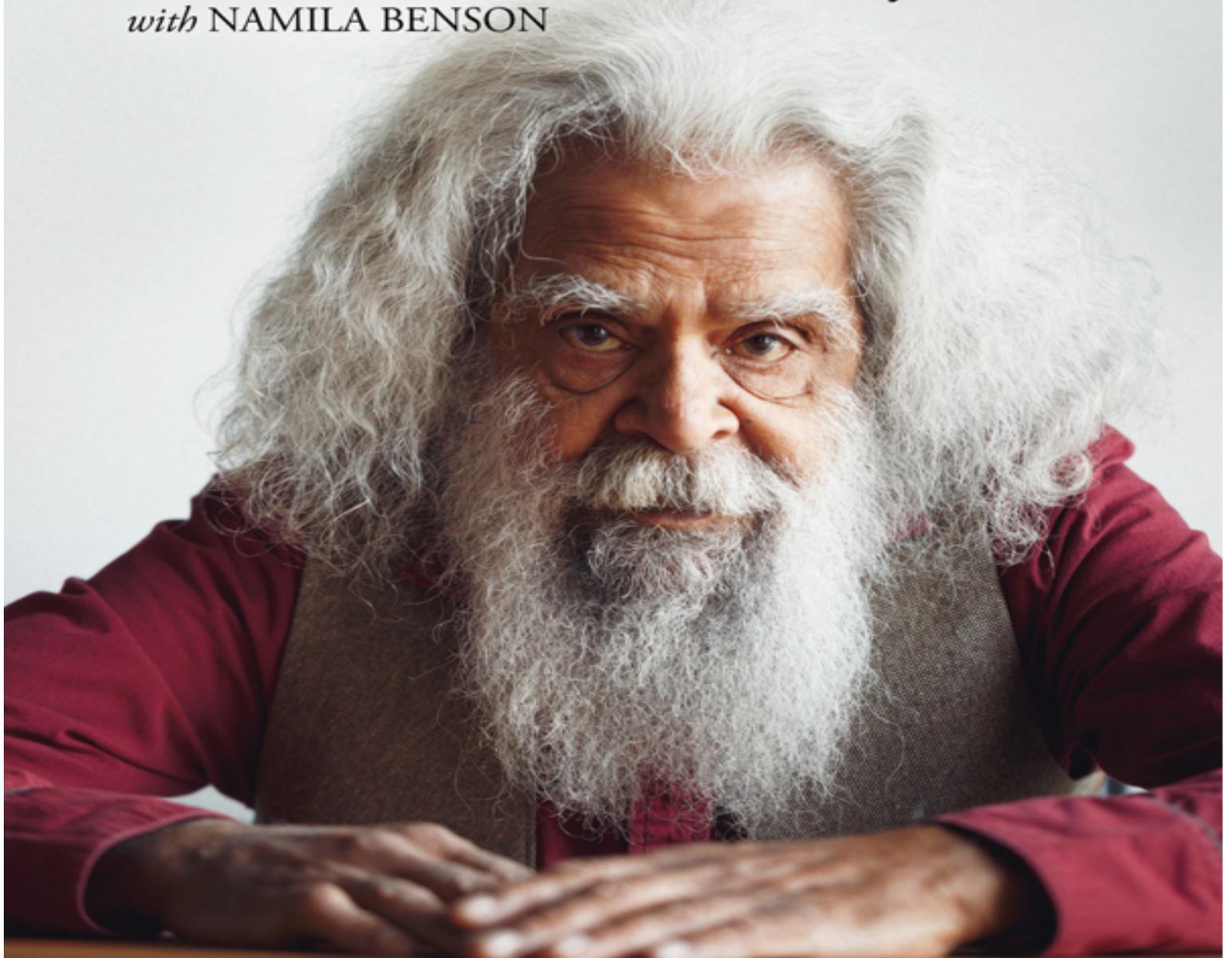


*'A hell of a yarn, a howl, a celebration and a gift to us all,
told by a huge-hearted, gutsy survivor.'* PAUL KELLY

JACK Born-again Blakfella CHARLES

with NAMILA BENSON



About the Book

Jack Charles has worn many hats throughout his life: actor, cat burglar, musician, heroin addict, activist, even Senior Victorian Australian of the Year. But the title he's most proud to claim is that he's an Aboriginal Elder.

Stolen from his mother and placed into institutional care when he was only a few months old, Uncle Jack was raised under the government's White Australia Policy. The loneliness and isolation he experienced during those years had a devastating impact on him that endured long after he reconnected with his Aboriginal roots and discovered his stolen identity. Even today he feels like an outsider; a loner; a fringe dweller.

In this honest and no-holds-barred memoir, Uncle Jack reveals the 'ups and downs of this crazy, drugged up, locked up, fucked up, and at times unbelievable, life'. From his sideline as a cat burglar, battles with drug addiction and stints in prison, to gracing the nation's stages and screens as he dazzled audiences with his big personality and acting prowess, he takes us through the most formative moments of his life.

By turns heartbreaking and hilarious, *Jack Charles: Born-again Blakfella* is a candid and uplifting memoir from one of Australia's finest and most beloved actors.



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Australia

JACK *Born-again*
Blakfella
CHARLES
with NAMILA BENSON

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*For my brother Archie and my sisters
Esme, Eva Jo and Zenip.
Also for my six missing siblings.*

FOREWORD

MY BROTHER JACK

My very first recollection of Jack Charles is seeing him perform in the Legendary Nindethana Theatre production of *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting* in early 1972.

I was in Canberra for a meeting and had been told that my friend Bob Maza was in a theatre show at the Australian National University. I remember approaching a large barn-like building on campus and entering the rear of the theatre itself, whereupon I heard a booming voice speaking in what I regarded at the time as a very cultivated accent. When I looked at the distant stage to see where this voice was coming from I was surprised to see that it was emanating from a diminutive black guy with a big afro hairdo. I was stunned not only at this little man's ability to project, but also at the incredible theatre production I witnessed from Jack and Bob Maza that night. That was my first introduction to the power of theatre as a means of getting a message across.

Thus it was Jack's performance that night that really inspired me to think of theatre as another part of the political weaponry of the Black Power Movement that I was involved in back then. When Bob Maza moved to Sydney in 1972 and established the National Black Theatre (NBT) in Redfern, it did not take much to convince me to get involved in the NBT's first production at Nimrod Theatre in late November that year. That show, *Basically Black*, was largely based on the earlier Nindethana production of *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting* and would later become the first all-Aboriginal television show when ABC TV made a televised version in 1973.

So, not only was Jack Charles a seminal pioneer in the development of Aboriginal theatre in Australia, he also became a lifelong friend of mine who has been a great inspiration for me in all film, theatre and television

work that I have done since. Mind you, I regard my efforts as very amateurish compared to the magnificent work of Jack himself.

I have always been one of Jack's staunchest admirers and defenders even during his darkest days, so to speak. That is why I was so pleased to see him finally overcome his demons and blossom late in life, and become truly appreciated both here and internationally with his brilliant performances of his one-man show. Indeed it was seeing Jack's one-man show *Jack Charles* that prompted me to follow suit with my own show, *Foley*, at the Melbourne Festival in 2011, which was a further indication of the profound respect I have for Jack and his work.

As I write this, in April 2019, I am very much aware of Jack's ongoing work and exuberance for life as he involves himself in projects that have great meaning for him and about which he displays such great passion. I have no doubt that new generations of Australians both black and white will derive great inspiration, as I always have, from his theatrical genius and his humanitarian humility. May he live forever.

Dr Gary Foley

PREFACE

A LETTER TO UNCLE JACK

Dear Jack,

I hope your days are as dense and rich as ever, my friend. I haven't seen as much of you as I would have liked these past couple of years – we have both been travelling endlessly, and I have missed you a great deal.

You have been a family friend of my parents since the 1960s. Growing up I heard mythological stories about Jack Charles the actor and Jack the cat burglar, but we did not meet until September 2001. I had just finished my second documentary and we agreed to meet in a cafe in Fitzroy, Melbourne, to discuss the possibility of making a film. I was only twenty-one years old. We had barely ordered our coffees when you said, 'So, have you brought a camera with you? We can get started whenever you want.'

I recently re-watched the footage we recorded in those first minutes that afternoon – your candour is disarming. From that moment on in 2001 we were making a documentary together. I had no idea that I would be in the slipstream of your life for the next seven years. It changed my life forever. You turned my sense of filmmaking upside down in the most glorious way, forcing me to surrender to the chaos of the moment, building up a very specific muscle attuned to patience and humility. Your circuitous, multivalent stories orbit in parallel strands and hover above us as we sit and talk and talk for days. You lived with me on and off during that beautiful, funny and sometimes very sad time and we became extremely close.

It is 4 a.m. and I'm sitting with you at my house in St Kilda drinking cups of tea. I have been filming with you for nearly four years and there is a particularly heavy mood in the room this evening. The police are looking

for you again. The next day you introduce me to your defence lawyer Doug Morey to work with him to try to minimise a potential twelve-year jail sentence.

Several weeks later I rush out of the Magistrates Court to find a payphone to speak to my producers. I remember thinking I might never see you again if the judge hands down a punitive sentence. I burst into tears. You have become like family. Fifteen months later I greet you when you appear at the prison gates upon your final release.

The tears of joy. The kettle boiling. Another cup of tea.

Another cup.

Like the art of so many of the artists I find most nourishing in this world, yours is born of a real urgency to create. You once told me your life depended on discovering theatre.

Sitting in a warehouse in Swanston Street you describe walking out onto stage as an actor as a kind of birth. It is this purity of expression and purity of intention that I keep with me. It is a part of my marrow – part of my way in the world.

Before meeting you I was relatively naïve about Aboriginal culture and history outside of the most cursory of platitudes. You lifted a veil on the city I thought I knew and exposed me to yours.

I had the good sense to keep my mouth shut and to just listen. I followed you as you barrelled into the Fitzroy commission flats to introduce me to another family member, another poet, another singer, another excellentmate.

Your radical and tireless personal form of reconciliation, your ability to neutralise a bigoted world view while busking on the street long enough to engage in a conversation, the change I saw you enacting on a daily basis with people who had most likely never spoken to an Aboriginal person, these were all remarkable to witness.

‘The artist, like the criminal, is a social explorer.’

This quote by Marshall McLuhan is made for you. Your life is spent traversing myriad disparate worlds and you are supremely comfortable doing it.

You have walked the streets of Melbourne for decades. I often think of these many years of movement as leaving a perceptible trail, as if your thousands of steps through the same streets all linger simultaneously in a marvellous shimmering web of experience, mapping Melbourne with an incantation traced into the soil with each step.

After seven years together and with the help of remarkable producers Pip Campey, Andrew de Groot and Lynn-Maree Milburn, our friendship gave birth to a feature documentary film called *Bastardy*, and it has lived a beautiful life in the world for the past eleven years.

Jack, I have never met another human being with the ability to imbue almost any social interaction with such dignity and compassion – and all with such an elegant light touch.

You lean into every social interaction with an equanimity that is humbling. Whether speaking to a bus driver, an aggressive semi-conscious drunk man or a politician, you possess the same candour as when we first sat down in that sun-drenched cafe all those years ago. You taught me about resilience and gratitude and how to move through the world with a lucidity driven by kindness, curiosity and dignity.

To merely thank you is not enough – this letter is to honour you, your generosity of spirit and your courage, to honour your turn of phrase, your mellifluous tones, your wicked laugh and your love of chocolate pudding. Your strength is endless; your love is endless.

I have known you for nearly twenty years and when I think about the human beings in my life who are truly luminaries, you are always there, a smiling force at my side, rearranging the molecules of those around you with theatre and stories and song and heart. An embodiment of love that is abundance personified, you are like sunlight – an equation of perpetual motion.

Even though much of what you say about your life brings tears to my eyes, I've realised that although the density of a life can never be fully unpacked, the delicate unspooling of your many stories in these pages gives us a rare joy.

You were already an almost mythical figure. Somehow you managed to not only fundamentally change the course of your life, but also outshine your own mythology and write entirely unexpected remarkable achievements into your story.

I remember you used to describe yourself as a bowerbird; forever attracted to and collecting shiny bright things. Though we've spent thousands of hours together, reading your story in your own words has allowed me to discover even more precious shiny and bright things newly collected from your almost seventy-six years on this planet. You have created a beautiful new constellation to accompany you on your seemingly endless ascent. Now even more people can sit down with you and be welcomed into your circle. It is a beautiful place to be.

I love you very deeply, my friend.

Amiel Courtin-Wilson

PROLOGUE

BLAK WATCH

It's the middle of the night and I'm huddled over, dragging my dilly bag, which is chock-full with all sorts of goods – jewellery, frozen food, wallets and the like. This loot is the result of another day 'on the job', which happens to be doing burglaries. Or 'burgs', as I call 'em.

By the faint light of the moon, I can see my breath against the cool air, steadily wafting around me as I silently pound the pavement. It's the wee hours. Most folks are tucked up safely in their warm beds sleeping, but this is the time of day when I'm wide awake. I always feel the stillness of the witching hour fills me with an easy calm as I walkabout doing my business along with other nocturnal creatures. We creatures of the night are in each other's company often. On more than one occasion I've confronted the odd cautious fox and have whispered a few calming words as we've circled one another, hunter-gatherers both.

I'm making my way home from the leafy, affluent suburb of Kew in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. Kew is one of my fave haunts; beautiful and picturesque, even in the still of night. The silhouette of impressive mansions and beautifully manicured hedges looks almost velveteen under the dim moonlight. It's dark, but I'm expecting dawn to break within a few hours. My general rule of thumb after a burg is to be out of the area before sunrise. I leg it out lickety-split, so that, should the coppers happen to ask locals if they've seen anyone dodgy around, they can't put a face to the crime. Still, it's the late 1970s and you occasionally encounter a few early risers out and about collecting milk and newspaper deliveries from their front porch.

On this particular morning, I'm a tad late exiting the suburb. I kick into top-notch performance mode and put on my dandified, jolly-good-ol'-chap air, playing the perfectly down-to-earth, nothing-to-see-here, friendly neighbour. It's easy to do when you've been forced to assimilate after years in a white institution. I wander past an old woman collecting her milk and

papers, and give her a big flash of the ol' pearly whites. 'Good morning,' I chirp. 'How are you?' She greets me with a smile and goes back inside. If the cops later decide to question her – 'Did you see an Aboriginal man walk past?' – she'd likely say, 'Oh, I did see someone, but no, I think he was African-American.' It makes me laugh that that has actually been reported when people have sighted me. I reckon it's the wild afro hair that throws them a bit. Too many folks equate Aboriginality with the stereotype of the blakfella silhouette in the distance, balancing on one foot. They don't think of someone wearing a dark jacket, neatly dressed and walking with dignified purpose through the posh eastern suburbs of Melbourne as though he belonged.

I continue on 'home' after the evening's slog – this morning it's a hostel. I'm in my mid-thirties and have been homeless, living rough, on and off, for over a decade. I'm also in the throes of a chronic drug addiction. Having dabbled in alcohol, marijuana and recreational drugs since my late teens, I've moved on to heroin. This morning, though, it's morphine and pethidine.

I follow a bottom trail along the Yarra. The sound of the water is soothing and it adds a damp freshness to the air that is familiar, calming and pleasant. I use this trail often as a means to get out of Kew unseen, walking along the bridge. Those of us familiar with the area know to cut through the boat shed, scurry down to the trail below and cross the flattened area to the local footy oval. It can be risky wandering across an open ground because you're easy to spot and this is the place where the jacks (police) like to do their early morning divvy wagon (police van) rounds. But over time, I've become familiar with their schedules.

If I need to stay out of sight, I'll duck into the women's toilets – which always smell way better than the men's filthy urinals. I'll pull out a book and indulge in my beloved reading. Once the coast is clear, I'll make a quick exit and head to another of my favourite haunts: Collingwood footy oval. It's perfect for a bit of shut-eye. You don't go from the scene of the crime straight to your place. It's a bit of tip-tap-toe, dashing from one cover to the next, giving a bit of space between destinations.

Today there's no one around. Before I near the boat shed I pass an outcrop of rocks nearby. Something compels me to glance up and I become aware of a warm glow, a powerful presence before me. I take a slight step back and see an apparition of a blakfella on top of the rocks. Red headband,

skinny legs and squatting on one of the rocks, looking down at me. I feel no admonishment or disapproval from this figure. There's a part of me that is self-conscious initially, but it feels like somehow or other in this moment there is something trying to bridge the gap of my denied cultural history, to set me back on track. Others might find it spooky, hair-raising stuff, but I'm not frightened.

There is no verbal communication between us, just an unspoken understanding that extends well beyond the limitation of words. Perhaps he's an embodiment of someone who has survived the Frontier Wars and massacres. Or maybe an ancestor keeping 'blak watch' over me. Either way, the vision I experience that night gives me clarity and purpose. It guides me to return to my roots, to stand tall and be proudly, unapologetically, Aboriginal.

But then I am, after all, stuffed to the gills on drugs, so I continue on my route to seek sanctuary at the hostel in Fitzroy.

Following a hearty breakfast and good cheer I surreptitiously count my ill-gotten gains, then head out to connect with one of my dealers. A routine that is tiresome and compelling, with a repetitiveness draining, at every turn, my soul.

CHAPTER 1

STOLEN

Thanks to Australia's shameful Assimilation Policy I was snatched like a little lamb from the breast of my young mother, Blanchie Charles, at the tender age of four months. Placed into City Mission Home for babies in Melbourne's inner-north suburb of Brunswick, I became a ward of the state. I was kept there until the age of two, then moved on to the next institution – Box Hill Boys' Home. There I was, a lone blak child among two hundred white faces, not another registered Aboriginal child to be seen.

I think about how Mum would've suffered back in Daish's Paddock, a blakfella camp near Shepparton-Mooroopna, having all eleven of her babies forcibly taken away from her. I think of the further pain she'd have endured had she known at the time that I, her eldest baby, would be subjected to repeated beatings, sexual abuse and desperate loneliness. Knowing that would've likely destroyed her. They say when a child is born, so is a mother. That so many First Nations families, women in particular, were not afforded the basic human right of raising their own children is deplorable.

Located in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, these days Box Hill is home to a large, bustling shopping area typical of a suburban metropolis. The precinct doubles as a major transport hub for commuters to venture to, from and across the city. Businesses in the suburb reflect the large Asian population, who bring a distinct multicultural feel to the area. But it hasn't always been so diverse. During my time at Box Hill Boys' Home, it was a very white, working-class place, with plenty of market gardens and bush retreats.

As a child, I wasn't necessarily conscious of *not* seeing blak and brown faces, but hindsight has shown me how this sense of isolation and difference became a load for me to bear over the years. I wasn't really aware of my Aboriginality. It was only when one bully said to me, 'You

blakfellas killed Captain Cook!' that I flipped. One punch and he shut up. I became a little angry ant, easy to rile, lashing out.

It takes my breath away to look at rare photos from this period and to see I'm very obviously the only registered Aboriginal child in the home. The Assimilation Policy was strategic and deliberate in keeping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids separated; ensuring they were completely isolated so there'd be no cultural or racial connection for them to even think of pursuing family ties.

Back in the day, Box Hill Boys' Home had a good reputation as an open institution that housed the city's forgotten children. But, as was only revealed many years later, it was a place that also housed forbidden, dark secrets; unspeakable crimes committed against the children placed in its care. Entering through the large gates of the boys' home, you'd see three impressive-looking buildings – mansions, really. Each building provided accommodation for boys of different age groups, from babies and toddlers through to those starting their teens. Turning into the driveway, you'd come upon a quadrangle which had grassed areas in each of the four corners. They've since poured cement over them, but back then, you weren't allowed to walk on the grass. The only exception was the bed-wetters. They had to stand in those corners for hours at a time in their soiled pyjamas and slippers, where everyone could see them. Best believe humiliation was something the home did very bloody well. As I was a bed-wetter until the age of eleven, I was subjected to this public form of humiliation on many occasions. It was a punishment that was delivered come rain, hail or shine.

My earliest memory at Box Hill involves being freezing cold and sleeping on the verandah of the babies' section when I was about four or five years old. Sleeping overnight there was the rather harsh punishment meted out to the toddlers and smaller kids who wet their beds. My guess is they did it so that they could air out the mattresses. There was a flyscreen on the verandah and you could see straight out into the yard. I remember there were huge poplar trees that looked, to my young eyes and active imagination, like people of the night. You'd see their silhouettes slowly flowing and swaying, with the wind howling under the dim glow of the moonlight, and you'd be too scared to get out of bed. The combined creepiness of the trees' slow movement, along with the howling, frightened the bejesus out of me.

To this day, directly across the road from the home is the famous Surrey Hills water tower, familiar to anyone who's driven along Elgar Road in Box Hill. Growing up, I thought of this tower as a sentinel standing over the boys' home, keeping guard over the insidious secrets behind that wrought-iron gate. It loomed large in our childhood. There was even an alma mater song which paid homage to it, called 'Water Tower Strong'. As young kids, we'd march along and sing the song enthusiastically:

*To the east and north lies the Dandenong Range
The south the Tasman Sea
As the sun sets through the city sky
The water towers in between
A water tower strong
That's the place where we belong
And our motto is fidelity,
Steadily surely la la la la
Advance the Box Hill boys ...*

I used to love singing it at the top of my lungs while marching along with my fellow miniature comrades in our bright blue blazers, with 'Fidelity', the home's motto, on the pocket.

I was eventually moved along to the dorm for young boys, referred to as Number Four, for kids aged between about six to ten years or so. During the years in this building I was not abused, but nor was I shown love, support or guidance from any of the adults.

At around age eleven or twelve I was sent to the dorm for older boys. This majestic building was commonly referred to as Number One. It was where some of the darkest moments of my life took place. Of the three buildings, that is the only one that remains standing today.

Upon entering the downstairs area, polished floors led you to the kitchen, which was connected to the long dining hall. It was here that a bunch of us older boys would congregate to eat together three times a day. And although ungodly acts took place day in and day out at Number One, we did collective prayers before each meal; praying alongside those who did unspeakable things to us.

Religion was a core part of daily life in the home. And so conditioned was I in the ways of the Salvos, that I was deeply religious for years. I

totally and utterly believed in God and loved learning stories from the Bible. It sounds bloody ridiculous now, but I wanted to *be* the donkey carrying Jesus over the palm fronds. It's Bunjil – the great wedge-tailed eagle and deity that oversees Kulin lands across Victoria – who guides me nowadays. But back then you would've been hard pushed to find a more enthusiastic Bible-bashing happy chappie than me. It was the highlight of the week for me when we were marched down to the Salvos' Citadel in downtown Box Hill. The church music and Salvation Army community gave me a sense of belonging. Inside we'd see the row of twenty or so ladies playing their tambourines with gusto, backed by a 38-piece brass band. It gave me a real buzz, leaving me swooning and joyous. Church music was perhaps my first taste of showbiz and public performance.

Beyond my religious education, I attended the state school located on the premises of the boys' home. It was known as SS4151. Later, long after I'd left, the home started to send kids offsite to Box Hill Tech and Nunawading High. Kids from the home were independently given train or bus fares to attend schools on the outside. Outsourcing education for the boys' home students became more common as funding started to dry up.

Despite being a willing learner, I was often overlooked for educational opportunities. Other kids would be taught things like geography, or arithmetic – which I didn't do well at – while I was sent off to clean the quadrangle, or to spend an hour watering the gardens instead. Most of my assigned jobs would include quite menial tasks. Still, I had a gift for gardening, and with my green thumb I became an expert in growing chrysanthemums. The school even won awards for the beauties I tended to. I remember one flower blooming nearly as big as my head!

Though I wasn't encouraged to be academic, I did have the benefit of one particular teacher, my favourite, who took it upon himself to give me elocution lessons. I think because I was Aboriginal he thought I needed to be assimilated. And what better way to do it than to teach me the Queen's English?

I was introduced to famous speeches and had a natural talent for memorising and reciting them, which held me in good stead for my future acting days of learning lines and performing. Speeches like the Gettysburg Address were moving to me and although I didn't necessarily understand the context of the words, I liked the sound of them. This teacher's efforts ensured I left the home a well-spoken laddie, with crisp enunciation. They

also ensured I felt confused, wondering why I was singled out for special treatment. I wanted the same opportunities to learn as the other boys. I found it hard to articulate why it felt hurtful – even when it was for seemingly good things – but I couldn't shake the feeling that my dark skin played a part. Still, this same teacher also taught me other useful information, such as the value of currency – pennies, dinas, shillings, bobs. This would come in handy when I later ventured into the world on my own.

Back then, the home had two paddocks and a great swimming pool on the premises. There used to be a storage area beneath the school building where you could disappear and forget all your problems, something I did often. The other thing I'd do when I wanted peaceful time alone was disappear into the long grass down the back of the buildings. This, for me, was a place of sanctuary and offered a momentary escape from other hardships. If I was ever joined in the long grass by other boys, we'd play cowboys and Indians. Of course, I'd be the cowboy as the Indians were always painted as the baddies. There's a picture of me wearing the group cowboy uniform, posing alongside other kids. We look happy as Larry, not a care in the world. I looked like a blackened Audie Murphy, one of the most decorated of American soldiers in World War II.

Those of us who weren't taken out to visit family or friends on weekends were kept busy cleaning our buildings from top to bottom. Throughout the week, everyone had tasks they had to complete, and the jobs were often done pretty quickly because there were so many kids to share the labour. Come Saturday mornings, you'd see a small bunch of us in Number One on our hands and knees, in our socks, polishing the floors. I can still remember that pungent, waxy smell of the polish. It was so strong you could almost feel your nostril hairs burning. As far as chores went, it was great fun. After cleaning, we'd go to the corner of the room, then take turns running full pelt and sliding on the freshly waxed floors. Then we'd go back to work, polishing the railings and banisters. Each weekend, Number One would be left looking spick and span, good as new, ready for inspection.

Upstairs were our dormitories, with our beds neatly lined up alongside each other. One member of staff had a room directly opposite my bed. He was one of my abusers. He often came to my bed to do painful and humiliating things in the middle of the night. It wasn't just me, either. He used to take one or two boys at a time into his room. I never had to do that,

but I remember how the bastard would stand and supposedly ‘supervise us’ each day when we showered. He’d watch us with beady eyes, staring out from a red, sweaty face. It was incredibly intimidating, not to mention uncomfortable and disgusting. All the boys knew what this bloody perv was up to. We’d attempt to position our bodies and use our hands to cover up and show as little as possible. Sometimes you’d hear one of the lads say, ‘Look, the bastard’s watching.’ But if he wanted to cop an eyeful, he’d demand you remove your hands so he could see everything. It’s no wonder I spent a period of my life trying to make myself as small as possible. Then, of course, come Sunday mornings, this man, this predator, would casually walk alongside us as we marched from the home down the road to the Salvation Army Citadel service.

We had some unique experiences living in the boys’ home. Total strangers used to drive into the quadrangle and give us fruit and other goods. I recall there was an old gent we called the Lolly Man, who drove a three-wheeler Morris. The poor bugger had the shakes real bad and his arm would tremble as he’d reach into this big bag of lollies. His arrival would cause much excitement and we’d all wait expectantly for the goods. He’d grab a handful of lollies and, with his trembling arm, suddenly fling them in the air. What a hoot! There’d be a flurry of movement as kids dived in to scoop up as many as possible. The Lolly Man would always point and motion for me to stand next to him. I’d be watching everybody gleefully grab their lollies off the ground and he’d pass one to me. Then he’d reach down to give me my very own full bag of lollies. Something about this act of kindness told me the old fella acknowledged I was Aboriginal. And that, in some way, made me special to him. Being so young, I accepted the lollies without ever asking this gentleman’s story. He never did anything untoward, and only ever showed us all kindness and generosity.

Even though I was often singled out for my blakness, in many ways I was also just one of the boys. There would be nights when a group of us would sneak out at midnight in our pyjamas and slippers to play games like touch tag or some war game down in the great outdoors. We’d creep down from the top of Number One and duck across the quadrangle at a run, then disappear behind the swimming pool. Looking back now, it was pretty brazen of us – and somehow we were never caught! But those were some of the fun times that were had there, right alongside the dark moments.

With the level of abuse going on in the home, it makes sense that there was sometimes trepidation among us when night time approached. But kids can also be very resilient. I didn't necessarily live in fear of going to bed every night. I buried the abuse deep down each time it happened. I could almost forget it entirely, until the moment I was in bed and somebody's hand was riffling through the sheets.

People wonder how survivors, especially children, are able to go on. I suppose it's like a war zone in some ways. You become immune to violence. That's what it was for me. I knew the abuse was to be part of my miserable existence at that point in time, and couldn't see anything further. Not beyond, nor behind – just to accept that this was my immediate situation and experience. To wish to be elsewhere, or to dwell on leaving, was useless. I took a pragmatic and realistic view that this was how things were. Perhaps I knew even then that to fight it was futile.

The traumatic, cyclical nature of abuse meant that some of the kids who witnessed or experienced it went on to abuse others. Not only did I have to contend with abuse from adults at the home, therefore, but also some other boys. The official rule was once you turned fourteen, you left the home and had to fend for yourself in the big, wide world. But some kids as old as nineteen were still hanging around. They were Salvation Army cadets and officers-in-training who had started off at Box Hill Boys' Home, but were then taken to the Salvation Army College to be trained up. I can only suspect that they continued the abusive practices that were done to them. It's a cycle. A vicious cycle.

There was an older boy who molested me in the home. Thanks to my job as school cleaner, I knew how to sneak into the building and slide the lock so he couldn't get in. That was a small measure of protection. I liked to be alone in the school. I knew how spotless the floor was, having just cleaned it myself, and I loved the feeling of lying there quietly and peacefully. My other escape from this boy was to go to the back of the school and climb the pine trees. Sometimes I'd stay there for up to three hours on a Saturday, sitting high up near the top branches, talking to the maggies and other birds nestled up there. The maggies never bothered me. Others may have dealt with their dive-bombing, but the maggies were my friends.

Out the back window of the dormitory you could see the quadrangle, and within that area the two recreation – or gym – rooms. Inside were

hobby horses, swing bars, ladders and other indoor play equipment. Sometimes I'd disappear there on my own while the rest of the kids played outside. One time, I decided to have a bit of an adventure. I shimmed right up to the ceiling using the ladders and then climbed to the top of the roof. I thought it'd be fun, but, truth be told, once I was up there, I nearly shat myself. I was completely alone and I had zero clue how to get back down.

In the end I slowly started to manoeuvre my way to safety, much like a koala, carefully grabbing onto the big wooden beams and iron rods to steady me and support my weight. The final step involved sliding part of the way down a pole and hopping across to a hanging vertical iron ladder. From there, I could safely drop down the rest of the way onto the gymnasium mat. But as I attempted to step across to the ladder, I slipped, lost my footing and took a hell of a fall onto the floor. There I was, flat on my back lookin' up, hurting, in shock, panicking because I'd been winded and couldn't breathe. I thought I was going to die. I couldn't even call out for help. I lay there gasping like a fish out of water until my breathing returned to normal. But I ended up okay. Story of my life: pick yourself up and keep moving on.

One particularly fond memory for me during my time in Number One was listening to the radio. It sat in the corner of the upper area of the building, just above the stairs. Every now and then we were allowed to listen to different radio shows. My favourite one was on a Wednesday night. It was called *Inner Sanctum Mysteries* and featured American actor Vincent Price. The timbre in his voice was beautiful and electrifying and I loved listening to the stories that jumped out of the radio's speaker. Each episode would start off with the sound of a creaking door and we kids would be leaning in, on the edge of our seats, listening. Inevitably, as we were being drawn into the drama and mystery of an episode, some bloody ratbag kid would give one of us a jab and we'd shriek in fright. I'd jump to the roof and gasp at the boy that'd done his well-timed 'gotcha', and we'd collapse into giggles. I loved those stories and especially loved the sound effects. Perhaps it stirred the thespian within me, who was nowhere to be seen at this stage of my life and wouldn't be let loose for at least another decade.

I didn't realise until recent years, but the gym at Box Hill Boys' Home is what sparked my interest in acting. One of the disciplinary actions at the home dictated that if you were pulled up on some indiscretion, you were to be punished at the hands of an older kid in the home. You and a handpicked

bigger boy had to put boxing gloves on, then you'd be locked in the gym and the bigger boy would be ordered to bash you. I never knew of a smaller kid than me who escaped that punishment unscathed.

On one occasion the boy handpicked for my punishment was Barry Leighton. I can't even remember the reason for my punishment, but I remember the two of us being ordered to put our boxing gloves on and have it out. I gulped, looking up at his towering figure. We were shoved into the room and the sound of the door slamming behind us thundered in my ears. Frightened, I looked at him wide-eyed and he gently said something along the lines of, 'Now, Jack, I'm not gonna hurt you. I'll just slap your face a little bit to make you red and bring tears to your eyes, but when I punch my gloves together or punch myself in the gut, you gotta make a noise like I'm hurting you, okay?' I was relieved beyond words, and could only grin in agreement. I think Bunjil must have been watching out for me.

Barry furrowed his brow and nodded at me, indicating he was about to start. He proceeded to bang his gloves together and hit himself in the stomach. As he launched into his 'delivery' of the punishment, I groaned and yelped in pain, as though we were embroiled in almighty fisticuffs. Once we'd been at this charade for a good fifteen minutes, Barry winked. He slapped my face hard enough to cause some redness, bringing tears to my eyes. He messed up my hair, then led me to the exit where, with a stern face, he knocked on the rec room door. The major, satisfied that I'd been soundly pummelled by an older kid, opened the door and we walked out as I continued to feign agony and pain – complete with a mild limp. My debut acting role was a resounding success.

I've often spoken of the kids in the home as being my first and foremost siblings. Even though some of them were standovers and bullies, the rest of us saw ourselves as brothers suffering under the same Salvation Army flag. While there were bad moments, we also had our good times as well. I remember occasions when I'd wake up and do my ablutions before heading down to the kitchen to visit an older staff member called Mrs Johnson. She and I got on well. She showed me rare acts of kindness in the home by taking me out every now and then to the pictures, or on outings, separate to the other kids. She was genuinely nice to me, an adult working at the home who didn't try and get in my pants.

For decades after I left the home, I carried my silence and shame of those years, conveniently blocking out names and incidents. My defence mechanism was to pretend it never happened. I didn't dwell on what I'd endured there or what I'd do if I saw any of my abusers again. I never got counselling. I counselled myself through those terrible times. That silencing of my pain and anguish led to a heroin addiction, which took over much of my adult life. It numbed the deep pain. But in the end it couldn't numb *all* the pain, and in truth on more than one occasion I attempted suicide, but failed each time.

These days, I see myself as a survivor of Box Hill Boys' Home, the second-most vicious Salvation Army home in Victoria. I've come out the other side. I find it cathartic to talk about my abuse. Every time I speak about those difficult moments and verbalise those memories, whether on paper, on screen or into a microphone, it's like I'm bleeding them out. Emotions flare up in the telling, and that, to me, is a natural part of the healing process. I just let it be.

One of the best pieces of advice I can give to anybody struggling with the trauma of past abuse is to talk about it. It's difficult to open up, but I try to encourage folks to reflect on themselves during those moments of suffering – without a sense of blame and shame. What you were subjected to is a part of your lived experience and, as unfortunate as it is, it happened. Come what may, you have to relegate it to a section of the old grey matter up top. Leave it there, until you wanna talk about it in a group session or it comes up naturally in conversation.

I took part in the class action against the Salvation Army for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, but it was rough. In giving evidence to this Royal Commission mob I had to expose what had happened to me in the home in the first place: the emotional, mental and sexual abuse that I had endured. I'm glad I did it. It's hard to convey the damage that place did to me. It wasn't just the abuse that traumatised me – Box Hill Boys' Home stripped me of my Aboriginality. The place turned me into a whitewashed, well-spoken, assimilated, sexually confused soldier of the cross. A Salvationist. It was only after years of struggle, through helping others and healing myself that I would begin to rebuild my life.

CHAPTER 2

KINSHIP CONNECTIONS

It was early June and the year was 1957. The time had finally come: I was leaving the boys' home. At fourteen years of age, after spending nearly my entire life there, the bittersweet day was upon me. I was filled with a sense of trepidation and relief. On the one hand, I was finally escaping the home and the memories. On the other, I was saying goodbye to the closest thing to siblings I'd ever had – and not just metaphorically.

A month before leaving the home, I was quite taken aback by the sudden appearance of a boy who came up and shyly said his last name was Charles. He was registered as Arthur Charles and we weren't supposed to speak to each other. I wasn't going to let that stop me. I secretly managed to chat to him briefly – and as soon as I did, I knew, I just *knew*, he was my brother. I told him so. Before I could talk to him further, though, it was time to say goodbye to Box Hill.

Of course, they weren't going to let me go without a final reminder of the power they held. To avoid punishment after wetting the bed one day I had stuffed my pyjamas in a crevice behind dorm Number One. One of the officers found it, and picked the moment right at my departure to make me pay. He was a creepy bastard, a Salvation Army major who called me into the office to deliver a cruel parting gift of half a dozen whacks from his cane that final morning.

Afterwards, with tears in my eyes, I slowly pulled up my pants, wincing at the pain from the lashings. I gathered my cardboard suitcase, filled with what few clothes they'd given me, and turned to finally leave the home forever. As I walked out the gated entrance of Box Hill Boys' Home, I took one final look at the building and the well-tended quadrangle and gardens, and at that water tower standing strong.

The Aborigines Welfare Board supplied me with a yearlong train ticket. It felt a small symbol of my newfound independence. I made my way to the

local railway station and jumped on a Red Rattler train to head to my new home. I would soon be living in a nearby Melbourne suburb called Blackburn. At fourteen I was still a ward of the state, but I'd now be living with a foster family – the Murphys.

I had come to know the Murphys during my earlier days of living at Box Hill. I'd connected with them through their eldest daughter, Norma Nichols. From when I was quite young, Norma would pick me up from the home and take me on outings. I'd stay with her and her husband, Kevin, on weekends. He worked at Beaurepaires in the city and drove a mighty impressive Austin A-Seven. They'd collect me on Friday arvos from Box Hill and we'd drive into the city for a day outing. Along the way, we'd go past the iconic neon-lit Skipping Girl sign, advertising vinegar, in Melbourne's industrial, inner-city suburb of Richmond. Like most kids in Melbourne, seeing the Skipping Girl always gave me a thrill. Hours later, after spending time in the city, we'd head back to the Nichols' house in Blackburn and I'd spend the weekend there. Sometimes Norma would take me to Box Hill baths and teach me how to swim. Word was that she was once an Olympics contender when it came to swimming, but when I knew her, she was leading a quiet, suburban life with her husband.

Whenever I stayed with the Nichols, Norma would take me to visit her mother, Mrs Murphy, who lived locally. Mrs Murphy was a frumpy, kind, stern-faced widow, whose husband, Spud Murphy, had died before I met the family. She lived in a very homely two-bedroom brick and weatherboard house. Out the front was a lovely garden and neat lawns. I remember tending to the roses that filled the garden. Inside, the house was cosy and warm, and the lounge room had a radio and a television. This was a huge deal.

Mrs Murphy had twin sons living with her, Brian and Barry, who were slightly older than me. They were bodgies, part of a youth subculture during the 1950s that had a somewhat rebellious style and attitude; the Aussie version of rocker or greaser culture, as it was known in the United Kingdom and United States. You could pick them out by their slicked-back hair and slightly leery manner. The twins played a lot of records at home – records I wasn't allowed to touch – by artists like Elvis and Johnny O'Keefe. At that stage, I was into Pat Boone, Nat King Cole and Slim Dusty, so my encounter with the bodgie twins was quite the musical education. Beyond appearances, Brian and Barry were actually wonderful kids. They took to

me from the start and treated me like a little brother. They'd dink me along Tyrell Avenue where we lived, as well as through neighbouring streets and laneways around Blackburn.

Those weekends I loved jumping on the pushbike and riding around the many orchards and bushes, exploring the local area alone. Even from a young age, I was something of a fringe dweller who liked escaping the crowd and doing my own thing. If I wanted company, though, I didn't have to venture too far. I got to know the rest of the kids living in the street who were the Tyrell Avenue mob, as it were.

I assumed I'd get to live with the Nichols family after I moved out of the boys' home, but things didn't pan out that way. Mrs Murphy developed a real fondness for me. Soon enough, I was staying over at hers too, on a mattress wedged between the twins. I lived with them over a Christmas period one year and perhaps that was the time that sealed it for Mrs Murphy to take me on. I can't be certain why I ended up with Mrs Murphy instead of Norma and Kevin, but I think she wanted me for herself. I've got letters written by her to the Aborigines Welfare Board, explaining that she'd become fond of 'young Jacky' and asking if I could live with them permanently. The letters don't mention another pertinent detail: that when it came to fostering children, people got a bit more money if they took on an Aboriginal kid. This was another way the government enacted its Assimilation Policy.

The day I left Box Hill Boys' Home for good, I caught the train to Blackburn and walked the short distance from the station to the Murphys' home. I was a resilient kid, and tried as much as possible to settle easily into my new life. But even though I was being accepted as part of this new family, I still felt I was something of a tolerated outsider.

Once I started living with Mrs Murphy, I called her 'Mum'. This was something very much encouraged by the Aborigines Welfare Board, who continued to insist I was an orphan. I didn't mind at all at the time – I had never had a mother before, and was happy to have one now.

On a couple of occasions, Mrs Murphy took me to the Cottee's factory where she worked six days a week, and would show me off to her co-workers. I could see she was a hard worker, and well liked by her

colleagues. They all thought I was cute, which made 'Mum' grin from ear to ear.

I soon came to realise she was not a religious woman, but I was still a pretty devout Christian at that point so I'd sneak out the window on Sunday nights to join in the local Methodist service in downtown Blackburn. The prayers and praises-be filled me with joy and comfort, giving me a sense of being part of an extended community. I joined the choir and I loved the singing and music.

One of my favourite memories of living with the Murphy family was Christmas. Each year we would head to Rosebud beach, located along Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, a picturesque getaway for many families over the yuletide season. For a kid, it was heaven. I loved the feel of soft, warm sand beneath my feet and the sounds and smells and feel of the ocean. Those days were perfect. The weather was always predictable and just right. There was an occasional sun shower or rain storm sometimes, but nothing like the chaos we get nowadays.

I got used to living with the Murphys. They had a horse that belonged to the twins, and in exchange for dinking me on their bike I took over looking after it. He was a beautiful seventeen-hand bay gelding and he lived in the paddock at the end of Tyrell Avenue. One of my chores was feeding him, and as I got older, I started riding him too. Being of a shorter stature, I needed a rock to climb on so I could reach the saddle.

One weekend I rode the horse up to Box Hill to say hello to the boys at the home. There I was, riding this beautiful horse, with Rex, the family Labrador, running alongside us. You can imagine the excitement when I got there! The boys loved it! Little Jack Charles on a horse? That's a tough act to follow.

Mrs Murphy was generous in her own stern way. I didn't love her, but I respected her. She was a homebody, someone who spent a lot of time in the kitchen. But every now and then on Saturday nights, she'd take me and the twins to the speedways in a nearby suburb. Brian and Barry were apprentice mechanics at the local Volkswagen garage, opposite the cinema in Blackburn Village, so of course they were right into cars and petrol. VW motors were often used at the speedways and it made sense for Mrs Murphy to spend time with all her sons this way. The dirt thrown up by the drag cars was pretty awesome, along with the screaming motors and excited crowds. I'd go nuts, thrilled to be close to the action.

Blackburn was a bustling, respectable hub throughout the week, but every now and then things got turned up a notch. My foster brothers, their bodgie mates and their widgie girlfriends would all descend on the cinema (also known as the 'bughouse') on the weekend. Big mobs would travel down from Ferntree Gully too. Sometimes a mate and I would wander out from the movie theatre to watch the crowds of youths fighting each other. We would stay at the top of the theatre steps, knowing we were too little to get involved, and I suppose that my foster brothers wouldn't want me cramping their style.

I remember one particular evening, I saw a bunch of kids getting off the train at Blackburn station, joining the masses in the village. The numbers kept growing. The air was thick with tension and testosterone. The boys were all ribbing each other and carrying on, and it got quite intense. People started tearing palings off nearby shops, using other bits of wood and grabbing iron bars and just going at each other. It was like something out of a movie. I legged it out of there quick smart, before anyone could clock me.

The local community was understandably worried about these sorts of shenanigans. Mrs Murphy, having three boys to look after, probably got more than a few grey hairs worrying about us. I remember her giving the twins a right old strapping when they got home late one Saturday night. I'd been with them at the time, but she never laid into me like she did with the twins. It was punishment for keeping me out late at night.

The Aborigines Welfare Board organised for me to be given an apprenticeship at RMS Glass, a glass bevelling factory on Riversdale Road in Auburn. Entering the workforce gave me a new lease on life, a purpose. My starting wage was four-and-a-half pounds, the standard rate at that time. I learned the fine art of budgeting through Mrs Murphy and the twins. I had to be good with what little coin I was earning, since I was expected to pay a portion of my income to Mrs Murphy. At the time, I didn't think much of it. I was part of the family and contributing to the household. That said, there were times when I could only afford a quarter loaf of bread for lunch. I learned during those periods to just make do, and never asked my workmates for even a pence.

As luck would have it, I was good at my job. I was reliable and fitted well in the close-knit team. I worked with a bloody great bunch o' fellas. They'd share stories of their lives, what they'd done during the war years and how each time they'd returned from the war, there would be a new kid from Box Hill Boys' Home working at RMS Glass. I met a couple of ex-Box Hill boys at the factory, as well as another kid from a different home. We all got along famously. I also got along well with my boss, Alf, who showed me a lot of kindness and looked out for me.

Alf used to love bringing his mates to the factory to meet the little blakfella he had working in the back. I'd been working at RMS for a year or so when one day Alf came to me and said, 'Jack, I want you to meet a mate of mine.'

'Righto. Another one?!' I thought. There was a fella in his thirties or forties standing before me.

'Jack Charles, meet Don Bradman. Don Bradman, meet Jack Charles.' There I was, minding my own business at the factory, when all of a sudden I was shaking hands with one of Australia's biggest sporting legends. At the time I didn't appreciate just how big a deal this was. And, would you believe, years later, when I started acting, one of my earliest roles was for an ABC series called *Behind the Legend*, playing the part of Eddie Gilbert, the Aboriginal Queensland fast bowler from Barambah Aboriginal Reserve in Cherbourg who bowled the great Donald Bradman out for a duck, twice.

I grew to love working as a glass beveller and making mirrors. I enjoyed the opportunity to do night work every now and then to earn some overtime. Some nights I wouldn't get home until 9.30 p.m. I didn't have much of a life beyond work and, really, I had nowhere else to go. When I knocked off I headed straight home, where Mum would have my meal in the oven waiting for me.

Earning an honest buck, learning a trade and being part of a tight team were just some of the positive changes that helped me settle into my new life since leaving the home. After years of assimilation and whitewashing, there was a big hole in my sense of self, though I didn't realise it at the time. I kept the lid on my Aboriginality well and truly closed, but that was all about to change.

My fellow workers at RMS Glass began gently poking my conscience, planting the seed in my head about reconnecting with my heritage. Soon enough they were encouraging me to go into Fitzroy and Collingwood.

‘You should go, Jack,’ they’d say. ‘Lots of blakfellas there. Ya never know, ya just might have family among ’em.’ *Family*. Was that a word I really understood?

My Aboriginality was rarely discussed with the Murphys. On the odd occasion it came up with Mum, she would simply insist I was an orphan and that was the end of the story.

It wasn’t just my blakness that marked me out as different. From my younger teen years, I knew I had gay inclinations. Others might have picked up on it. Kevin Nichols – the Murphys’ son-in-law who used to take me out on drives with Norma, Mrs Murphy’s daughter – tried to harden me up by getting me to play footy for Blackburn United. But it was too rough for me. When one day I was bashed into the mud, I thought, ‘Barley Charlie, that’s it. Too much violence,’ and I quit.

Despite the constant shutdowns, I kept trying to ask Mrs Murphy questions about my background. I recall one particular moment, which happened about nine months after I’d started living with her. It took all my courage to raise this with Mum – she was so set in her ways. During this private encounter I tentatively said to her: ‘There was a young fella that came to Box Hill just before I left, Mum. His name was Archie and he had the same last name, Charles. I reckon he could be my brother.’ She responded with, ‘No, he couldn’t be. No, no, Jack. All those kids are orphans too.’ I didn’t argue the point but her dismissiveness stung my soul. I knew she was wrong.

I didn’t tell Mum that I’d also met two small Aboriginal girls who I thought might be my sisters. I’d visited the Nunawading Girls Home in Winlton to perform a concert with the church group, and had immediately noticed them sitting in the crowd. As I sang at the top of my lungs I kept looking at them. They happily grinned back. Once our group had finished performing, I approached them and asked their names. The elder of the two smiled shyly and responded: ‘My name’s Esme and this is my little sister, Eva Jo.’

‘What are your last names?’ I asked, sparked by curiosity.

‘Charles,’ Esme replied.

‘Charles!’ I exclaimed loudly. ‘I’m a Charles! Wouldn’t it be funny if we were brother and sisters?’

I would find out years later that we *were* siblings. But that night, we simply stood together and chatted a little longer, until it was time for me to

leave.

I left the girls that evening wondering – just as I did with Archie – about the possibility they were my long-denied siblings. Looking at them had been eerily like glancing into a warped mirror. It was as if deep down I knew the truth. Family, culture and community will always find a way to bring kin together, even if the system deliberately tries to keep you ignorant and apart. And, who knows? Perhaps Bunjil also played a part; conspiring to put me on a new path in my life that would eventually lead me to family.

I kept my head down at the factory, ignoring the boys' suggestions that I go and find my mob in Fitzroy. I steadily worked away, but something inside me that had been kept dormant for my entire life began to stir.

After a couple of years of my apprenticeship, I was earning good money, and almost at the end of my three-year apprenticeship. Only a few months to go. Each week, I'd get my pay packet, then take it straight home to give to 'Mum', paying full board.

It was becoming harder to ignore the boys at work, and I couldn't get the idea of visiting Fitzroy out of my head. What if I had family there? What if I could finally get the answers about who I was? What if I finally found a sense of belonging? I felt scared and nervous. If that area was a big Aboriginal community, how was I going to begin to explain my life story? I had basically been raised as a whitefella. I'd never been around other blakfellas. But, as disconnected as I initially felt, I desperately wanted to start making that connection.

One evening after a long day at work, on pay day, I decided to do it. Bloody hell – the nerves, mate! I didn't tell anyone, not even the fellas at the factory. I had to just get it over with.

The year was 1960. I was just shy of my seventeenth birthday and only six months off completing an apprenticeship for a trade I really loved. I jumped on a tram and set off in search of my culture, history and destiny. I hadn't thought of asking permission from Mrs Murphy. I didn't think to ring her up and say I'd be home late because I was going in to Fitzroy. I never had the presence of mind to do that. I knew what I was going to do was a sin. I felt it had to be done.

Connecting to culture and kin would complete the wonderful stage I was finally at in my life, after the damage done in the home. I'd landed on

my feet and things were going well. As the old-style tram rattled heavily along the tracks, I was nervous and blissfully unaware of the danger of what I was doing. I had no idea at the time, but because I was still a ward of state, it was actually a criminal act to seek out my birth family. It was something you could be imprisoned for.

Finally, the moment arrived. I bent down, grabbed my satchel and stood up to pull the cord, signalling I needed to alight from the tram. I edged past fellow passengers and as I waited for the tram to come to a complete stop my hand tightly gripped the pole near the door. This was it. There was no turning back. I had no idea what I expected to happen, but I gulped down my tensions and jumped off the tram.

I stood on the corner of Napier and Gertrude streets, trying to get my bearings about where to go. Within minutes, an old blakfella approached me and grabbed my arm. I jumped, then smiled nervously as he stood close and looked directly into my eyes.

‘You’re Blanchie Charles’s boy!’ he shouted, in a tone that sounded like a cross between excitement and accusation. Blanchie Charles. My brain felt zapped, and a soft jolt travelled through my body. It was the first time I’d heard this name. Blanchie Charles. That was Mum’s name. My real mum’s name.

The man gestured for me to follow him into the iconic Builders Arms hotel, one block up Gertrude Street.

Walking into that building absolutely blew my mind. Nearly every face in the place was blak. I couldn’t believe it! For my entire life, I’d been the only noticeably blak person in any space and yet here I was, in a sea of blakfellas. I couldn’t believe this was Melbourne – I’d never experienced a Melbourne that looked like *this*. I’m not gonna lie; it was overwhelming and scary. I wasn’t a drinker, so being in a pub felt awkward. Perhaps it was my inner Bible-basher silently cussing out my conscience for being in a heathen joint like that. As people began to notice my presence, they started rushing up to introduce themselves, all smiles, telling me we were family and explaining how we were related. I got hugs, friendly slaps on the back and offers of beer (which I politely declined).

I was engulfed by overwhelming feelings of shock and delight. It was like a piece had clicked into the jigsaw. People knew that I was a Charles.

They knew my mother, Blanchie.

I ripped open my pay packet, which I'd never done before. Mrs Murphy was always the one to open the envelope and dole out my share. I shouted a few beers and happily settled down with a lemon squash as I continued chatting, connecting and learning more about my culture, my family, these people.

One old woman revealed that my mum was still alive. 'She's up in Swan Hill, little fella. You have to go and see her. Oh, I'm gonna tell her about you, the first chance I get.'

So it was with great glee and joy that I arrived home at Mrs Murphy's after this life-changing visit. I saw the lights on as I approached the house and was happy that Mrs Murphy was still up so I could share my amazing news.

I bounced through the door and my first words, as I jumped up and down excitedly, were: 'Joy oh joy, Mum. I've just found Mum!'

Her reaction was not what I expected. She stood cold and distant. She dismissed me and reiterated what she'd always told me, that I was an orphan. My confusion turned to rage. We were soon embroiled in a furious argument. When she said, 'Those people will tell you anything,' I saw red.

'Well, I believe them!' I shot back, and raised my arms in emphasis.

'Get to bed!' she hissed, and backed off, but not before I saw the fright in her eyes. I was mad, sure, but I was so small – was she really frightened of me?

I headed to my room, my insides churning from the emotions of the day. I felt exhausted and relieved, but also devastated by Mrs Murphy's reaction. I took off my work clothes and changed into my pyjamas, deciding that as soon as my apprenticeship was done, I would head up to Swan Hill, in the north-west of Victoria, to see Mum. My real mum, Blanchie Charles.

I had just finished putting on my pyjamas when 'Mum' called my name. I came out and saw her standing at the front door. She motioned to me, telling me I had to go outside. Puzzled, I went out the door. It was the police. Mrs Murphy didn't say a word. Two policemen, who towered over me, escorted me to the divvy wagon. They told me to jump in. I didn't understand why they'd been called, or what I had done wrong, but I was in too much shock to speak.

Once I was secured in the back, I heard the engine start and the car began to move. We drove for what felt like an eternity. I was despondent and frightened; I had no idea where they were taking me. Eventually we stopped. The door opened and I was told to step out. We were at a place called Turana, a youth detention centre in Parkville. It was the place that marked the beginning of my criminalisation. The police delivered me to the office registrar, who shot me a stony glare and signed me in.

Over the years, I've had dreams of what would've happened if Mrs Murphy had accepted my news and bounced around joyously with me, holding my hand. What if she had celebrated my discovery, rather than punishing me? Where would I have ended up then? Instead, the night I discovered my blood kin, I lost my foster family. That night, I stopped believing in God.

CHAPTER 3

COMRADES

There I was, nearly seventeen and about six months off finishing the glass bevelling apprenticeship, locked up in a cell at Turana. Feeling disoriented and frightened, I settled down under the flimsy supplied blanket, wondering who the fuck I was and where the fuck I was. I had been told my whole life I was an orphan. Now my trip into Fitzroy had revealed that I was in fact Blanche Charles's son.

In one evening, I had gone from being recognised and accepted by the mob, to being banished by those I considered family.

Alone in my cell, I wept bitter tears into my pillow, wondering how on earth I'd ended up here. Eventually I fell into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, I heard the loud chatter of other young fellas and dragged my weary body out of bed, falling into line with the others. We headed into the dining area where I found myself face to face with my former comrades from Box Hill Boys' Home. It had been a while since I'd seen 'em, and we exchanged rowdy greetings as we lined up for brekkie. Little did I know that this was the first of twenty-two occasions I would be incarcerated throughout my life.

I was at Turana for two weeks and quickly reconnected with my Box Hill mates. I also made friends with other boys from Burwood and Bayswater Home.

It sounds strange to say, but I didn't resent being in youth detention. It felt like a bit of a holiday from the Murphys, and I was pleased to be in the company of old and new friends my age; it was a comfort. We were all outsiders, and I felt that us being locked up together again was just part of our journeys.

I didn't miss the Murphys, but I did miss working. I thought often of my co-workers and wondered how they were going. I had developed a solid

work ethic. Now that I was stuck in detention, without any structure or purpose, I became more bored each day.

I was released from Turana thanks to my RMS Glass boss, Alf. He'd called up Mrs Murphy asking for his 'favourite little worker', and found out I'd been sent away. I don't know the details of their conversation; all I know is that Alf offered to take care of me. He was as good as his word and bailed me out of Turana that same day.

I was very happy to return to work. I loved my glass bevelling job and had genuinely missed my colleagues. They were happy to have me back in the factory and very apologetic. They explained how terrible they'd felt but added: 'You know, Jack, you're out of Mrs Murphy's clutches now.' There were no hard feelings from my end. I was thankful they'd unlocked my culture within and opened up new possibilities and trajectories for me.

Not long after being released from Turana, I had to return to Mrs Murphy's house to collect my bank book. I greeted Mrs Murphy politely, nervously explaining that someone probably told her I was coming to collect it. Thrusting the book at me, she coldly responded, 'Well, here you are. And I don't want to see you anymore.' We never had any contact again. I fell out of touch with the bodgie twins, Brian and Barry, Norma and Kevin, along with the church mob too.

It may be difficult for others to understand, but I didn't blame Mrs Murphy for everything that happened. I still had respect for her, which I've carried to this day. I often think about the amount of hours she put in at the Cottee's factory. She was always busy, always working. I imagine it was hard being a widow and trying her darndest to keep the three young-'uns living under her roof on the straight and narrow. There's no denying that's a challenge for any parent. So, yeah, I don't harbour any resentment towards the Murphys and Nichols. I wish them all well, whatever they may be up to. And I thank them for allowing me to experience what it's like to live as a family.

Despite being incarcerated for trying to find my real mother, I couldn't shake the urge to try to discover more about her. And I kept thinking about the rest of my family too. There was that boy, Archie Charles, at the boys' home. Were we brothers? What about those girls I'd sung to? Were they really related to me? And there was another incident that kept going around in my mind. A memory that resurfaced. I had received a strange visit one day at Box Hill. I rarely had visitors, but one Sunday morning, I was called

to the office. When I walked in, there stood a beautifully dressed Aboriginal couple. They smiled when they saw me and the man said, 'Hello, Jack. I'm your Uncle Henry Charles and this is your Aunty Amy Charles. We're here to pick you up to take you out for the day.' I had no idea who they were, and whether they really were my aunty and uncle, but I was excited to enjoy a day away from the home. I raced up to the dorms, headed to my locker and quickly got dressed in my Sunday best. You wouldn't believe how thrilled I was that I was going to be taken out to a nearby park by these newfound relatives for a picnic, with cakes!

As we walked out the front of the property, my mouth dropped open. There sat a big, shiny Chevrolet. At this young age, you see, I hadn't met any Aboriginal people. And this couple were very well-off. It was so flash! All I could think was how clean they were and how clean the car was! I felt proud to be seen with them.

We drove to Surrey Park, a few minutes' drive away. Uncle Henry parked the car and we sat down for a picnic, watching some cricketers play nearby. It was lovely. Amy explained again that she and Henry were my aunt and uncle. It hadn't dawned on me at that point that I had family. I listened carefully to what they were telling me. Like everyone else in my life, when it came to my history, they were slim on details. I asked them if they knew where my mum was. They told me that they knew my mum but she was dead. They offered no other information beyond this.

I expected them to come back again the next week. In anticipation, I even donned my special Sunday outfit: knickerbockers, high socks, shirt and blazer. But they never returned.

No longer welcome at the Murphys', I was taken by a welfare officer to a gentlemen's residence on Glenferrie Road. A boarding house. From the outside, it was an ordinary-looking house. Nothin' flash. The building itself was quite large, similar in appearance to a stone cottage, with a neatly tiled roof and a lovely garden. Inside, everybody had their own room, fitted with a bed and desk. Each evening, your meals were cooked and if you weren't going to be home in time, you had to let them know. I'd slip into a phone booth and do that from time to time. Here, I could come and go as I pleased. The residence always knocked up good feeds too.

My room at Glenferrie was fairly sparse but I enjoyed living independently and having my own space. When I'd arrived, all I had was a cardboard suitcase with the few clothes I owned. This period of my life was a steep learning curve because, for the first time, I took full responsibility for buying my own clothes and whatever supplies I needed. I credit learning the art of budgeting to Mrs Murphy. Having very limited access to funds taught me how to stretch whatever earnings I made. Though daunting, it was exciting to be living in Glenferrie. It marked a time of new beginnings.

I was already familiar with this middle-class area in Melbourne's east because it was close to the location of the glass bevelling factory I worked at. And I'd been knocking around with a bunch of ex-Box Hill boys who were living in Auburn, the next suburb along. I'd bump into those boys from time to time, especially when the Hawthorn football games were on. They'd try to coax me out to watch the game with them. Back then it was a small football league known as the VFL (Victorian Football League). I didn't barrack for Hawthorn myself, but it was cheap to get into the games and everyone went. We'd head along and scream our tits off for Hawthorn. I remember the Aboriginal activist Burnum Burnum joining us one time. We partied into the early hours of the morning, but I never saw him after that. The next I heard of him, he'd been over to England and planted the Aboriginal flag on the white cliffs of Dover.

We fellas would also often hang around at the local swimming pool, or go ten-pin bowling, which I loved. The ex-Box Hill fellas went bowling a lot. The straight ones would head over to chat up the girls and the gay ones, well ... we'd just have to be content with handling heavy balls! If I recall correctly, Glenferrie was the first Victorian area to open a ten-pin bowling alley. We had lots of fun working, earning money and kicking around there after a long day in the factory.

After my stint in the gentlemen's residence, I ended up getting a rooming house right next to Glenferrie train station. This was when I really started knocking around with my boys' home mates, made even easier because we were living so close to each other. The rooming house was right near a joint called Ziegfeld Palais, which sat just above the local market. It was a popular venue for us young-'uns. Me and the fellas would polish up our fancy shoes before traipsing on upstairs to the 60/40 dance. These were social dances that attracted a mostly teenage crowd, many of whom were up for some up-close dancing with a random partner. I was something of a

wallflower and shied away from the action, though I loved watching the dancing itself; the flurry of motion and movement that overtook the room.

Over the course of the evening, dancers would move in a circular motion, rotating from one partner to the next to do the waltz, the foxtrot, the quickstep, Charleston, cakewalk, and so on. They'd glide effortlessly in time with the music, all going in the same direction, with no bumping. It was like poetry in motion.

The fellas were dressed sharp and the women frocked up. I loved dressing up to the nines, shining up my shoes 'n' all. Even to this day, I'm still all about wearing good shoes. Gotta make an impression, eh? Shoes maketh the man.

I was in my late teens and very busy socialising. I was earning good money and now that I was no longer handing over eighty per cent of it to Mrs Murphy, I was free to spend it all as I wished. Even though a lot of the boys hanging around knew that I was working and sometimes sponged off me, earning good money and living independently made me feel good about myself. I was a cute kid, too. Especially when I had two wonderful buck teeth, I was a beautiful boy. So a lot of men were eyeing me off. People have asked me over the years whether I had to field off advances during these years but, truth be told, well ... I didn't always field 'em off! I laugh about it now but what can I say? You gotta take it where you can get it. There was a lot of drinking going on in those circles, but I enjoyed a few shots of the old Pernod myself, a liqueur that tasted like aniseed.

So now, after everything with the boys' home and Mrs Murphy and getting locked up, it seemed I was in a good place. My social life was good; work was good. I was close to finishing my apprenticeship, plus I had steady accommodation. But I still had a yearning for family so I decided to return to the mob in Fitzroy and Collingwood. This time I didn't get such a warm reception. In fact, I was confronted by a person I didn't know who told me, 'Your mum killed Alf Bamblett's father. Did you know that?' Of course I didn't. I didn't even know who Alf Bamblett was at the time. I soon learned that his son, Alf Bamblett Junior, was running the Aborigines Advancement League in Melbourne. It was a lot to process. Not only had I just learned a huge detail about my mum's past, I was now faced with the realities of Aboriginal law, including payback customs. Even though I had met friendly faces that first night at the Builders Arms, now I felt that most of the mob I spoke to was acting standoffish.

I felt I couldn't even consult with the Elders because they were so unwelcoming. Sure, people were polite, but there was a distance between us. That distance was magnified by my paranoia – I was very aware all of a sudden that I had been raised away from my family, essentially had been raised up 'white'. Many of the older mob I met had been brought up by mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, cousins, and so on. Somehow or other, they had the right names or the right words to attach to themselves, and comment. The Charles name was mud.

Feeling unwanted by the Aboriginal community, I turned to my old friends from Box Hill to fill the gap in my heart. A notable number of the lads, however, were heading for a life of crime and I was young and immature. It was hard to speak up and I found myself getting influenced by them a lot.

One of my mates was well and truly on a path of petty theft, and inching towards more serious crimes. I wish I'd had the foresight to just knuckle down and concentrate on my apprenticeship, but I was easily led. I won't say his name. Let's just call him 'Tommy'.

Tommy was the one who talked me into doing my first burg. It would land me in the nick for the second time. He convinced me he'd found a way to score some extra cash and other goodies. 'Don't tell anybody you're doing it,' he warned. 'We're mates and it'll just be us.'

'Okay,' I agreed. 'We'll do it.'

One evening, he decided we'd do over a small grocery shop opposite Hawthorn train station. The plan was to break in by shimmying down a rope from the skylight. We'd fill our packs with ciggies and cash, then climb back up the rope and bob's ya uncle. Sounded pretty straightforward. We opened the skylight and tied the rope so it was secure, then one after the other, we both slid down the rope carefully. I headed straight to the stash of cigarette cartons and shoved them into my bag. In the meantime, Tommy went and raided the cash registers and emptied them of their contents. We cleared out our goods in record time and headed back to the rope to start our escape. Being two centimetres short of five foot, I found it easy, but Tommy was a big fella and the bloody bugger couldn't shimmy back up.

In the semi-darkness of the shop he looked up at me and said, 'All right, Jacky. You take the cigarettes and go home. I'll throw a lolly machine through the front window and leg it back. See ya there.' I nodded in agreement. It was a good plan. With a quick tug of the rope, I grabbed a

firm hold and easily shimmied up, deftly slipping through the skylight before replacing it carefully. I walked purposefully back to Glenferrie feeling calm. I don't recall my heart racing – if anything, the process had felt almost too easy. I pulled out a cigarette from one of the cartons and enjoyed a smoke as I strolled home. It was to be the first and only ciggie from our loot that I'd enjoy.

True to his word, Tommy had manoevered a lolly machine to the front window entrance, picked it up and chucked it through the window. But it wasn't his lucky night. The machine – and Tommy – landed straight into the hands of the coppers. By the time I got home, there was Tommy, sitting on my bed, alongside the jacks. We'd been caught red-handed, with nowhere to hide. That was the second time I got locked up. This time they sent me to Pentridge Prison in Coburg. My first burg had been an absolute failure.

CHAPTER 4

LOCKED UP

Jail is a place that reflects a significant binary in my life. It represents the damage done to me as part of systemic racism, but it has also been a place of strength and empowerment. It's easy to be cynical about gaining empowerment from an institution designed for punishment, but for me jail was a place of respite. I could rest my weary head and draw on my lived experiences and education to be of service to other prisoners. Jail was where I completed my fourth, fifth and sixth form secondary education. It was also where I had time and space to indulge in my love of reading.

So I always was a little bit grateful each time I was put in the nick. I was given a bed and my own cell, or sometimes a shared cell. I was well fed with three meals a day and for the most part, I was treated with respect by the staff. The other prisoners were mostly fine, too. Sure, you'd get those silly buggers who'd test the waters with you, try to see how far they could push you, but after years of incarceration, I learned to navigate the system inside to make life a bit more manageable.

One of the ways I did this was, of all things, writing love letters for other inmates to their wives. That's right, folks – I poured out fancy declarations of love to a missus and heartfelt letters to family members. I was picked out early on for having a very good grasp of language. 'That's the bloke who speaks good English. And fuck, he can write letters too!' It was always whitefellas getting me to write their letters. I don't remember any blakfellas asking me to write for them. I'd make sure to use just the right language and phrases so these unsuspecting women back home would know they were number one. And the payment for my efforts? Tobacco and chocolate. This letter-writing business held me in good stead. I always rolled out of prison having gained a few pounds.

The odd hardened crim wasn't afraid to let me see his vulnerable side. They could let down their guard with me. I automatically assumed that they

knew I was, well ... a poof. My sexuality wasn't a huge issue in jail. I think most people in prison knew I was gay and didn't seem bothered about it. I was a fringe dweller of sorts. That set me apart from the other fellas. They'd joke and say things from time to time like, 'Is it true that you're gay, Jack?'

I'd quip, 'Give us a kiss and we'll find out, fella.'

We'd roar with laughter and they'd shoot back, 'Ya fucken cunt, Jack!' That's how it'd work out. My flair for the written word helped keep me protected. I was often called on to come through the gates into the dining room where the tables were set up for the morning letter writing exercise. You'd hear the announcement for those having morning tea in the yards.

'Those who want to write a letter, come up to the gate. Come up to the gate now.'

It still makes me hoot with laughter thinking of those fellas lining up, bringing in little bits of beige paper that they'd cut from the Births, Deaths and Marriages notices. Many of these blokes were illiterate. But most knew of the attraction of the prose and poetry in these small 'notices', registered by partners of their dead or loved ones. If you browse through the Births, Deaths and Marriages notices, you'll come across some heartbreaking and beautiful messages to loved ones. Since these blokes couldn't read properly they'd ask me to copy lines from the notices and add little bits of poetry to make the missus swoon back home. I'd write whatever came into my head at the time. Everyone seemed happy with my work, and I was often asked to read the letters that had come in the daily mail call. I really enjoyed helping others in this way. I got an insight into partners, mothers, children, lovers. I saw the vulnerable side to these crims.

Often when people ask me about being in the slammer, they want to know how I passed the time. Depending on the severity of the crime and what division I was locked up in, it wasn't always the case that you were stuck in your cell for an entire day. In different sections of prison there was some measure of freedom in terms of getting involved in various programs. In some jails, once you'd done your chores, the day was yours. You could stay in your cell, go to the exercise yard, do weights or just wander outside and sniff the air. Otherwise you could go watch television or do any other approved activity. Prisons also ran all sorts of programs that inmates could get involved in, which allowed fitness, creativity, faith and intellect to be nurtured.

The way I passed time in jail was through books and learning. Books are the one great pleasure I indulge in no matter where I am. Prison was no exception. Most of the time I was locked up, I had the freedom to read and revel in my love of spy novels. I read non-stop whenever I was incarcerated.

I gravitated towards the education centres too. Learning new skills and knowledge helped me get through my sentence. For instance, I did a writing course because I wanted to be a journo at one stage. I also took German and Italian classes. To this day, I love learning and expanding my mind no matter where I go. I took being locked up in jail as an opportunity to keep my brain active. It was during my time in prison that I was introduced to pottery, which would turn out to be one of my favourite skills. And in time I would be given the chance to run my own pottery workshop.

After that stint in prison I returned to glass bevelling, knowing it was a safer road, where I could earn an honest keep with a steady income. For a time I didn't feel the need to do any more burgs. The jacks would check in on me occasionally and I'd see them around. In an effort to keep me on the straight and narrow they talked to my friends at work, and heard I liked singing. I was always singing at the factory. I was in charge of what's called a Weber machine. You placed four panes of glass on a rubber top with grooves in them. With a push from the back, the glass would slide over stone wheels with water dripping on them. This gave it a smooth finish. The whole process made an awful racket, akin to a high-pitched screech. The four panes of glass created harmonies, so I'd sing over them, adding another layer to the sound. I'd imitate Frank Sinatra, Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, middle-of-the-road Dean Martin songs, that sort of thing. I'd even sing songs of the Aboriginal activist and tenor Harold Blair.

To this day, I reckon that machine is what gave me a powerful voice. It took a lot to sing in counterpoint to the harmonies from the machine. You needed gusto, which I had in spades. It was another little part of the job that made me enjoy it.

Now that the cops knew how much I liked singing, it wasn't long before they eventually convinced me to sing in public. Every Saturday night people would gather for social dances at Ziegfeld's. It was quite the buzz. You'd have all the fellas looking at the ladies and I'd go there and just be

looking at the fellas! But throughout the course of the evening, men and women would gravitate towards each other for a dance and do the waltz, the foxtrot and so on.

One night there was a singing contest there. The coppers and the factory boys coaxed me into entering. This contest at Ziegfeld's looked like just the job to keep me out of trouble. I have a feeling this is what the jacks thought too: if I was kept amply occupied, I'd have fewer run-ins with them.

Performer Frankie Davidson was the host that night. I lined up patiently to register my name. One by one each contender got up and sang a song accompanied by the band. The winner was decided based on who got the loudest and most enthusiastic applause from the audience. I can't remember what I performed that first week, but I remember after I finished my number, when Frankie put his hand on me, everyone went nuts. I won the competition that night and was invited to return the following week. I won again. If I'd have got there a third time I'm sure I could've won again, and that would've landed me a spot singing on Graham Kennedy's *In Melbourne Tonight* show.

Unfortunately, that never happened. I was still hanging around my fellow Box Hill boys, and many of them were leading lives of crime, so it was only a matter of time before I joined in again. Shortly before what would've been my third week performing, I decided to do another burg and got picked up by the police. Consequently, I didn't sing for that third session. I was in the nick in Camberwell.

CHAPTER 5

THE PRODIGAL SON

When I left prison I returned to the factory. I have a memory of entering into Channel 9's *Swallow's Juniors*, featuring Brian Naylor as the host who introduced young kids competing in a singing contest.

Brian introduced me as a glass beveller from Glenferrie, and the only other person with a deep voice on the show. Don't know what I sang, but dear Bert Newton was pretty complimentary. He said he'd enjoyed seeing and hearing an Aboriginal boy 'having a go', and wished me well. Bert was the hidden voice of judgement and we listened to his critique with great interest.

I'd managed to get back to Glenferrie in time to see my performance on the tele at a restaurant where I usually ate. All the diners clapped enthusiastically and I won some hearts that evening.

But there was one heart I was still searching for.

Although I knew my mother was living in Swan Hill, I still had no address for her and was completely reliant on other Aboriginal families to give me snippets of information. The Aboriginal services were being developed in Melbourne, so I tried desperately speaking to the Aunties in the kitchen at Gertrude Street Medical Services, but was thwarted at every turn. Nobody would answer my questions.

My friends pointed out that I could write the letter to my mother and address it care of the Swan Hill police. So I did. The sergeant wrote back saying, 'It would be good to see you. I know your mum well.'

I was earning decent money. With the security of my earnings tucked safely in my pocket, I finally made plans to venture up to Swan Hill to meet Mum. Apparently she lived between Moulamein and Swan Hill, about forty kilometres out. Her humpy was on the banks of the Edwards River. The sergeant said he would meet me at the airport to take me to Mum. He suggested I bring a gift. 'Look, Jack,' he wrote, 'you're playing the prodigal

son.’ (I knew what ‘prodigal son’ meant from Bible studies at the home.) ‘You’ll get a better reception from your mum if you take her a carton of Melbourne Bitter. She likes a drink.’

Once the details of my visit were locked in, I wrote a letter directly to Mum, care of the sergeant. I didn’t quite know how to form the words. I decided to keep the letter simple:

I am Jack Charles. I believe I am your son. I’m flying up around Christmas time. Apparently the sergeant in Swan Hill is going to pick me up, Mum. He will arrange to have me delivered to your place.

Alf, my boss at the factory, once again showed his kindness. He’d looked out for me so many times over the years. He paid for my flight up to Swan Hill and even gave me a generous bonus in that week’s pay packet. I had a lot of emotional support from him and my colleagues at the factory. At that stage, I didn’t know if I’d necessarily be back.

Soon, I was on a DC9 plane, on my way to Swan Hill. To Mum. My real mum. I was excited, nervous, full of trepidation. The flight felt like it lasted forever and also like it was over in a heartbeat. Good as his word, the sergeant was there to pick me up when I landed. He took me around to the Federal Hotel, on the New South Wales border. I was to wait there while he arranged a lift to my mother’s house. I nodded and turned around on the street outside, taking in my surroundings. In the distance, I saw rows of plantation-like cottages. They looked straight out of America’s deep South. Turned out these wooden structures were a blakfella camp.

I had a bit of time on my hands that day. The publican at the Federal let me keep my luggage behind the bar, as it was too early for check-in. I had never drunk alcohol at this point, but I bought a carton of Melbourne Bitter. I kept it with my suitcase. It was a hot day, so I decided I’d go for a swim. I quickly downed a lemon squash and then off I went to the Swan Hill Baths. When I arrived there, I patiently lined up, got my togs ready and when it was my turn to enter, was told I couldn’t come in.

I looked at them, shocked. ‘What?’ I asked. ‘I can’t swim here?’ My brain was scrambling to understand.

The staff members shook their head. ‘No. You’re not allowed in. If you wanna swim, you have to go to the Murray down there.’

I felt shocked and embarrassed and didn't know how to react. I'd waited so long for my turn without realising what would happen. It was humiliating. I turned and left, got myself an ice-cream and went back to the pub to continue waiting. Eventually an elderly couple came to pick me up. I grabbed my goods and jumped into the car with them. The stark landscape of Swan Hill's back roads was very different from the familiar hustle and bustle of Melbourne streets. When we pulled up at the property, they asked me to open the gates. I did so and went to jump back into the car.

The husband said, 'Now we're in the country, Jack. We've gotta close the gate behind us, because of the cattle.' I went right back to the gate so I could close it once they'd driven through. We continued bouncing along the road, past fields of rice on one side and wheat on the other. We passed trees and the river. The wife turned to me. 'Your mum lives over there, Jack,' she said, pointing. 'Right on the edge of the river here.'

I glanced in the direction she was pointing and saw a lovely big house. 'Ooh,' I thought to myself. 'That's a beaut house. She must be doing well ...'

We continued driving towards the house, then suddenly veered off the track and onto a rutted road heading towards the river, behind some hedges on a bushy strip of land. It was land that couldn't be used because there was a gully between it and the river. Beyond that was the camp where my mum lived. Apparently it'd been there for donkey's years. We pulled up. A large woman, looking absolutely rapt, was coming towards me. I cracked a huge smile. 'It's me!'

I got out of the car and walked towards her. Then I uttered the words that, once upon a time, I never thought possible: 'Hello, Mum.'

We had a joyful reunion, and Mum couldn't wipe the smile from her face. But soon I learned that she hadn't always been smiling. Apart from having all eleven of her children taken away from her, there were problems stemming from that Alf Bamblett Senior case, which I still only had very sketchy details of. I had worked out that Mum had been released and the murder charges dropped. Instead she was charged as an accessory to the crime, because she'd got rid of the knife.

Before Alf Senior's murder, Mum had gathered the blakfellas together to talk about the destructive power of a man abusing the children and other

women in the camp, including other men's wives.

Mum ended up ostracised by the community because of this killing, but also because she had been so central to organising the mob to take a stand. It had isolated her, and the memory of the events seemed to still haunt her. But it brought me to a place of understanding. I finally understood why the Charles name was stained. I thought back to the time that well-dressed black couple took me out for the day, and realised this would've been just after the incident, and they had been sent to check in and see how I was going. I still didn't know who had sent them, though.

Mum was living away from the community now. She was looked after by an old bloke named Clary Pike. He was a wonderful fella, who taught me how to shoot a rifle. It came in handy for cooking. We'd go out to the rice fields and down the road to shoot wild ducks. Sometimes, from the house, I'd see them fly in our direction, and hear him firing a couple of shots at them. The next day I'd have wild duck for breakfast.

I learned to drive the utes, and Clary would sometimes bring me along when he went to visit one of the five surrounding properties. Part of his job was population control of rabbits, which were a huge pest in that area. He even had about a dozen whippets, who got in on it. Sometimes they would bring back rabbits to the house, alive and still kicking. I'd learned to wring their necks to kill them. You could get five shillings a pelt in those days.

Mum was often busy cooking stews with all the meat around. I tried my hand at farm life, and would accompany Mum or Clary when they went out shooting the odd kangaroo, wild ducks, snakes, turtles and fish.

I liked living there. I spent many days working in the wheat paddock in the heat of the day. I'd shovel wheat into bags while Mum sat under a beach umbrella, sewing up the filled hessian bags. I loved the physical nature of the work and the country lifestyle I got to live. At night, I'd collapse onto my bed, set up outside with a tent top and netting to protect me from mozzies.

Mum and I didn't exactly bond. We were cautious around each other, tentatively trying to get a sense of who the other was. Mum was haunted – she was very angry sometimes, not to me but to some imaginary presence. In my paranoia, I thought I was the cause of it.

During my time living up there, I met relatives from along the Murray, Swan Hill and all the way up to Deniliquin. One of the uncles was Uncle Ray Charles – great name! – and I got to meet his kids. He was a beautiful

bloke, who drove a big Plymouth and taught me to drive it too. His family had come down to meet the prodigal son. It was the Christmas holidays, and I got to meet many different members of my extended family, who had turned up to meet me as soon as they heard I was with Mum, in the camp.

Over time I learned more about Mum who, like me, was quite short. She was an avid reader, which is probably where I got it from. We were also both creative, albeit in different ways. Mum loved to take walking sticks and carve wonderful snake designs along the length of them. She also had a lovely singing voice (something else I seem to have inherited from her!).

I wanted to ask Mum about my life, but I barely knew where to start. Well, I knew where to start, but it was a difficult question. I wanted to ask her, 'Why did you let them take me?' One day I finally plucked up the courage and asked her straight. She explained, tersely, that it was the law, that she couldn't do anything about it. 'You all were taken, Jack.'

As far as I know, I was the only one of Mum's eleven surviving kids that ever tracked her down. Two of her babies had died during birth and the rest of us were forcibly removed by the government. I started to piece together the strange and wonderful coincidences scattered in my childhood memories. I asked Mum if she'd had daughters called Esme and Eva Jo. She said yes. My heart did a small skip. 'What about an Archie Charles, Mum?' I followed up.

'No, it's Artie,' she said pointedly. 'His name's Artie, all right?' She told me he was named after his namesake, Uncle Artie Smith in Moe.

'There is a third sister, Zenip, language for "pretty butterfly". You look out for them, Jack,' she pleaded.

Decades later, I discovered six other children had been taken; where they are now is anyone's guess.

As the Christmas break was coming to an end, I felt like my time with her was coming to an end too. Whenever we went into Swan Hill to stock up on supplies and for me to draw out some more cash, I felt miserable from the drunken fights and arguments breaking out among the residents of that blakfella camp behind the Federal Hotel. Much of the abuse was directed towards Mum. The rows of tiny wooden houses, no larger than your average shed, looked strangely reminiscent of slave quarters on a plantation. I left posthaste, lickety-split, shortly thereafter.

Overall it had been a great experience being there, and I counted myself so lucky to spend this time with my real mum after a lifetime of being lied

to about my past. But I was ready for a change of scenery.

I gave Mum a substantial portion of my savings, then told her I was heading into town to send a letter to my boss at the glass bevelling factory telling him that I wouldn't be coming back to work. I placed an ad in the local rag offering up my skills. I'd learned a few things while living the country life up there, and ended up landing a job as a farmhand at one of the towns nearby along the Murray.

It didn't go as planned. I felt like I'd landed on the wrong property. Every morning I'd grab the big dry coal shovels and some rope, and I'd go pick up all the sheep that'd died overnight. It was pretty brutal, a bastard of a job. There was too much death and I had very little human interaction. I spent a few months jackarooing around the place, and getting small jobs here and there. But soon enough the lure of Melbourne drew me back. Now that I had a better sense of my story, I felt more confident, if a little weary, and was ready for the next adventure.

CHAPTER 6

HEAD OVER HEELS

After I returned to Melbourne I was lucky enough to find work in a glass factory called Brookes Robinson, in South Melbourne. I worked there for a few years and stayed at the Gladys Nicholls Aboriginal Youth Hostel.

A couple of folks from the renowned New Theatre came to the youth hostel one day to try to coax a few of us into joining a new play they were producing. They wanted a full Aboriginal cast for Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. A girl and I put our hands up to be involved, but she chickened out at the last minute and I was the only one who actually turned up. I was told to shadow another actor in the cast called Ron. If I learned all his lines, they said, they'd give me a run for a couple of nights and a matinee. With my absurd, youthful confidence, I happily agreed. Ron and I got along like a house on fire, and I aped him in my own acting.

The second I was on stage in front of those bright lights – mate, I loved it. I felt I belonged. I paid the five shillings required to join the New Theatre and stayed with them for about seven years. I could afford to pay the fee in those days, thanks to my day job. I was glass bevelling by day and acting by night. Everyone in the theatre company had their various jobs to go to. They, like me, were workers. Theatre was something of a side hobby that formed an important part of our lives.

This theatre company was left wing in its politics. More accurately, they were communists, jokingly referred to as 'pink theatre'. I knew nothing about the Communist Party and wasn't very political in those days. Truth be told, I wasn't certain of my own political beliefs. I didn't understand, or care about, the difference between Marxism and Leninism. All I knew was that I loved the theatre, and the theatre loved me. Renowned critic Katharine Brisbane gave me a glowing review, writing: 'A new light has shone in the Melbourne theatre scene in the guise of the diminutive Jack

Charles at the New Theatre.’ In my early acting days I read the reviews, always eager to see what was being said about me.

I learned a lot working for the New Theatre for those seven years. I credit that joint with my acting training, and I consider it as good as any NIDA course. I got to play a whole range of different characters. I played a West African, West Indian, South African and others. Funnily enough, I never played an Aboriginal.

With barely any other Aboriginal actors around, I looked to overseas actors for inspiration. I remember seeing Sidney Poitier on the big screen and wanting to be like him. But musically, I was inspired by local artists like Aboriginal singers Harold Blair and Jimmy Little.

Theatre was a real turning point for me. There was great camaraderie among us theatre folks. They threw great parties, and they didn’t seem to care about my sexuality or my Aboriginality.

Since finishing my apprenticeship, I’d started earning a good wage at work. At the same time, I was getting to do all sorts of musicals and political revues at night, including significant plays like *The Blood Knot*. That was a game-changer for me, as I realised that, with only two of us in the cast, I had a calling for performing.

Much as I loved acting, it could be hard work. In one play I was cast alongside a white girl who I had to pash on with in a scene. Bloody hell, she had the worst breath! I didn’t know at the time that the solution was to give her a piece of chewing gum before going on stage. Mostly, though, I found working in the theatre an absolute hoot. A big part of it was testing your comfort zone – for me that was the thrill of it. Also, theatre gave me so many new experiences and introduced me to some very special people. One such person was a man named Jack.

Jack and I met sometime around 1960 through the New Theatre. I noticed him sitting right in the front row one night when I was on stage. He kept turning up, and sitting in the same spot night after night, front row and centre. Our eyes would meet across the stage lights.

He started offering me lifts home, which was now a flat in Queensbury Street in Carlton, and I was happy to accept. One night, while dropping me off, he paused and looked me in the eye. ‘I love you, Jack,’ he said. So I invited him upstairs for a slap and tickle, and he stayed overnight. It was my first affair.

Jack would drop me home after a show, then come upstairs. We'd have our way with each other, then off he'd go, back to his parents' house. We were together for about five years.

Jack kind of plucked me out of semi-obscurity. He and his friends introduced me to a bigger world of art and art lovers. He even got me into jazz – a favourite haunt of ours was a traditional jazz club on Franklin Street, at Frank Trainers, in Melbourne's CBD. Jack was great company. He was also kind and very gentle. I got to know his family and friends, and soon enough I was kicking around with his old schoolmates from a Melbourne private school, and their girlfriends. This was the gang we mucked around with in those days.

My time with Jack was wonderful, whether we were with that circle or staying home and cooking a meal together. We lived together at various points, in a couple of different units and houses.

I was head over heels for Jack. There was a stage when he gave me a unit, so it could be said that I was a kept boy. I knew he'd had flings with women, but I saw myself as the special one in his life. I realised things were over when he came home one day with a birthday cake, when I'd just turned twenty-three. He told me he and a female fellow worker were going overseas for a holiday. I felt sick. I threw my birthday cake into the wall and wept. He packed his bag, left and that was it.

He left his car with me, which I kept for a while. Eventually, I ended up moving out of the house and in with a bunch of hippies in nearby Parkville. I hadn't any idea about how to look after a car and didn't know you had to actually wash it, polish it and start the motor from time to time. So the car sat there for a period with no one driving it. In time, I organised to have it dropped off to his old man, which I should've done earlier. By the time it was driven there, Jack's car was a bit of a wreck.

I, too, turned into a bit of a wreck. Without a loving relationship to stabilise me, I fell onto hard times. My enjoyment of drugs had turned into an addiction. I struggled to secure regular work and, in turn, couldn't secure regular housing. So, I started couch-surfing and crashing on the couches of drug dealers. I always had an idea to stay close to them, for easy access. It was a case of, 'Stay as close to the source as possible.' You could wake up of a morning and have your first whack. I would arrange my life like that.

Eventually I ended up on the streets. To get money I was doing burgs, but I was often relieved to be caught by the jacks because it meant having a

roof over my head and meals.

Looking back, I can see that my relationship with Jack had been doomed to fail. I wasn't a good lover to him. I knew nothing about love. I had never been loved or nurtured in my entire life, and I think it changed how I felt about things like public displays of affection, even physical intimacy in general.

There's never been another love since Jack. I have had offers over the years, but I've rejected them every time. In an odd way, it's easier. I don't want to experience that kind of heartbreak again, so I avoid it. You count your blessings and accept your decision to lead a relatively peaceful, if sometimes lonely, life. It is what it is. I'm thankful for the years I had with Jack and wish him all the very best.

CHAPTER 7

COLLECTING RENT

There was no real method to my madness when it came to doing burgs. It was pretty basic: I would check the cars first, because people tended to leave their wallets and handbags in there. More often than not, that would be enough of a score for me, and I'd head to the next place. On an average night, I'd do over dozens of houses. I wasn't interested in violence or confrontation. My main goal was to pick up whatever cash and jewellery I could.

Over those years I did over a lot of large mansions. I'd do a job then go visit my former comrades. They weren't all friends, though. There were a few who had abused me in the home who were around the area, and continued to abuse me on the outside too, so I did my best to avoid them.

The Glenferrie/Auburn area was a very wealthy one, and with all those large mansions, we were like kids in a lolly shop. As far as we were concerned, the houses and their contents were ripe for the taking. These burgs were more than a quick thrill: they were a way to get some easy cash and valuables to support my worsening drug habit.

Even though hanging out with the Box Hill boys led me back down the path of crime, I was mostly carrying out the burgs on my own, late at night. It was quiet in those leafy, dark suburbs. In those days, there weren't as many streetlights. It was much easier to not be seen. I kept myself company by singing as I prowled the streets. And I'd rehearse my lines while going from one place to another. Walking, walking, power walking; I did a shitload of it. To this day, I credit walking for my longevity, despite being a regular smoker.

Every now and then, I'd get a little curious about the resident of the house I was robbing, and would stop to have a squiz at the photos lined up on the wall, and on mantelpieces. On a few occasions I'd also stop by the kitchen and have a feed. If there was cake I might sneak a sliver off. Or I'd

grab a knife and cut a slice of leftover roast meat for myself. 'Ah, nice! Very good cook, this one!' I'd think to myself. Cheeky.

I remember spotting one of the first three-in-one TV, cassette player and radios that came into Australia. It was in a house in Kew. Not only did I spot it, but I stole and sold it. Now that I knew this house was particularly well stocked with goods, I decided to go back the following month. I couldn't believe it: they'd bought another set! They would've had to order it from overseas. I stole that one too.

There was a large double mansion I did over in Hawthorn. Actually, I did over this joint a few times, because the owners always left wads of cash in the cutlery drawer, and other hiding spots around the house that I'd worked out. I'm talking hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars, stashed in different spots across the home. Perhaps this was where the very wealthy felt their money was safest. Strange that they never learned their lesson, though. Each time I went back, there'd be a fresh stash of cash in the cutlery drawer.

I never bothered to case a joint before a burg. Didn't bother with trying to work out people's routines. Because I carried out my burgs at night, I assumed most people were asleep upstairs.

I'd shine a torch through the house on the bottom level, where the curtains were usually left open, and would head around the back to enter through the kitchen. People have asked me whether it was scary doing a burg. It wasn't at all. You needed to stay focused. If you were scared, it'd ring in your ears and you wouldn't be able to hear. I couldn't afford to let my thoughts get cluttered.

The main bedroom was sometimes downstairs. It was where I knew there'd be wallets and rings on the bedside tables. I'd slink in and, with a quick dash of the torch, spot where the watch, wallet and valuables were. I'd quickly snatch those up and then slither around slowly to where the handbag was. It could take up to half an hour to finish the room and be out of there: rushing wasn't worth the risk of accidentally waking the owners. I would be more nervous by this point and there were times I thought my beating heart was loud enough to wake them. In the middle of the night, when you're doing a burg, your senses become heightened. And not just for me, but also for those sleeping. Invariably, it's the woman who senses that something's not right. They have a sixth sense that kicks in even when they're asleep.

That stillness in the air can be stirred merely by opening a door, so entry has to be extremely quick. It's an art, shutting that door as quietly and quickly as you can, so as not to change the atmosphere of a room. Sometimes people can detect the very air being disturbed in their sleep and that's enough to wake them.

Part of not creating a disturbance also involves being something of an animal whisperer. Sometimes a dog would approach and I'd have to spend half an hour talking to it and asking the dog permission to be on the land and all that kinda stuff. It'd lick me and we'd have a friendly moment. You have to spend a little bit of time with them because they're excitable. After all, a stranger is in their territory. Sometimes the dog would insist I shouldn't be there, so I'd gently say, 'All right, okay. Fair enough. I'm goin', I'm goin'.' But others would allow me to get in through their doggy door, which they were usually very protective of. I'd check in and talk to the dogs, assuring them they'd be okay; that I wasn't there to deliberately inflict violence on them or their owners. I wouldn't enter unless they let me. It was all charm, though: I never bribed dogs with biscuits. People have said you've got to carry treats to keep pets quiet. But, you know, I think guys who carry meat to feed dogs are really strange. You hear about dogs dying because a burglar gave them poisoned meat, and I take issue when people are treating animals like that. I'm not in the business of killing animals.

Cats were harder to befriend. They only had to hiss and it was enough to send you on your merry way. As soon as an animal started making noise, they'd wake up the mob upstairs, so I'd be off like a light.

Kids were usually completely unaware that I'd entered their home. Once, I was doing over the upstairs rooms of a mansion, having gone up one staircase, when I heard the kids getting up early and heading down another staircase. That's right, a house with two staircases. I knew it wouldn't be long until the parents would awaken, so I slowly inched my way downstairs. The kids were in the kitchen, demolishing their Weet-Bix, TV on, not noticing a thing. They had their backs to me and I was able to quietly make my way out the front door. They'd been so engrossed in their cartoons, I got out unnoticed.

On another occasion, one child – again, in Kew – was coming downstairs early one morning as I was slipping out the back door. He spotted me as he was making his way over to one of the mini brekkie tables set up for little ones. While he was fixing his breakfast, he caught me out of

the corner of his eye. He didn't seem afraid. Instead, he sat still and looked right at me. I waved and it was like he had emerged from a trance. He went back to his business, getting his milk out of the fridge. Couldn't you just imagine the conversation if he was to tell his parents what he'd seen? They'd likely say something like, 'Oh, that's all right, darling. It's probably just old Aboriginal spirits ...'

That boy may not have been scared, but I know that what I did violated people's sense of safety in their own homes. Some years ago I reflected on this. I thought about those awful years in the boys' home, all the things that were done to me, and the way my personal safety had been violated, and I understood their pain. I had thought at the time that that was some kind of a justification for my actions – sure, I'd committed crimes, but look at what had been done to me – but now, of course, I know it's no excuse. Useless at best.

The main areas I hit were in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne: Toorak, Kew, South Yarra, Camberwell and so on. They were places where I always felt safe and at ease, though I couldn't quite explain it at first. It was only when I found out that my mother was a Boon Wurrung woman that I realised why my burglaries happened to take place on traditional Boon Wurrung land. This was my mother's land, part of the great Kulin Nation, which is made up of five tribes – Woiwurrung, Boon Wurrung, Taungurong, Nguraimillam-wurrung and Wathaurong. Our Creator is Bunjil, the wedge-tailed eagle and ancestral spirit.

Was it perhaps the presence of Bunjil keeping me safe from harm? It's a thought that gives me a little bit of comfort even now. When I discovered my connection to this traditional land, I started thinking of my burglaries as 'collecting rent'; taking back just a small piece of what had been cruelly stolen from me and my people.

I didn't carry much on me during a burglary. I brought a dilly bag, which I'd stash in nearby bushes. If no one was home, I'd use a sharp card or a little knife to slide open the lock. Sometimes two nails were enough to break into a building. I learned how to open locks through trial and error. It was a slow process sometimes and you had to keep the pets quiet, particularly those that wanted to nip and bite you.

Sometimes I couldn't break into a house via a normal entry or doggy door, so I'd come in through the garage. If I was lucky, the garage would be all I needed, because the rich folks often kept a second freezer in there, filled with choice cuts of delicious food. It was enough to load a dilly bag right up.

Many nights, after I'd done over a bunch of other properties in the neighbourhood, I'd swing past these garages again and scoop up the tucker. Thanks to some of these mansions, from time to time I was able to enjoy a good feed.

Sheds and garages could be particularly time consuming. Especially men's sheds, where there'd be a lot of good distractions if you were on the sort of speed I was on. I'd find myself in somebody's shed, filled with pottery equipment and tools that hadn't been used for yonks. I'd learned pottery in jail so I'd sit there goggle-eyed, checking out their ceramic creations and itching to use the wheels. There was one place where you could tell no pottery had been done for some time: everything was covered up and there was no fresh smell of clay. Even though my rule was to be out of an area before dawn, the pottery shed was enough to engross me for ages. I didn't even bother with the house. I was so lost in another world that I suddenly realised dawn was approaching and had to hit the road before the owners woke up to start their day.

I was totally amazed at the insides of the mansions I got to see over the years. I realised that, for all their money and riches, some of these people weren't necessarily happier than me. It wasn't unusual to see a wine bottle and two glasses on the kitchen bench. And next to the wine, sleeping pills. There were pill bottles on kitchen counters, next to beds, on nightstands. It seemed that keeping up with the Joneses was quite challenging, so you'd want to have some help with sleep. Not necessarily the happiest life for them, but it worked to my advantage. Whenever I spotted those details, it usually meant the owners would not be easily woken.

But I was proved wrong on many occasions. I set off alarms and was caught red-handed. One such occasion was at a Californian bungalow in Kew. I entered through the back door and started to wander through the house till I got to the front bedroom. No sooner had I started riffling through the drawers than I saw car lights flashing through the window. The owners had arrived home. I watched the lights as they drove down the side of the house. I'd left the back door open. Shit. I could hear a man's and

woman's voices, drama unfolding as they noticed the door ajar. I heard heavy footsteps approaching, and the low hum of the car followed by its engine cutting, as someone parked it. I slipped into a wardrobe in the front bedroom but the footsteps had followed me in. I heard a man's booming voice say, 'Come out! I'm armed and I know you're in there.'

There was nowhere to go. I stepped out and looked down at the man's 'weapon' – a broly! He looked right at me and dropped it in shock.

Then he grabbed me. 'What are you doing here?'

Embarrassed, I answered, 'Well, I'm robbin' you, mate.' He was a bit taken aback with my honesty, but then seemed to gather himself and demanded I empty my pockets.

As I was doing this, I heard his wife storming into the house and yelling out, 'Have you got him?'

'Yeah,' he said, not taking his eyes off me. 'He's here in the bedroom. Call the police.'

'No. I want to see him first,' she replied, and entered the room. She took one look at me and exclaimed, 'You're Jack Charles!' I shrank at the recognition. This woman had seen me in a show. And thank goodness for that. She happened to also be an enthusiastic supporter of the arts, so she didn't call the cops. Instead, she invited me to sit in their kitchen for a cup of tea and a chat.

'Jack,' she said softly. 'Why are you doing this? Why are you robbing people's places?'

I struggled to give her an answer. 'Well, the theatre only employs me when they want an Aboriginal. And those gigs are few and far between.'

She looked at me kindly. 'All right, Jack. We won't call the police, but please don't rob us again.'

People referred to me as a cat burglar. It was a bit of a profession, in some ways. Though I wasn't meticulous about casing a joint, I had my way of doing things. For example, I'd always take my shoes off when on the job. My dilly bag held a change of fresh clothes, underwear and a small towel, to wipe myself down after a hard, sweaty night. When I was smoking marijuana, there were a few occasions where I was so stoned, I'd forget where I dropped the bag. I'd get phone calls from Camberwell cops: 'Jack,

there's another bag we've found that belongs to you, mate. You wanna come and get it?'

Although as a cat burglar and an Aboriginal man I was a natural enemy to the cops, they did on occasion show me kindness. I remember two policewomen in particular who treated me with respect. One of them looked like an aunty. She even wore slippers for her sore feet. I found her very endearing. She and her younger partner looked after me when I was brought to them.

Not everyone was as kind as them. There were some harsher incidences, especially during my early years, when I wondered if it might be the end of the road. The physical violence from cops is one thing. It's the psychological stuff that really messes with you. At one point I was running around with a heavy – a serious criminal. I knew this guy was bad news but I was too frightened *not* to go with him. He was big, burly and very threatening. Unfortunately, it put me on the radar of the serious crimes police task force.

One day, four of them pulled me into their unmarked car and took me for a drive into the Dandenong Ranges, deep in the bushes. I assumed we were going to a police station for questioning, though about what exactly I wasn't sure. It was maybe 11 p.m. and we were driving slowly through the dense bushes. One of the cops said quietly, 'You know, nobody knows we picked you up, Jack.'

'Whaddya mean?' I said, suddenly afraid, but careful to not let it show.

'Well, we've taken you for a ride, Jack. Nobody knows you're here with us.'

'Yeah, but we're just going to a different police station.'

Another cop jumped in. 'No, Jack. This is the end.'

'Whaddya mean "the end"?' I asked.

He looked at me. 'Jack, unless you tell us more about so-and-so we're gonna leave you here to rot.'

'Whaddya mean? You're gonna shoot me?'

'Yeah.'

'Really? Well, do what you gotta do, eh?'

This is my memory of the conversation that I had with these detectives. All four of them were tall fellas. But even though the memory is imprinted in my mind, at the time I didn't necessarily fear for my life. That's because when the police have you, they can decide if that's going to be the last night

of your life, so in a way it's out of your hands. If they want you, they'll find you. That's what this was about. I had information they wanted and they were willing to use threats and intimidation to get it out of me. Or maybe it was because they had a bone to pick, payback for the times I was picked up, only to be released without charge. A reminder they'd always have their eye on me. I'd got a bit cocky, and had started robbing the very wealthy. High society. Top government officials, lawyers, doctors, politicians. I starting moving around in Toorak and South Yarra, where the very people who make the policies that continue to suppress our mob lived.

So here I was in the car, squished in with four very tall, very scary-looking detectives, having resigned myself to my possible fate.

'Listen, you may as well just kill me,' I told them. 'I can't tell you anything.' They were silent, so I continued. 'You know, this fella, so-and-so, well, he's a deadset bastard. When we leave here, I'll take my leave of him for good.'

'That could be dangerous, Jack,' one of the coppers said. It didn't sound good.

'This is it,' I thought to myself. 'They're gonna take me out of the car and shoot me.'

Instead, they turned around and drove me all the way back to Camberwell, to the exact spot they'd picked me up from. It was a game to them. Just one more way to mess with my head, see what they could get out of me.

But it had backfired. My resignation to them taking my life whenever they chose took away some of their power.

The cops tried a whole range of ways to catch me out. They kept me on my toes as much as I did them. There were times when I'd be wandering along the corner hedge of somebody's front garden, and I'd spot some hazy shapes in a car a few blocks away. Then it would click. They were cop cars. They were on what I liked to call Operation Get Jack Charles. They'd be sitting there, smoking and waiting. It was the wafting smoke that would catch my attention in the dark. As soon as I spotted 'em I'd backtrack, jumping fences, racing through backyards, ducking and weaving until I was out of sight.

There were times when I was tired of doing burls and wanted to be caught. Just so I could get some rest in jail. You get used to being busted after it's happened enough times, going to court, getting thrown into lockup. There was no fear. I always knew and accepted that I'd have to pay the consequences for my crimes at some point. Over the years, I'd done so many and the detectives in Glenferrie, Camberwell and Prahran came to rely on me to shed light on cases, helping to clear their backlog. Tell you what, though, I was also accused of things I hadn't done: wealthy people who have so much will still take the piss and try to acquire more where they can. There were times when I'd be busted and the coppers would say, 'Jack, these people say you stole leather coats and furs. They're worth a lot of money. Where are they?'

I was falling deeper into addiction. I started insisting on doctor visits so I could get a shot of pethadine before I agreed to talk. One doctor was particularly grumpy about this. He'd grudgingly come up next to me and say in a curt voice, 'I don't like doing this but I've been ordered to. Put out your arm. Righto, hold steady, Jack. You ready?'

As soon as I got that shot of pethadine, I'd feel revived. My mouth would start flapping non-stop! 'I done that, I did that, I took this ... I robbed her, broke that car window, did that joint ...' I didn't stop. I'm a talkative chap at the best of times, but there was no shutting me up once I'd had my hit. The detectives had trouble keeping up. 'You're going too fast, Jack.'

To my way of thinking at the time, I was doing my level best to own up to my nightly activities. It would've been unfinished business if I hadn't done so. My addiction was the root cause of my crimes and my conscience was mostly bedevilled by it.

Aboriginal law states that there can never, ever be any mitigating circumstances for any crimes committed. You had to face the consequences and cop the punishment. You couldn't plead the fifth. No excuses. Absolute.

CHAPTER 8

PSYCHO CERAMICA

When you first arrive in jail, you're processed by the registrar who checks in all items and belongings you arrive with. All your property – cash, watches, shoes, clothing – and it's recorded, sealed in a bag and placed in a locker until the end of your sentence. You sign and check your signature against the list of contents in the small bag when you arrive and once more when you leave. When I left I got to sign out all my belongings as well as the little store of cash I'd earned while doing time.

In Bendigo I was allowed to form a musical group. We called ourselves Just Us, a play on the word 'justice'. We were a five-piece band, and had some marvellous singers in our quintet. Our songwriter was a talented Welsh kid doing nine years for accessory to murder. Another fella was a nightclub singer from Sydney named George. This George, he had a beautiful voice. He could sing like Nat King Cole if he chose to. So we did a couple of those crooner numbers like 'Mona Lisa' and we'd kick into five-part harmonies. We had electric guitars, which I'd learned to play in the jails, in their education centre. Guitars were provided by the prison or prison school principal. I was usually the lead singer and would guide the others during our rehearsals. That's another example of resilience, that you can make your mark, even in a prison setting. I got used to dealing with men on heat in jail, and, being the song man that I was, I'd sing my heart out to them.

We had so much leeway back in the day. When I was locked up in Bendigo, we had a choir. We'd even compete in the Bendigo and Ballarat Eisteddfods.

Prison life had its challenges, though. Day-to-day life was fairly standard. It kicked off with everyone being woken by the sound of the bell. First thing, you'd reach through the trap window in your cell door and put your hand out for the morning count. That was so the screws knew you

were inside and, most importantly, that you were alive. If there was no hand, that was when they knew somebody had suicided or for any other reason hadn't survived the night.

Once, a neighbour of mine burnt himself by wrapping a naked electric wire around himself. The story was that he'd been due for release three days earlier but had no home address. With no address, he wasn't seen as fit to be released. The situation was made more difficult because he spoke very little English.

Sitting in my cell about eight o'clock that evening, I could smell something weird. I knew that there was some kind of situation happening and I started bashing on my cell door for the screws to come up from below, yelling that something was happening with the person next door. By the time the screws got up there, it was too late.

In prison, when you alert the authorities to these incidents, you get a little bit of time taken off your sentence because it *is* traumatic. But fuck, I was furious with the system for keeping this fella locked up when he should've been released. I yelled at them for having blood on their hands. Demanded to know why he should have to have an address to go to. 'He's done his time, ya bastards!' I shouted. 'You've killed him!'

Another part of day-to-day prison life was the emptying of the piss bucket. Each morning you'd put your hand out and the door would be unlocked so everyone could empty theirs. This was the case at Castlemaine Prison, which is where I ended up on a few of my stints inside. You'd see lines of fellas waiting patiently outside to empty out their buckets. Most of us had the presence of mind to have a poo before we were locked up overnight for seventeen hours. You don't wanna poo inside. Particularly in a shared cell. If you did, you'd have to forfeit your choccies or tobacco – that was the cost if you urgently needed to go in front of six other people. It wasn't always up to you, though. Sometimes other inmates were too lazy to bother doing their business before lock-up. You'd get a heavy in a shared cell saying: 'I'm gonna shit here ... Anybody mind? Course you don't.'

You'd do your best to hold your nose. Of course, there'd be plenty of jokes about turds – it was an inescapable part of prison life. There could be no dignity in that kind of situation so you had to get through it with humour.

Back then, during the 1970s, the principals of the schools in prison had more input and freedom in guiding the different education opportunities. I was in Castlemaine taking part in the journalism course when the principal – a wonderful bloke – approached me. ‘Jack, what do you reckon?’ he asked. ‘Should we start a ceramics shop here? There are a lot of potters around here in Castlemaine.’ I was keen to learn pottery skills and expressed as much to him. ‘All right,’ he said, pleased to add another course to the curriculum. ‘I’ll advertise in the local magazine and newspaper for a pottery teacher. You can sit in on the interviews with me.’

He was good as his word. I sat in on the interview as the prison education billet. For the most part, I got on well with jail staff and I was afforded opportunities such as this, where I could have a say in my learning. We interviewed three people and in the end, we went with a Canadian fellow who set us up well with equipment and tools. Eventually he had to move on, which made way for our second teacher, Barry Singleton.

When Barry turned up at Castlemaine, I decided I liked the look of him straightaway. He was a local potter with a quiet manner about him, but he knew what he was doing. I heard on the grapevine that he was one of the best potters in Victoria. It was a big deal for someone of that calibre to bother teaching prisoners pottery. It wasn’t the safest job in the world – there was lots of clay being thrown around, and the tools were a potential danger. It was my job to clean the tools, and I always kept a close eye on them. I’d set them out neatly so the screws could see them.

Pottery gave me a sense of purpose. Even though I was in jail, I felt like I was doing something of substance. Plus I was bloody good at it. I’d often wake up before the bell each morning, itching to get my hands dirty. I’d head straight to the little shed at the end of the prison yard after muster. Pottery requires a precision of sorts and an intense focus that is like a meditative form of concentration. Whether it’s trimming, carving, designing or painting, the focus and gentleness needed is what helps your mind get lost for hours.

Within a year or two of starting pottery classes at Castlemaine, I was tasked with running the workshops. I named the shop ‘Psycho Ceramica’ because you had to be a crackpot to be in the nick in the first place. When prisoners stepped into my workspace, they abided by the rules. You couldn’t muck up, fuck up or be stuck up. If you did, you’d be out. It was that simple. Which isn’t to say the fellas didn’t try it. Every now and then,

you'd get some cheeky bugger trying his luck making a bong. Before it went in the kiln, I'd secretly chuck some water on it, making it explode. I'd innocently say, 'Oh geez, mate – not sure what happened there. Must've been an air bubble. Shame, eh?' Whatever tomfoolery went on in Psycho Ceramica, I had no tolerance for it and would put an end to it. I knew what the space meant, not just for me, but for others. I couldn't risk the possibility of the workshops being shut down because of one person's fuck-up.

These workshops also served a bigger purpose. It was a way to build a safe community within the system. It was also a way to remain close to – and further discover – my Aboriginality. I may have been a diminutive figure, but I ran those pottery workshops with a sense of Aboriginal law. You weren't allowed to be in the classes if you were Serepaxed or Rohypnoled off ya tits, because you would've been like a bull in a china shop. Everybody followed my rules and respected the place as a hub of peace and creativity.

The sense of community we fostered inside the prison extended beyond the walls and into Castlemaine itself. We were able to make quality products to sell to the locals, enough that my pottery shop always ran at a profit. One of my rules was that for any object you made for your family, for example a box load of crockery, fancy vase, that sort of thing, you also had to leave something of equivalent value for us to sell on a Saturday morning down at Yarram's fete, on the local footy oval. Some of the larger terracotta vases made by prisoners would go for \$700 a pop. Today there is a lot of pottery still being done at Loddon. There's also the Torch Program in St Kilda, which provides cultural and arts vocational support to all offenders and ex-offenders in Victoria. Every year, many artworks by the prisoners are sold to locals and visitors alike. So there are ways to use your time effectively while doing time.

The Office of Corrections took me seriously enough to give me a key to the pottery shop, which I appreciated. The workshops offered a place of sanctuary for myself and others, open seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. It was only for prisoners and not even screws were allowed in. I didn't want them disturbing creative minds. Through teaching pottery I got paid \$50 a week. Top dollar. That was my job, my lot, and I loved it.

‘So, Jack, where do you want to go this time?’ one governor asked me when I turned up for classification, fresh from sentencing. I guess I was in and out so many times, the fellas got to know me.

‘You’ve done Castlemaine a few times, I can see. What about ...? Oh, you’ve done Bendigo. Hmm. What about Beechworth, Jack? Would you like to go to Beechworth?’

I nodded enthusiastically. This was the jail that had held one of Australia’s most infamous crims – Ned Kelly. His mum served time there too. And so I spent two years in Beechworth Gaol. A day or two after I arrived, one of the officers took me aside and said, ‘Heard you wanna see Ned’s mum’s cell and exercise yard. Come along, Jack. We’ll open it up for you.’ It was an honour to go into her cell for a mini tour with the officer.

In jail, sometimes you put your name down to see the prison doctor, just for something to do. You’ve got to go through a couple of different sections of the jail to find the medical centre. It helps break the monotony and gives you a change of scene. Once, while I was in Bendigo jail one time, I was coughing up and shitting blood, so I requested to see the doctor, who took one look at me and said, ‘Well, I better get you over for a scan, Jack. Check your innards.’ I was taken down the road to Bendigo Hospital to get my tests done.

I had a wonderful Sri Lankan lady as my doctor – black as the ace of spades, with bright red lipstick. She put on her gloves and I knew what she was going to do. So I rolled over and accepted the inevitable. It immediately took me back to Box Hill Boys’ Home ... that first time. This specialist could sense my tension and she kindly said, ‘There’s a bit of pressure there, Jack. But just try and relax.’ We had to go through all the necessary tests and once they were done, she instructed me to lie down and wait until the prison staff came back to collect me. I was happy to buy a bit of time outside the prison, so I sat and waited.

An hour turned into more hours and they served me an early dinner, which I polished off. After waiting a bit longer, eventually the nurse said, ‘Jack, look, we’ve tried ringing Bendigo but we can’t get onto them. They’re supposed to be here by now.’ I asked what time it was. It was four in the afternoon. ‘Oh, they’re on the muster now,’ I informed her. ‘They’re locking everybody up. Maybe that’s why nobody’s in the office. Strange, though – somebody should be there.’

The nurse looked at me and said, 'You know where to go, Jack, don't you?' I nodded and, to my surprise, she said, 'Here's your clothes.' And just like that, she handed them to me. After getting dressed I said, 'Thanks very much, Nurse,' and proceeded to walk from Bendigo Hospital to Bendigo Gaol. It didn't occur to me to run off. Where would I go? When I arrived back at the jail, I rang the doorbell many times, but there was no response. So I bashed on the door and yelled out, 'Let me in!' If anyone had seen me, it would've been quite an odd scene: me, the prisoner, in green, free on the outside yelling and begging to be locked up again!

It goes without saying that prison is not for the fainthearted. In those early days, I met some heavyweight crims. I knew some of them were in for life and that the system had almost broken them. There was one hard crim who was in charge of the crystal radio that we all had access to. He was a lovely fella but very temperamental. Now, look, the reality is you can't be on-side with everyone, but for whatever reason, me and this fella, we got on well. In fact, I got on well with all the crims. I wasn't actually doing anything particularly special. I just treated them like normal people. Never showed fear. That was important.

The trick to surviving prison is to never involve yourself in anything. If you feel slighted or unhappy about a comment or incident, you act deaf. Show no reaction. But there are times when you need to show that you're tough.

I learned that the hard way. During one particular month in Pentridge Prison's F division, I was being bothered by some young Yugoslavs, freshly locked up, no clue on how prison worked. We were in the dorm, late at night. They kept on throwing a ball at me while I sat on the top bunk reading a book, to rile me up. It worked and I was close to exploding. I figured they thought I was an easy target. Perhaps it was because I was a blakfella. For whatever reason, they just didn't like me.

The tennis ball bounced off my head. I finally cracked it. I jumped up and said to the kid who had thrown it, 'Do it one more time, mate. See that boiling water there? I'll throw it all over you. All right?' There were over a hundred of us in the dormitory at this point. Everybody was looking at me. I could feel the fury rising inside me and everyone's eyes on me. They knew something was about to go down. A quarter of an hour later the ball came bouncing onto my bed. Fuck's sake. Knowing if I backed down I'd become a target for others in the future, I walked down to the billy, filled it halfway

up and approached the kid. I still remember the grin on his face. He didn't think I'd go through with it. I'm not making excuses for what I did, but the truth is you couldn't show weakness in prison if you wanted to survive. I splashed scalding water over his jumper, avoiding his eyes and hair.

He yelled. The screws weren't opening the doors again until 6.30 the next morning so this poor kid was stuck in there with me until then. He awkwardly set up his bed near the gate. He was in agony and no screws came up the stairs to check on him.

There were some savage people in there, but if you were considered crazy enough, folks left you alone. After that boiling water incident, I was one of the inmates 'crazy enough' to be left alone. No one ever bothered me. I kept up appearances by firing up every now and then, just so nobody felt too comfortable. It was a defence mechanism and a form of self-protection.

Showing fear in jail only makes your life harder. I've seen others succumb to it. One poor young fella in F division was picked on, raped and assaulted by the others to the point where he expected it every night. He was resigned to it. I was very observant and clocked early on what you had to do to get through a sentence relatively unscathed. For the most part, I was friendly and congenial with people at all levels, from the most feared heavies right through to the drag queens who came through. A couple of them were Aboriginal and I made a point of looking out for blakfellas. Even those who made my life difficult on the outside.

Thanks to those years of elocution lessons at Box Hill Boys' Home, I had a voice that could command a room's attention. It helped me gain people's trust. It's very unusual for a crim or a screw to listen to a prisoner talk for very long. But for whatever reason, they'd let me run with whatever I was talking about and actually listen. I worked this in my favour. It allowed me to be heard when I told a doctor that I'd seen more than a dozen people go through one syringe.

After telling the doctor that so many prisoners were sharing needles, I was sent back to the unit with a brown paper bag stored in my undies, holding a dozen new fresh syringes. I wasn't searched as I went from unit to unit and was able to get the syringes to those who needed it.

How did I become so trusted by the staff? Maybe it was the spirit of Bunjil, looking out for me once more. Or the fact that I could shape the minds of others. I certainly did that with the hard-liners in prisons. And

even did it with some of the screws. I don't think I did anything particularly special, though. Just treated them like humans.

When it came to making friends, I was the one people came to. I didn't go out seeking friendship exactly. When you arrive in a new jail and go out in the yard, you know everyone's looking at you. Later, you go to pick up your supplies and head to your cell – blankets, sheets, pyjamas, that sort of thing. The tiers are lined with prisoners straining against the bars, trying to cop a good squiz at the latest arrivals. It's just like the movies. After a few years being in and out of the slammer, I became a known entity. Whenever I strolled in, a big cheer would erupt. Everyone would be pleased to see me.

'Ayyye! Ya silly bastard!'

'Here he comes!'

'Back again, everyone!'

And my favourite: 'Here comes the movie star!'

CHAPTER 9

TAKING RAGE TO THE STAGE

The early 1970s was an exciting time for the arts – particularly for mob. It saw the beginnings of a new direction as far as I was concerned too. Melbourne’s theatre scene was thriving. Great work was being done by the New Theatre lot and an alternative theatre venue, The Pram Factory, in Melbourne, had just opened. It was located on Drummond Street in Carlton, right opposite the Carlton Police Station.

I have hazy memories of taking my leave of the New Theatre. Dot Thompson, Don Munroe and dear Ron Northrope wished me well and good luck. The Pram Factory injected fresh talent into the theatre market. It was a huge game-changer for many creative types. I remember first seeing all the gang from the band Skyhooks, including Red Symons. Steve Hill was the lead singer back then, before Shirley Strachan. I even got to see their first show. They played at St Judes Church in Carlton. I’m grateful I got to witness the birth of The Pram Factory. I got to see it, and the people involved, grow and develop.

Up until that point most of the theatre people in my circles were white Australians. Bob Maza was the first Aboriginal actor I got to work closely with, and I learned a lot from him.

He was an impressive young Aboriginal actor and playwright; someone I could look up to in the Melbourne theatre scene. A role model. I have fond memories of visiting his home on the very busy Punt Road hill in inner-city Melbourne, close to Toorak Road. We’d spend hours together and I got to know his family.

When the Arts Council gave me a grant to start an Aboriginal theatre, I co-founded it with Bob. We wanted to develop a modern blak theatre movement – the first blak theatre company in Australia. I remember flipping through a small Aboriginal language book and coming across the word ‘Nindethana’, which means ‘ours’ (sadly the book didn’t specify

which language). It was the perfect name for our theatre company. The response to our endeavour was brilliant. Everyone in the theatre community was on board, particularly the La Mama mob on Faraday Street, off Lygon Street in Carlton. I'd done a few small gigs for Frank Bren and loved the manner and easy way folks at La Mama ran their performing business there. Listening to the likes of the frisky poet and man of prose Shelton Lea was an education in itself. Shelton had found himself delivered to Turana in Parkville. Just another poor soul who'd failed his adopted family and was lumped in among all the mobs of failed foster and adopted kids. He naturally gravitated towards the blak kids due to his own dark complexion. We had to set him straight, telling him he wasn't Aboriginal, but we made him feel welcome and included him in our ranks. Years later, I'd see him in Pentridge often, reading us his poetry, convincing the few among us mob to try our hand at penning some lines and reading them aloud the next visit. He always brought a carton of cigarettes to pass round this tight-knit group. In the nooks and crannies of the blue-stone walls of Pentridge, I was surprised and delighted how so many men would turn up at Shelton's poetry group; serious scribes in their own right, happy to read and share their works.

This period, and the people I encountered, were significant in slowly connecting me to my Aboriginality. Theatre gave us mob a platform to reclaim ownership over our hidden and stolen stories. Theatre brought me significantly closer to my true self and despite all the chaos and upheaval of my life, it was the one place where I felt most at home. Without being aware of it, I was using the platform of theatre to help me with that discovery.

I was a lost child back then, but also a willing actor and I threw myself into the various roles and opportunities that opened up. With nothing written for Aboriginal actors in those days, Bob Maza, Jack Houston, a fella called John Smyth and a couple of others wrote a series of sketches which we performed first at The Pram Factory and then at the Australian National University. The intention was to take the show to the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, but I was too frightened of all the police floating around the Black Power mob. I was also frightened of the Black Power mob itself. Looking back, I can see how the uncertainty of my own identity left me feeling out of the loop of Aboriginal political struggles at that time.

Still, for all my initial trepidation this, for me, was a time of cultural awakening. My awareness and knowledge of Indigeneity was being stirred, as was my understanding of the truth of this country's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. My conscience was processing the enormous inequity and racism targeting my community. My growing knowledge and personal experience gave me an edge, which took my acting to a different level. I virtually took the rage of my Indigenoussness to the stage. And taking our show up to Canberra further helped me step into my culture. This is where Gumbaynggirr activist, writer, performer and academic Gary Foley, the late Bruce McGuinness and many others saw the evidence before their eyes of how to take our stories to the stage. Writing was not my forte but I knew how to bring the written word to life. Perhaps it would've made sense to try my hand at being a playwright or producing scripts, but at that age I'd have been too feckless to seriously write much.

So, here we were, two blakfellas and a mate from the New Theatre named Ollie, doing our series of comedy sketches, sending up the government of the day and policies that were affecting our mobs, and we were able to reach a greater audience. It was exhilarating and liberating. We called the show *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting*, for want of a name. At every level, I never felt that we were being censored and that gave me a freedom and confidence I hadn't felt until then. Before we did the Canberra tour, we did a show at The Pram Factory called *Brumby Innes*. I believe it was presented with part of the money that I got through a grant to pay a month's rent with The Pram Factory.

Working with Bob Maza and doing shows like *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting* helped ease the sense of rejection and isolation I'd experienced when trying to connect with mob in Collingwood/Fitzroy. The distance I'd once felt with my Aboriginality was slowly dissipating and my uncertainty was being replaced by pride and knowledge. Eventually, instead of feeling frightened, I came to be most at home being surrounded by other blakfellas, learning about our shared stories, our politics and our cultures. The same stands true today. And these revelations came to pass thanks to theatre.

In 1972, The Pram Factory produced the play *Bastardy*, written by John Romeril and directed by Bruce Spence. It was based loosely on my alcoholic memories of meeting my mother for the first time, and was well reviewed as a fine example of Romeril's powerful writing and a significant tale of the Stolen Generations. Fellow actors Jude Kuring, Tim Robertson

and Peter Cummins were exceptional to work with. We seemed to bond together so well we performed our parts perfectly, right up until the very end of the season. Sadly, on that last night I threw a spanner in the works because of my heavy drinking. In the play I was supposed to get hit on the head with a bottle of beer, whereupon Peter Cummins would say his lines over my unconscious body. That particular night, though, his speech was interrupted by the sound of my loud snoring. I awoke from my drunken stupor to the sound of the audience clapping away, blissfully unaware. Big Bruce was angry and promised never to work with me again, but he changed his mind.

I hadn't noticed that my drinking was becoming a bit of a problem. I liked riding my CZ Czechoslovakian 175cc trail bike daily into Carlton and nicking in to the various pubs along the Lygon Street stretch, starting at the Curtin Hotel opposite Trades Hall and working my way to the Albion, near La Mama theatre. I was homeless off and on during that period but even when I had no house and was couch surfing, I'd always find time to practise my lines and work on my craft. It was a welcome distraction from my circumstances. I've always been old-school with my approach to acting and like to follow the writing to a tee, delivering the lines verbatim. I admire playwrights and dramaturges who can capture a moment so beautifully and eloquently through the written word. I think it's important to bring those carefully chosen words to life exactly as they're written.

But the drink was affecting my performance. It's hard to remember your lines when you're drunk. Shortly after *Bastardy* we did the first ever theatre-restaurant performance piece in Australia. It was called *Dimboola* by Jack Hibberd. The play was about a wedding reception and had a cast of brilliant performers. Bruce Spence was the groom. This was experimental theatre. We had a restaurant come and feed people, and audience members would come in with their baskets full of wine and other goods. The *Dimboola* cast was allowed six large cans of Foster's beer per performance. Most of the cast imbibed and I reckon a tad too much drinking affected our performances.

I played the part of an alcoholic gatecrasher to the wedding reception, along with acting legend Max Gillies. One night I glugged down the giggle-juice like water, and by the time I'd knocked off all my six cans I noticed that Max hadn't drunk his so I drank most of 'em. Then I managed to con an audience member out of a bottle of red wine. By the end of the play I

had to be poked every now and then by Max, prompting my cue. I guess that might've prompted a reaction from me, because since that night Max has reminded me that I chased him up and down the back stairs, wanting a fight.

A strange epiphany occurred for me a little while later outside Readings bookstore, next to Tiamo, my favourite cafe. (Tiamo still has an ageing poster of a student movie I did in the early 1970s. The film was called *Terror Los Stralis*.) I bumped into a mate of mine who had come to every recent show I'd done at The Pram, so I was a little taken aback when he physically tried to distance himself from me.

'Don't talk to me!' he yelled. I took a step back, genuinely flummoxed. He realised I had no idea what he was on about. No clue as to why he was pissed off with me. So he had the presence of mind to sit me down on a bench and set me straight.

I listened to his memory of the last night of *Bastardy*. It was a tale of woe and shock. After last drinks at The Pram, he had invited me to partake of his father's red wine, to celebrate the final performance of *Bastardy*. He asked me if I remembered anything about that evening. I answered nothing other than that the red wine we'd drunk was sweet and drinkable. Well, he said, we were in his lounge room happily gasbagging away to each other on one topic or another when we started arguing over something we shouldn't have been bitching over in the first place. Suddenly I broke away from him and went into his kitchen, where I took out a serrated steak knife from his cutlery drawer. I came back into the lounge room and, he told me, came up real close to him. With the devil's look in my eyes, I bent the knife, then straightened it out. Next I went out to his car – a beautiful Morgan – and knifed all four of his tyres.

'And then you jumped on your bike and took off. And, by the way, you left your Stackhat on my verandah. Go and collect it.'

Wow. Hearing him tell me that hit me like a ton of bricks. My first response was, 'Jesus Christ. Could've been *you* that I stabbed four times! I'm so sorry, mate.'

It sobered me up immediately. From that moment, I gave up grog on the spot. For eight years exactly, because I was so afraid of what I'd do if I drank to excess. Around this time, I was also smoking yarndi (marijuana). It wasn't habitual but it settled me down and made me see and develop strategies. It put things in proper perspective and stopped me being angry. I

realised if I had anything to say against the system, I could take this rage to the stage.

That's exactly what I did when I started with the Old Tote Theatre in Sydney. I was brought up from Melbourne and David Gulpilil, who was very young at the time, was brought down from Maningrida, NT. There was also a core of actors of note, like John Gaden. The play was written by Michael Boddy and was called *Cradle of Hercules*. It was about Governor Arthur Phillip, Bennelong and the people of the Eora, and was to be performed at the Opera House no less. Fantastic! But there was a catch. The cast included six young Aboriginal girls from Redfern who were being paid very low wages. They'd been told they'd only get a rehearsal fee rather than a performance wage like the rest of us were getting. The six knocked on my dressing room door one day and asked to have a serious conversation. They were forthright in their complaints about their wages and asked if I'd go and talk about their concerns to the director and the management mob of the Old Tote.

I was frustrated by the overall attitude towards these girls. I was told that since they were only part-time actors they didn't warrant the same pay structure that the rest of the cast were assured. I couldn't understand why everybody wasn't equal with everybody else – no one better than the others. I was so pissed off, in fact, that I threatened to pull out of the production unless they were paid fairly. Payment security guaranteed. I packed up my gear and got ready to leave.

The Opera House waited until the very last moment before finally calling me and agreeing to pay all the girls the correct fee. I told them, 'I'm so pissed off with you, ya bastards. Y'know, making those girls wait so long.' I paused but there was no response. Time to pull out the big guns. 'Okay, I'll stay, but I'm going to do *Bennelong* naked. Fuck yas.' It seemed like a fair exchange for the stress we'd been put under. And so I did it. Wandered on stage and performed the show with me willy dangling on the Opera House stage. That's what you do, that's community. I know it would've taken a lot for those girls to speak up. I've caught up with some of them here and there over the years. We have a good old natter and laugh about the old times.

Shortly after the Old Tote gig I was chosen to play the part of Billy Dargin, the supposed mate of bushranger Ben Hall, in a thirteen-episode series. *Ben Hall* was produced by ABC, BBC and Twentieth Century Fox and cost \$26 000. Filmed over nine months in the Blue Mountains and Orange and Dubbo regions, it was a wonderful experience working with the crème de la crème of Australian and British actors and an incredible film crew and directors. I learnt a huge amount, but even so I wasn't ready for what was to follow: I was chosen to screen test for *Apocalypse Now*. That's right, the film. As young 'uns say: Who'da thunk it? It's an unbelievable thing. You tell people and they're shocked. *Ya lying!* No one believes that the original script called for an Aboriginal deserter from the Australian Army. But Hollywood, in its own way, attempted things like that in the past. I mean, to put the call out to use me, it takes an individual director or somebody in the business to front up and say, 'Let's try a blakfella, an Australian,' you know?

An agency from Sydney, Frog Promotions, contacted me for the audition. Apparently Marlon Brando would star in it and the director was Francis Ford Coppola. I felt I was swimming in deep waters, a bit overwhelmed and unsure of my footing. I hadn't a clue about the pros and cons of undertaking an audition where I would get little support and direction.

At this very same time, the former sexual diseases clinic, which had been lying empty and useless on the Dirty Gerty (Gertrude Street) mile for about ten years or so, was taken over by McGuinness, Foley, Brownie and the mobs of Aunties and Uncles. They were developing once and for all the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS). Our first dental service started up too – just down the road. I was their first patient, the dentist told me. I'd gone there because one of my big beautiful buck teeth had been chipped when an angry young policeman shoved his .38 into my mouth in a cell. The chipped tooth was hurting horribly at the time, so I was grateful when the dentist removed it, but it was that very next day, early arvo, that I was required to turn up for my audition.

Lights had been set up beside a spot on a leafy road along a railway track over near Malvern. There was a small crew with a coupla big cameras. I was supposed to walk down the track where there was to be an impending fire fight with the enemy. There were young men with war paint on their faces and bodies up in the trees on either side of the trail. I was supposed to

make a delivery of cocaine and drugs of all manner, and was warned to hurry up or get caught in the cross-fire. I did my piece with bullets whistling close by, and walked away from the fray to safety in the nick of time.

Having never faced such a challenge I simply got on with it, with lots of starts and restarts. I was very conscious of my missing buck tooth throughout the entire experience. The audition was a complete disaster and I was told they'd get back to me. They didn't, of course. In hindsight, if I'd had the knowledge I would have been able to step on up and look down the barrel of the camera. I would have said my missing buck tooth was a sign I'd been initiated. And that made me a man and empowered me. But in reality I was a lost black duck. I didn't have the fortitude and command to stand strong in my culture. I was shy. Plus with this being one of my first-ever auditions, I didn't know how to handle myself in front of the camera. I wasn't really disappointed about completely failing that first screen test. I just let it be and let it go. But imagine if I'd pulled that gig off, aye?

My next audition was for *Hair*, the rock opera musical. I could sing, of sorts, and I remember belting out one of the numbers, but when I was asked to dance freestyle I found I had two left feet and no rhythm in my body. I moved around on stage so stiffly it was as though I had a didgeridoo up my moom (bum). Needless to say, I didn't get the gig.

Things turned around when the Melbourne Theatre Company asked me to come to their rehearsal rooms in South Melbourne to do a cold reading of a series of new plays. It felt as if every person was smiling and happy to see me there, which made me feel comfortable and confident, and like I was on my way with a future ahead. They gave me paying gigs regularly for a period. Good times.

I got more work with the Union Theatre too. I remember one production in particular fondly. It was a beautiful performance piece called *Carriage 17*, which was written by the director Daryl Wilkinson. He got every word in the script from his father, who had an amazing memory of an incident he'd witnessed aboard a train going from Geelong to Spencer Street Station. Daryl's father had related verbatim exactly what had been said by four travelling strangers – a young soldier from Vietnam, a young Aboriginal fella and two young girls recently escaped from Fairfield Women's Prison

the previous night. The serviceman and the Aboriginal bloke were talking to the two girls, striking up a conversation with them. The soldier had snuck a bottle or two of giggle-juice and soon a party was well underway. The boys latched on to a girl each. Much naughtiness and swearing and mad passionate couplings took place. The whole episode was turned into a performance piece and it took audiences by surprise. They laughed their tits off. With this kind of success, *Carriage 17* cast and crew drove up to Sydney's Nimrod Theatre where we were received with mirthful glee and full houses. I did a couple more plays for the Union Theatre shortly afterwards. Again I felt I belonged and I was wanted; eminently castable in one production after another.

I still wasn't drinking. I'd go into pubs to check out music and for the social aspect of it but didn't touch so much as a drop. Instead, I got into heroin because I needed some foible, as you do. I conned one of my fellow actors to give me a hit. I'll never divulge his identity. I doubt even his missus would know his dark secret. He didn't want to be the first person to introduce me to heroin but I insisted.

I do remember that first hit being euphoric. It felt beautiful. The feelings of paranoia and self-consciousness about my surroundings just melted away. It was a feeling that wouldn't last long; heroin soon had me in its grip. It was straight out of the frying pan and into the fire.

By the time I was playing the part of Harry Edwards in the feature film adaptation of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* in 1978, based on the Booker Prize-nominated book by Thomas Keneally, my heroin addiction was getting the better of me. I must've been a nightmare to work with. There was one day where I was as sick as a dog and felt like I was about to die. I'd had a dirty hit, you see. And let me tell you, if you have a dirty hit, you truly feel like you want to jump off the next bridge because the pain is excruciating. You're shitting and spewing at the same time and it takes a while for your system to adjust.

I was a mess. The director, Fred Schepisi, who was also the film's producer and writer, knew that when it came to acting I'd been at it for a while. So when we did the shots of me in jail, we did it in just a few takes. Despite feeling like death, I channelled that reality into the violence-packed film. I thought to meself: 'Ah well, in half an hour's time, someone is going

to pick me up from here and take me on set to be raped and hanged by Ray Barrett.' (Barrett was playing the part of the local constable Farrell who murdered my character.) Perhaps it augured well for the miserable part I was playing and the lines I had to deliver to be in the terrible condition I was in.

I explained my position to all the theatres I worked with that I was a functioning junkie. As long as I could get a hit of a morning and a hit of a night, I'd be sweet. Sometimes I was even paid a little bit of extra money to be able to afford to wax, in whatever stage I was in. I was learning my lines, doing my part and delivering on stage – and work didn't slow down. I was fortunate that those in influential positions in the theatre world recognised that when it came to acting roles, I was still quite capable, I was ready for it. They weren't aware that there were times when I hid myself away from any possibilities for work opportunities because I didn't feel ready. Sometimes it took them a couple of months to find me. As my drug addiction escalated, it took them longer to find me. Years, in fact.

Not long after *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, I got caught again. It was front page of the newspaper: 'Oz Movie Star Turns Burglar'.

CHAPTER 10

MY BROTHER ARCHIE

It was during this latest prison stint that I got an unexpected visitor. Incredibly, it was my sister Esme. She was one of the two little Aboriginal girls I'd met all those years ago when I went with my church to perform in Nunawading, at Winlaton Girls' Home.

Just as I never forgot them, it seems they never forgot me. And when she saw me in the newspaper she decided to visit me in Pentridge. I couldn't believe it. I'd hit the jackpot: instant family!

During the visit she said, 'I'm married up, Jack. So is Eva Jo. She's got kids and all that and I'm about to have my first baby.' It was a big thing to find family, but I stayed somewhat distant at first. It was a lot to take in.

Once I served my prison time, though, I got on my motorbike and rode over to North Melbourne to visit Esme and the family as soon as I could. At that stage, she was pregnant with my eldest nephew, Ben. I was happy to spend time with Esme and Ben, and later her daughter, Aya. And I felt honoured when I was invited to walk Esme down the aisle and hand her over to her husband.

Discovering family gave me a new lease on life and sense of purpose. It was nice to instantly become an uncle. And a brother. My younger sister Eva Jo lived in Heidelberg, and it was special getting to know her too. I alternated between her place and Esme's. I tried to never stay too long with either family, not wanting to outstay my welcome, and I'd give them gifts I'd stolen from the houses I'd burgled – my way of saying, 'Thank you, we're family.'

So suddenly, I had two sisters in my life. I also had a brother – but my reconnection with Arthur, as I'll explain, was more complicated. After first speaking to him in the boys' home, we had finally reconnected a few years

before my sisters, when I was living in a caravan in South Yarra. My life at that point was pretty much working for a quid and then partying of a night at the Woolshed at the Australia Hotel on Collins Street with other gay men. I had quite the social life. One that was liberally peppered with drugs, burgers and stints in jail. When I met my brother, he was on a similar path of destruction, doing drugs and doing jail time. He also had a minor mental condition, being on the spectrum.

Archie (I never did call him Artie, as Mum had done) had managed to travel over to Western Australia, working in the mines over there. Back in Melbourne, he would hang out in Fitzroy, where I'd occasionally bump into him. He told me about all the places he'd travelled to around Australia. He loved long train trips and the freedom of just taking off by himself.

Archie started joining me on my visits to see our sisters. Like I'd done, he'd alternate from one sister to another, staying with Esme in Broadmeadows or with Eva Jo over in Heidelberg. I'd hop on my motorbike and ride around regularly to visit them. Archie was quite a nostalgic and sentimental person. He'd try to reflect on memories, saying things like, 'Hey, Jack, do you remember that time ... ?' and then follow with one anecdote or another.

We'd talk about Mum and our experience of growing up. Archie and my sisters hadn't met Mum since childhood, but they'd lived with her until that incident on the blakfella camp in Griffith, New South Wales, and Esme had a vague recollection of what had happened. She recalled she and the other two were on their own for a bit one day when Mum came back holding a bloodied knife and with her dress covered in blood. Then a blue broke out. Esme remembered she and Eva Jo were moved from the camp after that and delivered to Allambie children's home in Burwood, Victoria. Archie was taken away too. Having worked out the time-lines, I must have been visited at the home by Uncle Henry and Auntie Amy around that same time.

It was a complicated time emotionally, reuniting with Esme, Eva Jo and Archie. There we were, siblings reunited, trying our darndest to bond beyond those lost years. Through Esme and Eva Jo, I met my youngest sister, Zenip, who is also known as Christine. My sisters all met by chance one day, after Esme visited me that first time in jail.

Esme and Eva Jo were boarding a tram together one day with their little ones in prams. It was in Melbourne's north-west suburb of Flemington and as the tram rattled along the tracks, they spotted a woman sitting nearby and

felt compelled to approach her. Something about her appearance was vaguely familiar and the sisters wondered if she could be a lost younger sibling.

Esme went up and said, ‘Excuse me, I’m Esme Charles and this is my sister, Eva Jo Charles. We were wondering, what’s your name?’

Christine looked at Esme and replied, ‘I’m Christine Charles.’

To which Esme said, ‘Oh, we thought you were Zenip.’

Christine immediately responded with, ‘Oh, you mean Zenith?’ At that stage, she was under the impression that her other name was Zenith. Esme and Eva Jo’s hearts skipped a beat as they realised this was, in fact, their long-lost younger sister. The two elder siblings corrected her there and then. ‘No, no ... we’ve been told that your name is Zenip. It’s spelled Z-E-N-I-P: Zenip. It’s an Aboriginal word that means “pretty butterfly”.’

From there, the sisters caught up on news. Esme informed Zenip, ‘Our brother, Jack Charles, went up to Swan Hill and met Mum. She was the one who informed him of your name and its spelling and that you were the last of us siblings for Jack to find.’

When my sisters relayed that encounter to me, it just blew my mind because that’s a unique story – but not an unusual one when it comes to those of us who are Stolen. Even when I was caught up in the fog and haze of addiction, I recall hearing from men, women and young ones their tales of discovery of a total stranger on a tram, train, bus or even at an Aboriginal function turning out to be long-lost family.

Folks will find themselves in a space together and they’ll look at each other and say, ‘‘Scuse me, what’s your name? What mob are you from?’ They’re the first questions we ask if we see another blak person. It’s a meaningful way to establish a connection of sorts – profound or otherwise. White people see themselves everywhere and so their sense of identity is such that they don’t need to necessarily go searching for that connection. But for blakfellas, that yearning for culture, kin and community runs deep.

That yearning certainly ran deep in me too. I wanted to be part of my sisters’ lives. I became like a drop-in instant uncle, as did Archie.

Some of the extended family weren’t always so keen on our visits, though, and were especially cautious of Archie, being a little different as he was. The poor bugger must’ve sensed it because even though he was never told to piss off, he would often stay away for months at a time.

Archie and I saw each other often but our addictions interrupted the connecting process. That, and his mental state. He was in a world of his own, with the eyes very much blinkered. With this tunnel vision, his one purpose in life was to coal-bite and beg for as much money as possible. He and I were both trying to learn how to live and survive after those years in the home. There was no counselling for people like us. This was part of the huge price you paid as a member of the Stolen Generations. And I tried to keep an eye on my little brother and give him the support he needed whenever I could, but my own addiction was getting worse, and it was like the blind leading the blind.

Archie wandered around Fitzroy asking strangers for money to support his drug habit. He was a good coal-biter; forceful and very insistent, and you could hear him coming from a long way away. Coal-biting is when you're begging and not trying to offer anything in return (unlike, say, a pan-handler or a busker). He was very forceful and would sometimes grab people's arms as they walked past. I told him, 'Don't do that, Archie. It's abusive.' But he didn't give it a second thought to encroach on a person's space. You know, people would be sitting enjoying their latté and brunch down on Smith Street or Brunswick Street and he'd approach them and spray saliva all over them while asking for spare change. They'd give him a note to get him to piss off so he wouldn't be spitting all over their food and drink.

He'd even wander the streets in Elsternwick, where the Jewish community loved him. Every time he went down to Elsternwick and Elwood, or even Inkerman Street in St Kilda, he'd come home with more notes than coins! I think the folks down that way regarded Archie with kindness and looked out for him. Unfortunately, he was also an easy mark because it was so simple to con him. Archie had supposed 'friends' who would follow him around and take whatever cash people gave him.

Archie did some odd things along the way. He'd wander along the Gertrude Street strip in inner-city Collingwood and stop outside the front of a chic, trendy salon shopfront, where young ladies were doing clients' hair and nails, helping them look and feel pampered to the nines. I knew these ladies and one told me, 'He didn't give a stuff, Jack. He'd go and stand at the tree outside and take a piss with everyone looking out the window or people driving by. It was always that same direct spot he'd piss on.' He wouldn't care that people right near him were prettying themselves up for a

special occasion, or spoiling themselves as a treat. If he needed to urinate, then right in front of them would do just fine, thanks.

One day Archie was wandering through Flinders Street coal-biting when an old lady approached him about religion. She asked if he read the Bible and he answered, 'Yeah, I read the Bible!'

And she said, 'Well, look, it's Christmas time, dear boy. So I'll give you this. Read this.' And she handed him a Bible.

Archie exclaimed in his trademark loud way, 'Thank youuu! Thank you!' The old lady waved and wandered off, having done her good Christian bit for that Christmas and disappeared into the crowd.

Archie opened up the Bible and inside was \$100.

Apart from coal-biting, Archie's other talent was an ability to suddenly disappear. You wouldn't see him for months – he was like an Aboriginal Houdini. He'd travel around Australia, working in the mines in Western Australia, visiting South Australia, that sort of thing. I didn't know how he managed it but he always seemed to have money for it.

I learned later that he had his own stint doing burgs – guess we really were brothers! One night when I'd been booked by the jacks, they took me in for questioning. One of them asked me out of the blue if I ever told my brother about the houses I did over.

Surprised, I looked at the copper and replied, 'No way. You fellas know I operate as a loner.' Turns out Archie had been busted doing over many of the same houses I'd done, particularly around the Kooyong area. When Archie stayed the night, I'd hear him wake around three in the morning and leave. At the time I'd figured he just didn't like to stay in one place for too long and would become restless. After being questioned by the police, however, I realised he had been getting up to do burgs. But he was a complex and internal person, not much given to sharing his exploits.

Once, I heard through the grapevine that Archie had been locked up in Turana. I decided to go there one Friday night and asked the staff if I could take him out for the weekend. The Office of Corrections was more relaxed back then and they actually let me do this.

I took him to the pictures in St Kilda. The next day, we went over to my sister Eva Jo's house, as he wanted to visit family. It was tough because the

kids didn't like their uncle. He scared them. I got him back to Turana at about nine o'clock on Sunday night.

Archie was very quiet and reserved, but when he did speak or laugh, he was loud. Every now and then, you'd hear the odd guffaw, but I never saw much of that. In trying to get to know him better, I struggled because Archie wasn't chatty. He never divulged anything. He minded his business and, for the most part, aside from his determination when coal-biting, he was a harmless, sweet young man.

It was tough sometimes. There were stages where whenever I'd see him an instant cloud would form over my head. I was depressed by how little I could do to help him. The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service didn't seem to be capable of dealing with Archie's high-level needs on account of his mental difficulties. And there was a part of me that always wondered whether their lack of assistance was in part due to Mum's surname – Charles.

You see, over the years, as I struggled with increasing drug addiction and crime, I thought access to the Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) was my right. The building, in Thornbury, is next to a footy pavilion where I would hang out with other mob on hot nights, especially during my homeless years. It was a place where you could meet up with mates, have a feed.

In my later years I used to attend an Elders' luncheon put on by the AAL. One year a man came up to me and said, 'What are you doing here? Ya mum killed Alf's father. This is Alf's organisation.' I disagreed. The organisation was actually started by the late Sir Doug Nicholls, who was a Yorta Yorta pastor, activist and sportsman back in the day. He also played footy for Carlton. He was a short but powerful player who grew tired of the racism at the club and left after a few years. Even the masseur refused to massage him. Sir Doug Nicholls had co-founded the Aborigines Advancement League in 1957, and Alf Junior took over as leader after his death.

These sorts of instances of exclusion plagued me. I struggled to access health, education and housing resources from the AAL. I'd head up to the Advancement League or spend time at the Gladys Nicholls Hostel to connect with others. There was also the Doug Nicholls Hall, where everybody used to go for dances. Everyone would get dressed up to the nines and wear their best gowns. I would turn up at events from time to

time and there'd be one particular member who would ask me point-blank why I was there and would also level at me, 'Why do you call yourself Uncle?', suggesting I was not worthy of such a title within the community. It was hurtful and humiliating and no one really came to my defence. I hadn't touted myself as an Uncle, either. It was bestowed upon me in many a prison by the crims, management and general staff. It's a form of respect. I was the prison's hotshot tutor, teaching pottery, but I was also making a difference, and calling me Uncle was how they acknowledged that.

But there was an occasion when Alf Junior helped me out. I was in and out of prison at the time, and after each release I would resolve to turn my life around, as you do. After one of my releases I needed work. I didn't know Alf well but I went and met with him, asking, 'Can you get me a job there? I've just come out of the nick.'

'Ah yeah, easy, Jack,' he said. 'Come on in.' And, full credit to Alf, he was true to his word. My job was to count the number of Aboriginal students in schools across Victoria. It was all done by phone and I had a secretary whose job was to type up all the information we collated. She also handled my diary, scheduling my visits to schools in each area. But I found it all a bit awkward and didn't know how to deal with it. One day, I tapped Alf on the shoulder and said, 'Oh, this is getting too much, mate.'

He considered things for a moment and said, 'Well, there's other things you can do, Jack. You could sit in on the visits up to Waverley Police Academy.'

My eyes lit up. 'Yeah,' I said enthusiastically. 'I'd love that.'

It was also thanks to Alf that I had the opportunity to hear Ambrose Golden-Brown's speech to the newly arrived Vietnamese community, as part of a cross-cultural awareness program for migrants. Ambrose Golden-Brown was an Aboriginal educator and a member of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy established outside Parliament House in 1972. He was a great public spokesperson for the Aboriginal community – a brilliant man with a beautiful voice. He explained the basics of Australian history and whose land they'd arrived on. Aboriginal cultural leaders would be virtually at the gate when the community touched down in Melbourne. This was organised by the Koorie education service that Alf Bamblett developed as leader of the AAL.

I continued to pay the price for accusations against my mum, even though she was eventually cleared of any wrongdoing. We Charles' were

doomed for inappropriate payback action.

By the time Alf passed away, our relationship had improved but I would say that it was because of my longevity and various roles in the arts, rather than being accepted as part of the community. Paranoia allows me to believe that.

Just before Alf Bamblett Junior died, I went to visit him. He was faring poorly and I thought it was important to make peace. I'd been looking into Mum's case and had accessed some of her files. The truth lay on those pages. I gently said to Alf, 'Listen, I've got the evidence clearing my mum of your father's murder. I believe I know the story now of why it happened.'

He looked at me and said quietly, 'Oh, that's good, Jack. Thank you ... I know, too.' Six months later, Alf Bamblett – by then, Dr Alf Bamblett – died.

Whenever Archie and I ended up in the nick, often in separate prisons, I'd try my best to look out for him. It's a common misconception that when you're in jail, you're completely isolated and news doesn't travel. But it does. Particularly if it concerns family. The last time Archie came out of Pentridge, I was already aware that he had been facing problems during that last jail sentence.

I implored my teacher down at Won Wron, a lovely woman called Marge Findlay, to put in a request for Archie to finish off his sentence with me. I wanted to get him involved in my pottery workshop in Won Wron; at the very least keep an eye on him.

It's my belief that if the prison had let Archie transfer, I would've been able to protect him. But they didn't. Connection to culture would've so greatly helped us at this point. When people read and connect with cultural stories, it can be a catalyst for our own journey of discovering a more powerful being than we are now.

The Pram Factory actor and playwright Phil Motherwell was busted for drugs around the time I was pushing for Archie to be moved from A Division to join me at Won Wron. Phil was serving time with Archie. Every Thursday, I'd get a note from Phil that had been shoved up someone's moom in Pentridge, which would be delivered to me, giving me an update on what was happening with Archie.

Before continuing, a quick aside about the word ‘moom’ ... I was fortunate enough to have sat in on a couple of Ambrose Golden-Brown’s sessions explaining the history of Victoria to new arrivals and sharing different stories about this part of Australia. One of those stories was how the annual ‘Moomba’ celebration in Melbourne came to be back in the day. In his words, ‘The city’s fathers wanted to develop a term for a festival they intended to have.’

Festival organisers asked the two most eminent activists of Victoria, the renowned Eric and William T. Onus brothers, to coin a phrase that would nicely capture this upcoming event. The Onus brothers took on the task and went away to have a think and discuss ideas. After a bit, they came back and said, ‘Look, call your event “Moomba”. It means, “Let’s get together and have fun.”’

Naturally, the festival people, who had no idea, were all for it. ‘All right, okay then – Moomba!’

And so it became part of the psyche as a word associated with bringing people together and having fun. Several years later, while I was serving time, we were told another meaning of the word. From all along the east coast, New South Wales, to Victoria and South Australia, ‘moom’ was a well-known word for ‘bum’ and ‘Moomba’ means ‘up ya bum’. God, we bloody hooted. We laughed our tits off.

I should clarify that ‘moomba’ was not a derogatory term. In our culture, we don’t have the need to swear at each other like that. We’re great orators like the original Africans; great debaters too. That is merely one element of our culture that white people never saw in our development.

But I digress ... Back to Phil Motherwell and his notes being shoved up the moom of a person-who-shall-remain-nameless. This person would then board the prison escort van to visit me down at Won Wron Prison. Each Thursday, I’d get a message from Phil keeping me up to date about my brother.

Through these notes, I learned that three Yugoslav lads in A Division had given Archie his first hit of heroin. The panic and devastation I felt haunted me. There was nothing I could do.

It’s my understanding that these three Yugoslav men talked Archie into king-hitting the bloke next to him on the muster one day. Eager to please and willing to deliver, Archie did exactly that. He turned around and knocked this man out cold. The meat wagon – otherwise known as the

ambulance – came along and picked up the unfortunate bloke. And the ambos picked up Archie too. He was on god knows what, and had tried to violently resist arrest. Eventually, he was knocked out and the ambulance took both men to the G Division hospital.

They ended up waking up opposite each other, so the bloke instantly saw who had king hit him. Armed with this knowledge, he sent word down to me at Won Wron. I was to make Archie apologise to him, or else he'd shiv – knife – him.

I managed to make a personal plea to my brother to apologise. I explained to a teacher that I'd been sent this note from Pentridge and something needed to be done. She got right on board. We contacted the Education department in A Division and we organised a person-to-person call where I spoke with Archie and said, 'Don't be a silly bugger. Tell him you're sorry.' The next message I got was that Archie did exactly that. I heard directly from the bloke who said, 'Thanks, Jack. Sorry to see that your brother's come to this.' A Division was a small world and everyone knew what everyone else was doing. Even the screws. So they were fully prepared for the next time another incident happened with Archie.

I didn't know Archie had that arrangement with those three Yugoslavs. I never met or spoke with them. They injected poisonous shit into my brother that meant he was never the same. Years later, when I asked Archie what'd been injected into him he frantically and loudly cried out in his staccato manner of speaking, 'They. Gave. Me. Bon Ami!' That's the powder you clean your sinks with. That's what they injected into Archie. My brother. A brutal combination of heroin and Bon Ami that went straight into his veins and forever changed him. Bloody shocking.

Archie was young but a big lad, and with that king hit incident it took a few beatings of the batons to quell him into submission. I ended up getting a third note from Phil who said, 'They got him again, Jack. Shot him up and conned him into throwing a big tin rubbish bin through the screw's box.' But the screws were fully prepared this time and they brought out the longer batons to handle the situation. They jumped Archie and knocked him into submission. Apparently after that he was delivered into H Division. You know things are serious when you get taken there. It's a hellhole for the worst of the worst crims.

I didn't hear at that time that he'd actually been sentenced to H Division, but I was eventually told. H Division was the final solution to

anybody who arced up against the system. That was where all the heavies went after a killing, a bashing, a stabbing, raping people. If the screws or the governor got wind of your misdeed, the offending prisoner was delivered down there. There were a couple of times while doing time when it looked likely that I was destined to go down there but it never happened. And for that I count me lucky stars.

The thing is with Archie, he wasn't aware of the rules and regulations and how to conduct himself with prisoners and screws. And H Division's procedures were very strict and military-like. Archie was easily influenced by the heartless people who took advantage of him. He was the source of their entertainment and the butt of their jokes. I only heard about these details years afterwards. But I did get to hear some stuff as it happened, through Phil Motherwell. I attempted again to get the system to let Archie see out the rest of his sentence alongside me. If they'd allowed that, he wouldn't have been bashed. Incapable of following the strict regime, he copped punishments there big time.

One reason why Archie was given a really hard time was because you had to march everywhere. If you didn't follow through or salute when you marched past the cat sitting in the Governor's hat, you had the absolute daylights bashed out of you. And every prisoner they went past had to turn away and not look at them, otherwise they'd be forced to join the march whether they wanted to or not – they'd be pummelled until they started marching. Another rule was that you weren't allowed to look at authority figures. If you even *looked* at a prison officer, you were immediately bashed against a bluestone wall. Thing is, though, if somebody talked to Archie he'd look at them. Mentally, he couldn't adjust to those rules. It wasn't deliberate.

I firmly wish that I'd kept those notes from Phil Motherwell, as it would've been proof that here was a man who was living in extreme hardship.

I believe that the system shanghaied him in the quietness and the darkness to Aradale, which housed the mentally ill and criminally insane. Poor Archie, with an ordinary jail sentence for stealing, was taken from an ordinary prison to a jail for the criminally insane. I've since spoken to a couple of guys who were up there with him and they told me they saw my brother being raped and overloaded with psych drugs.

They closed Aradale down as a psychiatric unit in the late 1990s. It can't have been easy for Archie during those difficult periods – he didn't even understand why he'd been sent there – and I couldn't wait for him to escape the clutches of the harsh prison system. A system not set up to accommodate the needs of someone like my brother.

I was living in the George Wright Hostel when Archie came out of Aradale and he came directly to me. Seeing him really shocked me because physically he'd changed so much. He was limping, had a hunched back and his arm was often stretched up and curled over his head. Someone said it was a sign of Archie trying to protect himself from bashings but I knew it was something more than that and was likely an overload of the psych drugs they'd given him. My heart sank with sadness and fear. All I could think was, 'What on earth happened? What *happened* to him?'

When I asked Archie, it was as though he didn't understand me. I continued looking uneasily at him and said, 'Well, I'll take you over to our sister Esme's.' At this point, Archie became animated and started shouting, 'Yes, Esme!' With the volume he spoke, all I could think was, 'Wow, is he deaf or something?'

So, shortly after Archie was released, I arranged for a hospital to do an assessment to determine whether he needed a specialised care and attention package. We were taken down into the bowels of the hospital and spoken to by this forensic psychologist bloke.

'I'm here to determine, Archie, if you need care and attention, to be placed in the care of the state trustees,' the psychologist said.

I said to Archie, 'Look, whatever question he asks, just answer them. I'll be there with you.'

The psychologist proceeded to reach into a box on his desk and pull out cards. There was nothing on them but a square in the top right-hand corner. He directed Archie to sniff them and asked, 'Can you smell anything?' Archie replied, 'No, no. Can't smell anything.'

The psychologist then directed Archie to sniff the square on the card and said, 'Can you smell the difference from the rest of the card, compared to the small corner there?' And again, Archie's answer was, 'Nah. No difference.'

The psychologist turned to me and said, 'Jack, would you like to have a smell?' and I answered, 'Yeah, sure. I'll have a go.'

I leaned over and sniffed the cards and started to say, 'No, I can't smell anything ...' but then I went, 'Ooh, I can smell the ink. Fresh card. I can smell the ink because I worked on a Heidelberg machine in A Division's print shop.'

Then the psychologist fella made an odd statement. 'Oh, that's right, Jack. Now in this instance, Jack and Archie, you don't smell any human smells with this card.'

Archie and I glanced at one another, collectively thinking, 'What the fuck ... ?'

In what was becoming a running theme, I was taken aback by the bizarreness of the conversation but attempted to engage and mentioned that I'd read books on slavery and had come upon the presumed musk of the negro, but was still unsure of the context of our discussion. This oddball psychologist then said, 'Well, Jack, you sweat ... and you can smell your sweat, right?' to which I agreed that, yes, Archie and I sweated and added that there was nothing harmful in that. And he explained, 'Oh, it's just that sometimes we give it to a Chinaman and he can smell an Englishman and vice versa.'

I laugh about it now, but honestly, talk about a six-pack short of a slab. It was such an odd moment. Archie and I thought it strange. Very strange.

So I told my friend Dr Gary Foley about this incident and he said, 'Jack, that's a classic ploy of forensic psychologists to see how easily you could arc up over the possibility that you smell. It's designed to create a response.'

But in that moment Archie and I didn't ark up. We'd been too flummoxed by the laughable notion that we were being subjected to a sniff test.

After all that, it was determined that Archie would need care. And eventually we ended up organising regular visits to the state trustees to see if we could get more out of them. Archie stayed with our sister Eva Jo a lot. And he also kept going to the Salvos shelter down in Abbotsford, which was a hostel for homeless men. He lived there for a number of years.

I tried to go to the VCAT (Victorian Civil & Administrative Tribunal) to get a proper care package for Archie. And we did that. We went to VCAT; explained Archie's story. They saw the documents of his history and info from the Melbourne Magistrates and his jail records. They told me, 'You need to pursue the Office of Corrections on Archie's behalf, to get a more

positive and long-term permanent care package for your brother.’ That message was delivered to Connecting Homes and I thought they’d do the right things.

A couple of months later I was told that they’d tried to get the medical records from Pentridge, but they couldn’t find them.

They tried to get the records from Aradale, but they couldn’t find them.

They tried to get the records from H Division. But they couldn’t find them.

I don’t know if the records were destroyed or what happened, but to this day I still want answers.

I wish I’d been in a position to do more for Archie. I was battling with my own addiction and my own challenging road. I’d try and look after him as much as I could, but to be frank I was out of me depth. After all, you know, I couldn’t look after meself, let alone look after me brother.

One day, the Salvos officer who looked after Archie approached me and said they’d like to do something for him. It was clear my brother needed care and attention. He was still going around coal-biting. With all these people taking advantage of him, the grim reality was Archie was working for them. And that was a huge concern for me. I’d told him previously in the Napier Street flats, ‘Look, if any of these blokes pump you up with something and you don’t feel it – and you bought that shit – you can punch them. You have my permission to punch them.’

Because we had this strange incident in Castlemaine jail one time ...

I was cleaning the dining room, in preparation for the Sunday visits and Archie came down and sat at one of the tables, looking somewhat glum. I asked him what was wrong and he said, ‘Somebody threw a lolly at me!’

‘Ah right,’ I said. ‘A hard-boiled lolly, Archie? One of those ones?’

‘Yes!’

‘And it hurt?’ I asked.

‘Yes!’

‘Look,’ I said calmly. ‘Don’t get upset. If he throws it again, pick it up and eat it. Okay? And if you don’t want it, fucken throw it back at ’em, Archie. Real hard. Hit ’em dead centre.’

And he did. And it was the talk of the town in jail for a week, giving us all a good chuckle. Still makes me laugh today. I didn’t witness it meself but I heard through the grapevine that Archie got so incensed that a lolly was thrown at him that he hurled it back and hit the standover kid directly

in the face. I laugh about it now but Archie never did that again because I told him not to – he'd made his point.

Despite Archie and me being addicts, there were very rare moments when we did sit and have talks with one another. And there were times when nobody else was around and it was just the two of us and we had scored and I'd say, 'Oh bugger it ... I'll have to hit him up.' And he'd be on tenterhooks because he knew I didn't like doing it. But I never missed a vein. Others did. As a consequence, he had festering arms at one stage. Archie's rapid physical decline after that last sentence meant he often had the shakes. And as he also had one arm curled up over his head, he couldn't hit himself up. He just couldn't do it, so he was always reliant on other people. I realised that these guys had become his brothers, as it were. His fellow sufferers, all struggling. Through Archie they were brought the ease of money, and they in turn were hooked in with the dealers so there was easy access to drugs. If no one was around, Archie'd know exactly where to go. There were several sources and they'd welcome him and give him a good deal. Nobody ripped off Archie when it came to the dealers. It was only the men from the shelter who followed him around and took advantage of him. But I made sure to reiterate to him that if he didn't feel the effects of a hit: 'You're allowed to hit 'em, mate. You can hit 'em, Archie.'

Eventually Archie moved in to a place in Eltham working on a house that belonged to a mate, Jack Ross. And I moved in to a mansion in Stawell Street, in one of my favourite suburbs, Kew. I was moving up in the world! I was living with a very well-to-do woman called Aunty Molly who I'd got to know during my New Theatre days. We got on really well, and I'd stay with her from time to time.

That was when I got word from Alick Jackomos, a Greek fella who'd married a Koorie woman and was very tapped in to the community, that Mum had passed away. To this day, I have no idea how the Aboriginal community knew that I was living in a mansion in Kew. Usually if people wanted me, particularly in theatre circles, it took them up to a couple months to find me. My brother Archie and I were similar like that. If we wanted or needed to disappear, we could. But I received word of the news and all I could think about was how sad and unfair it was that none of my

siblings got to meet Mum. To this day, I'm so glad I took the opportunity to spend time with her in Swan Hill.

There was no two ways: we had to attend Mum's funeral. I had neither the money nor means to get to Moe, in the Latrobe Valley in Victoria, where it was being held, but wherever and however, I was going. In the end I forced Archie to hitchhike there with me. We arrived just in time. We didn't know anybody down in Moe. All I'd heard was that Mum's funeral service would be at the Salvation Army Hall there. When we walked into the place I was gobsmacked – it was jam-packed.

I learned a lot about Mum that day. She had many brothers and sisters that we never knew about. I met Ollie Harrison and Eric Harrison, family members who both lived in Healesville. We met Archie's namesake too – Artie Smith – who lived in Moe. After the funeral, my brother would occasionally pay Artie Smith a visit. Archie enjoyed spending time with Uncle Artie.

I learned how much Mum had suffered throughout her life.

I'm still discovering new stories about Mum at my ripe old age. It never fails to give me a thrill. In early 2018, I was chatting to an Aunty who said, 'Did you know your mum was called "The Sarge", Jack?'

'No, no, I didn't know that,' I said, with a smile on my face and feeling curiously proud of this person who was still such a stranger to me.

'Powerful woman, your mum. Powerful woman.'

CHAPTER 11

THE RAGING BRER RABBIT

One day I was out on bail after another stint in the slammer, and was hanging out at Melbourne University. It was the perfect place to hide from the jacks. Rumour had it that the Victorian police weren't allowed on the property unless they were called for – the federal police looked after it. In those days, nobody worried about me. Without the strict surveillance so evident today, I'd go into Baillieu Library to indulge in some reading. Every now and then people would be prompted to come up and say g'day. They'd hear my dulcet tones and my grammar, and they'd be further convinced that they should stay and have a good ol' natter with me.

I was checking out the posters in the Union Theatre and this fella kept popping in and out of his office and looking at me. In my head I was thinking, 'Who the fuck is this? Does he fancy me? Is he comin' onto me?' After a few minutes, he walked over and politely said, 'Excuse me, are you Jack Charles?' I confirmed I was. 'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'Oh, I'm just checking out the posters, mate,' I answered. 'I'd like to see this production here. And that one looks good, aye.'

This guy said, 'Well, Jack, I was a student here many years ago and I remember you performing a few times in the Union Theatre. I've been heading it up and I'm actually clearing my desk because I'm finishing up and I'll be heading back to Perth. I developed Black Swan Theatre with Janet Holmes à Court.' That's when the penny dropped – he was theatre director Andrew Ross.

He continued talking. 'We're about to do a production of Jack Davis's *No Sugar*. Another tour.'

I told him I remembered the show, which someone had mentioned while I was locked up in Won Wron. I heard through the grapevine that Jack Davis was in the show and they did a performance at Fitzroy.

Andrew asked me, 'So, Jack, what are you doing these days?'

‘Well, nothing,’ I replied.

‘Is that right?’ he said. ‘Come into my office and let’s chat.’ I wandered in and, sure enough, there were piles of boxes everywhere. He was obviously clearing out his desk. He reached over and picked up a book, handed it to me and pointed to a page. ‘Jack, read that passage there.’ So I read the passage. ‘Okay, Jack. Try reading it this way.’ I followed his lead and read it the way he instructed. ‘Now read it this other way.’ And again, I followed his directions.

That’s when it clicked: ‘Ah. The bugger’s tryin’ to see if I’m still eminently directable.’

Andrew looked at me, deep in thought and said, ‘We’re about a fortnight into rehearsals of touring *No Sugar*, Jack.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ I said.

‘Yeah and Ernie Dingo has opted out for television commitments.’

‘Oh, right.’

‘So, Jack, would you like to do it?’

Talk about being in the right place at the right time!

I didn’t skip a beat. ‘Yeah, I’d love to do it. I’d love to come over and do the show.’

And then he asked, ‘So when was the last time you did something, Jack?’

I hesitated before answering truthfully, ‘Well, look, mate. I haven’t done anything on stage for years.’

I didn’t mention it was because I’d been doing too much jail time. Andrew wasn’t put off.

He said, ‘Well, Jack, we’d love you to be there. We adore you. But you need to go to the international bookstore. I’ll give you some money – grab a copy of Jack Davis’s *No Sugar*.’ Andrew continued, ‘Tomorrow morning, go to Melbourne Airport, show your ID and we’ll have a plane booked for you to head over to Perth and somebody will pick you up at the airport.’

It was happening! I was excited to be treading the boards again, but there was one small problem: my raging Brer Rabbit – drug habit. Nevertheless I wanted to see what Perth would bring on so I pushed those concerns far from my mind.

The next day, good as Andrew’s word, I was booked on a flight to Fremantle and when I arrived, it was all systems go. Neil Armfield was the

director and his first words to me were, 'Now remember, Jack: this is provisional.' I nodded my head in agreement and from there, off we went.

I lasted that entire week without drugs, but come Saturday, with nothin' in me system, I was really sick. I panicked and thought, 'How the fuck am I gonna do this?' I sorted it in me trams and train (brain) that I was gonna go in on Monday and tell them I couldn't hack it and I needed to go back home and visit my dealer in Melbourne. It was urgent. With that plan, I calmed down a bit.

The next day – Sunday – I decided to get out and about and thought I'd go check out some buskers at The Market Bar in Freo. As I wandered through the bar I spotted a familiar face – a man we called Black Allan. We'd been mere kids in Glenferrie when I first met him and encountered his blues music, harmonics and singing. I exclaimed, 'Moarywalla!' and he shouted, 'Jack Charles!' We hadn't seen each other for twenty-two years. Black Allan was a couple of years older than me and I wondered where he'd disappeared to. The talk was a rich lady had picked him up and taken him to America and he came back singin' the blues. He was brilliant and a real unsung hero who everyone was fond of, but unfortunately he had brain damage from too many hallucinogens.

Within five minutes of meeting him at Freo Market, I dropped the question: 'Can you get me on? I'm hanging out.' Within ten minutes, I met some Pommy bloke and I had something up the Warwick Farm (me arm). And that's when I knew that I'd stay to see out the show. Heroin got me up and going, y'know? It wasn't a nodding off thing. I'd take enough just to keep me functioning. The fact that Black Swan Theatre were willing to give people like me, who hadn't gone through NIDA, or VCA, a chance was life-changing. I put it down to my voice, which is what many commented on. Apparently, they hadn't counted on the volume of it. I remember Bob saying that my voice would go up to the gods in the Opera House.

As soon as I arrived there, I was somewhat hailed as an actor of note – the lone Boon Wurrung man from the far east in the wilds of the West. Working with Yamaji and Noongar actors was exciting. I was taken into a television station to pull out the lucky number for some Tattsлото draw. The university crowds loved me and I used to hold court after a show until five in the morning. That's some stamina, aye!

There were two or three others with drug habits, but I was the only one on heroin. We ended up looking out for each other. I minded three actors

and we each had to make sure the others would get to the theatre okay and basically be a support for one another. It was exciting times. And to be wholeheartedly accepted into the Noongar fraternity of performing arts meant a lot.

Deckchair Theatre also got me on board to perform a show with them while I was doing *No Sugar*. One night I'd be treading the boards doing *No Sugar*, the next afternoon I'd be doing this other Jack Davis play, *In Our Town*. So I'd be alternating between shows and doubling up on performances, which was actually a real hoot because I just loved being on stage. I think I pleasantly surprised Perth audiences and genuinely felt their affection. Added to this was the warm camaraderie of the cast. Each show, males, females, kids, we'd all get prepped in this great, chaotic atmosphere backstage. It felt like a big family thing and I loved it. One of the actors stood up one day and said, 'You know, they say actors should never work with children and animals? Well, I've got a new saying: "Never work with children, animals and Jack Charles"!' and everyone screamed with laughter, including myself.

All up, I toured nine months with *No Sugar*. We even went to Tassie, which I loved. It was rare to see an overwhelmingly Aboriginal cast in that neck of the woods and I welcomed the opportunity to perform there.

CHAPTER 12

THE FAIRY KINGDOM AND A FUNERAL

In 2014 I started filming on the set of the Hollywood movie *Pan*. It was only ten years after I'd been living homeless. As an actor and an addict, I had grown used to the paradoxical nature of my existence. I'd drop in at one of the hostels for a feed and there'd be a message for me to ring a number or to be at the airport to catch this flight or that. You'd go from using newspapers and sleeping in laundrettes and women's toilets to being put up in fancy hotels with plush bedding and pillows.

These jobs often came out of the blue. If it weren't for my community, I wouldn't have got the messages. I was always readying and prepping myself for the odd call when I'd go around and have breakfast at the Gladys Nicholls Hostel or the George Wright Hostel or the William T Onus Hostel or the Health Service. These were the places where folks in the arts knew to get a hold of me.

From 2008 onwards, my profile had jumped to another level. This was the year a documentary was released, which was filmed over a seven-year period of my life. It was called *Bastardy*. In the doco, film-maker, director and producer Amiel Courtin-Wilson captured my burls, jail time, heroin addiction and homelessness, as well as my road to redemption. It's a real-deal, ridgy-didge reality doco. It's a tough watch, but for whatever reason it struck a chord with viewers – especially Victorians.

I knew Amiel's mum and aunties during the late 1960s. They were part of the crew that I socialised with regularly through Jack Houston. So, although I didn't know Amiel before we started work on the documentary, it helped that we had a connection through the Elder women in his life – women who were once a significant part of my inner circle.

Creatively, *Bastardy* was a risky undertaking for both of us. I was deep in the throes of addiction at that time and the story could very well have ended tragically. As I say in the film, 'If I hide anything, it wouldn't be a

true depiction.’ Well, nothing was hidden. No stone was left unturned. You see me burgs, you see me shooting up, sleeping on a cardboard box under a stairwell – getting busted, heading into jail, leaving jail. Amiel captured it all during those seven years and shared it with the world. The very last burg I did was captured there in that doco. There’s a scene where Amiel tells me he’s received a phone call. The homeowner’s security camera had busted me.

The house belonged to a friend of a family in the arts scene. Actually, that family wasn’t just part of the arts scene. They were *friends* of mine. John Hepworth was a writer and journalist who wrote a column called ‘Outsight’ for the now-defunct *Nation Review*. And his missus was Oriel Gray, who was a playwright and writer for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, doing radio plays and that kinda stuff. I was semi-adopted by them and called John ‘Pater’ and Oriel ‘Mater’. I also got to know their three boys.

I’m not sure what compels a person to rob a friend of a friend, but in my case all I can say is it was borderline kleptomania. Really, it was that simple. I didn’t purposely set out to rob them; it was an opportunistic thing. The feeble opportunity presented itself and I grabbed it. Over the years I’ve tried to justify my burgs as collecting rent, but I’ve never found a justification for robbing a friend of a mate. It’s something I just have to live with.

In *Bastardy* I listen to Amiel tell me the story, and then I admit to the crime. The judge gave me a year but the parole board wanted to give me two. I never worked out why, exactly. Maybe it was to teach me a lesson. It was the twenty-second and final time I was imprisoned.

We never could’ve predicted the incredible response to this film. We debuted *Bastardy* at the Melbourne International Film Festival, with two premiere nights. The opening included a Q and A session after the screening, and I was worried that nobody would show. But when I got to the venue, well, I couldn’t believe my eyes. People were lined up around the block! They even stuck around for the discussion afterwards.

The last time I saw my ‘friend’, my ex Jack, was there at that festival. Jack and I had broken up and got back together a few times before. Between break-ups, we would bump into each other and catch up from time to time. He’d pick me up and we’d go for a drive along the boulevard and just sit and talk. During those times, I never told him I was homeless. I’d

get him to drop me off at the kerb, pretending it was near my apartment. After he drove off I would wander around the corner for a quick cat nap before 'clocking on' – in other words, doing my burgs. Knowing Jack, though, it's possible he had figured out what was going on, but was kind enough to go along with it for my sake. Actually, a few months before Jack and I ever got together, I'd been doing over houses in the southside suburb of Elsternwick. One night I was out in the area. I'd packed my dilly bag with the usual change of clothes, but had forgotten to include a fresh pair of jocks (burgs is a sweaty business and I often ditched my clothes afterwards). I was wandering down a laneway when I noticed washing on the line in a backyard. I hopped the fence and nicked a pair of undies, ducking into a nearby shed to put them on. Not long afterwards, I was with Jack heading to his mates' house. We drove to Elsternwick and, would you believe, turned into the driveway of the very same house! Turned out his close mates were in a sharehouse there, and it was a pair of their undies I'd nicked!

Spending time with Jack again was a painful reminder of how caring he could be. He had the ability to reach into my soul just from looking into my eyes. But I had my guard up, always. There was too much pain buried deep down. I never even told him about the abuse I copped as a child.

So many Melburnians wanted to see the first Q and A for *Bastardy* at Federation Square that we had to do it again another night. The audience included people I'd robbed from around Kew and Toorak, retired Criminal Investigative Unit (CIU) inspectors, former brothers-in-arms from the boys' home and fellas I'd been in the nick with over the years. I was stunned. Even Chopper Read was in the crowd. The documentary brought all manner of folks out of the woodwork. All because people wanted to come and see a doco of this little bastard's story.

After the second screening, it took ages to leave because everyone wanted to engage and had a story to share about their experience – whether it was about me or because they could relate to me. An older couple came up and tentatively said, 'Oh, Mr Charles, we just so admired your story.' The wife wrung her hands together and continued, 'Look, we had a house up in Camberwell, thirty years ago. We don't live there now, but it was a large house. And well ...' She hesitated. 'We were robbed ...'

I looked at her with raised eyebrows and a smile and said, ‘... You were wondering?’ And we all cracked up and had a good ol’ laugh!

Melburnians have always reserved a soft spot for me. When I used to busk under the subway at Spencer Street Station, or underground at Flinders Street, I’d often get folks coming up to me on a Friday to apologetically say they hadn’t had a chance to put anything in all week. Then they’d hand me a note. I’d strum away and sing to them, and there were times when I walked away with a lot of money thanks to the generosity of Melburnians opening their hearts to me.

Bastardy is the project that saved my life. It extended my story and my reach to people and places that I couldn’t have imagined. And it had such an impact. Part of the documentary’s success was that people saw aspects of their own story in mine. But it was also an eye-opener for anyone unfamiliar with heroin addiction. I didn’t take a cent for *Bastardy*. I wanted Amiel to go on making powerful films. I wanted this documentary to be shown and used as a resource tool in high schools, in the prison system and within drug rehabilitation programs.

Despite *Bastardy*’s success, I couldn’t escape my past. Sometimes it didn’t just come back to haunt me, it straight up bit me on the moom. In 2010 I was invited to do two Q and A’s at the Sheffield International Documentary Festival in the United Kingdom. I’d just acquired my brand-spanking-new passport to travel over and we were set to take Sheffield by storm, except that I had forgotten about my extensive rap sheet. Four days before I was to fly out, the British High Commission refused my visa.

I was beside myself. In a panic, I called Amiel, who was in London, to update him on this dilemma. He was shocked. But life has a funny way of turning things around. When I called Amiel, he happened to be in the company of Australian singer-songwriter Missy Higgins. Concerned, she listened to Amiel’s conversation with me and heard my plaintive cry. Missy didn’t skip a beat. She hopped on the blower and rang Peter Garrett, who was the Minister for Environment Protection, Heritage and the Arts at that time, to see if he could intervene on my behalf. How’s that for a bit of luck? I had two rockers getting together to make a pathway for me. I waited impatiently and nervously to see what the outcome would be.

It worked. I was allowed to enter the UK. And lemme tell you, for an old thief like me, this was incredible. I had so many letters of support from people in the arts – Magda Szubanski wrote a lovely letter, Geoffrey Rush,

so many others. Even the Victorian Police wrote a glowing report on my behalf.

When the ABC aired the edited version of *Bastardy*, there was a competition between playwrights Rachael Maza and Rachel Perkins as to who would do the stage version. They each rang me late that night after it screened. That's how passionate these two were in wanting to grab a hold of me! It thrills me no end to see these powerful blak playwrights creating works right now that are telling our people's stories. The rest of the world is hungry for it too.

The gig went to Rachael Maza in the end. Even just saying that is a shock because she's Bob Maza's daughter and I sometimes forget how long I've been in this business. It goes back to the early 1960s, for chrissake! You know, I started when I was nineteen, so I've been at it for more than half a century. So much has happened and I'm not slowing down yet.

Through working with Rachael and Ilbijerri Theatre Company what came to fruition off the back of *Bastardy* was a play on my life, written in my voice, *Jack Charles v The Crown*. It was co-written with the mighty playwright John Romeril, a wonderful wordsmith who captured my story so evocatively. The show was accompanied by a three-piece band and documented my various struggles, particularly trying to expunge my criminal record so I could return to prison, but this time as a visitor – I wanted to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inmates.

The show toured to London, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Canada, New York and across Australia. After one show, two fellas came up and said, 'Jack, do you remember us?' I smiled, though I didn't have a clue who they were. The faces were friendly but weary and completely unrecognisable.

'No, no, I don't remember you fellas. Remind me where I'd know you from?'

'Box Hill Boys' Home, Jack.'

I exclaimed, 'Oh gosh, blast from the past. Nah, I'm sorry, I don't remember either of you.'

One of them said, 'Well, we remember you well, Jacky. I recall one time you chased us across the footy oval.'

'What was I chasing you around the footy oval for?' I asked, baffled.

'Yeah, well ... I think I called you Blacky Jacky or something like that.'

I said, 'Oh right. What happened?'

He said, 'You bashed me, Jack!'

‘Oh ... I’m sorry, mate!’ I said.

So, there I was more than five decades later, apologising to this old fella for having bashed him when I was ten.

I always secretly hoped as we were touring *Jack Charles v The Crown* that a prison officer from my past would come and see it, but as far as I know that didn’t happen. Or maybe they came and were too put off by the crowd to speak to me.

Archie came and saw me on stage on the odd occasion. He couldn’t hang around for long and didn’t have the attention span to stick around for an entire show. He liked the fact that I was an actor. He loved that I’d be on stage and it was always a thrill for him when he’d see me on the telly. He’d yell at me, ‘I liiiiike you!’

It made me laugh that he’d fucken yell it out. He was so loud, which came down to his deafness. But by now I’d noticed that he was bumping into stuff. He was also becoming skeletal. I worried that he had some kind of blood-borne disease, because something just wasn’t right. It turned out Archie came out of Aradale with a sexually transmitted disease – HIV. He also had kidney disease due to hepatitis C. If all of that wasn’t enough, he had tuberculosis – which beggars belief. The only blakfella I know in Melbourne who had tuberculosis. Poor fella.

Back to 2014, where I had found myself cast as the chief of the tribe protecting the Fairy Kingdom in the film *Pan*. The film would be – excuse the pun – *panned* by the critics. But all I know is that at the end of the day, I did my very best in that performance. Besides, the role changed my life.

It was a bit roundabout, the way I got cast. The director Joe Wright’s wife spotted me at the Barbican in London in *Jack Charles v The Crown*. Apparently, they needed someone of my vintage to play the chief. She told her husband about me and he organised for us to have a meeting. Luckily, they lived just around the corner from the theatre.

They had to know full well that I, Jack Charles, was too far up meself to audition. It’s true. When it comes to acting roles, auditioning and getting knocked back just won’t do. I’m very lucky to be in the unique position where I’m not forced to audition in order to be seriously considered for roles. The great Australian actor Bill Hunter never auditioned either, so I take my lead from him. He told me once, ‘I get away with it so often, Jack.

Thing is, I can't act but everybody reckons I can.' It was a relief to hear someone of his calibre say that, not to mention his advice that I should be more assertive. I responded, 'Well, I'm in the same boat, Bill. So long as we know our lines and create the illusion of being someone else, then we'll get across the line. You know, if it works for us, it'll work for the audience.'

So, I agreed to be interviewed rather than auditioned. After a matinee performance of *Jack Charles v The Crown*, the stage manager took me around to Joe's studio. It was a real hub of activity and there were lots of people milling about. Joe spotted me and walked up, saying, 'I found you at long last!' Needless to say, the interview and discussions about *Pan* went well. There were no guarantees at that stage, but Joe felt I looked right for the role. I told him I'd love to do it, never thinking anything would come to fruition because, y'know, this was Hollywood we're talking about – surely there were other actors they had in mind. But as luck would have it, I soon got the phone call from Warner Brothers that they wanted us over in London. We'd even be flying business class!

My criminal record was more than twenty pages long and Warner Brothers wanted me on their set in a week. But such is the influence of Warner Brothers that my visa was approved in twenty-four hours. It had taken eighteen months to have my visa approved in order to get me over to London to do my *Jack Charles v The Crown* show, but there I was in next to no time with a visa. When my manager Patrice Capogreco – who I call my 'manager girl, Pat' – and I arrived in London, a VIP immigration agent met us at the aircraft and escorted us directly to the arrivals desk, where they were already expecting me. We were processed in record time and ushered through without a hitch.

The cast of *Pan* was full of some big names. Within minutes of arriving at the studios, I was spotted by none other than Hugh Jackman. He leapt over to me and gave me a hug. Levi Miller, a young Australian actor who had been cast as Peter Pan himself, was not far behind. We were three Aussies in among this international cast. I met the pirates and the film extras, and it was a very warm welcome all round.

I used any opportunity to tell my colleagues all about my culture and my people. I proudly displayed the Aboriginal flag on my trailer on set and it became a talking point to discuss the social and political hopes for

Aboriginal Australians as well as teaching people about the Dreaming. The extras, particularly from my Fairy Kingdom, were very interested in learning about Australia and asked some tough questions about race relations in my home country. I'd give them a historical context and I'd also share my personal story so they could hear what it was like for a survivor of the Stolen Generations.

It was while filming *Pan* that I found out Archie died. It was Pat who came up to me to break the news that he'd had a peaceful death in a hospice over in Footscray. I had one more scene to shoot. Word quickly spread on set that my brother had died and I was very touched to see many of the cast and crew lined up outside my trailer to pay their respects and offer their condolences. I held it together long enough to do that last take and then urgently flew back to Australia to bury my brother.

Archie's funeral was all arranged through the Aboriginal Funeral Service, up at the Advancement League. There was no trouble in finding a burial plot next to his sisters at Weeroona Cemetery in Greenvale, facing south, as we mob do. And we went to St Mark's, there in Fitzroy. Not very many people turned up but his friends from North Melbourne Salvo Hostel – people who'd gone coal-biting with him and followed him around – were sitting there in among the congregation.

From memory my nephews Ben, Matty and Red Ron came along and managed to be at the funeral. Archie's coffin was decorated by a local Aboriginal artist who loved Archie. That artist has become quite notable because, you know, people want to be buried with Aboriginal art on their caskets. Personally, I don't want a wooden casket. I actually wanna be wrapped up, because otherwise it's a waste of time waiting for the weevils to eat up the wooden box to get at me – or vice versa.

But Archie was a traveller. He loved travelling and there he was on his final journey. I've come to realise that despite being a very inward person, he must've made a lot of friends over the years, because I'll have people come up to me and say, 'We met Archie on a train, Uncle.' Or, 'I met him over in Perth.' And even, 'He lived with us for a while, Archie did.' There are times when people recognise elements of Archie in my stance or mannerisms. Even through my voice and the way I interpret things, I'm very similar to Archie.

CHAPTER 13

SENIOR VICTORIAN AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR

In 2015, I was invited to go on the television panel discussion show *Q&A*. It was a couple of years after Australian Football League player Adam Goodes – one of our leading blak lights – had been called a derogatory name at a game. Carlton was playing against the Sydney Swans when a thirteen-year-old Carlton supporter sitting in the crowd called Goodes an ‘ape’. This incident took place during the AFL’s Indigenous Round, which is an annual round recognising and celebrating Indigenous players, and was broadcast live before a huge crowd at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Goodes was absolutely gutted. In the moment, he immediately responded by pointing to the young girl who had shouted out, whereupon security removed her. Watching, my heart sank. I knew this was going to be a divisive and decisive moment for Australia. It sparked one of the most controversial moments on-field in AFL history and it impacted many of us. It made front pages around the country, talkback radio had a field day and various social, political and sporting pundits added their opinion to the already heated debate.

The national dialogue seemed to go from bad to worse, revealing the clumsy, casual racism that is such a common part of discussing these sorts of incidents in white Australia. Across the nation, conversations were layered with wilful ignorance. Collingwood president Eddie McGuire made matters worse by suggesting on breakfast radio that Goodes should be involved in the promotion of the musical *King Kong*. He later apologised for his ‘brain fade’, but his ‘joke’ revealed a lot about Australian society’s approach to race.

A lack of willingness to understand and empathise with Goodes’s response on that day wasn’t just about that singular word, in that one moment. It was a response to being humiliated, denigrated and subjected to

decades – in fact, *generations* and more than two centuries – of indignities in this country. In his words, it was ‘shattering’. And it fucking was.

The young person at the centre of the incident wasn’t aware that calling a black man an ‘ape’ was offensive. And Goodesy didn’t blame her. In fact, he extended a hand to support her, kindly saying she needed education to recognise why her comment was racist and unacceptable. In a moment of incredible hurt, fury and humiliation, Goodes wasn’t allowed to make the incident about his own pain. He had to focus on someone else’s. For Indigenous peoples to be silenced in this way is incredibly hurtful and erases the validity of our complex emotions. We are subjected to that kind of silencing every day and it’s devastating.

While I was on that Q&A panel, the program’s host, Tony Jones, put to me the comment of an audience member alluding to Goodes’ response of being insulted and deeply hurt as an ‘overreaction’. The audience member equated their experience of having red hair, being of Irish descent and being called ‘ranga’ with Goodes’ experience. Hair is not the same as race. It’s not. That there could even be a correlation made between the two beggars belief, but there you have it. This dismissiveness, denial and unwillingness to listen and show genuine empathy is in itself a form of racism. I said in response that, no, Goodes was not being sensitive. I described Australia as being ‘uniquely racist’, particularly towards First Nations Australians. I stand by that.

That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are discriminated against, erased and overlooked on our own land is what makes racism in Australia so peculiar. We’re considered so lowly that even those who have recently migrated or sought sanctuary in this country consider us beneath them. One of the most painful ways this is made glaringly obvious is when it comes to taxis ...

It was an exciting start to the evening. I’d arrived at the flash Hilton Hotel with my manager-girl, Pat. We were there for the announcement of the Victorian Australian of the Year awards for 2016. Some cheeky bugger thought me fit to be put forward as a Senior Victorian Australian of the Year contender and I was tickled to be in such fine company. I was nominated alongside the likes of Channel 9 newsreader Peter Hitchener, the popular

broadcaster and priest Father Bob Maguire and another priest, Father Kevin Dillon.

Father Bob came up to me and said, 'I think you've won this one, Jack.'

'No, Father Bob. You're pretty popular,' I replied. 'Everybody loves you, mate.'

'Catholic priests aren't flavour of the month at the moment,' he responded.

And he predicted correctly. I was named Senior Victorian Australian of the Year for 2016 for my work in the community as an Elder and actor. It was indeed an honour and I felt proud sitting there alongside such an esteemed group of contenders.

It was a beautiful evening, topped off by an amazing rendition of John Lennon's 'Imagine', sung by a young Aboriginal girl from Cummeragunja. So enamoured was I with her performance that I forgot to get up and scoot before she finished, which I'd normally do so I wouldn't have to awkwardly partake in the national anthem. Where possible, I avoid it altogether because for many blakfellas we don't find this anthem a particularly inclusive one. But as she left the stage to our applause, the strains of 'Advance Australia Fair' came on. I remember thinking, 'Oh shit, I've gotta stand up. This is a public event and I'm a leading light.' In that setting, I felt I couldn't *not* stand.

Thankfully, the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, stood up in front of me. He's a big fella with an extremely large moom, so I got up and hid behind that! If you were looking front on, you wouldn't have been able to see my hair on either side of his body. I shrank behind him and thought, 'This is good. Thank you, Danny boy.'

After the event, on an absolute high that had nothing to do with drugs, Pat and I went and stood outside the Hilton at its taxi rank. It was the end of a long night and we'd both had a blast meeting, greeting and learning about the extraordinary work of other people in the community who'd come together for the awards. I felt happy and proud, clutching my beautiful oval-shaped orange-and-jade glass trophy. It felt sturdy and heavy in my hand – like a medium-sized shot-put – and I couldn't contain my grin when I saw that my name was etched on it for the 2016 Senior Victorian Australian of the Year. Just a few short years earlier such an accolade would've seemed far-fetched and ridiculous. I couldn't wait to get home and see it sitting

inside my home. Little did I know that something was about to happen that would give me upsetting, sleepless nights.

Indigenous folks know that hailing a cab as a blakfella can be a troublesome affair. There have been plenty of times in the past where I've seen a cab approaching, expecting it to pull over, but then when they've clocked me – an obvious blakfella – they've continued to drive past. When it's got too much, I've asked a random white person to hail down a taxi on my behalf. That's always worked.

So on this evening, there Pat and I stood, in good spirits, thrilled and overwhelmed at the accolade I'd just received. It was a public nod to the work I was doing in the community. We chatted happily and saw a cab up ahead. I said to Pat: 'You go grab it, mate. You know what cabbies are like with us Aboriginals.' The cab noticed her and slowed to a stop.

I jumped in the front passenger seat next to the driver and Pat went to sit in the back. The driver was unmistakably South Asian, hailing from the sub-continent, and I started proudly boasting to him about my award, thinking he'd be excited. But no, he wasn't. In fact, it was clear that he wasn't interested in me or anything I was saying. That's when I started to feel uneasy, recognising, as mob do, that this fellow objected to me being in the cab.

He turned around to Pat and asked where I was going, talking about me – but not to me. Pat explained she had a Cabcharge and was to be dropped off first. I would be the final stop, in the next suburb. It was at that point that the driver demanded we prepay. He said to Pat: 'No, you have to give me money first because he may not pay.' It was around 8.15 p.m. and in Victoria customers are only required to prepay fares between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. The driver's rudeness and the stinging humiliation of that moment sent me into a rage and immediately my hackles rose. 'I've never been asked to pay a sum of money upfront. I believe you're being a racist, mate. You're racially vilifying me.' We refused to pay the driver upfront and I told him what he was doing was against the law. Furthermore, I told him I'd take photos of him and make a complaint.

Pat and I jumped out of the cab but the damage was done and my night was ruined. We eventually hailed another cab, this time driven by a man of African descent. We explained what had happened earlier and the driver told us that Melbourne cabs were allowed to request pre-paid fares from

Aboriginal people. Whether or not that's true, it seemed to be what they believed.

The next day, I headed off to the airport. I had to fly to Adelaide for the day to give a keynote address. The speech went well and, excited but exhausted, I returned to Melbourne. Once we'd touched down, I grabbed my dilly bag and proceeded to make my way across the airport to get a taxi. I took my place in line and patiently listened for instructions from the airport staff member. Seeing a row of taxis, I noticed the bloke waiting in my allocated bay. He spotted me, but as I began to wander over to him he took a good look at me in the rearview mirror, then started up the cab and drove off.

Each incident like that is a pinch on my soul, my humanity. It knocks me for a six that for all my accolades, both on and off stage, I'm still regularly refused a ride. Whenever it happens, it creates a pure agony within my mind and I can't sleep. One incident that made headlines here and overseas was after a lovely day out with a couple of Turkish artists. I'd met one of them at a sculpture festival on the Gold Coast and I wanted to look after them while they were visiting in Melbourne. One of the artists wanted to do a photo montage on my story, so I was keen to share some local Aboriginal history. The plan was to round off the day by heading over to Collingwood and Northcote, where they could take more photos.

We were in the heart of the city and lined up at the Flinders Street train station taxi rank. A taxi became available and I went to jump in the passenger side while the artists opened the back doors. The driver had clearly been waiting in line to pick up passengers, but when he saw us he told us he was 'knocked off' and drove away.

The next driver in the queue informed us he wasn't available. 'No, no – finished,' he said. And he turned his meter off. I can't tell you how embarrassing it was to be refused, standing there with my Turkish friends and a queue of strangers behind us. They could see what was taking place. I was furious and took photos of the driver with my phone. I said to him, 'It's against the law not to pick up your passengers on this taxi rank. I believe you're a racist. Why are you doing this in my country?' He smiled and drove off. His blatant disrespect was like a kick in the gut. The third cab finally picked us up but the moment was ruined. I felt embarrassed to have been treated that way. Doubly so that friends and strangers had borne witness to it.

That story was reported on the ABC and went around the world. But there have been so many moments that haven't been documented. It's at those times that I wish my blak magic powers would come forth; that I could point the bone and just give a flick and suddenly a racist driver's tyres would go flat. That is a great Dreaming that I have. Let the tyres go flat! I'm not asking for him to be shivved or harmed with a nulla nulla (hunting stick). Just to have something that inconveniences and upsets them like they've inconvenienced and upset me. It does feel good to say something in the moment because I'll sometimes go off my head in a really loud fashion. I'm known for doing that because, y'know, I'm not the full quid.

I decided I needed to educate people to counter this chronic behaviour of racial profiling from newly arrived communities – communities that might not have had an understanding of Indigenous cultures in Australia. Pat and I enlisted the help of a legal beagle to help us with a case to put to the taxi industry. What I ideally wanted was not to demonise individual drivers, but for there to be an overview of the on-board program when new employees entered the taxi industry. I had so many questions I wanted answered. I wanted to drill down and get right to the heart of where drivers had got such problematic ideas about Aboriginal people. What were they being told about us? What were they told about the Indigenous peoples in the state they were going to be living in?

A couple of months after the taxi incident with the Turkish artists, I went to the Spring Street office to discuss my experiences of racial vilification. There was a transport lackey from the state government present, two taxi CEOs and a representative from the taxi union. I shared a few of my experiences and asked the questions that were most bothering me: 'Is it legal for taxi drivers to ask Aboriginal people to pay a sum of money upfront? Who among you has been asked to pay money upfront when you have a taxi voucher?' I wanted to understand what was going on in the culture of the taxi industry for black and brown drivers who'd migrated to Australia to not want to be associated with the original people of this land. I pitched the idea that the taxi companies should bring in paid Elders to be part of the recruitment process for each new intake of taxi drivers and we could deliver cross-cultural awareness programs to help them to get to know who we are and what our history is. I felt that fostering understanding and engagement through education would be one way to tackle the issue.

But I didn't get very far. Perhaps it was because I was in a room full of white people who couldn't conceive of our misery and pain. If you can't see a problem, you can't identify or understand it. You just ignore it. My suggestion of involving Elders in their training process for new drivers wasn't taken on board. Nothing really changed. I was written about in their industry mag but I doubt many drivers would have read it.

Maybe it would make sense if we blakfellas greeted newcomers at the Immigration gate like we used to with the Vietnamese community. Back in the day, they'd arrive and First Nations people would give them a Welcome to Country. And it worked – the Aboriginal and Vietnamese communities built a relationship of mutual trust and respect. So it makes you wonder: would that make people see us in a different light?

These days, I silently weigh up whether or not to hail a cab. I'm usually too frightened to get into taxis when I've got a cab voucher, or if I have to I'll deliberately place it on the console so they can see that I'm not going to do a runner. I've had some drivers go out of their way to support me, though. There are a couple of drivers who've given me their direct details and said if I have any problems hailing a cab, I can just call them. When I feel at ease in these situations, where there's a congenial air of mutual respect and non-judgemental banter, I have said to some of these drivers on occasion, 'Oh, by the way, welcome to my country.' I give 'em their very own, personal Welcome to Country.

CHAPTER 14

HEALING

Through acting, you realise whether or not you're on a stage, you're on show. Anytime someone sees or hears you, they want to engage, and you play the part. You tread the boards every day. I perform the part of my usual character, Jack Charles, the friendly little bloke. Your local bloke. Your local Elder. There's never a time that I won't be that person because I know many are relying on me for a good engagement or interaction, even if it's unexpected or chaotic. I love it too. You're making a difference and people feel your energy and it's contagious. Even if they blush and feel awkward, I just roll with it and try to make 'em feel comfy, have a chat and do what I can to put them at ease. I enjoy fame and it's why I think it's so important to meet people after every show. I'm happy to do that when I'm out in public because once I get home, I leave it all behind. *Then* I can take everything off, put on me shorts and night time T-shirt, sit in me rockin' chair, spread the legs open, allow the balls to drop ... and finally relax.

So I'm fortunate that I found theatre – or more that *it* found me. It fills me with joy, counsels me, uplifts me and centres me. It's not farfetched to say the pain and challenges I've experienced in my life continue to take my craft to a different level. They really do. You see young actors who have limited lived experiences or memories to draw from, and that makes their performance lack depth. The emotional well that you need to draw from, which prompts one to develop and step into a character, isn't there. Everybody's got a story to tell and some of us reach into our past to compare and deliver on some of the lines we're confronted with. Sometimes ya just gotta go there and perform as part of a lived experience.

Acting has taken me on journeys to amazing places. I've met some incredible people. And some friends still remain from those Pram Factory days. One important friend for me is renowned photographer Rod McNicol. He used to photograph me back in the day and has known, seen and

captured me at my best and my worst. I still pop over to his place for a cuppa from time to time and we often reminisce about the old days of theatre. They were some classic times.

Rod has a twenty-year photography project featuring people he knows, admires or is drawn to. The series is called 'A Portrait Revisited'. Rod takes initial portraits of his subjects at a youthful stage and then captures them twenty years later. He puts the two photos side by side. If there's no photo to accompany the younger shot, it means the person is no longer alive.

Over the years, Rod has taken some incredibly striking images of me. One of the best ended up taking out the gong for the 2012 National Photographic Portrait Prize and was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery. It's a simple shot, with the composition of me front-on, looking down the barrel of the camera. There's so much that Rod captured in that single image and it clearly struck a chord with the judges. As I've said before, I have no fear of posing for a friend in my old age, having him capture photos of my ravaged face. For all the trials and tribulations throughout my life, one can see the determination and resilience that's etched on my face, a significant part of my survival.

In a strange way, acting has not only helped build my profile – but also my resilience. When I came out of the nick I tried to make my mark through theatre. When I was on stage, I'd forget I had a criminal record and would lose myself in the craft of taking on another's character and momentarily walking around in their head. That's resilience. To put all that prison stuff behind you and be completely in the moment, that's resilience for me. That's how I picked myself up when I was being slapped down.

Acting has also led to some really stellar moments in my career, particularly as an Elder. One of those joys was the opportunity to appear on *Play School*. That was a hoot, getting to hang out and read *Go Home, Cheeky Animals* alongside Scrap and Little Ted!

Anh Do's interview for his TV program *Brush with Fame* in 2017 was another highlight. Australian audiences just loved it – as did I. It was hugely popular locally and internationally. In the show Anh chats with his guests and as they open up to him he paints them on canvas. He interviewed me at his sexy little Sydney studio. His warmth and engaging manner helped him tap in to places and get things out of me that barely anyone has been able to in previous interviews. As we talked about my life, Anh captured the light and shade of our conversation in his painting. He's a beaut listener and

embedded a combination of my sadness, wisdom, strength and longing into his painting of me. It was a powerful observation and captured a complicated life story. But it clearly resonated with the masses as it took out the People's Choice Award at the Archibald Prize that year.

Anyone who knows me, whether on stage or off, knows that I love a good chinwag. Having a unique public profile of sorts means I'm afforded the gift of being able to travel far and wide to engage in public speaking events; events where I can touch on topics very near and dear to my heart. My proud Aboriginality – and the journey it continues on – runs deep in these convos, and such moments inevitably spark profound conversations that tap into different elements of my life story. These stories I get to share with the masses. It's a bloody hoot to walk into a packed room and realise these crowds have spent their hard-earned coin to come listen and learn from an old bastard like me. And listen and learn, they will. Fancy that, aye? Audiences packing out a joint to hear me talk from the heart.

A very memorable gig was sharing the stage of the Opera House alongside singer-songwriter Archie Roach. I'd met Archie at the Builders Arms many moons before. If you recall, the Builders Arms was where I made a lot of significant connections in the early days. One day a young, gently spoken fella came up and introduced himself. He propped himself near me and said his name was Archie. Archie Roach.

As I recall, he said he hadn't seen me there before, even though he was a regular. It might've been my beautiful bushy afro, or my yellow crushed velvet pants that compelled him to approach me. I evasively said, 'Oh yeah, I've been away.' I figured prison counted as 'being away', right? No need to get into details.

'Havin' a break were you?' he asked.

'Yeah ... something like that,' I replied.

Archie innocently carried on making friendly conversation. 'I don't do anything myself,' he said. 'What about you? Do you work? Do anything for a quid?'

I didn't skip a beat. 'Well, sort of,' I replied. 'I go into people's homes and rearrange things. Kinda like an ... interior decorator. Yeah, yeah.' He looked impressed and seemed to think I was legit.

'Oh, that right?' he said. 'Sounds interesting.'

Archie and I kept chatting for a bit more and eventually I leaned in and whispered, 'Listen, come here. The work I do? I'm a cat burglar!'

He was listening intently the whole time and when I said that to him, we hooted. 'Ehhh, go ooonnn!' he exclaimed through laughter.

We bonded then and there. And have ended up working together over the years. He is rightfully recognised as one of our leading blak lights for his work not only in music, but also within the prison system.

At the Opera House Archie and I were part of the Antidote Festival and discussed 'Stories and Songs of Resilience'. Thankfully, this time I was on stage fully clothed, unlike back in the 1970s! We both spoke about our work and our Dreamings as part of Archie's foundation. It was a powerful night and we ended the evening by singing 'We Won't Cry', which never fails to bring the house down. Afterwards, it was wonderful to see a full foyer of people waiting to meet and chat with us.

Both Archie and I have a strong commitment to going into prisons and reaching our young-'uns. In 2016 I had the chance to do some mentoring at Loddon and Middleton prisons in Castlemaine. That was powerful and emotional. I don't take it for granted that I was highly regarded, honoured and respected by everybody in that prison. The officers, the Maoris, the Islanders, the Africans, the Torres Strait Islanders and all. It can't be taken for granted that it has to be blakfellas doing this work. Elders working with young-'uns.

I'm still pissed off over the fact that those of us of the Stolen Generations are still doing hard time in prisons. It's intergenerational. If your father or mother was ripped from their family, they never got to learn about tribal lore or customs. Things like nurturing a child by wrapping them in a possum-skin cloak, or learning the basic necessities of the trees your feet brush past and where to find food or medicine in nature.

When I was serving a sentence at Loddon jail I was given the opportunity to be part of an incredible program. It was called Marumali and it was delivered by Aunty Lorraine Peeters and her daughter, Shaan. Marumali changed my life forever. As I discovered more about my culture and, in particular, my kin, I discovered more about myself. It was a thrilling feeling to have a sense of certainty and clarity about who I was, who I came from, the legacy of those great-greats and ancestors and how *that* determined where I fitted in the cultural context of mob. When you can trace your ancestors, others can trace you. That is what connects our Dreamings.

It was a program that brought blakfellas together to talk openly and honestly about the impacts of being forcibly removed from family and community. It opened up a space for healing, connection, grief and trauma that was invaluable and it stirred something within me that felt something like a spiritual awakening. It strengthened my sense of identity and ignited a heightened awareness of my sense of place. The shift within me was pretty powerful after completing that month-long program. The workshops in the program were incredibly hard work, but one month changed the trajectory of my life forevermore.

I left prison rejuvenated and focused. I also took part in a drug and alcohol counselling course, which was another part of my healing. When I left jail after that sentence, I was finally able to jump off the wicked methadone and undertake the role of my community's missing feather-foot, Kadaitcha man, lore man. It helped me find my purpose.

Today, part of that purpose is helping Aboriginal inmates. There's still a lot of work to be achieved. We need Aboriginal cultural awareness training for prison officers. We need rehabilitation programs in prison. We need to band together and push hard to move beyond the haphazard, almost seemingly disorganised, way of influencing the Office of Corrections. This kind of education, so necessary for mob, can only come from within the community. Specifically, getting Elders from outside to come into the prisons to work with mob. It's not a sexy proposition to be working within a prison's walls, but it's what we need. I never had a family of my own, but I do have family – young-'uns I look out for and lose sleep over at night. Some of them I'm related to and others are the young kids, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, who are stuck in the juvenile and prison system. It's my mission to reach out to as many of them as I can; not only as an Elder but as someone who knows firsthand what they're going through. A reminder that they're seen and loved.

Another purpose in my life is Treaty. Treaty for me means the government finally taking us seriously. I'm hopeful that one day I will join the rest of the thirty-eight clans here in Victoria to come together in Parliament and discuss the business of Treaty, and be considered a serious party. The Blak Party.

Heads of government don't like the word 'Treaty'. Then again, they don't like the words 'racism' or 'genocide', either. They talk about 'discovery' and avoid the word 'invasion'. These word choices seem small,

but they go to show how unwilling the government is to be accountable and face the difficult truths of this nation's history.

There's a lot in our land's history that needs recognition and acknowledgment and we need a Treaty now to start a real process of reconciliation. My idea of Treaty is for a group of Aboriginal Australians to make a list of demands and put it to the government.

Really, we need to impress upon the public that 'Treaty' is not a dirty word.

EPILOGUE

THE JOURNEY NEVER-ENDING

These days, I know who I am.

I am Jack Charles, son of Blanchie Charles. I am Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung and Yorta Yorta. I'm not merely Koorie, not 'just' an Aboriginal.

I am also a Wiradjuri man on my father's side, which I only recently discovered, thanks to the Koorie Heritage Trust who helped me trace my bloodlines. I even learned that my great-great-grandfather, along with William Barak and many others up at Coranderrk, some of them from other missions along Lake Tyers, were members of the Victorian Native Police Force. That was a revelation.

But my story is still an ongoing discovery. It's tough being denied the rightful inheritance of who I really am – my identity. At times it's traumatic, because I'm almost at the end of the journey and I'm still discovering my story. It was only in 2017 that the Koorie Heritage Trust told me who my father was – an Aboriginal man from Leeton in New South Wales.

And it's shameful that I got this information so late in my life. As I get older and continue to reconnect with my stories and history, I've realised that I always carried these stories within me, from the day I was born. My body and mind is a library that houses these incredible songlines and storylines.

I believe that fate has blessed me with good health – especially lucky considering everything I've put my body and mind through over the decades. I've somehow defeated the odds and am still here today. I know that the life expectancy for Aboriginal men is somewhere in the late sixties. Ten years lower than non-Aboriginal men. But there are quite a few of us now reaching seventy and over. From where I'm standing, it's all down to the work of the Aboriginal health services. They ring you up if you're an Elder and invite you in to undertake regular blood testing. They organise

appointments and transport to see a doctor. This kind of outreach is important. It demystifies and normalises talking about your body, your ailments and what's going on physically and mentally. I managed to find a doctor I could trust to share my full story with. For many Aboriginal people, the only time we get to see a doctor is when we're in jail.

After years of sharing needles, I contracted hepatitis C. But because my doctor and I had discussed my situation, he told me about a hep. C treatment and now the virus has been knocked out of me. I've been a public spokesperson for this health initiative in our community and that's been a blessing.

I see this as part of my work being an Elder – you lead and guide by example. So many call me 'Uncle' and this is all related to me being part of my community's Blak Watch – a self-proclaimed Kadaitcha, feather-foot lore man. My commitment is to mob. 'Uncle' is a term of respect and, in some cases, endearment, but it acknowledges the standing and experiences of those who've come before you. I tell everyone, not just mob, they can call me Uncle – and I'm grateful that me name's not Tom.

I've seen many who have professed to be Elders, yet are too far on the sideline or ignored and are waiting to be taken seriously. Many of us are living exemplary lives in the community. As an Elder, I hope to be a glorious reminder of my people's culture, our place of belonging, our kinship, community and connection. It's from listening to our Elders of the past, and those who come in the future, that we can pass on the knowledge of our experiences to younger generations. For me, personally, I will never forget how reconnecting to my culture helped me find my true path. I saw the blak light and, within that, saw my own presence.

The plan is to continue to get back into the system, this time as a mentor and Elder and share my lived knowledge and experiences with young blak people. I've had the honour of being able to do that from time to time, but not often enough. One of my Dreamings is to have my criminal record expunged, so I can carry out important work and provide support to those who need it. I once found my police record in a pile of rubbish. I was living in a cottage in a park right near the Royal Melbourne Zoo. I'd had a hit and when you're high silly things attract and absorb your attention. The rest of the world can be passing you by and you'll just start going through the rubbish heap. And I did that. Out the back of that cottage, councils used to put a lot of their rubbish and documents, and that day I focused on this

small pile. Going through it I realised I'd stumbled across local police records. And lo and behold, there was my own record. So I grabbed it and had a good read. And do you know what I reckon? If the police can't be bothered hanging on to those records, they should just go right ahead and expunge them. I'm a reformed man now. I've paid for my crimes.

It's taken many years, but I now feel mostly accepted into the Aboriginal community. I'm true-blue, ridgy-didge mob. When I travel near or far, this knowledge is what keeps me connected to the land that holds my stories, even when I trek to the other side of the world. As a traditional owner of this land known as Australia, I'm fortunate to be part of a people whose history goes back at least 80 000 years. Australia has a blak history. And I'm part of that history.

My story is about connections. Connections to my countrymen and global communities, connections to performance and the arts, connections with workers in the drug and alcohol support sector, needle syringe workers, country, kinship, culture and Aboriginality. That I live to tell this tale and revisit those connections is, in some ways, nothing short of a miracle. Given my initial starting point and the ways I've been tried and tested, it's a hoot that I get to share my reflections with you. As with so many blakfellas who were Stolen, I'm constantly discovering new pieces of information. Piecing together the formation of who and what I am is a journey never-ending.

In recent years, thanks to the help and support of Koorie Heritage Trust and Link-Up, I've since found the names of other lost siblings. Mum never mentioned them to me when I was in Swan Hill. I imagine it was too difficult for her. Now that I've been able to track down more information about my family, I hope to head up to Broome to find the rest of my siblings. Might even nick over to Roebourne – there are some Charleses there too, apparently. Mostly, we Charleses live along the east coast, from as far away as Griffith in south-west New South Wales, all the way down to Wilson's Promontory in Victoria.

Maintaining my roots is vitally important in my culture. It binds my kinship to have a sense of belonging. And as I continue to make connections, I gain a better understanding of who I am and who I've come from. I used to agree with the saying 'It's never too late'. But fuck, it is too late. How different would my life have been if I'd reconnected with my culture at a younger age? I'm still putting the pieces together even now, and

it hurts. The policies of child removal were a divide-and-conquer method of destroying people's sense of identity and self-esteem. Ignorance, misdirection and miseducation were central to keeping people from knowing who they were. But those attempts at hiding histories were destined to fail because the truth comes out in various ways.

When you're Stolen, not only is the system looking to eradicate your culture, it also messes up your personal history. Having your identity and sense of belonging ripped to shreds is an unspeakable horror. You feel bloody hoodwinked not even knowing your own life story. You might go years thinking events in your early life happened a particular way, only to discover there's another version of events. Then you might find out that neither of those versions is correct. For instance, I thought I'd been taken when I was two months old. As an adult I found out that I was actually four months. It's difficult to explain to those who don't understand how this mucks up your head. When you're Stolen, you desperately try to piece together the shattered fragments of your life story. When you're given incorrect details, it's infuriating. Among the lies, the deceit, misinformation and *no* information, you're trying to identify what is actually real and correct.

Those who were supposed to protect me as a Stolen child further harmed me in unspeakable ways. I was raped and abused in the boys' home. Those acts were committed by Salvo officers apparently serving under the god I'd been whitewashed into worshipping, but no longer believe in. After all, what god would allow a child to suffer such devastating horrors? The trauma, pain and anguish I've carried throughout my life; the brutality and inhumane treatment I've suffered.

Each day, it takes every ounce of power to combat the negative tropes associated with those of us who are Stolen. Every day I pull up, stand up and stand tall in the very essence of that which the system sought to destroy – but which, in actual fact, saved me: my Aboriginality. Ultimately, the essence of being a Stolen person is that you're always trying to find out who the hell you are. I damn well insist you know the story of my people's resistance – even when the schools and courts and prisons have tried to destroy us. We have tens of millennia of stamina that carry my people onwards and upwards. I think of my ancestors and realise with pride and joy that I stand large on the shoulders of giants. We're still here.

The journey of discovery is something that I pursue with a passion. My culture offers a foundation for me to continue learning and reconnecting to the stories that form it.

When former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered the 2008 National Apology to Australia's First Nations peoples, specifically to the Stolen Generations, he referred to the period as a 'blemished chapter in our nation's history'. And he wasn't bloody wrong.

I remember the day the Apology was broadcast. I was at home on my own, watching the live coverage in my living room. I was amazed at the large crowd that had gathered and I felt a wave of emotion seeing Australia, in a small measure, demonstrating a way forward. Hearing the Apology didn't necessarily do anything or give me much. But I accepted it. Watching Rudd, I thought: 'Well, jolly decent of him. Good luck to him.' Saying sorry doesn't take away our pain, but it's part of the way we heal.

I've experienced periods of deep anger at how the system treated me as a child, at everything that made things more difficult. But there have also been people who reached out to pull me out of my difficult place, whether it was physical, mental, creative or emotional. It's important to keep in mind my story is also about healing. That's how I've been able to keep going.

Today, as I write my story, the year is 2019 and I'm right on the cusp of my seventy-sixth birthday. I can feel Bunjil watching over this latter part of my journey – along with my ancestors. It's a beautiful thought, eh? Imagine Bunjil hovering over me as I traverse the ups and downs of this crazy, drugged up, locked up, fucked up, and at times unbelievable, life. Who else would take it upon themselves to protect me, if not my ancestors? Once upon a time, I wasn't sure I'd even make it beyond my sixtieth birthday. But whaddya know? With a mixture of pride, joy and a little bit of weariness and lairiness, here I stand to tell my tale thus far.



This was taken about a year before I had to leave Box Hill Boys' home. I was thirteen at the time. With my unmanageable hair and my two big, beautiful buck teeth, I was cute enough to be taken by the cook, Mrs Johnson, to a photographic studio in Swanston Street, Melbourne.



I recall our gymnastics afternoons in the building behind the boys in this picture. We did a lot of calisthenics and exercises with flags, learning navy flag codes and morse code, readying ourselves for a future as sailors or soldiers. We all so wanted to be dedicated Soldiers of the Cross in service of God and country.



That solid edifice of the water tower strong was a comfortable beacon, the place where we belonged. It was beyond reach and stood high and mighty. But in the cool of summer evenings, we lounged in its shadow as the sun set.



Surrey Hills tower today. *Photograph by Nick Harrison*



Christmas at the boys' home, 1953. The Christmas parties were generally wonderful until Father Christmas entered the hall. Half the children would be overjoyed by his appearance and loudly applaud, but the other, wiser boys like myself would not be in such high spirits. Father Christmas was one of the main culprits who interfered with us in the dorms at night.



On a group excursion to Lake Mountain in Marysville, Victoria, in 1954. We loved this type of fun-filled afternoon far from home, with the excitement of the unexpected and release from the bondage of the boys' home. We were innocent children again.



Returning for a photoshoot with photographer Nick Harrison, I was immediately assaulted by the memories of taking my leave from the boys' home once and for all time. The ground-floor window behind me was the office where I'd been given six of the best, a final strapping for some minor indiscretion. I left that building with tears in my eyes, blurring my vision of the Surrey Hills water tower, carrying my cardboard suitcase. *Photograph by Nick Harrison*



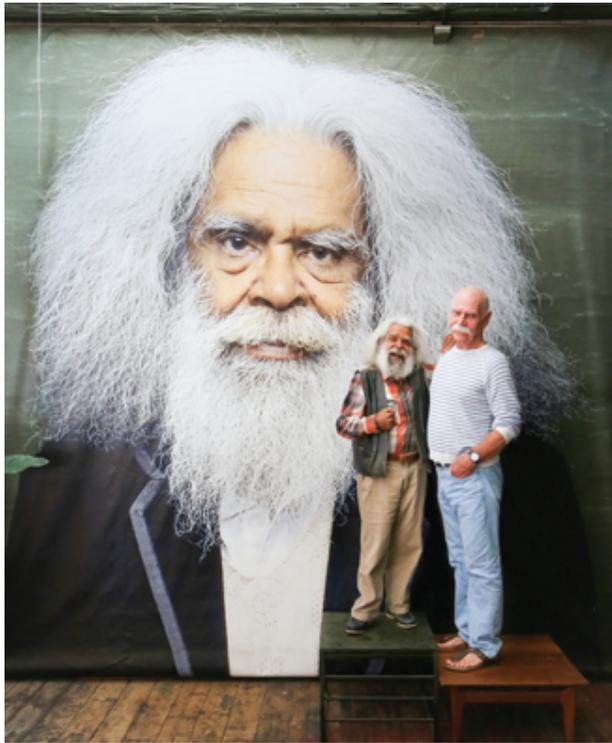
The plaque outside the home today. The building is listed under the Heritage Act. *Photograph by Nick Harrison*



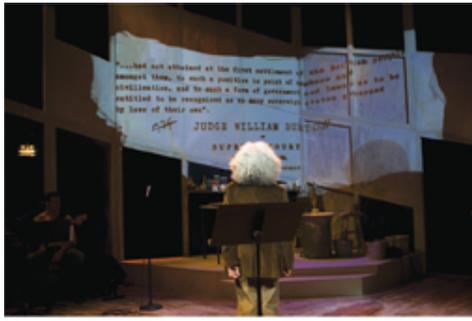
This photo was taken in 1997 when I was in the fog and haze of drug addiction. *Photograph by Raffaella Torresan, artist and author of La Ragazza (The Girl's Story)*



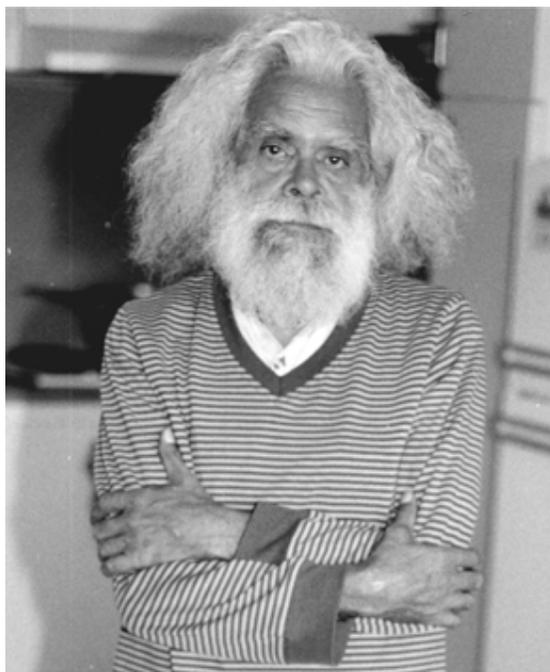
My friend Rod McNicol took a photographic portrait of me and a few other local lads and lasses when we were young and engaged with the Pram Factory Theatre. Twenty-odd years later, he re-photographed those of us who were still alive for his 'timeline' series for the National Gallery of Victoria. I'm about sixty in the second shot. *Photograph by Nick Harrison*



This was a promo poster that hung on the side wall of the National Gallery of Victoria promoting Rod's timeline series. *Photograph by Nick Harrison*



Some stills from my performance of *Jack Charles v The Crown*. Acting has taken me on journeys to amazing places and I've met some incredible people.



A photograph of me in 2010, taken by Raffaella Torresan when she was painting me for the Archibald.



A gift from my friend and director of *Bastardy* Amiel Courtin-Wilson. After a bit of visa trouble due to my criminal history, I was finally allowed in to England (thanks to the efforts of some special friends!). I treasure this present from Amiel.



On stage with Archie Roach at the Opera House in 2017. *Photograph by Martin Ollman*



With my co-writer, Namila Benson, at the Melba Spiegeltent in 2019.
Photograph by Nick Harrison

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My thanks also to the following people who I am proud have contributed in their inevitable fashion to the relevance of these stories. Each and every one of them were supportive, leading me to believe I could further the edification of white Australia regarding the Stolen Generations and myself. They include:

James Henry for your beautiful blak art. At every turn, your photos have captured the best of my good self.

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3CR for giving me a platform to expose and reveal myself – metaphorically speaking, of course!

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Rod McNicol, a lifetime friend and my personal photographer who has supported me and gotten me through my worst days of uncertainties. I look forward to our next cuppa, Rod. Meet you at Rose's or Friends of the Earth, aka my unofficial office.

Ilbijerri Theatre mob were true believers from the time *Bastardy* premiered at MIFF, and convinced me to collaborate with the great Jon Romeril to write *Jack Charles v The Crown*.

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And of course, I want to thank my ghostwriter, Namila Benson, for all the laughs, tears and headaches throughout this process. Could not have done it without your good grace, understanding and love. To Manu and Solomon, thank you for allowing me to work with your mum. And thank you Elizabeth O'Brien and Judith Harrison for your generous support so this book could be written.

Kimba Thompson, of Blak Dot Gallery. Thank you for your wonderful hub of creativity which is a sanctuary for blak arts.

Benji Mazzone, I was delighted and utterly enthralled with your contribution to our live shows *A Night With Uncle Jack*. Goldie Mazzone, what can I say about you? Pure gold, girl!

Close to the end of my last prison sentence, I spoke to Uncle Jimmy Berg and told him of my intentions to write a book about my life. I said I needed his Koorie Heritage Trust organisation to dig deep into their archives for my heritage, that of my great-greats and to help me uncover my connection to country, community and culture. Uncle Jimmy has definitely

stamped my identity as a Melburnian Boon Wurrung man, through my mother, Blanchie Charles. I also thank Margaret and Jennifer Bates, in particular, for working to establish my true identity.

And high distinction to the Link-Up mob. I acknowledge their wonderful effort to support myself and my last surviving known sister, Zenip, aka Christine Charles, in connecting to our family story.

Above all, these people mentioned have shown themselves to be true believers.

I cannot complete my acknowledgements unless I mention You, the reader. Thank you for keeping a watch over me, as I traverse the rocky road from infamy to fame.

Namila Benson's Thank-yous:

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To begin with, a massive thank you to an incredible woman who is an absolute dream to work with – Patrice Capogreco. Working with you has taken my life to the next level in profound ways. Not least because you see what I'm capable of way before I do! Thank you for always having my back. I'm proud to call you a friend.

Manu and Solomon, you're everything to me. Each time I faltered on this journey, you set me back on track by getting me to focus on the importance of this book. You guys are a reminder of how necessary it is for your generation, and future generations, to have access to the true stories and histories of this land's First People.

Thank you to Nick, Judy, Liz and Julian. I couldn't have done this without your support behind the scenes, your delicious dinners and your encouragement. I appreciate you all very much.

As with Uncle, I thank 3CR, Kimba at Blak Dot Gallery and Triple R for generously opening your doors to let Uncle and me do our interview sessions for this book.

To the various friends and family who've shared my journey since starting this book, thank you for opening your hearts, homes and ears so I

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Which leads me to the person I am most proud of – Uncle Jack Charles. You’re often rightfully referred to as a ‘national treasure’, Uncle, and after seeing you in a theatre performance many years ago I understand why this title is so deserved. It’s been a huge privilege to work alongside you. I learn so much from your strength, cultural pride and honesty. Learning your story has been a game-changer for me and I know it will be for many others. I’m so glad that you’re able to tell your story, in your words, Uncle. Thank you for entrusting me with the responsibility to bring it to the masses. What an honour!

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this book
contains images of deceased persons*

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