

Dave and Mackie

The brakes squealed wearily as the Main Western Line train rocked in to the near-deserted station.

"Wake up," Dave said, nudging his younger brother. "We're here."

Mackie sat up, groggy with sleep. He pulled off his battered canvas hat and rubbed the top of his head. "Whatsa time?"

"Just on five."

"Only got an hour 'til closing," Mackie observed with concern.

The brothers alighted from the train under the watchful eye of the conductor. The same conductor who had checked their tickets on boarding with the intense scrutiny reserved for aboriginal passengers.

A minute later Dave and Mackie were standing at the entrance of the Railway Hotel. It was busy with after-work drinkers imbibing urgently before the bars closed at 6pm. The publican finally found a break from assisting his staff pouring beers and came out.

"Haven't seen you blokes before," he said.

"Just got off the train," Dave replied. "Bit thirsty."

"Round the back," the publican instructed gruffly.

The brothers carried their swags around to the rear of the hotel, taking seats at a grey, rickety wooden table surrounded by empty kegs. The publican appeared as soon as they sat down. Instinctively, Dave pulled a pound note from his pocket to demonstrate the pair's liquidity. "Beer and a lemonade," he requested.

The publican took the pound note. "Lemonade?" he repeated with surprise.

"He don't drink," Dave said, nodding at Mackie.

"Used to drink beer," Mackie said. "But one sip and I can't stop. And then I can't run so fast."

The publican sniggered. "From who?"

"He's a great runner," Dave said. "Be a champion one day."

"Is that right?" the publican said sceptically. "Who's he beat?"

"Everybody in Narromine."

The publican laughed dismissively, and turned to leave them.

"Fifty pounds he could beat anyone in this town over a hundred yards," Dave said. "And give 'em ten yards start."

The publican stopped and turned back. "You got the fifty pounds?"

Dave pulled out some crumpled notes from his shirt pocket and counted. He was short. After Mackie scrounged three pound notes and a few coins from his back pocket they spread forty-six pounds, nine shillings and four pence on the table. Dave swept up the change and put it in his pocket, then held up the notes. "Forty-six pounds. Ten yards start."

The publican's eyes lit up at the sight of the money. "I'll see if anyone's interested," he said.

A few minutes later he was back with the beer and lemonade, handing Dave his change. "Got a taker for you. George Driscoll's in the bar. Reckons his son will take you on for ten pounds."

"Only ten?" Dave said.

"People 'round here didn't come down in the last shower. We never seen you blokes before."

"Thought we could do better than ten pounds," Dave said.

"Look," said the publican. "Give me your stake and I'll see what I can do. But don't hold your breath. When did you want to race?"

"Tomorrow's Saturday," said Dave, handing over his cash. "How about in the morning?"

"Should be alright," said the publican. "You could use the football ground just up the road. Say around eight o'clock. Before it gets too hot."

Dave looked at Mackie, who nodded in agreement. "No worries."

"Where are you two fellas sleepin' tonight?"

"Got any rooms available?" Dave asked.

"Nah, booked out."

"Funny," said Mackie. "Itsa same wherever we go. You hotel blokes must be makin' a bloody fortune."

The publican gave a wry smile. "I got the old stables over there if you want some shelter for the night. Just need a sweep out and you can have one each."

"That'd be alright, I'd reckon," Dave said.

"Two bob for both," said the publican.

Two beers, two lemonades and some toasted ham-and-cheese sandwiches later, Dave and Mackie thanked the publican for the use of his broom and swept out two of the narrow stalls to prepare for some rest. The publican dragged two old and grubby straw-filled mattresses out to the stables and threw them into the stalls.

"Kitchen opens at six for breakfast," he said. "You're gonna need it if you're givin' Driscoll's son ten yards. He's greased bloody lightning on the football field."

Before sleep, Dave and Mackie went for a walk around the town to get their bearings for the morning. They stopped at the football ground, walking on to inspect the playing field as a ghostly night-mist descended, illuminated by a distant street light.

"Not much grass," Mackie noted, kicking at the ground.

"Good," Dave said. "Suits us perfect."

The brothers made their way back wearily to their beds in the stable stalls. They lay in silence for a few minutes before Mackie yelled out: "Remember those religion lessons in mission school?"

"How ya reckon I'd forget?" replied Dave.

"Isn't this how Jesus got born? The Inn was full and the Innkeeper stuck Joseph and Mary in the stables."

"Yeah," said Dave. "But I don't reckon he charged 'em two bob, and I reckon his Inn was actually full."

They fell asleep, but an hour later Mackie heard the gate of his stall creak lightly. He opened his eyes to see a shadowy figure placing a cardboard box inside. "This is for you, mate," the figure whispered before carefully stealing away. Mackie crawled over to the box and found four large bottles of cold beer inside, each wrapped in brown paper.

The following morning, Dave made his way to the football ground just before eight o'clock under a rapidly warming sun. He could see a crowd milling, at least a hundred had gathered on the football field where a white line had been painted on the grass and a tape hung between two poles a hundred metres further on. A young man in a singlet and football shorts was bending and stretching in preparation for the race. Dave approached the mob and shouted at them angrily.

"Which one of you bastards give my brother the beer?"

The crowd looked at each other in confusion. "Whaddya talkin' about?" asked the publican.

"Someone slipped me brother four bottles. He's sleepin' it off. Too crook to run."

The crowd moaned with disappointment. "I'll let you chuck 'im in a shower at the pub for a few minutes," said the publican. "He'll come good."

"Nah, he's had too much."

"Typical," someone yelled from the back. "Can't handle the drink."

"Give me my dough back," Dave said to the publican.

The publican hesitated. "Wait a minute. Young Jim Driscoll here went to bed early and came out this morning to race. I reckon a bet's a bet. If your brother can't race it's not Jim's fault. You forfeit and the stake goes to Jim's father."

The crowd murmured agreement, irritated at giving up their Saturday morning for no entertainment. Dave was in no position to argue. He let out a deep sigh of frustration and looked at the publican. "At least let me 'ave a go then. If I'm gonna lose my stake anyway, might as well get a chance to run for it."

The crowd cheered, desperate to see a contest. The publican considered the proposition for a moment and then agreed. There was some mild laughter as Dave peeled off his shirt, revealing a slight paunch above his waist. He was considerably heavier than his taller, leaner brother.

"Can't run in these," Dave protested, pointing to his denim trousers.

"Someone give him their shorts," suggested a young woman excitedly. One of the men agreed to swap his shorts temporarily for Dave's trousers, and the crowd waited while they swapped in the change shed.

"This is gonna be hilarious," Stumpy Moran pronounced gleefully.

"Don't be so mean," chided Meryl Johnson who ran the dress shop. "At least he's having a go."

The crowd cheered as they watched Dave emerge from the change shed and walk to the start line, adjusting his adopted shorts as he walked. They looked at least a size too small. Dave's clothing benefactor came out behind him, struggling to tighten the belt on Dave's trousers and prompting fits of laughter from the crowd.

Dave strode to Jim Driscoll and they shook hands. "We both runnin' from scratch?" Dave asked him. "At least give me a chance to save my tenner."

"I reckon that'd be fair..." Jim started.

"The deal was ten yards start," the publican interrupted, pulling out Dave's stake from his pocket. "And you put up forty-six pounds. There's thirty-six pounds still to be matched. I'm covering ten of that myself, anyone else want to come in?"

People rushed the publican, shouting to 'get on' and almost knocking him down as they thrust notes at him until he announced: "All covered!"

Dave stood with his hands on his hips and shook his head with amazement at the sight of the clamouring punters. After the commotion had died down, the crowd shuffled obediently off to line each side of the makeshift running track. Dave took a deep breath, then stretched his legs and walked to the start line. The publican paced out ten yards and Jim took his starting position, looking back at his rival. "Good luck, mate," he called. "Reckon you'll need it."

"On the signal," the publican said. "When I drop my arm."

The runners nodded and an expectant hush fell over the crowd. The publican raised his arm slowly and held steady for a few seconds, then he dropped it suddenly and the race was on. Jim Driscoll shot up from his starting crouch and into a steady, powerful stride, hitting full speed after just a few yards. Behind him, Dave took a little longer to get into stride, but soon his legs were

thrashing like pistons and his body straightened as he hit his rhythm. When Jim hit the half-way mark, to the crowd's astonishment Dave had closed the margin to five yards and was coming fast. Suddenly the cheering lifted to an urgent intensity, and Jim sensed his rival must be closer than he could have feared. He took a quick look over his shoulder to see Dave bearing down on him, and his stride faltered momentarily. Dave swept past him with five yards to run and hit the tape, a huge smile of relief breaking over his face.

The crowd was in shock. Nobody could have expected this result. How could an unprepared stocky little man in borrowed shorts prevail over the supremely fit and talented local hope? And worse still, some had lost their money into the bargain.

A disappointed Stumpy Moran sidled up to the publican. "Saw it with my own eyes," he said in disbelief. "Otherwise I wouldn't have believed it."

"It don't make sense," said the publican. "Jim musta had a bad day or something."

Dave approached them both, smiling and still catching breath.

"How didya do that?" Stumpy asked Dave. "That Jim's a flyer."

"How fast would you run for forty-six pounds?" Dave replied, his chest still heaving.

"Well done," the publican said without enthusiasm, handing Dave a wad of cash. Dave took it without counting, and Stumpy and the publican watched him make his way to the change shed to exchange shorts for trousers.

"Hey," said Stumpy, rubbing his chin slowly in contemplation. "Ya don't reckon we was somehow..."

The publican looked at him with scorn. "Somehow what?"

"Ah, nothin'," Stumpy said. "Jim musta had a bad day."

When Dave arrived at the train station, Mackie was waiting for him on the platform, sitting on one of the two small benches with the swags packed, smoking a cigarette. Dave broke into a satisfied smile, waving his wad of cash as he approached.

"Good work, brother," Mackie said. "Got those bottles in me swag. We can crack one on the train to celebrate."

Dave sat beside him and took a quick puff of the cigarette before counting the cash and giving half to his brother. "Only just got there today," he said. "Must be gettin' old."

"Rubbish," Mackie said. "If you wasn't a black fella, you'd be runnin' for Australia in Melbourne and meetin' the Queen."

"That dream's long gone, brother," Dave said wistfully. "Long gone."

"Bastards."