*Kristen Weiss*

# THE WIND AS MY COMPASS

On a warm and breezy tropical May afternoon, I am riding in an eight-seater twin engine plane on my way to Iama Island in the heart of Torres Strait. Below me, the shallow sea is an opaque turquoise dotted with white caps. Every so often, the torpedo shape of a dugong breaks the surface. Then the round dome of a turtle's shell with thin flippers jutting out, paddling along with the current.

I received the call two weeks ago from Sam, the Iama Land and Sea Ranger.

"I remember you saying back at that university workshop that you liked making 'dem doco films,'" he said over the phone. It was more than a year since we last met in Townsville. "I kept telling 'dem boys' — (the other Islander Rangers) — "I kept telling 'dem that here's this girl offering to make films for our dugong and turtle management program, and we always talking bout raising awareness in our communities and educating people. Why don't we get 'dis girl to help?"

"Where do I sign?" I responded, my heart racing at the unexpected opportunity.

Fifteen days later I am on my way to Iama. As the little plane rattles along over pockets of foamy white clouds and long, winding reef flats, the reality of the project weighs upon me. How will people in a remote Indigenous community react to a young white female visiting their island to film them and their land? And what about Sam, my "island chaperone"? What would it be like working with a Traditional Owner of the community, a young male at that? I had no supervisor to hide behind on this trip. No-one else to speak for me or make my decisions.

The pilot steers the plane in a semi-circle as we begin our descent. I can see the entire island, small enough that you could walk across it in the leisurely span of an hour. On one side of the runway, a single dirt road leads to a cluster of square tin-roofed buildings nestled between a hill and the shoreline. On the other side of the runway is another road leading to a large playing field and an oversized mobile phone tower, dead-ending at a cluster of rocks on the opposite shore. The rest of the island is covered in mangroves, tidal mudflats, and pockets of hibiscus and coconut palms. One last dip and we touch down on the runway. There's no going back now.

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We are all, for better or worse, an artifact of our ancestry, a product of the culture into which we are born. My life emerged out of a deep history of

imperialism, and colonialism, and is partly defined by the political and social connotations alluded to by these ominous terms. Trickling through my veins are fragments of various northern European lineages — Danish, Russian, German, Irish — though no single heritage is particularly discernible among my features. So although on the exterior I am undeniably fair skinned and light eyed, my internal compass, the one that should guide me "home," connect me to my familial roots, has been obscured. At times the powerful pulse for adventure and conquering the unknown surges within my blood; other times, I shrink from the world unsure of my place.

My dad comes from a Jewish background. My mom Christian. Yet religion was all but absent in our home. My only understanding of religion growing up was the expectation of gifts on Christmas, playing dreidel on Chanukah, or the scavenger hunts, dyed eggs, and chocolate bunnies of Easter. My dad never expressed a hint of spirituality, while my mom, though I know she believes in God and has strong moral principles influenced by her church-going Lutheran childhood, always kept them entirely to herself. Her spirituality thus remained an enigma to me, except the few bits and pieces I grasped.

"I don't understand Baptists," she said to me once. "They make God out to be so mean and vengeful. Why would God want to be mean?" When she moved to California and met my dad, with his bright red hair and pale freckled skin, she assumed he was Irish, like her. She never would have guessed he was a Jew, because in fact she had never met a Jewish person before in her life. For my mom who was raised in a sheltered Cleveland USA suburb, Judaism was as dead as Latin, existing only as stories in the First Testament.

Growing up without a religion can be both a blessing and a burden. I grew up agnostic, enjoying the few times I accompanied friends to church or temple services. Judiasm especially drew me in with its rich symbolism and organic connections between past and present. Even food, from the intricately braided Challah bread to the humble unleavened matzoh cracker, symbolized an important event in Jewish history. Christian services always seemed a bit more awkward with their stifling hymns and tangled preaching, followed by store-bought cake and circles of gossip. I was never drawn in fully by any religious doctrine, but became engrossed in the sense of community each faith inspired, intrigued by the internal politics inherent to each, awed by the mythical and historical origins of our consciousness. But I always felt the outsider, looking in on content groups of people, so apparently sure of their place and understanding of this world. Such willing acceptance was foreign to me as a child. It still is now.

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Mr Louis radiated the self-importance I would expect in an Indigenous elder. He is one of the first I had ever met. His true age was hard to place; indeed his large, rotund body hid his real age. He could add or erase 10 years from his face at will, just by changing his expression. He seemed to do this consciously, to perpetuate a sense of timelessness about himself. Whenever he spoke, he articulated each word as if formulating it for the first time. Pauses were used for emphasis, like he was pronouncing a sermon. His accent was more proper than any English-speaking person I knew, with no hint of the pidgin I was accustomed to hearing Indigenous people speak.

When I met Mr Louis, I introduced myself out of courtesy. I was delighted when he took the time to sit down with me to discuss my research on marine conservation, and provide his perspectives on Indigenous relationships with sea country.

On the last day, he motioned for me to approach him.

"I really look forward to speaking with you again."

He looked off into the trees.

"There is so much to teach you about our culture, our connection to our land. I'm glad you want to learn about such things."

He motioned with his hand. "When I look at these trees, I see the story behind their origin. When I see that bird up there on that branch, I know that bird. You see?"

I didn't quite, but I wanted to. I was impressed with his spiritual connection to the land, and his willingness to share it. He spoke in a formal, resonating tone absent in most modern conversation, like he was a spirit from the past. It was at once daunting and intriguing. I started to feel lightheaded, almost swooning as we stood beneath that tree. He handed me a slip of paper with his email written on it.

"I'll hear from you soon then."

The tone suggested a subtle command rather than a request. I was flattered that he would take the time to speak to me and listen to me, and I eagerly accepted the paper.

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My dad had always been distant, emotionally awkward. I've never known what it feels like to have his arms wrap me in a hug, or to hear the words: "I love you' pass through his lips. He often surprised me with gifts, like expensive mobile phones, or a new car for my 16th birthday, as if to prove the love he could never speak. As his daughter, I forgave him his weakness, but I could never understand how my mom, who had such an affectionate soul, could live with such an impassive man. I can't remember a single time that that I'd seen them hold hands or share a kiss. I sensed that my parents had been unhappy for years. Yet they clung to their life together, perhaps out of convenience, or familiarity. It was my dad who finally asked for a divorce after 25 years of marriage. I found out that he had been seeing another woman for sometime. The divorce tore my mom apart. While my dad gallivanted around the world with his new fling, she was left behind to clean up the pieces of their shattered life — selling the house, packing away belongings, settling bills. I observed it all from a regrettable distance, as my childhood sense of home and family was, in a few short months, washed away for good in a tide of disenchantment.

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"And what do we call this connection I speak of?" Mr Louis was asking in an authoritative tone. We were driving through town to the family barbeque he had invited me to.

I was silent for a moment. Self-conscious to speak the Aboriginal word he had taught me the day before.

"Mullah?" I answered tentatively.

"Ah, say it again," he demanded, shifting back in his seat.

"Mullah." I said with faked confidence.

"One more time." He licked his lips as if in anticipation of the word.

I said it again, trying to sound sure of my pronunciation. I felt like a child being coaxed to speak in front of their class.

"You are starting to get the hang of it," he responded, seemingly satisfied. He put the car in drive and we headed toward a suburb where some of his family members were hosting a barbeque.

Mullah, he had explained yesterday, meant "honey" in his language. He used the term metaphorically to mean "the sweetness of life," which he described as

the experiences, feelings, and spiritual connections that make life worth living. "Mullah could be taking a road trip up the coast of California, or sitting on a beach meditating on the surf, or anything that fulfils your sense of meaning," he had said, and it made sense at the time.

When we hit a red light along the main road, Mr Louis pointed to a plot of land on the corner. "That's Aboriginal owned land," he pronounced. "They should have sold it years ago, when they were offered millions of dollars for it. There is nothing sacred there, no reason to keep it."

Indeed, the plot was simply a field, scattered with dry brush and a few eucalyptus trees dotted across the several acre property. It was surrounded by suburban neighbourhoods and strip malls. The only building I could make out on the property itself was an abandoned lodge, covered in graffiti.

I wondered if maybe the land was a symbol of pride for those who owned it, giving them a sense of original ownership which translated into power against the whitefellah city that had sprung up around it. I nodded and remained quiet. I was still looking out of the window when I felt a quick tap on my arm followed by the tracing of a circle — it was Mr Louis's finger. The suddenness of it made me flinch.

"Aboriginal magic," Mr Louis answered in reply to my puzzled look. For an instant I thought he was joking. It reminded me of the 'cootie shots' we used to give each other playfully as children. One look at his serious expression made me suppress my tentative smile. I asked meekly what the magic was for.

"It is to protect you," he answered, matter-of-factly, as if performing magic spells was a daily routine for him. Even though my Western science trained brain officially refused to believe in sorcery, another, deeper corner of my mind couldn't help but feel apprehension at being the subject of magical manipulation.

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I read a book during my undergraduate years called *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*. Supposedly based on the real life experiences of the author, the book focuses on an unusual teacher-student relationship between a wise old man (nick-named Socrates) and a young college student who has yet to find meaning in his life. The old man, an eccentric gas station attendant, challenges the student to complete rigorous mental and physical exercises, tests him with philosophical questions and riddles, and basically dictates his life for a period of years. He ends up teaching the student crucial lessons about peace, about spirituality, and about sense of self. I suppose the book is meant to show the reader that in order

to find peace and meaning in your own life, you must let go of your culturally-ingrained inhibitions in order to find true wisdom. Anyone who reads the story inevitably wishes that they, too, had been adopted by some unimposing sage who opens their eyes to the meaning of life. I was no exception.

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"Do you know why I chose you?" Mr Louis continued as we turned off the main road into a neighbourhood of old Queenslander houses. He eased the car to a stop at the end of a cul-de-sac, pulling it up over the curb onto a dirt and grass covered bank overlooking Ross River. Apparently, we weren't going straight to the barbeque; I started to feel uneasy. I realized he was asking me another question.

"No. Why?"

He repeated emphatically, stressing each word.

"I am asking you, do you know why I chose to approach you that day?"

I started to feel that he expected me to behave like a student eager to soak up the knowledge of life, as if he was a true-life Socrates. I was a shadow desperately trying to crawl out of the darkness and into the light.

"Because . . . you felt a connection with me?" I repeated his earlier words.

"Yes, that's right." By this time, he eased the car to a stop at the end of a cul-de-sac, pulling it up over the curb onto a grass covered bank overlooking Ross River.

"And what do we call that connection?" he coaxed.

"Mullah," I uttered.

Despite myself, I was already wary of Mr Louis's attempts to tease out these answers. By now the sun had nearly set. The sky continued to darken as our lesson continued within the car. Mr Louis had the air conditioner turned on full blast. I huddled in my seat, shivering. I was only slightly reassured by the fact that now and then people passed us by to access a bridge crossing the river; people walking their dogs, jogging, pushing baby carriages. Although we were only separated by thin panes of glass, I felt as if I had been transported to another realm. That these figures passing by were not real, just one-dimensional images moving along a backlit tapestry. Or perhaps it was I that was not real. I looked down at my hands, and felt almost translucent. What was I doing here?

"See all these people?" Mr Louis nodded toward the passersby. "Their lights are dim." He tapped his head. "They are going nowhere, have no clue what they are doing, what their life is about. They do not understand. You can be intelligent, but still not have the 'light'." A wallaby appeared from behind a nearby willow tree and hopped across the grass in front of our car, and then vanished. "You have this light," he continued mystically. "I recognised it in you, and you in me. Do you see? Do you understand what I mean?"

I tried to choose my words carefully, but knew that I would have trouble expressing myself clearly. I didn't know how to respond to this man any longer, whether I should respond any longer. But I did.

"I'd like to think, well, that I am capable of understanding the complexities of life, but also the, you know, the simple things that give us meaning and satisfaction." I stammered.

He sat silently, so I continued: "I know there is more to life than work and school, than getting my degree and making money. I need more than that."

It was the first time I had spoken in awhile. I thought my voice sounded small and hollow as it bounced against the walls of the car. Fewer and fewer people walked past us, but those that did shot us incredulous sidelong glances. The daylight was nearly gone by this point; I could barely make out the silhouette of treetops and the faint reflections of street lamps from the river below.

Mr Louis said, "Give me your hand."

Every vein in my body wanted to resist this man's power, though I couldn't tell whether this was pure stubbornness, or glimmers of my own prudent intuition. As if compelled by some force, I lifted my hand toward him. He clasped both his around it.

"You're hands are so cold," he sighed. "You must learn to warm up to me."

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Recently, I visited my hometown in California for the first time in two years. My parents' divorce had been finalised, and my mom now lived in a small apartment filled with remnants of our past life, fragments of memories that seemed out of place now. I was sorting through old photos one day when I came across a picture of myself as a baby, held by my mom who was wearing a fancy dress and with her hair all done up. "What's this from?" I asked.

My mom picked up the photo and her brow wrinkled in an attempt to recall the day. "Ah," she finally concluded, "This is after the ceremony."

My eyes narrowed. "Ceremony?"

"Yes. . ." She hesitated, casting her eyes down. "That's when I had you baptized."

"What?" My throat tightened. "You never told me I was baptized!"

My mom sheepishly explained that she had done it secretly, without telling my father or anyone else save her own parents. The idea shook me to the core — I started to wonder what else I don't know about myself, how I had been shaped before my memory could hold fast to such experiences. Despite the purely symbolic nature of the ceremony, the act of being baptized fundamentally labels a person. I had always assumed that I was in the 'not baptized category', thus giving me a pass to spiritual self-exploration that couldn't be restrained by the antiquated rituals of a bureaucratized congregation. Was I now to believe that I, a heretic by all conventional standards, have a spot reserved for me in some eternal paradise by virtue of some priest 25 years ago dousing me with rose scented tap water?

Only then did I notice the watery pools in the corner of my mom's eyes. It signalled to me for the first time in my life that beneath her assured, calm exterior lay a much more fragile spirit, who secretly clung to her faith as the only steadfast in her life. Instead of making my typical wisecrack ("thanks mom, it's nice to finally know I can get into heaven"), I didn't say a word. Instead, I wrapped my arms around her and gave a squeeze that said I understood why she baptized me, why she didn't tell my father, perhaps even why she never told me until that day. It was one thing that could not be undone, one thing she could keep sacred no matter what else changed around her.

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Sam is waiting for me at the airstrip when I land.

"Yawol Kristen, how you been?"

He grasps my hand to shake it, and gives me a formal hug.

He looks the same as he did when I first met him the previous year. He wears his hair in thick tawny brown dreadlocks that bounce around his shoulders even when his body is still. His dark golden skin reflects a mixed ethnic background, and although he appears fit, the slight bulge under his t-shirt hints at his weak spot for beer. Like Mr Louis, his exact age is hard to place. But unlike Mr Louis,

he is unimposing, carefree even. Yet he has a vast knowledge of his land, of the fisheries business, and of the government policies affecting both, which I'd seen him express at the workshop. He must be in his mid-thirties, although his jittery energy and obstinacy against authority (which I'd also witnessed) reminds me more of an adolescent.

"I'm doing great Sam. Very excited to be here."

I smile graciously as he loads my bags into a beat up white truck.

Sam hops in to the driver's seat so I slide into the passenger side, and we make our way down the sandy road. We pass a large, colourful sign that reads "Welcome to Iama," with a hammerhead shark painted on the right, and a brown whap (spear) on the left. I barely have time to fasten my seatbelt when we pull up to a quaint white and blue painted guesthouse across the street from the edge of the airstrip, and Sam turns off the engine.

"Here's where you will be staying," Sam explains as we hop out. I laugh, realizing that although everything on the island is in walking distance to everything else, each house has at least one car parked in the drive way.

I drop off my things and we continue down the road another hundred yards, pulling up to a ragged house on stilts facing the church. It looks like it hasn't been painted in years, the sun bleached wood rotting away at the edges and the yard strewn with discarded oilcans and engine parts.

"This is my home," Sam declares as he points at the place. I try not to gape. We mount the stairs (carefully avoiding the broken one in the middle), and Sam explains in an apologetic tone that he's been away crayfishing for several weeks. The inside is an extension of the exterior. The same weatherbeaten wood floor throughout, cardboard boxes of tinned food in the kitchen, and a meagre scattering of chairs and couches with ripped cushions. From the front room I can see part way into the bedroom in the back, empty save for a bedroll and another cardboard box. None of the windows has shades or curtains. I wonder why Sam, who is a traditional owner of this land, settles for such a modest house, so empty and battered.

"A total bachelor pad, I know," Sam mutters.

Definitely a male's place, I think, reminiscent of a boy's tree house.

He grabs a hat sitting on the kitchen counter, and then we continue our tour, not bothering to lock the door behind us. We walk down a narrow street that ends at the community boat ramp. Beside it is a picturesque wooden wharf

built out over the half-moon shaped lagoon in front of town. Half a dozen dinghies are tied up to the wharf's pillars, and crayfish pots bob in the shallow water a few feet beyond. We walk out along the wooden pathway to the last pillars, where we have a full view of the town on our left, and the open ocean with distant islands on our right. The azure water directly below is clear enough to reveal a community of colourful fish darting about between a few larger fish and meandering nurse sharks. Red and blue spotted crabs peak out from among the cracks in the wood when they think no one is looking. Families sit calmly along the wharf and on nearby rock walls fishing with hand lines, buckets of fish heads and bread dough beside them for bait.

Sam and I stand facing the ocean, mostly silent, and watch the sun sink lower and lower until it melts into the horizon, leaving behind a streak of faint stars bathed in shades of orange and purple. I can hear a reggae beat somewhere in the distance. Some children laugh. A boat engine hums. A soft breeze plays with my hair. I take a deep breath, realizing that I hadn't thought about school, work, or anything else outside the present moment since I had arrived. All my worries have dissipated. I look around me, and it seems as if everyone else, from small child to grizzled elder, is in the same peaceful state of mind, satisfied to spend their afternoon lounging beside the sea, perhaps collecting a few small fish for dinner. I sigh deeply, taking in the scene before the sky goes dark.

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"Do you know that I have visited you?" I stared blankly at Mr Louis, not understanding his meaning. "Your spirit can leave the body, you know, and mine has come to visit you."

He goes on to describe how his spirit had watched over me several times, analysing me, protecting me. From what, I had no idea. All I could register were the goose bumps spreading across the nape of my neck. My mind wandered to ridiculous childhood speculations about whether spirits of dead people walked among us. I felt like I had been violated, yet I still grappled with whether or not I truly believed what Mr Louis was telling me.

He didn't acknowledge my awkward silence. He was looking off into the distance, lost in reflection.

"I can still see what you were wearing on that day we first met. I can smell you. Taste you."

I sneaked my left hand closer to the car door handle, hoping I would have the courage to pull it if the situation turned dangerous. The confines of the car seemed to be shrinking all around me, closing in on me. I understood that

Mr Louis often talked metaphorically, but I also realized that he was a virulent middle-aged male alone in a car with a 25-year old female. I felt like I should be able to get myself out of the situation, but for the life of me was powerless to do so. I chanted silent prayers and hoped that I was indeed reading too much into this man's intentions.

"Do you feel Mullah toward me?" He asked, in a much quieter voice than his typical oratory boom. It was even more intimidating. I stared at him, fronting a confused expression to evade answering. He tried again: "I feel Mullah toward you. Do you feel Mullah toward me?"

No, I thought. I don't feel anything except frightened. But I was equally scared to defy him by responding in the negative.

"Yes," I squeaked out. His domineering presence seemed to force me into stating the answers he wanted to hear. I knew he could sense my hesitance, but hoped he would take it as shyness and nothing more. I felt like I was trapped inside a cage with a tiger. The second he sensed my fear, he would pounce. If I kept my calm, I would pull through unscathed.

"Alright." He seemed satisfied. "Then will you dance for me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I would like you to dance for me. All Aboriginal people dance. Do you know why I want you to dance for me?" I stuttered out some response about how it can reveal aspects of one's character that couldn't be expressed through words.

"Exactly. And do you know how Aboriginal women dance?" I shrugged my shoulders. "Without clothes." He looked at me, reading my response to this. I raised my eyebrows and wrapped my arms tighter around myself.

"Your mind went in the gutter, didn't it?" Where else was it supposed to go?

"Listen, why do you think Aboriginal women dance in the nude?"

"So they can be uninhibited?" I mumble, immediately regretting I had said anything at all.

"That is exactly right," nodded Mr Louis. "In order for you to find your mullah, you must release your inhibitions. Your only problem is that you cling to a culture that forces you to restrain yourself. That culture is flawed. You will get nowhere if you do not expand your mind beyond it. So, will you dance for me?"

"We will see," I lied.

"The reason you are here is to expand your mind. So you have to trust me."

I didn't respond. I stared straight ahead, and Mr Louis sat silently as well. In the darkness, a distant street light flickered on and off, on and off. I knew I would never dance for this man willingly. Finally, Mr Louis let out a raspy breath and started up the car engine. I too breathed out in relief as he put the car in reverse and pulled onto the street. Our conversation had ended.

We stopped by his family's home, but by that time everyone had eaten. I pretended to receive a text from my boyfriend, and fake texted him back to say that I would be home soon. Like a dog being dragged to the vet, the last thing I wanted to do was to get back in that car. I fervently hoped my little texting ploy would encourage Mr Louis not to make any more detours.

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"Do Torres Strait Islanders have any legends about the constellations?" I ask, flopping down on a yellow padded armchair in Sam's house. We had stayed on the wharf until dark, then walked back to his place to crack open on a bottle of wine he had found in one of his boxes.

"Funny you should ask," Sam answers, and disappears for a moment to the back room. When he returns, he has something in his hand. He sets it next to me. It's an entire book about Torres Strait Islanders' connection to the stars and the mythology related to the constellations.

"That's how our ancestors navigated from island to island," Sam says, sitting down on the couch across from me. "They told stories they saw in the stars, stories that led 'dem home. A lot of us can still use notin' but stars to get around the sea at night."

As I flip through the book, I notice that Sam is fiddling with one of the floorboards next to the couch. In a few moments he pulls the board up and lifts out a plastic bag with some green dried bits in the bottom. His friend Robert removes a tall glass bong from behind his chair and whips out a lighter.

Robert takes a hit and then passes the bong to Sam. Through the haze I notice a cylindrical wooden sculpture hiding beside the couch, and cross the room to explore.

"That's a traditional drum," Sam says. "My uncle made it."

"Do you ever play it?" I ask as I lift it carefully for a closer look. Beautiful carved faces and oceanic designs cover the hollowed out instrument.

"Yea, I play 'dem for ceremonies and stuff like that. We do a lot of dancing."

I look around and realise that Sam's place has lots of these little cultural emblems scattered throughout. It wasn't as empty as I had first assumed. He shows me another carving hung on one of the walls, this one of a great hammerhead. "My family totem," he explains. He reaches for a box sitting on a small corner stand, opens the lid. Inside is a carved hammerhead figurine connected to a leather necklace, made by another family member. Sam has lots of little treasures tucked away in boxes or buried under stacks of mail on the floor.

I look around again and see past the cardboard boxes and stained cushions. I begin to see that way of life for Sam has nothing to do with a nice house, new furniture or a big screen. It's pride in one's culture, and people. It's having the freedom to live off the land (and sea), or to develop it if the community so desires. The freedom to wear multiple hats, to be both commercial fisherman and traditional hunter. To possess sacred knowledge and customs but listen to hip hop and play on the local footie team. Freedom, in other words, to develop one's own sense of meaning in a contemporary world forever growing upward and outward, without ripping out the roots of the past.

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I blamed myself for putting a man such as Mr Louis on such a high pedestal. In the end, blame, though, is not a useful form of catharsis. The more painful experiences in life, for better or worse, meld each of us into complex, fragile, and yet resilient beings. I was unwilling to join the occult in the blind hope of being handed 'meaning' on a silver platter in exchange for all of my accumulated ethics and morals. Somewhere within me my internal compass led me a year later to Iama. By this time I had lived in Australia for over two years, and finally began to understand what it means to be connected to place, to culture, and to oneself. I realised that it is the relationship we develop with ourselves that keeps us steady, and is the most important of all.

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"People say that this lodge was built on land with bad spirits," Sam says nonchalantly as I swing open the gate to the guesthouse.

"What do you mean?" I ask, stopping in my tracks.

"Weird things have happened in this place. The last guy who stayed in your room had seizures. Blood comin' from his mouth. Had to be flown off the island."

"Why are you telling me this?" I moan. Despite my scientific background, I make no qualms about my susceptibility to ghost stories. "I'm the only guest staying here tonight!" I whine as Sam laughs. "There's no way I can sleep now."

"Aw, you'll be fine girl," he laughs. I shake my head, tentatively unlocking the front door. Sam seems to sense my hesitation, so he offers to sleep in the common room. He says it's a good excuse to take advantage of the brand new air conditioning and comfy couch. I breathe out in relief, hoping whatever spirits may be lurking around will be appeased by his presence.

There is no tension. No awkwardness although we are alone in the house together. I feel safe with Sam around. He acts like my big brother who will protect me from bullies (or vengeful ghosts). He sits unassumingly on the leather couch propping a pillow beneath his head. We agree to wake just before sunrise so we can use the morning high tide to get over the fringing reefs to Sassie island, where we will look for nesting turtles. I retreat to my room and crawl into bed, leaving on a desk lamp in the corner. Even with Sam in the next room, I can't bring myself to turn off the lights.

At 4:45am the alarm on my mobile shocks me out of dream-filled sleep. I pull myself out of bed to see if Sam is awake. From the snoring I get my answer.

"Sam?" I whisper. Pause. Again: "Charrrrles, it's morning." No response. I decide to try a different tactic. I enter the kitchen, flip on the light, and start making breakfast. I ruffle the cereal package and peak around the corner back at Sam. He has turned over and started snoring again. I bang some bowls and spoons around. Still nothing. I marvel at his sleeping abilities, feeling regretful at having to wake him. It takes me another twenty minutes until he finally rolls onto his back and realizes that I keep calling his name.

"Morning already?" he gurgles scratching his head, which makes me laugh. We drowsily munch on cereal, wash it down with tea, then stroll down to the wharf beneath the last twinkling stars of dawn.

Sam decides to take me to a nearby island, Mukar, to show me turtle nesting sites. Robert comes along for the ride. As we pull up to the island, the swells subside and we enter a cove protected by fringing reef, where we pull the boat up onto the beach. I follow Sam up the steep slope of sand until he pauses at the top. He turns toward the centre of the island and begins speaking softly, half in English and half in "broken," the Islander's version of pidgin.

I catch only some of what he says, but I hear enough to understand that he is introducing me to the spirits of the island, explaining to them why I am here with him. I look down while he talks, not sure how best to express my respect. Sam's typically feisty nature is more subdued here, I notice — more serious and pensive.

Satisfied, he starts pointing out various features of the island. I follow him with my camera as he treads across the beach, here and there collecting little red seeds off the ground — "I make instruments with them," he tells me. "Shakers for traditional dance". He talks about the island in a low voice, as if not wanting to disturb the residential spirits. We come across mounds of trochus and giant clam shells, which Sam proudly claims as the middens of his ancestors, built up over hundreds of years. He also shows me the widespread erosion that has ripped away at the coastline and flooded the turtle nests lay all over the island.

We come across a pile of sand with several turtle-hatchling carcasses littered around it, shrivelled and stiff. Sam is stricken, and stumbles around the nest as if looking for an answer to the deaths. Perhaps a goanna dug up the nest, and then was scared off; or the hatchlings may have emerged during the day and expired under the unforgiving heat of the sun. Only the island spirits know for sure. We mourn the little creatures for several minutes, and I record it on film. Silently, we head back to the boat to find Robert sprawled out on the bow smoking a cigarette. Sam pushes the dinghy off the beach and we head back out through the maze of fringing reefs.

"Well, are ya ready to tag some turtles?" Sam winks. My heart leaps. Robert stands at the bow as spotter. In no time he catches sight of a juvenile green turtle, and the chase begins — he points left, and Sam turns left. The next instant he points right, and we jerkily change directions. I'm amazed at how he can take every jolt and wrench in stride without being thrown off the front of the boat. He balances with the ease a tight-rope walker, with nothing to hold on to save a rope he loosely grips with one hand, while he points or shades his eyes with the other. It's the same technique used to hunt both turtles and dugongs. I imagine that Robert's skills make him an expert hunter.

He motions for Sam to speed up, then slow down. I try desperately to keep my balance while I stand behind Robert filming his every move, expecting to fly over the edge myself at any moment. After several more zig-zags, Robert suddenly throws off his sunnies and leaps into the water. He disappears for a few seconds, then pops up behind us with the exhausted turtle in his grasp, its flippers flailing lethargically and a clump of seagrass still locked stubbornly in its jaw. It all happens in a flash, and I don't know whether I even remembered to keep the camera focused on the action. I never imagined catching sea turtles would be so exhilarating. Sam and Robert together heave the turtle into the

boat as I try to keep my balance, and film them as they place a tag on the front left flipper, then measure the turtle's shell. After everything has been recorded in a little notebook Sam keeps in his front shirt pocket, he heaves the turtle up onto the side of the boat.

"Esso (thank you) little one," he whispers as he gives it a pat, then helps it over the side and into the water.

"Your turn!" Sam turns to me, and we start scouting for our next catch. My heart starts beating more rapidly. I want to try it, but I feel too self-conscious. I shrug my shoulders, but the guys give me a look that says, 'Nonsense — you give it a go'. Robert takes the bow again, helping me spot. He finds one, and we go through the several minute chase. Right, now left, now right again. He's behind us! Turn around, speed up — there it is! I see the turtle begin to tire and slow its pace.

"Now!" Sam and Robert shout in unison. Before I can think, I spring off the left side of the boat, aiming just ahead of the turtle as Sam had told me to. Once I hit the water, I see nothing, I just feel ahead of me with my arms. I touch something hard and smooth, and grip. It's the shell! I pull it towards me and push off the sandy bottom to get back to the surface. When I emerge, I hear whoops and clapping behind me, and turn to see Sam using my camera to take a picture. I shriek with delight, like a child in the spotlight.

For the rest of the afternoon, we meander through coral bommies while Robert intermittently catches turtles for tagging and spears crayfish for dinner. In all directions, the shimmering blue of water blends with the creamy blue of sky. I lay back and feel as if I am floating in an endless blanket of cerulean warmth where time no longer exists. I marvel at the relaxed, carefree pace of life the islanders lead. The people of Iama seem filled with an ageless wisdom of savouring every moment rather than worrying about the next. It's a tantalizing way to live.

After a long while, we pass a particularly large reef and Sam suggests I go for a snorkel. I lazily pick myself up and throw on a mask and fins. When I plunge into the water, I am surrounded by a new paradise. On all sides of me swim fish large and small, in all colours, darting in and out amongst the shelving reef. I drift along, inches above giant purple-lipped clams and orange spotted corals. I notice a white tipped reef shark a few feet ahead, so I follow it along as it wanders along the reef edge. I've never seen such a diverse, vibrant habitat, even on the Great Barrier Reef. I pop up to the surface and give Sam a thumbs up. It's a humble way to express my utter amazement at such a magical place. But somehow it seems right to understate my wonder, to accept this moment for what it is without forcing meaning upon it.

I slowly kick my fins in the direction of the boat, reluctant to leave the underwater world behind. It is not my world, but for a few moments I belong to it. Out here I do not need to search for myself, for who I am spiritually or intellectually. I just am. Maybe Sam and Robert aren't consciously aware of it, but their unassuming ease of existence embodies a spirituality that most of us seek for the better part of our lives. I realize that the moment I cease worrying about who I am or where I am going, the past and future blur while the present moment becomes crystal clear, and is all that matters.

With a last kick I reach the boat, and Sam takes me by the arm to lift me up and over the side.

"Ready to head back?" He asks. "We gonna cook up a feast for kai kai!" He waves his hand over the stack of fish and crays piled in the front of the boat, our dinner for tonight.

"Sounds good," I say with a smile. I take my seat at the back and brace myself for the bumpy ride back. The sun, now orange as it stretches far to the west, basks everything in a warm glow.

I'm not thinking about my flight home the next day. I'm not even thinking as far ahead as dinner. I had flown all this way to help Sam make an educational film for his community. In the end, it was his people who educated me; about life, about myself. I realize that spirituality is not some goal you can work to attain; it is immersion in the present, and respect for the past. In the end it was by falling into the rhythm of the land and sea, like two men sitting with me did, which leads me a step closer to inner peace. As the engine roars to life and we pick up speed, I look behind and give silent thanks to the spirits of this place for revealing one of their special secrets to me.

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I've always felt like a drifting dandelion spore, wafting about in whatever direction the wind desires to carry me. It had carried me to Australia. Shortly after my trip to Iama, I returned home to help my mom unpack her new post-married life. One day I walked from my mom's apartment up into the hills overlooking my hometown, hiking along dirt paths through scrub oak woodland. Halfway up the trail, it hit me — a familiar smokiness, the thick heady scent of sage — a smell that effortlessly pierced through the fainter grassy scent of the wind.

At once, images flooded into my mind — plucking bright red berries in a pretend game of survival, learning the secrets of the noble yucca plant native to this land, wading through ephemeral creeks in search of invisible croaking frogs

— a childhood deeply connected to this particular place, with its tapestry of seasonal creeks and towering oak trees, golden grasses and wildflowers.

I peered through the sagebrush as it rattled in the light breeze, spying mother quails zigzagging away with their clusters of chicks. I looked up at the ageless oaks to find blue jays chattering amongst themselves, as squirrels clamoured up their worn trunks. No matter how far away the wind had carried me, its circular voyage brought me back to a place where my blood surged stronger than ever. It was not about a particular house, or even about particular people, but about my own unspoken connection to this land. After so many years of drifting, I had roots all along, as thin as gauze, stretching across the sea back to a home that lived on patiently in case I ever was to return. And when I leave, it now travels with me, pulsing through my body as I continue on a life-long path with newfound wisdom and rediscovered comfort.



*Nathanael O'Reilly*

## *ANNA KARENINA* IN CANBERRA

After viewing the Picasso exhibition
At the National Gallery, spending
A lazy afternoon studying
Charcoal sketches of nudes,
We watched *Anna Karenina*
In an almost empty cinema.

Oscillating between melancholy
And desire, we lay on the lawn
Beside the lake and drank
Half a dozen stubbies of VB,
Her breasts squeezed into a blue
Chesty Bonds t-shirt, and talked
Of the impossibility of true
Love between people like us.