

# BEING BLACK 'N CHICKEN, & CHIPS

MATT  
OKINE

 hachette  
AUSTRALIA

*Dedicated to my daughter, Sofia Atswei Okine.  
Your grandmother was strong, smart, caring and  
hilarious. I see more and more of her in you each day.  
I love you more than anything in this world. – Dad*

# PROLOGUE

As you might imagine, lying on the sand, half-naked, begging your own Mum to wee on you, is not the best way to start a new year. It does little for the self-esteem, and – as it turns out – even less for a jellyfish sting.

I'd planned to start my first year of high school with a bang, but Mum had extinguished those hopes with a crisp number one, and if that wasn't bad enough, somehow – as far as my year's turn of events would go – that parental golden shower would turn out to be one of the highlights.



It was 1998.

Year of the Tiger.

Year of the France soccer World Cup, and England hating David Beckham.

A year that four brightly coloured blobs, called Teletubbies, would debut on Australian TV, dancing around each other in a green field, muttering an indecipherable language, somehow captivating every baby in the country.

It was the year that rugby league was getting its shit back

together after a disastrous breakaway competition called Super League which broke the patience of fans, and the pockets of clubs, so that it could finally go back to making headlines for all the regular reasons: drug possession and assault charges. Our prime minister, John Howard, was making headlines of his own, proving he had little taste by refusing to meet the Spice Girls.

It was the year of Winter Olympics in Nagano, Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur, and US President, Bill Clinton, having quite a bit to answer for.

It was the year of Britney, and Buffy, and dorks stampeding at dawn to install the ground-breaking operating system, Windows 98, on their lightning-fast Pentium IIs.

It was also the year, in a city called Brindlewood, two thirds up the East Coast of Australia, three months after the pissing incident, that I found myself sitting on the edge of a jetty, with the wind howling across the nearby mud flats and all those damn mosquitoes.

For every mosquito I slapped on my arm, it seemed there were seven more on my legs. Some sort of kamikaze mosquito mission; one taunting my top half, sacrificing herself so that the masses could feast below. I could see Dad's torchlight way off in the distance, flickering across the moonlit waters, disappearing briefly behind thick mangroves and re-appearing again.

This was 'The Swamp'. A small cove of mud and mangroves, at the base of Jenkins' Reserve, where the Burnett Creek met the curved banks of the Brindlewood River. This was my backyard. Not in a literal sense, but I'd grown up here long enough to own it. Five square kilometres of bushland, sprawled across the southern base of Brindlewood's biggest peak, Mt Kartha. To the east was the fancy side of town, home to posh shops spruiking smelly candles, my high school, and a prestigious golf course

that cushioned the yards of all the rich kids. To the west was the cheap side of town, where my house (of course) was bordered by the unkempt nature of 'The Reserve'. Splitting The Reserve down the middle, like a prawn's poop shoot, was 'The Creek', that ran from the top of Mt Kartha, down to where I was sitting right now. The Swamp. The asshole of it all. Sometimes you could sit in this spot of an afternoon; the murky water lapping sullenly at the wooden frame of the jetty, the occasional guppy ducking its head up and out of the water to capture little gasps of air, like a dog lapping at freshness from the yawning window of a car. Other times, in low tide, like now – the muddy riverbed exposed – you could see all sorts of sea life scampering across the muck, darting in between the short, stubby mangrove roots that jut out of the earth, each about the size of a cigarette; they looked sole-slicing, but would actually crackle and crunch quite easily under the thick rubber of a damp Dunlop.

'Mike!' I heard Dad yelling to me, his voice thin and faint as it dispersed around the huge open marshland; only ten percent of it reaching me, the other ninety percent filling the open sky and disappearing up into space.

'What?' I screamed at the top of my lungs; my voice echoing across the stillness of the creek mouth.

'Just checking!' he screamed back.

God, Dad was so annoying. He was always giving me oily eyes; I mean, anything he said would make my eyeballs roll.

'You asked me to stand here with the torch, so I'm standing here with the torch!'

'I'm coming back now!' he screamed again. 'Stay there!'

Where did he think I was going? Did he think that I would just disappear?

It'd been in the mid-twenties most of the day, and I'd had

no problems rocking my fave get-up all afternoon, but now I was shivering in my black shorts and my favourite striped purple polo. Tully had really ripped me hard when I'd come home from Tassie wearing it for the first time. She said it looked like I was wearing a sleeved stained-glass window. She'd asked whether I'd spewed on myself cos it was so technicoloured.

But I didn't care.

I'd had the best time in Tasmania with Mum. She'd taken me there as a graduation present during the Summer holidays between finishing primary school and starting high school. That once-in-a-lifetime month of happiness that sees you leave childhood behind, but before puberty and profession start presenting you life's problems.

This shirt reminded me of that.

I would never forget it, even though - now - I was cold, wet, and itchy, sitting on the edge of the jetty.

*Slap.*

Tasmania.

What I'd do to be back there.

Just me and Mum.

Before the pissing incident, of course.



We'd been sitting on the shores of a spot called Friendly Beaches, watching the timid Tasmanian waves crawl towards us as the sun gradually dipped below the tree-tops; that beach soundtrack of a thousand analogue TVs without reception, engulfing us.

We'd been to Cadbury's Chocolate Factory in Hobart, and while the colours and gadgets weren't quite up to Wonka's standards, it was pretty rad seeing the birthplace of my Friday

night snacks. From there, we'd driven up along the south-east coast of the island, before making a pit stop at Friendly Beaches.

Mum and I were lying amongst the sparse tufts of grass that acted as a fringe between the beach's carpark and the sandy slope leading down to the sea. She was scribbling away furiously in her smart, black faux-leather diary, and I was practicing my triple jump.

'What's a sonic boom gun?' I asked as I drew a line in the sand with my toe and took a few steps back for a run-up.

'I'd say it's a good indication that you play too many video games,' Mum replied, barely looking up from her writing.

'Uncle Greg told me at your fortieth that if I ever hear the floorboards creaking in the middle of the night, it's not the floorboards, it's sonic boom guns. That they're "listening to us".'

Mum lowered her diary. 'This. This is why I *never* have parties.'

'We've never had floorboards,' I said.

'What else did he say?' she asked, one eyebrow cocked.

'He said he's been trying to contact the Queen, but she won't answer, and that he's sixteenth in line to the throne, which makes me thirty-second in line to the throne,' I shrugged.

'Well, you're not,' Mum said, matter-of-fact. 'You're not even in the line. It's like Disneyland. You need to be 'this tall' to go on the ride, except 'this tall' is an incestuous bloodline, and 'the ride' is a horribly outdated and colonial sense of supremacy.'

'Oh man,' I said, spitting little particles of sand out of my mouth, 'I already told Tully I'd make her a duchess.'

I dusted off my legs, stood up and went back to my mark for another jump.

'Why isn't Uncle Greg a patient at Woolvin Park?' I asked. 'Don't you want to help him?'

‘Mike, I’m an Aquarius. It’s basically my cosmic duty to help others, but my job is to help people get out of that place, not send them in.’ She sighed. ‘Plus, you should never work with family.’

She flicked over the page of her diary and kept scribbling as I hop-step-and-jumped away from her, landing with a thud, the wind kicking sand back into my eyes and mouth.

‘Jesus, Mike, do you mind?’ she said, waving her hand around her face like she was swatting flies.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, spitting sand out of my lips again. ‘I need to practice. I really want to make the team for the Dobson Dash.’ The Brindlewood All-Schools Cup – more commonly known as the ‘Dobson Dash’ – was a massive, interschool track and field event named after some guy called Gary Dobson, an ex-Commonwealth Games runner from Brindlewood who apparently won lots of gold medals back in a time when metres were still yards and Aboriginal people couldn’t vote. The event was designed to bring all the kids together from the high schools right around the Brindy region to raise money for a charity of your school’s choice. Every metre jumped or thrown was a dollar towards the kitty, and every first, second, and third in the races earned ten, five, and two dollars respectively. At the end of the day, a team from each school – two boys and two girls – ran a 4 x 100-metre mixed relay, and the winning school would score an additional \$1000 for their charity of choice, paid for by the local newspaper, *The Brindlewood Chronicle*, who would also chuck you on the front page of the sports section to boot. You can bet your boulders I was keen to get amongst it. I could picture the flashes of the paparazzi cameras already.

Mum’s voice brought me back to reality. ‘Don’t be too disappointed if you don’t, Mike. You’ve been a big fish in a small

pond for too long. It's good to be challenged.'

A big fish in a small pond was an understatement. I'd won every single event at the Ironbark Primary School athletics carnival, from the shot put to the sprints. I wasn't a big fish in a small pond, I was a shark in a bathtub. A goddamn blue whale in a tear drop.

'I know, Mum. That's why I've got to practice. I'm going to be at the same school as Skon Helpmann now. He wins everything at States. The guy is a monster.'

I remember the first time I saw Skon compete. He had the swagger of an athlete who knew no one could touch him. But I was sure as hell going to try.

I crawled over to Mum and put my head on her chest. It was nice and warm, offsetting the cool coastal breeze that was blowing around us. The moment felt right, and even though my nerves were tingling and my heart was pounding, I took a plunge.

'Mum.'

'Yes, Mike?'

'Can we get the internet?'

Mum laughed and rolled her eyes. She put a full stop at the end of the sentence she was writing, snapped her diary closed, and stood up, dusting off her backside and gathering her things.

'Oh, I love you, my little chook. Now let's go, I need to use the ladies and my squatting days are over.' She wrapped her arms around me and ruffled my curly hair.

'Stop it,' I said, wriggling out of her grasp. 'I'm serious. I'm in high school now. I need the internet to study!'

'That's what the library is for, Mike.'

I was scrambling, 'Or I could use it to learn an instrument, or... or for workout techniques! So I can be big enough to beat

Skon. I'm sitting on 'zero from nine' from every meet we've ever done together. If I let him get to ten, I may as well wear a tombstone to school because my athletics career will be as good as dead.'

Mum laughed again.

'Mike, don't be silly. The internet is expensive. Plus, you're too young to be working out.'

'Just because *you* never work out,' I said.

She stared at me, laser beams. 'Go wash yourself off.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that, promise,' I said, looking sulkily out at the ocean as it welcomed the rich navy of night. 'It's just... you can't treat me like a kid anymore. I'll be a grown-up soon.'

Mum's eyes softened. 'Fine, but there's no need to be rude. Now go wash off. You're not getting in the rental car looking like that, unless you want to walk all the way to Coles Bay?'

'But Mum. It's too cold.'

'No whingeing, Mike. *You'll be a grown-up soon*, so act like it.'

I felt really bad. I didn't mean it like that.

So I took my shirt off and started running.

Running towards the cold.

# CHAPTER ONE

**SATURDAY 28TH MARCH 1998**

*You'll be a grown-up soon.*

I certainly wasn't a grown-up yet, sitting out on this stupid jetty, waiting for Dad.

There were guys at Brindlewood High with facial hair, and I don't mean whiskers, I mean full-blown, crumb-catching beards. The senior girls all wore bras and shaved their legs and armpits and had hips and cellulite. High school was no place for a kid like me.

I had a high-pitched, whiny voice that sent dogs into panic whenever I piped up. I had a pokey little pigeon chest with scrawny arms like chicken wings, and legs that resembled two bendy, brown chopsticks. I hadn't so much as grown a single strand of bumfluff on my top lip, and my downstairs region had as many thick-and-curlies as a Sphynx cat.

I needed to grow up.

I got to my feet and cautiously walked up the jetty towards where Dad's car was parked. Each step was an uneven gamble for my ankles, as the occasional wayward nail head poked the rubber of my thongs firmly against the soles of my feet. Each

footstep, a chance for fate to send me straight through those rickety boards and plunging into the water below.

But I knew what was down there.

*The Irukandji.*

Dad always took me on crabbing trips, ever since I was a little kid, and I hated it. I mean, it's kinda fun when you're eight or nine, but not when you're almost thirteen. I wanted to be hanging out with Zoe Ingham, my crush from school. I wanted to be lazing about in The Reserve with her. I wanted to be holding her hand as we walked across the small bridge that crossed over The Creek. I wanted her to stop and look down at some guppies, and for me to stand behind her, put my arms around her waist and then kiss her neck. I wanted to lie down on the grass somewhere, or maybe even on a high jump mat, and I wanted to make out with her, and feel her boobs and ass.

Instead, I was standing on a creaky old jetty in the middle of nowhere, stinking of fish guts, while my dad looked for goddamn mud crabs.

'Hey Zo, I was just wondering if –' I had to stop myself. Was it weird to call her 'Zo'? I cleared my throat and tried again.

'Hey, Zoe. You, me, and a picnic in the park. Whatya say?' Jesus was I a waiter at a rock-n-roll diner in the 60s?

'Can I kiss you?'

OK, now I was jumping ahead. It's not like we'd ever talked. I was only in a couple of classes with Zoe, and high school had only been going for two months, so everything I knew, I knew from overhearing conversations in class, but I liked what I'd heard. She'd told a story in English one day about how she'd beaten up her sister for 'accidentally' kicking the Sega plug out of the wall when they were neck-and-neck, coming out the final bend of the beginner track in Daytona, and it really cracked me

up. I'd thought about her beating me up a few times, and it always made me smile.

I imagined myself standing next to her in the parklands, looking over the pond. Arms around her waist. I tried again, 'Can I kiss you?'

'Of course,' she would say. And then we'd go at it. Our tongues lashing across each other like silicone brushes oiling a hot BBQ grill. Opening and closing our mouths like goldfish.

By now, I'd stopped in the middle of the jetty.

Dad was still at least five minutes away, which I figured was enough time for this freak show to hit second base. I curled my right hand into an oval, up against my chapped, windblown lips and started really going for it; slowly at first – small, soft pecks – but soon enough I was sticking my tongue in and everything. I could taste the salty remnants of fish bait that I'd been helping Dad with earlier.

It was disgusting. I'd turned into a monster, but I couldn't help it. I kept going. I'd seen people kiss their hand in movies as a joke, but I wasn't joking. It's as close as I could get to the real thing, and I needed the practice. It's embarrassing to admit – and trust me, I've lied about it plenty before – but Zoe would be the first person I ever kissed.

At least, I hoped she would be.

That's when I heard the footstep.

A stick breaking. Thick, and hard, under the weight of something.

Or someone.

I dropped my hand to my side, embarrassed, and quickly wiped the saliva onto my shorts, looking up. God, there was a lot of slobber. Is kissing really that messy?

I stared back towards the bushes flanking the narrow dirt

path that led to Dad's car that was parked forty metres away.

Was it a person?

Standing there. On the left of the path. Still, but breathing. I could see their chest moving from the single orange light that barely illuminated the mostly dirt carpark of The Reserve.

Ours was the only car when we arrived, and I'd been sitting alone for twenty damn minutes. I would've heard someone else turn up.

Unless they didn't want me to.

The figure took a step closer, and it suddenly occurred to me what was going on. It was Dad! Trying to scare me. I almost let out a chuckle too, when –

'Mike!' Dad's voice, cracking the night air. But Dad's voice was coming from deep inside the mangroves.

My head snapped to my right to check, and, sure enough, there was Dad's torchlight flickering within the thick foliage, all the way across the bay.

This person wasn't Dad.

This person had been watching me. Watching me get my pash on with my dirty stinking fish hand.

I wanted to point my torch right at them, but I was frozen.

'Help!' I tried to yell for Dad, but it didn't come out nearly loud enough.

I felt my stomach lodging up next to my heart.

'Please, don't yell,' the figure rasped.

I couldn't help it.

'Help!' This time I was louder. Much louder.

I snapped my torch up, and shone it directly into the bushes where the stranger was standing.

That's when he stepped forward. The old man. Not rough-looking, but not clean. He looked the way Dad looked after

a Saturday in the garden. Not clean enough for a meal at the pub, but clean enough for the pokies room. The type of body fat percentage you could only get in prison, he had a dog by his side – and at this distance I couldn't tell if the dog was friendly or not.

'I said – stop yelling,' he croaked. He was now blocking the top of the jetty; my only way out, unless I went the other way. Into the River. Into –

*The Irukandji.*

'I'm sorry,' I mumbled. And that's when I saw the gun. Held by his waist; its long barrel running against his thigh.

He stepped forward, walking towards me, marching, urgent and gruff as though he'd caught me keying his car.

That's when I ran, feeling –

*The cool rush of sun-setting wind.*

I dropped the torch and sprinted as fast as I could towards the end of the jetty.

*Running away from Mum, towards the cold of the Tasmanian ocean.*

I could hear footsteps behind me. Speeding up.

*Promising that as soon as I hit the waves, I'd be a man. All grown up.*

The closer I got to the edge of the jetty, the more I realised I was going to have to face my biggest fear.

I'd stood at the edge of the jetty that afternoon, 12 hours earlier, when Dad was setting up his crab pots, still dreaming of Zoe Ingham, and how we might one day even get married, and how my next-door neighbour Tully would be my best woman, and I'd look out into the front row of the chapel and I'd see Mum and Dad sitting there. In the same room again. For once.

*And as my foot hit the edge of the ocean, I took-off, hopping over*

*the first line of whitewash, stepping across the waves.*

No looking back.

*Jumping into the sea, to clean my body of sand and sins.*

Standing at the edge of the Jetty that afternoon, cutting my curls off.

*Unaware of the swarm. The Bloom brought by the North-Easterly winds.*

Jellyfish. So many jellyfish.

‘No, don’t!’ The man’s voice bellowed past me, but it was too late.

I hit the last board on the edge of The Jetty, and like a jumper at the Olympics, I put everything into my calves, dipped my quads, and took a breath.

And I thought about how I might never see Mum again.

And that made me sad and mad, at the same time.

Because I really loved her, more than anything in the world.

But this was all her fault.

And then I jumped.