

INVASION DAY

'STAND OUT!' YELLED STIFF-LEGGED JACK.

Through the amplifying harshness of the megaphone, he sounded like a dictator.

He turned to me. 'Stand out, brother,' he said, in the melodious yet gravelled tones of his natural voice.

In his day, stiff-legged Jack was a national leader and a balls-to-the-wall activist. He was our hero, really. Even in retirement, he is on the news every couple of weeks – agitating, pushing our interests. People around noticed he had singled me out, and a hand patted my shoulder. I felt important.

A chant rose from the front and it spread like a Mexican wave. Missing the first word, I broke in on the next. I could hear my voice, clearer than those around me – making me self-conscious. I wondered if the other chanters experienced the same effect. A fat man with slick hair and a business shirt leaned against a traffic pole, shaking his head and clapping his hands slowly. He yelled at us to 'get a job'. Two police motorcycles barricaded the intersection and a string of cars waited. A horn bleated.

A half-full plastic water bottle swung in my hand. Lifting the bottom of my protest shirt, I eyed the padded bulge in my pocket.

And I shivered under the biting sun.

You're not going to chicken out, I told myself.

The *chink-chink* of clap-sticks gave rhythm to the chant. The hypnotic metallic ring echoed off the shop facades and the townhouses facing the street. I bounced along on the balls of my feet for a few steps, looking over the banners and bobbing heads for the dancers I knew. Streaked in elemental paint, they broke away from the front and, bent low to the footpath, wove their way back through the opportunistic spectators, with their phone cameras and takeaway coffees. One of the dancers, from my hometown, carried a spear and feigned a throw at an old Chinese couple, who clutched at each other and giggled, not wanting to lose face.

A short woman with a jowled face approached me from the side. I knew her through the community. She was from up the coast. I had been observing her as she started conversations with other marchers. She was uninterested in the protest, but she was there. She was a number.

'Did I tell you I've stopped drinking Coke?' she shouted into my ear and then waited for a response.

I gave her a thumbs up, then pointed at my ear and frowned. I hate chitchat during protests. It kills the mood. The chant heightened, and I took it up heartily, leaving the woman and her poor social skills to be swallowed up by the masses.

The lady in front of me must have been expecting cold weather: she was wrapped in a black puffer jacket and carried a small, plastic Aboriginal flag on a wooden stick. I can always pick whitefellas at our events; they come with their banners and flags,

but rarely hold them high enough to really stand out. A young girl ambling along beside the lady turned back to look at me and a bubble of watery snot burst from her nose and clung to her top lip. I bent down and straightened her oversized beret, which had slid down over one eye. She clung to her mother's leg, rubbing her face into her jeans.

'Spread out, people, and slow down.' The marshal ran alongside the footpath, bellowing and sweating into his loudspeaker. I slowed my pace. My throat was scratchy from yelling, and my lips felt desiccated. I should have brought another water bottle – one that I could actually drink from.

At the next set of lights, another police blockade waited with some media folk. A tall brunette reporter in a navy sports coat and fitted slacks scanned the marchers with an intensity akin to a cat monitoring its prey. She looked at me and then away. *Shame*, I thought. *She was cute*.

Then, after the intersection, a hand grasped my elbow lightly – it was the journo. Her dark fingernails rasped against my skin, giving me a tingle that followed my nerves all the way to my armpit. She looked over the top of her sunglasses at me, and her lips parted. I felt seduced, even though I knew she was just doing her job.

'Would you mind saying a few words about the march? About what Australia Day means to Aborigines?' she said, letting go of me. 'I'm with the *Tasmanian Herald*.' She took a notepad from her coat pocket and flipped it open.

'Sure,' I said. I relayed my opinions as she took notes. I babbled in my nervousness. When the loudspeaker came near, she leaned in close and I spoke into her ear. Strands of her hair blew into my mouth, and I tasted raspberries. She moved on, then, to the

mother with the snotty pants. I felt a twinge of jealousy, but it faded fast as I remembered what I was planning to do.

‘Go home, ya fucken wankers!’

Two teen boys and a girl with heavy make-up sat on the steps outside Franklin Square. The one who had called out had a skateboard resting across his knees.

‘You go home, fuckwit. Back to Gagebrook,’ said stiff-legged Jack, referring to the rough suburb on the far side of the river. He was by my side again, and we were cutting through the square, on our way to Parliament House. The teen’s rant trailed off behind us.

Stiff-legged Jack hobbled forward at a surprising pace, unperturbed by the young hecklers. He raised the megaphone. ‘Come on, you fellas. The fat cats’ll be able to hear us from here. Let ’em know what we think of Australia Day.’

The crowd booed. Someone yelled out, ‘Shame.’ The footpath became a bottleneck as the police blocked us from walking on the highway. Up ahead, the dancers and the kids holding the large *Invasion Day* banner started crossing, moving down towards Parliament House Lawns. The march had stretched out to almost a kilometre, and I was somewhere in the middle. The chanting had ceased as we walked across the highway, but as the lawns and the gathering crowd came into view, the loudspeakers sparked up again, and the progressing throng found their second wind.

I experienced a twisting wrench in my stomach, a tightening chest. I took a deep breath but struggled to get air. It reminded me of a time I was given dope cake at a house party during college; I couldn’t feel the air going into my lungs and panicked, thinking I couldn’t breathe. My cousin Jimmy put me on the trampoline outside and talked me down until everyone else had gone home.

I felt for the package in my jeans. It was there. Part of me had hoped I'd lost it somewhere, so I wouldn't have to go through with it. *You'll be fine*, I heard Jimmy's voice say in my head. *No-one's ever died from dope cake, and no-one's ever died from what you're going to do.*

The protesters filtered through the stone gates onto the lawns. I was surprised at how succulent the grass looked. Looming above, like a love sonnet to colonialism, stood the sandstone monstrosity of Parliament House. To us, it was the physical manifestation of Australia Day, an ongoing reminder – a memorial, really – of the European invasion and all we had lost. A middle-aged hippy with grey pigtails and patchwork overalls gave it the finger as she passed through the gates, cursing the rotten bastards inside.

People gathered below the steps. Above them was an open area, bordered by a square, yellow hedge. This was our stage. A sound crew in black t-shirts fiddled with the PA as a group of official-looking people milled around. Stiff-legged Jack and others I knew were amongst them. Their faces became solemn as they readied themselves to take turns addressing the ravenous media, gathered there in numbers.

A dark man with a long grey beard tested the microphone and introduced himself as the MC. He wore one of the protest shirts, distributed to the crowd by the marshals earlier in the day. In bold, white capitals, it read: *CHANGE THE DATE*. The rally kicked off with a minute's silence, for the fallen heroes of the black resistance, and all the blackfellas who had passed on since. The crowd parted for a faux funeral procession, led by two wailing women Elders, arm in arm. Following the women were four community members, hauling a fake coffin constructed of

thin plywood, painted matte black and adorned with eucalyptus branches and bright wattle flowers.

I felt a stab of envy towards the pallbearers. It was an honour to carry the coffin, something reserved for those who have fought in the struggle. I was overlooked, year after year, which was fine – I was young. But one of the pallbearers this year was new in the community. How had they got to be there? If I hadn't respected the ceremony, I might have sworn at them, out loud. Declared them a greenhorn in front of everyone.

To finish the ceremony, the dancers took up the branches from the lowered coffin and swept them across the ground in graceful arcs. They circled the funeral procession, stamping their feet in jagged motions and gripping the backs of their wallaby-skin cloaks with their spare hands.

The speakers then took their turns, each of them introduced by the enthusiastic MC. The first speaker was a shadow minister in the state opposition, who droned on about the failings of the current government and, in particular, their unwillingness to change the date of their Australia Day celebrations. The crowd cheered, and someone yelled, 'Shame.'

Short memory, people, I thought to myself, clapping along with the rest of them. This woman headed the previous government. While in office, she too had refused to change the date.

The rest of the speakers blended into one, with the exception of stiff-legged Jack, who spoke last. He described the atrocities committed against our people, in the days of the Black War. He recounted massacres that occurred around our island. His attention to detail was fascinating and gory, but he spoke an undeniable truth that made even the yobbos and the rednecks at the fringes of the crowd stare at the ground.

He ended on a positive note: ‘There is, indeed, hope for the future,’ he said, and indicated, with a hand gesture, to the large crowd.

I thought about what stiff-legged Jack said to me earlier. *Stand out, brother.* I knew what he meant. I knew what I had to do. Sometimes, it’s your turn to stand out. And to stand up. Sometimes, it’s just your turn.

Like I knew he would, stiff-legged Jack opened the mic up to the crowd. I was already making my way to the stage as he said the words. He nodded, as he handed over the microphone. I turned from him to face the people. *My people.*

‘This is what I think of Australia Day,’ I said. My voice sounded tinny through the PA, but it was clear and loud. I was heard. I pulled the bunched-up flag from my pocket and shook it out with one hand. I squirted the contents of my water bottle on it and held it high for the crowd. Spirits burned my eyes. The only sound was the whir of the cameras – as they zoomed, and panned, and closed in around me – and my heart, pulsing in my ears.

Holding my lighter against the dripping rag of red, white and blue, I thought of the fat businessman who’d told us to get a job, and the car that honked at the lights. I thought of the angry bogans, and the police who looked at us as though we were ants and they were the boots of destiny. But most of all I thought of the old people. *My old people.*

I thumbed the flint.