

Most kids spend their summers outback of their parent's house, or on video games with friends. Maybe a few experience camp, where their devices disappear, so they get a taste of real living.

Real living is dirty and it has a tendency to hurt. I should know, I had been doing a lot of it lately.

Do you see the size of this shiner? And don't even ask me what kind of meat this is that's taking down the swelling, because I can't name half of the animals I've seen out here.

Oh, this? No big deal. Just a boxing match with a Kangaroo. We're friends now.

Jake's not all that bad, just has a tendency to make people sea sick.

Uncle Mascoby had hollered to me, "Don't look eem direct in the eye, Mate. You'll agitate eem!"

I couldn't think of how anyone could possibly do that if they tried. With the way he was bobbing up and down, it felt as if he were trying to hypnotize me.

Have you ever seen a snake charmer swaying gently to confuse a cobra?

Yeah, well, that does not work with Marsupials.

"What in the bloey heck are you doin', Mate?"

By then we had drawn a crowd. Uncle Mascoby's friends, outside of the Rustic Neath, were in no shape to help a teenage boy in corduroys through his comical first-time run-in with the *real* Outback's wildlife. However, they were sufficiently armed with enough whoops and hoots to cheer on a nest of owls. All the fellas stamping feet was just kicking up more dust into the air.

"Have at 'em then," one yelled.

Down Under, everything is dust. Dirt and dust. If it's anything else, it's gnats.

Uncle Mascoby was actually trying to help a little, if only to be sure he returned me home to Mom in one piece.

"Get down on all fours lad, you'll be less threatnin!"

Mascoby, because that's what he liked me to call him, had once told me that eventually the gnats wouldn't bother me.

'Eventually you learn to suck in a mouthful and spit 'em all out in the same breath. Then ya won't even notice they're there,' he'd once said.

That was exactly what I was attempting while I cautiously eased down onto all fours. I was surprised when the animal came down to my level.

The hoots and cheers went silent, and for a brief moment I shared a few inches of gnat filled existence face to face with Jake.

And then ... he punched me in the face.