

The Javelin Thrower

by
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Chapter One

Tommy Skinner is standing on the winners' podium at Beijing. The tape is blaring out 'Advance Australia Fair' and Tommy is joyfully and wholeheartedly singing. His heart is full near to bursting, here he is, once a near street kid in Perth, now top of the wazar. His javelin throw, at 97.9m, is a world record and although he cannot look into the future now, the length of the winning throw is just so much, it's a fair bet his record will be standing after Tommy is no more.

His path to these dizzy heights has been long and tortuous, although he's the youngest javelin winner ever (he's just 20 ½ years of age) and there's every chance he'll be javelin throwing at more Olympics in the future; he's a born natural. Tommy has had a good upbringing until age 13. His Dad was a mining engineer and Tommy was going along well at Hale School until the gas explosion occurred at Varanus Island. His Dad wasn't killed in the main event, but in a huge repeat, when they were working under pressure to get this most important gas supply back under control to feed the hungry system. Short cuts were taken and only disaster resulted. He has good insurance, which all devolved on Tommy's mother, who is really the weak link in the family trio that was. She picks up with a detective copper about twelve months later and moves into their Wembley home and Tommy's life nearly goes down the drain.

This beggar has a very vicious streak and within months, he has the wife terrified of him, often sporting black eyes and bruises. Tommy, perforce has to get out of the house, comes home to shower and spruce up, to have a meal and get some money from his mum to keep him going at College. This too, turns totally sour, as the school fees don't get paid, the copper changes all the door locks and stays en situ, burning through the widow's money.

Tommy is a very self-contained kid. He's getting untidy due to being barred from his home and starts sleeping under bridges and in parks. He takes what precautions he can, but he's often on the streets. He pals up with a tough alcoholic, who, even the police don't muss with too much. His life-changing event happens when he's stealing some canned food from the IGA store, out in suburban Maddington. It's better to fudge a train ride out to the burbs to find sustenance, than try it on in the city, where security is tighter. He fluffs the Maddington enterprise and a very agile and quick security guard grabs him and takes him into the owner's office.

The owner of the free hold is there quite by accident and he listens in to the tough interview between the Manager, security guard and Tommy. He gets up from his desk and walks over.

"You're no street kid," he says. "You sound educated and intelligent."
He says to the security guard,

"Go and get this lad a takeaway coffee, plenty of sugar and get a decent roast beef roll from the deli, while you're at it."

The big chap drops a list of figures in front of Tommy.

“Add those up,” he says. “Multiply the result by 25 and divide that result by 73.” Tommy does this in a flash. The chap gives Tommy a longish memo.

“Condense that down to sense as quick as you can.” This is easy peasy to Tommy and the chap is not surprised. The security guard returns with the coffee and roll.

“Scoff that up,” the chap says. “And then we’ll talk.” Tommy wolfs the roll.

“Want another?” the chap asks.

“My tummy has shrunken a bit with my present life, no, but thanks you kindly anyway.”

“Okay,” the owner says. “No names, no pack drill. Just tell me why you’re on the streets and what drugs you’re on.” Tommy condenses his life story and says, “No drugs. How I live, you can’t afford not to be sharp. There’s just too many sleazes around.”

The chap takes Tommy in. “I’m a sheep and cattle man,” he says. “Bought this as an investment. I can pull you out of the ruck if you want.”

“What do I have to do?” says Tommy.

“Come up and work on the farm for a while, it’s near Round Hill, on the way to Moora. If you want to give it a try, we’ll walk down a couple of shops and kit you out. There’s staff showers here if you want to clean up first, plenty of towels in the staffroom cupboard.”

Tommy’s life changes. An hour later, he is dressed in new jeans, shirt and a good wool jumper and they’ve sourced him some work boots from the Good Sammy shop.

Chapter Two

They roll up to McNaught’s farm. It’s quite a well set-up place, good house, and brick shearers’ quarters and overseers house. McNaught introduces him to the overseer, Vernon Lindquist.

“This is a lad with possibilities, Vern,” he says. “Give him some ongoing farming experience and don’t land him with drudgery jobs. Work with him. Share your experience.” He takes Tommy down to the quarters, which are tidy and decent.

“I’m at the house when I’m here,” McNaught says. “My wife, sometimes. Now,” he continues, taking out a box of supplies bought in Midland, “here is everything you need for a decent breakfast and I’ll educate you in microwaving up Uncle Toby’s Oats. A good start to the day, summer or winter. Vern’s wife, who I will talk to next, will I’m sure, do you a daily lunch crib and give you a decent meal at night. Learn what you can. Vern’s a stockman born, but isn’t too flash with machinery, so that’s why we are using smaller, older type gear. The new big Johnnies are rather intimidating and high tech, while what we’re using, although slower, is much easier to get a handle on. There’s a spare Tojo over there you can hack around the farm in, but not off it. Tommy,” he says, “it’s all just common sense, but it’s a good opportunity too, as Vern will be glad to be quit of operating the machines. You’re not a big lad, but you’re strong and intelligent. It’s an opportunity you may enjoy, or at worst, endure. Weekends may be a problem for you, but there’s Foxtel at the house as well as a normal set here in the quarters and I’ll tell Vern to take you into Moora on shopping days. Are you into sport?” he asks. Tommy replies,

“I was in the Hale cricket team until I dropped out of College.”

“Well, I can easily revive that for you. The Abernathy’s over the road are mad cricketers and I’m sure would take you to cricket in town and I’ll do a deal with Vern to get you home, so that you are not stuck outside a pub after a game. Give it a good go,” he continues, “You can do a stint at the cattle station at Hall’s Creek next, once you get a handle on things here.”

Tommy’s life takes a huge turn for the better. He is both quick and smart and Vern is delighted to have such an apt and quick learning helper. Tom has a feel for machinery and takes to farm work like a duck to water. They put him behind wickets at the cricket and pretty soon he’s doing well across the board and putting McNaught’s money in the bank. He is extremely worried about his mum. He tells McNaught, who sucks his teeth and says he will look into the matter.

“Careful,” Tommy says. “The copper’s very bad news and has a very violent streak.” About a month later, McNaught is back at the farm, pleased with Tommy’s progress.

“We’ve sorted the cop,” he says. “With a bit of big strong help, got him out of the house and have put a caveat on the property, as he was planning to sell it.”

“And Mum?” he asks.

“Well, Tommy, she’s coming up to housekeep for you for a while, at the big house. That is, if you agree.”

Tom’s manly. He extends his hand to McNaught.

“I owe you,” he says.

A deal of time goes by. Tommy and Vern have been out dumming up internal fences and they coast down to the house in the Tojo, they are using for that and stumble on an amazing scene. A modern car is standing in the drive outside the house, passenger door wide open and the big copper is dragging Tommy’s mother towards the car. She is kicking and struggling but has no show against this big mean chap.

“Hang on, Vern,” Tommy says. He plants his foot and the bull bar impacts the open car door, tearing it off. Tommy hops out, grabs a post rammer and smashes the big chap between the neck and shoulder. The chap falls on the driveway. Tommy pulls off two lengths of strong blue twine, it comes from around big square hay bales that they have fed out. Every farm ute has these things tied on their tray rails. Tommy loops these around the copper’s legs, hooks one end to the bull bar, puts the Tojo in reverse and drags this chap along the gravel.

“Hold on, Tom,” says Vern. “You’ll kill the beggar.”

“What a good idea,” Tommy says. He cuts the twine with his pocketknife.

“On yer bike,” he says to the big copper, who is somewhat shocked and dazed, but climbs into his Holden and dribbles off down to the road. Vern watches him go and says to Tommy,

“It may be possible that he will be back with his mates from Moora in a while. Let’s give this spare car door the deep six in the old well at the 6 Mile, and they do. Nothing further happens, but one of them stays in sight of the homestead over the next few weeks. A fair deal of water runs under the bridge. Tommy is becoming a very competent man around the farm and gets his driver’s license. His mum makes friends with the local ladies and helps a catering volunteer group that works at clearing sales, funerals, the main local show and so on. Tommy spreads his wings, invites Rachel Abernathy, from the adjoining farm across the road, to come into a Lee Kernaghan concert in Moora with him. She readily accepts. Her eldest brother, a rather Oklahoma Judd type, comes over to have a heart to heart with Tommy. He would prefer her to go out with someone landed and gets a bit nasty. Tommy is

filling out rapidly and the healthy outdoor life he is leading, is making him strong and confident.

“Lester,” he says. “Back off. It’s your sister’s business and there’s such a thing as an overprotected teenager in country districts. She’s entitled to a look at life.”

“Bastard,” Lester says and swings a punch at Tommy. Tommy, in his life on the streets, has seen fights and he’s observant. He doesn’t have to even punch Lester, just leverages his arm and throws the fellow flat on his back. He’s winded.

“Where the hell did you learn that?” he asks. Tommy laughs.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you. Here, I’ll help you up.”

The concert is fun and the Abernathy’s accept him as a pop in visitor. He hasn’t any intention of making Rachel a steady, but they have fun when they do go out.

Vern moves off the farm to take over his Dad’s property at Badgingarra. McNaught offers Tommy the job. Tommy accepts, provided Vern continues to class the rams for their closed stud. It’s a daughter stud of Jaloran at Wagin and they sell on property once a year and the odd ones that don’t sell, go up to Weedarra Station as station drafts. They avoid all the falderal of the stereo-typed stud breeder and make a deal of money from this sideline.

Chapter Three

Tommy believes in making do, never pressures McNaught for capital items. McNaught realises they need some bigger gear and it’s damned expensive. He raises this with Tom, who says, “I have a better idea.”

Jim McAuley, their adjoining neighbour, has emphysema and cropping is getting a bit beyond him, though he can handle the sheep work. He outlines his plan to McNaught, who is impressed and says, “We’ll give it a go.”

Tommy mizzles over to McAuleys, and has a heart to heart. The upshot is Tommy gets his hands on the big versatile tractor that McAuley is getting past driving, teams it with two big combines hooked up by a Reece hitch and with a smallish Cole bin, puts in the crop on the two properties very economically. He services all the gear at the end of seeding and returns it.

“What about harvest?” McAuley asks. “Neither of our headers are too flash.”

Tommy replies,

“One of my cricketing mates has a New Holland machine sitting in the hay shed of a farm they bought six years back. They’re into big Johnnies and chaser bins and haven’t even thought of using this machine. Let’s buy it between the two farms, but at the same time service one of the old ones in case I’m wrong.”

McAuley has a new lease of life with Tommy helping out.

“Jesus, Tommy,” he says. “You’re wasting your time sparking Rachel Abernathy. There are five boys on the property and the most she is likely to get as a wedding dowry is a vacuum cleaner. By comparison I have an unattached daughter, a lawyer at that, who would come with a very good farm in time and a useful farm adviser in the interim.” Tommy laughs.

“Not looking for a wife,” he says. “Mum’s a great cook.”

“Ah,” says old McAuley. “You are not keeping your eyes open Tom. Bill Higgins, up at Walebing, thinks she would make an excellent wife.”

“Hmmm,” says Tommy. “He’s a big cocky, maybe I can wiggle my way into that deal.”

McAuley, who due to his affliction, has been getting both down and depressed, says, "Christ, Tommy, you have brought new purview on life into my life since you popped over. Don't write my suggestion off. Come over to lunch Sunday."

"No can do," says Tommy. "Cricket, but Sunday tea is okay." Thus, he has a good look at McAuley's only child, Megan, who is indeed a good sort.

"Megan," he says. "It's so nice to meet you. Do you know your Dad is offering me your hand in marriage, subject to me signing a prenuptial agreement, that leaves you with the farming assets intact and me with all the work, to be done under his direction." She laughs merrily.

"Sounds like Dad," she says. "His family comes from Fifeshire you know." McAuley grins, "What sort of a deal do you have with McNaught, Tom?" he says. "You seem to be making a good fist of his farm."

"Keep and pocket money," Tommy says. "Also use of the farm Tojo."

"Hmmm," McAuley says. "He's getting you very cheap."

"Well," Tommy says. "Thanks to McNaught, I'll never be short of employment in rural Australia and I owe him just so much. He's a pleasure to work with."

"Well, I was hoping you might consider moving over here to Melrose and work with us."

"No need," says Tommy. "Your cropping is easy peasy to fit in and I can always strike a blow on the sheep, if you need me, but with the mechanical side out of the way, you'll find the sheep side easy. Sheep you know, grow wool 24 hours a day." They all laugh and have a pleasant evening.

"What about dinner in Moora?" Tommy says when leaving. "Bring your Dad too, in case a racial riot occurs at the Drover's during dinner."

"Fine," she says. "I'll be back up to the farm for a week next month and we can catch up then."

Chapter Four

McNaught's farm is well boundary fenced, heavy posts and rabbit netting surviving well from the thirties. However, the internal fencing is shot and only Tommy and Vern's efforts to dummy these up, has kept them standing. Heaps of new materials now start arriving on the property. Steel posts, treated pine strainers and rolls and rolls of ringlock.

"It's like this," Bob McNaught says. "You're running the place on the smell of an oily rag and I thus need some tax deductions. The fencing team that has been working on the Halls Creek place, are coming down in a couple of weeks to make a start on replacing all the inside fences."

They duly arrive along. Among the five man crew, are a couple of Indigenous chaps. Big Paddy is a runty and very black chap, born and bred on Kildurk Station, once a Durack property. Little Paddy is an immensely tall and well built desert native. They are, of course, pretty well Westernised. The first working day, Tommy and Bob McNaught are walking down to the quarters where the gang is camped. The two Paddies have laid a long, fire-blackened spear on the ground as a marker and are barefoot. They explain they are entering the Halls Creek spear-throwing event next month and are keeping their hand in. Tommy is wearing trainers, carrying his work boots in his hand.

"Ave a go, Mr Tommy," they say. As Tommy drops his boots and picks up a long spear, an inner voice tells him that what he is about to embark on is totally significant. He dismisses the inner voice, balances on the balls of his feet, starts his

fast run up and throws the spear near out of sight. The Indigenous are gobsmacked and say,

“That’s better than any Yamatgee throw we’ve seen. Must be a fluke. Try again.” Tommy does so and goes even further. McNaught is similarly gobsmacked.

“Gawd, Tommy,” he says. “I’ll ring up WAIS for a used javelin. You could be throwing for your country.”

And he does.

He goes to the Commonwealth Games in Vancouver later that year, only McNaught with him. He wins and sets a world record. He goes to Beijing, complete with a huge team of supporters. All the Abernathys go, McAuley and the lawyer, half his cricket team, his mother and her new farming husband and ‘the cream on the cake’, Big and Little Paddy. They tell a pair of Americans in the stands, “We taught him all he knows”. Which is stretching things a bit. The Americans laugh.

“Gawd,” Hiram says later, “Down in Alabama, the Klan used to string up people that looked like that.”

Tommy stands on the winners dias, hand on his heart, as the crowds go mad. The shiny gold medal hangs lightly on his jacket front. A street kid has gone indelibly into the record book. The Channel 7 sports commentator, who spends much of the AFL season trying to make out what imprecations players are flinging at one another through lip reading, is looking very intently at Tommy through his hi-definition sports glasses.

“Is he actually singing the words?” the second stringer asks. The commentator says,

“No, he seems to be singing, ‘Gold, Gold, Bloody Gold.’”