

Eighty Seven

“...eat small freshwater creatures such as insects, small fish, tadpoles and yabbies. As you can see they are great swimmers. They live in rivers, creeks and dams throughout eastern Australia. They will travel several kilometres looking for food, shelter and water, particularly in dryer times. In mating season they move around even more.

“So that’s our reptiles. Any questions about the long-necked tortoise, or any of the other animals we looked at?”

Half a dozen hands shot up, with some “ooh-oohs” from the more attentive inquisitors, while a general hum of conversation came over the class.

“Alright children, one at a time” interrupted Miss Baxter. “Ranger Barbara can’t hear if you’re all talking.” Quiet descended upon the group as quickly as the noise had arisen. “Thank you. Justin, you first.”

“When they go inside their shells is it hard for them to get back out?”

“No,” said Ranger Barbara, giving the question her most serious consideration. “It’s what the tortoise is made to do – they hide under their shell when they fear danger and they can pop back out just as easily.” Ranger Barbara smiled as Justin nodded his acknowledgement.

“Next question?” Ranger Barbara smiled at a freckle-nosed girl and nodded for her to go ahead.

“On TV they had these great big turtles, you can ride on them, and they’re more than 150 years old.”

“They were probably Giant Tortoises from Galapagos. Long-necked tortoises can live that long. Some grow to about 200 years old.”

The Ranger pointed to a boy who’d shot up a hand after the previous question.

“Last year a man came to our school and he was eighty-seven.”

“Crikey,” said Ranger Barbara, “that’s pretty old. He must have seen a lot in that time.”

“Yes,” interrupted Miss Baxter sensing Mitch shaping up for a supplementary of equally oblique relevance to the learning at hand, “Mr Calder came to tell us how it used to be in the old days. Does anybody have a question for Ranger Barbara about the National Park?” As the questions began to flow again, with the class on autopilot Miss Baxter permitted herself to drift.

Eighty-seven. That's how old her grandfather would be now. A decade and a half had passed but it still felt so... relevant.

When her grandmother passed away it became clear he could not take care of himself. Miss Baxter had been in the final semester of her teaching degree. She remembered the Thursday her grandmother called. They'd been in touch quite a bit, which was not unusual. Miss Baxter's mother died young so her grandparents tried to fill the void, and Miss Baxter partly filled the hole their daughter's premature death left in their lives.

They'd asked about her plans when she finished university. She'd promised to come up and stay with them a while. It wasn't until this phone call, and mostly in hindsight, that Miss Baxter recognised the urgency in her grandparents' conversation.

"I thought I'd be around after your grandfather but..." her grandmother said with a sense of helplessness and frustration. The subject had until now always been treated in half jest. "I'm packing it in. Your grandfather's feeling the winters so hard. Promise me, Lucy, if I die before your grandfather you'll look after him."

"Of course I will, Nan."

Two days later her grandfather rang. Her grandmother was in hospital, a stroke.

"No, don't bother," he'd said. "She'll come through. You just concentrate on your studies. Just thought you should know."

Wringing her hands and pacing her flat Miss Baxter didn't know what to do. End of semester – four years of university coming to its conclusion. She had two essays due and exams beginning soon. Within half an hour her decision was made, by mid morning she was on a bus heading north on that familiar highway.

Her Nan was immobile, unable to communicate but heartbreakingly lucid. When Miss Baxter dragged herself from the bedside that evening she hadn't thought it would be the last time she saw her grandmother alive. In the morning however it was a reality.

The following weeks were divided between family affairs and university hundreds of kilometres away. The funeral, her grandmother's estate, arrangements made for her grandfather. He would stay in Melbourne with her uncle while Miss

Baxter folded her life in the university town before moving into her grandparents' home.

Miss Baxter failed two subjects and wouldn't be graduating in autumn with her friends.

There was a boy in university who with Miss Baxter had experimented at living together as man and woman. Ewan sought a post in that town up the coast, but a largely retirement age population and idyllic location meant schools were few and teaching jobs highly contested. They maintained a long distance love – eighteen months a testament to their dedication, until one day the inevitable happened, he broke it off. Inevitable only in hindsight - the betrayal too much for Miss Baxter to bear at the time. She forced the hurt away to be dealt with at a later date, and in self-preservation insisted on never seeing Ewan again. Nowadays this caused her regret. She would love to see him, not to rekindle the romance they'd had, just to tell him she understood and he was forgiven. She was also curious about his life, for she knew he'd married that other girl.

Four years she cared for her grandfather. The household, Doctors' appointments, operations, dialysis three days a week, bedsores, ulcers, lapses of bowel control, in public. Her mid twenties were no small sacrifice, but he was part of her. She would give anything to go back for one day to be with him.

On her grandfather's passing her yearning for Ewan finally went away.

"Little darlings," said Ranger Barbara as the children filed out. "They've got it all ahead of them."

"Yes," said Miss Baxter stepping into the soft spring sunshine with a gentle smile and subtle resignation in her voice. "They certainly do."