

## Young Writers Award - 1998 runner up

### Grasshoppers by Maureen Donahoe

I remember the first time I ever saw Danny Mac. I remember that it was the night after the new moon, so the king tide had left big bitemarks on the spit, and this huge mother low had been sitting on the east coast for three days, and I was walking back from a wicked session in a seven foot swell. It was the middle of summer and I had just finished high school because Mum always insisted that whatever I do, I finish my senior. Anyway, it was hot-that heat that's like a wet blanket on your skin, and the trawlers were coming out of the rivermouth with their navigation lights like candles against the burnt orange sky, and there was a fingernail moon, and a storm growling to the south, and I was just mellow, you know, just content.

I remember Danny was in the park near the dry docks with some other deckhands, mending blue nylon trawler nets with twine. I liked watching them fix nets. It was weird, seeing those grubby men in their flannies and hair all wiry from the salt, sitting in the grass knotting the net like some old woman.

"Not going out with 'em?" I asked him, nodding towards the trawlers heading out to the shoals. He squinted up at me. He was a stocky man, Danny, with red brown skin and yellow hair. Quiet, too, and some people thought he wasn't real smart. But he was switched on, Danny, and a good mate.

"Nah. They're mad." He answered. "Nothing doing 'til the weekend at least, not with this weather, an' the new moon, too." He turned back to his darning, and I just stood watching him. Then he said, "What boat are you off?" "squinting up at me again. "From up north? Bundy?"

"I don't work the boats," I answered. "My dad's cane farm, up Bli Bli way. In season, but. They're done now, 'til June." I remember Danny nodded, and said, "Y'after work? M'Skipper needs a new deckie, if you want a job. 'Blue Harvester', docked on the end. Are y'interested?"

I thought a bit.

"Yeah," I said.

"Go see him. We'll head out Saturday night, I reckon. I'm Danny Mac." And he put out his cracked brown hand.

"Jeff Murphy." We shook. I remember his handshake.

I remember when KM shot the crested tern, too. It was May, and the swell was good at Moreton and the prawns were bad on the shoals, so the Skipper headed over to the Island to go surfing. Then the mackerel started biting in the Bay, so we cut the engine and fished with lines. I liked that, the sea and the sky and so quiet, except for the waves and the whingeing of the rig. Some sharks-bronze whalers-had been following us for scraps, and when we started gutting the mackerel, they were getting excited. Not frenzying, but pretty stoked. And KM got out the rifle. He picked a big shark, and got him three, maybe four times-and then the sharks really went off, snapping at the mackerel and their mate and each other and the water was pink and foaming like a reef break.

I remember Danny turned away, because he hated the frenzies, but the rest of us had this weird sort of fascination with them-it's full on. KM hauled the big carcass aboard with the gaff hook, and the rest of us jumped in the rig and up the bridge because even though the shark was heaps eaten by his mates, he went savage, and thrashed that massive gold tail around and nearly wrecked the sorting board and KM was just hacken and hacken and we were freaking and it was

wild until KM hacked his head off with the machete. KM sells the jaws along the Esplanade for good prices.

I remember the skipper swore at KM and said to clean up the mess and put the gun away, and Kabi payed KM out a bit, saying four shots and he couldn't kill the thing, and we laughed, and he got pretty dark at us. So he shot this little bird to show how good he was.

It was weird, how quiet everything was when the bullet knocked it from its glide. It just crumpled and dropped, like a feather turning into a rock. It was quiet after it hit too-like the splash didn't even make a noise. And the sharks were all gone, but maybe they'd gone before and I didn't see, and no one spoke and everything was slow and silent and just centred on that little white heap in the swell. I felt like someone had kicked me in the guts.

The silence ended when Danny turned and punched KM in the head, so he fell and skidded over the deck and got covered in the shark's blood. It's not like they're really superstitious or anything, but bad things happen if you kill sea birds, it's always like that.

But nothing bad happened for the rest of that trip, not 'til we'd docked.

Yeah, I remember when KM introduced us to Steve, who'd been his mate years before and they'd done Indonesia together. Skipper had decided to take the Harvester up to Gladstone for a while, try the waters around there for a bit, plus the harbour master was hassling him a heap down here for a few different things, like shooting distress flares at parties, and pulling the bung on the guy's dinghy. It was too close to cane season, so I wasn't going up north, but I said I'd work until they went. One night, we were docked, and Steve was on board for a few quiet beers. He told us about a friend of his who needed a few handy guys to ferry some cargo for him, from a camp up north a bit, and then do a bit of driving, down to Noosa. Rich guy, this friend. Generous as hell, trustworthy, easy to work with.

"What's the cargo?" I asked. Steve flinched like I'd kicked him. He glanced about, and grinned awkwardly and said, "Resin man...y'know..."

I remember Danny was chewing his knuckles.

"We're set, though," Steve assured us. "Real discreet, completely dead area, and my mate knows a couple of cops...and it's not like it's smack or something."

Danny frowned. "I don't know, hey," he said. Steve rolled his eyes.

"C'mon, Danny, man," he said. "We need you. Did I say what he's paying?"

"No," said Danny. So Steve told him. I sure was in from then. Danny wasn't so sure, until KM said, "You'll be able to buy Dougie's forby drive!" Danny had wanted that truck for months.

And I remember waiting in the old Army Landrover with Danny, while KM and Kabi and another guy ferried the stuff from a massive ketch anchored close to shore. It was daybreak, and the sky was red and I was freezing as we stared through the dewy windscreen, but Danny was smiling at the thought of Dougie's truck waiting back home for him.

No one off the yacht came ashore, but there were a fair few people on board. We helped lug the stuff up the beach, and dumped it in the Landrover. Kabit was hitching north to Gladstone, and KM was staying at the camp, because he wanted to catch up with some mates there, he said, so Danny and I drove off, Danny at the wheel and me thinking of my savings account. Mum would be fully impressed when I showed her the balance. She would just think we'd had a great haul on the Harvester. Guess we had, sort of .

And I remember the day. We drove south through the pine forests, and the sky was that intense winter blue, and the air was crispy cold with the morning, and the sun was bright but shallow, the way it is in June. Danny was telling stories over the whine of the Landrover, fishing and camping and surfing stories. He told me about his mate who had seen a yellow eye big like a plate in the night water off the Gneering Shoals.

He told me about the freak tide when he was a kid, that kept coming until it flooded two blocks past the Esplanade. He told me about how his dad drowned when he was young, and he nearly drowned himself, except that another boat found him, unconscious in the life jacket his dad made him wear. And about the time he arm-wrestled a fisherman from Ballina for three hours in the pub at 1770. I remember Danny was real happy. I'd never seen him talk so much.

I saw the white car first-it pulled out from in the pine forests, and I saw it in the rear vision mirror. It was the only other car I'd seen so far, and I remember thinking it was weird, a nice shiny car like that coming out from a dirt track. Danny saw the other one, pulling out on his side. He frowned and said, "Hey..." They picked up speed and I could see all the people in them. Shiny cars full of people don't just hang out in the pine forests.

"Danny, maybe they're cops or something," I said. He didn't answer, but his face was scrunched like old wrapping paper. He accelerated. "Danny..."

"No way," he said. "No!" yelled Danny. "Just go away!" He went faster and I was pretty scared-I'd never seen Danny stress, never, and I held on to the dashboard and I was thinking how an old Army Landrover is a bad thing to speed in.

"Danny!" I shouted and ahead, I could see heaps of police and cars. I didn't know they really did this kind of road-block thing in Australia, I always thought that was just in seppo movies, but they were there all right.

I remember the way Danny looked at me, and I remember he said, "Jeff, it's just us, okay?" Then we hit gravel on the roadside and skidded out and there was this ditch and Danny's head jerked with mine as we rolled it. I remember worrying that I'd get cut by the glass as we crashed around, and I remember the sound of those sirens singing for us, and then I don't remember any more.

The officer nodded. "Thanks, mate, you've done the right thing," he said. I didn't feel like it.

"What about Danny? What's going on there?" I asked. He looked at me and shrugged.

"He didn't testify. I'd say he'd be in the lockup for awhile."

"You said he was going to testify." I stared at my hands. They were gripping each other, squeezing, and were all red. I wondered how long I'd been doing that. The cop said, "Well..."

"You can't put him away," I said. "Danny couldn't handle it, hey." The policeman shrugged, and said, "He should have thought of that before."

"It wasn't his idea-he was just helping out like he always does! Danny'd never-he didn't do us in 'cause he's looking out for us-he's got standards and that, Danny." I said. The guy just looked at me like he didn't understand or didn't care.

"He's just doing what he reckons is right for the people he knows," I said clearly. The policeman snorted and started collecting his papers, and I started getting, like, really really angry. "You know what's going on anyway!" I yelled. "He doesn't have to tell you! Why does he get punished 'cause he does the right thing by his mates, and I'm rewarded when I scam the people who've been good to me? I did just as much wrong as him but it's cool 'cause I'm also a bastard? Where's the sense there?" I stood up. "Danny is a good man! He's a good man and he's different and it's not like the others!" I was just losing it at this copper, but he wasn't too stressed. I was cuffed, after all.

"Sorry mate," the policeman said, indicating the guards to take me out. "You's were on the wrong side. This is justice."

I didn't get off too badly. I was back on the cane farm for the end of the season, because I think they thought I was pretty dumb and in for a quick buck. I suppose they weren't far off. Danny did pretty bad. He wouldn't say anything against anyone, not Steve or KM or anyone, plus he couldn't get a lawyer unless he went into debt, and Danny wouldn't do that.

I got to see him once, in this little brick visiting room, with two hard plastic chairs and a laminate table. It kind of freaked me, his hair all short and his face paler than I've ever seen it, and those eyes like a dog's after you boot it in the ribs. We talked a bit, but it was like he was trying to climb inside himself all the time. Like he was little than when we were at sea. I felt bad. But he asked about the docks, and the swell, and the people-it was a bit awkward. Stilted. But then, when I was about to leave, he said, "Jeff, I might be getting out come March. I think they always knew I didn't have much to do with it." I said, "Yeah?"

"Thought I might feral out a bit. Got some mates down at Byron. Or you know, there's always the docks, or the trawlers."

"Or the cane," I said. He grinned.

"Or the cane. Thanks, Jeff." When he was talking then, it was like he was the old Danny, Danny out at sea.

"I'm glad I'm not KM, hey," he said. "KM'll be always hiding, and stressing, y'know? He's paranoid enough as it is. When I'm out, that's it, hey? I did something wrong, and now I've made up for it, and it'll be cool. Won't it? He'll never feel right, KM. Poor bastard." He walked me over to the guard, and he was different. "You've got to live with yourself in the end, hey? You can't hide from your head." I knew that was all right. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know the right words so I shoved my hand out. He gripped it with his strong paw. "You know this freak northerly that's been happening out of cyclone season the last couple of years?" he said. "We should go south to the Heads and do some surfing come April, hey?' Big mother swell, I'm thinking. It's coming. I feel it in my bones, even in here."

He looked out the screened window, and back at me. "It's coming, Jeff."

I smiled, and I nodded.

Yeah, I remember Danny.