

Watch out for snakes

“Off with you!” My mother swished her broom at me as I passed.

“Bye, Ma,” I called over my shoulder.

“And watch out for snakes!”

I ran out the door, dodged three flapping hens, leapt the split rail fence in one go and continued at pace across the paddock. I slowed to a jog as I neared the bush. On the flats near the creek, the big gumtrees were sparse. But as I started up the hill, the stringybarks drew closer together. The nearer I came to the foot of the escarpment, the denser the forest became.

Pushing my way through a thicket of dogwood and musk, I startled an unseen wallaby which thump-thump-thumped away from me. The musty scent of the forest’s dampness and decay filled my lungs. Massive, buttressed roots of towering swamp gums blocked my path and forced me sideways to slither over moss-covered logs and through swathes of glossy green fishbone waterfern. As I scrambled my way higher, the understory thinned and dappled light broke through. Further up the steep hillside, I began to see patches of blue sky and glimpses of the high cliffs through gaps in the canopy. Here, the dry leaf litter crackled underfoot.

Eventually, I reached the enormous rock that bulged out from the ridgeline like a great grey sphinx. I clawed my way up the precipitous rockface. Once atop the sphinx’s head, I opened my kangaroo skin knapsack, removed the old amber glass rum bottle, pulled out the cork and took a swig of water. The bread and cheese wrapped in a cloth, I saved for later.

Far below me, a sea of grey-green foliage filled the valley, except for the ten acres of pasture around our hut. A thin twisting ribbon of blue smoke rose from its chimney. To its left, I could see the milling white dots of sheep being moved by my stepfather, Patrick O’Brien.

The farm wasn’t much to look at, yet O’Brien was proud of it. In Van Diemen’s Land few men with a convict background owned land, and O’Brien never tired of telling the story of how he was rewarded with the King’s pardon and thirty acres for capturing the bloodthirsty bushranger, ‘Roarin’ Jack’ Rathmines.

“It was him or me,” O’Brien would say, “and even though he had a pistol, and all I had was my shillelagh – Jesus, Mary and Joseph – I knew it wasn’t goin’ to be me!” Then O’Brien would put down his pannikin of rum, lift his shirt and point to the purple scar the size of a crown piece where the pistol ball glanced off his rib.

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A shower of small stones rattled down the sphinx's back. I spun around and peered up at the bushes where the rock buried itself into the mountainside. My heart thumped hard in my chest. Probably just another wallaby. Then something moved. Something much bigger than a wallaby.

"Who's there?" My throat was so tight the words had difficulty escaping.

A man's bare foot emerged, followed by his outstretched leg and then the rest of him. He slid forward on his backside. His matted hair and beard were filthy, and his stained yellow convict slops marked with the government's broad arrow were ragged and torn.

"I means ye no harm, lad. But I'm ever so thirsty. Could I trouble ye fer a sip of water?"

A bolter. I weighed the consequences of being caught assisting an escaped prisoner against failing to be what Ma called a 'good Samaritan'. I walked halfway across the rock and placed the bottle down.

The man grimaced as he held his swollen purple foot off the ground and crabbed his way forward. With shaking hands, he grasped the bottle and poured its contents down his throat. When he was done, he wiped his mouth and sighed with relief.

"Thank ye kindly. I slipped comin' down yon cliff." He waved towards the fluted rock stacks that towered above us like castle battlements. "Busted me ankle. Been scrabblin' round on me arse since yesterday. Like the 'Grand Old Duke of York'," he chuckled, "I could go neither up nor down." He paused. "I thought I was done fer. Till ye come along. What's thy name lad?"

"Michael. Michael Mulligan."

"Well, I owes ye a debt of gratitude, Michael-Michael-Mulligan." He held out his hand and winked at me with a smile, "Richard-Richard-Arkwright, *Georgiana*. Life. Fer machine breakin'."

I folded my arms, "Shouldn't you only got seven years for that?"

"Ah, well ye have me there, 'yer honour'. Maybe, I also threatened a rich bastard mill owner, and perhaps I burned down his factory and his infernal steam engine – but nobody was killed."

"Why you running?"

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“Got tickled by the cat one too many times.” I could see an involuntary wince as he recollected the bite of the lash. “Decided to take me chances in the bush... Been on the run about a week.” He shut one eye and grinned meekly, clearly embarrassed. “Turns out, I’m not so clever a bushman as I thought.”

“I suppose you’re hungry then?”

“Aye. A touch.”

I reached into my knapsack and handed him the bundle of food.

Ma passed me the bowl of potatoes. I heaped a larger than usual portion onto my plate. O’Brien scowled. “Mind you leave some for the rest of us.”

“Leave him be, Patrick. He’s a growing boy.”

“Shut your mouth, woman. He’s a *growin’ boy* that’s never around when needed.” O’Brien narrowed his eyes at me, “Tomorrow, there’ll be no disappearin’ after dinner, like you been doin’ lately. I require a *growin’ boy* to dig postholes for the new fence. And you can get inside the fowl house and find where somethin’s gettin’ in and stealin’ eggs.”

“Yes, sir.”

My eyes met Ma’s for an instant. She didn’t say anything, but I sensed she knew something was afoot.

“I done some explorin’,” said Richard between mouthfuls, “while ye been away. I found somewhere better to sleep.” He pointed along the cliffs, “Behind that big rock, is a cave.”

My eyes widened, “Really? I didn’t know that.”

“Aye, when ye crawl about ye get a different view. Wouldn’t’ve noticed otherwise. I reckon natives used to camp in there. Maybe that’s where they ate their victims?”

“They aren’t cannibals!” I said, rolling my eyes. “Old Punch, one of Mr Stocker’s men, told me all about them. He was on friendly terms with them. He said, as long as you ‘paid your

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rent' with sugar, tea and tobacco – and treated their womenfolk proper – they gave you no trouble. But if you broke their laws, they'd hunt you down and spear you.”

“Ever seen any round here?”

“Nah. But O'Brien says there used to be, back when he first come here. He said, once he showed them whose land it really was, they stopped bothering him. Me and Ma only been here a year. Since she took up with that bastard O'Brien.”

“Fond of him then?”

“I hate him. When he's on the drink – which is pretty much all the time – he beats Ma. I've copped a fair few floggings, too. Ma keeps saying she'll leave him if he hits her again. She won't, though. She's more scared of what he'd do if she did.”

I looked left and right, to see no one was about, then started across the yard. O'Brien stepped out from behind the barn and grabbed me by the collar.

“Where you headed, Master Mulligan?” he said, his hot rum-soaked breath in my ear.

“Nowhere.”

He shook me, snapping my head back-and-forth like a rag doll. “Don't take that tone with me, show some respect!”

“Yes, sir. Nowhere, sir. I mean, I was just going for a walk, Mr O'Brien, sir.”

“That's better.” O'Brien shoved me hard. I stumbled and fell, my face striking the ground. He laughed. I dragged myself up onto my hands and knees and spat the dirt from my mouth. I could taste blood.

“I seen you nosin' around up there,” O'Brien motioned towards the cliffs. “You're not to be goin' up there anymore. You hear me?”

“Yes sir,” I said as I stood up.

“A young fella could 'accidently' slip and fall. And we wouldn't want that, would we Michael?”

“No, sir.”

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A week later, I smiled to myself as I climbed the sphinx. It'd been getting harder to give O'Brien the slip. But today, he headed off early to Westbury to sell some wethers. If he made good money, he'd be back late.

I whistled to summon Richard. There was no reply. After a while, I whistled again. Still nothing. I sat down. My eyes grew misty. Richard's ankle had been improving, and I knew he'd be moving on soon. Even so, he should've said goodbye.

I decided I'd better check the cave. It took me a while to find it. Richard was right. Unless you got down on all fours, you'd never see the opening. I peered into the tunnel, took a deep breath, and crawled in.

The light receded and darkness swallowed me. As my eyes adjusted, the cave wasn't as small as I feared. The walls and roof were formed by massive, blue-grey granite pillars running across each other at odd angles. The air was damp with a mineral tang. I shivered. Outside was summer, yet here it was cold as a grave. Somewhere in the darkness water dripped. From the unseen depths an unearthly moan reached out and grasped my heart with long bony fingers. I told myself it was only the wind. I felt I wasn't welcome here. Trespassing in an ancient, secret, sacred place.

"Richard!" I called and was unnerved by the returning echo. I groped along the wall until I came to the dead ashes of a campfire, a neat stack of firewood, and the old blanket I'd given Richard. I brightened. There was no way he'd leave without the blanket. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed dim light coming from where the wall met the floor. I got down on my belly. A low passage, less than a foot high, led to another chamber. The air on my face was fresh. If I squished myself flat, I was sure I could squeeze through.

I pushed my knapsack ahead of myself and wormed my way in. Pushing and pulling and wriggling, I inched forward. Until I was halfway. Here, the passage was lower, and I felt the disconcerting pressure of stone, both from above and below. I began to panic. It felt like the whole weight of the mountain was crushing me. Calm yourself. You got in, you can get out. I strained backwards and, with a grunt, dislodged myself. Between deep shuddering breaths, I thanked the Lord for saving me. As I lay there gasping, I noticed the gap was wider to my right. I

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squirmed over. Soon, I emerged, puffing and panting into the light. This chamber was smaller than the other, but open to the sky with a jagged oblong of blue twenty yards above me. With a sigh of relief, I pushed my knapsack to the side. Barely a foot from my face, a human skull stared at me with empty eye sockets.

I let out a cry and leapt up. At first, I feared the skull was Richard's. But there was moss growing on it, and there wasn't just one. Two large skulls and another smaller one sat amongst a scatter of bleached bones. I guessed they'd laid there for years.

The child's skull that confronted me had a neat circular hole in the forehead, the size of a musket ball. I shuddered. Then something else caught my eye. Among the bones was a loop of plaited leather cord attached to an animal skin pouch. I picked it up. It felt like it was filled with sand. Upon opening the drawstring, I found ashes. Old Punch told me about these. Charms made from the cremated remains of loved ones, worn to ward off evil or pressed against the body to cure illness or injury.

I wasn't sure if this was the right thing to do, nevertheless I said a rosary for these people. People I'd never known. But people who'd not died well. Later, when I thought about it, I don't know why I tucked the pouch into my pocket. I then began to climb up and out of the cave.

Just before I reached the top, I heard a familiar voice.

“Ello Michael.”

I looked up. O'Brien's gap-toothed grin stared down at me. “I told you to stop comin' up here. Now, you've seen more than you should've.”

I froze. “I don't know what you mean, Mr. O'Brien, sir. It's just a pile of old bones.”

“I watched you down there. I heard you prayin'. I know you've worked out what happened.”

“Please, sir. I won't say anything to anyone. I promise.”

“I don't believe you, Michael. You're too bloody honest for your own good. The governor says it's murder to shoot 'crows'. Well, no white man has yet swung for it, but sure as hell, I ain't goin' to be the first.”

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O'Brien pursed his lips and shook his head in mock disappointment, "I can see only one solution to this conundrum. Remember what I said about 'accidentally' fallin'? Well, you won't be able to say I didn't warn you – 'cause you won't be sayin' anythin' ever again." O'Brien bent to lift a large rock from near the lip of the hole, "Better start prayin' again, boy."

There was a deep whirring sound. O'Brien had barely enough time to turn and face its source. The heavy bulbous end of a wooden club struck him where his brows met the bridge of his nose. He dropped the rock at his feet and toppled head-first down the hole, doing a half-somersault. O'Brien was facing directly towards me with a surprised look on his face when he struck the boulder. His spine snapped like a whip-crack. I'll never forget that sound.

I began shaking uncontrollably. I was still staring into O'Brien's dead eyes when I heard Richard. "Here, lad, give us thy hand. Easy does it. I got ye."

Richard hauled me up. I hugged him and started to cry. Not for O'Brien. Maybe for the dead family. Maybe out of relief. I didn't really know. Richard held me close. Eventually, the tears stopped, and I wiped my face on my sleeve.

"Where'd an Englishman learn to throw a shillelagh like that?"

Richard looked at me quizzically. "What do ye mean? I was up here lookin' for another way into that cave when I heard O'Brien. I come as quick as me bloody ankle would allow. But all I saw was his arse disappearin' over the edge."

Just then, Richard and I saw the young man. He'd moved almost imperceptibly, but enough to make his presence known. He must've been standing there the whole time. His dark skin was drawn tightly over his naked muscular frame. His hair, coloured with red ochre, was collected into thick braids hanging down to his shoulders. Around his neck were strands of iridescent pearly green seashells. In one hand he held a bundle of long thin spears. His other hand was empty. He raised it, fingers spread, palm outwards.

I clung to Richard, uncertain of what would happen. The young man walked over and picked up his waddy from where it landed after striking O'Brien. He tossed it up, spinning into the air and deftly caught the handle as it dropped back down. Then he looked me in the eye and with a hint of a smile, tapped the waddy on his chest.

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The young man then took a deep breath, leaned, and looked down the hole. He hung his head. After a time, he began speaking softly in a language I didn't understand. Then his voice rose in musical loops drenched in sadness. As his lament reached its peak, he threw his head back and shouted at the sky. Gradually, his voice fell, until at last, he was silent again. His eyes glistened with tears and their shiny wet tracks lined his face.

A hush came over the bush. No bird or insect made a sound. No reptile moved in the dry grass. It was like there was a hole in time. I'd never before, or after, experienced such stillness. Then a gentle breeze began to whisper through the treetops and the leaves recommenced their shimmering rattle. A shrike-thrush called, and the buzz of cicadas hummed around us. The young man emerged from where his song had taken him, looked first at Richard and then me, nodded and turned to go.

“Wait!”

I reached into my pocket, withdrew the pouch and held it out to the young man. He took it in his long fingers and caressed it. He draped the cord around his neck, smiled at me, turned, and walked away.

A search party found the sheep tethered just off the road, a few miles from our hut. But there was no sign of O'Brien. What happened to him remained a mystery. Most believed he was bitten by a snake and, delirious, wandered off into the bush and died. The tigers and devils probably feasted on his carcass. One old lag said, if they did, they would've been drunk for a week.

Richard stayed three more days. As we parted, we agreed we wouldn't tell anyone what really happened. No one would believe us anyway. Everybody knew that at the end of the Black War, Governor Arthur's 'Conciliator', Mr. George Augustus Robinson, brought in the last of Van Diemen's Land's Aboriginal survivors back in 1834 and imprisoned them all on the Great Island in Bass's Straits. Despite this, some still blamed 'the natives' when a hut was robbed of food, blankets and the like. But most put it down to absconders. Maybe, I would think with a smile. Or maybe not.