

# Hunting the Thylacine

*by* Geoffrey Fox

## **Hobart, 1990**

In the cool, crisp air of Hobart, Tasmania, in September, a man stands at the end of a white dock and gazes past the white hulls and sails reflected in the deep blue water of Sullivan's Cove. His tweed jacket, buttoned against the chill, is a bit informal for a businessman on a tea-break, and his inspection of the defunct IXL Jam Factory on the opposite quay too sustained for a local stroller. In front of him are mounted photographs of the long masonry buildings through all the years, from the 1890s to the 1950s, when "IXL" was cooking, mashing and canning Tasmanian apples, pears and apricots for the breakfast tables of England. The black fumes pouring from the factory chimney would have been sweet with burnt sugar and fruit, and the smoke stack and masts of the waiting ship would have been rocking gently at the dock, like the small craft now bobbing brightly at their moorings.

The bright morning light strikes everything at a sharp angle, ricocheting off the boats, the white-painted docks, the glossy water, the flame-orange jacket of a young mother and the bright blue parka of her child as they enter a dark green, light-sucking restaurant at the end of the dock. The stranger follows, and queues for fish and chips and beer in a room noisy with shouted orders, crockery and sputtering grease. At a chilly, but quiet, dockside table he looks at the label on the beer bottle, "Cascade." A pair of yellowish quadrupeds with striped backs are pictured, generic and lifeless, in a vague landscape of green hills, grayish lagoon, and darkening yellow sky — smogged up from the jam factory, no doubt.

In a map-and-prints shop back on Terra Firma, he asks to see animals. Obliging, almost servilely, the thin, nearsighted storekeeper limps to a rack of drawings of the fauna of Tasmania: echidna and platypus; yellow-eyed currawongs, gaudy cockatoos and chubby black mutton birds; kangaroos, Tasmanian devils, and other marsupials, and finally a tinted print with all the beasts of the island,

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assembled as though for a conference or to embark on Noah's ark, in inked outlines, pastel colorings and placid poses.

"Ah, there's the Tasmanian tiger," the visitor says in an American accent, maybe midwestern. "It's called a 'thylacine,' right?"

"Thylacine, yes."

"Un huh. Thylacine. Extinct now, isn't it?"

"Oh! Let's hope not!"

"I thought the last one died in the nineteen-thirties?"

"Oh, yes, the last one in captivity. In the zoo."

Air escapes from his lungs, and he seems to deflate and shrink as he says this. But suddenly he puffs up again and almost shouts.

"But there are still sightings, every now and then! And by people who should know. Rangers, in the mountains."

The American nods quickly and backs away. When a couple comes in, the American slips out.

A block away, at the Tasmanian Museum, he locates the single stuffed specimen described as "Thylacinus cynocephalus, 'pouched dog with a wolf's head,' commonly called 'Tasmanian tiger' or 'Tasmanian wolf.'... a semi-nocturnal marsupial carnivore; its pouch opens to the rear. It is unrelated to dogs, cats, or any other animal except the much smaller 'Tasmanian devil.'"

The thing in the case is about wolf-size, but the proportions are odd — the hock, or "dogleg," only inches above the foot, so that most of the hindleg is a single long, unbending bone, and the tail seems too straight and long. The forelegs are almost stubby, and the shoulders look less muscular than the haunches. It has short, stiff hairs, yellowish brown with dark, nearly black stripes across its back and the top of its tail. On the floor of the case lie the skulls of another thylacine and a dog, for comparison. The thylacine has more teeth, among other differences.

In the nineteenth century, says the placard, sheep-breeders used poison, traps and guns to exterminate them, and the Van Diemen's Land Company, and later the Tasmanian Parliament, paid bounties for their scalps. The last known thylacine was snared in the Florentine Valley in 1933. It was sold to the Hobart Zoo, where it

died on the 7th of September, 1936, the same year the Tasmanian tiger was declared to be a protected species.

He glances at the stuffed kangaroos, wallabies and little potoroos and bettongs, the platypus and echidna, and a furry “sugar glider,” with webbing between its fore and hindfeet for sailing through the air, stuffed and suspended from wires as though in midflight, and gives even less attention to a gaudy array of dead beetles from around the world, before following the signs to the exhibit about the Tasmanian Aborigines. Labels explain, disapprovingly, that English colonists hunted down the natives until, by the mid-nineteenth century, big, black William Lanney, photographed in suit and tie, and little Trucanini, in Victorian gown and jacket, were the last known survivors, and when they died, the race was thought to be extinct.

A few school children and a man and his son stumble in and look dumbly at the crude bamboo spears and spear-throwers and the stone knives. One boy looks sideways at an illuminated turn-of-the-century photo of another black lady, a later-than-last survivor, and when he presses a button, a scratchy recording of a woman's voice sings Christian hymns mixed with seemingly tuneless songs in a language that even she had forgotten. But on another wall are photographs of lighter-skinned people, described as contemporary Aborigines — descendants of white sealers and their black concubines of over a hundred years ago, reclaiming a heritage that, presumably, they now have to make up.

### **The valley, Tasmania, 1934**

Billy Rourke was so mad he was going to burst, he was shivering with rage as he stomped into the bush, clutching his father's kangaroo gun by the barrel. He didn't have to stomp far — gum trees, ferns and then the celerytop pines quickly hid him from sight of their box-like little house with its filthy chickens scratching around the coop. And he had to stop stomping, anyway — he knew the trail, but still he had to be careful where he stepped, because the bush was full of snakes.

“‘E's got no right. No right at all. It wa'n't my fault, and 'e knows it. Besides, 'e was pissed. Grog is what does 'at to 'im.”

He trembled until he finally let it out, in a vehement, hoarse whisper.

“God damn 'm!”

And he cried, little short sobs and tears burning in his eyes. That was enough, it was plenty, because it was just between him and God, and God could hear him even if he just thought it and didn't say it at all.

Billy was 15 and nearly as big as his pa. That was what made it so humiliating. He should have twisted out of his grasp and run away. Or he should have pushed the old man. But he couldn't and didn't really want to. He was his pa, after all. And if he got a mind to take a switch off that old apricot tree and light into him with it, even if there weren't no reason, Billy was supposed to just stand there and take it. And it hurt, it hurt all right, right through the thin shirt and mended pants. The old man was still strong, especially when he was mad. But what hurt wasn't so much the stinging of the switch against his twisting back and thighs, it was that here he was, Billy, 15 and nearly grown, and this man, his pa, was doing this to him. And for something that wasn't even his fault.

Something had got at the chooks, filthy old chooks scrabbling around their coop, tore a hole in the chicken wire and made off with a hen. Billy was supposed to take care of the chooks and the fence, but there wasn't nothing wrong with the fence before, just somethin' come nobody coulda been expecting. What made it worse was it was that fat old black one that wasn't such a good layer anymore but that his pa had been eyeing for a stew. Somebody else had got Pa's meal from 'im. Black feathers all over around the hole in the fence, ripped open at about two feet above the dirt.

Having to keep his mind on his footing distracted him from his anger. As he got deeper into the damp, chilly woods, he became aware of their dampness and chill penetrating his wool jacket. It was dark in here, deep shadows texturing the gray: gray brown mud, gray green leaves against gray blue branches, accented by the black

of a lightning-charred limb tangled among the grays. The wood was his refuge, its darkness an extension of his mood, externalizing it, enveloping him in its shadow like a like-minded companion. The wood was, in some way he couldn't quite grasp or say, his parent. His mother, perhaps. Walking in the woods was like letting his mother hold him, which he was too big to do now, even though sometimes he wished he could. He kept walking along the muddy trail, and he heard the forest sighing with him as gradually his sharp anxious breaths slowed, grew longer, deeper.

In the shadows now, his body quiet and alert, Billy began thinking, listening to the wood and feeling the cold damp through his jacket and the soft, cold, moist earth beneath his cracked, laced boots, becoming aware as if for the first time of the hard smooth cold barrel of the rifle in his hand. He looked at another black limb tangled among the grays. A black currawong perched on it was examining him with its yellow eyes, and Billy remembered the hole in the chicken wire and the lovely swirl of black feathers and fluffy gray down around the rent fence. He'd grabbed the gun from behind the kitchen door without thinking about it, just because he wanted to go out deep into the woods and because he was so angry he wanted to shoot something, a wallaby maybe, or a bunch of currawongs or any bloody thing. But he didn't feel like shooting the currawong that was perched just a few feet away from him. He knew, even if he'd wanted to, the bird would take flight as soon as he moved to lift his gun.

Now he thought again. Maybe he could shoot whatever it was got the chook. It wasn't a snake, which was what usually got at them. And it probably wasn't a devil — they didn't go for tearing up fences, and it was sort of high for one of them. Coulda been a dog, but he didn't know of any dogs gone wild around here.

He'd been reading an American book he'd got from his cobbler Harry, it had a bad smell of mildew 'cause Harry'd had to hide it somewhere, maybe on the floor under his bed, so's his mum didn't catch him reading. Same with Billy, his pa didn't care much but his mum would whip him if she caught him ruining his eyes on

something wasn't school work or the Bible. The book was about a hunter named Mackenzie, in the mountains, the Rockies, tracking a mountain lion by following its footprints and other little signs, like broken twigs where the cat had passed and sometimes even a few little hairs from his coat. Billy and Harry'd never done any tracking, you can't track a mutton bird and the way they hunted kangaroos was they just went out to where they knew they'd probably find some and looked around and waited and then, bang! But tracking a mountain lion, that would be an adventure.

'Course, the mountains around here weren't so high as the Rockies, and they didn't have the same kinds of trees. Most of all, there weren't any mountain lions. But, he thought, there could be tigers. Probably. Used to be, used to be lots. Billy's Uncle Conrad, his mother's half-brother, had a pelt, he called it a Van Diemen's wolf but looked more like a tiger to Billy, with those stripes. Besides, "tiger" sounded meaner and bigger.

Billy had never hunted anything that could fight back. He thought about that tiger, the one he'd now decided must have got that chook, and it got bigger and meaner the more he thought about it.

In the woods, a tawny, striped figure pushed away from the ground with a thrust of its forepaws and rocked back to rest on its long hindlegs and tail. Thus tripodally erect, its forelegs held loosely in front of its chest and its thick, long neck stretching up and forward, its sightline was above the highest ferns and its quivering nose high above the confusing wealth of smells at ground level.

It was a female, and hungry. Until today, she had been carrying her three cubs and had barely been able to hunt. Months before, tiny, hairless and almost weightless, they had emerged from her womb and she had felt them groping the short trail to the opening of her second womb, the pouch. Once inside, each had attached itself to a teat and suckled. For the first few days, their minute weight, their tiny movements, the tugging at the teats inside her pouch, the new smell of her own milk had been almost the only sensations she was aware of. In the following weeks, she stopped trying to rear up

on her hind legs, because of the cubs' increasing weight and because she knew they might fall out. They had gotten so big that they dragged her pouch to the ground as she walked, and she could no longer lope through the bush mile after mile, pursuing wallabies or potoroos.

Her mate would normally have done the hunting then, bringing whole birds or a pademelon or the bloody haunch of a kangaroo to the lair. Her mate also would have mounted her again by now, now that this, her first litter, was empouched. But months back, even before the embryonic cubs had emerged from her uterus, he had fallen into a snare, not far from the lair. She had heard three hoarse, startled barks which, though she had seldom heard it, she knew to be his voice. She had poked her head from the lair, not daring to rear up, and faintly but surely, she had smelled men. Her short, blunt ears, standing straight up, caught the sounds of bodies clumsily crashing through the bush and a man's curses and then laughter.

The cubs had come normally and had continued to grow, suckling on her teats, but for the past several weeks their mother had had very little to eat. Little birds, a lizard — she had even gnawed on roots with her sharp teeth, meant to tear meat. In desperation only the night before last, she had crept to the edge of the woods, the weight dragging under her belly making every step a strain. Cautiously, cautiously, she stopped every few feet to sniff the air and catch any sounds, careful to move against the slight, betraying air-current toward her goal. Her nostrils caught the green, minty scent of eucalyptus, the powerful and more significant odor of chicken shit and newly scratched earth, and something else that made her hesitate — the not-too-distant smell of a dog's sweat.

Trembling, she had crept to the wire fence. A sudden swipe of her short, powerful forepaw stretched an opening in the wire, and her head darted in and her jaws snapped through the back of a sleeping hen so swiftly it barely had a chance to squawk. Then, much more quickly than she had arrived, she loped back, the weight of the pouch between her hind legs partly counterbalanced by the warm,

jerking chicken bleeding in her jaws as she lurched into the relative safety of the bush.

But that had been more than a day ago, and since then she had had no meat. This morning at the edge of the lair she had raised herself upright, straightening her hind legs and standing tall, leaning back against her thick-based tail, and, even though she knew it was too early for them, let the weight of the cubs and the taut stretching of her belly force them to scramble to keep their grip until finally they tumbled out, one on top of the other. She dropped down again to all fours, and with her nose sought out one who had tumbled a little further and was beginning to overcome his bewilderment and to test his new environment with a forepaw, and nosed him back with the others and pushed them all to the back of the cave, their little furry bodies huddled tight against one another. Then, confident that they would not venture out, she leapt the few feet from the rock ledge to the ground and disappeared into the bush.

Now, in mid-morning, too hungry to wait for dusk, she stood up on her hind legs and tail for the second time that day and sniffed the air.

Billy'd thought of maybe going to get Harry to come with him, Harry and the Rourkes' dog Rex. It wasn't that he was afraid exactly, it was just that it was always good to have your mate along. Because you never know. Maybe there was more than one tiger. And even if it was just one, a fellow wanted to have his back covered, because tigers were sneaky creatures, his Uncle Con had told him. But if he went back for Harry, he'd have to pass by his own house, and that didn't feel right, now that his original impulse — the rage that had started him off into the woods — had carried him so deep, so far from home. And he didn't want to face his pa again until he could show him, show him what had took the chook in the first place and that it hadn't been Billy's fault and that now he'd killed the tiger. Besides, that hunter Mackenzie in the American book had done all his hunting by himself. Made a point of it, just him and the mountain



and the mountain lion, it was the efficient way of the hunter. Well, Billy would do the same.

Of course the sensible thing to do, if he were a real tracker, would be to go back to the coop and see if he could pick up a trail. Well, it was too late to do that, and wouldn't do any good anyway, because him and his pa had messed up the ground so much with their scuffling feet when his pa had grabbed Billy and started hitting him right there where the fence was torn.

Anyway, Billy wasn't really tracking, not the scientific way anyway, by looking for clues on the ground. He was instead listening to his own impulses, the same ones that told him it was a tiger that got the chook. He was trying to think the way Mackenzie did: If I was a tiger, where 'ud I go? He had just a feeling, a hunch, fed by his hearing that a tiger had been caught in the area less than a year ago, and by his memories of what his Uncle Con had said about tigers when he was a boy. His hunch, what he chose to believe, was that there were more of them out in the area near where that last one'd been caught.

He hadn't seen it, but his pa had read about it in the paper and there'd been talk on the radio and in school about it. They'd sent it to the zoo down in Hobart. Billy'd never been to Hobart and never seen a zoo, although his big brother had gone there a year ago to work in the jam factory — if it'd been Billy, he'd have gone to sea. Billy's teacher'd said the tigers'd become very rare, and there was some people wanted the government to make it a crime to kill them, but most people just thought they was nuisances and they should kill them all off. But his Uncle Con had a different attitude.

Uncle Con was kind of a queer fellow, Billy's pa was right about that. He didn't like Con coming around the house, so when Billy wanted to see him he had to go out to Con's cabin in the woods. It wasn't much of a cabin — his pa had called it a "humpy," and Billy's mum had got mad and his pa had said he was sorry but that Con's house was sorrier still. He said it in that way he had where he'd say the meanest, cruelest things but with a smile, like you was supposed to laugh at his joke, but Billy's mum hadn't laughed and the whole

house was in gloom for days after.

For Billy, Con was part of the woods, just as much as the kangaroos and gum trees and the currawongs. His dark brown eyes on those yellowish eyeballs would look at you and through you and beyond you as he talked about the old times, not just tigers but kangaroo hunting and bushrangers and the sealers over on the little islands, some things he'd seen and some he'd heard from his mother. He had the same pa as Billy's mum, but Con's mother was some lady Billy'd never seen and nobody ever talked about, not even Con himself. Con just laughed and changed the subject whenever Billy'd asked about her. He didn't even know if that other, sort-of grandmother, was still alive. Billy had learned that Con had some other brothers and sisters, though, who weren't brothers and sisters of Billy's mum. It made him awfully curious.

Con had hunted the "wolves," as he called them, for the bounty when he was a kid. The government was paying a pound per head, but there was a rich farmer paying one-and-twelve, even after the government bounty stopped back in oh-nine. They'd needed the money, Con'd said — which was another reminder of Con's differentness, that he'd grown up in a poorer household than Billy's mum.

Anyway, Con said he'd only collected the bounty once. He knew how to track the "wolves," and he'd followed one and come up on it from downwind and surprised it, and he said it stood up on its hind legs and looked at him with almost a human expression, fear and pleading, and he'd pulled the trigger. Then in order to collect the bounty, he had to cut off its head, and he said when he did that, he knew he was never going to shoot a Van Diemen's wolf again. He mentioned a brother Tolly, lots older than he, or maybe it was a cousin, who'd caught one in a snare, and the animal was so nervous and frightened it gave off a series of high-pitched barks, like a small dog only it didn't really sound like a dog, and then it went stiff and its heart stopped. Con said he'd decided to leave the wolves alone, that they belonged to the woods just as much as he did. He'd kept the pelt of the one he'd shot, must have been ten years before Billy

was born, so it would be about twenty-five years old now. It wasn't very big, not even as big as the hide of their mongrel Rex. As Billy reflected on this, and the stories he'd heard from Con, a lot of his fear of the tiger evaporated, only to come back when he remembered other things he'd heard, about how vicious they were and that they killed sheep. He wanted to still his fear, so that he could dare to go on in his hunt, but at the same time he wanted to convince himself that the animal was dangerous, so that the hunt would be worthwhile. So as he walked deeper into the area where he thought that last tiger had been caught, and closer also to where Con kept his "humpy," he kept alternating frightening himself and calming himself, trying to keep the two emotions in balance.

She had caught a scent and dropped quickly, silently to all fours. She hadn't yet seen her prey, but she was certain it was a wallaby. She slipped easily through the woods, crouching under the lowest branches, slowed only by the thick ferns, leafy at ground level, and the occasional fallen branches where she had to squeeze underneath, ducking her head and shoulders through and then stretching her long hindlegs behind her as she pulled with her forelegs. She was intensely aware of her hunger and eager for the kill.

The wallaby, grazing in a clearing, sensed her and suddenly jerked upright. She stood still, eyes fixed on the wallaby which was now looking around, its weak eyes trying to sense some movement. It was full grown, probably at least as heavy as she was, and its kicks and powerful tail lashings would be dangerous if it were cornered. But she knew it would choose to run, or rather hop, rather than fight as long as it had the choice. The trick was simply to get and stay as close to it as possible, until the moment to move in for the kill.

Now it seemed to see her, and wheeled around and leaped into the woods. The predator lunged after, keeping lower to the ground. And of course, unlike the wallaby, her hindlegs moved independently. In its panic, the wallaby crashed through the brush,

while she loped in pursuit, trying to stay below the branches and twigs. The wallaby, seemingly unsure of which way to turn, would suddenly change course and bound off in another direction. The predator followed, far enough behind that she could take shortcuts toward the wallaby's present position. Some instinct was taking the wallaby to higher ground, to a steep ascent that he managed with great ease with his long, powerful hindlegs, his thick, almost conical tail waving up and down with each bound. The predator followed that tail and the noise of branches breaking and of the wallaby's weight landing, over and over. Scrambling where the wallaby leaped, she was sometimes only a few meters behind and never too far to locate her prey. The chase was taking her far from her lair, but no matter, she'd go as far as she had to. The panic of the wallaby gave her an advantage, offsetting his superior speed. With all his twists and turns and darting about he would not be able to keep up his flight for many hours. Nothing could distract her from her pursuit, not even another, smaller wallaby that suddenly bounded up and off in another direction, startled by the panic of his cousin. Not even the potoroos scampering out of their way. Still less the currawongs screeching and cawing and waiting to share the kill. Nothing could distract her, unless —

Another sound, another smell, familiar and menacing, not yet clear to her what it meant. Still, she kept after her prey until, a roar, a crash, much louder than a crashing branch, more like a great Huon pine falling to the forest floor, and a pungent smell of gunpowder. Man!

She stopped, thrusting both forelegs stiff in front of her, her haunches nearly folding into her shoulders from the suddenness of the halt. She listened. The wallaby could no longer be heard leaping and crashing through the brush. The birds no longer screeched. She held very still, jaw dropped and tongue out, ears straight up, chest heaving silently, only her tail, moving stiffly but slowly, betraying her nervousness. She knew, without knowing why, that the shadows of the wood blended with the stripes of her coat to make her nearly invisible, and so she waited for some clear sign of danger or

opportunity. Her hunger was for the moment forgotten.

Billy had got him a wallaby. He had been all kinds of nervous, thinking about tigers, and mountain lions, and all of a sudden up popped this big wallaby, really surprised him. A wallaby doesn't usually come out in the open like that, especially not around a man, but here he was, leaping right at Billy, and Billy with his gun at the ready because of what was on his mind, and Bang!

Well, it wasn't a tiger, but it was something. He'd got it skinned by now, wasn't worth much but you could always get something for a skin. Got a lot of bloodstains on him, especially his pants, but he didn't mind that, except that it made the cloth stiff. His mum would put her hands to her mouth when she saw him. Poor mum. Maybe he'd just stay out tonight, now that he'd got something to eat. Mum'd worry, and he didn't want that, and Pa'd be angry, but it'd serve 'im right, and wouldn't be the first time anyway. Well, yes, it would be the first time all alone, out in the woods. If he'd planned this, he would have brought a handful of matches from the kitchen stove, and maybe a blanket.

He was on the east side of the ridge, so the sun was going down early, and it was getting cold. Mackenzie would know how to make a fire. Now if he could just find some dry wood— He liked wallaby, but he wasn't about to eat it raw.

The cicadas were coming out now, and the currawongs were making their evening noises. Billy was sitting on the ground in a clearing, his back up against a log. The clearing wasn't wide, but he could see a fair-sized patch of sky. There weren't many stars, too cloudy, going to rain, he thought. He was tired from the long hike. The rifle had felt heavy after a while, and that dead wallaby on his shoulder must have weighed near as much as he did. He'd had to carry it for about an hour before he found a clearing that he liked. It looked like he wasn't going to have a fire tonight. He could stretch the skin on the ground, fur side up of course, because the other side was all bloody, and he could lie on that. He wished he had a blanket. He sort of laughed at himself. "Billy, look what you done, where

you've got yourself, all because you wanted to catch a tiger, and you know there's no tigers been around here since they got that one last fall, and that was the only one anybody'd got for years and years." "Well," he answered himself, "maybe there is a tiger or even a lot of tigers. They're just hard to find, that's all."

She had been following the man with the rifle ever since she saw him lift up the dead wallaby. He had taken her wallaby and now he'd settled down not far from her lair, where he had been for hours. She wanted that wallaby. She had hunted it, tired it, and it was hers. But she couldn't just stay here waiting forever. She had to eat something.

That shouldn't be such a problem now. It was her time, early evening. The small animals came out now. She backed out of the spot where she had been watching the man with the gun and turned her head, slowly, testing the air first in one direction, then another. Still, she was reluctant to leave the man with the wallaby.

The rain made Billy want to move to cover. He dragged the skin and his rifle over to the edge of the clearing and found himself a more or less level spot where only a few raindrops came through the overhead leaves. He lay back and flung one arm over his face, and ran thoughts of mountain lions and tigers through his head. He liked feeling the rifle snug against him. He thought of that tiger pelt that Uncle Con had, and tried to imagine the tiger that had worn that pelt. And he tried to imagine Con as the hunter Mackenzie. He wished he'd got further in that book. Harry'd thought it was pretty exciting at the end. Looked like that lion was going to play some tricks on Mackenzie. Animals can be pretty smart. Not the animals we got around here, maybe, but those Rocky Mountain lions are terribly clever.

He heard some noises not far away. Pademelons, probably. If he'd only brought some bloody matches! Without a fire, animals will bother you all night. Creation! They're making an awful bloody noise! He flung his arm off his face and sat up. He didn't see any

animals, but sometimes it took a while, you had to look real close, but in a kind of relaxed way. In the dark, you could sometimes make out an animal only if you didn't look right at him, but a little to the side. But this was a gnawing and a tearing he heard. Funny noise, not like a pademelon or a wallaby. Wallaby! His wallaby! He'd left the skinned carcass back near the log where he'd been resting.

Billy grabbed his gun and quickly rolled himself up to a crouch and ran toward the wallaby carcass. But he'd loosened his boots and one of them started to come off in the mud, which slowed him down. Then he heard one louder tear and a loud crunch and a scurry of feet, and he could just make out a sole animal as it scampered off, its tail waving almost straight out behind its bouncing rump.

There was just a bit of starlight coming through the clouds — it was still raining, but lightly. Billy could see how the carcass had been dragged and torn apart. It no longer looked like a wallaby at all, but like parts of seven or eight smaller animals. One hip and hindleg were completely gone. The marauder had gnawed or crunched right through the bone. Devils could do that, two or three devils could have done it in the few minutes it had taken him to put the sound together with danger and rush up to protect his prize. But he'd seen that it was just one animal, much bigger than a devil. And the way it ran, unevenly, with its hindquarters rising and pushing.

Billy's heart was racing now. He knew what it was, and he could hardly believe it. But he had to believe it. His thoughts flickered on Mackenzie and abandoned that image at once. This was real, this was here, he didn't need the Rockies or some other country's wildcats.

He frantically pulled up and tightened his boots and plunged into the brush, following the tiger, his rifle grasped high to clear the ferns. He knew there wouldn't be anything at all left of the wallaby when he got back — the devils would probably take care of it, and if they didn't there were always the ravens and the little tiger cats. But it didn't matter, and it didn't matter that he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. He was after a tiger.

She raced back through the woods, but only a little ways, slowed by the weight in her jaws. She stopped, dropped the bloody limb and attacked it again, quickly tearing it apart and swallowing quickly, noisily. She didn't hear the man until he was almost upon her. Startled by the cracking of a branch and the shwoofing sound of a heavy foot sinking into the mud, she looked up and saw a glint of starlight on metal. She crouched low and tore again at the meat and swallowed a chunk whole before twisting around to resume her path, racing through a tunnel between the soft ground and the low branches.

The gun roared in her ears for the second time that day.

Billy was pretty sure his shot had gone wide, and he rushed forward to get off another one when his toe ran into a soft lump and he nearly fell on his face, catching himself on some branches. He groped in the darkness and found cold, bloody, hairless flesh. He whistled as he felt around it, sensing how easily the tiger had cut right through the bone. At least he'd interrupted its dinner. But it was far off now, and moving much faster than he could in the dark. He'd have to wait for daylight.

Billy had barely dozed, wrapped in his wallaby skin against the cold and wet, waiting anxiously for the first dawn. He couldn't stop shivering. He was thirsty and tore off some leaves of a gum tree and started chewing as he tried to stretch the kinks out of his back and opened his pants to pee. The warm yellow stream steamed as it hit the leaves and the cold mud. He looked around as he shook himself and stuffed himself back into his pants and buttoned up, all the time twisting his back and shoulders to loosen up the cold, cramped muscles. He must have slept more soundly than he'd thought. His clearing had had visitors. There was now nothing whatever left of the wallaby except the skin that he'd had wrapped around him. Even the skull had been eaten, except for the part of the jaw with those big white grass-chomping teeth. Plenty of tracks. He guessed there



had been four or five devils at work. Wouldn't have taken them long.

But he wasn't interested in the devils, and he sure didn't care about the wallaby. He threw the skin down. Let 'em eat that too, if they wanted. And they probably would. He just wanted to find that tiger.

It took him several minutes, in that gray first light, to find the spot where he'd fired on the tiger. The bloody chunks of meat were gone, of course, but he could tell from the broken branches that this was where he'd stumbled. As the sky lightened a little more, he could see where his bullet had gone through leaves and knocked off a small branch. He followed to where it must have gone into the earth. No sign of blood, but there were broken twigs very close by and what looked like fresh tracks, like a devil's but bigger, with longer spaces between them. He couldn't be sure, but he thought, or at least felt, that he could discern the direction the tiger had gone.

Several times he doubted that he was still going in the right direction, or that the tracks he was following were still those of the tiger and not of a devil or of the smaller, tree-climbing spotted carnivore they called a tiger cat. But then he'd come upon a distinctive pawprint, and a fresh break in a branch made by the passing of a larger animal. The sun meanwhile was climbing — he could tell by the angle of the rays coming through the forest canopy like individual skinny columns of light. He reckoned it to be about six o'clock now, and that it had been before five when he'd started. But he'd lost the trail again, and stood very still, looking all around, puzzling what to do. Then he heard something.

It could have been anything, any of the hundreds of species of animals hunting or browsing on the forest floor or on the lower limbs. A goanna, a potoroo, a bird even. Then he heard either the same sound or another one, he couldn't be sure, a scratching and brushing, and then a little “yip!” of a small animal. He faced where he thought the sound came from, reached the barrel of his rifle ahead to clear the branches and stepped quietly but firmly forward.

There was something, in deep shadow. A dark bulk. It didn't move, and it took him a moment to tell what it was. Something under a

ledge, making a shallow cave. He readied his rifle and studied the outline of the cave, following the rim with his eyes. Everything was either in deep shade or dappled by the narrow columns of sunlight shooting through the leaves. Yellows, grays, blue-grays, green-grays, browns. He noticed something his eyes had just passed over a second before, a branch or twig leaning against the cave. No, leaning into the cave, or coming out of it. He puzzled over this and then he saw it twitch, and his own shoulders twitched in sudden, uncontrolled reflex. A snake! No. Not a snake. A tail, the end of a thick, straight tail. Dappled or perhaps striped.

As he stood there, in those few moments, the sun rose slightly, enough so as to change the angles of the rays, and now he could see more clearly what was before him. It was the tiger, but not at all as he expected to find it, on all fours and ready to fight or run. It was lying on its side with its long hind legs stretched out before it, almost like a kangaroo, and it was staring at Billy, its eyes narrowed in sharp, tense focus and its mouth slightly open. Billy almost imagined it was smiling or laughing at him, like his pa when he wanted Billy to know how stupid and useless he thought he was. Billy was trembling now again, not with fear but with the rage he'd felt almost twenty-four hours earlier, when he'd started out on this adventure. He was going to kill that tiger, but at the same time he didn't know if he dared, the same way he hadn't dared fight back when his pa had grabbed him and started in with the switch. Defying what scorned you, it was like blasphemy. He remembered the audacity of his "God damn" just the day before, and wondered if God had heard and what he'd think of him. His arms were trembling as he aimed the rifle, trembling from the muscles pulling him to fire and the muscles pulling him to lower the gun and surrender to the cruel, sarcastic sneer.

Then he heard the "yip!" again. The tiger's mouth and throat hadn't moved, as far as he could see. But he noticed something else, a movement under the topmost hindleg, a kind of tussle. And he saw a tiny paw and the blunt end of a tiny snout, which then ducked back under the fur. Then he understood. And he lowered the end of his

rifle slowly, not because he'd given up the idea of shooting the tiger, but because now he knew the tiger was not about to spring up and run away. He had seen enough wallabies and kangaroos to know what was going on. She was nursing, and from the movements under the fur of her lower belly, it looked like there were more than one young one in there.

He looked again at the face. It wasn't a sneer. It was a look of fear and paralysis. But as the little ones tumbled around beneath her bellyskin, he saw her nose rise ever so slightly and her eyes half close, as though for the moment she had become more aware of them than of him. It changed things, somehow, to think of his tiger as somebody's mum. But she'd taken his pa's chook. He raised the rifle once again, this time not in anger but regret. And this time there wasn't any fear of blasphemy to hold him back.

### **The road back, 1990**

They must have left much later than planned, because it was already after 11 o'clock when Jonni and Andrew stopped outside Deloraine. Andrew had been driving this time. As he got out of the little compact rented car he tried to smile, but it was a crooked smile, and — perhaps he was just sleepy, or fighting sleep, but his eyes looked different, not dreamy and vague but intense. There was a dark spot under his left eye, a smudge or a bruise. He hadn't shaven. Jonni, in the passenger seat, did not move at first, just stared forward as though not seeing anything, probably not seeing the sign announcing tea and coffee, the white-painted boards. Andrew stood just a little to the right of the front end of the car, shivering in the cold morning air, stretching and rolling his shoulders, his neck. At last the passenger door opened and Jonni's mudcaked pantsleg emerged.

“‘Emohruo’?” Jonni had the habit of reading signs aloud, sometimes just for the pleasure of the sounds.

“Read it backward,” he answered curtly.

“Oh, I get it. Like 'IXL,' the jam factory in Hobart. Tasmanian word games. There, 'Rourke's Devonshire Tea and Scones.' Sounds

more promising."

"Yeah."

"Hey, snap out of it!"

Andrew stood silently, sullenly.

"You've been like that all morning. What did you want to do? Tell me! Stay up in the mountains until you found your tiger?"

"No!"

It had been Andrew's insistence to travel into the wilds of Cradle Mountain to find the beast, ever since he'd seen one stuffed in the museum in Hobart. Sightings had been reported, the museum placard said, even though scientists were sure that the island's largest carnivorous marsupial was extinct. At Cradle Mountain, he had at least seen the jerky, silent, three-minute film of the last known one, incessantly pacing his cage in London before dying apparently of anxiety in 1928.

Now Andrew, his body rigid, his footsteps loud and heavy, his face scowling, marched to the door and pushed it harder than necessary. Two men at the only occupied table in the place looked up, and when Andrew said "Good morning," they replied more politely than might have been expected. Jonni smiled in their direction.

When they were seated and had given their order to the middle-aged woman who was probably the owner, Andrew leaned across the table and said again, in a lower voice but in the same tone, "No! It's a myth. There is no tiger, there are no Aborigines, they killed them all off and now they want to pretend they didn't."

"Yes, well, but you knew that. You knew that before we left Hobart."

"I knew it, I knew it, but I wanted to see it."

"See what? The absence of a thylacine?"

"Look, I know! Will you leave me alone? It's over."

"What's over? Hey! God, Andrew, I hate it when you're like this."

"I hate this place. I wish we'd never come. But anyway, it's over. We're going. You want to see the east coast, we'll see the east coast. But this, my part, it's over."

"But you wanted to— Oh, never mind. I don't even know why I

bother to argue. You wanted to come, you said you loved it, you had to go up into the mountains. We have only two days, I want to see the coastline, but you have to come to the mountains, and I say, fine, let's go. For you, for you I do this. I don't know why I bother."

"It's over. That's all, it's over. They killed it."

"‘It?’ What do you mean? The tiger?"

They went on like that, unpleasant, one angry, the other exasperated, one repeating the same or similar angry phrases, the other talking optimistically about things they'd seen, the wild animals, the beautiful mountains and forests, the flocks of sheep, the things they had yet to see.

"Oh, right. The old prisons you mean? I can't wait. Wonderful place Tasmania. Shackles and whips and torture machines."

"Oh, Andrew, stop it! Look at where you are! Now! Not at ghosts. You're chasing the past, and it's, it's past!"

"That's right. Ghosts. This place is haunted!"

"You're haunted. The place is just a place, with people living here, making a living, getting on as best they can."

Andrew trembled and his clenched fist crumbled the scone and knocked into the sugar bowl. Jonni, embarrassed, looked around, and suddenly saw a photograph on the wall above them, one of a group of old family portraits. Unlike the others, this one had been tinted and was labeled in ink that has turned brown over the years.

"What's it say there? Can you make it out?"

"What?" Andrew barked, and looked up. "The kid in uniform? Another militarist."

"Skinny young man. I'll bet he was tall. What does it say?"

No response from Andrew, now turned away from the photo and glaring toward the window and their muddy rented car beyond. His companion had to stand and lean partway over the table to get a better look.

"‘Sgt. William Rourke, 1919 Beulah, 1942 New Guinea,’ it says. Then, in bigger letters, ‘Remember me.’"

Still no response from Andrew.

There was another room in the frame tea house and restaurant,

with tables set for lunch or dinner, though no one was in there now and the curtains were drawn. At another time, in another mood, Andrew might have gone in to look around, examining everything with his voracious, restless curiosity. But now it is Jonni who gets up and walks toward the darkened room, but then stops, stretching and yawning, and turns away toward another door labeled, in that straightforward Australian fashion, "Toilet." And for that reason never sees the striped pelts on the wall, three of them very small.

- END -

