

The Journey Home

John felt his head lurch suddenly forward as his whiskery chin jolted against his chest. He woke with a start, snorting salt and gasping for breath. He could feel his legs kicking air, his arms dangling over the side of the boat as it bucked in the Gulf of Papua. Had the hospital boat been hit? Who had dragged him from his hospital bed? He knew they had evacuated the ship when the Jap bombers came in. His left leg was crushed, useless; he was told they had to leave him. Now he was in a life boat, miles from the bay where they'd launched out of Port Moresby. He couldn't remember how he'd got into the boat, couldn't remember the bombs hitting the hospital ship or the flames ripping through the ward or the screams and bellows from the sailors.

'Sister Maria, is that you? Captain? Where are we? Were we hit?' he croaked.

The boat kept on its trajectory, up, down, up, down. He couldn't sit still. Perhaps he was drowning? 'Bloody hell, help me, I can't hold on any longer!' he cried, his eyes still shut, not wanting to see the eternalness of the sea coming up to meet him, not wanting to think about his life ending like this. He could see the moon so close to him it was almost like a street light, its brightness within touching distance. The boat creaked, as if in pain, as if it wanted to collapse around him.

'Come on Dad, it's alright. We'll get you home.'

'Yeah Dad,' a boy interrupted, his voice bored, resigned. 'We're almost home, just half a mile. Keep it down, would ya! I don't want the neighbours gawking at us.'

His fingers found cold metal. He moved his further down and rubbed up against worn fabric. He made himself open his eyes a little and saw two kids pushing him along a road. Lights shone above him in the summer night sky. He could hear traffic hiss past just a few feet away. A pram. He was in little Alan's pram. His legs were bundled unceremoniously over the ends, his head bounced every time they hit a crack in the footpath. The wheels screeched. And the kids were his, fetching him from the Moorabbin pub – wasn't that where he'd been? He could hardly remember the night beyond playing a couple of swing tunes, shouting a few ex-servicemen a lager or two and arguing if Jim Laker was the best bowler in the world with a testy Englishman.

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'Thanks you two, just try to be more...just get me home.' He wanted to spew. Instead he held it in, trying to ignore the prams exaggerated suspension thanks to its darned huge wheels, and at the same time knowing he should at least be staggering home past the red brick fences of Union Street instead of being pushed in a baby pram by his two bloody kids. He closed his eyes tight, amazed at his life. He thought it would never change, would always be there, just as beer always flowed in the Prince, as the sea lapped against the Brighton baths, as willow hit leather, as the piano keys hit note, after note, after note.

It was difficult to say what he was best at – cricket or piano. He lost interest in anything he couldn't immediately perfect, but both came naturally to him. He made a decent quid playing with his jazz band *The Kit Kat Syncaptors* at Saturday night dances and the Gardenvale Dance Hall. Long, smoky nights of endless tunes, going on until the crowd left the halls damp with sweat and spilled drinks and exuberance. Still he could have kept playing – Fats Waller and Winifred Atwell and requests for songs he studiously adlibbed or plain ignored. Then there was the drive from home at Montrose up to the Healesville Grand. Afternoons in the winter, snow in the hills beyond and his dislike of the girls who wanted to stand at his piano, staring at his dancing, elegant fingers, cheapening the music. It paid the bills, much to the amazed chagrin of his brother, a doctor, who often said it'd be half his luck to earn that much.

Then the cricket. Captain of the Richmond First XI, talk of playing for the Vics that never did eventuate, standing in at slip and ordering his field around Jolimont like a regimental commander, coaxing his bowlers into one last steam train of an over under the Melbourne sun. The smells of cigarettes mixed with cracked leather and the rich aroma of cut grass. Even better, standing out on the pitch in his green felt First XI cap, driving a ball to the boundary on the up, knowing life couldn't get better than a century stand and a pot in the club rooms after, and a long Saturday night on the ivories to follow.

He was right. It didn't get any better. Not even nearly.

'Are we almost home kids?' John sighed. The disgust at the thought of having to be wheeled home in a kid's pram gave way to the comfort of the mattress and pillow at his head and the warm summer night. He could get used to this. Perhaps they could just park

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him in the garage when they got home – he was sure he'd have a better night sleep than constricted by the sheets in the house.

Then he remembered his hat. The brown felt Fedora. Had he left it on the bar? He couldn't quite tell if it was on his head. And if it was, was it crushed, wedged into the back of the pram? 'My hat kids, where is it? Did you get my hat?' He was panicky now. The thought of one of those drunks staggering out with the hat, laughing at they hurled it beer-stained onto the train tracks made him gag.

There wasn't a man in the Moorabbin pub that could wear the Fedora as well as he could. Even on the turps he cut a sharp figure. The creases of his pants were ironed as if by a razor, his shirts spotless, and he went through quantities of Kiwi shoe polish that made his wife wonder if he was eating the stuff. He'd been teased as a Dandy before the war by his bandmates, but not one of them, not Syd, nor Norman or Paul had the girls' eyes like he did. He believed dressing well no matter what, regardless of what pub or dancehall he played at, what cricket ground he caught the tram to or how dirty the Gossards factory made his shirts. Even now, with his trousers frayed and the shirt collars as thin as his brother Max at the end of the war, he still made sure he looked good.

His left leg hurt as hit the pram hard, making him forget the hat. 'Watch what you're doing boys,' John grimaced. His mouth now tasted like Omo powder, rough and soapy and gritty. If he was up for it he'd nip into the garage when he got home and sneak in some of the sherry he'd hidden behind the Studebaker. The car was covered in a tarpaulin since he'd tried to overtake a pattering Holden on a corner coming home from the Brighton baths, his mind a slight fug, his anger growing at the time spent in the hot car with his family. The car had taken the corner too tightly, its wheels buckled and the car had shot right up the embankment, its undercarriage screaming as the bumper fell off, never to be found again.

'Mum, we want you to drive!' one of the kids had yelled as the Studebaker came to an inglorious halt in the middle of a clump of acacias. 'You're a much better driver than Dad!'

'Shut up youse lots,' he'd said as he forced the door unsuccessfully open. It stuck like a cutting machine and he'd had to endure a bullocking from his wife. She'd even called him William.

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A girl laughed as the pram made its way off the busy road and turned left into a quieter suburban street. He could hear a sprinkler and a dog in the front yard they passed by. 'Dad, it's me and Russ,' she said. 'Stewie is off playing and Mum is trying to get Alan to sleep so she said I had to go.'

'Ah, you're a great girl Glenny,' John said. He kept his eyes shut now they were close to home. He felt worn out and ashamed and unpleasantly hazy.

He slipped back to New Guinea, as he often did when alcohol was on his breath, as he did home in bed with Joyce when he'd spend the early morning fighting the Japs and Joyce would wake up and tell him she'd got in the left hand side of the bed and woken up on the right.

'You must have killed half a dozen of them last night,' she'd say.

He'd joined the 39th Battalion and after training in the northern suburbs of Melbourne he'd found himself halfway between Port Moresby and the Kokoda Trail for a final spurt of rushed activity before joining the front line.

He found himself in a trench seven foot deep and six foot wide staring down the barrel of a Lewis gun, scanning the sky for Japanese fighter bombers screaming their way towards Moresby. Tall, wrangly and a good shot, he was happy enough as a machine gunner spotting planes if it meant avoiding hell like the poor buggers at Rabaul. He'd read about it in the Moresby Army News Sheet. The poor infantry boys left to fend for themselves, the bayoneting in the jungle and the prisoners of war sent off to join his brother in Burma or Thailand.

'You wouldn't catch me on a Jap prison boat going to Siam,' his fellow gunner Macca told him. 'I've heard how they treat ya. John, I'm telling ya - better of dying in the trench than getting captured by them bastards.'

John would write home about the Jap blighters, the unrelenting rain and the powerful sun that'd burn a man's skin right off his shoulders, and how he'd happily give up the entire rotten land to the Japs for a dozen dim sims or a carton of Champions. He promised his wife Joyce he'd bring home a python as a pet for his boy, that he was safe enough but the food was awful and he couldn't make it stay down.

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Life became a routine of waiting and watching with two hours on and four hours off, staring into the horizon or beyond the jungle foliage for the attack towards Port Moresby that everyone expected. He spent his hours off talking to a Yank platoon that was stationed in walking distance nearby. They were happy enough with the Australian soldiers, but felt aggrieved when they were in Brisbane that the locals didn't think much of them and charged them double for cigarettes and beer.

'We're protecting your ass up here,' one Corporal told him as they shared a cigarette in the humidity of early evening. 'I'd rather be home in Savannah, that's for sure. Same weather, but less chance of a bullet between the eyes.'

'Melbourne doesn't have this sort of heat,' John told him. 'It sucks your breath away. You can't even walk without sweating. We have it hot, but I've got sweat dripping down me undies.'

'I won't give you an invite to Savannah then champ,' grinned the Corporal.

'Never much of a traveller. Won't be after this anyway,' John replied. 'I'm staying home and never leaving Melbourne again.'

He could take the broken sleep and the late nights, but the tension began to get to him. He felt the anger and anxiety play at him like two footballers tugging and pulling at each other's jumpers at the start of a big match. In some ways standing in the trenches was worse than walking the track. The imagination started at him, and he'd see the Jap blighters swarming over the horizon, their rifles and bayonets stuck out aiming right at his heart, their bodies impervious to the chugging of the Lewis' bullets, their screams bouncing around the Papua valley.

He was sleeping behind the lines when there was news that a brief fire fight had broken out near his trench line. A few hours later he stood staring at a dead Japanese shot three times through the abdomen and chest. The soldier was pathetic; mousy and thin, his near moustache too big for his drawn facial features and his uniform splattered with moss and mud and guts.

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‘Must have been lost,’ Macca said to him. ‘Just the one of ‘em, yet he comes screaming across the valley like a banshee. Fair near shitted meself, but managed to get a few shots off.’

Looking at the pathetic body twisted at right angles, John knew the Japanese would never reach Australia. They wouldn’t make the distance. But it’d be a hell of a fight to stop them trying.

By late 1943 John was back in Port Moresby as a Vickers gunner on a troop carrier. He was walking in front of his tank when, like a hunting dog, it sprang forward on top of him. Only the quick intervention of a captain who pulled him back stopped the thing from devouring him. Instead his leg was crushed into the mud beneath the caterpillar tracks.

‘Lucky for you it’s the wet season,’ said the camp doctor. ‘You’ve broken your leg, but if the ground was any harder you wouldn’t have a leg left at all.’

He was moved to a hospital ship anchored permanently in the Port Moresby harbour. The break refused to heal, the doctor telling him his malnourished body wasn’t doing him any favours. The weeks went by, then the months, and five months later he was still lying in the hospital bed and feeling his mind going to jelly. It was startled to reality one morning when the air raid siren screamed. An entire squadron of Japanese fighter planes had broken through and headed towards the boat. The call came to abandon ship. John knew what that meant. Only able bodied patients would get out. He’d be staying in bed.

The top ward was soon deserted save for a poor soldier from Yass across the way whose legs had been shattered by a mortar. John felt his teeth dig in to his bottom lip and draw blood as the sirens kept wailing and the unmistakable drone of low flying aeroplanes came overhead. He looked at the boy from Yass who continued to read an army newspaper. John admired his nonchalance, was even jealous of it, until he saw one hand clenching the side of the bed so tightly the knuckles had turned the colour of whitewash.

Anti-aircraft fire echoed from the port, and John thought he heard the distinct splash of a torpedo hit the water close to the ship, but within minutes there was silence. The Japs had gone. When the ward sister walked in an hour later with a big toothy smile and asked the boys if they’d missed her, John had almost sunk right through the thin mattress.

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He'd come home with permanent pain in his twisted leg and a bigger pain in his head. His mates tried their best. The train journeys into Richmond stopped and he played for the Montrose Seconds, his mates letting him bat as they ran for him, but he couldn't take fielding and once the first three kids were walking he soon gave up as they sold the house and moved into the city where the music could pay the bills.

He never quite found the solace and pleasure in music that he once had. Winter months were spent practising in the lounge room, the kids sneaking a look behind the glass sliding door, the cigarette smoke dancing up into the lighting, the band trying to coax him into solos. His mother had been so proud when he was young. After three years his piano teacher said she couldn't teach him anymore. What would his mother say now that the gigs had dried up and the money was tight and he couldn't manage the hours at the dance halls anymore?

Then he cut his hand badly on the factory floor at Gossards, the lingerie pattern he was cutting falling onto the ground soaked in his blood, and he was out of work for a good few months. The visits to the pub increased until one night he threatened the family with an empty rifle he kept in the garage along with the sherry and the car.

Now life was a bit of a bugger.

Lying in the pram as they reached the red brick home, the smell of roses mixed with the summer smells of salty tarmac, John knew he'd be back at Bundoora or Larundel soon enough to sort himself out. This was the third time on the plonk this week. He'd become mouthy and explosive. Joyce would get her bush lawyer airs on and give him an earful and he'd long for the quiet of Bundoora where he'd spend the weeks playing piano for patients and visitors or just himself, and he'd start feeling fair dinkum again.

'We'll carry you in Dad,' said the boy. 'Reckon you can get up the steps if we help you?'

'I reckon I can,' he said, before falling on his arse. The front light went on. There was angry murmurs from inside. The kids groaned. And he still didn't have his hat.

Cricket or piano? It was a fair question. He reckoned he'd give it some more thought in the morning.