That’s the only kind of teacher to have. She’s called Mrs Marble, ’cause that’s how hard her heart is. And it doesn’t pump blood, it pumps bladder juice.’

Accordingly, on the day that she was due to arrive, Mick and Blue went to Cossack on the Francis-Barnett, just to put off the evil hour when he would have to meet her. It was a blistering hot morning, and Mick had his dad’s wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his eyes, and a large handkerchief tied around his lower face so that he would not have to breathe in all the dust. He looked very like a bandit from an old cowboy film.

Cossack was a sad ruin, not least because people had been pillaging the old buildings for timbers that they could use in their own. Many of these timbers had originally come from ships, and had naval markings on them, as you often found in the timbers of cottages in the Old Country. In Mick’s time, there were a few little Aboriginal boys fishing off the old harbour wall; a selection of
dead people in the old cemetery outside of town, many with exotic names; one family of Greek fishermen who were always out at sea; and one person living in a ruin.

Mick met Sergeant Sam the first time he went to Cossack, finding him relaxed in a deckchair on the veranda of a derelict house, with a rough roof over him that had been knotted together out of vegetation and strips of plank.

Sergeant Sam was an old soldier, a tall thin whitefella with a large hooked nose, whose clothes were pretty filthy, and who wore shoes whose soles flapped as he walked. He had come back from the war in Vietnam, and decided that he truly did not want to live among humans any more. He had a long white scar on his back, and burns on his legs.

Sam had said, ‘G’day, mate,’ to the boy and the dog, and Mick had replied, ‘G’day.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I came to look around,’ said Mick. ‘Granpa said it was interest-
ing.’

‘It used to be interesting. Now it’s a big barrel of bugger all, worse than Bunbury. That’s why I like it.’

‘Do you ... do you live here?’ asked Mick.

‘Yup.’

‘Oh.’

‘Aren’t you going to ask me why?’

‘If you like.’

‘I don’t like or not like. Don’t you want to know?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘It’s because I’m a bloody hermit. That’s a nice mutt you’ve got there. Red cloud kelpie. That’s what I always had.’

‘This is Blue,’ said Mick.

‘Hello, Blue,’ said Sam, holding out his hand, and Blue raised his paw for a shake. ‘Bonzer polite dog,’ said Sam.

‘I taught him that,’ said Mick.

‘Well, you’re a fine boy then, aren’t you, mate?’

Mick came back to see Sergeant Sam regularly, bringing him things he might need, such as
toothpaste and string, and paraffin for his Primus stove. The little Aborigine boys sometimes gave him a fish, and all in all the Cossack hermit led a nice simple life with no worries except running out of water, and he wasn't such a hermit after all, because of the occasional presence of the Greek fishermen living there too, in the old Courthouse. Before that there had been another hermit, but he had left when Sam had arrived, on the grounds that the place was getting too crowded.

Sergeant Sam told Mick all about how the town had risen and fallen, beginning with a ship called the Mystery, which, in 1863, had failed to find a landing place at Port Hedland or De Grey. On its sister ship, the Tien Tsin, there had been a cargo of cattle in desperate need of water and fodder. Here in Cossack they had found the Harding River nearby, and plenty of places where wells yielded water, and so that was how Cossack accidentally came to be.
Sergeant Sam showed Mick where the horse-drawn tram used to run, and the railway to Roebourne, whose cars were pulled by teams of oxen. He showed him where the huge fleet of pearling lugger used to anchor in the cyclone season, and he took him to wasteland near the cemetery, which used to be a town of hundreds of Japanese pearlers, and Malays, and Afghans, and Chinese, complete with gambling joints, opium dens, stabbing and brawling, and rowdy houses of ill repute. ‘Just imagine it,’ said Sam, ‘and look at it now. There was a riot when a boatload of Jap women turned up, once. Now it’s just dry grass and baked earth, and not a Jap woman for miles.’

‘Granpa always says that everything passes away, and something else comes in its place,’ Mick told him.

‘Your granpa’s right,’ replied Sam, ‘but the only thing that came instead was me.’

Sam told Mick about Emma Withnell, the first woman to
arrive, who raised eleven children, and then there was Caroline Platt, who was always in trouble with the law for getting into fights, wrecking things, and even beating up the schoolmistress. And then there was Susan Thompson. ‘A true blue scarlet woman,’ said Sam, and Mick wondered what on earth he meant.

Then there came the Gold Rush, and then leprosy arrived, which infected the blackfellas, and they had to build a lazaret for the poor victims on the other side of the river, and all that was left of it now was a few lumps of concrete.

Sam showed Mick the remains of the turtle-soup factory, and the Aboriginal petroglyphs down at Settler’s Bay, whose age nobody knew. ‘Everything grows up, and then passes away,’ said Sam. ‘Take my advice, son. Think of every day as a new bash at life.’

‘Is that what you do?’

Sam looked confounded and abashed, and replied, ‘Too late for me, mate. And don’t do as I do, do as I say.’
All in all, Sergeant Sam was as friendly a hermit as one could ask for, and a boy and a dog could waste a whole day very happily in his company. Quite inadvertently, Mick learned a great deal from him about how to winkle the history out of archaeological remains.

Another important influence was Mrs Marble.

When Blue and Mick got home just before dark, covered in the usual and universal red dust, they found that Granpa had been pulling a fast one. Mrs Marble was really Miss Marble. She could not have been a day over twenty, and every man on the station had already fallen in love with her, apart from Granpa, who had learned to value the peace and quiet that comes from being unattached. In the days to come he was to enjoy the spectacle of all the station hands turning up, hiding behind corners, or idling nearby while attempting to look busy. One day Taylor Pete even cut himself on purpose, so that