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TONY THE WOG'S MANGO TREE

In the mid 1960s I did not really understand the ramifications of the music revolution, politics and peoples changing views on Vietnam. We were young mischievous boys, just enjoying time just as it was.

We lived in Rocklea, a small outer southern suburb of Brisbane, with my parents, four brothers and two sisters. My parents named me David and I was the eldest of the siblings. It was me, my second eldest brother and my mates who often got into some sort of mischief. At that time our area felt like a small country town, caught in the era of the late 1950s. We filled our lungs with the freshness of clear morning air, listened to early morning magpies warbling and the echo of harking crows in the pine trees at the nearby school and streets. There were still a couple of dirt roads in the area and these doubled as a lot of fun for me and my mates whenever it rained.

Old Queenslander homes dominated my suburb. Most were fronted by white timber and chain mesh or picket fences and had the obligatory garden bed running its full length. These homes also sat on high stilts and underneath became the 'living area,' especially during the summer months when the breeze would blow through making the area a cool escape from the heat. My father, uncles and a couple of their local male friends would gather in this area to enjoy a cold beer and chat after a hard days work.

There was that comfortable feeling that everyone knew everyone else and *kept an eye out*, so to speak. I can remember our whole family piling into the old Vanguard and driving the few kilometres to the Moorooka Shopping Village. We always left the house wide open without any fear of it being ransacked. Even during humid summer nights, when we were all in bed, the house would be left open. I can recall hearing the distant echo of car tyres going *Ka-chook, Ka-chook* as they crossed over the joins on the single lane cement slab road.

Munroes' local store was a three minute walk along our street. My brother, Rodney, my mate, Larry and I would *cash in* empty soft drink bottles that we had collected from around the area. Then we would sit under the large awning and lean against the front of the shop laughing and hatching mischievous schemes. If Munroes didn't have what Mum needed, it was just a fifteen minute bike ride along a well used track beside the train line, to Ashs' general store. Now, to a thirteen-year-old boy, this store was amazing! They carried everything from tools, clothes, magazines, models, toys as well as a huge selection of ice

creams and lollies. Across the main road was a group of shops, which included a rock 'n roll café, a tobacconist, Mr Gray's barber shop and a fish and chip shop to name a few. The bulk of the area, however, was covered by Hansen's pub. This is where, almost every Friday night, Dad and his mates would spend a few hours drinking and placing some bets on the horses.

One of Dad's mates was "Tony the wog." According to Dad Tony had inherited this nickname because there was already "Tony the truckie" and "Tony the butcher" so, to separate the three, he became "Tony the wog." Tony didn't mind his nickname because he knew the term was not being used offensively. Nevertheless, Tony used to "give it back" as well. Whenever they were enjoying a beer under our house and some of the men would give Tony a hard time, saying "Ya bloody wog," Tony would reply "Ahh! Youse are da bloody Malukas." They would all have a good laugh, including me, even though I didn't know what Tony meant by *Malukas* until quite some years later. But there was never any malice. It was always light hearted and friendly.

Tony wasn't a huge man. He was only about 5ft 3inches tall with dark olive skin and jet black hair. But he did have what I used to call "Popeye arms." They had hardly any hair and on the inside of his left arm was a tattoo of a ship's anchor entwined with rope. I once heard Mum say that Tony and his wife had migrated to Australia from Greece after the Second World War. Apparently they had two young teenage sons who had both died fighting for the Greek resistance against the Germans. Anyhow, Tony and his wife bought the house two streets up from ours. About twelve months later Tony's wife died. Mum reckoned it was from a broken heart and homesickness for Greece. Most of the people in the area rallied to support Tony through his grief and he never forgot the generosity of the locals, including Mum and Dad. Tony was very good at welding and if Dad needed something on his truck welded, Tony would be there in a flash to help Dad out.

Nothing much *ruffled* Tony. Dad would often say, "He's a good sport." Quite often during hot summer afternoons Tony could be found sitting on his wooden fold-up chair at a small round table under the shade of his magnificent mango tree. He sliced off pieces of the fruit with a small pocket knife that he always carried in the pocket of his shorts. Sometimes, when my brother and I had been walking home from playing with our mates near the train shunting yard, we would walk past Tony's house. Now Tony's real name is Antony Demopoulos. Every now and then I would make fun of his surname as we passed by his driveway gate. Tony would say "Eh! You a boys been a getting to trouble?" I used to have a good laugh at times, listening to his broken English. This time I replied, "Not us Mr Demop-olop-olop-olop-oulos!" Tony shook his fist: the one now holding an big apple.

“Eh! You a cheeky a little bugger! You a not a make a fun of a my name eh!” he said.

“Sure, Mr Demopoulos” I would reply. But I was sure he was having a giggle under his breath.

The following Sunday afternoon, I was walking towards Tony’s place again. This time I was flanked by my mate and my brother. Now Tony’s house was like all the others in the suburb. Timber weatherboard on stilts with a *dug out* area underneath where he would park his old Austin car. He would always let the grass grow to about six inches high before he would drag out the old skirtless Victa mower and spend most of the day mowing his large yard. As we drew closer to Tony’s place, I noticed he was again sitting under that beautiful old mango tree with a bowl of fruit and *that* pocket knife. He called out the same familiar line

“Eh! You a boys been a getting to trouble?”

“No, Mr Demopoulos,” I replied, noticing that his huge delicious looking Bowen mangoes were starting to turn. I estimated that by the end of the week they would be ripe for picking. I pointed up and said “Those mangoes are looking nice!”

Well then it happened. And even with the vast knowledge of my thirteen-year-old brain, I couldn’t pick if Tony was being serious or not, but he sure scared the hell out of us as he sat on the edge of his chair and pointed his pocket knife in our direction. He twisted it from side to side, like he was penetrating an orange.

“If a you a come a near my a Mango I will a skin a you boys alive!”

In unison we replied, “Yes, Mr Demopoulos,” and kept walking at a slightly quicker pace.

On Sundays, the normally deserted train shunting yards were a good place to hang out. In the cool shade of a big old gum tree we sat eating the two foot soft lolly snakes we had bought from Munroe’s shop. Discussing what had just happened at Tony’s and were trying to determine whether or not, he was fair dinkum about skinning us alive. But all I could think of were those big juicy Bowen mangoes. I reckoned Tony had the best mangoes in Australia, so there and then I planned a way to retrieve some of the delicious fruit.

The following balmy Friday evening there was a yellow moon but it was still bright enough to see. On the footpath’s edge, opposite Tony’s place, Mrs Kelly maintained a thick bushy three-foot hedge which made the perfect place for the

three of us to meet and squat behind whilst we waited for Tony to go to the pub for the men's weekly TAB meeting. I figured we had about two or so hours to fill the sugar bag we had brought with us and get back home in plenty of time. I heard the back door close, then the familiar *slap, slap, slap* of Tony's rubber thongs on the back steps. It seemed like an eternity before I heard the car door close and the engine start. Tony reversed the car from under the house and wheeled it to the left before driving forwards out of the driveway. We waited until the red lights of Tony's car disappeared into the distance.

I nominated Larry to stay below and collect the mangoes whilst Rodney and I picked and dropped them to the ground. Things were moving along nicely and I didn't even think about of the sound of the approaching car until I heard the familiar crunching sound of its second gear. A blood freezing chill raced through my body.

"It's bloody Tony!" I whispered as loud as I could. "Get your carrot top up here now!" I called.

Larry left the bag where it was and shimmied up that tree quicker than a frilly lizard being chased by a Kookaburra. He reached the thick branch near me just as Tony drove in the driveway.

"What are we going to do now?" whispered my brother.

"We wait and be very quiet," I replied.

Tony steered his car under the outer branches of the mango tree then to the right and into its parking spot. I heard the car door shut before he proceeded up the stairs and into the house. It was then that I thought it would be a good time to *make a run for it*. Just as I was about to make a move, the kitchen light came on. Again, I felt that blood freezing chill as Tony slid the old casement window up as far as it would go before propping it up with a piece of dowel. We had unwittingly positioned ourselves only about eight feet from Tony's kitchen window. Had he leaned forward to look out the window, I reckoned that he would have spied three bug-eyed, shaking, white with fear kids perched close together, resembling a trio of wide eyed possums that had just been spotlighted.

There I sat, like an ice block in a freezer. From my perch I could see a good deal of Tony's kitchen. I watched as he walked past the corner of the old retro table with its red mother of pearl laminate top. It also sported a broad chrome trim and twin "V" style chrome legs. Tony approached the kitchen bench and plugged the cord into the yellow china jug. He flicked the switch to *boil* before retrieving a large cup and saucer from the overhead cupboard. He then

picked up the upturned white and floral patterned teapot from the sink top and placed it on the bench in front of him. From a row of old tin canisters he grabbed the one with a faded label printed *Tea*. Then he shovelled two teaspoons-worth into the teapot before returning the canister to its place next to the others on the shelf. By this time the jug had furiously boiled and Tony turned off the power, unplugged the cord and proceeded to pour the boiling water into the teapot. He then approached the cream coloured round topped “Crossley” fridge and reeled on its lever-type handle and removed the tapered top glass bottle of milk. Tony poured the tea into his cup before adding the milk and returning the bottle to its place in the fridge before slamming the door closed.

It was at this point that I realised that we had another small, *but large* problem: that haunting, annoying, drive you crazy, unmistakable sound, *ZZZZzzzzZZZZzzzz...* Bloody mozzies! Swarms of the blood sucking, stinging kamikaze buggers had found us. It was okay while we were moving around, but now that we had to stay put, they seemed to sense that it was time to come *in for the kill*. We couldn’t slap them for fear that Tony would hear us so all we could do was to slowly brush them off with a hand, which didn’t seem to help much.

My mind ran wild as it played out different scenarios... “Would I end up like a wrinkled piece of leather hanging over this tree branch once the mozzies had sucked me dry?” Or ... “If Tony did catch us, how would I be able to explain, why and where my skin had disappeared to, to Mum?” My mind flashed back to a Laurel and Hardy movie that I saw once. They had been skinned alive and were walking down the street as skeletons. “Hmmm!” I wondered. “How long would it take for the skin to grow back over my bones? I certainly wouldn’t be able to go to school for a while, that’s for sure!”

I was startled back to reality when the kitchen light was switched off and Tony walked to his lounge room. Rodney whispered, “Can we go now?”

“Wait just a second,” I replied watching Tony place his cuppa on the side table next to his big wide-armed lounge chair before walking to the corner of the room and turning on the TV... *I’ve always wondered how the old H.M.V. tellys balanced on those long thin spindly legs*. Tony settled into his armchair with the T.V. blaring away. We quietly absconded with the sugar bag almost full of juicy mangoes... *But that’s not the end of the story, Ohhhh No!*

We were so glad to be back on terra-firma and free to scratch away those dammed mozzie bites. I decided to *divvy* up the mangoes on the way home. Cracker night was fast approaching and I knew that the sugar bag would be needed for that event. We stopped at Larry’s place first and he took his share of

mangoes before Rodney and I carried the remaining mangoes on to our place, then tipped them into one of the old cement tubs under our house.

Tuesday evening arrived and Dad, along with some of the men, including Tony, had again gathered under our house to enjoy a drink. Being a growing thirteen-year-old, I liked to spend time with the men and, even though I didn't really understand most of the jokes, I would always laugh along with them. Now, everything was fine until Mum went around with a large bowl of ... sliced juicy mango. Because nobody was paying any attention to a mere young boy, they didn't notice the colour draining from my face or that I was turning a shade of *illuminating white*. Tony accepted a large slice of mango and said, "Beautiful a piece of a mango missus."

"Oh, thank you Tony," Mum replied. "The boys brought them home the other night."

Then, in a tone I will never forget, Tony said "Oha, did a they just?"

Tony slowly turned his head until his piercing brown eyes met mine. I felt that same blood freezing feeling come over me when Tony patted the side of his shorts where he kept his pocket knife. I almost couldn't contain, what surely would have been, a glass shattering scream. It was a good cue to leave. So with quivering voice I said to Mum, "Be back shortly, have to go and see me mate!" I don't recall ever riding to Larry's place in such record breaking time. But I do know this: we never raided Tony the wog's mango tree ever again.

