



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION  
2021

Highly Commended in the Open Division

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*She was fine*

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*She was fine*

As she stepped off the plane, her feet cushioned by the lush, green grass, her eyes scanning every detail, her ears pricked up, drawn to the intense sounds of the orchestral magnificence of the *Cosmopsaltria gestroei*, the local species of cicada, singing their little hearts out.

It was hot, bloody hot! The stickiness of the tropical climate only exacerbated by the incredible sting that had already begun on the back of her neck as she tried fruitlessly to cover her exposed skin with her sweat drenched rag for some sort of relief and looked to seek refuge in any available shade – there was none. All she could do was reapply her sunscreen and try to move more quickly in search of shelter.

She started the trek walking along the makeshift airstrip and headed towards the village. From the bottom it looked like a steep hill but by the time she huffed and puffed her way to the top, she asked herself “what the hell was I thinking?”. The steep inclines hadn’t even begun, and it was only the first day. She was not fine.

Hidden amongst the grass, weeds and masses of overgrowth high above the village, the bunkers from the war remain virtually untouched. Frozen in time with a history, rich in family connections and synonymous with a legacy, one she was proud to call her own.

She tried to imagine peering out to spy the enemy before the whizzing of their bullets would again undeservedly take another life.

Someone’s husband, a son, a father, a brother or a friend.

An unenviable task, one taken in their stride as the battle raged back and forth until the silence again took over.

The first night she cried herself to sleep. Her thoughts consumed her and with so much self-doubt, she wondered how she was ever going to make it through the next 9 days.

She was not fine.

After what felt like 10 minutes of broken slumber, she was woken with a jolt at 5am by a loud whistle being blown repeatedly and with a little too much enthusiasm. As she tried to unzip and exit the comfort of her warm sleeping bag, she envisaged shoving that whistle fair up his Khyber Pass. He was a passionate ex-Army Major, awarded the Military

Medal for bravery in action, a wealth of knowledge and someone she would definitely want on her side.

This trip was meant to be a pilgrimage, a chance to bond with her Dad as they had finally found something in common, a love of history and a chance to honour her late Grandfather, his father, together, but it would take another 2852 days or 7 years, 9 months and 22 days for her to finally have the courage to take the plunge. She was not fine.

The knock on her front door came as a surprise, given she was only awake as her 10 day-old first-born son had gone from zero to psycho in the space of 10 seconds and was screaming bloody murder at the top of his lungs for his 3am feed.

What came next was absolute heartbreak. She remembers opening the door, holding her newborn and looking into her mother's eyes.

She felt the blood drain from her face and her Uncle saying "take the baby, take the baby". She will never forget the look on her Mother's face coupled with those words she had replayed thousands of times over and over like a bad dream in her head.

"It's your Dad", she said. "He's dead." The words stung her like a hard slap across the face. Her life would never be the same.

As she fumbled her way through the next few months, almost robotically, she often thought about taking this trip and honouring her Dad and Grandad's memory in the way that they had talked about, but the demands of being a new mother and drowning in grief were fast taking their toll on her. She was not fine.

She was undeniably different now, and often viewed her life feeling like she was looking from the outside in. Her marriage suffered. Friends stopped calling, mostly because of how "they" felt uncomfortable and didn't know what to say. At times she didn't care, she could barely make it out of her pyjamas most days. She functioned on minimal sleep and drifted between grief and what she would later confirm to be postnatal depression.

The line was completely blurred, and she rejected whatever help was offered and told those who did bother to ask, "I'm fine". She was not.

The nausea hung around for the first few days and although she didn't feel hungry, she knew if she didn't eat, she wouldn't have the energy or strength to make it.

By midway through the second day, their fearless leader had pulled her aside and in true bloke fashion said, "you need to get your shit together, find whatever it is that bought you here and use it, or you will be going home". His words stung like the sunburn on the back of her neck. Her emotions were raw, but there was no way she was going to be

helicoptered out without completing this trek. She had told far too many people of her trip and like hell she was going to fail now.

She decided to channel all her energy and focus on her “why”. Every time her feet ached, she was tired or felt like giving up, she reminded herself of the fact that she had shelter, she had food and she didn’t have anyone shooting at her, although there were times that she felt that being shot would have been the easier option. She wasn’t doing it tough!

She encouraged those around her to challenge her and “suck it up princess” became her most favoured words of encouragement.

Each new day proved more challenging than the last, the laughter regarding her bringing a hot water bottle to keep her warm had subsided, being the inaugural winner of the “Dumb Shit Award” enabled her to then pass the baton to another, a worthy winner who dropped their camera down the full long drop, giving the award a whole new meaning.

Joe, her porter and new friend, decided to make a walking stick, just for her. It was hand-carved from a piece of wood he found along the way, it was complete with individual finger grips, a traditional pattern and the words Kokoda 2007 etched on it. He said, “this might help you on your journey”. It was beautiful beyond words, and she was so touched by his thoughtful gesture. It would have more of an impact than he will ever know.

They gathered in silence on the steps of the Isurava Memorial surrounded by darkness, all huddled together, shoulder to shoulder, each deep in their own thoughts.

As the first rays of light broke through the clouds across the ridge, it coincided with the soft melodic sounds of what can only be described as angels singing, her new local friends caressed her heart with each word.

As the sun began to rise and the fog lifted enough for her to take in the enormity of the battle that went on here, the magnitude of incredible bravery and human sacrifice, her eyes filled with tears as she read those four simple words on the pillars – COURAGE, SACRIFICE, ENDURANCE and MATESHIP – she was truly honoured to be in the presence of heroes.

As he looked at her with those big, blue, innocent eyes and said “Mummy, are you going to die in the jungle?” noooo, she laughed nervously whilst actually thinking, “oh god, I hope not”.

The thought of leaving her now 7-year-old behind, just as she had confirmed the news of her marriage ending, she was completely overwhelmed and unsure about what to do next.

She had waited so long to honour her promise, though felt completely pissed that her Dad had died and not honoured his end of the bargain. She knew she had to go, and

she knew it would be ok, but what she didn't know was just how much she needed this and how much it would change her life. She was not fine.

Although today would prove to be her toughest test yet, she had walked for fourteen hours. They had encountered an impassable section of the track where there had been a landside of mud. She bit her lip so hard she could taste the blood to try and hold back the tears as she was told she would have to double back and walk around, adding at least another three hours to her trek today.

Unwavering in her steely determination to finish what she started, she didn't utter a word but just kept putting one foot in front of the other, mud squelching underneath.

Breathing deeply in through her nose and out through her mouth, in through her nose and out through her mouth. Her body took over and did what it had to do. Like a well-oiled machine, functioning without much fuss, it just got on with it.

Her mind was clear, she couldn't allow those negative thoughts to creep in, it would have derailed her completely.

She continued to walk in silence, deep in thought about the demons she was fighting and the reality she would soon need to face. She was not fine.

Although she knew that with each passing day, she was edging ever closer to the end, there was no denying each incline was a rough, soul-destroying ritual that felt like some cruel kind of torture where there was actually no end to it at all.

Up – up – up - up and then you guessed it, up again. TWELVE HOURS A DAY!

She had to remind herself to stop, lift her head and look around. Take in the beauty, pause to reflect on those who had come before her, and sometimes only allowing for one foot in front of the other, she pressed on. Her porter walking barefoot on the side of the mountain, one wrong step could have been catastrophic, but he was both experienced and completely confident in what he was doing.

He never wavered, not once. He was like one of those mountain goats, that walk up the ledges with the greatest of ease.

Some days they talked, about the track, their families, and where the best place to pee was.

Every day “how much further?” she'd ask, he would answer, “not too far”, but she knew he was being polite and that he would never actually tell her how far it was, probably because he knew he might end up having to carry her, which would be a disaster for both of them. She wondered about his life, his family, the simplicity of it and whether he was satisfied. Did he know any different, what were his dreams, his aspirations and goals for

the future? He seemed completely content and happy that he was able to provide for his family, as there were not a lot of job prospects for him.

She focussed on being able to get to the next village, where she was usually last or second last in every day – which was fine, as long as she continued to arrive. Most of the locals, the porters and the guides were softly spoken and quite shy. So, when they had about three days to go, she was curious as to why they had become increasingly chatty, full of laughter and what seemed to be, up to mischief. She asked why, was it because they were excited to be going home to their families or having a few days rest?

No, as it turns out they were excited at the prospect of whether she made it to camp every day, as they had been placing bets with each other as to how many days she would last. Given it was getting close to the end, the stakes were particularly high. She didn't know whether to be offended or inspired. She chose the latter. It may have been the extra push she needed to keep her going. She was not fine.

She took comfort in the fact that as each day passed, she continued to show strength and felt what she had first doubted within herself started to dim a little and was pushed further to the back of her mind.

As she ascended the final incline, she could once again hear those angelic voices singing in the distance, "Welcome Home".

She had come so far, the emotion started to spill from her, gently at first with tears streaming down her flushed, sweaty cheeks but the closer she got, the more intense it became, her body shaking uncontrollably as she reached the final peak. As she lifted her head for the last time, she saw they had formed a guard of honour.

As she drew in one last breath and exhaled, the porters, guides, cooks and leaders, some actual descendants of the original Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, showed such pride, care and genuine concern for her, just as they had done all those years ago.

As she took her final steps towards the arch, she placed her foot firmly on the grass underneath, and finally succumbed to what had been building for so long, she released a sigh that sounded like an injured animal crying out in pain. She was not fine.

Everyone who had already finished, stood clapping her and willing her to keep going.

She had ridden this roller coaster all the way to the end, and it was now time for her to get off. It was beyond anything she'd ever dreamed of.

His little face lit up as he ran towards her, “Mummy, Mummy you did it, you walked in the jungle and now you’re home,” he screamed.

She smothered his face with kisses and hugged him tighter than she ever had before. Her mother beamed with pride and mouthed the words, you did it.

Little did she realise that this haunted jungle filled with the spirits of the past would not only educate and terrify her, but appease her need for family connection.

She had walked in the footsteps of greatness, succeeded where others hadn’t, triumphed when others thought she wouldn’t, honoured her family and those who had sacrificed so much so that she may enjoy her freedom, it was now up to her to take control.

They still tell the story of the girl who bought her hot water bottle, the girl who was not expected to finish, the girl who kept pushing when others had given up, the girl who continued no matter what was thrown at her.

She smiled for the first time in a long time. She was fine.