

An Unforgettable Photo

I raised the camera to my eye, hoping to photograph the old weatherboard house that stood in between two apartment blocks. It looked like it could topple over in a gust of wind but somehow it had stood its ground, defying any property developers who might have wanted to take a bulldozer to it. I focused my camera on a dog sitting underneath the verandah of the house. He looked razor sharp as he sat guarding the house. Before I could take the photo, the front flywire door was flung open and an old man hobbled out yelling, “Kip! Kip, where are ya?”

I put my camera down. The dog barked and the old man looked directly at me. He pointed a knobbly finger.

“If you’re selling anything, I’m not buying. If you’re doing a survey I’m not talking. And if you’ve got some religion you want to preach about, I’m not listening, but other than that you’re welcome,” he said. The corners of his mouth lifted into a smile.

He shuffled down the brick path, with the dog walking behind him. He got to the wire gate and leaned on it.

I walked closer to him. “I was going to take a photo of your dog.”

“Yeah, Kip loves a bit of attention. Don’t you, Kip?”, the man said, showing the few yellow-stained teeth he had left. Kip bent his head and let me stroke him.

“Friendly, isn’t he?” I said, trying to make conversation. My eyes went from the dog to the man’s face. He was scratching the white stubble on his face. The sparse white hairs on his head moved about in the breeze, reminding me of the sugar cane growing back home, swaying in the tropical winds.

“He likes you,” he said as he gave Kip a pat. “Don’t you, Kip?”

There was a shout from the adjoining apartment. He waved his hand towards the apartments like he was shooing a fly away. “Ignore that, it’s just a regular occurrence,” he said as he eyed my camera. “You a tourist?”

“I’m from Cairns, here for a week,” I said.

He looked at me curiously. “On your own?” he said.

“Um,” I hesitated. “Yeah.” I swallowed the sadness that was bubbling in my throat.

Kip barked at a passing truck. The old man gently nudged the dog with his knee. “You’ve met Kip. I’m Syd.” His raspy voice sounded like it was being dragged over gravel.

“I’m Toby,” I said, pushing my camera back into my back pack.

Kip started barking. Syd put his hands on his hips. “Kip, you hungry old mate?”

He squinted at the watch on his left wrist and, at the same time, reached in his shirt pocket with his right hand. He pulled out a pair of black-rimmed glasses that looked as old as him. When he put them on, they made one of his eyes look slightly higher than the other.

“Oh, I’ll have to fix these before they fall apart. It’s just that these hands are pretty useless these days.” He sounded annoyed as he showed me the palms of his hands.

“Here, Syd. I think I can fix them,” I told him.

“Can you?” he asked, taking them off his nose and handing them to me. I could see that the tiny screw attaching the left arm to the frame was ready to fall out. I took the glasses and, using the nail of my little finger, screwed the tiny screw back in until the arm was secured properly to the frame.

“Here, see if this makes a difference,” I said, handing the glasses back to him. He put them back on and they sat straight.

“You’re a marvel,” he said, grinning. “I’ll get Kip a bone and you can sample the bread I baked this morning. You can give me your expert opinion.” He motioned with his head for me to follow him down the brick path to his front door. He opened the fly screen door and shuffled inside, and then waited for me to go in.

“You want me to come in?”

“Sure, why not? Don’t worry I’m not an axe murderer?” He gurgled with laughter.

I followed him into a dark hallway that suddenly opened up into a small kitchen. The aroma of baked bread punched me full on. “Wow, Syd! Smells real good,” I told him.

“Sure does,” he said, grabbing two oven mitts that reminded me of boxing gloves. He pulled a golden loaf of bread out of the oven. It looked like a puffed up pillow sitting inside a tin that was as rectangular as a bathtub. He flipped it gently out of the tin and onto the kitchen table. Using a knife that looked as if it could do with a bit of sharpening, he cut through the loaf. Steam wafted out of the slice of bread.

“Here, taste this,” he said, spiking it with his knife and passing it to me. As I munched into it, it felt marshmallowy soft and the crust had a crunch to it. The crumbs fell out of my mouth and I caught them with my hand and put them back into my mouth.

“Syd, that’s delicious. Mum taught me how to make bread, but this ... this is awesome,” I said.

“Sure, is,” he replied. As he sliced more bread, a memory flickered in my mind.

“You know, Syd, me and Mum used to bake bread every Sunday when I was a kid. We’d make the dough from scratch. We’d leave it on a window sill where the sun heated it, till it doubled its size.” I recounted.

Syd nodded as he placed a slice on a plate. “Go on, then, how did you make it?” he asked.

“I’d knead the dough like this.” Without even thinking, I made a pushing motion with my right fist. “Mum would put her hand over my fist till I got into a rhythm, kneading the dough back and forth.” I paused. I could almost feel the brush of Mum’s floury hand over mine. “They were good days, those days, with Mum and me.” The memory felt raw.

Syd focused on gathering the crumbs on the table into a pile. “So, how old are you, Toby?” he asked.

“I’m 19.”

Syd looked up at me. “Oh you’re only a young tacker. You working?” he asked.

“Nah, I’m supposed to be at university but I took a year off to be with Mum.” A feeling of despair nestled in the pit of my stomach. My eyes started to well up with tears.

Syd tilted his head. “You OK, mate?”

I shook my head, not wanting to cry. “It’s just that me and Mum had organised this holiday for ages and then she found out she had cancer.” I cupped my hands around my face. “She died three weeks ago.”

Syd shook his head, “Oh, Toby, that’s bloody awful.”

I brushed my eyes with the lower palms of my hands, trying to contain the grief simmering inside of me. “I miss her a lot; miss how it used to be,” I said.

“My parents used to say that my first cry was to tell the world the war had ended.”

“Hmm,” he nodded slowly. “I’ve been to so many funerals that I’ve worn out my black suit. They’re all gone, my wife, family, mates, all gone.” He sighed. “Yeah, it’s bloody hard.”

His chest heaved up and down with every breath. The skin on his face looked like the waxy tracing paper I used at school to trace pictures of maps from my atlas. His long black pants were gathered underneath his belt which was tightly wound around his skinny frame. His grey check shirt was frayed around the collar of his thin neck. He reminded me of a scarecrow in a field.

He tapped the loaf of bread with his knife. “Do you know what, Toby? I was born on the day the First World War ended. In fact, I was born at 11am on the 11th of November in 1918. My parents used to say that my first cry was to tell the world the war had ended. They gave me the middle name of Peace, to mark the day. My parents met in Sydney, hence my name Syd Peace Smith,” he explained.

He pointed to a framed photo on the wall. It was of a younger version of him with a woman and a young boy. “That was my wife, Rosie, and my son, Ned. He was ... what? Maybe eight years old then. Now he’s a grandfather. But I miss Rosie every day. I just keep reliving the memories. Memories are all that we have when a loved one passes on.”

I took a photo out of my wallet. It was creased and bent in the corners caused by the many hours I’d spent staring at it. “This is me with Dad. He died when I was eight. Our neighbour’s house caught on fire and he ran into the house and rescued her, then he collapsed and died of a heart attack.”

“Oh that’s tough ... you were so young.”

I nodded in agreement as I held the photo in my hands, like it was some sort of a bird with a broken wing.

“And now your mum’s passed,” he said.

“Yeah,” my voice was a whisper. My chest felt tight. I took a deep breath. The feeling of being alone sat perched on my shoulders.

For a few seconds, we sat in silence. A clock in another room ticked endlessly. Syd pushed his chair back. “Would you like a beer, Toby?” He shuffled over to the fridge and then stopped. “Oh, hold on a minute, I’ve run out of beer. I’ve only got lemon squash.”

“Oh lemon squash is fine, Syd.”

He took a bottle of lemon squash out of the fridge and a glass out of a cupboard above the kitchen sink. His hands were shaking as he tried to lift the bottle.

“Here, let me help.” I took the bottle from his hands.

He shook his head. “I used to be strong like you. Now I’m just a bag of bones and saggy skin.” He watched me drink. “Play any sport, Toby?”

I put the glass down and wiped my lips with the back of my hand. “I played cricket for my school’s cricket team back in primary school but I was a skinny kid back then and I didn’t have a lot of power when I batted.”

Syd reached over to a shelf next to the fridge and grabbed what looked like a photo album. “You wanna see skinny? I’ll show you skinny.” He opened the album and pointed to a photo. He had a black and white photo of a boy with thin tanned legs and a mop of thick dark hair. He was wearing brown woollen shorts. His bare chiselled chest had a few bristles of hair on it. He was grinning widely as he held a fishing rod in his hands. I looked back at Syd and I could see traces of that boy’s face masked into his own lined face.

He pointed to another photo. “And this is me and my mates. We had a ton of fun together. Then we grew up and got jobs. The Second World War changed everything. Most of my mates enlisted with me. I came back but a lot of them didn’t.”

He stared down at the photo for a moment and then slammed the album shut. As I helped him to put the album back onto the shelf, I noticed the kitchen clock.


“I should go, Syd.”

“You can stay as long as you like, but me and Kip understand that you’ve got things to do. Drop in any time, Toby. We’ll be here.”

Syd and Kip followed me as I walked down the hallway. I stepped outside into the sunlight and turned to Syd. “Hey, Syd, can I take a photo of you and Kip? It’s been great meeting you guys.” My voice was gruff with emotion.

“Sure, we don’t mind being in a photo, two ugly mutts like us.”

I focused my camera lens on them and took the photo. He put his hand out to me, “Next time, Toby, we’ll have a cold beer,” he offered.

I smiled, and shook his hand. I started walking and then turned around. Syd stood with his hands around the top of the wire gate, while Kip crouched beside him. I knew then that I really didn’t need a photo to remember Syd and Kip. That memory of them standing at the old wire gate, watching me walk away, would forever be etched somewhere deep inside of me. 

AUTHOR MARY HOWLEY

Mary Howley has had many careers – as a teacher in several schools and a researcher at a university, she has also worked in retail, and is currently in hospitality. However, her most rewarding and challenging career is as a mum to her three teenagers. In her spare time, she writes short stories and novels, that she hopes will be good enough to be published ... one day. Writing is her “mindfood”.



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