

“I am,” muttered the groggy Lizard. “I’m not suckin’ up to no cop. I’m no gutless bloody street worker.”

I stared at him. His naked chest was covered in cheap tattoos and scars from fights and years of pathetic diet and all he knew was how to inflict more damage on himself. Thanks a lot, Lizard, I thought, spit on the only one who’s out to help you.

But it was precisely that interjection which seemed to calm the sergeant. He shoved us down the corridor, back to the cells and silently, angrily, pushed us inside.

“I’m on duty all night, Marcoota. You just better pray that my ulcer doesn’t play up before the next shift.”

The gods must have ensured the alka seltzer supply at the front desk. Lizard and I passed a sleepless but visit-free night.

Around 6 a.m. they brought us breakfast, a hamburger from the Taylor Square cafe. Lizard scoffed mine down. He looked dreadful but put on a defiant front as the sergeant led us through the back exit and pushed us, one by one, into the laneway.

The serg was aiming me a kick at my pants when Lizard, who was in front of me, turned and yelled. “You pigs think you’re so tough. I’ve had sour apples that made me crooker than what you did!”

I was nonplussed. I stood stock still and looked back at the sergeant. He was grinning at Lizard’s sprinting back. His big, genuine smile disappeared the second my face came into his view.

“The little bastard’s worth ten of us,” he sighed.

MARY ANNE BAARTZ

HE GREW WINGS

This was always Manfred’s best time; a clear night, the stars reflected in little ripples and eddies on the water. It was now, for just ten minutes or so, that Manfred would forget the aches in his groin and the burning in his gut. It was just as well for the bottle was empty, drained, and his possie under the Story Bridge might have been damp, and would be soon enough. But for the moment he was lying on velvet and nothing hurt. Manfred closed his eyes and let the crisp air of the satin morning soothe his lungs and let the tiny splashes and dips of the water cello their way through his crippled brain.

Suddenly his eyelids sprang back and the music warped. Something big and nasty lapped at the bank. He saw a gigantic swirl, the flickering, twisting tail of some fearsome bunyip. Manfred scrunched himself as close to the muddy, slimy pillar as possible and rubbed his burning gut. He looked at the empty metho bottle and cursed the magic that had run out through its cracks.

The bunyip appeared head first out of the water. Manfred could see it was scaly and scratched and there was some sort of motley green and red viscous stuff spreading across its horrible face.

“Garn, git,” Manfred yelled, shuddering at the sight. The bunyip smiled. Manfred could see its teeth were cracked and its face was pushed in, some bone showing through the ripped skin.

“Don’t be afraid, old man,” the bunyip said. Manfred’s eyes popped. He swiped repeatedly at his brow and spat at the ground in an attempt to forestay his fear.

“The fing talks, the fing talks,” Manfred shrieked, scrambling for his life up the bank. There were lights on in the pub. The cops would be soon making their rounds. They’d found him here the other night, maybe they’d find him again. Suddenly Manfred yearned for the fluorescents and scratchy blankets of the ‘Gabba’s lock-up. The cops would chase the monster away. But it was no use. Manfred’s legs wobbled and collapsed under him. The river swelled and ricocheted off its banks, playing marbles with itself. The traffic hissed, snarled and snorted above, even at this time of the morning. Manfred screamed as the creature touched his arm.

“There’s no need to be afraid of me. Of course I talk. I’m a person, not a thing. I won’t hurt you,” it said, the two holes where its eyes should be, singeing Manfred’s own sockets. Manfred had curled himself by the pillar, making his hands binoculars over his eyes. He mumbled and gibbered and cried. The bunyip continued speaking. “I should be dead, you know.” There was a sing-song quality in the monster’s voice. Manfred’s arm was numb from the thing’s touch, but the voice was soothing. “I jumped off the Story Bridge. Did you see me?” It looked sideways at Manfred and was surprised when Manfred suddenly hooted with laughter, picked up the empty bottle and smashed it against the pillar.

“Ya ole gin,” Manfred giggled and slurred at the splinters of glass. The creature sat up when he heard Manfred abuse the shattered bottle. “Ya’d do that ta me, rob me, me bes time. Ya’d go an plant a bunyip.”

“I’m no bunyip. I didn’t crawl out of that bottle.” Manfred shrank back and cringed against the pillar at the Caliban’s words. He narrowed his eyes and peered through the slits between his fingers. He searched for his fat tongue.

“You jus visin, then?” Manfred’s hope was dying.

“Visiting?” the bunyip sighed and looked away, as if Manfred hadn’t spoken. “I’m glad it didn’t work. I daresay I’ve sustained a few injuries,” a bony, jagged hand, the knuckles grazed, ran gently over the intruder’s face. It laughed softly, wispily, like the wind. In fact, Manfred thought it was the wind and shivered. “A freak chance, I s’pose. I might go down in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the only would-be suicide to escape death off the Story Bridge.”

Manfred squinted through the haze. His heart was drumming a jungle tempo: “Ya mean, yah ain’t no boogy?” he jabbered. There was that sneaky, breathy laugh again.

“Of course I’m not a boogy!”

“But yah horrible,” Manfred glared at the slithers of glass. “This bish done care. Sometimes she jus done care.” He turned back to the hideous oddity at his elbow. “Ya mean,” the words were difficult. His tongue was swollen and sore and his brain was flaky. “Ya mean ya jus a crazy bum who jumped off the brish?”

The bunyip man wriggled further up the bank: “I’m not crazy, old man. I had a good reason for jumping,” he frowned, “it’s just I can’t think what it was.”

As this was said Manfred felt a huge sigh lift out of his body and his best time returned. As the moan died away, the best time flooded in. Nothing ached. His head no longer thumped, the velvet was soft under his body and the music pleased his senses. Now that he could see better, he realised it was no bunyip that had surfaced out of his bottle, but an ordinary man, fairly young, maybe thirty. And his face wasn’t battered at all. That had been a trick of the light. It was a nice face. Manfred liked looking at it.

“You a lucky fella,” Manfred shook his head wisely. “I’ve seen plenty a corpses washed up ere. You hardly got a scratch.” His tongue was magically slender and clean, fitting around the words like a master.

“Must’ve been the way I landed. They reckon if you’re totally relaxed, you can fall twenty stories onto concrete without hurting yourself.”

Manfred was listening, but from a semi-trance. Every second he expected the grizzle in his gut and the murderous drumming to return, but when it didn’t and the three a.m. darkness sent out nothing but silk and music, he found himself relaxing. Something more was happening. The fibres in his brain, mauled and shredded by a thousand years of ‘gloom’ were uncurling and springing together. Manfred felt his sense returning. This was good, but the best thing was that nothing hurt. He

couldn't remember ever feeling so alive and in tune. The moment billowed around him in waves and he found himself smiling.

"This is a crazy time," Manfred whispered. The visitor glanced at Manfred and was amazed. The gibbering, tortured sack of broken crockery had metamorphosed into a man. Manfred looked good. His black eyes were shiny and bright. His dark skin had smoothed out over his bones, losing the splotches and ropes and his lips had lost the translucence and swelling the metho never failed to infuse.

"What are you doing here? I wouldn't have thought this a very good place." The man poked his nose at the sickly stench of stale water that licked the bank.

"Oh," Manfred raised an eyebrow, "this is the best. They can't get down here too good. They can't drive their paddy wagon close enough. Too risky. They come, but not often."

It was Manfred's turn to survey the man. He noticed the man's clothes were wet and there were streaks of mud across his face, but he wasn't shivering, his teeth weren't chattering and his eyes, now that Manfred could see properly, weren't holes at all, but a clear, vibrant blue. And now that Manfred was no longer afraid, he noticed the cut of the stranger's clothes.

"Why would a prosperous lookin fellah like you wanna do imself in?" If Manfred's brain had still been in tatters, he would never have asked such a question. Amongst him and his kind, there was a tacit approval of a fella's right of way. But his reason was back and imposed on his sensivity. He was curious, for the first time since he could remember.

The stranger looked at his hands and for a moment his eyes dulled. When at last he raised his eyes to Manfred, he smiled.

"You know, for the life of me, I can't remember. Silly, hey? I remember standing on the girder and the wonderful feeling of independence and freedom as I let go. The falling was like flying. I s'pose it took less than a second but it seemed like eternity and I was an eagle, swooping, swerving. I don't remember hitting the water or clawing up the bank. But, here I am, so I must've." His eyes misted up and he smiled again. "Whatever the reason, I'm glad of it for the feeling the flying gave me."

Manfred was visibly moved by the man's tone. He'd always wanted to jump off the Story Bridge, but had never been game. He'd always wanted to fly like a bird, a kitehawk. He had flown sometimes, after a rigorous dousing with his magic lady in the bottle, but never the way this man described it.

"I'd like to fly like a kitehawk," Manfred said quietly.

The stranger sat very still and contemplated Manfred. He let his eyes wander over the wiry, grey flecked hair, the crumpled, grimy St. Vinnie's coat, the twine holding up the stained trousers, the chewed rubber thongs. He caught the intelligence in Manfred's dark eyes, intelligence that hadn't been there when he'd first arrived on the bank.

"You mean it? You'd really like to fly?" The words were more than a challenge. They stung Manfred inside with the force of a swarm of bees.

"Yes, I mean it."

"All right, then," the man stood up and offered Manfred his hand. Manfred let the man pull him up. "It's best to go now before the dawn traffic."

Manfred let the man lead him up the bank, through the spaces in the bushes, beyond the lights of the pub to the bridge. Hand in hand, the tall young man and the withered old one, walked along the footpath until they came to the centre.

"I'll climb up first and help you, okay?" The man paused as a Semi screamed past. He was caught in the truck's headlights and ducked. The driver must have seen him. He let out his breath as the truck growled by, not even slowing down. He crawled up onto the railing and helped Manfred do the same. Cars were coming more thickly and the sky was lightening. "We'll have to hurry if we don't want to be stopped," the man whispered into Manfred's ear. Manfred nodded. But no one seemed to notice. No car slowed.

They stood side by side, closer than lovers, their fingers laced, thighs touching. And together, they jumped.

Manfred scrunched his eyes tightly. He was a panther springing and expected to hit the water and shatter like the glass of his metho bottle. But he didn't hit the water. He was no panther. He was a kitehawk, just as the man said and together, the two birds swooped and swerved and spread their wings. The man was right. Manfred realised he'd never before known a best time. This was the best time. He was free and powerful.

They flew from bank to bank, over the bows and sterns of the vessels rocking in the water, under the bridge, over the bridge. Manfred noticed a commotion in his old possie and flew down to see. The cops had found his place under the bridge. There were a few of them flashing lights around. He could see stretchers. Someone was bundling the broken body of a suicide onto one and the crumpled body of an old bum onto the other. Some words were exchanged.

“Hey, Dave, isn’t this Manfred, that old black fella we flushed outta here the other night?” The second constable looked down into the wizened face of the dead man.

“I think you’re right. Poor old bugger.” He took the other end of the stretcher and straightened up.

A flutter over the policemen’s heads caught their attention and they were just in time to wonder at the incongruity of a dashing eagle and a sleek and mighty kitehawk flying into the dawn over the Story Bridge.

CHRIS LENNINGS

THE RECLINING BUDDHA

I

You should visit early in the morning
(ignore the glossy brochures
advertising “comfortable afternoon coach trips
and a slice of authentic Asian life”
that take you past the spitting hawkers
who sell all manner of goods and daughters
by their temple’s footsteps).
In the morning
the monks are praying
their bare feet gliding on dust and discarded wrappings
mumbling over the various names of God
and igniting the spicy braziers
that drive away the mosquitoes and other demons:
when early morning the air is still cool
and not yet be lumbered with the hot fetid smells of today’s
smoked duck, fish, rotten port and dried seaweed.

The gold glitters on the Gautama.
He reclines, one hand raised as if plucking a rose