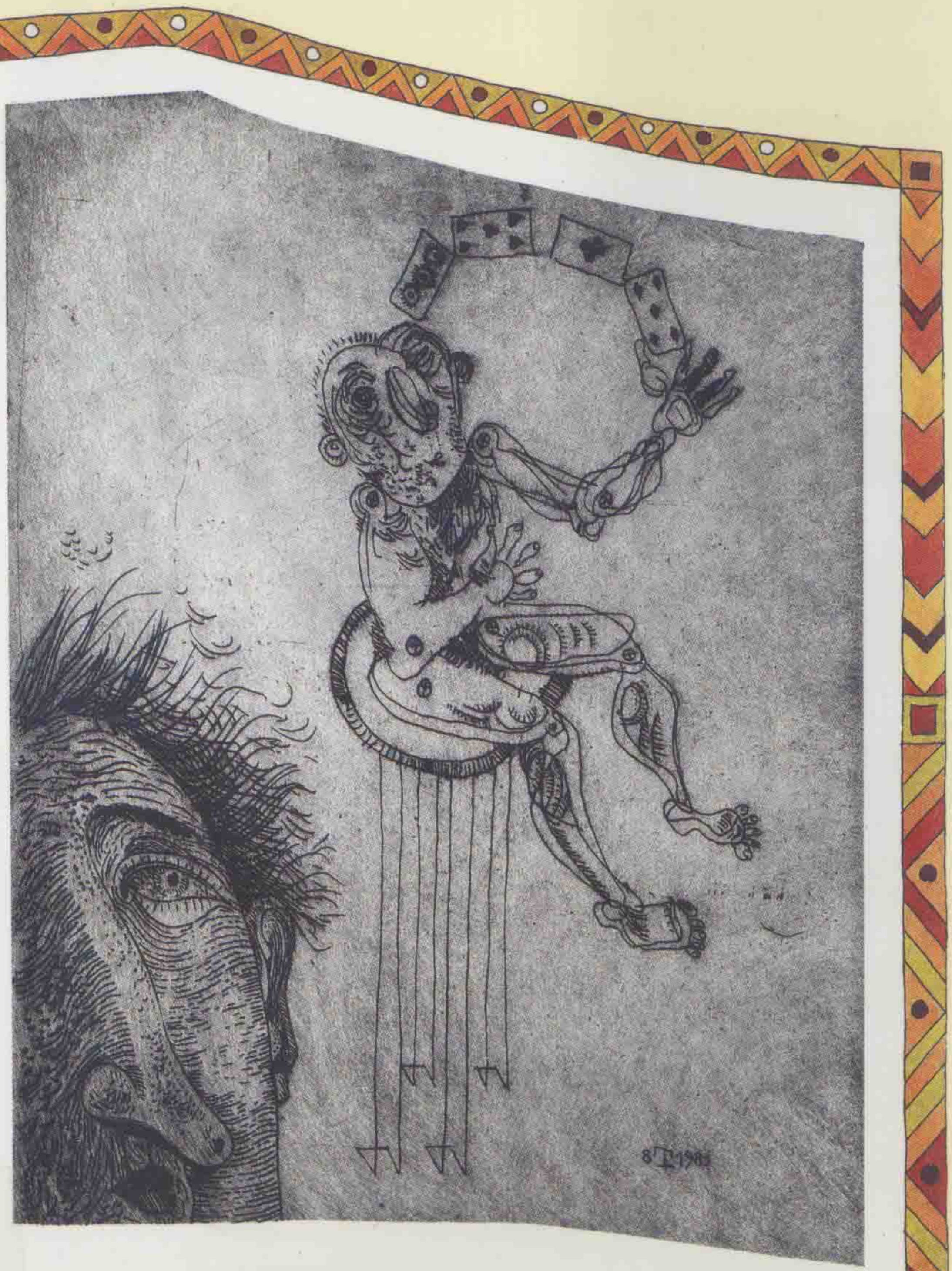
STEAL AWAY



GARRY DISHER

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ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

Creative writing programme assisted by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body.

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1
Good Audience

When Robert Saxby was eight years old he realised that his father was often fearful and anxious. His father was a man who hated to find himself alone, a man who bloomed only when he had made himself snug with people and pets and bustle. Then Mr Saxby might uncoil. He liked to gesture, his hands grainy with printer's ink from his workshop, and would grow sentimental and expansive, calling people by the wrong names, shaking his head and clicking his tongue, pumping visitors and new acquaintances for more. "And what happened then?" he would ask. His face moved in delight, concern, triumph and a kind of knee-thumping glee as he listened to the answers. He leaned forward for more. Robert saw that people liked his father — he was a good audience.

Many of the visitors to the Saxby house in those years after the war were Mr Saxby's mates from his army days. Robert, a boy in short pants and with hair that wouldn't stay down at the back, sat on a wooden chair in the kitchen and listened to them yarn. He absorbed their voices, he imagined himself wearing berets like the ones that they had tucked into their pockets before they entered the house, and he watched the way they rolled their cigarettes with one hand and held the burning tip turned inwards to their palms.

And, when the visitors went home, or stayed on but had nothing more to offer, Robert's father had things of his own to say, uttering calumnies with such certainty that the family continued with its roast potato, knitting or crayons and said a short "Mm", avoiding his eyes and the self-doubt that they sensed was there, hoping that a guest might take up the point and help him weave his way through it. Finally somebody would say something and Mr Saxby would say a quick "You could be right," and blow his nose like a trumpet.

2
Impatient with Austerity

Robert's father liked to say that he'd be a much happier man if his ship came in. But money was tight in those years after the war, and he kept getting knocked back at the bank. He was a printer of wedding invitations, grocers' flyers, newsletters for the Labor Party and whatever else, and, if he could only buy a better press and rent a bigger building, why, he could expand.

"Well," he said one day. "It can't hurt to have another try, can it. Come on, kids, into the car." He wore a tweed suit and a little feather in the brim of his broad-brimmed hat. Robert's mother was smartly dressed in a suit, and her fingers kept her bosom free of ash from her cigarette, but a spring in the seat of their old car caught and pulled a thread in her suit and she swore, making Mr Saxby nervous. They had a lot to do that day: the bank, shopping, an Abbott and Costello picture.

They parked the car, and Mrs Saxby was glad to get going. She took Geoffrey with her to get him fitted with a new school uniform. He was starting high school soon, and had left Robert and their sister Eleanor far behind him. He had been given a wallet for Christmas, and a leather satchel. Mr Saxby watched them depart, turned back to Robert and Eleanor, and clapped his hands together. "Right. Let's see. Would you like to go exploring?"

In the last year of the war Robert had been only five years old and he could remember going by train into the city to meet his father back from the fighting. From the carriage window he had seen a football oval scored here and there with muddy trenches. There had been sand-bag walls around public buildings, striped with runnels of sand leaking from holes in the rotting bags. The post office had been battened down so that it looked like a fort.

Mr Saxby took them to see where he had scratched his

initials on the wall of a government building. They entered an alley. "I was on guard duty at the time and bored to bits," said Mr Saxby, standing awkwardly to obscure what Robert had already seen, "fuck" written at shoulder height and not easy to see unless you had wondered why your father was sidling along the wall while he talked to you. "That was before I got sent overseas," said Mr Saxby.

Later they all met for lunch in the cafeteria of the main department store. The other diners had the air of people after a change. They sat at the little tables, impatient with austerity now that the war was over. They were waited on by dark, silent Yugoslav women who had husbands driving graders somewhere up in the mountains or in the interior.

Mrs Saxby opened her handbag and took out a small fountain pen to make notes. She wrote some cheques and put them in envelopes and gave them to her husband. "On your way to the bank this afternoon could you drop these off?" she asked. "I'll do some shopping and take the kids to the pictures." Robert saw the apprehension on his father's face. He wondered what a bank manager could be like.

Their overcoats were hanging on a coat-stand near their table. A man in a dinner suit held their coats open and helped them put them on. Mr Saxby shook himself into optimism, clapped his hands and rubbed them together, and slapped a sixpence on the table. "Thank you for your gracious service," he said, offering the man another coin and gesturing, No, please don't do that, when the man gave a deep bow.

Mrs Saxby took the three children to the cinema by way of the busiest shopping streets so that they could look in the windows. She was alert for signs of the war but could not find any here. "But you just look along this lane," she said, taking them down a sunless little side street. They walked past a blighted patch of ground heaped with sand-bags mucky with stains and weeds, and stopped in front of an abandoned tailor's shop. There was a bolt of drab cloth in the window, and a store dummy leaned against the glass, dressed in a cuff-less, lapel-less suit to which was attached a

tag: "Victory Suit — 38 coupons". Some upstairs windows had been painted over or criss-crossed with strips of tarry paper. "It was very dangerous at night," she said, telling them about her best friend who had been knocked down by a car one night during a brown-out. "It was too dark to see properly, especially in winter in a fog."

They came out into the sunlight, their backs turned to side streets and the past, and marched into the cinema. At half past four they came out and waited for Mr Saxby. They watched him walk up the hill towards them, his hat pushed back and his hands in his pockets, holding himself upright even though leaning forward would have made his progress easier. He had undone the knot of his tie. He looked to be at odds with everything. "Well, looks like you're shickered," said Mrs Saxby brightly. He stopped and rubbed his face with both hands in a washing motion. "Might as well bloody be," he said. "No point in doing anything else."

They walked stiffly to the car to drive home. Robert sat in the back seat with Geoffrey and Eleanor. Eleanor, cross and tired, began squabbling with him about his elbow. "For Christ's sake, shut up the pair of you," said Mr Saxby, turning around and slapping their legs as they contorted to escape him.

"Hartley," warned Mrs Saxby.

Mr Saxby tooted his horn at someone. He put on the brakes, accelerated, braked again, so that their progress was jerky along the streets their mother had glowed upon two hours earlier. Near the business district a dark, clever-looking man got out of his car, looked straight at them, buttoned his ashy-grey suit coat over his white shirt and deep blue tie, reached into his car for a long, belted overcoat, fastened its buttons and belt, and drew fine black gloves from his pocket: wit and grace and certainty were on his face. Through the open window of their car at a traffic light, Robert heard the man's car door close like a secretive footstep on gravel.

"Just look at him," said Mr Saxby, who had been

burping and not saying pardon me. "Just look at him, would you? Bloody sis with his coat and gloves, thinks he's the ant's pants. Useless bloody silver-spooned mincing bastard. Just look at him. Oh dear, I do believe there's a teensy weensy bit of fluff on my sleeve. Oh, what a pity I have to park the *Jag* amongst all these people's cars. Well, what *shall* I do for the rest of the day? A sundowner with old Reg and Eric? Buy a painting? Squeeze a boy's bum?"

"Hartley," said Mrs Saxby. "I think that's quite enough."

3
Mrs Saxby

Robert's mother was not like other mothers, and the family was hard-pressed at times to keep up with her. You had to admire her energy and moral courage, and she did not suffer you gladly when you were foolish. In the kitchen in the mornings she snorted when she read the paper and let Mr Saxby and the children get their own breakfasts. Men with beards and women in slacks came around in the evenings to discuss Labor's prospects in the next election. Wanly observed by Mr Saxby, she spent hours laughing and talking over ideas with that Bill Prior bloke, her friend, the president of the local branch. Bill Prior was a man who winked and laughed.

And just when you had accustomed yourself to seeing little of her because she had thrown herself into Labor Party business, with all those meetings, overflowing ashtrays, leftovers for dinner, newspaper barriers at the breakfast table, long sessions of talk, wine and cheese with Bill Prior, she would turn around and envelop you with love, shock and please you with a vulgar intimacy, squeeze Mr Saxby somewhere naughty on their way out to a dinner or a ball, and kiss you goodnight in a rustling, dazzling black dress.

4

Desire, Meanness and Madness

Mr Saxby had a large family and an automatic, unquestioning loyalty to it. "But I hate her," said Robert when Mr Saxby suggested that he might like to take Great-Grandma Saxby for a walk in the garden. "Do you?" replied Mr Saxby wonderingly, his face unused to the idea.

Great-Grandma Saxby came to Sunday lunch about once a month. Robert hated these visits. At the dinner table she released little farts and there was a strange, dull click in her jaw when she chewed mutton sliced up especially small for her by Mr Saxby. Robert did not like to sit beside his great-grandmother, but there was no escape for they were too small a family for evasion of duty, and in her lucid moments she insisted on it anyway. He calmly watched her, twisted up inside with hate and frustration, seeing those fluffing gases thinly working their way around the fat cheeks of her bottom to escape, hearing food creeping down through her wet red tubes, concocting in his mind the smells and moistures and substances caught in her crepitating underwear and creased old body. "I bought this roast at Simpson's, Grandma," bawled Mrs Saxby. "Do you remember Simpson's?" The old woman lifted a tiny pea on her fork, and when it fell off on to her plate she tried again, but it scooted down her bosom and she whimpered for it, hunted by ghost emotions. Deaf as a post.

"We're top-heavy with old people in this family," observed Mrs Saxby after one of these visits, waving her cigarette in the air, "and they're all indestructible."

Robert recognised the truth in this. He formed a picture of older people that was fashioned around their litanies of aches, the cold, the heat, the hours of lying awake the night before. Don't ever ask them how they've been feeling lately, he warned himself. On the other hand, if it was a duty visit and there were long minutes to fill, *do* ask

them how they've been feeling lately. He could not escape or ignore them. His father had a large number of great-aunts, uncles and cousins, and Great-Grandma Saxby, and he was a man who did his duty. Mrs Saxby happily cooked and looked after them. She had long talks with them and had accumulated a frightening store of knowledge about the family.

She seemed to be the end point of her own family. She had a tired sister called Fay who wrote once a year from an unfamiliar town in another state, and there was also Auntie Joy who had married an American during the war and once sent Robert a baseball mitt. But their parents had died many years ago.

And so she made her husband's family her own. She sorted out the tangled who, where and when of the Saxbys, and put Fay's Christmas cards on a string looped under the mantelpiece. Her knowledge of Mr Saxby's family was deep and accurate, and she enriched it with plenty of accompanying motive, all nicely wicked and foolish as in a popular novel. Knowing the tugs and eddies of desire, meanness and madness gave her a knowing look at weddings and funerals. None of it mattered to her necessarily — it was all there for fashioning into a rich here-and-now. But Mr Saxby, on the other hand, who was closely defined by shadowy ancestors, brothers, uncles and grandfathers, all big, wealthy men, war heroes and landowners, was the kind of man who remained careless and ignorant of them all, and took them for granted, but could not be faulted if you happened to ask him if the king had any sisters or cousins.

5

Nerves

Robert was deliriously happy when, in a flourish of spending, his father went out and bought a white Holden Special. Business had improved and the bank had given Mr Saxby a

loan. The family beamed. The war had been a persistent smudge on their lives since it had ended but now, amid the gloomy Austins, Humbers and pre-war Fords of their suburb, the new white Holden was like a visitor's car.

That weekend they went for a long drive. Mr Saxby's bracing manner at the front gate, and again when he got behind the steering wheel, told the family that they were setting out on a major expedition, but as soon as they got to the city's edge he breathed out heavily, slowed and stopped the car, and said, "I think you'd better drive, dear. I'm all right around the city, but I haven't got your eyes. I think you'll do much better than me on the open road."

Mrs Saxby drove like the men of those days drove, her elbow out the window and a cigarette streaming smoke from the other hand that rested negligently on the steering wheel. Robert enjoyed watching his mother lift a finger of acknowledgement to oncoming cars, and it became a private game with him to lean on the back of her seat and peer over her shoulder and count the number of responses she got.

He thought that this summer might be one of his happiest ever. He remembered those past holidays, when Mr Saxby had had to explain, in a voice penny-pinching and beguiling, that they could not afford to go away this year: "But you mustn't mind, we'll make the most of it, won't we? I'll make you a tree house. We'll go to the beach."

They played "Riddle me, riddle me, ree" for a while, and tested each other at adding up the numbers on registration plates. Mrs Saxby, as usual, chose strange examples and was the quickest adder. "Riddle me, riddle me, ree," she said, "I can see something that you can't see, and it starts with an N."

"'Nor," they said, Mr Saxby's pet name for Eleanor. "Needle on the petrol gauge. Nought on the speedo. Nut shells."

"Not even warm," said Mrs Saxby. "Nerves. Your father's nerves."

"I'm not nervous," said Mr Saxby quickly. "Do I look nervous to you kids?"

"What are you sitting like that for then," they said.

Mr Saxby took his hands out from under his thighs, sat back with his shoulder against the door and rested his arm along the back of the seat. His fingers brushed through the hair on his wife's shoulders. "I suppose you want us to have an accident," he said. "Two pairs of eyes are better than one, you know."

6
Open and Trusting

Things improved. They moved to a bigger house, one that was suited to sprawling. Its buckled verandah faced a broad park where Mr Saxby liked to go and practise golf swings, and at the back of the house were a lichened fish pond and half an acre of tangled shrubs and old trained roses on trellises.

Inside the house Robert's footsteps on the wooden floors boomed around his ears and gathered near the high ceilings. He lay on his back in bed or on the lounge-room couch, watching faces emerge in the dampness stains on the ceiling and wondering how the rosettes stayed up. He fancied that there was a secret compartment somewhere and went about striking the dark panels with his knuckles. But there was a cellar out the back that had a tangled creeper over it which he lifted and let fall like a curtain behind him, leaving him in a soft, damp, stale-smelling room with shelves in it for his secret things, a dim, vegetable light illuminating everything.

Warm family reminiscing about the schools Mrs Saxby had taught in, Eleanor's memorable displays of bad temper, or the disastrous progression of Great-Grandma Saxby's senility, took place around the kitchen table on winter evenings. Mr Saxby often said, "There was a hum-

dinger of a storm the night your mother had you, Rob." He slapped his knee. "I'd just come home on leave. Your mother thought we weren't going to make it because she'd used up her petrol ration. You were an ugly little bugger, all red and cross."

Every mother made egg-and-bacon pies in winter when Robert was growing up. They did not take long to make and were easily transported to a relative's house for a family dinner on a Sunday evening. On Saturday afternoons in winter Robert went with Mr Saxby and Eleanor to football games and got numbed by cold on far-away railway stations, waiting for a train home. A rattling of doors and fragments of strange conversations went with him across the dark, wet park between the station and the house, ebbing only when Mrs Saxby heaped his plate with a slice of pie. They could not afford a gas or an electric oven. They sat in the kitchen warmed by the old wood-burning stove, reminiscing, and just about anything might be funny. Afterwards they might sit around the fire in the lounge-room and Robert might be asked to read aloud to them. On reflection they agreed that he did *David Copperfield* best, especially the bits with Uriah Heep. Robert thought that he might become an actor.

The Saxbys bustled with people, pets and favourite objects. Kittens and an old stray dog tottered about the garden. There were some silkworms in a shoebox. Eleanor had her horse books, saddle and reins, and in the back garden Bluey and Curly hooked their claws into the wire netting of the aviary near the rose trellis. There were enamel plates on the back porch, their edges chipped and their sides flecked with dry milk and scabs of food. Moby Duck floated in the bath until his wooden bottom suppurated with soapy water like the paddle Mrs Saxby used for poking at clothes boiling in the copper.

Robert played in the garden and in the park, losing skin on tree trunks, asphalt and tin roofs. At school he got good marks. Cocky, successful, never quite graceful. He liked dogs. He thought that it might be nice to get a pup for Christmas. Dogs bounded about, open and trusting.

7
Sonny Jim

At least once a year Robert, Eleanor and Geoffrey visited Uncle Dave and Auntie Margaret on their farm, but this time Robert was to spend a week of the August school holidays there on his own. "Would you like that, dear?" his mother asked. Then she turned to Mr Saxby and said quietly, with a laugh, that with the kids home from school, with idle hands, it was understandable that Dave and Margaret had chosen just that time to shear the sheep.

Robert wanted to say something to her about his aunt and uncle's cold, cold house, about Auntie Margaret slapping his hand, or his cousins hiding from him and pushing him around, but he knew she would only reply, "Oh, I'm sure it wasn't as bad as all that," or "Next time they do it just punch them right back again."

They drove for two hours and arrived in time for lunch. Robert saw that his cousins had not changed much. They were still disagreeable: too big, too plain, too satisfied.

"Come here," they brayed after he had waved goodbye to his parents after lunch. They held him and pushed him a little, and he became entangled among them in one of the bedrooms. He did not perceive them as individual figures: the four of them seemed to move everywhere as one noisy organism with many destructive legs and arms. "Come here," they said, with a look of suppressing something important. "Now," said the biggest, waving one hand like a fist hiding something, "I'm going to rub this secret chemical on my hand and you got to tell me what it is." Robert bent down to the scratched and dirty palm, and instantly a fist slid down the callused skin and punched his nose.

"Dear, oh dear. Did they really," said Auntie Margaret in her kitchen, grinning into Robert's shocked, accusing face. "Well, I don't see any bones broken so you must be

all right." She turned away from him and touched a wet finger to an iron that had been resting on a hot-plate of the wood-stove.

"You're getting fat, Sonny Jim," said Uncle Dave at lunch in the kitchen the next day. "Isn't he?" he said, turning to his wife. "Doesn't he look fatter to you?" They all turned to Robert and grinned. The sheep dogs groaned and stretched in their sleep on the chilly hearth, and Robert drew himself in a little because the room was so cold. Outside he could hear the sleety grey wind in the pine plantation on the hill.

"All the kids in this family have got daily chores to do," said Uncle Dave with a shout and a laugh as if he had just remembered. Robert's uncle was a rudely healthy man, not bothered by the cold, not bothered by the crusty bits of old food on his fork or the rim of his plate. Earlier Robert had been picking at something caught in the tines of his fork and had looked up to see his aunt watching him. "The dishes," said Auntie Margaret suddenly. The air was filled with congratulations: "Fatso can do the dishes."

The cousins took him to explore the pine plantation, the creek and the shearing shed, and Robert caught a lamb that had got out of a yard, so that was all right. There was an old house down the road where they met children from the other farms to do dirty things. They looked at some pictures and took some of their clothes off and pissed and shat a bit and then went home. Robert's new knowledge was awesome.

He inherited another job too, shutting up the hens at night so the foxes would not get them. "They're around at the moment," said Uncle Dave, "going after lambs weakened by this bloody cold."

At half-past ten Robert woke up and remembered the hens. He left the house and went to the chookhouse, remembering to walk wide of the woodheap in the dark. He got cold and wet and shut the wirescreen door, hearing one or two hens move in sleepy alarm. In the morning he wiped mud and dung off his slippers with a scrap of newspaper torn off the sheet folded at the bottom of the ward-

robe in his room, and pushed it into a corner of his suitcase.

Tim was the baby of the family. "I saw Tim chasing the chooks yesterday," said Robert at breakfast. "I reckon what happened was they got scared and went and hid somewhere."

"Yes, but did you count them when you shut them up?" persisted Auntie Margaret. She let the hens out of the chookhouse every morning and collected the eggs.

"Sort of."

"How many?"

"Twenty-four, I think."

"Well, there couldn't have been. There are only sixteen there now, and bloody feathers all over the bloody yard."

Tim was rocked about in her arms in a passion and he dropped the finger of toast that he had been trying to eat. Auntie Margaret stopped rocking and wiped his mouth.

"Did you chase the chooks, Bub? Did you chase the chookies, my sweet?" she crooned on the top of his head. "You wouldn't do that, would you, precious." Tim suddenly smiled and offered her the top lopped from his boiled egg.

8

Puzzled and Out of Step

By Christmas Day in his tenth year Robert had conclusively proved to himself that Father Christmas did not exist. This made it easier for Mr and Mrs Saxby to produce the labrador pup, which Robert was to call Gypsy before the day was out. They gave Geoffrey a smart wristwatch, and Father Christmas brought Eleanor an English schoolgirls' annual, a horse book, ribbons for her hair, a gold bangle and a bone-handled brush-and-comb set. "We'll get some nice scraps of meat from Simpson's for Gypsy," said Mrs Saxby. "Feeding her will be your job, dear," she told Robert.