

Task for *The Divine Wind* by Garry Disher

Sprung

'Damn!' How had I got myself into this mess? It had all seemed pretty straightforward last night at Joshua's sixteenth birthday party.

I'd gone straight to Joshua's place from the skateboard ramp and had been feeling real pumped.

'Fellas,' I'd said, 'I'm bored with that tame skateboard park stuff. It's too suburban and safe for me. I'm ready for a proper challenge. I want to reach for the stars. I want to be Tony Hawks.'

'Well, what about riding the handrail outside the Oswald building at school?' asked Nicholas. 'Or from Founders' Court down to Oswald?'

'Yeah,' piped up Jack, 'and then do a few ledgies down the Terraces to the Oval'.

I could see that they were setting me up and was starting to regret ever opening my mouth. Still, I could see their point. If you're bored with the suburban ramps then you've got to look for your thrills out there in the big, wide world. And I had to admit that there were some terrific spots for trying out some skateboarding tricks at my school.

There was just one problem. I go to Warthogs, this posh private school in the middle of the city, and I know that Warthogs and skateboarding just don't mix. See, Warthogs has Tradition with a capital T. Beautiful grounds, a chapel with stained glass windows, and shingles on the rooves...well, you get the picture.

And yet, knowing all this, here I was and I was trapped. I'd told the boys that I'd ride the rails and do the ledgies at five o'clock today and they had set themselves outside the school on Elm Street (heroes!) to make sure I went through with the dare. Fifty bucks Josh had promised, but now five thousand wouldn't have seemed enough.

I'd come into the school grounds just near the Darth Building where they keep the school archives. You see, this school's really old. It's having its centenary in 2019. Anyway, I should have noticed that the door to Darth was open and that a sign at the door advertised a talk by the archivist at 5.30. Instead, I'd swaggered out onto Founders' Court to take stock of the approach for my first jump. I'd flicked the peak of my cap round to the back of my head, kicked the board up so that I could hoist it up

onto the rail and that's when I heard the voices which seemed to be coming from around the corner near the Darth Building.

As the voices came closer I thought that I could recognise Headmaster's distinctive American accent colouring one of them and perhaps one of the other voices belonged to Mr Vader, the Deputy Head. That was bad enough but what really worried me were the other voices. Big wigs on the School Council? Prominent citizens? Distinguished old boys? It was definitely time for the earth to open up and swallow me. I had a mental image of being drummed out of the school as Captain Jones's cadets formed a guard of dishonour to see me off the premises. Or perhaps the ritual tearing off of epaulettes by Headmaster during his Thursday morning assembly (even though I didn't actually have any epaulettes). "This boy has tarnished the good name of Warthogs," he would thunder as he banished me with an accusatory finger pointed towards the outer darkness of Elm Street. Oh, why had I wanted to be different? Why couldn't I just accept the constraints of suburbia?

I had just one factor working in my favour. Daylight was fading fast and in the gloom of twilight I might just avoid detection. It was a fairly forlorn hope, though. Behind me was the Oswald Administration Building which afforded me virtually nowhere to hide. And if I cut and ran in either direction, left or right, I would surely be seen. There was nothing to do but wait ... and hope. I squirmed back into the shadows of the building. A fog of guilt shrouded me.

Now, however, another problem presented itself. In my earlier panic I had failed to notice my fast-filling bladder but now, hunched awkwardly on my straining thighs and with my skateboard clutched across my knees, I felt a sharp, excruciating pressure which I had no way of relieving. I started to sweat with emotional anguish and physical pain.

Suddenly, though, my luck began to change. A bell rang from the direction of the chapel and almost immediately the voices became less distinct as they moved away. Now was obviously my best opportunity to make a getaway. There was no time to worry whether there were other people in the vicinity. Under the circumstances I had to take my chance as it presented itself.

I raised myself slowly to a half-crouch, trying to get some blood back into my legs. That was the moment when I faltered and took a slight step backwards. Then I just froze. There was someone behind me. I could sense their presence. A forbidding, disapproving presence but perhaps that was my own sense of guilt. My breathing slowed; I felt paralysed. Still, I would have to take my chances now, come what may,

and so I forced myself to turn to confront whoever had been spying on me all this time. Slowly, I turned, and finally I could just make out the figure of a man seated above me in the gloom. I squinted with the strain of trying to identify my silent observer. And then, suddenly, recognition came. Of course, it was Bishop Rowan, the venerated founder of the school and next to him I could now see the Bishop's faithful dog, Rex, standing on his hind legs while he rested his front paws on the Bishop's leg in an unambiguous gesture of canine affection.

The hair stood up on the back of my neck as man and animal stared down at me in what seemed to me a shared expression of total contempt. I was sprung. No use hiding now and so I leapt up and made to run off down the ramp towards the Kransky Building and from there into the safety of the nearby suburban streets. As I did so, though, I looked back again for an instant at my silent witnesses and this time I could have sworn that I detected a faint smile on the Bishop's lips and Rex seemed to be positively grinning. I couldn't be sure, though. It's hard to know what a bronze statue is feeling.