

He was stifling in the hut, could not bear the closed-in feeling. It was too much like being in a coffin deep in the earth.

He started to speak, fell over the words, coughed, tried again: *I'll just take a look.* His voice was thin in his own ears. *Make sure they're not up to no mischief.*

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It was a relief to be outside in the fragrant night. A full moon rode in the sky, dimming the stars and lighting the forest in shades of grey. Under the noise from the point, the place was going about its business, ticking and whirring secretively. Something rattled in the dry bark near the woodpile and the black shape of a bird swooped over the clearing.

Glad of the moonlight, Thornhill made his way up to the shelf of flat rock and around towards the camp. He wanted to be unseen, but he knew how his shirt, dingy though it was, must stand out bright against the trees. His skin, that inescapable envelope, glowed white and dangerous. He tried to move without making a sound, but by moonlight his familiar place had become somewhere else. Rocks came at him unexpectedly, trees were not where they were by day. He stumbled along against the grain of the place until, from behind the powdery flank of a paperbark, he could see the camp. No one turned or pointed. If the blacks knew the white man was there, they were not concerned.

They had a huge blaze going at the centre of their camp. He could see the firelight illuminating the trees from beneath, flickering on the skin of the trunks, making a cave of light. Figures passed in front of the fire so it winked on and off.

A circle of men stamped and jumped around the fire, and one sat at the side with his legs crossed and his face tilted up, singing in that way that made everything urgent. They were striped with white, their faces masks in which their eyes moved. The firelight made them insubstantial, webs of light dancing.

Women and children sat around them clapping sticks together to make that brittle pulse underlying the song. The women's long breasts were outlined with white, with a collar effect around the upper chest that was absurdly like the neck of Sal's bodice. Their faces, like those of the men, were barred with white. The children were painted too, even the smallest of their faces. It was only a bit of pipeclay, but it gave them the look of the very earth made human.

War paint, he thought. They're doing a bleeding war dance. He was surprised by the calmness he felt at the idea, and realised he had been expecting this moment for a long time.

The dancing was recognisable as being from the same world as Scabby Bill's, but it was as little like his as Thornhill's warped hat was like the Governor's plumed tricorn. Scabby Bill had danced with his eyes nearly closed, his face blank, absenting himself from the moment. These men danced with their eyes full of light from the fire, the lines of white on their bodies twisting with life.

After a moment Thornhill recognised Long Jack. He crouched with the others, his spears in his hand, then leaped with a powerful spring and came down again stamping his feet and scuffing the dust up into the air. Jack was no longer a man, but a kangaroo made human.

To the man listening behind the tree, there was no more sense to the sound than there was to an insect's drone, no sense of it having a beginning or an end. But then the sticks all stopped on the same instant, the voice of the singer gave a final flick and was silent. He realised it was the same as the way everyone in church stopped singing at once, because they knew that they had got to the end of the hymn. Watching from behind the paperbark, Thornhill was the only one who did not.

They started up again, with a different beat this time. Now there was one old man dancing alone, his feet stamping into the ground, so that the dust flew up around him, glowing with light:

Whisker Harry. His body was sinewy with muscle, turning into the dance like a fish in a current. The pounding of his feet seemed the pulse of the earth itself. When he began to sing, he threw the song up into the air, its long crooked line the sound of the blood in the veins of the place.

Thornhill saw that this person was not Whisker Harry, who existed only in the minds of those who had given him that name. This man, dancing in his white paint, wrapped in a mystery of song, was another person entirely.

The others watched, clapping one stick against another. He saw that they were not simply watching a man dance, as people might sit at the Cherry Gardens and watch folk do a jig. There was a drama alive on their faces. There was a tale that they all knew being told in the language of this dance. It was like Christmas at St Mary Magdalene: everyone in the church took pleasure in the telling of the nativity, the same from year to year.

This old fellow is a book, Thornhill thought, and they are reading him. He remembered the Governor's library, the stern portraits, and the rows of gleaming books with their gold lettering. They could reveal their secrets, but only to a person who knew how to read them.

Watching the power in this man's thighs as he thudded his feet into the dust, Thornhill remembered that he had slapped him and scolded him like a child. It had been a mistake, and it frightened him now. Whisker Harry was not just a stubbly fellow with an old man's spindly shanks, as unimportant as the almsmen at the Watermen's Hall, doddering along for their bowl of gruel. This man was old in the same way the Governor was old. A man should no more push and slap him than he would the Governor with his shiny sword hanging by his side.

The steady clapping of the sticks and the rise and fall of the wailing voice beat back from the cliffs, muddled and multiplied, a

river of sound bending over its stones. Thornhill stood behind the tree, feeling drawn deep into the sound, the beat of the sticks like the pumping of his own heart.

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When he got back to the hut, Dan pulled him in. *Get the bleeding door closed for pity's sake*, he cried. *And the bar up quick.*

It was stuffy inside. The lamplight flickered on their faces as they turned to him. *How many of the buggers is there?* Dan said. *A hundred, two hundred?* His voice had gone thin, frightened of the answer it might get. *No more'n a dozen*, Thornhill announced. *Maybe not so many.* But this lie sounded as hollow as a quart-pot.

Sal had got the children up and dressed. They were all crowded around the table on which the slush lamp gave off its smoky light: Ned and Dan, and the children wan in its light. Only Dick was not around the lamp with the rest of them. He lay on the mattress, staring up into the rafters.

On the table Sal had set out everything they owned: the pannikins, the teacups, the knife with the broken tip, her other skirt neatly folded. There was Willie's pocketknife and a bonnet she had just finished sewing. There was the bag of flour, the smaller one of sugar, and the hand-mill for the hominy. They were laid out on the table as if on a shop counter.

*They'll leave us alone, Will, if we give them what we got*, she said. *Just let them help themselves. Mrs Herring done it one time.* Her voice was very matter-of-fact, as if she had often dealt with savages. *They got no call to do us no harm.*

In the shadows, someone went *huh* in disbelief. Thornhill thought it might be Willie and turned on him, but the boy stared back expressionlessly.

Ned spoke up: *We kin shoot the buggers, cain't we?* His voice was uncertain. But Dan cut across him, his voice gone high as a woman's. *They'll burn the place*, he cried. *Flush us out like possums.*