

Extract

I

It's still warm when I leave the house and make my way across the clearing outside. I can feel the heat underneath me as I walk, trapped in the earth, rising up through the soles of my boots. When I reach the front gate, I stop for a moment, rest a hand on a post then turn and look back. I fix my eyes on the bedroom at the front of the house and imagine my brother asleep, the small wooden soldier I left on the pillow beside his head.

'I'm sorry, Eddie,' I whisper. 'It's the only way.'

Lingering only makes the moment harder, so I throw Eddie a smile, a silent goodbye and turn my back on everything I've ever known. Maybe it's the idea of leaving, the walking away, but I'm suddenly swamped by a feeling of freedom. I think about my mother and wonder if she felt it too. I wonder if she stopped at the gates and cried, if she bothered to say goodbye, or if her leaving was more about a beginning than an end. I try to hang on to her, the memory of her at least, but a dingo begins to howl and she drifts away and disappears into the night. As I walk, the road seems to open up in front of me and I settle into a rhythm, something comfortable I'll be able to maintain during the long days ahead. I go like that for two miles maybe three when I become aware of a strange squeaking sound. I know it's ridiculous, but I pull up and check my boots to see if there's anything stuck to them. There isn't, so I continue on.

A few yards along, the squeaking noise gets going again so I turn my head and look right, thinking it might be some animal in the bush. While my eyes search the scrub for movement, I remember something my father told me once, a story about this blackfella he met when he was working on a property up north. Couldn't see a thing, this black, on account of his milky eyes but he could ride a horse, drive fifty head of cattle from here to there without losing one. I suppose it was about a lot of things that story but mostly it was about listening, listening in the dark.

I'm no blackfella, I know, and maybe the listening took years of practice but I decide to give it a go. I close my eyes and step as gently as I can across the dirt. I'm a little unsteady at first, not even sure if I'm going straight, but I continue on regardless. I hold my head still and then open my ears to the night. Nothing happens at first, but after a few minutes the squeaking noise begins to grow louder and I realise it's coming from somewhere behind me. I open my eyes and tell myself I'll turn when I get to the tree, a few yards up by the side of the road. Four steps, three steps, two, then one. I stop walking and turn around. Not knowing what to expect, my eyes fall short of the mark, so I walk them down the road a little to the darkened figure some twenty yards back. It's Eddie. I can tell by the way he holds himself, his heavy lumbering walk. When he sees I've pulled up, he does the same and the billycart stops squeaking.

'Go home, Eddie,' I yell.

'No,' he says. 'I'm coming with you. Eddie and Bess and Big Boy Dan.'

'Jesus, you got Bess with you as well?'

Bess, our heeler, lifts her head and confirms her presence with a woof.

'There's no way you can come, Eddie. Go home.'

'No.'

'Eddie, I'm not discussing it, all right. The road is no place for a . . .' I gobble up the words and stop myself just in time.

'Turn yourself around and get home. I'll send for you when I get to where I'm going. You and Bess, I promise.'

Eddie's not budging. I think about racing back and dragging him home but there'd be no point in that. He'd be kicking and screaming and unless I tied him up, he'd come after me the minute I took off.

'I won't tell you again, Eddie. I've thought about this long and hard and it's the only way. Now get!'

Despite the harshness in my voice, Eddie lowers himself down and sits on the billycart next to Bess. Although I knew it would be like this the minute I saw him, his act of defiance fills me with rage. It robs me of my new-found freedom and suddenly I'm back in the house again as if I'd never left. Everything comes rushing back - Eddie and my father - and I feel the weight of them around my neck, find it hard to breathe. I suck in lung-fulls of air and go searching the ground for rocks. I find three decent-sized ones and hurl the first two down the road at Eddie. The second rock makes contact and I hear him scream.

'I'm not taking you,' I yell.

As I turn to walk off, I wrap my fingers around the third and largest rock. After I've given Eddie some time to get to his feet, I cock my arm, ready. One, two, three. I swivel on the spot and, after lining him up, I let go with everything I've got. 'Ow!'

'Get home, Eddie. I mean it.'

I set off along the road again and almost instantly the walking seems harder. We haven't even gone that far and although Eddie keeps some distance between us, I can feel his clumsy presence as if it's piggy-backing a ride.

'Do some songs, Dan,' he calls.

'No.'

'Mum's songs, Dan. Go on.'

'Shut your hole, Eddie. I'm not doing songs.'

'Do marching then. Left, right, left, right.'

'No.'

Oh the Grand Old Duke of York

He had ten thousand men,

He marched them up to the top of the hill,

And he marched them down again . . .

By the time I get to the Jenson's place, I realise I've got no choice.

I stop walking and stand there in the middle of the road, mad as hell. When I turn around I see that Eddie has closed the gap. He's ten yards away, testing my nerves with a pretty-please smile.

'Come on then,' I say. Eddie's not convinced.

'I said, come on. Jesus, you want to come or not?'

Still he doesn't budge.

'Suit yourself.'

A little way past the Jenson's place I hear Eddie's feet crunching the gravel behind me. The billycart's wheels begin to whir as he quickens his pace and soon he pulls up on my left and falls into stride beside me. As we walk in silence, he shuffles closer and I feel his fingers brush against mine. Weak as piss, I open up a little and he grabs hold of my hand.

'Where we going, Dan?'

'Never you mind, Eddie. We got to get some things clear first.'

'What things?'

'Soldier things.'

'We gonna be soldiers, Dan?'

'Yeah.'

'But we haven't got our guns.'

'We don't need guns.'

'We don't?'

'No.'

'But what if we have to shoot someone?'

'We won't.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm in charge, that's why. If you want to come along, I'm the general.'

Eddie looks far from pleased. He's used to being the general himself.

'Who's the general, Eddie?' I ask.

'You are, Dan.'

'And what does the general do?'

'Orders. The general does the orders.'

'Good. And what does a soldier do? '

'Listens and obeys.'

'Right.'

As we continue on, I become aware of Eddie's hand in mine and think of the unwanted attention it might bring along the way.

'And do soldiers hold hands?' I ask.

Eddie tightens his grip and looks up at me confused. 'They might.'

'No, Eddie, they don't. Soldiers don't hold hands.'

'But they might in the dark, if they were scared.'

'I don't think so.'

'But we could, Dan. We could hold hands. If we were scared, I mean.'

I look at my brother's face and see the panic in his eyes. 'All right, then. We can hold hands. But only at night, if we're scared.'

Eddie breaks into a smile, and as we approach the sleeping town of Gunnedah, he squeezes my hand tight.

'I wish we had guns,' he says.