

Andrew Milson

GREAT LIKE DENNIS LILLEE

Miguel's fifth birthday was his last in the village of Higuera, concealed by the sodden, echoing mountains of eastern Bolivia. After that, all celebrations took place at twenty-four Smith Crescent, a house of fibro with two bedrooms that were divided between Miguel, his three sisters, mother and father.

The grey paling fence that imprisoned the back yard wavered on the northern side under the weight of the passionfruit vine. In the centre of the lawn protruded a galvanized tap with an incurable drip, the grass beside it rich, but brown and desiccated beyond—until seeing this, Miguel had no idea that grass could be anything but green.

The numbers of the houses went up in twos, enshrining to neighbours the notion of distance. In twenty-six lived Dot and Ron Wilson. Dot's hair fluctuated between blue and mauve and occasionally she'd stand on a milk crate to pass over a cellophane-sealed plate of her award-winning lamingtons. Ron moved slowly about the yard, always wearing his white singlet and brown shorts, defeated stomach and permanent sunburn. "Jesus Christ!" he would say often but Miguel knew that his neighbour never attended church, five minutes away by car.

At the end of their street was an oval, encircled by eight eucalyptus trees; spartan and aloof with smooth, unclimbable trunks. In summer the oval was the domain of the cricketers. All players wore white, irrespective of which team they belonged to. This permeated to the game a sense of timelessness, of never changing.

It was a game of restraint, control and suppression. All day out there in the sun, wives and children on the boundary following the flawed shade of the gum trees. At the end of a game, it was rarely obvious which team, if any, had been victorious.

At school Miguel became aware that cricket was important. Everyone knew who was in the team and everyone knew that Doug Cunningham was the best cricketer in the grade, capable of bowling an inswinger and setting a field all by himself. Mr O'Leary, the principal, inducted Doug as school captain and

said that he "was made of leadership material." He said other things too but they were inaudible, for the portable microphone crackled under a gusting westerly, so strong it sent loose papers into delirious airborne spirals and forced Miss Green to place a preventative hand on her shortish tartan skirt.

After cricket, fighting ranked next on the ladder of importance. Miguel was lucky to be seated next to Jimmy Smith, unbeaten behind the toilet block and in the school car park. Miguel helped Jimmy with maths, allowed him prolonged glimpses of his work during the weekly tests and soon they were friends. Other boys were suddenly wary of Miguel and now only called him the names from a distance, the same names they hurled and spat at the Italian, Greek and Turkish children.

Six days of the week his father worked in the factory and, until discovering the East Hills Workers' Club, his day off would be spent lying on the bed; not sleeping, just staring at the roof, fully clothed and slowly smoking his way through a packet of cigarettes. On one such day he called for Miguel to come into the bedroom.

What do you remember about Higueras? His father asked, his eyes still directed at the ceiling.

I remember how it was sometimes misty all day and there was a stream that ran beside the village and we had to be careful when we played near it, he answered.

Yes, the water ran down the hill véry quickly, his father confirmed.

And I remember the monkeys and at night we could hear the growl of the jaguar. Sometimes I thought he was right outside the window.

Do you remember what happened just before we had to leave? His father asked, his tired eyes drifting down to Miguel.

I remember there was a man who the soldiers had killed and they laid him out in the church, Miguel said.

No, they laid him out in the school building, his father corrected. The school was next to the church.

Oh. Why did they lay him out in the school?

For everyone to see, as a warning to certain men, his father said.

I remember how the women were all crying, even mother, and some of them cut pieces of his hair. But he wasn't a man from our village, was he?

No he wasn't, he was a man called Che.

Why were they cutting his hair?

Because he was a great man. He was truly a great man. Seremos como el Che!—that's what we used to say. Be like Che!

His father reached for a cigarette and said nothing more.

Quietly Miguel left the room, walking sideways and watching his father who was again staring to the ceiling.

The next day Miguel hit fifteen runs in the school cricket game, though by that stage his team-mates had begun to call him "Mick." In the field he covered the deep mid-wicket boundary where tufts of grass injected an unpredictable streak into a rolling ball. Standing there, he thought about what his father had said and wondered if Che was great like Dennis Lillee, or maybe Rod Marsh. After the game he and Jimmy Smith took off their white shirts and went tadpole hunting down in Noll's creek, though really it was only a series of ponds and puddles, one linked to the next by a path of parched and scaled mud.