

Sal tightened her shoulders into herself and leaned towards the fire, not looking at her husband. They had never disagreed on anything that mattered. He wished he could explain to her the marvel of that land, the way the sunlight fell so sweet along the grass.

But she could not imagine it, did not want to. He saw that her dreams had stayed small and cautious, being of nothing grander than the London they had left. Perhaps it was because she had not felt the rope around her neck. That changed a man forever.

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He said no more, but the thought of that mild-mannered point of land was with him from the instant of waking, as if his dreams had been full of it. On his trips up and down the river with Blackwood he saw it in all weathers and conditions. Under the black skies of August he would see the curtain of rain advancing up what he thought of as Thornhill's Reach, turning the headland grey, making the bushes on the point twist and flail in the wind. As summer came, birds sang from the trees on sweet blue and gold mornings. He saw kangaroos, and striped lizards as long as his arm sidling up the trunks of the river-oaks. Sometimes he thought there was a haze of smoke rising up between the trees, but when he looked harder it was not there.

At low tide the point was lined with mud. This was not the same as slimy Thames mud, but a rich brown that looked good enough to eat. Beyond the mud were the rushes, higher than a man, packed as tight as the bristles of a broom, topped with feathery plumage. They were alive with little round brown birds, something of the order of a robin. He could hear them in there making their calls: ca chink pee pee wheep! Wheep!

Other birds, as bright as soldiers, stalked across the mud on long hinged legs. He watched, not two yards away, as one of them broke off a reed with its claws, holding it so its beak could strip off



the outer sheath and eat the pale stalk within, one bite at a time, like a lady with a finger of asparagus.

The reeds protected the point on one side, dense mangroves on the other. Beyond the slope of the gentlemen's park, the land tilted and became a wall of jumbled rocks and scrubby woods. But between the river and the ridge there was plenty of good flat land. A hundred acres? Two hundred?

Whatever it was, it was enough.

Each time they passed the place he looked for the thing he was dreading: the dug-over patch of ground where some other man's corn was growing, the square of some other man's hut. Each time there was a moment's relief, but then the dread returned.

The thought of that point of land became a private thing, a bead of warmth in his heart.

Blackwood was more jovial these days than Thornhill had ever seen him. He was planning to sell the *Queen*, retire to his farm *away a ways up*, and make do on what his moonshine brought in. *Plenty of wood, plenty of water, plenty of tucker*. Blackwood shrugged when Thornhill was surprised. *I got all I need up there, and none of the aggravation I can do without.*

But he seemed to want to see Thornhill right before he disappeared into the valley of the First Branch, and seeing him right meant making sure he got his pardon.

The ticket of leave was a way to make men work, but a full pardon worked even better. Those who were already free and who had the benefits of servants assigned to them did not agree, but for the moment the Governor was handing out pardons as if they were two a penny.

Which in a manner of speaking they were. Blackwood knew a man of the cloth, a Reverend Cowper, who was prepared to