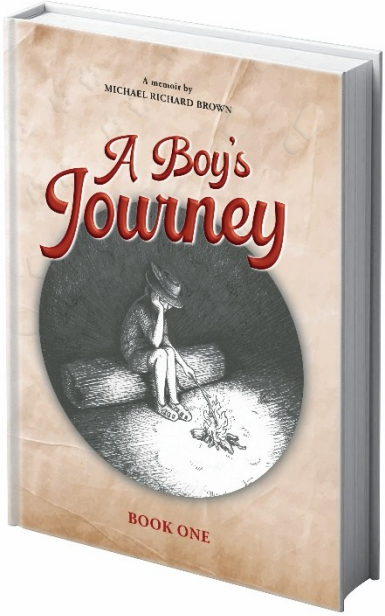


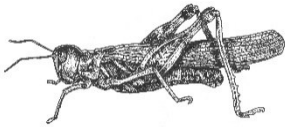

**Twenty scenes from the inner world of a ten-year-old boy from my memoir;**

***A Boy's Journey***

**Michael Brown**

# CONTENTS





# Scene 1 – A Boy's Journey

## Prologue

"Hey, Trig? Why don't the sun come out?"
My best mate, a jet-black Labrador, sat and watched. He had a longer name once, but Dad trimmed it to Nig. Mum, shaking her head, insisted it be Trig, a proper name for a fancy dog like wot Trig was.

Mum bundled me into a raincoat that didn't keep the cold out. The drizzle wasn't going anywhere, hanging around like it always did. A typical Essex afternoon, I figured. I clung to the hammer, my fingers red and stiff, gripping another staple. The moment the hammer met my thumb – again – I nearly cried.

"Son, you're eight, for crying out loud. Big'n burly enough to wire the cage on your Pat Malone. He'd dropped off a roll of chicken wire and a hutch he got cheap, for me to put together for the guinea pigs I was getting for my birthday.

No sun today. No sun yesterday. Me and Trig reckoned there wouldn't be none tomorrow, neeva. Beaten by the weather, we dropped our tools and scampered inside.

"Oh! Child of my heart! Get over by the fire, warm yourself up," Mum fussed, scrubbing my hair with a towel, making me dizzy – like she always did.

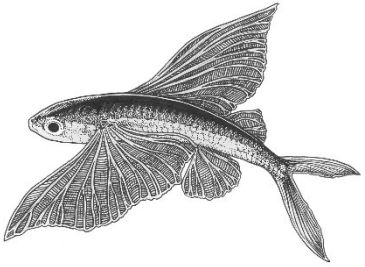
The kitchen window rattled under the first downpour. Rain streaked the glass and dripped onto the coal bin's metal lid. Dad said it'd do his head in one day.

“If they don’t fix it soon,” he grumbled, “council bloke’s gonna get the rough end of my tongue. And gawd ‘elp ‘im!”
He shoved his chair back, cigarette stuck to his bottom lip, mumbling to mum about his Woollies job being shite anyway.
“Michael, I wanna show you sum’inc. Come ‘ava look.”
I rubbed my frozen hands together, just like he taught me, and shot to the table. My thumb throbbed worse now that I was inside. Trig stayed by the fire, giving himself a good shake.
Dad straightened his tartan shirt, tucked it in proper, like he was about to say something important. Papers, maps, and bossy Ingrid’s school atlas covered the table. He leaned forward, so close I could smell his Brylcreem. Nose to nose, he said:
“Michael. I’ve had enough. We’re orf to Australya.”
I never got my ninth birthday party. Never got my guinea pigs, neeva. And worst of all – on the day we left – Dad sent Trig to a good ‘ome.

***

# Scene 2 - *A Boy's Journey*

**Dad talks up Australia (1959)**



When Dad got going about Australia, none of us quite knew what he was on about. But his excitement was infectious. He spun tales of creatures that defied logic, things so odd it seemed like the gods had gotten it all wrong.
"Kangaroos hop instead of run," he started.
“Yeah, we already knew that one Dad. But fish that can fly?" Ingrid frowned. "You’re having us on."
"Nah, it’s true!" Dad grinned, loving the disbelief. "They’d jump outta the water, go on for ages!"
I pictured schools of fish taking off like startled pigeons. Could fish really fly?

Dad knew just how to hook me, knowing my love of the outdoors. He painted pictures of adventure, hunting crocodiles and snakes, camping out in the forests, which he now called ‘the bush’.
He kept digging up more details. "The native people? Some of them don’t go to school or work. No houses, they kip under a tree. When it’s cold, they snuggle up to their dogs."
"Sounds alright," I said. Eight-year-olds like me liked the idea of not going to school.
Truth was, Dad needed an escape. Here he was, stuck in a two-story, semi-detached council house with a young wife and five kids, working for basic wages, with no real skills to speak of. Week after week, they scraped by, slipping deeper into struggle. Australia wasn’t just an adventure; it was a lifeline.
I overheard Dad telling Mum he'd chucked in his job at Woollies. That night, my bedtime prayer went out to all the angels, saints, God, and even dead Grandma in Germany. *Please make Australia the dream Dad hopes for, and also Jesus: I don’t wanna be unhappy like dad when I grow up neeva.*

***

## Scene 3 - *A Boy's Journey*

**Australia, here we come.**

September 1959
(I dedicate this scene to all the grandkids and great grandkids who today, just want to know what it was like for their grandparents who sacrificed so much to give us kids a better start)

Two strides up the gangway, my whingeing over leaving dog Trig drifted over the Thames like an old newspaper caught in the wind. Decked out in my Sunday best, I thrust my chest forward, shoving past a snivelling kid ahead of me. At 8 I was big enough to carry my own bags on my 'pat Malone', he wasn't. The gangplank rocked beneath our feet, the movement scary but exciting. We were swallowed, along with everyone else, into the cruise ship Fairsea's belly. The air buzzed like Barking Station at rush hour, with bodies pushing forward, hurrying, jostling. Families clung to each other at the wharf's edge, waving flags and fabric full of colour in a patchwork of farewells.

A prolonged blast from the ship's foghorn thundered over the crowd, but it couldn't drown out the sobs. For many, this was a last goodbye. Family, never to be seen again.

The thought of a six-week voyage to Australia had me near peeing my pants with excitement. I barely thought about not getting guinea pigs

or about Trig needing a new home (that's a lie, at first I missed Trig real bad). But this day was thrilling.

For Mum and Dad, with five kids and no money, it must have been terrifying. It was a leap into the unknown. But the cost of passage for all seven of us amounted to little more than a ten-pound processing fee, and we knew our vessel Fairsea, a dated ex-naval troop carrier from 1941, would get the job done.

The crackling over the loudspeaker ushered in fresh tears, with Vera Lynn's song We'll Meet Again, not helping. A woman beside me, about Mum's age, clung to her man's arm, knuckles white, breath shaky. As Fairsea slipped further from the dock, she bent forward, hands braced on her knees to steady herself, and sobbed her poor little heart out. I stood there and watched her cry. For me it was very scary.

We drifted sideways. The figures on the wharf shrank to the size of little tin soldiers as they retreated back into their own unknown worlds of longings and imaginings.

The magic of Dad's stories

Once our cabins were sorted, Mum fixed me with a look.

"Stephen's yours for the trip," she said. "Look after him."

Stephen, my almost two-year-old brother, stuck half his fist in his mouth and grinned.

We explored our deck first, weaving through hiding spots behind lifeboats, under stairs, down eerie corridors. The scent of orange juice clung to the open-air decks like something permanent.

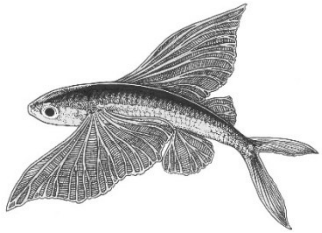
As my confidence grew, we ventured further, doing our best to stay unnoticed. One morning, we got caught in a storage room - which reminded me of Mum's airing cupboard - by a cleaning lady with a strange accent. Barely taller than me, she knelt, took Stephen's hand, and guided us to the drink station.

We got lost on a lower deck, wandering aimlessly, while Fairsea edged through the Mediterranean toward the Suez Canal.

I stopped by a porthole.
“Steve! Steve! Look at that!”
I hoisted him up. Fish. Flying.
My breath hitched, hands pressed hard against the porthole’s cold metal. Until then, I thought flying fish existed only in Dad’s stories. But there they were, silver blue streaks darting from wave to wave, shooting like arrows, spreading delicate wings, skimming the water’s crest like surfers, before tucking themselves away and plunging back beneath the surface.
That moment sealed it. Every tale Dad had ever spun became gospel. Sister Ingrid found us and took Steve off to Mum for his afternoon kip, but I stayed spellbound. Two decks below, I found another secret viewing window. The cleaning lady handed me an empty bucket so I could stand tall enough to peer outside.

***

**Scene 4 - Passing *Fairsky***



One day, I spotted our Greek Kapetanos on deck, dressed all spivey in a pristine white uniform. He adjusted his cap, brushed the dust from his uniform with the back of his hand and stood at attention. He looked ready for a naming ceremony.

Passengers crowded the railing. *Fairsky*, our sister ship, was gliding close enough for us to see her captain salute and wave. It didn't make sense meeting in the middle of the ocean like this, until I overheard an officer explain: "She's full steam ahead to Southampton to pick up another lot of immigrants. That's why she's empty."

That day, I learned my first nautical rule.

“She’s on our left, passing port to port. Always pass from port to port.”
Years later, during my sailing days, those words became second nature.

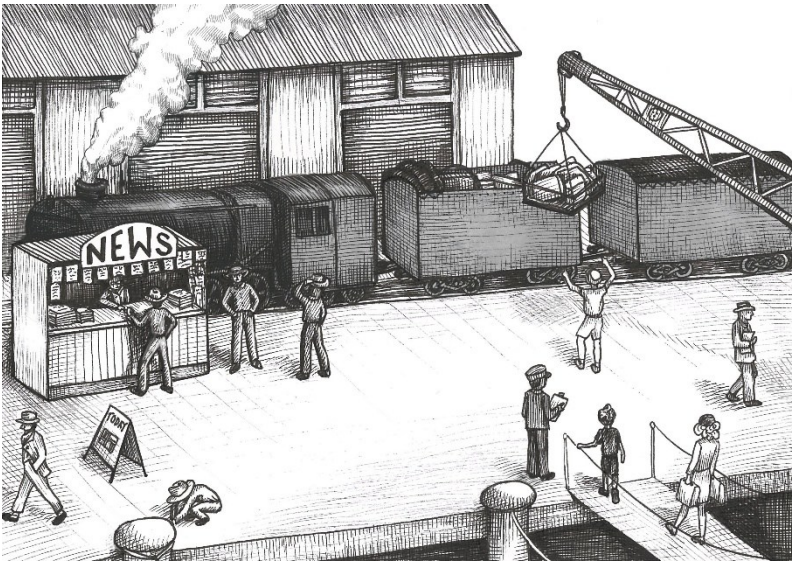
**Storms and orange juice**
On our way to Western Australia, a storm struck. *Fairsea* pitched and tossed, the sea shifting us sideways. Spray flew over the bow every time we nosed into a wave. Most passengers fell sick. Going on deck helped. I inhaled the exhilarating sting of sea spray, the scent of diesel. I loved it.
One afternoon dad nudged me toward the drink station. “You gotta drink more juice,” he muttered.
“Why dad?”
“To avoid the hurvy.”
He shoved a freshly rolled cigarette behind his ear, eyes scanning the horizon as if it held secrets. “Too many poor sods ended up with their teeth rattling loose from that hurvy,” he

said. - I think he meant scurvy but I believed him all the same.
However, things must have been tough, right enough, for my parents on this passage. I recall several times being asked to collect old fag ends on deck and bring them back to our cabin. Dad unravelled them to hunt out any unsmoked backy. It made me feel sick. After sorting through for the good stuff, he rolled it in paper, lit it with his paraffin flick top lighter, took a couple of slow drags, then handed it to Mum for her to have a go. It's hard to write about this stuff dear reader, but that's how it was.
It surprises me, at such a young age, how my environment influenced my thinking. Michael was too young to know what to say, but he knew. He knew alright, deep down, when he grew up, he'd make sure there'd never be a day he'd be so broke as to have to unravel other people's fag butts to get himself a durrie.

***

# Scene 5 - *A Boy's Journey*

## The Fremantle wharf




1959. I was six days out from my ninth birthday. Steam engines puffing smoke and

cinder made me tingle to the bone with excitement.
Dad was desperate for a decent fag. He needed proper cigarette paper so he could roll the backie from the dead butts I'd collected for him onboard.
It made me sick really, and I nearly cried knowing dad had run outta money except for the two old pennies he gave me to go ashore and buy a pack of zigzag papers.
The wharf was abuzz with wagons being loaded and unloaded with all kinds of stuff. The guard said he'd let me off if I was quick and didn't run away. I was the first member of our family to explore Australia. I was so proud.
Eyes wide, now full of smoke and soot, I kept turning as I walked so not to miss anything. Three farmers wearing bent cowboy hats and grubby jeans with holes in stood by the news agency gassing to each other in 'Stralian' with words like 'giday mate' or 'struth mate' while all the time they scratched at their bums. They

were all way taller than dad and had a smell like the sheep for at Romford Market back in England.
Right there and then – I decided to learn 'Stralian speak' and become like them. Life was instantly wonderful, although dad had to wait to get his fag papers. Two pennies wouldn't buy piss all, the man said.
I looked up as the towering farmers; one hitched his pants up and retied his Binda twine belt before slowly sauntered away. One of the others turned and said to me 'Spot cha latah Sonny,' and winked.
I was in heaven.
I stood back and sucked in all the goings on around me, thinking Dad's gunna be annoyed. I was happy to dawdle back and breathe in all the wharf smells.
"Oy! You better get back on board young fella, before we both get in the shite."
I thanked the gangplank guard and stepped aboard. The first in our family to explore

Australia, I felt my heart banging in my ears with excitement.
I needed to practise Aussie cowboy speak on Dad to help me learn proper ‘Stralian.
“No fag papers Dad, mate! The shop bloke told me tuppence ain’t gunna buy ya fag papers nor piss all. Sorry, mate!”
I thought Dad would laugh but he wasn’t in the mood.

***

# Scene 6 – *A Boy's Journey*

## East Hills Immigration Hostel

They allocated us half a Nissan hut at East Hills ex-army camp. Mum's face said it all: Horror.
The building had no straight walls except at the ends. A circular tinroof arched overhead,

spanning from one side to the other, fitted with a couple of windows and a door. It looked like a sausage cut in half lengthways.
Inside, it felt even smaller. One cramped bedroom squeezed in two sets of bunks for me, David, and little Steve. Ingrid and Frances had a closet-sized space to themselves. Mum and Dad's room wasn't much bigger. The lounge doubled as a dining area, but even that felt tight, every corner pressing in, every surface used.
Sydney, with all its grandeur, felt miles away. The camp sat in a low-lying regrowth area of either desert scrub or tidal
flood plain tucked away from prying eyes. Across swampy Williams Creek, barely 50 yards away, was the abandoned army training ground. Signs warned: "No Entry: Live Ammo Possible," and "Beware of Snakes."
Most people stayed away. Good thing, too. It left the wildlife undisturbe perfect hunting ground though I never found any live ammo.

Now Ten Pound Poms – beggars couldn't be choosers. For twenty months we endured two punishing summers. The ex-army tin barracks trapped heat like a furnace, suffocating and sticky.

Winters were cold and frosty. There was no running water, no kitchen. Just a communal ablution block we shared with three other huts - like a camping ground, but with none of the charm.

Mum, Dad and us five kids couldn't afford to eat in the mess hall. We made do and ate in the hut. A battered icebox was our only luxury, kept cold by a two-man-lift block of ice, delivered once a week, just enough to stop the milk from curdling, and the butter from melting.

Across the river, the wasteland stretched wild and untamed. To me, it was my sanctuary. Strange creatures thrived there, tucked between gnarled roots and along the banks where the bush grew thick. I barely slept,

itching for daylight so I could leap out of bed and chase the next discovery.
I'd flip logs, lift rusted sheets of iron, hunt through the remains of long forgotten outbuildings. I'd upend discarded tyres pooling with water, it became an obsession. Where there was junk, there was life. And I wanted to see it all. I fell in love with the bush. Dad didn't.
From the moment we arrived, his face hardened. He had pinned his hopes on this move being our salvation. It wasn't. I felt sorry for him. I was glad I wasn't Dad.

## Scene 7 – *A Boy's Journey*

### I hated school

Mum had high expectations. She always wanted the best for her 9-year-old loner. That's why she enrolled me at All Saints Catholic College in Liverpool.
She didn't know what it was really like.
On my second morning, I was late. "You're late," barked my teacher, a towering figure with a black patch covering one eye. Then, crack! His bamboo rod met my desk. No warning. No hesitation. He scared me stiff.
Lunch breaks became an escape.
Behind the cricket pitch, the tall grass was perfect for practicing making snares. I tied long grass together like trip wires along the narrow track, testing my handiwork. A nosy kid spotted me.
The bell rang. He ran straight into one of my snares, proving they worked. Unfortunately,

he face-planted. Blood smeared his nose. He bolted straight to the office and dobbed me in. Mr Raglan, on lunch duty, wasn't impressed. His strap cracked across my butt like a flax whip. Raglan had it in for me. I was given detention for not knowing stuff. It was ridiculous.

On my third week, he forced me to stay late after school for not doing my homework. I missed the bus home.

"Write 'I will do my homework' a hundred times," he ordered, shoving a dip pen into my hand. That's why I remember his name, because in my homework book, I also wrote: I hate Mr Raglan.

He never missed a chance to mock me for being left-handed.

"You'll never amount to anything, smudging your writing like that," he scoffed.

He saw the bus pulling out. He knew I'd missed it. I think he planned it. Mum had once told me, "Hate nothing, Michael. It's not good for you.

“Sorry, Mum, I hated that school. I hated Mr Raglan, and I knew, as I walked that five-mile stretch looking for the hostel, I was never going back.

*William’s creek – my happy place*

## Scene 8 – *A Boy's Journey*

**Missed the school bus home.**

After getting detention and missing the bus back to the hostel, I wandered through town streets, then country dirt roads trying to find my way, but the hostel was miles away. I got myself lost while rehearsing excuses to convince Mum I ain't going back to that Catholic outfit in Liverpool. I needed a new school. Open farmland stretched out ahead. Then, an Italian market gardening family invited me in for dinner. Their son Mario wore the same cap and uniform I did.
They were delightful people. His father - Papa - stood my height, with a coal heavers chest and sun-darkened arms. His face, lined with deep wrinkles, reminded me of cracked glass. I was impressed by his gardens full of all sorts

of veggies; carrots, zucchinis, squash, and lettuces, all neatly planted in rows.
The smell of dinner. Oh my! Garlic sizzling, onions caramelizing, tomato sauce bubbling, made my stomach growl. I smacked my lips, rubbed my hands together getting ready to dig in. I'd never had anything like this before. I thought this must be what restaurants are like. Papa said grace in Italian. Then we tucked in. Then, I humiliated myself.
Mario, seconds earlier my friend, thrust his hand up in front of my face before I could eat any more. Rapid Italian shot from his mouth. Papa waved his knobbly fingers.
"No, no," he said.
I had taken the last slice of their lovely bread without knowing it was always saved for Papa. My first lesson in Italian etiquette.
Still, Papa seemed intrigued by me, the immigrant from East Hills. Maybe he pitied me. Maybe he just liked my company. Either way, I felt special as he drove me home in his

little one-ton Bradford truck, the kind with wooden doors and flick-out indicators. Squashed in the front seat between father and son, it hit me: I had never been taught manners like that. Proper dinner etiquette, or how to greet people. Or how to have a conversation without getting embarrassed.

Why? I didn't know. I thought my German Mum, well-educated as she was, must have known these things but apparently not.

Another promise to myself: I would learn. I would get to understand people, and maybe one day, I'd have the confidence to talk about news, movies, and cricket like the other kids.

***

## Scene 9 - *A Boy's Journey*

**Snake hunting.**

One hot February afternoon, I jumped off the school bus two stops early to hunt around a disused sewage treatment plant. It was my favourite spot to catch bearded dragons or find ring-tailed possum nests if I got lucky.
East Hills hostel was a sweltering place that time of year: some days over 110°F (which is 43°C). It was oppressive so I stayed in the bush as long as I could. Grasshoppers fluttered to life as I brushed through the long grass. A couple of pee-wee larks sat in the shade, my only companions. Lizards along the trail sat with their mouths open, panting like dogs.

I walked carefully, watching my step. That's when I spotted it - a red belly black curled beside a dead gum tree. It heard me coming - they always did - and lifted its head but didn't move. I raised a metre of gum branch and smacked it fair on the melon.

It was huge for a nine-year-old boy to handle. Heavy too. I liked skinning snakes on the spot, but my Yacka mate liked to take his home. I suspected his family ate them, though he never said.

I had no knife that day. Before Christmas, I'd been caught with dad's penknife at school. Mum told me off, Dad had to speak to the principal and I had to promise never to bring one again. So I snitched and sharpened one of the canteen's table knives on a rock and hid it in the bush near the camp. On this occasion, I decided to carry my snake home in one piece, draped over my neck, like one of the mighty hunters you read about in books or saw at the flicks.

The William's Creek bottom lagoon was nearby. I wanted to wade chest-deep through the tidal stretch, but after thinking about it, I balanced carefully on a stormwater pipe to cross the river. During the Christmas holidays, I'd nearly drowned - trying to climb onto a floating cable wheel with the big kids. The wheel kept spinning. I slipped, swallowed water, and went under. I bounced off the bottom, gasping for air until I reached shallower water.

**The day Mum fainted**

I strode into camp, carrying my trophy. Hidden eyes watched from behind huts. How proud I felt. I rounded the corner past Arthur's hut (last summer he had burned the back of my legs, killing ticks with a cigarette butt. Geez, that hurt). Arthur thought he was some great white hunter. He didn't know shite. I couldn't figure out why Dad liked him. He later packed up and moved to New Zealand, he reckoned there were better jobs over there.

Anyway, as I got closer to home, I felt the weight of all those watching eyes. Finally, I crossed our front yard, a dirt patch they called a lawn. Mum was pulling pegs off a row of nappies. She looked up, saw me, muffled a scream into her hand, then fainted. The wicker laundry basket caught her knee, tipped over, spilling washing everywhere. Dad was still at work, thank gawd.

"Sorry, Mum. I'll pick it all up."

"Oh dear! You'll be the death of me yet, child. What have you got now?"

Hands up to her mouth muffled her speech, she muttered in German, "Jesus, Maria und Joseph und alle Engel und Heiligen, erbarmt euch über uns!"

I tossed the guts into the creek for the eels. The skin was big enough to cut into two belts, one for me, one for my Yacka mate. But he never turned up. I kept the skin for a week. Eventually, a kid at school bought it for a bag of marbles, a catapult, an old cricket ball, and

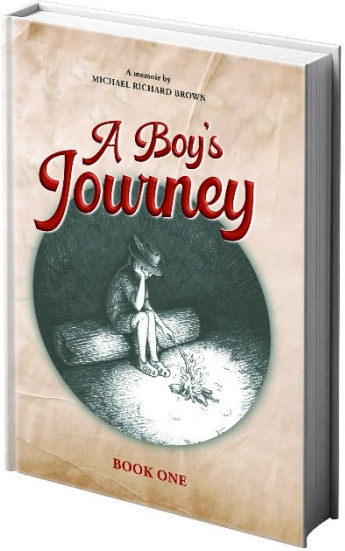
some useless tuppenny bungers left over from New Year.
I never saw my mate again. I missed him so bad, later in life I wrote a poem to express to my grandkids what he taught me in the few short times we roamed the bush together.

***

## SCENE 10 – *A Boy's Journey*

### Mum loses the plot

1961 - (this scene runs close to the bone - so important I had the sketch on the front cover)



I arrived home late from school and smelt trouble. Mum had on the pretty floral dress she only wore to church. She stood in our doorway, hands on her hips. I knew, by the way she pursed her lips, that whatever was bothering her was all my fault.

I'd jumped off the school bus down at William's Creek to check if the mullet had come in with the tide. While there, a couple of kids wanted help propping up a tunnel they'd dug into a sandhill by the swimming hole. It looked dangerous to me. Sand dries out, and if you don't prop it up properly with gum posts, it might collapse. So, I gave them a hand.
"Where have you been?"
"Down the creek. Sorry, Mum."
"You're not sorry at all."

She turned on her heels, stormed into the hut, grabbed her white patent leather belt from the bedroom, and came back out. I got a fright,

I hadn't seen Mum like this before. Tears welled in her eyes when she said, "I've been waiting for you at the bus stop for over an hour. Dad's still waiting at work."
"What for?"
"Don't you remember? We were getting you clothes for that camp you're going on."

Mum lost the plot and hit me with her belt. She was crying. She got me across the arms, then the legs. It blimmin hurt. There was no point hanging around. I dropped my school bag and headed for the bush. Mum tried to catch me, but her fancy dress got in the way, and I was too quick anyway. By the time I reached the other side of William's Creek, I figured Mum was at the end of her rope. I needed to get a fire going and think.

It's always a good idea to sit on a log and poke a stick at a fire when you need to figure things out. That's what my Yacka mate reckoned. I was half hoping he might show up,

he was a whiz at lighting a fire, even without matches. I never got the hang of it unless everything was rustling dry. But I had my own secrets. In a disused miner bird's nest, down a gumtree hole, on the end of a shoelace, I hid a knife and a box of snitched matches from home.

Fire crackling, perched on a smooth gum log, I poked and prodded until sparks flew into the treetops while I thought about Mum. The last time I had seen Mum cry, I cried too. We were in England and I was seven. It was when Grandma had the cancer and Mum flew back to Germany to visit. I loved my mum. She was sweet and kind, went to church, cared for us, and put up with life in this godforsaken camp without complaint.

I jabbed at the flames until it was dark. When you prod a fire, you can't help but think about stuff. I thought about how Dad must yearn to give Mum the life she deserves. With thirty-five years behind her, she was in her prime. I had a dream for Mum too.

I wanted her to live in a house of her own, getting pampered by dad like he told her. But the reality was different. She was stuck in a sweltering ex-army hut with five kids, no money, and no prospects. It was nothing but hard graft for her. She was the saint we all took for granted.

When the moths visited my fire and the mozzies started biting, I knew it was time to go home and face the music.

***

## SCENE 11 – *A Boy's Journey*

### Broken Bay Kids Camp


*1960 - 'Broken Bay Kids Camp.*
*Snotty nosed Nigel, left of lifebuoy. Me, right side.*

The frustration of life in the hostel for Mum and Dad was insufferable, and putting up with

a troublesome 11-year-old kid like me probably didn't help.
They grounded me until the weekend for running away. I could feel Mum and Dad were at the end of their rope. Dad needed to change things.

**A camp with a difference**

To everyone's relief, they sent me to Broken Bay Kids Camp. Mum packed new plimsolls and an absurd number of undies - why do mothers always insist on too many undies?
It was August school holidays, and this bush camp we nicknamed *The Broken Boys Camp,* was a temporary escape for frustrated parents to offloaded unruly kids, both sides desperate for space.
The camp sat halfway up a forested hill, a building that looked like a cross between a country schoolhouse and a scout den. Young, energetic teachers ran the place, their laughter infectious.
My mate Nigel latched onto me the second we arrived. We were the only kids from the hostel.

Always with a snotty nose, his sniffing trailed behind like a shadow. "Go make some friends," I finally told him. He frowned but shuffled away.

Days stretched wide, filled with long, winding tramps into the bush. Noisy bird song followed us from morning until night, then the rustle of possums and the distant hoot of what I thought were owls. We learned the secrets of the forest; the way certain trees thrived where others failed, the silent battles of survival happening all around us. I liked it there. But every night, the weight of home pulled at me. I thought about how hard life had become for Mum, and me running off into the bush, not helping.

One evening, on an overnight bush tramp, we sat around the campfire for "chat time." Each of us had two minutes to talk about something we enjoyed, while the rest held damper over the fire on the end of a stick and listened. I'd never done anything like it, but sitting among

kids with problems like mine, it felt different. It felt possible. I talked about skinning snakes. My words stumbled out at first. But then I saw their faces, leaning in, eyes wide, hungry for a story none of the city boys had ever lived. I found my rhythm.

"Hey, Mike, how many did you catch?"

"I dunno. Over the summer? Heaps."

"Were they all different?"

"Mostly brown snakes, but I skinned three big red-bellied blacks too."

The teacher finally stepped in, shaking his head. "Let's not encourage handling snakes, alright?" But that wasn't the point. The point was the rush of speaking, of owning my story, of holding the kids attention and not folding under it. I felt important. I thought to myself - *I can talk with kids, just like others do.*

Then, in a blink, the week was over. We packed, loaded up the bus, and headed home. Back at the hostel, I apologised to Mum for forgetting to meet her to buy clothes. She told me to be more thoughtful next time, and since

she and Dad never mentioned it again, I figured all was forgiven. She liked my camp report card. Although my written test scores were average, I earned an ‘excellent’ grade for my ‘exemplary ability’ in practical skills - helping kids pitch tents, lighting fires, and cooking damper.

Back home, I was allowed to join the other kids collecting stuff for the Guy Fawkes bonfire in November. That dear reader, is the next story I’ll tell you about.

***

## SCENE 12 – *A Boy's Journey*

**Walk to East Hills.**

Cracker night in Australia was a big deal. Dad was so impressed by the massive bonfire us kids had built, he gave Ingrid and me money to buy fireworks from East Hills. The way he lobbed logs high onto the heap made me think he wished he could be a kid again, if only to escape life's drudgery for a while. Ingrid, my 13-year-old sister, slung her stuffed duffle bag over her shoulder, loaded with togs, towels, and all sorts of girl things. She tried tidying me up, tucking my shirt into my pants like I was some five-year-old. I was 10, for gawd's sake, and we were only walking to East Hills!

We slogged a mile down the sealed road, searching for a footbridge to cross Georges River. No traffic, no houses, no fencing, just

open bushland right up to the roadside, full of nature. I loved it. Ingrid hurried me along, but I knew I'd come back another day when I could explore properly - without her.
November's warmth brought the landscape to life. The air shimmered and the ground pulsed with movement, with ants, lizards, and sun-drunk creatures carving their paths through the dust.
"Hey, Ing, watch this!"
I stomped hard, cracking open a mound of red ants. They surged out, a furious tide scrambling towards me.
"These guys eat anything, dead or alive."
Ing barely glanced, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, restless. "Just keep moving, will you?"

The sun was high overhead. The odd bearded dragon scurried across rocks

or hard earth, always with one eye open to danger.
"Bet there's something living under this," I said, toeing a rusted sheet of iron.
"For goodness' sake, grow up."
Metal scraped, a sharp sound against the quiet. Three redback spiders stayed put, so did the bull ant scouts waving their pincers, and a couple of skinks - gone in seconds - scattered into the undergrowth.
I caught up, still chewing on a thought. "Ever notice most birds out here are black and white?"
"Don't know. Don't care."
I kept going anyway. "Magpies, butcherbirds - the ones nesting near the dunnies," I said.
"Then there's magpie-larks. My Yacka mate says they're absolute mongrels when they start nesting. I think that's what he said."
Ing sighed, pushing forward, eyes ahead. "Come on. I wanna try the swimming hole."
"And Willie Wagtails. You've seen them, right?"

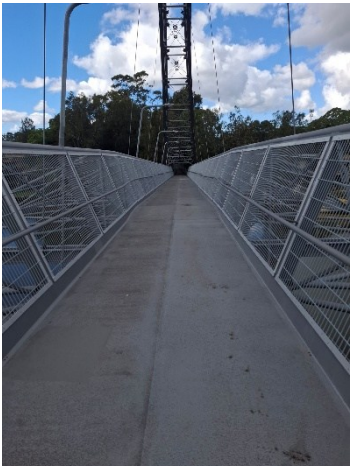
"You’re annoying me. Get a move on!"

We reached the swing bridge at the end of the road. Across the river sat the town of East Hills with its end of the line train terminal. It was a worn-out place with rusty-veranda shops. It reminded me of a spaghetti western, except for the tar bubbles in the road, still lingering from last summer.

A sign pointed down a no-exit street to a shaded park, pressed against the bend in the river. The swimming hole waited, murky and not very inviting.
Ingrid hesitated at the edge, arms folded.
"I don’t know if I wanna go in there,” she said.
"Why not? It’s got nets around it. Other kids are in."
She squinted. "Oh dear! Are they shark nets? Look at the colour of the water. Those aren’t jellyfish, are they?"
A dozen orange-pink jellyfish clung to the net near a group of teenage boys. The boys weren’t looking at the jellyfish.
"Those boys are gawking at you, Ing."
That did it.
"I’m going in," she said.

She waded forward, strong in the water, cutting through like she belonged there. Her sea-blue one-piece clung tight enough to catch the boys' eyes. I didn't like the way the muddy water curled around her, but I kept quiet.
"Come on, Michael! What are you waiting for?"

"Hang on, I can't see where I'm going. Give me a lift."
I climbed onto Ingrid's shoulders. She grinned at the boys as she strode deeper, but the riverbed shifted underfoot. She stumbled.



I pitched forward and hung on. My legs gripped around Ingrid, forcing us both under - I swallowed muddy water - kicked and thrashed until I found myself on shore, coughing it all back out again. The world was a blur of mangrove mud and worried faces looking down at me.
Ingrid stood over me, dripping and furious. "Michael! You boofhead! You nearly drowned us!"
A few snickers rippled through the crowd of boys.
"Thanks, boys. He's a blimin' Wally sometimes!"
One grinned. "Crikey, no worries, you'll be right, mate."
"Strewth, that was close!" his mate whispered.
The moment put a damper on the trip, but later, we still bought our fireworks.
On the way back over the Georges River, a school of grey mullet swam shoulder to shoulder like an invading force. They took their time cruising upstream under the bridge,

the tide pushing them forward. There were more fish than water to hold them.
Local kids leaned over the railing, staring down with envy. Not one of them had a chance of catching the mullet - not during breeding season. My Yacka mate told me they don't take bait when on their run upstream.
"Let's get a move on," said bossy Ingrid. "Don't forget, it's cracker night."

***

## SCENE 13 - *A Boy's Journey*

**Cracker night.**

Back at camp, the bonfire stood like a monument to our weeks of scavenging. An unruly tower of old couches, car tyres, and plastic scraps. The whole camp gathered around. Approving murmurs rippled through the crowd as we admired our handiwork. Then, just as we were ready to light it, a tree-hugging sheila noticed a pair of hungry-looking cats dart into the heap. She begged the adults to pull them out first. After some kerfuffle, the decision was made to light the fire. Surely, they had the sense to run. If they did, no one saw them.

The flames caught, swallowing the pile in a surge of orange and blue. Plastic melted, sending up acrid smoke that stung our noses. A

few of us shuffled back, coughing, and shielding our eyes. Others tried to stay closer, but they too had to retreat.
Smokers came in handy to light the Catherine wheels and sparklers. We even put some rockets in milk bottles to zoom up into the dark. And we, the wiser ones, pocketed our tuppenny bungers for another day.
The night rolled on, with shouting, laughter, and the sharp hiss of rockets tearing skyward. The Fireo's turned up eventually, though not for us. They swung their hoses towards the kindergarten's rubbish fire, nodding at our spectacle like they'd seen it all before.
No harm done - just a gentle reminder to keep things in check.
For days, the smouldering remains were the district gossip. At school, we strutted through the Aussie kids, tossing out smug grins. "See?" we said. "Even us Ten-pound Poms know how to throw a cracker night."

## Tuppenny Bungers


There's a special thrill in chucking a tuppenny bunger. The double banger, tuppence a pop, packed a serious punch. About the size of a cheerio sausage, with a double wick, it had just enough destructive power to make things interesting.

We tried to be macho, holding onto them until the last possible moment before throwing them skyward. Plenty of kids ended up with burnt fingers doing that. To stop my mates from making the same mistakes, I volunteered to show them the right way.

I pulled out half the wick to buy myself an extra few seconds, lit it, and waved it around for the crowd. Closer … watching … arm back, ready to throw, closer … closer, now! Bang! Too late. Brownie's thumb and two fingers blistered good and proper.

I swallowed the pain, tried to laugh along, but it hurt worse than the time I got the cane for not knowing my stuff at the Christian Brothers' school. Way worse. It took weeks for the blisters to heal, just in time for summer holidays, when boredom ruled unless you could think up something wild to do - like gang warfare.

***

## SCENE 14 - *A Boy's Journey*

**Gang warfare was alive and well.**

Most of the time, I kept out of trouble. Mum's only worry was me getting lost or hurting myself.
During our second Christmas school holidays, we spent long hours at the Williams Creek swimming hole. No supervision, just scorching sun, coconut oil for sunscreen, watching the girls lying out until their skin turned raw.
Two of the Sheila's considered themselves a cut above, rubbing in their fancy Coppertone, but us boys were too tough for that.

Kids from our camp and the Heathcote immigration lot hung out together by the river, jagging for mullet, swimming with plastic goggles, skipping stones, filling in time. The

huts were unbearable in the heat. Staying home wasn't an option.
Trouble started when a Heathcote kid kicked sand over the two girls sunbathing and called one of them a Dorris - whatever that meant. Both camps closed ranks. A stone fight erupted. Hits landed, blood appeared on faces.

**The standoff lasted for days**
Some parents complained about boys getting hurt, but no one stepped in. I loved it. It gave us something to do, and I was appointed one of the lead scouts tasked with sourcing better weapons.
The real geniuses in our camp came up with a superior way to fit out our shanghaies - rubber slingshots. The mission? Locate abandoned bikes and steal the inner tubes. Cut lengthwise, they worked far better than standard bungee rubber. Marbles made the best ammo, until we ran out.
The war effort was full steam ahead. A makeshift triage station was set up by the boys

sand cave, with water and strips of tape for patch-ups. One kid's sister even donated a handful of sanitary pads for bandages. We laughed at first but had to admit, they worked. The Heathcote kids doubled down, setting up watches to guard their dugouts overnight.
Then it all came crashing down when someone pulled out a slug gun. Nobody found the pellets, but we saw the bruises.
Nigel, the same snotty Irish kid who'd been my shadow at Broken Bay naughty boys camp, was the first to spot the sniper holed up behind a gumtree. His mates backed him up, firing shots. I just knew this would end in tears.
One slug scraped the side of my head, right above my ear, leaving a burning red line. Another whistled past. I bolted. We retreated, still slinging stones to keep them at bay. This was too dangerous, even for me.
Back at camp, we grassed on them. The adults phoned the police, who kicked the Heathcote gang out and gave us back our swimming

hole. We never found the slug gun. From then on, the separation between camps was permanent. Even at school, Ten-Pound Pom kids were kept on separate cricket teams, depending on which camp they came from. It was a pity, really. Most of us had loved being part of the madness. Now, bored rigid, it was time to dream up something new to occupy our days - like getting lost.

***

## SCENE 15 - *A Boy's Journey*

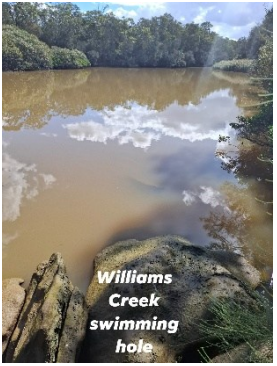
### Harris Creek hunting trip

With the hostel gang war behind us, we swapped battle stories, comparing scars, exaggerating running charges that had supposedly sent the enemy backpedalling. But it wasn't the same. I spent most of my days back in the bush.

Under my bunk lived my pet blue-tongue lizard named Bluey. I decided it was time to find him a mate, so I set off toward Snake Island, a floodplain island at the confluence of Williams and Harris Creeks, accessible only at low tide. Few ever went there. The bushland was teeming with life.

I barely missed catching a brown snake, it darted off before I could grab it. But my luck turned when I jagged a decent-sized mullet from Harris Creek's deeper waters. I stomped

down the earth for a makeshift camp and tried lighting a fire. Damp matches. No luck. Times like this, I wished my Yacka mate was there.




Still, it was a beaut day. I went home with a fish but no partner for Bluey.

A week later, I told snotty nosed Nigel, my Irish hang around mate from the stone-throwing battles, about Snake Island. We planned to head out the next day after the storm cleared. Then Mum ruined it. I had to go to the murder house for a teeth checkup. Unbeknownst to me, Nigel went alone, trying to beat me at my own game. Big mistake. The storm hadn't fully blown over yet. Nigel worried me sometimes.

***

## SCENE 16 - *A Boy's Journey*

### My mate Nigel

(You are going to love this one. Try closing your eyes and wear Nigel's shoes, just for a night)
If there was a Nobel prize for kids not understanding the Australian bush, Nigel would be up there with the best of them. (Dad would have been close, but being an adult, he didn't qualify). A non-swimmer, Nigel couldn't light a fire, rarely jagged a mullet, and would get lost if you didn't keep an eye on him. He'd trip over logs, get stung by bull ants, and always had septic cuts and sores on his legs from scratching mozzie bites.
He used to follow me around and made it clear he wanted to do the things I did and roam around the creeks and scrubland, but he didn't have a feeling for the bush like I had. He was

a strange kid. When you told him something, he'd squint, twitch his lip, and gawk at you like he was looking into the sun. My Yacka mate never liked him from the day he chucked a lizard into the creek to see if it could swim. He said, "he's a no-good fella."
I didn't mind Nigel, but he was hard to get rid of. He told me once all he wanted was to sit in the bush with me and light a fire or fish for mullet. To get away from his mum and dad, because they were always arguing and throwing stuff and swearing.

**Search party for Nigel**
That night, a group of adults in wet weather gear showed up at our door, their hoods dripping, their faces tight with worry. Although rain had turned to drizzle on the tin roof, Nigel's mum, wrapped in one of those clear plastic bike capes, was beside herself. Her voice cracked. "He went out to play. He hasn't come home."

I thought for a second, then said, “I reckon he’s at Snake Island, down by Harris Creek.”
The way her breath hitched, you’d think I’d suggested he’d gone to Mars.
Maybe I thought, if they found him, things at home would settle down. Maybe he wouldn’t have to go bush. I wouldn’t wanna be out there at night, not alone, not down by the creek in this weather. No fire. Mozzies tearing into you. I felt sorry for Nigel already, stuck out there in the dark.
The island was only a mile’s trek through the bush, following the William’s Creek trail. Lucky for him, the worst of the weather had blown through. The search party didn’t hesitate. They grabbed torches, kit bags, and headed off into the night.
I called after them, “Watch yourselves. It’s close to full tide. There might be bull sharks in the creek after dark.”
Nigel’s mum spun back, eyes flashing, swung at her husband, and spat something I wouldn’t repeat.

I shut the door and went back to bed. I thought about Nigel, shivering somewhere under the trees. Stupid boy. I hoped they didn't blame me. I hoped the sharks didn't find him, and that he hadn't drowned. They found him before midnight.

He was curled up on the island, soaked through, miserable. The mozzies had had their way with him, and he shook from the cold. There was only one phone in the hostel camp, that I knew of, nailed to a power pole near the cafeteria for emergencies. Someone rang for help. An ambulance arrived, loading him up, while the adults murmured around him.

Two days later, he was back. Sick as a dog, coughing, spitting, swollen, with red spots dotted across his skin like bad graffiti. They doused him in calamine and made him lie on his bed, but he was still full of stories when he finally got to talking.

"I t'ought ye'd be proud o' me if I got a snake by meself," he rasped. "When the tide rolled in, I was proper fecked. So, I parked meself there, and right enough, the dark came creepin' in, and Jaysus, it was a right fright for a young Nige!"

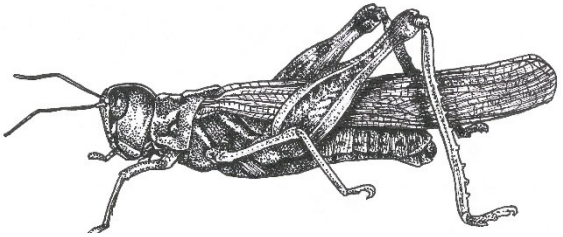
I clapped him on the shoulder. "Goodonya mate. You did the right thing staying put."

***

## SCENE 17 - *A Boy's Journey*

### Night Time in the Camp

I loved the bush, but not the camp. Although, at nighttime, I made it interesting. Precious, fourteen-year-old Ingrid wasn't keen on using the ablution facilities after dark because of the strange sounds and flying insects.
For me, I'd make special trips to the men's block. The single corner streetlight, during summer, attracted innumerable flying insects that were chased around by what I thought were small bats. Green tree frogs climbed the concrete walls, geckos, beetles, half a dozen different varieties of spider, and lots of mozzies, all doing what creatures did after dark.



**1961 – Locust Paranoia**

Dad never quite fitted in at the camp. He was a bit of a klutz at times, with a fear of everything that moved, especially small things like locusts.
One weekend, while bent over, fixing Nigel's back wheel puncture, a full-grown locust landed on Dad's shoulder as if it were supervising the repair job. Its claws gripped his cotton shirt like a cat, clinging tight. Without looking, Dad felt the weight and casually brushed at it. The olive-green insect slunk lower for a better hold.
Then—chaos.

Dad's scream bounced off the tin huts and echoed all the way to the swimming hole. A pair of butcherbirds overhead abruptly turned mid-air and darted for cover.

Dad leapt up, flicking frantically at his shoulder. In his panic, he attempted a vault over Nigel's bike, but his pants snagged on the greasy crank. Buttons flew as he ripped off his shirt and flung it to the ground, convinced whatever creature had latched onto him meant business.

Nigel and I exchanged glances, stifling laughter, but the look on Dad's face warned us against making fun.

Mum knew this reaction well. He'd done the same when, out of habit during a nappy change, she stuck the pin into his shirt pocket. That time, we couldn't help laughing. Dad? Not so much. He wrecked that shirt too.

I think the heat got to him in the end, but there was more.

Deep down, like everyone else, I didn't like camp life, but being a kid was a blessing. I could escape to the bush. It was different for Ingrid, now 13, who just wanted to socialise with nice people her own age in a safe environment.
No teenager in their right mind went anywhere around camp after dark. As for my father, I felt he was close to chucking in the towel, I'm sure of it. He couldn't fit in, and he couldn't find a way out.

I thought things couldn't get any worse.
Then, to add torment to the torture, Mum was going to have another baby.

***

## SCENE 18 - *A Boy's Journey*

### A fishing experiment

That scorching afternoon, we finally convinced Dad to leave the hut and come with us to the river. Mullet had returned with the tide to Williams Creek, and David was eager to test a new fishing float he'd designed.
Dad rarely went outside for long, but on this occasion, he gave in, perhaps just to escape the suffocating heat inside. His outfit spoke volumes: an off-white, short-sleeved open-neck shirt, khaki shorts past his knees, brown plastic sandals, and black pulled-up socks. No hat.
His pale legs were blinding in the sun. Ingrid reckoned he had the dress sense of a vagrant. David, like Dad, wasn't an outdoorsman. He preferred tinkering with

his scientific experiments in his cluttered bedroom. But today, he was determined. All set up by the creek, he had me knead bread dough onto the treble hook for bait and, fiercely independent even as an eight-year-old, insisted on doing the rest himself.

With the line swinging back and forth, Dad and I instinctively stepped back to avoid getting hooked. David gripped his homemade, steam treated, bent-tipped bamboo rod (another of his creations). Tongue poking out in concentration, he cast his line.

We watched as the multi-coloured prototype float bobbed with distinction, first a few delicate dips as the mullet tested the bait, then a full submersion. A hit! David jagged the line and managed a hookup. The mullet fought bravely, and that's when Dad, eager to help, rushed to the water's edge. But the moment turned to disaster.

He slipped into the mangrove mud. So did David. It was reminiscent of a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers choreographed dance routine. Then they both sat there, covered in sludge, while the snapped line sent the mullet leaping skyward. It took off with all its mates, dragging David's prized creation behind like a submarine periscope.

Dad and David slogged their way out of the mud, leaving me to clean up the mess. As they headed for the showers, Dad slung an arm over David's shoulder and said:
"It's OK, son, you'll just have to make me another one."
That was the first and only time Dad ventured near Williams Creek. His mind, I knew, was elsewhere.

***

## SCENE 19 – *A Boys Journey*

**Finally - relief**

Deep down, like most everyone else, I didn't like camp life, but being a kid was a blessing. I could escape to the bush. It was different for Ingrid, now 14, who just wanted to socialise with nice people her own age in a safe environment.
We were told no teenager in their right mind went anywhere around camp after dark. As for my father, I felt he was close to chucking in the towel, I'm sure of it. He couldn't fit in, and he couldn't find a way out.

Dad hated his job at the car assembly plant. Spray-painting car parts wasn't his dream, it was survival. But even that seemed better than spending day after day in the sweltering heat of the camp, trying to hide his frustration.

I watched him one morning, kicking at the dirt on his way to the bus stop. He wasn't kicking the dirt in anger, just sheer exasperation. During school holidays, I used to meet him at the bus stop and walk home with him, skipping alongside, eager for stories. But now? He barely spoke. His head hung down, his shoulders slumped. He was a beaten man.

Each day, he dragged himself back to our hut in his sweaty blue work clothes with nothing to offer his wife and kids except mumblings of another empty day. There were no jokes, no laughter, and precious little money. There was just a lunchbox full of unfulfilled dreams.

Like many immigrants, he realized the Fairsea had promised more than it delivered. I loved Dad and I worried about him. I thought things couldn't get any worse. Then, to add torment to the torture, Mum was going to give us another brother. His name was Peter.

Mum's life was far from easy. From the day Ingrid was born, 14 years earlier, she sacrificed everything to care for us kids. All she had to show for it was a never-ending routine of cooking, cleaning, and keeping spiders, mosquitoes, and dust out of our tin hut.

At night, when the heat clung to us like a second skin, I'd hear the rhythmic clicking of Mum's borrowed pedal Singer sewing machine. She patched my ripped school pants from climbing trees, stitch David's uniform from scratch, and somehow managed to keep us clothed. She never spent a cent on herself.

Two summers passed. Mum endured it all – a gaggle of kids, a scorching hut, and now a newborn. Without Ingrid's help, I don't know how she would've managed. I was no help at all, preferring the cool escape of the bush.

***

## SCENE 20 – *A Boy's Journey*

**Dad got a letter**

It bore a New Zealand Post stamp, sent by Dad's old mate Arthur – the 'tick killer' from camp. Arthur had done his two years then pulled the plug and moved to Christchurch, NZ.
By sheer chance, I overheard everything as Mum and Dad read his handwritten note.
I had run home after a cricket ball slammed into my forehead during a missed catch. Mum, ever the healer, dabbed my bump with a wet flannel, fussing over me as she always did.
But something was different that day. Dad smiled.
For the first time in what felt like forever, he actually laughed. They spoke softly; voices filled with something I hadn't heard in ages –

hope. Arthur said jobs were plentiful in Christchurch.
“No snakes neeva,” Dad added.
Mum looked up. “We can’t go there, can we?”
“I’m gonna look into it, Hilly. I’ve had enough.”
“I know, Fred. Come here.”
Mum put little Pete in his cot and hugged Dad. The last time I saw them that close was when we waved goodbye to Southampton from Fairsea. Dad unwrapped himself from her grip, locking eyes with me over Mum’s shoulder.
“Son?” he said, “I’m gonna get us outta here. I’ve had enough.”

That night, down on my knees, I prayed he had the guts to do something. Anything.
To make him and Mum happy again. Would they let us go?
We all knew Dad hated his job, but seeing him stripped of the humour we loved, was

unsettling. He lost a part of himself the day we disembarked from the dreamboat Fairsea. Now, two summers later, with unwavering encouragement from Mum, he poked at the ashes one last time and somehow found a renewed spark of hope. If the authorities agreed, he'd pull up digs and fly us to Christchurch.

How Dad secured an early release or scraped together the money, I'll never know. Maybe the arrival of Peter John Brown had something to do with it. Those iron huts weren't made for a family of eight.

Twenty months after setting foot in East Hills, we were granted permission to leave. Two weeks later, we crossed the ditch to Christchurch, NZ with nothing but a smidgin of hope and an unwavering belief in mum's prayers.

***