“A short story is the ultimate close-up magic trick – a couple of thousand words to take you around the universe or break your heart.”

– Neil Gaiman

Pretty Boy

Philip Burgess's transformation from a skinny, naïve eleven-year-old first-year student at the Hendrik Coetzee Secondary Boarding School for boys in Pretoria into one of Olivia's attendants in Twelfth Night, the annual Shakespeare play selected for the boys to perform at the close of that year, was eye-catching. Dressed as a maid in an auburn-haired wig with a thick plait falling to the small of his back, beautifully made up with rouge and eyelashes, and wearing a seductive, body-hugging Elizabethan floor-length gown of green satin embroidered with gold roses and slippers to match, he was stunning.

Without having the courage to say so, he felt vulnerable after the metamorphosis and hated it. It really sucked. Especially when one of the Boarding House Matrons, who was applying foundation cream to his face and then rouge to his cheeks for the first time on dress rehearsal night, commented in loud surprise, 'What *skin* you've got, you lucky boy. Such quality. So smooth and unblemished. I've never felt skin like it, on a man or woman.'

He felt his face burn.

When he looked up at the large mirror on the grey clinker block wall of the actors' dressing room, he saw the faces of the five boys sitting in a row beside him undergoing make-up turn in his direction, eyebrows raised and grins breaking out. Big, bold and dangerous seventeen-year-old final-year student Robert Viljoen, who was playing Malvolio and sitting next to him, puckered up his lips and blew him a long kiss; and then, sensing Philip's shock as he recoiled, he went for the jugular with a meaningful unambiguous smirk and blew him another two, each with a resounding smack of his lips.

The room erupted into laughter and Philip lost his cool. With his jaw gritted as if he was grinding his teeth, he felt his eyes sting as he forced himself not to cry. For the first time in his short life, he felt so powerless, alone and disconnected he had no idea how to respond, or what words he could conjure up to defuse the situation. Overcome with shame and incandescent with rage, he wished he hadn't volunteered to act in the play. He wished he could disappear. He wished he was dead. No! He wished Robert Viljoen was dead. *If I had a knife*, the unexpected thought gripped him, *I'd stab him in the guts and twist it… a curved butcher's knife, like Mum's. One so sharp it cuts through bone.*

New to the school, he had stepped up to act in the play on impulse when they called for volunteers. Apprehensive but expectant, he felt he was prepared for it. A small speaking part, perhaps. Before being promoted to the High School, he had performed as one of the three witches in Macbeth Act 1 Scene 1, a segment in the end of the year concert at his Primary School. He loved it: the ominous, supernatural atmosphere of the stage plunged into darkness before being struck by lightning and echoing with thunder, the boiling cauldron with its mix of weird ingredients—and the paradoxical lines he'd learned, "When the battle's lost and won," and "Fair is foul and foul is fair" often still ringing in his mind.

But no. His voice was on the verge of breaking, so he was offered a non-speaking part. The sailors were all taken, but there were vacancies for three attendant maids. He agreed to fill one of them.

The play was performed over six nights. On the third night, when his left eyelash came loose, Philip went into the dressing room to reattach it. Robert followed him in. He pulled up a chair, spread his legs in their yellow stockings with their black cross-garters, and said: 'Well hello, beautiful. When you've fixed that cumbrella, why don't you come to Papa and sit on my knee? I know you've been wanting to, and so have I.'

Philip ripped off the eyelash, flicked it into the bin and stormed out, his silent 'Get *fucked*, *arsehole!'* echoing in his mind as Robert shouted at his retreating figure, 'Don't play hard to get, sweetheart. I can wait. Remember, it's the thought that counts.'

Philip felt such hurt and overpowering rage as he ran away, he could barely stand it. It simmered deep within himself for the rest of that night, associated with the grinning sneer on Robert Viljoen's face; and he made up his mind his hatred would last for the rest of his life, if his revenge was to take that long.

On the last night they performed in front of the other six hundred boys at the school. Philip appeared five times, each of his cameo appearances more humiliating than the last. In Philip's mind the hum of conversation each time he appeared grew louder, a communal snigger more knowing as the night wore on, and the wolf whistles after final curtain fall were targeted straight at him

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At home during the next vacation, Philip often took time out to study his face in the mirror after cleaning his teeth. He didn't like whatever it was others saw in him, even though he couldn't see it himself. Once, while he was peering at himself, he picked up his father's

switchblade razor and sliced the blade across his forehead and down his right cheek, drawing blood but not requiring stitching.

My scars will alter everyone's perceptions of me, he thought, although his real scars were way more than skin deep.

His wounds, which he told his mother he'd suffered when he fell into the top line of barbed wire in the Barret's sheep farm fence when he was out running—thankfully avoiding his eyes—weren't deep enough. They healed within a month, the fine red lines of scabs turning into a cicatrices too faint to see, except when his face was tanned.

When he returned to the High School for his second year, he was relieved to discover Robert had matriculated and been conscripted into the army to do his national service.

Determined to fight back, to thicken his skin and outshine others on the running track and in the classroom, Philip withdrew inside himself. Camouflaging his deeper feelings and knowing his well-being had to be earned, he applied himself painstakingly to his running schedules and studies. It paid off. Within a year, and each year after that, he set new age-group school records in the 1500 metres and regularly won annual prizes in the Arts subjects he excelled at—in particular English Literature.

Realising at last that life was worth living, he learned to fend for himself, gained in self-confidence and laughed off insults that would have cut deep earlier. When someone anonymously left a raunchy Playboy centrefold of Pamela Anderson on his desk, with his face cut from a school photo glued over hers, he pinned it to the Boarding House notice board with the words in bold italics: ***Show yourself you gutless prick. You won't be doing this twice.***

When someone else he didn't know sat next to him in the school hall one Sunday film night, when *The Power of One* was being screened, and put his arm around his waist, Philip lashed out with his elbow, broke his nose and felled him as if he'd struck him with a baseball bat.

No one messed with him after that. He survived his personal nightmare, though flashes of hatred for Robert still simmered deep within him, erupting whenever the memories arose.

And yet, in a strange way, he acknowledged that dealing with the teasing that descended into bullying during his first two years gave him the inner strength to stand up for himself, grow emotionally and develop an empathetic understanding of the pain other outsiders suffered.

He matriculated when he turned eighteen and enrolled at the Cape Town University to study for a bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature; and three years later, with

his undergraduate degree completed, he won a Rhodes scholarship for postgraduate studies in the same degree at Balliol College, Oxford University.

During his first December vacation in the UK, he took part in a weeklong intensive Creative Writing course at the University of North Wales in Bangor. There he came to what he later described as a fork in the road, when fate tossed the dice and put him to the sword again—and whoever he was telling the story to would wonder what was coming next.

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The short and wiry white-haired warden of the Llys Meirion Hall of Residence met him at Bangor station. It was a grey and chilly day, the dark clouds low and a persistent drizzle falling. The warden was carrying a battered black umbrella in his bony right hand. He transferred it to his left and held out the other.

'Philip, is it? I'm Dafydd. You picked a tidy morning to travel.'

'Phil, please. Is it always like this?'

'It is the season for it, I have to say. You may not see the sun for the week you're here.'

'Something to look forward to.'

'Ydy wir. You can bet on that and not lose your wager.'

Philip slung his backpack over his shoulder as the train pulled out, Dafydd struggling to open the umbrella before they left the shelter of the platform. Her fiddled with the rusty clip above the handle, swearing under his breath. When he succeeded, he held it up at full arm's length for both as they walked to the car park, Philip bending to duck beneath it. By the time they reached Dafydd's car, Philip's right shoulder and Dafydd's left were uncomfortably wet.

Ten minutes later they reached the Hall of Residence, views of the Menai Strait appearing in bursts of blue through gaps in the hedges and over the low granite dry stone walls blotched with moss lining the road.

'I must warn you you'll be sharing your room with one of our senior students living here during the break,' Dafydd said, as they walked along the ground floor corridor to the last room on the right. Part way there, Philip held his breath against the fumes that struck the back of his throat as they rounded two painters rolling white paint onto the walls.

'We've changed the double bed in there for two singles,' Dafydd went on.

'Two singles? That's a relief.'

‘Ydy wir,’ Dafydd smiled, his gnome-like face cobwebbed with wrinkles as he knocked on the door. ‘You’ll be safe. And I think you’ll like your roommate. He’s a third-year environmentalist and a countryman of yours. Mr Robert Viljoen.’

Not *the* Robert Viljoen? *Surely not!* Philip hesitated mid-stride as Dafydd swung the door open, shock settling in his gut like a block of ice, the hairs on his arms and the back of head rising.

‘Mr Phil Burgess,’ Dafydd said to the student seated at his desk beside the window with his back to them. ‘Our visitor. He’s here for the week, as we warned you. One of the creative writers.’

Philip had time to gather himself and conceal his alarm as Robert spun round at his desk, rose, and with a broad smile introduced himself. ‘Robert,’ he said, his voice the deep baritone Philip remembered. ‘Bob to my friends. Viljoen.’

He was as tall as Philip remembered him, but broader in the shoulders and thicker through the hips. His sandy hair was receding at the front, exaggerating his high, broad forehead, his sharp brown eyes if anything less haughty and scornful, but as keen and alert as they had been. He was wearing what looked like a bullet on a leather thong strung around his neck that caught Philip’s eye. *A trophy of some sort perhaps? Dug from the corpse of an ANC liberation fighter during the civil war?*

Robert’s smile widened, and Philip wondered if he’d recognised him.

‘Goeie dag en hoe gaan dit met jou?’ Robert asked in Afrkaans.

Clearly not, Philip realised, relief sweeping through him. *Thanks to my beard, and the fact that last time he saw me I was eleven years old—and then only for a week at close quarters. My name means nothing to him.*

‘I’m good, and I’m sorry, but ek praat nie Afrikaans nie.’

‘That’s a shame. I haven’t had a chance to speak it for years. It’s all Welsh here.’ Robert pointed at the bed closest to the door. ‘Okay, then. Park yourself there. The two bottom drawers in the dressing table are yours, and the ensuite’s through there.’ He hesitated as the warden left the room. ‘Dankie Dafydd,’ he yelled as the door closed, before turning back to Philip: ‘You fancy a drop this early? There’s some Scrumpy Jack cider in the fridge.’

Philip laughed. ‘Later will do, thanks.’

‘Later it is.’

The week raced by and the creative writing course was intensive. Philip was in the University library most evenings, drafting the short story assignment the attendees were expected to present on the last day, applying the principles discussed during each session. He

decided to base his story on his personal experience of bullying when he was younger, how it had haunted and transformed his life. Warts and all. He found it cathartic, especially dreaming up the ending.

Communication with Robert was polite, formal and distant, their conversations little more than small talk. They did, however, spend one night together in the University Jazz Club, where Robert was performing, much to Philip's surprise. An accomplished acoustic guitarist, he accompanied himself singing several covers, his voice a remarkable rich baritone. When he was on stage his presence was commanding. You would have heard a pin drop, as they say… and his memorable rendition of Miriam Makeba's Xhosa click song that ended his set brought the packed house to its feet, the applause deafening.

'Congratulations,' Philip said, impressed, on the way back to their room. 'That was something else.'

'You know the Welsh. They love a good singsong. I'm small game compared to a few of the locals.'

Philip completed his short story on the last day, made the required number of copies, and, with time to spare, scoured the shops for the perfect butcher's knife. He found exactly what he was looking for: a foot long curved stainless-steel blade with a bone handle.

Moments before Dafydd was due to take him to the station, Philip took the knife from his backpack. Robert had his back turned and was studying at his desk. He was concentrating so deeply he didn't hear Philip coming. The blade caught the light like a sharpened scimitar as he leaned over Robert's right shoulder, holding the knife as though he was about to slit his throat—but with the sharpened edge facing away. Robert wrenched himself sideways and looked up as the blunt edge touched his gullet, his shocked expression a mix of horror and disbelief as Philip leaned further and placed the knife on the open pages of his book.

'For you, Bob,' Philip said. 'A present.'

'A present?'

'For your next braai barbecue. It cuts through bone.' Philip reached into his back pocket and withdrew a folded copy of his short story. He handed it to Robert. 'You've been served,' he said. 'Read this. I'm sure it will interest you.'

He shouldered his backpack, strode to the door and turned as he opened it. 'Do you remember Malvolio's last words in Act 5 Scene 1? "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you." I do. I've never forgotten it.' He paused, gazing directly into Robert's eyes. 'Remember, dis die gedagte wat tel. It's the thought that counts.'

He closed the door firmly behind him, and seconds later heard the deadlock click. A weight had been lifted. He was walking on air.

The Walking Cane

Her husband Johnno's elegantly carved ebony walking cane with its ivory handle was the only thing of his that Mercedes was reluctant to part with. She had other plans for it but was unsure yet what they were. Put it in Johnno's coffin with him so that its ashes mingled with his? Or keep it in a glass display cabinet on the sideboard in the next unit she rented? It had saved her from serious harm, after all, as Johnno promised it would. Twice.

She had no issues with donating most of his salvageable clothes, shoes and hats to the Salvos Op shop though, before scouring through the rest of their belongings for every other reminder of him. She burned the lot on an open bonfire on the grounds of the Salvation Army Crisis Accommodation she'd moved into. It would have been too painful and impractical for her to keep any of it.

She surprised her three children, Milly, Liz and Charlie, all born a year apart, with a marshmallow and a half each as a special treat that day. She bought them with the last of his winnings on the pokies. He may not have approved, but she would have done it with or without his say so. Their sudden smiles as they sat around the blaze roasting them on the end of eucalyptus twigs gave her joy and made the gesture worthwhile.

It was a chilly July night, a week after he drowned. Watching the flames eventually die back to embers that glowed as the night breeze ghosted over them, she felt herself cauterising the ten long years she'd spent with him. She would no longer bleed for him—or herself. Those days were over. She was worn out, but relieved and ready to reconstruct her new life.

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The walking cane was a family heirloom, he told her, when she admired it the morning they first met. He was guiding a group of tourists up the steep, misty track on Bluff Knoll.

A distant great grandfather had acquired it, when he was a Sergeant Major in the 32nd Regiment, serving in India in 1857, he told her. The year of the Indian Mutiny. Whether he'd used it as an ornament, an aid to walking when he was injured or as a weapon to keep his sepoy mutineer underlings in line he wouldn't know. Probably all three, he suggested with a chuckle.

Whatever might have been the case, the cane had passed down to him when his father died last year. He had only used it for the first two options, he told her, his chuckle developing into a laugh. So far. Because there were no longer any sepoys within striking range, unless you counted the raghead taxi drivers in Perth, and you could hardly call them mutineers. Not that he'd ever be tempted to use it on them in that way, he assured her, when she recoiled from his comment.

'*Raghead* taxi drivers?' she asked, taken aback by the red flag of racism.

'I'm just kidding,' he assured her. She was welcome to borrow it if the trail became too steep, he quickly went on, and he'd help her with her backpack if it became too cumbersome.

'Perhaps on the way down,' she said. 'That's when I'll need it most. I'll likely trip headfirst over my own two feet on these rocky steps. They're all a different height.'

'It'll be ideal for that,' he said. 'Save you from serious injury.'

She was twenty-four years old, and she wrongly estimated that he was in his mid-thirties. In fact, he was twice her age, he admitted, when the group took a break at the lookout. She was shocked. He was too handsome to be that old, surely, with such an alert and understanding look in his amber-coloured eyes and his tall, rangy body an athlete would be proud of.

'I'm getting too close to fifty for my liking, growing old but not growing up,' he said, as they admired the sunrise spreading across the Stirling Ranges. It lit up the mist below in white sheets that so obscured the way down it became the path of no return, and applied delicate pastel blues and browns across the landscape stretching to a horizon so out of reach they seemed marooned on the mountaintop with time at a standstill.

'I told you my name's Mercedes,' she said, four hours later, when she handed his walking cane back to him and he reached down and took her hand to help her step up into the bus, 'but I prefer Mercy. Or Merce, if you like.'

'As in Percy?' he smiled, holding her hand for longer than she expected. 'Pleased to get to know you, Mercy. I'm Johnno, as you know.'

Warmed by his kindness and the attention he'd paid her all morning, she didn't mind the faint, salt smell of sweat offset by the scent of what she guessed was *Calone* hanging about him as she stepped around him to take her seat. She took several deeper breaths as she did so, breathing in another memory of him among the others she'd have once she got home. She liked the easy strength she'd felt as he'd lifted her into the bus in one firm move, his large hand holding hers. There was something protective about him. Something strong, fatherly and safe.

Given her long history of growing up in foster homes, seven in fact, from the age of four, she felt reassured and responsive.

When he resigned from his position as Tour Guide that month and moved into her suburb to work on the nearby Fremantle wharves, she was flattered and excited. After three months of his unrelenting attention and the pleasure they took in each other's company on most evenings and nights in her rented unit overlooking the Swan River and the city, they were married in the Perth Registry Office.

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During their brief but intense courtship, she discovered one morning he was a Viet Nam veteran diagnosed with PTSD. When she woke him from an unusually violent nightmare, he jerked upright, unseeing at first and his arms flailing, before trembling with rage, and then becoming aware of his surroundings as she walked him into the sunlight streaming through an open window and calmed him down. When she supported him through the episodes of nervous anxiety that followed that day, he could no longer conceal his diagnosis.

He'd been reluctant to admit to his service in Viet Nam to anyone, he explained, let alone her. 'Try getting a job in those days once you were branded. You had Buckley's. We were pariahs. Stigmatised. I was fortunate to be offered that job as a tour guide eventually.'

The welcome the veterans received when they came home after losing the unpopular war wasn't exactly friendly. He had to discard the uniform he was wearing during the march past in Sydney, when one of the protestors spat on him and drenched him in red paint. It took him three days to remove the stain from the right side of his face, during which time people took it for a wine-coloured birth mark. The sting of paint remover on his eyelid was the worst, he said. It was fortunate he wasn't blinded.

She felt such empathy for him she believed she could help him deal with his interaction with the world in so predictably unpredictable a manner. She was a qualified nurse, after all. From then on, she'd prepare a coffee when he was sleeping in, and once he was awake but aggressive and confused, she'd lead him out to the chairs on the veranda overlooking Fremantle, where she reassured him of his actual surroundings and he settled as he took them in, conscious of resuming the ongoing narrative of his life.

Crossing paths with him at Bluff Knoll was meant to be, she suggested. Fate had brought them together for that reason. It was written in the stars. Saving him from losing his sense of self and his hold on reality gave her life a purpose, and they'd work it out together.

She couldn't have been more mistaken.

For the first eight reasonably peaceful years, during which the children developed from infancy into middle childhood, he refused professional treatment or support from anyone other than her.

When he was in his late fifties, however, his deteriorating symptoms took a sinister turn for the worse and she found herself out of her depth. Getting him to talk about his haunting experiences had not released him from the trauma. It had driven him deeper into reliving his terrifying nightmares instead, and they invaded and distorted his awareness of the present.

The worst of his war experiences occurred during a week in mid-May 1968, when he was twenty. He was a member of the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment's mortar platoon, and spent several days under heavy bombardment and rifle fire when they were setting up Fire Support Base "Coral", north of Tan Uyen.

The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese threatened to overrun them the first night they were there. They had to repel wave after wave of attacks; and at one point, with the enemy metres from their protective embankment, they had to press themselves deep into the mud to avoid the swarm of flesh-shearing steel darts that rocketed over their position and into the enemy, when the artillery behind them fired several rounds of Splintex shells.

'I can still taste the mud,' he told her. 'When I least expect it… and hear the screech of the darts as they flew over my head. Let alone the rest of the deafening ruckus. No wonder a car backfiring, or someone giving a loud flick of their fingers unexpectedly, gets me ducking for cover and sweating these days.'

Two of his closest mates were killed that night—JJ Jimmy Johnson, who died in his arms as a medic was applying a tourniquet to his severed right leg; and Mack the Knife McKnight, when a chunk of shrapnel tore into his chest when he was kneeling beside him, handing him mortar shells. A few centimetres to the left and it would have struck him. He was flooded with relief and *Thanked God!* for his escape moments after it happened, with Mack outstretched and writhing at his feet. The survivor guilt that gripped him then had never left him. Seven others also died, and many were wounded.

He dreaded the thought of losing his sense of continuous self and his awareness of his moment-to-moment present, his ability to remember faces and communicate, his memory, his consciousness of how he kept his bearings in the world… but he sensed himself gradually doing so. He became extra vigilant as he read the signs, or when Mercedes alerted him to them.

He was standing dreamlike at the ironing board and talking to no one during a session of ironing one afternoon, for example, his voice loud and getting louder as his tension rose.

'Viet Nam! Why the hell were we there in the first place?' He flattened out one of Milly's blue school blouses and began ironing the collar. *'Good question.'* He slotted the blouse over the end of the ironing board and began pressing the front, taking care with the badge embroidered into the pocket… *'Bugger the ANZUS Treaty, and bugger "All the way with LBJ". Why tailgate the Yanks whenever they flick a finger?'* He turned the blouse over and pressed the back… '*The fall of the whole region to communism and Chinese influence spreading? Bullshit! Not yet, not by a long stretch.'* He laid out the right leg of a pair of Charlie's khaki trousers, the steam delivery hissing over the creak of the ironing board… '*The Cold War and the domino effect? South Viet Nam first, then Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore? Give me a break.*' He folded the trousers… *'It was Ho Chi Min's internal bloody civil war, for Christ's sake. The North against the so-called democratic South.'* He reached into the laundry basket for Liz's maroon skirt… '*It was none of our fucking business!'*

Mercedes, concerned at the growing agitation in his voice and its effect on the children, tried to take the iron from him to complete the job. He stretched out his right arm and held it threateningly towards her cheek, his left hand clutching the back of her neck so that she felt the heat. '*I'll leave you to guess who won,*' he shouted, glaring at her, his bitter answer hissing over the screaming of the children, '*It wasn't us… and those of us who were there lost more than the war*.' Then he reluctantly stepped back and handed her the iron.

The end came quickly.

He was one of hundreds who lost their jobs to redundancy on the wharves when the State Government outsourced the work to a private contractor. He became more uncontrollable when he took to drinking in Paddy's Waterfront Pub on the south embankment of the docks, and began gambling more of their meagre savings on the pokies there, and on the horses at the nearby TAB.

Worse still, he began taking his resentment out on Mercedes with his fists when she complained, Milly hiding with the younger children in a wardrobe with the doors closed, so that they couldn't hear the noise when the fighting erupted.

Mercedes did what she could to appease him, working with him to regain what was left of his self-esteem when he apologised after each episode. He didn't know what he was doing, he told her, because he couldn't remember it the next day, and he was sorry. It wouldn't happen again, not if he could help it.

But it did, often starting in the car when she went to drive him home after closing time on the nights he was at the pub.

When she reached out for professional help, she discovered there was a long waiting list, the Psychiatrists were expensive and the Counsellors few and far between. Besides, PTSD was a new condition she was told, still poorly understood by the medical researchers. There was little they could do. As his carer she had to soldier on and, ‘Call the Police and take out a restraining order when things get really out of hand.’

Exhausted, distraught and frantic, determined to save the children and herself from further trauma, she secretly applied for emergency accommodation at the Salvation Army Crisis Centre. The offer came within a month, and she prepared to leave.

On the fatal night, she picked up the walking cane when she left the unit to pick him up. She took it with her for the first time, unsure why. The pub was two hundred metres from the car park, a walk along the wharf, its seaward edge protected by thick jarrah sleepers bolted to the concrete.

She stepped out and closed the car door when she saw him weaving his way towards her with two fellow drinkers. She walked towards him as she always did, meeting him under the pool of floodlight to guide him to the car.

He saw her coming. When he caught sight of the walking cane he hesitated, his eyebrows up and his expression questioning. Then, with a raucous laugh, he shouted, ‘I’m not a sepoy mutineer, Sergeant Major!’

He stepped away from her, and his right foot struck the railway sleeper. He toppled over the edge and disappeared without a further sound beyond the splash.

The walking cane had saved her from serious harm for the second time.

The Ghost Writer

When I write about an episode in history, there's often so fine a veil between fact and fiction that the longer I spend in the company of those I'm bringing back to life, the louder and more insistent their voices become. They're so unrelenting at times it seems the dead themselves are presenting me with unexpected coincidences or revelations or directing me down forks in the road I've never taken, inspiring me to reimagine them. It's as if the living and the haunting dead exist in interpenetrating universes.

I was unaware of any of this before I'd started writing, when I leant across the starched white tablecloth at a dinner one night in the Parmelia hotel, gazed across the bowl of dried orange and yellow Banksia flowers and said to my guest sitting opposite, 'I think there's a story in there somewhere.'

It was Saturday, August 3, 1996. She and I were discussing Phillip Playford's non-fiction book *Carpet of Silver*, published earlier that week. In it, Playford describes with meticulous accuracy the discovery and exploration of the shipwreck of the Dutch cargo vessel, *Zuytdorp*, on the cliffs north of Kalbarri in 1712.

'By most estimates, up to sixty of the crew may have survived,' I went on. 'What if one of them was rescued by a local Malgana or Nhanda family?'

Was that young Gerrit de Waal's first whisper in the ear of my subconscious? I believe so. He was the senior shipwright-carpenter aboard… and in that unsuspecting moment the trap sprang shut. There was no escape.

A month later I was attending a UWA Historical Society seminar on the topic of Playford's book, when Lennard Currie caught my attention during a lull in the proceedings. I had just met him during a drinks break. Distracted for a moment, I was watching a small black native bee zigzag noisily across the flywire in the window as if searching for what looked like a bullet hole through which it had come, when Lennard tapped me on the shoulder.

He handed me a one-page summary of his biography.

'I've heard you think at least one survivor from the wreck may have lived among my Malgana countrymen three hundred years ago. This might interest you,' he said.

It was impressive. An Aboriginal Malgana man of High Degree from Shark Bay, and an internationally celebrated glass sculptor, he'd been researching Gerrit de Waal's life to unravel his own ancestry, believing their family trees were intertwined.

Lennard then introduced me to his friend, Stefan Novak, who was working with him on the spectacular glass cenotaph they were creating on Bathers' Beach, dedicated to the 20,000 Aboriginal warriors who died during the Frontier Wars.

Stefan told me he was using Lennard's research notes, maps, illustrations and archival records to write Gerrit's biography on Lennard's behalf. He was part way in, and he agreed to allow me to read his drafts so far, with a view to collaborating with him on completing it.

The Kite Flyer is the result.

You'll find a postscript at the end describing how Gerrit came to ghost write his story through us. With his imaginary yellow highlighter, his green ink pen and his carpenter's precision, he was as painstaking and particular as any editorial perfectionist you could name. We had to cut some passages he considered too racy and personal to expose to the world: his affair with Magdalena when he was fifteen years old for example, and he corrected us on some of the detail. The first bird he ever carved from an offcut of pine when he was nine was a wren, not a sparrow. We'd missed the acne scars in our description of his face, and they disfigured his shoulders as well. His dead sister Kathrijn's name was spelt with a j, and he scrupulously avoided eating the apples on the tree in the orchard under which she was buried, when they ripened each October. As for the depth and range of emotions he felt when he first took his daughter Medika from her Malgana mother's arms into his own the day she was born, well, only he understood that. He had experienced it, after all, and we hadn't come close.

We followed his advice, and after a second and third review he gave us the green light.

In having his say, Gerrit had proved as real to Stefan and me as we were to each other.

Many Eyes for an Eye

I will never forget that afternoon. How Could I? I was thirteen years old, and the wind was so cold I felt it sharpening its razor blades against my skin and I was shivering. It was the middle of winter, and we'd been living for over a week on Garden Island in the Swan River Colony, having come ashore on Wednesday 10 June, 1829.

Those of us with proper tents that is. The rest of the passengers were still sheltering aboard the *Parmelia*. They only had umbrellas or empty tea crates or what not to avoid getting rained on when they had to disembark. The ship's crew had built the only proper shacks on the island, with pine tree branches and canvas coverings to protect the supplies and the barrels of cement.

I know the exact date because my mam was keeping a diary of the trip from Plymouth, and I checked. I remember the rain eased and there was a break in the clouds when Captain Irwin read the Proclamation out to all the settlers. I was standing at the back of the crowd with my best friend, Billy Hokin, and we could hardly hear him. Mrs Roe had an upright pedal-powered harmonium in the tent next to ours, and she belted out *God Save the King* when the Union Jack went up.

That got my back up. I'm Scottish for starters, not English. My dad, James, was born in Inverarity, close to Dundee. He was a horticulturalist, just like his dad and grandey, and he was working as a botanist for the City of Cork Botanical Gardens in Ireland, before we sailed. I was born there—as were my three brothers and two sisters, which means we're as much Irish as Scottish. You must know what that means. We hate the English, who believe they rule the world with their British Empire… and I despise any Scotsman who calls himself North British so that he can cosy up to the English.

I'm John, by the way. John Nicol Drummond, the middle one.

I went to the Blue-Coat School in Cork. Just because we were Presbyterians didn't mean we didn't have fun with the Catholics, because the English who ruled the country turned us into rebellious bands of brothers. We loved watching the protests and the riots of the secret society, the Rockites, when they were on the streets, imagining we were taking part in throwing rocks and smashing windows like they did, when they were on the warpath beating up the

English landlords and tax collectors. So much so, I learned to speak Irish and preferred it to English by the time Dad was made redundant in 1828. That's how I discovered I had a knack for languages; and that's why Dad decided to join the other settlers in 1829, establishing the Colony on the other side of the world.

Here we go again, I remember thinking that freezing day. *Raise the Union Jack like they did in Ireland and the country's yours, if you're British. Never mind the natives, the black people living here… and we know they're here, because they've been causing problems down south in Albany, we've been told. I know they're black, even though I haven't seen one yet.*

Late that evening as the sun went down, Dad sat us down on a circle of limestone rocks around the fire beside the tent. We were at dinner, eating fish we'd caught. He explained that the Proclamation meant Britain had claimed all of New Holland to longitude 129 degrees east, and: 'It's called Western Australia now, and anyone living on that tract of land is a British subject, protected by the rule of law.'

'What about the natives?' my younger brother Johnson butted in. 'Are they included?'

He was nine years old and smart, the smartest of us all when we were his age. He had red hair and blue eyes to go with his orange freckles, like my mam and older sister Jane. When he was standing in the sun it often looked as if his head was on fire.

'Of course.'

'How will they know? Have they agreed?'

'They'll soon find out… and no. Not yet.'

'Is that fair?'

'You can answer that yourself.'

'Won't they cause trouble when they do find out, like the Irish did in Cork?'

'If they do, Lieutenant Governor Stirling's forming a Militia to deal with them and keep us safe.'

'What's a Militia?'

'A Police Force. Every boy and man over fifteen years old and under thirty must volunteer to join. Then he'll take his pick when the troubles start.'

Johnson looked up at our older brothers, Thomas, the quiet, thoughtful one who was eighteen, and James, the musical one who was fifteen, and gave them a knowing grin. 'That means you two, doesn't it? Right now.'

'It does,' Dad said. 'If they're called up, they'll go. They can't refuse, like the Irish. We're here now, and we won't bite the hand that feeds us. Eat your fish, then get some sleep.

We've all got a job to do tomorrow, digging more latrines, clearing the scrub and setting up the vegetable gardens.'

Dad was sitting opposite me, and I looked across at him, the firelight dancing on his face, his salt and pepper hair and thick sideburns framing it. As usual I felt a warm rush of love for him, even though he was so tough and strict with us. He didn't laugh much, but when he smiled his piercing no-nonsense eyes beneath his bushy eyebrows came alive and you couldn't help responding. His nose was long and his chin receding, so that his bottom lip stuck out a bit, giving you the impression that he was grim and determined, which he was, especially when he was concentrating on examining his plants and seeds… or carefully counting out his money when he was handing us our monthly allowances. I sometimes used to think he couldn't bear to part with any of his hard-earned coins, even though they were such small amounts.

'Think about it,' he said, when he gave us the news that we were leaving Ireland to head for Plymouth and New Holland, and we were shocked and complaining. 'I'll be the one and only Honorary Government Naturalist in the Colony. Do you know what that means? We'll have our own allotment of land, and I'll be the first botanist to explore the western side of the continent no one's ever seen before. There must be thousands and thousands of plants waiting for me to investigate and classify them.'

'Will I be able to help you, Dad?' Johnson asked. Over the past year he'd spent all his spare time after school with Dad in the Botanic Gardens, developing an interest in plants that would in time become as deep as Dad's.

'Of course, but school comes first.' He sucked in his cheeks for a moment and then said: 'You four boys are going to have to learn some new skills.'

'Like?' Thomas asked.

'Like shooting rifles and riding horses. You never know what you're going to meet out there, and you'll have to get around.'

An electric thrill raced through me when I heard his reply. He'd recently exchanged a collection of seeds and some Himalayan Rhododendron plants for a second-hand fowling piece and several boxes of shot shell cartridges—and I discovered I was the family's best shot when he allowed us to fire at targets we set up in the dunes at Garrylucas beach. I scored a bullseye twice.

As for riding horses, I couldn't wait.

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They tell me time flies when you're having fun, and I must say I agree. That was my experience over the next sixteen years, when everything was so new and waiting to be explored, never mind the tough times in between.

That's the way it was—until Sunday 13 July 1845, to be exact, the toughest day of my life.

We lived on Garden Island until mid-November at first, growing vegetables and flowers for sale and then, late one evening, 'Time for us to go, everyone,' Dad said, when he returned from Perth after negotiating with Lieutenant Governor Stirling. 'He has granted us 100 acres of good land in Guildford up the river, provided we develop it into a market garden within a year.'

It took us two days to get there with our belongings, in a flat-bottomed whaleboat from HMS *Sulphur* and four sailors at the oars. They raised the sail when the onshore afternoon wind came in and it swept us up the Swan River. We slept ashore that night on the riverbank in Perth, while the sailors went to the newly opened Freemason's Hotel. The next day the sailors let James, me and Johnson row the rest of the way, while they smoked their pipes and recovered. Thomas steered the boat, and Mam and Dad bailed when the water in the bilge got too deep.

Our land was a triangular block at the junction of the Swan and Helena Rivers, on the southern side. We couldn't miss it, because the bush was on fire when we got there, the smoke billowing up like a warning signal.

'Who are they?' Johnson asked, pointing at three native men with firesticks in their hands. 'Why are they destroying our property?'

They ignored us as they methodically swept the firesticks through patches of undergrowth, setting them alight. Then they disappeared as if they were ghosts. I was fascinated as the line of flames crept across the block, buffeted by the fluky afternoon wind.

Dad was unperturbed. 'They're doing us a favour,' he said, grunting as he offloaded Mam's oak treadle spinning wheel onto the bank, a sailor helping him. 'They're clearing the land. Stirling warned me about it. Apparently, they always do it at this time of year. It makes the hunting easier later. He said he was going to stamp it out in the settled areas soon.'

'Why?' Johnson asked.

'Think about it.'

'Because of the risks to the animals and crops?'

'Of course. And the timber houses.' He sucked in his cheeks, his bottom lip sticking out as it used to when he was about to tell us something important. 'Stirling told me the natives in this area are called the Whadjuk Nyungar and we have to be wary of them.'

I'm not surprised, I remember thinking. *They must be as confused and furious at the British invasion as the Irish were*.

'Why do we have to be wary?' Johnson asked, persistent as usual.

'Why not?' I said, before Dad could reply. 'Think of Ireland and the Rockites.'

'Oh, right. Of course. How could I forget?'

We built a three-roomed shack there, and a stable for two horses Dad bought. The first was an old, retired Clydesdale we called Alloa, after the brewery in Glasgow where he used to work. Dad needed him for the ploughing when he was setting up his nursery and market garden, and we had a great time riding him, sometimes three at once. The other was a smart young chestnut pony we called Feathers, after her long blonde mane that looked like an American Indian headdress when she was cantering. Both names were suggested by Jane, and we all agreed.

Feathers was Dad's horse, and he rarely allowed us to ride her. He needed to keep her fresh and well-fed for his ride to Government house each day, when he was appointed Superintendent of the gardens and nursery there. With his time split between Perth and Guildford, we all had to help in keeping up with the gardening and selling the nursery plants and vegetables as far afield as Midland and Bassendean, with Alloa harnessed to the cart.

Things soon went sour for us though, when the British Government withdrew Dad's salary, and he was away for the whole of 1834, unsuccessfully trying to convince the officials in London to reinstate it. By the time he got back, we knew the sandy soil and summer heat were not ideal for the nursery and the market garden was failing. When Alloa got colic and died, we found dragging the cart loaded with barrels and buckets of water from the Helena River for the plants so backbreaking and inefficient they died and we began running out of funds.

Mam refused to let us use Feathers to tow the cart, but we were allowed to ride her for the exercise. By the time Dad got back we were all good at it. Especially me, I like to think. I couldn't wait to have my own horse. As for my skills with the fowling piece, I had plenty of practice shooting snakes and rarely missed. Right behind the head.

Forget the hard work we had to undertake, though. We loved it there.

Especially Johnson and me.

The day after we arrived, the fire had burned itself out, leaving the allotment scorched. Hot cinders glowed in patches here and there when the wind brushed across them. After helping Dad locate the red-painted wooden survey pegs, most of which were burned to the ground, we all jumped in the river for a swim. Johnson and I had a race, and when we rounded the first

bend upstream, we came across a small Whadjuk Nyungar family camp, with a circle of leaf shelters on our allotment. There was a cooking fire lit to one side, the grey smoke curling away and the strong smell of burnt fur and roasting meat carrying to us.

It was shallow enough for us to stand, and the group of natives there gathered along the bank staring at us. I counted four women, one carrying a baby in a sling, three girls of different ages, and a boy who looked to be the same age as Johnson. There were no men or older boys.

They were silent at first and then chatted among themselves before laughing at us. One of the women tugged at her hair, then pointed at Johnson and shouted '*Mirdu! Mirdu!*'

That cracked everyone up and the baby in the sling started crying.

'What do you think she said?' Johnson whispered.

'I don't know. I don't think she means us any harm.'

'They're laughing at me, aren't they?'

'It must be your hair. Maybe they've never seen your colour before.'

'Or my freckles. I'm the exact opposite to them. What do we do?'

'Laugh with them.'

Which we both did, before waving and swimming back round the bend.

Over the next three years we got to know them well, although they moved around a lot according to the seasons and the camp was often empty. There were two boys my age in the family, and we met them three days later when they joined us in the river. One of them somersaulted from the bank—Kardarong, we discovered, and the shyer one, Malkar, who wasn't such a good swimmer, came in later.

They were usually away each day with the three men, but when they were free, we enjoyed joining them, exploring the Helena River valley, right up to the catchment.

Apart from the Nyungar language, which we gradually picked up, we learned the art of spear throwing and making stone axes with chunks of quartz and glue from blackboy plants. I taught Kardarong and Malkar to shoot selective targets: poisonous snakes we recognised, goannas and ducks the family ate, and possums, whose fur the women used to weave their belts and headbands. We also shot all sorts of birds and parrots with brilliant feathers—except the ones the boys explained were *nunich*, or sacred totems for them. Among these were the *karak*, the red-tailed black cockatoo; the *waalitj*, the eagle; the *manitj*, the white cockatoo; and the *wardong*, the crow and others.

I'm always surprised at the way fate often seems to lend a hand and work things out for you. The birds we shot never went to waste, for example. Johnson kept them and taught himself to skin and preserve them. Over time his remarkable collection grew, to such an extent that in

the late 1830's he sent specimens to John Gould in Sydney, in exchange for the first two volumes of his book *The Birds of Australia*. They took pride of place on his bookshelf in Toodyay.

Toodyay? You ask.

When Dad returned from London in 1835, Johnson and I could understand Nyungar when it was spoken and speak it well enough to get by. We also had a basic understanding of Nyungar culture but knew there was still a lot to learn.

We also knew our way around the Helena Valley. When we walked Thomas and James through the landscape, we convinced them to talk Dad into exchanging his land allocation and moving there from Guildford. Which is exactly what he did. It proved to be a fresh start for him. He set up a nursery, as usual, and planted a vineyard; but when he and others explored the Avon Valley way beyond the Darling scarp, he was attracted to the richer, more open land discovered there—and once again he exchanged his Helena Valley allotment for 2900 acres of farming land in Toodyay, perfect for sheep and wheat.

'A guinea for anyone who can guess what I'm going to name this place,' he said, flicking a gold coin he retrieved from his pocket the morning we walked the eastern boundary. 'Hawthornden!' he went on before anyone could reply, saving himself the coin.

We didn't need to ask him why. He'd often told us he'd served the latter part of his apprenticeship working in the famous Drummond Castle gardens, which were known by that name.

Dad's come home at last, I remember thinking. *And so have we.*

Six months later, with the fruit trees planted in the orchard and the vegetable gardens flourishing, 'Time for a Council of War, boys,' Dad told us one morning when we were taking a break. 'George Moore has asked me to start collecting local plants and seeds for the Agricultural Society. He's the secretary, as you know. He's been contacted by Botanists in London who want to start classifying them and sending them to museums and herbariums round the country.' He smiled. 'We're in the right place at the right time… all of us. I'll be paid for my services and you four can run the farm, with Thomas in charge.'

Johnson promptly leaned forward and interrupted him. 'You mean you *three*,' he said bluntly.

'You three?'

'I'm coming with you.'

'Are you now—?'

'I am.'

‘On whose say so?’

‘Yours, once you think about it, Dad. I’m as much a naturalist as you are. I know the country. I speak Nyungar and know many of the Whadjuk and Ballardong families round here. I’m your perfect guide.’

‘Says you.’

‘I do… because I am.’

‘I’ll give it some consideration.’

‘Try stopping me.’

Dad burst out laughing, which was very rare for him. ‘I like it! A sixteen-year-old Drummond with the spirit of a Rockite. We’ve trained you well.’

Of course, Johnson got his own way, and over the next two years he and Dad built a thriving business selling plants and seeds to collectors in Cape Town and London. By 1845 they had explored the country south as far as King George Sound, north beyond the Moore River to the land around Champion Bay, and inland to the Victoria Plains. By then they were both internationally recognised botanists, with Dad discovering over sixty new species, many of them bearing his name.

As for me, by 1840 my reputation as someone steeped in the Nyungar way of life, and with an extensive knowledge of local family groups had spread across the district. When Mrs Sarah Cook and her baby were speared to death in a revenge killing that year, on a smallholding in the nearby village of Norrilong, Governor Hutt called on me to set up a local Native Police Force. He wanted one like the force in Perth, to hunt down the murderers. Based in York at the Town Hall, with horses, uniforms and the latest Brown Bess rifles supplied, I appointed two Yued Nyungar trackers I knew from the north as constables, and my new career was born.

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My appointment that year as Police Inspector might surprise you, but I saw it as an opportunity to use my new position, my knowledge of the Nyungar and my skills as a negotiator to improve relations with them.

It was difficult for me at first.

Like Johnson and my older brothers, I was a Rockite through and through. We had always stuck together, and I felt they might accuse me of betraying everything we believed in when I accepted the position; but my hatred for the English had never diminished. I had to bury my true feelings when I was expected to keep the peace by delivering allegedly guilty Nyungar

captives into the British justice system. They misunderstood and resisted seeing themselves as British subjects. They had their own system of Laws and standards of behaviour with lesser spearing punishments, after all, and refused point blank to abandon them.

Living in Ireland and in the Colony meant I'd been experiencing British imperialism at first hand; with all the evils it delivered. The Nyungar deaths from introduced diseases; the settlers looking at the Nyungar as a potential source of labour when they had no interest in or need for that, maintaining themselves in the traditional way, with their hunting, gathering and fishing skills—but when the British dispossessed them of more and more of their land, they were reduced to relying on handouts to avoid starvation; the traditional infighting between Nyungar family groups to settle scores seen by the British as breaches of the peace, so that they were prohibited from fighting or carrying spears on the streets of Perth and Fremantle and couldn't understand why; the shooting of game like kangaroos by settler sportsmen diminishing the numbers available to the Nyungar, who had to resort to stealing sheep, chickens and pigs and suffer the consequences; the destruction of fish traps seen as a hazard to settler boats, and restricted access for the Nyungar to the rivers and waterways… I could go on and on, but all these were minor.

Worst of all were the massacres.

The first of these resulted from the death of Private Nesbit in July 1834, speared by Pinjarup Nyungar warriors in the dunes on the Peel estate, near Mandurah. It led to Governor Stirling organising a punitive expedition to Pinjarra to deal with them once and for all. When his mounted police and foot soldiers came across a large family group camping beside the Murray River, they took up positions on both banks and slaughtered as many as they could, including the women, children and dogs. Those who made it into the river stood little chance, and I imagined the river running red when I heard. They left the bodies where they fell, one found downstream tangled in the branches of a tree days later.

Many an eye for an eye, I remember thinking, as a surge of grief swept through me. *I'm thankful I wasn't there. This is an example of the real way despotic British imperialism works. I hope it doesn't set a precedent for future actions…* but of course it did, across the state.

And then came early dawn on Sunday, 13 July 1845.

In January six months before, Johnson had returned to Toodyay from a seed-collecting expedition and surprised James and Thomas with his new Yued Nyungar partner. James described their visit to me when he was passing through York.

'I've never seen him happier,' James said. 'Her name's Alinta, and they've been together for the past three months. She's a tall, slender, well-proportioned skinny-legged

woman in her mid-twenties, at a guess. She seems shy but her smile's so dazzling and mischievous you realize you've read her wrong. Johnson said he had such strong feelings for her he paid her traditional husband Kabinger and his family for her with twice the usual dowry of flour rations.'

'Cheap at the price,' I said. 'But if anyone knows what he's getting himself into, it has to be Johnson. Marry a Nyungar, marry the tribe.'

'Been there, done that?'

'What do you think?'

'I don't have to think. I know.'

In July, Johnson was camping at the mouth of the Moore River on another seed collecting expedition. He was asleep in his tent with Alinta, when Kabinger surprised them and speared Johnson twice as he woke, killing him.

I got the news that day.

I took out a warrant and with one of my tracker constables, Mackintosh, headed for the mouth of the Murray. We buried Johnson there, deep enough to keep him from the dingoes, his gravestone a cairn of rocks. *Appropriate*, I remember thinking. *The first of us Rockites down*.

Kabinger used every trick in the book to evade us, but we caught up with him on open ground, miles inland near the New Norcia surveyors' camp, two weeks later. As we rode up, he attempted to hide behind a blackboy tree.

'Why did you kill Johnson?' I shouted in Nyungar, my rifle drawn and primed, my horse skittish at the shout. He did not reply. He emerged from behind the tree fifty yards away, stood upright and loaded his spear in his woomera when I shot him in the chest. He fell face first, his mouth full of sand when I turned him over.

I have never felt so torn between revenge and regretful empathy. In a strange way I was glad he had loaded his spear into his woomera. It gave me a legal reason for the shot, and I didn't have to choose.