Creative nonfiction: alchemy at work

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

December 2014

Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Signature:

Acknowledgements

I have travelled a long way to reach the end of this PhD. I am weary and in need of rest, but first I must give thanks.

At the University of New England (UNE), I am grateful for the encouragement and support of my early supervisors, Professor Donna Lee Brien (now at Central Queensland University) and Dr Ingrid Harrington, who set me on the 'academic path' in style. In 2008, I enjoyed a brief sojourn at the University of Canberra, and I remain appreciative of the efforts of Professor Barbara Pamphilon, Professor Jen Webb and Associate Professor Jordan Williams. I returned to UNE in 2009, and I would especially like to thank Professor Russell McDougall and Professor Dugald Williamson for seeing me through to completion. Their guidance and support has been invaluable, and I commend them for their patience and good humour. I am also thankful to Professor Julian Croft for his feedback on the creative project.

This thesis was completed with the assistance of an APA Scholarship and I am grateful to UNE, particularly the School of Arts (English, Media and Communications, and Writing), for this financial support. Within the School of Arts, I warmly thank: Gill Willis, Helena Davies and Jane Kelly for their administrative support; Dr Tom Bristow (now at University of Melbourne) for his advice on the exegesis; and Dr Rose Williamson, for encouraging me to take on tutoring work during my candidature.

More friends than I can name here have helped me along the way, and I am grateful to them all. I particularly acknowledge the friendship and support of those who have accompanied me for the entire PhD journey: Dr Janene Carey, Dr James Vicars, my sister Sonja Elsegood and my 'best writing buddy' Edwina Shaw. I also thank Vicki Knox for her careful proof-reading and formatting; her calm, professional manner has been like a soothing balm in these final weeks.

Saturday singing sessions with the Firebirds Community Choir sustained me throughout my candidature. I also gratefully acknowledge the nurturing support and

solitude offered during residencies at Varuna – the Writers' House in Katoomba, and at Bundanon on the Shoalhaven River near Nowra.

Above all, I am indebted to the people who feature in the creative project. I especially hope that my family, the original BackTrack crew – Bernie Shakeshaft, Jayne Schofield, Geraldine Cutmore, Andrew Simpson, Sally Schofield and Justin Flint – and the boys at the shed feel that I have treated their stories with sensitivity and respect. I am also thankful to Bernie Shakeshaft for so generously sharing his wisdom, and for his unwavering belief in me.

Finally, I thank my own boys for their love and tolerance – they've helped me though some hard times over the years – and I'm especially grateful to Joey for his brave, true heart.

Published works resulting from this thesis

2011, 'What's updog?', Verity La, July.
http://verityla.wordpress.com/2011/07/26/what's-updog-**helena-pastor**/

2010, 'Joining the pack', Griffith REVIEW, no. 28, Autumn, pp. 246-250.
Also published in: Nth degree: the 2010 Australian Association of Writing Programs anthology, Arcade Publications, Melbourne, November, 2010.
An extract of this article was also posted on ONLINE opinion – Australia's e-journal of social and political debate
www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=10386 posted 5/5/2010

2008, 'Where are we goin' with this shit?', in M Costello, V Marsh & J Conway-Herron (eds), Re-placement: a national anthology of creative writing from universities across Australia, SCU Press, Lismore, pp. 132-141.

Abstract

Creative nonfiction: alchemy at work seeks to integrate and explore research and writing options available through the genre of creative nonfiction. It contains an exegesis, 'The transformative possibilities of creative nonfiction and immersion research', and a creative project, 'Iron Men: alchemy at work'. As a whole, the thesis aims to answer the question of how the techniques and approaches of creative nonfiction can be used to investigate a grassroots youth intervention strategy in a way that uses observation and description to reveal the core factors of its success and also integrates autobiographical content in order to highlight possibilities of social and personal transformation.

'Iron Men: alchemy at work' incorporates material gathered during an extended period of immersion research in a welding shed (which involved note-taking, observation and interviewing). For this reason, the creative project is able to offer an intimate insight into rarely chronicled aspects of youth work as it investigates the processes and issues involved in the early years of BackTrack Youth Works, a youth organisation founded by Bernie Shakeshaft in Armidale, New South Wales. 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' also explores the challenge of disaffected youth from a mother's perspective as it describes Helena's efforts to heal her relationship with her son, Joey. In this way, the creative project seeks to employ observational and autobiographical modes to form a work that addresses the subject of youth at risk and documents the transformative nature of Shakeshaft's youth work.

The exegesis explores the same central question in a complementary way by explaining the methods and process used to research and write the creative project. Along with considering the broader subject of youth at risk, it elaborates on the key principles of the BackTrack approach which are shown in action in the creative project. Importantly, the exegesis explores the ethical as well as the aesthetic implications of combining observation (based on immersion research) with autobiography, particularly in the work of narrative and characterisation. While recognising similarities between

immersion research and ethnography, and the benefits of adopting and adapting 'ethnographic techniques' when gathering material, I come to the conclusion that managing interactions in the research environment is enhanced by a responsive approach. The forms of the research, and the selection and arrangement of the combined research material and autobiographical content, require sensitivity towards the situations of, and careful negotiation of relations with, those whose experiences and stories the creative nonfiction work draws together.

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Exegesis

The transformative possibilities of creative nonfiction and immersion research

Chapter 1

1 Introduction

1.1 Question

In this thesis, which includes an exegesis and a creative project, I seek to integrate and explore research and writing options available through the genre of creative nonfiction. I do so by using observational and autobiographical modes to address the subject of youth at risk, and I aim to answer the following question:

> How can creative nonfiction techniques and approaches be used to investigate a grassroots youth intervention strategy in a way that uses observation and description to reveal the core factors of its success and also integrates autobiographical content in order to highlight possibilities of social and personal transformation?

In the creative project, titled 'Iron Men: alchemy at work', I offer an intimate insight into rarely chronicled aspects of youth work as I document the processes and issues involved in the early years of BackTrack Youth Works, a youth organisation founded by Bernie Shakeshaft in Armidale, New South Wales. 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' also explores the challenge of disaffected youth from a mother's perspective as it describes Helena's efforts to heal her relationship with her son, Joey. In this way, the creative project seeks to employ observational and autobiographical modes of writing to form a memoir that addresses the subject of youth at risk and describes the transformative nature of Shakeshaft's youth work. In the exegesis, I explore the same central question in a complementary way by explaining the process used to research and write the creative project.

1.2 Genre and method: creative nonfiction and immersion research

I approached my doctoral project with a long-standing interest in the genre of creative nonfiction. In 2006, I had completed a Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Queensland. For that degree, I wrote a memoir which aimed to document the experience of homebirth in such a way that readers would feel empowered to make an informed choice if they wanted to experience birth at home. As part of my research, I came across writers who used the method of 'immersion research' to gather material for their creative nonfiction projects. Immersion research will be discussed in depth later, but briefly, the method involves spending lengthy periods of time with research subjects, engaging in note taking and interviewing with the intention of creating a compelling true story from the experience. It shares many similarities with 'fieldwork' methods used in the academic disciplines of ethnography and anthropology. However, although the process of immersion research may be similar to ethnographic fieldwork, the product, with its emphasis on narrative rather than analysis, is quite different. In addition, creative nonfiction has the potential to be a catalyst for social change by being able to create in the reader's mind the living, breathing reality of the subject it describes. Kerrane and Yagoda (1997, pp. 83-84) have identified that immersion research was a technique used by writers such as Jack London and George Orwell in earlier times to create commentaries on social issues. During the 1960s, the method was embraced by the 'New Journalists' in America and it has been favoured by a host of mostly American writers since that time (Boynton 2005, p. xi). In fact, works by American writers such as Jon Krakauer (1996), Gay Talese (1969), Tracy Kidder (1989) and Martha Gellhorn (1959) initially captured my interest in the genre. By the time I began my PhD research, I had a strong desire to write about other people's lives in a style reminiscent of the New Journalists.

1.3 Subject: youth (boys) at risk

Along with my interest in creative nonfiction and immersion research, I was also interested in exploring what happened to boys who had unsatisfactory schooling experiences. For several decades, the mainstream education system in Australia has been failing boys, reflected in the figures for academic achievement for boys and girls. In early 2000, due to growing concern about boys' under-achievement at

school, the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs requested an inquiry into the education of boys. The subsequent report Boys: getting it right by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (2002, p. xvi), confirmed that boys had lower rates of literacy achievement, school retention and admissions into higher education, and higher rates of school suspensions and exclusions. As for post-school outcomes, the report also found that young men were more likely to be unemployed and that they did not fare well on a range of measures which indicated social and emotional wellbeing (p. xvi). This disparity in successful outcomes for boys and girls continues today. Along with low educational achievement, other factors such as cultural background and socio-economic status contribute to boys falling behind (Muir et al. 2009, p. 13-14). Underachievement at school and early school-leaving leaves young people at risk of entering a life path that may lead to unemployment, substance abuse, crime and youth suicide (Murphy, McGinness & McDermott 2010, p. 57). The dangers of underachievement at school are further supported by a recent government report on disadvantage which claims that a relationship exists 'between education and better health and raised civic and social disadvantage' (McLachlan, Gilfillan & Gordon 2013, p. 2). It is in this broader context of connected problems and the need for solutions that my research finds its place.

1.4 Intervention programs for youth at risk

My PhD focuses on an intervention program for youth at risk in Australia. The history of Australian intervention includes a range of religious, philanthropic and government initiatives that have had varying degrees of success (Griffin & Luttrell 2011, p. 13). For example, in the 1960s, many believed that youth at risk – who were then called 'juvenile delinquents' – needed firm discipline and employment skills, which led to the training farm approach and other forms of institutionalised care. However, while some young people did get back on track through these initiatives, many were permanently damaged. Research into effective intervention programs for youth at risk, especially those who have moved into juvenile crime, has consistently shown that traditional 'penal' or 'get tough' methods do not work (Murphy et al. 2010, p. iv). Instead, programs that address the 'underlying factors behind the

offending behaviour' and aim to 'divert young offenders from entering the juvenile justice system' seem to be work best, and are also more cost-effective for the Australian taxpayer (Murphy et al. 2010, p. iv). Therefore, an important reason for achieving best practice in successful youth intervention programs is that youth at risk cost the nation millions of dollars in unemployment, crime, family chaos and dysfunction, and substance abuse.

1.5 Personal motivation to explore topic

Within this broader context, another motivating factor for exploring the topic came from my own parenting experiences. In 2004, my family had relocated from Brisbane to Armidale. Shortly after the move, it became increasingly evident that my oldest child was not suited to mainstream schooling and he left high school at the end of Year 9. Because he was more than academically able to complete his studies, he enrolled in a Certificate in General and Vocational Education at the New England Institute of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). During this time, there seemed to be increasing pressure for young people in Australia and elsewhere to succeed at high school (Quart 2006; Robbins 2006). I began to notice that other parents in the Armidale community, especially those whose children were entering their senior years of schooling, viewed early school-leavers like my son as losers. I was aware that early school-leavers could be disadvantaged later in life, but rather than resort to discriminatory labelling, it seemed more useful to explore new ways of engaging youth in meaningful learning experiences. As it turned out, my son's experiences at TAFE proved unsatisfactory, and for this reason I became interested in researching other approaches for youth at risk in my local community, especially those that helped young people make a successful transition to adult life.

1.6 Iron Man Welders and BackTrack Youth Works

From my research into alternative approaches for youth in Armidale, I came across the Iron Man Welders, an intervention program for youth at risk that focused on welding skills. In 2007, the Iron Man Welders were attracting a lot of media coverage in Armidale and the initiative seemed to be making a difference to young lives. I soon discovered that activities for the welding program were held on Sundays

in a shed only two blocks from where I lived. At this point, my interests in immersion research as a writing methodology and the subject of youth at risk began to coalesce. It seemed I had found an accessible immersion research project which I could manage alongside my family commitments. At the same time, the research could have wide-ranging interest and appeal for both general and academic readers who were interested in viable community-based solutions for early school-leavers and youth at risk. Upon further investigation, I discovered that the Iron Man Welders was developed through the efforts of Bernie Shakeshaft and a team of volunteers from BackTrack Youth Works (hereafter BackTrack).

Bernie Shakeshaft founded BackTrack in 2006, and the organisation has since gone on to achieve major successful outcomes for youth at risk in the New England region. It now operates under Jobs Australia Enterprises and is supported by Armidale Dumaresq Council, Tamworth Regional Council, local MPs, local magistrates and police, schools and universities, the business community and local community groups. The BackTrack model was recommended in the Review into agricultural education and training in New South Wales report (Pratley 2013). This report notes how BackTrack has ‘successfully delivered agricultural and metals / engineering training and life skills development for nearly 300 disengaged, at risk, young people’, of whom ‘around 87% have transitioned into full time employment or further education and training’ (Pratley 2013, p. 102). Additionally, the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation 2013 annual report (2013, p. 15) recognises that participation in BackTrack ‘leads to educational achievement and real jobs for young people who have struggled to thrive in mainstream school and society’. The Fairfax Family Foundation (2013, p. 15) further asserts that ‘The BackTrack boys are brilliant role models and their personal achievements are creating a positive ripple effect into communities that experience intergenerational welfare, offending and unemployment across regional NSW’. Shakeshaft was named Armidale Dumaresq Citizen of the Year in 2012, and his photo appears on the cover of the 2014 / 2015 Tamworth area phone book. Shakeshaft was recently awarded a 2014 Churchill Fellowship to research international methods in youth work, and BackTrack received the ‘Outstanding Contribution to Community Services Award’ in the 2014 Armidale Business Chamber Awards.

1.7 Parallel creative project

As BackTrack began to gain national recognition for its innovative programs, my creative project, 'Iron Men: alchemy at work', also began to attract significant recognition by the Australian writing community. Because I was committed to establishing a professional writing career alongside my academic pursuits, I regularly applied for residencies and manuscript development opportunities. Such programs exist to give emerging writers time and space to develop their work, or to enable them to work alongside experienced mentors. Initially, I was awarded a number of residencies at Varuna – the Writers' House (hereafter Varuna), in Katoomba. Then, in December 2010, the first complete draft of the creative project attracted a 30-hour Australian Society of Authors' Mentorship with editor, Judith Lukin-Amundsen. When Lukin-Amundsen and I discussed the work, she talked about the need to extend the story for several years to bring about an up-curve in the narrative arc. Before I had time to think about the implications of this idea, 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' won a Varuna HarperCollins Manuscript Development Award. In April 2011, I met with my Harper-Collins editor, Anne Reilly, for an intensive consultation at Varuna. Reilly said my work had potential, but thought it lacked 'emotional truth'. For this reason, she advised me to undergo an 'uncensored writing' process which would uncover autobiographical content that she believed was missing from the narrative. By the time I left Varuna, I had 66,000 words of new material, some of which needed to be merged with approximately half the material from the existing creative project to form a new draft.

At this point, I realised that the changes needed to make the creative project a publishable manuscript were at odds with what I had originally envisaged for the purposes of the PhD. For example, if I extended the story several years and incorporated more autobiographical content, I would go beyond the framework that had been approved in my Ethics Application. I was also concerned that feedback from two professional editors would go beyond the institutional limits of supervisory advice. So, a parallel project – a work more suited to the requirements of the Australian publishing industry – began to exist alongside the PhD version of the creative project. It is worth noting that the content of the parallel project is still evolving, but when it finds its final form, it will no doubt benefit from my ongoing involvement and deeper understanding of BackTrack. I could have approached my

writing about the Iron Man Welders in a number of ways, and I explore some of these options in the exegesis. Regarding the two versions that now exist, I do not think that one is correct or that the version I am submitting as part of this thesis is inferior in any way. The PhD version and the Publishing version are simply written in different ways for different purposes and for different audiences. Most importantly, the PhD version complies with the Ethics Approval process I underwent as part of my obligation as a university researcher. It incorporates feedback I received from research participants, a trusted writing colleague, my supervisors, and a professional editor who read the first twenty pages only. It is also accompanied by this exegesis which places the Iron Man Welders in a wider context and offers a deeper explanation of Shakeshaft's working philosophy.

1.8 Intention

In summary, the creative project of my thesis uses the genre of creative nonfiction to document the early years of BackTrack. It is my hope that 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' will demonstrate why a transparent community-based approach works for youth at risk, and it may assist in the process of replicating the BackTrack model in other areas throughout Australia. So far, the model has been successfully trialled in communities in Quirindi, Tamworth, Gunnedah, Glen Innes and Tenterfield, and is likely to be implemented elsewhere in the future. The seven boys who feature in the creative project have all gone on to follow successful life paths and are now informally known as the 'Magnificent Seven'. Perhaps my research will help other people view youth at risk in terms of their potential, rather than their limitations. Finally, I hope that my research methods are of value to the literature on creative nonfiction and immersion research, especially as they provide a detailed account of the way I gathered material in order to write the creative project. My experiences may illustrate how the choices and methods available through creative nonfiction were well-suited to document the early years of a successful intervention program for youth at risk in regional Australia.

1.9 Content of the exegesis

The literature review that follows in Chapter 2 covers the genre, method and subject of my PhD. Because the creative project illustrates the BackTrack approach through

the genre of creative nonfiction, and because I have used the method of immersion research, the chapter reviews selected literature on both genre and method. I also review relevant literature on youth at risk such as parenting guides and works of creative nonfiction that informed the creative project. In terms of the subject, the literature review provides a historical overview of youth at risk and locates BackTrack in this context. In addition, Chapter 2 elaborates on the key principles of the BackTrack approach, and these same principles are later shown in action in the creative project. This chapter also discusses ethical considerations of writing creative nonfiction. Chapter 3 focuses on methodology and outlines how I gathered material to write the creative project, with particular reference to the use of ethnographic techniques such as note taking, observation and interviewing. Chapter 4 describes the process of transforming raw material into prose, and touches on the use of fictional techniques, working to a structure, and sharing draft chapters with research participants. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the outcomes of the research, with reference to researcher stance, methodology and sharing the work with participants. Finally, Chapter 6 outlines the significance of the research and discusses my ongoing commitment to BackTrack.

Chapter 2

2 Literature and other sources

This chapter considers a diverse range of sources that explore the genre and subject of my PhD. First, creative nonfiction is a subset of nonfiction writing that incorporates fictional and journalistic techniques in order to tell a story based closely on real people, events and situations. The term encompasses writing that includes, among others, short and long forms of memoir, reportage, travel writing, autobiography and personal essays. Some writers of creative nonfiction use immersion research as a way to gather material for specific projects. Immersion research, where a writer spends lengthy periods of time observing others in an unfamiliar environment, has much in common with methodology in the related fields of documentary film-making and ethnography. For this reason, my discussion on creative nonfiction draws upon a variety of literature to examine the history of the genre, some methodological concerns, and key texts that influenced my thinking. Secondly, although the broad subject area of my research is youth at risk, the particular subject area is the Iron Man Welders, a youth initiative devised by Shakeshaft and BackTrack. In my discussion, I refer to government reports and academic literature to provide a historical overview of youth at risk in Australia. I explain the philosophy behind BackTrack by referring to material on the organisation's website and also to information I have gained through interviewing Shakeshaft. This chapter also explores how the subject of youth at risk has been portrayed in literature intended for a general audience, including parenting guides and works of fiction and creative nonfiction. Finally, I discuss important ethical considerations for a creative nonfiction writing project.

2.1 PhD genre

2.1.1 Creative nonfiction: definition and history

It is not clear who first thought of the term 'creative nonfiction', but the label has been used in America since the 1970s to describe artful nonfiction writing which adopts the techniques of fiction. Lee Gutkind (2005, p. xxvii) was one of the first to teach a creative nonfiction course at the University of Pittsburgh in 1973, and he admits the term has attracted some controversy over the years. Nonetheless, its use is now widespread and it seems to be the preferred term over literary journalism or narrative nonfiction. Regardless of the current label, the practice of mediating real life through the use of story-telling techniques has been around for many years. In the late 1960s, American journalists such as Jimmy Breslin and Gay Talese started writing articles that incorporated a range of literary techniques commonly associated with fiction. In his preface to Fame and obscurity, a collection of celebrity profiles, Talese (1969, p. vii) mentions how the portraits collected therein were being referred to as the 'new journalism', the 'new nonfiction', or 'parajournalism'. Talese's style of writing was regarded with suspicion because critics claimed that the writers of this new genre 'compromise the facts in interest of a more dramatic reporting' (p. vii). Talese did not agree, and the definition he offered for new journalism in 1969 (p. vii) is still relevant for creative nonfiction today:

> Though often reading like fiction, it is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage, although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotation, and the adherence to the rigid organisational style of the older form. The new journalism allows, demands in fact, a more imaginative approach to reporting, and it permits the writer to inject himself into the narrative if he wishes, as many writers do, or to assume the role of a detached observer, as other writers do, including myself.

Talese's definition raises issues to do with truth and perspective, and it also stresses the importance of finding the universal within the particular in order to present a 'larger truth'.

Another leading writer during this time was Truman Capote, whose story of a Kansas murder trial was serialised in The New Yorker in 1965. When the work was published in book form, In cold blood (1965) became a literary sensation, with

Capote resisting the tag of 'journalism' and instead choosing to assert that he had invented a new literary genre – 'the nonfiction novel' (Wolfe 1973, p. 26). Long before Capote was claiming he had invented a new genre, however, writers such as Daniel Defoe, James Boswell, Jack London and Stephen Crane were writing artful and imaginative nonfiction. In The art of fact, Kerrane and Yagoda (1997, p. 84), acknowledge that London's book The people of the abyss (1977 [1903]), for which he lived for seven weeks in the East End of London, was the inspiration behind the immersion research reporting that George Orwell and others would take up in later years to document the lives of the poor and disadvantaged in England and America. Themes concerning the lives of the poor and disadvantaged are still evident in creative nonfiction today, and a contemporary analysis of the genre is presented in The new new journalism (Boynton, 2005). In this book, Boynton interviews American nonfiction writers who favour 'reportorially based, narrative-driven long-form nonfiction' and 'use immersion-research techniques to uncover impoverished subcultures' (2005, pp. xiv-xv). Many of the techniques outlined in interviews with writers such as Ted Conover, Jon Krakauer and Adrian Nicole LeBlanc are similar to those I used during the immersion research phase with the Iron Man Welders. Also, Boynton's book was one of the few I found which offered detailed insights into the working methods of creative nonfiction writers.

2.1.2 Immersion research and its methods

As noted, immersion research was favoured by politically-motivated writers such as Stephen Crane, who published widely in the late 1800s, and George Orwell, who began researching and writing nonfiction in the late 1920s. These two writers felt that traditional methods of investigation did not provide sufficient insight into the lives of the poor or disadvantaged. For this reason, Crane and Orwell chose to put on ragged clothes and live amongst the lower classes of society in order to gain a deeper understanding of 'how the other half lived' (Kerrane & Yagoda 1997, p. 58). In Down and out in Paris and London, Orwell (1933) investigated the slums of London, accompanied tramps on their journeys and stayed with them in workhouse accommodations known as 'spikes'. In Paris, he worked unholy hours in hotel kitchens that bring to mind the conditions of hell. Throughout this book, which is a

continuous narrative, he provides readers with a vivid portrayal of the indignities that the afflicted suffer on a daily basis. Orwell's work illustrates that the desire to educate and empower the community through immersion research and creative nonfiction is a continuation of a long literary tradition.

The central techniques of immersion research consist of interviewing, observation, note taking and journal keeping, and may also include archival research. How each of these techniques is realised depends on each writer and their project, but many would agree that observation is a key aspect. Philip Gerard, an American writer, asserts that writers engaged in immersion research in an unfamiliar environment are 'not there to make things happen, only to see what happens, to witness with the clarity and judgement of a well-trained imagination' (2004, p. 52), a point which underscores the importance of observation as a research technique. When discussing immersion research techniques in The art of creative nonfiction, Gutkind (1997, p. 102) maintains that for a writer engaged in immersion research, the activities of 'sitting, watching, and taking the occasional note' are more than enough involvement, and it is not productive for the writer to become 'part of a team' because it impedes the observation process. While this is an important point, a variant argument which is relevant to my project is that research stance depends on the writer and project, just as note taking or interview methods need to be adapted to suit the subjects or situation. I discuss this point further in the chapters on methodology.

When preparing for the immersion research phase at the BackTrack welding shed, I was primarily influenced by the methods Talese (1969) used to write Fame and obscurity. Talese was not writing about the poor or disadvantaged in his celebrity profiles, but his work shows the depth that immersion research can add to a work of creative nonfiction. Further, Talese's style of immersion research seemed do-able for someone like me. For example, in the forward to Fame and obscurity, Talese (1969, p. vii) explains: 'I try to follow my subjects unobtrusively while observing them in revealing situations, noting their reactions and the reactions of others to them. I attempt to absorb the whole scene, the dialogue and mood, the tension, drama, conflict'. Unobtrusive rather than conspicuous research behaviour appealed to me. 'Frank Sinatra has a Cold' is a well-known profile from the collection and is full of telling details, yet Sinatra was not very cooperative during the six weeks Talese spent

researching the piece. Instead of interviewing Sinatra (who had a cold), Talese waited around and gathered material for the piece by 'watching' Sinatra in recording sessions, on movie sets and at gambling tables (p. x). Along with his observations, Talese interviewed other people who had known Sinatra for years, but he did not use a tape recorder or take notes in front of his subjects. Reflecting on the experience some years later, Talese (1998, p. 164) notes: 'What could he [Sinatra] or would he have said (being among the most guarded of public figures) that would have revealed him better than an observing writer watching him in action, seeing him in stressful situations, listening and lingering along the sidelines of his life?' Talese's method of lingering and careful listening resonated with me. In my own research, I initially thought it would be best to combine Talese-style observations with semi-structured taped interviews. In this way, I thought I would be able to capture the voices and nuances of conversations and then add the details and extra information gathered through observation and reflections.

2.1.3 Ethnography

Although I situate myself in the field of creative nonfiction writing studies, at an early stage of my candidature a colleague suggested my work might fall under an ethnographic framework. John van Maanen (1988, pp. 1-2) defines ethnography as 'a written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)' that comes out of a fieldwork experience, where fieldwork means 'living with and living like those who are studied'. Upon further investigation, I found that common elements do exist between immersion research and ethnography, especially the group culture focus and the likeness of creative nonfiction to the richly descriptive ethnographies that van Maanen calls 'Impressionist Tales' (1988, p. 102). I never intended to write an ethnography of the Iron Man Welders, but my reading of the ethnographic literature, especially those concerned with ethnographic techniques, enhanced my process of immersion research. I discuss this point further in the chapter on gathering material for the creative project.

2.1.4 Relevance and appeal of creative nonfiction and immersion research

Another reason why I choose to situate myself in the field of creative nonfiction writing studies is to do to with the product of my research. When I began my PhD, the

genre of creative nonfiction appealed to me because it offered the chance to present my findings in a form that could have emotional and persuasive effect. I wanted to influence the way potential readers of my work viewed youth at risk, and I wanted my readers to care about a group of boys in a welding shed. My thoughts on this matter coincide with those expressed by Gay Talese and Barbara Lounsberry (1996) in Writing creative nonfiction: the literature of reality. They identify that the ultimate goal of the creative nonfiction writer is 'to enlarge our understanding of the world … to bring forward the unnoticed from the shadows of neglect, or to offer revisionary portraits of well-known persons and events' (1996, p. 30). This goal is particularly relevant to the creative project, where I hope to bring forward youth at risk from the 'shadows of neglect', much in the way that Shakeshaft seeks opportunities for BackTrack youth participants to engage and connect with their community.

2.1.5 Literature: immersion research

When I was considering the product that would come from my immersion research experience at the welding shed, three books in particular informed my thinking on apsects involved with narration, characterisation, and whether to use a plain or literary writing style. The first of these was Among schoolchildren by Tracy Kidder (1989). In this book, Kidder documents a year in the working life of Christine Zajac, a fifth-grade teacher working in a poor area of Holyoke, a city in Massachusetts. The book portrays Zajac's daily struggles with the Puerto Rican children in her school, and shows the reality of someone who is trying to make a difference in a tough educational environment. Although Kidder writes in third-person throughout, he uses a technique known as 'internal monologue' to describe Zajac's inner thoughts and her hopes for the children in her class. The technique of describing a character's mental state is common in fiction and the challenge of adapting it for nonfiction was taken up by many of the New Journalists in the 1960s. By transposing material gathered through a lengthy process of interviews and conversations, these writers sought to reveal a person's character by providing access to their 'inner thoughts' (Cheney 2001, p. 139). Because of the time involved, however, using internal monologue was not something I planned to do with Shakeshaft or with any of the Iron Man Welders. In fact, in 2007, I made the following note after reading Among schoolchildren:

> Third-person narration is the favoured style of the 'greats' – Talese, Kidder, Capote – but to do it you've got to really understand and know your subject. They've spent months and sometimes years hanging out with their subjects – how do I do this when my youngest son is only two-years-old?

Because of my family commitments, such an intensive level of reporting was not an option for me. Along with third-person narration, another stylistic point related to Among schoolchildren is that Kidder uses a plain style. The book is also packed with details about the location, Holyoke, which Kidder describes in order to provide context. It illustrates that knowing where characters come from is an important step to creating empathy and understanding for the reader. So, while the technique of internal monologue was beyond me, I was interested in trying third-person narration and incorporating descriptions of Armidale into the narrative.

The second book that informed my thinking was Random family: love, drugs, trouble, and coming of age in the Bronx by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc (2007). She also uses third-person narration and an unadorned writing style to expose the world of tough young Puerto Ricans. In this book, which involved more than a decade of research, LeBlanc describes the men and women who live amongst poverty and crime in the South Bronx. I admired LeBlanc's ability to create clearly-defined characters through direct observation, interviews, and by showing how each character operated in relation to others in the story. Within the narrative, she includes letters that central characters write to each other while in prison, and her work suggested many possibilities on how to incorporate observable actions, routines and challenges to capture elements of a person's character. I also took note of LeBlanc's portrayal of the beauty that lay behind the tough exterior of the Bronx because I wanted to do something similar in my writing about the welding shed.

The third influential book was Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall's (2007) Down to this: a year living with the homeless, an example of a work informed by immersion research that is written in the first person. Bishop-Stall, a Canadian writer, lived for a year in Tent City, a shantytown for the homeless on the edge of Toronto. In contrast with Kidder and LeBlanc, who use a plain style, Bishop-Stall writes about his experiences using metaphors and vivid descriptive passages to enliven his work. As

to how he came to be in Tent City, Bishop-Stall writes, ‘I came without a clue and nothing to lose, to learn about this place, write a book and live rent free’ (2007, p. 2). After his year in Tent City, where he came very close to losing his way in life, Bishop-Stall offers the following conclusion: ‘Very few of those who were not born healthy and well off, to a kind and loving family, can transcend the squalor without help – and for some it will come too late’ (2007, p. 475). Acknowledging the trials he underwent, Bishop-Stall appeals to his readers’ humanity and urges them to ‘be good to vagrants, beggars, winos, buskers, con men and tramps. They are like you, or else you are like me, and I am just lucky’ (2007, p. 475). Because of the respectful way in which Bishop-Stall portrays the characters in Tent City, Down to this challenged and changed my view of the homeless and influenced my early thinking.

Other works of immersion research that were of interest were Seven seasons in Aurukun, Paula Shaw’s (2007) memoir about her time as a teacher in Aurukun, and Behind the beautiful forevers, in which Katherine Boo (2012) exposes the heartaches and challenges that her characters face while living in a Mumbai slum. I was also influenced in stylistic matters by memoirists from the past and present who firmly position themselves within the narrative, and who use the intimate voice – a close and personal style of writing – to communicate with their readers. I have long-admired Mermaid singing (1958) and Peel me a lotus (1959), two memoirs that Charmian Clift wrote about her family’s life in Greece. I also respect the work of Helen Garner, especially her personal essays and longer works of investigative journalism. Elizabeth Gilbert, who wrote Eat pray love (2006) and The last American man (2009), also uses the intimate voice, and later in this exegesis I describe the influence of The last American man upon my own writing.

2.1.6 Literature: sheds

The context of my research is a youth welding initiative based in a shed. When I reviewed the literature, I was unable to find any works of immersion research that documented a woman spending any length of time in a shed. Sheds are an iconic part of the Australian landscape and have consistently featured in Australian literature since the poems and stories of Henry Lawson, CJ Dennis and Banjo Paterson began appearing in The Bulletin during the late nineteenth century. Broadly speaking, it is possible to

link immersion research to these writers. For example, they spent long periods of time in unfamiliar environments and then re-created those environments for their readers through stories and poems. These writers, in particular, portrayed the shearing shed as a tough masculine world. In recent years, a renewed interest in men and their sheds was led by Mark Thomson's best-selling photo-books Blokes and sheds (1995) and its sequel Stories from the shed (1996). Most recently, a proliferation of Men's Shed organisations across the nation has led to 'National Community Men's Shed' conferences and a spate of academic literature which focuses on the connection between community sheds and men's health and wellbeing in Australia (Golding 2006).

From this sampling of shed-based literature, it is clear that women are peripheral or absent. Although some of the Men's Shed organisations are incorporating youth programs into their activities, much of the academic literature focuses on the health and wellbeing benefits of shed-based programs for older retired men. 'Iron Men: alchemy at work', which documents a shed-based program for youth at risk, shows how I interacted closely with men and boys in a traditionally masculine environment, along with the constraints inherent in my presence as a female researcher. I describe more about this process in the sections on method.

2.2 PhD subject

2.2.1 Youth (boys) at risk

When exploring the broad subject area of youth at risk, I examined sources that included government reports and literature from the fields of youth work and education. I also talked with key research participants and reviewed websites and newspapers. A definition of the term is provided in Early school leavers at risk (McIntyre et al. 1999), an extensive study conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). In their report, the authors define 'youth at risk' as being youth who are at risk of 'not making a successful transition from school into a successful adult life through work and study' (p. 8). This definition is adequate for the purposes of my PhD because the youth work initiative under investigation is industry-focused and prepares young men for careers in welding and agricultural areas. The NCVER report identifies a range of factors which contribute to young people falling into the 'at risk' group due to early school leaving. These factors include 'socioeconomic

status, Aboriginality, ethnicity, geographic location, parenthood, and familial situations' (McIntyre et al. 1999, p. 1). Because this group is in no way homogenous, the report recommends that further research on youth at risk needs to take into account the 'complexity of their transition to adult roles' and to understand that people's experiences are partly 'shaped by a given context' (p. 3). I hope to address these factors in my creative project, where I focus on youth at risk in a particular rural context. In addition, one of the NCVER's current priorities is to conduct further research which examines the contribution of education and training to social inclusion (NCVER 2013). 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' documents how Shakeshaft encourages youth at risk to engage with the community through dog jumping events, and to also gain skills to improve their employment opportunities in the future.

2.2.2 Boys having trouble at school

As mentioned in the introduction, my research focuses on teenage boys at risk and addresses a number of concerns about boys and education. McIntyre et al. (1999, p. 11) note that boys are more likely to have a 'higher chance of leaving school early', and that 'young people, particularly boys, feel under pressure to rebel against perceived control'. This behaviour can lead to boys being in greater danger of suspension or expulsion from school, which is the case for many of the youth participants involved with BackTrack. Additionally, the Australian Government's 'Success for Boys' education initiative emphasised that boys in particular are underachieving at school and are 'over-represented among students experiencing disciplinary problems and school expulsion', and the research behind this study has highlighted that young males are more likely to be 'unemployed, experience alcohol and substance abuse, or commit suicide' ('New assistance for boy's education' 2005). I will elaborate on the guiding principles behind BackTrack, but it is important to note here that one of the success factors behind the Iron Man Welders program is that Shakeshaft offers participants autonomous control and actively helps young people learn to take responsibility for their actions. This type of working philosophy operates very differently to the 'perceived control' mentioned by McIntyre et al. (1999), and therefore adds to the discussion on how alternative learning approaches can help youth at risk successfully transition to adulthood.

2.2.3 Alternative learning approaches

BackTrack's Iron Man Welders youth initiative is one example of a range of alternative learning approaches that have emerged in recent years. In Successful outcomes for youth at risk (Apte, Bonser & Slattery 2001, p. 32), the authors maintain that learners who have left school due to feeling 'discouraged or alienated' respond positively to alternative learning methods which focus on 'real life issues of immediate relevance to the young person, indirect approaches, integrated approaches, creative communication modes, and linking young people to key people in their community'. Some of these programs, such as a recent Victorian initiative called Hands on Learning (Hands On Learning n.d.), operate within schools, but take disengaged students outside the classroom one day a week to connect with mentors, engage with a different peer group and experience 'hands on' building activities. In the creative project, I refer to 'Youth Links', a program Shakeshaft organised in conjunction with two local high schools and the New England Institute of TAFE. This initiative acted as a feeder program for the Iron Man Welders for some years. It offered boys who were at risk of being suspended or expelled from high school the chance to spend one day a week at TAFE learning welding and life skills. Illustrative of the wide-ranging nature of current alternative learning approaches is the Typo Station program in the Victorian Alps, which is run by Evolve, a not-for-profit organisation offering intensive life-skills sessions and treks through the wilderness to help youth who are 'teetering on the brink of the juvenile justice system' (van Tiggelen 2009, p. 23). Another innovative idea is a 'station-training scheme' run by the Indigenous Land Corporation in the Northern Territory which trains young Aboriginal men and women for work on cattle stations, as well as for the hospitality and tourism industries (Myers 2010). My research, which documents a successful alternative learning approach for youth at risk, may act as an important case study for other researchers engaged in this area and add to knowledge on what sort of assistance works best in rural and regional areas.

2.2.4 Youth work in Australia: historical overview

The role of alternative learning programs can be seen more clearly if put in the context of longer-term historical developments. Over the years, the lives of Australian youth

have been affected by a range of interventions, and the emergence of grass-roots organisations such as BackTrack has occurred in response to a number of historical developments. Much early youth work in Australia was philanthropic in nature; for example, in the mid-nineteenth century, well-intentioned enlightened citizens operated privately-run activities that sought to help the poor and neglected (Griffin & Luttrell 2011, p. 13). This philanthropic period was followed by the arrival of Sunday Schools and 'faith-based' youth work, where groups such as the Young Men's Christian Association and the Boy Scouts provided guidance through recreational activities 'informed by Christian values' (Bessant 1997, p. 35). The early to mid-twentieth century saw the advent of local, state and government intervention, where youth work policies began to focus on issues of 'juvenile delinquency and the need for welfare provisions' (White, Omelczuk & Underwood 1991, p. 47). The results of this government involvement had traumatic outcomes for large numbers of State Wards placed in institutional care throughout Australia. In hindsight, although training farms and other institutions provided hands-on skills, they did not focus on caring, mentoring or building self-esteem and self-confidence for the young people in their care. White et al. (1991) go on to explain how the 'government intervention' phase led to the situation in the 1990s, where issues such as 'youth unemployment, homelessness and poverty' were the main focus of intervention programs (p. 47). Under the banner of youth at risk, these issues continue to be a major focus in current youth work practice. However, youth work that actually responds to the needs and interests of young people is now likely to be conducted by low-budget community-based initiatives. This shift has occurred because publicly-funded youth organisations need to deliver services to targeted groups 'against clearly defined criteria and measurable outcomes derived in part from management frameworks' (Bessant 2004, p. 20). In summary, this overview provides some context for understanding Shakeshaft's methods and demonstrates that working with the interests of youth rather than policy-makers is what makes a difference to young people's lives.

2.2.5 Bernie Shakeshaft and BackTrack Youth Works: early influences

The Iron Man Welders, BackTrack's first major youth initiative, began in 2007 and used welding as an engagement tool. It is still operating out of a shed on the outskirts

of Armidale. The founding members of BackTrack Youth Works were Bernie Shakeshaft, Jayne Schofield, Geraldine Cutmore, Sally Schofield, Andrew Simpson and Justin Flint. The members of this team were all volunteers who were otherwise engaged in diverse jobs or study commitments. However, what this somewhat disparate group of people shared was a passion for helping local youth. The designated leader was Shakeshaft, a youth worker with more than twenty years' experience in rural environments. By 2006, Shakeshaft's working philosophy was shaped by three main influences: William Glasser's (1998) Choice theory, Peter Slattery's (2001) Youth work, and aspects of Aboriginal culture that Shakeshaft became familiar with while working as a stockman in the Northern Territory in his younger years. My knowledge of these motivating factors was gathered during informal conversations with Shakeshaft over the course of my research.

During one of our early discussions, Shakeshaft mentioned that much of his youth work was guided by William Glasser's Choice theory (1998). When Shakeshaft came across this book in his early twenties, he found it inspirational, liberating and life-changing. Briefly, Glasser's 'internal control psychology' advocates that 'the only person whose behaviour we can control is our own' and the choices we make 'determine the course of our lives' (p. 7). Glasser presents this 'new psychology' as an alternative to 'external control psychology', which he describes as: 'Punish the people who are doing wrong, so they will do what we say is right; then reward them, so they keep doing what we want them to do' (p. 6). Many people would argue that it makes perfect sense, but Glasser asserts that external control psychology is a 'terrible plague that invades every part of our lives' (p. 7). Although Glasser recognises that going against 'common sense' is not easy for most people, he states that adopting 'internal control psychology' will help people move closer to those they care about (p. 7). Because Choice Theory matters to Shakeshaft, who is a participant in my research, it was important for me to understand and respect this belief. My knowledge of Glasser's influence on Shakeshaft's youth work also helped me to understand why he communicated the way he did with the boys at the shed. In terms of my PhD research, 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' shows Glasser's 'new psychology' as practised by Shakeshaft in his interactions with the BackTrack boys and with me.

Another key influence was Peter Slattery, a youth worker who has been a long-term mentor for Shakeshaft. Slattery's (2001) basic process for working with youth can be summarised as having three stages. He maintains that the first stage is to 'catch a person's interest'; the second stage is to 'invite responses and then explore them'; and the third stage is 'to identify new paths' (p. 2). Slattery explains that the key ideas behind this process are engagement, participation, 'mutuality' (which means working together), questioning, balancing ('exploring all possible outcomes of any path'), integration ('combine what you are doing with how you are doing it') and difference (a different process leads to different responses, which 'brings into focus new options') (p. 4). 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' includes several scenes where Shakeshaft conducts informal meetings in the kitchen at the shed and these meetings demonstrate how the seven key ideas behind Slattery's process work together to achieve better communication with young people. Additionally, the creative project illustrates how Shakeshaft is able to shift from welding to dog jumping when interest in welding begins to wane. His youth work is flexible and because of the way he prioritises 'catching the interest' of youth participants, the BackTrack programs continue to go from strength to strength.

The third motivating factor behind Shakeshaft's style of youth work is his deep respect for Aboriginal cultural beliefs. He often refers to the important life lessons and dog skills that he learnt from working with Warramunga men near Tennant Creek in his younger days. A former stockman, Shakeshaft is also known as a renowned dingo tracker and trapper, and he admits that his approach to youth work is based on dealing with wild dogs. In fact, the lessons Shakeshaft learned from old men at Tennant Creek resonate well with Slattery's process. Another form of guidance shown in the creative project is Shakeshaft's respect for the importance of the uncle system in Aboriginal culture, and for the importance of having sensible older people around to show younger people how to grow up.

An example of the thinking behind Shakeshaft's methods is provided in an article called 'Youth programs' that he wrote for Crime in rural Australia (2007). In this article, Shakeshaft explains how youth projects which have 'sustainable long-term results' depend on several key factors: these projects have flexible program design and delivery, 'actively listen to and involve the experts (young people)' and 'have managers

who advocate flexible and achievable program outcomes' (p. 86). Shakeshaft also notes the importance of a whole community approach to youth work, where 'industry, small business, local council and community members work together on projects that are visible and contribute to the community' (p. 86). In fact, much of Shakeshaft's work is guided by this desire to 'educate the community' so that people learn to see those perceived as 'delinquent teenagers' in a more positive light (p. 87). Shakeshaft observes that another key factor in successful community-based projects is long-term mentoring from youth workers and support personnel, who encourage young people to 'create their own boundaries, consequences and outcomes' (p. 87). The current BackTrack approach – which enables the organisation to accept a demographic informally described as the 'intractable five per cent' – encapsulates the diverse lessons Shakeshaft has taken from his reading of Choice theory, his association with Peter Slattery, his experiences with Aboriginal culture, and his ideas on successful youth programs. In terms of my research, I endeavoured in 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' to show the way in which Shakeshaft transfers these ideas into his youth work.

2.2.6 Literature: youth at risk

I had trouble finding many contemporary long-form works of creative nonfiction that featured youth at risk and youth workers, even though the subject matter appeared in essays and articles in newspapers, magazines and literary journals. However, an early work of creative nonfiction that was closely-related to my own themes was Tom: a child's life regained by John Embling (1978). Presented in a diary style format, the narrative covers two years in the life of an emotionally damaged 13-year-old boy who spent six months in a juvenile institution when he was ten. Because of that experience, and because of the challenges he has been through with his family, Tom behaves in inappropriate ways at school and in the community and has serious learning difficulties. The book describes the time and energy that Embling, who was then a teacher at Tom's school, put in to restoring Tom's life, and it demonstrates the importance of a caring adult mentor in a young boy's life. In a section where he acknowledges that he cannot help all the troubled youth around him in the same way as he helps Tom, Embling writes: 'There have to be caring people in the community who can meet these kids on their own terms' (p. 103). This is the role that Shakeshaft plays in the

Armidale community. Insofar as it describes corporal punishment at school, not to mention large numbers of male teaching staff, Tom is somewhat dated, but much of its content is as relevant today as it was thirty-four years ago. As for differences in scope and aim, Tom features a caring adult helping only one troubled youth, whereas 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' shows how one youth worker helps many. Additionally, it was useful to consider Chloe Hooper's (2008) The tall man (2008), in which Hooper provides an evocative description of her characters and the lives they lead on Palm Island. I also admired Kristina Olsson's (2013) Boy, lost, a 'family memoir' in which Olsson shows the strong bonds that exist between a mother and son (who later became a delinquent youth) even though they were separated when he was baby.

Other genres in which I found representations of youth at risk (and more infrequently youth workers or teachers who worked with youth at risk) included parenting guides and fiction. Although these were not my intended genre, several works were worthy of consideration because they dealt with similar subjects and issues to my own. For example, two parenting guides which support the ideas behind the BackTrack approach are Steve Biddulph's Raising boys (1997) and Celia Lashlie's He'll be okay: growing gorgeous boys into good men (2005). In accordance with the points already raised in this exegesis, Biddulph, a family therapist, recognises the importance of male mentors in boys' lives, especially in the case of boys with absent fathers (p. 27). He says that employing more caring male teachers in schools will alleviate some of the educational problems that concern boys (p. 128). Biddulph also suggests that boys should start school a year later than girls, and that schools should be more 'boy friendly' by becoming more 'physical, energetic, concrete and challenging' (pp. 128-129). His acknowledgement of the importance of community, and of building 'community links', resonates with the work of Shakeshaft and BackTrack. Biddulph mentions the positive outcomes that resulted when staff from a large New Zealand company reached out to help at-risk children by offering them one-to-one coaching in reading, literacy or motor-skills (p. 168). Although it is not uncommon for businesses to offer financial support to youth organisations, Biddulph asserts that the benefits of 'human contact' with youth at risk has the potential to 'change the world' (p. 170). This point is in line with Shakeshaft's idea of educating the community in order to bring about change.

The other parenting guide with themes that resonate with my creative project, Celia Lashlie's (2005) He'll be okay, is based on the author's experiences as a mother of a troubled son and of her years spent working in prisons in New Zealand. Lashlie refers to the concept of a 'bridge of adolescence' that a boy needs to cross on his way to manhood, and she advocates that the 'central issue in the lives of adolescent boys' is 'how to get mothers off the bridge and fathers onto it' (p. 77). Lashlie adds that mothers need to 'back off' and respect their sons' personal space, give their boys room to take responsibility for their own lives and make their own lunches (pp. 155-156). Like Biddulph, Lashlie also emphasises the importance of mentors and says: 'We should be looking for potential positive male role models, heroes, not in the public arena but among the men in our boys' lives – their grandfathers, uncles, older brothers, teachers and coaches and, most of all, their fathers' (p. 213). Biddulph and Lashlie's books are useful when trying to understand what factors make a difference in helping troubled youth become responsible adults. These works also indicate a main genre in which the content of youth at risk – especially boys – has been treated, and this helped me sharpen my purpose and clarify my reasons for choosing creative nonfiction to document the Iron Man Welders program. I could have chosen to write a parenting guide, but I was not an expert and I wanted to present my research findings in a form that had an emotional impact. Also, the phenomenal popularity of these two books, which both became international bestsellers, suggests that many parents are in need of advice or reassurance regarding the parenting of their sons. It also supports my arguments that boys are at risk of coming into strife through the choices they are making, particularly once they approach the 'bridge of adolescence'.

Because my creative project incorporates fictional techniques to tell a true story, I also reviewed how the subject area of youth at risk had been explored in fiction. Novels such as Jasper Jones (Silvey 2009), Past the shallows (Parrett 2011) and Thrill seekers (Shaw 2011) were all written from the perspective of youth at risk and provide valuable insights into the thoughts and actions of youth who have fallen off the rails in some way. In short, this section shows the diverse ways youth at risk have been represented in Australian literature to date.

2.3 Ethical considerations of life-writing

Because my research involved human subjects, I needed to satisfy Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) guidelines before beginning immersion research at the welding shed. The University of New England's HREC approved my ethics application (and its subsequent variations) in 2007, and copies of my information letter and consent forms for participants are included in Appendix 1. My main regret with the ethics approval process is that I did not consider the length of time needed to gather material for the creative project, or how this gathering process could be ongoing, especially once I had a full draft which contained informational gaps. Nonetheless, the end-date for my data collection period was 31st December 2009, and any information I gathered after that time (from casual conversations with Shakeshaft, other youth workers or youth participants) has not been included in the creative project submitted as part of this thesis.

In the university environment, it is important to show that the intended research will not cause unnecessary physical or emotional harm to participants, and to also state how the researcher will take responsibility to minimise any potential risks. Researchers cannot omit the formal procedure of gaining University Ethics Board approval, but the practice of ethical behaviour needs ongoing care and review because researchers can still come unstuck. For example, Carolyn Ellis (2007, p. 23) reveals the long-lasting feelings of betrayal that came out of her early ethnographic study of two fishing communities in Chesapeake Bay, and concludes that although researchers have 'no one set of rules to follow', they must 'seek the good'. On the basis of her experiences and her years of questioning what constitutes ethical research behaviour, Ellis has come up with several 'guiding' suggestions for students who aim to be ethical researchers. Along with the need to 'reflect critically on ethical practices at every step' and to 'think of the greater good of the research', Ellis says that researchers 'should let their participants and those they write about read their work' and she advises students to 'hold relational concerns as high as the research' (p. 25). In my own research practice, I was determined to prioritise relational concerns. For this reason, I constructed my own set of principles: a respect for participants and a willingness to listen to ordinary people and their stories; a desire to write a compelling narrative with a positive focus about a misunderstood group in

society; a willingness to undergo a collaborative effort with the research participants insofar that I was prepared to show drafts of each chapter to the BackTrack youth workers and to all characters I described; and a commitment to be honest at all times and to strive for truth and accuracy in my writing. I wanted to treat my research participants with respect and I wanted them to be comfortable with how I represented their world, including the shed. I also wanted them to be interested in the writing – they were, in part, the intended audience. These factors influenced my choice of methodology and the way I conducted the research, which I will explain in more detail in the next section of the exegesis.

Chapter 3

3 Method: gathering material

This chapter on methodology describes how I gained access to the welding shed. It also refers to specific strategies and techniques I used to gather material in order to write the creative project and it draws on literature related to both immersion research and ethnography. The literature review highlighted general similarities between immersion research and ethnography, but further clarification about shared techniques is useful before continuing. A leading practitioner in the field of ethnography, Harry F. Wolcott (2008, p. 44), maintains it is important to distinguish between 'doing ethnography' and 'borrowing ethnographic techniques' because this distinction makes it clear that a researcher is simply 'using – or, more likely, to be adapting – some standard fieldwork procedures for gathering data'. Although Wolcott's use of the terms 'data' and 'fieldwork' contrast with what I call 'material' and 'on location', I find it appropriate to use the term 'borrowing ethnographic techniques' when discussing my methodology. Wolcott also acknowledges that by using this phrase, it is clear that a researcher is not 'insisting that the final product has been informed by, and therefore may be judged by, ethnographic standards other than in this broad "fieldwork" approach' (p. 44). This chapter expands on aspects of note taking and observation (which includes focus) because this was the primary method I used to gather information for the creative project. Additionally, I describe why interviews are important, and what options are typically available to writers of creative nonfiction. As for a time frame, the bulk of the immersion research stage was conducted at the shed from July 2007 to July 2008. I visited the shed intermittently from July 2008 to December 2009.

3.1 Meeting Bernie Shakeshaft and gaining access to the shed

In early 2007, I became aware of Shakeshaft's Iron Man Welders youth initiative through a number of newspaper articles featured in The Armidale Express. The

articles were accompanied by photos of young men engaged in welding activities and featured sparks, helmets and welding guns. It is worth noting here that many aspects of finding a suitable story for immersion research relate well to similar issues in documentary filmmaking. For example, my thoughts upon viewing the photos of the young men in the Iron Man Welders program reflect what Michael Rabiger (2009, p. 36) terms 'the work of ideation' in developing a documentary, wherein a writer wears two hats – 'story discovery' and 'story development'. In 'story discovery', the writer uses 'play, imagination, and intuition to look for a subject or topic that brings a "shock of recognition"' (p. 36). When I saw the photos and read the articles, I felt that 'shock of recognition', and I knew that focusing a work of creative nonfiction on the Iron Man Welders would satisfy a number of aesthetic considerations. The youth workers and teenage boys would offer interesting characters with narrative potential, and the welding shed, a masculine environment, would be an unusual setting for a woman to write about. Also, in the months preceding these newspaper articles, I had been influenced by Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall's (2007) Down to this and Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's (2003) Random family, and the possibility of an immersion research project at the welding shed strongly appealed to me.

In March 2007, I wrote a letter addressed to Shakeshaft (and also Dave Rowlands, the welding teacher at the shed) in which I outlined my interest in coming along to observe the activities. In this letter, I included information about creative nonfiction and my motivation for undertaking such a project. A few weeks later, Shakeshaft rang me at home. He informally approved my research proposal over the phone, but suggested I meet the boys first. He asked me to attend an Iron Man Welders meeting at the local TAFE campus that night, where I could further explain my research. Before the meeting, I prepared a one-page explanation about my creative project and made copies for people to take home and read at their leisure. As it turned out, my formal presentation was not appropriate for the group, and I thought I had failed to make my research appealing and understandable. But Shakeshaft later informed me that after I left, the group had 'gone around the circle' and the boys had mostly given me 'three out of five'. The next step was to inform the University of New England HREC, and, once the approval came though, I was ready to begin immersion research at the shed.

Before I began, though, I contacted the Occupational Health and Safety Officer at the University of New England. He emailed back with a list of safety tips to prevent potential hazards in the shed, and recommended I wear specific items of safety clothing to minimise risk and protect my skin from arc flash UV. A further benefit of this advice about protective clothing was that it assisted in the process of what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 83) call 'impression management'. They claim that 'personal appearance can be a salient consideration' in the fieldwork environment, and that it 'may be necessary for the researcher to dress in a way that is very similar to the people to be studied' (p. 83). As a woman in a male environment, it was important for me to consider how to blend in so the boys at the shed were more at ease in my presence. For this reason, I was glad to buy work boots and blue King Gee work clothes (the same colour as everyone else) to wear on site. Most visitors did not even realise a woman was on the premises.

3.2 'Hanging out': note taking and observation

Much of the literature on immersion research assumes that writers already know how to go about gathering material. As a novice, however, I was confused about what methods to use when I first started going to the shed. Because of the lack of direct guidance on this matter, the research techniques I came to adopt were informed by the data collection methods discussed in qualitative research literature. Although few creative nonfiction writers would refer to the material they gather as 'data' or call the immersion phase 'fieldwork', the methodological overlap is worth further examination. Referring to a practice that creative nonfiction writers commonly call 'hanging out', Wolcott (1995, p. 95) notes that 'participant observation' describes a range of activities that qualitative researchers engage with when in the field. He refers to participant observation as 'the complement to interviewing rather than inclusive of it' and notes the 'essence' of the technique can be described as 'being there' (p. 95). A dilemma for qualitative researchers, adds Wolcott, is how to 'achieve some workable balance between participating and observing', and the challenge is to participate and observe 'effectively', while at the same time encouraging research subjects to 'act naturally' (p. 96). According to Wolcott, these concerns are further complicated by researchers being confused about 'what to look at, what to look for, and the never-

ending tension between taking a closer look at something vs taking a broader look at everything' (p. 96). Wolcott acknowledges that there are 'no definite answers' to resolve the problems that arise, other than researchers developing an acute awareness of their own fieldwork processes. Similar concerns exist for immersion researchers, of course, and in this section I explore a variety of note taking methods that may suit creative nonfiction writers. I also examine the importance of finding a focus when first engaging in the immersion phase.

3.2.1 Note taking

When discussing my note taking methodology – which came to include notes I jotted down at the shed, hand-written journal entries, and typed interview transcripts – I continue to refer to literature on ethnographic techniques to inform my discussion. A point of difference here is terminology. As a creative writer, I use the term 'notes' to describe the writing I did while at the shed, but ethnographers and anthropologists commonly use the term 'fieldnotes' to describe their written observations while in the research environment. For this reason, the terms 'notes' and 'fieldnotes' both appear in this section.

As further illustration of the importance of note taking methodology, in The professional stranger, Agar (1996, p. 161) mentions that fieldnotes are considered a 'traditional core of data from ethnographic research'. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 175) add that fieldnotes are 'the traditional means in ethnography for recording observational data', and they assert that such a vital research tool should not be 'shrouded in mystery'. Yet few researchers are keen to share raw notes with the wider academic community, even though emerging fieldworkers are keen to know more about the standard 'write down what you see and hear' advice. For example, Hammersley and Atkinson claim the novice fieldworker will want to ask 'what to write down, how to write it down, and when to write it down' (p. 176), and their claim resonates with Wolcott's concerns about researcher stance mentioned in 3.2. As for the creative nonfiction literature, I struggled to find examples of raw notes from immersion researchers. Although some writers are happy to talk about how and when they took notes, the scarcity of published fieldnotes from both academic and creative writers means there are few models to follow. Accordingly,

Hammersley and Atkinson recognise that there is 'very little explicit advice available' (p. 176), which is why I elaborate on note taking methodology and include some of my own notes in this section of the exegesis.

With regard to how notes are recorded in ethnographic research environments, Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2001, pp. 356-357) distinguish between 'mental notes', 'jotted notes' and 'full fieldnotes'. Karen O'Reilly (2009, p. 74) expands on this distinction in her own practice and states that mental notes are 'held in the memory, observed and mentally recorded' and are about 'noticing and thinking about writing as one participates'. Conversely, jotted notes are 'brief jottings that inform fuller notes' and include things that will 'trigger memory (which may even include smells and sounds) and details one is likely to forget (names, questions, dates)' (p. 74). Finally, full fieldnotes, which 'contain all details that might be required at a later stage', are notes which should include a complete description of 'anything and everything thought relevant, and record the when, where, how and who of events' (p. 74). To extrapolate from this for my own purposes as a creative nonfiction writer, I found that the notes I took in the shed – which mainly consisted of jotted notes (later expanded into full notes) – enabled me to recreate the experience long after the immersion research phase was over, and these notes proved to be a valuable resource.

3.2.2 Focus

Before I explain more about note taking methodology, it is important to mention focus, which, as Wolcott and others have noted, is frequently a matter of concern for novice qualitative researchers. The same issue applies to creative nonfiction writers who adopt ethnographic techniques when gathering material. Firstly, Agar (1996, p. 162) is scathing of researchers who use their fieldnotes to 'vacuum up everything possible' because they do not know how to recognise what is important: 'Not that you shouldn't keep notes,' he stresses, 'but they should be more focused in topic, and they should eventually be made obsolete'. Also, when considering focus and its application to the immersion research environment, it is once again useful to identify strategies from the related field of documentary film-making. Rabiger (2009, p. 51) observed that novice documentary makers often begin with 'little or no preparation' and do not consider a possible focus before starting to film. Consequently, he adds,

'everything looks potentially significant, so what you shoot is … everything' (p. 51). For those who question whether it is better to shoot with an open mind, Rabiger says: 'What you need is a plan that narrows and deepens your quest', and he recognises the importance of developing plans which help 'shape' the ideas and 'clarify' the intentions, otherwise the film-maker will 'shoot everything that moves' (p. 51). Although I did not set out to make a documentary about the Iron Man Welders, there is no doubt a methodological similarity here. So, Rabiger's idea for a proposal or plan can be effectively adopted by creative nonfiction writers, and time spent considering the intention and purposes of a project may help reduce problems with focus.

In my case, even though only a small group of boys and two youth workers regularly attended the shed, an issue that emerged shortly after I began was whether to focus the work on Shakeshaft or on the boys. I received conflicting advice on this matter. For example, one of my early supervisors was not convinced that I needed to incorporate the stories of Shakeshaft or the other youth workers, or even myself into the creative project. This supervisor came from a qualitative studies background and thought it best to focus on the boys. She had conducted numerous case studies on teenage boys who left school early, so it was natural for her to suggest this focus. But I was writing creative nonfiction, and my early observations at the shed had shown me that Shakeshaft was as much a part of the story of the Iron Man Welders as the boys were. Further, in creative nonfiction, it is acceptable for the researcher / writer to become a character in the narrative, so it was not inappropriate to consider my own role in the story.

An answer to this concern came about in September 2007 when I attended a biography writing workshop in Canberra. I outlined my confusion regarding the focus of my research in a paper: 'Boys at risk: the transition from school to the workplace'. In this paper, I explained how I had come to see three elements in my writing about the Iron Man Welders: Shakeshaft, the boys and my own place in the narrative. At the time, I was reading Interpretive biography in which Denzin (1997) proposes that a life is shaped by key turning-point moments or epiphanies. While recognising that these two terms are not identical, I wanted to know about Shakeshaft's history and about the turning points which had led him to youth work. As for the boys, I wanted to know where they had come from, and what turning points had led them towards

Shakeshaft's welding project. And, finally, if I did include myself in the narrative, I could document the turning points that led me to research the welding project. One clear reason for my interest, of course, was that my oldest son was an early school leaver and was struggling to finish Year 10 at TAFE. After hearing my paper, the organiser of the workshops wondered if perhaps Shakeshaft was the main subject of my research, and my question to the boys could be: 'Tell me about Bernie.' At the time, I thought this idea was a viable solution. I could centre the work on Shakeshaft and tell the stories of the boys through their relationship with him, and this formed much of my focus during my first months at the shed.

3.2.3 Note taking: creative nonfiction

Whether to take notes in full view of research subjects is a contested issue. Gay Talese rarely takes notes in front of the people because he maintains that it affects the atmosphere between him and his subjects in a negative way. If they happen to leave the room, he might jot down a few important points, and he sometimes takes notes immediately after the interview, but mostly his note taking is completed later in the day, when he has returned to his own space. In 'Not interviewing Frank Sinatra', Talese (1998, p. 159), explains his method: 'Before I go to bed, I sit at my typewriter and describe in detail (sometimes filling four or five pages single-spaced) my recollections of what I had seen and heard that day – a chronicle to which I constantly add pages with each passing day of the entire period of research'. Talese adds that the pages of this chronicle also 'include my personal impressions of the people I interviewed, their mannerisms and physical description, my assessment of their credibility, and much about my private feelings and concerns as I work my way through each day' (p. 159). To use the terminology raised in my earlier discussion of ethnographic techniques, by documenting his experience in this way, Talese is relying on 'mental notes' and 'jotted notes' to inform his recollections in the form of 'full fieldnotes' later in the day.

Talese's sentiments are echoed by Ted Conovor, a contemporary American writer of creative nonfiction, who has used immersion research techniques to explore the lives of tramps, to understand the world of Mexican migrant workers and to engage in covert research as a prison officer. When he was working as a prison

officer, Conover would come home and write 'six to eight pages of exhaustive, single-spaced notes' (quoted in Boynton 2005, p. 20). Although Conover acknowledges the difficulties of taking notes on dialogue, which are essential for re-creating scenes, he admits he can hold 'five or six lines of conversation in his head' until he gets a chance to write them down (p. 21), which, again, is an example of 'mental notes' in the immersion research context. Taking copious notes outside the immersion research environment seems common practice for creative writers. However, for qualitative researchers, Agar (1996, p. 162) discounts the method of writing things down at the end of the day because he claims that 'long-term memory recall often produces distorted results', and that researchers end up remembering stereotypical rather than specific details of what has occurred. Agar may be making a valid point here, but I do not agree that relying on memory to record impressions outside the immersion environment is a problem for writers who have good recall. Once again, this is an example of where the research methodology can be adapted to suit the researcher and the research environment.

In contrast, other creative nonfiction writers are happy to openly take notes in front of their subjects. Jon Krakauer says: 'My notebook is always out. I'm like a human sponge. Anything that happens anywhere near me gets recorded, whether on paper or tape' (quoted in Boynton 2005, p. 173). Krakauer's method raises issues of whether an overt research presence affects subjects and whether interpretation is skewed because of this. But, in support of Krakauer's methodology, Gutkind (1997, p. 111) also openly uses his notebook and considers it important, and only fair, to remind people of the reason he is there. He asserts that writers can remain unobtrusive even while taking notes in an obvious manner. Gutkind (p. 102) explains:

> As a writer you have as much of a job to do as the people about whom you are writing. It may not seem as if you are working, but for a writer, sitting, watching and taking the occasional note is a key and vital activity. If you are helping the people you are observing on a regular basis then you are not writing. If you are perceived as part of the team, then you are not perceived as a writer, a misconception that may lead to misunderstandings down the line, after the essay or book is published. Besides, you have been given access because of a special project that you have proposed; people expect you will act in a 'writerly' way, whatever that is, rather than as a labourer or technician.

Gutkind's argument of being an overt yet unobtrusive note-taker brings to mind Wolcott's dilemma of how to effectively balance participation with observation. However, Ted Conover's experience of living for four months as a hobo, as well as my own experience of actively participating with the boys at the welding shed, seems to qualify Gutkind's theory of what the immersion writer should do. Perhaps it is more effective to argue that a flexible approach is needed. Gutkind's argument does not account for the variables that one encounters in the immersion research environment. I think the Iron Man Welders would have felt uncomfortable if I had stood back and remained an observer during my time at the shed.

3.2.4 My writing process: notes from first day at the shed

On my first day, I headed off to the shed in my new blue work clothes and boots. I had a tape recorder and notebook in my bag, and a large container of brownies to offer for afternoon tea. I remember feeling like an imposter in both my work gear and in my role as an immersion research writer. In Key concepts in ethnography, O'Reilly (2009, p. 73) asserts: 'The first foray into the field can be some of the most important moments, when you see things for the first time as a stranger, or with a stranger's eye … be as detailed as possible in writing first impressions'. Similarly, Wolcott (1995, p. 98) recommends that researchers be 'especially observant about capturing little vignettes or short (but complete) conversational exchanges in careful detail' and he provides the following advice: 'What you do record, record in sufficient detail that, should the need arise, you would be able to report it directly from your notes'. My notes from the day (included in full in Appendix 2) are sufficient to tell the story of what happened, so I will not repeat the content here. But it is important to mention that I was not comfortable taking notes in front of the boys, and most of my notes were written afterwards. On the way home from the shed that day, I parked the car a few blocks away and wrote up what I remembered. This became a pattern I kept up for the duration of the immersion research phase. I wrote my notes in a small 64-page exercise book, and the next day I would type these notes and save them in a computer file, along with other thoughts or emails related to my research. The following excerpts are from jotted notes I wrote after my first day at the shed. The notes illustrate the highly detailed nature of my stranger's eye and how I tested and

applied the advice on note taking techniques discussed in this chapter. Most of these first impressions later found their way into the creative project and prove the value of recording detailed notes, especially when the focus of the research is still unclear.

First day at the shed, Sunday June 17th, 2007

Excerpt One

> As I drove to the workshop I saw Bernie heading away in the other direction.
> Pulled up – there were only a few boys around. Someone said, 'Thommo will show you around.' He showed me the areas of the workshop. After reading the information from the OHS I felt paranoid about flashes destroying my retinas. I looked at the photos – the things they've made. Candle holders, wall hooks, book ends.
> Bernie's two dogs were chained up outside. Border collies. I read the Iron Man Welders Project small business plan – Draft 1.
> Triple J radio up extremely loud. After ten minutes I had a headache from the music, the grinding, the thumping, the flashes that kept capturing my eye. This was going to take a bit of getting used to.
> …
> Trucks come and go – piles of sand out the back. Seven roller doors on one side – a large covered area – take some photos next week.

The notes in this excerpt relate to the physical environment of the shed. On later visits, I also took photos in order to incorporate physical description into the narrative.

Excerpt Two

> At the end Bernie said, 'Great to see you guys can come down and hook in. The welding bays … terrific. You've done a really good job.'
> Then they talked about tools – 'Wombat machine disks? That's something you're keen on, as keen as you are on anything besides the girls?'
> They talked about toolboxes. Someone said, 'I just had an idea!'
> Bernie said, 'Hard hats on everyone! Stand back!'
> The boy laughed and talked about making a tool wall.

Excerpt Two illustrates my first impressions of Shakeshaft's youth work and his use of humour. My impressions of Shakeshaft were commonly recorded through remembered dialogue.

Excerpt Three

> The boys cooked sausages. Some others mucked up. Climbed into the back of a truck carriage. Another boy came out – Blister? – and said, 'Get outta there!' When they don't listen he says, 'Come on! Get outta there!' He seems very responsible.
>
> The dogs – no one knew the names except Blister. Girl and Lou (or Lil?). He let them off the chains and threw the stick to them for ages while the sausages were cooking – getting the dogs to crouch down and wait as he threw the stick. Sitting outside I could see the flashing light of someone welding. I didn't feel like going back in the workshop. The radio is too loud.
>
> I wonder if the welding light is affecting the dogs' eyes?
>
> After the boys have had their fill of BBQ sausages they give half a hot sausage each to the dogs. Too hot to eat – they lift the sausages, lick them, but the sausage falls back onto the dirt. Later I see Blister dipping the sausages in the water bowl so it's cool enough for Girl and Lou to eat them.

These notes demonstrate how I began to record impressions of participants who might become characters in the narrative. Although I did not know who the main characters would be, I did know that characters can be portrayed through their actions and words. For example, Blister's gentle nature is shown by the way he cools the sausages for the dogs.

3.2.5 Journal / diary keeping

The importance of journal keeping is a view shared by both creative writers and qualitative researchers, and thoughts about focus and structure often came to me through notes I wrote in my morning journal. These notes were separate to, and often an extension of, the material I wrote immediately after each visit to the shed. This practice is endorsed in the qualitative studies literature. For example, although Agar

(1996, p. 163) does not advocate writing extensive fieldnotes, he does recommend that ethnographers use a personal diary to record events because personal accounts bring the ethnographer into the fore-front of the research process. He also claims that 'personal diaries would profit from more careful development as an ethnographic method in their own right' (p. 163). These views are further supported by Heewon Chang (2008), a specialist in autoethnography, a form of ethnography which focuses on the researcher's own experiences. She states that it is important to keep a journal or diary because a journal helps to 'capture your behaviours, thoughts, emotions, and interactions as they occur' (p. 89). Finally, creative nonfiction writers, Perl and Schwartz (2006, p. 20), further assert the value of self-reflective writing and advise writers to take 'frequent jottings, by hand or by computer, of whatever seems to be surprising and provocative at the moment'.. It seems that the importance of journal-keeping for both qualitative and creative researchers cannot be underestimated.

Notes from 'morning pages'

I have kept a journal for many years, so it was natural for me to write reflectively about my time at the shed in my everyday 'morning pages' journal. Writing daily morning pages, which are three pages of 'longhand writing, strictly stream-of-consciousness', are part of a process Julia Cameron (1995, p. 10) recommends in The artist's way. I include an excerpt from my morning pages to illustrate how major ideas on the narrative began to emerge. The catalyst for my realisation that everyone at the shed was, or is, an idiot was an 'identity within our borders' themed issue of Griffith REVIEW, an Australian literary journal. It is important to note that my use of the term 'idiot' is an allusion to the colloquialism of the shed and is not intended to be a personal judgement of the research participants. This excerpt shows how my morning pages journal not only helped me to reflect further on events at the shed, but also raised issues of focus for the creative project.

Sunday 21st October, 2007

> Thoughts I had on the Blue Hole walk – tape Simmo, ask questions on Tuesday or sometime this week – why is he doing this volunteer work? Gives up his time to help Bernie – what's it about Bernie's working methods that he likes?

> The whole idiot thing – how most of them left of their own accord or were chucked out of school early – Blister for 'kissin' his missus', Riley telling a teacher to 'fuck off' on a ski trip when the teacher wouldn't stop hassling him. They hadn't engaged positively with school. I asked the boys today if there was anyone like Bernie at school – 'Hell no!' Like it was such a far-fetched idea. What's different about Bernie? He gets down to your level – not into the whole authority trip. Doesn't judge you – just listens to your problems.
>
> Refer back to that meeting where the girls are stealing from the craft supplies for the knitting group. Bernie says "I've got the biggest lot of fuckin' thieves in Armidale down at that welding shed and there hasn't even been a fuckin' welding rod stolen.'
>
> TRANSCRIPT about putting the trust out there straight off, that maybe the girls needed a name that helped form them as a group, give them an IDENTITY, or maybe leave the name thing till next time – the next bit of the work. DON'T TRY AND FIT EVERYTHING IN. Keep the focus on the Griffith REVIEW stuff – identity within our borders.
>
> The identity to get in to the Iron Man seems to have been idiot-related behaviour – leaving school early etc. But now they are there they don't act like idiots at the shed. They might still act like idiots on the street or elsewhere – drinking too much, Thommo's Galliano story, but not in the shed. Hardworking, industrious, busy, happy. These are the words I'd use to describe them at the shed. It's not about the welding – it's about who is teaching it.
>
> They 'don't shit in their own nest' – they are proud to be part of the Iron Man team. Gary and Freckles both now have apprenticeships at the mine at Hillgrove.
>
> So these are the thoughts I had on the walk at Blue Hole – extend the piece out.
>
> Kevin Rudd – idiot at a topless bar in America. Fine with me. Scent of an idiot on him too?

These reflective thoughts from my morning pages journal led to a chapter called 'Scent of an Idiot', which was once the beginning of my narrative on the Iron Man Welders.

3.3 Interviewing

Interviewing – in its various forms – is widely used in creative nonfiction and qualitative research methodology. I now briefly explore how researchers manage aspects of interviewing, and I refer to my own process to illustrate various points.

3.3.1 What is an interview?

Although most people think of an interview as a formal question and answer session between two people, the range of what constitutes an interview in qualitative research is surprisingly large. Wolcott (1995, p. 106) describes interviewing as 'any situation in which a fieldworker is in a position to, and does, attempt to obtain information on a specific topic through even so casual a comment or inducement as, "What you were telling me the other day was really interesting"'. Elsewhere, Wolcott's (2008, p. 55) full list of interview categories includes: 'casual conversation; life history, life cycle interview; key informant interviewing; semi-structured interview; structured interview; survey; household census, ethnogenealogy; questionnaire (written and/or oral); projective techniques; [and] other measurement techniques'. He deliberately places casual conversation first to 'underscore its importance not only as a source of information but in recognition of the everyday nature of fieldwork itself' (p. 55). Along with casual conversation, the interview styles from Wolcott's list which had most relevance to my own doctoral project are semi-structured interviews and key informant interviewing.

It is important to understand the difference between structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews. O'Reilly (2009, p. 126) describes a structured interview as a situation in which 'a set of questions is predetermined and fixed', and where the researcher does not deviate from asking these set questions. In contrast, an unstructured interview is 'more free-flowing and formless', where the researcher's questions may be guided by a loose range of themes or topics, and the style is similar to that of a naturally occurring conversation (p. 126). A semi-structured interview, concludes O'Reilly, 'contains elements of both styles', where there may be some 'set questions', but there is also the opportunity to explore responses in depth or to diverge and explore new topic areas (p. 126). Although I did not conduct structured interviews over the course of my research, I did conduct two semi-structured

interviews with Shakeshaft, especially after I realised he would be a central character in the narrative. In qualitative research terms, Shakeshaft is known as a 'key informant', and my interviews with him would be called 'key informant interviewing'. Wolcott (2008, p. 55) defines this technique as 'the practice of making one or more informants a major source of information in one's research'. The semi-structured interviews with Shakeshaft were conducted at both his work and home environment and provided me with valuable background material to incorporate into the narrative.

3.3.2 The benefits of interviews

Before continuing, it is important to consider the benefits of interviews. Creative nonfiction practitioners tend to highlight the aesthetic benefits of interviewing. For example, Philip Gerard (2004, p. 55) claims interviews are worthwhile because they add 'real voices of real people' to a story. These voices add 'texture beyond the writer's style' and enhance aspects of character development through the use of dialogue (p. 55). In addition, Gerard states that 'quoted lines' in creative nonfiction share the same benefits as dialogue in fiction because they 'illuminate personality and character, establish the subtleties of character, move the piece along, add credibility to other claims in the piece, establish tone (including irony or humor), convey information [and] provide variety in point of view' (p. 55). According to Gerard, another important factor to consider when incorporating dialogue is that the reader is offered 'white space' on the page, and because sections of dialogue are 'not as dense-looking on the page', a writer can use them 'to speed up or slow the story down to accomplish other effects' (p. 120). Theodore Cheney (2001, p. 199) further confirms the importance of interviews, and says that material generated from interviews can add 'fresh ideas' to a nonfiction narrative and 'provide different angles, views, perspectives, insights on the person or topic under study'. In accordance with Gerard, he also asserts that one of the central advantages of interviews is that they allow writers to 'people' their article or book, which is vital, he claims, because 'people give life to a piece of writing' (Cheney 2001, p. 199). For these reasons, interviews conducted in an immersion research environment provide writers with important material to use as dialogue, which actively enhances a creative nonfiction narrative.

3.3.3 Interviews vs observation

The question of whether it is better to begin gathering material through interviews or observation has received some attention in literature from qualitative studies. Agar (1996, p. 157) notes that anthropologists in particular tend to have polarised views about whether researchers can learn more from watching what people do rather than listening to what they say, but he proposes that it is more sensible for researchers to incorporate both interviews and observation during fieldwork. When one considers that casual conversation is a valid interview technique, then it is likely that many researchers do, in fact, begin their fieldwork with interviews. But when the asking advances along the continuum and becomes more focused or semi-structured in nature, conflicting elements are at play. Wolcott (2008, p. 49) highlights the difference between 'being present as a passive observer of what is going on and taking an active role in asking about what is going on' and he claims that asking often introduces a tension into the research environment. As a result, he says that researchers become confused about 'whether to intrude by interjecting one's own agenda into a setting, or to remain silent in the hope that what one wants to know may (eventually) be revealed in some naturally occurring way' (p. 49). Elsewhere, Wolcott (1995) acknowledges that although many qualitative researchers believe observation and interviewing can 'complement' each other, this does not mean that the two fieldwork methods are to be managed in equal measures (p. 105). Once again, the choice of whether to lean more heavily on interviews or observation, or whether to omit one technique altogether, is dependent on the research environment. Importantly, Wolcott notes that some researchers do 'little or no formal interviewing', and choose instead to maintain a 'casual conversational approach' throughout their fieldwork (p. 105). As outlined previously, this is considered a valid and important interviewing technique and is one of the main methods I used to gather material at the welding shed.

3.3.4 Recording interviews: creative nonfiction and qualitative research

A common interview-related quandary for creative nonfiction researchers is whether to use a tape-recorder. Gay Talese is renowned for not taping his interviews, and Susan Orlean, author of The orchid thief (2000), also avoids using recorders because 'so much of the time I spend with people is spent just blabbing … do I really want to

transcribe hours and hours of tape of that?' (quoted in Boynton 2005, p. 286). However, the majority of writers find that the advantages of tape recording far outweigh any disadvantages. Jon Krakauer is a writer who uses his notebook and tape recorder 'like a professional photojournalist uses a camera' and 'tries to tape every conversation he has with a subject' (quoted in Boynton 2005, p. 172). This strategy might be beyond most people, especially when one considers the time needed to transcribe interviews. Although the transcription process can be tedious, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc says it is important for her to hear the 'dance of the interview', the intonation, the pauses, because she can then incorporate these nuances into her writing (quoted in Boynton 2005, p. 239). Further benefits of taping an interview, notes Gerard (2004, p. 74), is that it guards against 'claims of libel' and can 'preserve the sounds of the subject's voice, the inflection and tone, the audible attitude he brings to the answers'. He says this can be invaluable when writers are working on a long project because memory often plays 'tricks upon your research' (p. 74). Cheney (2001, pp. 201-202) also acknowledges the advantages of tape recording, especially considering the 'complex' nature of an interview, where the attention of the interviewer needs to accommodate a myriad of 'simultaneous activities'. These important considerations have both ethical and aesthetic implications for immersion researchers. It seems there is general consensus for both creative and qualitative researchers to supplement tape-recording with detailed notes. For example, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 186) advise researchers to jot down notes describing the 'non-verbal aspects and features of the physical setting'. This view is endorsed by the late biographer Hazel Rowley (2007, pp. 44-45) who argues that 'the most important thing was to sit down somewhere, straight after the interview, and go through your notes while the conversation was still fresh in your mind'. I found this to be true in my own work, and recorded interviews gave me the means to add realistic nuanced dialogue to the narrative.

3.3.5 The importance of preparation for creative writers engaged in immersion research

In order to avoid transcribing unfocused interview material, it is important for researchers to be clear about why they want to interview someone. Gerard (2004, p. 58) asserts that 'Until you know why you're talking to somebody, you don't know

what you want to take away from the interview'. By clarifying their intentions, either mentally or in note form before the interview, researchers have a better chance of acquiring useful material. Although Gerard recognises that the act of 'interviewing' can add a certain amount of tension to an exchange (p. 57), he has found that people are 'surprisingly forthcoming' and are likely to reveal 'amazing and intimate facts' during an interview (p. 66). Biographer Janet Malcolm (1993, p. 173-174) also mentions how 'both subject and interviewer give more than necessary' and says: 'They are always being seduced and distracted by the encounter's outward resemblance to an ordinary friendly meeting'. Of course, unguarded revelations are invaluable to researchers, and to increase the chances of giving their subjects enough rope, it is useful for interviewers to hold back from filling in the silences themselves, and to read up on effective questioning techniques, such as those found in Ken Metzler's (1977) Creative interviewing. When preparing for semi-structured interviews with Shakeshaft and other youth workers, I would always write a short list of open-ended questions directed towards the information I sought. An example is provided in Appendix 3.

3.3.6 My writing process: interviews with youth participants and youth workers

During my first day at the shed, I conducted what turned out to be my only interview with a single youth participant whose pseudonym is 'Lenny'. Because the shed was so noisy, we had to sit on a concrete ledge far from the others. I could sense that Lenny was uncomfortable about being singled out; he responded in monosyllables and seemed keen for the interview to be over as soon as possible. After this interview, I pondered how I could gather information from the boys at the shed, many of whom suffered from the usual inhibitions of adolescence. My supervisor with the qualitative research experience had interviewed over 350 teenage boys during the course of her research, and she assured me that she had no trouble getting them to talk. But I did not pursue the idea of interviewing the boys. Instead, because I knew I would be attending the shed for at least a year, I decided to provide space for the boys' stories to emerge naturally, over time, just as happens in real life. Similarly, although I knew Shakeshaft had an interesting life story, I held back from interviewing him until later. I wanted to try and interpret who he was on my own and from what other people said

about him, much in the way Talese conducted his research on Frank Sinatra. For this reason, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three of the BackTrack youth workers – Andrew, Geraldine, Sally – and I had several informal conversational interviews with Jayne, Shakeshaft's wife. This process of trialling different interview techniques illustrates how after reflecting on the efficacy of the method, I would often try another approach. Through trial and error, I worked out what best suited me, the participants and the research environment.

3.3.7 My writing process: recording group meetings

As it turned out, the strategy I used to capture the voices of the boys was to record the group meetings that Shakeshaft held at the shed. This strategy provided me with excerpts of dialogue that I could then thread through the narrative, and also gave me a chance to record group behaviour – both on tape and in my notes. An opportunity to do this came about each Sunday, when we had a regular afternoon break where we all sat together in the kitchen for a while. Shakeshaft used this time to seek feedback from the boys and conduct informal boys to men development sessions. For my research purposes, these kitchen sessions were a valuable time to observe the interactions of the group, which was often difficult in a noisy shed. The following excerpt is part of a longer piece of transcript material from a tape-recorded meeting that Shakeshaft and the boys had about whether to go to Tamworth or Coffs Harbour for a tool-buying trip. This excerpt illustrates the deeper workings of Shakeshaft's youth work practice, and is illustrative of the dialogue that I would later incorporate into the narrative.

Transcript material: 24th June 2007

> Bernie: What do you think? A Coffs trip or a Tamworth and then a Bellingen trip just to have a look at the market?
> Freckles: I reckon if we don't take that many people down there … like just take a couple of cars, we could go to Coffs.
> B: Uh huh. How are we going to work out who gets to come and who gets to stay?
> Silence
> …

B: What do you reckon? [to Tye]

Tye: It doesn't worry me – whatever.

B: That's not an answer. That's sitting on the fence. [laughter]

Tye: I really don't know.

B: I don't know – reeking of "whatever".

T: It doesn't worry me …

B: A or B? A is Coffs, B is Tamworth.

T: A (blowing smoke rings into the air in front of him)

B: Okay, sounds like Coffs is what we want to do.

Although it was tedious to transcribe lengthy meetings, the process helped me understand Shakeshaft's style of youth work, which further informed the writing. During the meetings, I jotted notes on clothing, actions and the general atmosphere in my exercise book to supplement the transcript material.

Notes: 24th June 2007

Bernie sits at the end, same clothes as last week, except they look dirtier. Said he was still out 4am – big party on last night.

Discussing the tool buying trip. (I have this taped but these are extra notes to remind me of who said what)

Simmo is here as well – striped black, red, yellow beanie, has a cold. Wears glasses that sit on his nose.

…

Tye – brown hand-spun woolen beanie, big eyes, Bernie says he's a character.

Everyone's eating brownies. Gary seems serious, Brown GLOBE cap, earring.

Gary – 'I reckon if we don't take that many people …'

…

Talk about the party last night.

'There were still people there at 3 am, busted beer bottles all over the street.'

'Half my fuckin' school was there!'

'I only had four beers!' Tye.

Gary – thin guy, blue overalls, brown cap. 'I think we should get back to this crap again.'

This excerpt demonstrates how I noted snippets of dialogue and details of clothing which I later used to differentiate characters. For example, Gary's cap became an identifying feature that set him apart from the other boys at the shed. I used the same tape-recording / note taking process to record staff meetings, which also provided valuable material for the narrative that I was beginning to develop. In addition, during the semi-structured interviews with Shakeshaft, I asked him to elaborate on certain aspects of his life history, his attitudes about death, and his relationship with Aboriginal people and their culture.

3.3.8 My writing process: casual conversation

Clearly, interviews and accompanying notes play an important role in terms of their potential for drafting scenes, capturing aspects of character, and adding depth to description. I was reasonably skilled at remembering snippets of dialogue in my notes, and on the odd occasion, certain events transpired to make the research experience more like that of Gay Talese's. For instance, not long after I started attending the shed, I heard a conversation about branding. When I asked Shakeshaft for clarification about what one of the boys had said to the others about his bandaged arm, Shakeshaft said, 'Hey Freckles, can you tell Helena about branding?' Freckles was happy to explain his branding story in front of the group, but if I had asked him to come outside at that early stage of my research to formally record his response, our exchange is likely to have been stilted and uncomfortable. The following excerpts from my notes and from my morning pages helped me to write the branding scene in the creative project. As time went on, the amount of material I gathered at each session at the shed grew less because my focus became sharper.

Notes recording casual conversation: 24th June 2007

> Behind me an orange glow comes from the forge room.
>
> 'What are they throwing on the fire?' I ask Gary.
>
> 'Kero.' He shakes his head, 'Fuckin' idiots.'
>
> The boys are into making these lists – they're doing it.
>
> …
>
> 'You blokes taking a lead on this stuff which is really great!

> Freckles branded himself when drunk. Branding self on chests. Iron Man Branding. Branding – bottle opener with a turtle on the top. Heat it up, put it on your skin. Freckles – Mine went too deep. Third degree burn. Went to the doctor two weeks later.

Excerpt from morning Pages: 25th June 2007

> When the talk got on to safety issues Freckles showed them a bandage on his arm and talked about branding himself. I asked what that meant. Heating up a bottle opener with a turtle on the end – he left it on his skin too long – third degree burns he discovered when he went to the doctor two weeks later. 'Did you tell the doctor how you did it?' someone asked.
>
> 'Yeah.' They all laughed. 'Love the fuckin' honesty!' smiled Bernie.

Although the content is similar, the two ways of recording casual conversation around the branding event each gave me something different to add to the narrative.

3.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has shown a clear link between the ways in which creative nonfiction and qualitative researchers go about gathering material, albeit for different research outcomes. By referring to the literature on ethnographic techniques, I hope to have illustrated the finer points of note taking and interviewing which, with the exception of Boynton's The new new journalism (2005), seem strangely absent from the creative nonfiction literature. My experience does not provide a definitive answer to the question of 'what to write down, how to write it down, and when to write it down', but it does show how the practice of creative nonfiction involves both researching and identifying suitable methods. Adapting those methods to suit the environment and the purpose of the research can sometimes lead to unpredictable results. I found that testing a variety of note taking and interview techniques led to insights that helped to shape the narrative I was writing.

Chapter 4

4 Method: composition and arrangement

At some point, creative and qualitative researchers need to confront the material they have gathered in the immersion environment or field. They go about this in a variety of ways; for example, creative nonfiction writers tend to focus on how their material will work as a narrative and is character based, while ethnographers commonly organise their material around cultural themes. In this way, important differences begin to emerge between the two areas of research, and the relevance of the qualitative research literature diminishes from this point on. Although the techniques for gathering material may be similar in both fields, ultimately the material is being gathered for different purposes, mostly in terms of genre and audience. Another point of divergence is that qualitative researchers such as Wolcott (1995) and Chang (2008) claim it is important to start writing as soon as possible, whereas it seems most creative nonfiction writers are better placed if they have an understanding of the shape of the whole story before they try and impose a structure on their notes. For these reasons, I now refer only to the creative nonfiction literature in my discussion on how to transform notes into a narrative. Similar to my discussion in the previous chapter, my experience of writing 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' was also a process of applying, negotiating and sometimes discarding various options. Rather than relate a full account of my writing process in this chapter, I discuss the most important developments which emerged. At various times, I was concerned about issues to do with first-person narration, which characters to focus on and how best to represent them, and structural matters. As I outline this process, I briefly add reflections for each stage.

4.1 Finding a structure for the work

4.1.1 Structuring material gathered during the immersion research phase

After the immersion phase is over, creative researchers commonly look for patterns and / or a structure in their materials. Writers approach this interpretation phase in a number of ways, and once again there is no clear answer on the best method. Although some begin writing with little or no idea of structure, it seems more common for professional writers to consider structural issues at length before they begin writing in earnest. Robin Hemley (2001, p. 58-59) abhors the idea of outlines, but admits that 'without a cohesive structure for the longer work, what you will arrive at is a book of essays most likely – if you're lucky'. Cheney (2001, pp. 147-148) also observes that writers who begin without a plan often end up with a 'lot of wheel spinning, revision and rewriting once the structure magically emerges from the mist'. So, it is useful to consider the ways in which writers organise their material. As a guide, Cheney suggests that the writer 'sit back and shift, shuffle and stack' the material, while looking for 'any vague shape that promises structural potential'. He also argues that it is better to know the ending of the story before beginning to write because 'the middle must somehow take off logically from the opening, and it must lead with some inevitability toward the ending you've decided on. From my own experience and from my reading, I agree that knowing the ending in advance and having a clear outline to follow has definite advantages.

The writers featured in The new new journalism (Boynton 2005) elaborate on aspects of their writing process, and I found it helpful to read more detailed accounts of how others 'sit back and shift, shuffle and stack' notes collected during immersion research. For example, before he does anything else, Jon Krakauer (quoted in Boynton 2005, pp. 175-176) reads his notes and 'underlines any useful passages'. Then, considering a possible structure, he searches for elements that 'best propel the story forward – no matter what those elements are, or in what chronological order they occur'. When writing an outline, Krakauer sorts through his material to find 'the forty or fifty most interesting scenes or incidents'. After writing a few descriptive lines for each scene, he then asks himself: 'How can I shape this material into a story?'. Using 'only ten or twenty of the strongest scenes', which each form the basis

for a chapter, he creates a 'crude overarching outline' to which he then adds the remaining scenes. From this process, he is left with a 'skeleton of the narrative' which he describes as 'the map that's going to lead me through the wilderness to my salvation'. Once this map is placed on the wall above his desk, Krakauer is ready to start writing. Beginning with the first chapter, he goes back over his notes searching for more relevant material, which he uses to make a 'much more detailed revised outline' for each chapter, and he then 'writes directly from that', repeating the process for each chapter. Although this means that Krakauer is continually re-reading his notes, he says it is useful because he often comes across crucial quotes that seemed insignificant at the beginning. He claims this method helps him to concentrate on the chapter he has before him, without worrying about what lies ahead, and says: 'It makes writing a book much less terrifying'. Although Krakauer's method may not suit everyone, I think it has merit and the idea of approaching the writing with some sense of direction is worth considering.

4.2 Incorporating big picture fictional techniques into a work of creative nonfiction

Writers generally consider big picture fictional techniques when they devise a structure for a work of creative nonfiction. For example, when a writer such as Krakauer (quoted in Boynton 2005, pp. 175-176) starts plotting his strongest scenes onto an outline, he simultaneously takes into account a range of elements such as point of view, major and minor characters, narrative arc and considerations of narrative drive. Once the writing begins, a writer needs to pay closer attention to the finer details of incorporating fictional elements. This stage includes making final decisions on the 'voice' in which to tell the story, using notes from the immersion research environment to create descriptive scenes that bring the immersion experience to life on the page, and creating effective dialogue from the transcript material. My initial considerations when writing 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' were to do with point of view, writing in scenes and character development. I briefly explain these points in the following section with reference to my own writing process.

4.2.1 Point of view

Choosing the point of view in which to narrate a story is an important decision for writers of creative nonfiction. American writer Sol Stein (1998, p. 309) defines point of view as 'the perspective from which a scene is written, which character's eyes and mind are witnessing the event'. Additionally, Gerard (2004, p. 114) claims that selecting the 'most interesting' point of view in which to tell the story is a key decision because it 'defines the scope of the story, the narrator's angle on the action, and how naïve or well-informed that narrator will be'. The most common options for writers are first-person or third-person narration. Stein (1998, p. 131-132) notes that first person, where the narrator tells the story from his or her point of view, 'establishes the greatest immediate intimacy with the reader', and says that it suits writers who are adept at 'impersonating' their characters. However, when choosing this narration style, Stein cautions the writer to be wary of coming across as 'weak' or as a 'braggart', and he says it is often better to rely on the 'action and the speech of other characters to reveal things – particularly good things – about the "I" character'. Conversely, Stein suggests that the way to understand third-person narration is to think of first-person narration but substitute 'he' for 'I'. Tom Wolfe (1973, p. 32) describes third-person narration as the 'technique of presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader the feeling of being inside the character's mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it'. Of course, the writer of creative nonfiction does not have access into a character's thoughts, but Gerard (2004, p. 116) argues the way forward is 'to present the illusion of interior lives, giving the reader insight and private information about real people, but stopping short of claiming to know what cannot be known – without making it up' (116). At an early stage of my research, I considered using a third-person narration. I ended up choosing first-person narration because I thought it was the most interesting way to tell the story and it enabled me to explain my presence in the shed. Also, Cheney (2001, p. 123) states that first person is better for writers who want 'close-up, intimate, immediate involved writing', which is what I hoped to achieve. In summary, deciding on point of view depends, once again, on the writer's intentions and their material.

4.2.2 Scenes

Writing in scenes is one of the hallmarks of creative nonfiction. Gutkind (1997, p. 33) claims that the presence of scenes, which he defines as 'vignettes, episodes, slices of reality', is a key difference between creative nonfiction and traditional journalism. Elaborating on this point, he says: 'The uninspired writer will tell the reader about a subject, place, or personality, but the creative nonfiction writer will show that subject, place, or personality in action' (p. 33). The importance of scenes in creative nonfiction is further emphasised by Gerard (2004, p. 132), who says: 'A storyteller persuades by creating scenes, little dramas that occur in a definite time and place, in which real people interact in a way that furthers the aim of the whole story'. When attempting to re-create a scene, Talese and Lounsberry (1996, p. 77) advise writers to 'begin with the picture the material creates in their minds, and then seek to reproduce the picture in appropriate sentences'. In order to re-create scenes from the immersion environment, fictional techniques of description and dialogue are used to show characters in action, and this is where detailed notes from the immersion phase come in useful.

4.2.3 My writing process: writing the first scene and my choice of first-person narration

I began writing 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' shortly after attending the biography writing workshop in Canberra, where the convener had suggested I focus the work on Shakeshaft. The convener of the workshop had also proposed that I try and understand the following: why Shakeshaft did things the way he did; why his methods worked; and where his ideas originated. So, on the 14th September, 2007, I wrote the beginning of the first chapter in my morning pages journal. Later that day, I typed up my notes, along with some accompanying thoughts about structure, into a file titled: 'IRON MAN WRITING!' It is worth noting that I had been at the shed for only four months when I began to write while also considering the structure of the creative project. Unfortunately, I had not yet discovered Robert Boynton's The new new journalism (2005); if I had, I would have known to hold back from writing. The following is the opening excerpt of what I put together that day (full notes in Appendix 4). This excerpt includes my first formalised writing for the creative project, early thoughts on structure, and notes taken from a BackTrack meeting some time before.

The BackTrack Crew

We sit around the kitchen table like Jesus and his disciples, except there are only six of us and our Jesus is drinking too much red wine and swearing a lot. But still we listen. I'm the ring-in, the one who thought it would be a simple thing to write about this Jesus man, Bernie, and the good he's doing with a group of young men in our community who, in his words, are 'having a hard time'.

Who was there?: describe all the people. Jayne, Bernie's wife, wearing a geometric shaped black-knitted poncho, jeans, purple shirt and hand knitted scarf. Her face has an honest beauty, the sort of face you would see sitting around the table in van Gogh's painting, The Potato Eaters. Simmo – wore a beanie that made him look like a robber, glasses perched halfway down his nose, Sally – Jayne's sister, Geraldine, Streetbeat co-worker, knitted scarf and beanie, Me, Flinty – a tree of a man with a straggly beard and a long plait like an American Indian.

There was a media release on the Iron Man Welders coming out in a local Armidale magazine. Bernie wanted to revisit – what is BT? BT is you! says someone.

Have an idea that's not Bernie's …? He goes around the table, asking about the stealing, what would you do?

Am I chucked out of BT now? asks Jayne.

ASK BERNIE WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH THE STEALING FROM THE GIRLS' PROGRAM – I DIDN'T GET THIS ON THE TAPE.

I've got the biggest lot of fuckin' thieves in Armidale down at that welding shed and there hasn't been a single welding rod stolen.

Why? Bring in an interview????

Knitting program – what to call it, how did Iron Man Welders get their name, YES Hot rod cocks!!!!

The meeting – cold Armidale winter's night. Everybody in beanies. Gel so proud that she made her beanie and scarf with the girls' knitting group.

This is Essay Chapter 1 – I have a beginning. Focus is introduction to the backtrack crew and stealing – an example of how Bernie's mind works.

At the time, writing these thoughts about the meeting, as well as the opening lines of the first chapter, felt like a major breakthrough. I especially liked the Jesus analogy as a way of understanding Shakeshaft's character and the way I placed the other youth workers and myself as his disciples. I also thought I had found the right voice to tell the story of the Iron Man Welders.

How to explain my presence in the story was a matter I had considered at length. Unlike Gail Bell in Shot (2003), or Chloe Hooper in The tall man (2008), or Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall in Down to this (2007), I did not want to present myself overtly as a researcher or investigator in the narrative. I wanted my role in the story to be more naturally occurring, and my participation in the events that followed to be seamless. In the opening lines I wrote that day, I thought I was halfway to achieving my goal. I had found my place in the writing – as a rookie youth worker and a credible witness to the events which were set to unfold at the shed – and although the narrator's voice was first person, it had a distance, as if it were edging towards third person. In this way, I thought I could put myself in the story, but keep my character firmly in the background and bring other characters to the fore. On the downside, by not having completed the immersion phase, and by not knowing the ending, the only structure I could come up with was a book of essays, which is exactly what Robin Hemley (2001, p. 59) warns writers about when they begin work without a 'cohesive structure'. Nonetheless, I surged on with the story. The opening line, with its 'Jesus analogy', led to a wrong-footed attempt to incorporate a religious theme in the narrative, and I discuss this point in the next section on characterisation.

4.2.4 Characterisation

Creating believable characters is an important part of the creative nonfiction writing process. Gerard (2004, p. 117) asserts that 'creative nonfiction is always about people' and says 'the special requirement of nonfiction is that we must learn what it inside them [the characters] through what we can reasonably learn from the outside'. Therefore, a writer's observational skills need to be particularly sharp during the immersion stage because a character will become realistic only through the writer's recording of pertinent details. Gerard (2004, p. 118) goes on to suggest a comprehensive range of strategies to use when developing their characters, some of which include the use of:

> Physical description, including characteristic mannerisms; names and nicknames; dialogue – what the person says and how, including favourite expressions; the person's written words; actions and gestures; background and personal history; anecdotes that illustrate character traits; what others say about the person; what others say to the person; how others react in the person's presence; your reaction to the person; and, juxtaposition.

Although Gerard (2004, p. 119) acknowledges the challenges of establishing character in nonfiction, he claims that using a mixture of these strategies will enable a writer to 'draw a convincingly "real" character'. I drew upon many of Gerard's strategies when developing the characters in 'Iron Men: alchemy at work'. For example, I always made notes about people's clothing or hairstyles, especially clothing that distinguished the boys from each other (like Gary's cap, Tye's beanie, Riley's hair). I studied Shakeshaft's mannerisms, took note of his favourite sayings, and paid particular attention to the way he used humour in his youth work. Additionally, through interviews and casual conversations with Shakeshaft, I discovered more of his background story, which further developed his character. In interviews with other youth workers, I asked about Shakeshaft's working methods. In many ways, the process of creating a believable character is like making a mosaic, where many small pieces fit together to create a unified work.

Along with creating a believable character, writers also need to decide how to reveal aspects of that character to the reader. Cheney (2001, p. 134) says it is important 'how the writer develops the revelation, not how the real person develops character over a lifetime'. When writing creative nonfiction, writers need to reveal their characters 'as honestly and accurately as possible', and this works best, says Cheney, 'as it happens in real life – bit by bit' (p. 134). Cheney adds that writers can choose to reveal aspects of the person's character 'in a sequence that is reasonably connected with the unfolding narrative and simulates life in its nonlinear, unpredictable revelations, spreading pieces of characterization through the article or book instead of trying to reveal all aspects of character at once' (p. 135). This advice informed my decision to hang back from interviewing the characters at the welding shed. With Shakeshaft, in particular, I wanted the reader to get to know him gradually, as I did – not by presenting his life story in a slab of information. I now discuss two aspects from my experience of developing Shakeshaft's character in the creative project: the Jesus analogy and the influence of Elizabeth Gilbert's (2009) The last American man.

4.2.5 My writing process: the Jesus analogy

Questions of style, especially the use of imagery and issues around this in relation to techniques of characterisation and setting, emerged early in the writing process. The Jesus analogy, which I use in the opening lines of the first chapter, came about through noticing that Shakeshaft seemed to live his life with a passion not often seen. He was funny, charismatic and youthful; he drank and swore and smoked with gusto, and a wide range of people were drawn to him. Along with his volunteer work at the shed each Sunday, Shakeshaft juggled four other youth work jobs. After talking to Jayne, Shakeshaft's wife, at the shed one Sunday, I wrote in my notes: It must be hard being married to Bernie – it would be like being married to Jesus. Everybody wants him. The idea of a Jesus-like character found its way into my thoughts, and was still there when I wrote those opening lines. I am not sure what Shakeshaft, a lapsed Catholic, thought of me comparing him to Jesus. We never discussed it. But, in retrospect, comparing one of the subjects of my research to Jesus in the first sentence of the work was a bold thing to do, albeit with a secular touch of irony.

To support the Jesus analogy, I liberally scattered Biblical references through the first five chapters. A writing colleague and one of my supervisors told me I was trying too hard to incorporate the religious imagery, but I did not listen. During this time, I was influenced by the literary style of Bishop-Stall (2007) in Down to this. In the opening pages of his book, Bishop-Stall writes: 'Just three days in Tent City so far and I'm already a mess, my old boots leaking sewer water, the knees of my jeans two moons of mud, my leather jacket all beaten down like a moth in the rain' (p. 10). I was impressed by Bishop-Stall's use of images like 'two moons of mud' and 'beaten down like a moth in the rain'. I wanted to write about Shakeshaft and the Iron Man Welders in a similar style. Also, because the context of my story was a dusty and dirty tin shed, I thought it would make an interesting contrast to use well-placed metaphorical language in the writing. Although I ended up cutting most of the Biblical references, I still think my use of the Jesus analogy was appropriate because Shakeshaft, like Jesus, is an agent of change who transforms people's lives. This experiment in characterisation taught me a lot about the importance of choosing appropriate ways to represent complex real life characters.

4.2.6 My writing process: influence of The last American man

By mid-2009, I had come to a standstill on the creative project. The first five chapters were written, but I was unsure of how to continue with the story. At this stage, I knew Shakeshaft was a central character, but I did not know how to develop his character on the page. A major influence during this time was my discovery of The last American man, Elizabeth Gilbert's (2009) study of American visionary Eustace Conway. Reading this book raised a lot of questions, and provided some direction as to how I could illuminate aspects of Shakeshaft's character and history. I wrote copious notes in my journal about the themes that guided Gilbert's writing, and I include an excerpt here to illustrate the aspects of Eustace Conway's character that resonated with my thoughts of Shakeshaft (the page numbers refer to The last American man).

Notes from morning pages journal about The last American man

> What is remarkable about Bernie? His passion? Seeks to train the community to nurture all young people, not just the ones who succeed in school.
>
> SUBJECT: Bernie and his youth work methods. The young men he works with. How did B get the ability to interact with young people in the way he does so successfully and where did this passion to retrain the community come from? Need to go a lot deeper into Bernie. Still need to address: Spiritual upbringing? Catholicism?
>
> Who are the visionaries – past and present - (people like Bernie) in Australia? What were their fathers like? Boys busting out of homes – far from fathers. Ideas for 'Iron Man' book: When did B leave home? Was it an easy transition? Where did he go? What / who were his influences at that time? (Eustace lived in the bush in a tee pee.) Bernie out in the bush in a caravan near a shed. First jobs? Working experiences? Bosses? Eustace – boyhood – to manhood was hiking the Appalachian Trail. What was B's BOYHOOD TO MANHOOD transition? SPIRITUALITY HERE? India? Mother earth? Catholicism? P.57. Bernie – stockman type? Australian outback hero of the bush. P. 58 women are for rescuing and tipping your hat to (how he met Jayne – something about the way he held his hat?). Australian heroic stories? Man from Snowy River? Jolly Swagman? Sex and love in these stories?

What's it like to be the woman in B's life? What sort of life did B see himself heading for as a young man. The same age as the boys in Iron Man W.
Early days of B's youth work? Mentors? University education? Training? Hunting / wildlife skills? FIRST SWAG? How did he learn to read people so well? Rabbit trapping? When did B realise his mission to train communities?
Rural communities in Australia? What were the rural communities B lived? What role did young men have in those communities? What was he seeing (ie. in Gunnedah / Alice Springs?) What was he concerned about? Visionaries?
What is B ruthless about? How does B get what he wants? Visioning … What are the FAULTS in his character – a swearing Jesus. What are B's imperfections? The business side of B? Bernie is not guileless or simple. He is cunning. He often says, 'I've got a cunning plan.' He's like a dog. What do other people want B to be?
Gilbert p.127: 'The story of EC is the story of American manhood – shrewd, ambitious, energetic, aggressive, expansive – he stands at the end of a long and illustrious line of the same. Nothing anachronistic about his savvy ways. We want EC to be Davy Crocket.'
How does B get what he wants? What do I / most people see when they meet Bernie for the first time? Admiration? Why do I/others believe in him? His self-assurance? Bernie's work habits? "The Duracell Dingo". B's serious injuries – broken leg, broken shoulder – incredible pain – just keeps on going. 132. just kept on going.
The role of DOGS and HORSES – B's relationship with horses, the Alice Springs trip. Understanding B? E pushed himself as far he could go with charisma and courage – now he needs to go on a spiritual journey? Needs to do s/t that is private. JUST LIKE BERNIE!
Big difference between the two characters is that B attracts people into his life and keeps them – E doesn't.
In the final chapter Gilbert talks about getting drunk with Eustace – that's when he is at peace: what is drink for B? What does he become when he drinks?
EPILOGUE: Round up of E's history – how that made him who he is. Eustace in the woods – I thought about my own ending – how I could finish with B camping, sleeping in his swag. Eustace and the deer.

Notes such as these provided guidance about the questioning process I undertook in order to understand and present Shakeshaft's character. In addition, Gilbert's portrayal of Eustace Conway provided me with a range of subjects to pursue in semi-structured interviews with Shakeshaft. After reading The last American man, I conducted the first of two semi-structured interviews with Shakeshaft, and began to obtain useful information about his history. I then threaded relevant parts of this history throughout the narrative in the way that Cheney advises writers to reveal character gradually. Although many of the parallels with The last American man were not realised in the creative project, Gilbert's influence is still evident, especially with the content on Shakeshaft's Catholic upbringing, his relationship to the land, his connection with Aboriginal people, his connection with animals and his work with young men.

4.3 Sharing the writing

Once I began writing scenes which involved the characters from the shed, ethical considerations of sharing the work became timely. So, I began to share early drafts of the creative project with participants. In the literature review, I raised a number of reasons why writers choose to share work with the subjects of their research. Gerard (2004, p. 152) further confirms the importance of sharing the writing with people who are part of the story:

> As an artist, you may not want to – you and you alone are responsible for its truth. And showing your manuscript is not the same as soliciting approval – you may find yourself unwilling to make the changes that subjects want you to make. The implications can be legal – invasion of privacy or libel – but they are more likely to be ethical, artistic, and personal. It's a hard choice. Not showing a manuscript prior to publication, a manuscript in which someone's private life is exposed, can be a kind of cowardice.

I agree that it is cowardly not to show the work. I also thought the process of sharing the work would provide validation of my interpretation of what was going on at the shed. Finally, another important reason for a writer to share their work is to gain critical feedback to improve the content. This may be achieved by asking writing colleagues to read early drafts or by seeking professional advice through editorial opportunities that arise. I now provide a summary of developing 'Iron Men: alchemy

at work' through sharing the writing with research participants, with a professional editor (first 20 draft pages only), and with my supervisors. I also shared drafts of my writing with Edwina Shaw, a trusted friend and an emerging writer, and she was an excellent sounding board throughout my candidature.

4.3.1 My writing process: sharing the work with research participants

From the start of my PhD, I believed it was important to be open about my research. For me, this meant sharing the writing with the participants. I was initially confused about how to go about this because at least half the boys at the shed lacked the literacy skills necessary to comprehend and respond to a written text. Once the first chapter was written, I discussed my concerns with Shakeshaft. He came up with the idea of sharing the work as a group and arranged a barbeque at the shed one Friday afternoon, when I happened to be out of town. In this way, the first chapter was shared in an open reading session led by Andrew Simpson, one of the youth worker participants who is referred to as 'Simmo' in the creative project. It is important to mention, however, that Simpson was also a university lecturer and a former school teacher, and his comments on the process are pertinent. During the open reading session, the boys and a few visitors sat around on milk crates outside the shed. Shakeshaft later gave me a written report of the proceedings on a scrap of paper which included his impressions and a list of those present. Although Shakeshaft's impressions are brief, they highlight the importance of this part of the research process.

> Boys – thinking – silent – laughs / milk crates / sitting – smoking – drinking / bbq – few beers / never seen boys sit so quietly / Helena should be here / Love name of chapter / Boys deep in thought / atmosphere – could cut air with knife – (positive) / Simmo read it in 20 mins / only few changes – e.g. Sally also youth worker.

Along with these notes, Shakeshaft also passed on some written feedback from the boys. Straight after the reading, he had passed around paper and pens, and asked the boys to write down the first three things that came into their head.

- don't real know, weird being in a book, interesting to hear what we do in like a story
- telling the truth, it's funny, the name of the chapters great
- description of people good, a good start to the book, funny parts
- funny, are we gunna get into shit if this becomes a book with OHS or COPS
- it was really good, funny, I think we should put real names

Receiving this feedback gave me valuable insight into what my research participants were thinking. I was pleased they thought the writing was funny, and their comments also made me feel that I was providing an honest description of the events at the shed, especially as someone wanted to use real names. The concern about getting into trouble with 'OHS or COPS' arose because the first chapter originally contained references to some questionable work practices I had noticed. My initial focus on Workplace Health and Safety issues was fuelled by the precautionary email the Occupational Health and Safety Officer sent before I began my fieldwork, but I was fully aware of the need to report any OHS or COPS issues of concern to Shakeshaft.

My research participants, particularly Shakeshaft, behaved with significant agency during this part of the research process. As part of my ethical stance as a researcher, and because of my respect for Shakeshaft's youth work experience and knowledge (as well as my respect for Andrew Simpson's experience and knowledge as an educator), I was happy for the work to be shared in this collaborative manner. As for the way in which the sessions were conducted, Shakeshaft later explained his reasons for the group reading method. The first reason was because at least half the boys could not read, and the second was that a group reading led by Simpson gave Shakeshaft the chance to watch the boys' reactions, and he felt he could learn more about what the boys thought in this way. The group reading sessions continued in much the way I have described for the first five chapters. I chose not to attend any of the readings because I thought my presence would inhibit responses from the research participants. To make sure the success of the first reading was not a one-off, I asked Simpson to forward a report on the reading of the second chapter. I include his comments below.

Andrew Simpson's report on sharing the writing with participants

> Altogether there were about 10 or 12 Iron Men at the shed for the reading of Chapter 2 as well as Gary's girlfriend. A few of the lads hadn't heard the first chapter so I read some excerpts from it after explaining what you were doing. Of course, it was met with much laughter at times. I also explained their ownership of it in terms of being able to negotiate with you if they wanted anything cut or names changed etc. Again, the boys were deathly silent during the reading of Chapter 2 apart from the funny bits ("Never seem 'em focus for such a long time" reckons Bernie). Bernie went around the group asking them what they thought, and while it was all very positive, the common response was "Yeah, it's good" or "It's pretty funny" etc. (A Simpson 2008, pers. comm., 10 April).

The silence of the boys at the reading of each chapter illustrates how seriously they took the process. As an extension of sharing the writing, I also found that my research participants corrected my mistakes. For example, I was corrected for not knowing that one of the BackTrack team was a qualified youth worker, and when I said one boy was going up to Brisbane because his mother was having a baby, I learned it was actually his girlfriend's mother. Over the course of sharing the first five chapters, I was only ever asked to make minor changes such as these. Even so, I consider it an important ethical practice to offer participants the chance to suggest changes and to be prepared to incorporate these changes into the writing project.

4.3.2 My writing process: sharing the work with a professional editor

Even though it was an important ethical process, I stopped sharing the work with participants after Andrew Simpson read the fifth chapter. My decision to cease this practice came about after I attended an editorial feedback session at the Brisbane Writers' Festival in October 2009, where I met with Anne Collins, a Senior Editor from Random House Canada. Although Collins made only minor line-editing suggestions on the first twenty pages of my manuscript, we mainly talked about the big picture of the creative project. 'How are you going to turn this into a book?' she asked me. We talked about narrative drive. If my reticent stance as a researcher was not uncovering conflict in the lives of the boys at the shed, then perhaps more of my

own story could provide the narrative tension needed to propel the story forward. Further suggestions from Collins included the idea that I go deeper into the stories of some of the boys to find out what was at stake for them, and that I made it clear how much of a lost cause they were before Shakeshaft came into their lives. Collins noted that Shakeshaft was still a puzzle and suggested I explain him more. She also advised me to explain why I was in the shed in the first place, and why Shakeshaft could possibly be a way forward in healing the relationship with my son. When I told Collins about my process of sharing the work with research participants, she expressed concern and thought this process might be holding me back as a writer. At that time, I had not written any new chapters for nearly a year. Collins' parting advice to me was: 'Go where it scares you … write as if everyone is dead, and don't show anyone until it is done.' Because I thought there was truth to her words, I later informed Shakeshaft that I would not share any more of the writing until I had completed a full draft. He was understanding and supportive of this decision.

Over the weeks that followed my meeting with Anne Collins, I thought more about including my own story in the narrative. I began to devise a new structure for the creative project, where chapters from the shed were interspersed with chapters that described aspects of my own life. I now realised my story would play a greater part in the narrative than I originally intended, but I still considered it would be secondary to the broader story of Shakeshaft's work with the Iron Man Welders. I did not view this shift as a way to impose a narrative formula on a real-life situation, but the feedback from a professional editor had certainly given me more understanding about the function of a narrative, especially from a publishing perspective. With a clearer structure in place, I worked steadily on the creative project for several months and soon had over 20,000 words written. This was enough material to submit to opportunities for emerging writers, and over the next year, I was awarded several retreat fellowships at Varuna. These residencies provided me with valuable uninterrupted writing time to further develop the creative project.

4.3.3 My writing process: sharing the work with final supervisory team at UNE

Encouraged by the interest the creative project received from the professional writing community, and under the guidance of a new supervisory team at the University of

New England, I worked steadily on the manuscript for the remainder of 2009 up until November 2010. Upon meeting one of my new supervisors, I raised some concerns about my larger role in the story, but he thought my place as 'the woman in the shed' was a point of interest. My supervisor expressed uncertainty as to whether Shakeshaft was of Aboriginal descent. Because Anne Collins had also queried this point, I realised I needed to clarify it in the writing. My supervisor also commented on the confronting nature of the Jesus analogy, and about my held back stance in the story, and I later addressed these matters in the creative project. As it turned out, my personal story provided a structure on which to hang the material I collected from the immersion research experience. The autobiographical element figured more than previously, but still in relation to the representation of others in the youth project and the awareness of transformation found there.

In September 2010, I finished the first full draft of 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' and gave it to Shakeshaft to read. Although Shakeshaft offered his approval, he was unsure about the content regarding my own story and the death of my father, and wondered if this material took too much away from the focus of the Iron Man Welders. His feedback left me feeling confused about the direction the creative project had taken. In a subsequent draft, I tried to address some of his concerns as well. In November 2010, I gave this revised draft to my supervisors. Among other things, they thought I needed to address my Dutch background and family history, and also work on several scenes where they lost faith in my character. It is worth noting that my supervisors' comments had much in common with the feedback I later received while working with professional editors in two separate manuscript development programs. As mentioned in the introduction, for the purposes of this thesis, I am submitting the PhD version of the creative project – the version which existed before I began working with the two professional editors. This is also the version my son read and approved. My later work with these editors on the publisher version of the creative project raised further questions of how to manage observational, biographical and autobiographical material, and had implications on my thoughts regarding the factors and processes that are part of writing a work of creative nonfiction based on immersion research.

Chapter 5

5 Reflection on process and outcomes

As outlined in the previous chapters, the research and writing process I undertook was one of trial and error. I took a number of wrong turns, especially in the writing up stage. Reflecting on his own writing process, Talese (2006, p. 75) comes to the following conclusion: 'Writing is often like driving a truck at night without headlights, losing your way along the road, and spending a decade in a ditch'. I would have to agree. Because of some wrong turns I took while writing 'Iron Men: alchemy at work', I spent a considerable amount of time stuck in a ditch. In this chapter, I discuss major points related to research and gathering material, and arranging and composing material into a work of creative nonfiction.

5.1 Research and gathering material

5.1.1 Research stance, observation and note taking

From both my reading and experience, I now understand that choosing a research stance depends on a number of factors and like many of the choices available in the process of gathering material, there is not a set of rules for a researcher to adopt. Managing interactions in the research environment will always depend on the researcher, the project, the site and the participants. My views on this matter concur with Wolcott's (1995, p. 96) claim that there are no 'definite answers', and that the best researchers can do is to develop an 'acute awareness of their own fieldwork processes'. Therefore, after considering my research participants (youth at risk and youth workers), my research site (a welding shed), my genre (creative nonfiction), as well as my role as a female researcher in a male-dominated environment, I believe my decision to maintain an unobtrusive research stance was the correct choice for this particular project. As for managing aspects of participation and observation in

the immersion research environment, I think I managed the balance well. The times when I did work on welding jobs with the boys enabled me to build rapport and trust with participants, and also gave me an insight into the enjoyment that comes from working with sparks and metal and noisy machinery. I still believe the research participants would have been uncomfortable if I had stood back and observed them, with notebook in hand, acting in a 'writerly' way, as Gutkind (1997, p. 102) suggests. Besides, the noise of the shed made it very difficult to hear anything once people were actively involved on welding jobs. Further, the work of creative nonfiction writers such as Ted Conover and Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall shows that participating and / or becoming part of a team is not a detriment to the success of an immersion research project.

I also appreciate the privileged access I was given into a world that not many people, especially women, get to see. Before I began this project, I would have crossed the street if a group of rough-looking boys were walking towards me. But, from my very first day at the shed, the Iron Man Welders welcomed me into their world without question. That sort of acceptance is hard to find in any group, especially considering I was the mother of someone they knew. As for 'impression management' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, p. 83), my dark-blue King Gees and work-boots provided me with safe clothing in a hazardous environment and also helped me to look like everyone else. Because of my clothing and behaviour, the boys did not pay me much attention. My intention was for them to forget about my presence in the shed, and some of the conversations I overheard seemed to prove they had forgotten a woman was present. This not only enabled me to collect uninhibited material, but my unobtrusive research stance made it easier for the participants to accept me hanging around. My freshly-baked brownies – a weekly gesture of thanks for my access to the shed – became a 'motif in the writing, and were very much appreciated by the boys. Finally, my decision to use a variety of note taking methods enriched the research, and my experience shows that researchers need not be bound by only one form of note taking. I found it particularly useful to park my car in a nearby street and jot down thoughts after each session at the shed, as noted above, and also to follow up on those notes with more reflective material in my journal the next morning.

5.1.2 Interviewing

Although it was useful to conduct semi-structured interviews with Shakeshaft and other youth workers, I have no regrets about holding back and not interviewing the boys. Of course, this factor is also related to my unobtrusive research stance, but because I was at the shed for a long period of time I was able to observe the boys' activities and interactions without pressure. Nothing had to happen on any particular day with any particular person, which is why there was no need to do intensive interviewing of the youth participants. Over time, my observations of the boys revealed aspects of their character and I appreciate the benefits that the luxury of time offered. To further explain what I set out to achieve, I include some feedback from an early reader of my work, Zoe Miller, a psychologist who worked alongside Shakeshaft on several projects. She said: 'I like that you take me into the shed, and that I get to be one of the boys in the sense that I listen to their dialogue. I also like that the dialogue and the scene that you set does not interfere with my interpretation of what is happening or being said' (Z Miller 2009, pers. comm., 5 June). However, if I had gone ahead with intensive interviewing, I could have assembled life story narratives constructed from the boys' own words, which is another powerful way of giving voice to those who often remain unheard. For example, Inside this place, not of it (Levi, Waldman and Silbert 2011) is a collection of narratives that tell the harrowing stories of thirteen women imprisoned in the United States. Although I recognise the benefits of this technique, it is not what I wanted to do with the Iron Man Welders, and I do not think my decision to hold back from interviewing impeded my research in any way.

Alternatively, I could have written about the boys in the style that John van Tiggelen (2009, p. 21) uses in 'The lost boys', an article about a youth intervention program that was published in the Good Weekend. I include the article's opening paragraph to illustrate his style:

> Jamie is 14. He is fit, handsome, ginger-haired and, relative to his mates, late to lose his virginity, though not for lack of girlfriends. He beats himself up about this. Spare him the guff about sex being no substitute for love. He has a depressed mother who drinks too much, a disease that lands him in and out of hospital, a father who rejected him, a stepfather who belittles him and a brother who raped him. His sexual health counsellor, whom he sees fortnightly, has told him the longer he leaves it, the

> more daunting it will get. His saving friendships are with a football coach who hugs him and a best mate who, until recently, went thieving and tagging with him around the streets of Dandenong, in Melbourne's deep south-east.

This opening paragraph is very powerful, but I never found out if any of the Iron Man Welders had similar histories to Jamie's because I made a conscious decision not to dig for that sort of information. One of the reasons for this decision is that Shakeshaft's youth-work philosophy is very much about working with what is happening in the present, rather than putting energy into what happened in the past, and I hope to have reflected this philosophy in 'Iron Men: alchemy at work'. Also, the boys would have been very uncomfortable sharing this kind of information with me. Another reason I did not write explicit personal histories of the boys is because I knew I was going to share early chapter drafts with them, and their reaction to the writing was always at the forefront of my mind. Armidale is a small rural city and the Iron Man Welders were local boys. I did not want to dig deep into their lives and histories because I knew it was possible they would be recognised, even with pseudonyms. I wanted them to be comfortable with what I had written. Another writer, or a journalist working within a shorter time frame, might have gone in and dug deep for the boys' personal stories in order to write a book that was all about the boys' journey through life, but that was not me. For the purposes of this PhD, I am satisfied with the level of information I have provided about the youth participants at the shed.

5.2 Arranging and composing material

5.2.1 Writing early and sharing the work

While Wolcott's (1995, p. 201) maxim 'You cannot begin writing too soon!' may be appropriate for ethnographers, I do not think it is applicable to creative nonfiction writers. From my own experience of writing early, I have learned that it is better to approach the writing up of an immersion research project with some idea of its direction, and that it is beneficial to know the shape of the story and have a clear outline to follow. Additionally, although sharing the work with participants has many benefits, I have learned it is not a good idea to show early drafts of the writing to anyone, let alone the subjects of the writing, before the first full draft of the work is complete. Sharing early drafts of the work with the research participants had a huge

influence on how I wrote. In retrospect, although my intent was noble, it was not a good choice for me as a writer. One reason why I have come to this conclusion is related to the writing process, which some people characterise as having two distinct stages. For example, Cate Kennedy (2010) refers to the 'hot' and 'cool' stages of writing. The hot stage is when writers create the first draft of their manuscript without fear or worry. During this time, a writer's inner critic needs to be pushed aside so the imagination can run wild. Conversely, the cool stage occurs after a writer has completed a full draft and is ready to stand back from the work and allow the critic back into the room. Stephen King (2000, p. 249) describes this process as writing with the door closed or with the door open and he asserts that the first draft 'should be written with no help (or interference) from anyone else'. When reflecting on my own writing process, by choosing to share each chapter as it was written with the subjects of my research, I was writing with the door open right from the start. This meant I was thinking about the reader, which inhibited me as a writer and led to a long period of writer's block.

The fifth and final chapter that I shared with my research participants was called 'The fishbowl' and included a scene at the police station with my son, whose pseudonym is 'Joey'. It was a turning point in the development of the work. In my role as the narrator, I had suddenly entered the story in a much larger way. It is not surprising that I became blocked at this point because I was no longer sure where I was going with the story. Because I was already focused on my reader, I was unable to give myself the privacy of a room with a closed door to think things through. When I gave 'The fishbowl' to Shakeshaft and the other youth workers, I wondered whether they would be annoyed or bored to read of a mother's frustrations. Also, the fifth chapter was not as funny as the previous chapters. The story had suddenly become a lot more serious. As I considered how to propel the narrative forward without my personal story intruding too greatly, I grew fearful of writing more chapters. I did not know at the time, but the feeling of being unable to continue at a certain point in the narrative is common for writers. For me, though, it was intensified by the process of sharing early chapters and of working with the door open. My thoughts on this matter are supported by the advice I received from Anne Collins at the Brisbane Writer's Festival.

Nonetheless, even though the sharing process had its disadvantages, it also had important advantages. Sharing the work ensured the validity of my research, and one of the finest comments I ever received about the writing was from a youth participant who said: 'You tell it how it is'. Sharing the work also fostered the importance of relational ethics, or what I prefer to call trust, and this point is summed up by Andrew Simpson in his final feedback about sharing the work.

Andrew Simpson's final comments on the process of sharing the work with participants

> I feel the sharing sessions has given the young men at the welding shed control and ownership over the story … they are able to negotiate changes that they feel are needed. They seem to 'respect' the whole process, evidenced by their focus and silence during the readings. They seem to treat the writing as an important aspect of the whole project they are involved in. And they seem to think the story is funny … enjoying the story together makes it another aspect that bonds them together. From a teacher perspective, it also allows them the opportunity to reflect, discuss and learn about each other and themselves.
>
> The success of the project is based on the trusting relationships between the young men and Bernie (and us other mentors). Sharing the story chapter by chapter further strengthens the project in general and builds on the values of honesty and transparency which are fundamental to the success of the project. It also ensures an even power relationship between the researcher and the subjects of the story and further cements the trusting relationship between them.
>
> Sharing the chapters with the adult mentors and significant others involved with the project has resulted in the creation of a wider 'Iron Man Welders' community. It feels like there is a group of us keeping an eye on the boys and on the story and what is actually happening in the project … in effect we are ensuring that the researcher is being kept 'honest'.
>
> Whilst sharing chapters that have involved me particularly has been challenging in some ways. I have been confronted by my own questions such as: "Should I have stated so much about my 'wicked' past life?" and "What will people think about me after reading it?" However it has also been rewarding to share an

> open and honest dialogue with the young men, to show them we all make mistakes. The sharing of chapters also gives me the opportunity to negotiate changes, so I too feel some control over the narrative (A Simpson 2009, pers. comm., 12 August).

Simpson's feedback reflects the positive aspects of the sharing process, but, all things considered, I think it would have been better to share one or two trial chapters early on. This would have helped the research participants understand what I meant by creative nonfiction and it would have showed what I intended to do in my research. I could have avoided a long period of unproductive time if I had waited and shared the finished manuscript much later on. I am sure this would have still maintained trust and mutual respect, which is so important in an immersion research project like mine.

Sharing the final draft of the creative project

I completed the first full draft of the creative project in September 2010. By that time, a few of the boys had moved to Alice Springs for work opportunities and it was no longer possible to conduct sharing sessions with the research participants. So, my first step was to share the entire story with Shakeshaft and also with my son. After I incorporated their feedback, I gave the full draft to Jayne Schofield and Andrew Simpson to read. Because the other youth workers each had a minor role in the narrative, they were only shown the sections in which they appeared. Finally, Shakeshaft and I sought feedback from the youth participants on the chapters in which they were included. Shakeshaft also helped organise pseudonyms for the boys, and I liked how most of the boys chose names of dogs – both alive and dead – for their pseudonyms in the story. Because I wrote about my father's death, I also sought feedback from my family. In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss the responses from Shakeshaft, Joey, Schofield and Simpson.

Feedback: Bernie Shakeshaft

When Shakeshaft and I met to discuss his response, he first of all affirmed that it was my book, and that he would support me with whatever content I decided I wanted to include. However, he admitted he was a little surprised that I had brought in more of my own story, and he thought that perhaps there was too much content about my

father. He wondered whether including my father's death in the story may have been part of my grieving process at the time. Apart from these comments, his feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Shakeshaft said reading 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' was a an emotional experience for him – 'a beautiful experience' – and he told me that even if it was thrown in the garbage the next day, it was worth it. He also said he learned a lot about himself and his youth work through reading the story. Overall, I was reassured by this feedback, and, after our meeting, I made some revisions to the creative project which incorporated his comments. Once again, it was mostly small things that needed correcting.

Feedback: Joey

Reading 'Iron Men: alchemy at work' was also an emotional experience for Joey. At the time, he was living in a flat next door to my house. I gave the story to him one afternoon, and he came around the next morning, visibly upset. We hugged, and I told him I loved him. He had finished the story at two in the morning and hardly slept afterwards. He said he had never understood what things were like from my perspective, and he admitted that his behaviour was often self-centred. He sat in bed next to me and we talked about the creative project for a long time. He thought I never saw anything that went on in his life, and sharing the writing felt like a big step towards understanding each other better. Joey agreed that Shakeshaft was like Jesus, and when he read about Shakeshaft not fearing death, he liked the way it was all connected. He told me the things he did not want included and I later removed them from the story. Mostly, he thought there were too many fights, but he said: 'Maybe you need them for the story to work.' I reminded Joey that there was plenty of time to work through things, and that I was happy to remove some of the fight scenes. He also commented about the scene which described him and his friend being questioned by the police outside the sports store. That kind of thing meant nothing to him: 'We get that all the time,' he said. Joey thought I had captured the boys at the shed well. Receiving this positive feedback from Joey was another important part of the research process.

Feedback: Jayne Schofield and Andrew Simpson

I also received positive responses from other youth workers on the BackTrack team. Schofield read the creative project over one weekend and came around to see me as

soon as she finished. She said it felt important for her to not talk to or see anyone else, but come straight to my house to give me a hug. She said she had issues with my character, and at times she felt cranky with me for being such a pushover in the story. After Simpson finished reading, he returned the manuscript with similar feedback and the following comment:

> I felt really uncomfortable when you described Joey's mates as 'sloppy looking boys'. Not sure why I felt that way. I was just surprised when I read it ... seemed a bit judgemental (although you obviously had your reasons). Would you still look at them in that way now? The boys at the shed usually look pretty sloppy, but when I read your descriptions of them, it seemed to be humorous, rather than a dislike of their appearance. This doesn't really mean anything ... just needed to mention it for some reason (A Simpson 2010, pers. comm., 1 Nov).

I addressed Schofield and Simpson's points in the next draft of the creative project because I thought they were valid. In summary, I am pleased with the way my research participants felt they had the freedom to offer comments and suggestions. This not only improved the content of their work, but it gave them ownership of the story as well.

5.2.2 Focus

Although I originally thought Shakeshaft and the boys would generate enough of a story that I would be able to keep myself out of the narrative, this did not happen. With hindsight, I can see that my father's death significantly affected the focus of my research. Because of my grief, I withdrew from the world; I stopped going to the shed for several months, and I lost my connection with the immersion research environment. During this time, my oldest son started getting in trouble with the law and our relationship suffered. When I did end up back at the shed, Shakeshaft began helping me sort out problems in my own life. During this time, I suppose I became like one of the boys at the shed – one of Bernie's crew – which is how I still feel today. In qualitative research literature, this sort of close identification with the research environment and participants is known as 'going native' or 'over-rapport' (O'Reilly 2009, p. 87). It is generally thought of as something to be avoided in order

to maintain objectivity. But, as Cheney (2001, p. 118) notes, objectivity is not necessarily required in the writing of creative nonfiction. Over the year or more that I spent at the shed, Shakeshaft taught me techniques to fix the problems in my life, and, as that was happening, I wrote about it in my journal. In this way, my own story found its way into the narrative. I still do not know whether this choice was the best one for the creative project, but it was the choice I made. I am aware of the dangers of writing about intimate others, and I am aware of the criticisms that were directed at Julie Myerson (2009) for writing about her teenage son in The lost child. The discussions around this subject are worthy of a whole separate exegesis, but, as Rachel Robertson (2011) recognises in a recent article concerning the ethics of motherhood memoirs, it is possible to be ‘a mother and writer and memoirist’ without betraying anyone. I have done my best to write ethically and respectfully about everyone who is represented in my creative project ‘Iron Men: alchemy at work’.

Chapter 6

6 Conclusion

In the preceding chapters of this exegesis, I have discussed the implications of the Australian education system not meeting the needs of a significant number of boys, and I have placed BackTrack within a historical context of government intervention programs for youth at risk. I have also discussed a range of literature that supports the need for further research on youth intervention programs in Australia, and I have outlined the influences that contribute to Shakeshaft's ongoing success with BackTrack. I have also discussed the genre and the origins of creative nonfiction, and some ethical considerations of life-writing. The exegesis also provides an account of the processes I underwent in order to write 'Iron Men: alchemy at work'. Immersion research is not practised by many writers in Australia, but by documenting some of the strategies I used in my research, I hope to provide practical information that may encourage other writers to conduct immersion research projects in an Australian context. Although some of my choices did not work out so well, it is my hope that other creative and academic writers can learn from my reflections on the research process. In this final chapter of the exegesis, I discuss the significance of my research and my ongoing commitment to BackTrack.

My intention was to use the genre of creative nonfiction to document a grassroots youth intervention strategy: the Iron Man Welders program, organised by Shakeshaft and managed by BackTrack. Through a process of trial and error, I tested and applied a range of research and writing options that were available to me through the genre of creative nonfiction. My experiments with these options enabled me to investigate the Iron Man Welders and the origins of BackTrack, and I hope my efforts inspire others to act for social change in the future. By articulating the core principles that contribute to BackTrack's success, I also hope my research will assist in efforts to replicate the BackTrack model in other areas of Australia. Gutkind

(1997, p. 2) claims that the goal of creative nonfiction is 'capturing and describing a subject so that the most resistant reader will be interested in learning more about it'. I hope my creative project has achieved this goal. As I related at the beginning of this thesis, not many people seem to be overly interested in, or care, about youth at risk or the efforts of youth workers in their local community. During a conversation with Zoe Miller, I asked about renowned youth workers in Australia. Unable to think of any, Miller expressed doubt as to whether people would want to read about Shakeshaft's welding program at the shed:

> You've got to be in there, or youth work has to have touched you in some way … even if this situation (Shakeshaft's work with the Iron Man Welders) got captured in words or a film, unless it had cars exploding in it, I don't think the mainstream population will … I mean, there's a select few who want to be enlightened by what they read (Z. Miller 2009, pers. comm., 8 May).

Nonetheless, I trust I have managed to make youth work an appealing subject (even with the absence of exploding cars), and my trust is placed in the power of creative nonfiction to reach the most resistant readers and to bring about real changes in the world.

BackTrack has attracted a great deal of academic interest since I began my research in 2007. However, I am the only researcher to date who has taken a creative approach to the research output, and whose intended audience for the work is the general public as well as the academic community. In this way, my research complements the work of BackTrack. As Shakeshaft states on the BackTrack website: 'In over 25 years of youth work, my unrelenting desire has been to educate the community that those young people they consider most marginalised or difficult have skills and aspirations and want a sense of belonging, just like us all' (Shakeshaft 2014). In recognition of Shakeshaft's efforts, the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) awarded a '2013 National Play Your Part Award' to BackTrack for their 'commitment to the wellbeing of young people and effective community engagement demonstrated by their locally relevant skills training programs'. In addition, NAPCAN commented that BackTrack's

programs for youth at risk have led to 'a noticeable change in community attitudes towards these young people: seeing them as positive contributors and embracing their potential' (NAPCAN 2013, p. 2). It is my hope that my research also adds to a change in community attitudes.

As a researcher who prioritised relational ethics, it was never my intention to leave the research environment without giving something back to Shakeshaft and BackTrack. Over the years since I finished the immersion phase at the shed, I have maintained my commitment to BackTrack in a number of ways. For a year of two, I dropped in at least once a month with a tray of brownies. During these visits, I caught up with the news and sometimes joined in with circle work sessions that Shakeshaft conducted with the boys. Shakeshaft would introduce me to each new group of youth participants by saying: 'This is Helena … she's been writing a book about BackTrack', and the boys would always welcome me into their circle. In 2013, I was awarded a Country Arts Support Program grant from Regional Arts NSW to be a writer-in-residence at BackTrack, and I remain involved with improving the boys' literacy skills through creative writing activities. Also, in March 2013, BackTrack began trialling a 'School at the Shed' program to complement its existing skills training and life skills programs. Funding for this program was provided through the NSW Department of Education and space for the classroom (known as the 'paddock') was made in an annexed area of the shed. I was a teacher in the paddock for a year and a half, but recently dropped back to doing two hours of tutoring with the boys each week. BackTrack continues to be an important part of my life, and Shakeshaft remains a friend and mentor.

To conclude this exegesis, I offer a final reflection on my writing process. During my candidature, I came across a movie called Adaptation (2002), which is about a screenwriter attempting to adapt Susan Orlean's (2000) The orchid thief – a book about flowers – into a compelling screenplay. I strongly identified with the screenwriter's struggles, and one particular scene resonated with me. After many false starts, the screenwriter begs his agent to get him out of the deal (which is not possible), and one night, in total despair, the screenwriter speaks directly to Orlean's photo on the back cover of the book and says: 'I don't know how to do this. I'm afraid I'll disappoint you.' The photo comes to life and Orlean whispers: 'Just whittle

it down. Focus on one thing in the story. Find that one thing you are passionate about and write about that.' This moment in the movie describes how I felt for much of the time while writing 'Iron Men: alchemy at work'. I often wondered how Orlean or another contemporary writer would have approached an immersion research project with the Iron Man Welders. Perhaps they would have kept their personal story out of it. For example, they may have focused more on Shakeshaft's character, as Orlean does with Laroche in The orchid thief. Or, they may have done an extended profile and explored Shakeshaft's life story in greater detail. They may have focused on how he became a youth worker and described what happened during his time in the desert with Aboriginal elders, like Elizabeth Gilbert (2009) does with Eustace Conway in The last American man. Other writers may have included pages of densely packed information about welding and its history, or men and sheds, but as Shakeshaft often said to me: 'It's not about the fuckin' welding.' What happens at the shed is about transformation. Bernie Shakeshaft transforms lives. He transformed mine. I became the mistress of tough love, my son became responsible for his own life, and I wrote about that.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: ethics documents

Copy of information letter for research participants

Dear ………………,

My name is Helena Pastor and I am a student at the University of New England Armidale. I am enrolled in a PhD in the Department of English, Communication & Theatre Studies and my supervisors are Dr Donna Lee Brien (dbrien@une.edu.au / ph: 02 67733271), Professor Adrian Kiernander (akiernan@une.edu.au / ph: 02 67732478 – Semester One 2007 only) and Dr Ingrid Harrington (iharring@une.edu.au / ph: 02 67735068 – Semester Two 2007 and continuing).

My PhD project, The Iron Man Welders Project, will explore the factors which lead teenage boys to drop out of high school before completing their secondary education and examine the ways in which community-led programs such as The Iron Man Welders Project meet the educational, emotional and social needs of these boys in their transition to the workplace.

The work will include the stories of the teenage boys and youth workers who are involved in The Iron Man Welders Project, and will also incorporate material from other research sources. After the initial research period of one year (June 2007-June2008), I would expect the writing up and editing of the project to take two years (to be completed by January 2010). I will incorporate all my research into a book-length manuscript (approx.70 000 words) written in the style of creative nonfiction which uses the devices of fiction – dialogue, characters, scenes, plot, and detailed description – to tell a 'true story'. I want to write descriptively about Armidale in my research because it is a unique city in Australia and I hope to use the seasonal changes as a backdrop and structure to the narrative. Because of this I cannot promise any participants in The Iron Man Welders Project that their anonymity will

be safe, even though names will be changed. But participants will be given the chance to voice any concerns about my writing and changes will be made.

As a parent of teenage boys (one an early school leaver), I am keen to understand more about the options available to help in the transition from school to the workplace and to show that academic success is not everything in life. I hope that my research will also enlighten others and change people's perceptions of what it is to be a 'successful young man'.

For your information:

- Your participation will involve one, possibly two, taped interviews in your work or study place, home or other preferred location, and may also include being observed in a classroom or elsewhere on campus. The questions for the interview will be supplied to you beforehand. If, at any time, you wish to stop the interview, I will honour your wishes and the tape will be erased.

- When the interview is over, I will transcribe the data and then the tapes and data will be itemised by a system of alphabet coding (no personal identity information will be written on the tape – they will be de-identified). All data will be stored in a locked personal filing cabinet in my office at the University of New England, Armidale (and later in a locked filing cabinet at my home). In the thesis, names will be changed to protect identity but because I will be writing descriptively about Armidale and The Iron Man Welders Project I cannot promise participants that their anonymity will be safe. After five years I will destroy all data.

- Your participation will be of great benefit to anyone interested in education and workplace training and who wants to know more about what alternatives are there for teenage boys who do not fit the traditional school system.

- Your participation in this research is voluntary and you are free to withdraw (without penalty) at any time. If you choose to withdraw, any data already collected will be destroyed. You will not be disadvantaged in any way for not participating.

- At the end of the project (early 2010), after negotiating with participants throughout the writing, I will send each participant a letter detailing the results and possible publication of the project. Contributors will be able to read the final draft of the thesis and will be given their own soft-bound copy or CD if they wish. The completed thesis will also be available for perusal in the UNE library.

- I am available to answer any questions you have concerning any of the procedures for your participation in the research (Telephone (02) 6773 5201).

- This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No. HE07/096, Valid to 31 /12 / 2009). Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which this research is conducted, please contact the Research Ethics Officer at the following address:
  Research Services
  University of New England
  Armidale, NSW 2351
  Telephone: (02) 6773 3449 Facsimile (02) 67733543
  Email: Ethics@pobox.une.edu.au

- It is unlikely that this research will raise any personal or upsetting issues but you may wish to contact the following counselling services:
  Armidale Community Health Centre on (02) 67769600
  Kids Help Line on 1800 55 1800

- If you are willing to participate in this project, please sign the consent form included with this information letter and send it back to me in the stamped, addressed envelope provided.

Yours faithfully,

Helena Pastor

Questions for The Iron Man Welders Project:

Questions for teenage boys involved in the Iron Man Welders Project:

1. How do you like being part of the Iron Man Welders Project?
2. When did you finish high school?
3. What did you think about school?
4. How did you get along with the teachers?
5. Do you ever think of those teachers now?
6. What were your reasons for leaving high school early (if applicable)
7. What do you reckon you'll do in the future?
8. What things are you really interested in?

Questions for youth workers and other adults involved in the Iron Man Welders Project:

1. How did you get involved with youth work in Armidale?
2. What do you hope to achieve through the work you are doing – especially with The Iron Man Welders Project?
3. How do other people in the community react to your work
4. Can you tell me about your own experience of high school/ teenage years?
5. What do you think about the young men involved in this program?
6. Do you think these young men share any characteristics?
7. What's your passion in life?

Ethical Clearance Consent Form re: Taping for Participants aged 18 years or over:

Ethical Clearance No: HE07/096
Consent Form

I (the participant – aged 18 years of age or older) have read the information contained in the Information Letter for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby agree to participate in a taped interview with Helena Pastor for the Iron Man Welders Project.

I acknowledge the following things:

- That any data that I supply will be de-identified and kept in a secure storage area.
- That my participation is on a voluntary basis.
- That I have a right to withdraw (without penalty) my participation at any time.
- That I will be informed and given the results at the end of the project.
- That research data gathered for the study may be published, provided my name is not used if I so wish.

……………………………………..   ………………………
Participant or Authorised Representative   Date

……………………………………..   ………………………
Investigator   Date

Ethical Clearance Consent Form re: Observation for Participants aged 18 years or over:

Ethical Clearance No: HE07/096
Consent Form

I (the participant – aged 18 years of age or older) have read the information contained in the Information Letter for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby agree to be observed in a classroom / workshop setting by Helena Pastor for The Iron Man Welders Project.

I acknowledge the following things:

- That my participation is on a voluntary basis.
- That I have a right to withdraw (without penalty) my participation at any time.
- That I will be informed and given the results at the end of the project.
- That research data gathered for the study may be published, provided my name is not used if I so wish.

…………………………………….. …………………………
Participant or Authorised Representative Date

…………………………………….. …………………………
Investigator Date

Ethical Clearance Assent Form re: Taping for Participants aged under 18 years

Ethical Clearance No: HE07/096
Assent Form

I (the participant – aged under 18) have read the information contained in the Information Letter for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. What I have to do to help with this research has been explained to me. I agree to take part in the research (and to have a tape made of what I say) with Helena Pastor for The Iron Man Welders Project.

I acknowledge the following things:

- That any data that I supply will be de-identified and kept in a secure storage area.
- That my participation is on a voluntary basis.
- That I have a right to withdraw (without penalty) my participation at any time.
- That I will be informed and given the results at the end of the project.
- That research data gathered for the study may be published, provided my name is not used if I so wish.

……………………………………..   ………………………
Participant   Date

……………………………………..   ………………………
Investigator   Date

Ethical Clearance Assent Form re: Observation for Participants aged under 18 years

Ethical Clearance No: HE07/096
Assent Form

I (the participant – aged under 18) have read the information contained in the Information Letter for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. What I have to do to help with this research has been explained to me. I agree to take part in the research and be observed in a classroom / workshop setting by Helena Pastor for The Iron Man Welders Project.

I acknowledge the following things:

- That my participation is on a voluntary basis.
- That I have a right to withdraw (without penalty) my participation at any time.
- That I will be informed and given the results at the end of the project.
- That research data gathered for the study may be published, provided my name is not used if I so wish.

………………………………………..	………………………
Participant	Date
………………………………………..	………………………
Investigator	Date

Ethical Clearance Consent Form for Parents/Guardians of Participants aged under 18 years

Ethical Clearance No: HE07/096
Consent Form

I have read the information contained in the Information Letter for Participants and any questions I have asked about Helena Pastor's research for The Iron Man Welders Program have been answered to my satisfaction.

Please answer these questions:

1. Do you understand that the research will be conducted within sight and sound of a welding teacher, youth worker, parent or other responsible adult and that the researcher has obtained a criminal records check. YES / NO (Please circle answer)

2. Do you understand the nature of the research sufficiently well to make a free informed decision on behalf of the person under 18 to consent to it? YES / NO

3. Are you satisfied that the circumstances in which the research is being conducted provide for the physical, emotional and psychological safety of the person on whose behalf you are giving consent? YES / NO

……………………………………..   ………………………
Parent / Guardian   Date

……………………………………..   ………………………
Investigator   Date

Appendix 2

Notes: first day at the shed, Sunday June 17th, 2007

As I drove to the workshop I saw Bernie heading away in the other direction.

Pulled up – there was only a few boys around. Someone said, 'Thommo will show you around.' He showed me the areas of the workshop. After reading the information from the OHS I felt paranoid about flashes destroying my retinas. I looked at the photos – the things they've made. Candle holders, wall hooks, book ends.

Bernie's two dogs were chained up outside. Border collies. I read the Iron Man Welders Project small business plan – Draft 1.

Triple J radio up extremely loud. After ten minutes I had a headache from the music, the grinding, the thumping, the flashes that kept capturing my eye. This was going to take a bit of getting used to. It was quiet because Bernie was driving to and fro to the soccer tournament of a team he coaches.

I looked in the fridge in the room with the old table and a jug for making tea and coffee. The fridge was an old rusted Kelvinator. It had a tub of Flora salt-reduced margarine, milk – a week out of date – a bottle of Apple and Raspberry Crush cordial, and some BBQ and Tomato sauce squeeze bottles.

Lenny [NB: a friend of my son's] turned up – he was surprised to see me there. He was wearing a dirty Billabong cap, stained grey sloppy joe, and nylon tracksuit pants. He'd had a haircut since I last saw him – his hair was always hanging his face. He looked younger, sort of innocent.

Bernie came back and helped the boys organise a few things they were doing. He was wearing a handmade crocheted beanie in soft green colours and an orange polar fleece jumper and jeans. He has shining eyes and says 'you know?' a lot. All a bit confusing for me at this stage. He asked me to go and get about 20 sausages and two loaves of bread from Woolies for a BBQ later. Gave me $30. 'You could take someone with you if you want – the car if often a good place for a chat.' Not this time. Maybe when I get to know them a bit better.

My eyes were hurting when I drove away. I nearly crashed into the back of a trailer load of sheep. I thought I might try and interview Lenny – he was sort of

hanging around looking lost. When I came back to the workshop Bernie still wasn't there. The boys cooked the sausages.

Some others mucked up. Climbed into the back of a truck carriage. Another boy came out – Blister? – and said, 'Get outta there!' When they don't listen he says, 'Come on! Get outta there!' He seems very responsible. A boy had arrived while I was away – he had a No. 2 haircut, wore army pants and a black jacket. He wasn't friendly.

The dogs – no one knew the names except Blister. Girl and Lou (or Lil?). He let them off the chains and threw the stick to them for ages while the sausages were cooking – getting the dogs to crouch a down and wait as he threw the stick. Sitting outside I could see the flashing light of someone welding. I didn't feel like going back in the workshop. The radio is too loud.

It's a social gathering. They loved the brownies. I'll bring a large container every week. I wore an old brown coat – had to find a quiet place to do the interview with Lenny. I like Lenny. I wonder if the welding light is affecting the dogs' eyes?

After the boys have had their fill of BBQ sausages they give half a hot sausage each to the dogs. Too hot to eat – they lift the sausages, lick them, but the sausage falls back onto the dirt. Later I see Blister dipping the sausages in the water bowl so it's cool enough for Girl and Lou to eat them.

The site – ask some questions. The old council workshops for what? The boys have built a forge – ask about that too. The shed has been adapted into a welding workshop. They have $6000 insurance that the credit union payed for. Free rent on the workshop? Trucks come and go – there are piles of sand out the back. Seven roller doors on one side – a large covered area – take some photos next week.

Inside the guys are making welding bays for the jobs. To make it safer.

Later, when Bernie came back and I had interviewed Lenny there was a meeting about the Bellingen trip to buy tools for the workshop. When I came in I could hear Bernie asking, 'What's the main problem we're going to have with this trip?' No one knows. 'Every man and his dog will want to come when they hear about it. What sort of rule do you want to make about who comes and who

doesn't? Maybe something like you have to have been three times. You can work that out.'

'You guys be alright in an old bus?'

'What are we going to do about tucker?' said Bernie.

Someone said, 'Hunting at night?'

'Going to Maccas?'

They talked about staying in a caravan park at Sawtell … Everyone's keen to come? The grog thing is what I worry about the most. Getting pissed, getting locked up. A lot of guys who aren't eighteen, whose parents don't want them drinking … I don't want to see you vomiting all over the place.'

Bernie talked about some contract jobs that had come through – 'It's going to be pressure. They might want 400 of these hook things. Gotta be quality. Can't send something that's covered in bird shit.'

'Been out to the mines. They got a few contract jobs they want us to do.'

Talked about JIGS – what are they? Something to hold the piece in that is being welded???

At the end Bernie said, 'Great to see you guys can come down and hook in. The welding bays … terrific. You've done a really good job.'

Then they talked about tools – 'Wombat machine disks? That's something you're keen on, as keen as you are on anything besides the girls?'

They talked about toolboxes. Someone said, 'I just had an idea!' Bernie said, 'Hard hats on everyone! Stand back!' The boy laughed and talked about making a tool wall.

'Simmo's going to ring and see if we can get a deal through the tool shop. Say if we spend $1000 bucks.'

The young guy, he goes to TAFE one day a week while he's still at school. He knows a lot about tools. His dad works in Tamworth. He's not interested. Hand over head, looking out the window.

Safety gear? Bernie says, 'Do they have them in any of them cattle dogs?'

Bunnings – massive warehouse. De Walt tools – fuckin' expensive. Two nail guns – fucken' $1500 bucks each.

Milwaukee ones seem to go alright.

Talked about having a night meeting to discuss the Bellingen trip. I'll go to that too. Maybe tape it.
Bernie said, 'Let's pack it up and …'
'Fuck off?' someone asks.
'Yeah, that's a good way of putting it. Need to bring the barby in, throw the snags to the dogs.'
I drove Blister – goatee beard – and the young fellow home. I fumbled for my keys, feeling nervous. 'Where do you live?'
'West side.'
'Okay.'
On the way we saw an unmarked police car with a light flashing on the top, stopped behind a black ute with BAD HABITS written on the side.
'That's probably not the best thing to have on your car when the police are around,' I said. Dropped the young fellow off first, in a new housing development behind Girraween shopping centre. He told me he was at Armidale High. After we drive off again Blister said, 'I was expelled from Duval – expelled for kissin' my missus. Excuse the language but I said, "Fuck you!" to the principal (check this story later). He shook his head in disgust. 'My mum and my brothers – they're older than me … thirty and that – they went off when they heard. She's still my missus – we live together.' I dropped him off at a small blue house in the central housing commission area of Girraween. Felt wiped out after the day – went for a walk up Faulkner Street to clear my head.

Appendix 3

Questions for semi-structured interview with Bernie Shakeshaft: 29/9/2009

- What is Bernie's idiot history?
- What were his teenage years like?
- Mentors? Role models? Teachers?
- B's life with Aboriginal people – Tennant Creek
- How was his relationship with his mother … father? Why didn't he speak to his folks for ten years? Where would he have rated himself in his family 1-5 then? Now?
- How did choice theory (book and method) come into his life and why did it change things so much for him?
- Why still drinking and smoking?
- Death? Jayne's party … I've never had a parent die but I've seen a lot of death? Impact of Banjo's death on those boys?
- Way he treats the pups? … I think I made a comment that same birthday night that his methods often seem a bit hard, but then later he put a puppy underneath his jumper to keep it warm, like a baby. Soft and hard.
- BOYS AT SHED – what did he think of these boys who became the first YL group – Tye, Thommo, Blister, Riley, Freckles – what were the risks for those boys? What were their crimes / troubles? Where would they be now?
- Skippa? Mother's worst nightmare
- Early on – B asked me to write the list of positives about Joey's father. Why?

Appendix 4

Notes: the BackTrack crew

We sit around the kitchen table like Jesus and his disciples, except there are only six of us and our Jesus is drinking too much red wine and swearing a lot. But still we listen. I'm the ring-in, the one who thought it would be a simple thing to write about this Jesus man, Bernie, and the good he's doing with a group of young men in our community who, in his words, are 'having a hard time'.

Who was there?: describe all the people. Jayne, Bernie's wife, wearing a geometric shaped black-knitted poncho, jeans, purple shirt and hand knitted scarf. Her face has an honest beauty, the sort of face you would see sitting around the table in van Gogh's painting, The Potato Eaters. Simmo– wore a beanie that made him look like a robber, glasses perched halfway down his nose, Sally – Jayne's sister, Geraldine, Streetbeat co-worker, knitted scarf and beanie, Me, Flinty – a tree of a man with a straggly beard and a long plait like an American Indian.

There was a media release on the Iron Man Welders coming out in a local Armidale magazine. Bernie wanted to revisit – what is BT? BT is you! says someone.

Have an idea that's not Bernie's …? He goes around the table, asking about the stealing, what would you do?

Am I chucked out of BT now? asks Jayne.

ASK BERNIE WHAT HE SAID ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH THE STEALING FROM THE GIRLS' PROGRAM – I DIDN'T GET THIS ON THE TAPE.

I've got the biggest lot of fuckin' thieves in Armidale down at that welding shed and there hasn't been a single welding rod stolen.

Why? Bring in an interview????

Knitting program – what to call it, how did Iron Man Welders get their name, YES Hot rod cocks!!!!

The meeting – cold Armidale winter's night. Everybody in beanies. Gel so proud that she made her beanie and scarf with the girls' knitting group.

This is Essay Chapter 1 – I have a beginning. Focus is introduction to the backtrack crew and stealing – an example of how Bernie's mind works.

Tues 17th July, Meeting at Simmo's

Just been at a BackTrack meeting. Feel a bit hyped up now – probably due to the cup of tea Andrew made at 7.30 pm. Should have had wine instead. Interesting meeting.

Bernie – black beanie, glasses, black polar fleece jacket – Armidale is cold this week

Jayne (married to Bernie) – black knitted poncho, jeans, purple shirt, scarf

Sally – Jayne's sister, dark clothes, lovely multi-coloured hand-knitted scarf, works at Joblink Plus.

Geraldine – hand-knitted beanie and scarf in lurid pink and orange colour

Flinty – jeans, long hair tied, ponytail, beard, hairy guy. Ent-like. Like a tree.

Talked about what BackTrack is – Bernie's finding the media focus on him, doesn't want it to be like that. Jayne wasn't acknowledged in the paper as being part of back track.

Bernie's so intense – driven. Swears so much. It would be hard being married to him – like being married to Jesus. Must get Bernie's story down soon – I think it's important to know where's he's coming from. He alluded to a troubled background in the notes for the focus interview coming out soon.

<u>I think a good beginning could be this Sunday, after the meeting, where we are in danger of losing them. Conflict situation. How are we going to get them back?</u>

Parallel story with me feeling like I'm losing Joey? Going to buy Joey some warm clothes this week.

Essay / Chapter 2 …" Tool Shed"

" Fuckin' 'whatever' isn't an option. What's your answer."

The tool buying trip to Tamworth and the importance of decision making and ownership. In future, tape all of BT meetings, go on a Streetbeat night with B. Talk with all disciples – Tell me about Bernie. Bernie is the focus of this work. All revolves around him. How does he do what he does? This is how other people interested in working with kids in this way will learn.

Essay / Chapter 3 … Bernie's childhood

40th Birthday speech – okay, what was he like as a 16 year old and how did he come to have a good relationship with his parents again. Gorgeous Boys book??? My troubles as a parent.

That's enough to get started. Might then lead on to Bernie and the open day – his relationship with Peter Slattery and what he has learnt from him. Simon's song – what is Simon's impression of Bernie? Lots of people to ask. Tie all this in with objects – each of the boys to show me something they are proud of, what is the story behind it, take a PHOTO, link it in with eternity themes somehow.
Henry's impression of Bernie. Remember the tyre-slashing incident – Bernie crouched down low on the gravel at the school.
"I think he's … a man, he's self-confident."
Joey's first impression of Bernie down at the show – standing out the front with a group of guys – suggestion about caps for Street beat workers.
"Swearing Jesus" – good title??

Creative Project

There is a crack in everything,
that's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen (1993) 'Anthem'

Iron Men: alchemy at work

Winter 2007

Joining the pack

The Iron Man Welders meet on Sundays in an old council depot on the edge of Armidale, a university town in northern New South Wales. I recently volunteered to help out with this program for troubled teenage boys, an initiative led by a maverick youth worker called Bernie Shakeshaft. Not that I'm a welder or a youth worker – I work part-time as an English language teacher, and I'm also a part-time doctoral student, a wife and a mother of four boys who range in age from two to sixteen. I was just looking for some answers.

About a year ago, Bernie had a vision of a welding project that would build on the strengths of a group of young men who had dropped out of high school but weren't ready for work. He asked the Armidale community to help out. The local council offered him the depot, which had once been a welding workshop and was lying empty, as if waiting for Bernie and the boys to come along and claim it.

There was nothing in the huge shed, not even a power lead. The boys turned up each weekend and worked hard to clean and create their own workplace. They borrowed nearly everything, from brooms to welding equipment, and started collecting recycled steel for the first batch of products they planned to make and then sell at the monthly markets. Local welding businesses gave scrap metal; people lent grinders, extension cords and old work boots.

Then the money started coming in. A local builder forked out the first five hundred dollars. The bowling club gave a thousand and a steel-manufacturing business donated a MIG welder. The credit union offered to draw up a business and marketing plan, organised insurance and contributed a thousand dollars for equipment. A nearby mine donated another thousand and raised the possibility of apprenticeships for the boys, and the NSW Premier's Department handed over a grant worth five thousand dollars. It seemed like every week Bernie and the boys were in the local paper, celebrating some new success.

I saw a photo of Bernie in the paper, surrounded by a group of boys, their faces beaming with happiness and pride. At the time, I was having a lot of trouble with my eldest son, 16-year-old Joey, who had left home but boarded in a house nearby. I was worried about him and didn't like the way he was drifting through life – no job, no direction, living off Centrelink payments, sleeping in till midday. I'd tried to get Joey to attend the activities at the welding shed, but he wasn't interested. As I looked at the happy faces in the photo, something stirred inside me. I wanted to be part of it: the Iron Man Welders.

The next day I heard Bernie on the radio, seeking community support for the project. 'We'll take any positive contribution,' he said. His words sounded clipped and tight, like he wasn't one for mucking around. 'Whether you've got a pile of old steel or timber in your backyard, or if you've got an idea, or if you like working with young people and you're prepared to come down to the shed and work one-on-one with some of these kids ...'

On impulse I rang. I'd never used power tools, let alone done any welding. I liked bushwalking, baking cakes. I enjoyed order, cleanliness, silence. What was I thinking?

Right from the start, though, the boys were gracious in accepting a 42-year-old woman into their grimy world. With my short brown hair, and in my King Gees and work boots, I don't stick out too much. The boys find easy jobs for me to do – like filing washers for candleholders or scrubbing rust off horseshoes. I sweep the floor, watch what's going on, listen to what they want to tell me. The fellas who come along are the sort of misfits you see wandering the streets of any country town, with nothing to do, nowhere to go. Once, I might have crossed the street to avoid them.

Most of the Iron Man Welders didn't 'engage positively' with the education system. Not one finished Year 12 and some barely made it through Year 10. One was expelled in Year 10 for 'kissing his missus in the schoolyard', another told a teacher to 'fuck off' on a ski trip because the teacher wouldn't stop hassling him, and another finished Year 10 at TAFE because he was about to be kicked out of school and reckoned the teachers didn't like him anyway. The welding shed is a different story. They love it. Bernie gives them the chance to take responsibility for their lives, to engage on their own terms with the community.

The first Sunday I joined them it was early winter. I walked in carrying a tray of freshly baked brownies. Self-conscious in my new dark-blue work clothes, I

huddled from the cold in the open-sided tin shed. Music blared from an old radio, and thumping and grinding noises came from the machines. Sparks flashed; everyone dragged on rollies, littering every sentence with 'shit' and 'fuck'. Taking a deep breath, I forced myself not to panic.

Thommo, a stocky bloke in his late teens, took me on a tour. His voice rumbled softly, and I could barely hear what he was saying as he showed me the kitchen area, the main workspace and a forge he'd built in a dark side room that brought to mind a scene from the Middle Ages: flickering fire, hammers and anvil, dirt floor, open drain, a rusty tap jutting out from the wall.

He led me towards a shelf at one end of the shed to show me a range of candleholders, nutcrackers, penholders and coat hooks made from horseshoes. I noticed a smartly presented copy of the Iron Man Welders' business plan and several glass-framed photos: Thommo bent over the anvil, hammering a piece of a glowing-red metal; Bernie and about eight boys slouched in front of his yellow ute; and a young bloke with curly hair using a grinder, a halo of sparks around his head.

Bernie doesn't actually seem to know much about welding. Every so often I hear him say, 'No point asking me questions about welding shit' – but that might be his way of throwing the decision-making back onto the boys. He knows the basics, like what processes are involved in different jobs, but most of the fellas have the edge on him. Some are doing TAFE certificates in engineering, following on from their school studies.

Along with understanding the welding and power tools, I'm also keen to learn more about boys. You'd think I'd know enough with four of my own, but I've probably made every mistake there is, especially with Joey.

Joey moved out of home when he was fifteen, just over twelve months ago. Years of anger and rage, windows getting smashed and police knocking on the door had forced the decision. Thinking back, it was just crazy adolescent behaviour. I probably had similar scenes with my parents in my teenage years, but I wasn't as wild or angry. Rob – Joey's step-father – and I could have handled the conflict better, but we didn't know how back then. We didn't understand Joey and he didn't understand us. Our home life was an ongoing battle of wills, with escalating scenes of conflict occurring on a daily basis.

Joey used to play thumping loud rap music in his bedroom, and if we asked him to turn it down because the baby was sleeping, he'd rant about how 'unjust' we were.

Every time we attempted to impose some sort of control over his behaviour, Joey would go wild. I've never been good at confrontation, and I found it impossible to reason with him. He'd stand over me, his face close to mine, and yell so loudly I'd give up and walk away, anxious to keep the peace. One day he shouted so much that a neighbour called the police. When I saw the police at the door, I waved them inside – 'Please explain to my son that it's not appropriate to yell so loud the whole street hears.'

Something had to change. Neither Rob nor I were good at handling stress; we were like two nuclear reactors heading for a major meltdown. The tension in the house was palpable. This wasn't how I wanted to raise my children. I wanted to see Joey do well in life. He had a lively and inquisitive mind, a zany sense of humour and a passion for music. He also had a family who loved him deeply, but our tension-filled environment was bringing us all down. I didn't want my younger boys growing up in a house where people were always fighting and angry.

Then, one afternoon, Henry, our second youngest, got a lift home from school with another mother, Anne. Henry must have mentioned our troubles because she came into the house and asked me what was going on. After I'd finished telling her, she said: 'How about Joey lives at my house for a few weeks, while you and Rob get some counselling and work out what to do.' I was overcome, unable to believe that someone – practically a stranger – was offering to help. It seemed like a good solution at the time. When Joey came home, Anne asked if he wanted to come and stay with her teenage son in a converted shed in her backyard. He nodded, packed his bags and left. And that's how Joey left home.

The house breathed again, but my boy was gone. For weeks, grief, guilt, relief and love rolled around inside me. Anne gave us the number of a respected psychologist in town, and Rob and I started a mediation process with Joey. But after the first session, the mediator said she wouldn't be able to work with us. She didn't explain why, but I think her concerns were more about the way Rob and I were behaving as parents rather than how Joey was behaving as an angry, confused teenager.

After two months, when it began to look as though Joey wouldn't be returning home anytime soon, Anne approached a local church on our behalf and asked the minister if any 'empty nesters' in the congregation wanted a boarder. An older couple volunteered to help, and Joey moved in with them. During that time, Joey came around nearly every afternoon, and he often had dinner with us, too. We began

to have more good times than bad – and I felt hopeful about a positive future for our family.

Joey was still at high school then, more than bright enough to do further study. But after months of garbage duty, behaviour-level cards and several long-term suspensions, he left school at the end of Year 9.

'Better to leave now than be expelled next year,' the Deputy Principal at the time had advised. 'He can always do Year 10 at TAFE.'

It wasn't the right decision. Joey's new friends, in their baggy pants and back-to-front caps, gathered out the front of TAFE each morning smoking and laughing like they were the lucky ones. Maybe they were, and maybe school would have damaged them further, but after a few weeks, Joey and his friends stopped attending classes. I often see them at the mall these days, slumped on benches near the courthouse or hanging around the toddler's playground.

If only Joey had been coming to the shed each week, slowly 'getting his shit together' like the others.

'I'm a lone wolf,' Joey says whenever I pester him about coming down.

I thought it was time he joined the rest of the pack.

The scent of an idiot

About half a dozen boys turn up at the shed each Sunday, and after a few more weeks of filing washers and scrubbing horseshoes, I start getting to know them all. I notice Gazza during a group meeting late one afternoon. He seems more serious than the others, a real worker in his baggy overalls, cap pulled down hard over his eyes. Next to him I feel like an imposter in my pristine King Gees, the factory creases still visible, my work boots shiny and new.

Snow has been falling in the high country over the weekend and outside is threatening sleet, but we stand near the open shed doors so the boys can smoke.

'We've got six hundred things started,' says Bernie, his hair ruffling in the wind, 'but we're not finishing anything. I think we need groups – have someone who's shit-hot at welding working with some new fellas. You blokes decide what jobs are most important. The sooner we get started, the sooner we can hook in.'

Bernie throws a piece of chalk over to a boy who begins to write names on the dusty concrete floor. The others stand in a circle around him – choosing group leaders, assistant group leaders, offering comments. They decide to have groups of five: two who can weld, two who are handy enough to cut, and one new bloke who can start on easier jobs.

'Crackin' idea,' says Bernie, looking down at the lists. 'Seeing you blokes take a lead on this is really great!'

From behind, I feel a blast of heat from the forge room. I turn to see the fire raging and two boys sitting next to it on upturned milk crates: Thommo, thick-set and mustachioed, who showed me around on my first day, and his mate Freckles, who has the fine features and demeanor of a devious elf. They nod at me with raised eyebrows and guilty smiles.

'What did they throw on the fire?' I ask Gazza who is busy writing job lists on the whiteboard.

He turns around, lifting the brim of his cap to see. 'Kero,' he mutters disapprovingly. 'Fuckin' idiots.'

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Most of the Iron Men were recruited from a school welding program that ran the previous year. The local TAFE had asked Bernie, a youth worker known for his unconventional methods, to manage a new welding program for disengaged youth. Bernie agreed and approached the principals of Armidale's two public high schools with a proposal: each could select the group of Year 10 boys who were most in danger of not making it through the year, and he would work with them at TAFE each Friday. The principals readily agreed. For the rest of the year, Bernie taught those boys how to 'fly under the radar' and keep out of trouble at school, while the metal engineering teacher taught them how to weld. That group of boys all made it through Year 10.

One day, as Bernie and I sat together on the concrete ledge outside the shed, I'd asked him what the boys were like when he first met them. He shook his head and grimaced: 'They were the wildest bunch of hoorangs I ever came across!'

I laughed at his pained expression. He found his tobacco and rolled a cigarette, his habitual way of settling in for a chat.

'There were some damaged kids in that group,' said Bernie, his voice low. 'It was almost too late to start with them. Hard-core kids, on the edge of going inside for violent bashings – already identified as hopeless troublemakers – a lot of them living away from home. For sixteen years they'd heard the only thing that matters is getting a school certificate, only to be told: "It's all bullshit. You guys aren't going to get there."' Bernie gave a scornful huff. 'The schools hadn't worked on the strengths and dreams of those kids.'

He paused for a moment to light his smoke. 'It was like getting a bag full of wild cats and letting them out in one room where they couldn't escape. The schools kept saying I had to stick with the rules … that the boys weren't allowed to smoke or swear.' Bernie whistled through his teeth. 'For Christ sakes, you send me twenty of your wildest boys – all full-on swearers and smokers and blasphemers – and tell me to enforce the school rules? It was wild!' He grinned, his face alive with the memory. 'We had knives pulled in the welding shed, and just as soon as you'd be finished with the knife incident, the boss-man from college would be yelling, "What the hell is that kid doing up on top of that three-storey building!" The boys would show up black and blue, on the piss and smoking bongs. Not all of them ended up here at the shed – some did well, some not so well. One of them died, another's in jail.'

'It's hard to believe the boys were like that.' I thought of Thommo with his quiet dignity. 'Was Thommo that wild?'

Bernie rolled his eyes and groaned. 'He was the craziest! He and his mates were riding bikes into poles and dropping garbage bins on each other's heads from the highest roof at school. Whatever someone did that was dangerous, Thommo did something double-dangerous. Thommo wouldn't just jump off the third storey of the building – he'd want to jump through three sheets of glass as well. Taking it to extremes. Crazy self-mutilation stuff.'

We sat quietly for a moment.

'I did a lot of that as a kid myself,' said Bernie. 'Hardly a bone in my body I haven't broken – from having no fear or need for self-preservation. Dealing with those kids rang a lot of bells for me because, all those years ago, I would've been one of those wild cats let out of the bag.'

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In the makeshift kitchen at the shed, I make a cup of tea to warm my hands and then wander back to join the boys who are still gathered near the door. I notice Freckles has retreated from the fire in the forge and is showing the others a bandage on his arm. One of the boys says: 'We could all brand our chests – Iron Man Branding!' I sidle up to Bernie to ask what they mean.

'Hey, Freckles,' he calls over. 'Tell Helena about branding.'

Freckles looks a little sheepish, but explains what happened. A few weeks before, he'd heated up a bottle-opener embossed with a turtle and pressed the red-hot end onto his forearm. 'I left it on the skin too long,' he says. Two weeks later, when he finally went to the doctor, he discovered he had a third-degree burn.

'Did you tell the doctor how you did it?' asks Gazza.

'Yeah,' says Freckles, in the tone of 'why wouldn't I?'

We all laugh.

'Love the fuckin' honesty!' says Bernie, giving Freckles a pat on the back as he walks by, grinning like a proud father because Freckles told the truth, even though branding himself was a stupid thing to do.

Later, when everyone is gone, I talk with Bernie about Gazza. 'He seems keen.'

Bernie reaches into the pocket of his jeans for his tobacco. 'Gazza's a bit older than the others. He's been driving around on Sunday mornings and getting the boys out of bed, taking on the responsibility. He'd be here at six if he could. I'm thinking of giving him a key to the shed. The boys listen to him – he could keep them working.'

'That'd be good for him,' I say, thinking of those serious eyes underneath the peak of his cap. 'He's different to the others.'

'Three or four years ago he would have been like the rest,' says Bernie. 'I don't know his story – he's only been coming along for a few months – but I reckon he

was a bit of an idiot.' He clicks his lighter under his rollie, drawing in hard. 'It helps. Idiots respect other idiots. They can smell it – the scent of an idiot.'

What's updog?

A few nights later, washing up after dinner, I hear the click of the side-gate. A dark-haired figure lopes past the window and Rob calls out, 'Joey's here.' My body tenses, my heartbeat quickens as my temperature gauge begins to rise. If only I could be more relaxed when Joey comes over, but experience has taught me otherwise. Who will Joey be today, I wonder – Mr Happy, Mr Sad or Mr Angry?

'Hi Mum!' he says as he comes through the back door. I glance up from the sink. He's smiling broadly, his brown eyes alight with mischief. Mr Happy.

I smile back and relax a little, thinking how handsome he is when he's in a good mood. 'How's things, Joey?'

'Good … good.' He leans against the kitchen bench and sniffs deeply. 'It smells like updog in here.'

'Hmmm …' I murmur, keeping my response minimal, wondering what he's up to. Theo comes out of his room, still dressed in his high school uniform. Joey calls his brother over. 'Don't you reckon it smells like updog in here?'

'What's updog?' asks Theo.

'Nuttin' dog,' answers Joey in a thick gangsta accent and a big grin. 'What's up wit' you?' Theo reddens, caught out, while I chuckle over the dishes. Joey can be very funny.

'Want to go for a drive, Mum?'

Night drives have almost become a ritual with Joey and me since he moved out of home. I tell myself it's our quality time, an opportunity for us to talk without the other kids around, but it doesn't usually turn out that way.

‘Not really,’ I say with a sigh. ‘It’s been a long day.’ But I know two-year-old Freddie is nearly asleep, and Henry is trying to finish his homework. I also know how hard it is for Joey to be quiet. I grab the keys from the top of the fridge. ‘Maybe just a short one.’

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As I reverse onto the street, Joey plugs his MP3 adaptor into the cassette player. The thumping beat of rap fills the car. The music is so loud people stare as we go past. Each time I turn down the volume, Joey turns it up even louder. I shouldn’t have agreed to go out with him. ‘Put on a song that doesn’t have so much swearing!’ I snap. ‘I don’t want to hear “motherfucker” over and over!’

‘Alright, alright,’ he says, searching through his songs. ‘You don’t need to get angry. Let’s do a lap around town and check out Hungry Jack’s.’

I drive around the block, fuming. Why do I do this week after week when my life is already so busy? As we cruise past the back of Hungry Jack’s, a local hangout, Joey scans the crowd for someone he knows.

‘Stop here a minute,’ he says, leaping out to ask the whereabouts of one of his friends. I wait in the car, a faithful servant, watching Joey laughing with a group of teenage boys gathered under the lights outside Hungry Jack’s. When he jumps back in, we drive to an address in Girraween, a housing commission area on the other side of town. I already know this won’t be a ‘short drive’. Joey doesn’t seem to notice when I purse my lips and exhale loudly with frustration.

We stop in front of a brick house. Joey gets out to see if his friend is home. While he’s chatting at the door, I remember a phone call with my mother the previous week. She rang to tell me about her friend’s grandson, a young man who was often in trouble with the police. ‘He joined the army and became a different person,’ she said. ‘Maybe this would be a good thing for Joey?’

I wasn’t sure if I wanted Joey to become a soldier, fighting someone else’s war. But the next day I’d looked up the Defence Forces website and read through an impressive list of trade jobs available for army recruits. I rang the recruiting line and asked them to send further information about the training program so that Joey and I could read through the brochures together. Definitely worth a try.

On our drive back to town, I sneak the volume down a notch. 'Oma reckons it might be a good idea for you to join the army.'

Joey looks at me in surprise. 'I've been thinking about doing that already … I want to be a driver.'

A driver?

'You could learn a trade,' I say, pretending I haven't heard. With a brain like his, he could do anything. 'Telecommunications, or mechanical engineer or systems analyst.'

Joey shakes his head and sighs. 'You remind me of Marge Simpson.' He turns up the music again; end of army conversation. This is how it always is when I bring up something serious.

Later, I drop him at his place. When I found Joey a boarding arrangement in a house only a block away from us, I worried it might be a little too close. In some ways, I was right. He pops around whenever it suits him, wanting food, money, lifts, his clothes washed. I enjoy his company and I'm always keen to help out, but sometimes I think he just wants to see me. For the first year of his life, it was only him and me. I'm sure he'd still prefer it that way – to have my undivided attention so I can listen to his stories for hours, spend the nights driving him around town with rap music shaking the car, do all his cooking, shopping and washing. Maybe he should have been an only child – we certainly have our best times when it's just the two of us, but that's not how things turned out.

Joey leans over to kiss my cheek before he gets out of the car. 'Bye Mum, I love you.'

A lucky idiot

The following Sunday, only Simmo, another volunteer worker with the Iron Man Welders, is at the shed with Freckles and Thommo. The turn-up is never as good

when Bernie is out of town. Stepping over some broken glass near the door, I notice the side window smashed in and Freckles busy welding a security grille to cover it.

I start sweeping up the glass. 'Do you reckon we should smash the rest out? Those jagged edges can be nasty.'

'Good idea,' mumbles Freckles, grabbing an iron bar and handing a hammer to Thommo. They start swinging away at the glass left in the window with great enthusiasm.

Later, when Simmo and I are having a rest in the kitchen while the boys finish the security grille, I ask him: 'Were you an idiot when you were a young bloke?'

Simmo, who is in his late forties and is rugged up in an old footy jumper and a droopy beanie that matches the bags under his eyes, chuckles into his cup of tea. 'Me and my two brothers were all idiots … but I was a lucky idiot.'

'Why's that?'

'Our Dad was a school principal, a hard-liner,' he says. 'We moved a lot, and, by the time we ended up in Warren, I was thirteen and running amok with my two older brothers. We broke into shops late at night, nicking lollies and cigarettes. We snuck into the goods train a few times, taking whatever we could find, and we went into the church hall and stole boxes of chips.'

Stealing boxes of chips and lollies seemed pretty innocent. In my early teens, I was a small-time thief, too – chocolates from the local milk bar, books from the library, even clothes from small boutiques. Maybe it was something all adolescents went through, a test of nerve.

'And when we moved to Moree,' adds Simmo, rubbing the stubble on his chin, 'it was underage drinking. My brothers got busted for a lot of stuff, and one of them spent time in jail, but I was lucky. I didn't get caught and I ran with a mob with a reasonably sensible side. My late teens though …' He chuckles again. 'They were pretty wild years. We lived in Sydney for a while, then I went back to Moree, then up to Yamba. In those three years I got into drugs, although in all that time I might have only had acid twice, mushrooms twice, speed half a dozen times and ecstasy three or four times.' Simmo pauses for a breath. 'We smoked pot nonstop … but I didn't get into heroin.'

'That's alright then!' I say, laughing.

Simmo sits back and folds his arms over his belly, his young idiot self only a gleam in his eye, and grins back at me. 'That's not many drugs, Helena! It's just the way it came out when I said it!'

He didn't need to convince me. In the coastal area where I grew up, smoking dope was a common pastime for teenagers, but I found alcohol an easier way to lose myself. My friends and I used to drink Tequila slammers in the local park: lick, sip, suck. We'd be falling over drunk on the way to the pub and still somehow manage to convince the bouncer we were over eighteen.

One of the things that kept him on the right track, says Simmo, was that he always worked. The whole time he was drinking and taking drugs, he had a job.

'But where did that work ethic come from?' I ask, thinking of Joey who resisted my advice and efforts to get him to finish Year 10 or find a job, and whose work experience consisted of two nights' kitchen-hand duties in a Chinese restaurant.

'I don't know,' admits Simmo, like he's never thought about it. 'To have a car or rent a flat you needed a job, so I suppose it was just to get by. I went from one job to another and didn't particularly care what.'

'What made you pull away from that life? What was the turning point?'

'It was after that year in Yamba,' says Simmo. 'My sister and brother-in-law were going out west to start a business and asked if I wanted to come. I wasn't doing anything else so I went with them. That saved me – not that I was heading for any great crash …'

'But it was a good move?'

He nods. 'Yeah, it was a good move.'

**

Over the next week, I thought about this baptism of idiocy. It seemed true enough. Bernie himself came from a stable home but went off the rails in his teens. He reckons he was a bigger idiot than the lot of these Iron Man Welders put together.

'I just didn't fit the system,' he once explained. 'Shithouse at reading and writing, and they're the things society says are most important. As the years go by you start to act the fool, and if you're told you're an idiot enough times, you start acting like one. Relationships with teachers fall apart, and you start to hang around with a smaller and smaller group of like-minded idiots.'

**

One afternoon recently, while the boys were scoffing a tray of brownies I'd brought along, I asked if there'd been teachers like Bernie at school. 'Hell no!' laughed Gazza, and Thommo said, 'Nah … no way,' like it was the most ridiculous idea ever.

'Okay, so what's the difference between teachers at school and Bernie?'

Gazza sat back, fiddled with his cap. 'At school I reckon they're on a power trip – a bit of authority and they run with it. Bernie comes down to your level.' Pointing to the ceiling, he added, 'But teachers are up there.'

**

A few Sundays later, I come home from the shed, filthy dirty, arms aching from scrubbing horseshoes, to find Joey waiting for me with a basket of washing. He hangs in front of the open fridge door and tells me how he saw some of the Iron Men at a party the night before. 'They all like you at the shed, Mum.'

'Probably because of my chocolate brownies,' I joke, but inside I feel warm with acceptance, the same feeling I had earlier when Bernie, after showing me how to use the grinder to file off some nails, told me, 'We'll make you a welder yet!' The shed really does make me happy. And later, as I drag myself off to bed, I wonder if maybe, just maybe, the scent of an idiot lingers on me, too.

A man who had the answers

A small group of volunteers forms the basis of Bernie's grassroots organisation, BackTrack Youth Works. After I've been at the shed for a couple of months, I'm invited along to my first BackTrack meeting. We sit around Simmo's kitchen table like King Arthur and his knights at the round table: there's Jayne, Simmo, Sally, Geraldine, Flinty and me. And Bernie, of course: our stand-in king.

Tonight, Bernie's eyes burn bright but look troubled all the same. For the past week he's been busy talking to the media about the Iron Man Welders. Now he's going through a moral dilemma about being seen as the 'boss-man' of Backtrack, the spokesperson with all the answers.

He takes a swig of wine. 'It's hard for me when people ask, "What is it?" Fuck, I don't know.'

At the head of the table, Simmo shifts his half-moon glasses down his nose and moves his chair in closer. His black beanie makes him look like he's about to organise a bank heist. 'Backtrack's a group of people doing shit for youth. I'm here because I like the idea of helping you out,' he says. 'Are you worried it's too Bernie-focused?'

'Yeah.'

Simmo shrugs. 'But I see Backtrack as being Bernie. Some bastard's got to be the leader.'

Bernie runs his fingers through his hair. Although he spent much of his youth as a stockman in Central Australia, his skin is clear and unlined, his face boyish, even though he's approaching forty.

He glances around the table. 'Most of you have known me long enough to know that I'm great at flying off on tangents and having all this passion, but if you lot weren't writing the grant applications or helping out where you can, then it would be nothing – just someone with a lot of passion running around chasing his fuckin' tail.'

Maybe so. But he's the one with all the ideas, the ones that work.

'Can I ask a question?' Sally, Bernie's sister-in-law, looks like she wants more order in this meeting. 'Don't we have a mission statement or vision or something?'

Bernie gives her a wry smile. 'We do that every time we get together, every time we get pissed.'

Sally laughs, shakes her head like she should have known better.

Then Bernie's wife, Jayne, has her say, elbows on the table. A poncho flares over her arms like dark wings and I notice, not for the first time, her robust beauty; she's the sort of woman you'd see peeling potatoes in a Van Gogh painting. 'I'm sure we've answered all these questions before, Bernie. Just keep talking about Backtrack exactly as you have. It's fairly definable – it's us here, in this room. It has been since the beginning.'

Bernie stands, stretches, and goes out to the cold night air, ducking his head as he walks through the back door for a smoke.

***

While Bernie is outside smoking, I think back to when I first came across him. Not long after Joey left home, I was helping set up for the fete at Henry's primary school. Another mother came over and said Henry and her son had stuck a knife into the tyre of a yellow ute parked in the school car park.

'It's Bernie's ute,' she said, as we examined the tyre. The knife hadn't gone in very far and the tyre looked undamaged, but still – a knife? It wasn't like Henry to do such a thing.

'Who's Bernie?' I'd asked, my face burning with embarrassment.

A woman with dark unruly hair had looked over at me. 'He's my husband.'

She came and stood by the ute with us. I must have stammered out some sort of reply, and I'm not sure why the matter wasn't resolved then and there, but the following Monday, when I dropped Henry at school, I noticed the same yellow ute pull up behind me in the car park, a male driver behind the wheel.

'That must be Bernie,' I said to Henry. 'You need to go and talk to him about what happened.'

I watched in the rear-vision mirror as Henry walked over to the driver's side of the ute. A tall, lean man, wearing dark blue jeans and a cream-coloured shirt, opened the door and got out. I didn't know then that Bernie had once been a stockman, but I remember thinking he looked like a hip cowboy in his jeans and boots, a pair of dark sunglasses pushed back over his curly brown hair.

He knelt down on the dirt in front of Henry, so that he and Henry were face-to-face. They spoke for several minutes. I liked the way Bernie knelt down rather than loomed over – the way he spoke to my son like an equal, even though Henry had stuck a knife in his tyre.

Here was a man talking to a boy with respect. It was so different to the way Rob and I dealt with the kids. As I watched Bernie through the rear-vision mirror, I realised I needed to become a better parent.

The knife business – a silly prank – was never mentioned again, but about a month later, I saw the photo of Bernie and the boys in the newspaper and heard him on the radio. That's when I decided I wanted to do something for BackTrack.

Bernie looked like a man who had the answers.

* * *

Bernie slides open the screen door at Simmo's and a cold gust of night air and cigarette smoke blows in with him. He takes his place at the table, ready to carry on with the Backtrack meeting. The crew falls silent when they see his expression. He tells us he's tired of waiting on a funding application that'll secure him a part-time wage for the next two years. He wants to make a roster and call in some other blokes to help ease the load: 'Otherwise it's just relying on me and …'

'It gets real old,' offers Geraldine with a knowing look. She's a Murri woman who has worked with Bernie on other youth projects in Armidale.

'Yep,' Bernie says. 'Real old, real quick. And the pressure's on me the whole time. I'm the worst time manager in Australia, and when we get down the shed I go righto, I'll get those three started on that, and then I've got to pick up Tye or someone else, and I skip up there, and then I get back and Simmo's there and I go oh great, Simmo must be working with them on that. But they've drifted off and started fifteen other fuckin' projects, and I go right, Tye, you go and see Simmo and he'll tell you what to do – I've got to go and pick up someone else. I'm a frazzled chook and by the time the day's over I just go what the fuck – we haven't finished anything and we started another thirty things …'

It's true. I've seen how some Sundays are messy and nothing much seems to get finished, but I still reckon Bernie is making great leaps with these boys. And besides, as he often tells me, 'It's not about the fuckin' welding.'

A list of positives

Armidale is a small university city and, sooner or later, some of the people you see at work, school, or even at the supermarket, end up in your social trajectory. Not long after I first meet Bernie and start at the shed, Rob begins playing the ukulele. He joins a folky bush band with Simmo and a few other people, including Jayne, Bernie's wife. Rob has been very supportive of me going along to the shed on Sundays, and I'm happy for him to have a new interest as well. He puts a lot of energy into learning the instrument and spends hours sitting in the garden shed, practising old Johnny Cash numbers. It's good to hear him singing again. When I first met him, he used to play guitar and serenade me with Bob Dylan songs.

Rob's band members often hold parties. At one of these gatherings, I spot Bernie standing in the shadows of the garden, smoking. I wander over to join him, and we chat about the boys from the shed. Standing next to Bernie, who is about a head taller than me, I have the same 'little sister' feeling that I get with my brothers. Not many people are tall enough to make me feel that way.

When I ask Bernie if the boys at the shed ever say anything about me, he stares at me confused, like he can't work out why I would ask such a question.

'I'm a woman,' I tell him. 'I'm curious.'

'Nah, they've never mentioned you,' he says. 'I suppose that's strange in itself.'

I'd hoped someone would have said something, that I'd made some sort of impact. Maybe the boys are just happy to share their shed with a mother-figure who doesn't hassle them; a Wendy who brings home-baked brownies into their Neverland, who doesn't comment about stained clothes and jeans hanging halfway down their bums, who leaves them alone. If only I could be like that with my own boys.

'Have you seen Joey around on your Streetbeat nights?'

I know that Bernie has come across Joey through his work with Streetbeat, a crime-prevention program for youth in Armidale, where youth workers drive around on Friday and Saturday nights, keeping kids away from the lock-up.

'Yep,' Bernie pauses, like he's not sure if he should say more. 'I think Joey's going through a hard time, Helena. I've seen him pissed a lot.'

I stare at him, shocked. So naïve, always wanting to believe my kids are too sensible for drinking and drugs, that they're not having sex or living dangerously. I live my life like those three monkeys who see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil – I prefer to pretend something isn't happening rather than the face up to the truth.

'My guess is he's struggling with that transition from boy to man,' continues Bernie. 'Like a lot of the fellas down the shed. They go along thinking they're men, but they're just little boys strutting around with no fuckin' idea. From what Joey has said, it doesn't sound like he and Rob get along …'

I nod, suddenly uncomfortable. This conversation is going places I don't want it to.

'Joey's missing out on that significant male role model,' says Bernie, seemingly oblivious to my awkward silence. 'One way of helping him could be to write a list of positives about his father. I can imagine he's got a picture in his head that's mostly negative, you know – "Why isn't he here for me now? Why did he let that happen? Everybody else has got a dad … mine must be no good." That's probably not the case, but I don't think it helps with any area of your life to be focusing on the negatives. If you keep thinking negative, and soaking negative, and exuding negative, then negative is what you're going to get around you. For right or wrong, there's a positive side to everything. Joey is probably going to be a dad himself at some stage, so I think it's important he gets that positive stuff about his father.'

I slide my hands into my coat pockets, wondering how this conversation had become so deeply personal in such a short time. Bernie and I never talked like this at the shed.

'There are lots of positives about his father.' I struggle to keep my voice steady, glad it's dark so Bernie can't see my tears.

He nods. 'Yep. And it won't hurt Joey to know them because he exudes the negative – it's in his body language, the way he dresses, the music he listens to, the kids he hangs around. Anything down the track that might help him break that cycle …' Bernie leans over and pats my upper arm. 'Positive, positive, positive, Helena. I'm a big believer in it.'

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I met Joey's father at a youth hostel in Amsterdam. It's strange for me to call him that – his 'father' – I don't think of him that way. I'm sure Joey does, but we hardly ever talk about him. His name was Khalil. I'd noticed him one night in the hostel cafeteria because he was so handsome with his dark eyes, pale skin and chiselled features. 'I been no good for many years,' he told me, 'but now I am a Christian.' I almost swooned when I heard his husky voice. Fifteen years older than me, his hair already speckled with grey, he dressed in suit pants, collared shirts and ties. He smoked Camel cigarettes and was like a foreign diplomat with a touch of James Bond mystique. We chatted for the rest of the evening and Khalil told me three things: he was a political refugee from Syria, he'd never had a job and he had a drinking problem. I've since developed a theory that people tell you the most important things about themselves in the first conversations you have with them, but at the time, none of that seemed to matter.

Because of the hostel and its lack of space for intimacy, my time with Khalil was based on companionship rather than sex, on endless games of backgammon in smoky cafes, on hash joints and shots of Arak. My relatives in Holland, whom I rarely saw, called me een rare vogel – a strange bird – and maybe they were right. Khalil and I talked about travelling to Spain, where he'd lived before, using money from stolen credit cards. I was keen. On one of the few times we slept together, I became pregnant. Khalil talked for hours about what we might call the baby, how we could find a flat to rent in Amsterdam, how we could start a family together. Thinking back, he had many good qualities, but by then I'd uncovered the truth of his life. Or maybe I just started listening. Khalil had spent years living on government benefits and would probably never find paid work. He owed me a thousand guilders. He'd left the hostel and was renting a small room in the red-light district. He drank too much. 'I'm always trying to make my life better,' he told me in his beautiful accent, lighting yet another cigarette, ordering yet another beer, borrowing yet another ten guilders. Being with him wasn't going to bring me happiness. I knew that. So I booked a flight back to Australia.

Joey was born in Darwin, where I was staying with my sister. He was a homebirth boy, born at sunset, while the birds outside sang their evening song – A baby is born! A baby is born! Overwhelmed by love, I gazed down in wonder at his

dark tufty hair, his rose-bud lips, his strong nose, and his clearly-defined eyebrows. My beautiful boy.

As for Khalil, he rang three times that first year and sent a postcard:

> Together we made little "Joey". Together we love him and together we shall be around forever. I love you both. Wishing to see you as soon as possible. Anxious to hear him saying "Pap".

Then we lost contact. Eight years later, I received a letter from a friend in Holland. Khalil had been murdered, shot in a sordid Amsterdam street brawl. I wept when I read her words. Joey would never meet him now.

* * *

At home that night, after talking with Bernie at the party, I sit at the kitchen table and start writing a list – all the lovely things I remember about Joey's father. He was a good man; he just lost his footing along the way.

The next morning I walk around to Joey's house with the letter. Too early to knock, so I push the envelope under his door. Throughout the day I imagine him opening the envelope and reading through the list.

Joey rings later that evening. 'I wish I could have met him,' he says.

Sucking lemons

A few days later, Joey comes over with a story of how drunk he was the night before – 'I vomited all over my bedroom floor.'

'I'm not going to help you clean that up,' I tell him, trying not to let despair creep into my voice. I lend him the hose, a bucket and some old rags. Later he comes around: tired, belligerent and demanding lemons.

I check the fruit bowl. No lemons. I wish I had some so I can send him on his way. His heavy mood sets my nerves on edge. 'Why lemons?'

'They help with a hangover,' he says, pacing the length of the kitchen.

'Maybe you can buy some at the corner store?'

'I can't walk all that way!' he complains. 'I've got a bad hangover. I already told you that. Why do you never listen?'

We drive to the corner store, half a block away. I buy two lemons. Joey bites through the peel of one and sucks it dry as we drive back to his house.

I park out the front, force a smile. 'Bye Joey.'

He chucks the remains of the lemon onto the floor near his feet. 'Bye Mum,' he says, leaning over to kiss my cheek, his breath a mixture of tangy lemon and stale alcohol. 'I love you.'

***

Most of the time, Rob is content to sit back and let me deal with Joey – it's easier that way. He and Joey tend to become antagonistic and confrontational whenever they're together, and I always seem to be hustling Joey out of the house in an effort to avoid yet another argument. We've been trapped in this pattern for a long time now, which is a shame because there were many tender moments between Rob and Joey in those early years.

When Joey was nine months old, we left the Northern Territory and moved to Armidale so I could study at the university. Around the time of Joey's first birthday, my mother came to visit. While we were having coffee downtown, a bearded man came over to our table. He was from the same small town where I'd grown up, he said, and recognised my mother. She remembered him and his family, and invited him to join us. Rob had a rugged 'bushie' look about him, like he lived on the land. He was thirty-five, ten years older than me, and had gone to school with my siblings. Rob spoke proudly of a stone and timber hut he'd built on a scrubby bush block forty kilometres out of Armidale. He'd lived there on his own for six months, but some vandals had recently burnt it down and he'd lost everything. Now he shared a house in town with a philosophy lecturer, worked in a truss factory and had just bought a ticket to India.

I liked the look of Rob. Before he left, I asked him for his telephone number.

A few weeks later, when one of my housemates had a dinner party, I invited Rob to come along. We sat together on the lounge and talked about our lives. He was a deep thinker. I discovered he wrote poetry and enjoyed studying history and philosophy. He was the only one in his family – third-generation dairy farmers – who had owned a book, and that had been given to him by the Methodist Church. He described a fractured relationship with his parents and said he rarely visited them. As a boy, he was captain of the local football team, and his father used to stand on the sidelines and yell: 'Get in there!' and, 'You can do better than that!' Rob ran away from home at seventeen. He went back eventually – after the police were called. That was his past. As for the future, all he wanted to do was go to India.

The weekend after the dinner party, Rob and I went to see a play at the university theatre. I wore a white puffy coat from Amsterdam and felt like a girl on her first date. When he dropped me home, I asked him to come inside. We drank brandy and kissed by the fire, and that was the beginning of our life together.

We only had a month before he went to India. Every day, after finishing work at the truss factory, Rob would come around to help with the evening ritual of feeding, bathing and dressing one-year-old Joey. 'I don't know how you do all this on your own,' Rob would often say. He built a sand-pit for Joey in the backyard. When I stayed at Rob's house one night, in his tiny room with a futon bed and a printed cane blind and not much else, I brought Joey in after his bath and Rob had laid the nappy and night clothes out on the bed, just as I always did, and I loved him for that.

Fuckin' 'whatever' isn't an answer

The next time I go along to the shed, Bernie and Simmo round up the boys and we meet in the kitchen to make the final arrangements for a tool-buying trip. A few weeks

earlier, the Iron Man Welders had received a $5000 grant to buy new equipment. Since then, the boys had spent hours poring over tool catalogues from Bunnings and other hardware stores, dreaming of what they would buy with the money.

In the kitchen, stained carpet squares cover the concrete floor, matching motley remnants of a lounge suite that belongs at the dump. An old workbench on one side of the room holds an electric jug, an upturned packet of tea bags, a tin of Milo and a ripped bag of sugar. Someone's pouch of tobacco is passed around. As the boys light up, the smoke rests on shafts of afternoon sunlight coming through a barred window.

Bernie wears a vibrant orange polar fleece jumper and stands out like a seedling in a dirt paddock. He tells me they're trying to decide whether to go to Coffs Harbour for an overnight trip, or just make a day-trip to Tamworth, which is only an hour's drive away. Bernie moves across the room to open the window, letting in a blast of cold air, and then takes a seat next to Tye. I'd heard a few things about Tye in recent weeks – he'd been through a lifetime of foster homes, and when he first met Bernie, 'fuck off' was his way of saying 'good morning'.

Whenever I see Bernie and Tye together, it's like seeing father and son: both tall and rangy with wild brown curls and countryman looks. Tye's face is softer, though, his blue eyes bigger. Simmo once told me there's something about Tye that Bernie recognises in himself.

'Righto,' says Bernie, getting down to business. 'We've got two options – Coffs Harbour or Tamworth? What do you think, Freckles?'

Freckles looks up from burning the frayed cuff of his jeans with the end of his rollie. 'If we don't take too many people, maybe just a couple of cars, we could go to Coffs.'

'Uh huh,' nods Bernie. 'So how are we going to work out who gets to come and who gets to stay?'

The boys fall silent.

'What do you reckon, Tye?'

'It doesn't worry me,' shrugs Tye. 'Whatever.'

'Fuckin' "whatever" isn't an answer,' says Bernie. 'That's sitting on the fence.'

The rest of us laugh while Tye slides off his beanie and scratches his head. 'I really dunno.'

'I dunno,' repeats Bernie, looking hard at Tye. 'That's reeking of a "whatever" answer as well. A or B? A is Coffs, B is Tamworth.'

We wait. Tye takes a drag on his rollie and blows a dignified line of smoke rings across the table. 'A.'

Once the others have their say, the boys soon reach a group consensus on Tamworth.

'Okay,' says Bernie. 'We could do it next weekend.'

'I'll be in Queensland,' says Tye. 'Me girlfriend's mum is having a baby.'

'And you're going to deliver it?' jokes Bernie. 'Doctor Tye, eh?'

The other boys chuckle, but I feel a surge of tenderness towards Tye, thinking of all the foster homes he's passed through.

I once asked Bernie where Tye would be if he hadn't become involved with the welding program. Bernie had pressed his palms together and exhaled slowly before answering: 'He'd have a raging drug habit, he'd be extremely violent – mimicking what he saw as a young fella, which wasn't pretty – he'd be bashing women, struggling in a lot of areas, and probably would have spent time in the lockup.' Bernie looked at me and nodded. 'That's my belief with Tye.'

**

The talk shifts to a big party the previous night, someone's eighteenth. Bernie rubs at the corners of his eyes and smothers a yawn. 'I was out driving the Streetbeat car till four in the morning … that party just went all night!'

'I only had four beers last night,' offers Tye in a low voice.

'Very impressed with that, mate,' says Bernie, suddenly serious. 'That was the most impressive thing I saw all night.'

Gazza taps at the notebook on his lap. 'I think we should get back to this crap. I've got to head off soon.'

They discuss approximate costs of tools and welders and work out, for the umpteenth time, what they want to buy. Freckles flicks through a tool catalogue. 'How much are you willing to pay for a cordless drill?'

'How much am I willing to pay?' Bernie shakes his head. 'How much are you blokes willing to pay?'

Again and again, Bernie passes on the responsibility for deciding which tools go on the list. He's like a soccer coach who keeps kicking the ball back, nice and easy, until his players gain confidence.

After Gazza reads through the final list, Tye whistles and says, 'Fuck, we're not going to have much money left after this.'

'We'll have everything then,' says Bernie, and asks Simmo to ring Bunnings in Tamworth. 'See if we can get a discount. Tell 'em these blokes won't steal a heap of shit if they give us a good deal.'

The boys all laugh at that, even Gazza.

They picked the wrong head!

A few days later, reading in bed after a busy day, I hear the back door open. Urgent footsteps pound up the hallway.

'Mum! Mum!' whispers Joey from my bedroom door. 'I need to show you something!' He leads me to the kitchen and turns on the light. Taking off his cap, he leans forward to show me his head.

'What is it?' I ask.

'I've got ringworm!' he says, like it's a life-threatening disease. 'Probably from Tim's dog.' Circular markings dot his scalp, like one of those fields where unexplained patterns appear.

'A friend shaved my head tonight and saw the circles,' says Joey, searching through the medicine cupboard. 'His mum is a nurse and she said we need to put Betadine on it!'

I flick through an old medical book. 'Ringworm isn't anything to do with worms. It's a fungus you pick up from humans, animals, or places … might have something to do with the way you sleep on unwashed sheets and pillowcases for months on end.'

Joey finds the Betadine and dashes into the bathroom. Brown liquid splashes over the sink as he tries to cover his entire scalp with the antiseptic lotion.

I grab one of Freddie's old nappies from the cupboard. 'Put this over you before it drips onto your T-shirt.'

Joey throws the nappy around his shoulders like a cape and narrows his eyes. 'They picked the wrong head! I'm going to sit up all night and wait for them to go.'

'They're not worms, Joey,' I tell him, trying not to laugh. 'The marks will be gone in twenty-four hours.' Ignoring the mess in the bathroom, I hustle him out the door with clean sheets, a pillowcase, and some money to buy anti-fungal ointment the next day.

The next morning he staggers up the side of the house with a huge basket of washing and dumps it in my laundry. Before I have time to ask what's going on, he runs back home for another load. 'All my clothes and bedding need to be washed!' says Joey when he returns, desperate to go downtown to buy the anti-fungal ointment.

'Don't forget to come back and help hang this washing!' I call after him.

Six hot-wash loads later, there's still no sign of Joey, but his quilt covers, sheets, towels, pillowcases, hoodies, jeans and black T-shirts flap about on my clothes line. Thank goodness it's a sunny day. Later, I fold everything neatly back into the baskets and leave them on his front veranda. Joey's house-mate, Tim, a divorced man with adult children of his own, opens the door just as I'm struggling up the steps with the second basket. We've become friends over the last few months. He shakes his head in mock-despair at the huge amount of washing at my feet.

I look at Tim, my cheeks burning. 'I know I shouldn't, but sometimes Joey needs help getting organised.'

'Oh, Helena,' he says, like there's no hope for me.

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Whenever my mother asks: 'How's things with Joey', I try to answer in a light and positive tone. My parents, especially my father, wouldn't be impressed to know the whole truth about the heated arguments that Rob and I have with Joey. When my father was a boy in Amsterdam, he grew up with three main rules – obey your

parents, respect older people, and be home at six for the evening meal. He doesn't understand why I can't implement this regime in my own life. That's why I don't tell him how things really are at home.

Like most of us, though, my father had his wild times as well – mostly during the years of German occupation in Amsterdam. In those war years, my father was always on the lookout for an opportunity. As a boy of fourteen, along with a legitimate job with a greengrocer, he also had clandestine dealings with skippers from the barges that transported fruit and vegetables to the markets. It was a time of strict rationing, but at night, my father would sneak out on his bakfiets – a tricycle with a table-top in the front – and pick up a load of potatoes from one of these skippers to sell later on the black market. 'It made the adrenalin flow through the system,' he once told me. He stole bread and milk from the back of German trucks and wooden decking from ships in the harbour. Like many other desperate citizens, he raided the houses in the deserted Jewish neighbourhood for doors and floorboards, risking his life to bring wood home to his mother. She begged him not to steal, but there was no coal, no food, no money. One time he was discovered and had to go to the children's court, where his mother pleaded with the judge. Her son wasn't really bad, she said, it was just the circumstances. After that, my father never came in contact with the police again.

Due to the strength of his mother, my father's family remained fairly happy during those difficult times. Sterkte – strength – is a trait common to the Dutch, as is the ability to be stoic. I wear a pendant that once belonged to my father's mother, an oval-shaped piece of haematite set in gold, which brings to mind the elegance of old-time Europe. People often notice it, especially if they're interested in gemstones. I wear it because it belonged to my oma, and because I want her strength to flow through to me.

I have a photo of her wearing the pendant – she stands by the oven in her tiny kitchen, tea towel in hand. She was always cooking and washing, just like me.

* * *

Joey is back the next day, his head still streaked with Betadine.

'Did you find the washing?'

'What?' He looks confused. 'Oh, yeah, thanks.'

He picks up Theo's harmonica from the kitchen bench and blows a few notes. 'I could be one of those guys in the army,' he says, cocking one eyebrow in a charming manner. 'You know, after everyone's fallen asleep around the campfire … one guy is left quietly playing the harmonica?'

I smile. Joey can be so lovely. 'Yes, that could be you.'

'I'm serious about joining the Army, Mum. I might go to Iraq.'

'Maybe peacekeeping in Timor would be better,' I suggest, thinking how Iraq is too close to the action for my liking. I don't know if it's foolhardy or rash of me to be encouraging him – I don't want him shooting people or risking his own life – but somehow I can see him in the army. Perhaps army life would help him become more organised.

He was supposed to meet the TAFE counsellor at noon the other day. I drove past Joey's house after Freddie's playgroup to check if he'd gone. He answered the door in his pyjamas, unconcerned when I reminded him about the appointment. Instead, barely able to stop laughing, he told me: 'I just realised I spent the last three months washing my hair with bubble bath.'

Not gammon

The soft blue sky of New England stretches wide above me as I drive to the shed the Sunday after the boys' shopping trip. When I arrive at the gates, Bernie is heading out in his ute with one of the boys.

'How'd the Tamworth trip go?' I ask.

'It was great!' says Bernie, easing the ute forward. 'Blister will take you around and show you what we bought.'

On the dusty floor of the shed are piles of flattened boxes and plastic wrapping. Blister wanders over, eyes twinkling, quite the gentleman with his dark crew cut,

gangster-style moustache and short goatee. He always seems much older than seventeen. We walk around the shed together and he shows me all the new tools, and even remembers how much they all cost. The trip has made a huge impression on him. I suppose it's one thing to have thousands of dollars of donations and talk endlessly in smoky meetings about what to buy, but it's something else to go and spend it on real tools and equipment.

And today, the boys are busy working the whole time – no mucking about with BMX bikes on the piles of dirt out the back or anything like that. Gazza and Thommo make a trolley for the gas tanks for the oxy welder to sit in and the others try out the new tools. When Bernie comes back with food for the barbeque, Blister and Tye cook the meat while I sit in the sun, sorting Bernie's dockets from the previous month. Even with thick socks and heavy boots, my feet still ache from the cold.

Once the paperwork is done, I stand near the barbeque, rubbing my hands together and trying to warm myself with the heat coming from the gas burners. Blister tells me and Tye about his new caravan at the Highlander Caravan Park – $90 a week, electricity and everything included. He loves it. His mum chucked him out of home so he's living in the caravan with his 'missus'.

Tye skillfully flips over some patties. 'That'd be terrific, living in a caravan.'

After lunch, Blister lets Bernie's two border collies, Girl and Lou, off their chains – the dogs are tied up outside the shed whenever Bernie's there. Blister throws a stick to them, over and over, getting the dogs to crouch down and wait each time. Later he feeds the dogs leftovers, dipping the still-hot sausages in the water bowl to make them cool enough to eat.

That afternoon, there isn't time to ask Bernie any more about the tool-buying trip, but as I'm leaving he says, 'Geraldine would be good to talk with.' He laughs, as if remembering something very funny. 'That was a horrible day she had, but we were having the time of our lives.'

**

I wouldn't have thought Geraldine, one of the BackTrack crew, the type to volunteer for a tool-buying trip. She's a self-confessed 'clothes horse' who straightens her hair and wears high heels. She often seems on the edge of a giggling fit, the laughter held

beneath her skin like the bubbles in a bottle of champagne, just waiting for someone to pop the cork.

While Bernie's busy welding with the boys, Geraldine has taken on the wayward girls in the community. She's also a member of Streetbeat night patrol. Geraldine is only short, but Joey, who stands well over six foot, told me how she'd been joking around with him one night at the Streetbeat office, ordering him to commando crawl through the doorway. He said no and a second later found himself on the floor, wondering what the hell had happened. Small, tough and glamorous with a big laugh – that's Geraldine, or Aunty Gel as she's known around town.

The next time I'm over in Girraween, the housing commission area near the university, I stop in at Geraldine's. After she makes cups of tea, we sit on comfy chairs in her lounge room, where knick-knacks are carefully placed on side tables and framed family photos cover every wall. In one corner is the biggest television I have ever seen. Geraldine laughs when she sees my surprised expression. 'I get kids come and sleep over on Friday nights,' she explains. 'I make them a bed on the floor and they watch my big-arse screen … I tell ya, size does matter!'

We talk about the trip to Tamworth. When I mention how Bernie told me it was the greatest fun she ever had, she shakes her head, glossy auburn-tinted hair flying. 'Yeah right!' I watch as she organises her knitting on her lap, trying to picture her in Tamworth with the boys, running up and down the aisles of Bunnings in her high heels. The image doesn't fit. 'It was good of you to help.'

'I'm up for anything really,' she says breezily, counting a few stitches. 'Like most of those boys – they'll come along to anything as long as Bernie's organising it.'

'Why's that?' I ask, curious. I'd never had anything to do with youth workers before starting at the shed and I often wondered what made Bernie's work so special.

Geraldine looks up from her knitting. 'He's just not gammon. He's truthful, honest, moralistic and upright in how he faces the world, and he's not afraid to take on a fight. He's always said his core root is from mother earth, so for him it's about giving back as well. He had people mentor him when he was wild and woolly and they're still in his life. Those boys will be around Bernie forever.'

She goes over to a shelf and finds a photo album, flicking it open to a group photo. 'That's the boys when they started with Bernie at TAFE.'

I laugh – 'What a crew!' Then I notice a picture of a young man standing on his own. 'Who's that?'

'That's my brother,' says Geraldine, staring at the photo. 'He died when he was twenty. He was one of them loose kids – always drinking and smoking – and one night, walking home from a party, he got hit by about four or five different cars. That was thirteen years ago … he'd be thirty-three now.'

I don't know what to say, it seems such a senseless way to die.

As I'm walking out the door, I remember Joey's Streetbeat story and ask Geraldine if she's ever done any martial arts training.

Her face creases in confusion. 'No. Why?'

I begin to tell her Joey's 'commando crawl' story. Before I've even finished she's giggling, getting louder and louder, holding her stomach, eyes watering.

'I grew up with all boys …' she splutters, then points to herself. 'Small girl – learn how to fight dirty!'

It's funny, though, after spending time with Geraldine, she doesn't seem small at all.

Wild country for a wild young fella

A few nights later, as I'm getting ready for bed, I hear the gate click. I hurry to the back door. Joey stands on the patio, looking distressed.

'Mum! Prison Break is on and I can't watch it at Tim's because his meditation group is there!'

'It's nine-thirty, Joey,' I tell him. 'I'm on my way to bed and everyone else is asleep. I don't want the television on now. Sorry.'

'Can you drive me around to Liam's?' he pleads. 'I'll watch it at his place.'

I'm tired and want to say no, but I know that's likely to lead to an angry scene. So, I snatch the keys from the top of the fridge and walk out to the car in my pyjamas and slippers. We drive to Liam's in silence. Once we arrive, Joey gets out and turns to me angrily.

'I should be able to watch TV at your house! You put all your problems onto other people, just like you did when you made me leave home!'

Guilt stabs my heart. I know that I'm intolerant. Other parents wouldn't mind their sons watching television at night – it's a normal activity. Most teenagers in Armidale are probably tuned into Prison Break right now, and I really don't understand why I react the way I do. But when Joey comes around unexpectedly, I automatically shift into high alert, which always makes things worse. No wonder he judges me harshly, and I'm sure others in this community do as well. I wish things were different – that Joey could move back home and that our family could live in harmony under one roof. If only he understood how much I love him, how I only want the best for him, but unfortunately the 'best' doesn't include him living at home right now.

I need to learn how to be a better parent first.

**

Shopping in Armidale's open-air mall one morning, I spot Bernie outside the courthouse. He tells me he's waiting for Thommo – 'He's up on an assault charge.'

'Oh!' I exclaim. 'That's terrible.'

Bernie shakes his head like he's seen it all before. 'Same sort of crazy shit I did when I was young. He'll probably get off with a caution.'

'I hope so.' I put my shopping bags on the ground and sit on the bench beside him, taking a quick look at the crowd gathering out the front of the courthouse. The Armidale courthouse – an old-style stone building in the centre of town – offers an open-air display of who's in trouble with the law. Like a public playhouse, a Shakespearean drama unfolds here each weekday morning, and I often engage in surreptitious people-watching when I walk past.

Since talking to Geraldine, I'd become curious about Bernie's 'wild and woolly' background. 'By the way,' I say to him now, settling back on the bench, 'you never finished telling me about your idiot days.'

He lifts his eyebrows. 'You really want to know?'

I nod.

'I had a little golden circle just above my head,' he begins, circling a finger over his hair in the shape of a halo. Then he laughs softly and says, 'Well, maybe that's not true. I grew up in Armidale with strict Catholic parents, went to Mass and Catholic schools – all that sort of business.' Bernie pauses to roll a smoke and waves to someone walking by. 'The rest of my family were fairly academic, but that was never going to be me. I probably spent as much time out of the classroom as in, and the more ancient history, geography and trigonometry I did, the more I didn't want to be there.' He lights up and leans back on the bench. 'I guess a lot of my anger at the time came from being the dumbest in the school – I was always in trouble for smoking and that sort of stuff.'

'Dope?' I ask.

Bernie shakes his head vigorously. 'I never touched dope till I was much older, thank God. Wasn't at a real young age for kicking off with the grog either. It was more just running around wild, looking for thrills.'

With his unruly hair, dark sunglasses, boots and jeans, Bernie could still pass for a thrill seeker. He reminds me of that group of boys who were always outside the principal's office when I was at high school. I'm sure every school has them – they're trouble and make their teachers' lives a nightmare, but you can't help admire their daring, their lawlessness.

Bernie left school as soon as he could, a decision which led to his first real 'bust-up' with his family. They wanted him to do Year 12. 'I worked for a year as a travel agent,' he tells me, and I can't help laughing at the idea of him behind a desk.

'Then I ended up in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains,' he says, 'and somehow I crossed tracks with a couple who owned the saddlers – Paul and Annette. No doubt they could see what was going on – young bloke who thought he knew everything with nowhere to live and very few skills – and they took me in.' A wistful look crosses Bernie's face. 'Must have been tough times for them when I think back, having me there carrying on like a flaming idiot, but for some reason Paul could tolerate all my bullshit.'

Bernie stares down at his boots, quiet for a moment. 'I never had much of a verbal relationship with my own dad. A lot of our talking was around fighting and

arguing – not that there weren't good times, and I know my parents love me, but I wasn't understood, and I didn't understand shit myself.'

As we sit in companionable silence, I think about Bernie's words. I wonder what Joey will remember of his troubled years at home, of not being understood.

'It's a tough gig to parent any child,' continues Bernie. 'But it's a smoother transition if there are other older people around to look up to and learn from. I got into horses and dogs through Paul, and he lined me up some work in Victoria where I worked with some of the best horsemen in the industry.'

I watch as he crushes the butt of his rollie under his boot.

'But I had a passion for wild things, so they sent me off to the Northern Territory, to Newcastle Waters – wild country for a wild young fella! I worked on the outstations, busted a heap of bones and had a heap of fun – that's where I met Jayne.'

'So how did you become a youth worker?'

'Nuclear science didn't pick me,' says Bernie with a grin. 'Being a policeman or a fireman didn't come and grab me by the collar. But somewhere along the line, the youth work came along, and all of a sudden here's this job I shouldn't have because I didn't have any qualifications. I worked in a youth refuge in Alice Springs, and straight away it was like I'd been doing it my whole life. Youth organisations often use shortcuts – but for me it was always "man-up" and let's fuckin' sort this shit.'

Bernie and Jayne went back to New South Wales to work as house parents for some 'wild lads' on a farm at Tarago, but it wasn't long before they returned to the Territory, where Bernie ended up working with the Warramunga people around Tennant Creek.

'The old fellas sniffed me out and took me out bush,' says Bernie, his voice hushed. 'I'll never know why those proper old men took on a young white fella like me, but I started cruising around with them and they showed me about animals and the bush … about how things are all connected.' He shakes his head. 'Oh Christ, the things those old men taught me.'

'Like what?'

Bernie whistles under his breath. 'Stuff I probably shouldn't talk about … but something that would be okay to talk about is whether it's your dreaming how you have a connection with an animal, or how to split dogs and bitches on tracks, how to

find animals.' He chuckles to himself. 'White fellas are forever running around chasing things, but those old fellas taught me how to draw things to you, and that's not just with dogs. We do it with the boys at the shed – I call it "visioning on a spiritual level". If I've got a tricky dog or a tricky kid to catch, I see what's going to happen out the front, and then get to it. Doesn't usually happen in a day, but it comes … eventually.'

Around us, the front of the courthouse is teeming with black-suited lawyers and nervous clients. Everyone is smoking. The drama is about to begin. Time for one last question – 'What else did those old fellas teach you?'

Bernie clears his throat. 'The "uncle" thing, no doubt about that – about the importance of having sensible older people around to show younger people how to grow up.'

Out the corner of my eye, I see Thommo shambling up the mall. I gather my shopping bags. 'Is that what you are to those boys at the shed? Uncle?'

'Yep,' says Bernie quietly. 'Very similar.'

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Not long after this conversation, I meet with a friend, a psychologist, who has worked with Bernie on various youth programs in Armidale. We talk about his style of youth work. I'm interested to hear her say that because Bernie is self-taught, he hasn't inherited a whole lot of boundaries through doing a university degree – he hasn't become 'bound by his boundaries'.

When I question my friend about this, she explains how there are certain rules involved with having a therapeutic relationship, rules that are in place to avoid the relationship becoming intimate. 'For example,' she says, 'never in a million years would I bring a client to my home, but Bernie breaks that rule.'

So does Geraldine, I think, remembering her big-arse TV and the movie nights.

'He also answers the phone all the time,' my friend adds. 'I wouldn't do that. But something I would do – that other practitioners wouldn't – is if one of my weekly clients was going for a job interview on a Wednesday, I'd ring Wednesday afternoon to see how she went.'

I ask how that's breaking the rules.

'You're not that person's friend, Helena,' she says, giving me a straight look. 'Everyone likes a phone call after they've had a job interview, but am I helping a client if I fill that role, or am I helping them better if I don't fill it? You don't have a thirty-year relationship with your counsellor – that's what you have with a partner or a good friend.'

Afterwards, I think of how Bernie's phone hardly stops ringing, how he gives up his Sundays to spend time with the boys at the shed, and how I have never heard him say the word 'client'.

Joey-in-a-box!

On the night before Joey's seventeenth birthday, Rob and I decorate the dining room with streamers and balloons and arrange Joey's presents and cards on the table – one of our family birthday traditions. When the kids were younger, we always told them the 'birthday fairies' had been, and even though everyone except Freddie has long stopped believing in fairies, I still like to put up decorations. I also make Joey a 'collage card' – another tradition – from pictures and words from the weekend magazines. I write on the bottom of the card:

> Live your dreams, Joey!
> Happy 17th Birthday!!!

Later, when Rob is asleep, I look through a scrapbook I once made for Joey, which covers the first eight years of his life. I especially wanted him to have a record of our first year together, before we met Rob, in case something happened to me. When I look at it now, the photos of his birth and of happier times with Rob and the other kids leave me feeling a little sad. The book documents the activities Joey used to enjoy – like painting stripes on a cardboard box, climbing inside, and jumping out

from the top yelling: 'Joey-in-a-box!', or re-creating Dreamworld's 'Tower of Terror' with his Lego. We had a lot of fun with Joey. With the page still open before me, and with Bernie's 'visioning' technique in my mind, I write a positive affirmation for Joey in my journal, my hopes for what the coming year will bring:

> Joey is caring, kind and happy. He is busy with work, friends, love and life. Joey is sensible and aware of other people's feelings. He loves and is loved. Joey is great to be around and knows his family loves him. Joey is calm and settled within himself. Joey has all the money he needs. Joey is my beautiful boy.

After I read over the birthday affirmation several times, I close the book.

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Years ago, when Rob came back from India, he took me to visit his parents, who lived on acreage outside of the small town where we'd both grown up. We swam in their creek that first day – Rob, Joey and me – and in the photos we took I'm impossibly slim and beautiful, and Rob and I look impossibly happy and relaxed. Later, up at the house, his mother fussed and made cups of tea. When his father came home from the pub, he joked around with Joey before he and Rob went into the garage where there was a beer fridge and a transistor radio. Rob's younger brother and his new girlfriend came over, and she brought her daughter to play with Joey. Everyone welcomed me warmly and I felt part of a real Australian family. But then, at dinner, Rob's mother kept asking why the children weren't eating more, and everyone kept saying, 'Do what you're told!' to the little girl. 'Do what you're told!' said with a rising intonation. I felt uncomfortable each time they said it.

Back in Armidale, Rob wore soft white Indian shirts and a straw hat, and when he cut his beard, he looked like Vincent van Gogh. He enrolled in further study at the university, with the hope of becoming a history lecturer. We moved in together a year later, and the following winter our first baby – Theo – was born beside the fire in our bedroom. We had good times in that house. On weekends, Rob and Joey spent lots of time together in the backyard, building tree-houses and rock pools. Whenever they worked on their 'backyard projects', Joey wore Rob's old leather tool-bag around his waist.

When Joey was four and Theo was one, we left Armidale for Brisbane so Rob could finish his PhD. I taught English to migrants and completed one more year of part-time study. To boost our income, I also worked in a local restaurant four nights a week. Rob was left with much of the evening parenting, which wasn't easy for him or the kids. Our family life suffered a lot during that year. When I think of that time now, I don't understand why I was out of the house so much when I had two small children. Even when I became pregnant again, I continued to work two jobs. Rob could have picked up some extra work at night, but we didn't do it that way. I recently heard an interview with Leonard Cohen, where he admitted that he was 'always escaping' from his intimate others. Maybe that's what I was doing, too. But when Rob started saying: 'Do what you're told!' to Joey, I cut back on my hours and spent more time at home. We needed to carry the load together, and it wasn't long before Henry, our third boy, was born into our house by the river in Brisbane.

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On the morning of Joey's 17th birthday, Freddie helps me with the 'birth cake' – a rich chocolate sour-cream cake – dipping his spoon into the chocolate icing whenever he thinks I'm not looking. The cake recipe, from an old Women's Weekly cookbook, has about fifteen steps and I make it for Joey's birthday every year. I'd been making the cake on the day he was born.

Later, after buying some last-minute things at the supermarket, I return home to find Joey in the lounge room, watching The Mummy at full volume, all the doors and curtains closed.

I walk over and switch off the television. 'Sorry Joey, but that movie isn't suitable for Freddie.'

Joey leaps to his feet, his face darkening with anger. 'I have the freedom to watch TV whenever I want!'

So much for positive affirmations, I think, as I pull back the curtains and open the windows. I direct his attention to the birthday table – 'Happy Birthday!'

Joey holds himself stiff while I hug him, but then his frown disappears as he unwraps the presents. He likes the series of Russian vampire books I bought, and the

book from Rob is 'okay', as are the new jeans and Superman T-shirts. Joey loves Superman merchandise – most of his clothes are printed or embossed with Superman logos – and I always look for new T-shirts when I'm shopping. I breathe a sigh of relief once all the presents are opened.

Soon after, wearing one of the new T-shirts and his new jeans – the old clothes thrown in the washing basket – Joey goes downtown to meet his friends, promising to return later for the cake-cutting ceremony when everyone else comes home. While Freddie is in bed for his afternoon sleep, I make a cup of tea and wonder why the experience of managing Joey's birthday is so fraught with emotion. It wasn't always that way – we've had some memorable successes over the years – but lately the birthday celebrations haven't gone quite so well. I try to dispel all birthday-related anxiety from my mind, and when Joey bounds into the house later that afternoon, the six of us gather around his cake like any normal family. As Rob lights the candles, I take photos, aware of expectancy hanging over the table like an unwanted guest.

Then, two-year-old Freddie starts to sing – 'Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you' – the only words he knows from the song. Tears fill my eyes in this moment of sweetness as I stand in the light of seventeen candles, listening to my youngest boy sing 'Happy Birthday'. Smiling at Freddie, Joey blows out the candles in one breath and cuts a piece of cake for each of us.

Watch the actions

The next time I roll up at the shed, I find Bernie sitting outside on the concrete ledge. Inside, I wave to chubby-faced Brendan, a new boy, and spot the looming helmet-headed figure of Jimmy, a tall fellow with a gingery crew-cut, working in a welding

bay with Simmo. Apart from the three of them, the shed is empty. I stow my bag in the corner and head back outside.

'Where's Gazza?' I ask. 'I've never known him to miss a Sunday.'

'He's sulking,' says Bernie, raising his fists and punching the air a couple of times. 'The boys had a falling out over a girl and they're keeping away from each other for a while.' He shrugs carelessly, like he isn't worried. 'Anyway, it's working really well with a smaller group – gives the keen ones a chance to hook in.'

I look at him, not sure if he's trying to convince me, or himself. Then I take a seat on the ledge, yearning for some warmth to seep through the heavy clouds. It's nearly the end of winter, but the weather has been freezing cold all week – sleet, snow, rain – with grey skies and the smell of wood-smoke constant on the breeze.

'Good to see Jack so keen.'

Bernie nods and reaches for his tobacco. 'When Brendan first started he was always picking fights with everyone. He'd come from Lismore, was having troubles at high school. But I've never seen a kid respond so well to a few pats on the head. He won a couple of welding competitions we organised and became a changed boy. The prize was a chocolate bar.' Bernie huffs out a laugh, ducking his head as he lights his smoke. 'Willy Wonka knew what he was doing!'

I rub my hands together. 'Maybe the others are just waiting for the cold weather to pass.'

**

During the afternoon, Jimmy and Brendan work on an order for a portable barbeque, while Simmo and I finish the candleholders. Simmo is frog-voiced from a cold. 'Why don't you go home?' I ask. He says he's here for Bernie.

Afterwards, I clean the 'trophy shelf' – a wide wooden plank about two metres long, fixed at chest height to one of the corrugated iron walls. I'd stood by this makeshift mantelpiece on my first day, examining the photos and objects on display with lengthy consideration, wondering how I'd ever find my place here. The shelf was kept tidy in the beginning, when lots of visitors were coming through, but three months later it's looking shabby. And empty. The photos, most of the glass frames cracked, lie scattered on the table in the kitchen area. The Iron Man Welders business

plan has curled-up edges and the imprint of a dusty boot stamped on it. I look around the empty shed – it's not only the visitors who have stopped coming.

At the end of the day, as I wrap a thick woollen scarf around my neck, Bernie asks the two boys to close up the shed. Simmo and I wait outside, watching the dogs have a run.

Bernie wanders over, still looking troubled. 'I think we're losing them.'

Behind me, I hear the boys slide the heavy wooden shaft through the hinges of the shed door. Simmo pulls his beanie over his ears, his brow wrinkling in concern. 'Maybe we need to do more personal development with the fellas,' he suggests. 'Have a regular part of the day where we down tools, sit around and chat about shit.'

Bernie nods. 'We've had a couple of chats, but I know that's not enough. Everybody thinks it's the welding that makes the difference, but it's not the fuckin' welding – it's those few minutes you're talking about. Stuff goes on with these kids that you might never hear about. You have to watch the behaviour as well. If you're only listening to the words, you're making a grave mistake. Watch the actions, and when you see those actions change … it's time for something different.'

* *

On the drive home, I think of how Bernie's worries reflect my own. The night before, Joey had called from a telephone box on the north side of town, asking for a lift. I found him standing outside a bakery, shivering in the cold. He doesn't dress warmly enough. All his clothes seem to be disappearing. When he slid into the car, I noticed that he was only wearing a hoodie and had tomato sauce stains on his jeans. I lent him a dark blue fleecy-lined coat from the back of the car – 'Don't give this one away' – and drove him to his friend's flat. Two young men had been sitting on the steps, smoke from their cigarettes curling up into the porch light, and a woman had been standing in the doorway dressed in pyjamas. Inside the flat, through sheer lacy curtains, I saw more people watching television. 'Bye Mum, I love you,' Joey had said, pulling on the coat and leaning across to give me a kiss.

My throat had tightened. 'I love you too, Joey.'

I drove home, sad about the way things were turning out. Joey's world seemed to have become more desolate since his birthday, or perhaps it was the gloom of a

long winter affecting me. In the carport at home I had turned off the motor and sat for a moment in the dark car. I wanted Joey to do well in life – to eat healthy food, to stay clean, to sleep in a bed with fresh sheets and to use his mind in a job he enjoyed. But maybe I was expecting too much from someone who wasn't yet eighteen. At a similar age I was living the party life in Darwin: unemployed, drinking every night, sharing a room at a run-down tourist lodge with several others who didn't look too different from the people outside that flat. Joey's new peer-group had accepted him for who he was. Maybe it's time for me to do that too.

To be honest, I've never been able to accept Joey for who he is, which is a huge fault on my behalf. In the beginning, his eccentricities were a source of pride. He could do complex sums in his head by the time he started attending school, and his spelling was perfect, even though his handwriting was almost illegible. He wanted to be a magician or a comedian when he grew up, and he told me lots of funny stories about life at school. I remember when he was eight, he wore his hair slicked up at the front like John Travolta in Grease and he kept a black comb in his pocket. That year, when the school photos arrived, Joey opened the packet and said: 'My hair! What happened to my hair?' Then he raised his fist, 'Someone will pay for this!' His teacher had to work hard to keep a straight face while she handed out photos to the other kids.

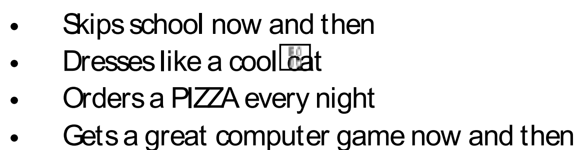
Joey happily went off to school each morning with his cool-cat hairdo, often wearing a pair of Blues Brothers-style sunglasses that my mother had given him. He loved learning, but although he settled well into school, he became harder to manage at home. He began to lead us on a tumultuous journey through life, and I would swing from despair to elation within minutes. I started to notice his sensitivities – he could smell if ants had been in the sugar, he hated crowds, shopping centres, and he never wanted any windows open, even on hot days. When he was seven, I jokingly made him his own business card:

> Joey Pastor / Fusspot Extraordinaire / You name it …I'll complain about it / No job too small.

Joey loved to draw, so I used to send him off to cartooning workshops at the State Library during the school holidays. Even as a very young child, he was able to capture facial expressions particularly well in his drawings, and I think that's because

he was so observant. He experienced life so intensely, so deeply. I have all his artworks in a box in a cupboard at home. One of his drawings from that time is a heart-wrenching sketch of a confused-looking little boy standing with his hands clasped in front of his body. I still weep whenever I look at it.

Over the years, even though Joey's behaviour was often challenging, he always remained lovable. One time, we went to see my brother and his family who were visiting my parents on the Gold Coast. I was stressed after the drive because road repairs meant we were trapped between concrete girders for many kilometres while trucks roared past at deadly speeds. At my parents' house, my brother's children behaved like perfect angels, while Joey acted the fool. I was embarrassed and felt like an incompetent parent. Joey knew I wasn't happy with him, and, once we were back at home, he went off to his bedroom to write a new list of rules for himself:



- Skips school now and then
- Dresses like a cool cat
- Orders a PIZZA every night
- Gets a great computer game now and then

So much for me thinking Joey had seen the error of his ways, but his list did make me smile.

Because he was the oldest, I didn't realise for a long time that Joey's reactions to the world were a little unusual. He often teased and provoked the younger boys, and I couldn't leave them alone with him because in less than a minute someone would be screaming. I read parenting books and tried star charts, but nothing ever worked. Joey was like a rare and beautiful orchid that needed certain conditions to thrive, but I just couldn't work out what those conditions were. Someone lent me a book, Raising your spirited child: a guide for parents whose child is more intense, sensitive, perceptive, persistent and energetic. Yes, I thought, that's Joey. The book said many spirited children grew up to be wonderful adults – you just had to get through their childhood first.

After he gained entry into a prestigious selective Brisbane high school, Joey became one of the 'lost boys'. On school mornings, he'd laze around the house and make excuses, so he wouldn't have to go. Letters came home about unfinished assignments, and I soon discovered he wagged school several days a week. I realise

now that those early adolescent years were very hard for Joey, and I feel a lot of grief about that time because I didn't handle it very well. I was often angry rather than supportive, and I didn't appreciate the beauty of the child – the rare orchid – I had in front of me. Perhaps if I'd just accepted Joey for who he was, and stopped trying to force him to be something that he wasn't, things would have turned out differently.

Can't breathe cake

At the shed, the footy commentary booms from the radio but the workshop is empty. In the kitchen, I find Blister and Tye leaning back on plastic chairs, blowing smoke-rings while Sally, Bernie's sister-in-law, rummages through a heap of papers on the table. Thommo is stretched out on the lounge, fast asleep. I say hello and slide a tray of brownies between some over-full ashtrays on the table.

It's a relief to see Sally. Like her sister Jayne, there's something solid and reassuring about her. When we first met I was surprised to find she was only thirty. Today, with her smiling brown eyes, oval-shaped glasses and hair tied back in a neat bun, she looks fresh and efficient, like Mary Poppins come to visit. She's trying to get the boys to make job sheets which detail the measurements and steps for each product. 'We can print them up on the biggest sheets of paper,' she says brightly, 'laminate them, and then stick the job sheets on the walls around the shed.'

Next to her, I notice Tye having a coughing fit after stuffing down a brownie.

'Can't breathe cake, mate,' Sally tells him. 'You've got to chew it.' She clears a space on the table. 'We need sign-on sheets as well. Let's make a list of all the boys who've been coming.'

'Some young fellas just turn up for lunch,' grumbles Blister.

I'd noticed how lunch was an important part of Bernie's work. Each Sunday, he went shopping with one of the boys, and later, the others took it in turns to fire up the barbeque, cook the meat, or prepare the chicken and salad.

Tye stops coughing. 'Speaking of lunch …'

Bernie comes in, car keys jangling. Thommo sits up on the lounge and rubs his eyes, looking around in confusion.

'Not keeping you up are we?' asks Bernie. He turns to me and Sally. 'A few of the boys are missing. I've just picked up Jimmy, but the manager of the youth refuge reckons Shaun's gone off the rails. He's moved out to a caravan. Brendan's gone too – to Tamworth.' Bernie sighs. 'His dad's a fire-fighter, and it's his fourth move in a year. No wonder Brendan has problems.'

***

I moved a lot when I was young and it didn't do me any good either. In 1958, when my parents first came to Australia, they lived and worked around the eastern suburbs of Sydney – Rose Bay, Waverly, Bronte, Bondi and Paddington – places that must have seemed like paradise after Amsterdam, a city still in recovery from the war. In 1965, I was born in Paddington, and most of my baby photos show me at the beach, in the arms of one of my siblings. Because I was the youngest by nine years – my family called me 'het kind'. The child.

'Waar is het kind?' they always asked. 'Where is the child?'

When I was two, my parents bought a bakery business in a small town south of Sydney. The 1880s building, with its shopfront, living quarters and separate bakery out the back, had peeling white paint and a faded Big Boy lemonade sign on one wall. Inside, the rooms had boarded-up fireplaces and twelve-foot ceilings. We lived in the bakery house for the next nine years, which doesn't seem like much now, but that big old white building is the one solid thing from my childhood I hold onto.

We left the bakery when I was eleven because my father thought he was ready to retire. My parents wanted to send me to an elite boarding school in Sydney – 'We have money enough now!' they said. But I pleaded not to go. I didn't know then that we would move eight times over the next seven years – to Sydney, to Gunnedah, back to various places in Sydney, and then Bomaderry – or that I would change high schools five times. With each move, I became progressively wilder. I changed my name, started smoking cigarettes and joints. I drank beer, tequila, my father's sherry

and whatever else was on offer. At one stage, we even went back to the bakery, but it wasn't the same. In Gunnedah, where my parents inexplicably bought a motel business, my father almost had a nervous breakdown over the cracks in the concrete driveway, and my mother spent a lot of time lying on the lounge in a darkened room. Meanwhile, I continued to spiral downwards – I was in Year 10, hanging around older boys who smoked and drank too much, who drove cars with loud mufflers, and who weren't the right sort of friends for me.

You'd think I'd remember my wild days more often and be able to put myself in Joey's shoes.

***

That afternoon, Shaun, a lost-looking pup of a boy, comes through the door with his arm in a cast. 'Fell off me bike!' he says, like it's really good news.

While I file washers to fit the pipe needed for the candleholders, he stands by my side and chats. He's living in a caravan at Pembroke Holiday Park, by himself. 'I've been sitting up late watching horror movies – Jason X and Freddy!' He starts to describe a scene where Freddy gets his arm chopped off.

I put up my hand to stop him. 'Aaahh! I can't handle that stuff anymore. I had my horror movie stage when I was your age.'

When Blister returns from the grinding room, Shaun races over to show him his arm – 'I'm getting a new cast on Tuesday, a waterproof one.' He scratches inside the plaster with a stick and tells Blister about getting chucked out of the youth refuge. Blister asks him where his folks are.

'Dad's in Perth. Mum's in Moree.'

'How come you don't live with one of them?'

'Mum kicked me out 'cause I was always picking fights with me sister.' Shaun laughs, a crazy cartoon snigger. 'Hee hee hee hee. Got kicked out of the youth refuge for picking fights too.'

He acts like he's proud of it, but I don't think so. Not really.

'You might get lonely living in a van on your own,' says Blister.

Shaun sniggers again and walks over to show Bernie his cast. Soon Bernie has him holding a length of steel steady with his good arm.

Blister is talkative during the afternoon, more than ever before. He tells me about the caravan park at the other end of town, where he's staying with his girlfriend. He'd rather be in Pembroke, too, but his missus won't let him – 'She thinks I'd always be down here at the welding shed.'

She's probably right.

'I was always fighting with my brothers and my sister,' adds Blister, 'but my mum didn't chuck me out. I left on my own accord. And she always says: "If you're in trouble, you can come back".'

If only I could say that to Joey.

When Bernie stops by the bench where Blister and I are working, I half-jokingly complain: 'It's hard, sticking with the candleholders.'

'Hard sticking with anything,' says Bernie.

Jimmy lopes over in our direction and shows us a jig he's made to twist metal for jobs like fire tools. Bernie twirls the antiquated-looking contraption in his hand and shakes his head in admiration. 'Crackin' idea, Jimmy! So that's what you're dreaming of at night, eh? While those other blokes are dreaming of girls, you're dreaming of jigs!' The boys burst into laughter while Jimmy blushes.

Before I leave, I fetch the brownie tin from the kitchen and offer the last pieces. Tye, holding an oxy welder in one hand, is the first to reach over.

Bernie glances at Tye's lanky figure. 'The amount you eat, you think you'd be the size of a hippopotamus. Thanks for the cake, Helena.'

'Yeah, and keep it coming,' someone calls as I walk out the side door.

I turn to see Tye wearing a 'who me?' expression and catch his smile just before he flips the cover on his welding helmet.

Driving home, I'm almost bursting with happiness. What it is about the shed – a dusty, dirty, noisy place – that lifts my spirits so? Bernie's a big attraction, of course. The boys obviously love him, and I'm drawn to his wisdom as well. Just as they are.

Parenthood

Joey rings to ask if I can give him and his new girlfriend, Melina, a lift. I agree, curious to know more about Melina, whom I'd met briefly on the steps of his house in the half-light the previous week. She was tiny, maybe only five foot tall, and looked away when she saw me approaching.

Once in the car – Joey in the front, Melina in the back – Joey says, 'We need to go over to Kentucky Street and pick up Ryan.'

'Who's Ryan?' I ask.

'Melina's baby.'

Melina's baby? My pulse begins to race. Joey's girlfriend is a sole-parent? A girlfriend is one thing, but a baby is something else altogether. I glance in the rear-view mirror, and in as casual a tone as I can muster, I say: 'You don't look old enough to have a baby, Melina.'

'She's twenty,' says Joey.

We drive to Kentucky Street, where Melina directs me to a low-brick house. A small group of people stand out the front. 'Wait here,' she tells Joey. We watch as she goes inside. A minute later she appears with baby Ryan. He's fast asleep, tufty hair poking out from his fleecy blue blanket. We drive to Melina's flat without speaking. Joey helps her carry the baby inside, and then asks if I can drive him downtown to check his bank balance. On the way, I question him about Melina and the baby. He replies with one-word answers. I prattle on about early parenthood, the loss of freedom – 'I know what it's like, Joey,' I say, parking in front of the automatic teller. 'I had you when I was twenty-four.'

***

I often feel like I've made a total mess of parenting my kids. Maybe that's because I didn't have a strong example to follow. My parents didn't know what to do with their teenage children either. When we were living in the bakery house, by the time my three siblings were at high school, any advice my father suggested was looked at with a wary eye. He was a 'New Australian' who spoke with a heavy accent. What did he know about life in this country? Like many migrants, my parents believed

education was of prime importance. But in the early 1970s, young people were choosing travelling adventures over university. 'Fruit picking?' my father asked my sister one time, his tone full of scorn. 'Is that what we came to Australia for? So you could go fruit picking?'

When Joey and the other boys were growing up in Brisbane, Rob and I really struggled to be effective parents. Our problems were made worse by financial troubles. After finishing his PhD, Rob found it difficult to find reliable academic work, and during the nine years we lived in Brisbane we moved five times because of rising rents.

Rob and I didn't know what to do when Joey exploded into puberty. In the heat of Brisbane, he only wanted to wear black T-shirts and heavy denim jeans, and he often looked hot and angry. Getting him out of the house in time for the train, or to do anything, became increasingly difficult. I began to research Asperger's syndrome. Today, it seems like every second person has this syndrome, but back then, it was only starting to be recognised. Joey exhibited nearly all the behavioural traits, so we saw a specialist in Brisbane. After fifteen minutes, he declared Joey had Attention Deficit Disorder because Joey had responded heartily to a joke, and people with Asperger's syndrome aren't supposed to have a sense of humour. The specialist gave us a script for Ritalin, but I didn't believe medication was the answer. I didn't want Joey to be drugged, to lose all the special traits that made him who he was, even if some of those traits made him hard to live with at times. Besides, too many things didn't fit with the diagnosis. We went for further testing, but the results were inconclusive, which left me with nothing. Rob and I both tried our best to make things better for our family, but the pressures of life continued to grow.

***

A few days after my drive with Joey and Melina, with my thoughts still in turmoil, my father has an operation to remove a cancerous growth from his scalp. When I ring my mother to check how he went, she tells me the operation took three hours.

'Three hours?' I ask in surprise. 'That sounds serious.'

Caught up with a busy life, I sometimes didn't listen closely when my mother talked about my father's medical issues on the phone, but the thought of him lying vulnerable on an operating table for three hours fills me with fear.

A few weeks later, my mother phones again to say my father now needs a course of radiotherapy on the area around the cancerous growth.

'Maybe I'll come up soon?' I suggest, concerned for her, but she brushes away my offer of help.

'No, no, I'll be alright.'

We don't ask for help in my family. And we're not accustomed to illness either. When my siblings and I were growing up in the bakery, we weren't allowed to be sick and we rarely missed a day of school. I suppose when my parents were teenagers, 'sick' didn't get you anywhere. Everyone was sick, or dying. You had to be tough.

There are a lot worse things than a baby

One night, I take some pizza over to Joey's place and find him and Melina snuggled up on the lounge in front of the television. I stay and watch the rest of America's Next Top Model with them, trying to engage them in conversation during the ad breaks, but they're not interested in talking to me. I still don't know much about Melina. She's been very 'closed' and somewhat stormy on the few occasions we've met. It's not that I think she's a bad sort, but I'm worried that one day Joey will come home and tell me that they're having a baby together. I don't want Joey to become a father yet. He's too young.

A week later, Joey comes around and says he's moving in with Melina.

'Are you sure?' I ask, heart pounding with anxiety. Within me, another voice wants to shriek: 'Don't do it, Joey!'

'I know what I'm doing, Mum,' says Joey. He asks if he can leave some of his things with me, for safekeeping. While he's putting the boxes in the shed, the phone rings. Reverse-charge. In the brief pause after the automated message asks whether I want to accept the call, I hear Melina's voice – 'CanyatellJoeytoringme' – before the line goes dead.

Joey comes back from the shed. I'm tempted not to say anything, but it doesn't seem right. 'Melina wants you to call her.'

'Was it reverse charge? I told her not to do that.'

I sigh. They don't even have fifty cents to make a phone call.

When Joey shuffles in with the last of his gear, I ask, 'Where's that blue coat you borrowed the other night?'

He looks at me. 'I traded it for a silver jacket.'

'I told you not to give it away – I lent it to you!'

As I rant about the injustice of his behaviour, I wonder at the same time why I care so much about an item of clothing.

After Joey is gone, I sit on the lounge room floor. Next to me is a box full of the stuffed animals and other toys that Joey slept with when he was a baby. He still carts them around with him. The toys are grubby, in need of a wash. I take them out, one by one: Sleepy Bear, who went with Joey to his family day-care mother while I went to university; Sharky, a plastic glow-in-the-dark shark from Sea World; Dino, a stuffed green dinosaur we picked up in a second-hand shop in Brisbane; Dolphin, Little Dino, Rabbit. Tears fall from my eyes. The pain of motherhood, alright. Nothing I do or say seems to make any difference. Helping Joey is like trying to push a big heavy rock uphill – he keeps sliding further back, no matter how hard I try.

I ring a counselling support service and within minutes I'm sobbing, almost inconsolable with grief. It's like Joey has died.

'I want to help him find some positive direction in his life,' I weep to the anonymous listener on the other end of the line. After the call, I hug Sleepy Bear to my chest, and imagine Joey surrounded by white light, shining and strong.

***

Driving to the welding shed a fortnight later, with prams still featuring heavily in my thoughts, I notice the poplars lining the highway have grown leaves again. Spring at last. I carry my tray of brownies into the kitchen, waving to Bernie and the boys, welcoming the smell of burning metal in my nostrils. The shed is beginning to feel like home. As I place the brownies on the table, I see Sally's unfinished job sheets lying among the cracked photo frames and tattered tool catalogues. Although the

sign-on sheet has made an appearance, drawn up with neat columns and clipped onto a folder, it doesn't look like anyone has been using it.

When Bernie walks into the kitchen, I blurt out my fears about Joey. As always, Bernie remains unfazed. 'There are a lot worse things than a baby,' he says. I suppose he's right, but it still feels like Joey is perched in a billycart at the top of a rise, waiting to speed downhill without any brakes.

We head outside for a moment to escape the noise of the drop-saw. 'Good to see more of the boys here today,' I say, glancing back towards the shed.

Bernie nods and finds his tobacco, looking every bit the yokel in his khaki overalls and checked shirt. 'I had a real good talk with them – just asked a simple question: "Why are we running out of steam?" They came up with about thirty different ideas, but the main thing is they want to muck about on weekends. Maybe we'll move away from Sundays.'

'Fair enough.'

Bernie lights up his smoke and inhales deeply. 'It's the same with all my youth work: I go through patches of thinking, "What the fuck am I doing? I'm sick of this." You bust your arse and they all end up in court. I often think – "Where are we going with this shit?" But then I look at how far these boys have come, and I think, nah, we're on the right track. We'll shift in some other direction, but we'll keep at it … whatever's helping this particular group of kids is where we need to go.'

* * *

Later that week I find Joey asleep at home, curled up like a cat on the sofa. Scratches cover his face and arms. In the laundry are two washing baskets, stuffed with wet clothes and his possessions. More washing, I sigh, as a mixture of relief and anxiety hits me. When Joey wakes up, he tells me that he and Melina have broken up.

With nowhere to go, Joey sleeps on the spare bed in Theo's room for five nights. For him, it's moving back home. For me, it isn't. He tries so hard to be 'good', but I'm rigid with tension the whole time. Theo has to move out of his room because Joey sometimes stays up till one or two in the morning playing music. On several mornings, Joey storms out of the bedroom, infuriated because we woke him with our talking over

breakfast. I don't want to creep about in my own house. I bite my nails, pick at my skin, pull at my hair – the old familiar nervous mannerisms. When I eventually tell Joey he can't stay, he says I don't love him. It's not true. I love him very much, but I can't live with him. I wish it could be different, but right now it isn't possible.

'Perhaps you can move back to Tim's?' I suggest.

He scowls. 'There's no way I'm going to live there again!'

'Well, you can't stay here,' I say firmly. 'I'll pay two weeks rent at Tim's to help you catch up … and cook you dinner some nights.'

Joey stomps out, slamming the back door.

***

After organising things with Tim, I fix up Joey's old bedroom and make the bed with clean sheets. I also buy cereal and milk, razors, a toothbrush and toothpaste. Three days go by with no sign of Joey. He rings on the fourth day, but when I tell him the key for Tim's is in the letterbox, he hangs up.

A few days later, he appears on my doorstep, wearing the same clothes he was in when I last saw him. I find some of his clean clothes in Theo's room and give him a razor. Joey showers with the water pressure turned up so hard the pipes wail. After he's dressed, I hand him the key for Tim's, which I retrieved from the letterbox during the week, and send him on his way, my heart almost breaking in two.

Dog whisperer

At the shed the following Sunday, the workshop is empty but Simmo is in the kitchen. He's kneeling in front of the fridge, sleeves rolled high as he dips a cloth into a bucket of soapy water.

'You're doing a fine job there, Simmo. The state of that fridge has worried me for some time.' I place a tray of brownies on the table, and ask if he's heard any news from Bernie, who has gone to Fraser Island for three weeks, helping a friend trap dingoes.

Simmo wipes his brow. 'He's been offered a full-time job.'

'What?' I ask in surprise. 'I thought he was only going for three weeks.'

'They're asking him to come back and work there all the time, tagging dingoes. He's a bit of dog whisperer, old Bernie.'

I stand beside the fridge. How can Bernie go and live on Fraser Island? What will happen to the Iron Man Welders without him? Peering into the empty workshop, I think of the crowd of boys who were here the week before. While Simmo continues with the fridge we talk about the future of the project. 'I can't see it surviving long,' I tell him. 'Not without Bernie.'

Tyres crunch over the gravel outside, and soon Gazzaand Thommo saunter in. I almost cheer. Thommo looks sick, like he's had a really rough night, but Gazzaseems his normal self.

Simmo eases himself up from the floor with a groan, and congratulates Gazza, who has just scored an apprenticeship at the local mine. 'You were only saying the other day you didn't know where you stood,' says Simmo.

'I've just been showing up,' replies Gazza, lifting a brownie out of the tin with the edge of a rusty knife. 'Freckles got one as well – for a fitter and turner, so we'll both be doing apprenticeships out at the mine.'

'You'll have to put in a good word for Thommo,' Simmo says, nodding in Thommo's direction.

I ask Thommo if that's the sort of job he wants.

'Yeah,' he rumbles, not sounding too keen.

Gazza wipes his hands on his workpants. 'Freckles's apprenticeship is going to be a lot harder. I don't know how he'll go.' He and Thommo snigger together, like a pair of welding-workshop psychics who've already seen the cards that foretell Freckles's downfall.

I reckon he'll prove them wrong. Freckles might act like a misdirected fire-sprite at times, but he's held down a part-time job at McDonalds for years. He'll be alright.

Gazza's apprenticeship is for three years. 'I've already knocked off one year at TAFE,' he says. 'Bernie reckons there'll be a few apprenticeships with the council as well.'

Simmo raises his eyebrows. 'Geez, there'll be no Iron Men left!'

Maybe that'll be a good thing, I think, especially if Bernie takes the job on Fraser Island.

Car doors slam and Freckles, Jimmy and Geraldine walk in, carrying cans of paint, a roller and some paintbrushes. Jimmy turns up the volume on the radio and then burps, long and loud, as he checks out the welding on the bike rack.

'I love boys!' laughs Geraldine as she totters back to her car in her high heels. Jimmy gives her a wave and a big smile.

I opt for the job of painting the tool wall with the roller, while Gazza does the edges with the small brush. I also paint two noticeboards in the kitchen, scrub the hand-washing sink in the workshop, and then paint the splashing boards. The paint isn't the right sort for a wet area, but the sink looks clean and sparkling when I finish. I even scour the barbeque utensils until they shine.

I think of Simmo toiling away in the kitchen. What are a couple of clean-freaks like us doing in a place like this?

***

I shouldn't have promised to cook Joey's dinner several times a week. Since he's been back at Tim's, he no longer bothers to think about his own meals or do any shopping. He just drops around most afternoons to see what I'm cooking. Although we keep trying to have relaxed family dinners, the conversation usually becomes heated and accusatory. I start taking a plate of dinner down to Joey's each evening. We sit together in his kitchen, often with Tim, while Joey eats his meal. One night, Joey tells Tim and me a story about how he and another friend were waiting at a train station in Brisbane when a very long goods train went past:

'All the carriages had BULK MOLASSES written on them,' says Joey, smiling to himself. 'Except for one – it had BULK ASSES!'

***

A few days later, Joey comes over and I agree to take him for a drive. 'You need to do some washing for me,' he says as he puts on his seatbelt. 'Tim's machine broke down and won't spin. Stop by the house and I'll get the basket.'

Parking out the front of Tim's house, I notice a heap of paper napkins scattered over the street. 'What's all that?'

'They're from KFC. Liam dropped them when he drove me home earlier.'

'Don't you think you should pick them up?'

'It's alright, Mum,' says Joey, shaking his head. 'They're biodegradable!'

While he's inside, I pick up the napkins from the street. When Joey comes back, he's holding a chicken drumstick and his MP3 adaptor.

I pass him one of the paper napkins. 'Use this. I don't want you wiping chicken grease all over the seat. Where's the washing?'

'We'll pick it up later,' he says offhandedly, like we have all the time in the world. 'Have a listen to this.' The car throbs to the sound of Jay-Z's latest hit. When Joey finishes his drumstick, he winds down his window and prepares to throw.

'Don't!' I yell. 'I'll find a bin.'

Joey chucks the chicken bone onto the street. 'Problem solved.'

As we drive past a block of flats near the university, Joey tells me about a friend who was at the flats with him the previous Friday night. His friend, loud and drunk, created a ruckus and returned the following night in the same state. People in the neighbouring flats complained and called the police. Joey laughs and says the people who rent the flat now have three 'ticks' against them and have to leave.

I look at him. 'That's not funny.'

Joey ignores me and impersonates his drunken friend talking to the police: 'You think I'm scared of going to jail, man?'

Back at his house, I wait out the front while he gets the washing. He staggers down his front steps with a full basket, and heaves it into the back of the station wagon.

'Phaw … what's that smell!' I complain, holding my nose.

'The clothes have been in the machine for the last three days,' says Joey. 'They might need another wash.'

'Why didn't you hang them on the line days ago?' I ask, the stink of damp and mould catching in my throat.

He shrugs and leans over to kiss my cheek. 'Bye Mum, I love you.'

***

We wait for Bernie to come back before opening the shed again. About a month later, I spot him out the back of the Armidale Club, a live music venue. He looks suntanned and healthy. I'd already heard from Simmo that Bernie didn't take the job. I head over to say hello and ask if I can bum one of his rollies.

Bernie shakes his head. 'I've given up,' he says, 'mainly because I can't stand seeing the boys at the shed smoking my brand of tobacco.'

I congratulate him, noticing how he looks years younger. He's put on weight and his cheeks have filled out. 'How was Fraser Island?'

He inhales deeply, like he's breathing in memories of hot sun, sandy beaches and lush rainforests. 'Great … I was so tempted to take the job. That's my dreaming – working with dogs, with the earth, trapping dingoes – but I'll stay here for now.'

I remember how Simmo described Bernie as a dog whisperer and a shiver runs over me. But he works magic with the boys, too. And they need him more.

Don't shit in your own nest

At the next BackTrack meeting, the seven of us gather again around Simmo's kitchen table. We begin by discussing a girls' craft program that Sally and Geraldine recently started.

'About six girls turned up on the first night,' says Sally. 'I took a suitcase full of wool and we decided to knit beanies. Since then the girls have moved on to scarves and bags. But the problem is things are being five-finger discounted. Someone …'

'Someone or someones?' says Bernie, his eyes two specks of blue against the blackness of his beanie and polar fleece jacket.

'Someone.'

'Who?'

'What about the confidentiality thing?' Sally asks. 'No names?'

'That confidentiality shit causes more problems than it solves,' says Bernie, suddenly fired up. 'If you've got something to say, fuckin' say it and we'll keep it in this room here.'

Geraldine, wearing a lurid orange and pink beanie and scarf set, tells us the culprit's name. 'She's taken money out of my car, she's taken stuff out of my office, and she hid that bag of wool that we found under the chair the other day.'

'What would you do if the boys were stealing down the shed?' Jayne asks Bernie.

He opens his mouth to speak, but Geraldine beats him to it. 'It's only one girl. We're going to have a group meeting with the girls and tell them, "Fuck it. Someone's been shaking stuff."' She looks over to Bernie for confirmation.

Bernie refills his glass of wine. 'Let's go around the table. What would you do and how would you do it?'

'I've got no idea,' says Jayne.

'That's not good enough,' Bernie tells her, the same as he'd tell the boys at the shed. 'That's like a "I dunno" or a "whatever" answer."

She shrugs. 'Get rid of her?'

'Okay,' says Bernie. 'The next time that girl comes into the room, in front of all them other kids, you're going to say, "You've been stealing stuff – we're kicking you out of this program."'

He stares at Jayne, waiting for her to comment.

She glances around the table, bites her bottom lip. 'Have I just been knocked off the BackTrack Crew?'

'Well …' Bernie holds his palms up to the air. We all laugh, relax a little. 'What about you, Simmo?'

'I'd do a session on stealing,' says Simmo, sitting back in his chair. 'Something like: "We're our own little mob here and we've got this thing going and …" I don't know. Somehow work your way into it.'

'That's great.' Bernie nods in agreement. 'Stuff like, "When is it okay to steal? When is it not okay to steal? What's one thing you could steal, what's one thing you couldn't steal?"'

Simmo chuckles. 'Who's got a really good way of stealing from Kmart?'

'And where's my fuckin' watch!' jokes Bernie.

When it's her turn, Geraldine looks around in desperation. 'What am I going to do?'

'Have an opinion that's not Bernie's!' says Sally.

'Yeah, come on!' teases Jayne.

'Okay,' sighs Bernie, after everyone has spoken. He's like a tired father sorting out squabbles with his kids. 'If someone's in there stealing shit, I'd be saying, "I got no doubt you mob know who's doing it, and whoever's doing it, they certainly know themselves. But what do you guys think we should do?" If we provide them with the opportunity they'll be saying the same things we're saying – it isn't okay. Don't shit in your own nest.'

He drains his glass of wine and finds his tobacco; I notice his plan to give up smoking hasn't lasted long. 'I've got the biggest lot of fuckin' thieves in Armidale down at that shed,' says Bernie, 'and there hasn't even been a welding rod stolen 'cause they own it – they went out and bought it. I put that trust straight out there. You just keep giving till they don't take it.'

We talk about whether it would be better for the girls if they had their own space to meet, and about giving them the chance to think of a name for themselves.

'When we were working out a logo with the boys,' Bernie says, 'we sat out the back of Hungry Jack's one afternoon and threw around ideas. They suggested things like "Steel Rod Cocks" … I said yeah, great, that's a good one, put that down, what else? And I suggested we grab onto something already big and out there, you know, like the Big Merino or the Big Banana. One kid came out with Iron Boys Welding. Fuckin' oath. We talked about how we're working with iron, how we're working with boys, or is it men? Iron Man is associated with breakfast cereal – people are familiar with the name. Yep.' Bernie smiles and mentions the boy's name. 'That's when we had him in that TAFE course and he was liftin' everything.'

Simmo laughs. 'Was he the one living at Ebor?'

'No,' says Geraldine. 'Uralla.'

'Thank fuckin' God,' says Bernie as he stands to go outside for a cigarette, 'because the whole of Ebor would have been stolen. Hang on!' He looks down at his hands with an incredulous expression. 'It says on the map there's a town, but it's been pinched!'

We laugh as he slides open the back door. Sally soon joins him out in the cold while the rest of us finish our drinks and pack up. Driving home after the meeting, I have a giggling fit in the car, thinking of the boys wanting to call themselves 'Steel Rod Cocks'.

It has a certain ring to it, that's for sure.

The boxer

The Armidale Club, a live-music venue, has a theme night featuring music from the 60s and 70s. I sit near the stage with Rob – listening to the songs my siblings used to play on the record player in the bakery house. When I hear 'The Boxer' by Simon & Garfunkel, my thoughts turn to my father. He became a boxer after the war in Holland, while he was doing his bakery apprenticeship, and he boxed his first twelve fights in a pair of gym shoes he found at work.

Later, when he was doing compulsory military service with the Marines in the early 1950s, my father went on to have many boxing successes – Champion of the Netherlands, Military Champ of Europe, and Inter-Allied Champion of the World in the light-heavyweight class. By the time he was chosen for the Dutch boxing team that went to the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, he was planning to leave the Marines and become a professional boxer. But then he had a falling out with his manager and quit. Many of his friends later became professional boxers, but it was enough for my father to know he'd beaten them all in his amateur time.

It wasn't easy for my siblings and me to have a father who was so intent on winning. Intensely competitive, he could turn any game into a combat sport. When he played table tennis with my brothers in the 'big room' at the bakery house, sweat streamed down his face as the ping pong ball flew back and forth across the table. He was the same with poker and Scrabble – he loved to gamble, to win. Even when driving, he always needed to pass other cars, to be the one in front. My mother would

clutch the seat in fear, asking him to slow down. At traffic lights, he often leapt out of the car to abuse fierce-looking truck drivers who'd edged in front of him. He continued to do this until he was well into his 60s. He thought he could take on anyone and anything.

But now he's in hospital – again – recovering from a dislocated hip, which happened three days after his recent hip replacement operation. My father's medical problems seem to be worsening. It's only a couple of months since the three-hour operation on his head. The other week, when my mother rang to tell me my father had gone in for his hip replacement, I realised I had completely forgotten he was booked in for the operation. 'Why haven't you rung for fourteen days?' my mother asked. Life is busy.

Three days ago, my mother rang again. After coming home from hospital, my father dislocated his hip getting out of bed in the middle of the night. 'He didn't want to listen to advice about taking it easy,' my mother told me. 'And he didn't want to use his walking stick either.' She had to call an ambulance and now my father has to lie flat on his back for the next ten days. I'd called my mother a few times over the last week to see how things were going. She said my father wasn't in pain or discomfort, but she sounded worried.

I look around the room at the Armidale Club. The dance floor is filled with a group of teenagers who've come along with their parents. Some are even dancing with their parents. As I watch them, I feel sad about Joey, unable to imagine him here at the club with me. The teenagers all look as if they have healthy family relationships. I'm sure none of their parents trudge up the street with their dinner each evening. I draw my attention back to the stage, where a young man with a guitar sings Leonard Cohen's 'So Long Marianne', his powerful voice vibrating through my body. On stage, his father plays bass guitar while his mother sings back-up vocals. After the song, she drapes an arm over her son's shoulder – 'That's my boy!'

Suddenly tearful, I jump to my feet, in need of fresh air.

'Back in a minute,' I say to Rob, pushing through the crowd to the back of the club. Passing the drinkers at the bar, I catch sight of Tim, Joey's housemate. He follows me outside.

'All these bloody happy teenagers and their parents,' I tell him when he asks why I'm upset. 'I feel like such a failure.'

Tim puts an arm around my shoulder. 'I'm sure they've got problems too, Helena.'

* * *

'Going to play you some Slim Dusty,' Bernie says, looking over his shoulder with a cheeky grin. 'Get you relaxed and focused on the job.' He sets up an old cassette player on the bench in the kitchen area and walks over to pull open the barred window. 'Crackin' idea or what?'

Apart from several guffaws and raised eyebrows, most of the fellas slumped on the lounge and chairs stay silent. The cloud of smoke hanging over their heads drifts across to the open window. Except for Tye, all the regulars are here today – Gazza, Blister, Thommo, Freckles and Jimmy, and some I haven't seen for months – all busy puffing on rollies and passing around a bottle of soft drink. They've been working hard all morning, cutting lengths of steel for a sheep-loading ramp and welding chunky pieces of metal for a bike rack, the shed so noisy I had to go in search of earplugs. Now I'm happy to sink into a saggy armchair and listen to an interview Bernie and a few of the boys did for the local ABC radio station recently.

'Want to have a listen, fellas?' asks Bernie. 'You can go back to work if you want, but I reckon you'll be sorry.'

From the corner of my eye, I see a slight figure slink off into the workshop with his cap pulled down low. He's not taking any chances.

'Gazza's gone.' Blister nods in the direction of the door.

Lenny, one of Joey's mates, who has been coming to the shed for the past month, also wanders away. The others laugh loudly.

'Shame job,' murmurs Bernie.

I want Gazza and Lenny to come back into the kitchen with the rest of us, to listen to the program and feel proud, not embarrassed.

'It played on the breakfast show,' says Bernie. 'A lot of people have been ringing up, saying "That sounds unreal!"' He presses the play button and then walks out to join the other two in the workshop.

A young woman's voice booms into the room: 'If you're someone who has seen the sparks of a grinder or enjoyed the smell of molten metal …'

The familiar noises of the shed are heard on the player. The boys sneak looks at each other and chuckle nervously.

'… you might be pleased to know the trade of welding and iron mongering is alive and well in Armidale. We had a tour of the Iron Man Welders' shed earlier this week …' The woman's voice is backed by sudden laughter from the boys in the kitchen. I'm smiling, too – so strange to hear the world of the shed projected back like this.

I listen as Bernie introduces the reporter to Lenny.

'Tell us your story, Lenny,' she says after he has explained how he used a hammer to make a patterned finish on some water bowls. 'You look fairly young – what does the future hold for you?'

'I dunno – banging metal.'

The boys in the kitchen burst into raucous laughter. Now I understand why Lenny left the room. Shame job, alright. But as the interview continues, the boys listen intently, hunching forward on the edge of the lounge with elbows on their knees.

Towards the end of the program, the reporter asks Bernie why the local community supported the project in such a big way. 'People are looking for answers,' he tells her. 'It's a tough business rearing young men: they're dropping out of school, unable to find work, all sorts of alcohol and drug abuse going on. When people start to see young fellas stepping up to the plate, they think, "Well, gee …" Parents are ringing up, but it comes back to the boys themselves. If they want to do it, we'll help make it happen. For the most part, these kids come from very disadvantaged backgrounds, and I think it's the first time they realise there's somewhere for them to go in life.'

Near me, one of the boys clears his throat. Looking over, I notice no one laughing now. Not even smiling.

The fishbowl

A few weeks later, I pick up Joey from a friend's place.

'Mum, we need to go to the police station at six o'clock.' Joey is bleary-eyed, unshaven, and as he eases himself into the car, I smell rum. He's probably been awake all night partying. I was on my way to the welding shed when he rang to ask for a lift home from a friend's house, and even though I grumbled about him treating me like a taxi driver, I didn't say no.

'Why's that?' I ask.

He tells me a complicated tale about being involved in a mishap at a local hotel. His mates told the police about Joey's part in the escapade.

Joey yawns loudly. 'I was in one of the cells at the police station for two hours yesterday. They tried to ring you.'

I take a deep breath, trying to slow the panic inside. The image of Joey in a cell fills my mind. It isn't right. Joey's not a criminal – he's just been caught doing something stupid, the sort of thing that can happen to anyone when actions come before thoughts. 'Clean yourself up,' I tell Joey when I drop him at his house. 'Have a wash, a shave and a sleep. I'll pick you up at six.'

* *

My eyes adjust to the shadows of the workshop after the brightness of the day outside. I catch sight of Tye working alongside Bernie on some shelves designed to fit the window of Jayne's health food shop. He hasn't been to the shed for months because he and Bernie had a falling out. At the Armidale Club the other week, I'd been complaining to Bernie how I was always driving Joey around. He'd told me, 'If there's a glimmer of hope it's leading to something positive, go with it … but if it becomes a "use", back off.' He'd had the same thing happen with Tye, he said, and had been giving him the cold shoulder – 'But we'll come right again.' It looks like they've sorted the problem.

I wave hello and put my gear in the kitchen. When Tye sees me carrying in a tray of brownies, his eyes widen and he gives me a big smile. At least his appetite hasn't changed. Then Gazza comes over, the brim of his cap pulled down low. He asks me to help him with a job, just as he'd ask any of the boys. Feeling like I've

passed some kind of test, I cut lengths of steel in half with the drop-saw, mesmerised by the blade slicing through the metal, sparks flying.

After checking with Bernie about what other jobs need doing, I grab a pair of ear-muffs and work at a bench outside, sanding and oiling lengths of timber for the shelves. Jayne's health food shop will be a good place to display smaller products like candlesticks and nutcrackers – that's if we ever manage to finish anything.

Later, with an almost desperate desire to see something completed, I work on the nutcrackers. They're made from a metal ring cut from a three-inch pipe, with a threaded bolt which twists down to crush the nut. Blister helps me find a long-forgotten pile of metal rings and I buff them on the grinder until they sparkle. Then I use the bench-drill to make the holes for the bolts. Each time I pull down the lever, my thoughts turn to police lock-ups and criminal records.

Lost in one of these disturbing daydreams, I jump when Bernie taps me on the shoulder. 'Helena, we're having a short meeting before lunch.'

In the kitchen, the boys have already made themselves comfortable on the old lounges and the air is thick with smoke. Bernie stands near the bench, holding a steaming mug of coffee, upright and stiff-legged in faded jeans and muddy boots, a checked shirt neatly tucked under his belt. He seems a little tense, like he's about to give a presentation, but then he takes a seat at the table next to Tye. 'Let's have a quick chat about making an effort to get stuff on these shelves for Jayne's shop,' he says. 'What things could we finish?'

He's interrupted by someone's mobile phone ringing. Thommo answers the call. I notice his shirt sleeve is shredded, like he's been attacked by a wild animal. The shirt was caught in the grinder earlier.

'It's Jimmy,' he says, 'asking for a lift.' Simmo finds his keys and heads out to pick him up.

'We filled Jimmy's shoes with frangers,' Freckles tells Bernie, an impish gleam in his eye.

Bernie screws up his nose. 'Not used ones?'

'Yeah!'

Simmo soon returns with Jimmy, who swaggers in like a naughty student coming back to class. He greets the other boys with a cocky half-smile. Bernie looks

at Jimmy. 'You need to finish that bike rack so I can get the fuckin' thing out of here. And we've got the steel for the barbeque edging, so you can get started on that too.'

'Okay,' mumbles Jimmy, the self-satisfied expression fading from his face.

'Freckles, get someone on the fire poker things. Blister and Helena are working on the nutcrackers. Once we get a few finished, we'll put them in cane baskets.' Bernie taps the side of his head. 'Who does the fuckin' thinking around here?'

The boys laugh.

'And who wants to come in tomorrow?' asks Bernie, like he's inviting the boys to a wild party. 'Some of you blokes might get here early.' He looks at Thommo. 'But don't you be using the grinder.'

'And don't be bent,' warns Freckles.

'I haven't smoked dope for eight days now,' says Tye. There's a hush in the room. 'I've just been sitting around people, not even wanting to smoke.'

'You seem to be talking a lot more,' says Bernie. 'And looking at people.'

'I'm feeling more rested,' says Tye, blowing a neat line of smoke-rings into the air.

'That's crackin'.' Bernie closes his diary and pushes his chair away from the table. 'Good to have you back with us too. Tye's doing army reserves now,' he tells the others. 'I've asked him to bring a hand grenade down to the shed next week.' Bernie grabs his welding helmet and strides out to the workshop. A moment later he pops his head around the door and looks at Freckles. 'Frangers in shoes, eh?'

**

Later, as we sit out the front of the shed eating lunch, I ask Bernie if he knows anything about the incident at the hotel on Friday night. He shakes his head and raises his eyebrows for more information. I briefly mention Joey was involved and that we have to go to the police station at six for an interview. 'Any advice?'

'Just tell the truth,' says Bernie. 'He'll be much better off and will probably just get a caution.'

Freckles pipes up and says he has three cautions. The next time he'll be charged and sent to a remand centre at Grafton. I wonder if he really understands what it means to be locked up.

We talk about the new police station: a hulking, green-painted brick building on a corner near the centre of town. Bernie finishes his bread roll and asks, 'Any of you blokes been in the fishbowl yet?'

The boys guffaw and make jokes about drunken nights in the lock-up. I don't know what Bernie means by the fishbowl, but I laugh along with the others anyway. I suppose I'll find out soon enough.

***

I have a shower at home before picking up Joey. He looks better – clean-shaven, dressed in baggy jeans and a faded blue hoodie – and on our way to the police station, I mention how Bernie said to tell the truth. Joey nods in reply.

We wait for over an hour in the icy-cold foyer, watching various people come and go before having our initial interview with a fresh-faced blonde policewoman. Then, another young police officer, with a muscular build and what looks like a stuck-on moustache, takes us to the 'holding area'. He lists Joey's belongings: a cap and a bottle of Coke. On one side of the holding area is a row of perspex-covered cells, each about the size of a telephone box. The fishbowl. I notice how each cell had a curved steel bench. As I look around the room, I'm reminded of places where animals are slaughtered – places easy to hose down afterwards. A toilet at one end of the line of cells has clear perspex on the top and bottom and a clouded area in the middle. I shiver, imagining Joey sitting for two hours in one of these plastic cells. While I was walking in the bush on my birthday, he was here. My beautiful boy.

On the counter is a set of scales behind a perspex shield and I ask the police officer what they're for. 'We weigh the drugs in front of people,' he says. I blush from ignorance, out of place in this sterile environment. At least old-style police stations had character. The empty cells in this holding area may have been hosed down and disinfected since the previous night, but I sense layers of wretchedness on these surfaces that will never wash away.

We have our interview with the two police officers in charge of the case. When they ask Joey questions, he slouches in his chair and says things like: 'I didn't really think about it.'

As I listen to him recount his actions on the day, my mood sinks lower and lower. What am I doing in this police station with my son? This isn't the right path for him – he's meant for better things.

The police give Joey a caution. Three hours has passed by the time we finally walk out the front door. I'm drained, shaking with cold and hunger. We drive away from the police station in silence. When I stop out the front of Joey's house I say, with little hope, 'Maybe you should come along to the shed next week … spend some time with Bernie and the boys.'

'I'll think about it.' He yawns and then leans over to kiss my cheek.

Gotta learn shit for ourselves

The next day, I ring one of my brothers to ask if Joey can visit him in Sydney for a few nights. My brother works as a truancy officer – surely he'll understand how important it is for a male mentor to step in at a time like this. He assures me he'll ring back in a couple of days, but he doesn't. We're all busy with our own families and work commitments, and he's no doubt overwhelmed by the needs of the families he's already supporting through his job.

'You make your bed, you lie in it,' my mother always tells me. I think she developed this attitude during the war. My mother was only nine when the Germans took over. Tall and thin, with short dark hair, she was often mistaken for a boy, so she was the one her family sent to steal whatever she could find. She doesn't like to talk about the war or her family, so I know very little of what went on – only that it wasn't a happy home. By the end of the war, she and her sisters had been without food for so long they developed oedema. My mother was weak and near death when the Americans finally rolled into the city, throwing bars of chocolate from the tanks.

* * *

At the shed the following Sunday, Bernie pulls up with a couple of new blokes in his ute. I meet Skippa as he steps down from the cab. He's tall and dark-haired, with rounded shoulders and the sad eyes.

'Skippa's just been expelled from Year Eleven,' Bernie tells me, before calling out to the others in the workshop to down tools and head into the kitchen.

The other new bloke is looking at me curiously. As I smile and introduce myself, he reaches forward to shake my hand in an old-fashioned way. 'Nice to meet you, Helena,' he says. 'They call me Marshall.'

Marshall is tall with thick blonde hair and a farmer's drawl. As I lead the way into the kitchen, he says he's from Bernie's TAFE group. I can tell he's excited to be at the shed.

Bernie plonks a couple of bottles of soft drink onto the table. The boys wander in and start pouring drinks, rolling cigarettes and talking amongst themselves.

'I thought we'd see how we're tracking,' says Bernie, once everyone has settled down. 'Have you been going to TAFE, Thommo? Don't fuckin' bullshit me either.'

Thommo flicks a match under the end of his rollie. 'Occasionally.'

'You've only been back a week,' says Bernie. 'How occasional is it?'

'I was there on Wednesday,' says Thommo.

Bernie sighs and turns to Freckles. 'Still feeling good about the apprenticeship at the mine next year?'

'Yep,' says Freckles, pleased with himself. He told me earlier he'll be earning $56,000 by the third year of his apprenticeship. That's a lot of money.

'How about you, Jimmy?' asks Bernie. 'Full-time welding still?'

'Pretty full-time,' admits Jimmy, already turning away, keen for Bernie to move on to the next person. But Bernie leans back on his creaky plastic chair and regards Jimmy with a confused expression. 'You know, Jimmy, at TAFE the other afternoon, I heard your old man saying to Rocket that he'd bring in some forms for you. Surely you're big enough to take in your own forms?'

Jimmy shifts in his seat, and doesn't seem to know what to do with his mouth. 'It's easy for him – he's always at TAFE.'

'So are you. In fact, you're down there more than he is.' Bernie stares at Jimmy, steady and uncompromising. 'Time to man-up. Are you with me? I'm going to check with Rocket and I'll kick your arse if your old man does it.'

Jimmy shakes his head. 'Nah … Dad took them home and said he'll take them back to TAFE tomorrow.'

'But he's not going to take them,' says Bernie. 'You're going to take them when you're there next.'

It's like watching a showdown between two cowboys, but I already know who's going to shoot straighter and faster. And it's not Jimmy, who sits sulking on the edge of the lounge, his mouth a twisted half-smile.

'Have a thirty-second conversation with your old man,' adds Bernie. 'Take the forms off him and say, "I'm in control of my life."' The others laugh, relieved they're not getting the third degree, but Bernie's expression remains serious. 'Are you picking up what I'm putting down?'

'Yeah,' mutters Jimmy.

'Man-up time,' says Bernie, and I can almost see him sliding a smoking pistol back into its holster. 'Man-up time.'

* *

After checking with the rest of the boys, Bernie asks if they'd mind answering a few questions for a research project he's involved with. The boys organise themselves into two groups: Freckles, Blister, Jimmy and Marshall sit around the table, while Thommo, Gazza and Skippa stay where they are, lined up on the lounge near me. Bernie hands out paper and pens. 'Righto,' he begins, 'what is it that you blokes really give a shit about?'

The boys are silent until Freckles says cautiously: 'Family, friends, full-time job … getting my head wet?'

The others next to him nearly fall off their chairs laughing. I haven't heard the expression before, but I assume it means having sex. I'm not asking for an explanation, that's for sure.

'You know what you're talking about now,' says Bernie with a smile. He turns towards the despondent figure of Skippa, who sits hunched forward on the lounge. 'What about you, Skippa?'

Skippa shrugs. I wonder if my presence in the room is making the boys inhibited, too shy to say what they really think or feel. I catch Bernie's eye and nod towards the door – 'Maybe I'll go outside?'

'Nah, you stay here.' He crouches down to join the group at the table, who are talking in low voices, laughing from time to time like they're sharing special secrets. 'If getting your head wet is really important to you, put it down,' says Bernie, his voice soft. 'This isn't about bullshit – it's about fair dinkum answers.'

Freckles's group snort and giggle like bashful schoolboys, scraping their chairs across the floor to shift closer together. The silence in the room is broken from time to time with their ripples of laughter and comments. I hear Freckles say, 'Enjoying myself', and next to him, Jimmy nods in agreement, 'Yeah, happiness.'

I look across to the trio on the lounge and wonder how to get them talking. Gazza is supposed to be writing down his group's answers, but his page is blank. It feels like I'm hanging out with the wrong crowd at a party – all the action is happening on the other side of the room.

Bernie fires off another question: 'What makes you happy?'

'Hanging out with mates,' says Freckles, leaning forward to consult with the others in his group. Soon they're spluttering with laughter again.

Bernie, who is hovering over the lounge like a pesky magpie, asks: 'What makes you happy, Skippa?

Skippa shrugs. 'Having money.'

Bernie raises his eyebrows. 'Those guys in Hollywood always got more money than they know what to do with,' he says. 'But are they happy?'

Skippa shakes his head and looks across to the other group for support.

'They're just stupid,' answers Jimmy, blowing three perfect smoke rings into the air.

'Yep,' agrees Bernie. 'But if we say it's not just money, what is it that makes you happy, Skippa, because …?'

'Doing different shit with friends,' interrupts Freckles.

Bernie ignores him. 'Come on Skippa, I'm not letting you off the hook.'

I hold my breath, waiting for Skippa to answer. I feel for him. He seems too exposed and vulnerable for this sort of questioning. Like Jimmy and Freckles, I want to protect him.

'Being around people you like,' says Skippa at last, like it's a huge effort.

Seemingly oblivious to Skippa's discomfort, Bernie nods and looks down at his list. 'Next question, if you could change one thing in Armidale, what would you change?'

'Reduce the amount of dickhead cops,' says Jimmy, grinning at the cleverness of his answer.

Bernie looks at Jimmy like he hasn't heard properly. 'Here's your big chance to change something and all you got is a couple less dickhead cops?' He strides across the room. 'Come on, Skippa, you know I'm picking on you – what's one thing you'd change?'

Maybe Skippa senses the end nearing. He sits up on the lounge and answers straight off. 'Better teachers in school.'

'What about you, Thommo?'

'Less crap.'

'What do you mean? People shitting in the streets or …?'

The boys and I crack up. Even sad-faced Skippa can't help smiling. It's like watching stand-up comedy as Bernie struggles to wrench answers from these boys, forcing them to participate, to think.

Thommo shrugs helplessly. 'I dunno.'

Bernie purses his lips and exhales, runs a hand through his hair. 'Righto, last one … if you had a piece of advice for older people, what would that be?'

No quick answers this time. The boys are thinking hard. 'Come on,' says Bernie. 'Older people are telling you guys shit all the time! Here's your one chance to tell them something! What are you telling them oldies, Skippa?'

Skippa shakes his head.

'Gotta learn shit for ourselves,' says Freckles, looking up at Bernie.

'Yep, put that down.' Bernie puts the list of questions away. 'Thanks for that guys. Okay, let's get back to work.' He and the boys wander off. I notice one lonely brownie in the tray, surrounded by crumbs. No one ever wants to take the last one.

Freckles comes back into the kitchen and searches through the papers on the table for his pencil. I offer him the last brownie.

As he reaches across to the tray, I ask about his branding burn. Freckles rolls up his sleeve, uncovering a mottled, raised oval of skin which vaguely resembles a turtle.

'Will it stay like that forever?'

He nods. 'I could get a skin graft but I'm okay with it looking like this.'

'Do you have any other branding scars?'

'Nah,' says Freckles, shaking his head. 'Lesson learnt the hard way!'

I smile. 'They're probably the best sort of lessons – the ones you remember anyhow.'

We don't ask for help

A week later, I meet up with a friend from Brisbane at the coast. While I'm away, Rob rings and says, 'You better call your mother. I've just been on the phone with her – I think she needs help.'

I'm a little surprised by his concern. My father is still recovering from his dislocated hip in hospital but, knowing him, he's probably safer there than anywhere else. All the same, I phone my mother. In an offhand way, I mention how I'm close by and that I'd like to visit her at the Gold Coast for a night. She doesn't brush me off this time.

At the house, my mother has pinned a note on the front door with the name of the hospital and my father's room number – 630.

Through the doors of the hospital's main entrance, the air is chilly and smells of disinfectant and hospital-kitchen catering. I walk down corridors and avoid looking sideways at pale old bodies stretched out on hospital beds, tucked in with stiff sheets, finding it difficult to imagine my father in such a place. Sweat drips

down my arms, even though it's cold. I arrive at room 630, where an elderly man, who vaguely resembles my father, is lying in bed watching television. I stop at the door. Surely my father hasn't changed so much that I can't recognise him? The man stares back at me with a confused expression. My heart thumps wildly.

'Are you okay, love?' asks the man.

As soon as I hear his voice, I know it isn't my father. 'Sorry – wrong room.'

A friendly nurse directs me to room 603. My mother is sitting on a chair by the bed. 'Ach … you're here at last,' she says. 'Let's go and get coffee!'

'Hang on.' I lean over to kiss her cheek, forcing back tears. I'm shaken by the sight of my father, old and frail in his pale blue hospital gown. He's lost weight and has a vulnerability I've never seen before. It doesn't suit him. He was a boxer, a big strong man. A few months ago, he flexed his arms for the kids and his muscles popped up like Popeye's. I turn to kiss his forehead, controlling the waver in my voice. 'How's the hip, Pup?'

'Ja, not so good,' he says with a grimace, his voice weak.

I'm suddenly hit by the realisation that my father might die soon. Even though he's seventy-nine, the thought has never really occurred to me before. I'm not ready. I should have come earlier, should have been supporting Mum. But on the phone she always says, 'Don't come. Your father is okay. I'm alone … but not lonely!'

We don't ask for help. But my father is not okay.

I stay for a few days, travelling back and forth to the hospital. In between visits, my mother and I walk along the beach, and enjoy fancy cakes and coffee at Pacific Fair. One morning, I notice signs for a surf carnival. All along the promenade, people with white-zinc noses, tattoos and low-slung board shorts or bikinis are busy setting up 'camp' with open-air tents, folding chairs, eskies, bags of ice, cartons of beer and portable barbeques. The smell of barbequed sausages makes me nauseous, and nearly every man I see has a beer in his hand.

'Even though I was born here, I often feel like an alien in this country,' I tell my mother. She agrees. The Dutch don't do hot food on picnics.

When the time comes, I'm reluctant to go back home. It doesn't seem right to leave my father behind in the hospital, to be so far away.

* * *

Back in Armidale, on the front page of the local newspaper, the free one delivered to every house in town, is a large photo of Bernie. He's wearing a florid green and blue shirt, staring into the camera with a crooked grin. The headline states – 'Top Award for True Believer'. I laugh and read the first few sentences of the article. Bernie's won a New South Wales Premier's Award for his efforts with the Iron Man Welders. Good for him. I look at the photo again. Bernie's tropical-style shirt isn't like anything I've ever seen him wear. Maybe he picked it up during his time on Fraser Island.

I didn't know Bernie had been nominated for the award, and by the puzzled look on his face I don't think he did either. The article mentions 'Mr Shakeshaft was surprised but beaming about the honour.' I bet he was. He'll be even more surprised when he sees this photo splashed across the front page of the paper. He'll never live it down.

A few days later, I visit Bernie's wife, Jayne, at her health food shop. She's busy serving customers but greets me warmly. Even from a distance, her smile feels like a hug. I wander around, enjoying the calm atmosphere of her shop, running my hand over one of the metal gum leaves entwined in the decorative railing leading to the upper level – an Iron Man Welders' job.

When Jayne finishes serving, I ask about Bernie's new-found fame … and about the shirt in the photo.

Jayne laughs. 'Bernie didn't know anything about the Premier's award – I knew he wouldn't go if I told him! I just said we had to go to the ceremony at the town hall to support the people who'd donated money to the Iron Man Welders.' A guilty look crosses her face. 'I bought the shirt in Byron Bay. He's always trusted me with buying his shirts – but not anymore! Anyway, as we walked into the town hall, this man came over and told Bernie that he'd have to go and stand on the stage ...'

Bernie walks into the shop, eyebrows raised at the sound of his name. He shakes his head when he realises what we're talking about. 'Shame job,' he says ruefully. 'When that photographer fella said to go and stand with them three old ladies on the stage, I was thinking he's loopy and he's picking on me because I'm the one in the crazy shirt. Then Jayne said, "He's got no idea." Stop fuckin' around, I told her – what's going on here?'

He sighs. 'I copped it. I wore that shirt to humour Jayne. Now everyone in town is calling it "the shirt award". One girl we picked up the other night on Streetbeat was cackin' herself for about twenty minutes – I've never been so laughed at.'

Bernie looks so comically miserable I can't help myself. I laugh, too. And so does that sneaky earth mother Jayne.

Step up to the plate

Summer's arrived and Jimmy is sporting a strawberry-blonde mohawk. I find him sitting on the old lounge outside the shed, intently smoking a rollie and kicking stones to Bernie's two border collies that are tied up near the door.

'That's a different look for you!' I tell him, laughing.

'Thommo did it after a few drinks on Friday night.' He smirks. 'Mum's not impressed!'

No, I don't imagine she would be.

Dust and gravel spray as Blister pulls up in Bernie's yellow ute, a tattered P-plate stuck to the front fender. The dogs leap to their feet, tails wagging as Bernie steps down from the passenger side. Thommo emerges from the shed on a remodelled BMX bike, a huge smile on his face. His broad shoulders hunch forward as he struggles to master the chain-link steering wheel which has replaced the handlebars.

Bernie stops in his tracks and laughs out loud. 'Crackin' idea! I can see those being real popular around town!' He shakes his head and wanders into the shed, the rest of us following behind.

Inside, Gazza shows him the bike rack, a contract job for the local credit union, and complains that Thommo, hung-over and ratty from a big night out, did a 'shit job' the Sunday before. The welds are messy and need to be ground back. I help carry the bike rack out to the front of the shed and Gazza and I start filing down the ragged joins.

Blister comes out to lend a hand. He doesn't seem his normal cheerful self, and I noticed earlier that he was walking with a limp. Once the bike rack is done, I find the bag of nutcracker pieces and ask Blister if he wants to help finish them. He dutifully welds bolts onto the inside of the metal rings like he's doing chores for his mother. The nutcrackers only need a coat of spray-paint but Blister isn't interested. He wants to go home.

Bernie asks if I can give Blister a lift to his flat in Girraween. I grab my keys and we head off. To break the silence in the car, I ask Blister about his limp. He says he hurt his ankle at soccer and it's starting to ache. We hardly speak for the rest of the drive. As we approach the west side of town, he gives directions to his new flat – 'Me and Emma had enough of living in a caravan.' I watch him shuffle down the driveway of the red-brick units.

Back at the shed, Bernie takes me aside. 'Did Blister tell you about Emma?'

I shake my head. 'No.'

'She's got a cyst, and they think it could be cancer.'

'But she's only sixteen … and she's pregnant!'

He nods. 'They're having it checked out this week. From what Blister has told me, it looks like they're preparing them for bad news.'

***

A few days later, Joey and I return to the police station to sort things out about the caution.

After we're finished, I drop Joey at his house.

'Wait here a minute,' he says. 'I've got something for you.'

He goes inside and comes back minutes later with a belated birthday card for me. On a white piece of paper, he's drawn an unbalanced set of scales. On the lighter 'up-side' of the scale is a stick-figure with an angular face and a turned-down mouth, wearing a police cap and dark glasses. The figure is surrounded by symbols – a station wagon with an emphasised music note hanging over it, a bank note, a broken bone, a medical cross and the words 'yell!…argument…fight'. On the heavier side of the scale, outweighing all of the above, are two full-bodied figures – a man with a

goatee beard and shaved head wearing a Superman T-shirt, standing with his arm around a woman in a white smock, both of them peaceful and happy.

* * *

Two Sundays before Christmas, Bernie rings, and says he's heading down the shed for a couple of hours. I make a batch of brownies and drive over. In the workshop, Bernie is standing at a bench with Blister, organising a heap of metal buttons into piles. He asks if I can pick up all the scrap pieces of metal lying around, and then give the floor a good sweep.

Blister is wearing shorts and thongs – unusual shed-gear – but it looks as if his eyes are twinkling again. He's also had a haircut and trimmed his goatee. I wander over and ask him about Emma.

He flashes me a crooked-teeth smile. 'She's really good. The tests came back clear.' Blister looks down at his thongs. 'Bernie picked me up from downtown today – said it didn't matter what I was wearing. He just wanted me to come over for a while.'

'I'm glad it worked out so well,' I tell him. 'I was worried for you.'

Once the concrete floor is swept, I take a break on the lounge outside. Blister comes out to where I'm sitting, lighting a cigarette on the way. He pulls up a milk-crate and tells me a little more about Emma and the cyst she had on her ovary.

'The first doctor we went to said if the cyst was cancerous she would only have five weeks to live.' He pauses to take a tight-lipped drag on his smoke. 'But the doctor at the hospital sat down with me and we had a smoke and he explained things without using all them big words – like if you cut the cyst away, even if it was cancerous, it'd be gone with the operation.' Emma had the operation two weeks ago. 'It's been hard at home,' admits Blister. 'I've had to cook all the meals, do all the cleaning, carry Emma to the shower and to the toilet, but now she's getting stronger.'

The baby is fine and Emma is nineteen-weeks pregnant. Blister reckons it's a boy because of the way it's kicking.

I laugh. 'You sound like a proud father already!'

Blister finds a piece of scrap metal to throw to the dogs. 'We're going to wait three or four years before having another kid because if it's a boy and it's like I was …' He raises his eyebrows, suggesting hard times ahead.

'What were you like?'

'I had A.D.D.'

'Really?' I'm surprised. 'You don't seem that way.'

To me, Blister has always been the gentleman of the shed, the care-taker. He's the one who shows an interest in the young fellas when most of the others can't be bothered.

He nods. 'I've got the adult version of it now, but I was always in trouble when I was little. These days I only get aggressive if I'm drunk and someone disses Emma or my mum or my little brother. I don't mind if they diss me … but not them.' He crushes the butt of his cigarette under his thong. 'We couldn't find out what sex the baby is because it turned its back to the screen.'

Bernie wanders out from the shed. 'Blister, when you two are finished yarning I want you to give Helena a lesson in welding. Give her my helmet.'

A thrill runs through me… welding! In the storeroom, Blister finds some leather gloves for me and Bernie's blue welding helmet.

'It's a good one' he says, handing it over. 'Take care of it.'

After putting on a leather welding jacket and some strap-on leather pieces for leg and feet protection, Blister hooks up the welder. While he scouts around for scrap metal to practise with, I stand by the bench trying to stay calm, even though my heart is beating wildly. Me – welding?

When we're ready to start, I place Bernie's helmet over my head like I'm getting ready for a space mission. Blister squeezes the trigger on the welding gun and taps it on the metal bench. Everything goes dark. A sudden shot of panic makes my throat turn dry. I swallow, wondering if I've momentarily blacked out. The only thing left in this night-time world is a small flash of green. Then the green flash disappears and it's light again. Through the helmet-visor, I see Blister leaning over pieces of metal at the end of the bench, lining up the copper wire of the welding gun. He lifts the visor of his helmet –'You have to line it up really well because it's hard to see when you start welding.'

I connect the brief and confusing darkness with the trigger on Blister's welding gun. 'I didn't know everything went dark!' I tell him.

He laughs and flips his visor back down.

I never expected a welding lesson to be so intimate – it's like Blister and I are the only two people left in this dark world, with just a small green light to guide us through. Maybe this is why the boys enjoy welding so much. It really is an escape. And Blister is the perfect teacher. He shows me how to hold the welding gun steady, draw straight lines, do a tack – all the things I've heard about for months. My welds are jerky and messy, but at the end of the lesson he's full of compliments. 'That's a good weld here,' he says, pointing to a join, ignoring the hole I burnt through the pipe when I was supposed to be attaching it to a flat piece of metal. He could just as easily say: 'That's a shit weld.' But he doesn't.

As we walk outside to join the others, with me holding my 'welding trophy', we pass the bike rack which still needs re-welding. Blister stoops down, checks the joins and shakes his head in disgust. 'Shit welds.'

**

Outside, Bernie is sitting with Freckles and Jimmy on the concrete ledge. I take a seat and listen in on their conversation, noticing Jimmy has swapped his mohawk for a stubbly crew-cut. A late-afternoon breeze stirs the leaves in the gums along the side fence, and the dogs from next door bark as Lou and Girl chase after sticks that Blister throws for them.

The week before, Bernie organised a competition to design a pamphlet holder. Jimmy's entry was judged the winner and now Bernie hands over the $50 prize money. 'Get some credit for your phone,' he says in a quiet voice. 'Before you just go and drink it all.'

'Mum's buying me credit.'

'Don't worry about your mum. You do it. And step up to the plate, or I'm going to have a talk with your mother.'

'What's she going to do?' scoffs Jimmy.

'Wait and see. I'll put some things in place you won't like.'

'And I'll go, "Mum … get fucked."' Jimmy laughs like he's said something funny, but no one else joins in.

'Hey, not to your mother,' says Bernie in a low voice.

Unconcerned, Jimmy says that he tells his mother to get fucked when she needs to be told to get fucked.

'Is there another way you could address it?' asks Bernie. 'As opposed to talking to her like she's one of your mates at the pub?'

'She tells me to get fucked,' says Jimmy, looking to Freckles and Blister for support. They both stare at the ground.

'I'm not talking about what she does,' continues Bernie. 'I'm talking about when you tell her to get fucked, like you tell Freckles to get fucked when you're at the pub. Is there another way?'

The three boys are silent, deep in thought.

'Get off my back?' offers Freckles.

Jimmy shakes his head. 'If I'm going to say, "Get off my back", it comes out as, "Mum, fuck off!"'

Bernie asks Freckles what he does when he feels like telling his mum to get fucked.

'Walk off.'

'That's what I do too.' Jimmy leans over to spit into the trench next to the concrete ledge. 'But Mum follows me and keeps jabbering shit in my ear.'

'What I'm interested in, Jimmy,' sighs Bernie, 'is whether it's possible for you to try saying, "You're in my space. I'm happy to sit down and talk about it, but following me around is making me really cranky."'

'I've tried that.'

'I'm coming up with a plan for you, and it's going to involve not telling your mother to get fucked.'

Bernie crosses his legs and stares at Jimmy with narrowed eyes. 'We liked you better with the mohawk, mate.'

Not my fault

Three days before Christmas, I hear knocking at the front door, and then at the window. I check the clock – four in the morning. I jump out of bed, heart thumping, imagining the worst – accident, death, disaster. My legs shake as I open the door. A police officer stands on the doorstep, his torch shining down. I quickly scan the porch, but he's on his own. I'm sure there have to be two if the news is really bad.

'Do you have a son named Joey Pastor?'

I nod, too scared to speak. The police officer says Joey is at the police station. He's been charged with another minor offence and because he's only seventeen, a parent needs to be involved.

I don't want to go to the police station at four in the morning. I don't want to see Joey in one of those perspex cells, to have that image hanging in my head over Christmas.

'Can you go?' I ask Rob. 'Bring Joey back here.'

Rob pulls on some clothes and goes to the police station. He soon returns, alone. 'Joey didn't want me there. They'll let him out in the morning, Helena, when he's sobered up.'

I lie in bed for hours, unable to sleep, drifting off briefly before daylight.

* *

The next morning, Joey comes around in clothes that smell of alcohol and cigarettes. 'What's going on?' I ask. 'Do you want to spend Christmas in a juvenile detention centre?'

'The police over-reacted,' he replies. 'It's not my fault.'

'It never is.'

He flops onto the lounge and tells me about the misadventure he had with his friend Tobias the previous night. Joey has been cautioned again and put on bail. He has to be home at nine every night, either at Tim's or at our house.

My son on bail? This is Joey's second caution.

Joey stands up, ready to go. 'I need you to drive me somewhere.'

'I can't do that,' I tell him. 'I'm going to a friend's house to sing Christmas Carols.'

Singing is the last thing I feel like, but Freddie has been looking forward to it all day. 'You'll have to walk.'

'It'll only take five minutes,' he insists, his voice rising.

I shake my head. 'Sorry.' I know that no drive with him ever takes five minutes.

Joey curses loudly and storms through the lounge room, knocking against the telephone table and a bookcase on his way past. Crash! The phone falls to the ground, glass tinkles, books scatter over the carpet. He doesn't care. The front door slams shut. Bang! I kneel on the floor amid the rubble. In my hand is a framed photo of Joey and Theo, aged six and three. They're perched on a rock at the Brisbane Botanic Gardens, their faces laughing and happy behind the broken glass. Tears roll down my cheeks. Crying won't help fix this mess. I wipe my eyes, replace all the books and then wrap the broken glass in newspaper. Later, as I pick up the phone, I notice the number display doesn't work and the plastic covering is cracked. What does it matter? I don't care if the phone never rings again.

***

On the eve of the BackTrack Christmas party, the sky fills with heavy clouds and rain blows down in sheets. I enjoy summer storms in Armidale, but driving out of town to Bernie and Jayne's place, I have to be careful the car doesn't slide off the muddy road. I park as close as possible to the front door, then dash across the grass with my bag and a bottle of wine. Inside, I catch my breath and look around the room. On the hearth, a small Norfolk pine sits in a bucket, its crisp scent infusing the room. The tree is decorated with tinsel and coloured balls, a pile of presents underneath.

Bernie is in the kitchen, looking clean and fresh in a blue and white football jersey. As I place my cheese and biscuits on the table, Jayne walks in from the back verandah and hugs me warmly. She hands me a parcel from under the tree – 'Merry Christmas, Helena!' Under a layer of red cellophane and gold ribbon is a box of Turkish Delight, my favourite sweet-treat from her shop, and … a nut cracker with its own wooden stand!

'Who finished it off?' I ask Bernie.

'Who do you reckon?'

Taking a macadamia nut from a bowl on the table, I place it on the metal ring, twisting the bolt down onto the nut until the shell cracks. It works perfectly.

We join the others on the back verandah. The rain has eased, leaving the chill of a New England summer's night. In the distance I make out the misty shape of Dumaresq Dam – once the water-supply of Armidale – with the platypus-like hump of Mt Duval looming large behind. A pack of black and white dogs run past the back steps, heading towards the horse sheds, their fur flattened from the rain. Bernie calls them back with a sharp order and then says to Simmo, 'Let's set up the gas barbeque on the veranda.'

Flinty, another youth worker from the BackTrack crew, helps bring the barbeque up the steps. He nods hello in his solemn way, the plaited strings of his Nepalese beanie framing his wispy beard, his hair pulled back in a ponytail. I listen in as he and Bernie discuss their plan to take the boys camping at a friend's bush property near Ebor.

'I want to take them rabbiting,' says Bernie. 'Do some killing.' Noticing my expression, he adds, 'So they see where meat comes from. It's one thing to put a piece of steak or sausage on the barbeque, but it's another to think: what animal gave its life so I can have life?'

Bernie mentions a time when he and Jayne were house parents on a farm near Goulburn with a group of boys who were 'too wild' to go into mainstream anything. 'We used to go rabbiting at night and try and catch them by hand,' he tells me. 'It was months before those boys finally bagged a rabbit, but the build-up was all about how they were going to kill that fuckin' rabbit. They'd have punch-ups through the day, sorting out the pecking order as to who got to do it.'

I smile, picturing the scene.

'They had no idea how they were going to kill it, except that they were going to smash it and whack it.' Bernie lifts his arm to demonstrate. 'I eventually taught them how to sneak out around the spotlight to chase the rabbit back towards the light, and it wasn't long before they had a rabbit. But all of a sudden they had a frightened little animal with its life at stake – trying to get away and biting and scratching them

– and they were passing it around like a hot potato. I didn't show them how to hold the rabbit, that was for a later lesson, but I grabbed it and said, "Scottie, you're the man … come and kill this rabbit."' Bernie shook his head. 'Those boys were in tears, couldn't kill it between the six of them. They ended up letting the rabbit go. It didn't mean a whole lot to me at the time, but I realise now it was a good lesson on how we kill things. That's why it's good to get those boys out bush … they spend all day shooting things on the computer, but give them a real gun and tell them to shoot a rabbit – most of them choke.'

Bernie's story reminded me of a story my father once told me. In the third floor apartment where he lived in Amsterdam, they often 'grew' a rabbit in the attic. The slaughtering of the animal was an event of much importance. Usually it was done by an uncle, but on this particular occasion, my father's father was going to kill the rabbit himself. After ten minutes in the attic, he came downstairs, looking rather pale.

'Is het gebeurd?' his children asked. Is it done?

They raced upstairs to find the rabbit still running around the room, with a rope around its neck.

My opa – known for being a big, strong, tough man – had tried to hang it.

* *

When the food is ready, we drag in a few sawn-off logs and sit around the fire to eat. Soon the rain clouds disappear, leaving the sky full of stars. The meat is the best I've ever tasted – organic fillet steaks from Jayne's shop, marinated and cooked to perfection. So different to the beef patties and sausages served up for lunch at the shed.

After the meal, the dogs snuffle about for scraps while we talk about what's in store for the New Year. Bernie tells us that Blister has just scored a painting apprenticeship with a local fellow.

'Beauty!' says Jayne, raising her glass. 'Another BackTrack success!'

Bernie doesn't look so sure. 'His missus doesn't want him to do it. She's in tears and they've just had a big barney. She wants him home.'

'They like being at home with their blokes,' adds Geraldine. 'Doing nothing.'

'She needs to get her own life,' says Bernie with a heavy sigh. 'They're just kids … with a long history of living with unemployment.'

**

Later, just before I leave, I remember my nutcracker, still lying on the table inside. As I make my way around the fire, Bernie leans back and asks if I want to come along to Ebor with him and Flinty. 'I'll think it over,' I tell him with a surprised laugh. 'But I don't think rabbiting is really my thing.'

'You won't know until you try it.' Bernie's tone is light, but his eyes are serious. 'Might be time to step up to the plate, Helena.'

'Maybe,' I say, still laughing as I open the door into the kitchen. I know I won't go rabbiting, but his comment leaves me thinking of the challenges I do need to face – like fixing things between Joey and me.

Just out walking

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, Joey rings and asks me to pick him up from a friend's place. 'I've bought presents for everyone,' he says happily. 'I need you to help me wrap them.'

Once he's in the car and we're on our way home, we stop to save a small turtle stranded in the middle of the road near the university. I hear sheep bleating in a nearby paddock, and watch as Joey kneels down to pick up the turtle. Then he carries the turtle gingerly over to show me.

'It really stinks!' he says.

He's right – the smell is overwhelming. Even after he leaves the turtle in the bushes by a creek some distance away from the road, his fingers still reek of smelly turtle.

Joey wipes his hands on the car seat. 'Imagine how bad a skunk would be!'

We laugh.

At home, I help wrap his presents – rap CDs for Theo and Henry and a fancy Super Soaker water gun for Freddie. After dinner, we all sit around the tree, opening gifts and being nice to each other. Later, Rob and the older kids play Poker, a Christmas tradition from my own family, while I put Freddie to bed and clean up.

Then, just before nine, Joey goes back to Tim's, in time for the bail conditions.

* * *

In the early hours of the morning, four days after Christmas, two police officers are at the door with torches and serious expressions.

'We're looking for Joey,' one of them says. 'He was seen downtown at midnight.'

Joey is still on bail. What was he doing out at midnight?

'He hasn't been here today,' I say, my mouth dry. 'But I'll check.'

I find Joey asleep in Theo's room, stretched out on the spare bed in his boxers. He must have come in the back door without me hearing.

'Joey,' I whisper. 'The police are here.'

He wakes, rubs his eyes, and pulls on some clothes.

The police take Joey away.

'I couldn't sleep,' he tells me before he leaves. 'I was just out walking.'

Now he's breached his bail conditions and will go before a magistrate in the Children's Court the next morning. The magistrate will decide whether to send Joey to a juvenile detention centre in Grafton or increase his bail conditions.

I lie awake for the rest of the night, imagining Joey sitting on one of the curved steel benches in the fishbowl. Over the past week, I'd begun to think things were improving, especially after Joey came around one night and told me he'd been invited to a Youth Camp in Jindabyne. He asked for money to pay the deposit and said the camp was organised by a local Christian group. I gave Joey the cheque straight away, happy he was doing something positive.

As dawn breaks, I hear birds twittering in the bamboo outside my bedroom window. I suddenly feel very scared. 'Please don't let Joey get locked up,' I whisper. 'I want him to go camping with the Christians.'

Like Bernie always says to the boys at the shed: 'First time is learning. Second time is stupid.'

* * *

I meet Don, the Legal Aid Solicitor, in the icy foyer of the police station. He's a large, bumbling man, whose words rush from his mouth with the hint of a stutter. I find his awkwardness strangely reassuring. Joey is still inside the police station.

'He's fine,' Don tells me. 'The police bought him breakfast from Maccas!'

Out on the footpath, where we can talk in private, Don chain-smokes, holding each cigarette between his thumb and first finger. 'The most likely scenario is that the magistrate will change the bail conditions,' he says. 'But there's no guarantee.'

Then Don looks at his watch. 'The police will bring Joey over to the courthouse shortly. I must warn you, Helena … he'll be handcuffed.'

I nod, struggling to maintain control. How had Joey and I become part of the public drama at the local courthouse?

* *

Inside the courtroom, I sit on an uncomfortable wooden pew, droplets of sweat sliding down my arms. The police bring Joey through the doors – he's wearing silver handcuffs around his wrists.

He was just out walking, I want to protest. He couldn't sleep. He's a good boy.

The magistrate listens as the details of Joey's offence are read aloud. I keep my eyes on the back of Joey's stubbly scalp as he stands before the judge. I listen while Don explains to the court how this is Joey's first breach of bail, how he has a family who care about him, how his mother is sitting in the courtroom.

Confused by the legal terminology, I soon lose track of what's happening. It takes me a while to realise the judge's decision is to increase the bail conditions – the gist of the change is that Joey will reside with us, his family, in our home, and he is not to be absent from home between 8 p.m. and 8 a.m.

I stand, my legs almost crumpling with relief.

***

We have our annual New Year's Eve party, but no one arrives till after nine. By that time I feel like a friendless pariah. When the first guests finally walk through the door, disappointment flashes across their face. Others trickle in, but my confidence is gone. The anxiety of waiting for people to arrive is too much after the courtroom events of the previous day. Joey – happily settled back in Theo's room – and the other kids watch movies together. Rob and a couple of his friends stand around a fire near the back shed. Inside the house, the other guests and I sit at the wooden table and chat. My nutcracker is in hot demand, people get drunk. I don't need to do much – just listen, occasionally laugh, and wish for it to be over.

Later, while I'm out the front saying goodbye to the last guests, Joey dashes past and sprints down the street. 'Joey!' I call. 'Where are you going?'

He returns a minute later with his mate, Lenny, who lurches drunkenly in front of me. 'He needs a bandage,' says Joey. 'He's hurt.'

Lenny's arm is badly gashed, blood everywhere. Saliva fills my mouth. 'Maybe we should call an ambulance?'

'Nah, no ambulance,' slurs Lenny. 'I'm right – jus' need a bandage.'

'He's walked all this way looking for help,' says Joey when he sees the worried look on my face. 'He can't be that bad.' We wash Lenny's arm under the tap, while Rob finds a bandage in the first aid kit. The cut is deep and will definitely need stitches.

Lenny doesn't want to stay at our house, and he doesn't want to go home either – 'I promised Mum I wouldn't get into trouble,' he says over and over. As Rob and I talk about what to do, Lenny becomes agitated, worried that we're trying to take him to hospital. Joey takes him aside and softly reasons with Lenny until he agrees to go to another friend's house with Rob, but only if Joey travels with them in the car.

I clear the table and wash up, hoping the police won't turn up while they're gone. When Joey comes back, he stands by the bench in the kitchen and talks and talks – about how Lenny told him he lost his mates while he was out, and three drunken guys had attacked him and thrown him up against a window which smashed.

I kiss Joey goodnight, thinking how much older he suddenly seems. He's stepped up to the plate.

'I'm proud of the way you behaved tonight,' I tell him. 'You were a good friend … calm and caring.'

He nods. 'I'm glad I couldn't go out tonight, Mum … I'm glad I stayed home.'

Afterwards I think about alcohol and the havoc it wreaks. Lenny could have died if the glass had slashed his wrist. He could be lying near the window now, bleeding to death on the street.

The other day, when I'd driven Joey over to Lenny's house, Lenny was getting out of a car with some awful-looking men who had bottles of grog under their arms. One of them said, 'What the fuck are we doing standing out here?' and Lenny told him to shut up because 'Joey's mum is in the car.' Lenny cares about things like that.

'Keep Lenny safe,' I plead in the still of the night. 'Please.'

You don't love me

Having Joey home isn't easy. The house is crowded; tension builds. I sleep badly, waiting for the police to come knocking, which they do in the early hours of most mornings to check if Joey is home. Each time they come, I have to wake Joey and bring him to the front door. Rob and I begin to transform into nuclear reactors again. Rob starts telling me I have to force Joey to get a job, force him to be more responsible, force the court to change the bail conditions. When Rob speaks this way, I grit my teeth – I'm tempted to snap back and blame him for everything that's gone wrong, but I know that's not fair. We need to do this together, and learn how to be less adversarial and more loving with each other, but most especially with Joey.

**

A welcome break comes when Rob takes the three younger kids down south for a week's holiday at the beach with his family. I'm supposed to go, too, but I have to stay in Armidale because of Joey's bail conditions and his upcoming court appearance.

While Joey is out visiting friends one afternoon, I submit his court form and visit various people to ask if they can write reference letters. Joey should be doing this himself, but I'm worried he won't get the letters done in time. Because Joey doesn't have any formal clothes, I buy him a pair of black pants, a pin-striped shirt and some black lace-up shoes. He tries on the outfit that night.

'You look like you're going to a wedding,' I tell him, smiling at how handsome he looks. 'That'll be a useful outfit for job interviews in the future as well.'

Later, when I mention it's likely the bail conditions will be changed so he can go back to Tim's house, Joey turns on me. 'You don't love me! You only want me out of the house!'

'That's not true,' I say. But I know from his perspective, it probably seems that way.

What I want is to heal my relationship with Joey; for him to feel like he's part of the family. I also want him to go on the camp to Jindabyne, and to move back to Tim's so the pressure eases at home.

The phone rings. It's Tim, asking if I'd like him to come down to the court in the morning.

'Thanks,' I say, touched by his concern. 'That'd be great.'

He's a good man.

* *

The next morning, while Joey is in the shower, I ring Don, the solicitor, and reiterate the importance of changing the bail conditions. He says he'll see what he can do.

We wait outside court for three hours. When Tim arrives, Joey greets him politely. Lenny's mother, her face worn and drawn, is also waiting outside the courthouse. Lenny is up for an alcohol-related incident. I stop and talk to Lenny's mother for a few minutes and wish them both a positive outcome.

When Joey's name is called, we file into the courtroom. The court date for the charge is put back to a later date, but apart from that, things go as well as can be expected. The judge changes the bail conditions so Joey can go back to Tim's house, and Joey is also allowed to go on the camp to Jindabyne.

I leave court a much calmer woman.

This old-school fella called Maslow

Bernie and a few of the boys are heading out to the shed – the first day back this year. 'Did you hear the news about Gazza?' says Bernie when he rings. 'He lost his job and his apprenticeship.'

'Gazza?' I ask. 'What happened?'

'He didn't turn up to work for five days and didn't have a good enough reason,' says Bernie with a sigh. 'He's also broken up with his girlfriend and has to find a new place to live. I need to find out what's going on with him.'

'You think he'll be okay?'

'Not sure,' answers Bernie. 'He's one of those quiet ones who doesn't give much away. There's some sort of family stuff going on that I can't work out – him and his older brother are always knocking the dust and shit off each other every time they have a drink. I don't know what it is … but it's the quiet ones you have to watch.'

**

I'm the first at the shed, so I wait out the front until Gazza arrives to unlock the gate. He opens the side door of the shed and we walk into the workshop together.

'Bernie told me what happened with the job,' I say, looking sideways at Gazza. 'Are you sad about losing the apprenticeship?'

He shrugs. 'I was at first but now I'm just looking ahead.'

Good for him. First time is learning. Second time is stupid.

As Gazza and I heave the wooden roller-door across its runner, Bernie pulls up in the ute with Skippa, Blister and Marshall. Then Jimmy and Thommo arrive, nursing takeaway coffees and hangovers. They head straight for the kitchen. Jimmy doesn't look too worse for wear, but Thommo, still wearing clothes from the night before, seems strangely fragile and smaller than usual. He puts his skate shoes on the table to use as a pillow. I notice his feet are bare and dirty, the frayed ends of his too-long jeans crusted with dried mud. He looks broken.

'Was Tye at this party last night?' asks Bernie.

'We weren't at a party,' says Jimmy. 'We were at the pub.' He glances across at Thommo. 'Where'd we go? The Kilda, the Wicklow, back to the Kilda again.'

'Good to hear you're doing some exercise – you're a health freak, Jimmy.' Bernie rubs his chin and looks across at the boys. 'I don't know … you blokes are all over it this morning.'

After making a coffee, Bernie takes a seat at the table. 'How's the start to the New Year, Thommo? Feeling good or bad about it? One to five – one is shit, five is great.'

Thommo lifts his head off his skate-shoe pillow. 'Two and a half.'

'If there was something you could do to get off to a better start, what would that be?'

'I dunno,' says Thommo. 'Just getting things sorted.'

Bernie turns to the others. 'What do you blokes think Thommo needs to work on?'

'He needs a house,' says Gazza. 'He needs to sleep properly instead of going from house to house.'

Bernie asks the boys if they've heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. They shake their heads.

'This old-school fella called Maslow came up with this thing like a pyramid,' explains Bernie, 'and it's about being happy and sending your life in a certain direction. He reckons until you get shit like accommodation, safety and food sorted, nothing else matters. It seems to me that this basic stuff is what Thommo needs to sort out first.'

After some encouragement from Bernie, the boys offer further thoughts on what Thommo needs to work on to improve his life. Bernie nods at their suggestions and then turns back to Thommo. 'How do those things sound to you? Get your licence, back off the piss, work on your sleeping habits and accommodation?' He pauses. 'Which one do you reckon is the most important?'

'Accommodation,' rumbles Thommo, half-asleep. He lays his head back on the skate shoes.

Bernie wipes a hand across his forehead and sighs. 'Doesn't look like we'll get much work done here today, so I'm going to sit with each of you – one-on-one – and

work out what you need to make a priority in your life. I want to see some fuckin' rock and roll for you blokes this year.'

**

Before we finish, Bernie tells the boys he's looking for some helpers for a dog jumping event at the Armidale Show in a couple of months. 'It'll involve a bit of training,' he says, 'and learning my way of working. The last thing I want on the night is a pack of uncontrollable dogs.'

Most of the boys are keen to be involved. Jimmy seems especially interested, and asks Bernie if he can bring in his blue heeler next week – 'She's a good little jumper,' he says with pride. Gazza isn't interested. During the afternoon, the boys rig up a basic dog jump out of a steel frame with planks of wood that slot in to make the jump higher each time. The same model they use at the show. I busy myself cutting lengths of pipe for the next lot of nutcrackers, while Bernie and Thommo drive off to get lunch. They soon return with loaves of white bread, chips, a container of gravy, a cooked chicken and two bottles of coke. I join the others in the kitchen, feeling like a real worker – filthy dirty, eating chips and gravy on white bread and loving it.

After lunch, Bernie backs the ute until it's flush with the doors of the shed. He places the metal dog jump near the back, so the dogs will land in the tray of the ute. 'That's how they do it at the show,' he says. 'So the dogs don't have far to jump down.'

Bernie has his two border collies, Girl and Lou, and also Sammy – a kelpie pup he's training for a farmer. Jimmy holds Sammy on the lead while Bernie goes through his training methods, which mostly involve hand movements for sit, down, up and stay. Each time the dogs do the right thing, Bernie pats them heartily and says: 'Good dog! Good dog!'

After the demonstration, Marshall is the first to step forward, but when he has trouble getting Girl to sit, Bernie comes over to lend a hand. 'You need to be thinking in your head what you want the dog to do, Marshall.'

'I'm no good at this,' grumbles Marshall, ready to throw down the dog's lead.

'The minute you start thinking that, it's over,' says Bernie. 'You're in control of the dog, Marshall. That's what you've got to be thinking.'

Marshall straightens up and gives Girl the hand movement for 'sit' with a look of fierce concentration. This time the dog sits down. Then Marshall readies himself and the dog for the jump. When she makes it over the wall, I cheer and clap.

Blister has worked with the dogs before, but even he has trouble getting Lou to jump.

'Say it with enthusiasm,' instructs Bernie from the side. 'That dog needs to think jumping over that thing is the best fun in the whole world!'

The boys feed the dogs tit-bits of leftover chicken for encouragement. Gazza and I sit on upturned milk crates and watch. Joey would like this, I think to myself. He's always loved animals. Maybe the dogs will be the way to get him to give the shed another go. Just before they finish, Bernie comes over to see if Gazza has changed his mind about having a go. Gazza shakes his head – 'Nah.'

'Do you train the dogs for the show every year, Bernie?' I ask.

'Never done it before,' he says with a grin. 'That's why we're going to smash it this time. Not even going to be drunk when we get down there.'

**

Later, as the boys pack up the metal jump, I join Bernie outside while he has a smoke.

'Time for something different?' I ask, raising my eyebrows.

He nods and tells me how he first brought in a heap of border collie pups when he was working with that wild group of boys at TAFE. The pups belonged to a friend who had a farm out at Ebor. Bernie asked the boys to help him train them.

'It was the first time I saw that group of hoorangs settle down,' says Bernie with a chuckle. 'I taught them how to understand dog language and we just flew into it every week. That's when we started working on: "How do we get things done in a non-violent way as opposed to a violent way?"'

His eyes light up, like he's remembering something very funny.

'Around that time,' says Bernie, 'I was down the street with Tye one night. A bikie dude – who looked like he might just bash you for looking at him – was across the road wrestling with this thumping big pit bull. The dog was pulling on the lead out in front of him, so Tye went straight across the road and said, "I'll tell you what's

wrong with your dog, mate!" I was trying to hide – you don't start telling people how to handle their dogs – but Tye's over there telling him, "The reason why he's pulling out there in front means he thinks he's the top dog." And then he's motioning for me to come over. The bloke was saying, "You won't fix this dog … he's done this for three years," but Tye says, "Nah mate, we'll fix this in five minutes." So there we were, in the middle of the night, with this big bloody fella covered in tattoos, and we got that dog to walk behind in a handful of minutes. Later I told Tye if he ever fuckin' did that again, I'd kill him. Don't worry about the dog biting him – I'd bite him!

One big smile

Joey's bus for Jindabyne leaves at midnight. I'm still awake at quarter to twelve, so I walk around the corner to Tim's house to see how things are going. One of the Christian youth leaders is waiting in a car parked out the front. Joey meets me on the steps of the front veranda with a backpack slung over one shoulder.

'Mum! We're just going to the bus station.'

'I thought I'd come and say goodbye,' I tell him. I give him a quick hug. 'Have a wonderful time, Joey.' Then I hurry back home, before he can see my tears.

**

I miss him terribly while he's away. I don't understand our relationship. I wish we could love each other easily, without all the dramas. When he rings from Jindabyne a few days later, Joey sounds happy. He's having fun and meeting lots of new friends. This camp may be a turning point – Joey might come back to Armidale ready to finish Year 10 and move ahead in life. After his phone call, I try to enjoy the break. At least for this week I don't have to worry about Joey sticking to his bail conditions,

or wait for the police to knock on the door at any time of night. But even though I go to bed early, I don't sleep well.

The day before Joey arrives home, I go around to Tim's with clean sheets. I make Joey's bed, tucking in the corners neatly and arranging all his soft toys around the pillow. Tim has his neighbours over for post-Christmas drinks, and I accept his offer to stay and have a glass of red wine. Later that night, I ring Joey. He's on the bus to Armidale, he says. I won't need to pick him up because the camp leaders will drop him home. Without thinking, I mention his bed is made up with fresh sheets.

'Why did you do that?' he snaps in a frantic whisper. 'You know I don't want you in my room!'

I hold the phone away from my ear and take several deep breaths. The wine, combined with my lack of sleep, has weakened my defences.

I swallow hard. 'I did it because I love you, Joey. I thought you'd like to sleep on a clean bed after being on a bus all day and night.'

He hangs up on me.

A short while later, he rings back and apologises. 'I just don't want you going near my room, Mum.'

**

The next afternoon, I hear the gate click and then a knock on the window.

'Joey!' I marvel at the difference in his appearance as he walks in through the back door. His face, normally so pale, is full of colour and life. 'It's so good to see you!'

Joey laughs and leans back against the kitchen bench – 'The camp was great!' He tells me about all the people he met, the fun times he had. Later, he puts on a DVD which has the highlights of the week's activities – sail boating, drama nights, crazy flour and water fights. It's incredible to see Joey's beaming face featuring throughout – participating in everything.

'I had a lot of fun on the camp, Mum,' he says, cocking one eyebrow in a charming manner. When I look over at him, his face is one big smile.

My beautiful boy.

Fully loaded

'That's a good dog!'

The Armidale show is less than a month away now and training has begun in earnest for the dog jumping event. Earlier, Bernie thought it was going to be a 'no-show' day, but it wasn't long before Blister arrived in his I'M SOTALLY TOBER T-shirt, followed by Marshall, Gazza, Jimmy, Skippa and Thommo. Jimmy brought in his blue heeler bitch, Vickie, and Thommo brought his girlfriend, Jade.

Thommo's wearing the same tattered jeans and black T-shirt he was in the last time I saw him. Although his clothes don't look as if they've been washed since I last saw him, he's had a shave and a haircut and the circles under his eyes are gone. While the others help Bernie set up the jump, Thommo waits with his arms crossed over his chest, like he's hugging himself. His girlfriend stands to one side, holding Sammy's lead, the kelpie pup now known as 'The Five Thousand Dollar Dog'. It's strange to see a young woman in the shed, especially one dressed in a baby-doll mini-dress with shoestring straps and white platform sandals.

Bernie strides around in his old blue singlet, jeans and boots. With three border collies, the kelpie pup, and a blue heeler, the shed has a definite 'outback' atmosphere today. Bernie borrowed the third border collie – a lively dog called Banjo – from Simmo. I notice Skippa is having trouble controlling Banjo. 'You gotta read the dog, Skippa,' calls Bernie from the side. 'Give him enough slack on the lead to let him do what he needs to do. You need to know what works best for your dog.'

I smile at his words. The dogs are just like the boys. Bernie uses the same methods in his youth work.

On the next attempt, Banjo flies over the top without touching the plank. Skippa walks past grinning.

Bernie lines his tape measure against the jump. 'Just over six foot. Seven foot two is the record.' He takes Lou by the collar and runs up with her. When Lou

scrambles at the top and falls back down, Bernie catches her and pats her head softly. 'Good dog!' He looks over at the boys. 'Shit, we're in trouble – that's about as high as that dog can jump.'

He calls Girl over, looking at her, then at the jump. 'Hey, Girl. Can you jump that high or can't you?' He turns back to the boys again. 'At this sort of height, if you don't "see" the dog jump over it in your head, the dog won't do it. I don't know why it works that way … but it's pretty fuckin' accurate.' Bernie stands on the platform behind the jump and encourages Girl. With a bit of help from Thommo, the dog manages to make it over the top.

After the training session, Jimmy's dog does a poo near the side of the shed. The kelpie pup strains at the lead, aching to reach it. 'That dog would eat shit off a shovel, I reckon,' laughs Bernie. 'Jimmy, your dog … you clean the shit.'

***

A few days later, Joey rings. 'I went to dog jumping, Mum. I worked with Lou and she jumped higher than ever before!'

'That's great news, Joey!'

'Bernie said I might be able to get an amendment to my bail conditions so I can go to Ebor and camp with the others and learn more training.'

It's a long time since I heard Joey so enthusiastic about anything. Bernie has tapped into something special by bringing in the dogs, and Joey's not the only one who's been drawn to the shed lately. Aboriginal boys have been coming along in droves. Bernie's had to scout for extra dogs – mainly Border Collies – from all over Armidale. After an article about the dog jumping program was featured in the local newspaper, people started turning up at the shed, offering to lend Bernie any dog with a spring in its step.

**

Simmo hosts a gathering for the BackTrack crew the following weekend. Flinty and Bernie are busy barbequing steaks and sausages when I arrive.

'Joey told me about dog jumping,' I tell them. 'It's a miracle!'

Bernie laughs. 'He's fully loaded now. He rang me today to check what time it was on.'

A major shift has occurred – not only with Joey, but with me, too. I'd spoken to him earlier and he'd mentioned dog training was on that afternoon. Around three, I rang to see if he was going, but heard the engaged signal on his phone. On the internet, I thought. At about six, he'll probably remember – 'Dog jumping!' I almost walked around and knocked on his door, but stopped myself. Joey needed to remember, not me. If he missed out, so be it. But later, curious, I drove past the shed. The dog jump was set up around the side and about a dozen boys stood holding dogs on leads. When I saw Joey in the crowd, an enormous weight lifted from me. I didn't need to take responsibility for this one.

I ask Bernie how Joey ended up with Lou.

'The dogs are picking the boys,' says Bernie, turning over sausages. 'No doubt about it. That's a bit of the magic.'

'But how do they pick them?'

'They follow the boys around, smell out the personality – find what they're looking for. The boys don't even know it's going on.' He smiles. 'I've had many fun hours seeing those dogs sort out the boys. When we started, I thought the boys would all want the dog that jumped the highest, but they don't give a shit about which dog wins.'

He reaches for a bottle of red, fills his glass and then offers some to me. 'The dogs are bringing out the soft side in the boys. I often see them sitting and patting the dogs.' Bernie looks at me and chuckles. 'You wouldn't see them doing that for their mother. It's a good way for them to let out some sort of emotion – and the dogs are always highly sensitive to whether they're having a good or a bad day.'

Just as Bernie is, I think to myself.

'Joey reckons Lou is the smallest and cleverest dog.'

'Yep, that's her,' he says. 'Way smart dog, but Christ, she drives me bananas.' He laughs and rolls his eyes in exasperation. 'If we're doing jumping, she's the one that pulls up and goes, "Jump the fuckin' wall yourself."'

I laugh and take a sip of wine.

Over dinner, the conversation turns to the popularity of the dog training program. 'It's going properly silly,' says Bernie. 'Everywhere I go in town, Aboriginal kids are asking, "Can I come down the shed … even just help with it?" I've never run anything that draws the countrymen kids like this.'

Crowd pleaser

On the day of Joey's next court appearance, Bernie arrives at the courthouse while Joey and I are talking to the solicitor outside. Don tells us that he's discovered a probationary constable was responsible for charging Joey and Tobias on the night they were arrested. 'The police don't have a real case,' says Don, 'and because they haven't bothered to put in their brief, we have to wait another couple of weeks.'

Today, Don will ask the magistrate to make a further change to the bail conditions so Joey can go with Bernie and the dog jumping crew to rural shows in the New England area. We also need to work out a date for the next hearing. Joey's co-offender, Tobias, is now at the juvenile detention centre in Grafton. He had since breached his bail and had been denied a second chance on it and had to wait out his court date in custody. He'll have to be brought over on the day of the hearing.

Bernie has come along to say he'll take responsibility for Joey if they change the bail conditions. He wants to see Joey do well, too. Don nods and hurries off to talk with another client, calling over his shoulder that he'll be back when Joey's name is called. I notice Joey is wearing worn-out sneakers with his black pants, and that his shirt is hanging out.

'We'll get him to tuck his shirt in before we go inside,' says Bernie when he sees the look on my face. He turns to Joey. 'I'll give you some hints on courtroom etiquette, too – I got in a lot of trouble being cheeky to magistrates.'

Bernie pulls out his tobacco and rolls a smoke. 'I once had a run-in with the highway patrol in the Snowy Mountains, when they pulled me up for drink driving years ago. I was just over the limit but I acted like a smart-arse and it was one of my early lessons …' He looks at Joey. 'Don't be a smart-arse with the police. They stuck a heap of stuff on me – dangerous driving, all that sort of shit. I was angry about it, but that's the reality of what goes on … there's a time to be smart, and a time not to be,' he says as he lights up. 'You certainly don't joke with magistrates in the court – while everybody else might find it highly amusing, the judges are the ones that make the rules.'

Joey yawns and stretches his arms over his head. 'I'm getting bored of waiting.'

Bernie shakes his head and sighs. 'Joey … shut the fuck up.'

**

Before too long, Joey's name is called and we troop inside. I sit near the front, with Bernie next to me. Before I can work out what is going on, everyone stands, ready to leave the courtroom. The magistrate has said no to any changes. Joey's bail conditions remain the same. My faith in justice is shaken and I'm angry, especially with the judge who was dismissive and arrogant. He barely looked at the reference Bernie wrote for Joey.

Joey's face is downcast as we leave the courtroom.

'I'm pissed off as well,' says Bernie, once we're outside. 'But when it comes down to it, Joey, we're all here because you did something wrong. If you hadn't breached your bail in that first week, the judge would have probably been more lenient.'

He's right. And things could be so much worse. One of Joey's friends was waiting outside the court for an 'aggravated break and enter' charge. I was sad to see him there – he always had a big smile for me and seemed really friendly. Now he's facing nine months in a juvenile detention centre and he's only sixteen – just a young bloke who did something crazy without thinking of the consequences.

I thank Bernie for his support.

'Joey will be okay, Helena,' he says, giving me a reassuring pat on the arm. 'He should learn something from this. See you at the show tomorrow night.'

***

The grandstand is full and the crowd three-deep around the fence by the time Bernie drives into the showground, pulling a trailer-load of dogs behind his yellow ute. People cheer. My throat tightens when Joey clambers down with the others. As I watch Bernie and the others unload, I think of how he's brought these boys from the edge of society to centre stage. Thommo, Tye, Blister, Freckles and Jimmy assemble the jumping wall, mature with responsibility. Over the last weeks, as more and more new kids have taken on dogs, these old-school Iron Man Welders have stepped up to help Bernie with the program. Joey and a heap of young boys stand holding their dogs with confidence, somehow managing to contain their excitement. I'm almost bursting with pride to see Joey standing out there with the others. Skippa, no longer the sad-eyed boy from months ago, struggles with Banjo who barks and barks.

All of a sudden, six police officers, dressed like a riot squad, come swooping along the showground fence with a sniffer dog. They force the dog to brush up against people's legs. From where I'm sitting, it looks as if the police are targeting the Aboriginal boys lined up along the fence, just inside the ring. Even though the boys are focused on their dogs, they're no doubt aware of the police passing behind. The sniffer dog moves on. I shake my head, baffled. Why would the police search for drugs at a time like this? While young people are engaged in a positive activity, some of them for the first time ever.

The dog jumping begins. The ringmaster makes good-natured jokes about the dogs, quickly locking into their different personalities: Geordie, as always, is super eager; Zorro flies over the jump without a care in the world; Lou has a relaxed and nonchalant style; and King, a wiry brown farm dog, is an instant crowd-pleaser who loves the attention. Everyone cheers and claps loudly when each dog comes to its limit and is led away from the competition. Bernie stands to the side, stepping in only when the dogs baulk at the jump. The boys have everything under control. Along with the rest of the crowd, I whoop with pleasure when each dog makes it over the plank as the jump gets higher and higher.

When Zorro, the champion jumper, finally reaches his limit, the crowd give the entire dog jumping team a standing ovation. All around, people are smiling. Some,

like me, have tears in their eyes. In the ring, the boys and their dogs gather around Bernie as he speaks to them intently. Afterwards, when the jump is dismantled and the dogs are loaded back into the trailer, Bernie comes over to where the rest of the BackTrack crew are sitting. We congratulate him for master minding the 'feel good' event of the show. Bernie nods and looks back to the boys, who are still standing around the ute in the centre of the showground.

'What did they say about it?' I ask.

'They loved it,' he says. 'Look at the actions – that's more important than the words. They're sticking around and talking about it for over half an hour … It wasn't a hassle finding anyone today. They were ringing me.'

***

Two days later, I see Simmo downtown. 'Did you hear the news?' he asks. 'Banjo died yesterday.'

'Oh!' I immediately think of Skippa and what a difference that crazy dog made to his life. Skippa's eyes were shining with happiness at the showground the other night. He couldn't keep the smile off his face, even though Banjo was never an easy dog to manage. Joey always said Lou was the best behaved dog, and that Banjo was the naughtiest because he was always barking. Bernie used to place his hand over Banjo's snout and make a growling noise in the back of his throat – dog language. Banjo would look ashamed for a few minutes, but would soon start barking again.

'The vet reckons he ate rat poison,' adds Simmo. 'Two of the lads came over from the high school this morning in their break. They weren't even sure if it was my place, but they introduced themselves and told me how sad they were about Banjo.'

At home, there's a message from Bernie on the answering machine: 'Not sure if you've heard … Simmo's dog died. We're having a smoking ceremony for him out at my place after dog jumping this afternoon. I'm trying to find Joey.'

When I phone Joey to tell him about Banjo, he takes a sharp breath. 'Oh! – I'll ring Bernie straight away.'

I can't make it to the ceremony that afternoon. But the next day, when I see Bernie shopping in Coles, he tells me how important it was for the boys to go through

the ritual process. 'Handling death is something we do very poorly in western culture,' he says with a wry smile, throwing tins of spaghetti and baked beans into his trolley. 'But that mob in Tennant Creek taught me how going through a process like a smoking ceremony can help. It doesn't make death any easier, but it helps to handle it.'

This is my dog

Don, the solicitor, calls with some good news. He's just heard a case in court for Tobias, the co-offender who was charged with the same offence as Joey. 'The police withdrew the charge,' says Don. 'Tobias got a two-year good behaviour bond and no criminal charge.' Because Tobias has been in trouble with the police before, this bodes well for Joey. We're due back in court the next day. I want Joey off bail so he can go with the dog jumping team to Walcha.

I'd driven Joey around to Tobias's house the previous week. Tobias had just been released from the juvenile detention centre. He stood out on the street by the car, talking to Joey through the window. I listened to Tobias tell Joey stories about his time inside, making it all seem like a grand adventure.

Sometimes I worry about Joey's friendship with Tobias. Perhaps I should be putting more effort into persuading Joey to join the defence forces, where he can earn some money, finish Year 10, and get a driver's licence … move away from Armidale for a while. But that afternoon, as I waited in the car for Joey and Tobias to finish their conversation, a long-haired toddler came out of the house, calling for Tobias. I couldn't work out if it was a boy or a girl. I watched as the child tugged on Tobias's jeans, wanting to be picked up. Tobias hoisted the toddler onto his hip and held the baby with such tenderness that I was ashamed of myself for having judgemental thoughts about him. Tobias is probably a kid who's been labelled his whole life, and here I was doing the same.

**

The next morning, Joey and I are outside the court by nine. We don't have to wait long this time. Don informs the court how Joey has been to the Christian youth camp, how he's been involved with dog jumping, how his mother is in the courtroom. After considering the paperwork and the reference letters, the judge says Joey can come off bail. Because it's his first offence, he gets a twelve-month good behaviour bond. My held-in breath escapes as I realise Joey is free.

Outside, I thank Don for his efforts and say goodbye to Joey. Walking home, I remember Bernie's words from the previous court session. I hope Joey has learnt something from this experience.

**

A few hours later, Joey comes around while Freddie and I are eating lunch. Joey, still in his 'court clothes', is holding a rope tied to Lou.

'This is my dog,' he tells Freddie, and then turns to me, his face open and light. 'I talked to Bernie about buying Lou. He asked me how much I reckoned she was worth. I said a hundred and fifty? He said, "Try again." Two hundred and fifty? "Try again." Five hundred? "Try again." He said she's worth around a thousand dollars … but I could pay for Lou by mowing Bernie's lawn.'

'That'd be a great thing to do,' I say, pleased to hear him so excited.

We head into the backyard so Lou can be off the lead. Once Joey unties the rope, Lou runs straight over to Freddie's clam-shaped swimming pool and submerges herself in the water. Joey and Freddie laugh and laugh while I grab my camera from inside. I take photos of Joey kneeling down with Lou, his arm around the dog's neck.

***

Over the Easter weekend, Rob takes Henry to a folk festival in Grafton for two nights. While they're away, Bernie and Jayne host a BackTrack get-together. It's a perfect evening – the sky full of stars and the first chill of autumn in the air. Bernie sits on a rolled-up swag and tells me the barbeque is Jimmy's latest design – 'It's got swing-around hotplates and everything!'

'Good old Jimmy!' I laugh. 'How is everything at the shed?' I hadn't been there much since the dog training began.

'Triple J want to come up for the Wool Expo and follow us around for the day,' says Bernie, rolling a smoke. He stokes the fire and uses the end of a burning stick to light up. 'Parents are coming over to the shed to watch their kids training the dogs.' He shakes his head, like he can't believe it. 'Getting those countrymen kids engaged in anything is really difficult, but we had fifteen boys at the shed last week. I was the only one supervising. Came home, went to bed and freaked out.'

I feel a sudden pang of guilt.

'We got Skippa a welding apprenticeship through the week as well,' he adds. 'Now we're almost down to no boys from that original mob. We've been too successful.'

Jimmy is the only Iron Man Welder left.

'Hanging around like a cobweb,' sighs Bernie. 'Tomorrow I'm taking him and eight boys out to Ebor to camp out and do some dog work. Funny how Jimmy is the only white fella going on the camp.' He chuckles. 'Around that Sorry Day time, when all the old prejudices were coming up, Jimmy was saying things like: "My dad's car window was bashed in 1979 and it had to be Kooris because they were in town." Maybe this is his lesson.' Bernie yawns and stretches his arms out wide. 'It's taken me a few weeks to realise I can't hang on to those other boys forever. They've all got jobs now – even Blister – but we need to stick with him because he's got the baby coming in a month.'

Before I go home, Bernie takes me aside. 'I saw Joey wandering around last night. He was sober, said he couldn't sleep. Something's going on with him, Helena, and I'm trying to figure out just what it is.'

**

The following week, my mother rings from Wollongong, where she and my father have gone to buy a unit. They've wanted to move away from the Gold Coast for years, and recently decided on Wollongong as an option for the future. But things aren't going well.

'I don't think it's a good idea to move,' she says, her voice wavering. 'We need to be close to your father's doctors. He still hasn't recovered from his hip replacement.'

'It might be better down there,' I tell her. My brothers live nearby and would be much closer. 'You're so far away from everyone on the Gold Coast.'

My mother soon regains her composure. She's overwhelmed from making all the decisions. Because my father is taking strong pain medication, he isn't his normal self.

After their stay in Wollongong, where my father hardly leaves the hotel room because of the pain in his hip, my parents decide to stay on the Gold Coast. On their return, they buy a second floor unit in a complex at Broadbeach Waters, the same neighbourhood they've lived in for years.

Fixing some shit

The next afternoon, Joey comes around in a bad mood. When I ask about the dogs, he says he doesn't want to be involved anymore, that it's all boring. He argues with Theo, argues with Freddie, argues with me. Then he breaks a sword Theo made at school and knocks the television over. I'm a shaking wreck by the time he leaves.

I don't know how to deal with Joey when his anger explodes like this, but I know I need to toughen up. Things have to change. Cooking his meals, driving him around, giving him money when he's broke, putting up with his destruction of our property – none of it is improving his life, or helping to send him in the right direction. I want us to have a better relationship, where we can love each other easily.

The next day, when my head is clear, I write Joey a letter:

> Dear Joey,
> I feel we've gone back in time, to when you first left home, when you were being really angry and breaking things in the house. It's not acceptable, at any time, to break other people's property when you're angry.

> Perhaps we should try and build up some positive times again – go to the movies once a week, or something like that. Also, after tonight, I'm not doing the dinners anymore, or supplying you with breakfast cereal and milk. You get money in your allowance to pay for food and rent. Work it out with Tim or buy the food yourself. If you need more money to buy food, get a job. I'm not going to keep on lending you money because you don't budget the money you get each fortnight.
>
> I'd really like for us to improve our relationship, Joey – let's see how we go.
>
> Love Mum

At Joey's house, I knock on the door, nervous but determined to see this through. He comes out in his boxer shorts, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He reads the letter while I stand on his doorstep. Then he rips it up and throws it at my feet.

***

A few weeks later, Rob comes home from work and tells me he's arranged a mediation session. Joey has agreed to come along. I look at Rob, impressed that he's made an effort to improve his relationship with Joey. He's stepped up to the plate, and I need to do that, too. 'You won't need to be involved at this stage,' he tells me, and explains why it's better to address the issues separately for now.

On the day of their first mediation appointment, Joey doesn't show. So, Rob meets with the Family Support counsellor on his own to discuss the issues he's most concerned about. He books an appointment for the same time the following week, with the hope that Joey will appear.

That afternoon, Joey rings. He tells me that Bernie has been over at his place and they've had a chat.

'We're not calling it "mediation,"' says Joey. 'We're calling it "fixing some shit" and I'll give it a go next week. Bernie is going to be my support person.'

I'm glad Joey is keen to go ahead. Things need to be resolved between all of us.

'I also told Bernie about joining the army,' adds Joey. 'He thinks it's a great idea.'

**

On the weekend, I take Freddie to see the dog jumping display at Central Park, where a huge crowd is gathered under the trees, cheering loudly each time a dog makes it

over the jump. At the end of the show, I wander over and thank Bernie for helping Joey see the benefits of mediation.

'You'll soon need to be involved too, Helena,' he says, in a voice that means business. 'Not this week, but next time.'

I nod.

After we talk a little more about the mediation process, Bernie asks me what Joey was like as a two-year-old.

I look at him, surprised by his question. Whenever I think of Joey as a young child I become choked with emotion. We did our best, and Rob was a loving step-father when Joey was a toddler. We always tried hard, but we made so many mistakes as Joey grew older. Maybe Theo's arrival put Joey's nose out of joint, or maybe it's the ongoing way Rob and I behave as parents under pressure, or maybe it's just me – I don't know, but I've always wanted Joey to feel loved and part of the family.

'I need some time to think about that,' I tell Bernie.

***

Joey's eighteenth birthday is approaching. I want to do something special, but I'm not sure what. Bernie once told me that 'uncles sometimes need to be forced into their job', so I email my brothers and suggest it might be beneficial for them to reconnect with Joey as he enters adulthood.

My middle brother rings and says Joey can come down for three nights. Joey will then catch the train from Sydney to visit my older brother, who lives further down the coast. The two of them have already worked out suitable dates.

'Thanks … thanks so much,' I say. 'I'll get his ticket tomorrow.'

For his birthday, I'll buy Joey a train ticket and some decent shoes, jeans, T-shirts and socks – new clothes for a new man. I'm also going to take him away to the coast for the weekend. It's been far too long since we had a holiday together.

Bare-chested buddies

On the morning of Joey's birthday shopping trip, he opens the door dressed in his boxer shorts, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Determined to make the day special, I push aside rising frustration and return home for a cup of tea. By the time I get back to Joey's, he's invited his friend Tobias to come shopping with us. He's also asked Tobias to come along on our coast trip. I'm a little disappointed, but I guess I didn't make it clear that I wanted it to be just him and me when I described it as: 'I'm going out of town for a few days – do you want to come along?' I thought the shopping and the trip to the coast might be a chance for some mother-son bonding, but perhaps it'll make things easier with Tobias coming along.

Our first stop is the railway station, where I buy Joey's return ticket to Sydney. Then we drive downtown. 'Where do you want to buy shoes?' I ask. Joey suggests a sports store near where we've parked. As we go inside I notice one of the shop assistants looking warily at Tobias and Joey. Because of her attitude, I'm inclined to leave the store straight away, but I know Joey won't want me making a fuss. While one of the shop assistants helps Joey with his shoes, Tobias browses through the athletic-brand clothing, casually hanging a couple of jackets and T-shirts over his arm. I watch him go into the change room. The shop assistant looks up from tying Joey's laces and calls out to another assistant who is tidying racks at the back of the shop. She walks over and they exchange glances. The other woman moves across to stand near the change room, looking as if she's poised to kick in the door at any moment. Joey is happily oblivious to what's going on, but I feel like I'm watching a suspense thriller.

Tobias comes out of the change room, holding one of the T-shirts. He waits at the counter with his wallet in his hand.

Don't do it, I want to yell. They think you're a thief.

I pay for Joey's shoes, burning with injustice. This shop doesn't deserve our money.

As we head outside, we bump straight into two beefy-looking police officers.

'Tobias!' they say.

A sense of shame creeps over my skin as the police talk to Joey and Tobias. I feel like white trash – even though I haven't done anything.

'There was a break-in at a house on Brown Street about half an hour ago,' says one of the police officers. 'Two white boys and an Aboriginal boy.' The police officer suddenly notices me. 'Are you with …?'

'Yes,' I tell him curtly. 'We've been shopping, and before that we were at the train station.'

The police officer nods and turns back to Tobias and Joey. He mentions the name of a local boy and asks if they've seen him around.

'I saw him at dog jumping last Wednesday,' says Joey, but doesn't offer any further information.

The police look as if they're making up their minds about something. 'Okay then,' one of them says. They leave.

We walk back to the car, Joey and Tobias excitedly discussing who might have done the break-in. I follow behind, considering Tobias. He's always polite and well-mannered whenever I'm around and I always enjoy his witty sense of humour, but he has an 'edge' that unsettles me. Maybe the police are right to be suspicious, but I don't like the way they questioned Joey and Tobias on the street.

For the rest of the morning, it seems that people stare at Joey and Tobias with suspicion in their eyes. At the newly-built shopping plaza, Joey waits with Tobias on a seat while I do some browsing on my own. Walking up to them later, I realise they stand out like a pair of rough-necks.

***

I'd planned to leave early for the coast, but it's mid-afternoon by the time Joey and Tobias are ready. 'It'll be almost dark by the time we arrive,' I grumble. On the way, we stop for a break at Ebor Falls, and as we admire the view from the look-out platform, Tobias lights the stub of a rollie he has in his pocket and shares it with Joey. People stare at them, just like at the shopping centre. When I notice Tobias about to throw the butt on the ground, I tell him, 'You can't do that … this is a National Park.'

Joey shoots me a dark look, like he thinks I'm being a prig, but I don't care.

Back in the car, we listen to rap – Wu-Tang Clan and Busta Rhymes, and a little bit of Flo Rida and Lil Wayne. Joey and Tobias sing along with the lyrics and

discuss the rappers' lives. Just before Grafton, we pass a sign for the juvenile detention centre where Tobias has just been held. He wants me to drive in so he can pick up a painting he'd left behind.

'Maybe on the way back,' I say.

We arrive at the cabins on sunset, and I take Joey and Tobias down to the beach for a swim, hoping to wash away the sense of squalor clinging to my skin. We search for crabs along the shoreline, and then eat dinner at the local fish and chip shop – normal holiday stuff – but for some reason, when I look at Joey and Tobias, sitting at the table in their hooded jackets, I long to be elsewhere.

On the walk back to the cabin, I call my mother from a public telephone box. My father is going into hospital again the next day to have an arthroscopy on his knee – a simple one-day operation – and because we're only an hour and a half away from the Gold Coast, I ask if we can visit.

'I could take Pup home from the hospital,' I suggest, 'while Joey and his friend cruise around Surfers Paradise for a couple of hours.'

'No, you can't come,' my mother says. 'I can't have it right now.'

She's worried about my father, I know that.

The next day, instead of driving to the Gold Coast, I take Joey and Tobias to Chinamans Beach and show them my way of body surfing. They stay in the water for ages, long after I've gotten out, having the best time ever. I take photos of them afterwards, bare-chested buddies with huge grins, arms draped over each other's shoulders.

Lone wolf

Back in Armidale, I ring my mother to see how my father's arthroscopy went.

'He'll be in hospital for another week,' she tells me. 'The doctors found an infection under his kneecap.' The doctors have removed his kneecap and he's booked in for a knee replacement the next day.

I'm unsettled after the call. My father went into hospital for an arthroscopy. Now he's having a knee replacement? To think of him undergoing a major operation, when he still hasn't fully recovered from the hip replacement, worries me. He isn't strong enough. Besides, they're moving into their new unit in fourteen days and have advertised a garage sale at their place on the weekend. I pour myself a glass of wine and lie down by the fire to rest.

The phone rings. It's my sister, who lives in Bali. She's heard about my father's knee and says she's coming over to help my mother with the move.

'That's a relief,' I reply. 'I thought I'd have to do it.'

'Pup's immune system has really disintegrated from the antibiotics they gave him after the hip operation,' my sister says.

She sounds like she's making the trip to be with my father one last time.

My siblings and I have always called our father 'Pup' – not 'Dad' – and I can't imagine him called anything else. I can't imagine him not being around, either.

***

On the Sunday after Joey catches the train to visit my brother in Sydney, Bernie calls and asks me to pick up Blister. 'No worries,' I tell him, happy to be asked. I'd been avoiding the shed since Joey joined the dog jumping crew, so today will be a good opportunity to catch up with what's been happening.

I spot Blister waiting out the front of his flat. When he sees me pull up, he looks disappointed. He was probably hoping Bernie was coming to get him.

On the way to the shed, I ask about Emma's pregnancy.

'It's a girl,' he says with a shy smile. 'We found out on the last ultrasound.'

'I thought you said it was going to be a boy!'

'I was hoping for a boy,' he admits. 'We're going to move into my brother's house soon. It's right next to Mum's place in Girraween.'

I swing through the gates at the shed and park the car. 'You'll get lots of help with your mum next door.'

Bernie and a group of boys and dogs are standing outside the doors. As we walk over to join them, I ask Blister how he's going with his painting apprenticeship.

'It was boring,' says Blister. 'I quit.'

Bernie gives him a sideways glance. He calls out to Skippa. 'Hey Skippa! Does welding get boring?'

Skippa nods.

'And that's welding!' says Bernie, his tone incredulous. After we talk about different jobs we've had, Bernie mentions a time he worked as a drilling assistant – 'I was earning two thousand dollars a week,' he explains, 'but it was the most boring job I ever had. The boss only ever spoke about ten words and most of them started with "c" and were preceded by "useless". I lasted six months.'

The boys ask Bernie what he does now.

'I'm a youth worker,' he says, giving me a quick grin.

The boys don't seem to realise. What do they think Bernie is doing out here each weekend?

A black poodle is tied up with the border collies and kelpies. Bernie's minding it for a friend and, although it has a name, he calls it 'Poodle'.

'Poodle thinks it's a person in a dog's body and doesn't understand why we can't see that,' he says. 'It's used to eating with humans, sitting on the lounge, sleeping on its owner's bed. Poodle got quite a shock when I put it in the kennel with all the other dogs.'

He's interrupted by the sound of growling. The poodle is trying to mount Jimmy's dog Vickie, the tail-less blue heeler that always looks as if she's about to bite someone's head off.

'Watch,' says Bernie, unconcerned. 'Vicki's given him one warning. She's growling but still playful. When that stump stops wagging … Poodle better look out!'

***

On the morning of his 18th birthday, Joey catches the train back to Armidale. Apart from checking he arrived safely, I'd avoided ringing my brothers because I wanted to

give Joey some space. But today, before I make his birthday cake, I phone my middle brother to see how the visit went.

'We really enjoyed having Joey come to stay,' he tells me. 'Lots of laughs and good times – he's quite a poker player!'

When I ring my other brother, his wife answers the phone. 'We didn't see quite enough of Joey,' she says, her voice warm and loving, 'he should have stayed longer.' I hear my brother in the background, keen to take the phone.

He comes on the line and says, 'I want to tell you what a wonderful young man Joey is, Helena. You and Rob have brought him up well … and he's full of good values.'

I hold the phone and weep. Crazy. Someone in my family is finally telling me we've done a good job and all I can do is cry. I'm glad Joey had a good time with them, that they love him as uncles.

While I mix the ingredients for the chocolate sour-cream cake, I think about the past eighteen years. How can it be so long ago that I gave birth to my beautiful boy with the rose-bud lips? Once the cake is in the oven, I make Joey's collage-card. The central photo is of a howling wolf at sunset, with a golden red and orange map of the world in the background, and on the back I write:

> Dear Joey. Congratulations on your 18th – you may think you're a 'lone wolf' but LOTS of people love you very much, most of all me! Love Mum.

Later, I pick up Joey from the train station. When I rang his mobile earlier in the day, he'd said he wanted me to wait in the car, not on the platform. So, I sit in the car and watch him approach, backpack slung over his shoulder. My son the traveller. He opens the door of the car.

'Good to see you, Joey!' I cry, hugging him tight. 'Happy birthday!'

At home, we stand around the birth cake, and in the flickering light of eighteen candles we sing Happy Birthday – just the five of us this time. Joey's train was delayed in Sydney and Freddie is already asleep. Joey is shining with happiness, just like he was after the camp at Jindabyne. He talks and talks about how funny his uncles were, about what a great time he'd had with his cousins, and how much he loved their cats, which are friendly and sociable.

'Unlike ours!' laughs Joey.

He shows us his birthday cards, the new silver and black cap one of my brothers bought for him – 'It was fifty dollars!' – and then Joey gives me a copy of a lovely photo of him standing between his uncles.

As I look at the photo of my adult son standing between my two brothers, I feel very proud. My beautiful boy.

Thank goodness your father isn't here!

My father is still in hospital without a kneecap because the doctors are waiting for him to get stronger before operating. My mother cries on the phone whenever I ring to see how things are going.

'I think I need help,' she admits. Boxes need to be packed for the move, and the garage sale is on the weekend. 'Your sister can't come until the end of the month,' adds Mum, bursting into tears.

'I'll come,' I tell her.

The following weekend, Henry and I drive up to the Gold Coast. We find my mother in high spirits, busily preparing for the garage sale. She sends Henry around the back to fetch the heavy plants, and asks me to carry the outdoor furniture. When I ask if we can go and see Pup at the hospital, she waves her hand impatiently – 'Ach! We'll go and see him tomorrow. I've had enough of that hospital!'

At the garage sale the next morning, she keeps saying things like, 'Thank goodness your father isn't here!' as we sell paintings and plants for one or two dollars, and when we drive off to the beach at eleven, we leave the unsold items on the driveway with a big sign: 'ALL FREE – PLEASE TAKE AWAY!'

'Your father would have been sitting there till it was dark,' my mother laughs, snapping on her seatbelt. 'Don't tell him how cheap we sold everything!'

We visit Pup that afternoon. I'm shocked to find him looking much worse than last time, and I hide my concern as I bend down to kiss his forehead. His right leg is covered in bandages, and as he shifts himself into a more comfortable position, he grimaces with pain. I'm suddenly filled with rage at the hospital staff, especially the doctors. Is this what you do to someone who's nearly eighty? Take their fucking kneecap out so they can't walk?

Somewhere along the line, someone has stuffed up.

My father is still dignified, even in his blue pyjamas, but he's clearly not doing too well in this round. I find it difficult to see him so vulnerable. Making an excuse to go to the bathroom, I stand with my hands on the edge of the basin, taking deep fortifying breaths. In the mirror, my face looks pale and frightened. Come on, Helena, I tell myself. You need to be strong.

When I come back into the room, my mother is feeding mandarins to my father, segment by segment. He has no appetite, but at her insistence he obediently sucks out the juice, spitting the pith into her hand.

For the next hour, Henry and I sit beside Pup's bed. We tell him about the garage sale, carefully omitting any mention of the outdoor furniture left on the driveway.

'Everything sold by eleven?' he asks with surprise.

We nod.

When he queries me on how much we sold the plants for, I change the subject – 'I was packing a few boxes last night, Pup, and I found your classical guitar book in the study. Maybe I'll get a friend to record your favourite pieces onto a CD, so you can listen to it while you're here.'

I show him the book, expecting him to tell me which ones are his favourites, but he can't. His mind is too foggy from the pain medication.

***

Not long after I get back from the Gold Coast, I escape to the shed, where the kitchen is smoky and cold. Skippa, in his cap and work shirt, sits brooding on the lounge. On one side of him is Freckles, who runs the flame of a silver lighter over the tip of his thumb. You can tell he's a man with money now. On the other side of Skippa is

Jimmy, hungover and yawning from a big night at the pub. Thommo stumbles in, looking younger and fresh-faced without his moustache. Earlier, I noticed the three of them wandering off to the sand piles in the wasteland behind the shed. They'd walked in ten minutes later, their eyes glassy, sneaking looks at each other and giggling.

On the kitchen table, someone has written: 'Freckles licks shitty cocks'.

Bernie comes into the room, pulling a Russian-style sheepskin beanie down over his ears. He pulls up a chair and says hello, steam escaping with his breath. Skippa, who recently began his first year as an apprentice welder, is ready to quit. Bernie's interested in hearing what the other boys think he should do.

'Stick it out,' says Freckles. 'So you end up with a trade.'

'It's harder to find another apprenticeship if you just quit and look for somewhere else,' agrees Jimmy. 'A lot of employers don't want first year – they want you past that point.'

'I don't know if I can hack it,' says Skippa, folding his arms against his chest. The main problem is his boss, a huge man, who is notorious for yelling at his workers.

'He'd scare the shit out of me if I was working there,' admits Bernie. 'Having a seven-foot Brahmin bull screaming at ya … but you could get a boss like that at Hungry Jack's and after three years all you've got is hamburgers.' He picks up a piece of metal from the table and twirls it in his hand. 'Have you ever heard anyone thank him, Skippa?'

The boys look at him, confused.

A cunning look crosses Bernie's face.

'What I'd be doing,' he explains, 'is saying: "Thanks for the input, Boss. I'm picking up that we're slow, lazy and we're fuckin' up all the jobs. I'm going to work on those three things today and be the best employee you've ever had! How about we get back to work?"'

Everyone bursts out laughing, slapping their legs and guffawing.

'Could you have a crack at that?'

'He'd probably tell me to fuck up,' says Skippa with a shy grin.

'Maybe … but if you just do the same as everyone else, nothing will change. If he sacks you, so be it – "Thanks for sacking me, Boss" – and tell him I said to do it.

You'll be smiling for the rest of the day. If he can't work out how to get the best out of his workers, that's his problem, not yours.'

Bernie's strategy sounds like fun, but three days later, when I see him down the mall, he tells me Skippa quit his job.

'All that yelling and screaming from his boss really pushes his buttons for some reason,' he says thoughtfully. 'Skippa's one of those quiet ones – his dad died when he was very young, he's Aboriginal but not very black, that sort of thing.' Bernie's eyes meet mine. 'There's a lot of shit underneath the surface with that kid … but he'll be right. Skippa will come through this.'

* * *

'We need to have faith the doctors know what they're doing,' my older brother tells me on the phone the following week. 'Pup will be alright.'

I'm not so sure. Neither of my brothers has been to see Pup yet. They don't seem to be taking it seriously, no matter how many times I say: 'Pup is really sick.' The idea of Pup dying scares me. I want him to make it through this awful hospital stage he's been in for over half a year. Earlier, when I'd been speaking to my mother, I asked if my brothers were coming to help. 'They can only come for two nights each,' she said, bursting into tears, 'and that's after the move.'

'I'll come,' I told her, wondering how I'd go with another six-hour drive so soon. 'Take some of your homeopathic calm pills.'

Later that night, I email my sister to check if she's still coming. She emails back and says she can't take leave from work for another month or so. I stare at the computer; I obviously haven't been going about this the right way. I send my three siblings an email saying that Pup is in a really bad way, Mum needs help, and I can't do it all. Then I go for a long walk, up and down the steep hills around the graveyard on the north side of town.

When I get back, Joey is in the kitchen. 'Hey Mum … can you shave my head?'

Dealing with a whole mess of hair is the last thing I want to do, but perhaps I can use it to my advantage: 'Only if you promise to ring the army.'

He nods.

Once his head is done, Joey rings the Defence Forces recruitment line. I sweep hair into the dustpan and listen as he tells someone he wants to be a driver. Less than

a minute later, the call is finished. 'The person on the phone said maybe I should think about getting my driver's license first if I want to be a driver,' says Joey.

'What?' It could take Joey years to get his license. The Army can bloody well teach him to drive. After Joey leaves, I ring Defence Force Recruiting and lodge a complaint.

Before bed that night, I check to see if my email had any effect. Yes. My brothers have changed their minds. One will stay with Mum for a week before the move, and the other will stay the week after. My sister has arranged time off work, and will book her flight the next day. Perhaps I will go up again the following week if my mother still needs support.

The boxing cabinet

A few days later, a truck-load of my parents' old furniture arrives. They've given it to me because they're buying new things for the unit. Rob is away at a conference in Sydney, so the house is in chaos as I try to find a place for everything. I ring Mum later to let her know the furniture arrived safely, and when I ask about my father, she becomes teary.

'It's okay,' I tell her. 'Crying is good.'

'Your father isn't improving,' she sobs. 'He's getting worse.'

'We need to have faith he'll get through this.' I repeat my brother's words, even though I don't really believe them. Because she doesn't drive, my mother is travelling back and forth to the hospital by public transport every day. It's all becoming too much for her. My middle brother is arriving at the Gold Coast on Sunday evening, five days away.

For the rest of the week, each time the phone rings, I fear my mother will tell me my father is dead. When I phone my father's hospital room, he speaks in Dutch for most of the call. I don't know how to deal with this – we've been shielded from

death because the extended family all live in Holland and have been remarkably healthy. I've only been to one funeral.

Then, on Friday morning, after dropping Freddie at preschool, I listen to a message from Mum on the answering machine: 'I've got bad news for you …' she begins. I hear her crying before she hangs up.

I immediately phone my father's hospital room to see if he's still alive.

'Ja?' he answers in his weakened voice.

'Just wanted to say hello.' My hand grips the receiver so hard it hurts. 'I love you, Pup.'

I ring Mum on her mobile. She's walking around the hospital grounds, trying to bring herself under control. 'I'm coming up this afternoon,' I tell her. 'It's too hard for you to be on your own like this.'

After calling Rob at work, I arrange for a friend to pick up Freddie from his preschool, throw my swag in the car and leave. Six hours later, I arrive at the Gold Coast. My mother makes me a cup of strong sweet coffee before we visit my father. At the hospital, as we walk down the corridor she hands me a pair of dark sunglasses, the sort movie stars wear.

'So he can't see us crying,' she explains.

Once we enter the room, I understand the need for the glasses. My father is propped up in bed, looking pale and skeletal. My mother's composure in the room is admirable – sterkte – but she keeps her sunglasses on the whole time. Meanwhile, I struggle and make excuses to go to the bathroom.

The doctors have found a shadow on my father's lung which may be a serious cancer, or it may be the imprint of lymphoma cancer he's had for twenty years. They'll do more tests after the weekend.

Three days later, my brother arrives from Sydney. His flight doesn't come in until after six, but he's keen to see Pup straight away. I drive him to the hospital while Mum makes dinner.

'Expect the worst,' I tell my brother as we walk down the corridor to our father's room. But Pup is alert and clear, sitting up in bed eating dinner and watching the football. He says his leg is feeling much better.

My brother brings a positive and cheery energy into the room. I sit back on a chair in the corner and watch him talk to Pup about the football. He's stepped up to the plate better than me. Mum and I had slid into negativity, brought on from exhaustion and worry. Maybe Pup needed male company, not two snivelling females in dark sunglasses who run into the bathroom twenty times during every visit. I'll return to Armidale tomorrow – let my brother do his share while I rest and focus on my own life. My older brother is coming up next to take over. Then my sister will be here.

After dinner, I pack the car, ready for the trip home. Mum has prepared boxes of unwanted household items for me to take back to Armidale – towels, blankets, cutlery and books. She also tells me to take my father's boxing cabinet.

'Why are you giving me that?' I ask in surprise.

My father's boxing medals and trophies have always been kept in a glass-fronted wooden cabinet that one of his bakery bosses made for him out of an old cupboard. Over the years, in our various houses, this cabinet always hung on the wall in the lounge room where we watched television. I never thought it anything out of the ordinary. But now the cabinet is like a precious relic from the past. I'm reluctant to take it.

My mother says she doesn't want the cabinet in the new unit. 'It wouldn't look good there,' she tells me, waving her hand. 'You take it to your house, Helena.'

**

My brother and I carry the cabinet out to the car. As we place the wooden box onto a piece of stained carpet in the back of the station wagon, I assure my brother I'm not claiming ownership. Together we tuck towels and blankets around the box, to keep it safe.

Driving home the next day, I keep thinking about the cargo in the back of the car, and about my father's rich and varied life. He's been an Olympic boxing champion, a successful baker, an energetic tennis player, a Bridge champion, a classical guitarist, a harmonica player, a yodeller, a card shark, and a mad Scrabble fiend. He and my mother have loved each other for over fifty years.

Pup is old, I tell myself. He's had a good life. Whatever happens now is okay.

***

A few days after I get back to Armidale, the news comes through. My father isn't going to live for another ten or fifteen years. 'Maybe a couple of months,' says my older brother on the phone. 'More likely weeks.'

I knew the news wasn't going to be good. Pup has deteriorated so much over the last few weeks. But still, I can't comprehend how he isn't going to be here anymore. My brother talked to Pup about what the doctors said. 'He's still with it enough to understand,' says my brother, his voice breaking. 'He shed one tear … and then asked about everyone else. He was so stoic.'

Of course.

After the call, I kneel on the floor and sob. Later, I ring the hospital. 'Antonius Pastor,' I tell the receptionist. 'E-wing.'

When my father answers, I swallow hard and then take a deep breath. 'Pup, I'm very sad.'

'Ja,' he says in a thin wispy voice. 'What can you do? Everyone is sad.'

'I love you.' I've said this more times over the last couple of weeks than I have in forty years. 'I'm really going to miss you … and I'm coming up again on Monday.'

He sighs. 'Ach! – so much travelling.'

**

That afternoon, I drop in at the shed. Jimmy is there with some new blokes. He tells me Bernie is at the hardware store. I wander around, looking at the iron flowers and dragonflies the boys have been making. 'Arty stuff,' says Jimmy.

Bernie arrives, looking like a stranger in his dark sunglasses and a red and black shirt. What am I doing here, I wonder? I don't belong at this shed anymore. When he sees my face, Bernie takes me around to the side of the shed, away from the boys and the noise. He rolls two thin cigarettes while I tell him about Pup.

'I'm scared of this death business,' I say to Bernie, lighting up with shaking hands. 'But I'm thinking of taking Joey with me to the Gold Coast next weekend.'

Bernie's eyes are intent and serious. 'Yep,' he agrees, 'if you can do it, let Joey be around him as much as possible. It's good for a young bloke to be around death.'

The high-pitched shrill of the drop-saw pierces the air.

'Death isn't something that's really talked about in our culture – certainly not with boys,' continues Bernie. 'One time, I was at this funeral for a young fella who died. When they started carrying the casket down the aisle of the church, this other kid sitting in front of me, who I knew to be a good mate, had tears streaming down his face. His dad whacked him across the ear and told him to get his shit together.' Bernie shakes his head. 'Death scares the shit out of young fellas. All that stuff about not showing your emotions and not talking about things, not crying … when all that's muddled in front of you it's hard to go through a grieving process. But you may as well not be frightened of something that's going to happen at some stage.' He looks at me. 'It's about how you deal with it in two parts, Helena – in your head and in your heart, or in your spirit.'

'I'm having trouble with the head part.'

Bernie nods in understanding. 'The boys freaked out when Banjo died. Those boys still talk about that dog and that ceremony we had out at my place. A couple of them, whenever they come out, ask, "Can we go down and have a look at the grave?" And we talk about things like: Where do you think he is now? Do you see him in any other of these dogs? If you could do one more thing with him, what would you do?'

'I miss the shed.' I stub out my cigarette and find my car keys. 'All these trips to the Gold Coast.'

'We'll be here when you get back.'

**

On the phone, my mother is talking about palliative-care options. That's how she wants to do it. She and my brother have almost finished packing up the house, and are visiting Pup several times a day.

'Ja, last night it was a nightmare,' she says with a heavy sigh. 'Pooing and peeing. Your father doesn't care – he's past it. The hospital is going to transfer him to M-Ward, palliative care.'

M-Ward sounds like the final solution, the place they send people with no hope, like in those scary movies about psychiatric wards. I don't know how to cope

with something as big as this, but at the end of the week I'm driving up to the Gold Coast with Joey.

So brave

The six-hour drive with Joey goes well. Not too much rap, no arguing. Joey even sleeps for a few hours. While the car is quiet, my mind wanders back to other times, long ago, between Joey and his grandparents. Joey was four months old when I first took him to meet them in Sydney. I felt anxious on the flight from Darwin – it hadn't been easy for Mum and Pup to accept that het kind was a sole parent, but they loved Joey from the moment they saw him. My father ate dinner in front of the television with Joey on his lap, and whenever Joey cried, my father croaked, 'Ja, Ja …' in his gravelly voice. My mother brought crocheted blankets and jumpsuits and covered Joey's face with kisses.

As he grew older, Joey and I had many holidays in Manly with my parents. My father often took Joey to the local park, and when Joey fell over or did something silly, my father would say, 'Bung!' Joey enjoyed riding a little red pedal-car that was kept for the grandchildren to use. He and my father went all over Manly together – Joey in his red car and Pup walking along beside him.

One night, Joey slipped in the bath and cut his chin open. My father and I took him to the Health Centre and comforted Joey while a doctor stitched him up. Joey screamed the whole time we were there. All I wanted to do was run out of the room, but Pup held him down, calmly repeating, 'Ja, Ja … it's okay, Joey. It's okay.'

**

When Joey and I reach the Gold Coast, I find it strange to drive past the turn-off to my parents' old house. So many changes. The day before, my mother moved into her

new unit, a 1970s high-rise at Broadbeach, just down the road from where they used to live. Mum buzzes us in, and is waiting outside the lift when it opens on her floor. She looks tiny, hunched over with grief.

'Your father is very bad,' she says, her face solemn. 'We need to go to the hospital. The doctor said if the family want to see him, they should see him now.'

We drive to the hospital, my hands white on the steering wheel. Mum wears her enormous sunglasses. Joey sits silently in the back, looking stunned. I park the car and we march purposefully towards my father's room, fear building with every step. But Pup is okay. He's noticeably thinner and disoriented, but he's okay. He's still Pup. Not as bad or scary as I thought. I kiss his forehead and hold his hand, tears filling my eyes. I need to be strong. I'm here to support my mother, but this hospital turns me into a weakling as soon as I walk through its doors.

'Don't make a drama of it, Helena,' says my father in his feeble voice.

I laugh through my tears. That's so like him. How can he be dying? I suddenly remember Joey, sitting quietly on the chair in the corner of the room, and motion for him to come closer to the bed, to touch his grandfather.

I take photos, the saddest photos I've ever taken of Joey and his grandparents. I rest my head on my father's shoulder. We talk about normal things, like Pup learning the guitar at fourteen, what Amsterdam was like after the war, the new unit. But soon Pup becomes confused.

'What is going on here?' he asks Mum, like it's a perfectly reasonable question.

Mum takes Joey to the hospital café to buy lollies. 'For the stress,' she whispers as they leave. Joey looks pale.

I don't know what to do or say when they're gone. While my father naps, I walk up and down the corridors, taking deep breaths. My mother and Joey return with a bag of liquorice allsorts. We all have one, but my father can't finish his, can't chew it hard enough. My mother takes it out of his mouth and pops it into hers. They hold hands. Pup says he dreamed about police stations and his old bridge partners.

'Do you ever dream about me?' jokes my mother.

My father becomes tired. He wants to lie down with the lights out. I don't like leaving him there – he should be coming home with us.

'So brave,' the nurse comments when we pass the desk. 'He's been in pain for a long time. Never complains.'

'Only to me,' says my mother, making a face. My father has been very cranky with her over the past week. I suppose he has to take it out on someone. We drive away from the hospital, the three of us crying – a car full of tears.

'He was so peaceful tonight,' says Mum, finding her tissues. I buy a bottle of wine on the way home. Maybe Pup will die tonight – the nurses said he'll be at peace. They've given him strong medication so he can't feel anything, but this doesn't seem right to me. I want the old Pup back – the one who has the strength to go back into the ring.

**

My mother's second floor unit is bare of furniture – she's still waiting for the lounge and dining room suite to arrive. On the balcony are a wooden table and three matching chairs. She has a new bed in her room and an old single bed in the spare bedroom. 'Joey can sleep there,' I say, 'and I'll sleep in my swag.' I open the wine and we sit on the balcony, overlooking a lush tropical garden lit up by a string of soft yellow lights.

The phone calls begin. My sister is coming in twelve days. She's asked Pup to hold on till then. 'He's given up the fight,' Mum tells her. 'The doctor said he had enough.' Later, when I hear my mother talking to our Dutch relatives on the phone, I notice she ends every call with the words: 'Ja … sterkte.' Strength.

Facing hard times with strength and courage is important in Dutch culture. My parents' generation learnt about sterkte during the war years, but it's probably something I need to cultivate within myself, especially in the weeks ahead.

After the call, Mum turns to me and says, 'I show you later what my new Duster Buster does.' She's been on a shopping frenzy for weeks – I guess it's her way of coping.

The phone rings again, one of my mother's closest friends on the Gold Coast. Her friend's niece works in a funeral home at Beenleigh, and she wants to talk about pre-paid funerals.

'He's got all that weird talk about police stations,' says Mum, changing the subject. 'But he was lying with his hands crossed over his chest when we left – very peaceful.'

Joey sits at the end of the table eating cheese and crackers. We've barely had time to talk since we arrived. I wonder how he's feeling. I don't think he had any idea how sick Pup had become. In the morning, Joey is catching the train to Brisbane to stay with an old school friend. I know Bernie said it's good for him to be around death as much as possible, but Joey is keen to go.

After the phone call with her friend, my mother starts coughing. She coughs so much she can't take in a breath. I race into the kitchen and search through the rubbish for the paper bag the mushrooms came in.

'Breathe into the bag,' I instruct, trying not to panic.

I hold her shoulders until her breathing returns to normal.

Sterkte

Before Joey goes to Brisbane, the three of us walk silently down the hospital corridor to Pup's room, accompanied by the now-familiar feelings of apprehension and dread. Through the open door of Pup's room, I catch a glimpse of him trying to pull himself out of bed.

Mum rushes to his side. 'What are you doing?'

'Ja,' says Pup, sounding cranky. 'I've been waiting so long for the nurse. Ik moet plassen.'

My heart sinks. Pup needs to pee. I'm not ready for this.

'We'll help you,' says Mum. My father collapses back onto the pillows, and I go around to the other side of the bed. Without the sheet covering him, I see for the first time his stick-like legs, his shrunken stomach, his bony ribcage. My breath

catches in my throat. Sterkte, I tell myself sternly. But somehow Pup manages to look dignified, even like this.

I notice Joey on the chair in the corner, rubbing the palms of his hands over his face, like a ringside attendant who can't bear to see anymore. As soon as Pup is lying comfortably again, I wave Joey over to join us. With tears streaming down his cheeks, Joey sits by the side of the bed with his head bowed and holds his grandfather's hand.

Joey is still weeping as we head back to the car. 'People don't change so much from day to day,' he says. 'When I took the photos yesterday, Opa didn't look so bad. But today …' He wipes his eyes with his sleeve. 'He used to play Scrabble and now he can't do anything.'

On the way to the railway station, I talk to Joey about all the things his Opa did in his life – 'He was always a high achiever.'

Joey begins crying again. 'The only time I saw Opa smile was when he asked me about joining the army.'

'He wants to see you do well in life, Joey – he's always been so proud of you.'

**

The next day is my mother's seventy-eighth birthday. In the morning, the phone rings – too early for birthday wishes. 'It's the hospital,' I tell her, passing the phone.

This is it. My father is dead. I watch my mother's face. But a look of relief smooths her frown and she laughs heartily before saying: 'Ja, thank you for letting us know … we'll come in later.'

'What is it?' I ask when she hangs up.

'Your father has a black eye,' she replies. 'The nurse doesn't know how it happened, but she didn't want is to be alarmed when we visit him today.'

'We're past being alarmed,' I say. 'A black eye is nothing.'

At my father's bedside later, Mum jokes that he must have dreamed he was back in the boxing ring last night, swinging wild punches. Although I laugh along with my mother, my insides are aching at the sight of my father. He's sitting lifelessly on the bed, his eye black and bruised, the shape of his bones showing through his skin.

On the way back from yet another visit to the bathroom, I spot a birthday card lying on the floor – one of my brothers must have bought it the previous week. I show it

to my mother, and she asks Pup to write something for her birthday. He always wrote beautiful messages in her cards. My father holds the card upside down for a while. When I realise he's not capable of writing anything, I take the pen from his fingers.

'You tell me what you want to say, Pup, and I'll write it down.'

After Mum reads my father's words of love, she rushes into the bathroom. I prop the card on the bedside table, thinking how lucky my mother was to meet my father in Amsterdam all those years ago – to find a man who brought the light into her life, and who still loves her so much, even after fifty-three years of marriage.

The pain of him dying, of him slipping away from her, must be unbearable for them both. I want death to come quickly now. Although we keep telling Pup to wait for my sister to arrive, I don't think he will.

The saddest song

At the unit, my mother has boxes of new cutlery, plates, glasses and towels lined up along the wall in the lounge room. Any spare time she has away from the hospital, she goes shopping. But she isn't ready to open any of the boxes yet. When I look around the room, I think how strange it is to be in a place where my father has never lived, where he will never live.

'He wasn't interested,' my mother says when I ask her what Pup thought about the place. 'When we came for the inspection, he just stared out the window.' She was the one who made the decision to buy the unit. I'd been feeling sad about them leaving the old house, which has so many memories of Scrabble games and swims in the pool and glasses of champagne on the patio, but I like the new unit. It's fresh and sunny. I even like the way it has no furniture. The unit feels temporary, like the space Pup is in.

Later, my mother takes me down to the car park underneath the building, where my father's silver Holden sedan is parked near a small storage shed. Pup loved that car – it's a powerful model, and at the touch of the accelerator, he was able to

zoom in and out of lanes in the traffic. I stand back as my mother opens the shed. Apart from a few photos and a recently bought guitar, still on its stand in the empty lounge room above us, my mother wants me to have all my father's possessions.

Holding on to his belongings is too painful for her.

**

The next morning, we pick up Joey from the train station, and the three of us stop in at the hospital for one final visit before Joey and I drive back to Armidale. My middle brother is returning later in the day to help Mum through the next few days.

Pup looks terrible but is still stoic in his blue-striped pyjamas. I realise my father is approaching death the same way he approached those fierce-looking truck drivers who used to offend him all those years ago. Mum and I thought Pup was crazy for leaping out of the car and shaking his fist at truck drivers who'd muscled into his lane. But now I admire his courage. I know this will be the last time I see him. I hold his hand and clip his fingernails, kiss his forehead, tell him I love him and say goodbye.

**

I cry the whole way home, too afraid to ring Rob en-route as I normally do because I'm sure he'll tell me Pup is dead and how will I be able to drive after that? At a little petrol station at Mallanganee, I stop and check the oil level. Joey stays asleep in the car as a woman comes out to help me.

'Are you moving?' she asks, with a glance at my battered station wagon, packed with boxes of my father's clothing and paperwork, his old guitar, a television, a spare mattress and my swag. With Joey slumped against the window, and my reddened eyes, we must look like a couple of desperados escaping to a new life.

'No,' I tell her. 'My father is dying.'

The woman hugs me, one of those rare moments of kindness from strangers, and says, 'I've got some books from the Bible that might help you.'

'That's okay.' I manage a smile. 'I know he's going to a good place.'

**

Joey sleeps all the way to Glen Innes. When we stop at KFC, I wait in the car while he buys some takeaway food. Back in his seat, he looks over at me and says, 'That was real hard seeing Opa at the hospital, but I'm glad I did it. I think I was closer to him than the other grandkids.'

'You spent a lot of time with Opa when you were young.'

He chuckles and opens a box of chicken nuggets. 'He used to take me to the park a lot, and when I fell over, he'd always say "Bung!" It was such a funny word. I'd be in pain but still laughing.'

Then Joey takes out his MP3 player and asks if he can play some music by Nas. 'This is meaningful rap,' he says, 'used to convey a real deep message, not like the usual stuff I play for you. The whole album by Nas – God's Son – is about loss.' Joey shakes his head and sighs. 'That damn song where he says goodbye to his mother is probably the saddest song I've ever heard – "If heaven was a mile away," he sings, "would I pack up my bags and leave this world behind?"'

I glance across at Joey, impressed. He still experiences life so intensely. He's busy dipping a chicken nugget into a container of sweet chilli sauce. After he licks his fingers clean, he searches through his songs for 'Thugz Mansion' and says, 'Leonardo di Caprio thinks Nas is the greatest poet of our generation.'

'Hmm,' I murmur when the song finishes. 'I think I'd like to hear more of his music. You've got good taste, Joey.'

**

As soon as I arrive home, I ring my mother.

'Your father was much better in the afternoon,' she says. 'He perked up with your brother's arrival … but I won't be surprised if we get a call in the night.' Her voice is light, almost gay. Perhaps she's in shock. When she mentions that Pup was worried about some bottles of grog hidden in the bakery house, she laughs heartily: 'Ja … I told him we found the bottles and you drank them all!'

The next day, my guitar-playing friend gives me the CD of classical music he'd recorded from my father's Carulli method-book, the one my father had as a fourteen-year-old boy in Amsterdam when he first started learning guitar. When I listen to the CD at home, I burst into tears. The pieces are so familiar – it's like Pup is sitting in

the lounge room with me, playing his guitar. I make four copies of the CD. I post one to the Gold Coast, priority paid, and send the other three to my siblings. Then I take Pup's old guitar to the local music store, and ask them to give it a clean and polish and a new set of strings. Later, when I pick it up, the guitar shines like new. I splash out and buy a hard-cover guitar case which looks like it belongs to a rock and roll band. With a satisfied smile, I lay my father's guitar on the green velvet lining. He would have a fit if he knew how much money I spent. I've never been good with money. Not like him.

**

My father becomes increasingly disoriented. The nurses prepare to move him to M-Ward – palliative care. One day, when my mother and brother turn up at the hospital, they discover Pup halfway off the bed. Dishevelled and confused, he keeps saying – 'Afgelopen!' which means: 'This is the end – no more!'

'Pup wants to go home,' my brother says when I ring the hospital room later. 'He's had enough.' My brother also tells me my father now has two black eyes.

'Two?' I ask.

Low blood platelets are causing the bruising. Pup's body is shutting down.

'Can I speak to him?'

My father's laboured breathing comes on the line. 'Have a listen to this, Pup,' I say, holding the receiver up to the stereo and playing one of the pieces from the CD. The copy I sent to the Gold Coast hasn't arrived yet.

'Ja …' he whispers in a drawn-out way.

'Bye, Pup,' I say. 'I love you.'

Very faintly, almost like I'm imagining it, he echoes: 'I love you.'

It's not right that my father, a champion boxer, is going out of the ring with two black eyes.

Death isn't something to fear

To take my mind off what's happening on the Gold Coast, I go with Rob to a party at Bernie and Jayne's. It's Jayne's birthday and Rob's band is playing. It's good to hear their uplifting music, but after half an hour, I drift back from the crowd and stand on my own. I thought the party would be a welcome distraction, but the last thing I feel like is idle chatter. I'll drive back to the Gold Coast in the morning – that's where I need to be.

Above me, the sky is a cloudless, starry-lit tarpaulin. I tighten my coat and watch as Freddie comes out of the house looking for me. He wants to run around the garden with a friend from preschool, but when I fetch his coat from the car he refuses to put it on. 'You'll have to go back inside,' I tell him. He whines. I cajole.

Bernie, who is standing nearby, comes over and takes the coat. He kneels on the ground in front of Freddie. In the same way he'd talk to any of the boys at the shed, he says, 'Coat … or no coat? You make the choice.'

Freddie shakes his head and laughs.

'Okay,' says Bernie. He takes Freddie by the hand and leads him into the house. Freddie struggles, but not much. A moment later, Freddie comes out, wearing the coat.

When Bernie wanders back over, I say, 'That worked well.'

He nods – 'Yep.' Then he looks right at me. 'How's your father doing?'

'Not so good.' My words catch in my throat. 'I shouldn't be here. I thought it would be helpful to have a break.'

'I haven't had a parent die,' says Bernie, his voice gentle, 'so I can't know what you're feeling, but I've had a lot of experience with death and dying. When I was young I lost a lot of mates through motorbike and car accidents, and probably should've been killed myself on at least half a dozen occasions.' He chuckles softly. 'But that was a tough time … and working with those blackfellas in Central Australia – all the death around them, with kids who've suicided. But for some reason I've never really feared death.'

'I fear it,' I admit. 'I'm going back to the Gold Coast tomorrow and I'm scared of what I'm going to see.'

'Death isn't something to fear, Helena,' he says. 'Sure, it might be a bit unknown, but I look forward to it. I'm happy to be here in the physical world doing what I'm doing, but for me it's a cycle and death is just the next chapter.' Bernie grins. 'And it's probably going to be even better than this lot … and I love this lot!'

The sound of barking comes from the other side of the yard.

'Wait here a minute,' says Bernie, striding towards the kennels. A short time later he returns with a glass of wine, cradling something under his jumper with his free hand. I laugh as the head of one of the new pups pokes up from the neck of the jumper.

'What's a good little dog doing down here?' croons Bernie, caressing the puppy like it's a baby. 'Don't worry. I'll get you warmed up.'

Earlier, one of the bigger dogs had been barking at some kids who were playing nearby, getting in the way of their game and not listening when Bernie called it over. I watched as he caught it and gave the dog a tune-up before locking it in the kennel.

'You seemed pretty hard on that other dog earlier.'

After an awkward silence, Bernie says, 'I'd be one of the softer fellas around … but I also understand the dog is an animal and what needs to go on. We take on dogs in the program that are pretty damaged, and you have to be tough to bring them back into the dog world because the dog world's a violent place. When dogs bite and fight, things get hurt. I've seen kids bitten – ferocious big ugly stitching-up stuff – and I've seen dogs tearing down sheep. I might be going, shit, I love this dog, but if he bites one of those kids and I have to put the dog down … what's harder? If you talk about hard,' Bernie pauses, giving the word full emphasis, 'wait till you're squeezing the trigger of a gun to kill that animal and you have no choice. Kids have to be safe.'

I nod, unsure how to reply.

He nestles the puppy more securely under his arm. 'Dogs need to understand their role in the pack, and that business of dogs pulling their owners down the street leads to a whole chain of events. If I try and take a bone off a dog and he starts growling, that dog doesn't understand his place. So, I'll tell him – "I'm the top dog around here, and if I want that bone, well you just fuck right off."'

I laugh, picturing him speaking to his dogs like that. But Bernie is serious, very serious. He looks across to the fire, where people are no doubt chatting about much

lighter topics than violence and killing. 'There are times where I know I'm too hard. I'm not perfect.' He stops for a moment and pats the puppy's head. 'People would say there are times when I'm too hard on the boys, too. Pretty similar thing, but you can be harder on kids with verbal exchanges than you can physically. Not so with a dog. With a dog you need to jerk him into line. They know what's okay and what isn't … and if the dog wants to be a fuckwit, we need to fix it.'

***

The phone rings early the next morning.

'Pup died at six,' says Mum, her voice empty of emotion. She and my brother didn't make it to the hospital in time.

The guitar CD had arrived the previous day. My mother and brother played it for my father that afternoon, and he'd listened appreciatively, with closed eyes.

'We played the music when we sat with his body this morning,' adds Mum.

For the rest of the morning, I sit on the lounge and listen to the guitar CD. The kids come and go. I take my father's old guitar out of its rock-star case and hold it in my arms.

Joey comes by in the afternoon. I'd tried ringing him throughout the day, but he wasn't home.

'I'm locked out of my house,' he says, opening the fridge and checking what's inside. 'I forgot to take my key when I went out last night.'

'Joey … Opa died this morning.'

'Oh!' He comes over to me. 'That's really sad … but I'm glad I got to say goodbye.'

'Yes, you were lucky.' We hug and I smell alcohol on his breath.

***

Only ten people attend my father's funeral – my mother, my brother, my sister, three of my parents' closest friends and me – plus three of the staff from the funeral home. My oldest brother is in hospital, recovering from an urgently needed knee replacement.

My father didn't want the details of the funeral in the paper.

I know it was his wish, but it doesn't seem right. Pup was an Olympic boxer, a successful migrant and a long-standing member of the Gold Coast Bridge Club … people would want to be here.

I stand tall and deliver the eulogy as if the room is full of people.

* *

The four of us have dinner that night at a seafood restaurant near the beachfront. As we relax over wine, we discuss Pup's unfailing belief in medicine and doctors. 'He wanted to have both my legs broken,' my brother says with a wry smile, 'so I wouldn't walk like Charlie Chaplin.'

'He put me on a hormone program,' I remind them. By the time I was twelve, already the height I am now – five foot ten – my father was convinced I needed to go on a hormone program to stop me growing any taller. The program was barely trialled in Australia, but the doctors said I needed it and Pup believed them. I think I would have liked to be six foot.

He didn't do anything like that to my sister, apart from shouting at her about the dishes and the fruit picking. She was too hard to mould into what he wanted. Just like me with Joey, my father should have appreciated her unique qualities rather than try to change and control her.

We drink more wine and reminisce. Pup wanted us to be perfect. It wasn't easy to be his children – to live up to his expectations. Later, at the unit, when Mum gives my brother Pup's wedding ring, he says, 'I'll never be the man he was.'

The next morning, I drop my brother at the airport, and then drive home to Armidale. My sister is staying on to help at the Gold Coast for another week. I leave her meditating on a pier overlooking the canal outside the unit complex. When I ring to let them know I arrived home safely, my mother tells me one of the residents came out and offered my sister a cup of tea because he thought she was suicidal.

She was in the lotus position, chanting.

A fuckin' bear pit

In the weeks after Pup's death, the weather turns grey and bitter, like my mood. Because Rob missed a lot of work while I was away, he stays back late most afternoons. On top of the normal household chores and the busyness of caring for an active three-year-old, the fire needs fixing all the time because the wood isn't burning well. Out by the back shed, I chop kindling, my fingers cracked and bleeding from the cold. Whenever I handle logs of stringy-bark, I end up with pieces of timber in my hands – huge dark lines lodged under the skin – that I lift out with a needle and tweezers. The other reddish-coloured wood is so heavy it's like hauling slabs of concrete inside. I become sad and weary. Anger sparks inside me like kindling catching alight in the coals of the fire. I find myself snapping at Rob and the kids at every opportunity. Grief.

One afternoon, while Freddie is sleeping, I search through a box containing odds and ends from my father's study. I find his bakery certificates from Holland, notebooks of recipes for meat pies and sausage rolls, plectrums for his guitar, half-written letters of complaint, an old pair of spectacles, and some black and white publicity photos from his boxing days. I put one of the photos on the wall above the phone – a youthful, bare-chested Pup who faces the camera with a serious expression, boxing gloves raised into position. He's wearing shorts and a fancy silver belt. On his feet are handmade boxing shoes, the only luxury he ever allowed himself. He looks ready for any punch life is going to throw at him.

***

Bernie rings the following week, his voice grave. 'Bad news about Skippa,' he says. 'He's in the lock-up and not looking good for coming out any time soon.'

He mentions the name of a jail in a nearby town.

I shake my head, bewildered. 'Skippa's the one I thought that would never happen to!'

'Except they all have that potential,' replies Bernie.

I think of Skippa's mother, the pain she must be going through.

'What did he do?'

'Skippa and another fella bashed the fuck out of someone,' says Bernie. 'So much alcohol involved we'll never know who did what. But again, it's those quiet ones you got to watch …'

A shiver goes through me as his voice trails off.

'Is that jail okay?'

'It's not too bad,' says Bernie, sounding grim. 'But he'll be moved to another one soon and that's a fuckin' bear pit. He'll be mixing with some pretty hard-core fellas there.' He shakes his head and sighs. 'Skippa's not the jail type of kid, really. I just hope he just doesn't do too much time.'

I remember how Skippa couldn't cope with his boss screaming at him. 'I can't imagine him in jail.'

'He'll do it in his own quiet way,' says Bernie. 'But if he doesn't get out soon he'll go quieter and quieter, get more and more depressed … he'd be a great candidate for suicide.'

***

A few days later, Joey comes over and tells me his house-mate, Tim, is going overseas for two months. He wants Joey to live elsewhere while he's away.

'Maybe I'll move back home?' suggests Joey.

I shake my head. 'No, I don't think so. I'm not ready. I'm still grieving for Pup and I've got enough on my plate. I'll help you look for another boarding arrangement or share-house.'

Joey isn't impressed – perhaps rightly so – but I can't have him move back home, not yet.

**

That same afternoon, Bernie rings again. 'Want to come down to the shed this Sunday?' he asks. 'Some of the old crew are coming along and we're doing circle work with the new boys from TAFE.'

I almost say no. But maybe it'll be good to reconnect with Bernie and the boys, to escape from the house for a while. Pup never liked people to be idle.

'Okay.'

Bernie tells me he's been visiting Skippa in jail.

'How's he going?'

'It's fuckin' horrible,' says Bernie with passion.

* * *

The following Sunday, I put on my boots and King Gees and head over to the shed. Bernie is sitting outside with Blister, Jimmy and some other blokes. I pull up a milk-crate and join the circle, feeling like the new girl at school. I nod hello to the others, recognising a few of the boys who've been working with the dogs.

Everyone is teasing a boy who's just had his tongue pierced – it's still swollen and he's having trouble speaking. Bernie teases him the most. Later, when Bernie asks why one of the boys hasn't arrived yet, someone tells him, 'He probably had too many cones this morning!'

'What's he doing eating ice cream for breakfast?' says Bernie, with his wide-eyed innocent look. The boys laugh, and I start to relax. It's good to be back.

'Okay, let's make a start,' says Bernie. With a nod in my direction, he adds, 'This is Helena and she's going to be sitting in with us.'

The original group of Iron Man Welders help Bernie keep the younger boys in line. I notice Blister in particular has stepped up to the plate since I last saw him. 'This time is for going around, checking how everyone is, and to work on any problems,' he explains. 'One is shit, five is great.' He turns to the boy next to him who is wearing baggy trousers, a crew cut and a 'fuck you' expression.

'Where you at, Danny?'

'One,' says Danny, rocking back on his milk crate.

'Why's that?' asks Blister.

'My dad's always going out without me and I'm feeling shit.'

Bernie stops Blister before he goes on to the next boy. He looks around the circle. 'What do the rest of you blokes think might help Danny in this situation?'

The answers spill out: tell your dad you love him; you miss him; handcuff yourself to him; jump in the car with him.

When it's time to move on, Bernie looks at Danny with admiration. 'Congratulations for having the guts to speak out in front of everyone.'

Danny nods, his lips pressed hard together.

The new boys are happy to join in, and it works well having the older boys lead the way. I listen in, curious, as Bernie talks about taking responsibility for actions, helping the boys understand how if they choose to do things – like playing up in class, or talking rudely to a teacher – then they need to take responsibility for those choices instead of blaming the teacher, other kids or their parents.

'It's about changing the script,' says Bernie. 'We can't change what happened yesterday, we can only change from this moment on … and I'm giving you the seeds of change today.'

I'm the last person in the circle. Blister looks over at me and gives me a kind smile. 'Where you at, Helena?'

His question takes me by surprise. 'Three and a half,' I reply, wanting to wrap things up. But really, I'm a one. Maybe not even that.

**

Before I leave, Bernie takes me aside and asks if I'm ready to attend a mediation session with Rob and Joey. Because of my father's death, I haven't had much time or energy to think about mediation, but it's important for me to face up to what's going on in my own family, to stop running away.

I stare back at Bernie, wondering if I'm ready. 'Not really … but I'll give it a go.'

You picking up what I'm putting down?

The day before Joey is due to move out of Tim's, with nowhere but our house as an option, we go up to the university and look through the noticeboards for share-house

accommodation. At home later, Joey rings one of the numbers about a room. A woman answers and says yes, the room is still vacant.

'Let's go and see her now,' I say, grabbing my keys. 'You're running out of time.'

'What do I say?' asks Joey in a panic when I pull up outside a weatherboard cottage. Wind chimes hang on the front veranda, tinkling in the breeze.

'Just say hello and see where it goes from there.'

I watch as he knocks on the front door. It swings open and he goes inside. Five minutes later, he comes back out and slides into his seat. 'Yeah,' he nods at my questioning glance. 'They were really nice and relaxed – a guy and a girl. They said I could move in tomorrow.' He keeps nodding to himself, like he's surprised by what happened inside the house. 'Yeah, I think I could live there.'

I look at him proudly. 'That's great, Joey. I'll drop you home so you can start packing.'

***

The mediation session is held in the front room of the Family Support building. Sparsely furnished with a couple of old lounges and an armchair, the room has a box of toys in the corner and a large mirror over the mantelpiece. Joey sits opposite me, looking like a character from an alien movie – his newly shaven head covered with wax. I had to laugh when he told me how that happened. He'd wanted his head completely bald – the barber always left a soft covering of fuzz on the scalp. Tobias's sister thought it would be a good idea to put wax on his head and pull the hairs out. Neither the hair nor the wax came off. The day before, I'd tried to remove the wax with a hot washer, but it was stuck fast. Even the barber couldn't help. Joey would have to wait until his hair grew, so he could cut the wax off.

During the mediation session, we mainly talk about our fraught years in Brisbane – all those wrong paths Rob and I took in our efforts to be better parents. Bernie leads the session. He makes me laugh, just like he does with the boys at the shed, by teasing Joey about the wax on his head. I've never laughed so much in a counselling session, yet here we are, talking about our history of pain.

At the end of the meeting, Bernie suggests that we establish a 'no-go' zone from five-thirty in the afternoon to seven in the evening – as a way to manage Joey's visits. That's the busiest time of the day for me, and also the time Joey usually appears wanting food, money, a lift and attention.

'And no more driving,' says Bernie, looking hard at me. 'You picking up what I'm putting down, Helena?'

I nod. 'Yep.'

Putting some of those tricks to use

'How do I make a doctor's appointment?' asks Joey as I park the car behind Hungry Jack's.

A month has passed since the mediation session in which we agreed to implement the 'no-go' zone. Nothing much has changed. The 'no-go' zone isn't working – Joey's been coming around every day, sometimes more than once, and not always at the times we agreed on. I shouldn't be driving him at all, especially after what Bernie said at the mediation session: 'No more driving.'

So why am I still doing it? Because I want to help him move ahead in life and I want to heal our relationship.

**

I manage to convince Joey to attend a Defence Forces information session in Tamworth. On the drive, Joey eats takeaway chicken while I admire the New England scenery. At the conference centre in Tamworth, he goes inside to complete an initial aptitude test. He'll enjoy that, I think, as I wait outside in the car. He's always loved tests. I've spent hours studying the job descriptions in the brochures, and have underlined the ones I think he's most suited for – like cryptologic linguist

or systems analyst. When I read through the brochures, I feel like running away to join the army myself.

We had another mediation session yesterday, during which I reminded Joey that I was, and still am, his strongest supporter. We're going to give the 'no-go' zone another try … and this time stick to it.

**

I pop into the shed one afternoon to see how things are going. As I wander through the doors, I see Skippa working in one of the welding bays.

Bernie comes outside to talk with me, wiping his hands on his overalls, his eyes bright. 'We sprung Skippa from jail!'

'How did you manage that?' I ask, laughing with relief.

'I was just relentless,' he says with a grin.

**

While making dinner one night, I listen to a feature about Bernie and the boys on the local community radio station. The program host is reporting from the shed, and in the background I hear the familiar sounds of bashing, clanging, crackling and the shriek of the drop-saw. The reporter begins by asking Blister about his involvement in the program.

'I joined Iron Man Welders at the start,' answers Blister with pride. 'A few of us old fellas recently came back to help Bernie keep some of the young fellas in line.'

I smile when I hear him say that, remembering how Geraldine once told me: 'Those boys will be around Bernie forever.'

Blister is a dad now. His baby girl was born two months ago.

The interviewer moves on to Bernie. 'What is it you're doing that's working?'

'We sit and talk with young people,' says Bernie. 'Self-development is the most important thing. It doesn't matter whether a kid can weld or whether he can read and write if he doesn't know who he is and where he fits in life. So one of the things we work on is life and relationships – because those are the things that really matter to kids.'

I look up from chopping the onions, tears in my eyes. I always get a lump in my throat when I hear Bernie on the radio.

'The key to the stuff we're doing isn't coming up with new ways,' adds Bernie. 'It's going back and having a look at the old ways and at the things that really worked. I spent a lot of my life working with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory and learnt four or five golden rules. One is the auntie and uncle system. These days we use fancy names like "role models" or "mentors" – but it's just about having sensible older people around to show younger people how to grow up. Those Aboriginal people showed me some really clever tricks that have been around for thousands of years – I'm just putting some of those tricks to use.'

* * *

A few months later, Joey's share-house is sold and he needs to find somewhere else to live. Once again, we go up to the university notice boards, searching for available rooms. We don't have any luck. With all the university students back in town, it's not easy to find a room to rent in Armidale. The day before he has to move out, I leave Joey with twenty dollars and the last of the phone numbers. 'I've got to go to work. Buy some credit for your phone and keep ringing until you get a place to live. You need to take whatever you can get, and tell them you'll move in the next day.'

The next morning, Joey rings and says: 'I had a look at a room in someone's house, but they won't be deciding till the following week. That means I've got nowhere to go … except your place.'

For the next six hours I help clear the stuff out of his room and clean it. Then we pile his boxes and bags into the car and drive back home.

'Just for a few nights,' I tell him. 'I love you and I want the best for you, but living together doesn't work for us. You know that.'

Put a spoonful of cement in your Weet-Bix

A few nights turns into eight. Joey falls into old patterns of staying awake until four in the morning and not emerging from the bedroom till noon. At breakfast, the five of us tiptoe around so we don't wake him.

I ring Tim, who recently returned from overseas. I ask if Joey can move back in with him. 'Just for a little while,' I add, expecting Tim to answer, 'Yes, of course.'

But he doesn't.

'I'm painting the house,' he says apologetically. 'All the furniture is piled up in Joey's old room. He can come back when I'm finished, though, and that should be by Sunday.'

Sunday is three nights away. I know I'm being intolerant again. I think of Blister's mother telling him: 'If you're in trouble, you can come back.' Why can't I say this to Joey? I take a deep breath, loosen my fingers around the handset of the phone and steady my voice.

'Things aren't going so well here,' I tell Tim. 'I could really use one less person in the house – Rob and I are arguing, I've had to move Henry out of his room, Freddie is waking up all through the night, Theo is being horrible and I'm stressed out of my brain. Please.'

'Okay.' Tim says he'll definitely have the furniture out of the room by Sunday, for sure. Joey can move back as a short-term option, but he'll need to be out for ten days over Easter because Tim's relatives are coming to stay.

Easter is weeks away. For now, Tim's words mean only one thing: three nights to go till I can breathe properly again. As I hang up the phone, I spot a photo of Joey on the noticeboard – blowing out candles on his eighteenth-birthday cake, in high spirits after visiting his uncles in Sydney. If only he could be Mr Happy all the time.

***

On Sunday, I reach breaking point. At three in the afternoon, it's still unclear whether Joey is going back to Tim's. 'For sure' has become 'maybe.' Joey hangs around the whole morning – lying in bed, playing with his portable PlayStation, not making any effort to pack up his stuff. Really, it's just normal teenage boy behaviour, but for some reason, it drives me wild.

When he comes into the kitchen to eat breakfast, I take the sheets off his bed, pick up the clothes off the floor, pack everything into bags and put them in the car. Joey doesn't comment. At six, I finally manage to wrench him out of his room and take him and his gear around to Tim's. Back home, I'm almost ready to collapse from emotional exhaustion. I sit on the lounge, eyes closed.

Five minutes later Joey reappears, asking for a lift to a friend's place.

Rob looks over in confusion as I snatch the keys from the top of the fridge. I know I'm not thinking rationally, but if I take Joey out now, then I'll be able to drop him back at Tim's. I drive him to his friend's house, hands tight on the steering wheel. Joey gets out of the car and knocks on his friend's door. Sick with impotent anger, I sit in the dark car, sobbing at the injustice of Joey's behaviour, while he happily chats with his friend for over fifteen minutes.

I push my grandmother's pendant along its gold chain. Why can't I say 'no' to Joey?

Guilt. That's it. I was too hard on him when he was young. I forced my own son to leave home at fifteen, and for years I've been trying to make up for it because I haven't been able to create a space for him to come back to. This driving business seems so much worse now that I have Pup's car – he would have hated to see me driving Joey around like this. I pull down the visor to look at a boxing photo I'd stuck on with Blu Tack. I don't like being so angry in his car. I can almost hear his voice: Is this what we came to Australia for? So het kind could be treated like a servant by her own son?

When Joey gets back in, I don't trust myself to speak. A torrent of rage will be released if I open my mouth. That won't help either of us right now. Stay calm, breathe, I tell myself. We drive back to Tim's in silence.

At the house, I turn to Joey. 'I think we need a break from each other for a week or so.'

Joey doesn't comment. He gets out, half-slams the door and walks up the steps to Tim's veranda.

Back at home, I fall onto my bed and cry so hard my stomach hurts. The phone rings. I hear Rob's voice answer, the sound of his footsteps up the hall. He opens the door of the bedroom. 'Bernie's on the phone for you.'

I wipe my eyes, take the phone.

'Hey, Helena, how are you going?' Bernie's voice reaches out to me like a lifebuoy in a stormy sea.

'Not so good.' I burst into tears.

'Tell me what happened,' he says, like it's completely normal for me to be sobbing on the phone.

After I tell him, Bernie says, 'Joey has developed a pattern of behaviour where he threatens and intimidates you. Your behaviour perpetuates it. You both need to stop.'

'I don't know how.'

'I'll come over tomorrow and give you the words you need to use. Words that'll help you to be strong with him.'

I reach for the tissues. 'I just want Joey to join the army … to move thousands of miles away.'

'We need to get him to move thousands of miles away from his behaviour,' says Bernie. 'And we need to work on your behaviour as well, Helena. It's time to toughen up. Put a spoonful of cement in your Weet-Bix tomorrow morning … and for fuck's sake, stop driving Joey around.'

Bernie's right. Joey and I are caught in an unhealthy relationship. I'm not going to allow this pattern to continue any longer. I love him, but enough is enough.

Staying here isn't an option

The shops are full of mandarins. Gleaming dimpled orange fruit. I have them in the fruit bowl at home, but I can't eat them. I tried. I peeled the skin off one but the sharp scent of citrus instantly brought back the image of Mum feeding Pup mandarins, segment by segment.

One afternoon, I walk past a nursing home and through the window I see an old woman lying on a bed with blankets tucked under her chin. She looks lost and lonely. The old woman stays in my mind for days. Is that all there is to look forward to? I don't want to be left to rot in a nursing home, my needs attended to by strangers.

**

In the meantime, I have more immediate concerns. Easter is less than a week away and Tim's relatives are coming. One morning, Joey rings and says: 'Hey Mum. I need to be out of my room in three days. I'll probably stay with you for ten days while Tim's family is here.'

I don't comment but I know I can't let that happen. The time has come to put that spoonful of cement in my Weet-Bix. Although Bernie said he would come around and tell me my 'lines', he never showed. He's busy with the boys at the shed, so I let it go. But now I need his help. I ring Bernie on his mobile and tell him about Joey's plan to move back for ten days over Easter.

'It's time for me to stand up to him, Bernie.' I get my notepaper and pen. 'What do I say?'

First of all, Bernie apologises for not coming around earlier: 'Just got caught up,' he says. Then he gets straight to business. 'Okay, the next time you ring him, ask Joey: "What are your options?" He'll say your house. Then you say, "That's one option but let's think of some others." Tick them off with him – "You get the dole so Centrelink may be able to help, or the caravan park, or the youth refuge, or the police station." Tell him, "Staying here isn't an option, Joey, but this is what I can do. I can give you a hand to get in touch with any of those places on the list, but choosing to shout at me is not one of the options." Don't engage with his arguments about the past. Just keep saying, "This is what I can do. I can help you come to a decision, but staying here is not an option."'

'Yep,' I say, writing furiously. 'Thanks, Bernie.'

**

The next morning, when the house is quiet, I ring Joey. 'Let's talk about your options for where you're going to stay over Easter.'

'Your place,' says Joey, in a tone that implies it's the only option.

'Where else?'

He can't think of anywhere else, so I start reading through the list of choices I'd prepared.

'There's no way I could stay at the youth refuge,' says Joey. When I mention the caravan park, he asks: 'You'd prefer me to stay in a caravan park with murderers where I might get my throat slashed?' There had been an incident a couple of weeks before where one of Joey's friends had witnessed a man getting his throat slashed in an altercation at the local caravan park.

'Staying here isn't an option, Joey,' I tell him, calm and steady. 'But I'll support you with whatever you decide.'

He hangs up on me.

**

That afternoon I write a letter outlining all the options Bernie and I discussed. I put the letter inside an envelope, walk around to Joey's house and slide it under his door.

Joey comes around later, when I've just put Freddie to bed. 'I want to talk about things,' he says with a hint of belligerence. 'What are the reasons why I can't stay here?'

I have told Joey the reasons a hundred times already – how his behaviour creates enormous tension and affects everyone in the house, how he refuses to do any jobs and help with the housework, how he plays loud rap music while Freddie is sleeping, how he sometimes shouts at me so loud the neighbours call the police. I have two other boys entering their teens, and I don't want Joey's behaviour to be their benchmark.

I take a deep breath. Come on, Helena. You can do this.

'I'm not going to discuss that now, Joey,' I tell him. 'Staying here isn't an option, but I'm prepared to help you with whatever you decide.'

A stubborn look crosses his face. He sits on the couch. 'I'm not leaving till you tell me.'

Bernie's voice sounds in my ear: Don't engage.

I'm not sure what to do. Bernie said to ring if I need help, so I walk over to the phone and dial his number.

'Hey Bernie,' I say when he answers, keeping my voice level. 'Joey's come over to discuss things, but he doesn't want to accept he can't stay here.'

'Okay,' says Bernie. 'Tell him – "Now is not a good time for me, Joey. I'd like you to leave. We'll talk about it tomorrow at a time that suits me, but staying here is not an option." I'll stay on the phone while you talk to him.'

I repeat these words to Joey, working hard to maintain an unruffled appearance. My legs are shaking. I'm not good at confrontation. Knowing Bernie is listening makes me feel a little self-conscious. When I lift the receiver to my ear to check if he's still there, I hear him say, 'You're winning, Helena. You've seventy per cent won this. Keep going.'

Joey pulls the phone cord out of the wall, hanging the line up on Bernie. Now it's just Joey and me.

I stand my ground. 'Now is not a good time for me, Joey. I'd like you to leave.'

I'm sounding like a broken record, but the words come easier every time. 'I'll talk to you tomorrow.'

In the end, I have to force him out the door. Clearly unnerved by this change in my behaviour, he doesn't know how to deal with the new me. The side gate clicks shut. I wait for him to come back, to start arguing with me again like he'd normally do. But he doesn't.

I plug the phone back in and call Bernie. He answers on the first ring. 'How'd you go?'

'I did it.'

'He's probably gone home to lick his wounds,' says Bernie. 'No doubt he still thinks he'll be staying at your place. But we've introduced him to choice theory, which doesn't leave him any room to debate and argue and win. Ring him tomorrow and have a list of reasons why he can't stay by the phone. Don't engage, just keep telling him – "I'm prepared to help you with whatever you decide to do, Joey, but staying here isn't an option." You're going to have to be strong, Helena, but this will lead to a more honest relationship with Joey. It'll release his life to him.'

Later, lying in bed, I feel a twinge of guilt about how I behaved with Joey. But then I remember what Bernie said about the dogs the night before Pup died – there are times when you need to be hard, especially when the dog needs jerking into line.

This is one of those times.

Don't engage

The next morning, I type out a list of reasons why Joey can't stay, and put them by the phone:

Reasons why you can't stay here?

- You didn't contribute any money or offer to help with housework the last time you were here
- You go to bed really late and sleep in till the middle of the day – the rest of the family have to creep around the house
- I don't like the fights and the tension
- It doesn't suit me – it's my life, my house.

At midday, after reading the list out-loud several times, I ring Joey. When he answers, his voice thick with sleep, I start to explain why he can't stay. By the time I reach the second reason, he hangs up.

Okay, fine.

At three the next afternoon, Joey calls and says he's coming around.

'It's not a good time for me,' I tell him. My pulse begins to race. 'I'm about to pick up Freddie from preschool.'

'I'm coming around.'

Joey has caught me off-guard. I rush around the house, closing doors and windows, finding my keys, hoping to leave before he arrives.

Too late. I hear knocking on the front door. I stand back against the wall, like a rabbit caught in a spotlight, pretending I'm not home. Ridiculous. Hiding in my own house. Anyone else would stop knocking and try again later. Not Joey. He walks around the side, banging on the windows, shouting: 'Mum! Mum!'

Worried he'll break the glass, I race over to the back door.

'I didn't hear you,' I say. 'I was in the bathroom.'

Joey tells me he's bringing his gear around the next day.

I breathe deeply and slowly, trying to regain my composure. I remember Bernie's words: Don't engage.

'Sorry Joey,' I tell him. 'Staying here over Easter is not an option.'

'Fuck you!' he yells, inches from my face. He races outside, grabs the trunk of the nearest rose bush, and rips it out of the garden. His face wild with fury, he spots one of my favourite pottery dishes on the back table. Crash! The plate lies smashed on the concrete path. Satisfied, Joey marches up the side of the house, his body an exclamation of injustice. The gate slams. Bang!

My hands shake so much I can barely hold the dustpan and broom as I sweep up the broken crockery. I throw the rose bush in the compost heap. Then, a mess of nerves, I find my helmet, lock up the house, and ride my pushbike across town to Freddie's preschool.

Later, when I'm home again, I call Bernie. 'I had an awful scene with Joey this afternoon.'

'Tell me what happened,' he says.

Shamefully, like I'm releasing a long-held secret, I recount the events of the afternoon. Bernie doesn't seem surprised or shocked by anything I tell him. When I joke that mine might be a hard case to fix, he says he's seen much worse.

'I think I'll write Joey a letter,' I say, when I've finished explaining. 'I'm better at writing than speaking.'

'Good idea,' agrees Bernie. He helps me work out the words I need to use.

***

'Dear Joey', I write the next morning,

> You come asking for help and wonder why you can't stay here? The answer is the way you behaved yesterday afternoon. From now on, if you want to come over you need to ring first and check if it's a good time. If I say no, it's not a good time, then don't come over. Simple as that. And when you do come over, the behaviour has to be normal. Same as at anyone else's house. Bashing on windows, swearing, smashing plates and ripping rose bushes out of the garden is not normal or appropriate, and I'm

> not accepting it anymore. When you visit other people's houses you don't behave like that. This is my house, my life, and I don't want people abusing me and damaging my property. As I said yesterday, and also today, staying here is not an option over Easter.
> Love Mum

I walk around to Joey's house and push the letter under his door.

* * *

As I prepare dinner that night, I listen to a radio program I recorded when Triple J featured Bernie and the boys at the Armidale Wool Expo a while back.

I recognise the voice of Wayne, one of the Aboriginal boys, as the program starts: 'Yeah, some people just go around and break into houses and everything, iPods, laptops …'

The reporter's voice follows: 'A bunch of teenage boys from Armidale on the New England Tablelands of NSW, who've been well known to the cops for ages, are now on a first name basis with farmers on the dog-trialling circuit. Now, in case you're not familiar with dog jumping, basically it's like the canine equivalent of high jump and these boys have won every dog jumping competition they've entered. It's day one of the dog jumping competition here at the Wool Expo in Armidale.'

I boil water for pasta, smiling at the sound of barking. Someone says, 'Come on, boy! Come on … good dog!' and I'm suddenly filled with an intense desire to return to the world of the shed, to Bernie and the boys. I didn't know they'd been doing so well with the dogs. I'd been too caught up with my own problems to ask.

Skippa comes on next. 'I'm nineteen,' he tells the reporter. 'Been working with the dogs for about a year and meeting new people all the time. It's real good fun – the dogs give us something to look forward to.'

Then the reporter introduces Bernie. 'I can only call it dog magic,' he says earnestly. 'The boys love these dogs and the number of comments we've had about the way they handle the dogs is something special. I've never seen anything like it. There are farmers here with third generation bred dogs and fancy Land Cruisers talking to this mob of boys who wear their caps on back to front – telling the boys what a fantastic job they're doing with the dogs. It was one of the most amazing moments I've had in youth work.'

The reporter swings back to the boys. ‘Wayne, you and your dog won today. How does it feel?’

‘Good. I was confident.’

‘Have you come first place in any other competitions?’

‘At the Armidale Show,’ answers Wayne in a cocky manner ‘And every comp we go to!’

‘So now you’re just used to winning.’

‘Starting to get sick of it!’ Then he laughs. ‘Nah!’

Doing the right thing

Rob and I had planned to take the kids to the coast for Easter, but it pours with rain so we decide to cancel. Joey comes around on Easter Friday, waltzing around the house like he owns it.

‘I’m staying at Lenny’s,’ he says, and asks me to drop a mattress around. ‘I slept in Tim’s tent in Lenny’s backyard last night, but it poured with rain and everything’s soaked.’

Joey jumps into the shower, without asking, and then goes through the drawers in Henry’s room, searching for some cards. By turning up unexpectedly like this – not ringing like I asked – he has the upper hand again. I decide to let it go, for now, but when Joey leaves, I call Bernie.

‘He’s introduced the third trick,’ says Bernie. ‘Carry on like nothing has happened. He has to understand it’s not like that anymore – “You need to ring before you come over, Joey.” Let’s work out what you’re going to say next.’

I grab a pencil and a notebook. ‘He’s asked for a mattress. I was going to lend him a comfortable one, but I think I’ll just give him a thin camping mat and an old sleeping bag.’

'Yep,' agrees Bernie. 'Take a mattress around, but don't give him the comfy one. He's only thinking about what's best for Joey. He needs to know you'll help him and that you want the best for him, but the help isn't unconditional. If he comes around like that again, tell him: "You can either choose to leave, or wait here for the police."'

'The police?'

'Ripping rose bushes out of people's gardens and bashing on windows and doors isn't acceptable, Helena. He needs to learn that … maybe the hard way.'

**

Straight after talking with Bernie, I write the next letter:

> Dear Joey,
> The way you behaved when you came over here this afternoon is not the way it works. This is not a place where you can make yourself at home, open the fridge, have a shower, and go into other people's rooms. Would it be okay if I did that at your house? I don't think so. From now on, you're not coming into this house if you haven't rung. If it suits me, you can come over, or I can help you with something. I said I would support you, but my help is not unconditional. You play by the game and I can give you help. At the moment you seem to only want to do things your way. It doesn't work like that anymore. This is my house and I make the rules about what goes on here. If Lenny's place is too uncomfortable, ring one of those other options on the list. I've dropped off the camping mattress, your sleeping bag, the pillow you left here and some milk. We can have another crack at things some other time – remember to ring first.
> Love Mum

I drive around to Lenny's with the bedding and the letter. No one answers the front door when I knock. I walk around the back to the shed where Lenny sleeps. It looks like a homeless shelter – bottles and mess cover the concrete floor, bare mattresses and filthy-looking pillows. It's hard for me to imagine Joey sleeping here in this cold rainy weather. But I have to be tough otherwise Joey will never take any responsibility for his life. I put the letter, the mattress and the old sleeping bag near the door, so Joey will see them when he returns.

Later that night, at a party where Rob's band is playing, I spot Bernie across the room. It's disconcerting to see the 'real' Bernie after the intensity of our phone conversations over the past week. He knows so much about me. I wave to him from where I'm standing and he nods in my direction, but at the end of the night, I can't

leave without saying goodbye. He's sitting with a crowd of people, so I don't want to say too much. I bend down to speak in his ear. 'Thanks for everything you've done this week … you really make it a lot easier.'

He stands up and gives me a hug. 'No problem, Helena. I'm always happy to help.'

***

Joey comes back at seven the next night, without ringing. Although he's remembered to come after the 'no-go' zone, he didn't ring first. Rob and I are exhausted from being up during the night with Freddie, who had his worst bout of croup ever. I'm resting in bed when I hear voices in the kitchen – Joey asking Rob if he can use the computer, if he can make a call to a mobile, if he can pick up some shoes that were left in Theo's room.

He's completely ignored my letter.

Joey follows Rob through the house, saying over and over how he needs to make a mobile phone call, how he needs to use the computer, how he needs some dry socks.

Is this what our life is going to be like forever?

I think of Bernie's advice to Skippa, when he was having that trouble with his boss – 'Time to do something different'. If we just do the same as what we've always done, nothing will change. I want to help Joey find the right path in life.

I go to the kitchen where Joey and Rob are standing.

'I'd like you to leave my house now,' I tell Joey. 'You can choose to do that or I'm going to ring the police.'

He looks at me like I'm a half-wit, and then heads into Theo's room.

'I just need some socks,' he says over his shoulder. 'I'm going in a minute.'

I watch him walk away. He always has a reason for not listening to what I say. It's time to change the script.

I ring the police. An officer comes on the line.

My voice feels like it belongs to someone else. 'My eighteen-year-old son, who doesn't live here, is refusing to leave my house.'

When I give my name, the officer asks, 'Is this in relation to Joey Pastor?'

They know him well. This is why I am ringing the police – because I don't want my son to go to jail.

Joey bursts out of Theo's room.

'How could you ring the police!' he shouts. 'I'm leaving, aren't I? Just getting some fucking socks! Do you know what they'll do? They're just waiting to find an excuse to send me to jail! Is that what a mother does?'

From a distance, like I'm watching a scene from a play, I think, what drives a mother who loves her son to this point?

Bernie's voice rings in my ears. Don't engage.

'That's not my problem Joey,' I tell him, fighting back the tremor in my voice. 'I asked you to leave. You didn't. Now you can deal with the police.'

I hear Freddie crying in his bedroom, woken by the shouting. My heart aches, but I have to finish this. 'Go sit with Freddie,' I say to Rob. 'He needs someone with him. I can deal with Joey.'

I'm doing this for all of us, but mostly for Joey.

The police are at the front door. Rob asks them to go down the side, so they won't alarm Freddie. Joey runs through the back door as the side gate opens. He leaps over the back fence like an Olympic hurdler. We've had the police here before, but this time I don't care about the neighbours hearing the noise, or whether they see a police car parked out the front. I'm not collapsing like I usually do when the police arrive. I'm strong enough to deal with this.

Two police officers search through the backyard with their flashlights. Then they come to the back door and ask what I want to do next.

'I told Joey to ring and check if it's a suitable time to visit,' I explain to them. 'I don't want him charged, but if he doesn't ring before he comes over, I will keep calling you until he gets the message.'

**

After the police go, I phone Bernie. 'Is this is a good time to talk?'

'Any time is good.'

'I just had another scene with Joey.'

'Tell me what happened.'

I don't need to hide anything from Bernie, or pretend that we're some happy family who have got it all together. I tell him about the police, half-expecting him to say I went too far.

'"Fuck off Joey,"' says Bernie, like he's the one talking to Joey. '"You didn't ring. We're not having this conversation." Next time he comes over, tell him, "You didn't ring. Here's fifty cents so you can make a phone call." You're doing the right thing, Helena. Even if he doesn't talk to you for ten years, you're doing the right thing. You're a good mother.'

I need to hear this.

While I'm on the phone, Theo comes over and asks if the police are chasing after Joey. He looks worried.

'Let me talk to him,' says Bernie. He talks to Theo for a long time. I stand in the kitchen, listening as Theo says, 'Uh huh … yeah … uh huh.' I drink three glasses of water while they're talking. My mouth is as dry as a desert.

When Theo gives me back the phone, Bernie says, 'Tell the kids that I'm helping you to do this, Helena – and that we're doing it for Joey.'

Drawing a line in the sand

It's nearly a year since Pup died. If I don't 'sort out this shit' with Joey soon, I'll be very disappointed in myself.

Weeks go by with no sign of Joey. On the day before his nineteenth birthday, I give him a call. 'Maybe you want to go out for dinner or see a movie …' I offer, but before I get any further, he says: 'I don't want to talk to you.'

Afterwards, I ring Bernie. 'It's hard not seeing Joey for his birthday.'

'There'll be other birthdays,' he says.

'I know, but it still hurts.'

**

Late the next afternoon, Joey rings back. He explains how he's angry about the way I'm treating him, and that he feels my behaviour is unfair. Joey admits that he's starting to see things from my perspective, but doesn't feel that I'm seeing things from his. He says that I treat him differently from the other members of the family, and that he couldn't enjoy his birthday while feeling so excluded from his family.

In many ways, he's right. I have treated him differently, but what he doesn't understand is that I've always loved him and tried my best.

'I'm sorry you feel that way, Joey,' I say cautiously. 'But I did ask if you wanted to go to the movies or out for dinner. Maybe we'll try again next week.'

After the call, I take my cup of tea into the backyard, where I sit in the sun and remember how the birds twittered outside the window when Joey was born in Darwin.

A baby is born! A baby is born!

I'm weakening, I know it.

I call Bernie.

'Don't go there,' he says. 'This is the next strategy – the guilt trip. He's been walking all over you. Now you're drawing a line in the sand and he can't cope. Tell him – "Joey, you choose to be excluded by your actions. Would you accept it if I started pulling plants out of your garden and punching on windows? If you treated your mates the way you treat your family, you wouldn't have any mates." It might be time to do some mirroring with him.'

'What's that?'

'When he says, "I'm your eldest son, how can you act like this?" you say, "But I'm your mother, how can you act like this? If you want to be treated differently, act differently." Joey stepped up to the plate with that mediation between him and Rob. You asked him to try mediation again and he didn't want to. So, now we're doing it this way, and you'll meet in public places until his behaviour changes.'

'Okay,' I say. 'Thanks Bernie.'

That night I write Joey another letter.

I'm drawing a line in the sand.

* * *

The first anniversary of my father's death is only thirty days away. The date has become my self-imposed deadline to have things sorted with Joey. The other week he resorted to subterfuge and secretly arranged for Theo to fill a bag with food from our fridge. Another night, he came over without ringing. I gave him fifty cents to make a phone call and forced him out the door. Joey shouted and became angry. After he left, even though I was upset, I didn't ring Bernie. I need to stand on my own.

I explain to Theo that I have to be like this because otherwise Joey will still be coming around when he's forty-five, asking for food and money. His life will be a mess because he never learnt to take responsibility for anything.

I have become the Mistress of Tough Love – and I'm doing it for Joey.

* * *

'Dear Joey', I write, hoping this will be my last letter,

> What happened last night is not the way it works anymore. Ringing Theo is not the option if you want to come around here. You need to speak to me first. Also, you are still shouting at me when things don't go your way, so until this behaviour changes, no house visits. I love you and I want to improve our relationship, and I'm keen to meet up with you in public places (which is why I invited you to the movies), but coming around here like you did last night is not an option.
>
> Also, it is not my responsibility if you don't have food or didn't get to Coles on time. How would you feel if I came around to your house and took food out of your fridge, or if Tobias or Lenny came around and did that to you? If you need more money to buy food and pay for other expenses, put more effort into finding a job or finishing Year 10.
>
> This is the second time you have come to the house without ringing. If you try it a third time, I will phone the police immediately. I'm happy to meet up with you in a public place – ring first.
>
> Love Mum

Shortly after I push the letter under his door, Joey rings. 'Stop writing those damn letters,' he says, more in exasperation than anger. 'If you feel the need to write a letter, you can read it over the phone.'

'Okay, fine … but no interrupting.'

'We can discuss each point,' says Joey. He sounds like he's prepared to make a big effort to be reasonable. But I only get as far as the second paragraph – about him choosing to live on Centrelink payments – before he hangs up.

**

The next day, I come home from dropping Freddie at preschool and listen to a message from Bernie on the phone: 'Joey rang and we had a very interesting conversation. Talk later.'

I call Bernie straight away. 'What happened?'

'Joey said I had to stop telling you to write letters,' answers Bernie. 'He didn't like this 'ringing-up' business with the fifty cents. I said I was free to help you out as a friend, and that he'd been given the opportunity to have mediation and knocked it back, so this was how you were doing things now. Joey said he'd changed his mind about mediation, so I asked him to choose where we could have these sessions. He suggested McDonald Park. Is Thursday at two okay with you?'

'That's one of my teaching days … can we change it to another time?'

'Joey will have to work that out,' says Bernie, unconcerned. 'But he's definitely feeling the pressure, Helena. He's bending in the right direction.'

Like a parrot on a pirate's shoulder

The first anniversary of Pup's death is like a day of rebirth. I buy a new bra, make my first ever pot-roast in the slow-cooker, and bake a Greek New Year's Cake. I also ring Joey and ask him to come to the movies. He agrees, with just a moment's hesitation. That evening, we walk down to the cinema together to see Defiance – a movie about two brothers who hide Jews in the forest during the war. Later, as we walk home through the cold dark streets, I tell Joey how years ago I read through a

list of Jewish families who died in the Holocaust, and I saw the surnames of both my parents listed among the dead. Recently, my sister discovered our mother's great-grandmother was a German Jew, and that our father's ancestors were Spanish Jews who fled to Holland in the 15th century.

'It's a part of our history that I don't really know anything about,' I say to Joey. 'But I'd like to find out more one day, just as you will probably want to know more about your Syrian connection. It's important to know where you come from.'

***

Bernie is in the paper again for the second time in two weeks. He's taking six boys and a team of dogs to an elite dog jumping championship in Victoria. Only six dogs were invited, and two of them were Bernie's. In the photo, Bernie and the boys are rigged out in jeans and embroidered black cowboy shirts. Good for them, I say to myself.

I haven't heard from Bernie since the last episode with Joey. After I suggested again to Joey that we meet for mediation, and had no response, I let it go.

The next day, I pop in at the shed, hoping to catch Bernie before he leaves for Victoria. Only Blister is there, working with Rocket, the old welding teacher from TAFE.

'Bernie's at the rural skills shed,' says Blister.

By the time I reach the rural skills shed on the other side of town, Bernie and the boys are just about to start circle work. This new lot of boys are wild, but Bernie keeps them in line, mostly with humour. One of the boys hasn't been going to school, hasn't been going to Youth Links at TAFE, and hasn't handed in his work experience form. He asks Bernie if he can do work experience with him.

'I was hoping you'd ask me that,' says Bernie. 'How about …'

He's interrupted as a figure in a white pantsuit and high heels sashays through the door. I watch in amusement as Geraldine puts her hands on her hips and tosses her hair back from her face.

'Alright,' she says, looking around at the group of boys, some of whom are already cowering in mock-fear. 'Who's been eating sugar this morning?'

The boys start dobbing on each other – pointing their fingers and calling out names. One boy has the misfortune to be caught with a can of Coke, and before he can run out the door, Geraldine grabs him and wrestles him to the floor. He calls out to the others for help, but they just stand back and laugh.

'You know the rules,' Geraldine tells him sternly, holding him down and putting her knee in the small of his back. 'No lollies, no soft drink, and no junk-food before twelve!' When she pulls his ear – hard – the boy cries out in pain. He's half-laughing, but obviously feeling the pressure. 'What's good enough for my daughter is good enough for you!' she pants, still holding his ear. 'If I catch you drinking Coke again next week, I'll beat you!'

The others whoop and holler, while Bernie sits back and lets it all happen before him. Before Geraldine can deal with any more rule-breakers, two drug and alcohol lecturers from Tamworth arrive. They've come along to see the boys work with the dogs.

Geraldine releases her grip and the boy goes back to his seat, grinning madly, even though he's followed by calls of 'Shame!' Soon after, Bernie and the boys take the visitors down to the grassy area at the back of the rural skills centre. As Geraldine straightens herself and tidies her hair, I wait behind with her for a moment: 'I think he enjoyed having his ear-pulled!' I say, with a nod towards the boy.

'They love it,' she says with a giggle. 'Someone is actually giving a shit about their health and how they are – but not coming down on them like a teacher would. I give them permission with boundaries … and they can apply that to lots of things in life.'

Geraldine shouts out her goodbyes to Bernie and the boys, warning them that she'll be back next week, and then totters off to her car. I smile to myself as I walk down the hill to join the others – although Geraldine has a weird way of showing it, I feel like I've just witnessed an act of love.

While the dogs have a run, a staff member from rural skills wanders over and tells Bernie not to let the boys and dogs jump around on the hay bales – 'They might put holes in the plastic,' he says.

'We don't go many places where we don't do something we shouldn't be doing,' Bernie tells the visitors from Tamworth. 'The boys will give you a demo on

how much control they've got over these dogs. Take Badger off the lead, Skippa. We train the dogs with hand commands, whistles …'

One of the other boys calls out to Badger to see if the dog will be distracted.

Bernie whips around to face the group sitting on the bales. 'Don't call him if you're mucking around … it fucks up the dog!'

The boys are quiet.

'It seems funny at the time,' says Bernie, 'but it just fucks up the dog.'

Bernie turns back to the two men. 'They're all pretty young dogs,' he explains, 'and socialisation is really important with them.' He walks over to join Skippa, who is keeling down next to Badger. 'This dog is one the boys have been starting – Skippa's been doing some work with it. When we got Badger, he had never walked on a lead and you couldn't catch him.' He knelt down and called to the dog: 'Here Badger! Sit, good dog!'

The others are silent while Bernie works the dog.

'Good dog!' Bernie looks up at the boys gathered around him. 'He wants to roll over, so we just ignore that. Here Badger, come on, good dog! What a good little dog!'

I love Bernie's dog voice.

Afterwards, Bernie lifts the pup up onto his shoulder, like a parrot on a pirate's shoulder, laughing at the expression on the dog's face. 'I'll just let it look around,' he says. 'It thinks it's a bird … good dog!'

***

I ring Joey the following week. 'Want to go to the movies again?'

'Yeah, okay,' he says grudgingly. 'Is Alien vs Predator still on?'

'That's not the sort of movie I want to see,' I tell him, 'especially if I'm paying for the tickets. In the Wild is on at six. I'll meet you at the cinema if you're interested.'

**

Later, walking to the cinema, I think of how Joey is often reluctant to see the movies I suggest. How many action movies have I sat through to keep him happy? I wait for

him in the foyer, watching the clock, not really expecting him to show. At one minute to six, he wanders through the door with a slight nod in my direction. He still doesn't like to talk to me in public. I buy our tickets and we go inside.

Based on a true story, Into the Wild is about Chris McCandless, a headstrong young American man with high ideals. After finishing college, he gives away his car and all his money, changes his name to Alexander Supertramp and hitchhikes to Alaska without telling his parents where he's going. His mother almost goes mad with worry and wonders if her son is still alive. McCandless sets up camp in a deserted bus in the Alaskan wilderness at the beginning of spring. A few months later, when he runs out of food and is ready to return to civilisation and perhaps even forgive his family, he can't make his way back across a flooded river. Stranded, he spends his last days huddled in his sleeping bag, getting thinner and thinner, his face sunken and gaunt, watching the blue sky outside the bus window. He didn't believe in maps, but if he'd had one he would have known that only half a mile away was a cable spanning the river that he could have used to transport himself across.

As Joey and I walk home together through the dark streets of Armidale, I can't stop crying, thinking of the suffering parents go through with their children.

Beside me, Joey sighs heavily. 'This always happens when you choose the movies, Mum. We should have seen Alien vs Predator.'

Are you really Superman?

Over the next few months I don't see much of Joey, even though he's still living around the corner with Tim. We have the occasional flare-up where Joey steps over the line, but most of the time we're softer and kinder with each other. By August, things are going so well I invite Joey to Freddie's fifth birthday ceremony at his preschool. Rob is at work and can't make it.

'That's if you can be ready by ten,' I tell him.

When I knock on Joey's door the next morning, he opens it immediately, dressed and ready to go.

'Good on you,' I say, impressed. 'Freddie is really excited about you coming.'

We drive to the Steiner preschool – Joey's first trip in the car for nearly two months – and wait outside till the class is ready. I sit on a bench in the garden. Joey, in his black cap, black baggy jeans, and black and silver Superman T-shirt, stretches out on the slippery dip, his rap-style appearance out of place in the preschool's serene bush setting. Then Rosa, the young preschool teacher, opens the door and beckons us in. Her rosy cheeks and Germanic-looks remind me of Julie Andrews in The Sound of Music.

Inside, orange walls glow like sunlight. Freddie and his classmates are gathered in a circle, sitting cross-legged on the floor, almost bursting with excitement and anticipation. In the middle of the circle are a cake and a treasure basket full of stones and shells, with pieces of coloured cloth strewn about. Rosa gestures for Joey and me to join the circle – we sit either side of a golden cushion – and Freddie sits opposite us with a big smile on his face.

Once Rosa takes her place on the floor, the children begin to sing: 'Freddie's birthday, he's turning five, shining with his heart of gold.'

Rosa drapes a golden cape around Freddie's shoulders. He closes his eyes as she places a silver cardboard crown on his head. A lump forms in my throat as the treasure basket is passed around, each child solemnly selecting a stone or shell to put on the cloth near the birthday cake.

'Once upon a time,' begins Rosa in a soft storytelling voice, 'a little angel and a big angel lived happily in a heavenly garden. One day the little angel said, "I would like to go and live on earth." "Yes," said the big angel, "I will look after your wings until you return." So, the little angel and the big angel looked for a home on earth. At this time, there lived a woman and a man who loved each other very much, and their names were Helena and Rob. One day they made a wish for a child. The big angel caught the wish and brought it to the little angel and said, "Now your time has come to live on earth." The little angel went over the rainbow bridge to live on earth.'

As she says these words, Rosa spreads a rainbow-coloured cloth along the centre of the circle. Freddie stands and walks across the cloth, taking his place on the golden cushion between Joey and me. I sneak a glance at Joey – his face is rapt.

Rosa and the children begin singing again, their voices earnest and high: 'Welcome, welcome brand new day, flowers bright and sunshine gay, with painted birds that sing their song, make me kind and good and strong.' Tears fill my eyes. Birthdays always turn me into an emotional wreck.

'The parents were overjoyed to receive the child,' continues Rosa, 'and they called him Freddie.'

Freddie beams at me, his eyes shining with happiness.

Afterwards, we sit together around a low wooden table to eat cake and drink water from pottery mugs. The kids, fascinated by Joey, ask heaps of questions. 'Where do you go to school?' … 'Are you really Superman?'

Joey smiles at them, eyes twinkling, and cocks an eyebrow. 'What do you reckon?'

Later, when it's time for us to leave, the kids wave madly through the open windows. 'Bye, Joey! Bye!' He turns and waves back.

'That was pretty cool,' says Joey thoughtfully, as he puts on his seatbelt. 'Rosa's definitely in the right job.'

I look over at him – Mr Mellow. I decide to take the long way home, through the back streets of east Armidale. As we pass the welding shed, I ask Joey, 'Why didn't you stick with the shed?'

'There was nothing there that interested me,' he answers, stifling a yawn. 'I liked the people there, but …'

'It wasn't your scene?'

'Nah.' Joey looked out the window, and we drove in silence for several minutes. 'It wasn't for Lenny or Tobias either. In fact, all my close friends, none of them stuck with the shed.'

Leave him be

It isn't long before Joey moves again, into a garage at Tobias's new house in Girraween. Tobias has just been released from the juvenile detention centre again for getting into another minor scrape with the law. Joey asks me, very politely, if I can help him move. Loading his gear into the car, I notice he's still carting the box of soft toys around with him – Sleepy Bear, Dino, Sharky, Dolphin, Little Dino and Rabbit.

Once Joey is living with Tobias, I see less and less of him.

I miss him in my life. I worry about him, too.

One day, when Bernie rings, I begin to express my concerns about Joey. He cuts me short.

'You need to chill, Helena … he'll be right. Stop worrying.'

'Okay.' I'm reassured by his words. 'That's going to be my new motto – chill.'

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A few months later, Joey rings and tells me he has to move again because Tobias and his family are moving to a smaller house. I fully expect Joey to ask if he can move back home, but instead he says: 'If you can help point me in the right direction that'd be really great.' He wouldn't mind finding a flat, he tells me, but he doesn't want to go in one of those cheap places where 'every other unit is full of drug dealers.'

'I'll check the university noticeboards,' I say, hardly able to believe that firstly, Joey is taking on the job of finding a place by himself, and secondly, he isn't leaving it till the day before he needs to move out. Only a year ago – the time of the big 'showdown' over Easter – this sort of conversation would have been unthinkable.

But the following week, I send this email to Bernie:

> Just got to get this off my chest ... feeling worried about Joey. I helped him move from Tobias's yesterday to another house in Girraween. He's renting a room from an older woman – weathered face, looks like she's lived an extremely rough life, and she has another boarder as well. I KNOW it's great that Joey organised somewhere for himself ... but I just feel like he's living a down and outer's life. What's he doing sharing with the sort of person? She's probably salt of the earth in that rough as guts way, but I don't know ... I thought of him sleeping there last night and felt very sad. It's brought up these terrible feelings within me, that I've abandoned my own son.

Bernie's reply set me straight:

> Everyone's trip is different and the universe throws stuff at us that makes no sense at the time. Who knows why Joey has ended up living where he is, or for how long it will last. May be a good thing he's not still with Tobias …I think he needs to run his own race and it sounds like he is by finding somewhere to live himself. Might not be what you or I would choose – but his choice will involve what he can handle and what is comfortable for him. I don't think many parents would agree with the choices their kids make. You can't change what he does – so you need to either accept it or don't look. I don't think you really believe that shit about abandoning your own son – it certainly isn't what I see from the outside! But it seems as though you have a vision for how Joey should be living his life – and when he lives his life in his way, then it won't pass muster in your head. This will keep going round in circles – a constant state of sadness, disappointment and worry. My advice would be to leave him be – let him make his choices and live his outcomes – love him and be there to help if he needs it. Try not to decide in your head what is best for him – he is a young man and needs to sort this for himself. Hope I haven't been too hard on you. Talk soon. B.

And, so, I leave him be. Joey often rings me from the shopping centre, asking if I can drop him home with his groceries.

'It's a long way to walk,' he says.

I sometimes think of Bernie's words – If it becomes a use, back off – but it doesn't feel like a use, not yet. I'm just happy to see Joey and help him out. When I drop him off at Girraween, I try not to notice the rusted-out car in his neighbour's front yard, or the overflowing garbage bin spilling onto the street.

This is Joey's choice, I tell myself. Or the choice I imposed upon him.

Leave him be.

Taking care of important business

A few days later, I find Bernie at my front door, wearing dark sunglasses and carrying a cup of takeaway coffee. We go outside so he can smoke. As I clear some

junk off a couple of chairs, I notice Bernie doesn't seem his normal upbeat self. 'What's wrong?'

'We had a mishap during the week.' Bernie lights a cigarette and tosses the dead match into the bushes. 'I had to put one of the dogs down this morning.'

When I ask which one, he says. 'Not a dog you know.' He looks out over the back garden, and we sit in silence for a minute or two. 'Part of the stuff with the dogs is that they come and go. There's a lot for young fellas to learn from that, like when Banjo died. That shattered some of those boys.'

'Will you do a ceremony again?'

'Done it this morning,' he says, blowing smoke into the breeze. 'Put him down there with the other dogs – starting to get a fair dog cemetery out there.'

'Who was with you?'

'Just me today. It was a bit too serious for the boys.' His voice drops. 'It was a cock-up on my behalf, so it was something I had to go through. It'd be easier to run off to a vet and get the ground-room needle, but it's important for me to go through that process and check things are alright, meditate on it, look at it from another angle.'

I watch two rosellas hover over the sunflowers in the garden.

'It reminded me of a time when I had to shoot a few hybrid dogs for National Parks,' says Bernie, his voice still soft and low. 'Something happened one day with this dog. I had it there, ready to shoot, but I couldn't get a clear shot. And I thought, if only that dog would move forward three feet, I'd have a clear heart and lung shot. As I was thinking this, the dog moved forward and stood there.' Bernie looks across at me, but I can't see his eyes behind his dark glasses.

'I couldn't shoot the dog,' he tells me. 'I nearly quit my job over it. Shit … if you've got a touch with animals, should you be using it to kill them? I would have been laughed at for talking about that sort of stuff in a white fella environment, so I went back up to Tennant Creek and sat down with that old man who first started showing me dog tracks and went through it with him.' Bernie shakes his head. 'He was gobsmacked that I was there, asking him stupid questions, and said: "If you think you're bigger than the universe, then you've missed something very important.

If that's meant to happen with that dog, then it'll happen, and it's not for you to question why."'

Bernie finishes his smoke, and takes another sip of coffee. He straightens his legs out in front of him, his boots covered with dried mud.

From inside comes the sound of Leonard Cohen singing 'Anthem'. We'd both been to his concert in the Hunter Valley a few months earlier.

'I hadn't had much to do with his music prior to that concert,' says Bernie, nodding in the direction of the house. 'Slim Dusty is more my man. But I was really taken by Leonard Cohen and what he stood for. You got the feeling – same as those old men in Tennant Creek – there's more than one lifetime's learning in that fella. A few songs in particular touched me, and this is one of them – that line about how there's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.'

I ask Bernie what the lyrics mean to him.

'You think you're doing really well,' he says, 'but for some reason, it all falls apart, like with that dog I couldn't shoot in the Territory. For Christ's sake, here I was doing the most unbelievable job in the world, and all of a sudden the whole show came to a stop because I couldn't shoot one bloody dog! So, there's the crack – and it was time for me to go and learn another lesson that has multiplied a billion times on top of that through life, through dogs, through the boys. When things are going bad, it's back to that same stuff – the universe is bigger than what you are. If you learn to trust it, it knows better than you, and the right things happen for some reason or other. Why do things happen? Why do you get sacked from a job? Why do you stub your toe on a rock and then can't walk? Why does a kid like Skippa end up in jail? We spend so much of time thinking, I've got something going really well here, this is the answer to everything, you know … but wait! There's a big bloody crack, and you can either look at it as the whole show is fucked, or you can look at it as, that's where the light gets in. And when the light gets in, whoa! All of a sudden, it's just been one little stepping stone to something bigger and better.'

'Yep … I reckon that's true.'

Bernie finishes his coffee and makes to leave. I follow him inside, watching his long legs stride up the hallway. I imagine him shooting the dog that morning, going through the smoking ceremony on his own – taking care of important business. At

the door, I think about giving Bernie a hug or reaching out a comforting hand, but my arms hang loosely by my sides, not sure.

'See you next time,' he says.

I watch him walk to his ute. 'Hey Bernie,' I call from the doorway.

He looks around, his eyes impenetrable behind his rock-star sunglasses.

'I … um …' There's so much I want to say, but I can't. Not today. 'Say hello to the boys at the shed for me. And keep an eye out for Joey on your travels.'

He grins. 'I always do.'

Epilogue

Spring 2014

Several years have passed since the events in this story took place. Looking back, I now realise how very hard it was for Joey to be living away from home so early. He was only fifteen when he first left, and apart from a few short visits in times of need, he never lived at home again. Like many of the boys at the shed, Joey really struggled to be independent at such a young age. When I read over this story, I can see how much he longed to be at home with his family – a family who loved him, but who, for complex reasons, found it hard to live with him. Joey showed enormous strength and resilience to make it through that time, to reach a good place in life, and he touched a lot of hearts along the way, especially mine. I'm very proud of what he has achieved, and I know my father would be, too.

Joey and I still have a way to go, but we'll get there. In the meantime, I'm just happy to know he's doing well. At 24, he has a loving partner – a good, strong woman – and they're the parents of a beautiful five-month-old baby boy. Joey also has a full-time job, and he and his family live in a flat in a quiet part of town. I sometimes think of that affirmation I wrote for Joey on the night before his seventeenth birthday:

> Joey is caring, kind, and happy. He is busy with work, friends, love and life. Joey is sensible and aware of other people's feelings. He loves and is loved. Joey is great to be around and knows his family loves him. Joey is calm and settled within himself. Joey has all the money he needs. Joey is my beautiful boy.

It all came true, even though I made so many mistakes along the way. I wish I could go back and do it all differently, but that's not possible. Like Bernie says: 'First time is learning. Second time is stupid.' I learned a lot when Bernie began helping me heal my relationship with Joey. During that time, there was no need for anyone to be a winner or a loser – Joey and I just needed to come to a better place of understanding. Perhaps others will learn from my story and avoid similar years of heartbreak with their children.

Over the years, Bernie has also gone from strength to strength. Although the original team of BackTrack volunteers has moved on, Bernie has continued to work tirelessly to improve the lives of nearly four hundred boys. He's been supported in his efforts by a wide range of people and organisations. BackTrack now has a team of paid staff and a number of programs that include Iron Man Welders, Paws Up, AgLads (a rural skills program), Links 2 Learning (a program for girls) and the Paddock (BackTrack Boys School program). Because of the organisation's phenomenal success, people all over Australia are now sitting up and taking notice of what goes on down at the shed.

Like Joey, the seven boys who feature in this story all have gone on to achieve good things in life – they have trades, they're buying their own cars and houses, they're bringing up their own families, and they're passing on the lessons they've learned. Some of the boys still live in Armidale, some have moved away, but they all keep in touch with Bernie and they drop into the shed whenever they can.

The BackTrack boys, past and present, come from loving families. They're all good boys, but if they hadn't found their way to the shed, many would be unemployed, struggling, in jail or dead. Family conflict remains a recurring theme – even in loving families – and sometimes it's easier for people like Bernie and the BackTrack team to step in and become a surrogate family for a while, to help the boys make it through adolescence in one piece.

Back in 2007, when I first joined the Iron Man Welders, I was struck by the amount of love I saw in that dusty, dirty welding shed. That love is still there. Those early years were rough and tough, with hardly any money or structure, but BackTrack achieved what it set out to do. Much of what happens today is the same as what I've described in this story – the only thing that's changed is that Bernie and the current BackTrack team are doing it better.

We've all grown from the experience.