

HITTING THE BIG TIME



Trevor Hughes

Part One

He heard the bikes first through the open, fly-screened window, a far away muted sound and he took no notice until the noise was right outside his front door, engines revving and roaring. Reluctantly he left his chair and went to peer through the tattered remnants of his curtains.

He could see five of them: rough, tough guys in their twenties or thirties astride big polished motorbikes caked with dust. Behind them the parched brown land stretched away, a few odd twisted bushes surviving in the scrub. He wondered, fleetingly about reaching up into the hollow, crafted over the fly-specked window and taking down the revolver which he had not used in so many years but there was nothing here they could possibly want barring a few beers and a tin box with a little cash. He still had plenty more of that.

He returned patiently to his chair, sat placidly as the big blond man kicked open his door.

“What do you want?” he asked politely. In the old days he would have killed him without a thought.

He had bloodshot blue eyes, many days growth of beard, and his lips were cracked and dry. “Anybody else here?” he demanded.

“No”

The big blond man motioned to two of the others, filling the low doorway with their bulk. “Go check it out,” he said.

They stared at the old man sitting placidly in his chair. There was only one other door, so they both stomped into his kitchen, their worn leathers creaking like the fan which rotated slowly overhead, barely moving the dry, hot air.

The other two gang members came into his front room, grinning.

“How’s it going Ned Kelly,” said one of them, his face red and sun scorched, his vacant gap-toothed smile.

The old man said nothing.

Shortly the two who had gone into his kitchen returned. “Nothing,” they said, “except these,” producing a six-pack of beer. The blond man took the six-pack, tossed a beer to each of his gang, and the last to the old man.

“Drink up old-timer,” he said. “Who knows, it could be your last.” His eyes were red-rimmed and crazy

They all stood, drinking the beer, staring at him.

“How old are you, old man?” sneered the blond man. “You want to live any more now you got to be so old?”

With a sigh the old man stood, went to the rough stone fireplace, pulled away a loose brick. “Here,” he said, “it’s all I have.” He offered a battered tin box.

The blond man took it, opened it, saw a few dollars and some coins. He took the money and pushed it into the pocket of his denim shirt. Then he crushed the empty beer can in his right hand and tossed it to the floor. It was very hot and still, and the flies buzzed around the empty can. He swaggered up to the old man. “This the best you can do?” he sneered, waving the old tin box in the man’s face.

The old man shrugged his shoulders and waved at the room; the old, patched

furniture, broken chairs, tattered pieces of carpet. "What did you expect?" he asked.

"So didn't you hear us old man? Didn't you hear us coming? Why didn't you run off and hide?"

"I don't hear so good these days."

"Come on Jake, there's nothing here." An empty can crashed against the wall. "Let's go."

The blond man wheeled around his eyes blazing with fury. "What did you say?" he shrieked. He turned back to the old man. "That fool's told you my name now old man." He licked his lips and pushed his unshaven face up close. "Now we'll have to kill you."

The old man stared at him with a spark of hatred deep in his eyes. "I told you I don't hear so good these days," he said, stolidly, with no emotion.

The blond man stood up again and his eyes lit on a picture displayed in a flyblown frame hanging on a nail on the wall. He took it down and squinted at it. "Who's this then," he sneered. "Your life-long partner is it?" He rubbed away some of the grime, trying to decipher the inscription. "Nellie," he read aloud.

He cracked the photo frame with his hand and pulled out the picture, stuffed it into the top pocket of his shirt. He was grinning delightedly. The only sound was the flies buzzing around the empty beer cans.

"That doesn't mean a thing to you," the old man said quietly. He held out his hand. "Give it back to me," he said.

"I don't think so old man, I think I'm going to put this on my wall along with my other pictures." He patted his pocket. "Who knows, it could be worth something one of these days."

The old man stood. "It's worth nothing to you," he said patiently. "It's worth something to me. Give it back."

The blond man swung a fist and the old man collapsed back into his chair, licking the blood from his lips. *Once, he thought, I would have shown you.*

The blond man turned on his heel and jerked a thumb at the others, all standing motionless in the room. They began to file out, stooping under the low sagging timbers of the doorframe. The blond man turned to stare at the old man "You should be grateful we let you live," he said.

The silence was shattered by the sound of the bike engines and the old man walked to the window, peered through the grimy window pane. He took a stub of pencil from the table. *Jake* he wrote. He looked again through the window at the motorcycles retreating in a haze of dust into the distance through the dry, barren scrubland. Then he wrote the number of the blond man's motorcycle on the envelope beside his name.

He continued to stare through the window at the cloud of dust. He took tobacco and paper from a pouch in his pocket, rolled a cigarette, lit it with a match. He inserted the thin cigarette carefully into his mouth, ignoring the flies that buzzed around the drying blood on his lip and his eyes were filled with hatred.

Part Two

It was the still of the late afternoon when the parched frogs fall silent, the toads and lizards sleep in the shade, the very wind holds its breath, when not a leaf stirs on the desiccated trees and the sun beats down hot and alone in the heavens.

Slowly the beat-up old pick-up made its way along the dusty road, heading west towards the small Australian town.

They knew the old man, vaguely. He came in sometimes, sat at the bar, drank his beer, then left. Attempts to engage him in conversation met with silence. Not that he was rude or anything, but he didn't want to talk small talk or any other kind of talk, which they respected out here in the outback, so when they realized that he was here for the drink rather than the company they left him alone.

He drained his beer and pointed silently to his empty glass for a refill. The barkeep, a huge fat man with a face full of bad memories silently placed a glass on the bar.

"Hear tell of any bikers out this way at all?" asked the old man, sipping his cold beer.

The barkeep stared at him. "Now why would an old man like you be asking me that?" he said. "Figuring on joining the Hell's Angels now are we granddad?"

There were three other men sitting drinking in the bare dark bar and they grinned at each other over their drinks.

The old man leaned over the bar and took hold of the barkeep's hand, still holding his new glass of beer. "Asked a civil question," he muttered, "and expect a civil answer."

His hand tightened and with an explosion like a gunshot the glass shattered, cold beer foaming along the bar and dripping onto the sawdust floor. The barkeep examined the two fresh cuts in his hand and stared thoughtfully at the old man.

"Now why in hell d'you do that?" he said in wonderment, looking at the drops of blood forming on his hand. He put his hand to his mouth, licking away the fresh blood.

"Hear tell there were some bike boys running out to Sanderson's Creek, but that's a

hell of a ways from here,” he said. “You had some trouble there old timer?” looking at the old man’s busted mouth, and the beer dripping off the bar, wrapping a filthy bar rag round his cut hand.

The old man threw some coins onto the bar. “Nope,” he replied, and stood up and walked out of the bar into the blinding sunshine.

“He gives me the creeps, that old guy,” muttered the bartender, inspecting the bloody rag on his hand.

“Jesus, Gus, he’s just an old man,” remarked one of the drinkers.

“Then what’s he doing looking for bikers at his age?”

“Maybe his daughter ran off with one of ‘em.”

“Daughter?” grunted the man known as Gus, in disgust. “Granddaughter, maybe,” He polished a glass with a dirty old rag, and stared at his cut hand.

“He still gives me the creeps,” he said.

The old man drove back to his shack. He looked at the white patch on the wall where his picture had hung. Sanderson’s Creek was two hundred miles away towards the coast. He threw a couple of clean shirts and a half-gallon plastic container of water into the back seat of his truck. The roads were bad and it would be a long drive but it wasn’t as if he had other things to take care of. He picked up the crowbar from the kitchen, went to the door, opened it. He levered up the flat stone which served as a doorstep. From the hole below in the earth he took a large metal box, opened it, took out some notes. He went back into the house, carefully removed the brick from the wall above the window and unwrapped an oiled leather package. He checked that the action was still working smoothly, slipped six bullets into the chambers and dropped it into his pocket.

He closed the door, climbed into his pick-up and started the engine.

Part Three

The old man walked into a bottle shop and ordered a bottle of whisky. It had taken seven hours to drive down to Sanderson's Creek and it was dark now. He sat in his pick-up by the side of the road and listened to the music coming from the bar a hundred yards away down the road, with the Harleys and Yamahas in the dust outside. There were five of them.

He'd had bikes, lots of them in the old days. Stolen mostly. Proper bikes with kick-starts and kick-down gears, not these fancy push-buttons and twist grips that girls could handle. He sat in his pickup and took a swig of the whisky, feeling it burn down inside him like the old days.

He waited patiently as the full darkness came down, and occasionally took a sip from his bottle but he was careful not to drink too much. He had never ruined a job by drinking and he wasn't about to start now. He rolled himself a cigarette and waited.

Eventually he watched two people emerge from the bar, mount their bikes and with loud, night-shattering noise roar away down the road.

Cats-Eyes. Everyone had called him that, because he could see in the dark better than most of them could see in the day. He stared into the darkness, but made no move. They weren't the ones he wanted.

Suddenly he awoke, cursing himself for his old man's frailty, woken by the sounds of shouting in the night. He looked through his windscreen and in the bar doorway a man stood, cursing and threatening, blood running down his face. Three men swaggered,

laughing down the wooden steps which led from the bar onto the street. There were two girls with them. One overweight and rough looking and one blonde, good looking in a real hard, mean way with long hair and very tight jeans and leathers.

There were always girls who fell for the bad guys, reflected the old man. A bit of a swagger; a good pair of fists; a bit of rough. It was always the same. As it had been for him. He thought of Nellie and the missing picture and his fists tightened on the steering wheel. He took a swig from his bottle and started his engine.

The guys on the bikes were revving their engines and whooping. He recognized the one called Jake but he carefully read off the number because he wanted to be sure.

They roared past him in a cloud of smoke and exhaust fumes and when they had gone he followed slowly, watching their tail lights disappear into the distance. He kept his window open so that he could listen to the sound of the bike engines, listening for the change in the engine noise when they turned off the road. He didn't use his lights in case they saw him behind them. In any case he didn't need to use his lights.

It was about four miles down the road when he saw the dirt track off to the left with the marks of skidding tyre tracks in the dust. He drove a few yards past the turn-off, switched off his engine and walked along the dusty, rutted track. There was no need for silence. He could see a light through the stunted scrubby trees, and hear the bass thumping of loud music.

From the darkness he studied the decrepit, abandoned cabin. There were five big bikes outside. He shrugged his shoulders walked back to his car, drove a few miles further, away from the town till he found another track meandering off into the bush.

He stopped his truck half hidden behind some scrub, pulled his hat over his eyes and slept.

In the morning he awoke, sat, stretched his cramped limbs and picked up his flask of water. He tipped it gratefully into his parched mouth, the sun already hot, the air dry and still, the taste of whisky still in his mouth, swallowing water and spitting some through the window into the dust. He took one of his spare shirts, sluiced his armpits and his face with the tepid water and changed into a clean shirt.

He needed to keep a watch on the abandoned cabin, wait until the bike boys and their girls rode off somewhere. Then he would go in, take what belonged to him and leave. He might also, he thought to himself, teach them a lesson: like burning the place to the ground. He'd see how he felt. He was aware that he was hungry but he ignored that.

He drove towards the town and the cabin. There was nowhere he could effectively hide his van so when he was still out of earshot of the cabin he left it by the side of the road with the doors and windows open so that it would look as though it had broken down or been abandoned. Then he began to walk.

It was still early in the morning. He found a place he could hide reasonably well, a depression screened by scrawny bushes from where he could see the cabin and the bikes. He settled down patiently to wait. He didn't figure them for early risers. The sun climbed in the sky. There came the odd call of a kookaburra. Lizards crawled in the dust. Flies buzzed in the hot dry air, settled on his face and his sweaty shirt. He ignored them.

It was mid-day, the sun burning down ferociously when he heard sounds of life. Eventually the door opened and one of the girls appeared. She was wearing nothing but a pair of flip-flops. She strolled arrogantly to the falling-apart shack that was obviously the dunny and the old man swallowed hard as she kicked at the rusty corrugated sheet that had once been a door and sat down casually on the wooden plank with its ancient septic

tank beneath.

He watched as they all, one by one went down to use the crude toilet. Even from where he watched he could smell the foul smell and hear the flies. Don't you people have any self-respect? he said to himself in disgust.

Still he waited, all through the long day until, with the sun fading he saw them leave their tumbledown accommodation. The two girls climbed up on the bikes, one behind Jake and the other behind the guy with the crazy eyes and they all took off in a deafening roar of noise and a cloud of dust and smoke.

The old man waited until the engine noise had faded, pulled himself stiffly to his feet and walked casually into the cabin. It was obviously empty now, but in case he was wrong he kept one hand inside the pocket of his ancient jacket on the handle of his gun.

There was only the one room with clothing and bedding rolls scattered on the floor. On one wall were pictures torn from magazines, mainly of naked women. He remembered Jake's boast and looked for his picture but it wasn't there.

Methodically he began to search through the pockets of the sweaty, smelly stained shirts lying on the floor, two ancient cracked leather jackets hanging on nails, old, patched, torn jeans, but he found nothing. He looked in contempt at the piles of dirty clothing, unwashed sleeping bags, empty bottles and cans. Maybe Jake had lost the picture or thrown it away but he couldn't take that chance. There was only one way to find out and that was to ask Jake.

He was hungry. Hadn't eaten the whole day. He walked along the dusty road in the evening shadows and drove into town.

He drove past the five big bikes outside the bar and continued through the town till

he came to another bar, old, run-down and decrepit. A bit, he thought like himself. He sat at the bar and had a beer and a pie. The bartender looked at him curiously a few times but said nothing. The old man paid and left.

He was not looking forward to the next bit, leaving his truck down the road, walking back to the cabin and settling down to wait right by the foul-smelling toilet.

Part Four

He was barely a mile out of town when he heard the bikes. He wound up his window, pulled his hat a little further down to hide his face. This he didn't need.

They raced alongside his pick-up yelling cheerful obscenities. The old man kept his head down and drove slowly. If they recognized him he'd have to change his plans but they tired of their game after a few moments and roared away in a cloud of dust.

The old man continued to drive patiently, following the direction of the bikes, peering into the blackness on both sides of the narrow dirt road until he saw a light in the darkness. He drove slowly past, stopped his truck, felt under the seat for the old, oiled package, took out his gun and walked slowly and a little stiffly back up the road. He could see the bikes in a line outside the derelict shack. Loud rock music thudded through the thick still air. The old man stood and watched and he could see a woman dancing against the window, lit by a lamp or a candle inside the shack. *Whore*, he said to himself, and spat against a tree.

He moved silently through the scrub until he came to the dunny behind the

abandoned shack, a plank with a rough hole cut in it laid across a foul-smelling pit. In the old days there had been a small cabin for privacy but now the whole thing was open to the bugs and mosquitoes. The smell was awful and flies buzzed in clouds over the pit. The old man squatted on his heels and waited.

He watched in the darkness as one of the girls staggered down the track, let down her jeans and relieved herself. A drunken biker came next, sitting on the plank, waving a bottle and singing. He recognized the one who had thrown the empty beer can against his wall and he squatted on his haunches holding the gun in his hand and wanted to kill him but his common sense told him he couldn't kill them all. Not that he really cared whether or not he killed the bikers but he had a problem with killing women, even whores, and in any case the police would surely turn up everything in many miles if he killed them all.

He didn't want to go on the run again. He was an old man and he wanted to live out his days peacefully. He waited patiently, ignoring the smell and the flies. He wanted Jake, and Jake was a human being and had to come for a shit at some stage like everyone else.

He saw the door open and the blonde, the good-looking one, framed against the light. She walked down the rutted, dusty path and squatted casually over the hole in the rotting plank. *What would it be like if the whole damn thing collapsed?* thought the old man and had to stop himself from snorting with laughter in the darkness. The flies buzzed in a cloud over the dunny as the girl stood and wiped herself. She walked off back to the cabin.

The old man hunkered down and waited patiently, immobile as a tree stump. He listened to the cicadas chirping in the trees, felt the mosquitoes feeding on his forearms, watched the stars in the clear night sky.

One by one they came and carried out their business, and the old man wrinkled his nose in disgust as he waited patiently. Occasionally he stood and stretched for he was no longer young and he could feel the cramp beginning in his thighs.

Eventually he saw blonde hair and big shoulders framed in the doorway and he let fall a small sigh as he eased off the safety catch and took the gun from his pocket. Jake unzipped the fly of his stained, torn jeans and began to piss contentedly into the hole in the rotting piece of wood. A spider crawled up the wooden support and Jake aimed a stream of urine at it and laughed as it tumbled to the ground. "Bang bang. Gotcha," he said.

The old man moved silently around behind him in the darkness, his gun in his fist, and hit the blonde man as hard as he could behind the ear.

Jake crashed to his knees, whirled round and saw the old man with his finger on the trigger of his gun, standing perfectly calm between Jake and the house.

He swore and leapt forward and quite casually the old man stepped aside and hit him hard on the side of his head. Jake lay sprawled in the dust and kept perfectly still as he felt the barrel of the gun pushed behind his ear and heard quite clearly in the silence the click of the hammer as the old man cocked it with his thumb.

"Get on your feet, and if I don't like one thing you do I'll kill you," said the old man.

"You're fucking insane, I'll break every fucking bone in your body," snarled Jake.

The sound of his scream and the sound of the shot sounded together in the night. Jake grabbed his arm. The blood was beginning to seep from the gunshot wound. The old man watched the shack and listened but there was no interruption in the incessant,

monotonous beat of the music.

“Get on your feet,” he said.

Jake clutched his arm. “You’re a fucking maniac,” he whispered.

“Probably,” said the old man. “Now where’s my picture.”

“Your picture?” said Jake incredulously. “Is this about your stupid picture? Jesus, you really are insane.”

“So you say,” replied the old man. “Now where is it? I looked through your clothes today and it isn’t there. So where is it?”

“How the fuck would I know. Lost somewhere. Jesus, what the hell’s wrong with you?”

Jake felt the gun boring into his temple.

“I’ve spent two days in this town, and three hours waiting behind your stinking shithouse and that’s all the patience I have,” said the old man. “Whether I kill you or not doesn’t matter to me.”

“It’s in the saddle bag of my bike,” said Jake, nursing his wounded arm. “Jesus, you only had to ask.”

“That’s what I did,” said the old man. “Come on.” He prodded the blonde biker with his gun. “Let’s go and get it,” he said.

They walked around the shack, the sound of rock music loud in the night. At the front of the shack stood the bikes, big bikes, polished and gleaming.

Jake fumbled in the saddlebag of his bike, awkwardly, with his good hand. He took out a tattered, creased photograph. “Here,” he said, contemptuously, and tossed it on the ground. “I hope it was worth it you stupid old fuck,” he said.

Very carefully the old man bent down, retrieved the picture. He stared at it and nodded his head and Jake leapt at him, clawing at the gun with his good hand. Casually the old man shot him in the guts.

Jake crumpled to the ground, twisting in the dust and clawing at his stomach. "Oh Jesus," he moaned. "Oh Jesus, why did you have to do that?"

"It doesn't matter," said the old man. "I would have killed you anyway."

Jake was threshing around on the hard dry ground, his hands pressed to his stomach. The old man pressed the barrel of his revolver to his temple and pulled the trigger. He stood again, listening. He couldn't believe that even over the loudness of the music, even as drunk as they were they hadn't heard the sound of the gunshots.

He unscrewed the petrol cap on Jake's bike and kicked out the supports, lying it flat on the ground so that the fuel ran across the parched, dry earth and lapped at the wheels of the other bikes.

He lit a cigarette, drew the smoke down contentedly into his lungs in the darkness and threw the match onto the ground. He waited until he saw a tongue of fire creeping over the ground and walked away into the night. He drove away in the darkness and behind him, in his mirror he could see the flames leaping and lighting up the darkness and hear the shouts and screams and he grinned to himself as he remembered other times many years ago that he had walked swiftly away from the chaos and the bodies and the screaming.

The police would come from the town but he was heading in the opposite direction. By the time they started to look he would be long gone.

He drove steadily, eating up the miles and he watched the branches of the ghost gums standing stark against the sky and listened to his engine and his tyres humming over the tarmac and to the screeches of the night owls.

Part Five

It was four in the morning and the first pink fingers of the sun beginning to shade the far black horizon when he stopped.

He climbed stiffly from his pick-up, turning off the engine and the silence was like a different kind of sound echoing through the bush and across the flat land to the indistinct hills far away. He took the picture from his pocket. He sighed regretfully, but it was time now to do what he had to do, and he knew that he should have done it many years before and he cursed his old man's vanity but not too harshly.

He had very little which he could treasure; a tiny shack, a box of cash hidden away beneath the stone at his front door, an old revolver, his memories, and a few years left to him to live out his life in peace.

He took a match from his pocket, looked a last time at the picture and then he struck the match on his thumb nail watching the flame burn brightly in the early morning darkness and saw the flames curl the corner of his picture as he held it in his hand.

He watched the words disappear before his eyes.

WANTED, DEAD OR ALIVE

James Alexander

For Robbery and Murder

\$5,000 REWARD

It had been an awful lot of money in those days. It was still a lot of money to someone who didn't have any, someone like a useless drunken biker.

And scrawled on the bottom of the reward poster in a precise, neat hand:

So you finally made the big time then Jimmy

Take care of yourself

Love

Nellie

Of course the picture was of a young man, hard and confident, nothing like the way he looked now but he couldn't take the chance that one day Jake would pick it out, and through the haze of alcohol and God knows whatever other drugs he filled himself with, would stare at it and put two and two together.

He crumbled the charred pieces to the ground and watched as the wind blew them away into the bush. The sky was pink and gold in the early morning, and the land full of dark pools of blackness.

He climbed back into his truck, started the engine, and drove slowly along the dusty road oblivious to the dawning of the new day.