

Boarding House Blues

"I've got heartache in my top pocket" croons Ronald, his fingers thick, rough and calloused delicately picking at the guitar strings.

*"Like a fool I believed you,
when you said you'd never leave."*

His voice is melancholy as he sits on the concrete steps of the sharp edged building block that is now his home.

*"Now I search the heavens and the earth for a reason why you left
And why you lied".*

His eyes are dark except for the whites; a shocking contrast to his skin, as are his white teeth that flash from time to time beneath his thick, black lips as he sings. Skinny arms strum.

His brother Mark sits close by, also on the step, rhythmically tapping an empty, plastic Coca Cola bottle to the music. He uses his palm, then his leg and eventually the stair itself to create a beat for Ronald's wistful tune. Mark eyes the distant scrubland, no doubt drawn by its mystique. Arak, their 'brother' but not related, picks up on the tune and rhythm and begins to hum. He taps out a beat on the hollow of his guitar, selects a few basic notes and joins in with his own harmony.

I feel like an impostor.

But it's always been that way, ever since I lived here. Moving into the boarding house at an affluent boys' school in middle suburbia had never been an ambition, just a necessary cause of action in a bid to finance myself through university and continue to afford mid-winter trips

to Indonesia or up North in a search of perfect surf, sun and big fish. Who could resist free board and lodging in return for one night a week and every fifth weekend minding 64 ‘little brothers’? My presence had caused quite a stir. The look on each parents face as a busty, blonde, twenty something year old was introduced as the new Resident House Assistant of Wilson Boarding House had been priceless. I had said ‘no’ three times to the Head of the Boarding House, I didn’t want the job; but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. I suspect he sensed my desperation to be out of home and at least a few more kilometres closer to the beach.

So now I, the only female in a house of 64 boys and two other male Resident Assistants, sits alongside three 15-year-old boys from up Beagle Bay on the North West coastline, on a starry Friday night. We always sit outside after dinner just to wind down. The dining hall is a mass scramble for food as 426 boys revert to ‘survival of the fittest’ type Darwinism trying all tricks in the book in an attempt to be served ahead of the next.

Inside the house, the other boys sit under fluorescent lights, watching TV, playing game boys, pool and table tennis. Tick, tock, tick, tock as the ball goes back and forth, until cheers break the rhythm, as someone is defeated. Tick, tock, tick, tock, back and forth, back and forth. The continued blare of techno music and modern punk, pumps from each boy’s stereo in their cubicles. Repetitive in beat and rhyme, the stereos spew out their monotonous sound.

Back outside, the night is still except for a light easterly breeze.

“All we need is a fire”, says Mark.

“And maybe a few beers” laughs Arak.

Ronald looks thoughtful “And Ma, Vinnie, Gemma and the littl’uns”.

The boys strum on.

“Miss!” someone calls from inside the house. “Miss!”

“Out here!” I call in reply.

A young schoolboy appears at the doorway. He hesitates at the entrance. He goes to join us on the stairs, but changes his mind and stays within the confines of the building.

“Can we order pizza?” he asks.

“You guys just ate!”

“I know, but we’re hungry” he laments.

One thing I’ve learned from being here is that 15-year-old boys are *always* hungry.

“Yeah, sure. The phone number is in on the whiteboard. What are you guys doing in there?”

“Nothing” he says, “Just watching telly”.

“Well it’s a beautiful night out here, there’s a warm breeze and a zillion stars”.

He nods but doesn’t seem interested, “I’m gonna order the pizza” he calls over his shoulder, walking away.

“Hey Miss?” my attention focuses back to the three boys outside with me. “Do you know the song, ‘My Island Home’? Was writt’n by some fellahs from up our way”, Ronald asks.

I do. I know and love that song. “Yep, I know it, but not all of the lyrics”.

“I’ll sing, you just join in where you can”, he replies.

The stairs are cold and hard, but the night sky full of stars. The pine and jarrah trees in the park across the road whistle and moan in the light breeze. The house mongrel, an obese staffy stretches out on the cement steps and sighs loudly. Ronald, Mark and Arak begin to play and

sing.

"I come from the saltwater people,

we always live, by the sea.

They say home is where the heart is,

Will this place, ever satisfy me?"

I begin, quietly at first and my mind wanders to my own saltwater dreaming and my own 'brothers' and 'sisters' of a loosely knitted tribe. People, whose search takes us from coastline to coastline, beach to beach across the continent, in fact, the whole world. All drawn to the same taste of saltwater on our lips, sun on our back and feel of a wave under our feet. Each person searching for the wave that carries us the furthest pushes us the fastest and traps us the deepest. Where fear and euphoria are only seconds apart and where nobody cares where you come from, what you 'do' or how much you earn. All that matters is who is the deepest.

"And now I've come to live in the city,

with my woman and family"

My voice rings loud for the chorus.

"My island home,

my island home,

my island home, is waiting for me"

Upstairs, a tired teacher, the Head of Boarding raises his head from the daily paper at the sound of the singing. He reaches for the remote and turns down the television, where onscreen, American movie stars dressed to the nines, clutch golden trophies, gush their appreciation to whoever is listening, smile, blink and then move offstage. The teacher is

drawn to the window, where he peers down at the group singing below. The hairs on his forearms and neck rise and he shivers gently from the sound.

Further along in the dormitory, a young boy slams his window shut to block out the same noise. He returns to his desk in his three by two meter cubicle and pushes the replay button on his computer game. The overhead light pulses down, blinding. The blue walls and blue drawn curtains close in. It's the same in the next cubicle and the next.

We sing loudly now, lost in the verses of the song.

"In the evening, the dry wind blow,

from across the hills and across the plains.

I close my eyes and I'm standing, in a boat on the sea again.

And I'm holding that long turtle spear,

And I'm feeling close now, to where it must be

My Island Home is waiting for me"

We finish in perfect harmony

"My island home is waiting for me".

Another lad appears at the doorway, older than the last and tanned. I smile and the others greet him, "Come and join us, James", they beckon.

He swings off the doorway without hesitation and looks up at the sky, "What a great night!

You guys sound awesome. Do you know any Midnight Oil songs?" he asks Ronald.

"I think," but after a few attempts at playing Ronald doesn't remember.

"Here" says James as he reaches for the guitar, "like this". He plays a tune that we all know,

but somehow the lyrics we sing are muddled. There is a break in the playing.

“I was just checking the swell charts,” says James “And there is a three meter swell on its way. Should hit the coast by tomorrow morning”.

“Ah Miss, could be some waves for ya tomorrow eh?” Mark smiles.

“True, but I’m on duty all weekend. Can’t leave the school premises” I feel disappointed.

One more day without the familiar feel of cool sand between my toes at dawn. Another sunrise missed where at first the sky is pink and purple, then golden yellow, till radiant orange fills the sky. Another day will pass and I will be without the feel of morning wind that dampens my wetsuit left out overnight and fogs up the windscreen of the car making it difficult to navigate to the beach.

I imagine the sea at daybreak with no one out. A few surfers congregate on the sand, close to the waters edge, stretching, limbering up and hooting at the waves. Just a few more moments now and it will be light enough to paddle out through the keyhole in the reef. During the night tiny crabs have left their ghostly patterns in the sand. The surfers, on cue with the sun’s rays peeping over the hills and illuminating the ocean hit the water and the surf comes alive with bodies and boards all negotiating their path through the liquid energy.

Further down the beach surf lifesavers swim out and around the buoy placed in a perfect straight line, exactly one hundred meters out to sea. Out and around they swim, out and around. Sometimes on the shore, they switch to some sort of surf craft and paddle their skis and boards, but it always the same, out and around and in. Out and around and in.

In the water, a young surfer’s pleasure is shattered by an authoritative voice shrieking over a

loudhailer. "Surfer! You must move out of the swimming zone. Out of the designated area!"

The grommet looks to shore where he can see a fat bellied, balding man, in sluggos waving a flag, pointing frantically at his 'No surfing' sign. The man continues to shout until the boy resentfully paddles away to a more crowded spot. He looks back at the perfect waves reeling through the peak he was forced to abandon because of some idiot with a power trip. He yearns, but knows in two months time, after the summer season has gone and the 'Baywatch' style madness has packed up their banners, removed their buoys and flags, that he will have his choice of autumn, winter and spring waves.

James intrudes on my thoughts.

"Well, there's always next weekend for waves" he offers sympathetically. "I'll catch one for ya, tomorrow" as he nudges my shoulder.

Two more boys appear at the door. Their skin is sun kissed and their hair, salty blonde. Both are barefoot and they instinctively look at the sky and trees.

"It's going be offshore tomorrow for sure. Those trees are blowing east," says the small freckly one.

"Man, check out the stars" says the other.

"Do you play?" Ronald asks offering his guitar to them.

"No, but I know that last one you were playing. Play it again".

They sit down on the stairs with us.

Ronald begins to strum, Arak clears his voice and Mark finds the beat with his bottle again.

"I come from the saltwater people,

we always live, by the sea.

They say home is where the heart is,

Will this place ever satisfy me?"

Our voices, melancholic and sweet, combine and carry through the boarding house walls,
across the schoolyard and out towards the west. The easterly wind lifts and carries our voices
to the sea and beyond the breakers to where our hearts truly lie.