

Running out of Road

Reading a book on the art of travel, I stumble upon a beautiful word inherited from Greek philosophers. The word is 'eudaimonia'. It means human flourishing. The book speculates that our travels express our understanding of what life might be about in our eternal search for happiness. Yet, it also claims that the danger of travel is that we see and do things before we have the ability to synthesise the meaning, making it all as useless as 'necklace beads without a chain'.

Today I am digging up details from places long ago and almost wishing that these stories didn't belong to me. I begin by pulling out a sealed plastic storage box from the depths of my overstuffed wardrobe. It contains albums of photos back from the time when you developed them from film rolls of twenty-four, or sometimes thirty-six. Precious moments of surprise often poured over at the chemist counter after weeks, or even months, of suspense. I also find a scrapbook of angst from my final teen years and a half dozen travel diaries from some international backpacking, and the four or so years I lived in a constant state of transit around Australia. Lastly I come across a folder full of lovingly printed out emails documenting my adventures to the people I left behind. They are of course from my parents, saved like childhood finger paintings, and gifted to me years later. I have not so much as peeped into this box from the past, or reviewed its contents since they were sloppily archived. In my mind, there is nothing there for me that I need or want anymore. Yet, the box survives, unloved and shunned, a reflection of its contents.

The re-entry into my mindscape of a decade or more ago proves a little overwhelming and I decide to go for a run in an effort to make some sense of it all. I pull on worn sneakers that have done too many kilometres, but I can't afford to replace. I scrape my sandy auburn hair into a childish ponytail and tuck five bucks into my shoe for a coffee later on. I march determinedly the several hundred metres to the bayside track that stretches all the way from Port Melbourne to Frankston. I start at Elwood, and begin running into the wind at my one steady pace. I love this bay. It has a million moods and

I identify with all of them. Today the sky is brooding a soft greyish blue; not quite reflected in the watery expanse owing to the confusion of the wind.

Uncovering a passage of anxious scrawling from the final year of my teens is both fascinating and eerie to my now thirty-four year old self. Partly due to the fact that this is the first I have seen of it since I wrote it so long ago, and then partly because it seems as though I wasn't meant to until now.

I didn't think you could be lonely with so many people around you. But I am alone. I wonder where the real me is, and why she is hiding? It seems she just got lost in the confusion of life. I don't know if I want to find her, but I know one day I will have to.

At the time I lived with my parents in Sydney, had finished an unremarkable stint at uni, worked a meaningless job and defined myself largely by what I did on the weekends, and whom I did it with. This included a lot of booze and whatever drugs I deemed safe and reasonable from my upper middle class background. My two lovers at the time, one an unhealthy obsession and the other my first love, were casual and adult relationships. I didn't understand either of these then, or have the capacity to stay balanced within them. I was so busy putting on the Rachael show that I didn't notice I had lost myself, and would not get another glimpse for many years to come. More and more I would hide in my room at night questioning life as I knew it, and crying quietly without knowing why. During my silent existential torment, I did the only thing that felt like it would make things better. I fled, and never looked back.

I suppose my decision reflected the changing life phases of newer generations. No longer do we seamlessly transition from childhood to adulthood, by following the well-worn rights of passage and duty. These days we have tweens, teens and retirement savings to erode as young adults in our parents' pockets, before actually growing up. In a way I did delay adulthood somewhat because as I trekked off in my beaten up corolla, most of my peers settled into jobs they would keep for many years, and relationships

that mirrored those of their parents before them. This apparent failure to enter 'adulthood as we know it' was meant to be a period of identity formation while I reached psychological adulthood. I can't say I agree because I never reached this so-called psychological adulthood in all the years I spent avoiding doing things the way they are supposed to be done.

There I was, car packed with all of my suburbanly, as opposed to worldly, belongings reversing out of the driveway with Mum and Dad waving me off on my way to the apparent oasis of Queensland. They were probably just as confused, disappointed and worried as they were certain that I would be back before long. But no one finds themselves on the Gold Coast, it's a place perfect for staying lost. So amongst the bright lights and late nights I created a very similar life to the one I had previously, minus the comforts of home. Then add to that more booze, less personal reflection and a drug-dealing boyfriend whose life ambition was to travel around Australia in a panel van. He told me this as we staggered drunkenly along a road to nowhere one night. It sounded like a grand plan to me and in an effort to prove my free-spirited nature, I declared that was exactly what I had always wanted too. And so the planning began, a shared vision, a joint venture and a welcome distraction from everything else. Our pact to create 'travelling around Australia' as our reality kept us together for almost nine years. That, and the intoxicating feeling of validation, that comes conditionally through the love of another. I was hooked.

Dear Rachael,

After you rang today I felt so sad and it made me realise how deeply I feel for you. If you are not happy, then I can't be either. You are the most beautiful woman in the world to me. The thing I love most about you Rachael is how you love me. I love your patience with me and my habits. You are so understanding, and I am sorry. I love how you are so forgiving because I know I don't always do what I say I will and I don't always do the right thing. I know we are strong enough to make this last. What we have is

*something special and I can see a real future for us. I love you more than anything else in this world Racheal, and I always will.
Love forever.*

For a long time his love letter was my most prized possession, even if my name was spelt incorrectly throughout the entire thing.

Eventually we set off, two pioneering young Aussies amongst countless international backpackers and retired grey nomads. The oldies had worked their jobs, had their families and lived in their houses in the suburbs for their whole lives. They were now living the dream, doing ‘the big lap’, that for some will never end. We envied their big rigs and leisurely pace. But we were about fifty years younger than these fellow Australian travellers and the people our own age were from a world away, and most often downright annoying. I’ve read that backpackers are neither looking for a replica of their everyday lives nor a complete escape from it, but some kind of suspended reality in between. This, I could identify with. Backpacking is a widespread phenomenon where people travel from home to destination and home again in an effort to find meaning, change and self-expression. But in my mind, I had never really left home, I was just mucking around in my own backyard.

What never occurred to me at the time is that the term ‘backyard’ implies a static outdoor place connected to your home, not actually your home. By definition it is a familiar nearby area, or even neighbourhood. These days, the shore of Port Phillip Bay is my backyard, where I get outside, feel connected to nature and run freely over the same tracks time and again. My feet beat rhythmically to the tune of my own breathing. It is my way of restoring balance, attaining clarity and re-energising a world-weary body and mind. I never tire of it. It has become my touchstone of peace.

Reading through my rudimentary and repeatedly cringe-worthy travel diaries I become increasingly alarmed at the lack of depth and reflection that my twenty something year old self was more than capable of. There is no nod towards, ‘who am I and who

do I want to be?’ There appears to be no growth or learning beyond practical banalities. In fact there are years of entries that are almost identical.

Today we got up and drove about 200 kilometres. We stopped and had lunch in such and such National Park where we did the 3 kilometre walk along the river. It was okay. After getting some groceries we checked into the local caravan park, which is a bit of a rip-off at \$22 a night. But we badly needed to do some washing and have a full service of the hot shower variety. We spent most of the afternoon bumming out in the pool cos’ it’s so hot. We even got TV reception, which was cool, so we drank beers, smoked a few joints and made a private party of it.

In fact, even when engaging with relatively awe inspiring experiences, my commentary remains firmly funneled through a static mindset of blinkered vision. Take the next excerpt for example, which comes right off the back of a vent about indigenous land ownership so ill-informed and humiliating that I just cannot bring myself to reproduce it.

As we pull up closer to the rock, all the money grabbing is forgotten as the awe and magic of it take over. It’s much bigger than I thought and truly symbolises the heart of Australia to me. I cannot wait to fulfill my lifelong dream of actually climbing it. It’s only open from sunrise to 8am at this time of year due to extreme temperatures and I’m worried we won’t be able to. Also, the abbo’s hate people climbing it and have a fair bit of power in closing it whenever they want. When we pulled into the climb car park at about 5.30am, a ranger came and told us that, “climbing was not appropriate behavior”, blah, blah, blah, although we were free to do so if we wished. HOORAY! He was a dickhead anyway and the “it’s our rock too and we’ll climb it if we want to” attitude really pissed him off.

I go on to document a hair-raising and challenging climb that resulted in a sense of accomplishment and, of all things, a marriage proposal. So the sight seeing checklist merged with the lifestyle checklist and brought about a pause in travels for a year or so. Understandable really as all our money at the time was promptly used to purchase an adequately expensive engagement ring.

Said pause did not however mean returning home. We ended up landing a caretaker-couple type job, managing a dusty pub in the South Australian steel town of Whyalla. As publicans we became local identities, got comfortable, cashed up and by the looks of things had settled down somewhat. This was a fairly tough town where beer and footy mattered, summer days sometimes topped 45 degrees and everything was tinted pink from the local steelworks, even the seagulls. Problem was, static life left too much room for individual identity to reveal itself, and a permanent open bar tab did not particularly help matters.

I had to call the police to the front bar last night. We had a brawl brewing that I must admit was sort of started by me, not that I'd admit that to anyone. My bloody fiancé was out arguing with a local drug dealer (he assures me he has never in fact been a customer, even though the dealer said otherwise in a heated screaming match later on). Anyway, I decided to restore peace to the bar so marched over and told him to forget about those 'fuckers'. Not a great move as all hell broke loose after that. Apparently people take offense to being called fuckers. Fair enough I suppose, but that was the alcohol talking. Fortunately there was no real violence apart from a lot of scuffling and some serious shouting. Now the cops are looking into the whole thing and checking the security tapes. I just hope those tequila laybacks were far enough around the corner of the bar to stay off camera.

Even though our upstanding reputations remained largely intact after that little incident, it got us thinking that the job was too high-pressure for us, the hours were unhealthy and it wasn't the life we really wanted anyway.

Once more I found myself back on the road. Different car, different side of the country, yet same old story. I'd love to attribute my choices to something other than a willful ignorance to what dwelled somewhere deep in my gut, but I really can't. Perhaps I could claim something like multiphrenia, the condition of a displaced sense of self, where we march to the tune of 'ought to' and start working through socially constructed checklists. Maybe I can. After all, it causes relationships become more important than the self as that is the only place where the self is understood. But, social conditions aside, I probably should not neglect to acknowledge that the places I travelled to and through were nothing short of amazing. Australia truly is a county of extremes and of every possible landscape imaginable. It was the landscape of myself, and my relationship, that was static and stuck. But while there were things to do and places to see, it just wasn't something that jumped up and slapped me in face, so that I would actually take a good look.

By the time my fiancé and I had circumnavigated the entire Australian mainland in an all-encompassing sideways figure eight, also the symbol for infinity, we had literally run out of road. The sight seeing checklist was quickly abandoned for the equally important business of catching up on the lifestyle checklist. We had been quite efficient in taking care of an engagement whilst travelling, so got straight to work buying a house, and then arranging a wedding. All of which required the complete suspension of self while money was manufactured from strict adherence to many hours, weeks and months on the corporate treadmill. Before I knew it I had spent nine years of my life running around with the first guy who took hold of me, and then stayed. On the eve of my wedding day I started to glimpse the slowly unraveling nightmare I had pimped out as the great Australian dream.

He is in the bedroom sleeping. I have crept out with my blood pumping so hard I am sure I will wake him. I am terrified. Not of him, but of what I might find out. Earlier tonight he celebrated his last unmarried night with his half of the wedding guests, while I did the same with mine. It's like a massive group holiday, everyone installed in Portsea's various accommodations. The closest I have come to saying anything out loud was in the ladies toilets tonight. I was with my sister and childhood best friend, also my bridesmaids. We had a belly full of bubbles and amidst the tandem peeing I told them I really wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing. There was some good-hearted jostling and assurance that everyone gets cold feet, while I nodded and smiled, and convinced myself that was all it was. But it is after midnight and I'm staring at a text message from another woman on my fiancé's phone. My blood has stopped pumping and has all but evaporated. Oh fuck, I'm getting married tomorrow.

Looking back, that was the moment I knew that if I stood still long enough, I would find that I was standing in a wasteland. But I just kept going, mostly because it was all I knew how to do. Next stop Mexico, for the honeymoon chapter of the charmed and enviable life I had constructed for myself. And for three weeks I did everything I could to tend to the withered garden of my brand new marriage. It was all I had since I had willingly set adrift from myself all those years before. What amazes me more than anything is how easy it was to just carry on as if everything was as perfect as it looked. I have since learned that the unacknowledged and unspoken is every bit as dangerous as the truth.

I really don't know what to do. I mean I REALLY don't know. I am laying on our bed and I don't know what comes next. We only got back from Mexico four days ago and he has already gone missing for a night. Apparently he had too many beers at the pub and fell asleep in his car. He called me this morning on his way to work in yesterday's clothes. Fucking asshole. I was left the whole night wondering without so much as a text. I didn't know

whether to be scared to death or in a seething rage. As it turns out I am neither. Nothing in fact. His online phone records confirmed the lies. Then the look on his face, when I finally confronted him, started the fire that has burned me, and my life, right to the ground. He's gone now. What a mess. I don't know what to do.

At that point I felt that I had nowhere else to run and nowhere else to hide. And then very slowly, from the ashes of my almost fire resistant self, the real journey began.

Running along my bay I allow all moods to come and then go. Some days the sun dances in divine light across the impeccable watery surface. The sky is painfully clear and all the colours of nature are illuminated. Locals spill out onto walking tracks with spoilt little fur friends. Other days are steely, muted and violent. The wind wails and even the resident birdlife take cover. But I don't like to sit inside my man-made unit with the blinds drawn tight playing happy families. I thrust myself out into the place that I love for all of its beauty and all of its turbulence. I've never lived in such uncertainty and I've never felt more alive. Today I'm running up the steep little hillock of Point Ormond with the wind arguing against my progress at every step. It is tempting to stop and walk, after all nothing is stopping me. But I remind myself that I have run this run countless times, and to stop now would be to give up and fail. Fail at what I have no idea. I urge myself on to the top where I pause for a minute to catch my breath and take in the view of Melbourne's cityscape. The wind buffets against me while I have my own private 'Titanic' moment, alas without the handsome man holding me up. I know that I can keep going and soon enough, as I turn back towards home, the same wind will be a gentle helping hand on my back. And then again, by the ways of the wind, it may not.