

1948

Getting on

Len gets a whiff of the blood-sopped sawdust, recoils and stumbles, banging his hip against the solid wooden counter. The screen door taps shut behind him, barely shifting the flies clinging to the outside of the wooden frame. Inside, it is slightly less hot but there is no real respite from the sweltering heat. Righting himself, he grins at David Smith, the town's butcher, and somehow manages to stand tall while leaning on his stick.

'What are you doing here, Len? Middle of the bloody day.'

'What do you think I'm doin', Davo? Came to say g'day.' Len feigns offence and sways slightly. 'Bloody good bloke, your big brother...for a Pommie bastard.' He salutes. 'And you too, of course, are a fine man.'

Len stands at ease. Hums a few lines of 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen'.

'Took Evie to see a Noël Coward revue once, at His Majesty's, up in Perth. Before we were married. Pretty little thing she was.' He taps his cane on the ground a couple of times. 'Had an uncle in the theatrical world. Bit of a nancy, as your big brother, rest his soul, would say. I thought about becoming an actor for a while. Did you know that?'

‘Bulldust, Len, you’re a farmer through and through.’ David points to the door at the side of the counter. ‘Go through, mate. I was about to close up and make a cuppa, anyway. Nobody in their right mind wants meat on a scorcher like today.’

In the kitchen at the rear of the butcher’s shop, Len takes a seat at the wooden table and sits quietly for a minute or two. He starts talking as David opens up the back door to allow the miserable wisp of breeze through. He’d love another beer but knows Davo won’t go for that. Teetotaller from day dot, that one. Too much of his mother’s churchy goodness, his brother Joe used to say.

He’s not so drunk that he forgets that Davo knows the story he’s about to tell. But he likes repeating it. It grows a bit each time – a bit more drama to embellish the facts. And in a way it brings Joe closer. *Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story*, Joe’d laugh when caught out with the bulldust.

‘Cracks me up to think of it, even now. Unbelievable how we ended up across the way from one another in the hospital ship.’

Len didn’t remember getting out. One minute he was doing what he’d been doing for the past fortnight or so, managing as best he could to hide the fact of his foot swelling and festering, the poison from the rot inching its way through his body, burning like buggery. Then he was flat on his back, swaying in and out of sleep on a hospital ship, with nothing to show for the past few weeks but a thumping headache that consumed his entire body, and a shock of pain where he used to have a foot. Messed with his mind, the poison. Thought he was gunna die. Thought he was already dead. He was scared as hell in his lucid moments, he remembers that much. Not being hot anymore. And feeling that somehow he’d pushed through a new type of evil, and he wasn’t burning in all kinds of hell, after all.

Sad and sorry cases, the pair of ’em were. Well, them and the rest of the motley bunch crammed into the hospital ship. Hard to imagine they’d all been in the prime of their lives, him and Joe

virile young men with children to prove the fact, just a few months earlier. Now they stank of impending death, and of close shaves, and of narrow escapes from a meeting with The Maker. That, and months of caked-on sweat, shit and fear. The war in Europe had supposedly been done with about three months earlier, and they were half expecting to learn that the victory over Japan was a hoax. Most weren't going to say it out loud after all they'd endured. But they were scared. It was like now they'd got the one thing in life they'd wished for the hardest, and they might wake up and find it snatched away. Some sick bastard's idea of a joke. Worried that they could go down into the blue, they were, too.

In the beginning, Len really didn't know or care that much, one way or the other. But a while into the trip he'd wondered aloud if they'd throw the bodies overboard if they carked it. Wondered what'd happen if the ship arrived – assuming they weren't torpedoed mid-way – emptied of casualties. A ghost ship, sailin' into port.

Nearly fell off his hospital stretcher with the shock of it when Joe spoke up – or cacked and spluttered and just about choked with laughter, more like it. Kept laughing about the fact that they'd started off fighting in different parts of the war, and what do you know, they're now near enough to sharing a room. *Strike me pink. We survived the war. You gunna bloody talk us all to death, Lenny?* They laughed so hard at that. Joe'd said to be sure to tell his missus and kids that if he croaked, he'd died laughing at the irony of the situation. By the time the pigeon-faced old bag of a sister came down between the rows to squawk at 'em to be quiet, they'd established themselves as the Laurel and Hardy of the hospital ship. But they'd protested when someone'd called them that. *No!* they'd called out together, both remembering the film they'd seen at the pictures before going off to war. *Abbott and Costello!* Felt pretty good for them to be laughing, despite the pain. Had half of the banged-up mob on board chortling by then, it seemed.

'Good mates with adjoining properties but never directly crossed paths in the war, the two of us, until they shipped us home. How'd you be?' Len says.

Not that you'd expect to cross paths, not really. It was a big bloody war. Len reminds David of the fact that they'd signed up at different times. Joe early, him late. Funny, to think about it. Shipped back to Australia together, shared a ward in the city hospital for the first couple of weeks, then trundled back here, to the regional hospital. Metal-framed beds with lumpy mattresses lined up on the verandah. A view of the river, they had. Same spot, by his reckoning, that his old man had been laid up after the first one.

He stops talking when his old man comes into his head. His thoughts grow too dark to go on. After going away and seeing something of what a man is capable of doing to another man, he gets that the old bastard might once have been a decent bloke. But it still hurts to think about it. His mother loved his old man once, she'd always maintained that, and was responsible for him, and loyal until the end. But she'd had to hide Len away too often as a kid. She'd give him that look and off he'd go, quiet as a church mouse, to the space between the big old broken cupboard and the wall. Afterwards she'd make all the excuses under the sun for his father's swinging moods, his alternating long blank silences and crazed rages. *He came home alive but not the same*, she'd say, pretending that she could see through her bung eye and that her face wasn't mashed to a pulp, trying to smile at Len as she coaxed him out of the hidey-hole.

He'd never remembered his old man being any different. Didn't really have any happy childhood remembrances. Best thing about his childhood was getting on his pony and riding to school, dawdling as long as he could on the way back. Avoidance of the old bastard, that's what his life was all about for as long as he could remember. But she never blamed him. Bloody saint, his ma was. Kept excusing the prick as he went out, farther into the property, and beyond the fence line, too, chopping down trees. He'd had no bloody clue what it meant to be a farmer. Chopped and culled but hardly grew more'n a vegetable patch on the parcel of scrub he took up after the war. Not enough land to make a go of it, but it'd eased the stinking government's conscience, probably, to give something to the motley bunch that made it back.

David sits without speaking. He's waiting on him to finish his story, no doubt.

'I held back enlisting so long,' Len finally says, 'because I had to run the miserable excuse of a farm for Ma. She had nobody else. Held on until there was no bloody choice but to go – call me a coward, but I'm not ashamed of that fact.'

He always dresses the story up for Davo. Skips over the darkest bits. Tells how Mary, Joe's missus, used to call in while they were out on the verandah recuperatin', making out she was doin' her rounds, telling 'em to behave 'emselves, and not show her up. Evie'd be regularly popping by with little treats she'd baked, too, sneaking Olive in to see her old man and Uncle Joe. Sometimes, if she was looking after Hazel and her brother Harry while Mary worked, Evie'd bring all the littlies in and they'd sit there, quietly playing on the edge of the verandah, until three became a crowd and one of them started squawking or crying.

'Like a bloody summer holiday by the sea. If yer stretched the imagination hard.'

Len likes his chats with Joe's younger brother, though Davo doesn't say much. More contained than his brother, serious like, doesn't take the time to play around like Joe. He's a good *mother*, though. Keeps the mug of tea topped up, and occasionally waves the plate containing a couple a slabs of his mother's fruitcake in Len's general direction.

Feels a bit sorry for Davo, Len does. There were ten years between him and Joe. Lived in his brother's shadow. And Joe was a bit of a local hero. Done it all, he had. Got married and had a family, took his place running the family property, fought a war for his country. Died of his injuries, a slow and protracted death – four years of war followed by three years of dying. Eternally brave, that man.

'There's not much,' Len says, a little less wobbly now that the beers have been sopped up with the Bushells tea, 'not much that me and your brother didn't talk about.'

'That's good to hear, Len. He thought you were a good bloke, too.'

Len doesn't know what to say to that. He's a bit choked up, if the truth be known. He's wishing now that Mrs Smith'd turn up. Come home early from the CWA bake-off, or church meeting, or whatever it is she gets up to on a Wednesday arvo.

David surprises him then, tells him that since Joe's passing his ma's been keeping herself busy, trying to forget, probably, that in the past two years she's lost both a husband and a son. His voice tapers off to barely a whisper. 'The pride-and-joy son, at that.'

Len tries to find the right words to say. He expects that Davo is just as much a pride and joy to his mother as Joe was, but what would he know? He's relieved when he changes the subject.

'How is Evelyn, and little Olive?'

Len starts at that. Nobody's called Evie that for as long as he can recollect. That was how he'd been introduced to her. *Miss Evelyn Henderson*. In town for three weeks before the start of the war, she was, to help out old Doc Allan just before he was due to retire. Never woulda thought he'd go to the quack to have a chat about the knotted-up feeling in his guts – probably just indigestion that wouldn't go away, according to the doc – and come out with an arrangement to have afternoon tea with the prettiest girl he'd ever laid his eyes on.

He notes how long his quiet has lasted and shakes himself back into the present.

'Sorry, mate. Heat's taking it outta me. I was just thinking. Life, eh? Yeah, she's good. Tired, with the baby coming soon. But she'll be right. Tough girl, my Evie. And Olive's still as cheeky as a whip.'

Len yawns big and covers his mouth.

'Bit weary meself these days.'

He doesn't sleep much since he came back. It was starting to improve after the first year or so went by. Things were starting to feel more settled inside. But with Joe passing unexplained like that when he was supposed to have been getting better, the night terrors have returned. Many's the night Evie's come out to the kitchen to find him

sitting by the fire with it stacked up and blazing away. She'd go over and fling open the sash windows, saying she needed to let some fresh air into the hotbox, and he'd make out like he'd been caught sleeping. He'd be shivering, though. Wrapped up in a dirty great blanket but still he couldn't get warm. Chilled beyond the bone. Ground into his core, that cold. Tried to hide it. Didn't want Evie to know that he was worrying that he might be losing his marbles again. Bad enough he's down a foot without going cuckoo on her, too. Only one who understood any of that, only one he ever spoke to out loud about it, was Joe, the bloody bastard.

He chuckles, remembering how after they came home they could really knock 'em back. Even though Joe was supposed to be recuperating and off the grog, he'd sneak 'em in and Mary'd turn a blind eye. Some nights they'd keep talking until the sun came up. Joe'd had his own demons, of course. Some nights they didn't talk about any of it at all. Just sat in silence, and that helped, a bit. Going inside himself and not feeling he had to explain his thoughts and actions to a worried wife was somehow curative. That, and being able to poke fun and laugh at the dirtiest, grimmest bastard stuff of life with a couple or more medicinal rums under the belt.

Len picks up the half-empty mug. Clasps it in both hands. Breathes deeply into his mug, inhaling the pungent black Bushells scent.

'Missed this brew,' he says, turning to the open back door. The breeze seems to have picked up the tiniest bit. 'Not likely to be a break in the weather anytime soon.'

Finally, he gets around to what he came to say all along.

'Decided to sell up the back half, Davo. Hardly enough land left to call meself a farmer.'

Everyone tells him he's doing real well. But he knows his limitations. He's smart enough to figure that he'll continue to get better and faster with time. But it's more than just his foot that they took from him. Might take years for him to work at full pace. He tires easily, mind goes off on tangents. He forgets things, too. Started thinking again about the months leading up to that bloody hospital ship a while back. Hasn't been quite right since. Recalled lying there

on that hospital bed on the way back to Fremantle, fully knowing he'd be as useless as tits on a bull to Evie. Practically willed a torpedo to come out of somewhere and sink them all. At least there'd be hope of a pension for her then. It was bloody Joe what took those thoughts away, made him laugh again.

He'd ended up lying facedown out on the damp grass by the chook house that night when the thoughts came back to dog him. Evie'd found him. Worried sick, she was, to wake and find the door wide open and him gone. He didn't have a bloody clue why he was out there, or even remember going out. Left his cane inside. Must've hobbled out in his sleep, forgot he couldn't walk without it, or something. Tried to hide his wet face from Evie as she held him close and forced him to love her. He couldn't feel a thing, but she persisted anyway. Said to her, when she climbed off him, that he thought there'd been a fox out there, working the chooks into a frenzy. She'd cried then, and gone back inside. He'd stayed there a bit longer, forcing himself up and inside before the sun fully rose and little Olive came out and started ramming questions down his throat.

He takes a swig of tea. Avoids Davo's eye as he finishes what he'd come to say.

'Smiths can have first option, if youse want it.'

When he'd raised the notion of selling the back blocks, Evie'd seemed relieved, joyful, even. He had an inkling that she'd misunderstood for a moment or two. Thought he meant to sell up altogether. Leave the farm. He knows she thinks she wasn't really cut out for this life. City girl at heart, though to her credit she'd given life here a bloody good go. Took at least ten years of dancing classes before the war. Liked to go to plays and acted in the local repertory company. Imagined she was headed for something bigger and better than falling for him, no doubt.

When he saw that split second of joy flash through her, he'd felt betrayed all over again. She *wanted* to leave. He could've said they'd sell up in that moment, let her parents help find a job for him in a

shop or an office or something befitting half a man with a hobble. But just the thought of that had made him shudder. She'd just told him about expecting another baby, too, and he didn't want no kid of his growing up to be citified.

He told her it would be good for them to sell up some of the land. They could make the house bigger with the money. Get a few luxuries to make life a bit easier for them both. Take Olive for a proper holiday, to Sydney maybe, and see that Luna Park he'd heard all about. He hardly ever went near the back half of the property, anyway. His old man'd never got around to clearing or fencing it properly before he took his last walk out there and carked it in the scrub. He'd never had the interest to try and make a go of it himself. After his mum passed, he didn't feel he needed to make use of the land. Didn't feel he had to prove anything to anyone anymore.

There're things he can't talk about with anybody at all, now that Joe's passed. He came here today feeling lonesome and half thinking that maybe something of Joe would be there in his little brother. Thought that he could perhaps raise some of the stuff he's been keeping bottled up. Maybe he could keep it light to start. Try telling Davo that he's wondered on occasion if they've held a community meeting to come up with ways to try and keep him chirpy. It's odd, he'll say, how they lean into him when they speak and pat him on the arm. Smile at him bigger than usual, like he's some sort of special case. They'll pull him up in the main street, or at church when Evie whinges hard enough so that he makes a token appearance. Some of the oldies talk at him slowly and loudly, too, enunciate their sounds carefully so you'd think it was his brain that was removed, not his foot. It's almost laughable, the way that Louis Fraser's kid stamps his bankbook each week and pauses, like he's got something profound to say, then hands the book over, all respectful like, with the biggest, dopiest grin Len reckons he's ever seen.

But old Mrs Smith comes in then, fussing and bustling about, and pulls him in and holds him so close and tight when he stands

up that he's embarrassed by his own neediness. It was Joe who was the war hero, not him. And Joe's gone. He's just the dumb bastard who got stretchered out of Changi at the end, with a septic foot and troppo brain. Nothing heroic about that. Stayed alive for the duration, that's about all he'd managed. *Alive for the duration*. That'd make a good epitaph. But he's not going to say anything about any of that. Not here in this house of sadness. He's lucky, he's alive, and he should be grateful that all these people care enough about him to be nice, even when he slips up and gets sloshed in the middle of the week. No point in disturbing good folks just going about their daily business of getting on with life. Not their problem, where he's been and what he's seen. Diggers in the First saw worse'n them, anyway, by some accounts.

He excuses himself. Tells 'em he'll go home and get on with doing what needs to be done to make amends with Evie for skiving off in the middle of the day. Give them some time to think about whether they want the land. He'll keep the rest to himself. Nobody wants to hear what goes on inside his head, or his miserable concerns, either. He'd only ever confided in Joe about the big one – seeing his missus sneaking out in her pretty green city dress while he was laid up and feeling sorry for his lot. A spring in her step, she had.

She's having a baby, that's the good thing to come of all this. Olive's not going to be a lonely kid like he was. She'll have a brother or sister. Doesn't matter how the baby came to be, or that he can't make the sums add up. He'll love it all the same. Just because he doesn't remember even being up to the job of making a nipper doesn't mean he wasn't. His head's messed up. He forgets stuff. No secrets there. She lay down in the grass that morning he was out there and said she loved him more than life and tried to show him how much. That's when they made the baby, she says. Then this morning, before he came into town, he was thinking about that pretty green dress and where she might've last worn it, and how her belly'd grown out awful quick. She said it again. Pulled him close and said she'd be patient, and that they'd be right. It reminded him a bit of that night he proposed. He couldn't quite believe she actually said yes.

That she'd be willing to give up city living for life in the scrub with the likes of him. But he accepted that she had, ready enough, and was so happy that he'd cried right there on his knees in front of her. Soft bastard.

Olive came out of her room then, made him be a monster, chase her with his clunking wooden foot. Squealing and laughing as she let him catch her. He shook his foot off and made out like he'd wipe his ugly scarred stump all over her belly. She jumped up and ran outside. Then came back and planted a kiss on his cheek. He'd felt pretty damn good to be alive in that moment. Maybe that was enough to be getting on with.