

# 1

—January 1972. Soldiers. Blue heavy sheets flapping in the wind.

Mum ignores me awhile, fussing with a brush, and then says:

—The hospital had no roof. The cyclone blew it away. The army slung blue tarps across the rafters ... But a newborn remembering birth? Impossible!

I watch her reflection comb her long auburn hair.

—Cyclone Althea destroyed Townsville, says her mouth in the mirror.

She wears her hair out now. Back in the city she wound it in a bun, spent hours smoothing down strays with lacquer. When Mum swims, she wears it loose. She doesn't swim often. Diving gives her migraines, since Dad ran her over with a tractor.

On the corner of Cassia and Acacia. Our house and the police station side by side, separated by a driveway and a narrow dead patch of lawn choked with bindii-eyes and goat's-head thorns. The white brick police station has a huge open-air skylight. The Acacia Drive side has a reception area, an office and a courtroom. The house side has a prison cell, two bunk beds with grey government-issue blankets, a sink and a stainless-steel toilet with no lid and no door. My bedroom window looks out to the reinforced wall of the prison. The shouts of drunken miners and the moans of sunburned truck drivers seep through the bricks.

Our house on stilts. Seven steps up to the veranda. We moved here right before my fifth birthday. The town has only one policeman: my dad,

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posted here from Townsville by his sergeant. Imagine hills of rolling grass and wild horses grazing on the banks of a slow-flowing river. Limestone mountains bursting up from the earth. Blue jagged rocks reaching into the heavens, shrouded by gentle mists. Now picture the opposite: a stopping point for tired travellers with dusty caravans on their way to Undara Volcanic National Park, a service town, two hundred kilometres inland from the coast.

Greenvale belongs to the nearby nickel mine. Queensland Nickel Industries laid it on for the miners and their families when they built the entire town in the early seventies. Golf greens and tennis courts. Olympic-size swimming pool, a library, a theatre, a school, a shopping centre and a pub. Kerbed streets and channelled gutters, sports oval with fifty-metre-high lighting towers, eighty-five houses, a police station and a drive-in movie cinema. Before that, nothing but the cattle which still roam through town, kangaroos, and yowies that roar in the night above the cacophony of the galahs. The galahs sound like your neighbour falling down the stairs forever, with an entire crockery set filled with boiling water.

## 2

The kids at Greenvale State School wear the same shirt. Pale blue, *Greenvale State School – Mining for Knowledge* written in white letters around an excavator bucket-wheel. My first day, in a big dumb hat with stupid shiny shoes and a huge bag with a plastic lunch box containing an orange which thumps and annoys the hell out of me when I walk. Inside I have a chocolate tin full of pencils and a ragged copy of *Tom Sawyer* with missing pages. The other kids wear jeans with dirty knees and go barefoot. They slouch and yawn as the teacher introduces herself as Mrs Crisp.

—Now, children, Mrs Crisp says, arranging some papers: Get up off the carpet and pick a desk. You'll sit there all year. I'll go into what you can, and what you *cannot*, keep in your desks later.

A mad scrabble of dusty kids in an eager fit bump and fight over the desks. I grab one as close as possible to the window, beside a strip of linoleum and a room-long stainless-steel sink which separates me from the bush and the creek through the glass. A boy with a crazy mop of orange hair slumps down at the desk next to me.

—Hello! I say, offering to shake.

—Fuck off, with ya pretty gaylord shoes, he says, rolling his eyes at my extended hand.

He has odd eyes. In the left, two colours fight for dominance, bleeding into each other like the edges of shadows: orange, matching

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his hair, and green, like the greenest blade of grass you've seen. His right eye, cold and black as a shadow itself, swallows the light from the window behind me.

So I stop wearing shoes to school. Walking home across the park, I kick a broken bottle and cut the webbing between my big and second toes. Another memory flashes like a punch in the liver. The slice through skin. A man wearing a green cloth hat tied under his chin and a white face mask with a wet patch from his breath. Someone holds me down with rubber hands. The man mumbles for a while. My mother's voice. The man wipes at me with a cold yellow liquid and with a pair of scissors cuts my penis.

At home from the park. After cleaning up the trail of blood that follows me through the door, Mum produces a box of cotton-wool balls, a sticking plaster and a bottle of the same yellow liquid, marked *Iodine*. As she dabs at the cut between my toes, I ask:

—Mum, what happened to my penis?

Picking up the bottle of iodine from the table and studying the label, I press on to fill the silence:

—I remember a doctor cutting me with shiny scissors, and a bottle of this iodine stuff. I remember screaming!

Ashen-faced, she tut-tuts at my foot, dabbing at the wound.

—In the showers at the pool you can see the whole tip of mine. The other boys have a hood-type thing. It wrinkles in the water.

Still fussing with my toe, she says:

—We believe in different things than those other boys. Dad has the same ... She falters, trails off, composes herself: Jesus said those who *truly* believe will make the covenant to circumcise our sons.

—Circumcise?

—Ask your father about it. She rearranges the kitchen chairs to dismiss me.

Walking with a studied limp out through the screen door, down the steps, I stick up a middle finger to my little sisters, Jaz and Fliss, on the trampoline and cross the yard to the police station. I find Dad sitting at his desk, typing with two fingers, his police hat on a pile of papers. The

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air-conditioning circulates the smell of ink stamps, typewriter ribbons, boot polish and copy paper. My head swims. Dad never can spare time for anyone when he has paperwork to do, and he only does paperwork when someone sits rotting in the cells.

—Hey, Dad. I poke his shoulder.

He ignores me, tap, tap, tap, ding.

—Dad! I shake his arm. Nothing but the shouts of my sisters outside on the trampoline and a truck roaring by on the distant highway. I poke his ribs.

—Buzz off! he yells.

I back away and slip through the courtroom. The heavy vinyl-covered oak desks stink of linseed oil. Out into the jail hall the sun beats down through the skylight. The hot cement burns my feet. I smell piss in the heat and my stomach rises. I blink and focus on a set of filthy fat fingers gripping the prison bars. I can't see the rest of the man in the darkness of the cell. One of the hands disappears and then comes back through the bars holding a blue melamine cup. A gnarled mask scrunched around sharp predatory eyes aches out of the shadows. He opens his mouth to speak, revealing front teeth cracked, yellow and black:

—Get me some fucken water, kid. Water, fuck ya!

A string of drool oozes from his strips-of-liver lips, scabby and swollen. I stand out of his reach in the stretch of sun through the skylight and contemplate his blasted head. Clean shaven and traversed with scars, it lolls to one side like he has a broken neck. As he rocks back and forth, his head disappears from the light and reappears. He resembles a broken lamp, the bulb at an odd angle, flickering before it explodes. He reaches further through the bars to grab me. He drops the blue cup and it bounces on the concrete.

Dad told me melamine doesn't shatter. He showed me. He hit one of those cups with a hammer and said:

—See! Criminals can't commit suicide with the shards.

Suicide? A new word to me. Dad said sometimes people decide they don't have any reason to go on. Life gets too much, I guess. He told me suicide means someone intentionally takes their own life, a serious tone

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strumming in his voice. I pressed him of course and he said with a final full stop: the word derives from the Latin. A fancy word for self-murder. Dad rattles off definitions, like he memorised the dictionary:

—Murder: the killing of another human under conditions specifically covered by law. Boy, my job involves catching murderers and rapists and thieves and drug addicts and other low-life scum who'd sooner stab you in the guts than help you with your groceries.

The prisoner drools in the cage. I step further out of the gasping low-life's reach.

—Kid! Water, please, boy. The tap in here doesn't work. The shape points at the blue cup. I kick the cup. It bounces off the bars and hits the courtroom door behind me. The man glares at me with his anti-matter eyes.

—Get your own fucken water, scumbag, I spit at him.

Dad comes out the door and catches me mid-sentence. Too late – my mouth runs its course. He slaps the back of my head.

—Get the hell outta here, boy! he yells as I bolt from the jail block.

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At dinner I ask:

—Dad, what does *circumcision* mean?

Mum drops her fork. It clatters on the table. She glares at me. Dad clears his throat, reaches for the wine bottle.

—Circumcision demonstrates to Jesus that us fellers follow the path, we know the truth, we've heard the living gospel. We know the way home. He takes a large gulp of wine, waiting for me to reply. I don't, so he continues: All the men Friends, and their sons, have undergone circumcision. I guess you could say as a pact. A pact with Jesus.

—Friends? A pact? None of my friends in school have it. You can't see their whole tip-thing.

Jaz laughs and baby Fliss flicks a glob of mashed pumpkin onto the tablecloth.

Mum sucks wind through her teeth and jumps up, sending her chair flying into the kitchen wall. She makes a dash to the sink and comes back with a dishcloth for the table. Dad fills his wine glass again and says:

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—Those other boys won't get saved. The Angel of the Lord hasn't whispered the truth to them.

As Mum sits again, Jaz pushes a baby carrot around on her plate and says:

—Dad, do we know the truth?

—Jaz! Mum says: Behave yourself.

—Yeah, Dad! I pipe in: Who told us? And when? I don't remember. Can you tell us again?

—Don't you remember the meetings back in Townsville? Every Sunday, every Wednesday night, with the other Friends? Dad says, draining his glass and refilling.

—Yeah. I think so, but what friends? Jaz tries to hide the carrot under her fork.

—Other believers, Dad says, examining the label on the wine bottle.

—Anyway, I cut in: Today, when I sliced my foot, I remembered getting *circumcision*, and it bloody well hurt!

—Language! Dad yells, slamming his fist down on the table. His wine glass spills over. The off-white linen gulps the red like when friends meet: And you say *circumcise-d* – past tense! Rights his glass.

Mum stands, upsetting her chair again, strides across the kitchen and reaches down the Discipline Stick from atop a cupboard. A flat plank of pine with a handle shape cut into it, it has *Discipline Stick* painted in red capital letters, old homestead style, above a black and white cartoon of a boy bending over, his trousers around his ankles. The boy looks over his shoulder with tears in his wide comic eyes at a disembodied hand paddling his bum. Mum passes it to Dad.

—Where did you learn that language, boy? Dad holds the stick in his right hand, slapping it onto his left palm. Jaz starts crying, which sets the baby off.

—School! I shout above the racket. Sensing a beating anyway, I push my luck. Making a dash for the open front door, I yell over my shoulder:

—I also learned bugger, shit and piss!

—We'll lose this boy, Mum wails as I run across the lawn and leap the fence.

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I pause on the other side and lean with a swagger up against the post. When I see Dad peering out the door, I shout:

—And I learned fuck from the scumbag in the jail! You don't like that, hey! Fuck. Fuuuuck!

—Why, boy, I oughta ... Dad rages from the veranda as I sprint up the footpath towards the park.

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At school I have a habit of stretching my legs out under my desk to kick at the aluminium edging which separates the carpet and the linoleum. Mrs Crisp yells at me a thousand times to stop. Soon as she leaves, I kick at the edging again. This day, as she walks back in across the lino, the edging springs up like a silver snake and she trips right over it, falls headlong into the desks. Her left arm slaps down on the floor with a loud crack. She screams the same way baby Fliss did when she pulled a cup of tea off a table and melted her chest into her onesie. JJ looks on enthralled as Mrs Crisp bawls on the floor.

JJ and I hang around together now. It took him two whole years to talk to me. I don't notice his odd eyes so much anymore. I've never met JJ's dad. He drives trucks for the nickel mine. Mum doesn't like me hanging out with JJ because I go around to his house after school to watch *The Goodies*. Because of the stupid cult, Mum and Dad forbid television, smoking, drinking, dancing, jewellery, watching movies, cutting your hair if female and having a normal penis if male. JJ's mum has long straight black hair. She always goes barefoot, wears tight blue jeans with a wide flare at the bottom and looks pretty. We steal cigarettes from JJ's mum. *St Moritz – King Size Deluxe Menthols with gold band of authenticity!* it says on the packet.

I saved up four dollars washing the car and oiling the courtroom desks every Saturday to buy a flash new copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain. It has a picture of Tom and Huck on the front and a Mississippi riverboat behind them. I swagger and smoke, like Tom. I reckon I started younger than him. Adults at the servo sure stare hard when they see a gang of seven-year-old boys puffing away. I also bought

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an authentic Barlow knife, which I carry at all times, like Tom. I've read the whole book a thousand times, except the missing pages. My new copy fixed that. I show JJ.

—Already read it, he says.

But I don't think he has. I have to explain to him, over and over, the motivations behind our escapades, which I base on Tom's adventures. I convince him that if you want to have a fulfilling life you need to create your own adventures. I practise what I preach, and I write everything down as well. Why else have adventures? He gets it, comes meowing outside my window in the middle of the night. I scramble out of bed and we sprint down the path into the public gardens, breathless, heads reeling with plots. The next day at school both of us fall asleep at our desks.

We start a gang one night in the park to protect ourselves from the prowler that heaps of people report to my father. This prowler, they say, also kills animals. A few people have reported finding household pets dead in bizarre circumstances. We call our gang The Wreckers, based on a film JJ loves called *The Wanderers*. He says if I think Tom Sawyer has clout, then I should go see this film. He asked the projectionist at the drive-in for the poster he has tacked up in his room. A bunch of mean dudes with greased-back hair all glaring into the camera, wearing beat-up leather jackets with cigarettes dangling from lips or tucked behind ears. A couple of them have shirts unbuttoned so you can see their chests. A few wear cool hats.

The other boys we let into our gang have to bring something to the table. We let Charlie in because his dad owns the pub and his mum owns the supermarket. Daryl can join because he says he can get us the green tobacco all the bikies like to smoke.

Here comes Ren, sweating from the climb to our gang headquarters on the hill behind the medical centre. Breathless, Ren says:

—Can I join The Wanderers?

—Wreckers! Dip-shit, JJ snaps: And *no*, fuck off, ya dome-head poofter! Ren has a dome-shaped head with stringy mouse-brown hair sticking up like fairy floss and a sore-looking welt above his left eyebrow from his habit of rubbing his face. He has episodes where he rocks back

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and forth saying *no-no-nooo*, swatting at the air around his head. Ren remains calm, but a darkness clouds his eyes.

—We should let him join, I say, watching his still face and stormy eyes.

—Fucken ... why? JJ looks confused.

—He can take a beating.

Ren smiles. I've never seen him smile until now. I know him better than the other boys. Ren lives across the road. He comes over every day with his toys and doesn't take them home. Every day he has a black eye or a busted lip or bruises on his chin. An enormous collection of his Tonka trucks and Matchbox cars, marbles, even an expensive-looking telescope, overcrowd my bedroom.

—Ren, why do you leave your toys? I ask.

He sits there building a Lego supermarket, complete with shoppers pushing little trolleys. As he ploughs a red fire truck with real flashing lights through the shopping centre, mashing the plastic housewives into the carpet, he says:

—So I can play with them longer.

I know what he means. I climbed a tree to see into his yard one night. I saw Ren crawling around bleeding on the kitchen floor. A shadow moved, his dad smashing a collection of Matchbox cars with a hammer on the back steps.

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A concrete driveway, suffering under the Australian sun, yawns like a cracked tongue between our house and the police station. You have to walk up the driveway to the front door. If I hear the rusty gate swing open, I stick my head out of my window to see who has come to visit.

The creaking gate wakes me. A pair of feet slap on the concrete. Wailing and banging on the side of the house.

—Help. *Help!* Officer cop, he raped and bashed me. Help! *Rape!* The voice chokes. I stick my head out of my window, trying to get a look at her in the shadow cast by the house. She sees me peering out and starts up some hellish wailing, bashing the wall with her fists. My parents stir

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and a strip of light blinks under my door. Footsteps down the narrow hall. A loud thump and much cursing as Dad cracks his shin on a table or something which Mum moved without him noticing. The veranda light comes on and reveals an Aboriginal woman wearing a white nightie splattered with blood, both of her eyes swollen shut. A strip of eyeball flickers around under one drooping lid, trying to focus on me as I look down on her. Dad emerges.

—Officer? Help. Me old man raped me with a bottle. Fucken broke inside ... Help!

—Slow down ... Let me get a look at you, Dad soothes. He leads her by the arm into the light.

Dad spies my head sticking out of the window, whispers to the woman and then shouts for Mum to call the doctor and an ambulance from Charters Towers. Dad and the bleeding woman disappear up the path into the police station.

I wake to the sound of water hitting the wall. I drag myself from my bed and look out. Dad has a hose, washing blood off the house.

—Dad, what did the screaming woman mean by *rape*?

—Rape? he mumbles, not looking up: The unlawful compelling through physical force, or duress, to have sexual intercourse.

—Unlawful. Sexual. Intercourse?

—Illegal fucking.

### 3

The phone rings. Mum picks up, listens awhile and says:

—Huh? Oh, okay, why don't you come over here? Oh ... okay. She hangs up and says Dad wants to see me in his office. I drag myself over there. This hasn't happened before, ringing the house from ten paces away. I wonder what he caught me at. I find him in the courtroom, sitting in the judge's chair.

—Bren, I've got to talk to you about something important.

—Okay.

—I have to go and catch some deer poachers in the Maryvale Reserve.

—Oh.

—Most people consider this quite dangerous, so I have to tell you I mightn't come home. He looks into my eyes, puts his hands on my shoulders: Until I get home, you have to act as Man of the House. And if I never come back, you have to look after your mother, and your sisters.

—Never come back, Dad?

—Some persons do desperate things to avoid getting caught. They might kill me, boy.

—You mean, they might murder you, Dad? I say, my voice breaking.

He gives me a huge hug. Dad never hugs me. I don't remember another time he hugged me.

—Now go, help your mother. I need to get my weapons ready.

—Dad ...

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—Yeah?

—How do you define a *person*?

—The books you read, and the people you meet, he says, oiling his gun.

The next morning Dad has already left. Mum sits in the early light at the kitchen table. She doesn't hear me coming down the hall. Rays through the curtains catch her face; tears stream down her cheeks. She looks ten years older.

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No JJ meowing tonight. I strike out alone into the sleeping town. Everything sparkles, covered in dew. Fog swirls around the fences. Owls and night-birds screaming in the gardens. Toads on the footpath. Outside the pub on Redbank Drive I see a figure slouched in the phone box. I recognise Ren and knock on the illuminated booth.

—Ren!

He doesn't acknowledge me. I push the door of the booth. It folds inwards, hits him in the back. He turns on his heel, facing me eyes wide, vacant, pupils flickering like insects.

—Ren? I say, startled.

Nothing but the soft thud of moths hitting the bare neon bulb in the box. The bulb buzzes, responding to dusty wings. He thrusts an arm out of the phone booth. A dead cat hangs from his fist, knuckles white, squeezing hard on its neck. Intestines balloon from its mouth, along with some white stuff, like cauliflower. I run like a poodle encountering a wolf.

The news rolls through the town in the morning. The groundsman fished a tabby from the pool, every bone in its body smashed, guts out like someone squeezed it.

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Dad comes home from the deer-poacher gig with a gaggle of scruffy, shirtless, tattooed men. He's chained them together with their arms tangled around each other. Dad drags the whole group of six out of the back of his police Toyota by pulling one of the men by the beard. I taunt

the shit out of them as they sit glaring at me from the cells. I skip up and down, singing about the glory of freedom while going through their bags.

Dad has piled the men's belongings on the concrete outside the bars. He sits in the office typing. They have an armoury of weapons, sleeping bags, radios, and the skins and horns of about twenty deer in various stages of stink and preservation. They have a huge plastic container of the green tobacco my gang likes to smoke. I call them a bunch of scumbags and criminals as I help myself to a handful. They also have a couple of dirty Orchy orange juice bottles with bits of garden hose stuck in the sides. It all looks pretty sinister. One of the lengths of hose has an aluminium-foil funnel full of green tobacco stuffed in the end. This must work as a pipe of some sort. We use corncob pipes, like Tom Sawyer. I steal a whizzer-looking bowie knife: a full-sheath blade with a stainless-steel bust of an Indian chief's head on top of an antler handle. One of the foul-looking men, who has no front teeth, snarls at me as I make my exit:

—Little cunt, I'll wring ya fucken neck for nickin me shit.

I turn back to the bars to ask him what he means by *cunt*, but as I turn I kick a rolled-up swag. My toe hits something hard. I stick my hand in and find a pistol. I figure Dad hasn't seen it, so I nick that too.

I show the gun and the knife and the green tobacco to the other boys in my gang. I say *my* gang, because I beat Daryl fair and square in a fistfight for the title. Daryl's dad belongs to a bikie gang. I don't know which gang – not that I'd name them if I did; Daryl and I steal stuff from their headquarters all the time. Anyway, Daryl stands a bit taller than me. He has long black hair parted in the middle. He also has a hard head – you can smack him full knuckles to the chin and he doesn't blink. I beat him by resorting to trying to choke him to death. I near broke my hands. Daryl respects me now. Says he thinks that I carry *the crazy gene*, one of those freaks born without fear. I want to take him along one night to follow Ren, show him what crazy means. I think I will tell him, but I bet he won't believe me.

I doubt I'll ever meet a better thief than Daryl. He'll nick anything not nailed down. He lifted a bottle of tablets from his dad's gang headquarters. They have a rickety busted-up shed in the scrub surrounded by rusted

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barbed wire and guarded by two docile Dobermans. Our hideout up on the hill behind the medical centre has far superior engineering. We built it out of stones, old sheet-iron and wrecked car doors, and we call it a fortress. The Wreckers meet at the stroke of midnight, either in the fortress for drinking rum, smoking and eating crap, or down on the school oval for general mischief.

Daryl turns up with these pills. He calls them *salt tablets*, claims that truck drivers use them so they can drive for days without falling asleep and killing themselves. I take a green one and a red one. Charlie takes two green ones. JJ refuses, even after we call him a poof. He says he tried them before and they made him not shit for a year. Daryl chews up five, two red and three green. He washes them down with a huge swig of Bundaberg Rum. Daryl. The wildest boy I know. I mean, besides Ren, but in a different way.

We whoop up hell in the town, smash some windows at the theatre, break into the school canteen and eat all the potato chips, plus about a dozen boxes of sultanas each. We break the lock on the school caretaker's gardening shed and mess up his tools and piss into the lawnmower petrol tank. Charlie finds a toolbox with a padlock on it. He breaks the lock off with a hammer and goes quiet over in the corner. The curiosity kills me. I feel like I can fly. I go over and find Charlie poring over a glossy magazine with photographs of two women licking each other between the legs. I grab the magazine from Charlie. He snatches it back and pushes me over.

—Get ya fucken own. The box has heaps! Eyes glued to the photos.

I get myself a magazine from the toolbox. It has a title in bubble-type writing: *New Cunts, No. 12 – October 1976*. Underneath the title, a picture of a woman sticking her tongue into another woman's ...

—Hey, what do ya call a girl's bits again? Charlie breaks into my thoughts.

—My mum says you call it a *sninny*, I say.

Daryl, who has a copy of a magazine called *Oui*, says, laughing at me:

—A fucken *sninny*! They call it a *cunt*, ya gaylord! Look, on the front of the fucken magazine: *New Cunts*. Christ. Shakes his head: My dad has

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a couple of these, Daryl adds: I saw my uncle jacking off through the window. He had one of these too.

—Jacking off? I look up from a picture of a woman sticking her whole hand into another woman's cunt. Both women look at the camera, tongue on teeth.

—Yeah, I know about jacking off, Charlie says: I do it all the time. Feels good, man.

Daryl laughs, loud, and it echoes across the school oval, disturbs a flock of plovers sitting around in puddles from the sprinkler. He claps his hand over his mouth. We listen for a bit. Only the *chhk chhk* of the sprinkler and an occasional squawk.

—You actually *admit* to wanking! Daryl whispers.

—Jacking off ... wanking ... what? I ask.

—Wanking, or jacking off ... Same thing, man, Daryl says.

Daryl says *man* a lot since he started hanging out with his uncle.

—My uncle Johnny told me, in the city, in Townsville, you can pay a woman and she'll let you growl her out. He said you can pay em and they'll rub you all over with erotic oil and then jack you off. He called it a happy ending.

—Growl out? You still didn't tell me what *wanking* means, man. I call him *man* to see if he notices. He doesn't notice, so I say it again:

—Man, tell me what the fuck wanking means, and growling out, now, cunt.

—Don't call me a *cunt*, man. You call women cunts, Daryl snaps, angry, glaring at me.

—Why do you call women cunts?

—Uncle Johnny said so, says you call women cunts coz they have cunts. He even told me a joke. It goes: What do you call a woman?

Charlie and I look at each other then back at Daryl. Charlie shrugs.

—A life-support machine for a cunt! He laughs out loud again, echoing across the oval. The joke goes over my head. I've never heard the words *life*, *support* and *machine* said together, until now.

—What about *growling out*? I ask.

Daryl thinks for a moment, lights a cigarette, shrugs:

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—I dunno, man ... I dunno. I'll ask Johnny and let ya know. Then, opening a centrefold: Look at this, man. Sweet as a nun's cunt on Sunday.

We realise JJ hasn't said a word for ages and look over. JJ sits on the lawnmower, one of those ride-on ones with the big comfy vinyl seats, with his penis out of his jeans, tugging at it furiously.

—What the hell! Daryl laughs extra loud this time: JJ, stop wanking in front of us, man. Put ya cock back in ya pants. Jesus!

—Cock? What do you mean?

—His penis, his *cock*, you wanker! Daryl shouts at me.

—I haven't got *my* cock in *my* hands, so how can you call *me* a wanker? I've never heard that word. My mum calls it a diddle.

—*Diddle!* What the fuck ... kinda poofter word! Daryl yells, punching me in the stomach.

I lie in the dirt and oil-spills on the gardener's shed floor, winded, gasping for breath. I manage to stand again and see Charlie drooling over one of the magazines, trying to get his cock out. Charlie has the body weight of at least four normal kids. He eats stolen chocolate bars from his mother's supermarket, and he drinks rum like a normal kid drinks Coke. He has a lot of trouble getting his arm under his belly. He grunts and sweats and pulls on his cock until he falls over, huffing like he's run from the law. The wrinkled bit he has, which I don't, looks red raw, poking out from under his belly like a rat's nose peeking from under a stove. JJ, contemplating this scene, his cock hard and proud in his hand, says:

—I told ya about them salt tablets. I couldn't wank for a week, and, I swear, I didn't shit till Christmas.

After we finish laughing, Daryl, who's eaten five tablets, gets his cock out of his jeans and it looks kind of droopy. He slaps at it a bit but nothing much happens. He glances over at me:

—Maybe you should get yours out, man. Let's see if the salties have affected you.

So I pop it right out of my jeans through the fly and JJ gasps:

—What happened to your cock? You got no beanie!

—You've had a *circumnavigation!* exclaims Daryl.

—*Circumcised*, ya fucken idiot. Charlie's voice, shaking.

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—Circumcised. I correct them all.

—They chopped off your beanie! JJ, exasperated.

—Jesus told my parents to get me circumcised ... because the Prophet whispered us the living gospel. It fucken hurt, I say, examining the scar.

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The next day in school we can't sit still. We ping around the room from the salt tablets until Mrs Crisp clues on we've taken pills of some kind and searches our bags. JJ, the wanker, has the entire bottle in his lunch box. *Amphetamines*. A new word. Mrs Crisp says having my Barlow knife at school, and the drugs, constitute illegal acts. I've broken the law. People will call me a criminal. It feels fantastic. Dad will lay into me with the Discipline Stick for a good twenty minutes. He'll lock me in the cell. As Daryl, JJ, Charlie and I sit in the principal's office, waiting for him to come down from teaching Grade Seven and serve us the cuts for having drugs in school, Daryl says:

—Hey, Bren, I asked Uncle Johnny what *growling out* means ... He said it means licking a woman's cunt.

—Why would you lick a woman's cunt? I ask, remembering the pictures from the glossy magazines. I can smell the paper.

—Johnny said women love that shit.

—So, if women like it, why pay them so you can do it?

—I asked the same thing! Uncle Johnny says growling out a woman *rocks your world*. Then my mum screamed at him to stop filling my mind with filth.

—So licking a woman's cunt, women call that filthy, even though they like it? I say as the principal bursts in.

We each receive six lashes with a bamboo cane across our palms. Well, I get seven as the principal heard me say the word *cunt*.

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Easter school holidays, 1980, I learn about hell. A huge rain monsoon makes it across the mountain ranges from the coast. All major bridges on the highway flood and Greenvale loses contact with the rest of the

## *The Wreckers*

universe. The water level breaks every record, the town overrun by stranded truck drivers and busloads of tourists. The courtroom at the police station has seven families sleeping there.

One family with a caravan full of kids introduce themselves to us as *Friends*. These Friends come from the mysterious meetings back in the city before we moved to Greenvale – the first Friends I've seen in the flesh since we moved here three years ago. They have a Prophet with them. An important man, Mum says, scalping up her hair tighter than I've seen it. Mum reckons this bloke speaks for God himself. The rain caught them out while heading north to Cairns, via the mountains instead of the coastal route, for the unfamiliar scenery. The Prophet, named Bruce the Elder, has a sick mother in Cairns and the family of Friends agreed *kindly* to drive him the six hundred and thirty-two kilometres to see her.

These Prophets travel around the world without any possessions or money, living off their Friends. I overheard Dad call one of the Prophets a *tramp preacher*. I guess you could call them that, but they always look sharp and own nice things, and stink of expensive city-folk aftershave, not like tramps at all.

Anyway, this Prophet and the family of Friends move right into our living room. The family look pretty uptight. They have one son and three daughters. The boy comes into my room. I tell him to fuck off. None of the daughters looks like a potential Becky Thatcher, so I pay no interest. The Prophet, Bruce the Elder, calls me *boy* and *son* and *champ*, takes a real interest in what I say about anything. I will have to put up with this phoney shit for the entire Easter holidays. Rain torrents out of the sky. The government sends in helicopters with supplies for the town. No trucks can cross the swollen rivers. Mum and Dad call every Prophet a *Worker*, for reasons I can't comprehend. They don't work at all, just preach the whole time about hell and damnation, say the government has fooled everyone because they have evil intentions. Bankers have the Devil whispering by their bedsides.

We crowd around the Prophet in the lounge room while the rain belts down and the wind tears at the roof and trees cascade against the sides of houses. He reads from the Holy Bible, then starts on about how we

*Scoundrel Days*

should thank the Lord for choosing us and blah blah blah when he stops mid-sentence and points at a school photograph of me on the wall above Mum's piano:

—Except that one. He has the smile of Lucifer himself. He'll need some extra attention.

My mother gasps in horror. All eyes turn on me.

Later, sitting atop the garden shed with JJ, smoking a St Moritz, sipping rum, I see Bruce the tramp preacher sneak past in the shadows of the house and peek through the window, at the boy of the visiting family of Friends in the shower. JJ's sneaker squeaks on the tin of the roof and Bruce looks up. At that same moment the donkey Santa brought for Jaz at Christmas snorts and kicks in her pen. Startled, because he didn't see the donkey huddled up under the tarp that Dad had slung over a tree to give her some shelter from the rain, the tramp preacher scuttles back to the house.