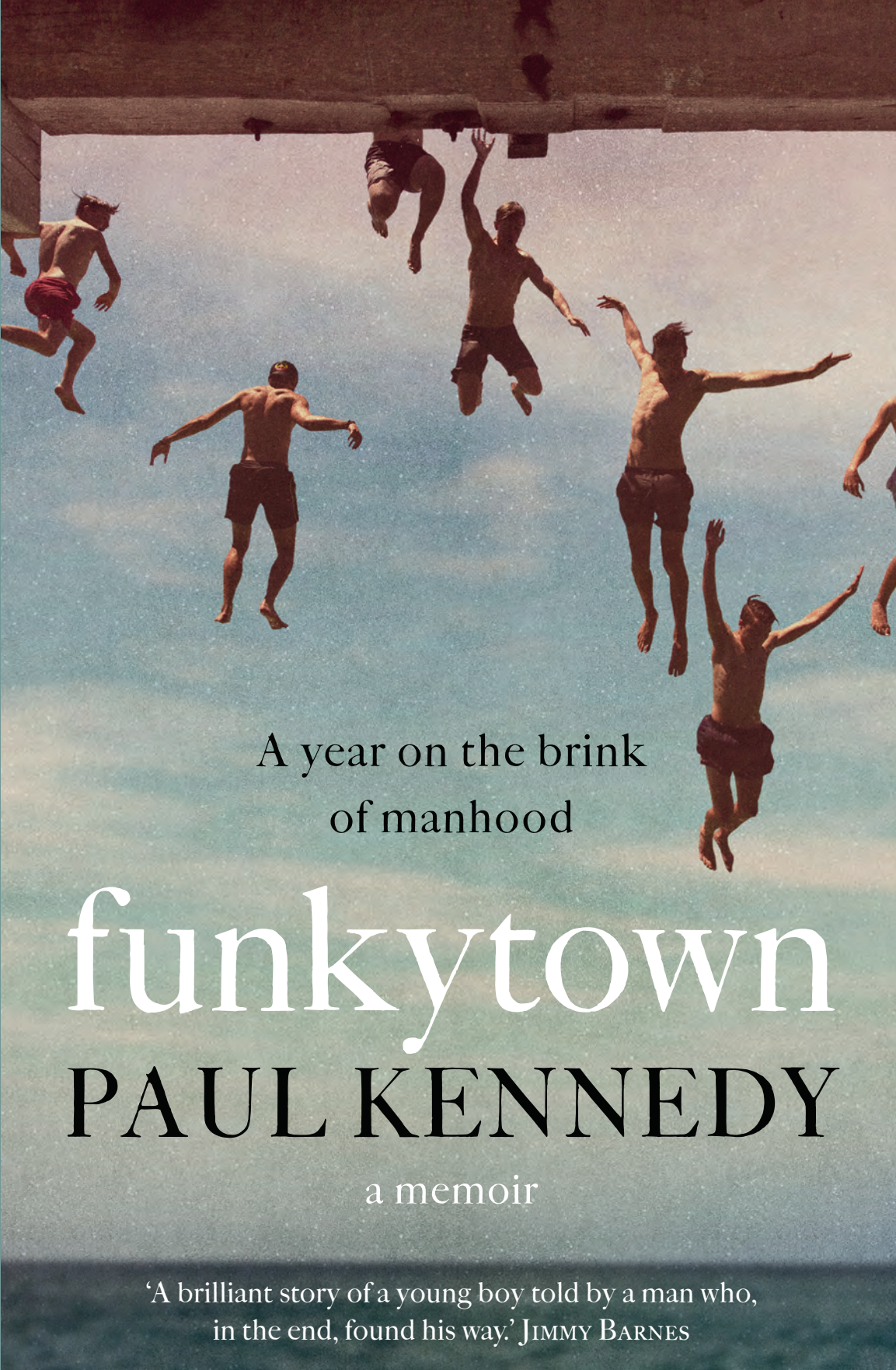

A year on the brink
of manhood

funkytown

PAUL KENNEDY

a memoir

'A brilliant story of a young boy told by a man who,
in the end, found his way.' JIMMY BARNES

Paul Kennedy is an ABC television presenter with twenty-five years' journalistic experience. He is the author of four previous books, including *Hell on the Way to Heaven* (co-authored with Chrissie Foster), which helped Australian survivors of child sex abuse achieve the nation's largest Royal Commission. Paul is also a successful football coach on the Mornington Peninsula. He lives in Seaford, Victoria, with his wife and three sons.

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For Joan and Mick, who gave us everything. And for my wife Kim, with love and thanks.

Some names in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of old friends and acquaintances.

1

Drinking the Rain

Backyard birdcalls and a streak of summer sun crept into my room to wake me, making me squint. It was January 1993. The first day of my final year of school. I was seventeen. I kicked off my sweat-damp sheet with a sigh, rolled off my single bed onto the carpet, and started doing push-ups. In my cheap elastic jocks, elbows tucked, eyes up, arse down, counting.

More than anything, I wanted to play football under lights at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Push-ups were going to help me get there. Often, I pictured myself running, bouncing, twisting one way then another, a record crowd standing to applaud my courage and skill. Every night I fell asleep in that room I had the same visions, only they were in silent slow-motion. This was my last chance to turn ambition into reality. Most recruits got drafted into the Australian Football League when they were seventeen. This was my big year, and I knew it. What I didn't know was just how momentous it would be.

We lived in Seaford, two train stops from Frankston. There were plenty of nicknames for Frankston. Franger. Frangalas (after a 1980s footballer). I'm sure there were others, but my favourite was the one my little sister Kate used: Funkytown. She always said

it with a cheeky smile. The city was more than forty kilometres away. Not that we cared. In Funkytown, we had it all: a Myer, two surf shops, a double-storey Macca's, and a popcorn cinema with a magical domed ceiling that changed colour every few seconds. The ever-expanding shopping district had an American-style mall – a singular high-rise building so ugly it was quaint – a Brashs music store, a Pancake Parlour, a rotating dance floor nightclub, and an annual foreshore circus with caged African lions. Above it all was the lookout at Oliver's Hill, where you could linger on the expanse of Port Phillip, a majestic bay with as many moods and secrets as an ocean.

At fifty push-ups I stopped, turned onto my back and did crunches till my stomach burned with pain. With arms and legs stretched out, I let my pulse return to normal. Then I went to the mirror on my wall and admired my torso. A plaster cast covered my left hand like an oversized glove. My skin was itching under it, but I knew the bone was healing because the aching had stopped. I didn't want to think about how I'd broken my hand. I just wanted it fixed. Another week or so and I'd be able to cut the bloody cast off.

I checked in the mirror for pimples on my chin. My skin was hardening from fortnightly shaving, but I still got the odd whitehead. If one appeared, I squeezed it hard to send a message to others. I ran my fingers through my wiry hair, which I'd started to grow long. Until this year I'd only ever had a short back and sides, trimmed straight as a ruler across my forehead, like a Lego man. Mum used to cut our hair. She learnt how to do it from a *Women's Weekly* article. The four of us Kennedy kids weren't prima donnas: we didn't request anything fancy, although after seeing *Top Gun* in

1986 I begged for a Maverick hairdo. Mum rolled her eyes and cut off my fringe altogether. My older sister, Jo, said it made me look simple and nothing whatsoever like Tom Cruise. I wore a hat and a frown for a month.

'You'd better hurry up,' Mum called to me from the kitchen. 'Don't wanna be late first day back.'

She was wrapping a sandwich when I came out of my room. She wore a green shirt, gold earrings, and a necklace so long she looped it twice around.

'You look nice,' I told her.

'Thanks love.' She kissed me on the cheek. 'I gotta go to work. Love you.'

She strode down the hall and I heard the front door bang shut behind her.

I made myself breakfast: seven Vita Brits and milk. We only ever had skinny milk in our house. I drank it like water, often straight from the carton when no one was watching.

The house was unusually tranquil and spacious. I'd been noticing things like this recently. My family home was changing. It used to be busy and full. Now, it was as if it didn't belong to me as much as it used to, or I had started to outgrow it. In my diary I called it a growing restlessness. I also suspected I was becoming nostalgic.

For five months I'd been filling pages of a school notebook with my thoughts. The entries had begun when a girl from school dumped me. Louise King. This led me to writing about other things – prospects beyond high school, short stories and movie quotes. I wrote slowly to make it last, hovering my pen over the page at the beginning of new sentences and paragraphs, crossing

out some words to replace them with something more specific and honest. I wrote about my feelings. It felt like a cure for some undiagnosed ailment.

I stuffed my schoolbooks into my backpack and rode my bike to my best friend's house. I could get there in two minutes if I fanged it. Adam Ray lived on the corner of East and Downs Roads, one of the main intersections in our estate. I bunny-hopped up the gutter, squeezed my brakes and jumped off, flinging my bike on his lawn. The handlebars jackknifed against the frame and the back wheel kept spinning. Luke, the Ray family dog, was watching me through the loungeroom window.

'Sorry, I'm late,' I said, bounding through the door.

'Sure you are.' There was no need to shake hands in reunion. We'd spent most of the six-week summer holidays together.

The two of us had been mates since kindergarten, back in the days when he used to make faces and chew warts off his knees. He was a good-looking kid with blue eyes, freckles and wavy red hair – a real-life Ginger Meggs. He used to get teased for his hair colour. 'Carrot top' was just one of the names he copped, and hated. 'Carrot tops are green, so there,' he used to tell his tormentors in primary school. These days, he didn't get sledged much at all. He had a quick temper and a decent right cross if needed. He also had his father's natural barrel chest and strong arms. Which is not to say he was a brawler. He'd tell a joke rather than raise a fist. He was thoughtful, too. When I broke my collarbone playing junior footy he came around to my house with a Polly Waffle. He'd only eaten half of it by the time he arrived.

'Righto,' Adam said, filling his bag with textbooks. 'Let's get this over and done with.'

He wasn't a keen student. He was a good athlete but didn't live for sport like I did. Adam wanted to be a rock star. He was always singing some new pop song he'd heard on Casey Kasem's *American Top 40 Countdown* on Sunday nights. Adam liked finding out about new bands. Once, he got all giddy about an English group called Bros, and its song 'When Will I Be Famous?' I reckoned he thought the lyrics were written for him.

Adam's singing ambition was no pie in the sky – he had a beautiful voice. Out and about on our various adventures, he would strike up a tune while I did my best to sing back-up. Show me the old Melways street directory and I can trace for you our drunken songlines up this street, down that one, looking for the next party. We were on Map 99 – a sapling housing estate built on an ancient swamp, home to young families and dwindling numbers of frogs.

We had moved here from the country town of Puckapunyal when I was two, in 1977. Dad had quit the army, and the government was offering cheap land under a veterans' resettlement scheme. My parents got a $25,000 loan on a special interest rate. Ours was one of the first houses in the street – Emanuel Drive. Mum took a lot of photos while the house was going up in the otherwise empty expanse. I'm in a few of the shots, standing beside a stack of bricks, dressed in red tartan pants, the weight of my enormous head almost tipping me over. I've been big-headed since day one; young mothers apparently commented on it in the Seymour Hospital ward: 'Look at the size of that one's head. I'm glad he's not mine.'

Adam and I took off, riding in the middle of the road, no hands, cruising. School was about five kilometres away. We rode our treadlies everywhere in those days, in all weather. I especially

loved riding through thunderstorms. I used to tilt my head back, stick out my tongue and drink the rain.

'What'd you get up to last night?' I asked Adam as we pedalled.

'Went round to Emma's house,' he said. He and Emma had been going out for a few weeks. She was one of the most popular girls at school. Smart, funny, friendly. Long, blonde curls.

'How long d'ya reckon you'll go out with her?'

'I dunno, why?' he said. 'Don't you like her?'

'Yeah, I do. She's nice.' I was jealous of them. 'Just wouldn't want a girlfriend if I was you. Better off hangin' out with the boys.'

Adam smiled. 'Don't worry, mate. There's someone out there for you too.'

Unlike me, Adam had always found it easy to talk to girls. I was hopeless. In Grade 4, we both had a crush on a girl called Amanda. I tried to impress her by wearing my best BMX T-shirt and Sprintz sneakers, and by doing flips off five-metre parallel bars. Adam had a better plan: he just talked to her, made her laugh. They started going out. I pretended I didn't care.

At Friday night Blue Light Discos, run by the local police, Adam was our John Travolta. We were twelve on our first time. I wore a T-shirt tucked into my rolled-up acid wash jeans, with white cricket shoes. My palms were slippery with sweat. There was a rumour a girl called Kara had agreed to kiss me. She hadn't yet arrived. Adam and I were on the dance floor. He was gyrating. I was swaying, trying to find the beat. There were songs by Starship and The Bangles. In my pre-kiss panic, I worried: 'What if my breath stinks?'

Adam, walking like an Egyptian, agreed I might have a problem. 'But there's nothin' you can do about it now.'

'I could wash me mouth out with soap in the dunnies.'

He grinned. 'Bloody oath,' he said. 'I'll help ya.'

He followed me into the toilets, shaking his head as I lathered up my gums. The kiss never happened – maybe Kara was tipped off. 'You're a dickhead,' Adam kept saying. 'I thought you were joking.' Sometimes it felt good to be a dickhead, even if you were spitting up soap for days afterwards.

To get to school we rode slowly over the graffitied freeway overpass. On the other side, we took the swamp track through the older part of Seaford. The swamp was a heritage-listed wetland that ran along the coast behind a dozen streets of houses. We'd learnt a bit about it in history classes. For thousands of years this was the hunting grounds of the Kulin nation's Boon Wurrung people. The Indigenous name for the area was Carrum-Carrum. In the late 19th century, Europeans built a river nearby. They drained most of the land and subdivided it, preserving only a section of natural habitat: Seaford Swamp. I'd heard adults call it an environmental treasure, a home to rare migratory birds from Asia and beyond. But I wasn't impressed. The place smelled like duck shit and mud. My youthful eyes weren't trained to see its rich colours and soft reflections. I just knew it bred armies of mozzies after big rains, and that some kids reckoned flashers liked hiding out in the tall reeds.

Adam and I had travelled along that swamp track hundreds, maybe thousands, of times, lost in conversations about nothing in particular. Like old men, we talked about friends, family, the weather, or news of the day, especially if it related to our neighbourhood.

About this time there was a crime story on television that had

mentioned Seaford. We always got excited when our otherwise anonymous suburb got talked about on TV. But this one took some of the shine off our corner of utopia. Channel Nine reported that someone had broken into a woman's home, not far from our estate, and slaughtered three cats. They had written death threats on the walls in blood. The police talked about the disturbing way in which the animals had been cut up, with their intestines spread over the floor. The cat killer decorated one of the corpses with the picture of a naked woman. The woman whose pets were butchered wasn't there when it happened. Anxious about an earlier prank telephone call, she'd gone with her boyfriend on his pizza delivery run, taking her baby with her. Adam and I wondered if she'd stayed home that night whether she would have been murdered. Adam pointed out that the crime scene was only a few hundred metres from his work. He was a cashier at the popular service station Food Plus.

We rolled up to school after the first bell. Predictably, we weren't the only ones running late. A crowd of students behind a wire fence was looking at the charred remains of the science wing, across the road from the teachers' car park. A month earlier, someone had torched ten computer rooms.

'Fuckin' hell,' one of the kids said.

We had read about it on the front page of the *Herald Sun*: 'School Blaze Agony'. A photo showed our two cleaners, Kim and Dennis, standing next to the crime scene.

'Wonder who did it,' someone said.

'Bet it's someone who goes here.'

I was sure the cops would pinch someone for it. But I never heard anything else about the investigation. We'd get used to the smell of ashes – and make do without computers for a while.

'Hey, you!' I turned to see who was shouting. There was a uniformed policeman across the road, pointing at me. 'Come 'ere.'

I did as instructed.

'Where's ya helmet?' the cop said.

'Shit.' I patted my bare head. I wasn't wearing one.

Adam tapped his skid lid and laughed. 'See ya later, mate,' he said, riding for the bike shed.

My helmet, one of those bulbous yellow Stackhats, was stashed in a cupboard at home. I'd stopped wearing it because it made me look like a dork. I figured it was my head, my risk.

'Got any identification?' the cop said.

'Don't think so.'

'What about a concession card?' He was young and surprisingly affable. If it wasn't for his uniform, I might've liked him.

'Left it at home,' I said.

I was wary of cops.

Two years earlier I'd been caught up in a wrongful arrest. I was walking to the bus stop when a patrol car skidded beside me; two officers sprung out and bent me over their bonnet. It was in the middle of winter and I had the flu, so I was wearing a heavy coat, scarf, beanie and gloves. This apparently made me look like a burglar they'd been chasing around the neighbourhood.

'You've been seen jumpin' fuckin' fences,' one of them said, pushing his entire weight onto my back.

'Nah, ya got the wrong guy.' My hands were pinned. A bolt of pain shot through my shoulders and neck. 'I live round the corner.' They took me home and soon realised their mistake. I said they owed me an apology, but they refused, even after Mum made an official complaint at Frankston police station.

'Never be afraid to speak up against things like that,' Mum told me. I'd never seen her so angry. Injustice made her furious. 'Even the police need to be held accountable for their actions sometimes.'

I got over it – it was no Rodney King moment – but I guess it left a chip on my shoulder.

'We're gunna give you a fine for not wearing a helmet,' the friendly cop was saying. 'If you can't prove who you say you are, I'm gunna have to go and see your principal so he can tell me your name and address.'

'Wait,' I said. 'What about my school diary? That has my name in it. Will that do?'

'That's fine.'

I dug around in my bag for the small green book. The cop started making small talk.

'What year are you in?'

'Twelve.'

'What are ya hoping to do after high school?'

'Lawyer,' I said. 'Reckon I'd be a good barrister. That's if I don't play footy for Collingwood.'

The cop smirked.

'Here it is,' I said.

I showed him my diary. I'd written a fake name and address on the cover. I'd anticipated a moment like this. It might also be handy if I got caught without a ticket on public transport.

The cop read my name: 'William Wyatt.'

'Most people call me Billy,' I said.

'You should start wearing a helmet, Billy. Fifteen bucks is fifteen bucks. Sign here.'

I scribbled a signature. He handed me the fine, keeping a copy

for himself. We said our goodbyes.

I was sweating from the humid summer air when I arrived at my classroom for first period. Ten minutes later, it was more of a cold sweat. The public announcement system crackled: 'Paul Kennedy, come to the office, please. Paul Kennedy to the office right away.' I glanced at the fine. I'd signed my real name. 'Shit.' Other students saw my reaction and laughed.

The cop was waiting for me in the principal's office.

'Good try,' he said, handing me another fine with my real name and address. 'Who's Billy Wyatt?'

The principal and a senior teacher stood silently, glaring at me.

'It's a character from one of my favourite movies,' I said. 'You seen *Stealing Home*? It's got Jodie Foster in it.'

'No,' he said. 'I'll look out for the video. Good luck with your studies. Might see you in court one day.'

2

Outside The Grand

The false name I gave the cop wasn't my only lie. When he'd asked about my plaster cast, I'd told him I'd busted my hand in a skateboarding accident. The truth was uglier than that. It was wrapped up in another lie; a lie to myself. While I was dreaming of becoming a football star this year, I was also on my way to becoming an under-age booze hound.

With the help of a fake ID, I was becoming a regular at The Grand Hotel in Frankston. I'd been slipping into this new world for months. It felt daunting and brazen. There were beautiful women everywhere. The throbbing music shifted the crowd this way and that. People were shouting and laughing, almost howling. When I first started going, I stuck close to my brother Steve and his mates, who seemed popular, confident and strong. I was a wide-eyed witness to the way they played pool and threw their empties against the concrete floor; the way they leaned in close to chat up girls, while eye-balling any potential rivals. I wanted to be one of the boys. Seeing me with a beer in the corner, Steve's friends would pat me on the head and tell me I was 'the man', as if I was being anointed, or at least included.

I wound up wearing the plaster cast after another big night

at The Grand with my brother Steve and his mates. It was late on a Saturday, just before Christmas. The pub's security guard had finished hosing down the front steps and locking the doors. There were about two dozen of us milling on the footpath. All the women had gone home.

I'd often got stranded on the street after hours like this, with Steve, his friends and all the other stragglers. It was well known to locals that cabbies stayed away from Frankston's four-pub intersection at this hour. Too much could go wrong. The small fares weren't worth the threat of violence, verbal abuse and vomit.

On this night, every other business on the highway was shut except for Uncle Vic's, the fish and chip shop next to The Grand. Uncle Vic, who worked in the shop with his bull-chested nephews, was famous for giving free dim sims to anyone who reached over the bain-marie and slapped him a spirited high five.

Inevitably, an argument broke out on the footpath, not far from where Steve and I were standing.

'Here we go,' Steve said. 'Bit of action.'

Two young men were closing in on each other, trading insults.

'Fuck you,' said the shorter one.

'Nah, fuck you,' said the other.

'Why don't ya 'ave a go?'

'You 'ava a go, cunt.'

Not quite a debate; more like two dogs barking at each other. I didn't hear the substance of their dispute. I assumed any grievance began inside the hotel earlier. In these street fights, the combatants usually knew each other. The pub crowd was tribal; most boys becoming men were attached to local footy clubs. You became known as a Seaford boy, a Pines boy (Frankston North), a Karingal

boy (Frankston East), a Langwarrin boy (a little further east) or a Mt Eliza boy (Frankston South). There were other subtleties, but the point was that local clans fought other local clans. Conflict came from bruised egos or threatened status.

The shorter man happened to be a friend of Steve's. His nickname was Slugger, which wasn't ironic, rather it was an evolution of a previous name: Plugger, after his footballing hero Tony Lockett. Some nicknames had long histories I didn't always understand.

My brother edged as close as he dared, eager to see what would happen next. I followed. Slugger threatened to put the other guy 'to sleep'; he was drunk and fearless and over-confident. The stand-off didn't seem too menacing. I thought it might end in some harmless grappling. But my thinking changed when eight or nine strangers walked around the corner to join the ranks of interested onlookers. The newcomers were in their early twenties; they seemed alert, eager.

I knew only one reason why interlopers came to Frankston at this hour. They wanted to see blood spilled.

I nudged Steve. 'These blokes are gunna jump in,' I said. My brother agreed but seemed unalarmed.

The strangers were whispering to each other. I moved to the front steps of the hotel to get a better view of the crowd. My mouth was dry and I started chewing hard on my fingernails. Slugger and the other guy had stopped shouting at each other. They were glancing the way of the new arrivals. A strange silence fell over the scene. I could hear the seagulls squawking in the trees along the median strip. I saw their white feathers under the streetlights; they were irritating me. It was as if someone had pulled the pin on

a grenade, and we were waiting for the explosion.

I'd thought this night might come, my first all-in. In the picture of bravado I'd framed for myself, I was decisive and powerful. All I knew about street-fighting was what I'd seen on action movies with Sly and Arnie and Chuck and Bruce. When the time came for my first go at it, I fantasised about being as tough as those guys. Of course, my Hollywood heroes taught me nothing of violence in the real world. That had mostly come through football. When I was eleven, I lined up an opposition player just to see what it would feel like. We slammed into each other, collapsing in a heap on the grass. The other boy was hurt; I heard all the air leave his body at once. I was also winded but recovered quicker. Dad commented after the game that it looked like one of those hits that made your back teeth rattle.

'I remember that feeling,' he said, recalling his days playing rugby league in Sydney. 'Did it hurt?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'But I'm okay.'

He beamed with pride. Dad was a gentleman, but he couldn't betray his admiration for pain tolerance. I resolved to always be a player praised by my father for his physical courage. I sought out collisions as a way of proving myself. If I got hurt, so be it. I told myself that wilful aggression was in my nature; it came with competitiveness. By the time I was fifteen, rough play often sparked on-field scuffles. It was accepted as normal in footy. There were nasty incidents – I saw players king hit – but I came to learn the real art lay in intimidation and bluff. There was no need for intentional body blows when the threat of brutality was enough. Go after the ball with a shoulder dropped and nostrils flared, and opponents were far more likely to get out of your way.

Another appeal of controlled violence was the satisfaction I got from sticking up for my friends. If a teammate got into a stoush, I helped him out. Bonds were formed in the tumult. Later, in the change room, we'd laugh about how it all happened. And boast. 'We lost the game but who won the fight? We did.' All that bullshit. Importantly, there were no consequences for the odd fracas in sport, only benefits. At the time, it gave me what I needed: a reputation as someone who could 'look after himself'. Mind you, I never thought this made me special. Most Seaford boys acted like I did. Our first rule of fighting was hit first and hit hard. It was the tribe's motto.

But standing on the steps of The Grand that night, I was scared. I hoped no one would look up and see me there gnawing my nails.

Slugger threw the first punch. He had to rise up on his toes to do it. His left fist swung slow and steady as the second hand on a clock. When it struck twelve, it was on. The strangers who had come for a fight rounded on Slugger. Steve and his mates jumped in after them. The brawl took up the entire footpath. There was kicking, smashing, tumbling and lunging – like a bar-room scene from an old Western movie, but more vicious.

I searched for Steve in the chaos. He was shaping up to one of the strangers. Gone was the timid, softly spoken boy I'd known growing up. At nineteen, he was a strong man, like our father. He threw a flurry of straight rights at a man of similar size; his opponent was going back at him, using both hands imprecisely as his mates joined in. Suddenly Steve was outnumbered. The sight tripped some kind of alarm inside me. A kill switch overrode my nerves, triggering a surge of cold fury. I went wild. This

wasn't courage; it was some other primeval reaction. Something animalistic. He was my brother. I bounded one stride down three steps and launched at Steve's attackers. Then I blacked out.

When I regained my senses, as if my wiring was somehow repaired, I was pinning a stranger to the ground. He was trying to get up but I wasn't letting him wriggle free. In my peripheral vision a pair of scuffed brown boots were approaching along the footpath, stopping and starting, waiting for an opportunity. I knew what they were up to. I'd never had someone try to kick me in the head before, but I'd seen it done to others outside The Grand. I raised my forearm to deflect the blow. The kicker had put so much effort into his swing that he lost balance and landed beside me. I leapt to my feet, thrashing my arms like the cartoon Tassie Devil, trying to give the impression I was insane. This bought me time and space to look around for Steve and the other Seaford boys, if they were still standing. The brawl was as frantic as before, although more spread out. Some young men were being dragged onto the empty highway, some were backing away down the footpath, some were lashing out with fists, boots, knees and elbows. Our opponents weren't tiring; their resentment was rising. A couple of them had smashed the tops off stubbies and were brandishing them like sabres.

'They're gunna try and stab us,' someone called out.

It was time to retreat.

I hurried into Uncle Vic's fish and chip shop. My body ached but I was too charged with adrenaline to pause and work out exactly why. Steve made it inside a second or two after me. Our marauding enemies were taunting us from just outside the front door.

'You're trapped,' one of them said. 'We're gunna kill you when ya come out.'

They didn't dare come inside. Uncle Vic's nephews were holding the knives that they used to shave rotisserie meat for kebabs. The nephews told us to go out the back door, which led to a side street off the highway. We said okay and went back into the uncertain night, to hide among the overflowing bins and fossicking gulls.

'We sure about this?' I whispered. 'They could be waiting for us.'

The alley was short. It led to a side street, which had me worried that the enemy had seen us go and ducked around the corner to follow through with their threat. A moment before they had a chance to spot us, we got lucky. A cab came to our rescue. We saw the headlights first, then the smiling faces of two of Steve's friends in the back seat – they had fled the fight early in search of a taxi.

'Fuckin' ripper,' Steve said.

We piled in and told the driver to floor it, straight past the baying mob. Beside me in the back seat, Slugger was bleeding. A piece of glass was stuck in his skull. We should have taken him to the hospital, but he was making jokes about losing one of his Andrew Bews (shoes) so we laughed along and tried to forget about his serious injury. He soon closed his eyes.

Steve turned to look at me from the front seat. 'You okay?'

I could no longer ignore the throbbing pain in my hand. It must have shown on my face.

'Yeah,' I said, 'except for this.' My knuckle was relocated halfway up my fist. I must have hit someone. Maybe someone

hit me back. I couldn't work it out. The part of my brain that shut down never restored the images. I was pretty sure I never actually lost consciousness during the fight. I'd just been out of my mind.

Steve looked worried but I reassured him I was fine. I wanted to show him that his little brother could take anything; I was fit for this new manhood, for good or ill. He knew better, but smiled anyway. We were both relieved to be going home.

A day later I went to the doctor to get my hand plastered. Steve got in trouble from Mum for letting me get into a pub fight. She never said anything to me. I didn't know why.

The big brawl didn't put me off the pub scene. The summery nights still saw me drinking and partying. But by day, with a plaster cast keeping me off the beach, I kept my footy dreams alive with a new, improved fitness regime. I took to jogging like never before: twice a day, mornings and afternoons, in preparation for the footy season. I got faster, lighter and stronger. I always ran topless, soaking up the sun. I'd never sweated so much in all my life. I felt like I was being cleansed. All I needed to work out was my running gear, my Walkman and my favourite mix tape. With the right song playing in my headphones, I'd lengthen and quicken my stride to the beat. I became durable, with stamina to burn.

One morning I ran so well that I bounded over entire squares of footpath. I was flying. I daydreamed I was leading the final stage of the Coolangatta Gold. The country's best Uncle Toby's Ironmen, Guy Andrews and Trevor Hendy, were behind me and closing in, but the finish line – the Emanuel Drive street sign – was in sight. I needed one last push. Getting me there was Steve Winwood, singing 'Higher Love'.

I surged past the post, waving to the imaginary crowd lining each side of the street. Doubled over in my front yard, I took gulps of water from the garden hose. The grass beneath my feet became the turf of the MCG. I pictured myself in front of a packed stadium, on this hallowed ground where the first ever game of Australian football was played, back in 1858. I'd researched 'The G' for school assignments. I'd read the description of that first game in Melbourne's *Morning Herald*: 'Most jubilant were the cheers that rang among the gum trees and the she-oaks.' I'd watched my heroes play footy and cricket there. I'd sat beside the enormous scoreboard for the 1990 Grand Final. In my mind the siren had gone. The fans in the grandstands were chanting my name. With my new run-all-day fitness, I could do anything.