

Chapter One

Perhaps I should start at the beginning.

Not the beginning, beginning. No one cares that far back. Just the beginning of this story.

But it's going to be hard to tell it right. The whole story, I mean. The whole story of that long year and a bit leading up to the millennium party, 2000, 'cause although not much happens in a pot-boiler kind of way, there's still a lot went on. For as my friend Zane would say, 'Sam, with young people, everything's a drama – even life!'

So you'll have to bear with me 'cause, well, I find it pretty scary getting things out. When I get closest to people, that's when I feel furthest away. You know just what can be said but, worse, how much *can't* be.

A writer's supposed to be good at expressing things, but I reckon writers are the funniest lot in the world, and they've got it worst when it comes to communication. They can't say how they feel except in stories. That's just it, you see. Stories, stories, stories. They don't write things straight out – they won't. It all has to be suggested or, at least, not everything said. But in the end they

communicate best, 'cause you remember what they say: the important bits stick.

So when I say writers don't talk straight, I mean it. They can't. Never get too close to one. They're hopeless. But I reckon writers can reveal a thing or two. In the most artsy-fartsy way in the world, of course, but when they get it right, it's true. And that's what I fear worst. That you can't ever just say something and someone will understand. You have to be understood. So I'm sorry if this takes time. It has to.

This story's about me mostly, 'cause it's through my eyes (can't be helped!) and I guess it's about ... well, it's about people and things that choke you up.

Okay, I'll shut up about that now.

Getting selected for District Cricket in Melbourne was how I got out of the country. That was my Superman, swooping me up before I got stuck on the ground for good. It got me off the farm and into the city. Cricket's about the only thing I showed promise in at school. In the city, the stars might not hang above you, but at least they're all around.

I got into Melbourne in early December 1998. The season had well and truly started, but some colt had shied from the game two months in and they needed a replacement. I had a week or so to get settled, and then I'd be into it.

First thing I did was get a place in inner-city Melbourne over Wally's Bar. Single room, shared amenities, which sucked. Tried to keep outdoors mostly and rarely went downstairs for a beer 'cause, well, you don't drink where you shit, right?

The first night was kind of lonesome. The shadows of the trams on the street below played noughts and crosses on my ceiling.

In the morning I made my way by about a million forms of transport to Balwyn Oval to try for my position in the batting order. The fellers were practising in the nets, with a tall muscly guy (who was obviously the coach) standing watching.

When I walked up, they all gave me the twice-over. This guy with a bit of a goatee and mullet eyed me up most. Turned out his nickname was Dizzy (not *the* Dizzy, but some wannabee). He was standing next to this other guy called Tubby, who had a bit of a paunch. (They fancied themselves a bit, these blokes).

When I put in my box, the celebrity duo smiled like I was going to need it. The coach had Dizzy bowl his quickie best at me. The ball wasn't five seconds out of his hand before it was outside the oval. Needless to say, Dizzy was pretty rubbed up, but I noticed Tubby had a bit of a smile. All ten people on all five adjoining pitches stopped their practice. They turned their heads from where the ball had landed to me.

After Tubby and the coach exchanged nods, the coach threw me a key. It had a number on it: six.

'Okay, Big Feller, you can open with Arny.' The coach nodded at a guy in the adjoining net. Through the wire veil, I saw the guy smiling at me. He had curly black hair and the nicest smile.

The coach called it a day and we all retired indoors. The clubhouse was a red-brick building, with benches, lockers, the odd poster, but not much else. I guess with so many teams using it, it wasn't worth the effort and risk of theft to outfit it beyond that.

At the lockers afterward, I found my spot. The locker door to the left of mine had 'Vice-captain' written on it. It swung closed, revealing Arny.

'We're neighbours,' he said and shook my hand.

It wasn't too firm a grip and it wasn't too limp. A shake so right it was almost secret. Next thing I knew, Tubby appeared. He owned the locker to my right. Boxed in.

'Hey, Sam!' said Arny, 'Have you met our captain Arnold?'

'Another Arny?' I asked.

'That's why they call *me* Tubby,' and Tubby gripped his stomach with a laugh. He retrieved his bag pretty quick then turned back to me, paunch stuck out.

'Man, that form you showed out there, that was the shit.'

I just about slugged him.

'It's okay, Sam,' said Arny, putting his hand on my back. 'Tubby doesn't mean it was *shit* shit but *the* shit.'

'Big fuckin' difference, eh Arns?' laughed Tubby as he poked Arny in the ribs.

Tubby was making for the door already, but he kept shouting to us over his shoulder.

'With you two opening, this team might win a few.'

Arny finally dropped his hand from my back. I couldn't remember a guy ever being so familiar before. Maybe things were different in the city and besides it was kind of nice – in a manly way.

I must say, I got really lonesome by the end of that first week. And I didn't have my first game till a week after that, on the Saturday. At least cricket practice would help fill in some of those hours. The pay wasn't too bad, so I wasn't going to be totally broke, but I didn't know what you did for kicks in the city.

On the farm, it was pretty obvious. One of my faves was building rock walkways across the creek. The test was how long they'd last 'cause in winter, after a few beltings of rain, the creek would swell so much the bridge would be washed away. But in the city ... well ...

Sunday came and I caught the afternoon train back home. With the setting sun coming in sideways across the fields, it was like we had another train travelling with us, but a phantom one, just out of synch. A slide show but without the pictures; you just had squares of orange light. Real pretty, if you pick up on that sort of thing.

The station loomed with the attraction of an iron lung. Cinders was there, all black and white stripes and dyed orange hair. She wasn't going anyplace.

'What you fucking back for?' she asked. She was curled up in the waiting alcove, smoking a ciggy. Kev was half passed out next to her, his hands between her thighs for warmth. Even though it's hot in town during the days, a real chill wind can blow across nights.

'Well, what *you* doin', Cinders?' I asked. 'It's fuckin' freezing.'

I don't know why, but soon as I caught up with Cinders, I started saying fuck as much as her.

'Last night, my fuckin' mother come into my fuckin' room, Sam. I'm already on the piss, yeah, and she says, looking all fuckin' serious: Cindy, what's this I found under your bed? Yeah, fuckin' what, Mum? Mum went off at me. Don't fuckin' talk like that to me, missy. Not when I found this under your fuckin' bed. Yeah, found what, Mum? Mum holds it up, right. And guess what she says?'

'Dunno.'

'I found your fuckin' boing.'

'Your what?' I asked.

'My boing.'

‘Boing?’

‘Couldn’t fuckin’ work out what she was on about. Then I got it. That’s my fuckin’ *bong*, Mother. Bong.’

I had a bit of a laugh, not that I knew much about dope at the time. But Cinders shook so much she nearly woke up Kev: a few sparks from her smoke twitched on his cheek. She heaved down to a standstill then smiled at me.

‘Yeah, mums, they don’t know shit.’

Cinders tried to push Kev off. A bit of drool frog-tongued onto her skirt. A train was roaring through the other side of the station, a freight one that didn’t stop. Just tooted its high range horn for people to stand back.

‘Gotta see the fam’, Cinders!’ I shouted.

‘Well, gonna have a fuckin’ beer with us after?’

‘Sure.’

I turned and walked from the station.

Cinders was the closest I had to a friend. But that hadn’t got me into her larger friendship group; even Kev didn’t welcome me in. It eluded me why I couldn’t be more successful on that score, what it was about me, why I wasn’t taken up as one of the gang. Recess and lunch were always the longest times at school.

I passed the white brick houses, with their faded white slatted fences, red geraniums and pelargoniums sprouting from ground and pots, and the peppercorn trees giving the night air a lemony flavour.

In Melbourne, I’d make friends.

Normally I’d have a few ks walk to get to the farm, but Sunday was always barbecue at Dirk’s place. I’ve got two brothers, Dirk and Ashleigh, both older than me. Dirk’s the eldest. He lives near the station. I rolled up at his front door. Locked. The house unlit. That didn’t mean much; Dirk ‘lives’ in his backyard. I walked down the side of the

house. As predicted, the family was there. Had to pat about five dogs before I got to the people.

‘Here he is!’ they yelled. I made out the familiar faces in the firelight. The fire was in a washing machine tumbler; it blazed and crackled.

Dirk told me to get a beer from the tub. (They had a bathtub on the lawn filled with ice – an ancient bathtub with brass lion feet.) My brothers’ girlfriends were also there, Janet and Tarlia. The whole family reunion thing, so something was up. I found myself a seat and started ripping up the cardboard boxes the beer came in, feeding them to the fire.

Dirk benches a few weights – his neck tapers off to a head. His hair, a short, grizzly black. A wide nose, slightly crooked. Ashleigh is slightly leaner, with longer, lighter hair. I guess my appearance back then lay somewhere between my two brothers. I hadn’t yet filled-out. Janet’s a peroxide blonde; Tarlia, a brunette with a bob cut.

Janet held her ring up to the fire so it copped a licking of light. She got Tarlia to hold hers up against it. So that was the fuss: double engagement.

‘So when’s Sam tying the knot?’ asked Janet.

Dirk pincerd her neck. ‘He hasta get a girlfriend, first, babe.’

Ashleigh butted in with a few jokes, how he and Dirk would be tied down for the rest of their lives now and all, but it wasn’t serious. All I could think was, here’s Dirk and Ashleigh getting married and here’s me, not much younger, with ... well ... I just hadn’t met the right girl yet.

The smoke finally got around to annoying me in the circle.

Tarlia asked if I hadn’t met any ‘babes’ in Melbourne.

‘What’s wrong with the girls round here?’ asked Ashleigh.

Dirk piped in. ‘Not good enough for Sam. Just ’cause you read all those books,’ he directed at me.

My eyes were still smarting from the smoke. Dirk reckoned I was a snob. So did his girlfriend, Janet. I guess if you don’t sign your name with a cross.

Janet’s younger sister, Carlene, emerged from the side of the house, nearly tripping in the dark on the hose and assorted junk. I was glad of her arrival and moved away from the circle to meet her.

‘Hello, cunt,’ she said, scratching my chin. ‘Look who’s looking rough and manly.’

Carlene was wearing a red, short-sleeved, check shirt, brown cord trousers and black boots. A pretty cowgirl look. She held up her arms.

‘It doesn’t pouch when I do this?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘it’s a pretty shirt.’

Carlene and I were always pushed onto each other. Not that I minded. She was a swell girl. Always called me ‘cunt’ and ‘bitch’. No one else much, so I guess that showed I meant something to her.

‘So how’s Carlene?’ Dad asked when I went to refill our drinks; he was refilling the tub with ice. ‘Saw you two chatting away.’

‘Dad, we’re just friends.’

‘Oh right, just friends,’ he said, winking at Mum.

The winks kept doing the laps. Soon I was jack of it. So I slunk off and walked up the dirt road a couple of k, using the dogs as an excuse. But I only took one – the most ladylike. That’s how she got her name: Lady. At the station I looked about for Cinders. It was pretty dark with only a sliver of moon and the odd lamp to illuminate things, but I could see she was gone. I went to the six-pack

(that's what we called the silos) and there she was, the red of her cigarette like a lone firefly. She must've dumped Kev back home at his boatshed. I asked Cinders why she was hanging about so much.

'My fuckin' folks had a bit of a blue. Would've waked the neighbours 'cept they were also fuckin' arguing.'

Cinders snorted. Lady took it for a friendly 'come here' in doggy-speak, and self-cranked her tailshaft to take-off speed. I called her back but Cinders gave up rolling her ciggy to give Lady tiny, circular pats.

'Why aren't you at Kev's?' I asked.

'Nah, fuck that. What a place! You wonder why I'm never fuckin' there, man. Fuck, when I do sleep, practically have to sleep with one eye open. Just to make sure the other eye isn't lifted, 'course. Playing fuckin' winkies all night, eh. But yeah Kev's there all right, he's there with his other woman.'

Other woman? Poor Cinders.

'Horse.'

Horse? Not the most attractive name. But then I got it: heroin. Where did heroin take Kev that this life couldn't?

'Yeah, he's screwed my brain with her. All the same, everyone treats 'im like God, Love and Heaven Sent. The only one that stands up for me in this fuckin' town is me. They wanna crucify me, I'm tellin' ya. What fuckin' Christ do they believe in, eh? Schizes me out. Can you tell me that, Sam? What fuckin' Christ do they believe in?'

I don't know why exactly but seeing Cinders like this, made me more than ever not want to miss out on life, whatever life was, or would turn out to be. Whatever Melbourne held, I'd stick with it. Coming back home, even after so short a time away, I knew my change of scene would be a good thing, because it might allow *me* to

change. And I did need that change – even if I didn't know what form it would take.

Cinders pushed her hair away from her face. I wanted to get away, but I also couldn't leave her.

'Wanna come to this barbie we're having?' I asked. 'The whole friggin' family's there. Even Janet's sister, Carlene.'

She looked at me closely. 'What the fuck do you want me there for, Sam?' she snapped. 'So you can pass me off as your girlfriend?'

I practically recoiled, like she'd slugged me. What made Cinders say that? She didn't elaborate but felt a bit bad I guess and patted the space next to her. I sat down reluctantly. Straightaway, Lady docked her head in my lap for more pats.

'Wan' a ciggy?' asked Cinders, half falling against me.

I didn't but I took one anyway. As I formed a cave for Cinders to light the cigarette, I thought of Carlene waiting for me back at the barbie.

Everyone was pretty drunk when I finally got there. A quick look told me Carlene had gone home. I felt a relief that disturbed me. I mean, I'd just had this great revelation about embracing life. But if I wanted life so much, hadn't I walked away from it by walking away from a potential sweetheart? I put the question out of mind, or at least out of reach.

The remaining soaks were saying how they loved each other and all, their empty beer bottles cracking in the fire. Ashleigh tossed me a stubbie, fresh from the tub. Eventually I packed up inside, on the couch.

You never sleep well if you're drunk but somehow I made it to morning. At least when you're soused, you

don't remember your dreams. And some of mine weren't regulation. Some of mine were ...

Anyway, morning came, a kookaburra waking me with its laughter. With a bandaid yelp, I pulled my wet face from the imitation leather couch, then worked out the damage by excavating my jeans pocket, left: ten beer tops. Ten? I'd never drunk like that before, and it certainly hit me when I stood, giving my brain a good slap.

It was dawning on me that I never drank much because I didn't want to let my guard down.

No one was up. I was about to wake someone to say goodbye but decided a message on the fridge whiteboard would be simpler.

The train got back to Melbourne mid-afternoon. I sat in my cramped little room, hearing the trams outside, looking down on Lygon. Hey, it wasn't so bad. I'd found myself a good place, really. Melbourne was okay. And I would make the best of it, making sure not to avoid life any longer. The next girl that showed interest in me, I wouldn't run away. Because if I'd learnt anything from all the books I'd read, the books Dirk teased me about, living meant loving.

The next Saturday, the last before Christmas, I went to the oval for my first match. People were nesting in the stands and spreading out on the lawns, pecking at the grass to remove stones and bottle tops, then flicking out blankets and settling down. We had a home game against Camberwell.

In the clubhouse, Tubby and Army were padding up. Dizzy looked from his watch to me and back about ten times. Okay, so I was a tad late. Tubby undid his pads and threw them at me.

'I'm not an opener,' he said.

‘Then why “Tubby”?’

‘Well, it’s not for my batting prowess,’ he said, like I was stupid. He knocked Arny on the helmet. ‘Plus we can’t have two Arnys now, can we?’ he added less blisteringly.

I quickly got changed into my whites and batting gear.

Arny and I walked onto the field. We played a good game. Well, all right, a brilliant one. Arny and I opened and never went out, scoring 5.6 an over. When it was Camberwell’s turn to bat, they didn’t have a hope. There was a fair bit of cheering once the game wrapped. In the clubhouse, with everyone getting showered and changed, Dizzy said Camberwell were a crap team anyway. Me and Arny wouldn’t do so well against Brunswick, who we were scheduled to play in the new year. He knew ’cause he knew Brunswick’s captain, Charles Acton-Heath, and a few of the other players, and had watched them play. They were an unbeatable team.

‘Fuck that shit!’ yelled Tubby, towelling his hairy belly. The guy didn’t mix it up. ‘We rocked. Camberwell sucked. And we’ll rock even harder against your mate Charles Acton-Heath if our bowling is better.’

Dizzy was stung. He turned to Arny and me, involuntarily I’d say, as we turned to each other. Perhaps we shouldn’t have smiled. I made my way out of the steam and quickly got dressed.

At the end of a beery night at the nearby pub – only six beer tops for me this time – Tubby asked if I wanted to go away with them for New Year’s Eve. The big ’99, practice party for year 2000. His girlfriend’s family had a holiday shack near Woodend.

Dizzy nudged Tubby, spilling some of Tubby’s pint. ‘Tubs, there won’t be room in the van.’

Arny, who was sitting my side of the long table, ignored Dizzy and turned to me. 'You can come in my car.' From the beery smile on Tubby's face, I could see that settled it.

I was due back at my parents, though. That was the plan: Tuesday to Saturday in Melbourne, Sunday and Monday on the farm. Plus I was always there for New Year's Eve.

The next morning, I rang Mum from a payphone on the street corner near my room.

'Some of the boys have asked me to go away with them for New Year's Eve.'

'But you'll come for Christmas first?'

'Sure.'

'You left before I could give you some money,' Mum said. 'I'll give it to you Christmas Day.'

'Thanks.'

My forty cents ran out.

On the Thursday after Christmas, last day of the old year, Arny drove by after work, honking his horn. (I told him to do that – my humpy wasn't too flash, and I didn't want him coming up.) Pretty nice car he had, too: Holden Barina. I hopped in. The wool seat-covers smelt good in the sun. There were a few manila folders at my feet which Arny told me to throw in the back.

'They look serious,' I said.

It turned out Arny was an accountant, if you can believe it. He looked more like Superman than Clark Kent, even in his work suit. In his jocks, well ...

Well, anyhow, we got on the Calder and were soon out of Melbourne. Tubby, Dizzy, another guy (Joe) and their respective girlfriends were being troop-carried in Dizzy's van, according to Arny. Arny and I were the rear flank.

The drive up was kind of nice. First I couldn't think what to say. Army didn't seem to be even trying. He looked happy just to be minimising the bends with deft steering. Then I mentioned something about the ring-barked trees looking like sun-bleached coral on a desert reef.

That got Army grinning.

Soon we were outgunning each other for arty descriptions. We passed a dead tree that had fallen over, its roots yanked out of the ground, disturbed dirt beneath.

'A beached squid,' I said. 'A pool of ink seeping out from beneath its tentacles.'

Army reckoned that was the winner.

The holiday shack was pretty cute, I must say, the way it was cut into the side of a steep hill and all. I got introduced to the girlfriends over some beers on the porch. (More alcohol; I'd have to watch it!) Tubby's girlfriend was Beth; Dizzy's, Jane; and Joe, who I'd hardly said a word to, had Kelly. They were a funny pair, those two. Joe was beach-boy blonde, Kelly crustacean red, and it was hard to tell whether they loved or hated each other.

Either way, it added up to one very coupley occasion. Hell! Felt more like spring than summer. I did another scan of the tandem tricks. Somewhere in that one-eighty pan I reckon I saw Dirk and Ashleigh with their girls, Janet and Tarlia. But I didn't really. Just felt like it. My eyes came to rest on Army's. From his look, I reckon he must've just done the same pan as me, but starting from the opposite end of the arc, and now our eyes idled on one another's with a reflected smile. We were so out of pattern with the rest ... A pity there weren't two single chicks. Or if only Army was a ...

Geez, my mind needed burning back. I should explain what I mean by that. One of the best times on the farm was in winter when Dad would give me, Ashleigh and Dirk a stick each, wrapped at one end with a rag and dipped in fuel. He'd light them one by one before we'd stick them in the blackberry bushes. Burning back, he called it. Now and then a rabbit would race off. Kind of sad, destroying their homes like that. But Dad said they were an introduced pest and besides he needed more grassland freed up for our sheep.

There weren't any blackberry bushes on *this* property, not that I could see from the porch. It was pencilled in with trees.

Beth suggested we climb the hill. Tubby complained that it was a ruse of hers to get him to lose his paunch. With that gone, his name wouldn't fit. Beth countered that it was a great view from the top. I could see it was all in fun, and thought it was kind of sweet. Affectionately baiting in front of an audience.

Suddenly, we were all on our feet.

'You'll come, won't you, Sammy?' Arny nudged me.

Since when was I Sammy? I tried to think if I'd introduced myself that way. Nup. No way. Sammy? No one called me that.

It was odd, him asking me specially like that. Particularly after the general call had been put out. He told me to wait till he got changed.

I stepped off the porch.

'Isn't this great,' said Dizzy, 'how we're all in couples!'

He looked sideways at me and half put his hand over his mouth as if to say 'careless me'. Tubby flicked him a backhand. I felt pretty uncomfortable. It's awful when you join a group and someone takes an instant dislike to

you. What had I done, except maybe smash his bowling around? I'd had the same problem back home, with Kev not liking me for one reason or another. It meant my exclusion from Cinder's gang. I hoped like anything that Dizzy's aggression didn't mean I was going to be left out the same way among the cricketing guys.

Beth walked over and talked to me while the others got their shoes on. She was pretty nice. Joe joined us as well, to give him credit.

Arny came back out, tucking his shirt in. He'd put on a baseball cap. Curly black hair like tendrils under a shell. He had a grubby white T-shirt with a long-sleeved grey T-shirt underneath.

We climbed the hill with its little terraces the sheep had marked out: trails with a fishtail patterning.

'I think we got it right, Sammy.'

'What?'

Arny was walking beside me. Big stomping steps. He laughed and pointed back.

'Going straight up. Rather than sideways.'

I looked back at the others. They'd doubled their climb, really. By zigzagging. Me and Arny were almost at the rim.

When we got to the top, we looked around. It was your typical country Victoria vista: ridgeback hills, Rottweiler valleys. Arny was pointing this way and that. That's Melbourne over there, with its smog halo aura even non-mediums could see. That was the bubble-gum stretch of highway we'd driven on. He said it was good to get on top of things, and a hill was a good start. Pretty obscure stuff. It was one of those conversations where you didn't quite know what the other person was getting at, but you wished to hell you did, 'cause you liked them.

It turned out Arny hadn't joined the cricket club much earlier than me, scoring the job of vice-captain over the veteran Dizzy. Maybe that partly explained why Dizzy was so worked up. Arny came from Canberra. Even that little journey made him want to travel further.

'Overseas, Sam. See the sights, visit the galleries. Have greasies with the Mona Lisa.'

Arny was born in England, so he had dual citizenship. Which meant an EU passport, even better. Working overseas would be easy for him. He could even live in England if he wanted to.

The others caught up.

Dizzy got me to photograph the couples against the sky, like they were in front of a red velvet drape in a photographer's studio. Tubby and Beth posed hugging; Dizzy and Jane all over each other; Joe and Kelly with a chasm between. Then Dizzy kicked the football he'd brought, and they were all hurrying down after it, zigzagging again because of the slope.

At the time, I hadn't been overseas but I have since. In Paris, I remember getting in this queue to see this famous statue of some goddess. You had to wait hours and then, when you finally got to see her behind her thick glass monocle of protection, you'd first be surprised how small she was, but then take as long as you could before the breathing of some feller behind you buffeted you forward. The funny thing was, how so many people, when they finally got their turn, would just pull out their camera, take a snap, and walk on, without even looking at the picture! Why bother coming from overseas? The reproductions in art books are probably better anyway – no tank glass in the way. That's the sort of people these cricket guys were, Dizzy especially. They'd climb all the way up a hill, take a photo of themselves against the background, then race

down again. Then, when they showed their friends, they'd say how you couldn't really get the feeling of space from the photo.

I hung back.

Arny looked at me.

'I think I'll stay,' he said.

The others were already three sheep trails down. I mumbled something about getting back myself. Arny smiled and leant back, putting a straw in his mouth. It was so American Midwest.

He was staring at the horizon, face varnished gold. An Old Masters painting, enigmatic as any Mona Lisa yet 3D. *He* wasn't taking any photos; he was taking it all in. Me, I was doing the tourist thing, getting down as fast as I came up.

I kept looking back, all the way down that hill. Reckon Arny turned up nearly an hour later, when it was all dark. Don't know how he ever got down.

Later that evening, I somehow found myself one side of the fireplace, feeding the flames woodchips. I'm a bit of a pyromaniac. Once I start, I can't stop. It wasn't too nippy, being summer and all, but you don't always light a fire for warmth; there's cooking and ambience. Arny walked over.

'Sammy,' he said.

Sammy again!

'Let me make you a hamburger. I've put two meat patties on to cook.'

I sort of waved him away. He sat the other side of the fireplace, skewering the two sides of the bun and holding them into the flames.

'You need something longer,' quipped Dizzy from the other side of the room, grooming his goatee with one hand, and Jane with the other.

Arny smiled at me. He was deliberate with the toasting, doing one side, then the other. I got up and sat next to Beth on the couch while Arny went into the kitchen to put the meat patties and fillings in the bun. Beth was talking to Joe and Kelly who were sitting on the opposite couch and didn't appear to be talking to each other. Arny returned, giving me the hamburger. I could see him looking for a space between me and Beth. I spread my legs to fill the gap. But the unbelievable happened. Arny took a pillow and threw it at my feet. I wanted to yell, 'No! What are you thinking?' but I was under water. Arny slumped down on the damn thing. All eyebrows in the room made a Mexican wave. I chomped into my hamburger.

Actually, I have to admit, he'd toasted it to perfection. Pretty good, considering what he had to work with. A crackling fire and a bent fork. He'd rolled it round, making sure it was crisped every side, licked hard on the outer but soft inside. A class job.

I could do nothing but eat it. Best hamburger I've ever eaten and I don't generally care for them much. Maybe 'cause of that multinational variety and how it makes you feel like you're in the 51st state. I could see the others looking at me. *He* was looking at me. Arny. Rather than lean back, he leant forward, head tilted up. Funny effect somehow.

Midnight ticked over. We were now one minute into '99. I wondered, like you always do, where I'd be in a year's time, when I'd forget, like you always do, what I was doing a year before.

Rooms were divided up among the couples and I was to have the fold-out couch in the main room we'd been sitting in. I felt pretty out of it, being the new kid and all. Beth helped set up then I got into my sleeping bag. Arny unrolled his, and said he'd kip with me. Tubby, Dizzy and

Joe looked at him. ‘To stay by the fire,’ Arny said and lay on the floor next to it. The others cleared off to their rooms. I could see Arny was getting quite toasty. I was lying to one side of my big bed and we both looked at the empty space.

‘Why don’t you ...?’

‘All right.’

And before I could think about it, he was next to me.

We lay turned in towards each other, the green hood on Arny’s sleeping bag an oval frame for his face. We didn’t speak. Every time I opened *my* eyes I saw him just closing *his*.

The fire crunched the logs. Bits of red spittle were lost to the dark. The smell of must, of smoke, and ... and him ... a real live human lying next to me.

A log fell out of the fire.

‘Almost had an incident,’ Arny said next morning.

I coughed my cereal.

We were sitting on the porch with the others.

‘But me and Sammy saved the day,’ laughed Arny, leaning forward in his plastic chair. ‘We had these three logs we piled up high. To stay warm all night. Well, I knew one would roll off when it got a bit charred. Did too. We’d just gotten to sleep and “collumph”.’ He rolled his arm. ‘But it hit the grate. That’s why we have them, kids,’ and for a moment he spoke to a porch full of them. ‘Let that be a lesson to you. Remember the grate.’

This got a laugh.

‘Might have been nothing left,’ I put in.

‘Nope, and me in my nylon slipper.’

‘Could’ve been shrink-wrapped. That would’ve been a tragedy – ’

Arny’s face was all teeth.

‘I mean ...’

But it was too late; I’d said it.

Somehow the morning dipped into day. Arny and I were back on the foldout bed we were both too lazy to fold away. We were poring over a coffee-table book of aerial photographs from around the world, so abstract they were like modern paintings. Except for Beth, everyone else was outside playing footy.

Beth called out from the bathroom, ‘Arny?’

‘Yes’m?’ replied Arny.

Beth popped her head round the door, pink toothbrush in her mouth.

‘No, not you, Arny,’ she said. ‘*My* Arny.’

She meant Tubby, but Arny played on the mistake.

‘Boo hoo hoo,’ he cried, rolling about, ‘I’m nobody’s Arny.’ And he looked at me.

‘You’re your own Arny,’ I said. I don’t know why – I just blurted it out.

Beth turned from me to Arny and raised an eyebrow. The two shared a smile. Despite this, I couldn’t stop myself.

‘Beth’s Arny is Beth’s Arny,’ I went on. ‘But you’re your own. You’re Arny’s Arny.’

Arny looked kind of sad at that but he smiled and put a hand on my knee. Beth turned back to the bathroom with a flutter. I stiffened. I felt sick. I smiled but it was the twisted-est smile ever. I couldn’t get it right. I wanted it to say ‘righto’ but it just said ‘red’ – scarlet.

I got up, shaking Arny’s hand off my knee and peered through the windows for the others. Their game must’ve migrated down the hill. Arny joined me by the window. He had this funny way about him. Rather than just shouting something across a room like the others, he’d

walk right up to me, stand a metre away or less, straight on, hands in back pockets, and talk like that. His hair was mussed from sleep.

‘Do you want to go for a walk, Sammy?’ he asked.

A walk! Actually, I thought, that’s good. Outside I’ll tell him. Tell him ... well, not to stand so close and all. Hell, that would sound silly. Christ, I couldn’t even say what he was doing exactly. I just knew, with him around, I was feeling the funniest ever. Like I wanted to take off or something but couldn’t get a run-up.

No, that sounds good. It was bad. Something he was doing was bad.

He was mesmerising me.

I mean, I couldn’t take my eyes off him for more than a second. Why ...? This was ... It was too scary. There *had* to be a reason ...

Ah! That was it! I’d worked it out. So obvious. Nothing to sweat over at all. It was simple. The guy had the perfect-est features you ever saw. Perfect mannerisms, so goofy, so fleet. Right-on voice, camphor and sweet. Perfect hands, perfect body, perfect package ...

I wanted to look like him, that’s all.

Hell, I’d noticed that about myself. The way I’d eye up guys. That was normal enough. I mean, the way I’d look at guys all the time. Well, that was why. The reason was simple: I didn’t feel too special myself. If I’d been a looker, I’d be eying up girls – crotches to cranium and back – pretty much secure they were doing the same in return, but no, I was checking out the saucy guys to see what I didn’t have myself. You can rise above most things, but you can’t rise above your looks. A bit of styling mousse, maybe.

But did that explain the dreams ...? I’d never slept well anyway. Not surprising, really.

I was still staring at Arny.

Hell, those curls, each one looping back, all in love with his head. *My* hair can't wait to get away from me. Talk about the white afro.

Arny was outside by this time. I could see him standing by the clipped-wing gate, waiting for this walk I'd said I'd accompany him on. I'd told him I had to get my shoes on first. Beth had come back into the room and was washing up. Clink, clank.

Arny, hair wriggling in the wind. Hell, he was the sort of guy anyone would look at, right? Girls, guys, anyone.

I stood up, feet firmly sutured. Twelves stitches per boot.

'Hey, um, Beth ...' I began.

Beth swivelled at the neck, hands still in the sink so the water wouldn't comb down the carpet.

'Um, why hasn't Arny got a girlfriend?' I asked.

She cocked her head at that. I had to make it normal.

'I mean,' I blurted, 'you'd say he was pretty attractive and all. I can't really tell with guys, you know, but ...'

And my words ran out like coins. Ten cents short for the Coke. Beth turned right round, snow suds adrift.

'So you think Arny's hot, do you?'

Her playful tone and smile frightened me. It was like she was playing matchmaker. She must've seen how uncomfortable I was and backed off, turning back to the dishes.

'Well, Sam, I suppose he's not *too* bad-looking,' she said to the window in front of her, obviously trying to sound flippant. 'Guess it depends on your type.'

Depends on your type ...?

That would mean he was my ...

No!

That clinched it. I'd have to get out there quick smart and tell Arny to stop it. Once and for all. It was sick.

Seducing a feller. What was he playing at? And what made him think I was like that anyway? I was sporty, daggy, a regular bloke. Apart from the book-reading, just one of the guys. Or hoped to be ...

In the barn, he kissed me.

Again and again and again.

That night, stuck in my cramped room above Lygon, I tried to get to sleep but couldn't somehow. My head felt saddled to the pillow. Eventually, I hugged the pillow to me and that was enough, just, to canter through the night. *Arny* kissed me. Or had *I* kissed *him*? No. We'd kissed each other. In the barn. The light slicing the boards. The others' footsteps outside in the grass. On instinct, me pushing him away. Arny falling heavily. Then the door opening. The cricketers and their girlfriends standing there.

'You've got it wrong,' I said with all of us there, in tableau. 'I'm not a fucking faggot.'

Arny got up and left the barn. We followed him out and watched him walk to his car.

Dizzy told how he'd seen us walking to the barn together, close, a little *too* close. That's why he'd gathered everyone for the hunt.

We watched as Arny fumbled for his car keys.

'He tried ta come onta ya, Sam,' said Dizzy in my ear.

'Yeah, I know.'

'Lucky I saved you.' A little louder: 'He could've fucked your arse right up.'

'I know.'

'You owe me one.'

‘I know.’

Beth went over to Arny and tried to make him stay. She turned and yelled at Tubby to make Dizzy shut up. Dizzy started another crack but Beth cut him off. She pleaded with Tubby to say something, take control of the situation, lead.

Too late. Arny drove off, taking a swig of the horizon. A coffee dreg on the porcelain sky was all he left.

I got a lift back in the troop carrier with Tubby, Beth, Dizzy, Jane, Joe and Kelly. Beth sniped at Tubby from time to time. I couldn’t hear what it was about but I knew: Tubby not coming to the aid of his best friend, Arny. Joe tried shooting the breeze with me but Dizzy turned the music too high for talking comfort.

I’d managed to break into a friendship group – tenuously, yes, but enough to be invited away with them. Not only was I messing that up; I’d created rifts in the group.

They dropped me the other side of Edinburgh Gardens. I felt like the walk.

We’d just had a whiff of summer rain that had wet the grass to a crew-cut, and there was me, walking the footpath, telling myself how lucky I was. Geez, a little bit later and ... he might of ... we might of ... I thought of those hills, and how there was something I wanted, something I wanted to get so badly, but couldn’t for cucumber eyes. But I’d been saved. Must remember that. Something terrible could’ve happened. I’d let my guard down and I wasn’t even drunk! A minute or two later and ... and ... My cheeks felt wet. Before I knew, it was raining. Like it never had since I was a kid. A full-on flood. Seemed to flow right through me, lifting my organs and dumping them on higher ground, my heart in my mouth and my life downstream. I shivered; barely made it

off the footpath and onto a seat. I had only one thought, and it was pretty silly: hold myself. That's right, hold. Hard as could be. Otherwise I'd tear apart. I'd just about pulled the shoulders of my white shirt together at the front, double-breasted, when it ripped, with every cotton strand aching apart down my spine.

A lady walked past with soft pink impasto features. A lovely green scarf like seaweed caught on a jetty post.

'Son ...?'

Just keep holding yourself, Sam. Hold.

'Son, have you hurt yourself?'

Injured? I looked at my knees. Maybe I'd tripped.

'Are you injured?'

Not a scratch.

'Have you hurt yourself?'

And I knew the answer.

Yes, I had. Deeply.

Back in my room, for some reason I thought about this effeminate guy at school, Carl. I hadn't thought about him in ages. The other kids teased him – no, I lie, *we* teased – so much his parents took him out of school and moved away. I was especially cruel. Reckoned we had nothing in common but maybe I feared we were too alike. It was the first and last time I teased someone about their sexuality. But I didn't reckon there was anything sissy about *me*. Nothing. I was – *wanted* to be – could *still* be – one of the guys.

The next day, Saturday, I forced myself to make the long journey to the clubhouse. There were general shouts of 'Here he is'. The coach told me he didn't want to lose both star openers.

'Both ...?' I forgot to step back as I pulled my locker door open, getting a metal slug in the chin.

‘Yep. Arny’s done a runner.’

The coach walked outside. A great scythe had taken out my feet but I was still standing. I saw Tubby on a bench, strapping on his pads, and something snapped. For the second time, I let my guard down, like I had finally let myself get drunk. Drunk all the time.

‘Tubby, what’s Arny’s number?’ I asked.

‘What?’

‘His number?’

Tubby, Dizzy and Joe just stared at me. I turned to Arny’s locker. Maybe he’d left something with his number on it. But Dizzy was there, shoving his bag into it, then fumbling with the lock. Didn’t make sense at all till he walked away with a smile, and then it did. I’d forgotten the ‘Vice-captain’ on Arny’s locker. Dizzy had got his promotion.

But how to find Arny? Maybe when he had cleared out his locker, he’d thrown something in the bin. I looked. And sure enough: no number, but an old bill with his address on it. I put it in my pocket and ran outside, pushing through the others, who’d been watching me rummage like a dero, and past the coach who yelled at me, ‘Where are you going?’

Arny’s flatmate said he didn’t know where Arny was either. But he sure as hell wanted to. The ‘bastard’ owed him on the electricity. I looked at what I’d rescued from the bin: an overdue notice.

I walked back to the game. The coach nearly hit me. He’d put Joe in to open with Tubby. But Joe and five more were already out and we’d only made fifty. Tubby and Dizzy scored fifty more between them before Dizzy was bowled out and I was sent in. At that point, we had to at least double our score for a chance of winning and, with the overs remaining, that meant better than one run a ball.

We were playing Brunswick, the team Dizzy reckoned was unbeatable.

I took the crease, then walked up the pitch towards Tubby for the usual chat, but he just stayed at his end. My stomach bunched up and I turned back.

Tubby tried to get a single down to long-on but was picked up in slips. A dot ball. The over finished, leaving me to face. The new bowler came on; the wicketkeeper moved in close; there was even a silly mid-on. Must have been planning spin.

The bowler marked out quite a log run-up. Medium-fast? He hurtled in. As he let go of the ball, the wicketkeeper whispered at me.

‘Poofter boy.’

The ball hit the pitch short, a bouncer.

‘Poofter boy.’ This time it was silly mid-on.

I was distracted.

‘Poofter boy.’

And didn’t see it off the pitch.

I must’ve staggered pretty near the stumps ’cause the slips went up, but I hadn’t knocked the bails off. My head hurt like hell where the ball had connected under my ear. The umpire’s voice was a wet buzzing. I waved him away.

What was said? Before the ball came? Poofter boy, that’s right! Poof? Strangest thing in the world. I mean, whispering that at me!

Tubby half walked up the pitch to me. I waved him back. The bowler got ready again. His arm cartwheeled, the ball was loosed.

‘Poofter boy.’

Crunch!

My left elbow melted from solid to liquid state, and was aiming to go gaseous. Silly mid-on stepped in close. He put an arm on my shoulder. I looked round and he blew

me a kiss. A kiss! Tubby yelled, halfway up the pitch. He must've seen. Then the wicketkeeper pinched my bum. What was that supposed to say? I was a girl or something?

Again, the whispering, 'Pofter boy, pofter boy.'

Just your regular sledging?

'You all right, Big Feller?'

The coach, I think. From the sideline. Everything was a dull cicada hum, and it wasn't the crowd.

'You all right?'

Maybe it was Tubby. I looked down the pitch, long enough for a runway, and saw Army. A mirage, for a moment. We'd opened the last match and never gone out, retiring with a century for him and almost a double century for me.

'Have you hurt yourself?'

It was that lady in the park, with the pretty, green scarf.

'Have you hurt yourself, dear?'

The scarf blowing over one shoulder.

'Do you want the medic?'

It was the umpire, this time, definitely.

I shook my head at him. The world shook twice as hard back. Stay with it, Sam. The bowler winked at me before turning to find his marker. Tubby elbowed him as they passed and there was a bit of scuffling. The umpire shouted at them both.

The bowler merely shrugged at Tubby.

'You're the poonce, mate! Tubby yelled. 'With a name like Charles Acton-Heath!'

Charles Acton-Heath? Dizzy's mate.

The umpire motioned to get on with it.

Next ball. The run in.

'Fucking faggot.'

Whack!

My feet fell out. I sank to my knees. A direct hit to the stomach. Air, air – I needed air! I stopped wheezing and sucked, gentle as could be. The pain, the pain ...

Tubby was yelling, the crowd shouting, and I could hear booing from the boxes where the rest of the team was up, standing.

Poofter boy? I mean ... they were saying it ... to me!

Me, Sam. I felt sick. Sickest I ever had, on top of the physical hurt. I felt exposed. Starkers in the middle of the oval. Practically a streaker. Maybe even the crowd were in on what had happened. I couldn't see how everyone knew about ... Well, I suppose my running off to Arny's had done it. Guys just don't charge off after each other like that unless ...

'Right, help this guy off,' said the umpire.

He and Tubby lifted me up.

'No,' I said.

Tubby squeezed my arm.

'Come on, Sam.'

'No.'

I threw off their arms. They walked back to their places. Three balls to go this over. I felt like a half-made house robbed of its struts.

My eyes on the pitch, I saw Arny driving away.

And it hurt. Ten times as much as it should've. I looked round at the fielders and saw what I'd lost, what it should've been. That memory, Arny. If it'd been boy and girl, not boy and boy, it'd be something else now, an altogether different time. It'd be my first real kiss, first love, something to think back on at eighty and smile about. The first real awakening of heart and hard-on, a tingling, a tantrum in the groin. But no, it was just pain. All pain. And no one wants to think back on that. No one, I tell you. I didn't want to hate.

Silly mid-on was whispering again.

I did hate.

Charles Acton-Heath loosed the ball.

Terribly.

Smash.

Silly mid-on was rolling on the ground, grabbing his groin. Snot and tears streamed from his face. Got him! There were yells and cheers all round. They took silly mid-on and replaced him with the twelfth man. No one was going to kick me out, no one was going to oust me from the game! Either this one or the game of life. I wouldn't be excluded any more. If I was gay, then I wouldn't hide it.

I smiled the meanest smile at the wicketkeeper. He signalled for a helmet. The next ball I stepped forward and hooked straight into him, hard as I could. He went to catch it, then tried to get out of the way, but couldn't do either. It caught him in the ribs, rolling him over and (I heard later) cracking two of them. There wasn't anyone to replace him.

The umpire lectured me. I ignored him, completely.

Next ball after that, I whacked a perfect cover drive. Charles Acton-Heath watched the ball straight into his forehead and fell with a crunch.

Tubby hardly got a bat the rest of the game. I made a hundred and fifty-three runs, not out.

Our rivals put on a good run-chase. Charles Acton-Heath was absent so someone batted twice. The wheezing wicketkeeper had a runner. In the end their 'good' wasn't good enough. We'd won.

I felt strangely elated. Justified. The opposition walked off, heads bowed. Tubby came up to me, took my hand and raised it in the air as the volume of the crowd rose. Tubby and I walked off to claps and cheering.

‘You stayed in there Sam,’ said Tubby, taking off his helmet. ‘Man, you stayed in – you took control.’

I removed my helmet. The coach was staring at us as we approached the gate. Tubby’s voice developed a wobble.

‘Beth reckons I’m not much of a leader ... for a captain,’ he confided.

I turned but it was too late to say anything. The coach watched as we walked through the gate. I couldn’t gauge his expression. Tubby and I made our way through the crowd and into the clubhouse.

Head down, I approached the bench, then realised Tubby was no longer beside me. When I turned, he was in the doorway, staring. I followed that stare.

‘Dizzy!’

Dizzy turned around, surprised at Tubby’s tone.

‘What?’

‘You told your mate Charles about Sam, didn’t you?’ spat Tubby.

‘So what?’ I could tell Dizzy was surprised Tubby was taking him on.

Tubby half-turned, looked like he was going to drop the matter, but then walked over and grabbed Dizzy, shoving him against his ‘Vice-captain’ locker.

‘It isn’t fucking cricket, that’s what.’

This was captaincy! Beth could be proud of Tubby now. Tubby let go.

‘Well, Tubs,’ said Dizzy meekly, ‘you tell Charles that. He’s in hospital. Unconscious.’

The coach stuck his head in.

‘Okay, Big Feller. Out here.’

I was sick to the core, elation gone. Knocking that guy out – I’d never gotten angry like that before. Always pictured the ball as my enemy. It was the missile, the

grenade I had to get away from me, far as I could. But now it wasn't the ball so much as the field. The whole thing had been target practice. What had I done?

I glanced at Tubby, then followed the coach outside.

We sat down in one of the now-empty stands. To my surprise, the coach lectured me on how smashing up the other side was none too nice but an indication of phenomenal talent. He went on so long, I couldn't get away. I was aware of the other cricketers leaving, their friends and families all gone. It occurred to me the coach was excited, like I had been, by how I'd batted. He was a big, toned guy, and to see those arms waving about like a kid's was a strange sight.

'This is what a coach hopes for in his career. Even if it occurs once.'

I finally got away, heading back to my room above the pub. But on entering the bar, I saw Tubby drinking beer and chatting to Wally over the counter. The fact he'd dropped by indicated he was still my friend. Certainly seemed like it, the way he'd come to my aid on the pitch, and his taking on Dizzy in the clubhouse. But I didn't know if I could face him right now. I'd cost him his closest friend and key player, Arny. And there had been an explosion in my life bigger than my explosion on field I needed to deal with.

So I slid out of the pub, making my way to the street and the phone booths. Even though mobiles were taking off in a big way, they still hadn't gotten round to removing most of the booths.

Tried calling Ashleigh but the line rang out. I couldn't quite talk to my parents yet. Don't know why. Nothing else for it, so I rang Dirk.

'Dirk, I ... Dirk, I've fallen for a ... for a guy.'

The phone booth window had been smashed. I remember thinking it was like a glass web. Silence. Then Dirk's gravelly voice.

'Me and Janet always thought you were a bit of a woolly woofter, Sam.'

'Prick.'

'What?'

'Nothing,' I mumbled.

If they thought I was a 'woolly woofter', why hadn't they ever said anything? Why had they gone on so much about me getting a girlfriend?

'Hey, you coming back, Sam? Drinks are at me and Janet's again. You bailed on us for New Year's.'

'Okay ... all right. See you tomorrow.'

And I hung up.

I didn't get there till late – the afternoon train again. Cinders wasn't at the station but, then again, she didn't live there. The sun eased below the horizon, leaving a ripple of red. I walked to Dirk's. Noise carried from the backyard. I went round the side of the house, Lady and the other dogs greeting me. Dirk and his mates were getting the fire going, getting into their tinnies. Ashleigh wasn't there with Tarlia yet, Mum and Dad either. Dirk told me to get myself a drink from the tub.

I sat down in the circle. Again, I felt sick with nervousness. But it seemed to go okay – I kept up my end of the conversation, until Dirk said to fetch him a beer. I said *he* should. He went on, fuck, how he was always waiting on me, and stuff. Telling his friends he had a lazy sod for a bro'. It got pretty nasty.

'Steady on, you two,' said Janet.

I reckoned *I* should be the one waited on, if anyone was. Not like I was the birthday boy or nothing, still ...

Well, it *is* kind of special in a way, like opening a tinnie. Don't know if it will just fizz or, if it's been dropped, whether half of it will foam away. Things got sore between us, that's all I'm getting at. Dirk reckoned he always had to do everything for me. Whenever he hung out with his friends, Mum and Dad always insisted he let his 'little brother' tag along. 'Only way Sam's gonna make friends,' they'd say to him. That always pulled me up short. Pretty sad when even your parents feel sorry for you.

Night was getting on, I could tell Dirk was still black with me, and people started telling jokes. Kev just told a funny one about a talking dog, when Dirk piped in – Dirk my own brother. 'I've got one,' he said. And he leaned forward into the fire.

'Okay, there's two fags fucking and one goes to the fridge to get a drink of milk.'

Straightaway, my stomach bunched up. I couldn't believe it.

'One of these fags, the one who's been butt-fucked by the other one, goes off to the fridge. He seems to be away forever. Finally, the other fag gets up to see what's taking so long. The guy's moppin' up this stuff on the floor. His bum-buddy says, "What happened? Spilt the milk?" "No," says his bum-chum. "I farted."'

Everyone laughed. Pretty hard. Even Janet. I could see she couldn't help it. I couldn't look at my brother. Couldn't look at his friends, either. I didn't even know if they knew about me yet. I didn't know what would be worse. If they did, or didn't. Dirk sure as hell knew. There was just one joke after the other, after that. He'd got them started. All pretty much the same theme. And I felt scared. Very scared. I'd felt scared sometimes before in similar

situations, but I'd always thought: Geez, it's lucky I'm not gay in a place like this.

I got up.

'Hey, we're just telling jokes, Sam,' said Janet. '*Your* turn.'

I headed for the exit down the side of the house. Dirk yelled that Mum and Dad were coming over any minute but I walked straight out and down the road and caught the last train home. Yes, home. I would make Melbourne my place.

When I walked into the pub, Wally was holding the phone: Dad was on the line. People could ring in; I just wasn't allowed to ring out (Wally was onto the fact it wouldn't be local). Taking the phone from Wally's pizza crust fingers, I put it to my ear.

Dad wanted to know why I'd ticked off without warning. I said, well, what did he think of what Dirk had told him. Dirk hadn't told him anything, he said. Just that I'd taken off, no explanation. I could've killed Dirk.

'I'm gay,' I told him and hung up.

I'd done it now. I was gay and out. My family knew. The cricketers knew. I knew. How would I face anyone? I called in sick at training all week, and for the match at the weekend. Just stayed in my room and turned troppo.

Tubby caught up with me the following week. He'd been phoning the bar every day. (Wally was complaining about turning into my 'personal secretary.')

But it was nice of Tubby. Seems I'd made one friend in Melbourne, at least. Could've been two with Army. Tubby took me to the nets, for practice. That's why he was pursuing me: he still hoped I'd return to the club. No one bought my 'feeling ill' excuse.

I asked about Charles Acton-Heath.

Tubby broke his run-up.

‘Man, you go and do something like that, which rocks, then you go and soil it all by feeling guilty. Don’t feel guilty. Fuck the cunt.’

I certainly hadn’t expected an approving response.

‘Mild concussion, that’s all,’ Tubby offered at last.

The echidna in my stomach eased up slightly but then it scrunched up with my next question.

‘Heard from Arny?’

Tubby looked at his feet. ‘Yeah, he’s gone overseas.’

I nearly cried. Don’t, Sam, don’t.

‘Hey, Sam, he was always planning to,’ said Tubby hurriedly. ‘You ... I mean ... *we* just pushed his schedule forward.’

I liked Tubby even more for that touch but I didn’t agree with it. ‘We?’ I asked sceptically.

‘Yeah, well ... maybe *I* should’ve come to his aid,’ Tubby explained.

I tried to convince him it was all my fault, which was how I felt. He got ready to do his run-up but broke it again. He then said something else that surprised me.

‘Man, maybe it was a little bit Arny’s fault as well.’

I didn’t understand that at all. I asked him to explain.

‘Sam, *I* know what it’s like to be called names. But, hey, *I’m* still here.’

I’m so thick, again I didn’t know what he was getting at. He eventually had to explain it.

‘Tubby!’ and he slapped his belly.

That pulled me up short. It never occurred to me that the name hurt him. But he’d braved it out, even ending up by owning it. Maybe my problems weren’t so big or rare.

‘So, man, are *you* going to tough it out?’ he asked.

This time, I knew immediately what he was getting at. I'd wanted to change, I'd hoped Melbourne would change me. It had. Now I had to decide to face people as the new Sam. Could I?

Tubby was still staring at me.

Swallowing drily, I nodded yes.

Tubby bowled his ball which I hit straight back into his hands.

'Anyway,' he said, the serious tone dropped, 'Arny will be back by the end of the year. No long-term harm done.'

Just under a year? It wasn't that long to wait. I lowered my bat, indicating I was ready to receive the next ball, but it was Tubby who wouldn't play. He got onto the real subject of why he'd called.

'Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I go along with this whole thing. 'Cause I don't. No way, man, that shit ain't right,' he said. 'Copping cock like that. That shit ain't right. No way. That shit must really hurt. That arse must wink. Rise! Rise to the pillar of meat. Take a ride down that chocolate speedway. Do the hoola-hoop in his arse. Twenty cents, kids. Roll up, roll up. You too can ride the baloney pony.'

Tubby was unstoppable for someone who supposedly knew the pain of being called names. I didn't like the way he was making out I was some kind of girl. This is the way I'd reasoned it to myself: being gay made me even more of a man. I mean, I wasn't into girls. When you think about it, how girly's that?

'Christ, Tubby,' I yelled at last, 'maybe everyone should be fucked up the arse at least once. Hell, we might loosen up a bit.'

That got a quarter-inch smile. And from that I managed to create my own, the first in a while. I would accept this gay thing, even if not everyone around me could.

People amaze you, don't they? 'Cause the next thing I know, Tubby's confiding to me how he always wanted to sodomise a girl. I didn't really want to hear his fantasies; I was still working out my own. But all I said was, 'Listen mate, if you can't take it, then you shouldn't dish it out.'

'Nah, I'm never getting fucked up the arse.'

'Get Beth a strap-on.'

'Nah, fuck that.'

'Why not? Power to the pussy and all.'

I was actually having fun now. 'You'd have a strong back, wouldn't you ...?' I started to say as I leant behind him, lifted his shirt, but he whacked my hand away, hard enough for a boundary.

'Fuck you!' I yelled, jumping. My arm really hurt.

'Just don't touch me,' he said.

That was the limit.

'Fuck you, Tubby. It's all right on the oval.'

Tubby looked away. I'd touched a nerve. He was always running up and hugging guys on the field. And because I'd caught quite a few balls in the slips, I'd had about a million bear hugs from the guy. I was jack of him, now. Being quizzed over your sexuality – it just ain't fair. I grabbed my polo bag, hitched it over shoulder left and made to lag out of there.

Tubby stood in front of me. I was about ready to rumble the bastard.

'Look, man, it's just ... it's different now I know you're a ...'

'No, it's not.'

I walked right through him like the fuck was a turnstile. When he stopped spinning, he called after me.

'Sam!'

'What?'

I couldn't believe I stopped; I even turned round to hear him out.

Tubby looked at the ground. 'Um,' he said, 'have you ever ... er ... fancied *me*?'

I just about tripped over myself in a rush to say no.

Tubby was just as quick to yell, 'Good.'

A long moment passed and then at last he looked at me.

'Why not?'

I reckon the stupid bugger was really cut.