

BRIAN FALKNER
**SHOOTING
STARS**

HE'S BEEN HIDING ALL HIS LIFE. THAT'S ABOUT TO CHANGE.



I cocked my head to one side, listening intently. There it was again, and this time there was a light metallic click. There was a hunter in the forest.

I forced my body to stay still. I told my heart, which was racing, to calm down. I took long, deep, slow breaths, and waited...

**SHOOTING
STARS**

For Molly
So wonderful, so bright,
for such a short time.

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SHOOTING STARS

THE PRIVATE DIARY OF
EGAN (BUSH) TUCKER

AND OTHER STUFF COMPILED BY
HIS FRIEND, J.T.

[WRITTEN BY **BRIAN FALKNER**]

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INTRODUCTION

I'd like to think of myself as Egan's best friend.

A lot of people know him as 'Bush' Tucker, but he never liked that, so I'll avoid it.

I volunteered to put together this edition of his diary, complete with some of his paintings and drawings, as well as other associated material, because Egan's kind of busy right now. I think he's currently visiting the Leaning Tower of Pisa (where's that postcard, Egan?) and after that, NASA have something cool planned for him.

He's pretty hard to keep track of nowadays, while I've got ... well ... a little bit of time on my hands.

There are always critics and haters. Some people have said some not nice things about Egan and his code of honour.

I hope this book sets the record straight.

J.T. Hunter,

26 September, 2016

C O U R T T R A N S C R I P T

IN THE HIGH COURT OF NEW ZEALAND

HC 7/2016 [2016] NZHC Trans 10

Hearing: 18 July 2016
Court: Slaydon J
Appearances: E J Lacy for the Appellant
F E Milton and W C Johnson
for the Defendant

CRIMINAL PROSECUTION

MR LACY

Please state your name and occupation for the court.

WITNESS

Jeffery Thomas Hunter. Motivational Trainer.

MR LACY

And a former member of the New Zealand defence forces.

WITNESS

Yes, sir.

MR LACY

Please elaborate.

WITNESS

Royal New Zealand Special Air Services, One Squadron.

MR LACY

Your rank at the time of discharge?

WITNESS

Staff sergeant, sir.

MR LACY

And you first met the boy, Egan Ray Tucker, and his mother, Moana Ruth Tucker – when?

WITNESS

I met Egan on December third last year. I never met his mother.

MR LACY

And at that time Egan was living in a small stone hut in the Coromandel forest. And to the best of your knowledge he had lived there, with his mother, his entire life?

WITNESS

I believe they sometimes lived in a nearby cave during the colder months.

MR LACY

But he had lived in the bush all his life?

WITNESS

I believe that to be true, sir.

MR LACY

And under what circumstances did you first meet the boy?

WITNESS

We were shooting stars, sir. And he got one.

THE BUSH PAGES

December 1st – January 3rd

December 1st

Captain Cooker in vegetable garden overnight. Lots of damage.

Moma said not to hunt the pig. Too dangerous.

Fixed the pig fence.

DINNER: Potato stew (again!)

BOOK I AM READING: 'The Old Man and the Sea' by Ernest Hemingway.

THINGS I AM AFRAID OF: The pig.

December 2nd

Pig came back last night. Lots more damage.

Must be a big one.

Fixed the fence again, and made it stronger.

Moma said not to hunt pig.

DINNER: Turnip soup.

BOOK I AM READING: 'The Old Man and the Sea'.

THINGS I AM AFRAID OF: The pig.

December 3rd

Captain Cooker came back again! Smashed the new fence.

Moma said not to hunt pig. Did it anyway.

Met a soldier. I hope he doesn't tell anyone.

DINNER: Pork roast.

BOOK I AM READING: 'The Old Man and the Sea'.

THINGS I AM NOT AFRAID OF: The pig.

December 1st (again)

Moma read my first two diary entries and said I wasn't trying hard enough. Not enough detail. So I'm starting over.

Moma is the one who told me to do this. She said if I wanted to be a writer then I should keep a diary. She said writers keep diaries to record their memories and bare their souls and also it was a good chance to practise my writing skills.

Moma also said not to worry that anyone else will read it. Just write it for myself. But I think that's stupid. Even if you don't intend anyone to read it, what about when you are dead? Someone will read it then, for sure. So I think a diary should be written for others to read, even if you don't want them to.

I guess that means you. Hi! Whoever you are. Please stop reading my private diary.

Yeah, like that was ever going to happen. And does that mean, if you are reading this, that I am dead? If so, I hope I lived to be 120 and was a millionaire and travelled all around the world and ate pizza.

I should write a list of things that I am going to do when I turn 18 and can leave the forest.

Top of that list will be that I want to be a writer. A famous one, like Ernest Hemingway. He writes really good stories. I have a whole collection of books. Moma gets them from the general store down in the town. She says it's important to read because that's how I'll learn about the outside world.

Today I am going to write about the big pig. And about the soldier. He was the first person I have ever spoken to (apart from Moma). It was scary, but he was nice. But that doesn't happen until Tuesday.

So I'll start with the pig. A big Captain Cooker. In America they'd call him a razorback. I know he's a boar, and a big one, from the hoof prints in the vegie garden. They are deep. He is also strong enough to knock down the pig fence.

We lost potatoes, turnips and carrots, and he trampled all over the silverbeet and the lettuce. He didn't touch the tomato plants. I guess he doesn't like tomatoes. I don't either. So the pig and I have something in common.

Captain Cookers have big tusks and a bad attitude. The big boars are hard to kill and a sow protecting her piglets is just nasty. Believe me, I know!

I want to go and hunt it anyway, but Moma says it is too dangerous. I know she's right. My last dog Chunder got killed by a Captain Cooker when I was twelve, and it nearly got me too.

We fixed up the garden as best as we could and repaired the fence and propped it up with a few extra branches to keep the pig out.

I could say I wasn't scared of this pig, but that would be a lie. I'm pretty afraid of it.

Moma says that if I am worried or frightened about something, then I should write it in my diary. That way, I can look back later and see that there was really no need to be worried or frightened. So:

THINGS I AM AFRAID OF:

The pig.

BOOK I AM READING:

'The Old Man and the Sea,' by Ernest Hemingway.

I really like the way Mr Hemingway just tells it like it is, with no messing around. I'd like to write stories like him.

THOUGHT FOR TODAY:

I am glad Hemingway didn't call the book 'The Old Man And The Ocean.' Because if you took all the first letters it would spell 'tomato'. Ha! I really don't like tomatoes.

WISH LIST

Things I am going to do when I turn 18 and can go out into the world.

1. Be a famous author, like Ernest Hemingway
2. Fly in an aeroplane
3. Drive in a car
4. Fly in a space shuttle (any kind of space-craft will do)
5. Drink Coca-cola
6. Drink Coca-cola on a space shuttle!
7. Eat pizza
8. Visit the leaning tower of Pisa
9. Eat pizza at Pisa, ha!
10. Eat deep-fried ice-cream balls
11. Visit the Grand Canyon
12. Visit the Auckland Harbour Bridge
13. Go in a submarine
14. Swim in the ocean
15. Watch a television

December 2nd (again)

The Captain Cooker came back overnight and it did even more damage than yesterday. Moma was very upset.

I am still really afraid of the pig, but I am also angry with it. The pig upset my Moma. I don't like to see her upset. But she told me not to hunt the pig, and I promised I wouldn't.

We spent the day rebuilding the fence.

The problem with our fence is that it has to be strong enough to keep out a 100-kg pig, but if any hunter or hiker walks into it, it has to seem like a natural part of the forest.

So we have grown gorse bushes intermingled with some strong shrubs to make a hedge, but not in a straight line – just a random, weaving course. Then inside that, we built a fence of tree branches, jammed into the ground so they look random, but they are actually cleverly interwoven to stop any animals from pushing through the gorse.

Not cleverly enough, I guess.

Anyway, we got some big, heavy branches that I had been saving for firewood and we jammed them into the existing web of shrubs and branches, trying to make them look natural and random ... although by the time we had finished, it didn't look random or natural at all. It looked like a fence built by an escapee from a lunatic asylum.

Still, that doesn't matter as long as it keeps the pig out.

I went for a swim in the waterhole after that to

clean off the sweat and mud and scratches. It's really warm this time of year.

Moma went later. She likes to bathe alone. I understand that. She's a woman.

When she came back she smoked a cigarette. She does that sometimes when she is unhappy. I asked her if I could smoke one but she said no, smoking is bad for your health. So I asked her why she smoked and she said it was a bad habit she had picked up when she was younger, and she didn't want me picking up the same bad habit.

I don't really want Moma to do something that is bad for her health, but I do want her to be happy. Things like the pig digging up our garden make her feel sad. And sometimes she just feels really sad, for no real reason. The cigarettes make her happy. And a bit giggly.

I want her to be happy.

BOOK I AM READING:

'The Old Man and the Sea'.

THOUGHT FOR TODAY:

I think I will put Moma's code in my diary. Not in the order that she gave it to me, but when it seems to suit what happened that day. Or maybe I'll just put them in random order. Or alphabetical order. I haven't decided yet. I'll see what happens each day.

MOMA'S CODE #17

Always keep your promises.

Or you will turn friends into enemies.

December 3rd (again)

There is so much to write about today.

Today I went pigging with Jack. We found the old boar. But I didn't kill it. The soldier did that.

But if I want to be a writer like Hemingway someday, then I should tell it the way it happened, from the beginning.

The Captain Cooker came back overnight. Pushed right through our fancy new (escapee-from-a-lunatic-asylum) fence and did even more damage than yesterday. This is a BIG PIG.

Moma cried when she saw what happened. She told me not to hunt the pig and I didn't say anything. I was too angry.

Besides, if I said I wouldn't then I did, that would be a lie.

Moma was too busy trying to fix up the mess in the garden to notice that I didn't answer. Or maybe she just figured that I had already promised not to hunt it.

But that was yesterday. And I didn't hunt it yesterday.

After we had cleaned up – again – and fixed up the fence – again – I took off towards the waterhole. But really, I doubled back to the hut and got the knife and the crossbow. And Crackerjack, my dog. Jack for short. (He's three. He's brave and strong. Moma bought him to replace Chunder.)

With a smaller pig I'd just use the sticking knife, but this Captain Cooker was clearly way too big



My dog, Jack,
and his bunny

for that. Usually I only used the crossbow for deer, and very occasionally. Never during hunting season. I didn't like to be out on the trails when there were hunters around.

For one, they might see you. For two, they might mistake you for a deer and shoot you. Hunters are stupid like that.

I knew that when I didn't come back from the waterhole, Moma would know where I had gone. But by then it would be too late. So I'd take my punishment when I got home.

I guess I could've just stayed up in the garden that night and waited for the pig to come back. But the last

thing I wanted to do was to take on a 100-kg Captain Cooker in the dark.

When I got out the pig collar, Jack went a little crazy. He loves going pigging and he's got the scars to prove it. I gave him the 'shut up' sign so Moma wouldn't hear and figure out what we were up to.

Moma would be angry, but she wouldn't be worried. Maybe a little. But I often went off into the bush with Jack. He was trained to run home if ever I got hurt, and to bring Moma back to where I was. I don't know how Moma trained him to do that. She has a way with dogs. But as long as Jack didn't turn up, she'd know I was okay.

There was rain coming. I could tell by the look of the sky and the smell of the air. Good rain too. Not just a summer shower but a proper watering for the garden.

I stripped naked and put all my clothes in one of the plastic bags from the general store to keep them dry, then put the bag in a secret hole I knew in a tree. I don't mind being naked in the bush. I actually prefer it when it rains, especially in the summer when the rain is warm. I like the feel of the water on my skin. I don't like the feel of wet clothes. And it's not like anyone is going to see me. (Even if they did see me naked, so what? They might see my pee-pee gun. I'm sure it is just the same as everybody else's.)

In the forest I am like a ghost. I know where to put my feet. I know how to move without rustling the leaves on the cabbage tree or moving the fronds

of the ponga. The bush is my home. Nobody sees me, nobody hears me, even if they pass right by me.

(Except for the soldier. He saw me.)

I want to write about rain for a moment.

There're two kinds of rain when you're in the bush. When you're in a clearing, the rain just falls in straight thin lines, but when you're under the forest canopy, the rain accumulates in the foliage before splashing down like dragons' tears.

Like the tears of a sad dragon. A melancholy dragon. A grieving dragon.

Is that like something Hemingway would have written? I think it is too poetic for him. I wish I could write like Hemingway.

But I quite like the last one. Like the tears of a grieving dragon.

We started at Go and followed the hoof prints all the way up to Marylebone Station.

I guess perhaps I should explain here that Moma and I named different parts of the forest around our hut after squares on our Monopoly board. It was too hard saying "up by the old tree that hangs over the stream" and stuff like that all the time. So we gave places names.

'Go' is the main entrance to our little kingdom. It's a gap in the scrub hedge that's easy to push through if you know where it is, and almost impossible otherwise.

Marylebone Station is a flat patch of rock next to a

bend in the stream. I might draw a map of all this to make it easier to understand.

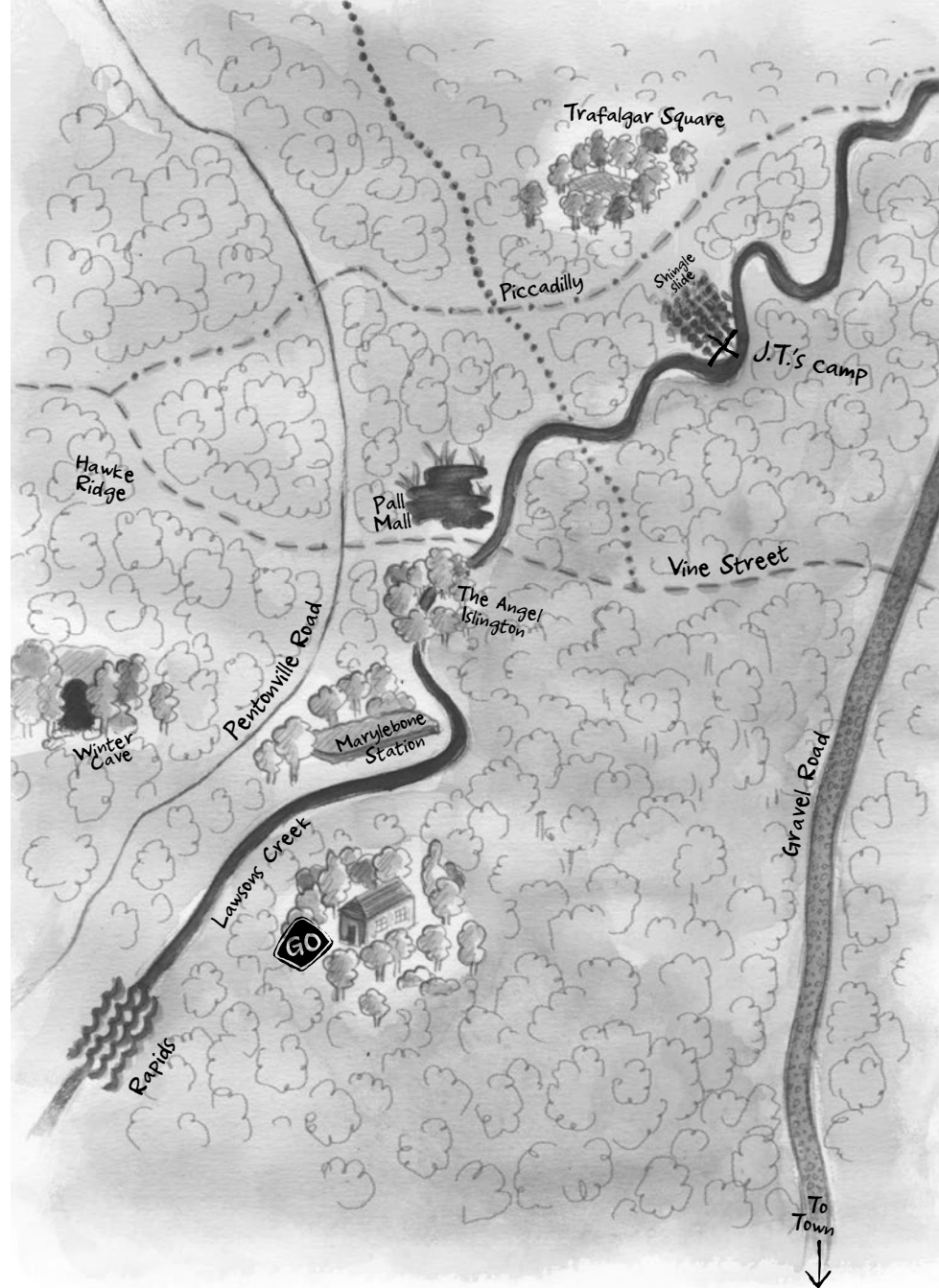
Anyway, we had good hoof prints and other pig sign all the way up to Marylebone Station, but the prints petered out on the rock. I looked for tree scrapings and droppings, but there weren't any, so I let Jack take over. He's a good dog, Jack. Never runs off ahead. Just follows the scent with his nose to the ground, looking around to check that I'm keeping up with him.

He followed the trail up through The Angel Islington (a small clearing) and along Vine Street (a hiking track). At Pall Mall, which is a small swamp, I put my nose next to the water and smelled it. He'd been here all right. I could smell his pee. There were clouds of mozzies around the swamp, but they don't bother me. They don't seem to like me.

There was a rustling in the undergrowth behind me just then, but I didn't even turn. It was something small, a ground-bird probably. The Captain Cooker would make much more noise.

I finally got a real indication of his size at an old kauri tree just a few metres from Pall Mall. He'd rubbed himself on this one – and by the height of the rubbing, he was huge. At least 150 kilos. Suddenly the crossbow and the sticking knife seemed very small. I tightened Jack's collar around his chest.

The crossbow bolts were sharp. I had sharpened them myself. But even with the crossbow, I knew I'd have to get close. If I missed his heart then he'd either turn on me or take off, and I'd lose the bolt.



There was a tui singing in a tree nearby. They used to call it a parson bird because it has a little tuft of white under its chin. I was happy to see it because tuis bring good luck. I whistled back. They like it when you do that.

The pig seemed to be heading towards Piccadilly, where two hunting trails cross. I nearly got caught by some bush lawyer following him there. It's a vine with curving thorns. Stings like anything and it can take ages to disentangle yourself. I saw it just in time and we skirted around it. It's bad enough on clothes, but horrible on bare skin.

We finally saw the pig at Trafalgar Square, just along from Piccadilly. It's a small clearing around a rocky shelf. He was up on the shelf and, jeez, he was big. Biggest pig I have ever seen. Gotta have respect for a pig like that. Two hundred kilos I reckon. Cook some, smoke some, salt some, he'd feed us right through winter.

I gave Jack the stay sign and he lay down straight away, resting his muzzle on his paws, looking up at me out of the corner of his eyes. I knew what he was thinking: *When is it my turn?*

The pig was higher than me, rooting around in a patch of mud. That gave me a clear shot at his heart, and I knew that if I missed I was going to have one seriously angry 200-kilo tusker on my tail.

I crawled into the middle of a fairly dense patch of bush, where he wouldn't see me. A couple of wood pigeons warbled their warning tune to each other, but the pig took no notice. I loaded the crossbow silently.

I had already tensioned it, so just had to slot in the bolt...

He turned around as I did that. I waited. I wasn't going to shoot him in the arse – for lots of reasons.

A helicopter flew overhead as I was waiting. I see them occasionally. Sometimes dragging deer carcasses out of the bush, sometimes dragging tourists from Auckland around on sight-seeing tours. I don't know which kind this was. I couldn't see it, just hear it through the trees. It didn't seem to disturb the pig, he just kept grunting around up on the rock.

Eventually he turned again and I lined up carefully, allowing for drop, but not for breeze. There wasn't enough wind to make a difference at that range.

Jack stayed still, he's a good dog like that.

Just as I was about to fire I heard a noise, not of the forest. My finger froze on the trigger.

I cocked my head to one side, listening intently. There it was again, and this time there was a light metallic click.

There was a hunter in the forest.

I forced my body to stay still. I told my heart, which was racing, to calm down. I took long, deep, slow breaths, and waited.

It would be a shame to miss out on all that pork, but the main thing was to keep him out of our garden. It didn't really matter to me who killed the pig.

I hoped the hunter would be a good shot. If not, then the pig would run, and I'd have to spend all day tracking him again. Or, worse, he'd be wounded and attack.

Something else occurred to me as I waited. Up until that last moment, I hadn't heard the hunter. Normally

I hear them a mile off. But this guy was perhaps thirty metres from me and I hadn't even known he was there until just now.

Maybe I was concentrating too hard on the pig, or maybe the sound of the helicopter had masked his movements. But I didn't think so. This guy was good.

I crept backwards silently, hiding even deeper in the patch of brush. I gave Jack the 'shut up' sign. Twice.

There was no sound or movement at all.

The pig lifted its head, sniffing at the air. He was a clear, easy target. Why didn't the hunter take the shot? What was he waiting for? It wasn't one of those photo hunters; I'd seen plenty of them, traipsing through the forest with a camera instead of a gun hanging from their shoulder.

But the click I had heard was the click of a safety catch on a rifle.

Still no shot.

I wondered if the hunter was stalking something else.

But there was nothing else around here to stalk, I was certain of that. If there was a deer, or another pig, I'd have heard them.

Then I realised. There was another animal in this part of the forest and that was what he was stalking.

He was stalking me.

MOMA'S CODE #4

Never tell a lie.

The consequences of telling a lie are always worse than those of telling the truth.

December 3rd (continued)

(I made this like a new chapter. When a writer leaves you hanging at the end of a chapter, like I just did, that's called a cliff-hanger.)

I stopped moving. Movement makes noise, no matter how careful you are.

I didn't think the hunter could see me. I was well concealed. I don't know how he knew I was there, but I was sure he knew something was there.

I gave Jack the stay sign. He watched me without flickering a muscle.

Whoever this hunter was, he moved like a soft breeze through the trees, barely a murmur in the forest. But that was enough for me. I knew where he was now. He was circling around to my right.

The sounds stopped and there was silence apart from the natural sounds of the forest.

He was doing what I was doing – listening. That was good news. It meant he didn't know where I was. I could stay still and wait for him to move, or I could move and hope that he wouldn't hear me. Normally I'd just move, but this guy was good. Maybe he'd grown up in the bush, like me.

I waited. He waited.

I waited some more, then I heard him move.

As soon as he was moving, so was I. He wouldn't be able to hear me while he was moving. I crept out of the bush on the opposite side to where I had heard him.

I had been concentrating so hard on the hunter that I had completely forgotten about the pig. He saw the dog, and Jack saw him and growled, despite the 'shut up' command that I gave him.

The pig could have turned and run at that, but this pig was not afraid of one little dog and a scrawny human kid. It snorted a couple of times.

I wasn't sure whether I was more afraid of the pig, or the fact that the hunter was hearing all this.

It was the pig I should have been afraid of.

He put his head down and charged.

I had no time to take a shot, and even if I had, it was the wrong angle. I jumped up, turned and ran for the nearest tree, no longer worrying about the noise I was making.

Jack ran with me.

I had almost made it when I got hit from behind and went flying into the trunk of the tree instead. I bounced off, dazed, and hit the ground, but rolled away automatically ... and just as well, because those huge tusks ground into the dirt right where I had landed.

I scrambled backwards on all fours, trying to put a tree in between me and him but he charged again and this time the only thing that saved me was Jack. He did what he had been trained to do. He lunged up and bit onto the ear of the pig and pulled down with all his strength.

That stopped the boar in his tracks. He couldn't run with his head twisted around to the side like that. Instead he snorted and tossed and tried to throw Jack

off, but Jack was having none of that, he had a grip and he wasn't letting go for anything.

The boar managed to flick Jack up, and got a tusk to him, but it glanced off his thick pig collar, a leather collar and vest that covered all his vital organs.

The pig advanced on me, dragging Jack with him. With my back to the tree I was going nowhere. He tossed his head one more time, loosening Jack's grip, then lunged forward at my stomach.

I didn't have a leather collar to protect my vital organs. I didn't even have clothes. I just managed to twist out of the way, but he pulled back and lunged again.

This time was his last.

Jack was still pulling him down by the ear, twisting his head around, and suddenly two long legs were straddling the boar, one hand lifting the boar's muzzle up away from me, widening the neck even further, and then in went the knife.

I was gasping for air so my mouth was wide open and I got a mouthful of hot pig blood.

The pig still fought, but only for a few seconds, growing weaker and weaker until he went limp.

The hunter stood and pulled him to the side so he wouldn't land on top of me. Then he stuck out a hand to help me to my feet, hawking and spitting out the blood.

Jack still hadn't let go of the pig's ear, not sure if it was dead. I gave him the 'stop' sign, then the 'sit' sign, unsure if he would have a go at the hunter next.

The man and I stood and looked at each other for a moment.

He was tall and looked strong. He had a bushy beard but was almost completely bald. He wore a green Swannndri and old jeans that had been torn off into long shorts. He had a small camo-coloured rucksack. There was a weathered look to his face and he looked like he belonged in the bush. He looked tough and hard.

I wondered what he thought of me. A scrawny, naked, fifteen-year-old kid, brown from the sun, wet from the rain, red from the pig's blood. Unshaven, with wild hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Whatever he thought, he didn't comment. He unslung his rucksack and opened the flap. "Put this on," he said, handing me an old scratchy, holey woollen jersey.

"I'm not cold," I said. "And it'll get dirty." Covered in blood, I meant.

"It's not for cold, it's for shock," he said.

I didn't like the look of it, and I wasn't going into shock, but I took it and put it on in case my nakedness was making him uncomfortable.

"What are you doing all the way out here, at this time of the day, in the altogether?" he asked.

By 'altogether' I think he meant nude.

"It was raining," I said. "I didn't want my clothes to get wet."

That answer seemed to satisfy him for a moment. Then he asked, "But what are you doing here? Are you camping nearby? Did you get lost?"

I shook my head. "I'm not lost. I was hunting the pig."

"You're a long way from anywhere," he said.

I just nodded.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"I can't tell you," I said.

He looked intently at me. "Why not?"

"Because I would have to lie," I said.

I expected that to lead to a whole lot more questions, but to my surprise he just nodded. "There's no lie that's worth telling," he said. "I respect that. But you're okay? You don't need any help?"

"No," I said. "How about you?"

He laughed. "I've been hunting in these forests for years. And before that it was the forests of East Timor and the deserts of Afghanistan. I think I'll be okay."

"Were you a soldier?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Afghanistan!" I said. "That sounds really cool. Was it?"

"Yeah ... nah," he said after a strangely long pause. "Not really." After another awkward silence he said, "I love it here. It's so quiet."

I didn't know what he was talking about. The sun was going down so the birds had all started up. The crickets were going mad and the wind was shifting branches against each other. The bush was alive with sound. It was so loud that I could hardly hear myself think. But I didn't want to argue, so I just nodded.

"J.T.," he said, holding out a hand.

I didn't know what to do with his hand, so I held mine out the same way and said, "Egan."

He took my hand in his and lifted it up and down

a few times. I think this is called shaking hands. I have read about this.

“And this is Jack,” I said.

J.T. held out a hand to Jack, who licked it vigorously. He doesn’t know how to shake hands.

“Did you have a line on him?” J.T. asked, looking again at my crossbow, then over at the dead pig.

I nodded. “Woulda took him too, but I heard you and held off.”

He didn’t ask why.

“You’d have to be a good shot to take him down with that thing,” he said.

“I am,” I said.

“I bet you are,” he said. “Where’s your campsite?”

“Coupla hills that way,” I said vaguely, nodding my head in completely the opposite direction to our hut.

“You won’t make it back before dark,” he said. “You want to borrow a flashlight?”

“No sir,” I said. “There’ll be a good moon tonight.”

He seemed surprised at that and looked up at the sky, before nodding. “Yes, there will. But not for a couple of hours.”

“I can wait,” I said. It wasn’t safe to travel around the bush in the pitch black, even for someone like me.

“My camp’s just down the hill,” he said. “Are you expected back for dinner?”

“No sir, not really,” I said. I was, but I didn’t want to tell him that.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s cook up this old grunter while we wait for the moon.”

We dragged the Captain Cooker down to J.T.’s camp. It was heavy, but easy with two of us. His camp was by the stream, at the bottom of a shingle slide. Rather than lug the pig all the way down, we just pushed him off at the top and he took himself most of the rest of the way. Jack was running along behind, barking, as if the pig had suddenly come back to life. He grabbed it by the ear at the bottom of the slide and held it there, waiting for us to catch up. He looked up at me, excited, as if he had caught the pig by himself.

I said he was brave and strong. I didn’t say he was smart.

J.T. started preparing a fire. I took a moment to thank the pig for his life, and to apologise for killing him. He was a fierce warrior and had fought bravely.

Moma taught me to do that.

(But to be honest, I was actually thinking about his crackling skin on the fire the whole time.)

J.T. made a rough spit out of some branches and a thin metal pole. He let the flames die down a bit while he butchered a leg and impaled it on the pole.

While he did that, I took off the jersey and cleaned myself up in the stream. Then I rinsed the jersey, wrung it out, and put it back on to dry it out.

Looking around at the camp it was clear that he intended to stay a while. There was a tent set up by a tree and a cache of supplies hung from a branch where animals couldn’t get to it. It was a good place for a camp: right by the stream for water, with a wide shingle area where you could safely make a good fire.

We talked a bit while the leg was cooking, but I can't really remember what about. Just shootin' the shit, as Moma says sometimes.

I did find out that he is a deer culler. Apparently the deer population has been exploding in this area. The DOC (whatever that is) didn't want to wait until the roar, when all the amateur hunters come out, so they had sent in a culler.

I did ask him how he knew I was there. That was peeving me, because I was being really quiet.

"Birds," he said. "You upset a couple of pigeons."

He was right about that. I just hadn't thought he would have been smart enough to know their different cries.

"I was worried you were going to shoot me," I said.

"Yeah nah," he laughed. "I thought you were a deer, but I'd never pull the trigger until I was certain. You were safe. Unless you'd put on a brown fur coat and stuck antlers on your head."

I laughed and tossed a bit of meat to Jack.

We had a farting contest after we ate. It started when I let one go. Moma always said not to fart in front of other people but there have never really been any other people so I forgot. Anyway, I blamed Jack, which was what we always did at home for a joke.

"Crackerjack!" I said. "Pooh!" He gave me a disgusted look.

"That's awful," J.T. said. "Was that the dog?"

I couldn't lie so I admitted it was me. I was a bit embarrassed but J.T. just laughed.

"Pardon me, number three," I said.

"Number three?" he asked.

"You don't know about number threes?" I asked.

"Like number ones and number twos?" he said, so I told him Moma's little rhyme. "Number one, use your gun, number twos, those are poos, number threes make a breeze."

J.T. laughed again. He lifted a leg and let out a much bigger, louder fart, then stared at me. "Now that's a number three," he said.

So I squeezed a bit and cocked my leg and let go a long, whiney one. It really stank.

J.T. laughed and waved his hand around to disperse it. Even Jack looked disgusted and wandered off upwind.

"Wouldn't want to aim that one at the fire," J.T. said.

I am not sure what he meant, but I laughed anyway.

Then he did another big one, huge and long and stinky.

"Oh man, I think you just invented number fours," I said.

I tried again but I only got a little peep.

"I win," he said.

"Only 'cos my mother's not here," I said. That set us both off laughing.

"You know what would go down real well right now?" J.T. asked.

"No sir, what?" I asked.

"Vanilla ice cream," he said.

I've never had ice cream, but I didn't want him to know that so I just nodded and said, "Yes sir, that'd be swell."

He saw me looking at his rifle and asked if I would like to know how to use it. Of course I was mad keen,

so he showed me how to load the magazine and how that slots into the rifle and where the safety catch is and how you aim and fire it. It was so cool! Much better than the crossbow, and it shoots a lot further. But it's too noisy. With the crossbow, nobody hears you.

I know this because he let me shoot it.

He wasn't going to, but I kept asking and asking. Eventually he said okay and I aimed the rifle at a tree, but J.T. said no. He said it was too dangerous to fire into a forest at night. There could be campers or other hunters.

"But I am aiming at a tree!" I said.

"What if you miss it?" he said. "No. Never fire a gun anywhere if you can't see where you're firing."

I was going to say that I wouldn't miss, but then thought it was best not to argue.

"Aim up at the sky," he said.

"At what?" I asked.

"At a star," he said.

I looked up. The rain had stopped and the night was clear. It was really beautiful. We were up on the hill and so I could see lots of stars. I lifted up the rifle and took careful aim, the way he showed me, at one of the stars to the east where it was darkest.

"Don't pull the trigger ... squeeze it," J.T. said.

I tried to keep the gun on the target, but it kept wavering around. So I took a deep breath, held it, and when the sights settled back on one of the stars I slowly squeezed my finger and thumb together the way he said.

There was a huge bang and the gun kicked back

against my shoulder and it hurt like anything and Jack started barking but I didn't really notice any of that. Up in the sky, just where I had fired, a star was falling. It flashed across the sky and disappeared behind one of the hills to the north.

"I got one!" I cried, and we both giggled for a long time like Moma does when she's been smoking her cigarettes.

I really like J.T. I wonder if this is what having a dad is like.

"I wish I had a dad." I said what I was thinking without thinking what I was saying. Moma says I do that a lot.

"What happened to him?" J.T. asked.

I had to be careful here, because I didn't want to say anything that could give away who I was or why I was here.

"He doesn't live with us anymore," I said.

"And you don't see him at all?" J.T. asked.

"We're afraid of him," I said, and wondered if that was too much information.

"He hurt you?" J.T. said.

He had already seen the scar on my arm, and I couldn't lie, so I nodded. "He broke my arm when I was nine months old."

"You remember that?" he asked softly.

"No sir," I said. "My mother told me the story."

"You want to talk about it?" he asked.

"No sir," I said. I'd already probably told him too much. "I'd better get going. Moon's up."

“Don’t forget your pig,” he said.

The pig still sat on the other side of the clearing, watching us with accusing eyes.

“Too big for me to carry,” I said. “Anyway, you killed it.”

“But you were going to,” he said. “If I hadn’t blundered into your hunt.”

I shrugged.

“Can you carry half a pig?” he asked.

I’ll spare you the next bit, it’s not for the squeamish, but I was just about to hoist the front half of the pig up on my shoulders when J.T. said. “So you’re not allowed to lie. What about stealing?”

“No sir,” I said. “You should never take anything that doesn’t belong to you.”

He just looked at me.

“You said I could have half!” I protested.

“Not talking about the pig,” he said.

That was when I realised I was still wearing his jersey. I went to take it off, but he held up a hand. “Keep it,” he said. “I’ll be around here for a few weeks. Drop it back to me some time.”

“Can’t,” I said. If I went home wearing it there would be hell to pay.

“Why?” he asked.

“Can’t tell you,” I said, stripping it off and tossing it to him over the remains of the fire.

Moma knew exactly where I’d been, even before I turned up with Crackerjack yapping around my heels,

half a pig carcass slung across my shoulders, and my clothes in a plastic bag.

“He’s a big’un,” was her first comment. I knew she was angry.

She was right to be. I was just about killed. Then all of this would have been for nothing.

“Where’s the rest of him?” she asked.

“Too big to carry,” I said. That was not a lie.

She helped me clean up the carcass and store it in the meat locker. Tomorrow we’ll make up some brine and start salting the pork. Then we’ll store it in the cave.

After we cleaned up I waited for my punishment, but all Moma did was to get out her guitar and we sang some Beatles songs.

She even did her wacky rain dance around the clay oven. I joined in, because as long as she was going crazy like that, she wouldn’t go crazy about what I did.

It didn’t seem like a punishment.

But I wonder if somehow I was getting punished in a way that I don’t understand.

BOOK I AM READING:

‘The Old Man and the Sea’.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY:

Reading back, there are too many exclamation marks.

I must stop writing so many exclamation marks!!

THINGS I AM NOT AFRAID OF:

The pig.