



1988

One Hot Night

Archie Weller

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

Recommended Citation

Weller, Archie, One Hot Night, *Kunapipi*, 10(1), 1988.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol10/iss1/24>

One Hot Night

Abstract

The train smashes away the hot, still, trembling body of the night and leaves it crumpled upon the hard rocks beside the sleepers. Black and bloody and flecked with light from the dying sun and the prosperous shops or the comfortable middle-class houses or the rushing vehicles on the highway. The train charges noisily onwards, high up on its embankment. It will never reach the stars, but it is too proud for the common, crowded highways. It floats on a lonely uniform course between reality and dreams.

One Hot Night

The train smashes away the hot, still, trembling body of the night and leaves it crumpled upon the hard rocks beside the sleepers. Black and bloody and flecked with light from the dying sun and the prosperous shops or the comfortable middle-class houses or the rushing vehicles on the highway. The train charges noisily onwards, high up on its embankment. It will never reach the stars, but it is too proud for the common, crowded highways. It floats on a lonely uniform course between reality and dreams.

The train rattles and rocks in rhythm to its music. Inside its throbbing belly the black boy who huddles in the very corner is rocked too.

When he got on at Guildford, the three sailors with their painted giggling girl and the old, faded, white couple in their faded best eyed him furtively and coldly.

Just a skinny, scrawny part-Aboriginal boy, with a ragged mop of tangled blue-black hair on top of his hatchet face and a black beard and moustache surrounding it and his thin lips. He holds up his head in pride. His royal black eyes flick scornfully around the carriage for a brief second before he drifts up to the other end and throws himself into the corner to stare out of the window, ignoring the world.

He had a fight with his woman and punched her to the ground. She stared up at him reproachfully with her large sad eyes. Faces going red and orange, then black again in the flickering firelight. People stood silent. Blood ran out of his woman's mouth.

'Don't go to town, Elgin. Ya know the munadj's on the lookout for ya. Specially that big Fathers. Ya wanna go back to jail or what? Ya don't even think of me, unna? I may as well be dead, as much as you care, any rate.'

'Block up, Maydene. I'll do what I wanna do, see? I'm me own boss now.'

'I was better off when you was inside!' the girl cried and he backhanded her across the face and kicked her in the stomach so she gave a queer half-cry.

He knelt down beside her in remorse, and stroked her long black hair back from her bruised face before leaving abruptly. He went away from the communal campfire that held the ever-present circle of shadowy forms close to its warmth or comfort.

People get on the train. People get off. All white. They stare at the dark, sullen youth gazing out the window.

The sailors' girl leaves. Her high-heeled shoes clickety-clack off the platform, then she is swallowed up by the lips of the stealthy night. The Nyoongah's eyes devour her plump white body then, from the corner of his eyes, he spots the three sailors glaring at him. He smiles at them, an evil smile. Spits out the window.

The Indian ticket collector bustles along the corridor. He stares through the youth with arrogant eyes, as if no one is there. He takes the youth's money, though.

Perth station.

Full of noise and colour and dancing lights. Shouting people and shunting trains.

Early yet.

He hunches into his clothes and shuffles outside. He rolls a smoke while the cars roar and rumble around him and people pass him by. So alone in the crowded city.

Over on the other side of the river, the flats stand high and alert, like a tribe of advancing warriors. Lights flicker from balconies and rest on the serene back of the river. Soft music from record players, radios or guitars drifts around the dark shore like a lazily swooping seagull.

Tonight is a night for romance.

Little Caesar Jackell struts importantly down the cool white footpaths. He flits in and out of the shadows like a busy black hummingbird searching for honey.

He disappears.

Silent as a thought, he creeps between the trees and bushes of the garden. Only the whites of his eyes are seen in this world that he knows all too well, if only through the stories of his brothers and cousins.

No one is home.

No dogs.

Big house means big money.

He slinks around to the back and tries a window. Locked. He notices a small louvred window high up on the wall, big enough for him to crawl through.

Quickly and quietly, he drags a box over to the window. He pecks out the glass louver one by one with agile fingers, like a black crow ripping out the eye of affluence, as it squats, powerless, in its green garden. Then he scurries through the hole he has made, to feed off the living juicy insides.

First he pulls out a packet of smokes from his coat pocket and lights one up to calm his nerves. This is only the second house he has ever broken into, and the first time he has done it alone.

Wait till his eyes become accustomed to the dark, then slip quietly through the house.

He comes to the bedroom. A photograph of an earnest young man glares out at the cheeky thief from among various bottles of perfume on the dressing table.

It can do nothing to him.

He flattens down his bushy hair with a brush and pulls faces in the mirror. Then he sets to work.

He finds a small locked metal cashbox with a lucky-sounding jangle inside it, various rings and necklaces in another box and a watch that takes his fancy. In the kitchen, he takes two bottles of beer and a flagon of riesling from the fridge. In another room, he finds more cigarettes, three cigars, and a \$10 note. He shoves the biggest cigar into his mouth and grins into another mirror.

On top of a cupboard, his searching fingers feel a hard, cold object.

It is a rifle. A telescopic .303. He searches the drawers of the cupboard until he finds four packets of bullets. This truly is a prize.

He shoves all his loot into a bag he finds, and lowers it out the window. Then the .303, then himself.

Same stars, same people, same lights.

He goes.

Keeps to the back ways as much as he can. No one sees him – or would care if they did.

He reaches the riverside and lights up another cigar. He decides to dump the bag and .303 and come back for them later.

‘Takes me, unna?’ he brags to the waves that gently slap-lap-lap against the shore. ‘Poooh! Ya one solid man, Caesar Jackell.’

Takes one of the bottles of beer from the bag and wrenches off the top with his white teeth. He pours his cold, golden triumph down his throat. Starlight and city light glint off the bottle. No one is at his celebration party. Only the waves, and the floating rubbish and a few drifting ghostly gulls.

Across the water, the city beckons with crooked fingers and winks from tempting eyes. The buildings dance the dance of the night people, the street people, the nobody people.

His people.

Caesar finishes off the bottle and tries to open the cashbox.

He curses and swears and rips his knuckles open before he smashes the lock with a rock.

Open it eagerly.

Shells.

‘Shit!’

Hurl the useless box away, spewing beautifully patterned shells into the air.

He still has the \$10.

Drinks the other bottle of beer. Slowly. He relishes the bitterness, and remembers he has robbed a whole house – a big, rich house – all on his own. Last time he was scared as he squatted under a tree chain-smoking, with his eyes darting about nervously, keeping watch for the others. Now he has proven he is as good as they. No, better, because has a .303 and bullets.

He is drunk now.

Pats the barrel then aims it at the curious gulls.

‘Bang, bang,’ he mutters softly and smiles.

He hides the gun and bag, then stumbles away.

He staggers across the bridge and along the freeway, a small insignificant, drunken moth going to boast and be a big spender for at least one night in his miserable life.

The people pour onto the footpath in a noisy flow. They whirl and eddy, and cling to the sides of cars or heroes in bobbing groups. Inside is a comforting blast of music and synthetic gunfire as the youths become pretend cowboys or soldiers or gangsters or racing-car drivers; all fantasies

that are so real for them. Then they squeeze out the door, to become black boys gazed upon in contempt or fear or black girls sitting on the seats, giggling and shouting, eyed over by the white man.

Big Murry James leans into the darkest doorway across the street from Crystal Palace, watching all the Kings and Queens and Princes and Princesses amble in and out.

He is the Court Jester.

He was fostered by a white family and lived with them for fourteen years. Last month, the murmurings of his people stirred in his heart and he wandered home again to Lockridge camp.

Very black, with large round eyes – and a deep voice. A small squashed nose and a low forehead. He hardly ever talks, for it takes a long time for him to work things out. He leaves the thinking to his cleverer cousins and friends while he just gets on with living.

Despite his huge size, he is gentle and kind.

Puff on a cigarette, and dream about the girl he would like to take to bed. The other boys shout and yell their love across the rooftops and drag names from dirty lip to dirty lip, sweetened by knowledgeable laughter. Then they will swoop in and rip a girl off the footpath like an owl pouncing on a squeaking, cowering mouse.

Not Murry. His woman is like a drink kept secure in a bottle so no one but he can partake of her. Her name slides down his throat and warms him whenever he thinks of her.

He sees her now, lost in a crowd of grinning girls gathered around two blonde-haired brothers who came out of Riverbank last week.

Saunter across.

'G'day, Lynette'

'Look 'oo's 'ere! What ya doin?'

 she shrieks.

Small and young with a beautiful body, a permanent grin and sparkling dark eyes that have not yet been dulled by brutal sex. She is only fourteen and still a virgin. He is sixteen and shy and not yet used to this dark world that laps around the marble pedestal he has stood upon for so long.

'Nuthin'. Wanna Coke?'

'Get away!' she cries, grinning at him. Then her grin fades to a half-smile, as she looks deeper into him.

'Orright then, if ya like,' she replies.

She understands. She always did from the first, when she caught him staring at her silently across the campfire the first week he drifted in.

He is tall and strong and handsome – in an ugly sort of way. He is quiet and gentle and kind. When he does make love to her, he will not be cruel.

They walk down the street to a coffee lounge.

'Lets go to Beaufort Park, Murry.'

'No. Ole Billy 'Owes died other day. The place is packed with 'Oweses now.'

'Elgin Broppo oughta look out, then. 'Im an' Mantan 'Owes 'ad one big fight, unna?'

'Yeah.'

'Ya got any boya, Murry?'

'Yeah.'

He is proud of the job he has at the panel beater's. He grins down at Lynette then away again at the staring, glaring lights all around him. They rip into his love like fruit fly boring into a delicate, delicious fruit. Get away from the harsh forest of lights. Go to the sea of darkness and shadows and softness and bushes down at Supreme Court Gardens.

'Stick around me, Lynette, an' we'll 'ave a good time.'

'Orright.'

They grin in unison and she moves a little closer to him.

Elgin Broppo slinks into a darkened, rutted lane way near the Beaufort Hotel and peers around the corner at the crowded park. Obscure figures flutter from one circle to another. Furtive mumblings and occasional yells of recognition. The Howeses drink to the death of old Billy.

An ebony trio is squeezed from the park and ambles across the street towards Elgin. He tenses, ready to run, then notices his cousin Jimmy Olsen.

Grins and soft punches as the cousins meet.

'Hey, Elgin, brother. Doan' 'ang round 'ere, budda. Manny 'Owes is drunk as all buggeries.'

'Shootin' off 'ow ya fought 'im dirty, like.'

'Go an' get 'im, Elgin.'

'Doan' talk silly, Larry. Mantan 'ud kill 'im with 'is own mob,' Jimmy growls.

Elgin's sombre eyes gaze thoughtfully over the park. He lifts his lips a little in a suggestion of a smile.

'Another night, yeah.'

'Let's buy a drink, you fellahs.'

'Oo's got the boya?'

'Jimmy busted into a shop, unna? Ya still got monies?'

They troop over to the bottle shop leering out at the dark parked cars.

The proprietor eyes them in an unfriendly way because last night there had been a big brawl in the front bar where the Aborigines drank. But money's money, so he sells them a flagon of Brandevino and half a carton of cans.

Fade away behind the toilets, in the grubby, scuffed sea of dirt. Broken bottles blink their last as they drown in the sea.

The youths drown, too.

Caesar Jackell stumbles into the light-blasted circle outside Crystal Palace. His stage light. His big performance.

'Hey, Donny, I got a gun, ya know.'

'Yeah, an' I got a million dollars.'

'No. True's God. I got a real gun. Bushted thish 'ouse. Easy as pissin', it wash.'

'Look 'ere! Caesar drunk, or what?' a girl shouts happily.

'Yeah, 'e's drunk. Finished.'

'Caesar drunk!'

They gather around him, gabbling and grinning. All blurs and noise. Caesar clutches hold of Donny's sleeve.

'I got a fuckin' gun – and bullets.'

'I'll give ya gun right up ya bony 'ole d'rectly, if ya don't bugger off.'

'I got ten dollars, too, if ya wanna know. I'm fuckin' rich, me.'

They gather closer. Caesar smiles around the group, then swaggers into the poolroom. He nearly trips over his feet and is saved from the disgrace of falling on his face by two girls grabbing him. Everyone howls louder than ever at the joke.

Caesar dances over to the counter. Everyone of importance gathers around, and he is a hero to the drifting night people.

Slaps the \$10 note on the counter.

'Fill 'er up, buddy,' he grins.

'Gimme a lend of a dollar, Caesar.'

'Caesar, give me a few bob, please. Go on Caesar, baby.'

'I'm ya people, Caesar.'

Five dollars go.

'I'm keepin' the rest,' he says.

Staggers over to a pinball machine, which blinks at him with the knowledge of an old friend. The people disperse and only two bony, scraggly-haired girls hang around him in the hope of more handouts. He becomes lost in the world of bright lights and bouncing balls and flashing numbers. The only world he wants to know.

Murry and Lynette huddle on the corner with all the white people. They sip their Coke silently.

'Let's go down to Supreme Court Gardens, Lynette.'

She is thoughtful for a moment. Looks up at simple Murry's kind face.

'Yeah, orright.'

They cross over, rubbing against each other in the crowd.

Up the street, with busy people and screeching buses and windows full of white man things.

The gates: and beyond the gates is sweet obscurity that swallows them up.

The Gardens are quiet and cool. The young couple go down past the Court House and through the trees onto the lawn.

No one is there.

They lie under a spreading tree and let the silence and peace blanket them. They finish off their Coke, talking in whispers.

Murry forms the words in his mind and repeats them over and over before rising up above her. She stares up and the whites of her eyes glint in the city light.

'Lynette ... Lynette, ya wanna be my woman?'

'Get away, ya silly bugger.'

'No. Ya know I'm mardong for ya, unna? I just gotta tell ya, that's all.'

She grins uneasily, yet knows that she *does* love him.

Soon, one day, a boy will grab her and suck what he wants from her, then toss her away. She would rather it was this boy than any other.

Murry's large clumsy hands encircle her and she gives an involuntary yelp before his face buries into her own and his lips devour her untainted ones. She struggles for a moment before relaxing. She is fearful of the unknown, yet happy in the comfort that will be her new life.

He peels her jeans down while his heavy fingers fumble around her body. Warm brown skin touches warm brown skin, and a unison of young, gentle, love is born.

The buildings, like stern priests, gaze down. The moon runs in naked freedom across her field, while the stars, clustered like daisies, wait to be put in a chain around her head.

The night – the hot, dusty night – presses down upon the city. Its misshapen head peers over the mountains of tall buildings while its grotesque fingers feel along the streets.

People go home.

Aboriginal children linger in large pulsating groups, sucking as much fun from the night as they can.

Elgin wanders up from Beaufort Park with his cousin Jimmy Olsen. Both are half-drunk and happy.

Caesar Jackell slumps in a dingy doorway, feeling sick. Drags listlessly on a cigarette.

Money, all gone. Friends all gone. He is just like everyone else now. Waiting for the police to come and send him on his way.

'Give us a cigarette,' Elgin mutters and sits beside his little cousin. He grins up at slim, watchful Jimmy.

'What ya reckon, J.O.? Our main man is pissed as a parrot, yeah.'

Ruffles the boy's wiry hair. Caesar turns bleary, dull eyes on Elgin, his hero.

He remembers, and clutches at the straw that is going to save him from drowning.

'I got a gun, Elgin,' he mumbles as he extracts the crumpled cigarettes.

Elgin and Jimmy grin as each takes a cigarette.

'Yeah, I got a gun too. Right 'ere, unna. Big shotgun.' Elgin grins and jabs a finger at his groin.

The older boys laugh.

Caesar sits dazed.

'No, I 'ave got a gun, ya know. An' jewels, I even got a watch.'

No one listens to him. Jimmy Olsen squints down the street.

"Ere come them 'Owes, budda. Time we was movin'.'

Half-drunk Elgin stares away, with his quiet eyes in some far-off thought of his own.

'You c'n go, Jimmy. I'll wait 'ere. Go later, yeah.'

'Doan' you get in no fight, Elgin, that's all I ask, or else ya 'istory. None of our people around tonight, ya know, 'cept Murry – an' 'e's gone somewhere – an' this silly little prick.'

'Yeah. Well, see ya, J.O. See ya t'morrow, then.'

'Yeah.'

Jimmy disappears.

Just Caesar and Elgin and the city left.

'Ya gunna fight Mantan again, Elgin?'

'Naw. Fightin's stupid. Where's fightin' got ya? In jail, that's where, brother.'

'If ya get me gun, ya can shoot ole Mantan full of 'oles.'

'So ya truly 'ave got a gun.'

'Course. An' jewels an' a necklace an' everything.'

They puff away on another cigarette.

Some Howeses wander by and look the two over with hard Oriental eyes.

'Goin' to be a smash, directly, Caesar. Let's get goin' and find Murry.'

Elgin, the boss, climbs off the seat. Everything is going hazy, but he still walks with a sort of pride. His grubby little page boy swaggers behind him.

Big cousin Elgin who held up a bank and has stolen a dozen cars and beat up two munadj. Big Caesar who broke into a house.

Black boys who idle along. Shy of the bright white lights that expose them for what they really are.

They go up Murray Street.

Past the fire station where the firemen whistle and shout and jeer.

They sit down on the low wall outside the nurses' quarters where girls in short, tight uniforms glide between the iron gates, comfortable in the knowledge of their whiteness and virginity.

No one notices the two Nyoongahs in the shadows under the huge Moreton Bay fig tree that erupts from the footpath in a green volcano. It

leads a doomed life, one day to be chopped down by the hands that nurtured it. Just like the people it shelters now.

'Hey boy, 'ow'd you like 'er?' Caesar grins and spits as a pretty, buxom, young nurse walks past.

'Roasted, with two eggs,' Elgin grins.

Eyes follow her as they would a dream.

'Yeah, just like I was thinkin'.'

Elgin glances at his little cousin and bursts into laughter.

'Listen to 'im talk. Ya couldn't 'ave a moony to save yasef. Don't try foolin' me. I'm almost ya brother, yeah.'

'I done all right with Jenny Doolan.'

'Garn. Y'never touched 'er, even. I was there.'

'Any rate' Caesar sulks, 'I thought we was lookin' for Murry. What we doin' up 'ere?'

'Walkin',' Elgin grunts.

Staggers to his feet. 'Let's get goin'.'

'What we goin' up 'ere for? I wanna get me gun before some jerk finds it, ya know.'

'I'm goin' to say a prayer to turn me white,' Elgin smiles, and his eyes take in the cathedral that looms down upon them, its spire silhouetted against the sky. The Virgin Mary looks out over the city that surrounds it like broken eggshells.

'What ya reckon we steal the cashbox, Elgin?'

'Don't talk silly. 'Ow'd ya know God won't blast ya to bits, eh?'

Caesar laughs loud and young, while Elgin gives a mocking smile.

They leave the cathedral with its awesome shadows and tranquillity up on the hill.

Past the now-silent school. In the daytime (with all its blue heat and flies and dust) green-clad schoolgirls shout in play and hide their self-conscious womanhood behind starched uniforms.

Past the mint, looking like a caged animal behind the iron bars and twisted barbed netting. A snarling white man's animal.

The two descendants of the kings of the old civilisation glance from hooded eyes as a police car swishes past.

Elgin digs his hands deeper in his pockets, and his sharp eyes flick over to the taxi parked beside a block of flats that rear up into the sky. It taunts

him with its sleek whiteness. The sleek white owner is upstairs in the flats, fondling his white girlfriend between white sheets.

'Ya can't even pinch a car, Elgin,' Caesar sneers, still sullen from Elgin's gibes about his sexual prowess.

Elgin's eyes flash.

'Couldn't I, ya little jerk? Just you keep watch, budda, an' I'll show ya 'ow one Nyoongah can steal a car.'

The wiry youth crouches beside the taxi and his teeth pull back in a grin. His thin fingers find a crack where the window is wound down and he heaves with all his might. Puts in his hand and unlocks the door.

Caesar stands, tense and afraid, under a tree.

A utility glides past.

Elgin leaps onto the other side of the taxi, while Caesar melts into the tree.

Door open. Silver paper on the fuses.

Two shadows pushing a taxi down the hill. The gentle crunch of tyres on cement. A sudden kick, and the engine bursts into life. Doors slam and Elgin lets out a howl of laughter as he screeches around the corner.

Caesar clutches the door in fright.

Elgin Mortimer Broppo lets all his drunken frustration bubble out in one long whoop of joy.

'Now we'll get ya bloody gun an' shoot bloody ole Mantan so full of 'oles e'll look like a piece of lace, yeah,' Elgin cries.

Caesar lights a nervous cigarette.

'Not so fast, couz. I wanna live, ya know.'

A faint, persistent thought hammers at Elgin's mind.

Back to jail; back to jail

E.M. Broppo back to jail

The wheel between his thin agile hands whisks the thought away. It bobs with the coloured lights here, then is gone.

Down in the cool peace of the gardens, Murry lies beside Lynette. She smiles serenely at him and he rubs a calloused hand through her hair.

She has become a woman tonight. In the way she dreamed about, down at the dusty camp, when she was small, and read, over and over again, the tattered book on 'Sleeping Beauty'.

Caressed and kissed and loved on this hot night. And her man is still here beside her, tracing patterns in her hair.

'We'd better go soon, Murry. The 'Owes'll be everywhere.'

'They won't bother us,' the giant rumbles.

The girl realises he is still white, in many ways as well as in his manner of making love. She sits up and takes out cigarettes for them both.

'They will if they know ya one of Elgin's people.'

They finish their cigarettes. The incense-like blue smoke drifts around them and the tree squats above them like a buddha. They kiss again, never wanting to leave.

But there are Lynette's father and three brothers to think about – and her uncles and cousins. Just as everything is going well, Murry doesn't want to start a feud of his own.

'Better go.'

They amble up into the lighted city that is becoming dark and empty now. The buses are all gone.

The Howeses are all there. Too many glowering, hunched Howeses stalking the streets for gentle Murry and feminine Lynette to fight.

They slink back the way they came and down towards the river.

'We'll get a taxi, if there's any goin'. I got the money,' Murry murmurs.

Elgin and Caesar, on their way to get the .303, find them.

The squeal of brakes rips out the guts of the night. The taxi reverses back to gaping Murry and surprised Lynette.

'Shut ya mouth an' open the door, Murry,' rasps little Caesar, eyeing Lynette. He feels more sure of himself now, and happy that – at last – he is going to get his rifle.

Elgin cocks his head over his slight shoulders. Bright eyes twinkle at Murry.

'Where ya been, Murry?'

'Where ya think, Elgin? Down Supreme Court Gardens, unna, Murry?' Caesar says before Murry can answer.

'Ya *wanna* punch in the 'ead, Caesar Jackell, ya big prick?' Lynette snarls.

'Da's true,' returns Caesar, and nudges Elgin. Their teeth gleam as they shudder in silent laughter.

Lynette glowers.

'Ya steal this taxi, Elgin?' Murry mutters as he slides in.

'Nah! 'E bought it, unna?' Caesar cackles.

Elgin smiles a superior smile.

They drive over the bridge. Elgin idles along the riverside slowly.

'Where ya goin', Elgin?' Lynette asks from the back. She is the only girl there. She has heard about these sort of rides before. After all, the two in the front *are* Murry's cousins. Share and share alike is their code.

'Just gettin' some of Caesar's stuff.'

'Ere. Turn off,' Caesar orders. He is the boss again, just as he was up in front of Crystal's.

The taxi rocks and bumps down the gravel track until it reaches the water's edge.

Caesar leaps out and searches in the long grass until he finds the .303 and the bag. He holds them up and shouts a challenge to the soaring flats and the dancing moon and the cold, white, impassive stars.

The cab screeches back onto the main road, spitting dust and gravel in defiance.

Caesar produces the flagon of riesling. Drunk and happy again, he hands out pieces of jewellery to everyone. He keeps the .303 on his knee and the watch and two earrings in his pocket. He takes a long swig of the flagon, then hands it to Elgin.

'Ya smart little bugger. 'Oo'd of believed it, eh?' Elgin gives Caesar a proper grin. A man-to-man grin for the new hero of the clan.

Caesar aims his rifle at buildings and boats and the occasional bird, Murry and Lynette snuggle up close to one another and take the odd sip of wine from the offered flagon.

Elgin drives, drowning in bitter riesling and his own thoughts.

They will be looking for the cab by now. When they catch him, they will make sure he goes to jail for a long time, if Big Pig Fathers has anything to do with it.

He thinks about his woman, lying alone in their tent out at the camp. Her round, bright eyes and quiet voice, and the gentle smile that can calm his wildness.

A still part of town. A tired sign above a building, flashes blue and red:
LAWSON HOT L.

He swings the taxi into the gloom of the parking area.

Two o'clock in the morning. No one around.

The others stare at him in curiosity as he grins around the dark cab.

'We just goin' to break into 'ere an' get some beer. 'Ave one big party, when we get back to camp.'

'Yeah?' Murry, uneasily.

'Nothin' to it, Murry. Wait 'ere a bit, you mob. Be back d'rectly.'

Elgin slips out and scuttles over to the wall. A sharp crack as the window breaks. Protesting squeaks as it jerks open.

A low whistle.

Murry clammers out noisily, not used to this sort of thing.

Caesar floats beside him, holding his .303. Lynette huddles in the cab, with just a cigarette and the riesling to keep her company, feeling terribly alone, without big Murry beside her.

Elgin's head peers out of the window like a fox glancing out of his lair. A sly, thin, black fox, about to grab the fluttering white chickens and make them squawk.

'Come 'ere, Murry, Caesar, keep watch.'

The two coloured boys stand inside the murky lounge, while their eyes become used to the gloom. Elgin leads the way as they sneak into the storeroom.

'We right now, baby,' Elgin whispers, 'Fuckin' Christmas, unna, out at camp, when we deliver this little lot.'

Murry is afraid. It is strange that he is here, in someone else's place, taking all this beer. The pictures on the wall scowl down at him. He passes out the carton to drunk Caesar, who staggers over to the cab.

Carton after carton of bottles and stubbies and cans.

Murry is a criminal now. If he gets caught, it's an end to all his dreams. And all he wanted to do was go home.

'Grab some gnummerai, Murry. Geeze, do ya 'ave to be told everything?' Elgin hisses as he dashes past with an armload of spirit bottles. Murry gets a small cardboard box and quickly fills it up with cigars and packets of cigarettes. His strong hands wrench open the till and he stuffs about \$200 in notes into his pockets.

'Come on, Murry, ya ole woman!'

He rushes over to the window and leaps out.

They roll start the taxi. Head for home. Home amongst the gaunt trees, beside the wide river flat.

They weave through the streets, keeping clear of police vehicles and taxis. Out on Guildford Road, Elgin pushes his foot down hard and lets the power and freedom of his body and mind echo in the taxi engine.

Reedy voices crackle feebly over the two-way in a vain search for the cab. Black Elgin is supreme once more. For the second time in his life he has the radios of Perth spread like a spider's web to catch him as he buzzes along.

'What ya reckon they'll say out at camp when we roll up?' he grins.

"Appy birthday,' Caesar laughs.

A train roars past and Elgin tries to beat it.

The only car on the whole lonely road.

Caesar pretends to shoot the people in the train.

Lynette sniggers, 'Look 'ere at Clint Eastwood!'

Caesar turns and laughs with her. All he can do now is laugh. If he stops laughing, he will spew up. He sways and rolls and clutches his .303 even tighter. His smile is a fixed one.

Lynette is only happy-drunk. She leans against broad Murry and his big hand covers her child's breast. He broods about the crime he has committed, then thinks about the money that will buy his woman a lot of joy.

Elgin is remote from the others. Just him and his car and the road.

They are almost at Guildford when they zoom past a speed trap.

Caesar hears the eerie wailing and jerks around.

'Hey couz, bloody munadj 'ave got us!'

Fear settles like a mist over the remnants of the tribe.

"Old tight. When I tell ya to run, ya bloody run – understand?" Elgin says, through clenched teeth.

More cars join in the chase: two blue vans and a CIB car. They bay and howl like hounds after the fox.

'I'll stop 'em!' screams Caesar, and loads the magazine of his .303.

Six bullets.

He leans out the window of the swaying cab so the wind whips his hair back and shrieks through the curls.

He fires the rifle and the bullet whines away. Fires again and again.

On his last shot, the bullet smashes through the windscreen of the foremost van so it slews to an abrupt halt. The RTA car also stops, but the others come relentlessly onwards.

The CIB car comes up alongside them. They think they are Starsky and Hutch, in their olive-green Kingswood. Elgin sees the fat, pale face of Detective-Sergeant Fathers peering in at them.

Slides over to the other side of the road in an attempt to block off the CIB car.

It only comes up on the other side of the road, so Elgin rams the taxi into it.

Twice he smashes the taxi against the car, desperately trying to escape. He has visions of smirking Fathers and his mates, like white toadstools growing on Elgin's black rotting body, down in the forest of Central police station.

The second time he rams the CIB car, Caesar Jackell's arm breaks with a snap like the click of his stolen rifle bolt.

He gives a cry of pain.

Just over the Swan River bridge, Elgin slams on the brakes. The taxi careers up onto the footpath.

'Run! Run!' he yells, and is out sprinting even before the car has stopped. Down over the bank and towards the river.

Caesar stumbles across the road, in the headlights of the pursuing CIB car. He scrabbles painfully down the opposite bank from Elgin, and staggers across the paddock, trailing his .303.

Dull Murry is stunned for three vital seconds and Lynette clings fearfully to him. When he explodes from the taxi, the area is surrounded by police.

He has more to lose than the other two boys. He has his pride at never having committed a crime and his good job and his girl whom he *does* love. He pushes Lynette down the bank after Elgin. Turns to face the approaching horde with the anger of a cornered wildcat.

He lifts one policeman off his feet with a powerhouse right and smashes huge Fathers in the mouth, rocking him.

Six police pounce on the giant Aboriginal and grapple him to his knees with punches and kicks. Hurl him into the van where he crouches in the corner with dead eyes.

'Who's your mates? Who was drivin'? What was the girl's name? How old was she, sonny? Do you know what carnal knowledge is all about? What's your name, asshole? You 'ad the gun, eh, Jesse James? Well, who did, then? where did you get all this beer and grog, matey? By Christ, you're in the shit now. Tell us who the others were, or we put everything on you. Hey, sarge, one went down along the river. Where'd that bloody girl go? I wouldn't mind arresting her, eh, Billy? ... Hey, sarge, Central want you on the radio: Get every man you can down here, a mob of Abos have split everywhere ... one of them is fucking dangerous ... got a gun ... took a shot at one of our cars ... No, no one is hurt, only shaken ... Listen, Jacky, yer better start talkin' soon, before I belt yer bloody ears off ... How's Mal? Pretty crook, that boong's got a hard punch. Yaaah! They all think they're Baby Cassius.'

Words, words. Going round and round inside Murry's battered head. He drops his eyes and chews on his bottom lip while white faces gaze in at him as though he were a monkey in the zoo, not a human at all. Hard eyes, contemptuous eyes, wondering eyes: slit mouths and Hitler moustaches.

White faces, blue uniforms.

Being the only one caught is such a bitter feeling. The loneliness is more acute. He remembers Caesar joking and Elgin grinning, and Lynette smiling and pressing against him – so close – in a world so far away.

They take him to Midland lockup.

Caesar huddles, moaning, down beside the river. He stares at the blank brown water. His arm hurts now and tears run down his face. He sniffs noisily and wonders if he has killed anyone. The excitement of the chase wears off and he feels sicker than he has ever been. Leans over and vomits all over the ground. Fades among the trees as he hears the droning of a car bouncing over the paddock. Two yellow eyes stare out of the darkness and pick him up, cringing against the tree.

Car stops. Doors open. Feet crunch on the dead grass.

'Look out! He's the crazy bastard with the gun!'

'G'day, Caesar.'

Fathers and company.

'I never meant to kill no one.'

'No one's dead, Caesar. Now, suppose you give me that gun.'

'I busted me arm, ya know.'

The men close in around him.

'Well, we'd better get it looked at, then, hadn't we?'

He is escorted to the car.

The stars watch from above. His people.

They can't help him now.

No one can.

Inside the CIB car, on his way to Midland regional hospital, with the stale fingers of the evening's enjoyment ripping at his small body, he babbles out the truth of everything.

Just as the sun is crawling over the hills to begin a new day, Elgin creeps into the camp. He has run and slipped and swum his way along the river, then over the paddocks.

Safe back at home, in his tent.

His young woman stares at his silhouette in the tent opening with chiding eyes. He is angry, yet ashamed, of her disapprobation.

'Where ya bin, Elgin?' she whispers, tired of asking the same question. Tired of trying to settle her thin husband's turbulent soul.

'Nowhere.'

He throws himself down on the blanket and lights up a cigarette. He cannot meet her dark, all-knowing eyes.

Blood from a rip in his arm where he got caught on a barbed wire fence, trickles down the brown skin like a teardrop.

'Ya badly 'urt, 'oney?' she murmurs.

'No. Go back to sleep, Maydene.'

'It's almost mornin', an' ya been stealin' again. Elgin! 'Ow *can* I go to sleep, with yaself moonin' all over the countryside?' she cries. 'Ya only come out of jail last month, too. Ya *want* ole Fathers to flog ya again, or what?'

And Elgin was going to ride into camp on his white horse and unload all the beer. Everyone was going to gather around, and there would have been jokes and laughter and fun. His woman would have smiled at him and hugged him, and forgiven him – because he had brought some light into the dusty reserve.

He digs his hand into a pocket and pulls out one of Caesar's necklaces. His feral eyes meet her bruised ones.

'I got ya this, Maydene,' he mutters.

'Ooohh, Elgin! What ya tryin' to do to me, boy?' she weeps.

Elgin gets up abruptly, and moves outside. Muffled sobs pierce him like the first shafts of the orange-red sunlight from the new day.