

This Country



Our home was an old stockman's quarters with thin plywood walls and a tin roof full of holes. The house creaked and cracked, expanded and contracted, in the dust and heat of the day, in the dust and cold of the evening. That dust got into your eyes, ears, and up your nose and made the shower run red.

It was a Monday morning and Mum was yelling at me from the kitchen.

"Get your arse into gear, we're leaving soon, make sure you're presentable, and wash that mud off your bag."

I wiped my bag and cleaned my shoes a second time, but the problem was not my outfit. She was irritated because my older brother hadn't come home the night before. Jimmy was sixteen and went out till dawn, got charged with his mates, and had sex with girls. At least that's what he told me.

I left my bedroom and found Mum standing by the sink, her dark brown eyes watching me. She wore her cotton cleaning uniform, whiter than white against her brown skin slick in the light from the kitchen window. One bony hand was at her hip and the other stretched out holding a peanut butter sandwich for my lunch.

"Tuck in your shirt," she said.

The sandwich went into my bag and I heard the distinct blurring of a motocross bike in the distance.

"There's someone coming," I said.

She was already at the window.

"Who's that," her voice now tight and anxious. "Who's got a motorbike?"

“No one,” would have been the correct answer, but then, as I looked over her shoulder, the rider turned into our driveway, opening the throttle and leaving a plume of red dust drifting over the rock-hard paddocks.

“Who is it?” she asked.

We made our way onto the veranda and my mother smoothed out her uniform as if to be presentable to the visitor whose identity was hidden by a full-face helmet.

The motor died and the rider removed his helmet, and there he was, Jimmy, with a big white smile in his handsome black face. I noted the long case slung across his shoulder.

“What’s this?” she said, grabbing at the case as he passed her.

“Just drugs, Mum,” said Jimmy, and I wondered why she didn’t ask about the bike. Jimmy didn’t have a bike. He didn’t even have a driving license.

“You come back here.”

Jimmy slipped past her and I was right behind him.

“Oliver, you stay with me.”

I ran through the house and into Jimmy’s room with the girls and dirt bike posters on the walls. Jimmy’s window was open from where he had escaped the night before. Dust had entered, layering the bed and shelves. He threw the case onto the bed and opened it.

“What do you think of that?”

It was a .22 rifle. Guns were expensive and no one in my family had one, and if they did, it certainly wouldn’t be so new and polished. I was struck by a pinpoint of reflected light from its barrel. It felt like staring into the sun.

Mum’s footsteps shook the house from the living room.

“Shepherd’s creek after school,” said Jimmy, before he closed the case and put it in his closet.

“What Shepherd’s Creek?” said Mum, entering.

“Just going fishing,” said Jimmy.

The joke was: Shepherd’s Creek was dry. The message was: meet Jimmy after school.

“You’re a cheeky bugger; I’ll give you Shepherd’s Creek,” she said, then to me, “We’re late.”

We drove past flat red land stretching to the horizon on either side of the road. Our town, Scarlet, had been in drought for a good couple of years and every week I saw more chalky bones along the fence line. Mum was mostly quiet as the car hummed along, but I knew she had Jimmy on her mind.

“What’s he been up to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Whose bike was that?”

“He must have borrowed it.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I reckon.”

She took one hand off the steering wheel and ruffled my hair. “You’re a silly bugger, Oliver. But I love you anyway.”

Jimmy used to come with us and would doze on the way, his thin frame, with odd cuts and grazes, laying across the backseat. He’d dropped out at the end of the previous year after grade ten.

Mum sped past the barren earth and slowed once we got to Wasp Bridge with its big sign: Scarlet: Beef Capital of the World. We continued past the butchers, the grocers, the Chinese joint, the fish and chip joint, and town hall. Mum checked her speed when we saw a couple of coppers at the servo. The portly white one was standing tall with one hand resting on his pistol. The other was a young-looking blackfella bent over helping an old man with a bag of ice.

“You have a good day, my boy,” she said, as we pulled up outside of school.

I told her I’d make my own way home that arvo and jumped out as quickly as I could. “You come back here and tell me what you’re up to.”

I escaped her custody and was already running. I passed beneath the big white cross and arches of St Peters Public School and then there was nowhere to go but class.

Students huddled in groups chattering about the weekend just gone. I sat behind my desk and idly scanned the posters on the walls—unchanged since my first day of school years before. The periodic table, Einstein, Uluru (although “Ayers Rock” was printed under the large red monolith), sheep, cattle, and other rural images of people working, but the most conspicuous artefact in the room, the one that took centre stage, was a big cross above the board with Jesus attached, his head bowed to the right and looking gloomy. My first class was History, and Mrs Robinson wrote “1788” in white chalk on the blackboard. It would be a long day, I thought. I was eager to get another glimpse of the sun.

I ran out of school and down Cook Street past all the shops. I took a left at Wasp Bridge and away from roads and sidewalks. My footfalls over the dirt, rock, and sand of the creek bank mixed with the cacophony of sounds. Stray dogs barked, magpies sang, and kookaburras cackled to one another. I breathed in the afternoon, when cold slowly seeps over the land and the world feels fresh for a few precious hours before the dark of night.

Like I said, Shepherd’s Creek hadn’t run for what seemed like forever. When it did flow you could swim, but I didn’t go to the spot. I was meeting Jimmy. It was where the older kids partied, lost their virginity, and shot guns. They made a game of shooting cans, other trash they could find, large rocks, or they would strip bark off the old gums lining the banks and carve crosshairs into the trunks. I passed piles of rubbish and targets before reaching Jimmy.

He sat alone on a log with the .22 across his lap. A cigarette dangled from his mouth and a thin line of smoke trailed over the trees and lantana. His new bike was nearby. The fuel tank pinged as the engine cooled.

“Where did you get the bike?” I asked.

“I have my ways,” he said, and stamped out the smoke in the dirt. “I’ll show you how to shoot. You’re old enough now.”

Shooting a gun was a rite of passage for most of the kids in Scarlet. I was the only twelve (almost thirteen) year old I knew, the only bloke in my grade eight class, who hadn’t done it. I felt myself smile. Jimmy rose and nodded.

“Right, then,” he said.

We walked into the shade of a stringybark.

“See those beer cans?”

There were five of them neatly lined up and shimmering in the afternoon light.

“Five cans, five rounds. Off you go.”

He passed me the rifle. I was surprised at how light it was. I ran my other hand over the grainy butt and then along the smooth barrel. I pondered how such a thing could do so much damage.

“Breathe in. Squeeze the trigger. Don’t pull it,” he said.

I raised the gun to my shoulder and lined up the sights like he showed me.

“Get on with it.”

There was a breeze and birdsong drifting, but at the same time everything felt very still. I was careful to squeeze the trigger. The shot rang out lightly, like a cracking branch. Birds fluttered over the trees. When I opened my eyes, I saw the beer cans had not moved.

“Try again, mate.”

I did, four more times.

“Give it here.” My brother snatched the rifle off me, refilled the magazine, and gave it back. “This time try opening your eyes.”

I lined up again and forced myself to watch the target.

Another crack.

“Not a total zero,” said Jimmy.

We heard hissing. Soft at first then louder. Jimmy shook his head. He pointed with his dusty boot, and there, below the beer cans, in the shadow of a patch of wild lantana, was the world's unluckiest gonna.

I hurried over, my feet digging into sand and my heart beating too fast. I stood over the goanna. I had shot it right in its meaty flank. It hissed and hissed all terrified. Blood flowed down its scales and dripped onto the sandy ground of the parched creek bank. Its forked tongue flicked the dry air in distress. It was dying and there was little I could do. As things worsened it began to produce this dreadful throaty warble that entered deep into my chest and made my knees clack. I would later learn that this was a rare sound for a goanna to make, but I figure he needed me to hear those dying words.

Jimmy ambled over and looked down at the mess I'd made.

"Put it out of its misery," he said.

I was too terrified and stunned. I tried to hand the gun to Jimmy, but he forced it back towards me.

"Clean up your own mess."

Mum had told me that all living things had knowledge and were connected, that we were of the land just like everything else. I stood over the goanna with the gun raised. I closed my eyes again and tensed, but I couldn't. I just couldn't kill the thing. So there the goanna lay in pain, telling its secrets.

"Kill it, kill it, put out of its misery," Jimmy said, taunting me.

I just stood there with my head down staring at it.

"You're bloody useless, you are," he said, and ripped the rifle off me.

He pushed me away.

The gun popped twice.

The language stopped.

I stood for a few moments all jittery. Jimmy gave it a poke with the rifle to see if there was any life left.

"We need to bury it," I said.

"Do you?" he said. "Jesus."

Jimmy walked back to the bike and lit a cigarette. I found a stick and scratched away in the blood and sand making a shallow grave. I whispered a prayer I'd learned at school: "May you rest in the arms of the Lord who formed you from the dust of the earth."

"You right to get home?" Jimmy called over.

"No."

"All right, hurry up." He patted the bike seat behind him and spat on the ground. "I've got some business to take care of."

Jimmy wasn't around much, but he looked after me in his way. He taught me footy, and when Scotty Pearson called me a coon it was Jimmy who did a number on him.

As the engine fired and crackled off the creek bed, I jumped on behind and placed my hands on my brother's shoulders and we rode towards home.

Mrs Taylor had thick white legs and tiny scratchy hands with which she took a stick of chalk and wrote down the themes and character lists for *Lord of the Flies* on the board. Her blond hair bobbed up and down as she wrote. She started her classes with a "Hail Mary" or an "Our Father" and you had better recite them loud, clear, and correctly. She had rapped the cane over my hands a few times for speaking out of turn, and I didn't like her much, but she also taught a few of my cousins to read at the Gum Nut Centre on weekends so she wasn't all bad.

Jesus watched her from his cross above the board and I noticed the red drops on his hands and head.

I flipped up the tray of my desk and grabbed the compass with its sharp pointy end and started to write my name backwards. I carved as carefully as possible and loved the feel and sound of the little fibrous wood grains ripping apart. I wiped the desktop over with the bottom of my untucked shirt. Revilo Reklaw, it read, right next to my brother's name, also spelled backwards, Ymmij Reklaw.

I opened my ratty copy of *Lord of the Flies* and saw one of Jimmy's personal annotations: *Oliver, this book sucks. Piggy needs to grow a pair. And Mr Cliff reminds me of Jack. Wouldn't take much for that bloke to turn feral, I reckon.*

I liked the notes from Jimmy even if I got in trouble for laughing when I came across one. What I didn't like were the ill-fitting hand-me-down uniforms with grease stains and holes, or the pain of my dead arm from a couple of sharp jabs he'd administered that morning while we mucked around boxing after breakfast.

The door knocked. It was the principal, Mr Cliff. He was a rail-thin man with sideburns and dark blue eyes. His face was sombre, and he didn't take front and centre and address the class with his energetic "Hello, how are we all?" In fact, he didn't enter the room at all; rather, he waved to Mrs Taylor and she scuttled out. This was strange, and I quickly closed my book with Jimmy's note and watched the door with the rest of the class. Mr Cliff was looking very serious, talking quickly but softly, and scratching his chin every so often, and Mrs Taylor crinkled her nose, nodded a lot, and fiddled with the cross around her neck.

Everyone turned to face the front as they entered. Without a word, Mr Cliff went to the back of the class and unlocked the cabinet that held the TV and DVD unit and the *National Geographic* magazines. A bad wheel rattled as he pushed the TV to the front of the room.

"You'll watch a documentary for a while. No funny business, please," said Mrs Taylor.

A video about bush tucker started. Mr Cliff and Mrs Taylor came and towered over my desk. I hid the fresh carving with one hand and held the book shut with the other.

"We'd like to have a chat, Oliver. To my office," said Mr Cliff, and he picked my book off the table and passed me my bag.

Mr Cliff was into big-wave surfing and visualisation. He believed that visualisation was best achieved in the clarity of silence, so almost every inch of the walls and roof of his office was lined with egg cartons. While this gave his office a strange eerie quietness and look, it wasn't dull. He had tacked up posters of professional surfboarders riding some of the world's biggest breaks. Australia, Hawaii, Samoa, Venezuela, and France. All the waters were a different shade of blue.

The door shut and I felt pressure in my ears. They sat across the desk both looking pale and clammy.

"Oliver, it's terribly hard for me to say this, and we don't have all the information, but your mother just rang the school," said Mrs Taylor, before she paused.

Mr Cliff tapped my book.

"What did Mum want?"

They looked at each other.

In that moment before one of them spoke, my mouth went dry, my hands gripped the wooden chair, my heel tapped the brown carpet, sweat pooled on the crease of my lip, the clock ticked, the fan rotated, and the wind, lifting all the brown and red dust, beat against the window.

"Jimmy," I said.

"I'm afraid...I'm afraid there has been an accident," Mrs Taylor said.

I didn't reply. I looked at the posters and noticed how small the surfers were on the face of those big waves.

"I'll be taking you to your mother at the hospital," said Mrs Taylor.

When I got up to leave, Mr Cliff patted me on the shoulder and handed back my book.

This is how the story went: Jimmy had stolen the bike and the .22 rifle from the shed of a station owner near Maroon. He took the bike to a makeshift motocross track that the locals had knocked up in the bush and had a party with his mates. A friend of the bike owner happened to see them at play. He reported back to the owner who drove his ute to the track to retrieve his property. Jimmy fled and the owner gave chase. As the owner closed within inches, Jimmy breached the curb in an attempt to go off road and lost control. Jimmy flew off the bike and bashed his head on the hard ground. The owner called the authorities. Jimmy was rushed to the Maroon General Hospital. Mum was called. Mum had a few moments with Jimmy before he passed from head trauma. Me and Mrs Taylor didn't make it in time.

I met Mum at the hospital and we left soon after. I didn't get to see him. It wasn't until we saw the white bones, lit by the moon, flashing along the fence line on the road toward home that Mum told me what happened. She spoke with her eyes fixed ahead, her voice flat as the earth around us. My arm was still sore from Jimmy's punch that morning.

That evening when I knew Mum was asleep, I went to the telly and saw a report about Jimmy. It was a white report. It was clear to them, to all their viewers, that the white man was the victim of a vicious crime: theft.

I approached the open casket and saw my brother. His eyes were closed. He was pale and his wavy hair looked stiff. I couldn't stand to see him. If this was really Jimmy, then death didn't suit him at all. I wanted to punch him in the arm, get him back for the bruise on mine. I wanted to shoot guns with him and brawl. I wanted him to show me how to ride and talk to girls. To be tough like he was. But he would have none of it. He just lay there with his eyes shut and his hands limp. I searched for dirt under Jimmy's fingers, nothing. I couldn't stand to see him, wearing the one suit we had in the house that used to be my father's, the black one with the white shirt and the red tie. He would never wear that stuff. No, it wasn't Jimmy.

Outside the funeral home, there was a protest about police inaction. Vehicular homicide is a crime. Inside was a mix of sadness and anger and Aunty Susan played church songs on the piano near the casket. I looked around for Mum. I found my uncle John instead, his long thick frame hunched over a plastic table, his glasses fogged by the heat of the drink in his strong hand.

"You seen Mum?" I asked.

He hadn't.

I sat down up the back, on a white plastic chair. I scanned the room for Mum. I bit my hand. I scanned the room for Mum again. Then Aunty Susan was beside me.

"Hey, my little nephew."

"You seen Mum?" I asked.

She rubbed my shoulders lightly.

"Have you?"

"How about you come home with your Aunty and Uncle."

"Where is she?"

"You'll see her soon enough. You can watch whatever you want on the telly."

All that was on the tele was Jimmy's face.

"I need to talk to Mum."

"Come on, mate, you'd be better off with us," said Uncle John. He loomed over me with a large white smile.

"No," I said.

Uncle's smile was gone when he pulled me off the seat. He grabbed my shoulders and looked into my eyes.

"Quit it," I said. "Leave me alone." I never talked to him that way, not ever. If he had been any smaller I would have dropped him. I swear I would. But he had me, his hands around my arms like cuffs, walking me through the crowd outside. It was like I had been arrested.

I was held in custody at Uncle John and Aunty Susan's house. It was a one floor brick place with two bedrooms and a garden with frangipanis I used to climb. I liked going there in the past. It was a nice change from the dust and cattle-trodden land around our place. Aunty had a craft room with a sewing machine and knitting bits on a desk and in the corners were Uncle's books from floor to ceiling. More books than the school library. You could smell them.

I liked it, as I said, but this was where they put me on that soft and lumpy bed.

"Make yourself comfortable, little nephew," said Aunty. She did not ask permission to look in my bag. She took out my clothes and put them into some bookshelf space she had just made.

"When will I see Mum?"

"Your Mum just needs a little time," she said, and I thought that she had no right to lie to me. My brother was murdered and now they had taken Mum from me.

"When can I go home?" I asked.

Disregarding my question, she closed my case and put it under the bed.

"Alright then. I'll give you a moment to settle in. Uncle will clear the table for your school work."

We both looked at the table where the sewing machine sat. There was a framed photo of my family. Me as a baby in Mum's arms as she smiled, Jimmy at three wrapped around her leg, Dad with a slight grin and his arm around Mum's waist.

"Oh," said Aunty, because my brother was dead, freshly buried next to Dad at Headly Cemetery. She smiled a sad smile before walking out of the room and she took the picture with her.

A week went by and my days were filled with school. Every afternoon I attempted to go back to that spot at Shepherd's Creek, but it was occupied by white teens drinking and smoking and shooting cans and trees. Every night I tossed and turned and when I managed to sleep I dreamt of Jimmy's face all pale and lifeless in the casket. I just wanted to be home with Mum, but she hadn't even called.

I lay down on the brown rug in the living room and stoked the fire with a metal rod. Shadows moved over the green wallpaper and I saw Jimmy's face in the dancing darkness. Laughter came from the main bedroom as my Aunty watched TV. Uncle sat behind me in his reclining chair and read with his reading glasses at the point of his nose. He made grunting sounds when he got to an interesting part.

"Stop playing with that fire and do your work," he said.

During a break I stretched and fingered spines on the bookshelf. That's when I saw the old photo of a man who looked the splitting image of Jimmy. I asked Uncle who it was.

"That's your grandfather, Poppy Norman."

"Why is he wearing boxing clothes?"

"Doesn't your mother tell you anything? I suppose she was only a bub when he passed. You would have liked him."

"He looks like Jimmy," I said.

"He does."

"Can you tell me about him?"

He put his book down and I grabbed a chair from the kitchen and sat next to him.

"Your Poppy worked on the railways when I was born," Uncle said, and blew dust off the glass frame of the photo. "He ended up touring rural settlements with a troupe of fighters. They would go from town to town, erect a large tent in the showgrounds, and make money from entrance fees, booze, and bets. They would box each other and locals. You feed them cheap grog, then the locals want to fight. He was often picked out. The white drovers couldn't stand a blackfella beating them. He got real good that way. Before long nobody could beat him."

The photo of Poppy was framed against a boxing ring in a large tent. I noticed straw on the ground and there were bails for punters to sit and watch the fights. He wore boxing trunks and his bare chest and arms had the width of toil. His hands were low and his chin was high in that old-timer stance. He looked in his mid-twenties. His nose was flat like mine and Jimmy's, but he was darker than us. If you looked close enough you could see a slight curl to the left side of his mouth. He had wavy hair the colour of night, just like ours.

"He was killed. One evening they were packing up the ring and tents and he was accused of bedding a white woman."

I wanted to know more.

"Maybe when you're older," he said, and patted my shoulder.

In the photo Poppy's eyes looked off in the distance.

"He was a traveller, always moving."

The gloves on his hands were grey in the photo, but I imagined them a dull red with dried blood in the little cracks. Just as I imagined the sweat, smoke, beer, and yells as he battled in the ring.

I put the photo back and Aunty yelled out from the bedroom.

"Look here, look here."

My cousin Albert was on the news. He was with a mob of people protesting outside the Maroon police station. Aboriginal flags were waving and there were placards with the face of Jimmy on them with words like "Justice for Jimmy" underneath. I looked around the screen for Mum.

A week later I came back from school and Mum was sitting in the kitchen with Uncle and Aunty. Her bony fingers rattled a cup of tea on the saucer. She wore her best dress, the one with the peonies. Her face was drawn and weary. She hugged me and kissed my head.

“You ready to go home, my boy?”

In February, six months later, I started grade nine. I began the day in Mrs Mark’s math class. I opened the algebra textbook and found one of Jimmy’s notes towards the end of the first chapter: *Welcome to hell. You’d be smoking by now. If you’re hard up there is a spot near the shed just past the footy field. Duck down and nobody can see you. You’ll know it when you’re looking at it.*

I liked the notes more when Jimmy was alive. I’d tell him I’d found one and we’d have a laugh. Now I got a chill whenever I came across one. It didn’t stop me from ripping out the pages when I found them, though. I put them in a folder so they were all in the same spot. When I was sore he was gone, I’d read them in his bedroom and it felt like he was there.

Jimmy was wrong about the smoking, I hadn’t started, but I looked out the window across the oval and thought it might be nice to see where he used to run off to. The sun beat down and the field was dry and cracked like the veins up Aunty Susan’s legs. The wind was blowing hard and dust whipped up over the pitch and formed mini tornadoes. I wouldn’t be going out in that.

Mum picked me up from school that arvo after she finished work. The white of her uniform had a brown tinge to it from the dust. The wind hadn’t settled one bit and stung like nettles over my face and hands as I ran under the shadow of the cross to the car. We drove with the sun just starting to fall. Once we cleared Wasp Bridge the landscape opened up. Dust and dirt blew over the car and we couldn’t see more than a couple of meters in front of us. Mum was in a rush to get dinner started, so much so, she accidentally veered off the road a couple of times and gravel pinged the undercarriage. She was peeking over the steering wheel and put on the wipers thinking that might help. She turned off the radio to concentrate harder on the road and I could hear the wind lashing.

Out of nowhere something large crashed into the bumper, smashed the windscreen, and flew over the back of the car and onto the bitumen. Mum slammed the brakes and my neck and chest stung something fierce from the seatbelt. Mum cursed and we both crawled out. Our old Toyota was all bent out of shape and the front was steaming.

“You alright?” Mum asked.

I nodded.

“Let’s try and lift the bonnet,” she said.

We tried with all our might to lift the mangled metal but couldn’t. I wished that Jimmy was there and almost said it but held my tongue.

“We should call the police,” I said, because that’s what you did when something like that happened.

Mum picked up her phone but didn’t call. Instead she knelt down on the dirt and cursed because we didn’t have insurance.

“How the hell am I am going to get to work?” she said.

“We need to call the police.”

Mum just sat there with the dust like needles sticking us.

“I’m gonna see what hit us,” I said.

It looked like someone had thrown a sack on the ground that had split open. The big red kangaroo’s eyes had rolled back and its tongue was touching the bitumen. I looked to see if Mum was watching before I called the emergency line.

When the cops rocked up we were sitting in the car out of the gale. Mum’s face was long and her mouth was tight.

“You’re a silly bugger, Oliver,” she said sternly, not knowing I’d called them.

The fat white one with grey temples and a bald spot put his head through the window. He looked us over, checking for injuries before he spoke.

“Anyone hurt?”

Mum was unresponsive.

“We’re fine, just shook up,” I said.

“Jeez, you bloody done a number on that roo,” he said, and laughed. The fold under his chin wobbled.

Mum continued to be silent.

“Is she in shock?” he asked me. I didn’t reply. “Listen, lady, are you alright? The car’s stuffed, let’s get you two to the hospital. Can you move? Do you need an ambulance?”

Mum didn’t reply. She just stared out into the dust.

He waved over to the other cop. A brown face appeared in the window with dark eyes and day-old stubble. He looked just like Poppy Norman in the thickness of his arms and frame and he smiled big just like I imagined Poppy would if I’d met him. His blue uniform was being battered in the wind, but the badge was shiny and he had a baton on one side of his belt and the black pistol on the other. I felt like asking him then and there how I could become a cop too. His smile put me at ease, but Mum clenched and unclenched her hands.

“You okay?” he asked.

Mum looked at him.

“We don’t need any help,” she said.

The cop looked at the front of the car.

“Are you hurt?”

Mum shook her head.

“How about you, young fella?” He looked at me with concerned eyes.

“I’m fine,” I said, and then to Mum, “we should go to the hospital.”

“No hospitals. No hospitals.”

The man nodded and I told him we lived not far up the road.

“Let’s get you there then.”

Mum looked at him and said softly, “We don’t need any help. We can walk home.”

He scratched his chin. “We’re just trying to help. What’s your name?”

Mum didn’t give it.

“It’s Rose,” I said.

“Rose, how about I open the door and we can take you home?”

Mum forced the door closed as he tried to open it. I thought Mum was being pretty rude and got out and went over to the cop car, got in, and waited. The man continued to plead with Mum and eventually she came over to me. I put my hand over Mum’s as we pushed toward home.

We drove up our long driveway and saw the white house through the dust. Mum jumped out of the car before anyone said anything.

“Some thanks,” the white fat one said.

The blackfella looked back at me, “Will you and your Mum be alright?”

I said we would and blurted out if they wanted a drink.

“Go a cup of tea if there’s any,” said the white fat one.

Mum was nowhere to be seen and I assumed she was in her room. I put the kettle on. The house creaked in the wind and a loose flap of corrugated iron twisted and rapped at the house. I had to raise my voice when I asked if they wanted sugar.

“Milk as well, and do you have any biscuits?” the white fat one asked from the living room.

He was sitting in Mum’s chair and I was glad she wasn’t there to see it. I jumped up on the kitchen bench and stood up to grab Mum’s special stash of biscuits in the metal tin on top of the pantry.

“Cosy place you got here, young fella,” said the blackfella cop.

“Needs a new roof,” said the white fat one. He fingered the table, bringing up dust. They both laughed at that.

I brought in the tea and biscuits and asked if they wanted the telly. They were happy enough to chat.

I asked how I might become a copper and the fat one got excited and started talking.

I watched the blackfella look at the bookshelf with the one small set of encyclopedias and a Collins Dictionary, then to the photos on the mantle with the yellow brown floral wallpaper behind it. He got up off his chair to take a closer look.

The white fat one told me to get in touch when I was older and to “Keep that nose clean in the meantime.”

I said I would and asked when you were allowed to have a gun.

He didn't reply. He was looking behind me. I saw Mum in the reflection of the wobbling window before I turned around. Mum filled the hallway with her ruffled black hair loose to her shoulders. Her legs and bare feet like vines under her dirtied uniform. Her hands by her side very still.

“Your son here invited us in for a cuppa, hope you don't mind,” said the white fat one.

She looked at the man in her seat and the tin of her secret stash on the table.

“Oliver, go to your room,” she said.

I told her I didn't want to, which got a laugh from the coppers.

“Oliver, go to your room, now,” she said, softly, which was scarier than her raised voice.

“You better do as your mother says,” said the white fat one.

“Don't you talk to my boy,” Mum said.

“No harm done. He wants to join the force, giving him some advice.”

Mum stared at his pale round face. “Get out,” she yelled, and not at me.

The blackfella, still standing by the pictures, looked shocked.

The fat white one said, “We mean no harm.”

“Get out, get out,” Mum repeated.

“Some thanks we get,” said the fat white one, but the blackfella took his arm.

“It's time to go,” he said.

“Now wait just a minute,” the white fat one replied.

“Let's go, Don. Let's leave them in peace.”

With a huff the white fat one walked out the door. The blackfella turned before leaving. “I'm sorry,” he said, and nodded.

Mum grabbed their cups, tipped them out, and put them in the bin. I asked if she was alright, and she stared at me like something had broken.

She walked into Jimmy's room and came out with my folder.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

I saw the lights from the cop car driving away before Mum opened the window. Wind and dust flew into the room and swirled about us. She grabbed a handful of sheets. She stood by the open window and looked down at the jagged pages with Jimmy's scribbles on them and said, “This country.”

She crunched the paper. Her hands white.

“Stop, Mum. Those are my papers from Jimmy.”

She began to throw them out the window in handfuls. Some flew back in and spiralled the room. She took page after page and flung them out into the driving darkness.

“Stop, Mum. Those are my papers from Jimmy,” I yelled, but it did no good.

I jumped about trying to catch the loose sheets.

She dropped the folder and fell in a heap on her chair with its extra pillow. I shut the window and the swirling stopped. I picked up the folder and went about gathering the papers in the deep silence after the brash wind.

I knew Mum was angry because I let the coppers into our home. I knew she was still sad and angry about Jimmy. But I wanted to protect her. I wanted to become a cop so I could look after her.

I sat down by her and held the folder in my hands. I watched Mum's face. She didn't cry, I hadn't seen her cry once since Jimmy's death, but I was sad to watch my mother die on the inside like everything eventually does. I placed the folder on her lap and said she could have them.

When it was all over and Mum had gone to her room, I stayed up in bed and thought of Jimmy. I balled my right fist tightly and punched my left arm over and over as hard as I could until I was certain it would leave a bruise. With my arm asleep, I lay back in bed. Moonlight streaked into the room, catching dust falling from the whistling roof.

Graham Akhurst is an Aboriginal writer from the Kokomini of Northern Queensland. His fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction have been published widely in Australia and America. He is the recipient of the W.G. Walker Fulbright Scholarship, the Nomad Two Worlds Foundation Indigenous Arts Scholarship, and an Australia Council of the Arts Professional Development grant for the completion of his MFA in fiction from Hunter College. His debut YA novel *Borderland* will be released in 2022 with Hachette Australia. He currently lives in New York.