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BILLAROOBY was a small community on the Lachlan River, a few miles northwest of Wudgewunda in New South Wales, Australia. There was a one-teacher school but no shop, no post office, no electricity or telephone and no church, although there was a service every Sunday morning up at the MacAdamses' woolshed, which had been specially consecrated for that purpose. Ironically, if it hadn't been for the guarantee of that regular service, it is very possible that Dad would not have bought his sixty-five acres in Billaroooby, and we Armstrongs would have gone elsewhere and remained the nice, ordinary, country family that Mum always insisted we were.

When we settled down there in the spring of 1942, my sister, Heather, was twelve, and I had just turned eleven. Heather was named that because they could tell right from the start that she was tough, like the plant, but my name, Lindsay, was my grandmother's maiden name, and Dad called me that in one of his many attempts, mostly futile, to appease Granddad.

Our house was on the edge of a plateau above the river flats on which Dad grew his vegetables. It had verandahs on three sides and a faded red roof of galvanized iron. The house was very old and dilapidated but made out of wattle and daub, which, next to the rare magnificence of a stone house like the MacAdamses', was the strongest and coolest form of construction around. There was a washroom, and a kitchen tank from which water ran right into the house. The main drawback was the floor. It wasn't concrete, or boards like other houses we had lived in, just beaten red earth. Mum had put down layers of newspaper and spread her beautiful carpets, but one night I had overheard a bitter argument.

"You seem pleased that we have gone down in the world," Mum had shouted.

"It's the price we have to pay," Dad replied.

"The price for what?" Mum's voice had risen to a scream.

In the yard, which Mum had planted with all the flowers she liked best back at River Hall, our rather more grand home in Suffolk, England, there was a Lombardy poplar, a ragged privet hedge, and a huge, shady pepper tree.

I remember only too well the day it all started. I was in the hammock, daydreaming away, and Mum approached from the house, talking to herself.

"My God, my God, this heat, I can't stand it. I won't put up with it. I won't. We're all going to die. I know we're going to die."

She sloshed a bowl of dishwater over the petunia right by me and, for the thousandth time, sighed for the misty green of England. Mum was always going on about the heat, and Australia, and worse. She took a look down to the flats, let the bowl fall to the gravel, and then slowly pulled her dress off over her head. I stared at the dimpled whiteness of her shoulders and then guiltily looked elsewhere.

"Jack, Jack, Jack, JACK!" she cried out in exasperation.

I shrank back into the hammock, and the movement caught her eye. Startled, she clutched the dress to the front of her petticoat.

"You were supposed to be down helping your father. What a boy you are! He'll have a piece of you." Her voice was sharp.

I said nothing, and Mum tipped me out of the hammock.

"Get a move on. And don't let the flies sit on you like that."

I waved off the flies and headed for the house. Mum gave me a push as I went by. Mum hardly ever cuffed me, but she had a push like a shove.

"You can come down with me, but I'm sick of you hiding behind my skirts. Do your hair," she called after me.

I stuck my head into the basin in the washroom and then pushed my wet hair back with my hands. Mum was always critical of my hair, which was badly cut (she cut it) and ash blond, a colour that no one else in our family had ever had. Sometimes grown-ups called me Snowy, which I hated but mostly let pass. As the water dripped down over my face, I inspected my eyes in the mirror.

There was no doubt where their colour came from. Down from the sky, and blue as a blind man's.

"No, I'm reading." I heard Heather say petulantly from her room. "Dad won't mind." Dad was always letting Heather off work in the fields. He would have minded about the book she was reading, however. It was *Gone with the Wind*. I don't know where she had got it. Certainly not from our shelf of wholesome Everyman's Classics.

"You'll miss Auntie Annabel's tea."

"Mum, it's only the Douglasses."

"But it's so we can all meet Brown."

"Mum, will you stop that."

I heard Heather slap the page to indicate she thought the conversation had gone on long enough. Mum's eyes caught mine. Brown had been badly wounded in the war, and every Sunday up in the woolshed, since we had come to Billaroooby, there were prayers for his full recovery. He had been in the Repatriation Hospital in Sydney but had arrived home unexpectedly two days before. The doctors had been giving him the tomtits, said Auntie Annabel, and he had done a flit. He was now fixed up in his room down on the flats at the dairy, where he lived with his father, Slow George Douglass, and Auntie Annabel, his father's unmarried sister. Heather was always very blasé – it wasn't even an act – but I was looking forward to meeting Brown almost as much as Mum.

Mum gave up on Heather. "Get some exercise. Those eggs had better be collected before I come back."

Heather stuck her tongue out at me as I went by her door, so I slammed it in her face. Heather and I put up with each other, but I cannot say we had managed friendship. Friendship was not Heather's style. She was big for her age, and took physical advantage of it. "You little squirt" was her favourite epithet for me, and it was often accompanied by a slap. It was said that we had the same face, but I couldn't see it, of course. For one thing, she wore round glasses with black wire frames, and she had ten times as much hair, which she did in plaits and ribbons. Her voice had a horrible sibillance from her growing up too fast.

The mantelpiece clock, and then the grandfather clock, chimed four. "Late," said Mum from in front of the full-length mirror. She finished buttoning up her grey cotton work smock and began stroking her hair with the silver brush. Her hair was long and lustrous and a beautiful auburn colour.

Mum's name was Lillian. Mr MacAdams had described her as "an English rose trapped in the southern sun." Since arriving in Australia she had developed tiny freckles on her face. Every time we had moved further west and the sun grew hotter and the air drier and dustier, Mum cried a little about the loss of her peaches-and-cream complexion. Her freckles eventually grew so large they became a tan, and the darker colour actually went very well with her hair and her large hazel eyes. I knew she had secretly come to like the change, but it was not something that she would ever allow to Dad.

She dropped the photograph of Brown into her handbag and again caught my eye. Auntie Annabel had been up for tea the previous week and had accidentally left the photograph behind. Now Mum was regretfully returning it. "Real striker in his uniform, ain't he?" Auntie Annabel had said when she saw the effect it had on Mum.

"I'll be a few more minutes." Mum pushed her handbag to one side and began fiddling with her hat. "Why don't you wait for me down in the orchard?"

I ran down past the lavatory (or dunny, as they called it in those parts), which was thirty yards below the house, to the bottom of the hill and climbed the mulberry tree. From the top there was a fine view in every direction. Dad's vegetable crops – peas, beans, beets, carrots, tomatoes, corn and pumpkins, even cucumbers and lettuces – stretched in lush, glistening rows from the Douglasses' dairy fence all the way to the Lachlan, which flowed by to the west. Their outlines were softened by a covering of beautiful blue haze, and I always yearned to walk in them. "What is beyond those hills?" I asked one day when Mr Buchanan, our schoolteacher, came round to see Dad, and he replied, "The great emptiness – and that includes Dubbo." He laughed, and it was good for Mum to hear him laugh about it because she was frightened by Billaroooy. To

her it was like the end of the line, the edge of nowhere. Dad had created an oasis down there by the river, but what if ...

“Jack, they have droughts all the time.”

“Not for years. There’s a different pattern now.”

“There was that big one in 1927–28. Slow George’s wife just up and left him.”

“The Lachlan never goes dry.”

We had all spent long hours in the fields. There was a fire in Dad’s head that kept him going from before dawn until after dusk, every day except Sunday. Mum had tried to keep up, but she had become exhausted with the effort. Dad had refused to get help, but then Mum had noticed an advertisement in the *Wudgewunda Star* for Landgirls – respectable, educated young ladies who were available for farm work as part of the war effort. It was a scheme being promoted by the Women’s Land Army and Auxiliary to make up for all the young men who had gone off to fight. Mum had persuaded Dad to apply for two of them, and since their arrival a week before, she had been very happy. At last she had time for the housework, her sewing, and a little neighbourhood visiting.

I could see the Landgirls now, their backs bent to their hoeing, way down by the river, and closer, at the pump, I could see Dad. I wasn’t looking forward to the encounter with him in the least, and was glad Mum would be there to protect me. I suppose that made him right about me being a “mother’s boy” and justified his scorn. But I didn’t know what to do about it.

Mum was coming at last and going for the flies with a fury. Over one arm she carried her tea dress, to change into after “a little light weeding,” which was all she ever intended to do now that the Landgirls had arrived. It was made of olive green Swiss voile with small white dots.

I suddenly was impatient to meet Brown, and gave a sigh as I saw that Mum was going to go into the lavatory before she joined me in the orchard.

It was at that instant that life in Billaroooby took a momentous turn. As I watched her hurry down the path to the burst of rocks and the acacia tree where the dunny was, I had a feeling that someone else was watching her too. And checking quickly I found

that somebody was. Not fifty yards away, in the eroded gully that ran from the orchard all the way to the river, a man was standing. He had on a red shirt, red trousers, and a white cap. I couldn't be sure but it seemed that there was a long scar running down one side of his face. And he was grinning. His eyes left Mum and settled on me, up there in the tree. Then he beckoned me with a wave of his arm.

"Mum, there's a Chink," I yelled. My first thought was that it was one of the Chinese gardeners who irrigated their plots along the river on the other side of Wudgewunda. But what was he doing so far from home?

Mum heard my voice, and her eyes searched for me in the orchard. I waved and pointed down the gully, but she didn't see me.

"Chinaman," I yelled. "Chink" was rude.

"Wait," she called. She shooed the flies out of the dunny with her whisk and then closed the door. I looked back to the gully, but he was gone. Could I have imagined it? I let out a cry of disappointment. But our eyes had met. He had beckoned me. Then I saw a flash of red farther down toward the river. There he was, moving fast, clambering over the Pirates' Log. He dropped down the other side, once more out of sight.

"Mum," I yelled again. My heart was pounding and I almost ran after him then and there.

"I'm sure you imagined the whole thing," she said as we hurried along the path between the irrigation channels. Everywhere crickets were chirping. Two Wanderer butterflies flew by, stuck together. Myriads of insects swarmed in the humid air. A frog plopped into the water. "Oh, these flies."

I hated it when I was told that I imagined things, and in my anger, made a great leap across the channel. "Mum, I'll prove it to you."

"Your father's waiting."

"I'll just go by the river and look," I shouted, running off between the beans. "I'll be at the pump at the same time as you."

“Lindsay!” Mum made one last desperate attempt to call me back. But I was well off. “Don’t you try to cross that river.” Her voice was almost lost in the hot breeze.

2

MUM WAS RIGHT ENOUGH to warn me. The Lachlan, early that summer, was a broad, muddy expanse that she knew I had not fully accepted was impossible for me to cross. It flowed deep and swift between its steep banks and was full of snags that created dangerous eddies and whirlpools. There were often places where fallen trees had stilled the river into large pools, and some of these could be swum in, but even these were perilous. They were bottomless and dark and concealed the fearsome Bunyip, a monster of ancient Australian legend, which loved to lurk in such opaque places, always ready to pounce on unwary passers-by and careless swimmers, particularly young tenderfeet like me. Well, that was the scare story. At school, Mr Buchanan, who couldn't swim a stroke, was always lecturing us on the dangers.

As I leaped along the cow trails threading their way up and down the bank and saw no sign of the man in red, I began to suspect that somehow he had managed to do what I could not – cross the river – and when I reached the ford, which was just beyond Dad's pump, at the southwest corner of our farm, I was sure of it. I waded in. The current was swirling around my knees before I stopped and moved back a little. It would be Christmas before it was low enough to cross there. "Dry up, dry up," I cried, and then immediately felt guilty, for it was one of Mum's greatest worries that the river would go on us.

I stood still, enjoying the cool of the water on my bare legs and the shade of the red river gums. The steady chug of the pump came from across the flats, and I sighed. Mum would be just about there by now.

The second I started for the pump, the scarred face of the man in the gully loomed large in my head. Maybe he hadn't crossed at all.

He might have gone along the bank above the ford. It was wilder territory up there, territory I had yet to explore. I sniffed the air. Fox. It would just take a minute and then I would weed the beets. If I could confirm that a Chinaman had been nosing around our property, Dad might not mind that I was late.

I hadn't gone twenty yards before I knew that I was right. There were brambles beaten down, and a patch of nettles that he had walked straight through. I reached a stand of silky oaks, thickly infested with yellow-belly spiders, and found even better evidence, for someone had cleared a path through the oaks by rolling up the webs with a stick and scraping the spiders off onto the tree trunks. I could see, discarded on the other side of the trees, the stick that it had been done with. Dislodged spiders still struggled to free themselves from the trap of their own silvery webbing.

When I picked up the stick, it cast a spell on me.

I found myself on a bend in the river where the bank flattened out and the sun shone brightly. After the gloom of the infested silky oaks, it seemed like an open parkland. I was in the midst of a spacious grove of river gums of enormous girth and height. The trees stood grandly and at ease, elderly survivors that had long since carved out generous areas for themselves. The outer bark hung in long, tattered strips, and beneath, their trunks were fresh and smooth, except for some bulbous growths. The limbs were full of ample forks like armchairs waiting to be sat in.

There was something peculiar about the joy in those beautiful pale trees, a strangeness in the whisper of the leaves. Then I thought about how free they were and how wonderful it would be to be a tree, with 360-degree vision and, unlike our family, a permanent place in the world. I put down the Chinaman's stick, placed my arms around the nearest one, and closed my eyes.

Even as I sank into the cool caress of the trunk on my cheek, my head filled with the horrible memory of a cyst that had once been removed from the crook of my left arm. The cyst had grown and grown until it was as big as a hot water bottle and spread almost from shoulder to wrist. Mum treated it like a boil (our family was subject to boils when we first came to Australia), with poultices, but it went from red to purple, from hard to soft. It wasn't until it turned

yellow that I was taken many miles away, to a doctor in Cowra, which was the nearest town. He was angry that I hadn't been brought in sooner. "Might have to lose that arm." He called a fellow doctor and they removed the cyst that same morning.

I opened my eyes in fright and looked up. Right above me was one of the large pitted growths. In my imagination I saw the doctor cutting it open. There was a tray of knives, pus and blood were flowing down, the smell of chloroform filled the air. I backed away from the tree, shaking my head to get rid of everything, particularly the chloroform. I saw that I had dug my nails deeply into the soft, new bark.

I circled warily. There was freedom in that grove, but the freedom included some kind of dying. I decided to release the spiders from the stick.

As I watched the spiders crawl unsteadily away into the grass, I had the strange feeling once more that someone was watching. I looked around, and there, not twenty yards away, squatting on the broad trunk of a tree newly fallen into the river, was the man in red.

"Hey, who are you?"

I approached him slowly. He was smiling at me but did not move from his position. His elbows rested on his knees, and his hands were clasped under his chin. As I came to the edge of the water and looked up at him, he continued to smile in the friendliest way. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to take the next step and climb out along the trunk over the water to him. He reached out a hand, but I was perfectly capable of doing it myself.

A few seconds and I was standing in front of him. He looked up at me. He did indeed have a scar. A really bad one. It stretched from under his cap past his right eye and raggedly down his cheek to the corner of his mouth. It had only recently healed, and I could see where it had been stitched. His cheekbone was very red and there was a spot of dried blood. His skin was a light brown with a yellowy tinge, and he had an owl's beak of a nose. He was much too young to be one of the Chinamen.

"How do you do?" I said, suddenly remembering my manners.

I stuck out my hand and he shook it.

Still he said nothing. There was silence but for the chuggle of the river going by.

I thought he might be deaf and dumb, and then something in his eyes brought a realisation upon me with a rush: he couldn't speak English. I was overwhelmed with sympathy.

"Lindsay," I said loudly, jabbing myself a few times in the chest with my forefinger. "Lindsay."

"Ah!" He pointed to himself and said "Tadao."

He began speaking rapidly in a high-pitched voice and pointed across the river.

"You come from over there?"

He stood up and moved farther out along the trunk. He climbed through the tangle of branches and leaves until he was up to his knees in the swirling water.

"You can't cross here." I called. The river still rushed by, in a deep, dark channel at least twelve feet wide.

He began talking again, pointing to the water.

"Oh, I really wouldn't. The current is very strong. Can't you see?"

But suddenly, just as I was thinking I could start teaching him English, in he plunged. His cap came off and got caught on a branch. The current swept him several yards downstream, but he was a strong swimmer and very soon reached the far bank. He slipped in the mud, grabbed some of the thick bracken fern, and hauled himself to safety. Easier than it looked, he gestured. I suppressed a wild thought. I could swim but I couldn't possibly take the risk. In any case, my clothes would be soaked and Mum would be furious. He called out something to me and then clambered up the steep bank. At the top he gave a wave, and was then lost from sight.

"You lost your cap," I shouted. It was still there, in an eddy, swirling slowly round and round. I fished it out with a stick, rinsed it, and gave it an inspection. It was neatly embroidered with chrysanthemums, which I found very strange – a man having flowers on his cap. I sniffed it, and the sweet smell of greasy hair produced a strong feeling of connection with him. The man who had visited our farm was no longer a stranger to me.

"Come back," I cried into the empty air. "Oh, please come back."

Perhaps the loss of his cap was a punishment for having watched Mum go to the lavatory. Anyway, I had a trophy. I could prove to Dad that there had been an intruder on the flats and I had almost caught him.

I should have gone back to the farm right then, of course, but I didn't. Anything to delay that confrontation with Dad. I don't know quite at what point I decided to follow the man in red, Tadao, but I found myself running farther and farther along my side of the bank, convinced that somehow, I, too, would find a way to cross. And as if in answer to a prayer, around the very next bend, find a way I did.

It came in the form of a cable dipping low across the water. It was suspended from steel tripods, and from the end of the cable, on my side of the bank, hung a small cradle. I approached cautiously. Even as I considered the mechanism (it was simple enough), a voice came from above me. "Aha, a victim for my trap!"

It was Mr Kelly. As he descended the bank he buttoned up his low-hanging, baggy shorts, which didn't begin to cover his pendulous gut. He had a house on stilts, somewhere farther up the Lachlan, and he was the owner of Kelly's dump. He dealt in scrap. He was about fifty years old and very large. A curly underbrush of greying hair covered his entire torso, thickest of all where it grew down into his shorts. It spread across his shoulders and thinned out only when it reached his biceps.

I had seen Mr Kelly several times, but only as he drove furiously by in his old truck. Many years before, I had heard, he had killed another man in a drunken fight.

"Here, take a pew," he said in the most generous way, and before I could say anything, I had been swallowed up by his arms, his lap, and the rails of the cradle. His hairy body was wet with sweat and he had an overpowering, unwashed beery smell. He released the catch and we were off, swooping low over the water like kingfishers. The swirling surface rushed up towards us and I panicked for a moment, but as the forbidden far bank came gliding to our feet, the panic was replaced by a wicked thrill.

"You like my dandy contraption, my little matey?" He might have killed a man, but he always used jokey, elaborate language.

“Yes. Thank you.” I eased myself quickly out of his lap, but not quickly enough. He reached out and grabbed my arm.

“And which way would you be going, my young gallant?”

I pointed to the blue hills, now much closer and nowhere near so blue.

“I wouldn’t if I were you.”

“I’m older than I look.”

“You’re the Armstrong bleeder, aren’t you? What are you doing so far from home??

I was silent.

“Razor cut your tongue? Well, you tell your dad that this afternoon that friendly gentleman Pict named Bruce Kelly got you safe and sound across the Lachlan, warned you about the hills, and showed you, as a very special privilege, his pretty crop of domestic mustard.” Mr Kelly gestured, and I saw through the trees a field of spindly plants with pale yellow flowers.

Mr Kelly’s grip tightened on my arm and I grew more and more uncomfortable. It was partly my impatience to be off – the chance of catching up with the man in red was slipping further and further away – but more Mr Kelly himself. All that hair. His face. It was a big, round baby face, with grey stubble and little squinty eyes. I began to wonder if I had fallen into the clutches of the Bunyip himself.

“Mr Kelly, that’s me, of the Billaroooby Kellys, who have lived here longer than the MacAdamses and even longer than the fucking Douglasses. Two lovely wives left me, through no fault of mine. Sluts, the both of them.”

He took a long swallow from the bottle of beer he was carrying, and then offered it to me. I shook my head.

“Mr Kelly, that’s me. The man who killed a man.”

“That’s not something to boast about,” I found myself saying.

“Friendly little bugger, aren’t you.” He dug his fingers in a little more, bent down, and said, “Kill once, you can kill twice. What’s that in your hand?”

“My cap, sir.”

Mr Kelly let go of my arm, shoving me at the same time.

“Well, I’ll be fucked. *Your* cap!”

Somehow he knew it wasn't mine.

"How'd you get hold of it?" he demanded, suddenly threatening.

I put the cap behind my back and had the sense to say nothing.

"You'll find what they've got in those hills soon enough. See if I give a shit. My little sonny sir."

I could have quoted Mr Buchanan and told him that people who didn't give a shit quickly became boring old farts, but I just stood there mesmerized.

Mr Kelly took a Chesty Bond singlet hanging out of the back pocket of his shorts, wiped his red, sweaty forehead with it, then pulled it on. It was so filthy Mum would have been disgusted. I was disgusted.

"A boot in the arse is what you need."

His good mood returned and he twinkled down at me in a way that I would come to know well. He lunged forward, spun me round, and delivered the needed boot. Then he moved off toward his field of mustard without another glance at me.

I followed a tussocky track up a slope covered in thick brown grass. There were several yellow box trees and clusters of huge boulders with patches of pink lichen. Suddenly I gave a leap into the air as I realised that at last I was in the yearned-for rocky hills. My eyes drank in this new world, so different from the river flats and the soft soils of Dad's irrigated fields. There came a brief pang of guilt and I looked back. In the distance was our farmhouse on the edge of the plateau, and closer by was Mr Kelly's head and shoulders as he made his way through his yellow mustard field. He was heading for a tin-roofed shack.

A flock of chattering lorikeets skittered overhead. Their flash of red and purple in the sunlight was a good omen. It was a day for adventure, whether I caught up with the man in red or not. I turned away from the sight of Mr Kelly and began to run.

The track wound upward. I flushed a hare out of a clump of grass and it bounded splendidly off. There was no mistaking it for a lowly rabbit. Overhead soared a broad-tailed hawk. The boulders gave way to open grassland, and sheep grazing peacefully on the slopes gave puzzled looks as I loped by. I found myself drawn to the

horizon, where an outcrop of rocks, crowned by graceful kurrajong trees, thrust into the sky like the ruins of a mediaeval keep. That's what I would do, I decided: climb that outcrop, have a last look for the man in red, and then head back for the farm and the weeding.

But it wasn't easy. Long before I reached the outcrop, the track went into a dip and merged with a freshly graded road coming from the other direction. Almost immediately there was a cattle grid and a fence to which a metal sign was wired. On it was stencilled:

GOVERNMENT PROPERTY
KEEP OUT
GUARDS HAVE ORDERS TO SHOOT
ANYONE PROCEEDING WITHOUT
AUTHORITY BEYOND THIS POINT.

Australian Military Force

If I had obeyed that sign, everything might have turned out very differently for our family in Billaroo. As it was, one of Mr Buchanan's sayings came to my mind: "Take no chances, you miss a lot of choices." I looked in every direction, found the road deserted, and took a chance.

I crossed the cattle grid, veered off to the right, and was soon high in the jumble of rocks. There were flannel flowers and dog rose growing amongst them. My run became a scramble, and I fleetingly worried about pythons and bandy bandys, spitting rats and rat wallabies. I slipped and scraped my knee, but nothing stopped my blind rush upward.

"Ah!" Below me was an open plain. The afternoon sun bathed it in a brazen light and I shaded my eyes to get a better view.

I knew at once what it was.

There were neat rows of brand-new bungalows, dark green, with galvanized iron roofs, glittering like salt in the sunlight. A large Fibro building, with a huge red cross painted on its roof, glowed white. Other buildings were scattered about. Ploughed and harrowed ground was all ready for planting. An area closed off with wire netting had several chooks pecking in it. An Australian flag

hung limply in the windless air, and enclosing everything in the shape of an immense circle were three concentric fences of tangled barbed wire, with tall towers at intervals around the perimeter. Men with rifles stood in little cabins at the top. The circle was divided into four sections by barbed wire lined roads, which formed a cross. One road was covered in this grass, the other with tar, which was blistered and bubbling, black in the heat.

It was a prisoner-of-war camp. Somewhere in the back of my head I remembered Mr Buchanan passing a remark about one being built, but it had been of no interest to me and I had forgotten. Now as I heard a whistle blow and saw a line of men appear from behind one of the huts, I realised who it was that I had been following. These men were dressed in red clothes and they were behind heavy barbed wire because they were Japanese, the scourge of the Pacific. The man I had followed was no Chinese gardener but a Japanese prisoner who had escaped.

I shrank back into the rocks. For the first time I felt that I had come too far from home, and I looked around in dread, almost expecting the escaped man to be behind me.

"Japs," I whispered. "Japs are worse than Hitler." I rose to flee. I would never come here again.

I took one last look at the camp, so close below. The Japanese were now running round and round their exercise yard at a fast pace. Two more of them had appeared, one swinging a bat, the other tossing a ball up into the air. I saw that the yard had been marked out for softball. They shouldn't let Japs play games, I thought.

I began to wonder. Why were there not soldiers out looking for the man in red, and why had he been moving back toward the camp?

I was not prepared for what happened next. A black horse came into view from the north, galloping fast. As it came closer, I could see thick white foam oozing from its mouth. The rider was an old man in a uniform, his cap braided with red and gold. He held himself very stiffly, and his long nose was stuck up haughtily above a grey handlebar moustache. An officer. Maybe even a general or something equally important.

In the rocks thirty feet below me there was a sudden movement. A flash of red. It was the escaped prisoner. His face was turned to the right, toward the approaching horse and rider. He stood and then ran out into the open, waving a stick.

"Don't be crazy!" I cried out involuntarily.

The rider did not seem to see him coming until the last moment. The prisoner screamed something and threw a stone, which missed. He swung his stick, but the horse sheered away and quickly outdistanced him. The prisoner ran in pursuit. A great shout arose from the camp as the other Japanese saw what was happening and rushed to get a better view. They clung to the barbed wire and began a strange chip-choppy chant. From one of the towers came the sound of a rifle shot, and then another. A group of soldiers appeared from behind a long white building just outside the main gate of the camp and took a look. Some of them began running toward the rider, who shouted a command and then, wrenching his horse around, galloped back. As he did he drew a whip and raised it high. The prisoner swung at the horse again, and missed. The rider lashed him hard across the shoulders, causing him to stagger forward. The stick went flying, but the prisoner, instead of trying to retrieve it, threw his head back and gave a strange cackle. Then he stood to attention and stretched his arms out like Jesus Christ on the cross, as though daring the very worst. The rider charged, forcing his horse straight into him. There was another cut with the whip; the prisoner fell to the ground and lay motionless. Dust from the horse's hooves rose in the air. The rider steadied his horse, and then, leaning over in the saddle, gave the man two terrible cracks with the whip, back and forth, right across the face. He paused, and then gave a third one for good measure. I saw blood explode on the prisoner's cheek as clearly as if he were next to me, although he was a good forty yards away.

I had seen such a thing before. The exploding blood. "Granddad!" I gasped, and closed my eyes.

When I dared look again, the rider was cantering in the direction of the main gate, and the soldiers had reached the fallen man. They began hauling him roughly toward the camp. A whistle was blown, orders given, guards forced the other prisoners, silent now, back from the barbed wire.

I watched until the injured man was dragged through the gate and out of sight. Then I ran from the camp without another glance. The sun scorched my back, but still I felt covered in a clammy sweat and I stumbled twice, my legs almost jelly. Mr Buchanan was always telling us to watch out for the terrible things man does to his fellow man. I had just seen one of those things. The man with the whip had committed a most cruel act, and I felt sorry for the Japanese. I did not even want to think of him as a Japanese, and found myself wishing that I had climbed down from the outcrop and somehow given him his cap back.