

## Billy Watkins

The problem at Sullivan's Bay was that there was no fresh water. With more than 400 men, women and children in his charge, Lieutenant Governor Collins had wasted little time in ordering the *Ocean* to return to sail the Exiles to Van Diemen's Land.

Even when some of the men devised a solution by burying barrels in the sandy soil and letting water filter into them most of the settlers found it was drinkable only to survive. Billy could never get the salty taste out of his mouth.

"We'll be leaving soon enough," his Dad, Ronnie said, only six weeks after they arrived. "We can drink all the fresh water we like there."

Billy knew Van Diemen's Land was where the worst convicts were sent. In comparison, he knew his Dad's crime had been small and he'd traded time in gaol for the chance to start anew a world away. The plan worked well until Billy's mum died on the journey. The baby didn't survive either. Now it was just Billy and his dad. And the threat of Van Diemen's Land.

He took a bucket and walked to the edge of the ocean to dig up pipis. He knew the finger of land that was their settlement was bounded by ocean on both sides. Behind him was home. In front of him was a blankness. A bird dipped onto the water and let out a ripple of notes. He missed the throaty warble of the doves that roosted in the eaves of their boarding house in London. He missed the sparrows and the blackbirds and the pigeons and the crows. He missed his mum. And even though Agnes lived for only a few minutes he missed his sister.

His eyes sought out the land across the bay away from home. He wondered if it were true about the savages with spears and skin so dark a man could mistake them for a burnt out tree stump. Curls of smoke rose between the darkness of the trees.

"Burning again. They've got a habit of setting fire to everything," his Dad said, joining him.

"There must be good water over that side. To keep them there."

"Maybe, but that's where the savages live. And we don't have a boat."

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“Could borrow a rowboat and sail out with some men, we could scout out a new camp.” Billy could hear his voice rise as his blood rushed excitement around his head.

“That’s your plan?”

“If we find water, the whole lot of ‘em will come over, surely.”

“Collins won’t allow it. The *Ocean’s* on her way. We’ll be away soon and we’ll have fresh water. And no savages. Just me and you, son. Safe together.” He smiled down at Billy.

A week later and Billy crept out of his hut into the dark. He walked to the jetty where the small rowboats were tied up. The men on guard duty were drinking with a couple of the women. Their carousing was loud enough for Billy to untie the leathered rope from the mooring, steal inside and push himself off.

The water was gentle against the low breeze and he pulled himself along at a decent pace for several minutes until the lights from the settlement became an eerie shape on the horizon. Billy’s nerves caught up with him when the wind whipped up and pushed his boat around. The muscles in his arms fizzed with effort. He had no idea where he was, how far he’d gone, or whether he had spent the time going around in circles. He wanted to cry, felt the wobble in his lips, imagined his Dad’s stern face. But the dream of fresh water forced him through until the dawn lit the blanket of water still between him and land.

His oars snagged on mangroves. When he got out of the boat cool water soaked into his trousers. The mangrove gave way to pebbled sand and beyond that a thick stand of tea tree. He stood awhile straining his eyes back across the bay to see the settlement. He could see shapes cut out against the black-green backdrop. Here, the trees were bunched together and he could see it would take days to get through. Disappointment swept through him with such force he sunk to the sand and hunkered down against the trunk of a tree. He heard a sweet melodic note rising and falling, stopping then click-click-whirr and so it began again. It made such a change to the raucous cries of seagulls and men that he

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found himself unable to move. When he finally opened his eyes it took a while to focus. The birdsong faded and in its place the thick thudding of fear in his ears. He was face to face with a spear.

Holding the spear was the blackest hand attached to the blackest arm, thin but muscled and when Billy's gaze met the savage's eyes fear forced bile into his throat. His time had come. A thousand memories flooded his mind. The cool London air, the stench of the ship, his mum's softness, Agnes, blue and perfect. The savage's mouth opened and a string of sounds came out, rising and falling like the bird. It was like music and for a moment Billy's fear subsided. When he focused again there were a dozen savages staring at him.

Their camp was not far from the beach through a narrow track between hacked out branches of tea tree. Their humpies were neat, thatched with fronds, covered with mud that had baked hard. There was a stone fire place, filled with shells. They'd fashioned bowls and baskets out of wood and leaves. There were children of all ages running here and there. Women were gathered in small groups. Men squatted by the fire, chewing on bones. They were all naked. There was no shame. His own clothes seemed to add fire to his own rising fear. All around him they were jabbering in their strange tongue, some of the younger children pulled at his shirt, ripping it and covering their mouths as they giggled. He jumped away from them and one of the women approached. She ran her hands through his hair and from her tone he realised she was marvelling at his blonde hair.

“My name is Billy. Billy Watkins. From England. From Sullivan's Bay. The other side of the bay.” He pointed, but it was useless. “Me, Billy.”

The man who held the spear walked around, stabbing it into the ground. He spoke too, clear and deep. But not aggressively. The man touched his chest and uttered a sound. To Billy, it sounded like 'Kieran' so that is what he called him.

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“Me Billy, you Kieran.” Billy held out his hand. The savage held his spear and stared at Billy’s arm. He burst out laughing and the rest of them erupted too. Billy pulled his arm back to his side, frowning at his own stupidity. These savages had no manners about them.

That night, in his dreams, he heard the crying of Agnes, his Mum’s soft singing, his Dad’s scolding. He knew his Dad would want to mount a search but he also knew Collins and his men would probably deny him. He was a boy lost. If he survived the night he would plan his escape. So it was a pleasant surprise when he awoke to the sound of the birdsong that had so comforted him just the day before.

A boy around his own age offered him a hunk of damper and some strips of brown meat. When he took the food their hands met and he was surprised to find the skin felt soft and warm. Like his. He ate, not sure what he would taste but the salty texture of the meat was pleasant. The boy spoke, with the same musical sounds from the back of his throat. He touched Billy’s clothes, his hair, his hand. As he did, Billy named each item. The boy’s lips split apart into a smile, his teeth so startling white that Billy blinked.

“Me, Billy.” He touched his chest. “You?” He pointed to the boy, who said a word similar to ‘George’ so that’s what he became.

George took him to a humpy where several women were tending babes or binding broad leaves together. They stopped for a moment to regard him. George spoke, as though introducing them, a couple of words for each woman, as he pointed. They were his family.

He tugged on Billy’s sleeve and they went outside, back along the track to where Billy had landed. The rowboat was still there but it was surrounded by a group of men. One of them had the oar in his hand and his arm was up and drawn back like he was going to throw it as a spear. The others laughed. George did too. Billy wondered if he could simply go up to the men, address them politely to return the oar, hop in the boat and row back to Sullivan’s Bay. He briefly thought of it as home but when he saw how these people lived he wondered if he

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would ever settle back there. All at once he was gripped with the need to bring his dad here. He would see these people weren't savage at all, but a real community.

George grabbed a spear from one of the older men and Billy followed him deep into the brush. They trod with stealth, Billy following in his exact footsteps for fear of upsetting the balance. With a fierce turn of speed George launched the spear and Billy held his breath as it landed with a dull thud in the side of a wallaby. The bush seemed to hold its breath too as they ran to the body and retrieved the spear. Then the birdsong rose again to fever pitch, the whole canopy seeming to lift and fly away in fear.

The next day the wallaby was stripped and cooked over a fire and Billy joined the group to feast. As he took water from a cup fashioned from reeds he wondered about his how he would return to Sullivan's, how he could convince his dad of this paradise. "Water," he said, holding up the cup to George.

"Where is the water?"

George chewed on his meat, blank eyed.

"Water." Billy dipped his finger in the cup and licked it.

George nodded and sang a word back. Billy walked to the large tub where they had stored some water. He pointed again and this time George jabbered something back to his people and rushed into the bush.

The track was well trodden and the scrub changed from gnarled tea tree to taller, more willowy trees. The change in habitat was matched by a change in temperature. The cooling sea breeze subsided and the humidity rose. Billy wiped the sweat off his brow. George gabbled on, pointing this way and that. The trees fanned out, freeing the air so Billy could breathe. The sand became darker and more mud-like. The sky revealed itself to be wide and soft.

The track petered out and in front of them was what looked like a cow pasture, open and grassed. George pointed to the stream running through the top of it. He uttered a word, with a sharp sound, which Billy took to mean 'creek'.

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He nodded and made a sign like he was drinking. George lay down and scooped water up with his hands. Billy imagined his Dad coming here, seeing this expanse of land and its potential – crops, stock, the lot. They could become self-sufficient. And they could learn so much from the tribe. Not savages. They were a long way from savage.

“I can’t imagine Lt Collins letting you come into our settlement.” He laughed at his own thoughts. The look on Collins’ face, the idea that the blacks would be welcomed and fed and introduced to families. “But I have to go back.” He mimed stepping into the boat and rowing. George held a hand to his brow and nodded, joining in the game. “I can’t take you.” Billy shrugged his apology.

The afternoon sank down behind the trees to cool the air. As they walked back along the track, they heard a rumbling, a series of bangs and a shrill chorus of voices. The noises of the bush shut up. George took off but Billy struggled to follow. Tree roots tripped him. George bent himself around branches and trees like their coordinates were mapped in his brain. The noises from the camp grew more urgent. Babies wailed. Men yelled. Women screamed. As they got closer Billy recognised some of the words. English! They’d found him. But thoughts of rescue were confused with the sounds of terror.

When they finally reached the camp Billy and George witnessed the ending of the massacre. Black bodies were hacked, headless, limbless, striped with sword wounds, babies were crushed under bodies, children were hunched in tight balls, not moving. Billy saw Collins’ men. Their faces red with effort, but a madness glinting in their eyes. It was so quick, so shocking he barely had time to register George flying towards the crumpled body of the woman he guessed was his mother. Her right arm was missing. Her stomach a mess of split flesh and oozing blood. George let out a hair raising wail and charged at a small group of men. One was his Dad. He held a sword by his side and raised it as George flew towards him.

“No! Stop!” Billy yelled.

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His Dad blinked. Another man raised a pistol. George swooped down and pulled a spear from one of his people. He ran lifted it above his head and screamed. The man fired the pistol and George recoiled and thudded to the earth, a hole in his chest leaking the life from him.

Billy's Dad got to the body the same time as he did. "He's gone. You're safe."

Billy wiped tears from his eyes. He saw that his Dad thought them tears of relief. His body shook as he took in the ruins of the camp around him. Some of the men ransacked what was left of the humpies, picking up bowls and weapons. Billy's Dad picked him up, nuzzling his face into his neck. His whiskers were coarse and Billy pulled away, putting a hand to his chin where his skin was chafed raw. He put a hand up to touch it, his fingers bloodied red.

He cast his eyes over the destruction behind him and noticed the blood from the blacks was the same colour as his own. The boats pushed away and he heard the mournful tune of the birds settling back into the trees.