

## **44.**

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The banks of the Burdekin. Grim, as always, did not want to get to town too far ahead of time. We numbered four. Grim and me, plus the goat and the gold standard of manliness, old Saitchell. The goat was waiting for us when we docked at Townsville and grumbled every step of the way as we struck inland towards Charters Towers. Leave me alone out there! Middle of the fucken desert! Every man for his fucken self and fuck the goat to hell why don't ya! The goat said it had been hard trying to keep track of Joe through the wire services. He walked all the way to Kalgoorlie only to get word that Grim had re-emerged in Sydney. Very fucken inconvenient he said. We were possibly glad to see the goat again but chose not to make this known.

Saitchell didn't say where he was going to or coming from. He stopped at our camp, such as it was, and asked if an old timber cutter could avail himself of a little company for an evening, and we said yes, and then he didn't leave and we didn't suggest it. Apart from anything else he was clever at catching eel-tailed catfish and scooping up mud crabs, a drastic improvement on the dirtwater damper that had been our staple. The goat thought we made too much noise about Saitchell's food provision. It's a very big fucking river and I think you will find there are black catfish, eastern rainbowfish, empire fucking gudgeon, mangrove jack, Agazziz's glassfish, tilapia, yellowbelly, freshwater long tom and even fucking barramundi said the goat, fuck me backwards, the Burdekin is roiling with banded grunter if you must know, but all hail the ancient bushwhacker who can snaffle a few bottom-dwellers and crabs that move slower than Grim's footwork. We ignored the goat and picked our teeth each lazy night with sweet white catfish bones.

Saitchell, who had travelled, was familiar with Grim's work. He had been in Philadelphia in 1903 doing some stevedoring when Grim constructed his Peerless Tetralogy over a span of three months and four days. That was when Grim fought Peter Maher (a former heavyweight champion of the world; when he met Grim, the great Maher boasted a record of 128 wins, 15 losses and five draws), Joe Walcott (welterweight champion of the world, then 80-11-15), Bob Fitzsimmons (heavyweight champion of the world, 63-9-13) and Joe Gans (lightweight champion of the world, 131-7-16). No man ever tackled world champions across three weight divisions in four straight fights, and no-one will again.

Add it up, Saitchell said, those bastards had more than 400 wins between them and not one of the bludgers could finish you off. Who was the best?

All of them. Gans was good. Johnson was good. But none good enough.

The black fighters were better, then.

Don't care if they're black, don't care if they're white. Big punchers mean big crowds mean more moolah.

What I wanted Grim to say instead was: I crave interesting challenges, from opponents black, green or brindle. I have no time for racism and abhor those who promulgate it. Take Tommy Burns for example, who was both excoriated and praised for breaking the 'colour bar' when he fought Johnson. Well, Burns showed his true colours when Joe Gans fought George Memsic. Burns crouched in Memsic's corner and howled abuse all night.<sup>92</sup> You wouldn't know that Burns knew Gans had a name; he was the coon, the dinge, the smoke, boogie. Gans won on points, effortlessly, and I thought every jab he twisted

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92 William Gildea, *The Longest Fight: In the Ring with Joe Gans, Boxing's First African American Champion*

into poor Memsic's face was a retort to Burns in the opposing corner. Myself, I want my opponent to be greater, not diminished, because that makes me greater. That was the speech I wished I could hear from Grim, but it was my speech and never his.

I thought after the asylum your insights might extend a bit deeper I said.

Grim turned to me, eyes grey in a face that had tanned to the colour of a drover's boot heel. I know why I'm here. What about you? Still running away?

It'll be a woman he's running from said the goat. Or more fucken likely a man.

Saitchell said nothing, just raised one eyebrow a sixteenth of an inch.

It's modern fucken times said the goat. Chase all the blokes you want, fucken good onya.

It's not a bloke I said. And not a woman either. I know I can't use another human to solve my problems.

Fucken knew it said the goat. You're after some goat action. Well, get to the back of the fucken queue.

I'll cook some more of those eel-tailed catfish for everyone said Saitchell, and the goat rolled his eyes and muttered something unpleasant.

You want a flag you can march behind said Grim. You could do worse than attach yourself to Saitchell.

Well, I never wanted to be Ned Kelly I said. I wanted to be Joe Byrne.

Most men want to be spear carriers said Grim. Harder to be the one out front on your own.

There's a trick to life I reckon said Saitchell, positioning the twitching fish over the fire. I think you'll find it, even if you have to wait until you're very old. Just keep looking. You'll probably get there in the end.

## **45.**

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It is not so hard to sleep when your bed is the lap of night blanketed by the ancient muttering of water moving ineluctably from land to ocean. Is this the oldest sound of all? Slow, solemn, the steady decline into somnolence. And so we slept. There were night birds, and the wriggle of reptiles in sand and riverbank bush, and human snoring, and sometimes the conversation of distant livestock, but it was all swathed in river sigh, and the mosquitoes and heat prickle did not stop us drifting, and our sleep was like the river as well: that shut-eye state where all the dread heart-stones carried through waketime are without weight or consequence.

We slept. Men on a riverbank. All over the world men were sleeping on riverbanks, all part of a single endless river, one vast family drifting through sleep to the susurrations of one river, all doing our best to get through days, all seeking respite at night from fears and terrors smothered and smoothed by sleep, sleep induced by the sound of solemn water moving from land to sea, from land to sea, the endless ancient movement a loop without start or end. Men asleep, their troubles neatly folded and placed beneath their heads, placated by river whisper murmur rush or rumble. We slept.

And then we didn't. A stockwhip crack, loud as the world splitting apart. I struggle-swam from dream's depths towards consciousness, lost in the deep blue and panicked suddenly stupidly groping for surface lost and maybe too distant, just for that piece of then, and then breaking the meniscus into wake reality, hitting like a blare of trumpet. Awake then, knowing there had just been a stentorian sound, guessing initially it was a widow-maker branch splitting from