

## “Watermelon” By J. B. Ringer

Nick’s watermelon patch lay right beside the road. All that separated us from the fruit was a shallow ditch overhung by paspalum and three rusty strands of barbed wire. We looked at those melons longingly as we scuffed past each hot weekday afternoon. We yearned after them, Jack and I, until the whole summer’s dust seemed to settle at the back of our throats. Only cool, stolen watermelon flesh could satisfy that kind of dryness.

The problem was, the field lay in full view of Nick’s bach. And, as the melons ripened, Nick always seemed to be there. Every evening, every weekend, he was in his garden, carrying water, rustling through the corn to snap off ripened cobs, or bending over a hoe clearing the last crackling rows of peas.

If he wasn’t in the garden itself, then Nick would be pottering about his bach, hammering away at something, scraping the weatherboards

ready for painting, puttying a window or, more often, just sitting on the verandah steps sharpening tools. He had a lot of these: three or four each of spades, hoes and mattocks. He used to line them up on the verandah and sit there for hours sharpening them, using a file and a whetstone, rubbing at the steel with smooth, careful strokes.



Nick, everyone called him Nick. You couldn’t pronounce his real name – or we didn’t try to. Nick was Polish. He had fought in the war, Dad told us, first against the Russians, then against the Germans, and been a prisoner in between, and come to New Zealand afterwards. His part of Poland had gone to the Russians; I suppose he

felt there was nothing left for him there. Nick had some medals, Dad said, but we never saw them. We made up stories about how he got them, killing Nazis, bloody stories, adding gory details every time we told them.

But we didn’t talk much to Nick, no more than we could avoid. We didn’t mind his accent, all hisses and splutters. That made us laugh behind his back. Out of his hearing, we’d imitate the way he spoke, spitting and chuckling.

It was his eyes that scared us, black and expressionless. There was a white scar too, that started half-way down his forehead, burrowed into the eye-socket at the corner of his left eye, and emerged to throw up a furrow across his cheekbone. Curiously, the eye itself was unmarked, but it was dead, I think. Nick never smiled, at least I never saw him smile – only once.

Jack and I used to raid the gardens and orchards of every farm

within a mile of our place. We filled our bellies with green plums and peaches and nectarines, with sour apples, with gritty peas scooped from the pod with our teeth. If there was nothing else, we stole carrots, wiping the earth off roughly on our shirts. But we never touched anything belonging to Nick.

Never, that is, until the summer he cleared the upper part of his garden, near the bridge, and planted watermelons. That was the summer we grew up a bit, or thought we had, and decided that Nick was a challenge we had to face.

Once in a while, in the afternoon when we came down the road, Nick wasn't in sight. Then we'd stop by the bridge, lean over the railings, drop twigs in the stream, and toss rocks into the scum on top of the pools. We shoved and punched at each other, wrestled a bit, pretended to trip each other on the dusty planks. All the time we watched the bach, trying to work out if Nick was there. We'd imagine him peering from behind the blinds, or standing hidden in the shadows of his dark windows. We knew

we'd have time to cross the ditch, grab a watermelon and run, but, if he was watching, we wouldn't have time to get away.

At intervals, we mustered up the courage to try. We persuaded ourselves that Nick wasn't there after all, that he must have gone fishing or gone into town. We moved step by step towards the ditch, reached across to grasp a fencepost, steadied ourselves ready to jump. But at the last moment, as the wire strained and twanged,



one of us would always call out, "Watch out! He's there!"

And we'd scuttle back to the bridge, melonless, and drop twigs in the stream again and bombard them with gravel, and swear at each other.

After a while, we'd give up and straggle home. As we passed the bach, Nick usually came out to the front step, settled himself down, and sat there watching us. We'd wave unwillingly; he'd wave back. Or he'd come right down to his gate, lean over it, and look at us expressionless as we went past.

"G'day, Nick!"

"How are you, boys?"

Once, once only, he called us over.

"Your mother like some peaches?"

He held out a paper bag full of them. I took it gingerly, almost dropping it.

"Careful!"

"Sorrigh! Thanks, Nick!"

"Yeah, thanksalot, Nick!"

We headed up our drive, munching, peach juice dribbling down our chins, tossing stones well out of sight into the bush on either side. The peaches were good. But it was watermelon we really wanted.

So we planned a night raid. I took the alarm-clock to bed and set it for 2 o'clock. The pillow muffled its shrilling, but it was still loud enough to wake

us. We pulled on some clothes and slipped out of the window. We took a torch, but there was enough moonlight not to need it. Making a wide detour across the fields, we came at the watermelon patch from the back. Yards away, we could see the fruit glistening among the vines. I was about to hop over the last fence when Jack suddenly grabbed my arm. "Hsshshhshst!" We dropped flat on the grass. After a few moments I lifted my head cautiously. Over by the plum tree nearest the patch was a tall figure outlined by the moon.

There seemed no point in not walking back down the road.

"Out late, boys?"

"Yeah. We've been after possums."

We felt pretty silly; neither of us was carrying a gun.

"You've got nothing?" Nick sounded really concerned. "That's a pity. Hey, help yourself to some plums."

And he strode off towards the bach.

We took up his offer of the plums but, even using the torch, we couldn't find more than

half a dozen, and those were over-ripe.

We had to have the melons, or one melon at least. That summer Jack had been learning to drive. It might have been watching *Z-Cars* that gave us the idea: we planned a motorised raid.

One Saturday, Dad and Mum went out with a friend in the friend's car. They always hid the spare car keys when they went out, just in case, but we knew the place: inside one of Dad's shoes in the wardrobe. Jack got the



old Standard 10 out of the garage, graunching it only slightly against the side, in the usual place. The Standard could be a bit temperamental, and Jack was a bit uncertain about gear-changes. For practice, and to make sure everything was running smoothly, we took the car as far as the main road, then turned back to the house.

The next few minutes replay themselves often in my mind.

This is it! This time!

Jack revs the engine, we roar down the drive.

Before we are even out of the trees the Standard is in third, lurching and bucking on the gravel. I keep an eye on Nick's bach. No one in sight. The Standard hits a bump and my head jerks around.

"Keep on the road!"

"Shut up!"

Jack is hunched over the wheel, frowning, tense. I glance back at the bach. All of a sudden Nick is there, on the verandah, scrabbling amongst his tools.

"Nick! Nick's coming!"

"We'll make it!"

We are opposite the melon patch. The car skids to a halt. I already have the door open, and leap out.

I hurdle both ditch and fence, twisting in the air as I cross the wire. Grabbing the nearest melon – no time to choose the best – I wrench it free and turn for the car. Vines crunch beneath my feet. I stumble and drop the melon. It rolls under the fence. I crawl after

it, catching my shirt on a barb, but ripping it free. I scoop the melon out of the ditch and, clutching it to my ribs, tumble into the car.

Nick is now half-way across the patch, shouting, waving a mattock in the air. We'll make it! Jack has the motor revving. He lets the clutch out and slams down the accelerator. The Standard leaps forward – and stalls.

“You little shit!”

Jack, hand on the key, pumps furiously at the pedals. The engine catches, and dies again.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!”

The fence twangs. Dropping the melon on the seat, I fling open the door and race up the road. The gravel pricks at my bare feet. Way past the bridge, winded, hearing nothing behind me, I stop and turn. The car is still where it stalled, in the middle of the road. Jack is a few yards from it, half-way across the bridge, going as fast as he can, but with the melon in his arms.

Just beyond the bridge, Nick reaches

him. He comes up beside him, breaking stride. His arms swing in one smooth motion back and around, the mattock coming with and beyond them in an arc. The end of its blade glints. There is a tearing, a thump, a curious “splosh”.

Jack is on his knees on the road. There is red on his arms and his chest, a red mess dripping from him onto the dust. I take a few involuntary steps towards him, stop, take a few more. Melon pulp. It's pulp smeared all over him, pieces of green rind are scattered on the road.



Jack is crying and laughing at the same time, gurgling at the back of his throat, trying to say something. I can't help myself. I curl up on the long grass and wildflowers beside the road, threshing about, giggling madly. The fit stops. I get up. My stomach has gone all

hollow and cold.

Nick is standing there beside Jack, mattock in hand, tapping the blade gently against his boot. We look at each other, silent. Dust pricks at the inside of my nose. My mouth is dry. I feel my shoulders shaking.

Then Nick grins. For the first time ever, I see Nick grin. We look at each other a few moments more. Nick's smile fades, he turns and swings away down the road. I watch him, his lean back and legs, the puffs of dust his boots make as they scrape along. Just beyond the bridge, he pauses and turns.

“Hey!” he calls. “If you boys want a watermelon, you know, all you have to do is ask!”

