

Archie Weller

In 1978, as editor of Identity magazine, Jack Davis advertised a short story contest which was open to all Black Australians. Over fifty entries were received and the winning story, written at the time under the pseudonym of R. Chee, was "Stolen Car". This was Archie Weller's first published story, a success which prompted him to continue writing both prose and poetry. An abridged version of that winning entry is reproduced below.

He was eighteen years old, thin and dark as an ancient snag hidden in a river. Golden laughter of the sun shone from his yellow eyes and melted into his blond curly hair. His eyes were the first thing anyone noticed about him. Gentle, in half crescents of laughter, sometimes wide with interest, sometimes sad. But the colour was quite strange, and within them if one was kind or quick enough, one could see a spirit of restless searching and unsureness that was the very soul of the boy.

He had hitched a ride with a truckie that morning from the country to the ragged outskirts of the city. Red and white houses pimple the hills that circle it like a sleeping snake. Orchards have tamed the crude wilderness, but now a new savageness, the city itself, squirms like the awakening pupae of some cruel, giant insect, between the hills and the ocean.

He stood under the tree trying to thumb a lift. A grotesquely ugly, yet beautiful old red-gum, covered in clusters of sweet smelling blossom, clinging tenaciously to the edge of the rushing highway.

But the tree and he are the same, out of place in this brick and bitumen world. None of the cars stop until an old Holden skids to a screeching stop beside him. A grinning dark face, minus one front tooth, peers out of the window.

"Hop in mate," a nasal voice croaks, "Ya won't get a lift 'ere mate, unless a Nyoongah comes along. Them white bastards too good for us," continues Gap-tooth conversationally.

He wrenches the gear stick around, pushing the accelerator down. They spin off in a cloud of flying gravel and dirt, bowling along the grey intestine leading into the bulging stomach of the city.

They swap names. Johnny Moydan, lived all his life on a farm near Katanning, come up for his first look at the big smoke. Benny Wallah, known as Wallaby. Brags about the girls he knows and the "breaks" he has done.

Dusk. They shoot up onto the top of the hill in Shepperton road and Johnny takes his first look at Perth.

Buildings scar the purple, pregnant sky. Anguished, tortured silhouettes, rearing from the darker mass below. Holding the dying sky and the living city apart. The claws of the city rip open the clouds. Blood pours from the wound and night comes slipping over the too truthfully cruel city, sending the day people scurrying for home and dragging the night people from their holes and ditches. Park the car in a dark, dead-end lane in an empty industrial area. Streets full of people, flat black shadows, dancing in the lighter grey of the night. Fluttering dank, dirty, moths gathering in little clusters in pools of light on street corners.

"We'll go up to Zigi's first, see if me woman's there" says Wallaby. "Might even get you a moony too. Plenty of women 'ere for ya."

City youth, wise in the ways of his world, treading the streets surely. Johnny follows, shy and confused. The sun, his sun, has quite gone now, and he is cold and a little afraid in this dead place that seems so alive.

Music from the night club throbs hypnotically, escaping through its gaping red mouth and crawling painfully across the air, beaten out on drums and lacerated by whining electric guitars. The club's pale face shows neither pleasure nor annoyance, only suffering blankly. An air conditioner protrudes like a gray wart, dribbling into a pool on the street. People are spewed out of the fluffy red mouth, gathering in chattering groups on the street. Stumbling people, happy people, angry people. Aboriginal people. This is the Nyoongah hang-out.

Around the corner, dark and full of lanes, Aboriginal people talk quietly and laugh softly. Sometimes voices rise and a family quarrel that erupts into a brawl. Then the police move in like a pack of hungry dogs.

Police car always squatting in the road outside Zigi's. Big, cold-eyed policemen striding the streets, pushing the stray people around.

Wallaby leans against the glass window of the Pizza bar next to Zigi's and fishes in his pocket for a smoke. A voice from the dark cries out.

"Hey, Wall, when you get out of 'Illston?" and they are surrounded by a crowd of boys with a few girls clinging to muscular arms, afraid they will be swept away if they let go.

Dirty, sly, wary, children, with eyes that look at, yet away from, strangers.

Where is the soil that spawned their ancestors? Only bitumen and cement here now. These are not spirits from the bush, who hide in the bodies of humans, or trees, or rocks, or bound joyously to the stars. They are like the leaves of yesterday's yellowed newspaper, with yesterdays news, whirling aimlessly in dirty streets.

"When ya get out, well? Ya only bin in 'Illston a coupla munce unna?" asks a slouching youth, paler than the others, blank, humble eyes and a twisted smile. A kicked, stray dog, tail between dusty, dungareed legs, and a whine.

"I ran away, Billy. Me an' Froggy Moore. Froggy got caught, but."

"Well, what ya standin' on the streets for Wall? Bloody demons 'll ave ya d'rectly. Flog piss outa ya then," rasps a bedraggled boy, cheerfully.

"Not me, Eddie. This is th' Wallaby 'ere, look!"

Bursting into the cocoon of male security, two short solid girls push their way. They are sisters with blonde streaked hair, lively flat faces, and happy brown eyes.

"Wallaby darling. Where ya been ya stropky bastard?"

"Ah, just 'anging around, Junie," a wink at the others, an arm over her plump shoulder and he has found his woman.

Her sister Jody looks at Johnny. Big warm eyes and fleshy boldness. Shy Johnny looks away.

"Well," Wallaby hitched up his trousers, "Oo wants a ride in me

car?" "Go on! Where's ya car, ya bullshitter? Ya just run off from 'Illston an' buy a car, like that, or what?" sneers a youth on the outskirts.

"Don't believe me then," cries Wallaby, ego shattered. "Ya c'n ask me mate, Johnny 'ere, if ya wanna, Charlie Moran."

To own a car is the dream of all of them. In a car one is King of the roads, going anywhere. Down to Albany, up to Geraldton, even across the Nullarbor. A car opens up limitless boundaries of adventure. Squeal around the dull streets, impressing the girls. Shout out to lesser mates who have to walk. A car is a throne for Royalty to sit in and observe, in arrogant splendour.

"If none of ya wanna come, me an' Johnny's goin' up to Balga to roll some drunks."

"Truth is ya jus' wanna show off Wallah. Ya c'n roll drunks jus' as easy in Supreme Court Gardens," jeers Charlie and Wallaby thinks it's time to be going. The Morans are enemies of the Wallahs, through some long standing family feud. It would be just his luck to get in a brawl with drunk Charlie, be arrested, and returned to Riverbank for escaping custody.

He swaggers off, Johnny and the two sisters in attendance. Back to the car, lurking in the shadows. Scramble in, happily anticipating adventure.

"All of ya ready for one ride ya never goin' forget," Wallaby cries. "Orright, then, 'ere we go."

Let out the clutch. Slam foot on accelerator. Alley fills with smoke and the smell of burning rubber, wheels spin on the spot, car leaps out of its cave, glad to be free.

"Jus' leave me trade mark," Wallaby laughs. "Now, you mob, this car's 'ot, so if we get caught jus' say ya 'ich 'ikers, orright?"

"Let me out, Wallaby ya mad bugger. Ya drive too fast, an' in a stolen car too. That's askin' for trouble," cries Jody, then shrieks as they just miss a bus.

"You shut up, ya stupid bitch. I'm a good driver."

Then they hear the triumphant, maniacal, wailing of a police car behind them.

Spin the car around the corner where the bridge sags over the line, near the station.

Wallaby is out and running as it jerks to a stop. As though he is a

magnet, the girls cling close behind, Johnny last.

Up towards Zigi's they belt, desperate and afraid. Round the corner into James Street Wallaby is out of sight. The girls run up a lane that opens bedraggled arms for them. Johnny follows.

Then a thin young policeman runs up beside them and drags Johnny down. "Come on!" he orders.

A van speeds swiftly and smoothly down the rutted lane.

Bundled in the door.

Before he can even sit down a torch probes in. The beam rests on him. A finger of doom.

"Come here son, the sergeant would like a word with you."

Torch beam hauling him out, like a fish on a line. Pushed into the back of a sleek police car. Hunches into the corner, miserable, confused. The young driver's face, pale, humourless, looks around at him.

"Steal a car, did you?"

"No," he mutters.

"Hab," Face laughs, nastily "I'll bet you didn't."

Then the sergeant gets in.

Middle-aged and thin. Greyish hair, a little curly. A hard, lean, bony, face. A slit for a mouth, and cruel, dark eyes boring into the youth, alight with a madness that frightens and paralyses him. The sergeant leans close and speaks in short, hissing bursts.

"Right, sonny. Now you're going to tell me a little story, aren't you?"

"Me name's Johnny Moydan, an' I never knew th' car was stolen," stammers Johnny.

The sergeant leans closer. The excitement in his eyes whips the quivering youth.

"Now listen, I haven't been a demon for ten years for nothing. I'm giving you five seconds."

"What---what ya wanna know? I never done nuthin'."

Poor Johnny. Confused, terribly alone. Peaceful, gentle, Johnny, who liked to muster sheep and breathe in their greasy smell; who liked to pick the first blossoms of the red-gum, or Christmas trees for his mother; who liked to listen to the magpie's call or the parrot's cheeky whistle.

A fist slams into his face, just under his left eye. He doubles up in

shock and pain, covering his head. He is pummelled in the side of the stomach, and punches thud on his thin back. Then the sergeant is savagely pulling his blond hair, his gift from his sun. All the time the hissing voice continues.

"You stole the car, didn't you. You stole it from Innaloo last night. Come on, who were your mates?"

"No, no! I didn't steal it," cries Johnny.

"Don't lie, you little black bastard. You stole it, didn't you. Speak up."

Jerks his head up and down.

Johnny's brain snaps. He becomes a loose, ragged spineless, wreck.

"No, no! God's honour mate, It was Wall 'oo stole it," he blubbers.

"You said you didn't know it was stolen!" comes the driver's triumphant jeer, and Johnny hates him as he has never hated before.

The sergeant seems to love the feel of Johnny's hair between his fingers. He pulls it more and jerks Johnny's head up and down as though trying to break it off.

"Wall who? Where's he live?"

"I don't know. Oh, I don't know. Please don't hit me any more boss. I'll never get in trouble again."

"Hit you," says the sergeant, surprised. "Listen, I've only just started. By the time I've finished with you, you'll be stretched out on the ground. And when I get tired there's a younger bloke waiting to take over."

The car rolls to a menacing stop in a vacant block and the sergeant suddenly opens the door and pulls Johnny out by the hair.

The boy collapses onto the cold, earthy smelling soil, his soil. A green, untidy vine stares sadly him from the fence. A light winks in the old CATS building beside the empty army barracks.

Scream and bring people running.

But nothing, except a sick grunt, and another as he is kicked in the stomach.

"Too many houses and people here," one of them says.

Pushed back into the car. It is too late. His chance of escape is gone and his soul dies.

The sergeant gleams at him, triumphant and victorious.

"Have you got your baton there?" he asks the driver, watching Johnny's face. But Johnny has learnt in these last five minutes what he should have known since the day he was born, to keep a shutter always between himself and the white man. He stares blankly at the floor. Face expressionless. Only his mind knows the weak terror within him which will stay there forever.

"Yeah," comes the driver's flat reply.

"Well we'll find some dark lane. I'll hold him down while you give him a few whacks in the crutch. Might help his memory."

Move off slowly and surely around the corner and down the hill. Turn left into a lane of grey dirt, bordered by grey fences. Rubbish bins, startled awake by the stark, harsh glare of the headlights.

Turn them and the engine off.

Silence.

The two men stare at the youth, hungrily, with their not quite human eyes.

Then—a voice crackles over the car's intercom.

"Detective-sergeant Maxwell would like to see the prisoners now."

Hesitation. Then the car starts up, slides like a snake out of its hole.

The sergeant leans over Johnny.

"Listen sonny. This Sergeant Maxwell is a big man, and a friend of mine. If I find out later you told him anything you haven't told me, I'll come looking for you. You understand, you little black bastard?"

Out in the main road again. Cars and lights, people and reality. Past Zigi's.

Johnny looks up with his new, dead eyes, and sees two Aboriginal youths leaning against a car watching him with the same dead eyes. He is truly one of them now.

Drive to Central, a towering glassy building that curves beside the Swan River, like a scorpion's tail.

Statements, fingerprints, photographs, then led off to the cells.

Iron bars, flat yellow walls and floors. Pale light from passage gently brushes his face. Lie on the hard mattress, smelling of vomit and other people. Pull the grey blankets up over him and momentarily stare at the hump in the next bed, wondering who it is.

The feeling that it is all a nightmare slowly dies away.

Shiver with shock, exhaustion and the reality of it all.

He had always been a "good boy". It had been like a medal for him and a trophy for his parents. The Moydan family had worked for Mr. Williamson on his farm for years. Betty Moydan was proud of her neat little house and the whole district knew and liked quiet, gentle Johnny, a good worker and a good footballer.

Fall into an uneasy sleep, and dream his ordeal all over again.

Next morning.

Thin and afraid in this wooden, shiny, court, before the bored, bespectacled eyes of the magistrate. Only the legal-aid man isn't his enemy. Even him he doesn't really trust.

Gapc around the room, while the lawyer speaks.

"... good boy . . . up from the country . . . never been in any trouble . . ."

What is the use. He's speaking out-of-date words.

Pompous, mechanical voice of the magistrate discharging him.

Led out, signs book, receives his envelope of belongings.

Then he runs from the building.

Wallaby and Billy in a pool-room. Wallaby grins at him.

"G'day, Johnny. They catch you, unna?"

"Yeah," flatly.

"I was watchin' ya from behind a tree. Then demons flashed their torches at me, but they never seen me, look. I 'ad one big piece of pipe there. I'd 'ave given it to them monyach bastards too," he growled.

Empty bragging. A pitiful attempt to prove a manhood that doesn't exist. Stamped out of existence by generations of white men. Roll a cigarette and silently offer his tobacco to the others. Slit his eyes against the smoke, gaze around the room.

This is what he had come to Perth for. Enjoy himself, then go home. But he can't go home now. Restless, uneasy and bitter like the city that has adopted him.

"Oo give ya th' black eye, cood?" asks Billy.

"Oo d'ya fuckin' well think?" snarls Johnny.

The two boys stare at him, shocked by the hate in his voice.

"I'm complaining about them two cunts," he continues.

"Hey, look out Johnny," Wallaby whispers, scared yet awed,

while Billy looks fearfully around. "Don't drag me into it, anyrate. I'm on th' run, remember."

"Nor me," says Billy. "More better if you just forget about it, good?"

"No." Johnny's voice is flat. "But you don't 'ave t' worry you two. Only me, all by myself."

Ring up the legal-aid man, who helps him write out a complaint. Two weeks pass. Staying at the Wallahs' house in West Perth and watching TV with dark, happy Raymond and Wallaby's sister Ethel. A knock on the door. A deep voice.

"Johnny Moydan home?"

"Dunno. Might be." Mrs. Wallah flusters.

Walks into the hall, followed by Raymond and Ethel.

"I'm Johnny Moydan."

A giant Inspector, shiny cap, snowy white shirt, row of coloured ribbons displayed on his jacket. He senses the other Aboriginals staring at him and knows he is alone.

"You made a complaint, I believe?"

"Yeah," Johnny shuffles.

"I'd like you to come to the station with me. Make a statement. You understand?"

So he has begun. Can't stop now. Wallaby is angry.

"Ya too simple Johnny. Jeez, ya can't tell ya nuthin! Now ya got th' cops sniffin' around Mum's 'ouse, gettin' 'er upset. An' what about me ay?"

Night.

Billy and Johnny ambling home. Billy spots the slowly moving car, pulling to a threatening stop and nudges Johnny. They lean against the charcoal-coloured wall, while three plain clothes men descend upon them.

Two of them close around the fearful Billy, eyes opened wide so the moon reflects the whites. Third one beckons to Johnny who follows warily.

Pushed into a corner. Big red face leers down at him.

"Where's your switch wires?"

"What ya talkin' about? I got no switch wires."

"Yeah! Supposing I search you, then?"

Beefy hands whip over his thin frame then the man straightens up and takes out his note book.

"What places has your mate broken into tonight?"

"None, 'e was with me."

"Well, what breaks have you done?"

"None. Leave me alone."

A sudden slap across the face breaks his lip. The detective's mate calls from the alley entrance. "Righto Wal, this one's clean."

"Right, Allen." Luminous eyes peer down at him "What's your name, anyhow, smart-arse?"

"Johnny Moydan."

"Yeah?" the man stares at him a minute longer "Well, piss off." Raises his hand. Johnny cringes. Hates himself and the man. Hurries away with Billy.

Next day.

Rings up the same legal-aid officer, and complains. Can't understand Billy's fear and that of the other Aboriginals. He sees it as his right. Urges the others to complain too. Talks loudly to the lawyer about the wrongs his friends suffer. Advised in apathetic tones to get them to put it in writing. Other Aboriginals frightened of him. He is different. Begin to drift away from him until only a cheeky Wallaby and Billy are his friends.

One evening, they wander aimlessly and happily down the street. Once again a police car slides to a halt. Two uniformed men get out, relaxed in their confident authority. One points to Johnny.

"You— come here."

Johnny is spat out of the group. Shambles forward.

"All right. What's your name?"

"Moydan. Johnny Moydan," he pouts.

"You mean you're the smart little nigger who's been rubbishing the force?"

Johnny says nothing. Digs thin hands into pockets. Where will he be flogged this time? The words of his friends drum in his mind.

"Look, cooda, if ya black ya got no chance. It's natural aint it?"

"Monyach blame us for most anything, then beat piss outa us, but aint nothin' ya c'n do 'bout it, 'cept keep outa their way."

"Can't even take a slap in th' face look."

"That Moydan is one wild boy, 'e's mad I reckon."

Glances into the policeman's face, then his eyes slip sideways. Murky eyes, dull, muddy coloured as a river in winter. Angry as one too. So much dirt in the water now, no one can see the ugly snags that will impale a man.

The policeman's mate wanders over to Johnny's side. He says gently. "Listen Johnny, you may as well own up and give up."

"What ya want with me, well? Ya always pickin' on me." For a moment his eyes flash fire before the flood puts it out.

"No, Johnny, you've got it all wrong. You were identified, see?" Brings a pad from the car and reads from it. "Young Aboriginal, blond hair, thin, brown coat, bare feet. Fits you exactly, Johnny."

"So where's the wallet, sonny?" growls his mate.

"I never got no wallet."

The quiet policeman treads on Johnny's bare foot, squashing it to the pavement.

"Johnny, you don't want us to flog you, do you?"

Remain silent, staring at the ground. Keep the pain from his foot from showing in his face.

The policeman sighs and removes his boot.

"Well, suppose we show you to the old man you robbed?"

The old man looks him over and shakes his head.

"You can go then. You were lucky tonight Johnny, but just keep out of trouble in the future, see," says the disappointed policeman.

How can he keep out of trouble, when trouble waits around each corner to seize and roll him in the filthy mud of petty persecution.

Then Wallaby is recognised, picked up and returned to Hillston. For a week Johnny stays indoors at the Wallahs, brooding.

Wander back down town at last.

Long, low, pool-room, glass windows staring onto the street. Red door gaping stupidly open wide, a lipstick mouth. Juke box mumbling words of love. Pool tables, flat and green—plateaux of dreams where a man becomes a hero or a loser, able to spin the balls into ideas of his very own. Around the walls pin-ball machines clack and tinkle.

He is about to spend his last twenty cent piece on a game when he is halted.

"Mc ole cooda, Johnny. 'Ow are ya then, mate?"

"Goodoh. Run outa money but, Billy."

"Come out 'ere bud," Billy hisses. Around the corner into the covered car park. Hands the startled boy a handful of crumpled notes.

"What's this then Billy?"

"Well it ain't shit," Billy grins. He is high and happy. He and Crabby Unkel have busted the easiest store of all, and stolen over a thousand dollars. Billy thinks of all the clothes he will buy, the wine he will drink to forget what he is, the friends he will have. But his laugh is sliced in half by a blinding spotlight.

"Hold it right there, you two," a voice shouts.

Billy gets nine months, and despite his denials and Billy's insistence that he was not involved, Johnny gets six.

He is released in the autumn.

His face is thinner than ever, hard and angry, picked bare by experience. Quieter than ever, with bitter golden eyes staring like a savage dog. Catches a train from Fremantle into Perth to slide his body into the tepid, stagnant swamp of people.

No one he knows anywhere. Wallaby inside again, Billy still in Bunbury. The girls, like fat little brown moths, have fluttered off to other lights. Wander down to Supreme Court gardens. No one there. Coloured leaves dance frantically in the wet wind, drying, dying. Perhaps like him they wish they still had something to cling to.

Squeeze into a corner by a brick wall. Roll a cigarette. He shivers and wonders where he'll sleep tonight.

A car pulls up beside him. But it isn't the police.

A boy gets out of the car. His own age, in a neat clean, suit, warm ruby-coloured shirt and white tie. Gold cuff links show as he straightens his immaculate hair. An expensive watch circles his wrist. A chain shackling him to the rich life he leads.

"Come on darl. We're running late."

Now a slim girl gets out. Beautifully dressed. The prettiest girl Johnny has ever seen. They clasp hands and hurry up the street, leaving the keys in the lock.

Something deep down in Johnny's tortured heart breaks. The strange white boy has so much, while all he has is a bad name, lying among the weeds of society like rotten fruit, eaten away by white maggots.

The car is a smooth blue sports type. A prostitute, flaunting her

body sensually. Teasing and tempting him. He desires her. Be as good as the boy who owns her.

Out of the shadows, into the comfort of the car. Turn the keys. The car purrs insistently to life. A good clean engine, just like the owner.

Squel down the street and around the corner, past the immaculate boy and his beautiful girl. Honk the horn, laughing, leaving them standing there stupidly.

He wishes Billy and Waliaby were there, to see him commit his first crime, and share with him the joy and beauty of his car.

Drive out to the ocean. Whirling around corners and up straight stretches. Push the car until it whines in agony. Rejoice in the speed and power he controls. Turn on the heater, to warm his frozen body. He finds a packet of cigars and sticks one jauntily in his mouth. Turns on the radio.

He reaches West Coast Highway and turns up it. Black and mysterious ocean. The light from Rottnest flashes regularly across its dark, oily, undulating back. The sea is his father, the earth his mother. He is remote from man. Safe and warm and sheltered in the pulsating body of the machine.

The police find him near Scarborough.

He sees the light coming up behind him, hears the murderous howling. Thin face pulls into a dingo grin, hard angry eyes shine with excitement. He feels no fear. He has no feelings at all. They were beaten out of him in prison.

Slender hands grip the wheel and he pushes his beautiful blue being to its limit. The police car's blue cyclops eye flashes into the blue-black night. People get out of the way to watch. For the first time in a long while Johnny Moydan isn't being pushed around. He is in control, he is free, he is supreme—he is someone.

But at the corner he couldn't control the creature he had created.

He was touching two hundred kilometres an hour when they hit the sand dune.

Someone?

Pathetic Johnny. The shadowy, formless people watch from the footpath. Watched you and the banshee-wailing police car rush past and away, leaving just a wind in your wake.

And who remembers the wind?

A Letter from an Aboriginal Mother

Ruby Langford

13 January, 1987

Dear Sir

I am writing on behalf of my people. I'm an Aboriginal and I don't know much about your white system of justice as I've never been in trouble with the law. But I have sons whose fathers are white men and have been involved in prison and police custody since they were children, and in boys' homes. Now I'm not only talking about my sons, but the sons of every mother, be they black or white, who have ever run foul of the law.

I went to court on the eighteenth of December, 1986 to hear my son's bail application and I was thoroughly disgusted with the attitude of the Magistrate or Judge that heard his bail application as he was, in my opinion, a very opinionated judge. And after the Crown Prosecutor produced evidence which I thought was not admissible anyhow because it was bought up about him absconding from the boys' home twice when he was a child and here he was, now a thirty-one year old man, and the courts were still judging him on his record when he was in boys' homes.

When he was seventeen years old, this son of mine whilst in the company of another youth, aged sixteen and a girl fourteen, and also very drunk, was driven to my home in Green Valley, as he'd had a breakup with his girlfriend and had gotten drunk and asked the sixteen year-old youth to bring him home to me. What he didn't know was that there was a gun under the seat, the sixteen year-old was driving negligently and the police chased them, then the girl opened up and fired shots at them. I know my son and the only