

Luck Filled Platypus

As the car wound its way around the tight curves and hidden dips on the road up to the Tarra-Bulga national park, Ava was busy trying to quell the nagging voice in her mind. It was the voice of her mum, her mates and the media, all telling her the worst would happen. All of a sudden, the trees to the right of the road cleared and she was able to peer beyond the man driving, towards tree caked mountains which looked like the back of a sleeping dragon leading all the way to Morwell. Vistas like that were not available in the city, that was for sure. She found herself leaning forward, trying to drink in and appreciate the view.

“Pretty impressive,” said the driver, “want to stop for a photo?”

She felt herself tense up. “No, it’s alright,” she managed. She felt she should say more but didn’t. The man nodded.

“He’s nice,” she said to herself, and she knew she was right, despite the lingering doubts she couldn’t quite dispel. She was right, she had planned this, and it was working.

She had stayed on the bus as it drove past the school that morning and deposited her at Richmond train station. Changing in the toilets, she packed her uniform tightly into her backpack. The guard checking her Myki didn’t ask any questions, so she was able to put her headphones in, sit back and relax for the two-hour trip to Traralgon. The city fell away to be replaced by swathes of farmland punctuated by small regional towns. She thought about Grandpa Ernie and wondered if this was right way to pay tribute to his memory. She reckoned he would be delighted with her plan but would worry like everyone else with the idea of her hitchhiking.

She knew she was right though. Disembarking at Traralgon station, using her phone, she walked for 20 minutes and navigated to the Hyland Highway with only a couple of wrong turns. At home she had worked out it was the perfect road to hitch from as cars were likely

to be heading up to the national park or the Loy Yang power station. She had sworn herself to check the cars before sticking out her thumb. She ignored utes and trucks as they were probably heading to the power station. A blue Yaris had stopped for her but the woman driving it was heading home to Woodside after a weekly shop.

“Aren’t you a bit young to be hitchhiking?” she asked Ava.

“I need to get up there today.” Ava replied, hoping her sincerity might persuade the woman to make a detour. It wasn’t.

She couldn’t remember the make of the next car she stuck her thumb out for, but it was a green version of model her friend Charlotte’s parents drove. She was a bit surprised only the driver was in the vehicle, but he seemed safe.

“They always do,” chimed the voice in her head.

He was nice. He tried to chat to her as he drove. He lived in Yarram and had travelled from Melbourne himself. There were shorter routes, but he loved the mountain drive and had the time. Looking out the window, she could see why.

“Why are you going to Tarra-Bulga?” he asked.

She paused before answering. She had a prepared answer, which she had created after friends had laughed at her real reason. Part of her knew it was a fool’s errand, but she was doing it for Grandpa Ernie.

“I want to see a platypus.” She sighed, expecting the inevitable.

“You’ll be lucky.” The driver replied, as she expected.

Ava bit her lip. This was the problem, all the doubters and the haters. She was sick of being told what she could or could not do, what she could or couldn’t achieve. People were always giving their opinion when it was rarely asked for. At home her mum was always ordering her about and insisting she take more responsibility for her actions. At school her teachers were

'advising' what she should do in the future and claiming she really did know the answers to questions when she knew she didn't. Even her friends were telling her what she should do, and with who and what would be possible, or not possible as long as she did things she wasn't entirely sure of.

The only person in her life who had never told her what she could or could not do was Grandpa Ernie. Anything was possible with him. He used to travel into the city and visit her and her mum in their unit on weekends when she was little. She would sit at the kitchen table with him whilst her mother made fairy bread and he would regale them with tales from his time working for the Forest Commission of Victoria in and around the park. Along the way she worked out he planted hundreds of pine and eucalyptus trees, but he seemed to do so much more than that.

"Did I tell you about the time I was attacked by a vampire koala?"

"Dad, don't make up stories," Ava's mum scolded.

He wasn't. He and his mate had been doing the count one time, which seemed to be checking that all the trees that had been planted were still there.

"Jacko was up ahead of me somewhere and it was getting dark. We were nearly done but we'd got it wrong. We had started counting after getting out of the car, when we should have walked to the furthest point and counted them on the way back. I was worried the number would slip out of my head."

"That happens to me at school." Ava blurted. Ernie smiled.

"Course it does, because you've got so much going on up there," he tapped his temple twice. "Anyways, as I'm counting, I start hearing this rustling above me. Nothing unusual in that, there are heaps of birds and wildlife in the park and I think nothing of it. Suddenly, Jacko's up ahead of me and shouting at me to watch out. I look up and this terrifying

vampire koala with blackened eyes which looked like it had five eucalyptus leaves too many is careering down from the sky towards me.

“We’re not European,” chided her mother, “we know there’s no such thing as drop bears.”

“There is,” he insisted, winking at Ava, “but this wasn’t one of them.”

“What was it?” asked Ava.

“Turns out it was something called a Greater Glider,” Ernie responded. “I’d never seen one before. I’d seen the occasional long-nosed bandicoot and quite a few ring-tailed possums, but this was something else. I heard about them from the boys, but they’re nocturnal normally. This one had huge ears and a massive tail, and I thought it was going to land right on top of me. Then, in a blink of an eye, it opened its arms and swooped off into the bush. Jacko comes back and asks if I’m okay, which I am, but in all the excitement, I’d forgotten the number of trees.”

Ava giggled.

“Why didn’t you keep a note as you went along?” asked her mum.

“Just because,” he replied.

“Maybe I will be lucky, someone has to be,” she said to the driver before clamming up. She could see that he knew he had said the wrong thing and looked like he was going to say something else, but he left it.

The platypus was Ernie’s favourite animal. He claimed it was the only animal that could make a person believe and not believe in God at the same time.

“Beaver-tailed, otter-footed and duck-billed!” he would rejoice. “Other nations called it a ‘duck-billed platypus’, like it needs to be defined against other platypi, if that is the plural for platypus, which it isn’t but it sounds good. Even better would be a Luck-filled platypus!”

It was the last time Ava had been able to visit him before he died. He had been too sick to make it to her fifteenth birthday party, so she and her mum had caught a train to Traralgon where his retirement village was. Her mum had gone shopping whilst she sat next to his bed and shared a block of Whittakers.

“My English teacher would have some choice words for you,” she admonished mildly.

“He would, being English.” Ernie smirked.

“SHE is not English,” Ava corrected, “she teaches English, and Humanities in fact.”

“How is school?”

“It’s alright I suppose. Everyone is telling me this is my most important year and that everything I do will affect my future. It’s pretty stressful.”

Ernie reached for her hand. “You’ll be right Ava, I know it. They are right, it is your most important year, because the year you are in is always the most important. I’ve had 82 years but this one right now is the most important.” He smiled. “And next year will be even more important. Do you know what happened when they took a platypus back to England?”

“What?”

“They thought we were taking the piss! They reckoned someone had got all the bits from different animals and sewn it together. They thought it was impossible that this weird looking mammal which also laid eggs and could be venomous was the real deal.”

“Have you ever seen a platypus, grandpa?”

“I haven’t unfortunately, even Snow White couldn’t help me.”

“Are you joking with me?”

“Of course not, some of us called her Snow White because that is what she was like, although her name was Kara Healey.”

“I’ve heard that name before, I think.”

He spent the rest of the visiting hour telling her about Kara. She had become the park ranger for Tarra-Bulga after her husband’s death in the 1950’s. Ernie would bump into her from time to time when he was out with Jacko. Sometimes they would find themselves in the deepest darkest parts of the forest only to discover Kara calmly collecting moss or fungi specimens.

“We’d be treading carefully watching out for snakes and trying to avoid leeches and she would just waltz through the terrain like Snow White. As part of her job, she would greet visitors at the car park and collect parking fees, but she would deliver impromptu nature talks. We were there on a weekend once and she started telling all the folks around about the fauna and wildlife. All of a sudden, she calls up into the trees and a crimson rosella descends and lands on her hand. It was amazing.”

She collected over 500 various specimens of animal, insect, moss, fungi and other vegetation and sent it to the national herbarium for identification. Of all the specimens that were sent during the 1950’s, CSIRO admitted Kara’s were the best.

“Whilst she couldn’t help me with a platypus, she did help me see a few Lyrebirds,” conceded Ernie smiling at the memory.

“Aren’t they the ones that can make the same noise as other birds?”

“And people,” laughed Ernie. “Jacko and I once spent an afternoon searching for a child who we thought was shouting for help. The only thing was, one minute it would be over there struggling, and minutes later it would be all the way in the opposite direction. It took us ages to work out it was a lyrebird, and that it wasn’t even shouting ‘help’. We got soaked through and covered in mud in the process.”

Eva chuckled at the thought.

“So, I signed up for this nature walk Kara was running. There were eight of us on it and she was really nice, but strict. If anyone made any unnecessary noise, she would shoot them a look that would turn them to stone. We went roaming through the ferns, off the paths and under the forest canopy. The trees and the leaves are so massive, you wouldn’t be surprised if a dinosaur just reared up over you. Kara was so light on her feet, it was hard for us to keep up, and all the while, she’s collecting bits of moss and bark scrapings and whatnot. She pointed out some mounds made up of debris and whispers to us we are close and to be even quieter. We start creeping along, come into a small clearing, and there is a beaut of a bird with majestic tailfeathers. Unfortunately, I stood on a branch at that moment which spooked the lyrebird and it ran off squawking like a stalker at the MCG!”

He’d grown tired after that and her mum turned up at the end of visiting hours. Ava kissed him on the cheek as she prepared to leave.

“Here’s an idea,” he said quietly, “next year, when I’m better, you and I can go up to Tarra-Bulga and search for a platypus.”

“I would love that,” she smiled.

“Well then, that makes next year the most important.”

The driver dropped her at the car park where Kara Healey would have once met visitors.

“All the best with your search,” he said kindly.

“Thanks,” she replied, discovering it was much colder in the mountains than in the city.

He handed her a card. “There’s a phone over near the café further along the road. Call me if you need a lift back down to Traralgon.”

She took the card and smiled her thanks before closing the door. Gathering her jacket about her, she slowly walked towards the visitor centre. There was a smattering of vehicles in the

car park. She sat on a picnic bench and closed her eyes. It was quiet. Not entirely, she could hear the wind in the trees, birds calling to one another and the creak of branches, but it was all natural. She could feel her head expand for the first time in ages.

There was a gentle old man in the visitor centre who gave her a leaflet with various walks to do from the car park. She took it and glanced over the information boards that explained about the history, wildlife and prospects of the park. She was a little taken aback to see a stuffed platypus on display. It was smaller than anticipated and had the most curious feet. Its eyes were missing.

“A relic from older days,” the man confided, “I’m sure it would have died of natural causes.”

“Have you ever seen one in the wild?” she asked hopefully.

“No, worst luck. I would love to though.”

“Any idea where in the park they might be?”

He blew air out of his mouth. “That’s a good question. They like to be where there is running water, but beyond that I’m not sure. They are, of course, nocturnal.”

She thanked him and left the centre. Once more the voice at the back of her mind had a go.

“Shush!” she hissed to herself. If she was going to ignore other people telling her what to do, she would also ignore herself. For a moment her brain hurt with the concept that by telling herself what not to do, she was telling herself what to do. She batted it away. Her English teacher was always harking on about asking the awkward questions without finding an answer.

Studying the map, she found there was a Tarra river which appeared to be at least three kilometres along the road. There was a fern gully close to the visitor centre where the swing bridge was, but that didn’t appear to cross water.

She set off keeping as far over to the right as possible so she could see all oncoming traffic. The road was littered with the skin of trees and not a single car passed her. She realised that the park would not be the most visited place in the middle of May on a school day. She started to worry from a practical point of view about getting home. It was half past one and it would be getting dark just after five. Her planning had been reasonable but not brilliant. What if there was no-one around to give her a lift home?

The road dipped down and turned right to begin a U-shaped bend. Ava was considering her decisions so much that she wasn't concentrating.

The Lyrebird was looking right at her. Its black feet were planted and large brown body hunkered low to the ground. Ava stopped. The bird did not flinch. It cocked its head and studied her. He rose up and shook his beguiling plumage to entice her attention. And then he spoke.

Ava tuned out as the stern, but caring middle-aged woman drove her down the mountain. She was telling Ava that she should be careful, that there were dangerous people out there and she should be careful who she trusted. Ava knew this.

She would see a platypus another time. She would plan better or she would cheat and go to the sanctuary at Healesville. Grandpa Ernie wouldn't mind. He would tell her anything was possible.

And it was. She understood that clearer now, even if she did not quite believe it. Which is why, when the Lyrebird spoke, it possibly did so in her grandpa's voice.

"Go home Ava. It will be dark soon."