

Real Wild Life

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Sam was already seated at Bills 14, a pumpkin muffin in front of her, when Cal arrived. She stood for him; they kissed each other on the cheek; they hugged briefly. The waiter, smiling and immaculate, was with them in seconds.

``I'll take a skim soy latté and a thousand dollar bet on Australia for Saturday please,`` said Cal.

``Sure,`` said the waiter. ``Do you want any cash out?``

``No thanks, but could I get a mobile phone with that?``

``No worries.``

``Oh,`` said Sam. ``Do you mind if I pay for my muffin with *my* mobile?``

``That's fine,`` said the waiter.

``I'll be paying on my ethernet account,`` said Cal.

``Absolutely,`` said the waiter, before skipping away.

``Sorry I'm late,`` said Cal as he sat down.

``Traffic was murder.``

``Use the T16?``

``No, the T38.``

``Deadly,`` said Sam.

``I know.``

``That was meant to relieve all the problems of the T37.``

``Hasn't happened.``

The coffee arrived and Cal sipped it as he programmed his new phone, which was the size of a small biscuit.

``It's cute,`` said Sam. ``Love the colour-scheme.``

``How's your muffin?`` asked Cal.

``Genetic,`` said Sam.

``Ummm.``

They drove through the T17 to Bankstown in thirteen minutes. There they parked underground before heading to the surface. The BBD - Bankstown Business District - greeted them with its one hundred apartment buildings and twenty-eight thousand inner-Bankstown residents.

``It's changed here,`` said Cal. ``It used to be more crowded.``

``People are moving out to Canberra,`` said Sam.

They walked through the carless malls towards a large green and blue building.

``You ready for this?`` asked Cal.

``Oh yeah,`` said Sam.

After the divorce they had a coffee in Bills 23. Cal also ordered an MG Tunnelbuster and gave the keys to Sam as a farewell present. She smiled at him.

“You were a good man,” she said.

“Thanks,” said Cal. “You were a good woman.”

“Seeing anyone?”

“Yeah, I’m getting married Wednesday to a guy named Luka.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks, it could be good. We met Saturday at Retro. He’s kind of kooky. Could last awhile.”

“Nice. I’m getting married next week to a guy named Jo.”

“Known him long?”

“Ages. Since, oh, last Tuesday.”

“Were we married then?”

“No... I guess I met him the same night I met you.”

“That’s funny,” said Cal.

As they took the MG down to Cal’s car in the huge underground BBD parking lot off the T17 Cal turned to Sam and asked, “Did you have many affairs while we were married?”

Sam thought for a moment. “Several,” she said.

“Oh. That’s cool. I thought it might have been lots.”

“Nah. You know me,” she said smiling at him, “I’m an old fashioned girl.”

They drove their separate cars to a hotel room in Ryde where they made sweaty passionate love before Cal drove back to work in Cabramatta and Sam went off to her offices at Goulburn.

At Cabramatta Cal threw himself into his work. Cal produced short films, like everyone else. He produced four short films by six that evening, entered them into a few festivals and decided to call it a day.

At the gym Cal sat in the sauna and thought about his marriage to Sam. They'd had a good one, he decided. He was actually kind of sad about the divorce. Perhaps he could have lasted a little longer with her. Why hadn't they given it another chance? Unconventional, sure, but hell, why not be unconventional once in a while?

These thoughts made him feel a little depressed and he decided he'd better eat something. He noticed that he'd lost a fair bit of weight since the divorce. Well, divorces can be stressful, he reasoned, although admittedly most of his other ones hadn't been.

He ate at Tsaumaki, the one at Lewisham. He sat at one of the long white-wood tables with a hundred or so other solo diners as little boats bearing pieces of Thai-influenced sushi whizzed around a long

moat in front of them. He picked some Tom Yum Tuna, some Salmon Choo Chee, some traditional eel. As always he regretted the eel. He drank two small bottles of sake, traded in his mobile phone for the next model, paid his electricity bill, traded some shares, drank another small bottle of sake and decided he needed a little something extra before he could turn in for the night.

He drove to the Surry Hills Gratification Sector using the T3 (once known as the Eastern Distributor, he observed to himself - what an unwieldy name!) The SHGS was savagely short on underground parking, and he ventured up to street level with heavy trepidation. As he AutoTrawled the six or eight streets that still allowed cars he watched a couple of dozen short films on CommuterTel and one of those old dinosaurs, a feature film, on the Nostalgia Channel. Just as it was ending he saw someone pulling out. My lucky night, he thought.

In Lancer's, one of the more upmarket franchises within the SHGS, he ordered a medium, and her name turned out to be Justine. She was pretty and came with a full complement of kinks. Cal had a little whipping, engaged in a bit of shrimping and went for some good old-fashioned felching, just for the heck of it.

Finally tired, he paid up, traded in his mobile phone for the latest model, traded a few shares on

the Dow, drove home on the T3 and went to bed.

When Cal awoke to the warm morning sun streaking through the automatic louvers of his high-altitude bedroom, he was surprised to find that he still felt a little down. Normally when he got divorced he was completely over it the following day. Instead he found himself thinking of Sam and... what was that word people used very occasionally... *missing* her a little bit. He looked at the other side of his bed. Yes, he thought. I do believe I'm missing her.

He thought she might pop out of his head while he drank coffee, ate sourdough toast and read NewsNet, but she didn't. She lingered there like a catchy tune. Even reading on NewsNet that a couple of the short films he'd submitted the night before had won major awards at their respective festivals didn't help. I can't believe this is happening, he thought. I can even remember her *face*.

As he drove to his office it occurred to him that maybe he should try to get away for a few hours, to clear the cobwebs, get a new sense of perspective. I need to get out of Sydney, he thought, that'll help. He could take the T11 to the Blue Mountains, check out the short film festival there - no, that was too much like work, he needed a vacation. He could always pop down to Canberra but that wasn't really getting

out of Sydney. He could go out to Dubbo or Yass or Inverell or any of those other Major Cities, but what was the difference between a Megalopolis and a Major City? He wanted to feel like he was on his own, spend a little quality time with himself, maybe with a tree or a lake or something. Where the hell could he find a place like that and still be back in time to have a productive afternoon?

Suddenly it came to him - Centennial Park. Oh, the absolute delicious irony of it! Right in the heart of the Megalopolis was the most expansive Green Area for thousands of kilometers. It had been even larger once, before Privatization, but it was still a place where one could sit under a tree, perhaps even alone. That sounded like the go. There was certain to be a short film festival or two playing there today but he'd make sure to avoid them.

He parked at an ÜberStation in Ultimo and caught a taxi to the park. In the taxi he watched *documentaries* rather than short films on TaxiTel and felt guilty but also a little cheeky and reckless, like a wagging schoolboy. He also caught a little porn and traded a few shares, but one couldn't avoid business entirely.

At the park's perimeter he discovered that most of the driver's facilities were down and that he might actually have to pay in *cash*. For a moment he had to stand there and recollect where he kept cash,

if he indeed did keep it. Then he remembered something about a wallet and in it some cash maybe, somewhere around his chest. He found it - an inside pocket, and look, yes, a wallet, and look, yes, cash! He gave a wad of fifties to the driver, shared a quick latté with him, then headed into the park.

The sun was shining and he could actually see a whole lot of sky, much more than one normally saw, and it was a deep and friendly blue. Cal took off his jacket and carried it over his shoulder. He waited for the rollerbladers to pull up at the lights before crossing the circular drive - no reason to risk his life just because he was on holiday! - and walked into the park proper. There were surprisingly few people. Sure, there were families on holiday, and scores of Forgottens, but really it was quite peaceful. He saw a couple of young boys flying a beautiful red kite; he saw a few people actually reading *books*. He found out from an electronic NewsBoard whereabouts in the park there were going to be short film festivals that day and plotted a route to the lake that avoided them.

Naturally, as he got closer to the lake, the people started thinning out, even the Forgottens (who feared all water like everyone else.) By the time he reached about a dozen meters from the water's edge he was alone. Actually, really, alone! Sure he could see people scattered around the kiosk up on the hill,

could hear their low hum and chatter, keeping a safe distance from the water. But he was on his own, on a sunny blue-skied day, in a Green Area. The sun was warming his face and his body. He closed his eyes. He felt relatively relaxed. He might even be able to start feeling good.

Then he heard it.

At first, of course, he couldn't believe his ears. Then he came to his senses and figured that it was part of a SoundScape for people's enjoyment - a sort of heritage thing, a trip down memory lane. Yes, that's all it was. He opened his eyes to look around for the speakers -

- and there it was. Really, truly. Not a hologram, either, no way.

A duck.

Quack!

Cal panicked. He didn't know what the appropriate response to a duck was. Were they dangerous? Why was this one being allowed to roam free? Weren't there rangers and hunters to take care of this sort of thing? Should I run? Or stand still? Or try to talk it down?

The duck seemed to be staring at Cal, probably sizing him up, preparing for a sneak attack. Cal elected to stand still. He kept his eyes on the creature, barely breathing.

Quack!

The duck shook its head, shook its body, waddled around a bit. It seemed not to be too concerned about chomping Cal. It seemed like it didn't even mind Cal being there. Cal was taking no chances, however. This could be a ruse, he thought, a ducky ploy.

But after a while he started to let his body relax. The duck really seemed not to give a damn about the invader. In fact, the duck seemed not to have too much of an agenda at all. As far as Cal could assess, the duck was either on holiday or a Forgotten, because it just seemed to wander around and quack. It seemed peaceful. It actually seemed to be *at peace*.

Cal's upper lip started to tremble. He couldn't help it. And then tears came to his eyes. *Tears?* He hadn't felt such a sensation since he was a child. And then they actually started to roll down his cheeks - tears! - and he felt the strangest feeling of his entire life - a combination of deep sadness and immense happiness, combined in total harmony, like the rice, fish and wasabi in a good spicy tuna roll. It was a good feeling, an intense feeling. And Cal suddenly realized what it was he had to do.

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his mobile phone. It wasn't the latest model (what an appallingly unprofessional taxi driver he'd had!) but it should still work, he hoped, as he scrolled through his stored phone numbers. He found the one he

wanted and hit the call button.

“Hello?” Sam answered. It was a shock to hear her voice after such a long time apart.

“Uh, Sam...”

“Who’s this?”

“This is Cal.”

“Cal! What a surprise! It’s so nice to hear your voice.”

“It is?”

“Sure it is.”

“It’s nice to hear yours too,” said Cal.

“What’s going on in your life?” asked Sam.

“I, um...”

“Yes Cal?”

“I just wanted to know... I’ve found something extraordinary, here in the park, and -”

“You’re in a park?”

“Yes, Centennial Park, and -”

“Are you taking a holiday?”

“Yes, just for the morning, and I’ve encountered a duck -”

“Oh my God. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine, the duck’s fine, we’re all fine, we’re actually sort of having a great time and just minding our own business really.”

“Is it huge?”

“No, it’s a tiny thing really. It’s very nice.”

“Wow. I can’t believe you’re hanging out with a

duck."

"Yeah, well, we've been together for a while now, and we seem quite comfy with each other."

"That's amazing."

"And I was wondering if maybe, if you're not too busy -"

"I've got three films to produce this afternoon."

"Right, yeah, but maybe if you wanted to squeeze in a trip out here at lunchtime or something, you know, it's nice here, it'd just be you, me and the duck -"

"What's this all about, Cal?"

"Um..."

"Cal?"

"Sam, I don't think I ever said this to you - I don't think I've ever said this to *anyone* - but it's something that I think I've realized..." He could barely speak, barely face up to the momentous nature of what he felt, of what he wanted to say.

Sam's tone was quiet, patient, hopefully expectant, perhaps excited, perhaps nervous. "What is it, Cal? What is it that you want to say?"

"I, uh..."

"Yes Cal?"

"I... *I think I like you, Sam.*"

"Oh Cal, oh my God, oh Cal," she said, and he could hear her bursting into tears. "Cal, oh Cal, oh

Cal... *I think I like you too.*''

After their chat Cal called Luka and called off their wedding. It was no great deal; Luka had met a woman named Mel and was kind of excited to marry her instead. Cal stood happily in the warm sun for a few more minutes. Then he tipped the duck a couple of fifties, traded some shares and his phone at the kiosk, and headed back up the hill towards the park's perimeter, a new man after a much needed holiday.