

## WANT

I want out of this job, nearly thirty and where am I? He gritted his teeth: selling kiddy clothes in this bloody dump.

It was four-forty-five, Friday, with cold rain pissing down. He wished he could walk out but he knew Mr Greenberg would still be watching; so he began clearing up, thrusting clothes into the shelving.

I want it tidy, Mr Greenberg always said. Bugger Mr Greenberg.

Noise from another tram clanking by made him look up. What about a job as tram driver or conductor? He watched as it crawled its way up the hill to Redfern station. Bugger that – too slow, too wet and too noisy.

He threw more clothes into the stacks.

Just want to get home, have my tea, watch some telly, bugger this job.

He reached, but the last bundle fell off the counter's edge to land on the floor. Sighing, he grumbled his way around, and bent to pick it up. It was then he caught sight of four small boys, standing at the entrance sheltering from the rain, the biggest with a wrapped-up newspaper in his arms, the three other boys tugging at him, and pulling at the paper like scratching chicks.

What the bloody hell...?

Mr Greenberg wasn't in sight. The man left the clothes and was at the front door in six quick steps.

They didn't see him until he was almost standing over them. And when they did see, they froze for a moment, then giggled and went back to their arguing – because through the drumming rain, he could hear the bickering: fingers snatching and pushing at the newspaper bundle while the biggest boy – nearly black from street grime, perhaps seven or eight and piercingly blue-eyed – thrust them back, keeping the paper out of their reach and repeating, 'Wait yer turn, ya fuckers, wait!'

The man searched their faces. 'Hey! Look – what's going on here, you lot?'

Redfern's a hellish place for Abos, he knew, but these kids are ... *white*. All had suppurating sores on legs and arms, like the native kids he'd seen in war-ravaged New Guinea, twelve years earlier. Barefoot, muddy and drenched, the urchins looked at him, the youngest barely four. Even their clothes looked terminally diseased.

And yet they grinned at him, shivering in the cold, while they still fought over the bundle.

'I said stop!' He reached over the smaller boys to grab at the oldest, held him fiercely and snatched the paper from him. 'What've you got here, eh?'

'That's our tea, it's our *tea*, mister.'

Ignoring the plea, the man pushed him back and peered through the tear in the paper to see the raw, white animal fat, flecked with traces of red, dark beef. The smell sickened and, with a curse, he pushed the bundle away.

The biggest snatched it back, and began to hand out pieces to the others, all of whom tore at them, as though starving rats.

'What d'you mean – *tea*?'

Grey teeth tearing at the fat, the boy grinned. "Mum said if you want yer tea, go out and get it yerselves.' He swallowed greedily. 'So, I took me bruvvers to the butcher's and got some fer free.' Calmly, they all regarded the man as they chewed and swallowed.

He stared at them, appalled, unbelieving, wanting to escape from this living nightmare. His stomach churned.

'Be off with you!'

Mr Greenberg was at his side, bellowing at the children. 'Little bastards, go on, piss *off!*' He watched them run, then looked at the man.

'Finish tidying up!' He looked again. 'What's the *matter* with you?'

'I want t'vomit.'