

The research I have engaged in does not offer sympathy nor escape as proposed outcomes. The protagonist is certainly not searching for a sense of sympathetic justice but more of a sense of place in his own being and the world with which he is engaged, and therefore is not seeking the sense of defeated self that Sybylla avows she has achieved, through her struggles, at the end of *My Brilliant Career*:

To weary hearts throbbing slowly in hopeless breasts the sweetest thing is rest. And my heart is weary. Oh, how it aches tonight – not with the ache of a young heart passionately crying out for battle, but with the slow dead ache of an old heart returning vanquished and defeated.  
(Franklin 258)

Moments of hope and the recognition for the young protagonist of the gift he has been given within *The Expressionist* are multiple and varied over the course of Albert's journey. According to Katie-Reece Moss in 'The Power of Timelessness and the Contemporary Influence of Modern Thought' (2008), 'many could argue that hope is ephemeral, I argue that the author makes a case for the moments of duration that allows one to search for the hope' (Moss 105). When discussing hope in relation to *The Expressionist*, the real moment of truth arrives at the very point the protagonist stops to look back having surrendered to his destiny. Albert's interpretation of his life's journey culminates in his offering the reader this:

Whoever knows totally what it is that we are destined for, and with whom we are destined to be, each moment of each day. What I do know, though, is that all this belongs to me.  
To Albert Dennis Braun, grandson of a crazy old German

woman, surrogate son of an indigenous angel and a loving mother who has passed.

I know that this was my story. My life. And I have to embrace it as mine, always. Just like the rest of the world who have choices to make everyday. But making the ones that matter, now that is the big part, and not backing away from what is placed in and on your life path.

I told you at the very beginning that this is my version.

This is how I remember it. (*The Expressionist* 168)

## Chapter 8

### **Conclusion**

As a writer, I looked to approach the rural and regional areas of Australia and, more specifically, those of New South Wales with openness and a culturally positive expression in the creative form of a coming of age novella.

The act of imagination involved in the narration of the coming of age genre, more specifically that of the *Kunstlerroman*, forms a tissue of historically remembered moments and cultural experiences. These half memories, misunderstandings and a landscape of myth and hope, are working in the course of this project, providing the narrative with a sense of continuity and individualization. McCooey suggests that the ‘narrative personal beginning’ is the argument that ‘life writing is mythological’ as well as historical with the beginnings of ‘self-consciousness arising from a sense of place’, which then remains pictured with all that makes up narrative (McCooey 11-12).

The task of the writer of a *Kunstlerroman* is to develop a narration over time that provides the elements of situational isolation, surrogate parenthood, interconnection, friendship, growth through acceptance, and a sense of home as well as a notion of place. What creativity provides society and, therefore, what that actually represents as a sense of reality for the protagonist as a creative being is at the core of the coming of age genre. Within this format we can therefore respond to our circumstances through humour and dance while remaining childishly fearful of the darkness in life. Seret refers to this as confirmation of choice, and states that:

The second voyage is a confirmation of the artist’s search to develop a sense of sense. At the moment when he frees himself psychologically from parental and external pressures, he consciously decides which position he will



take vis-à-vis society, either one of participation or one of observation. (Seret 10)

With this in mind, it is most commonly the unlooked for and unwanted circumstances that provide a platform for the development of the inner self through the style and framework of narration - albeit in a remembered form (Booth 149). Blending realism with remembered myth as an aspect of the narrative style of the novel works to create moments of being which highlight the spiritual elements associated with the *Bildungsroman*. However, it is the never-ending process of self-definition in the subtype of the *Kunstlerroman*, which I have aimed to use narratively to create understanding. This understanding I refer to is the subjective juxtaposition of fictional myth and factual realism.

Artists are interested in the meaning of existence and a sense of wisdom, which is often associated with spirituality and life choices, and for many artists the opportunity of expressing this in a multitude of ways is the greatest driving force behind their passion and creative focus. The wisdom I refer to is one of, and for, the individual to discover and then share, and for the purpose of this study, one that is totally encompassed within the novel to its own end. The work I have written seeks to offer imagination in the form of a coming of age wisdom and a sense of hope when living within one's own individual destiny. The *Kunstlerroman* is a major contributor towards the reader's affirmation of the understanding and acceptance within this project. And it is the credibility of the narratological elements of the coming of age narration, or more specifically the *Kunstlerroman*.

It is, however, the individual and their self-belief that will ultimately achieve the greatness they desire through determination and commitment. Even though Joyce's character does not achieve his artistic destiny within the pages of *A Portrait of the*

*Artist as a Young Man*, it is the process of experience which allows for the growth and development of any human, albeit most often painfully and enforced. However, individuals do not always achieve flight from their circumstances, for a variety of reasons, and it is by depicting the protagonist's surrendering to and embracing of these elements of his or her life that some of the greatest narratives have been told.

I have aimed to contribute to the literary genre of the *Kunstlerroman* through this project through the exploration of the circumstances and reality involved in artistic creativity, isolation, belief, loss, spirituality, hope and regionality. In relation to this, Seret states that 'the artist must fly freely, neither too high, as did Icarus, nor too low, but in curving movements, always circling about his goal – beauty (Seret 106). When considering this, I have aimed to create a work of realistic fiction depicting the development and artistic growth of the protagonist through a remembered order of events. This blending of historically remembered moments and cultural experiences, according to H. Porter Abbott in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008), provides the narrative with a localized ideal of being rooted in a place, a family, a culture and a region (231).

The opportunity to explore the elements of the *Kunstlerroman*, from the perspective of the simple life, allowed for the expression of emotional process and more importantly spiritual connection, or more so the soulful attachment to the places we inhabit and life choices we make. Seret further explains that:

Narration is chronological, depicting important stages in the protagonist's development as an artist. Structure is dominated by the voyage motif, which functions on several levels: psychological, social, and creative. (Seret 143)

For *The Expressionist* and the examples of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *The Vivisector*, *My Brilliant Career*, *Johnno* and *My Place* utilised within this project, the elements of isolation, self-reflexivity and spiritual growth are very apparent. I also intended to engage with humour as a stylistic device to explore the ideas of the creative artistic development, the pastoral, regionality and connection to land. Therefore, the self-reflective questioning of the protagonist in each text worked to give me a sense of duty to provide for the reader an honest, vivid and spiritually enlightening experience, whilst leading the research to the personal representational processing of the past. Moretti argues that ‘much as we approve of the fact that a story does not automatically generate wisdom, that it should never generate it, on the other hand, should surprise us’ (125). According to Albert Dennis Braun:

Perhaps it’s just a grand idea that we either make up ourselves or is placed in us by others. A fantasy. So after having this moment I realised I needed to start from the start. To tell the truth according to what I know and remember. How I remember it and how others shared it with me, when I asked. Because all that fantasy stuff really isn’t what I would like to tell you. The young man wasn’t emotional and the young girl wasn’t even there.

But what he did know was that the journey had been pretty damn difficult at times as well as being painful, interesting and most certainly funny. So, now that you know all this I would like to tell you a story. My story. The story of my life. (*The Expressionist* 5)

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# The Expressionist

Dean Mobbs

## **Dedication**

For the opportunity to express myself in the form of these creative words, I am very grateful. This novel has allowed for a reflection on life as the beautiful gift that it is. The sense of hope, and the knowing that we can all fly if we surrender, has at times left me but usually not for very long, and has now decided to stay for the duration. To my family, I offer the greatest of love and humblest gratitude. To those who have been and gone, and those I have yet to meet, I offer the greatest of respect. Thank you.

*“You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.”*

Friedrich Nietzsche

## One

Ever since I can remember, I have liked to wonder about what's in a name.

Names like 'Walter Moody' or 'Grace Wong'.

These are the actual names of people I went to school with.

True.

And I guess I could have been named Wilfred or Hans or Bertram.

But thankfully my mother had a little more sense than that.

My name is in direct respect to the creative greats that my mother always wanted to study and know about. This was all before I was born, so I didn't really have much say in it back then, I guess. However, I didn't always feel so lucky that my mother was intent on the artistic and creative. The study part, that was something that my mother always wanted to do, "to be able to learn about the great Australian artists, that have been so very many and different since the country started." That's what she used to tell me when I was little.

That's what I remember. She used to say things like, "Life is the eternal anatomy of mind and art" or "An artist's function is to disrupt the life and mind of the observer."

My mother had this idea that if I was named after all these greats, that had and did touch her heart, she could then be saved from a life of drudgery and boredom because of what others had done or were, or something like that anyway.

That's what I remember of her. I don't want you to think that she felt sorry for herself.

No fear. My mother just knew that it was my life, because of her own dreams, that would be able to shine if she worked hard and gave me every chance to succeed. That's what she said to me all the time.

That's what I remember.

## Two

My mother told me more than once, if not a billion times, that my first name was paying tribute to two great Australian artists, and my middle name was to honour a great Australian writer and humourist.

So let me introduce myself.

My name is *Albert Dennis Braun*.

My first name of Albert comes from two great Australian artists Albert Tucker and Albert Namatjira. My middle name is Dennis. This is from the great Australian writer and humourist C. J. Dennis.

My last name is Braun. This is because my Grandmother, my mother and I are German. Well I'm only half. The other half is Australian. Which half is which I'm not sure, but I think it's all the parts that make me. That's what mum told me one time anyway.

My last name of Braun, it means 'strong one' in German. That's what my grandma told me one day when we were having breakfast together. This was quite normal for us, because you see, my mother and I lived with her at her property in the bush on the Central Coast of New South Wales. The place we lived was called Warnervale, as it was known back then. They call it something else now. But I can never remember it. We lived in Bruce Crescent. I don't remember what number it was because we never had a mailbox. Grandma just had an old black steel pot with a lid and no number.

Back then, you could travel through the little town, over the railway line, and then along a dirt track to get to the bush track that ran all the way to our gate.

The place was all grasses, mud and big trees. There were some dairy farms, a few hobby farms and some vegetable farms. Oh and flowers too. And one of the farmers near us used to grow pigs. I never could figure out, how it was that you 'grew' pigs.

They're not like carrots or flowers, are they?

Bert was his name. He was very funny and crazy. He always carried a big long silver butchers knife and would often scare me when we were visiting him with the dead animals that hung in his house by pushing them and having them bump into to you. They were pigs mostly, and sometimes a kangaroo. All in good fun for him, but for a boy of four it was very scary.

On the topic of pigs, my earliest memory of my grandmother was her screaming at the dog, a Great Dane named Winston, to get away from the pigs because they, the pigs, would stir up the chickens and they, the chickens, wouldn't lay any eggs for her to be able to bake a cake.

"Get out you stinken arses," she screamed.

"Shit bastards, mench, out!"

She often spoke like this to the animals, and on more than one occasion she spoke to people like that too. At least he, Winston, wasn't attacking or chasing me like he had done.

I was three when he bit me on the face. The details are a little vague, according to my mother, but I do have a pretty cool scar. The story goes that he was eating his dinner and at the time we were pretty good chums. But on this day he mustn't have liked me putting my hands in the bowl so he snapped at me and tore open my face. I don't remember much of it at all, but I know it left a mark. The scar runs across my left cheek, from my eye down.

Anyway, on this particular day as soon as she saw me standing near the gate she smiled and whispered something to herself then asked me, "Vot is dus, you up now for food or vot?"

"Where's mum?" I asked.

"At verk, milking cows, come eat!"

This is also my first memory of what people know and understand of the word 'home.' And as I said earlier, this is my own version, so I can say things like 'the mist was

covering the top of the scribbly gums that glowed in the morning dew,' but that's not what I remember.

I do know the smells that were there, and the feelings that happened, but not the romantic fluff and bubbles stuff, because I was just a little boy.

On this day, I think it was a Saturday when my mother was at work in the dairy, there was a breakfast of pumpernickel – that's black rye bread, rollmops – these are fish pickled in vinegar with onions and sugar, and also some sauerkraut – cabbage pickled with stuff as well, and I think there is some sort of berry in it too. You know, the Jupiter one. I don't know the full thing. But it's cabbage that is never cooked. It does stink a little bit – but not like the rotten vegetables that grandma fed the pigs – and it always tastes fantastic with fish and bread. I also remember eating some eggs, so I guess on that day the chickens got a let off from the dog's stupidity.

I hadn't been so lucky in the past.

As we ate I gibbered on about all sorts of stuff while my grandmother nodded or grunted, and then she told me a story in her pidgin English, which is what mum called it, and then she laughed really loud as I was still trying to catch up with what she had said.

Most of the time I knew what she meant, especially when she swore. Which was often.

We would also have sweet tea with honey and lemon and afterwards a cake. It was a yeast cake, coated with raw sugar and butter, then baked until brown, sweet and crunchy. I remember on that day the cake was so grand and big that I thought it could stop anyone from being angry or sad forever.

Well, almost anyone.

You see we, my mother and I, weren't the only ones who lived at my grandmother's house with her. Different people had been coming and going for years. There was always

someone visiting from another town, or even another country.

### **Three**

This one time there was some old man staying there who, according to my mother and an Aunt, had been living there forever and they wished he would just “piss off.”

I never called him Grandpa or anything like that because he wasn't. He just sort of hung around, drank out of the huge bottle he carried in his old hands and was cranky all the time. I also remember Grandma and my mother arguing about him and grandma telling her that at least he wasn't as bad as Hans Kitzmann. He was my Grandfather. I mean he was the man who Mum spoke about as being her father. I've never met him because he went over the wall to the East, in the old days of Germany, and just never came back. Whatever that meant!

Anyway I never thought that anyone could be so mean.

Especially to my Grandma! But this old man had been.

Like this one time when I was about five and he was drunk. This man, I never knew his real name, but he was the same man who's been living at her place since forever. Grandma had just never gotten rid of him, I think it was because of the threats he made all the time about the other little dog that was at Grandma's, Pippi.

He gave it to my Grandma as a gift and said he'd found it on the side of the road. And when he was cranky, he would tell Grandma that if he ever goes so does the little dog. But this time he must have totally crossed the line. On the Sunday morning that I got up to go and have breakfast I could tell that she seemed upset and was very quiet, not her usual loud self. That's when she told Mum what he'd done.

“Vot is dat? How can he do such things?” she asked while we ate.

As we sat together I thought about all the words I knew to describe it. I wasn't exactly



certain how many there were but I knew that Billy Williams called it 'snarf'. He was a bigger kid, in Year Three at school, and he asked the same question over and over again everyday. I was at the back of the school, in the little kids playground near the grey weather shed playing footy when he used that word for the first time.

"Hey Braun wanna eat some of my snarf?" he said.

"What's that?" I asked, as someone tried to steal our football.

"It comes out of your nose, you idiot," added another boy.

"No way, that's gross."

"Well, you will if you don't give us some of that chocolate at lunch time that you've been sharing with your little mates every day this week."

Someone else I knew called it 'spag'.

Like the spaghetti bolognaise we would have on Thursday nights for dinner when Mum cooked. Every Thursday night!

"Hey, you want some spag with that?" they would ask while you were eating your lunch.

Everyone at school, even my friend Michael Malouf, had a name for it.

You see, he liked to tease the Year Six girls, and he told me that I had to go and ask them if they wanted to eat some slugs. But I wasn't keen at all.

"No way. They're so mean to all the boys who do stuff like that," I told him.

"I'll hock in your drink if you don't go," he said to me after about the fiftieth time of asking. Having someone hock in your drink was pretty gross, I know, but to spit in my grandma's face? No way.

"Did he really slag on you, Grandma?"

"Vot is slag?"

"Well, that's what they call it at school when someone spits on you,"

“Yes,”

“And at school if someone was to hock at you, or near where you were standing, they would get a punch in the face. That’s for sure. Maybe that’s what you should do Grandma.”

“Vot?”

“Punch him in the face. That way he wouldn’t be able to goozy at you because he’d have swollen lips.” But she didn’t.

#### **Four**

The man who spat on my grandma was also the same person who had told me, one day, that I was a stupid little bastard because I didn’t have a father and I was from Australia. It’s funny, because Grandma told me one time that he was born in Sydney and spent most of his childhood in a place called Zetland. But he claimed to be American, and spoke with an American voice. He also claimed to be a famous singer named Brooke Benton, or something. But my aunt and Mum used to say that when he sang he sounded like a goat being strangled. And it was even worse when he’d been drinking. He drank some drink in a huge clear glass bottle that smelt like the stuff Grandma mixed with the paint. He then walked around killing songs for hours and hours.

As I sat in the tree, well really it was my tree because the tree that I loved, and still do, is not your normal one. You see, this tree over time had grown on the side to look like it had fallen over, and was shaped like a walking stick planted with the hooky bit in the ground. The main part is flat, and then all the other bits have grown up into the sky. It was very cool, this tree. Anyway, I was hanging upside down in the tree from a smaller branch when I decided I would make up a song about him.

It was more of a poem really, but I sang it over and over for the next few days, after I found out what he’d been doing. I was happy with the song, but sad that a person could be

so mean to anyone.

Not just anyone, but to my grandma.

It went something like this:

*He's old with creepy ugly hands,*

*he's mean and lives on grandma's land,*

*In my ears is the ring-ing*

*of his loud and crappy singing,*

*Eats burnt toast and hard boiled eggs,*

*Big fat kankles on his legs,*

*He walks around, his teeth they rot,*

*Rushing, rushing what an idi-ot.*

I thought it was a pretty good tune. But he didn't agree, and on the Monday after school he caught me singing it as I walked along the bush track and he started yelling at me to "shut the hell up."

I thought to myself no way, you've been spitting on my Grandma.

So I didn't. I ran away from him and sang it even louder as he chased me around the bush, trying to flog me with the little horsewhip that Grandma used to get the goats into the front paddock.

I was too fast and got away.

## **Five**

The next day I was around the front part of the house, in the tree singing his song, when he caught me off guard while I was lying in between two branches.

I thought he'd gone to town.

He dragged me down and started whaling on me with the metal spatula he used to cook his breakfast with at the fireplace. He held me tight and began pulling me back around to where the fireplace was. I was covering up as best I could, but he was so angry. I couldn't block all of the hits, and I couldn't break free from his grip. He was old but he was really strong.

Luckily for me, Grandma came rushing out of the kitchen and started hitting him over the head with a huge ham bone I'd seen her cleaning the meat off earlier to make her soup with. The bone was massive. It was almost as big as my leg.

She was screaming something in both German and English, and when I looked up I could see the rage in her eyes. He started to step back clumsily, but he was cornered, wedged between the whitewashed garden wall and the fireplace.

He stopped hitting me, let go, covered up and leant back across the base of the wall. I watched my Grandma whacking him as I stepped behind her, rubbing the sore spots on my head. I then gathered myself and began working my nose to bring up the grandest of snarf balls into my mouth. I made all the snorting and dragging sounds that were really gross, like they do at school. Then I stepped forward to get really close, so that I didn't miss; there was no way I was going to miss.

I was angry. The angriest I could ever remember being. Grandma stopped and was watching me do this while also raising her arm to hit this man one more time. I was about to let it all out, right into his face, when she grabbed my shoulder and said,

"No, you vill not do this. Ever, ok mench, ever," she added.

I stopped on the spot, looked at her and then over at him.

I nodded, stepped back and spat my mouthful of goozy into the garden. Then I walked

back around to the tree. As I sat on a branch swinging my legs through the air, I was smiling, and began to sing again.

It wasn't the song about him.

I think it was the very next day that he left.

I still don't even know his real name.

## **Six**

What I didn't mention earlier, about Grandma's place, is that there's never been any electricity there. The only light that she has ever used is daylight and candles, and that has been since forever. She'd gotten rid of the gas fridge as well, because the gas had started to cost far too much, and also because she didn't have a boarder anymore to help pay for it.

And according to her, "They can stuck it up their arses, shit bastards, mench." So she got rid of the fridge, and has been using an esky ever since. The milk and frozen cherry cheesecake that she likes keep the other bits and pieces cool (like the liverwurst), and every third day she would go into town to replace the things that she needed.

For her, life needed to be really simple and she'd been living this way since she arrived on some huge boat. The bush life "suits us fine", she told me all the time. She would sit with the trees as her backdrop and tell me stories, about the war and being a child in Germany, and about some man named Hitler. I wasn't exactly sure who he was, but he sounded very angry from what I could tell after listening to Grandma's stories.

And even though things happened sometimes that were a little crazy, I can't remember there ever being many other nasty people around or troubles at home at that time, other than the 'goozy man.'

The thing I remember most from that time is being free.

I don't remember ever being bored or kicking a can, like some of the other kids at school who I knew, because as well as the stories from Grandma, by daylight and by candlelight my mother used to read to me all the time. Books like *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Oliver Twist*. She also loved to read Roald Dahl, and all his crazy stories. I listened to *James and the Giant Peach* with great expectations.

But what my mother most liked was to read poetry and she most wanted me to hear from my namesake, the funny man C. J. Dennis. Over and over she would read me his poems. Such was my mother's way back then that we would read '*The Play*' or '*Uncle Jim*', and sometimes we would also act it out, but mostly I would have listen to '*The Long Road Home*'.

*For boys my size the sudden rise is quite a heavy pull,  
And yet I fear a short-cut here because of Craddock's bull;  
So I just tease the bull till he's as mad as he can get,  
And then I face the corner place that's been so long to let.  
It's very well for Ma to tell about my dawdling habits.  
What would you do, suppose you knew the place was thick with  
rabbits?*

I will say that these were awesome to listen too, especially the way Mum, and her funny C. J. Dennis style voice, would tell it. I always saw myself in this poem, running around in the bush like a crazy kid, chasing rabbits and stirring up all the animals.

But every time we finished I would be shaken from my daydreaming because my mother would hold my face, look me straight in the eyes and tell me, "When you are writing write well, like C. J. Dennis or like Patrick White. No half measures Mister Albert. When you paint, you paint like Picasso. You paint with passion, like Albert Tucker and

Albert Namatjira. You paint properly, and you create from your heart.” After which, she would kiss my head and sigh heavily.

“Nah, I’m just going to play footy for the Dragons, and then soccer for Australia,” I would answer.

## **Seven**

“We are going for a visit to Bathurst to check out a school, and to see what it’s going to be like for your arts education.”

This is what I remember my mother telling Grandma and me at dinner one night.

“Where’s that?” I asked.

“It’s past Sydney, and over the Blue Mountains, on the other side of Lithgow,” she stated confidently.

“This school has the most open ideas in relation to the arts that I can find. And you will do so very well there.”

“Why am I going to arts school?” I asked, confused.

“Not just any arts school, Albert, but a boarding school that excels in the arts.”

“Vot is wrong with here. Dis school. Its just dare! He can valk,” my grandmother stated with her loud firm voice.

“Albert needs to be at a school that can offer him as many opportunities as possible, if he is to be the artist that is within him. And to get into this school, he has to be enrolled before he even starts Year Two. The list is this long of people trying to get in for Year Seven.”

When she said this, she stretched her arms open wide, one above her head and the other towards her knees, and turned her hands in. I thought to myself ‘Wow, that’s a long list of names and I wonder where I am on it.’

“And they play that sport you always talk about, Albert.”

“Footy! Which game, league or union?” I asked with excitement.

“Yes, one of those,” she sighed.

I went to the tree after dinner that night. Why I was supposed to go to this school I didn’t know, but mum and grandma argued about it for a long time, and I suppose I didn’t mind too much if I got to play a game of footy. In the end it was agreed that we – mum and I – were to make a trip to Bathurst to ‘check out’ the school, and to see what my mother’s “fantasy art world”, as grandma put it, could find for us.

I don’t remember travelling there, but I think we’d been able to borrow a friend’s car, according to my mother, when I asked about it much later. On the return trip somewhere near a place called Bell, a car ran into the side of us and we then hit another car and my legs got broken.

Both of them!

My mother was all right because the car hit my side, at the front, and according to Grandma, they were “stupid, shit bastards mench.”

I don’t know how we got home, or why it happened. But I do know that I got to eat lots of ice cream. And I remember people offering me things all the time.

Like one of Mum’s friends from the dairy she worked at on Sparks Rd who bought chocolate as well as the chicken farmer on Louisiana Road who made me a fire truck on a piece of fishing line that they attached wall to wall across the room in Grandma’s lounge. I pushed the truck and it would hit the wall and then fling back, so that I could do it all again. That part was pretty cool!



## **Eight**

The other thing I most remember about living with Grandma, apart from her food, was her driving. I should also tell you about my grandmother's car.

This is what I remember of it. It was one of those little Suzuki vans. Like a little tin boat, but a van. It was a funny little car. My mother said it was called an L50. The L was for lucky to get over the 5 miles an hour, and the O meant it cost next to nothing to fill up with fuel. So it meant you used zero. It was all tinny inside. The seats were worn away, and nothing was soft, so we had to sit on blankets and horse rugs that smelt all mouldy and a lot like horse poo. And even though it didn't go very fast at the best of times, the worst was when she would turn the engine off to go down the hills.

"To save money, yah," she would tell me. Then when we reached the bottom, and the car had come to a complete stop, she would restart the engine and we would drive up the next hill, then repeat the same thing each time there was the smallest of rises.

On this one day, we were on our way to the railway station at Wyong, after going to the shops, to pick someone up from the morning train, when she was pulled over by the police. In her version of English she asked why, and the policeman told her to look behind her. She did, and there, looking very unhappy, mean and impatient, just like the policeman, was a line of cars along the highway as far back as you could see, even around the bend, past and over the railway bridge near the golf course. Apparently, the road we were on was also the Pacific Highway, and the main road for travel. He told her to either drive faster or he was going to have to book her.

I had a blanket on my legs which she pulled back showing the man the plaster casts, and then worked at trying to tell him what had happened to me. He smiled at us both and asked that she wait until all the cars had past, and then we could move on.

"Just a little faster than before, thank you," he offered sternly.

It was the day I also first met Sally-Pearl. Mum told me that Grandma had met her on a visit to Alice Springs to see one of her friends that she had met on the boat ride out to Australia. They had stayed together at some detention centre as well. The name sounded like some tree, or log, or something. I could never remember that one. But it was cool to know that they had travelled together all that time ago and were still friends.

Anyway, Grandma came back from her trip and was telling Mum about this woman she had met who was from some tribe and was different to her and us, but also the same, and that she had invited her to come and stay for a while, and that she could help out around the place. You see, around this time, Mum was working at the dairy and also at a flower farm. I liked the sounds of the dairy farm, but I wasn't too keen about the smells, and she always brought home bunches of flowers of all kinds to put around the house. Sometimes we would sit together and draw them.

“Dis is Sally-Pearl. She vill be visiting with us. So no jiba jabba, yah!”

This is all Grandma said as Sally-Pearl got in the car and sat next to me, being very careful not to touch my legs. She smiled the biggest white-toothed smile I had ever seen on that first day when I met her. Her skin was so different, which made her smile even bigger and brighter. She was dark, but her face was so smooth and shiny brown in the sun that it looked just like a big dam, or the top of a lake, like the one I remember swimming in at Christmas once.

Sally-Pearl had come to visit by way of ‘the outback’. Alice Springs actually, and she’d been to visit her family in Menindee and now she was down on the coast at our place. Her family’s house in Darwin was one of the ones that was blown over in some cyclone I heard the adults talk about called ‘Tracy’. I’m sure that this was close to the coolest thing I had ever heard at that time because my mother had read the story of Dorothy to me many times, over and over! You may have heard it, the story about a girl and her dog. The story

about the wizard and a storm and a flying house and the girl, and her dog named ‘Toto’, or something like that. Sally-Pearl even had a dog with her, Max. He was little like Grandma’s dog. But he was really quiet, and so nothing like Grandma’s dog at all.

I was pretty chuffed as I now had a style of the real version of that famous story right in front of me.

She and Grandma talked a lot, and they smiled at each other too.

Not the sort of smile like a friend does. But a different smile, and like I told you earlier, Grandma had said that Sally-Pearl was shy. At first she was, I guess but after only a few days of being with us, when she would get close to me she would hug and squeeze me and say things like, “You good boy Albert, strong one aye, smart little fella.”

I may have been young, but I think people who are shy don’t do stuff like that. Even I know that, and I was just a kid. But I did like the attention, and she smelt just like peaches.

Sweet tinned peaches. So I’m not sure where all the shy stuff came from because I would be crushed under her firm and comforting hold.

All the time.

## **Nine**

I was still in the white plaster that the doctor had put on my legs, and that everyone had written their names on. I had to be carried a lot and pushed around in a wheelchair that had been lent to us. My legs got really itchy and I was allowed to scratch inside the plaster with one of mum’s knitting needles. Sally-Pearl did most of this with me, and while we were together she would tell me stories about her life in Alice Springs.

Sally-Pearl would talk about ‘her place’ and stuff about her country, her mob and all the types of trees that she knew. I remember being so excited to listen.

She would start with the same line each time, “*My story is a little bit like this Albert.*”

Then she would talk for hours about her life and her mob.

“Some of the first ever stories was telled by my mob. My peoples. We are the Arrernte people of the hot country.”

“Can you say it Albert, like this Arrernte, A-R-U-N-D-A, now you go,” she asked.

When I repeated her word she smiled at me with her big brown shiny face and I knew that she was happy.

“See my mob tell the story all da time about how the land was made by caterpillars, some crazy dogs, some travelling boys, two sisters, some euros – they’re like a kangaroo and some others.” She said this in a calm and knowing voice and she had a look of being happy, like she knew that everything was all right.

She began telling me about all the things that she knew of from ‘her country’ as she put it, “Now, them trees they funny ones I reckon. Big trees.”

She pointed to the bush and then continued.

“But me Albert. I like the ghost gum. Like in those pictures by the artist named like you, only dark like me.”

“Do you know Mister Albert Namatjira? He’s famous for my peoples.”

She looked at me to see if I knew him.

“I know him. Mum talks about him and the other Albert painter all the time.” I told her.

“Well he’s the Albert I mean and he paints the trees that are smoooooth and crazy colours and loooooook at you with their scary big body and those arms.” When Sally-Pearl said the words with an ‘oo’ sound she would make them really long and run her hand across her arm down, from the elbow to the tips of her fingers and then into the air.

“Or the black butt.”

As she said this I began to laugh and couldn't stop. Sally-Pearl was not sure about me laughing because she looked at me and turned her shiny head to the side and screwed up her face.

"What's funny little Albert?"

"Well, the word black is not so funny I guess, but the word butt is," I told her.

"It means," I rolled my bottom and tried to lift my right bum cheek and point at the same time as I told her this.

"Ohhhh!" she grabbed her mouth and began laughing a big huge belly laugh, and as she did, her whole body shook. This big, brown shiny-faced woman looked so happy in that very moment. She settled a little bit and told me about the other trees. Ones like Mallee, they were only small and they had white leaves.

"But the worst one is the dead finish. If that one dies. Time to walk off the land! Move on till water comes."

We were eating lunch, or as Sally-Pearl said sometimes 'munga', on that same day as one of the goats came wandering around to the fireplace and table where we ate on nice sunny days.

"What's munga mean?" I asked.

"Tucker. Not sure where it comes from. My Aunties used to call it that." Then Sally-Pearl pointed to the goat.

"Billy Goat Hill. We used to go visit all the time. We call it Akeyulerre in my mob."

She waved her hand and, as she was shooin the goat, she told me that on another day she would tell me the story about the goat and the pelican.

I really looked forward to that one.

As I have said earlier, this is my version of what I remember, and so far things have been pretty good. But I wasn't too sure about this whole school thing in 'Bart hurts', as Grandma called it. I didn't want to leave. I had the bush and Grandma and Sally-Pearl and Mum. Oh, and the animals when they were nice to me. But it felt like all of it was going to change, no matter what I did.

## **Ten**

It was a Thursday in the school holidays and my mother suggested that we all take a visit to the Opera House in the city. You might know the one I mean, it's at some place called Sydney Cove. It's right on the edge of the water and looks just like big waves that crash in the ocean only it's made out of other stuff besides water. I had never been, or I at least couldn't remember, being on a train before. When we went to Bathurst it was in a car. So to go to the city in the morning on the train was pretty cool. We got on at Warnervale and then travelled all the way into the city to a place called Central Station. Then we got to have a look around at the station while mum went to the toilet, and then we walked all the way down to the place called The Opera House.

While we were walking along I saw this woman asleep in the street. I wondered to myself why she would choose to sleep there, on the footpath, and not in her bed. When I asked, no one seemed to want to answer me, so I thought maybe she liked the street better.

And just maybe she liked all the people.

Because, wow! Everywhere you tried to step there was a person. They were pushing and shoving past or around each other, and one man even tried to step over another man who was laying down listening to the concrete. As the man tried to do this, the other one sat up and began screaming at everyone that was close by him. He was saying things that I had never even heard grandma say, and she was the best ever at swearing.

That's what mum had said one day about the words Grandma would say when she was angry. His hair was really long, and because I was standing near him, I could smell it. He smelt like wee. A lot like possum wee I thought myself. I remember the day when mum and I were walking home from school and she was teaching me how to whistle with my fingers and make a loud sound. We were about half way home when a possum fell out of a tree, landed right in front us, and didn't move. Mum stepped towards it to help but it must have been scared because it ran up one of her arms. At the same time that it was running across the back of her shoulders, it was weeing all over her. Then it ran down her other arm and it just kept weeing. I cannot remember a smell so bad, other than the time we buried grandma's horse, but I'll get to that later. The smell was so strong that mum began to scream and take her shirt off while trying not to vomit as we ran home to wash her hair and burn her clothes. Sounds really gross, I know, but it was very funny as a child, and she did laugh about it afterwards.

But the man in the street, he smelt bad, really bad. Grandma and Sally-Pearl held my hand and arm on either side and we walked faster to get through the people, but there were so many of them that it didn't matter how fast you walked, or where on the path you stepped, people still ran into you or pushed past each other and then swore at others to get out of the road.

When we finally did get there, I must say the building was huge and bright and all funny shapes like mum had told me on the train. Grandma didn't want to go inside at all because she just didn't. She waited outside on the steps, ate the sandwich that she'd bought with her, and talked to the pigeons as the three of us went in.

"She doesn't care for art. She just wants to be in the bush with her trees and animals, and with Sally-Pearl," my mother told me as we waited at the top of the steps, while Sally-Pearl went to the toilet.

“Listen to this Albert. The Sydney Opera House, according to the brochure, is a modern expressionistic design with a series of large precast concrete shells, each composed of sections of a sphere, forming the many rooves of the structure, and set on a podium. And it says here that although the roof structures of the Sydney Opera House are commonly referred to as shells, they are, in fact, not shells but are instead precast concrete panels supported by precast concrete ribs.”

“Imagine that Albert, this building has ribs just like you,” she stated and tickled my belly and rib cage.

She continued reading as Sally-Pearl returned, and we walked around the building. “The shells are covered in a subtle chevron pattern with over one million glossy white and cream coloured tiles made by hog’n’ass.”

“That’s a funny name,” I added, laughing.

“Hmmm,” she said, before continuing to read from the brochure.

“Though from a distance, the shells appear a uniform white. And apart from the tile of the shells and the glass curtain walls of the foyer spaces, the building’s exterior is largely clad with panels composed of pink granite quarried at Tarana.”

“Sounds like a car,” she stated.

“So what do they do here, mum?” I asked.

“Well, according to this there are two larger spaces, the Concert Hall, which is located within the western group of shells, and the Opera Theatre within the Eastern group. There are lots of venues: The Drama Theatre, The Playhouse, and one called The Studio, which are located beneath the Concert Hall. A smaller group of shells set to the western side of the steps has a restaurant. There are lots of open public spaces, of which the large stone-paved forecourt area with the adjacent monumental steps is also regularly used as a performance space.”



As my mother was telling us this, she glowed bright and flitted about all over the place. She looked just like a little kid in a candy shop. You know what I mean? It's like when you see all the lollies and can't choose and feel like your head will explode if you don't have something, now. Right now!

Sally-Pearl didn't say very much at all during the whole time we were at the House of Opera. I don't know why, but she looked really scared. I held her hand as we were going into the playhouse part and she smiled at me and seemed to be a little calmer. Maybe it was all the art, or maybe the pictures of the people on the walls that looked like her. When we were leaving to find Grandma, my mother held my face and said, "Things like the Opera House building and its exhibitions and performances offer us a rational foundation of feeling Albert, a place to take ourselves. "

I thought to myself, 'Whatever that means?'

Either way, my mother was very happy we'd been, and Grandma was happy we were on our way home. Sally-Pearl was smiling, and I liked the train ride, so I guess it was a good for everyone. I would have really liked to go to the footy but, apparently, we didn't have the time. As we travelled along, I rubbed my legs where the plaster had been taken off a while ago. I thought maybe I was now able to run a little, walking was fine, it was the running I wanted to do. I was keen to get back to playing footy at school and running in the playground and stuff.

## **Eleven**

It was raining and we were sitting in the main part of grandmas house, having tea with lemon and some biscuits mum had made. They had funny fruit stuff in them and the seed parts got caught in your teeth. Grandma often said that she used the same stuff to feed the horses and that mum should learn to cook better. But they tasted great when they were all

golden brown. As we sat by candlelight, my mother and grandmother were discussing some painting that had some poles in it that they had discussed before, they'd seen a photo in a magazine as well.

Apparently they were all blue, and some man named Saxon Pole Lip, I think that was the name Grandma used, had done it. Some man Grandma called Vit-larm, in some big office in Canberra, had bought in the year 1973, for two million dollars.

"Stupid shit bastards, mench. So much money. For vot?" she yelled across the table.

"Culture," my mother responded.

"Culture. "Vot culture, shit bastards mench?" Grandma offered back.

"This country, our nation, our home is building on its creativity and cultural heritage," stated my mother.

Sally-Pearl was sitting in the corner fixing a pair of my shorts that I had torn trying to climb the tree, and she smiled at the two of them arguing. They did this often about things like art and money. I decided to go over and join her in the corner.

"I'm going back to meet with the principal, the priest and the dorm master about the details of how and when you go to school in Bathurst, Albert," offered my mother.

"Do I have to go to that school?" I asked.

"Well, Albert Dennis Braun, if you are to fulfil all that is within you, well then, yes you do. And I need to go back to the school in January, to meet with them, as this is the only time they will allow for discussions concerning future enrolments that are a few years away," she told me firmly.

"What does that mean, to fill?" I added.

"Now you're just being silly. No more questions about it. This is the right thing. You'll know it, and I know it," she stated this sternly and confidently, as she took the plates and cups to the sink and lit a candle for the kitchen.

It was a Sunday, and we all piled into grandma's tin can car and dropped her off at the Wyong railway station. Grandma wanted to go shopping afterwards, and the train trip was cheaper from Wyong. That's what Grandma had said, as we drove along the highway.

"Who are you going to see?" I had asked as we walked onto the platform.

"Just someone who might be able to help us if I can find them," she'd told me.

I will never forget the smile on my mother's face. It was so large as she hugged me strongly and said I love you and stepped into the carriage. I read the numbers as the train pulled away from the station. It was number 108.

I got to stay home with my Grandmother and Sally-Pearl because I had to help with the pigs, and also because my mother wanted to talk to some other people as well, about helping with the school fees. I didn't know who the other people were at the time.

## **Twelve**

On the day that my mother was due back, a Monday, she decided she would go and visit a friend in Mount Victoria and catch the morning train from there and be home by lunchtime. She had left a message with someone at the post office, and then they had told Grandma. I didn't know who they were, or what their name was.

We were told that we needed to pick her up from Warnervale station on the Tuesday now, instead of the Sunday. Grandma, Sally-Pearl and I waited at the station watching as people came and went that day. Then there were no trains at all. Then all of a sudden the people who worked at the station were talking excitedly to each other and rushing everywhere. They started to talk to the other people standing on the platform. Someone, I think it was the Station Master made an announcement that there would be no more trains because there had been an accident somewhere in Sydney. Everyone was really different

after that. We had been at the station a long time and there weren't many people left waiting, just us and another group.

When they spoke to Grandma she turned and told us to get in the car because we were going home. We went away, not knowing if, or when, my mother would be on the train home to Warnervale. I remember Grandma being grumpy, more than normal, about having to go to the station and wait and then no one being there, and mum not telling her.

The next day the police visited us at Grandma's. I can still remember the scream that came out of Sally-Pearl's mouth when they told her and Grandma what had happened.

I don't remember what I did. I'd never heard of Granville until my mother died in the train crash that happened there. I remember the date very well.

It was the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1977. I know because my mother died on a train that was travelling through Granville. She died travelling back to see me after visiting the school that I was supposed to go to. Dead.

### **Thirteen**

We went in grandma's tin car. Sally-Pearl held my hand the whole time we were there. I cannot remember her leaving me at any point. People who knew my mother were coming over and patting me on the head. Smiling, and then saying things like, "You are such a brave little boy, Albert."

Then others, who I hadn't met before, came over and stayed near us and talked to each other. They were saying things like, "Poor little fella. How will he cope?"

"What will he do without his mother now?"

"What will become of him, living with that lot?"

"I certainly hope the father doesn't show up!"

This was all being said directly to me or near me. I didn't know how to speak to them,

or what to do when they tried to hug me or pat me on the head. People that I didn't even know were saying these things. I kept thinking to myself, 'Who were they?' I was numb. I think that's the word that best describes it.

No one gave me a reason to feel good or comforted me with good words, except Sally-Pearl. Not even Grandma. She just helped the others with the food and avoided talking to me the whole time. She even ignored Sally-Pearl.

She was even more upset than the goozy time, I knew that much.

I do remember that the funeral was at the small church in Warnervale, but I don't remember too much about the ceremony, only the real sadness that everyone I knew showed afterwards when we all went to the hall and ate and drank cups of tea.

Bert got drunk on the sherry that the ladies had been putting in their tea and sipping to calm their nerves. Bert, he never sipped anything, especially tea, he swallowed the contents of the whole bottle and half of another one. This is what he told us when he came to sit down near the old shed outside of the hall, where Sally-Pearl and I were resting.

He swore and cursed the trains and God, and someone named Fraser. I remember that he was upset at him especially because he was the one who made the people do stuff that were on the railways and who worked on the roads. So it was his fault that the bridge fell on the train. I was really glad when someone gave us a lift home to Grandma's.

I was back walking fast now without the plaster on, and could even run at some pace, so when we got to Grandma's gate I jumped out and I took off into the bush. I ran until I couldn't breathe anymore and my legs were aching so bad that I sat in the dirt. I tried getting up but it hurt. It hurt all over. I was crying, and I couldn't even stop it. I collapsed into the dirt down near the dam and watched the trees moving in the breeze. I don't remember it getting dark, but I do know Sally-Pearl placed a blanket around my shoulders and said that I must eat something, and me not wanting to. She must have left at some point,

because I do remember feeling very alone. Later, she and Grandma helped me to my bed, and I layed down to the smell of my mother's perfume and the sound of her voice, calming me and telling me to sleep and rest and breathe easy. And then this is what happened.

#### **Fourteen**

I rise out of my bed and walk to the kitchen. It's early because I hear the rooster still crowing. There is steam coming from the top of a teapot. The room smells of freshly made toast with butter and vegemite. I rub my eyes awake and sit down at the table. My mother is reading a magazine about art. She hands me the book of poetry that is on the table. It's by C. J. Dennis and is open on the page that has the poem, *The Singing Garden - Dusk*. The page is dog-eared and the book looks well read. It smells of Grandma's room. She smiles and tells me, "Time to learn now. Time to grow."

I see her in the garden pulling out weeds. Her hands look smooth and are covered in fine dirt. She raises her left hand to her forehead and looks at me, squinting from the bright sun.

"Hello my little man. And how was school for you today?"

"Good."

She stands, brushes herself off, then blows me a kiss with her lips and both of her hands. She smiles strongly at me.

"I'll make some biscuits, shall I, the ones you love so much?"

Then she heads towards the house, walks inside, closing the door behind her.

I can see her doing the smooth hair that flows down her back. She is using the old silver brush that was her grandmother's. She brushes with long slow strokes and smiles at herself in the mirror.

"Will you help me with my dress, my little man?"

“OK.”

I zip the back of her dress up, and she swirls around in front of me.

“Ready for the ball.”

We are in the Opera house looking up at the huge ceiling. My mother is smiling and laughing, and very excited.

“Quick, Albert, come here. Quickly, quickly. Can you see the colours that are across that window? The reflection of the light?”

“Yes, I see it.”

“Well, then, tell me how it makes you feel. What does it ask of you, Albert?”

“It is telling me to run and jump.”

“Good. Very good, Albert. My little mate is wise.”

She’s sitting at the kitchen table, smiling to herself. My mother looks happy as the sunlight hits her face. She’s all shiny. Glowing and looking at me, with the same kind smile she always had for everyone. I watch as she walks to the sink and washes my cup, the green one with the black and white footballs on it. Then she pours me a glass of milk, grabs two of her brown sugar biscuits, and sits back down. She offers them to me and I smile as tears begin to well up in my eyes.

“You can’t be sad, my little mate.”

“I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“Will you always be here?”

“Yes. I might just need a rest sometimes. But I will always be here.”

“How will I know?”

“You just ask. I will be here. And when I am, you will know that I am.”

“But I’m really scared, mum.”

“I know, and so am I. But that mustn’t stop us Mister Albert Dennis Braun. That must never stop you from doing anything. And most definitely should not ever stop you from being you, OK.”

“Ever!”

“I’ll try my best.”

“Besides all of that, you are a powerful young man. You will show the world all that you have. Just remember never to feel sorry for yourself. I won’t have you pitying your life Mister, got it?”

“Yes, mum.”

“It will be your turn at some point. You’re the one, Albert. It will be up to you. You must be very brave and very strong. Be wise, and create with all your heart, my little mate. I love you so very much.”

“And you must remember I am always close.”

She shuffles across the kitchen floor towards the sink again. She turns to the door, smiles, waves and walks out into the bush.

She was gone again. I didn’t know where she went. I only wished she had come back for real as I stood in the doorway. Alone.

## **Fifteen**

I remember having that same dream over and over around that time and the crazy part was, I realised I was able to see my mother, talk to her, and that I could actually feel her presence.

I thought to myself, ‘that wasn’t one of those moments, where you think you can respond, but nothing will come out of your mouth. Or like when you try to scream in your



dream, or when you push forward with a punch or kick at a ball, and it is all in slow motion.'

I was just a little boy at the time, and I probably didn't know too much, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't just a dream. I remember that I wished with all of my soul that I could have helped her more, or something. I didn't know where she was at that point, or even where she went to, I was glad that she decided to come and visit me. Often.

I don't remember being sad when I saw her either, I was more just happy than anything else. I think it was because I felt comforted that she was still with me, no matter what. I know that now, and that's all I have to say about this.

It was about a month later when I was told we were going to Nora Head, and that I was having the day off from school. I can remember Sally-Pearl telling me, and that apparently it was some love day thing couples did, the 14<sup>th</sup> of something, and on the day people bought stuff like flowers or chocolate and went to places to be together. Sally-Pearl, Grandma, the two little dogs, the food and I, all piled into Grandma's tin can car and went to some rock pool. I figured out the idea of the day many years later.

I'd never been there before so I was little bit excited. The drive into Nora Head itself is fine, straight down the main road from Bruce Crescent, through Kanwal and Gorokan. Over the Toukley bridge, through to the turn off into Nora Head, and then around and down a little to the main boat ramp. At the entrance to the boat ramp you can't see how steep the drive down to the beach is. And at the very top, if you put your arms out and squint your eyes, you think that you can fly straight into the ocean. We stopped at the top and grandma went to check if there was a car park. I was hoping that Grandma didn't turn her car off like she usually did, because if the brakes didn't work we were going to end up in the ocean like one of the boats I saw heading down the steep road. She didn't, and once we parked I

decided that this was the coolest place I'd ever seen. I'd been to the beach, before but not a whole pool with rocks.

I swam in the rock pool for a while and then Sally-Pearl asked if I wanted to walk along the beach with her. Grandma stayed and watched the camp.

I remember we'd been walking for a while when we found some little crabs that looked like ghosts. They were so cool because you could see all the way through them. Then we saw some blue bottles and helmet shells as well, at least that's what I remember Sally-Pearl calling them.

"In Darwin they got big ones they call mud crabs," Sally-Pearl told me.

"Dhuwa. They could eat ya little leg off," she said laughing.

Along the beach there were a few seagulls, and near the same spot was a huge big bird with a long beak.

"See that bird there he's named the pelican?"

"You see him? That one there? See him?"

"Yeah," I offered.

"There was one of them up in my home town one time, and the story my aunties tell, is that many, many nights a long time ago this one bird was very nasty see, all the time to everyone and one person didn't like it."

I nodded.

"It was mean to anyone that came to that side of Akeyulerre. Billy Goat Hill. It was very noisy too."

"Well, the next thing that big bird he was gone. He had disappeared. No one knew where he went. But in the night time somebody had seen the big tall spear carrier and they say that he made him into tucker. A big pot of pelican soup and he ate him all up."

"Is that a true story?" I asked.

“Doesn’t matter if it’s true or not. No one ever saw him again,” she smiled.

“There are lots of fruit there too. Some figs. They look like big brown round raindrops. Taste sweet and are furry and bush passionfruit and oranges.”

“All of this is not far from town, down the road little bit,” she offered.

On the walk back I was trying to run and weave in and out of the seaweed that had washed up on the beach at the same time as I tried to chip over the top, like a half-back trying to side step a big prop. It was still a little painful to run flat after the accident, but I kept kicking and diving and pretending to side step. I was calling all the plays that I knew from listening to the footy on the radio. Especially last year’s grand final. We got to listen to it on Grandma’s wind up radio. She even bought new batteries, just in case. It was the year that they played two grand finals because the first one was a draw. And it was the time that Ted Goodwin, also known as Lord Ted because he commanded, and owned, all the field in front of him and behind him when he played, raced to the in-goal area, running as fast as he could. Then he dived to get to the ball that was about to run over the line and landed on his head at the same time and knocked himself out. He scored the try, but it was a trip to La La land for Lord Ted for the rest of the game. And it was a drawn game as well, so we got to have another game the next weekend. How cool was that? St George won that game, and Parramatta had to wait for a few more years to be winners.

Just as I scored in the corner of the seaweed like Lord Ted, I noticed that there was a group of boys a lot older than me sitting near the big drain that opened into the ocean. I jogged over to Sally-Pearl and smiled as we headed towards the beach camp and Grandma.

“Hey, look at the big brown coon and the snowflake holding her hand,” yelled one of them.

“Yeah, a choc top ice cream,” yelled another.

“Coco pops boys. Only dirtier and smellier,” a tall boy added.

“Just like a chocolate milkshake, only Cruuunchy,” yelled another and they all laughed.

“And not as tasty, I reckon,” said the short one.

“Come on Albert let’s see if we can find some fish in the rock pool,” Sally-Pearl said, as she held my arm and began quickly walking me towards the rock pool.

I remember at the time being able to make out the face of the first boy who called out. And wow, did he have the biggest nose that I’d ever seen. It was huge and pointed right out from his face, and then spread across both his cheeks, just like a big squashed peach. The boy with the big nose called out to us again, while staring closely at Sally-Pearl. They all ran down to the beach area and began to follow us as we headed to the rock pool. That’s when grandma came towards where we were and told us to hurry up for some food.

“Stupid dumb abo,” big nose pointed and laughed.

“Go home back to the desert,” another called out.

“Back to ya own country, ya lazy black bludger,” added another boy.

“You should shut-up big nose, and not be so mean,” I called out.

“Wad you say? Ya little poof,” asked the tall one with a nose like a squashed peach and hair the colour of the sand. They were standing around us by now, and one of them pushed me over. Sally-Pearl grabbed a stick, and Grandma came running over and threatened them by holding out her fist and waving a large rock around and swearing.

She also told them in her pidgin German that she would be telling the police. They all laughed and walked off, pushing each other and swearing, calling behind them the names they had used before.

I remember it being one of those moments when you realise that the world is not a perfect place, and that you have to look after yourself as best as you can. I guess that’s what we all did that day at the beach. I didn’t have the muscles to beat them, but I did have the

people around me to show me that I didn't need to be scared of anything or anyone.

"Yobbos," That's what Bert called them later that night at dinnertime, as Grandma told him the story of our trip to the beach.

"They should get a bloody job instead of picking on women and children at the beach. Make themselves useful to the country. Not just bludging on the street."

"Yah, yah," added Grandma.

Sally-Pearl didn't say a word. She just smiled at me, and went on making dinner.

## **Sixteen**

A few weeks later, the three of us were sitting at the table near the fire eating breakfast and Grandma was having a discussion with Sally-Pearl about getting the horse in, when they kissed each other on the lips. It was almost like they'd totally forgotten where they were. They stepped back quickly, and Sally-Pearl went to see about the horse in such a rush that she banged her arm on the door as she left, knocking the jars that Grandma used for the candles. I remember that three of them smashed.

I'd seen them being affectionate to each other before and, sure, at the time, it seemed natural to watch them walking through the bush holding hands. And once when I woke early and went to see if grandma could get rid of the possum that was in my room, I saw them lying together, asleep, hugging. They both looked so happy sleeping and holding on to each other.

Really happy.

But a full-on kiss on the lips. That had never happened before. At the time I wasn't quite sure how it worked or why they were so very interested in holding hands, but only at home. Never once did I see them do it at the shops or outside of Grandma's place. Sleeping

together in the same bed also seemed normal to me. It didn't happen all the time. Mainly when it was cold. Grandma told me it was to stay warm when I asked her about it once.

Only later would I discover what it all meant. When you are younger, you don't seem to be so quick to judge or catch on to the more detailed happenings around you, and I wasn't in a position to pass judgment because these two women were my family.

As Sally-Pearl rushed out, Grandma told me to clean up the glass and she went and got a pile of papers from the large hutch that held all her special things. The papers were in German. I remember it clearly because she also had a letter that was in English which she began trying to read out to me. It was from my school. She went really slow and made me help her with some of the stuff that I knew. It said that I was doing well but that I was still being fairly quiet in class, so I needed to go and see the school principal and talk to my teacher. Grandma said I had to do it by myself because she was going to kill one of the pigs on that day, so she could make ham for Christmas.

My teacher was always trying to help, and I guess I had been a little unhappy at school. It depended on what we were doing in the classroom, but sometimes I just didn't feel like talking. I wanted to be outside running around, kicking the footy or climbing trees.

And that's what I told them in the meetings.

I was told, back then, that I was quiet and withdrawn. Aloof. That was another word that the principal had used. Aloof. I remember at the time thinking that's what Grandma might say, when she was yelling at me to go up the ladder and get on the loof.

The day after the meeting, the teacher suggested that I should start writing letters and putting some words in a diary. He told me the first time that if we did this that we would then be able to, as a class, go outside for a game of bull rush. I agreed, and said that I could write a letter to my mother.

“That is a really nice idea Albert, but you know that she won’t be able to read it,” he told me, softly. I wrote one anyway, knowing that it would be sent back to me, unread. As I think of it now, it went like this.

*dear mum,*

*the teecha ~~sad~~ sed i shod rite to sum won so i am ~~ry~~ wryting two you.*

*i miss you. i reely reely, reely miss you end*

*why doo i have to be her wif owt you?*

*it hertz so mutch plees rite bak soon,*

*albert.*

I folded the letter like the teacher had shown us, and slid it gently into the envelope. I wrote our address on it, without the number, and asked the teacher for a stamp. He gave me one that had a telephone on it. It was a black and white one.

As I stared at the stamp I realised I’d never used a telephone before.

On that same day, in the afternoon, we got to play bull rush in the back paddock, and I remember being able to smile at the idea that I had helped the teacher in some way. I felt a little bit happier after writing the letter and I wasn’t in some of the shock, as the principal called it, that I’d been feeling before. According to the teacher, this was a good thing.

From that day on, I started to write lots of letters and I began to talk and chat with the other kids a little more, so he was pleased. I didn’t tell anyone that I’d actually been talking to my mother as well.

I wrote and I wrote and I wrote because I knew that they would never be read, other than by me. I also knew that they would arrive back from the postman, and that they could never reach her. But the teacher didn’t know that she’d been talking to me as well.

Only I knew. And maybe, just maybe, I would be able to read one out to her.

All the writing made me feel happy somehow, like I could run and leap right over all the huge trees at Grandma's. It gave me feelings that I remember were so powerful, I felt like I could fly right out of the classroom as I wrote and then read them back to myself.

After about three weeks of this, Sally-Pearl handed me a red cardboard box with yellow swirls on it.

"This one is for special things Albert," Sally-Pearl told me.

"Things that you love, okay!"

I remember I counted up to eighteen letters in my little shoebox that she'd given me to put things in. I also had a rock in there that my mother had given me one time. A black, flat smooth rock, that we found on a walk, and a feather that was in the tree last week. It was a really long one, with greens and reds all through it. And I also had a photo of my mum when she was a little girl. In the photo she is holding a huge cone thing that she was given on her first day of school. It was in Germany, in a place called Peine and she is standing on the steps of her Grandmother's house about to go to school. Apparently, when you went to her school you got a massive cup thing full of lollies. When I first went to school, all I got was a tap on the head from grandma and a 'play nice' from my mother.

'Not happy, Jan!' I remember saying to myself out loud. Bert would sometimes say that when he lost something or hurt himself. I remember looking at the picture and thinking how pleased my mother looked, and how tall she seemed to stand.

## **Seventeen**

"Why would a dingo want to eat a little baby?" I asked Grandma at dinner.

"Vot?" she asked, grunting at the same time.

"Well, at school someone, I think it was Grace Wong, said that someone had said to



someone else at her uncles wedding that a dingo had eaten a baby at a place with a big rock where a spring is,” I stated.

“Ah mench,” Grandma scoffed, shook her head, and went back to eating.

That was it. There was no more discussion about it. You just knew that she wasn’t going to talk anymore. But this didn’t answer my question. I was still confused about it.

“That’s what dingoes do,” Sally-Pearl told me as she collected the dinner plates.

“Why are dingoes so bad?” I asked, as we walked to school the next day.

“They are just like that. They wanna take the people back, because the people are on their land,” Sally-Pearl offered.

“Who?” I asked, confused.

“It’s the spirits in them. It takes them away. That baby they lost. The dingo and its nasty mean mamu spirits. Remember to stay away from the nasty spirits,” she said firmly.

I nodded and waved as I ran to the school gate.

The other thing that happened around this time was that Sally-Pearl told me she was going to Alice Springs for a visit, and that I could go with her. I was supposed to go visit someone in Broken Hill. No one told me who it was, just that I was going. It had been a long time for her, and she was really excited. Grandma didn’t seem very happy about the whole thing though because no one would be there at her place for Christmas Eve. In Germany, you celebrated Christmas the night before, and have your presents and food and singing and stuff in the night. Which was pretty cool, even though we lived in Australia.

She seemed to get over it pretty quickly though.

Again we went to the station at Warnervale. Grandma dropped us off. I must admit that I wasn’t too sure about the train trip at the time. What made it a little crazy was that Sally-Pearl held my hand the whole time going to Sydney, where we changed trains. As we walked through the station I felt sick like I was going to vomit from the butterflies in my

stomach. Everybody seemed to pushing past or through each other. One lady swore at us because we went up the steps on the side she was coming down. She looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Where are you from. Certainly not the city are you!” and then pushed straight through us, as someone else yelled, “Yeah, that’s right!” and pushed past.

The other thing that I recall, very clearly, is the smell. The place stunk of dead fish, like the kind grandma used to salt and try to dry on the roof of the back shed. But often she would forget about them, until they were rotten and green. Yuk! With all of this going on I remember thinking to myself that I really didn’t like the city much at all. It wasn’t until we were on the other train, and we had got to a place called Greystanes, that Sally-Pearl finally let go of my hand and I started to feel calmer. I could breath again. I’m not sure why she did that but I remember my hand was sore and very sweaty by the time I was allowed to have it back.

I also remember that we didn’t talk very much on the train part to the letting go of my hand part either. But about twelve seconds after she let go, Sally-Pearl began to speak about all the great things that she would be doing when she got back to her mob and her country.

“You and I’ve talked a little bit about my home before, remember?” she asked.

“Yes, I remember,” I offered.

“Well I forgot to say that my home is a special place. Really special. Our mobs name for Alice Springs is Mparntwe. My mother told me the story over and over. Remember I told you too, Albert?” Sally-Pearl smiled.

“Yes, the one about the pelican and the one about the caterpillars.”

“Well the spirits made all this land a special place too. Not this name, Alice Springs. And Alice. Who is this Alice girl anyways? Not from our mob. I reckon she’s just some white girl that came for a visit one time, and then the place gets named after her. Crazy white fella times!” she giggled.

It was really late when we finally arrived in Menindee. It was warm and I remember feeling like I was on fire with excitement when I stepped off the train and onto the platform. It was dark and I don't remember the time of night but it felt, with the heat, like it was the middle of the day. The sky was so bright it seemed as though you were inside a huge big bubble looking up. Like those snow dome things you can buy at tourist shops. They have water inside and you shake them and they drop all the snow or sand onto whatever is inside.

"Albert, we'll stop here and visit some of my mob for little bit aye," Sally-Pearl told me as we got off the train and went to collect our other suitcase.

"Ayyy sista girl," called out a large dark woman with a red shirt on and no shoes.

"Aunty," Sally-Pearl responded as they hugged and smiled at each other.

"This here is my little Albert, " Sally-Pearl told her as she patted the top of my head.

"Little white fella got big moon face aye," the Aunty person said to me as she smiled into my face. She held my shoulders and pulled me towards her belly and hugged me just like Sally-Pearl did all the time.

A large group of kids surrounded us as well. They were all different colours and sizes, but all of them had huge big eyes just like Sally-Pearl. They were hiding behind each other and pushing and shoving and teasing as they worked for a position to see the two of us. Sally-Pearl knew some of them, and they hugged and there were kisses as well, which the little boys didn't seem to like too much. I knew how they felt.

"This one here is Clancy, and this one he's a Ronald," Sally-Pearl told me as the Aunty pushed the two boys forward. They were almost the same height. Clancy was a little chubbier, a bit like William Plomp, a boy from my school on the coast, but Ronald was skinny like me. We all piled into a big car and then we were off to some house on the other side of town. It was dark as we drove, but I could see from the streetlights that it was a quiet place. There were a few people walking the street but no traffic or loud noises.

I liked it straight away, and when I saw it the next day I felt right at home. The sky was so big. We went and had a look around at the main street. It was so dusty and dry, but the colours were rich and so amazing that they felt like they tickled your face when you saw them. Softly at first, but then they began massaging the whole of your head, and I it made me feel very differently to anywhere I'd been before. I remember getting dizzy, like I was a beehive, and all the bees had been stirred up and were racing around my head, inside and out.

And then we went down the road a bit where there was this big lake thing that went on forever. It was a massive amount of water, even bigger than the ocean we had seen at Nora Head, and it looked like it didn't have an ending. Like it went on forever. Sally-Pearl told me that we could have a swim before we left.

I was looking forward to that.

## **Eighteen**

It was Tuesday and we were going to travel by car across to Wilcannia, to see some of the family that Sally-Pearl had been talking about since we had met her.

It was very early in the morning and the night before we had all slept outside. It was just like the camping that I had done once with mum, I guess, but without the tree tent that we had built. This had been outside in the night, no cover. It'd been fun, and I was very much looking forward to meeting all the rest of Sally-Pearl's mob in the town called Wilcannia.

"This one here is an AP five Valiant," Clancy told me.

"Go real good, aye. Push da button and off he go, whoosh!" added Ronald.

"What car your mob got, Albert."

"My Grandma has a van. A Suzuki."

“What kinda of a car is a sus kee,” asked Clancy, laughing.

“I’m not sure but it does look funny, and she turns it off when we go down hills,” I added.

They both laughed at this and said, “Your Grandmas mob is crazy.”

“Clancy and Ronald, you lot in da back with him, and that other girl too,” shouted Aunty June.

“Her name is Minni. Like the car Albert. She from a place called Utopia,” Ronald told me as we piled into the back of the huge car.

“Got an aboriginal name too. Like the one you find in the oyster. I got one too. Don’t remember it though. Forgot it for a long time,” added Clancy.

On the way out of the town, in the distance, I could see this huge long fence that looked like it was almost as tall as a house. I asked Ronald and Clancy what it was and they just shrugged.

“That’s the fruit farm, Albert. It grows all different stuff,” offered their Aunty.

“Does it have a name,” I asked.

“Tandow. Got big juicy grapes too,” she added.

As we headed out I was thinking to myself, how is it that I was in the back of this car with a friendly, crazy and giggling crew. It was way cool. As we travelled there was dust flying out of the back of the car and rocks were bouncing all over the place. It seemed that the wind would blow the car so that it’s tail would be winding, just like the huge carpet snake we fed at grandma’s. The trip was very bumpy, even though we had an old mattress to sit on. At the end of the first rest stop I was not looking forward to getting back in, my bum had gone numb from when we’d reached the dirt part of the road. Maybe it was the spring that I had been sitting on that did it.

As we travelled along I realised that Minnie had not said one word since we started out. I thought to myself 'she must be shy,' but she kept smiling at me as we travelled along. All us little kids were sitting in the back and Ronald started laughing because, apparently, that's what he did.

"He funny boy that one, aye," Clancy stated.

I was daydreaming as we travelled, and thought a lot about my mum.

"These colours are amazing. Their role is to lift the soul of one's being, remember them Albert. Remember them!" That's what she would have said if she were in the car or sitting with us in the dirt, eating honey and bread. I can't ever remember being so nervous, scared and excited all at the same time. It was weird.

We'd been driving for a while, it was so peaceful, and then all of a sudden the back of the car had a smell so bad that I thought I was going to be sick. It was worse than any rotten fish at grandmas. Ronald and Clancy started giggling at each other. I'm not sure exactly who it was, but someone had done a dirty. Everyone looked at each other and put their hands over their mouths or their face in their shirts and tried to breath without being sick. The smell was so bad that Aunty June had to stop the car and let everyone out.

The dogs had been in the back with us, and even they were keen to get out in a hurry. They were snorting and shaking their heads, I think to get the smell out of their noses. We all piled out and Aunty June was so cranky that she started slapping the two boys around the head and yelling at them to stop being so grubby, and to keep their smells to themselves.

"I didn't do nuffin," said Ronald, as he was rubbing the back of his head.

"Clancy it was you then, aye," she asked.

"Nah, not me Aunty. It them dirty dogs you bring every place we gotta go," he told her.

Everyone started to laugh and I looked around at the group, and then the landscape. We'd been travelling for what seemed forever, but Sally-Pearl told me that we still had a while to go when I asked her, again.

"Little bit long time, Albert," Aunty June said as she went to the car to check the air inside. She decided that we would have a rest and go to the toilet here, rather than stop again. I was smiling when I spotted a large kangaroo and then an emu.

"Hey, look," I said as I pointed past the car.

"Mmmmm good tucker that one," Aunty June said, smiling.

As I was looking out into the red dirt I saw the biggest lizard ever.

Clancy told me it was a 'Wardapi'.

"That's what my mob call it in the stories they tell," added Ronald

"It's a goanna for your mob," Aunty June said.

I was standing out in the dirt watching the scene when Minnie walked over and held my hand, opened it and handed me something. Sally-Pearl had told me last night that Minnie was going home to Wilcannia after a visit to Menindee with her aunty, and that she didn't say much at all. Clancy had also told me that she was shy, crazy about feathers and that her mum had been sick. That's why she had been staying with them in Menindee. As we stood in the desert she didn't say anything at all, she just handed me the feather and smiled.

"Thank you," I whispered.

When we arrived in Wilcannia it was lunchtime, and the scene was almost the same as when we got off the train in Menindee. All the families came out to see us and they pulled, shoved or held and teased everyone that was there. It was hot. We all went into a big house that was next to the river. It was made of tin and all the windows had no glass, there was a big shed off the back where everyone sat to talk. I could see food was being cooked

on a fire in the backyard. There seemed to be more people than at Menindee. The thing that I noticed most was how happy they all were to see Sally-Pearl.

We ate and everyone laughed and then we got to go to the river to see all the birds that came in to rest onto the trees just before dark. We ran around and played chase and hide and seek. We climbed trees in the dark and saw all kinds of animals. Even though there was no water I felt like I had been swimming, it was a very strange feeling. On the walk back to the house where we were staying I was told that I was going to sleep outside again, with all the nephews and nieces and Minnie.

“You need to see all the stars in this country, Albert,” Sally-Pearl told me.

“The sky is so big out here,” I offered in return.

She smiled her big creamy smile and hugged me tight as we headed back to the house.

## **Nineteen**

The next day I was asked by Ronald and Clancy to go to the school to see the nuns and the teachers. “They funny lot them ones, aye,” Ronald said, smiling.

“Yeah, they make all sorts of stuff and crazy noises too aye,” added Clancy giggling into his hand.

Minnie was the one who held my hand as we walked over the bridge to the little school behind the tall tin fence. There were all these small buildings that were sitting on bricks and they had windows cut out of the tin. The ground leading up to the door of the rooms was grey like the clouds. It was also really dusty, and if you rubbed the ground with your feet it would cover you with a fine powder, just like for babies after a bath.

Minnie was smiling at me as we went into the main building. She pushed me towards the lady standing at the back of the room near a large bookshelf, talking to herself and laughing softly.



“Good morning, my little darlings,’ she offered as she heard us and turned around.

“Hey sista,” these were the first words I ever heard Minnie speak, as she walked over and hugged the leg of the lady at the bookshelf. She turned and pointed at me, Clancy, Ronald and another girl who had appeared from somewhere.

“This Albert,” she told the lady.

“A-l-b-e-r-t,” Minnie said really slowly.

“Hello Albert, I’m Sister Margaret,” she offered.

“And how are you two boys going today,” she asked in a stern voice, looking straight at Clancy and Ronald.

They dropped there heads and said very quietly, “We real good sista.”

I thought to myself, that’s a very different Clancy and Ronald than in the back of the car. On arrival at the next school building another lady appeared, and she said that all the kids had to go and see the nurse. All their faces changed to a look of sadness when she came from around the corner. She didn’t look mean or nasty. She smiled as she held the ear of one of the boys and looking in with a bright light that was pointy on the end, then she checked a reddish mark on his leg. She rubbed the top of his head, smiled again, and then motioned for the next in line to walk towards her. But the others were not keen to go near her, and so another teacher held their hand as they walked towards the lady with the light.

The next person to see us was an old grey haired lady, with big blue eyes and a smile the size of a large banana. She looked at all of us and bent down to pick a flower from the garden that she was walking past. She walked towards us and placed the yellow blossom into the hand of Minnie. They all smiled, and some went and hugged her leg, others were pulling at her hands and elbows.

“Sister, sister, cum here, look,” one of little girls, told her.

“Yes dear, I will,’ she told her as she walked towards the area where another group were playing.

I followed Minnie and there in the hole that the group had dug was a bird and a nest and some eggs. She held the nest in her hands after checking all of the bits inside. The group walked over to a tree to find a branch that was high enough from the reach of any animal, and another boy climbed up and placed the nest in. Someone said that the goats would walk all over it otherwise. I think it was the teacher.

“And who might this be,” the lady asked, touching my shoulder as we all walked towards another building.

“His name Albert sister,” the boy next to Clancy told her.

“He is from they coast some place,” added another boy.

“Well, Albert from the coast, I am Sister Flo and it is lovely to meet you,” she stated.

We were all asked to settle down as we entered the classroom and found a place to sit. Minnie grabbed my arm and dragged me towards the corner where we sat on a red mat near the window. Some of the children started talking in a small group and giggling. Ronald and Clancy were in the group, as well as some girls, and they were pointing at the lady.

“Sister, can you help us little bit,” asked the taller boy.

“Yes I can. What do you need?” she asked, walking over to the group.

“Need to lift this ere book up,” offered one of the girls.

As they asked her the question, she bent over to get some papers and the book. As she did this, Sister Flo let go with the loudest fart I had ever heard in my life, even louder than grandma. She mustn’t have heard it, or she was just so old that it didn’t bother her, because she didn’t notice anything and the children were laughing as she returned to her desk to start the class.

The other great mystery about all of it was that I couldn't smell anything. It was amazing, she did not smell when she passed wind. 'How do you fluff and not smell,' I thought to myself. I know when I have mistakenly walked behind an older person, like grandma or Bert, and they have farted, my whole face has almost fallen off and I've been unable to breathe. I remember back then, thinking to myself, 'That's amazing.'

## **Twenty**

I remember feeling at the time that there were changes happening to me. I wasn't sure how, but I was feeling it. The landscape seemed to be talking to me, like I was a piece of paper you see blowing in the wind as it falls from a window or the back of a truck, and moves around in no ordered way.

When my eyes opened I realised that while I was sad to leave Wilcannia the next day, it'd been a funny, interesting and very exciting time. I remember feeling powerful somehow. Like I could fly.

I had laughed a lot and Minnie had even spoken. Ronald had made a nun bend over and fart, and we'd eaten all kinds of foods, and I'd seen the river. Even though there was no water in it. We did get to have food that was cooked in the ground, and food that was raw, and also food that was cooked on the flames. Grandma would have loved it. I told Sally-Pearl that it was pretty cool. She smiled, hugged me tight, and giggled.

On the way back to Menindee, Clancy and Ronald made up a game. It was from what happened with the nun in Wilcannia, and it was called the Sista-Flo-Fart-Game.

If someone farted, the closest person to them had to fart, and if they couldn't, then the first person got a point. It was a lot like soccer, but without the ball or a net, and without the field. It was a long trip back, and I made sure that I didn't sit too close to them.

We were going to Broken Hill today, and leaving Menindee. I had never seen so many people come to say goodbye before. There were people everywhere. Little people. Old people.

Sally-Pearl was crying, but it seemed in a good way. They were ‘happy tears’ she told me, as the train pulled away.

“I am a little bit happy and little sad, Albert,” she said as we headed out.

It was daytime, so it was a bit hotter than when I remember going into Menindee. And when we went to Wilcannia it was a crazy time so I didn’t take much notice of the hills. There weren’t any. There weren’t many plants on the ground either. But I did notice that there was this really big gap in the middle of the landscape as we headed towards the town of Broken Hill. It looked like a hill had been snapped in half and left broken on the ground, like a paddle pop stick or a branch from a tree. I remember it looked like it had a huge bite taken out of it. Either way, it was different to anything I had ever seen. The railway track was really windy. It weaved us through the orange ground spotted with bushes and the flat desert that blew all over the place. It looked to me like the place was something out of the movie that we’d seen at school one time about some science thing and about the moon.

We were going to stay with another of Sally-Pearl families. But when we got to their house they were sad and upset. They told us that someone in Alice Springs was sick.

I remember at 11.05 that day I was told that I’d be staying in Broken Hill. I know because I stared at the wooden clock with birds on it when she told me. Not happy Jan!

“Albert, you need to stay here for a little while, okay. You can stay till I get back. You can stay with your father,” she told me as we ate.

“What!” I yelled.

“That’s why we’re here. He wants to see you.”

I had all kinds of ideas racing through my head and I felt like my heart would jump right out of my chest, it was beating so fast as we waited for him to arrive at the station. I had never stayed in Broken Hill before, and I'd never met my father. I had never even seen a photo of him. But it didn't matter because a woman came to pick me up.

"Hello Albert, I'm Penny," she said.

Apparently, she was his girlfriend. She told me that the man they called my father was at the pub and would be home later. Sally-Pearl was still crying as she got on the train to leave. When the train pulled away from the station I felt very alone. I didn't cry, but I was sad, and I was very scared. His girlfriend took me to their house that was built on the side of some big pile of grey dirt, with buildings, wires, steel poles and cables all over the side of it.

The house was an old tin building. Painted green. Most of the rooms had cement floors and there was an outside toilet. One of the rooms even had a dirt floor, just like the shed at grandmas where she kept all the food for the pigs and the horses, and where the snake lived. The lounge room part did have carpet. It wasn't all bad because she showed me the bathroom and the bath. I was used to having to wash in a bowl at grandmas, and I'd never had a bath before. I was really excited when she pointed to how the taps were hot and cold, and how if you wanted, you could have more hot water if it went cold while you were in it. At Grandmas, when you washed, the water had to be used by at least two people, and then if it was cold, you just had to deal with.

"To save gas, yah," she would say.

These were just Grandma's rules. The room that Penny said was mine while I stayed with them had a blue cement floor and white walls. The bed was covered with a blanket that had red flowers on it. I was pretty chuffed with running water, and even with the new flowery blanket.

I was really tired and she said that if I had something to eat I would then be able to lie down for a while if I wanted. She had made a pot of stew during the day, and we ate it with fresh bread. I was in bed when I heard all the banging in the house. It was loud enough to wake anyone and it sounded angry, which scared me.

“Oi, wake-up?” a figure standing in the doorway offered.

The man then turned on the light and stood over my bed. I sat up and blinked.

“Well, stand up boy, and show me who you are,” he said, slurring the words. I climbed out of the blankets nervously, stood up and looked at the man. He was tall and really hairy, he had tattoos on one of his arms, and his skin was really dark. Not dark like Sally-Pearl, but more like a dark suntan. He was wobbly on his feet. When he spoke it was with an angry look on his face, like someone had taken all his lollies when he was little and he had never gotten over it.

“How old are you?” he asked, gruffly.

“Nearly ten,” I offered quietly with my head down.

“You need to eat more,” he growled back at me.

“Okay,” I said, quietly.

“Now, go back to bed,” he told me, as he staggered out of the doorway, bumping into the wall. Penny came in and turned the light off and tucked me back under the blankets. She smiled and said that she would make me some pancakes in the morning.

“Sleep tight Albert, and sweet dreams,” Penny offered, as she went out of the room.

I don’t remember falling asleep, but I do know that I wasn’t very happy. I lay in the bed, looking up at the ceiling, thinking about all the things that had happened, just in this one day, and how this was my second memory of someone’s home. But it wasn’t so polite, this one. It was very different to living at Grandmas; different to anything I had ever seen

before. Because I was from the coast, and because I hadn't seen many other types of homes, I thought that all homes were the same, just like mine was on the coast.

But this one just wasn't. It wasn't like anything at all that I knew. Even though it did have a bathtub.

## **Twenty-One**

I remember thinking to myself that this was not a home at all. At least I didn't think so. There was no sitting at the dinner table and eating together. That only happened on special occasions, and there was definitely no laughing or talking about different things. No, this home was where you sat in silence, didn't ask questions about footy, or talk about art or writing or anything that I was used to. I was even afraid to ask for a biscuit. I wasn't scared of Penny, but I was afraid of the man they called my father when he was at the house.

And then to top it all off, some people named Thea and Les came out to Broken Hill for a visit from a place called Condobolin. They drove out to meet their 'grandson' because they thought they should. They came out to meet me. I didn't know why. After the first day of them being there, I was told that the man they call my father was adopted, so they weren't even real grandparents. "Just a bunch of ring-ins," as Bert would have said. They reminded me of characters from a Roald Dahl book, like the Nitwits or something.

"Crazy!" That's what Sally-Pearl would have called it.

I remember the first night they were there and we were all sitting at the dinner table. No one was speaking as they scoffed their dinner. Then the man called Les started to cough. He smoked these cigarettes that he rolled by hand from a tin of tobacco he carried around in his back pocket. He coughed for about a full minute. As I was about to put a big spoonful of mashed potato into my mouth, he spat a big green thick glob of goozy right into the ashtray that had been sitting in between the two of us. I felt so sick I thought I was going to bring

up the roast lamb. It wasn't all bad, I suppose. The one good thing I do remember about these people was that Thea made this thing called bread and butter pudding, and it tasted great. But just as I thought maybe this was a good thing, she let the dog that was sitting on her lap eat and lick the rest of what was left in the bowl. As I was walking to the toilet, one of the dogs hopped up onto the lounge and did a big poo right onto the blanket. I must say that all this really started to scare me.

I had a crazy dream that night. I dreamt that I was being chased by something that looked like a big poo that was coming to eat me in the night. The dogs were sitting on the lounge like humans, laughing at me, as the poo thing chased me around the house.

Just imagine it, a smelly wet orange coloured dog poo in your bed, and then having it chase you while trying to eat you. The next day I felt so scared that I thought I could run right out of there and all the way home to Grandma. But I didn't because I knew I only had to stay for five more days.

## **Twenty-Two**

It was a hot day and we were on the front steps of the verandah trying, unsuccessfully, to get some relief from the heat by sitting near the tree that grew on the front path. The heat in Broken Hill was very different to what I was used to. The air was dry and seemed to take over your whole body, and I even felt dry in my stomach. But, it didn't matter today, because I knew that I was going home to Grandmas the next day. I'd been counting down the days with Penny since Sunday, and I knew that it was only two more days until Sally-Pearl would be here to collect me. It had been eight days since I had waved goodbye to her, and I was smiling when the man they called my father arrived at the front gate to the house. He'd been at work and had a big box of beer under his arm. The box had the initials 'KB' written all over it.



“The black sheila’s not comin and the old German woman is sick. You’ve gotta stay here. Not my idea. That’s it. No complanin. Got it.”

“And you have to go to school up the road as well, the law says. So you’re goin too morra.” He grunted, as he walked past us and into the green tin house.

As he told me all this, I remember feeling my face begin to catch fire, and my chest so full of pain I felt like I’d stopped breathing. It seemed like hours before I moved. I eventually went inside and sat on the bed with the flowery blanket.

His girlfriend later told me, while we were sitting together on the bed, that Sally-Pearl had been held up in Alice with a funeral and ceremony and some other family stuff, and that they didn’t know how long she would be. She also told me that Grandma had been in hospital to have something taken out that was making her feel sick.

“How about I make some fruit salad and we can have it with ice cream?” she stated as she patted my leg and left the room.

I didn’t say a word. And I didn’t speak to anyone about how I felt. I just couldn’t. I especially didn’t know what to say to him, the man they called my father. When he was drunk, it was even harder. He would yell and swear, and say nasty things like, “What are you doin that crap for, boy,” “Shut that boy up, would ya” and “You’re both just a total pain in the arse to me,” he would often tell his girlfriend.

The school I had to go to was called Alma Primary School. I stood out the front on the first morning and it seemed to me like a prison out of a book mum had read to me once. It was a place of stonewalls, metal buildings that sat on bricks, cement and one grass playground and tough mean kids.

Not everyone was mean though.

My teacher wasn’t. His name was Mister Lazzar, but all the children called him ‘Mister Bizarro’. He was a tall man with thick glasses, and he had a really shiny head

because the top part was bald. He was always making the class laugh. He would pull these crazy faces and make noises like animals or cars. One time he even did a hand stand in the classroom to prove to Angela Watkins that he could still do it, and that he wasn't too old like she suggested. Now that I'm older, I realise that back then he offered to the children a chance of laughter, and a break from their crazy lives. Most of the kids were from 'out south' and they were seen as poor and dirty and didn't have many options for their future.

The first two days of school were a little tricky because I didn't have a friend or a playmate, so I sat by myself during recess and lunch. But on the third day at Alma, I was told by Angela Louise Watkins that, "She was to be my friend because I needed her to be and that if you and your family lived out south, your father usually worked in the mine or on the railway, drank lots and lots of beer, and played footy for the South Broken Hill Red Kangaroos."

She also spoke about the fact that in her case it was not like this. Her father was a foreman at the south mine and did not drink. He had never 'drank' anything besides tea and soft drink. Sometimes water. However, he did play football for the South Kangaroos.

Unfortunately for me, she wasn't talking about the types of footy that I new. It was that other funny game, where if you missed the goal you still got a point. It used to be called VFL or Aussie Rules. Now they call it AFL.

Her father was a full forward and he was also the treasurer. Whatever that part meant I didn't know, and Angela left out the details in the explanation, which seemed from her way of doing things, very unusual. Because she talked non-stop, I learnt to just listen and then nod from time to time.

"Now, Albert Dennis Braun, what exactly do you like about me?" She asked, on the second day of our friendship, as she called it, at little lunch.

"Umm?" I mumbled because I didn't know what to say.

“There must be something that stands out. Is it my hair, or perhaps my smile?” she asked. I didn’t know how to answer her. No one had ever asked me anything like this before. Her hair was a sandy colour and was tied up in two really long plaited things. It actually looked like it was hurting because her face was pulled back really tight, and this made her mouth and eyes spread across her face. She looked a lot like one of grandma’s pigs when they were angry.

“It’s pretty,” I responded. I had heard my mum say this to Sally-Pearl one day about a dress she was wearing.

“Good. I think I will be liking you more now, young Mister Albert Dennis Braun. I think we could be friends for a long time,” she stated, and then went on eating her sticks of celery that she sprinkled with salt from a little plastic bag.

I wasn’t sure why she thought this, but I was glad to make her happy, and at least I had one friend in my first week at Alma Primary School.

We would spend most of our time in the library, those first weeks, growing. This is what Angela called it. She would say things like, “This is our time Albert, and we need to read and discover as much as we can in this magical place.” I enjoyed the library, but all I really wanted to do was to go outside and kick the footy, even though it was coloured red and a funny shape. I still wanted to kick it.

In the second week of me being there, I met Angela’s brother. His name was Oscar, and he was smiling as he walked towards the office from the oval. He was shorter than her, but also her twin. I knew this because she had told me that she was a twin, and that there was two of her, but that the other one was a boy, unfortunately. He had scraped some skin off his knee in the playground and was walking to the office when we came out of the library to get a drink. We were also going to ask Mister Lazzar about some woman named Nancy Bird-Walton and what she did in the year 1935 with her plane.

According to Angela, apparently, we just had to know!

“Check this out, Angela. Bloooooood. My bloooooood,” he smiled and pointed to his knee. Then he touched it and covered his finger with red liquid blood and tried to put on her face.

“You are just a stupid little boy, Oscar William Watkins, and I will be telling our mother. Come on Albert, let’s go and find Mister Lazzar!”

She grabbed my arm as she said this, and dragged me away.

“Nice friend, girly boy,” he called after us as we stepped off the verandah.

“Oscar, I will also be telling our mother that you were rude to the new boy, and that you have been a disturbing element,” she told him. His face changed from a smile to one of being scared stiff when she said this as he turned to go to the office.

“I forgot to tell you that our mother is also the chair of the P and C, and the head of Fete Committee. So her children are not allowed to be mean or rude to anyone, especially the new students,” Angela told me as we walked to the classroom.

“What’s a scurvy elephant?” I asked her.

“What?” she asked, as she stopped and thought for a few seconds.

“Oh, Albert, you are silly. I said he was a disturbing element.”

Whatever that was, I didn’t know, but I certainly knew in that moment that I was never going to be cheeky to their mum, ever.

It was the third week of my schooling at Alma and the day had arrived for the athletics carnival. We were going over to Lamb Oval for the whole day. There were going to be races and jumping and throwing, and a thing called a relay. I had always been a good runner, even though I had had the broken legs I could still run fast, and I always wanted to chase things. I could step to my right and left in the yard when I played footy by myself. I could jump high and long, and I loved to do all of those kinds of things, ever since I could

remember. I was told by Angela who, according to her, ‘was still my only friend’, that she had decided that I was going to go in all the races and all the events. That way, if I won some of them, or placed second or third, that I would get the big silver trophy. Then she could tell everyone that I was her best friend and I would be the Junior Athletics Champion of Alma.

“I, of course, will need to be cheering from the sidelines, Albert. So I will not be running,” she stated, the way she always did when offering her opinion.

“But you, Albert Dennis Braun, will run like the wind.”

“I’ll try, Angela,” I offered, nervously.

I went in all the races. I went in all the jumping. I went in all the throwing events as well. I didn’t get the big trophy but I did win the high jump and came second in the 100 metres race. The longer races were a little harder for me, so I guess I was just meant to run fast and short. It was fun that day, and I felt like I could do some good things and help someone to feel good about something.

### **Twenty-Three**

One of the reasons I wasn’t happy at the start of school was because I didn’t have a uniform, and all the other kids had teased me over and over again. Calling me things like ‘scab’ and ‘povo.’ One kid even yelled at me because his father had a fight with the man they called my father at the pub last year. And, apparently, that was my fault. I remember thinking to myself ‘he’s not even my father, so what’s it got to do with me.’ But the other kid wasn’t so convinced and pushed me over every time he saw me.

I finally got a uniform after about four weeks of being there. It was given to me by the Watkins family, as their son Oscar was about the same size as me. Angela had convinced her mother that I was to have a sleep over at their house to watch the Commonwealth games

on their television, because Raylene Boyle was running in the 400 metres, and was going to win. I had read the sports pages of the newspaper when I was teaching Sally-Pearl to learn how to read, so I knew who Raylene Boyle was, but I had only ever seen a television at school, or when we went shopping.

So this was pretty cool.

We all screamed at the television, all of us, and I got a school uniform. I saw what happens in a home where everyone actually likes each other.

After the race, the parents were watching the news, and there was all this talk about how some people didn't own the land, and that the Commonwealth games were wrong, and that white people had invaded this country years ago. I wasn't sure what the deal was about all that, but I had heard Sally-Pearl and Grandma talking one day about some protest thing, and that the people were upset about their land. I didn't really know what it all meant that day, but all the adult talk was about some trouble in the city of Brisbane, where the race had been.

The next day, we all went to church. This was my first taste of what Angela referred to as religion.

"We'll be attending the church on the hill, Albert. Well, actually, it is called the Cathedral. But it is the Catholic Church of Broken Hill, and it is grandest building ever," she stated, as we sat eating a breakfast of tinned peaches and hot porridge with brown sugar and cream.

"Why do we have go to church all the time?" asked Oscar, shovelling food into his mouth at the same time.

"Because it is Sunday, and we always go to church on Sunday morning," stated his mother.

“You know that already, Oscar,” offered his father, who’s name was Bill. But I called him Mister Watkins, and so did Angela.

It sounded funny when she said it, but no one seemed to mind. I don’t ever remember having gone to church before, only for the funeral of my mother, and I had certainly never been with a family. I had no idea, at the time, what this God person did, or who Jesus was, that Angela spoke about. As we entered, I felt like I was out of place, shy and unsure, as I followed the lead of Angela and dipped my finger into the dish of water and crossed myself, from my the top of my head to my tummy, and across my chest. We then went to sit in the long wooden seats. Each person knelt down on their right knee, and then moved along to sit on the bench seat. No one was speaking as they put their hands together and then dropped their heads, closing their eyes at the same time. I did the same thing, but it got the better of me and I had to open my eyes to see what was going on.

All the people were resting their heads forward or mumbling to themselves, with hands joined together or with their chin against their chest, or both. I didn’t really know what to do so I followed the others, and waited until the music started. Oscar made a silly noise with his mouth until Mrs Watkins looked at him, with a raised stern eyebrow, and he stopped instantly. A bell sounded and everyone stood up as music started to play.

I looked towards the middle as a man walked down between the seats, in front of him were three other people. A boy in a white sheet, another boy in a white sheet, and a taller man dressed in a white sheet with colourful shapes all over it and some sort of hat on. The man was holding a big colourful book and looked like Sally-Pearl. The last person to walk in was holding a big gold pole, like a shepherd or someone you see in the cartoons that looks after animals. He had a sheet on as well, but his had more patterns and colours on it. As the music stopped, all of them went to the stage and stood facing the people. The man

with the tall gold stick placed it against a stand and held out his hands as we all stood facing him, waiting.

“Good morning to you all,” he offered, and everyone responded with “Hello Father” or “Good morning.”

“Peace be with you,” he said, with his hands outstretched wide.

That’s the last I remember of being in my seat, until we were all walking out to leave. I’m not completely sure what happened, but I was up on the stage watching everyone as they listened to the man speak as well as some other people. Then I was sitting next to the big colourful statue of the person they all called Jesus. I was not in a seat like everyone else, but at the same time, I was in the church. It seemed a lot like the time I got to talk to my mum.

I just floated about the church until it was time to go, and then I seemed be able to rise out of my seat and walk out. I didn’t say a word about it to anyone.

## **Twenty-Four**

My memories of that time are very strong, particularly when I recall the events surrounding the people and the places I was involved in. I remember very clearly that when I got home from my sleepover at the Watkins house, I was told we were going to a barbecue for some night that people celebrated with firecrackers and a big fire. I’d never even heard of firecrackers. I was told by Penny, when I asked, that it was the Queen’s birthday long weekend.

Everyone had huge bags of crackers that they took along to the party. I didn’t get a bag. But those who did had all different kinds. There were these things called throwdowns that made a loud banging sound when you threw them at the footpath or up against the fence or a wall. Others had crackers that were called Tom Thumbs or Catherine Wheels and



Penny Bungers. I watched as they lit them, ran away, and they sparked and there was a loud bang. The colours sprayed all over the dark sky. It was pretty cool, I must admit.

The man they called my father worked for the railway. He did something with the trains, punting, or something like that it was called. At least that's what someone at school called it, and at the time I didn't really want to know so I didn't ask for an explanation. I only knew it was the railway because a person known as 'the callboy' from the railway office would come looking for him all the time. This was because people wouldn't show up, and they needed someone to cover the shift. And there was no phone to call us on. Most of the people at the house for firecracker night were from the railway. And they were all drinking.

A lot.

There were all kinds of different people at the house. Some in short shorts, holding beer cans in their hands, and others with no shoes on, that stood drinking out of big bottles that had beer in them. It was cold, and I was wearing a jumper. At the time I wasn't sure how they could stand around and not feel the cold.

There were also lots of woman, with all different kinds of hairstyles, and a man with one as well. Another man they called 'Pup' was stirring him about having a perm in his hair. He didn't look very happy about being teased.

One of the things that I also noticed was that all of the men stood together, and all of the women sat around in another group. It was like they couldn't go near each other or they would be teased, like the man with the permed hair. According to Penny, his name was Elmore Loveridge. They didn't even talk to the other group unless they wanted something. Which was usually the man, wanting another can of beer, one that was gold and that had the letters KB on it. The other type of beer they drank was called Melbourne Bitter. I remember

that name because at one point someone was very drunk and they threw a full can at another bloke which hit him on the back of the head. They all laughed, but it must have hurt.

I recall that the night was fun, I guess. All the adults kept drinking and I fell asleep in front of the big fire with a blanket that Penny had gotten for me. I did get to eat some burnt sausages and coleslaw, as well as some Pavlova. I had three pieces of it, so I was pretty stoked. Later that night Penny took me home and tucked me into bed. I liked Penny. She seemed nice enough, but she just looked really sad sometimes. And I remember thinking that my mother had that same look when she was alone and thought no one was watching. My mum also used to get the same look when she was tired at night. It was like they were looking through walls out into the world, trying to find something that has been lost or taken. I used to always go and sit with Grandma when my mother got like that. I have always wondered what I could've done to help.

Just so they didn't look so sad.

## **Twenty-Five**

I remember the day very clearly. It was a Friday afternoon, and the man they called my father was at the pub getting drunk again. I was certain that he would come home and be yelling at Penny and me for not putting out the rubbish the night before, or something silly like that. It seemed the only time he ever paid any attention to us was when he was angry about something. Or drunk. Or both.

I just could not understand why he would get drunk every Friday night. It was also a big drinking day on Saturday in Broken Hill as well, so I didn't like the weekends very much. Something always happened that was a little crazy.

Like the Saturday he nailed the door shut and made us sleep on the verandah.

On those days he would get very, very drunk and he would play loud music. The drunker he got, the more he would want to tell us about all the things in his life that were ‘crap’, as he called it. They included us, his work and his parents. Oh, and the fact that there could never be enough beer to drown out the fact that we were ‘crap’. There were a few moments in this drunken haze when he was kind, but then he would change, just as quick as it came and he would be back to the mean and hard man that was always yelling at us to ‘shut the hell up’.

“We thought we might go to church one Sunday morning,” Penny had said, as he left for the pub that Friday night.

“Not going to happen,” he grunted as he walked away.

When he came back later that night for dinner, she suggested it again.

“It won’t hurt anyone if we go,” she offered.

“Like hell. You stay out of that place, no fear. Or I’ll flog the crap out of you all. Got it. You don’t need no church, they are all full of shit anyway, same as those artists and writers his mother used to waffle on about. Full of shit, I tell ya. And what kind of a name is Albert, anyway?” he stated, looking at me in his drunk manner.

“Leave him alone,” Penny whispered.

“What?” he yelled, as he raised his hand and went to slap Penny across the face. I stepped in front of her and put my arms up to shield us both from the blow. He paused slightly, then whacked me instead, right across the left side of my face. I fell over the lounge and landed in the corner. I got up fairly fast because I didn’t want to get hit again, and I was ready to run. But he just looked at me and walked outside, huffing and swearing loudly.

Penny took me to bed, tucked me in, and said, “Thank you,” as she turned off the light

## **Twenty-Six**

As I walked to Angela Watkins' house for a sleepover the next day, I rubbed my face gently. It was sore from the whack that had been given to me. But I remember thinking to myself, 'man that hurt!' I didn't have a huge mark or anything, but I knew that it had happened, and I was pleased that I had stood up for Penny. Just like grandma had done at the beach that day.

I was glad to be away from the green tin house. I liked the house that the Watkins family lived in, and I liked having Oscar and Angela as my friends. Angela hadn't been at school as much this term, and I noticed that she looked a little different. She wasn't as bossy as usual, either. She looked tired, and her eyes were really dark all the time.

She kept going to her room to rest that Saturday afternoon. I played checkers with Oscar and Mister Watkins.

We all went to the church at night this time, and we all prayed for Angela to get better. After the church service, we had a dinner of mashed potato, crumbed chicken and minted peas. It was really nice.

I remember being told by Mister Watkins that it was bedtime, so I brushed my teeth and then went to the toilet. It was outside, like the dunny at the green tin house. I was finished and closing the door when I heard someone talking.

Around the back of the toilet was a table, and I watched as my friend's mother was having a discussion with herself and crying about what was wrong with her daughter, my friend Angela.

"She can't have this leukaemia. She just can't. She is not going to die, I can tell you that much. She will be coming with me, and we are going to fix this thing, that's for certain," as she raised her fists in the air and shook them hard at the sky.

Angela's mother didn't know that I was watching, as I snuck from the toilet to the house. I was almost in the door when Angela came to the opening and smiled at me, as if she knew what had just happened.

"Albert Dennis Braun, you're a funny little boy, aren't you," she said, hugging me tightly. Then she moved past me towards the toilet. I didn't sleep much that night. I remember my mind racing with all kinds of stuff. What was she sick with? Where was she going? What could I do?

The following morning, as I went to go home, Mrs Watkins hugged me so tight that I thought I would break.

"You're a good boy, Albert," she offered.

She kissed my forehead, with tears in her eyes, then went to the kitchen.

I walked to the shops and met Penny at the takeaway. We were going to the chemist and back home, for some scones and sweet tea. She had been baking all morning.

"What's loo-kee-me-a?" I asked, as we got to the park near the green house.

"It's something to do with the blood, and you get sick from it."

"Okay," I offered, sadly.

"I'm going to have a baby," she told me, with her very next breath.

"Wow, what flavour?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know silly, but I hope it is a pretty little girl. Wouldn't you like to have a little sister, Albert?" she asked me, while opening the front door.

"I guess so," I told her, shrugging my shoulders.

That night I was lying in my bed thinking about my very short life. Why was I here in this house? Why was Penny having a baby? Where was Angela going? Why did I feel sick, and how is it that everyone who is close to me dies? And why was the man they called my father not very nice? And why was I stuck here? And what had happened at the church that

time? Not very important questions to most people, I guess, but to me they mattered.

I was ten years old and thinking that it was all too much.

Then it happened.

## **Twenty-Seven**

The man they call my father vomited all over me. Not the most pleasant experience a ten-year-old child could have, and certainly not one that you forget in hurry. He was overdosing on sleeping pills. He came home drunk, put a Charlie Pride record on the stereo, and as *Me and Bobby McGee* played it seemed as though it was just another night at the green tin house. I noticed that the volume had risen only slightly, rather than the regular blasting we would usually experience. I became a little suspicious.

I stood in my doorway, gazing down the hall, and could smell a burning cigarette. The air in the room reminded me of the local takeaway shop, when all the drunks and their newly acquired girls were looking to get food after a boozy Friday at the pub. There was a can of Fosters Lager sitting on the edge of the wooden lounge chair; it held its place like it knew what had just happened.

The tall, dark-skinned, well-built man with a love heart tattooed on his right arm was dancing around the lounge room as happy as a child with an ice cream. I was confused. Was this really the angry man they called my father?

As I entered from the hallway he told me that he had swallowed a handful of sleeping pills and chased it down with a half bottle of Johnny Walker. It was serapax, he said, thirty-two of them, actually.

He asked me if I was proud of him, then fell to the floor.

I remember landing on my knees and working to cradle his head. I began slapping his

face, softly at first. By the seventh time, I was hitting him hard and screaming, “Wake up!” My hand felt like it had been slammed in a car door.

I called out to Penny and then realised.

She’d gone to her mothers for a ‘rest’, and was going to sleep in her old bed to avoid seeing him when he was this drunken, crazy-angry man.

I remember that I wasn’t angry, just fearful that he would miss his chance to hold his next child. I also remembered that we didn’t have a phone.

‘It’s just never happened because most of the money goes to the pub.’ At least that’s what Penny had told me after a few days of being at the house.

How was it that I was supposed to belong to this man?

I called out for my mother. There was no answer. I screamed out for help, and then left him there. I was running to the neighbour’s and screaming. The man next door answered. I told him what had been said to me, and he ran over to the house. I followed, walking this time.

“Bloody hell,” he yelled, as he ran back out of the house and left me standing there. Staring at the man on the floor.

With the man from next door gone, the person on the floor came to and began rambling stuff that I didn’t know anything about. He kept trying to tell me that he was only showing us that he cared and wanted the best for everyone. He stated such things, as “I’m just a no hope drunk, you’re better off.” “I do love her” or “What the f... does this have to do with you, anyway.”

He began to vomit and in between being sick he kept murmuring of lost girlfriends, and the need to escape from inside his head. He spoke of his mother, and how he was abandoned, “It’s all her fault.” He spoke of a sad life, and how he didn’t want to be chased by his own madness anymore. In just a few moment’s he’d shown a soft side, like never

before, but to me he just looked scared. I felt the need to help him, not from pity, but rather in disbelief, as he continued to vomit. I knew that it was not about blame or anger. Eventually, we were both swimming in his yellow-orange curdling fluid, dotted with red sleeping pills. He repeated the phrase, "I really did love 'er, ya know." He was not one to give out such statements, but twice now he had said it like it was all ok, normal. Then he vomited one last time and passed out.

The next thing I knew an ambulance officer was looking me directly in the eyes, he helped me up, began wiping the vomit, and asked if I would like to sit on a chair. He took my arm and we went to the kitchen. He spoke softly to me about school and footy while he wiped the vomit from my hand. He was calm. It felt like I knew him, and should say something but at the time all I could muster was a nod.

As they took the unconscious man to the ambulance, I sat thinking about Penny and the baby that she was going to have, and how she hadn't been here to see any of this. I was not jealous. I did not cry. I was just grateful that he had not vomited on her too.

That's all I have to say about this.

## **Twenty-Eight**

The man they called my father was due back from the hospital on Monday. It had been so quiet and peaceful while he'd been gone. For a whole week I had been calm.

"Would you like to go to church today, Albert?" Penny asked, as she handed me some toast with vegemite and a cup of warm Milo.

"But won't he find out?" I asked.

"No one he knows will be at church, so he will never find out, but not a word, Albert.

Not one word, okay!"



I nodded in agreement. I had been to church at the sleepover with the Watkins family twice now, so I said yes, thinking we would be going to the same one. But we went to the one out the south. Sitting in the church I watched as the people got to go up and eat some bread, and then the priest drank some wine stuff. He looked different to the other ones that I had seen in the Cathedral. Not so stern or stiff, maybe. I remember thinking that he seemed more relaxed, and the church was different too. I saw the whole ceremony this time. I stayed in my seat and didn't float away anywhere.

When we got home, Penny started talking to me about some of the stuff that had been happening in the house.

"You know its got nothin to do with you, don't cha," she stated, while stirring her cup of tea.

"I guess so," I shrugged, mumbling my answer.

Then she suggested that I write it all down on paper, just like she did, 'to make myself feel better,' she told me, while I sipped my Milo. Penny then handed me a small book with blank pages in it and a new pencil. The book has little footballs on it. I still have it.

"Just in case you feel like it," she offered, smiling.

When the man they called my father returned from the hospital it only took about three days for him to start drinking again.

A man came to visit us once in that first week, to chat about what had happened. I figured out later that he was a social worker, and his role was to assist in the transition from the hospital into a happy and healthy environment. Ironical really, but when I think about that now, it was kind, what he was trying to do, but also funny, because not much was said by any of us as we sat in the smoke filled lounge room with the curtains closed. I didn't know what they wanted to hear, and his girlfriend looked too scared to say anything. The man they called my father just nodded and shrugged his shoulders at what the Social Worker

was saying. He talked about responsibility and care, and then there was some discussion about forgiveness, and also about some therapy for his drinking. I remember he laughed in the social worker's face when he told him that.

"I'm not goin' to no therapy," he stated defiantly.

I was not very old at that point, but I had figured out that if you drink and you were not a very nice person and you get angry, then you perhaps shouldn't drink. So why not just stop. Easy really, just don't buy alcohol.

He laughed even louder at the man when he suggested that it was a good idea to at least think about it, and said, "Like that's ever going to happen."

Penny let them out and offered her thanks.

On the following Sunday, the man they called my father went to the pub and came home in a mood. He started yelling at his girlfriend about how we had been seen at the church by someone, and that he'd told her we weren't supposed to be there.

I was in the kitchen drawing in my art folder and doing homework. The school was putting on an art show for all the parents, and I was finishing off a drawing of the house at Grandma's. Penny said that she was going to take me. I was really enjoying doing the shaded areas of the back of the house. It made me feel connected in some way to my place at Grandma's. I got goose bumps when I thought about running through the bush.

"And you," he said, pointing and walking towards me.

"What's this shit?" he asked, as he grabbed the folder from under my elbows.

"Homework," I told him.

"That won't toughen you up. You're a nancy boy. You need to grow some balls. This is a tough world, not some airy-fairy arty crap of a place. A Tough World! Got it!"

He yelled the last part at me, and backhanded me across the face. I landed really hard on my bottom near the doorway. I was hurt and I was dizzy, but I wasn't going to cry.

There was no way I was going to give him the pleasure of seeing me weak or sad ever again. That much I knew!

I got up and went down the hall. Penny followed, and took me to the bathroom. She told me, “not be scared and not to worry, and that it will be alright one day very soon,” as she wiped the blood from my mouth.

I never said a word. She had almost finished patching me up when I remembered my homework. I went back out to get my books, but they were gone. Looking out the back door, I could see him in the yard lighting matches. I watched as he took my folder and my book, tore them up, and lit the pages, throwing them into the fire-pit, a big metal drum at the back of the house. He yelled back towards the house as I stood in the doorway.

“This will make sure you get a real job, boy, when you grow up. You’re just a wuss, a mummy’s boy.” He laughed as he fed my pages into the flames.

Tears began to roll down my face as his girlfriend took me by the shoulders and led me to my room. That night I cried myself to sleep. I cried hard.

I knew that this man was definitely not my father.

## **Twenty-Nine**

It was a Monday, and a letter from grandma had arrived. I remember the writing very clearly on the front. I had mixed feelings as we opened it. The letter, according to Penny, said that I was able to come back to Grandma’s place because Sally-Pearl was going to collect me at the station on Sunday. I don’t remember the dates, but I do recall feeling full of excitement and very, very happy. That’s what I felt in that moment, happy. The happiest I could ever remember being.

I spent the whole week avoiding the man they called my father. I stayed longer at school, helping the teachers, and then walked home really slowly. I went to my room as

often as I could. I hid around the corner until he went to the pub or to work.

Then that final day arrived.

I remember standing on the platform with Penny, she was chatting to me a little, but not much. We were both nervous. I'd been to this place of nervousness before, so I was feeling really scared, but excited, at the same time. I remembered the last time that I waited for someone to come back on a train.

As the train arrived and I saw Sally-Pearl's face ride past I was overcome with the greatest sense of excitement about being able to go home, sadness at leaving Penny, and also indifference towards the man they call my father, who was at work. I knew I was so ready to leave. But these feelings were all happening at the same time. He didn't even know that I was going with Sally-Pearl on the train today. Penny had decided not to tell him and said it wasn't so much a secret, but more because he'd been away at work, and then when he was home for the last two days he had been drunk the whole time anyway.

"It just never came up," she said, smiling. Penny looked very pleased with herself about that. Even though she was almost ready to have her baby, and I was leaving, and she would be alone for a while, I remember that she still looked happy. Content, almost.

I was calmer as the train travelled along towards my first home and Sally-Pearl chatted about her family and the travelling from Alice and stuff. I didn't feel any pain or sadness when we left, or as I saw the landscape begin to change.

We stopped in Menindee again, but we stayed on the train this time. There wasn't anyone there to greet us. Sally-Pearl told me that her mob was away at some-big-festival-get-to-together thing in Wilcannia, and that she was a little bit sad that she couldn't go. She also told me that grandma had said to be home on a certain day. Which was tomorrow. The train travelled all night and then we caught an early train to Warnervale from the crazy Central Station in the city.

“No visiting anyone! Just be home, mench,” she’d told Sally-Pearl in her letter.

Grandma was waiting on the platform at the little station as we pulled in. I saw her smile at us both, and then she even hugged Sally-Pearl. Normally, she would just shake hands with everyone. She then patted me on the head and said, “Yah yah, big now.”

I was in the middle of Year Five when I returned to the coast to live with grandma and Sally-Pearl. I got to go back to my old school for the rest of the school year and all of Year Six before high school started. I was excited about that. It was different when I entered the gates the following Wednesday.

It was a Friday, and raining really heavily, so our class had to stay inside and write a story about someone famous. The story part could be made up, but it had to be about someone who was well-known and or famous for doing something.

“Is Pro Hart famous Sir?” I asked the teacher.

“Well, yes. I know who he is. Does anyone else in the class know who Pro Hart is?” he asked, opening up his hands and gesturing to the room.

There was a chorus of ‘no’s’, and someone asked who ‘Pop tart’ was, at which everybody laughed. The teacher told the class about him, and said, “Yes, you can write about him if you like, Albert.”

“Thanks, Sir,” I said, smiling.

We had until Friday to finish the story, and then we were going to read them out to the class. Mine went like this.

*It was on a saturday and I ~~can~~ remember that we ~~went~~ were going to a BBQ. It was at the house and ~~set-up~~ organised by the parents of angela and oscar Watkins, my friends and it was at their place in ~~broken~~ Broken hill. I was living ~~out the south~~ in the town before I came home. It was a nice day. All the people were laughing and smiling and sharing stories about their children and each other and about painting and writing. Nothing like ~~I had~~ Id*

ever seen before. They weren't falling over ~~from drinking~~ having to much to drink and there was not one swear word that I can remember.

That was a really great memory from Broken Hill. Standing together getting their photo taken was a group of men who were ~~all~~ artists. They ~~paynted~~ painted all kinds of ~~things scene~~ seen scenes from ~~round the town of~~ around Broken Hill. ~~Their~~ There was a man ~~named~~ whose name was Pro Hart and another called Eric Minchin and some others. One of them his last name was Pickup. They were called the brushmen of the bush. There were five of them ~~I think~~ in total I heard someone say ~~later~~ as we ate all kinds of different foods and people ~~talked~~ chatted at the house. They were there to help sell ~~all these~~ some paintings for money and to then help some ~~kids childer~~ kids who needed to go to hospital. One of them was my friend. Her name was Angela and she was sick. I got to shake hands with all of the brushmen ~~from~~ of the bush.

I can remember that I even had a talk with Pro Hart and he ~~drow~~ drew a ~~drawing~~ picture of a dragonfly in my ~~book of~~ little art book that Penny ~~gave~~ had gotten for me. ~~That~~ which I had been ~~using~~ carrying ~~all the time~~ everywhere.

"There you go cobber," he said to me. It was the best day and also not the best day. My friend Angela was sick that ~~was not~~ wasn't very ~~nice~~ good. But all the ~~men and woman~~ people were there to help her and also some other kids as well who ~~was~~ were sick. So it was good for ~~them~~ that ~~reason reason~~ reason. Do you have to be famous to help someone else? ~~I don't think so~~ I'm not sure if you do, but these men did and my friend got to go to a big hospital in ~~adelaide~~ Adelaide for help so that she could ~~get~~ feel better. I am very ~~grateful~~ great full to them.

The end.

Angela was still there, in Adelaide, when I left on the train to come home. And so was her family. It had all happened so fast that there was no time to say goodbye.

I realised that I missed my very bossy friend, Angela Louise Watkins. I wanted to know how she would be feeling now. It did make me feel giddy, like when I saw a really cool painting or when I read a poem that my mother had told me about. I was also excited that I was going to be able to see her again one day. I knew, in my soul, that I would. I just knew it.

### **Thirty**

It had been very different over the last year or so since I arrived back. Grandma got a new car. Same sort, but newer. It even had foam on the seats, but she still turned it off down hills. Sally-Pearl was reading really well, and I was close to finishing Year Six at Warnervale Primary School.

There were now a few more kids at the school, big ones, little ones, more girls than I remember from before. I was older, so the other boys were not so keen to bully me. I got to play footy for the school and I played on Saturdays as well. We played on the massive oval near the Wyong Leagues Club. Grandma and Sally-Pearl would drive me there. But only Sally-Pearl would watch. Grandma went and did some food shopping, or got hay and oats for the horses.

“Vot is this feet ball, any vays,” she would say every time, on the way to Breen Oval.

“Footy, Grandma. It’s footy!” I would offer.

“Ah, mench,” she’d scoff, waving her hand across the inside of the car.

I loved being able to run around and step and tackle and try to chip over the top of the other players. I also loved that Sally-Pearl would be on the sideline, screaming out for me.

“Run, Albert. Go, my little man,” she would say.

At the end of every game she would tell me, as we walked from the field, ‘You are my little Albert. That’s what I tell all of them people on the side line.’ Then she would hug

me, and we would go and find Grandma. After each game she bought me a can of soft drink.

In term three I got to go to Sydney and play footy with the school. I played fullback. We went to some sports ground at a place called Narrabeen. We lost the first two games and won the last one. It was pretty cool. Some of the other teams had these huge kids playing for them, with curly black hair and dark skin, like Sally-Pearl. I got to hang out with a few of them in between our games.

They were good fun, constantly laughing, and they could run, man could they run. They were fast and strong so it was really hard to tackle them, but I tried my best. They didn't say much, and they spoke a bit like grandma did when they tried to explain anything.

But when they smiled, you knew that everything was going to be okay. It was that kind of smile. We also got to play together in a possibles and probables game. I tried my hardest, and I even scored a try. I was picked for the rep side that was to play in a carnival in the city, where they played all the big games. The SCG. I was stoked.

I was floating through the air on the way home along the bush track that afternoon when I came across the smell of something that had died. It stunk so badly, even worse than Ronald and Clancy in the back of the Valiant. I couldn't see anything, or where it was, but I certainly knew that it was there.

I went and told Grandma, and she said I had to go and see what it was.

"So we can bury it, yah!" she told me as I went in search of the smell from hell. I looked but I couldn't see anything. I must admit, I didn't try very hard. I found the spot where the terrible smell was coming from as I walked home from school the next day, though only because I'd gone chasing the goats through the front paddock for fun.

One of Grandma's horses had died. It was the one that she called 'the guts'. The horse that no one had touched in thirty years, according to Grandma.



“Get da shovels, yah,” she told me, as we stood against the fence near where the horse was. I was trying very hard not to be sick as I held my shirt over my face to hide my nose.

“Are you going to dig a hole for it?” I asked.

“No, no. Yooo!” she told me, pointing aggressively.

“What! That will take forever,” I offered.

“Yah, yah,” she said as she left, telling me again to go and get the shovel. Which I did! I returned to dig the hole and try not to breath in the worst smell ever. I found a soft spot, just away from where the horse was, and started. I’d never buried a horse before, and I had certainly never had to dig such a big hole. Fence post holes, the footings for a water tank, holes for the horse shed and some gardening, but never a hole the size of a car to bury a dead horse. But I dug and I dug and I dug.

I wasn’t very happy when I saw Grandma take off in her tin car. I just hoped it was to get more shovels because the one I was using was sure to wear out.

As I dug, the thought of what the horse may have died from started to take shape. I wondered if it was old age, or did it have a stomach ache. Perhaps it died of a broken heart because no one had ever touched it. A story started to form in my mind.

By that stage I was sweating and beginning to get tired and had sat down to rest when I first heard it. It was a slow hum and all of a sudden, this loud rattle of an engine was right next to the fence. In the drivers seat was Bert, and on the back was grandma riding it, the tractor, like a skateboard or surfboard. I started to laugh and just couldn’t stop. As they came into paddock and near the hole I had been digging, Grandma stepped off and smiled.

“Vot?” she asked, with her hands open and a shrug of her shoulders.

I watched as Bert moved the dirt that I had dug to form a large hole that looked like the bank of a dam, and then began to push the dead horse into it. I was leaning on the shovel as I saw grandma cry, for the first time in my whole life. I don’t ever remember seeing her

show any sign of being sad. Angry, yes. Grumpy, most certainly. But crying, wow, that definitely was a new one! The tears were small but still, they were there.

I made a cross out of branches, and we put a white hanky that had flowers in the corner at the top of the middle piece. Sally-Pearl baked a big cake and we ate that and drank sweet lemon tea under our tree, in memory of the horse that had never been touched.

The next morning, Grandma told us that she wanted to build another house because some relatives from Germany were coming over to visit us next year. And she didn't think they would want to stay in the house with us, so she wanted to build a cottage in the trees to the front of the main building.

"You vill help, yah," she told me over the tea with honey and vegemite toast that Sally-Pearl had made for us all.

"Why do you need any more houses? Isn't two enough?" I asked.

"No! It vill be better with two, yah," she stated.

My Grandmother had plans, and when that was the case she was very determined. I always liked that about her. The sense that she had to finish something, and it had to be done properly. It was just that she always had new projects, new things that I had to work on. New houses or gutters or tiles for the front verandah or a new shed for the goats. The crazy animals never went into it anyway, they just stood in the rain, sheltering against a tree or huddled together out in the open paddock. I have never been able to understand why they do that.

"Germans, that is how vee do things. The right way, yah," she told me, as we started to dig the holes to put in some posts to mark out the shape and where the footings for the new house were to be.

That's when Grandma told me the other news. "When you are going back to schools

from holiday next year, you vill go to Bathurst. Like your mother says, yah,” she offered, without changing her face or her actions.

Then she went back to digging.

“What?” I asked, putting down the crowbar. “Wadya mean, Bathurst?”

“The school with da arts stuff. You have to go there,” she told me again, as she put the shovel down and picked up the crowbar.

“What! When did this happen?” I asked her, now very annoyed.

“You vill go. Dat is it,” she grunted, and then walked away to the next hole.

I threw the shovel hard at the side fence and went into the bush.

I was upset and sat there for hours. On my way back to the house, I realised that sometimes things are things, and that life is just what it’s meant to be.

No more explanation than that.

### **Thirty-One**

So this was to become my third memory of what a ‘home’ was meant to be.

I wasn’t sad. I did not cry. I did try to give grandma a hug as I went to get on the train, but she shook my hand instead and stepped back. Sally-Pearl travelled with me as far as Lithgow, and then the school dorm master picked me up in a car that looked like a little bus.

I found out, much later that it was a VW Kombi van. It was really strange looking. It was orange, not like the colour of the desert, but more like the flesh of a peach. The paint was peeling off, and there were a few dints on the front doors as well. As we travelled to Bathurst, the dorm master Brother Bill began asking me questions, ‘What did I do for interests? Did I play any sport, or perhaps an instrument?’ And he also told me that I had to be confirmed, whatever that meant, but that it would need to be done at a later time.

“Not too much later, young man, because God needs you to be true to him, and your fellow Catholics,” he told me, as we passed through a place called Meadow Flat.

I nodded in agreement, not sure how to respond. Then he offered, “A very wise man once said that we are only chosen, to the extent that we choose. I’m certain one, day Albert Dennis Braun, that you will come to know this.”

We didn’t speak much at all after that, until we reached the school.

As we turned the corner into Brilliant Street, the place that was to be my new home came upon me like a giant castle, or like something out of a nursery rhyme. The points at the top of the main building were silver and shiny, and they had little windows at the centre, that looked like someone was watching out from them. Just like the big towers in the stories my mother used to read to me. The building was a little scary, I must say. Not in a way that stopped you going in, but more about the way you were supposed to act.

On arrival I was told to go to mass straight away. The church, or chapel as the dorm master called it, reminded me of the church in Broken Hill that I went to with Penny.

“Cold and smooth, dark and mysterious, then they have to eat some bread, and then the priest fella drinks some wine stuff”, she had told me, as we sat waiting for the start.

“Very exciting!” I remember her stating, as we walked home that day.

There weren’t many adults in the chapel and I felt a kind of nervousness as I sat with some other boys and listened to the priest give his talk. The principal stood up and spoke as well. He welcomed all the new students who were going to be boarding there, and asked us to walk up to the front and show the other boarders, the priest, a teacher and the dorm master who we were. I stood next to a big dark kid. He looked like one of the kids we’d played footy against last year, at the school carnival. He smiled and nodded at me with a big grin, and his frizzy hair bounced around and looked a lot like really shiny steel wool, only black.

This frizzy haired dark kid was also in my dorm room, and he still hadn't spoken one word as we went and lined up for dinner. I wasn't sure if he was following me, or whether he was as nervous as I was, but we ended up sitting together and not speaking all through dinner. He just smiled the whole time. I remember that his teeth were so white. Then when we were led to the rooms by the dorm master, he walked next to me. As we went to go our separate ways, he held my shoulder and pointed to the emblem on his jumper, which said Tonga, and had a white bird on it with something in its mouth. He smiled again with his big white teeth, and slapped me on the back.

I lay awake that first night, not scared, but more nervous than anything. I wondered what was going to be happening in the next few weeks, and when was it that we could play some sport. As I fell asleep, my final thought was of Sally-Pearl, and whether she had stopped crying yet. I hoped she had. I also realised how much I missed my family.

We had two full days before school officially started, and on the first day we got to go swimming in the pool that the school had. I remember very clearly how awestruck I was about the fact that school had its very own pool. Imagine that, our own pool, and you could even see it from the dorm room windows. The frizzy haired dark kid from Tonga didn't swim with us. He sat on the edge, throwing a footy in the air by himself. None of the teachers tried to make him get in either. But me, I was so keen. I'd only ever gone swimming in the dam at Grandma's and in the ocean and in the bath when I was in Broken Hill. I felt like a king, and remember how good it was to have a huge clear pool with its own diving board, and even some stands across the lanes to jump off.

On the second day, a group of us went to town and had hot chips with vinegar and chicken salt at a park in the centre of town. The chips were wrapped in newspaper. The park had ducks and a pond and was named after a doctor. I know this because Brother Bill gave

us a full description of the place as we sat down for lunch. We got to play a game of touch footy after lunch.

We'd been at school about a week, when some of the Year Eight boys surrounded me and started to push me around, and one spat near me. I couldn't think of any reason why, because I hadn't seen any of them before. Maybe it was just because I was sitting by myself that day. The frizzy haired Tongan boy was on detention because he didn't answer the teacher when he asked him a question about the planets. He had to stay in at lunch to do lines in his science book.

"What's ya name?" asked one boy who had very hairy legs.

"Albert Dennis Braun," I told him, confidently.

"What kind of a name is Braun, anyway?"

"You a poof?" added another boy, laughing.

"It's German," I offered, thinking to myself, I'm outnumbered here. A quick count of heads told me there was seven of them.

"Are you from Germany? You aren't even Australian," added another boy who had blonde hair that was cut up really high at the back, but long at the front. He stepped in close and told me to stand up, to see how tall I was. I said no, and then one of the other boys grabbed me from behind and lifted me up, as hairy legs punched me fair in the stomach.

I couldn't breathe, as the tears started to come to my eyes. I held them in, as best I could, and then tried to struggle free. But they had me. Just as I thought I was done for, someone came from behind the group, and started punching wildly at the Year Eight boys. There were arms and legs going everywhere, and then all of a sudden there were two of us, and only three of them. I struggled free from the grip of one of the bullies and began kicking out at him. The frizzy haired Tongan boy was punching the hairy legged one in the face. All of a sudden a third person who was now apparently on our side screamed out,

“long live the swamp donkey,” and leapt into the group, knocking over the two bullies as the other ones went running across the playground. Then the Tongan boy let go of hairy legs, and he joined them as they limped and rubbed their heads, disappearing around the corner.

“No one, and I mean no one, should mess with the Swamp Donkey,” the new person said, as he sat down next us. I looked over and the frizzy haired Tongan boy had this big grin on his face.

“Hey man, I’m Swamp,” he said, as he put out his hand for me to shake.

“Albert,” I said, accepting his firm grip and rubbing my face.

“I know man. I was told by the arts teacher to keep an eye out on the new kids,” he said.

“My mum works here as well, and she told me to check for any trouble in the playground. The Swamp is on it, I told her.” He smiled and asked what was the name of the other member of what he was now calling “our fight club crew.”

I shrugged my shoulders and said, “I dunno, but I think he’s from Tonga.”

He put his hand to his chin, rubbing it, and creating a pose that made him look as though he was in deep thought.

“Frizzy King of Tonga! That’s what we’ll call him,” he offered.

“Righto, then,” I agreed.

“You are now known as Frizzy, the King of Tonga,” Swamp told him loudly, while standing in front of us, with his hands open and his arms outstretched.

“Is good!” The frizzy haired, dark skinned Tongan boy told us as he smiled, stood, and slapped me on the back. It felt like I had been hit by Muhammad Ali’s short over hand right, like the one he gave Sonny Liston in 1965. I knew about that punch, because I’d seen a photo in the primary school library, when we were looking for sporting heroes to draw

and paint. The teacher explained the fight, and the rivalry, to the whole class. I was a fan from that moment on.

So that's how I first met my best friends, and how I came to be in a group with a self-confessed superhero named Swamp Donkey, and a frizzy haired Tongan boy who didn't speak all that much. I remember it felt like I'd arrived somewhere, like I belonged again. It reminded me of the time at the beach, when the boy with a squashed peach for a nose was nasty to Sally-Pearl, or the time that I stood up for Penny. Only this time, it was me and my new friends that had stood up for each other and bought down a scurvy elephant and his crew.

### **Thirty-Two**

During our religion class the next day, Swamp decided to tell me the real story, well his version of the real story, about our newfound friend, Frizzy, the King of Tonga.

"My mum told me that apparently all his family worked in the orchards, and on the farms, in places like Forbes and Young and Mudgee as well, to pay for school. He had a chance to go to university in Canberra and play rugby union for Australia, just like some of the other boys that had gone to this school. And that he didn't speak much because he just doesn't."

"According to the priest, he has to be confirmed like you as well," he added.

"Does that mean that we'll get to do it together?" I asked, thinking out loud.

It did.

And that was when I found out his name. They read it out at the first lesson for confirmation.

His full name was Beni Sione Fissilose.

We were standing with two other boys and some teachers when they read out his



name. Each of us who were being confirmed also had what the priest called a sponsor. Their role was to help us find God and Jesus and the inner spirit that was supposedly floating around inside us. I remember Frizzy laughing when the priest offered us this speech. I tried so hard not to smile that my face hurt. I also remember that I liked his name. It had a real sense of meaning to it. Swamp agreed, when I told him about it in Geography.

It was about a week later, and we were at the canteen, when a Year Nine boy called out to Frizzy,

“Hey fizzle-dick, what kind of a middle name is Lee-o-nee, anyways! Leeonee, Leeonee, Leeonee.” He chanted. He was a big kid and had a massive head.

Frizzy smiled at me, stood up, grabbed his milk carton and walked over to the group.

He stopped at the boy who had called out.

“Not nice words. I am Frizzy. Okay,” he said to him, as he put his open milk carton down on their table and held the boy by the ears, shaking his very large head really hard. Then he stepped back and tipped the entire contents of his milk carton over his head, walked back to us and sat down to eat his lunch, like nothing had happened. The boy who had called out was not liked by many of the other boys because he was always making trouble, and he had a reputation for starting fights, and then letting others fight them for him. He was the older brother of the boy that had tried to bully me a while ago. He didn’t react that day and I think by the look he had on his face, that he was really scared. No one at our table said a word, we just all smiled and went about eating lunch.

Swamp and I went on calling him Frizzy because he seemed to like it better, and I knew that I wasn’t going to argue with him about anything, that was for sure!

We also knew that he was our friend.

The boy with the huge head, who was now known as Buttermilk, copped another scare later that week when we all lined up for footy practice and he was to be opposite

Frizzy for tackling. I smiled to myself as he was thumped every time he got the ball, and even when he didn't have it he seemed to get smashed.

Even the Year Nine students had a certain respect for Frizzy. He was so tough on the field and smashed everyone when we had a practice game against them. I was fast and liked to tackle, but wow, this guy could play. Not only did he smash everyone during tackling, but he would also step and weave and run over the top of all the other boys when we had the ball. It was just like I imagined the players in Sydney would do, but in the other game. Not this one, that they said was played in heaven. Whatever that meant.

Footy was a big part of school at Stannies, as were other sports like cricket and tennis and swimming. As well as this, the school and Bathurst also had a long and proud tradition of producing artists, just like mum had told me. According to Mister Wetherston, our very old and wrinkled head art teacher, "this was in many forms across the artistic realm."

"These include such icons as the writer John O'Grady, and did you know that the painter Brett Whiteley went to Scots School. Not that we talk about that here," he offered, as we were returning from sport on one Thursday afternoon.

"There was also an Albert someone, who went to this very school as well, many, many years ago. However, I am always at a loss to remember his last name. I am quite certain he painted abstracts. At any rate, this proud and traditional educational facility is not only strong in the area of sporting achievements, we're also very proud of our contribution to all of the arts," he stated, as he often did. I smiled to myself, and wondered who that Albert might be.

"How would we find something like that out, Sir?" I asked, as we entered the Great Hall for assembly.

"It was a very long time ago, young man, and I am certain that all those papers would be put away somewhere. Somewhere very dusty," he offered, walking to the stage.

I was left standing there alone thinking to myself, ‘old people always do that. They say something and then they just leave it at that. No answer, or at least no complete answer anyway.’ It reminded me of how my Grandmother had been the queen of not giving a worded response, as I took my seat and waited for the school prayer.

### **Thirty-Three**

I was sitting in religion and I still couldn’t get a handle on why it was that I had to be a part of all this confirmation stuff and the ceremony, and “the changing of Christian understandings,” as the priest had put it, last week at chapel. We had to meet twice a week and discuss the process that we were going through, and we also had to study a saint and choose a name that suited us or that we felt we deserved. Unfortunately for me, Father Paul didn’t agree with my choice of the sixth century Irish Saint Barry, and told me “to be more applied in my choices.”

“The Saint must speak to you, young man,” he told me when I asked for the second time.

“This is not just about a name, Braun,” he added, sternly.

I thought it was very funny that there would actually be a saint named Barry. But I chose another one that was more agreeable to him, and I left it at that.

It was a Tuesday and we were in geography, with the teacher explaining the European countries and where we, in Australia, were placed as a nation. I was bored and didn’t want to be there. So the next best option was the toilet.

“Sir,” I asked, at the same time as putting up my hand. “May I go to the toilet, please?”

“You can’t be serious. Are you from Syria or somewhere, Braun? We just had lunch,” he bellowed at me.

“No, Sir. I am German, actually. Well, at least my family is. Well, some of them anyway. And I forgot to go at lunch, Sir, because we had training, Sir,” I offered.

“Hurry up,” he told me firmly, pointing to the door.

As I was on my way to the toilet, I saw a group of boys sneaking into the Great Hall. They looked like seniors, but I couldn’t tell for sure, and they were carrying pillowcases that looked like they had tinned fruit in them or something. I wondered what could be on in the hall, but thought no more of it, until the entire school was called for a special assembly. As we entered, there up on the main wall was an outlined picture of a huge penis and balls. It was painted in pink, and had white spots that were supposed to be hairs. It wasn’t very creative, and all the teachers certainly didn’t find it as funny as we did.

Up on the stage, the principal was looking like someone had stolen all his lollies, his face was so stern. Also on the stage was a group of very scared looking boys, and some other adults who I didn’t recognise. The principal stood, walked over to the microphone, cleared his throat and began. He was holding a long thin piece of yellow wood.

“I have been in education for almost thirty years and never once, and I mean, never before, have I come across such a lowly act as the one you see before you today.” He yelled this at everyone sitting in the hall, his face red, as he gestured for the group to come towards him.

“This group are a disgrace to this school, and an embarrassment to themselves and their families, and this is what happens to those who sin like this.”

He lined the boys up behind each other and made them hold out their hands, and each student then walked towards him when called.

“The cane for you, young man,” the principal bellowed, as each student on that stage was given six hits to each of their hands with the long stick. The cuts they were called. At least that’s what we knew them as, because sometimes you were cut on the hand.

The whole assembly was silent the entire time. All I heard was the swoosh of that cane, and the whacking sound of it hitting the hand of each boy. Two of them were crying by the third hit. They were all then told to leave the school grounds with their parents, and not to return until they were summoned. I heard also that one of them was even going to be expelled. It was the stuff of legends. At least that's what Swamp reckoned, when we were finally allowed to go home that afternoon.

"Legend, I tell ya," he offered, as he walked to the bus stop.

"Nah, man, that's just a cheap shot," I told him as he walked away.

All I could think about was what a crappy picture it was. I guess God did work in mysterious ways after all, because the boy who was expelled was the would-be bully from Year Nine, Buttermilk, the scurvy elephant.

I laughed really hard when Swamp told me that on the Monday, while we ate Tongan sweet cakes that Frizzy's aunty had dropped off for him.

"These are awesome, Frizz," I told him.

"Yeah, man, yum!" offered Swamp.

Frizzy sat up, smiled, then filled his mouth with the sweet fried dough.

That same day I received a letter from Grandma and Sally-Pearl. They spoke in the letter about how the dogs were, and the tree, and about the neighbours who had lit a campfire and burnt all the bush around the house. It didn't go near our home, but it burnt most of the bush close by, according to grandma. The new building was also coming along well, and they were looking forward to me coming home in the holidays to help put the tin on the roof. Some photos came inside the envelope as well. They were of me with Sally-Pearl and my mother, the day we went to the Opera House and also a postcard of a Picasso painting that they had found in one of mum's drawers, and some photo prints of a Pro Hart painting as well. She'd held onto them over the years, and in one of the photos we were at

an art gallery somewhere. I'm not sure I remember going there that time. And I couldn't identify the place.

"Sir, do you know where this gallery is? I asked Mister Percival in our next art class.

"Not sure, young Braun. It could be that it is in the city. It looks a lot like the front area of the art gallery of New South Wales, I think," he offered while scanning the picture.

"That is you? And who is with you?" he asked, gently.

"That's my mother, Sir. And the lady with the long hair is Sally-Pearl. She's my other Mum," I told him.

"Hmmm," he offered, walking back to his desk.

As I sat on my bed later that day, looking at the photos, and from my own memories I began trying to piece together an understanding of my life, and of where I was placed in this world. I just wanted to play footy and run in the bush or ride a bike. But it seemed that every time I turned around there, was some form of art or writing or a creative avenue that was being placed onto my path. It was like the world had other plans for me. I was beginning to really feel that I couldn't escape it. But I wasn't entirely sure what it was that was happening.

Around that same time, I'm fairly certain it was the following Tuesday, a letter and a photo arrived from the girlfriend of the man they called my father. It read:

*Dear Albert,*

*How are you? Well, I hope. I am going pretty good and guess what? Go on guess. Ok, I will tell you then. You now have a sister.*

*Her name is Bianca Rose. She looks a little bit like you and mostly like me. And even though she is your half-sister, really she is your true sister in my eyes and I hope in yours as well. Her eyes glow the most amazing blue and she smiles all the time. I showed her a photo of you last week and she grinned right across her whole face. I think she really likes you.*

*The rain has finally started to come back. Thank goodness we are now nearly out of the drought. Everything was so dry for so long. Only thing is we now have the craziest mouse plague going on. I have taken to putting cheese and bread into big barrels of water and hoping that the mice will fall in. I really don't want to drown them but they're just everywhere and so many.*

*The neighbours have been putting petrol into big drums and then scooping all the mice out and burning them. It stinks really really bad when they do that. I have also had to put steel wool in all the corners and spaces of the green tin house so that the mice can't get into the walls. It took me nearly two days to do the whole house. So how is school and stuff? Are you liking it there on the coast? Anyway we miss you and hope you are having a nice time.*

*Love always Penny and your new little sister Bianca Rose.*

Straight away, I started to write her a letter. But it wasn't working like I wanted it to, so I decided to do a drawing of something for her instead. It was a portrait of her face from when I remember her being the happiest. It was the day that she told me she was going to have a baby, and the time when we had been to church and were walking home. I knew she would like it. I remember wondering what she would look like being so happy to have a baby now. I really wanted to see her face at some point, to see if she was smiling. I was sitting in the lunch area re-reading the letter, when the Frizzy King of Tonga sat down next to me and told me, in his own way, about how the other boys had been farting in class and in his dorm room area.

"Stink, stink bad! In da Maths class," he said.

Swamp joined us, and a discussion about farts took place. The different types, as in smell and sound and force, and I then told them both the story about Ronald and Clancy in the back of the Valiant, and about the nun in Wilcannia, Sister Flo.

The details are still a little sketchy, but out of this discussion we ended up with a game we called 'fart tennis'. Swamp came to school the next day with the rules outlined in his Math's book. He began to read them out loud to Frizzy and I.

"Let me, the Swamp man, explain the rules of fart tennis to you, The Frizzy King of Tonga, and to you, Albert, the artist from Germany," he offered.

"Play will begin at the ringing of the bell for the start of Maths. Either player can start the game, obviously by farting. The other person has about one to three minutes to respond. This can vary due to the server possibly having a follow up shot in the firing chamber. The scoring is the same as normal tennis, which includes deuce."

He continued, as we all laughed.

"The fart has to be audible. Even if the person next to you is gagging for air, it still has to be heard by the opposition player. A follow through is immediate disqualification, however I think this may well happen on some occasions, but the farter might not move or admit to it, and the other person, I am certain, will not want to check," added Swamp.

After we recovered from our laughing fit, we discussed the rules further, and any questions that anyone may have had were then asked.

"Okay, It's settled then," I stated, and Frizzy nodded as we all agreed to the rules and to the new challenge that lay before us.

I wish I had thought a bit more about my agreement with my friends, because when I sat down in Maths on Monday morning early in second term, the King of Tonga farted and so it was his serve. Unfortunately for me, I was sitting directly behind him and received the full force. I couldn't breathe.



I was gasping for air when the teacher decided to enter the room, and took a whiff. He immediately assumed that I had done it, because of the lack of colour in my face, or perhaps because I was trying not to be sick. Either way, it was off to the office for the first time. I wasn't happy at all, mainly because I couldn't even return serve. I guess Frizzy won that point.

The next time I visited the office was after we went to the river and got caught. Swamp and I got the cane for ditching school and swimming in the Macquarie River and for playing footy in Peace Park without permission. We got two cuts on each hand.

"But I am the Swamp Donkey. That's what I do, I swim!" he offered to his mum as they walked to the car.

"I do not care if you think you are the bloody wonder woman, young man. You will not be running off anywhere during school hours. Do you understand me?" she yelled and shook her pointing finger into his face as they walked away.

"Swamp man is no wonder woman! And I told her that too," he offered at school the next day.

I also got a week's detention that time because I confessed it was my grand idea to go to the river instead of going to cricket at the cycling track near Carrington Park. Our ovals at school were being repaired so we had to do sport down town. I thought we could make it back to school on time and no one would notice we were gone.

That didn't happen. Swamp reckons someone doxed us in to the Year Coordinator. But I guess it didn't matter either way, we still got caught out. I also got kitchen duty, which I didn't mind so much, because all you did was scrape and stack plates and you got free food most times as well. The cook and the other kitchen staff always felt sorry for the boys on detention who were boarders. That time I got extra biscuits for supper. They

reminded me of the ones my mum used to make with the horse oats in them.

Sweet and chewy, just like I remembered.

### **Thirty-Four**

We'd been able to stay low and out of trouble for a while, and we were now starting to get somewhere with our school studies and other activities. Frizzy had been selected for the NSW Schools Rugby team and was training the house down. I went to train with him when I could. He was becoming a very good kicker as well, and our dorm had about ten footies so we could kick end to end and stuff, as well as practice shots at goal from all over the park. He was good. Fast. Big. Strong. I knew he would do well at the carnival in Brisbane. Swamp was still a self-proclaimed superhero, and had been elected to the School representative council for student playground welfare.

"Man, I'm gonna change the way this school views harassment in the playground. I will be famous for this, you watch," he told us as we walked to footy training with Frizzy.

"Funny boy, Swamp," chuckled Frizzy.

"You'll be right, man. It's the perfect role for you," I offered sarcastically. But it actually was. It suited him to a tee.

"Hey, how is that artwork going for the art competition next term?" asked Swamp.

"Not sure, man. I want to do it but I'm also not that keen. What if it's crap, and everyone tells me that," I offered sounding very self-defeatist.

"Are you from Syria? You cannot possibly be serious. You crazy skinny little half German white boy from the coast! How dare you. That has to be the stupidest thing you have ever said, man. I, the Swamp Donkey, am outraged that you, Albert the German, would even for one moment suggest that you have absolutely no talent in the area of art. Outraged! And it is about time you got over feeling sorry for yourself and had a go. A real

go!” He yelled the last part, and stormed off across the quad, leaving Frizzy and I standing there looking at each other. I was uncertain about what had just happened.

“Is true,” said Frizzy, as he raised his shoulders and tilted his head to one side.

We walked up to the oval for some training and I was lost in what my friends had said as we began footy training.

The biggest kid there wasn’t Frizzy, but a new kid from Dubbo, who was very round and taller than even Frizzy, and he played in the front row.

The first fifteen had nicknamed him ‘Donut’. When he got the ball on the next play, I ran at him as fast and as hard as I could. I flew through the air and landed somewhere near his shoulders. He bounced back, landing on his bottom, and lost the ball at the same time. I grabbed the ball and ran straight for the try line. I was so angry when I started to run, but as I scored under the posts, and then went back to set up for Frizzy to kick off, I was smiling and winked at my mate. I knew I was on a mission. This was about all of me. My life, and those that I cared for, this was my mission.

A calling. I felt it in all of my body like a fire. Something in the air changed that day. It changed for Swamp. It changed for the other kids there, and it certainly changed for me.

I, Albert Dennis Braun, changed that day.

It was a moment. And I am very grateful to my friends for their honesty.

Another one of these ‘moments’ occurred that same week. It was to do with religion, and the idea of confirmation. According to the research we’d done in the library, confirmation wasn’t just about thinking that God existed, and then saying it was true.

“Hey, listen to this Alby,” Swamp told me, as we were working on our projects for religion in the library.

“Apparently the age of discretion, also known as the age of reason, is defined by the Catholic Church as the name given to that period of human life at which persons are

deemed to begin to be morally responsible. But according to this, when it comes to Confirmation, the law gives great power to the members of the church who are free to determine that a later age is more suitable for receiving the sacrament. And, that after the second Vatican Council, it has been more appropriate for those who were becoming Catholics to receive Confirmation later. It happens between the Year Six and Year Ten,” Swamp told me, as he rubbed his eyes and felt the side of head, like he was in pain.

“Wow. There’s more to this than I thought. I don’t remember going through any of that stuff at all,” he stated.

“Yeah, but I am because they say I should. Now, that’s weird. And what does morally responsible mean anyways?” I added.

“I wonder how Frizzy feels about it all?” he asked.

“Not sure, man. He wouldn’t say much anyways. We just need to be there to help him out I reckon.”

“That’s for sure. The Swamp is on it.”

It was a Thursday, and I was sitting on the train to go home. I had to travel by myself this time because Sally-Pearl had to stay and help Grandma with the house that day.

According to Grandma, I was big enough to figure it out on my own by now. So I was dropped off at Lithgow Station, and boarded the train bound for Central Station.

I was packing it. That’s the only way to explain the feelings I had. They weren’t like nervous football butterflies, or how I felt when the creative took over in me. Like, oops, this is really a crazy place, and where do you go when you have an issue, and why is that dude wearing a metal bucket on his head and playing the drums in only his underpants at the bottom of the main stairs. Wow, was I glad to get on the train and into a seat.

As I waited in carriage 808 for the rolling metallic beast to head off so I could get home, and away from the crazy place they call the city, I was gazing down the aisle as the

passengers finished boarding, looking them over as well as listening to their conversations. There was a young girl sitting with her father. I remember that she was pretty, with curly hair that shuffled around her shoulders as the train pulled out and bumped along the eastern line to the coast. Probably in Year Eight or Year Nine. I also remember that her look was deceiving, because her smile disappeared when she turned towards her Dad. I watched these two people who sat in the middle row of seats in cabin three, and listened in amazement as this mild looking girl began screaming at the man across from her.

She was telling him the story about how she knows what it means to be fourteen. “I am fourteen, you idiot,” she screamed. Then she offered him the wisdom that a tattoo is an expression of the place to which she chooses to take her life, and you will just have to put up with it. She also reminded him that he wouldn’t know what it was like to be a girl today anyways, “So just shut up and get out of my face,” she yelled. I wondered to myself how this girl got away with screaming at her parent like that. I would have been stoked just to know what it meant to even have a real father around.

“Where is the little girl from Year Two who would run to her daddy’s arms after school, or wrap herself around her mother’s neck while having her hair dried after her big bath is finished?” That’s what my mother would have whispered into my ear if she had seen the entire goings on. I also noticed that a few of the other travellers seemed uncomfortable with the screaming. The girl noticed this and gave everyone a look that would have spooked even the most hardened of underworld criminals, like those from the crime stories I read with Swamp sometimes at the library.

Amongst the other passengers in the carriage was a group of railway workers. They were seated in rows five and six. They were wearing grease-covered rail uniforms and they smelt of fuel. One was telling the story of how he got his girlfriend pregnant and how he doesn’t want her to have the baby. He was telling his mates that she was always so mean to

him.

“The stupid dumb bitch!” I then heard him tell the group he was certain, but didn’t know how to prove it, that she had tricked him.

“Like a shadow,” he said. “A shadow from my past, that will follow me around for the rest of my days! What am I gonna do?”

It reminded me of a story that Father Paul had told me once. He said that when a person makes an attempt to lose their past, they become more aware of the qualities and impulses plainly seen in others. He told me that laziness, sloppiness, cowardice or love of money, things and objects were cast in your past shadow.

I was confused about what he said for a long time. I think, at times, I still am a little bit. But back then, on that train listening to the father-to-be and his dramas, I thought maybe he needed to talk to Father Paul about his shadows.

I continued to gaze around the carriage. In row four I saw a figure that looked like an accountant (or ‘Counting Mutant’, as my Mum used to call them). I remember he was working on a set of sheets in his lap. And in row seven a very odd-looking tourist group, who must have been headed to the beach, were talking about the weather. They looked more like a collection of very poorly disguised secret agents, trying to conceal their identity with their huge straw hats, zinc creamed noses and two very large blow up jungle creatures, which I might add, were perched ever so gracefully on the seats opposite them. I remember that they seemed very pleased with their lot.

The most interesting passenger sat across the aisle from where the secret agents were seated. She was a small, olive-skinned nun in a light-blue habit and was reading a book. I had never seen a nun on a train before. In fact, I don’t think I’d ever seen a nun outside of school. She looked at me, smiled, and went back to her reading. I couldn’t see the book’s cover, so I wondered what she might have been reading. It didn’t look like a bible. I thought

to myself that this scene was only something that you might ever see in the movies. We came to a halt somewhere along the way to my grandma's. It felt like the halfway point. We were stopped on the eastern line, as a train shipping livestock passed us. Bert used to call them 'pig palaces or cow cages'. I always laughed at his funny names for things, and imagined I could hear the animals talking to me. They were asking me things like: "Where are we going? Will we be there soon, and what happened to all the grass and water we were allowed to enjoy this morning? Oh, and Daisy Bell just pooped all over my leg, and this is not what I had planned for today at all! What is going on?"

As we pulled away, leaving the cow cage behind, I pretended I was on the Indian Pacific heading to Broken Hill or to Adelaide to find a long lost relative. What would their name be? Would they like me, or could it be that they preferred a little girl and her plaits? Or, maybe, just maybe, they loved the footy and would take me to see all the stars jump, run and leap. I looked up to notice that the Counting Mutant was still writing into his lap. He was a thin man, his eyes not completely darkened, but he looked very sad.

A 'half-lived soul' is what Brother Bill would have called him. He looked like he believed that this was a long black snake (a fully loaded coal train) taking him to a darker place to be fuel for the warmth of others. He tapped at his paper lap with a pen. As the girl grunted, and moaned at her lot in life, I sat smiling to myself at the strangeness of a train ride to Warnervale station, and was curious as to whether this was an everyday occurrence for these people. It seemed like it. But more importantly, I wondered what it was that a quiet, tanned, kind-looking Nun reads on the train to Grandma's?

I was glad that the holidays were here. I needed to go running in the bush and to put my feet run in the sand. I was glad to see Grandma and Sally-Pearl, but I must say that I wasn't all that keen on getting up on the roof to put sheets of tin on. That was for sure. I

wanted to know what Sally-Pearl thought about all this religion stuff as well. I was keen to ask her. I had been home for a few days when I got the opportunity.

“My people have the dreaming. It’s what we do. We tell stories and then share them in the dreaming,” she told me.

“I’m just not sure what I’m supposed to be feeling or seeing or experiencing. It makes sense one day, and then the next it feels like I have no idea at all.” I told her, frustrated.

“You have to be you, Albert. You just have to be yourself, ok. That’s it!”

When Sally-Pearl told me this, she held my hand and looked me directly in the eyes. In that moment, I knew that I was going to be fine, because she knew it. Later that day, I found some paper, pencils and a new journal on my bed. The note said, ‘To my little Albert Luv Sally-Pearl’.

I felt so proud. She had been learning to write since we met and I had always tried to help. But since I’d left, we hadn’t been able to do as much. She told me later that it was hard doing it by herself, but that she would keep trying.

It was a Sunday, and I was travelling back from the coast after the school holidays, having helped put the roof on. Brother Bill was going to pick me up again from Lithgow Station. This time there was also another boy on the platform waiting. He looked nervous. Nervous like I would get in the city, when all the chaos took over, and you were pushed and shoved to go in certain places, and to not feel you were your own director. Only this was the opposite. It was like he had too much room to move and wasn’t sure about the space outside of the density of a big city. I remember it very clearly. He had a badge of the Parramatta footy team attached to his tie, and he was eating cheese and crackers and drinking plain milk from a small carton with a straw. So right from the start, I had a small dislike for him. Not that I don’t like cheese, crackers and milk, it was more that Parramatta were just not my team at all. I was thinking about the grand final from a few years ago when Brother Bill



arrived to pick us up.

“Hello, young Albert, and how are you going today,” he offered.

“I’m going pretty good, thank you Brother. How are you, and how is God today?” I asked, cheekily.

“He is perfect, young man and waiting for you to decide what it is you will be doing this term. He asked me just the other day how you were, and I told him you were a work in progress, and that you are still gaining the ability to express yourself in so very many ways,” he offered with a smile on his face.

“So, you can honestly tell me God knows what I’m doing, even if I’m still unsure?”

“Absolutely, young man. The fact of the matter is that it’s already written. You are just living it out, the only way you currently know how. God has a plan for you, young man. A big plan,” he stated, looking me straight in the eye.

“And you must be Andrew,” he asked the boy with the Parramatta badge.

“That is right. I am. But, actually it’s Andrew Peters-Pym,” he stated, as he pushed his arm out in a jerking manner to shake hands.

“Okay. Andrew Peters-Pym it is then.”

We all piled into the old orange Kombi. I stayed quiet for the drive back to school, reflecting on what Brother Bill had said about your life being written.

### **Thirty-Five**

It was back to Stannies for another term, and this time we had an extra day before we were to go back to classes. I got permission from the dorm master to visit with Swamp, and so did Frizzy.

We went down to the river. Frizzy brought some boiled Tongan potato and baked bananas for us all. As well as sweet Tongan cakes with pineapple in them, that looked like deep-fried tennis balls.

We got talking about the term. According to my superhero friend, we were going on some trip with the school. Swamp, who also wanted to grow some dreadlocks, told us this as we skimmed rocks across the river. Frizzy, who was going away with the NSW Catholic schools rugby team next week, was also really excited about being able to go on the excursion. It was in week four, and we were going to Canberra. According to the note, the school was taking all of the art students from our year on a cultural tour. We were going to see some painting called 'Blue Poles'. It was the one that I remember my mother and Grandma arguing about at the dinner table, all that time ago. The one that was bought in 1973, and hung at the National Gallery when it opened in 1982.

I must admit that I was keen to go, and also keen to have a look at the snowfields, because that was on the program as well. Sally-Pearl sent me some gloves, a beanie and a scarf she had knitted. They were red and white. So you can imagine how stoked I was. I would be warm and be supporting my favourite footy team.

"You look like a barber's pole, Braun," offered Craig Leston, as we found our beds and checked out our room.

"Shut up, ya idiot. At least I'll be warm."

"Yeah, warm like a buzz cut," he laughed.

"Better than being a boring lesbo like you," Swamp said joining the banter.

"Lesbo, Lesbo, Lesbo," Frizzy chanted, as he danced around the room.

We were in a room with three of the other boys from footy so, all in all, it was a good start for the school excursion.

There was Swamp Man, Frizzy, Lesbo, me, Pig Ryan and Fainty.

Fainty got his nickname because he fell over, hitting his head, after he passed out in Year Eight science when we had to cut open a frog. His name could have been a lot worse, because he also wet his pants. But that would have been just downright mean, if he had been teased for that as well.

Lesbo was Lesbo because it sounded better than Lesto, even though it started out as that. And Pig Ryan got his nickname because his dad owned a farm that bred pigs, as well as the fact that he was just a little chubby around the waist.

“Hey Braun, this is your playschool isn’t it? Or is it Romper Room that you still watch? You must feel right at home,” Lesbo offered, pushing me as we entered the National Gallery.

“You’re not a lesbian, Craig. You’re a faggot. A complete and total faggot,” I told him, laughingly as Frizzy rubbed the top of his head with his knuckles and Fainty pulled on his ears.

“Funny boys, you lot,” he stated, fixing his hair and staring at a sculpture that looked like two people dancing in the nude.

As we approached a large wall, I remembered how I had listened as my mother and grandmother had talked about it more than once. They had argued over the cost, and the title, and the meaning, and why the Australian government had bought it. And why we, as a nation, needed it. I had seen lots of photos and my mother had explained it to me many times as I was going off to sleep. But I never thought for one minute that it would be so beautiful in real life. I stood in amazement at this huge mass of lines and dots and squiggles of ‘Blue Poles’.

There were poles in it. I could see that. But what caught my eye most, was the ordered randomness of the shapes and the lines. As I stood there, I remember that it felt like I was

walking through it. I was all giddy and dizzy in the head, and I again had that feeling of being outside of myself.

A weird feeling, I know. But its what I remember. So clear.

“It doesn’t make any sense at all. It looks stupid. And you can’t tell what any of it is.”

Pig Ryan told the group.

“Perhaps it isn’t supposed to make sense,” I offered.

“Yeah, but it should at least look like something. Don’t ya reckon?” asked Fainty.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because, otherwise, its just scribble,” Lesbo added.

“But Lesbo, man, it’s an ordered and calculated scribble. A place to take your soul,” I stated with confidence.

“Rubbish. It looks like crap!” he offered, laughing and moving to another painting around the corner. I was glad he left.

We sat for a while looking at it, Swamp, Frizzy and me.

I didn’t speak. I was completely fixed on the painting. I found myself swimming around in the spaces of the image, wading through the emotional world of the colours and the shapes. It spoke to me. It totally spoke to my soul. All of my past collided in that very moment. The emotions that I experienced within the gallery, and my feelings towards art in all areas, changed that day. I had gotten lost in the painting that Jackson Pollock had done all those years before. The one that had been the topic of many a heated debate at the dinner table when I was a little boy. I finally realised that my mother was a person of high belief, when it came to the artistic realm. I was grateful to her for all the talks about music, and writing and painting and artists that we had had almost everyday. In that moment I was her son.

“Come on, Alby, we have to go to the Islander section and visit Frizzy’s ancestors,” mocked Swamp.

“Cool,” I said, as I stood and floated toward the expressionist world of my good friend.

My good friend, who in the middle of term three I finally got to go and visit at his home. I was supposed to go to see the King of Tonga and his family a few times, but something had always come up, like a funeral or a footy thing, or the fact that they moved from orchard to orchard, or to some vineyard. It had been a little bit tricky.

But this term we had managed to sort it out, and I was so keen to spend time with his family. I had met most of them before at footy or school or assemblies and stuff like that. They would bring *keke* and his Grandpa would wear his lap-lap. It was like a dress, but for men, and it started at the waist. He had all different kinds, and would pick a bright colour every time he visited. Frizzy told me that it made him proud, and that his grandfather was a teacher in Tonga. So he loved that Frizzy was at such a strong school. The *keke* thing was actually *pani keke*, and they were fried in oil. Little fried cakes that tasted just like heaven. I finally found out how they made them when I visited.

Frizzy had even started to speak a bit more this term, and he had another nickname.

It was Aka. Aka fakahû, actually.

He got it after a game of footy we played for the school last year, against Kings College. His cousin told me that he was now known in his family as Aka as well. Because of what happened in that game.

I can remember thinking that the place they were living was really cool. At the time I thought so anyway. There were all different kinds of buildings and outhouses and stuff. They even had an inside toilet. And it was separate from the bathroom. That was pretty

good in my books, as far as a home goes. We got to pick some fruit and also eat sweet corn straight off the plants, apparently, we were going to have a hungi as well.

While I was there, I also spent some time by myself and drew the shed and the landscape as a gift for his family, for having me over for the weekend.

We were sitting with Aka's Grandfather, Malakai, wrapping fish and potatoes for the hungi, when he started to mumble about all sorts of stuff. He was talking to us about how we have shadows, and how they follow us around. He said that when a person makes an attempt to lose their past, they become more aware of the qualities and impulses plainly seen in others. He told us that such things as laziness, sloppiness, cowardice or love of money, were cast in your past shadow. I remember thinking, someone else told me that once.

"What I mean to say is that shadows, attached to your feet, can be your greatest regret," he stated, and then wandered off towards the packing shed, his lap-lap covering his feet and thongs as he walked. Frizzy had my art folder, showing one of his brothers, as we walked to the house with the fish.

At school the next day I read the brochure on the notice board. The Art and English Department were putting on the annual art and drama show, with prize money, vouchers for the sports store and the art shop, as well as movie tickets. My eyes were on the sports voucher. According to Swamp, for the art show this year some famous artist was going to be coming along to present the awards.

"Mum didn't know his name. Or maybe I just forgot. Not sure," he told me.

"You're really hopeless at remembering things, for a superhero," I offered.

"You wussed out last year anyway. And if you really are Jackson Pollock's half-sister's step nephew, twice removed, like you say then piking out is just not on," he told me, laughing.

“I’m in it this year. The art teacher has already put my name down and selected the piece from our classes this term, ya caped crusading donkey,” I said, pushing his shoulder as we raced to the food hall.

I was only going there to have lunch, but Swamp had to do first half detention. He’d been caught holding a Year Ten student by the belt, swinging him around, then letting him go at full speed, because he’d seen him bullying a new Year Seven kid at the library. Apparently he needed to talk to the students, not re-bully them for revenge or to teach them a lesson.

“Hey, man, I’ll help you, and we can get it done faster, then we can go and kick the footy with Frizzy,” I told him.

“And the cook will give us some of those awesome biscuits if you are there. She likes you, man. And I reckon you like her, and those man hands,” he added.

“Funny, ha ha,” I said, as we entered the sink area and started to wash up.

The following Friday, as we walked in, I was stoked to see the entire Great Hall was covered in artworks. There were long landscapes, rich with dark earthy colours. One student had even done a painting of the school. There were lots of portraits of the teachers, a collage that was a replica of the mining days, and a set of photos taken at a rugby match.

I had chosen to paint an emotional response to the time we buried the horse at Grandma’s. I had mixed all the elements, and had the horse upside down, and grandma in the tractor but it was flying and there was a shovel that had a face on it. You could just make out that it was screaming. And all the trees were talking to each other about how the horse died.

I won. I got the sports store prize. It was worth one hundred dollars.

First prize.

“Albert, this is very convincing, as an abstract expressionist piece. The colour association and the depth of the layers as they travel through the elements provide for a juxtaposition of formational awareness. Very impressive!” he stated as he shook my hand and gave me the envelope.

“Truly impressive, young man. Well done!”

To be honest, I had no idea what he’d just told me, but I nodded, shook his hand and said, “Thank you.”

I must say, I felt pretty good about the comments. I got goose bumps as he spoke, and when they handed me the gift voucher. It was a feeling of exhilaration. I thought to myself, my mother would have said something to me like, “It is the anatomy of eternal mind and artistic spectrum that will gauge who you are to become, Albert Dennis Braun. So think about the choices you make. Think very carefully!” I went and had look around the hall one last time and was about to leave when the artist pulled me aside. He started lecturing me about how if I want to be really successful and get the best knowledge, I had to go the city or London.

“Albert, you can’t possibly want to stay here, or anywhere outside of the city, for that matter. Far too uncultured, young man,” he offered, firmly. Then he continued, “It is far too uncultured, this outback post, for the true artist.”

It was like it was their own little club. And if you didn’t act like them, or live where they were, then it simply wasn’t acceptable. Not my go at all. I remember thinking that there is relevance in looking at those places, sure, but the true essence of humanity is in the basic process of day-to-day life. A simple life of human beings, not some big-flash-get-out-of-my-road-city-lifestyle.

I was quite angry at what he’d said, and I certainly wasn’t convinced that I had to go overseas to live. Visit, maybe, but to live, what was that? Why was it that all the



expectations were in the big cities or the bright lights? The teachers had once said that in English as well. “All the best writers go to this college, and all the great artists have been to that university,” they had told me.

No way. I didn’t believe it for one minute. I remember thinking, I will prove them all wrong. I will make it, and I will make it by remaining true to myself, and true to the places and people that I know, like the bush and Broken Hill and the beach, and grandma and Sally-Pearl and my mates.

I remember that all these thoughts started to bounce around in my head regularly after the art show lecture. Like the time we went on a footy trip, and all the city kids were teasing us, saying that we were just dumb bushies and had no place being in their city. How would they know anyway, the stink of smog and the thought cluttering noise had clouded their brains. At least that’s what Swamp reckoned, when I told him what had happened, and what I thought about it all. Frizzy just shrugged and said. “Hungry, let’s eat.”

But, even after all that, I was still smiling in the photo that was placed in the school magazine that week, which I sent to Grandma and Sally-Pearl.

### **Thirty-Six**

I received a letter during the week that made me ‘crazy with rage’, as one of our English teachers used to say. It was from Penny. She wrote a little bit about herself and Bianca, and then she told me about an accident that had happened in Ivanhoe. Apparently, the man they called my father had gotten drunk and went driving in the bush. A family had been camping in the same area, and he started to do donuts around their campsite. The family had gotten very upset, and when they finally approached the drunk and laughing person in the car he became angry and punched the father of the family, knocking him out and breaking his jaw.

I could not believe it. I was so angry that I felt like my head would blow-up. How could someone be so selfish and stupid? So stupid!

It was the next Saturday night and I was lying in bed. I couldn't sleep because I was still thinking about the story that I had started to write a while ago, and also about what I would say at my father's funeral or in a letter to him. We now had to write letters as part of our English classes. The nasty version of the letter to the man they call my father would have questions like 'Why didn't you die instead of my mother?' Because if that had happened, this would have been a very different version of events that I am telling you, wouldn't it? Or 'Is it best to drink beer or port first, when you want to get drunk at night while everyone eats their dinner. Which one?'

But this is what I decided to do. I decided to say 'thank you', and then try to forget about him again and move on from what had happened, as best I could.

I realised that I was being continuously transformed by others, and also by the conditions of my life. The resentment of being treated poorly by others had something to do with it, I guess. It was more of a belief, that all of this somehow had a reason. And that it was supposed to happen to me. I wasn't angry about it all. I just wanted to get on with living and creating and sharing without being hassled by others. I was all about telling my story. I put the letter in the bottom of my suitcase. I don't remember when I fell asleep, but I knew when I woke-up that something had changed.

### **Thirty-Seven**

I was in the chapel for mass and saw myself resting once more on the shelf next to the huge statue of Jesus. The figure, resting its hand on my shoulder, was giving me advice about who I should be, what I should do and where I needed to go. I was starting to think that maybe I was going crazy for real this time. The opportunity to experience this sort of

stuff only happened in the stories that the priests or the religion teachers told us about all the time. And how would the Jesus statue know what I'm suppose to do anyway. It was made of cement and plaster or whatever was used back then to build them.

Then it began to happen with the living. People that I knew had an idea about me and what may well be the good, the bad and the ugly choices for me to undertake.

Like the following Saturday, when I was sitting in the chapel feeling lost. Not lost like I hadn't won a game of footy or received a good mark in English, but in the way of being uncertain of my sense of direction. I must have been sitting there for a while, because Father Paul came out to sit with me. He only ever did that when he saw someone alone in the Chapel. I knew this because I had hidden in the roof with Swamp and Aka once and watched the goings on in the church. Not very polite, I know, but we did get to see Angus Rutledge confess to the painting on the wall in the Great Hall, that he had done after he was told that his dad and mum were splitting up. He wrote 'school sux' and 'God is a faggot'. Hiding in the roof peaks, trying to see over the front oval, we heard him tell Father Paul. We were all in trouble for a whole week for that, because no one would own up to it. I remember feeling good about keeping his secret though.

"So, young man, you've been sitting a while. How can God help you today?" Father Paul asked me.

"Not too sure, Father. I just wanted to sit and forget who I was for a while."

"That's a good thing, I would suggest," he stated.

"How is it good to forget who I am?"

"Albert, forgetting is just a way of remembering things better," he offered.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's a way out of the conflict that you feel. It's a place to take your memories and leave them there. It does not mean that you don't honour the sad memory that you have,

you simply do not allow it to dictate who you are, and how you feel,” he smiled broadly when he finished saying this.

“The real challenge, Albert, is to see ‘that what God has given you is a gift’ that you have and are. When it is not used, you forget that you have it,” he smiled again, nodding his head slowly.

“Life is enriched by the attempt. Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven, young man, and the answers you seek will arrive!” he stated, and then left me sitting in the pew. I sat there for most of the afternoon and only realised how late it was when the dinner bell rang. I wasn’t hungry, but I knew that I had to move on or the brothers would move me, especially at dinnertime.

So I grabbed myself a plate of food for later and went back to the dorm. I wanted to write a letter to grandma and Sally-Pearl because we still had to write letters as part of the curriculum in English. I was in the middle of the letter when Swamp came in, after having played cricket against All Saints College.

“Nice pants, fancy man,” I teased.

“Nice pen and paper, Picasso’s love child,” he offered back.

“It’s a letter home, ya donkey,” I told him.

“Hey, wanna go to the river?” he asked me as he sat on the bed in his dirty white pants and began eating the chips on my dinner plate.

“Na, man, not today,” I told him as I turned to get an envelope.

“Cool man. Hey, don’t forget the wedding is in two weeks. Mum told me to remind everyone I see. She is so obsessed with it, man.”

“The Saturday before I go to the coast. It’s in my diary, Swamp man,” I offered.

“You’re a poof,” he told me as he left the dorm calling out, “My diary my diary. Albert has a diary.”

I smiled to myself as I returned to the letter and the now cold lasagne and three chips.

That night I dreamt again of my mother. I could see her standing at the station, waiting for the next train. She wasn't coming home though. I knew that from the look in her eyes. "Sometimes, Albert, you need to go away from where you are placed in order to find out who you are," she tells me, turning and boarding the train.

I woke up smiling, and maybe not so confused.

The next few days were spent thinking about what had happened in my dream. I could feel the changes that were occurring, but I was uncertain as to what I was supposed to do with them. Was there a 'different feeling' catalogue you could read? Or maybe a formula that allowed for a smooth transition into the next phase of life. Apparently not!

The changes were in my attitude towards school, religion and girls, as well as in the level, and strength, of how I saw my way forward. It was time to share some of my story. It came out in a public speaking task we had to do for English and Drama. The theme was 'Whom did we see ourselves as, and what was our greatest fear?'

Standing in front of the entire school to deliver my version both of my legs were shaking as I began. It went like this:

*Fear. Inner fear. It has the potential to pause people, especially a person who is destined for greatness, and it can make them frightened of the space that exists between themselves, their talents and, ultimately, their destiny.*

*It's the main reason. Simply because they're scared!*

*You see it everyday, people walking along (sometimes running) from the true outcomes of their own lives. For many, it's been a mystery over the years, but it's the reason most people use to ignore the opportunity to face the life that exists for them.*

*For him, it also seemed to be a topic that he could simply hide from, over and over again. At least that was the case prior to the day in question.*

*You see, this particular day was very different. On this day he was caught off guard.*

*Why? He wasn't sure.*

*Arriving early, he sat at the rear of the stage, waiting for the two o'clock audition bell. He had always been good at being early.*

*He liked to watch the other people. Those who milled about near the entrance, and those to the rear of the building. He was waiting near the rear entrance when it happened.*

*'Do you think you actually have a chance today?' The voice asked.*

*"Sorry?"*

*'It's easy enough to answer. Do you, or do you not, think you have a chance?'*

*"Well, actually, yes I do. I believe in myself, and I will give it the best I can when I'm out there."*

*'Back in the city, that's where you belong. In all that grime and smog. Wallowing in your own self-failures. Which part do you really want? That's the question for you. Who will you really be when all this is done? Because I want to be in the city, and I'm not waiting for you,' the voice snapped back.*

*"Go then. I like it here."*

*'But you could always be shopping for new things. Fresh tastes, with real flavour.'*

*"I'm just here to perform, then to visit my family."*

*'Oh, okay, are you thirsty maybe? What about some alcohol, or a toke on this then.'*

*"I don't drink. And I definitely don't smoke."*

*'It will help ease the nervousness.'*

*"No!"*

*'Good. I'll have it all then.'*

*"I'm not going back to who I was. I'm not backing away, if that's what you think."*

*This is going to happen today. I'm not giving up."*

*'Nice. But who do you think you are, standing in this place? Do you really think your life will change?'*

*The words pierced him.*

*"Of course I do," he stated strongly.*

*'You can't do it. The past is proof of that.'*

*They called for him and he smiled with all his white teeth so as to make his mother proud, and walked tall onto the stage.*

*"You need to show them what you can really do," are the words he heard as he stepped onto the stage.*

*"Thank you," he told them.*

*No applause, but one of them smiled.*

*"Should I flash another confident grin, showing my teeth, and ask softly if my chance will come? Just wait, be patient, they will let you know soon," he reassured himself as he headed to the exit, collecting his bag on the way.*

*'What about the city? New tastes, fresh things.'*

*"I said no already."*

*As the tin can car crawled up the street and pulled into the car park, he walked toward the vehicle then turned back to look over the top of the car at the exit. He saw his former shadowy frame move back towards the building, now lit by the streetlights. As he entered the car he smiled once more, as fear turned, faced him and faded back into the wall.*

*Gone. Forever.*

The room was silent for a very long time. All of a sudden, the Swamp Man and Frizzy stood up and started clapping loudly. The entire school then followed, and I stood there on stage having felt like I had finally arrived, like something had truly shifted.

I was me!

### **Thirty-Eight**

I was sitting at the Acropole Restaurant by myself when a girl approached my table. We'd met before, at a school dance that we had every term with the all girls' school. They came in from Perthville where they boarded and went to school, over the other side of the railway line across town. Her name was Anastasia.

"Hi Albert, what are you up to?" she asked, just as I placed a fork, loaded with hot chips and gravy, into my mouth. It was always difficult talking to a girl at anytime, but with a mouthful of brown-coloured, fried and then squashed potato in your face it was even harder.

"I'm writing to my friend, Frizzy," I gurgled.

"That's a great name. Where does he live?" she asked confidently.

"He's a friend from school but he was allowed to go home early, and we still have to write letters in English," I offered shyly, as I worked to empty my mouth. "His family work in the orchards and on the farms around the area, to pay for his schooling, because he has a chance to play rugby for Australia."

"I know who you mean. He is really, really good, and has this great big smile. I met him at the last social," she offered.

"That's him," I stated.

"Do you come here often to write?" she asked me softly, as she sat down.

"I try different places. It seems to help."



“Will you be here next week?” she asked.

“I could be,” I stated, shrugging my shoulders.

“Would you like to meet me next week Albert? I have to go shopping on Monday to get a gift for my mum. You could help me,” she stated with a very mature confidence.

“Ummmm, okay,” I offered.

“Well, how about here again. Say, at around 3.45?”

I agreed, and she smiled, leaving me to eat my cold chips with gravy and chicken salt. As I finished the letter, I read it through for any spelling mistakes. We had to do a copy, so I rewrote it into my diary.

But a different version.

*Dear Frizzy,*

*Hey man. How are you?*

*Today we all had to go to class in the Great Hall because someone had written in paint on the walls again, but this time in the toilets. We think we might know who it is but not one hundred percent certain yet. They are trying to blame Angus again but his mum and dad are already divorced so that one won't wash with the brothers. You are so lucky getting to go home early man. How is downtown Stuart Town? Is there any footy there? And what about sport over the holidays, what are you going to do?*

*Hey the food might be getting a bit better, it could even be good for next year. We have a new cook. She is round and short and smells like sweaty armpit but the food is beginning to have more flavour. So we will see how it goes. Swamp reckons she has man hands. They are fairly big I guess. He's worried that she may actually be a man. It's a concern for him because as you know we always seem to be on kitchen duty for doing something or being in the out of bounds areas. He's been having nightmares about her hands he reckons. In one of them he woke up with the chills and had to go and have a*

*shower. Hey I just saw a really nice girl. Do you remember that girl at the social with the really long curly blonde hair that I danced with three times, well it was her. Nice girl man, nice girl. Niiiiiicccccce!*

*Hey got to go Aka, need to be back for clean up and dinner.*

*Talk soon.*

*Your mate Alby.*

I floated back to the dorm that day. Smiling up at the sky, all the way to Keppel Street, and then up Bentinck Street, and into my dorm. I was grinning like a crazy man as I stood at the mirror washing my hands.

She made me feel sparkly. I know it's a weird word to use, but that's what I remember of it.

### **Thirty-Nine**

It was a Tuesday, and we had the swimming carnival. But more importantly, in the middle of my back was a big red mark. We'd been walking back from the time recording table, and had stopped to talk to a few of the other boys who had just raced. I was about to walk off, when one of the female teachers slapped me in the middle of my back. "How dare you, young man!" she exclaimed, as she walked over to one of the sets of seats.

"Whaaaat was that for?" I half yelled while trying to rub the sting out of my back. Swamp had turned and was walking towards the other end of the pool laughing. "You're a shit, Swamp Man. That really hurt," I told him.

"Like, bad?" he asked me while grinning like he had stolen all the lollies.

He'd pinched the female teacher on the bum in front of everyone, but I got the slap.

I struggled to talk to him for the rest of that day. I couldn't even find Frizzy to break the mood. He hadn't gone to the carnival that day. I'm not sure if he was even at school. He

said that he was sick all day and had stayed in the library, when I found him later that night. He was better the following day though, and smashed everyone at training that afternoon. So I wasn't so convinced.

I was convinced, however, that a sense of being was starting to arrive for me. I realised that it could be interpreted as a warped sense of belonging that'd been available to me so far, but I guess it was also a feeling that I would belong somewhere, eventually.

Again, very weird I know, but that's how it was. That is how I remember it being.

Then I had another dream. I was by myself, floating around above everyone and everything, until I reached a room with huge wooden doors that were carved with all manner of decorations. I pushed through to where I saw my mother, the art teacher from school and Father Paul all sitting around a big dark shiny wooden table with candles on it. They were discussing my life, and my supposed talents, and what it is that I offered the world.

"I really like your place, Father," my mother offered.

"Thank you, Miss Braun."

"Now, to the young Albert. What do you think?" she asked the group with outstretched open hands.

"Well you know that he can do anything within the realm of art," stated the teacher.

"He has always been a talent. It was in him even before he was born," added my mother.

"Albert has a spiritual awareness that is rare among the youth of this world. All he has to do is embrace it. Follow the spirit, and God will find a way for him. God has a plan so large for him, that it beggars belief," Father Paul offered the group.

"I know," my mother responded.

"Yes, yes," offered the art teacher.

“It is very important to remember that he must trust that inner calling. He has it, just like all the rest of the world, but Albert is very, very strong, and that’s what makes it so rare,” Father Paul offered.

“Look, it’s my life. I will do what I want with it,” I screamed out to them.

But they didn’t respond.

When I woke up, all I could think of was how did my mother know where Father Paul even lived?

## **Forty**

It was a Monday, and we were sitting in the extension English classroom, waiting for Mister Langley, when a very pretty young woman with long blonde hair, and a rather large chest, walked into our room. I had never had a female teacher before, other than Mrs Packum, who we had sometimes for religion.

She was pretty cool.

But I swear she thought I was mad. I thought so, anyway. Because I must have called her ‘mum’ at least eight times since I’d been at the school. But when I did, she never seemed to be bothered by it at all. She would just smile and tap me on the shoulder when she saw me the next time.

“Such a nice young man,” she would offer as she walked past.

Swamp ribbed me about it all the time, and even Frizzy had a laugh at that one too.

Swamp would tell me that my mum was looking for me in religion because I forgot to take out the rubbish and feed the cat. Or he would write notes and sign them, *Albert’s mum*, *Mrs Packum*. At the top he would have Albert Packum as the student.

“You are a goose, not a donkey, you know that don’t ya,” I would tell him in the next religion class that she took.

“Your mum!” he would offer, smiling.

But this new teacher, she was a whole different world. All the boys were speechless as she sat down, and most of them almost fell off their chairs when she bent over to move her chair, wearing a low cut top and her very ample chest fell forward. All the boys just sat there with their mouths open.

Total disbelief engulfed the room.

“Ahh, good morning boys,” she stated, nervously.

“Morning Miss,” we all offered, grinning like we’d just won the First Fifteen Shield against Scots College.

“Right then. My name is Miss Mackay, and I will be your new English teacher,” she told us as she shuffled the papers on her desk for the third time. That was her name. I remember thinking, that was how I felt when she leant forward during the class.

“Where is old Langley Miss?” asked Craig Leston.

“It is Mister Langley to you, and he is unwell and will not be back this term. Now lets start with the character of Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait*, shall we!” she stated, as we all sat down and tried to close our very open mouths.

Most of us, I’m certain, were not thinking about the Irish novelist James Joyce and his motivation for the story of Stephen Dedalus, but rather our new and exciting English teacher. Things were certainly looking up in the area of the extension English curriculum. I felt like we should have sung the Ric Ric Ric Hooray song, like we did at footy. That’s how awesome school was looking at that very moment! Over the next two terms she was really cool to have as a teacher, and she helped us in the lead up to the final Year Twelve exams. A lot of the boys did find excuses to visit her to get some advice on the upcoming test, or the true structure of writing an essay.

The Year Twelve exams were hell.

I remember being so worried that I wouldn't be able to remember anything, or that I would forget what time the tests were on. Even worse than that, I started having dreams that I was sitting in the hall with everyone laughing at me because I was naked, and trying to cover up by using my pencil, ruler and calculator.

I still didn't have a story for my final English piece as I sat waiting for Anastasia at the Acropole. I was beginning to really worry. She didn't show that day, so I went up the road to Elies Café instead, and tried to come up with something to write about.

That's when it happened. Well, at least it seemed like it was happening. But I wasn't one hundred percent certain, and as it unfolded I started to take notes just to be sure that it was real.

A group of women had arrived and sat near my table. They began discussing their weekends. Who said what! What they did. And which places they will not be going to this week for lunch. They are of all ages and many shapes and sizes.

After a while a heavy-set blonde lady arrived, waved to the table, and after ordering something at the counter joined the group. She sat and listened for a short while.

Then the person next to her, a rounder lady who was using her hands to communicate, must have asked how her weekend was because she responded, with hand signals that I didn't understand, and then began to tell everyone the story of her weekend. Loudly!

"Do you guys remember how I was going to that fancy dress party on the weekend on the Central Coast?" she asked. Some responded with a "yes, and do tell please" and one with "How was it? "Well, you're not going to believe this, because I can't believe it, and I was right in the middle," she stated. This statement seemed to set the tone for the entire group.

The women were all attention and gossip.

“I’m driving home from the party, right. I’ve got Sebastian in the car. Some of you know him, he’s the tall one that played basketball with Zeb here at the stadium, near the golf course, over Easter last year,” she told them. They nodded as the lady who was signing screwed her face up and signed something. It must have been to ask the lady speaking to clarify, because she then stopped, signed something, and continued.

“I’m telling you God hates me, of that I’m certain. We’re driving along Terrigal Drive.

Its Saturday night, so there’s lots of people about,” she stated. “You know what its like on a Saturday in a touristy place?” They all nodded to this, even the lady who signed, as the storyteller had decided to keep using her hands to convey the full story.

“I’d gone back to the hotel after the party because my outfit was all messed up and getting tangled, so I went and got changed. Sebastian and Zeb had been there watching movies. Zeb asked if I could give Sebastian a lift back to the caravan park as his parents were out for dinner and still hadn’t made it back yet. He’s a nice boy, Sebastian. He’s actually quite funny, and he always talks to you politely, which is nice. So we’re cruising along, through the round-a-bout, and have to pull up at the intersection nearest the pub as there are cars all over the place, as well as people.” They all nodded in confirmation to this as the waitress brought the storyteller’s drink, as well as a one for the lady who signed.

“So, I decide to turn left and take the road around past the primary school instead of through all the traffic and people and taxis, my god,” she continued while stirring raw sugar into her coffee. “I get just past the back entrance to the pub and this girl leaps out, in front of the car. Doesn’t even look. I end up hitting her with the full force of the front of the car.”

The entire table gasped, then sighed, as she told them this.

“I stop and as I’m getting out of the car another girl comes running over laughing at her friend. Then she starts screaming at me, “You idiot, what’ve you done.”

“Was she alright?” one of the women asked.

“I couldn’t tell because she was drunk and rolling around, trying to pick up the can of vodka she must have been carrying before she ran onto the road,” she told them this with disgust and disbelief.

“Her friend then started to help her up, but couldn’t, because she was just as drunk, and I’m thinking to myself shit, what’s next,” she offered to the group while screwing up her face.

“No way,” chimed in one of the group.

“Yes way,” she answered.

“So a whole group starts to form, and the friend is telling them that it’s all my fault and that I just didn’t stop to let her pass. Can you believe this?” she asked them.

“While the girl is still on the ground, and I might add that she is in fact so drunk that she’s still totally unaware of what’s going on, another friend, a male, started to abuse me and tell me ‘I’m an idiot’ and ‘should learn to drive better’.”

“What? I told him, you’re kidding, right. She jumped out in front of my car you stupid boy. I’d had enough by then. It was beginning to rain. I had thongs on and my PJs. I was over it, totally. Can you believe this,” she confirmed with the group. “But the guy started to yell louder and shoves me. I wasn’t going to take that, so I pushed him back.”

“Meanwhile, the girl, the crash-test-dummy, is still on the ground rolling around drunk and I’m thinking probably injured. By this stage, I was starting to get fairly angry, and wondering why I hadn’t just told Zeb that his friend could sleep over and I would drive him home in the morning, on the way to basketball,” she offered to the group. But by now she was more rambling more than telling.



By this stage, I was in. I couldn't take my attention away from the group of women, especially the lady who, through this whole process, is signing in response. Her face would light up with the most wonderful expressions as the storyteller introduced each new part.

"Then Sebastian got out of the car to stick up for me, and the guy just started hitting him. I mean fully, all out. Banging him in the face with his fist and kicking him at the same time. I was screaming by now and just about to lose it. I mean, I'm responsible for him aren't I, he's underage and in my care," she told them, this time with actions and a more heightened, dramatic tone to her voice.

By now the group at the table was totally enthralled, as was I. They hadn't even taken the chance to sip their drinks, they just wanted to know what happened next.

"Here I am, trying to ward-off this drunk young group, and help her friend who, by the way, is still on the ground trying to collect herself and at the same time protect my teenage son's friend. I will definitely be kinder to my fellow man from now on," she told them.

"Someone steps in and helps by stopping the fight, but I still don't know who," she offered.

"While all this is happening, I'm standing in the rain thinking to myself 'no one is going to believe this', you just couldn't make this stuff up."

A couple of the women in the group giggled in amazement at this and looked at her gesturing with their hands so that she would continue.

"You just couldn't," one lady, with really big hair and glasses added supportively.

"She ran out in front of the car. I didn't even have time to swerve, let alone stop."

'The police are on their way,' I heard someone call out. I was so glad they did. Christ, it had gotten out of hand. I just kept saying to myself you couldn't make up this stuff, no

way. I don't know who called them, maybe the bouncers who just stood there through the whole process," she added with a look of disgust.

"So, then," she said taking in a deep breath.

"I started to have an asthma attack just as the police got there. It's raining, I have thongs on, my PJs, and the police are trying to quell the crowd as well as look after this stupid young girl who leapt out in front of my car, and I'm trying to calm my breathing."

"Then the two friends go silent, and no one else wants to say anything either. They don't want to get involved 'officially'. By now the police have called an ambulance as well. So it's on the way and this girl's friend is saying to her lets just walk. I'm thinking to myself you're kidding aren't you. She's just been hit by a car, like 'hello'."

"The ambulance has also arrived and is trying to treat the girl. She ends up being able to walk with some help. But she doesn't want to go with them in the ambulance back to the hospital for observation because she is underage and drunk, so she knows she will get into trouble," she told them.

"I'd been drinking at the party but I only had four drinks over the course of the whole night," she reassured the group listening to her tale of woe. "But I told the police officer that I'd only had two, as he is breath testing me. Just a little white lie," she says, as she smiles and continues to translate for the lady who needs it. A courtesy bus had arrived from another club somewhere, so all these drunk young partygoers are now gathering near this crazy scene. The police decide to cordon off the area and redirect traffic," she continued.

I ordered another milkshake as my hand began to cramp as I try to keep up, writing the details of this very interesting, bizarre and strangely funny story. I persevered though.

"Then this guy drives straight into the area which the police have cordoned off. The police officer tells him to back up and go around, right. But the guy just looks at him and doesn't respond. He's just stopped, like he is in a trance. The copper asks him if he's alright

to which he says 'what', as he rolls his head forward like he's falling asleep. "Have you been drinking mate?" the cop asked him.

"Na, no way," he slurred out.

"So they get him to move out of the car. He falls out the door, and the cops just look at each other in disbelief," the storyteller shrugged her shoulders and opened up her hands when this was said.

"I'm saying it again, You-just-couldn't-make-this-up," emphasizing each word slowly this time.

"The guy cannot stand up and he's so drunk that he can't even blow into the tester thing properly when they ask him to. It takes him four goes. He ended up blowing over and the cops arrested him.

"You should totally have her charged, I reckon," the red headed lady chimed in.

"No, they can't charge her because she's not eighteen," she told them with a look of amazement on her face. "And we can't sue her either because she's not eighteen. So I haven't bothered with a solicitor. The police said that because she is underage it would be a fruitless process if they charged her, so they didn't. And if they don't charge her then it wouldn't be worthwhile suing her. They just wanted to get her home or to hospital safely, and out of their hair."

"Then the friend of the girl who was abusing me comes over, all tarted up and swaying, while I'm talking to the police, and asks if they can give her a lift home. To which the copper said, "What do I look like, a taxi service?"

"Walk," he told her.

"But my boyfriend is too drunk and has run off and she hurt my friend."

"And then she pointed at me."

"Well then, your friend needs to go in the ambulance," he confirmed.

“I’m still in shock. It’s like fairyland. Neither the police nor the ambos can get a hold of the parents. She won’t go home because she is drunk. It’s raining. I am wet, in my pyjamas, recovering from an asthma attack, which I might add, they didn’t treat me for, and have just caused a young teenage boy to have his eye blackened and his lip split open. I should’ve just stayed home,” she told them again.

They all nodded in agreement. One of them tells her that she was in the right. Another wishes she had been there to help her out.

“I so feel for you,” she told her.

“And you are right,” said another.

“You just couldn’t have made this up!”

“No way,” was the chorus of responses.

As I paid for my milkshake and wandered out into the glorious autumn day I was very grateful for the story that I had just heard. I was also very aware that the group was right, and as I walked along the footpath back to Stannies I whispered to myself ‘you just wouldn’t be able to make this stuff up,’ while trying to replicate the sign language with my hands.

I now had my final English piece.

### **Forty-One**

It was the last exam day when I got word that I was able to go to Broken Hill to work in the mines for a drilling company in the Christmas holidays as an off-sider.

I decided to leave straight away.

Grandma and Sally-Pearl thought that I was going to go to the coast and then go to Broken Hill. I left a message at the Post Office for them both.

I caught the train. It was dark when I reached the station at the hill. I was staying with the Watkins family, and Oscar was there to pick me up as well as Mister Watkins.

According to Mrs Watkins, as we ate breakfast the next morning, Penny still lived in town in the same tin house. The man they call my father had left town and was now living in a place called Ivanhoe. He was still on the railways. Travelling on the train the day before, I realised that I had no intention of visiting the man they called my father while I was in town. However, I did want to see Penny. So I decided to go and visit.

That's when I met my sister.

"Her name is Bianca Rose," Penny offered as we met at the front gate and she hugged me like Sally-Pearl always did, tight, and with love.

"Bianca bum this is Albert your big brother," Penny said as she squatted down and smiled at the little girl. The little girl hugged my leg. I knelt over and rubbed her back as she held on tight. I was thinking to myself, 'A real live sister'. She had all this long brown hair and she smiled at me like we had known each other forever. I just knew that Sally-Pearl would really love her as well.

And I even reckon mum would have too.

"What brings you back to the Hill, Albert?" Penny asked as we sipped hot chocolate and I ate the cookie that Bianca handed me.

"I got a job working for a driller so I can make some money for the holidays. And I just want to have a break from everything," I say.

"You be sure to visit each time you get a chance, okay. We will cook some lasagne and have that salad you like so much, with the cabbage in it. Wadya reckon, Miss Bianca?" Penny tickled her belly as she said this, and I got up to head back to the Watkins place for dinner, as it was six-thirty sharp according to Angela, and an early night because I was to start on the drilling rig the next day.

“For sure!” I told them both, as I gave Bianca a kiss goodbye.

I remember that I floated home that afternoon.

But something that Penny told me stuck in my mind all that night. It was something that she had said about Angela.

The next day as I emptied a rod we had just disconnected, I realised it was just as Swamp’s Uncle had explained to us at the wedding.

“A crazy way to make money.” He’d told us.

But I didn’t care, I just wanted to forget about everything. Forget it all.

Forget who I was, just for a little while.

But now I know I was actually finding myself.

It’s funny how life works. Here I was feeling sorry for myself, and about to work a twelve-hour day, and thinking about how lonely and sad my life was when it happened. The next day, while I was still feeling sorry for myself, I got a telegram from the Post Office delivered to me at the rig, by the boss man.

It was from the Swamp Donkey. I opened it and had to sit down. I couldn’t breathe as I read the telegram again, and then again. I could feel myself beginning to cry.

My best friend, Aka Fakahû, had died.

According to the telegram from Swamp, he’d drowned in some dam called Burrendong while they were out fishing in a little tin boat at night. The note said that they had all tried to save him, but it was dark and cold, and he disappeared in the water.

Percy came over and took the note from my shaking hand. After reading it he told the boss man what had happened. The boss said to me, “Go back to Bathurst and see what you can do. Go now.”

And before I knew it I was on the next bus. Sad. Alone. Very confused.

I remembered that all his family had been living near the dam because it was free accommodation. They'd been picking grapes in a place called Mudjee that season, which was over the hill a bit, well sought of, from where the dam was.

The service was in Bathurst, at the school. Swamp's mum came and sat with us at the chapel. She held my hand and put her arm around Swamp. It was nice to have her there, and Aka would have liked it because he said to me a few times that she was always nice to us.

"Do you remember whenever I saw you guys you were being silly, and how Aka was always smiling, and you three would laugh at the stupidest things? Giggle like little girls. Do you remember that, Albert?" she asked me softly.

"Yeah, I do. We did I guess," I offered.

"And what about Aka's singing, man, of any song, especially the national anthem. It was so bad. He would forget the words and just mumble something in Tongan that he thought sounded the same," added Swamp, laughing loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Actually, I don't think he knew the words at all," I whispered to them both.

I was giggling when I stood, walked to my friend's coffin, held the silver handle and travelled with him to the long black car at the front of the chapel. Everything seemed to be in slow motion from that moment onwards, the rest of the ceremony, the sprinkling of dirt, and the placing of a football on top of the wooden box that held my friend.

The next day I went and sat by the river with my journal and wrote.

I wrote for Aka because I wanted the world to know who my friend was, who I saw him as.

*This morning ~~I didn't cry~~ I laughed at a funeral. It ~~might~~ probably seems ~~strange~~ odd to most people that I would laugh at a funeral. But it was for my friend Aka, which is short for Aka fakahû. We used to laugh all the time. His name ~~meant~~ means kick an extra point*

after touchdown. ~~We gave~~ It was the name given to him by his ~~folks~~ family. We were playing ~~a game of footy~~ in a rep side for the school one day and someone had scored in the corner right on the bell. But we couldn't decide who was going to take the kick. No one in our team had ever kicked a goal from the sideline before. While we were ~~talking about~~ debating who was going to attempt to not make a fool of themselves, the frizzy haired kid piped up and said, "I do it, give me go." And with that he took the ball from Craig Leston's hands and was off ~~over~~ towards the referee. We all watched as he walked back to the spot that the Ref had marked. I noticed that ~~he wasn't listening~~ he was ignoring everything ~~else~~ on the field. He seemed so calm. He set the ball in place, checked the wind and took four steps back, walked towards the little mound of sport and drove forward with his right ~~foot~~ leg.

He ~~smashed~~ nailed that kick and we as a team for the first time ever had actually converted a try from the sideline. We won as well. We'd never beaten a Kings Grammar year seven team before. This ~~dark~~ brown coloured boy with frizzy, wiry black hair had become our hero.

As the ball flew through the ~~sticks~~ posts and over the black dot, his mother had come screaming over yelling aka fakahû, aka fakahû, aka fakahû. We all just stood there looking at each other and I was thinking why is she swearing. But Aka ~~saw~~ noticed this and said "It's good". So we all laughed and went back to ~~smiling~~ cheering and high fiving. We were so ~~happy~~ stoked to have beaten Kings.

Last night as I ~~looked~~ glanced at my watch it was 4.08am. In ~~Tonga~~ Tongan tradition the funeral service is an all night ~~thing~~ vigil. The ~~morning~~ mourning period is done over a full night. The families sing and pray and visit the casket. Church services are taken over the course of the night while family and friends share stories, food and sometimes even laughter.



*I'm smiling when I enter the hall. Traditional grass skirts surround me, the kind that have been worn many, many times.*

*Everyone is dressed in black.*

*I am wearing a ~~bright shirt~~ brightly coloured striped shirt. I have a large smile on my face. My friend would not have had it any other way.*

*My friend's mother, her name is Pataloepa. But sometimes I used to get it mixed it up. Especially when I was younger. I would call her Pedal Roper or something silly like that. Not on purpose or anything. ~~I say hello~~ I pay my respects to her and his Grandfather Malakai as I walk past them to see my friend.*

*The coffin casket in a Tongan funeral is open and I sit to visit with my friend, holding his hand while he lies there, motionless. He seems to be smiling. I remember the times together when we were laughing. There were so many. I begin to giggle. Softly at first, then a little louder. People look up and stare in my direction. Many of the faces are frowning. They look at me through their sad eyes and grass skirted souls.*

*I don't want to be disrespectful. But it does seem appropriate to laugh. After all that's what our friendship was built on. Laughter.*

*I am still giggling to myself when I return to my seat, as the minister begins the vigil service for the last time. Swamp and I settle a little as the minister starts to wander back and forth across the decorated area. He is speaking in Tongan and then translating it into English. There were some Tongan words I couldn't quite make out.*

*But if I listened really carefully I caught some of the Tongan that I knew.*

*Sometimes when we were just hanging out my friend would teach me his language. I can still remember bits and pieces. Like Fo'i Moa 'ulu (egg head) and Ma'u ha 'aho fiefie (Happy Birthday). It was cool when we would sit and talk. I know a little German as well as English so we would teach each other different words, but my friend's words were always*

*better than mine. My friend used to call me Palangi Tokoua, which means “White Brother” and sometimes my friend’s father would call me a white honky just to be really funny.*

*Words like Hohomo, which means parrotfish. We would have so much fun with this one. I would call someone we knew a hohomo. “You are just a hohomo”. And they would get so angry, but my friend would be lying on the ground laughing.*

*It was even more hilarious when my friend would teach me Tongan words that sounded a lot like English swear words. Not really all that funny for the adults, but for us it was just a blast. We would laugh so hard. Words like fakatau. They were the coolest. I would ask the dorm master if I could fakatau one of the new season fute fo’i pulu fuka for this fakata’u. Which was me actually asking if I could purchase the new season football flag for this year, well sort of anyway. He would get so red with anger and warn us that if this sort of behaviour continued that he would be taking his belt off to wail both of us. My friend would run away laughing and I would follow after him. He hardly ever caught us.*

*Well not very often anyway.*

*I can remember once when we went to visit my friend’s uncle in ~~Ugowra Eugowra~~ ~~Yougowra~~ Eugowra to fei’umu - help prepare an underground oven. As you know by now I love to eat and my friend’s family loved to cook so it worked out well for all of us. There were people everywhere. Tongans, relatives, friends, white people, pink people, caramel people and even coconut ones- they’re the ones that are brown on the outside, white on the inside, born in Australia like me. We were at the table with all the food when my friend asked me if I could give one of the Tongan ladies in the kitchen a gift from him. He was always giving gifts. Today it was a compliment. He asked if I could say it to her really close. The words were, “You have the most mata kovi I have ever seen.” He told me it meant “wonderful eyes.” I was always happy to help out. So in I went to deliver the gift.*

*But just as I finished she grabbed my arm with her massive hand and started to hit me*

*across the top of the head with her other palm. I certainly didn't expect this as I tried to get away. She was so strong and had hold of me for what seemed like an hour, just wailing on me. My friend, who had stayed out of the kitchen, stood in the door laughing at the lady. He kept saying, "But you do, you really do," as she was dragging me toward him.*

*Eventually I broke free and ran for my life. My friend followed. As we reached the edge of the grass behind where the hungi was, I started to ask what went wrong and my friend just kept laughing. He told me that he had seen the lady at the park being rude to some children last year and he didn't think she was very nice. So he wanted to see if it was true.*

*Only problem was that I didn't move fast enough and he didn't think she would do any of that. He then said that mata kovi actually meant 'ugly face.'*

*"Thanks" was all I said. I made a mental note to check the meaning of Tongan words with his sister before offering them up as a gift to others.*

*As the world turned silent except for the singing of the choir, I look up to see Aka's sister, her eyes were red and she had a look of sorrow on her face. I never thought I would be sitting at my best friend's funeral giggling about my childhood.*

*I always believed my friend would grow into a wise old man to match his big heart and play rugby for Australia.*

*But my friend 'Beni' died last week.*

*This morning I went to his funeral.*

*My friend's name was Aka fakahû. That's who he was to me. That's who I knew him as, and I miss him.*

## **Forty-Two**

Being back in Bathurst was a little strange, and having been at the chapel was even weirder. Swamp and I were hanging in the front car park of the school, waiting for his mum to pick us up after I had dropped off my school uniform, when we decided to have one last visit of the house on the hill, that we knew as Stannies. We were walking across the quad area near the library, canteen handball area and I was looking up towards the oval and the Great Hall when I started to think about my time here at St Stanislaus College. As we walked, Swamp told me that he was going to University at CSU, around the corner, to do primary school teaching.

“My mum reckons it will do me good. I told her I would only go if I could grow some dreads. She said she would get back to me about it. I really wanna grow some dreadlocks man, because dudes with dreads get the girls, Bro. I’m not too certain about the teaching stuff either, I want to get into people’s minds, man. Do something with the brain,” he told me.

“That suits you Swamp. The idea of analyzing the thoughts of others, only true superheroes can do that properly,” I offered.

“That’s what I told her. But she isn’t so convinced. What will you do, Alby, when you finish in the hill?”

“Not sure yet, man,” I told him.

As we stood there I reflected on my first few weeks with Swamp. I remembered my first few days with Frizzy, and my very last day when we said goodbye for what I thought was only a short time. Those first days of school I was so scared. It was daunting walking into the school grounds.

The way I must have looked, as I entered the stomach of the school. I remember how Swamp was a flying kamikaze when we first met, and how Frizzy got his name. I recall

how we won the Wybird Shield in Year Ten and then in Year Twelve when the first fifteen beat Blue Mountains Grammar to win the Waratah Shield for the first time. Aka scored two tries that day, and smashed anyone on the opposition who came near him.

He was a machine.

I was still daydreaming when Swamp told me he had to go and see a man about a pigeon. I decided to wander around the hall when I stumbled across Father Paul.

“Young Mister Braun! And how are you?” he asked in his caring and proud fashion.

“Not too bad, Father. Thank you for your speech, it was very powerful.”

We walked along the marble hall as we were having our discussion and found one of the art teachers and also the head of English in the main staffroom. There were only a few of the teacher’s left in the school. Holidays were good for them too, I guessed. I sat with them and we talked about the funeral, and what had been happening, and what my plans would be. I never really had the chance after the HSC exams to talk to any of the teachers and say thank you, or anything like that, because I went straight to Broken Hill to drill.

“You should paint and write, Albert. That’s what you do best,” said Father Paul.

“That’s who you truly are,” added one of the art teachers.

“You have a chance to make a real difference in this crazy world young man. Don’t go wasting your life, Albert Dennis Braun.” He finished the statement with a stern teacherly look. “You will do what is right, won’t you?”

He reminded me of my mum a little bit. Weird, I know, but that’s what I remember.

“You have a gift Albert, therefore you must use it. Do you remember what I told you at the start of Year Seven.” Father Paul added.

“Yes Sir, I do.”

“Well, would you like to share it?”

“You said that being scared is too easy. And that the risk in all of life is not following through and doing the thing that you are most scared or fearful of.”

“That’s right. And especially don’t be scared of your own abilities,” stated the head of English.

Father Paul shook my hand and then walked towards the hallway door.

The others had to finish up their notes and wished me well for the holidays. Ms Gobensmak hugged me, and I remember that I blushed as I left the room to find the Swamp Man.

“Where did you go man, and why is your face so red. What happened?” asked Swamp.

“I must just be tired,” I offered.

“You are such a poof. Hey man, are you ready to par-taaaayyy?” he asked.

“No, I think I’ll take a walk.”

“What about the river and some passion pop for old times sake, man.”

“Maybe later, man,” I replied.

We shook hands and promised to catch up before the bus trip to Broken Hill. As Swamp went off to save the world, he bounced down the long driveway out the grand gates of Stannies screaming, “Long live the Swamp Donkey.”

Then I was alone. Standing on the top tiered edge of the front oval, looking out over Bathurst. Alone.

You might think in that moment I was feeling sorry for myself, but it was actually the complete opposite. I felt totally alive, on fire with emotion, then cold with a chill, all in the space of fifteen seconds.

I realised that it was all a myth. The landscape of my life had been full of myth, all the way along. Lies, accidents, sadness and mistrusts, demands from others and expectations that were not my own.

Yet, in that same moment, I also felt like I could own into this myth if I tried hard enough. So I did.

I ran. I ran right into it.

Not away. But in.

I've told you a few times I liked running. So I ran. To the top oval then to the road that leads up to Mount Panorama, and then around the top of the race track. I was a third of the way down the steep hill, the curves and the esses, when I stopped to take in the view. I was breathing deeply when I could feel my body being carried across the hills, towards Lithgow, when I started screaming.

I screamed out all the names of those that had died. Of those that had been at me, those who had been nasty, and those that are still so very close to my heart.

I screamed and I screamed until I collapsed on the grass next to the road and began to laugh at this place they called 'the mount'. At first it was a big belly laugh, then the tears came. I cried hard, realising it had all been a trope, all a lesson in how to grow up, a waking dream. But it was my myth. It was my lesson. It was my dream. It was my trope.

I also realised that it didn't have to be so God damn hard. I realised that it was just stuff.

My stuff. My life.

My simple and perfect life.

Deep tears flowed out of me. I was empty when I stopped blubbering, and I felt like I was fifty kilos lighter. Weird, I know, but that's what happened.

That's what I remember.

### **Forty-Three**

“If you need to talk, Albert, I will always be here for you,” Angela offered at dinner on the Sunday night back at the Hill.

“Thanks,” was all I said.

I was back at the rig the following Monday as agreed with the boss man. It seemed really quiet there for the next few days. Percy was cool, he chatted about the old days and footy and his wife even made a cake for him to bring for his birthday.

I remember I didn’t say much at all to anyone.

On the following Friday, I went into town to cash my pay cheque and send some money to Grandma and Sally-Pearl to bank for me. I was standing at the corner near the Post Office when I heard all the yelling. And it was directed at me.

“Hey, you skinny white fella. What are ya doin in this town?” the taller one yelled at me, waving his arms around in the air.

“You don’t belong ere. Not your place, aye,” the short chubby one said, as he pushed right up close to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

I was about to step back and raise my fist when the taller one put out his hand and said, laughingly, while the other clapped his hands.

“Albert from da coast. Your mob drive the suss-ki van made a tin! What are you doin here?”

I smiled at this, leaning back to see them fully.

“No way. Ronald?” I asked as the tall–dark–proud–aboriginal–man hugged me, slapping me on the back at the same time.

“Yep, that’s me.”



“Then this must be Clancy. Wow!” I stated as we shook hands and hugged each other in the main street. Not really the done thing in a town like the Hill. Especially a group of blokes. But I didn’t care. I was so stoked to see them.

We talked for a few minutes, about the past and about Sally-Pearl and her mob. And why I was in the Hill. They seemed keen to move out of the street and sit down somewhere.

“Aye, we gonna get some hot chips, aye, and talk about olden days,” Ronald said. I nodded, and we crossed the road and headed towards the Silver Bream Café.

As we ate, Ronald told me about how he was now an Aboriginal Education Worker at the Alma School, and Clancy worked as an Indigenous Guide for the National Parks and Tourism Centre.

“Hey, you remember that nun and her big farts, Albert?” he asked, laughing.

“Yeah, I remember that for sure,” I offered. “We made a game out of it at school and played it whenever we had a maths class.

I explained the rules of fart tennis, and how I’d gotten into trouble a few times because of it. They thought it was all very funny.

“Hey, wanna come to Wilcannia with us aye?”

“We gonna visit our mob. We’re goin tonight then come back on Sunday. ”

I was off for the weekend and had been wondering what it was that I would do for two full days because the Watkins family had gone away to Adelaide for a funeral. They’d gone on the Thursday, and would be having a break for a few days to recover.

“Yeah, for sure, lets go.” I offered.

We were in Wilcannia at around nine o’clock that night. And again, when I arrived there were kids and people everywhere. It was the clearest night I had seen since being in the outback. Both times. The sky was gleaming and the stars seemed close enough for you to be able to touch them. It was that dome shape I spoke about earlier.

So clear, so bright, and so full of hope.

We stayed at Clancy's aunts place. We got to sleep outside again. I really enjoyed the open air and the sounds. At night in the outback, it is so still and calm. Even if there is noise off in the distance, directly around you is stillness. It consumes your whole being. And if there is a big noise it takes forever to reach you. A lot like the head lights of a car or truck coming towards you from off into the distance. When they are first seen, you expect them to arrive, and then seven minutes later you are still waiting. Then all of a sudden, they're there, and then whoosh, they're gone again.

The storms are a lot like that as well. You can see them coming and you can hear them. Then.

Boom.

They're there, and then whoosh, they've left. The next morning I was asked if I wanted to come to the river. It had been raining heavily in and around central Queensland for a few weeks now, and the rivers were flowing well and the water was due to reach Wilcannia that morning.

"We go watch da water come, aye, den go for a swim," one of the little kids told me, as we ate tinned spaghetti from a big pot by dipping in crusty toasted bread with butter all over it.

"Sounds good," I told him.

"I nebba done dat before. Eba," a taller boy offered.

"Not even once?" I asked.

All of the younger ones shook their heads as well.

Sitting around the pot of spaghetti were eight small children. They hadn't seen the river with water in it; they'd never been swimming.

"Well, how lucky are all of us today then," I told them.

“Bery,” the littlest one of the group told me, as he nodded and shovelled long strands of food into his mouth.

After breakfast Ronald, Clancy and I were at the river helping the group from breakfast and some of the other kids from the community. We were showing them what to do when you jumped in the river for a swim, and then taught the younger kids, who had not seen the river full because of the drought, how to swim.

Jumping off the bridge into the deepest parts, now that was fun.

I watched as all the kids did the most amazing back flips and front mickeys into the flowing river. It was just awesome to be a part of. I tried a front flip and ended up doing what the Swamp Man would have called the ‘king-of-all-the-belly-whackers.’

My whole front stung for about an hour. I tried again later on, and jagged one good one, but I lost my kahunas after the big stinger. All the little kids told me that it was one of the funniest things they’d ever seen.

“You a funny one, aye, Albert from da coast,” a little boy whose name was Henry told me later, as we all sat on the riverbank.

“My mum knowed you aye,” stated another little boy, dripping wet as he stood on the edge of the bridge about to jump in.

“Oh yeah. Who’s that?”

“Her name Minni,” he said as he jumped.

I smiled. And so did the others on the bridge.

They were all so happy. The elders had also come down to sit and talk. A few of the older kids played instruments. One had a guitar, another one a set of drums on their lap, and another a colourful didgeridoo. Others played wooden sticks that looked like a baton from the relay. And they all sang. One lot made up a rap. It was about living in a desert and being able to watch the footy on television, at the same time as being able to remember and

experience their own culture and their ancestors. They'd been working on it at school, as a part of English, and were going to send it off to some competition in the city.

"We go to da big smoke, Albert. Teach dem ones how to sing proppa, aye," one of them, told me.

Laughter. That's what I remember most about those two days. There were all ages, sitting and talking and stirring and roughhousing. We played a game of touch footy on the oval near the big Catholic Church, and we had a big feast on the river. The kids were so free, running around and being themselves. I admired that in them. I also reflected on my own growing up in the bush, with Grandma and Sally-Pearl on the coast.

I chatted with an elder who painted their country and their stories. The vibrant colours and the strength of the images really moved me. It stirred something inside me as I sat with them and also while we were travelling back to the Hill.

New things, new ideas and multiple levels of thinking about art began to filter into my head. It seemed that the world I knew had taken its own path, and had to be seen through to the end. That's what I felt, and that's what I remember.

My focus began to be on all things creative. All around me was the regeneration of the land in itself, the emotions that I felt when I thought about those in my life and those I had not yet met.

"A libbing desert," Ronald told me, as we travelled back to Broken Hill.

"Them kids can get da knowledge. That's what we reckon aye," Clancy added.

Both of them were working with indigenous kids in the afternoons, to help develop their confidence and show them a positive life path. They worked on traditional aboriginal educational opportunities, and both of them were now elders in their community. They also told me their aboriginal names that they'd forgotten when I asked all those years ago.

"Hey, did you ever remember your traditional names," I asked Ronald.

“Yep, an old uncle told us last year at a special men’s business. Mine is ‘Balun’, which means river and Clancy, he be called ‘Ganan’, which means from the west,” Ronald told me with great pride, as he puffed out his chest.

They were both really keen to share the idea of a living desert. Be a part of something, an idea that could develop the traditional cultural and educational elements for the indigenous kids around the area. It would have plants and walks and traditional experiences for the kids, as well as the tourists. A positive approach to their culture, and the opportunity to learn and grow and be confident about who they were. It sounded really exciting, the way the talked about it.

A chill washed over me. Their passion was contagious. I felt myself being changed by it. When they dropped me back at the Watkins house, I realised how much we had shared together since that first time we had met. All in short bursts. But, wow, the impact that it had on me was amazing. I remember that feeling very well.

“Albert from da coast. You be libbin da dream, aye,” offered Ronald.

“Them ancestors, they know you wise. You just have to folla your path, aye,” Clancy added.

“I will mate. I’ll try to be as wise as you guys,” I stated.

“You’re our brudda with the tin can car,” Ronald told me, as he started the engine to leave.

“See ya, Albert from da coast,” yelled Clancy.

“See ya, our brudda,” they both yelled as those drove off down Duff Street.

I was sad to see my friends leave, but I also knew that they would be okay. It was a feeling of great respect that I had for them, and humility that I was to be considered their brother. I sat in the gutter and cried.

## **Forty-Four**

I began to notice that artistic thoughts and visions were holding my attention more and more each day. They seemed to fill me with fresh cold chills, regularly. And then a smile would just happen across my face. It was like I had no control. It happened while I was out in the scrub, drilling. I was constantly looking at the landscape and the way people did things. I noticed that when you squinted at the sun your eyes made it look like there was all this blurring, and the sun itself became squashed, like a peach, with the coolest colours evolving abstractedly.

I was constantly thinking to myself, ‘How is it that I could express that’.

In words.

In paint.

In photos. In a sculpture. Would it be an abstract landscape, or a portrait of the emotions that the person is showing?

I tried to share some of this with Percy as we ate at smoko.

“The Fluxus movement! It sounds like something I do in the mornings,” Percy stated.

“If you look at the greats, they had this real sense of absolute completion in their works. Not just going through the motion of life, but actually consecrating their whole being into the realm of artistic expression,” I told him.

“What are you on about? You have no idea what you are saying, do you, really. Have you been drinking the sherry again, Alby?” he asked me.

“You’re a very funny man for a driller, Percy! Have you ever thought about comedy, not as a hobby, but a fulltime career?”

“Nah, not when I’ve got you. You’re funny enough, with all your big statements about art and stuff,” he offered as he headed to the Land Cruiser to get his smokes.

“An abstract ideal that may never be reached, and is enough to be able to drive a person crazy if they let it. Or, does it happen automatically. At this point, I am uncertain,” I told him when he returned.

I know my mother would’ve had something wise to say about it. She would have quoted something from C. J. Dennis or Patrick White or Dickens or Michelangelo, and then smiled at me knowingly as she went about whatever it was that she was doing.

“Define it, get on with it, and enjoy a good laugh about it. That’s what my old mother used to say,” Percy offered as he puffed deep on his dodger.

“Good advice, if you ask me. Did you never take it?” I asked, cheekily.

“As soon as I met you,” he told me as he stood on the rack to check the drill head.

I giggled to myself, and thought about how his life must have been, compared to mine. He’d been drilling for twenty-eight years he told me when I first started.

“That’s twenty-eight years of the same job. The same coldness, smells, unbearable heat and grease covered hands for that long,” I told him.

“Yep,” he smiled.

I knew that this life wasn’t for me, but for now the money was good.

It was hot on this particular day, and as I stood on the rod rack trying to untangle the wire line, the driller was flicking the drill-head up and down trying to help, but that just seemed to be making it worse.

“You’ll have to climb up there on the mast Albert, and give it a good yank,” he told me.

“Righto,” I offered as I turned, jumped down, and noticed off in the distance a car pushing up dust and travelling down the track towards our drill site.

“Hey, Pablo Dickens, or is it Emily Woolfe, I’m never quite certain, but anyway, isn’t that your little miss lover girl come to visit her very intelligent and academic Albert, the artist,” he jibbed at me as I stepped onto the ladder at the side of the rig.

“Could be,” I offered, laughing. “Or maybe it’s that gorgeous wife of yours coming to bring me the hot lunch that she promised.”

“She doesn’t even make me lunch. Why would she bring it for you? Ya arty–farty–poetry–writing–scrawny–little–white–boy?”

“Because I actually talk to her,” I told him.

He laughed his big old belly laugh as I climbed up the masthead and began to untangle the line.

“Good day to you, Miss Watkins,” the driller offered in a very antique manner, holding the peak of his hard hat and tipping forward.

“Hello Percy,” she smiled, straining to see with the sun hitting her eyes.

I smiled to myself as they greeted each other calmly. Looking down, I realised how pretty Angela Louise Watkins actually was. It also reminded me of what Penny had said, when I first came out to see her and Bianca Rose.

“That girl may well be bossy and a bit high strung, but Albert Dennis Braun, she loves you with all that she is. Believe me. When I saw her the day she found out you waz comin, well, I thought her head was gonna fall off. She was smiling that big, and telling her mother what they had to do to get ready for your visit. So, you have a good think about her and what it is you’re gonna do.”

Don’t get me wrong I had a fair idea already, but today I saw her in a different way to any that had gone before. And even though she looked at me as if I was the enemy, I knew that everything had changed as she looked up to where I was perched.



“Now you listen to me young Mister Braun, you have not the means nor the emotional well-being of a vagabond. How dare you not tell me that you are going back to visit your Grandmother?”

“How dare you! I was told by my brother after he went to buy some snacks for you to have on the train. You know that he cannot eat rocky road or cheese, don’t you Albert.” I just shrugged my shoulders and opened my palms up in a gesture of defeat. She wasn’t very pleased that I didn’t respond, and this made her even more irate.

“You are a terrible young man, just terrible. Albert Dennis Braun, it may well be that God has a plan for all of us. And if it is meant to be, we will see each other sooner than we think. But, goodbye for now,” and with that, Angela walked towards her brother’s blue ute, with what looked like steam coming from the top of her head.

I smiled to myself as I managed to untangle the line and started to climb down. What she didn’t know was that I’d planned to ask her to come with me. Only she’d found out about the food and the tickets first. Oscar confessed that night, when I arrived home for dinner. He told me he was sorry, and that I knew what she was like at getting her own way, that it wasn’t his fault, and that he’d tried to hide it all from her. I told him not to worry and that all was well. This seemed to calm him.

Angela and I had always been friends, ever since she told me what it was that I should like about her. And I realised that maybe we were closer than just friends. Angela had fully recovered from being sick and wanted to go to uni to do nursing. She wanted to go to Canberra to do it. Her mum thought it was a good profession, but wanted her to go to Adelaide instead, because it was only five hours away and not a day trip, a sleep over and a packed lunch.

“And that’s just to get half way,” Mrs Watkins told us all at dinner one night.

When I started to think deeply about it, Angela Watkins and I had been friends a very long time, and we had spent some quality time together. I'd told her things only she knew, and had been there through all her own issues as well. Us boys are a little thick at times, I know, but hey, all I could do was be myself. I didn't know if she was totally upset or just teasing me, so I left her ticket on her pillow after dinner and waited.

She made me wait all that night to find out. It wasn't until the next morning, when I discovered her sitting at the kitchen table dressed in her best, with her suitcase placed poetically near the door that I was forgiven.

"I do believe you have a travelling companion, young man," Mrs Watkins told me as she served up vegemite toast and sweet tea with honey.

"Looks like it, Mrs Watkins," I offered.

We ended up back on the coast to visit with Grandma and Sally-Pearl at about eleven o'clock that night. We were picked up in Grandma's tin can.

They both seemed to like Angela straight away. Even grandma was excited.

"Get da bags," she told me, as Sally-Pearl hugged Angela, and Grandma softly touched the bottom of Angela's hair like it was a butterfly or silk or something.

I was totally ignored on the trip home, and was told to make a pot of tea while the three of them sat and talked and jibbered on about all sorts of stuff.

"Nice girl, yah. Has good hips for babies, yah," Grandma told me as we cleared away the table after a very late supper.

"You be nice too her, yah. Got it," Grandma looked me straight in the eye when she said this.

Sally-Pearl had the biggest smile on her face, the whole time we were there. Even Bert seemed to warm to Angela. We had walked to his place and the station the next day for some exercise.

“I’ll be over tomorrow to visit,” he told us as we left the little shop at Warnervale Station.

It was even more noticeable when we all gathered for lunch the next day.

“Not too shabby, Mister Albert. Not too shabby at all,” he offered, as we went to feed the pigs down at the back shack.

Sitting at the lunch table, taking in the smells, the sunshine and the scenery, Bert handed Grandma some cured meat and me an art book, a new brush and an old tin, smiling.

“This tin was given to me by your mother for Christmas, the year before you were born. It was full of biscuits. They tasted great,” he added.

The tin had a bird on it that was eating a cracker, and on the top of the tin were the words ‘Arnott’s Biscuits.’

“Go on, open it up, young fella,” offered Bert, excitedly.

He also seemed a little nervous.

I jimmied the lid open, and a cloud of dust swam from it. Inside there were some paper clippings of the accident, a card that my mother had given him with a photo of the artwork ‘Blue Poles’ on it, a photo of all of us together, and an old bankbook. I noticed that when I open the bankbook the account was in my name, and it was filled with entries that dated back to the day I was born. The amount of the money was into the thousands.

Bert went on to tell us that he’d been putting money in it most every week, and extra whenever he could. The fact that he had been putting money away for me to have when I finished school, and that he had brought a new writing journal and some brushes for me to paint with, made me feel so grateful. I began to well up with tears as I reached out and hugged him.

“You’re a good boy, Albert. I hope it helps in some way,” he stated, as we shared our man moment.

We discussed the photos and the accident. Bert told me that he was still angry, but that he was happy he could help me out in some the way.

“It’s a sign, Albert,” Sally-Pearl told me later, as we washed up and began getting ready for dinner.

“It means something. You’ll see soon.”

I smiled and didn’t say anything.

On the way over on the train, Angela had asked me if we could have a bit of a look around while we were on the coast. I decided to take her to the lake. Grandma dropped us off at the footy fields I used to play on, and we walked along the lakefront and across the Toukley Bridge into town. I was also keen to show her the ocean, and we had all agreed that would happen on the weekend. But the lakefront was good enough to start with. She enjoyed the walking and looking and we held hands for most of it. She even seemed less uptight which, for her, I thought was quite an achievement.

As we sat waiting, the seagulls that had surrounded us squawked and struggled against each other for the few scraps that lay on the sand near where we sat. They became very loud and then, all of a sudden, they all moved away as a new group arrived at the small wall near the edge of the lake.

They were offering fresh hot chips.

We watched as the seagulls dive-bombed the fried potatoes and then attempt to dodge the litter on the beach. There were straws, coffee cups, lids, cigarette butts and even an old abandoned nappy scattered on the ground.

Angela began playing with the sand near us. I watched as the moist mounds moved within her fingers, ever so gracefully. Angela smiled as it fell and moulded on the shore.

This seemed to calm her even more.

“The task of playing with no outcome, no decisions, nothing to be analysed and no lists to complete, seems quite far away sometimes,” she stated with irony.

“I remember when we were little, and the time we played at the beach in Adelaide when I was about seven. It was in the rock pool, and the rock wall had been pushed out the day before to make it larger. We watched as the huge digger flung the large rocks, like we might throw pebbles into the ocean. It was very exciting, but when we got to the pool the next day, we were so scared and didn’t want to go in. There were all kinds of dead sea creatures and ocean stuff, and Oliver and I created the idea that they must’ve been making it bigger for the sharks. So there must be sharks in there and if there were sharks, imagine what else would be swimming around with us. So we went and dug in the sand instead. We began building and shaping all manner of creations that looked like sandcastles,” Angela stated.

“And I remember how they would fall down if the sand wasn’t wet enough, or if the side was weak at one point.”

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled at her. I tried not to show the confusion in my face, but I’m unsure if I was successful.

“It reminds me of how all of life is a sandcastle. How it’s built, and washed away endlessly by the tides. Well, at least that’s what some people would say.”

“That’s my earliest memory of building sandcastles in the sky, and never ever did I ever doubt it, always believing that it would come true,” she stated, while looking directly at my hands.

“Do you like your sandcastles?” she asked me.

“Yes, I certainly do,” I announced.

“Good! Young Mister Braun, you are very wise, be sure to hold onto that,” Angela told me.

We met Grandma and Sally-Pearl at the Seafood Co-op near the Toukley Bridge early in the afternoon. She was in a mood as we got in the tin can car, and when we arrived back at the house she seemed to get herself into even more of a flap.

“She’s been to the lawyer place,” Sally-Pearl told me as she made a pot of tea for everyone. Grandma came back from her room and was holding two envelopes in her hand.

“Ere. Dis is for you,” she said, shoving them into my hands. I placed the teapot down awkwardly as I tried to hold the envelopes. I opened the one Grandma pointed to first.

It was a letter from a solicitor’s office. On the front it had Messrs. Hall, Jacobs and Sidebottom, Pitt St, Sydney, with my name at the bottom in the right-hand corner.

“Money it’s been kept by some crow. Look, look,” Grandma said, impatiently.

The second letter was also addressed to me.

It was from my mother.

She used to sign everything with a little flick at the top of the last letter of her name. She did it because it meant ‘more’ in French or something. That’s what I remember her telling me when I had asked her one-day at the Post Office.

The date on the letter was around the time that we’d been in the car accident and my legs had been broken, and she’d gone to hospital. At least that’s what Sally-Pearl told me, as everyone sat staring at me, waiting for that letter to be opened.

“It was the time you were sick, Albert. Remember your legs and ya mothers crazy fever,” she offered.

“Yah, Yah,” added Grandma.

The terms of my mothers will were outlined in the solicitor’s papers, and so I told the details to grandma, as best I could understand them. Sally-Pearl sat silently, smiling, while Angela held my hand. I was dazed as I read through what the papers said.

“So, you vill go, yah? To the universities,” offered Grandma, firmly.

I didn't respond.

I left them sitting there and put both letters in my room as Angela and Sally-Pearl got dinner ready. We had potato pancakes, sauerkraut and some bread that Sally-Pearl had made.

The next day, I walked to the station and caught the train into Wyong. I went to the library and found the biggest dictionary I could. It was a Macquarie. I looked up the word 'Escrow'. It read: *Money or property or a written bond kept in the custody of a third party until a specified condition has been met.*

According to the papers the conditions outlined were for me to complete the HSC at Stannies, and then enrol in the Creative Arts program at the Australian National University. Once this happened, I would then be able to access funds that had been held in trust.

And on completion of a Creative Arts Degree in our nations capital, go on to share with the world all my apparent inner artistic ability. The cost of study and living would be paid for by the trust account, and then the rest of the money that was invested would be used for 'my *growth and development* within the artistic realm'.

According to my mother's thinking, and her letter, by doing this I would then be able to gain access to the National Gallery and other opportunities in Australia, as well as overseas, and live the life that she always knew that I was able to fulfil.

It seemed that I was wealthy enough, according to the solicitor's letter, to be able to pursue my artistic future, have an exhibition a year, and be able to support myself and future family while I wrote, painted and created whatever I chose to. But again, I asked the question, why me? The money was great, but I would much rather have had my mother back for just a day. One lousy day was all I have ever asked for. We could start that very last day again, and say goodbye properly. I went home, confused.

"Is there anything I can do for you Albert," Angela asked.

“No, I’m fine,” I offered.

“Okay. I will help with dinner then if you like. Sally-Pearl is making your favourite,” she stated, turning and walking towards the house.

## **Forty-Five**

I finally read the letter my mother had written for me, as I sat under the tree.

*Dear Son,*

*You Albert Dennis Braun are my little expressionist. You have I am sure my little man grown up. Grown so very much in so very many, many ways. Of that I am certain.*

*Your grandma would have been helpful in that area. She was always a great cook. And Sally-Pearl. How is she going? I know she would have looked after you.*

*The kind nurse is writing this for me. I feel tired Albert. I want to rest. They say I have an infection, but they are working on it and doing all they can.*

*I’m lying in hospital thinking about you my little man. And wondering what will become of you. You may never know why we do certain things or why some circumstances happen, they just do. I know in my heart that you will be all that it is you should be.*

*It is your journey Albert that matters. But remember we all have a calling and deserve the right to be all that we can be. So you will receive this letter and the one from the solicitor when it is time. They will know, when the time is right for all of this to be real. Remember when we chatted about all those great artists and writers. I watched as you smiled and took in all that I said about them. And what about those funny voices we would do. I know in my heart that you will always remember what it is you deserve.*

*It’s all inside ‘you’ my little man.*

*Greatness will arrive when you least expect it and will allow you to be the you that is desired. The person that you wish to offer the world is the person that you need to trust the*



*most. The man in the mirror Albert.*

*That is who you have to answer to.*

*That is who you need to honour.*

*I Love You Albert and know that you will fly.*

*Yours lovingly always.*

I thought to myself, ‘She must have known something, or why else would she have written the letter in this way. Perhaps she knew that she would one day be in an accident on a train on the way back to us. And not make it home. And perhaps she knew that the man they called my father would be so mean that I would never want to be like him. Ever. Or that I would be the person she dreamed of, and still be myself. Who knows!’

All I can say is that it’d been a crazy ride since coming back on the train. No wait, ever since I can remember! I was now the recipient of a significant sum of money that would be allocated for me each month by the trust fund, and any needs that I had were going to be met by this. This crow, that grandma thought was odd.

Food.

Accommodation.

The opportunity to travel overseas and the chance to hold some exhibitions were all things that were now very achievable.

That night I spoke with Angela about all that happened since we arrived on the coast. She ‘just knew’ that it was a positive thing and that that all of it, no matter what I chose to do, would be alright. She was so calm and told me that “No matter what I did it, would work out.” I am reminded that Angela didn’t tell me what to do or boss me around in any way, and come to think of it, neither did Grandma or Sally-Pearl.

But still I had absolutely no idea what I was going to do. I remember thinking ‘wow, what choices I have’. The biggest one in front of me was to be true to the world, as well as myself, right then. I had some thinking to do.

## **Forty-Six**

It was the day before Christmas Eve, or ‘Christmas Eve Eve’ as Swamp had always liked to call it, and we were all sitting on Grandma’s porch area, eating her sugar cake. I was looking forward to celebrating Christmas with everyone, and I was also looking forward to going back to the Hill for New Year’s Eve. Angela was keen for us to spend some time with her family, and to talk about what had happened, and what the potential future choices were. Scary. Well, I thought so anyway.

But I remember that I was thinking more about what the man they called my father would be doing over Christmas. I know it seems odd, but that’s how I felt.

So I wrote to him. I didn’t know if he would ever want or be able to read it or even receive it, but still I wrote.

*Dear Mr Bailey,*

*I am writing to you because it’s time I let you know of the one thing that you taught me. I totally believe that you really have no idea you’ve given me this gift.*

*The simple truth is I never wanted to or ever will be like you.*

*Whilst it never seemed fair, that you did all that you did, however I realise that you were doing what you knew how to do. You showed me how not to live. The most dramatic experiences only tend to make us stronger as people. This I now realise. And for this I am very grateful.*

*Your former girl friend told me once that if someone offers you a gift and you don’t accept that gift to whom does the gift belong. I would say it belongs to the giver. The*

*sadness, the fear, the pain and despair are all yours.*

*I am so very grateful that I was able to experience all of that. And it is you that I am grateful to. I am also certain that all that happened while I was staying with you, will not be of much concern for you, but just maybe one day you will see that you, the man they call my father, has done some good. I will make certain of that by living my life true to myself and with kindness.*

*I forgive and most of all I thank you.*

*Yours Sincerely,*

*Albert Dennis Braun*

Again, it was a moment that I remember very clearly. The clarity still seems so perfect. That same night I dreamt of my mother. In the dream I thanked her for all that she had done, all that she had shown me, and all that she had asked of me.

Even though I will always miss her, I knew she was with me.

I guess that's why I have talked about, and to, her so often. But I still don't tell too many people about that.

Grandma has always been there for me, and that was good to know. I also believe Sally-Pearl is one of the kindest, wisest and most compassionate human beings to have ever walked this planet. Really cool. A mother by default. Who would've thought a little boy from the bush would have more than one mother. I was definitely going to continue to visit them from time to time, just to make sure that they kept cooking such nice food.

I couldn't have them losing their touch, now could I?

## **Forty-Seven**

As I stood on the steps, everyone pushing past to get into the lecture hall I held my head high and felt ready for the artistic journey that had been instilled in me, from before I

was even born. Even though the large campus and the crazy aggression of the students scared the crap out of me, I still felt very positive about the process, as I entered and looked to begin my life in the world of art, confidently. This was about honouring my mother and making the decision to go to art school, and therefore honouring myself. A success, but by doing it my way, and not how the world tells people they should.

When we are offered opportunities, we also have major choices to make. That's what our lives are made up of. That's what I remember most about that moment. I recall the past events in my life and the effects on me. The choices that had allowed me to grow, and the energy that was now all coming to a tipping point. Good and bad.

The lecturer coughed, cleared his throat, and began.

"Now, who in here has heard of Doo shomp? That's spelt D-u-c-h-a-m-p. Anyone at all," he asked, and gesturing to the lecture hall.

"Does anyone here know what a toilet is? The boys might recognise this more than the females in the room."

Everyone laughed as he placed an image in the projector and it lit up the screen. It was a photo of a very early urinal, which had been signed with the name R. Mutt on the side.

"Who here thinks this is art?"

A few hands sheepishly went up, but I was unsure of where he was going.

"This is art. This is a concept that allows you, the observer, to offer yourself and your ideas in any realm at any time at any point to any person. Take that away with you, and you will not need to ever worry about what you think art is and, more to the point what anyone else thinks about your art," he stated with passion.

"Has anyone ever heard of a book called *War and Peace*, or perhaps an obscure writer that went by the name of Dickens?" he added.

Most of the hands in the lecture theatre went up.

“Well, all is not lost, just yet I suppose. Now, who can tell me why it is that they are here in this place doing this degree? Who can tell me with feeling, with emotion and with true conviction, as to why they’re here,” he boomed the last question, and so began the first of many lectures in that room by Dr Morehouse.

You may have noticed I wasn’t too sure about this art stuff when I was younger, and I have said so many, many times. It always seemed that it was forced onto me. Even when I seemed keen, I wasn’t totally committed. Like religion is for some people.

But, I found spirituality in the oddest of places, and I have found art from within myself. In a very roundabout way, I know, but still, here I was, about to step into the future, and perhaps only God and my mother truly knew what was going to happen. I recognised that it was an opportunity to grow and learn each day.

To be all that we can be, and not fall back from adversity! Not run from our inner artist, our dharma, if there is the slightest hiccup, but to stand tall and be the full person we are here on this planet, in this life. Whatever and whoever that is! I realised in that lecture that all was not what I thought it was, and neither would it ever be.

It just is. No right or wrong, just different.

Later that afternoon, I was standing in my first art studio prac lesson, filled with many, many thoughts. I was calm, but also excited, as the lecturer wandered over to discuss my work.

“Albert, this lyrical emotional lineage that you have offered here, where do you see this leading?” she asked.

“It was more the fluidity of the space in-between that was of most interest when I began. I feel that the spatial juxtaposition of the content is of more importance to the creative elements. The not seen, that’s what interests me most,” I offered.

As the lecturer looked at me, with a smile and a nod of academic approval, I realised that my own creative space was actually internal and already known, that the journey was here and most definitely in the 'now'.

"This may well be your ah-ha moment young man," she stated, walking away.

I asked myself, as I took on board the lecturers comments, 'Am I ready for where the journey may well take me, and am I really blessed with the many gifts that everyone talks about. Or am I destined to sully about like a la-la, and not fill the destiny that so many have stated is within me'. There was no answer. It was just about being involved, acting on your dharma, and feeling your way through life, creatively and honestly.

Whoever knows what it is that we are destined for, and with whom we are destined to be, each moment of each day. What I do know, though, is that all this belongs to me. To Albert Dennis Braun, grandson of a crazy old German woman, surrogate son of an indigenous angel and a loving mother who has passed.

I know that this was my story. My life. And I have to embrace it as mine, always. Just like the rest of the world who have choices to make everyday. But making the ones that matter, now that is the big part, and not backing away from what is placed in and on your life path.

I told you at the very beginning that this is my version.

This is how I remember it. It is the memory now of the reading then of what was happening at the time, my memory and the many, many moments to cherish, be baffled by and to experience, or something to that effect. It did hurt at times but it very often made me smile. So, here we are to this very moment.

I am glad that I told you, because now I can get on with the rest of my life.

I am The Expressionist, and this is what I have remembered.

True, real life.