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PRESENTS

THE GULLS

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I'd put off reading my grandfather's journals for months. His death had been too raw for me to pick up the sentences of his past or maybe I was afraid of what I would find, that the man in the pages would not live up to the grand-poppy of my boyhood.

I'd been named after him and we had once been close.

The first page entry was his last:

This is the final entry of Nathaniel H Johnston.

Since I started these journals I have kept this page, the first one, blank, waiting for today. Now what shall I write?

Well, to the reader: please note that the starred entries are the ones worth reading. You will also note that they are few and far between. "Such is life," as Ned Kelly was supposed to have said, before he went to the place where I am now headed, be that up or down.

Also, corresponding to each entry in these journals is a photo of myself, taken on the last Sunday of every month since I left home at the age of seventeen. They carry on my father's work. Together with those photos he took, which I also include with these journals, you will see that they number almost all my eighty-nine years by twelve. The only hiatus was the three years during which I was abroad.

"Abroad" was grand-poppy's way of describing his years in the British Army, before he married an Aussie girl and immigrated to Australia. And the portrait photos of himself had indeed begun when his own father, a keen but amateur photographer, started with a monthly snap of his newborn and, as it turned out, only son.

As regular as the calendar, Poppy had never missed a month and in a way I thought, even though the earlier photos were Box-Brownie faded, it was time-lapse photography before it was generally heard of.

There were nine journals. And over a thousand pictures painting the words.

In the later photos, if you scanned across them, you could see my grand-poppy crinkling with age, in contrast with the pictures as they grew crisper with technology.

I sat and shuffled through the years, trying to match the faces of my childhood Poppy with those on the bed before me. One decade became obvious; these were the years of my visits and holiday stays before he moved so far away that seeing him became almost impossible.

After I'd spread the photos over the bed, I checked the dates on their backs, sorted them into sequence and recognised the time we'd shared as if it were only a dream away.

One photo stood out like a plea. Taken in the same chair, and in the same stance as all the others, this one seemed brighter but less focused. I remembered the last time I saw it. I was there the day it was taken and seeing it again now, my childhood peeled away like a shell.

This photo, however, wasn't the one I had ruined.

I was fourteen and that was the last time I was to see my Poppy. I am thirty now. I never did manage to find the money for the trip to visit him in between.

Poppy had never been one to tolerate fools gladly. I'd sensed this from the earliest age

and was always at pains not to disappoint him. He wasn't a stereotypical grandparent; I have no recollection of fishing, football, or cricket hallmark moments. Ours were of the darkroom and the bright sky-lit hills, the watery, dusk-gloamed creeks and coppery fields in walking closeness to his cottage.

Poppy taught me about bulb setting, shutter speed, background, backlighting, and the all important balance of the shot. How you could frame the picture with branches gnarling around the edge of a pond, or the canopy of a tree uplifting the sky.

Since Grandma's death though, he seemed to be a step out of time with the Australian landscape, and started talking about the Marsh Harriers of his English country childhood in the Norfolk Broads or borrowing the wind to sail the rivers.

"So, Nat," he'd said that autumn morning of my arrival. "Just in time to help me with the Frog."

The Frog was his nickname for his old wooden rowboat. Its outer coat of green was the only legacy of its name that I could see. The Frog was sluggish when you rowed. Not that Poppy ever really understood this. He'd had an outboard motor fitted when he'd bought it.

Both his arms had limited movement, courtesy of having some of 'the war', as he called it, lodged in his spine. Over the years, the paralysis worsened and I often marvelled at his ability to function so well on his own, and also at his dexterity in what was known as his 'Light-tight' room, its only illumination a filter-fitted safelight.

The self-portrait photos Poppy carried on because he felt an obligation to keep up his father's tradition. But his real love, and indeed his profession, was photographing the wild, although he went for the commonplace rather than the exotic. "All nature is miraculous, Nat," he often told me.

This new autumn morning, I had arrived buzzing with excitement. It was March 1994 and the first digital camera had not long come out. I had received one for Christmas and couldn't wait to tell Poppy about it. But he had other ideas and as soon as I'd unpacked he had me rowing out to his favourite spot. The outboard on the Frog had died a few weeks before and he hadn't had time to fix it.

"Jonathon's gulls are back, Nat. I heard them screeching over the house last night. I know where they'll be heading. We had fishermen down here last weekend. One of those tour groups from town. Left lots of bait and dead carp by the old pier."

Five years before, when holidaying at the coast, Poppy had found an abandoned seagull and had taken it home and raised it. He'd named the bird Jonathon, as in Jonathon Livingston Seagull, one of his favourite books. Poppy lived in the high country and, before Jonathon, gulls never came that far inland.

I was there the day he'd released him into the valley where the ghost gums struggled with the drought and the cliff tops towered over them like god's hands. Jonathon and his flock of seagulls had come back every year after that but this time they were early. I'd had the long weekend planned since Christmas, although I hadn't expected to see the gulls. They usually didn't appear until spring.

"Going to be a bad winter, I reckon, Nat," Poppy said as I pulled the oars, heading inland. I felt uncomfortable with my position in the boat. Facing backwards I couldn't see

where I was going.

The Frog's hull snagged the reeds and the river's outbound flow slowed our progress. My arms ached and soon I had to stop. The boat swung sideways and Poppy cursed.

"Keep it moving boy. If you don't keep moving forward you lose your steering."

He only ever called me 'boy' when he was getting irritated. I started rowing again.

In retrospect I remember that Poppy had grown quiet after saying this. At the time I'd thought it was his anger rising in silence, but now I am not so sure.

Soon I'd passed the threshold and had my second wind but I knew my muscles would be on fire the next day. It was always like this. Even when the outboard was operational Poppy had me rowing. I think secretly he hated using the 'oil', as he called it. And I had to admit that gliding down the river with the breeze for song, accompanied by the dip dip of the oars, was the best way to photograph wildlife before it departed for bush or sky.

Poppy leaned over, keeping hold of the tiller, and dragged his kitbag towards himself. He opened the clip, took out his latest camera with its impressive telescopic lens, and a large bag of broken bread and rolls.

"The gulls will be hungry after such a long journey. I've been saving these scraps for ages. Kept them in the fridge. Poor old chooks have had to go light." He gave a gruff laugh but I just nodded. I needed all my breath for the rowing.

"Stop at the first bend before the pier, Nat. I don't want to spook them. We'll moor at the old log and walk up along the track."

When we got to the pier there was no sight of the flock. Poppy made his seagull sound, a sort of shrill whistle, then scattered some crumbs across the river. I watched as the lazy current swirled them outwards then inwards, catching some pieces on the tree roots sucking at the river's edge.

Then Poppy grabbed my arm and I instinctively froze. A casual flapping sound crossed over us. A seagull slapped the water and rose upwards with some of the bread clamped in its beak. Poppy shook his head. He covered his eyes with one of his broad hands and looked skywards. A squawking rose from the trees and then, as if one entity, the flock descended. It had easily doubled since the last time we'd seen it. Some birds landed to float in the water, some along the river bank. One gull alighted on the pier, as dainty as a ballerina. It took a step towards Poppy, snatched the bread scrap from his fingers and took off to a high branch above our heads.

"That's him Nat! That's Jonathon."

I couldn't tell. They all looked the same to me.

Then something extraordinary happened. Another bird came close and took a piece of bread right from my hand. I picked up a chunk of roll and yet another gull swooped and snatched. Poppy then picked up pieces of bread too. The air swirled white around us as gulls dipped and skimmed and dived for the offerings from our trembling fingers. For a moment it seemed we had become one with them, part of the flock.

When the food was finished they all took off. We watched the phalanx veer to the left in a half circle and then, in a shimmering grey white flash framing the sun, they were gone.

Poppy still held his camera and I wondered if he had caught any of it on film. But nothing could capture the feeling.

Our silence held us together as we climbed back aboard the Frog. I lifted the oars like a half salute and let the river's flow slowly take us back home.

Later, when Poppy still hadn't spoken, I knew to leave him alone. I remember hoping it wasn't anything I'd done. I spent the rest of that afternoon fooling around with my digital camera and laptop, and wishing I'd had the camera with me when we fed the flock.

When it was getting dark I began looking for Poppy. First calling for him and then searching through the house. When I opened a back bedroom door Poppy shouted, "Bloody hell, boy. I'm working in here. Clear off." It was not his Light-tight room, I knew better than to go in there unasked, but as soon as the door had opened I'd seen this room was as dark as a blackout too.

I quickly retreated to my room and waited. He stormed in some minutes later.

"The best bloody shot I've ever had and you ruined it. Didn't your damn mother teach you to knock?"

I collapsed back in my chair, unable to answer. I was tingling down to my fingertips with the unfairness of it all. How was I supposed to know he'd made up another darkroom?

He said he'd forgiven me but the rest of the weekend was spent on my own. Not long after, Poppy left to go back to England, to the place he was born. He wrote to me saying he had lost his steering, that he had to go back to go forward. And he sent me photos of Marsh Harriers and The Broads, and of white sails riding through flat paddocks, the water in the rivers hidden by whispering reeds.

For me though, photographs had lost their appeal.

But now, sixteen years later, after reading the corresponding journal entry to the photo that I held in my hand, I finally understood.

Poppy said feeling that oneness with the gulls that day and then watching them heading off home to the water had made him see what he really wanted. And losing the photo of Jonathon's flock, that total glimpse of freedom, had made him decide to go back to his home country. He also wrote that he hoped I would forgive him one day.

I traced my fingers around the star at the top of the entry, closed my eyes and tightened the grip on the picture of my Poppy.

His other faces, time snaps, merged and folded when I shifted my position, like waves of still memories. Perfectly framed.

THE END