

THE QUARRY

The Great Divide

By Antony Pincombe

The events of my childhood in Broken Hill shine like a beacon, yet events that happened only yesterday fade and blur. I am aging. The past seems haphazard, a passing haze of scratchy moving pictures. But the memories of my early childhood are as vivid as a Van Gogh. One day in particular stands out. My recollection is like a scene from a movie, it is 1966...

I was walking toward Lee's house across the road from my own. A little button nose, followed by big brown eyes, a tangle of black curly hair, peek around the fence post. Dana Lee, small, brown skinned, with a mischievous grin, was peeking at me. She was spying, on me, Aiden Shanahan, the boy with a shock of blonde hair. I was six years old, Dana five. Her head poked out, then quickly ducked back. I knew she was there but we both loved the game. The moment arrived, Dana sprung, catching me in a hug. We both giggled, I grabbed Dana's hand and we walked into her yard.

I see Tara Lee, Dana's mother, a tall slender woman with long dark hair, tending Dana's little brother, Robert. He puts rocks in his mouth. I want to ask Mrs Lee if I can take Dana for her first day of school. I am nervously chewing my golden fringe, almost stuttering as I ask the question. I shifted nervously from foot to foot, furiously searching Mrs Lee's face.

She frowned and looked at me.

'I don't know Aiden.'

'Please Mrs Lee, I can get the other kids to like her.'

A fist lands in my tummy and I double over. I look at Dana and she is glaring at me. Gosh girls can be funny sometimes.

'Cor Dana, what was that for?'

'Mind your manners Aidie.'

I also notice Mrs Lee's face. If she could have gone white she would've.

'What do you mean Aiden?'

'She ain't gonna know anybody. I can tell her who they are,' I say, my brow beetling.

I am nervously balling my fists. Mrs Lee purses her lips and looks me in the eye. Robert has discarded the rock for a wriggly worm.

'I'm sure you do Aiden. Don't you think it'd be a better if I took Dana on her first day? Not all the gubbas will like it.'

I scratch my head trying to understand, maybe I missed something here.

'Oh! You can come along too Mrs Lee,' I say eyes wide, my grin almost splitting my face.

'Please Mum! Aiden'll take care of me, please!' Dana's face is all screwed up.

Mrs Lee smiles and I feel we're winning the game. But then a dark look comes over her face and I see a shiver run down her body.

'Aiden, do you remember what happened with Ted Ford last week?'

I sit here on my porch, my mind meandering to the incident in question. Tara was tending Robert in the front yard, Dana and I were playing in the middle of Mercury St. I was laughing, pointing ball in hand at Robert, who was eating a beetle. Dana laughed too. I saw Ted Ford, a local from a few blocks away, swerve down the street. Ted was drunk. I could smell the alcohol fumes leeching from his body, the closer he got. My father used to smell like that every Friday night. Dana and I moved off the road behind Lee's fence. He stopped and looked at Tara Lee behind the fence, protectively hugging Robert to her breast. He glared at her with pure hatred in his bleary eyes; a grotesque expression consumed his face. 'Yer bloody boongs. Who asked yous to live here? I sure as hell didn't. Why don't yous black cunts get the fuck back to yer humpies where yous belong? Just fuck off!' I was so frightened that day. Dana said later, her father, Nick, had a word with Ted but people like him don't change.

I see myself a little boy cringing and looking forlornly in Tara's eyes, I was close to tears. Standing in front of Tara Lee almost in tears. Dana hugging me.

'It's alright Aidie, Mr Ford isn't here now.'

'I'm sorry Mrs Lee, me mum says Mr Ford's a nasty drunk, she don't like him.'

'Aiden not all gubbas are like your mum.'

My mother was special, all the neighbours loved her. Mum always said 'if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.'

As if the clouds had blown away leaving an azure sky, I watched as Tara Lee on bent knee smiled and ruffled Robert's head. She promised to talk to her husband Nick. He was an easy going bloke and he nearly always gave in to Dana and I. The look in Dana's eyes had the same glint, that must have been in mine. She was giggling and telling me how much she wanted us to go to school together. We had been inseparable before I went to school the year before. Dana hugged me. I pinched her cheek playfully. We ran off to play on the black bitumen of the wide road. There was little chance of being hit by a car unless Cowboy Jackson left the pub early. Cowboy Jackson, the Railwaytown drunk, drove an old black 1930's Ford. Very badly. So badly, he once managed to hit a tree in Mercury St on the opposite side of the road. Cowboy was doing what we called the 'snake slide'. This is where a car is driven in a swerving motion to the right and left across the road. We were always off the road by five o'clock when Cowboy left the pub. Rows of kids would line the street yelling encouragement to old Cowboy every evening, 'you go Mr Jackson', 'watch the tree Mr Jackson'. If he'd been black he would have been arrested.

Dana and I stand nervously in front of Nick Lee. He looks a bit like the British actor, Dirk Bogarde, a fact not lost on many of the neighbourhood girls.

'So you wanna take me daughter to school tomorrow Aidie?'

'Strewth, Nick ya know I do,' I say, eyes wide.

'Cheeky little beggar, it's Mr Lee to you,' I can see Nick smiling behind the hand.

'Sorry Nick, I mean Mr Lee.' I am fidgety, I don't get nervous like this playing in the footy grand final.

Nick Lee said 'yes', of course he did. Dana and I danced around like a pair of whirling dervishes. I remember Dana yelling, 'Yeh! Aidie yer takin' me to school,' we ran off into the road. At that moment my brother Gerry and our friend Bear emerged from my front gate. Gerry is four and Bear, who's real name was Ronny Tines, is the same age as me. Ronny got the nickname because he was a big solid kid with dark shaggy hair.

'Dana, here's Gerr and Bear,'

'Giddyay,'

'Giddyay Dana,' yell Bear and Gerry as they approach.

'You guys wanna play brandy, hidey or hopscotch?'

'I'm for brandy,' from Bear.

'Hidey,' from Gerry.

'Hopscotch,' from Dana.

'Crikey, we won't get ter play anything if you all wanna play different games.'

Suddenly a voice splits the summer haze.

'Yous a loser Shanahan, you and yer boong Piccyninny.' The voice is Teddy Ford's, Ted Ford's son, and he is accompanied by his best mate Johnny Butcher. Bear turns toward the two new arrivals, his face red, he has a furious look in his eyes. Ford and Butcher are just not bright enough get the picture. A primeval growl escapes Bear's mouth and suddenly the boys get the message and back away.

'S'ok Bear they're just idiots.'

'I know Aidie but they always pick on Dana and I don't like it.'

'Bear you're my hero,' Dana hugs Bear.

'Johnny Butcher and Teddy Ford, don't you think it's about time you got home for tea?'

Good old Mum. I don't know how many times she saved the day. The sun crept slowly down the horizon. Painting the sky pink and purple, the land red and black as the golden orb descended between the two. Tomorrow was a land far away, a dream-time phantom, a new dance for a new day.

I wake very early and raise Gerry from his comfy bed.

'Aw, Aidie can't I stop in?'

'Nup, gotta get used to it Gerr, you go to school next year ya know.'

'At's nex year Aidie, not now.'

I am chewing my fringe, all nervous energy and anticipation.

'Sure is Gerr, but I'm takin' Dana to school for her first day.'

'Cor really!' says Gerry rubbing his eyes.

'Yep. I gotta be on havior Gerr.'

'Mum says we gotta be on havour all time Aidie.'

'Yeah well, I ain't one of the saints Father Leo keeps on about Gerr.' Father Leo is the priest at St Marys Catholic Church, which we Shanahan's attend.

'Dunno about no sains Aidie,' says Gerry screwing up his face.

'S.A.I.N.T.S. Not sains.'

'How'd yer know that.'

'Father Leo, bloody hell, Gerr.'

'If yer don' stop swearin', mum won't let yer go ter school, Aidie.'

All of a sudden I am frightened, I can feel the colour draining from my face.

'Strike me Gerr, yer could be right. C'mon let's get goin'.'

We ran from the sleep-out to the kitchen where Bonnie Shanahan, our mum, is making

breakfast. Mum was a grey haired, small sparrow of a woman with hazel eyes. She always seem to know what we'd been up to. She looked up from the stove as we entered the kitchen and smiled, giving us both a hug and went back to the stove.

'Start of school today Aidie, I see you're ready to go.'

'Yeah mum. Have to get Dana and her mum soon.'

I see tears running down mum's cheeks and I ask her what's wrong.

'Nothing Aidie, I'm just proud of you son. There's time still Adie, not even eight yet. It's only a five minute walk after all.'

Mum is smiling while tending the sausages and eggs. I think 'aren't old people strange' but forget about it almost immediately.

'Yeah, but we wanna get there early so Dana can see the other kids,' I say eagerly.

'Fair enough Aidie. Sausage anyone.'

Mum always bought Hannigan's sausages, the best in Broken Hill.

'Yum!' Gerry and I both yell.

It was February in Broken Hill, as the sun rose high, heat shimmered on the black bitumen. Kids emerged from houses all along Mercury Street in school uniform. I walked over to Dana's house as she, her mum and Robert, emerge from the front door. Dana ran to meet me.

'Cor Dana, the school dress is real nice on yer.'

'Ta Aidie,' she beamed.

We started our journey to school in high spirits. The school was next to the church, one street over from ours, on Gypsum St. The school yard was bitumen hemmed in by native pepper pod trees. Kids streamed toward the school. Women dressed in white Nun's habits stood at the school gate. As we approached, several boys broke from a group near the pepper tree at the entrance of the school.

One of the boys, Pat Waters, was a sort of cousin. Pat was unofficial head kid at St Mary's school. Even though he was only in grade one, he was one of the biggest kids at St Marys, which went to grade three. Tara Lee stopped at the gate and talked to sister Mary Helena, a crow of a nun with a pinched mouth, hooked nose and sharp beady eyes. She might have looked like the wicked witch but she was really quite sweet.

'I hope Dana will be ok Sister.'

'Don't worry Tara. She'll be in Sister Mary Maximilian's class. She's a very gentle Nun. She'll make Dana welcome.'

'Thank You, Sister,' a small smile crossed Tara's worried face.

'Don't thank me, thank them.' The old nun was smiling as she pointed.

We were playing not far away and I heard everything Sister and Tara said. In that moment I was filled up like a big balloon with a fuzzy sort of feeling. They were both looking at us playing with a group of other kids. With a last wave Tara Lee turned and walked back along Gypsum St pushing the effusive Robert. I saw there were tears in her eyes and thought big people were weird. I looked at Dana and she was as happy as a sleepy lizard in the sun, I think she'd forgotten her mum already.

In my daydream I see Teddy Ford and Johnny Butcher approach the group of kids we are playing with. Butcher's father was a copper, renowned for beating up black fellas. He and Ford are in grade three, two grades above Pat and I.

'So yer brought yer picaninny ter school did yer Shanahan,' says Ford, the smaller boy, with an ugly sneer.

'What do yer want Teddy?'

'I'm gonna give you and yer picaninny a kickin','

Butcher, a big lad, lunged at Dana with an itchy powder pod, from a Pepper tree, in his hand. Itchy powder doesn't just itch, it burns and can leave nasty scars. He threw powder all over Dana. Immediately she started to itch and burn, her face reddened and the visible skin started to blister.

To her credit Dana just glared at him. But soon there were tears in her eyes.

'What did I ever do to you, Johnny?'

I was angry as hell but I wasn't the first to react. Pat quick as a flash turned Butcher around to face him and punched him in the mush. Butcher dropped on his bum, Pat removed an itchy powder pod from the tree and poured it down Butcher's back.

'Take that yer bugger, see how you like it,' said Pat.

Butcher started to scream and writhe on the ground. By this time I had Teddy Ford in a headlock wrestling on the ground. Teddy was a bully. As with most bullies, he was a coward and was already calling dibs. Sister Mary Helena saw the brawl and told us to knock it off. The result was a visit to Sister after class and a hot hand from a deadly cane. The bell sounded and children all over the playground moved toward the classrooms. Dana picked herself up, bearing her pain, she fronted Teddy Ford.

'Teddy, me mum says if yer say nasty things about people, it'll come back ta bite yer bum.' She nodded and walked off with Pat and I, leaving Teddy stunned.

'Yer sure told him good Dana,' said Pat

'Aidie my skins burnin',' said Dana with tears running down her cheeks.

I looked at Dana's skin and it had started to blister badly.

'We'd better hurry and wash the itchy powder off, Dana. Let's run.'

Dana gave a big nod of her curly head and we all ran toward class.

The suns beats unrelentingly down on the black asphalt, heat spirits play and cavort as moisture leaches from the earth. Memory clouds softly close around the events of a time far away. Sitting on my verandah my reverie is broken by my companion who asks me, 'you having a bet in the cup?'