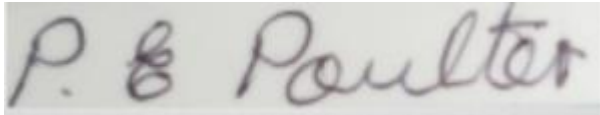


# *Yarnbull*

A novel by Phillip Poulter  
(1942-2017)

A rectangular image showing a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored background. The signature reads "P. B. Poulter" in a cursive, slightly slanted script.

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## CHAPTER 3 – FORKIN’

The sun arose as usual and so did Sawn Off, as he scratched his balding head then his arse, as usual.

‘Are you still going fishing?’ came the muffled query from somewhere under a rose-coloured doona.

‘Yeah, Mick’s picking me up at six,’ Sawn Off replied.

With a ruffle of the bedspread and a roll of the body, and with one eye squinting at the bedside clock, Jessie said, ‘You better get a move on, it’s nearly quarter to’.

‘Only gotta git the grog and ice outta tha fridge, packed tha gear yesterday.’

‘Taking the dog?’ she sleepily asked.

‘Bastard wouldn’t let me out the front gate if I didn’t’.

Sawn Off was aware, as best his brain would allow in this early part of the day, to take stock of his provisions. Dog-grog-ice-worms-tucker-shrimp-bucket-grog, double check. As he stood and waited for his transport, the three-day survival kit packed before him on the footpath, his gaze fell upon the light blue Toyota Corolla that was parked in the driveway. *Got a good buy there* he thought to himself.

Jessie had purchased the car from an elderly man who at the time was recovering from an eye operation and had no further use for it. Low miles and very cheap, Sawn Off recalled. He turned, looked both ways and listened for anything incoming. Satisfied nothing was approaching, his mind drifted back to his encounter with a motor vehicle and his first and last attempt at driving.

One hundred yards of fencing, one clothesline, one dog kennel, one letter box, two garden beds – all were enough to deter Sawn Off from ever driving again, much to the relief of the neighbours. Anyway, Sawn Off consoled himself with *why should I?* Jessie had a car, his son and daughter both drove and it was only two blocks to the pub so it makes sense, don't it?

The sound of an approaching vehicle brought Sawn Off back to reality and with a squeal of worn brakes and a cloud of black smoke, the old ute shuddered to a stop. Lifting Mongrel onto the steel tray he fastened his chain to the steel ring welded to the centre of the cab and loaded his gear onto the already half-loaded ute, his eyes quickly taking stock of the gear. 'Got everything?' Sawn Off enquired by way of greeting.

‘Hope so,’ came the reply. Sawn Off glanced at his mate Mick and noticed no change in all the years he had known him. Mick was nearly two foot taller than Sawn Off and fast approaching sixty, being of slim but wiry build with watery grey eyes to match and a grey beard. He rarely said anything but reckoned Sawn Off said enough for the both of them, especially with a bit of piss in ‘im.

They arrived at their campsite and started to set up as if it were an everyday occurrence. After the fire wood was gathered and stacked to last them at least a week and the old and patched single man tents were erected, they both stood and admired their handiwork, as Mongrel strutted around and pissed on everything including Sawn Off’s boots.

‘Better crack on ‘ey?’

‘Why not, sun’s up,’ came the reply.

‘Grab us a grog and I’ll git tha tube and tha pump,’ Sawn Off stated.

‘I hope ya put the gear in,’ came the reply, gear referring to the highly illegal fishing nets which to their minds were craftily hidden in a wheat bag topped up with several holey and frayed blankets. Satisfied the non-answer equalled a yes, Mick placed the two beers on the fold-up table and

proceeded to unroll an old piece of canvas and spread it on the ground. Sawn Off placed a large heavily-patched truck tube on top of the canvas and began folding and tying the corners together. Picking up his beer Sawn Off stated, 'Better git this into me before I start pumpin'.

Mick, also now with a beer in his hand, looked on in amusement at Sawn Off and knew for a fact and past experience that Sawn Off wouldn't go past fifteen on the old foot and hand pump. True to his prediction, he took the pump from a completely stuffed and sweating Sawn Off and continued pumping until the canvas was drawn tight, forming a floating platform. Cracking another beer, they checked for leaks and then carried their floating device down to the water's edge. Mick returned to the ute to get the homemade wooden paddle and the nylon five-inch square gill nets which were expertly folded to allow a tangle-free run out.

Placing the now empty wheat bag on top of the taut canvas, he laid the two nets flat on top. With the help of Sawn Off they pushed the tube into the still waters of the river and Mick handed Sawn Off his empty bottle and knelt on this rather wobbly but adequate transport. After paddling a short distance, he stopped at a fallen tree where its limbs protruded

from the centre of the river. There he secured the two hundred pound breaking strain top line to a limb, just inches below the surface and looking over his shoulder, estimated the direction and distance to his final tie-off. Paddling slowly backwards, the net unravelling smoothly from its bulk, he reached the protruding limb and again tied the net's top line out of site, just inches below the surface. Mick was satisfied because of the calm water that he wouldn't have to attach the thin leaden weights to keep the net down.

After checking that no part of the two nets were floating and couldn't be seen from the bank, he returned to shore where Sawn Off was just finishing a beer-long piss and was shaking his old fulla dry. He offered his piss splattered hand to help Mick disembark, which was quickly battered away. Unoffended, Sawn Off dried the offending hand under his armpit and queried, 'How'd it go?'

'Got some deep water over there,' Mick answered, stretching unworkable legs. 'Gettin' too old for this,' Mick complained.

'Ya wouldn't say that if ya was between the legs of a good sort,' Sawn Off grinned.

Mick, completely ignoring the remark, took the cold bottle offered and headed up the slight incline to camp. It was still reasonably early and already the sun was promising a hot one. Dragging their old fold-up chairs to the meagre shade on offer, they sat down to enjoy another nectar of the gods. Mongrel rose from the now sunny spot, stretched his old and battered frame, cocked his leg and pissed on the hand pump Sawn Off had discarded, shook himself and crawled under Sawn Off's chair where he farted loudly and sprawled out contented.

'Phew, bloody 'ell, bastard of a dog, hundred mile of river and the bastard's gotta fart right under me!' Sawn Off complained.

Mick, who was in the process of packing his pipe, paused and squinted at Sawn Off before adding, 'That's probably why ya named him Mongrel. Besides,' he continued 'he won't say nutthin' if ya happen to fart on him!'

Sawn Off was about to reply only to be interrupted by the sudden movement of Mongrel from under the chair. He was standing fully erect, his bristle and ears all stiffly standing up. 'Someone's coming,' alerted Mick as they both listened for any noise but they heard nothing.



'Bloody dog's supposed ta be deaf but I reckon he could hear a sparrow fart in a thunder storm.' Sure enough, there came the distant sound of small motor approaching.

'Shit, I hope it's not the bloody fishing inspector,' a panicky Sawn Off remarked, looking at Mick for reassurance.

'Don't think so,' Mick stated, 'his brother told me he's off crook, and by the sound of this coming, it's not his noisy four-wheel drive diesel.' Mick was proved spot-on as a tiny two door car approached and stopped on the edge of their camp site, where Mick and Sawn Off with relieved curiosity took in their intruders. The small yellow hatchback contained two people, a young fair headed girl and a young man. Both appeared to be around the same age. The little car was still running as they seemed to be discussing something between themselves.

'I hope they make up their bloody minds what they're gunna do, I'm busting for a piss,' Sawn Off complained.

Unperturbed as always, Mick drawled 'Well why don't ya pull it out and have one, don't seem to worry ya any other time, besides it's that small they wouldn't see it anyway!'

Sawn Off was about to respond when suddenly the two doors opened and both travellers alighted, only for the

girl reaching back inside the car to retrieve a wide brimmed straw hat with a wide purple band and adorned with pretty daisies displayed on the front. Approaching rather slowly, it gave Sawn Off, Mick and Mongrel time to scrutinise their visitors. They guessed they were both in their early twenties, he being slightly taller than his companion with a slim build and slightly hawkish features with a pale-ish complexion that hinted city life and oversized glasses that gave the impression of a studious type. The girl, now wearing the pretty hat, was nowhere as serious looking as her companion. She was wearing a sleeveless pale blue cotton blouse which exposed her outdoor active sun tan, the white jeans fitted perfectly and the white leather sandals had small matching flowers. A real pretty girl with green eyes, a fresh innocent face and well-formed lips that were protected with a very pale pink lipstick, her golden hair protruding from under her hat in a ponytail. She also wore glasses but they seemed part of her and highlighted her green eyes.

‘I do hope we are not disturbing you?’ she enquired, concern in her voice and noticing the dog for the first time.

Sawn Off, catching her nervous glance at his dog calmed her by stating, ‘Don’t worry about Mongrel, he won’t

bite ya, lazy bugger, half the time he's too tired to bite his own food!' Reassured a little, they both now entered into the rather primitive camp site. Sawn Off introduced himself as Shaune Orth, then Mick and the dog. Mick nodded, still seated, waiting for more information.

'I'm Susan, this is Wilfred, we are on holidays,' she hesitated then continued. 'Maybe I should elaborate further. Wilfred and I attend bible college and have fortunately been granted three days off.' Continuing she added, 'We have already spent one day travelling and looking for a suitable camping spot but all the banks seem to be too steep and the grass so high and I'm terrified of snakes and crawly things.'

Sawn Off scratched the back of his head and wondered what the other things might be, then in a statement that came as natural as Sawn Off himself, declared 'Youse can camp here if ya want to.' Sawn Off didn't miss the raised eyebrows of Mick.

*Bloody marvellous, Mick thought, show him a bit of tit and a firm arse and he'd give ya the fucking opera house.*

'Oh, that's so kind Mr Orth, isn't it Wilfred?', to which Wilfred nodded vigorously and his glasses slipped sideways off his thin hawkish nose. *Anywhere is better than walking up and*

*down fucking river banks looking for a suitable spot, he thought.*

'Are you sure there's enough space for us, Mr Orth?' a concerned Susan asked.

'Course there is love!' assured Sawn Off.

'Course there is love!' mimicked a sarcastic Mick.

'Come on Wilfred, help me unpack the car and then perhaps Mr Orth and his friend will join us in a cup of tea.' Susan and Wilfred then headed back to the car.

'Fuck you Sawn Off ya silly prick,' said Mick somewhat agitated. 'They'll turn us into bible bashers,' he scowled and grabbed his bottle and headed for the sanctuary of his tent. After a moment's silence there came the distinct pop of a wine cork being released and a long gurgle, followed by a burp and an audible 'Fuck you Sawn Off'.

Sawn Off, now seated with the bottle between his feet scratched his head and wondered what he had done to upset Mick. His chain of thought was interrupted by Susan and Wilfred unloading the small hatchback and he marvelled at the amount of gear they had crammed into such a small space. They appeared to be having trouble with what looked like a new domed tent, with wanker Wilfred tangled up inside

yelling instructions to a bemused and completely confused Susan.

‘Ya need a bit of help by tha look of it,’ Sawn Off offered.

‘Thank you Mr Orth, I’m afraid we haven’t had much experience in the pitching of tents.’

If Sawn Off’s hearing wasn’t so bad and the wind was blowing in the right direction he would have heard Mick’s comments, ‘Oh thank you Mr Orth,’ coming from Mick’s ragged and patched-up tent, followed by pop, gurgle, burp, gurgle, ‘Fuck ya Mr Sawn Off’.

After much controlled swearing, all from Sawn Off, the tent stood proudly even if it was just a little lopsided and a bit on the saggy side. As they stood there and admired their bush skills, Sawn Off remarked, ‘I noticed ya haven’t got any mosquito gauze on tha back window flap and none on tha front.’ Sawn Off indicated pointing to his own battered old tent which revealed a patched on and frail mosquito covering.

‘Oh, do we really need them? The salesman told Wilfred that would cost more and Wilfred decided not to buy them,’ she confirmed looking annoyed at a placid Wilfred.

‘Oh she’ll be right. Mongrel won’t let snakes or things round tha camp,’ he stated proudly as their gaze fell upon a heavily snoring dog. After everything was completed with the help and advice from a regimental Sawn Off, they placed their fold up chairs around a pile of wood that would become their light and warmth come night-fall.

Sawn Off had already lit a smaller fire which he called his cooking fire and after scrummaging through his battered and blackened pots and pans, he produced an equally battered and black billy can and headed for the river, followed by a curious Susan. He stood looking up and down the river as if looking for something, causing Susan to ask, ‘What are you looking for Mr Orth?’

Without looking at her he answered, ‘Dead cattle, sheep or dead pigs. They don’t taste too good in a cup of tea, so ya gotta git ya water upstream, away from the maggots and stuff.’ Not unduly concerned with this statement, she watched as a satisfied Sawn Off filled his billy can and headed back to camp with his apprentice in tow.

Making sure he had Susan and a half-interested Wilfred’s attention, he demonstrated the proper bush and time-honoured way of boiling the billy for a cuppa of the best

brew only a bush person could produce, in Sawn Off's opinion anyway. Susan and now Wilfred watched with growing interest. Sawn Off placed the time worn billy on raised coals and wood so flames and heat could penetrate under the bottom and packing smaller twigs around the can for a quick boil. And now with their full attention, he was about to show them the art and expertise of the professional billy boiler. Just before it was about to boil, he casually strolled over to the nearest gum tree where he cast his eyes over the hanging leaves as though he was deciding which ones to use. Finally making his choice, he returned with a small bundle of eucalypt leaves which he placed around the now boiling billy. They both watched fascinated as he explained that it would give the tea a smoky flavour as it boiled. He waited only a short time before leaning over and adding the tea leaves. Susan and Wilfred wondered when he was going to put in the tea bags.

'Ya don't want ta boil too long, after ya put tha tea leaves in, ya'll stew it'. Placing a stick under the handle, he lifted the billy from the fire and asked Susan to pass him another stick from the wood heap and began to tap the side of the can. Pointing out how it caused the floating tea leaves to sink to the bottom, they both smiled at his bushcraft

without realising swaggies had been doing it forever. Now completely carried away with the amazing looks of his small audience, he would now present the grand finale. Stepping away a short distance from his star-struck pupils, he started to swing the billy can over his head like a ferris wheel and announced, 'It gives it extra flavour!'

A distant sigh came from Mick's tent, followed by 'Fuckin' bullshit,' and pop, gurgle, gurgle, pop, burp. Then without a cloth he placed the tips of three fingers under and in the centre of a still very hot billy can without any discomfort and poured their tea.

'Don't know how it works, but ya can put ya fingers there and not get burnt,' Sawn Off offered confidently. Now as they sampled their first cup of gum leaf flavoured, stick-tapped, billy swung tea, they both genuinely declared it the best they had ever tasted.

'Bullshit,' burp.

'Did you hear something Mr Orth?' Susan anxiously enquired, looking towards Mick's tent.

'Yeah, sometimes the old dog farts and snores,' Sawn Off said, squinting at Mick's camp totally unoffended by Mick's remarks.



‘Coulda made ya a damper only we forgot tha flour.’

‘Make a damper,’ Mick scowled, ‘Bastard couldn’t heat up a tin of baked beans!’

As the day grew longer and the bullshit grew stronger, Mick finally emerged from his battered old tent and grabbing his equally battered old hat from the tent pole, squinted at the now setting sun and headed for the water.

Sawn Off stood up from his chair and informed Susan and Wilfred it was time to check their fishing gear and proceeded to follow Mick. ‘Won’t be long, Mongrel will look after ya,’ he assured them.

Reaching the river, Mick already had the inflated tube in the water and Sawn Off noticed although Mick had been drinking all day, it didn’t seem to have any effect on him.

‘I’ll cook ya a damper darlin’, how was tha tea sweetie, would ya like some jam and cream on ya scones honey?’ Mick teased and a huge and unfamiliar grin spread across his weathered and furrowed features.

Sawn Off, unperturbed, concentrated holding the makeshift boat steady as Mick positioned himself in the centre of the tube. He didn’t have to paddle far in the calm water before finding the submerged top line of the net. Placing the

handle of the makeshift oar under the net line, he raised it and hand over hand propelled himself to the other end, placing the incoming net and its contents between his knees, carefully avoiding the needle-sharp pointed spikes of the catfish and razor-sharp fins of the yellow belly. Sawn Off watched and waited in anticipation and was relieved when he heard the splash of netted fish. After collecting both nets and satisfied with their catch, they placed the fish-laden nets on a grassy patch and Mick reached into his top pocket and retrieved a pair of side cutters, which he used to cut off the poisonous and threatening spikes, making it safer to remove them from the nets.

‘Not bad’, Sawn Off stated proudly. ‘Must be about twenty or more Mick.’ Mick just grunted and gathered the now empty nets and walked a short distance to a fallen tree where he stuffed the nets in a hollowed limb and rammed in dry grass and now stood back and inspected his concealment.

‘That oughta do it,’ talking to no-one in particular.

‘I’ll gut ‘em, you scale ‘em,’ Mick announced. After their work was carried out and the now cleaned fish were placed in a clean bag, Mick effortlessly swung them over his shoulder before grinning hopelessly at Sawn Off. ‘Now that’s

all done, I might head up and have a cuppa with scones and jam and cream.'

Reaching camp Mick headed straight for the old ute where upon the back was a small rusted tucker box deep freeze. With the motor removed, it held three large blocks of ice and even after three days would hardly have melted. Susan and Wilfred looked on in awe as Mick packed the fish on ice and they both turned to see Sawn Off entering the camp dragging a filled bag behind him.

'Oh, you're both so clever to catch so many fish'.

Mick grinned and stated, 'Yeah I caught these all by myself, show 'em yours Sawn Off,' as a curious Susan and Wilfred stepped closer.

Up-ending the bag and spilling its contents on the ground, 'Cow shit, he caught a bag full of cow shit!' Mick roared and burst into uncontrollable laughter.

'It's for tonight,' Sawn Off explained, 'Ya haven't got any mozzie screens on ya tent and if ya throw some of this shit on tha fire it'll keep them away,' Sawn Off advised.

'You are honestly so sweet, isn't he Wilfred?' Wilfred merely nodded.

*Well wouldn't that root ya,* Mick sulked to himself, *can't take a fuckin' trick.* He made his way to his abode and took a swig of his preferred red. Sawn Off, now genuinely inspired by Susan's comments, was busily arranging the wood for the coming night and had the fire built and ready to light with the cow shit heaped close by Susan and Wilfred's tent.

Arriving back at their own site, Sawn Off noticed Mick emerge from his tent with a bottle of wine, its contents already half consumed and not to be outdone or left behind, Sawn Off made a diversion to his own supply. He returned to the fire where Susan and Wilfred were seated in their new fold-up chairs and were drinking Sawn Off's gum leaf flavoured tea. 'It really makes a difference Mr Orth,' Susan remarked, referring and pointing to the blackened old billy can which was placed on the edge of the now fading coals.

Sawn Off shifted uncomfortably in his battered chair, scratched the back of his neck and asked shyly, 'Can ya call me Sawn Off? Every time someone calls me Mr Orth I look around spectin' ta see a bill collecta.' Susan laughed gaily and promised it would now be Sawn Off. While they were discussing this new identity, Mick had left and returned with an old fishing rod with a huge alvey casting reel with what

appeared to be very strong fishing line and a hook nearly as long as Susan's hand.

Saying nothing, Mick sat down and waited, the rod between his knees. The inquiry came from an unexpected quarter as Wilfred asked, 'Going fishing again, Mick?'

To which Mick answered, 'No, bought this rod down to show ya something ya'll never see again. This rod,' he continued, making sure he had everyone's attention, 'used to belong to my grandfather who passed it on to my dad, who passed it on to me,' he stated, rubbing his hand affectionately along its length. *Bullshit Mick, ya oughta be rubbing and pullin' ya own length*, mused Sawn Off as he reached for the esky and recalled how Mick and himself were scrounging at the local garbage tip for a five-gallon drum to make a shrimp bucket when they had found it.

'What's so special about it, looks like any fishing rod except for that oversized hook.' Disregarding Wilfred's observations, Mick continued his story, even if only to a curious Susan, a half-interested Wilfred and Sawn Off who secretly knew it was all going to be *Yarnbull*.

'We were fishin' the mighty Darling River, Grandpa, Dad and me, and that part of the river we was fishin' was very

deep, everyone called it the devil's hole because no-one had ever swum to the bottom,' he stated, looking to make sure he had their attention. Although he had heard it before, Sawn Off sat intently like a child at their first day of pre-school.

'Four days,' Mick continued 'and not a single bite.' He took a swig of wine and Sawn Off copied with his beer. 'So Grandpa, never the one ta give up, decided ta change baits and put on a bigger hook and baited it with a sheep's head.'

Wilfred was about to ask where he obtained the sheep's head when he noticed the stern look from Mick, who continued quickly. 'Anyway, even after another two days, the line never moved.' Sawn Off was observing the intrigued faces of their guests, as even Wilfred was now leaning forward taking an interest.

'It was while we were packing up and going home when we heard it.'

'Heard what?' inquired Susan.

'Tha bell,' answered Mick.

'What bell?' a now confused but interested Wilfred asked.

'Tha cow bell,' Mick explained. 'Old Grandpa had it tied to the thick sapling he had driven deep into the ground,

also to which he had tied his rod.’ Sawm Off had his head cocked to one side so that his good ear wouldn’t miss anything. ‘Even though Grandpa was nearin’ eighty, he sprinted for this rod like a wino for a shit house, seized the rod and took up the slack and leaned back to set the huge hook. The line now taut, screamin’ from the reel as Grandpa tightened the drag but it didn’t make any difference as blue smoke poured from somewhere deep inside the overheating reel and you could hear the bones pop in Grandpa’s back and shoulders. But like our breed, we knew he would never give in. Well ta cut a long story short, we set the camp back up again realising this fish wasn’t goin’ ta give up either.’

‘Every now and again we would check on Grandpa to see if he was alright and offer him some water only to be told to *Fuck off* and let him concentrate. I remember stayin’ up late with Dad and hearin’ the curses and the groans comin’ from Grandpa and finally going ta bed just before sunrise. When I awoke it was rainin’ heavily and I peered outside but couldn’t see anything, but then I heard the sound of someone choppin’ somethin’ so I threw Grandpa’s old coat over me shoulder and walked outside ta have me swagman’s breakfast.’

‘What’s a swagman’s breakfast?’ asked Susan and Wilfred.

‘A piss and a good look around,’ replied a serious Mick.

‘That wouldn’t fill ya much,’ added Sawn Off.

Ignoring the interruption, Mick continued his amazing story. ‘Then after the choppin’ sound stopped I heard what I knew for sure was the crosscut saw bein’ used. I was still buggered what was goin’ on and still half asleep, when I looked over the bank, there was Dad and Grandpa either side of this huge mound pushing and pulling the crosscut saw and as I stumbled down the bank to my amazement I saw the biggest fish in the whole wide world. Grandpa tried ta cut the head off with the axe but bein’ stuffed from fightin’ the fish all night, gave in and let Dad help him with the saw. I remember it took most of the morning ta cut its head off and I was flat out climbing up and down the river bank bringing Dad his beer and Grandpa his plonk and his pipe.’

Although he’d heard it before Sawn Off still excitedly asked, ‘How much did it weigh, Mick?’

‘Don’t know, couldn’t weigh it, no scales around big enough. There was talk about taking it over ta Flat Peak



Station and puttin' it on the weigh platform they use for the wool bales, but they couldn't figure out how ta get it there.'

After a pause, allowing Mick and Sawn Off time for refreshments, Susan commented, 'It must have been a huge fish, Mick?'

'Yeah,' Mick casually agreed, 'ta tell ya the truth, it was so big that when Grandpa pulled it out, the water dropped six foot and while trying ta reel him in, he pulled the bend clean outta the river. He was so big he was sunburnt on the back and gravel-rashed on the belly.'

'How come it was sunburnt on the back Mick?' a dubious Wilfred inquired.

'The water wasn't deep enough ta cover it,' explained Mick.

'Well how come ya didn't see it sooner?' challenged Sawn Off.

'Must have travelled here at night time,' covered Mick.

A more polite but still sceptical Susan asked, 'What caused the gravel rash Mick?'

'That was caused by the fight he put up. Every time Grandpa reeled him in, he took off again, diggin' a trench in

the gravel bottom of the river. Anyway, it was still pissin' down and Grandpa said there was no way we would be able to make it the two miles through the black mud to the bitumen road and all the gear was wet.'

'Oh you poor things,' a concerned Susan offered, 'how did you manage?'

Mick, now realising he was once again the centre of attention, studied the fast depleting level of wine his bottle offered and let tomorrow look after itself. He took a mighty swig and replaced the cork, burped, wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve and continued. 'Well for a start, we didn't have ta worry about food, we had two tonne lying on the bank and according to Grandpa, we might need it the way the weather was lookin' and it was then that he came up with the idea.'

'And what was that?' asked Wilfred.

Mick paused for effect and casually stated, 'We camped in the head of the fish for five days, moved all our gear, fold up beds, blankets, cooking gear, the lot. Come dinner time all ya had to do was cut off a fillet or two and ya was right as rain. Speakin' of which, Grandpa was worried, not about the rain but he was worried he'd run outta plonk.'

‘But wouldn’t it smell after a couple of days?’ inquired Wilfred.

‘Nah, Grandpa knew what he was doin’. He strung a rope line up inside ta dry out clothes and lit a small fire and that smoke cured the fish.’

‘Did you eventually get out without too much trouble?’ a concerned Susan inquired.

‘Yeah about a week later. Shame though, we couldn’t weigh the fish and we never got any photos. Yah’d be surprised at the amount of people that still reckon we’re all bullshit.’

‘Anyway, Sawn Off if ya git that big frypan I’ll go and git a couple of those fish I caught and I’ll show our guests I am not only a great fisherman but a bloody marvellous cook.’

Unoffended, Sawn Off was happy to oblige. Any other time Mick would say, *git stuffed and cook ya own*.

After Mick had filleted two golden perch, rolled them in flour, placed them in the huge blackened frypan, raked out a bed of hot coals and placed the pan on top, Susan asked, ‘Don’t you use any spices or anything?’

‘Nah, not with these fish, yah’d spoil ‘em. Ya always gotta cook ‘em nachul, pity we didn’t have some lemons though.’

Susan’s eyes lit up as she happily informed them she had some and headed for her tent and came back holding two very large golden lemons. Mick winked slyly at Sawn Off and asked, ‘Where did ya git them?’

Proudly she announced that she and Wilfred had spotted them just down the road. ‘They were hanging over the fence,’ she declared noticing a frown spread across both Mick and Sawn Off’s faces. ‘Is there something wrong? We won’t get into any trouble for taking them, will we?’ she innocently asked.

‘Nah, nothin’ like that,’ Mick stated.

‘Well, what’s wrong then?’ a now concerned Wilfred joined in. They both looked first at Mick and then at Sawn Off, who looked just as baffled as they were.

‘There was an old Chinaman and his wife used ta own that place. I think there’s about eighty acres and it runs down to the river, wasn’t much ta look at when they bought it, but they planted all different kinds of fruit trees which are still young and now the fruit just drops on the ground wasted.’

‘What a shame, why did that happen Mick?’, inquired Susan.

‘Well people say that they both got into a violent argument because she wanted ta return ta China ta see her parents and he wouldn’t give her any money ta go, so one thing led ta another and she poisoned him with arse-nick.’

‘With arsenic? Oh how horrible!’ Susan declared and looked at Sawn Off who simply shrugged his shoulders and still looked baffled.

‘Well anyway, she took off,’ continued Mick, ‘musta found his hiding place and took everything of value and went home ta China. They found him about eight days later.’ Mick bent over and turned the fish with his fork and continued. ‘They took his body inta town ta have a whacha call it?’

‘An autopsy’ helped Susan.

‘Yeah, that’s it’ agreed Mick. ‘They found traces of this arse-nick in him.’

‘They found his will at his place and apparently she was going to git his money anyway, and it also said in this will that he wanted ta be buried on his small property and they didn’t want ta argue anymore about it as he stunk that much people two blocks away from the mor...mor...’

‘Mortuary’ Susan again helped.

‘Yeah the morshawary, complained about the terrible smell and Jake Edwards, the butcher, one block away complained it sent nearly all his meat sour, so they put ‘im in the ground pretty quick.’

‘But what’s this got to do with the lemons?’ persisted Wilfred.

Mick gave him an annoyed look but continued, ‘Well apparently he loved lemons too and before he kicked the bucket he musta had a feed of ‘em and when they threw him in the hole, a seed must have germinated in his gut and shot out through his arsehole and because it shot out at an angle that’s why the tree is leaning over the fence and nobody will pick ‘em because they’re frightened of gitten arse-nick poison.’

Susan gave a shriek and dropped the lemons and wiped her hands on her jeans and Mick and Sawn Off fell on the ground in fits of laughter and it was now Wilfred who was baffled. ‘Oh, you pair, you had me believing you!’ she exclaimed retrieving the lemons from where she’d dropped them and handed them to Mick who sliced them into quarters and placed them alongside the now cooked fish.

After what was described by both Susan and Wilfred as by far the best fish they'd ever tasted, Susan collected the old frypan and plates and accompanied by Mongrel, headed for the river where to her delight great swarms of different coloured species of parrots and finches had gathered for their evening fill. She became instantly aware of the vast difference between city life and country life and it was at this moment she knew her future and her plans were going to drastically change and she felt a calmness develop around her, supported by the sweet twill of parrots.

Returning to camp, Susan noticed Mick and Sawn Off had built up the fire and placed a rather thick log in its centre to assure good light from the approaching dusk. Moving their chairs back from the heat of the fire, Susan poured herself tea from the blackened billy and gazed serenely at the approaching shadows and asked, 'How many acres did you say there was Mick?'

Not realising what she meant, Mick looked at Sawn Off and then back at Susan who was about to explain when it became clear she was referring to the old Chinaman's place.

'Eighty acres or thereabouts,' Mick informed.

'Is the Chinaman really buried there?' Susan asked looking both at Mick and Sawn Off.

'Na, he's buried in the cemetery, actually he's planted two graves down from my old man.'

'And what about his wife, where is she now?' Susan asked.

'After he died she went back ta China, put the place up for sale, packed up and left.' Mick stated.

'Who's handling the selling of the property Mick?' Susan inquired.

'Harry Belford, he's a cousin of mine, got the real estate shop in town, not a bad bloke if ya was thinkin' of buying it. I could put in a good word for ya, make sure ya got a good deal and that,' Mick promised, happy for the attention she was showing him.

'Thank you Mick, Dad is always looking for investment properties and I am very sure he'll be interested so I'll make it a point to call in and get Mr Belford's business card and I'll mention that I was talking to you.'

Night fell quickly and Sawn Off stoked and re-arranged the fire sending brightly coloured sparks skywards, disappearing instantly into darkness. Mick stood, stretched



his scrawny lean frame, gave a half salute with his wine bottle and leaning slightly to starboard, persevered with his wobbly boot and made for bed.

‘Does Mick always retire early?’ asked Susan.

‘Yeah he goes ta bed with the chooks and gits up with ‘em,’ then lowering his voice he added cackles, ‘and scratches around in his sleep like ‘em too!’

It wasn’t long after a tired and seemingly bored Wilfred decided to retire too. ‘Doesn’t say much does he,’ Sawn Off stated.

‘No, although as I have got to know him better I realise it was a mistake to bring him,’ Susan said as a disappointed expression spread across her face.

‘Ah well, I don’t s’pose we kin all like tha bush,’ consoled Sawn Off.

As night progressed and the surrounding noise seemed to magnify the hearing and flood the ever-curious mind, they discussed their families, their past and future and Susan was saddened by the events that befell Mick and his beloved Becky. ‘She was pregnant with twins, both girls tha doctors reckoned, they both died at birth and Becky was never tha same. Poor old Mick nearly went out of his head trying ta

git her back ta normal, but it was no use, she committed suicide not long after.'

Susan wiped tears from her cheeks and shook her head slowly trying to understand the meaning of life, one minute so beautiful like the parrots at the water's edge and then to the darkness and edge of despair.

'Sometimes when he gits bad tha old dog will go up and lay down beside 'im. Funny how dogs just seem ta know, and then when Mick comes down in tha mornin' like nothin's wrong and I know he's better because he says, *ya must stink Sawn Off, tha dog prefers to sleep with me!*

Susan smiled and said nothing and then after quite a moment asked, 'I have noticed your dog doesn't go near your tent Sawn Off.'

Sawn Off gave that cheeky grin, pleased that Susan was using his real name, the name most people used anyway. 'Yeah, I got tha tent tha same time I got tha dog.'

Susan glanced at the old shabby structure and believed it. 'Anyow, when me and Mick went ta put tha fishing gear in, I'd zip 'im up in tha tent, he was still very young and I didn't want 'im wandering off and git bitten by a snake or

summthin' and ever since, tha only time he'll go near it, is ta piss on it.'

The silence was broken by what seemed an approaching truck missing its exhaust, bringing Sawn Off to his feet and facing his good ear to hear the vibrating irritation. He listened and wondered why the dog wasn't interested.

'Oh, I should have told you, that's Wilfred. The brothers at the dormitory get quite annoyed with him, it looks like very little sleep for me tonight.' Susan told him.

'Oh don't worry, I'll use tha bush cure on 'im,' Sawn Off advised and disappeared into his tent emerging soon after carrying what looked to Susan like a forky stick.

'I'll be back in a minute. Put tha billy on will ya, I'll light tha fire for ya and throw some cow shit on, there's no breeze tonight so I reckon tha mozzies will be bad.' Not long after, the faint crackling of burning twigs and the pungent smell of burning manure invaded her senses and the sound of snoring had miraculously disappeared.

Returning to his own fire, he made tea for Susan and opened his bottle. 'I'm really impressed with your skills Sawn Off and I am hoping you will explain how you managed to do what a gathering of so-called scholars couldn't!'

‘Nuthin’ to it, all ya gotta do is fork ‘em,’ Sawn Off stated.

‘Excuse me?’ Susan asked.

‘Fork ‘em,’ Sawn Off repeated and seeing Susan’s bewilderment continued. ‘I’ll go and git another forker and I’ll show ya.’

Returning from his tent, he produced another forky stick which seemed to be blackened by fire, to which he explained. ‘After we cut ‘em, we hold ‘em over tha flames of tha fire to keep tha natchul oils sealed inside.’ He handed it to a still mystified Susan. ‘These are what we call forkin’ sticks, we git them from a spesshul tree that grows along tha river.’ He glanced up at her knowing full well she had too many manners to declare bullshit. In actual fact, Mick and Sawn Off had gathered them to make slingshots, firing at empty bottles while they waited for their nets to fill, the rubbers removed and hidden under his lumpy old mattress.

‘I still don’t know how they work,’ stated Susan.

‘Well ya know how Wilfred was snorin’?’ Susan nodded. ‘When I went over ta light tha fire, I forked ‘im.’ Instantly a pink glow appeared on her pretty face and noticing her embarrassment he quickly continued.

‘I didn’t mean ta embarrass ya, but it’s hard ta explain.’

‘That’s alright Sawn Off I know you mean well.’

‘So anyway, Wilfred was layin’ on his back and that’s when they snore tha loudest.’ Sawn Off announced. The colour had once again returned to Susan’s face and seemingly more calm, she leant forward in anticipation.

‘What ‘appens is they git their flappers caught over their arsehole.’

This time Susan did interrupt, knowing what the latter was, but she hadn’t a clue what, pray tell, were flappers. ‘That’s tha ball bag, it gits caught over their arsehole and they can’t breathe properly and that’s tha noise ya kin hear tryin’ ta git around his flappers.’ No blush this time from Susan but she was aware of its shallow presence. Continuing, Sawn Off stood upright, stretched his skinny frame and placed each thumb under the straps of his faded singlet, then after a brief pause, retrieved the forky stick from Susan and began.

‘Ya take the forked stick in one hand and here’s tha important part. I always carry a feather in my back pocket and whatcha do is, ya tickle ‘im under tha nose with it and that gits his hands off his old fella ta scratch his nose and while he’s

scratching, ya carefully lift his flappers up in tha fork, but ya gotta make sure tha end part is in tha ground and tha handle is resting between tha cheeks of his arse so it can't move.' Sawn Off looked at a not-so-sure Susan and thought about admitting he'd merely rolled Wilfred on his side, but then thought *fuck it, it's not everyday a bloke gits a bit of attention and besides, Mick took all tha credit claiming he caught all tha fish.*

'What an unbelievable story Sawn Off,' she said with a little grin then continued, 'Thanks to you and Mick this has been one of the happiest moments ever, and I've got to apologise for Wilfred's rude lack of interest, so tomorrow I think we will return home, that should make Wilfred happy.'

Like an approaching dusk, a shadow of gloom fell upon Sawn Off and he realised when she left a light would fade. Looking at Sawn Off's saddened face, Susan put on her brightest smile and asked 'Is there any chance of buying a couple of your products Sawn Off, because where we are boarding, there are four other brothers staying there as well.'

Seeing Sawn Off's confused look, she explained. 'Although they are bible students I still call them brothers and they all study late into the night and come bed time the

snoring is horrendous, so I thought if I explained the workings to Wilfred and he placed the forks we might get some sleep at last.'

'No worries, I'll go and cut ya four.' As soon as the words had left his mouth, a chill ran up his spine, which reminded him once again he was terrified of the dark.

'Please Sawn Off, wait until morning, you might hurt yourself wandering around in the dark.'

*She's right* thought Sawn Off, hoping his shaking wasn't obvious. *But I can't git them in tha morning*, thought Sawn Off, *bloody Mick will want ta know what's goin' on*.

'Na, she'll be right,' he stated with a false sense of bravado. 'I'll just git me axe, won't be long,' and with that disappeared into the unknown. It wasn't very far into the unknown, at the very most twenty paces to the nearest tree where he broke off a skinny limb and dragged it back to camp.

'That was quick,' said a surprised Susan.

'Yeah didn't need tha axe, I brung it back ta camp so I could see what I was doin',' he said, hoping like hell Mick couldn't hear or see what he was doing.

'You should not have worried Sawn Off, it must have been awkward for you out there in the dark.'

'Ya git used ta it, been knockin' around in tha dark all me life,' quickly checking Mick's tent for movement and an unwanted statement, a statement that still put the wind up him, causing him for no logical reason to look over his shoulder, a worried look that wasn't missed by Susan.

Obtaining his bunny knife from his fishing box he proceeded to cut and trim his flapper sticks curiously watched by Susan. 'Do you know Sawn Off, that ever since I can remember I have been frightened of the dark,' Susan said, a confession that caught Sawn Off completely off guard and caused a look of guilt to spread across his worried face.

'There's no shame in being over anxious from what surrounds you, it's only natural, it's a form of awareness that protects us.' Sawn Off had never heard it explained this way before and suddenly felt he could tell Susan of his ordeal.

'If I tell ya summthin' ya won't tell Mick will ya?' Sawn Off asked.

'Of course not, this is strictly between you and I, and I want you to know talking about your fears will definitely help you to at least understand them.' Susan counselled.

Sawn Off reached into the esky and grabbed another beer before revealing the events that had Sawn Off and Mick



terrified of the dark, although neither one would talk about it or admit it to each other. Sawn Off once again looked over his shoulder checking for the presence of Mick or something more sinister. Now satisfied within reason, he produced his bunny knife and began to trim his forks. It happened about two years ago when they were camped not far from here when the river was more easily accessible. But someone had leased the ground and erected a barbed wire fence and a sturdy steel gate with a heavy chain and padlock including a sign warning of no trespassing.

Mick knew, like himself, that Sawn Off was afraid of the dark and cursed him for shitting too close to camp. 'Whaddya scared that tha boogeyman's gunna sneak up on ya while you're havin' a shit or summthin'? Well I'm here ta tell ya he wouldn't come within five miles of ya tha way ya stink,' Mick goaded.

'I'm not frightened, just careful, I'm watcha called night blind, might trip over or summthin'.'

Mick realised he had Sawn Off on the defensive and added, 'Ha, bullshit, tha only thing you'd trip over is your own dunghill and ya don't have ta leave tha fire for that!'

‘Yeah that’s what you reckon,’ Sawn Off said, still not realising Mick was baiting him.

‘All right Sawn Off, prove it,’ Mick said, going to his tent and fumbling around inside. He emerged with his now-lit tilly lamp and placed it in front of a not-so-sure Sawn Off.

‘If ya night blind take tha lamp and go over to tha old camp, tha track will take ya right to tha iron gate and when ya git there, bang tha gate with a rock or summthin’ and that’ll prove ya not scared.’ Running out of excuses and half full of grog, he picked up his bottle, took a huge gulp, burped, picked up the tilly lamp and disappeared into the unknown.

Holding the lamp high above, his head quickly moving from side to side, resembling the rows of clowns at a sideshow alley, he had gone a hundred fearful yards when Mick was engaging in the most important part of his devious plan. Returning once again to his tent, he stripped the old grey blanket from his bed and set out in the direction of the light getting smaller in the darkness. This should do, he thought, as he placed the old blanket on the ground slightly off the seldom used car track. Stretching out on one side of the blanket and gripping the edge, he rolled himself up, making sure the blanket remained loose around his body and tried to control

the surging fits of laughter about the outcome of the story he could tell at the pub.

Mick didn't have to wait long before he heard the loud banging on steel which continued longer than necessary. *Little fart's havin' a go at me is he?* Mick grinned. It wasn't long and the sounds of urgent footsteps became clearer to Mick and he almost felt sorry for his game little mate. The approaching footsteps now seemed to be running and just as the beam of the tilly lamp broke the darkness and formed the outline of what seemed like an old fallen log, it suddenly sprung to life with a blood curdling scream, directly in front of an already terrified Sawn Off, who also at that precise moment felt his bowels loosen and not waiting for the results, whether it was piss or shit, let out a blood chilling scream, threw the lamp over his shoulder and bolted. It was at this precise moment when the tilly light reached its zenith, another figure was revealed to Mick in the darkness and conjured up the most frightening image his brain would allow, except for the horrible scream coming from not only him but from the terrifying figure before him.

Still screaming and his boots now finding traction, he flung the blanket and with a high-pitched yell, took off after

Sawn Off who upon hearing the screaming coming after him, found another gear.

Susan's pleasant voice brought Sawn Off back from his revelations as she inquired, 'But who did Mick see?'

Sawn Off placed his magic sticks on the coals to seal in the natural oils and fussed over them as if he believed his own bullshit. Sawn Off stood up and reached inside the esky for another beer, considered going for a piss, squinted into the darkness and changed his mind. Sitting back down, he produced his old tobacco tin and proceeded to roll himself a smoke while Susan poured herself tea from the old blackened billy.

'It's funny ya know, me and Mick never spoke about it again.' He paused, took a long draw and blew smoke from both nostrils, the slight breeze shifting the smoke to give the illusion it was coming out both ears.

'Anyway, tha next morning while Mick was down havin' a wash at tha river, I went for a walk and found tha spot where Mick was frightened,' of course leaving himself out, Susan grinned to herself.

'Did you find anything Sawn Off?'

'Yeah, first I found Mick's old blanket which I brought back, which Mick threw on the fire sayin' it was haunted, but I didn't tell or show Mick what else I found.' Susan now had Sawn Off's full attention as he continued.

'After finding the blanket, about three yards away I found a billy can and about another yard away I found a small burnt circle and inside that circle was a pipe. So anyway, I got ta thinkin' and then it struck me as clear as a bell that the person Mick had seen was a swaggie. I reckon he's seen our fire and like all travellers was coming ta join us and put the billy on.'

'I think you are indeed correct Sawn Off and what did you do with his belongings?'

'I didn't say anything ta Mick but I gave him the pipe six months later, said it was my old grandfathers' and he could have it seeing it was his birthday, and between you and me, it brought a tear to his eye and he only lights it up on spesshul occashuns.'

'I can't help feeling so sorry for that poor old swagman. By the way you said he dropped his billy can, what happened to that?' Susan said with a touch of concern.

'Ya drinkin' outta it!'

Sawn Off didn't reveal to Susan all he'd found that morning. Fifty yards further along he came across some clothing in a jumbled heap, which upon closer inspection revealed a pair of discarded trousers swarming with flies. It was not hard to guess why the flies.

'You've certainly led an interesting life and have had some weird experiences. I could listen to them all night but it's rather late so I better get some sleep.' Susan said.

'Don't forget ta take the flapper sticks with ya.' Gathering the forky sticks she rose, stretched and much to the surprise of Sawn Off, leant and kissed his bald head and headed for her tent, followed and watched over by Mongrel.

Sawn Off drained the last of his beer and suddenly realised he was alone and felt the familiar prickle of bristles at the base of his neck. Busting to syphon the python, he nervously looked into the dark and the dark looked back at him and the dark won.

Pulling his private over the top of his shorts, he sighed with pleasure as he sent a stream of acid-laden piss onto the hot coals which returned a steam-stinging ashen-loaded ball up his nose, which in turn caused him to sneeze, cough and fart, and his eyes to water.

'Are you alright Sawn Off?' came the question of concern from Susan's tent.

'Yeah, just tha beer went down tha wrong way' a croaky voice replied.

'Lyin' bastard,' Mick's voice was heard to say, 'ya been pissin' on tha fire again, serves ya right if ya too frightened ta walk into tha dark.'

Sawn Off stuck up his middle finger, Susan grinned and peace fell upon their little camp. Mongrel stretched out peacefully between Susan's tent and the dwindling fire, his huge head buried between two equally large paws. The first sign of movement next morning came from one of Mongrel's chewed and battered ears which had risen and twitched ever so slightly as it digested the faint but unwelcome intrusion that had alerted his senses. Now confirming something was out there, his other ear rose and both went onto full radar. The great head lifted and two cold grey eyes scanned the early morning darkness and the sound of a dull flop caused him to rise and the bristles along his back to stiffen. Now fully alert, there came a deep growl that was followed by the dull flop-flop of ears pinned back, his body low, every muscle as taut as a spring steel, approaching with caution to what seemed to

the dog a mass of invading meat. With his ears forward and his head to one side he eyeballed the blob and reaching out tentatively, lightly touched its shape which didn't move. Now with more vigour, he jabbed it with his paws and it leapt into the air and landed at the entrance to Susan and Wilfred's tent. Seeing it was retreating, the once cautious dog charged in and sank his teeth into soft but leather-like skin. A huge croak followed by a huge leap, the massive toad along with Mongrel disappeared into the small nylon tent and the high-pitched screams echoed through the darkness and sent a shiver up Sawn Off's spine.

Even before the echo returned, Sawn Off was on his feet and running, only for his foot catching under the tent rope which sent him headlong into the portable table and chairs and a split second after, blue and orange flames exploded into the early morning light, followed instantly by whistling shrapnel that tore over Sawn Off's head and shredded and demolished Sawn Off's accommodation.

'Stop firing Mick, ya stupid barstard, you'll kill the lot of us,' yelled Sawn Off.

'How many of 'em is there Sawn Off, did I git any?'

'No ya mad barstard, ya blew me tent away!'



Untangling himself from a chair leg that somehow had gone up the leg of his shorts and was protruding out the back, he peered through the weak early light towards Mick's tent hoping he'd come to his senses, or had no more cartridges.

Finally freeing himself, he set to work trying to free Susan and Wilfred and nearly tripped over Mongrel who was standing proudly over the biggest, most horrible looking cane toad Sawn Off had ever laid eyes on. Now with some help from the ever-wary Mick, shot gun still in one hand, they finally cut and untangled enough of the tent for the two terrified campers to emerge.

Out of the two it was Wilfred who was the whitest and who commented, 'I thought the dog was attacking us,' his voice seeming like it was going to crack as he swayed on jelly legs.

'Na, he was just savin' ya from that,' Sawn Off pointing to the huge and very mangled frog.

'My goodness, he certainly is, I mean, was huge. You're a very brave dog Mongrel.' Unconcerned, the dog shook himself, smelt his conquest and satisfied it had no more kick, proudly made his way up to the main camp for some

peace and quiet, while Mick followed, carrying his shotgun military fashion with a port or two in mind.

‘Fuckin’ typical isn’t it, he nearly shot my head off, shot tha shit outta me tent and fucks off.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Susan said calmly, ‘the sun will be up soon and in the meantime I will make some breakfast for us, including Mongrel. So Wilfred, if you would, take the billy down and get the water so Sawn Off can make the tea.’ Realising it was still dark and seeing the relieved look spread across Sawn Off’s face as he sheepishly piled wood on the fire to drive the demon shadows back.

‘Ah well, ya haven’t got much ta pack up anyways,’ Sawn Off pointed out.

‘Likewise to you too,’ she replied looking at a crumpled, shredded mound.

‘Shit happens, coulda been in it!’ mused Sawn Off.

*What a difference a woman can make to cooking,* thought Sawn Off, as the smoky smell of bacon drifted on the thin morning air and brought Mick running with a battered old enamel cup and plate. *Fuck tha wash,* he thought, *it can wait, it’s not every day a bloke gets his breakfast cooked,* as he sat by the fire with his cup and plate held out expectantly.

After breakfast Mick took the plates and cooking utensils to the river where they were scrubbed with wet sand and rinsed in the clear flowing waters of the river. Returning to camp, Mick noticed that the visitors were nearly packed up and also noticed Sawn Off heading for the river with a towel and what looked like soap in his hand. *That's funny, never seen him wash with soap before at the river,* then shaking his head decided on an early port to take the kinks out.

Returning to the fire, he amusingly looked at Sawn Off. 'What's tha speshul occashun, Sawn Off?'

'What ya mean Mick?'

'How come ya wet and combed ya eggshell and ya changed ya singlet?'

'What's wrong with that, I've had it on for three days,' Sawn Off stated.

'Never worried ya before,' Mick pointed out. 'Wouldn't 'ave summthin' ta do with Susan would it?'

'Get fucked Mick!'

The slamming of the back doors to the small sedan brought their stirrings back to reality and they both already felt a loss creeping up on them, following by an ever-growing sadness.

'Well that seems about it,' Susan stated, her eyes searching for something they had missed. Mick and Sawn Off both noticed Wilfred had elected to stay by the car and to avoid the dramas of saying goodbye.

'I hope this won't be the last time I visit. I have had a beautiful time although I am not sure about Wilfred and its funny what you can learn about another person and I don't think there's any future regarding us. They say animals are a good judge of character and Mongrel peed on his foot,' she said with a huge grin.

'Yeah, he's a smart dog!' Sawn Off added with no comment from Mick. 'If ya thinkin' of coming up or ya want ta leave a message, just ring the Federal Hotel and ask for Sawn Off.'

'Or Mick,' Mick added.

'I certainly will,' Susan promised and walked over to Sawn Off and kissed him on the cheek and followed up with the same for Mick and with tears in her eyes turned and strode towards the car. There came a short wave from Wilfred.

Suddenly stopping, she turned and ran back, knelt and cuddled Mongrel, rubbing him between the ears and whispering to him, 'You are right Mongrel, he is a nerd!'

before once again walking slowly to the little car, wiping her eyes.

With tears in both their eyes, Sawn Off and Mick watched her reverse then drive forward and wind her window down and announce, 'Don't worry Sawn Off, I'll make sure they're all forked!' And with that lingering promise, she drove away.

Turning away from Mick to hide his tears Sawn Off croaked, 'It was nice of 'er ta give us a kiss Mick.'

'Yeah and I didn't even have ta comb me hair or put on a clean singlet.'

'Get fucked Mick.'

A few months later, Mick was seated at the dining room table in the Orth household. Sawn Off had his arse in the air and his head in the fridge searching for more beer when Jessie arrived home from work carrying a small amount of shopping.

'Hullo Mick,' she greeted Mick which startled Sawn Off causing him to bang his head on the fridge shelf. 'If you can get your big boof head out of the fridge for a moment I would like to put some things away including my nice bottle of wine.'

Sawn Off extracted himself and two bottles of beer, gave Jessie a kiss on the cheek and sat down with Mick.

‘What are you pair of larrikins up to?’ Jessie inquired, noticing for the first time a pink envelope Mick was holding and nervously tapping the table with and looking at Sawn Off for support.

‘You haven’t by any chance acquired a girlfriend Mick, have you?’ she asked cheekily.

Mick was about to respond when Sawn Off interrupted. ‘This letter came for me and Mick.’

‘Oh so you are both sharing this new girlfriend, are you?’ Mick and Sawn Off both looked at one another, now completely confused.

‘It came to tha pub,’ stated Sawn Off as if that explained everything. The letter now discarded as if poisoned, laid on the kitchen table.

Taking a seat and a mouthful of Sawn Off’s beer, Jessie picked up the letter and at once noticed it was expensive stationary with a lovely perfume. This is going to be interesting she thought and waited for them to ask, knowing both could not read and finally it was Mick who asked, ‘Do ya think ya could read it for us please Jessie?’

‘Sure, if you both don’t think there’s anything personal in it,’ she chided.

Another dumb look from both of them convinced her there wasn’t. Mick had gone back to fidgeting with his battered hat, twirling it around and poking his finger through the hole in the crown. Sawn Off simply sucked on his beer and waited.

Not wanting to spoil such a lovely envelope, she rose and going to the knife drawer, returned and carefully slit open the letter and as she slid out the coloured writing sheets, two sheets fell onto the table. Putting aside the written letters, she opened the smaller ones and found them to be both cheques made out to cash for five hundred dollars each.

‘My, what have you larrikins been up to?’ she repeated and placing the cheques aside retrieved the letters and began to read with Sawn Off and Mick both leaning closer in with curiosity.

*Dear Sawn Off, Mick and families,*

*Sorry it took so long to get back to you but I have been so busy and so much has happened and I hope you will forgive me. Anyway, I have decided not to continue with the bible studies and have taken a position with my father’s business*

*investments which now includes land development and importing brood mares for the racing fraternity. Anyway, enough of that, the special news is I am engaged to be married and I am sure you would both like him. He attends his final year of medicine and he, like you two, loves the bush. Dad was so pleased for your help in acquiring the land and says it's one of his better investments as he is going to put stables for the mares and build a house for the stud-master. Also, he is going to keep the orchard section and the cottage and wondered if one of you was interested in living there and maintaining the grounds and the orchard. You will be paid a wage of course and it's rent free. I also told Dad about you Sawn Off and explained you were married with a lovely wife and family so therefore it might suit Mick better.*

Jessie paused and added, 'I'm starting to like the girl' and continued.

*However, once the stables and house are built and the horses arrive, they are going to be very busy and Dad assured me there will be work for you too Sawn Off and to show his appreciation to both of you, he has enclosed a couple of small cheques.*



‘Small!’ Jessie said aloud. ‘He can write me out a small cheque anytime.’ Sawn Off reached across the table for his share but shouldn’t have bothered as his hand was soon grasping for air, and in the same swift movement, Jessie had placed the other one in front of a grinning Mick.

*So, with all our love and thanks, I will close but before I do, let me tell you about Wilfred. Apparently, he was caught in the mens dormitory by the head priest who stated to his elders Wilfred was lifting the private parts of the sleeping brothers and trying to wedge some sort of forky stick between their legs. The church people claimed he must have had a mental breakdown because of the intense studies and sent him away for a complete rest. And it’s rumoured that the objects he was caught with were confiscated and hidden from prying eyes deep in the bowels of the church, fearing there was some kind of spell attached as Wilfred was mumbling something about testaculls and circalashun snore stoppers.*

*Lots of love,  
Susan and Eugene.*

‘Shaune look at me, say testicle and circulation,’ and Jessie knew beyond a doubt Sawn Off’s pronunciation and involvement somewhere, somehow were linked.

'Testacull and circalashun' Sawn Off repeated.

'Shaune, I think even though you haven't done anything wrong, apart from getting someone sent to the madhouse, I want you to explain to me what this is all about. Do you know Mick?'

'Haven't got a clue, he does some bloody funny things!'

'Before you start explaining, I think I'll open the wine. Want a beer while I'm up Mick?'

'Yes thanks Jess.'

'What about me?' pleaded Sawn Off.

'I'll hear your story first then I'll decide,' came the firm reply.

'Ah stuff tha sticks!'

'And no swearing in my house Shaune,' came the rebuke and brought a huge grin from Mick. *Must be in heaven, Mick thought, five hundred dollars ta spend, free beer, a payin' job and Sawn Off in tha shit. Heh heh!!!*

Some days you're the dog, some days you're the hydrant!