



THE MUTT AND I took the road leading south towards Broken Head. We shuffled through the sleepy streets of Byron Bay, pausing only for the mutt to sniff out some road kill and feed herself. Each time she did, I caught a whiff of her breath, and lurched back. Beach walking was impossible for a day because of the rugged terrain of Broken Head. I planned to be at the northern end of Seven Mile Beach near Lennox Head by the end of the day. My feet were beginning to become raw and blistered. They had cracked and healed, only to re-crack when on hard ground. They needed time. Caught between putting distance between Brisbane and the increasing need to rest my feet, I trundled on in a surreal panic.

The bitumen was tacky by 11:00 A.M.—running off the side of the road in the sun-drenched sections. My feet began to cook slowly, which only added to

the pain and discomfort in them. The hot icky substance melted the soles of my boots off; they may have been dogshit proof, but like me, not designed for this sort of torture. I walked on, feeling my feet simmering away beneath the leather, like in a slow cooker. My mind thought of my Mother's silverside on the stove and pined for some real meat, savouring the aromatic memory for an instant. I looked up and scrutinized a limping man ahead.

As I caught up to him, I made out his impression and stared stupidly at his scraggy clothes and small calico bag hung loosely over his strong shoulders. He was barefoot and walking *in the gutter, through the tacky roadside*, paying no heed to the roasting smell of his flesh, wafting alongside him. If I was slow cooking, this guy was having a regular BBQ. Why he was limping soon became obvious. A small piece of bone was protruding from his Achilles, and apart from the raw cooked flesh of his feet, the foot with the exposed bone was swollen: bluish-black and puffy.

The mutt sniffed at his feet, licking her lips.

I wondered how the hell this guy was able to walk at all.

I shook him on the shoulder.

"Hey! Looks like you have a broken foot mate. You might need a hospital?"

The man looked at me calmly. "The walking helps heal it. You gotta have faith." He was sucking deep gulps of air as he spoke, and small groans escaped his lips each time he exhaled.

“You want to stop over there in the shade for a bit? Have a cup of tea and a smoke? It’s nearly midday mate. Best to stop this time of day, ya know?”

He gazed over to the small roadside rest area I was pointing towards and nodded weakly.

“How long has your foot been like that?” I stirred the tea-leaves in the Golden Circle tin on the free electric BBQ at the rest area. The man was standing in the midday sun, baking his body to match his feet.

By my reckoning he would be medium to well done in no time.

I shuddered.

“I don’t know. Some guys beat me up when I was sleeping in the park at Brunswick Heads. I woke up on the beach and started walking south.”

“Why didn’t you go to the hospital?”

The water began to simmer slowly, the steam whirling up in the exposed roof of the shelter before dissipating. There was no breeze.

“I don’t believe in hospitals.” He stood on his broken foot, eyes serene and his breathing relaxed. “I have faith. It will heal me.”

The traffic had died down on the main road. We sat in a silence for the next 2 or 3 minutes as the water slowly came to the boil.

He rocked on his broken foot and began chanting something indiscreet. I stared at him in disbelief, pinching myself to see if I was not dreaming.

Nope, real as.

You have to love Byron Bay.

“Tea?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t have any sugar or milk. It’ll have to be black?”

A bit like his foot, I thought.

“Black’s OK.”

I sat and smoked, sipping the brew. He leaned hard, propped on his broken foot.

“That must hurt.”

“It’s not too bad. Have faith.”

He stood and I sat in silence. As we left, a slight breeze stirred and we headed east towards the beach and Broken Head Road.

We plodded along the rainforest clad dirt road, the mutt sniffing and drooling at the cripple’s heels and me doing my best to put the pain in my own feet to the back of my mind. He groaned and chanted something , like a monk invoking inspiration. A bush turkey startled the mutt and she chased it into the rainforest, only to come yelping back out after the animal had turned on her and pecked her just above the eye. She resumed her position next to me, and sheepishly dawdled along, embarrassed to be the victim of such a fickle bird. We traipsed along Broken Head road till mid-afternoon.

He had not said a word. Droplets of puss and blood left a trail on the dirt edge of the road,

marking his passing.

There was no way we were going to make Seven Mile Beach, so we found a clearing off the side of the road and I hitched up my AFrame. He propped himself against a tree, standing firm on the gammy foot, obviously content to sleep like a horse.

I said nothing.

There was really nothing to say.

His strength stumped me. I was glad for his company, but also relieved that we didn't have to talk. I offered him some of my food, but he said he was fasting—that this acted as a great healer. I said goodnight, crawled into my tent with the mutt, placing my knife under my pillow in case the man freaked out during the night and desired a replacement foot.

You can never be too sure of anything.

I had left Brisbane utterly lost at what to do. After three years of failures and no qualification, I struggled within to think of what I should do for work, and, the rest of my meaningless life.

I hated being on the dole.

At some point around midnight, after a dozen of Dr XXXX's finest and the last of Ivan's dope, I packed my bag, woke the mutt and walked down the empty streets of Hawthorne to the river ferry terminal.

I had to leave. That was all I knew.

A crisp mist rolled across the Brisbane River. I

stood under a yellow fluorescent light on a pontoon and saw a ferry approaching in the distance. Splip-plop bow waves reached the muddy rocky shore under the pontoon as a lolling, rust stained ferry neared. A staggering operator tied the port side of the vessel off, the yellow fluoro light on the pontoon exploded softly, leaving the vessel in the mist.

The operator of the ferry didn't look well at all.

Neither did I. It had been a long month.

He briefly eyed the dog. "Looks like you're goin' somewhere laddie. Don't worry about the fare. Hide the dog."

As I boarded, the spine tingles began, and a smell of decay burnt in my nostrils, increasing as I edged closer to pass the ferryman. I felt like I was going to vomit.

The cross river jaunt was brief but seemed like a year. The dim lighting, rotting timber and rust wrapped the vessel in a sinking silence. As I disembarked, the toothless grin of the ferryman made me stumble. My knee connected with a bollard and I winced at the electric pain shooting through my thigh and calf. Staggering along the floating gangway, I could feel my weak stomach nausea beginning to rumble.

I did not look back.

I ran up Brunswick Street to the hedges bordering New Farm Park and fertilised them with my cocktail of Dr XXXX and dope smoke. A donging, distant bell sounded across the river. As I hoofed my way up to Fortitude Valley, the tingling subsided.

I breathed in deeply the fresh March pre-dawn air.

A similar hint of decay amplified as I tripped back into the clearing— wild-eyed and reaching for the man. He was still asleep on his feet and I cautiously approached, edging nearer, the acrid burning rising in my nostrils. I was 6 feet from him when his eyes opened.

His pupils were dilated.

Black as pits.

A dirty stain on the ground marked where he had stood all night. Flies had been cleaning his wound. The mutt's interest from the previous day was stifled now, and she stood at a distance whimpering.

His foot reeked.

Our pace was slower than the day before. The man's faith healing tested him; his pastiness an indication he could benefit from an amputation from the head down. His collection of flies had migrated to his gammy foot in a light black mist—a devoted bunch of feeding travellers.

We didn't have far to go. Once we made it to the top of the ridge line, Broken Head Road became an easy stroll for me, and a living hell for the man.

About a kilometre from our secluded beach destination, he dropped to the ground, found a sharp stick and stabbed the soles of his infected foot. After a few minutes, his washed out face took

on colour. He jumped back up on his fragmented foot and began walking ahead of me, reinvigorated with a celestial sense of purpose.

We hadn't spoken a word since the previous day. The dreamlike surroundings of the forest had mystified my mind, and when we reached the beach, I realised I didn't even know who this bloke was. We found a camp site high up the beach near the dunes.

He sank on his knees into the sand and began to chant to the ocean—waving his arms in increasing circles of devotion.

I turned away to set up the tent and find a creek for some freshwater to drink. The familiar tastes of salt and fresh ocean air filled my lungs, and I drifted into a beach haze: my body and mind just another grain of sand on the expanse of beach where solitude raked away the pesky perceptions of my mind.

Waking to the boisterous sounds of the Pacific Ocean booming on the rocky outcrops of Broken Head, I felt that something was missing. So did the mutt. I followed her to where our companion had rested in the dune.

He wasn't there.

The mutt followed the trickle of his infection across a zigzag path to the rocks, up and down the beach and finally she sat, looking out into the pristine blue ocean and whimpering at the powerful white-caps.

Running back to my camp, I quickly packed, abandoned breakfast and began the walk along Seven Mile Beach. I passed some walkers with my head shielded with my hand as they headed north to Broken Head, and kept an eye on the surf for him, but the battered man was nowhere in sight. Confused at why he had left during the night, I began to sense my guilt rise for not asking his name. I thought of him floating in the ocean on his back: splayed out in a crucified position, floating to South America with the bitumen-picking tripper from Byron Bay.

He'd certainly be a well done crispy steak by then.

My feet had become blistered and torn from the abrasive sand, and I sat down at Lake Ainsworth on the northern end of Lennox Head outside the Surf Club. I couldn't tolerate the thought of walking on the pavement as my boots were holey and paper-thin and it seemed that:

1. People were looking at me strangely; and
2. My brain was sizzling inside of my skull.

Because my head throbbed with the threat of another town, I abandoned the short way along the Coast Road, looked at my map and made a beeline towards Ballina. This wasn't the smartest way to go, but my leg wasn't broken and I walked on through the pain barrier, adamant I would rest at day's end.

When I finally arrived at Ballina, I was muddy,

in pain and almost beat. I had crossed the North River because of my short-long-cut, and cursed myself because of my stupidity; because where I sat, I could see a bridge where I should have crossed the river. Sitting in Boomerang Park, I tended to my blistered, raw feet and carefully chopped the remnants of the soles off of my dogshit proof boots. The last thing I needed—or so I thought—was to end up in jail for vagrancy. If I had my sole less boots on, at least I would appear less of an itinerant. I had to avoid the cops at all costs.

I rested till sunset, watching the traffic and the people in the park living lives around me. To have the time and patience to observe people is great, but it also gets to you after a while—trapped watching lives so unlike my own. There I stayed, stuck in no man's land with burnt feet and bugger all food. At least I had my mutt; always with me, licking my feet and finding me water to drink. As I sat pondering my predicament, the thought of a transistor radio to listen to the news came to mind. The problem was I had no money. In my haste to find my floating injured mate, I had somehow lost my wallet.

Shit happens.

Walking through Ballina became necessary and I walked head down to evade all eye contact. I could hear passers-by's voices talking to me, but they were vicious and patchy. I found Burns River Ferry Road after I had passed the Gigantic Prawn and made my way down the long road to the ferry. I wanted to make it to Wardell for the night.

At 11:41 P.M. I arrived at the scraggly bridge at Wardell and stopped, pulled out my tent and encamped under the bridge.

Out of sight and definitely out of mind.

I desperately needed a radio so I could listen to the news. By the expression on the mutt's face, she agreed. The radio alerted me to *events*, warned me of things. The radio was my mobile premonition machine. I missed contact with people on one hand, and longed for seclusion on the other.

A small dose of humans was all I could take.