



Source: Michael Slackman, 'Egyptian fire stirs anti-government anger', *New York Times* in *International Herald Tribune* online, 07/09/05.

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When I was a child we lived in a country town in the Central Western district of eastern Australia. The town was situated on one of the area's main arterial rivers and had built its quiet prosperity on the back of the sheep that grazed the open paddocks and from the wheat that grew golden and long throughout the summer. The purple splash of Salvation Jane, the botanical curse of local farmers, also bloomed in the summer as a reminder that beauty and pestilence were not always strangers.

For children of the town the summer meant swimming in the swift current of the brown river, dodging snags and lazing naked in the shade of that other local pest, the weeping willow. We weren't allowed to swim in the river so my cousins and I made a daily pilgrimage to the local swimming pool where we would spend the day swimming until our skin wrinkled and reddened from baking in the sun. Our staple food was hard black liquorice Choo Choo bars which had the dual advantage of being chewable for hours under water as well as turning your tongue and saliva a bluey black. The saliva proved particularly useful in battles against other groups of kids or as a way of simultaneously disgusting and gaining the interest of girls.

The town was a mixed bag of people, some black, mostly white, some rich most not. We were middling poor and lived up in the housing estate on the hills on the south east side of town. My father was a gambler posing as a green grocer whose real occupation was unknown to many because he was the local SP book maker. SP stands for Starting Price and my father's trade involved taking bets in pubs and barber shops at attractive odds and considerable risk because his trade was highly illegal and if it weren't for the fact that some of his best customers were police officers he may have landed himself in hot water which he never did, at least not as a consequence of being a bookie. Having a colourful racing identity as a father rendered me both heroic and untrustworthy in the eyes of my friends but no one ever said as much so I was a popular kind of kid with a certain cocky if undeserving swagger that has stuck with me for most of my life.

Across the road from us their lived a family by the name of Starrs. They were a large family, poorer than us for sure because they had eleven kids and were probably Catholic now that I come to think of it. The town was pretty evenly split between tykes and Proddies but my family was a mix, my father being Irish Catholic and my mother being Scottish Presbyterian, lapsed. We kids never thought anything of it at the time but apparently it was a talking point around the town. We didn't play with the Starrs kids much because they were a gang unto themselves and

tended to easily resort to violence whenever the need arose. They were quick with a slingshot, we all had slingshots made from bicycle inner tubes and forked eucalypt, and they had a mean old blue cattle dog mongrel they'd sick onto frill-necked lizards they'd flush out of briar patches when they were looking for rabbits. They were what you'd call feral today those Starrs kids.

Their house was a study in the kind of neglect only the poor and the eccentric can muster and, as I recall it, had the smell of stale cigarette smoke and bacon fat wafting from it out into the street. My parents never had a bad word to say about the Starrs family but what was unsaid made you realise that my mother thought they were a notch below us which would have put them at just about the bottom rung of the ladder of opportunity. For me they existed as a presence, neither good nor bad when it came down to it and to be honest my brother and my cousins quite liked having them around to fight slingshot wars with and to spit our bluey black hockies on at the pool. Then there was the fire and all that changed.

I remember the night as a kind of silent movie but in colour. We watched it all unfold from the window of my parents' bedroom which overlooked the street. The sheer curtains in the room were lit up in a strange orange glow when I stumbled in in the early hours of the morning seeking an explanation for the eerie light. Outside the street was filling up with people walking around in their pyjamas breathing steam that also glowed with that strange orange light. I don't recall any sound, even when the fire brigade arrived. I watched in silent fascination as the Starrs' house went up like a bonfire on cracker night until it collapsed in on itself with people running all around it clutching their hair or with hands held over their mouths and eyes as wide as an owl's. No one said a word for as long as it took the flames to die down just as the sun began to rise over the hills.

For the next few days there was talk about what caused the fire. An iron left on, someone smoking in bed. My mother swore it was a cigarette because she never saw any of the Starrs family wearing a stitch of clothing that had been ironed. I heard someone say the shadows of the dead children were burned into the concrete floor of the house. All that was left was a nest of blackened cinders and the old blue cattle dog that sniffed around the ashes during the day and howled during the night until someone came along and took it away too. All the people in our town remembered that summer for a long time.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Boris Kelly.*