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# THE DECEMBER BOYS

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*The December Boys* is set in the 1930s, before the outbreak of the Second World War. The economic Depression of the early 1930s hit Australasia especially hard; the deserted camp and the boarded-up caves the boys discover at Captain's Folly were typical of a number of temporary dwelling places set up by the jobless and destitute.

‘Have you anything more to confess, my son?’

The husky whisper came from the dark shape behind the metal grille, the head of the priest.

Yes, I had but I was having trouble getting it off my chest.

So far my sins had been routine and unspectacular: swear words; the name of Jesus Christ taken in vain; laughing in church; telling lies about washing my feet at night, and behind my ears; morning and evening prayers ignored. Yet I felt I had an excuse for abandoning prayer since I was already treading the strands of what seemed tantamount to anyone's paradise – Roman Catholic, Protestant or whatever.

‘Speak up, my son.’

How could I explain? It was no fault of mine that I had come by the information. It had been thrust on me, a sort of forbidden fruit. Yet I had been given no choice but to partake of it.

'I've got a secret,' I said at last.

'A secret, my son?'

'Yes, Father.'

'And it troubles you?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Perhaps you have been tempted by bad thoughts?'

My acquaintance with the world of the flesh had not yet begun in the way that he suggested, but I had most certainly been having bad thoughts of a kind. In fact, for some ten days my life had been one long bad thought. The information I had overheard was precious, and I had been obsessed with thinking how to stop it from reaching the sunburnt ears of my four companions.

'A secret can be a sin, my son.'

I was afraid of that.

'It will ease your mind to unburden yourself?'

So I told him. I revealed how I had been an eavesdropper, quite unintentionally, to a conversation between a man named Fearless Foley and another called Shellback O'Leary, and how the woman Teresa was involved.

It set him a problem not frequently posed by a customer aged just twelve. He pondered in that curtained box where the dark birds of conscience were uncaged and vanquished. As I knelt in the confessional, the silence

outside was choked with prayer. It was broken only by the clatter of the forgiven and the about-to-be-forgiven in and out of the pews.

'My son,' came the whisper, 'in keeping this knowledge to yourself are you being fair to the others? By remaining silent it is possible that you are being selfish, and that in itself can be sinful in the eyes of God. Surely, then, for your own peace of mind it would be best for you to tell the other boys all that you overheard. Share the secret with them, my son. The good things of life, and the burdens, are all the better if they are shared.'

He droned absolution in mumbo Latin. Penance seemed to range in those days from three Hail Marys to a decade of the Rosary, depending on the frequency and magnitude of sin confessed. I was spared this, but I knew enough about my religion to understand that the cleansing of my soul would not be final until I had carried out the priest's prescription and given those eight sunburnt ears something to set them tingling.

'Pray for me, my son,' he murmured as he slid a wooden panel across the grille and opened up for business on the other side of the box.

Pray for him? Surely, after having been set this task, I was going to be busy enough praying for myself.

## 2

Just over two weeks earlier we had come to the place called Captain's Folly and looked down on the sea (and the scene of my unwitting sin) for the first time in our lives.

We had nine eyes between us for the event, nine good eyes, all as bright as quicksilver that morning: the usual two apiece for Spark, Maps, Fido and me, one only for Misty. His right eye did not work properly and he kept it hidden behind a clouded spectacle pane.

Until now the earth's surface had been pieces of piecrust shaped like continents and islands, all surrounded by water. Not ordinary water. Water with power: the power to inspire men to sea-shanties; the power to cast others away under lone palm trees while it took years to

deliver their bottled messages back to civilisation. And what a wonder it was. Sheer immensity. Sky distilled to liquid. As we stood on a hilltop yellowed by summer, it was a Friday morning, and our sockless toes curled and flared in our Sunday boots.

'There it is, boys,' said Mrs McAnsh. 'The Pacific.'

'That's right. The Specific,' murmured her husband, introducing us to the odd distorted echoes of her statements that became more pronounced when he had been imbibing.

Our glimpses of the sea up to this time had been highly artificial. There was the oil-painting in the visitors' room at St Roderick's, a murky seascape freckled with full stops dropped by the outback version of the common house-fly, and at one time or another we had all fixed our eyes on it while married couples decided that their childless lives were not so dismally unfulfilled after all. Now not a single fly-spot marred our view. Only the hovering motes of our own dizziness lay between us and a gloss that was the glaze off a billion beautiful blue-green tiles.

No glimpse had prepared us for this. Certainly not the azure pond behind Our Lady Star of the Sea in the big print in the chapel at St Roderick's. That was a dull imitation. Nor were the travel posters around the railway station equal to what confronted us now, no matter how tantalisingly their headlands and their surf had beckoned to us through the heat-waves that pulsed off the bricks.

Fido, much the smallest of the five of us, so slight that

his bones might have been thin steel rods and fence wire, now had one of his seizures.

‘Crumbs!’ he twanged. ‘It’s gotta fire under it.’

‘A fi-er?’

The crack-voiced warble came from behind us, from the knuckle-ankled, double-shafted, black-frocked stand for a hat that looked like a secondhand wreath, the petals of its satin roses dog-eared, flattened and faded.

‘A fi-er?’ repeated Mrs McAnsh, the female section of the kind couple in whose charge we were to be. ‘Under it?’

‘Lady, just look!’ cried Fido, skin and fence wire trembling down at the snowy flummeries that clumped into shape and rolled, shrinking, to the sand. ‘It’s on the boil! Boilin’ over! Gotta fire under it!’

Hullo, I thought, Fido could be right. This so-called sea is molten glass frothing along the edge. It’s hot up here, too. That’s why.

The male hatstand spoke up: ‘Upon my wretched soul, Cynthia, this time we surely have a bright lot of distress signals in our safekeeping.’

Distress signals! Us? What did he mean by that, this ageing hatstand?

He had thick bow legs to upholster baggy trousers that wrinkled over unpolished brown boots. His moustache was untrimmed and untrained and grinned on behalf of the mouth it partly hid. His hat looked as if it might have a lively hard-luck story to tell. For instance, it could have been blown a hundred miles across the sharp edges of a

stony desert, then carried out to sea, sodden, salted, hurled ashore, there to be snatched up by a crazy beachcomber of a dog, shaken and wrenched, perforated by teeth and abandoned at death’s door. The brim drooped all around and looked as if it would collapse altogether when the sun worked up to its full thump.

Another of the alleged distress signals fluttered. It was Misty this time.

‘Sa flood!’ he yelled suddenly. ‘A flood!’ He lapsed into the sort of talk we heard from the stock saleyards next door to St Roderick’s. ‘It’s the biggest damned almighty flood ever there was!’

‘Upon my very wretched soul!’ muttered Mr McAnsh.

‘Language! Language!’ cried his wife – at us, of course.

Mr McAnsh used a cuff to wipe the mouth of a bottle of ruby wine and handed it to his wife. A swig left her short of breath. ‘Come along, boys,’ she gasped. ‘Come along down.’

‘Up down,’ muttered the other hatstand.

Mrs McAnsh’s ankles wobbled as she trod over the rubble surface. Perhaps a nut in them wanted tightening, or a race of ball-bearings needed replacing. As we followed, Mr McAnsh shoved the wine-bottle in his hip pocket. It poked up through the cloth of his jacket and wagged at us like a sly forefinger.

## 3

Spark became vocal as we reached the end of the first leg of the zigzag road.

Probably the briny smell of the sea triggered it, somehow reminding him of the pungent animal odours that swamped through our classrooms and lingered in the dormitory on sale days. Sheep and cattle were sold once a week, and sometimes wild horses and goats. The bawling jangle of the auctioneers intrigued him, and one day he planned to join them. He was the only one of us certain of what he wanted to be; he was sure it would come to pass, and we believed so, too. He often imagined himself on an auctioneer's rostrum, and he had trial runs without anything particular to sell, indulging in a sort of inarticulate warming up, a flexing of his vocal cords, a

performance akin to the *do-re-mi* wails of the choir ladies who came to St Roderick's for what were supposed to be singing lessons.

Down the stretch of road he went. 'Hurrum! Hoo! Hee! Haw! Haw-hah! Haw-hah! Boing, boing! Bong! Old!' All of which we took to mean. 'One hundred! Two! Three! Four! Four and a half! Four and a half! Going, going! Gone! Sold!'

Spark was ginger and well freckled, his eyes milky blue. On a visit to St Roderick's the bishop had asked him what he did before going to sleep every night. Spark gave a prompt and canny reply: 'I pray for the Pope.' The bishop chortled and said that here was a bright spark, and thus a nickname was born.

We picked up the cheap suitcases containing our few belongings, and in the wake of the McAnshes and the wagging wine-bottle we descended into the mouth of a valley that ran into the sea. The formation was that of a headless torso, arms divided, wrists scarred by cliffs, and hands dipped into the ocean. At the foot of a steep hillside opposite were two cottages, one painted light blue, its garden ablaze with a species of ice-plant that opens by day and encrusts the ground in silken-surfaced sheaths of deep scarlet, magenta, buttercup, lavender and tangerine. Here and elsewhere on the hillside it was in patches so dense and glistening that each might have been some exotic tapestry laid out in the sunlight. The other cottage was white, its path marked by white-washed stones, and

in its garden was a phrase picked out in bleached shells:

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Another leg of the road took us to a point from which the full sweep of the beach lay revealed: sandhills with long grasses faintly tinged with green, dry yellow sand pocked like pewter, darker damp sand, smooth, except for a lone set of footprints down to the water.

The line of these footprints took our eyes through the waves to something that was bobbing towards the shore. A red ball? No, we saw a face under it. Someone was riding in with a wave. Presently, in the shallows, where the foam wove brief patterns of lace, a figure in a glistening green bathing-costume rose to her feet.

At a distance toddlers recognise fellow toddlers, small boys other small boys, dogs other dogs. We saw at once that this creature from the sea was a grown woman. She splashed through the thin foam to the wet sand, where she laid a second set of footprints. She used both hands to press the water down over her breasts and hips, and then she tugged off the red bathing-cap, letting loose a small flaxen shower that settled over her shoulders, until she brushed its flow to the back of her neck. She crumpled the bathing-cap as she walked and threw it up the beach. She moved forward at a run, checking herself with a slight dancing hop, and then she executed what must always be the most perfect and most beautiful cartwheel I have ever seen. She hung momentarily upside down on

the palms of her hands, her hair touching the sand; then her hair streamed back over her shoulders as the cartwheel landed her on her feet again. What a treat for our nine eyes. The distance seemed to make that cartwheel exquisitely slow, and every phase of it is impressed on my mind, a flower preserved with its original brightness between pages of memory.

Such was our first glimpse of Teresa.

She was beside the bathing-cap now and stooped to pick it up. As she reached the soft sand her walk changed, each step becoming a sort of downward jab. It puzzled us why she should suddenly seem to be marching, but we were soon to learn that the dry sand could retard footsteps and that this walk made crossing it easier. She was a grown woman, as we had been quick to decide, but that cartwheel seemed to tell us that part of her was still somewhere in our world.

The two hatstands were making fast time downhill and we hurried along after them, the ice-plants like brilliant banners opposite, the sea booming chords of greeting, and some two months of freedom ahead – a freedom which, because the means of an even greater escape was dangled in front of us, we were doomed to abuse.