



DAVID IRELAND

BURN

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Douglas Stewart,
Sydney Morning Herald

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*All characters in this book are
entirely fictitious, and no reference
is intended to any living person.*

ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

*Unit 4, Eden Park, 31 Waterloo Road,
North Ryde, NSW, Australia 2113;
94 Newton Road, Auckland 1,
New Zealand; and
16 Golden Square, London W1R 4BN,
United Kingdom*

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*First published in Australia
by Angus & Robertson Publishers in 1974
Sirius Quality Paperback edition 1984
This New Sirius edition 1989*

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*National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-publication data.*

*Ireland, David, 1927- .
Burn.*

ISBN 0 207 16102 X.

I. Title.

A823'.3

Printed in Australia by Australian Print Group

OUTSIDE ONE OF THE SIX HUTS there's a pair of legs watching a stick stuck in the sand and a set line that dips down from it into the river still high from November rain. The line's been out two days. The shanties are stumbled almost into line on the steeply eroded river bank across the bridge from Myoora and a quarter-mile upstream.

From thirty thousand feet up, Myoora is a bulge on the road spearing south to the Kelly country. A single seedpod, brown and dry, left from another year on a thin twig of bottlebrush. At eye-level it's a town with one pub, three churches, sports ground, bridge over the Murrumbidgee, general store, butcher's shop and a few dozen houses.

To men of another time Myoora meant camp. Resting place. No one remembers now. An old tree fallen in the river and drowned lifts wet arms towards the bank for help.

Now and then galahs shriek and squabble and play in the small stand of timber left by the timber-cutters between the shanties and the town; this timber, this merciful screen, is protected by the local council. Until tomorrow. On the first of January the shanty dwellers have to be gone. Already they've had several final notices delivered by hand from the town: the huts have no address. The problem's been passed right down the line from state government to shire council to the local cop—at least that's the rumour. Tenders are in for the timber—another rumour. The land's wanted by the farmers on the north bank for new irrigation pipe installations—another rumour.

The tall ragged eucalypts and angophora cast little shade. The sun aggressive already, slants down and hits the tin and shaggy board roof with bits of bark still clinging, strikes a corner of the half-log veranda, dazzles the white sand in front of the shack belonging to the legs. The shack is supported on round log sections and irregular rocks; the

only one of the six with a board floor. Dock and dandelions grow out from under the veranda, protected by a pile of dead marines—empty brown wine and beer bottles—tidied away under the house. More weeds grow round two old square rusty kerosene tins; one for washing, one for drinking. There are places on the veranda and on the boards inside the one room where every time you tread there's a melodious song of bottles underneath.

To the hoarse cries of crows sideslipping down the soft air let's squint against the glare of sun on sand and follow the legs from dirty grey sandshoes on the bare brown feet past a few inches of hairless leg, up the frayed grey trouser legs into the shade, to the thick stomach and chest, the strong arms erupting from a sleeveless shirt, the massive head, black curly hair. And short chewed pipe.

This is the Gunner. He watches the line for the big 'un he knows is in the river, spits every few minutes and lets his mind idle along on a familiar track: he's back fighting a war in the Pacific. Thinking of the men who were his mates and his enemies while guns were firing. In an old cigarette tin he has his medals and service ribbons, discharge papers and a badge to say he's a returned soldier. The one big thing in his life.

The blue-white smoke from his pipe climbs into the shade of the veranda and, finding nowhere to go, curls out into the sunshine and disperses towards the lower branches of the river red gum his home leans on.

He was seventeen when he joined up, had to go all the way to Sydney to do it. His father was white and there was a birth certificate somewhere, but he went where he wasn't known and told them he had no bit of paper. They looked him up and down; he was a big young kid and a half-caste and that was that. In, son. Sign here. McAllister, eh? And they laughed. They dished him out a pair of yellow boots, —well, they went yellow in the sun inside a week—an overcoat, giggle jacket, giggle pants, socks and Bombay bloomers. Shorts. Shorts that were all one size and reached his ankles. *Imagine having to roll up a pair of*

shorts. The idea was to get you used to looking ridiculous, then after a while you wouldn't care what they told you to do: you'd do it.

They kept me at Sydney showground twelve days. Slushie in the officers' mess. Out of the army I wouldn't have spat or shat on half those dick heads, but there it was salute like a black boy. Some joke. Mum was alive then. Boy, was I glad she couldn't see the food they threw out. Poor Mum. Black as the ace of spades. Sweating in a hole like this all her life. She'd have cried. Mountains of food. Us slushies enjoyed the officers' scraps better than our own tucker. The first afternoon I was strolling across the showground and hundreds of others going this way and that when a bugle started to blow. One of the kids practising, I thought, but everyone else stood still and me still walking, so after a bit I stood still too. Just like kids playing a game of "O'Grady Says". O'Grady says stop.

It was retreat, they told me later. Fine way to start a soldier off. When the bugler finished, everyone moved and started talking or whatever they were doing before. Like when the movies stop the action for a second or two then start up again. I thought it was funny how everyone knew to stop and all had a straight face.

Inside the house someone bumps into something heavy. The floor shakes, the bottles delicately tinkle. Joy comes to the door, brushing hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand, rubbing her eyes. She yawns loudly, without inhibition. When her jaws close together with a snap after the yawn, she wrinkles her nose. Waggles it from side to side. Something there. And begins to pick it with the forefinger of her right hand. She might be fifteen. Her body has trouble deciding whether it's girl or woman.

"Want a rag," he says.

"What for?" She's a girl right now. She's cheeky, goes to

him, finger extended, picks his handkerchief out of his pocket, says, "I'll just wipe this on it."

"Blow while you're at it."

She blows. He glances at her face as she returns the rag crumpled in a ball. Pretty little slut. Manners of a pig. That's all we're doing here, living like pigs. Mess all round us. Making pig noises. *We messed in the pig pavilion, where they show the pigs each year at the Easter Show. It seemed appropriate. Long rows of pens under a big tin roof, aisles between. Enough room for a coupla blokes in each pen.* That's all this is: the town's a house and our shacks are the pig pens in the backyard. All round the town, for miles, there's wealth. Wealth standing on four legs, wealth pushing up from the ground, wealth hanging on trees between green leaves. We've got nothing. But that's not strange: we plant nothing.

Joy says, "Where's my little daddy 'smorning?"

"Aaah," he says slowly, reluctantly. And more quickly, "Be quiet an' go 'way."

Why couldn't she stay asleep. I don't need company.

Joy jingles three gold bangles on her bare brown arms, puts her hands up in the air and lets the bangles slide down to her elbows, reverses the trick and catches them with fingers spread. The soft brown skin sets an extra shine on the gold. Which is only thin gold plate, but this doesn't dull the colour.

"Why you always pester round me? Do I look as if I have 'im?"

He draws deeply on his pipe. Coughs violently. Something loose flaps heavily in his chest. He spits a brown slime on the dirt, grinds it with his heel and considers it.

She says thoughtfully, "You never look like anything. But you're always different." And looks away between the trees, to catch the tail end of a bird's song, echoing.

"You're an idiot. Beat it. Get out of here and stop muckin' up the fishin'. I got the biggest old cod you ever seen, lookin' at my line. How can he start bitin' and workin'

up his appetite with you howlin' and screamin' on the river bank?"

He was there all right, the big 'un. Mary went crook when he threw back little fish, she didn't understand they'd be big one day and he wanted to catch 'em full grown.

Joy stands, breathing.

Look at her. She's gettin' it all right. Pounds to peanuts. There'll be no babies here, I hope. But she's gettin' it. All shapes and sizes. Look at her. Look at me. As I was then. Private McAllister. The black Scotchman. Private? Anything but. *The funniest thing was having to stand there on our first short-arm parade right out in the open. You'd think it was funny if you saw us drawn up into lines with our shorts down and doctors walking in front of us holding up the object of their inspection and looking over him, under him and into his eye. The kids near me looked at mine to see if he had a tan. He had a tan. And a smile on his little pink face. An eager smile. And why wouldn't he?*

There's that smell, always with her. Musky sort of. Or musty. A dark smell, slightly bitter. Reminds me of something in the bush. A leaf? She's not my kid, far as I know. Course she's not. One thing, I've never played round in Myoora. Only before the war and that rules her out. Mary might have hawked the fork when I was away, but I never had a go at anything in Myoora since. She's not a bad little root, this kid. Not bad at all. Still.

She cops it, anyway.

Joy moves, walking gracefully, over to the river bank, looking down, hitching at her dress and scratching. Bare-foot, wearing a sleeveless dirty-white dress which maybe should have a belt at the waist. Then again maybe it shouldn't. Buttons are missing, there's a tear in the material, she looks as if she's slept in it and she has.

"Any fish was there woulda been on your line hours now."

"Never you mind woulda been. I tell you there's bigger

fish in there than we've ever seen all landed up nice and ready for the fire."

"You really think there's a big fish in the river?"

But she hadn't wanted to be impressed.

"There's always someone bigger than you are, jus' round the corner. Always a bigger fish in the river."

And what better place to find that out than the army. Stripes, crowns, stars. A pyramid with me underneath. Only difference, they've changed a few of the words now. Every tinpot lancejack talks about the digs. And if he's in anything but plain ordinary footsloggers he talks about the grunts.

"Can I have some if you catch him?"

"You'll make a proper guts of yourself if I don' watch ya, won'tcha?"

A lightning flash of bad temper blitzes from her pretty young mouth.

"Keep your dirty old fish, and you're a lousy stinkin' old bastard!"

Mary rides over her words, speaking from behind a rough wooden shutter in the wall of the shack. When you prop the shutter outwards and keep it open with a stick, the window's open. "Keep your tongue off your father, you."

Gunner sucks and spits. "I'm not her father. That's one thing you can't blame me for."

"The kid's father's the one that looks after her. You look after her. You're her father."

"So that's how it is, is it?"

"No man don' ever know beyond doubt so what you can't know you can't know so stop nigglin' at it."

"But you didn't have her, we took her in. What you talkin' about."

"You could still be her father, that's something I'll never know. Now let's shut up about it."

Without warning Joy drops to the dust. The fight comes and goes in her, now it's gone. She's a little girl again. A

little girl in a paddy. She hits the dusty sand with the flat of her hand and when the dust gets in her face, stops.

“And don’ think you’re gunna start on me, you dirty lazy old nuisance,” Mary says. Just a little push. You have to let him know you won’t let him drive you into the ground.

“Old, you say,” comfortably from his position on the veranda, but still shouting, “Look in your bits of broken mirror and see who’s old, you miserable old goat.”

“Mirror,” she says. “That’s one of your troubles. You never look in the mirror, you can’t see yourself. You even shave by touch.”

He doesn’t answer. Hasn’t looked himself in the face since he came back from the war.

Paper crackles inside. Yesterday’s paper that he picked up at the pub. He hasn’t read it yet, thinks of chipping Mary about burning it, decides he doesn’t care.

“How about some sticks for the fire,” she says.

There are none on the ground. You can’t leave sticks around, he’ll break them in halves, then each half in halves and so on to a pile of short ends. He doesn’t only break ’em to throw ’em in the bushes round the camp to make a warning: it’s his destroying habit.

“Everything you can break you break,” she goes on, driving the words into his hide. “If you expect me to make a fire I’ve gotta have kindling. We can’t keep anything in one piece here.” Just the same you’ve gotta be careful with him. In case he flies off the handle. “There’s something in you wants to burn and destroy.” You should see his eyes when he looks in the fire.

He looks at her from the side of his mouth. The grip isn’t on him now. The rifle’s safe. His mind’s calm, he enjoys the morning, the sun, the subtle surface skin of the river wrinkling in places. Enjoys another day like any other before.

Joy decides to blubber. And gets a few tears out, making tiny mud pies where they drop from her lashes and cheeks to the grey sand. She carries on for a bit, gets fed up, wants some action, stops her noise, grabs a handful of powdery

dust and flings it at Gunner, who springs off his seat with the agility of a scrum-half, hits her a backhander on the side of the face. She sprawls in the dust.

“I saw that.” Mary comes to the doorway, feet in the light. They are broad bare feet, coarse and thick from no shoes and the extra weight her body’s put on as an armour against approaching middle age. Joy is cunning enough to lie where she is, flat out like a lizard.

Gunner looks at the kid as he wipes his face and eyes and mouth. She’s going to give someone or some twenty a hell of a time. Like she gives me. Some dust’s gone down his shirt. No peace here, never any peace here for a man. Don’t know why there’s always trouble, but there is. Always.

“You hear me?” The voice comes from a distance and swoops right down on him. “I said I saw that.”

Christ, everyone’s onto me. All on my back. Now her. He wipes his face and splutters away the rest of the dust.

“She’s always askin’ for it. Now she got it.”

Mary says nothing, letting the situation work on him and in him.

“Get up, you. I know you’re not hurt.”

Joy presses her advantage, not moving.

“See? Look at her. You can tell she’s puttin’ it on. I don’t see how she can take you in all the time. She don’t fool me. Here.” And he goes over and gives the girl a very mild toe in the ribs. “Get up and get out of here. Have I got to have trouble with everyone?”

She answers with more silence and no movement. He picks her up by one limp arm and hoists her to the other side of the clearing away from the river bank, as you would a half-empty sack of bran. She falls flat.

“Get that girl fixed up. She’s only a kid. And give her back her little toys. I saw you take ’em last night. Why you got to be on her back all the time I don’t know. One day you’ll hurt her bad and then you won’t be able to fix it up without a lot of money.”

“I got no money for doctors.”

“Got more money’n anyone else round here. You’re the only one went to the war.”

“Me pension I got for meself. Shut up about it, it’s mine. Anyway, you get a bit. You even get a dollar forty-one for me wound.”

“A fortnight. Not each week. If I’d had me hands on more of that money I wouldn’ve had to skimp and scrape to get enough to send Gordon to school in the city. When he got a bursary we only just managed.”

“For Chrissake don’ keep reminding me of that. Have you gotta throw it up at a bloke all the time. I didn’ go to any high schools.”

“You could’ve. Your father told me. But no, you had to leave when your mates did, those good-for-nothing louts with only one idea: to have a bottle in one hand and the racing form in the other.”

“That’s two ideas.” And she forgot the pool cue.

“Smartarse. Anyway, you’re not stupid, you could’ve passed the tests and got there.”

“I did a few tests in my time.” *Three days of tests, putting pegs in holes, inkblots, that sort of thing. What books do you read, what sort of people do you like best, do you prefer to do your own fly up, do you know when to get in out of the rain. After three days they picked five kids out of a hundred and five for trade specialists. And the rest of us, the hundred, for infantry. No one failed the tests or got sent home.*

He looks at her as if she’d heard him think. But she was with her son. Or rather her son was with her. She would never hear Gunner’s thoughts nor he hers, and it wasn’t a tragedy.

“With him coming home today and maybe Billy too, it’s time you were reminded of some things.” She felt she could still be sharp with him. “Now get and do something about that girl.”

“There’s nothing the matter with her. She’s right as rain. All she needs is a wash. Can’t you get her to wash when

she gets up mornings? She stinks. You're always clean, it's a wonder to me you don't have a word in her ear."

He looks over at Joy who's lucky enough to be lying with her face on one arm. Listening, he knows that. Dust to dust, poor little bitch. Wonder why a man has to pity kids for having to grow old and die when he'll go first all things being equal.

Mary watches him, gauging how far she can go. You've got to be careful, all right. He's pretty calm today. When that gun's got hold of him he'll get out the old axe and go mad with it. Thank goodness he always takes it out on the clay in the river bank or bashes an old rotten log to pulp. Stands there sinking that axe into the clay as if he's chopping the world to bits. And the sweat falling off him. All because he can't bring out that gun of his. If ever he does it'll be goodnight nurse. Shut the gate. He'd go through this town like a packet of salts.

At least I've got a man. No one game to stand up and fight him for miles around. Some man. Don't know when he'll fly off the handle. Just don't know with him. I could have had, well, I could have had a lot of others. I *have* had a lot of others. None of 'em half the man he is: lazy, drunk, never knowing when he'll explode and all. Still, I'm here to keep the lid on things.

She gets her voice quiet, breathing in well so as to control it.

"Never mind a wash. You've got something hidden away, haven't you? Something you won't ever let anyone see. You look at it when you think we're asleep, and oil it and all, except when you're drunk, don't you? Now get and do as I say and be nice to that girl or I'll tell the policeman."

"You tell anyone anything that's none of your business and you'll go down in a screamin' heap 'cause I'll clobber you for sure. Wife or no wife." Kincaid's waiting for me to fire it. And get me. He knows. But he doesn't know where I've hidden it. Mary won't tell any copper, either. She'd

sooner I jobbed her and laid her out than tell a copper anything.

“Like to be hung, would you?”

“They don’ hang a man now. Not in this state.”

“Then cooped up inside four walls the rest of your life. Till you rot away and die and they plant you in the stinkin’ trod-down earth of a gaol instead of our little cemetery out there behind the church near the river with the trees shading you that were there before you were born. That what you want?”

“Struth! You sound as if you like this place.”

“We all must or we wouldn’ be here.”

“Rot.”

“It’s true. We’d go somewhere else.”

She doesn’t believe it for a moment. They’d need a bomb under ’em.

“Somewhere else? I s’pose there’s worse places.”

Must’ve been worse where Mum’s people came from. Out west they gradually came in to the cities when the land was fenced, but where out west did she come from?

He says, “Yeah, the river’s a good place. Water.”

I remember water. Donga. A sort of wide cleft in the side of a hill. They bank one up and trap enough water to call it a river. Training, had to go over on ropes pretending they were jungle vines while a corporal shot gelignite in the water. Do anything with a bit of fright behind you. There’s worse places than here, all right. Except it gets cold in winter. The coldest night of my life I spent out on the plain near Bathurst. We froze. Preparation for the tropics. And the worst thought in my mind was everything we had wasn’t ours. The army owned the lot. Us too. Cold soldiers. Here, we might not own anything, but at least no one owns us. And we don’t have to work for a boss.

Something in Gunner feels ready to do something about the girl. It’s not exactly a decision, more a feeling that it’s

about time. He goes over to her, hesitates, spits to one side accurately, bends down to touch her gently.

"Come on," he says in a rough sort of stomach voice. "Up you get. I suppose I did hit you a bit too hard. Come on."

"Tell her a story, why don't you? About the dark folks."

It was the wrong thing to say. As soon as she said it she knew. He'll think I mean his folks. Always worrying where they come from they are. They're mad. I don't know where I come from either. Only rich people know their family tree and who they come from.

Her thoughts don't seem to have bothered him one bit.

Joy gets up, unwilling. Suspicious. He says, "Come over here. You sit on the edge. I got to be near the line, case we get a bite."

She sits on the veranda, he squats in the dust near the set line. She moves round while he tells the story; standing, squatting like him, lolling on the veranda. Once even striding springy over to the red gum to pat its smooth flanks then lay her two hands on its cool hide.

"Long time ago, way back before old Goroooh was a little boy—"

"Before Goroooh?"

"Long time 'fore him. There was a woman with long hair and skin dark and shiny like she could walk in bushfire country among the black stumps and a man not know she was there. Quiet she walked, so's you couldn' hear the old feet steppin' on the ground between the grey twigs and the hot stones. An' she carried her little old daddy, a bit in each hand."

"He was broken?"

"In two pieces."

"Where was he broken?"

"Right across his belly-button he was. She had 'im in two bits, taking him on the long walk up north to the warm country away from the frost and the cold wind."

"What broke him?"

“Stop buttin’ in. The cold broke him. He froze out straight like a skinny stick and snapped across the middle.”

“What was he made of?”

“The whitest clay you ever picked out of the river-bank.”

“Just like the ones you made me?”

“Like that, only better. She took him away up there in the hot north so’s he might melt and stick back together again.”

“Did he stick?”

“Wait while I get to it. No. There was no stickin’ together. She lost the top piece.”

“The head.”

“The head. All she had left was the legs. So she reached a deep gully up there where it was warm all the year and planted him alongside a blackboy spear and went off, and while she was away the rains came and the wet winds of the hot west and with the first green shoots of spring up he grew, straight as the living spear beside him. And he was the father of the dark man who started on walking round the land. He never settled down in any place, always staying a bit, then off. Off to new game and fresh berries and he fought a bit and had his family and they all grew up to walk about the land. Walk walk walk. And when the wind blew the ashes from their fires, there was nothin’ else to tell they’d been that way.’

There’s a long silence. Early tourists passing at a hundred and ten down the south road slow resentfully to eighty at the sixty sign and speed up the other side of Myoora.

Lovely day, the women say.

Too hot, say the men.

What was that?

Where?

In the trees.

Didn’t see anything.

Like huts.

Maybe it was huts.

Oh. They’re gone. Wish you didn’t go so fast.

You want to get to a decent motel tonight, don't you?

Well, yes. But they looked so romantic, those huts in the trees. Sort of peaceful.

You'd curl up and die without air-conditioning, sweetheart.

Joy says, "Maybe it's my little man's been broken in two. Maybe that's what it means. What happened to the other part, the head? Did she ever find it? Did it ever grow up and be a man?"

"No one ever found him. The black man's never found his top piece. If he did, he might grow up to stay in one place and build something that'll last after him and be kind of his own. As much as anything can be your own. He's got nothing, but he could have something if he used his head and got away from his sorrow at not being able to walk free about the land." And he waves a muscular right arm expansively. "Where he liked."

Mary's been listening at the shutter. She's pleased he took the trouble to tell one of his little stories and the only way she can say thanks is to keep at him.

"You're a fine one to talk, you are, about using your head. You don't walk about the land and you don't use your head, either."

She might just as well have said take care of yourself or keep yourself tucked in at night or don't forget your pipe.

He doesn't bother to look up. Instead, he tests the set line with his finger, gently. Silly bitch. There's a lotta stories in me she won't hear. Like the ones I used to make up when I was a kid, about where my folks, my black folks, come from. Was it the west and they came back here or were they from the coast, pushed out west and came back here. There's no one to ask. No one alive knows. Don't even know the name of the tribe. Or where they're buried. No totems, none of us initiated. Not one thing or the other.

Joy stops thinking and says, "In the story you like the walkin' one better, don't you Gunner?"