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The pharmacy in Cottonwool was the best in the country. They had cottonwool shoes, cottonwool gloves, cottonwool masks and a range of cottonwool gags that covered an entire wall. On the wall opposite was a huge array of the latest cancer drugs. It was all white silence and the gentle whispering of sales attendants fitting various products to customers.

Em had two dollars left over from last week's busking. She eyed off the cottonwool gloves—she knew her bleeding wrist would soon seep through the rags she'd wrapped around it that morning before leaving home. The cottonwool gloves were beautifully tailored, and very expensive. Em walked around the shop, sussed out where the mirrors and cameras were. She fiddled ostentatiously with the cottonwool buds in full view. Then quick as a whip her other hand grabbed a pair of gloves and shoved them down her pants. She went to the counter to pay for her cottonwool buds.

The assistant took her dollar, glancing suspiciously at the tap shoes dangling from Em's hand. 'You can't tap dance around here, you know', she said. 'It's way too noisy.'

'I know', Em nodded sagely.

'The inspectors are around', the assistant said with grim satisfaction. 'They've been handing out fines all week.'

Em left the pharmacy and went around the corner to the alley. She was looking for a dark doorway but everything was floodlit. There were cameras everywhere. Em walked further across the park to the water's edge where black oil lapped the sea wall. Facing the stench of the oil-covered harbour she supposed all those cottonwool masks served a purpose after all. A little bud of thanks to the cottonwool designers opened in her belly. She sat down and hunched over to hide her wrist, then unbound the bloody rag and pulled on the cottonwool gloves. Perfect.

Em felt good as she walked down the street. She fitted in, in her white cottonwool gloves, she felt just like one of the crowd. Shoppers in the latest cottonwool gags stood in front of shop windows, nodding to one another and pointing at the merchandise.

But there was still the very real problem of finding work. One dollar left, and it wasn't even lunchtime. Em was thirsty but water cost five dollars. Inspectors were hovering where Em used to busk. She held her tap shoes against her thigh and hurried on.

Australia Park was finished. Two white gateways rose to the sky. With the sun behind them they made strange silhouettes that resembled giant kangaroos—hulking bodies and little pointy heads with little pointy ears.

Over one gateway was a sign saying 'Players', over the other was one saying 'Workers'. Em felt confused. On the one hand she would rather play than work, on the other her parents were at home in bed waiting for her to bring money in. It was decided by the 20 dollar entry fee over the Players gateway. Em joined the Workers queue.

She recognised a fat boy just behind her: John from

school who used to get beaten up by the footy team.

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'I'm going to find a job', Em said sunnily.

'Do your parents have cancer yet?' John's footy boots dangled from one hand. He began to swing them around and around like yo-yos.

'No', said Em. But she couldn't be sure. They had been in bed for three days now. The bedroom smelt. She thought about her own bleeding wrist. Glancing down she was pleased to see that the glove hadn't seeped. She loved these cottonwool gloves!

'Well mine do', said John. 'So I'm going before you.'

Em ducked out of the way of the swinging boots. The queue was growing, everybody jostling and squirming in the heat. A middle-aged woman in front of Em gave out a sudden groan and sat on the ground. Em wormed in front, giving the woman a kick as she passed.

An hour later, parched and sunburnt, Em reached the desk. The man took her details. Em worried briefly that he might have seen her plying her trade in the old days on the corner. Her scrappy plate, and scrappy costume. She lied that she had danced on every grand stage in the country. The man ushered her over to one side. From here she could see the stage, a vast white plastic map of Australia. The curtains were drawn.

By late afternoon Em was on the map, in her tap shoes, rehearsing in a long line of dancers. A man with a blond bouffant strode up and down barking instructions. Em's mouth was so dry that she could barely swallow. But it was good to dance again, and a privilege to be chosen. The bedraggled rejects had disappeared into a hole behind the stage. Em kicked high, feeling the blood pump down her thighs, enjoying the clatter of steel on the white plastic map.

A complicated system of lines had been drawn on it. You had to keep your eyes to the front, but if you danced outside the lines, you were sent off. John was next to her huffing away in his football boots. Em was thinking what a lovely sound his boot spikes made. She was trying not to sing.

The choreographer stood in front, tapping his stick on the floor to get the dancers' attention. The sound of Players milling on the other side of the curtain pressed through the plastic.

'Right', said the choreographer, 'we're opening in two hours. Costumes and gags arrive in one hour.'

Em put her hand up. 'Can we have a drink of water?'

'When you've shown you can dance the dance', the choreographer snapped.

He lifted his stick. Everybody stood up straight, inside the lines, and waited on his command.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Fiona McGregor.