

RECENT PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE MOON

A SHORT STORY BY DARYL AITKENHEAD

Inside her coffin were various framed photographs of different sizes. On her chest were two photographs of Alice Springs taken several years apart. One photograph showed the dry river bed of the Todd River during the annual Henley-on-Todd regatta, a bizarre spectacle where bottomless boats race along the dry river. That photograph had been taken about a decade earlier. I had returned last year, she had wanted to come, but by that stage her health had deteriorated to the extent that she was bedridden. The rain fell relentlessly while I was there and the river flooded along with large portions of the town. Aboriginal children swam and played in the flooded streets near the raging river, as she had done a long time ago, whilst the tourists on the verandah of the pub watched on. The river flowed a vivid red, like the desert on the bank, so that all that surrounded me was a brilliant red sea. I photographed that scene and when I returned I put it in a red frame and placed it beside her on the bed.

It was in this bed that she had died. It was a magnificent piece of design, the cast iron rods growing from the base of the bed and coming together near the roof, so it resembled a giant bird cage or a strange tropical flower. It was a gift from a friend she had met in Buenos Aires who created eccentrically designed furniture, because as she said, 'he was eccentric'. All around the bed were her photographs. Her three favourite prints were enlarged and covered the walls of her bedroom, while others were in tiny frames the size of a cigarette packet. The large photographs on the walls were a series of portraits she had taken whilst she was travelling down the western coast of Africa, from Morocco all the way to Namibia, over the course of 18 months. She captured horrific, recurring moments of poverty, civil war, aggressive military coups and government oppression. Yet she also documented the contrasting beauty of the continent.

My favorite was of a young girl, no older than five or six, standing barefoot outside the front of her school, which had been gutted by fire. Her father stood beside her, towering over her, dressed in military garb and holding a massive rifle over his shoulder. While her father stared intensely or perhaps solemnly at the lens, his daughter beamed at the camera with a radiant smile and waved one hand in the air so her tiny arm was distorted like a hummingbird wing.

She had told me that she wanted to be buried with the photographs because then those memories, her images, would stay with her. There were dozens of them in the coffin, portraits and landscapes from all over the world in different sizes and coloured frames. It was the largest coffin that I had seen.

It wasn't raining as I had imagined and seen in countless films. It was a clear day and the giant old gum trees lining the entrance to the cemetery swayed slowly in the breeze almost as a mark of respect. The cemetery grew larger as each year passed. The front of the cemetery still had the gothic style iron fence lining the road, it had been there as long as I could remember and it reminded me of her bed. Like most cemeteries in towns like this, there were giant mausoleums that were the resting place of the wealthy from long ago who made their fortunes from gold or other commodities as the land was opened up and new townships born. Those graves were in stark contrast to the new part of the cemetery on the top of the hill, with the small, almost

insignificant plaques on the ground; they had none of the eerie beauty that you feel at a military cemetery, like at the Normandy American Cemetery where the headstones are arranged in a beautiful structured dignity among the greenest grass in the world. She had wanted to take me there, but we never made it to France.

Her eyes were closed. The night was clear and cold and I lay with her in the bed. She looked just like she had years ago when I first met her. She showed no sign of her illness that was slowly taking her away. She asked me to set up the tripod on the verandah, I was surprised by the weight of it and struggled to think of how she had carried it with her on every journey, through Brazil or eastern Europe or the urban madness of New York city. Many of these places I had never visited, but through her photographs I felt as though I had.

The verandah overlooked the ocean and in the distance you could see the lighthouse at the head of the bay, where container ships would navigate the narrow, treacherous path.

She didn't have the strength to walk, so I lifted her into the wheelchair beside the bed and took her out to the verandah where the wind was blowing in off the ocean from the south, it was blisteringly cold, as it always is on such clear nights, but she didn't seem to mind. She had always liked nights like this, particularly in the desert outside Coober Pedy or Woomera, where after baking in the heat all day, the sun would set and the temperature would plummet to near freezing. The sky was never as clear anywhere else in the world. She had a photograph of snow in the desert, it was the strangest image I had ever seen, I couldn't remember where it was taken.

She asked me to get her favourite camera. I knew which one it was. Her camera collection was remarkable; she had nineteen cameras, all in black leather cases that sat on the bookshelf that covered a whole wall of her studio. Her favourite was in the largest case and I carried it to her on the verandah. She slowly opened the case and removed the camera and several different lenses and from one of the pockets on the side took a roll of film. She loaded the film into the camera with ease; she always laughed at me at the time it took for me to perform that procedure, and placed the camera on top of the tripod. She then began taking photographs. The moon was brilliant and full and illuminated the slow, rhythmic waves on the ocean. The last photograph she took she used the auto timer to capture one last portrait of us together, she had taken many of these over the last few years. That was the night she died.

I carefully took the film from the camera and walked into her darkroom. It took some time for my eyes to focus in the darkness as I tried to find the safety light. She had taught me the process many times, about the developer, the stop bath and the fixer, but it took some time for me to finally have a print of any quality. The photographs from that last film were beautiful shots of the moon and the ocean. In some of the photographs the surface of the moon was so vivid and close that it seemed if you outstretched your hand you would feel every detail of the moon's surface. I chose three small photographs of the moon to frame and add to the collection for burial. The final shot on the film was the portrait she had of the two of us, I kept that one.

I sat with no one behind me and no one in front of me. There was a line of black, fold-out chairs in a straight row of ten, I was sitting in the chair on the far left of the row, all the other chairs remained empty. I looked over at the gum trees again. She would have liked them. The first photograph she ever took was of the beautiful River Red Gums that lined the banks of the Murray River. Those trees were now dying as the mighty river slowly died. She was fascinated by the sacred scarred trees of the local Aboriginal people. She took the photograph with the Pentax her father had given her for her thirteenth birthday and she took that camera with her everywhere. It was with that camera she had taken her last photographs, and while the gums continued their gentle swaying; there she was, buried, with those recent photographs of the moon.