

SPINNER



· a novel ·

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FREMANTLE 
fine independent publishing PRESS

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It was a long time ago, between two wars, when David came and conquered all, not with rifle and bayonet, but with a cricket ball. It was the most astonishing thing you ever saw, but all the more amazing because we needed him so much, not just his family, or his town, but the whole country. We all wore the same dopey grin, blinked through the same shining eyes and gave a collective shake of the head at the crazy, impossible wonder of it all.

Here is his story, the best I can recollect it, from seeing some of it myself, and finding out the rest.



David's favourite place was the dam, and his favourite time was just before sunset, when the midgies came out from wherever they hid during the day. And they hovered, and careered and dived and streaked up, all around the water. Then, as the sun set, the dam water turned golden, and the midgies danced around the liquid gold, themselves turning from grey to silver and then golden. For those fifteen minutes they became fairies, wraiths and sylphs and everything else filled with magic that you could never catch, nor seldom see.

When the sun finally dipped out everything would turn into silhouettes and the magic dancing things would turn back into midgies and mosquitoes, and it really wasn't a good time to be around the dam anymore, because they'd get up your nose, and down the back of your neck and some of them would bite you. Yet, even after the sun went down and the midgies started biting, David would stay a little longer, and think about his mother.

CHAPTER ONE

Just after lunch David's grandad came to the hay shed, where he rested one of his long hands on the torn halter hanging on the nail there.

David looked up, a shimmer of dust filling the air from his frantic sweeping.

He'd been pestering his grandfather all morning for leave to go into town but the old man had just pointed to each of David's unfinished chores then moved off to do his own. On school days David had fewer jobs to do, but Saturday and Sunday were full of them. He'd shifted the hoses, fed the chooks, chopped wood and then attacked the sweeping of the hay with such vigour that Jess the blue heeler had gone to hide under the rain tank.

David set aside the broom and waited, hopeful as his grandfather looked.

'You call this done?'

David tried not to look at the floor, where he knew there was lots of hay still, but the glint of a half covered horseshoe dragged his eyes down. 'Pretty much done.'

'I beg your pardon.'

David swallowed, squinting at the sunlight behind the old man, or maybe at the line he'd crossed. His grandfather was a thin man, long limbed and leathery from work and

the sun. There were a lot of lines around his grandfather's eyes. And a lot of lines you could cross.

David looked down. 'Sorry, sir. It's not done.'

'Why?'

'Cos it's not done properly.' He could feel the old man still staring, but didn't look up. He could feel the old man start to shift to go, and he tried to stay quiet, but it just wouldn't stay inside him. 'Don't you even want to know the score?'

Australia were playing England. It was the second day of the first Test being played in Brisbane. It was cricket, the most wonderful game in the world.

David's grandfather turned back and looked at him with his closed face.

'The Railway Hotel will have the wireless on,' David offered. 'I can hear it out the window if I stand by the veranda.'

His grandfather looked back out across the yard like he could just make out the Test match being played all the way across the country. He took his time. Maybe he was seeing a ball being bowled or a brilliant dive and catch. Maybe it was a batsman standing tall and cutting the ball to the boundary. Maybe it was a spin bowler he could see.

David's grandfather used to be The George Baker once. He had been an off-spin bowler for The Wheatfields, and then Country. He had been the coach of a combined Western Australian team that played Visitors from other states and other countries. David had seen photographs in the Railway Hotel. But that was before the war, and before David was born and ... before. Now George Baker was just his granddad, and he never talked about who he once was.

David supposed his grandfather must have loved cricket. He didn't seem to now. Maybe for his grandfather all the cricket training was like the farm work, an eternal wrestle

against a stronger competitor who just wouldn't quit.

His grandfather finally answered. 'They brought over a pretty good team this time.'

The English had brought out a fearsome team. George Proctor was said to be the fastest bowler who had ever lived. Tudor was the most fierce, Windsor was cruel and gifted, and Longford a talented bat and a winning captain. They had a very strong batting line-up and it was difficult to see how Australia would manage to bowl them out especially with so few quality spin bowlers in the current game. That's what the newspapers said.

'Can I go then?'

'They will have finished for the day.'

'Then I can get the final score, for the day's play.'

'You can get that tomorrow.'

'But tomorrow, there'll be another score.'

Grandad nodded.

'You mean I can go?'

'Finish your work.' The old man turned and walked towards the work shed.

David went back to sweeping up the hay. He pulled up the horseshoe and put it with others on the wood frame of the wall. He picked up the fallen bale and restacked it. He swept up the chaff and hay bits into a pile and sifted out the dirt so they could use it as feed for the few sheep they still had.

As David swept he also played cricket. He called the game aloud like a wireless report and sometimes he swung the broom, making the stroke. 'Proctor turns having reached the start of his run-up. David Donald takes guard, having played majestically to ninety-six. Proctor is running in, fiercely. Donald is ready. Proctor like a steam train. He

bowls. And a cracking stroke to the boundary for four runs. What a show. What a wonderful hundred against the most fearsome bowling in the world today.'

At around three o'clock, while David was mucking out the stables, his grandfather came to the fence holding a badly bent shaft bolt. This joined the horse traces to the plough. He placed the bolt on a fence post. 'When you've finished that, go and see if you can get another of these from Pringle's.'

David cycled madly, his long fingers a bunch of eager snakes riding on the handlebars.

Dungarin, like many country towns, kept some places open for business on Sunday afternoons. The pub, the blacksmith's and a back door of Pringle's Westralian Farmers Hardware and Stock Feed allowed for some extra farming needs and gossip.

David rode down the main street of Dungarin at full pelt, his eyes fixed on the Railway Hotel, his ears already straining to hear a cricket report from the wireless by the front window. As he neared Pringle's, a motorbike backfired with the sudden charge of a rifle shot. David wobbled on the bike just regaining control, but a horse, waiting outside the blacksmith's, baulked and danced back, its rope snapping. Wide eyed, the horse spun into the street in front of David, who tried to turn his bike the other way, only to whack his right handlebar into a veranda post. The bike stopped and David somersaulted as he let go.

As the world turned violently upside down, David watched the horse continuing its mad dash up the street. His bike was sliding still. He needed to protect his wrist. There was a big spider web on the underneath side of the tin roof of the veranda. Some sacks of feed were coming towards his back.

David pushed his right wrist under his left arm and hugged it as his head cracked against something hard and his back collapsed into the sacks.

Silence. The end.

David became aware of his own raspy breathing and a slight dampness at the back of his head before he made out the voice.

‘What do you think you’re doing now, Donald?’

David opened his eyes to see Mr Pringle’s red face glaring down at him.

‘He fell, Mr Pringle.’

David, still lying on his back on the meal sacks, looked over to see Nell Parker, the blacksmith’s eleven year old daughter, coming towards him.

‘I can see that,’ said Mr Pringle. This was the oldest Mr Pringle. Dungarin had three Mr Pringles. There was a middle Mr Pringle, who ran the butcher’s, the baker’s and the pub, and a younger Mr Pringle who managed the wheat operations. This Mr Pringle was the stoutest, most usually angry Mr Pringle, who ran the Westralian Farmers and the bank. None of the Mr Pringles liked David very much. ‘You should stop dreaming and concentrate on what you are doing.’

‘But it wasn’t his fault, Mr Pringle,’ pleaded Nell. ‘The car backfired and that spooked the horse. Dad was going to shoe it this afternoon for the Kellerways, only he had to look at Taylor’s flat-bed first, on account of him needing it to go into Geraldton tomorrow.’

David watched an upside down Nell look brightly at a blinking Mr Pringle, whose whole capacity for anger seemed to just go out of him right then. He seemed thinner when the anger was gone.

Nell looked up the street, before adding, ‘Dad’s gone after the horse.’

‘Well, be careful,’ said Mr Pringle, going back inside.

Nell looked down at David, who began to unwind himself. His wrist was fine. ‘Do you know the cricket score?’

‘Haven’t you heard? Australia is in all sorts of trouble.’ Nell said ‘trouble’ like other people might say ‘fine weather’ or ‘jolly good swim.’

‘Already? But it’s just the second day.’

‘The Poms are six hundred and twenty-three runs.’

‘In just two days. Are you sure?’

‘I’ve been going over to the Railway to listen. I knew you’d want to know. It’s just as your grandad said. We don’t have a good spinner.’ She took a dramatic swallow before going on. ‘It’s worse than that. Australia are two out for eleven runs at stumps.’

‘Who’s out?’

‘Johnson and Bardsley.’

David was relieved. Johnson was in poor form, so no real loss there, and they were trying out Bardsley so he’d learn from this Test. It meant John Richardson, the Australian captain, was still in. He could hold things together, and rebuild the innings. But letting the other team get six hundred runs in the first innings was always going to put your batsmen under pressure.

‘Some boys are playing at the oval,’ said Nell.

David started to flex his fingers. He winkled them, keeping them straight, then bent and straightened, keeping them tense. He flicked them out, loose, like he was trying to shake off water. He started to bend his wrist, and turn it clockwise, then anticlockwise.

‘They won’t let you play.’

Nell was smiling but when she saw David looking at her she changed her face to a sympathetic look. She had a smudge of grease on her cheek, and quite a lot on her dress. David noticed she had a scab on one knee. The scab had split and two flies were fighting to get at the blood welling there.

David picked up his bike. One handlebar was badly bent but everything seemed to work.

Nell said, 'Are you going to go and watch?'

'Yep. Who scored all the runs for England?'

As Nell recounted all she could remember of the cricket score, David wheeled his bike. They passed the new Anzac memorial on the way. The town had built a kind of tower out of granite that was a memorial to the Anzac soldiers who'd died in the war. It was sometimes called The Great War and sometimes called The War To End All Wars, which was worth it, some said, to end war. Mostly, it was just called The War, and people didn't want to talk about it. Australia had lost a lot of men to The War. So had Dungarin. Some men came back with an arm gone, or a leg or an eye. Lots of men didn't come back at all. One of the men who didn't come back was David's father.

There were ten older youths playing in the centre of the school oval. A motorbike was parked along with a farm flat-bed and a couple of horses under the trees. They were playing tip and run. If the bat made contact with the ball, you had to run. Whoever got you out, be it the bowler or the catcher or the fieldsman, became the next batsman.

A lad, whom David didn't recognise, danced down the wicket to hit a drive. Judging from the slumped shoulders of the bowler and the fieldsman who was trotting over the

far boundary to retrieve the ball, they were having trouble getting this fellow out.

‘Geez, Eddie, hit us a catch,’ yelled Billy Clarke from cover.

‘That was a catch,’ said the older youth, ‘you just weren’t standing in the right place.’

From his accent, you could tell Eddie wasn’t from around here.

Bob Pringle sprinted in and bowled a beam ball straight at Eddie’s head. David heard Nell gasp, just before the youth stepped neatly aside and helped the ball over his shoulder to the fence near the school.

‘He’s got good technique,’ said David. He and Nell had edged onto the field now.

‘That one fair nearly took my block off, Bobby,’ smiled the batsman.

‘Yeah, well maybe you wanna think about retiring,’ growled Bob.

‘Before you’re hurt,’ yelled Fred Calligan from down near the boundary.

There were mutters of agreement from the field. It was hot and dusty. The school oval hadn’t seen grass since last May when it rained for a single day. When the men got tackled at football they got gravel rash.

Eddie pointed grandly towards the stumps. ‘There they are, boys. Just hit the wood.’

Bob Pringle bowled again, and again Eddie stepped forward, but this time he cut and the ball raced towards where David and Nell were standing. As Nell bent to try to field it, David said quietly, ‘He uses his feet really well. So he’s turning the length into a half-volley all the time. Here. Give it here, Nell.’

Nell threw David the ball. He caught it and stepped a few more paces towards the cricketers before throwing the ball. It was a poor throw. It fell between two boys without even much dust jumping.

That's when Eddie turned and winked to David. No one else had even looked, but that was what David had been waiting for. 'Can I play?'

'No.'

'Not likely.'

'Rack off, Donald.'

It was instant, practised and said without feeling.

Eddie said, 'Why not let them field near the boundary? You could use the help.'

'He'll want to bowl,' spat Billy.

David was watching Bob Pringle. He'd picked up the ball and looked from it to David, thinking. Now Bob was smiling a nasty smile. He looked at David then tossed him the cricket ball. 'Come on.' He looked back at Eddie. 'We'll let the young lad have a bowl at you, Eddie.' He looked around at the other youths who started nodding suddenly.

David rubbed the ball in his palms. It was well worn, some stitching loose with lots of tears in the leather. It was a very good ball—for a spin bowler. He spun it gently from hand to hand, as he walked to the bowler's mark. The feel of the rough ball made his hand tingle.

Bob yelled, 'Come on, you fellas, come in.'

Eddie looked suspicious. 'What you blokes up to?'

Bob said, 'I'm just setting my field.'

Fred yelled, 'Hey, you're about twelve, aren't ya, David?'

David nodded, but was not really interested in talking. He looked down the pitch to the batsman.

Jimmy Drake yelled, 'Geez, I'd hate to be bowled out by a

twelve year old kid. Crikey.’

They were all in on the joke except Eddie, who could not figure out what was going on. There was clearly some trick.

Bob set his field. It was most unorthodox for a game of tip and run. There was a wicketkeeper, and fly, two slips, two leg glances, two silly mid-ons and two silly mid-offs. David was the only fieldsman more than two paces in front of the batsman.

David stood, spinning the ball from his right hand into his left. He’d then put it back in his right hand and do it again.

Bob finally looked at David properly, eye to eye and really looking. ‘You happy with that field?’

David nodded.

Eddie looked at David and then around. ‘I’m gunna clobber you blokes.’

Jimmy said, ‘No, you gunna get out.’

Bob said, ‘I’ll tell you what, Eddie, if you can hit David over the fence, you don’t have to buy a beer all night.’

‘You’re on.’

Eddie took guard, and David walked in to bowl. The ball didn’t come out of David’s hand very fast. It seemed to float. But just as Eddie took his two steps down the wicket to smash the delivery to the boundary, the ball dipped in the air, and when it hit the rough flax weave of the pitch, it spun left. It didn’t spin a lot but just enough to evade the swinging bat. Eddie staggered forward then twisted to look back at the wicketkeeper who held the cricket ball. He smiled at Eddie then pushed the ball into the wickets.

‘You’re out, stumped,’ yelled Fred gleefully.

‘Time for the pub,’ said Bob Pringle already heading

towards the horses.

‘It was a lucky ball,’ exclaimed Eddie. He looked up at David. ‘Give me another.’

David nodded eagerly. ‘All right.’

‘Rack off, Donald. You got your bowl,’ said Jimmy, gathering up the stumps and heading after the others.

Eddie ruffled David’s head. ‘Lucky ball kid, but Bob couldn’t try that trick twice.’

‘It wasn’t a lucky ball,’ said David.

Eddie had already gone.

‘It was the right ball at the right time to the right batsman. And it went how I wanted it to, so it wasn’t luck,’ said David to the empty pitch.

‘It was great, David. You got him,’ said Nell, coming up. ‘You got that fellow out.’

It was like David woke from the dream of bowling to the older youth. The sky was darkening and it was ten miles to home.

‘I better go.’

David headed for his bike, and replayed the ball as he rode home. He had some difficulty steering because of the bent handlebar. He thought he could have got Eddie out with a completely different ball. That one had beaten Eddie in flight, but had spun away, just enough for the stumping. David could have spun it less, he thought, and drawn the edge of the bat, but you could never be sure if a batsman would be good enough to get a nick, and as for catching, David knew the youths of Dungarin were not very good fieldsmen.

There were a lot of parts to the leaving of a day. There was late afternoon, when the sun finally stopped burning. Then

there was the golden time. And then sunset, as it went down and sometimes turned the sky into pinks and purples all mixed with light and shade. Then came dusk. Even dusk had parts to it. When the sun first went down, there still seemed to be light, all around on the things of the ground, just dimmer than the day. Things would start to look grey. Then, after that, everything on earth would go dark, with the land, and the buildings and trees and windmills all black. But the sky stayed lit for quite some time. And it would still be warm for a while. After that, finally, after all the parts of the sun going, it was night and the sky went dark too. Just after that the world would snap into its black coldness and you'd give a shiver. Then the stars came out, and they covered the sky with their dots of light, like a grapevine over a trellis bursting with fruit everywhere you looked until you felt it was close enough to pluck one, and pop the star into your mouth.