

The ships anchored in the port were the end of the long string that joined this place with the one they had left behind. What Sal saw as she stared out at the *Osprey* or the *Jupiter* was herself climbing on board and turning her back forever on Sydney Cove, getting the bit of roof-tile out of her pocket ready to put back on the sand at Pickle Herring Stairs.

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The black natives of the place seemed to come in two sorts. The visible ones were those who lived in the settlement. There was a man who hung about the Thornhills' hut, so black his skin swallowed the sunlight. They called him Scabby Bill because his face had been mauled by the smallpox. More than once Thornhill went out of the hut at night on a call of nature and found him near the door: a piece of the darkness moving as if the night itself was standing up to take hold of him. In that moment he was not just Scabby Bill who whined all day for a bit of bread. Thornhill felt a quick pulse of fright, then the man turned away and was gone.

In the morning Scabby Bill could be found sleeping up against the back wall as if he owned it, collapsed into angles, one long skinny leg sticking out, his entire naked black body on full view except for the once-pink bonnet on his head, sitting on black hair frizzed as if singed, a tattered ribbon hanging down over one ear, one hand closed around a silk fan gone to shreds, his eyes nearly closed, singing and chuckling and frowning by turns. When he woke he coughed in long spasms the way Thornhill remembered his father having done before he died.

Yet he was still a fine figure. The sunlight fell on the crags and slopes of his face, the eyes cast into deep shadow beneath the ridge of brow. The creases beside his mouth could have been carved in stone. On his muscular shoulders and chest were rows of scars.

This was a town of scars. On board the *Alexander*, Thornhill had once seen Daniel Ellison flogged, after he had forgot himself

so far as to raise his hand to a guard. All the male convicts had been brought on deck to witness his punishment. Later Thornhill watched over weeks as the wounds thickened into lumps, the skin slowly closing.

On a lag's back the point about the scars was the pain that had been inflicted, and the way they marked a man to his dying day. The scars on Scabby Bill's chest were different. It seemed that the point was not so much the pain as the scars themselves. Unlike the net of crisscross weals on Daniel Ellison's back, they were carefully drawn. Each scar lined up neat next to its neighbour, a language of skin. It was like the letters Sal had shown him, bold on the white face of the paper.

At times during the day Scabby Bill would appear in the doorway, a black silhouette against the sun, calling, *Missus, Missus*. The first time she saw him there, Sal blurted out a high embarrassed laugh, and turned away from his nakedness. Thornhill saw the colour flood into her face—he had never stood before her naked—and smiled to see that cheeky wife of his reduced to confusion by a shameless black man.

But like everything else that was peculiar here, Scabby Bill's nakedness soon became ordinary. She grew used to him calling at her, and would tear a bit off the loaf to give him.

He would take his crust and go and she would say, *Thank God, Scabby Bill has buggered off*. She did not seem to fear him: he was the same as the ants or the flies, a hazard of the place that had to be dealt with. Every time he left, she was confident that it was for good. *He's gone off to die, Will*, she would say. *Taken his bleeding cough and gone under a bush somewhere*.

He saw that she understood it as a transaction. In exchange for a crust of bread he would leave them be. But later they always found him back again, leaning up against the wall.

Scabby Bill accepted crusts, but what he preferred was a sup of rum. Liquor seemed to act on him with astonishing power.

Thornhill envied him, the way it went to his head so quick, so entire. *If them others got legless so quick we'd be out of business*, Sal said. A white man might have to be coaxed along to empty his pockets before the world seemed a friendly place to him, but Scabby Bill needed hardly a mouthful.

It turned out that Scabby Bill was good for business, because for the promise of rum he could be got to dance. Everyone liked to watch him gather the sticks of his limbs together and get to his feet, stamping into the dirt, thudding so the dust flew up, staggering and calling out, pointing his ragged silk fan at his audience, droning through his teeth to himself. Men came from all the streets around, cheered to watch this black insect of a man capering before them, a person lower in the order of things even than they were.

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The other sort of native was the kind that Thornhill had met on that first night, when they been on the very edge of civilisation. This sort of native was invisible to those like Sal who confined themselves to the township. They lived in the forest and in the bays where settlement had not yet reached, and melted away if any of the new arrivals tried to come close. Even in the few months Thornhill had seen the settlement grow, he had watched how those hidden ones retreated with each new patch of cleared land.

They wandered about, naked as worms, sheltering under an overhang of rock or a sheet of bark. Their dwellings were no more substantial than those of a butterfly resting on a leaf. They caught their feeds of fish, gathered a few oysters, killed a possum or two, then moved on. The most Thornhill ever saw was a silhouette stalking along a ridge, or bending over with a fishing spear poised to strike through the water. He might see the splinter of a canoe, fragile as a dead leaf against the dazzle of the sun on the water, with a figure sitting in it, knees drawn up to its shoulders, or a twist of blue smoke rising from some hidden place in the forest.

But the canoe had always gone by the time he rowed over to it, and the smoke vanished when he looked at it too closely.

During the day, if a person kept to the settlement and did not look about himself too hard, he would see no one out there in the tangled landscape. He might even imagine that there was no one there at all. But at night, a man out in a boat on Port Jackson saw the campfires everywhere, winking among the trees. Sometimes the breeze brought the sound of their singing, a high hard dirge, and the rhythmic clapping of sticks.

There were no signs that the blacks felt the place belonged to them. They had no fences that said *this is mine*. No house that said, *this is our home*. There were no fields or flocks that said, *we have put the labour of our hands into this place*.

But sometimes men were speared. Word would go round the settlement: that so-and-so lay at this moment in the hospital with the spear still in him and the doctor shaking his head. That another had got one in the neck so the life had pumped out of him in a minute and left him as white as a piece of veal.

Thornhill never spoke of those spearings to Sal, but she heard of them from their neighbours, and he had found her more than once poring over the smudged pages of the *Sydney Gazette*, her finger under the words, mouthing them out to herself. *They got him just along the way here*, she said without looking at him. *Just around in the bay*.

But there was no point dwelling on the spears of the blacks. They were like the snakes or the spiders, not something that could be guarded against. He reminded her that even in London a man might be killed for the contents of his pocketbook. He meant it as a kind of reassurance, but Sal went silent. He came to dread seeing the *Gazette* spread out on the table.

Whatever he said to Sal, he was glad to spend his days out on the water. On land he was always within range of a spear.