

The rise and fall of Britney Spears seems so acutely ridiculous right now, but I'm guessing all distractions are welcome. There are two dozen of us, an even spread of men and women, resting in the TV room of the 139

Club, a drop-in centre for homeless people in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley. We're watching Channel Seven's *The Morning Show*, on which a Hollywood gossip reporter is detailing the pop star's latest traffic infringement. "*Britney's done it again,*" he says. "*Now it looks like K-Fed wants the kids!*"

The guests are silent but for the wheezing chest of an elderly man on a day bed. You don't have to live on the street to detect the rattle of a chest infection. He lies on his side, his knees pressed to his chest, standard sleep posture for the homeless, tense even in rest. A sign hangs above his head: "Day sleepers only".

Two men in front of me share a bag of tobacco, holding it the way jewel thieves might a bag of diamonds. A guy no older than 17 struts into the room. A big toe, dirt-brown, pokes through a hole in his runners. He sits next to me and taps the men on the shoulders for some tobacco. The one with a tattoo of a medieval spear running across his neck shakes his head. "C'mon," pleads the young man. "I slept rough last night."

He means he slept on the street rather than in a boarding house, the other common form of shelter for Australia's 110,000 homeless, 26,000 of whom live in Queensland. (Most homeless figures exclude newborns and toddlers, who fall under the radar.) In Queensland, where only 1.5 per cent of private rental accommodation is vacant, well below the three per cent that represents a balanced market. In the Smart State, where 33,000 people wait to be allocated one of 64,787 public homes; where lines of renters, 50-strong, battle auction-style to secure private properties with rents in the past five years rising between 22 and 44 per cent; where nine-year-old girls sleep on the street and grow into 13-year-old girls who don't know how they got pregnant. Where else but Queensland, where any low-to-middle income family is three, maybe four, bad turns from the gutter.

### A housing crisis and a help-yourself economy mean many ordinary Queenslanders are now facing their darkest hours – on the streets.

The tattooed man hands the young man the tobacco. The scent of stale urine reaches my nose. The young man stands and the smell emanates from his green and gold tracksuit pants. "You boys lining up?" he says.

In the kitchen for morning tea I sit near an elderly woman. Her shaking right forearm brings a chocolate muffin to her mouth but it's too hard, too old, for her to bite into. A woman with a cane scans the bread bins lining the wall, places a loaf in her handbag. A bearded, middle-aged man takes a muffin from the table, inspects it and puts it back. A voice bellows behind me: "You touch it, you take it." The owner of the voice, a large, muscular Aboriginal man, stirs a coffee behind us. "I'll throw it in the f.kin' bin," barks the bearded man. He sits down beside me.

"How'd you sleep last night?" he asks.

"Not too bad."

"Where you sleepin' tonight?"

"I don't know."

"How much money do you have?"

I have \$3.20 in my pocket.

"That's not enough for a bed. You could go to St Vinnies and get an advance. Maybe you could do some sweeping for them and pay them back that way. They sometimes let you work for your credit. Or you could sleep rough. But don't sleep in the open. You'll get bashed by them pricks coming back from the clubs, just for fun, like. Stay out of the parks, too. You'll get bashed there if you fall asleep. Rob you. You want to get into a boarding house."

The cook has heated the food parcels. "Smokol!" he calls, scattering the food donated by local outlets – dim sims, meat pies, crumbed sausages, kabanas and Chiko rolls – across the kitchen bench. Waiting in a line with about 30 others, the bearded man introduces himself as Mark. He's wearing a University

of Queensland rowing shirt. Maybe he was a scholar once, or maybe he found the shirt among the free recycled clothing on the second floor of the 139 Club.

He takes two meat pies and stuffs them into a plastic bag. "I'm off," he says, shuffling away. "Look after yourself." Not for a long time has an expression of departure seemed so genuine. I take a Chiko roll and sit at a table opposite an Indian man wearing thick-rimmed glasses and a blue business shirt with a Nestlé logo. The Chiko roll is cold and old but I swallow it, suppressing gag reflexes.

I realise the whole club is silent, library-quiet. They say homeless people function in a state of mourning, not for the loss of loved ones but for the loss of their own life and what might have been.

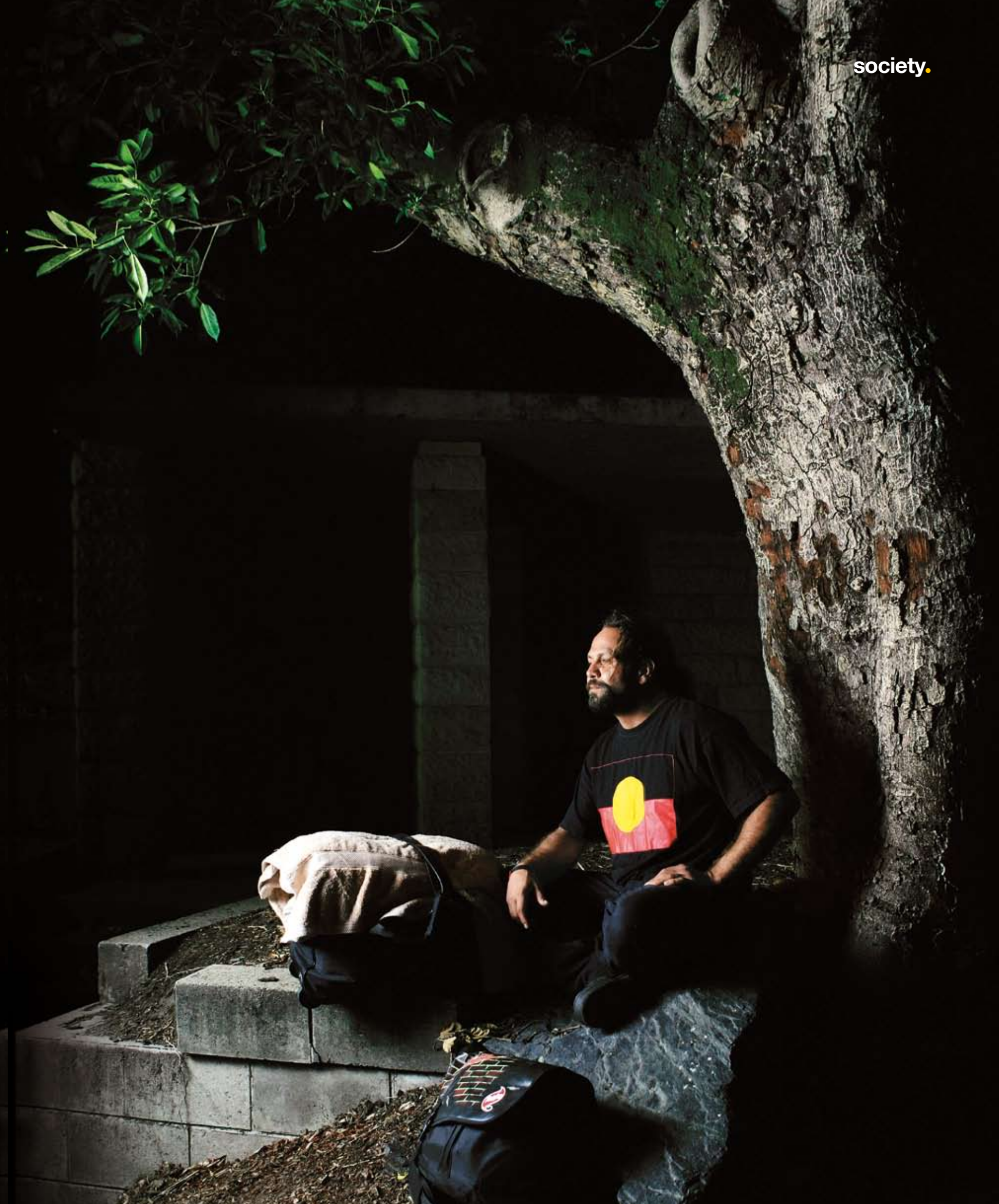
**TEN YEARS AGO, PENNY WAS RUNNING A** wholesale jewellery business. Then her husband started drinking. Then he developed liver disease. Penny was battling chronic arthritis. Her husband died. The business collapsed. She couldn't pay rent. At 49, she was living in a broken-down van on the streets of the Sunshine Coast. "I spent six months of sheer agony and fright in that van," she says.

We meet on the corner of Adelaide and Albert streets. Penny has spent the past 15 months in boarding houses, funded by her disability pension. "Boarding houses I wouldn't put a dog in. These places are like asylums with bed bugs. One was the size of two coffins put together and it was \$145 a week, without a bath, facilities, anything." She receives \$580 a fortnight. Her current lodgings, a boarding house in South Brisbane, costs her \$150 a week. She can't secure private housing because she's been placed on the Tenancy Information Centre Australasia black list of people who defaulted on their tenancy agreement. She says she's been waiting four years to be placed in public housing; "they now have told me it's going to be six years' wait".

"It's almost impossible for me to get a job," Penny says. "It's nice putting a disabled person in front of a computer but it's really not going to work for all of us. My arms and legs will ache so I can only work in small segments. My vision's going as well. They call it a disability and that's what it is. It disables you from life. ▶

# cityofbroken dreams

Story Trent Dalton Photography David Kelly



"A stigma gets attached to you: 'I wonder where she went wrong?' You don't have to have done something wrong. You can have the wrong done to you and then you're just as vulnerable as anyone else without M-O-N-E-Y. It's a very thin line for anyone."

I recall the words of Gary Penfold of Brisbane's Homeless Task Force, who has worked in Queensland housing for two decades and organised a recent soccer match for the homeless. "Local, state and federal governments were saying we had a house crisis in '88. Now think of how many people have moved here since 1988. Job loss, breakdown in your health, can't pay the rent, your tenancy is terminated and bang, you find yourself on the street. I would say five per cent of Brisbane's population is potentially two months away from being homeless."

Penny points out a woman seated at a bus stop outside City Hall. "Irene's a legend around here."

Irene wears a loose blue T-shirt over a long dress. She turned 70 days ago. Her possessions are one towel, seven shirts, five pairs of underpants, a jumper, a pencil case, a dressing gown she never gets to wear, a pair of thongs and one dress. In her pencil case is a can of deodorant, toothpaste, toothbrush,

I pee and it goes everywhere." She breathes deeply. "You smell it, don't you?" I nod my head.

"I didn't like giving up drink," she says. "It was the only thing that got me through this. I get so scared. The day I won't be terrified is the day I die."

**GOD BLESS THE LUCKY COUNTRY. IN OCTOBER**

last year, Queensland Housing Minister Robert Swarten predicted "we will see homelessness in this country like we haven't seen since the Great Depression". Swarten blames the federal government for cutting funds for public housing, a sentiment echoed by housing bodies who claim almost \$3 billion has been ripped out of the national public housing system since 1996, with the Howard Government deciding that private market forces would better serve housing needs. Today there is no federal housing department. The last federal body to focus purely on housing was the Keating government's Department of Housing and Regional Development. "Howard's Coalition came in," recalls Dr Tim Seelig, a member of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, "and housing was suddenly dropped in among Community Services."

\$268.85 a week. In August, St Vincent De Paul released a report saying half of all people seeking emergency accommodation in Australia once rented from investment-property owners.

Queensland's Department of Housing has been forced to streamline the system, implementing an eligibility system to ensure public housing goes to those in greatest need – the elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill – resulting in an unprecedented concentration of people with mental illnesses and drug and alcohol addictions lumped together in high-density unit blocks and rows of public houses.

"You put mental health together, people on drugs together, you put alcohol together with no curfew, what are you going to get?" asks Irene. "A riot, where there is no law and no order."

**I STROLL ACROSS VICTORIA BRIDGE TO THE**

OzCare hostel in South Brisbane, where 20 or so homeless people line up before a trolley of afternoon tea. We gather in a covered space that's more like a cave than a courtyard. Nobody oversees the distribution of cake. Anything could happen here: bashing, robbery, rape. A 20-something man



Three walls ... Adam (previous page) sells *The Big Issue* and sleeps in a cement shelter in inner-city Spring Hill.

Fortitude ... Irene (left) survived the concentration camps of World War II and now sleeps at a city bus stop, while other homeless people find respite at the 139 Club (right).



several lipsticks and some blue glitter nail polish.

When Irene was three years old she was hiding with her mother in a Warsaw ghetto. "Six years I was dragged around concentration camps; I left that war for this war," she says. She came to Australia in her teens. Lived in Melbourne, where she worked in restaurants. "My husband drank for 25 years," she says. "Then he died and I drank for 24 years. I mucked up everything. I had a problem with Jacks; you know, Jack Daniels ... I thought I was immortal." That was until she was almost strangled to death by another homeless person on a tram a decade ago.

She came to Queensland for the weather. She has been sober since she was rushed to the Royal Brisbane Hospital ten months ago with what she describes as "poisoning" in her right leg. Most likely alcohol poisoning, she says, lifting her right leg to reveal a scarlet scar the shape of a dagger extending across her calf.

Irene sleeps at the bus stop at night. "I want to lie down right now, actually, but I can't." A bus passenger is sitting in her seat. "When I stopped drinking all this got to me," she says. "Now I'm so embarrassed ..." She wipes a tear away. "It's bad. My liver is bad.

In Queensland, the cost of renting privately is now rising twice as fast as inflation. The average weekly rent for a three-bedroom house in Brisbane is \$325. Most of the guests at 139 Club, says welfare worker Jim Kilbride, are on Centrelink payments of \$420 per fortnight.

The federal government blames the states, with federal Community Services Minister Mal Brough earlier this year accusing them of squandering a decade's worth of Commonwealth public housing funds. "There are 13 less public houses [nationwide] than there were ten years ago," Brough said. "The states have not delivered ... let's see if someone else can do it better." Private developers have been asked how they could better spend the money. But, says Swarten, "who is going to house the disabled? Who is going to house Aboriginal people? People who are poor – you can't make money out of them."

Meanwhile, Queensland is facing what Australian Red Cross community services manager Matthew Cox calls an "epidemic of loneliness" where, in an ageing population, elderly widows – many of them estranged from their children – are left to pay for rented accommodation on a single aged pension of

unwittingly bumps a young pregnant woman as he goes to pour tea. "Wait ya f..kin' turn," the woman screams. "I was waiting just like you," he barks back. The woman scurries away and returns with her boyfriend, a heavy-set man in a Jackie Howe singlet. They turn into an alley in pursuit of the young man.

There's a tattooed man with a crew cut and a long plaited rat's tail. He knows I don't belong here. He taps the back of his skull against a brick wall, light blue eyes fixed on me. Something tells me to leave the courtyard immediately. I cross the road and rest with a tea near the steps to a modern apartment block.

A middle-aged man rattling the keys to his BMW passes me in the entrance. He looks toward my feet; I follow his eyeline to a vomit stain and several cigarette butts. "Take your cup with you when you go," he says. He doesn't even look at me to say it. His face shows disgust and, if I'm not mistaken, the faintest hint of pride.

I move to the rear of OzCare, where four men slug methylated spirits from a large wine bottle. This is home, a dark nook outside a sprawling building where the four men have neatly stacked their mattresses. On a makeshift shelf in the corner ▶



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are combs, phone books, pipes, bottles, trinkets. I ask permission to enter their space. Homeless people are fiercely territorial. When you have nothing you'll defend the most valueless things: a position in line, a tent space by a river bank, a seat in a bus shelter.

A man named Uncle Pat greets me with a handshake. He introduces me to his friends. Peter, a thin Aboriginal man wearing a black jumper and black hat, has been sleeping rough for 45 years. "Give me a wine and I'll sleep anywhere," he says. "I don't get cold, mate. I got seven blankets. It's the kids you worry about, though. I don't remember there being so many kids before."

James is only a young man – white, early 30s at most – but he moves like a geriatric. It's only when I'm shaking his hand that I see the disease: across his hands, arms and legs, his skin has broken away to a bright pink, split by scabs and pustules. His feet are black and throbbing, gangrenous looking.

"Do you mind me asking what has happened to your skin?" I ask.

"I'm not sure," he says, dazed. "I think I sit in the sun too much."

Uncle Pat wears a brown suit. His auburn hair is like Albert Einstein's. He slurs his words but his message is clear: "Why do you think we're sleeping here? We can't find a home. We're that f..kin' sick that we can't get up and walk. So cold you just up and die. You get the f..kin' shingles and you're f..ked. Some of us are awful drunks. We're awful sick and we can't get up in the morning. What are we supposed to do? No housing commission. We're totally f..ked. Look at Dennis over here ..."

Dennis has long silver hair running past his shoulder blades and a bushy white beard. Shirtless, his sagging breasts fall over a large belly. "I can't walk," he says flatly. A female voice echoes from a dark space further in the corner: "He's been on the cold floor too long," says Peter's niece Nancy Fisher, a proud and welcoming Cherbourg girl. "It buggers the legs. They just collapse."

Fisher leads me to a grotto outside St. Mary's Catholic Church where an elderly Aboriginal man sleeps. "You know who this is?" she asks. "That's Adrian Blair."

In 1964, Cherbourg boxing champion Adrian Blair, boxer Frank Roberts and basketballer Michael Ahmatt became Australia's first indigenous Olympians, competing at the Tokyo Games. This man, gaunt and weary, with a red cask-wine stain on his beard, is a member of the Aboriginal and Islander Sports Hall of Fame. Sweet and personable, he offers a hand for shaking. His daughter Margaret and her two small children rest by his side. "My dad is a legend," says Margaret. "He boxed for this country." Her eldest boy, a beautiful toddler who bounds around the grotto like a slippery featherweight, throws a series of shadow punches: "Legend!" he sings.

Night falls, and I do what 26,000 Queenslanders can't – I go home. The memory of Dennis's half-smile follows me. There are several community health and food vans that drop in on Dennis regularly: the nightly Drug Arm street van; Rosies Brisbane; Street Access; the Brisbane Homeless Service Centre. But I can't see anything helping him. No community service, no government think tank, no public housing is going to save him. The best I hope for Dennis is a long happy time with his friends and a painless end.



## When people look at the homeless they should ask themselves: 'who do I know that could be in that situation, but for the fact someone lent them \$1000?'

**A dog's life ...** Dave Free of South Brisbane's Tent City has been homeless for 15 years but has a loyal friend in Boy.

On Milton Road, I pass an ALP sign that quotes John Howard as saying: "Working families in Australia have never been better off." The Prime Minister has offered \$34 billion in tax cuts over coming years to help Australians cope with increases in all living costs, including housing. Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd has promised to spend \$500 million to help councils provide housing infrastructure and a further \$600 million in tax breaks to developers prepared to invest in affordable rental accommodation. Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman has opened his civic doors with Homeless Connect, a program whereby homeless people gather in City Hall to access legal, health and housing services. Two decades have passed since it was flagged in 1988, but the housing crisis has made it on to the political agenda and homelessness has climbed on with it.

At home, as I go to sleep on my soft queen-size bed, I think of Kenneth, a man I met at the homeless soccer match. He was 46 years old. He'd been homeless for 20 years until he met and fell in love with Judy, a Brisbane administration worker. Judy invited him to live with her. Within months, he had found a nine-to-five job. Kenneth and Judy are getting married early next year. "Love saved me," he said.

I think of how Adrian Pisarski, president of Queensland Shelter, reckoned that in Australia, nobody is immune from homelessness. "When people look at homeless people," he told me, "they should ask themselves: 'Who do I know that could be in that situation, but for the fact someone lent them \$1000 or provided them with a temporary form of accommodation or supported them at a dark time?'"

If I was injured, if I lost my job, if I struck a dark time, my wife would support me. If I didn't have my wife, I'd phone my parents. If I didn't have my

parents, I'd call one of several close friends, praying that pride wasn't as distasteful as a cold Chiko roll. If I didn't have friends – well, I don't know what I'd do.

**AT THE BUS STOP OUTSIDE CITY HALL, I ASK IRENE** straight up: "What if I gave you \$1000?" She laughs. "I don't like taking money. It's no good to me. I'll just get robbed for it. I'd be likely to take it to the casino."

"What could I do to help you?" It's a patronising question. "Nothing," she says. "I don't need anything from you." She changes the subject. She talks about Poland. She talks about her years as a waitress, when she was pretty, when she was a catch. Then, out of nowhere, she addresses the question: "I always turn to Streisand: 'People who need people are the luckiest people.'"

It's night and I'm on the street. A light shower falls on me. I duck into the Australian Red Cross's Night Café under City Hall, where a group of volunteers engage homeless youths in art activities. This, says community services manager Matthew Cox, is the solution. "Access and time is what matters. Every homeless person has a different story, a specific reason for being on the streets. We must provide tailored support. We'll work with any individual for three years so we can understand the cocktail of issues – mental health, drugs, abuse, alcohol, violence – that affects their life." Cox works from a model used in New York called Common Ground. "Homelessness in New York has declined 35 per cent since the program has been in place," he says. "If it can work on the streets of New York, it can work in Brisbane."

A young Aboriginal girl creates an impressive dot painting on the back of a guitar. "Where did you learn to do that?" I ask. "In jail," she says. A wiry young

man looks up from a plate of beef casserole, served free from the kitchen. "Oi, can you put an ad in the paper for me?" he asks. "Handsome 21-year-old male seeks female companion. Likes walks on the beach. Will give pleasure in exchange for housing." He laughs uproariously. This is Travis. His mother died from a heroin-induced heart attack when he was 11. He moved through a series of foster homes before sexual and physical abuse forced him on to the street. He's currently squatting in a plush riverside apartment that he breaks into every night. "It's paradise, mate," he says. "Leather couches and a pool table."

Travis throws a backpack over his shoulder and leaves the café. "Make sure you tell my story," he says. He leans over and grips my neck in a headlock. "And if I don't like it, you know I can find you."

**THE STREETS AFTER MIDNIGHT ARE DARK,** frightening and, above all, boring. Idleness is only pleasurable when you're busy. I search for a safe place to sleep. Nothing is suitable. The Botanic Gardens are too dark, with police patrols that would move me on. Cement is too hard to sit on for longer than an hour. I have no doubt this would be far more sufferable drunk or high. I could stretch out six beers to sunrise. At least I would be doing something. Alone in the dark, in slow hours looking into the Brisbane River from beneath the Riverside Expressway, I fester in thoughts both good and bad. I wonder what Travis thinks about at such times.

I stroll to Spring Hill to meet Adam, a 30-something seller of *The Big Issue*, which is affiliated with the International Network of Street Papers and is dedicated to giving homeless people "a hand up, not a hand out". We met three nights ago in the city. Adam invites me to sit in his shelter, essentially three cement walls looking out to the city. "Some bastard pissed in here when I was out," he says. "Where?" I ask. "Right about where you're sitting," he laughs, swigging from a light beer. Adam made \$39 today selling the magazines for 13 hours. I figure he's earned a beer, and then some. It's 1am. I haven't eaten since 8am. "What's your favourite food?" Adam asks.

A police car stops before the shelter and a policewoman and younger male officer get out. Adam hides his beer behind my back. The woman scans the area suspiciously: "What are you guys doing?" I tell her I'm writing a story on the 26,000 homeless in Queensland. "26,000?" says the male officer, shocked.

The car pulls away. Adam takes his beer again. "I really like mud crabs," I say.

"My favourite food is oysters, big fat oysters," Adam says.

At 3.30am, I pass under the bridge at Kurilpa Point in South Brisbane, the place once known as Tent City, a homeless HQ. Since police move-on powers were expanded in 2006, forcing homeless people from public spaces such as the Gallery of Modern Art, which once fronted on to Tent City, the area has been reduced to a series of tarpaulin homes tied to the fence of a noisy dairy factory. Here, Dave Free sleeps. At 54, he's slept rough for 15 years, guarded by a faithful and fierce bitsa named Boy.

There's no way I'm sleeping here. In fact, there's no way I'm sleeping anywhere. I walk on.

I walk and sit, walk and sit, until the bustling milk and garbage trucks mercifully foretell the coming of sunrise. ■