Reportage:
A cry in the night
Reporter:
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It was a cry of many voices. It sounded like anger, or lament. It was past eleven o'clock on the night of November 28, 2007 and I was in my study, tucked into the roof of my house, preparing to close down my computer and my mind. I looked out of the window. The noise had come from down the hill. It had been a hot day – more than thirty degrees – and night had fallen like a warm sheet. The golden arches of the McDonald’s had only just been switched off, but the public housing flats still seemed to glow in the heat left by the western sun. Bright lights are mounted above these blocks and the white squares of windows in concrete walls make wakefulness a public thing, visible across the suburb. As I prepared for bed, it was clear that people were still up, trying to rid their flats of heat. Over there, night never really arrives. Nothing happens that is not illuminated.

Then the wail of many voices stopped, replaced by a single voice shouting. Then that stopped too. It was possible to believe – and, sleepy as I was, I did choose to believe this – that what I had heard were sounds made by friends leaving one of the fast food restaurants on Racecourse Road, or the normal noisy acts of self-assertion of the crowd from our award-winning Irish-themed pub – ironically called The Quiet Man.

I turned the computer off, went down the stairs and cleaned my teeth. Now there was only the hum that you always get from cities: not only traffic, not only voices but the beat of thousands of people living next to each other. I barely registered my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I went to bed.

The next morning, I found out what had happened – or at least a version of events. The cry in the night had made the radio news and the national newspapers.

I live in Flemington, and like my neighbourhood and its routines. I particularly like the way the weather sweeps across Melbourne’s western suburbs, over Port Philip Bay and across the giant cranes on the docks, to reach us here between city and the famous racecourse which, for one day in November, makes our suburb the centre of national attention. The rest of the time, things are usually mundane. In the morning there is the clatter of kids going to school. Commuting cyclists speed along the stormwater drain – once a creek. They use it as a raceway into the city. At the southern end, it runs under the giant red and yellows posts that mark the end of the
Tullamarine Freeway – the triumphant gateway to the City of Melbourne. Down here under the road bridges, where the red posts are anchored, they are tangled with debris like hair caught in the bristles of a hairbrush. This is the sort of close-up perspective you get when you know a place – when it is home.

Most mornings, the bus from Wesley College – one of Melbourne’s most prestigious private schools – curves through the suburb, picking up kids in purple blazers. Old Italian men come out when the light is still soft to water the crops that grow in their front yards. The life of the main street begins – buying, selling, delivering, displaying and carrying away. Four-wheel drives squeeze into the permit-only parking spaces. The real estate agents drop bait advertising into letterboxes. If we sold, how much money we’d make. So much money! The street trees are dropping their leaves out of season because of the drought. A queue snakes out of the post office. The heroic clerks – Filipino, Vietnamese and Italian – deal with the mail of many small businesses, process banking, sell stationery and mobile phone plans, and help those with insufficient English negotiate the myriad bureaucracies for which they are the human face.

Down at the public housing estate, the owners of plots in the council-funded community garden gather for a delivery of mushroom compost. The garden was featured on Australia’s Best Backyards a while ago. It doesn’t look quite as glossy or cheerful as it did on television, but it is still a place of hope – a practical symbol of the possibility of growth. ‘I come here to escape the towers of hell,’ says Angie, an Anglo-Australian, nodding at the flats. Two Turkish women in headscarves are giving away armloads of lettuce and silver-beet. Their plots, about the size of a single bed, yield more than they can eat now their children have moved to the suburbs. Coral, an Aboriginal woman, says she will point the bone at white people, and laughs when they believe her. ‘I am the matriarch,’ she tells her grandchildren. When they ask her what that means, she tells them to look it up in the dictionary. Angie is growing the leaf crop amaranth, which some people think is a weed. It tends to wander over the plot of her neighbour, an African woman. But the African woman is growing pumpkins, and they also tumble over boundaries. ‘It doesn’t bother her. ‘It doesn’t bother me,’ says Angie. ‘Live and let live.’ In these gardens the female scarecrows wear hijab, and the male scarecrows have beards. More than eighteen languages are spoken. There is Somali and Blene from Ethiopia, Tigre from Eritrea, Vietnamese and Hakka, a Chinese dialect from Vietnam, as well as Farsi from Afghanistan, Greek, Chinese and English. Sometimes in the compost the gardeners find baby mushrooms tightly furled like fleshy pebbles. Whoever is there takes a share.

All this is routine in my suburb. But sometimes things occur that make you take a backward step, and see things differently. Sometimes it seems that the problems of the nation – even the world – are rooted at my back door in this little suburb close to the heart of a major city. This is what the Herald-Sun said happened in my suburb
on the night of November 28, 2007: ‘An attempted arrest descended into a mass brawl last night as police came under attack from up to a hundred youths in Flemington. One officer suffered a bruised chest and ribs as the aggressive crowd turned on police.’

According to that paper, The Australian and talkback radio the next morning, African kids from the flats had thrown rocks at a police car. When the police attempted to talk to a suspect, a mob turned on them: ‘Scores of youths and adults – many believed to be of African descent – surrounded police and attempted to free the men,’ the Herald-Sun reported. More than fifteen police units were needed to dispel the crowd, and four males aged between fourteen and eighteen were arrested, taken to the Moonee Ponds Police Station, then released.

The story was on the news all day, but by the evening other voices were being heard. One of the rock-throwing suspects was an apprentice chef. He had just been dropped off at the flats by his boss, who went on television to say that the police had been over the top and inflammatory.

Meanwhile, up the road at the Flemington-Kensington Community Legal Service, housed in what was once the town hall before council amalgamations threw different communities into one and made the heritage building redundant, solicitor Tamar Hopkins was preparing to add another case to the files.

Since 2005, the legal centre has received thirty-eight complaints of police mistreatment – mostly of African youth. There are constant complaints about young people being stopped and interrogated for no apparent reason. Some say they are asked for their names and addresses up to five times a day. Then there are the more serious complaints – assaults by police. In February 2006, one youth claimed he was searched illegally and forced to drop his jeans and shorts to his ankles in a public place in full view for no specified reason. The police are said to make racist comments: ‘monkey’, ‘nigger’ and ‘go back to Africa’.

More than a dozen of these complaints have been referred to the Office of Police Integrity. Some have been dismissed as unsubstantiated. Others await a result. The legal service has accused some police of running a regime of ‘racially motivated violence’. The legal service has tried – unsuccessfully – to use Freedom of Information to obtain an ‘ethical health’ report on the station by the Police Ethical Standards Department. A particular focus was a senior sergeant employed at the station in 2005 and early 2006 who has since moved on.

Tamar Hopkins says things improved for a while. She had regular coffees with the new senior sergeant; police met young people from the flats, although these exchanges were rarely comfortable. A police officer might ask friendly questions about home life, but be heard differently. ‘How’s your mother?’ is a difficult question to answer when your mother has post-traumatic shock syndrome and your father is lost or at war. Now Hopkins worries about what will happen next.
She has grown increasingly reluctant to make formal complaints. Nothing ever happens, and sometimes it gets worse for the clients. The more vigorously a complaint is pursued, the more vigorously the charges are pursued as well.

Meanwhile, the newspapers run the police version of events more or less uncritically, fuelling Melbourne’s shock-jocks and right-wing columnists. In the lead-up to the noisy exchange on November 28, tensions had been building for some time. A few weeks before, police and young people clashed at the Flemington Community Centre during a hip-hop dance. Rocks and tree branches were thrown, according to police. Anonymous police were quoted in the local papers as saying rocks had been thrown at them, and that young Africans were always ‘baiting’ them.

There is some common ground. Everyone agrees that on this estate of about five thousand people there is a small group of youths – between six and twenty depending on who you speak to – who have fallen out of the school system. They are troubled, jobless, with few prospects, and they cause trouble. In the community gardens, the gardeners share stories. Coral and Angie – both of whom have lived on the estate for more than twenty years – are puzzled by the headlines. The estate is a lovely place to live. People have always lived harmoniously. But they have seen African youths with weapons. The police, they say, have done a lot. They are at the community centre. They run workshops. They take kids on trips and to the football.

Fatma Asir, a Turkish woman who has lived here for decades and who raised her children on the estate, just sucks her teeth and looks away. ‘Too much trouble,’ she says.

Later, the ward councillor – a member of the Green Party – tells me: ‘There are a lot of good people trying to do a lot of good things.’ One of the complaints heard regularly on the estate is that the community centres have moved to cost recovery, meaning weekend programs that occupied bored youths have closed, and groups have to pay more than they can afford just to meet there. This, the councillor says, is being looked at.

A leader of the African community, Berhan Ahmed – a man who arrived as a refugee and has worked his way up from tram conductor to university lecturer – says he doesn’t want to antagonise the police. He doesn’t say so, but seems to regard the legal service as being provocative. And yet there are problems. They cannot be hidden. The events of November 28 have him worried too, and he wants action – and changes – from the police.

The truth is that my suburb is divided. Those bait ads from the real estate agents describe my part of Flemington as ‘Flemington Hill’ or even ‘Flemington Heights’, although there is no slope that cannot be scaled on a bike. Those in my part of the suburb are, in most measurable ways, fortunate and above average. We have high incomes. We live in gentrified, inner suburban houses. We form associations to
protest about traffic in the streets and we adopt street trees and water them through the drought.

Then there is the bottom of the hill. This area is known as Debney Park. The name comes from a family who, decades ago, ran a tannery there. Now it is a sports oval and a public housing estate where about five thousand people live in little under a square kilometre. The most common language in the high-rise flats is Somali, which almost a quarter of the residents speak at home. Just over a third speak either English or Vietnamese at home, and most of the rest speak Cantonese or Arabic. The most common religion on the Flemington public housing estate is Islam – almost half the residents are adherents. Another 20 per cent are Buddhists.

Up on Flemington Hill, Catholicism is our most common religion, but that accounts for less than a quarter of us. Almost a quarter of us have no religious allegiance. We are everything that a prosperous, community-minded suburb should be. Except we engage with only one half of the community.

On Flemington Hill, the population is older than average, and there are many one- and two-person households. At the bottom of the hill, half of all the residents are aged under twenty-five. Down there, life is much more public. There are no backyards, no private places to hang out. There is only one basketball court. There is a primary school at the foot of the flats that takes most of the kids from the estate. Meanwhile, at the other – mainly white – primary school my children attend, more than half go on to private secondary education in other suburbs.

I wrote in Griffith REVIEW 11: Getting Smart about how the local high school, Debney Park Secondary College, is struggling to attract children from the wealthier community after decades of serving the children from the flats. During this campaign, it has seriously been suggested that the school should change its name from Debney Park Secondary College to Flemington Hill High School, as though this will make a difference.

There are a few places where the two communities of Flemington meet: the queue at the post office and the main street. But we tend not to talk. One of my Flemington Hill friends says: ‘I like Flemington because of its diversity. But I don’t know a single African person to speak to.’ People from my part of the community rarely or never set foot on the public housing estate – perhaps from fear, although there is little to be scared of. Perhaps because they don’t wish to intrude. We are all defined by this. Every hill creates a valley.

Yet the estate is a non-threatening place, at least during the day. I have taken to walking through it regularly. It is full of mothers and toddlers, living their lives, on the play equipment; they smile at me as I pass. The women sometimes back away, clearly frightened, if I have the dog, although their toddlers pull against them to pat her. There is no feeling of deliberate exclusion. These women seem keen to make contact, glad to see me, quick to greet me. The police are often visible. It is rare that a day goes
by without me seeing a police car on the estate, but I have never seen any trouble. In the community gardens, it is hard to catch the African women in the act of planting and harvesting. They come early in the morning and late in the evening. This is because many of them are single mothers, and once their children are in school, in order to get government benefits they must work or study, and for them this means English lessons. ‘They are always studying,’ says Ailsa Winfield, the gardens support officer. Nevertheless, in the middle of the day some of them come out and harvest great armfuls of greens for lunch, smile shyly and disappear.

Inspector Nigel Howard of the Moonee Valley Police draws a comparison between the two communities of Flemington. On Flemington Hill, he says in his flat ocker accent, there is ‘serious wealth, lovely homes’. At Debney, poverty and the legacy of trauma coexist. He has recently been to Sydney, to a workshop about better policing of minorities. ‘They don’t have our problem,’ he says. There the refugee communities live in suburbs far from the CBD: ‘This is like having public housing blocks in Rose Bay.’ Does it make it better or worse, I ask, to have wealth and poverty next to each other? ‘It makes it interesting,’ he says, and grins.

Nigel Howard is spoken of with some respect among the elders of the African community. He is the one who has spent hours meeting with them, talking to them, setting up programs, making promises. Then, the day after the cry in the night, they saw and heard him in the media defending what the police had done. Now there is a sense of betrayal. They are angry with him. The gap is too big, they say, between his promises and what actually happens on the beat. Howard, on the other hand, describes the events of that night as a ‘ripple strip’ in the journey to an improved relationship.

Things were going really well, he says, until a few months before the incident. What changed? Howard thinks it was the comment a month before by the then Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews, that Africans have trouble assimilating. ‘I don’t think those comments were helpful at all, but that’s just Nigel Howard’s opinion. You and I might say [he makes a dismissive gesture] … but they brew on those things. You have to go back to the conditions these people have come from, the things they’ve seen. And they are trying to start a new life, they are trying to get their families out here and that comes out from the government, and it’s not helpful.’ He pauses. ‘I have enormous respect for these people, and when you sit down with them and talk to them about what they have seen and experienced – well, we live in a lucky country. If you want to look for blame, the blame here lies fairly and squarely with the federal government. They take all these people in, and they just displace them and dump them. They don’t give the community the opportunity to understand all the issues they bring with them.’

And so what does Nigel Howard think happened on Wednesday, November 28, 2007, on a hot night just a few days after the federal election? He drops into a monologue, a mix of police prose and blokey explanation.
'There was an incident where an object was thrown at a police car as it was driving down Racecourse Road. The members driving had come back, and as they did a U-turn they saw a number of youths running off towards the flats. The youths were wearing white t-shirts. So they’ve come into the carpark and they see a youth in a white t-shirt so they propped him – which anyone would do in our line of work. And immediately there has been this altercation where the youth has started with a barrage of language directed at our members. All they want to do is find out who he is, where he’d come from, was he involved. As it turned out, he’d just been dropped off from work. His employer came over and verified that that had happened so he was exonerated from that particular line of inquiry. However, it’s my understanding he kept going with the language side of things.

‘Now one of the big issues we have – and it’s not only in the community here, it’s across society generally – is the way we speak to each other. I don’t expect my members to stand there and cop the personal abuse … It is personal insults. I don’t think anyone in our society should have to accept that. Our members acted as the law allows them to act and they arrested the youth. Obviously there was a fracas because he was carrying on yelling at the top of his voice and that attracted a mix of about a hundred people, young people and others coming out of the flats … and it became overwhelming for the two members and for two others who attended. Reinforcements were called for. That is the nature of policing. When we come up with a particular code they know you have to be quick. This first youth was arrested and in the back of the van, and there was obviously another incident and which led to further arrests, again related to the language directed at the members.

‘And I think we have to say enough is enough. I am a pretty tolerant person. I’ve been around. I’ve copped the best of it in thirty-one years of policing and probably dished it out a bit from time to time when you have to dish it out when required, but you have to say enough is enough. When the language is directed to you and some of the insults that are made, some of the derogatory remarks that are made – you have to stand up and say “no”. We are not going to tolerate that any more.

‘So they were locked up. Which caused another scene. People came up here. There were allegations that our members were bashing these youths who had been arrested. So members of the community were called into the back where the vans are. Nothing happened. They try to bring up this thing that police took them to the station to bash them. That is the furthest from the truth. There was no bashing.’

It is five o’clock on the Saturday after the cry in the night, and there is a meeting of the African community at the North Melbourne Community Centre to discuss the events of a few days earlier. Everyone is upset and angry, wanting to do something. There is talk of a demonstration outside the police station. Others think that, once more, an attempt must be made to talk to the police, to work with them. The media
are not allowed in. Channel Nine is there. One of the elders asks the cameraman not to film the people going in. He lowers the lens until the elder is out of sight, then starts filming again, making a special effort to catch the people whose dress declares them as African – men in white, loose trousers and smocks, women with veiled faces, only eyes showing. The cameraman ignores those in ordinary Western clothes, and the white people – Tamar Hopkins from the Community Legal Centre and the workers from Jesuit Social Services who have a program based on the estate. African taxi drivers pull up and park, taking an hour off to attend the meeting.

Then the young men who were at the centre of the fracas slouch down the street dressed in t-shirts and baggy pants. They look tiny, puny even. Just kids. They show their bruises. More than three hundred people squeeze into the hall, dozens stand around outside. Those of us outside can hear speeches and clapping, the occasional raised voice.

A young man is sent out to speak to me. Ahmed Dini is often pushed forward as the spokesman, and it is easy to see why. Stick thin, with feline grace, he is enormously articulate. Twenty years old, born in Somalia and raised in a Kenyan refugee camp but educated at Debney Park Secondary College, he has become an unpaid youth leader, even starting his own youth group. He was the City of Moonee Valley’s Young Citizen of the Year. This meeting, he tells me, is the first time the community has come together over police behaviour. Before this, the old people would tell the young men it was their fault they were in trouble with the police.

Now they are angry. He hopes this is the beginning of something new. ‘I am always telling people that in this country we have rights. We want to be Australian. We want to have rights.’ At the same time, he admits: ‘Sometimes young people hear that they are in a free country, and misunderstand this to mean there are no restrictions. I tell them if the police ask for their names, give them your names. You must do this.’

Ahmed Dini has his own history with the police. In February 2006, he was charged with hindering them. That incident, too, began with police searching the estate for youths who had thrown rocks at them. Dini said he was standing thirty metres away holding a cake and a cup of hot chocolate as the police wrestled with a suspect. The police told him to raise his arms, which he did, still holding the cake and mug. An officer hit him in the face with a torch and dislodged three teeth. The police claimed Dini had been running towards them to interfere in the arrest, and that a forearm had accidentally caught him in the chest. Magistrate Charlie Rozencwajg believed Dini. He said several aspects of the police case were ‘curious’ – why he would be running over to interfere in an arrest holding a cup of hot chocolate, and how did that chocolate spill on to their clothes? The charges were dismissed, and now Dini plans to sue for damages. ‘We have rights,’ he says.
It is a lesson he learned at high school – the same school the locals wanted to rename Flemington Hill High. Ahmed Dini has other criticisms of his old school. It suspends too many students, he says, leaving them ‘lost’ and on the street. Sometimes these young men ring him at night, talking about their nightmares. Dini thinks counselling is the answer. He is reading psychology books at night. Does he want to go to university and become a lawyer or a psychologist? That would mean studying, he says, and leaving the estate, where he is needed. He has quit his job as a union organiser to spend more time with the African youth in the flats. Maybe one day he will go to university.

As we stand talking on the footpath outside the community meeting, a police divisional van drives by, turns and comes back. During the two hours of the meeting in North Melbourne, police cars pass four times. A police helicopter circles overhead. ‘They can’t leave us alone,’ says one of the women. Perhaps it is just a coincidence, but the Africans believe they are under surveillance. Another police car goes by, and the policewoman in the passenger seat smiles wryly and raises a hand in a languid wave. I feel a stab of sympathy for her. There is no way she will be greeted with anything but hostility. Later, I hear the police have thrown a sausage sizzle for the African youths in the flats nearby. Some of the kids ate the sausages, once they were satisfied that they were halal. Others refused. The police are being boycotted until they apologise for November 28. Ahmed Dini understood the sausage sizzle as a mute gesture: the police won’t apologise, but they know something went wrong.

So what happened on that night? A few days later, in the sparse meeting room at the base of one of the blocks of flats, Ahmed Dini introduces me to Mubarek Mussa, the eighteen-year-old apprentice chef who was at the centre of the fracas. Mussa was coming home from his job behind the scenes at Café Italia, in Carlton’s restaurant strip. He says he was walking from his boss’s car to the block where he lives when the police car screeched into the estate. He says they yelled at him: ‘Get over here you black cunt.’ Mussa yelled back: ‘Why are you bothering me? I am not doing anything. I just want to go to bed.’

‘Did you swear?’ I ask. He drops his eyes and shrugs. Dini tells me separately that he thinks there may well have been language. ‘It would have been something like, “I didn’t throw the fucking rock, why are you coming after me, you cunt?” That’s why the officers arrested them, that’s apparently it. But you don’t have to bash them. Some people are going to abuse you in your life.’

Mussa says that after this exchange he turned to walk away and the police grabbed him and pushed him on the ground, smashing his head. By then there were two police cars. Younger boys were nearby on the play equipment – one of them Mussa’s relation. They came running over, and the police jumped on them too. Women
watching began to yell, and people came out of the hot flats. Suddenly there were many, many police – up to five on each of the young men. Mussa was being bashed and his boss was running to tell the police that he had just been dropped off from work.

‘Do you know who bashed you?’ I ask. When there are five police on top of you, it is difficult to tell, he says.

Every Friday lunchtime, the Somali Women’s Association meets at the foot of the flats to sew, pray and chat. Fadumo Hassan is a woman with a careworn face; she is entirely clothed in black and brown. She does not speak good English, though she clearly understands a great deal. She is prepared to be a witness in court for the young men if it comes to that. She does not want to be photographed.

Through an interpreter, Hassan tells me what she saw. She had been visiting a friend, and was on her way back across the estate to the neighbouring block where she lives. Another friend was with her. She saw a police car and a boy with a backpack. The police called the boy over – she didn’t hear the words, but he seemed to be protesting. Then there were two police cars, and the police were out of the car and grabbing the boy, who had begun to go up the stairs into the flats. They threw him from the stairs on to the ground, pushed him on to the floor and (she breaks momentarily into English) ‘stepped on him’. She and her friend began to yell. ‘We were saying: “Why are you doing this? What do you want with him?”’

The police told her to shut up. ‘My head was spinning, I was screaming and crying.’ Then she makes a gesture – a hand whooshing over her head. She is describing how suddenly there were many police. What she says translates as ‘they flowed over us’. And three ‘little boys’ who had been on the play equipment were being pushed to the ground and squirted with capsicum spray. A policewoman threatened her and her friend with the spray. ‘She said: “Go away, you are not helping your people. Go away. Or you will be in trouble.”’ Her friend’s robes were wet with capsicum spray. And now other people had come down and were yelling and the boys’ mothers were crying. The police were yelling, ‘and we were saying, please talk to us, tell us why you are doing this’.

That hot night, Ahmed Dini was in Footscray with another youth worker, Youssif Mohammed. About the time I heard the cry from down the hill, he got a call on his mobile phone: ‘They’re getting bashed, they’re getting bashed.’ He jumped in a car and drove as quickly as possible to the estate to find the cops and the youths gone, mothers crying.

Dini and Mohamed from the Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups drove with Ahmed Ahmed, who works for Jesuit Social Services, to the police station. Three of the four people arrested were juveniles – two aged sixteen, and one aged fourteen. Mussa is eighteen. For about half an hour, the youth workers
hung around the station, telling police the youths were under age and could not be interviewed without a guardian present. ‘We have rights.’ Dini and Mohamed were asked for their names and addresses – as though they were in the wrong. Mohamed gave the police his business card. One of the officers looked at it and asked: ‘Have you ever been in trouble with the police?’

Then, quite quickly, the young people were released. Nobody got much sleep that night.

I told Inspector Nigel Howard Fadumo Hassan’s version of events, and said those who witnessed the event had thought the amount of force used had been excessive. He agrees that might have been how it appeared, but ‘the force we use is not disproportionate to the force that is applied to us. If a certain amount of force is used, we obviously use a bit more to get the upper hand. Things like handcuffing, our members are taught to take people to the ground, to cuff them etc., etc. Some people come compliantly and other people don’t … People see a scuffle on the ground and say that’s excessive force … You have to understand the nature of policing and what we have gone through since the mid-1980s; the way we police has changed. The public have upped the ante, we have to up the ante in return. Now we have extendable batons, spray, Smith and Wesson firearms, we have different options to use.’

The capsicum spray was used, he says, because youths were running at police. ‘Based on what I have been told I don’t think it was excessive, but members of the community would.’ He has had too many police officers from his station injured this year. ‘We are not here to be the battering ram for members of society. Sorry. I don’t come to work each day expecting to be belted around.’

But isn’t it part of policing to defuse situations, rather than escalate them, I ask. He agrees. ‘At the end of the day you weren’t there and I wasn’t there and situations develop very, very quickly … Ten minutes’ volatility is pretty full on … It’s very easy to step back in a glass case and criticise, but unless you are actually there and you are involved in the situation it’s very, very easy to pass judgement. But if you are there, Johnny on the spot, and placed in pretty dire circumstances, you’ve got to act on your feet. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, I bet Kevin Andrews thinks that too. But when you are placed in this situation, you have got to act.’

Charges will be laid, he says. The courts can sort it out.

It seems to me that two things are clear from these largely consistent versions of events. First, the police must indeed have been ‘overwhelmed’, perhaps frightened, by the screaming and the shouting and the crowd. The back-up they called for – using an emergency code – came flying in with aggression. Yet it is also clear that, had the police not intervened that night, none of this would have happened. There is no
reason to think any of the young people involved would have done anything wrong. Mussa would probably have gone to bed. So too the kids on the play equipment, once the flats had cooled down enough. Now all of them will probably face charges. While the kids may not have responded well when the police arrived, there is no doubt that the charges they will probably face are the direct result of the police having ‘propped’ the wrong man. And now, in the media, the people on the estate – mothers, fathers and grandmothers – have seen themselves reported as having been a ‘mob’ and having turned on police. It is not surprising that the mood is sullen. In the weeks after these events, meetings with the police were boycotted. The Africans on the estate wanted an apology.

Howard takes a deep breath. At the end of the day, he thinks things are improving on the estate. They will overcome this. He lists the things the police have been doing to try to improve relationships: working with council on a capacity-building project, to improve the ability of the people on the estate to represent themselves before council and government. Police have partnered with Essendon Football Club, and organised GoalKick and Ozkick programs to get young men involved in Aussie rules. They have helped run homework clubs, organised trips to the police academy, and encouraged some young men to join the force. Nigel Howard has talked to the Victorian Automobile Chamber of Commerce to try to get apprenticeships. Last year, police from the station took ten Year Eleven students from Debney Park Secondary College on the punishing trek up the Kokoda Trail, all expenses paid. The camaraderie was enormous. One of the students appeared on the front page of the PNG newspaper *The National*. Google the words ‘Debney’ and ‘Kokoda’ and media releases pop up, from school, the government and the police – ‘Police Make a Difference at Flemington Flats’. Howard says: ‘If people say Victoria Police aren’t doing things for the community, they need to come in here and take the blinkers off because I think we are doing a hell of a lot.’ It is impossible to doubt his sincerity.

And yet someone in a position to observe Howard closely tells me she wasn’t surprised by the trouble in November. A few weeks before, she had talked to him and noticed seemed to be showing signs of fatigue – not compassion fatigue but engagement fatigue. At the end of our interview, it is there again. Many of the things Howard does are not police work as he understands it: ‘At the end of the day there are only twenty-four hours in a day. I am one person. I am doing a lot of driving, but at the end of the day I will say I have other areas of responsibility. Liquor licensing laws. Christmas coming up. The road toll … At the end of the day I have a wife and three lovely kids at home who I have to look after as well.’

I ask him about the claims that police are always on the estate, stopping kids and asking them for their names. And what about the allegations that the kids get called ‘monkey’ and ‘nigger’? Howard says: ‘If that’s going on, tell me the people who are saying it and I will deal with them. They will be out of here in a flash. That is straight-out racist. I will not cop those kinds of comments. I will not. At the same time, let’s go
back to some of the things they call my people.’ As for the claims of harassment: ‘It’s about intelligence gathering. Knowing who is around in the community, where you have crime being committed, so you have an intelligence database. It’s about building the knowledge of our people, so that I know that’s Nigel Howard or Bill Smith or Joanne Lee or whoever they are … so when we see them we can say: “Hi, Margaret, how are you going?”’

He is adamant that Africans are not stopped any more than other people. The problem is that in the public housing estate there are thousands of people – a whole town – in a square kilometre. It may seem the police are there all the time, but it is simply that in the crowded space normal policing makes them visible.

Nevertheless, in the community stories of police harassment and worse are everywhere. Talking to the Somali women, I hear dozens of stories – admittedly most of them at third hand. ‘It is as though we are back in the war in Somalia,’ one says. And another comments: ‘The police say they want to work with us, but how can we when there is no trust?’ And there is a story circulating – not possible to pin down – that one of the girls on the Kokoda Trail trip was stopped by police who were on the trek with her, asked for her name and address, and as they drove away given a one-finger salute. Whether or not this story is true, it is circulating and widely believed.

Everyone agrees there are problems with the ‘lost’ kids as Ahmed Dini calls them, or ‘dispossessed’ as Nigel Howard describes them. All agree they represent a minority. Last year someone deliberately set fire at the Debney Meadows Primary School – although parents from the estate are sure this was the work of outsiders. On another occasion, the recently refurbished park neighbouring the flats was doused with kerosene and set alight, and newly planted trees were torn up.

But the police display problems too. In January, my husband saw a young woman carrying a hand-gun in the street. She was getting into a car – there was no sign of trouble. Alarmed, we rang the police station to let them know, with a description and number plate. It turned out she was a plain-clothes cop. Was she meant to have her gun on display? ‘She has to have it handy in case she needs to use it in self-defence,’ we were told. And this was on the shopping street in the middle of the day, with no trouble in sight.

The school comes in for criticism as well. Why does it suspend young people, leaving them with nowhere to go, no prospects? Principal Michael O’Brien knows Dini and most of the young men in this story. He has taught them. He expels very few of his students – just five over the last three years: including three Africans, one Caucasian and one Asian. These are better figures than many high schools. The lesser penalty of suspension, on the other hand, is an ‘intervention’ he uses quite frequently and successfully. For every story of a ‘lost’ teenager, he has one of troubled youth brought back to finish school and go on to university. O’Brien sees the work he does as part of nation-building – teaching the habits of citizenship that can make this community, and this country, work.
He suggests that, ‘for a balanced view’, I talk to Khadra Ahmed, whose children attended his school. She now works at the Debney Meadows Primary School as a teacher’s aide and when we meet she tells me more stories. She had no problem with Debney Park Secondary College, but she is worried about police harassment. She remembers her son, who had just finished his VCE exams, crossing the estate to visit his grandmother. He was stopped and questioned by police. The pressure, she says, is constant.

As for Nigel Howard’s claim that the African boys are not stopped and questioned any more than other citizens, living in this suburb it is impossible to believe him. I see the boys getting off the train in their private school uniforms. I see the drunks under the railway bridge, not to mention the classier drunks wending their way up to the tram stop during the spring racing carnival, high-heeled shoes in hand. It is simply not possible to believe that they are treated in the same way.

I have a plot at the community gardens – but it is a different community garden to the one at the foot of the flats. Mine is full of aged Italians and Greeks, who have moved on and up since their migration long ago. They look at my sheet mulching method of improving soil fertility – a kind of compost heap built on the soil, left to rot and find its own way into the soil structure – and snort. There are no short cuts, they say. I should dig in double trenches. You dig one out, fill it with compost, vegetable scraps, lawn clippings – ‘whatever you have’ – then fill it with the earth from the next trench, and so on. You have to work the soil. Double digging is the answer, they say, to good root penetration.

In the garden at the foot of the flats, though, putting down roots is more complicated. There was a previous garden on this site, but it was closed down when they discovered the soil was contaminated – the legacy, probably, of the old tannery. To get it up and running again, the soil had to be dug out, a membrane laid and clean fill laid on top. Now the soil is not poisonous, but still nothing is easy. Lots of people are doing good things, but still nothing is easy.

Things have settled since the cry in the night. After a couple of early meetings with police were boycotted, a dialogue has resumed. Berhan Ahmed is working to persuade school and police to involve the community in disciplining children, and stop the rapid turnover of trainee police officers. They want continuity. Howard says this is ‘non-negotiable’. Police have to be trained.

The end of the day approaches in my suburb. On Flemington Hill at Pepper Café, the African taxi drivers sometimes stop and have coffee with the white families, but increasingly they go to new African businesses opening on the main street. When my daughter tried out for soccer, some of the soccer mums were African women, cheering their girls in tracksuits and headscarves.
Now school is out, and the kids come down the hill from Debney Park Secondary College. The Africans among them are tall, rangy and thin. Although many were born in Australia, it is easy to imagine them stepping across some African plain, yet here they are in Flemington, pushing and mucking up as kids do, the girls in robes or head scarves, crop tops and tight jeans. They are smiling, faces open, as they push on through the suburb, past the heritage houses and the renovations and down the hill to the concrete blocks they call home.

And despite everything, on a sunny day it is hard not to think that they justify – indeed demand – the best of us. They demand hope.