

THE GAP

It felt late, later than it could possibly be. Still only dusk fading across the Sydney skyline, the Opera House and iconic bridge to the west would still be bustling with activity as people began heading home from work. Spring days pinching moments of sunlight from winter, still even before six o'clock, the day had extracted more than it ought. Releasing thoughts of the day into the breeze rising from the Tasman Sea, James exhaled a long sigh.

Imagining that he could observe his breath mixing in the air, floating away to join the clouds, peace began returning to him. Wisps of breath fading, watching the fleeing sun being consumed by the western lands, chased by the bruise colored sky, as he inhaled the beginning of his calm. Tomorrow it would begin again, the night would again pacify him.

Inhaling the unusually tactile humidity as it mixed with the cooling air, he reminded himself that everything is part of something else. Just as day fades into night and stress releases into tension, he embraced that night would retire the day. Somewhere he would become whole, a confluence of his experiences.

Now a habit for nearly twenty-five years these twilight walks always served him well: recalibrating his world; grounding his beliefs, enabling him to face the demands of tomorrow. *Opportunities* he called these walks.

Mutt was running ahead or lingering behind, filling his canine olfactory senses with clues of the unseen occupants that made The Gap home. James could only imagine the games and adventures his dog might be playing out in his infectiously lighthearted manner.

Reliable companionship always came in the form of a dog. Mutt, the fifth such escort to have joined him over the years, James shared certain sensations with his friend. But there were others only known to the dog. Memories of a hare, tracks of lizards, and snakes, the scent of other curious canines, sounds demanding Mutt's attention but sometimes escaping James' capacity.

James returned his thoughts to the day. News of drought, the cricket matches, the rugby, asylum seekers, ISIS, and other plights facing his proud country; with a list like that, he didn't delve into the behavior of specific politicians to renew his despair.

Humidity welling up from the sea as the cool air displaced the warmth of the day, becoming indifferent to the time consumed by the deepening dusk, he watched the world changing. Patiently watching Mutt and seeking a balance as the mixing between the external tranquility of the park and the lingering internal tension of his day continued.

Allowing a shallow smile, there was enjoyment in negotiating along the cusp of a duality and the tension that was both tangible and imagined. Even in the failing light, he could sense a tension along the escarpment, the strain between the earth and the sea. Developing conflict of approaching weather, a cooling wind that first graciously offered a reprieve from the day's stifling humidity, but then once welcomed, rudely extending its indulgence creating the chill of an overstaying guest.

Above the grey horizon was smearing between day and night, extending into the dusk and obscuring the details of the day. Details that harbored history. Details filled with stories of this place; the present reality and the future of those who so often find themselves at the crossroads. Crossroads that deposited countless pained souls along this headland.

The history of The Gap is storied enough for most. A testament to wayward sailors caught in fierce Tasman storms, having failed to find safe harbor in Sydney. A history that always counted a rosary of lost souls. Wrecks. Ships and souls alike have floundered on the shoals below. Crashed vessels and souls alike, mercilessly against the rocks below, relieved of all their earthly expectations and inchoate dreams.

As much a part of the history of the place as anything else that happened yesterday; James occupied a gap somewhere between the forgotten military garrison and the spawning stories of victories and repression, depending on the voices behind the tale. Who would really know? Ultimately the degree of our participation is measured in the history of tomorrow. What had once started as his habit, became a section of land that James took responsibility for and protected.

As James' eyes became more attuned to the failing light, he saw what he had come to expect on his walks. Mutt saw, or sensed, it as well, and drew close to James' heel before venturing away again as they moved toward the horizon.

Casting a muted silhouette against the sky, there was a solitary figure sitting along the ledge of the cliff, his legs dangling over freely, touching the void, looking out towards the sea. Bracing his hands on his legs in front of him, James could see the man's square broad shoulders covered in a light colored jacket. James whistled and called out, "Mutt, back." The dog's return was immediate and certain.

"G'day." James called out.

"Hey," the stranger responded offering an indifferent wave, without looking away from the sea.

"You 'right mate?" James persisted. Walking towards the man, with his palms extended up, he offered, "Is there anything I can do for ya' mate?"

A silent nod was unable to convince James that the stranger was responding to the question or to some other question posed from afar.

"Ya' know mate, I just live up around the way, why don't you come 'round for tea and tell me about it?"

"Thanks, but I'm fine. Just as happy here with the sea and my thoughts. I'd just as rather not impose upon you."

"No imposition mate. Com' on."

"Have a good night. Enjoy your tea. No reason to feed a stranger, besides I've got means enough to find my own."

"Fair enough, but The Gap here has taken more than it's share of troubled souls; if it's all the same to you I'd be happier making a new friend than either one of us facing regrets."

"All the same, I'm fine. Besides, this isn't' about you. G'night."

"Hey, it's just me and me dog Mutt, we're just heading back for our tea. We could use the company."

“Mutt’s the dog’s name or just what you call him?”

“It’s his name and what I call him,” James chuckled.

The man nodded his head and continued to look away from James.

“It’s actually short for mutton,” James continued, sensing a restlessness beyond the indifference of the stranger.

“Funny name for a dog.”

“My cousin from across the ditch gave him to me, other than the dog, the only good to come from New Zealand is Mutton. But as a pup he chased more than he herded, he was no good with the mutton, so I took him.”

The man nodding said, “Should’ve called him ‘Lucky’; lucky the station hand didn’t give him a bullet.”

“Well, that’s sort of why I took him. Don’t do any good letting creatures die before their time, know what I mean?”

“I suppose,” the stranger said nodding, “like I say ‘Lucky’ seems to fit.”

“Last dog was ‘Lucky’, so that wouldn’t do.”

“Can’t be lucky twice?” the man asked still looking across the water.

“Well some can. Mutt deserved something different. We all do. You looking for better luck?”

“It’s not like that. I’ve said I’m fine; just thinking.”

“I’m sure ya’ are mate, but ya’ know the browns hunting these grasses at night.”

“Seems that the snakes tend to leave me alone more than people do,” he answered with a sigh. “Are you that guy?”

“What guy might that be?”

Turning to look towards James, the man answered, “People say an angel patrols these cliffs helping the suicides.”

“Well I suppose that they’re not really suicides if I talk them down. More like folks that need an extra ear. I’m no angel, but yeah, I’ve come across some folks that wanted a talk.”

“You can’t save them all you know.”

“Well, maybe. But I save what I save.”

“Are you sure? Do you save them or just delay the inevitable? Aren’t suicides like recovering addicts, they are what they are? Some don’t recover and some suicides aren’t preventable. Nothing can stop those, you just delay the end of the day.”

“I don’t need to be sure. . . I suppose sometimes it is only temporary but that doesn’t stop me from trying.” Mutt was sitting a few meters off, quietly looking between his master and down at his paws, the emphatically understanding the fine line between situations that are contentious and those that are embarrassing. Sometimes it’s the opposite sides of the same coin.

“I suppose not.”

“What if I told you it was equal measure about both me and them. If I felt a draw to sorrow and wanted to chase it away from everyone near, as though misery was a contagion that could be eradicated.”

“Ain’t no crime in being here. Park closes at midnight; I’m not bothering anyone.”

“You American? I hear a bit of an accent.”

“Canadian.”

“Right, sorry mate; been in Aussie long then?”

“A while. Not long enough to be bit by a Brown snake.”

“That’s funny.” James said with a chuckle. “I’m James, I didn’t get your name.”

“Nice to meet you James.”

James waited for the stranger not to tell him his name and then shrugged his shoulders and scratched Mutt’s ear. “So then mate, why don’t we just chat about what brings you out ‘ere; sitting over a cliff lookin’ at the sea?”

“Just ‘cause we’re both here, doesn’t give you the right to ask.”

“Suppose not, ain’t any harm neither.”

“Suppose not.”

“So?”

“So maybe I’m just thinking. Maybe I’m just enjoying the softness of the day’s end or the night’s awakening embrace. Maybe I’m composing a photograph.”

“Without a camera?”

Chuckling, the man replied, “maybe you come out to see the world first, then carry out your art. Maybe you need to sense something before you can capture it.”

“Could be I suppose. I don’t know much about art. It’s getting dark though, why don’t we go back to my place, have a pint and talk about the Ashes disaster.”

“Cricket? Maybe you’re not the guy to help suicides. Ashes has been awful.”

“You’re not wrong there. Look, anything you’d like to talk about. I don’t want to be out here all night, but I don’t feel right leaving you.”

“Hmm.”

“So I’m not gonna make somethin’ out of this, or anything. You sure you don’t want to talk?”

“Thanks, I’ll be fine with my thoughts, the brown snakes, and whatever else might be out tonight. Have a good night.”

“Satisfy yourself mate.” James said, turning home, “Have a good one, seems odd to me. Mutt— away. Let’s get tea.”

“Well, thanks for stopping by, but like I said, maybe it’s not about you.”

“Still don’t make no sense to my why you’d be here in the dark; be well. G’night.”

The man arose and fumbled in his pocket, watching James and Mutt dissolve into the evening. He turned off a hand recorder and waiting until James was out of earshot, said, "Maybe I just wanted to see if you'd come."

Post Script

Don Richie (9 June 1925 – 13 May 2012) was a local resident who patrolled the cliffs at The Gap. In 2006, he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for his rescues, the official citation being for "service to the community through programs to prevent suicide." It is estimated that he intervened saving over 400 people.

Similarly there is man in Nanjing, China who patrols the Yangtze River Bridge providing compassion to lost souls who've found themselves there. In the past 11 years Chen Si has saved over 300 people, roughly one every fortnight.

What is your compassion worth?

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