

IT'S CAPTAIN COOK ALL OVER AGAIN ...

EDWINA HOWELL

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'Hey unc! Meet my friend here. Unc, Andy, this is Liz.'

'Good to meet ya Liz.'

'You too', she shakes his hand as he pulls his ciggy out of his mouth, with a grin.

'You know who her old man is eh?'

Danny's pointing across the road at the cake shop with graffiti on its wall. The empire of Yarra needs some common sense.

'That one, eh, Unc. But no problem', he's chuckling 'they don't see eye to eye, you know'.

God damn it Danny, I've asked you not to do that, embarrassed, and she's lost the conversation to another one now. Amy and Jess have come down from Dubbo and they're hassling Andy about where his son Bill could be. Bill's got the tickets to Tjimba and the Yung Warriors and they've still got to make it to see Nan before they leave.

She'd met Danny out here on the corner one day going for a coffee with her biological father. They'd liked each other and just started hanging out a bit, you know as friends do. The second time they'd met she'd jumped in the back of the car with him and his mate and taken off on a mission down to Toorak. It was hard rubbish day and they were parousin' for bunk beds for a couple of kids in the flats. She loved that kind of thing, scouring through the bits and

pieces people would leave on their front laws, and had loved it since she was a kid.

Liz turns back to Danny, here on the corner outside Safeway on Smith St.

'So how've you been bub? Sorry about that before hey, it's just this young one she's come from out of town and she's causing some trouble. Yeah, sorry, bub. So yeah, how've you been, eh?'

'Alright ... yeah, pretty good really. Just doing my thing, bit of recording and stuff.'

'You found a job yet?'

'Na ... kind of thinking I'll just wait till I finish this session and then I'll start looking again.'

'You're not back with that lawyer mob?'

'Na ... na ... still not sure about all that stuff hey. Probably go back to waitressing or the pub. Enough about me though, hey what happened with your case?'

'You mean the one with them undercover jungkai? You know what they said hey bub, they said 'You stinkin' Abo'. I've got witnesses. Witnesses who can back me up that it was 'Abo' you know, not 'ho-bo'.'

'Yeah that one. With the Legal Service down here?'

'Na, I went to the other one over at Fitzroy, hey. The coppers said they'd

drop three charges if I pleaded guilty to two.'

'What! But you're not.'

'Na ...'

'Hey, Danny, is it true that they get people to plead guilty at the other one 'cos it's easier?'

'Yeah bub ... But they're a good mob down at the Fitzroy one.'

She takes a swig of her coffee, and starts rolling up a cigarette.

'So, tell me what you've been up to bub?'

'Ah just the same old stuff, you know, bit of guitar, bit of recording. Ah ... and I've joined this choir which is awesome.'

'You seen that show on the 7.30 Report last week?'

'Na. You told me about it on the phone though. Should be able to get it off the net hey?'

'You know what they were doing bub? They were standing just over here, right, with their big film cameras and everything, outside Safeway there and were sticking it right on us. It's Captain Cook all over again. Sticking their cameras at us and not even asking us what we think. So I went over there eh, and went right up to the woman speaking and told them to stop bloody filming or I'd shove the camera in her face. If they wanted a story they could come over and ask. Yeah, oh sorry, bub, so yeah they did, come over and that. And we said our bit you know about the drinking here and the bus and the council and all.'

She watches his emotion as he recreates the scene.

'I'll check out the program. Hey, good on ya for telling them where to stick it.'

'So your old man over there, he's been stirring up trouble again.'

'Yeah, with that graffiti and he said something about an article in the Age. ... Hey Danny?'

'Yeah bub?'

'You know that it's not fair to introduce me like that. It's not because of all this stuff, it's just that it's kinda disrespectful to the parents I grew up with. It just grates on me, ok?'

'Ah bub, it gives 'em a bit of a rise, that's all, eh?'

'Yeah, I know, but ...'

'He really does care, you know. He just comes at things from a weird kind of angle.'

'Sure does.'

'He just reckons Yarra and the State government will never cough up the cash if someone doesn't complain loudly enough about the past. And that's what he thinks he's doing, although I know he can be full on. You know he's been arguing for this community centre down here for years? As a base with the right equipment for people to record their stories. He's had his eye on Collingwood Tech for ages.'

'Where the justice centre is?'

'Yeah, down there. But that was before it was turned into a court house.'

HOWELL: IT'S CAPTAIN COOK ALL OVER AGAIN ...

'Sure bub. I know what ya old man's like.
I'll 'ave a talk with him, eh ... Bub, have I
played you this one?'

He reaches for his mandolin case and
pulls the strap over his head, starting the
rhythm, in his body and out across the
strings of his voice.

'You've gotta listen to the words, eh
bub, not many fellas really listen you
know.'

You can't always get what you want
You can't always get what you want
You can't always get what you want
But if you try sometimes well you might
find
You get what you need
*(lyrics from 'You Can't Always Get
What You Want' The Rolling Stones)*

The Store at Pine Creek

Betty's son, Jimmy, had come up the morning after we'd stayed at their joint and told us about the Buranga festival, east of here towards the Gulf. Jimmy was playing guitar in a band that night and wondered if we had the space to give him a ride. In the end we went but we never saw Jimmy again. I remember how he'd given his last cigarette to you, how his laughter bolted out from beneath his face burnt by oil from a car engine he was fixing when he was young, and how, on our way out of Buranga, about 200kms south east, I'd held your head as we lay amongst the bloated dead cows in a gravel pit on the side of the road, your stomach cramming with blades. I'd never used the radio phone before and I was shit scared by who I was and where we were and the smell of dead ringing in my ears.

We'd met Betty, and her partner Martin, out the front of the general store in Pine Creek, and we stayed up at their camp for just one night after we'd bought them some beer because, in Pine Creek in 2003 only whites could get beer before midday.

We were a good hour and a half south of Katherine and it was another nine hours or so to Tennant Creek so this was it for groceries and beer for the next little while. A bench in the centre of the dusty general store presented us with the possibilities: brown skin bananas \$8.99kg, tomatoes caved and wrinkly \$9.49kg, onion and potatoes \$5.50kg and a wilted lettuce for \$4.99kg. So we'd picked up tinned beans, canned corn, peas and some more rice. A local looking fella, wearing an akubra, bought four pies and a two litre bottle of coke.

We'd been up round Darwin for a couple of months by that time, and were finally heading out south, it was a mid point, perhaps a turning point in two ways. On our way out of Pine Creek we'd parked on the side of the road so you could peel the bark from a Banyan tree to make string. I was sitting in the drivers seat and a woman came up, she was talking to me and she wanted some money or something and she started stroking my hair, and then my face. But it wasn't the stroking of a mothering touch. I could feel her bitterness, her grief running its fingers across my cheeks, her anger at the ease of my open smile, my traveling by, my moving through and leaving, leaving without having listened to her. But I couldn't really understand what it was that she wanted to say, but was I ever really listening?

And us? The 'turning point'? I had decided to put a flag in the sand, a marker of time, September. I would be returning home with or without you in September.

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I'm diving for lily bulbs and Brett is sitting on the bank, having a stubby in the afternoon light with Martin, 'Show you fishing tomorrow, hey? Take you out, good country my country'.

Betty points, 'Over there. Get 'em that big one' and I dive into the tangled web of lily roots, trying to get to the bottom but I'm frightened of getting stuck. I come up gasping for air, and Betty's laughing. Down again, even more determined, grabbing a hold of the slippery stems, pulling myself to the bottom. I'm diving for the root as Betty told me to. This is the part that gives the brightest colour for dying string, but I'm out of breath again and struggling up through the thick brown-green webs of lily to breach at the surface, stripping

the hair back from across my face. Betty is almost rolling on the grass at the sight,

'Hey sister, I been getting 'em this one.'

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Brett's pissed off at me for bringing him here. Betty was so excited about having us as guests but you can tell that she doesn't come much either. In this place you're either a Christian or you drink – black and white, like that.

The tin roof is shifting with the falling of the coolness of night. And the singing is gorgeous. It's in language this one. And this is what Betty wanted us to hear. It's almost all women, and young kids, and then the preacher, his assistant, and three teenage boys setting up the gear for their band. I feel Brett shifting awkwardly next to me on the wooden bench that we're sharing up the back in the dim light and the preacher's assistant takes up the microphone. The sound is hard against the tin walls as the end of the wire runs on the concrete floor, but this isn't why I feel Brett's body become sharp. The young preacher is pacing as he speaks, the rhythm and tone builds to storms of fervor and then lulls in the calm between waves:

The time has come my brother's and sister's. The signs are here. Praise the lord. You see dead animals on the side

of the road. It's time, Amen, to let our black brother's and sister's know that Armageddon is near.

We need to search for our brothers and sisters out bush and gather them in. We need to let them know, Amen, that the signs are here and they are welcomed by God to join us on our journey to heaven. Praise the Lord.

Brett can't stand it. He gets up and walks off. And I'm left here, not wanting to be here anymore either, waiting for the band, movement enough for me to make a subtle escape.

Later Martin tells us how the church group comes up from the town once every month to put on the show. He'd gone to live down there for a bit but 'they don't listen to Aboriginal way' he'd said. So he came back up here where it's harder to stay off the grog, where it's harder to live. We've been talking for hours. It must be near midnight and he needs to be up to go out with the CDEP crew in the morning to fix the fences that keep the ferals out. But he'll be back to take us fishing in the afternoon he promises. I pull out our swag from out the back of the truck and lay it down by the softening red coals. I'm in love with this amphitheater of stars as I hold Brett's body close and fall into sleep.

Port Hedland

They'd been traveling north of Port Hedland for hours, but she's been somewhere else out the window as the red dirt and grey-green scrub washes her by. On the seat with its grease marks, sweat marks, was the list of names, twenty-one contacts and their ID numbers. You had to have both, a full name and their immigration detention number to get in. She'd been given the list through a web of people - from Melbourne, to Sydney, to Port Hedland the list had been siphoned to end up in her inbox just a week ago.

She'd called a local contact number given to her from a Refugee and Immigration Legal Service in Melbourne. It was the local minister.

Hello. I was wondering if I could speak with Patricia, please?
Can I ask whose calling?

Sorry, I'm Liz. I've been trying to contact Patricia about visiting the detention centre.

She heard his footsteps down a hallway, an open wire door, and a softer paced step returns to the phone. They speak and Patricia explained:

You might have to wait a bit. This can be a very difficult thing for those inside. Just seeing someone from outside can bring up a lot of pain. Some days they'll be OK, some days they just can't face it. Do you understand?

Yes, of course. Thank you. I really don't want to make it harder for any one. I just thought if there was a chance to let people know back in the city what it was really like, well you know, that it could maybe make some kind of difference.

'Do you want to go back?' Brett asks for the second time but his voice has raised in pitch and volume, just a little, enough for her to hear his thoughts. Yes, I think I do. But she sits there eyes still her eyes out the window. 'I really don't mind you know. You want to don't you?' Sometimes she finds it so hard to say what she wants if she thinks it's not what he wants to hear, but she turns to him, 'Yes I think I do'. She watches his breath deepen, his bare chest opening the skin across his ribs. He pulls the car to the side of the road, turns to her, knows her, and swings the car around.

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Three days in a town marked by the arch of salt mountains at its entrance. Each day they go to the pool. In the city, two years later she is taken here to her memories through the footage of the Freedom Rides protesting at the apartheid in rural towns in northern New South Wales. The scenes of the protests at Moree pools in the 1960s remind her of the local Aboriginal kids who came back each day to beat her and Brett at bombing competitions and underwater races and how the time passed so quickly with their games.

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'Sit down please', the lady in a white and blue security guard suit says from behind the glass window of the reception desk. Finally they are here sitting, waiting, nervously on squat padded chairs in the reception of the detention centre. She feels the sweat drip down her side body and the air conditioning makes her queasy. There's a glass cabinet in front of them that they move to during the hours that they wait, with a woven boat of dried grass, a papier-mâché family propped up in the corner and an ocean of blue and green beads spilling towards them. A sand

mosaic bends the edges of a glass bottle. And they wait.

She's worried they're intruding, that she got Brett to turn the car around and spend three days in this shit-hole of a town for nothing, that the men they've come to see can't even get out of bed to see them, and that she's making things so uncomfortable just because she thinks it's important to know. She remembers in a place of river red gums, washing charcoal and paint from the children's clothes, that this process of opening can hurt and it carries the responsibility of return. For once you've been given the gift of a story, someone's faith in you, you must return.

After two hours the manager comes with his boots and calves the size of a decent thigh. Stand over tactics - they don't understand why.

In the court yard, the visitors' area, they stumble past stories, through stories, tentative with their words, careful not to prick the skin of deeper suffering. Remeir and Azim had learnt English so they could understand what was being said on the news, how likely it was that Howard could be knocked out in the November election. Their lives depended on it. You could see it in the shift of their eyes as they spoke - the way a person disappears through their pupils when hope begins to disappear. But together they do share some laughter and a kick of a hacky sack around a dusty dirt floor.

Later that afternoon they find out how Remeir and Azim had been eager to meet them early that morning, but they had been told their visitors had failed to arrive.

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Back in Melbourne, two years later, Liz reads Azim's files. She's thought about marrying him, yes just for the visa. To her it makes more sense to get married for a life than for 'love'. They said you were lying because your scar is straight and being beaten by police doesn't make straight scars, they know this. For the shifting pages of the Immigration Review Tribunal, this is fact. They beat you in a cell until you became unconscious, falling onto the side of a table and you now have a sharp line that speaks your story across your back.

Author Note

Edwina Howell is currently a PhD candidate in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University writing a thesis on the life and activist methods of Gary Foley. She has presented guest lectures in the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies at Monash University and a seminar in the School of Anthropology on how alternative epistemologies are contested at the McArthur River Mine. Last year she co-facilitated the subject 'Hearing the Country' and tutored in CAIS in the subject 'Culture, Power, Difference: Indigeneity and Australian Identity' and has also taught at Melbourne University in the Department of Education in the subject 'Indigenous Australian History'. She is also an officer of the Supreme Court of Victoria. Edwina's contact email is: edwina_howell@yahoo.com.au.