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One of My Best Friends
(Australia, 1994)

1 People used to whisper that Willy had a touch of the tar-brush in
him. That he was half boong.

I guess I should have known it was true – the accusation al-
ways drove him into a frenzy. And if I'd looked carefully enough,
5 the evidence was there to convict him – the flattened nose, the
brow jutting like a sun visor, the legs thin as spinifex. He had a
good strong set of teeth, too – as abos were supposed to have in
the days when they were treated like horses. Unreliable horses.

When I first met him, though, he was white. Or no colour –
10 like the rest of us. As kids, we couldn't care less.

It was my first day at school – a day everyone remembers, but
me more than most. My old man was in the Force, and forever
being posted from town to town – so I had a lot of first days, in a
lot of different schools. And being the son of a cop didn't make
15 them any easier.

I always seemed to be wearing the wrong school uniform, or
the wrong haircut. Or had a mouthful of the wrong slang. I'd
arrive with a kitbag instead of a satchel, or a satchel instead of a
shoulder-bag ... Christ! I could fill a whole library with a cata-
20 logue of different school fashions.

And as I stood there among the stares and sniggers, the first to
befriend me would always be the other loners. The dunces, the
stammerers and stutters, the fatsos – all the professional
schoolyard victims. And I always befriended them in return at
25 first, for they were useful to break the ice with. Although I often
had to turn on them later as I settled in, and took my rightful
place further up the pecking order.

Anyway, that's how it was with Willy that first morning. I
guess he was just starved for human contact, and realised I wouldn't
30 know who he was. Or what he was – an untouchable. He fol-
lowed me around all that day – remembering it now, I could
almost swear he was wagging a tail.

And of course, we were put at the same desk after the class
filed in for the first lesson. There's a natural law about such things,
35 a strange gravity that binds victims and bullies together.

It took a week or two to establish my position in the schoolyard
hierarchy. A few bruises, a few bloodied noses, and a stage of

tar-brush tjærekost
boong australneger
accu'sation beskyldning
frenzy raseri
con'vict domfælde
brow bryn
jut rage frem
visor kasketskygge
spinifex australsk græsart
abo australneger
unre'liable upålidelig
Force politistyrken
kitbag rejsetaske
satchel skoletaske
snigger fnisen
loner enegænger
dunce dumrian
stammerer, stutterer en der
stammer
fatso tyksak
be'friend hjælpe
turn on at slås med
pecking order hakkeorden
un'touchable paria
wag logre med
file in gå ind i rækker
gravity tyngdekraft
bully voldsmand
e'stablish befæste
hierarchy rangfølge
bruise skramme
stage niveau

1 equilibrium was reached. The bullies left me alone, and so did
the victims.

Somehow though, I couldn't bring myself to jettison Willy.
Maybe pity had something to do with it – there was certainly a
5 lot about him that was pitiful. He could almost make me weep
with stories about his life – the booze, the beatings, the foster
homes, the good behaviour bonds. Even if half of it was bullshit,
who could blame him for turning into such a miserable sneak.
Any self-respecting social worker would have thrown herself on
0 his flick-knife out of guilt. Or invited him home for a larceny, at
the very least.

I remember one weekend we were out rabbiting – camped in
the middle of a vast paddock somewhere. Just the two of us, and
a thousand rabbit holes. We'd both got a bit pissed that night on
5 a bottle of my old man's sherry I'd borrowed, and a bit giddy on
his cigars, when Willy, for no reason, suddenly started to blub-
ber. Snivelling about his parents, the police, the boy's home – the
whole grim Fairy Tale.

'You're me only friend,' he whimpered. 'The only one who
10 listens ...'

Lucky for me, a trap went off just then, and the rabbit started
whimpering too. It was Willy's turn to do the gutting, and when
he got back I was asleep.

Or looked as if I was.

15 Still, I like to think I helped him. Hanging around with me, he
learnt to stick up for himself more. Or maybe the other kids just
left him alone more.

He was always around at our place on weekends, and would
stay the night whenever my mother let him. And sometimes even
20 when she didn't – I remember discovering him one morning curled
up on the front porch. He'd been there all night – anything was
better than returning to the home.

He used to come to tea every Friday night, and my old man
would take us both to the Club – the Police Boys Club. That's
25 where Willy first learnt to box – we spent a lot of time with our
gloves on. My old man said he was a natural – all he needed was
a bit more weight. We taught him to kick a football, too – and
both of us played every week in the Police Boys team.

I guess it was one of the happiest times in his life – some
30 recognition for his achievements, a bit of affection, growing self-
confidence. My parents were even talking of legally adopting him,
when he got pinched for illegal use, and sent up to the city for a
year. Maybe he'd been too happy, and it blew some kind of fuse.

equi'librium ligevægt
jettison kaste over bord
booze alkohol
foster home plejehjem
bonds bånd
sneak luskepeter
flick-knife springkniv
larceny tyveri
rabbit jage kaniner
vast uhyre stor
paddock vænge
pissed pissefuld
giddy svimmel
blubber tude
snivel flæbe
whimper klynke
trap fælde
gut tage indvoldene ud
porch veranda
a natural et naturtalent
recog'nition anerkendelse
a'chievement præstation
af'fection kærlighed
self-'confidence
selvsikkerhed
pinch anholde
il'legal ulovlig
the city opdragelsesanstalt
fuse sikring

1 As though he didn't somehow deserve it, or the guilt in him
 couldn't adjust.
 'Once a boong, always a boong!' my old man said. He was
 really upset.

5 We were transferred again the next year, and though I wrote to
 the reform school Willy didn't answer. I knew he was ashamed of
 his kindergarten handwriting, and put it down to that. Then I
 settled into my new school, made new friends and new enemies,
 and slowly forgot about him. Although occasionally my old man
 10 jogged my memory with things he'd heard on the boxing grape-
 vine. That Willy had left school, and was travelling the country
 shows with a fight troupe – and making a bit of a name for him-
 self.

My life wandered on from weekend to weekend, through those
 15 endless adolescent days, those summers that seemed to last for
 ever. Then suddenly I found that I'd left school, and was married.
 A graduate^s from the Police Academy, being posted back to the
 same country towns I'd grown up in.

The inevitable transfer came just before my thirtieth birth-
 20 day. We were reasonably settled where we were – a house and
 garden, a couple of kids – but it was worth an extra stripe to
 move. And I didn't plan on being a constable for ever.

Besides, I was curious to see the place.

I might never have left.

25 Country people never forget you – if only because they don't
 have a lot of other things to remember. But whatever the reason,
 they hadn't forgotten me. And I quickly found that I hadn't for-
 gotten them.

The faces were all the same, if worn a little rougher with time.
 30 And life was still much as my parents had lived it – the same
 rounds of work, pub, and church. And footy on Saturdays, of
 course.

My wife liked to tell me I was too old for it at thirty – espe-
 cially when the lawn needed mowing. She used to say there was
 35 nothing more pathetic than someone who wouldn't face up to
 their age. Maybe – but what I'd lost in speed, I made up for in
 enthusiasm. There was still nothing quite so releasing as putting
 foot to ball on a sunny afternoon. Or even on a wet one, for that
 matter.

40 And Willy must have felt the same – because that's where I
 first saw him again. He was playing for an abo team – the first
 year they'd had one in the local competition. The league didn't

a'djust tilpasse sig
 up'set rystet
 re'form school
 opdragelsesanstalt
 jog sby's memory opfriske
 ens hukommelse
 grapevine jungletelegraf
 troupe gruppe
 ado'lescent halv voksen
 graduate person, der har
 taget afgangseksamen
 in'evitable uundgæelig
 transfer forflyttelse
 reasonably nogenlunde
 settle falde til
 an extra stripe en
 forfremmelse
 constable politibetjent
 footy football
 lawn græsplæne
 mow slå græs
 pa'thetic ynkelig
 face up to se i øjnene
 en'thusiasm begejstring
 re'leasing frigørende
 compe'tition konkurrence
 league (fodbold)liga

1 really want them – but some new discrimination law had been passed in the city, and they were stuck with them.

Not that the league was prejudiced – but every time the abos played people seemed to end up leaving the field by ambulance.

5 So maybe the league *was* prejudiced – against violence.

Of course, I didn't know all this that particular Saturday – no one had bothered to warn me. I guess it was part of the entertainment – see how long it takes the new guernsey to get his nose broken. And no doubt the fact I was a cop made it even more interesting.

10 I should have realised what was going on from the start. I'd never seen so many grudges settled, so much niggling behind the play, so many crippling tackles.

The first time I was felled, I put down to bad luck – but not the second. Or the third, or the fourth. Finally, half-strangled by
15 a kick in the neck, I hit back. My old man used to say that abos have glass jaws, and the owner of this jaw was certainly an abo. He flipped over like a shot rabbit.

It was a crazy thing to do, but football does crazy things to you. I've heard TV experts arguing that team sports are a sort of
20 safety valve, an emotional release – but that's bullshit. Football's where you *learn* aggro, not get rid of it. I didn't use to be a loudmouth, in fact I'm still not – except when I'm wearing a guernsey. Or driving my car, of course.

Anyway, as soon as I hit him, it was on for young and old. All
25 over the field the boots were going in, the scores being settled. Something hit me from behind, I turned around, and next thing I knew I was squaring up to Willy. A whole crowd of the bastards was after my blood, but luckily some kind of chivalry seemed to operate – and he was first in line.

30 We recognised each other at the same time – after the first couple of punches. You never forget the combinations that hurt. He'd got blacker over the years, his nose flatter, and it came as a bit of a shock – I'd never thought of him as an abo. He was faster too, but after I'd stung him a couple of times he knew that who-
35 ever won, we were both going to be sore.

That's when he dropped his fists, and turned to the rest of the crowd.

'This bloke's a mate of mine – a good feller. Let's forget it, get on with the game.'

40 There were a few dissenting mutters, but Willy obviously had the authority – or the fists to back it up with.

I'd been forgiven, and that rush of affection reprieved victims feel for their persecutors welled up in me. I knew how lucky I'd

prejudiced forudindtaget
guernsey football
jersey (bluse) worn by foot-
ball players in Australian
Rules. Australian Rules is a
game played by teams of
eighteen with an oval ball
settle a grudge hævne en
forsmædelse
niggling smålighed
crippling lemlæstende
fell fælde
strangle kvæle
safety valve
sikkerhedsventil
release frakobling
aggro aggression
loudmouth skrålhals
to be on at lukke op for en
slåskamp
settle a score gøre et
regnskab op
square up to stå overfor
parat til at slå
chivalry ridderlighed
combi'nation slagserie
sore øm
dis'senting uenig
rush bølge
af'fection hengivenhed
re'prieved benådet
victim offer
persecutor forfølger
well up vælde frem

1 been – there were bottles all around the ground just waiting to be broken and ground into my face. Suddenly I loved them all – Jesus, *nobody* knew their troubles like I did. Their brother.

I dropped my fists – and that’s when Willy king-hit me.

grind tvære
king-hit slå ud
be'get avle
genocide folkedrab
option valgmulighed
nil nul

5 I know what they say. That violence begets violence, that a punch in the face is nothing compared to a hundred years of genocide. That Willy didn’t have a chance from the day he was born, that his options were nil in a world dedicated more to charity than equality. I heard all that from the social workers at the Police

dedicate vie
charity godgørenhed
e'quality lighed
social worker socialrådgiver
mend reparere
tyre dæk
plate tandprotese

10 Academy and maybe it’s true.

But it’s also false – the blame’s got to stop somewhere. Otherwise we’d *all* be guilty.

I used to think that people could be meded like any other machine. Pumped up with a little kindness like a flat tyre. But

15 now I know better.

Every time I clean my lower plate, or my jaw aches in the cold, I know.

Black or white, Willy was a boong, and always will be.

Just like my old man said.

QUESTIONS

Understanding

1. Where and when does the story take place?
2. Who are the main characters?
3. The story consists of seven sections. Give each section a heading that sums up its contents.
4. Describe the narrator and his attitude to Willy.
5. Describe Willy and his background.
6. What is the narrator’s attitude to Aboriginals? How did he get that attitude?