

wild
cat
falling



by Colin Johnson

Foreword by Mary Durack



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I
RELEASE



one

TODAY the end and the gates will swing to eject me, alone and so-called free. Another debt paid to society and I never owed it a thing. Going outside into the fake heaven I have dreamed of these last eighteen months. Lifetime lousy months. Lifetime boredom of sameness. Same people, same talk, sick sameness of dirty jokes. Same sick sagas of old jobs pulled and new jobs planned. Heroic memories. Swell hopes.

Nearly eleven o'clock and ready for the shower that will clean our prison-fouled bodies for the sweet fresh air of the free world. A screw stands by as we file in. The stalls are waist high to prevent prisoners breaking rules. No talking. No sex. Today he lets up on the talking ban and stands blank-eyed, uninterested. No one would dream of breaking any other rule on the last day. Except possibly myself.

For me Fremantle jail has been a refuge of a sort. They have accepted me here as I have accepted hopelessness and futility. The others still have their hopes. Some even make resolutions—but they will fail and fall. Out a few weeks or days, then back a few years

in jail sweet jail. Hope is an illusion for squares. I don't fall for it. Don't care any more. I trained myself this way so no phoney emotion can touch me. I go through the actions of life, like in a dream. Actor and audience. Split personality. I can get outside my skin and look at myself.

I stand aside and see myself now, grinning stupidly as I soap my long, lean body. Today the shower is hot for a change and the jets trickle soothingly over my skin. Mother's hands faked by memory. The hissing water becomes her voice, "There, there. Everything will be all right." Phoney comfort. Has anything ever been all right?

Let the water be a girl's hands. Soft like in romantic novels—

Love me tender, love me long.

All my dreams come true. . . .

Mother love, boy-girl love—all love is fantasy. Taking a busty woman to bed and done with it like in the gaudy paper-backs they smuggle in here. That's enough I guess. Like I mean, that's life.

I listen to the other cons making with the patter—kidding each other about the great things they're going to do to celebrate release. Some look uneasy just the same, secretly scared to face the world again. With me it's not so much that I'm scared, I only know it will be worse out there. What's to do but lie about in some cheap room until I can't stand it any longer, and then meet up with the milk-bar gang again? Green light on the road home to jail.

I remember that first time in. Sixteen years old and standing sick and scared in the corridor wishing I was

dead. How huge the place seemed. Four tiers of cells reaching to the ceiling and daylight greying in through the dirty skylight. A centre space where the cons lined up to be marched off to work, to be fed or locked up again. The cells square, small, with white-washed walls and highly polished floors containing a bed, stool, table bolted to the floor, and a shit bucket. Bare electric bulb watching balefully. All ugly and desolate as hell. It is ugly still, but so familiar now I hardly notice it.

The social classes are rigid here. Screws the contemptible masters, tough cons the bosses next in line, stool pigeons the outcasts. The rest a formless mass, neither big nor small, only there. It is more clear cut than outside and I soon found out who to trust and mix with and who to avoid. Summed it up pretty quickly and decided to make my mark.

The screw was an ex-army type turned warder. Real neat. Tidy moustache, highly polished shoes, never missing a chance to show off his medals. He was in charge of the Juvenile Section, a tough mob trying to talk and act like they thought criminals should. Like gangsters in American movies. You had to be extra tough to make your way up with them.

This day I was supposed to take round the bucket of tea and fill the mugs outside the cell doors. I picked the bucket up, put it down again on the floor and folded my arms.

"You there! Pick up that bucket," the warder roared in his best parade ground voice. "Hop to it!"

I took a long look at him and sneered back in my best Hollywood crim voice: "Who do you think

you're ordering around, you little animal? Do it your bloody self."

Then I jerked up the bucket and flung the tea in his face. Tough screw, now wet little man, whipped out his whistle and blew a chorus of hysterical shrieks. Help arrived and the episode ended with the struggling offender being dragged off. . . .

The prison magistrate and superintendent sat at a desk in judgment.

"You are charged with assault, with disobeying orders, and insolence to an officer. How do you plead?"

"I don't know."

"Guilty or not guilty?"

"I don't know."

"Take that insolent grin off your face and plead."

Grin faded. Spirit collapsed. "Guilty."

"You are sentenced to fourteen days solitary confinement. Seven days bread and water."

I was led away between two warders. We marched across the main division to a door. One screw juggled with the lock and we marched through. First screw waited to lock up again and the other took the lead. We went through an iron gate and into an enclosure with a three-foot margin between wall and building. A box within a box. Flat, grey concrete roof and square windows spaced at uniform intervals and divided by bars into smaller squares.

We entered the building and stood in a long passage with doors fast locked on either side. The key scraped. One door opened to reveal another. Double doors to give a complete feeling of isolation.

"Undress, you!"

The cold air struck my skin and I stood shivering and goose-pimpled while the screw searched my clothes and flung them into the cell.

"Come on you. Up here."

He watched intently as I took a rug and mattress from an empty cell.

"Leave them between the doors."

I did as commanded and entered the cell. The inner door clanged shut and the outer one gave a muffled thud as it closed. I was alone.

I put on my clothes and sat on the hard, bare floor. There was light enough from the small, high window to read the Bible that was the only other thing in the cell besides a bucket.

Days and nights drifted and merged. In the morning I received a quarter of a loaf of bread and a mug of water. In the evening the same. I saw only two people during this time—the warder on duty and the con who emptied the bucket. All day it was cold and I huddled in the corner and read.

The nights were better. At the time of the evening's bread and water I brought the blanket and mattress into the cell. Between window and door there was enough room to stretch out, and after a while I could get warm and sleep.

Time continued its cold and warm drifting. When I finished the Bible there was nothing to do but lie on my back and let my mind wander and my eyes rove. I stared at the ceiling, white and remote, at the wooden floor, cold and splintery under me. The win-

dow barred and unreachable. The fast closed door.

Memories and nightmares haunted me till I hardly knew which was which. Flicker of shadow became a shaped dread of dark wings and scared wild cat eyes. . . . Falling, falling. Plunging and twisting out of the sky and the hard ground rising up.

"Mum!" . . .

I hear her move in her bed but my voice is panic-strangled and she does not wake. I gain courage to leap up and dive past the demons into her room.

"Go back to bed," she says.

"There's awful things in the kitchen, Mum. They've got wings and claws."

"Nonsense," she says. "It's the light from the stove. They're only shadows, son."

"They keep grabbing me," I whimper. "Can't I sleep with you?"

She sighs. "Keep still, then." She smooths my hair sleepily and I relax.

No nightmares here.

She is clattering around in the kitchen when I blink awake from the tangled heap of blankets on her big double bed. Two long streams of light filter through holes in a hessian sack that covers the glassless window. There is a large battered wardrobe in a corner, a kerosene lantern on the floor, and a mirror on the wall between pictures of two people pointing at their exposed hearts. I don't know what they mean but Mum says they are holy, so I suppose they bring good luck.

Mum's always telling me how lucky we are to have

this place and her widow's pension to keep us on. She had to put up a fight to convince the authorities that she had been legally married to a white man and wanted to go on living white. Mum cried when the Welfare took the older ones away. She was soft about her kids. Then the baby died and there was only me.

She didn't take up with anyone until Mr Willy came along. He was pretty old but he was white and earned a decent enough crust from his wood-cutting. He didn't live with us, just dropped in and stayed the night sometimes. He found this place for us and got us the furniture. Mum was proud and respectable, but she wasn't a fool. If she married she would lose her pension.

"Get up out of that," she calls. "Your breakfast's been ready the last hour."

I straggle up and pull on the clothes I have left where I got out of them last night.

"Don't forget to wash," she says.

I go out to the tap, wet my hands and wipe them over my face and hair.

She ladles out a plate of steaming stew and sets it on the table in front of me.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Kangaroo tail."

"Did you get it off the old abo?"

"Stop asking questions and eat up," she says. "You're nothing but a bag of bones. They'll be saying I don't feed you next and we'll have the Welfare on to us again. You know what that'll mean."

It is a threat that always works and I get on with it.

"I saw that old trapper come past yesterday," I say. "Gee, he's a funny looking guy."

"You remember what I said and don't go talking to him," she says.

I'm not interested in the old blackfella but I always get a bite if I mention him.

I get up from the table and she notices my clothes.

"Looks like you've been wriggling through that drain pipe again? You haven't been with those dirty Noongar kids I hope?"

I shake my head and grin.

"It's no joking matter," she says. "If we get seen with that mob we'll be chucked out of this place quick smart."

"Some of the white kids play with them."

She starts packing up the plates. "That's different. They belong on the white side of the fence. You've got to prove you do, and don't you forget it."

Mum's always at me about this Noongar mob, though some of them seem to be related to us in a vague way. A few of them are as light coloured as herself, some even as near white as me but most of them are pretty dark skinned. None of them are real aboriginal, though sometimes a full blood relative will drift in to the camp, stay for a bit, and get on the grog with them. This kind never seems to stay long though. They just appear and disappear, except the old rabbit trapper who sticks around but lives in a camp on his own.

Most of the Noongars drift round the place too. Some of them go off on seasonal work—picking apples, digging spuds and odd jobbing at harvest and shearing

time, but there are always some in this outskirts camp and when the workers come back they all get on it properly till the money runs out.

The Noongar kids are supposed to go to school, and the Welfare blokes are always chasing them up. A lot of them get shoved into missions and homes, but somehow there are always plenty who manage to dodge out—not the same ones all the time—but usually enough to have some fun with.

I bring in some wood for the fire. "There's a cricket match on in the school grounds," I say. "Can I go and watch?"

"All right. But look out you're home in good time for dinner."

I dart off and make for the stock pens across the railway line. I hear the Noongar kids shouting and laughing a long way off. They are playing follow-my-leader along the pen tops, wobbling and balancing and falling off.

"Hullo!"

"Hullo. We've been waiting ages. Thought you must be back in that old school or something."

"Nope. It's still holidays. My mum kept me yacking."

"Making you clean up that la-di-dah house, I s'pose."

Another one chips in. "That's what my mum reckons about a house. 'Not worth the bloody trouble,' she says."

The boy is bigger and darker than me and I am a bit afraid of him.

"Yes, it's pretty mad," I agree. "But Mum likes it so we have to live in it."

"My mum reckons she's stuck up because she married a white chap and has another white man on her now. But she weren't no better than the rest of them before."

"She went to school and got educated," I say defensively.

"So what," he comes back. "My mum went to the same mission only she don't get stuck in no Department house like a cocky in a cage."

Another boy says: "I wouldn't mind the house but damn going to school. What's the good of it anyway?"

"My mum says you've got to go or you can't get on."

"Get on where?" asks the first boy.

"Search me," I say. "Get a job I s'pose."

They look at me with dark and doubtful eyes.

"Aw, let's get moving," I say. "What're we going to do?"

"Go after birds and rabbits. We got some gings."

This is attractive but they would probably not be back till nearly dark and Mum would ask questions.

"What say we catch gilgies? I've got a gidgee hidden down the river bank. There's some real big ones this time of year."

The others are not so keen on this.

"Let's go to the silos," another suggests, "and slide down the wheat."

This is attractive too but if I'm caught with these kids it might be all up for Mum and me. "Some kids

were copped for doing that the other day," I lie. "They got sent to clink."

"Yeah," says the big chap who is about as scared of trouble as myself. "Let's get over into the bush where no one'll bother us."

We straggle across the line and into the trees. The kids fill their pockets with little stones and trail about spotting birds and aiming without success.

"My old uncle," says the big chap, "I seen him drop birds with stones plenty times. He made a spear once too and showed me how the abos used to bring down kangaroos."

"I saw a real bush abo once could throw a boomerang," another kid says. "He had thick scars cut on his chest and arms."

"What for?" I ask.

"He reckoned they did it to all the abo boys to make them tough."

"Bet it must have hurt."

"They got trained up to it. The kids played who could keep live coals the longest in their hands or on their arms and legs and after a bit they got used to it and didn't feel the pain hardly at all."

One of the kids lends me his ging and I fool around with it a bit. A rabbit scuttles out of the grass and we all yell and get around it. I put a stone in the ging and let fly. I don't expect to hit it but it flops down and the big chap picks it up and bangs its head against a tree. The others shake my hand and hit me on the back and the big chap holds the dead rabbit out to me.

"It's yours," he says. "You knocked it down."

"No," I say, "I don't want it. We got plenty rabbits home."

I haven't seen a rabbit killed since that time in the cemetery. Mum had gone there with me and some old native woman to put flowers on my brother's grave. He was only a baby when he died and it hadn't meant much to me until this time standing beside the oblong rain-leached heap of gravel and sand. Then this rabbit bounced out of the scrub and the old woman picked up a stick and battered it. I looked down at the dead animal beside the wilting flowers in the jam jar and suddenly burst out crying and hid my face in my mum's dress. We had rabbit stew that night.

I get home late. Mum asks where I've been. I tell her just mucking about with some of the kids from school, but she knows I'm telling a lie.

"You want to stay with me, son?" she asks.

I nod and look at the floor.

"They'll take you away like the rest of them," she says.

"No!" . . .

My voice ripped out in a scream that hurled back the familiar bareness of the cell. A key mercifully grated in the lock. The door opened. The fourteen days were done.

When the warder took me back to the Juvenile Section I found I had become a hero to my mates. Even the screw became a bit human and gave me a cigarette. I was a little colder and a little older, more a part of the prison and its atmosphere, part of the

grey cloud that dismally envelops it. This atmosphere got me down when I first came in but now it had become part of me. I became an emptiness gas-filled with the grey cloud.

After solitary the prison accepted me as I had never been accepted outside. I belonged.

