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The Darlington Under Fourteen All Stars

Number Six, **Walter Sugden** (Captain and five eighth)

Number Seven, **Quentin Gallagher** (Halfback)

Number Eight, **Neil Davidson** (Prop)

Number Nine, **Cyril Smyth** (Hooker)

Number Ten, **Ken Casey** (Prop)

Number Eleven, **Anthony Moroney** (Second row)

Number Twelve, **John Flood** (Second row)

Number Thirteen, **Enzo Cuda** (Lock forward)

Number Five, **Declan Bennett** (Left wing)

Number Four, **Peter Tregonning** (Left centre)

Number Three, **Mark Tregonning** (Right centre)

Number Two, **Billy Bomer** (Right wing)

Number One, **Chris Robertson** (Vice-captain and fullback)

Jimmy Bomer (Coach)

Vincent Vansittart (Reserve)

Chapter One

Shadows

I treasure simple experiences; a summer sky starched and faded to cornflower blue, or the relief of a southerly buster cooling the worst of the day's heat. I celebrate October's purple, dazzling jacarandas, and marvel at the tenacity of an insistent bullfrog, croaking for a mate in the depths of an overflowing, rusted iron tub. And as I consider these gossamer things, I ponder the ineffable changes in my life.

Yesterday, as the sun's arc shifted higher, I glimpsed a lifelong companion: my shadow, lockstep in front, constant over my shoulder, fluid by left and right. And though I am now stooped, my shadow showed a self much as it was, when as a child I first recognised its existence.

There are times when other shadows join my wandering. I see their faces, and conjure memories of forgotten conversations. I hear the phantom clatter of ball-bearing wheels rasping and screeching the underside of a rickety billy

cart down the Darlington back streets. A constant, tedious scrape means slow times, but frequent, measured silences spell an increase of sales of the inky afternoon tabloids, snatched by scurrying men, dashing for the 5.10pm steamer to Parramatta or Hurstville.

Six o'clock and the streets belong once more to Darlington's denizens, coughing up the dust and coal smoke coiling from the cooling Eveleigh boilers, drifting the length of Abercrombie Street to Broadway and Central Railway Station, before settling close by the garment alleys of Surry Hills.

A cascading toxic pink patina stains that late March dusk of long ago.

Succulent steam rises from a thousand meaty dinner pies, crusty crisp and golden, cooking in four room cottages in Golden Grove and Camperdown. Working men roll up cuff-less sleeves, casting furrowed glances at enticing headlines, before turning to the back page sports news, with appetites whetted by the succulent aroma, and the anticipation of the first weekend round of football

But no hot pie for Darlington's aspiring under fourteens. Cold Devon sandwiches churn butterflies in thirteen nervous stomachs, for this year a victorious schoolboy state championship

side tours England with the Kangaroos. Outstanding players dream the unimaginable; recruitment by the South Sydney Rabbitohs or the Newtown Blue Bags.

The first Monday of autumn. The premiere training session of the season. A chilly night when languid skills sharpened at the summer crease, and honed in explosive games of tip football on Coogee Beach, mean nothing if a member of last year's "thirteens" fail their bid for selection.

Acceptance in the under fourteen squad offers the chance of a career beyond the tool sheds and factories. The fourteenth year tolls childhood's passing, and entry to the harsh, glittering world of adults.

Nominal captain Walter Sugden dons a hard-won training uniform, comprising an old Bankstown jersey, and white patched shorts. A pair of long, green and gold socks signals first grade ambitions. Walter walks with a skipper's modesty, a gait redolent of dignity in victory, pluckiness in defeat.

The previous year the victorious Darlington under thirteens won a rugged grand final against their old rivals. As tradition demanded, the captains swapped jerseys with each other. At the final whistle, Walter exchanged his shirt with the

toughest fullback he had ever played, a brooding brown-eyed kid who in a promise-filled future, became the 24th Prime Minister of Australia.

Every Saturday morning in a ritual of bravado, Walter pummels the fast ball at the local Police Boys Club. Boxing lessons develop speed and agility, and sharpen the knack of reading an opponent's strategy. Darlington men reckon Walter this year's choice for Best and Fairest, and in a few years, a first grade certainty.

Money is scarce in the Sugden household. And to pay his keep, each workday afternoon Walter hauls the billy cart, filled with late extra editions. He detests the moniker 'paper boy', and fights fist and boot a gang of fifth-formers who tease him with the epithet, and often beat him bloody in the dingy, dangerous lanes of Golden Grove.

The owner of Walter's paper run, Murray Dwyer, risks most of the newsagency takings with the local starting price bookmaker. Each day from 10.00am to 3.00pm, Murray studies the turf guide, analysing the form of every horse listed to race at Randwick, Canterbury, or Warwick Farm. For relief, he thumbs the latest editions of *Men Only* magazine, ogling the bosomy models.

Murray knows his customers' secrets, and keeps book on local scandals, trading information

to the coppers when down a few quid. By 5.30pm each weekday, he divvies the deeners, draws the shutters, locks the newsagency and sprints to the Golden Grove Hotel, thirsty for a boisterous schooner amid the mayhem of the six o'clock swill.

One of his pastimes remains a murderous secret. Each summer weekend Murray prowls the remote sand hills of Cronulla's Wanda Beach, spying on boys dallying with their girlfriends. But he seeks lone girls sunbathing topless, and on one fateful Sunday, spent hours watching two beautiful young women. Neither saw him approach.

Walter's father Francis Xavier Sugden - Frankie to his mates - posts the starting price at the Golden Grove Hotel. Frankie's business partner, broken-nosed Police Sergeant Mick Vaughan, ensures fair policing of the book.

Frankie and Murray loathe one another. Frankie calls Murray a mongrel for his condescension to local workers, and despises his support of the chamber of commerce, his membership of the Master Carpenters' Guild, and his crony gang of toady factory managers. Yet without hesitation, Frankie takes Murray's bets,

paying out on a win, or touching his nose when a nag comes in last.

The paper seller, aspiring football star and altar boy at St Gloria's unwittingly maintained a sulky peace between his father and Murray Dwyer, but on this distant, smoky autumn Monday night, at the end of the Age of Steam, the Bug struts out of his parents' terrace house, day-dreaming of running onto the Sydney Cricket Ground, as captain and five eighth.