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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Belonging

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Belonging

The silence settles thick and heavy. The only sounds I've heard for the last three days are my own and those of the bush; my boots crunching on the bark and twigs that litter the ground; my breathing as I labour up another rocky spur; the clanking of fork on pan as I stir the evening stew. Now I stand still as a tree, feeling the bush closing in around me, slowing time. I shut my eyes and bathe in the sensation, taking in the scent of the eucalypts mingled with that of my own sweat. In the cooling late afternoon air, shafts of sun penetrate the tree canopy and cascade into pools of dappled light. Swinging the pack down buoys me like cork. It's been a warm day and my shirt is stuck to my back. I stand there drinking in these sensations knowing time is precious. I still have to climb another ridge and find a campsite for the night – and water, I'm running low on water. If I don't find some on the ridge it will be a thirsty dinner of cheese and chocolate. I check my watch. Four-thirty. I've been standing in my trance less than five minutes. Gently I transfer my weight and a twig snaps beneath my boot.

I haul the pack onto one knee and swing it onto my back in one practiced movement. There it settles, pushing me back into the forest floor.

Half way up the ridge I find a trickle of water dribbling out of a mossy crevice and spend a good half hour collecting two litres. I wouldn't even think about drinking it if it came out of the tap like that but later it will taste better than a beer.

I continue on up the ridge hopping from rock to rock, getting the rhythm of it, using the weight of the pack to push me forward. I crest the ridge just as the orange ball of the sun touches the horizon. A hundred metres beyond the crest is a flat, grassy clearing which will be too exposed if the weather turns but I decide to chance it. After making camp, I retrace my steps to the top of the ridge and catch the last of the day.

Getting back to the basics of food, water and shelter puts the world into perspective. All you think about is keeping your body going and not getting lost. Simplicity.

I mop the last puddle of stew with my bread and suck it until it melts away. The billy lid is dancing and I fish the billy out of the fire with a stick. Now I've finished cooking I heap more dry wood until the flames are leaping again. Lying back on one elbow half on the small blue ground sheet I sip at my tea and stare into the flames. I've been out here three days and the world has receded to a pin prick. Out here I know exactly what I have to do to get from one end of the day to the other. It's not always that simple in the real world.

The hour or so after dinner, hypnotised by the fire, my mind wanders to a hiking trip I did with some kids ten, maybe fifteen years earlier.

These were city kids and it was the first time any of them had carried a pack. It was the first time they'd really been in the bush. Sarah MacKenzie was the oldest at fifteen then there was her

thirteen-year-old brother, James and his mate, Kel. I met the MacKenzies when I was living over in the western suburbs. They were battlers but deep down they were good people doing it the best they knew how. Sarah and James were always getting into scrapes and I thought I could show them there are better things to be doing with your life. It wasn't hard to convince their parents. Mum and dad were happy to have a weekend off. I never even met Kel's folks. He just turned up with his gear ready to go. Looking back, it was pretty irresponsible to take them out on my own. There's a lot can go wrong looking after other people's kids in the bush, even if you think you know what you're doing.

I picked a walk that wasn't too difficult and had a lake at the end of it. It was the first walk I ever did, the one that got me hooked. It's always better if you know you're walking to something. The road in to the start of the walk is spectacular, climbing gradually to just under two thousand metres. Not exactly mountains to the rest of the world but it had my passengers wide eyed, especially on the ridges where it drops away on both sides.

We left Melbourne in the dark with the kids full of anticipation. By the time we pulled into the car park four hours later they'd eaten all the munchies I'd brought and were ready to get going. After a session trying on and adjusting packs and then redistributing the load, mostly to me, we finally hit the trail. The track takes off across a broad plateau so the walking for the first hour or so is easy but unspectacular. There were birds and plants to look at but the kids, with little tolerance for discomfort of any kind, were struggling with their packs, their boots and the flies. It was at that point I realised how unrealistic it had been for me to expect them to share my

enthusiasm for a world so foreign and was seriously questioning the wisdom of taking them out there. Then we got onto the start of the spur that would be our stairway down to the lake and the mood changed. Clambering onto a rocky outcrop for a late morning tea break, we got some great views across the ranges. James and Kel charged up and down the rocks like monkeys while Sarah sat on a log silently chewing on a chocolate bar.

From there the track threaded across the top of the bluff that overhangs the valley. I'm pretty good with heights but getting close to that drop had my stomach churning. It didn't seem to bother James. "This is cool," he kept saying while I was like a broken record.

"James, not so close to the edge!"

It was just after noon and the day was warming up. It was still another three hours to the lake but I didn't want to stop for a full lunch break. I figured I could keep them going on snacks for an hour and a half after which time the sight of the lake would be motivation enough. I just had to make sure they kept drinking. The track meandered away from the bluff, leading us through tall trees to the start of the main descent. The boys wanted to race ahead and I had to hold them back while we waited for Sarah to catch up. She'd lagged behind since we got off the plateau. It was important we all start the descent together.

"Do we have to go down there?" James asked, hanging on to a tree and peering down. "It looks like a cliff."

"It's not as bad as it looks," I reassured him, hoping I was right.

When Sarah finally arrived she wouldn't look me in the eye. Pretending not to notice, I gave them a pep talk about thinking where they put their feet and not going too fast. We didn't need any twisted ankles or cracked skulls. The track falls straight off the top of the spur and I'd forgotten just how steep it was. My heart was in my throat as I watched them struggle against their packs, which were trying to send them headlong down the slope. It was slow going but we eventually hit the first saddle where the track levelled out and we could take a breather. After that it got easier, with a series of short descents interspersed with flat sections. Half way down the third descent the lake came into view, heralded by the shouts of James and Kel. I smiled remembering my own excitement the first time I saw it and thought we were nearly there, but from the first glimpse there's a maddening hour of switching back and forward across the hill before you're standing at the bottom. I could mostly see the boys on the track below as it snaked and when I couldn't see them I could certainly hear them. They couldn't easily get lost so I just let them go. Sarah was a worry though. She'd fallen back again. Every ten minutes or so I'd stop and wait for her to come into view. She looked like she was purposefully keeping her distance so I decided to leave her be as long as I knew she was safe. I spent a pleasant hour ambling down the hill, stopping regularly to take in the lake, which was slowly growing in size, and to make sure Sarah was still behind me. For the last half hour the water looks close enough to touch and just when you think you're never going to get there, you're standing on the edge of it. The boys, having dropped their packs, were hurling stones into the water as boys do. It was just before three and more than warm enough for a swim even though I knew the water would be freezing. Hearing footsteps, I turned to see Sarah thump into the clearing and drop her pack.

“Hey, you made it,” I said, trying to sound upbeat.

In response she burst into tears and fled, her pack reeling drunkenly where it fell. James stood open mouthed, rock in hand.

“What’s the matter with her?” he whimpered. It was the first time he’d ever seen his sister cry.

I told the boys not to move and shot off after her. After two twists off the track I had to pull up sharply to avoid tripping over her. There she sat with her head between her knees.

“Sarah?” I puffed. “What’s the matter?”

She didn’t answer or look up.

I stood there awkwardly not knowing what to say or do. When nothing came to mind I sat down next to her and put my hand clumsily on her shoulder. Turning suddenly towards me, she threw her arms around my neck and started sobbing. This scared the living daylights out of me and I sat there like a plank waiting for her to come up for air. Eventually she did and started wiping at her eyes with the grubby backs of her hands. I handed her a clean handkerchief and she smudged her face with it.

“What’s got you so upset?” I tried again. She was quiet now, just sitting with her chin on her knees staring into the bush. I let her take as long as she needed. Eventually she spoke.

“I’ve never been in any place like this before. It’s so big and, I can’t explain it”

I nodded. “It’s ok to be frightened. If you’re not used to it, it can be scary.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, “it’s not that. It’s so beautiful. It makes me feel like I want to cry and I don’t know why.”

Hearing that made me want to cry too.

“When I saw the lake I it was like out of a story,” she went on, “You know the one, about the lady, where the knight throws his sword in and the hand comes up and grabs it. I couldn’t stop myself from crying. My heart felt like it was going to stop or burst or something. I feel really stupid.”

She dropped her head and squeezed it between her knees.

I gave her shoulder a pat.

“Don’t be embarrassed. I still feel like that myself sometimes. I know exactly what you mean.”

She looked up at me.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s a fantastic feeling. I love it.”

She put her head back between her knees.

“OK,” she said.

“Come on,” I said, “We better get back to those boys before they fill the lake up with rocks.”

Sara was a different person after our chat. I wondered how many other kids there were like her. I got up to see the dawn both mornings we were there. The second morning she zipped herself out of her tent as the light began to filter across the lake. We sat together watching the fish breaking

through its silver skin without saying a word. I could never describe the honour and the humbleness I felt.

The fire has died and the chill on my back tells me it's time to turn in. My stiff muscles make getting to my feet an effort and I let out a grunt of pleasant soreness, the result of a day of honest effort.

The birds wake me before first light and it takes a few seconds to remember where I am. The air is cold and I snuggle down into my sleeping bag. The idea of getting up isn't appealing. Today I have to walk out, back to the real world. That isn't appealing either. Rummaging around in the gloom I find the torch and then my clothes. I dress as quickly as the tent will let me then unfold myself out of it, stretching gingerly. Camping on my own like this, I wouldn't normally bother with a fire in the morning. It seems like an extravagance of wood and time but I want to wring everything out of my last day. I've specially saved a couple of pieces of bacon and an egg. The cold burns my cheeks and stings my eyes as my numb fingers build the fire but It's not long before the bacon hisses and sputters in the pan and the aroma of fresh coffee penetrates the air. I hold greasy bacon and egg wrapped in a slice of bread in my left hand and coffee in my right.

Sitting on a rock, munching the sandwich and slurping the coffee, I watch the first rays of the morning sun reach down the valley. After a few minutes they strike the tent and then me.

I finish breakfast and bask like a lizard until I can feel my fingers again.

“Time to get going,” I say aloud. Not because I need to be told but because I want to hear my voice.

On the track I'm on automatic pilot. There's a lot of distance to cover but it's easy walking on a clear path and I watch my feet instinctively picking the best route. With nothing else to concentrate on, the pack pushes its way into my consciousness. Searching for something else to think about, I return to the hiking trip with the kids. I wonder why after all these years it's resurfaced with such clarity. Being here in the bush has obviously dredged up those feelings but their power surprises me. I really did almost burst into tears when Sarah described how the beauty of the bush made her want to cry. I tear up now just thinking about it. My strongest memory of all is the peace I felt watching the dawn with Sarah and knowing the weekend had given her something she would never forget. It made me feel like I'd met her and her family for that purpose, like I was part of something bigger. I feel a deep satisfaction when I think about it. I find this odd. Happiness is such a tenuous thing. We spend so much time in pursuit of it but there doesn't seem to be any formula. I know there are people who get satisfaction from helping people but I never considered myself to be one of them. Maybe we're all wired that way deep down. Maybe it's some evolutionary hang over. I don't know, but in those moments with Sarah I felt I'd earned my right to exist.