

Other Country

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Behind the timber rails of a rodeo bull chute somewhere in the Top End of Australia, a ringer crouches on one booted heel and draws in the red dirt with a stubby finger. The cowboy traces for me the rough outline of Australia...a remote and ancient continent, with a fringe of humanity mostly around its edge. Then, about a third of the way down, he draws a clean, straight, horizontal line from the Pacific Ocean in the east to the Indian Ocean edging the west coast. A line representing three thousand kilometres.

His golden-gloved hand spreads wide over the dusty landscape south of the line – the bottom three quarters of the country's familiar shape. 'Down here,' he says, 'that's Australia.' Then he points with a single, direct finger, above the line. 'But up here. This is the other country.'

The other country covers a million square miles, in the old money – the forty per cent of Australia that lies in the

tropics. As big as Europe, from England to Russia, Norway to Turkey.

No borders, no barriers, no passport checks, but on the way north you cross an invisible line and into this other place.

And so it is within you.

One



The Ace thinks of his brother as a rip-arsed kid who gave himself a name. They were scragging around on a dustbowl cattle station the Old Man was trying to wring a quid out of, and The Ace sees no humour in the fact that nothing has changed. At best, the windmills on Mt Mead dribble brackish water, but most stand crippled against a northern Australian sky bleached of blue. The land is trashed from overstocking and the Old Man is broken down too. Too many horses with bite-scarred bums. Too much anger, too much grog. Sometimes he doesn't speak for days as he has nothing to say. There is a roughness between the Old Man and his two sons.

They eat bare beef meals from chipped enamel plates. Once a month they drive three hours to tea with the Old Man's only real mate, on a neighbouring homestead that has a patch of green lawn and flowers out the front; a wife there, of sorts. Their own place has no home comforts.

The Old Man called his oldest son 'boy' and didn't bother giving the youngest a name at all. But when the second son

was seven, the Old Man's sister in Adelaide sent him a book about Wild Bill Hickok and he christened himself 'Wild Billy' in the creek, with his older brother looking on. The Ace followed suit, choosing his name through being older and bigger, but perhaps mostly out of wishing.

Billy sees in his brother the same invincibility as in the snapshot of the Old Man when he was a young bloke in a Western tent show. Sometimes The Ace's cheeky grin is so much like the bronc rider's, it scares him. He feels he can see things coming; a smashing together of history and inevitability. He thinks about it a lot.

'Hey, Billy. Shut the gate. *Quick,*' yells The Ace. But Wild Billy is distracted by thoughts, daydreaming. 'Useless bastard.'

The Ace, on a frothy nag, has chased a colt down a hessian wing that leads to the yards. He slides from his saddle before the cleanskin shies at the metal rails, spins, and bolts at him. The Ace shouts and waves his hat until, at the last second, he has to give way. The colt kicks out wildly in passing.

'Shit. Took me an hour to get him in there. What's up with you?' The Ace slams his hat back over sweat-wet hair, eyes rolling mad as the lost horse's. He charges Billy, hitting him full in the chest; the thud vibrates like thunder. Their hard bodies fall into the red earth, locked together, throwing up dust.

The Ace is taller and stronger, but Wild Billy is always up for a scrap. They trade solid blows, pounding and grunting on the ground. Then The Ace locks Billy's head under one arm and swings a hard boot heel into his groin. Wild Billy rolls out of the headlock, curled and cussing.

'Jesus Christ alive.'

The Ace stands, picks up his hat and cracks the dust off it against a thigh. He steps back to a safe distance and coolly watches his brother writhe, then roll up onto his knees. Billy stops moving, and scratches the back of his head. He looks up at The Ace and smiles. ‘Arsehole.’

Wild Billy Parkes stands, straightens and massages the handful of blue denim showing through his suede work chaps. He play-punches his brother lightly in the ribs in recognition of the win, and they walk back to the homestead in companionable silence and the comfortable smell of peppery bulldust and horseshit.

That’s how it is between them.

A killer beast is hanging in the meat room, its hide peeled to show pink muscle barely sheathed in white fat. The Old Man has cut rough steaks from it and fried them. There’s a pile on the sticky electric stove. He sits hunched over his own plate, forking at one without much interest, a two-week-old newspaper spread before him. He scans it with equal uninterest. The Old Man hates cookhouse duties, but the boys argued with him and eventually the three split it more or less evenly.

The Ace heats a pan and cracks eggs, some for his brother and some for himself. They sit wide-legged on their usual wooden chairs – one painted green, one blue – and each pick a bone-handled knife and a fork from the pile in the middle of the table. Then they set into the eggs, bright yellow and runny over thick meat that is the warmth of living flesh.

‘Someone’d better fix up the generator tomorrow,’ says the Old Man, without looking up. ‘She’s running rough and we’ll be needing her.’ The Old Man specialises in outback

understatement; it is their only power source, though other stations are already moving to solar and wind turbines. ‘Reckon it’s just shit in the sump.’

The Ace and Wild Billy exchange glances. The Old Man’s at it again; he used to try to shift the dirty jobs slyly, but now he can’t even be bothered trying to cover things up.

There’s a silence.

Wild Billy still hacks bluntly at the tough meat as The Ace rocks back in his chair, balancing it on its two hind legs. He looks around the room, dimmed by drapes so old and sun-bleached that they’re disintegrating. On one wall, in a broken frame stuck together with masking tape, there’s a faded print of a herd of cattle. Around the walls, whiter rectangles show where there were once other pictures. The floor is covered by brown linoleum that is mostly holes. There’s a stack of broken chairs in one corner, a television set too big for the two channels that sometimes reach it, and the Old Man’s smoking chair, arms pockmarked with burns, suspicious stains on the cushion.

None of it offends The Ace. Rundown homesteads are all he has known. But the room and the Old Man’s words clash with his brooding mood. He stiffens and draws himself taller – a single motion that makes Wild Billy look up and narrow his eyes nervously, setting them hard on his brother, in warning. The Ace feels it, but won’t return the look.

The Ace speaks quietly, his eyes fixed on the lifeless TV. ‘You could do some of the dirty work for a change, and fix it yourself.’

The Old Man stops cleaning under his nails with a fork prong and looks up at his oldest son, nineteen now but treated like a man from childhood. ‘Don’t you speak to me

like that, boy.' The challenge has been met. Wild Billy is too familiar with skirmishes, but this seems different; it feels too cold. The undercurrents scare him.

The Ace doesn't back off, his stare still set on the dark grey screen. 'I'll speak to you how I want,' he says calmly.

The Old Man jumps up sharply, catching the table with his thighs and clattering it. 'Don't push me, boy...' He stands before The Ace in stained blue overalls that show, through a rip, a naked and scrawny hip and thigh. The skin is white and jockless. The Ace slowly stands too, six foot three and wide as a bull. Physically it's a ridiculous match. He meets his father's gaze, and Wild Billy waits for an explosion that doesn't come.

'There's nothing more to say,' The Ace replies, and turns away. The Old Man grins, thinking victory. Mutters something about respect.

The Ace hears and turns back on him, still cool. 'There's nothing more to say because we're out of here. Come on, Billy, grab your gear. This mean old bastard can stew in his own juice.'

Even in leaving the room, The Ace doesn't make a big show. He just picks up his plate, takes it to the sink and goes to his almost bare bedroom. Wild Billy hears drawers opening and cupboards closing. He hears The Ace scrape his good boots from under the iron bed and then hears it all being pushed into his nylon holdall. The inappropriately comic crescendo of a zip.

Through it all, the younger son sits looking down at his plate and the Old Man never takes his eyes off him. Then The Ace is back in the room. He sees his brother still motionless and that the Old Man has fixed his gaze on him; old Jack

Parkes seems more confident just from the fact Wild Billy hasn't moved.

'So, whaddya reckon?' The Old Man plays his hand.

Wild Billy slowly looks up at him, then over to The Ace, with his blue bag in his big left hand and his blue heeler, Sherman, now perched familiarly on his right boot.

The Old Man pushes on. 'Answer me.'

History and possibility collide. Wild Billy eases back the chair, never taking his eyes from the Old Man, but speaking to his brother. 'I reckon there's nothing else I want from this place. Let's go.'

As Billy stands, The Ace's stare locks onto the Old Man, just in case he wants to make something of it. Silently begging him to. But the Old Man can see the odds now, and never moves. Soon the boys are gone from the room, the flywire door slapping behind them.

The Old Man shouts, loud like a bull-roar. 'If you go, there's no coming back. You think about that. You won't be welcome here again.' And they all hear the hollowness of the threat.

'So, what's the plan?' asks Wild Billy as Sherman thumps into the tray of the ute and takes a half-hearted snap at The Ace's holdall as it lands on him.

'No plan,' says The Ace. 'But we'd better get our kit from the sheds.' The Ace and Billy each throw in their canvas swags. Then they one-two-three-lift The Ace's prized chest of mechanical tools in too, and the old tin ammo box filled with power equipment. Billy carries out a water jerry and The Ace loads a couple of cans for spare fuel. They fetch their working saddles, halters, reins and rodeo gear; the shiny

rodeo spurs with sixteen sharpened points on a one-and-a-quarter-inch rowel.

The Ace and Wild Billy make sure that everything they take is theirs, paid for with meagre dollars wheedled out of the Old Man or won riding bulls.

Then the V8 fishtails up the dirt track, away from the homestead, and rattles the cattle grid. They shoot through. Bolt. Do a runner. And neither looks back.

The Ace and Wild Billy hit the blacktop and drive at the dropping sun through land that is flat and open, covered sometimes with clumps of dry grass but mostly with nothing but dust. Past burnt-black stands of thin trees and the socially intricate red turrets of termites. They don't talk. They just focus on the bitumen.

By the time they reach Nine Mile, its two thousand inhabitants hemmed by tidal mud flats to the horizon, it is dark and the place is bristling. Mobs of station hands are cashed up, drinking hard and jostling in sparry groups. Aborigines stumble in and out of the black bar.

Four-wheel drives and utes line up in the main street and The Ace pulls in next to a hotted-up Holden SS with a longhorn sticker across the back window, big *Back Off* mudflaps, a forest of aerals, and six bug-eyed spotlights on a bar over the cab. Wild Billy notices one of the Bachelor and Spinster Ball stickers on the tailgate: *I spewed in my swag and still got a shag.*

He steps out into vomit and curses. 'Don't worry about it,' says The Ace. 'Let's get a drink.'

The bar's floor is sticky with beer, its air is slicked with bodies and heat, and the atmosphere is saturated with the thick, hazy testosterone that nurtures mateship, competitiveness, violence and sex. To The Ace and Billy, it smells dangerous and homey. They push through, nodding and saying g'day. The barman pauses, squints at young Billy, only sixteen and a half, shrugs and then lines up two beers, which they gulf down, cold and sharp. The glasses' condensation mixes with the dirt ingrained of their cracked fingers to make mud.

The noise of the place mixes with the Slim Dusty song spat thinly from a cheap cassette player behind the bar.

Jugs, a flap-eared, broken-nosed ringer from Beringurra Station, sits next to them, crooning along, his head bowed almost to the formica under the weight of alcohol. He is consistently half a tone under Slim and his brain can't assemble some of the words.

A friendly, flat-handed slap lands on The Ace's back. 'What are you two doing here?' He knows the raspy, chainsaw voice and swings, smiling, to face John Lacy.

Nearly as tall as The Ace and almost sixty years old, Lacy is hard, brown and resilient as desert timber. He stands his shirt collar up to protect his neck from the sun and the big-buckled belt on his boot-cut jeans is slung low. Even here, he is in his wide-brimmed white hat with a kangaroo skin band he cured and plaited at camp. Sweat runs down the sides of his face, through grey stubble.

As usual, he has an unlit match clenched between bright teeth and cracked lips. The sulfur tip of a Redhead. He wears his age with pride and still has a spark that women like, though he never found one to keep. 'I always dreamt of

having a blonde on one arm and a brunette on the other – but I’ve had to settle for a Redhead between my teeth,’ he says.

Lacy shakes The Ace’s big, bituminised right hand. The same with Wild Billy’s. ‘Haven’t seen you boys in here on a Friday night. What are you up to?’

‘Just killing time.’ The Ace likes John Lacy but is used to guarding his business.

‘How’s the place? The Old Man still up to tricks?’

Lacy reckons Jack Parkes is shifty and lazy, and doesn’t go out of his way to avoid saying so. He doesn’t like his way of doing business and he doesn’t like the way he tries to get more off the land than is right. Parkes’ll wring the life out of a place, then move on when it’s trashed and wind-whipped. And Lacy’s never liked the way he treats his boys or anyone else.

The Ace glances at Wild Billy and sees his approval. ‘We’ve walked off. We’ve had it there.’

John Lacy takes a mouthful of beer and stares thoughtfully at himself, or perhaps something behind him, in the mirror behind the bar. ‘To be honest, I can’t say I’m sorry. No good wasting your time, the way Mt Mead is now.’ He wants to add ‘*or with that old bastard*’ but stops himself, though the unspoken words seem to tumble into the air anyway.

‘Looking for work?’

‘I guess we are,’ says The Ace.

John Lacy runs the best contract cattle mustering operation across the top of Australia. Over million-acre stations, his ringers collect up mobs, brand the cows and chase out wild bulls for the meatworks.

‘You could head out to Mardoo Station for starters.’ Lacy orders a jug of beer and three glasses and it’s agreed over that.

John Lacy is a man of his word, and there's nothing better in the other country.

Flushed with future, The Ace and Wild Billy party late. Billy drifts into a happily melancholy solitude and Ace hooks up with some blowzy backpacker who has a whitewashed smile and too-short shorts. He talks outback nonsense and she giggles appreciatively, flirting back in her foreign accent.

When Wild Billy eventually lies in his swag near the ute, his head yaws in the spinning whip of alcohol. In the tray, the girl's heels tap urgently on the open tailgate and Ace finally leaks one long hiss, like a truck shuddering to a halt under airbrakes.

The Ace flops back the green flap of his swag, rolls out immediately and greets the morning head-on. Clothes creased by the unevenness of sleep, he stands looking up at the sky with red eyes and rubs his haybarn hair in big, circular motions. Billy lies scratching the night's insect bites. He hums, almost inaudibly, as he does every morning, a medley of hymns, anthems and country songs picked up in snatches off the wireless. '*Today's theme tune*,' The Ace calls it.

Trained in the arts of silence and breaking camp, each rolls his swag and wedges it into the back of the utility. Billy grabs from his bag a crumpled but cleaner replacement for the shirt he slept in. He is as lean as a red kangaroo, ribs defined like the octave of keys along a hunting dog's flank. Muscles sculpted by work.

The Ace reaches into the glovebox for the grey-bristled toothbrush he keeps there, trying to scrub away the seediness of stale beer and rash actions at the tap behind the pub.

‘Let’s get going,’ he says to Billy. ‘We can make a brew on the way.’

Billy nods. They slide into a cab musty with the dampness that defies every dry morning.

The Ace’s morning anthem is the musical moment when he turns the ignition key and hears the V8’s cold, throaty song. It sounds like someone blowing down the drinking straw in a milkshake. Like him aerating the bathwater.

The Parkes boys head through Nine Mile, a double-decker shadow tracking alongside. Troll-like boab trees flank a main street wide enough to turn the old camel trains.

They pass houses propped on steel stilts with first-floor rooms. In the spaces beneath, iron bedframes slung on chains are filled with lumpy bodies swung by the restlessness of sleep, not breeze. There are car bodies in front yards, thin dogs trawling the night’s debris and dark kids staring white-eyed from behind wire fences. They pass paddy wagons with steel rage cages outside the cop shop, and the shire depot’s barbed-wire crown.

Frangipanis throw off pungent scent so strong it seems sticky in the air. The reticulated and drenched park is an obscene green. Its fences have golden, mineralised arcs where they are caught by the spray of bore water. The vivid pinks, peaches, violets and mauves of bougainvillea-gone-berserk are even more ridiculous than the colours of children’s playground equipment trucked up from the state’s capital city three thousand kilometres away.

They head east into low sun, leave the sealed road and slide back onto more familiar gravel, the country opening up before them. Pulling free from the town’s undertow, the brothers feel more at ease. Early morning travelling, in silence

and rosy light, is an odyssey. Wild Billy thinks that with every dawning, there's a new chance; the vitality leached out by the previous day is restored.

'I'm parched,' says The Ace. 'How about that brew?'

Two



The grand days are over for Mardoo Station. The breed that opened up the country and bred cattle dynasties has been swallowed by time; a squattocracy dissolved into fable.

Over two decades, burnt-up managers have let Mardoo's homestead grow shabby. The enclosed verandas are jumbled with mildew-spotted fridges, broken plastic chairs and cardboard boxes that mice live in. There are piles of dirty clothes. The mesh wall of the meat room is ruptured, its hooks rusted and its brush roof falling in; the bandsaw has long forgotten flesh and bone.

The distant beat of the generator falters, half-stalls, then staggers back, to compete with insect-buzz.

Once the red earth under the frangipanis was raked daily by a station gardener, but now it is scuffed and scattered with old engines and vehicle entrails; sculptures of obsolescence. Dead fronds hang off the cotton palms in brown hula skirts. The wire-mesh fence that held humanity together is mostly fallen and lost in dirt.

‘All the men are at camp.’ The Aboriginal girl in the cane chair out the back doesn’t look up from the magazine she’s reading, one hand locked onto a breakfast cola.

‘Where’s the camp?’ The Ace asks bluntly.

She reluctantly gets up and, on thin legs, bony ankles and flipper flat bare feet, leads them through a homestead smelling of smoke and cooked meat. A station map hangs on the wall in a bedroom now used as an office; the edges have curled away from its plywood backing. She stands before it, hands on hips, as if puzzled by where she is. A smudge shows where fingers have pointed to the homestead, in the south-east. Ace and Billy’s instincts take in the country, with all its distances; the contours of the ranges to the west and gorges running down to speargrass flats, where there will be billabongs. On any day after this, either could redraw the map in the dust.

Moving into a society. Settling in amongst other men. There are handshakes and nods from the ringers at the muster camp on Mardoo Station, but not from Wally Crotty and Ray Woods. The Ace vaguely recognises them from years back. ‘Your old man still owes us,’ says Crotty. ‘For work done,’ finishes Woods.

The Ace is just about to set them straight when Alby Curro steps in. ‘Give these lads a break,’ he says. ‘Your business is with Jack Parkes; nothin’ to do with them.’ Besides, he adds, the Parkes boys’d have been kids back then.

‘Family debt’s a family debt,’ mutters Wally Crotty as he walks back to the cookhouse. ‘They should pay up.’

‘Looks like we’ve got a bit of history around the place,’ says The Ace.

‘Nothing to worry about,’ says camp leader Alby Curro, holding out a hand to shake. ‘It’ll wash over. They’ve just got to get to know you.’

Alby Curro is about the same age and stature as John Lacy, but with the sort of unshiny, pitch-black, desert Aborigine skin that sucks in sunlight. He wears a black, broad-brimmed hat with a yellow and red plaited band. A finger is missing from his right hand, leaving a smooth stump, and there’s a crease down his left cheek that’s as wide as a canyon. ‘They’re just a couple of old grizzlers. No one pays much attention to ’em. You get that in camps.’

Another man joins them. He is clean but feral, his hair in dreadlocks and straggly, greying beard left to separate naturally in a fork. He has a row of brown seeds strung round his neck. Deep initiation marks just showing across his chest. Wild Billy recognises him from rodeos way back. ‘Jimmy March,’ the man says, holding out a thin hand. Marchie is white but his sing-song accent is Aboriginal. ‘I’m over on Kardigan Downs Station. I just came visitin’ while they’re setting up.’

The Ace just throws his swag under a tree and settles Sherman by the vehicle, while Wild Billy sets up his own little spot away from things; constructing a privacy. He spreads it carefully and hangs a rectangular mosquito net over it; a soft, white four-poster tucked in the bush.

‘Howzit, Billy?’ Lee Kenny pulls up in a bull buggy, sees Wild Billy Parkes making himself at home and comes over, open-faced and grinning. ‘Heard you were coming.’

The Old Man started his boys young in rodeo, gambling in makeshift bars and drinking long in poor company while they were sent off to work it out for themselves. Him left to his unsavoury liaisons.

Rodeoing has given The Ace and Billy a handful of loose friendships with other riders like Lee Kenny, and first introduced them to John Lacy.

‘You kids alright there? Perhaps you need a drink?’ The man looked down at them as they crouched by the arena, watching between horizontal wooden rails. Billy six years old, Ace nearly nine. He smiled and handed The Ace a bottle of water.

‘Thanks,’ said Ace.

‘Name’s John Lacy. People just call me Lacy. You can call me that, too.’

About the same age as their father, he smiled kindly.

‘Where you from, boys?’ They chorus the name of the station where they are currently perched. ‘Our old man’s in the tent.’

Lacy just nodded. ‘Like the riding?’

They both nodded back.

‘If you boys want to get started in it, let me know and I’ll point you in the right direction.’ John Lacy is the fourth generation in a bloodline of drovers who walked cattle across the continent, following stock routes. From the tip of Queensland, two and a half thousand kilometres south to New South Wales, perhaps veering out west through the Northern Territory. Putting condition on the herd and educating horses at the same time. The youngsters were into campdrafting and rodeo competitions along the way. John was still a young bloke when the droving finally dried up and he headed north-west for good, taking with him a love of horse sports.

Rodeo is more than a competition in the other country; more than a passion, even. It is part of the whole organism and the sense of place. People are drawn thousands of kilometres down thin spokes into the hub of rodeo and race rounds. They slide in from the sparse stations where nearest neighbours are hours away, and from remote homesteads with no company but their own. Friday rodeo, Saturday races, the ball that night, then the final rodeo day on Sunday; rodeo and race days with a different chemistry.

Utes draw arse-up to the arena, ringers laughing and raucous, partying in the tray. Some have garden chairs in the back for the ladies and the Boss, who pass them champagne from the icy esky, while he sticks to a cold can of Gold. The women hang their handbags over the arm of the chair and passed plates and pleasantries.

Some vehicles pull up nose-to so people can sit on the roof and see the action, or sling their dusty backsides into the gap between the bullbar and the hot bonnet, wedged there, potty trained.

The Parkes boys crouched behind the arena fence, suddenly aware of the difference of other lives and places. It all intimated a bigger world.

They liked the sense of manhood behind the chutes, where some bull riders stretched like gymnasts, pulling on the top rail to open up their vertebrae, rolling their ploughshare shoulderblades. They lifted a leg onto the second rail, pushed down on the knee and bounced their joints. They stretched wide, toes out, and then bent forwards to touch the ground, their minds blurred.

These riders seemed more careful than Billy imagined full-grown men to be, and he liked that.

Some of the hardened hands just lolled at a rail yakking, or sat along the fences like washing on a line. Larrikining around, chiacking on; bullshitting and building themselves up. Just hot air, The Ace thought.

The next time the young brothers saw John Lacy at a rodeo, The Ace plucked up courage to ask, and he set them in with a nice group of boys who showed them the ropes. He kept an eye on them. The other boys pointed out Jimmy March and told the story of Alby Curro, who lost a son and finger in a car rollover, spent two years hard on the grog, then cleaned himself up. He was left with a streak down his cheek that showed the cut of emotional pain.

‘Kept your noses clean?’ More threat than question from the Old Man on the way home from that meet.

‘Yep,’ said Ace, getting in first. ‘A bloke gave us a hand; introduced us around.’

‘Who?’ snarled Jack Parkes.

‘John Lacy.’

The Old Man stamped so hard on the brakes that the vehicle slid left and right before swinging side-on and threatening to tip. The Ace and Billy braced themselves. This was bad.

The Old Man turned on them and pointed a dangerous forefinger. First at one, then the other. ‘Don’t you ever go near or speak to that man again. Hear me? If I ever catch you, you’ll pray to be dead.’ Not his usual hysterics. Frigid and far more frightening.

As the Parkes boys grew, they moved on from the sharp, jolting merino rides of the mutton busters to horses, then bulls. They came at it with their own ways; Billy limbering with the athletes, The Ace just relying on his courage. Both

took it seriously, winning belt buckles, a little money and some respect – even from the best, like Lee Kenny. Bare bronc champ three years running, bull ride champ two years running. Still the king at thirty.

The Mardoo muster camp works the ranges and jump-ups on rough horses drawn from overnight yards and in cutdown four-wheel-drive bull buggies, pedal to the metal. Two helicopter ringers drive defiant beasts out of hard, high gullies and widow-maker country, buzzing them like bees.

Mad bulls, pissed-off bulls; monsters that'll hook a horn over the skid of a swooping helicopter and drag it from the sky, given half a chance. They reckon one did just that and took out Murph with him. Shorthorns, and the odd Brahman, that have never seen humans and think they run the joint; their own theory on dominant species. Slick-hided, fat as waterbags, trotting arrogantly on their toes.

A black bull comes prancing out of spear grass, nostrils bulbous, eyes rolling in their sockets and looking too small for its gigantic body. The Ace sees the muscles in its shoulders ripple as it locks its forelegs in a showy halt, issuing a warning. The bull twists its head round to peer at him with one eye, mostly white. Then it turns and prances off into the long growth, confident it's made its point.

The Ace hitches his bandana up over his nose and grates the vehicle into a near-toothless first gear. It lurches forward and plunges into the speargrass, Ace crashing up through the box, bent forward, hat jammed hard. At first he is just following the path of broken grass stalks, then he catches a glimpse of it, glossy and oil-dark. It spins and halts again, challenging him. The Ace slams on gritty brakes and halts

too. Alpha males, weighing each other up. The bull snorts and retreats and the chase is on again. The Ace is relentless, taking the inside line as the bull wheels, and cutting corners when it tries to double back. They crash down the sharp bank of a dry creekbed and Ace launches out of the other side, the four-wheel drive shrieking as its wheels spin up in thin air.

He senses the bull tiring and kicks the accelerator harder, hitting it in the haunches with the solid bullbar, two old tyres strapped to the front. They both stop, and eye each other again. The beast shakes its head, as if throwing off the blow, affronted but unfazed. Then it takes off again, with The Ace in pursuit. He catches it and rams it hard again.

Over the next half-hour, The Ace butts the bull. He will often joke that he's never had a McDonald's burger in his life, though he's spent a good deal of it tenderising the meat for them. With the last hard hit in its flank, the weakened bull is knocked down and rolls over; big-kneed legs silly and girly, wild eyes suddenly bewildered and baby-like. The Ace drives straight up onto it and parks the front of the vehicle on its wriggling bulk, heat from the engine block bringing the smell of burning hair and hot hide. Then he jumps out and straps its legs – fore to fore, hind to hind – with the big belts kept over the rollbar. The bull lies immobilised, arrested and completely hopeless. Its obscenely big, pink tongue lolls out and it lies panting white slobber. It seems instantly resigned to its fate.

The Ace seeing only a neat package. 'Stay there, fella. Meat truck'll be along soon.' Lee Kenny scoots past in another bull buggy and salutes *'good job done'*, a forefinger to the brim of his hat.

Half an hour later, The Ace can hear bellowing as the bull is winched up its ramp.

They take killer beasts for fresh meat, choosing randomly and dropping them with a single shot between their sad or blank eyes. Camp cook Ray Woods butchers them, and when The Ace comments on his neat knife-and-chopper work, Woods says he'll teach him, and does. A hatchet being buried.

They hang split carcasses in swaying curtains along the old army truck that follows the camp with Wally Crotty at the wheel and Ray Woods bouncing and bitching beside him. Sometimes it is filled with the giggly chatter of the Aboriginal women.

In the mornings, the men drink black tea by the bucket load while Alby checks in on the radio sked, the long wire of antenna thrown high up over a branch. In the evenings, they eat in silence or low conversation. Some sit around in the circle, head hung over a plate, fork scratching on tin, and some skulk off into the dark to gulp it down, eyes up and scanning.

After eating, Old Billy stretches out the leg that ends abruptly at the ankle, footless, and tells again the story of its loss. 'Chasin' a big old bull...big as anything...big as a *house*. And that bull buggy 'im roll right over. That foot trapped under the pedal and 'e *pop right off*?' He shakes with laughter.

'Silly black bastard.' Crotty and Woods retreat to their camp stretchers behind the truck, Old Billy looking sheepish. 'No call for that,' says Lee Kenny, just loud enough, and exchanges glances with Alby Curro.

‘How’re you settling in, boys?’ After a few days of work, Alby Curro visits the Parkes boys, separately, at their swags in the last minutes before lie-down. ‘You’re doin’ a good job,’ he says quietly to each. ‘Been good days’ workings.’

‘Thanks,’ each says, happy for the acknowledgement.

‘Anything you need, let me know,’ says Alby kindly.

The ringers’ swags become home; clandestine away from the firelight. Some live in a swirl of clothes, bedroll innards and dirt. Others set up more elaborately, spreading the canvas flaps wide as a floor; magazines in one corner, a lantern in another, a washbag and a pile of clothes. With the mozzie net hung over, it’s a sanctuary. Here, in the evenings, they lie back, one knee up, dozing in their lamplight, or perhaps flicking through a mag yet again. *Australian Ute*, *Street Commodores*, *Bike Dirt Action*. *Sporting Shooter* or *Bacon Busters* – a glossy thing for pig hunters. *Fishing Wild*, *Breeding and Racing* magazine. Plenty of girlie stuff.

The Ace habitually slings his swag – a bulky thing stuffed full of blankets – onto a flat patch near trees then he walks away, leaving the big leather straps and buckles until later. Not worrying. Wild Billy sets his up neatly straightaway, pushing a small bundle of possessions in one corner. Among them, his old Wild Bill Hickok book.

‘Kids’ book,’ gibes Brad Hooker, a chipped-toothed ringer, hanging round for chat.

‘Not really,’ says Billy Parkes.

‘What’s it about, then?’

‘Wild Bill Hickok, an American west guy,’ says Billy. A gunfighter, first, but then he guided people down the Santa

Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail – opening country. Then a sheriff and marshal – a tough one.

‘Made up, though...’

‘No. He was real. Toured in a Wild West show with Buffalo Bill Cody. Before Hickok met Calamity Jane.’ The names ring somehow familiar to Brad Hooker, from films or picture books.

‘Yeah, yeah. Sure. Then he went off to play with Superman, right?’ Hooker shuffles off.

Billy shrugs and flicks to the aunt’s inscription, wishing him a happy sixth birthday. And that was it; no word from her again. The Old Man’s sister in Adelaide made one gesture, then just walked away, he thinks.

He flicks on through the familiar book, looking at 1870s black and white photographs showing Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, and Wild Bill Hickok himself, with long locks and an elaborately drooping moustache. *A man who did wrong and right, but more right than wrong.* ‘Good enough for me,’ he thinks.

Then he reads the familiar ending. ‘On the second of August, 1876, as Wild Bill Hickok was playing cards, Jack McCall shot him in the back of the head at point-blank range. At the time of his death, Hickok was holding a pair of black aces and a pair of eights. This became known as “A Dead Man’s Hand”.’

Wild Billy Parkes feels like he’s only just shaking one off himself.



Cows, calves, steers and young mickey bulls are eased into a mob. A plume of brown dust ascends from its congregated body. By day, the ringers walk them in quiet procession, staying upwind of water; at night they sit singly on watch. In the moonlight, the horses' spines bend to crescents too, as their heads droop in standing sleep. On moonless nights, the outriders are lost in a bowl of blue-black under stars from the line of the all-round horizon to the thick sparkle of the Milky Way.

The Ace likes being out at night, wrapped in blue and cool. He likes the romance of it and the elasticity of time; some minutes strung out, some hours crunched together. Who would have thought one of the Parkes boys could find peace so easily? He feels far away from the oppressions of Mt Mead and allows himself to feel happy. It feels good, he thinks.

Then there's a rustle and noisy exhalation as someone stands. Old Billy stomps up. 'Sorry to disturb. Just sitting with the relatives.'

'Relatives?' whispers The Ace.

'You think they're stars, we Aborigines know they're the ancestors' campfires,' says Old Billy, gesturing up. 'People we're all related to, one way or another. Plenty of family up there, looking down. Night, son. Sorry to disturb.'

The yards get really cranked up, with long days of dangerous work. Cattle-sound and ringers whistling. The clank of big, beefy bodies against metal rails and men shouting. Then, one morning, there's a desperate scream. '*Help-help-help-help...*' It cuts through everything else.

Wally Crotty was standing whinging with Ray Woods when trouble stirred over the other side of the yarded mob and the cattle shifted as one, the nearest jamming against the metal rails, slamming the temporary gate hard into a post and trapping his hand.

'Christ-christ-christ-christ...'

The Ace is there first, clearing the fence with just his left hand on the top rail. He lands, half-sprawled across rough, red cattle backs, then slithers down to his feet, submerged in the bog of weighty bodies.

'G'arn ya,' he cries, and hisses like a snake, pushing the beasts aside until he gets to the one trapping Crotty's hand. He takes it by the head and rolls it sideways onto the ground, half on top of himself. It wriggles free and bolts.

Wally Crotty has fallen backwards, Ray stumbling beneath him to break his fall. Then they are all there, and Wild Billy has stripped his Buck knife from its sheath and is gently cutting at Crotty's glove to see the damage.

'How bad?' asks Alby Curro.

'Not good,' Billy says, peeping in. *'Reckon we should leave this on to hold it together.'*

'I'd get the chopper back to take him out of here,' says Alby. *'Probably the quickest thing.'*

Soon Wally Crotty is gone skyward and Ray Woods is hastily throwing his things into a vehicle to follow. But not before heading over to the camp table covered in mugs, big coffee tins and jars of tea, where the others have gathered. *'Ace, Billy,'* he says. *'Thank you both.'*

'No worries,' they say simultaneously.

'Good job,' adds Alby Curro, and everyone raises a mug

to them. The Ace catches Billy's eye – after a childhood of insults, it's the strangest bloody feeling.

John Lacy brings a letter. Or, to be precise, a note dashed off on the back of an unpaid invoice, stuffed in a used envelope with Mt Mead Station's post office box scribbled out.

The Ace recognises the scrawl. 'You seen the Old Man?'

'No. Someone gave it to me to pass on.'

The Ace turns and walks to his swag, and reads the note in private. There are just three lines of writing. Things are bad and the place needs more hands. About time they came back. They are family, after all, and they owe him.

The Ace screws it up to a tight ball and lobs it towards the smouldering fire.

'Lacy says there's a letter,' says Billy, coming in late from the afternoon's work. Ace is silent, lying back now, eyes shut. 'Who's it from?'

The Ace ignores him.

'Who's it from?' Billy demands.

'Nothing for you to worry about,' says The Ace, dismissively.

'I want to see it,' says Billy, with growing frustration. 'What's the big secret? Who's it from?'

The Ace answers begrudgingly. 'The Old Man.'

'What does it say? Let me read it.'

'Just bullshit. None of your business.'

Wild Billy's fuse is burning short now. 'If it's addressed to me, it *is* my business. I want to know what it says. This letter that's addressed to me too.'

'Jesus Christ,' bursts The Ace. 'Just him bleating, telling us to get back there. I chucked it.'

‘You chucked it? And exactly what makes you think everything is for you to decide? It’s as bad as *being* with the Old Man sometimes.’ Confined by the proximity of this new camp society, he storms off and throws himself down on his swag, rather than on his bigger brother.

‘A few problems?’ The whole camp knows Ace and Billy are having a blue, and what it’s about. Alby Curro prefers to tackle things head-on.

‘Nothing we can’t sort out,’ says Billy.

‘Doesn’t sound too bad, then.’

‘It’ll be OK.’ He wants Alby to go, but he sits instead.

‘All that stuff about family being the most important thing we’ve got?’ Alby settles in.

‘Bullshit?’

‘Nah. Spot on,’ says Alby, suddenly smiling. ‘A bit of advice from an old codger; life’s too short to hold something against someone you love. Next thing you know, they’re just not there anymore. This life can be a fleeting thing.’ He rubs the stump where a finger is missing.