WINNER OF THE DAISY UTEMORRAH AWARD



ROBERT RUNS

MARIAH SWEETMAN



On a previous night of conspiring in the dormitory, the children had collectively agreed to only kill the Boss Man, but spare the lives of Miss Adams and Mr McRae, because they were mostly nice to the children.

"Oi, Robert, imagine how impressed Miss Adams would be. Think of her face if you speared Boss Man," Jonathan probed.

Goupong was thankful for the dark as he felt the heat spread in his cheeks. He wrung his hands in embarrassment.

"Why do you reckon all the white people keep talking to us about spears when we've never even seen one before? They're always acting like we'll somehow make them out of twigs," Goupong stated. "Aw boys, he's getting embarrassed! Hear that children?" Jonathan interrupted. "He's tryin' to change the subject!" he giggled. Goupong could hear the springs in Jonathan's bed as he sat up on his knees.

"I am not! Don't be stupid!" Goupong retaliated with a square hit to Jonathan's face in the dark. "I got beat by her – as if I love her!" Goupong argued.

"Woah!" Jonathan exclaimed. "Nobody said anything about *love*."

Goupong felt Jonathan poke him with his finger hard in the ribs.

"Whatever," was all Goupong could think to reply.

Jonathan started to speak but stifled it quickly as they heard footsteps on the veranda. All the children fell silent. They listened out for the thumps and squeaks of the footsteps on the wooden boards to recede. Surprisingly, none of the children spoke up. They each lay in their own reverie, longing for a life different to the one they were living.

Goupong froze. Did he hear correctly? It was a scratching sound that ended in a hiss. A rat? No, much too big. A snake? Snakes don't have claws.

"Jonathan," Goupong prodded Jonathan again.
"Jonathan, do you hear that?"

Goupong was gripped by an icy fear, he wanted to scream but he felt paralysed in his canvas cot. Alow growl echoed through the dormitory. He heard the scratching coming towards him, until he could almost feel the hot breath that accompanied the rumbling growl.

His eyes darted to the side to see Jonathan lying in his own cot. Goupong could see the whites of his eyes reflecting the moonlight and his mouth agape with horror. Goupong knew then that Jonathan was also aware of the sickening presence. They were not the only ones to hear the sound; from outside the window they heard the wild bleating of the mission sheep.

That night Goupong did not sleep, not even for a second.



Like whispers in the trees, the rumours came. First a trickle, then a flood. Trustworthy sources, terrified witnesses. White men had arrived on the shores of Eora Country then spread to Gubbi Gubbi Country, slowly extending their territory. They were insatiable, needing precious resources, building up and across.

"Have they stopped?" the Elder asked.

The traveller hung his head. "My family were slaughtered by fire bullets."

The men stood in silence, hanging their heads in despair.

"You may stay with us, son," the Elder said, touching the young man on his shoulder. "You have travelled far. You need rest."

The young man clenched his fists at his sides, "No, Elder. I must continue my journey. I must warn the tribes that they are coming."

The Elder looked out at the river. He had noticed the change in the waters. The change in the trees. The fish were different, too. He looked out to the east, where the

white men were coming from. He had seen an increase in travellers wandering in groups over the last few months. They were hungry, their food supplies cut off and their people killed by guns and disease.

"Just rest one night, young man," the Elder said gently. He looked down at the young man's thin frame, ribs and spine showing beneath his skin.

The young man sighed. "I am very tired," he croaked.

As the young man slept, the Elder sat by the river, watching its slow currents.

The Elder had heard of the dreadful thing happening on the coast for years. He watched the travellers passing through, all being pushed further and further to the west by the ever-expanding colonies. He'd heard rumours of the swarms of strange creatures brought over by big boats with white sails. At first these white people were friendly, mistaken for ghosts by the tribes, but very quickly their intentions were known. They outstayed their welcome.

"Ugarapul people have been on this Country since the beginning of time," the Elder whispered to the river. He listened to the croaking frogs. "Are we to lose it to the greedy?"

The next day, the white sails appeared on the river.

