

SIX FOOT TRACK

The track cuts through stunted trees on worn down mountains, very old mountains of uncertain memory. They made it six feet wide so that pack horses could pass. Untended, the track has narrowed – so that now it's barely a track at all – sufficient, though, for a man and a dog. The dog tags along behind. He knows the dog is there, but when he turns around, there is nothing, only a hint of dog – a rustle in the undergrowth, a canine smell. Sometimes, to catch it out, he turns about abruptly – but always with the same result: no dog, just an impression of dog.

When he reaches a small stream, he stops and scoops the tannin water with a green enamel mug. The mug is a reminder of his scouting days. He was a bad scout. Unreliable, untidy, profane.

He drinks and splashes water on his face, knowing that this is the easy bit, that the plateau will soon give way to ragged, sandstone cliffs and he will be descending in a slipstream of crumbling rock. On unsure footing. Grabbing on to anything he can.

And the water in the stream will come undone, fall into the valley – a central, disorderly cascade – a halo of fine strands floating in the updraft. Like lover's hair. Like Cynthia's hair. He used to love the way she'd swing her hair loose on getting home, in their bedroom late at night, after a concert – back in the years of wonder when the band, his band, could do no wrong.

He sits for a while beside the stream, studying the fragments of sky that hang between eucalypts. He looks down at his boots, caked in mud. He looks to a far-off escarpment glowing yellow in the morning light. He cannot see the valley. It is country without middle distance.

He gets up and swings his pack to his shoulders and shouts *cooooooeeee* and then stands still to listen. And all he hears is the hum of wind winding its way through the fractured landscape.

“Silly bastard. Silly bastard.” He mumbles to himself and presses onwards.

He’s decided they’ve gone on ahead. Maybe they’ll be thinking he’s left without them. He knows they won’t be happy. The fat banker will be saying he’s a loser. Kelly will be discouraging them from hanging about because she has a boyfriend waiting at the other end. And the lovely guide? She’ll be worried. It’s obvious she’s new from the way she reads from prepared notes, boring things like how banksia need fire to germinate and how everything was once completely underwater. He’s sorry to be getting her into trouble.

When he’s moving, he keeps his eyes squarely on the ground ahead. Because it can suddenly become wide-angle. Precipices appear without warning. It’s possible to simply walk out into space. Into the blue.

He recalls the story of a German tourist who left his hotel for a bit of fresh air and a smoke. Who wasn’t seen again until they found his body years later, on a ledge, close to the top of a nearby cliff. The surprising thing was that only one leg was broken. Apparently, everyone spent too much time searching the bottom of the valley. Which goes to show that pessimism rules.

He is haunted by the image of a rescue chopper and a stretchered, spinning man inching upwards to its jaws. “Not me,” he says aloud; but he is uneasy – the red-checked shirt, the pants, the hair – a little hair has escaped the medivac shroud and blows about in the rotor wash. He imagines the man’s face and sees his own: a grim rictus, an aquiline nose, full, rosy-red lips, an unshaved chin – rather square.

Jesus Christ, not me! He says a second time, pushing the image of the corpse out of his mind, trying to distract himself with thoughts of Cynthia. They should have worked it all out, stayed together, made babies; he should have cleaned up his act, gone to rehab. She was beautiful, perfect, brilliant and now, even a little bit famous. He was an idiot.

He walks on – in his red-checked shirt and baggy shorts and boots that should have been road-tested before the hike.

He is already talking to himself and he's only been lost for two hours, which he thinks is reason to keep the pouch of dope safely tucked away. It's half empty, in any case. Some of it was smoked the night before while the guide read a book in her tent. He'd offered it around. Most of them had taken polite little drags – with the exception of Suresh. He had the tip of his joint glowing like a furnace and he'd had to snatch it back. They'd all talked and laughed until, one by one, they retired. By midnight, only Kelly remained. They'd gone on to discuss cool things like the colour of mirrors and how long it would take to listen to every song on iTunes. He'd made a pass. She wasn't interested.

*

And now here he is, lost, looking like a total fool. Which, he has to admit, he is.

*

The next twenty-four hours are a blur, just puffs of memory passing like clouds. The emergence from bush. The brightness of sky curving over and around and down to the roof of trees far below. The valley waiting. He had once been told that wilderness is always waiting. By whom? He cannot remember.

There is a path on the valley floor that is barely a path and he moves along it like a shadow, unused to the silence of soft ground, in a graveyard of fallen trees, with giant ferns blooming

in the half-light, roots branching and sifting in the thick, black, worm-racked soil, flashing at him like pieces of bone.

This is the land before Adam and Eve, he says to himself, before dinosaurs even.

Occasionally, somewhere in the canopy, up in the dry, clear, thin white air, a whipbird whistles a long, drawn-out, middle C. Finding comfort in this sound, he responds by calling *coooooee* again and again and again. Until he is hoarse.

Then he walks on, making arbitrary decisions on paths that fork and fork again; on looping paths that return to the beginning. On false passages. In a world without reference to anything. Not to time. Not to place. No sun by day. No stars by night. He can't remember much about stars in any case, except that the Southern Cross is Southern.

*

Lunch on the first day was a Mars bar at the base of a boulder with an overhang.

Afternoon tea was a joint while sitting on a log at yet another fork in the track.

When the light grows thinner, he soothes himself by making plans, deciding that the evening meal will comprise of a Mars bar and a second joint. But he's soaked his matches. Late in the afternoon, at the base of a cliff, perhaps not far from where he started, he had heard the sound of falling water, like a distant rain shower. As he approached, the trees parted and he could see water tumbling down from a dizzy patch of blue – in a perfect, even sheet. To strike a shelf of furrowed rock and make a fog of spray. To gather itself up and flow away. A neat little stream in a forest of shadows.

He found her there, veiled by falling water, Cynthia, naked and beckoning. He did his best to read her lips. Come to me, she seemed to say, come to me. Naturally, he'd marched straight

in, without a moment's hesitation and lost his footing on rounded rocks. In freezing, knee-deep water. After righting himself, he'd got up and looked around and she was gone and there was nothing for it but to proceed onwards, wet and shivering, with the dog trailing.

The night, moonless black and fearfully cold, stopped him in his tracks and he slid down against a tree into a soft depression of fallen leaves. Using a torch, he selected the driest of his matches and struck the box – but it broke in two. He tried again with half a match and managed to make a little flame that quickly spluttered out. Please, Jesus, he said, before he tried a new match. This time a bright flame illuminated his cupping hands and he found himself in a cave of light like in a Flemish masterpiece, or in outer space, and he lit a joint. Feeling better, he reflected on his situation – noting that there was one serviceable match left. This match was going to be the fire match.

“They're sure as shit going to buy my music after I'm gone. I didn't give up the piano for nothing. All that practice for nothing!”

His teacher had cried when he broke the news to her, that he was giving up classical music and joining a band. She told him that she could take him to the very top. He will never forget it: the mole on her neck, the faint, downy hair on her chin, the tears rolling down her powdered cheeks. Then he got higher and felt great and he started to think about the good things. Cynthia. The girls. The parties. His family. Cynthia. It always came back to Cynthia. He smiled and shivered.

The joint became so short that he had to hold it in a delicate pincer grip between index finger and thumb, like a crab. That was the great thing about dope, he thought, the metaphors come thick and fast, the guitar riffs drop out of heaven. Of course, there is always the problem that inspiration in such circumstances comes in code. The punter has to be high to decipher it, so it isn't commercial. He recalled someone saying (and he wished he could recall who all these

someone's were) that if you drink enough absinthe, it becomes clear that van Gogh painted in straight lines. But you've got to drink lots of absinthe and not many people do. No wonder van Gogh died a pauper.

He considers the options while he smokes: let the joint go out, light another joint, start a fire. He lights another joint. And when it is nearly finished, he madly scratches about for leaves and twigs and attempts to start a fire with the still glowing tip, puffing at embers for all he is worth, failing and swearing. He tries to light a third match without result.

*

They came for him that night. They must have been waiting. The spirits floated in like unmoored boats, some familiar, some vaguely recognised, some unknown.

First came the spirit guide, floating in-between the ferns, gliding under the canopy of trees.

Then came Jeremy, the band's first drummer wanting his thirty dollars back.

"You don't need thirty bucks, mate, you're dead," he said. And Jeremy told him that there was a girl over at the bar and that he wanted to go down to the ferry wharf with her and a bottle of Jim Beam. Jeremy was always hard to refuse.

"So, there are girls in heaven?"

"Who said anything about heaven, I don't know where the fuck I am."

"I'm sorry about letting you go, Jeremy."

"That's okay, man. I can see the big picture now. I was too unreliable, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were, Jeremy."

"Was I any good, though? That's what I want to know."

“You were pretty good. You could have been better.”

“The booze, the pills?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you love me though? Did you all love me?”

“We loved you Jeremy. We felt terrible. You shouldn’t have done it, mate.”

“I wouldn’t do it now.”

“Jesus Christ, Jeremy, it’s a bit late to say that!”

“I know.”

“If we could do it all again, we would have looked after you better. We were selfish arseholes back then.”

“It is what is.”

“Yeah, it is what is.”

And he fell asleep again and the cold crept up, its icy roots permeating every layer of clothing, burrowing inward towards his warmly beating heart.

Mrs Granger, the headmistress, with her hearing aid and Eau de Cologne, came next.

“You’ve got to get your act together, my boy, before it’s too late. You could do great things you know.”

And then came Cynthia.

“We nearly had it all,” he said to her.

“We did have it all, baby,” she replied.

“Don’t tell me you’re dead.”

“I’m not dead, baby, I’ve just come to mess with your head. ’Cause you deserve it, you’re a selfish bastard. You take more than you give.”

And, before he had a chance to apologise to Cynthia, she was gone.

And there were others.

Just before daybreak, there was a young man he didn’t recognise. The young man asked him:

“Do you remember December?”

He could not.

*

Sometime during the night, a tree fell. It must have been a very big tree. It shook the ground and woke him up. He later remembered thinking: *I am here for the tree, man, I’m here, that’s what it’s all about, being here. Here not there.*

*

He wakes to the laugh of a kookaburra in the pale, grey light of dawn and sets off, hungry and light-headed, to what he hopes is the western side of the valley, measuring time with dry-mouthed, whispered songs, navigating by the length of shadows. The dog follows, hanging off like a mangy mongrel. He comes upon further crossroads as he knew he would.

The track ahead forks three ways and he hasn’t the faintest idea which to choose.

Despondent, he stops walking, convinced he is no longer a lucky man, and sits on a log, filling in the time inspecting his remaining matches, dropping them one by one into his

upturned cap. When he finds an almost dry match, he lights up and has a smoke while the day grows brighter. Then Jesus comes along, white-robed and bearded, walking towards him with gentle, even steps. He has a wooden walking stick. He has kind eyes. He even has stigmata.

There are needle tracks on his wrists.

“Mate, am I glad to see you,” he says as he gets up, unconsciously tucking in his shirt, taking off his cap, smoothing down his hair, aware that “mate” is too familiar a term for Jesus. If it really is Him.

He suggests a round of Texas hold 'em poker to break the ice, knowing that Jesus is sure to win – although he has no money on him and, probably not Jesus, either, there being no shops in wilderness. But Jesus declines and walks on down the track, gesturing to one of the three paths, before disappearing into the eternal gloaming of rainforest. Without even giving him the opportunity for a selfie.

He takes the path chosen by Jesus and emerges late in the day, in the car park of Jenolan Caves, half-running, half-rolling down a steep embankment until coming to a stop on bitumen between a tour bus and a campervan.

*

The rest was disappointing. No squawk of two-way radios. No relieved search and rescue personnel. There was nothing for it but to cadge a lift to town. Where there was no office. Where there was no hiking company. Where no one knew his guide. He went to the car park behind the supermarket, to the space next to the stacked trolleys, and found it empty. The car wasn't worth much, in any case. The gears were shot. The wipers didn't work.

He found half a hamburger on a bus seat and shared it with the dog. He remained there until nightfall. Not a problem to anyone. Merely a derelict in a dirty red-checked shirt asking himself if this is what it's like to be dead.

*

In the great chamber of Jenolan caves, amidst stalactites and stalagmites, the fog of breath lifts upwards in the frigid air. Whispered words are rippling, sliding along the limestone walls. It's night and winter and very cold. Like when he was lost. All those years ago. How many years? – he doesn't know. Wandering souls lose track of time. Mountains have no memory.

Before him, his darling acolytes wait in eager anticipation. He is remarkably serene, given the circumstances, a moment that may never come again. Or maybe it will. Depending on unknown variables. But who cares? Who gives a shit? The dog has a juicy bone and he is as ready as he will ever be; gym-toned ready, with hair grown long, the greying bits dyed black. Practised, polished to the nth degree.

He nods. The lights go off. The darkness is now total. Not even a phosphor smudge. Not even a retinal memory of light. Silence broken only by steady drops dripping down crystal cones, hanging for a bit, finding release, falling into muddy little pools on the limestone floor. Counting out the aeons. Keeping perfect time. Always. Unlike Jeremy.

Then someone coughs. The lights come on again. With startling effect. To stun dilated pupils. To razzle dazzle. And he is on the stage before them, the gathered, privileged few. With his organ, giant and rare, sitting sideways so that everyone can see. On a dais, hammered together three days earlier – each hammer blow a shock of sound.

He turns to smile. The audience is small. It had been a battle to get Parks and Wildlife to agree to anything at all. Humidity, they said. Humidity ruins the crystals. So only a small audience and a livestream to the world. Unavoidably, the ticket prices are high, very high, a million dollars a seat including champagne.

A humidity extractor hums, vermiculates, hovers like a giant silver worm above their heads. So that programs flutter upwards in rare flight.

A tuxedoed emcee says: "Silence please."

And he lives on in this before; before his fingers fly on ivory keys, before his feet dance, before the pipes sing.

