

# into the sea

α novel by **jay laurie**



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**For P**



# 1.

The old man sat cross-legged on the sand in the shade of a palm tree. Smoking, squinting into the glare of the morning sun glittering off the sea. Loose skinned brown legs protruded from under a faded sarong tied around his waist. Below the knees, his legs lay placidly on top of each other at rest. Wide calloused feet merged into the sagging muscle of his calves.

Selamat pagi.

Pagi, the old man replied.

Apa kabar?

Baik baik terima kasih... anda dari mana?

Saya dari Australia.

Australia... mmm, the old man smiled. His watery eyes slowly blinked. He drew thinly on his skinny crooked cigarette and looked peacefully out across the sea: apa pekerjaan anda di Indonesia?

# Part I

## 3.

Billie Saunders and Riley met in the schoolyard at lunch on the first day of high school. Standing around on the edge of the mayhem unfolding on the oval, lost and a bit empty and trying hard not to show it. The long Summer holidays which at their beginning had no end, stretching way into the never never, to some date long past Christmas, too far away to fathom, were really over.

Clusters of boys and girls in dishevelled grey uniforms and bare feet ran riot across the grass after tennis balls and footies and leapt about under skipping ropes and frisbees in the February heat, scattering seagulls prospecting for lunch scraps near discarded shoes and socks.

Billie looked over at the bigger kid standing near him with a woolly mop of brown hair, gnawing steadily on his fingernails and, above the continuous cheer of the schoolyard, asked:  
You new here?

Yeah, the other kid said, glancing quickly over, his finger still in his mouth.

Me too... what's your name?

Riley, he said taking his finger out of his mouth.

What kind of a name is that? Billie asked with a grin.

The other kid's face flushed and he looked away and started on his fingernails again.

I'm Billie Saunders, he said to the side of Riley's head, I'm actually Will but everyone calls me Billie.

Riley's hunched shoulders dropped a bit.

Wish I was at the beach today, Billie said rooting around in his nostril with a forefinger.

Me too, Riley replied.

Do you surf?

Yeah, a bit, Riley lied.

What's your board like? Billie asked and flicked a crusty flake off his finger.

I'm getting a surfboard for my birthday, Riley lied again and then hurriedly confessed more quietly: I just go out on a surf mat at the moment. He looked away and flushed again, waiting for derisive laughter from Billie who he imagined was a real surfer like the kids with proper boards his Mum and Dad told him to stay away from at the beach.

I've got one of those as well, Billie said smiling. I ride it sometimes, my stomach kills for ages afterwards... mostly just ride my surfboard now... maybe we could go to the beach one day.

Yeah that'd be great, Riley grinned.

\* \* \*

Billie lived a couple of streets back from the beach in a small sky blue fibro house with his parents, his sister and little brother. It was a distant suburb. They rarely went to the city. Mr Whippy dawdled along the streets on weekends from time to time, pied-piper-ing the kids with Greensleeves on continuous play out of the megaphone fixed onto the roof and setting off a flurry of pleading and tugging at dress hems for a choc top with a flake and nuts or alright just a plain vanilla ice cream (with nuts).

He was younger and smaller than a lot of kids in his year. At the start of Year 8, he was still 12. He had watery blue eyes that made him seem elsewhere. He mostly was if he wasn't at the beach. His face was brown from months on end in the sun over Summer and speckled with freckles and peeling skin which he worked at patiently hoping to get a long bit. He knew he had to time it right. If he waited too long to peel it off it became itchy and flaky and came off in small wispy shards. If he tried too early, it hurt as the soft unripe pink skin underneath became exposed.

Straight, bleached hair ran horizontally across his forehead above his barely discernible blond eyebrows and in short neat lines across his ears, leaving only the lobe exposed. Despite his protests about looking like a roman helmet again, his Mum had cut it the week before, ready for school. She had sat him down shirtless on a chair on the grass and leaned in close while she moved her dress making scissors along his forehead and asked him to sit still when she cut the hair near his ears. Then she'd combed it down straight to make sure it was even. After she'd finished he'd bent right over and rubbed and



slapped at his head and shoulders to get rid of the itchy loose hair and then run down to the beach and across the sand whipping at his ankles in the stiff sea breeze and plunged into the short peaked chop to mess it up.

Billie's father went up north to the mines for work for long stretches at a time. Each time he left Billie had a lump in his throat for a day. While he was away, the bigger kids chipped in a bit more at home and Billie's Mum showered the three of them with evenly distributed affection. She had olive skin and bright blue eyes. She wore colourful skirts and dresses and bright headbands in her honey coloured hair and walked with a light dancing sway. Some nights, as the days his Dad had been away mounted up, when Billie and his sister should have been in bed, they peaked out from behind the curtain and watched her hosing the garden out the front for a long time and talking in low voices and laughing with different men who seemed like they wanted to be Joe.

Their house was raised off the ground on low wooden stilts. The space underneath provided shelter for creatures from the nearby bushland and so an almost fool proof hiding place during games of hide and seek. Across the front lawn, white wooden steps led up to the porch and the front door. Inside, the living area centred on an open fireplace which contained the only bricks in the house. Scratched and faded orange laminex benches and cupboards, an old white stove and a rounded cream fridge with an over frosting freezer they had to chisel out every fortnight, made up the kitchen. Past the round dining table, worn armchairs hidden under brown and yellow blankets and a comfy green velour sofa gathered around

the fireplace. Grandma's tall reading lamp stood in one of the corners. After Winter the rugs on the wooden floor were packed away in preparation for the tracks of fine sand that they brought in on their bare feet from the beach in the warmer seasons.

At the back of the house was a big open deck. On a warm blue Saturday morning one Spring, his Dad had bowed out of the chorus of droning lawnmowers and announced that he'd be putting in a new wooden deck. The old skinny landing and flight of rickety steps would be going. The old gum tree would stay. He'd be building round that he'd proudly said. Once his Dad had committed himself to something there was no turning back. But it was a bigger job than he had imagined and he was hammering and sawing and letting go the odd short word that the kids weren't supposed to hear all through the following Summer on his breaks before he and Mum had their first beers on it and gave the two bigger kids a sip. Billie helped him on the weekends, more enthusiastically when the sea breeze came in, fetching tools and nails and water and relaying messages.

Out the back, past the new deck and the outside dunny and the brick walled barbeque off to the side, where sausages were cooked on a rusty hot plate until they were crusted to charcoal and brittle and skinny as a twig and had just the faintest trace of pulped god knows what left in the centre, right at the end of the back lawn, next to the lemon tree, was his Dad's shed. It was out of bounds unless he was home. Billie knew where the key was though and stole in there when he could but he made sure no one saw him go inside

and touch the furniture his Dad chiselled and turned during his breaks.

Next door were the Killyahs. The Killyah's were actually the Blaney's. The Saunders called them the Killyah's amongst themselves. From time to time there were nights at the Killyah's which put the surrounding neighbourhood on high alert as hefty, massive chested, bottle blond Sharyn Blaney tucked into the rum, beat the life out of the pots and pans in the kitchen and raged and ranted at rock concert volume against her lanky gaunt grey haired husband Terry and their two withdrawn girls and anything else in her line of sight. Her most common threat to the members of her family on those nights was 'I'm gunna farkin killyah'. Every now and then one of the girls would scream back a desperate pained response at a few decibels higher but there was nervous fear in their responses and Mrs Killyah seized on it and escalated her already irrational rampage into an intoxicated tirade and door slamming which shook the foundations of the little stilted weatherboard house they rented. Terry Blaney had learnt over the years that it was best to walk away but sometimes he couldn't help stepping in to try to set things straight and make her ease off the girls and his voice would bellow fleetingly over the top of hers. Now and again, the cops were called out by neighbours fearing an assault was about to happen or something worse. The girls suffered badly. They were cowering unhappy kids with a rich knowledge of expletives and a doubtful future.

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