

1.

THERE ARE CHOICES IN THIS WORLD. Like bloody shit. Don't let em tell you otherwise. Maybe in some parallel universe. But not here, mate. Not here. My only concession: if I knew it was going to turn out this way, I would have re-scripted the flippin thing. Would have re-painted the wording, would have nailed new bright an glossy chapter headings on it. Sorry to say, we just don't have a bleeding word, not a blimmin letter in the alphabet in these things. Not us. Not us kids. Not us kids like falling stars tumbling and shooting out of the skies, born to no one, known to no one, born only to an arcing mass of black sky, heaven, that everyone looks up to as if the lights that shine from there give direction, show the way as to ships, hold the substance that glues us together as fellow travellers, humanity. And yet I look around me, among all the stars, among all the cheerful, smiling faces, and I only have one person, one single person among all the world, and he is shouting at me, 'C'mon, have a fucking drink. Just have a fucking drink! You'll be fine, mate.' And all about us it is dark, but there is laughter. Loud, possum-like running and screaming and snarling laughter across the carpets and gloss-varnished floorboards, because this is the only day in our lives. This is where it begins and ends. In chaos.

Sitting there in the dark like that, with my big bro Gordon in someone else's home, a drink of spirits cutting down my throat, a much more comfortable place to be than where we just came from. Mum telling Mick to shut the fuck up, Mick telling Mum to shut her gob or he'd shut it for her. Only minutes before Gordon and me in our room, getting away from their drinking noise,

sitting there, kicking back on our beds, wondering what was in store. Soon seeing it was Saturday night and maybe we weren't going to watch that video with Mum and Mick like they said like a family – like they wanted us to – watch a movie and eat takeaway pizza like they promised for us.

No, even their buddies, the visitors they said were coming over, hadn't arrived. The laughter of the afternoon, the build up to another Saturday night lost in Mum's yellow wine, the bottom of Mick's brown beer that Gordon snuck one or two of because Mick said he wasn't allowed any, was too young for, even though he was already eighteen.

Mick standing there earlier in the afternoon, scraggy like an old broom, a grey cardigan blowing out his skinny shoulders, promising Mum: 'Hey Ange, we'll get a video and pizza for us and the boys hey, what about that? Just us fer a change, a real family. An Stirlo an Val when they come. What d'ya think, Ange, hey?'

And Ange, Angel, our mum, responding on our behalf, 'Yeah, Mick, that sounds great. Like a real family. The boys'd love that, I know.'

Mick looking so clean for once and pleased with himself. Even his grey, billowy cardigan looking suddenly almost neat and pressed.

Without knocking as usual, Mum curling a long, stiff head into our room.

'Did ya hear that boys? A video an pizza tonight, just for us – an maybe Stirlo an Val?'

'But we're going out,' Gordon spraying back, eyes alert like a private detective.

'Yeah, but this'll be different, just us for a change. You can still go afterwards, Gord. No worries. Mind, just make sure ya leave Grey behind when ya go. He's still young ya know.'

Gordon responding with a smile that breaks the brownness of the room, 'Yeah OK, Mum, that'll be good. Just tell Mick not to leave it too bleeding late.' Me glaring at her like a child shoved against its will into a playpen.

'Yeah, of course,' Mum smiling back like it is a family wedding or something we're waiting for. The only thing missing the caterers.

Seven o'clock moving on to seven-thirty no video having arrived, no pizza ordered, Gordon sucking on the last of one of the beers he has stolen off Mick, there is the usual loud smash of a table falling over that seems to announce it. That all has changed. The couple of before-dinner drinks turned into a throat-drowning fountain, the grown-up mind from fuzzy warm to fuzzy bent, and Mick is screaming, 'Gordon's gotta get a bloody job, ya know Ange? He's gotta contribute! He ain't a bloody kid no more.'

And Mum is defending, 'But he already does, when he can, Mick. Give the lad a chance. He's only just eighteen, ya know, and it's not like there's that many jobs in town. He's trying. Remember, he even worked in the supermarket for a while, collectin trolleys and carryin parcels an that for people?' And then she says it, what she usually does, what sets the coals burning. 'Would be nice if *you* got a real bloody job fer a change.'

And Mick, we know, even hidden as we are in our bedroom, looks at her with eyes that have an ancient and unpredictable fire in them, and erupts. 'Say that one more time, just one more time, an I'll smash this bloody fist in yer mug. Trouble with you, Angel, is ya have no bloody respect for me. You just don't get what I'm bloody trying to do here.'

'And what exactly is that, Mick?'

And then, as usual, hell breaks loose. Gordon the first out of the bedroom, to see Mick shaking Mum by the collar, and like a popping bubble of hot coal he yells: 'Get the fuck off Mum, prick! Get the hell offa her.'

And Mick screams back, releasing Mum, 'No, you get the fuck outta here, wool-head. And get a bloody job, mate! Ya not gonna break this family!'

And Gordon's tongue fires back, 'Good one, Mick, good one. So what about the movie an pizza hey? And being nice to Mum an us, huh? Or ya forgotten already?'

And Mick moves towards Gordon who is moving towards Mick, 'Get a flipping job, mate, and then maybe *you* can get the flippin movie and the flippin pizza for a change. Show ya can contribute to this family.'

Mum seeing the two heads about to exchange horns like goats determined to knock one another over, me rustling in my baggy pants for my puffer, to open my lungs, to squeeze the oxygen down my throat, wishing some big hand would appear out of the

sky and pick Mum and us up and drop us off somewhere nice and comfortable and safe, away from him.

'Just keep away from one another, Mick. Keep away, for God's sake.' Mum, her wiry frame, her grained face throwing them apart like a boxing referee.

Gordon chewing under his breath: 'Cunt.'

Mick mincing in the spittle of his tongue, 'No, you cunt.'

Me wishing Dad were here. Our real dad. A long time, a long, long time since we'd seen the bugger, but it never got this bad. Never this bad. Well, sometimes. Yeah, maybe sometimes. But at least he was our real dad, like, and we were family. And even most people in town, or on the outside of our place at any rate, thought we were. Now it was all over. Like Dad was all over. There was nothing left. Just squabbles and drunkenness and promises.

Standing there seeing in the white hollows of Mick's dark cut face the times Dad, our real dad, took us out for a drive, a real drive, to the mountains, just us, him and his lads, off to Mt Moon, there, right there, just beyond Ipswich, near Boonah. And coming back again to Mum's cooked meal of chops and mashed potatoes, still smiling and feeling the day warm inside – until the drinking began. Until the drinking began with them, too. Until it ruddy began with them, too. But at least Dad had a job, well, to be honest, most of the time had a job, and somehow the line to the grog – or food – never dried up, was never an issue, like it was now, always. 'Who's going to pay for it? Who's going to pay for dinner? Who's going to pay for the videos? Who's going to pay for the next bloody beer?'

Now suddenly, instead of the occasional visit, it was like the cops cruised by all the time. Senior Detective Constable Watno Thornes and them, cruising round like they were the only ones who cared. Who worried about our safety. But we weren't the only ones in the neighbourhood. The truth was they needed a permanent cruiser, for the entire neighbourhood just about, but they made like they cared, even stepped in sometimes – that's when the fighting stopped, quick like the final whistle on a footy game – and they saw that Gordon and me were big enough to look after ourselves, just like they saw when our real dad was around and we were much younger, even smiled then because our dad, our real dad had a way with the coppers; and then they cruised down the road to the next house, the next neighbourhood, back to

the cold safety of the cop station.

I breathe in, struggling to gulp down the oxygen like it is an ice cold thick shake striking straight into the roof of my head, seeing into those times, how Dad always dealt with them, the uncanny warmth between him and the cops, like their skin was somehow of the same colour, like in their eyes they saw and knew one another's homes. And despite all Dad had done, there was a feeling that we were protected, that the streets were out there and we were still in here, in our home, a family contained.

Now it was Mick and Gordon standing toe-to-toe. In the middle of the wobbling living room, neither of them giving way. And Mum, seeing the blood in those eyes, was half whispering, half shouting at us: 'I think you lads better go. I think you better get outta here. The both of ya. Come back later again. It'll be OK then. It'll be OK then, I'm sure.'

'Yeah, listen to ya mum for once, just get the fuck outta here,' Mick screaming, fists in the air, classic boxing pose, squaring up to Gordon's woolly head, breathing out a boxer's triumph, seeing us turning and disappearing out of the front door.

'Shit Gray, ya know I'm gonna leave for good one of these days,' Gordon is saying as we lumber darkly through the black streets.

I look up at him, sort of like a beggar up to a rich man, and he looks down at me, and says, 'I dunno mate. I just dunno what we gonna do about you. You still have to go to school an all that. You're good at it. They all say so. I don't want to spoil that.'

'But it doesn't matter where we are,' I hear a hot liquid spilling in my throat, 'I can still finish school. I just can't... I just don't want to be left with them, ya know, alone like. He's not even our dad. I could kill him sometimes.'

'Yeah, bro, I know,' Gordon is saying. 'Someday mate, someday soon, we'll work something out, buddy. We'll work something out, I won't go without ya.'

The hot, thick liquid in my throat softens, pours, seeing that Gordon is family, real family, seeing Mum left behind in a place where we can no longer see her through the kicked-up, angry dust particles, where we can no longer get to her. Where we can no longer see anything.

'Maybe if it wasn't for that one big fight, Dad would have stayed?' I venture like a sick calf.

And Gordon looks down at me. 'Hah, yeah, right. You romantic thick-head. It was more than that, mate, it was much more than that. I think you already forgetting what Dad did to ya, buddy. Maybe you can forget it, mate, but I can't. I mean, just look at ya – walking with a permanently broke pin cause'a him. It's just worse with Mick the prick. I know. Mum's a bloody sucker for punishment. Don't you be one too, mate!'

I look down, feeling my limp like it had suddenly gotten there by some heavenly magic, like I had magically forgotten how I could never forget Dad because of this bloody perverted limp. How, in everyone's eyes I saw without even trying, how no one could forget me because of my limp. My squeaky, uneasy breath. How Gordon and me knew the truth. The darkness in there. And Mum. And Mum too, but she was stuck now.

'I think we can do better than em, mate. Specially you, Grey, specially you.' Gordon is whistling into my face as though into a dark breeze.

We look forward into the night like we are children again, walking quickly, holding hands, afraid of the blackness, knowing that we have to seek out the others.

2.

IN THE COLD WIND THERE IS NO CHOICE but for Gordon and me to spend a night with the kids out here, in the stroking but uncaring breeze, while Mick and Mum cool off, sort through another lost Saturday night. Everything so dark and groggy.

We seek them out, our homies, our bros, under the bridge, by the river in the Ipswich dark, and then as if of one large mind, like a single huge brain cell, hungry and in search of things to do we go seeking through the suburbs looking to fill our bellies and have some good, honest to God fun. Scouring the neighbourhood for targets.

And now we are here, all of us kids, in the blackness of someone else's home, afraid to switch on the lights, but warm and comfortable in a way we can't be in our own artificially lit homes. Seeing for the thousandth time that we have eyes that can see in the dark. Yes, it is true. It is the way we grew up. We did not need chandeliers or bed lights or even torches. We were brought up as marsupials. Our lives were the night. We bathed in it, drank in it, shat in it, ate in it. And it gives us a paradoxical kind of freedom. A kind of control. Superiority over our superiors. They say that you need light to dispel darkness. But the reality, we have found, is the other way around. Freedom lies in darkness, under covers, far from the seeing eye, from the light of day. Darkness dispels reality, the imprisonment that day imposes, that keeps you scattered, skulking, out of shit, out of the way. Darkness, as me and Gordon and the rest have found and see now, gives you a bond, like a huge connecting shadow, like right now in this house, in this rich,

middle class home, no this palace, this palace filled with security and fermented spirits and chandeliers and books – books that we will never read, books that we can tear out of their shelves and covers and throw to the ground, books that we can rip into shreds without giving it a second thought, books that we can destroy to teach our teachers, our parents, city aldermen, state authorities, government handlers, supervisors, yes, all the supervisors of the world, imposed on us, who think we are just hoons, scum, dirty gravel of the earth.

Yes, we are all of those things: dirty, brown, thick gravel; we have been told so many times, even in the mess of our own grey-brown homes, and yet it is like a song, a requiem, a top of the pops blockbuster, a hip-hop street poem that fires our blood, that lights our minds with neon dreams, this drinking rich people's grog, slinging their books and plates and vases across shiny lounge floors, ripping with pen-knives and bread knives into soft, tempting couches that you want to sleep on, so desperately want to rest your head and sleep on, that you want to spend your entire life on, that you want to die on. Yes, it is like a heavy metal, twisted steel guitar that sings inside you, that makes you feel kind of full, alive. Worth something at last. That makes you dance an Irish fling with Gordon, your brother, who has saved you yet again.

And I am singing, I think even with him hearing me, 'Thank you, buddy. Thank you, bro.'

And he is swinging me round him, like when we were kids, except our own lounge was never quite big enough, right in the thick of this lusciousness, this impromptu Saturday night party that began with the promise of a family night of pizza and videos, and ends with this – me letting him pour a drink of something that cuts like razors down my shaking throat, seeing the curtains in front of me coming down, falling, tumbling on our heads. Ripped loose like falling screws from the walls, eight-foot high, at least, feeling that pure soft satin finish flouncing round my head, the kids in this new covered warmth embracing me in laughter, soft then loud, bowel biting, angry. But close, comforting.

Me, Gordon, Jamie, Kelly, clutching onto one another, hugging like children in movies of Christmas morning, a family, a happy family beneath these drapes. We, a family sheltering in that light that only darkness can bring, that special uninhibited intimacy, the dark glue that casts us together. Brings joy to the world. Lights

up trees. And streets. And other people's rooms.

And then rolling out, disentangling, grudgingly falling apart, the dark outside the curtains even lighter now, mouth opening to yet another razor-cutting explosion of vodka going down. For them like juice. For me like barbed wire hooking in the larynx. But warming, freeing inside. Anaesthetising the constantly scratching gravel in me. Little Danno, twelve, a smooth-faced star in the night sky, dancing like a swirling ballerina, screaming, 'Meeeee... Meeeee... Meeeee...' It is his song, the hip-hop song that is constantly in his head. Little Danno's anthem. The song that lives deep inside. 'Meeeee...'

No one even notices when Little Danno sits in the middle of the lounge, that pretty, decorated lounge full of swish woven rugs, with his trousers down, and shits, no one even notices. Except me, weak, crippled me, struggling to breathe again, remembering that fist coming out of the sky that not even Gordon could save me from, that fatherly crunch in the jaw like solid rock through water, watching like seeing an orchestra strike up, just for the hell of it, as we sometimes did, watching it strike up on the stone podium in Queen's Park as we rested from the night before, from nothing else to do, from boredom. Watching him now, it is like Little Danno is a conductor with supreme power over his own orchestra, his own big band, his own band of drummers and trumpeters and saxophonists, picking up the baton and then throwing it against this pristine white wall, smudging it with his hands like finger paint, like children do, like sometimes we even did at the city library, under guidance of watchful eyes of course, and in art classes at school. Just smudging the shit all over like a Pro Hart spectacular. Striking long upwards reaching strokes like he is trying to touch the roof, Heaven, only too short, always too short, at age twelve, too damned short, and then arcing down with his spread out fingers, artistically like Japanese writing, until the paint runs out and the design loses touch with its beginnings. Going back for more, to finish the work, to show that inside there, there is design, construction, composition, controlled thought, anger composed and forged in primeval fire, in history, a kind of creative force that comes from the belly, from deep inside, anger and creation, creation and anger, two sides of the same piece of shit. Two sides that I understand. I have seen it with my own eyes. Felt it, the full fist of it, in my own cheeks. And it seems the only

thing left I have to thank them for, Mum and Dad, my real dad that is, is forcing me to go to school, not that I liked it, or ever wanted to go. But there were some things there that I even liked, like reading and writing, although I didn't like to overstate it to any of them. Not even Dad, especially Dad, even when the teachers, some teachers, sent home praises. Remembering the time in primary school I won the reading prize and Dad who was so proud of me, but couldn't even make it to the prize-giving because he fell asleep dead drunk. But we always had takeaways those nights, when the teachers sent home praises, not like with Mick, just when they, he and Mum, were too lazy. Which was most nights. And, inevitably, specially on weekends, it ended like now.

Seeing inside Danno before me, muddled thoughts of why it should be him, he of all the invisible spirits up there, that should be tossed down out of the sky. To taste the breath of reality squashed out of screaming, tear-drained thighs. And Little Danno's orchestra, Little Danno's yellow-brown painting, Little Danno's creation grows, a fountain spouting wildly, shooting upwards and then flopping, dragging, and then rising again, a lightshow of candles flickering, bright stars outside, from whence Little Danno came, peering in through the now curtainless windows at their Little Danno's creativity, his great composition. Until... until Kelly, long hair following her twisting head, her hip-shaking dance, like it is a thing, a mop thing on batteries, ends it with her own motherly kind of song: 'It stinks in here, man! It fucking stinks, you little bugger! Go an fucking wash y'self off, kiddo!'

And when Little Danno, a rabbit stunned in torchlight, will not move, as though he cannot believe himself what has happened, the painting he has created, the foul words he is getting for it now, the lack of applause, Gordon steps forward with his broad shoulders that I always wish were mine, his dark brown woolly hair that looks recently cropped like a badly cut Afghan sheep, and grabs him in the thickness of his hands, around the scruff of his long little chicken neck and leads him, in the darkness, like he already knows the place blindfolded, into a bathroom.

The girls, Kelly and Candy, happy to have a real man take over their duties, running around holding their noses, making puking convulsions, hugging one another, smoking cigarettes, stubbing them out on shiny varnished floors, into Persian rugs, pouring dishwasher and Handy Andy and toilet cleaning chemicals all

over. Then flying out of the room like ghosts spooked by their own shadows, pirouetting back in a few minutes later, angels blowing powder and squeezing perfume around the lounge, desecrating Little Danno's fired up, God-given inspiration, making the place smell like a ladies house, a hairdresser, a dogs' parlour.

'Little shit-head!' Kelly falling over in laughter, onto the thick couch. Candy swirling around, following, slinking into it, the sheer comfort of it, like daughters, the Hilton sisters, affectionate siblings at home, like they have always somehow been a part of it, this couch, its ensnaring warmth, its safety, its cushiony peace. And then standing up again, taking two massive jumps and leaps, as if something has been forgotten. Stashing souvenirs, things to sell, to bargain with, into their jeans pockets, little silver ornaments from table tops, sliding into a handbag; then entering bedrooms, scavenging for things that shine, that are the nightlights in the darkness: silver necklaces, gold bracelets, earrings, shimmery coins. Tearing apart and throwing cheap looking strings of beads to the glowing floorboards, sliding on them like it is an ice rink, and it is funny seeing them there, the two girls, so free and light-headed, slipping on the floor, onto their backsides, onto beds, in big, luxurious five star bedrooms. Ripping out drawers and laughing like it comes from somewhere deep inside. Now in the main bedroom, six star lush, perfumed sex and kink, opening eight-foot doors, rummaging through huge cavities in the walls, gold-specked drawers, trying on fancy shoes and tops and panties, pocketing glinting pieces of jeweller bent metal. Gordon and Little Danno in the room now, Little Danno in his hot black tracksuit pants with the neon gold stripe down the sides, smiling now, wet and clean like an angel, shouting: 'Meeee... Meeeeee... Meeeeeee...'

'Ah, shut the fuck up, will ya!' Fat Deano thumping into the master bedroom too now, a bottle of whiskey in clumpy hand, diving onto the bed. Kelly collapsing on top of him, kissing him, rubbing his balls, pretending they are actors in a movie, Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise, only it's Eyes Wide Open here, bouncing on the bed like it is the trampoline they once had, or maybe never had. Passionate, playful actors; spontaneous, unscripted words, uninhibited, erotic, majestic. A light shining on them, through the window.

Me screaming out to Gordon, 'You see, we don't need em. We can live on our own, man.'

AS IF!

And Gordon screaming back, as though possessed, as though not hearing a word I have said: 'C'mon dudes, for fuck's bloody sakes, let's get the fuck outta here. Now!'

And then we are running, running for our lives. Or in my case, hobbling. And then out of danger, bouncing along the road, a party of revellers, brave in the dark that is so camouflaging, and so freeing.

'What a laugh,' Kelly is saying. 'What a fucking laugh.'

'That little shit Danno. Did ya see the little runt? Painting the walls with shit! Jesus, Little Danno, get a life!' Candy is saying.

Gordon hitting him hard behind the head like he is me, a little brother, and then smiling. 'At least warn us next time, homie.'

Coming to the bridge, near the railway station, in Central Ipswich, home for the night, walking slap bang into Thornes. Fucking Thornes. That is Detective Senior Constable Watno Thornes to everyone else in the town.

'So, what have we here? Do I smell trouble?'

'What d'ya think! We done nuffing.' Candy, affronted, confronting.

'And what if I tell you to turn out your backpacks and bags and pockets, huh?' Turning with a smile to his lanky, Brylcreem-clean looking sidekick.

'Why us, why always us? Why don't ya go an catch real crims?' Fat Deano looks up into the dull-white eyes, equally affronted, squeezing his fat knuckles like a husband ready to defend a wife.

'Well what d'ya think we should do with em, Steve-o?'

'I think we should search em, Wattie.'

'Ha ha – Wattie! Wattie!' Kelly calling out suddenly and then all of us following like a warcry, having not heard that nickname pinned to him before.

'Wattie! Wattie! Wattie!'

'Smart arses, hey? OK, Steve-o, search this street shit.'

And like a lightning fast baseball pitcher Detective Senior Constable Watno Thornes – Wattie – grabs Candy, the nearest to him, by her pencil thin neck and with his boxer-like hands squeezes the back of it until she is white in the face, and Gordon steps in.

'Please sir, all we wanna do is get home. We tired, man. We don't want no trouble.'

'Doesn't look like you don't want no trouble to me?' he stares

back into Gordon's wide eyes. 'Sure you fellers haven't just come from trouble?' But he releases Candy anyway, reluctantly, slowly, like he is letting go of a cold beer.

'Yeah, I swear Mr, I mean Sir... Cunstable...'

Squaring with one another now, Detective Senior Constable Watno Thornes' thick, leather shoulders looking down into Gordon's broad but relatively thin pancake shoulders, solid chest into pleading chest, brick-thick face into round, skin-thin face.

'Well, what d'ya think, Detective Constable Steve-o?'

Constable Steve-o nodding, retrieving from his jeans pockets surprisingly thin, delicate girls' hands, as though in readiness. Anticipating an ambush.

'OK, I'll tell you what, we won't search you buggers if ya promise me one thing?' Everyone looking up to the Almighty Thornes, mug-serious, as to a deity. 'If ya promise me you'll all be off the streets and home in bed – wherever the fuck that may be – within the next half hour!'

Staring up into eyes that we know even in the dark are a dull film of blue. Have behind them the thick power of heaven.

'Yeah, we promise, mate,' Gordon says for everyone.

'Well then get the hell outta here – except you two.' Pointing with that dull film of blue, and a short, stubby finger like a cigar end, at me and Gordon. Looking up at him like we didn't hear right. 'Yes you, Mr Morrow, and your scrawny little brother here.'

'See yers,' Kelly and Fat Deano shouting, knowing the plan, and then all of them gone, like flying foxes noisily into a tree, buried in the dark leaves. A narrow escape, thankful. Maybe Thornes not so bad a chunk of juvenile aid copper after all?

Now Gordon and me are standing there alone, uncertain schoolchildren before Detective Senior Constable Watno Thornes and his gel-swept deputy, Detective Constable Steve-o. Between them, a power far greater even than a school principal. Than the sky, than the stars, I am thinking.

Thornes, his huge face, a colourless putty with sun-bleached gravel rubbed into it, shining gloomily under the lamp post we stand beneath, is scanning our eyes like he is trying to see something in there, see somewhere deeper, into places that we can't even see. Like he is a scientist discovering new genes, unravelling them for the first time. His eyes stopping, suddenly, like they are

applying brakes, then softening, smoothing like a careful foot off the accelerator. Like a father.

'I don't think you two fellers should be hanging with em...?'

Me, shaking my head nervously, humbly, more than eager to admit guilt.

Gordon replying, 'With who?'

'Who d'ya think, smart arse? With that crowd, that mob of no-good street kids!'

'They just people we know.' Gordon, squaring his shoulders. 'We just having a bit of fun with em, mister, that's all.'

'Well listen to me for a change, Gordo mister. They mean trouble those kids. I know you two lads, we been in this town a long time together. You come from a better home than that. You don't have to be mucking about on the streets with their sort.'

'They just friends, we like em. We don't always hang with em.' Gordon defending with eyes that pour, like you would to a father.

'Listen to me now, Gordo boy,' Thornes flicking holy eyes to his sidekick Steve-o and then back again, 'I'm just trying to tell you, lad, they'll always be no good those kids, they're beyond hope, beyond redemption. Understand?' Gordon nodding, eyes shifting down warily then back up into Thornes' putty face. 'So, I'm just squaring with you, mate. You two Morrow boys will come to no good if you stick with filth like that. You know, I knew your dad, and he was a good bloke. Worked when he could and looked after ya mum like, like she meant something. I know she's with a bad egg now, but that don't mean you have to be like that. Take care of ya mum. That's what you should be doing, lads. You're better than them, these other kids. Listen to me. Keep away from them, get a job... and just get on with your lives. Gordo, I know you're a tough lad, but the only thing you should be doing now is finding a job, earning some bread for yourself, man, and encouraging your little brother here to finish school.' The bulky eyes in his lumpy face sear down like wings into Gordon's face, '...I hear Gray's very good at school, English an things... when he bothers to go... so, listen up, I want you two fellers to make something of your lives. I think you can. What d'ya say?'

Gordon's eyes strike like an arrow, straight up and beyond Detective Senior Constable Watno Thornes' bulky eyes, into the sky, the dark heavens. 'Yes, sir... Cunstable. 'Course, we'll try.

Can we get on home now, dude?’

‘Just promise me I won’t find you fellers hanging around with that lot again.’

‘Promise, dude man.’

‘Well *dudes, man*, then get outta here before I kick ya bloody arses and search ya bags. Go on, get the hell outta here.’ He shoots his eyes to his lanky colleague Detective Constable Steve-o, finding him already aiming his own crossbows at us.

And then we turn and run and are gone like dust particles abruptly blown away, ourselves now buried in the night. Knowing the plan. Gordon yelling under his breath, ‘Pig!’

Me out of breath, echoing, ‘Piiii-hhg!’

Stopping.

‘For God’s sakes, Gray, take a snort on that bloody puffer, will ya.’ Gordon ordering.

I get the asthma puffer out of my pocket, my life-blood, my wheeze machine, as I think of it, that I can’t remember ever being without, and take two shallow puffs, out of breath, feeling the pipes in there open and declog, wishing I had one of these machines permanently affixed to my jaws. Seeing for the thousandth time, life’s not like that. Difficult to breathe in. Looking to Gordon to breathe for me.

Within half an hour we are back on our path, our original path, sliding, running, slipping down the embankment under the bridge, across the road from the railway station, in the dark blanketed cosiness of the bridge, on the banks of the Bremer River, the darkness making the water look like a stream of floating tar, all of us hugging and laughing. More arriving. Bottles of gin and whisky making the rounds, the smell of a bong on fire, the world becoming transformed, lighting up, darkness making that quick transformation to radiance again, hard to soft, deadly silence to drum-bashing noise, coldness to warmth, fear to joy.

Little Danno twirling around in circles just like a spinning top, looking like he is tripping. On what? Who knows? Glue? Gin? Chasing his own tail, ‘IIIII... Weeee... Meeeee...’ Next moment he is bent over, so far, you can’t even see him for the ground, puke gushing out of him like a too quickly turned on garden hose. His guts mixed into the Bremer soil, his little life prostrate now, hugging his skateboard, fast asleep on his cold, damp mother, crusty earth.

Kelly and Candy operating on three hundred volt batteries propelling them into a jig, tugging each others arms and throwing themselves around, Kelly's long hair flinging behind her like a skirt, Candy's short hair teased back like a dove, and then shaking their hips, hip-hop Public Enemy cum Britney Spears style. Burn, Hollywood, Burn. Shake it, baby. Shake. Fat Deano, next to tall, acid-speed-thin Jamie, his baggy skateboard pants sitting around him like a low hanging dress, glugging unquenchably from a bottle, sitting there, all laughs, eager, he and Jamie like an audience at a live show. 'Go! Go! Go! Yo!' The river an airplane landing strip in the background, drops of falling light, a fairy's tarmac going who knows where? Where do rivers go? Deep underground back to the whales? More certainty in that dark liquid runway, where it is going, than any one of us gyrating on that embankment.

Stunned with alcohol, lying on my back on the slopes of the embankment I can hear Gordon's groans, as I have so many times before, groans that sometimes arouse me, sometimes sicken me, sometimes make me see green, always leave me feeling empty, like we are all really running on some low octane gasoline, needing to be sparked, constantly fired up, lungs, mine the sickest of all, clogged with uncertainty, hearts and liver and bowels the mechanics we do not understand, winding on and on, our heads doused with that feeling of always asking for directions, without ever being told where, of having maps, internal organs we cannot read, stopping at roadsides and hospitals we do not know the names of. Looking for parents who do not exist. Wondering who it is this time beneath him, squirming, squealing, grunting, wheezing like me. Knowing that day, brutal light of day will reveal all, the smell of parched eucalypt leaves dampened by night dew sticking in my nostrils like suffocating wet dust.