

## PREFACE

In the bathroom of the bakery house, the bare-chested boxer fronts up to the mirror. He adjusts his stance, raises his fists and tucks his chin. His face takes on a faraway look, like he's back in the ring perhaps, in another time and place. His hands flash through the air, accompanied by short tight breaths. *Phh phh phh* goes the right fist, *phh phh* goes the left. Right – *phh*. Left – *phh phh*. The punches and breaths have a rhythm, a timbre, like music. His children wander in and use the hand basin, where they brush their teeth and prepare for bed with the familiar sound of *phh phh* coming from the other side of the bathroom. They know not to interrupt their father while he boxes with his other self.

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I take out a photo of Joey and his Opa at the beach, and put it on the wall above my computer. They've just made an extravaganza of a sandcastle and are sitting back on the sand, looking pleased with themselves. When I was a child, my father built me similar sandcastles – huge mounds covered in turrets and decorated with shells – that stood grandly on the shore. He was always good like that with Joey, too, even though Joey didn't make it easy for him. When Joey was a baby, he often struggled and screamed at sleep-time, but my father would sit in the room with him and play

classical guitar until Joey fell asleep. The crying never seemed to bother him. As a toddler, Joey liked to run away from his Opa when they were at the beach or the park – and my father, who had bad knees, couldn't chase after him. He'd be calling for him to come back, petrified that Joey would fall from the rocks into the sea, or run across the road into traffic. One time, when Joey was eight, he and my father were playing cards, and when Joey didn't win, he kicked his Opa in the leg. My father didn't get angry. He just said in his thick Dutch accent: 'That was not a very nice thing to do, Joey. You can't always win in life.'

My father wasn't always so calm and measured. He was once a boxer, and a baker, and the master of any fight with words. After a long day in the bakery, he would hang over his plate at the end of the dinner table and bait and criticise my three siblings, who were already teenagers by the time I was five. My father's recurring themes centred on how ungrateful his children were, how they didn't help enough around the house or try hard enough at school, and how their friends were the wrong sort of people. 'Is this what we came to Australia for?' he would ask. I lived through years of yelling and arguments over dinner, watching as my siblings tried to oppose my father, while my mother sat by and said nothing. Every time, my brothers or my sister – big, strong teenagers – crumpled before him, often running from the table in tears.

As a child, I cried to our corgi. I curled up with him in his kennel as the fights raged inside the house. By the time I was a teenager, I knew not to fight.

# I

## *Winter 2007*

### Joining the pack

The Iron Man Welders meet on Sundays in an old council depot on the edge of Armidale, a university town in northern New South Wales. I recently volunteered to help out with this program for troubled teenage boys, an initiative led by a maverick youth worker called Bernie Shakeshaft. Not that I'm a welder or a youth worker – I'm a trained English language teacher. But I only work part-time these days because I'm also a part-time PhD student, a wife, and a mother of four boys who range in age from two to sixteen. I was just looking for some answers.

About a year ago, Bernie had a vision of a welding project that would build on the strengths of a group of young men who had dropped out of high school but weren't ready for work. He asked the Armidale community to help out. The local council offered him the depot, which had once been a welding workshop and was lying empty, as if waiting for Bernie and the boys to come along and claim it.

There was nothing in the huge shed, not even a power lead. The boys turned up each weekend and worked hard to clean and create their own workplace. They borrowed nearly everything, from brooms to welding equipment, and started collecting

recycled steel for the first batch of products they planned to make and then sell at the monthly markets. Local welding businesses gave scrap metal; people lent grinders, extension cords and old work boots.

Then the money started coming in. A local builder forked out the first five hundred dollars. The bowling club gave a thousand and a steel-manufacturing business donated a MIG welder. The credit union offered to draw up a business and marketing plan, organised insurance, and contributed a thousand dollars for equipment. A nearby mine donated another thousand and raised the possibility of apprenticeships for the boys, and the New South Wales Premier's Department handed over a grant worth five thousand dollars. It seemed like every week Bernie and the boys were in the local paper, celebrating some new success.

I saw a photo of Bernie in the paper, surrounded by a group of boys, their faces beaming with happiness and pride. At the time, I was having a lot of trouble with my sixteen-year-old son Joey, who had left home but boarded in a house nearby. I was worried about him and didn't like the way he was drifting through life – no job, no direction, living off Centrelink payments, sleeping in till midday. As I looked at the happy faces in the photo, something stirred inside me. I wanted to be part of it: the Iron Man Welders.

The next day I heard Bernie on the radio, seeking community support for the project. 'We'll take any positive contribution,' he said. His words sounded clipped and tight, like he wasn't one for mucking around. 'Whether you've got a pile of old steel or timber in your backyard, or if you've got an idea, or if you like working with young people and you're prepared to come down to the shed and work one-on-one with some of these kids ...'

On impulse I rang. I was interested in learning more about boys and alternative forms of education – for both personal and

academic reasons – but I'd never used power tools, let alone done any welding. I liked bushwalking, baking cakes. I enjoyed order, cleanliness, silence. What was I thinking?

Right from the start, though, the boys were gracious in accepting a 42-year-old woman into their grimy world. With my short brown hair, and in my King Gees and work boots, I don't stick out too much. The boys find easy jobs for me to do – like filing washers for candleholders or scrubbing rust off horseshoes. I sweep the floor, watch what's going on, listen to what they want to tell me. The fellas who come along are the sort of misfits you see wandering the streets of any country town, with nothing to do, nowhere to go. Once, I might have crossed the street to avoid them.

Most of the Iron Man Welders didn't 'engage positively' with the education system. Not one finished Year 12 and some barely made it through Year 10. One was expelled in Year 10 for 'kissing his missus in the schoolyard', another told a teacher to 'fuck off' on a ski trip because the teacher wouldn't stop hassling him, and another finished Year 10 at TAFE because he was about to be kicked out of school and reckoned the teachers didn't like him anyway. The welding shed is a different story. They love it. Bernie gives them the chance to take responsibility for their lives, to engage on their own terms with the community.

The first Sunday I joined them, it was the middle of autumn. I walked in carrying a tray of freshly baked brownies. Self-conscious in my new dark-blue work clothes, I huddled from the cold in the open-sided tin shed. Music blared from an old radio, and thumping and grinding noises came from the machines. Sparks flashed; everyone dragged on rollies, littering every sentence with 'shit' and 'fuck'. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself not to panic.

Thommo, a stocky bloke in his late teens, took me on a tour. His voice rumbled softly, and I could barely hear what he was saying as he showed me the kitchen area, the main workspace, and a forge he'd built in a dark side room that brought to mind a scene from the Middle Ages: flickering fire, hammers and anvil, dirt floor, open drain, a rusty tap jutting out from the wall.

He led me towards a shelf at one end of the shed to show me a range of candleholders, nutcrackers, penholders and coat hooks made from horseshoes. I noticed a smartly presented copy of the Iron Man Welders' business plan, and several glass-framed photos: Thommo bent over the anvil, hammering a piece of a glowing-red metal; Bernie and about eight boys slouched in front of his yellow ute; and a young bloke with curly hair using a grinder, a halo of sparks around his head.

Bernie doesn't actually seem to know much about welding. Every so often I hear him say, 'No point asking me questions about welding shit' – but that might be his way of throwing the decision-making back onto the boys. He knows the basics, like what processes are involved in different jobs, but most of the fellas have the edge on him. Some are doing TAFE certificates in engineering, following on from their school studies.

Along with understanding the welding and power tools, I'm also keen to learn more about boys. You'd think I'd know enough with four of my own, but I've probably made every mistake there is, especially with Joey.

Joey moved out of home when he was fifteen, just over twelve months ago. Years of anger and rage, windows getting smashed and police knocking on the door had forced the decision. Thinking back, it was just crazy adolescent behaviour. I probably had similar scenes with my parents in my teenage years, but I didn't break things and I wasn't as loud or angry. My husband

Rob – Joey’s step-father – and I could have handled the conflict better, but we didn’t know how back then. We didn’t understand Joey and he didn’t understand us. Our home life was an ongoing battle of wills, with escalating scenes of conflict occurring on a daily basis.

Joey used to play thumping loud rap music in his bedroom. Although he never played it at full volume, it was always too loud for me, and if Rob or I asked Joey to turn it down because the baby was sleeping, he’d rant about how ‘unjust’ we were. Whenever we attempted to impose some sort of control over his behaviour, Joey would go wild. I’ve never been good at confrontation, and I found it impossible to reason with him. He’d yell so loudly I’d just give up and walk away, anxious to keep the peace. One day he shouted so much that a neighbour called the police. When I saw the police at the door, I waved them inside – ‘Please explain to my son that it’s not appropriate to yell so loud the whole street hears.’

Something had to change. Neither Rob nor I were good at handling stress; we were like two nuclear reactors heading for a major meltdown at any moment. The tension in the house was tangible. I didn’t want my younger boys growing up in an environment where people were always fighting and angry, and I didn’t want my relationship with Joey to be based around anger. I wanted to see him do well in life – he had a lively and inquisitive mind, a zany sense of humour, a passion for music and loads of potential. He also had a family who loved him deeply, but our tension-filled environment was bringing us all down.

Then, one afternoon, Henry, our second youngest, got a lift home from school with another mother, Anne. Henry must have mentioned our troubles because she came into the house and asked me what was going on. After I’d finished telling her, she said: ‘How about Joey lives at my house for a few weeks, while

you and Rob get some counselling and work out what to do?’ I was overcome, speechless with gratitude, unable to believe that someone – practically a stranger – was offering to help. At the time, it seemed like a positive step. When Joey came home, Anne asked if he wanted to come and stay with her teenage son in a converted shed in her backyard. He nodded, packed his bags and left. And that’s how Joey left home.

The house breathed again, but my boy was gone. For weeks, grief, guilt, relief and love rolled around inside me. I didn’t miss all the shouting and door slamming ... but I missed Joey’s funny stories and jokes, and I missed *him*. Anne gave us the number of a respected psychologist in town, and Rob and I started a mediation process with Joey. But after the first session, the mediator said she wouldn’t be able to work with us. She didn’t explain why, but I think her concerns were more about the way Rob and I were behaving as parents rather than how Joey was behaving as a confused teenager. While Joey was staying at Anne’s, she invited me to dinner one night. I watched as her husband threw frozen vegetables into huge pots of boiling water, whacked various frozen pies in and out of the microwave, and piled mountains of food onto people’s plates. We ate in front of the television, with the dinner plates balanced on our knees. Joey couldn’t stop smiling, and after dinner he and Anne’s son did the washing up. Anne’s house was chaos, mess everywhere, but it suited Joey. I could see that they genuinely cared for him. But, after two months, when it began to look as though Joey wouldn’t be returning home anytime soon, Anne approached a local church on our behalf and asked the minister if any ‘empty nesters’ in the congregation wanted a boarder. An older couple volunteered to help, and Joey moved in with them. During that time, Joey came around nearly every afternoon, and he often had dinner with us, too. We began

to have more good times than bad, and I began to see a brighter future for our family.

Joey was still at high school then, more than bright enough to do further study. But after months of garbage duty, behaviour-level cards, and several long-term suspensions, he left school at the end of Year 9.

‘Better to leave now than be expelled next year,’ the deputy principal at the time had advised. ‘He can always do Year 10 at TAFE.’

It wasn’t the right decision. Joey’s new friends, in their baggy pants and back-to-front caps, gathered out the front of TAFE each morning, smoking and laughing like they were the lucky ones. Maybe they were, and maybe school would have damaged them further, but after a few weeks, Joey and his friends stopped attending most of their classes. I often see them down the mall these days, slumped on benches near the courthouse or hanging around the toddlers’ playground.

If only Joey was coming to the shed each week, slowly ‘getting his shit together’ like the others. He’d been to the shed a couple of times with one of his TAFE friends, and I often encouraged him to give it another go, but he wasn’t interested.

‘I’m a lone wolf,’ Joey says whenever I pester him about coming down.

I think it’s time he joined the rest of the pack.

## The scent of an idiot

About a dozen boys turn up at the shed each Sunday, and after a few more weeks of filing washers and scrubbing horseshoes, I start

getting to know them all. I notice Gazza during a group meeting late one afternoon. He seems more serious than the others, a *real* worker in his baggy overalls, cap pulled down hard over his eyes. Next to him I feel like an impostor in my King Gees, the factory creases still visible, my work boots shiny and new.

Snow has been falling in the high country over the weekend and outside is threatening sleet, but we stand near the open shed doors so the boys can smoke. ‘We’ve got six hundred things started,’ says Bernie, his hair ruffling in the wind, ‘but we’re not finishing anything. I think we need groups – have someone who’s shit-hot at welding working with some new fellas. You blokes decide what jobs are most important. The sooner we get started, the sooner we can hook in.’

Bernie throws a piece of chalk over to a boy who begins to write names on the dusty concrete floor. The others stand in a circle around him – choosing group leaders, assistant leaders, offering comments. They decide to have groups of five: two who can weld, two who are handy enough to cut, and one new bloke who can start on easier jobs.

‘Crackin’ idea,’ says Bernie, looking down at the lists. ‘Seeing you blokes take a lead on this is really great!’

From behind, I feel a blast of heat from the forge room. I turn to see the fire raging and two boys sitting next to it on upturned milk crates: Thommo, thick-set and moustachioed, who showed me around on my first day, and his mate Freckles, who has the fine features and demeanour of a devious elf. They nod at me with raised eyebrows and guilty smiles.

‘What did they throw on the fire?’ I ask Gazza, who is busy writing job lists on the whiteboard.

He turns around, lifting the brim of his cap to see. ‘Kero,’ he mutters disapprovingly. ‘Fuckin’ idiots.’

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Most of the Iron Men were recruited from a school welding program that ran the previous year. The local TAFE had asked Bernie, a youth worker known for his unconventional methods, to manage a new welding program for disengaged youth. Bernie agreed and approached the principals of Armidale's two public high schools with a proposal: each could select the group of Year 10 boys who were most in danger of not making it through the year, and he would work with them at TAFE each Friday. The principals readily agreed. For the rest of the year, Bernie taught those boys how to 'fly under the radar' and keep out of trouble at school, while the metal engineering teacher taught them how to weld. That group of boys all made it through Year 10.

One day, as Bernie and I sat together on the concrete ledge outside the shed, I'd asked him what the boys were like when he first met them. He shook his head and grimaced: 'They were the wildest bunch of hoorangs I ever came across!'

I laughed at his pained expression. He found his tobacco and rolled a cigarette, his habitual way of settling in for a chat.

'There were some damaged kids in that group,' said Bernie, his voice low. 'It was almost too late to start with them. Hardcore kids on the edge of going inside for violent bashings, already identified as hopeless troublemakers, a lot of them living away from home. For sixteen years they'd heard the only thing that matters is getting a school certificate, and then to be told: "It's all bullshit. You guys aren't going to get there." Bernie gave a scornful huff. 'The schools hadn't worked on the strengths and dreams of those kids.'

He paused for a moment to light his smoke. 'It was like getting a bag full of wild cats and letting them out in one room where they couldn't escape. The schools kept saying I had to stick with the rules ... that the boys weren't allowed to smoke or swear.'

Bernie whistled through his teeth. ‘For Christ’s sake, you send me twenty of your wildest boys – all full-on swearers and smokers and blasphemers – and tell me to enforce the school rules? It was wild!’ He grinned, his face alive with the memory. ‘We had knives pulled in the welding shed, and just as soon as you’d be finished with the knife incident, the boss man from college would be yelling, “What the hell is that kid doing up on top of that three-storey building?!”’ The boys would show up black and blue, on the piss and smoking bongos. Not all of them ended up here at the shed – some did well, some not so well. One of them died, another’s in jail.’

‘It’s hard to believe the boys were like that.’ I thought of Thommo with his quiet dignity. ‘Was Thommo that wild?’

Bernie rolled his eyes and groaned. ‘He was the craziest! He and his mates were riding bikes into poles and dropping garbage bins on each other’s heads from the highest roof at school. Whatever someone did that was dangerous, Thommo did something double-dangerous. Thommo wouldn’t just jump off the third storey of the building – he’d want to jump through three sheets of glass as well. Taking it to extremes. Crazy self-mutilation stuff.’

We sat quietly for a moment.

‘I did a lot of that as a kid myself,’ said Bernie. ‘Hardly a bone in my body I haven’t broken – from having no fear or need for self-preservation. Dealing with those kids rang a lot of bells for me because, all those years ago, I would’ve been one of those wild cats let out of the bag.’

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In the makeshift kitchen at the shed, I make a cup of tea to warm my hands and then wander back to join the boys who are still

gathered near the door. I notice Freckles has retreated from the fire in the forge and is showing the others a bandage on his arm. Someone says, 'We could all brand our chests: Iron Man Branding!' I sidle up to Bernie to ask what they mean.

'Hey, Freckles,' he calls over. 'Tell Helena about branding.'

Freckles looks a little sheepish, but explains what happened. A few weeks before, he'd heated up a bottle-opener embossed with a turtle and pressed the red-hot end onto his forearm. 'I left it on the skin too long,' he says. Two weeks later, when he finally went to the doctor, he discovered he had a third-degree burn.

'Did you tell the doctor how you did it?' asks Gazza.

'Yeah,' says Freckles, in a 'Why wouldn't I?' tone.

We all laugh.

'Love the fuckin' honesty!' says Bernie, giving Freckles a pat on the back as he walks by, grinning like a proud father because Freckles told the truth, even though branding himself was a stupid thing to do.

Later, when everyone is gone, I talk with Bernie about Gazza. 'He seems keen.'

Bernie reaches into the pocket of his jeans for his tobacco. 'Gazza's a bit older than the others. He's been driving around on Sunday mornings and getting the boys out of bed, taking on the responsibility. He'd be here at six if he could. I'm thinking of giving him a key to the shed. The boys listen to him – he could keep them working.'

'That'd be good for him,' I say, thinking of those serious eyes underneath the peak of his cap. 'He's different to the others.'

'Three or four years ago he would have been like the rest,' says Bernie. 'I don't know his story – he's only been coming along for a few months – but I reckon he was a bit of an idiot.' He clicks his

lighter under his rollie, drawing in hard. ‘It helps. Idiots respect other idiots. They can smell it – the scent of an idiot.’

## What’s updog?

A few nights later, washing up after dinner, I hear the click of the side-gate. A dark-haired figure lopes past the window and Rob calls out, ‘Joey’s here.’ My body tenses, my heartbeat quickens. If only I could be more relaxed when Joey comes over, but experience has taught me otherwise. I never know what sort of mood he’ll be in. Who will Joey be today, I wonder – Mr Happy, Mr Sad, or Mr Angry?

‘Hi, Mum!’ he says as he comes through the back door. I glance up from the sink. He’s smiling broadly, his brown eyes alight with mischief. Mr Happy.

I smile back and relax a little, thinking how handsome he is when he’s in a good mood. ‘How’s things, Joey?’

‘Good ... good.’ He leans against the kitchen bench and sniffs deeply. ‘It smells like updog in here.’

‘Hmmm ...’ I murmur, keeping my response minimal, wondering what he’s up to. Theo comes out of his room, still dressed in his high school uniform. Joey calls his brother over. ‘Don’t you reckon it smells like updog in here?’

‘What’s updog?’ asks Theo.

‘Nuttin’, dog,’ answers Joey in a thick gangsta accent and a big grin. ‘What’s up wit’ you?’

Theo reddens, caught out, while I chuckle over the dishes. Joey can be very funny.

‘Want to go for a drive, Mum?’

Night drives have almost become a ritual with Joey and me since he moved out of home. I tell myself it's our quality time, an opportunity for us to talk without the other kids around, but it doesn't usually turn out that way.

'Not really,' I say with a sigh. 'It's been a long day.' But I know two-year-old Freddie is nearly asleep, and Henry is trying to finish his homework. I also know how hard it is for Joey to be quiet. I grab the keys from the top of the fridge. 'Maybe just a short one.'

As I reverse onto the street, Joey plugs his MP3 adaptor into the cassette player. The thumping beat of rap fills the car. The music is so loud people stare as we go past. Each time I turn down the volume, Joey turns it up even louder. I shouldn't have agreed to go out with him. 'Put on a song that doesn't have so much swearing!' I snap. 'I don't want to hear "motherfucker" over and over!'

'Alright, alright,' he says, searching through his songs. 'You don't need to get angry. Let's do a lap around town and check out Hungry Jack's.'

I drive around the block, annoyed with myself. Why do I do this week after week, when my life is already so busy? As we cruise past the back of Hungry Jack's, a local hangout, Joey scans the crowd for someone he knows.

'Stop here a minute,' he says, leaping out to ask the whereabouts of one of his friends. I wait in the car, a faithful servant. When he jumps back in, we drive to an address in Girraween, a housing commission area on the other side of town. I already know this won't be a 'short drive'. Joey doesn't seem to notice when I purse my lips and exhale loudly with frustration.

We stop in front of a brick house. Joey gets out to see if his friend is home. While he's chatting at the door, I remember a

phone call with my mother the previous week. She rang to tell me about her friend's grandson, a young man who was often in trouble with the police. 'He joined the army and became a different person,' she said. 'Maybe this would be a good thing for Joey?'

I wasn't sure if I wanted Joey to become a soldier, fighting someone else's war. But the next day I'd looked up the Defence Forces website and read through an impressive list of trade jobs available for army recruits. I rang the recruiting line and asked them to send further information about the training program so that Joey and I could read through the brochures together. The brochures haven't arrived yet, but it's definitely worth a try.

On our drive back to town, I sneak the volume down a notch. 'Oma reckons it might be a good idea for you to join the army.'

Joey looks at me in surprise. 'I've been thinking about doing that already ... I want to be a driver.'

A driver?

'You could learn a trade,' I say, pretending I haven't heard. With a brain like his, he could do anything. 'Telecommunications, or mechanical engineer or systems analyst.'

Joey shakes his head and sighs. 'You remind me of Marge Simpson.' He turns up the music again; end of army conversation. This is how it always is when I bring up something serious.

Later, I drop him at his place. When I found Joey a boarding arrangement in a house only a block away from us, I worried it might be a little too close. In some ways, I was right. He pops around whenever it suits him, wanting food, money, lifts, his clothes washed. Mainly, though, I think he just wants me. For the first year of his life, it was only him and me. I'm sure he'd still prefer it that way – so I could listen to his stories for hours, spend the nights driving around town with him, do all his cooking,

shopping and washing. I enjoy spending time with Joey, but I have three other children who need my attention as well. Maybe he should have been an only child – we certainly have our best times when it's just the two of us – but that's not how things turned out.

Joey leans over to kiss my cheek before he gets out of the car. 'Bye, Mum, I love you.'

## A lucky idiot

The following Sunday, only Simmo, another volunteer youth worker with the Iron Man Welders, is at the shed with Freckles and Thommo. The turn-up is never as good when Bernie is out of town. Stepping over some broken glass near the door, I notice the side window smashed in, and Freckles busy welding a security grille to cover it.

I start sweeping up the glass. 'Do you reckon we should smash the rest out? Those jagged edges can be nasty.'

'Good idea,' mumbles Freckles, grabbing an iron bar and handing a hammer to Thommo. They start swinging away at the glass left in the window with great enthusiasm.

Later, when Simmo and I are having a rest in the kitchen while the boys finish the security grille, I ask him: 'Were you an idiot when you were a young bloke?'

Simmo, who is in his late forties and is rugged up in an old footy jumper and a droopy beanie that matches the bags under his eyes, chuckles into his cup of tea. 'Me and my two brothers were all idiots ... but I was a lucky idiot.'

'Why's that?'

‘Our dad was a school principal, a hard-liner,’ he says. ‘We moved a lot, and by the time we ended up in Warren, I was thirteen and running amok with my two older brothers. We broke into shops late at night, nicking lollies and cigarettes. We snuck into the goods train a few times, taking whatever we could find, and we went into the church hall and stole boxes of chips.’

Stealing boxes of chips and lollies seemed pretty innocent. In my early teens, I was a small-time thief, too – chocolates from the local milk bar, books from the library, even clothes from small boutiques. Maybe it was something all adolescents went through, a test of nerve.

‘And when we moved to Moree,’ adds Simmo, rubbing the stubble on his chin, ‘it was underage drinking. My brothers got busted for a lot of stuff, and one of them spent time in jail, but I was lucky. I didn’t get caught and I ran with a mob with a reasonably sensible side. My late teens though ...’ He chuckles again. ‘They were pretty wild years. We lived in Sydney for a while, then I went back to Moree, then up to Yamba. In those three years I got into drugs, although in all that time I might have only had acid twice, mushrooms twice, speed half a dozen times and ecstasy three or four times.’ Simmo pauses for a breath. ‘We smoked pot nonstop ... but I didn’t get into heroin.’

‘That’s alright then!’ I say, laughing.

Simmo sits back and folds his arms over his belly, his young idiot self only a gleam in his eye, and grins back at me. ‘That’s not many drugs, Helena! It’s just the way it came out when I said it!’

He didn’t need to convince me. In the coastal area where I grew up, smoking dope was a common pastime for teenagers, but I found alcohol an easier way to lose myself. My friends and I used to drink Tequila slammers in the local park: lick, sip, suck. We’d be falling over drunk on the way to the pub and still somehow manage to

convince the bouncer we were over eighteen.

One of the things that kept him on the right track, says Simmo, was that he always worked. The whole time he was drinking and taking drugs, he had a job.

‘But where did that work ethic come from?’ I ask, thinking of Joey, who resisted my advice and efforts to get him to finish Year 10 or find a job, and whose work experience consisted of two nights’ kitchen-hand duties in a Chinese restaurant.

‘I don’t know,’ admits Simmo, like he’s never thought about it. ‘To have a car or rent a flat you needed a job, so I suppose it was just to get by. I went from one job to another and didn’t particularly care what.’

‘What made you pull away from that life? What was the turning point?’

‘It was after that year in Yamba,’ says Simmo. ‘My sister and brother-in-law were going out west to start a business and asked if I wanted to come. I wasn’t doing anything else so I went with them. That saved me – not that I was heading for any great crash ...’

‘But it was a good move?’

He nods. ‘Yeah, it was a good move.’

Over the next week, I thought about this baptism of idiocy. It seemed true enough. Bernie himself came from a stable home but went off the rails in his teens. He reckons he was a bigger idiot than the lot of these Iron Man Welders put together.

‘I just didn’t fit the system,’ he once explained. ‘Shithouse at reading and writing, and they’re the things society says are most important. As the years go by you start to act the fool, and if you’re told you’re an idiot enough times, you start acting like one. Relationships with teachers fall apart, and you start to

hang around with a smaller and smaller group of like-minded idiots.’

One afternoon recently, while the boys were scoffing a tray of brownies I’d brought along, I asked if there’d been teachers like Bernie at school. ‘Hell no!’ laughed Gazza, and Thommo said, ‘Nah ... no way,’ like it was the most ridiculous idea ever.

‘Okay, so what’s the difference between teachers at school and Bernie?’

Gazza sat back, fiddled with his cap. ‘At school I reckon they’re on a power trip – a bit of authority and they run with it. Bernie comes down to your level.’ Pointing to the ceiling, he added, ‘But teachers are up there.’

A few Sundays later, I come home from the shed, filthy dirty, arms aching from scrubbing horseshoes, to find Joey waiting for me with a basket of washing. He hangs in front of the open fridge door and tells me how he saw some of the Iron Men at a party the night before. ‘They all like you at the shed, Mum.’

‘Probably because of my chocolate brownies,’ I joke, but inside I feel warm with acceptance, the same feeling I had earlier when Bernie, after showing me how to use the grinder to file off some nails, told me, ‘We’ll make you a welder yet!’ The shed really does make me happy. And later, as I drag myself off to bed, I wonder if maybe, just maybe, the scent of an idiot lingers on me, too.

## A man who had the answers

A small group of volunteers forms the basis of Bernie’s grassroots organisation, BackTrack Youth Works. After I’ve been at

the shed for a couple of months, I'm invited along to my first BackTrack meeting. We sit around Simmo's kitchen table like King Arthur and his knights at the round table: there's Jayne, Simmo, Sally, Geraldine, Flinty and me. And Bernie, of course: our stand-in king.

Tonight, Bernie's eyes burn bright but look troubled all the same. For the past week he's been busy talking to the media about the Iron Man Welders. Now he's going through a moral dilemma about being seen as the 'boss-man' of BackTrack, the spokesperson with all the answers.

He takes a swig of wine. 'It's hard for me when people ask, "What is it?" Fuck, I don't know.'

At the head of the table, Simmo shifts his half-moon glasses down his nose and moves his chair in closer. His black beanie makes him look like he's about to organise a bank heist. 'BackTrack's a group of people doing shit for youth. I'm here because I like the idea of helping you out,' he says. 'Are you worried it's too Bernie-focused?'

'Yeah.'

Simmo shrugs. 'But I see BackTrack as being Bernie. Some bastard's got to be the leader.'

Bernie runs his fingers through his hair. Although he spent much of his youth as a stockman in Central Australia, his skin is clear and unlined, his face boyish, even though he's approaching forty.

He glances around the table. 'Most of you have known me long enough to know that I'm great at flying off on tangents and having all this passion, but if you lot weren't writing the grant applications or helping out where you can, then it would be nothing – just someone with a lot of passion running around chasing his fuckin' tail.'

Maybe so. But he's the one with all the ideas, the ones that work.

'Can I ask a question?' Sally, Bernie's sister-in-law, looks like she wants more order in this meeting. 'Don't we have a mission statement or vision or something?'

Bernie gives her a wry smile. 'We do that every time we get together, every time we get pissed.'

Sally laughs, shakes her head like she should have known better.

Then Bernie's wife, Jayne, has her say, elbows on the table. A poncho flares over her arms like dark wings and I notice, not for the first time, her robust beauty; she's the sort of woman you'd see peeling potatoes in a Van Gogh painting. 'I'm sure we've answered all these questions before, Bernie. Just keep talking about BackTrack exactly as you have. It's fairly definable – it's us here, in this room. It has been since the beginning.'

Bernie stands, stretches, and goes out into the cold night air, ducking his head as he walks through the back door for a smoke.

\*

Not long after Joey left home, I was helping set up for a fete at Henry's primary school. Another mother came over and said Henry and her son had stuck a knife into the tyre of a yellow ute parked in the school car park.

'It's Bernie's ute,' she said, as we examined the tyre. The knife hadn't gone in very far and the tyre looked undamaged, but still – a knife? It wasn't like Henry to do such a thing.

'Who's Bernie?' I'd asked, my face burning with embarrassment.

A woman with dark unruly hair had looked over at me. 'He's my husband.'

She came and stood by the ute with us. I must have stammered out some sort of reply, and I'm not sure why the matter wasn't resolved then and there, but the following Monday, when I dropped Henry at school, I noticed the same yellow ute pull up behind me in the car park, a male driver behind the wheel.

'That must be Bernie,' I said to Henry. 'You need to go and talk to him about what happened.'

I watched in the rear-vision mirror as Henry walked over to the driver's side of the ute. A tall, lean man, wearing dark blue jeans and a cream-coloured shirt, opened the door and got out. I didn't know then that Bernie had once been a stockman, but I remember thinking he looked like a hip cowboy in his jeans and boots, a pair of dark sunglasses pushed back over his curly brown hair.

He knelt down on the dirt in front of Henry, so that he and Henry were face-to-face. They spoke for several minutes. I liked the way Bernie knelt down rather than loomed over – the way he spoke to my son like an equal, even though Henry had stuck a knife in his tyre. Here was a man talking to a boy with respect and I liked it – it was so different to the way Rob and I dealt with the kids. As I watched Bernie kneel before Henry, I realised that I needed to become a better parent.

The knife business – a silly prank – was never mentioned again, but about a month later, I saw the photo of Bernie and the boys in the newspaper and heard him on the radio. That's when I decided I wanted to do something for BackTrack. Bernie looked like a man who had the answers.

\*

Bernie slides open the screen door at Simmo's and a cold gust of night air and cigarette smoke blows in with him. He takes his

place at the table, ready to carry on with the BackTrack meeting. The crew falls silent when they see his expression. He tells us he's tired of waiting on a funding application that'll secure him a part-time wage for the next two years. He wants to make a roster and call in some other blokes to help ease the load: 'Otherwise it's just relying on me and ...'

'It gets real old,' offers Geraldine with a knowing look. She's a Kamilaroi woman who has worked with Bernie on other youth projects in Armidale.

'Yep,' Bernie says. 'Real old, real quick. And the pressure's on me the whole time. I'm the worst time manager in Australia, and when we get down the shed I go righto, I'll get those three started on that, and then I've got to pick up Tye or someone else, and I skip up there, and then I get back and Simmo's there and I go oh great, Simmo must be working with them on that. But they've drifted off and started fifteen other fuckin' projects, and I go right, Tye, you go and see Simmo and he'll tell you what to do – I've got to go and pick up someone else. I'm a frazzled chook and by the time the day's over I just go what the fuck – we haven't finished anything and we started another thirty things ...'

It's true. I've seen how some Sundays are messy and nothing much seems to get finished, but I still reckon Bernie is making great leaps with these boys. And besides, as he often tells me, 'It's not about the fuckin' welding.'

## Positive, positive, positive

Armidale is a small university city and, sooner or later, some of the people you see at work, school, or even at the supermarket,

end up in your social trajectory. Not long after I first meet Bernie and start at the shed, Rob begins playing the ukulele. He joins a folk bush band with Simmo and a few other people, including Jayne, Bernie's wife. Rob is always supportive of me going along to the shed on Sundays, and I'm happy for him to have a new interest. He puts a lot of energy into learning the instrument and spends hours sitting in the garden shed, practising old Johnny Cash numbers. It's good to hear him singing again. When I first met him, he used to play guitar and serenade me with Bob Dylan songs. He's always been a bit of a romantic.

Rob's band members often hold parties, which is a good thing because Rob and I hadn't been out much since Freddie's birth. One night, at one of these gatherings, I spot Bernie standing in the shadows of the garden, smoking. I wander over to join him, and we chat about the boys from the shed. Standing next to Bernie, who is about a head taller than me, I have the same 'little sister' feeling that I get with my brothers. Not many people are tall enough to make me feel that way.

When I ask Bernie if the boys at the shed ever say anything about me, he stares at me confused, like he can't work out why I would ask such a question.

'I'm a woman,' I tell him. 'I'm curious.'

'Nah, they've never mentioned you,' he says. 'I suppose that's strange in itself.'

I'd hoped someone would have said something, that I'd made some sort of impact. Maybe the boys are just happy to share their shed with a mother-figure who doesn't hassle them; a Wendy who brings home-baked brownies into their Neverland, who doesn't comment about stained clothes and jeans hanging halfway down their bums, who leaves them alone. If only I could be like that with my own boys.

‘Have you seen Joey around on your Streetbeat nights?’

I knew that Bernie had come across Joey through his work with Streetbeat, a crime-prevention program for youth in Armidale, where youth workers drove around on Friday and Saturday nights, keeping kids away from the lock-up.

‘Yep.’ Bernie pauses, like he’s not sure if he should say more. ‘I think Joey’s going through a hard time, Helena. I’ve seen him pissed a lot.’

I stare at him, shocked. So naive, always wanting to believe my kids are too sensible for drinking and drugs, that they’re not having sex or living dangerously. Or maybe I just prefer to pretend something isn’t happening rather than face up to the truth, living my life like those three monkeys who see no evil, speak no evil and hear no evil.

‘My guess is he’s struggling with that transition from boy to man,’ continues Bernie. ‘Like a lot of the fellas down the shed. They go along thinking they’re men, but they’re just little boys strutting around with no fuckin’ idea. From what Joey has said, it doesn’t sound like he and Rob get along ...’

I nod, suddenly uncomfortable. This conversation is going places I don’t want it to.

‘Joey’s missing out on that significant male role model,’ says Bernie, seemingly oblivious to my awkward silence. ‘One way of helping him could be to write a list of positives about his father. I can imagine he’s got a picture in his head that’s mostly negative, you know – “Why isn’t he here for me now? Why did he let that happen? Everybody else has got a dad ... mine must be no good.” That’s probably not the case, but I don’t think it helps with any area of your life to be focusing on the negatives. If you keep thinking negative, and soaking negative, and exuding negative, then negative is what you’re going to get around you. For right

or wrong, there's a positive side to everything. Joey is probably going to be a dad himself at some stage, so I think it's important he gets that positive stuff about his father.'

I slide my hands into my coat pockets, wondering how this conversation had become so deeply personal in such a short time. Bernie and I never talked like this at the shed.

'There are lots of positives about his father.' I struggle to keep my voice steady, glad it's dark so Bernie can't see my tears.

He nods. 'Yep. And it won't hurt Joey to know them because he exudes the negative – it's in his body language, the way he dresses, the music he listens to, the kids he hangs around. Anything down the track that might help him break that cycle ...' Bernie leans over and pats my upper arm. 'Positive, positive, positive, Helena. I'm a big believer in it.'

\*

I met Joey's father at a youth hostel in Amsterdam. It's strange for me to call him that – his 'father'. I don't think of him that way. I'm sure Joey does, but we hardly ever talk about him. His name was Khalil. I'd noticed him one night in the hostel cafeteria because he was so handsome with his dark eyes, pale skin and chiselled features. 'I been no good for many years,' he told me, 'but now I am a Christian.' I almost swooned when I heard his husky voice. Fifteen years older than me, his hair already speckled with grey, he dressed in suit pants, collared shirts and ties. He smoked Camel cigarettes and was like a foreign diplomat with a touch of James Bond mystique. We chatted for the rest of the evening and Khalil told me three things: he was a political refugee from Syria, he'd never had a job, and he had a drinking problem. I've since developed a theory that people tell you the most important things about themselves in the first

conversations you have with them, but, at the time, none of that seemed to matter.

Because of the hostel's lack of space for intimacy, my time with Khalil was based on endless games of backgammon in smoky cafes, on hash joints and shots of *Arak*. My relatives in Holland, who I rarely saw, called me *een rare vogel* – a strange bird – and maybe they were right. Khalil and I talked about travelling to Spain, where he'd lived before, using money from stolen credit cards. I was keen. On one of the few times we slept together, I became pregnant. Khalil talked for hours about what we might call the baby, how we could find a flat to rent in Amsterdam, how we could start a family together. But by then I'd uncovered the truth of his life. Or maybe I just started listening. Khalil had spent years living on government benefits and would probably never find paid work. He owed me a thousand guilders. He'd left the hostel and was renting a small room in the red-light district. He drank too much. 'I'm always trying to make my life better,' he told me in his beautiful accent, lighting yet another cigarette, ordering yet another beer, borrowing yet another ten guilders. Being with him wasn't going to bring me happiness. I knew that. So I booked a flight back to Australia.

Joey was born in Darwin, where I was staying with my sister. He was a home-birth boy, born at sunset while the birds outside sang their evening song – *A baby is born! A baby is born!* Overwhelmed by love, I gazed down in wonder at his dark tufty hair, his rosebud lips, his strong nose, and his clearly defined eyebrows. My beautiful boy.

For the rest of the year, I lived with my oldest brother and his family in an Aboriginal community near Katherine. My brother was the principal of the local school, and he offered me a job as a live-in nanny for his two-year-old daughter while his wife went

back to teaching. I thought it would be a good place to stop and take a breath, to work out what I wanted for the future.

As for Khalil, he rang three times that first year and sent a postcard: ‘Together we made little “Joey”. Together we love him and together we shall be around forever. I love you both. Wishing to see you as soon as possible. Anxious to hear him saying “Pap”.’ Then we lost contact. Eight years later, I received a letter from a friend in Holland. Khalil had been murdered, shot in a sordid Amsterdam street brawl. I wept when I read her words. Joey would never meet him now.

\*

At home that night, after talking with Bernie at the party, I sit at the kitchen table and start writing a list of all the lovely things I remember about Joey’s father. He was a good man – he just lost his footing along the way.

*Dear Joey,*

*I’ve been thinking about Khalil lately, and I thought I’d write a list of all the things I liked about him so you have a better idea of who he was. It’s a shame he’s not alive anymore – I think you would have really liked him. Here’s my list:*

*Khalil ...*

- was funny*
- was handsome with the classical features of a middle-eastern movie star*
- loved reciting classical Arabic poetry and literature*
- loved playing table football – and he was very competitive too!*
- loved playing backgammon in the brown cafes in Amsterdam*

MY BEAUTIFUL BOY

- *was a loyal friend*
- *loved the Spanish dance music that was popular in Amsterdam at the time – he would clap his hands over his shoulder to the beat of the music*
- *could make delicious baba ganoush – a Lebanese eggplant dip – by blackening the eggplants over the gas burner, and then mixing the smoky flesh with tabini*
- *loved having his hair cut*
- *loved the movie ‘It’s a Beautiful Life’ – especially the scene where the three guys are in the prison cell chanting: ‘I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream!’*
- *was a deep thinker – often pensive*
- *had a lovely husky voice – when he spoke Arabic it sounded wonderful. Try and listen to people speaking Arabic – it’s a beautiful language*
- *was spiritual – his family were from a Christian region of Syria, and when I first met him he was very strong with God*
- *loved going to shwarma bars in Amsterdam and eating freshly made shwarma rolls – which are like Lebanese rolls*
- *always dressed well – he was distinguished and gentlemanly*
- *was a wonderful companion to spend time with*
- *always kept trying to make his life better*
- *was caring and generous*
- *spoke Spanish like he was born there because he lived in Barcelona for several years before Amsterdam – and people used to think he was Spanish, even Spaniards! He loved different languages and was interested in learning.*

*I hope this helps you gain a better picture of what he was like. Remember, I’ve still got the scrapbook I made for you about your first eight years of life. I’m keeping it safe for you, but you can*

*look at it anytime, and we can talk about Khalil whenever you like.*

The next morning I walk around to Joey's house with the letter. Too early to knock so I push the envelope under his door. Throughout the day I imagine him opening the envelope and reading through the list.

Joey rings later that evening. 'I wish I could have met him,' he says.

## Sucking lemons

A few days later, Joey comes over with a story of how drunk he was the night before – 'I vomited all over my bedroom floor.'

'I'm not going to help you clean *that* up,' I tell him, trying not to let despair creep into my voice. I lend him the hose, a bucket and some old rags. Later he comes around: tired, belligerent and demanding lemons.

I check the fruit bowl. No lemons. I wish I had some so I can send him on his way. His heavy mood sets my nerves on edge. 'Why lemons?'

'They help with a hangover,' he says, pacing the length of the kitchen.

When I suggest the corner store, he says he's already been there.

So, we drive to the supermarket, two blocks away. I buy two lemons. Joey bites through the peel of one and sucks it dry as we drive back to his house.

I park out the front, force a smile. 'Bye, Joey.'

He chucks the remains of the lemon onto the floor near his

feet. ‘Bye, Mum,’ he says, leaning over to kiss my cheek, his breath a mixture of tangy lemon and stale alcohol. ‘I love you.’

\*

Most of the time, Rob is content to sit back and let me deal with Joey – it’s easier that way. He and Joey tend to become antagonistic and confrontational whenever they’re together. I always seem to be hustling Joey out of the house in an effort to avoid further conflict. I hate how they muscle up to each other in the doorways, like oversensitive drunks at a pub, shouting rubbish. And I hate how I always intervene and make it worse. We’ve been trapped in this pattern for a long time now, which is a shame because there were many tender moments between Rob and Joey in those early years.

When Joey was nine months old, we left the Northern Territory and moved to Armidale, high in the New England tablelands, so I could do a teaching degree at the university. I found a room in a share-house with two other women, bought a pushbike with a baby-seat on the back, booked Joey in with a friendly family-day-care mother, and began my studies. I rode my bike to the university each day, and life felt free and full of possibilities.

Around the time of Joey’s first birthday, my mother came to visit. While we were having coffee downtown, a bearded man with a wide smile came over to our table. He was from the same small town where I’d grown up, he said, and recognised my mother. She remembered him and his family, and invited him to join us. Rob had a rugged ‘bushie’ look about him, like he lived on the land. He was thirty-five, ten years older than me, and had gone to school with my siblings. I liked the sound of his voice, the way his lips moved, and the way he kept looking at me. He told us he’d studied to become a history teacher, but after three

weeks of teaching in a high school in the Northern Territory, he decided it wasn't the life for him. For the next fifteen years, he had travelled around Australia – living on the dole and occasionally working on building sites. Rob spoke proudly of a stone and timber hut he'd built on a scrubby bush block forty kilometres out of Armidale. He lived there on his own for six months, but some vandals had recently burnt it down and he'd lost everything. All his books, clothes, photos ... gone. Now he shared a house in town with a philosophy lecturer, worked in a truss factory, and had just bought a ticket to India.

Like I said, people tell you everything you need to know in the first conversations you have with them. But at the time, I was concentrating on Rob's lips and thinking how sexy he was, even with his bushy red beard. Before he left, I asked him for his telephone number.

A few weeks later, when one of my house-mates had a dinner party, I invited Rob to come along. We sat together on the lounge and talked about our lives and our dreams for the future. I discovered he wrote poetry and enjoyed studying history and philosophy. Books and learning were important to him. He was the only one in his family – third-generation dairy farmers – who had owned a book, and that had been given to him by the Methodist Church. He described a fractured relationship with his parents and said he rarely visited them. As a boy, he was captain of the local football team, and his father used to rip into him from the sidelines and yell: 'Git in there!' and, 'You can do better than that!' Rob ran away from home at seventeen. He went back eventually – after the police were called – and spent years going out with a local girl. But when she wanted to get married, he decided to go travelling instead. That was his past. As for the future, all he wanted to do was go to India.

The weekend after the dinner party, Rob and I went to see a play at the university theatre. I wore a white puffy coat from Amsterdam and felt like a girl on her first date. When he dropped me home, I asked him to come inside. We drank brandy and kissed by the fire. That was the beginning of our life together.

We only had a month before he went to India. Every day, after finishing work at the truss factory, Rob would come around to help with the evening ritual of feeding, bathing and dressing Joey. 'I don't know how you do all this on your own,' he'd often say. He built a sand-pit for Joey in the backyard and fed Joey his porridge in the mornings. When I stayed at Rob's house one night, in his tiny room with a futon bed and a printed cane blind and not much else, I brought Joey in after his bath and Rob had laid the nappy and night clothes out on the bed, just as I always did, and I loved him for that.

Before Rob left for India, I asked him for a copy of a poem he had written called 'Days of My Youth'. I liked it very much, and I've often thought of it over the years:

*In the cold-shower Christianity of my youth  
when God was all-knowing with a long white beard:  
Sunday, between milkings, was for Sunday School and Church,  
with great-uncle snoring in the pew behind and great-uncle leading  
the choir,  
and Sunday dinner with cousins  
of roast beef and leaving room for dessert.  
Dad said 'You can get milk out of a bull, but only one squirt',  
and I didn't know what he meant.  
Corn was cut by hand and the Fergi pulled a sled to the stalls,*

*and a pocket-knife was full of mysteries of Tom Sawyer and Treasure  
and billy-carts.*

*In the spluttering fire of my adolescence,  
When God was too difficult to think about:  
Risa Riso seemed exotic and school was full of strangers from ten  
miles away,  
and staying over at a mate's place meant a bottle of beer  
and being pissed for the first and most ecstatic time.  
A girlfriend's pants revealed secrets hardly dreamed of,  
but bra-straps were a snap with one hand,  
while Mum and Dad fretted and muttered over blow-stains on the  
sheets,  
and I chopped the copper-stick of beatings into little pieces  
on the wood-pile out the back.  
Running away from home was easy,  
but coming back after three days found Mum on tranquillisers  
and Dad in league with the cops.*

*In the run-free joy of having left school,  
when God was Shanka and Going:  
The Pacific Highway was the road to the world,  
and my thumb the only ticket.  
Pot was thirty dollars, and a hundred dollars was a fortune.  
The continent was full of me,  
life rode in a rucksack,  
and the sun could rise anywhere.*

## Fuckin' 'whatever' isn't an answer

The next time I go along to the shed, Bernie and Simmo round up the boys and we meet in the kitchen to make the final arrangements for a tool-buying trip. A few weeks earlier, the Iron Man Welders had received a five thousand dollar grant to buy new equipment. Since then, the boys had spent hours poring over tool catalogues from Bunnings and other hardware stores, dreaming of what they would buy with the money.

In the kitchen, stained carpet squares cover the concrete floor, matching motley remnants of a lounge suite that belongs at the dump. An old workbench on one side of the room holds an electric jug, an upturned packet of tea bags, a tin of Milo and a ripped bag of sugar. Someone's pouch of tobacco is passed around. As the boys light up, the smoke rests on shafts of afternoon sunlight coming through a barred window.

Bernie wears a vibrant orange polar fleece jumper and stands out like a seedling in a dirt paddock. He tells me they're trying to decide whether to go to Coffs Harbour for an overnight trip, or just make a day-trip to Tamworth, which is only an hour's drive away. Bernie moves across the room to open the window, letting in a blast of cold air, and then takes a seat next to Tye. I'd heard a few things about Tye in recent weeks – he'd been through a lifetime of foster homes, and when he first met Bernie, 'fuck off' was his way of saying 'good morning'.

Whenever I see Bernie and Tye together, it's like seeing father and son: both tall and rangy with their wild brown curls and country man looks. Tye's face is softer, though, his blue eyes bigger. Simmo once told me there's something about Tye that Bernie recognises in himself.

'Righto,' says Bernie, getting down to business. 'We've got

two options – Coffs Harbour or Tamworth? What do you think, Freckles?’

Freckles looks up from burning the frayed cuff of his jeans with the end of his rollie. ‘If we don’t take too many people, maybe just a couple of cars, we could go to Coffs.’

‘Uh huh,’ nods Bernie. ‘So how are we going to work out who gets to come and who gets to stay?’

The boys fall silent.

‘What do you reckon, Tye?’

‘It doesn’t worry me,’ shrugs Tye. ‘Whatever.’

‘Fuckin’ “whatever” isn’t an answer,’ says Bernie. ‘That’s sitting on the fence.’

The rest of us laugh while Tye slides off his beanie and scratches his head. ‘I really dunno.’

‘I dunno,’ repeats Bernie, looking hard at Tye. ‘That’s reeking of a “whatever” answer as well. A or B? A is Coffs, B is Tamworth.’

We wait. Tye takes a drag on his rollie and blows a dignified line of smoke-rings across the table. ‘A.’

Once the others have their say, the boys soon reach a group consensus on Tamworth. ‘Okay,’ says Bernie. ‘We could do it next weekend.’

‘I’ll be in Queensland,’ says Tye. ‘Me girlfriend’s mum is having a baby.’

‘And you’re going to deliver it?’ jokes Bernie. ‘Doctor Tye, eh?’

The other boys chuckle, but I feel a surge of tenderness towards Tye, thinking of all the foster homes he’s passed through.

I once asked Bernie where Tye would be if he hadn’t become involved with the welding program. Bernie had pressed his palms together and exhaled slowly before answering: ‘He’d have a raging drug habit, he’d be extremely violent – mimicking what

he saw as a young fella, which wasn't pretty – he'd be bashing women, struggling in a lot of areas, and probably would have spent time in the lock-up.' Bernie looked at me and nodded. 'That's my belief with Tye.'

The talk shifts to a big party the previous night, someone's 18th. Bernie rubs at the corners of his eyes and smothers a yawn. 'I was out driving the Streetbeat car till four in the morning ... that party just went all night!'

'I only had four beers last night,' offers Tye in a low voice.

'Very impressed with that, mate,' says Bernie, suddenly serious. 'That was the most impressive thing I saw all night.'

Gazza taps at the notebook on his lap. 'I think we should get back to this crap. I've got to head off soon.'

They discuss approximate costs of tools and welders and work out, for the umpteenth time, what they want to buy. Freckles flicks through a tool catalogue. 'How much are you willing to pay for a cordless drill?'

'How much am *I* willing to pay?' Bernie shakes his head. 'How much are *you* blokes willing to pay?'

Again and again, Bernie passes on the responsibility for deciding which tools go on the list. He's like a soccer coach who keeps kicking the ball back, nice and easy, until his players gain confidence.

After Gazza reads through the final list, Tye whistles and says, 'Fuck, we're not going to have much money left after this.'

'We'll have everything then,' says Bernie, and asks Simmo to ring Bunnings in Tamworth. 'See if we can get a discount. Tell 'em these blokes won't steal a heap of shit if they give us a good deal.'

The boys all laugh at that, even Gazza.