

Tentative Threads

Everything, it must have a place.

Bicycle chained to the stairs. Photograph on the windowsill

...Everything, it must have a place.

‘You know, son, I went to great lengths to get you and your Mum here. If it weren’t for the greatness of this country, you wouldn’t be where you are right now, y’hear?’

I look up from my cereal, the teaspoon balancing on my bottom lip; milk from Old Nancy dripping down my school uniform.

Y’ hear?

But I am in Hendrik-land. Nancy’s milk leaves a trail as white as the dotted line in our street being drawn by the Fluoro Men.

The alphabet in my bowl disbands like balls on a pool table; a mixture of vowels and consonants. Repeat offenders bob up and I think of the sweating can Da holds. His precious XXXX Gold.

‘Only brew you can get for miles,’ he rants, ‘no wonder they forgot how to spell “beer”’.

Our house was built back in ’76, Da told me.

Back then, there was just a dirt track and us, Number One Coolum.

Our house was built among the gum trees, so the Green People didn’t complain and the Original People still had their Belong.

Mum and Dad weren’t Original people, though they spoke about their Belong — a bitter cold *bila* where the Nasty People only wanted Originals and not misfits like Ma and Da. Families like us — the Nowaks — were outcasts. The way our mouths formed words meant we weren’t invited to Sunday School.

‘Just be grateful you get to go to school *any day*,’ Da reminded me when the other kids ran circles ‘round me in the playground.

Da-d, Ma-m, Da-ad, Ma-am. Say it properly. Say it. Proper this time!

But I didn’t know any better.

I liked our home at One Coolum Terrace: nothing but sunbaked beach and the outstretched hand of the north: one dusty road meeting five more.

To where?

Dad told me it was Original country; the people of song and spirit. Now, each finger was dotted with little orange triangles and Fluoro Men in square hats holding circle signs. The shapes meant we should – STOP -- and pay attention.

To what?

I asked Dad if the new rectangle strip was for planes landing and, if it was, could they make me their Control Tower Operator. Dad laughed and ruffled my hair like I'd seen Mrs-Connolly-next-door do to her dog.

Ma said she didn't mind if the planes landed just as long as they didn't run over her *camellia reticulata* in the garden bed.

Ma loved her flowers, all types, but in particular the red and white Camellia — 'a White Christmas in the desert', she called it.

I memorized the tag just for the Special Day of the year when Dad slipped me a fiver to buy her favourites because he forgot which ones she liked best.

Dad forgot things a lot. I guess that's why he stopped trying to remember things, like how to spell beer, or picking me up at the school gate.

The year they built the airport, I started riding my bicycle to school.

Ma cried because I was growing too fast. Dad didn't cry. But maybe he did. I didn't see him much because he built his shed and stayed in it, guarding his gold like a Tolkien dragon.

Ma clears away the breakfast dishes from our Big Jarrah Table that Da spent weeks in his shed whittling and sandpapering away. Most of what made up One Coolum started its life in the ground and found a new beginning on our concrete-slab floor.

Your Da is clever like that, Ma said, good with his head and his hands but not always with his heart.

Da used to work on people's hearts for a living. He made black-and-white pictures called *cardiograms* to work out if the heart is worthy of its Human, or the other way round.

But Da couldn't get heart work on the Coast, so he took the dark and stabbed it, or at least I think that's what he said. Development work, it turns out, stabbed him right back. Funny that.

Sometimes Grand Ma and Pa visited from Out Back. I never understood how Da could bear to look into those Big Brown eyes and still deliver the lethal dose to its bloodstream. Da said it sped up the drumbeats so death would come quicker. *Did a quick death make it right?*

I always looked right into the bull's eye, just to see if it was true, what they say about seeing the Light at the end of the tunnel before you die.

Ma said it's like Coming Home; a glint. She said Da had almost gone there the day they fled; right to the edges where the black escapes and loops around the tear duct.

As a boy of the Dreaming Land I learned to read maps in the sky; to see shards of suns glinting with lines crisscrossing to join everything in the universe, even my Da and the Last Fateful Cow.

I wasn't an Original but the land spoke to me and told stories of how it came to be. *Bila* in their mouth formation meant water, and the dead sound that came after meant it had found its final resting place.

I knew the reason now.

They had travelled to bring me home so I too could *belong*.

Everything, it must have a place.

And that's why I am staying here.