

# *The Prize*

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**PANTERA  
PRESS**

### *Author's note*

While the characters and events in this story are based on real-life historical figures and actual events, this is a work of fiction.

## CHAPTER 1

# Sparing Rewards

*Sydney 1943*

Bill glanced at his watch. Still no Joshua. Had he done something wrong? It wasn't like Joshua to be late. He was a stickler for being on time. 'It shows respect for one's host,' he'd pronounce. 'A demonstration that there is no other place you would rather be.' Bill on the other hand was often late.

His mind wandered, only half listening to the conversation, watching the swirls of smoke he blew into the air after drawing on his cigarette. It was rude to ignore his guests, but he felt sure few would notice.

He looked around the room at the motley crew he called his friends – a turnout of locals, mostly artists and old friends, greedy for reassurance, if only from their hangers on; toppers up for free wine and free-flowing conversation,

buttonholing others with their sour breath and hyperbole about all things art.

It was his turn to host the regular get-together. An opportunity to complain about difficult sitters, compare commissions, boast small wins and even smaller sales, reassuring each other that their threadbare existence had occasional, if sparing, rewards.

He watched his guests devour the meagre provisions: Polish sausage, aged cheddar and day-old bread that Wolfe, the owner of the local deli, had so kindly provided. Wolfe had a way of knowing when Bill was hard up. He would graciously accept as payment a humble pencil sketch, hastily drawn on the lid of an old cigar box, redolent of a lifestyle he couldn't afford. Today, Wolfe had thrown in a jar of homemade Polish pickles. 'From the missus,' he said, smiling. 'Can't let your guests go hungry.' Bill, appreciative of the gesture, hoped someday to repay him. Next time, he would give him something more substantial. Perhaps an offer to paint a portrait of him in his white apron – his chubby pink fingers working the sausage machine as he made his Biala Kielbasa.

It was now after 9 pm. Still no Joshua. So much for lending a hand with preparations. The guests, having quaffed the warm beer, were already on to the rough stuff – a few flagons of claret and some room-temperature hock. They would move on before long. That was their routine. Stay until the grog ran out and then head off to some other starving wretch's place.

It reminded Bill of London and nights at his local pub, The King and Lion, always dark and rowdy, the haze of cigarette smoke mingled with the smell of stale beer and refried chips;

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and the safety of long held friendships sewn together with remnants of stories told and retold. Familiar faces cradling their drinks under the dim lights that hung over the ancient wooden bar, waiting for closing time.

They'll be gone before Joshua arrives, he thought. Perhaps that was what Joshua was hoping. He peered out the window into the warm evening light, hoping to see him coming up the hill. He watched as the No. 10 tram rattled slowly up William Street, the dull rumble of the wheels thudding on the tracks as the bell rang to signal it was stopping. Hopefully Joshua would be on it. Bill decided to wait for him downstairs. Squeezing past his guests, the smell of cheap perfume failing to disguise the scent of oil and turpentine ingrained on their well-worn clothes, he made his way to the front door. As he opened the door, he found his elder sister Alice standing on the landing.

'Alice!'

'Bill! Where are you headed?'

'To find you of course!'

'Not so,' she said, holding out her cheek for a kiss.

'You're late. Seems to be a trend. What's kept you?' he inquired, kissing her on both cheeks. 'You look lovely.'

'You trying to avoid my question?'

'No, no, not at all. I was hoping to find Joshua. He's late. Later than you!'

'That's not like him.'

'Should've been here hours ago.'

'I hope he's okay,' said Alice.

'Thought I'd take a walk. See if he's coming up the hill.'

‘You know it’s not etiquette to leave your own party.’

‘Gathering,’ he interjected. ‘You sound like Joshua.’

Alice smiled. ‘Did you two have a fight?’

‘Not that I’m aware.’

‘Hmm. I’m not sure I believe you,’ she said, with a slight quizzical look.

Alice was five feet ten inches tall, making it hard to avoid her gaze. Her smooth pale skin and slender frame reminded him of a ghost gum; her graceful arms and long legs were often draped in the colours of a eucalypt forest.

‘I see you have opted to ditch the florals this evening.’

‘Florals belong in the garden. Besides, I’ve no desire to resemble our parents’ curtains.’

Bill chuckled. ‘That would be impossible,’ he said, as they stepped back inside. Alice’s green eyes and magnificent waves of dark brunette hair were enough to turn heads, as was her audacity to wear trousers in public, confidently ignoring disapproving looks. She was not pretty but striking, with a strong jawline, high cheek bones and forehead. She didn’t wear makeup, but her cheeks naturally flushed in the heat, and when she smiled her eyes widened in a way that made you feel instantly at ease. She was candle-lit bright, warm-hearted and generous and, like many eldest children, at times hands-on-hips bossy. She was not to be trifled with.

When he was younger, Alice protected him from his elder brothers, making sure they did not take advantage of him, and demanding they return whatever it was they had taken from him, along with apologies and what she called ‘peace offerings’, most often sweets secreted away in their cubbyholes.

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She would settle their disputes by taking a senatorial position, and her sense of fairness and ability to make a deal meant that arguments were quickly resolved, and soon forgotten.

On the way home from school, Alice would hold Bill's hand even though he protested, her grip as firm as her resolve. She would make him greet local passers-by, jabbing him in his side if he failed to look up and say hello. Everyone knew each other in Newcastle. To acknowledge each other implied a sense of being equal, mine worker or banker, shopkeeper or landlord. It didn't pay to see yourself above anyone else, lest you find yourself the implied subject of Sunday's sermon.

'Good afternoon, Mr Burns. Lovely morning, Mrs Muir,' he would mumble, casting his eyes at the ground as he kicked the gravel and picked the paspalum from the ankles of his darned woollen socks.

Once home, Alice would stand over him, her hand out, demanding he empty his pockets. She would wait patiently as he took his time rummaging through his pockets, picking through the fluff, anxious to avoid the rustling of the notices that lurked in the bottom of his pants pocket. Her instincts were impeccable. Once he secreted a detention notice in the sole of his shoes for failing to master his times table. He'd have been better off inserting it first in his sock. Hours later, having polished his own and his brothers' shoes, he was made to write out his twelve times multiplication table one hundred times. Although he promised to be more diligent in future, he began instead to teach himself to darn socks, with the intention of making a pocket, impossible to detect, in which he could more successfully hide such notes.

She was less draconian than she made out, writing late notes when he overslept, sick notes when he wagged school, and apologetic notes for failing to hand in homework. 'You won't get into trouble for telling the truth,' she would assure him. But this did not always turn out to be the case, and he learned that the truth wasn't always what people wanted to hear.

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'Are all these friends yours?' said Alice, looking around the room as they went inside.

'Not mine, exactly, no. I don't know everyone. Plenty of familiar faces though.'

'Well, I hope you remembered to hide the silver.'

'It's under the bed,' he said, winking.

It wasn't unusual for the locals, including laid-off performers from the local Minerva Theatre, to show up uninvited. The Cross boasted a close-knit community of artists and performers, writers and raconteurs, Polish immigrants and Eastern European refugees, mostly Jewish, who took their coffee standing at the local delicatessen, lamenting a country in which they had no history and a lack of paid work. Desperate for a sense of belonging they contributed whenever they could, pooled their meagre pennies to ensure no-one went hungry and no-one felt alone.

Returning to the verandah with Alice, Bill noticed the music playing on the gramophone had finished, but the vinyl disc continued to spin, the crackling sound of dust on the needle unheeded by the boisterous and rowdy crowd.

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'I'm beginning to think Joshua won't show up,' said Bill, shrugging his shoulders.

'Did he call?'

'No. That's what's worrying me.'

'Hmm, that's odd. At least you look well. Been spending too much time in the sun?' said Alice.

'That sounds very accusatory.'

'Just trying to take your mind off Joshua,' she said, smiling.

'It's the white shirt. Sets my skin colour off, don't you think?'

His eyes were the colour of pewter, softened by smile lines that had formed not from the sun, but from years of squinting, in the dim light of London where he'd often painted almost in darkness, unable to afford to feed the electricity meter. Since turning forty, he'd needed to wear glasses, particularly when drawing fine detail or doing close-up work. His thick, dark-rimmed glasses accentuated his bushy eyebrows and waves of black hair. He wore only white shirts; it made washing easier, and people couldn't tell if you owned one shirt or seven. It proved impossible to avoid getting paint on the cuffs of his shirts, so he rolled them up, showing off his elbow-length tan. His sartorial choices suggested a self-confidence and a level of sophistication that both he and Alice knew was far from the truth.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Prize

‘Bill, so sorry I’m late,’ said Joshua, looking around the crowded room for some place to put his hat. It was just after 9.30 pm.

‘I’ve been worried sick about you. Thought you weren’t going to show.’

‘I had no idea I’d be this late. Mum was entertaining guests, making it difficult to get away. The train was pulling out just as I got to the station. If I’d known the next one was more than an hour away, I would have returned home and called you. I really am so very sorry. I knew you’d be worried.’

Still holding his hat in one hand, Joshua kissed Alice on the cheek. ‘I’m a little sweaty, but it is lovely to see you.’

‘I’m glad you’re here. Bill was beginning to think something awful had happened.’

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‘You look like you could do with a drink,’ said Bill, relieved, putting his arm around him, ‘though not as much as our guests need a little music.’ He pointed to the gramophone. ‘I saved you the only cold beer. Been guarding the ice chest for the past couple of hours. Made sure no one stole it.’

‘Marvellous,’ said Joshua. ‘Just what I need. Thank you.’

Bill reached down and pulled out a bottle of freezing cold beer from the ice chest. Normally on occasions like these, he kept bottles of beer and hock in the bathtub, submerged in cold water, but tonight it was filled with his paint bottles and brushes, hastily cleared from the tops of benches so guests would have somewhere to place their drinks; the fold-out card table that doubled as his work bench was the only suitable place to lay out the food.

‘Cheers,’ he said, handing a glass to Joshua. ‘Don’t drink it all at once, there’s not a lot where that came from.’

‘Most grateful,’ said Joshua, raising his glass.

Bill smiled as he watched Joshua make his way slowly across the room to the gramophone. Occasionally he looked back to see if Bill was watching, and they would exchange knowing glances as Joshua took a sip of his beer. Secretly he would be glad when the guests had moved on and he and Joshua could be alone. They would lie together on the lounge and recount what their guests had said, laughing at some of the alcohol-fuelled nonsense spoken by some that few would recall in the morning. He watched Joshua raise his glass as he moved on, his arms covered in soft downy hair that hid a layer of pale ginger freckles where his skin had been exposed to the sun.

Stopping to greet guests, his beer would be warm by the time he made it the few feet to the gramophone. He was incapable of walking and talking at the same time, something Bill observed on their painting expeditions. He learned to build in extra time when making plans.

When they had worked together for the Allied Works Council, painting camouflage as part of the war effort, they would go on long hikes through the bush on bivouac. Frustrated with the pace, their fellow infantrymen would forge ahead, setting up camp long before they eventually arrived. Joshua would stop, resting against the twisted limbs of a young angophora as if he was preventing its fall. He would shield himself from the midday sun, continuing to recount events in great detail, in no hurry to be moved on. 'Come on, we'll never get there,' Bill would moan, beginning to walk away, but Joshua remained steadfast taking in the views. He would pick up the discarded shell of a cicada, claiming he could still hear its tymbals vibrating, or run his long, elegant fingers through the soft needles of a bottlebrush. 'Why are you always in such a hurry? Stop for a minute. Enjoy your surroundings. Take time to observe.'

Bill just shook his head. Joshua painted like he walked, slowly and deliberately, planning out every step, capturing every detail.

Bill watched him now, gently removing the revolving vinyl disc from the gramophone, careful not to touch its black shiny surface. Joshua placed the disc carefully back in its paper sleeve before taking another off the pile and placing

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it on the turntable. His slow and gentle movements made him seem older than forty.

The faint sound of Duke Ellington's 'Mood Indigo' began to waft through the room, swirling around the trail of cigarette smoke caught by the dim yellow lights. Before meeting Bill, Joshua had been unfamiliar with jazz, its complex tones and improvisation almost entirely new to him. The Duke and his orchestra had quickly become his favourite, and he would now seize every opportunity to listen to the notes curl and linger from room to room. It was a welcome relief from the sombre hymns so often played at home, where Joshua lived with his parents, though he protested to Bill that jazz would never diminish his love for the piano and the works of Chopin and Schubert.

Bill leaned against the louvred window, continuing to watch Joshua from across the room, resting his elbow on the narrow sill amid the glasses and empty cigarette tins that acted as makeshift ashtrays. The thick summer night air clung to his skin, creating a soft sheen, as though he was covered with the mist of light summer rain. Occasionally the smallest hint of a breeze crept through the louvres, taunting guests, reminding them that they were by the sea. The tiny lights of the boats on the harbour seemed to wink at them as they sipped their drinks.

Alice, seeing Bill was alone, wound her way over to him, careful not to spill her drink as she squeezed past the guests. Now standing beside him, she whispered softly in his ear. 'Have you asked him yet?'

Bill shrugged and took a sip of his beer.

'You haven't, have you?' said Alice, poking his rib.

'Ouch! I haven't had a chance ...' he said, wincing.

'I don't believe you.'

He shrugged his shoulders and looked around for a diversion.

'You're frightened he'll say no.'

'I'm sure he'll say no.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'What makes him so Joshua?'

'I'm sure you'll do a good job.'

'I'm sure too, but I'm not sure I can convince him.'

'Because of his looks?'

'Because of my style.'

'Secretly, he'll be flattered,' said Alice, turning to look at Joshua still crouching by the gramophone, flipping through the vinyl discs looking for the next thing to play. Leaning against the wall beside him were a stack of canvases, the top one entitled *The Dead Landlord*, a strangely humorous depiction of Bill's former landlord in London, bathed in light and laid out before his wife who was sitting naked at her dresser, grooming her hair.

Joshua seemed oblivious to the din around him as he took out his neatly folded handkerchief and wiped the tiny beads of sweat from his forehead. His hands were thin and delicate; his fingers forensic as he flipped through the records.

'So, what are you going to do if he says no?' asked Alice.

'I'll probably end up entering something I've already finished,' said Bill.

'Such as?'

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'*Billy Boy*, maybe. Perhaps *The Dead Landlord*.'

'I think your subject has to be alive.'

'He is more alive than some other portraits I've seen win,' said Bill, surveying the room to make sure no-one was listening. Almost everyone in the room who called themselves an artist intended to enter the Archibald Prize.

'Ask Joshua. He'll know the rules,' she said.

'Rules? What rules?' said a voice from behind.

'Russell, hello. When did you arrive?' said Bill.

'I snuck in. Is that in the rules?'

Alice laughed. An old friend and fellow artist of Bill's, Russell had recently moved from Melbourne.

'We were just talking about the Archibald,' said Bill wrapping an arm around him, careful not to spill his drink on him. 'The deadline is a couple of weeks away and it will, I am sure, come as no surprise to you that I am running out of time to submit something.'

'You're surely not thinking of submitting only one portrait?' said Russell, feigning surprise.

'Not unless you think a dead landlord, preserved with cheap liquor, has made a major contribution to the arts.'

'Science more likely.'

'There you see, I knew it would be okay.'

'If you want any chance of winning, you'd better get busy. It could be Dargie's year for a hat-trick.'

While some artists postulated that it would be too obvious, in the past it hadn't stopped the judges choosing the same artist multiple times, even after the critics took them to task. Longstaff, an official war artist, had won five times. Billy

McInnes, well known for his square brush technique when painting sky and clouds, had won seven of the twenty-two years the prize had been running and many believed he would still be winning had his death not taken him out of the race.

‘It’s worth a try for that sort of money,’ said Bill. The odds were long, but the prize – 500 guineas – was worth the effort. Bill didn’t dare tell Russell he wanted to paint Joshua. It wasn’t just that Joshua might say no; artists loved to gossip, even good friends like Russell. If Joshua got wind of it before being asked, he would refuse, steadfastly, on account of not being asked first.

Joshua’s angular features and elongated neck suited Bill’s approach to form and structure and he was keen to capture him. If he could convince him to sit, he thought he would have a reasonable chance of winning. But Joshua was overly self-conscious about his slight and angular body. It would take some convincing.

‘Show me an artist who isn’t hard up,’ said Russell.

Bill lifted his foot, showing Russell the hole in his left shoe. ‘There is one in the other shoe as well. Lord knows I could do with some new shoes. They’ve worn a hole through every sock I own,’ he said.

‘Have you fired the hired help?’ inquired Russell, looking around for a drink.

‘Didn’t your host get you one?’ Bill replied. ‘There’s warm hock, and warm hock. What do you fancy?’

‘Let me get you one,’ said Alice, raising her eyebrows in mock indignation.

‘Thank you, Alice,’ said Russell. ‘Otherwise, I might be waiting all evening.’

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He turned back to Bill, smiling. 'You know I don't believe in competitions. No artists should have to stoop to that. It's insulting. Archibald should have known better,' said Russell.

'It pays the bills if you win.'

'And crushes the livelihoods of others who don't. It's so bloody subjective.'

Jules Francois Archibald, founder of *The Bulletin* magazine and an iconoclast, had a flair for creating dissent. He relished controversy, leaving a bequest for an annual prize for portraiture, the rules of which were quite specific, though the wording imprecise and open to significant interpretation. Many felt purposely so. The portrait must be 'preferentially of some man or woman distinguished in Arts, Letters, Science or Politics', and, importantly, painted from life by an artist living in Australasia in the twelve months prior to entering the competition. The subject was often as controversial as the work itself, leaving critics, judges, artists, and their unsuspecting subjects to defend their positions most publicly in the press.

As a writer and journalist, Archibald was instinctual when it came to creating public discourse, and feared a growing conservatism in Australian political circles, particularly among those who possessed an inveterate fear of anything new, such as the avant-garde movement sweeping Europe.

Bill couldn't help feeling that the largesse of the prize was equally deliberate, enticing a wide field of entrants, even those with a paucity of talent.

'Whatever Archibald's motive,' Russell continued, 'there is no shortage of toffs wanting to be captured on canvas, even at the risk of being the subject of scorn and ridicule.'

Bill laughed. 'Congratulations by the way, on your Hill End exhibition. Good to see the critics haven't torn you apart.'

'So far, so good. Thankfully. But I'm not painting portraits,' said Russell.

'They can still be merciless.'

'Being blind in one eye helps. They're mindful not to tear the other one out.'

'Milton was blind, and that didn't stop critics attacking him.'

'I didn't pick you as a reader of poetry.'

Bill laughed. 'I'm not. I saw his portrait in the National Gallery in London. Joshua sometimes reads me his poems.'

'Oh well, you ought to see more of him then.'

Bill smiled. 'The critics will have their fun this year if the field is anything to go by. Ample fodder.'

'Shredded as swiftly as the bark from a melaleuca,' said Russell.

'Can't wait,' said Bill, lifting his glass for a toast.

'I'd stick to landscapes, myself,' said Russell. 'Still, there's always the popular choice. That might bring a few commissions.'

It was a dreary thought. Commissions brought handsome sums in return for immortalising a subject not of your choosing. Most often they were toffs looking for a traditional portrait, an exact likeness. A formal reflection of their social and economic position. They would insist special care be taken to hide signs of their indulgences, evidenced by the strain of their waistcoat and the colour of their complexion,

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so that the family in years to come could gaze upon their ancestor with pride, looking for genetic resemblances.

‘What is Joshua entering?’ asked Russell, moving towards the gramophone where Joshua still crouched.

‘He’s been labouring over a portrait of Dame Mary Gilmore for weeks now,’ said Bill, raising his eyebrows.

‘Good luck with that one! No doubt Jules Archibald had Dame Mary in mind when he established his bequest.’

They had made their way over to Joshua who immediately stood to greet Russell, a mixture of awe and eagerness passing over his face.

The painting, *The Dead Landlord*, was leaning against the wall. ‘It’s a bloody good painting you know. Are you sure it doesn’t meet the rules?’ said Russell, focusing his good eye on Bill.

‘I very much doubt it. It needs to be of someone distinguished and I don’t think a drunk furniture repairer, particularly one now dead, would be distinguished in the fields of art or science. He could barely hammer a nail in straight.’

‘Then, you’d better make your mind up soon. You’re running out of time.’

‘You look like you could use a refill,’ said Bill, taking Russell’s glass and leaving him to talk with Joshua.

## CHAPTER 3

# Joshua

*1939*

‘You must be Joshua.’

Joshua turned to see Bill standing behind him. ‘How did you know?’

‘You are the only one not wearing a skirt,’ said Bill, extending both hands to greet him.

‘Of course,’ said Joshua, nervously tilting his head back. ‘I only wear a skirt when I am in heels.’

Bill laughed. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, at last. I’ve heard plenty about you.’

‘And I you.’

‘I arrived a few minutes early. Thought I’d take a quick look around,’ said Bill, gesturing at the paintings lining the walls of the gallery. ‘It’s been a while.’

Joshua had suggested they meet at the Art Gallery,

where, if necessary, he could keep things cordial and most importantly on a fairly impersonal level. If it turned out Bill was an upstart, full of himself as a result of his being ten years in London, then he would make a polite but swift exit.

They began to walk around the portraiture gallery, its gleaming parquet floor and burgundy walls reflective of the privileged subjects that hung on the walls, seemingly eavesdropping on their conversation with imperious disapproval.

‘So much wealth and power in one room,’ said Bill. ‘It’s unsettling.’

‘Let’s continue to another wing then,’ said Joshua, reassured that his old friend Eric was right – Bill appeared charming.

*I think you ought to meet him, Eric had written from London. He is returning to Sydney as his father is unwell – dire, I’m afraid. I’m including some of his scribbles and the odd drawing. Don’t be offended by the nudity. Bill and John pose for each other rather than spending what little money they have on hiring models. Whatever you do, don’t blush when you meet him!*

Eric had been spending time with Bill and his good mate John Passmore in Paris, visiting art schools and galleries. *They’re a heady pair, raucous as a pair of naughty schoolboys, impersonating toffs and finessing the accents of barrow boys and East Enders. I’m not sure renting a flat together is such a good idea. The late nights and parade of house guests has put unnecessary strain on both their finances, not to mention John’s work.*

From what Joshua could make out, they seemed to spend most of their time playing bon-vivant to a constant stream of

Australian artists, many in need of a place to doss down until they could find a place to live.

*Bill's a good chap, and I think he is a little homesick, so we convinced him to travel with us on the Continent. Tried to cheer him up. I'll let you know how we go. With the war escalating, we could all be headed home soon enough.*

*Off to the ponds, ever yours,*

*Eric*

Joshua could only imagine their life in London. Having never travelled abroad, he consoled himself by living vicariously, devouring Eric's letters, and dreaming of a time when he too might visit the Continent. He spent hours at the City Library, reading the latest issues of *Walkabout* cover to cover, and scouring newspapers, months old, for reviews of exhibitions in London and New York. He also flipped through copies of *The Home*, which his mother, Louisa, read assiduously. Apart from the latest fashions and entertaining tips, there was the occasional feature story on a new exhibition in Paris, or an emerging artist. But it was slim pickings and he waited patiently for more news from Eric, relishing his depictions of life abroad.

Joshua hoped one day it would be his turn. Probably years away. The few pennies he received from selling his work paid for his paints and other art materials. Anything left, he would give to his mother. They were comfortable enough, but given he was now in his late thirties and still living at home, he insisted on paying his way, when he could.

Knowing only what Eric had told him, Joshua was intrigued, and arranged to meet Bill not long after he returned home from London. He didn't give Eric any sense

of his reticence, but he feared Bill might find him unworldly, particularly compared to his London compatriots. Bill was, after all, a celebrated artist, awarded a scholarship to London. Whereas he was not a carouser, and more than likely Bill would find Sydney a little dull, particularly when compared to the Continent. It was a city yet to develop a sense of its own identity, bound in servitude to the Commonwealth and tied doggedly to ideas and traditions long since out of fashion. Slowly growing into a large and more sophisticated metropolis, at its best, it was charming. He tried to put all these thoughts out of his head as he and Bill meandered through the gallery. Wandering across the marbled entrance they stopped to take in Elioth Gruner's *Weetangera*.

'What do you think of our most recent acquisition?' said Joshua. 'Some thought it too cold.'

'I like Gruner, particularly his earlier works. This one is a little bleached but then that's Canberra,' said Bill, smiling. 'Drought stricken again I hear.'

Joshua liked him. Instantly. Though he tried not to show it. Bill was confident and immediately put him at ease. His accent was polished – London having removed any trace of shortened vowels. Occasionally he used phrases Joshua was unfamiliar with, like 'on the high street' and 'cooker'. He was more talkative than Joshua was expecting, although he thought about his answers carefully. He was quite sure of himself, or at least of his talent, but he wasn't cocky, not at all, and seemed to want to know more about Joshua's views on art than talk about himself. Bill asked as many questions as he answered.

‘How do you like being home in Sydney?’ said Joshua.

‘Newcastle is home,’ said Bill, looking at his feet as if he had dropped a penny. ‘I’d like to feel things have changed,’ he said. ‘Certainly, my approach to painting has. But perhaps it’s too early to say.’

Joshua sensed talk of Newcastle made him pensive and changed tack. ‘What do you think of Dada?’ he asked. There was so much he wanted to know. Was he a fan of Duchamp, Picasso?

‘My father,’ said Bill, ‘was horrified when I sent him a newspaper clipping of a portrait by Picasso. It was the one of his mother-in-law. You know the painting? Hardly flattering.’

‘Yes, I do.’ Joshua wondered if this was some kind of test about his knowledge of art. If so, he would pass with flying colours.

‘What do you think?’ said Bill.

‘It wouldn’t be my favourite Picasso, but fortunately I don’t have a mother-in-law, so I wouldn’t have to explain why I depicted her in such an unflattering manner.’

Bill laughed.

‘I live at home still, with my parents,’ said Joshua, the words coming too quickly, so that they sounded like an admission of guilt. ‘Economic necessity, I’m afraid. At my age it can be a little stifling,’ he continued, looking at Bill, trying to gauge his response.

‘At any age it can be stifling,’ said Bill. ‘Beats starving if you ask me,’ he said, smiling.

Joshua was relieved. Bill had not judged him. Quite the contrary. Bill expressed a desire to see his work. He

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appeared to want to get to know him. Joshua hoped he wasn't blushing.

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They met the following week at a relatively private rotunda in the Botanic Gardens, not far from the Art Gallery. The summer heat was oppressive, and the rotunda offered shade. A cool breeze came off the harbour, bringing with it the briny smell of seawater and dried kelp. They could hear the water slapping against the rocks, announcing the arrival of the more vigorous nor'-easter.

Joshua removed his hat before entering and mopped his brow with a neatly folded checked handkerchief he pulled from his hip pocket. He was carrying an old wicker basket under his arm, deep enough to hold a thermos of tea, and a couple of scones, wrapped in a fine linen tea towel – a modest hamper prepared by his mother.

'No cream, I'm afraid,' he said, placing the basket on the bench seat. 'Thought it would curdle in the heat. They're pretty good though, even with only butter and jam.'

He laid out the tea towel on the bench, smoothing it down before unwrapping the scones and laying them out with a small pot of jam and a wedge of partially melted butter. He proceeded to pour two mugs of tea, already milked and sugared. He was nervous and tried not to shake, attempting to distract Bill from watching him by pointing out the view.

'How'd you know I took milk and sugar?' said Bill.

‘How did I know you ate scones?’ said Joshua, pleased with himself.

‘Next time, I’ll bring beer,’ said Bill. ‘I don’t bake.’

‘Good,’ said Joshua, laughing. ‘I thought you were about to say, I don’t drink!’

They began to meet more regularly, picnicking, taking small excursions around the harbour foreshores. Joshua would bring a satchel with his sketchbook and pencils, but there was so much to talk about, it remained unopened. Bill regaled him with stories of London and the Continent, outlining for him European trends and styles never seen before, compositions violently abstracted that were beginning to dominate canvases, often shocking and confronting audiences. Joshua hung on every word, greedy for detail and first-hand accounts of the art movements and political changes sweeping Europe. As much as he wanted to understand the artists’ motivation and intention, he also wanted to know more about the artistic dialogues that were informing audiences, how audiences were reacting, and changing, and how it felt to be part of it all.

But it was Bill who interested him most. Unafraid to speak his mind, he was confident in his opinions about art, willing to be challenged, to experiment, and to discard. At times Joshua was horrified that Bill would paint over a work that was coming along nicely. Bill didn’t flinch. Just set about removing excess paint and beginning again. Joshua wanted to spend as much time as possible with him. Learn from him. He was infatuated for sure, but he hoped it was more than that. For the first time in his life, Bill was someone who made him

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feel equal – free from obligation and without expectation. Joshua was euphoric.

‘You know, life in London wasn’t just all-night parties and cavorting through Europe,’ confessed Bill. ‘At times, I was cold and miserable, at the mercy of a mean and avaricious landlord who was happy to watch me starve as I fed my last few pennies into the coin-operated heating. No money for hot water.’

‘Oh well. You seem to have survived,’ said Joshua, who would have sat in a thousand cold bathtubs, and lived on bread and dripping only, if it meant he could travel.

‘Survive was all I really did do. I should have more to show for my ten years in London, more than just frost-bitten toes, don’t you think?’

‘I’m not one to judge,’ said Joshua. ‘Remember, I still live at home.’

‘You’re lucky you still have your parents. I didn’t even make it home in time to say goodbye to my dad.’

Joshua sensed Bill’s mood was shifting. It was not that he was beginning to feel sorry for himself, rather that he felt comfortable enough to let down his guard, show he too was vulnerable. The expectations placed on him upon his return were high. He was not prolific and could not turn out paintings in a series for a show like Russell. His love of portraiture made this impossible.

‘You know, I’ve forgotten how charming Sydney can be. I regret now, not returning earlier.’

‘But you’re here now, and I’m glad.’

‘Yes, I’m here now, and happy,’ said Bill, smiling.