

CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS PLAYS

Bitin' Back Vivienne Cleven

Black Medea Wesley Enoch

King Hit David Milroy & Geoffrey Narkle

Rainbow's End Jane Harrison

Windmill Baby David Milroy

Introduced by Larissa Behrendt



Currency Press, Sydney

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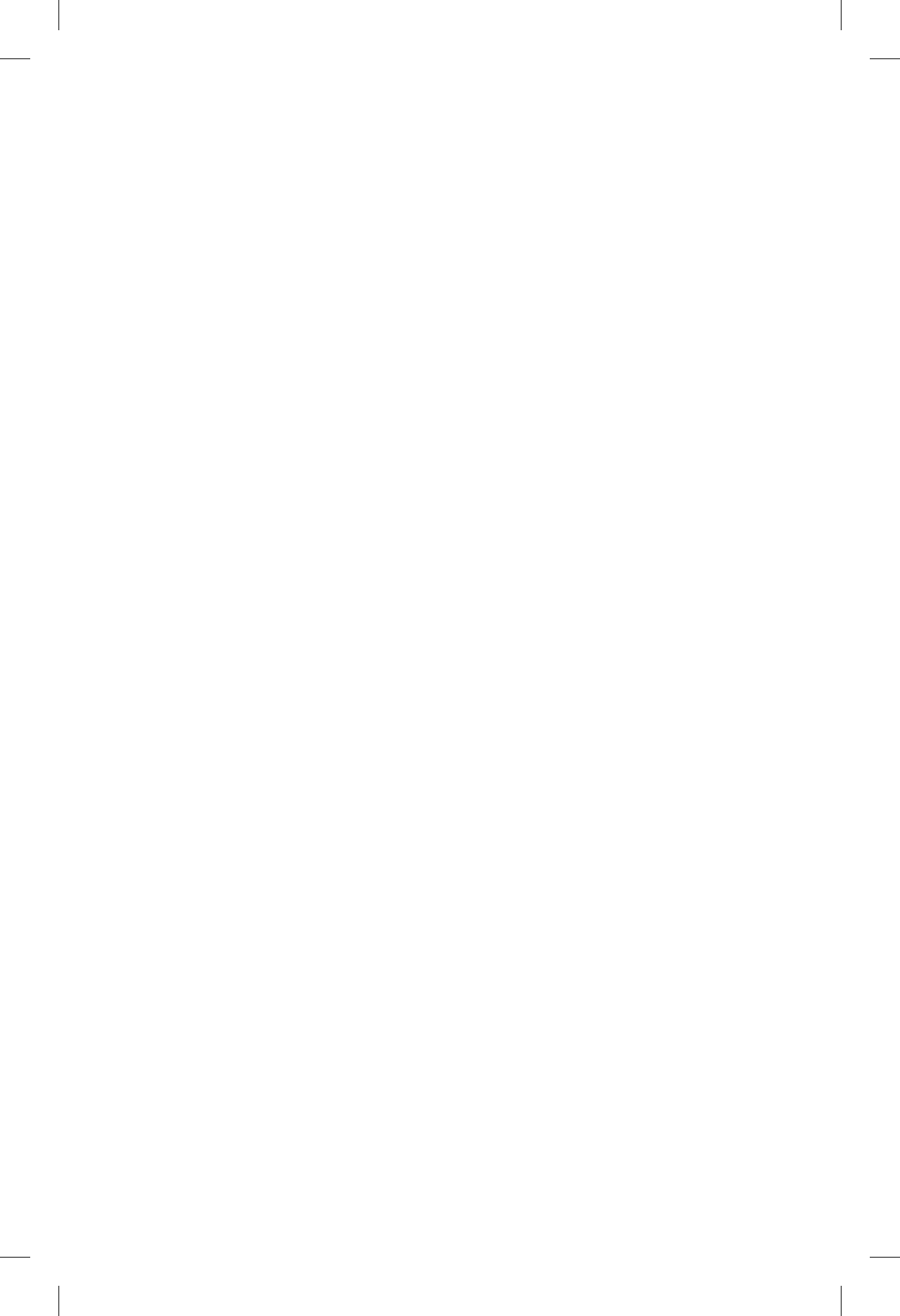
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‘This is a falling star, a true story. When I was a little boy, I was walking, walking at night-time. I was walking across to some people, and the star hit me. Then they picked me up, and my grandfather fixed me, fixed my head, after that star hit me. So I draw that star in the sky, and then it starts moving around in the sky. Then I draw the star travelling, falling towards me. Then it hit me.’

Jimmy Pike, on *Falling Star I*



Introduction

Larissa Behrendt

Wesley Enoch has described how he sees Indigenous performance: 'Every new work, every artist, each endeavour, is a small stone building on the one before.' There is a strong belief in interconnectedness in Aboriginal culture that reinforces an understanding that we are each inter-related to each other and our environment, and it teaches us that we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors. While contemporary Indigenous cultures are often portrayed as being eroded or diluted, these cultural values and this tradition remain strong.

Contemporary Aboriginal cultures across the country are a complex mix of diversity and shared experience. Shaped by distinctive environments, there are many shared values and, in colonial Australia, there are also many impacts of colonisation—dispossession, child-removal policies, forced assimilation, systemic racism and cyclical poverty have all left their stamp on Indigenous families and communities. These same communities also exhibit a resistance and resilience that is the hallmark of survival under the oppressive power of colonisation. It is little wonder that they recur as themes in Aboriginal storytelling, whether oral or written.

This collection of plays—each groundbreaking and significant in their own way—showcases the talent of Indigenous playwrights in capturing human experiences within circumstances where there is the scarring of struggle and hardship but also the healing of the strength of family, the warmth of love and the use of humour.

Each story introduces the audience to a gathering of strong, complex and rich characters who are sometimes iconic, sometimes archetypal, sometimes unconventional and always unique. Through each of these personalities, their experiences and their relationships, the storytellers who have created them craft stories which may be about personal and intimate interactions but are not just moving tales about life stories;

they are also stories that speak to the audience about the politics that inevitably underlies the experiences of Aboriginal people in a colonial world.

By telling stories about the complexities of family dynamics, interaction with the wider world, crushed hopes and the pursuit of dreams, personal experiences become a way of pointing to the wider political themes that define Indigenous aspirations to equality, opportunity and self-determination. Each story, as it unfolds, reaffirms the life experience of many Aboriginal people who have not been able to give voice to what they have lived through, or reminds others of the stories they have heard from parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, especially when venturing into the autobiographical. But these stories—at the same time both universal and unique—assist in explaining distinctive Aboriginal experiences in terms that a non-Aboriginal audience can understand.

Bitin' Back is Vivienne Cleven's adaptation of her award-winning novel for the stage. Winning first the prestigious David Unaipon Award for her unpublished manuscript and then being shortlisted for the *Courier-Mail* Book of the Year Award, Cleven arrived on the literary stage with impact. In *Bitin' Back*, Cleven uses humour and mystery to explore the issues of racism and gossip in a small town as it tells the story of Mavis, a mother who hopes for a better life for her son, Nevil, through the promise of a football career. Both Nevil's cross-dressing and his own dream to become a writer challenge her plans. Reconciliation between the pair comes only after a series of comic misunderstandings and painful, sometimes violent, attempted interventions. Along the way, the audience is challenged by the fluidity and intersections of identity and sexuality as well as confronted by the subtle and overt racial tensions in a small community.

There is nothing subtle about the brutality that confronts the audience in Wesley Enoch's *Black Medea*. It captures the complex and confronting issues of violence within relationships in Aboriginal families. While this is a story with particularly Indigenous themes, Enoch's brilliant and inspired way of framing the narrative in a reinterpretation of the Greek tragedy by Euripides gives the story its universality. It explores the dark themes of revenge, sacrifice and murder. It is a compelling yet cruel tale that by standing in such stark contrast to Enoch's more

feelgood, uplifting work, such as directing the popular *The Sapphires*, illustrates his range, accomplishment and stature as one of Indigenous Australia's greatest figures in the theatre.

King Hit, co-written with theatre powerhouse David Milroy, is the mesmerising tale of Geoffrey Narkle's life. It is a brave and unflinching account of a Noongar man's path from a childhood on the mission to adulthood in a travelling boxing troupe, from self-destruction and despair to inner strength, determination and survival. It is a story of the reconciliation that comes from finding peace within one's self, and of discovering solace and contentment upon understanding one's place in the world. Not only was this a cathartic story for Narkle, it became a landmark in Indigenous theatre, inspiring a generation of Aboriginal actors.

Jane Harrison's talent was evident in her first play: the phenomenally successful and politically significant *Stolen*. This collection contains her work *Rainbow's End*, which takes place in 1950s rural Victoria and is the story of three generations of women who each deal with their own challenges—overcoming past disappointment, finding one's own voice and compromise between dreams of a better life, and ties to family and country. This is ultimately a heart-warming story even though it is set against the dramatic themes of the humiliation of poverty, the brutality of violence and the crushing impacts of racism. It is through humour, strength of character and the healing power of love that hope and optimism triumph over adversity and oppression. While this is a story defined by Indigenous disadvantage, it is also a story about the relationships between mothers and daughters. For as much as it explores universal political themes, it also explores the intimate relationships that nurture the heart.

Aboriginal plays have given birth to many strong female characters. David Milroy's powerful and moving—and award-winning—*Windmill Baby* brings to life Maymay, whose lyrical voice is that of a true storyteller. With the feel of a campfire yarn, she takes the audience for a trip over the stony territory of love and loss. Set in a Kimberley cattle station and evoking memorable and provocative characters that are eccentric and endearing, *Windmill Baby* chronicles the cruelty of colonisation whilst paying tribute to the way in which wit, music and steely resolve allow Aboriginal people to survive heartbreaking events.

It won the Patrick White Award, Milroy being the first Aboriginal writer to receive this accolade, and was described by the judges as 'hard as quartz, sadly poignant and hilarious all on the one page'.

This collection of plays is not only a showcase of some of the most important moments in Indigenous theatre in the last decade. Between them, these plays encompass a cross-section of the themes that make Indigenous theatre distinctive: the experiences of forced separation, racism in the provision of everyday services, the struggle with identity, the need to reconnect to family and country, the struggle with abject poverty, the desire for self-determination and the strong ties of family, kinship and community.

But it is also a reminder of the strength of contemporary Aboriginal cultures, a continuation of the tradition of storytelling in our communities as a way of teaching, as a way of retaining history and as a way of communicating across time. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have an oral tradition and it is often said that this is in stark contrast to the Western tradition of valuing the written over the spoken.

But this distinction is not as simple as it is often portrayed. As this collection shows, the tradition of storytelling is powerfully alive and potently well in Indigenous Australia. And it also shows that this tradition finds itself as much in the performance and the oral telling of the story and it finds itself in the written word, the activity of playwriting. Indigenous playwrights continue this condition and this collection pulls together a powerful sample of their craft. Each play is a durable, resilient stone that both builds upon Indigenous traditions but also lays the foundation for the generations that will follow.

November 2006

Larissa Behrendt is Eualeyai/Kamillaroï woman, Professor of Law and Director of Research at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is on the Board of the Bangarra Dance Theatre, a Director of the Sydney Writers' Festival and a Board member of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Larissa's first novel, *Home*, won the David Unaipon Award.

Bitin' Back

Vivienne Cleven



Vivienne Cleven was born in 1968 and grew up in western Queensland, homeland of her Aboriginal heritage. She left school at the age of thirteen to work with her father as a jillaroo: building fences, mustering cattle, and working at various jobs on stations throughout Queensland and New South Wales. In 2000, with the manuscript *Bitin' Back*, Vivienne Cleven entered and won the David Unaipon Award. Published the following year, *Bitin' Back* was shortlisted in the 2002 *Courier-Mail* Book of the Year Award and in the 2002 South Australian Premier's Award for Fiction. She later wrote the stage adaptation of her book, which was produced by Brisbane's Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Theatre Company. Vivienne's next novel, *Her Sister's Eye*, was published in 2002 and won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award in 2004 (Indigenous category). Both novels were also awarded the Kate Challis Raka Award for Fiction in 2006.



*Roxanne McDonald as Mavis in the publicity image for the Kooemba Jdarra production of BITIN' BACK, 2005.
(Design: Jodi Edwards, Creative Plantation)*

FIRST PERFORMANCE

Bitin' Back was first produced by Kooemba Jdarra Theatre Company at the Cremorne Theatre, Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Brisbane, on 5 July 2005, with the following cast:

MAVIS DOOLEY

BOOTY DOOLEY

NEVIL DOOLEY

DARRYL KANE / ISAAC EDGE

DOROTHY REEDMAN

DETECTIVE LYLE GOULD / MAD DOG

MAX / MRS WARBY

GRACIE

Roxanne McDonald

Lafe Charlton

Jorde Lenoy

Mark Conaghan

Andrea Moore

Hayden Spencer

Scott Witt

Paula Nazarski

Director, Wesley Enoch

Dramaturg, Peter Matheson

Designer, Jonathon Oxlade

Lighting Designer, David Murray

Sound Designer, Brett Collery



AUTHOR'S NOTE

The premiere production of *Bitin' Back* involved many people and thanks must go to the fabulous and incredibly talented cast who made the play a truly funny, rollercoaster of a ride—Roxanne McDonald, Jorde Lenoy, Scott Witt, Andrea Moore, Paula Narzaski, Lafe Charlton, Mark Conaghan and Hayden Spencer.

Throughout the three-year process of adapting my novel, *Bitin' Back*, I was lucky enough to have the wonderful Peter Matheson as my dramaturg. I am thankful for his support and encouragement.

A special thanks must go to Nadine McDonald-Dowd and Vera Ding (formerly of Kooemba Jdarra) who first commissioned me to write the play.

Thanks to the National Playwrights' Centre for inviting *Bitin' Back* to attend the Centre and to have the opportunity for further development.

Thank you to *Bitin' Back*'s producer Kooemba Jdarra, director Wesley Enoch, Production Designer Jonathan Oxlade, Lighting Designer David Murray, Sound Designer Brett Collery and Production Manager Abbie Trott.

Vivienne Cleven

CHARACTERS

MAVIS DOOLEY, murri, forties, confident, not easily intimidated
NEVIL DOOLEY, murri, twenty, has a macho demeanour, sensitive, intelligent
BOOTY DOOLEY, murri, forty, loud, aggressive persona
GRACIE, murri, twenty, hyperactive, suspicious, erratic, stoned most times
TREVOR DAVIDSON, white, thirty, very 'city', has the tendency to come across as 'nerdy'
GWEN HINCH, murri, forty, scatty, vulnerable
IVY WARBY, white, sixty, has an air of religious fanaticism, unpredictable, eccentric
DOROTHY REEDMAN, white, forty, dress-style evocative of the sixties, tacky, shrilly, mean-spirited
DETECTIVE LYLE GOULD, a humourless, know-all bully, narcotics cop from Brisbane
MAX BROWN, white, forty, Mandamooka's clumsy copper who tries hard to uphold an air of competent authority
ISAAC EDGE, white, thirty, dodgy drug dealer
DARRYL KANE, white, thirty, a full-of-himself, strutting Casanova
MAD DOG, punch-drunk pugilist

SETTING

Mandamooka, a dusty bush town somewhere west of Brisbane.
The action takes place in Mavis's kitchen.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The language of the play is a mixture of Standard English and Aboriginal English, and is significant to the characters of the piece.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Time: The present. Afternoon.

Place: Mandamooka football field.

MAVIS, BOOTY, GRACIE, MAX (*in uniform*), DOROTHY, DARRYL and MRS WARBY wait for the game to begin. Some supporters carry home-made signs with the words: 'The Blackouts'. Others wear the team colours of black and orange on scarves and beanies.

A whistle blows. NEVIL enters. He runs past, football in hand. He holds the ball up to the CROWD who jump, clap, cheer.

CROWD: Onya, Nev! Yahoo, the Blackouts!

MAVIS: Go, son, goal for Mum!

MRS WARBY *moves through the CROWD shaking an ice-cream container and an uncooked chicken at everyone. Hanging from her neck is a pair of binoculars and slung over her shoulder is a duffle bag.*

MRS WARBY: Tickets here! Everyone, dig deep for the church! The reverend needs our help! The new church pew won't build itself!

NEVIL *sprints by, dodging, weaving and ducking.*

MAVIS: [*to the audience*] That's me boy there. He's the star player for Mandamooka's footy team, the Blackouts. He loves footy. It's his life. His future.

The CROWD's more excited now, waving signs, scarves.

CROWD: Score for Mooka! Go the Blackouts!

BOOTY: Nevil, don't arse around! You can do better than that!

Distracted, NEVIL drops the ball. The CROWD moans, disappointed.

DOROTHY: Get the bloody ball, Dooley! Move your useless arse!

DARRYL *struts across to GWEN, whispers something, gesturing wildly with his hands. GWEN turns to him, looking annoyed, then*

shuts him up with a kiss on the lips. BOOTY gallops down the sideline, arms flailing.

BOOTY: Fuck me roan, Nevil! Stop playin' like a nancy!

MAVIS *points to* BOOTY.

MAVIS: [*to the audience*] That's his Uncle Booty. He's just too hard on Nevil sometimes. God knows, Nevil tries like hell to please him. But a woman knows where it all comes from...

BOOTY: Don't be a pussy, Nevil! Move faster, stop bein' a fucken sheila!

NEVIL *picks up the ball and tears towards the finish line. MRS WARBY shakes the container harder, more frantic.*

MRS WARBY: Support the church! We need that pew! Someone buy a ticket, for God's sake!

MAVIS: [*to the audience*] Booty was Nevil's age when he was picked by the state reps to play, but things went wrong. Someone lied—Dottie Reedman's mother. She hated the fact that Booty was better than her kid. Couldn't stand the idea of Booty being picked! Womba.

NEVIL *'s closer to the goalpost now.*

CROWD: Go, Nevil, go! Goal! Yahooo!

BOOTY: That's the way, boy! Show us what ya made of!

MAVIS: [*to the audience*] Soon Dottie's mother started to gossip. Word reached the selectors that Booty loved the grog too much. They said they didn't want a drunk on the team. It was all bulldust. Booty's once-in-a-lifetime chance was ruined by a lie! I hate lies! I hate liars even more!

CROWD: The Blackouts are better than the rest 'cause they're the best!

BOOTY: Dodge him, Nevil! Hook left!

MRS WARBY *shakes the container even harder.*

MRS WARBY: First prize, a roast chook! One of my own hens! Golden. Crisp. Juicy!

MAVIS: That's what worries me about Nevil, how others'll treat him. I know how much damage gossip and lies cause. In this town, that's part and parcel of life. Way the dice rolls round here. Makes a woman sick.

NEVIL *tears past, faster. The goalposts are closer. The CROWD builds in excitement. NEVIL scores! The CROWD goes wild and mobs NEVIL, all praising him at once: 'Good game', 'You're our*

star'. They jostle each other to get closer to him. BOOTY cuts through the CROWD and grabs him in a bear hug.

MRS WARBY reaches into the container and pulls out a ticket.

MRS WARBY: Mavis Dooley! God bless you, Mavis. You'll be in the reverend's prayers tonight.

MRS WARBY hands MAVIS the chicken.

MAVIS: Thanks, Mrs Warby. I'll share this with the team later.

NEVIL holds the football in the air, a salute.

BOOTY: No doubt about it, you're too deadly, Nevil!

MAVIS: You gotta love him. A good kid. *[To the audience]* He's the best player in Mandamooka. Football's everythin' to him. And it'll be over me dead carcass if I let any bastard in this town bring him down the way they did Booty. Been there, seen that, run the miles.

MAX slaps NEVIL affectionately on the back.

MAX: Well done, son! You do Mandamooka proud!

MAX's walkie-talkie kicks into life. He unhooks it from his belt, speaks.

[Into the walkie-talkie] Max here.

LYLE GOULD's voice crackles over the air.

LYLE: *[voice-over]* Max, Isaac Edge alert. He's in your area somewhere, suspected of carrying skag. On your toes, cowboy. Over.

MAX: *[into the walkie-talkie]* Right to it, Lyle. Over and out.

MAX fumbles to hook the walkie-talkie back on his belt. He looks around, taking in the CROWD. DARRYL gestures to GWEN.

DARRYL: Here, take this!

DARRYL stuffs a drug bag into GWEN's Avon bag.

GWEN: Darryl, what are you—?! Christ's sakes! Watch my Avon!

DARRYL: Shut the fuck up and hold onto it!

DARRYL exits.

GWEN: Darryl, Darryl, where ya goin', Darryl? *[To MAVIS]* See you later, Mave!

NEVIL, BOOTY, GRACIE, GWEN, MAX and DARRYL all exit. MRS WARBY moves across to MAVIS. DOROTHY rushes over to MRS WARBY. She spots MAVIS, stops flat and glares at her.

MAVIS: What are you gawkin' at, Reedman?

DOROTHY: It isn't a pretty picture, that's for sure!

MAVIS: Oh, looked in the mirror lately?

DOROTHY: Rumour has it, Nevil's burnt out! Losing it big time. Just look at the way he dropped that ball, says it all.

MAVIS: That was an accident!

DOROTHY: Just admit it, Dooley, your kid can't play! Shit, I doubt if he could even play with himself!

MAVIS: You're just like that lying mother of yours, Reedman! My Nevil's the best player, full stop! Burnt out! What, you couldn't think of a better lie?!

DOROTHY: Don't you call me a liar! My mother told the truth for what it was—Booty was a drunken, talentless loser! Still is!

MRS WARBY: Settle down, Dorothy. No arguments today! Please.

MAVIS: Your mother saw sweet f-all! She couldn't tell the truth if it bit her on the arse!

DOROTHY: Shut up, Dooley! I don't give a hot piss what you think!

MRS WARBY: Lord, oh Lord. Not this again!

MAVIS: Booty would have had a chance if Rita hadn't ruined it with her lies!

MRS WARBY: I thought this nonsense was finished years ago.

DOROTHY: Nothing good will ever come of Nevil! He'll wind up just like his uncle.

MRS WARBY: Enough, Dorothy! Be pleasant. No more fights. Let's move on. Good. Now, I've some important news for you both. I heard on the grapevine that the footy selectors from Brissie are in.

DOROTHY & MAVIS: [*together*] They are?!

MRS WARBY: They'll only be here for a few days. Nevil and Jerry better get their acts together. They only want one player.

DOROTHY: They'll pick my Jerry!

MAVIS: Nevil!

DOROTHY: Jerry!

MAVIS: Nevil!

MRS WARBY *looks at both women in turn.*

MRS WARBY: Nevil or Jerry, that's the big question, isn't it?

DOROTHY: Jerry's always been a great player. The best in Mandamooka. Even the coach reckons so.

MAVIS: Oh, that's shit! Nevil's the only star round here! He'll be picked.

MRS WARBY: Now, now, ladies, both boys are top players.

DOROTHY: Jerry's top-grade! They'll pick him, that's that!

MAVIS: Don't bet on it, Reedman!

DOROTHY: Your kid's a real queer bird. Six-pack short of a carton.

MRS WARBY: Good Lord, Dorothy! Every time you use such vulgarisms, the Lord weeps. Upon my soul, he does.

MAVIS: Leave my boy alone! Oh, just shut ya guts, Reedman!

DOROTHY: Screw you, Dooley! You'll get yours one day, bitch!

DOROTHY *exits*.

MAVIS: What's bitin' that cow?

MRS WARBY: Most likely the Devil. Oh, and Mavis, I've a little something for you. I made these this morning.

MRS WARBY *pulls out a tray of lamingtons from her handbag and gives them to MAVIS*.

MAVIS: Mrs Warby, you really shouldn't have. Proper thoughtful of ya, but. Thanks.

MRS WARBY: Say, Mavis, hate to be a stickybeak but I saw a woman in your yard this morning. Pretty little thing, except for those muscular arms. Almost jumped the fence.

MAVIS: Probably Nev's girl, Gracie.

MRS WARBY: By George, such big shoulders! Footballer shoulders, in fact.

MAVIS: Mrs Warby, I gotta go now. Have to keep Nevil on his toes, 'specially since the selectors will pick him. A woman has to make sure he's ready!

MAVIS *exits*.



SCENE TWO

Later. Kitchen / backyard.

In the background are a couple of rusting kerosene drums housing straggly geraniums. On the other side is a clothes line, clothes already pegged—bloomers, a dress. A dish of water and a dog chain lie nearby.

In the foreground is the kitchen. The room is spotlessly clean with an old table and worn chairs in the centre. A stack of plates, a kettle, enamel tea mugs and various other kitchen items are placed on a sideboard. Some pots and a phone hang from the wall. A broom and mop are in the corner. Against the wall is a rusting fridge and taking pride of place on the door is a huge football poster. An assortment of football paraphernalia—trophies, medals, ribbons—decorate the room.

MAVIS is busy unpacking lamingtons into a huge container overpacked with them.

MAVIS: [to herself] Bloody gossipers! That lying cow Reedman! Why do people have to lie?

NEVIL enters, dressed in his football clothes. He grabs something to eat from the fridge, then kisses his mother. MAVIS squashes a lamington angrily into the container. NEVIL exits.

What good does it do to tell lies?! Only causes—

Hearing a noise, she looks behind.

Only causes grief. This town. This spiteful bloody town.

NEVIL enters again. He's dressed in an oversized frock, face made up, clutching a handbag. He glances at his mother, straightens his hem. He dares to go closer to her.

I hate liars! Turns me gut!

MAVIS slams the container hard on the table. Surprised, NEVIL jumps back.

So many lamingtons! What's a woman to do with them all? That Dorothy Reedman! She can get ripped!

She picks up a lamington, shakes it. Hearing a small noise from behind, she spins around to face NEVIL. At first, she's not sure what she's looking at. A woman: who? A thing: what?

NEVIL: Hey, Mum. Do you reckon you can take up the hem?

The container of lamingtons falls to the floor.

MAVIS: Huh?

NEVIL: The hem. [Indicating the dress] Can you take up the hem?

MAVIS: Nev? Nevil, that you?