



Fly with Galahs

by
Kenneth Vickery

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Fly with Galahs

Like a cat in the sun, Krista stretches on her rug. She inhales dry bush, wet river, and sun-drenched eucalypts smells. Sitting up, she rests her chin on her knees and looks at reeds growing out of a spring. 'I think those reeds are from the Rainbow Serpent.'

Sophie glances at the spring. 'No shit!'

'Yeah, it leaves reeds like that to tell us not to stuff about here.'

Sophie hitches her hipsters. 'Aboriginal people are, like so connected to this land.'

'Their myths are. Aboriginal people are not all the same.'

'Yeah, yeah, I was just talking generally. So, do you think this place is sacred?'

Krista starts to pack away lunch. 'Could be. Had enough?'

'Yeah, but chill Krista.'

Krista looks at her watch. 'Time to get our shit together and find a campsite.'

'Yeah, but what's wrong with here.'

'Here? No shit?'

'No shit.'

Krista feels panic but tells herself she's being weak. She looks at the serpent's reeds waving in a gentle breeze and takes a deep breath. 'Right then!'

As dusk approaches, they drink cruisers and eat cheese while watching shy kangaroos come for a drink.

Their own drinks in hand, they get out an orange tent. Sophie wants it next to the spring. Krista says it would be more respectful to be further away.

Sophie lays out the tent next to the spring. 'I don't want to be spotted from the road.'

Krista sighs and starts putting poles together. She looks up when she hears something swilling leaves. A willy-willy lifts the tent off the ground. Krista grabs it and the wind wraps her up and pushes her back. She feels the reeds crunch under foot, jumps off as Sophie gets control of the tent, and gets it to the ground.

Krista turns to see half the reeds broken and roots lifted.

‘Oh shit!’ She prods roots down with her shoe.

Sophie is sitting on the tent and reaching for stakes. ‘What ya done?’

‘I’ve crushed reeds.’

‘Screw the reeds. Help needed here!’

The tent is up and it’s getting dark. Sophie gets a lantern. Krista takes her torch to the car. She pulls out her bag and rummages, finds mosquito repellent. She looks back towards the tent as she rubs on lotion. The broken reeds mess with her. It’s like when she broke a friend’s china plate. The plate was cheap, but her friend had been fond of it. Krista tries to tell herself she’s being stupid. How can a few reeds in the middle of the bush be anything special?

Sophie’s shadow moves around the orange tent, flicking light into the bush and setting the broken reeds glowing.

Sophie pokes her head from the tent. ‘What are you looking at?’

Krista looks at her. ‘Nothing.’

‘Shit Krista, you’re not still pissed about those crappy reeds?’

‘No.’ Krista isn’t convincing.

Sophie comes out of the tent, putting her hands on her hips. ‘You’re weird Krista, no joke. Like get over it. It was the wind. Shit happens.’

‘Yeah, shit happens.’

Sophie turns away and shakes her head. ‘Hope you found something to eat? I’m starving.’

Back in the boot Krista finds food. Then she hears an engine roaring as tires toss stones into the bush. It’s coming closer and moving fast. She closes the boot and sees headlights appear through the trees. She turns off her torch and steps into shadow.

As the car comes into view, the engine cuts. It slows, headlights bobbling like laughing eyes. Krista squats down as it draws level. She sees silhouettes in the car. The car pauses. The silhouettes yell. Male voices ring out across the campsite. Krista is sent sprawling. She gets up to run but the car drives off, going even faster than it came.

Krista's mind is churning. They sounded Aboriginal. What if they came back? What then?

Sophie stands outside the tent looking at her mobile phone. 'Shit, no signal.'

'Who could help us out here?'

Sophie picks up the sleeping bags she'd pulled out of the tent. 'Police.'

'I'm just glad they didn't stop.'

'This time they didn't but they've seen us. You're not thinking of staying, are you?'

Krista looks around at the campsite, still lit by the lantern in their tent. The magic of the place is gone. 'No, I guess we can't stay.'

Still holding the sleeping bags, Sophie puts her hands on her hips. She narrows her eyes and says, 'What do you mean "I guess"? It's a no-brainer Krista – we piss off before those assholes come back.'

Packed and off, Sophie grips the wheel, her eyes seeking the ruts and corrugations that buffet her car.

Sophie looks fixated at the road. 'Watch for roos, I've no roo bar. If I hit one, we're fucked.'

'Sure.' Krista feels glad to help, although even spotting elephants would need infrared vision.

'Lucky to get out of that.'

'Give you points for getting our sleeping bags.' Krista wants to lighten the tone.

Sophie's mouth makes a cat's bum. 'Those bloody Aboriginals.'

Krista thought this was unnecessary. 'You don't know what they wanted, and you can't even be sure who they were.'

'What? Hello – you heard them shout at us.'

‘If they wanted to fuck with us, they’d have stopped.’

Sophie slows down to look at Krista. ‘If you’re such a brave bitch, I’ll take you back.’

‘Fuck off – I’d shit myself.’

‘See.’

‘Just because I’m shitting myself, doesn’t mean they meant to harm us.’

Sophie increases speed. ‘I don’t fly with galahs. That’s just you, sweetie.’

Krista turns away. In their university tutorials, she’d always been impressed with how her friend had her shit together.

Going over a crest the road vanishes, the sky sucking the light from their headlights. Sophie screams, brakes hard. Clouds of dust rise behind them. Headlights jolt over a wall of trees. The road has disappeared.

‘Shit,’ Sophie screams pushing harder on the brakes. More trees, more dust as the car slows, stops, engine stalls. No sickening clash of metal with wood, no hiss of smashed radiator, just the tick of a hot engine. Sophie doesn’t move, stares at the settling dust as if there’re separating clouds in a crystal ball.

Krista tries to take a deep breath but there’s too much dust and she coughs. She’d like to hug Sophie and tell her everything is alright, but Sophie’s too wound up. They sit. The dust settles showing a wall of trees in the headlights. Krista gets her torch. ‘I’ll check everything’s alright,’

Krista shines her torch on the skid marks coming down the hill. They’d skidded sideways several metres, with headlights facing away from the road. She looks at Sophie. ‘It’s not just me that shits themselves when there’s no danger, sweetie’

She checks the tyres until she sees Sophie looking around. She gets back in the car.

Sophie turns to her. ‘Everything okay?’.

‘Sure.’

They sit in silence for a while until Krista turns to her friend. ‘Would you like me to drive?’

Sophie leans forward to start the car. ‘No, this is my car, I’ll drive,’

She drives at a crawl. The next town has an old brick and iron pub. From the footpath, Sophie and Krista hear male banter and clinking billiard balls. The hubbub eases as they enter. Sophie sees several men check them out. 'A bit different here,' Sophie observes, but Krista isn't listening. She's rummaging in her bag.

The barman comes over. He turns and fixes Sophie with soft brown eyes. He asks, 'You girls right?'

'Looking for somewhere to stay,' Sophie says as Krista continues searching her bag.

'Got a reservation?'

'Do we need one?'

The barman smiles and runs his fingers through hair, which looks untroubled by brush or comb. 'Nah, not really.' Then looks at Krista. 'Ya lost something?'

Krista is still rummaging through her bag. 'Shit. I think I left my purse back at the campsite.'

Sophie turns back to the barman. 'Shit.'

'I'll get your room ready if you like, while you check ya car for the purse,' the barman says as if this happened all the time. He asks one of the drinkers to look after the bar and goes up stairs.

Sophie steps out onto the street. 'It must have fallen out in the car.'

'I hope so, but I remember getting it out at the campsite.'

'Why?'

'I was looking for mosquito repellent.'

'Shit.'

They don't find the purse and return inside with their over-night gear.

When the barman meets them on the stairs, he sees their faces. 'No luck then.'

They just shake their heads.

‘Well, at least your room’s ready. Let me help you with your stuff.’

The girls follow him up a staircase, too distracted to admire the beautiful jarrah balustrade or notice the pressed tin ceiling that would have once been nice but is now marred with rust and crude patches.

In their room the girls are shown two wrought iron beds with sagging mattresses. The wallpaper is thick enough to be a padded cell and the floorboards are thin enough to let up noise from the bar.

The barman waves his hand with mock pride. ‘This is the best room, doesn’t smell of cigarettes.’

Sophie takes her bag from him. ‘Thanks.’

The barman turns to Krista. ‘Where’d you leave the purse?’

‘Down by the river at a picnic site upstream from the town bridge.’

‘The one on the other side of the lookout?’

‘Yeah, that’ll be the one.’

‘That’s just down the road.’

‘Yeah, but I don’t think we could get back there in the dark.’

‘Come with me.’ He leads them back to the bar.

He walks up to a stocky bloke. ‘John, just the man. This lady’s left her purse at the picnic site below Jones’ Rock. How about you give her a lift there?’

John looks at Sophie and Krista evenly. ‘Sure.’

Krista turns to John. ‘It’s not too much trouble?’

‘Only take a minute,’ the barman replies for John.

Krista moves closer to John. ‘Is it okay?’

John gets off his stool. ‘Sure, ya ready?’

‘Well, that would be great, thank you.’

John opens the passenger door of his red ute and swipes engine parts, boxes and grease paper off the passenger’s seat for Krista. Even in this light Krista can see flame decals coming from its vents and real mud spatter coming

from its wheels. 'Thanks.' Krista gets in as John gets in his side. 'Do you know the spot?'

'Sure.'

'Is it a sacred site?'

John starts his throbbing engine, answers with a shrug.

Krista looks up as they back out and head down the street. A cold shiver runs down her spine. 'Shit, this is the wrong way!'

'What?'

'We came into town the other way.'

'Oh yeah, that's the long way.'

'You sure you know the spot?'

'Sure, go there all the time.'

Krista watches John out of the corner of her eye and wonders if she should demand to be taken back or jump out. She says nothing and stays.

John's hands move with unhurried confidence. He shuffles in his seat to look at Krista. 'Been to a B&S?'

She thinks they are now going too fast for her to jump out. 'A what?'

'A B&S – a Bachelors' and Spinsters' Night.'

'Oh right. No, no I haven't.'

'They're great, lots of beer, chicks and fast cars. There's one in a couple of weeks.'

Krista nods. 'Right.'

He smiles. 'I wear evening dress and work boots. Get so maggotted, I have to hose me clothes off when I get 'ome,'

She doesn't smile back.

They're out of town and John slows down to turn onto a track. She could jump out now but would she be able to get away? Indecision paralyses her.

John gets his ute speeding along the track. 'Seen mud skiing?'

'What?'

John proudly nods at his ute. ‘Mud skiing, I can toe three people behind me,’

‘In mud?’

‘Yeah – they got skis on.’

‘In mud?’

John frowns. ‘Yeah.’

Krista bites her lip and wonders what Sophie would have done. At least she’d have been decisive.

John pulls the ute off the track. ‘This the spot?’

To Krista’s surprise, it is. John’s right, it’s much quicker this way. ‘Yeah, thanks.’

John’s spotties light the area like a stage. Krista doesn’t have any trouble finding her purse.

‘Ya right?’ John asks.

‘Fine,’ Krista says, holding up her purse, ‘Thanks.’

John shrugs. ‘No prob's. Let’s go.’

Krista sighs. John is okay. She hadn’t realised before because she was too busy feeling superior.

John stands at his door. ‘You okay.’

Krista gets in the car. ‘Yeah, yeah sorry.’

‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘Nah.’

John backs the ute. ‘Mum says this place is haunted.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah, by some old Ab bloke. His face hangs in the air.’ John hunches his shoulders and leers at Krista before putting the car in gear and driving back down the track.

Krista laughs. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah, guardian of the spring or something.’

‘Do you know how I can find out if it’s a sacred site?’

John sniffs. ‘The Ab’s have a culture centre in town.’

She smiles. ‘Thanks, so where are you holding the B&S?’

This time she enjoys being told all about it.

Krista and Sophie get out of sagging beds to go back to the city. They pack quietly until Sophie asks, ‘How could you, like be scared of John?’

‘It got up me, when he went the wrong way.’

‘The right way as it happens.’

‘Like I knew that.’

Sophie narrows her eyes and says, ‘You were a joke. How could it shit you? What could he do? The whole pub knew you were with him.’

‘Your opinion is noted.’

‘And you dished me for being scared of those Aboriginals.’

‘Bullshit, I was scared too. I just didn’t lay blame.’

‘You really do fly with galahs. Maybe you think the bloody Rainbow Serpent would have looked after us.’

Krista thinks Sophie has gone somewhere she didn’t want to follow. She turns away and goes back to packing. Then she remembers something.

‘John said the culture centre would know if our spot is a sacred site.’

Sophie continues to pack. ‘Right,’

‘Yeah, we could go there on the way home.’

Sophie tightens her jaw. ‘Could we? Well I don’t think so.’

Krista stops her packing to look at her. ‘Why not? You were keen before.’

Sophie puts her hands on her hips. ‘I want to piss off out of here.’

‘Sure, after we find out about their culture.’

Sophie looks back into her bag. ‘We were trying to escape their culture last night’

‘Shit Sophie!’

‘Alright, alright – anything to stop you crapping on.’

Sophie parks at the Aboriginal Advancement Council. It's a house with wide verandas. Krista leads Sophie to the building as a small circle of people sitting on the grass, watch them without looking their way. Krista sighs. She'll never hear the end of this if it turns out to be a waste.

Inside a young man cheerfully greets them. Krista takes in the silky glow of his skin, which contrasts the rumple of his shirt. His wavy hair is wet and pulled back like he'd just been for a swim.

Krista smiles. 'Do you know the picnic spot under Jones' rock?'

His cheeriness vanishes. 'Yeah.'

'Is it a sacred site?'

He looks away. 'Yeah,'

'What makes it sacred?'

'Resting place of the Waugal.' He's still looking away.

'The Waugal?'

'You know, you Wadjela call it the Rainbow Serpent.' His head tilts forward like he's carrying a heavy load.

Krista hears Sophie's deep sigh and is sure she's rolling her eyes. 'Yeah, but can you tell me more about the site? Does the spring have a guardian?'

He looks at her out of the corner of his eye. 'That's secret men's business. Why ya wann'a know?'

'We were camped there last night.'

He turns and looks at her wide eyed. 'Last night? You should'na been there!'

'Why not?'

'Waugal came. Ya see Waugal – ya die.'

'Ya die?'

He nods.

'But I didn't see it. How'd ya know it was there?'

He shivers. 'It lit up trees.'

'It burned trees?'

‘No lit ‘em up.’

Krista’s eyes widen. ‘*You* drove past?’

‘Yeah.’

‘We were there. I didn’t see... Oh no, was it an orange glow?’

He nods.

‘That was our tent.’

He shakes his head. ‘We saw its shadow.’

‘Where?’

‘Comin’ from the spring.’

Krista puts her arm out to indicate Sophie. ‘That would have been Sophie.’

The man looks at Sophie. ‘Not a person.’ He shakes his head.

Sophie steps forward. ‘I was dragging sleeping bags.’

‘Sleeping bags?’ He looks shocked.

Sophie glares at him. ‘Yeah, I was getting them coz’ you scared us.’

His shock disappears and he laughs. ‘We scared you? You sure scared us; thought you were the Waugal comin’ for us.’

Krista and Sophie are still giggling when they’re back in the car.

Sophie shakes her head. ‘Talk about flying with galahs. Demons didn’t create fear – fear created demons.’

Krista wipes her eyes. ‘Yeah, we all got it so wrong.’

Sophie stiffens. ‘What do you mean “we”?’