

STORIES FROM THE *Clarence Valley* 2020

# LAND/MARKS



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## FINDING HOME

By Kylie Fennell

The Keeper sits at her desk flanked by towers of overflowing filing cabinets. Manila folders and scraps of paper burst from overstuffed drawers. The contents represent echoes of her past. Breadcrumbs of stories untold. Stories yet to unfold.

She clings to any fragments of information she can find, collecting them like a bowerbird. Faded photographs with torn edges. Copies of documents that once lived on microfilm or were buried in dusty government archives. Rare records and oral histories she's hunted down over the years. Each of them a clue. A piece of a puzzle she needs to solve so everything makes sense.

It's up to her to put all the pieces together. The pieces that anchor her to the community, culture and Country lost to her for so many years.

She is the Keeper of knowledge and preserver of storylines, past, present and future.



THE MUSICIAN'S ears pop as they descend the mountain range, jolting her attention away from her phone.

She's been reading the same reviews over and over. Words like '*disappointing*', '*forced*' and '*annoyingly angsty*' weave a knot in her mind.

'You're not reading those bloody reviews again?' her boyfriend, and manager, asks.

'They're right. The songs have no heart.'

Her boyfriend cups his hand over hers. 'The album's great. You're a brilliant artist.'

Dusty, the blue heeler she inherited from her grandmother, barks from the back seat.

'See, even Dusty agrees.'

She forces a laugh.

They're driving from Tamworth to play at a private party on a property near Grafton. After the success of her first album she'd been performing at major country festivals and venues that hold thousands. A far cry from performing for some rich property owner and his mates.

Her debut album was a soundtrack to her personal grief and heartbreak. Her lyrics and music as raw as her pain.

The critics and fans loved it. Everyone assumed she was singing about bad break-ups and ex-boyfriends but the songs are about something more powerful than that. They're about the death of her grandmother. The woman who practically raised her while her single mum worked three jobs. She was the Musician's compass. Her rock. Her confidante.

By the time the Musician started her second album she was spent. Lost. She'd resorted to emulating others and imagined heartbreaks. The reviews shouldn't come as a surprise.

Her boyfriend says this weekend's gig is a chance to

reset and reconnect to her music without any pressure. Maybe he's right.

The road straightens as they reach the bottom of the range. Grey-green hills mark a landscape dotted with cattle and the occasional farmhouse.

'Didn't your grandmother originally come from down this way?'

'I think so but she never really spoke about it.' Her stomach growls. 'How much further to a shop?'

'There's a service station up ahead. Whoa!'

Her boyfriend slams on the brakes as they round a bend to find a herd of cattle blocking the highway.

A farmer approaches the driver window and takes his Akubra from his head to wipe his brow.

'Sorry, mate, but these gals won't budge. You'll have to go back and take Cangai Bridge Road. Go over the bridge then follow the road back out to the highway.'

The Musician's boyfriend shrugs suggesting that it might be the 'scenic route'. The Musician is less optimistic when they find the detour is a dirt road.

She changes her opinion though when the road emerges alongside a blue-green river, its shore a blanket of pebbles. Here and there white water skips over rocks that jut out from the surface. The Musician can almost hear the water gurgling. Singing to her.

They get to the bridge but she doesn't want to cross it. She wants to stay and hear the music of this place. She tells her boyfriend to pull over and they get out of the car.

She breathes in the crisp air and laughs as a willie wagtail appears and starts dive-bombing Dusty.

Dusty snaps at the bird but misses each time. The willie wagtail lands on Dusty's back and lifts its beak in

challenge before launching itself into the air and flying across the bridge.

In the blink of an eye Dusty is off, chasing the bird, and the Musician chases Dusty.



THE KEEPER WAS nine years old when her mother and father separated. She can only recall little things from that time like the timber cottage with a giant river red gum beside it, a gully and a creek behind. The constant thrum of cicadas and insects. The sounds of bird calls. The trickle of a river in the distance.

She remembers her father saying goodbye. He'd wiped away the fat tears that rolled down her cheek, saying he'd see her soon. His face crinkled into a reassuring smile. He told her it wasn't anyone's fault.

'Some things aren't meant to be forever. You mum and me – our time has passed.'

His voice had cracked as he'd spoken. Or maybe it was the sound of his heart breaking.

A bird broke into song in the red gum.

'Do you hear that?' her father asked, squeezing her hand. 'That's the willie wagtail. It's our messenger bird. When you see or hear a willie wagtail, you'll know it's me sending you a message.'

Her father died a few months later.

Remembering her father's words, the Keeper never blamed anyone. It wasn't the same for her siblings.

The Keeper was what they called a 'change-of-life' baby. Her brother and sister had already left home by the time she was born and were strangers to her.

They'd come to their father's funeral but didn't speak to their mother.

She'd contacted them when the dementia overtook their mother and she had to be moved to a nursing home. Her siblings never visited their mother or came to her funeral.

The brother and sister couldn't forgive their mother for their father's death.

The Keeper couldn't forgive *them*.

After they left her father, the Keeper lived with her mother and grandparents on the Mid North Coast.

Not long after the move some official-looking types turned up at school and took a boy away.

The Keeper overheard some teachers talking about it. They used the words 'mixed race' and some other terms she didn't know but she could tell by the way they said them – screwing up their face like they'd just sucked a lemon – that they weren't good words.

Another day, a kid at school asked her if she was Aboriginal.

The Keeper said she didn't know and asked her mum when she got home.

Her mother got angry before a scared look came across her face. 'You aren't Aboriginal. Your great-grandparents were Italian. Your father's grandparents came from South America.' She bent down to eye level and put her hands on the girl's shoulders. Her tone serious. 'That's what you tell people, okay.'

The Keeper came to understand that being Aboriginal was synonymous with shame and fear.

Many years later she felt a greater shame – a shame borne of denial.

The Keeper married and moved to Grafton with her husband. They didn't have any children and she had no family to speak of. But her life was comfortable. She

should have been content. She shouldn't have felt anchorless. Adrift at sea. Alone.

One day in the main street an older Aboriginal woman approached her.

'*Baarrii?* Is that you?' she cried. 'It's gotta be! You're the spittin' image of ya mother.'

She wrapped her arms around the Keeper sobbing the word '*baarri*'.

The woman turned out to be her father's sister. Later she learned that '*baarri*' meant niece.

The Keeper's journey to reclaim her culture began that day. Over time she was introduced to the Elders. She listened. She listened more. She learned the old ways. The bush ways. How to read the land and seasons.

She learned how her people would wait for the blossoming of a particular shrub or vine that would signal the coming of fish up the river, or the best time to eat a specific animal or plant.

She learned how the old people would rub bunches of a poisonous weed together in the water to stun fish to make it easier to spear.

She learned about a certain spot across the river, high up on a hill, where her ancestors danced and performed a ceremony when someone died. The spirit of the dead would see the dancing and know they weren't forgotten.

The Keeper made her connection to Country and now must help others do the same.



THE ARTIST WONDERS if he can in fact call himself an artist after one good painting and a series of mediocre ones.

He's really a lawyer. A profession his father approves of yet gives him little pleasure.

While the pay is good, the hours are ridiculous. In the little spare time he has he sketches. Landscapes featuring exotic places he's been. Italy's Amalfi Coast. Scotland's rolling hills. Kyoto's temples dusted in snow.

He loves painting but it's not a 'real' job.

THE ARTIST IS HELPING his daughter with a family history assignment when he finds the photo of his grandfather. It's faded but the way his grandfather's dark eyes twinkle back at him and the cheeky grin on the man's face immediately transport him back to his childhood.

He remembers a time when he was about twelve and his grandfather came to visit. He'd taken him for fish and chips by the river.

The old man lit up a rollie and watched the CityCats and yachts snake their way up and down the river. The city's concrete towers standing to attention on the other side.

The Artist's grandfather made a sound that was halfway between a sigh and 'hmpf'.

He spoke about a different river. His river. The river where he swam with his mates and caught turtles for dinner. 'Gumbaynggirr Country,' he said.

The Artist's grandfather went back regularly to his river. He'd camp there for weeks at a time.

His grandfather had asked whether he could take the Artist with him but the Artist's dad refused.

'Maybe when you're old enough to take care of yourself.'

That time never came.

His grandfather passed away on one of those trips.

*Peacefully*, they'd been told.

He'd taken a nap under an old red gum and had never woken up.

The Artist tried to find his grandfather's river but it was harder than it sounded. His dad knew nothing about the place and didn't care to help.

Gumbaynggirr Country extends all the way from Grafton down to Nambucca and rivers are plentiful in that part of the world. Over time the Artist's need to feel connected to his grandfather was pushed into the background. Until he found the photo.

THE ARTIST'S brushes dance across the canvas as if they have a mind of their own. He paints like a man possessed, until a faithful representation of his grandfather smiles back at him.

On a whim he enters the Brisbane Portrait Prize. He doesn't win but he's one of the finalists.

His success spurs him on but nothing else he paints fills him with the same sense of completeness.

He persists and paints his landscapes.

He holds an exhibition. At the end of the night an older woman he hadn't noticed earlier zeroes in on him.

'You've been some fancy places,' she says.

She points to a landscape of Bacharach in Germany with a river in the background. 'What about this place? That river there?'

'The Rhine. Perhaps the most beautiful river in the world.'

She makes a 'hmp' sound that the Artist finds eerily familiar.

'You have a different opinion?'

'For me,' her dark eyes sparkle, 'the most beautiful

river is at Cangai. Gumbaynggirr Country.’

At that moment the gallery owner delivers the disappointing news that none of the Artist’s paintings have sold. When he turns back to quiz the woman further, she’s gone.

The Artist can’t stop thinking about the encounter with the woman and what she’d said about the river in Gumbaynggirr Country. The next day he quits his job and tells his wife he wants to go to Cangai.

His wife holds the fort at home for two weeks so he can go and paint.

The Artist camps by the river at a spot between the bridge and a gully that leads to a creek.

The landscape and river are as beautiful as the woman said. There aren’t any grand landmarks or features. The beauty comes from its simplicity. Its restraint. None of which translates onto the canvas.

It’s the end of the two weeks and the Artist has resigned himself to giving up his artistic ambitions. He’s going home to get a job. He packs up his brushes.

‘Get back here,’ someone cries.

The Artist looks up to see a young woman running across the bridge. She’s chasing a blue heeler. The dog’s chasing...a willie wagtail!

The dog runs right past him toward the gully and the Artist gives chase.



THE KEEPER GOES to the place where the house once was. She sits under the red gum and waits. Her months of planning are coming to fruition. She could have told them who she was and invited them here, but they had to find their own way. Even if they needed a little help.

She had seen the portrait of her brother in a newspaper. He was much older than she remembered but still recognisable. She tracked down the Artist and planted the necessary seed at his exhibition.

The Keeper had seen an interview with the Musician talking about her grandmother and how the dog goes everywhere with her.

She just needed a couple of favours from her friends. The farmer whose cattle had ‘strayed’ onto the road and the property owner who’d booked the Musician for his party.

Then it was up to the willie wagtail to deliver its message and the land itself to speak to them.

The willie wagtail flutters back to her, landing on her shoulder. The dog arrives and greets her like an old friend.

The Artist appears and does a double take.

‘You’re the woman from my exhibition.’

The Musician arrives puffing, her face flushed. Her gaze falls on the dog nuzzling the Keeper’s hand.

‘He doesn’t normally like strangers,’ she says.

The Keeper speaks.

*‘Ngayu yaam gurriji yilaa Gumbaynggirr guuyu jurruy biin.  
Darruyay yilaami ngiyambandi jagunda Gumbaynggida.’*

‘That is a Welcome to Country. A welcome to your Country.’

‘Who are you?’ the Artist and Musician ask in unison.

‘You can call me Aunty. Not because that’s what everyone calls me but because I *am* your aunt. Your great-aunt.’

The Artist and Musician exchange a confused look.

‘Let me tell you a story...’