
JANE DOWLING

CHURCHILL

The four sat at the Yacht Club with the ocean in front of them. The ocean was retreating with the tide, though they all knew it was also rising. Climate change was not a cheering topic, least of all when the day's work was done and the Yacht Club was open.

"It's like there's an elephant sitting on the island pushing it down below the water level," said Genevieve as she lit a cigarette, as old nurses are wont to do.

"Remember the time there actually was an elephant..."

"How could that be? interrupted Brooke.

This was the Pacific. Not Africa or India. Not the natural habitat of the pachyderm. But they got like this, the older women, when they were together. Memories were like code. You had to be in the know to decipher anything. Dr Heidi Martin, visiting on her way home to Australia, didn't help. She'd worked on the island in the early 'gos when she and Genevieve and Queenie were as young as Brooke was now. Young and idealistic. Now they sat down, ordered alcohol and fell upon the stories like famished prisoners.

Only Queenie was locally born. Storytelling infected them all. Shooting the breeze, a far less violent thing than the verb implied. It had evolved over the centuries. When the sun went down voices would shift shadows outside the cookhouse, stories would light a spark in the darkness to rival the cooking fire.

No need for a warming fire this close to the equator. The atoll sat just below the imaginary line that circumnavigators had drawn around the globe because they thought it important. The islanders had learnt to survive, more than that, to live fully, on tiny pebbles of land thrown into the biggest pond on the planet long before anyone set out from Europe. Survive and tell stories to make sense of it.

They drank Tequila Sunrises, the four women. The red of the grenadine bleeding into the tinned orange juice. Heidi persuaded them: "At least it's Vitamin C." The sunset across the exposed reef didn't last long. It was as brief as the blush of a bride before the lights went out. Then they could no longer see the water. Only it's inky sheen. They could no longer see the land, the thin strip between ocean and lagoon. Only feel the certainty of it under their feet. An illusion. What with the sea level rising? Or to turn it on its head as Genevieve said: like an elephant was pushing the island down below the water level.

Churchill the elephant hadn't asked to come to the island, nor, it could hardly be said, had he decided to run away to the circus. Yet, there he was that day, swaying amongst the palms on the parcel of land in front of the island's hospital.

"When was this?" interrupted Brooke again. She was an Australian Volunteer. Here to help. Here to learn. "Which bit of the past?"

The past was pretty easy to work out in the islands. It was as clearly defined as the textbook image of geological strata, or better, of an archaeological dig. Each colonial master left debris for a unique time profile.

Queenie, however, took things more personally and told the past by her children. How old they were when events took place, how old they were now - a quick bit of arithmetic. They were small, wide-eyed, hugely impressed, when the circus came to the island. Now they were big, blasé and living in Auckland. "It must have been after we got our Independence," she told Brooke, who she'd already learnt kept asking questions till she got a good answer. ('and why were you called Queenie, most other women your age have names from the Bible?' "Well it has nothing to do with the Queen of Sheba! You won't find any Delilahs on the island either.")

"Whose brilliant idea was it to tour a circus through the islands anyway?" sighed Genevieve. She was tired, perpetually tired. She'd come out as an Australian Volunteer when the world was a different place, married the son of a chief and was now distracted with worry about the impending birth of her first grandchild. They all knew there'd be no islands left here to sit on telling stories by the time the baby was Genevieve's age.

"There were lions I remember," said Heidi thinking about the circus that came to town. She'd grown up in Africa, with missionary parents, and wondered if she was seeing in her memory the circus lions or the safari lions, muddy and dribbling, sleeping along tree branches and disinclined to tricks of any kind.

"Or were they leopards?" Queenie asked, her own slideshow of memory faltering.

"Both?"

"And monkeys of course, and the performing dogs."

There was silence then. It wasn't the image of the terriers in tutus dancing and driving peddle cars. It was the children on the island in the following weeks, vainly coaxing their mongrel mutts into tighrope walking, two-legged accidents waiting to happen.

"And an elephant. Five tonnes would you say?"

Heidi remembered being persuaded to go and see the show under the Big Top despite having

no children as reason or excuse. It was a night out. Nothing came to the island, so Animal Rights squeamishness was mollified by the lure of the new. It was a hot night, so heavy that time itself staggered a little. The Ring Master swirled. His assistant shimmered. No one knew how good they were at the disappearing trick yet.

The Ring Master popped off his top hat and put his head in a lion's mouth after goading it into skin-tingling roars. The spangled lady led out a Shetland pony ridden by a jockey-monkey. A tall man began to breathe and guzzle fire, finished by swallowing a sword. The injunction to *not try this at home* was in English and only half understood by the crowd. There were no swords on a Pacific Island, Heidi hoped, not wanting to be the one called into the hospital in the early hours to staunch the blood. Who would have remembered the Japanese trophies tucked away since the Americans swept that brand of coloniser out during the second world war?

Then in plodded Churchill the elephant. Heidi couldn't remember him doing much. He didn't have to. The smell in the tent was pretty high at the end of the show, Heidi remembered. Queenie didn't remember that, she remembered how excited her children were milling around the adults' legs beneath a night sky studded with more sequins of light than the Ring Master's assistant. They were breathless with enthusiasm. It was the best thing ever.

The circus people hadn't had quite the temerity to claim Barnum & Bailey's aphorism, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, whoever they were. And no one seemed to know who they were after the midnight flit.

Somewhere along the way the future hadn't looked so bright for the one-ring circus. Debts were left unpaid from Fiji to Tarawa. And now on the island the collateral of one menagerie of African wildlife left their creditors breathing fire.

Genevieve lit another cigarette. Pushed the strands of her long hair back, cupped her hands against the breeze. The cigarette sizzled as the tobacco caught. The sound of comfort. Precursor to the first deep inhalation. She knew the biology, the studies, the undeniable conclusions but she smoked anyway. (In the same way the world ignored the scientific studies and the sea level rising and spewed out carbon anyway.) She imagined the smoke curling down, languorous, fumigating the lungs. A cleansing image. When she was most stressed, not tonight at drinks with good friends, but when running the hospital got too much, she sucked and sucked, like a pumping bellows, forcing the smoke down like an apiarist trying to subdue the agitated bees.

She was the one to protest when the whole Churchill thing got out of hand.

"It was absurd," Queenie was saying.

"Not an elephant in the sitting room we all tried to ignore – it was out in front of the hospital

getting skinnier every day." No-one got Heidi's allusions, it was a very English saying, but it became clear that Churchill was as hard to ignore as he was to shift.

It was a tragedy in slow motion. Soon enough a private zoo on the mainland had agreed to provide a home for the animals – the community on the island only had to get them to Oregon. Two by two they were loaded onto the next flight and the modern day ark was airborne. But no amount of Creationist-style fiddling with dimensions of this particular ark was going to get an elephant into the hold.

Meanwhile the shipping company waved unpaid circus bills about like a pompom girl and the ship left the dock without any of the animals it had carried to the island. Churchill was stranded. The next ship, even if its owner was more forgiving, wasn't due for months.

Five-tonne elephants eat over two hundred kilograms of food every day. The helplessly overcrowded island couldn't, with all the best will in the world, provide that sort of carrying capacity. The country already imported most of its own food, the taro pits built over, rice now the staple. With the food supply as precarious as it was, the overstay of an elephant was likely to tip the balance. Individuals had a go at helping. Ex-pats uprooted banana trees from their gardens which Churchill treated as hors d'oeuvres. The hospital handed over scraps. Individuals acting alone were never enough in the face of any plight. So a couple of Australian businessmen organised a fundraising dinner.

"Absurd alright," fumed (rather than fumigated) Genevieve. "The ethics of feeding an elephant when children were dying of malnutrition."

Heidi hung her head and took another long suck of tequila and canned orange flavour. She'd been persuaded to attend. Even though she acknowledged the lack of fundraising dinners to feed starving babies. There were raffles and an auction. The proceeds somehow covered the importation of fodder. Nevertheless, Churchill stood tethered against the picture postcard view of the lagoon and grew steadily thinner.

A cyclone delayed the next ship. Churchill's skin cling-wrapped his bones. A mist of stoic distress filmed his eyes. Heidi looked away when she drove to work.

Heidi, when she had flown in that week, though a lot had changed since the country had gained independence from Britain. Buildings are so obvious. Solid and three dimensional even if they are Lego-sized from a plane. The town had expanded down the atoll, spreading from island to island. (Up in the air, she'd pushed away the simile: spread like a disease). Population had been an issue for decades. They had to be housed somewhere. Shiny, headachy roofs stretched way beyond the airstrip, which still acted as a water reservoir. Water was also a problem. The rosary chain of problems. With feeding the population hanging there at the end.

Then Heidi landed and discovered not much had actually changed. The same problems. But

also the same good friends.

An order of sashimi arrived at the table. With soy sauce and tart wasabi. Heidi forked a sliver of the fish. "You don't know how lucky you are," she said around the feathers of fish flesh.

Then she realised her mistake. In the muted light of the yacht club she could make out the features of Genevieve and Queenie who knew exactly how lucky they were despite the litany of woes. Brooke was beginning to guess. And it wasn't just the fresh tuna every day. They had a home. It was home.

The women couldn't help themselves and often got onto talking about the sea levels rising. This latest problem would, quite literally, wash all the others away. These strips of land they called home had always been low to the ocean; there wasn't much leeway. The world's carbon footprint was turning into a giant Pythonesque foot smashing down on the lot.

"Imagine the plans to evacuate everyone. Getting Churchill on the ship was, well, plain sailing in comparison..."

"Is this a real story or an allegory?" asked Brooke, suddenly suspicious. She'd been told too many stories in the last few months that turned out to be educational as well as entertaining. When she squinted into the coloured globes bobbing above their heads, she could see that from the island world's point of view, the West was the elephant. The uninvited guest, gobbling up everything – or at the very least, more than its fair share of the world's resources.

"No, it really happened. Honest," the others said, in three slightly different versions of this affirmation.

Perhaps the story had lost some of its original definition with time and in the telling and retelling. It was a bit fuzzy and hazy around the edges like the last photograph on a roll. Which younger people wouldn't understand because everything was digital and instant now. A constant stream of photographs leave no room for memory.

They'd worried how to feed Churchill; how to feed all the children; how to make the ocean compensate for all the problems on land. But it all seemed a little academic now.

"There won't be any food problems to worry about when the sea rises," said Queenie after the plate was cleaned.

And they waited, cocooned in eau-de-mosquito coil, for another round of Tequila Sunrises.

