

Years 9 & 10

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JoeyBoy

There are kangaroos on the highway again. Their broken, breathless bodies are like forgotten toys tossed on the asphalt. Tyre marks like texta scribbles, matted fur like mismatched clothes. Long, slender legs are skewed at odd angles, splintered bones protruding awkwardly. Horseflies buzz lazily around glassed-over eyes.

I stand next to the roo in silence as cars whistle past. Exhaust whips limp hair around my face, plastering loose strands to sweaty skin. The camo jacket slung around my hips catches dust as it waves a wild goodbye. I snap on my blue rubber gloves and pull a mask 'round my ears. I watch and wait for a moment longer, waiting for a breath or a twitch. But the body stays motionless. It's dead.

Even after all this time, it scares me when I catch them alive. When they're lying there all limp, but there's still a heartbeat somewhere. At your mercy in the most awful way. But you can't do anything but curse at the four-wheel drive slipping into the horizon. Just watch as those big, beautiful eyes stare back at you with such raw, real, dread. Strained coughs, wheezing blood and mucus. Hot breath stinking of fear. Their muscles are still warm and tense with the thrill of living. You can see it leaving, you know. All the life dribbling out like bathwater, until the last awful shudder. Then they're still. Scarily so. Not yet stiff with rigor mortis, but unmistakably dead all the same.

Those days, I tell Maggie that the only roos I saw were bounding through the bush with their joeys, free as the wind. She hugs my side, round face pressed up to my hip, and tells me that she wants to be a kangaroo. I scoop her up, and soon we're chasing each other round the sanctuary, giggling as we go. I reckon it'd break her heart if she saw how, it really was.

If you find 'em dead, its easy. It wasn't at first, when blood and guts and dead baby kangaroos weren't part of my daily routine, but it's gotten better. You have to hold them gently; lay their heads off to the side, move gangly limbs away from swollen bellies. Its corny, but I like to close their eyes. Give them one last little goodbye before I leave them there, limp on the verge side.

Then I can get to work.

The carcasses are nothing but a sorry sight to most. Another roo on another road. Standard. Ordinary. Expected. To me, though, they're like treasure. Pots of gold dressed in tawny grey coats. If you're real lucky, within those torn up, beaten bodies, dead on the tarmac, is life. Tiny, wriggling things nestled away, safe underneath layers of fur.

Sometimes they're bubble-gum pink and the size of a jellybean. Hardly even an animal. Those ones never last long. Sometimes they're just about cartoon perfect. Big blinking eyes framed by these crazy long eyelashes and covered in soft downy fur like a plush blanket. They survive. And sometimes you catch them in between. Still ugly and raw and not quite ready for the outside world, but patches of fur are beginning to grow, and their eyes are wide and searching.

Another tweener this time. Half-dead and squirming in my arms. Routinely, I flip it over. It's a boy. I scan the wriggling joey for any sign of disease or injury, pulling back its gums, parting tufts of fur with my fingers. There's a rash on his belly and he's got bugs. Pretty clean for a roadside baby. As I pluck out a tick buried in the skin behind his ear, I feel a sharpness against my arm. Broken skin gives way to slashes of red. A lot of power for a small roo. He'll live.

I carry the kicking joey back to the ute and place it in the roo box. It sounds all proper and profesh, but really, it's just a second-hand washing basket, filled with tattered blankets and tossed hay. As the car rumbles into a start, the little kangaroo looks up at me. It's odd, the way he looks. Almost indescribable. But it makes me feel something different. Something I haven't felt for a scraggly orphan tweener in a long time

As I pull into the sanctuary driveway, I hear the front door click closed and three pairs of footsteps bounding towards me. My daughter leaps forward and wraps her little arms around me before I can even step out of the ute, her piebald puppy trailing close behind. I ruffle Mag's hair and lean down to pet Jess.

"Jessie-dog and me have been waiting all day for you, Mum."

Her 'r's are still soft and round, and she drags out vowels with her little kid accent. Maggie peeks around the door with bated breath, hoping for one of those cartoon type joeys tucked into the roo box. It's been months since I brought a living roo back, and Mags has been following this same little routine each day since.

I can't tell if she knows what happens to the joeys once they leave the sanctuary. I mean sure, some do make it, sent off to wildlife reserves or released back into the bush, but most end up as bones littered around the property. I'd like to bury them, I would, but food is scarce here. The dingoes and the wedgetails are as hungry as the rest of us, and a tiny broken body is enough to feed starving pups. It's one baby for another.

I pull the box out the car, and Maggie erupts in giggles of joy. She trips over her words as she stumbles through hopeful questions, never quite finishing each one. "It's a baby! Oh, this joey's my favour— can we keep hi— wait, will he live wi— where was he? What happened to his— oh, Mummy, I love him!"

She fawns over the joey, softly patting the tufty fur between his ears, stroking his back. The joey stares back with that curious expression. I ask her what his name is, expecting another repeat of one of her favourites. We've had a few Daisys, some

Buttercups, even a Rosie-Belle. Typical little girl names. But she turns to me with such a confidence, a sureness of herself that I've never seen, and tells me that his name is JoeyBoy.
"JoeyBoy, our boy."

I nod my head softly and walk her and the animals back into the house. We spend the following days tending to the baby roo's rashes and treating his ticks. Each night, Mags and I scrub him down with carbolic soap and old bottles of nit shampoo we found in the bathroom cupboards. While I work in the garden, Maggie draws scribbly texta scenes of JoeyBoy and her running through the bush. She swats away swarming horseflies and mosquitoes diligently, focused on her masterpieces. She presents them to me proudly, gappy grin wide. Within hours, the fridge is filled with colour. Mags hosts tea parties with the roo, forgotten toys discarded on the floor. She lies upside down on the couch, legs flopping off the arms, holding him. He sits awkwardly on her lap, legs skewed at odd angles. I remind her that he's still wild, but she only hugs him tighter. I catch them snuggled underneath a makeshift fort later, covered in far too many blankets than the temperature allows, but still fast asleep.

Those two became thick as thieves. Almost like siblings. Mags throws tantrums each time we leave for school, claiming JoeyBoy will meet all sorts of catastrophic fates. Monday it was starvation, Tuesday was bushfire, and by Friday she told me that he would die of heartbreak. The roo, on the other hand, only lets Maggie hold him, skittering away whenever Jess or I dare get close. But he has outgrown the pillow fort, and his stay. We need to let him go.

The animals scatter as the ute pulls into the paddock, leaving tyre marks in dry grass. The sun is slipping into the horizon, lighting up the sky in fiery reds and yellows. We stand there, silent, watching our shadows stretch out infinitely before us. JoeyBoy is too big to fit in Mags's arms anymore and stands proudly between us instead. He's nearly as tall as her now. Our backs rest against the ute's steel chassis and we watch the wallabies and kangaroos timidly return to grazing. The only sound is magpie lullabies and rustling grass. Maggie stifles tears as the little roo takes his first steps back into the wild. He looks back for a second, whiskers twitching, I pull her into a hug, and we watch him hop away.

Months and weeks and years become a blur. Instead of red dirt and eucalypts, I live in a world of tile floors and sanitary wipes. Nurses are always present, bringing TV dinners and bottles of little white pills. It's too clean here. So I lie in this bed and dream of the bush and the ute and kangaroos dead on the highway. I lie here and wait for Mags to come by.

She tells me JoeyBoy still visits. He's outgrown his name, but his eyes still carry that same faraway look. Even here, in the care home, I can see it. Those eyes, oh they'd stare right through you, but gently. Like warm afternoon light bathing the bush or a wash of summer rain softening weathered rock. Sometimes, she shows me pictures

on her phone. His fur has changed from tan fluff to rusty red, sleek and smooth across his body. His muzzle has greyed with age, and he would tower above either of us. Between coughs, I tell her that he could pack a real punch, knock her right out if he wanted. She just softly laughs. We both know he's the same shivering soul wrapped in old towels. Same curious roo hopping through the kitchen. Same scraggly orphan boy we loved as our own. He's our boy and he knows it. Our JoeyBoy.