When octogenarian Australian writer, Jon Janacek, was shortlisted for the prestigious Dublin International Literary Award for his latest historical novel, *The Life and Times of Michiel de Ruyter,* the greatest Dutch Lieutenant-Admiral of them all, he refused to be interviewed.

He sent the following blog to everyone interested in the genesis of the novel instead.

Thank You, Gabe

Call me naïve, but seventy years ago, when the world was a kinder, less hostile and dangerous place, I believed that things would always work out for the best without much effort on my part.

Why? Because from as far back as I can remember I had a familiar unseen guardian angel presiding over everything I did, someone with whom I had brief personal conversations, when I, or rather we, were alone in some secluded private place, preferably behind a locked door. I'd spell out what I needed help with at the time—an upcoming hundred yard race at the school sports while I was putting on my spikes; a Maths exam I was about to sit (Maths being my weakest subject); a bully twice my size I'd decided to confront and was practising clouting on a swinging punch bag.

When I say 'spell out' and 'personal conversations', I mean *telepathically*, but no less charged with emotion and echoing loudly across the aether that separated us than they would have been if they'd been vocalised and he was real. And I say *real*, but to me he always seemed much, much more than real.

I was convinced he was an Australian pilot I'd read about, on loan to the USAF aboard the aircraft carrier *Yorktown,* shot down in the Battle of the Coral Sea on the day I was born in May, 1942. His burning Grumman Wildcat trailed plumes of black smoke before it struck the ocean with him at the controls, wounded, and struggling to save himself.

He was now assigned to protecting me—among others, but I believed I was one of his favourites—and he always came through with the goods. I'd win the race, ace the exam and demolish the bully with a surprise straight left and a right hook he never saw coming. And I never failed to thank him after the event and commend him for his effective multi-tasking.

I sensed him in his spirit form still wearing his flying gear, his helmet on with the chinstrap loose and his goggles on his forehead, his black leather flying jacket unzipped, his hands casually relaxed in his trouser pockets, occasionally taking one out to make an elegant gesture of appreciation as he listened and told me once again that it was, 'No problem, to be honest, no worries at all… any time.'

I'd recognise him anywhere. His brown, expressive eyes with their direct perceptive gaze beneath straight dark brows, his prominent cheekbones triangulating down to a slightly pointed chin with a cleft that made shaving difficult. His mouth that broke easily into a knowing grin, or a smile displaying a chipped front tooth. He was the picture of debonair cool—and when we did communicate across the spiritual airwaves I imagined his lips as motionless as those of a ventriloquist.

For no reason that I could fathom, I felt prompted to name him 'Gabe' sometime after we first met. He approved without hesitation and it stuck. I came to wonder later if the name may have applied to him and all his peers, assuming they existed, or to their Commander-in-Chief.

On occasions he'd operate without being called upon, always with such subtle and unobtrusive skill it didn't look as if he was interfering with the normal course of events.

For example, when I was twelve and was crossing Sydney's hectic Parramatta Road at Ashfield on my first visit there and looked the wrong way, I took an unexpected misstep at the last moment as if he'd held me back—and the rear mirror of the truck that would have struck and killed me if I'd taken another step whistled past my right ear.

Or when I dived from the ten metre rock wall beside Dalmanyi pool in the Kimberleys, its water brown and murky after the first drought-breaking rains, and I wrenched myself upwards at his whispered warning just in time to save myself

from striking the bottom and breaking my neck. Scraping the skin off the left side of my face as I grazed the rocky bottom proved an unforgotten lesson. I still bear the scars. They show up clearly when I have a suntan.

There were other times when he'd arrange a sequence of apparent coincidences with the lightest of magical touches with immediate effect—then follow them up with long term consequences that revealed themselves years later.

The most remarkable of his on-the-spot-behind-the-scenes effects occurred in 1960, from early April to the end of August. I was turning eighteen and taking a gap year in the Netherlands to learn Dutch, before entering the University of North Wales, Bangor, to study the Dutch language, their history and culture—and then, as a consequence fifty years later, I researched the life of Michiel de Ruyter and wrote my third novel, the most successful in my *Life and Times* series.

Why the University of North Wales, Bangor? Because the family history on my Welsh mother's side went back over two centuries, with strong connections to the Methodist Revival movement.

My Australian father died when I was two, leaving my mother struggling to bring me up alone as best she could. She barely kept our noses above the breadline for years. Her strict work ethic, stoicism and unfailing persistence kept us going. I will never forget her. Short and lively, the sparkle in her dark brown eyes was accentuated by her pale and freckled skin surrounded by a mop of wiry, tightly curled black hair turning white, her moods alternately sweet and sour as she swept like a dynamo through the house in her black smocks or colourful bedgowns.

'*Never* a glass half empty, my dear,' she'd insist, the faint remnants of her Welsh lilt still evident, '*always* a glass half full, and then you make do.' And we did. 'When things *do* go south,' she'd sometimes add, 'as they often will for no good

reason, you ride the wave to the beach, no matter how rough the sea.'

I took that advice throughout my years at school, and the scholarship I won for a university education in the UK proved a minor miracle. Thank you, Gabe.

And why Dutch? Well, because the four-hundred-year-old skeletal remains of marooned and mutinous sailors and passengers of the Dutch ship *Batavia*, on display under glass in Fremantle's Shipwrecks' Museum, have enthralled me since I first saw them when I was nine. The bullet holes in the shattered skulls. The shoulder blades, clavicles and ribs chipped and gouged by swinging sword blades. The mystery of the missing bones of both hands hacked off several of them. The ship was wrecked on Beacon reef in the Abrolhos Islands off the West Australian coast in 1629, and the fascination has never dimmed.

Late evening on Friday, 3 April, 1960.

A cold mist was settling over the still waters of the port of Harwich on the River Stour as I boarded the ferry for the crossing to the Hook of Holland, the glimmering lights of Felixstowe across the channel gradually disappearing as it closed in.

My cabin for the overnight trip was on the lower deck. I chose the upper bunk, stowed my haversack at my feet and prepared for an early night, the uproar I could hear in the ferry's two bars and social café not tempting me. I was feeling as uptight and excited as I had been when my adventure began—with my first flight a month ago, the surge of the UK bound Qantas Boeing 707 jet surprising me as it accelerated down the Perth runway, thrusting me back into my seat.

I woke at midnight. The sour reek of whiskey and sweat, and the regular rasp of my snoring cabin mate kept me awake

for another hour. I slept fitfully after that, the sound of wharfies shouting as the ferry docked in the port of the Hook of Holland waking me at dawn.

I climbed down, and when I came back out of the ensuite bathroom, I found my cabin mate sprawled on his bunk in his well-worn jeans, his shoulders resting on his double pillows, his head against the bulkhead. I guessed he'd spent the night that way. He was shaven headed and darkly sunburned, his eyes a piercing blue, his bare, solid chest and wiry arms so heavily tattooed in blue and scarlet inks you could barely see the skin. He was smoking.

'Also, was haben wir hier? Ein Wanderer auf dem Weg zurück ins Vaterland?' he asked. His voice was deep, and what I took for his Glaswegian accent rendered the German barely comprehensible, the sharp whiff of bile and stale whiskey reaching me.

'Beg yours?'

'Beg yours! Oh, God… not another Aussie out to conquer the world. I took you for a German, son. A Fritz, for sure.' He flicked the ash from his cigarette into his calloused left palm before sprinkling it beneath his bunk.

'Me, a German? Why?'

'The buzzcut. The kraut shape of the head, if you don't mind my saying so. The tall and skinny Aryan body shape that would suit a Brown Shirts uniform. You fit the mould.' He gave me a friendly but sarcastic grin. His eyes, reflecting his humour, were spiced with a touch of cruelty. 'On second thoughts, didn't I see you in the Queensland outback at that rodeo in a clown suit? Wasn't that at the Deniliquin Muster? Or was it Mt Isa Mines?'

I laughed with him, but uneasily. 'I'm from the West, actually. Perth… but I'm often up in the Kimberleys.'

'Catching crocs?'

'Fishing, actually. Spanish mackerel and Barra mostly.'

I hefted my haversack onto my back and stepped towards the door.

'*Riiiight*, my mistake,' he said. 'So what brings you to these parts?'

I turned and looked back. 'I start Uni in September. I've come here to find work and hone up on my Dutch till then.'

He swung sideways off the bunk and stood unsteadily, stretching out to the cabin wall for balance, before following me out onto the deck. He was a foot or so shorter than my six foot three, compensated for by the breadth of his shoulders.

'*Find work?*' he said. 'What do you know that I don't?'

'What do you mean?'

'Do you have a work permit? A sponsor? Somewhere lined up to stay? Money?'

His questions stunned me and I held his stare. I slowly unloaded the haversack and placed it at my feet. 'You need a working visa?'

He gave a bark of laughter. 'My God!' He flicked his cigarette overboard and threw open his palms. 'Haven't you checked? How old are you?'

'Eighteen next month.'

'Then you should know better. Yes… you need a permit. Yes, you need a sponsor, and somewhere to stay. Jesus B Christ, do you have any money? A return ticket?'

'Enough to get by on. Just enough for a return ticket.'

'Take my advice and buy it now. Go straight back to Harwich and get yourself sorted. Unless you're a glaikit.'

'A glaikit?'

'An eejit. Someone who doesn't know his arse from his elbow… which most of the Aussies I've come across up until now generally *do* know.'

'I'm going to try finding work on a farm somewhere,' I said. 'To save some money and practice the language. I can drive a tractor… operate a forklift.'

He looked thoughtfully out over the port. The thick plume of smoke from one of the factory chimneys, flattening out as the wind caught it, trailed a long blue-grey finger pointing inland. He turned and gazed back up at me, leaning against the rail.

'Look, son,' he said, 'you may well be lucky. You may find a sympathetic farmer before his dogs rip you to pieces… or before the Immigration Officers do the same, come to that. But I very much doubt it. If I were you I'd take my advice—'

'I have to give it a go,' I cut him off. 'Things will work out. They always do… always have. I've come this far. And anyway, I've overstayed my welcome with my relatives in Berkshire.'

'Well, good luck with that if you insist. Just a word of warning though. The Dutch are still touchy about Germans, even fifteen years after the war. They copped a hit from the Nazis, as you know, and they're ready to give it back in kind. You do look German, that's for sure. You did to me. And many Dutch people won't know the difference. So make sure you advertise yourself as Aussie before they pull the trigger.'

'Thanks for that,' I said, reaching out to shake his hand before lifting the haversack. 'Jon Janacek. It's good to meet you.'

'Davie Dickson,' he grinned, 'a weegie from way back. I'm the chef aboard the *Kathleen,* a coaster in the Black Sea. She's due in Istanbul in a fortnight and I'm going to join her there. I'm stuck in Rotterdam for another week or so.'

'Goodbye, then,' I said as I headed for the gangway. 'You take care.'

'So long, and the best of British, Jon. See you around.'

'Like a rissole,' I called out as I reached the paving on the pier and took a step towards the city.

'A rissole indeed,' he raised a hand and slowly shook his head. 'Don't get yourself barbecued to a crisp, now.'

I took a bus that morning from Rotterdam travelling northwards to Leiden, to get the lay of the land. I was filled with enthusiastic optimism as the gateway to my future creaked open, after Davie threatening to slam it shut.

Unfortunately, my grasp of Dutch was still rudimentary. I hadn't progressed much beyond the chapters on greetings and introductions in my *Teach Yourself* and *Complete Idiot's Guide* books on Dutch, and that disadvantage became evident the moment I climbed aboard. The bus driver spoke no English. I unfolded my *Euromap* and indicated the green open spaces between Rotterdam, The Hague and Leiden. 'Somewhere in there,' was not good enough for him, neither was, 'Ergens darbinnen,' hoarsely translated over my shoulder by a helpful passenger with smoker's breath behind me in the queue.

To forestall the driver's growing impatience and escape the stale odour, I bought a ticket all the way to Leiden. *I can miss a meal to offset the extra cost,* I thought, and told the mystified driver, 'I'll get off when I see the sort of countryside I'm after.'

'Hij zal uitstappen als hij het sort platteland ziet warnaar hij op zoek is,' I heard the passenger explain for me as he bought his ticket.

In the end I pressed the bell at the first stop after Zoetermeer. We had just passed several goat and dairy farms, a rose nursery and a paddock stocked with alpacas.

I spent the next two days trudging along the highway and ducking down several lanes and byways to visit eight farms. Four were dairies, one a free range chicken farm with flocks of bright-eyed white Leghorns protected by two placid and gigantic white Maremma watchdogs, a specialised tulip nursery and two goat farms.

My reception at the first seven farms were all the same, with slight variations on a theme. After the dog—or dogs—had been quietened: 'What do you want? Where are you

from? Where? *Australia?* Where's that?' And the eventual, 'No, we have all the workers we need.' Then the eyes lost focus and avoided mine—and the farmer or the farmer's wife retreated behind the front door, stepped rapidly away into the barn, or engaged first gear on the red or blue mud-spattered tractor and roared off into the paddock, leaving me to walk despondently back down the driveway to the road.

Except for one. The eighth. A goat farm. The last farm I visited, in fact, on the second day in the late evening, after spending the night sleeping in a leaf filled ditch in a coppice of beech trees.

The farm had an honesty market stall at the end of its driveway, with the creamiest blueberry yoghurt in its refrigerator I've ever tasted. I also bought a freshly baked hot cross bun and ate it on the spot, even though Easter was still a fortnight away.

When I reached the farmhouse, still dipping into the yoghurt with its plastic spoon, I struck the small bronze bell beside the door using a metal mallet suspended from it. The sound rang out across the acreage, and I was amused to see several bearded white goats in the lushly grassed paddock beside the house whip up their heads and trot to the whitewashed fence to investigate, their distended pink udders swinging.

The door eventually opened and a red-haired, green-eyed girl about eight or nine stepped around it. She was wearing blue stonewashed dungarees and she had a light powdering of flour on the fine blonde hairs on her forearms. She had just washed her hands and was drying them on a dishcloth.

'Kan ik u helpen?' she asked, her eyes flicking from my face to the tub of yoghurt.

'Do you speak English?'

'A little bit. I'm learning.'

I felt my hopes soar. 'Are your Mum and Dad home?'

She turned and shouted, '*Papaaaa!* We hebben een bezouker,' then disappeared.

Moments later her father peered round the door. He had a full ginger-beard and what I took for reading glasses balanced in his unkempt hair. His eyes were as luminously green as his daughter's. He stepped lightly onto the porch, nudged aside a grey cat that had followed him out with his bare foot, and closed the door behind him. In a brown check shirt and maroon corduroy trousers, he was solidly built and looked like a welterweight boxer.

'Your daughter speaks English,' I said.

'She does. I'm teaching her. How can we help you?'

'I'm looking for work—'

'I can stop you right there. I don't need anyone at present. When the blueberries need picking, yes. Early in June. You're two months too early.' He looked down at the half-finished yoghurt. 'Why don't you come in and finish that inside? More comfortable than standing out here.'

'If you don't mind, I will. Thank you. It's delicious, by the way. I was thinking the best I've ever tasted.'

'What's that accent?' he asked as I followed him in. 'New Zealand, is it?'

We spent the next hour discussing my situation and Hugo—he'd introduced himself as Hugo Bouwman—confirmed that everything Davie had told me was true.

'His advice was on the money,' he said. 'You won't find work without a permit… least of all round here. We're a suspicious lot, us farmers, at the best of times. We have a living to make, and the world out there can go jump, except for our customers as long as they're buying.' He looked at me with some sympathy, and shrugged. 'Best you beat a retreat before things get too dire.'

He fed me that night and allowed me to sleep the sleep of the dead in his barn among the bales of straw. The next

morning after breakfast he drove me to the train station in Leiden and I caught the express back to Rotterdam.

So it took as little as three days for Davie's forewarnings to sink in, his predictions to come true, and for me to experience feelings of such deep despair that any thoughts of riding the wave to the beach were out of the question. For the first time in my young life I went through a range of dark emotions. I felt foolish, frustrated, desperately afraid and furious with myself in turn.

Until, that is, I stepped off the train in Rotterdam station and pushed my way through the rush hour crowd to the revolving glass door at the exit.

As I stepped into the orthogonal glass partition in the door to make my way out, someone stepped into the partition directly opposite mine, making his way in. We caught one another's eye through the glass panel as the door swept around, his a piercing blue and mine, I imagined, a depressed and defeated hazel—and a sudden surge of shock rushed through my chest.

Of all people, I recognised Davie.

I couldn't believe it, but he hammered with the knuckles of his left hand on the glass to alert me as he swept by and followed me around, wagging the forefinger of his right.

No! Not a chance, I thought, as I was catapulted out into the dazzling sunlit square outside the station and spun around as he emerged. *Not Davie. Not… a… bloody… chance.*

A hysterical burst of spontaneous laughter overtook both of us as we faced one another, before he embraced me, then held me at arm's length, his hands on my shoulders.

'Well, what do you know,' he said as he calmed down, clearly as surprised as I was, and we shook hands. 'The prodigal son returns, sooner than expected. What brings you back to these parts?'

'Just as you predicted, Davie. I've hit a brick wall.'

'So what now, son? What do you have in mind?'

'Time for me to head for the hills, I think. With my tail between my legs.'

Before I'd got the last words out he smiled and scrutinised my face, before saying laconically, 'So you're going to make a run for it? Already? You sure about that?'

'What choice do I have? Besides, isn't that what you recommended three days ago?'

'Aaaah! That was then, and I was barely sober. This is now. Come with me. I have to buy a ticket to Istanbul and I'm going to have a bite to eat in the station restaurant. The pieces they serve up in there aren't all that bad. I'll treat you.'

'Pieces?'

'Sandwiches, son. Your Aussie sangas.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. No point in doing anything rash. Let's take our time and think your situation through over a steak and salad… sanga.' He gave a conspiratorial chuckle coupled with a wink. 'There's more ways than one to skin a cat. We've just got to find the right way.'

'Oh, okay, then. Thank you.'

He glanced back as he led me to the entrance. 'You only live once, Jon. And fortune favours, so they tell me. You fill in the blank.'

Three hours later we were standing in the queue in the busy Immigration and Labour Department, with which Davie was familiar. When we reached the head of the queue, Davie asked the counter clerk in basic Dutch to arrange an interview with the manager—and within ten minutes we were talking to English-speaking Guus Dekker, in his cubicle at the end of the office.

He was a friendly, middle-aged and well-groomed man,

casually dressed and greying at the temples, with a receding hairline and an alert and searching look. He checked my passport and flicked through my university enrolment documentation, his lips pursed, before turning his full attention on Davie. He listened patiently as Davie explained my situation, stressed my upcoming studies, my selection of the Dutch language and culture as a subject of study and my Australian origins.

And then, without commenting, he reached for the phone and dialled out. He spent the next few minutes conversing with someone who clearly responded positively to whatever he was suggesting. When he rang off, he smiled, placed his elbows on his desk and gazed at me over his interlocked fingers.

'This is your lucky day,' he said. 'That was my wife Coby. We have a spare bedroom at home and she will be happy to have you as a lodger. The rent will be minimal and I will sponsor you and find you work.' He paused, as if to let the good news sink in. 'On a student's wage, of course. So how does that sound?' he asked at last.

I slowly shook my head. I felt strangely powerless, as if I was a pawn swept up in the mysterious course of events with no say in how it turned out, wondering how in the world Gabe had orchestrated it.

'I can't believe it,' I struggled to reply. 'That's brilliant. Of course I accept. And thank you… and your wife.'

'A few things you need to understand,' Guus said. 'Coby does not speak English, so you are going to have to learn Dutch. And we have three children who have all now left home. They are girls, and Coby always wanted a son. So she's likely to thoroughly spoil you.'

'Half your luck,' Davie said, smiling widely.

Guus reached for a pen and a scribble pad and hastily wrote an address, sketching a mud-map below it indicating

the tram that would get me there.

'Turn up any time after five and I will meet you there,' he said as he handed me the sheet. 'We will see you then.'

He stood and ushered us out of his office.

I was stunned and Davie was ecstatic. 'Well son,' he said as we exited the building. 'Never say never. We've skun the cat. Here's the beginning of the next four months of your life. Let's drink to that.'

And he was right.

Within two days I was offsider to a truck driver delivering crates of Phoenix beer around Rotterdam and The Hague, and did so for the next four months. I caught a tram to work every morning after a breakfast of white bread sprinkled with hundreds and thousands, washed down with a cup of black tea, and carrying a lunch box of sausage and rollmop sandwiches prepared by my doting second mother, plump-and-homely always-smiling grey-eyed Coby. I slept in a comfortable bed beneath a sloping roof and dormer window on the third floor of the house beside the Hillevliet canal and washed myself down in the basin at home as best I could, before bathing once a week in the nearest communal bath house. On some weekends I accompanied Guus and Coby to the art museums, the wide and sandy beaches at 's-Gravenzande and the Marantha Dutch Reformed Church on Sundays.

Until mid-August, that is, when Guus and Coby went on holiday to Belgium to meet their daughter Adrie and her children. To occupy my time while they were away, Guus enrolled me to attend a conference on the 'Seventeenth Century Indian Ocean Voyages of the Ships of the VOC', to be held in Middelburg, south of Rotterdam.

The conference lasted a week, but its indelible memories and influences lasted me a lifetime. Visits to the maritime archives; trips to the ancient warehouses, canals and docksides; examination of the saw windmills close to the port

of Vlissingen; the engineering of the Haven Canal connecting the city to the sea; films and documentaries recording the famous voyages of the *Batavia*, the *Gilt Dragon*, the *Zuytdorp* and the *Ridderschap van Holland* among others.

In my later years, those seven days supercharged my determination to write my *Life and Times* series, fictional historical novels based on reality—the remarkable VOC voyages and the men and women who crewed the ships.

Once again I felt heavily indebted to Gabe.

At the conference, I met Cornelis Mertens, a dry and humorous sixty year old Professor of Marine Archaeology at Belgium's Ghent University. I discovered that he had visited Fremantle and we shared a common interest in the fate of the *Batavia*. During the week, he showed such empathy and interest in my circumstances, I opened up to him. I told him about the death of my father, my meeting with Davie and Guus, my belief in the interventions of Gabe and even let slip that I was close to broke. Most of the student's wage I'd earned delivering beer had been used to pay the rent, buy the occasional fresh bunches of tulips and other flowers for Coby and pay for my irresistible weekly treat—a pint of ChocoMilk, to which I'd become addicted.

After the conference, Cornelis came to the station to see me off.

As I was about to step up into the carriage, he handed me a book—a well-worn paperback copy of Czech writer Franz Kafka's *The Trial*.

'I want you to read this,' he said. 'Your father died when you were two, you said.'

'Yes, he did.'

'Then I'm sure he'd approve. I have to say I'm concerned that your belief in Gabe, as you call him, is excessively naïve. I'm sure your father would have advised you against it.'

'Naïve? Why?'

'In my view you've created an imaginary surrogate father for yourself. It isn't healthy, and Kafka's book will serve as a dose of reality.'

The train began to move. I thanked him, shook his hand and stepped in through the door with the book.

I found myself a seat, opened the book—and a bundle of yellow fifty guilder notes concealed within it fell to the floor. I was astonished. I gathered up the scattered notes and counted them as the train picked up speed. We were soon rocketing through the Zeeland countryside. I shook my head in disbelief. They'd pay for the ferry back to Harwich and the rail journey to North Wales, with change to spare.

I felt a rush of such excited relief that I laughed aloud, alarming and amusing some nearby fellow passengers as the train crossed the silvery marshland of an estuary, flocks of waterbirds scattering skyward.

Call me naïve? I thought. *Thank you, Gabe.*

Skating On Thin Ice

'Watch out for Clifford Farmer,' my friend Alistair thoughtfully forewarned me as we strolled around the UWA campus exhibits during orientation week.

A postgraduate student in Aboriginal Studies himself, Alistair was examining a printout of my first-year enrolment details.

'Uncle Cliff,' he went on, 'I see he's your senior tutor. Best of luck, Caleb. He's got a mind like a dingo trap and a tongue like a whiplash. If you can tolerate his sarcasm and his eccentric teaching techniques, you'll learn everything you need to know about Aboriginal history. Not to mention culture. And I mean everything. He's one hell of a taskmaster, but you'll come out the other end the better for it.' Then he sent me a knowing grin. 'If not, then you're in for a rough ride. In fact, you may as well pack up and go home now, with your tail between your legs. Avoid the torture.'

I said nothing about Alistair's warning to the other first-year students the Friday we gathered at ten o'clock outside Clifford's closed study door. *Best they find out for themselves*, I thought. *Even if it's the hard way.*

Right on time, the door swung inwards and Clifford appeared, the rich smell of percolating coffee wafting out around him.

'Brothers and sisters,' he said, giving us a formal ironic bow. 'My prospective victims. I'm pleased to meet you all. I'm Clifford, never Cliff for short, or, god forbid, *Uncle* Cliff. Not until you graduate, that is, and even then, only with my say so.'

He stepped aside and ushered us in with a vigorous circular wave of his right hand, pointing his thumb at a silver coffee percolator and several mugs standing on a sideboard to our left. 'Welcome to my lair. Tell me your Christian names on the way in. Make yourselves at home and feel free to pour yourselves a coffee at any time.'

He inspected us as we filed past, handing us each a single A3 sheet showing the dramatic illustration of a shipwreck foundering in a storm at the base of a line of towering red cliffs. *The* Zuytdorp *wreck site*, I read in capitals across the top.

'Sandy.'

'Nikki.'

'Sanjeev.'

'Kristina.'

I was the last to enter.

'Lucky last,' Clifford said, as the others took their seats, 'but hopefully not least,'

'Caleb,' I replied.

Dark brown and sharply intelligent, his eyes were deep-set beneath the protruding bony ridge behind his eyebrows. His face was lean and his cheekbones prominent, the shape of his compressed lips hinting at sardonic humour. His unruly black hair was generously streaked with silver and held in check with a woven black and white Clothing the Gap headband.

He was taller than me, and rangy, with what I took for a slight pot belly evident under a lime green short-sleeved shirt. *It may instead be a set of well-developed abdominals*, I realised, when I saw a squash racquet propped in the far corner of the study. His skin was light brown, the wiry sinews on his forearms gliding beneath it as he reached out to shut the door. His left arm was heavily tattooed in abstract patterns similar to the Maori. He wore white shorts and Asics joggers.

I took the last seat in the semicircle facing him.

Still standing, he held the picture up before us. 'Right.

Let's get down to my introduction,' he said. 'The *Zuytdorp*. She went down on the cliffs just north of Kalbarri in June 1712. The experts reckon there were up to sixty survivors. Sixty Dutch seamen brimming with semen. Imagine the consequences once they joined our local mobs. From then on, the fortunes of the next generation of my people and those who followed took a turn for the better.'

Then he sat in the chair facing us, stretched out, carefully crossed his legs, placed the picture on the floor beside him and clasped his hands behind his head. 'Or worse, depending on your point of view. Judge for yourselves. You're looking at a prime example, no less.'

He gazed at us in turn, his eyebrows raised, his eyes piercing. 'No need to pass judgement till you get to know me better, my brothers and sisters. What I'm saying, by way of introduction, is both my parents were part-Aboriginal and part-Dutch from way back. I used to wonder what that made me. I was never really sure. That is, until I came across Cyril Volkov. Any of you heard of him?'

There was an extended awkward silence. 'Anyone? Anyone at all?'

'I can't say I have, sir,' Sanjeev eventually said.

'You haven't missed much, but you're going to get to know him… and never mind the "sir", Sanjeev—unlike Price Philip I haven't been offered a knighthood yet. You'll discover Cyril was an anthropologist in the 1920s to give you nightmares. An ideological proponent of the White Australia Policy. Of course you've heard of that or you wouldn't be here.'

He looked inquiringly around us.

'Good. Anyway, I read his expert opinion on the subject of mixed bloods and he enlightened me. Quick smart.'

He rocked a long way back in his chair and reached for the inbuilt bookshelf lining the clinker-brick wall behind him. 'According to him, I'd have been classified as a quadroon. Or

maybe an octoroon. But when you calculate the proportions, do you *square* the denominator? Not that my fractions are in any way vulgar. Pint for pint, I'm a pure-blood on both sides of the equation.'

He ran his finger along the spines of the books and pulled out a slim volume before resettling his chair. He flicked it open—his bookmark, I noticed, was a Qantas boarding pass—then held the book up to the sunlight pouring in through the window behind him to read from it. I saw the title in faded gold on the battered cover: *The Australian Aborigine: a Study in Assimilation*.

'You'll all appreciate this. It's a paragraph from Volkov's thesis for his doctorate regarding the definitions of caste. The first time I read it I was ready to strangle the bastard, except that he was already dead. Nowadays it's part of the ammunition us blackfellas use. It's our heavy artillery when we want to score a point about our mutual history. It's our stud book, complete with the formula for breeding out the black.'

He began to read with slow deliberation, 'Definitions of caste and the determination of aboriginality or otherwise may be derived from the inverted family tree. By counting backwards through the parentage the degree to which a person is removed from the full-blood may be calculated. For each of two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents and so on, count the proportions of black or white, particularly of course where that person is already a half-blood. The fractions then become a matter of simple addition. The term half-caste or half-blood implies two parents who are full-blood, one black and the other white. Quadroon indicates one full-blood and one half-blood parent hence a quarter-blood, while octoroon results from a full-blood and a quadron, or one part in eight.'

He looked up from the page and clicked his tongue.

'Quadroon spelled with a missing "o". I like that. A slip of the tongue from an educated whitefella.' He looked at Sanjeev. 'Or educated Indian, of course.' He hesitated. 'Or Sri Lankan, perhaps?'

'Malaysian actually. From Langkawi.'

'Right. Malaysian. Langkawi. A beautiful island. Named after the brahminy kite, I understand—the sea eagle. One of our Malgana tribal totems, as a matter of interest. But back to the missing "o". I don't expect to come across similar grammatical errors in any of your essays this term. If I do, prepare for a public roasting.'

He stood, walked across to the percolator and poured himself a coffee. Then he sat back down and read on. 'Complications arise higher up the tree when new terms are required. What term does one use if five-eighths of the great-grandparents are black so that the grandparents are quadroons and the parents are octoroons? Will the person then qualify as a quadroon or an octoroon in the strict sense, being less than a half-blood; and if not, are they to be classed as Aboriginal or white? The fraction considered the determinant between Aboriginal and white is critical and for fairness, it needs to be mathematically exact. As the generations pass,' he turned the page and murmured, 'and have they what! The mathematics will become more complex. If the fraction is below the half-blood, then degrees of skin colour may be considered, and the term half-blood used as a catchall. For example, a person of five-sixteenths with light skin might be classed as a quadroon and white while one with the same proportions who is dark-skinned may qualify as half-blood and aboriginal. The mathematics may become so complicated when we deal with sixteenths that the term aboriginal may be applied to full-bloods and greater than five-eighths only, with light half-bloods or quadroons no longer classified as blacks but whites.'

Clifford snapped the book shut and waved it in the air, the bookmark with its white kangaroo trapped in a red triangle jutting from the page. He gave a dry burst of laughter. 'With light half-bloods or quadroons no longer classified as blacks but whites! What do you make of that, Caleb? Sanjeev? Nikki? Any comments? Kristina? Sandy?'

Before anyone could reply, he went on, 'The formula for a blackfella evolving into a whitefella! You need to be another Einstein! Christ! We had enough trouble coming to terms with our extermi-bloody-*nation*, let alone our exterminology.'

Unsure how to react. I wondered what was coming next. It was our first tutorial with him and he was already taking us to the heart of the Black Lives Matter debate. I'd expected bitterness and there was bitterness, but to my mind, there was also a sardonic humour that offset his rancour.

I recognised this moment as the beginning of my education. *These* were among the things I needed to fully understand.

'Times were different then, weren't they?' red-haired Sandy suggested to him, her Irish accent evident. 'People acted on different principles.'

'What principles?' Clifford shot back. 'You'll be firing blanks if you follow that line of argument. The principle of having no principles? The principle that the end justifies the means? That might is right? Or *terra nullius* justifies invasion and massacre?'

Sandy paled. 'No. They thought they were acting for the best.'

'The best? On whose behalf? Their own? Or were they doing *us* a favour?'

'They believed the changes were inevitable. They were convinced it was just a matter of time.'

'Before what? Before us blackfellas died out? So they accelerated the process and turned a blind eye to the consequences? They assumed it was only a matter of time and

that gave them the foresight and the mandate to legislate the way they did and take the half-caste children away?'

He pointed at the gold-embossed name on the cover, rapping it with an emphatic forefinger. 'Only they were wrong. And Volkov here, he was one of the architects of the whitefella policy of assimilation. Assimilation my backside. Another word for annihilation. Turn the half-castes white while the full-bloods die out.' He looked enquiringly across at Sandy. 'Can you guess what I like to call him?'

'I have no idea.' Her voice quavered. She looked as though she'd swallowed a handful of ground glass.

'The mathe*mortician*. The mathemortician of Anthro-*no-apology*, with a formula for calculated genocide. We know he took his initial degree at Harvard before transferring to the ANU for his postgraduate studies. He would have learned their theory of the One Drop Rule there. It still applies in the States. One drop of black blood and if you're white you're black, not a darker shade of pale or one of the fifty shades of grey.'

He stared at her mercilessly, raising his eyebrows. 'Anything to add?'

When she didn't reply, he said, 'Looks like you've painted yourself into a corner, Sandy. Better hope you used quick-drying.'

Then he turned directly to me. I struggled to hold his gaze. 'Didn't the Nazis in Auschwitz-Birkenau render the Jewish inmates down and turn them into bars of soap before doing a Pontius Pilate and washing their hands of them? Wasn't that ethnic cleansing at its worst?' He reached for his mug and sipped his coffee. 'And didn't they make candles with whatever was left over in the vats?'

Shocked and cornered, I had no reply.

'Must have been thin candles,' he said, shaking his head. 'They didn't have much fat on them.'

Horror settled like a pool of molten lead deep in my gut. I wondered why he had directed his observations at me. *Was it my name? Did he think I was Jewish?*

'My God!' he went on, 'The things that so-called civilised human beings can own up to. White plus black equals black. The formulated logic of exclusion to preserve the imperilled white race and its culture from contamination. We all live behind the barricades and it saddens me. I find it inexcusable that it's taken so long for us to admit that we've all come through the blender and genetically every single one of us is as crazily mixed up as the next. If you go back far enough, we all have to be related.' He looked around us in mock horror. 'That means we could be having incestuous relationships if and when we get down to business, my brothers and sisters. We could be contravening the taboo.' Then he gave us a sudden, unexpectedly beatific smile, showing all his teeth. 'If you don't tell anyone, I certainly won't.'

There was another extended silence.

'Right there, on that note,' he he looked down at his watch, 'you'll be pleased to learn today's tutorial ends. Before you give a communal sigh of relief, let me explain. What I've thrown at you is the sort of argument you're going to come up against throughout this course, especially when we go out into the field and meet some of the Indigenous firebrands I've lined up for you—in their urban and country environments.

'You're going to feel at times as if you're facing a firing squad. Each embittered trigger-happy rifleman supercharged with emotion and armed with a verbal shotgun, will be sending you a scatter of pellets with what they consider rhyme and reason. You're going to have to learn to duck and weave, and avoid getting carried away… dead or alive, to complete the metaphor. You get the picture? You're going to have to sort the racist facts from the fiction. Steep yourselves in the history, in the truth. Be patient, perceptive and persistent—the

three "Ps". Get organised, in other words. Do the research and apply the appropriate logic.'

He leaned back and looked thoughtfully at each of us, 'Oh, and above all, record a "yes" for the Voice when the vote comes around later this year or next, but don't let me sway you one way or the other.'

He stood, picked up a sheaf of papers from his desk, walked to the door and opened it. He handed us each a stapled document of several pages as we filed out.

'Same time next week,' he said. 'This is a short story by Kate Chopin—*Désirée's Baby*, published in *Vogue* magazine way back in 1893. It's set before the American Civil War about a baby and a racial conflict between a plantation owner and his wife. Given what we've discussed today, I want an essay giving me your analysis of the story, with no limit on the number of words. Feel free to go overboard or keep it as short and succinct as you like. Whatever you do, don't bother coming to the tutorial without it. Good day to you, brothers and sisters all. Nice meeting you all.'

He shut the door behind him, leaving us on the landing bemused and at a loss for words.

Except for Sandy.

She shook her head, her afro-styled mass of red curls bobbing and her green eyes fiery. 'What have I got myself into?' she asked, her lilting Irish accent embellishing her outrage. 'Analyse a *short story* for starters? I didn't enrol in another English Literature course. Did any of you?' When no one replied, she hissed, 'I've already *done* that, damn it!' as she stormed away.

I spent several hours on two successive nights the following week analysing the story.

Set among wealthy French Creole cotton plantations in

Louisiana before the civil war, it concerned the 'beautiful, gentle, affectionate and sincere' Désirée, a young girl abandoned on the successful Valmondé plantation. Despite her unknown origins, she was adopted by the owners. When she turned eighteen, despite her anonymity, she married Armand Aubigny, a young nobleman with a 'dark, handsome face', heir to the neighbouring L'Abri plantation.

She soon became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. At first, Armand was 'the proudest father in the parish'. When the baby was about four months old, however, Désirée was horrified when she noticed the pigment in the baby's skin darkening. Everyone around her confirmed her worst fears, including the slaves on the plantation, who began taking a keen interest in the child.

Armand was outraged. He vented his anger on Désirée and his retinue of slaves so that she was driven to despair. Despite her insistence that she was white and not part black, Armand exiled her from the estate. She escaped into the neighbouring bayou with the baby and was never seen again.

Sometime later, while burning all her belongings, including her love letters to him that he'd saved, Armand came across a letter from his mother to his father expressing her relief that Armand had never discovered the mixed African heritage in her line.

Seeking to preempt what Clifford was looking for, I treated the story as an essay rather than a supremely ironic short story. I did my best to unpick the themes around racial prejudice, race and cultural practice, the structure of the Louisianan social hierarchy and the devastating effect that racial profiling can have on people, both those who judge and the victims judged by them. Not to mention that Armand, who already possessed his mother's letter, may in fact have known about his African descent and he was hiding it by blaming Désirée to avoid the humiliation of his possible exposure.

I wrote just under three pages for a total of 1260 words. I spent a great deal of head-scratching time composing it and was eventually only partly satisfied with the result.

The following Friday, we filed into Clifford's office once again. This time he had a plate of lamingtons beside the coffee percolator and we helped ourselves, before handing him our essays and settling into our places.

'Right,' he said. 'It's good to see you all. So let's see how you went. Be prepared to defend your line of argument.'

He shuffled through the papers and then withdrew a single sheet with a look of surprise. There was one line typed on it, a sentence comprising three words.

I have never forgotten what happened next.

'Sandy,' he said. 'What on earth is this?'

'Read it. You did say there was no limit either way on the number of words.'

He looked down. '*Nganuralu nguba gutiya*,' he read, then gave a sudden bark of laughter. 'Brilliant! We are all of one blood, written in my Malgana language. Nicely done.'

He gazed at her, slowly nodding his approval. 'That was a smart move, sister, given the context of the story and the last tutorial. But it was a risky one. In matters so sensitive, when you think you're walking on water, you may instead be skating on thin ice and must tread very carefully to avoid falling through it and drowning.'