

Jack's Island



North Point

Bathurst Lighthouse

school

home

Roads Board jetty

Garden Lake

pub

Thomson Bay

Oliver Hill
(the big guns)

army jetty

Crackpot Pete's

Government House Lake

Kingstown Barracks

aerodrome

Henrietta Rocks

West End

Fish Hook Bay

The Ferry Ride

‘Struth!’ I said as the ferry rose up on the swell, hung for a moment on the crest of a wave and then dropped into the dark trough. It crashed down with a gut-wrenching thud. The wooden planks shuddered, threatening to shake the old boat apart. The next wave loomed huge and dark over us. I gripped the rail until my fingers turned white.

The *Valkyrie*, Captain Eric Jansen’s battered flat-bottomed ferry, felt small as it cleared the heads and chugged headlong through the enormous waves towards the island.

‘We’ll never get there at this rate. It’s five-thirty already,’ grumbled Mr Purvis, Dad’s workmate. ‘If we don’t show on time we won’t get paid.’

Not get paid? Why was he worrying about not getting paid when we’d be lucky to even survive the journey? He made it sound worse than drowning. Maybe for him it was. The Great Depression had that effect. It was supposed to have ended years before, but the lost, haunted look in our

fathers' eyes from those terrible days had never really left them. They were always going on about how dreadful it had been and all the hardships they'd experienced. And now none of them dared miss a day's work, even at only five miserable bob a day labouring at building the new island aerodrome.

The ferry gave another, even more violent, shudder and this time it rolled so steeply on its side I thought it was about to capsize.

'Rob, look at the sea,' my mother groaned wretchedly to Dad.

'Looks like it might be easing off a little,' he said unconvincingly as the ferry crashed once more into a deep trough.

Every plank trembled sickeningly. Huge whitecaps whipped the sea all the way to the horizon and thunderclaps stunned the black sky. Mum turned an even deeper shade of green. She hated the crossing and went through hell every time.

From the wheelhouse window Captain Jansen yelled over the roaring wind. 'We'll be running late this morning. It's a little rough but I've seen worse. Much worse.'

That amazed me. How could anything be worse than this?

Most people called the captain Red Eric. I thought it was because of the colour of his hair until Dad told me it was an ironic nickname because Captain Jansen hated Reds — people with commo, lefty politics. He hated commos so much he

once threw a new crew member overboard when the man said he liked 'Uncle Joe Stalin'. Luckily the man could swim and didn't drown, otherwise Red Eric would've been in real trouble. But not as much trouble as the bloke in the water, come to think of it. As it was, Constable Campbell locked Red Eric up overnight.

The huge swell continued rolling in. The small ferry slid down each of the waves and bucked in the troughs like a bronco in a Saturday afternoon Hopalong Cassidy flick, and every few minutes water mixed with vomit surged across the deck and drenched our feet.

Pretty soon just about everyone onboard was leaning over the rail chundering like sick dogs. Everyone except me, of course. I stood looking heroic, holding the rail, the sea spray in my face. I liked to think the blood of John Paul Jones, the founder of the US Navy, swirled through my veins. After all, our names were the same. The only difference I could work out, except for the Paul part, was that he was American and I wasn't. And he started the American navy, but I bet I could've too, if I'd been old enough, and if I'd actually wanted to.

John Jones, that's my name, though everyone calls me Jack. Or 'that Jones brat', which is a bit unfair. I'm not that bad — I just get caught a lot.

The wobbly old engine chug-chug-chugged along and spewed thick, oily diesel fumes into the cabin. Dad had his

right arm around Mum's shoulders while she shook and heaved her heart out, and in his left arm he held Bette, my new sister. Bette started crying again. The little horror never seemed to shut up, even when she wasn't wet and cold like the rest of us.

Patricia, my other sister, was curled up in a corner, whimpering about the cold. 'Where's Churley Temple?' she moaned.

I didn't have the heart to tell her that her rag doll had drowned, like the rest of us were probably going to.

The howling wind and waves finally slackened as we reached Thomson Bay and pulled alongside the old grey jetty. Though completely drenched and frozen blue, I'd survived the crossing. And even more surprising, so had my mum, though she looked as though she'd become a zombie and joined the undead.

Up the Hill to Work

As soon as the boat moored, Dad and the other half-dozen road workers on board immediately jumped across the gap, rushed along the jetty and up the hill to the bikes they'd propped up against the wall of the pilot boat shed on Friday night. The bikes were still there, of course. Nobody ever stole anything on the island. Not that the rickety old bikes were worth pinching. I wouldn't have given you two bob for Dad's rusty old bike. Not that I ever had two bob.

As they hurried away I couldn't help noticing that all the men were dressed the same, like they'd bought their clothes at the same charity store. Old suit coats, army-salvage boots left over from the Great War, battered felt hats pulled low over their ears and, this morning, their collars turned up against the chill. Nobody said much. They had nothing but hard, backbreaking work to look forward to all day.

Not that us kids were much better off.

'Jack, quick, it's almost the bell,' called Bess.

Bess Merson went to our school but she was much older. She sometimes acted as the class monitor and helped Mr Palmer with the first graders.

'Mrs Jones, come with me and I'll get the kettle straight on,' I heard Mrs Carter say as we jumped across the juddering gap between the jetty and the boat. She helped Mum ashore and took her home for a cuppa. Mum sure needed some help as her legs were wobbling like a newborn foal's. Patricia followed on behind, crying pitifully for her dead doll.

It might've been tea Mrs Carter had in the pot but by this time in the war we were seriously rationed, so it might've been only a cup of oily black chicory essence or something equally disgusting. Perhaps even homemade tea brewed up from peppermint tree leaves. It smelled all right but tasted nothing like tea, or peppermints. More like constipation medicine, I reckoned.

People on the island looked after one another. They gossiped all the time but if anyone needed help they'd drop everything and rally round. That's what they called it — rallying round. More than once I'd seen Mum give away all her pin money to Mrs Carter or Mrs Evans when their husbands lost their wages gambling on a Friday night. I remember thinking Mum could've bought an awful lot of pins with the pin money she always seemed to be giving away. Though I still hadn't worked out why she'd ever want an awful lot of pins.

Introducing Mr Palmer

Bess and I ran towards the schoolhouse. Being late always meant we'd get at least two cuts, and probably six if old man Palmer was in a bad mood. He'd started calling the roll by the time I scurried into my chair.

'Carter? Miss Carter? Edwards? Miss Hurley? Jones?' He sounded as if he resented having to even say our names, especially mine. He spat them out like watermelon seeds.

'Jones, you are late,' he said without looking up from his register. As if I didn't know. But why pick on me? Bess was just as late.

Because we were at war, lots of old teachers had been brought back from retirement to replace the regular teachers who'd joined the army. Mr Palmer was one of them, and didn't we curse Adolf Hitler for that. Standing there facing us, he looked like he'd prefer being shot at by Germans. We would've preferred him being shot at by Germans too. It was a pity they'd been such lousy shots the first time round in 1917.

'Jones?' He glared at me over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses. His left eye twitched. It looked like he was having one of his days. Most of the time he wasn't too bad but sometimes he'd be overwhelmed by terrible black moods. I think sometimes he really did believe he was back in the trenches of the Great War. He had a limp that he said was from a war wound, but I reckoned it was probably self-inflicted. I wouldn't have put it past him.

'Sir?' Why did he always pick on me?

'Come out the front and begin with what you learned on the weekend. You should have "The Highwayman" word perfect by now.'

That's the sort of thing we had to do in his class — learn great long passages of boring poems off by heart. They had to be word perfect or we'd score one whack for every word wrong.

I turned and faced the class. "The highwayman come riding ..." I began.

Swish, whack! His cane burned the back of my cold, damp legs. I winced but didn't cry out. That just encouraged him.

'*Came,*' he snarled.

'The highwayman man *came* riding, up to the inn door.'

Whack!

'*Old* inn door.'

Whack, whack, whack! And so on until Bess, the highwayman's floozy, shoots herself in the chest and the redcoats shoot him and he 'lay in his blood in the railway, with the bunch of lace at his throat'. Good. At long last. Not soon enough.

Whack!

'*Highway*, boy, not *railway*.'

Why couldn't they have been shot two pages earlier? They could've saved the back of my legs a lot of grief. By crikey, those cuts stung. And Mum was going to give me hell when I got home for not knowing my poem well enough. I was going to get bread and a smear of dripping for tea tonight. And then I'd probably get another whack for being disrespectful to my 'elders and betters' when my dad got home.

Introducing Dafty

From our classroom, if we looked through the windows towards the air-raid trenches — the ones we had to dig at the edge of the playground the first summer we arrived on the island — we could just see the sea. It made it hard to concentrate. All we wanted to do was get down to the ocean. With Palmer droning on and on about some sorry Greek bloke wandering all over the miserable Mediterranean, it became impossible.

Banjo, my best mate, decided he needed to get outside. His real name is Andrew, Andrew Paterson, just like Banjo Paterson the poet. He reckoned he was related. I reckoned he had more chance of being related to King Kong.

‘Sir?’ Banjo put his hand in the air.

‘Paterson?’

‘Sir, can I go to the dunny?’

He shouldn’t have grinned when he said it. You would’ve thought he’d announced Admiral Yamamoto was his all-time

hero and he was off to enlist in the Jap navy. All hell broke loose. Palmer, the rotten old maggot, instantly went berserk. His eye twitched and he lurched across the room, knocking into the desks and swinging his cane like a Viking battleaxe.

‘Don’t you talk to me in that tone of voice, Paterson. I’ll teach you to show some respect, boy.’ He drew back his cane and let fly, catching Banjo across the back. He lashed out two more times. The third blow struck Banjo’s face as he turned away, hitting his nose. Blood gushed out. Banjo tripped over, his legs caught in his upturned seat. He couldn’t get away. He pulled himself into a ball and covered his head, but he didn’t cry out. He didn’t make a sound.

Palmer stopped as suddenly as he’d started, as if he’d just realised what he was doing. He seemed slightly confused.

He put his hand to his temple. ‘Yes, you can go outside. Go to the tank and clean up your face. Jones, you go with him.’ Then he turned to the class, ignoring us. ‘Class, the twelve times table.’

Banjo wouldn’t cry, not in front of the rest of the kids. Not in front of anybody. I only ever saw him cry once. But he must’ve hurt like hell. Two thin red stripes had appeared on the back of his white shirt. We sat in the shade of the water tank and I took out my hanky, wet it and cleaned him up as best I could. The class was droning away inside.

‘Six twelves are seventy-two, seven twelves are ...’

Then we saw Dafty. Dressed as usual in his ragged clothes and with hair like mouldy hay, he looked just like I imagined Tim, the ostler in 'The Highwayman' — which is funny because Dafty's real name is Tim, Timothy Small. He sat under the shade of the Moreton Bay Fig tree at the edge of the schoolyard playing with his chook. Lassie, he called it, as if it were a collie dog and not a scraggy, mangy, bantam rooster.

Dafty sang the same four lines of the song he always sang over and over whenever he saw Banjo. 'Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda, you'll come a waltzing Matilda with me ...' I don't think he knew any more words.

Dafty wasn't bright enough to go to school, even though he really wanted to. I think he would've given anything to be allowed in the classroom with the other kids. Instead he'd wander all over the island with Lassie, exploring or swimming until home time, and then he'd rush back to meet us at school. He'd collect lizards and little snakes and bird feathers and eggs and strange-shaped rocks, and things washed up by the sea, and brightly coloured wildflowers. He hardly kept anything for himself but gave his treasures away to anyone he liked that day.

He stood up and wandered over. 'Hello, Banjo. Hello, Jack,' he said in the slow and careful way he always spoke. 'What's happened to you? Why you bleeding, Banjo? Did

he hurt you, Banjo? Did the teacher hurt you? Why did the teacher hurt you, Banjo?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'I've got for you a Christmas present.' He always called them that, even in July. 'It's a army bomb for you, Banjo. Look.' He opened up a bit of dirty cloth and held out a real live hand grenade. 'I got it for you specially. My bestest friend.'

'Holy hell!' I cried. 'Dafty, do you know what that is? It's *dangerous*. It's a bloody grenade.'

'Don't you want it then, Banjo?' asked Dafty. He frowned at me, genuinely hurt at my reaction.

Banjo instantly forgot his pain. 'Yes, Dafty, I do want your Christmas present. Don't listen to Jack. I want it very much. Thank you.' He reached out for the grenade. 'You mustn't tell anyone about this, you hear, Dafty? It's got to be our secret. Not where you got it from or anything. Do you understand? It's a special secret.'

'Yes, Banjo, but Lassie knows. Why did he hurt you, Banjo?'

Simple kids usually get bullied, but there was something so childlike and trusting about Dafty that people hardly ever teased him. Just about every kid in the school looked out for him. When a new kid called Nobby laughed at Dafty once, Banjo beat the living daylights out of him. Nobby never laughed at Dafty again. In fact, he was pretty careful what he laughed at at all from then on.

Kids always swapped their sandwiches for one of Dafty's Christmas presents. The night I told my dad I'd swapped a beetroot sandwich for one of Dafty's funny-shaped rocks, he laughed so hard he nearly choked. Even Patricia laughed, my little sister who was too young to go to school and hardly understood.

'Who's the daft one? Jack or Dafty?' Dad had cackled like a broody chook. 'You wait till I tell Merv Purvis tomorrow. He'll think it's such a good joke he'll probably give himself a hernia.' Dad shook his head in disbelief.

The Grenade

As the school bell rang the class rushed out into the yard, filling it with noise and laughter.

Forgetting the grenade, Dafty went off to deliver another present, this time a little yellow flower, to Bess Merson. Lassie scratched along behind him, pecking at insects and crumbs.

'I think we'd better get out of here,' said Banjo. 'The last thing we need is for Palmer to catch us with the grenade.'

He was right. We'd be under one of those unmarked gravestones in the cemetery quick enough if he did. Banjo carefully put the hand grenade in his satchel and we headed away from the settlement. For once in our lives we pedalled our bikes very, very carefully.

'We'll chuck it over the cliffs at West End.' Banjo was full of good ideas. West End was nice and remote but it was also a long, long way to ride on a rough dirt track with an unexploded bomb in your schoolbag.