

## Twisted Fates.

Merle leapt out in search of a conversation before Mike parked. They'd been on the road for two weeks and she was already missing her Probus club confidants.

'Hello, excuse me, are you on this walk today? I'm Merle, could my husband and I join you, I really need to have a good ole fashioned natter.'

'Hi Merle, we'd love you to join us. I'm Brenda, this is my husband, Bob. We live in town; came to see what all the fuss is about. It's the second time they've tried; we keep telling people, keep your expectations low, and to think what we could have done with all that money; the council chambers desperately need a facelift.'

Mike took four attempts before settling on the perfect spot to park his thirty-foot Winnebago, a spot that offered the promise of afternoon shade. He'd been drawn to the cultural tourism centre by its brochure proclaiming to offer '*a unique insight into our ancient culture with a contemporary twist.*' It was the contemporary twist that had piqued his interest. That, and wanting to learn about his soon-to-be son-in-law, Karl, who was part Aboriginal, a fact Merle had not yet come to terms with. Their daughter Joanie had met him at university, they'd consoled themselves that he had at least the promise of a stable profession. 'Keep quiet about Karl will you,' Merle had advised, 'you know how quick people are to judge.'

Mike wandered over and introduced himself. 'Perhaps we could sneak in a cheeky beverage for happy hour after the walk, hey Bob. By the way, don't you think it strange they have a used car yard next to their cultural centre, and so many RVs for sale?'

When the complex opened six months ago the front page of the Daily Examiner had boldly proclaimed it 'the great saviour of the town, with an innovative business plan, a diversified economy to supplement income when visitor numbers are low. Dignitaries descended from the capital to shake hands and congratulate each other. The national apology had recently been given, fuelling a mood of optimism and goodwill.

‘A beer would be great Mike, my shout, to show how hospitable we are around here. I give this place a year, maybe two. More importantly, I’ve had sleepless nights worrying whether to upgrade my van to a bigger diesel or petrol one, I’d love to hear your thoughts as an experienced tourer.’

Most of the visitors were bypassing the cultural walk assembly area, heading straight for the café and shops, a few were checking out the car yard. To Merle and Brenda’s collective horror, only one other couple were waiting for the walk: a dreadlocked, swarthy looking, European pair badly in need of a bath. ‘Hi, I’m Hayk, this is Eva, please excuse us, we’ve come straight from work at the berry farm.’ I’ll be keeping myself upwind of him noted Brenda.

Suddenly a young Aboriginal man came bounding out of the centre and jumped up onto the bonnet of his car. ‘Hi, my name’s Stevie and I’ll be your tour guide for the afternoon.’

‘Bloody hell, that’s a bit over the top,’ Bob whispered to Brenda.

‘Lovely thighs, so athletic, I wish I was a few years younger,’ Brenda thought to herself.

A couple of younger men followed Stevie out. ‘This here is my couz Nate and nephew Billie,’ continued Stevie. Nate and Billie took a couple of steps forward.

‘You may be wondering why I’m speaking to you from the bonnet of my car? Why are my burley bro’s pushing up from behind? What would the dingo think if the wallaby suddenly raised its head and grabbed it by the throat? Something to think about on the walk; when do we feel vulnerable or safe, when might that shift, how do our fears and prejudices keep us divided? Depending on the group, we may offer a free extension to the walk, time and weather permitting.’

‘That might be the contemporary twist Merle, could be fun,’ whispered Mike.

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They headed down the gravel path in single file, the buoyant mood warmed further as the dappled sunlight filtered through the open crown of mixed eucalyptus. Fragrant myrtle and boronia blossom filled the air, butterflies flitted from star lily to sun-orchid.

‘We’ll follow the trail for a mile along the main ridge where it drops down into a dense rainforest gully,’ explained Stevie. ‘It was a popular trail for our mob, we’re always finding artefacts, especially after the bushfires took out the groundcover and made them easier to find.’

‘Keep your eyes open Hayk, I’d love to take something back to Germany,’ whispered Eva. She had been living her post university degree dream, berry and boyfriend picking her way up the east coast for the past six months. She’d met Hayk three weeks early and had a good feeling, he might be a keeper.

‘I’m sure you’ll agree Brenda, I just can’t get excited by bits of stone and rock,’ whispered Merle, and they both had a quiet chuckle.

It wasn’t long before Stevie pulled them up in a small clearing. ‘Alright everyone, we’re standing in a spot full of the famous native bush tomato, which I’m sure you’ll be taking home in a jar of relish from our shop once you’ve had a taste! Who can find one, and who knows when they’re safe to eat?’

‘I wouldn’t have a clue, would you Brenda,’ admitted Merle.

‘It’s the red ones you avoid, red rings alarm bells in the bush so I’m going to try one of these purple ones,’ said Bob with authority. He started picking a few off the low hanging branches and handing them out.

‘Actually, I wouldn’t eat those,’ said Hayk ‘From what I’ve read in my brief time here, you should eat the red ones, they’re the ripe ones, high in vitamin C.’

‘Sorry mate but I’ve lived here all my life,’ replied Bob as he continued handing them out.

‘Well, we’ll find out soon enough won’t we Couz,’ laughed Stevie, ‘lucky our bush supermarket has plenty of soft toilet paper on them paperbarks for when you start running.’

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After another half hour of walking, they came to the site of the old Aboriginal mission set back a few hundred meters off the trail. A couple of rough-sawn timber buildings, one a small residence, the other much larger, desperately clung on to their stone chimneys. Some rusty farm machinery, hand split fence posts and railings, all returning to God. A scraggly lemon tree was hanging on, the tilled soil of the old garden overrun by acacia and eucalyptus saplings now thriving, unencumbered.

‘The Methodists brought us here to find God in the 1900’s, to save and lift our miserable souls skyward,’ said Stevie. The leaves rustled in a sudden gust of wind, God still whipping the poor wretched souls from their heathen past.

‘My mum was born here, then taken away with her brothers and sisters by welfare when she was four. Given an education, of sorts. She came back years later to work as a servant before it was shut down, then she was kicked out again.’

‘So, it was the Methodists who started welfare, that’s when it all went downhill,’ whispered Merle to Brenda.

‘That sounds rough Stevie, I’m sorry for your mum,’ said Mike.

‘Thanks Mike, it turned out ok, she was a survivor, even figured out how to send me to boarding school, on a scholarship, free of charge.’ He often wondered about his mum, what it would’ve been like to know her better. Little things, her favourite colour, did she like pork or lamb, netball or footy. How she sat, or tilted her head when reading, was it slightly forward and to the right like him? What did she really think about her foster parents, when pressed? He often wondered whether she knew about the resourceful habit of the Eastern Koel; a parasitic bird which bides it’s time to sneak into the nest of its host, to replace the egg of its unborn offspring. The unwitting host then broods, feeds and raises the Koel chick as its

own. His mum dying young and boarding school had been a curse, a long road back to who he was, or thought he should be. Getting this job at the cultural centre had been a step closer.

He asked everyone to move forward and jumped up onto the old well so he could command their attention. Nate and Billie moved up from behind, a pod of killer whales tightening the noose.

‘Some would say we should forget and move on. Nate’s grand dad was tied to that fencepost over there and left in the baking sun every other week. I want to ask you how long it would take before you’d move on, how many generations before your children and grandchildren could forgive and forget?’

‘Well, I’m a proud Armenian,’ said Hayk, ‘and we still haven’t forgiven the Turks for what they did, and we never will, not until they admit it was genocide and apologize.’ Hayk was on the hunt for new adventure after his stint in military service, a serious business with the Turks and Azerbaijanis on either side.

‘This is a bit uncomfortable Bob,’ whispered Brenda. ‘I didn’t sign up for this.’ ‘They’d be a lot better off if they could just move on,’ he whispered before speaking. ‘OK Stevie, we know it was pretty rough back then, but don’t you reckon we’ve made up for it. Bloody hell, it was our taxes that paid for your new centre.’

‘That’s right,’ agreed Merle, ‘now can we just keep going, I presume you want us to have time to do some shopping when we get back.’

‘Too right,’ laughed Stevie, ‘that we do. Let’s go, the best is yet to come, this is where the real and virtual worlds collide, and you come face to face with your own fears and prejudices.’

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They continued in single file. The track descended into the fringes of the rainforest, getting damper, and darker. The rain clouds returned, a mist swept in with the quickening breeze, giving form to lost souls stirred by the unwelcome intrusion.

The plaintive cry of a male Koel, calling in search of a mate, echoed through the forest.

‘That poor Koel sounds pretty lonely,’ said Stevie, ‘female company has always been scarce out here, those early settlers had to make do with what they could find, hey Mike.’

‘Geez Stevie, what are you getting at?’ demanded Mike. He felt a sudden shove in the back. Worried he’d upset Nate, he turned around, just in time to catch Merle who had tripped on a tree root. They both tumbled to the ground, clutching each other for support.

‘Oh Mike, help me up, I’m not feeling too well, those tomatoes have given me a stomach-ache. I’m not sure how much more of this I can take, can’t we just turn back.’

‘I’m not feeling too good either Merle, I think I should have listened to Hayk back there,’ said Brenda, as she sat down clutching her stomach.

‘There was no turning back in the old days,’ said Billie with a wry grin, the first time he’d spoken all tour.

‘Get up you lot, a little hardship is character building,’ said Stevie, ‘the good times will be even sweeter when they return.’

A stream crossed the track, fringed with a grove of bamboo stakes rising out of the mist. Headstones, spears, or stakes to support the seedlings from an earlier working bee? A black crow sat quietly, observing proceedings, it heralded the coming storm with a crow that echoed through time.

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‘This is where we go native for a while,’ said Stevie. Shoes off everybody, we’ll be walking down stream looking for eel and yellow belly. Billie here is going to collect your valuables; car keys, mobile, wallet, into our dilly bag for safe keeping in case you fall in.’

‘Oh really, this wasn’t in the brochure, I’m not too happy about this, said Mike. Nate and Billie took a couple of steps closer. ‘Like I said earlier Mike, it’s about time you learnt to trust us.’

Split into two groups, men in front, women behind, they waded into the stream, knee deep, icy cold, water skimmers leading the way downstream toward a deep sandstone gorge.

Bamboo stake spears were handed out to the willing and able.

Hayk followed Billie to the edge of an old stag, watched, waited, saw the ripple, stood tall, thrust hard. It felt good, this going native, a simpler way, hunt and gather, reap, and reward, shed the heavy, false cloak of Christian civility, just like military service.

Stay in the shallows, hidden by shadow, patient, watch the shimmering surface for a disturbance, aim just behind the ripple, strike, hard, without warning. Mike struck hard and missed. Bob slid and fell. Confidence long gone, too soft now, too many years of excess.

Bob new if it came to it, he wouldn’t survive out here. He’d realised for a while that they were in the spot where it’d happened and thought of his great granddad. ‘Hey boys over here,’ he whispered. A rag tag bunch of shooters had gathered from across the district, their horses galloping through the night to search for the suspects. ‘These’ll do,’ they’d shouted as gunshots echoed through the still morning air. Bob’s great granddad was only 18 years old, ‘not the women and children,’ he’d pleaded, or so family legend has it. One of the women was Stevie’s great grandma.

When left alone and undisturbed, a dingo pack is a tight family unit, clear hierarchy, law, ritual, young and old nurtured for life. When disturbed, lone males prowl, circle, wait for an advantage.

Stevie and Nate tended to the women folk while the men hunted or were hunted. They sat under an overhang by the stream, concealed by a dense stand of bottlebrush. Wait here, you’ll be safe,’ said Stevie as the Koel’s moan echoed through the gorge, outcompeting the shrill cicada. A lonely male, or two, in search of a mate.

Eva watched the drama unfold, watched Hayk in quiet admiration, taking on the old Turks, new alliances. Finally, a glimpse beyond the cliché's, this is why she had travelled all this way to Australia.

Brenda remembered seeing a group of them on the riverbank last week on her afternoon walk with Potsy. 'Come Potsy, better cross the road, they've probably been drinking all day, someone should call the police.' She didn't realise Stevie had been there; he'd called his family together to help Billie and they'd assembled by the river where they felt most comfortable. Billie's dad had finally topped himself after years of trying and he had been walking home from the funeral when the police nabbed him. 'Uncle, if you write a court reference, I reckon I can get him a job at the centre,' said Stevie, 'that should keep him out of gaol and give his wife and kids some money too.'

Brenda didn't feel safe then, why now? She and Merle had all but given up, were cold, wet, exhausted, in desperate need of some paperbark. They sat watching the water ebb and flow its way past the boulders as it sped faster and faster toward the fall beyond. A steep drop ended a few hundred meters below in a dark pool, fringed by tree fern, pandanus, and water lily. They thought they heard horses pushing them on, killer whales closing the noose. Merle panicked, slipped, and stumbled into the stream.

Stevie was the first to react and grabbed her arm just in time. 'Careful Merle that current will take you over the edge in no time.' He heard the horses too, driving his relatives over the edge, where they fell, one by one. He could hear their calls, feel the Elders sitting, watching from beneath the ochre-etched overhangs of Baiame, emu, kangaroo, dingo, spear, friend, foe, horse, winnebago, dream time, returning, always.



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Mothers, daughters  
fathers, sons  
black and white  
past and present, long forgotten  
lightly tapping on our shoulders from behind  
casting a glance  
back  
black  
into the night  
or the light  
our choice, or is it

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‘Looks like some of you have had enough,’ yelled Stevie, ‘let’s go this way back upstream to the track.’ They slumped down, exhausted. Stevie let them recover, let the silence linger.

‘No one really knows, the government say about fifteen were killed that day, but we reckon it was well over fifty,’ he said. ‘My great grandma and a few others managed to hide themselves and survived.’

‘I’m sorry, I had no idea,’ said Mike.

‘It’s a difficult topic to talk about, we have a counsellor back at the centre if anyone needs to debrief. Our ponies will take you back, and if you’ve been touched and feel so inclined, donations go toward our community scholarship fund. The government has been generous, we can offer large tax rebates for any vehicles donated.

‘I guess a horsepower rebate is fair enough,’ murmured Bob with a wry smile as he mounted his pony.

Mike saddled up next to Stevie for the ride back to the centre, ‘Stevie, any advice on how Merle and I can bond with our new son-in-law, he’s Aboriginal, from up this way somewhere?’

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‘Billie, Nate make sure you turn off the lights,’ said Stevie, ‘and mark any donations on the ledger ‘reparation’ so they don’t get mixed up with the art centre lot. You know what those bloody accountants are like, we don’t need any more trouble with the Law.’