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The Night Bird

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Author Bio

Samantha Siomko says, "I'm an overenthusiastic biologist who thinks my life is too interesting to keep to myself. I write these things down partially to share what I've learned and partially help myself remember that the world is a diverse and beautiful place."

The Night Bird

“We had to stop the car because the herd of wild pigs was so huge. At the end of the line was this boar, all scarred up with these huge tusks.”

I could only see the back of Daren’s head, dark wavy hair that far surpassed the length of mine and skin the color of damp clay. He drove as he spoke, and the road over which we passed was composed entirely of red dirt which created opaque clouds behind the Land Rover as it bounced along. The trees were scraggly with bark blackened by fire, and the landscape was pock-marked by termite mounds taller than most humans. Heat distorted the air above the hood of the car and made me all too aware that just outside of this air-conditioned vehicle was the scorching Australian outback.

Daren chuckled as he encountered our silence. “You girls don’t talk much, huh?” I assumed his experience with American girls from previous college groups gave him a different impression of who we should be: loud, bleach-blond, vain, and weak.

I spoke, if only to provide a contradiction to his assumption. “It’s just been a long day. We’re probably tired.”

“Well, not too tired, I’d hope. We got a camp to set up when we get there.”

Daren resolved that he should continue his story. The boar had turned toward the vehicle, pawing at the ground with the intent to charge. Daren had retrieved his rifle and shot the pig square in the center of its forehead. It did not fall but charged, ramming its huge, bloody hulk into the car. Daren took aim again and laid three more bullets into the animal before it fell. Then they took it back to camp to be eaten.

“My mother used to go to school this way,” he said as if the end of the boar story contained some sort of sequitur. “She used to see this monster who lives out here. Looks like a man but all hairy and very tall. Would scream at night. I saw it too, once.”

The three of us in the back seat exchanged wide-eyed glances. “Wow, man,” I mumbled, if only to provide something to fill the stunned silence.

We arrived at a squat ranch house. Two horses dotted with flies nibbled on stiff grass in the front lawn. We were the third car in a convoy of four vehicles that pulled up to this place. Jack, a skinny Irishman with a Crocodile Dundee-air about him, shook the hand of a dirty-faced woman who emerged from the house. As she and Jack spoke, a few girls climbed out of the cars to harass the animals. One walked directly behind a horse while the other seemed determined to stick her fingers up the animal’s nostrils. The horse snorted indignantly and stomped off.

“Oh my god! Showers!” one of them shouted as she spotted the bathhouse. “We won’t be too far away, will we?” I had climbed out of the cool air of the car to try my luck at seducing one of those skinny horses. It sniffed at my hand tentatively before determining I had no food to offer it, then returned to tugging at the grass. Jack informed the convoy that we would be driving to the other end of the ranch to camp, much to the shower-girl’s chagrin.

There were nineteen of us students. We were all upper-classmen at Ameri-

can colleges, most aiming for a degree in some scientific field. Australia was a fairytale for many of us who had only dreamed of such a place of natural beauty. Others had come on the trip just for the novelty of the situation. And still others had no idea why they decided to come to such a hot, dirty place.

The first order of business was to go camping as a team-building exercise. We would be spending the next three months together, after all. A family of Aboriginal Australians was accompanying us with the intent of sharing their culture and knowledge: Uncle Russ the elder, Daren, his hunter-extraordinaire son, and Jared, who was Daren's more modernly-educated progeny. Jack would be there to supervise us, and Meryl was coming to make sure we did not starve to death. That brought the count up to twenty-four people, which was, essentially, a tribe.

We set up camp in a grove of trees flanking the river. The ranch house from earlier had long since vanished into the distance. Instead, termite mounds and snake-infested hovels overlooked our grassy oasis. The eucalyptus trees were tall and ancient sentinels that shaded the grotto. Cicadas rattled from high in their branches, and cows lazily plodded on the outskirts of camp.

"Go for a swim," Uncle Russ encouraged as he strummed an acoustic guitar from his shaded camp chair. "The freshwater crocodile won't usually bite." A few of the girls giggled as they tried to coerce Jared to accompany them into the water. He was classically handsome and fairly fit, aiming for a career as a professional rugby player. But his demeanor was shy, and while the screeches of horny college girls may have intrigued him, he had no clue how to react. I caught him once sitting in a tree overlooking the river in complete silence. We chatted about the lack of jobs for his Aboriginal friends and how his father felt like a hypocrite for working at a Catholic school that provides free education for natives as long as they practice the designated religion. Daren had a few sharp words for that place, but Jared reacted with a quiet truth.

At night, Uncle Russ would build a fire in the middle of camp and tell us stories. He told of the Rainbow Serpent, guardian of the rivers, who devoured two wasteful youths who killed more fish than they intended to eat. He told of the seven sisters who escaped into the night sky to become stars instead of letting the youngest marry a cruel man. He told of the injustices that his people have endured ever since white settlers arrived. He told of the death of his wife. He told of his lost culture. He told.

And one night, he gave us our names.

"You should be the dingo," said one of the students to me. "You're always playing with those farm dogs." Indeed, I gravitated toward the quick, sharp-eyed herding dogs or the two pad-footed puppies who would grow up to be monstrous white beasts. But sticks were easy to throw, much easier than holding a conversation with a distraught college student who is sick of peeing behind termite mounds and just wants to check Instagram.

The moon was full that night, but its pale, blue light could not penetrate the warm orange glow from the fire. We formed a circle around the burning log, some of us curled up on shared blankets, others huddled with companions for warmth. I sat downwind from the fire, and the smoke and ash blew over me with every gust. "Guyibara," he said to me. "The Curlew."

"Why?" I said to his shadowy form sitting on the opposite side of the fire.

“Because you’re quiet. You stand at the back, and you listen,” he responded.

I pursed my lips and whistled the curlew’s distinctive, eerie song; a minor tune that starts with one sustained pitch followed by another higher pitch which vibratos downward. A distant curlew, a slender-legged night bird camouflaged in the dark and dappled grass, whistled back. Uncle Russ nodded slowly at this exchange but said nothing. I imagined the wide-eyed bird pausing, listening for another whistle to break the night and ensure it that it was not alone. I obliged it one final time.

I awoke the next morning in a plastic tent to the sound of the neighbor boys swatting a large spider from their roof. Breakfast consisted of the same corn-based cereal which I ate every morning while sitting in the grassy clearing. “This whole trip just makes me really anxious,” said one of the students. “We’ve been here for four days, and there’s nothing to do. I feel like there’s work that I should be doing.” I chewed my cereal pensively as I considered her concerns. The girl frantically scribbled in a notebook, as if the afternoon swims and guitar serenades would be on the test. My own academic notebook remained untouched through the whole camping trip, but the pages of my personal journal were full. I ignored her reasoning and resolved that I would go and try to hone my boomerang throwing skills.

The nineteen of us had been thrown together just weeks before, and we had huddled together to protect ourselves from the strange culture we had been introduced to. But that time had passed. I was almost offended by those that had giggled at their Aboriginal name and passed it off as a cute cultural souvenir, or had griped about the damp ground and huge insects. They appeared to have come here to be “tourists”: culturally impenetrable, content to watch as if this experience was a movie they had paid to see and then leave behind at the end of the night.

After we returned to the city, the rest of our Australian experience continued to play out before us. Some chased boys, others discovered clubs, but I found a patch of grass to lie in and watched the stars. The tribe did not last. It broke up into smaller and smaller groups as each clique found what they coveted the most, be it alcohol or cheesy tourist photos. Eventually, we all went out on our own. But I was a curlew, alert and resourceful, too busy watching and listening to be bothered by loneliness. Uncle Russ said that we are all guardians of our namesake animal, forever a member of that species’ tribe. And while most in the group will slowly forget their names, I will forever be a night bird.