

Content note: The following story contains references to sexual assault and other possibly disturbing themes.

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Weelow

WITH SUCCESS COMES NOTORIETY, EVEN to a low-level clerk in the mid-1970s Australian Public Service. Nerdy little Eugene Fairbairn suddenly found himself the focus of previously undreamt attention at the National War Memorial, simply for identifying the problems with an apparently authentic photo of the ANZAC's Light Horse Brigade. Sycophants asked to sit with him at lunch in the cafeteria. Others slipped him the drafts of papers, asking for constructive criticism, or just a little feedback. And some at the War Memorial, it must be said, viewed him in friendlier, slightly-less-than-professional terms. One such colleague was a woman named Dorothea although she, unlike many who accosted him, had a genuine "in" with the newly popular Eugene. She had met his activist brother Kenny at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy.

"Excuse me, you're Eugene Fairbairn, right? The guy who proved the Beersheba photo was a fake?"

"Uh... yes, that's me."

"Forgive me, cuz, but are you related to Kenny Fairbairn? I mean, well, you guys have the same surname."

At the unexpected mention of his dimwit brother, Eugene grimaced and turned away.

But Dorothea was very hard to ignore.

She was a strikingly good-looking Aboriginal woman, interning at the War Memorial as part of her Bachelor of Social Sciences at Canberra's Australian National University. Her skin, Eugene couldn't help but notice, was the darkest of browns, for she was a full-blood, and her mob were the Kalkadoons of distant North Queensland. But she looked nothing like the Kalkadoon women most people knew from the Mt. Isa riverbed: all pencil-thin limbs, expansive pot-bellies, and drooping dugs, crawling with flies, caring little for their health or appearance, and snarling at onlookers through tawny port-flagon fumes. Nope, she looked "bugger-all like a clapped-out Boong from the long grass of the Isa," as the womaniser Gary Foley from the Tent Embassy would have said, slouching as he lecherously tried to score her phone number.

Dorothea looked like a magnificent black princess hand-carved out of ebony.

Her childhood had been happily lived in far North Queensland: in Townsville, a place inexplicably unashamed of being named after a slave trader. There, she learnt to be proud of her Aboriginal Australian heritage, but ashamed of her brother's and sister's dismal socio-economic conditions, which she knew were endured country-wide: the significantly higher rates of suicide, infant mortality, and imprisonment; the significantly lower rates of high school completion and university enrolment; the significantly reduced life expectancy and employment opportunities. She knew that these were issues that demanded healing. She also knew there was nothing she could do in the White Man's bureaucracy to redress these historic imbalances, except slowly climb its ladders to an eventual position of influence, but she was not above haranguing other students on campus with a history lecture when she got the chance. With her easy confidence, Eugene found her alluring and he soon deemed her company acceptable. Over several lunches at the War Memorial staff cafeteria, a friendship blossomed. And, it must be noted, Eugene began to rethink the possibility of his own indigeneity in the presence of one so stunning and proud of her heritage.

His brother accepted their part-Aboriginality. Should he reconsider? He thought: "Perhaps—while my skin is the canvas, the product of my very own palette and easel, with a dull base coat the colour of nothing more glamorous than wet Arnott's Arrowroot biscuits—perhaps, if I connect the dots of this skin painting before me in the mirror, I can trace the outline of a tree, a rare tree, like a boab tree? Perhaps," he continued to think, "but it is a plant in which some branches are indistinct. There is Scottish in the boughs, to be sure, phloem and xylem like inlets of the Scotland coastline,

secured by the good family name of Fairbairn. The trunk that holds me aloft is as erect as any British flagpole: is there a part of it that is Aboriginal? Over here the bark is stringy; there it is papery. In other places it is smooth, white and cross-hatched with rosacea and acne—like a sprinkling of red desert ochre.” These were the new thoughts, inspired by Dorothea.

“My epidermis is a bark painting, but I can’t yet decide how to categorise it,” he admitted.

He was beginning to concede that maybe, just maybe, there was some truth to his mother’s revelation about their great grandmother being Aboriginal, years ago, around their dining table as his father carved the saddle of roast mutton.

He decided he would visit this Aboriginal Tent Embassy with her, as an anthropological field trip, so to speak, and see how it felt in their company. And in his part-Aboriginal brother’s company.

But then, Dorothea met with a life-changing tragedy. She was raped. Brutally and unforgivably. It was something that came as a real shock to him.

Prior to the attack, Dorothea was fond of losing herself in exercise. She was a Blackfella Valkyrie. With her black, kinky hair scraped back into a severe bun, she’d don moth-eaten sweats and train like the Wiradjuri woman, Evonne Goolagong, preparing for Wimbledon glory.

There were weights sessions with forced reps and every set was completed to failure, the lactic acid burning into her muscles like liquid fire. Her resting heartrate nearly tripled in the aerobic sessions, which aimed at metabolising all unnecessary body fat. And then there was Pilates learnt from a French chick she knew at uni for flexibility, and yoga taught by the Hare Krishnas for focus and mental acuity.

And because it could be squeezed in around any university lecture timetable and interning schedule, she sweated through many miles of road running. So she was out jogging one Sunday afternoon, feeling strong and confident. After setting off from the Australian National University campus she passed through the residential streets of Acton, where the pets and children of tenured academics played freely, as if they were living next door to a police station.

Dorothea was no easy push over, so she was right to feel confident. Instead, she ran then safely along the high concrete wall of Scrivener Dam, which first impeded the Molonglo River’s progress in 1963, forming the mighty lake’s catchment, and past the secluded grounds of Government House, until, as she was nearing the leafy, rich suburb of Yarralumla, she was gliding high on endorphins and covering ground fast, when she was

tripped over by a wire strung taut across the jogging and bicycle path that winds around the perimeter of Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin.

But before she knew what was happening she was felled, flat. Nasal bones smashed in by the attacker's fist. Dragged under the cover of a thick row of neatly-pruned ornamental bushes. Grimy handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, her cries for help cut off, silenced.

He sliced through her lycra shorts with his little knife, pulling down his greasy King Gee work trousers, rejoicing in the pain he was inflicting. He felt, in the brief seconds of his violence, that he owned her, that his savagery and chaos made him the master.

It only took a few thrusts before the creep finished and disappeared in exactly the same way nightmares don't, leaving Dorothea bleeding and shocked beside the otherwise picturesque bike-path. Looping around the National Capital's shining jewel, a man-made lake, it made for an idyllic picture of bucolic scenery. Such acts are foreseen neither by landscape artists nor city planners. "What a scumbag, low-life, complete and utter waste of space he was," Gary Foley would have declared, as he would've also sworn to avenge his black sista's injury. "The weakest of dogs, the shabbiest of crooks, the scabbiest of filth, the vilest of suburban vipers," he would have said, but Eugene learnt nothing of these details.

Glimpses of other injustices were sung mournfully by the Australian landscape that never forgets crimes as unspeakable as this—for as clumsy as it can be at times, the good, stable Earth remembers all. But Dorothea was sobbing uncontrollably, too shocked to move, too insulted to scream, too hurt to listen to her Country trying to sing to her, trying to soothe her. Twenty five minutes later another jogger heard her low choking moans, found her dazed, semi-conscious form, and called the ambulance from a phone box a half kilometre away.

The hospital discharged her three days later and, although she remained convinced otherwise, the brutal offence she had suffered had nothing to do with her Aboriginality. A woman, any woman, might have done for him. With her mouth twisted forever by the bitter taste of betrayal, she withdrew.

Like the totem she subsequently adopted, the nocturnal Stone Bush Curlew (or Weelow, according to the Kalkadoon lingo of her mob), Dorothea withdrew from all contact with people, from all people's sight, from all people's hearing. Not inappropriately, the song of this Weelow sounds like the scream of a woman as it rises through the high-pitched registers of prehistoric terror, and through to peals of maniacal laughter before subsiding into desperate keening. It is a heart-wrenching noise, much like the

sounds made by an abandoned refugee, or a woman mourning for her lost or stolen children. Unhappy night shrieks are often heard around Townsville and the Isa, where the ungainly, grey birds gather. Tall and haughty, their long hard beaks held high, there they regard their lonely reflections in the night-time, mirror-glass walls of petrol stations on the outskirts of tiny Queensland towns.

And so Dorothea became a Weelow in all but physical form. She returned to Mt Isa, got on the grog, and never went back to the university, or the War Memorial.

And so Dorothea disappeared from Eugene's life, suddenly and without explanation, and the lonely Fairbairn brother felt confused rejection.

And so his bitterness towards Aboriginal Australians was reborn, his vindictiveness growing even stronger. And he finally declared himself to be not one little bit blackfella.