

The
West Rand Jive Cats
Boxing Club

Also by this author

The Voluptuous Delights of Peanut Butter and Jam

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Boxing Club

LAUREN LIEBENBERG



virago

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First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Virago Press

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978-1-84408-489-0
C format ISBN 978-1-84408-671-9

Typeset in Caslon by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Virago Press
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.virago.co.uk

For Mark, my love, who still makes it possible

Acknowledgements

I owe this story to one night many years ago that I spent sitting in the rough-hewn stands of the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, in the grip of one of South Africa's finest playwrights, Paul Slabolepszy, performing *The Return of Elvis du Pisanie*, which left me sweetly melancholic for something I had never known.

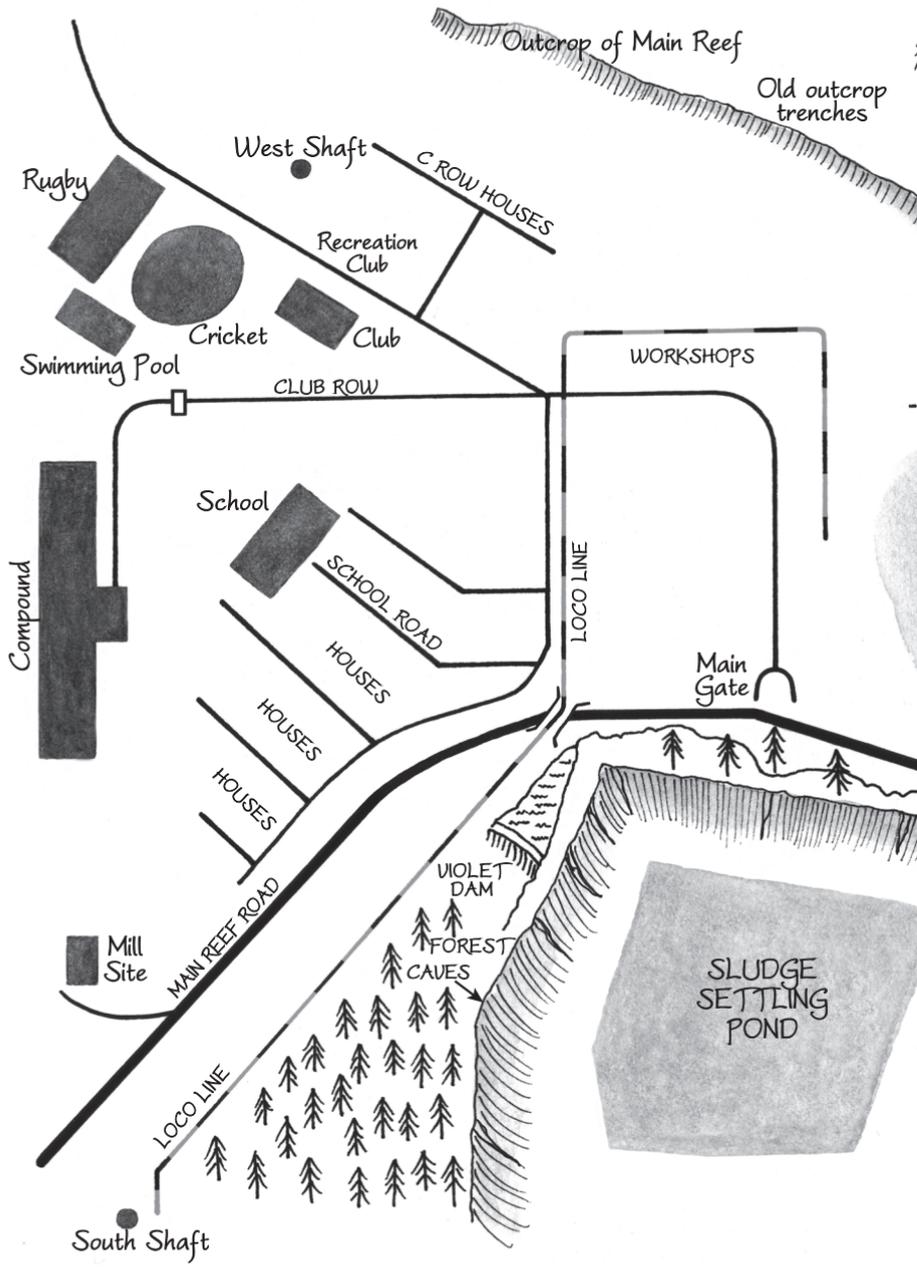
My West Rand Jive Cats were mostly forged from borrowed memories, and so I am deeply indebted to those who so generously allowed me to rummage around theirs: Rod MacRae, Mitch McLean and my father, Ken Liebenberg, who had to spend long hours trawling around the ruins of the mines along Main Reef with me. I am also very grateful to the women, who perhaps lifted the veil on some of the harsher truths, especially Patricia MacRae, Cathy Collins and my mother, Sheelagh.

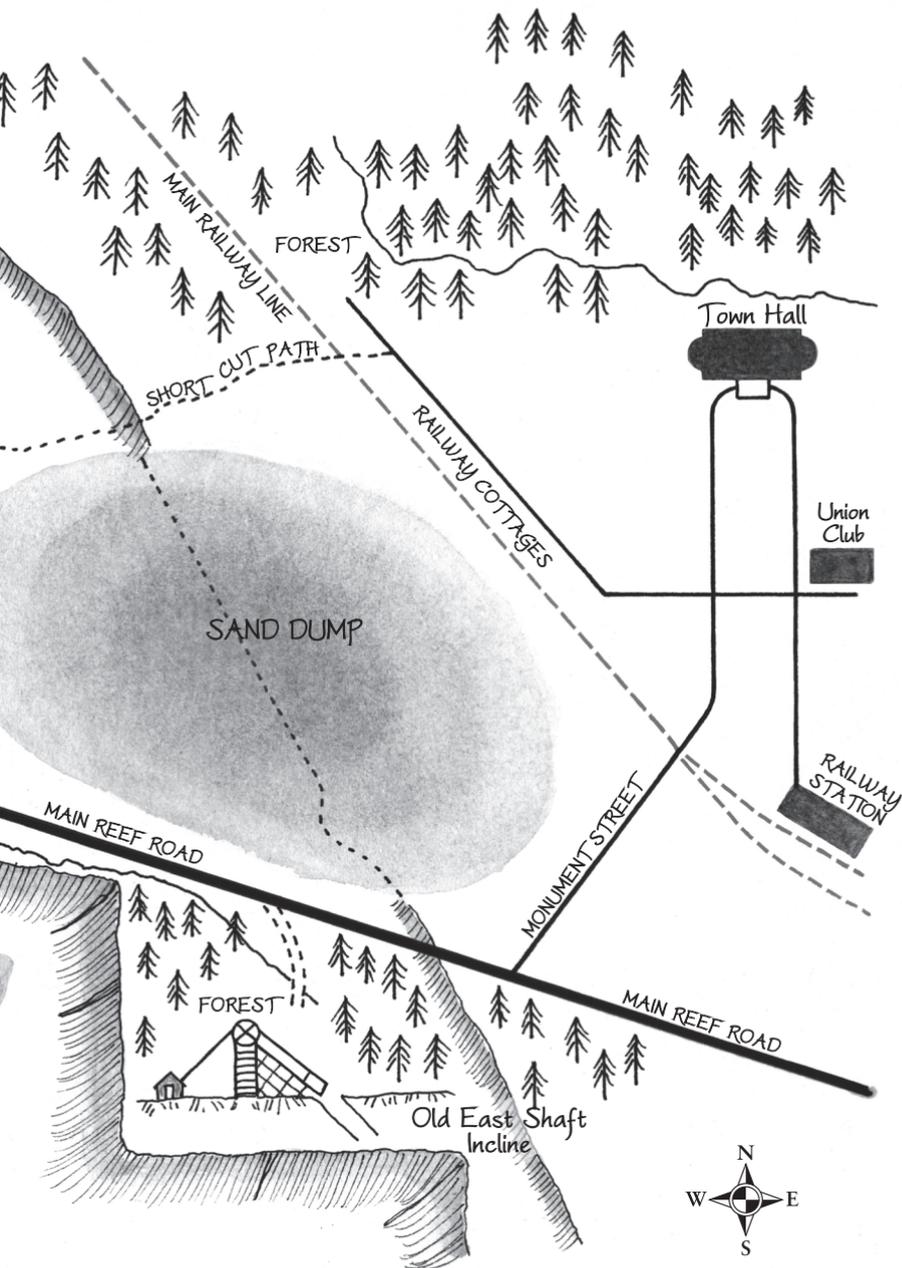
Few readers will grasp how many dismal drafts of the *Jive Cats* preceded the one they are reading, all brutally rejected by my remorselessly brilliant editor, Lennie Goodings, whose keen instincts and perceptiveness I relied upon utterly.

Trying to choreograph boxing and street fights having

never thrown a punch was somewhat daunting, and I am very grateful to Stephen Castle for his help. While I am certain that I have still made countless technical blunders, it was his passion for the art that brought those scenes to life and infused them with some of the raw energy of the sport.

Finally, an attempt at historical fiction necessitated consulting many tomes, and I am obliged to acknowledge some of the sources I drew on most heavily: Allister Sparks' *The Mind of South Africa*, first published twenty years ago, and still extraordinarily insightful; Frank Welsh's *A History of South Africa* and the concise version by Robert Ross; various of Herman Charles Bosman's still shrewdly comical works; David B. Coplan's *In Township Tonight!*, which was a rich feast, especially for someone as musically illiterate as I; and finally, the profoundly liberating *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, which inspired Jock's atheism.





For all of us there comes a fall, a loss of innocence – a time after which we are never again the same. For Tommy and me it was the summer of 1958, the summer we were twelve, the summer we were freed from a kind of bondage most of us don't even see.

PART ONE

1

Elvis

Chris

Elvis hadn't plucked the first chord but, man, I could already feel the beat, throbbing right down in my groin. A sour fog billowed eerily in the beams of the projector, softly curing the maroon velvet that swaddled the walls, the floor, the very chairs in which we were slouching. I didn't know how I'd live through the serial and the lousy war flick and all that crap before we got to it.

We were down in the front row of the Vaudette, Tommy and me, with Rod and Mitch. Tommy was jogging his knee up and down next to mine and his lemonade was quivering. A little had slopped into its saucer. I was itching to tip that saucer into my mouth and drain it. Tommy got it free with his ticket, but he told old Mrs Venter behind the counter that it tasted like they just *gooied* some sugar into green bloody water. He was gripping it now, though, like it was all he had. Suddenly he wrenched around and hissed at the row behind us, '*Shht!*'

‘Errol’s farted again, man,’ someone hissed back.

‘Sis!’

‘Did not, man, you lie!’

‘Hey! Shut up, you okes! Siddown!’

I knew why Tommy was so nervous. *Dick Tracy*. It was the last episode in the serial today. In the very first episode, the Spider’s gang kidnapped Tracy’s brother, and the Spider – also known as the Lame One – had had his mad scientist perform a brain operation on him, turning him evil. And every Saturday morning since, for the last fourteen weeks, Tommy had been there, his arse buffing the same seat, yelling and jerking around, firing his tommy-gun at the goons with Dick, ‘*Rat-tat-tat!*’ and every week ended with old Dick unconscious aboard a burning Zeppelin as it crashed to the ground, or falling from a skyscraper after a roof-top chase with his brother, or about to be crushed between two moored ships as they closed in on his motor-boat.

‘Hey, what do you okes reckon is going to start next week?’

‘Hell, I hope it’s *The Lone Ranger*, not the bloody *Zombies from the Stratosphere* again,’ said Rod.

‘Just shut up, man. I don’t want to talk about it,’ said Tommy, miserably.

Then he was up there, Dick Tracy, ten feet tall. It was a *lekker* finale. It started with Tracy strapped to the operating-table as that hunchback was wielding his scalpel, but Tracy busted free of the leather straps and there was a *moerse* big fist-fight with the goons. They were coming at him like flies and he was swatting them in time to the beat, his fists making a nice crispy sound – *dish!* – as he hit them. Next

thing there was a car chase and Tracy's brother plunged off the cliff. It was Tracy who found him lying next to the burning wreck. As he looked into his brother's eyes, he finally remembered who he was, but it was too late: he died in Tracy's arms.

'*Jisis*, no, man, get up, you *poephol!*' Tommy begged, but it was useless: the oke was a stiff, and it ended right there with Tommy slagging off Dick's mother.

Then the lights went up for the interval before the double feature started. Rod and Mitch were straining round in their seats, trying to get a look at what was going on in the back row. I couldn't help peering over my shoulder through the phlegmy smoke too.

The back row was where the big okes sat and smoked and *vryed* with the fast girls. Johnny, my brother, was there, of course, slumped low in his chair. Those girls wore gloves and stockings and starched petticoats same as what the other girls wore to the bio-scope, so you couldn't tell them straight away, but if they sat in the back row, then you knew. Me and Tommy and the okes had to sit in J Row down, the cheap seats.

Old Mrs Venter was hobbling up on stage with the lucky dip box. She was always telling me to hold on to my ticket for the lucky dip, young man, and I wanted to say, 'Jeepers, man, lucky dip? Lucky dip?' I wasn't there for the bloody sherbet and packet of pink pellets. Hell, sometimes when Mrs Venter's old man was playing, you scored a ticket to watch Cecil Grimsby and the Serenaders at the Krugersdorp Prison Officers' Club on Friday night instead. That's what I'm telling you, man.

I was there for Vince and his cellmate Hunk. It was the

sixth time I'd seen them. One Saturday I watched them three times in a row. Sat there through the matinée, then the lunchtime and afternoon showings. Tommy and the okes all bugged off, and afterwards I marched straight into the town hall and signed up.

I'd spotted the notice on a lamp-post on Market Street – 'Jivers, We Want You!' it said. Entry rules were a piece a piss; two and six to sign up and all you had to do was be under sixteen and present yourself backstage promptly at 7:30pm on the night of the contest to perform for strictly no more than four minutes. The judges' decision was final. It was barely three months away. Then, since I'd spent the tickie for my bus fare, I had to run through town, past the Astoria. We were forbidden to watch flicks in there. They called it the Bug-House.

'Well, you can go,' my dad'd say, 'but you'd want to keep a hand over the hole of your arse, that's what you'd want to be doing.'

I cut across the plantation behind the old mine dump on the north side of Main Reef Road to get home. It rose up like a ghost mountain in the twilight, and, jeepers, that old abandoned shaft by Lancaster East looked spooky.

The mine was littered with shafts, left open as ventilation chambers. There was a chimney over the Lancaster East one, but as it was an old incline shaft, there was a door set into the brick and steps descended into the darkness. The incline shafts were the oldest; the later ones, sunk to greater depths, were sheer, vertical bores.

In 1923, twenty-four men were swept to the bottom of Lancaster East shaft in a ground fall. Only five bodies were recovered, so sacks of quicklime were emptied down the

tunnel. The men fell to their deaths still wearing their money belts, so the story went, and a fortune in gold sovereigns lay buried with them. Me and Tommy and the okes planned to find it some day among the bleached skeletons – but, crikey, passing there alone at nightfall gave me the creeps.

Back at the 'scopes, I was getting a bit fidgety, miming Peggy in a breathy, girly voice for the okes: 'Oh, Vince, Vince!' so when Elvis finally got to it, 'Jailhouse Rock', and started movin' and groovin' and going crazy, I practically went crazy myself. Me and Tommy and Rod and Mitch were singing like we were the bloody knocked-out jailbirds. Tommy was sort of gyrating right there in his seat; I was sneering and gyrating beside him. The trick was in the pelvis: you had to shake it like there was an electric cattle prod shoved up your backside. And we weren't the only ones: the okes had gone gaga, dancing in their plush velvet seats, some of them dancing *on* their plush velvet seats – jeepers, there were even okes thrashing about in the aisles. The joint was swinging: the Krugersdorp Vaudette was hot, man!

Afterwards we stood to sing 'God Save the Queen'. I was chafing to get out of there to make it home in time for the Springbok Hit Parade, but we all stayed rooted to the bitter end, staring at the Queen sitting snootily on her horse.

Then, as we left the Vaudette, a bunch of loafers outside flagged us down. 'Hey, you okes, you from West Rand Cons Boxing Club, aren't you?'

'Ja,' Tommy said. 'What's the story?'

That was the trouble with always hanging around Tommy.

‘These okes from Booyens reckon they can take us on. They’ll be here now. We waiting here for them.’

How come it was always okes from the south who reckoned they could take us on? I waited for about five minutes and then said, ‘*Ja*, no, you see they *poeping* themselves. Let’s go home.’

Tommy reckoned he had to go by his house first to fetch his little sister. It was Saturday afternoon. Black Sabbath at No. 113. I didn’t want to go with him, but the Springbok Hit Parade wasn’t that much fun without Tommy anyway.

We climbed on our bikes and rode back up through town and across the railway tracks. From the European Bridge, I watched the people over on the Non-European one. An old man in a suit, whose trousers ended halfway up his shins, walked beside a wrinkled old lady with a brightly woven blanket draped about her shoulders and a stack of burnished copper bangles coiled around her throat. An absurdly large pipe dangled from his lips.

We turned west onto the Main Reef Road, the lone strip of tar that ran out of Johannesburg, linking all the mines on the Reef, towards the West Rand Cons gateway. The road traced the line of the main gold seam where it cropped out on the Witwatersrand ridge – ‘ridge of white waters’, in Afrikaans, so named for the springs galore gushing out of it.

We swung off Main Reef into the mine village, free-wheeling past the Rows where I lived and into Club Road at the northern end, where Tommy’s house was, though Tommy slowed as we neared his gate. I couldn’t help slowing down too. We climbed off our bikes and loitered outside, Tommy vacantly flipping the latch open and closed with his index finger. It whimpered with every flick. We used to

cruise the mine village filching latches. Don't know why. We still had a whole pile rusting in our cave in the big dump to the south of Main Reef.

Tommy's road was flanked by huge plane trees that cast deep shadows over the houses on one side and the rec club grounds on the other. The neighbouring gardens were teeming with hollyhocks and those pom-pom things, making No. 113's look all the more barren behind its stark fence – just a severely clipped lawn right up to the red-brick walls.

Jeepers, even Ma, who was always bellyaching about how she didn't have the time to mop the sweat from her brow, what with all of us greedy hogs, loved those dahlias of hers. Maggie, my little sister, picked bunches of them and plonked them into vases all over the house.

Tommy lingered outside the gate, lulled by the monotonous rasping of the hinge. He was always the last one to go home at night, but in the end, the worrying about Cece drove him back. 'No. 113' rusted forlornly on the chicken wire.

Finally Tommy swung the gate open and we walked up the path to his veranda. His house and ours were the same as all the others on the mine; same red brick and painted tin roof, except for the powdery white film coating everything on the gauzed veranda. Whenever the wind blew, great clouds of fine white dust gusted off the dumps and settled on the houses. Ma was always fussing at Beauty to get out there with her feather duster as soon as the wind dropped, but at No. 113 we left a trail of footprints behind us across the polished cement floor.

As we entered through the front door, I could hear the wireless from the front room. It was the cricket, crackling

with static. Tommy gently closed the door behind him and crooked his finger at me.

‘Hey, Tommy? Is that you, boy?’

The voice had come from the front room. Tommy was forbidden to go in there.

‘*Ja*, Dad, it’s me. And Chris,’ he added, with an edge to his voice.

‘Go fetch me more ice, boy.’

Tommy traipsed down the passage, through the kitchen and out the back door to the cold box. It stood against the wall under a frame of matted Catawba grape vines, the water from the dampened sackcloth seeping slowly through the charcoal. It was a relic from before the mine was electrified – ours had been unceremoniously dumped the day the electric frigidaire arrived – but Tommy’s dad kept theirs just for his ice. No one else ever had ice either. Mr Michaels ordered it specially from the ice-cream factory in town the last Saturday of every month. It wallowed in the cold box for days, gently melting.

Tommy took the ice pick from the top of the box and reached in to chip ice off the block cloaked back there in sawdust. He left me to wind the chicken mesh closed and walked back to the front room. I followed but lingered outside the doorway.

‘Do you think I’m stupid?’

Tommy’s old man was sprawled in a mangy armchair bellying at the wireless cabinet. I could see the outline of his string vest beneath his worn shirt, sweat stains spread under his armpits.

‘Do you think I don’t know bloody crookery when I see it? It’s a bloody bottle of whisky before the game, is what it

is.’ He grabbed the dripping ice from Tommy’s hand, shaking his head disgustedly, and chucked it into his tumbler. This was another thing about Tommy’s dad: I didn’t know anyone else who sat at home drinking whisky. Sure, Rod’s old man spent all afternoon tinkering under the bonnet of his jalopy with Mr Glynn-Jones, the boiler-maker who lived in the semi next door down in R Row, nipping furtively from the bottle of brandy Mrs Wazowski kept for medicinal purposes. Rod kept well away from the garage on Saturday afternoons.

My ma sniffed and called ‘those artisans’ the dregs, hardly better than the gangers, but I didn’t see how drinking all Friday night in the mine club was a lot better. The worst was the last Friday of the month. My old man went down Dorp to cash his cheque at the Majestic Hotel and didn’t come out until closing time. Hell, you could hear him crooning ‘That’s Amore’ from three rows away. Dean Martin never sounded so sweet.

Tommy’s dad took a swig. ‘Happens all the time, man. Where the hell you think that umpire comes from, hey?’ he asked Tommy, swallowing. ‘He’s a bloody Banana Boy. I’m telling you.’ He wiped his chin, smacked Tommy across the back of his head and looked up at me, scowling.

‘Hello, Mr Michaels.’

‘Christopher, I don’t know why I subject myself to this. I don’t need this *kak* in my life, boy. I mean, Jesus, man, life’s hard enough.’ He turned back to the wireless. ‘Hey, umpire! What’d you do with your six pieces of silver? Bloody Judas! Hope you rot in hell!’ He burped. ‘*Pro-vince!*’ He sounded like a cello paying homage to the Cape.

Tommy backed from the room and we scarpered down

the passage and out the back door of the kitchen again. 'Whew,' he said.

He was looking at his feet. So was I.

At the bottom of Tommy's back garden, behind the quince tree, was the old outhouse that backed onto the alley. Vilikazi was sitting against the wall with a plate of jam and bread and a copy of *Mining Sun* balanced on his knees. He was the mine boy who came to work in the garden on Saturdays.

'Hey, Vilikazi,' Tommy called. 'Where's Cece?'

Vilikazi jerked his head, 'You open that door,' he said sleepily. Deep grooves had carved a permanent scowl on Vilikazi's face, but underneath it there was a mellowness that we mistook for docility, and Tommy's little sister, who spent just about the whole day long in the back garden anyway, shadowed him when he was there.

Tommy wrenched open the rotted door – the smell of damp earth wafted out – and peered into the gloom. Cece was crouched in the dirt amid the picks and shovels. Her back was to us as she tucked a doll into a tomato crate, her huge bottle-green bloomers peeping out beneath the smocked dress that was rucked up over her bottom. The light fell on the doll's porcelain face, and there was something unnerving about its painted lips. Cece squinted up at Tommy and me haloed in the light. Her brow wrinkled, then she squealed.

'Come on, Cece, we're going to Chris's house.'

'Lulu too?' she asked, beaming at me, pulling down a hem that had obviously been let out over the gusset of her bloomers. Cece was a grubby, pig-tailed six-year-old, and she worshipped Tommy, who was twelve. I was also twelve, but Tommy had half a year on me.

'Bye, Vilikazi.' She waved to him as we headed around

the corner of the house. 'I have to go now,' she added, her head tilted apologetically.

'Ssh! You'll wake Ma,' Tommy hissed.

'Uh-uh. She's gone to Bible Study,' Cece said gaily, skipping around the house to the front gate, 'but Dad's timing her.'

Vilikazi, staring blearily into his newspaper, lifted two fingers in farewell.

'Hey, Vilikazi,' I called, 'that sweet *gwebu*'s going to kill you, you know.'

'*Gwebu*?' he grunted. 'I'm down to *morara, mfanam*. I don't know if I'm not already dead.'

'Ag, don't make me laugh,' said Tommy. 'Look at my old man – he's been on the *dop* for years, and he keeps breathing, hundred per cent proof.'

Out in the street, I hoisted Cece onto my handlebars and the three of us raced to my house in C Row. By the time we got there, Johnny, my big sister Mona and a load of their mates were already draped over the veranda around the transistor radio. It was Johnny's. No one but Johnny had their own transistor radio. He'd bought his with his winnings – boxing pro – which was even cooler than not having to fight our old man for the airwaves.

We squatted down at the bottom of the steps, and when 'Johnny B. Goode' came blaring out of that thing, we leaped up, twanging our air guitars and bawling at Johnny to be good. Johnny told us to piss off, this wasn't kindergarten, damn it, but we only made a run for it when Ma spotted us trampling on her bloody narcissi bulbs.

She stomped down the steps, slamming the screen door behind her and hollering, 'If I catch either one of you, so help me, I will flay you alive.'

Then she spotted Cece, who was running after us, her skinny little legs flailing, and stopped. 'No, not you, Cecelia, sweetheart. I didn't see you there,' she said, much more kindly. 'Why don't you come with me? You can help me with the little ones in the kitchen.'

Ma spent all hours God sent in the kitchen, which stank of great bubbling pots of lumpy Malta Bela, with Maggie and the babies bawling around her ankles. God knows why: what with the wringer Dad got her for her birthday, and Beauty forever scrubbing something to death, I reckon she liked standing in her apron by the deep stone sink, some baby's toes peeping out from under the horrible bits of curtain beneath it, swooning along to Cliff Richard.

I'd told her I'd like to grab him by the pompadour and slap him across the face, but Ma still called him dreamy. It was really Ma I was pissed off with: she shouldn't have been listening to teenagers, not even the drips, and she certainly shouldn't have been saying things like 'dreamy'.

'That's a wedding ring on your finger,' I told her coldly.

She said that might be true, but women still kept a special corner of their hearts for the sins they never committed.

'If I was Cece I'd think twice before going in there with her. There's a bloody good chance she'll never come out,' I muttered.

Tommy, straddled on the low Cherry Pie Lantana hedge, looked relieved, though. 'Um, thanks, Mrs Jameson. Sorry about your flowers, hey.'

'I will wallop your twelve-year-old backside, Thomas Michaels, if I catch you again,' she said darkly, but I could tell the sizzle had gone out of her.

Cece followed Ma back inside, looking helluva pleased

with herself, and Tommy and me headed off to the Violet Dam, jiving down the road, warbling 'Rave On' at the top of our lungs. I was aching to spill my secret, but I didn't have the balls. It was like I was supposed to see that poster. One of its strings had come loose and it was flapping lopsidedly from the lamp-post – even as I read it, the wind tore it free. Hell, when I thought about my name on that entry form, the ink drying before my eyes, I felt like I'd just sucked on an old stompie, my guts lurching with the scrambled brains inside my skull. The thing was, I couldn't dance for shit.