

Strange Land - Short Stories

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The Joke

Dean was one of those people who attracted attention. It wasn't the way he looked, though his crooked grin and thick bristly hair gave him a distinctive appearance. It was his imposing personality and habit of doing or saying something out of place, that made him memorable. Older brother Ray was unlike him in about every way you could imagine and he had extricated Dean from difficult situations on many occasions with his calm persuasive demeanour.

Ray hadn't seen his brother for a couple of months and wondered why suddenly, at this time of day, they had to meet. Dean had sent a text message pleading with Ray to come urgently. It was a short drive to Dean's apartment and conveniently on the way to Ray's work.

Dean was waiting at his ground floor apartment door when Ray arrived. "Hey, you're not working today?" Ray asked as he walked inside.

"No, I'm really sick. That's why I called," Dean said.

Ray thought he did look pale. "Why did you call me? Go to the doctor."

"I've been, had tests and they can't find anything," Dean said.

"Had tests, what's the matter with you?" Ray asked with a concerned look.

"I've got this dull pain in the centre of my chest, and I feel tired all the time. Had this since I came back from holiday last week," Dean replied.

"Can you stay a little while? I'll explain what's going on."

"Yeah, okay, not too long - working you know." Ray sat down at the kitchen table. Dean sat opposite.

"I think I'm going to die." Ray was shocked and about to respond. "Hold on, let me talk," Dean added sharply. "I've been on leave - you know I said I was going to Uluru?" Ray nodded. "I was there last week with Jody. We decided to do a tour bus trip to an aboriginal camp not far from there." The details of the events flooded back and replayed in his mind.

Dean stared aimlessly through the coach window. The grey-green grass that grew in sporadic patches through the red desert earth flashed by.

"Not much to see here," Dean said to Jody who sat beside him in the aisle seat.

"Should be there soon," Jody replied. Jody had been friends with Dean since high school and he enjoyed her company more than his male friends.

"I can see another bus parked up ahead," Dean said as he peered between the heads of the passengers in front of them. The coach slowed as it pulled in and stopped beside the other bus. They disembarked in a disorderly fashion as the forty or so passengers stood, grabbed pack packs, water bottles, and checked cameras before moving. Dean had been planning this trip for some time. He had enjoyed his overseas trips and now felt compelled to see more of his own country and the indigenous culture.

There were six humpies dotted around the camp area in no particular pattern and two corrugated iron sheds. The tourists milled around. They were either listening to the guides talking, or speaking with the local camp aboriginal people. A young aboriginal man sat cross-legged in front of one of these

temporary structures made of bark and branches. The white ochre paint on his cheeks, forehead, and arms gave him a menacing presence. The stark red bandana and loin cloth completed the picture. He was holding a didgeridoo across his knees and using a small paintbrush to highlight carved patterns as Dean approached.

"I had one of those when I was a kid," Dean said looking down at the didgeridoo. "My Dad bought it, and a boomerang, at the souvenir shop in Brisbane. Where'd you get yours?" he asked with a smile.

"I made it." The young man stared at Dean with black piercing eyes and a heavily furrowed brow.

"C'mon you get everything from China now... don't you?" Dean's grin was widening.

The young man put the didgeridoo on the mat in front of him. He stood up to a crouching position, turned and went into the humpy behind him. He started to chant and sing in low guttural tones - the intensity rising and falling. Dean was puzzled. Was this part of the show? He stood there transfixed. The young man suddenly appeared in front of Dean, chanting, swaying back and forth, with the rhythmic stamping of his bare feet raising the dust. He clutched a thin pointed object, like a long pencil, in his right hand. The young man continued chanting, dancing. The tour bus guide appeared from nowhere and grabbed Dean from behind by the shoulders.

"What have you done here? Let's go...quickly," he screeched. Dean was made of stone, he couldn't move.

The swirling aboriginal man swung around to face Dean and stamped his feet as he abruptly became silent and went into a crouch. With his left arm across his body and his right arm stretched out with the thin object pointing directly at Dean's

chest. The guide managed to drag Dean away and back to the coach.

"Since that day I've been getting worse. I'm going to die Ray." Dean said with anguish. "You know what he did to me?"

Ray sat wide-eyed. If it wasn't his brother telling this story he wouldn't have believed it. "You're kidding right. Of course I know what he did. He pointed the bone - that's just superstition - like voodoo. You don't really believe he cursed you?"

"What else can it be? Jody and I laughed about it on the way back that day. But there is something powerful going on here - you know - metaphysical." Dean sighed deeply. "I have to go back there and get the bloke to undo it"

"You amaze me Dean. Did you try to upset the man on purpose? Do you not have any respect for aboriginal culture?" Ray asked with a touch of venom.

"It was a joke. How was I to know he didn't have a sense of humour?" Dean paused, feeling the weight of his brother's critical gaze. "I'm sorry and I want to go and apologise - put things right." He looked up at Ray. "You need to come with me."

Ray organised a few days leave from his work while Dean purchased plane tickets from Brisbane to Uluru and the four-wheel drive hire from there. Ray had helped his brother out of trouble before. This time he wasn't feeling confident.

"Did you know that the bone they use is a splinter from a human shin bone?" Dean said as their four-wheel drive was nearing the encampment.

Ray didn't answer. He was feeling jaded from the three-hour flight and apprehensive at what may lay ahead. They pulled up in the designated camp parking area. There were no other vehicles so they parked adjacent to the camp. There were two aboriginal men standing at a nearby humpy chatting animatedly in their native language. They were both dressed like stockmen in jeans, long sleeve shirts, boots, and brimmed hats. One of the men had an expansive grey beard and appeared much older than the other. As Ray and Dean approached the two men stopped talking and looked at the brothers.

"No tours on today," said the older man.

"We are not here for a tour," Ray said. "We are here to see someone about a curse."

The older man's name was John. He was an elder of the tribe and he listened intently as Dean relayed the events that led to his having the bone pointed and his ensuing illness. He described to him the young aboriginal man and pointed out the humpy where it took place.

"That was Sam," John said. "You must've upset him pretty bad."

"Can we talk to him please?" Ray asked. "Dean wants to apologise and ask him to undo the curse."

"He's not here - gone bush," John replied.

Dean hung his head in despair. "What can I do?" he pleaded.

"Well, you gonna die unless I help you." The old man paused to see the effect of his words. "Do you really mean it when you say you're sorry?"

"Yes of course. It was just a joke. I didn't mean any offence."

"You need to leave a token for Sam - to show you're serious," John said.

"Sure, money, how much do you think?" Dean asked.

"Doesn't have to be money - a token - your watch would be good," John said looking at the watch on Dean's wrist.

"Geez that's a \$400 dollar watch - Okay that's fine - no problem," Dean said as he slipped the watch off and handed it to John.

"Okay, I can get a message to Sam - to return. Then we will sing over the bone and undo the curse." John said.

"How will you get a message to him - smoke signals?" Dean asked.

"No, mobile phone," John replied with a puzzled look.

"How will I know that the curse has been lifted?" Dean asked timidly.

"You won't be dead," John said as if that was obvious.

The two brothers thanked John profusely before heading off in their vehicle. Dean was starting to feel better almost immediately.

John stood motionless and watched at the four-wheel drive disappeared in a swirl of dust.

"Sam, you can come out now," John called out in the native language. Sam appeared from the behind the nearby shed dressed in stockman's garb similar to John. "You pointed the bone at that white fella."

"Yeah, he was disrespectful and a smart arse," Sam said.

"He was sure he was gonna die," John said.

"Really, think he would know about that psychosomatic stuff," Sam said with a cheeky grin.

"I don't want you to do any more bone pointing. It can be dangerous to the simple white folk," John used his best authoritarian tone. "And where did you get the bone, by the way?"

Sam smiled "KFC."

The Yew Tree

The narrow gravel path crunched under his shoes. The brick piers on each side of the open gateway were cracked and partially covered by ivy. The graveyard stretched up and over a hill with a black pointed picket fence stretching around each side. The fence was adorned by sporadic patches of green ivy with the surrounding sharp spikes like a prison for the dead. Graves and tombstones were a maze of granite and marble separated by patches of lush grass and a few wildflowers. The morning sun provided an intricate patchwork of shadows with the gravel path winding its way through the grave sites up the slope. A stately evergreen yew tree spread its foliage like a loving angel at the top of the hill. It provided shade for most of the grave sites around the pinnacle. The yew tree was common in the English churchyards and was a symbol of the immortality of the soul. Andrew stopped at the entrance and considered how he would go about his search. It was common for Australian visitors to track their ancestors in graveyards around the British Isles and Andrew had done his research. This was his first trip to England and he was determined to connect with his family history. At thirty years old, he had reached the stage where ancestry became interesting. The burial register had confirmed that his great grandfather, on his father's side, John Spence, was buried in this graveyard. He could find nothing on the burial information of his great grandmother, Bronte Spence. When he had arrived he had tried to find the Vicar of the adjoining church, to get a lead on where exactly to look. Unfortunately, there was no sign of anyone.

Andrew decided to work up the left side of the path and then down the right. The leather satchel slung over his shoulder contained his wallet, water bottle, the important details of his research and notebook. He felt well prepared. This may take hours or he could get lucky. He walked expectantly along

the first row of graves. The graves were primarily single headstones nowhere near as grandiose as the monuments and tombs at the top. The common attribute for all was their age. There were no new grave sites - some were over two hundred and fifty years old. The weathering of the stone made some of the inscriptions difficult to read. Andrew ran his fingers over the cold stone of those too cracked or eroded to read as if trying to sense those whose bones lay beneath. He continued... peering with expectation at the inscriptions on each headstone as he passed.

Andrew was making slow progress - wondering how long the search would take when he noticed the lone figure. He was dressed in long grey trousers, long sleeved pale shirt buttoned at the neck, red neck scarf, brown waistcoat, peaked cloth cap, and work boots. Like a character from a Charles Dickens novel, he stood, back turned, on the opposite side of the path from Andrew. He was standing under the shade of the yew tree towards the crest of the hill. Andrew could see that he was stooped over, using a long-handled implement - a hoe, to dig around one of the graves. This was a piece of luck... someone who may know where to look for his great grandfather. Andrew headed directly across the slope, zig-zagging through headstones and monuments up towards the figure. Hearing Andrew approaching, the man turned and waited for Andrew to arrive, using the hoe as a leaning post.

"Hi," Andrew said, short of breath from the hurried approach.

"Wonder if you could help me? I'm looking for the grave site of my great grandfather," he asked.

"Well, you've come to the right man. I know everyone that's planted here," he said with a broad Midlands accent.

Andrew looked at the bearded face of an old man, as weathered as the gravestones. Judging by the dirt on his britches and under his fingernails, he was the church groundsman.

"What name are you looking for lad?" he asked.

"John Henry Spence," Andrew replied.

"I know that one very well," he said as he walked off towards the pathway. "It's up top," he added not looking back. Andrew followed him up the path and then off to the left under the spreading yew tree. It would have taken hours to find without help. The old man stopped directly in front of two raised ledger monuments. "This is him,"

The monuments had flat coffin covering slabs of stone raised above the surrounding turf. The two graves were surrounded by a short, knee-high rusted iron railing with an upright at each corner. In the shadows of the beautiful tree, Andrew couldn't imagine a more serene resting place. "Thank you so much, it would have taken me ages to find it," he said.

"That's ok," the old man replied, standing and leaning again on his hoe.

Andrew expected the old man would go back to his chores - he stayed, obviously curious. Andrew crouched, as he removed his notebook and pen from his satchel, to get a better look at the inscription on the first stone slab.

He read out the inscription as he wrote in the notebook. "In loving memory - John Jack Henry Spence - 1838 to 1879," Andrew stood looking at his notebook. "Jack must have been his nickname,"

"Yes, it was," the old man said.

Andrew turned to the old man with a puzzled gaze. "Do you know anything about him?"

"I do," he said. "There is a bit of a story here," he added.

Andrew smiled at the old man. He was excited by the prospect of finding any information about the ancestors. "Great, I'm eager to hear anything you know. This grave must be great grandmother," he said moving over to the second slab and bending down.

"No, it's not her," the old man said.

Andrew, peering at the inscription read it out loud. "Lily Ryan - 1843 to 1878 - together forever at last. So who is this?" he asked.

"I can tell you the story - the locals know it well," the old man hesitated, looked behind him, lay down his hoe and sat on a convenient gravestone. Andrew, notebook in hand, squatted in front of him. "Jack Spence was a farm owner's son. He married young, only nineteen. It was an arranged marriage with one of the other land owner's daughters. They had a son - Henry. The three of them lived on the farm with Jack's mum and dad. The problem was that Jack had feelings for another - the maid who worked at the farm. Her name was Lily Ryan."

Andrew's eyes widened, "Lily is buried here...what happened to my great grandmother, Bronte?"

"Now that is a mystery... as it was back then. Bronte and the baby boy Henry just disappeared from the farm one summer's day. They were not seen again, and everyone was of the mind that Jack had murdered them. So as to be with his true love...Lily."

"And did he - murder them?" Andrew asked.

"Well, Jack professed his innocence, insisting that they had left of their own free will. No evidence was found to prove otherwise," the old man said.

Andrew was scribbling furiously in his notebook. He looked up, "How did Lily get to be buried here with John...Jack Spence, did he marry her?"

"Oh no, he was already married to Bronte. Lily left the farm to avoid any gossip about her involvement with Jack. Sadly Lily drowned in the River Trent not far from here. The circumstances of her death were judged to have shown it was accidental. She was laid to rest here in this graveyard," the old man looked wistfully at Lily's monument.

Andrew stared intently at his notebook. "Lily was buried here in 1878 and Jack Spence...only one year later in 1879."

"Jack was distraught at the death of Lily. You see that long branch?" the old man asked, pointing up at a long horizontal solid branch of the yew tree. "Jack hanged himself from that branch. He couldn't bear to be without his beloved Lily."

"Oh God - that's tragic." Andrew was stunned.

"But they are together forever now." The old man said as his eyes glistened with the welling tears. He stood up, straightened his scarf, composed himself and looked directly at Andrew. "I have always known Jack didn't murder his wife and son, but you've confirmed it."

Andrew looked puzzled. "How did I do that?" he asked.

"Because you're here," he said. "Jack had one son, Henry. He must be your grandfather and the line continued. Bronte must have left the country with baby Henry."

"Yes, of course," Andrew replied with a smile.

"I'll be off now. Got work to do," the old man turned and shuffled away.

"Thank you so much for your help," Andrew called out to the retreating old man.

Andrew was delighted. This was more than he could have hoped for. He stood looking at his notes for a few seconds. He wanted him to stay longer but the old man seemed eager to get away. Andrew made his way back down the path to the front entrance. He noticed the Vicar at the front of the church and decided he should inform him that he had been searching in his Graveyard.

"Hello!" he called as he walked towards the Vicar.

The Vicar, who was sweeping the church entrance paving, looked up. "Hello!"

"I've just been in your graveyard looking for my ancestors," Andrew said.

"Hope you had some success," the Vicar replied.

"Yes, I was looking for my great grandfather, John Spence. Your groundsman helped me. He knew a lot about the story with Lily Ryan. What a tragic tale." Andrew said.

The Vicar looked at him blankly. "We haven't had a sexton - groundsman here for many years. I don't know who you may have been talking too."

"But you would know the story of John or Jack Spence hanging himself from the tree in the graveyard?" he asked with a concerned look.

"No, I'm afraid not. I've been here fifteen years and I've not heard of it," the Vicar replied. "It may have been before my time."

Andrew was bewildered. He turned to look back at the church graveyard. He was sure he could see a figure standing in the shadows under the yew tree.

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