

DAY OF THE DROP BEAR / Jack Henry

Crighton had a reputation as a tough editor. He slapped a couple of fuel vouchers into my chest and said, make it good.

Didilabong, even the town's name sounded iffy. And I'm supposed to get a feature out of it. Crighton said everyone has a story; ask the right questions.

I climbed out of his car and shook feeling back into my legs.

Squat houses nestled under Poinciana trees, most with grass up to the windowsill. Barbed wire fencing sectioned each plot. The air tainted with overflow from septic tanks. A road train thundered along the Capricorn highway.

The heat was stifling.

Who in the hell thought this place could stage a flea market, let alone a festival?

I fished out my phone and took a picture of the pub. A dog tied to lattice work by the entrance barked. A weathered sign declared The Drop Bear Inn.

Noel Barrowclough.

"How long have you been the publican, Noel?"

The publican looked at the assortment of kerosine lanterns and bridles hanging from the pub's rafters. "Six, yeah, I reckon around six years."

Noel's beard was trimmed, unlike other men at the bar. His shirt sleeves were torn off leaving ragged arm holes.

I ordered lunch.

"Don't thank me." Noel dropped a serviette beside the plate. "Beryl Brown made that one. Tomorrow, I'll get a batch from Delores Stokes. The girls bitch about each other's cooking as if it's a contest or something."

"How did the pub get its name?"

Barrowclough laughed. "Good question. If you had been here a week ago, you wouldn't have asked."

I nodded, waiting for Noel to explain.

"Didilabong's not much to look at. Not a lot to attract the grey nomads as they zoom past to other attractions. We needed something to arouse curiosity."

A wizened fellow at the end of the bar spoke up, "And anywhere's fuckin' better than here."

Desi Carroll.

"Better make that your last, Desi. Don't want you getting the wobbly boot." Noel swept a dozen empty beer cans into a bin.

Desi's arms were flesh and bone. He steadied himself against the bar.

"And we had it, we did."

"What do you mean, you had it?" I asked.

"Yeah, a real beauty. Ya couldn't miss the bastard. Yous could see it over min-min rise five mile back, yous could."

Desi's lips and cheeks ballooned like a puffer fish ready to deflate. His skin leathery and pockmarked.

"We was gonna have a fiesta, eh, but it got pinched."

"What?"

"The Drop Bear."

I forced a smile thinking Carroll was having a lend of me.

He continued, "Country's full of deadly critters both on land and sea. Who's to say meat eating kola cousins don't exist?"

I shook my head.

He pulled a Vegemite pack with a peel-away foil top from his shirt pocket.

"If yer gonna go bush looking for one, rub this 'bout your neck. They can't stand the smell of yeast."

The Poet.

"The Poet?"

"Yep, that's what they call me."

His head was a mass of curls. On each sip of beer, he wiped froth from his moustache with the back of his hand.

"So, I suspect you are a bush poet?"

The man giggled. "Nah. Couldn't recite *Mary Had A Little Lamb* to save me-self. Got called the Poet after a minor altercation, see."

I shrugged. "Actually, I don't see."

The Poet dragged his hand across his moustache before drying it against his shirt, sleeveless as every other shirt in the bar.

"A big bloke, brutish, parked his rig other side of the highway. A lot of drivers park there for a spell. The way this bloke knocked 'em back, I knew he'd sleep it off in the back of his cab."

"Is that the usual for truck drivers?"

"Yeah, nah, depends on their schedule. Anyways, I started chatting with the bloke 'cause I like a chat, see. Asked him his name. He said, Warts."

I laughed.

“Said his name was Warts And-all. Being a bit of a smart arse, I said, Annal Warts.”

I sipped my beer.

“Next thing I know, me head was in his smelly armpit, and he was punching me lights out.”

“Holly crap. What did you do?”

“Nuthin’. What could I do? See that long orange pole over there?”

I scanned a shelf lined with ancient cigarette advertisements and dusty beer steins. The stick had two prongs much like a tuning fork.

“It’s the Persuader. Noel poked his bum with it.”

“So, what?” I asked, genuinely curious how this yarn ends.

“So, What? The bloke leapt in the air and screamed like a sheila. An eight-thousand-watt cattle prod straight up his clacker. Never seen the bloke since.”

The Poet drained his glasses, tapped it twice on the bar top, and wiped his moustache.

“Why would someone want to steal the Drop Bear?”

“You tell me? It broke this town, it did.” The Poet turned away; face twisting bitterly.

Seth Branich.

Branich wore a singlet top with man-boobs poked through the arm holes. His beard hung over his bulbous belly. I moved a bar stool next to his.

“What is the real reason the festival got cancelled?”

“The real reason?” Seth laughed. “The only reason the festival was cancelled is some prick lifted the Drop Bear.”

I sighed. “Wouldn’t it be easier to get another Drop Bear?”

“No, mate.” Branich hammered his fist into the bar top. “It was one of a kind. Nothing else like it; ugly, big fangs, evil eyes, scare the shit out of anyone coming across it under a full moon. “

Branich grinned. “That’s why we all loved the Drop Bear. It was like us here in Didilabong, ugly and a bit scary.”

“Have you a photo, by chance?”

Seth Branich stroked his beard. “Not that I can recall. We don’t have mobile coverage out here. Got to go a hundred clicks down the track to get that. Not much use having a phone, not like you city mob. I’ll tell you what. I can draw a picture.”

Branich reached along the bar to pick up a beer coaster. He pulled out a ratty carpenter’s pencil and began to draw on the back of the coaster.

No image of the town's chief attraction made me wary. Surely, tourists would have photos of the renowned Drop Bear. I made a mental note to Google it once back in the office.

Art was not one of Seth Branich's talents. He scribbled a morbid thing resembling a childhood nightmare.

"What is the tiny stick figure next to it?"

"Why, that's me."

"I don't understand."

"The Drop Bear was six metres tall."

My jaw dropped as swiftly as the name's sake. "Six metres?"

"And some arse-wipe nicked it."

"How? I mean, how could anyone steal a six-metre-high koala?"

Seth dropped his head and gazed at the floor.

Noel Barrowclough.

A dozen dongas sat in a vacant lot at the back of the pub. Workers accommodation from defunct mining operations and probably picked up at bargain prices. Only dongas next to the pub were functional, serving as the Drop Bear's lodgings.

My room had of a rattly air-con, and a gravity fed shower. I hoped for a cold shower but the water pressure was a trickle at best. The Inn opened at ten. Noel listened to Slim Dusty as he swept the floor. For the first time since arriving in Didilabong, I sensed there could be a story here.

I asked Noel for the breakfast menu. He cocked his head towards chalkboard.

"There are pies."

I decided on a crocodile pie. Barrowclough pushed aside a stool to get his broom under a table.

"What attractions were you planning to hold; line dancing, country music, that sort of thing?"

Noel lent on his broom handle. "Nah, been done before. Mexicans celebrate Day of the Dead. We kinda liked Day of the Drop Bear.

I laughed. "With Drop Bear piñatas?"

"Nothing too fancy. Wine bladders, hanging from tree branches, maybe. Might even draw a scary face on 'em."

The image of grey nomads staggering around Didilabong swinging at wine-casks and drenched in Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot was a hoot.

Noel waved his broom like a headmaster. “I also warned Delores and Beryl they’d have to make enchiladas and tortillas. They reckon they were up to it.”

Delores Stokes.

Delores was an attractive woman had it not been for her speech. Her jaws locked and her voice struggled through clenched teeth.

“The bear. Good grief. A mad artist, a loner made it, lived somewhere out in the scrub. Reckons he found everything to make the sculpture at the dump. He’d come into town wearing the most ridiculous shorts.”

Stokes giggled before continuing. “His balls hung down the leg hole. You wanted to turn away, but you couldn’t help but look. None of the men like him.”

“Why do you say he was mad? Apart from his tiny shorts, that is.”

“Well.” Delores took a long draught of her beer. “No sooner had Desi lifted the thing off his flatbed with his loader and stood it beside the highway, when the mad shithead comes back into town.”

I glanced at my phone to ensure the voice memo was still recording.

Delores leaned across the table. “He pulls out a rifle and shot the bastard through the head.”

“Who? Desi Carroll?”

“No, no, no, keep up, for gawd’s sake. The thumping great Drop Bear, that’s who. Never saw the artist after that.”

I shook my head. “Why would anyone want to shoot a statue?”

Delores shrugged. “Wasn’t as though it was doing any harm. The town’s not been the same since.”

The Poet

“When people noticed the Drop Bear was missing. Did anyone call the police?”

“Yeah, Noel did. He was in a right state at the time. The nearest cop shop is three-hundred clicks away in Dairunga. Noel said they recorded it, never heard since.”

“Who do you think stole the statue?”

“Everyone’s got their theory. Desi is the obvious culprit on account of him putting the thing there in the first place. But I doubt he did it.”

“No?”

“Nah. When I went over there, I noticed drag marks running parallel to the bitumen. The Drop Bear wasn’t lifted.”

“Do you mean, someone towed it away?”

“Or it left under its own steam.” Noel grinned as he slammed the dishwasher door.

The highway was kilometre after kilometre of featureless scrub. A six-hour drive back to the coast allowed time to think of the best line for my stay in Didilabong; Day of the Drop Bear Falls Flat; or King-sized Koala Can't be Caught. The niggling concern about Didilabong's festival was there was nothing to promote. All my notes were tales without a shred of proof.

Driving over a knoll, I scanned the tops of stunted gums longing to spot a pair of large ears poking above their gnarly branches. Nothing.

Eureka! That was my story. A fiesta of furphies where townsfolk took to a podium to regale tourists about a mythical creature in the mystical outback, and a behemoth that never was. I'll have the art department Photoshop an image based on my description on the spot The Poet pointed to.

The truth didn't matter. I had names, stories, and photos; the type of stuff Crichton loved.