



**THREE  
NIGHTS  
ON  
NOWHERE  
STREET**

**Garry Sargeant**  
(Ren Alexander)

# Three Nights on Nowhere Street

Ren Lexander (as Garry Sargeant)

*Three Nights on Nowhere Street* was originally published under the name 'Garry Sargeant' prior to the author changing his name to 'Ren Lexander'.

Dedicated to Mick, Apples, and all the other great street people who looked after me during my time on Nowhere Street.

All details in this book are accurate so far as human memory allows. Where times have been used they were obtained from public clocks or passersby as I did not take a watch with me.

All names are the real names except for those of a few people who had committed crimes of different sorts. These names have been changed.

The author has asserted his moral rights over this work.

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## **Please note:**

This book traces experiences amongst the homeless on Sydney streets in Australia. Homelessness differs from place to place. It is not meant to be a treatise on homelessness.

## Table of Contents

3Preface.....	6
Prologue: the preparation.....	8
Day One: Nowhere to go.....	11
Night One: The refuge.....	16
The A.A. meeting.....	17
Day Two.....	20
Wayne.....	23
Kevin.....	25
Hyde Park.....	31
First phone call.....	31
The Krishna Centre.....	32
Night Two.....	36
Belmore Park.....	36
King's Cross.....	39
Mouse.....	39
Chris.....	40
Tim.....	40
John.....	41
Roy.....	42
Pebbles and Bam-Bam.....	43
Paul.....	44
The park in Woolloomooloo.....	46
Day Three.....	48
The soup kitchen.....	49
Second phone call.....	53
Wayside Chapel.....	54
The Wayside Chapel.....	54
Margaret.....	55
Matthew Talbot.....	57
Hyde Park.....	60
The third phone call.....	61
Me.....	62
The photographer.....	63
Night Three.....	71
Central Railway Station.....	76
Day last.....	81
7.10 am.....	83
Epilogues.....	94

Friday night, 13th March .....	94
Saturday, 14th March .....	94
Sunday, 15th March.....	94
Monday, 16th March .....	95
Wednesday, 18th March .....	95
Saturday, 21st March.....	96
Monday, 23rd March .....	96
Sunday, 29th March.....	96
Monday, 30th March .....	97
Monday, 13th April.....	98
Tuesday, 21st April .....	98
Wednesday, 13th May.....	98
Thursday, 21st May .....	101
Friday, 29th May, 3.30pm.....	101
Postscript.....	105
After publication.....	106

## Preface

'I spent three days on the street. Actually, time there is not measured in days. It is measured in nights - where you spent the last night and where you are going to spend the next. Other than that, you are nowhere or anywhere. These are the refuges and the parks and railway stations.... I came think of it as "Nowhere Street" as that seemed to be where all the people I met were.'

At twelve noon, Tuesday, 17th March, 1987, the *Times on Sunday* offered me the assignment of living on the streets as a homeless person with next-to-no money in my pocket. At 4pm I was on the street with a little more than twelve dollars in my pocket. At 8 am on Friday morning, I walked off the streets and into the newspapers office to start writing the article. It was to be that weekend's lead feature article to acknowledge the beginning of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

Though I had previously written in many different forms - from university theses through to comedy articles for Australian Penthouse - this was my first venture into 'real' journalism. This book is about those four days and the experience of homelessness - mine and others' experiences. It is about my impressions, emotional and intellectual. I do not want to be thought of as knowing as much about homelessness as do those special people who dedicate their lives to combating the pains that go with homelessness - nor as much as those people who experience years or decades of those pains. Recorded here are just the impressions of someone abruptly uprooted from suburbia to the different world of the homeless.

This book is also about the manufacturing of a newspaper article and about the impressions - emotional and intellectual - of a writer suddenly thrown into a second different world - the world of 'real' journalism where articles are mass-produced on an urgent, deadline-stressed daily or weekly basis. Newspapers are a product like other commodities - and, like most manufactured commodities, cannot be afforded by the homeless. Rather they are pulled out garbage bins; I know because I did it myself.

The following is an extract from the notes I made on scraps of paper while living on the street. I wrote this very early in the morning, waiting for enough time passed for me to get a free meal from a refuge:

*I am sitting in Central in the last few hours of my time on Nowhere Street and I'm trying to draw it all together. The editor will want probably two thousand words. I will want her to run a series. It's like sending a person to another planet and asking for a fifty-word précis. That might be a lot easier in a way. Because the sad and overpowering things is that this is our world. I feel tempted to use the phrase 'a secret world' but it's not secret. It's there in the parks, and on railway benches, sitting in city gutters.*

*It's not secret. What you do behind closed doors, that's secret. These people live their lives in public places. The only privacy they get is when they turn the knob on the toilet door. Not even showers are private.*

*Yes, you have secret lives. People on Nowhere Street live the most public lives of all. We will them to make it a secret. We look the other way. We cross the street. We sidestep them when they ask us for forty cents. In our hearts, we want them to live their lives and suffer their hunger pangs in places we can't see them.*

The article in the *Times on Sunday* became scrap paper within a few days of its publication. After an abrupt welter of articles, the subject of homelessness disappeared from newspaper pages. Days after it started, the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless became a dead issue. The homeless went back to being the invisible.

## Prologue: the preparation

Tuesday morning 10th March, 1987. There is a message for me on my answering machine to phone back the *Times on Sunday*. I know what it is about - my writing agent sent her a comedy article - a piece on translating student report cards. Actually I co-wrote it with a high-school-teaching friend. It is about how to translate the cryptic comments that teachers scribble next to the student's mark. 'Worked to capacity.' Translation: Thick. 'Actively participates in class discussion.' Translation: Will not shut up. 'Seems to lack a proper concern for the future': Is on hard drugs.

The girl who eventually answers the phone tells me that the relevant section editor doesn't get in until 10am. I leave a message to say I phoned.

11am. The phone rings. It's a section editor at the Times. She thinks the article is very funny. But she'd like me to re-write it to make less funny. 'We'd like it one-third funny and two-thirds serious. Can you do that?'

'I'll have to think about it.' It seems to me a bizarre suggestion to make a genuinely funny piece less funny.

'Where are you going in your life?' she asks.

'Why do you ask? Is this twenty questions or something?'

'No, I just wondered if you were interested in real journalism... Why are you laughing? Does the thought of journalism make you laugh.'

'No, it was the adjective 'real'.' To me, comedy was much more real and acute than most public journalism.

'It's just that I need someone in a hurry to do a special project.' She wants someone to live on the street for three days and nights and write an article about what it is like to be homeless. International Year of the Homeless starts this weekend. The trick is she wants someone to be out on the street by 3 o'clock that afternoon so the article can be written by 2pm Friday and included in that Sunday's edition of the Times. I find myself being asked whether I can drop three days of my life at no notice to go onto the street with twenty dollars in my pocket. She leaves the phone suddenly to get some advice. Coming back she says, 'Ten dollars. In small notes.'

The idea is not exactly appealing to me. Frankly, it doesn't sound like a lot of fun. 'Well, I'll have to talk to my agent.'

'Oh, you haven't got an agent, have you. How boring.'

'Is there something wrong with having an agent? He sent you the article actually.'

My agent is not exactly overwhelmed by the idea. 'What about worker's compensation, insurance?'

'What about my dog? I've got to find somewhere to put my dog. My car's not working - how am I going to get my dog down to my parent's place to get it looked after? It's hard to cancel three days of your life on no notice. I've got appointments.'

'Of course, you have.'

I leave it up to him to phone her. Soon he is phoning back. 'She's desperate. It's got to be done this week because it's International Year of Homeless starting this week.' Apparently it can't be put off to next week. The offer is for a thousand dollars - she even offered to pay for kennel fees for the dog. We decide to add twenty dollars a night for the dog. 'I won't take a percentage of the kennel fees.' 'Great.'

I'm still not exactly over the moon about the prospect. The homeless are important and all that and, having been a uni student, a struggling writer, an impoverished performer and grown up in a struggling family in Sydney's western suburbs (Toongabbie), I'm no stranger to making do. Part of me wants to do what it can for the homeless. Part of me tells me it's dangerous. And a large part of my brain tells me that the day before I received an unexpected provisional tax bill for considerably more than this article was going to bring in and I didn't have any money in the bank.

I phone back the section editor. 'I hope the answer is yes,' she says.

'Yes, it's yes.'

A few hours later, I have smuggled my dog on the train from Woy Woy to Epping where my parents now live and caught a taxi into the Herald building where the Times is based. Along the way, I have managed to cancel three days of my life - appointments, commitments, asked the neighbours to water the garden, phoned my girlfriend and told her what I am doing. Viola is worried. 'I don't want you to do it.' I make a point of hastily throwing down some food at my mother's place while I waited for the taxi.

I have also put together my survival kit. The editor goes through it with me to make sure I don't have anything inappropriate. She and I roughly agree on what I get to take with - pens, scrap paper, Medicare card (the only I.D. I have), toothbrush (no toothpaste), a comb, two handkerchiefs (unironed), fingerless gloves, black beanie, comb, eight dollars in two dollar notes (no wallet) and assorted loose change to the value of about five dollars, maybe a little more. The clothes I have are old stuff I had kept for painting jobs - faded black jeans, a tired out-dated shirt and T-shirt, an old army great coat, worn but thick socks. For underpants, I have old faded out and drooping swimmers. I have two windcheaters, both worn out. The faded black one has some paint stains and holes in the sleeve. My haversack is ideal - small, sewn up in places to repair holes, one hole unrepaired.

I have not shaved that day and I have been meaning to get a haircut for weeks. 'You look like a hobo anyway,' she says. I'm not sure how to take the comment.

She doesn't want me to sleep in a refuge the first night. She wants me to sleep in a refuge on the last night. That way I can come in to write the article on Friday morning 'fresh'.

'Are you excited about this?' the editor asks me. 'I want you to be excited about it.'

'Oh, I am. Breathlessly excited. Desperately so.'

I leave the excess objects at the office - the change from the taxi, the book I read on the train, the toothpaste - a pathetic almost empty tube that I wanted to take with but was overruled me on.

'I want you to get inside the skin of these people.' Fine, I think to myself, as long as they don't get inside my skin.

She makes sure that I have the phone number of the office. I already have it on a piece of scrap paper. She gives me her home phone number as well and makes me promise to phone everyday.

'Don't get raped or mugged,' she advises me, 'But if you did, it would make good copy.'

## Day One: Nowhere to go

I walk out of the newspaper building. It is about 4pm and I realize that I don't know the first thing about being homeless. Perhaps that might sound stupid but out on the street there are the information rich and the information poor. The ones who have lived there know the lurks. They know where there are free feeds, where the safer places are to sleep. I knew nothing of that. Already I was tired. By a great stroke of bad luck, I had only slept five hours the night before.

I walk towards Central Station. Perhaps that might be where I spend the first night. Vagrants with their tatty clothes, unkempt beards and glass eyes look back at me with a sense of recognition, somehow recognizing that I am part of their world. I keep an eagle eye out for a public telephone that has a telephone book. Perhaps it would tell me where the refuges were; but there is apparently no such thing as a phone book in that part of the city. A poster in the subway gives the Salvation Army emergency line. They would have information. I jot it down but I am reluctant to spend the thirty cents that it would cost to ring it.

I find that I have walked aimlessly around Central Station and still I have no plan, no more information. I am tired already. A bad way to start. In Belmore Park, a small park near Central Station, there are homeless asleep on the grass. As I am one of them, and tired, and not expecting to get a good night's sleep, I lie down a few metres from one and sleep.

Waking up, I realize slowly how alone I am. I have no friends or relatives that I can call on. No-one to help me. Nowhere to stay. Worse, I am totally ignorant of how to find the people that can help me - except for the Salvation Army phone number in my bag. Depression hits me already.

When I went to sleep, there were Aborigines drinking around the table and benches in another part of the park. They are still there. I contemplate going down there to talk to them but the trouble is I have not had the time to research or concoct a cover story.

A van pulls in. Sydney Missionbeat. Two men emerge to talk to the Aborigines. This seems too good an opportunity to miss. Hastily gathering up my stuff, I walk towards the scene. The Missionbeat men talk to the Aborigines in cheerful, familiar tones. The Aborigines say, 'Come back later.' I figure that if I can get in the van and driven around for a while, I can learn something about the homeless. The men are already back in the van, ready to drive off. I approach the driver's side. The man there looks Fijian - black, clean-shaven, strong-jawed.

'Can you take me somewhere?' I ask in a quiet voice.

'Where do you want to go.'

'Anywhere.'

He takes my name and writes it down with a ball-point pen on the vinyl of a clipboard. He also asks me my age. This puzzles me but I give it to him. Immediately he is on the radio. He tells the other end that they have picked up a male, Garry Sargeant. 'Drunk or sober?' comes back the immediate reply from the other end. 'Sober.' 'Well, bring him in. I'll see if we can find a bed for him.' The voice at the other end does not sound very optimistic.

Meanwhile the other man shows me into the van, through the side, sliding door. 'Come on, Garry. Don't worry. We'll look after you.' I am impressed that he calls me by name. He is polite and, unlike me, cheerful. I sit on the black, thin, vinyl-covered padding, leaning against the rear of the van. There is a wire screen which separates the drivers from the passengers in the back.

I feel depressed - as depressed as I would be if I was really homeless. For I am homeless - virtually penniless, I have to depend on the generosity of strangers.

I hope for a long trip around the city, seeing where they go to pick up the homeless but it is only a few short blocks until they stop. I do things at their prompting - get out of the van, go up a small flight of stairs, sit on tired plastic seats. The Missionbeat van drives off again and I am left in the refuge.

We sit on a landing, crammed onto a few worn chairs. Some sit on steps. We are all waiting to see if we can get into the refuge that night. A couple of people are standing and talking animatedly but these soon drift out of the refuge. The seven or eight of us waiting for beds are mainly quiet.

The guy on my right asks me if I have a cigarette. Sorry, don't smoke. His name is Rodney. He has thinned hair, rotten teeth, stubbled chin. His knee jerks up and down constantly. People drift by. An English guy with thongs and dirty feet. Somehow he looks cocky and street-wise. He has just had the free meal there. I am depressed to discover that I have missed out on it. A man in an out-of-date brown suit coat walks by. Rodney says, 'Scuse me mate, you wouldn't have a spare cigarette on you, would you?' 'Certainly I have my man.' He is drunk and has the generosity of drunks - generous to everything except their last beer. 'Certainly I have.' He not only gives Rod a cigarette but pushes one in my direction. I decline. He gives the extra cigarette to Rod. 'For Ron' he says, meaning 'later-on'.

'Thanks, mate.' 'No worries at all. I've got to go out now. I've got a habit.' He is cheerful, almost winking as he says it. Already tanked, he goes out into the approaching night to write himself off completely.

Chin in hands, I try to take it all in and, at the same time, desperately try to think of a cover story. A counselor is slowly interviewing people before they take them into the refuge. I don't have a story to tell him. That makes me feel even more depressed.

The man behind the dingy reception desk is solid. Grey hair. Perhaps late forties. 'Sober or drunk?' he repeats everytime he monitors the radio phone. 'Well, bring him in. I don't know if I can find a bed for him though.' Someone

phones in with a drunk they found crawling along the street. He tells them they will send the van around. He hangs up, mumbling, '...bloody do-gooders'. He gets on the radiophone and instructs the van where to go.

The guy on my left mumbles something about '...they make you feel like a fucking sponger.' The wait is getting to him. His name is Wayne. I introduce him to Rodney. They strike up a conversation across me. Wayne asks Rodney where he got in from. 'Grafton.' Wayne has come in from Melbourne. This seems like the ideal cover. It explains why I would know nothing about being homeless in Sydney. 'Where you in from?' Wayne asks me.

'Melbourne.' I lived there for five years when I was doing my Ph.D. So I have drifted in from Melbourne. But why? Wayne does not ask me. It is no news to him that penniless people drift around from city to city.

The night before Wayne slept in his car. But that day he sold it. Fifty bucks. 'The engine was gone. It didn't have any petrol or anything.'

He is thirty-seven. He comes from New Zealand. 'I'm a painter, believe it or not.'

Wayne has three day's stubble on his chin. He wears a dirty green shirt and hideous pointed blue-suede boots. An op-shop job or a handout.

Sitting, standing and restlessly hanging around is an Aboriginal woman. She has a pot belly, short hair; a purple eyebrow pencil has been used on her eyebrows. She asks a counselor there if she can borrow ten dollars off her. The counselor is in her forties, bright clothes, glasses. The counselor tells her that she can't lend her ten dollars because you lend people money here and they don't pay it back. In a barely audible whisper, the Aboriginal woman assures her that she would give it back to her. The counselor repeats the fact that people here are unreliable and tells the story of someone's purse being stolen. 'We come down here to help and people steal our money.' Later on, another person comes and tells the Aboriginal woman to go back upstairs. 'I told you before - you're not supposed to be here. This is for people waiting to get into the refuge.' She wanders back to the woman's floor.

I have part of my cover story - I came in from Melbourne that day. But I don't have the rest of my story - why - from what. I decide that I was escaping from a bad situation. But what bad situation? Drugs? Perhaps illegal elements were involved. That might be all too much. I figure that the safest way to get through the interview is to burst into tears. Depressed, tired, broke, alone, it won't be too much effort to cry. I have cried on stage before but I figure I will be able to give a much more convincing performance tonight.

Slowly, a male counselor interviews people. After Rodney's interview, the brightly-dressed female counselor talks to him about medication. She tells him that they phoned from Grafton about his medication and a nurse will see him tomorrow. She says this in the slightly loud, slightly slow, emphatic voice that one uses to explain things to an obtuse child.

Wayne emerges from the counselor with a card in his hand. His step is bouncier. He has a bed. It is my turn. I pick up my scant possessions - my great coat, my nearly empty haversack.

The counselor's name is 'Finn', short for 'Finnbann'. He has a thick head of jet black hair and glasses. I give him my name - and, again, my age. He looks through a card index to check that I haven't been there before. 'How do you come to be here?'

'I just got in from Melbourne today. I hitched up.'

'Why did you come up from Melbourne?'

I don't answer. My lips compress together. The tears well up in my eyes. My throat constricted, it is difficult to talk. 'I had to get out.'

Finn is concerned. 'What did you have to get away from?'

I am crying now. 'It was a... really bad ... situation. I...' I can't continue talking because I am crying so much. 'It was just...'

Finn gets up and closes the door. He wants to encourage me to talk about my problems. He wants to help. 'Take as much time as you want.'

'No, I...' I stop, rubbing my forehead in distress, the tears pouring out. 'I think I'd be better off.. talking... talking about it tomorrow.'

'You sure?'

'I'm sorry.' I say, the tears starting up again.

'No that's all right. You sure you don't want to talk about it?'

I compress my teeth, shaking my head, holding back the tears.

'Do you have any money?'

I shake my head, not trusting my voice.

'I'll give you a bed card.' He writes a number on the card. 'You have to check in by 3pm tomorrow to reserve your bed for tomorrow night.' He writes the refuge phone number on the card. 'Are you sure you don't want to talk about it now?'

Tears well up in my eyes as I shake my head again.

'Well, there's a counselor here all night. So if you do need to talk about it. Just come down here. Any time of night.'

Tight-lipped, I nod my head.

Handing me the bed card, he tells me how to get to the dormitory. I try to compose myself, wipe my eyes, breathe steadily, I don't want people outside to know that I've been crying. Finn opens the door for me. He is sympathetic and hopes that I will come to talk about it later that night or tomorrow. He warns me to keep an eye on my stuff as there are a few light-fingered people in the place. 'Yes. Thank you.'

In a way, it was all acting. But in another sense it wasn't. Alone and broke on the street, at the mercy of strangers, I was confronting personal pains - lonelinesses and insecurities - that suburban Garry Sargeant pushed into the

back of his consciousness. Homeless and aimless, it is easy to feel pain on the street. It is easy to cry.

## Night One: The refuge

The dormitory is like a disused hospital - as if it had been locked up for years and forgotten about, slowly fading of its own accord. Rows of anonymous, characterless beds on time-worn vinyl floors. Two men are playing cards in an open area. They can see I am at a loss and ask me my bed number. It's written on the card. 'Twenty-one.' Their directions take me up a few steps and through a door. More rows of refuge beds. Once it was a big room but it has been divided by low walls to provide seemingly separate sleeping areas.

There is a slab of rubber as a mattress. It has brown stains on it and a small brown pockmark - a scar from a cigarette burn - though it is strictly against the rules to smoke in the sleeping areas. There are two folded, clean sheets and a pillow slip. There is a cupboard next to each bed. The walls are a time-greyled blue - characterless, devoid of posters or decoration. Everything looks not dirty but tired. Like many of the residents there.

I do not leave my things in the locker. That seems too dangerous to me. I carry them with me back to the open TV area. 'Smoking allowed in this area.' The TV reception is lousy - fuzzy - it relies on a corkscrew antenna placed on a plastic chair away from the TV. Plastic chairs are scattered around. It is not a warm area; it has the atmosphere of a corridor. Seven National News - a fuzzy Ross Symonds tells us about the important things that are happening in Canberra. The important decisions that have been made. The important leadership battles. The ads come on. A bank is offering high interest rate. 'Big fucking deal,' says the guy sitting next to me.

I wander back to watch the card game. I learn their names. Dave and Steve. They ask me if I want to join them. I have never seen the game played before. 'Patience' but played as a competition. They generously cajole me into playing with them and rope in another resident, Kevin.

Dave is a heavy man. Glasses. Gut. Thick arms. As much flab as muscle. He used to be a metho and orange juice drinker. 'But we got a kick out of it.' He checked himself into the detox program after he woke up one morning in the street to find his friend lying beside him, cold and dead.

He drinks still but only occasionally and lightly. He is now in charge of the floor with a room of his own. When the Royal Easter Show is on, he and others go off and work on that. The job is still waiting for him when he comes back.

Steve is a jovial, large man. In his thirties, he has a gut and a missing tooth near the front. He laughs easily. It seems that he used to live in the refuge but now he stays in a cheap flop-house nearby. Rooms forty-five dollars a week.

Kevin is in his twenties. He wears shorts and a red singlet top. His arms are tattooed - one of poor quality but mainly good ones - he has a recent one - a

well-endowed lady tastefully displays most of her upper body assets. Kevin was in the army and refers to it disparagingly, glad to be out. He seems now to be a well-established resident. The three of them are 'on staff'. In Kevin's case, this means that he helps clean the floors, etc. For this he misses out on paying the small charge the refuge makes on those who can afford it - something like five dollars a night.

The card game is simple enough. I win a couple of hands, less than my share. 'Take that and that and that.' Cards are piled on the victim's deck. 'That's fucked you, cunt.' 'You cunt.' 'You'll get yours. You'll be fucked yet, cunt.' 'You lucky cunt.'

Conversation runs to sex and jokes about masturbation. They talk about one guy who used to get into the fire escape stairs under the pretext of being an alcoholic and having to go to the alco ward but he actually went up to the woman's floor where there was a woman he was fucking. I admire Kevin's tattoo of the well-bosomed lady. 'Closest he'll get to a fucking woman,' says Dave. Kevin has an '8' on his singlet. 'What's that?' asks Dave, 'How many times you've wanked?' 'No, I'm only up to six.'

I wonder how they even get enough privacy to masturbate in these group dormitories.

Shane comes around. Tall, thin, grey-haired but energetic. Perhaps in his forties. He has only recently come onto staff. There is some storm in a teacup about whether he cleaned something properly. Somebody complained about it - a staff member or ex-staff member who is not too popular. 'That fat cunt.' He was a useless cleaner. Everybody knows Shane does a good job.

'That fat cunt' comes around with a cardboard box full of fresh pastries - apple turnovers. I take two. They become my dinner that night. They are fresh and fantastic. They are from the East Sydney Tech. The tech college sends the refuge all the stuff the students make in the day. Because of East Sydney Tech, I do not go to bed hungry that night.

The cards eventually lose their interest, there is something good on tele, so we wind up. This suits me as Dave has told me that there is an A.A. meeting in the dining room downstairs. I pretend that I'm going out of the refuge and will be back before the doors are shut at eleven o'clock - you can only get in later than that by special previous arrangement.

### **The A.A. meeting**

'Do you want to share?' A man approaches me as I walk in. He has a neat moustache and a trimmed head of hair. In his late thirties perhaps, he looks fit.

'No.' I say, 'I think I'm on top of it at the moment. I just want to listen.'

'Fine.' He points me towards where there is coffee and tea. I take some tea. It is already made up. White with about one sugar. I place myself at the side

where I am not too conspicuous. It is in the refuge dining room, the people scattered around the different tables. There are about thirty people, mainly men. A frail middle-aged woman chairs the meeting; there is another young woman, early twenties, at the back.

Another man gets up to share. He has fashionable grey trousers on and a well-matched shirt. His blond-brown hair is slightly balding. He looks a youthful forty and prosperous. 'I am an alcoholic.' He tells of his experience. He almost apologizes for the fact that his experience of alcoholism was so much shorter than many of the people there - his was only measured in years - others measure it in decades. He is articulate. He talks of fear. 'I was afraid to go out the front door. I was afraid to sit behind the wheel of the car. I was afraid to go to work.' And against all the fear there was alcohol. Until he went to A.A. There he met people who had been through what he had been through - people whom he admired and wanted to be like.

Here at the A.A. meeting were the survivors - the people who had come out of the other end of Nowhere Street. Upstairs, there was a floor full of alcoholics who did not come down for the meeting.

He talks about the steps and belief in God. He talks about how he missed the companionship of the bottle. 'I used to miss the people. I would go into hotels and drink soda water just to be with them. But I could see that if I kept that up I was going to end up drinking again.' By your friends, you will know them. 'I had to break with all that.' At the end of this man's sharing, a black man with tears in his eyes gets up and walks out of the meeting.

Other people walk to the front to share their stories - the drinking when they were teenagers - what started out as a lark, something you share with friends, ends up owning your life. The man who greeted me at the door concludes the meeting. He talks about the one hundred and thirty or so chapters of Alcoholics Anonymous that meet every week in the city area. He mentions Narcotics Anonymous. 'Like all the chapters, we're self-supporting. So we ask you to put a coin in the tray. Those members who can't spare a coin at the moment, perhaps at some future time. There is tea and biscuits at the back and hope you will all stay for a talk.' A plate is left on the front table. I put forty cents in. It's more than I can really afford.

Back upstairs, I go back to my bed. There is someone else's haversack and bag on my bed. I check my bed card and the number on it. Yes, this is my bed. I move the strange gear to the floor nearby and make my bed, wondering if I am going to get involved in an argument about whose bed it really is.

I have discovered that the loose change in my haversack rolls around and makes a lot of noise. This makes me seem wealthier than I am and makes me and my possessions more of a target. I wrap the loose change in my two handkerchiefs, tying them up. A test by shaking the haversack shows no more dangerous noise problems.

It is before lights out at 11pm but I am done in. I take off my outer clothes and get into bed in a T-shirt and the old, faded swimming costumes. The pillow is terrible. It is straw. I discard it and use a rolled up windcheater. It is a distinct improvement.

I am woken up by someone coming in late. He takes the bed nearest the windows, first opening the windows wide up and pushing the curtains to the side so that the maximum amount of cold night air gets into the dormitory. Outside the trucks and cars roar past.

I wake up again. A door has slammed - some guy going to the urinal. I am cold too. I put on one of the windcheaters I was using for a pillow. Still cold. I put on the one blanket that came with the bed. Still cold. By the light of the street light shining in the windows, I notice that the other people are happily sleeping with only a sheet on. They are not suburban soft like I am. Using my army great coat as a blanket, I am finally just warm enough.

I drape the arm of the windcheater I am using for a pillow over my eyes to help block out the light that is pouring in from the city street lights. I wish I had a decent pillow. I try the straw pillow again. No it's like sleeping on a block of wood. Unable to sleep, my mind rambles around of its own accord. Usually, people talk about not enough beds for the homeless. 'Not enough pillows for the homeless.' I mentally write, 'Tonight there will be not enough pillows for the homeless in Sydney. Instead they will use straw pillows and the wood of park benches, and the cold grass of park lawns, and rolled-up jackets.' More door slammings as people go for a leak. More trucks droning past outside. A man snores in a bed a couple down from me. My mind worries about where I will sleep tomorrow night. Perhaps Central Railway Station. It would be nice to stay in the refuge. The editor would die of apoplexy. The editor would be furious to know that I had spent the first night in the refuge. Still I was the one out here; it was my ball game now, not hers. I had done what any homeless person new to the city would have done - I had drifted.

And eventually, after an hour or so of my mind chattering, I also drifted back to sleep.

## Day Two

Woken up by a prison guard - that is how it feels anyway. Life starts early on Nowhere Street. 6 am and everyone up. I think that there will be a rush for the showers but that is just sleepy stupidity on my part. No-one is in a hurry. They are not doing anything that day.

Everyone else has a towel. Apparently, by some error, my bed did not have a towel and soap on it. I was too ignorant to know that I was entitled to one but Kevin lets me use his after he has showered.

Remnants of cakes of soap have been left in the showers so I use one of those. The showers are communal. The thin, drooping bodies of emaciated white-haired old men stand next to tattooed and muscled young bodies. One young man has the physique of a body-builder by virtue of the dumbbells he works out with. He seems permanently plugged into a walkman. Somehow he looks too rich to be in the refuge - not rich in money but rich in health and energy.

As I indicated to Dave last night, I help clean up. Kevin, Shane and others are into it. It is laundry day; all sheets and pillow slips are removed from all beds to be washed. If you are new, you get clean sheets but otherwise they are changed weekly. In one section of the men's dormitories, there is a bearded pencil-thin gentleman perhaps in his twenties. He is pale but his face is smooth, unlined. He is making his bed with precision, neatness, exactitude. Collecting sheets and pillow cases, I tell him that there is no need to make his bed as the sheets have to be changed today. He raises his finger and answers me in a series of tongue clicks. He goes back to making his bed with a painstaking sense of neatness. Mentally shot.

When I recount to Dave that someone just went on making his bed, his comment is matter-of-fact. 'Nothing unusual about that.'

Another gentleman speaks with a slight British accent. Perhaps Irish or Scottish or even Welsh. Middle-aged, only slightly thin on top. He is clean, shaven, well-groomed. His clothes, while far from new, are neatly kept. He looks to have himself together. I wonder how he comes to be in the refuge. Only later, do I see that he has most of his left hand missing. Physically shot.

A middle-aged man comes in, asking Dave, 'Have I still got my bed?' 'Yeah.' He didn't make it into the refuge last night.

Kevin attacks mopping the refuge floors with gusto. 'Better than doing nothing.' He is off to a museum today with someone. Museums are free.

The dormitory areas are locked during the day. The day centre downstairs is open.

Feeling that I haven't done enough, I sweep out the toilets and near the showers where it is not too wet. There is plenty of the dregs of tiny cakes of hand soap left around. I take one and wrap its wet cadaver in some toilet paper, sticking it in my pocket. A cheap disposable razor has also been left behind. I don't have one so I stick it in my pocket. Later the razor teaches me an important lesson. Forgetting it is there, I reach into that pocket to get out some change and slash my thumb open. It bleeds freely and painfully. I use a sliver of toilet paper to help stop the bleeding. I throw the razor away after that. The razor teaches me another lesson of the street: never take with anything you don't intend to use. I never intended to use the razor - I needed my unshaven face to help me look destitute.

I check my bed and cupboard a final time to make sure I have not left any of my scant possessions behind. I look at it with fondness. It was a space that I could call 'mine'. For a little time it was home. I am going to miss it.

Finally, it is approaching 7.30. Breakfast time. Kevin and others wander down to the dining room so I tag along. We have to wait for the women to be served first. Kevin ducks inside and comes back with a steel cutlery. I am not given any. The steel cutlery is, I discover, a special privilege for staff. Otherwise it is plastic knife, plastic fork and plastic spoon and cope the best way you can. What are they worried about? Theft? Fights? The plastic cutlery is never thrown away. It is washed and re-used every meal.

There seem to be too few people queuing for breakfast. Kevin apologizes to me, I shouldn't be here. This is for staff. I've got to go downstairs to the day centre to queue for breakfast.

The day centre seems tackier than the dormitories, even though there are faded murals on one wall. The murals depict faces - actual faces? There are two queues. I join the end of the one for residents. The other is for 'guests' - these are people who have wandered in from the street. Mainly they are drunks. Eyes that are somehow dull and bright at the same time. Worn, dark coats. Shuffled off the street for a feed before shuffling back. In the queue, there is the young English guy I saw going out of the refuge last night. He still only has thongs on his feet but his feet are considerably grimier.

Moving among the queues is a clean, neat gentleman in a grey uniform. A staff member. He is a little on the plump side with cheerfully chubby cheeks and a neat small moustache. He hands me a meal ticket. He treats everyone with a smile and a sunny disposition. It is 7.30 in the morning. He has got out of his comfortable bed to come down to look into faces full of pain, faces of some people that are, frankly, lost. How many mornings had he done that? Yet here he was, still cheerful, politely affable. The man is a hero.

Shane approaches me. Bless his heart, he offers me a position on staff. He has seen that I don't mind working and he wants to help me out. If I'm on staff, I help out a bit and I'm not obliged to pay rent. Save \$5 a night. It is a generous

offer and I am touched. I need an excuse for not spending the night in the refuge. Tonight I have to sleep out to see what that is like. I thank Shane for the offer but tell him that I am hitching further north; I have a friend 'up the coast'. I'm going to check him out - see if there is work around there. I might be back in a couple of days if the offer still stands. Seeming slightly miffed, Shane goes away.

It is the turn of male residents. We go up the internal firestairs to queue for a feed. There do not seem to be many women left at breakfast; two old ladies sit eating toast. Seemingly shrunken into themselves with age, walking sticks beside them, they have thinned, white hair and white whiskers on their crinkled chins. They seem to be toothless - or lacking full sets of teeth - because they make hard work of their food. Later one of these women gets up and starts abusing hell out of an inoffensive man. A man on my table says disgustedly, 'She's at it again. She should be in a bloody home.'

Breakfast is a piece of toast covered in baked beans. The man in front of me puts his ticket in a box. One of the men serving is suspicious because he didn't see him do it. But the man gets served anyway. I make sure that I am seen putting mine in. Also there is a small plate of corn flakes. There is tea too. It is pre-made, white with the equivalent of one sugar. I don't usually drink tea but I do now.

I sit next to Kevin. The plastic cutlery makes it hard to cut into the bread. The first mouthful of baked beans tastes warm and wonderful. But by the end of the plate it tastes insipid, very ordinary.

The street alcoholics and other 'guests' come in. One of them sits on a table nearby. He is forty-five going on sixty. His black hair is greying in places. It seems oiled down to his skull; presumably because it has been so long since his hair was washed. The stubble on his face is grey. His eyes are the brightest of blues, as if they each have a series of tiny blue light bulbs behind them. They burn out of his skull like headlights in a sea of yellow fog - in this case, yellow eye jelly. The fingers seem strangely disconnected from each other as they stiffly, robotically, tear a bread roll apart and inject it, fingers still stiff, into his eating orifice. The clothes are dark and unkempt. He looks somehow like a prosperous businessman whose business collapsed and he walked straight out of the building and into a metho bottle where he has been for the past ten years. The fingers seem disconnected from each other and from the rest of his body as they tear another orifice-sized piece from the bread roll and inject it.

Kevin asks me what I am doing today and I repeat my lie about hitching further north. These are good people who would not let me sleep out. If I had really been a destitute in from Melbourne, the Sydney City Mission would have looked after me. But the Editor doesn't want me to be that comfortable. Time to move on before there are any more difficult questions from Kevin. 'See you in a couple of days maybe.'

There is a huge plastic bag full of bread rolls. I remember Dave saying that they often get more bread given to them than they can handle. They never turn it away though because if they did, it might not be offered again. I take a couple of rolls. I have cut my bridges. My story does not allow me back into the refuge that night, no matter how desperate I am - it does not even allow me to come back there for lunchtime or evening meals. Taking the bread rolls, I put them in my dilapidated haversack and leave the support of the refuge.

### **Wayne**

On the street, you drift. As there are no plans or ambitions, you drift where whim or chance take you.

My whim was to go down to Belmore Park and make notes on what had already happened. But chance played its part and, like any street person, I drifted with it.

Wayne and Rodney, the two guys who sat on either side of me as I waited to get into the refuge the previous night, emerge from a cheap dive. The sign says 'Rooms from \$15 a night' but the '1' seems to have been rubbed out. Perhaps there are some rooms from \$5 a night. We happen to fall into step and we head up towards Central Station. Why there? 'There are people there,' says Rodney. It is as good a reason as any. Wayne wants a cup of coffee.

Both have on exactly the same clothes as yesterday. Wayne has the same hideous pointed blue suede boots, the same wrinkled green shirt. Only the stubble on his chin has changed - it is thicker. He was in the drop-house trying to persuade the owner to give him some work painting but the owner asked him to supply his own tools. Wayne countered with an offer to work for fifty dollars for the day. The owner asked him for a tax number. 'So I just walked out. I offer to work for fifty bucks for the day and he wants a fucking tax number.'

At Central Station Wayne, after saying a number of times how desperate he was for a coffee, ends up buying a coke. To fit in, I buy a cheap fruit juice. Rod doesn't buy anything. Probably no money. We share our drinks with him.

We sit down on one of the plastic benches at the side of the Great Hall of Central Station. We comment occasionally on the better looking women walking past. Rodney rarely joins in on the conversations. He is desperately trying to bludge a cigarette out of anyone nearby or passing by. Eventually he gets one.

Wayne talks about how nowadays the sheilas are fussier and want a bloke in good shape. 'That guy for instance, he'd never pull a chick.' Wayne says he must do something about his own gut and lose a bit of weight. Even the down-and-outs worry about being overweight nowadays.

Wayne is desperate for work - not permanent work though. No, he just wants to earn 'about a hundred bucks' so that he can make it to Brisbane. There does not seem any particular reason for heading to Brisbane. There is a vague feeling

there might be work there. It's warmer there. I wonder what happened to that money he got yesterday for the car but I don't ask. Eventually he mentions that he blew eighty dollars on the horses the day before. 'Bad as an alco,' he says.

He also tells me why he only got fifty bucks for his car. It was out of rego. He doesn't have a licence either; he used to have a New Zealand licence but it lapsed.

Wayne has a wife and two children in New Zealand. Six and eight. He wanted them to come over here but his wife didn't want to leave her friends behind.

Rodney, dressed in fray-ended clothes, sits on the other side of me. A barrel of nerves, he taps his leg up and down, squirms in his seat. We discuss past jobs - I say that I've mainly done bar works, pubs. I have done a lot of that too, especially as a student. Rodney says he worked for four years as a pastry chef. 'Yeah? What other jobs have you had?' But that was it, just that job. Rodney wanders off to try to get another cigarette from a passerby.

'You see some of these people - like those people in that bloody refuge - and they've just bloody lost themselves.' Wayne says reflectively, looking at Rodney trying to get a cigarette off someone who apologizes for not smoking. 'It's like there's a big fucking pit there and they're just looking down it all the time. Or like they're on the edge of a cliff or they're just looking down it all the time. A lot of the people in the refuge, they've bloody lost themselves.' I wondered how Wayne saw himself.

There is a neat and mature, tall and solid, pleasantly-aged gentleman sitting on the other side of Wayne. Despite the business suit, he looks to me like a farmer. He has a newspaper and he appears to be writing hieroglyphics into a book. Wayne asks him what he is doing and he tells us.

Incongruously, we two vagrants become caught up in a conversation about the stock market. This man is a farmer whose 'hobby' is following the stock market. He talks about the killings he has made - eleven hundred dollars just the other day, twenty thousand dollars on his biggest coup - bought at 4c and sold at \$1.20. Wayne decides that it is a bit of a better bet than the horses.

The farmer makes further marks in his ledger, and cautions Wayne that you have to follow it everyday. What a piece of absurd theatre: the man who does stock-markets for a hobby giving an introductory lecture to the homeless gambler who blew almost his last dollar on the horses the day before.

Rodney wanders jerkily back - worn sandshoes, no socks, frayed ends to his jeans. I ask him how he got down from Grafton. Train. He doesn't seem to have any reason to be here. Just to see Sydney again. He says that he will probably go back tomorrow. He tries to sit down while we talk to the farmer about the stockmarket but he's too restless. He says he's going back to the refuge and leaves.

Wayne decides that he is going to look for work in Redfern. I ask if he is going to walk there and his face wrinkles at the thought, 'Nah, I'll hit someone round

here for a coupla bucks to catch the train.' He turns to the stockmarket dabbler and ask him if he could spare two dollars. I feel sorry for the farmer in his nice business suit and tasteful tie. He looks mostly unruffled but underneath, he feels put upon. He talked to us in an open and friendly manner for half an hour and here we were stinging him for money. He tells Wayne that he will give him some when he finishes his ledger work. I walk away, looking for other stories from the street. For me, it is a sad moment. To the farmer, an annoyance. To Wayne? I don't know. The first few times, he'd hit strangers for money it had probably hurt him inside but now that part of him was probably dead. Probably he felt nothing at the moment - not loss of face, not embarrassment, certainly not guilt. Perhaps his lack of feeling was what made it such a sad moment. Certainly that's what I felt as I walked away.

### Kevin

I drift down from Central Station, determined to make some notes about all the experiences that are already cramming themselves on top of each other. I head for the place where I was picked up by the Missionbeat van, the place where the Aborigines were drinking last night. There is an Aborigine asleep on one of the other park benches I pass. Once-white T-shirt, worn jeans, no shoes. It is a cool morning; and it was a cold night.

The green park table is covered in people's scratchings - some of them look new - names mostly, no pornography. Around me are the jetsam of drinkers - spent port bottles, empty beer containers, broken glass.

The Aborigine who was asleep has woken up and walks sleepily towards me across a park lawn. 'You got a cigarette?' he asks.

'Sorry, don't smoke.'

'I'm desperate for a cigarette.'

And I am desperate stories. I offer to give him some money to buy a pack of cigarettes if he'll sit down and talk to me for a while. I have sort of decided that I might have to blow my cover in daylight hours to get the story of some of these people. I don't know how to go about it. 'I'm in a peculiar situation-' I begin.

'You're in a peculiar situation,' he interrupts. 'I'm in a bloody peculiar situation.' Without me prompting him, he starts pouring forth his current patch of problems in life. My cover stays intact.

His name is Kevin. He shivers. At first I'm not sure whether it is from cold or chemicals. He looks dark, a full-blooded Aborigine. His arms are covered with poor-quality tattoos and scars. He has a wispy beard. He tell me he has been in Sydney for about five weeks. He sleeps either in the open or at 'Black Theatre' - some place in Redfern where it is possible for Aborigines to flop at night. He hitched up from Adelaide to see his mother.

He is furious because his wife ran off on him yesterday. 'The cunt run out on me.' She jumped onto a train that was moving too fast for him to get on. When he gets hold of her, he is going to give her a hiding. I ask about the scars on his arm. 'Bloody women,' he tells me, 'When they get hold of you, they won't let go and it's this and this and this.' He makes scratching motions along his badly tattooed arms. It doesn't seem possible that any fingernails could make such marks.

Kevin is still shaking. I offer to lend him one of my two windcheaters while he sits with me. Soon he stops shivering. He tells me that when he goes back to Adelaide he has to do time for skipping bail. He was charged with grievous bodily harm. He knifed a woman. I never managed to find out why.

Why go back to Adelaide? 'For the good times.' Drinking. Hanging around. By coincidence, he and Wayne are the same age. Thirty-seven.

'I'm bloody hungry.' I take out one of the bread rolls that I took from Missionbeat and give it to him. He eats it to kill the hunger pains.

He tells me he has gone through Aboriginal initiation. Stupidly, I imagine this happened in his early adolescence. It happened last year. They circumcised him with a stone knife. 'It bloody hurt, mate, I tell you that, it bloody hurt. I got bloody drunk before it. I drank two flagons but it bloody hurt.' Some more Aborigines wander through the park. They are friends of Kevin. He introduces me. Quickly, I learn that one doesn't shake hands with young Aborigines, one grasps the other's hand, thumbs locking, like American blacks. Kevin wants to wander off with his friends. He asks me for the money. It costs, he says, \$2.40 for a pack of cigarettes. Not being a smoker, I have no idea whether he is telling the truth. It is an enormous sum out of my scant budget. Garry Vagrant would never part with such a sum. But Garry Sargeant says it is a fair cop and good value for his story.

I don't have the heart to ask him for my windcheater back. I watch as the black, faded windcheater with holes in the sleeve disappears on Kevin's back. I know that later, perhaps that night when I'm sleeping out, I'll hate myself for giving it to him but I would have hated myself more if had not let him have it. Part of me admits that I am not selfish enough, not street tough enough. Not yet.

The group

I make another attempt to start on notes, this time notes on Kevin but I only get a few sentences down when a group of six or so Aboriginal men and women approach. They are the same ones as were there last night when the Missionbeat van came around. This, after all, is their drinking table. 9.30am. Time to start drinking again.

My mind twinges with worries - will they hassle me about moving on? As they approach, I flick over a page and so that I can make out, if asked, that I was writing a letter. Dear Geoff. I am writing this to you... They do not ask me about

my writing as they set up for drinking at the table and chairs where I am, settling in all around me. I clear room for them.

Fortunately, a couple of them I met through Kevin. In any case, they are all friendly and sit down around me as if this happens everyday. The men drink port from a shared bottle. McWilliams Royal Reserve. The women drink beer. Large bottles of Toohey's Draught. We introduce ourselves.

The women seem more outgoing than the men: Lulu, Manuka, Tarina - 'But everybody calls me "Apples".'

The men offer me a drink so soon I am part of the circle of Aboriginal drinkers. I can't remember ever drinking so early in the day before. I take small swigs every time the bottle comes around. With the first swig, I give silent thanks that the general consensus of opinion is that Aids is not transmitted by saliva.

Uncle Jerry is a squat-faced dark pure-blood of about fifty years. He looks hale and good-natured. He seems to act as a sort of father-figure to the group.

The real old man of the group is Herbie. He is white-haired with white stubble over his face. His walk is a shamble - as if he were constantly walking over stony, unlevel ground. I ask old Herbie whether he slept in the park that night. He cautions me, 'Don't sleep in the park.'

'Too dangerous?'

'Too dangerous,' he agrees.

'Where did you sleep last night?' I suspect the answer might be some flop-house in Redfern.

A young Aborigine, lighter in skin, tousled hair and bleary eyes, answers for Herbie. 'We slept in the station.' Central Railway. His name is Stephen. Shaved and combed, he would be quite handsome. I wanted to know more precisely where in the Station they slept - but this was not research for the article, this was research for where I was going to sleep that night. But other voices take over the conversation.

Kevin wanders back through the park. He has a flagon of port and is desperately trying to bott a cigarette off someone. No-one has cigarettes. He does not stay to share his port but moves on.

Another of the younger Aborigines is Mick. He has puffed up eyes - perhaps a legacy of indulgences from the night before. But his face is strong underneath a reasonably neat beard. He looks to be in his twenties. His left wrist is bandaged and he has scabs on his knuckles - all battle-scars from recent fights, I assume. Later I find out that Apples calls him 'Big Eyes' because of his puffy-looking eyes. They are always like that.

Soon we are joined by some white drunks. One is called 'Irish'. Appropriately he wears green faded trousers. His body and face, like his clothes, look worn out. It's been some days since he had a shower. His walk is even more unstable than Herbie. When full-blooded Uncle Jerry calls him Irish, Irish replies 'Shut up, Pommie.'

Dave seems the most together of the trio of whites. He has longish, shoulder-length blondish hair and a beard. His age is hard to pick. Later it emerges that he is married - or at least having a relationship with Lulu. Mick describes Dave as being 'Aboriginal'. He could be. He could have some Aboriginal blood. Many Aborigines are invisible.

The last of the whites is Bill. He tells me he was in the army during the Second World War. He says that he is still in the army - never discharged. 'The bastards wanted to court-martial me. You think I'm going to wait around to be court-martialled? Not me. I shot through.' He spent a lot of years shearing sheep. 'I was bloody good at it. Better than some of the bastards out there now. Still be good at it. You ask these guys. Not this one.' He indicates Irish, 'But this one...' He turns to Dave and realizes that Dave couldn't back up his claims to prowess either. He trails off temporarily. Bill was court-martialled for being drunk on guard duty. His drinking problem goes back a long way.

Uncle Jerry says, 'I was in the army.'

Already I have perfected my non-questioning technique. When I ask Bill a question, I do it flatly and I don't look at him when he starts to answer but look somewhere else as if I don't really care whether he answers or not. It is not really usual to ask questions about what people have done. Nobody ever asks me about what I have done - it is assumed that you are on the street because you haven't done much. People ask you where you've come from or if you know somebody they know, that's about it.

The group is cracking rude jokes and laughing raucously. Manuka is trying to do a newspaper crossword and keeps calling out for help with clues. Half the time these are not actual clues but rude jokes - or made into rude jokes. 'What's a hard object' 'Penis. P-e-n-i-s.' 'How would you know?' 'What's a man with five fingers called?' 'Palmer.'

A police van drives slowly through the park. 'What's a three-letter word for police?' 'Dog. D-o-g,' 'Pig. P-i-g,' some of the more concerned Aborigines try to shush the others. 'They ain't got nothing on us.' 'Just don't look at em.' The police circle around and come by us on the other side. 'What's another word for police?' 'Dog. D-o-g,' 'Pig. P-i-g.' The police van keeps going on its ponderous way and checks out other vagrants in the park. What was the purpose of the charade? Not to pick up drinkers because we were all too obviously drinking. Not to pick up vagrants because we were all too obviously that. Presumably, it was just to remind us they were around.

The bottle of port starts to come to an end. Money is slapped on the table. I go through my pockets and put some loose change on the table. About a dollar and forty cents.

There is still not enough for a jug of port. Herbie shuffles off to try to beg money from people walking by. One guy who looks like a university student and a non-too-wealthy one at that, reaches into his pocket and pulls out some

change. Herbie comes straight over and thumps it on the table. It looks like about three five cent pieces and some copper. Maybe twenty cents worth.

Eventually there is four and a bit dollars on the dingy park table. Dave takes five dollars out of his pocket. An actual five-dollar bill. It is the largest note I see in my time on the street. He picks up the three dollar coins and some other change and gives it to Mick. Uncle Jerry calls him 'the runner'.

Mick heads off to buy a flagon. Everyone knows the going price. All that is left temporarily is the beer. 'Can't drink beer,' says Uncle Jerry. 'Got too used to the wine.'

Another Aboriginal woman, Denise, comes in with her full-blood man, George. She is off the grog because she is on medication and has brought with her a bag of fresh mixed fruits. I am encouraged to help myself and have some grapes. Uncle Jerry picks up one of the grapes and holds it above the table. 'Aint got not plonk,' he half-sings, 'Pick up a grape and let it drop. Plonk!' It is probably a performance he has repeated many times. I seem to be the only one amused by it.

'Where do you come from?'

'Melbourne,' I answer, sticking to my story.

'What part of Melbourne?'

'Fitzroy,' I say, selecting from the three different parts of Melbourne I lived in. This proves to be a happy choice.

There is general laughter, most of them know it well. 'I know Fitzroy,' says Uncle Jerry in his throaty whisper, 'I lived there for fourteen years.' I stayed in North Fitzroy for three months.

Manuka has bitten into an apricot. She holds up half the apricot - squeezing it between her thumb and forefinger. 'Apples,' she says, making sexual allusions. People laugh but Uncle Jerry takes exception. He stands up and leans across the table at Manuka. 'Don't you talk like that round me. Don't talk like that.' he shouts in his throaty whisper. 'Don't you talk like that round me.' He even raises a hand. 'Don't you bloody talk like that.' But he soon settles back down into his seat and within a couple of minutes is whispering-singing, 'There's a hole in the fuck-it, Eliza, Eliza; there's a hole in the fuck-it, Eliza, Eliza...'

Mick arrives back with the flagon. Uncle Jerry opens it. He carefully takes the virgin flagon and fills up the cap from it. 'Hey. Hey!' he says to make sure the act is witnessed. The port drinkers watch as he throws the capful of port onto the cement. Then the drinking of the flagon commences. It is a ritual which is repeated with every new flagon. I never find out why.

The others seem to find hilarious things that I do not. I don't fake any of my responses. I feel it is best to be myself with everyone as much as possible. Uncle Jerry notices my different reactions. 'It's a strange life,' he says to me, 'But we enjoy ourselves.'

I agree with him and gesture at the lonely white drunks elsewhere in the park, saying that at least, unlike those lonely whites, they shared.

It is true. The Aborigines it seemed had the best of Nowhere Street. If you have nothing and are black, at least you can share this situation with others. It is better to be down and out and black than down and out and white. If you are white and out, you only have yourself and frequently the casual disdain from other whites who look down on you or look the other way. But if you are black and out, you have lots of friends and relatives who are in the same boat. You share what you have. And no black seems to look down on any other black. Instead, as I was to see more and more, they tried to look after each other. They abuse the ones who dabble in pills. They abuse the ones who are hitting the bottle too hard and try to talk them into getting into detox for a while.

The last flagon starts to run down and tempers wear a little thin. Uncle Jerry accuses Irish of 'double-dipping'. Double-dipping is a serious offence. It is when you drink at one part of the circle and wander around and have another drink at a different part of the circle. Irish has double-dipped in another way: by drinking, putting down the flagon and then picking it up again.

'Don't double-dip, Irish,' shouts Uncle Jerry as best he can with his hoarse whisper. 'Don't double-dip.'

'I'm not bloody double-dippin'.'

One of the younger Aborigines - pale skin, prematurely balding - mumbles threats against Irish. He often stares aggressively and threateningly at people. The incident blows over; the flagon is passed through me to the young aggressive Aborigine. He, in turn, is abused by Uncle Jerry for drinking too much. There seems to be only a swig left but somehow it goes through four more pairs of lips before it is all gone, as if no-one wants to be guilty of the crime of running us out of alcohol.

Immediately it is gone, Bill talks about having a sleep. 'Well, go over there and have a sleep,' says Dave, indicating the grass. Bill talks about going 'home', wherever and whatever that is. This seems to be a good cue for me to go. I couldn't keep drinking all day like this. I ask them whether they would be there late this afternoon. 'We always here,' says Uncle Jerry. Around about five o'clock? 'We always here.'

I walk away, realizing that I am walking away from the Aborigine's home. We talk of International Year of the Homeless, not realizing in a way, that these people are not 'homeless', rather they have pathetic substitutes for 'homes' - for this group of Aborigines 'home' was the benches and tables in the middle of Belmore Park. For the men in the refuge, it was a bed and cupboard to call their own. For others, it was a railway bench that they favoured and felt foolishly safe with.

**Hyde Park**

A thin tired old man, bottle inside a paper bag, drinks behind a toilet. Another with baggy trousers and no socks sits drinking on a bench.

At least it is daytime and daytime is a good time to sleep. Better than night-time. It is warmer and safer during the day. An unkempt man lays comatose on papers in the sunshine. Another one lies near him. They try to shield their eyes from the sun with a newspaper or their arm so they can sleep more deeply.

I head past them to the toilets at St James station. There, a businessman with meat-bloated body and balding head a few cubicles down does not pay attention to what he is doing - instead, he stares at me. A homosexual. Common in this toilet. Often they stand in the cubicle next to you and stare at you. Trying for pick-ups or just titillation? I must look a sight in my army great coat and tatty clothes and two-day's beard growth. But I am young-looking and that, apparently, is attraction enough. One can see how many young men turn to the obvious as a way of earning money.

Finding a soft spot on the grass nearby, I am asleep almost before I hit the ground.

I wake up stupidly thinking that I must try to get some sleep. Waking up, I start streaming down notes. Among these I write:

I sit down and I am writing about all my impressions so far - the Aboriginals, Kevin; I have been writing for hours now. It's artificial, isn't it. Vagrants don't sit down and write for three hours in the afternoon. But I am not a vagrant, you know. Not really. I know that two nights from now I will go back to my cosy double bed and refrigerator full of food. I can count off the hours until that happens - if I had a watch. One doesn't count hours on Nowhere Street. The one thing that there is plenty of is time. One only counts the nights.

But it is artificial. I know that and you should know that too. I can only get partway into their world - perhaps that is as far as I would want to go anyway.

As I write, I spend my great wealth - my second bread roll, taken from the refuge, Sydney City Mission. It kills some of the hunger but not all of it.

**First phone call**

I know that I am overdue. I should have phoned the section editor in the morning. It is now three in the afternoon. I walk to Town Hall station where I know there are phones that work. I suspect she will be worried about me but I don't care. I hope she is.

'Thank God you're alive,' are her first words to me. 'When you hadn't phoned by 11 o'clock we thought you were dead.'

'No I'm fine.'

Her tone quickly changes from relief to remonstrance, telling me I have to phone in earlier.

'There are different agendas out here.' I tell her that I spent the morning drinking with Aborigines in the park but she wants to know where I spent the night. She is upset that I spent it in the refuge. She wanted me to sleep out the first two nights and sleep in the refuge the last night so I was 'fresh' to write the article the next day. She has a funny idea about refuges.

'You drift when you're out on the street. I drifted. I did what a homeless person would have done. Actually, the refuge was the ideal place to start.'

She wants to know where I am going to spend tonight - not so much for my welfare but so I don't spend it in a refuge again. I tell her I plan to sleep in Central Station tonight and in a park on the last night.

I talk to the photographer who wants to get some shots of me and other homeless. It is arranged that I phone back the next day.

The editor doesn't want me to spend any money on food. She checks that I am going hungry sometimes. I assure her that I am.

I wander back to Hyde Park to make some more notes

### **The Krishna Centre**

*I am sitting in Hyde Park taking notes and hunger has struck in a big way. I've been on Nowhere Street for twenty-four hours now and this isn't the first time I've felt hungry though this is the worst so far. I had this illusion that vagrants don't have to have any sense of time - for some that is probably true - but for those who haven't slipped over the edge, time is more vital than it is to Mr & Mrs Suburban House. At 3pm, one has to phone in to confirm that one wants to sleep at the Sydney Central Mission or one's bed is up for grabs; at 7.30, 12 noon and 5.30, the Mission serves food. Don't be late. And, importantly, don't be hungry before those times.*

*I have backed myself into a corner so that I can't go back to the mission - I've hitched up north, haven't I? So it must be about 4pm now and I can go up to the Cross and see if I can get a meal from the 'Hare Krishna place'.*

*Finally, with hunger pains burning my insides and a thirst that goes all the way down my throat, I find the Hare Krishna place. It was a struggle to find it. Everyone who said 'Yeah, I know that' is either way off beam or too vague in their directions. I walk once around King's Cross, too vagrant to attract any propositions from the hookers. Finally, I despair of finding a phone book and ask directions from a jewellery seller in King's Cross station. He has a friendly French accent - his directions are reasonably accurate (wrong side of street). It is complicated because I don't know its name. In fact, it is the Iskcon Food Relief and Drug Referrals Centre. As I walk there, I realize that in a city like Sydney hundreds of itinerant poor might arrive in any one week. They desperately need*

*a vagrant's guide to Sydney - a map showing where the places of food and sleep relief are.*

*I am thirsty more than hungry now. It would amaze you how few places there are to get a drink of water in Sydney. Lots of the public water fountains don't work. There are no sign posts showing where they are. Of course, when you are thirsty you probably duck into a shop and buy a mineral water or fruit juice.*

*I walk past the Krishna place without knowing it. I turn back, realizing I must have gone too far. The Frenchman's directions were pretty accurate but the side of the street was wrong.*

*I get to the Hare Krishna place at about 5pm. I find myself again in the position of having to ask for a handout and I can feel that my throat is constricting and it would be easy for me to cry again. I realize why I found tears so easy last night. I've never gone up to strangers and begged for a handout - for that is what it is when it all comes down to it. And one's emotions stir around - shame, fear of rejection, impotence, gratitude. I stand on the street edge for a moment, pulling myself together. Through the thick security door I can see the Hare Krishnas, with their distinctive hairstyles, cooking. 'I heard this is where you can get a free feed if you've got no money.'*

*'Five-thirty. Next door.' He has bright airs and bright clothes. Cheerful.*

*'Thank you.'*

*'Hare Krishna.'*

*'Thank you.'*

*At first I thought that he had said that as a piece of self-advertisement - a short-hand way of saying 'The Hare Krishnas are doing this.' But then I remember that that it is just their way of greeting and saying goodbye and as I walk up the street for the half-hour hungry wait in which I have jotted these notes, I think 'God bless the Hare Krishnas. God bless the Salvos. God bless the Central Mission and Dick Smith and anyone who does anything for the homeless and destitute.'*

*I sit now making these notes in the grounds of a church up the road. An expensive ornate church, a lasting symbol of the wealth of many Catholic churches. Ironically, I have been here before - performing as a clown for a ridiculously expensive scene in the first episode of *Willing and Abel* - a large wedding scene with everyone in outlandish costumes. And when it was on TV, there wasn't one laugh in it.*

*A person walks past me as I take notes. He goes up to a tap that is only a metre or so behind me against the church building. He takes a drink of water. My thirst curses me for an idiot. I have to be sharper than that. After he has finished, I take several drinks from the tap.*

*A passerby tells me it is 5.20. I head down to wait outside the Krishna food relief centre. The door is still shut. There are others there. A thin but straight-walking 'bag lady' - all her possessions in a large bag - including an umbrella -*

she is in her fifties or sixties. She has pencilled her eyebrows. Why? A man in his twenties with beard and wild blue eyes. Drugs? Both of them carry plastic trays such as butchers serve meat on.

The young man with wild eyes asks me whether I have a cigarette lighter. He sticks a transparent green, full lighter under my nose. As I tell him that I don't smoke, I realize that he is trying to sell me the lighter. He has blond hair and a beard. His clothes are dirty, his hair uncombed. He approaches another guy - a thin, tall young guy with a crew cut and pale blotches on his face - healed scabs? - these blotches give the appearance that he is recovering from a brain operation. This fellow misunderstands the guy trying to sell the lighter and replies he has some cigarettes but he has given them up himself. He takes two crushed and torn butt-ends out of his pocket - obviously scavenged from the street or a garbage bin. The blond man with the wild eyes, accepts the butt of a cigarette - better this than nothing. There is difficulty lighting it - a cold wind has sprung up along the street. The building shade has cut across the street. Already, I am grateful for my army great coat.

The tall thin man is exaggeratedly polite and insists on me getting in front of him in the queue. I tell him my name. He says hello. I ask him his name. 'I don't have one.' he answers without rancour. Wanted? Does he suspect me of being a policeman? We shake hands. I ask him if he knows any good place for sleeping out if you have no money. He has just bought a tent and set it up 'on a secret place near a beach'. Beaches, he assures me are good places to sleep out. 'Lots of caves. You're safe there.' He won't reveal his secret place or the name of his beach. 'Any beach is good.'

The Hare Krishna Food Relief servery is cramped - about four metres long and a couple of metres wide. You shuffle in as part of the queue. The meal is served up on the polystyrene plates and, if you don't have one, there is a twenty cent charge. That explains why the bag lady and the guy trying to sell their cigarette lighter had plates - they were saved from previous meals. I put my twenty cents in the tray. The thin guy behind me has to wait until there are more coins there so he can get change for his two dollar note. Further back in the queue are people who are obviously not homeless but feel poor enough - or are mean enough - to queue up for a free feed - a group of three young people with Scandinavian accents backpacking it around Australia, other young Cross residents. The food is ladled onto the small polystyrene tray. Yellow, with white lumps of potatoes and red streaks of tomato. It does not seem enough.

I walk up to the nearby garage and, like others, sit on the cement gutter at the side of the station. It is the closest thing around there to a seat. Others sit on the pavement or the street gutter. I shove down the food - warm, filling, even the taste is not bad. The hunger pains die down. But I do not feel full. I feel that I will be hungry again soon. I find myself resenting the Scandinavian tourists and

the trendy locals - all clean and showered that day, all wearing clean, nice clothes and all, doubtless, with places to stay.

Time to move on. Back to the closest thing I have found to friends - the Aborigines in Belmore Park - because it is with them that I hope to spend my second night.

## Night Two

### Belmore Park

And so, it is time to reverse the track back from King's Cross to Belmore Park via Hyde Park.

Walking is a time I have to myself. It is a time when I do not have to put an act on or to observe someone, trying to take in and store every possible detail. It is a time for my own thoughts and so a time for doubt. When I walk down from the Cross to Belmore Park, I question my motives for doing all this. I question whether I went into it for any noble reasons or was it just the money. Would I have done it just because it needed to be done - like the Salvos and the Hare Krishnas who do their bit just because it needs to be done. And I question the newspaper's motives, the editor's motives - what do they really care about these people - they're just another story - if it's good it increases their reputation, or maybe even increases the circulation. Next week, it will be all forgotten as new words are used to fill the space. And I question the motives of politicians, going around talking about how the state of the economy doesn't allow them to help poor people and then catch a jet overseas or increase the budget for defence and spend hundreds of millions on a new Parliament house when thousands of people don't have anywhere to sleep. What do they care that people will be in pain - cold, hungry. No, they'll be too busy with significant decisions to think about that.

In Hyde Park I stop, tired. It is dusk now. A group of men drink beer in the park. Not homeless though, not yet anyway. Their shoes are clean. I stop nearby. I take out one of the handkerchiefs filled with change and count out some money. \$2.18. I put the rest of the money away.

I arrive at Belmore Park. It is about 6.30pm and the Aborigines are there as promised. 'We always here.' Apples sees me and there is no false pretence about her greeting. 'You got any money for me, my darling?' Without hesitation, I reach into my pocket and pull out the \$2.18, slapping it into Apples hand. She adds it to the communal pile. The group sits on the grass. Uncle Jerry in his out-of-date, worn white safari suit approaches passersby for money. Some give him bits and pieces which he immediately brings over to add to the pile.

Just out of earshot, a neat suburban woman talks to a drunk Aboriginal young man with tousled hair and a neat Aboriginal girl. It seems to me that she is a social worker, some sort of do-gooder, trying to persuade the man to come in off the street. 'Who's that over there?' 'Oh, he lost his girlfriend three days ago. He's been looking for her.' The explanation doesn't cover all aspects of the

scene very well but I let it slide; I can't appear as if I care all that much. That's none of my business.

'Look at me fucking mate,' says Dave. 'Just look at him. I'm going to get him into bloody compulsory detox.'

Following Dave's line of sight, I turn around. At first I can't see who he's talking about but then near the other end of the park I see old Herbie shambling towards us, stopping passersby to ask for money.

'Just fucking look at me ol mate,' says Dave, shaking his long-haired, wasted head. 'I'm going to go to a fucking magistrate and get him to put him into compulsory detox.' The way Dave tells it, they virtually tie you to the bed to stop you drinking. He doesn't want Herbie to join A.A. or anything. He just wants him to straighten up for a while and get some strength back into his aging limbs. Then he can come back to his mates and do some more drinking. When Herbie finally reaches us, Dave repeats for his benefit what he has been saying to us. 'You want to bloody go easy a bit mate or I'm gonna get a magistrate to put into bloody compulsory detox.' Herbie mumbles his reply. He doesn't want to go there - his friends are all here - he doesn't want to leave his friends. 'You straighten up me ol mate, or I'll bloody go to the magistrate and get him to swear out a summons and into detox for you.'

The first flagon has disappeared and they are scratching around for some more money. Some dribs and drabs come out. More money is scrounged from passersby. 'What about you?' Uncle Jerry asks me. 'He put three dollars in for the last one,' says Apples, defending me, generous as always, overestimating.

The suburban woman with the young Aboriginal man and woman comes over to the table. Uncle Jerry asks if she has got any money for the pot. Without blinking, she takes out her purse and coolly puts two dollars on the table. 'But this one is not to have any more - he's had enough,' she indicates the young man she was talking to. 'No. No. He won't get anymore,' we all promise.

She is casually at ease with us. We thank her as she says goodbye and heads out of the park with the young Aborigines - the man and woman who are now arm-in-arm. Mick explains to me that she is the young girl's foster mother. The girl and the guy had had some falling out. As Mick put it - 'He's been looking for her for two days.' Now they are all headed back to the woman's house in Blacktown.

This two dollars helps us scrape enough money together for another flagon. A younger drinker is now needed to be 'the runner' - to go to the pub for the flagon. Mick doesn't want to go. 'I'm always the bloody runner.' Dave doesn't want to go. 'My stumps are bleeding.' He wears sandals and doesn't have any socks. This can quickly rub your feet into blisters that just as quickly break. When homeless people hobble it is as often through bad shoes or lack of socks as through alcoholic damage. Uncle Jerry suggests I should go. I am tired and say, 'Don't look at me. I don't even know where the bloody place is.' Uncle Jerry

suggests Mick could show me. 'I'm not going. I'm always the bloody runner.' Eventually George goes. He only comes back with two bottles instead of a flagon and complains that flagons are \$8.90. This leads to a controversy - Mick bought one earlier in the day for eight dollars. It is decided that they are different prices in different places. The bottles are decanted into the jug which resumes its slow circle around the group.

It is now deepening into night. Dave sits on the upper part of the park bench, his feet on the plateau designed for bums. 'Bloody rats,' he says, looking over my shoulder. I turn around to try to catch sight of one but can't see it. 'Didn't you see it?' I have to shake my head. 'There's another one of the bastards.' I turn around and still cannot see one. 'See that?' 'Nah, missed that one too.' 'Bloody come out at night. I slept here one night and woke up with the things crawling all over me. They're all round this park at night. You'll see one. There he goes.' I stand up but still cannot sight one. 'We're not kidding ya, ya know.' 'I just want to see one.' And soon, I do. A large rat, scurrying across the grass. It darts across the lawn, fat, well-fed but still fast-moving on the well-tended lawn. The garbage of the park keeps them well fed.

Steve, tousle-haired, young, is talking about going off to Redfern. 'What's at Redfern?' I ask. 'Redfern no good for whites,' says Steve. 'Redfern no good for blacks either,' says Mick firmly. Steve doesn't recommend Redfern to me - it's dangerous to my health. Mick holds the same opinion about the place for blacks.

Mick and Apples tell me that I can come and sleep with them in their park. They have a piece of foam in Woolloomooloo in a park there. 'Sounds good to me.'

Apples has to go off to Central Station to make a phone call. I am curious about who and why she could be phoning up. Obviously it is a regular occurrence - otherwise there would be talk of it. But I can't afford to appear too curious about things so I let it slide.

Lulu is going to the Albion refuge to sleep. Tomorrow she is going to check herself into a hospital to dry out and get strong again. She is an epileptic. My brother has epilepsy so we exchange some words about it. She has been drinking all day and looks a little frayed from it. She is in her mid-thirties but, chubby-cheeked and smooth-skinned, she looks younger. She pops a couple of pills but they are not for epilepsy. 'Sleeping tablets,' she takes them now so that by the time she walks to the refuge she goes straight to sleep. 'Do you want a couple?' She gets them for free on prescription. I take one though she is keen for me to take two. The only time I have ever taken sleeping tablets is in hospital but, as my bed for the night is not likely to be all that comfortable, I take the sleeping tablet and put it carefully in a pocket.

Two new blacks come through the park. One of them is called Paddy. Premature grey hair on a face in its thirties. George takes an immediate

exception to him. 'You go away.' Paddy asks for a drink in a quiet mumble. 'No, you no get drink here,' says George, his voice raised with anger, 'Go away.' Uncle Jerry looks at me, pursing lips and frowning, 'They're brothers. Don't get on. Always fighting.'

The other new arrival looks at me through grog-lazed eyelids and reaches out a large hand and grabs me by the collar of my army great coat. 'Give me coat,' he says, tugging at me. 'Give me coat.'

'No. I have to sleep out.'

'Give me coat.' He tugs at me some more. 'Give me coat.' He is large-boned, bearded, hefty, noticeably bigger than I am. 'Give me coat.'

'Sorry. I've got to sleep out in the open tonight too. This is all I've got.' Mick and Uncle Jerry tell him that I'm all right, to sit down and have a drink. He lets go but continues to stare at the coat and me. I am introduced to him. His name is Rossi. He only has a short-sleeved summer shirt on, but I'm not giving up my coat.

Soon the grog runs out so that there is no more reason to stay. I am tired and keen to go to bed. Mick, with his boundless energy, wants to go to the Cross. 'I'm with you.' I am quite glad to say goodbye to the group as Rossi, obviously drunk, has not taken his eyes off me or my coat since he got there.

So the three of us head off to the Cross, Mick striding in front of Apples and me like a professional walking champion in training. His energy amazes me. We stop at a pub so I can have a leak. This enables Mick to catch up with glimpses of the Rugby League game on the pub TV. His team is getting beaten but he admires the skill of the opposition half who scores a clever try. We move on. Mick, ahead of us, stops in front of a motor bike shop. He admires a new Honda there - probably worth about four thousand dollars. 'I'm gonna win the lottery one day and buy a bike like that.'

### **King's Cross**

Mick and Apples introduce me to a smattering of the Cross youth. Again, one grasps hands, thumbs locking. Like many urban Aborigines, they are invisible. Pale from cross-breeding, they often look more Italian than Aboriginal.

### **Mouse**

Mouse is drunk. Her eyelids droop in alcohol-reinforced sleepiness. She has good, strong cheekbones, nicely curled hair - not wiry though. She is from the south coast. She refers to Apples as 'aunty'. No-one would pick her as even part-Aboriginal. She is, at most, fifteen.

**Chris**

Chris looks about sixteen. Light-skinned, he seems Italian more than Aboriginal. Rotund in a cheerful way. He practices roundhouse kung-fu style kicks near the seated John's face. The kick's are slow, low, unimpressive - untrained. He would like to think of himself as a good fighter but, ultimately, he lacks training and conditioning - and a mean streak. He is easy-going, basically good-natured.

He has a cask of wine from which he fills up a glass container - earlier that day it contained fruit juice. He passes this around, offering some to me. No, already pissed. Later on, I have a little.

**Tim**

Tim looks like nothing more or less than Tom Cruise's younger brother. He has straight hair but he too is related in some way to other Aborigines. He is skiting because he just got laid. He recounts: "How do you like it?" I asked. "Hard." So I gave it to her.' He mimes holding legs and does pelvic thrusts. 'I've met her before. She's from Campbelltown. Never gave me the time of day before. But she was drunk, I was sober, so I had the advantage.' Where did you find to do it around here? 'There are places if you know 'em.'

I wondered what his response would be to authorities telling of the Aids threat - incubation period of seven, eight years. He doesn't expect to be alive in seven, eight years. Or he can't imagine being alive or doing anything different from what he's doing now. He looks thirteen.

The Cross youths drift away from me. Tired, drowsy, I slump on the bench. It must be somewhere around midnight. Mick and Apples are elsewhere, talking. Nearby, on another bench, an old lady has set up her home. For her, home is a thin mattress on half of one of the long benches of Fitzroy Gardens. She has gone to bed for the night, an umbrella over her head. Everything is neat. A suitcase underneath the bench. Plenty of blankets. Her home. Kept neat and orderly, as she had probably kept all the places she has lived throughout her life.

I close my eyes, hoping to drop off briefly. But when I close them, I feel my head spin slightly and my stomach turns around. The port. I open my eyes. There is a Chinese food container nearby. Three-quarters full, it contains sweet and sour something-or-other on top of rice. I realize I am starving. Without hesitation or thought, I pick up the container. The plastic fork is still in it. The rice is cold but nice. I intended only to eat the rice. The meat could be pork - last time I ate pork the reaction was vile. But the rice is gone and still the hunger is there. I bite into the meat - seems like chicken. In any case, I finish it off. Only after the food and the hunger are gone do I consider the germs. But at least I do not go to bed hungry that night.

**John**

John, in his late teens, is one of the few Aboriginal youths who looks dark-blooded - though, with his dreadlocked hair and goatee beard, he seems more negroid than Australian native. He is completely out of things - not just with alcohol. Mick is furious at him because he suspects that John has been popping pills. He slaps John across the mouth and a pill pops out onto the ground. Mick steps on it. It shatters into a white, sparkling dust. 'You been fucking poppin pills again?'

'No, man, just Mogodon,' says John, willing Mick to believe that they are sleeping tablets.

'They're not fucking Mogodons. They're fucking Serapax.'

'No, man,' mumbles John, 'Mogodon.'

Mick is furious. 'Mogodon's aren't fucking white. They're fucking Serapax.'

'No, man.'

'Don't pop fucking pills. Be a drunk, being a drunk's all right. It's all right to be a drunk. But if I catch you fucking poppin' pills I'm gonna kick your arse all around this park.'

'No, man. Don't do that. I love you, man.'

'I've got a good mind to take you over there and give you a hidin' right now.'

'No, man . Man, I love you, man.'

'Don't tell me that. Don't pop pills, You know what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna phone up your sister.'

John cringes visibly, almost shrinking into himself. 'No, man don't do that. Please don't phone Mary-Anne, man.'

'I fucking will. First thing tomorrow. I'm gonna phone Mary-Anne and she's gonna get the bus from Mildura and together we're gonna kick your arse all around this park.'

'No, man, please don't phone my sister, man. I love you, man.'

I am sitting with Mick, John, Apples and Chris when another Aboriginal youth races around to ask for help with a fight. Some gubbs - whites - have been hassling them. Mick and Chris rush off to give them a hand. There are no questions about whether it is justified or how it started. John tries to follow but he can hardly stand properly so he is shoved back onto a seat by Apples and me. I trail the group that is headed for the fight. There are three white guys standing in the entrance to the Astoria Hotel. There are about six Aborigines but not all will fight. There are some brief words exchanged. The gubbs smile inanely. They don't see what is coming. The gubb on the left goes down with a flurry of punches from the light-skinned Aborigine opposite him. He smashes into a parked car on the way down. The Aborigine follows him to the ground in a flurry of punches, stands up, ripping his shirt off and screaming at the guy he has floored that he wants to keep going. Meanwhile another Aborigine, darker,

broad-nosed, curly hair with red tint, about sixteen years old, has ripped off his shirt also and is picking another gubb who keeps repeating 'I don't want to fight you. I don't want to fight you.' The young Aborigine throw some karate-style side-kicks at him. They are fast and sharp. He looks trained or at least well-practised. The gubb keeps backing away, repeating, 'I don't want to fight you. I don't want to fight you!'

I turn my attention back to the first fight. The victim has stood up. He is bleeding from a puffed-up eyebrow. He looks stunned. He is being shielded by a short girl, she seems about sixteen. She screams pugnaciously back at the Aborigine. 'You know you're going to win, so what the point!' I turn my attention back to the guy pleading not to fight. He takes flight and is chased both by the karate-kicking Aborigine and the rabid one who floored the first gubb. The three run flat out. Later I find out that Mick flattened the middle guy with one punch. 'Went six foot backwards.' I never find out what happened to the gubb who ran away.

There is a code, you see. The Fitzroy Gardens, the Cross, is their home. They feel they have the rights to it. 'They're only fucking visitors - we live here,' says Mick. Mick points to a small park across the road. 'I lived in that park for three years.' Visitors give them hassles in their home, they cop a hiding. 'Fucking gubbs,' says Tim, 'Sorry,' he says semi-apologetically to me as we are sitting on a bench back in the Gardens, 'But the fucking gubbs come around and behave like bloody king shit and they don't even live here.'

There is talk of the fight. John sits next to me, partly in this world and partly elsewhere. He talks about the park being their park, and it was all their land originally. He half-sings a song about Captain Cook and how he should have been strung up, that the land was stolen. He looks aggressively at me. 'I agree with you,' I say. He does not seem to believe me. 'No, I think you're right. It was stolen.' He still does not believe me. I put my arm around him. He believes me then. 'I love you, man,' he says and kisses me on the cheek.

Soon, Mick is back abusing John for taking pills. 'I've got a good mind to take you over there and give you a hiding right now.' That is part of the code too: grog but no needles, no pills.

## **Roy**

Roy has a hard-bitten face. It would be easy for a casting director to give him the part of an ex- con. The face looks like it has seen more than one fight. The life-roughened face makes him look older than the others. Possibly he has made it into his twenties. He has blond hair. He moves easily and comfortably among the young Aborigines. Perhaps he is one.

He has a case of Fosters and is generous with it. I end up with a can. He is complaining. 'I was in a scam. Worth a hundred bucks. Two of the other guys

shot through on me. In the middle of a fucking scam.’ He relates a separate incident. ‘I was at Central Railway. I asked a guy for sixty cents for the bus fare. He took out his wallet to take out a couple of bucks, so I took his wallet off him and took out all the money. “Thanks, mate.” Must’ve been about fifty bucks.’

### **Pebbles and Bam-Bam**

They are obviously a couple. The punk look. His head is shaved bald. Her head has a crewcut but with longer locks sprouting at the back. Studded denim and some chain-style jewellery. He looks significantly older than her.

She comes from Melbourne - Reservoir. They seem white. Like the rest of the Cross youths, they stay in ‘The Squat’. Someone describes it as ‘like a disused hospital’. It seems to have several storeys. When I ask where it is, nobody tells me. The impression is that this is something one learns about only by invitation - they don’t want just anybody thinking they can squat there. The location of a squat is valuable information, too valuable to share.

Pebbles talks about going to the hospital tomorrow for a check-up on her baby. She is three-months pregnant to Bam-Bam. Without being asked, she tells me her age. ‘Eighteen.’

‘Yeah? You look a lot younger.’

Bam-Bam, she tells me, is twenty-one.

For no reason, she says, ‘Actually, I’m fifteen.’ She looks younger.

Apples and her children

It is hard to believe that I only met Apples early that morning - she wandered through the park when I was first talking to Kevin. Then we were drinking together morning, evening. In dribs and drabs I had learnt a bit about her. Left sometimes by ourselves in the Cross, I learnt some more.

She is in her mid-thirties. Jet-black straight hair, a broad, strong face, a little acne scarred perhaps. Once she would have been very attractive. Uncle Jerry had certainly said so. ‘Was lovely.’ Cheerfully she had agreed with this statement. She looked her age now; but her personality was attractive. Good-tempered; above all open - speaks her mind.

She is great to me.

Mick is devoted to her. ‘When you get a good woman like this one,’ he says to John, ‘You look after her. You look after her.’ Mick is twenty but they are well-suited to each other.

Mick talks about what they won’t name the kids if they have any. He is deadset against one name in particular.

In Belmore Park earlier that evening, she put away a knife she was carrying. A cheap knife, not stainless steel, but can be sharpened easily. She put it into a pouch with another knife. ‘For protection.’ Perhaps it was common for Aboriginal women to carry knives for protection. They might need them against

those Aboriginal males who became wild when they drank. It might explain how Kevin got all those scars on his arms which he said were from women.

Apples was fostered out as a kid - a lot of the Aborigines I met on the street were.

She tells me about the phone call she made earlier that evening. She was phoning Brisbane to make sure that her kids went to school that day. She is not worried that they are in a different State. 'They grown up now. They smoke and drink themselves. They grown up.'

### **Paul**

A gubb is walking through the park. He has a pale denim jacket and jeans on. Mick asks him if he has a cigarette. He stops and fishes out a pack. Immediately, the other Cross youths cluster around for one. 'Sure, have one. They're only American,' he says apologetically. The pack reads 'Vantage'.

A tourist, he stops to talk, sitting on one of the brick retaining walls of the garden. He only arrived in Sydney yesterday. His name is Paul. He is interested in the Aborigines but seems to spend more time talking about himself.

He has a house on the West Coast and another residence in New York. He looks to be in his late twenties, curly hair, no suntan, well-fed features, could stand to lose a couple of kilos. He describes himself as a millionaire. 'Is that all right with you people? Is it all right to be rich?'

'Shit yeah,' says Mick, 'Just wish I was.'

'I wasn't sure it would be all right.'

Paul's shoes are tattered with holes in. I've never met a rich person with raggedy shoes before.

Mick offers him a drink from a shared cup which he accepts happily. He plays lead guitar with a band but won't tell us which one. 'What's it matter?' Tomorrow night they are being filmed at the Sydney Entertainment Centre. He's just going to wear what he has on. Including those shoes? 'Yeah. Sure. Let them photograph these shoes. Why not?'

He asks about where are the best places to go on Australia. We talk about Ayers Rock, the Great Barrier Reef. 'I'm only in Australia one week.' We suggest a ferry trip across the Harbour. 'Haven't got time. My agent has got me booked out. Business lunches every day. I haven't got a spare hour.'

The conversation and drinking goes on in such a way until Paul cuts across it with a comment aimed at me. 'Why are you such a suspicious sort of person?'

I don't answer. Apparently, I must have been looking sceptical.

'You're a suspicious sort of person, aren't you. Why be so suspicious of people? You should trust them.'

This line of questioning worries me because it threatens my cover. Paul leaves his perch on the retaining wall and sits next to me on the garden bench. 'You don't believe me, do you?'

'Well... why won't you tell us what band you play with?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'If it doesn't matter, why not tell us?'

'I play lead guitar with a band. It doesn't matter which band.'

'If it doesn't matter, why not tell us?'

'Okay. I'll tell you if it means that much to you.' He pauses, hoping I will say that it doesn't mean that much to me but I don't say anything. 'My last name is Halen.'

'You're one of the Halen brothers?' I ask in stupid tiredness, not really knowing if there is such an entity as the Halen brothers.

'I know. I can't play lead guitar with Van Halen because everybody knows Eddie does.'

'I didn't know Van Halen was in town.'

'See? I knew you'd react like this when I told you.'

'Like what?'

'You're impressed. You're impressed because I play with Van Halen.'

'I don't know that much about the band. I'm impressed with their professionalism and some of the songs I've heard.'

'See? I knew you'd react like this.'

'Like what? We're not exactly mobbing you for your autograph, are we?'

Mick has drifted over to the conversation, interested in Van Halen. He wants to see if we can get free tickets to the concert. I have a better idea. 'Could you get us into one of the backstage parties?' This, it occurs to me, might involve a free feed and free grog.

'Sure. I can get you some backstage passes. Be here at 12 noon tomorrow and I'll have some passes.' 'Here at the park?' 'Yeah, at this bench. You're still suspicious aren't you?'

I still have trouble believing in rich people with holes in their shoes. The 'well-heeled' are not called that for nothing. 'You shouldn't be so suspicious of people.' 'Things are not always as they seem.' I say, appropriately.

Paul Halen persists with trying to find out why I am so suspicious.

'Hey, Mick, I'm fucking tired. Let's head for bed.' Apples, who has been making tired noises for some time, chimes in. She wants to get some sleep too. We finish our drinks. Apples souvenirs the near-empty bladder of the wine cask. I keep the glass fruit juice container, putting it in my haversack. It comes in handy. Paul is still telling me I shouldn't be so suspicious of people as we are leaving. He is very determined when he says that he will meet me there tomorrow with the backstage passes at noon. 'See you then.'

### The park in Woolloomooloo

Tiredly Apples and I trail Mick's still energetic walk, through the snakes and ladders of King's Cross and Woolloomooloo streets back to 'their' park. It is a small park virtually underneath the Eastern suburbs railway line. It is a pocket park situated on a corner, just near the Matthew Talbot men's refuge.

Mick has two blankets and offers one of them to me. Generous, unbelievably generous. But I don't feel that I can take it. They might need them both. Besides I've got my great coat. 'I'll be right. But if wake up freezing in the middle of the night, I might sting you for it - if you're not using it.' 'Sure.'

I fill up the fruit juice container I've souvenired with water from a park tap. With all the alcohol I've drunk, I'm bound to wake up thirsty in the middle of the night.

It is a cool night for this time of year. I put on all the clothes I own - my beanie, my fingerless gloves, windcheater, great coat. This does not leave much to make a pillow - only the three-day-old newspapers in my jaded haversack. I lie down on the chip bark. My back is to a brick wall. A few footsteps along the wall, Mick and Apples make their bed on a slab of three-inch thick rubber. We had passed this park on the way to the Cross earlier that night. 'It's still there,' had been Mick's only comment. Lying in the shadows of struggling pine trees, it is hard to be seen from the road. That lends an element of safety. With our backs to the brick wall, we can only be approached from one side. That lends an element of safety. Cars frequently whizz around the corner. It is a popular traffic route even at this time of night. It all helps. A train rattles by, virtually above our heads. Bright street lights glare into our eyes.

Devoid of watches, we have no way of telling what time it is.

Taking out of my pocket the sleeping tablet that Lulu gave me, I wage a mental debate about whether I should take it. I never take chemical substances, two aspirins a year at most. There won't be any trouble getting to sleep, I'm exhausted. The trouble will be staying asleep with all the noise, discomfit, and later on I will probably get cold. Garry Sargeant wouldn't take the sleeping pill (if that's what it was); but Garry Vagrant would. I swallow the pill, I pull the beanie down over my eyes to help shadow them from the street lights. Tiredness numbs you to any sense of dangers; sleep is more important. Instantly, I am asleep.

Middle of the night I wake up desperate to go for a leak. Somewhere across the street a fire has been lit and noisy yahoos can be heard. They can't be seen. Just the glow of the fire from around the edge of the wall. I am careful to get up from my sleeping position quietly and walk in the opposite direction. We are sleeping near toilets but they are locked. Even if they weren't locked, public toilets are too dangerous to go into at night. I find a nearby sapling to relieve myself on. And, keeping near the wall, I make my sleep-unstabled way back to

my woodchip bed, laying down as quietly as possible. It might be dangerous to draw the attention of a group of yahoos to us sleeping out here. My back is to the brick wall again. We should be hard to spot here in the shadows. It seems as safe as one could hope for. The yahoos are a worry but soon sleep takes over again.

I wake up shivering. It seems funny because I do not feel that cold. I am simply not warm. My body is too used to being warm at night. Tuesday's newspapers are in my haversack and I take them out and put some over my legs and stuff some more up my windcheater. It helps a little but still I do not stop shivering. I curse myself for not taking up Mick's offer of the spare blanket but I do not curse myself for giving away my other faded windcheater to Kevin.

The yahoos are gone. Only the occasional car whines around the corner. Mick and Apples sleep the sleep of the dead. They are tougher than I am - or perhaps it is just that they have shared bodily warmth. The spare blanket cannot be got at because Mick has put the bag it is in underneath the rubber mattress. You can't leave anything even a foot away from you. I don't want to wake up Mick or Apples to get the prized blanket.

Fortunately Mick wakes up, abusing Apples for pushing him off the mattress. 'Mate, can I have that spare blanket.' 'Sure,' he answers blearily. He reefs out the blanket from the bag beneath the mattress. Apples moans, her sleep disturbed. 'Thanks, mate.' Before I have lain back down, Mick is asleep again. It would never occur to him that I might make off with his blanket. What a friend.

The blanket works like magic. I push the chip bark around to make it more level, a bit of a dip for my shoulder; blanket over everything including the head. Sleep comes almost instantly.

## Day Three

The gradual increase in traffic noise slowly forces me awake. It is early but hard to estimate the time. In sleepy stupidity my mind starts thinking about the fact that I will be vacating this residence and how would a real estate agent advertise this 'situation vacant' - underneath the eastern suburbs railway line, a park in Woolloomooloo, traffic revving by at all hours. 'Close to public transport. Leafy aspects. Low-maintenance. Just a short walk to the city. Unusual extras. Handy to shops.' Or, more to the point, handy to Matthew Talbot refuge for homeless men.

Underneath the railway arch, the remnants of dawn appear, pink and pale blues. I lie there hoping for sleep but the subway roars with now-frequent trains and the cars rev constantly, barrelling around the corner of the pocket park. It may be late. Mick and Apples are still asleep. I should make sure that we don't miss out on breakfast. 7.30 am. That's what Mick said. Sitting up, I realize that there is only twenty-four hours to go in my sentence on Nowhere Street. Tonight is sleeping in Central Station. Piece of cake.

Stiffly, I extract myself from my bark bed, quietly brushing the bark from my coat. The sleeping pill had one magic effect - they enabled me to sleep the whole night in one position - on my left shoulder, back to the brick wall, that made it safer.

The park is littered with empty bottles. Port and sherry. There is a man in his fifties drinking from a bottle in a paper bag. He looks clean. He didn't sleep out. He tells me it is ten past seven. About a metre from where Mick and Apples still sleep, there is a white plastic top. It is designed to be child-proof - the sort you have to press down and turn at the same time to open. It is unmistakable. It is the top of a metho bottle.

The park seems to have been designed with the homeless in mind. There is a two-metre wide round grate set in brick. It is built for fires and contains black and grey ashes and broken glass. There are wooden benches set around it. It is designed for people who need to light fires to sit around and keep warm. The park, apart from the scattered bottles, is well-kept.

I put myself together as well as I can. Comb my hair, shake out Mick's blanket, brush the chip bark off my clothes, start to pick the bark pieces out of my socks. I ask another early morning drinker the time. 7.25. Mick is grumpy, wondering why I woke him up. Breakfast - I didn't want you to miss out on breakfast. He jumps up immediately when I tell him the time. Somewhere, the wires have crossed. Breakfast finishes at 7.30. We rush around to the refuge, past the bleary-eyed drunks on the footpath outside, clutching already at paper-bagged bottles of sherry and port. Just missed out. What a bastard.

There is a small kiosk run by a grey-haired man. Mick orders a cup of soup. 45 cents. It does not surprise me that Mick has held back money from the grog-on last night. After all, I have done the same thing. I suspect everybody except the worst cases do it - they keep back some pathetic amount of money for a cup of soup or whatever, making as if they have put their last cent into the communal port pot. If anybody asks, as Dave would say, 'That's none of your business.' The man brings Mick the wrong flavour soup. This works out well because he gives that cup gratis to Mick and makes him the right flavour as well. As Mick has ordered a soup, I do likewise. A sign on the outside of the kiosk reads: 'Single cigarettes 8 cents each.'

We walk out considerably slower than when we hustled in. The clothes on the alcoholics sitting in the gutter outside are crumpled, shirts hanging outside their pants, hair uncombed, their chins coloured by grey stubble. One of them is Aboriginal. Bleary, tired eyes, crumpled face, grey and white hair. 'You better ease up on the grog, Uncle.' Mick chides him as we walk past. The man does not respond.

One of the derelicts asks me if I have a cigarette, 'No, I don't smoke - I've got a better way to die.'

Back in the small park where we slept, a small gathering of the younger and stronger early-morning drinkers has gathered - a companionable mixture of Aborigines and whites. Apples is given the extra soup. She would not have been allowed into the refuge for breakfast as it is for men only, so Mick usually brings some food out for her. The soups are offered around. It is cup-of-soup stuff - the taste is ordinary. The top half of mine is liquid, the bottom half gluggy. Nothing to stir it with. Apples has taken out the depleted bladder of the wine cask that she salvaged from last night. When she finishes her soup, she squeezes the rest of the wine into the polystyrene cup. But mainly the men support the McWilliams company - port or sherry. One guy looks slightly out of place. Beanie, work shorts, he looks as if he is having a quick drink before he goes off to work as an offsider on a truck. It turns out that he has just come from work. He has been working at the Sydney Cricket Ground all night - cleaning up after the night football game. He doesn't think much of it as a job but it's money. He tells us that he was listening to the 2KY news this morning and there was a stabbing in the neighbourhood - 'just around the corner'. Someone who was sleeping out nearby got knifed.

### **The soup kitchen**

Our share of the alcohol peters out so that we are able to leave. Mick has promised to take me to 'the soup kitchen'. This means a trip back to Belmore Park - our daytime home.

Again we wear down the track between King's Cross and Surry Hills. As usual, Apples and I trail behind Mick's lightning pace. 'You want to go somewhere, you go. You get there. You don't muck around.'

In Surry Hills, we go into a street that is new to me. The Hollywood Hotel. I've heard of it because that is one of the places that the group gets its port from. It is yellow and run down, like an ill-kept toilet. Opening hours '6 am to 8pm' Outside there are a couple of white men and one women on the footpath drinking wine from hotel glasses. I have been desperate for a leak since I woke up. When I asked at the refuge they told me that the place was locked up until 10 am. Mick ducks straight into the hotel and I follow him. Inside, it is dingy, cramped, ill-lit. The word 'ambience' comes to my mind - principally because the place is totally lacking in it. The laminated tables are pocked with cigarette burns. Some customers sit at the tables quietly. The place exists solely as somewhere for people to feed their addiction; the decor is irrelevant. There is no sign on the tacky wooden door that Mick goes through but it is the men's loo.

Back outside, I find Apples is talking to the drinkers. She obviously knows them. The woman among them is drinking wine from a schooner glass. It is about one-third full. She looks in her late thirties. Her face is puffy like her body, but her hair is brown and straight and, under the wastage, the facial bone structure is good. When she was younger and less dissipated, she probably looked stunning. Now, sitting down on the footpath with the other drunks, she has her eyebrows etched in cheap pencil. When Apples asks her for a sip of her drink, she becomes aggressive. 'No. No! This is my last drink. I don't share my last drink with nobody.' Apples says something about the fact that she has shared drinks with her. It does not seem to sink in as she continues her monologue. 'If I had any money, I'd share it with you. But not my drink. This is my last drink. I don't share my last drink with anybody. Not with anybody,' she repeats this, more aggressively, until Mick comes out and we are able to move on.

Uncle Jerry and the others are already in the Park, lying on the grass. As a matter of course, the first question we are asked is whether we have any cigarettes. Apples does not want to go to the soup kitchen but she asks us to bring her back a coffee.

I am hungry and Mick, as promised, takes me around to the soup kitchen. The main advantage is that it seems to be open all daylight hours - no set meal times. It is just around the corner of the park. The sign above the door reads: 'Our Lady of Snows. Love and Mercy.' Inside it is dingy. There are some faded religious ornaments. One or two men are sitting at tables eating. We take one of the tickets for a meal and join the seated half a dozen waiting to be served. There is only one worker visible, a thin tiny woman in her fifties who comes to the serving table with a tray for each man. I suspect there is someone else

working in the kitchen but as they don't talk it's hard to be sure. A sign says: 'As we are shorthanded, please assist by picking up trays, return them to kitchen'.

It is our turn, Mick waves me up before him. There are two plates on the tray she gives me. One consists of a piece of white bread covered with a glutinous shiny gravy that has specks of tiny stewed meat in it. The other plate is a thin vegetable soup with occasional lumps of celery and carrot. I take the plates off the tray, putting them on one of the dining tables and head back to the kitchen to return the tray. The woman's raised voice stops me. 'Put those things back on the tray!' I turn around and do so. The rule here is to leave one's food on the tray - apparently to cut down on cleaning up. But what with plastic placemats and plastic table covers, one wonders why they bother. Mick and I eat our food in silence. One man talks to himself. That is about the only noise apart from the traffic outside - people going to work. It is not yet 9 am.

I can't eat red meat. I scrape away the gluggy gravy/stew off the bread and eat the soggy white bread. The soup is dreadful, it stings my throat as it goes down. Not for the first time, I daydream about bringing Leo Schofield or some other food critic down to Nowhere Street for a few days and getting him to write food reviews about the meals he experiences there. I wonder what he would make of it. Mick manages to battle through more of it than I do. It is warm and kills hunger for a while.

I remind Mick that Apples wanted us to bring her back a cup of coffee. He says that if she wants one she can come around and get it for herself.

When we go back to the group, Uncle Jerry asks us how it was. 'Just gravy,' comments Mick. There is talk about the Albion Street refuge and how we will go up and have a really good lunch. 'You can get showers there too.' That's great because I really need a shower. The conversation seems not so much to pick up from where it left off yesterday, but somehow to be a repeat of it. 'That's none of your business,' says Dave when someone asks about where we slept, 'That's none of my business either.' Dave seems to get great amusement out of saying this everytime somebody says something. It is starting to drive me bananas.

Mick goes off. He is trying to contact someone by phone. This is a good opportunity for me to leave the group. The last thing I want to do is spend the morning drinking port. Apart from anything else, it is pretty boring doing it hour after hour, day after day. I need to get off alone and phone in and then move back to Kings Cross to see if that Paul Halen guy from last night keeps his appointment.

I tell the others that I have to go off and, very quickly, I leave. It is easy. Nobody asks me. That's none of their business. But Mick, lively and full of energy, he would have asked because somehow we have grown quite close in a short amount of time and he would have just asked me out of friendship. Without him there, it is easier to just wander off.

I wander along Albion Street, hoping I can sight the refuge there that Mick and the others have talked about. Predictably there is not one sign pointing to any of the hostels. The homeless, the derelicts, the vagrants, are supposed to stay invisible; we couldn't make visible acknowledgement of their presence by signs pointing out where they can get help.

There is a Salvation Army hostel for alcoholic men. It is neat and clean both on the inside and outside. It looks new. Glass, plastic, clean. The foyer is a large open space. I look up. A large group of men cluster around a huge internal second floor window, leering down at me, seemingly laughing at me. It is like a scene from *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. They all look somehow identical in size and expression; they are slightly-dried-out alcoholics. Some may give it up but probably most will be back on the street in a few days, their strength returned sufficiently to do more damage to themselves. They seem like birds in a cage, singing to attract other birds to share their captivity - but instead laughing at me as another possible captive of glass-walled detox. The man behind the foyer desk asks me if I want anything. His manner is such that he does not think I am an alcoholic seeking admission. I ask if there is somewhere I can have a shower. He gives me a set of directions to a different building. 'Thanks.' I look up. The men continue to look back, grinning.

The directions take me off Albion Street. They take me, as I increasingly fear as I follow them, back to the Swanton Lodge, where I stayed the first night.

'Hey, Garry.'

I look up to the second floor of the time-smudged once-white building. Kevin, still wearing the red singlet with the eight on it. I also sight Shane and other staffers. Again, I feel my cover is threatened. What am I doing back here when I should be up the coast?

'Yo, Kevin.'

'Didn't find your friend up the coast?'

'Nah. Bigger it.'

Kevin naturally believes I am coming to check back into the refuge.

They are smiling, cheerful, friendly, rested. They look down on me a different way from the men in the detox centre.

I go into the day centre of the refuge and recognize some of the men there. One of them is the man who only answered me in a series of clicks when I told him he didn't have to make his bed. Unbelievably, that was only a day before. Probably he will spend all day there. For some of them, the refuge is just about their entire world: all night and all the day as well.

I move on. I walk around the building as if I might be going to check in - that is to satisfy Kevin and any others who may still be looking out the window. Then I cross the street, walking away from my one-time home. I can't stay there, tonight I've got to sleep in Central Station.

I feel dirty, grubby. My hair is oily. The socks on my feet are slimy with sweat and body salts. 'Sweat is only dilute urine': they used to teach us in high school science classes, causing us to wrinkle up our noses. I liked to turn it around: 'Urine is only concentrated sweat.' Whatever way you described it, my thick socks were greasy with it. The socks were also scratchy - bark from sleeping in the park had embedded itself inside the legs of the socks. My feet squirmed inside my shoes.

My next appointment for the day was to be in King's Cross at 12 o'clock in case Paul Halen honoured his commitment. But that was a few hours off. Plenty of time to walk up to Town Hall station and make a phone call to the section editor at the Times.

### **Second phone call**

'I'm alive.'

The editor is pleased that I spent the night out in the open.

'Apparently someone was stabbed just near where I was sleeping... Woolloomooloo... If you get any copy on that can you save it for me?'

'Of course.' But I can hear from her voice that she is not going to try to track any down. She has other priorities for the day.

'Do you know if Van Halen is playing at the Entertainment Centre this week?' She doesn't. Can't she find out? No, they're a weekly national newspaper - they don't carry things on the local entertainment scene.

'If you were smart, you'd pull me in today,' I advise her. But she doesn't seem to give that statement much credence.

'I've got stacks of stuff. Too much and not enough time to write it.... I'm not on top of it... I'm just going to come in and start thumping it out and you'll have to edit it down to something manageable... What if I come in today about 3 o'clock and start working on the article for a couple of hours.'

'That would cut down on your research time.'

'I'd probably only be making notes anyway.'

Where am I going to sleep tonight, she wants to know. Central Station probably - although my Aboriginal friends want to take me to a different refuge. She actually gives ground - 'You do what you think.'

The editor hands the phone to the photographer. We talk about when photos might be taken. The whole question of taking photos worries the shit out of me - it threatens my cover. If the Aborigines find out that I've been lying to them they might get upset and I couldn't blame them - not after they'd been so good and open to me.

I'm told that I have to phone back later in the day to arrange for photographs. Frankly, at that moment, I didn't give a stuff about their photos.

I discuss my other problem with the editor I'm supposed to have an interview at noon tomorrow for a 'real job' - Dean of Studies at a University college. She tells me it just can't be done - the tight deadline wouldn't allow it. She reminds me again about phoning to arrange the photographs.

Another phone call has to be made - to the college to try for a change of interview time. Shit, but I resent having to spend thirty cents on these fucking phone calls. Umzing and erring, I eventually string together enough coherent phrases about this concern from a different planet to make the poor secretary understand what I am doing and why I can't make it. She kindly races around and manages to get me an interview on the Saturday. Good. If I'd had to go straight into the interview like this, I probably would have frightened the poor people.

A queue has built up behind me for the phones.

Desperate for a crap, I go to the toilets at Town Hall station. The toilet has no plastic seating lid. A man enters the cubicle next to me and throws his guts up. Perhaps an alcoholic.

### **Wayside Chapel**

Thursday 11.15 am Back to King's Cross. I arrive at King's Cross too early for my rendezvous with the self-styled millionaire lead guitarist.

I am tired already and it is still morning. I decide that I will use the time to check out the Wayside Chapel - to see what it offers by way of support for the homeless. The only time I have been there was for a cousin's wedding over a decade ago. My memory of where it was is vague. But, surprise, surprise, there is actually a sign - one small sign on a pole points the way to the Wayside Chapel. In all my days of wandering around the streets looking for refuges and meals for the destitute it is the one and only useful sign I see. Anyone would think that the authorities believe that none of the destitute can read.

### **The Wayside Chapel**

Neat and well-tended in a jungle of near-enough-is-good-enough; a sanctuary of brick in a squalor of asphalt. A cafeteria sells cheap meals but well beyond my financial grasp. There is a well-groomed lady behind a desk who looks like she is there to take bookings for weddings in the tiny chapel. There is, though, no apparent crisis centre, no sign pointing to one that I can see. Devoid of the energy to ask if there is one, I slump onto one of the seats outside.

**Margaret**

A girl comes past. 'Is this the Wayside Chapel?' 'Yep.'

She has the name WAYSIDE CHAPEL printed on an envelope. She has been sent there by a stranger because she needs accommodation. For the last two nights she has slept in Central Station. Her name is Margaret. I go inside with her, back to the well-groomed lady who tells her the crisis centre is upstairs. We walk back outside where there is a set of stairs and a tiny sign indicating the crisis centre upstairs.

Margaret wants to wander off, she can't be bothered. 'I think I'll just go back to Central for the night.' But I persuade her to come upstairs with me to check it out.

There is a brightly-dressed middle-class lady, newly-washed hair, deodorant, pleasing manner. She believes we are together and attempts to say otherwise don't change that belief. Margaret needs somewhere to stay. The lady asks us if we have any money. 'Nah,' says Margaret. 'I've got seventy cents,' I say, confessing the amount I have in my pocket (though I still have some two dollars notes in other places). 'No money,' agrees the lady. Persuaded in her own mind that we are a couple, she tries to find us free accommodation which takes both men and women.

A teenaged assistant takes our names. She writes down 'MAGRET'.

Margaret has crooked teeth, freckles, oily hair from lack of showers. She is the wrong side of plain. She gives me one surname then tells me it is not her real name. 'You couldn't pronounce my real name,' she says but tells it to me anyway. It is Dutch, she explains. She has been living on the road for four days. She has come down from Newcastle. Her sister's boyfriend threw her out. 'After I'd paid my rent and food and everything.' She won't have any money until her next dole cheque comes through. She has foster parents but doesn't feel she can turn to them for help. 'They've got problems of their own.' Margaret takes out a belt she has brought. Second-hand. She is boastful. The lady wanted to sell it for five dollars but she got it for two. 'That's the way to buy things, hey.'

'Shh, put it away. They'll think you've got money.'

It is hard to believe but without enough money for somewhere to stay, she actually bought a tacky plastic belt. Everyone on the street was addicted to something. Perhaps that was her addiction.

The lady has made a phone call. As bad luck would have it, she finds us accommodation in Swanton Lodge. That is the one place I can't go back to - been there, done that. The only condition is that we have to check in by 3pm. I hope against hope that she will pull out a roneod map of Sydney showing where the major refuges are. Or at least some sort of map that she can mark and give to Margaret. But no, she pulls out a street directory. She has to look up the address, the map index, and eventually she points out where Swanton Lodge is.

Amidst the jumble of broken Sydney streets, she points to the wrong place. I point out where it really is; there is an old red biro mark on the worn directory at that spot.

Fortunately the Lodge is close to Central Station which Margaret knows, so her chances of finding it are good.

We walk away from the Chapel. We clasp hands briefly; my right hand and her left hand squeeze together. 'Look after yourself.'

Fitzroy Gardens

Crossing the road, I am in Fitzroy Gardens. In the gardens some of the young Aborigines from last night have returned. There is Chris and Roy and the karate-kicking fighter. It is doubtful that they will remember me - they were drunk and they are used to blurs coming and going in the Cross. It is a tricky situation: I don't want to snub them but I don't want to have to present myself to them when I'm a stranger either. My path crosses that of Chris. 'Yo, Chris.' This draws a blank on his face. 'Last night, with Mick.'

Recognition is slow. We grasp hands. 'Yeah, right,' he says, 'Where's Mick?'

'Up Belmore Park with the others. I'm supposed to meet a guy here about a deal - gotta sit at this bench. See ya.'

He wanders away, into the group of other homeless who have surfaced from the squat to go to their daytime home of the gardens. The other ones are still asleep probably.

I take up my position at the designated bench. Noon. 'Paul Halen' has not yet fronted with the backstage passes. Is Van Halen even on tour on at the moment? The woman who was asleep on the bench last night is now sitting up on her mattress. She looks to be in her sixties. Her hair is combed neat, the bed made, she sips at a polystyrened cup of tea with a certain amount of precision. A young couple sit with her and drink coffee and talk. They seem like old acquaintances.

12.15. 'Paul Halen' has still not fronted. Leaving the supposed rendezvous point, I lay down on the lawn of Fitzroy Gardens, close to the bench to see if he arrives. I would desperately like to sleep. No, too hungry.

Already I have met more people and faces and pain than my head can reasonably hold in. I have seen the ones who live a life - the Aborigines mostly; and I have seen too the ones who only want to get away from life - the lonely solitary alcos. For the Aborigines - like the young kids in this park - homelessness was virtually an inherited state. It was the only way of life they knew, the only option they could see. These were second and third generation homeless, following in their parents' and aunties' and uncles' footsteps - living out or in squats, getting free meals. They had no other way of life on which to model themselves, saw no other goal to aspire to. The parents themselves often knew no other state and so could not encourage their children to aspire to something different - or present them with an array of alternatives. Homelessness was an

inherited state; I was meeting second and third generation homeless urban blacks. As Apples had said last night about her children. 'They grown up now. They smoke and drink themselves. They grown up.'

12.25, according to a passerby. I give up on Mr Halen.

The need to go for a leak presents a problem. The group of young Cross youths whom I half-know are perched near the outside of the toilets. Again, the problem - ignore them, it is a snub; say 'hello' and they'll think 'who the shit is that?' because they blew too many brain cells last night to remember me. I decide to brazen it out. I pass Roy, the rough-faced guy who looks like an young ex-con. 'Thanks for that beer last night.'

'Hu?' He looks at me dumbly.

'You shouted me a beer last night.'

'Yeah?'

'I owe you one.'

'I'd rather have the money.'

I reach into my pocket. Seventy cents. 'That's all I've got. You're welcome to it.' I slap it firmly into his hand. 'You're a good bloke,' I lie.

He shakes his head. As I walk into the toilet, he says, 'I shouted that guy a beer last night. I don't remember it.' Actually, it was two beers. The seventy cents was well-spent. It absolves my debt, gets me out of a potentially awkward situation and, best of all, lets me have a leak.

Real and genuine hunger pains scrape at my insides. I have decided to head to Matthew Talbots in the hope that it might not be too late for lunch there. Mick told me that at lunchtime 'guests' are fed after 'residents' so I could be lucky.

### **Matthew Talbot**

Ignorance of the Cross backstreets leads me to take an unnecessarily long route so decreases my chances of a feed seem to dwindle. Men as always, sit in the dingy laneway outside Matthew Talbots drinking from a bottle. Inside, as always, there is a man inside the reception cubicle.

'I heard that if you have no money, you can get a feed. Am I too late for lunch?'

'No. Take a ticket.' A square of worn paper with the word 'TICKET' written on it.

'Thanks.'

In the corridor that leads to the dining room there are some men seemingly in a cue. 'Is this the cue for lunch?' The man tells me to take a seat in the room inside. Coming to the end of the corridor, I am greeted by a scene that could come from a piece of existential theatre or from its close relation, a horror movie. There are ten neat rows, eleven or twelve vagrant men to each row. Seated in perfect silence on plastic chairs, they look up at a television set

mounted high on a wall. A helpful man breaks the monastic silence to point me in the direction of a stack of chairs. I take the top one and, dutifully placing it in the incomplete back row, I join the other men in worshipfully watching the television. It is a talent quest show, Pot of Gold. A young girl is up before the judges. She gets a good score. Abruptly there is concerted approval which dies as quickly as it started. Obviously her performance had been seen and approved of. She wins the contest. More abrupt, quickly dying approval.

The men do not talk to each other. There is none of the fellowship of the Aborigines. They stare at the television religiously - this is a rare experience for the street wanderers.

Irresistibly I am reminded of a famous - at least a famously expensive - ad for television. The year was 1984; a group of hollow-cheeked prisoners skeletally shuffle into a cinema and look blankly at a cinema screen which rains down images onto them. A young girl, blonde, brightly colourful, fit, runs down the aisle carrying a sledge hammer which she hurls at the screen, shattering it. 'In 1984, 1984 won't be 1984 thanks to Apple computers.'

But there is no blonde girl here. No women at all in the men's refuge. And nothing shatters the screen or the silence. Instead a nondescript man walks to the front row. He is holding a small plastic bucket. He indicates. The first row stands up in silence, walking past him, placing the paper tickets in the bucket, filing past to the servery section of the canteen. The man steps to the second line from the front. He indicates. Silently, the men stand up and begin to file past him, placing each meal ticket in his bucket and shuffling on to the servery. The process line continues. Silent, clocklike, endlessly rehearsed, the men place their ticket in the bucket, shuffle on to the servery, receive their meal, sit at the canteen tables, filling them up in the order prescribed by long-time practice. There is no selection of favourite tables. There is no attempt to sit next to friends or to make new ones. The seats are filled in regulation order, one at a time, without comment.

After the first six rows are emptied, the man collecting tickets gestures to the corridor and more men file in to fill again the just-vacated front seats and wait until the man has processed the first sitting. The Rockford Files - a repeat, of course - is on the television. It seems like it would be nice to watch a bit of it but, surprisingly quickly, it is the turn of the back row. I, the novice, rise when the rest of the row does. We file silently past the man, ticket into bucket, on to the servery. The men behind there perform in clockwork silence also. The plate passes along them, each putting a serve on it. Gravy last. I follow the back of the person in front of me, following him to the next table to be filled, dutifully assuming the seat next to him.

But the meal. I can't believe it - a chicken drumstick and a chicken wing, mashed potato, mashed pumpkin, warm celery dish. On the table there is a fresh piece of bread waiting for each person. I can't believe it. I am just so

empty and hungry, and thirsty. And there is warm tea. Premade - white with the equivalent of one sugar. The food is fantastic. Warm. The mashed potato is nicely made. Everything is fresh and not cooked too much. Just right. The meals are consumed in monastic silence.

'Excuse me, mate.' One person is finished already and wants to get out. They are the first words I have heard spoken at the table. I scrape my chair pulling myself towards the table so he can get passed. 'Thanks.' Legendarily, I eat too fast, my friends abuse me for it frequently. Yet I am one of the last on my table to finish. I have my eye on a piece of bread that the person opposite me left behind, feeling that I will help myself to that when I've finished my own meal but a man from another table walks over, gets it, walks back to his place.

Over in front of the television another six or seven rows have filled up again after the first batch. That day the refuge feeds two hundred hungry men from the street - 'guests'. That on top of all the residents they fed.

As silently as they ate and came, the men hurry away. There is no fiddling around. Many of the tables need to be re-used for the late shift of the hungry. Dutifully, I finish my meal in silence and walk out of the dining room. As I am passing the reception booth, a man asks if he can get a towel and one is passed to him. I stop in my tracks, turn around and go up to the booth. 'Can you get a shower here?'

'Sure. Take a towel.'

I take one of the towels, hospital white and clean, newly laundered. It feels beautiful. There is a plastic container full of tiny soap cakes. I take one of those. The man tells me how to get to the shower.

There are a lot of showers; they are semi-private individual cubicles with no door. I slump, shoulder first, against the shower recess and the tears start welling up in my eyes. God help me but I need this shower. Oily, greasy, tired, some strangers have let me have a shower and the emotions mix around - gratitude to the people who let me have a shower, greater gratitude that they don't expect thanks even, they just do it because it needs to be done, and shame that one has to depend on the mercy of strangers. And relief, just relief. Leaning against the shower recess, I try to swallow back the tears. Elsewhere someone is singing in the shower.

I slump onto the wooden seat in the cubicle and undress. Removing the body-slimed socks, my feet hit the fresh air. For the first time in a day and a half, I remove the worn-out swim costumes I am using as underpants. The shower is warm and, starting to feel human again, I cry in the semi-privacy of the shower. The few tears washed into the water and soap.

I have to step outside the cubicle to fully dry myself. A man calls to me cheerfully. It is the man who was singing. From the neck down, there is no skin evident. It is all tattoos.

I am careful to not get any of my clothes wet. If they get wet, I have to wear them wet. They're all I've got. Sitting on the wooden seat, I put myself back together. I feel almost human again. Clean. Even my hair has been washed with soap. I feel so good I want to cry again but swallow it back down. My feet cringe as I reluctantly ease them into the crungy, oily socks, having postponed the moment as long as possible.

On the way out, I place the towel in the tea chest. There is a young man shaving himself. Palmolive lemon-lime shaving cream. Some people on the street look after themselves.

### **Hyde Park**

Fresh, full, warm, it is the best I have felt in days. Apart from the slimy, skin-crawling socks I have on that make my feet cringe with every step, things aren't so bad. My feet are wisely guiding me towards Hyde Park. There, I can sleep on the soft grass. There, there are non-threatening people and it is not too noisy. Maybe I will get time to take some notes.

I approach Hyde Park with a sense that I am coming home and also with a great sense of self-doubt. For the upteenth time, I question whether I am the right person for this job. If this was a film and Al Pacino was playing the undercover reporter, we the audience would see him racing around with seemingly boundless energy, making effortless contact with all manner of homeless. He would not feel guilty about using up the limited resources of a soup kitchen or refuge or taking free meals he could actually pay for. Oh no, he would be convinced that his article was going to change the world. I am depressingly sure mine cannot do justice to the needs and pains of the people I have met. But Al Pacino would walk off the street, sit in front of the word processor and punch out two thousand words which would almost instantly cause the sacking of two high officials. I was depressingly sure that whatever I wrote, nothing was going to change. Oh yes, I had plenty of words. Too many - tens of thousands of words stirring around inside of me. But how was I going to get on top of them. Not being Al Pacino, I didn't feel full of boundless energy. I was wearing a track between King's Cross and Surry Hills with stop-offs in Hyde Park and I was tired. I wanted nothing more than to take off my greasy socks and feel grass and fresh air between my toes, to lay down on my great coat, drape the arm of a windcheater over my eyes to block out the brightness of the day and sleep for an hour to make up for the sleep I did not get the night before. And that is what I did.

### The third phone call

Full, warm, safe, it was easy to sleep. I slept for probably over an hour. Waking up I realize that it must be time for me to make another phone call so I make the familiar trek down to the reliable phone booths at Town Hall station.

'Thank God you phoned,' says the editor, by way of greeting.

She wants a photo. That means it has to be taken today. She is glad I phoned so that she can arrange it.

However, I am more worried about something else. I broach a subject that has been worrying me for sometime. 'You know the Times really has to make some donations to these places I've been staying and getting free meals.' She is not at all taken with the suggestion. 'I am staying at these places, you know, taking a bed off someone who needs it, taking meals off places like Matthew Talbot, and I think the paper should really make some sort of donation to these places to cover it.'

She doesn't see why.

'Look if I had to stay in a first-class hotel, expensive meals to do a story, you'd pay the bill wouldn't you.'

'Yeah.'

'Well, you should feel obliged to pay something to all these places feeding and putting me up so that I can do this story.'

'We'll talk about it tomorrow when you come in.' She puts me off; she is more worried about the photograph.

This whole question of photos makes me nervous, very nervous. If I am seen with a photographer, it threatens my cover and watching the kids in the Cross in action convinced me just how quickly things could get violent if they took an exception to you. I couldn't blame them if they did take an exception to me - after all I had been lying to them.

Worse still, the photographer originally planned to do the gig isn't there. She is still at the Fashion Industry Awards. The editor races around to see if there is a photographer available. She comes back with a different photographer whom she puts on the phone. I would dearly love to tell him what I think he should photograph and then leave it up to him. He could just wander through Belmore Park when I am drinking with the Aborigines and take a photo. He could also go up and take a photo of people eating on the footpath outside the Hare Krishna food relief centre and photos of the dipsomaniacs outside Matthew Talbot. However, he doesn't know where anything is. I can see that way won't work. 'Okay, it looks like I'll have to hold your hand through it.' The comment is meant realistically not nastily. I arrange to meet him outside Central Station, Country Terminal, at 4.30pm. He will need a passport into the Aboriginal group. 'Bring a bottle of port - McWilliams Royal Reserve port. And a pack - do you smoke?' He doesn't. 'Buy a pack of cigarettes.'

It is just after three-thirty. This gives me enough time for a comfortable walk up to Central Station. Except that by now my feet are tired and bloody sick of walking in my slimy socks and grimy shoes.

### **Me**

As I walk around the streets, and vaguely head to Central Station, there is some time to kill, and energy to save, and I try to draw together not just what I have seen but how it has affected me.

In my time on the street, my perception of what I owned has changed, hopefully forever. On one hand, I know that from now on I will really value the things I have and own. The next time my car malfunctions and costs me money, I'm going to be grateful that I have those problems. Because there are a lot of people who wished that they could have problems like that.

But also I think I have learnt to value possessing things less. Christ was right - and I am no Christian. But the ultimate duty is to look after the people in real pain - the sick, the poor, the cold, the hungry - because those people are on the borderline between where life has some meaning and doesn't. If we help take away the pain, we give them the chance to lead a meaningful existence - if only for a few hours - and that is the greatest gift that you can give someone.

As I walk, freshly-made dishes - quiches, pastries, chocolates - stare at me out of shop windows and I learn to look the other way, because they make the hunger pains seem worse.

I realize that somehow through the years I have lost something important. When I was younger - fifteen, sixteen perhaps - I had more commitment to the communal good. I wanted to change things for the better. I didn't believe in the pursuit of money for money's sake. I believed that personal greed was not enough of a basis for a life. At some level, I still believed all those things. But the commitment to the belief was gone. It had been drowned in the bog of detail that takes over your life - the tax returns, the car maintenance, the food to be bought, the struggle to survive on money that gets worth less all the time. Billy Joel wrote: I've found that just surviving is a noble fight. And it is, but it's not enough. Down here on Nowhere Street people were really doing that - fighting to survive from day to day, fighting to stave off the pain. But other people could do more than just that.

As I walk around, I do not look in the windows of Coles or Woolworths or any food places, it is a pointless and depressing exercise to look at a shop window full of things one would like but cannot afford to buy, no matter how much of a special they are on.

In days gone by, people could believe that, whatever they were doing, they were working for the communal good. They were part of the village community and fulfilling a necessary role within that village. Nowadays, we have reduced

work and endeavour to a game - and the game is point-scored in dollars and not the amount of good you do. There must be a way in which the communal endeavour could be put back into our work ethic, instead of just working for the new lounge suite or the latest model car.

In my mind I envisage 'The 10% Club'. It would consist of people who donated ten per cent of everything they earned to the needy and homeless - to help the helpers - the Salvos, the Matthew Talbot refuge, yes and the Hare Krishna Food Centre. No new charity organisation just one to support the ones already there working their guts out. Then maybe people would have a chance to work not just for themselves but take pride in also earning money for the communal benefit. As my Aboriginal friends say, 'We share'.

### **The photographer**

I sit outside the great hall (country terminal) of Central Station. The photographer is supposed to meet me there at 4.30. It is 4.35 and he is not there. I am resentful - doesn't this turkey realize that if he is late it could cost me a meal? I can't wait for fucking ever. If he doesn't front soon, I'll have to start walking to where I know I can get free meals. 4.35 turns into 4.40.

There he is at last. He has a camera and camera case. Blond hair, clean, and a taxi waiting. We confirm names and decide to head for the Cross. The paper-bagged bottle of booze and the pack of cigarettes are on the back seat. Benson and Hedges. Silent curses are heaped on his head; no-one smokes those on the street; they are too expensive. Idiot. Later I realize that's unfair. Tiredness is making me irritable. He's a photographer, he could smoke that brand, no worries.

As the taxi takes us towards King's Cross, I start to tell him about the kids there. I want him to photograph the young Aborigines there from the taxi. I have seen how quickly things turn nasty up there. The taxi at least can drive off. No, he wants to get out and photograph them. I think that he is in bloody dreamland. He seems to have no idea how risky this venture is for me, that my cover is at risk, and that lead to all sorts of repercussions. The Aborigines up there see me with a photographer, get suspicious, pass it on to others and perhaps they may get aggro for being conned and want to hand out a hiding. I couldn't blame them.

The worries turn out to be academic as there is only one young Aborigine in the Fitzroy Gardens of the Cross. I tell the taxi to turn the corner and we are dropped at Wayside Chapel. The driver wants to wait. Easy money. No, we'll walk for a while.

The photographer decides he needs to make a phone call to the editor back at the office. He has been landed with the project at short notice; he needs to clarify what is needed. During the conversation on the Wayside Chapel phone,

he refers to 'this guy'. 'My name is Garry,' I interject as he continues. Again, later in the conversation, he refers to me as 'this guy'. 'My name is Garry. Get it right. Geezus.'

'Sorry. I've had a long day.'

'Tell me about it.'

As he continues his phone conversation, I realize that for two days I have not once repeated my name to anybody on the street. Once was enough. Unless they were drunk when we met - then they wouldn't remember me. But otherwise you only told them your name once. You see, down on the street, there are only people - no 'important' plans, no grandiose ambitions that other people get in the way of - all there is on the street is people. They remember your name. They are politer down on the street.

Getting off the phone, he tells me that he needs one general shot of 'derelicts' and one shot of me 'looking down and out'. I steer us towards the Hare Krishna's Food Relief and Drug Referral Centre.

I look the other way as we pass the Fitzroy Gardens. I don't want to be spotted.

The hookers look fresh-faced and energetic. They look clean and a long way from being homeless. Yabbering on to the photographer about everything that has happened, I realize that I am talking to someone from another planet, but still I rabbit on because I need to talk it out. There is a familiar head of curly brown hair in front of me. Mouse. The fifteen-year-old Aboriginal girl from last night. Tugging the photographer by the arm, we cross the street. It is doubtful that she would remember me; she was very drunk last night.

We walk on to the Hare Krishna Food Relief Centre. Too early, we walk on to wait at the church where I also waited yesterday. Again I slake my burning thirst at the church tap. And all the time I talk, talk and talk of the people and events that have burned themselves in and have to come out. I apologize more than once for raving on. I expect that he will want to photograph the Hare Krishna place from over the road. That would be easy because everyone sits on the footpath. But he says that he finds it best if he goes up and asks people if it's all right to take their photo. 'You do it your way.' He knows more about it than I do. But we are to act as if we are strangers. My cover is to stay intact.

The time is up. I go ahead. The young man with the wild eyes and the bag lady are there, just as yesterday. I saved my polystyrene 'meat tray' from yesterday to use again. That would save me twenty cents. But when I take it out of my haversack, it is too badly broken - used as a pillow, thumped around the city, it is a mess. I have to throw it away and spend twenty cents.

Unfortunately there does not seem to be as many people as there were yesterday. I am worried about getting a good photo. The meal is better this time, more variety of dishes, bigger serve and there is a cup of cordial too. There is a drunk - not obviously drunk but I have learnt the signs. Two days' face

stubble, crumpled clothes, bloodshot yellow eyes. Like many long-term drunks, his face somehow seems scarred rather than wrinkled. He does not have twenty cents for the plate but dashes off somewhere and comes back with it. Maybe he got it from a room nearby; maybe he sponged it off someone.

At first I start eating just outside on the street but as more people are drifting to eat in the sun at the nearby service station, I move up there too. The drunk takes his meal up there and sits there with his newspaper. I hope that the photographer gets a shot of his pain-hardened face.

As I am eating, a photographer comes across the street and asks a couple of people next to me if it is all right if he takes their photo - he is doing photos for the International Year of the Homeless. The young people are wearing clean, ironed white shorts and T-shirts. To my eyes, they're obviously not homeless and they tell the photographer as much. But possibly this was cleverness on his part because it stops him having to go straight up to me and ask to take my photo.

The photographer moves on to me next to ask if it's all right if he takes my photo. 'Sure. I'll just sit up here.' I gather up my haversack and move next to the drunk. I want his striking face in the shot. 'This guy here wants to take my photo, something about International Year of the Homeless, for a newspaper.'

The guy grunts. 'Don't tell me about bloody newspapers. This is what it's all about.' He throws his newspaper on the ground next to me, pointing to an article. It is a short article about a court judgement. Totally irrelevant. It is yesterday's newspaper.

I eat on. 'You know any good places to sleep out around here if you've got no money?' I ask.

'I've slept everywhere,' he answers, 'Isn't anywhere I haven't slept.'

The photographer comes up to thank me for letting him take my photo. 'No worries. What paper is it with?'

'Times on Sunday.'

'When's it coming out?'

'Should be this Sunday.'

'Right.'

The photographer moves on to other people and asks them if he can take their photo. I eat my plate clean and walk back to the Hare Krishna place. On the way, I throw away my twenty-cent plate. I won't be on the street tomorrow to use it. I have spilt my cordial, I tell the Krishnas truthfully, could I possibly have another one. 'Sure.' 'Thanks a lot.'

This gives the photographer a chance to register that I have gone. I walk down the street, sipping at the cordial and stop and wait once I have got around the corner. Soon he joins me, saying that he thinks he has a good photo.

We head off to Matthew Talbot refuge. Unfortunately, evening meals there start at the same time as the Hare Krishna place - 5.30pm so we will probably

miss a shot that I really want - the silent room full of men worshipfully watching TV, waiting to be summoned to ingest their meal. Still we walk down that way in hope. There are other possible photos - there is always the paper-bag brigade sitting on the street outside. Besides I am not yet full. I would like to catch some more food at the Matthew Talbot.

I talk on as we walk. I talk about drinking with the Aborigines and drunks, sharing around the flagon of port. His face wrinkles in distaste. 'What about the germs?' 'Yes, I must admit to being grateful that authorities agree that AIDS cannot be transmitted by saliva.'

'But what about hepatitis-B?'

'This is reality. You wipe the top of a bottle, it's a bloody insult. You don't do it.'

I show him the pocket park where I slept. The expression fades away from his face. 'You slept there.'

Unfortunately, it is no good for a photo. I leave him around the corner and hustle into the refuge, past the usual handful of frayed men drinking from sherry bottles. 'Got a cigarette.' 'No, sorry, don't smoke - they give me asthma.' My new excuse, a better one.

'Am I too late for a meal?'

'You could be lucky,' says the man in the booth inside. 'Take a ticket.'

The queue has dissipated. The hoped-for photo has gone. The men are eating red meat. Stew. I can't eat red meat. So the feed has gone too. I go back. 'Just missed out,' I say as I put the meal ticket back.

I tell the photographer the situation. He thinks that he might go inside and see if he can get a picture. In any case, he can try for a picture of the people outside. I let him walk off. I can't be seen with him. One of the Aborigines who I first met with the group is hovering around the vicinity of the refuge. That's one person I certainly don't want to see me. He is an aggressive one - he was the one threatening Irish the morning before when Irish 'double-dipped.' Possibly he might not recognize or remember me anyway.

I walk on and sit on the street corner nearby, leaning up against a dilapidated wire mesh fence. Tired, I decide to inspect the bottle of port he bought. The label is the wrong colour. 'McWilliams Dry Sherry'. Silent curses are heaped upon him, and his level of intelligence is called into question.

He comes back pleased with his efforts. The administrators wouldn't let him take pictures inside the hostel but they introduced him to the alcoves on the footpath outside and he got some good shots of them. We walk back to William Street. I take him into a bottle shop and make him buy a bottle of port, McWilliam Royal Reserve. After he has bought it, I swap the untouched bottle of dry sherry for a second bottle of port. Two bottles. My Aboriginal friends would have been proud of me.

He offers to buy me a beer from the pub. A real beer from a pub. Cold and fresh. It takes a great effort of will to say no. I'm on the street now. I can't afford to drink in a pub.

Walking down William Street towards the city, the photographer spies a group of young people down a side street. Immediately, he is all interest. 'What about them?'

'They're not homeless. Their shoes are clean. People on the street never have clean shoes.'

I whistle a taxi to take us to the Aborigines at Belmore Park. Inside, I take out the brand new pack of Benson & Hedges, take four out, stick them in my pocket and crumple the pack to make it seem used and give it to my photographic companion. I outline my plan for getting photographs of my Aboriginal street friends without blowing my cover. 'I think I've figured out how we're going to do this. I'll say that I met you at the Cross and that you wanted to take a photo of me for International Year of the Homeless and I said that I knew some Aboriginal homeless who would probably let you take their photo as long as you bought a couple of bottles of port.' It's the best I could come up with. I tell him that I won't remember his name, and he should pretend to not know mine. He tips the driver slightly when he fills out the cab charge docket.

The Aborigine's park is getting drab with the approach of night. The light is fading. I ask him what speed film he has got. 'Any speed I want to.' It is a strange comment. He really needs 400 ASA. Perhaps he believes that because I look like a vagrant, I can't think - vagrants can't read or can't think, can they.

There are a lot of Aborigines in the park. Unfortunately, they are split into two groups: one is at the table where most of the serious drinking goes on; the other group lies on the grass up the hill a bit. We head up there. 'They're very clean,' says the photographer with what? Surprise? Disappointment because it won't make as good a photo? 'Listen, these people know all the lurks. They know where to go to get showers and have their clothes cleaned.' Lulu is in the group of Aborigines on the hill. I go into my spiel about meeting this guy at the Cross. They accept it and accept the bottle of port I take out of my haversack. They immediately ask him for a smoke. His cigarette pack is rapidly depleted as each takes at least one smoke out of it. There are about six or seven there. They ask for a light. He doesn't have one. Stupid Garry overlooked that one. The guy doesn't smoke so, of course, he doesn't have a lighter. Before I fully register that there is a difficulty he has solved it for himself. 'I must have left my lighter on the... bar.' 'Oh yeah,' I agree as he looks at me, 'Yeah, that's right, you did put it down on the bar.'

This is no drama, some of them have lighters or matches. They don't care about the lighter. They only care about the cigarettes.

The photographer prepares to take photos. 'No. No,' say two men whom I haven't met before. 'No photos.'

'What's the problem?' I ask.

'Wanted. Wanted,' says one of the men, a strong and clean- looking full-blood who does not seem the slightest bit drunk.

'Right. Well, we'll try the other group.'

'Go down and photograph them,' says Lulu, 'They be all right.'

I am thankful that I have two bottles to spread the bribe around. I go into my spiel: met him in the Cross, two bottles of port, what do you reckon - do you mind if he takes photos, or do we tell him to piss off. Before I have hardly gotten into my spiel, they have said, 'Yeah, yeah. He can take photos.' Mick is there. Uncle Jerry, Uncle Herbie, Paddy, Apples. Apples decides that the other group is not drinking port so she goes off to retrieve the bottle that I gave them, bringing it back still unopened. Also at the park bench there is Rossi, the man who last night grabbed me by the coat and tried to get it off me. Today he is much more sober. I am cautious around him but later I realize that he does not remember me at first. We drink together and get on all right.

One of the bottles is opened and decanted into a jug.

Meanwhile the photographer takes a few careful photos and asks me, 'What was your name again?'

'Garry'

'Look, Garry I might just move you out of this photo as I've got one of you at the Cross.'

By a stroke of luck, the Missionbeat van arrives and the photographer goes up to talk to them - probably to ask them permission to take photos. Rossi tells me I should sting the photographer for another five bucks. Not something I want to do. But as he is away from the group, near the Missionbeat van, it seems the best time to do it.

I speak quietly. 'I've got to put the hard word on you for another couple of dollars.'

He takes his wallet and extracts two dollars. I take the note but also I see that there are other two dollar notes inside the wallet. I quickly reach in and snatch another one out. 'Thanks.'

The men in the Missionbeat van are the same ones who picked me up on the first night. The dark man with Fijian looks wants me to come back to the refuge. 'Nah, I'm all right.' 'You should come back. Where you going to sleep tonight?' 'Ah, I'll probably sleep in the station.' 'Why sleep there when you can get a bed in the refuge?' 'Other people need it more than I do.' He grudgingly gives ground. 'Maybe so. You still strong now. But still silly to sleep out when you can get a bed in the refuge.' I realize that he is less concerned about where I sleep than that I should not get into the habit of drinking night and day and start on a long slide down. 'Nah, I'll be okay.'

I go back to the table, replete with my loot from the photographer's wallet.

'How much did you get?' asks Rossi.

'Four bucks.'

'Good one,' says Mick.

With something approaching pride in her voice, Apples says, 'He reached in and snatched an extra two dollars out of his wallet.'

Mick is delighted. 'Hey, you're gonna do all right. You're gonna be okay.'

Four dollars is enough for another bottle of port. Three bottles all up. It is a windfall for us. No passerby will be hassled for money that night.

I am reading a newspaper that Rossi had with him. It gives me an excuse for not paying much attention to anything. I don't even pay much attention when the Missionbeat men come over to the table. Everyone says: 'Take Uncle Herbie.' Everyone is concerned for him. His hair messed up, the stubble on the chin now becoming a beard, the shirt hanging outside the crumpled pants, the shamble of a walk. He sits now at the wooden park table with the rest of us but they all want him to go into a refuge and get strong for a few days. 'Take Herbie.' 'No. No.' 'C'mon, Herbie,' the Missionbeat men encourage. They take him by the arm, gently trying to tug him and encourage him out of his seat. His mates try to gently prod him up and will him to go. 'Go on, Uncle, go on. Into the refuge for the night.' 'C'mon, Herbie.' 'No, no.' Herbie doesn't want to leave his friends. There are more hands, more gentle tugs, gentle pushes and more resistance from Herbie.

I look up at the photographer, expecting he will be madly taking photos. Unbelievably, he is standing there, watching it, not taking any photos of this. It requires a huge effort of will for me not to go up to him and shout, 'Take some bloody photos of this! What do you think negatives are - gold!? Take some fucking photos!' But no, I can't. That would blow my cover. I sit there pretending to look at my paper, willing him to start taking photos of it. 'C'mon, Herbie. A nice bed in the refuge for you tonight.' 'No. I stay here. Later come in.' His mates all shrug in their different ways. What can you do? The Missionbeat men have to give up on it. The hands are taken away from Herbie. The incident has passed. The photographer stands there, camera still at his side.

The Missionbeat men move over to a drunk, collapsed on the grass. One drunk looks much like another when they are flaked out. I had walked past the body twice, not realizing that it was Dave. The missionbeat men help lift him off the grass and put him into the van. 'Drunk or sober?' Dave will spend the night in a Missionbeat bed, Swanton Lodge. The photographer takes a photo of this.

The photographer comes over again. 'Thanks for your help, err...'

'Garry.'

'Right, Garry. I think I've got everything I need now.'

'Oh, right - what was your name... Yeah, what paper they coming out in?'

'*Times on Sunday*. Should be out this Sunday.'

'Right. Well, I suppose we'll have to get one. Somehow.'

Mick did not catch the full conversation and re-asks the question about which paper it is with. The photographer repeats the answer. Rossi, bear-like, is sitting next to me. He calls him over and shakes his hand. He also tries to sting him for another five dollars. I feel sorry for the photographer. 'Here,' I intervene, 'You gave us plenty. We got three bottles of port out of him. You gave us plenty. Piss off,' I say in a friendly manner, waving my hand casually. He goes to leave but turns around and comes back to the table. 'Take the rest of these cigarettes.' 'Thanks.' The smokes quickly disappear around the group as he walks away. I do not watch him go. He did all right in some ways. I just wish he'd taken some more photos. Negatives aren't gold. At least he remembered to forget my name. My cover is still intact. Yeah, he did okay.

## Night Three

Paddy wants us to move out onto the lawn. He grabs the jug and moves off in that direction to join the others. Some moan. Uncle Jerry does not like the grass. But eventually we move out there merging with others already there. The two men who were wanted have shot through.

The move brings the two brothers, Paddy and George, close together. Everytime George gets near Paddy, he starts shouting at him to shut up and go away. Paddy seems to whisper everything he says. As I can barely hear him, it is a mystery to me why George gets so upset.

It is no surprise that as soon as Paddy has sat down near George that George is shouting at him. 'Just shut up. Bloody shut up! You were bloody picking on my sister today.'

Paddy mumbles a denial. 'Just bloody shut up!' George screams. 'You were bloody picking on my sister. You picked on her three bloody times.' George turns to Lulu. 'How many times did he pick on you?'

Lulu holds up three splayed fingers. 'Three times.'

Apples mumbles, 'If you knew what he bloody did to me.'

'Three bloody times you picked on her!' George shouts at Paddy.

Paddy mumbles something. George explodes, dragging Paddy to his feet by his T-shirt. He screams and wants to fight. George pushes and pulls Paddy around by his T-shirt which rips. Paddy makes no attempt to fight back or retaliate. George strips off his own shirt, ready to fight. Trim and well-muscled he shapes up to Paddy who still makes no attempt to raise his hands to defend himself. George hits Paddy several times across the face - a flurry of blows which only succeed in making Paddy take a step back. Still Paddy makes no attempt to fight back or even to protect his face. 'Come on! Come on!' George lays into Paddy again.

Mick turns to me. 'You can't hurt this cunt,' he says about Paddy, 'He boxed in Montreal.' The Olympics.

The new barrage of face punches knocks Paddy off his feet. 'Come on!' screams George at his brother. Paddy stands up. There is blood coming from his thick bottom lip. Still he makes no attempt to fight back. He rips off the remnants of his T-shirt and throws it into the bushes.

'See I told you, you can't hurt this cunt.'

No-one makes any attempt to interfere. A screaming match in a suburban white family would make onlookers squirm with embarrassment. Any physical fight would make any onlooker to intervene. Not here though.

We in our suburban homes feel safe and secure. We expect to spend the day free of pain, and if cold comes, we reach for another jumper or we turn up the

heat or put on another pair of socks, and if hunger comes, we open up the fridge, and if tiredness comes there is our nice soft bed and warm blankets and if the slightest twinge of pain comes, there is Mr Bex waiting for us in the cupboard. But on the street they don't expect to go through twenty-four hours without some sort of pain or discomfort. In our suburban strongholds, we expect to be safe from pain, including the pain of violence. But on the street, they live with the reality of pain so that the pain of minor violence looms less large, less important, less fearsome - just another pain that has to be lived with.

George lays into Paddy again. Paddy just stands there and takes it. George's punches are mainly arm punches. There is no hip in them or Paddy would have been broken before this.

'How far did he get in the Olympics?' I ask.

'Third round,' says Mick, 'Won the first two. If it wasn't for the drink, he'd give anybody here a hiding.'

It is hard to believe that Paddy was ever a boxer of any sort. George rains more fists into Paddy's face and he goes down again. Paddy seems curiously unhurt. Perhaps the alcohol has numbed him so much that he is literally unable to fight back. In the early days of colonial Australia, they used to regale the Aborigines with grog until they were fighting mad and then watch as they fought and mutilated each other. It was known as 'abo-baiting' and was one of the favoured spectator sports of the time.

George keeps hitting Paddy who just stands there like a store front dummy and takes the fists on his face. Occasionally, he is knocked down or takes some backwards steps. He goes down another time and George walks away, still furious, still ready to fight, he sits down next to Denise, his woman, and continues to abuse Paddy.

Paddy walks up behind where George sits. 'Just don't bloody pick on my sister!' George shouts at him. Paddy mumbles something in reply. George is ready to get into it again. Paddy has decided to fight - he waves him to come on. George springs up from the grass. George starts putting his fists into Paddy's face again.

The flagon of port makes it steady circle around the group of spectators.

Paddy makes some attempt to fight - more pushes than any punches. He goes down again but gets back up. Somehow, as George throws erratic punches at him, Paddy gets under George and awkwardly hoists him over his shoulder. George is flipped heavily onto his back. The movement was unplanned but it draws hoots of approval from the watching relatives. There is more fighting.

Rossi corrects Mick's statements about Paddy. Paddy never fought in the Montreal Olympics. Apparently that was someone else.

Paddy tries to walk away after flipping George but George is after him and pelts him with more punches, knocking him down again. This seems to indicate the end of the fight. It peters out rather than ends decisively. George sits down

and Paddy sits down a few footsteps behind him. George puts his shirt back on, abusing Paddy. Paddy has no shirt to put on - his T-shirt was ripped to shreds. Tears start rolling down Paddy's cheeks. He mumbles something. 'Well, just don't bloody pick on my sister.' Paddy shakes his head.

Mick takes his shirt off. 'Put this on, uncle.' He throws it over to Paddy and is left only with his jacket. Paddy, tears rolling down his cheeks, goes to throw it back to Mick. 'Bloody put it on, uncle. Put it on.'

Paddy puts on Mick's shirt. The tears have stopped now. The talk centres around Aborigines who could box. Rossi and Uncle Jerry knew an Aboriginal fighter who won a gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics. 'And you know what he sold it for - this!' Rossi holds aloft the almost empty flagon of port, 'One of these.' Uncle Jerry adds: 'And a carton of beer.' 'I bloody held it when he brought it back. It was bloody heavy. And he sold it for a bloody flagon of port and a case of beer. It might have been two cartons of beer.' There is some further sad discussion on how much beer exactly was involved in the deal. It suggested it might have been three cartons.

George starts to abuse Paddy again. Apples mumbles, 'If you knew what he did to me.' Mick jumps up, instantly furious. 'Just shut up! Bloody shut up!' He is physically threatening, looming over Apples but Apples keeps talking, 'He did some bloody things to me.' 'Shut up!' shouts Mick and wacks her across the crown of her head with an open hand. 'Just bloody shut up.' He wacks her across the top of the head again. This are not soft love taps but hard open-handed hits. Apples does not feel like keeping quiet. 'He-' 'Shut up! Will you just bloody shut up!' The hits keep coming across the top of Apples' head - she trying to protect herself with her arm and hands - but refusing to shut up to protect herself. There is a lull. Mick stands there, glaring at Apples. Apples goes to talk. 'He did some-' 'Just you bloody shut up!' He starts hitting her across the top of the skull again with his open hand. 'Bloody shut up!'

There is another lull. Mick is still ropeable. Apples still wants to talk.

'Here get this into you,' I say to Mick and shove what is left of my polystyrene cup of port into his hand. It was the cup from the cordial the Krishnas gave me. Mick can't hit Apples and hold the cup at the same time - not without risking spilling some precious port anyway. Apples starts again. 'He bloody did some things t-' 'Shut bloody up!' shouts Mick. He wants to slap her across the back of the head again but can't because of the cup of port he is holding.

'Have a bloody drink,' I say. Mick is distracted and takes a drink. The incident dies down. The port is quickly gone but someone else has a case of twist-top beers. I am generously offered one. There is talk about the refuge. Tonight we are going to 'Albion Street'. A bed. Showers. They tell me that they clean your clothes for you there. A chance to clean up and rest up for a few more days in the open. You can get in later there - later than you can into Swanton Lodge. Apples tells me, 'We're gonna sleep in a bed tonight, my darling.'

My problem is that I need to sleep in Central Station - for the article. But my Aboriginal mates wouldn't let me do it if they knew. As they finish a drink, they toss the empty bottle away onto the lawn of the park somewhere. Why not - it's their park.

The solution for my street friends and most of the chronic homeless could not be to suddenly pluck them from this park and dump them into a three-bedroomed brick-veneer gardened suburban home. They would be as fish-out-of-water there as I was when I first got landed on the street. They would not know what to do with it. They'd probably treat it as they did this park, rolling empty beer bottles away from them on newly-laid carpet.

To imagine that sticking them all into divided bedroom houses was the answer is to pretend that the good suburban life is the ideal way of all existence that everyone has to aspire to. The issue is not three-bedroom houses that we can stick these people - though there are some for whom that would work.

The ultimate issue is pain - hunger pains, thirst pains, cold, muggings. What these people needed was ways of avoiding these pains - clothes, food, shelter. For many, the most shelter they need is simply somewhere they can come off the street late at night and lie down where it is warm and safe and a soft piece of bedding. That is, for many, as much of a home as they want or need. For some, it seems that the refuges have to close their doors too early. They would rather sleep out cold and in danger rather than give up two hours of drinking.

I finish a twist-top beer and throw it away across the lawn of the park. Another is generously offered to me.

Rossi takes out his wallet. That's a surprise in itself. It is the first wallet I have seen any of them with, mainly it is all just loose change stuffed into pockets - after all they don't have that much money and they don't have credit cards, driver's licences, rego papers, receipts held over for tax deductions, union cards. Why the hell would they need a wallet? Rossi takes out his wallet and removes a receipt. He paid his rent today. It's the receipt from that. So he has a home. Here he was grabbing me by the coat last night, pulling at me, 'Give me coat. Give me coat.' and he has a home. He wasn't even sleeping out.

The sun has set and it is street lights which provide most of the illumination. The rats scurry down the slope, feeding on the garbage. We speculate on where they go during the day... bushes... drains. Mick talks about a park that is really good to sleep in - one near Albion Street. Safe. No rats. 'Hey, that's my park,' says Steve.

Rossi looks at me. 'The coat. You were the one with the coat last night.'

'Right.'

'Yeah.'

We look at each other. Sober, Rossi is okay. Sober, Rossi thinks I'm okay.

I go to have a quiet word with Lulu. 'I thought you were going to the hospital today.'

'Didn't go.'

'Why not?'

'Another day.'

'You got any more of those sleeping tablets?'

'Yeah. You want some, luv.'

Lulu kindly gives me the two sleeping tablets I ask for. I have learnt that, living on the street, these things are more valuable than a meal. 'Thanks.' 'It's okay, luv, I get them for free.'

I sit back down and drink my twist-top of beer.

For some time, I have been casting around in my mind for some reason to leave my Aboriginal friends. This was so I could sleep in Central Station. I knew that they would not let me sleep there. They were headed to the hostel for the night and would insist on taking me with them. I felt in some bizarre way that I owed it to Margaret to spend the night in Central Station as she had spent the last two nights there. Finally, an idea arrives. I tell my friends that I am going to get on a late train for Gosford, that this will give me a headstart in hitching up to my friends. They don't check the tickets this late at night. Mick says, 'You can still get caught.' 'Yeah, I might get off at a small station just before Gosford.' As I am picking up my stuff, Mick questions me: 'You're not going yet?' 'I'm just going up to check what time they leave but there might be one going soon so I might jump on it.' Mick is still worried about this whole idea. I say goodbye to all my friends. I kiss Lulu and kiss Apples and hug her. But lastly I say goodbye to Mick.

Mick: generous to relatives, and generous and open to a guy he's only just met, sharing a blanket with me, giving his shirt to Paddy. Mick: boundless energy, concerned about his mates, perceptive, slapping the pill out of John's mouth, tough, a fighter. Somehow at twenty, already an elder of the urban tribe. He has the will and energy to be anything he wants but somehow he has never had a choice of wanting other things.

Earlier that evening, he had talked to me about his past. His mother was Aboriginal. His father came from the South Island of New Zealand, possibly part-Maori. His father killed his mother when he was still a kid. 'He only got two years for it. Two fucking years,' Mick says, 'I know where he lives.' He doesn't say it but the threat is there.

After that he was fostered out.

We grasp hands. Mick tells me that I am welcome any time. 'You're all right.'

'Thanks for everything, mate.'

We put our arms around each other and hug like brothers. I will miss him.

### Central Railway Station

As I walk away, I feel like I am deserting my best friends in the world, that somehow I am never going to see them again, or if I do they will resent me - I will be the fucking reporter who lied to them and tricked them. And if they resented me for that and wanted to give me a hiding because of that, who could blame them.

I am over the worse now. One night and I can walk off Nowhere Street back to where there are all the objects to keep pain at bay. I can afford to spend some money, so I telephone my parents to tell them I'm alive. My brother answers the phone. They were worried about me and had started trying to phone friends to find out what had happened to me. I had told my mother but she is in her seventies and has developing Alzheimer's. I telephone Viola, she who had said, 'I don't want you to do it.' She had been really worried. Her parents had been really worried. 'No, I'm alive.' I'm going to spend the night in Central Station, it's safe there.' She is not convinced.

10.45pm The general consensus of the street people was that Central Railway Station was safe. But I do not feel safe. It is not yet 11pm yet already it seems deserted - except for perhaps twenty or thirty souls who are going to make their bed on the hard plastic benches.

It is the great hall of the railway, drafty and bright. Even deserted, it is noisy with the shunting of trains and the clatter of the occasional passerby.

There is no sign of Margaret. She must have made it to Swanton Lodge all right.

It is easy to spot those who will make this their flophouse for the night. They seem to fall into roughly two groups: the passengers, stranded without money, waiting for tomorrow's train. They have large, clean haversacks and bright clothing. And here are the real derelicts too - unshaven, with soiled coats and worn out shoes.

An old derelict, who looks to be in his late eighties, falls over just behind a rail attendant. The attendant is one of two handling a garbage pick-up vehicle. The old man fell down heavily. It would be nice to say 'he fell over with a sickening thud' but he is far too thin to make that much noise. His walking stick makes far more noise than his body which crunches almost silently into the cement; the walking stick clatters noisily. The rail attendant does not even look around and, not skipping a beat, continues to empty a garbage bin into the pick-up vehicle. Eventually he looks around and, noticing that the man is bleeding from the back of his skull, decides he should take an interest. The other rail attendant comes over slowly. They look at the emaciated old man, afraid that they will have to reach the decision that they have to do something about it.

When I first saw him fall, I had snatched my haversack up and prepared to rush over to the old man to see if he was all right. But I caught myself. That is

not how a vagrant reacts. I dawdle past as if on my way to and from the coffee shop.

Another man sitting on a seat abuses the rail attendants at length. Either he is talking a foreign language or shouting with a heavy accent because I do not understand a word of what he is saying. He does not, however, attempt to get out of his seat and do anything himself. The old man lies on the cement, making vague attempts to get up. His white hair contrasts with the smeared red of his blood on the tiles of Central Station. He has another scab on the front of his head - a legacy from a previous fall. He is what we are now supposed to politely call 'disabled'. He has a six-inch heel on one of his shoes to make up for one withered leg.

Finally, one of the rail attendants realizes he has to go to tell the station master who will in turn phone for an ambulance. The old man is lifted and seated on a nearby seat. His white hair and blood are matted together. There is a thin red puddle on the floor where his head was. They tell the old man that an ambulance is coming to bandage up his head. But his mind is as withered as his leg and he seems not to take it in. It is not concussion. It is his everyday state. He tries to get up and wander away. The rail attendants make a perfunctory attempt to restrain him. However, the old man is determined - all the effort he can muster in his emaciated body is bent towards walking away. The rail workers aren't interested enough to restrain him. One holds him by the right arm, frightened he will fall over. The old man still looks unbalanced. I am nearby and put my hand around his other arm bone to stop him falling over. The rail attendant has a nice covering of fat underneath his skin. He is greying tastefully with a neatly trimmed moustache and a mediterranean accent. He sees me as someone on whom to palm off the old man. He indicates to me that I should take the old man to a seat and wait for the ambulance. My right hand is holding up the old crippled man. It is no trouble for my fingers to close around the tiny arm bone. He is thin - the sort of thinness one associates with pictures of the survivors of concentration camps. He tugs in the direction of a particular bench. I help hold him up. He is so light it is no trouble. We go where his crippled leg and stick direct us - toward a bench he must favour - the closest thing he has to a home. By the time we sit down and turn around, the rail attendants are already clearing out of the great hall of Central Station.

I place the old man on one end of the bench and sit up the other end so he will not feel threatened by my presence. He mumbles something to himself. Unintelligible monkey-talk. Soon the station master comes and tries to get through to him that the ambulance is coming to bandage him up. The old man looks back aggressively. It is only a few minutes until two ambulance officers arrive. They look fit and young. Above all, they look clean. The old man's head is bandaged. They and the station master try to persuade him to come to hospital with them. Apparently he still has stitches in his head from a previous fall. They

want to get him to hospital to take them out and also to give him somewhere to spend the night, and perhaps nurture him back to something approaching health. Maybe even get him into a home. The old man, his skull entirely swathed, will have none of it. He is not going anywhere. He looks at them with hostility. There is nothing they can do. They can't kidnap him - even for his own good. They have to move on. The station master mumbles something about 'the poor old bugger' and goes back to his tasks. The old man sits there for a while but later on I see him wandering pointlessly around the station. He seems not to sleep.

It seems to me then that he will wake up the next morning wondering how he got the bandage on his head. But possibly he won't even realize he has a bandage there.

As it is my last night, I decide to splurge to ease my hunger pains. I go and buy a bucket of chips (\$1). This is the second time I have paid money out on food. I would not have paid it out except that it was my last night and the encroaching hunger pains might have kept me awake.

A man approaches me. He asks where you can get a cup of coffee. I tell him to ask the ticket checkers if he can go through the gate, there is a hot food outlet inside. He is a wizened man with a contorted, crooked-toothed face such as Charles Laughton carried to extremes to portray Quasimodo. His trousers are worn thin from constant usage - the grime seems to be ingrained into the actual fabric. It would be months since they were washed. He has a noticeable humped back. He is not more than 4'10". When he shambles off, he leaves behind a fetid odour - it strikes me as a mixture of metho, stale urine and perhaps other excretions. In the many hours of looking at sad figures, he is the most sad of all.

He, like me, sleeps that night on a bench in Central Station.

I want to go to the toilet, have a leak, brush my teeth, fill up the drink containers I have scavenged with water in case of thirst during the night. However, I have commandeered for myself a bench in a good position - laughable comment - it is just not as bad as some other positions. Somebody might come and take it over. Still it has to be done. When I emerge from the toilet, my bench has been taken over. Someone else is sitting on it and will sleep on it. I find another one in a similar position. Except it wobbles. Everytime I move during the night it is bound to make heaps of noise and disturb me - and other people. I tear up some of Tuesday's newspaper which I still have, fold it and use it to stop the bench's wobbles. The bench is surprising hard. Not as comfortable as wood chips. I take one of the sleeping tablets which Lulu gave me. This might help me sleep on this 'bed'. You can't lay on your side effectively. It is too hard. Laying on the back seems the best bet. Still hard and too narrow. I take off my great coat - I am quite warm. Laying down the great coat carefully - no folds- provides a measure of padding between myself and the hard, orange plastic bench. Mits to keep hands warm, beanie for head to pull down over my

eyes to block out the harsh station lighting, rolled up windcheater and a thin and now dirty haversack for a pillow - stuffed only with papers. Still the bench is hard. There is a brief internal argument about whether to take the second sleeping pill. Garry Sargeant thinks it is a bad idea. He never takes sleeping pills. But Garry Vagrant needs it. I take the second pill.

12.15 am I am woken roughly by two railway policeman. After they have moved on from me they continue to make a racket waking up other people. As it is too noisy to sleep, I make the following notes in a snaky hand:

*Suddenly I am woken by two burly policeman. 'Wake up. You're not allowed to lie down and sleep. Where you headed?'*

*'Gosford' I mumble.*

*One looks up at the timetable. 'Train leaves in two minutes.'*

*They move on to the next one. They go to the next person. They start the same spiel. I hear them say, 'If you want to sleep, go into the park and sleep.'*

*I wonder if they realize that they are sending them off to sleep with the rats and flirt with danger from muggers and light-fingered derelicts. Perhaps they don't care. I look around. Temporarily everyone is sitting up. Meanwhile I shamble over to see the clock and check out the TV-screened departure board. I shamble back. By this time, I have missed the train.*

*What a pointless exercise from beginning to end.*

*Who does it serve? Not the railways, the homeless simply sit up for a while, perhaps nodding off anew but in no time they are back in their comatose position. Result: wasted time for police, wasted sleep for the homeless, wasted taxpayers' money. What was the point of it - I have yet to fathom it out. Demeaning, petty, trivial, sadly obscene. The police are happy to push these homeless out into rat-infested and mugger-infested territory. Or have them sit blankly up.*

*Explain it to me, Station Rail Authority and Police, just what is that exerc- I found myself nodded offing and sitting up position (The two sleeping tablets) I try to resist the temptation to curl up straight away. I suspect the police will make a a revers sweep back the othe way almostimmedaty - I coul be im...*

Unable to stay awake and keep writing, I slump back down on the plastic railway seat and fall asleep almost instantly. Further into the night, I become vaguely aware that a talkative guy has sat on the seat near me and jabbars away for hours it seems to me. When, in a louder voice, he says 'Here those cunts come again', it wakes me up. I sit up and watch the two railway police stroll through, not bothering to wake up anyone who is sleeping. I lay back down and die again.

I wake up again later, this time from cold, and put on all the clothes I possess. The windcheater that was my pillow has to go on the body. Great coat on. Only a thin dirty haversack with some newspaper in it for a pillow. I don't understand

why they don't close the sliding side doors. That is where the draught seems to be coming from. Just warm enough, I fall back asleep.

## Day last

5.45am. I have woken up. I now realize why the experienced vagrants were asleep by 10pm last night. The place starts up so fucking early. At 10pm week nights, the station is quieter than it is at 5.45am in the morning. I can't get back to sleep.

Normally, I would think that the workers were bleary-eyed but they look bright-eyed to me now. The other homeless who slept in Central Station that night are looking up from sleep painfully. The noise has woken them also. Workers coming in. Cleaners and early starters. Soon the public servants on flexitime will be here.

Slowly one puts oneself back together for the day. You bless the fact that you had sleeping tablets that enabled you to sleep for six hours in one, unchanging, awkward position on a hard bench. You stagger down the toilet and splash water on your face, pass a comb through your beanie-crushed hair.

There are not yet any free eating places open for street people so I sit back down on my plastic seat and take out my note pad. This is what I write:

*I am sitting in Central in the last few hours of my time on Nowhere Street and I'm trying to draw it all together. The editor will want probably two thousand words. I will want her to run a series. It's like sending a person to another planet and asking for a fifty-word precis. That might be a lot easier in a way. Because the sad and overpowering things is that this is our world. I feel tempted to use the phrase 'a secret world' but it's not secret. It's there in the parks, and on railway benches, sitting in city gutters.*

*It's not secret. What you do behind closed doors, that's secret. These people live their lives in public places. The only privacy they get is when they turn the knob on the toilet door. Not even showers are private.*

*Yes, you have secret lives. People on Nowhere Street live the most public lives of all. We will them to make it a secret. We look the other way. We cross the street. We sidestep them when they ask us for forty cents. In our hearts, we want them to live their lives and suffer their hunger pangs in places we can't see them.*

*Unexpectedly, I find myself thinking about the become-a-foster-parent-for-overseas-children. I imagine a comedy sketch: 'Adopt a vagrant. Yes, for just three dollars a day, you can adopt one of these people. You will receive a photo and get monthly reports on their downhill progress.' Or just maybe it would be an uphill progress. Or at least freedom from hunger pains and the cold.*

*Does Sydney have a heart? Oh yes, an enormous heart. It spreads from the Wayside Chapel, through the Hare Krishna Iskcon Food and Drug Relief Centre, the St Vincents' Matthew Talbot refuge for homeless men, down to Surry Hills*

*and the Sydney City Mission and the Salvos. It beats in the Lady of Snows soup kitchen. The sign there that apologizes for being understaffed and could guests please assist by returning trays to the kitchen. The heart beats in those Aborigines who took me under their wing for three days and called me brother and looked after me.*

*The heart beats in all those counsellors and volunteers and charity fundraisers and anyone who donates their time or a few bucks to back up the Saints of Nowhere Street.*

*And when you close your bedroom door and put your head on your Tontine pillow with the clean pillow case, I hope you'll ask yourself whether you're part of the heart which beats in the City and other Sydneys and keeps life pumping through the veins of the city's homeless. Or whether you'll roll over and not think about all the clothes you have in your wardrobe which you have not worn for months and won't wear for two months to come, while right at that moment someone is shivering in a T-shirt in a city park.*

*You lie comfortable in your locked-up home; what other people call home is a park, a squat, a piece of rubber hidden away during the day to provide padding at night.*

*This isn't objective journalism is it? It's not detached, dispassionate or objective. Probably the editor won't like it. And won't realize how irrelevant that is. You see down here on Nowhere Street, things like objectivity and detachment don't have a very high profile. You don't think about objectivity when you have to queue up for a charity feed. You try not to think about it at all. Objectivity is a nice middle-class concept that you can afford when you know where you will sleep that night and know that you can pay for your next meal.*

*So now I've got to stop writing, try and prop somewhere they can give me breakfast and kill time until I can get into the Herald Building at 9am. I wanted to start work at 7.30 but my editor wouldn't get out of her comfy warm bed and arrange me to get in that early. She comes in at 1 am Later on the 2pm deadline will come around and she will abuse me for not finishing quickly enough or having too much material for the space allocated. And somehow I don't give a stuff about her worries.*

*What do you need to survive on Nowhere Street? Not food. There are places to get food for free. Whatever warmth you can carry - blankets in a bag, I suggest. My great coat was too obvious. It made me a target because people coveted it. What you really need is sleeping tablets. A couple every night to help you sleep through the snores and door-slamming of refuge dormitories, to help you sleep on the uncomfortable hardness of railway seats, and get back to sleep after railway guards have woken you, to help you sleep in the park when the rats scurry over you, to help you sleep on woodchips.*

**7.10 am**

Time to look for breakfast. I put away the scraps of paper that I have been writing my notes on.

Leaving Central Station, I head for the Lady of Snows soup kitchen. There is a drunk there. Surprisingly cheerful, he says, 'The soup kitchen doesn't open until seven-thirty.' He has no trouble recognizing me as a vagrant.

I decide to look for the Salvation Army place that has been vaguely indicated to me. I walk past Belmore Park where I drank last night with the Aborigines. There are bottles lying where we threw them. But no-one slept there that night.

The Salvation Army place lies in a dingy sidestreet just off Elizabeth Street. It seems to have collected decades of grime and smoke. Outside of it stands Wayne, the New Zealander who I met in my first hours on the street, the one I sat next to when waiting to get into the Missionbeat refuge, Swanton Lodge. He has not yet made it to Queensland. He wears the same tasteless green shirt and faded jeans, the same revolting, blue, pointed suede boots. But he is clean-shaven now. He talks to another man; he is outlining his plans: he wants to get a flat in Sydney.

We exchange cursory hellos. I must look dreadful because he asks me where I stayed last night. Central Station. He can't understand why I didn't stay in Swanton Lodge or this place - which is obviously where he stayed. Ducking the question, I say, 'Somebody told me you can get a free feed around here.' He directs me to a doorway across the street. The darkness of the doorway is almost indistinguishable from the grime of the walls. I head for breakfast. A final glance back at Wayne. Already I am forgotten and he goes back to talking about his plans to the other man. A flat in Sydney. At least he still has plans.

'Is it possible to get a meal here if you don't have any money?'

'Sure. Take a meal ticket.'

A plastic chip. An improvement on the paper squares at Matthew Talbot. There is only one other person in front of me and not many eating. I see the man put his chip into a cardboard box full of them. He gets served two sausages and a mash of potato, diced carrots and peas. I put my chip into the box.

'Could I possibly have no sausages and a double serving of potato?'

'Where's your meal ticket?' says the man aggressively. He has short hair and thick features. He is about six foot tall.

'I just put it in the box.'

'Well I didn't hear it.'

'I'm sorry but I did.'

'Hu.'

In part it is my fault. I'd noted before that you had to make sure you were seen when you put the ticket or token in the container, otherwise there can be pointless problems.

He serves me what I ask for. Later I discover he is rude to everyone. Perhaps he is a grudging volunteer who lives in the Salvo hostel.

I notice that men go up to a T-chest and fish out pieces of bread. After I put my meal at a table, I go up there and fish out a piece of bread. There is also three-quarters of a weathered croissant which I take out, feeling that I have got myself a real treat. It slides down easily but the potato-and-vegetable mash is so salty that I can barely eat it. It burns my throat. I try to plough through it but I give up and go to get myself some wheatbix and milk. The wheatbix do not emerge from a neat cardboard container; they are in a huge bin. Chipped and cracking, the wheatbix look as though they have been thrown there. Probably they are factory discards or something. I go to serve myself but a man intervenes his body and serves them to me. 'Not too much milk. Thanks.'

Someone comes in. They won't serve him. It's too late. Breakfast finishes at 7.30. He will probably go hungry until lunchtime. That explains why there are so few people there. Already eaten.

The people serving have started to clean up the few worn laminex tables already. The rude man who served me is abusing someone to hurry up, not to play with his food but bloody eat it.

On the way out, there is a man at a desk with medicines in front of him. They are medicines for the residents of the Salvo hostel. They can't be trusted with their own medicine. It is dished out to them by the people who work there.

I go to walk out but am directed out through a small side door. The main entrance is closed to stop more people wandering in for a feed.

It is time to leave the street. As I pass Central Station, there are some of my Aboriginal street friends on a bench near one of the entrances. I can spot Uncle Jerry's distinctively dark black skin and Uncle Herbie's white hair and stubble. I turn the corner to avoid them, unwilling to be seen, unwilling to have to explain why I didn't catch that train further north, unwilling to have to tell them one more lie and, finally, unwilling to stay a part of Nowhere Street.

The article

At 8am I walk off the street and into the newspaper offices. It is a different world - glass, plastic, elevators, quiet. A clean man behind a clean desk. I tell him my story and that I have to get to work on a computer which a section editor has left logged on for me. He surprises me by believing my story. He is an ex-policemen. He looks about fifty. Probably, he looks the age he is. That is unusual on the street. There, almost everyone looks older than they are.

However, there is a security guard whose job it is to be suspicious. I understand that. I am rifling around in my haversack trying to find the now dingy scrap of paper with the relevant editor's home number on it. Eventually, it turns up and he goes off to phone her. He keeps apologizing but he keeps checking up on the story of this destitute, oily and unkempt person from the street. I go up to a toilet. When I come back, he is now satisfied. He apologizes

again as we get into the elevator. I could have been anyone. He has telephoned the editor but he has also checked up that the number he phoned was actually her home number. 'It could have been just anybody at the other end of the phone saying, "Yes, it's all right".' I agree with him.

He walks me around to the Times section. I am horrified at the waste of space we pass through. A huge unused hall - dozens of men could have slept there.

The office is totally deserted. It is rich with clean objects: computer terminals, pens, paper, posters, clean carpet. Even the garbage bins seem clean. The terminal is on. It reads: 'Do not use this terminal unless you are Gary Sargent'.

I drop my haversack and great coat on the floor near the terminal, anxious to start work. The security guard, now helpful, wants to show me where the coffee is. It is in a kitchen area perhaps thirty or so metres away. I find that I cannot bring myself to walk that far away from my sad haversack. It is too much of a wrench. For over three days it has been my only possession. In daytime it has held all my worldly goods, never leaving my shoulder. At night-time it has been my pillow. To leave it for only a few seconds is to risk losing everything I own. I make up an excuse to take it with me - something about going on to the toilet. It is still a physical wrench to walk away from the army great coat.

The security guard leaves and I sit down in front of the word processor. The system is a pain, different to what I am used to, and the capital shift on the left hand side does not work, causing frequent outbursts of swearing from me. But the words come easily, too easily.

*Three nights on Nowhere Street*  
by Garry Sargeant

*I walk out of the newspaper building. It is about 4pm and I realize that I don't know the first thing about being homeless. Perhaps that sounds stupid, doesn't it. But you see out on the street there are the information rich and the information poor. The ones who have been there a while know the lurks. They know where there are free feeds, where the safer places are to sleep. I knew nothing. I was already tired... ... I gather up my haversack and head down to the van. I ask: 'Can you take me somewhere?' 'Where do you want to go?' 'Anywhere.'*

And so it goes, pouring out. The first night in the refuge... Wayne the homeless, drifting New Zealander... Kevin the Aborigine who has a gaol sentence waiting for him back in Adelaide. But I realize that I am not on top of it. The words are pouring out of me but too many words, too many words and not enough structure.

But the words on Kevin and Wayne, they will be okay. Whatever the final structure of the article, I can paste them in.

The newspaper workers start to drift in. Clean people from their clean homes. Somehow they ignore me, not saying hello to this depleted oily vagrant

thumping away furiously on a word processor. I have become one of the invisibles.

The photographer comes in with some ten-by-eights of the photos he took. There is one good one of me eating Hare Krishna food on the street with the drunk. It is a good strong shot. There is a strangely undramatic shot of Dave being picked up by the Missionbeat people. There is one of me drinking with the Aborigines in Belmore Park - except that 'me' is actually a blur because I was turning my head - his film was not fast enough. 'I am all blurred,' I point out. 'That's all right,' he replies.

The section editor comes in early. It is about 9.30 am. My suggestion is that she should run a series of three articles about it. She dismisses the suggestion. That's right, I think to myself, one short article and that will be the last the Times runs on International Year of the Homeless - they will have done their bit. It will be all forgotten about.

Three hours of the experience pouring itself out into the word processor and I still haven't got a workable concept to turn it into a mere two thousand words. The editor is toey - she wants to get me off her word processor but there is not another one available. Finally I have a concept, a tone for the article. I write a new beginning.

*Three nights on Nowhere Street*  
by Garry Sargeant

*I spent three days on the street. Actually, time there is not measured in days. It is measured in nights - where you spent the last night and where you are going to spend the next. Other than that you are nowhere or anywhere. These are the refuges and the parks and railway stations. 'The homeless' And yet, as I am to find out, in many ways they are not homeless - instead they have pathetic excuses for homes. They have a bed and a locker in a refuge. That's the lucky ones. Others have a particular park that they feel safe sleeping in. One Aborigine referred to a small park as 'my park'. An old lady at King's Cross has set herself up with half of a long bed. She has her mattress, blankets, suitcase, umbrella. It is her home. And the Aboriginal kids I met up there had 'the squat'. Some abandoned building in the Cross whose location they didn't reveal. And there are the daytime 'homes', the park benches where the Aborigines drink, the day care centres in refuges, the lawns where you can get the warm sleep you missed out on the night before.*

*I came to think of it as 'Nowhere Street' as that seemed to be where all the people I met were.*

*For three nights and days, I lived in Nowhere Street. I went there with twelve dollars in my pocket and came back with four. That was because I learnt the very first rule of the street: you don't buy food. The second, less strict rule: you don't pay for accommodation. You see, apart from the cripples - and I know the polite word is 'disabled' - apart from the sad crippled cases with the missing hands, the*

*club foot, the ones with missing hands and missing limbs. Apart from these, all the long-term homeless I met were addicts. Not drug addicts usually. A lot were addicted to alcohol. Some were gambling addicts. The young ones up the Cross were addicted to the fast thrill - whether it was a fight, or grog, or a quick fuck with someone whose name they didn't know. And virtually everyone was addicted to cigarettes. It is these addictions that you spend money on. Not stupid things like accommodation or food. In three days and nights, I spent \$1.45 on food. Forty-five cents for a cup of soup and, on my last night, a big lash-out - one dollar on a bucket of chips. And I only spent that because I knew I was going to come in the next morning.*

*It is almost a matter of pride not to spend anything on food. You would rather put up with hunger pangs - your addiction is more important. There were times I was hungry. There were times when I could feel my stomach acids burning painfully inside me. But I didn't buy food because the homeless don't. They hold out and wait until one of the free meals become available at the Salvos or St Vincent de Pauls. And if these places didn't serve food? These people would be forced to buy food instead of grog, wouldn't they? No. They'd just try to drown the hunger pains in drink and waste away.*

*What about accommodation? I spent my first night in a refuge - the Swanton Lodge run by the Sydney City Mission. I spent my second night sleeping with an Aboriginal couple in what they called 'The Starlight Hotel' - a small park in Woolloomooloo. I spent my third night sleeping in Central Station.*

*In three days, I was bombarded by a book's worth of pain and fear, loneliness and also camaraderie and generosity and friendliness. But I can't tell you all that here. I have just literally walked off the street and sit writing this with five day's worth of beard and four day old clothes that smell. I sit at the terminal and write this barefooted because I cringe when I have to put on my socks which are slimy with bodily crunge.*

*I would like to tell you how I broke down and cried when I was interviewed to get into the Sydney refuge. Oh yes, I've trained as an actor. But I didn't need much motivation then. I was lonely, I was broke, I was ashamed at having to ask for charity. I cried again after the St Vincent de Paul refuge gave me my best meal for many days - chicken leg and a chicken wing, potatoes, pumpkin, celery and warm tea. I slumped in the shower recess and felt tears well up because these people had shown me kindness and helped me out, not asking for anything back and not questioning whether I needed it. And because, God, I really did need that shower. And I was so grateful that they had trusted me with a clean towel, the cleanest thing I touched in those three days and gave me a cake of soap. And I cried inside after I finally found the Hare Krishna 'Iskcon Food Relief and Drug Referrals Centre' and they told me that I could get a free meal there because I was hungry and tired and these good people were prepared to help me*

*out without asking questions or trying to make me feel guilt or gratitude even though I did feel gratitude.*

*Because I can't tell you all that happened to me, I can only give you glimpses of what I saw of the real homeless.*

*Margaret*

*I met Margaret when I was sitting outside the Wayside Chapel. She asked me if she had come to the right place. She had the name 'Wayside Chapel' scribbled on an envelope...*

Finally the tone is right - it is the right tone to bring it in on two thousand words, but the editor is getting anxious. 'You've got three and a half thousand words already.' I didn't realize that the screen gave a running word total. I am not surprised that the total is that high. Trouble is that a lot of all those are the wrong words. She transfers me over to another machine. She tells me I've got to one o'clock then she wants to work through it with me. I thought I had until two. It gives me only another hour. I set myself up at the other machine and thump furiously.

*I write of Margaret. I write of the fight in King's Cross. I write about Mick.*

*Mick is twenty. He is strong and he, more than anyone takes me under his wing. He is a good bloke...*

*Mick and Apples look after me. They take me down to the small park in Woolloomooloo where they have a piece of foam rubber they sleep on. They have two blankets. During the night I wake up shivering. I don't feel exactly cold but I have got the shivers. Mick lets me have the other spare blanket. He is a good man to have as a mate.*

*After we wake up in the morning, the early morning drunks gather around and we find that someone sleeping out in the open got stabbed that night.*

*I suppose it would be great if I had some moving message to finish off with - something clever to tell you how you can help the helpers - the Salvos, St Vincent de Paul, the Krishnas - something to make you feel guilty. I don't because I feel guilty. I feel guilty about the bed I occupied when someone who really needed it missed out and I feel guilty about the free meals I had. But most of all I feel guilty about the lies I told - to the counselor who watched me cry, to the people I got free meals out of, but most of all I feel guilty about lying to those great people - the Aborigines and others who took me in and showed me the ropes of where to sleep and get a feed. God know how I would have coped without them. They are good people out there among the homeless. They deserve better than my lies and society's contempt.*

It is ten to one. The tone for the article works. It is still a bit scattered. The word total reads 4,358 words. Way too much but most of what I wrote before the second start needs to be discarded. Some of it can be cut and pasted. The stuff on Kevin and Wayne could be pulled from the earlier section and pasted

into the final article. Another hour with it and I could have it in real shape. But I'm tired. And my time is supposedly up.

Dutifully, I tell the section editor that it's sort of ready. It is another twenty minutes before she sits down with me to go through it. I try to explain to her about the second start but she shushes me. 'Just let me read it,' she scans it hastily. 'This is where it really starts.' She finishes reading it. 'Well what about all that stuff beforehand?' I explain to her that some of it can be cut and pasted. I envisage an article with sub-headings. Wayne. Margaret. Mick.

Ironically I realize that if I'd still been on the street I would have had a shower and eaten by now. I am starving hungry. It is 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The editor tells me how to get to the canteen. She wants a sandwich too.

The canteen is on another floor. It is rich with the smell of newly-made food. Real food and I can actually spend money on it. I have already been given back the money and other things I left in the office.

Back in the office, I sit on the floor with yesterday's newspaper and read, while the article is edited. 'Stay there so I can ask you questions.' I know that, given an hour, I could have probably knocked it into shape. But that hour doesn't exist. I'm too tired. I thought that at 2 o'clock I would be heading home but two has come and gone and I'm still there. The editing process is frequently interrupted. Someone wants to ask about a letter to go on the letters page. 'I edit the letters page as well.'

She asks me what the refuge was like. 'It was like a tired hospital. A neglected, forgotten hospital,' she writes in The refuge is like a forgotten hospital.

I mention that I want to change the names in the article. The editor is horrified by the suggestion. 'That's the sort of nonsense the Truth gets up to. "Someone who we will call ...."'

'I would have thought the names were the only unimportant part of the article.'

'No. No. You've got to have real names. All these names are the real names, aren't they?'

'All except the New Zealander, Wayne. I can't remember his.'

'You've got to remember it, Garry.'

'I can't.'

'Go for a pee, you'll remember it.'

I pace around. Trouble is, deep down, I don't want to remember it. He had broken the law, driving an unregistered car without a licence. I don't want to put his name in print.

'You remembered it yet?'

'No. Sorry.'

'Go for a pee, you'll remember it.'

So I go for a leak. I had always imagined that I could change the names at the last minute - no trouble on a word processor. Change all 'Kevin' to 'Ian'. Easy. It

seems wrong to print these people's names. I hadn't presented myself to them as a reporter. It seems like an invasion of their privacy to print their names. Why couldn't the names be changed? All details of this article are accurate except names have been changed to respect the individual's privacy. But it wasn't going to happen that way.

'Did you remember his name?' she asks me when I come back.

'Sorry. Nothing.'

A woman comes around and reads the first part of the article. I am not introduced. The woman says, 'It's depressing.' 'Is that good that it's depressing?' I ask, but the editor cuts across with a question of her own, 'Can our readers take depression?' The woman nods and the editing process is resumed.

'Your spelling is good,' the editor comments. I take this as meaning that other aspects are questionable. But then again, perhaps I'm being paranoid; tiredness is making me jumpy. Worse, knowing that I am tired, I can't trust my judgements - not of what I've written, not of the people around me.

After a while and the occasional questions, it slowly dawns on me that she is not editing my article; she is re-writing it. I put my tiredness to one side and sit next to her through the second half of the article, trying to stop her doing as much as possible.

'It's all a bit of a rush, isn't it?' I ask.

'I like working like this.'

I couldn't say the same. The editor was an addict like all the people I met on the street. Except she was addicted to the socially advantageous contagion of 'stress' - the pressure of deadlines that enables you to get that shot of adrenalin, rush around at a hypered-up level and give you the illusion (and sometimes the reality) of importance and accomplishment. I never met anybody on the street who wasn't stressed - the body absorbs stress through the noise, the tiredness, the hunger, the cold. But theirs was the stress of placelessness.

The process goes on - she trying to alter what I wrote, and me trying to change it the way I would like it to go. When she is called away on some other task I jump into the seat and add what I can. Some sentences on how Rossi grabbed me by the coat.

*'Give me coat.'* He kept tugging at the collar. *'Give me coat.'* I tell him that I need it because I have got to sleep out. He is obviously drunk. He grabs me by the collar and starts tugging again, *'Give me coat. Give me coat.'* I tell him I can't and Mick and the others back me up. They tell him that I'm all right... The next day I meet him when he's sober. We get on well and drink together. We discover that we're both all right.

The editor comes back horrified that I am adding things. 'No, you'll like this. It's important,' she is doubtful until she reads it.

'There's too much for an article,' I say, as she deletes another paragraph. 'I think I'm definitely going to write it as a book.'

‘Hope you’re going to dedicate it to me,’ she says, tapping away at my article. I look at her as she continues to tap away at the word processor terminal. She is serious. ‘It was my idea.’

‘I thought I might dedicate it to Mick and the other homeless people who helped me on the street.’

‘Hmm.’

Someone else demands her attention. I jump into the seat to try to write a paragraph near the end.

*When I finally come to leave Nowhere Street, I leave Mick and Apples and Uncle Jerry with emotional farewells. I have told them I am hitching further north - trying to get on a late train out to Gosford that I won't have to pay for. They want to take me down to a refuge and make sure I get a bed for the night. Nobody wants to sleep out after the stabbing - and they like to go into a refuge every few days anyway. I know that they wouldn't let me go and sleep at the railway station which is where I do sleep. They are good people and they look after their friends. Mick tells me that I am welcome anytime and that I'm all right as far as he is concerned. He has been a good mate to me and I tell him so. We clasp hands and hug. I will miss him.*

A man comes around. Twenties. Clean-shaven. Blow-waved blond hair. Jacket. Board in hand. Could only be a graphic designer and is. A discussion of the title crops up. It amazes me that it is even subject to discussion. I know that editors live to change titles but my title seems so strong that I can't imagine why it would be up for grabs. ‘Three Nights on Nowhere Street,’ I say. The graphic designer likes it. ‘What about “Lonely Street”?’ suggests the editor. ‘Nah. Some of the homeless have more friends than you or I ever will - especially the Aborigines. Three nights on Nowhere Street,’ I repeat. ‘Three days on Lonely Street,’ she suggests. ‘Three Nights on Nowhere Street,’ I repeat. The graphic designer repeats that he likes the Nowhere Street title. The editor rushes off to check the title out with someone else. I jump in front of the terminal to add some key words. She rushes back. Yes, Three Nights on Nowhere Street. The graphic designer suggests that he has a great lettering for the title. ‘Show it to me,’ she says as she plonks herself in front of the terminal again.

I have written: *Mick's mother was an Aboriginal. His father came from the south island of New Zealand. When Mick was just a kid, his father killed his mother... He only got two years for it. Like many of the Aborigines on the street, Mick was fostered out.*

The editor wants to re-write it to read : ‘Like many homeless Aborigines, Mick was fostered out,’ somehow I manage to stop her. I point out that this makes it sound like Aborigines are fostered out when they become homeless (i.e., when their parents die or disappear) whereas the case might be in the opposite - because they were fostered out, they ultimately became homeless (ie, vagrant).

Most of the vagrant Aborigines I met seem to have been fostered out but not because their parents had died. It is one of the few I win.

Some sentences are definitely improved. She puts in her two cents worth; I change it back to something closer to what I originally said; the two-way process gives a final result that is better. But there is not time to be fussy. She sends off the first half of the article to be type-set while we are still working on the second half. I had been under the illusion that I might get to read it and check it but the computer sends it off never to be modified again, never read by me before it goes to print.

The editor says that she is getting nervous. It is approaching 4 o'clock. That must be some absolute deadline. She rushes off to check the article with the Editor of the Times. In no time at all she is back. He liked it.

Suddenly, it is over. Slash, there goes a paragraph. Slash. There goes two more paragraphs. It is entered into the computer. It's over. There's nothing more that can be done. Four o'clock.

I am quietly grieving. All the rest I could take. All the changing of my style, the journalising it up. That I could take. But she has cut out what I consider to be the key paragraph on the Aborigines, a key paragraph that comes just after the fight in the Cross where they bashed up some gubbs.

*There is a code, you see. The Fitzroy Gardens is their home and they feel they have a right to defend it with violence against any gubb that they think is giving them cheek. But they are good to me. They share their beer and wine with me. Mick is abusing shit out of John and threatening to give him a hiding for popping pills. 'You can be a drunk. That's okay. It's okay to be a drunk. But you start popping pills and I'll give you such a hiding. I oughta take you over there and give you a hiding right now.' That is part of the code too: grog, no needles, no pills. They also abuse their Aboriginal mates who are getting too wobbly and try to get them in the detox programme.*

This paragraph is cut in the final rush to meet the wordspace. Somehow I feel that without it, the whole picture of the Aborigines and their fight in the Cross and their way of life is unbalanced. It hurts. It hurts me and I feel that it hurts them.

And yet for all I can tell in the blur of tiredness, the editor has done a brilliant job - I can't say I supplied her with neat copy. I certainly didn't. Probably she has done a job of which most editors would be proud, completely professional. And yet it just seems wrong.

The editor wants to keep me in mind 'in case I get any other crazy ideas'. She mentions something about doing an article on gay bars. 'Do I have to go to bed with one of them?' 'No, that would be optional.'

I think about asking her about the *Times on Sunday* sending money to the places I got free meals from - the Hare Krishnas, Matthew Talbot, Swanton

Lodge where I stayed, the Lady of Snows soup kitchen. Just twenty dollars each. But I'm too tired to argue.

I manage to get a print-out of the stuff I wrote before the editor got at it to make it into a journalistic article.

I have to get back to my parents' home in garden suburbia Epping and the last thing I want to do is to go back to Central Railway Station and risk running into my Aboriginal street friends whom I feel somehow that I've let down. I haven't done them justice. Maybe I even feel like I betrayed them.

'You want to shout me a taxi home,' I tell her.

'I do.' She gets a cab charge docket for me.

The person in charge of petty cash is embarrassed that she has not got ten dollars in petty cash to give me for the taxi I caught to first get to the office those three nights ago. I tell her not to worry about it. The editor tells me she will add it to my cheque. The woman is still fussed. 'You won't be short on the weekend will you?' She wants to take ten dollars out of her purse and give it to me - she will get it back out of petty cash on Monday. Obviously her eyes tell her I am a penniless derelict so I need that ten dollars. I assure her I'll be all right.

The editor hands over a cab charge docket to me. 'Be sure to make sure that the taxi takes cab charge.'

'Right.'

'Were you happy with the article?'

'Oh, I was mostly disappointed about the stuff on the Aboriginals. I thought one or two key paragraphs were left out that really gave better and fairer picture of them. Still it was all a bit of a rushed job.' That was my worry - not what was said but what wasn't.

'That's journalism,' she says, already rushing off to see to other deadlined tasks.

'Hmm.'

## Epilogues

### Friday night, 13th March

That first night back is spent at my parents' place in leafy Epping. I lay down on the bed. Something is wrong, something strange. What? It is quiet. It is actually quiet.

There are no quiet times for the homeless - neither day nor night. The refuge had cars and trucks streaming past on the street below, snoring and doors slamming spasmodically all night as men went for urine strolls. The second night was a park under a subway, beside a major road. Third night, Central Station, noisiest night of all. Quiet sleeps are a luxury for the enhomed. Research shows that stress can be picked up by the body even when you are asleep - noise causes stress that the body continues to absorb even in sleep. The homeless lead a permanently stressed existence.

### Saturday, 14th March.

I have the interview for the Dean of Studies position at Dunmore Lang College. All these kids get their meals provided. Warm rooms that they can go into whenever they want. Pot plants, carpets, photos on walls, clean. It seems like a different planet.

That night, Viola prepares a great meal for me - fish, cheese sauce, vegetables. All at once, tears want to come out again and I have to bite them back. I am back in Matthew Talbots being given a handout of chicken and vegetables. Again I feel the pain of accepting handouts, of depending on the generosity of strangers.

### Sunday, 15th March

The article comes out in the *Times on Sunday*. With disgust I note that the title has become 'Three Nights on Lonely Street'. How did this happen? They have gone with the photo of the Aborigines in which I am all blurred because I am turning my head. The caption for it reads, '*LEFT: They drink the day away in Moore Park, Sydney.*' It was, in fact, Belmore Park. I start to try to read the article. My style has been butchered around. I read, 'An old lady at Kings Cross has set herself up with half a long bed.' It should read 'half a long bench'. I throw the article onto my bed, too disgusted to keep reading.

Later I realize that this last mistake came from what I had originally typed in. With the rush, with no opportunity for me to proof it, a typographical becomes final copy.

A few days later I phone up the editor and ask why the title was changed from 'Three Nights on Nowhere Street'. She didn't know. Like me, she was unpleasantly surprised when she opened the paper on Sunday morning. 'Did the graphic designer run out of letraset "w's" to make "Nowhere"?' I ask. She offers a more disparaging reason.

### **Monday, 16th March**

2BL want to interview me on the radio. This forces me to read the article in preparation for the interview. The first half of the article to me is a disaster but the second half, when I was watching what the editor was doing over her shoulder, trying to edit her editing, seems to be a definite improvement.

Later that week, Mark, a close friend from Melbourne, phones me up and, unprompted, says that he liked the article but, 'I have to say that the second half of the article seemed a lot better than the first half.' 'Funny about that.'

People who have read it tell me they find it 'moving'. I find it disappointing, a pale reflection of what could have been serious, precise, thorough and 'real' journalism.

Peter, the radio interviewer, describes me as coming 'from Newcastle'. (Incorrect but, politely, I don't correct him.) They are running late and it is just before the news so time is limited. I make some points. I talk about slumping in the shower in Matthew Talbot, of how the emotions stir around - gratitude to the people who don't expect gratitude, loss of face at having to depend on the mercy of strangers, relief, of how the pain and tears well up to your eyes. But he has to cut me off almost in mid-sentence to go to the news. Everything is deadlines. The producer phones me back. She thought it was wonderful. 'Very moving.' I get \$65 for the interview.

People who have read the article say things like: 'You're a braver man than I am Gungadin.' I don't know how to respond. I think about people who have spent decades on Nowhere Street and just can't think how to respond.

### **Wednesday, 18th March**

I phone up the editor and mention the radio interview. She missed it - being still at work. I comment that I gave her credit for the idea. 'Never mind about me. Did you give the paper a plug? I don't need a plug, the newspaper does.' I assure her that interviewer gave the paper an enormous plug. At the end of the interview he had urged the viewers to go out and buy this week's *Times on*

*Sunday* and read 'Three Nights on Lonely Street' describing it as 'very moving'. As I say to her, 'He could not have given it a better plug if you'd paid him'. I feel a twinge of guilt as I tell her this. In approaching the interview I was concerned to raise the issue of homelessness into the minds of listeners and to get across some of the things that I felt the article should have said but didn't. It never occurred to me that I had some sort of duty to promote the article or the newspaper.

### **Saturday, 21st March**

I have a call-back interview for the Dean of Studies job at Dunmore Lang College. The chief rival for the position is there. Dan has just got back from five years in universities in Canada and the States teaching Australian literature - apparently it is a lot easier for him to get a position teaching that over there than here. He read the article. 'In a previous lifetime, I used to be a sub-editor on the National Times.' He recalls that he was once commissioned by a Newcastle paper to write an article on what it is like to spend a week on the pension. 'It is one that the editors trot out every now and then.' Dan ends up getting the job. I am pleased for him; he is okay.

### **Monday, 23rd March**

Another friend, Jeff, got hold of the article only after he happened to hear the radio interview. He says that the article struck him as 'superficial'. 'In all honesty, a lot of it could have been written without having to leave the newspaper office, couldn't it... Actually I found a lot of the things you said in the radio interview more moving.'

### **Sunday, 29th March**

Finished the first draft of this book. I wrote this for the first draft but couldn't seem to fit it in anywhere:

*The solutions do not lie in jamming people into inappropriate architecture but in coming up with architecture that suits the problem. The Aborigines really wouldn't really want a house where everyone is divided up from everyone else. They would do better with a big sheltered space with a fire in the middle that they could all sit around and share - share everything - talk, alcohol, company.*

*The solutions lie in helping the helpers. The Salvation Army is well-named. They and the others are down there fighting a war - they are fighting a war against pain. But it is very hard to win a war when the supply lines are weak. And they certainly are that. The war is fought without enough space, without*

*enough beds, and ultimately without enough people. The governments' spending on International Year of the Homeless seems to have been mainly spent on advertising on TV what a great job they do providing homes. Most of the homeless I saw have very little access to televisions to learn this - ever seen a homeless person with a TV of their own to watch? All the expensive TV ads and not one sign on one street or on one railway to tell the really homeless and destitute where to go for a free bed or a free meal. Not one free phone number that the truly broke person can phone for help.*

*Big businesses profits go up and up. Cigarette and alcohol companies pour millions of dollars into sponsoring sport. There is, apparently, no percentage in sponsoring a home for the needy. Yet a lot of the homeless I met are big sponsors of tobacco and alcohol companies.*

*And what of Mr and Mrs Suburban Garden? We plot for the next holiday or the new lounge suite or the new car and think it's important. We talk of Aussie mateship and looking after your brother. Well, there are Aussie mates sleeping cold in parks and railway stations tonight and hunger pains burning on Nowhere Street tonight. There are good people there too - people who would greet you and remember your name if you became homeless. They'd show you where to get a free meal and bed. Are they our mates, our brothers?*

*No, let's think about something else.*

### **Monday, 30th March**

Caught the train to Epping, heading for tea at my parent's place. A man stopped me as I walked down the steps from the overhead pedestrian walk. Shabby clothes, unshaven. Vagrants have made it out to garden suburbia Epping. He approaches me. 'I was wondering if you could help me....' He is well-spoken with an English accent. He shows me two dollar coins and some smaller change. He needs forty-nine cents to get a bottle of something and wonders if I would give him it.

'I would be most happy to give you forty-nine cents.'

'Ah, it's amazing. Somebody will always help you out.'

I only have forty cents in change but take out a two-dollar note and get a dollar coin back from him. He raises his right hand to near my chest. Looking down I see that three-quarters of both the middle and ring fingers are gone. 'Hitler,' he says.

I shake my head. 'Well, I'd love to stay and have a drink with you but I'm afraid I've got to rush off.'

**Monday, 13th April**

Less than a week after I gave him the second draft of the book, my agent phones me up. Tim liked it and surprises me by saying he thinks it is publishable.

He raises the question of whether the real names should be used in the book. The problem is that they have already been used in the article. It's too late now to change that fact. He agrees that, given that the book is in part about the article, the name usage has to be consistent.

**Tuesday, 21st April**

The editor phones me up, worried. Apparently she has gained the impression that I must have written 'horrible' things about her because I hadn't yet sent her a draft of the book which I had promised her a chance to look over. I explain that I wasn't going to post it (too expensive); I was going to drop it in tomorrow when I have to go down to Sydney on other matters.

I assure her that I have just written about what happened and my impressions about what happened. 'It's sort of journalism about journalism.' I tell her that I haven't even used any adjectives about her, but this assurance seems, if anything, to make her more worried.

When the conversation finally finishes, I hang up with a guilty feeling - like the feeling I had about lying to the Aborigines. It is not too often that a journalist is subject to journalism. I wonder how many people she has written about (or edited articles about) who end up feeling depressed by what they read about themselves.

And yet, I still feel a sense of guilt about it. In a sense, I ended up invading what she thought was the safe, non-public world of her newspaper office. And it was, after all, she who instigated the article and thereby did more than most about the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. I even write a late dedication to her saying that she *'had the guts to try something different to bring home the life of the homeless to the general public'*.

**Wednesday, 13th May**

I am due to give a talk at the Milperra Campus, Macarthur College. There is a seminar on homelessness - a rare event in the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. It has been organized by the Welfare Studies students. They will go on to become counsellors and welfare officers.

About two dozen people turn up. The organizers are somewhat disappointed but it doesn't surprise me. I make the observation that if it was on the starving in Africa, the two-hundred seat theatre would probably be full; we're more

comfortable hearing about the suffering in other countries than we are hearing the suffering around the corner.

Kate Houlahan talks first. She works for the Liverpool Youth Accommodation Assistance Company in Sydney's south-west. They run houses in which they place homeless youths. They conduct interviews with each of the youths so that, hopefully, they will be placed with compatible people. 'We don't want to place them in a situation where they will just fail again.' They try to teach them life skills - cooking, budgetting, etc. But, of course, there is not enough money, not enough beds available. And there is no instant, crisis accommodation in Liverpool.

Paul Moulds from Salvation Army Outreach talks. He speaks about the new sorts of homeless they are getting - more women than before, and families. Whole families suddenly becoming homeless - often on a weekend. The organisation is not geared up for families. Sometimes they simply cannot find anywhere to put them and end up having to pay for a motel to put them up.

Paul talks about the dissatisfaction with the refuge system. They would like to get away from the big refuges and set up crisis accommodation in buildings for about twenty or so people with one counselor. This would give them a proper chance to counsel them, perhaps to teach them more life skills. Of course, there is not enough money.

Finally, I get up to speak. I had decided that I couldn't contribute the depth of knowledge that these people could - all I could do was to read out excerpts from the manuscript of the book and try to take them a little into the emotions of homelessness. So I read out bits. And it starts to flood back - much more vividly than just re-reading it to myself. The refuge. The glass-eyed drunks coming in off the street for breakfast. And my voice starts cracking. I keep sipping at the glass of water - it gives me a pause to compose myself. The kids up the Cross. The old man falling down and bleeding in Central Station. Finally, I read out the notes that I made on my last few hours on the street. *'Yes, you have secret lives. People on Nowhere Street live the most public lives of all. We will them to make it a secret. We look the other way. We cross the street. We sidestep them when they ask us for forty cents.'* I'm having real troubles soldiering through. My voice is cracking badly. I have to stop, look away from the microphone and take a deep breath. 'I'm sorry about this. But it's like living a lifetime - someone else's lifetime - in three days.' Finally I manage to make it to my rehearsed end. *'What do you need to survive on Nowhere Street? Not food. There are places to get food for free... What you really need is sleeping tablets. A couple every night to help you sleep through the snores and door-slamming of refuge dormitories, to help you sleep on the uncomfortable hardness of railway seats, and get back to sleep after railway guards have woken you, to help you sleep in the park when the rats scurry over you, to help you sleep on woodchips.'*

I start to sit down and somehow it seems there is a long pause before people are sure that they should applaud.

There are questions. Someone asks me how I would have gone if I had had to spend two weeks there. 'The reality is that it would have got a lot easier. You get better at it. In fact I made it a lot harder on myself than it had to be. I could have just stayed in the refuge.'

Responding to a question, Paul and Kate agree that one of the big problems is accommodation for young people aged eighteen to twenty-five. Youth accommodation runs out at eighteen, though many slightly older youths lie about their age to get in. But eighteen to twenty-five is an age where people can do a lot of damage to themselves and pick up a lot of bad habits.

Kate says that Liverpool has their Pebbles and Bam-bams too. The pregnant fifteen-year-olds with their older boyfriends are difficult to help, 'Because, on top of everything else, it's carnal knowledge with a minor, isn't it.'

A girl asks me if I felt that they had to go and live like a homeless person to understand them. She is young, healthy, probably eighteen. I couldn't recommend it to her - too dangerous. I tell her to buy the book if it ever finds a publisher. She wants to know if they need to experience the pain to understand it or whether it might be better not to let in the pain. 'That's the challenge of your chosen career. On one hand you've got to be able to distance yourself from the pain or go crazy. On the other hand, their pain is the only reason you're doing it.'

I am embarrassed by my display of emotion and, after the seminar ends, apologize for it but the others think it was all right.

Afterwards there are sandwiches for the speakers and organizers. I discuss a major thing that I feel is missing - signs that tell you where to go if you are homeless and free phone numbers. Kate recalls a phone call she had in which she recommended the person to phone another number but the girl had replied: sorry, I don't have thirty cents. She spent her last cent making that phone call to Kate.

I mention that the only sign I saw was the Salvation Army number in Central Station. 'Do you know how much that sign costs us?' Paul laments.

'Don't they realize that it's in their interests to have information like that around the station?' I ask, 'The railways should have maps up showing people where the refuges are. The city councils have to realize that it is in their interests to have signs up showing the homeless where they can get free meals and food.'

The welfare students wonder if they could do anything about it - write letters to Sydney City Council about signposts, and write to the railways. And I wonder out loud if the book or another article I have in mind ('No signs in Nowhere Street') might have some sort of effect.

**Thursday, 21st May**

I have just got off the phone from listening to the editor. She wasn't too happy with the book, putting it mildly.

Among other grievances, she feels that what I had written was inaccurate. She tells me that she doesn't recall suggesting a name-change for the article. She doesn't say I am wrong, she doesn't recall it. It was two months ago.

She tells me that things said between an editor and journalist are 'sacred'. 'If you don't understand how newspapers work then that's your problem... I thought how silly I was to approach someone who was unprofessional in the first place. The sort of things you went through, professional journalists go through all the time... Also you're extremely sanctimonious in the book.' She wants her name and the photographers' names deleted from the book.

I put it to her that when I went into the world of the homeless, they had their world invaded, that they hadn't had a chance to have their names change. She tells me, 'That was your decision, your responsibility.'

Later that day a decision is reached not to use the real names of the editor or the photographer from the newspaper.

Apparently the only world that journalists aren't allowed to investigate is the world of journalism.

**Friday, 29th May, 3.30pm**

It is my fifth attempt to find Mick and Apples this week. I kept going back to Belmore Park but, unbelievably, they weren't there. Neither was Uncle Jerry or Uncle Herbie or Dave or even Lulu. 'We always here.' But not now.

Perhaps they had moved homes for winter. Perhaps I'd left my attempt to see them too late. I'd been putting it off, of course. When I first got off the street, I missed them. For the first few days, I would look at the clock, knowing that they would be down in the park drinking and feeling how good it would be sharing a drink with my mates - feeling that I should be there with them.

Viola, my girlfriend (now ex-girlfriend), had wanted to meet them and have a drink with them. We had even scheduled it in for one Saturday morning but it didn't happen.

There was always some reason to put it off. But, of course, the real reason was fear. I didn't know how they'd take the article. Worse, I didn't know if they'd seen the article. At least if they'd seen it, they would have had time to come to terms with the fact that another gubb had lied to them. But if they hadn't seen it then I'd have to expose myself as a liar. Maybe I'd cop a hiding. And who could blame them for that.

But now the book had been accepted for publication and I couldn't put it off any longer.

Searching for Mick, I walk down from the Cross, past Fitzroy Gardens. John is there and Mouse but they won't remember me - to them, I'm invisible. Again down the snakes and ladders of Woolloomooloo streets, towards Matthew Talbot refuge, through the park where we slept in the open, turning the corner, there is Mick. He is sitting outside Matthew Talbot refuge on a car park rail with Apples and four other Aborigines, drinking wine. His face lights up when he sees. 'Garry.'

'Where you been, my darling?' asks Apples.

'Up north.' I say, taking a flagon of port out of my haversack. They are delighted to see it and more delighted to see me. We grasp hands and I kiss Apples. 'You saw the article when it came out and the photos?'

'Yeah. We were all in it, hey. Uncle Jerry, the lot of us. We're all in it.' They actually bought a copy.

'You know I wrote it.'

'Yeah.'

I take a can of beer out of my haversack. 'Aren't you drinking monkey blood?' asks Mick, referring to the port.

'This is just to wash the dust out of my throat. I've only got the one can.'

Apples hits me for some change to get some food later on. I empty all the change out of my pockets, about two dollars' worth. Later she will use it to help buy dinner for herself and her large jovial younger sister, Adeline, down from Queensland. Dinner is a chicken roll each. It's an unusual name Adeline. It is my mother's middle name.

Soon I am sitting down with Mick and Apples and we drink port from shared polystyrene cups. They were surprised that I turned out to be a reporter. 'Didn't you resent me for not telling you?' 'Nah,' says Mick. He is just happy to see me. They got a big kick out of the article.

I tell them about the book and, taking out the draft, show them that it is dedicated to them. They are rapt.

Apples hair is tinted red and so is Mick's hair and beard. 'Look what she did to me.' 'It suits you. Looks good.'

Now that it's cold, Apples is staying in a women's refuge and Mick is staying in squats with others, lighting fires to keep warm, huddling together under the couple of blankets they have. They don't have as many blankets as they did. They lost their swags. While they were inside Matthew Talbot eating, someone set fire to them - blankets, clothes, shoes, the lot. 'The fire truck came round and everything.'

Nobody has any smokes, so I volunteer to go to the shop across the road to buy a pack. Mick doesn't want to take the whole pack off me. 'What're you going to smoke?' 'Don't smoke. You know that.'

We talk about the others. Uncle Herbie is in detox; so is Dave. So is Irish. Lulu has gone north, back to her husband. Uncle Jerry is in Griffith. Winter is a good

time to go north or into detox. The kid's up the Cross are just the same though. Chris, I am surprised to learn, is actually twenty-two - older than Mick.

We talk about the article. They correct one mistake, the guy who had grabbed my coat wasn't 'John' as I called him in the article, it was 'Rossi'.

Anytime any of the others there say anything slightly negative towards me, Mick jumps in and says, 'Listen, he knows what it's all about. He lived with us for three days. He slept with us in that park over there.'

One guy is particularly drunk and not sure about me because I am a gubb. He asks me not to mention his name and starts singing an anthem of urban blacks. I get him to repeat it until I can write it down. In his alcohol-slurred voice, this is what he half-sung:

Wake up, white man  
 Now, the white man's taken all our land,  
 Leaving us nothing 'cept empty hands.  
 Can't get jobs because we're black.  
 We're rated second-class people and that's a fact.  
 When all we want is land and recognition,  
 Not to be drunk and thrown in prison.  
 Now white man wonders why we all fight  
 When all we want is just land rights.  
 So when our race begins to die,  
 And all our elders start to cry,  
 Please white man just realize,  
 The hurt you brought to the black man's eyes.

Mick tells me he was really surprised to find that all the things he told me about himself we're in the article. Mick tells me he was a year old when his mother died. 'My father thought she'd been playing round. So he took her out to an airplane strip and pointed a shotgun at her head and shot her.'

It turns out that Mick and I went to the same high school - Epping Boys' High. I went there for my last three years of high school and was dux of the school. Years after I left, Mick went there for a year. 'I still hold the record for the youngest person there to play first grade.' He was fourteen. But then his foster parents moved - again. 'They were always jetting off overseas.' Or shifting around - North Sydney, Marsfield, Pymble. After Epping Boys' High, he went on to Turrumurra High and had three fights on his first day. Crunched a couple of jaws and broke a nose. Soon he was only turning up to school on sportsdays and the school was preparing to expel him. He left the school for three years in King's Cross and, when seventeen, back to Darwin where he was born to do construction work. Very soon, he was a foreman. But it didn't last and he came back to Sydney.

He had turned twenty-one since I'd seen. He had on a digital watch - a birthday present from Apples.

I give them the rough draft of the book and copies of the article, encouraging them to note any mistakes they find. I give them my phone number so that they can phone me, reverse charges. Apples starts reading out bits of the book. 'Yeah. Remember that?' says Mick, delightedly. I read out the part about the fight in the Cross and how they have a code about not copping cheek from gubbs and not popping pills. 'Is that all right?' I ask. 'That's the way it is, hey,' says Mick.

I apologize for the article, saying that I wasn't happy with it, that important parts of it had been cut out. 'But they always do that in the media, hey,' says Mick, 'They chop pieces of the truth out.'

At 5.40pm, Mick and I go into the Matthew Talbot refuge to eat. He tries to act soberer than he is. He doesn't want them to put him in 'the tank' where they put drunks to iron out. Strangely, eating the meal of fish and vegetables, I don't feel guilty at all.

It is time for me to go. I hug Mick and Apples and promise to be round soon. Apples say, 'Bring me a jacket next time, my darling.' 'Here take this,' I say, taking off my windcheater, 'I've got another one in my bag.' It is cold already and Apples puts it on straightaway. It's nice to share things with your friends.

## Postscript

It was obvious to me when I started the assignment that I was about to enter a new world - the world of the homeless, Nowhere Street. In retrospect, I can see that I actually entered two new worlds - the world of the homeless and the world of 'real' journalism. That second world too has its element of 'nowhere'. Articles do not go anywhere. They flourish briefly - manufactured - provide an entertainment, perhaps instill a memory, perhaps stir the conscience fleetingly and then are forgotten. They disappear into nowhere. The journalistic mistakes, the sloppiness, the inaccuracies, don't in the end matter.

Once words, like people, were important. In a monastery, a book was a work of art, valued like gold. Once there was a delight in words. Now words splurge at us from every signpost of every city street, they are glued onto the sides of railway steps, they pour in torrents out of radios and TV sets. If a few words are awry or are twisted and lost, it doesn't seem to matter; there are plenty more where they came from. Rather like the homeless of Nowhere Street.

The article appeared in *The Times on Sunday*, March 15, 1987.

## After publication...

When the book was launched, I did some interviews on television and radio. This gave me the opportunity to go back to the refuge. The man behind the desk insisted on shaking my hand. He was so happy with the book.

Indeed, everyone I met who worked with the homeless were delighted with the book... even though many hadn't liked the original newspaper article (something they had in common with me).

Social work students coming to do work experience were apparently carrying the book with them when they came in. 'In past years, the students would come in here and go into a state of shock. Having read your book, they're not shocked by what they see. They're prepared for it.'

I suggested to the publisher that they should push for it to be a text book for social work students. It didn't happen. Some years later the publisher was absorbed into a bigger publishing house.

A few years after my article appeared, the newspaper it appeared in closed.

The year after publication, I visited the US for the first time.

In Washington, I was able to meet with Mitch Snyder, the legendary campaigner for the homeless. He had spent months at a time living on the street with the homeless and many years dedicated to helping them. Every line on his face seemed like it had been etched there not by age or sun damage but by pain.

His life had been turned into a television movie, *Samaritan*, starring Martin Sheen.

Mitch was very kind about my book and we discussed the difference between homelessness in Australia and America.

In 1990, he committed suicide.

Vale, Mitch.