

Martin Chambers was born in Perth, the son of two journalists. He is married and has two adult daughters.

He has worked as a biologist, a tour guide, a whitewater rafting guide, a lab assistant, a publican, a kayak designer, a ferry skipper and in mineral exploration. He once had a job at the Swan Brewery with the rather good title of 'Quality Control'. Contrary to expectation he never got to sample product. Quality control was about checking labels were on straight and testing the twist force required to unscrew the bottle tops.

Between episodes of cycling, kayaking, sailing or travel, he writes. He is the author of four novels and two non-fiction books, and his poetry and short stories have been published in various anthologies. *How I Became the Mr Big of People Smuggling* was shortlisted in the T.A.G. Hungerford Award in 2012.

Visit the author at

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www.martinchambers.id.au

HOW I BECAME THE MR BIG OF PEOPLE SMUGGLING

A NOVEL BY MARTIN CHAMBERS



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1

I picked up the gun. It was cold, heavy. I picked it up only as a way to break eye contact. To avoid looking at him I casually sighted across the yard, aiming at the first thing that stood out, the sign above the canteen door. *Hotel California*. I squeezed the trigger.

BANG!

‘Jesus!’

‘Shit. I didn’t think it would be loaded.’

‘Fucking hell, Son. What the hell you doin’, Son?’

‘It’s a goodun.’ The shot was still deafening my ears, ringing in the silence. The wave of birds that I hadn’t seen fly off settled back in the tamarisk and on the windmill. I gestured. ‘Bullseye.’

In truth I didn’t know if I had even hit the building, let alone the sign. I doubted his eyes were any better than mine, but he turned to see. He grunted.

In the nanoseconds after that first shot there was time to notice that the hole left by that shock of noise had not been filled, to realise that Cookie would be in the canteen unaware, doped up with Wagner at full volume as he conducted his dishes of ingredients around the stainless bench. Spanner was under one of his vans working to fix some part, and Margaret and the girls were sunbathing down at the waterhole. I could see myself and all of us from above: the camp, Cookie in the kitchen, Spanner’s legs protruding; further out, the girls sprawled on the rocks and Margaret supervising from her canvas chair under a sun umbrella. While the world stood still I was flying away, up, and from higher I could see the lacework of roads, red-brown against the drab green scrub, then the pit, the pit, where the ground was redder, where time and the sound stopped forever.

He was turned away from me, pretending to look at the canteen door. His bull neck had small beads of sweat and rolls of fat and

wispy hairs and I could see the pulse of blood in some veins that stood out. I remember seeing all this in great detail and slow motion and 'Hotel California' playing in my head.

You only get one chance and I took it. I shot him. I put the gun up close to the back of his turned head and in the white heat silence of an outback day there was a spray of blood and brains across the chair and onto the floor as his body flew backwards into the mess and fell with the chair – and the strange thing was I didn't even hear the shot and suddenly the world was going at double speed to make up for all the slow motion leading to the bullet in his brain.

2

The first person I met at Palmenter Station was Spanner. If it weren't for him I wouldn't have survived those first weeks. I remember how desolate the place looked as I drove along a few kilometres of hard dirt track to the station settlement. I saw two vans similar to mine parked outside a low prefabricated building and I was glad of that. These other vans might mean there were others like me here, school leavers or backpackers up for the season to earn a few dollars.

A sign on the door said 'Canteen', and handpainted above the door someone had written *Hotel California*. I parked next to the other vans and, like a sigh of relief, the engine rattled to a halt. Four thousand kilometres faultlessly and now, as if home, it shuddered.

Music was coming from inside the canteen. Muffled, it sounded out of place. As if the canteen were a spaceship that had landed in some alien world and inside the adventurers huddled in fear, playing loud music to keep their spirits up. It was midafternoon and the heat had gone from the day. The thought of a look around the deserted grounds was less intimidating than the idea of entering a crowded canteen full of strangers.

The canteen formed one side of a courtyard guarded in the centre by a solitary tree with a wire fence around it. Opposite was an older more conventional building with wide dark verandahs and a high-pitched tin roof. To the left was a row of seven prefabricated units. Each had five doors. That was a lot of rooms – if they were for accommodation perhaps this place was busier than it looked.

On the fourth side was a water tower – a skeletal pipe metal structure with an enormous fibreglass tank on top – and next to it and even higher was the largest windmill I had ever seen. On the

other side of the water tank was a vegetable garden and beyond that was a large open-sided shed full of agricultural machinery. Some trees behind the shed looked enticingly shady but the overall impression was of desolation. I felt suddenly temporary, as if not only were this homestead a fleeting thing on a timeless landscape, but so too were I a momentary stranger in a world where I did not belong. How could anybody live here?

I could see a man working in the shed so I decided to go that way to allow my head to clear the echo of road noise. The man stood from where he was hunched over the bench, arching his back to straighten it, and walked to meet me.

‘Saw you come in. How’s the girl going?’

I didn’t understand. He pointed.

‘Betsy. The van.’

‘Oh. Fine. They gave it to me to drive up here.’

‘Obviously.’

‘Yeah. It made a funny rattle just then when I turned it off. I’m Nick. Nick Smart.’

‘Wayne. Everyone calls me Spanner. Anything ’round here broken, I fix it.’ He looked me up and down. ‘Mechanical, that is. I don’t do hearts or paperwork or computers.’

‘Oh.’

‘My advice: if you want those, you head right on back out of here.’

Had he looked me up and down and assessed me with that single look, written me off? Was he serious I should leave? Dad had warned me the outback men were hard and rough and so I had been trying to look tougher than I felt.

The bloke led me back into the shed and continued tinkering with the engine part that lay dismantled on the bench. He had a beer open and took a swig but thankfully he didn’t offer me one.

‘I’m a jackaroo. They told me to drive the van up and I could start as soon as I got here.’

‘Jackaroo. He does that.’

I wondered what he meant by that and who ‘he’ was. But the man stood up from bending over whatever part he was toying with.

‘Fucked if I know what’s wrong with it. C’mon. I’ll introduce you to Cookie. No one else here. You can chill until Palmenter gets

here. I don’t know what he’s got in store for you. Pick yourself one of the dongas over there. They’re all empty. I live back of the shed. Cookie’s donga is over there. The girls are put in the bedrooms in the homestead when they are here. Place fills up coming up to muster but most time it’s pretty quiet. Good if it suits ya.’

He led me towards the canteen and as he walked past my van he patted it affectionately on the bullbar. ‘Heya Betsy.’

There was no one in the canteen except the cook who was sitting smoking by the back door. The music was loud, classical, some sort of military march. *Empire Strikes Back* or something. I felt absurdly inspired.

‘Cookie: new bloke.’

‘Nick. Nick Smart.’

Cookie shook my hand. His grip was soft, his hand felt like pastry. He was smoking dope and I could see a substantial plantation thriving between the back of the canteen and another prefab building that must be Cookie’s room. He saw me examining the plantation.

‘Anytime, mate. Help yourself. It’s a community garden.’ And he gave a little laugh, as if that in itself was a helpless joke. It was not the meaningless giggle of a pot smoker. It was more forlorn. It was the antidote to the uplift of music.

They pointed me towards the prefabricated rooms that were called dongas and told me to pick one and settle in, dinner at six, ask if I needed anything. I was left to myself for the rest of the afternoon. I lay on the bed and turned on my phone but there was no reception.

The next morning a guy about my age arrived. Jason. He arrived in another campervan as I happened to be walking across towards the canteen. We confused each other for a while until we worked out that neither of us knew what was going on. He was a newbie too.

‘Apparently the boss arrives tomorrow,’ I said.

I showed him the rooms and the showers and introduced him to Spanner who I found again in his shed with a beer and an engine part. While I was showing Jason around I learned that he, like

me, was taking a year off. Next year he would go back to study medicine. In the canteen when Cookie discovered that, he offered Jason some 'medicine' but Jason declined.

Palmenter arrived the next day with a bloke called Simms who turned out to be a third newbie. Simms didn't seem so bright, in a harmless sort of way, and Palmenter bossed him around no end. Fetch this, do that. Simms took a room opposite mine but that was it. In our spare time – and there was a lot of it early on – the three of us would sit around and talk. Simms did not say much and he rarely volunteered anything extra. When he answered a direct question he would look around anywhere but at you as he answered.

'You worked up here before?' Jason asked him.

'No, not really.'

'Did you work down south with Palmenter? He's got some business interests in Melbourne, hasn't he?' Jason probed. He didn't seem to pick up the vibe of the place.

'No. I don't think so. Don't know.'

Simms was older than us, and rake thin, and everything he did took too long. In the showers he would wander in and take forever to set out his kit on the bench, then shave, slowly like each scrape of the razor was a deliberate thing, then he'd pack that bit away and sort out things for a shower, get undressed and lay his clothes neatly on the bench. It was frustrating, because I was in and out, and to hang around and talk was as if I was hanging around in the changerooms and he was naked in the shower and you just don't know on these stations what people get up to. But it was frustration in a kindly way because I wanted to help him, partly because everything seemed such a difficulty for him and partly because Palmenter bullied him so.

At the station you kept to yourself and everything was fine. But somewhere under that layer of civility was something not said, as if, perhaps, everyone was on the run from the police. Or like Jason escaping from failed exams. Or me, running away from something I could not really explain. I wanted someone to talk to and Simms was the best I could do because Jason would have asked me too many questions.

Palmenter interviewed me the afternoon he arrived and it felt as if I didn't have a job at all, I felt I was reapplying and might be refused and sent home if I said the wrong thing. At that time I was keen to stay, prove myself, like when you are pushed you push back, so even if I didn't want to stay at that stage I would have tried like anything to be asked to stay, then say, 'No, I don't want to'. People are funny like that. You can get them to do all sorts of shit they don't want to by hinting that they are not allowed to.

Anyway, Palmenter took me into the office and grilled me about many things, asked me why I wanted the job. I knew I would be pretty hopeless around the place until I learned the job, and I said so, but he was more interested in my school results and that I was interested in studying business.

'Nick Smart. Smart eh?'

I smiled.

'We need someone smart 'round here, Son. Someone who can think for themselves. You could do accounts and take over some of the management for me. I have to spend a lot of time away, sorting out other parts of the business. If you're interested in commerce, you'll learn more here than in your classroom in the city. You stick with me, Son, and I'll turn you into a businessman.'

I nodded. I was wondering what limited business skills I might learn all the way out here in the middle of nowhere, but then I remembered Jason asking Simms about Palmenter's business interests in the city and I thought if I could do six months or a year here, maybe Palmenter might have a part-time position for me back in Melbourne while I studied.

'How old are you, Son?'

'Eighteen.'

'You look older.'

'I get that a lot. Anyway, it won't affect how well I can do the job. I learn quick.'

He made a noise to acknowledge that I had spoken. I was about to add that I'd be keen to learn some of the accounting but realised it didn't matter what I said. Palmenter was someone who made up his own mind and he already had about me.

'Son, I don't want no fly-in fly-out. You work here, I look after you, pay you well, lots of bonuses and benefits. It's a great life out

here, you just gotta want it, appreciate what we've got. But if you don't want this life, you leave now. Don't waste my time.'

'I've signed up for the year and I'll do the year,' I said. His gaze was challenging me. 'I believe in keeping commitments,' I added.

He kept looking at me and it made me uncomfortable. It was not that he was reading me or assessing me or considering me, it was that he had already done all that and I was irrelevant, I was nothing. I was signed up for the year and that was that. But he made no move to produce any paperwork or to end the interview.

'I was hoping to call my parents, tell them I've arrived safe and all that.'

'You're in the outback now, Son. No landline out here and the satellite phone is expensive, only for emergency. Write them a letter. I'll see it gets posted next time we do a run into town.'

Who these days does not have a landline? Why didn't I offer to pay for a satellite call? Why oh why didn't I walk out then and there? But like I said, it was early days and there was no way I was heading home with my tail between my legs. I did not, however, mention anything about paperwork or actually signing a contract.

I had done quite well at school, well enough to be offered a place at Melbourne University to study commerce. It was my brother who suggested it would be a good idea to defer for a year and work on the mines. Simon was working at a mining camp and loved it. He and a group of his friends had rented a house in Fitzroy and rotated through the house. Because they all worked some variation of weeks on and weeks off there was always a party happening there.

'Easy work, good money,' he said. 'Get some money together so you can pay your way through university. Fly-in fly-out is great because you don't miss out on anything, plus there is a real shortage of workers at the moment so it's easy to get.'

I found a recruitment agent that specialised in mining and outback jobs. After quite a long friendly talk the recruitment man told me that the problem with fly-in fly-out was although you earned big money you also spent big amounts during the time off and he suggested I was better off doing something like station work as a jackaroo. Well-paid, all food and board and no expenses

and if I worked out a full year, great bonuses. I had never been to the Northern Territory and there would be days off with the freedom to explore so it sounded pretty good. He told me of a job on Wingate Station. That was what they called it. It was only when I arrived that I found out the current name.

I discussed it with my parents and they were not happy. Dad said it was a waste to take a year off and thought if I did, then I'd never go back to study. Mum didn't want me to leave home.

'What's your hurry? Plenty of kids nowadays stay at home while they study. You won't have to pay rent so you don't need a job.'

Graduating from school is such a confusing time. I can't really say what was the real reason I had set my mind on this year away but the more we argued, the more determined I became. I can say that I was not happy at school and that once the idea of a gap year had taken hold I could not forget it, and the more I thought of escaping to the north, the less I could explain why I had chosen to study commerce. I didn't even really know what commerce was.

Our argument simmered over the summer. Mum insisted that I stay home and enrol at university. I think Dad would have been okay with my moving out and renting a place closer to uni but he knew he had to side with Mum. One time when Mum was out shopping he told me, quietly, that if it made the difference he would increase my allowance but that I was not to tell Mum.

'But you must go to university, Nick. It is a great opportunity. Thousands of kids don't get in. Don't turn it down just because you want to have some time off. By the end of summer you'll be itching to get back to study.'

'Lots of kids take a year off, Dad. I'll defer for a year, that's all.'

But after Christmas I felt even less like going to university and that was when I arranged a second interview with the agent. When I told Dad I had taken the job he warned me about the hard-drinking hard men of the outback.

'The Territory is the worst of it. Hard men up there, harder than most places. They don't take easily to strangers, outsiders, people who ...' and here he was for a moment lost for words, '... people not like themselves.'

I don't think Dad was worried I would turn into a hard man of the outback. He knew me too well. Although I'm quite physical, he knew I didn't have the tough streak it takes to be one of them. After all, he had watched me through all my school years.

Every school has its bullies and ours was Dan Taylor. He and his buddies picked on everyone, not just me in particular, although it often felt like it. Many times I would be hiding in the library reading rather than face him in the courtyard. The funny thing, though, is that Dan would be shocked to know I learned so much from him. Dan, the thick-as-two-short-planks bully! I survived at Palmerter Station because Dan taught me how to become invisible, how to pick up when was the right or wrong time to speak or to ask for things, and how to think quickly and talk my way out of situations. He taught me to notice who was where and doing what, because when Dan was on the oval extorting lunch money I could safely walk from the library to get my own lunch. And later I knew, because of Dan, how to use thugs to get my own way when I wanted to and even how to pretend to be a thug myself.

I told my Dad I was going to take the job. What he had implied was that while I might look the part of the hard-drinking territory men, I wouldn't fit in and I'd be pushed around just as Dan had pushed me around. Funny that, for the very same reason that I did not want to go directly to uni, I now felt challenged, to prove that I could cope to live away among the real men, as if there was some test I had to pass and the only way to pass it was to head directly to it.

'Think about it for a few days. Maybe we can see if Simon's work comes up with any better vacancies.'

'Dad, no one is leaving at Simon's work. They just don't get any vacancies. Plus, this is better. Full board, full-time, I save everything instead of coming back to the city fly-in fly-out and spending everything I earn.'

He tried to persuade me to take a few days to consider, but my mind was made up. If I rang them and said I was unsure I would probably lose the offer and I had agreed I could start immediately. I was supposed to collect a company car the next day as I had agreed to drive it to the homestead of a place called Wingate. In return for that I had free use of the car for the next two weeks. This sounded

like the sort of place I would want to work. There was no way I was turning it down.

Next day I got up early and left. I turned off my mobile. I wrote a note to my parents telling them that I'd call them with all the contact details of the station as soon as I got there, because all I knew at that time was it was called Wingate and it was in the far north of the Northern Territory. I wrote for them not to worry, that I would be home in six months when I was due a return air ticket as part of the contract, but I underlined that I'd be working the full year because the bonus for completing the year was an extra three months pay.

The agent had given me an address in Geelong and told me we could sign the paperwork later. That didn't seem at all unusual to me and when at the address – an old warehouse out the back of Geelong – another man gave me the van and a map and instructions how to get to the station and told me all the paperwork would be done when I got to Wingate.

'No worries mate. Jackaroo, eh? Do it when you get up there, chum. They do all the office shit up there. I just look after the transport for 'em. Take your time, don't push it on those outback roads.'

I didn't know exactly what a jackaroo did but it sounded good. Jackaroo. Like I was going to do a particular job and learn some specific skill. The bloke at the warehouse gave me a choice of the vans and said again I should take my time getting there. He gave me cash to pay for fuel on the trip up and when I asked about receipts he laughed.

'S'pose so.'

The van was a bit of a comedown from the company car I had expected but as it was set up with camping gear and a small stove I could see it had some advantages. There was no reason not to leave immediately.

I drove out of Victoria via Ballarat and Mildura and could not believe how flat and barren the land was. I had never been this far

from the city before, this far from the hills and forests of southern Victoria and Tasmania where we spent our family holidays. I called home that night and told them that I was okay, that I'd phone when I could. I drove through Port Augusta and on to Alice Springs. I stopped along the way, at Uluru and Kings Canyon and all sorts of other places. In the late afternoons I stopped by the highway and camped, watching the sunset and darkening sky and listening to the racket of corellas and parrots and then the remarkable silence as the stars came out.

A few days after my interview with Palmenter, a truck arrived with several more campervans that we unloaded and drove into Spanner's shed. Spanner's shed was becoming my regular haunt after work. My work was easy general stuff, helping out in the kitchen, some gardening, fixing reticulation to the vegetable and the 'herb' garden. It was pretty slack and in the afternoons I would go down to visit Spanner. He always had an open beer on his bench and by the end of the day he was quite chatty, asking about my family or about Melbourne or something else in a way that didn't seem intrusive. Often I'd find myself telling him something from school or about Simon and his mining job, but I can't remember Spanner ever telling me anything about himself.

Spanner didn't have dinner in the canteen, and neither did Palmenter, who I rarely saw, so it was only Simms and me, and Jason until he left after the first muster. And then Charles who had arrived with the truck. I liked him but found him difficult to understand. He was not English at all like you'd expect a bloke called Charles to be, he was Indian or something and he spoke exactly in that singsong way we used to send up at school, and he wanted to be called Charles not Charlie. He even had little swings of his head from side to side and he spoke so quickly you couldn't understand a thing he said, or you'd have to think about it after he said it like your brain was catching up with the words that had gone in.

A woman named Margaret had arrived at the same time as Charles but I didn't know this until a few days later when the girls arrived. I was surprised because one morning something felt

different around the place, and Spanner said it was the girls. He said that they always arrived shortly before muster. Later that day I saw them from where I was working in the garden, they were cleaning the empty dongas and later sitting on the verandah of the homestead with the woman called Margaret who reminded me of a protective mother duck. Her glare was every bit as fierce as Palmenter's.

I never talked to Margaret. She was older and lived in the homestead with the girls. She would arrive with Charles or Palmenter a few days before each muster and depart as soon as it was over.

3

Spanner helped me drag Palmenter's body across to the 4WD and bundle it in the back. He was a heavy bastard. I remember thinking that television cop shows never show how difficult it is to move a body, particularly a big fat one. We finally got him into the back seat by folding him in. He sat there as if alive but snoozing in that head forward uncomfortable way people do in cars.

'You drive him out to the pit,' Spanner said.

'I'll need you too.' I didn't want to be out there alone, to do it by myself.

'I'll bring a van. We'll torch the car.' He looked at the car. It was all white, unnaturally clean, gleaming, with almost black windows. The interior smelled of leather and pine and was cool even though it had been parked in the heat for an hour or so.

'Shame. Lexus hybrid.' He gave a little laugh. 'He musta cared for the fuckin' environment.' He said it in a voice that confirmed he didn't care at all for Palmenter.

Spanner walked off without saying any more. He got into one of the vans. I drove off. The whole way, I kept looking back at Palmenter whose body was bouncing around the back seat. His knees were bent up and his arms had fallen behind and his head rested forward so I could not see the gaping hole in his face where the bullet came out. He looked very uncomfortable but alive and I kept expecting him to wake up, to fly up at me and beat me, yelling abuse and smashing his fists into me, or worse, to start talking again. A rise of panic would flood through me and I'd turn back to check. Yes, he was still there, still dead. I couldn't believe he was dead. But I had shot him. Me. And a different panic would hit me. What

would I do now? What would happen if someone found out? Could I trust Spanner not to tell?

I'd force myself to relax. No one would ever know. Spanner hated him as much as I did. I could trust Spanner. He had been here all this time, had been party to all the goings on. He knew about the pit. If ever this came to light he would be in just as much trouble as I was.

Who was I kidding? Spanner hadn't shot anyone and I could hardly claim self-defence. Gunshot wound in the back of the head? There was a big difference between shooting someone in the back of the head at point-blank range, and pushing a load of sand over the bodies of illegals who had perished in the desert. I was in big trouble.

Spanner's van caught up to me and was following closely. I drove on automatic, fluctuating between near panic and total calm. I remember that the car smelled of that pine fragrance. I remember pine, and calm, and panic.

Funny how the mind works, what things it finds to notice when it's trying not to notice something else, like the lurching body of Palmenter that at every bump shifted and wobbled like a monster awakening. That pine fragrance was calming in a familiar way and I tried to remember it, identify it. Perhaps it was something my mother used. I liked it. It would be nice in my room. The drive seemed to take a long time.

At the pit Spanner looked over the car as if considering what parts best to strip off it and keep. We had no plan; we were making it up as we went along, but whatever we were going to do we had to be quick. It was the middle of nowhere but we both knew there were people everywhere, the nearest several kilometres away. That was too close. Mustering crew would be back after lunch. Chopper would arrive tomorrow. It would bring the first of the imports an hour after dawn. That was too soon. Nearest road was twenty kilometres, nearest town three hundred and fifty. That was too close. Too close. We had to hurry.

'Probably best if we don't take anything.' Spanner pointed to the other side of the dozer where he had recently extended the pit. The new bit was deeper and had steep edges. 'Park it there. Leave the brake off, outta gear, windows down. We'll push it in, bury it.'

'I thought you said burn it?'

‘Musterin’ crew’ll see the smoke. Chopper too. Due anytime. That pilot is a nosey bugger. Not sure about Newman either.’

Newman. What Palmenter had said. Should I tell Spanner? Maybe, but right now we had to get rid of Palmenter and his car.

‘They’re not due till tomorrow.’

‘Today. Tomorrow. Who knows? They’ll be nearby someplace. They might come out this way anytime. Any one of them could see the smoke, come lookin’, see the burnt-out shell. Won’t be able to bury it till after it’s burned and tomorrow the place will be crawling. We’ll bury the whole thing right now. Come on.’

I drove the car to the edge as he directed. I had barely got out and closed the door and he was pushing it, rolling it to the edge. In the movies it is so much easier: they push the car over the edge and it tips easily, plummets off the cliff, and bursts into flames before it hits the bottom. We pushed hard but as the front wheels went over the edge, the sand collapsed and the bottom of the car hit the ground. It was stuck half over with the front wheels midair and its belly resting on the dirt.

Spanner swore. He went to the dozer and started it, rammed into the perched car so that it slid over the edge, bounced a couple of times and rolled onto its side. I tried not to look to see Palmenter. Spanner pushed sand in after it until it was buried, then parked the dozer. It was done quickly, efficiently.

‘Grab some of those bags, some of that shit and stuff, throw it all over, cover the fresh sand so as it doesn’t look like something’s just been buried here.’ He pointed into the main pit that was full of garbage. It was foul smelling and revolting. Most of the bags had split when dumped, or been torn open by wild dogs and dingoes. ‘C’mon, do it.’

While I was tossing bags of garbage over the newly scraped sand he broke off the branch of a shrub and dragged it around where the dozer and 4WD tracks were, obliterating them, or at least confusing them so they looked like long-ago tracks. A few months, after the wet, and there’d be no trace of a body in a near-new Lexus 4WD under sand in the middle of scrub that stretched unchanged from here to the Gulf.

Nothing had changed at the homestead. Spanner broke off a couple more branches and showed me how to sweep the sand to hide our drag marks, the footprints and blood. Not that the blood showed, you’d have to know what you were looking for. Unless you knew, the area looked like dirt. But I kept seeing stuff. Patches that might have been blood. Or flesh. Bits of skull and brain. Already the ants had invaded. There were lines of them on the sand and up the two steps onto the landing, across the boards. I wheeled out the firehose and washed the boards down.

We had just finished when the muster crew came in. Two old utes roared up in a cloud of dust and stopped right at the canteen door. Bodies tumbled out of the tray and cab and into the canteen. I was thinking you’d have to do more than fire a gun and spray blood and brains over the ground for them to notice, and as the dust settled on the wet boards I was thinking that that was the end of Palmenter, that was the end of it all. Good riddance.

‘Better go about as if nothin’s happened,’ said Spanner. He was reading my mind. We would come to rely on each other more and more, and this understanding we had of what the other was thinking was later to save my life. But that was in the future and I was wondering what I should do next. Could I leave? I wanted to get as far away as quickly as I could. Maybe we shouldn’t have buried the car, I could have taken it, abandoned it in Katherine. Or even gone as far as Alice or Darwin before it was missed. I could have dumped it somewhere in the city. Cities are much better places than the wide open spaces to hide things. Perhaps I could take one of the vans.

‘For Christ’s sake don’t do a runner,’ Spanner said. ‘Play it cool for a week or so. If anyone comes lookin’ for him, notices him missing, be suss if you’ve scarpered.’

Spanner wasn’t the mind-lazy slob that most people thought. You know, a lot of the people you meet outback are smart. They just look and talk rough and drink like they’re thirsty but underneath they are real decent and thoughtful and have a pretty good idea what is going on. I looked over to the canteen and wondered about the muster crew inside. I’d wait a week.

Early on in my first year, every week had been my final week, but now it really was. That was it. Palmenter had always had a good reason for me to stay a week longer. ‘Just see out this week and then

you can go,' he'd say. He could be friendly, like it would be a favour to him, and as I was owed all my backpay it felt impossible to say no. Or he'd promise a bonus, a swag extra if I saw out whatever it was that was urgent in the coming week. Always something. Later he was less friendly. Plus, he controlled the vans and the comings and goings. It had been impossible to leave without his blessing but now I had no reason not to go. I'd lie low and wait the week out.

'You hungry?' asked Spanner.

Food was the last thing on my mind. I shook my head.

'Good. We gotta bring all the vans up. I got six ready. Park 'em up here, ready, like it was meant to be. Got to fuel 'em up, have 'em ready.'

'Before the mustering crew's gone?'

'Have to. Be suss, not having Palmenter strutting around during the import, but if we look and act like it was planned all along we might get away with it.' He signalled towards the canteen. 'They'll never notice anyhow. They've finished muster now, canteen'll be wet, they'll be pissed in no time. If we don't get the vans up now, first chopper'll be in the morning while we're still doing it. Tonight we'll have to be doing the licences and transfers, draw up maps for them. In the morning, driving lessons and then we send 'em different ways so's they don't end up in a convoy.'

He seemed pleased with that for some reason.

'Like in the old days,' he said. 'We used to bring in a few, sell the van to 'em. Tell 'em to drive to Sydney, or Melbourne. Not so many then. Five or six at a time, just one chopper load, maybe two. Once or twice a year. Not this many, not like now. Gave 'em a chance. At least they had a chance.'

I looked at him. I wanted to thank him for his help, for standing by me, because, after all, I was the one in trouble and if he hadn't helped there was no way I would have got away with it. But I didn't. I could say I thought carefully about it and that there was a reason I didn't say thank you. But really, you just don't say thank you to a bloke.

Like I say, it takes a while to get to know these outback blokes and Spanner was one of the best. Maybe he was on the run from the grey side of the law, but that didn't make him a ratbag. Plenty of law-abiding ratbags around the place. As we fuelled up and loaded the

kit and then shifted the vans from the shed to the car park I had time to think about Spanner and how not only was he a great mechanic but he was also a thinker. Once, I had suggested he write down his thoughts. He had laughed.

'I told you, I don't do paperwork.'

It was one of those long slow afternoons when the sunshine seems golden and the whole world is so at peace that the hours go on for longer. The air was sweet with the smell of spinifex in flower. We were at the gene pool, the collection of things piled behind Spanner's shed. It was mostly cars and vans and parts of them, but there was also furniture, bits of wood, old kitchen equipment, anything that Spanner deemed too useful to throw out but that he had no current use for. Everything else went to the pit.

Anyway, on this afternoon we were trying to unbolt some bench seats to put in the back of the 4WD work unit, Bitsy. While most of the vans outwardly looked to be what they were, a Toyota HiAce or a Mazda or a Ford, Bitsy was a bolted-together amalgam of all sorts. She had no bonnet and a roof from something too long so that it projected out behind and shaded the boot area. The boot lid was welded open with two metal bars that helped brace the roof, and wooden planks formed a platform extending back from the boot so it could carry a load. It looked a lot better than it sounds as I describe it to you, and it ran well. When we drove to the waterhole we would all pile on the back with beanbags and beers and today Spanner had decided it needed proper seats.

Spanner would often get me to help him salvage stuff from the gene pool. I discovered that all of the roadworthy vans were called Betsy and in Spanner's mind this was because by now, after years of transplant surgery, they were all of the same genetic makeup. The original Betsy was a Toyota Commuter bus at the centre of the heap; virtually nothing on it was transferable to the smaller campervans. When I pointed this out to him he laughed.

'It spreads out through all of them while they are waiting.' He waved his arms at the pile, mimicking the DNA flowing from the centre to the edge like he was smoothing out sand in the creekbed. Or mixing colour into paint.

‘She’s the grand old dame. Plus, don’t bet on it. I can make any bit fit onto anything. Lots of her making trips to and from Melbourne each month. Ain’t that so, honey?’ He looked up at the central wreck as if addressing a matriarch.

‘But why call all of them Betsy? Children have different names to their parents.’

‘It’s just easier that way. Plus, they are not children. They are ...?’

‘Clones?’

‘No, not that. Donors. It’s transplants. She lives on in them all.’

‘Like Frankenstein?’

‘Hey, don’t be rude. They can hear you, might go into a sulk, refuse to go for no other reason than they don’t like you. They have feelings you know.’

He was underneath and I was on the top, holding the bolthead as he tried to turn it. We had to speak between efforts and between his cajoling.

‘Come on ya bastard.’

‘So you call them all Betsy.’

‘Sometimes this is how I feel. That we’re all on some rubbish heap. Parked out here, someplace, waiting for the chance to be useful.’

I thought about that. I had only come out here for the year then intended to go back to Melbourne. Would that make me more useful? Certainly, stuck out on a marginal station helping to unbolt a seat from a van on top of a rubbish pile was not too useful. But what was useful?

‘What does it mean to be useful?’ I asked. He didn’t answer for a while.

‘Do your bit. Contribute to the good of humanity. Fucked if I know. If you knew, you could set off to do it.’ He made some banging noises and swore some more.

‘Sounds like that bolt doesn’t know how to be useful.’

‘Oh, he’s bein’ useful all right. Sometimes, resistance is put there to test you. Check ya resolve.’ Some gentler tapping sounds. ‘Might need to get the grinder onto this one.’ He made a long hard grunting noise. ‘Arrrgh, got you! See. They always give up as soon as they know you’re serious.’

‘You should write your thoughts down. Collected wisdom from the gene pool.’

‘Very funny.’

‘No, I’m serious. Write it down before you forget stuff.’

But he had laughed at the idea that anything he thought about would be part of his way of being useful to anyone.

‘Nah. I’m a mechanic.’

It took us three hours to get the six vans ready. By then it was late afternoon and I was hungry. In the canteen Cookie was angry, and he took it out on us. The stockhands sat at one of the tables talking and joking loudly and already there was a crowd of empty beer cans littered about. There was nothing Cookie could do about the stockhands so he ignored them. It was Spanner and I who copped it.

‘Lunch! Nearly dinnertime. You come back then. I’m not here now. Afternoons is my time.’

‘Why are you here then?’ I asked. We knew he wasn’t going to leave the canteen unattended.

‘C’mon. Let us go make a sandwich,’ Spanner said. ‘You can stay out here keep an eye on them.’ He pointed to the drunken muster crew who were racking up for pool and a long session.

Very clever, Spanner, I thought.

‘You tidy up,’ Cookie said. ‘Then I might. You’re not setting foot in my kitchen without me.’

Cookie didn’t like muster time. When it was only the few of us on-site he could smoke until he was off his face and still cook wonderful food but when the crews were all crowding around and drinking he had to remain sober. It was the only way to deal with the influx of hungry workers, who insulted him by insulting his food. They made a mess and raided his ‘herb’ garden and argued about the girls. But to Cookie, who daily made fresh bread and rolls, the highlight of civilisation was the sandwich. To him, anyone who knew how to load fresh ingredients in the correct manner onto a crusty roll was okay, and the chance to have us there with him while the crew drank themselves stupid in the dining hall was too good to pass.

‘Where’s Palmenter? I thought he was here. S’pose he wants one too?’

‘He’s gone.’

‘Took off.’

We spoke at the same time.

Unlikely. Palmenter would never have left without eating. Cookie raised his eyes.

‘Oh?’

‘New plan,’ I said before Spanner could speak. ‘Whole new way of doing business. We’re going back to the old way, the vans, small groups driving to the city. He had some urgent things to organise. He’s left me in charge. He’s on his way back to Sydney to run that end, needs to get some things set up before the imports start arriving.’

Cookie was looking at me. I could see he was trying to figure out whether to believe the rubbish I had just garbled. I kept talking.

‘Six vans, so you’ll need to make up six food packs. Like before, we’ll send them off a day apart, four or five in each van. Sorry about missing lunch, but as you know, when Palmenter is here, well, what can you do?’

Cookie continued to look but not speak. Spanner backed me up.

‘Go on, make us a sandwich, Cookie, I’ve got a hunger now. We’ve still got to write up all the paperwork, too. Be well into the night, just be thankful all you have to deal with is a few empty cans on the floor.’

‘Well, okay,’ he grumbled. If he didn’t agree he would have just said no, or asked for more details, but he said, ‘You want herbs on your sandwiches?’

‘No way!’

‘Gives you energy.’

‘Gives you wings,’ I said. Wouldn’t I have liked to fly away.

Spanner and I sat in the kitchen with Cookie while he made sandwiches. He heated us one of his beef pies too. I liked Cookie, although he and I had rarely had a chance to talk alone. Partly I guess that is the nature of running a station kitchen. Up early, sleep afternoons. As I watched him work I thought he seemed happy with what we had told him, and that perhaps, if he ever learned the truth, he would not be too quick to condemn me.

4

Spanner, Cookie and I had been here the longest. We were the old hands and knew a few things we preferred not to but it was Cookie who seemed best able to ignore it all.

A couple of years before the shooting, it was morning, just after breakfast. A muster and import had finished a few days ago and we were all relaxing. Arif and I were in the canteen, him talking at me and me pretending to listen. Charles and Simms were there too. Spanner was down in his shed and Palmenter was in the office. We heard the rumble of a car approaching on the gravel. That in itself was unusual and I stood to look out the window.

A police car drove up to the canteen building and stopped. No one got out and in each of the buildings curious eyes must have been watching for what would happen next. The police never came out here. For them to do so now, something must be serious.

‘Better hide the harvest,’ called Arif to Cookie who was chopping leaf in the kitchen. Arif was serious, but the joke was that an entire plantation thrived immediately out the back door.

‘Someone must have been caught,’ Cookie said as he came from the kitchen casually wiping his hands on his apron. He peered out the window.

Perhaps he was right: one of the previous imports had been picked up and then said something, given up the station and Palmenter and all of us. Unlikely, but I was wondering what this would mean for me, if I’d be charged, if we’d all be charged, with people smuggling.

Palmenter admitting anything? Ha! We’d all be for it. He’d find some way of pinning it on us and getting off scot-free. I wondered what the penalty for people smuggling was. A few years jail? And