

Watching and waiting

They called it the 'wet season', but it felt more like hell on earth. Such heat. Such humidity. Sweat covered me in places I did not know it could reach. Sunburn too. Mum had spent some of her twenties in north Western Australia, and to escape what our parents saw as the mayhem of school leavers, my sister Brooke and I had been sent north. Far, far north. We'd been sold lies about sunbathing on the beach, palm trees swaying in the breeze. Instead, we spent our time scuttling from air-conditioned room to air-conditioned room; wondering why we had bothered to shower whenever we stepped outside.

Aunt Kathy had welcomed us with open arms, though we had never met and she had not seen Mum in years. Aunt Kathy (not our aunt) and Mum had once been housemates, but while Mum returned to Perth to work for a while, meet someone, and marry; Kathy stayed, worked for a while, met someone, and married. We ate in the motel's restaurant, which also doubled as its pub, and Kathy entertained us with stories from their shared youth; the stories getting bigger and better the more she told them.

Another lie we'd been fed, the Bayside Inn Aunt Kathy and Ian (not her husband) ran was not on the side of a bay. In fact, it was nowhere near water. It was located out of town, within spitting distance of the rundown crocodile farm they also owned. At first glance, and every glance afterwards, the motel looked like a place people went to die. Most of the clientele were desperate fruit-pickers, daredevils, or the sentimental. "I've always stayed here" would be the answer if you ever asked why risk a visit, as if past guests could see something you couldn't and the threadbare carpet spoke to better times long past. Our room had an unpleasant smell and looked out on a communal courtyard, littered with cigarette butts and empty beer bottles. The pool was the only redeeming feature. Or so we thought.

One night, long after the sun set, we snuck into the pool area, giggling and shushing each other in the surrounding silence. When we went back home, we'd spin tales of how we skinny-dipped under a star-studded sky, washing the red dirt from our bodies. The truth was, we wore bathers in the hope of shielding ourselves from whatever water-borne diseases the pool might carry, the water was unbearably hot after being baked by the sun all day, and the final straw was the dead gecko we discovered drowned in the shallow end. Unable to see the bottom of the deeper end and having seen a snake the day before, we hastily got out.

We tagged along one day with a group of fruit-pickers to some of the local sights, dispensing our newly gained local knowledge and feeling special at the attention of this group of men. They just happened to also be staying at the Bayside Inn (which should have been a warning) and we'd tell our friends we spent the nights partying with them. If they asked for

more details, we would glance at each other and laugh, as if we had an inside joke. The actual joke was us, jamming the room door shut after one of the trio plied Brooke with alcohol and then proceeded to put his hands down her pants and tongue in her ear. We didn't think we'd sleep that night, but must have as we woke in the early hours of the morning to blood-curdling screams and the same word repeated over and over again. We lay frozen, wondering how much blood was being shed in the massacre outside. There was the crash of a screen door and Aunt Kathy was there, shouting and then laughing and then shouting some more. We later learnt the trio had gone for a late night swim. Unlike us, it was a skinny dip, and I realised I now knew the German word for snake.

Otherwise, there was only so much to do, as we saw it, so we spent most of our time bored in and around the motel. It was here we met Tommo, Skippo, and Jimmo. Paul the newspaper man. Sharron the fuel lady. And then there was Daryl.

Apparently Daryl wasn't Daryl's name, but it'd stuck sometime in the 1980's. His skin had been burnt brown after long years working in the sun. He'd lost part of a finger in his younger days, and was missing more than a few front teeth. The general consensus was bar fights, but I had other ideas after watching him take the top off a beer with only his back molars and a grimace. Mum told us to stay away but Kathy had a different take.

"He's harmless," she reassured. "But don't steal his tobacco and don't get near him when he's drunk."

Daryl did casual work around the motel in exchange for lodgings, and sometimes took tours of the crocodile park. He didn't seem to have a fixed schedule. He was the resident handyman but not the resident employee. He started work when he wanted and while he did the jobs that needed doing, he did them on his own time. The motel lost power one night because Daryl decided on a whim to mess with the main fuse box. It was almost part of the Bayside Inn's charm. Almost.

When he wasn't working, Daryl could be found sitting on the restaurant's verandah with his shirt off, and his tobacco pouch and a beer within easy reach. He scowled at the tourists (which he considered anyone he had never met), but chatted animatedly to any locals going past. If he was heading to the shops he'd give us a lift, but he wasn't our chauffer. He'd pull off the road and chat if he saw someone he knew, leaving us to melt in the back of the car. He tried to be less crass around us, but that was the difference between calling someone a "fucking bastard" and just a "bastard". Brooke found him weird and creepy but I think she judged him just as harshly as he judged us. She saw an old drunk who did casual work at

the motel in exchange for free rent; he saw two big city kids who hadn't worked a hard day in their lives.

So while our friends partied in Perth and others rented a beach house in Dunsborough, Brooke and I made do with perfectly framed pictures of the frangipani tree in Aunt Kathy's backyard. Palm trees at dusk. The beach at sunset. We took most of our photos at night, as if the sun's glare revealed too many truths about where we'd been sent. And we counted down the days before we could leave.

The day before our deliverance arrived, we had overstayed our welcome on Aunt Kathy's couch (she had the best air-con and a subscription to Foxtel), and she sent us to the crocodile park.

"Daryl's running a tour this arvo and you got to see a croc before you go," she said, all but pushing us out the door. "You don't know what you're missing!"

The crocodile park wasn't much to look at. I'd heard Aunt Kathy mentioned the council had been on their backs about the state of the park for years and I could see why. There wasn't much concrete, just red dirt. There wasn't much shade. There weren't many animals either, and the ones there didn't look too healthy. The chain mesh fencing around most of the enclosures had been DIY repaired more than once, a clear indication of Daryl's mantra that anything could be fixed with fencing wire. Like the motel, it looked like a place animals went to die.

As we waited in the dirt parking lot for Daryl to finish his cigarette, a busload of tourists pulled in.

"I see they chose the budget package," Brooke muttered. We watched them get off the bus, one by one, and then face after face fell as they realised this was their destination and not a pit-stop. Their eyes widened further when Daryl, sleeveless shirt and torn shorts, stubbed out his smoke on the ground and as way of greeting, shouted at the bus driver to park somewhere else.

Daryl's tour started in what you could call the 'non-crocodile' area of the crocodile park. He took us past the rock wallabies (small kangaroos), dingos (bush dogs), the goannas and lizards (legged snakes), the pythons (legless lizards) and kangaroos (large wallabies), and his script might have been funny twenty years ago. Or maybe if it'd been delivered by someone that gave a damn. By the time we actually reached the crocodile section of Daryl's lacklustre tour, most of the tourists, Brooke included, had drifted off to the attached café and

gift shop. I would've gone with them but it seemed rude; and I'd already spent all my birthday money on a crocodile fridge magnet for Mum and a small crocodile skin wallet for me.

We were led into a little shed where Daryl talked about the differences between salt and fresh water crocodiles, common misconceptions about the beasts, and all the other information that was printed in the parks brochure. The only time he was engaging was when he talked about his own experiences; of watching crocodiles stalk prey, of watching them jump from the water and take a bird from an overhanging branch, and of crocodiles watching him watching them as he fished in his dinghy. A baby crocodile was then passed around and as if a cruel joke, a leather bag was handed around after. Finally, we were let out and given free rein to walk around the pens.

I made one loop and found nothing of interest. Most of the crocodiles, Daryl had said they were the smaller freshwater ones, were just lying on the ground with their mouths open. They weren't that big nor looked that fierce. I held my camera up until my hands ached, hoping two would fight. They didn't.

My favourite part of the park was an enclosure at the back. It was empty. Inside was a swimming pool, not much bigger than the one at the motel. It too was filled with filthy water and I wondered what poor soul was going to wind up in there next.

"That one's the biggest one here."

I turned to find Daryl standing next to me. He wasn't looking at me but into the enclosure, and I used the chance to glance around. We were the only ones left in the park.

"I got that one a few months ago on the Ord River. It'd been eating the local dogs but the last one was still on a leash. Wasn't a long leash either."

He was quiet for a moment before he muttered.

"The bastards watching us."

I glanced back at the enclosure, making sure I hadn't missed something, and then wrinkled my nose at him.

"There's nothing there."

Daryl chuckled and banged his hand on the fence.

"Come on ya bastard, I know ya there."

He rattled the fence again. He was staring so intently at the pool that I wondered, not for the first time, if the sun had driven him mad. I started to edge away but Daryl grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

“Look.”

Ten years of martial arts training flashed before my eyes but just before breaking his wrist, I looked. And froze. Two eyes had risen from the depths of the murky pool, and they were staring straight at me. As they slowly rose higher and higher, out came the wide snout and behind, each scale slowly appeared until all that was left was the tail. He was too big for the pool and the tail wrapped its way around the bottom end. Daryl released me and I took a shaky step back.

“H-he’s huge.”

“She.”

I turned my wide eyes on Daryl but he wasn’t watching me. He had his eyes on the croc and if I wasn’t mistaken, it now had its eyes on him.

“She was a particularly nasty one,” Daryl said. “It took me a week to trap her. She nearly got me, but I got her instead. And now she lives here and her babies are going to become wallets and shopping bags.” He nudged the purchase under my arm. “Some already have.”

Daryl paused and narrowed his eyes at her.

“Crocs are smart, but that one. She’s always watching. She knows more than she should.”

He glanced at me and then again at my purchases.

“You wouldn’t catch me dead with one of those. It’s almost like asking for trouble.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“I’m not superstitious.”

“Who said anything about superstition? It’s just common sense.”

I looked again. Her eyes were back on me. I’d never tell anyone what I saw, looking deep into those eyes. The truth was, I don’t really know myself, but it was a cold, calculating intelligence. It spoke to deep dark places. Murky water. Rotting flesh.

I jumped as Daryl rattled the cage again.

“Bugger off, ya bastard.”

Her eyes were the last to disappear as she slowly sunk beneath the water. Within moments, the water had calmed and the surface was smooth. The wind blew a frangipani down from a nearby tree and it slowly drifted across the surface, the bright colour an instant juxtaposition against the brown water and the monster lying beneath.

Daryl grunted.

“She causes me to drink that one,” he said, his voice a low murmur. “Sometimes I come here at night and sit and watch her. I try not to fall into a routine otherwise she’ll expect me. That’s when she’ll strike.”

I wondered if I should tell Kathy he was sneaking in, but decided she probably knew. He continued talking, as if I wasn’t even there.

“I tell you, at night, when it’s just her and me, I feel like we’re playing a game of chess. I make a move, she makes a move. I move again. It’s her turn now. She’s been waiting a long time; I wonder what she’ll do next.”

He paused again before he spoke.

“They—he nodded his head towards the town but I couldn’t help feel the sentiment went a little further—they say evil walks on two legs. Terrorists. Arsonists. Politicians.” He shook his head. “Evil has four legs and a mouthful of teeth.”

“But it’s this—he pointed at his head with the finger that was half missing—you got to worry about. Never underestimate a croc. They’re far older and a lot smarter than we are.”

He eyed the pool again.

“And they know it.”

I didn’t see Daryl the day we left. Aunt Kathy drove us to the airport and didn’t leave until we’d boarded the plane, as if to make sure we’d actually gone. The rest of my summer was blissful. I traded half-truths and down-right lies with my friends about what we got up to at schoolies. I went to a party, had my first kiss, and spent the next half-hour rinsing with mouthwash. I got my learners permit. In leaving home I felt like I’d grown a little more and the world only seemed to be getting bigger.

I came home one day to find Mum speaking in a hushed voice on the phone. I’d just sat at the kitchen bench when she hung up.

“That was Aunt Kathy.”

“Everything okay?”

“Not really. She’s a bit of a mess. Something happened at the park. Someone died. And now the councils looking into everything. It’s probably the final straw.”

She then chuckled.

“Got to hand it to Kathy though. They shot the croc, was a big one too, and she’s already taking measurements for a bag. She said it was justice, but I couldn’t think of anything worse than carting around the skin of something that ate someone.”

It felt like a shard of glass fell into my stomach. I could feel my new wallet as if it was burning into the back of my jeans. I then glanced at the fridge, at the crocodile magnet that hung there. The same one with the googly eyes that bounced around and yet always seemed to be focused on me. Watching.

Over the next few days, more details emerged whether I wanted to hear them or not. Daryl must’ve gone on one of his night-time visits. They found a couple of beer bottles near her cage. They found what was left of him in the pool.

Brooke went around telling everyone we’d almost been snatched by the arms of death. The way she told it, we were lucky to have made it home alive. I didn’t mention she hadn’t even seen the crocodile in question, having spent most of her time drinking a milkshake in the café. I had a different opinion.

“I’m not superstitious,” I told myself as I snuck out of the house one night. I told myself again as I took my bike, and it was my mantra as I started peddling. And I said it again as I stood on the nearest bridge and threw the wallet and magnet into the deepest part of the river.

The wallet sunk immediately but the magnet floated, only sinking after it had fixed its eyes on me one final time. And even when it had disappeared from view and the wind blew the leaves from a nearby gumtree to settle on the water, I could still feel it watching.

And waiting.