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## Fear and Freedom

By Kirsty Whitmore

It was supposed to be a restorative, relaxing connection with our beautiful land, for life had been hectic. The rays of sunlight caught and distorted as they filtered through the plastic car windows. The old beat up Patrol we bought for a thousand bucks off Gumtree when we landed wasn't tinted. But we didn't mind- it had carried us faithfully so far through this rugged terrain. The red dirt, the arid lands, the sweat under harsh heat had come to feel like home; so foreign and unlike the sterile clinical environment we were used to. I hadn't travelled these parts of Australia before, but when my friend Sal suggested we drive from Alice Springs to Darwin, it sounded like the perfect escape.

Tired of responsibilities, timetables and appointments, we planned no more than a day in advance, feeling lightened by our new carefree attitude. We drove out to Uluru and camped under the breathtaking stars. Circling around to King's Canyon we marveled at how the rivers had worn down the hard land into a deep crevasse. Century after century of constant flow had scarred the rock so deeply it was no longer recognizable. Some young men were jumping off the towering cliffs into the lagoons below. As one poised to jump, my heart momentarily froze foreseeing the inevitable, unwilling to see another splintered bone or eviscerated life. Relief came with the splash of his safe arrival into the pristine waters, but the beauty and serenity of the canyon was lost forever. I couldn't shake the feeling of inescapable tragedy.

We finally tackled the first leg of the long drive into Tennant Creek. This endless road rolled below us uninterrupted, heat shimmering like a mirage in the distance. Hardy shrubs dotted the hills, harboring lazy reptiles and wildlife hiding from the heat. We wound down the windows, and absorbed sunlight into skin. Other than passing a single road train earlier, we were very much alone, the Triple J Hot 100 blaring from the speakers, energizing our journey, disturbing no one. I sighed deeply, relaxing for what seemed like the first time in months. The perpetual tension of my body eased as I sunk comfortably into the driver's seat.

Sal had taken over driving while I rested my eyes. She nudged me sharply, jolting me back to awareness. I could see her brow furrow and white knuckles clenching the wheel and I followed her gaze. When I spotted the object in the distance, I understood her tension and my own stomach churned; we both knew what it was. I held my breath with trepidation as we approached the telltale scene before us.

The crumpled fourbie sat on its roof. The dust had already settled over the cruiser and it was clear it had been there for some time. In a moment, instinct took over. Suddenly I was no longer on holiday, but in the front seat of an ambulance, assessing the scene. I studied the scene for fuel leaks, smoke and bodies underneath the car. As I got out of the passenger's seat

I gazed up along the road from which the car must have come. It was like a bomb had exploded in the boot of the car. Cutlery, clothing, books, and side mirrors were scattered like shrapnel along the warpath. It had clearly rolled several times before reaching its inverted resting point. The stark silence was unsettling, amplifying the anxiety that constricted my breathing.

The distinctive star shatter-pattern on the windscreen was streaked with hair and blood. I held my breath, dreading the gruesome scene to come. I forced myself to look through the windscreen. There was the battered face of a woman, still strapped into her seat, her hair straggling over her face. The driver's door was crumpled and concave, but thankfully the passenger's side gave way with a heave. My knees struck glass as I crawled along the roof of the car, fingers digging at a carotid of my upside down companion. My heart was racing. Sal was phoning triple zero, eyes desperately scanning the horizon for help. I called to her for help, surprised by the callousness of my voice. She hesitated until she saw my face, hard and demanding. I fished out my keys from my pocket, where my seatbelt cutter had lived ever since I lost a woman trapped in a submerging car. With difficulty, Sal and I wove our arms around dangling limbs and broken body, lowering and dragging the woman from the mangled wreck.

I knelt down beside the woman, my bloody knees mixing red dirt into mud. For the first time since we arrived, I could look into her face. It was clear she was around my age. Her dark hair was matted with blood and eyes already beginning to show the puffiness that would soon succumb them. "Fucking Le Fortes," I whispered as the deep-dish shape of her face showed her maxilla had borne the brunt of the impact. Looking into her young, broken face, I was gripped with the sudden realization of how easily this could have been me. In the emergency department, I constantly sensed death, close and foreboding, waiting for my mistake to steal away the lives of patients. My skin prickled, fear closing my throat, but I quickly suppressed the feeling. I had to focus.

"The GP and RN from Tennant were down on a call-out near the Marbles for a fractured arm, so they will be here in less than twenty minutes." Sal was almost whispering, clearly terrified, and I could see her hands shaking. I looked up at her, meeting her wide-eyed fear. She was not accustomed to this brutal kind of medicine, having settled into psychiatry some time ago. Studying her, I saw her fear was not just of the situation. It was of me, my hard almost stone-like posture, my short staccato orders, my impatient rough hands. I was devastated realizing this is who I had become. I remember when I told quick-witted jokes and would laugh exuberantly with the joy of life. I regretted how medicine washed away my softness, but had accepted this was part of being a doctor. Medicine had carved away my innocence and replaced it with callousness and scar tissue. We turned the woman on her side as the inevitable bloody vomit erupted from her stomach. Sal stroked her hair whispering soothing tones, contrasting the vile smell of digesting blood that rose upwards, just as the ambulance truck arrived.

As quickly as they appeared, they were gone. Sal and I stood among the wreck, crumpled, dirty and exhausted. I was struck by the sudden silent stillness. It shocked my senses after the noisy commotion of just minutes before. My role as a doctor was sharply ripped away and I felt purposeless. I felt vulnerable and exposed, no longer able to hide my emotions behind action. Staring down at my rough hands streaked with the blood of yet another body, the familiar ache

grew in my heart. Tears flooded my eyes as I was suddenly overwhelmed by the grief I had suppressed for so long. The years of fatigue and suffering had carved deeply like the crevasses in the canyon. I had always seen doctors as strong, confident and brave, and had never expected to be constantly on edge and afraid. But I was fearful: I was afraid of failing patients, of not being enough to save them, of losing myself, of losing hope. Above all, I felt an overriding guilt that I should even think of my own pain compared to the suffering of others.

Even here in the desert, I could not escape. I felt trapped, haunted by the faces of those lost, and those to come. With a gentle arm around my shoulder, Sal guided me back to our car. We still had a two-hour journey to our destination. The illusion was broken. There was no freedom out here any longer. As Sal drove from the scene, I turned and took one last look back at the carnage through the red cloud of dust. I swallowed back my remaining tears, frustrated by my weakness and scornful of my selfishness. I set my eyes resolutely on the road and left another piece of me behind.

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**Kirsty is a second year postgraduate medical student studying at Griffith University in Australia. She trained as both an intensive care nurse and paramedic, prior to pursuing a career in medicine. Kirsty is passionate about the role of story and narrative in exploring the patient and clinician experience, and its role in promoting awareness and change in global and public health.**

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