

The Camping Trip

"How you doing, Ian?"

I knew I knew him. He was in Bert's lawn bowls team, I'd met him when I'd filled in a couple of months ago. But I couldn't remember his name. I went the safe route.

"Good mate, good. And you?"

"Yeah good, Ian, good," he answered. "Few nice bottles you've got there."

We were in Dan Murphy's. I glanced down at the trolley.

"Yeah mate, stocking up for a camping trip."

I couldn't keep calling him 'mate' for the whole conversation. Doug? One of the team was called Doug... maybe.

"Yeah, Under told us you were going on a camping trip together," he replied.

"Who the hell was 'Under'?" I thought, momentarily confused. But he'd said 'together', so he must mean Bert.

"Didn't know Bert was called 'Under'," I answered.

He smiled. But it was a slightly smug smile. The smile of someone who knows a secret that you don't.

"Four day trip, eh? Maybe you'll know by the time you get back," he said, still smiling, smugly.

We'd reached the front of the queue to the payout counter. He was ahead of me and started loading his bottles onto the counter to be scanned.

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"Enjoy your trip," he said, over his shoulder, and then added, "The name's Phil, by the way."

I grimaced and headed to the next counter.

Susan, Bert's wife, and Saoirse, my wife, had met at an art class about seven years ago and hit it off. They'd then forced Bert and me to do the same, using golf as their weapon of choice. Fortunately we were both so bloody useless we enjoyed it. The conversation was never stilted or awkward as we only met at the tee and the green, eventually. Occasionally we ended up at different greens. He was about seventy, so twelve years older than me, wiser, good at doing everything practical but even better at denying being good at anything. I was good at everything that didn't matter and useless at anything that did. Calculus is pretty useless when your car has a broken axle one hundred kilometres from the nearest town.

After dinner at our place a few weeks ago, and after Bert and I had polished off two bottles of Shiraz, our wives had suggested Bert and I go on a camping trip. I'd retired about six months previously and bought a four wheel drive and some camping gear. Bert had done a lot of camping years ago but not since his two boys had fled the nest. The eldest was fifty but still a 'boy'. The Shiraz emphatically, unanimously and loudly sealed the deal. The morning after, sans Shiraz, gave me time to reflect but my wife was still very enthusiastic about it. The same Shiraz had led Bert and me to miss their decision to take that same time for a girl's trip to a

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luxury apartment in Melbourne and a shopping spree. She was looking up restaurants during our morning discussion.

"You can't back out now, Bert is really looking forward to it, he loves camping but Susan can't do it anymore," she said, decisively, while perusing booking.com on the computer. "He'd be insulted if you changed your mind. And Susan would be really disappointed... for Bert, I mean."

That was that. I was committed.

The camping gear we'd bought included a tent for Saoirse and me. We hadn't wanted to feel claustrophobic, so we bought one that could sleep six. Bert had his own tent, so I'd be the sole occupant. It hadn't been unpacked in the six months since I'd bought it. We'd also decided last night to go in my car, a diesel Mitsubishi. The only time the four wheel drive had been engaged was when the salesman showed me how to change from two wheel drive mode to four, also six months previously, in the car yard.

"Carpe diem, seize the day!" I thought. I did want to try camping but the truth was I was also afraid of taking Saoirse in a trip and embarrassing myself. This would give me a chance to learn from Bert.

Newly resolved I marched to the garage, to get the tent and roll it out. My enthusiasm dimmed slightly when I opened the garage door and saw what lay between me and the tent. Neither of our cars had ever been in the garage. It was full of other stuff. In unlabelled boxes and bags piled on top of each other. Setting

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up my garage as a workshop had been one of my priorities when I retired. I could visualise how it should look but there seemed to be an unbridgeable gap between that vision and its current state. My enthusiasm for the task evaporated every time I opened the garage door.

"Carpe diem," I muttered and waded in. Something immediately cracked underfoot, but I ignored it and shoved forward. A box wavered precariously above me, teetering unstably on the assortment of boxes that supported it. I held my breath and stood still. It fell. I grabbed at it, above my head. It was deceptively heavy and skewed sideways, opening. A volume of the Encyclopaedia Britannica slipped between my arms and slammed into my forehead at an angle, painfully. I dropped the box. Other volumes of the Britannica fell out and scattered out around me. I held my head, blinded by the sharp pain and stepped back but tripped on a volume that had fallen behind me and fell backward. Luckily a bag full of soft things cushioned my fall. Unluckily, I'd nudged the column of boxes again, as I fell, and several more collapsed on top of me. They all held volumes of the Britannica. The knowledge held in an encyclopaedia weighs about a kilo per volume. About 10 kilos of knowledge per box. That's a lot of knowledge. For a brief moment I thought I might be trapped in the garage under all that knowledge.

There were no further collapses. I rose gingerly. I was covered in dust and my forehead throbbed. But there was no blood. I thought about going back in and getting a coffee. As I looked around, I saw that the collapse had created a little

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mound up to the tent, which was on top of a wardrobe we'd moved to the garage from the house. Saoirse had progressively changed the style of the house from solid brick and timber to light and minimalist. Collateral damage from the minimalist movement now surrounded me, gloomy timber dressers and wardrobes, weighed down with boxes of 'stuff'.

I reached up and pulled the tent down. It was the same size, weight and breadth as me. It nearly knocked me over again. I dragged it out of the garage and slammed the door shut, vindictively. I heard something else fall, and a tinkling noise. I swore. Under my breath, so Saoirse wouldn't hear me.

Caaaaawwwwww! I gave it my all and it was mighty. Hahahahaha! My feathers puffed unconsciously, pride overcame me. My father would have been so proud of me. But stop, I musn't get ahead of myself. There was still one rival left. I hopped from one foot to the other, nervously turning my head from one side to the other, looking at him with one eye then the other. My rival moved over to the branch of trial, that I had just vacated. His chest expanded, getting ready. I was nervous. He was bigger, blacker, shinier and more confident than me. One eye glaring at me disdainfully, he started his caw. But, just as he started, a large, beautiful white butterfly alighted on the twig next to me! A white butterfly! Such an omen! Hungrily, I snatched it up, raised my head and gulped it down, staring eye to eye with

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my rival! So delicious! His eye was still fixed on me. He saw me do it! It distracted him. His caw faltered, he croaked, he tried to recover but was too late. He failed!

The Central Tree Crows who sat in judgment in the higher branches cawed my name. I was triumphant! I hopped along the tree branch to the place of leadership, listening as the other Tenth Tree Crows pledged allegiance. Once more I cawed. My fellow crows cawed with me. I took off into the air above the central tree, and slowly circled, allowing the other Tenth Tree Crows to gather with me before flying slowly back to our tree. And so began my career as Chief of the Tenth Tree. How proud I was, how full of optimism and self-belief.

We pulled into Woopwoop Station after a six hour drive, the last hour on dirt. I'd put the car into four wheel drive for the dirt portion of the trip and felt rather exhilarated. I was also a bit stiff and tired from the long drive, even though we'd stopped for lunch halfway. We drove slowly toward the main house which was surrounded by out-buildings. A middle-aged woman was standing with an older man, next to a battered looking and dust covered Landcruiser parked on the pebble driveway outside the house.

We got out of the car, stretched and then approached them. The autumn sun was bright, even though it was mildly cold.

"G'day," she said. "You must be Ian and Bert. I'm Lynn, the owner. This is my dad, Bill."

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We shook hands.

"Long drive for you today, eh," she suggested.

"It was a little bit of a drive," Bert agreed.

"Well, I have to nick into town with my Dad, so I'll have to give you a quick whiz around and then take you to your campsite."

"No worries," Bert replied.

"Yeah, have to drop my Dad at the RAH for an operation. He'll be in hospital for a couple of days."

When she'd said 'town' I'd assumed she meant Hawker, a tiny town about an hour away. She'd meant Adelaide, a 600 kilometres trip each way.

"You'll stay overnight then?" asked Bert.

"Naw, got things to do tomorrow morning. Some more guests will be arriving and staying in the Shearer's quarters. I'll be back later."

She made the 1200 kilometre round trip sound like a quick jaunt to the shops. We started walking toward the outbuildings. She and Bert began a conversation about how using the Shearer's quarters as holiday accommodation made great business sense, otherwise it was only used for a month or two each year. Somehow that drifted into her and Bert both knowing the Bishop family who owned a nearby station. It amazed me how, whenever I was with Bert and he met someone new, it turned out that he had been to their third cousin's nephew's wedding. In the

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hundred yard walk to the shearer's quarters, they'd become friends for life. Her Dad and I walked behind them, silently, nodding occasionally.

The Shearer's quarters were the size of a small motel, with about ten rooms and a communal shower and toilet.

"You can shower here each morning or night. Sometimes takes a minute for the water to heat up." she explained. "There's a smaller shower room closer to the house for the ladies. Good idea to bring a torch. Gets dark at night. City folk aren't used to no streetlamps."

She smiled and glanced at me as she said it. Somehow Bert was already 'country folk'.

"There's fresh rainwater from the tank over there, and firewood and kindling over there" she added, pointing.

"I'll take you to your campsite now. It's a new site we've just established. There's no other camp site within a radius of 3 kilometres. Not that it matters, we don't have any other campers here at the moment. So you'll be the only humans in 150 square kilometres when Dad and I bugger off. There's an initial stock of firewood at your campsite already. You'll need it tonight."

We headed back to the cars. By the time we got there she and Bert had discovered they'd both been to the same country ball thirty years previously.

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"Caaaawwwwww," I cried and led the descent to our tree. I alighted on the Tenth Tree Chief's perch for the first time. The giant red orb was lower in the sky. The day would soon be over. From my perch I could see all the way along the pebble strewn creek bed, from our neighbour's tree, the ninth, to the central tree in the distance. Other flocks were returning to their trees, including the Ninth and Eighth. I cawed a greeting, as was custom. My fellow crows joined in. Our neighbours responded, as did their neighbours, and so my caw cascaded all the way to Central, where they returned it, so it cascaded back, all the way to my tree, the last tree of our dominion. Its frontier tree. Pride made me plump my feathers. I swivelled my head, from one side to the other, eyeing and acknowledging my fellow Tenth Tree Crows. Such happiness.

Then I heard the tell-tale noise that always signalled the proximity of the strange bipeds.

Two of the metal monsters roared over the hill, flinging dust and their filthy, stinking fumes spiralling into the air, up into our tree, as they drove along the rough track down to the edge of the dry creek bed.

"Caaaaaawwwwww." Startled and outraged, I bellowed the alarm caw and launched back into the air. My fellow tree crows did the same. The Ninth Tree crows too lifted and swirled around, also cawing the alarm. So did the Eighth. And so that caw too, cascaded all the way to the central tree. This time there was no response. I recovered my composure and descended slowly back to my perch, followed by my

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fellow crows, one by one. The youngest were last and uttered a few nervous croaks as they settled on the lowest perches, closest to the monsters. I focused my favoured eye on the intruders. We knew them from our scavenging grounds on the long hard, black strips that they patrolled, sometimes killing the large hopping creatures. We crows knew better than those stupid creatures and posted sentries to warn of the monsters' approach, while we feasted on the corpses they left in their wake. But they had never before appeared in our homeland.

The arm of a biped appeared out of the side of one monster and pointed in different directions. I heard their incongruous, ugly peeping. The arm went back inside and that monster then roared off, down the track and back over the hill, out of view. The other stopped roaring and, mercifully, stopped spewing the stinking fumes into the air around our tree. Two of the strange bipeds slithered out of the metal monster that remained. With my other eye I saw two crows circle into the air above the Central tree and head in our direction. I began composing my report, it would be my very first, while keeping one eye fixed on the bipeds and the other on the approaching Central Tree Crows.

I'd never seen so many pebbles. They were Coconut, Orange, Plum and Grape sized. Millions of them. Grey, ochre, white, and black, they extended along the snaking creek bed as far as the eye could see. There were banks of them, dry pools of them, waves of them. As if a sea had evaporated in an instant and dropped waves of them

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in situ. It was both incomprehensible that they existed in such numbers and that the creek wasn't a world famous landmark because of them. We scratched our heads in awe. Huge ghostly white gum trees lined the creek banks, at intervals, far into the distance in both directions.

"Few pebbles, eh?" said Bert.

"Bit of an understatement, I think," I replied.

The owner had used an earthmover to shift a small mountain of them and create several sandy tent sites on the banks of the Creek. Further back, about fifty meters away, they'd installed a long drop toilet.

"Where'll we set up the tents?" I asked.

Bert pointed at two of the sandy stretches about five meters apart. "You take one and I'll take the other."

We turned back to the car and started unpacking. Bert's stuff was mostly in the back seat and mine in the back of the car. I unloaded mine into a pile and carried the tent over to the sandy stretch. Bert had a one-man tent. He pulled a cord and it unfolded, then popped into being a tent, just like that. He'd already put a tarp down as groundcover. He placed the tent on the groundcover, hammered in four pegs and threw a bedroll and a sleeping blanket inside.

He stood back, gave it a once over and said, "It'll do. I'll start a fire."

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I looked down at my tent. I suspected it was too large for the sandy stretch I was to put it on. It'd taken me more than an hour to erect it at home, and then with only with sufficient cursing. Saoirse's waves of laughter hadn't helped.

Forty minutes later Bert handed me a cup of coffee.

"Careful, it's a little bit warm," he said, sipping his coffee and examining my handiwork with a puzzled expression.

"Little bit on the large side isn't it?" he asked, "Expecting visitors?"

It looked like a big top circus tent when side by side to Bert's tent. Bert was a reasonably big guy, tall and carrying a bit more weight than was strictly necessary. I wasn't sure he'd fit into his tent.

"You might want to adjust a few of the guy ropes," he suggested.

It actually looked like a big top circus tent that had been hit by a cyclone. It wasn't really erect. I had one small pole left over. I suspected it wasn't a spare. I'd hidden it from Bert, in a fold of the tent. I couldn't bear the thought of starting over.

Bert put down his coffee on a log he'd dragged over earlier and adjusted a few guy ropes. Suddenly it looked a bit more like a tent.

"That'll do," I said.

Bert looked doubtful.

"I only need the front half. That's why I didn't bother with the back bit," I added.

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Bert looked even more doubtful. I knew he wanted to suggest something but didn't want to offend me. He scratched his head, picked up his coffee and said he'd start dinner. He walked back to the fire, still scratching his head.

Relieved I took a sip of my coffee. Christ, it was hot! My tongue was instantly burnt. I spat it out. *"A bit warm? Jesus wept," I thought. "Better be careful if he cooks anything with Chilli."*

I put my folding bed and sleeping bag inside the tent, hung the lantern on a hook and put the little gas heater inside. It looked quite homely, if I ignored the sagging at the back. It was unnecessary space anyway, I thought. I took a more careful sip of coffee. It was hot and sweet. Bert was standing by the little gas barbeque with his coffee. The sun was beginning to set. I walked over to join him, suddenly hungry.

The two Central Tree Crows had just left, as the giant red orb set and darkness fell. I felt intimidated and confused. They didn't care about the bipeds and didn't listen to me. They'd instead given me a dressing down for panicking and being alarmist over nothing. If I did it again I'd be punished, they'd said. I didn't want to be punished. They were big crows. The tension of the whole day had suddenly hit me and I was weary. The bipeds had started a small fire and had eaten. The smoke from their fire was drifting up through the branches of the tree causing some of the sleeping crows

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to croak softly. Darkness and the slow movement of the branch in the slight breeze lulled me to sleep.

We'd eaten steak, potatoes cooked in the coals and had heavily buttered breadrolls and tea. Darkness had brought the cold, so we had built the fire up and moved closer. I had thick socks and my Kathmandu hiking boots on but I stretched my feet out onto one of the large rocks that ringed the fire pit, luxuriating in the warmth. Bert had opened a bottle of red and we were drinking it slowly, staring into the fire and telling each other what shapes we could see in the glowing embers. The birds had settled noisily into the tree beside us but were now silent except for an occasional soft croak. A soft breeze would occasionally waft through the fire catching sparks and spiralling them up into the night above. *This is what I wanted, I thought, when I bought the car and the camping gear, Saoirse would love this.*

"You might be getting a little bit warm there," Bert suggested, interrupting my reverie.

"I'm fine," I answered. "Couldn't be more comfortable."

Bert seemed about to say something more but thought better of it and leaned back in his camp chair, staring into the fire again.

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I took another sip of my wine, relishing it. I'd spent a bit more than usual on the wine. It was worth it, I thought. This was really special. I looked up at the stars. The night was so clear and the countless stars in the Milky Way were so bright it cast shadows...

"You might be a little bit too close to the fire there," said Bert.

"What's bugging him?" I thought. "I'm really comfortabl.."

I smelled something out of place. Like electrical wire overheating. I glanced down.

My boots were steaming. NO! They were SMOKING! CHRIST they were on FIRE!

I jumped up and ran toward the creek. When I got there I remembered it was a dry creek. I turned around, trying to think. I suddenly realised my feet were more than warm, they were HOT. I sprinted over to my tent. I ripped up the tarp, exposing the sand beneath, and jumped up and down on it. The acrid smell of burnt rubber filled the air. My feet were getting hotter. I sat down and tried to undo my shoelaces with shaking fingers. It was a double knot. Eventually I got them undone. I turned my boot over and checked the sole. AAARGHHH! It was red hot. My hand was burnt. CHRIST IT HURT. I pushed my hand into the sand. It cooled it. GOD that felt better. I checked my socks. They were warm but intact. I got the lantern from inside the tent, holding it up gingerly, with my burnt hand, and looked at the boots. The soles were now a congealed mess of melted plastic or rubber and embedded sand.

Bert appeared, above me, carrying a torch.

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"Okay?" he asked.

"Fine and dandy," I answered. "Fine and dandy. Been a long day. Might get my drink and hit the sack."

"Probably a good idea," answered Bert. "I'll do the same."

I left my boots by the tent and carefully hobbled over the rocks and pebbles to the fire. I filled my glass to the brim and carefully hobbled back.

"Good night, see you in the morning," Bert called as I walked into my tent. "Great day."

"Yep, see you then," I answered. I zipped the tent shut and sat down on the camp bed. I had a few more gulps of wine in quick succession. The boots smelled of burnt rubber. I stripped down to my tee shirt and undies and crawled into the sleeping bag. It was warm and cosy. I was exhausted.

The bipeds were strange, inexplicable creatures. All crows were told from an early age to be wary of them. Only they could control fire and build monsters. But how strange to burn one's own feet, scream and then dance down to the creek and back again. The smell of the burnt feet was horrendous, all his fellow tree crows were awake and cawing softly to each other, complaining. He hushed and told them to go back to sleep. The bipeds had crawled back into their other skins and were presumably sleeping. He felt myself starting to nod off, again. Suddenly a new,

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terrifying noise emanated from the bipeds. He and the other crows awoke as one and cawed in fear. They woke the Ninth tree. It cascaded to the Eighth and the Seventh trees. Thankfully it petered out at the Fifth.

The noise was unbelievable.

"Why hadn't I thought of it earlier," I berated myself. "I could have separated the tents, politely. Maybe said I wanted some solitude..."

I was utterly exhausted. I looked at my watch. The luminous hands showed it was two am. The noise had awoken me almost two hours ago. Every now and then it paused and I would turn over, relieved. But before I could return to sleep it would start again. The thin walls of the two tents did nothing to stop it. There was no way I could move the tent in the middle of the night.

"Maybe I could take just the tarp and sleeping bag, wrap myself in it a hundred or so meters away, like a cocoon" I thought, desperately.

But I couldn't imagine dragging all that over the rocks and pebbles in the cold and dark without stuffing something up. My hand was still smarting and I needed to wait until morning to see what damage my boots had suffered.

The noise reached a crescendo and started to abate. It was a regular feature, a false promise that would be followed by another voluminous wave. There was also a lower frequency every so often that penetrated through the ground, vibrated up

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through the aluminium camp bed, into my bones, up my spine and reverberated around my skull.

It again reached the low point and then, like some nightmarish, orchestral movement created to torture lost souls, started to rise again.

"Bert," I called, guiltily. I knew he wasn't to blame but the lack of sleep was killing me.

"BERT!"

I heard him snort. It stopped. I heard him turn over.

"Oh, Thank God!" I thought, scrunching down into the sleeping bag, relief flooding through me.

But no matter how tired I am, it always takes me a few minutes to get to sleep. Before I could do so it had started again.

I tried meditating. I tried counting sheep. I tried deep breathing. I tore tissues in strips, rolled the strips into balls and stuffed them into my ears. Then I got a towel and wrapped it around my head. At three am I got out of bed with the towel, thinking it might be more effective wrapped around Bert's head. When I unzipped the tent, the noise made Bert snort and turn. That saved him from my murderous intent and I came to my senses. I rezippered the tent. He started a low wave base solo. I curled into a ball on the floor, holding my head. I realised I had to do

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something. I decided to take the tarp and the sleeping bag and venture forth. I had no option.

The noise went on all night. My fellow crows were as exhausted as me. The giant red orb was about to rise. The principal duty of the tenth tree was to inform all others that it had risen. Wearily, I cawed to my fellow crows, arousing them. I am ashamed of that first morning caw. In truth it was no more than a tired croak. My fellow crows tried their best, but our joint effort was poor. It barely roused the Ninth tree and weakly cascaded only as far as the Fourth, well short of Central.

The second attempt was better but still weak. The light was increasing. I could not let my first duty as Chief of the Tenth Tree be an abject failure. I gathered my strength and gave it everything. The Tenth Tree Crows did me proud. The caw cascaded mightily across the trees to Central and the response thundered back.

Just as it did so, the skinny biped appeared beneath us. He picked up pebbles from the creek. He hurled one at me! Impudence! I hopped to one side and watched with one eye as it missed me narrowly, flying into the branches behind me. He hurled another and then another and another, but each was weaker than the other.

Apparently exhausted by his pathetic efforts, he fell to the ground. Tired as I was, I saw my opportunity and swooped. I took a trophy! Another mighty caw swept across the trees.

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I finally got to sleep in my bag, wrapped in the tarp on the rocks, with the tree and a hundred metres between me and Bert. It felt like I'd only just done so when the stupid bloody Crows started going off. The tree above me was the instigator, they'd start and crows in the other trees along the creek would join in. I couldn't take it. I needed sleep. I picked up some rocks and tried to take out the crow in the tree in front of me. I didn't really want to hurt him, just shut him up. I missed. My next throws were weaker and wide of the mark. I slipped down onto my knees, exhausted.

The bloody crow swooped me and tore a lock of hair off my scalp! I've still got a scar. Bert witnessed it. He regales people with the story every chance he gets.

We separated the tents. Bert helped me put it up, properly. I got some sleep. The crows woke us at dawn precisely every morning thereafter. A camping trip isn't truly memorable without a 'little bit of trauma'. Saoirse and I are planning a trip. Bert's nickname is *understated*.