

1

MICK MAHONEY RISES to his feet in the dock, the way he did at the boys' home when he was in real big strife. He steels himself to stare back at the cranky faces on them retired farming fellas with their little brass returned servicemens' club badges and them smirks on their sunburnt faces and lifts his chin and drops one corner of his mouth and gives them back that same evil eye. Then he gives the same treatment to their women folk, with their hair all puffed-up like their opinion of themselves and their powdered faces that's supposed to make them look younger, on the other side of the lawyer fellas, and they stare back too, eyeing him off like a steer with no condition cause of the drought.

The skinny young fella with the skin like uncooked pastry covered in them little red pimples and the curly hair a bit like Mick's, only Mick's is dark brown, stands up and faces Mick like he's done something wrong, real bad wrong, you can see it written in the young fella's face, cause it's all screwed up. You sure can tell he means business.

The kid flicks the long black cotton gown hanging on his shoulders behind him over his right side as he picks up a blue bit of paper with a sharp crease down the middle and opens it, holding it out in front in two hands real careful. Then the kid starts to read aloud in a voice that sounds as angry as any Mick has ever heard a white fella speak to him in, and that's plenty of times for sure, that's something Mick's used to.

The kid shouts at Mick in a kind of highfalutin lingo, not normal white fella lingo, but that old fashioned lingo lawyer fellas use when they don't want ordinary fellas to know what they're really saying. But Mick knows one thing for sure. These people don't know him and never knew his Mary, never knew how much he loved her and she loved him, how much of his larrikin ways she put up with cause she was his, deep down only his.

This lot reckon he killed his Mary, done her in on purpose, a year ago. They reckon he pushed her to her death into that bone dry swimming pool at the Kinchela Boys' Home after the annual reunion at the Hat Head Surf Club. He can see it written all over their faces as they nod their approval while the kid charges him with Mary's murder. They're agreeing with everything alright, no doubt about it. It's always been that way. Some white fella says Mick did something wrong and he gets the blame.

The kid ends with the words, "How say you? Are you guilty or not guilty?"

Mick wants to say he never did nothing of the sort, but that's not one of the things the pimply kid wants to hear. Mick looks at Adam Rhodes, his defence solicitor, sitting nearest him at the Bar table beside the dock he is seated in. Jack Levine, his defence barrister, calls out across Adam, who is sitting between them, in a real loud whisper.

"Hey, Mick, you hear me?" Jack's thick brown eyebrows are furrowed like a new row of corn sown on his smooth olive forehead and his big brown eyes, the same colour as Mick's, open wide, as if they're an invitation to Mick to sit up and listen.

"What's that, Jack?" Mick asks, as he leans forward on the cedar bar of the dock.

"Mick, they've just charged you. You need to plead. You've got to say, 'Not guilty, Your Honour', got it?" Jack raises his eyebrows, waiting for some sign from Mick.

"Yeah, I got it," Mick says. "Ise not guilty, Boss," he says,

looking up at the kid, but the whir of the overhead fans circulating the sticky midsummer air make damned sure not a soul in this overcrowded courtroom hears a single word of what Mick said. He bites his bottom lip and waits to see what happens. Has he done it right? Why has it all got to be so complicated?

“No, no, Mick, you’ve got to say, ‘Your Honour’. Follow me?” Jack says in a tone of voice as if he’s Mick’s school teacher and not really his mate. “And talk louder too!”

Mick looks away from Jack and back at the kid sitting in front of the judge’s bench. So he speaks in a much louder voice this time, trying to make himself heard over the din of people chattering and them fans whirring overhead like crows over a carcass.

“Sorry, onner ... Ise not guilty, onner. Never did nothin ta urt me darlin lill Mary. Never did nothin to er ... never killed er ... not on purpose ... not me lill Mary.”

At that, he looks back at Jack for approval, smiling the way he used to when he was a little boy looking for his father’s approval. Jack gives it to him with a nod and a smile and, standing momentarily and leaning over the Bar table across Adam, taps Mick on the back of his hand, which is still resting on the lacquered cedar top rail of the dock.

“Good job, Mick. Well done,” Jack says. “You can sit down now. Take it easy for a while. Just relax. You look like a bloke who’s just lost a twenty dollar note in the street.”

Mick does not look at Jack or Adam. He is looking over at that flock of stuck-up old cockatoos in the jury box. They’re still giving him the evil eye. Anyone would think Jack just slipped him some stolen money the way they’re eyeing off the two of them.

Mick resumes his seat on the bench behind him and rests his back against the black painted wrought iron grille which forms the back of the dock and settles down to listen to the story of how Mary came to meet her death a year ago—one version of the story anyway—in the prosecution case. It is a

story he has heard before. It was told to him in less polite language by two coppers that came round to his place the morning they found Mary's body in the bottom of the swimming pool and slapped him round a bit and swore at him and accused him of pushing her into the pool to her death on purpose the night before when he got drunk at the reunion.

Mick finds it hard to follow the story being told by the Senior Crown Prosecutor. This prosecutor fella's talking to the jury in his opening address in that same highfalutin lingo the pimply kid just used. He's sitting in front of the judge fella with the white moustache the same colour as the fur trim on his gown and a wrinkled face the same colour as his bright red gown. He's got an even more serious look than the one the superintendent at the boys' home pulled when boys were hauled up before him to be punished for breaking one of the million rules they had back at Kinchela.

So Mick does what he always does in these situations, he escapes to his own world. He escapes to that morning a year ago when the detectives woke him up and told him the Crown case in language that he had no trouble at all following. Them coppers with their big beer guts and bright striped ties spotted with food stains and their short sleeve shirts reckoned he took Mary to the boys' home and got angry and pushed her into the dry pool on purpose. They reckon he left her for dead cause she died a few hours later and he's a little bastard who never really loved her and they'll make damned sure he gets life for it cause he's a no-hoper black fella with a string of convictions for being drunk and disorderly and Mary had been knocked about by him when he was drunk but she was too stupid to go to the coppers and have him charged with assault and they know what he is really like, that he was a real little shit to her. But it wasn't like that at all.

He and his Mary did argue that night, and Mick was pretty damned drunk and angry, and they did talk about going to the long derelict boys' home on the way home from the surf club reunion, and he did leave her, left her for dead to be honest,

in the middle of the night, but not the way them coppers said, and not the way this Prosecutor fella is telling these here jury fellas. It didn't happen that way at all. He wouldn't push her into the pool on purpose or leave her real angry like to bleed to death. He'd never do anything like that on purpose. This lot have got it all wrong, got it all dead set wrong.

She tried her best to get him to leave the reunion sooner, to stop drinking sooner, but he just wouldn't listen. He was riding high, reliving the glory days of his youth. How many aboriginal surf champions were there in the nineteen sixties in Australia, or even now, in 1980, for that matter? Bugger all, that's how many. He was a hero back then. Why wouldn't a fella want to stay as long as he could and hear people praise him, tell him what a top swimmer he was, hear about his famous single-handed rescue of them two old Pommy tourists from that real bad rip off Korogoro Point all them years ago?

But his Mary didn't help things by bringing up his time at the boys' home. That was a pretty stupid thing to do in the car on the way home when he was drunk and on a high. All he wanted to do was drive home quick smart and root her silly till he got brewer's droop like he always did after he went to the pub. But she had to bring up his time at the boys' home and how that old bitch of a Catcher Lady came and took him and his sisters away and how Mick's mother, the other Mary in his life, was no good, not according to Mary anyway, and how his mother let the Catcher Lady have her own way and how Mary's mother was a good mother cause she saved Mary and her brothers and sisters from the children's home by standing up to the Catcher Lady in court the day after they were grabbed and how the beak decided they shouldn't go to the children's home after all.

What's a fella to do when the little gin he's living with badmouths his mother like she's never been badmouthed before, like she's some kind of no hoper darkie that's no good to no one? He had to slap her round a bit, show her who's boss, stand up for the first Mary who ever loved him, protect

the memory of the Mary he never saw again after that old bitch of a Catcher Lady and her Catcher Fellas took him and his sisters away to the children's home.

He will never forget the words Mary said to him after they left the surf club on the way home that last night that made him so boiling-hot-angry as long as he lives.

“Mick, Mum saved me and me brothers and sisters from the Catcher Lady cause she was real good on her feet, real smart at talking white fella lingo and standing up for herself. She told that magistrate fella we were pretty good at reading and writing and we ate three square meals a day and we never got any boils or sores on us or any nits in our hair, and all the locals up Nulla Nulla Creek, you know, the cockies and their wives and the shopkeepers and the ladies on the committee at the Catholic Church up Bellbrook, they all spoke real high of our family, like we were pretend white fellas or something. And the magistrate fella, he let us go home and we never had to put up with all that crap you reckon you boys had to put up with at the boys' home, and you wouldn't have had to put up with all that crap too if your mum had stood up for you and Annie and Lizzie the way Mum did for us lot.”

After she had a go at his Mum, Mick just kind of went berserk and slapped her hard and then he figured he didn't feel like giving her a bloody good root any more cause she'd made him so angry. But he never pushed her into that bloody old swimming pool on purpose, not like them coppers said. It never happened that way at all. They don't want to know what really happened. They only want to hear the story they made up, the story this here Prosecutor fella is selling to this jury with no trouble at all right now, no questions asked, no need to check the goods first, cause they're all willing buyers of this pack of white fella lies they've made up. Yep, it's written all over the jury fellas faces as they move stares between the Prosecutor fella and Mick, all nodding in agreement. Mick doesn't know where to look when they stare at him like that, so he stares at the red carpet at his feet. The Prosecutor fella's

face just gets redder and redder under his pale grey wig and the spit from his mouth keeps on flying out onto that bundle of papers tied with pink ribbon he's got in front of him as he tells these jury fellas all these mongrel lies about how Mick was a no-hoper and how he never really loved his Mary cause some witness fellas, just a bunch of busybodies who lived near them, will tell the jury he used to knock her round a fair bit after he'd drunk too much at the pub.

It all came at a price, slapping her round that one last time on the way home from the reunion. It's a price which at times he has found too much to pay. He misses Mary's white fella way of talking, of being able to put into clever words things he could never put proper like. And that proud look she gave him, gave everyone, cause there were no flies on her, with her chin held up high, making her plump little tits and them nipples like pimples that hadn't suckled babies stick out through her blouse.

That last night she loved him for sure. She drove him mad to leave the reunion sooner. He should've listened. She always knew best in the two years they were together.

"Come on Mick, we'd better get going. You're always like a bear with a sore head the day after you've had a skinful," she said with a smile, looking up at him with them eyes, glistening thimbles of engine oil, as she took his arm off the bar next to a schooner of old beer, maybe his fifteenth, and she was dead right too; she knew it then and he knows it now. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, if only he could go back there right now, go back and make the decision to leave and drive straight home and not get all hot and bothered about talk of mothers and the boys' home and just go to bed and root her silly like she wanted, cause she was sending all the signals she wanted it. When she wanted him he wanted to be wanted by her more than anything. What she wanted was what he wanted, could have had, too, but he was too pig-headed, too wrapped up in his bad habits: joking and boozing with his mates.

She stood up on her tiptoes and kissed him tender like on

the lips in an effort to get him to leave and it finally worked, after a few, but only cause his mates from the surf patrol, all Kinchela boys, said he was needed elsewhere. Borrie Bowden winked at him and said that no stallion standing at stud stands up his teaser pony when she's up for it, neighing and sorting and crawling up the stable wall cause she wants it so bad.

Mary giggled at the suggestion; she even seemed flattered by Borrie's suggestion that she was Mick's teaser pony for the night. So Mick sighed deeply and leant down a bit and kissed her back on the lips and that got an even bigger round of wolf-whistles and catcalls from the fellas, so he surrendered his last beer, after sculling only half of it, and left arm-in-arm with her, feeling a hard one coming on then and there as they parted company at the toilets near the front door of the surf club for a leak before the long drive back home and that bed he couldn't wait to get her into.

It was only a year ago but it feels like an eternity, because it seems forever he's been in remand, thinking about her and that last night with her that he wishes he could rub out just like a mistake in his copybook at school and start all over again. But life's not that simple; it never has been. He would rub out the Catcher Lady and her Catcher Fellas too and go back to having his eighth birthday with his Mum and Dad and Annie and Lizzie if he could but it's all done and dusted and the dust long since settled. He must grin and bear the loss of Mary the same way he grinned and bore the loss of his family twenty-two years ago when the Catcher Lady came unannounced and carted him and his baby sisters off, no questions asked, and he never again saw his Mum or Dad or his bed or his fishing pole or that new pony, a filly, his Dad promised him for his birthday the following week.

Mick sits upright to see the Crown Prosecutor fella, a real tall fella with light brown hair visible under that silly looking horse-hair wig of his, pulling his black silk gown, which is slipping down his back, up onto his shoulders as he opens a paper in front of him and starts reading from it. It's something about Mary's injuries and how she died.

Mick doesn't want to hear it, doesn't want to have even a passing thought about how Mary suffered real bad in her last few hours, maybe only minutes, God be merciful, of life that night at the bottom of the pool in that mongrel of a place that took the best years of his life, and now hers too, bugger it. He knows she would have had no interest at all in going there if he had not spent his growing up years there, if he had not grumbled about it to her when he was real low, telling her it was like doing time for pub brawling. So he takes his mind back to the reunion dinner and their trip home before things turned nasty and the grog started talking for him. He goes back to before all that old beer he'd had too much of took over and started doing all the swearing and slapping that he doesn't have the guts to do when he's stone cold sober, before that other Mick, that mongrel fella that's deep down inside him, comes out fighting whenever Mick's drunk and starts doing all the talking for him.

"Mick, you think this dress looks good on me?" she asked as they got into the car in front of the surf club. "I respect your opinion of me more than all the others, you know that."

"Sure, ya look real pretty. I reckon youse the most rootable ... nah, I mean, I reckon ya'd be the prettiest lill gin, nah, nah, I mean, yeah, yeah, ya the prettiest gel ere tonight, honest."

She knew what he meant. She smiled that smile she gave when she was real pleased with him, showing all those big teeth of hers as white as piano keys as she lifted her strapless black dress to get into the car, her knees together as she lifted her legs in real lady-like, as if they were tied up real tight like at the knees with string. Then she placed the little black leather evening purse her mother gave her for her twenty-first birthday, not so long before they met, on her lap and opened it and turned the rear vision mirror to face her and switched the cabin light on and she put on some more ruby red lipstick and brushed her hair so she looked like a white shiela all dressed up to the nines. By the time he got round to the driver's seat he wanted to give her a big pash but she pushed him away, gentle like, begging him not to muss up her new

coat of lipstick, and he took it in his stride even though he had a bone-hard one under the bonnet.

They rounded the first bend on the Hat Head Road and that's when all the magic in the car evaporated in a puff. That's when she ruined the rest of the night by bringing up the boys' home. That's when the other Mick, the fella that does all the shouting and swearing and slapping when Mick's pissed, that foul mouthed arsehole bully whose guts Mick hates when he's sober, took over and made things a whole lot worse.

"Mick, it's only a short way from the turnoff to the boys' home. Why don't we go and have a poke round the old place and you can show me where you slept and ate and tell me exactly what it was like, cause you've always been real canny, kind of secretive like about the details. You're always whinging about it but you never give me any details. I can never imagine what it was like for myself. It's always just four letter words to describe the superintendent and attendants and the whole place."

She put her hand inside his thigh, squeezing it the way she did whenever she wanted to get her way with him and she knew he had a hard one because she was stroking it through his strides. But it made no difference because Mick had already up and left: he'd gone home and hit the sack, and only that other nasty little arsehole was left in the car beside her.

"Look, I'm never goin ere agen. Left ere twelve years back an I got no intention a ever settin foot in at mongrel place agen, get at clear in yer ead, ya dopey lill gin. I wouldn go back ere fer a million dollars. Ise real orny. I wanna go ome an make love ta ya fore the grog its me an turns me inna a geldin tryin ta be a stallion."

She started to whimper at that, but the bully Mick fella only gets worse when she does that. He never feels sorry for her when she's whimpering. It just gees him up more.

She kept on and on about going there despite her sobbing at the bully Mick fella's badmouthing her all the time, and he kept up his foul mouthed refusals to take her there.

The big row came at the turn off. That's where she dried her tears and got right into him about not wanting to turn right and poke round the boys' home. It's not far away, only a kilometre or two, and seeing as how they were so close to it on the way home that night, he could tell her all about what he went through there, like she was his mother or something and he was some little kid that's been bullied at school but can't bring himself to tell his mother about it, and she's all worried that he's bottling it all up and trying to help him get over it. But she was just making things worse. She was only making him relive what he had tried ever so hard to forget those last twelve years.

He kept telling her, the bully Mick fella, that is, not this Mick fella sitting in the dock trying hard not to listen to this Prosecutor fella badmouthing him at every turn, the other Mick kept telling her all he wanted to do was forget about it, forget he was a kid at all, pretend he was born aged seventeen when he was shot of the place. But she was having none of it. She was harping on about it like it was as important to Mick as it was to her, like she was never going to get to know him deep down till he told her the whole story.

"Mick, you listen to me!" she said as he revved the engine at the turnoff. "I'm never going to really know who you are, to feel right about marrying you, not till I know what you went through as a kid, everything you had to put up with, what they did to you boys. You've got to try to let yourself get free of your past. That's what Mum told me, only last week, when I told her I was thinking of getting you to stop by the boys' home, seeing as we'd be way out here close by it. She reckons you're still at the boys' home in your head but you won't ever let them let you go free, like your body left there all those years ago but your head's stuck there. So I reckon we gotta go there and sort something out, before we tie the knot at the church with a gold ring and a party up at Mum's and have a tribe of little tackers of our own. I don't want you all screwed up in the head like you are now about Kinchela when we got kids.

I'm not marrying no fella that's still stuck back at the boys' home, stuck there in his head even if his body's free to come and go as it pleases. You following me, Mick Mahoney?"

But Mick just kept revving the engine, and that bully mongrel Mick fella, well, he was never really at Kinchela Boys' Home, was he, he was somewhere else, so none of what she was saying made any sense to him at all. It never did. He never understood her. But it makes plenty of sense to this Mick, sitting here in the dock while this angry-looking Prosecutor fella bullshits his way through another piece of paper from that bundle in front of him tied up with the fancy pink ribbon, while all the old farmers and widows in the jury box nod their approval at every word, every wave of his arm he makes in the direction of the jury box, every accusing stab of his finger he makes in the direction of the dock. But it's all too late for Mick to sit and listen and agree with her.

The Prosecutor fella's story seems to be coming to an end, so Mick lets go of that last night; he lets go of his Mary's soft hand. But he will need to come back to it, to sort it out in his head, and damned soon. Jack told him yesterday, when he visited Mick in the cells under the courthouse: he's got to tell his story about that last night to the jury from the dock, "and it better be a damned good explanation of what happened or you're rat bait for the next twenty years, Mick, cause that story's your only leave pass outta here." Jack always means business. So it must be right. It all rides on Mick now.

The Prosecutor fella must have finished telling his story because he takes his seat and leans back and places his arm along the back of the chair of the young barrister fella sitting next to him, the heavy black silk tail of the sleeve of his gown dragging on the carpet. Then he winks at the young barrister fella like they both know some big secret they aren't going to let on about. The Prosecutor fella looks, for all the world, like an old fella waiting for a bus downtown. So Mick does the same. He sits back and waits.

2

MICK STANDS IN line that night waiting for his dinner at the remand centre attached to Grafton Gaol. His tray is piled high with fried food he can't even bear to look at, let alone smell. His stomach hurts real bad sick. It's getting worse too. He'd better see the gaol doc about it damned soon.

He looks round and can see only one table with spare chairs. He walks to the table he has spotted from the serving counter. There are four big white fellas there and room for another six. They've all got shaved heads and a bunch of real messy gaol tattoos. Every second word they're using is "fuck" and every third word is "cunt". They speak in a low growl. Just the looks on them four faces remind him of a pack of feral dogs.

Mick gingerly walks to the far end of the table, well away from them skin-head fellas, who suddenly stare at him. The one with the brawny arms and the red and green tattoo of an eagle on his left arm—he looks like the boss crim fella here cause the others seem to take his lead—looks up at Mick with squinted eyes and stretched out cheeks and, interrupting a spray of bad language from one of the others about some screw, speaks first. Mick remains standing to attention, holding his tray out in front of him.

"Hey, Sambo, who gave ya the okay to sit ere?"

“Huh?” Mick asks. He gulps a mouthful of saliva loudly and takes a deep breath.

The fella who spoke holds his fork upright and strangles it, stabbing the end of it into the table to stop Mick saying anything further in response to his question.

“We don’t want no fuckin coon at this table. Get ya little black arse over to some other fuckin table. No black cunt’s listenin ta what we’re talkin bout, got it, Sambo?”

Mick looks at the table and says nothing. His bottom lip quivers. He looks down at the aluminium tray and enamel mug of tea he is holding and then looks all round him for a vacant table. The boiling tea in the mug is spilling his hands are shaking so bad.

Another of these brawny bears, the one who looks like that wrestler fella, the Hulk, who used to be on the television, on the Channel Nine World Championship Wrestling Show when Mick was at Kinchela, with a scar on his right cheek and tattoos of maybe five girls’ names on his arms and neck and the letters “D-E-A-T-H” tattooed onto each of his knuckles on both hands, chips in to support the boss crim fella.

“Don’t sit at our table again, Darkie, or ya gunna get a taste of me knuckledusters,” he says, looking round to make sure the screw supervising the refectory is looking the other way and removing from his pocket a set of steel knuckledusters he must have made up in the machine shop which he has yet to polish sharp metal shavings from.

There is a small table at the far end of the refectory which the orderly is clearing so Mick walks over to it like he’s walking on egg shells and trying not to break any and sits there alone. He feels a tightening in his abdomen and looks back over his shoulder to make sure the bruisers with the tattoos have forgotten all about him so he can eat in peace without interruption from them or any other fellas. He should have known better than to sit at a white fellas’ table. What can he have been thinking?

He sips the hot strong tea in his enamel mug, sweetened

with four spoonfuls of sugar to sustain him and his sweet tooth, and tries to get the events of a year ago clear in his head, just as he has done every morning over breakfast and lunch and dinner, in his own time, to himself, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle back together, so he can tell the jury a convincing story of his last night with Mary and explain as best he can how she must have died. But, as always, they never seem to fit, there are always two or three missing pieces and other pieces left over that just don't fit anywhere.

Mary's strong womanly smell comes to mind. His nostrils twitch as he tries to detect it all the better. He pictures her smiling face and her brunette hair swaying over her narrow shoulders as if it were a heavy curtain of dark silk draped over her head.

"Hey Mick, you feeling horny tonight?" she'd ask with a kiss and just a fleeting taste, kind of like it was just a dream, of her tongue inside his mouth, stroking his tongue.

Her face looks so full of life. She was really a white woman in a black woman's skin, with sharp features like a white woman, not a broad nose or heavy set eyebrows and chin like most gins, and well-spoken and a kind of knowing who she was, with a great wanting to succeed in her work and as his missus too. She had a real pig-headed wish to turn their de facto marriage into a legal one with a priest and a gold wedding ring so she could show off to her mum and her friends at the library where she worked.

Between the ages of eight and twenty-seven his life was forgettable—an endless round of moving—from the nuns' convent to the boys' home to one sprawling cattle station after another, as work for ringers calling for his skills as a horseman opened and then dried up with the seasons, rain and drought and flood and grass and no grass and ticks and no ticks and cattle prices way up and cattle prices way down. But those two years he spent with his Mary at West Kempsey were as memorable as the first eight years of his life with the mother and father he has much greater difficulty picturing in his mind's

eye, because it's been ever so long since he last saw them. He must have been awful bad, must have had an awful lot of original sin, as the old priest who came to the boys' home would have called it, when he was born. Mick Mahoney sure must have been a bad bugger when his mum gave birth to him in the front bedroom at home.

Mick, his mother used to tell him when they sat round chewing the fat, talking family history, comes from an Irish ticket-o'-leave great, great grandfather and a gin, an aboriginal grandmother, a marriage which was by her account a happy one made at a time when the banks of the northern rivers of New South Wales were lousy with cedar trees waiting to be felled and the inland was virgin land, covered in Mitchell grass, waiting to be taken up and worked by squatters, as long as the local aboriginal tribe let in those early settlers, or the early settlers had the guts to stand up to attacks from the black fellas he is descended from, whoever they might have been. Marrying one of them was a great way to keep the local black fellas onside, his mother used to say. It happened in the case of Sean Seamus O'Toole, a convicted forger who'd served his time and, at the time of his death, the proud father of ten half-caste children and a cottage in the never-never. But they couldn't work out what tribe she came from. His mother never knew that important bit of information. Mick has no idea. It is one of the abiding regrets of his life: not knowing what his great, great grandmother's tribe was. Things got kind of lost in a haze of mixed marriages after that. A few more Irishmen and the odd Englishmen, mostly ex-convicts with a taste for the native women in a colony that had two white women for every three men, kept Mick's mother's side of the family more milk chocolate than their full-blood cousins for a century or more until her birth nearly thirty years before, somewhere on the coast, or so she said. That, she explained, was why Mick was Cadbury Dairy Milk like her but his father was dark cooking chocolate, a man with so little white fella blood it wasn't worth measuring, except in a thimble. His father once conceded to

having some white fella blood in him, even if it was only a thimble full, because it was enough to earn him an Irish surname and membership of the old Irish priest's flock.

Mick's mother always said that his mixed heritage explained his big brown eyes. His hair is pale brown and curly, "jes like the ol priest fella at comes from Ireland, Far O'Driscoll," yet his nose is as broad as that of his father, a man so dark that his mother always referred to him as being "ten minutes ta midnight, Micky, cause at ol man a yours, e's as good as a full-blood fella, e's a nitiated fella, an is people come from somewhere roun these ere parts, I reckon, not much white fella in im, not like you n me n the gels, Micky, cause wese alf-white fella, kinda alf gin an alf-white fella missus, I suppose. Not really one or the other, not really I reckon. Kind a like wese fallen tween two stools I'd say, not really black fellas an not really white ones too."

When he asked all about his father's tribal details, a fact which he assumed his mother would know all about, he was surprised by her reply. "No idea what tribe ya Dad's part of, but. Not interested in at ere black fella history stuff. Better ask im when e's ome an sober like. I know e was nitiated when e was not much older n you are, Micky, at's all I know. Ya Dad's a nitiated man but I got no idea bout what tribe."

Now life will never be the same again for him, even if he can clear his name and get a ticket of leave out of gaol after his trial. It'll never be the same without Mary. He knows he will never find another woman like her, never love again as he loved her, never find anyone to care for him as she cared for him, never find another lover with such patience for his bad fella ways. It was as much patience as his mother ever showed him, even more, as best he can recall. Mary had the patience of a saint.

"Mick, you keep throwing your dirty shirts and underwear on this here floor and I'm going take your strides off and tan your hide like my Mum used to do to my brothers," she'd yell out from the laundry in a shrill voice that could have cut a

turpentine log in half with its spinning jagged blade. She could be damned bossy when she wanted to.

But Mick always had the last say; he always had an answer that would shut her up alright. Mick Mahoney was always the household smart arse, and she put up with it.

“Ya come in ere an take me strides off, missus, an you’ll get more n ya expect, at’s fer bloody sure, cause I can feel me ol dick turnin inna a big ol nulla-nulla right now an ya aven’t even started ta smack me arse, ya spunky lill gin,” he’d call out to her.

The trial all seems so pointless. What purpose would it serve to try to convince them fellas on the jury he loved his Mary; that he could never bring himself to do her in on purpose like? He might as well be here where he gets three square meals a day and is kept away from the beer he knows he can’t control his urge for. At least he’s well away from the other Mick, that mongrel fella that always gets him into so much strife when he’s on the grog. That little bastard makes all the wrong moves but this here Mick’s always the one who’s got to pay the price for it, he’s always got to cut out the time inside for that other fella’s misbehaviour. He’d be just another no-hoper drunk black fella on the outside, doomed to a life on the dole and being thrown in and out of police lock-ups for drunkenness and getting the blame for every stinking pub brawl that happens within cooee of him.

Who is ever going to believe him anyway? None of them puffed-up fellas on the jury, that’s for sure. His missus is dead, he’s the last person to see her alive, he was found rotten drunk the next morning and couldn’t give a proper explanation of his time with her the night before to them fat detective fellas, or even where it was he last saw her. What else were them angry detective fellas going to do except do what coppers have always done: charge him with murder and let him try to prove he never did it?

It’s all part of the same shitty story he’s been smack in the middle of since they kicked him out of Kinchela Boys’ Home

at the age of seventeen as soon as he finished what passed for schooling. It's just another stage in a life in which he's carried along by events he knows he can never control, events white fellas always control, have always controlled since they came to his house without warning twenty-two years ago and grabbed him and his sisters and took them away, took them far away forever, as if he was no better than a bullock that's been mustered and consigned for the abattoir.

3

MICK CHEWS ON his lamb chop and tries hard to put together that last night in his head. But he is getting nowhere. Things are still a haze, thanks to the grog and the fact that that other Mick, the nasty mongrel with the mouth full of foul language and the shitty temper, did all the talking but won't help Mick piece it together for his dock statement at the end of the week. His mind is distracted by the taste of the lamb without tomato sauce. He stands and looks about for some. There is some over there on the sideboard near that old dago screw standing guard. He stands and baulks, not sure if it's okay to walk about the refectory freely while they're all eating and before he's finished his meal.

The old dago screw has a blank look on his face so it's hard to tell if he's going to be a friendly kind of fella or a real cranky shit like most of the screws in here. This fella is short and round with large brown eyes and olive skin, not much paler than Mick's, and a bald head that's so shiny it's reflecting the light off the fluorescent globe above them as if he's rubbed oil into it or something to make it so damned shiny. The dago screw fella looks round and spots Mick standing beside his tray. He calls out to Mick. Them skin-head bruisers at the table at the far end ignore the interruption, luckily for Mick. If they'd been disturbed he would have given up on the tomato sauce.

"Hey, darkie, you gotta a problem or something?" the screw

asks in a dago accent. His face softens and the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. Mick relaxes a little.

“I want some tamarta sauce for me chops, Boss,” Mick says, his right hand shaking so hard it moves his tray an inch or two in from the edge of the table with a tinny bang.

“Come over and get some, young fella,” the dago screw says.

Mick goes over and introduces himself. What has he got to lose? The dago screw is Tony Juliano, a grandfather aged fella that gave up dairying after his kids grew up and got a job here as a warder because the pay is regular and he doesn't have to get up at three o'clock to milk his herd every day or work twelve hours a day and because it's shift work and he gets penalty rates for working weekends and overtime and he likes the job, he says, only the cows are a lot friendlier than most of the inmates. They have a laugh at that, and Mick forgets all about his gristly lamb chops and starts talking about what occupies the front part of his mind to the only fella in the place who will listen.

“I member me lawyer fella,” Mick says. “Adam. E's a white fella but e works for the Abiginal Legal a bit, theyse the black fella lawyer mob. So e says ta me, e says, ‘Now Mick, it'll take us a week, mebe a bit longer, fer this ere trial ya gotta ave’.”

“A week?” the dago screw fella asks. He tucks his shirt into his trousers and adjusts his leather belt.

“E says ta me,” Mick says, “me lawyer fella, Adam, e says ‘if n em jury fellas reckon ya never did nothin wrong, you'll be outta ere by the middle a Febry.’ Sose e reckons Ise uny got nother, five, nah, nah, yeah, six, at's it, mebe six days in ere, jes six days ta go. I'm outta ere in five or six days fer sure, cause e knows, Adam, e knows I never did nothin wrong. I never did what em mongrel coppers reckon I done. E knows I never did nothin on purpose like ta me Mary, sose there'd be no proper reason fer em ta be sendin me next door ta the proper big gaol fer a life sence, would ere?”

“I suppose not.” But the look on the dago screw fella's face

suggests that he has real doubts about Mick's explanation cause his eyebrows are raised up and his mouth is down-turned. Don't suppose dagoes put much store in what black fellas think any more than other white fellas do. Why should they? What do black fellas know most of the time anyway?

"No reason ta be puttin me in with em fellas at's servin em real long time gaol terms, cause em jury fellas, they gotta reckon em copper fellas did somein real bad wrong, chuckin me in ere like this? Adam says, e says 'At ol Mick Money, e's outta ere, e's back out on at long paddock, eadin up ta Longreach lookin fer ringin work so fast em coppers won't be seein im fer the bulldust be-ine im.' At's what Adam reckons, anyway," Mick says. A brief nervous grin escapes from his face.

Mick looks over his shoulder at the table with the tattooed bruisers to make sure he is not being watched and criticised for talking friendly-like to a screw. The mere thought that the other inmates may be watching him makes him kind of hot and sweaty.

"What do you reckon?" the dago screw fella asks as he picks up the bottle of tomato sauce and hands it to Mick. Mick takes it and stops and thinks hard about his reply, because the question seems genuine, and no one has ever asked him a genuine question about his murder trial inside before so the question demands the kind of respect that genuine questions always demand.

"I reckon diffn," Mick says, looking deep into the dago screw fella's eyes for a sign of sympathy.

"What?" the dago screw fella asks, taking a step back and screwing up his eyebrows and pulling his mouth taught like Mick's said something wrong and raising his voice suddenly so that the inmates at the nearest table stop murmuring and look up at him momentarily.

"I reckon em jury fellas aren't gunna believe one fuckin word Ise gunna tell em, see. I reckon em fellas aren't gunna believe one bloody word me lawyer fellas says ta em jury

fellas. I reckon I'm rat bait. I reckon I'm gunna be stuck next door fer a real damned long time."

"Why? Why would you think different to a lawyer fella you reckon's okay?" The dago screw fella turns his head to one side a little bit and searches for something deep down in Mick's eyes.

"Cause Ise a no-oper black fella, drunk all the time, no job, no missus, no money. Cause she's dead ... an Ise the last fuckin fella at me mates at the surf club ever seen er with ... an I bin in trouble with the beak at Kempsey an up Queensnd too, plenny a times fer slappin fellas roun a bit, a fair bit, ya know, in the pub, when Ise on the grog, smackin em ard like, an, well, em beak fellas never believed me afore, not when Ise in trouble with the coppers like, fer pub brawlin, sose I don't reckon theyse gunna be believin me this time too."

The dago screw fella gives Mick a nod of acknowledgement and changes the subject. He reminds Mick that his dinner is getting cold and that he is holding the tomato sauce and that some of the other inmates are starting to take an interest in their conversation and that it would probably be in the best interests of both of them if they stopped talking. So Mick returns to his table and finishes off his chops and boiled vegetables and his mug of hot sweet tea.