

CHAPTER 6

The River

Brian

I suppose everything started to really turn to shit last summer when Jacko turned eighteen and bought his bomb of a car. Not that I'm blaming him. It was all that stupid wine company's fault. If they hadn't put a 'Scratch and Win' ticket with a ten thousand dollar prize in every four-litre cask, none of it would have ever happened. Or maybe it would have, just not so fast and all at once. To us Oxley Creek Boys, it was like a message from God, giving us a job to do, a purpose. Sort of like that bloke in France they told us about in school. He got a letter from Jesus telling him to get a bunch of kids together to go fight a crusade.

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We didn't have a war to go to like they did. But we got our message just the same.

Ever since I can remember we've been the Oxley Creek Boys, since even before we made our raft – Jacko, Douggie, Russ, Steve, and me. We used to fly up planks of wood on our BMX bikes, leap over buckets and burst through walls of hose-spray. We rattled down the hill on brakeless go-carts and crashed into the gully, coming up bloody but laughing. Sometimes we got hurt, a broken arm or bad gravel rash, but never anything that couldn't be fixed and never anything that stopped us doing it all over again.

'I dare ya,' was our motto.

Once we hit high school, we found out there were more things to try. Everyone was smoking dope – well all the cool kids anyway, the ones that mattered. We made our first bongos out of juice bottles and bits of hose, and cones from tinfoil. We pooled our money from part-time jobs and paper runs and bought huge bags of grass, smoking it

in endless weekend sessions, pulling cone after cone, laughing and coughing and gorging on junk food, till we ended up in a sweaty heap on the cubby floor, empty wrappers stuck to our backs, staring into space unable to speak.

We tried magic mushrooms, acid, nitrous oxide, pills – whatever we could get our hands on. We laughed all the time, especially at Duggie’s jokes. Mostly we laughed about other people who weren’t as cool as us. Life was a party and we partied harder than anyone.

One drunken night we decided that those ‘Scratch and Win’ tickets in the casks were the best way for us to get rich, as well as getting us a place in the world record books as unbeatable drinking thrill seekers. Our crusade. We wanted to be the coolest, and that meant being able to drink everyone else under the table. So we made a pact to drink a four-litre cask of wine a day, each, until we won. Moselle. Goon.

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Money wasn't a problem. Jacko and me both had jobs at the local servo by then, and Steve and Dougie did papers. The rest of our cash came from selling dope at school to kids who didn't know any better.

We drank the goon straight in tumblers, in mugs with ice, blended into smoothies with apple and even banana. Though I only tried banana once. It made me chuck. We drank it lukewarm and heated up over campfires on cold winter nights. We weren't just any old drinkers – we were the 'Goon Babies'. At night, huddled around the heater in the cubby, we sang hymns about goon like those French kids probably sang about Jesus. My favourite was sung to the tune of Gloria and went like this, 'Goo-oo-oo-oo-ooniie, we shall drink forever,' over and over again. We had a great time, arms around each other, swaying together, warm inside and out. Friends forever. Champion thrill seekers. Just like when we were kids.

Sometimes we won another cask of goon with our lucky tickets, but never the money.

So we kept trying. And trying. We couldn't believe it when yet another scratchie came up with 'Better luck next time'. It became the goon marathon, dragging on over months, straggling into the new year. Those French kids kept on marching to prove themselves, to serve their God. We served ours too. No giving up. Not ever. Anyway, we were having too much fun.

On the weekends when other part-time goon babies joined us, we had crazy boat adventures. In Dad's old tin dinghy we puttered down the polluted creek into the river, dodging barges, the occasional cruiser, and the dredges that made the river such a murky brown. There was a cement pontoon under the Indooroopilly Bridge where we left the boat while we scrambled up the bank through mangroves and lantana to the road. Half-swaggering, half-stumbling, we made our way to the orange brick pub and stocked up on supplies.

One Friday night, as we were tying up at the pontoon, I spotted a Russian wolfhound

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that was stuck in the mud. The dog's long hair was black and stinking, hanging from its loose skin. Even in the dark, his eyes gave me the spooks. They looked empty, like he'd given up hope. Like we were too late. He didn't even have the strength to move his legs and help us as we heaved, pulling him free of the black gunge that had sucked him in so deep only his front legs and head were still out.

We got him into the boat and went straight home, where we dragged him into the back seat of Jacko's car on a beach towel and drove to the free vet clinic at the Uni, his head bouncing on my lap. For a big dog he was really light. At the clinic they took him from my arms, put him on a trolley and wheeled him away. I swear he turned and looked at me.

The next afternoon I went to visit but he'd died in the morning. The vet said he'd been stuck in the mud a long time, a week or more. All they'd found in his stomach were a few yabbies. I felt real bad then. He shouldn't have died. I should've found him

sooner. I'll never forget that look he gave me. I should've known then it was a sign. A warning.

The weekend after we found the dog, we snuck into the Sea Scouts' shed and borrowed a bigger boat so we could fit everyone in. We had four extras that night. Everyone wanted to be in on our fun. First stop was the Indooroopilly golf course just up from where the creek joined the river. We pulled the boat onto mud at the bottom of a cliff and climbed up the bank to one side of the cliff face. We collected flags from holes as souvenirs and wandered around, so wasted that we were never all standing at the same time. It was a beautiful night. We laughed and sang our goon songs to the moon.

Across the river the powerhouse was sparkling with lights like a space-age city, its chimneys reaching high and smoky. It looked like magic, the Promised Land, so we headed in that direction. But first we had to

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find the boat, down on the mud far below. As usual Jacko led the way. He reckoned we wouldn't even know how to scratch our own arses if he didn't show us how.

'This way,' he called, leading us down a path, then disappearing.

I followed straight after him.

The track ended with a step into darkness, a couple of seconds' wingless flight, and a hard thumping body-slam flat into the mud.

'Don't come this way,' I yelled up to the fellas. But no one heard, and even if they had, they probably would still have followed. That's what mates did. Soldiers follow their leader.

One by one they fell the ten-metre drop off the cliff to the riverbank.

Because we were so out of it we landed soft and floppy in the mud and no one got hurt. The glass bong in Steve's hand got

smashed but he didn't even cut himself. A miracle. It was a hell of a drop. We wiped off a bit of the mud, laughed, and had another drink to celebrate. Back in the boat, I started the motor and we crossed the night-dark river to the lights of the powerhouse.

It seemed empty so we went inside, whispering at first, getting louder when no alarm bells rang and no guards appeared. We opened the workmen's lockers and helped ourselves to their dinner-box sandwiches and biscuits; made a bonfire of their magazines and books to keep warm. Jacko figured out how to get inside a crane, so we mucked around with that for a while. Duggie fell asleep in the boat. Russ went to explore further into the enormous building and got lost, returning hours later with a sketched map and the autograph of a worker who'd given him directions back out.

The sky was starting to brighten by then, so we headed back to the scout hut to return the boat. We were polishing off the last of the bottles and dancing with muddy boots on the narrow bunks when

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the scoutmaster arrived. He went ballistic and yelled at us till his face went red. But we weren't afraid. We knew he was the one who practised his knot tying around little boys' willies. Old perve. We got out of there quick-smart anyway, leaving him wiping mud off the vinyl mattress covers.

Back home we squashed into Jacko's car, chucking the young ones in the boot, and hit the pub for some beer. We drove to the local park of steep green hills and fig trees by the curve of the river, and found ourselves a comfortable spot for our beer breakfast picnic. The first beers were delicious, cold and refreshing, but no one finished their second, all of us finally falling asleep in the hard white glare of the morning sun.

When I woke up happy families were spreading picnic blankets around us, unpacking hampers, keeping their kids close by. I felt dirty, covered in mud and soaked to the core in goon. Dougie was crying.

The next weekend he had his fight with Steve.

But that didn't stop us drinking. The goon marathon has stretched on and on, I don't think it'll ever end. Jacko's moved out and got a place of his own where I hang out most of the time, away from Mum's tears and Douggie's crazy talk. We party every night, and every weekend the house overflows with kids who want to be us. But I can't get a handle on it anymore. Nothing's easy like it was before. Nothing's fun. All the promises we made of undying friendship have turned to shit and everyone's changed. Not just Douggie either. Feels like that bloody mud's got us all neck deep, grasping for the mangroves to pull ourselves out.

It's every man for himself.

And for all our drinking we've never won a cent. I wonder if there even is a prize. I've been thinking about those French kids on their crusade a lot lately, too. Tramping over snowy mountains singing their stupid songs, till they froze and starved, heading towards something that didn't really exist. You know what happened to them in the end? The ones that didn't die getting to the

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port were sold into slavery. Not one of them made it to the Promised Land. Not one.