

Dream Time

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Dedication

For Rachel, who existed for only a short time and who now sleeps with the Angels.

And for my mother Joan, who loved children and was also rather fond of ghosts.

Said the Voice of the Continent:

These newcomers will destroy the cycle of life; the dry spells will become droughts, sand will eat up the good lands, fire and floods will wipe him out.

If they do not know the secret of life, the secret of the trees, how can they survive?

Said the Herald of the Future:

They will bring knowledge and engines from overseas, new animals and new plants.

Said the Voice of the Continent:

I shall turn their inventions against them . . . I am old, and they are frail and new. I have conquered one race, I shall conquer another.

Said the Herald of the Future:

Nevertheless, they shall survive. And they will come to you at last in love, and will honour and serve you. They will take your strength and secret power and raise it to another plane. You will be hearth and home to a new race.

From 'A Mask of Australia' by M.B. Eldershaw.

Introduction

Dawn broke, and his world was illuminated. An intake of breath broke the morning hush as he spread his mouth into a wide yawn. He lay beneath a gum tree, beside the embers of the previous night's fire. He had walked through long hot days and dreamed through many nights of silence before finally arriving under her boughs. He had marked his way alone through these heat parched lands, following the timeworn tracks of his ancestors.

Killara was the son of a Wise Man.

He was aware of his latent power and longed to be able to use it. But first he had to complete the challenge set by his elders: a journey traversing the whole of his World. Today it brought him to the coastal fringe, and as the sun rose he smiled with all the confidence of royalty. He had almost reached the sacred site of the Great White Snake. As a child he had learned how she rested at the edge of this beautiful bay. Now Killara clicked his tongue against his teeth in happy appreciation.

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But first today he would be tracking small lizards like goanna. On his own he caught smaller game so as not to waste anything. This also left him with a lighter load to carry. Killara felt happily boyish as he climbed to a rocky viewpoint to get a good look at the bay below. He quivered with excitement as the morning sun provided its assured warmth, falling lightly

now over his slim frame. It was still early. He looked down into the sea and reflected upon his task. That evening he would find her site and give thanks to the Great White Snake, and enjoy a celebration feast under the stars.

His dark eyes took in the expanse of azure softness, effervescent as it lapped against the golden sands of the bay. A huge sky displayed several flag-like clouds as if in jubilation for this part of his quest. Sunlight danced gently on the surface of the water, lighting up the ocean with so many jewels. Although kinder than the arid interior, his heart still missed the ochre reds of his own country. He recalled the woman he was to be joined with when he returned. She was young, but already accomplished in gathering, cooking and basket weaving. He was sure she would provide him with strong, brave sons.

Killara looked out again at the indigo horizon. After a while he spotted something strange. He narrowed his eyes, straining against the brightness of the sun. Sure enough, a white flash was floating through the waves. It seemed to be heading towards him. Now it changed into several slivers of cloud, but a large solid form was below it, moving through the water like a whale. His people knew how to float on water with crafts cut from tree trunks, but this was much larger than that and able to move faster. He saw a similar craft following the first, and then another after that.

They were coming into the bay.

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Gunfire roared, rudely assaulting his ears. All at once his earlier joy evaporated, and instinctively he fell onto his

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haunches. Something this alien must spell trouble. Nervously he decided to watch a little longer and flattened himself down on the scrub grass. He stayed there, watching for some hours. He heard noisy calls echoing across the bay, and thought they did not belong here. From his watch point he saw how they poked at the earth with strange implements, laughed at the trees and hacked at the vegetation. If they did not understand his world how could they live here, how would they know how to survive?

Killara sighed, and for a moment wished he was back in his own country. As the Wise Man's son he had respect and trust. That was the real key to his future within the tribe. But what he did not know, and would never have any real use for, was the date that particular day: *26th January 1788*.

Chapter 1

Darwin, September 1973.

The gate had been unlocked the day I met Daphne Green. She waved regally from the veranda railings as I climbed the driveway past tall mango trees and even taller palms. ‘Sorry I’m late,’ I said, ‘the car broke down.’

‘You didn’t walk all the way from town?’ she replied, ‘And in this heat?’

‘Oh no, I got a lift from the rental agency.’

Miss Green fussily poured glasses of iced lemonade. I sat on a rather hard chair and looked around me. The house on Monkey Puzzle Street seemed immediately odd, as if masking some sort of secret. I felt uneasy, and shifted in my seat. Miss Green’s hat was tied on to her head with a chiffon scarf, the brim obscuring her eyes as she continued, ‘You must be Rachel; how wonderful you’re English. But you must have realised how much hotter it is here than in Brisbane? It’s enough to make you go completely troppo.’ ‘Troppo?’ I asked, gulping lemonade.

‘Yes, mad my dear, *quite mad*. It’s more the humidity than the heat that does it. Last year there were two murders and five people wounded, all with shotguns. That’s why I always get away for the wet season.’ She put down her glass and grinned in a bizarre fashion, showing her well preserved teeth. I stifled a tense giggle, and the lemonade fizzed painfully up my nose.

‘Well now, I’ve just got time to show you the house and the garden before my car arrives,’ she blustered, ‘and of course you must tell me all about yourself.’

I followed her through darkened rooms while bright pictures of native art shone out at me from the walls. 'I like your pictures.' I ventured to say.

'Thanks very much,' she said, as if she might have painted them herself. 'They're only prints you know, the originals are in the Art Museum in Melbourne.' She hesitated by a large sideboard. 'If you like Aboriginal art you might like to visit the museum in town. But what do you think of my antique furniture?' And she rubbed the wood finish. 'The heat has completely ruined it.' She proceeded until we reached a closed door. 'This is my bedroom, but I keep it locked while I'm away, you see.' She demonstrated unnecessarily by trying the handle. 'I understand you will be studying here?' She added, ushering me away from the door.

'That's right; I'm writing my history thesis. It's on Australia's first settlers.'

'Oh; how interesting. But will you be staying here alone?'

'For now yes, but my cousin is joining me in about a month. She's coming up from my uncle's place in Brisbane, like me.'

'Well now, that's all right then. I expect you will be busy until she arrives, but be sure to look out for one another, if you get my meaning.' She gave me a half wink. I smiled in reply but had no idea what she was trying to say.

She led me through the kitchen and out into the sunny garden. With obvious pride she presented her fish pond. 'Now then,' she said as we approached the edge, 'you must be sure to feed these little darlings daily. It must be every day without fail you know, because they get very hungry.' I gazed into the sparkling water. White lilies were flowering on the surface and three colourful fish were snaking through the stems. They came to the surface of the pond expecting food, and Miss Green was unable to resist the urge to give them

extra rations. She showed me where she kept their food, and chattered away to them while the flakes drifted softly onto the water. Small beads of perspiration gathered on my face, while larger ones dripped down my back. The sun singed into my head and I realised I'd left my hat on the veranda.

Miss Green was laughing softly, but I had stopped listening to her and was thinking about the paintings in the house. Perhaps she was laughing at me, a real fish out of water. All at once home seemed a lifetime away and suddenly I missed all the noise and bustle of London. She sped off across the garden, flowing chiffon and leaving me to trail after her. Near to the corner fence she stopped abruptly, nearly knocking my sunglasses off with the brim of her hat. 'Now this is really the most important part of the place,' she announced solemnly, 'and I do ask you to treat it with respect. As a special request I ask that you don't step beyond this brick line.'

What had once been the foundations of a small shed or outhouse lay before me. Miss Green had fallen silent, and her cheeks looked rather ashen. 'This is hallowed ground, you know. You can probably make out the remains of a little house. It was here that my friend Mulga used to sometimes stay.' She paused and then added, 'He was an Aboriginal artist.'

I swallowed audibly before saying, 'Where is he now?' 'He's dead, my dear.' Her voice lowered to a dull tone. 'He had a sudden heart attack one morning. Nothing could be done for him. He has returned to the Dreaming, now.' Her words trailed off weakly, and she looked desperately at the brick ruins, as if she were looking into a grave. I reached over and touched her shoulder, and she rummaged around her pockets for a handkerchief.

'I'm very sorry; you must have been fond of him.' I said. She turned her head away from me to blow her nose.

'We were friends you see, unusual as it sounds.' She gave her nose a good blow. 'He stayed here and did lots of art work, and every now and then he went on a walkabout. But he always came back, until one day.' She looked up and I caught a glimpse of a brave smile challenging her saddened eyes. 'It's probably difficult for you to understand, but he was such a good friend! In fact one of only two *real* friends I have in this life. This can be an awkward place to live, if-' and she looked at me carefully before saying, '-you were not actually born here. I come from Adelaide, although I'm pretty sure my ancestors came here from England in the 18th century. One day I intend to trace my family tree, and I may even visit the old country.' I started to reply, but the words were lost to a shrieking galah. It took flight from above our heads, and landed noisily on the house. I imagined it was watching us, and rapidly felt a chill crawl up my dampened spine.

A more composed landlady led me down wide steps where the garden was deeply overgrown. Brown leaves littered the ground and rippled as the insect world beneath sensed our steps. Around the corner and underneath the stilts of the house she pointed out a dingy room, and said, 'This is the storm shelter.'

I peered inside, through the wire mesh door. 'It looks like a store room.'

'It's a shelter in case of cyclones, you know.' She added vaguely, 'goodness, it is full of junk isn't it? I must get down to clearing it out one day. There's a camp bed somewhere, it might be an idea to find it in case of an emergency.' I tried to conceal this shock but my face must have betrayed concern. She gave my hand a gentle pat. 'Oh dear girl, please don't worry. It's extremely unlikely the weather will get that bad.'

But, if a storm should hit here it's better to know where to come if necessary. After all, this *is* the wet season, you know.'

Perhaps that was supposed to give me comfort. I took a last look into the dingy shelter. 'What's that thing?' I pointed to a small wire cage amongst the jumble.

'Oh, that's the possum trap dear. I nearly forgot to mention it! I've got several of the little blighters in the roof space. They're nocturnal you know, and can drive you mad at night. If they get too troublesome just bait the trap with bread and honey or apple slices, but not mango, they won't go for that. Then pop the trap into the loft for a couple of days.'

'But what do I do if I catch one?' Unexpectedly I felt insufficient, and woefully unprepared.

'Well, then you take the trap to the East Point reserve and release it. It won't hurt you,' she said, 'but be careful. If it has babies it's more likely to be aggressive.' She bent down and rummaged around in a box just inside the shelter. 'Here you are,' and she handed me some leather gloves, 'use these with the trap, just in case. Now I must be going, I really don't want to miss my flight. I do hope you will be alright, my dear.'

The early light streamed in through the window and silently caressed the bed sheets. Stillness engulfed the house, following what had been a noisy and disruptive night. No rainstorms had awoken me but Miss Green had been right about the possums. Abruptly wrenched from my heated slumbers at 1am by what can only be described as possum obscenities, I was unable to get back to sleep for over three hours. Heavy possum feet and bickering possum protestations had echoed from the roof space and had brought forth a few swear words of my own.

Intending to visit the storm shelter I hoped the possum trap was in working order. Another night like that was less than desirable. I passed Miss Green's bedroom and being

naturally inquisitive tried the door handle. I knew it was locked, but something seemed to draw me to try it. *Curiosity killed the cat*, my mother used to tell me. I touched it and immediately felt a surging sensation up my arm. This was not like a static shock; it was somehow different. My hand was numb, and my fingers were tingling. I took my hand away and then put it back. No surging that time. Perhaps I was tired after my night with the hateful possums. Uncle Sid was sure to be angry if he found out the house only had one usable bed. I decided not to tell him. When Kim arrived I would just have to rough it on the sofa.

It was still early, only 9am, but the heat was already building as I searched the kitchen for something to eat. Miss Green had left some bread and milk in the fridge, and I found some tea in a tin. Yawning, I made tea and toast, and ventured towards the veranda. But a crash and the splinter of breaking glass made me jump, and I nearly dropped my breakfast. Turning, I saw the kitchen clock dashed to the middle of the floor. I walked back to the kitchen. Its glass face had shattered, and lying next to it was the nail on which it had hung. A feeling of guilt washed over me, and I knew I must replace it.

I picked up the nail and considered what had happened. It seemed impossible that the nail could have flown out of the wall and into the middle of the floor. The clock hung above a window which was a good five feet away. Pulling up a chair with the toast between my teeth, I climbed on to the draining board and examined the exit point of the nail. I pushed it back into the hole, trying to make sense of this defiance of gravity. Surely if the nail had dropped out on its own, then the clock would have fallen straight down, into the sink? I let the toast drop out of my mouth and it landed plop, onto the drainer. Nervously I let the nail fall from its point of exit at the wall.

Sure enough, it landed in the sink with a metallic clink and didn't even bounce. Uneasily I looked out into the garden, towards the little house. Someone or *something* was watching me, I was sure of it.

Uncle's car had broken down as I arrived in Darwin, or I could have driven to town. He followed me part of the way up from Brisbane in Aunt May's car, leaving me to drive the rest of the journey alone. It was straightforward he insisted, just keep driving and you will end up in Darwin. At least that was fairly easy, but now added to my list of chores was: *find a car mechanic.*

I followed a map I'd found in the lounge. As I explored my new world I mused over what Miss Green had told me. She mentioned the gardener would be visiting the house to mow the lawn. I hoped it would be soon. I hadn't yet noticed any other life apart from the invisible but not inaudible possums and the barking dog next door. Anyway Miss Green had written lots of details down and put all the information on the sideboard in the lounge. She had said the gardener really just cuts the grass and tidies up, but I thought it could do with a lot more than that.

At the bottom of the hill the road divided in two and the frangipani trees either side stood like sentinels guarding their territory. I took the right fork to follow the most direct route to town. The trees, with deep green leaves and waxy white flowers appeared unreal, almost dreamlike. Roadside gardens displayed shrubs of Giralton wax smothered in tiny pink flowers and appearing so perfect they could have been made of silk. Soon the houses were gone and I travelled through a parched wasteland. I had to walk along a scrub lined path but was forced to stop and take off my sunglasses. Wiping the sweat from my forehead I struggled to wave the biting flies away. I cursed under my breath. My hat repositioned I

struggled up an incline while damp air hung like a burden on my back. It was becoming difficult to breathe and my braided hair pressed like a hot iron into my neck.

There seemed little point in complaining, but I cursed again. I let out a wet snort as I came to the summit of the hill. Wet through, my clothes tackily clung to my body. London seemed further away than ever, and I yearned for cooler climes. With all its faults, now I could only think of how I wanted to be there. From this far away even my father did not seem so bad. I missed my little sister, and thought I would weaken and cry. Uselessly I tried again to wave away the unceasing flies. How was I going to stand the months ahead, and how would I be able to work in this unbearable heat?

Eventually I reached the town, my mouth dry as leather. Rising before me shiny stone and glass contrasted violently with the ochre earth. These buildings towered over that which had endured since the first dawn. Near to the shopping mall I happened upon a group of Aborigines, slouched in a drunken haze on the ground. They saw me looking and pointed towards me with crooked fingers, shook their beer bottles and hissed words that I supposed to be an ancient dialect. I thought I heard one of them hiss, *mutant*. They lay among the litter and broken glass and had lifeless stares. Thin, shabbily dressed kids stood around with unflinching faces. Their hair was matted and their feet were bare. They appeared shipwrecked, stranded in a world that made no sense. I was unable to help them, and hurried away.

I headed through the modern automatic doors into the air conditioned vacuum of the mall. A Peter Sarstedt song rang out from the speakers: *I'll buy you one more frozen orange juice on this fantastic day!* My hair stuck to my face and the cold air began to chill my skin. I could appreciate if you lived here long enough you might end up crazy, but I had been here for

less than two days and felt like exploding. I was starting to feel queasy, and badly needed to quench my thirst. The deafening possums at the house had been replaced with ear splitting music in the mall. And even here, was something really watching my every move? I pulled myself together and headed to the general store in search of a clock. Having come all this way, I was determined to find one.

When I exited the mall the Aborigines had vanished. I wondered where they had gone. Perhaps they were lying in wait ready to ambush me as I crossed the scrub, back to the relative comfort of modern habitation. Or they might jump out at me later from the gardens, camouflaged by thick vegetation and flowering shrubs. Apprehension followed me all the way on the hot trudge back to the house. But even with my bag of shopping the trip back felt shorter than the journey going. In what seemed to be only minutes I found myself back at the large metal gate on Monkey Puzzle Street.

The house beckoned to me as I unlocked the padlock; tempting me inside, urging me to come back home. As I hastened up the drive, something inside me surrendered to its call with every step I made.

Chapter 2

A week had passed following Daphne Green's escape from the wet, and still I hadn't got the possum trap into the loft. There had been no rain for at least five days, but the heat and humidity remained fierce. The battered old radio in the lounge issued worrying *yellow* warning alerts because of storm activity out at sea. With no television I had little excuse to procrastinate over my thesis. However, rather than beginning work I seemed determined to provide my own diversions. I had been out walking and exploring most days, and in the evenings listened to the radio on the veranda.

My first visit to the shore revealed a deserted beach, apart from some craggy rocks and flapping notices about Box jellyfish. Crocodiles, it said were also to be avoided around the creeks and lakes. There was real danger here. From a rocky ledge I watched the waves as they rolled in and stretched out again. The water hissed gently at me as it clutched the tiny pebbles on the shore, and I felt a long lost smile stretch onto my face. There had to be a certain comfort in knowing this ocean had been around for millennia.

History had captured my imagination since childhood, and I longed to teach it to others. And since learning about the explorers who had discovered this continent I had held a secret ambition to come to this land.

Away from the house I felt more relaxed than I had done in years. At Monkey Puzzle Street I felt continually anxious, and still thought I was being watched. Perhaps it was nothing more than fancy. Since childhood I had disliked being shut in, confined as I would have to be in the storm shelter. But by

the shore the sea foamed in and out like a frilly petticoat, laughing and singing the way it had done for thousands of years. I couldn't be sure, but it seemed to be trying to say something.

Faded memories of home searched my mind for a place to live. Into my thoughts came Belle and the school playground where we skipped and played hopscotch and shared the secrets of small children. After school we sometimes visited each other's houses for tea. Belle's parents were Scottish and her father had a set of real bagpipes that we were sometimes allowed to blow. I huffed and puffed but never got a note out of them. My mother was not at all keen on Belle, and made lots of spiteful remarks about the Scots. Banging the pans on the stove, when Belle came to tea she always lost her temper. We were sent up to my room if we got the giggles and had to stay there until we were sorry. After that, I didn't think she would ever want to be my friend again. She would be gone forever, before I had the chance to tell her my deepest secrets.

I sat on that same rock for hours, just looking out at the steady horizon. Time passed gently while the gulls swooped over and over into the waves. When a steady breeze came up I knew it was time to leave, to start the hot walk back to the house. Once there I sat at the heavy dining table and looked for a long time at the blank paper in the typewriter.

I met Biff Johnson when he brought a newspaper round one afternoon. His dog Ringo came with him, and immediately started to explore the garden.

'Don't mind him,' Biff said, he's always had a thing about this garden.' A sun wrinkled postman, he told me he much preferred living with his dog since his divorce some 20 years previously.

'How long are you staying?' he asked.

‘My rent’s paid until April,’ I told him, ‘and my cousin is due to join me soon.’

‘One of these days Daphne Green will stay put in Adelaide, and then the house will sit empty and rot.’ he said.

‘Can I get you some tea?’ I wanted to be polite, but hoped for his refusal.

‘I only drink beer love.’ But he didn’t laugh and I couldn’t tell if he was joking.

‘I don’t suppose you know any car mechanics?’ I said carefully.

‘As a matter of fact you’re speaking to the right man there.’ He went home and brought back the number of a mechanic friend of his, insisting he was a good bloke. While he was gone I flicked through the paper. An article told about an Aboriginal man who had recently escaped from a crocodile attack. He saved himself by poking the croc in the eyes very hard, with both thumbs. The animal had let go of him but had left the poor lad with puncture marks right down the side of his torso. A gruesome picture of his wounds was next to the article.

Biff urged me to contact the mechanic before the police got a chance to impound the car. ‘And there’s storm activity off the coast,’ he said ‘but I expect a smart kid like you has got your shelter ready.’

The cyclone shelter was a mess. Over by the far wall I could just make out a folding camp-bed, the rest of the space being taken up with junk and gardening paraphernalia. The possums, *little blighters* as Miss Green called them, had left me with no alternative. Stretching over a rusted bicycle I grabbed the possum trap. Only the size of a cat basket, it felt surprisingly heavy. Moisture dripped from my face and I had to rest, like someone middle aged. The airless atmosphere was

stifling, and my throat was dry. A spider clung to one of the bars of the possum cage. A closer inspection confirmed my dread. It was a poisonous variety, a Redback spider.

I directed a shot of anger towards Uncle Sid, living comfortably in Brisbane. Aunt May was probably just about to light the barbeque for lunch. Kim was most likely on her way home from surfing, her blonde hair swinging in the sunshine. She didn't have to worry about jellyfish that could kill with one sting, or the gnashing jaws of crocodiles.

I knew I had to get the storm shelter ready. Biffs' paper had a useful article in it, explaining how to get a box together with some tins of food and water bottles. But I was unable to move, as if stuck to the upturned crate. Inside this cage my only company was the chirping song of cicadas. It was impossible to see beyond the garden walls, and I began to feel shut in. The insect volume increased, urging a deeper, primal panic. Familiar feelings of weakness crawled over me, providing their own grimy comfort. If Belle had been with me I was sure she would reassure me the way she had done in the past. I closed my eyes and tried to conjure up her face. But I saw the door to the old cellar: the entrance to my prison.

An icy chill ran through my heated veins. Quickly I opened my eyes. A glance out through the shelter door confirmed I was not shut in, that I was indeed safe. However, it was becoming clear that unwanted memories could turn this place into a prison of a different kind.

Tears tried to fight their way free, but my eyes just stung with sweat. I had no choice but to stay here, there was simply nowhere else to go. Grabbing the possum trap I slammed shut the shelter door. I realized my throat was parched. The front door was nearby but I decided to use the back door near the pond. The climb up the steps was rewarded by the shade of tall palm trees. I placed the trap by the back door,

remembering then to feed the fish. Their food tin was on the kitchen sill and as I reached for it the sun hid momentarily behind a dark cloud. The flakes fell in silence on to the water while a dull thud came from behind, like a falling mango. It was so loud it caught my breath. Then I was alerted to a different noise, one like a soft cry coming from the undergrowth.

Beyond the pond the trees parted to reveal the dingy remains of the old Aborigines' house. I approached warily, curious to find out what was making the noise somewhere amongst the rubble. Kneeling on the coarse grass I scanned the piles of rough bricks. Stinging ants climbed into my sandals and up my bare shins, oblivious to where they were going. Flicking them onto the grass, I shifted position onto my haunches. The heat was compelling me to go into the shade of the house, and my mouth was like parchment, but I continued to look. Perspiration drenched my clothes, sticking the fabric to my skin.

I began to feel nervous. I had been asked not to intrude here by Miss Green, after all. Why had she said it? And what was that noise? Was it my overactive imagination, the same one that kept telling me *he* had knocked the clock off the wall?

A dry smile twitched at my lips, and I admonished myself for such foolishness. The isolation and the confounded heat were getting to me, and it was time to pull myself together. I decided to go inside for a cool drink. Just then a momentary breeze drifted past my face, gently lifting my hair. It felt different, like a feather stroking my skin. Then it grew swiftly into an aggressive wind, stinging my body and blowing dust into my eyes. Larger clouds moved across the sky obscuring the sun and shadowing the foundations of the little house. Truly frightened, I turned to run. But my body cowered as a sudden crack of thunder exploded overhead. I jumped to

dodge a falling palm frond. Gasping for breath I felt my heart pump like an engine while I stood in frozen panic.

Several mangos hit the ground like missiles as my eyes darted around the scene. A crack of lightning split the heavens in two like a silver blade, releasing soft fat raindrops along with my helpless tears. Soon water was everywhere, noisily crushing the leaves and dust into the earth. I grabbed a nearby tree for support as a ripping groan of thunder sent shock waves through my body. The responding streak of lightning illuminated the shrine in which I stood, and before me I saw the dark eyes of an aged painted face, the hair long and matted.

A scream rang out but unaware it belonged to me I ran from it. I tried to get to the back door but the rain was so heavy now it was blinding. My foot caught on something and I struggled to free it but then I tripped forward and fell headlong onto the rubble.

It seemed like weeks later when I finally awoke.

A painful head accompanied my throbbing body. Opening my eyes, slowly the lounge came into focus. Through the screen door I could see the long veranda that flanked it. I thought I saw a figure leaning against the balcony rail. I rubbed my eyes, and then realized it was a man smoking a cigarette. He was looking out into the still falling rain, and seemed to be enjoying the precious release it provided. I tried to move, but the pain in my hip released an involuntary moan. The man stubbed out his cigarette on the veranda rail and entered the lounge. His heavy work boots clacked loudly on the wooden floor, and the noise reverberated through my brain.

‘Wondered when you were going to wake up,’ he said cheerfully as he headed for the kitchen. ‘You need some ice on that head.’

‘What happened?’ I watched him as he returned with a glass of water and the ice, wrapped in a tea-towel decorated with birds of Australia.

‘I wanted to ask you that.’

I put the ice pack to my forehead, where I felt a large lump. ‘You found me?’ I said unnecessarily.

‘Yep, you were knocked out cold; hit your head on a large brick.’ I winced as the ice stung the lump. Embarrassed, I realized he must have carried me inside. I took a closer look, hoping he didn’t notice. He appeared strangely familiar, but I didn’t see how I could know him. How odd, that he should be coming to the house at that very moment, and odder still how he had managed to get in through the gate.

‘Well, I’m really glad you found me, and thank you for bringing me indoors. How long do you think I was out there?’ I took a mouthful of water from the glass.

‘Not sure, maybe a few minutes, maybe longer,’ he said casually. He hoisted a foot onto his opposite knee and scratched his shin. ‘Damn mossies.’ He cursed. ‘Oh, by the way, I’m Luke, the gardener.’ I shook his large, outstretched hand, and made an effort to sit upright.

‘Pleased to meet you Luke; I’m Rachel. Did Miss Green mention me?’ It was painful to smile. ‘I’m supposed to be finishing my History Degree.’ I added.

‘She said something about a clever Pom renting the place.’ I thought this was rather insensitive and winced, but he sailed on, ‘She usually rents the place out during the wet. Mind if I roll one up?’ He reached for a tobacco pouch in the pocket of his scruffy shorts, and carried on anyway, before I had time to object. ‘I came by today to see if the lawns needed mowing.’

Anyways, just before I got here down it came thank God, so I thought, may as well shelter under Greenie's trees until it finishes. And that's when I found you laying there, out cold; sparko.' He gave a lopped sided grin as he finished rolling up the cigarette. 'Guess I'll have to come back at the weekend to do the lawns. Anyway I've got a key for the gate, so you don't need to stay in for me.'

I shifted round delicately, ignoring his last remarks and hoping Miss Green had not called me a Pom. 'I've never seen rain like this. Is it always this heavy?'

'Well, sometimes it starts and then stops again, and that's bad. Other times it rains for hours, even days without stopping, like now. If it gets really bad you need to get ready with your cyclone stuff. Keep listening to the radio. But try not to worry too much about it; we've managed to escape for years without a hit.'

'Well, I'm glad about that.' I had to drop my gaze, as his eyes were boring into me.

'D'you remember what happened before you fell?'

I tried to recall, and shivered as I remembered the face. 'It might sound a bit silly,' I said beginning to feel uncomfortable.

'Try me.' He looked straight at me, again with those steel eyes.

'Well, I was in the cyclone shelter getting the possum trap. Oh yes, then I remembered I had to feed the fish, but while I was doing that I heard something in the garden and went to investigate. I got spooked and must have fainted, but it felt like I was tripped.' I could remember my foot getting caught up. 'And I saw something.'

He lit his cigarette. 'Like what?' He was giving me that look again.

‘This is going to sound ridiculous.’ I glanced away, wishing I hadn’t mentioned it.

‘Was it near that old ruin?’ he said, apparently concerned.

‘Well yes, as a matter of fact-’

‘This is really weird.’ He got up abruptly and started to walk up and down rather noisily, puffing away on the cigarette.

‘Have you seen something too?’ I asked, hoping for reassurance. ‘What I saw, well I could have sworn it was the same person Miss Green told me about, you probably know about him, the Aborigine who used to live here.’ He stopped pacing and sat back down heavily.

‘He never really lived here, just stayed with her now and then and did some painting. She told me this when I first started doing the garden, but I already knew about it on account of my dad being the gardener before me.’ He took a slow drag and exhaled the smoke through pursed lips. ‘Well you’ve met Greenie; you know how she can rabbit on.’

‘So, have you seen something as well?’

‘I never said I saw anything.’ His eyes narrowed as he took yet another drag on the cigarette, pointing it in the direction of the garden. ‘But what happened to me out there to this day remains a mystery.’

