

A SONG FOR PETER

By JIMMY BROOK

“No one should have to bear the pain and the anguish of man’s differences and dogmas. Not even children. It never goes away despite the changes and the attitudes we adopt.”

A journalist comes across a story which she pursues and finds it ending on a small island. It hurts all it touches and would hurt more if she let it go. In the end, she is faced with the Decision to tell or not to tell.

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Gillian sat back in her chair and gave a sigh. She had an article to do for next month but the words and the vision were not there. Her boss would be unforgiving and she saw the look last month and knew it had to be right next time. Hannah the file clerk, told her to take a few days off and get inspiration. Inspiration! She would need more than that. Some music. That was what she needed. Gillian headed for her car in the underground car park and thought about what venue would catch her mood.

Eric, another journalist on the magazine, was standing next to his car, some two spaces distant to hers. He waved and then came over. "Busy? I'm meeting someone shortly and your more than welcome to join us."

She smiled at him but really she needed more than that. "Thanks but not tonight. I have things to do."

"When ever I meet this person, it usually ends up in a story and costing me money somehow. Sure you won't come? Only a few minutes away. Rudi's Bar." He waited a few seconds and then opened his door. "OK. Catch you tomorrow," and then he was in and starting up.

Gillian drove out into the cool air and decided on the Gateway Hotel for a coffee and change of scene. Then she passed Rudi's and thought 'why not. Could have my coffee there. And Eric is not so bad.' She drove around the block and found a parking space and headed back. Inside there was quiet music and just a few people. Eric had just arrived before her and was talking to a woman. She was dressed in a brown skirt and white top and wore a small hat. She looked about in her early sixties. Gillian hesitated but at that moment Eric, looking for a suitable table, spotted her and gave a come on wave.

"Gillian, this is Moira." Then it was drinks, Gillian still deciding on her coffee. Eric was hanging out for a cigarette but that meant going outside, so he just smiled. "Well Moira, you sounded positive on the phone. Something of interest?"

Moira had a drawl but not outback, more Lauren Bacall. More dusky. "Yes, as a matter of fact. Well to be accurate, probably."

"Probably?" Eric looked down his nose at her in a mock but friendly way.

"Was in Cairns last week with Hetty, old friend, and she was telling me about this fellow. Peter. She met him on a cruise out to the Reef. He was up in the islands as a young boy during the war. Didn't get much detail from her, but she said he was a very interesting man. I think there could be something there for you, and hopefully me."

Eric nodded his head and looked at Gillian. "Sometimes there is a story and if it is taken up by our illustrious leader, there are 'expenses' for Moira."

Gillian knew everyone had sources, just hadn't met any of Eric's. Eric looked at her and pointed a finger. "You want a story? Good time of the year to visit Cairns."

She blinked. "Your story."

"Can't do for a while. Going to cover the Regatta in Perth then back to Adelaide. Sniff it out. Tell you what. If it makes an issue, I'll sort out the expenses."

"No. My story and I will handle it." She didn't even know why she said it. It just came out. The meeting concluded and obtaining a rough idea where she could find this Peter, they all walked outside and she parted company. There was still some serious music to catch up on that night.

Next day and feeling very tired, she told the article Editor she was going north for a few days to follow up something and got a lecture on it better be worth it, etc. She had Hannah book an air ticket and hotel room and shuddered at the cost. The story better make a bonus.

The following morning she was in the air and hours later touching down at Cairns International Airport. Despite being June, the heat still hit her with a bang. She headed for her hotel, which was impressive, and had a cold shower. Then after a cool drink, went downstairs and took a taxi out to the newsagency at Home Hill, in the suburbs. In fact she was feeling a bit of an idiot, for all she had was the name Peter and a big rambling Queenslander house painted orange. The newsagent looked her over and evasively said there were lots of orange houses and lots of Peters in the area. Then he relented and suggested two blocks down the street and turn left. A Peter lived there and the place was orange. Probably out fishing or at the Bowling Club.

She thanked him and walked the required distance, finding the place. It was indeed rambling and some semblance of garden, but it just seemed to be missing something. Indeed it was also missing it's owner. She thought of leaving her phone number on the front screen door, but decided to try the Bowling Club first. That was easy as there were signs on street corners and she entered the air conditioned building where every one seemed to be sitting and drinking. Silly of her to think they played bowls. Many were in creams and similar shirts so she realised there had been games earlier. The bar man was the best place to start and he pointed to an elderly man having a drink with two others.

The men saw her before he did, and they stopped talking. He looked around and she saw strong eyes. Lines on his face could have been age but she felt these suggested something deeper. "Peter?"

It seemed an eternity before he nodded. The face strained. "Yes."

Gillian put out her hand. "Gillian Rush. I've come a long way to find you and I hoped we could talk sometime. I don't mean to intrude but maybe later today? "I'll buy dinner."

She waited for a reply but didn't get one. The man on his left hit his arm. "Don't knock an offer like that Peter." Then the other one stood up. "Like a drink mam?"

It was then that Peter stood up and faced her. Before she could answer his friend, he spoke first. "I don't know what you came to talk about but I usually ask a lady out. Join us for a drink if you like but we might leave it there."

"Pete! Not the right words. Miss, I'll buy you a drink and Peter will join you for dinner."

Peter went a little red in the face. "Bill, this involves me and as I said..."

"Please Peter. I only have two days. At least we can eat." Gillian used one of her best faces. Just a plain look.

He gave a sigh and shrugged his shoulders. "Six thirty at the Islander in the main street."

She smiled lightly. "Thanks." Bill left for the bar and Peter stood up. "I need to do a couple of things and scrub up a bit so I'll leave you to these two crooks." He actually bowed his head a little then walked away. She noticed a slight limp.

She arrived a couple of minutes late but he was waiting with a bottle of white wine on the table. "Hope you like wine?" It seemed to her this might go better than she felt earlier. All she needed now was to find out what it was he just might want to talk about.

"Let's enjoy the food first," he ventured, "then you can tell me what you came all this way for." He smiled and she felt the slightly harsh statement wasn't intended to be that. Just a simple fact. He asked where she came from as he poured and from that, small talk followed. He didn't pry and she felt the wait would be a better tact. In fact if this was a waste, she had splurged on a few days in the sun and might even get to see some sights with company.

When the dishes were cleared by a waiter, he turned from looking briefly out the curtained window and looked her in the eyes. She saw that same cloudiness and suddenly they shifted to look at two obviously overseas tourists who had ventured in. Then he took a sip and when he looked at her again, she saw pain.

"You want to know my story? I don't really want to recall it to be honest. Hetty was nice. We got on well on the cruise out to the reef. She started me off and I said a few things but then I couldn't. Did you know she wanted to make love to me there, along the beach? I couldn't of course, whether I wanted to or not. Still she stayed with me that night at my place and we just held each other and looked at the moon" He looked into his glass.

Gillian didn't say a word. What happened in the next two seconds would make or break it.

“Maybe a journalist should know. Care to come back to my place and we can sit in peace and you can make notes if you like.”

She nodded and picked up her hand bag. They left and she drove back to Home Hill. Back to the big orange house. “Why orange?”

He laughed. “Mate at Bunnings said they had a special on. Half price. I’m wasn’t fussed.” They mounted the steps and went to a spacious room with picture windows that had a view of the mountains to the west behind town. He offered coffee and she accepted. “Nice to sit here sometimes when a storm is brewing. Watch the lightening crack and snake down into the darkness. Where do I start? When I was little I suppose.....”

* * * *

“Peter. Stay away from the edge or you’ll fall in. Honestly.” His mother’s voice came through to his mind but he still went and looked over the edge of the big wooden wharf into the lime green water. A school of fish darted by then disappeared underneath. Nearby the boat that they would be going on to his father’s island, rocked slightly. He saw two fuzzy haired natives lifting boxes from the deck down into the inside. Black with old khaki shorts. In town they all looked like this. The women always wore colourful things. But he had heard that away from the town it was often the opposite. Manuka had said so. He would be sorry to leave her in Rabaul but his father and mother had decided that he should spend more time on the plantation. He was eleven years old and they had talked about St. Joseph’s Boarding School in Townsville. He had reached a time when high school was looming. He shuddered. He hoped not to leave. His best friend Tom and Tom’s brother Steve, were his greatest friends, and along with Bewodgy, they were all inseparable. But parents moved around as jobs came up and now they were gone. Tom and Steve were in boarding school in Australia and Bewodgy was living with his uncle in Lae. Despite their skin colour they were close as kids that age could be. Peter missed them.

They finally boarded the boat and it chugged out into the harbour. There were lots of boats and canoes and even a war ship. A small one but Peter looked at the White Ensign on the stern and knew it was the Australian Navy. After all this was part of Australia and why shouldn’t it be here. It would be a long voyage, overnight and tomorrow they would reach Matanka Island where a smaller boat would take them to the copra plantation.

His father managed it for CSR. The youngest manager in this part of the islands, he heard him say once. Mum was confident and suntanned. She could cook and handle the native girls who worked on the place and fix anything that needed fixing. Except the small truck that they used on the island to pull the wagons to the dock. It was so old it often broke down but dad somehow kept it going. He was actually shorter than his wife, by not much, but he was nuggetty and he worked hard. Often without a shirt, he became tanned almost like the natives, whom he liked. Peter would see him sitting down for a break together, smoking, and trying to teach each other words. The boys had a good command of Pidgin

so they all got by. The local dialect was a sing song sound and his dad had mastered just a few words. But they all laughed. Perhaps that was all that mattered.

Peter raced to the front of the vessel and hung over the bow. The water raced by and seemed to get sucked underneath. He could see fish darting to and fro, suddenly racing alongside then diving out of sight. His parents were sitting on boxes at the stern talking to three other people. They were huddled against the light breeze and not smiling. Out in the passage the water became choppy and the odd spray that came over the front, covered Peter in dampness. But it soon passed as the sun evaporated it within minutes. He wandered about and apart from a yell or two about not hanging over the side too far, he was left to his own. Peter felt that was not normal. His mother was always fussing, but today she was silent.

They headed towards a spit of land that stuck out from the main island and the outline of buildings slowly appeared, then a wharf and lots of people. Half an hour later they had tied up and in exchange for the post delivery they took on several small crates. There was not much room now and everywhere you walked, one had to dodge and weave. Mum and dad stood with him and they seemed happier now but Peter wondered what had upset them. Then the ropes were cast off and they slowly moved away, this time towards the open sea. Mum opened her big carry bag and out came sandwiches and fruit. There was always fruit up here. Not the apples and oranges of the south but mangoes and bananas and custard apples. Bread when it came by boat or mum baked it in the outside oven.

“What were you talking about dad, to those other people?”

His father looked at his wife then cleared his throat. “Grown up business, Peter.”

“Is it about the war? Lecky said the Japs had bombed the hell out of the Yanks at Pearl Harbour and...”

His father cut him off with a clip over the ear. He didn't feel it and he knew it was not meant to be felt. Just letting him know who was boss. “What have I told you about swearing?”

“Hell isn't swearing. You should hear what some of the others use. I heard you once.”

His father took hold of his shoulders and looked into his eyes without talking. Peter was a bit taken back. He had not seen his father so uptight since the blight got into the copra a year back. His father let go and put his arm around him. “Sorry Peter. You are growing up so quickly, just like your brothers did. Soon you will be going away and finding out about the world out there. We want this time to be a time of memories.” He looked out at the water and spoke. “May be they won't be the memories we want.”

Just then his wife joined them and sat on a case nearby. “You should tell him Will.”

“What dad?”

“We thought the sinking of all those ships in Pearl Harbour might be just that. To prove a point or something and that would be that. But it seems the Japs are just starting. They are moving through the northern Pacific taking over everything. The Philippines has gone. That’s what we heard today. Still they will meet their match if they try to take Singapore. It’s British and it will never fall. Still it is a worry.”

Peter took this in, whilst following a kestrel that had appeared and was following the boat. “But we are in the South Pacific. We are just too far away and who would want Malua or even Matanka?”

“I hope you are right. I’m sure Churchill will kick them back home pretty quick.” He gave his son a hug and moved to sit with his wife who was knitting. Peter stood up and looked over the side. A bright flash of colour caught his eye and then it was gone. He knew it was a coral trout or one of those fish the natives called a beggy. Why didn’t people overseas just mind their own business and stop fighting? When he grew up he would get on the radio and tell everyone and maybe they would listen.

At night they had hot soup and grilled fish the crew had prepared on the little stove inside. The men had bottled beer and his mother allowed him to have a small mug of sugared tea. Then they lay on thick mats that had been rolled away and with a light sheet to cover them they just looked at the stars. There were millions of them. Some twinkling and some steady. It was like Aladdin’s Cave. He remembered the night they went to the outdoor pictures in Rabaul. Only this was real. Even better. He started counting but lost track. Finally the gentle rocking of the boat put him to sleep. He dreamt of stars then fire and black things without shape and finally nothing.

Next day they were still chugging along and near lunch the sight of land and green mountains rising out of the sea. Peter recognised the mountain. It was Matanka and here they would leave the boat and pick up a smaller one to take them to home. What did dad say about home? He couldn’t remember exactly but he knew this time may be the last for him here. Boarding school would be next. Still there were holidays and he would be back each time. Fishing and wandering about the rocks with Bewodgy’s younger brother, Nifty, was fun. They had great adventures. It wasn’t actually Nifty but that was about as close as he could pronounce it and no one minded. The native foreman had a daughter called Lehay, and she sometimes came with them but preferred to sit and swim a lot and not explore. Peter wondered if he would ever marry a native girl when he grew up. He knew it was frowned upon and you became some sort of outcast. No one talked to you. But if he stayed on Waimeny there would be no one to talk about you and it probably would be alright. Why don’t grown ups work these things out like us?

The plantation boat was waiting and soon the family was on board. There was not a lot of room after the cargo was loaded and Earle Whitmore was coming with them. He was a company overseer who moved about the CSR holdings. Will knew him from early days and they got on well. He ate with them but had his own quarters. Peter’s mother thought

he should be married. Bewodgy confided in him, before he left, that he had seen a native girl climb out of Whitmore's window early one morning, so he didn't need to be married.

The trip took three hours and was fairly calm. Still dad insisted that he and his mother wear a lifejacket, just in case. Peter and Will threw in fishing lines and soon a reasonable catch was on the floor of the boat. Then the island appeared. Their island. Soon the boat slowed and tied up at the small jetty that had been built to load the copra. A few natives were waiting and greetings were exchanged. Emma, Peter's mother, announced she needed a cup of tea and grabbing a bag in each hand, made towards the house that stood up on a small rise. The house itself was surrounded by green foliage and a red roof of corrugated iron stood out to give it contrast. Peter was told to carry something and a couple of the natives took the rest. The remaining locals started unloading the stores from the boat.

The house girl was all smiles and the stove was already lit. She knew the missus liked a cuppa anytime of the day. Peter had dropped the bag he carried from the boat and ran to his room. It was just as he left it. The big window was propped open and he looked out at the sea. To the left was Pirate's Hill. Well he called it that. Nifty and Peter would clamber about it when Peter wasn't doing lessons or jobs, and they had found a cave. Not a real cave, just an overhang that was dry when it rained, which was most days in the wet. The boys had made a pretend telescope from a cardboard tube, and kept lookout for pirate ships. Peter would go up there tomorrow and take some of the chocolate and biscuits he had managed to obtain in Rabaul. The Chinese trader liked him and gave it to him as a secret gift. Peter remembered him saying something about there may be no more if rumours were true but wouldn't say what they were.

That night everything was more relaxed than other nights recently. It was if the world was a million miles away and here in Waimeny Island, it was just them and no one existed elsewhere. Will and Whitmore sat outside after dinner, and smoked. Mother knew they were thinking of the war to the north of them but didn't interfere in the men's business. She also knew that one day it might become all their business.

They all slept the sleep of people who needed a long rest. The boat journey although mostly sitting about, was all the same, physically draining. Earle Whitmore was on edge when he boarded the boat but it now seemed as a weight was removed from his shoulders. However news of the war with Japan was unsettling. Although thousands of miles away, these things spread quickly. With the Philippines gone under it was a lot, lot closer. Last night he and Will had talked a bit about it and what might happen if it got close. It was unlikely with the British in force at Singapore and the Aussies would make sure not one ever landed on Australian soil. However New Guinea was also Australian soil, so to speak, and for that matter, the islands stretching away to the north like the Solomons and New Britain and New Ireland. In these places there may be courage and determination, but just a handful of Australians and their friends to keep the enemy out.

The Americans were an unknown force. Will had heard some of what had happened at Pearl Harbour. The bush telegraph was always active in Australia but so was government

ensorship, and no one really knew what was happening. It could be a very long time before any Yanks appeared in the South Pacific. Still chances were they would overlook a small island like theirs, anyway.

The days settled down into normal routine. Peter made token efforts at his schooling and was surprised when his mother didn't follow up on him. She seemed normal yet not normal. He thought she had big things on her mind, the way she looked constantly out to sea.

"You right mum?" he asked one day, but got a smile and a hug for his answer. He let it go. More time to fish and play. Around the headland to the east, a small estuary came in from the sea and wound a couple of hundred yards inland before petering out at a small rock barrier. At low tide, he and Nifty would walk up the sandy bottom and clamber over the rocks to sit and muck about in the fresh water pool behind it. It was cool and anywhere out of the humidity was a blessing. In the wet season they couldn't swim on the beach as the big stingers sometimes came in. A native labourer died a terrible death the first month he was here. It upset everyone a lot.

Pirate's Hill became a sort of lookout for the two boys and sometimes they got Leahy to join them. She found wild fruit and things and they would sit there scanning the sea for Japanese ships with their cardboard tube. A real telescope would have been great but Peter's father made the only one on the island, off limits to the children.

Then two things happened which changed the process of daily living. One wet night, a gust of wind brought down a small palm tree. Quite common in storms but this tree not only had the radio aerial attached to it, it also crashed through the tin roof at the end of the house and damaged the radio. This meant they now had no communication with Matanka. Not a major problem as they would continue their plantation business and wait for the next boat to take off the bagged copra. Then a request to CSR for a replacement and one day months later, a boat would come and life would be back to normal.

The second thing that happened was when the pick up boat arrived. There was great consternation and Peter saw the captain and his parents in a huddle with serious faces. When his mother walked away crying, he knew it was bad news. He was older now, he told himself, and should be in on what happened on the island. Peter walked up to his father and doing his best to sound grown up, said simply, "Is there something I should know dad?"

The captain and Earle sort of looked in other directions and Will felt his son was no longer a young kid. After a moment of silence, he put his hand on Peter's shoulder and looking him in the eye, said "Singapore has fallen to the Japs. They are headed for New Guinea and we can't stop them."

Peter took a few seconds to absorb this then turned away and walked to the house. He found his mother sitting in a chair staring out the open window. "Peter," she said without turning her head, "you need to pack your port. You and the other children have to go to

Rabaul on the boat this afternoon. The captain will try to arrange passage to Port Moresby for you. Mr. Styles will look after you.”

“What about you and dad? And Mr. Whitmore and the others? We all should go.”

Then she looked at him and reaching out for his hands with hers, said “It’s not that easy. Your dad is the manager and has a responsibility to the company to stay and look after the place. We don’t think they will be interested in this island. There is nothing on it except coconuts. Mr. Whitmore will stay and help him.”

“And you mum?”

“My place is with your father. You know he can’t cook. We’ll be alright. Before the cyclone season we will close up and join you.”

The tears welled up inside him. “I’m not going without you and dad. You can’t”

His mother knew the pain in his heart. He had a whole lifetime to experience and she knew that pain would subside. Perhaps never go away. She hoped a little would be tucked away in there. She looked back at the open window. “Your father and I have decided. Hurry, the boat has to leave soon.”

“No.” he burst out crying and then instinct overtook him. He turned and ran from the room, through the outside door and into the plantation. He just kept running. Emma ran to the door and yelled after him but to no avail. Her heart swelled at pride for her son. He was growing up, Then logic prevailed and she hurried down to the jetty.

There was consternation and yelling and then whilst the captain and his crewman were securing their load, the other adults checked the buildings and the plantation. Will yelled himself hoarse but no sign of his son could be found. He was running now, spurred on by fear and anger. The boat could not wait much longer, and without the boy, he was putting his family in harms way. The sweat poured off him and every glimpse of Peter turned out to be just a piece of vegetation. When the boat’s whistle blew, he stopped and with a final look about him, walked quickly back through the trees and down to the craft. The others arrived just before him. His wife was crying and he put an arm around her shoulder for comfort. Just as much his comfort as hers

So it was a sad farewell. Leahy and Nifty were standing in the stern looking at the shore and a slow wave from the men saw the last hope, motor out and turn towards the sea. Whitmore said he would have another look around and headed off along the track towards the storage shed. Will and Emma walked slowly up to the house.

Peter could not see. He could not see for the tears that streamed from his eyes. Yet he ran and somehow seemed to go on without falling. Eventually he stopped and sank down to the ground and just sat there. He could faintly hear his name being yelled but he didn’t care. Nearby was a hollow fig tree and he vaguely remembered it from when they swam

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