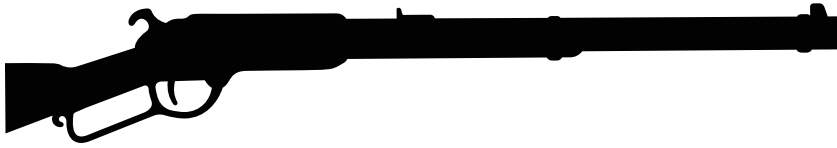


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EDENGLASSIE



**MELISSA
LUCASHENKO**

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Melissa Lucashenko is a Goorie (Aboriginal) author of Bundjalung and European heritage. Her first novel was published in 1997 and since then her work has received acclaim in many literary awards. Her sixth novel, *Too Much Lip*, won the 2019 Miles Franklin Literary Award and the Queensland Premier's Award for a work of State Significance. It was also shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction, the Stella Prize, two Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, two Queensland Literary Awards and two NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Melissa is a Walkley Award winner for her non-fiction, and a founding member of human rights organisation Sisters Inside. She writes about ordinary Australians and the extraordinary lives they lead.

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Also by Melissa Lucashenko

Steam Pigs

Killing Darcy

Hard Yards

Too Flash

Mullumbimby

Too Much Lip

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are respectfully cautioned that this publication contains mentions of people who have passed away.

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For Cec

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'You fool', she said, 'this is England.'

'I don't believe it,' I said, 'and I will never believe it.'

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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NOTE

This book draws on extensive research into colonial Queensland history, both written and oral. The timing of some real events, such as Tom Petrie's expedition to establish Murrumba Downs, has been changed to suit the narrative. Other historical details have been omitted, or in rare cases, embellished. In other words, this is a work of fiction, and should be read as such.

Edenglassie was a colonial name briefly applied to the area of inner Brisbane now called Newstead. It is used as the title for this novel in a nod to paths not taken.

More information on sources, informants and languages can be found in the Afterword.

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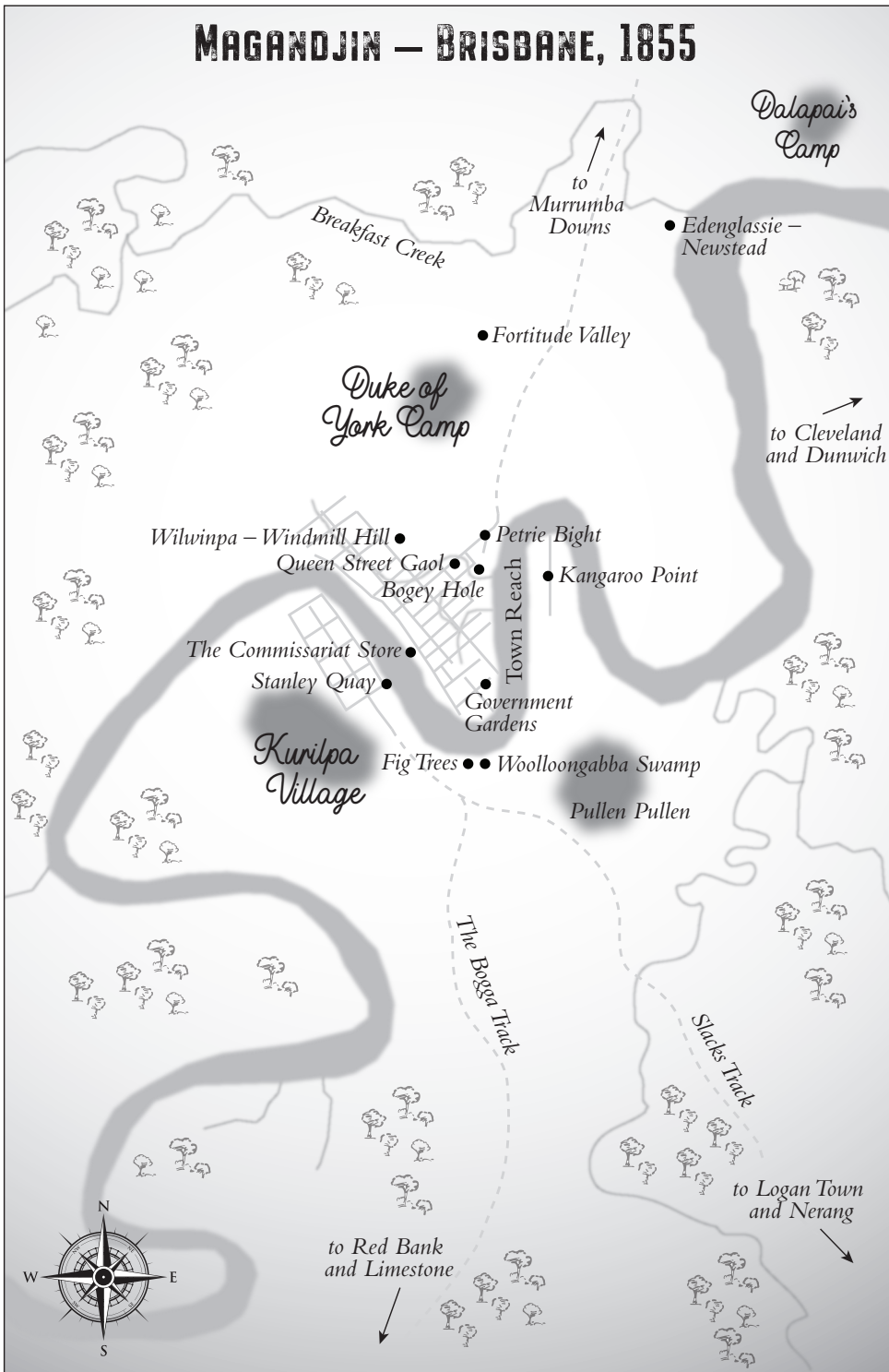


● All language group boundaries are approximations.

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I. THE FALL

2024

Eddie Blanket was falling, falling, falling towards the good Yagara earth.

A calamity. At her great age, a fall meant the end, simple as that. Broken hip, pneumonia, kaput.

Even as she lost the vertical, though, Granny Eddie was rejecting the whole stupid idea. You didn't live to her age by damn well accepting things. So: she was definitely *not falling*. Toppling, well yes, possibly. Or teetering – oh! – like the teeter-totter in the schoolyard, remember? Hot yellow sunshine in the playground, thumping up and down with Lizzie Norman on the other end, terrible buckteeth bared in joy. Lizzie was dead and buried now, of course. Nearly everyone was. Eddie had buried her own kids, and her husband, too. Sisters and brothers, she'd outlived the lot. And now here she was at South Bank, poised on the edge of the precipice herself.

Eddie observed with a kind of detached dismay her right knee buckling to the footpath outside the maritime museum, her walking stick betraying her to skid across the grass and into the nearest garden bed. There was a solid three inches of cement between Granny Eddie's person and the good Yagara dirt of the Ancestors, but that was of no concern to gravity, or indeed to Granny Eddie, for she was knocked cold by her fall.

~

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Everything had buggered-up, gorn skewiff. Blurred trees grew out of wavering buildings; human-shaped blobs stood at a right angle to normality. Something else was off, too. The traffic on Vulture Street had frozen in its lanes, the CityCat didn't move midstream, even the Qantas jet roaring over the river had decided to pull up and have a jolly old breather, its shadow flung down onto the maritime museum in the shape of a giant warped bird, an albatross or pelican. Granny Eddie blinked in confusion. Then her brain slowly began to crochet together a looped understanding of events: her stupid fall outside the museum, that was right, she'd tripped on the tiniest jutting tree root and in outrage the earth had flung itself up at her, insisting she join it. This act of remembering made time begin thumping sharply in her left temple: *ouch, ouch, ouch*.

Eddie Blanket lay there, registering her injuries, for two minutes and twenty-seven seconds. An Elder, mind you, laid low in the middle of the path – oh terrible, terrible! – and the whitefellas walking well out of their way to avoid her, to avoid even looking at her. There they go – bugger you Jack I'm alright, that's your motto, ay? Christ Almighty, *drunk*? Can't you see I'm hurt, and someone needs to stop and help an old black woman, and instead you go an turn yer nose up at me as a drunk on metho! Good go! Bugger off then! Useless! And you, I can just about see ya moot, missy, didn't the shop have a skirt your size, to make you go and buy a child's one? No shame at all. Yeah, I can hear ya, never mind yer *alco* and *homeless*. And in a sudden burst of rage: who dragged youse mob up? A person could be dead fer all you care. You, I'm talking to you – this is my country too, don't I count? So never mind walking past like I don't exist ...

When all of a sudden some youngsters stopped, knelt down and murmured in concern. A flooding relief of tears, because everything hurt and somebody cared. Oh, thank God. Thank you, Jesus. A girl and a boy with broad brown faces the pair of them, bending and exclaiming over her. Students with foreign

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eyes in their heads to see she was hurt, and foreign brains in their heads to know she was an old, old Goorie woman who needed some blooming help, quick smart.

Granny Eddie surrendered to the kindness of the students. Her head was hurting, her eyesight was all wrong and she was suddenly very, very tired.

~

In her long life, Granny Eddie reflected from her hospital bed that afternoon, she had seen a great deal of time. A lot of time, and more than one variety of it, but this sort of time – or life (which amounted to the same thing) – was altogether new. The blurred colours of the hospital ward were far too bright, everything shining and glowing with colours a person had never imagined before. All colour and no detail, and a pain in her temple that had taken a fair whack of morphine to knock over. At first Eddie thought it was the hospital lighting making everything glow and shimmer, but when the nurse drew the curtains apart, revealing the brown Warrar snaking around the City Botanic Gardens with the Story Bridge in the distance – a silver brooch joining the two banks of the river – she realised it was the same outside. Brighter. Newer. Blurry. The world was like it always was, and yet different. Hard to put your finger on it. Most things a lot less clear, and yet some things as clear as day.

Take Old Grandad Charlie. She'd never in all her born days been able to recall his face. Grandad had ploughed Mr Bolitho's Phantom Continental smack bang into the shopfront at McDonnell & East just before the war. Finally pushed it too far that day, bless. Just turned eleven, young Edwina had kept the memory of Charlie's voice and smell, nothing more. But strange, lying here in crisp sheets in what was doubtless a whiteman hospital overlooking the river – and as to why she could hear so many little babies crying so loud on the floor below was yet another mystery – strange that

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she could all of a sudden picture Old Man Charlie, his thick dark eyebrows and Fred Astaire hat, the cheeky old darlin as clear as anything in her mind. The fall must have shaken some of the dust out of the crannies in her head and made room up top for the old bloke to come visiting her.

As the nurses rabbited on about blood pressure and bedpans and suchlike, Eddie focused her mind on the serious matter of dirt. She had been concerned with dirt all her life, and with being dispossessed of same, not to mention treated like dirt, which is to say, trampled over and disregarded as a general rule. And what with being *a dirty black*, so-called, it was only common sense that dirt – meaning earth, meaning also Country – was something of a constant and compelling interest to her, unlike the whitefellas who so very rarely looked at the ground beneath their feet, for fear of remembering where it had come from and what it had cost, and where they themselves would undoubtedly end up.

She was dirty on them mob, truth be told.

Yes, yes, there were plenty of exceptions, like Rob's dear wife, Cathy, an actual human being for all them squatters she come down from, and wotsername Judy. But the Judys and the Cathys of the world were hard put to cancel out the likes of Bridget in Grade One, her with the short little stick at school just long enough to keep your black hand from touching hers in the line-up outside the classroom, and Margaret too, the sour-faced bitch, running your family down when she thought you couldn't hear her. So, all your Murri life, your Goorie life, it was a matter of learning the hard way to be just like the earth, unmoving and unchanging, in the face of white people and their never-ending provocations.

Despite the ache in her head and neck, Granny Eddie smiled. That was the funny thing, the really hilarious thing – white people thinking she was stupid, when they were the ones walking around with blinkers on, hah! Stupid as sheep for the most part, never noticing a damn thing. Looking at their phones for the last

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two hundred years. What was it Grandad Charlie had said? *Never say no to a white person. Say yes, yes, yes and always smile. Watch them relax, watch them believe they have it over you, that you are malleable, stupid, not a troublemaker, nothing to lose sleep over. Nothing to see here.*

The door began to open. With a burst of fright, Granny Eddie remembered the dirt beneath her fingernails. She curled her hands into quick fists to protect the precious dark grains from strangers. Never know who's in there, see. Never know whose ancestors you might be carrying around in the palm of yer hand. She fell at the maritime museum they said earlier, well, well. You might as well say Mary time museum. May as well say Murri time museum, meaning back in the day, back before Grandad Charlie even, so long ago the land didn't recognise the sound of an English word. How many Marys Murris Murrdis would you need to go back to ... for it was well known, of course, that part of every blackfella who ever lived went back to the good jagun, the good earth. Who was she holding on to, below her nails? Who was holding on to her, as the door to her room in Ward B swung wide for all the world to see?

Eddie uncurled her fingers then and peered at her shimmering nails, wishing for Grandad Charlie to come, or her big sister, or her poor old dead ma. But it was a man with a stethoscope who entered the room. Not very tall, and not particularly dark, but handsome enough, yes, in a blurry sort of fashion.

'Who're you?' Granny Eddie demanded. 'State yer damn business! Where's Winona?'

Doctor Johnny Newman startled. He was used to being sworn at, spat on and even punched by the unfortunates in Emergency, but Eddie's centenarian aggression was a novelty. He pointed to his ID badge.

'As if I can read that!' Granny Eddie huffed. The silly brat! Even with her glasses on, she could barely make him out, let alone

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his badge. And who was to say it was the truth written there? They could make anything up. What if he was one of them serial killers? Look at Daniel Morcombe. What chance did a hundred-year-old black woman stand, alone in the world, her husband and their three daughters finished up, and her blind as a damn bat it seemed. Someone needed to fix that and fix it fast.

‘I’m Doctor Johnny,’ the handsome blur said gently. ‘My damn business is to see what’s up with your eyesight, Aunty. Did you know you had a fall? Hit your noggin on the footpath?’

‘Noggin – is that a medical term then? I reckon you got your doctor’s licence out of a cornflakes box, mate. It’s my neck that hurts,’ Eddie grumbled. ‘Where’s Winona got to?’

‘Winona? Is that your daughter?’ Johnny looked around in vain for a flower-shaped family chart pinned to the wall.

‘Not my dort, my grannie – my daughters’ve all passed. Watcha doing now? Are you a student, ay? Don’t I warrant a real doctor?’

Johnny assessed her: hip – bruised but by some miracle not broken; limbs – sound; head and neck – very sore for no obvious reason, likely soft tissue damage, but also needing an X-ray pronto, especially given the sudden change in vision; diabetes no doubt a complicating factor, and quite possibly the reason for the fall in the first place.

‘Nice to meet you, Aunty,’ he said several minutes later, handing her over to the X-ray orderly.

‘I don’t remember saying you can call me Aunty,’ Eddie snapped. Somebody ran a cultural awareness seminar somewhere and she magically acquired a million white nephews. ‘Call me Mrs Blanket. And find my Winona!’