



by
Kenneth Vickery

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Flying with Galahs

Happy as a cat in the sun, Krista rolls and stretches on her picnic rug. She takes in a breath, savouring the aroma of dry eucalyptus leaves and damp humus. Sitting up, she rests her chin on her knees. A spring bubbles out of the ground, flowing past her to the river. She looks at reeds growing from its bank. 'I think those reeds are from the Rainbow Serpent.'

Sophie glances at the clear water trickling past them. 'No shit!'

'Yeah, those reeds tell us not to stuff about here.'

Sophie hitches her hipsters. 'This is what my stupid family can't understand. Aboriginal people are, like, so connected to this land.'

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

'Yeah, yeah, I was just talking generally. Do you think this place could be sacred?'

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

'Yeah, but chill girl.'

Krista looks at the time on her phone. 'Time to get our shit together. Find a place to camp.'

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

Krista's chest tightens. 'Here?' She looks at the serpent's reeds waving in a gentle breeze. She tells herself to be strong and takes a deep breath. 'Bitching!'

As dusk approaches, they mix Aperol spritzes in wine glasses and eat Arancini di risos and true calzone from deli containers. Krista hears a rustling from the scrub. A kangaroo shuffles on all fours to the spring.

Spellbound, she watches as its head turns towards them, ears pricked. Sophie and Krista keep still and the roo bends down to drink.

Another roo joins the first. Out of its pouch, a joey pokes its head. The joey climbs out and sniffs the leaves of a bush. Krista puts her glass on the ground, but it topples, clinks on a rock and cracks. The joey jumps back in the pouch and the roos vanish before Krista can recover her glass. ‘Ah, they were cute!’

Sophie mixes another drink and lobs an empty Prosecco Spumante bottle to clank about with others in the dirt. ‘Well, it’ll soon be dark. We should put up the tent.’

Krista gathers empty bottles and other rubbish and puts them in a plastic bag. Sophie gets their camping gear from her Skoda wagon, the car she was given when her mum updated. Back with the tent, she empties the bag onto their picnic rug. Unrolling the orange fabric next to the serpent’s reeds, she is a bit wobbly.

Krista stands up straight and points. ‘Hey, you drunk bitch, you should move the tent further away from the spring.’

Sophie titters as she lays out the seams of the tent to prepare for inserting poles. ‘Hey girl, don’t you call me a drunk bitch.’

Krista puts her hands on her hips. ‘Respect the beliefs of others, bitch. Set up the tent away from the spring.’

Sophie moves to the far side of the tent. ‘Girl, you’re being as pious as “George Pell”. No one will know. and I don’t want to be spotted from the road. I wish your tent wasn’t orange. Did your mummy buy it for you?’

Krista sighs. It irks her how her feelings are so easily dismissed, but she hates discord more. Squatting to put poles together, she ponders how to discuss where to put the tent, without the discussion descending.

The gentle breeze, which had been rustling leaves, picks up and swishes the treetops. The gust swirls leaves and lifts their tent. Krista leaps forward and grabs the fabric. The wind wraps flapping nylon around her, pushing her back. Reeds snap and crunch underfoot. Horrified, she realises she's stomped on the reeds she'd wanted Sophie to respect. She jumps away, freeing herself and the reeds from the flapping fabric as Sophie pulls the tent back onto the ground.

The squall decrescendos. Krista looks-over the damage. 'Oh shit!' She has broken reeds and lifted their roots out of the ground. She bends over to hold reeds in place as she tamps the roots back into the muddy ground.

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

'I've crushed the reeds.'

'Fuck the reeds! Help needed here!'

Although still unhappy with its location, Krista helps to erect the tent. The sun disappears behind the tree line. It is getting cold and buzzing mosquitoes are starting to show them interest. Sophie hangs their lantern in the tent to erect their beds.

Without the drama of the tent, Krista's mood flags. She traipses to the car and finds her torch and bag behind the passenger seat. Sitting the torch on top of the car, she lifts her bag into the torchlight to rummage through it. She digs out the mosquito repellent from the bottom of the bag. She looks back towards the tent as she rubs on the lotion.

Sophie's shadow moves around the tent, the lantern casting an orange light onto the bush, pointing out the crumpled reeds. She feels a stab of guilt. She tries to tell herself she's being stupid. How can a few reeds in the middle of the bush be anything special? But she knows they are.

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

'Nothing.'

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

'No.' Krista's voice sounds weak in her ears.

Sophie comes out of the tent, putting her hands on her hips. 'You're weird Krista, no joke. Like, get over it girl. 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.'

Searching in the back of the wagon Krista finds a jar of tomato and almond pesto, basil leaves and a crusty loaf for making bruschetta. There are frozen meatballs in the food esky. She adds them, as well as a bottle of red wine, carrots and spaghetti to her box of items. She puts them on her dad's camping tub, where the camp stove and pots were kept. She smiles. Not bad. Her enthusiasm for camping here is returning.

Her head back out of the car she hears a badly arranged choir of croaking frogs and chirping crickets all around her. Before she can reach in to pick up the tub, a car engine roars. It gets louder and is moving fast. Tires toss stones into the bush. She leaves the food in the wagon and slams the tailgate as headlights spear through the trees. She kills her torch and runs from the car to hide.

She peers through the leaves of a bush, as the square shape of an SUV comes into view. The engine roar cuts to a growl. It slows, headlights bobbling as though they were menacing eyes. Krista squats. There are two silhouettes, their shadowy faces indistinct in the dashboard light. The car stops. The dark shapes yell, ‘Ow wah dig ehh ya Fukken arh Hoody ell.’; The voices ring out across the campsite. She gets up to run but the car drives off, tyres spinning.

Krista’s mind churns. Was that an Aboriginal curse? What if they came back? What then?

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

Krista sighs, realising that nobody knows they’re at this campsite. Being cut off from the rest of the world no longer has appeal. ‘Who could help us out here?’

Sophie picks up the sleeping bags she’d dragged out of the tent, making them flap as if she had an enormous tail. ‘Ahh duh, Krista! The Police!’

Krista intended her question to be rhetorical. ‘Well, I’m 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. The orange glow from the lantern inside the tent still lights the campsite, but the magic of the place has vanished. ‘No, I guess we can’t stay.’

Sophie throws the sleeping bags down and puts her hands on her hips. ‘What do you mean “I guess”? It’s a no-brainer, Krista – we piss off before

those assholes come back.’

After bundling up their gear and throwing it in the Skoda, they’re off. Sophie grips the wheel, her eyes probing ahead, as she tries to avoid the ruts and ridges buffeting her car. ‘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.

Sophie hits the steering wheel with her palm. ‘Lucky to get out of that. It shits me how arseholes like that can make it unsafe for us out here.’

Krista breathes in through her nose and out her mouth. ‘Give you points for getting our sleeping bags.’

Sophie’s mouth makes a cat’s bum. ‘Those bloody Aboriginals.’

Krista stiffens at her racist comment. ‘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.’

Krista couldn’t let this one go. ‘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.’

‘For God’s sake Sophie, just because I’m shitting myself, doesn’t mean they meant us harm.’

The car increases speed. ‘That’s just you, sweetie. You fly with galahs! Anyone else would know exactly what those bloody Aborigines were thinking.’

Krista looks out the window, finding her friend’s unfairness distasteful. In their university tutorials, Sophie’s views had been nowhere near this jaundiced!

Bouncing over a crest, the road vanishes, the sky sucking the light from their headlights. Sophie screams, braking hard. Clouds of dust rise behind them. Headlights jolt over a wall of trees.

‘Shit!’ Sophie screams, pushing harder on the brakes. More trees, more dust as the car slows and stops. The engine stalls, but there is no sickening clash of metal, no hiss of a smashed radiator, just the tick of a hot engine. Sophie doesn’t move, staring at the settling dust as though watching clouds in a crystal ball.

Krista tries a deep breath, inhales dust, coughs. She’d like to hug Sophie and tell her everything is alright, but Sophie’s too shocked to even move. The dust settles revealing a wall of trees in the headlights. Krista finds her torch. ‘I’ll check everything’s alright.’

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

She pretends to check the tyres until she sees Sophie looking around. She gets back in the Skoda.

Sophie turns to her. 'Everything okay?'

'Sure.'

They sit in silence 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. When they reach the next town, they stop outside an old brick and iron pub. From the footpath, male banter and the clinking of billiard balls drift out.

The hubbub eases as they enter.

Sophie taps Krista's arm. 'A bit different here.'

Krista looks up from rummaging in her bag. The men playing pool have stopped to watch them. 'Yeah, not secluded here.'

A barman fixes Sophie with soft brown eyes and leans over the bar. 'You girls right?'

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

'Got a booking?'

'Do we need one?'

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

Krista looks up, her cheeks hot. '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 happens all the time. He asks a bloke drinking at the bar, to look after the till and goes upstairs.

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

'Maybe, 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 upstairs, too distracted to admire the beautiful jarrah balustrade or realise how impressive the pressed tin ceiling would have been before being marred with rust and crude patches.

In their room, they are shown two wrought iron beds with sagging mattresses. The wallpaper is thick enough to be a padded cell. Noises from the bar, fill the room through the floorboards.

The barman waves his hand with mock pride. 'This is the best room. We've just slapped more wallpaper on, so it 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.'

'What? The one on the other side of the lookout?'

'Yeah, that'll be the one.'

'But 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 and 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 without any emotion that Krista can read. '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 leads Krista to his red ute. He opens the passenger door and leans in, swiping engine parts, boxes, and grease paper off the passenger's seat. Even in this light, Krista can see flame decals jetting from its vents and mud-splattered Duco. 'Thanks.' Krista gets in as John heads to the driver's side.

John slides into a seat fretted with use. Krista puts on a pristine seatbelt.
'Do you know the spot?'

'Sure.'

'Is it a sacred site?'

John starts the throbbing engine, answers with a shrug.

Krista decides not to ask any more questions. She remembers all the people in the pub were white. She 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.

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 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 'ave 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, but would she be able to escape him? Indecision paralyses her.

John speeds the ute along the track. 'Seen mud skiing?'

'What?'

John 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 wouldn't be weak.

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 spots light the area as bright as a stage. Krista doesn't have any trouble finding her purse.

'Ya right?' John asks.

Krista holds up her purse. 'Fine, thanks.'

John shrugs. 'No prob's. Let's go.'

Krista gets in. John backs the ute. 'Mum says this place is haunted.'

'What?'

'Yeah, by an old Aboriginal 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. 'There's a cultural centre in town.'

She smiles. 'Thanks. Where are you holding the B&S?'

This time she enjoys being told all about it.

Hungover from drinking with John and his friends. Krista and Sophie struggle out of sagging beds to go back to the city. Neither speaks as they pack until Sophie asks, 'How could you, like be scared of John?'

'I shat bricks when he went the wrong way.'

'The right way as it happens.'

'Like I knew that.'

Sophie narrows her eyes. '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 protect us.’

Krista turns away and goes back to packing. She doesn’t want to follow Sophie to wherever she’d gone. Then she remembers something. ‘John said the cultural 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. ‘Last night, we were trying to escape their culture .’

‘Shit Sophie!’

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

Sophie parks her Skoda at the Aboriginal Advancement Council. It’s a house with wide verandas. Krista leads Sophie to the building where a small circle of people are sitting on the grass, watching them without turning their heads. Krista sighs. She’ll never hear the end of this if it turns out to be a waste of time.

Inside a young man gives them a cheerful greeting. Krista takes in the silky glow of his skin, which contrasts with the rumple of his shirt. His long wavy hair is wet and pulled back as if 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 as if 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 eh?.'

'We were camped there last night.'

He turns and looks at her wide-eyed. 'Last night? You been there that time?!'

'Yeah, what's the matter with that?'

'Waugal dere. 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 eh.’

‘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. ‘No gammon! Waugal shadow dere.’

‘Where?’

‘E omin’ spring.’

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

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

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

He looks shocked. ‘Bloody sleeping bags?’

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

His shock disappears and he laughs. ‘Scared you eh?! Bloody hell, You scared us real good. You, looking real cheeky, like da 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"?''