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Product Code A0518-F

The Australian Featherweight

A Drama in Two Acts
by
Susan Surman

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The Australian Featherweight

by Susan Surman

Cast of Characters

JIFFO: *On the threshold of a shot at the Australian Featherweight title, yet is unable to give up his gang activities as captain of the Push, his reckless boozing, and the demons within. The night before the big fight, his hand is forced, and he displays courage and character outside the ring. Early 20's. Cockney Australian.*

FLO BERRY: *A Rocks prostitute in love with Jiffo. Wants his rise to be her rise out of the no-hope existence. What she lacks in social graces, she makes up for with a swift mind. Early 20's. Cockney Australian.*

TOM RILEY: *Jiffo's trainer and mentor. Former bare-knuckle champion of Australia, now proprietor of the Iron Pot Boxing Academy. Knew he had a coming champ when he spotted Jiffo in a street fight. Took him into his stable of fighters. Australian as they come, but sometimes slips into an Irish brogue. Late 30's.*

NELSON: *Jiffo's foster brother and bitter rival, second in command in the Push. Lusts after top position, but isn't number one material. Openly turns on Jiffo, sealing his fate. Few years older than Jiffo. Cockney Australian.*

Scene

Seedy Fortune of War Pub in the tough Rocks area of Sydney, Australia. A counter and stools and/or 2/3 wooden tables and chairs suffice. Faded posters on the wall: Nestles Milk, Gilbey's Dry Gin, Town and County Journal, Sander and Sons Extracts, Walker's Whisky, North Shore Ferry Wharf. A lighting change indicates a warehouse (I-1).

Time

Summer, late 1890's

ACT ONE

Scene 1 – Night before the Australian Featherweight Championship fight.

Scene 2 – A little later.

ACT TWO

Scene 1 – Night of the fight.

Scene 2 – Later, same night, after the fight.

Scene 3 – One week later.

The Australian Featherweight

by Susan Surman

ACT ONE

Scene 1

*Fortune of War Pub in the
Rocks area of Sydney, Australia.
Summer, late 1890's.
A bar counter, stools and/or tables and
chairs. There are two entrances/exits –
alley and front door.*

*LIGHTS UP on JIFFO, the night before the
championship fight. Several empty beer
mugs indicate he's been drinking. His attention is
on a mosquito. He dances around, catches it
between thumb and forefinger, lets it go, catches it
again, lets it go free.*

JIFFO

Ta ra, mate. *(Returns to his beer)*

NELSON

(Shouting Off) Come here, you mongrel. I'm coming after you, you bleeding...

JIFFO

Blimey. Here comes trouble.

*NELSON ENTERS from the alley, dashing in wild
eyed, wielding a knife, searching for a dog he thinks
has run into the pub.*

NELSON

(Ignoring JIFFO, talking to the mutt as he looks for him) Confused by the smell of your
own fear and the odors from the alley? Reckon this'll take you out of your misery.
(Waves knife) Come to Uncle Nelson. *(Looks around)* Where the hell is that mutt?
(Acknowledges JIFFO) You seen my dinner go by here?

JIFFO

What's the bloody commotion?

NELSON

I ain't never had no mutt soup.

JIFFO

And you ain't gonna. Put the knife away.

NELSON

Just some fun.

JIFFO

Put the bloody knife away.

NELSON

Aw, come on, Jiff. A bit of sport, ole sport.

JIFFO

This ain't no kangaroo drive. We don't kill or torture animals for sport.

NELSON

Oi, what's this, then? Captain of the Push going soft?

JIFFO

Bloody hell, let the poor thing live.

NELSON

Are you hiding it?

JIFFO

Maybe I am and maybe I ain't.

NELSON

Never heard of the head of the Push having a pet.

JIFFO

No worries on that score, mate. Anyways, it ain't here. Put the bleeding knife away.

NELSON

Bet if a dingo run in here, you'd finish him off.

JIFFO

Shuddup!

NELSON

You'd finish it off good.

JIFFO

I'm telling you, shuddup!

NELSON

They're talkin' `round town. Ain't the first time neither. (*Loves baiting him, but never wins*)

JIFFO

What's that, then?

NELSON

It's going `round about the Push gang being nothing but two-legged dingoes just like...

JIFFO

You know my motto. Believe nothing you hear, half of what you see.

NELSON

There's the story about them dingoes.

JIFFO

I know that story.

NELSON

Thought you might.

JIFFO

Ancient history. Them dingoes was a menace. Times was tough back then. Now we got knives, switchblades, broken bottles, fists. We can fight back. (*Remembering*) Anyways, it was a long time ago.

NELSON

You don't like talking `bout it.

JIFFO

Then stop talking.

NELSON

I could handle anything but a dreaded dingo attack.

JIFFO

For the last time, shuddup.

NELSON

(*Likes taunting him*) You seem on edge talking about it.

JIFFO

Belt up, I tell you.

NELSON

I should tell you that the townspeople still talk about the unfortunate incident.

JIFFO

Enough!

NELSON

That it was that incidence of misfortune one summer's evening that turned a soft-hearted boy into a reckless boozier and a -

JIFFO

(Grabs him by the throat) You don't know when to shut your cake hole.

NELSON

—mean fighting machine.

JIFFO

I'll kill you, I will.

NELSON

(Choking, breaks free of the hold) Hey, Jiff, we're brothers. You can't treat a brother like that.

JIFFO

Foster brothers. We ain't blood.

NELSON

All the same, you could treat me better.

JIFFO

I treat you fine.

NELSON

You treat me like a slave.

JIFFO

We all got to start somewheres. Before I took you in to the gang and made you my lieutenant—

NELSON

Your what?

JIFFO

Second in command. Number two. I'm the captain, you're my lieutenant.

NELSON

Number two ain't number one.

JIFFO

You got no beef. Before I took you in, you was an apprentice barrel-maker. No future in that. On a good night, the mob pulls in more than you did in one month. Law wasn't breathing down your neck, but was you happy? I don't reckon. You'ze is happy now, right?

NELSON

I reckon.

JIFFO

You're making money, right? You hang out at the Fortune of War Pub with your mates, right?

NELSON

Yuh, but—

JIFFO

No buts about it.

NELSON

Bloody right. *(Knows he can't win the verbal battle)*

JIFFO

(The fly trick) Watch and learn, mate. Watch and learn. *(Pretends to catch a fly, let it go, catch it again, let it go)* Bet you can't do that.

NELSON

Pretty lame. Catch a fly that ain't there, let it go, and catch it again.

JIFFO

And let it go.

NELSON

Tom Riley teach you that down at the Iron Pot?

JIFFO

I bin doing that since I was eight years old.

NELSON

Lame.

JIFFO

Let's see you do it.

NELSON

Don't see the point.

JIFFO

It has an entertaining factor. Mostly for me.

NELSON

Forget it. Shouldn't you be over at the Iron Pot training with Tom?

JIFFO

We don't train at night.

NELSON

The big fight's at night.

JIFFO

A fight, not training, prat. It's different. So folks who work during the day can come. I reckon this is training enough. *(Lifts his mug to his lips)* Cheers! *(Takes a swig)*

NELSON

They say you need more training.

JIFFO

I don't know nobody by the name of they. No worries, mate. I win every fight.

NELSON

But this is the big one. Featherweight Champion of Australia. Maybe you won't win.

JIFFO

That's what I like. Confidence in a mate.

NELSON

I didn't mean nothing, but shouldn't you be—

JIFFO

Then belt up. New subject. Step into my office.

NELSON

You ain't got no office.

JIFFO

You'ze is getting dumber by the day. It's an expression. This *(Indicates pub)* is my office. We got Push business.

NELSON

Oh, I get it. Good one!

JIFFO

What'd you'ze get last night?

NELSON

You mean over at the Rocks Tavern?

JIFFO

I don't mean at the opera.

NELSON

(Isn't sure if it's a joke or not, but takes a chance) Good one. It's a joke like, right?

JIFFO

I'm waiting.

NELSON

(As the story goes on, becomes more animated, partly to impress JIFFO, partly out of nerves) A big, gorilla-like sailor no one's seen before pushes his way through the crowd shouting about knocking someone's bleeding head off. Then he starts punching out and fighting looking for a taker. So one by one, the blokes try. He's fighting anyone who comes in his path. Betting takes place. And one by one, blokes are trying, but he's winning. So me and Shorty are watching like, and we see this new face come forward and place a heavy bet on the gorilla. He's got money to burn. So then there's the main bout between the gorilla and Rocking Dave who now steps forward, and they're swinging at each other. Dave ain't got a chance, mainly cause of the way he keeps rocking from one foot to another which is how he got his name, but he's managing to stay upright, but in the end he was no match. The gorilla wins.

JIFFO

The point?

NELSON

This newcomer collects his winnings and heads out the door, so I gives Shorty the nod like, and we follows him. He didn't know we was there until we lays into him in the alley. That's when he knew we was there. Body and face. Shorty grabs his arms from behind. I put on the finishing touches with me heavy boots. When he was out cold, we went through his pockets, took his winnings, and it was like that. It was a good night.

JIFFO

That it?

NELSON

Aye.

JIFFO

Let's have it.

NELSON

I...uh...ain't got the loot on me.

JIFFO

I think ya has.

NELSON

Aye. Just remembered. *(Reaches in a pocket and slowly hands over some coins)* Not bad for an evening's work, eh Jiff?

JIFFO keeps his hand out. NELSON reaches into another pocket.

Whaddya know?

NELSON hands over more coins and some paper money.

JIFFO

What else you got?

NELSON

How do you mean?

JIFFO

Don't play dumber than you already is.

NELSON searches his pocket and pulls out a gold pocket watch on a chain. Hands it over.

That it?

NELSON doesn't move.

Apparently that's it. I'll put the cash in the Push bank account in the morning. For a job well done and for not killing the bloke who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, you'ze can keep the watch. I'm feeling generous.

JIFFO dangles the watch before letting it go.

NELSON

(Grabs the watch) This was our job. Just me and Shorty. It didn't involve the whole Push. I reckon us two should have all the loot for usselves.

JIFFO

You planning a holiday to Samoa?

NELSON

No, Jiff, it's just—

JIFFO

I got a news flash. I'm the captain – a position gained through my skill in fisticuffs. You're the born first assistant. We run the docks, the Rocks area, the brothel; waylaying sailors, stealing, stouthing other gangs when they get in our way; gambling, drinking and whoring. That's what we do. When the captain gives a directive, you follow. Righto. So now let's get back to the rules. What you did was a Push job and Push money goes into Push funds. You want to change the rules, mister, you got to change me first. You got to take me in a fair fight. That's the rule. You'ze up to the challenge? (*Adopts a boxing stance*)

NELSON

Come on, Jiff, I ain't gonna fight you.

JIFFO

Tell you what, since you'ze is so anxious to become a leader, I'm gonna give you the chance.

NELSON

I ain't fighting you.

JIFFO

You ain't gonna fight me exactly. Watch and learn, mate. Watch and learn.

JIFFO takes a large, soiled white handkerchief out of his pocket and methodically spreads it out on the floor. He steps on it carefully and stands perfectly still.

You knock me off the handkerchief, you can take over the Push.

NELSON

No one's ever knocked you off.

JIFFO

You'll be a hero. Okay, Lieutenant Nelson. Come on, mate. Have a go. You know the drill.

NELSON

You always dodge the punches. No one's ever knocked you off. You know you're gonna win. I ain't gonna do it.

JIFFO

Come on. Let's have it.

NELSON

Hit you?

JIFFO

You losing your ability to hear?

NELSON

I ain't hitting you. I ain't gonna do it I tell you.

JIFFO

You're second in command. That's what seconds do. They follow orders. Saves you from having to think. I'm giving you a gift. All you got to do is just knock me off instead of battling it out in a knock-out fight where I will kill you for sure. Just pretend you're in a fight down at the docks. Aim for my face. See? I'm even telling you how to do it. Come on.

NELSON

What if someone sees?

JIFFO

You prat. There ain't no one here.

NELSON

Someone might come in.

JIFFO

It don't make no difference. Come on. I ain't got all night. Here's your big moment.

NELSON

You want me to knock you off the handkerchief?

JIFFO

Quit stalling.

NELSON

You look a right twit standing like that.

JIFFO

You'ze is a right pain in the bum. Just do what I tell you.

NELSON

(Makes a false start) Naw. I can't do it.

JIFFO

Afraid you're gonna hurt me?

NELSON

You got a big professional fight in twenty-four hours. I'll be punching your face. You can't be doing this.

JIFFO

Not to worry, mate. My face ain't your problem. That's the trick.

NELSON

Well, okay. Here goes. Then I'll be the captain, right? Legit like. You ain't gonna interfere?

JIFFO

That's the deal. First, you got to knock me off the handkerchief. I'll tell you what. I'll give you three goes. That's a first. No one gets three goes. Pow, pow, pow. Come on.

NELSON

And you can't move, right? (*Gets into position*)

JIFFO

That's the idea.

NELSON punches out. JIFFO sways to one side, moving only his upper body and arms, never coming off the handkerchief.

That's one. Again.

THEY repeat the movement.

Two. Again.

THEY repeat the movement.

Three's all you get.

JIFFO picks the handkerchief up, wipes his nose with it and puts it in his pocket.

Pretty good for me, ain't it? Bad luck for you.

NELSON

You knew you would win. You always win.

JIFFO

Do you see the point here? Even if you won the battle over me, you'd lose. You ain't number one material, Mister Nelson. By eliminating me, you would only succeed in putting yourself out of business. Simple mathematics.

NELSON

I got a query, Jiff.

JIFFO

A query, is it? Don't tell me you're thinking.

NELSON

It's just a query as pertaining to this particular activity.

JIFFO

Go.

NELSON

What if you was down at the docks like, and your enemy comes up behind, you gonna say pardon, I got to get out me hankie?

JIFFO

Naw, it ain't to do with that. It's part of my training. In the ring, my opponent is in front of me, not behind.

NELSON

You don't have no handkerchief in the ring.

JIFFO

Not in the ring, you nit. It's good exercise for strengthening up my upper body. Shoulders, arms, parts like that. (*Prods him*) You could do with a bit of toughening up.

NELSON

Naw, not me. I'm plenty tough.

JIFFO

That remains to be seen.

NELSON

Ta, mate. (*Nervous now; senses something is coming; moves away from JIFFO*)

JIFFO

We got unfinished business. You know that deserted warehouse what is down at the docks? You remember what happened on Monday night? It appears one of our gang informed the bloody cops. Sound familiar?

LIGHT changes to indicate we're in the WAREHOUSE. NELSON is lying face down on a wooden slab. JIFFO fills a large sock with sand from one bowl and water from another bowl to create wet sand.

JIFFO, *Continued*

You broke Push rules by informing to the bloody cops as to what went on down at the docks on Monday night, the results of such dobbing landing poor ole Bob Burke a stretch inside. As lieutenant, you should know better. I should kick you out of the Push, but I'm giving you one more chance. Twelve lashes with this wet sand between the neck and shoulders and then I got an important assignment to give you. That is, if you live.

NELSON

Twelve lashes ain't thirteen. It was a grave error on my part that time.

JIFFO

Poor bloke didn't come to for a week, although I overlooked that error on your part. We don't bop one of our own to murder for entertainment. Push rules rule. Have you got all this?

NELSON doesn't answer. JIFFO pulls his head up by his hair. NELSON nods and grunts.

Sand and water is a lethal mix. I'll be slamming into the back of the neck between the shoulders. Wham, wham, wham. Twelve times. Not to worry. You'll be out by six, won't feel a thing after that.

NELSON

Piece of cake.

LIGHTS FADE as we hear the sound of JIFFO administering the sock punishment. LIGHTS UP on JIFFO and NELSON in the pub. NELSON is rubbing his neck and shoulders.

JIFFO

Mind you, I was a little easy on you. First offense and all. Pete Stewart didn't come to for a week.

NELSON

Mind if I get going now, Jiff?

JIFFO

Hang on a mo. We got business. You're still my lieutenant, ain't ya?

NELSON

What kind of business?

JIFFO

I need you to keep an eye on one of the sheilas.

NELSON

Yuh?

JIFFO

(This is not easy for him to say) One of the girls.

NELSON

(An all-knowing grin) Flo Berry?

JIFFO

Never say her name like that. And wipe that look off your face before I wipe it for you. You want another twelve lashes?

NELSON

I didn't mean nothing.

JIFFO

Glad to hear it. I want you to keep an eye on her.

NELSON

On Flo?

JIFFO

What I just tell you?

NELSON

Sorry. You don't trust the sheila whose name will remain nameless?

JIFFO

Maybe.

NELSON

She ain't in full feather?

JIFFO

It's them blokes I don't trust. Bunch of foreigners coming over.

NELSON

You ain't said my assignment.

JIFFO

Just watch and listen and report your findings. I'm otherwise occupied which means I can't be in two places at once, and like I need your two eyes and ears.

NELSON

I heard about that.

JIFFO

Heard about what?

NELSON

Four eyes is better than two. It's like four hands is better than two.

JIFFO

Never heard nothing like four eyes is better than two.

NELSON

It's what they say.

JIFFO

How can four eyes be better? A bloke'd be looking sideways and over his head. *(Tries it)*
It ain't possible.

NELSON

It's two people. It ain't one. It's like... *(Knows better than to correct his captain and stops talking)* It's what they say.

JIFFO

Never heard about these people called they.

NELSON

Just telling what I heard. Maybe you don't hear everything.

JIFFO

You got something to tell me, mister?

NELSON

Reckon I don't. Just having a chat.

JIFFO

Well, go chat somewhere else. Can you remember the assignment I give you?

NELSON

Keep an eye on Fl- the no-name sheila.

JIFFO

Buzz off. (*Nods towards the alley*)

*NELSON backs up, bowing his head
as he EXITS to the alley.*

JIFFO, *Continued*

(*Looking after Nelson*) And I'll be keeping my eye on you, mister.

*After a few seconds, FLO BERRY ENTERS. She is
fuming mad screeching and howling. Her dress is
flowery, and on her head is a gaudy oversized hat.*

FLO

How come you never said there was a place in Italy with my name?

JIFFO

Say what?

FLO

In Italy. A place named after me.

JIFFO

What kind of place?

FLO

A city place.

JIFFO

What's that, then? Flo Berry, Italy?

FLO

FLORENCE!

JIFFO

Don't be stupid.

FLO

Don't *you* be stupid.

JIFFO

Don't *you* be stupid.

FLO

Don't *you* be stupid.

JIFFO

Don't *you* be stupid

FLO

For your information, mister, an Eye-talian businessman said so, and he should know.

JIFFO

What Eye-talian businessman, I'd like to know?

FLO

From Italy. One of my business associates, as it happens.

JIFFO

Oh, yuh?

He has suspected she might be getting too friendly with a customer.

FLO

Yuh, as it happens.

JIFFO

I s'pose he said you was an Eye-talian Princess and you got kidnapped in the olden days and they thought you was dead so they named a town after you.

FLO

(Astounded at his knowledge) What?

JIFFO

You heard me.

FLO

How'd you know? How'd you know, I'd like to know? That's what I'd like to know.

JIFFO

Listen, Flo, I know them blokes. My advice is, just do your work, keep your nose clean, and stay out of trouble.

FLO

Why couldn't they name a town after me? Tom Riley changed your name from Bert Jiffiths, Junior to Young Jiffo without batting an eye.

JIFFO

Are you daft? That was for professional reasons. He's my manager. That ain't nothing like the same thing. Blimey!

FLO

As it happens, I heard it first-hand from a direct source. You don't know there ain't a Florence, Italy in Italy. Not for sure, you don't.

JIFFO

I'm tellin' ya, don't believe nothing those foreign blokes tell you and only half of what you see.

FLO

I like thinking it's true.

JIFFO

You'ze is working, ain't ya? You're making money, ain't ya? You're happy, ain't ya? So whaddy need to think for?

FLO

You definitely win top prize for knowing how to lower a girl's confidence level. As it happens, I like to think.

JIFFO

There ain't no point in all this thinking youze is engaging in.

FLO

There is so.

JIFFO

And why is that, pray tell?

FLO

`Cuz it's nice!

JIFFO

Just do your work, keep your nose clean, and stay out of trou... (*Notices her hat for the first time*) What the hell is that thing on your head?

FLO

That Eye-talian businessman I told you `bout. He give me it.

JIFFO

How many times I tell you, cash only. You're getting too matey with the customers.

FLO

Kah-pello. It's foreign. Eye-talian for hat.

JIFFO

You got all the local words you need without no foreign ones.

FLO

Well, sir, what about when you becomes a big famous boxer and you're fighting a famous Eye-talian or a Frenchie, and what if they don't know no English and you don't know nothing but Australian, you won't know how to talk to each other.

JIFFO

(Makes a fist with his right hand and wildly waves it back and forth) This'll do me talking, I reckon.

FLO

Testa. (Playfully caresses his head)

JIFFO

Whaddya doing?

FLO

(Moves her fingers around his face) Don't let that Torpedo Billy Murphy spoil your pretty face. *Fah chia.*

JIFFO

Quit it.

FLO

Naso. (Bites his nose) Bocca. (Kisses him lightly on the mouth) Labbro. (Brushes a finger over his lips)

JIFFO

For Chrissakes, Flo. This is a public place.

FLO

Bra chio. Arm. (Caresses an arm)

JIFFO

You'ze is still doing it.

FLO

I know. I know. You told me you couldn't. Not before a fight. I know. All I'm doing is educating you on the art of language. *(Continues to explore his upper body; feels something in his pocket)* What's this, then?

JIFFO

What's what?

FLO

(Pulls out two white cards) These.

JIFFO

Tom give `em to me.

FLO

They look like some kind of invitations.

JIFFO

I know that.

FLO

(Reads one of the cards) Wow! Wow! *(Keeps reading)* Wow!

JIFFO

You gonna keep saying wow?

FLO

It's a Morning Reception next Saturday afternoon at the home of Mr. Thomas A. Riley in Randwick. RSVP.

JIFFO

I knows all that. What's those RS letters mean?

FLO

Ree-spondey Seel Voo Play. Ain't that just grand? *(Her French sounds like her Italian)*

JIFFO

Yuh?

FLO

Let `em knows if you can come. It's French.

JIFFO

How come they has a Morning Reception in the afternoon?

FLO

`Cuz it is what they do on Saturdays, them folks who is upper class.

JIFFO

Pretty stupid.

FLO

Well?

Well what? JIFFO

I see two invitations. FLO

He said I could bring someone. JIFFO

Really? (*Likes the opportunity of 'moving up'*) FLO

Really. JIFFO

I'm waiting. FLO

I ain't going without you. I just don't know if I'm going. JIFFO

You have to. FLO

Yuh...well...I don't know. JIFFO

Yuh...well...you have to. FLO

I'll let you know. JIFFO

My *respondez* is I accept. FLO

Meaning? JIFFO

I'm letting you know I can come. FLO

Like I said, don't know if I'm going. JIFFO

FLO is deflated. There is a long pause. She moves away from him.

FLO

Why are ya drinking so much? You told me, no shagging and no drinking before a fight. That's why we ain't seen much of each other lately. That's why, ain't it, Jiffy?

JIFFO remains silent.

Considering the big occasion in twenty-four hours, why ain't you over at the Iron Pot with Tom training?

JIFFO

No worries. I know how to do it. I trained in the morning. And don't call me Jiffy.

FLO

You look a bit wobbly to me.

JIFFO

I'll knock the sonofabitch out in four.

FLO

Then you'll be champ. Young Jiffo, the Featherweight Champion of Australia.

JIFFO

I'll knock him out in four.

FLO

Seriously, Jiff, shouldn't you be with Tom down at the Iron Pot?

JIFFO

I got other business to take care of.

FLO

The gang can wait. Tom'll be looking for you.

JIFFO

Tom says do this, do that, show me your stance, show me your hook, show me your jab.

FLO

Ain't that what a trainer's s'pose to do?

JIFFO

No one tells me what to do.

FLO

You're in a right mood. Something must have happened to make you like you are.

JIFFO

I got a lot on my mind.

FLO

I don't mean in the immediate present. I mean in life. When you was a lad like.

JIFFO

Good grief, you don't know what you'ze is talking about.

FLO

A boozier. A hoodlum. A fighter. That's you. You can be real mean sometimes. And sometimes, real tender.

JIFFO

Did I ever injure you?

FLO

Never physically.

JIFFO

Well, then, there you go.

FLO

You keep changing the subject.

JIFFO

I don't know what subject you're on about.

FLO

For instance, take me. I'm a Rocks whore 'cause my mother was a Rocks whore. Until she ran off. Then it was just me and him...

JIFFO

I'm waiting for the rest of that sentence. You gonna say who *him* is?

FLO

I had a brother.

JIFFO

You never told me that. Where's he at?

FLO

Every night for six years, starting when I was ten years old, he told me what we was doing was brotherly and sisterly love. I don't know where he is, and I don't wanna know.

JIFFO

I heard enough. Anyways, what's it got to do with me?

FLO

Nothing. I was showing you an example. Events that happen to us in our past shape our future. We was conversing.

JIFFO

Could you converse a little plainer?

FLO

Maybe I ain't had – didn't have – education, but what I lack in formal training, I make up for in common sense. I know things. I've been told so. About knowing things.

JIFFO

You believe that?

FLO

As it happens, I do. I told you mine, now you tell me yours.

JIFFO

Nothin' to tell.

FLO

Everyone has a story.

JIFFO

Like what?

FLO

Like about when you was growing up.

JIFFO

Don't remember.

FLO

I bet you do.

JIFFO

Yuh, well, I don't like talking about it.

FLO

So you do remember.

JIFFO

I can't talk no more, lessen you take that bloody thing off your head.

FLO removes the hat. Puts it down.

It was a summer's evening. Mild, like now...

FLO

Go on. See? No more hat.

JIFFO

Don't remember.

FLO

Well, then, suit yourself.

JIFFO

Fighting must have erased it from my brain.

FLO

That must be it.

JIFFO

Me and me mum and dad was strolling.

FLO

Then what happened?

JIFFO

I guess we went a little ways too far from the center of town.

FLO

Then what happened?

JIFFO

The Edgar family took me in after. After. Nelson was their real lad. Until I come along, he was king o' the castle.

FLO

(Dreamily) A mum, a dad, and a brother.

JIFFO

They was never me real family.

FLO

Still...it was a kind of love.

JIFFO

That's when I tasted me first drink.

FLO

What was you? Like five?

JIFFO

Nine, going on ten.

FLO

Oh. *(Ten for her)*

JIFFO

Huh?

FLO

I didn't say nothing – anything.

JIFFO

I thought you says something.

FLO

Uh, uh. *(Shakes her head)* You must be anxious like. It's the big one.

JIFFO

Out on the street, I'm king. I'm in control. I give the directives. On the street, I can't be beat. I was just doing me business that time when Tom sees me fighting down at the docks. It was a right donnybrook.

FLO

That ain't Tom Riley's territory. What was he doing down at the docks?

JIFFO

He was coming home from the theater in a hansom cab like them rich folks do. The lads and me was battling it out in a no holds barred gang fight.

FLO

Just your typical larrikin battle.

JIFFO

(Fancies himself a storyteller) Tom come over and asks me name. I knew who he was. I seen his last fight up on the heath. Bare knuckles. I was never so pleased he was taking time to talk to me. I was a real nit, stuttering all over the place. I never stuttered in me

JIFFO, *Continued*

life. B-Bert J-Jiffiths, J-Junior, Mister R-Riley, S-Sir. They call me J-Jiffo. He said he could see a coming champ, and invites me to train in his Academy. Said I knew how to use me fists, alright, but there was no discipline. He renamed me right then and there. 'Young Jiffo,' he says, 'you come over to the Iron Pot in the morning and let's get you started on your way to being somebody.' I told him he was wasting his time; that I didn't need no training.

FLO

I never heard you stutter before.

JIFFO

He put his arm `round me shoulder and says, 'Listen son, you're wrong about training. Once in a while, a potentially great one comes along who needs all the mentoring he can get because he doesn't know what he's got or even if he did know, he wouldn't know what to do with it. Young Jiffo is one of those.'

FLO

You remembered everything he said. See? He couldn't let you spend your life out on the streets.

JIFFO

The Iron Pot was like nothing I ever dreamed `bout. I couldn't believe it. Blokes was fighting in a ring, `cepting it wasn't round; it was a square, and they was fighting with puffed up gloves on their hands, not bare-knuckled. Sudden like, Tom asked me if I ever seen a horserace.

FLO

What's that got to do with boxing?

JIFFO

Exactly my sentiment. He said it was important to watch horses, the way they moved like, and watch how they was thinking. I just thought they stood around and ate hay. He took me down to the Paddock for the big race. I never seen nothing like it in my whole life. Tom's nephew was riding a horse named Sofala. Sofala was playing up, see. He had one foible. He couldn't stand getting his ears wet, and it was drizzling. Once he got to the starting gate, he was fine. Getting him to the gate was the trouble.

FLO

What happened?

JIFFO

I came up with the solution.

FLO

You?

JIFFO

In a matter of minutes. It was simple. I got on Tom's shoulders holding a parasol over Sofala's head while the horse was on the way to the starting gate. That move calmed him right down.

FLO

Did Sofala win?

JIFFO

Number one.

FLO

All because of you. You're a genius.

JIFFO

Tom changes me name, takes me into his stable of fighters, and before you can turn around, I'm supposed to bring home the Australian Featherweight title.

FLO

Life moves with a mean clip.

JIFFO

I didn't ask for no mentor.

FLO

You saying you ain't- hasn't- you haven't got the stomach for this no more?

JIFFO

Scared? Me? Naw. Tom says I'll get twelve hundred for this fight.

FLO

By now, you must have a fortune piling up.

JIFFO

I told him I ain't fighting for less than a thousand.

FLO

Tom Riley's done everything for you, Jiffo. It seems like he's come into your life just in time. You're getting a second chance for a real life.

JIFFO

What second chance?

FLO

The majority of the inhabitants in the Rocks area are poverty stricken, no-hopers with short life spans living in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions with cheap, easily available likker to escape from the hard reality of the surroundings. It's a mean, violent world with few second chances.

JIFFO

For crying out loud, Flo, you having a drink with me or you standing for Mayor?

FLO

Don't you wanna rise out of this hell hole?

JIFFO

There ain't no place like the Rocks.

FLO

You're getting a second chance. Don't you want something better? You're my hope. What's a girl like me in the prostitute business to do without a guy like you? Without you, don't ya see, what's a girl like me to do? What's a girl like me to do? Take me with you. Rise me up with you.

JIFFO

I think I liked it better when you was talking that foreign language.

HE begins to dance around, uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, but there's more. He doesn't like seeing her hurt. While she's in love with him, he hasn't yet identified the feelings he has for her: part of his inner struggle.

Come on, Flo. Let's get some exercise. The other kind.

FLO

What are you doing?

JIFFO

Watch and learn. Watch and learn. (*Demonstrates*) POW. The jab. POW. The hook. POW. Uppercut. POW. Come on, Flo. Straight right. BOP. BOP. BOP. (*Dances around*)

FLO

We was having a serious conversation.

JIFFO

We was. Past tense. Come on. Get in the spirit.

FLO

(Gives in, and punches out at him with her left fist) WHAM. BAM.

JIFFO

Southpaw.

FLO

Huh?

JIFFO

When someone leads with the left, it's called a southpaw.

THEY dance and play about, pausing as they talk.

After you swing, don't drop your arms. *(Demonstrates)* Keep `em up. Always protect your face.

FLO

You're moving too much.

JIFFO

I'm s'pose to. That's how it's done. The idea is *not* to get hit. I'd advise you to do the same.

FLO

I would think it isn't the hit, it's how you come back from the hit.

JIFFO

Says the authority.

FLO

Is this what they pay you for? It ain't so hard.

JIFFO

Ain't hard? It's extremely dangerous!

FLO

It's like dancing. What's so dangerous about that?

JIFFO

A fighter can get injured. It's very scientific. Brain damage.

FLO

No fear of that, Jiffo.

JIFFO

You a doctor all of a sudden?

FLO

You been fighting on the street practically all your life. What's the difference in a ring?

JIFFO

`Cuz it's professional inside a ring. Your opponents don't sneak up from behind. That's why a professional like me has to train.

FLO

They say you don't train. Half the time you're in the pub lifting a mug to your mouth.

JIFFO

Training me arms. Anyway, don't believe nothing you hear, only half of what you see.

FLO

I got a question. When you're out there punching, and the other guy is punching, how do you know how to conk your opponent? Jab. Uppercut. All them positions. How do you?

JIFFO

Just do. I'm a featherweight, see, `cuz of my light weight. The facts is lightweights throw and receive more punches than heavyweights, but a heavyweight has more force in a punch. That's why it is more dangerous for someone like me.

FLO

(Hits his face) Always protect your face!

JIFFO

You'ze is catching on fast.

FLO

Tom taught you good. He must have been good in his day.

JIFFO

(Holds up his hand to stop) Great, not good. I'll never forget when I sees him fighting his last bare-knuckle fight before he retired. He was practically killing that Sandy Lynch, and Tom being older, too. They never had no rules then. The fight ended when one of `em went down. They was covered in dirt, sweat and blood, struggling to stay upright. Tom sidestepped each punch and repeatedly landed a left into Sandy's midsection. They went eighteen rounds without one of `em able to put the other away. They had bruised knuckles like what you never seen. And then with a solid left to Sandy's right kidney, followed by a powerful right uppercut to the chin, it was over. The crowd was cheering so loud, I reckon they could hear it on the other side of Australia. Some of the spectators ran forwards and hoisted Tom up onto their shoulders and burst into a chant. 'Ole Tom's mashed up Sandy's spleen and beat `im to the ground. This Sandy is an Orangeman and a

JIFFO, *Continued*

mighty tough spalpeen, while Tom Riley is the greatest champion of the Green.' That means Irish.

FLO

How old were you?

JIFFO

Fourteen. I can see it in my mind like it was yesterday. That's why Tom's known as the father of Australian boxing.

FLO

Tomorrow night they'll be chanting for you.

JIFFO

I reckon.

FLO

Then everything will be different.

JIFFO

Why?

FLO

You'll be the champ.

JIFFO

I ain't gonna change.

FLO

You'll see.

JIFFO

I ain't. And you ain't getting off so easy with that chattering. Put `em up!

The mock boxing match continues.

FLO

(Peppers him with light blows) Pow. Pow. Pow.

JIFFO

Pepper. Pepper. Pepper.

FLO

Salt. Salt. Salt.

TOM RILEY ENTERS. He is not amused.

TOM

Hey! Hey! What's going on here? I can hear you all the way down the street.

THEY continue the mock match.

Hey! Did you hear me? *(Pulls them apart)*

JIFFO

Sorry, Tom, didn't see you come in. Evo.

TOM

I didn't take you under my wing to train you to do a circus act.

JIFFO

I was just showing Flo here the ropes, so to speak.

This sends FLO into gales of laughter. JIFFO'S look silences her.

FLO

(Dips into a low curtsy) Evo, Mister Riley, sir. It's an honor, I'm sure.

TOM

(Always the gentleman with ladies) And you, Miss Berry. Keeping well, are you?

FLO

(Curtsies again) Very well, I'm sure, thank you very much, sir.

JIFFO

You better get going, Flo.

FLO

Maybe I could be the first lady boxer.

TOM

Actually, while women did not compete in most sports in ancient times, women boxers were often a novelty, competing in contests staged in London during the 1700's.

FLO

That is most interesting. Jiff, ain't – isn't that interesting?

JIFFO

Go on, Flo.

FLO

I always wanted to ask you about the Iron Pot, Mr. Riley. How it started and all. (*Sees herself now as upper class*)

TOM

(*Can't resist bragging about his Academy*) Some years ago, we would hold fights in the parlor of the City Tattersall's Club over in Pitt Street. Short distance matches, you see. Then we had to shift down to the cellar as we needed more space. The cops got too much interference because of the cement floor, so I decided to build my own place in Circular Quay. Actually, as part of their strength training, my students built it under my coaching and training.

FLO

Interesting. It's a good name, the Iron Pot. Never heard anything like it.

TOM

Aye. Well-named. A sturdy building with a wooden frame, iron walls and roof. The interior has bleacher seats, can hold about nine hundred, and has an expanse of ringside standing room. In the center ring—

FLO

Which is a square.

TOM

(*Impressed with her knowledge*) Aye. That's where we hold our sparring, training, and matches.

FLO

Most interesting. (*To JIFFO*) Don't you find it interesting?

JIFFO

You best go on, Flo.

FLO

Much obliged for the information, Mr. Riley.

TOM

Always a pleasure, m'am.

FLO

See you'ze later, Jiffy.

JIFFO

How many times I tell you not to call me Jiffy?!

FLO
Jiff — OH.

JIFFO
Charming. See you'ze later.

*FLO curtsies to Tom, remembers to take her hat,
and EXITS.*

Sorry, Tom. We was just fooling `round. Showing her the sparring like. No harm meant. I won't do it again. And I'll tell her not to come down to the Iron Pot no more.

TOM
Anyone can watch training as long as they behave themselves. In America, women aren't allowed to watch training, but can attend matches. In Australia, women can't attend the matches, but can watch training.

JIFFO
Funny rules.

TOM
Where've you been all day? You disappeared after our road work. I waited for you at the gymnasium to get some sparring in.

JIFFO
I been `round.

TOM
Not where I could see you. *(Sees the empty mugs of beer)* You been boozing it up pretty heavy.

JIFFO
Skates says I can come in any time.

TOM
I plan to have a word with that proprietor.

JIFFO
If you can find him. That's why they call him Skates. *(Skates around)*

TOM
I reckon it'll be best to keep you in my sight until the fight.

JIFFO
Don't you trust me?

TOM

In a word? No.

JIFFO

Charming. At least I know how you feels about me. Have a beer, mate. My shout.

TOM

Not me.

JIFFO

John Barleycorn here is me mate.

TOM

You better lay off that stuff.

JIFFO

No worries, Tom, I'll knock him out in four.

TOM

In my twenty-five years in the sport, I've never seen anything like it. You carouse, you stay out all night, you drink with your mates at the Fortune of War, you keep up your activities as captain of the Push—

JIFFO

The lads need me.

TOM

You get three or four hours sleep a night, you go dancing with Flo, or whatever you do. With all that, you have always come to the morning workouts bright and breezy. You've gone into every fight as if you've had ten hours sleep. When you get in the ring, this strange metamorphosis comes over you.

JIFFO

Beg pardon?

TOM

Metamorphosis.

JIFFO

Beg pardon?

TOM

From the Greek.

JIFFO

Italian words. French words. Now Greek. Don't no one speak English in Australia no more?

TOM

It means a complete transformation.

JIFFO

(Thinks) Got it. Like when the pond freezes overnight 'cause of the cold, and in the morning, it changed into ice.

TOM

Close enough. Stay out of this place if you know what's good for you. Let's not spoil it at the final hour. You've come a long way, my boy. You've trained hard most of the time, when you concentrate. You're ready as you'll ever be. Aye, a long way from the punk street fighter when I first saw you down at the docks.

JIFFO

Tom? Truth be known? I don't know if I'm ready. It's big, Tom, maybe too big.

TOM

You never talked this way. Listen, my boy, I wouldn't have set it up if you weren't ready. With my training over the years, you've gone on to fight Bob Quigley, Tommy Warren, Paddy Moran, Chiddy Ryan. Some as many as six times. Some weighing much more than you. When you defeat Billy Murphy to take the Australian Featherweight title, you'll be featherweight champion of the world. The world, Jiffo. Torpedo nearly killed a man once. But you can beat him. After, I'll be getting you ready next to fight for the world title. You're on your way. Aye, it's a fearful mauling that awaits Torpedo Murphy at the hands of Young Jiffo.

JIFFO

The Rocks is good enough for me.

TOM

Not any more, my boy. Not any more. Boxing is a science now. It's all about skill. In my day, the emphasis was on the power of the punch without gloves. Footwork was practically non-existent. Skill is the thing. And that, my boy, you've got.

JIFFO

Them feather pillows is like cement on the end of my hands. They're slowing me down. Wouldn't be any good down in the docks. My enemy is about to clout me from behind and I say, *(In a posh accent)* 'Hold on, mate, would you mind helping me into my six ounce padded gloves first? That's a nice chap.'

TOM

Feather pillows be damned. You can cut a man to pieces with those six ounce padded gloves. Don't know why you're griping. You've fought every fight with those gloves, and you won. Just let me be responsible for the training while you do the learning. I'm teaching you what Father O'Donnell taught me. Aye, there's a noble tradition to be learned in the twenty-foot squared circle. Together, we've developed your skill. As for courage, you needed some prompting on that.

JIFFO

I got plenty of courage.

TOM

There's a little something called false courage. It's normal to be nervous. That's a good sign. It shows you're concentrating on what you have to do. Next on the list is character. You need encouraging in that department. And in time, my hope is you will be weaned away from a life of crime – just as I was twenty years ago.

JIFFO

You was a boxer in the days of the bare knuckle. You never said nothing `bout crime.

TOM

I had a life before boxing, if you can call it that. It wasn't a life, so I found out.

JIFFO

I never seen this side of you.

TOM

Aye. I am feeling somewhat melancholy. It's the anniversary date when I lost my dear wife Mary. She was a painter, you know. Once I asked her what she thought about all this parrying in the ring that's in fact a square. She thought a moment before she replied. She said, 'Tom, life is a struggle done in private by most folks. A boxer is open about his struggle, taking the blows that come his way. It inspires both repugnance and admiration in the observer. The writer, the painter, the sculptor pick up pen, brush or chisel and stay in one place. The boxer has to keep moving. Perhaps because the physical act is the exact opposite of the artist's cerebral sedentary lifestyle might be the reason why it is so fascinating.' *(Pause)* Up to that moment, I thought I was just a brainless hoodlum turned boxer. After Mary's explanation, I saw myself as a kind of an artist. And I liked who I was.

JIFFO

Hoodlum turned boxer.

TOM

That's what I want for you, the son I never had.

JIFFO

Cheer up, Tom. Here's one for you. (*Likes grandstanding*)

There is a young fighter named Jiffo;
When asked will he fight, he says too bloody right,
I'll knock him for six in a jiffo!

TOM

If I were you, I'd be saving that energy for tomorrow night.

JIFFO

When asked will he fight, he says...he says...bloody hell, Tom, I ain't ready.

TOM

I wouldn't have set it up if I didn't think you were ready. But you got to lay off the booze. Where've you been? You disappeared after our road work. You don't have to tell me. I know where you've been. Go home now, have a kip. I don't want you hanging around here. And I don't want you getting into any street fights tonight. And eat plenty of meat.

JIFFO

Meat?

TOM

Aye, a meat diet's the principal thing. The Australian eats meat with a big—whatever letter meat commences with. (*Winks*) When I met you, you were living on potato pies. I don't know what you would have done during a potato famine.

JIFFO

I fancy them potato pies.

TOM

Not for a fighter. You need protein. Come on, son, I'll walk you home. Remember what I said. A kip and eat meat.

JIFFO

I got something to do. You go on, Tom. I'll be right behind.

TOM

Make sure you are.

JIFFO

(*Spots a mosquito*) Evo, mate. Watch this before you go, Tom. Me famous mozzie trick. (*Catches it, lets it go, catches it, and lets it go*) Pretty good, huh? Can't do that wearing padded gloves.

TOM

You best be saving that energy for tomorrow night.

TOM EXITS. JIFFO makes sure TOM is out of sight before he gets back to his beer.

LIGHTS FADE as JIFFO drinks.

END OF SCENE 1

ACT ONE

Scene 2

Pub, a little later.

LIGHTS UP.

FLO is waiting. Part of her occupation is to wait. Perhaps a customer will come in. Perhaps JIFFO will come in. Perhaps tonight will be the 'second chance' she has been waiting for. After a few seconds, JIFFO ENTERS, somewhat disheveled. He's been in a street fight.

FLO

Jiffy—oh! How are ya?

JIFFO

Quiet night?

FLO

Why ain't you resting up? (*Has he been with one of the girls?*) You look...you know...kind of—

JIFFO

I needed some air.

FLO

You been fighting down at the docks?

JIFFO

Ain't you supposed to be working?

FLO

It's a little slow right now. The other girls can cover.

JIFFO

I reckon everyone's resting up for the big night.

FLO

Aye. Reckon.

JIFFO

Reckon.

FLO

Jingoes! Jingoes! That's all I can say. Jingoes!

JIFFO

Would you like to explain your meaning?

FLO

It's an expression. It's a wonder the way life moves. One minute you're fighting in the streets; then you're in training to be somebody; then regular fights in the ring; tomorrow you fight for the Australian Featherweight title.

JIFFO

I trained five years for this. Ain't no wonder about it.

FLO

Tom says after the Australian title fight, you'll be training to fight for the world title. If you win, that is.

JIFFO

I'm gonna win.

FLO

I know. I know. Jingoes.

JIFFO

You got something on your mind?

FLO

I ain't seen much of you lately with your training and all that.

JIFFO

You gonna grizzle? We ain't starting that again. We already had this particular conversation earlier this evening.

FLO

You haven't found another girl? (*She knows he's a womanizer*)

JIFFO

(*He knows she knows about other women*) You know the rules. I been with Tom. Sparring, bag-punching, rope-jumping. Ain't we had this conversation earlier? Where do you think I been? I never worked so hard in my life. He's got me doing road work at the crack of dawn. Plus my other responsibilities.

FLO

The docks.

JIFFO

What about it?

FLO

I heard that's where you been.

JIFFO

My motto is believe nothing you hear.

FLO

You know how fast news travels around here. You're a prominent citizen. Everyone is watching you.

JIFFO

What about it?

FLO

Six gang members got killed. That's what about it. Look at you. You're a mess.

JIFFO

Only three. The other side, not us. I did what any leader would do. They come in, moving in on our territory. I built that territory. Should've taken care of them a long time ago.

FLO

You're a successful, professional boxer now. Why do you still need the Push?

JIFFO

`Cuz one day these hands ain't gonna be able to make a fist no more. New captains come along. I need something what to fall back on.

FLO

You could run the Iron Pot Boxing Academy. Later on, I mean. Be a trainer.

JIFFO
Like Tom? Naw. That ain't me.

FLO
Why not? It's a good profession.

JIFFO
I ain't a role model kind of bloke.

FLO
Everyone looks up to you. If you wanted, I could help, be your...your mate.

JIFFO
Say what?

FLO
Nothing. It ain't – isn't for me to say. Nothing..... Well, then, tomorrow night's the big one. They'll be betting and cheering. Maybe jeering.

JIFFO
I'm gonna win.

FLO
They say the Torpedo nearly killed a man in the ring.

JIFFO
No worries.

FLO
That's what they say.

JIFFO
Believe nothing of what you hear.

FLO
And half of what you see.

JIFFO
(Imitating Tom's Irish brogue) It's a fearful maulin' that awaits Billy Murphy at the hands of Young Jiffo.

FLO
You sound like Tom.

JIFFO
Aye.

FLO
You're all on edge.

JIFFO
Wouldn't you be?

FLO
And you're drinking more than usual.

JIFFO
Don't you start. I get enough of it from him.

FLO
What about... after?

JIFFO
After?

FLO
You'll be emigrating to America like the others.

JIFFO
What others?

FLO
Pete Jackson. Frankie Slavin.

JIFFO
Not me. Sydney and the Rocks is good enough for me.

FLO
You say that now.

JIFFO
I ain't leavin' the Rocks.

FLO
Jiffy... Jiffo...

JIFFO
Yuh?

FLO
Do you ever think of...of us?

JIFFO
How do you mean?

FLO
Us as in you and me.

JIFFO
You're my...my...you know.

FLO
My what?

JIFFO
You're one of my girls.

FLO
Oh. That it?

JIFFO
Dead right. You're part of the team. I got to tell you Flo, don't take this wrong, but sometimes it's hard to follow what you say because of the way you say things. How come you're asking all these questions all of a sudden? You never asked before. My advice? Stay out of my business. If you want more money, we can talk about that. Do what you do best.

FLO
And what is it I do best?

JIFFO
It ain't interrogation, I can tell you that.

FLO
I'm getting older. These looks ain't – aren't guaranteed to stay forever.

JIFFO
You're driving me potty. That's a subject between you and your chums.

FLO
Maybe now ain't – isn't the best time to tell you something. No time would be the best time.

JIFFO
You got something to say, say it.

FLO
I been thinking about my life.

JIFFO

There you goes thinking again.

FLO

I been thinking that nothing's changing.

JIFFO

What do you mean changing?

FLO

The Rocks. The docks. The brothel.

JIFFO

You'ze is under a misconception if you think places change. Places don't change.

FLO

The smell of the bed.

JIFFO

I swear I don't know what you're talking about.

FLO

I want one man in my bed.

JIFFO

Blimey, Flo. If that's what you want, you'ze is established in the wrong profession.

FLO

I want a fortnight's holiday in Queensland every year. I want tea every afternoon in a real china cup with cucumber sandwiches. I want to eat beef more than twice a month.

JIFFO

That it? You want more wages? That can be fixed.

FLO

It's more than the money. I'm getting fed up with second hand goods.

JIFFO

You're taking it too personal, Flo. Like fighting's my business. The Iron Pot is Tom's business. Your business is your business. You're there; but you ain't there. You know how to do it. You're a pro. It ain't personal. It's business

FLO

My business is personal. All business is personal. I wanna tell you something. `Member them changes I mentioned? I have a... I have a chance.

JIFFO

Yuh?

FLO

A chance to do something with my life. Something else from what I been.

JIFFO

I thought you liked things like they is.

FLO

As it happens, the fact of the matter is, I have a opportunity. An. An opportunity.

JIFFO

What opportunity?

FLO

An engagement.

JIFFO

What kind of engagement?

FLO

There is only one kind of engagement. Like in marriage.

JIFFO

Jeez, Flo, if you wanted outta the game, couldn't you go into domestic service like a regular girl?

FLO

Who says I'm a regular girl?

JIFFO

You're a girl, ain't you?

FLO

A girl with a craving for a better life. It has a name. Marriage. Two people together.

JIFFO

You don't know nothing `bout marriage.

FLO

You never think `bout it?

JIFFO

I think the hours would be too long.

FLO

`Member that Eye-talian I mentioned? The hat?

JIFFO

Him again.

FLO

He wants to marry me and bring me to Italy.

JIFFO

We have a rule `bout no fraternizing with the paying customers outside of business.

FLO

We never had no rule `bout that. What about us?

JIFFO

I'm holding me tongue on that subject. I recommend you do the same.

FLO

So assassinate me!

JIFFO

This is distinctly unconventional.

FLO

If you must know, I been helping him with ideas for his business.

JIFFO

What ideas for what business? You ain't a business type of person.

FLO

Ain't I? You wouldn't understand.

JIFFO

Quit waffling. Spit it out.

FLO

He says it is the early stages for a machine that can... the official name is a flying cab.

JIFFO

What the hell's a flying cab?

FLO

I can't explain it.

JIFFO

Use your words.

FLO

You won't get mad?

JIFFO

Dunno. I ain't heard it yet.

FLO

It's a machine made of a kind of mixture of metals. There's a pilot and a passenger.

JIFFO

Sounds bloody dangerous. What the hell's a pie-lut?

FLO

The person who drives it like. You crank up a handle on the side of the machine to make the engine go. Everyone wears goggles. You know, big glasses. When you push the stick back, it goes down. When you push the stick forwards, it goes up. It's early days.

JIFFO

Flo, I got a serious query.

FLO

What's that then?

JIFFO

You on opium?

FLO

It's called progress. I was hoping you would understand. It's a vehicle for transportation that can go up in the air. The idea is to take business people to their meetings faster than a hansom cab can go. I'm helping with the design. And I got some good ideas. He says when you're up there, you can see the other side of the clouds.

JIFFO

He's on poppy juice. They all are. I never thought anything of them foreigners. Sounds phony.

FLO

No, Jiff, it's all legit. It's the future. It's a way outta this hell hole.

JIFFO

So whaddya telling me for?

FLO

(Confidence gone; she's lost him) I thought you...that you might want...that you might not...not want...never mind.

JIFFO

Never you mind is a hundred percent accurate. It ain't nuffin' to do with me. You think I'm gonna stop you? `Cuz I ain't. You wanna go? You wanna go? Be my guest. I got plenty of other girls, in case you hadn't noticed. You ain't the only... *(Punches the air)* As it happens, I'm taking this as your official notice of resignation.

FLO

(Shattered, fighting back the tears) My what?

JIFFO

You heard me.

FLO

I didn't mean...

JIFFO

Yes, you did.

FLO

Why are you being like this?

JIFFO

Go on, get outta here.

FLO doesn't move.

The noise o' that machine you is working on must of destroyed your hearing. I said get outta here.

FLO

Good luck with the fight tomorrow. I hope you win. I hope you become World Champion. Good luck.

FLO Hesitates, then EXITS.

*JIFFO watches her go out the door.
He's torn. Has he lost her?*

NELSON ENTERS from the alley.

JIFFO

You! I wanna talk to you. I give you a Captain Cook assignment about a certain Miss Flo Berry. You did a lame job. You never told me nothing `bout an engagement to any foreigner.

NELSON

Engagement? Like married engagement?

JIFFO

Keep your cake hole shut before I shut it for you!

NELSON

Naw, listen, Jiff. They must of talked in secret before I had the assignment. Like I couldn't get in her private quarters. Not that I wouldn't want to.

JIFFO

Shut it if you knows what's good for you.

NELSON

Nothing happened. Don't get your knickers in a twist.

JIFFO

Piss off.

NELSON

Actually, I'm here because I'd like a word.

JIFFO

Having a moan? You resigning, too? Actually, you'd be doing me a favor.

NELSON

What say?

JIFFO

Quit waffling.

NELSON

We figure it this way. Like, they'll all – the punters – they'll all have their money on you, so the story is, we're gonna put all the money in the Push bank account on Murphy. You give the fight to the Torpedo in the fifth round, and we all clean up. Including you, Jiff. Not to worry, mate, you get your cut as member of the Push.

JIFFO

Is that so?

NELSON

Absolutely.

JIFFO

We talked `bout this before. About who is the captain and who is the second in command.

NELSON

The whole of the Push is behind me now.

JIFFO

Is that a fact?

NELSON

You got exactly twenty-four hours to fix the fight.

JIFFO

Look who is giving orders. See, the thing is like this, Mister Nelson. I'd like to help you out, but the fact of the matter is, and you need to listen to this – the fact of the matter is the captain is the only one who can make the decision to get money out of the bank. And guess what? I'm the captain, lo and behold.

NELSON

Well, then, get it out. The bank opens at nine.

JIFFO

Any more venom to spit out?

NELSON

I said what I had to say. I said... what I had to say.

JIFFO

And here's what I has to say. Fact one: The bank opens its doors at nine. Fact two: I ain't gonna be there. Fact three: From where I stand, I'm still running things `round here.

NELSON

No, you ain't. You ain't the leader no more. The Push is behind me now.

JIFFO

Me eyesight must be failing, `cuz I don't see no one behind you.

NELSON

I told `em to wait down at the docks.

JIFFO

I heard enough. You know the rules, Lieutenant Nelson Edgar. How many times I tell you? You wanna be captain, you got to take me in a fair fight. (*Turns as if to walk away, but in a swift movement, spins around*) Oi! Be warned. I'm about to break a Push rule.

*JIFFO punches NELSON hard in the stomach.
NELSON doubles up without knowing
what hit him.*

I'd call that a fair fight, say what? I'm always gonna win, you prat. Cheers! Me drinking mate John Barleycorn is waiting down at the Rocks Tavern. This place is getting too crowded. And it's giving me bad memories. Now, mate, if you'll pardon me, I got a real fight to prepare for.

JIFFO EXITS to the alley.

NELSON

(*Struggles to stand*) This ain't the end of it, mister. The whole of the Push is behind me now. You'll see. It ain't over yet. It's time for a showdown. I was number one 'til you come into the Edgar household. They was *my* mum and dad. You should be taking orders from me, 'stead of you telling me what to do.

FLO ENTERS looking for JIFFO.

Well...well...look here. (*Standing now*) Look who is here, pretty as any sheila could be.

FLO

I need to talk to Jiffo.

NELSON

(*Putting his arm around her*). Being as we works for the same organization, I could use some relaxation.

FLO

(*Pushes him off*) Join the queue.

NELSON

You don't seem keen.

FLO

Jesus! Get away from me, you snake.

THEY struggle.

NELSON

You like it rough, that it?

FLO

Get away from me. (*Scratches his face*)

NELSON

That ain't friendly, Flo Berry.

FLO

I'm telling you get away from me.

NELSON

I reckon that ain't the way a professional Rocks prostitute welcomes a customer.

FLO

You ain't a customer. Piss off. I'll call Jiffo.

NELSON

He can't hear you, Flo. It's just us.

THEY struggle and both go down.

LIGHTS GO OUT THEN BACK UP

A few minutes have elapsed.

NELSON is out cold. FLO is unharmed and standing upright. SHE prods him with her foot.

FLO

I'll be blowed. Out cold. You messed with the wrong one, you low-life larrikin.

JIFFO and TOM ENTER.

JIFFO

What's this, then?

FLO

Jiffo! Mister Riley! What are you—?

JIFFO

I had a feeling something wasn't proper. I went and got Tom. What happened? (*Prods the body on the floor*) He ain't moving. Brown bread. Nelson's dead. Flo Berry killed Nelson Edgar! And they say Torpedo Billy Murphy is dangerous.

TOM

He's still breathing. On a personal level, I'm glad you are upright, Miss Berry. As the businessman, I'm relieved my boy here didn't have to engage in a pub brawl on your behalf.

JIFFO

The main thing pisses me off is you robbed me the pleasure of knocking out the traitor meself.

FLO

He done it to himself.

JIFFO

That ain't possible.

FLO

They got a name for them kinds of blokes. Oozlum bird.

JIFFO looks at her questioningly.

The oozlum bird is a small strange Australian bird that runs around in circles chasing its tail until it eventually disappears up its own arsehole.

JIFFO and TOM laugh.

TOM

Oozlum bird. I'll have to remember that one.

JIFFO

Serious like, how'd you do it? Tom ain't been training you, has he?

FLO

I came back to the pub looking for you. I didn't like the way we left it...after all we been together. This low-life larrikin was here wanting...well, you know what he wanted.

JIFFO

I'll kill the bastard.

TOM

Steady on, Jiff. Let her speak.

FLO

I been experimenting with a thin metal shield that you wear under clothing to protect the bodies of the pilot and passenger in the flying cab I told you about I'm working on with the Eytalian business acquaintance of mine. It's protection in case of a crash. As it

FLO, *Continued*

happens, I'm wearing it. Nelson came after me. I knew what he wanted. He might have got it, too, if it wasn't for the metal shield under my blouse. It must be the shield that saved me and knocked him out when he came up against me with all that force.

JIFFO

Cor'blimey, it's more bloody dangerous outside the ring than in it.

TOM

I must say, that's very impressive.

FLO

Thank you, Mr. Riley. *(To JIFFO)* What made you come back here?

JIFFO

A feeling. I had the same feeling once before. Long time ago. So I went and got Tom.

TOM

Good thing I was still over at the Iron Pot. I've never known you to come in twenty-four hours early for a fight. Now I understand why. Well done for not giving into Nelson's demands. And even more so for having the guts to tell me.

JIFFO

(To FLO) He wanted me to throw the fight. I told Tom. Best to get it out in the open.

TOM

You're learning, my boy. You're learning.

JIFFO

I never could trust him an inch. It's time for me and him to have it out.

TOM

There'll be time to deal with that tomorrow after the fight.

NELSON is coming around.

JIFFO

You'ze is history, Mister Nelson. You'll get yours.

NELSON

(Gets up slowly) Bloody prat! Low down ignoramous! You ain't got the brains of a kangaroo! Drunken nobody!

JIFFO lunges for him. TOM pulls him off.

NELSON. *Continued*

It ain't over!

NELSON EXITS, limping.

TOM

Let him go. I'll summon the Chief of Police. He'll take care of it. You best get some rest now, Jiff. I'll see you in the morning. *(Nods to FLO)* Miss Berry. *(Starts to go)*

JIFFO

Hang on a mo', Tom. I got something I wanna say. Something I should'a done maybe before now.

TOM

Tomorrow. Get some rest now.

JIFFO

It can't wait. I don't wanna lose me nerve. *(Clears his throat in preparation for a speech)* Due to the current events that happened here of late, as the captain of the Push, I hereby announce, that the official end to all Push activities begins now. All the money in the Push account will be shared out to the poor what never had the good luck what I did to meet the great Mister Thomas A. Riley of Randwick, New South Wales, Australia.

TOM

I'm proud of you, son. Somewhere in my pupil's heart, a spark of celestial fire is alive. It's called conscience. *That*, I did not teach you.

FLO

(Had hoped there would be more regarding his intentions towards her) I best get back and change out of this. *(Pounds her chest)* See you later. Best of luck.

JIFFO

I'm gonna win.

FLO EXITS.

She's leaving me, Tom. She says she's going to Italy to get married.

TOM

Ah. So that's what this is all about. You have feelings for her and you had the instinctive feeling something was wrong and you wanted to protect her.

JIFFO

I don't know `bout what feelings I got.

TOM

You will.

JIFFO

Life is hard. I ain't got the Push, and I ain't got Flo.

TOM

She wants to be a wife.

JIFFO

Trouble 'n strife.

TOM

Have you led her to believe something else?

JIFFO

Meaning?

TOM

Two by two. People are happiest in pairs. That's how it is meant to be.

JIFFO

Hate pears. My preference is kiwi fruit.

TOM

Are you having a courtship? It signifies an understanding between a man and a woman.

JIFFO

You mean like...? It ain't like that between us. It's always been strictly business, kind of.

TOM

Then she's free to do anything she pleases with whomever she pleases.

JIFFO

It ain't right.

TOM

That's the way it works.

JIFFO

It still ain't right.

TOM

The first time I asked my Mary to marry me, she said she didn't think a match between a bare-knuckle boxer and an artist was a good idea. She didn't exactly say no, so I hung in there, and the third time I asked her, she said yes. It all worked out. Well, there's nothing

TOM, *Continued*

more to do here. I'm for my bed. Get some rest, my boy. I'm proud of you, son. See you in the morning. Don't hang about.

TOM EXITS. JIFFO paces, wants a drink.

After a few beats, FLO RE-ENTERS.

FLO

I seen Tom go. That was a good speech. A new beginning, letting it all go. The Push, I mean. Well done, Jiff.

JIFFO

Reckon it was time. Guess you'll be going away soon.

FLO

That's why I came back. I been thinking about the way things are.

JIFFO

I told you `bout thinking.

FLO

Putting your old life behind you, the Push and all that, guess that means you'll be concentrating on the fight business. Guess you'll go off to America.

JIFFO

I reckon you'ze'll be going off to Eyetalia now as planned.

FLO

That's why I came back before. I wanted to tell you something.

JIFFO

Like what?

FLO

What is it you always say? Sydney and the Rocks is good enough for me.

JIFFO

That's what I always say.

FLO

That's what I'm saying.

JIFFO

You're saying?

FLO

I ain't – I isn't – I'm not – The hell with it...I ain't going.

JIFFO

Ain't you forgetting something?

FLO

Like what?

JIFFO

That air transportation business you was so keen on inventing?

FLO

I reckon the thing will get flying in the future without me.

JIFFO

Well, then.

FLO

Well, then.

JIFFO

Well, then. So youz'll be staying. Back to business, is it?

FLO

Aye. One of the girls.

JIFFO

Reckon. Those wages I mentioned. I can arrange that.

FLO

I better get to work then.

JIFFO

Cash only.

FLO

Aye. Get some kip now. It's a big day tomorrow.

JIFFO

You'ze is sounding more and more like Tom Riley.

After a beat, NELSON ENTERS, heading for FLO.

FLO

What are you—

NELSON

Thinks you'ze is better `n me? I'll show—

He is intercepted by JIFFO.

JIFFO

Crikey, how'd you get away? The Chief of Police is out there after you. Go on, Flo, get outta here. I'll handle this.

FLO EXITS quickly.

Bad luck you come back, Mister Nelson, `cuz I'm gonna finish this once and for all.

NELSON

That's what you say. I'm the one what's gonna finish it.

JIFFO

I don't think so. You'ze is a coward and a cheat. You'ze is yella like the color of them wolves. You'ze is nothing but a two-legged dingo.

NELSON throws his body against JIFFO, but JIFFO is too fast and dodges the weight. NELSON can't connect. JIFFO sends a punch Nelson's way. NELSON punches the air. He becomes more enraged. JIFFO sends a stream of punches into NELSON.

NELSON

Put `em up! You think I can't take you?

JIFFO

I knows you can't. With one blow, I could knock you senseless, but it appears that has already taken place.

NELSON

You come into our household and me mum and dad forget I'm even around. I got less food at table so you could get more. Poor Bert, they would say. Poor Bert. Finish up this apple pie, Nelson, so I can get some fresh blueberry extract from Sanders and Sons. It's Bert's favorite. The leftovers was good enough for me, they said.

JIFFO

History. Let it go.

NELSON

And that time you was prancing `round for me mum in your new boots. You`ze two was laughing and she was telling you how proud she was of you. I got nothing after you come.

JIFFO

I heard enough outta you. Everyday goes by without me mum and dad, I wish them dingoes had got me, too. I didn`t come knocking at your door. The Edgars took it upon themselves to take me in. I should of stayed out there with me mum and dad, hoping the dingoes would come back for me. I never should of left them out there. I never should of run. I never even tried to help them. You know what it`s like living with that every day of your life?

NELSON

I wish you had stayed out there. I wish they got you, too.

JIFFO

You`re a right pain, you know. Get outta here. The coppers`ll be coming any time. They don`t have to find you. You better go.

NELSON

You`re letting me go?

JIFFO

You heard me. Get out.

NELSON

This thing between us – it ain`t over.

JIFFO

Go on, I tell you. Leg it.

NELSON EXITS.

Bloody hell, I must be getting soft. I had Nelson in the palm of me hand, and I let him go. I declared an end to the Push, turning over all the money in the Push account to the poor Rocks people. I`m gonna have to break the news to the lads. What`s gonna happen to the gang without the gang? Without their captain? Former captain, that is. There won`t be any organization. They`ll be out on the streets without any organization. What the bloody...? Who the bloody hell am I? (*Looks at his hands; checks his body*) Still me, in a manner of speaking. I don`t know. I just don`t know. Next thing you know, I`ll be adopting a pet kangaroo. Stranger events have happened. After that, I could be moving to Randwick where Tom lives. Then I`ll be getting married. And before you know it, I`ll be the former featherweight champion of Australia and become a trainer at the Iron Pot like Tom. Bloody hell. I may as well put a knife through me heart right now. It`s all

JIFFO, *Continued*

happening too fast. Somehow it don't seem right. It just don't seem right. Some things in life can't change. Some things gotta remain the same. It's too fast. Jingoos!

JIFFO EXITS quickly out alley door.

LIGHTS OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Scene 1

Next day, night of the big fight.

LIGHTS UP. Pub.

JIFFO is plastered. He wears his fight gear: Bare-chested, flat black leather shoes, white calf-length cotton tights with a crimson sash at the waist. Six ounce padded gloves on his hands.

JIFFO

When asked will he fight, he'll say too bloody right, I'll knock 'im for six in a jiffo!
(*Weaves and ducks as if he's being swung at*)

TOM ENTERS. He is furious.

TOM

Charming! Just charming! I'll kill you! I'm gonna bloody kill you!

JIFFO

Believe half of what you read and nothing of what you see... I mean nothing of what you read and half of what you see...nothing of what you see. I ain't here.

TOM

You've gone too far this time. You're pickled, you are. The Australian featherweight champ is waiting. Nine hundred spectators are waiting. I've been waiting.

JIFFO

Evening, Thomas A. Riley of Randwick, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

TOM

You don't appear to be grasping the seriousness of what is happening. Fist fights are breaking out at the Iron Pot. It's a no man's land over there between the Murphy supporters and the Jiffo supporters, each side calling out for victory for their favorite. Punters keep putting down more money. Murphy supporters are switching their bets to you. Jiffo supporters are switching their bets to Murphy. Some are betting on whether or not there's going to be a fight. It's pandemonium.

JIFFO

I'll knock `im out in four...I'll knock `im out in four...

TOM

You knock him out? He'll knock you out in one, you little drunken bastard.

JIFFO

No one knocks me out. (*Puts his chin out*) Have a go. Bet you can't knock me out.

TOM

You can't stand up straight.

JIFFO

Put `em up, mate. I'm right as rain.

TOM

The hell you are, you little punk. I should've left you on the docks. What's it all about? Is it because you're afraid you'll lose?

JIFFO

Lose? I'm gonna win.

TOM

If you know you're gonna win, why'd you run away?

JIFFO

I didn't run. I walked.

TOM

You think this is amusing? I'm waiting for your answer. Why'd you run out?

JIFFO

When I win and becomes famous, I'll have to live in Randwick.

TOM

Randwick? Randwick? What's Randwick got to do with it?

JIFFO

Where the rich people live like you.

TOM

What the bloody Christ are you talking about?

JIFFO

I ain't leaving the Rocks.

TOM

Forget the Rocks. All I want right now is to get you over to the Iron Pot.

JIFFO

The Rocks is good enough for me.

TOM

Jesus! Never seen you like this. You're scared. I didn't figure on that.

JIFFO

I ain't scared of nothing or no one.

TOM

Jiffo, you're ready for this. You haven't lost a bout yet. I wouldn't have set this up if I didn't think you were ready.

JIFFO is confused. Thinks TOM is here for a training session.

JIFFO

I got to ask you `bout something. Something I'm doing with my feet ain't coming right.

TOM

I don't think I'm getting through to you. This isn't a training session.

JIFFO

When I dodge a punch and rock back on my right foot and try swinging `round in a circle, me knees hit, and I can't make the circle right.

TOM

Sweet Jesus! *(Goes along with it, hoping it will ease JIFFO back to reality)*

JIFFO

Like this. *(Demonstrates unsteadily, rocking back on his right foot)*

TOM

(Adopts same stance) Instead of rocking back on your right foot, step back with the left.

JIFFO

(Does it) No problem. I should've figured it. I invented that step.

TOM

A good trick on the street when an opponent is behind. In the ring, it doesn't work. You're up against better boys, and they'll always be in front of you. Show me your stance.

JIFFO

My stance? I know all about that. In all my hundreds of fights, I never—

TOM

I don't care how many fights you've had. That's how fighters get lazy, thinking they know it all 'cause they've done it a million times. Concentrate. How many stances are there? Anything to sober you up.

JIFFO

I know this answer. Two. And the winner is—

TOM

It ain't a University course! Don't tell me. Show me.

JIFFO

(Demonstrates, getting left and right mixed up) Left hand and left foot forward. Orthodox. *(Puts out his right hand)*

TOM

Sweet Jesus. Other hand.

JIFFO

Right hand and right foot forward. Southpaw.

TOM

You got it backwards, for chrissakes. Left is southpaw. The foot or hand that is forward is known as the lead. And keep your chin tucked into your chest. This is a helluva time to be doing this.

JIFFO

(Dances around, punching) I been doing this since I was ten years old.

TOM

You're a natural, my boy, I will give you that. If I can just get you to focus. Focus! Concentration is the key.

JIFFO

I know how to concentration. *(Attempts the fly trick, but can't do it)* Catch it, let it go, catch it again, let it go. Not easy with gloves on.

TOM

Clowning around isn't gonna win the fight. The prize ring ruffian's had his day. Boxing is an art form – like painting or music or writing.

JIFFO

You'll be making me play the violin next.

TOM

Let's see if your fists can match your mouth. Put `em up.

JIFFO

That language I understand.

THEY spar lightly, finding it difficult to hit one another.

TOM

Stay loose. Keep the muscles relaxed. Don't tense up. It's the mental toughness you need. You have to solve a problem quickly.

TOM holds up his hands to stop the sparring. Here comes the pep talk. He has to get through to him.

Just like out on the street. You can't be tentative with your legs. You focus on your opponent's weaknesses. You have to work not to get knocked down. Just like on the street. And if you do go down, the trick is to get up one more time than you get knocked down. Keep bobbing and weaving, bending, twisting. Keep out of the path of a blow. Speed and surprise. Speed and surprise. Defend your territory, the way you did when I saw you that first time down at the docks. Billy Murphy is shorter and lighter in weight than I am. It means you'll have to shorten your punches, but not let up on muscle. He's tough, but you'll win, Jiffo. And then you'll be the Featherweight Champion of Australia.

JIFFO

(Raises his hands in a victory gesture) Told you I could do it.

TOM

It ain't over. Jiffo, listen to me. You still don't get it. You'll be the King of Australia. Understand? King.

JIFFO

King of the Rocks. I am what I am.

TOM

Incorrect, my boy. You become what you would like to be. The way I did. It isn't how you start out; it's how you finish up.

JIFFO

Most folks live in overcrowded, unsanitary living conditions with cheap...cheap likker...I have to stay in the Rocks to help those who are less...less...what? Fortunate – that's the word – less fortunate than me.

TOM

What the Christ?

JIFFO

I'm running for Mayor, don't you know. Flo – remember Flo Berry? She's my campaign manager.

TOM

Lo and behold. I get it. You sound like me all those years ago. At first, I protested, too, having to leave the only home I knew. The Rocks. Come on, son, it's time.

JIFFO

That's what I said. It's time.

TOM

After a dunking in a tub of ice water, some walnut juice rubbed on your face to toughen the skin, with my assistance, you'll give those punters their money's worth.

JIFFO

I'll be drinking that walnut juice. Toughens you up from the inside out.

TOM

It's for rubbing on your skin, not for drinking.

JIFFO

I need a drink.

TOM

After. Let's go, Jiff.

JIFFO

Give them punters their money's worth. I'll kill 'im.

TOM

Sure. Sure, you will. I believe in you.

JIFFO

I believe in me.

TOM

Come on, son, we've kept the customers waiting long enough.

JIFFO

Who is it I'm fighting?

TOM

A chap by the name of Torpedo Billy Murphy. No one major. Just the current champion of Australia. He killed a man once.

JIFFO

So did I.

TOM

Steady on, son.

TOM assists a shaky JIFFO towards the door.

JIFFO

No worries, Tom, I'll knock 'im out in six. Two at the most.

TOM

Math never was your strong suit. Keep moving.

LIGHTS FADE as THEY EXIT.

END OF SCENE 1

ACT TWO

Scene 2

*Later, same night, after the fight.
LIGHTS UP on TOM downstage.*

TOM

(To the audience) The referee announced that this was the fight for the featherweight championship of Australia. He called the two boxers to stand with him in the center of the ring. Briefly, he went over the rules, emphasizing that the fighters were to break clear any time at his word, that his word was final; the bell was to be obeyed as a starting

TOM, Continued

signal and as the signal to end the round. He then ordered the fighters to their respective corners to await the official start of the fight. The starting bell rang.

A hush fell over the gymnasium. You could hear a pin drop. Infuriated by the long wait for his opponent, the Torpedo flew out of his corner. As he approached the center of the ring, he held up his hands in a victory gesture. The gesture was lost on the crowd as all eyes were on Jiffo still sitting in his corner. It was clear he was more than slightly inebriated. No worries. I knew he'd sober up soon as he got started. It was taking a minute or two for him to get started, that's all. 'Go, Jiffo, go! Go! Go!' I shouted. I swear my voice went from arsehole to breakfast, but if truth be told, he couldn't hear. Then the crowd picked it up and started yelling, 'Go, Jiffo, go. Go, Jiffo, go.' Like a chant. 'Go, Jiffo, go.' That he heard. He was ready. He just needed convincing.

And suddenly, my boy became this fighting machine. He was there. Suddenly, he was there. There was no explaining the strange metamorphosis that came over Young Jiffo. I'd seen it many a time. The little fellow with bleary eyes became a remarkably skilled fighting machine. Murphy shot out a fusillade of lefts and rights, then bore in for what he figured would be a quick kill, only to find himself swinging at empty air. Jiffo's ability to dodge punches with a minute movement of his head or a twist of a shoulder was uncanny.

Murphy rushed at him and led with a jab to the top of his head. It failed to connect. Jiffo skipped around to the other side of the ring. Murphy rushed in again. Again, Jiffo sidestepped. Murphy then stalked Jiffo around the ring. His few light punches to Jiffo's body did no harm.

Then a ringsider shouted, 'Hit him with the right, Jiffo,' and that's when Jiffo made the grave mistake of turning his head. Murphy grabbed the opportunity and jammed a right hook into Jiffo's head that was strong enough to knock him onto the canvas. Flat out, he was in a daze. It took a few seconds to get to his feet.

Murphy didn't waste any time. He hit my boy repeatedly with a series of effective punches to the head and face. I could taste his blood. Only the sound of the bell ended the brutal beating. I cleaned the boy's bloodied face with cold water and liquid antiseptic and offered words of encouragement, as any manager trainer would do. He kept mumbling he'd been hurt worse in gang fights down at the docks. But I knew better.

Round by round it was a combat zone. Round seven. Murphy threw a right at Jiffo who sidestepped the blow and countered with a right to Murphy's middle. Murphy doubled over in pain. Jiffo looked out at the cheering crowd and prepared to hit Murphy with a right to the chin. He swung his arm, threw a punch, but his grandstanding threw off his timing. When he looked back, Murphy had gone. He was on Jiffo's blind side. Stupidity was the culprit. Now on Jiffo's blind side, Murphy threw a series of unexpected punches into Jiffo's ribs. Jiffo was out of breath, but retaliated with a flurry of punches into Murphy's middle. The bell sounded the end of the round. They kept punching. The referee stepped in but he couldn't stop them. He only succeeded in copping a few loose

TOM, *Continued*

blows. Jiffo was ready to finish off his opponent right then and there. I had to go in and pull the two boxers apart. Luckily, I came out in one piece.

Rounds eight through thirteen went much the same. Ignoring protocol, they were two street punks battling it out. Then round fourteen began with Jiffo dodging punches from Murphy. But by now, Murphy's getting frustrated. He turned his back on Jiffo, swung around suddenly and threw a direct jab at his head. Instinctively, Jiffo moved his head slightly to the left...that was his handkerchief trick training coming in handy. Murphy's arm carried on straight through mid-air. Jiffo grinned at the missed shot. And that was his mistake. No concentration. Murphy brought his elbow back to connect with his jaw. It sounded like a champagne cork being popped.

It knocked Jiffo flat on his back out cold. Never seen anything like it. I thought it was over. I couldn't believe it when he got up before the count. But he was in bad shape. I wanted to end the fight before my boy got killed. But Jiffo wouldn't hear of it. Just as the bell clanged, I figured I had one last bit of strategy. I whispered something in Jiffo's ear. Something major. I only hoped he'd heard me. With one eye half closed, Jiffo staggered out of his corner like a zombie and met his opponent in the center of the ring.

When Murphy extended his arm out to Jiffo's head with a straight hit, Jiffo ducked and bore in with a solid left to Murphy's right kidney. Before Murphy folded, he came in with a powerful right uppercut to Jiffo's chin. Murphy went down but got up before the count reached ten, clearly shaken and confused.

The look on Jiffo's face said it all. I'd been witness to that look many a time. Every street fighter has that look when he has to defend his territory. Jiffo tore into Murphy with left and right punches as if he was back down at the docks. Finally, with hot hate Jiffo went crashing into the one person who stood between him and the title with the knockout blow. Jiffo stood over the fallen champion while the referee tolled eight, then nine, then ten, then: YOUNG JIFFO NEW FEATHERWEIGHT CHAMPION OF AUSTRALIA.

Sound of crowd cheering.

*LIGHTS UP behind Tom. The pub.
FLO and JIFFO are having a beer.*

Half the Murphy supporters were cheering for their new hero. The other half were calling for a re-match. The crowd cheered for a full fifteen minutes. Clay Cooney is the world champion in the featherweight class. If Young Jiffo can take him – and he hasn't lost a bout yet – then he will own the world title.

TOM joins JIFFO and FLO

FLO

How'd you do it?

JIFFO

I was thirsty. *(Raises his mug of beer)*

FLO

Well done, Young Jiffy-oh. Well done. You're like – I don't know – like the Shakespeare of the ring.

JIFFO

Shakespeare? He ain't so good. I knocked him out in three!

TOM

Now there's more to this event, Miss Berry. Nelson.

FLO

Nelson? What's he got to do with it?

JIFFO

I knew it wasn't over between me and him, but I never expected what happened.

TOM

A lad in a long coat carrying a folded up newspaper seated halfway down to ringside wouldn't grab attention was in his thought process. And he was right.

FLO

Nelson's in prison.

TOM

It was the escaped prisoner in person. The referee announced Jiffo's victory and with the chaos in the gymnasium, this was the moment Nelson was waiting for to take his revenge. He aimed the newspaper at the victorious Jiffo.

FLO

A newspaper?

TOM

Inside that folded up newspaper was a revolver which he aimed and fired. Miraculously, the bullet hit the corner post of the ring with a loud ricochet. I jumped over the ropes.

JIFFO

Speed and surprise. Speed and surprise. You should'a seen Tom.

TOM

I knocked the gun out of his hand, and then knocked him out.

FLO

Jingoes! It's more bloody dangerous outside the ring than in it.

SHE is quoting JIFFO. THEY exchange knowing looks.

TOM

Thinking they had got double for their money, the crowd went wild.

JIFFO

You should've seen Tom, Flo. I never seen anyone move so fast.

FLO

What happened to that rotten sod?

TOM

The attending police carried him off where we know he is now locked secure behind steel bars and will remain for a long time.

FLO

I hope he never gets out.

TOM

My boy here, Young Jiffo, the winner and new featherweight champion of Australia. We've been training for this for a long time.

JIFFO raises his arms in a victory gesture.

FLO

Featherweight Champion of Australia.

JIFFO

I could've had him in round one, but I was enjoying meself too much.

FLO

When's the fight for the world championship?

JIFFO

Tom's got that all planned.

TOM

I have some breaking news about that.

JIFFO

No worries, mate, I'll knock him out in four.

TOM

That's not what I'm worried about. Hopefully, here's where part of that character part of our training kicks in.

JIFFO

This ain't boding too well. My scalp is beginning to itch.

TOM

No use dancing around with this one. You've won the featherweight title fair dinkum – there's no mistaking that one...

JIFFO

Too bloody right.

TOM

But to be truly accepted as a world champ, you'll have to fight George Dixon in America.

JIFFO

Clay Cooney's the champ over here.

TOM

That's just it. Over here. You could fight here, but it will only be official in Australia. Dixon holds the official world featherweight title.

JIFFO

I ain't exactly thrilled 'bout this breaking news. I almost could've snuffed it out there in that ring. I'm still the Aussie featherweight champ, right? And if I fight Clooney here and win, I'll be the world featherweight champ, right?

TOM

You would go down in boxing history as the world featherweight champion, aye, but it is considered an Australian title only. You have to go to America to make it official. Those are the rules.

JIFFO

Funny rules. A world title only in Australia.

TOM

Listen up, son. Boxing used to be largely a British-American rivalry. We've become global. It's truly an international sport now.

JIFFO

Global?

TOM

Worldwide. It's time for Australia to join the race.

JIFFO

And I was worried I'd have to move to Randwick! Bloody hell, Tom, I don't know 'bout all this. Australia is my home.

TOM

And it always will be. But it's dried up here. There's no one left to fight. Then what will you do? Back to the docks? You can't go from the professional ring back to the streets. I can't let that happen. I've taken you from the docks to the professional ring. You've learned skill, strategy and stamina. I can't do any more. You've gone as far as you can go here. It's all arranged. The match will take place in three months in New York. Passage is booked on the S.S. Parramatta. You sail in one week. I'm letting you go. It's my gift.

JIFFO

A watch-chain is a gift.

TOM

You go over there as a somebody. The world will be yours. You – and you alone – will be representing the smallest continent and the biggest island in the world.

JIFFO

It appears I don't get a say in this.

TOM

America's the place to be now. This is your big chance, Jiffo. Don't cock it up.

JIFFO

What's the deal when I get there?

TOM

You'll be reporting to Bishop's Athletic Gym of New York. If it was me, it's what I'd be doing.

JIFFO

First, you tell me you was trained by a Priest; now we got a Bishop.

TOM

Ed Bishop. He's a dinkum bloke from Melbourne. He'll be acting as your second. You'll train like you've never trained before. George Dixon battled Cal McCarthy in Boston for seventy rounds for the title. It was an exhausting fight and ended up being a draw. Dixon had to travel to England to face Nunc Wallace, the holder of the British version of the world title. Dixon scored a knockout in the eighteenth round. He returned to America and fought Johnny Murphy. He knocked out McCarthy in a rematch. Finally, he made his claim to the featherweight title when he knocked out Fred Johnson in Coney Island.

JIFFO

Suddenly all feeling is gone in my legs.

TOM

You'll be in good hands with Ed Bishop. He's the best trainer over there.

JIFFO

I don't know 'bout America. They speak some foreign language?

TOM

They call it the Golden Age over there. Horseless carriages, machines that run on chemicals, moving pictures. Aye, America's the place. You might even get to meet John L. Sullivan. Like you, he learned to fight in the streets. The last of the bare knuckle champs, first to wear gloves. Aye, America's the place.

JIFFO looks at FLO. They are torn but unable to verbalize the feelings.

JIFFO

You ain't coming, Tom?

TOM

You don't need me anymore. If you get clobbered, you'll hear my voice telling you to get up, get up.

JIFFO

It ain't the same. I need you with me. Whispering in my ear.

FLO

What did he whisper?

JIFFO

That's between me and me manager.

TOM

I... I have things to do here.

JIFFO

Part two of the breaking news is about to break.

TOM

I'll be in training.

JIFFO

Training? What kinda training? You got a new boy?

TOM

Up to now, I've ignored all the challenges from a certain Sandy Lynch.

JIFFO

We been together every day. You never said nothing 'bout challenges from a certain Sandy Lynch.

TOM

I'm saying it now.

JIFFO

The same Sandy Lynch from your final fight on the heath?

TOM

The very same.

JIFFO

The same Sandy bare knuckle fight Lynch?

TOM

Aye.

JIFFO

You said challenges. A challenge means a fight. You and him are gonna fight again?

TOM

Aye.

JIFFO

Naw. You can't do it, Tom. It's been too long since your last fight. Sandy's younger, taller, and weighs more. You'll get killed out there

TOM

And so, the pupil becomes the teacher.

JIFFO

You ain't said why.

TOM

Every boxer believes he has one more fight in him.

JIFFO

I ain't buying it.

TOM

No one calls me an old geezer.

JIFFO

So that's it. That does it. I definitely ain't leaving for America.

TOM

It's all arranged.

JIFFO

You gonna train yourself?

TOM

No worries, mate. I know how to do it.

JIFFO

You'ze is presenting too many factors all sudden-like. First, I got to go to America to win a title I could win here. Then second, you'ze is gonna become a fighter again. Everything is changing too fast. My head is gonna explode. I feel like I just gave myself twelve lashes with the Push sock. Some things have to remain the same. They just got to.

TOM

Time doesn't stand still, Jiff. We all have our moments. We make them count, and then we have to move on to the next round. It's called living.

JIFFO

I can't breathe.

JIFFO EXITS quickly.

FLO

Guess I'll be dancing solo.

TOM

Sorry, Flo. It's just business.

LIGHTS OUT.

END OF SCENE 2

ACT TWO

Scene 3

*LIGHTS UP. Pub; One week later.
TOM and FLO are drowning their
bittersweet emotions with a pint.*

FLO

Ship's horn blowed too soon.

TOM

Aye.

FLO

It seems like the entire population of Australia come to see him off down at Sydney Harbour.

TOM

Aye.

FLO

Never known it to be so quiet around here.

TOM

My wife Mary always said if you listen to the quiet long enough, you'll hear your inner voice, and it will guide you through.

FLO

Never heard that.

TOM

That's what Mary said. I expect you might emigrate to Italy.

FLO

Naw, too risky. Me and the girls are thinking 'bout opening a dress shop over in Rushcutter's Bay. Kind of upscale type thing.

TOM

Sounds like a fine idea. I wish you the best of luck.

FLO

Ta.

THEIR conversation is stunted. What is there to say...

Mighty quiet. TOM

Aye. FLO

Aye. TOM

FLO
You'll be getting busy training for the fight with Sandy Lynch.

TOM
Aye, that I will. And you'll be getting busy with your new shop.

FLO
Reckon.

TOM
Aye.

FLO
He'll be back soon. After the fight, I mean. I know he will.

JIFFO bursts into the Pub. He's wears traveling clothes, carries a satchel. FLO and TOM are shocked.

JIFFO
'allo, mates!

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes