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I tell this tale. Hold nothing back. Not the smallest thought. Nor the unseemly misdeed. What I tell is very like the time. Me, a few years younger, with a keen eye, but still with mush between the ears.

It's Thursday, the twenty-fourth of March, the year 1796. This is the day that we embark on our second *Tom Thumb* sail. We're charged with discovering where the deep river that the pilot Hacking has eyed inland, flows out to sea. He's guessed south of Botany Bay, near Cape Banks. The Lieutenant and Mr Bass say, if we find it, our names will be shiny buttons on English coats.

My oar stabs the side of the *Reliance*. We push off and pull away from the ship. Venus is out but the sky still has some light. Mr Bass and I boat the oars and hoist sail. The Lieutenant takes the helm. *Tom Thumb's* sail snaps at the breeze and air-filled we bounce across the water.

'To dare is to do!' Mr Bass shouts our motto.

'To dare is to do!' the Lieutenant and I reply.

Seawater sprays across the gunwale. We sail past stony Pinchgut. A man or woman, I cannot tell, stands on the shore. I see a hand rise to wave. Or is it a trick of the eye? Only the wicked are left there. No one on Garden Island. The ships moored in the harbour soon disappear. Larboard and starboard, only darkened forest. Indian fires glimmer between skeleton trees.

Our first *Tom Thumb* was seized—why and wherefore is another tale—but good Mr Paine has clinker built a new *Thumb* with steamed frames of spotted gum, red cedar planks, and shiny copper fittings. We're kitted with a mast of flooded gum, a linen lugsail, a sweep sail and well-crafted oars. Less than twelve foot so a small boat to sail in. There's no anchor spare in the colony. Our anchor is a lump of rock that the sea has speared a hole through and under Mr Bass's instruction I've threaded it with thick rope. We've only two muskets to contest pirates or cannibals, supplies for ten days, no more, and the danger is great. The Governor himself tried to dissuade us from the journey.

'The risk of young lives lost, with so much yet to give, outweighs the cause,' he said.

Mr Bass spoke for us all. 'Sir,' he said. 'Audere est facere.'

The water melts into the night sky. Mr Bass tips his head to stargaze. He is almost as long as *Thumb*. The Lieutenant sits, one hand on his knee, as he reads the wind. I button my jacket against the cold. I see the beacon flaming on South Head. The water goes, slap, slap, against the side of *Thumb*. Slap, slap, to dare is to do.

Near Shark Bay the wind drops. Mr Bass and I get upon the oars and pull to the shore. I jump from *Thumb*. The surf foams and spits as we haul our boat up onto the sand.

Mr Bass and the Lieutenant stand on the beach and shake hands.

'Mr Bass, congratulations.'

'Lieutenant Flinders, congratulations.'

They are pleased to have nine days exploring, with no pipe whistling when to wake, eat, and sleep.

A massive rock looms to one side. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant take off and become inky shapes climbing to the top. I spin on the sand. Only now is the creak and cramp of the *Reliance* forgot. The dark sea is furrowed by starlight. Behind, tall eucalypts stand like bark-coated marines guarding the beach, their leaves, tangled buttons tinted by the moon.

‘Will, bring me my red waistcoat,’ Mr Bass calls.

Yesterday he gave Hoary Bogarty a bottle for it. Hoary Bogarty won it in cards from a convict, who’d won it at dice from a marine. I fetch the waistcoat and scale the rock to where they stand. For a tick-tock they slip into their Lincolnshire thees and thous, like Quakers at prayer – think thee, Mr Bass, won’t thou, Lieutenant – as though our arrival needs marking. Then prayers are over and Mr Bass tears at a branch to swat mosquitoes.

The Lieutenant has lost his customary droop and the change is not the trip alone but also Mr Bass’s doing. Many times, on the *Reliance*, I’ve been below deck and have spied how the Lieutenant, on hearing Mr Bass’s boot above, will down pen and hurry to greet his friend. On deck, as they pace, the Lieutenant’s cheeks begin to shine, as though Mr Bass himself has brought the sun into the day.

The two sit on the rock talking of the Governor’s latest Tank Stream orders, while I go about collecting wood. In the first order, the Governor forbid the pulling down of palings or the keeping of pigs near the stream, it being the only fresh water Sydney has and now badly tainted. But all disobeyed that command. The worst offenders? The marines that have huts along the stream. So the Governor put out a second order saying that when he gives an order he expects it to be obeyed!

If I were the Governor I’d have the marines whipped. I venture this to Mr Bass but the Lieutenant says no, the marines are boorish and wield a new sort of power, whipping would only cause them to rise in revolt.

I set a fire on a flat rock that has a view of the bay. We supped before embarking, and, as we intend to sail before sunrise, I stretch out to nap, but with the sea splash, frog croak and insect buzz, napping is all pretence. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant sit fireside, drink medicinal beverage and argue the politic.

‘You take too many risks, mingling with seditionists,’ the Lieutenant says.

Mr Bass pokes at the coals. ‘A risk only for the lily-livered who hang on public opinion.’

The Lieutenant pays the jibe no heed. ‘You made a show by attending Gerrald’s funeral.’

‘Never a show to grieve a death,’ snaps Mr Bass.

I’m with the Lieutenant, for I did not weep at Mr Gerrald’s death. In the months before his passing, he’d often detain Mr Bass and me at his house, for hour after hour, giving speeches about universal manhood suffrage. Mr Bass was there to treat him, and this a kindly act, because Balmain, the colony’s surgeon, refused to medicate a seditionist. But the upshot of Mr Gerrald’s universal manhood suffrage was that more men should be like him and to my mind we had enough drunks in Sydney Cove as it was.

Mr Bass and the Lieutenant get as noisy as convicts at rut-time but when their beverage has spiked their drowsiness, they lie down and snore. I, flat on my back on

hard rock, eye the winking sky and listen to the night. Swish, swash, swish, swash. The sea never stops with its caress of the earth. On land, old-bone branches crack and crash. This place is an upturn of the natural world, each step, new and old together.

The next morn it's Mr Bass who wakes me. An owl hoots: yow, yow, yow, yow, yow, yow. I sand the fire and scramble down to help haul *Thumb* to the shallows. It's dark but the moon is our guide. We shove off and jump in, wet feet slapping wood. My eyes don't want to stay open but they must.

Mr Bass and I pull out of the bay, then hoist sail. The air is cool. *Thumb* skips over black water and through the twin heads of land to the ocean. The South Head burner is still flickering. A lone red coat will be tending but I see no one.

Through the heads and the breeze drops, paddles us along until dawn, then departs. The sun peeks over the edge of a grey-blue sea. Miles of watery dunes. Mr Bass and I set to the oars – splish, splash, splish, splash – the never-ending of it. I know now why sailors say the splash of wood in water is a mariner's dirge.

Mr Bass and I pull at an even pace. The Lieutenant sits at the helm, eyeing the coastline. Behind him, the English flag is limp. Seabirds fly overhead, black fringes sailing from their heads, flags for their kind. They look down on us – carrik, carrik – and head for land. The Lieutenant's eyes narrow as he flashes his timepiece and compass, scribbling calculations in a book that he keeps wrapped in seal hide. Mr Bass and I are hour hands of a clock, slow and steady, the Lieutenant, the seconds darting by.

The sun fires so hot it is dog days, even though it is March. My arms shake like a fish on a hook. At Mr Bass's nod we boat the oars.

'Water,' he commands.

I ferret the barica from beneath the thwart. Mr Bass sits side on, fills his cup from the barrel, and leans back to drink. In a tick-tock water spurts from his mouth.

'Blasted spoiled!' he shouts.

The Lieutenant reaches forward, snatches the cup and sips. He too spits it out, then turns to me.

'Will, you've put this water in a wine barrel!'

I feel a rush of heat and curse Bogarty and his ruddy head, for water held in a wine barica is quickly poisoned. The Lieutenant eyes me and sighs, thinking, no doubt, that his brother would not make such a blunder. Samuel is not a clot but he whines like one. I was chosen for the sail over him, thanks to Mr Bass's stubbornness.

'Will is as strong as a man,' Mr Bass had argued.

'I saw no evidence at Georges River,' the Lieutenant said, referring to our first *Tom Thumb* sail.

'Were you looking?' asked Mr Bass, offended on my behalf.

He stayed firm and the Lieutenant gave way.

But to be without water is grim. I press my toes into the wood to press away the horror of my mistake. Mr Bass scratches at his neck.

Bogarty, yesterday morn, was as slow as a wet whistle, because his hip was playing up and because of his rotten head, which, he said, was not due to drink, as I suggested, but caused by my mouth going pell-mell. I took the barica from his store without my usual look-to. The error is mine. Check and re-check all your tasks is what Mr Bass instructed at Portsmouth. One substance should never taint another.

Medicines must be stored with care. It's a sin to lose a life through recklessness. This is what he says, over and over. I burn with shame and hear the creak of *Thumb* above the slap of the sea.

Then I remember Mr Palmer's gift. 'Keep safe young friend,' he'd said, handing over melons newly plucked from his garden. (Mr Palmer, like Mr Gerrald, was transported for his belief in manhood suffrage, only from Palmer's mouth the term is reasoned.) I scramble to the bow to fetch a melon. Mr Bass eyes me with relief.

'We'll search out a stream when we land,' he says, turning to the Lieutenant. 'It's that fool Bogarty we should punish. The old goat sniffs rum from ten rods away, surely he has the nose for a wine barica.'

I lay the melon on the thwart. Mr Bass slips his blade along the thick skin, careful as he splits it not to lose any juice. He quarters the melon and we sit in the heat, sucking the moist flesh. Mr Bass recommends we chew the seeds. He fills his cup with the poisoned water, splashes the contents over his head and shouts, 'To dare is to do!' This is how he lifts the mood. He fills it again, hands it to the Lieutenant, who does the same. I take off my hat, pour the spoilt water over my bare head and feel less sore about my mistake. But when I glance at the Lieutenant I know he has not forgot. The Lieutenant stores a secret ledger in his memory. Each person has two columns, for and against, and the Lieutenant always knows where a person is placed. It's not surprising to hear him tell, in bitter words and months after the event, of some small injustice he has suffered at the hands of another.

'Mind, give that barica a good scrub before we fill it,' Mr Bass whispers as we start to pull.

Mr Bass doesn't keep ledgers but he does take measure of his fellow man. How he does it? In his mind, he begins to draw a portrait of a particular fellow and at every meeting he shades the portrait one way, then another. It might take several meetings for a full colouring, but once a portrait is complete, Mr Bass sticks to his opinion. The Lieutenant is more precise and, for good or bad, the ledger is always open. I eye my own name in that ledger. My against column is nearly full up.

We pull southward with the sun overhead. The sail flaps. We set taut the line to catch the breeze from south-south-east and steer for shore. We skim across the waves.

'We're sailing at three knots,' calls the Lieutenant, pleased with *Thumb*'s pace.

Mr Bass is at the helm. 'Is that Cape Banks?'

The Lieutenant peers toward land. 'Looks like Hat Hill!'

'Can't be,' Mr Bass replies. 'Hat Hill is fifteen leagues from Port Jackson.'

Cape Banks, the mark of our destination, is a far shorter distance.

Mr Bass leans forward. 'Surely we've not sailed that far?'

I scramble to the bow. Looking northward, I see the land is not at all like the land around Cape Banks, as I spied it on our *Reliance* voyage, but with its continuous arm, it is more like the flow of land around Hat Hill. I remember Master Moore pointing Hat Hill out to me.

'There's the hill Captain Cook called a hat,' our master said, chuckling at the navigator's wit.

On that day, more than a year ago, I'd stood on the deck eyeing Hat Hill for as

long as it remained in sight, stirred by the thought that I was sailing the same sea as Cook.

‘Hat Hill it is,’ I call from the bow. ‘See the land to the north.’

Mr Bass laughs. ‘Matthew, we’ve overshot the mark!’

The Lieutenant looks at the water. ‘Who would suppose it? The current must be strong.’

The wind from the north forces us to continue our sail south. We must find a place to land and search out fresh water before night falls. Clouds race along the coast, shifting from white to grey to inky black. The sea swells become frothing giants hungry for our boat. We tack for shore. To the west the sun dips behind the arm of the mountain and darkness arrives in a rush. The wind drops. The Lieutenant and I pull for a bend in the coast. We’re still four miles from land. The sea is choppy but the early moon tickles the water with light. Finally, we near the beach, but our disappointment is great as white surf is gnashing at the sand.

‘Landing is out,’ the Lieutenant shouts.

Nothing for it but to heave up the stone anchor and tumble it into the sea. As it sinks the rope uncurls from its loop. I look to Mr Bass. The moon catches his face as he clears the line but his thoughts are disguised. My belly rattles. There’s been no landing to boil beef, no chance to make bread cakes the way our cook showed me. I pull out another melon, place it on the thwart and cut it open. There is naught to add but raw potato. I serve our meagre meal and as we chomp I eye the wandering stars that halo the land.

‘Mr Bass, what shall we name this place?’ the Lieutenant asks, then sinks his teeth into the melon.

On our Georges River trip all had been named before we arrived.

‘Moody Bay?’ Mr Bass says.

‘The theatrical interpretation?’ The Lieutenant is not convinced.

‘Too emotive?’ Mr Bass asks.

‘According to Bligh, when naming unknown territory, the name must allow others to imagine its function. How it might serve future settlements.’

‘Anchor Bay,’ I say.

‘Too much the impression of large vessel anchorage,’ the Lieutenant says.

‘And this is not a bay, it opens too much to the east.’

He says it with ease but I hear his dismissal. I vow not to speak again, except to agree. This is best with the Lieutenant. The only way to stay on the right side of his ledger.

‘And yet,’ Mr Bass says, surveying the surrounds, ‘there is something in what Will says. This bay offers shelter. And that shadowy cliff could be an Arcadian barn.’

Mr Bass throws his melon skin into the sea and wipes his mouth on his shirt. He grins at me. I bite into my melon to hide my pleasure. Sheltering is not so far from anchoring, is it? For both conjure safety. How I wish to be like Mr Bass. All is ease. Glorious ease.

‘Barn Cove,’ says the Lieutenant. ‘It has a lyrical touch and yet, enough description.’

‘Barn Cove it is,’ says Mr Bass.

We jostle to find a sleeping nook. Not a simple task as Mr Bass's legs, which do seem longer than a horse, jerk about. The Lieutenant, thinking himself in privacy perhaps, begins souring the air with foul odours. I tuck one arm under my head and bury my nose in the other. I don't know if sharks can smell, but if they can I'll put coin to it that the Lieutenant's inner winds, once released, will keep them distant.

I think of the fish swimming beneath me. Do fish sleep? Slap, slap, to dare is to do. Slap, slap, to dare is to do. Mama you did never imagine me an explorer? Your stage set could not compare to this. What this? For this is no *Reliance* with its shuffle of crew, it is three of us rocking in a tiny boat on the great ocean. This is my second night away from the *Reliance*. I think now that no other tale ever had this shiver or this shine.

Saturday, March twenty-six, the third day of our journey. I wake. My throat is blistered. There is water about but the wrong kind. I'm hot even though it's cold. I say this out loud then regret it.

'Remittent fever,' Mr Bass teases.

Mr Bass likes to scare me with horrid diagnosis. He once told me that Mama had a terrible remittent fever. 'She could die,' he said, with a face so grim I nearly cried in his presence. The fever caused him to stay with her night after night until she was cured. At least that is what he proclaimed. It took me longer than it should have to see through his ruse.

'More like putrid fever,' the Lieutenant says with a sniff at my being.

'No,' I say. 'It's every bone in my body rattled by strange foot-kicking in the night.'

Mr Bass laughs, rubs his hand on my head. I pull away. I'm too old for such things but Mr Bass refuses to acknowledge it. To him I'm still the boy he hired.

Mama had just finished singing on stage when he told her of his offer.

'No,' she said, her face puffed and red.

'Don't do this, Isabella,' Mr Bass replied, calmly crossing his legs as he sat beside her dressing table. 'Don't cosset the boy.'

Mama took off her wig and thumped it on the stand. 'He has a gift,' she said, holding out her glass for more liquor.

'He wants the walls cast away, not the walls closed in,' Mr Bass said, in his deep-sea voice. 'He wants the rise and fall of waves, not the stage.'

Mama laughed. 'It's lucky you're not a writer, George, your rhyme is too limp!'

But Mr Bass could convince a fishmonger to buy fish and he proceeded to convince Mama to let me go to sea. I'd begged him to do it, having had my fill of rigging stage ropes, and cleaning floors, of holding cushions for kings while dressed in hot fabric. His convincing involved buying more expensive liquor.

'You're the victor,' Mama said to me two bottles later.

She put her hand to my cheek and laughed. I jumped around her dressing room.

That was more than a year ago and since, I've travelled further than most have ever dreamt. Despite what Mr Bass thinks, I am not that same boy!

'We need water,' the Lieutenant says. 'Landing is out as the waves are forceful close

to shore. North, the cliffs are high for some long way.'

'South, low land is visible,' Mr Bass says.

'South is away from our river,' the Lieutenant replies. 'We must wait it out here.'

'If we sail south and land, a stream might be found,' Mr Bass argues. 'Besides, the wind is for the south.'

'But is to continue south a stretch of our agreement with the Governor?' the Lieutenant asks.

'How can it be a stretch when the weather is telling us what we must do?' Mr Bass reasons.

'I can see the reckoning,' the Lieutenant says, but is still unsure.

'Remember, this far south no man has stepped,' says Mr Bass. 'Save roaming cannibals, and one or two pirates, who do not warrant merit as they've made no map.'

Mr Bass strikes the right chord, as map-making for the Lieutenant is like honey-making for the bee.

'Cook's map in this area is scant on detail,' Mr Bass adds.

It's all the convincing the Lieutenant needs. 'South it is,' he says.

We hoist sail and steer south.

At first, the coast is like the walls of a falling down castle, only walls where shrubs have rooted. It's forbidding and eye-gobbing. This is not a land of fairies and goblins, but more like monsters and ghosts. Then, the castle walls fall away, the land shrinks and is covered with scrubby trees. It becomes sandy beach and stony head, sandy beach and stony head, as if God had been practicing his Port Jackson craft before he created the main event. We spy a likely spot for a stream and sail through a gap in the reef but cannot land as the surf is in a beheading mood.

'Anchor,' the Lieutenant calls.

Mr Bass and I drop anchor well before the surf. My throat is now a hollowed out log. One of us must swim to shore to search for water.

'Are you up for it?' the Lieutenant asks.

'Yes,' I say, pleased for the challenge.

I begin to strip off my clothes. The white sandy beach is curved like a butcher's knife. Scrubby trees beyond the sand and a forest of green that stretches up to the hills. Before we left Port Jackson, stories of cannibals had been all the talk. I stare at the trees.

'Will, who be the best swimmer, you or me?' Mr Bass asks.

'Your stroke has mightily improved,' I say, unable to take my eyes from the trees.

Mr Bass laughs too loud. I meant improved so he could swim with me and say so.

'Together we could fight all the cannibals that came our way,' I add.

'Both cannot go,' the Lieutenant says. 'Two men lost to cannibal supper is unseemly.'

'Then, as I will no doubt make the best stew,' Mr Bass says to me, 'should not I be the one to swim to shore?'

I see how this moment is a mark. We're in a place where no European foot has stepped. It's Mr Bass who should have the honour. I empty the barica and throw it

into the ocean.

‘In the sea I’m a dolphin,’ Mr Bass shouts, as he dives into the water.

‘Don’t forget to scrub that barica,’ I tease, because the mood has turned easy and I don’t think the Lieutenant will mind my jesting.

Mr Bass floats on his back, takes hold of the barica, and begins a backward stroke. We cheer him on but the current is strong and, despite our care when dropping anchor, we’ve drifted to where the waves break.

‘Here, Will, take the helm,’ the Lieutenant snaps, spying the danger.

Taking hold of the anchor rope, he hauls us back to our dropping point. When we are safe again, I turn to watch Mr Bass, his arm like a great oar rowing to shore. But again the Lieutenant shouts.

‘Will, the anchor is lifting!’

I whip to attention and spy a growling dog of a wave sluicing in. Before I can sort the anchor it picks up *Thumb* and carries the boat towards shore. All is a dazzle of blue sky and salt spray. I just have time to steady the helm. We’re riding the wave with terrific pace and I cry out with excitement, ‘Ah!’ The wave shatters and *Thumb* crashes in the surf. I fall, grip the gunwale, but a second wave splashes over the boat, scoops me up and tosses me into the water. I tumble in white froth until my shoulder thumps onto wet sand and I thud to a stop, water rushing around me. I lay coughing and spluttering, a wet rag in need of squeezing. There is grit in my nose and ears. I let my cheek sink to the sand, spy shells like white pearls. Then I see the Lieutenant, mud-covered, as if newly born from the earth, staggering to his feet.

‘Will,’ he calls. ‘We must use the next wave to haul *Thumb* up to safety.’

He starts limping toward our boat. I stand and splash after him. Mr Bass, having swum to shore, comes wading through the surf. He throws the barica out of reach of the waves. We gather around our boat and watch as a boisterous swell romps towards us. I grip the gunwale so tight my knuckles turn white. When the wave lip splits around *Thumb* we heave with all our might and run with the smash and crash of water, pushing the boat up onto land. We’re safe.

Mr Bass and I whoop with pleasure and race around *Thumb*. And there, in our mad calls, is that nameless thing we share, all fluid and light, like an invisible bird pulling us up from

the earth.

I hear the slow

flap of wings and

see pelicans, flying

in a perfect V,

their white feathers

bright against

the blue

sky.

The wind is gusting, kicking up waves that lick the dry sand.

It checks our high spirits. The Lieutenant begins pulling soggy supplies from *Thumb*. He lays them on the ground to dry out.

‘Will, bail the boat,’ Mr Bass says, taking his cue from the Lieutenant but in truth, having to feign sensibleness.

I pick up the bucket and begin to bail, remembering the ride to shore, the rush

of wind. It's how it must feel to fly. I want to hoot but dare not. It would displease the Lieutenant. I dip my bucket and bail. My arms ache but in a good way. I only stop to rest when the water is ankle-deep. That's when I see it: a thin trail of smoke snaking up from the scrubby trees. My imaginings are bloodied and boned. The howls of darkest nature, in my head. I see how we are, as if from above. We three, caught between the snapping ocean and the scrubby foreshore, with a boat no more than a young one's toy. Beyond us stands, like a thousand hairy men, the jangling forest. I try to speak. No sound comes. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant face away. Don't see me pointing. I slip from the boat onto the sand, seize Mr Bass's arm. Mr Bass, still naked, stares at the forest. The Lieutenant does the same.

I've heard tales of cannibals living south of Botany Bay, but hearing tales is different to standing on a beach knowing one could soon hunt me. It's as if death and life are wrangling twins and I'm standing in between. I can touch without touching, see without seeing, hear without hearing.

The tall forest trees that line the back of the beach twist in the wind and lurch toward us, belching forth a flock of wild birds with yellow crests and enormous white wings. The birds fly above then arc south, winging the coast, screeching like the monkeys I saw caged at Rio. Their calls echo long after they vanish. In fright, I look to the forest again. There are strange beasts around Sydney but who knows what peculiarities we could meet this far south. We three are hushed. As if being here is a step too far beyond our knowing. When I first learnt my letters I stumbled over those that wouldn't jiggle together. I whittled away at them until one day I shaped a word. I felt so shiny with myself for having a whole word in my grasp. But a day later, when my uncle, Hilton, gave me one of his books to read, I fell so low. Before I started my lessons I didn't notice words at all, but that day I did, only I hadn't reckoned on there being so many *more* to know. Here in the new world it's like we're all just learning our letters.

The Lieutenant is eyeing the smoke. 'If natives were to run from those trees, we'd not have time to get *Thumb* through the surf.'

I peer into the forest and see the leaves of a bush begin to shudder. Animal or man I know not but something is there for certain. I stand like stone, staring, staring, only the splash of waves marking time. But nothing comes out from the bush shadow, except a chill that goes right through my bones.

Mr Bass picks up one of the muskets. It's wet and filled with sand. We have no arms.

'Get *Thumb* out past the surf now,' Mr Bass orders. 'I'll swim the provisions to you.'

'You and Will take the boat!' the Lieutenant says, his face pinched with worry. 'I'll wade out with the stores and meet you at the wave break, while you swim back and forth to *Thumb*.'

'And when the cannibals arrive have us both made savage supper with your dog paddle!'

Mr Bass flushes red. The air is full of fine ropes stretched tight. I can't breathe.

'Bass, my man,' the Lieutenant whispers. 'I'll not leave you alone on this beach.'

'No more on it, Matthew, you *can't* swim!'

When he wants, Mr Bass is commander of all. The Lieutenant's face is like furrowed land. He knows he has no talent in the water. If cannibals came he couldn't save himself, let alone Mr Bass.

'I'll pack what will spoil,' he says, and that is his agreement to the plan.

Mr Bass eyes me. 'From your vantage point at sea,' he says, 'you can spy the whole coast. If you see movement, holler with all your might.'

My friend, Na, has showed me how to call across distances with cupped hands to push the sound. I tell Mr Bass this is what I'll do if I see a cannibal. I grip the gunwale, ready to launch. I see one of the oars is cracked and pray it holds together. The Lieutenant signals me with a nod and we slide *Tom Thumb* along the wet sand, into the shallows. When we are through the worst of the surf we jump in, and sitting together on the thwart, pull out past the wave break. Mr Bass takes hold of the lead line and wades back to shore. The Lieutenant and I pull further out and drop anchor.

'Where are the muskets?' the Lieutenant asks.

In our rush we've left them on the sand. He goes to holler but I stop him. I put my cupped hands together and call. Mr Bass looks up but thinking I am signalling danger searches the forest first, then the beach. He turns to us, a quizzical look on his face. The Lieutenant stands and his mime of shooting Indians, at another time, would set me laughing. Mr Bass picks up the muskets and waves them at us. Holding the lead line in his left hand he runs into the surf. When the water is to his chest, we yank on the lead line, pulling him toward us. He raises the muskets high above his head. We heave, feeling Mr Bass's weight. *Thumb* creaks. We heave again. Seawater splashes. Heave. Heave. Then – Snap! The line breaks and we fall back. Mr Bass sinks and the muskets dip into the sea, but when I scramble up, I spy Mr Bass kicking through the water on his side, holding the muskets above his head. The Lieutenant hauls in the rest of the lead line.

'Damaged as we were dumped,' he says, picking at the frayed end.

Mr Bass reaches the boat. I grab the muskets. He clings to the gunwale. 'Lash those oars together, Will. I'll need to raft the rest of the supplies.'

I uncoil rope. The Lieutenant and I wind it around the oars.

'It's not stable enough, George,' the Lieutenant says, and he is up and at the mast. 'Will, help me here.'

We unstep the mast. Mr Bass clambers into the boat and we lash mast and oars together.

'Now we have a tolerable raft,' the Lieutenant says, grinning. 'But let's not tell the marines about our near musket loss, else they'll mock us for *not* preserving our artillery.'

I look to the shore. Our stores are spread out on the sand. What if cannibals were to come running from the forest? Can they swim? I wish I'd asked more questions of Na who says he has met some.

We lower the raft. Mr Bass climbs onto it and paddles to shore. He surfs a wave to the shallows, drags the raft up on dry sand and begins lashing stores to it. I eyeball the beach but see only sand glare and tree shadow. Smoke is rising up from the forest but it comes in short puffs. Have they left the fire unattended? Outward, I am calm, but inside, there is a great bellowing. I know now the true weight of my earlier error with the barica. If I'd checked it when Hoary Bogarty had given it over, we'd not be here. I see now how one error tumbles into another.

I think of the story that had been the rush of Port Jackson before we sailed. The events in question happened a way back with the tale written up in a Calcutta newspaper and transported to us by a vessel from that region. The report told of how a small boat, with a captain and eight men, set out from the main ship to explore an island. Rough seas caused them to lose sight of their vessel. As they pulled toward the shore the Indians gave off friendly and with waving arms showed the sailors a safe place to land. Once on shore, three sailors requested permission to tramp up through the trees to the top of the hill to eye the position of their ship. The captain agreed but said he and five crew would stay with the boat. Some Indians went with the sailors to guide them through the forest. When they neared the top of the hill, one of the three sailors, the only one with a musket, became suspicious of the guides. He whispered his fears to his two companions but they, trusting souls, assured him the natives were friendly. The men continued on their way. When they finally reached the hilltop they searched the sea for their ship but saw only waves and gulls. Their disappointment was great. Would they be trapped on the island for all time? On the trip down the man with the musket spied one of the Indians moving toward him, too fast for friendship. He shot off his gun. The Indians cried out and attacked, spearing the second sailor and cutting the throat of the third, then they ran off into the forest. With the help of the musket man, who was unharmed, the wounded men staggered down the hill. Arriving at the beach they saw blood splattered on the sand. Warily, they followed the blood trail. First they spied an arm lying in the shallows, a few steps on, a leg. These, they realised, were the limbs of the captain, now hacked from his body, a body that was nowhere to be seen. The men had barely taken in the sight when they eyed three of the crew floating, head down, in bloodied seawater. They turned the men over and saw how their throats had been cut from ear to ear. The three survivors, one holding his own throat, the other pressing on his wound, now waded toward the boat and saw two more sailors lying in it, face down. They climbed in beside the dead men and, sick with fear, pulled away from shore just as the Indians, which they now guessed to be cannibals, rushed across the sand, yelling and howling. The three pulled out to sea, far enough not to be pursued. The Indians set up an unholy racket and began dragging the dead bodies toward a large fire. The three survivors sailed on but had a terrible journey, with only salt water to heal their wounds and no food. After paddling through too many windless days, they made it to Sarret, near Timor Land, where the Indians gave them food and water. The three survived to tell their tale, although one of them died soon after from fever.

This story I tell to the Lieutenant as we watch the shore for any sign of wild men. The Lieutenant says he knows the tale.

‘Don’t think on it, Will, for it’s bound to be greatly exaggerated.’

He is stacking away the goods that Mr Bass has rafted in. He is being his sensible self.

‘For a start,’ he says, ‘why would the cannibals leave the boat and the bodies unattended? Where did they go?’

‘To light the fire,’ I say.

‘Why did they not leave a guard?’

‘Because they’re cannibals, they don’t have guards and soldiers and armies like we do.’

‘And why did the three survivors not see the fire burning before they set sail?’

‘They were in a state of great fear and shock.’

But the Lieutenant will not be convinced. I curse him silently. If Na was with us we’d be safe. Na had begged to come on the journey. Mr Bass had been for it but the Lieutenant was against, saying he’d need the Governor’s permission and that would delay our departure.

‘And besides, Na eats for ten,’ the Lieutenant had added.

‘Na is needed to sweep in the hospital,’ Mr Bass had finally said.

But Na knows how to ward off cannibals with his death rattle stare, which he has showed me, revealing the whites of his eyes. Oh, and it is truly terrible.

It’s mid-afternoon when a red-raw Mr Bass finally climbs on board and flops down, exhausted. The bread is spoiled, he says, and the tea and coffee too. He left them on the beach. I untie the raft while the Lieutenant reports on the rest of our supplies. The sugar is half wet but the flour not at all, nor the cakes of soup. The rice and beef and pork are good too. We have no fresh water but the barica is back, still in need of a clean.

‘One horn dry, two wet,’ the Lieutenant says, checking the gunpowder. ‘And I can’t pull the rod from the musket.’

Mr Bass lies gasping, like a caught fish. There’s no way to quench his thirst. The Lieutenant and I step the mast and hoist sail. A breeze catches and we are off, safe from danger. Mr Bass attempts to dress in damp clothes but his skin is too sun sore and he can only suffer a shirt. The Lieutenant sits at the helm and navigates toward the islands in the distance.

I sit at the bow. When we are near the first island I see it’s screwed for landing.

‘Not here,’ I call.

The wind rolls around us. The Lieutenant steers further south, Mr Bass asleep at his feet. We again pass beaches and headlands that look like practice Port Jacksons. The wind drops and I clamber back to the Lieutenant.

‘Can we land?’ I ask.

The Lieutenant looks to the sails to read the wind, then to the trees on land. He reads the invisible by close attention to the visible.

‘On land the wind is gusting to the west and will soon be with us. See that double saddle,’ he says. ‘We’ll pull to the other side.’

I watch the Lieutenant watch the water.

‘It’s the currents you need to understand as much as the wind,’ he says to me, in a kindly voice.

We douse sail, shift Mr Bass’s feet so they lay between us, and get upon the oars. We pull but gusts come from all directions. Slap, slap, to dare is to do. Slap, slap, to dare is to do. On the other side of the saddle we’re out of the gusts but the sea drums the rocks beneath the cliffs.

‘Anchor,’ the Lieutenant shouts.

Mr Bass wakes, his skin is tight and red. He lies on his side and rocks with the boat. Although he is hot to touch, he shivers. The Lieutenant and I sit by and try to cheer him.

‘Will, how do you think those cannibals would have broiled us?’ the Lieutenant asks me, as if it is a serious question.

‘The slow broil, I think.’

‘Slow broil you say, yet our cook might give a different counsel on the best way to broil human flesh,’ the Lieutenant says.

‘He might indeed,’ I agree.

Our cook on the *Reliance* has seven different broiling methods, which he feels a need to test on us, one for each day of the week. All on ship are in the habit of remarking, oh it is the tough broil today, or, yes, yes, cook has outdone himself with a feat that defies nature, he has given us the dry broil!

‘What say you, Mr Bass, what advice would our cook give the cannibals?’ I ask.

Mr Bass can only manage a whisper. ‘He’d say roast for my carcass. Too fatty for much else.’

‘What if they were not cannibals at all?’ the Lieutenant says. ‘But the kindest of Indians?’

‘What if the smoke was caused by young ones left by the campfire for the day?’ I say.

‘What if it were smoke smouldering from a fire caused by lightning?’ Mr Bass suggests.

We laugh at what might have been and our spirits are eased. But talking is hard with the drumming sea. I lie down and watch the sky fade and a fire-orange moon rise. When I learnt I was in Mr Bass’s employ, for days after, everyone wanted to jaw my journey. I was a bright star. On the sail out, it was Mr Paine that convinced Mr Bass I’d need to improve my letters if I was to contribute to the rise of man. Without my letters properly learned, Mr Paine said to me, I was an animal, no better or worse than a pig. But if I followed on with Mr Paine’s idea of who was animal and who was man, and if it all came down to knowing your letters or not, then most people I know are in the pen with the pigs. Mr Bass paid particular attention to my spelling for he said it was a sin to stick in and take out parts of the English language without law or licence, and it was he who, with his painterly way of shaping a foreign word, sparkled me to learn the Indian language. At that time Mr Bass was attending Baneelong, who was mightily ill. This, on the *Reliance* sail to New South Wales. Baneelong was journeying back from living the high life in London with Governor Phillip. For the first part of the journey Baneelong lay on his bunk staring at the boards above. He made no motion other than that made for him by the rock of the sea. I spied him once for a full hour. Stillness itself. Mr Bass said, after the high jinks in London it would be a cruel trick if he were not to reach home. But Baneelong rallied once we’d skipped across the equator. As if he could sniff his homeland on the breeze. It was then he taught us his language. The word for the Milky Way, only seen in the southern hemisphere, he called Warrewull. The Pleiades are Mooloomolong and the moon, Yennadah.

Now I see the stars and moon every night and speak them in two languages, where once I didn’t look to see them at all. And now I know how big the world is. Before, not knowing the world’s bigness meant that tomorrow looked like yesterday. But knowing makes it harder to spy ahead. Now I know that tomorrow is unmade.

I wake, cold to the bone, and eye Warrewull above. When I sit up I see it’s not only the sky that is rippling with light, the sea too is covered with flecks of shining. All

between is inky black. If the world were being born again this is what it would look like. There is only the splish, splash of water. I uncoil a rope – splish, splash – and twirl the end in the sea – swoosh, swoosh – like a whirligig – swoosh, swoosh. It goes round and round stirring the water so it throws off

thousands
of
sparklings
as
though
sea
and
sky
are
sending
signals
to
each
other
by
shining
shards
of
light.
I think I will never see anything so beautiful again.

I sleep again and when I next open my eyes I spy a sea eagle swerving in a blue cloth sky. I'm cold but remembering the sparkling night brings on a shine. My breath, in out, in out. And Mr Bass sighing. He wears only a shirt. Holds his head a prisoner in his hands. I see blistering on his calves but say nothing as he can't abide fussing. The Lieutenant eyes me good morning, then tips his cheek to catch the breeze.

I watch the sun bounce across the waves. Not warm yet, but promises to be. Then a voice. Heard above the swish of the sea. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant hear it too. We turn our heads together, like ducks on a river hearing the press of human feet on land. I spy two Indians in the surf, jumping and waving so as to catch our eye, and I'm like a man already stiff with death.

'Only fish gigs,' Mr Bass says.

But their fish gigs have sharp prongs. The Indians call again. I can pick out words. Only then do I ease. Cannibals would not speak like Na.

One of the Indians holds up a fish. My belly yelps.

'They're offering food,' the Lieutenant says.

We all have eyes for the fish.

'Is it safe?' the Lieutenant asks.

'I'm for it,' says Mr Bass.

The Lieutenant and I get upon the oars and pull in their direction. Mr Bass sits gingerly at the helm. On the beach seabirds squawk and flap their wings. It's calm enough to land but we stop pulling when we are still some distance from the Indians.

One is a giant. His body is burnt black and glistening with water; his hair and beard, like bushes, knotted and wild. His eyes are dark and when he looks at me my chest goes tight. But his mouth is merry.

Mr Bass talks using what language we know from Baneelong. He asks the giant his name.

‘Dilba,’ the giant says.

The second Indian does not say his title. He is twig thin but strong. Both men a match for Mr Bass in height. Bones through their noses. Do they suffer it for strength? The second Indian wades through the water toward us, a palm leaf bowl held in his long fingers. The bone through his nose is pointed at one end, like some I’ve seen before. He offers the bowl to Mr Bass, who takes it and sips, and hands it to the Lieutenant who does the same, before passing it to me. I sip and it cools my throat. Water, clear water. But after drinking I only want more.

The giant, Dilba, offers fish but we have no trade. Mr Bass finds a handkerchief. I spot two potatoes wedged under the thwart and pull them out. We offer these to Dilba who takes them, trading two silver fish of medium size. I throw them in the pail. Mr Bass has perked up. He likes to practice the language Baneelong taught him.

Dilba’s friend grins. His teeth whiter than any on board the *Reliance*.

‘Is one from Broken Bay, the other, Botany Bay?’ the Lieutenant asks me.

‘Yes,’ I say, although I haven’t been listening properly and am not at all sure.

I want to ask the Indians if they sailed down here in a canoe or if they walked. Na swears that he could beat me to any place, he walking and me in a canoe, even if we both set out at the same time. I can’t always work out what is fibbery with Na, as everything in this land is strange, and what appears strange may not be. Na has told me that his uncles walk south for garaabara. I want to ask the Indians if that is why they are here. Are you here for garaabara? I decide to ask when Mr Bass has finished talking.

I’m sitting forward ready to speak when I spy, on shore, several Indians striding down a sand dune. These are soon followed by more, and more again, until a large number have assembled, all calling and shouting, raising an almighty racket. The two Indians with us call to those on shore.

‘George?’ the Lieutenant whispers. ‘What do they say?’

Mr Bass has his ear cocked. ‘A different language,’ he says. ‘Can’t make out a word.’

The Lieutenant turns to me. ‘Will?’

I’m frightened by the shouting, it sounds like one big roar. I listen with my ear cocked, like Mr Bass. ‘Not a word,’ I say.

‘Pull out,’ the Lieutenant orders. ‘Too many are gathered.’

We take up our oars and pull away. The two Indians turn back, surprised at our hasty retreat.

‘To Port Jackson,’ the Lieutenant calls to them.

I start to pull north, even though the wind is the wrong way about and slaps me in the face.

The Lieutenant hisses. ‘Will! Where are you going?’

‘Port Jackson,’ I say.

‘We go south around the saddle,’ he says.

I change direction. *Tom Thumb* slides about in the water.
 ‘For pity’s sake,’ the Lieutenant says.
 ‘Matthew, ease up! We’re safe.’ Mr Bass laughs.
 He doesn’t look scared but with him it’s hard to tell.
 ‘When you know not your opponent’s next move,’ the Lieutenant says to me,
 ‘make sure your own is difficult to comprehend. I told them north precisely because
 we’re going south.’
 ‘Ah,’ I say, as though the strategy is clear.
 Yet, will they not see us going south?
 We pull out of the bay and around the point. We pull and pull and I’m weak
 with thirst when we haul *Thumb* up onto the sand.
 Mr Bass stands, eyeing the land. ‘No blasted water here.’
 ‘We’ll eat first, then search for water,’ the Lieutenant says.
 I feel dizzy as I collect the sticks for a fire and have to sit. Mr Bass takes the
 pail to the shallows so he can gut the fish. I pile sticks on top of each other and set
 them alight with a flint, blowing until I spark a flame. When the fire is crackling I lay
 our clothes near it to dry. My stomach has its own voice.
 ‘Hunger must be the most fearful death, I would rather a spear through my
 chest,’ I say.
 ‘You may get both.’ The Lieutenant smiles as though he relishes the idea.
 ‘The land is a book waiting to be read,’ Mr Bass says, slapping his gutted fish
 on the fire. ‘Learn to read it and you will never go hungry. But I agree, Will, hunger is
 a terrible thing.’
 ‘Disagree,’ says the Lieutenant, suddenly lively and spoiling for an argument.
 ‘Hunger can be good, as long as you’re not the hungry party. Thinking, France.
 Thinking, Howe.’
 Mr Bass scoffs. ‘What? Are you saying Howe won because he captured the
 grain ships?’
 ‘Yes!’
 Mr Bass finds a stick to stir the fire with. ‘It was an unnecessary move on
 Howe’s part. I would almost venture dishonourable. But that’s not why he won the
 battle.’
 ‘Howe used every tactic he knew in order to win. Hunger was one of his
 weapons and knowing how to employ it was his wisdom,’ the Lieutenant replies.
 There is a conflict that now and then rises between the Lieutenant and Mr
 Bass. Both have been cheek by jowl with the carriage of death but Mr Bass, being in
 the healing trade, thinks more on healing, while the Lieutenant, being in the business
 of defending, thinks more on that score, and thus they ride the talk of death
 differently. But it has to be said that when both are hankering for exploring, they take
 the same carriage.
 The Lieutenant squats before the fire, keen for debate.
 ‘I know the *Bellerophon* story,’ I say to him. ‘They talk of it on the *Reliance*.’
 The Lieutenant looks surprised. ‘Do they?’
 ‘They do,’ I say, though this is not what I mean. What I mean is that when I
 was first on the *Reliance* I would settle near the wardroom and hear the talk, and
 several times I heard the Lieutenant’s story of the Glorious First of June Battle, led by
 Admiral Howe. The Lieutenant was on the *Bellerophon* under his patron, Pasley. He

did not tell his version with the same verve as my uncle, Hilton, who was fond of telling that battle at London inns. His way of getting free grog. Yet, when I overheard the Lieutenant, he was not without style.

‘What do they say?’ the Lieutenant asks.

There is no *they*, but I cannot say I was listening in.

‘You wish me to tell how *they* say the story?’

‘Yes, Will, yes.’

I cannot look at him if I’m to speak, but I set myself up for the tale, in the manner I’ve seen my uncle do before an oration.

‘See, the French are hungry after the Revolution,’ I begin, improvising on my uncle’s version.

‘They start that way?’ the Lieutenant asks.

‘Yes,’ I say, remembering I must agree with him always if I’m to stay on the right side of his ledger. ‘The French people have the heads of nobles, but they don’t have a plan for what to do with the heads. Not only that but the people are helter-skelter with the business of revolution. With a bit of bad weather, the crops fail and in a tick-tock the whole country is desperate for a feed. War is trumpeted between England and France because Old George doesn’t want dirty revolutionaries crossing the seas and messing up what he has nice and orderly. When someone high-up hears, by use of a spy or two, that a hundred and twenty Yankee ships are sailing for France, loaded with grain, this makes English legs quake. The French fed are strong. The French hungry are a weaker foe.’

‘Ah,’ says the Lieutenant, turning to Mr Bass. ‘The French hungry are a weaker foe, they tell it this way too!’

Mr Bass flips the fish and pushes it into the fire.

‘So Old George decides to keep the French hungry still, and he sends Wrinkly Lord Howe, who is like a wolf when it comes to stratagems and spoils, to capture the grain ships. Lieutenant, you were only two years on my fifteen when you were on the *Bellerophon*, is that not so?’

‘It is so.’

‘The fleet sails out of Spithead with twenty-nine warships and fifteen frigates. Hundreds of white sails battling the winds. A glorious sight! And Lord Howe has a plan. He knows the French will sail out to meet the Yankee grain ships and guard them into port. The French are under Admiral Louis Villaret de Joyeuse. Howe plans to get to the Yankees first, take hostage the grain ships and guide them back to England, then turn his cannons on the French.’

Out on the Atlantic, Howe’s Channel fleet patrol day after day. Despite their constant watch no Yankee ship appears on the watery horizon. Howe gets a craving for battle so he leaves nine warships on guard and, with the remaining fleet, sails to the French coast. His new plan is to trap the French as they leave Brest. But all goes hubble-bubble when he discovers the French have already left. Howe sails in pursuit. On the twenty-eighth day he sights the enemy. They have twenty-six warships and smaller vessels too. This is a tough match for the Channel Fleet. They are now less nine ships and less ships means less guns. The blustering winds cause sea swells that tower above the English sails. Raindrops turn to ice and pelt the decks. But still the English chase the enemy. Gun ports are flung open and cannons rumble out.’

As I tell the battle beginning, I make the noises Hilton-style.

‘There must be theatre in the telling,’ he has often instructed.

His style is what assured him free grog. Sometimes, when we were setting up our theatre in town squares, I’d join Hilton as he rallied the crowd with spine-chilling tales. I learnt from him all the old tricks, yet my telling to the Lieutenant and Mr Bass has something firstborn about it.

‘The sailors are feverish for battle,’ I say. ‘The *Bellerophon* sees a frigate and fires. Bang go the cannons and the frigate sails off. The sailors cheer. Only now, alongside the *Bellerophon* comes the great shadow of the *Revolutionnaire*. Big and black like a killer whale, this ship has a thousand men on board and a hundred and ten guns. Cannons blast back and forth. The roar is deafening and the smoke becomes so black it’s hard to make out the figure of a man an arms-length in front. The maincap of the *Bellerophon* is hit and the ship lurches to one side, like a wounded walrus. The sailors drag the topsail and soon there is a mess of rigging on deck. The *Bellerophon* has to retreat to repair the damage. So too the *Revolutionnaire*. And soon these two foes, who appear and disappear like giants of the watery deep, lose sight of each other.

Night comes. Lanterns flash. The sailors on the *Bellerophon* work on through until morning. All that can be heard above the sea rush is a hellish hammering.’

The Lieutenant picks up a twig and draws the *Bellerophon* in the sand.

‘At first light Howe orders the fleet to form a line of battle. He has a new cunning plan. He wants the English ships to sail straight for the enemy – this is bold and never done before – and cut off the rear of the French line to confuse them. The English set sail but some cowardly captains don’t carry out Howe’s order to the letter. They think the plan too dangerous. Still, the tactic catches the French on the hop. The English have full stomachs but the French do not. There are loud shots – crack, crack! – and a mass of thick grey smoke. The *Bellerophon* aims for –’

And here I hesitate for in my rush of Hilton-style theatrics I forget what the *Bellerophon* did.

‘The *Bellerophon* sails for the space between the second and third ships,’ the Lieutenant says, prompting me.

‘The English sailors fire cannons,’ I say. ‘Boom, boom! So too the French. Boom, boom! Then comes the loud crack of timber as masts fall. Wails of men. All is desperate. The *Bellerophon*’s forward rigging is slashed to pieces.’

‘It truly was,’ says the Lieutenant, remembering.

‘The French, also, are badly mangled. The *Bellerophon* limps off to repair. That night, time slows. A fog covers the sea like a dirty old coat. The next day the fog is still there. On the *Bellerophon*, bloodied men appear and disappear, they carry hammers and bits of timber. All day the only sound is just the sea and this infernal hammering, on and on. This is a cold misty hell, not a burning hell, but it is a hell.’

‘You tell this tale well, Will,’ says the Lieutenant.

‘The morning after, fog again. Later, it clears. The English eat, but do the French? No. They cannot eat. They have little food. The English wait to attack, they hold out another day, in order to make the French tremble, in order to make the French weak. Then they sail, setting a diagonal course. They smash through the centre of the enemy, attacking the ships from leeward. The *Bellerophon*, second in line, opens fire on the French *Eole*. The two ships are so close that any one of the men, if they chose to, could reach out and touch an enemy sailor. Fighting breaks out. Black

smoke. Gunfire. Screams and clashing iron. Turmoil. The *Bellerophon* receives a heavy pounding from the French *Trajan*. You were standing where, Lieutenant?

‘On the quarterdeck.’

‘And you saw when a shot smashed through the barricading and hit Rear Admiral Pasley?’

‘I did. Pasley’s leg was gone.’

‘Blood was splattered on the faces of sailors around.’

‘They say this?’ the Lieutenant asks.

‘They say this and more,’ I reply, and the Lieutenant smiles, pleased his bloody battle is so spoken about. ‘Old Pasley has copped it bad,’ I say. ‘Bleeding, he is carried below. And you, sir, were at the cannons, so fiery was your mood.’

‘It was indeed.’

‘Yet, Howe’s plan has worked and the hunger of the French means it is not long before seven French ships surrender, too weak to continue fighting.’

‘And that goes to show that in war there are many ways to defeat a foe and hunger can be used for the good of a nation,’ the Lieutenant says, triumphantly.

‘And yet the grain ships got through, did they not?’ Mr Bass adds.

I look to the Lieutenant. Surely not? But a curt nod proves Mr Bass correct.

‘And the French claim victory of the exact same battle.’ Mr Bass laughs and turns to me. ‘But that was well told, Master Martin.’

It is now that the Lieutenant looks over my head and gasps. I follow the direction of his gaze. Standing on top of the sand dunes are Dilba and his friend.

‘They’re alone,’ the Lieutenant says, quietly.

The two Indians run down the hill, calling out. They have no weapons with them, but even if they had, I would not be afraid. My tale has filled me with courage. We stand to meet them. Dilba comes up to Mr Bass, takes his arm and points north.

‘Ah,’ says Mr Bass. ‘He thinks we don’t know where Port Jackson lies.’

The Lieutenant had said we were going north but we went south. We cannot tell Dilba about our stratagems, yet he thinks us stupid. If your enemy thinks you are stupid, what then? Might it not make them braver? Is it not better for them to fear you?

‘Thank you,’ Mr Bass says to Dilba, who I remember cannot be our enemy after all, as he speaks the Port Jackson tongue like Na, and like Baneelong.

The Lieutenant mimes how we had wanted to eat first. Dilba and his friend watch the Lieutenant closely, then look to each other and laugh.

The green sea is shiny. The yellow sand is warming. We are stood around the campfire. All appears calm. But the scissors that Mr Bass has used to scale the fish lie on the ground, glinting. Dilba’s friend picks them up, curious. He walks away, holding the scissors, and his feet on the sand goes whoosh whoosh like silk on a lady’s dress. The Lieutenant mimes what you can do with scissors. Then, with friendly gestures, but with a nervous air, he takes the scissors from the Indian. Dilba steps forward. For a tick-tock all I hear is wave crash. All I see is eyes back and forth. The Lieutenant, laughing again, takes hold of Dilba’s beard. Dilba swipes away the Lieutenant’s hand and darts back. Eyes toing and froing. I spy the stick I’ve used for poking the fire. A weapon if needed. One move and it is in my hand. But I wait. Ark, ark, a crow calls. Are we friends or enemies? It is yet to be confirmed.

The Lieutenant takes hold of a clump of his own hair. He snips it off and

offers it to Dilba who takes it, staring at the hair in awed silence. The Lieutenant reaches for Dilba's beard again, his movement slower than before. Dilba watches, wary. The Lieutenant raises the scissors and snips, then holds the clump of beard in the air. Tick-tock. Dilba grins. The Lieutenant leans forward, takes another snip. Dilba's friend laughs and points. And so the Lieutenant snips and snips until Dilba's beard is cut and his hair too and the friend is holding his sides he is laughing so much.

The Indians laugh like us, only they laugh more. This is my discovery.

Dilba's friend wants a haircut now. We all come closer as the Lieutenant snips at the friend's beard. Mr Bass sings a barber's ditty and Dilba sings it after him, in perfect English, in perfect tune. Hilton and Mama would be amazed. The Indians are our friends, it is clear.

Gulls circle above and the fire spits. We sit and eat, pulling the flesh from the fish. We invite our friends to join us. They eat the same way we do. This is proof that they are not cannibals.

'Bado?' Mr Bass asks Dilba, scooping up imaginary water.

Dilba points south. 'River,' he says. 'River, there.'

He speaks only some words of English, but his accent, Mr Bass says, is splendid. Dilba raises his head the way Na does to indicate direction.

'River?' Mr Bass points south to confirm.

'Yes,' Dilba says. 'River.'

Mr Bass and the Lieutenant look to each other. Maybe *this* is the river Henry Hacking has talked about? Or if not, it may be another river, not yet seen, by Hacking or anyone, except for Dilba and his like. The thrill of it. Maybe this is the river that, with waters deep, will lead us to the heart of the land. Maybe this is the river that will make rise our monument. What strange twists of fate. We would not have come this far south if not for water in a wine barica. And where I had felt bad about the troubles we have endured, now the fate of those actions may lead to a great discovery.

But this swelling does not last more than a tick-tock for, as Mr Bass and the Lieutenant debate the river, I spy Dilba's sly look to his friend. A look of malice. I remember the cannibal story from Calcutta. I remember also the Lieutenant's words. Do not let your enemy know your next move. Could these Indians be feigning friendship? What might be their next move? Dilba's eyes are half-open. Eyes half-open mark men that are slippery in their thoughts. Hilton told me this for he has always played Iago with a half-open eye. The Lieutenant and Mr Bass, not having stage skill, see none of it.

'The wind is the wrong way about for returning north,' the Lieutenant says.

'It is,' says Mr Bass, with a wink to me. 'And are we not in desperate need of water?'

How to tell them what I know without giving away the game? 'That drink we had was plenty,' I say.

Mr Bass thinks I've made a joke and laughs.

'We could not return north without water,' says the Lieutenant.

He is speaking to me as though I'm to decide. I'm baffled but then I see the ruse. Already they are planning what to say to the Governor about our journey south. All their meaning is between words, or behind them. This river could change our destiny is what they think.

'So that is that.' Mr Bass stands and rubs his hands above the fire.

‘That is that,’ the Lieutenant agrees.

‘We’ll sail to the river,’ Mr Bass says to Dilba.

The Lieutenant mimes us all getting in the boat and sailing south. Dilba claps his hands and points. He will show the way. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant begin to pack our things. I stand by the fire. If I don’t move Mr Bass will notice me. Then I will signal by my eyes that we cannot go. But Mr Bass and the Lieutenant continue packing. Reckless with ambition, they pay no heed to me or the Indians. I’ve no choice but to run to Mr Bass.

‘Sir, what if they mean to trick us?’ I whisper.

‘It was we who asked them to assist in our search for water,’ Mr Bass says.

‘But we must obey the Governor’s order,’ I argue.

Mr Bass gives me a sour look.

‘And that was to find a river.’

‘A river that joins the sea just south of Botany Bay. We’re a long way from that destination.’

‘Will, what do you fear?’

I see his mind is made up. I see also that he thinks me a coward.

‘Nothing,’ I say.

I curse the day I did not check the barica was clean. Curse the day I left England. As I stomp out the fire I spy Dilba watching me. His hand flicks up. A signal to his friend? I pretend not to see.

We shove off from the shallows, Mr Bass at the helm. The Lieutenant and I step the mast and we set sail. Dilba, near Mr Bass; his friend, silent at the bow, as if he does not like to go. I’ll have to watch them both. The wind picks up and we are off.

‘To the river,’ Mr Bass says.

Dilba watches him. ‘Yoorongi,’ he says and points south.

‘Duck?’ Mr Bass asks. ‘Yoorongi in water place?’

‘Moremme,’ Dilba says.

‘What else?’ Mr Bass asks.

A wave comes crashing over the side of *Thumb* and when I look up, wiping water from my face, Mr Bass and Dilba are laughing.

‘What?’ the Lieutenant leans forward to hear.

‘Dilba says that at this river there is a beautiful woman,’ Mr Bass says. ‘A white woman at that, and Indian corn and potatoes.’

‘If only that were possible, my friend,’ the Lieutenant shouts.

Dilba points to me and this makes Mr Bass laugh louder. My cheeks flush with heat. I turn away. Usually it’s Moore, the ship’s master, who stirs me about women. I always feign boredom. I know what goes on. I see it all over the cove. If a man has stirrings, no mind the flavour, anything can be supped. White or black, woman or boy, even child, all is there and up for trade. If no coin is had, spirit will do, even flour. When Mr Bass lets me have free roam, Na and I kick around the campfires at night. We see those that go cock-a-hoop for a bit of flesh. Hoary Bogarty growls as he distributes goods from the store but to see him with a woman by firelight and watch how he fondles her bosom is to see how he fair turns into a dribbling pup.

Mr Bass calls to the Lieutenant. ‘Dilba is offering you the white woman.’

The Lieutenant shouts over the splash of waves. ‘No white woman could live

so far from civilization.'

I look across the sea to the land that is scrubby. Two escaped convicts are reported living with Hawkesbury tribes. But there are farms on the Hawkesbury that the escaped men raid. This far south, there are no farms to be had. Fewer animals. That is why there are cannibals. To live here would be too great a risk. Even Cook did not land in this wild place. I lean over the gunwale and spy the silvery back of a dolphin. There are more romping in the water alongside us. Their fins flicker as they duck under the boat and criss-cross in front of *Thumb*. They come up for air with newborn squeaks. I eye one for his scarred back and swear he eyes me in return, as if to warn of the danger we are in. They swim off in a hurry. I look starboard and see in the water a feeding hubbub that would please fishermen. Dark-finned sharks circle silvery fish that jump from the water; these jumping flapping silvery fish themselves feeding on smaller prey. While above, white winged gulls cruise picking of what they can. It's as if all creatures of the sea and air have come to join a circling, snapping, flipping, flapping dance that will end in death.

Watching makes me dazed and I grip the gunwale. This sight must surely be a bad omen.

We sail toward shore. The long arm of the escarpment cradles spindly trees but through the sand dunes we see the flow of water. We strike sail and take up oars. Splish, splash, splish, splash, to dare is to do.

'But it's no more than a stream!' the Lieutenant calls, when we are near the beach.

The entrance to the stream is a yeasty beast and the wind howls like a child in tantrum. No way to enter yet Dilba starts to call directions, like a ship's captain. His language is his own but Mr Bass understands the pointing and waving. We navigate the surf like a rocky path, first going straight for it, then to one side, then the other, and soon we are through and pulling upstream against a strong tide.

Dilba and his friend jump from *Thumb* and splash through the shallows. They begin to stride the wide sandy bank beside us. They call out but I cannot catch their words. Our boat scrapes the bed of the stream. I turn my attention to pulling. The Lieutenant pulls with me. From shrubs on the shore, men appear, like tricky spirits, first one, then another and then another, as if the land is coughing them up. Dilba and his friend have their backs to us. I cannot spy their countenance. The Indians from the bush stand and stare, first at us, then at Dilba and his friend. No one speaks. They have a spirit way of talking. It must be that. I count the Indians. Nearly twenty have gathered. Then, at some unknown sign, they all begin to shout and stroll along the bank. Their dogs run to the shallows, but don't bark. They are devils in dog's bodies. The men babble and gesture. Some have grizzled beards that go to their navel, teeth in their hair and sharp bones through their noses. They wave friendly, but friendly could be a trap? The men call to us, Solja, Solja! Mr Bass says it's his red waistcoat that is the same colour as a soldier's.

Dilba, ankle deep in water, points to the hills. We look that way and spy a shimmering lagoon.

'But the stream is scarce deep enough to get us there,' says the Lieutenant.

'Even if we made it, we'd then have to wait for the tide to get us back down,' Mr Bass says, eyeing the men on shore. 'We're too vulnerable.'

own tongue. I talk to him with the Port Jackson speak I learnt from Baneelong but he does not understand.

‘We’re looking for a river.’ I make my arms bend, like the flow of a river. ‘Swoosh, swoosh,’ I say.

The old man pats the earth.

‘No, no, river,’ I say, but know it is no good.

When we come out of the shrubs the Lieutenant and Mr Bass are in a huddle with the Indians. The old man lopes over to them. I follow but get seized by a branch and stop to untangle myself. The Lieutenant eyes me, shouts my name. Mr Bass strides over, runs his hand through my hair.

‘Will, don’t scare us like that again!’

They are both by my side, pleased to see me.

‘I was getting water,’ I say, holding up the barica. The Lieutenant drinks first. He swallows in big gulps. Then Mr Bass takes his fill.

‘If water has been close by all this time,’ the Lieutenant whispers, ‘why has Dilba been luring us to the lagoon?’

‘To meet a darker purpose,’ Mr Bass says.

Now is the time to say the old man showed me the water, but I do not because the Indian talk rises too loud and my fears return. Maybe the old man is full of trickery. Mr Bass drinks again. ‘Good work, Will,’ he murmurs.

The Lieutenant agrees. ‘Yes, Will, good man.’

‘Stow the barica in *Thumb*,’ Mr Bass says. ‘We’ll dry the gunpowder, then depart.’

We walk together to the boat. The Indians eye our every move. The Lieutenant takes hold of the powder horns. Mr Bass retrieves the muskets. I stow the barica then ferret out twine as the oar needs repairing. I hear the sea roar and wish us back on the ocean. The Lieutenant sprinkles the gunpowder on a cloth to dry. Mr Bass kneels to clean a musket but this action causes a stir. The Indians holler. Some run at Mr Bass, waving their spears. I grip the oar, so it can be a weapon, but Mr Bass stills me with his eyes. Slowly, he lays the musket down. This quiets the Indians. But they hold their spears high, eyes shooting back and forth, from Mr Bass to the musket. Mr Bass calls for the twine and oar. I take them to him. He lays the oar across his knee and begins to wrap twine around the split wood. I stare at the Indians with their raised spears. Hear only my breathing. Then, birds in the shrubs, their faint twittering. An ant crawls across my foot. The Indians lower their weapons. One of them, no older than me as he has no beard, comes closer and sits on the sand, observing Mr Bass’s task. Another sits next to the first, picks up the ball of twine and threads it out as Mr Bass twists it around the oar. The Lieutenant calls me over.

‘This is the shock of the Indians,’ he whispers. ‘Savage one moment, child the next. Keep alert, Will, keep alert.’

But an easier mood settles upon our temporary camp. A long-bearded man now points to Dilba’s short beard. Dilba, smiling, jabbars how the Lieutenant has snipped it. He speaks fast. I can pick out some words. Yarrin, the word for beard. Dewwarra, the word for hair.

‘Boodyerre, boodyerre,’ Dilba says, miming the scissors cutting his beard.

‘You have become famous, Matthew,’ Mr Bass says. ‘These men want their beards cut.’

The Lieutenant walks to *Thumb* to collect the scissors. I find myself a sturdy stick. These Indians are warriors and I'll be ready to fight if this request for beard-cutting be a ruse. To dare is to do. To dare is to do. I say this to myself over and over.

All the Indians eye the Lieutenant who sets up a log as his barber's chair and points to it. The old man who showed me the water is the first to sit. The Lieutenant grips the old man's beard that lies, like an arrested waterfall upon his chest. The old man, surprised by the blades coming toward him, leans back and falls from the log. The Indians holler. I raise my stick. But Dilba, knowing what scissors are, picks the old man up, jabbering to him all the while. The old man raises his eyebrows, nods and grunts, then sits again on the log. He stares straight into the eyes of the Lieutenant who takes hold of his beard and begins to cut. The Indians murmur but soon shouting, like a soldier's huzzah, accompanies each snip.

'Mr Hogarth would find this man a fascinating subject,' calls the Lieutenant.

'Could he divine his nature?' Mr Bass asks.

'Better than I,' the Lieutenant says. 'Although the void between us might be too great, even for Hogarth.'

The sun beats down. The sand is hot. Insects nip at my skin. Indian dogs sniff at my feet. The first barbering is finished. The Indians surround the old man. Some reach out to touch his shortened beard. A second Indian steps forward. The Lieutenant snips a lock of this man's hair and holds it to his own beardless chin. The Indians laugh. One, a tall man with many teeth twisted through his hair, and with muscles as tight as a barrel, reaches out and wipes some sweat from the Lieutenant's forehead. Fearing attack, the Lieutenant starts back, gripping the scissors. But the Indian stands still, all his attention given to the moist drops on his fingertips. With his left hand he reaches up to his own forehead, thickly covered in fish oil, and wipes at it. He then holds his two hands out, as if comparing the traces of sweat.

'A fellow scientist,' Mr Bass suggests.

'Or a cook checking his ingredients,' the Lieutenant jokes.

The Lieutenant continues with his barbering but the tall Indian's interest has bothered him and he calls me over.

'Will, pack that powder now,' he says. 'Wet or dry I think we must leave. They are friendly, but altogether too friendly.'

On the hop I filter the gunpowder back into the horns and stow them in *Thumb*. Mr Bass brings the muskets and mended oar to the boat. He does it quickly. The Indians, amazed at their new beards, do not see, except for Dilba who comes towards us, again pointing to the lagoon. The Lieutenant shakes his head so Dilba takes hold of his arm.

'Lagoon,' he says, having already learnt our name for it.

The Lieutenant shakes free his arm and steps back. Dilba stares at him.

'Why is he so violent in his request?' the Lieutenant whispers to Mr Bass. 'We must put them off, George, in a friendly way, and make our escape without them suspecting.'

'Tomorrow, we will visit the lagoon,' Mr Bass calls to Dilba, pretending jolliness.

The Lieutenant points downstream to a green bank. He puts his folded hands to the side of his face, feigning sleep.

'We must rest. We go to that green bank there.'

Dilba turns and speaks to the Indians. I cannot pick out any words. But they turn and stare at Mr Bass.

‘The red waistcoat,’ Mr Bass says. ‘No doubt they’ve heard about our soldiers and are frightened.’

‘I’ll distract them while you get *Thumb* in the water,’ the Lieutenant orders, then he steps towards the Indians, repeating our need for sleep.

Mr Bass and I slide *Thumb* away from the shore. But Dilba again shakes his head, shouts, and points at the green bank. What is his objection? It is a bank like any other bank. Mr Bass and I splash in the shallows pushing *Thumb* into the deeper part of the stream.

‘Matthew, time to depart!’ Mr Bass calls as we jump into the boat.

The Lieutenant wades across and climbs in. We take up oars. Mr Bass is at the helm.

‘Keep a determined countenance, Will,’ the Lieutenant orders.

We begin to pull and are nearly away when four spear-holding Indians splash into the water after us, and jump into *Thumb*. More Indians wade in and surround our boat. I pull and pull, fearing for my life, but soon see it is the pushing of the natives that is getting us through the water at speed. The Indians whoop and sing, the sound, unnerving. Mr Bass eyes me and then he hums a sailor’s shanty.

‘Sing, Will,’ he calls out, sternly.

Soon we are all singing and such a savage clamouring I’ve never heard. There is much laughter, but there is *too* much laughter. Shall we get out of this alive?

When we are near the green bank, one of the younger Indians who has climbed into *Thumb* with us, snatches Mr Bass’s hat and drops it on his own head. He has no bone through his nose and no teeth in his hair, but his expression is all wildness as he jumps from the boat and splashes his way to shore.

‘My hat,’ Mr Bass shouts.

The wild Indian turns, raises his spear. My old friend, who showed me where to find the water, hollers at the younger man, who shouts back. I let the oar rest and grip my stick. Is this it? The young Indian splashes toward us, fierceness in his countenance. I plant my feet, ready. But the wild man stops, takes the hat from his head, and tosses it into the boat.

‘Shove off!’ Mr Bass shouts.

The Lieutenant uses his oar to push us into deeper water. We begin to pull but the Indians, still in good spirits or pretending so, begin to haul the boat to the bank.

‘Stop there!’ the Lieutenant yells.

Mr Bass joins in. ‘Halt! Halt!’

The Indians, intent on what they’re doing or shouting so loudly that they themselves cannot hear, do not stop. My old friend sees our red faces. He takes his hand from the gunwale and yells. The Indians, hearing him, stop hauling and stand back.

‘Pull, Will, pull,’ the Lieutenant yells.

Mr Bass takes up one of the muskets and aims it at the Indians. It is a ruse as the gun is still clogged with sand. The men stand in the shallows, eyes wide. They dare not follow. We pull towards the sea.

‘That was well suffered,’ Mr Bass says.

‘We’re not out of it yet, George.’

‘Very nearly.’

‘They have the numbers. They have the spears.’

Mr Bass lowers his musket. ‘If they wanted they could kill us all, but they do not and the why escapes me.’

‘They have no definite plan, no strategy,’ the Lieutenant says.

He and I keep pulling. The Indians watch us but do not move. We round a bend and they are gone.

‘What was their laughing about?’ I ask Mr Bass.

‘Indian mood shifts like the weather,’ the Lieutenant explains.

We ride the stream to where it meets the sea. The waves are crashing over us. The noise thunderous. Whoosh goes a wave, whoosh goes another.

‘We cannot pull past the sandbar,’ Mr Bass shouts.

‘Anchor,’ calls the Lieutenant.

We boat our oars, lift the stone anchor and drop it into the sea. The white foamy waves keep coming at us. It is fifteen yards on either side to the banks, and the water around is deep thanks to the current running out from the stream.

‘We’re safe enough,’ calls the Lieutenant.

We sit, wet through, rocking in our boat. Then the Lieutenant and Mr Bass begin to clean and rub dry the muskets, both working at a feverish pace. We’ll need arms if the Indians come for us again. I keep a steady eye on the white sand and the scrubby trees. Gulls flap on the shore. My breath slows.

Then I see Dilba and some men tramp around the bend.

‘Here they come!’ I shout.

The men wade across the stream and stand on the point to the south of us. Dilba puts his hand to his mouth. ‘LAGOON?’ he calls.

‘Why is he still at us?’ I ask.

The Lieutenant shouts, ‘YES, YES! IF THE WIND AND SURF DOESN’T ABATE, THEN WE SHALL.’

‘LAGOON!’ shouts Dilba.

‘WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN,’ Mr Bass calls.

Several times the Lieutenant, Mr Bass and Dilba shout in this way, like noisy magpies saying goodnight.

‘Coing Burregoolah. COING BURREGOOLAH!’ Mr Bass finally calls.

It is the Port Jackson speak for the sun setting.

‘Let’s hope that gives us some time,’ Mr Bass says.

Why does Dilba insist we go to the lagoon? If I was to kill someone I would not flag it so.

‘What is at the lagoon?’ I ask Mr Bass.

‘Death,’ Mr Bass says to me. ‘Nothing more than death.’

Mr Bass and the Lieutenant continue to clean the muskets while I keep watch. The Indians on the point south of us sit on the sand. The sun drops behind the hills. The sea flickers with fading light and the clouds redden. Just when I think we are safe, I see five Indians come out from the scrub to the north of us. They splash into the water.

‘Look there,’ I warn.

The men wade toward us. What to do? I still have my stick and pull it out from beneath the thwart. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant raise their muskets. The Lieutenant

has powder in his. Mr Bass has none. The waves are choppy from the surf. The Indians make good time and the seawater is soon frothing at their sides. One of them looks like Dilba's friend, but as there are five coming for us, with water splashing between them, and our boat in motion, I cannot be sure.

The Lieutenant twists his body, aims his firearm.

Mr Bass guides him. 'Wait, wait.'

The Lieutenant holds steady.

'Fire!' shouts Mr Bass.

The Lieutenant shoots. Boom! Gunpowder smokes above the men's heads.

The Indians holler, flinging their arms into the air. The Lieutenant makes to reload his musket but it jams.

'They're going,' I shout, as the Indians turn and splash toward the beach.

When they reach the shore they don't look back but disappear into the scrub.

'Excellent execution, Matthew,' Mr Bass says.

'I only had one shot.' The Lieutenant's face is drained of colour.

To the south of us, Dilba and the other Indians begin to holler. After a time, some walk back into the scrub. Others stand and stare. The waves lap at their feet but they don't enter the water. Slowly, one by one, they leave the beach until only Dilba is left. He stands, eyeing us. When the light is almost gone he too turns and walks into the scrub.

Mr Bass and I sit in the moonlight and watch the darkened banks while the Lieutenant, used to battle, snores. Mr Bass says he can't sleep. The day has had too much excitement. We wait for the tide to change. When the moon is part way in the sky, the water calms and the currents are for us. I wake the Lieutenant. He and I take up oars. Mr Bass stays at the helm. We pull toward the small islands off from the shore. Splish, splash, to dare is to do, splish, splash, to dare is to do. On and on we pull. When we are near one of the five islets north of the stream, Mr Bass and I push the anchor over the side. I look to him. He is smiling, glad to be alive, but I do not feel the same gladness. Every part of me is shaken. If the Indians wanted us dead why did they not throw spears? What was up at the lagoon? Mr Bass says death. But why must we go to the lagoon for death? I sit staring at the shore.

'There is melon,' says Mr Bass.

But I have no stomach for it. Splish, splash, to dare is to do.

'We'll call these islets after you, Master Martin,' says Mr Bass.

The Lieutenant agrees. 'You handled yourself well today, Will.'

I look about me. The islets are the kind that might vanish in heavy surf. Splish, splash. I see again the old man pat the earth. I see again Dilba's dark figure standing on the shore. I cannot speak because in the vast unknowing there is something I ache to know. What did they want with us? I start to shake. Not with fear but with despair at the mysteries of this strange world. I wish I'd never ventured from home. At least with Mama and Hilton adventures into the wild are always shaped, and death comes with fake swords. I put my arms around my head. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant talk, but their voices are far away. Despite the cold, I fall into a deep slumber.

Monday, our fifth day. The morning is bright and the breeze is up. According to the Lieutenant, I have faced a foe and survived.

‘We left them puzzling our very nature,’ agrees Mr Bass.

Yesterday is like a dream. My spirit, again hungry for adventure, soars. We step the mast and hoist sail but the breeze soon shifts, blowing one way, then another. The sea becomes a bubbling soup and the clouds lumpy dumplings. We strike the sail and pull for land. When the sun is above us, we pull through a gap in a reef, enter a shielded bay and haul up on the beach. We climb out of *Thumb* like old men, our arms sore from pulling and our bodies aching from three nights of sleeping on a boat. But the sun is warm on my skin and there are no Indian footprints on the sand.

I help Mr Bass undress. His burnt skin has blistered. He takes a bath in the sea. The Lieutenant and I join him. I dive into the water and swim as far as I can, then float on my back. The clouds in the sky are like sheep in a field. Seabirds, flying low, pluck insects from the air. I wade out and run along the sand to dry off, then collect sticks, light a fire beneath a shady tree, and boil a soup cake. Mr Bass wades out and gently rubs his body with a cloth. He suggests I add salted pork to the soup.

‘A neat culinary trick,’ he says.

‘Come, Will, we’ll search for fresh water,’ says the Lieutenant.

Mr Bass watches the soup while the Lieutenant and I scramble over slippery rocks. We find a place where water is dripping down from the cliff. I tip my head back to taste it. Sweet and clear. The Lieutenant does the same. He leaves me there to fill the barica. Drip, drop. Drip, drop. It takes an age to fill but I’m in no hurry. I see a gecko run across a rock. A spider drops down on a fine thread of web and dangles before me. Drip, drop. Drip, drop. Seagulls land on the higher rocks, squawking. Drip, drop.

I walk back to camp, happy to have my feet firm on the ground. My sad spirit from the night before has withered and a new one has grown in its place. Perhaps a man must always ride the waves of turmoil before finding peace. I make wheaten cakes the way our cook showed me. The Lieutenant writes in his journal. Mr Bass fossicks in the scrub, picking up insects and inspecting plants and bones. He stores his collection in the shade. I brew tea and we sup.

‘How would it be if all they wanted was to show us a river?’ I say, thinking of our trials the day before.

I dip some wheat cake into my soup but before I bite into it, I see that Mr Bass and the Lieutenant have stopped eating and are staring at me.

I need to explain myself. ‘Because what if a larger river ran into the lagoon?’

Mr Bass looks to the Lieutenant but the Lieutenant does not take his eyes from me. I see the fright in his eye before he banishes it.

‘Impossible hypothesis,’ the Lieutenant says. ‘A river of any strength reveals itself at the coast.’ He turns to Mr Bass. ‘We must make sure the Governor realises that too, else he might doubt us for further endeavours.’

The Lieutenant continues eating but I’ve unsettled Mr Bass.

Later, I walk in the sandy scrub collecting more sticks for our fire. The wood is dry and smells of the sea. The sun sets and the dunes take on new shapes. The sand cools. Small animals rustle in the grasses. The stars come out, like lamps in a faraway town. I make a vow, yet again, to hold my thoughts. I trail away further than I mean to and when I come back to camp, my arms full of sticks, Mr Bass and the Lieutenant are at each other.

‘The primitive mind,’ Mr Bass says, angrily, ‘does not just belong to the

primitive but to us all.'

'Yes, my point exactly! Take the French,' says the Lieutenant.

'Take them where?' Mr Bass snaps.

'Take their inclination to rise against their king.'

'But we must all rise. Man is like bread, to improve the quality of his mind, he *must* rise.'

I feed some sticks into the fire.

'Progress needs order, and order needs hierarchy. It is the ladder of civilization, with a top and a bottom. You cannot climb in disorder, George.'

The Lieutenant lays out his thoughts, like neat piles of sand.

'If you know where you are placed, top or bottom, king or subject, you know about civilization. These Indians mock us because they have no idea of our superiority. Their ignorance makes them arrogant. They have no order. The French did a great disservice to their country, trying to rid their society of the order of things. Causing such tumult they proved they were no better than the native.'

'The French have some of the best minds in science and philosophy!' Mr Bass says, thumping his hand on the sand. 'They build the best ships and they truly believe in equality. It's not lip service.'

'They think all can be equal, but equality will never aid progress. Such a belief dooms humanity as it seeks to elevate it. And the French thirst for the destruction of order *is* primitive.'

'Such arrogance, Matthew, that destructive force is in the English.'

'But we control it.'

'You talk of top and bottom, Matthew, as if you have no place in it. But what about the middle, you forget the middle, to which you belong!' Mr Bass is all afire now.

'What concerns me is not the middle, George, but the future. The future into which we are sailing. And how it will be for men of England.'

Mr Bass is lying on the ground, staring at the sky.

'Sometimes I look at men and see the flourishing of all that is good,' he says. 'But evil exists in the civilized as well as in the savage. We don't control it, but we do disguise it.'

Dark waves slurp at the shore. It's all very good, I think, them talking about top and bottom and middle, about good and evil, order and disorder, but think of it as water in a bucket, and what if that bucket has a hole? Then soon there would be no top, bottom and middle. No good or evil. No order or disorder. Only an empty bucket.

I'm about to say this to Mr Bass when he rolls on his side and groans at his blisters. He stands quickly and walks away. The Lieutenant motions me to speak no more. He bends his head toward the light of the fire and writes in his journal. I lie on the soft sand to sleep. The breeze tickles my cheek as I sink into a sweet dream. I'm at the theatre where Mama and Hilton are performing. They cheer when I walk into their dressing room and stand to admire my gold buttons.

I awake from a dream to the sound of water lap. The sun is in my eye and the sand is the white-blue of early morn. In my dream there was an Indian, covered in crow feathers, sitting by me. The Indian said, bird from far away, fly home. I was so in fright of him that I did fly, but when I was in the air, wind tugging my hair, I

remembered how far from home I was, and I began to fall.

I sit up. Mr Bass is cross-legged, staring at the fire. I tell him my dream and then, remembering our talk from the night before, speak of water in a bucket. He shoots dagger eyes at me.

‘You know nothing, boy, don’t pretend you do!’

I turn away and begin to prepare our food, as silent as a mute. It is our sixth day, a Tuesday, and I am not happy.

Mr Bass speaks to the Lieutenant. ‘The soldier I attended before we embarked had been flogged for stealing peas from the store. His wounds were so deep they needed special care.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ the Lieutenant says, evenly.

‘That is what hunger does, Matthew,’ says Mr Bass. ‘It turns us all into savages. The Indian cries out in pain when he sees a flogging. He must turn away from it. But we stand and watch, unflinching. Who then is the savage and who is the civilized?’

‘An interesting point, George,’ the Lieutenant says. ‘Why not write it up in your book.’

‘I just might,’ snaps Mr Bass, and turns away.

I want to shout at him. He raises up the Indians who might have killed him, but why not those men who are with him day and night?

The wind blows along the beach, tumbling driftwood down to the sea. There is a silence between us three. Us three? The Lieutenant’s theory of top and bottom is on my mind. I am thinking, if he is right, then I am not in the middle, as he is, but on the bottom. And it is not a good place to be.

I stow our provisions into *Thumb*. Mr Bass sits far away, on a rock.

‘The tide is for us, George,’ the Lieutenant calls.

Mr Bass does not reply, but joins us. We shove *Thumb* into the water, push across the wave break and climb in. Mr Bass and I pull out through the reef. The breeze picks up. We hoist sail. It rustles and flaps and is scooped up by the wind. As we sail past the

point I hear

bird song but

see no birds.

Thumb skims the top of the waves.

‘Look there, Barn Cove,’ calls the Lieutenant.

He is being his jolly self, attempting to pull Mr Bass out of his temper.

‘Will, you were there at its naming,’ the Lieutenant shouts. ‘You must tell that to your family on your return.’

I look to the cove that is not really a cove. A falcon flies above a rocky ledge. A flock of squawking seabirds settle on the sand. This land has been for all time. Perhaps there *is* something in being at its naming. Perhaps I am rising. Man must rise, was that not what Mr Bass said. And when he writes his book about the colony, as he has promised to do, my own name will be known to the world.

The breeze turns, whipping strong from the north and blows us about. The Lieutenant

steers us through a reef near a headland. Mr Bass and I pull toward the cliff to shield us from the wind. We drop anchor and sit idle in the rocking boat, waiting for the weather to change.

‘And there’s no river found,’ Mr Bass says, despondent.

‘We may come to it yet.’ The Lieutenant starts to repack our stores.

He has not stopped with his jollyng. He pretends all in our little boat are cheerful and by the force of his pretence he hopes we will become so.

I think back to the lagoon. All that water must have come from somewhere? But if there was a river in that place, we will not be the ones to find it. Is this what disturbs Mr Bass? Or is it seeing how slight we are in this strange world? Out here, away from Sydney Cove, this is what comes to mind each day. The vastness of the land, the sea, the sky. I feel it more now, in *Thumb*, than when on the *Reliance* where each day is busy with duties. *Thumb* sits low in the water. The waves bump us about like driftwood. I have voices in my head, like a hundred young ones calling questions. What is there to discover on the beach? Maybe a river flows behind the trees?

‘Mr Bass, may I swim to shore?’

‘What for, Will?’

‘To see what is there,’ I say.

‘If you wish,’ says Mr Bass and closes his eyes.

The Lieutenant smiles as though pleased with my spirit. I strip off and jump into the water. I dive under and swim until I ache to breathe, and then I surface. When I reach shore, I stagger out and look back. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant are dwarfed by the rocky cliff and the swirling sea.

I tramp the sandy beach. The cliffs at either end are like clay. Trees come all the way to the edge of the dunes. Seaweed lies in thin bands. There are no footprints on the sand, only shells and driftwood. Halfway along the beach I discover a stream whistling out from the trees. It narrows in places and can easily be jumped. I kneel to drink. The water is fresh. If I could name what I pleased I would name this stream for Mama, and the bay for my uncle, Hilton. I paddle in the stream, that is cooler than the sea, and watch two long bodied insects hover above it, one of top of the other. If I had wings where would I fly? I walk the banks of the stream into the forest and sit beneath a tall tree with roots so large they curve around my back. With a shell I scratch my name into the bark, then the date, 29th March, 1796. My stomach is twisted about like the roots. I climb the trunk to the top of the tree and look over all that surrounds. So many trees in one place! I think of Mama and her way of talking to me about the world. She could imagine her way into far away places, places she’d never even been. Now I have my own story to tell, only it is not imagined. When I return to the *Reliance* I will tell about this beach, and how I swam to it on my own and discovered a stream and was not frightened of cannibals. The Lieutenant’s brother, Samuel, will pretend not to listen, thinking I’m beneath him, but others will slap me on the back. But I will not tell them of my fears. For even Cook must have felt them, out here in this untamed place. I am now a man, not a boy, and fear must be banished. This is what the Lieutenant has taught me. To dare is to do. I hear it in the wind that is running through the trees. To dare is to do.

After a time I climb down and when I run into the water I dive beneath a wave that comes right at me, cheat it of its power. I kick along the sandy bottom before I surface and tread water, looking back to the beach. The white sand curves around like

a seashell. The bushes on the sand dunes are a mush of green. The forest behind is thick all the way up to the hills. This is a wild place. Too wild for civilization. It is a place for adventure. I will remember this place in my dreams. I will remember it in the stories I tell. For in this place I first realised that if I am to rise, it will come not only by what I tell of what I dare, but also, by what I don't tell. I kick out my legs and swim toward *Tom Thumb*.

Mr Bass hauls me into the boat. The sun has fallen behind the cliffs and dark is descending.

‘What did you find?’ Mr Bass asks.

‘A stream of fresh water,’ I say, wiping my face.

They say nothing about how long I've been on shore.

The Lieutenant eyes the sky. ‘The wind is from the south. We must make use of it.’

Mr Bass and I get upon the oars and pull out through the gap in the reef. We step the mast and haul sail. The wind gusts. The sky is heaving with inky clouds. They lumber above us as we ride the waves. And then I hear it. Boom, boom! The thunder makes me jump. Lightning, like giant spider legs, flashes through the sky. Night comes. We strike sail and pull into the shelter of a cliff. We lift the stone anchor and throw it in the sea. The Lieutenant leans over the gunwale, trying to guess our distance from the rocks.

‘Too near for us to stay long,’ he says, when lightning flashes.

We sit in the dark. Waves drumming. Another burst of lightning. I see the Lieutenant at the helm, watchful, and Mr Bass holding the anchor rope. Then, dark. We wait. When the he wind shifts it is sudden and strong.

‘Pull, we must pull now or we'll smash upon the rocks!’ the Lieutenant shouts.

Mr Bass and I haul up the anchor, get on the oars and pull. Out from the cliff we boat the oars and hoist sail. We are rolling on the sea. Thin strands of lightning whip through the sky. I see, high above, the crest of a wave bearing down. A wild whooshing and crashing, water everywhere, we sink to the dip of the wave, then rise again to ride the top. I slip and scramble, search for the bucket and begin to bail. Another crack of lightning. Larboard, I see harsh-faced crags. *Thumb* tips toward them but rises to ride the wave. I pin my feet beneath the thwart and bail. The next wave pushes us toward the rocks but again we rise. All is cold and hard and urgent. Time is measured by waves and only waves. Lightning! I see the Lieutenant, iron-faced. The sail flapping before me like a gigantic bird. Mr Bass fists the sail, his strong arms hauling one way, then another. He keeps us afloat but waves, like shape-shifting ghouls, emerge from the noisy dark to chase us. Death comes for us but we fight back. To dare is to do, slap, slap, and roar. To dare is to do, slap, slap and roar. Glory for us, not death. Lightning! And then I see a monstrous wave hovering above, dark and shiny and alive, like a magnificent Dark Angel. Oh, but this is not a battle of my daring. Nature is laughing at me. Ideas of manhood and mankind are nothing now. Everything hurts. My arms scream, but my legs hold on. Water crashes over me and I am thrust to the side of the boat. Bail, bail, I must bail.

‘Reef! Reef!’ the Lieutenant shouts, his voice barely heard in the wind howl. I eye away from my bailing and in the distance, through the pounding rain, I see white water breaking.

‘Get ready to strike sail!’ Mr Bass hollers.

The Lieutenant leans back on his steering oar and *Thumb* flips into the wind. Waves smash over us. I heave on the rope. We strike sail and unstep the mast in double-quick time. In the sheeting rain we get on the oars, wait for the slow between the racing waves and then pull. Every muscle in my body is screeching in pain. We pull and pull, rain hits my cheeks, pull, pull, my feet start to slip, pull, pull, my hands clench the oar, pull, pull! And then, there it is, we slip through a gap in the reef and I can feel by my oar that we are delivered into smooth water. An immense quiet crowds in, as though my ears are muffled in wool. We keep on pulling. I see a sliver of flickering white. Is it the edge of the world? Then the flickering white becomes a beach and I laugh inwardly at my foolish thoughts.

Mr Bass and I slide away the oars. Slipping on the wet wood, we muddle about in the dark, heave up the stone anchor and drop it over the side. We stop there in the pitch black. I listen to our heavy breathing and am thrilled by the sound. The moon comes out from behind a cloud. The Lieutenant looks like a cat that has a mouse. It’s infectious. We all laugh at the surprise of being alive.

‘My God, there’s grace in our protection,’ the Lieutenant says as our laughter subsides.

‘Not God, it was chance gave us safety,’ says Mr Bass.

‘Perhaps,’ says the Lieutenant.

‘We had only the option to choose movement or none,’ Mr Bass says. ‘And all the while we knew not where movement would take us.’

His voice is joyful and sad together.

‘This time to safety,’ the Lieutenant whispers.

‘Yes,’ Mr Bass agrees.

‘This place is providential.’

‘It feels that way.’

‘Providential Cove, that is what we must name it,’ the Lieutenant says. ‘Will, do you agree?’

‘That be the name,’ I say, ‘that most fits this place.’

And I see what it takes for me to be one of them. It was not about choosing or not. It was the Dark Angel that came to us. We battled her, and now, here we are, us three. I eye the clouds as they move swiftly overhead. The stars reveal themselves. It’s a night not to be forgotten. It’s some time before we can sleep.

The glorious morn of our seventh day. I say this out loud as I jump into the shallows and help haul *Thumb* onto the shore. I stand and look about me. Spiky green bushes grow in the sand and tall trees cast shadows in tidal pools. The rocky cliffs curve to a headland on each side and set a frame for the sea beyond, the water like a turquoise jewel. I eye a stream at the back of the cove. Without waiting for instruction I take hold of the barica and run up the sand dune. The stream curves around the rocks and dunes like a snake. There are footprints leading down to the water. They can only be from Indians but my feeling of gladness cannot be damped. This is a cove of peace. I spy the ashes of a fire. When I nudge a burnt log with my toe, it is cold. Nothing bad can happen here. There is nought to fear, not from man or beast or sky or sea.

It is late morn. We push off and row, then pick up a light breeze and sail. Our spirits

are high. I think of this remarkable life. Mama used to whisper me stories about Jamaica and Calcutta and other places that may or may not have existed. I'd listen and when she'd finished her tale I'd always say, how do you know about that, Mama? You, who have never been from England? Oh, she'd say, but in my imagining I've been to many faraway places, the future as well as the past.

If I dreamed a tomorrow for this place, what would I dream?

We sail on with Port Solander in sight. The cliffs turn low and sandy as we breeze into an open bay. The sun beats down upon water that is pond-like, and a tired wind pushes us along. The sky is pale blue, like faded uniforms, and on the scrubby shore the green bush is flecked with silver.

It is near noon when we see it. We are sitting in *Thumb*, coasting the northeast of the bay.

'There is our river,' the Lieutenant says.

'So it is,' I say.

'It was a long journey here,' says Mr Bass.

We strike sail and row up the river. It is scrubby on either side with rock ledges that hang over the water like bushy eyebrows.

Mr Bass sighs. 'It will not do for large vessels.'

'We'll name the river after Hacking, who guessed it was here,' the Lieutenant says.

Our mood is easy. This river will not make monuments of our names but after our stormy night each day is monument enough. We pull back out to the bay and sit rocking in our boat.

'This place feels older than time,' Mr Bass says.

'Yes,' agrees the Lieutenant.

'It should be our care, not so much to live a long life, but an honourable one,' says Mr Bass.

'Well said,' agrees the Lieutenant.

They look to me and smile and in their serenity I see something of what it means to live. For in all the tumble of joy and anger and love and hatred and hunger and greed that is our life, there are moments like this, that lift a man into a quiet place, where the thanks and wonder is in the drawing of each breath. Our journey has been worth this discovery alone.

We pull to the north side of the cove, drag *Thumb* up onto the sand. The fan leaves of the palm trees spread above us. I gather sticks from the back of the beach, flint a fire and lay out our clothes to dry. Then I stretch my arms and legs, and rub my toes in the sand. I turn and spy two Indians standing in the trees. How long have they been watching us? The two men smile. One is older than the other. They have no spears. Mr Bass calls to them in the Port Jackson speak and they walk across the sand. The Lieutenant, down by the water's edge, hurries back. He tells the Indians we are from Sydney Cove, but they seem not to know the name. We offer to share what food we have but they do not want it. They look us over from head to toe. The older man touches the freckles on my nose. The younger one strokes Mr Bass's waistcoat. I sit to tend the fire, but when I stand, I see they are leaving, as quietly as they arrived.

We take *Thumb* fishing in the calm water. I look to the hilltops but there is no sign of the Indians. The sharks slide alongside and eye us, as if curious to take a bite. We sit

with our lines. Catch nothing.

We leave off fishing and pull back to shore. I dig up soft grass and throw it on the ground to make our beds. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant gather sticks for the fire. I boil water and we eat the last of the salted beef. The night is all stars. I pick out Warrewull.

Our eighth day. Gulls greet me. Carick, carick! We push *Thumb* into the water – splish, splash – and the Lieutenant and I pull around Port Hacking. Mr Bass is at the helm, his long legs stretched out before him. We boat our oars. The Lieutenant scrambles to the bow and ferrets out his compass and journal. Mr Bass and I rummage for hooks and line so we can fish. We talk about what we will say on our return, about the currents being too strong so that we overshot our mark, about the dumping on the beach where the thin trails of smoke from the forest alerted us to danger, about the cannibals that we nearly met, and our trading with the Indians and barbering of their beards.

‘And our escape from their clutches,’ the Lieutenant adds.

‘Was it escape?’ Mr Bass asks.

‘You know it was,’ the Lieutenant says.

They look to each other, then to me, and for a tick-tock I hold my breath.

Carick, carick! The gulls call out. I remember what it is to be a man.

‘We were dead men in that place,’ I say.

‘We were,’ says Mr Bass.

‘Indeed,’ agrees the Lieutenant.

And we talk on about our battle with the storm.

‘What a story we have to tell,’ I say.

Mr Bass laughs and ruffles my hair.

‘I’m too old for that,’ I say pulling away.

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘You’re way too old.’

He ruffles my hair again and we start to wrestle.

‘Don’t get my journal wet!’ the Lieutenant shouts, as the boat rocks.

Mr Bass pushes but I push back. He is stronger but I am faster. We are poised for a fall.

‘The sharks will get us,’ I dare.

‘You think I’m frightened of sharks?’ he asks.

‘You tell me,’ I say.

We stay gripping each other’s arms. Holding tight. My heart beating fast.

Then, he pushes me as I push him. We tip together. I let go of my hold as I fall into the cool water. Down, down, I go, and then push up to the surface. I swim away from *Thumb*, dive under again, and swim back to the boat, bursting up for air at the side. I climb in, quicker than I might normally do, for a dare is a dare but I don’t want to chance sharks any more than I have to. Mr Bass stays in the water a moment longer to prove that he can.

‘Look there,’ I say, pointing to a spot beyond him.

He is in the boat in a tick-tock, with me sitting on the thwart laughing.

In the early morn of our ninth day, I wake. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant are still sleeping. The sky is full of majestic ships, all white, like from a dream. I get up and

walk the beach, gathering sticks. I light a fire, setting a pot on it to boil the last of our soup cakes. Mr Bass and the Lieutenant wake and we sup as though at a feast. We pack and push *Thumb* into the water. I look back at the wide bay as we pull out through the entrance. The sail flaps in the breeze and we head toward Port Jackson.

At sunset we are in Sydney Cove, clapping the shoulders of friends on board the *Reliance*. Our excitement is great, so we climb down, pull to the dock and hurry to the Governor's house to make our report.

The Governor is in the garden listening to an owl.

'I'm pleased to see you,' he says to Mr Bass and the Lieutenant. Then he turns to me. 'Young Will,' he says.

He shakes my hand and his grip is firm.

'A drink is in order,' he says.

The Governor leads the way toward the house.

At the door Mr Bass turns to me. 'Go, enjoy yourself, Will.'

The Governor and the Lieutenant are walking down the hallway. Mr Bass folds his arms.

'We must report our adventures but you have earned the night off,' Mr Bass says and turns away.

I walk along the shore, kicking stones. The sky is clear. The half-moon is bright. At the hospital, Buckley, the surgeon's mate, is outside smoking a pipe. His dogs bark as I arrive. Na is not there. Na has my dog with him, says Buckley. I search the faces at the campfires near the Tank Stream but Na is not there. I look in our usual places. Na would have seen *Thumb* come in, I'm sure of it. I scout along the edge of the stream down to the shore and along the sand. Na and my dog, George the Fourth – that is kept at Mr Palmer's place, Palmer's gift to me – are nowhere to be seen.

I climb around the cliff, to an outcrop of rocks and shrubs. In summer I came here to watch the chicks of the honeyeater. The chicks are long gone but the nest is still on the branch. I sit on a rock ledge. If I were born into a tribe like Na, what I would have to do to be a man is have my tooth pulled. But is not my journey, in a small boat, facing wild seas and treacherous cannibals, equal to teeth pulling? They will be toasting at the Governor's. There'll be a fire blazing and they'll tell the story of our journey. I hear an owl hooting and dogs barking. I lie on the rock and eye the water slapping the shore. Now I am a man.

This is what it is
to be

a man.