

JUST PERHAPS

Prologue: A wet Melbourne afternoon. Sunday 30 April 1995.

A middle-aged man sits restlessly at a paper-strewn table in a suburban living room. The weekend papers and television have been focussing on the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, and *déjà vu* has enveloped him. Not directly, but in an elusive way. He finds himself searching the recycled photographs for one in particular, and in the process the memories behind that photo gradually emerge from their hiding places. Then further memories behind the memories, in a strange parade. Some surface eagerly, like coal-miners from a teetering shaft; others have to be prised out, like clams from a shell. Slowly they drift into place, and a story is reborn.

The story spans two decades, three continents and four countries. Its pivot is one of many unpublicised incidents from the Vietnam war: one line out of an encyclopaedia of dramas, but one that should at least have its page opened. However the story's main dimension, the dimension that links otherwise disparate elements, is that of a friendship struck by chance in a far-off place with a remarkable man, of lives intertwined for a while, and of the lingering afterglow.

Memory One: A small cafe in the town of Calafate, southern Argentina. March 1974.

Two young Australian backpackers are sitting at a table after spending an unforgettable day at the Perito Moreno glacier, watching and listening to the moving mountain of ice as it melts and cracks and plunges. At a table nearby there is a slightly older Englishman, talking to a casual acquaintance. He is of average build and height, with hair that would once have been blond, and has that soft milky complexion they associate with an indoor occupation in an indoor climate. The acquaintance leaves and the Englishman joins the backpackers. "McDonald's the name, Keith McDonald", he says, pulling up a chair.

They chat, initially comparing glacier stories. The conversation then moves on to other places they have been. Standard small talk, being nine parts a swap of knowledge and one part an attempt at one-upmanship of the places seen and difficulties surmounted type. The backpackers had come up from the south of Tierra del Fuego, by a combination of military cargo plane and hitch-hiking. The Englishman, it turned out, had come on horseback. He had bought two horses and associated equipment from a cattle property near the town of Bariloche in the Andean foothills south west of Buenos Aires, then ridden south down the mountain spine completely on

his own. There is nobody and nothing in the far south of those glorious mountains, just scenery and tranquil isolation unequalled anywhere in the world.

He was lost much of the time, never knowing which side of the border he was on, and seldom caring. Of the few people he did encounter, two groups were border guards, one Argentinian and one Chilean. Both arrested him as a spy, releasing him a day or so later when they realised that any genuine spy would have come equipped with a better cover story. He spent New Year's Eve 1973-74 incarcerated in a tiny Chilean outpost, his drunken captors passing him some vile spirit through the bars at midnight. After four or five months he had reached Calafate, and had just sold his remaining horse. The Australians ask him whether he was a frequent rider in England: "Good God no! Before Bariloche I had never been on a horse in my life".

Like the Australians, he wants to get back to the Atlantic coast and make his way northward, so they decide to travel together. Transport south back to Rio Gallegos is almost non-existent, as the backpackers had discovered on their way northwards when they had to wait for two windblown days before even seeing a vehicle. The road directly east across the Patagonian wilderness to the coast is wider on the map than it is in full-scale reality, and has even less traffic. Quandary. The trio elect to hitch-hike along the eastbound road, but to do their soliciting in Calafate rather than out in the emptiness. At least they will know that any lift will be a lift the whole way. Luck smiles on them the very next day, in the form of a group of Argentinians with a few spare seats in their van.

Memory Two: Patagonia, soon afterwards.

Terrain doesn't get much duller than the plains of Patagonia. The only interesting feature the van passes is a distant river when they are a hundred or so miles away from the mountains. The river still has the unique pale green colour that comes from colloidal glacier-melt: even at a distance of several miles this river is a vivid green ribbon, a gleaming meander fighting against the drab grey monotony of the flat landscape. But for most of the journey there is nothing to do except talk. Keith has a keen, active mind, and the conversation bounces between biology, politics, physics and history. The Englishman quizzes the Australians about what has been happening in the world since he left Bariloche — they are hardly the right people to ask, but are all he has.

And they in their turn question Keith. He was educated in England, and had been in the British Army all his working life, taking early retirement the previous year as a Captain. That gives him a small but useful pension. He and his brother Angus, also a retired Captain, now live in a crofter's cottage on their own small island in the Orkneys, off the north of Scotland. A condition of their peppercorn rental is that they must occupy the place for at least eight months each year,

but that is no great burden when shared between two. Keith likes exploring; his brother likes sailing his small yacht down to the warmer climes of the central Atlantic.

The conversation turns to places he has served. He speaks mainly about a small country in the Middle East, where he spent several years. What was he doing there? He is a bit coy initially, but soon loosens up. He had been involved in a coup that replaced the elderly President with his son. The backpackers can vaguely remember the incident, which had occurred only a year or so earlier. Keith gives a few insights into the intrigues that preceded and accompanied the coup, and says it was a "bad show" because the old man had been wounded. They get the distinct impression he is chiding himself, from which they deduce that he had been one of the main organisers. Some of the other exploits he describes, in the mountainous parts of the country where there had been a long-running insurgency, leave them with a strong feeling that he was a member of some clandestine elite corps.

The three of them leave the van immediately upon reaching the coast. It is nightfall and they are still in the middle of nowhere – just a slightly less desolate nowhere, hopefully on a slightly more trafficked road. They walk a few hundred yards away from the road and lie down to sleep, each huddled behind the feeble protection of his own spindly clump of grass. The incessant Patagonian wind blows sand all night, and they wake up in the morning to find themselves three-quarters buried. Traffic is very sparse so they split up, agreeing on a town to aim for by that evening: no need to arrange a specific meeting spot in the town, as the towns are no more than spots anyway. In this manner they work their way up the coast over a couple of days, eventually reaching the larger town of Comodoro Rivadavia. Here they have to separate, as the backpackers are returning to the mountains, whilst Keith has to get to London fairly quickly. He has taken a position with the United Nations Children's Fund, and has been posted to Vietnam where he will be one of the UNICEF supervisors. They swap temporary and permanent addresses, plus heartfelt invitations to visit, then part.

Memory Three: A small cold room in a small cold house in London. April 1975.

A small black and white television set is perched on a table, surrounded by open newspapers. It is showing scenes of panic in South Vietnam as the North launches its final blitzkrieg on the South. Cities are falling daily. On the front page of the papers is a photograph that becomes one of the iconographic pictures of the Vietnam war, ranking in the second tier behind such shots as the napalm-burnt young girl fleeing the smoking village, the tank bursting into the Imperial Palace at the very last minute of the war, the helicopter evacuations from the roof of the American compound the day before, and the security chief blowing a suspect's brains out in the streets of Hue during the Tet offensive a few years earlier.

The picture shows the door of a Boeing 707 on the runway at Da Nang, one of the northern coastal cities of South Vietnam. There are two very concerned men in the doorway, and the steps are being wheeled away preparatory to takeoff. The caption has words to the effect that the plane contains the last Westerners from Da Nang, on their way out just minutes before the North Vietnamese Army arrives. The dramatic picture is indelibly etched into the Australians' minds from the moment they see it.

They watch it all and read it all, with a surreal avidity. So much by so many for so long. For so little.

Six weeks later, they get a phone call from Keith. He's in London for a few days. When can they catch up? Immediately, of course! They meet in a pub beside the Thames, and he tells them his news.

Memory Four: Vietnam, early April 1975.

Keith is in Da Nang arranging the closure of an orphanage. The North Vietnamese offensive has begun, and the city is certain to be captured within a couple of days. The biggest danger to date has been South Vietnamese troops, some of whom are completely out of control – looting, robbing people at gunpoint, shooting anyone who resists them.

Time runs out. Keith and the American Consul take the remaining orphans to the airport, where there is an airlift underway. The enemy is closing fast, and everybody knows that this will be the last plane: seats are scarce, and inevitably some people will be left behind. Keith and the Consul forgo their guaranteed places so that the last of the orphans can be evacuated, and then the steps are wheeled away from the plane. Two men are shouting from the door, urging the stupid photographer to hurry so they can take off. The stairs return, the photographer boards, the doors close. The plane departs.

The troops have entered the town, and mortar shells are ranging in on the airport. Keith and the Consul drive away in the orphanage van. But to where? They can see the soldiers now, and are coming under fire. Hemmed in by soldiers on every landward side, they make for the port where they jump into a small dinghy and start rowing out to sea. They get a few hundred yards unseen, then bullets start blipping the water beside them. Keeping as low as they can, they row for all they are worth. Whoomph! The North Vietnamese have set up a pair of mortars on the wharf. A pillar of water erupts near the defenceless eggshell of a boat, drenching its straining occupants. They change direction repeatedly, trying to make themselves just a little bit less like sitting ducks. More explosions; more dousings in the heaving open boat; more direction changes. The rifle fire

slackens, mainly so that its sources can better watch the ongoing sport between the oarsmen and the mortar-men.

As the dinghy gets further away from the shore, the shelling becomes less intense. Perhaps the soldiers harbour an element of admiration, or perhaps a thought that the days ahead will offer better targets. The occasional desultory explosion continues to worry the escapees as they row out into the South China Sea. Eventually they get beyond range, and later beyond all sight of land. For thirty-six hours they continue, guided by a small pocket compass, not knowing where they are going, but determined it will not be Vietnam where the Consul's head would be highly regarded. At last they see a Destroyer, and soon they are hauled aboard the USS *Harold E Holt*. After a series of debriefings Keith is back in England within a week.

Memory Five: The Orkney Islands, September 1975.

The Australians have taken up the invitation to visit Keith's island. They have not heard from him since May when he returned to UNICEF Head Office to be given his next posting, but when they decided to visit Scotland they wrote to his brother Angus, introducing themselves and advising him of their intentions and their vague dates. They arrive in Stromness on the main island of the Orkneys, having caught the ferry from Thurso. Keith's instructions had seemed clear enough, but a bit unsettling. Go up the main road linking the islands, across the causeway to the Isle of Rousay. Just across the causeway take a track heading off to the left. Proceed along that track until you come to a beach at the end. Wait until the tide goes out, then walk over the sand onto Island Nullay. The cottage is across on the other side of the island.

Their first problem is transport down towards Rousay. A quick inquiry at the Post Office reveals that the daily bus left ten minutes ago. They ask whether the ferry was late. "No", is the puzzled response: apparently the bus always leaves a few minutes before the ferry arrives. So they become hitch-hikers again. Standing there beside the empty road, admiring the barren beauty through the steady drizzle, it feels just like the time eighteen months earlier on the east coast of Tierra del Fuego. After an hour or so the first car comes along and offers them a lift. The driver doesn't bother to ask them where they are going, as there is only one direction. The road passes over low heather-covered ridges and through peat-bog depressions: hardly a tree to be seen, and never a person.

The driver drops them off at the northern end of the causeway and continues on his way. Anxiously they look for the promised track, finding it without much trouble. A twenty minute walk later they are at the beach, and a receding tide has just uncovered the spit. Over onto Nullay, where they follow the only path, up the gentle rise and over the first hill. Still no sign of life, be it a person, a cottage or even a fence post. Then, over the next ridge, a public phone box

greeted them, an alien shining in freshly painted red. They resist the temptation to try it, and press on. Around another bend they see the cottage and approach it. A note pinned to the front door catches their eyes. It is to them, from Angus. He is very sorry, but he has had to go to Glasgow urgently because his mother is ill. The note is dated that very morning, which means that Angus was at the jetty when they arrived in Stromness, waiting to ride their ferry back to Thurso. Looking around, they see a small yacht at anchor in a tiny bay below the house. Then they pen a quick footnote to the piece of paper on the door and retrace their steps, hoping to get back to the spit before the tide covers it for the rest of the day, and to Stromness before nightfall.

Epilogue: Melbourne again, later that same damp Sunday in April 1995.

Their failed visit to one of the most remote places in the British Isles was the last contact they ever had with Keith or his brother. They had written to Angus immediately upon their return to London, telling him how sorry they were to miss him, how much they had nevertheless enjoyed the Orkneys, and asking about his mother and his brother. No reply. At Christmas they sent a letter to Keith via Angus with news of their imminent return to Australia, and a request for some information, any information, on Keith's doings. Again no reply.

Year after year the pattern continued. Every Christmas they would send a letter to Island Nullay, and every New Year they would receive nothing. Not even their own letter returned with *Addressee Unknown* stamped across it. After a dozen such annual attempts they stopped trying: it was as if the people and the place had just evaporated, leaving behind nothing more than a collection of dimming memories supported by a few yellowing photographs in the bottom of a drawer. Their backpacking days are now long past and they are ensnared with children and mortgages to feed, so a first-hand visit to find out what happened is not possible. Occasionally when political hot-spots have flared up and the newspapers have shown pictures of innocent young victims, they have thought of Keith, wondering whether he might be involved, putting his life on the line for them, or, rather, "going in to bat for them" as he would put it. But less and less as the newsless years accelerated past.

Until today. The middle-aged man resolves to make one more try, exploring a new avenue that has suddenly occurred to him: he will write to UNICEF. Just perhaps they will have some records that could solve the mystery and add a final scene to the story.