

BANJAWARN

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Sometimes you can find hope in the strangest places. As Hoyle's found, snug in the corner of this mostly empty, abandoned house, just a few ks back from Peak Charles, listening to the wooden floorboards sigh, listening to the cold wind brush itself up against the open window like a friendly housecat.

He lies awake on the mattress he dragged out of the main bedroom and wonders how long he slept for and how long he's been here, close to the twin granite hulks of Peak Charles and Peak Eleanor. In this room that contains barely anything at all, only the old-style wood stove, leaning out of its frame like a drunk about to take a fall outside the pub. It's only the bricks around it that keep it from face-planting. Apart from this there's just a wicker chair in the corner, peeling white paint.

So he nearly leaps out of his skin when the door crashes open, blasting a spiral of orange dust into the room. Hoyle looks up at the old man standing there in red flannel and dirty overalls, a clothes bag in one hand. Afternoon light slashes onto the untreated boards around the shining outline of him.

Hoyle stares at the stranger for a moment, then clears his throat. ‘This your place then?’ he asks.

The old man looks around the room, at the empty wicker chair as if only he could see the ghost which might be sitting there. ‘Good guess.’

Hoyle kicks the minky rug from his body, sits up on the dirty, borrowed mattress which stinks of dry ravioli sauce. ‘Sorry.’ He starts rolling up the rug. ‘Thought it was abandoned.’

It was only half a lie. The old structure lay hidden among the sand mallees, throwing back the chirpy calls of the bright ringneck parrots, and Hoyle had just assumed it had been nailed together back in the days of the old woodlines, but there were signs that someone had been there recently. Empty soup cans lined up along the hearth, a lonely Stephen King paperback on the kitchen table.

The old man drops his luggage inside the room, still not looking at the intruder. Hoyle takes in the black satchel he’d left sitting on the wicker chair. To the casual observer’s eye, there’s was no way to tell what was inside.

‘Sorry, mate,’ Hoyle says. ‘I’ll get outta your hair.’

Surprised to see the old man hold up a hand. ‘No rush.’ He looks at Hoyle now, takes a breath. ‘You sick?’

‘You mean, do I have Covid?’

‘I guess that’s what I’m asking, yeah.’

‘Nup.’ Hoyle stands, looks down at the mattress. ‘I borrowed it. Hope that’s okay.’

The old man nods. ‘Drink?’

‘Depends.’

‘Bottle of Jacks in the car.’

He jams the folded minky under one arm. Waits until the old man has turned and gone back out through the too-bright doorway, before he slides over and snatches up his black satchel. Hides it in the curve of the rug.

Meets the old man out in the yellow scorch of afternoon light. The old man returns from his dirty Jeep with the bottle of whiskey and disappears inside the house. Hoyle wonders if he’s looking around to make sure there’s been no damage done by the squatter, but then he emerges again with two slightly rusty pannikins Hoyle saw in the kitchen earlier.

‘Look, I’m sorry,’ Hoyle starts to say.

The old stranger waves a hand. ‘Don’t sweat it.’ Places both cups down in the dirt beside two plastic chairs, pours the cups both half full. ‘Slug that.’

Hoyle does, feels it rip a sizzling hole in his stomach. Garbles with satisfaction.

The old man smiles. ‘That’s the way.’ He sits in the chair across from Hoyle. ‘Been here long?’

‘Dunno.’

‘When did you get here?’

‘Just before the internal state borders went up.’

‘That was two months ago.’

Hoyle shrugs. ‘Two months then.’

‘Long time to be on your own,’ the stranger comments thoughtfully.

Hoyle stares at the red dirt beneath him, hates having to talk after so long of not talking. ‘What’s it like out there?’

‘In the world? Nearly back to normal.’

Hoyle’s eyes glimmer. ‘I was starting to think maybe it had all burned.’

The old man takes his slug of Jacks. ‘No such luck.’ He gargles, louder than Hoyle. ‘Like the place?’ He points at the house.

He shrugs, glances back down at the rug without thinking, just to be sure the satchel is concealed. ‘Kept the rain off me.’

‘My grandfather built it. Worked the woodlines. Opened this country up. Not many people know this is out here.’ Watches the overly thin young man carefully. ‘Surprised you found it actually.’

‘I get around.’

The old man pours him another. ‘I’m not pissed about you being here. If you’ve got nowhere else to be.’

Hoyle feels like telling him he isn’t homeless, that he chose to be here. Glances up at the bald patches on the side of Peak Charles. It’s pyramid-shaped shadow inclining toward them. ‘I’ll be moving on shortly.’

The stranger pours himself another. ‘Welcome to stay is all.’

A hindrance in his throat. Has never been able to deal with lonely people very well, doesn’t have the tact.

‘Appreciate the offer,’ he says, taking the second slug. ‘But I’ll keep moving.’

‘You like it out here?’ the old man asks, looking around at the overhanging sand mallees. ‘This country talk to you?’

‘This country doesn’t talk. It sings.’

He likes that, raises his eyebrows. ‘What’s it sing about?’

‘Mostly good stuff.’ Hoyle thinks about it. ‘Sometimes some not so good stuff.’

The old man watches him, pannikin hovering below his chin. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says, ‘but I’ve lied to you.’

Hoyle frowns.

‘I actually arrived about half an hour ago,’ the stranger explains, then shoots his double-shot of Jacks. ‘You were fast asleep.’

Senses his teeth clench, rotten breath building.

‘I came in and saw that black thing on the chair. Must have been real quiet cause you didn’t stir a bit when I unzipped it and had a look inside.’

The satchel. Hoyle glances down at the rolled-up minky hiding his terrible secret. An incriminating act the old man pretends not to notice.

He clears his throat a little uncomfortably. ‘Do you need some help, son?’

Hoyle shakes his head. ‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought that shit into your house.’

‘It’s okay, really. It’s fine.’ He raises both hands as a gesture of goodwill. ‘No harm done. My grandson, he’s had a bit of trouble with that ice stuff.’

‘It’s not that.’

‘I wasn’t saying it was. All I’m saying is, whatever it is, you’re welcome to hang on here for a while. No judgements.’ He looks back at the ratty house. ‘Could even do with a spare pair of hands. Do the old girl up. Get her back in good nick.’

But Hoyle stands. ‘I can’t. I’m sorry. It’s a nice place you’ve got.’ And he stares at the house a moment, listening to the razored edges of the iron clatter

against each other in the wind. He'd miss the house breathing around him as he inched toward sleep. 'Good luck with it.'

He wrestles the rug and satchel into one awkward heap and starts toddling off with it all. Hears the old man sing out sadly behind him, a hidden plea in his voice. 'Swing by again if you get a chance.'

'We'll see,' Hoyle calls back, eager to escape in case the old man's loneliness is catching. 'Maybe.'