

Lost!

An Australian Short Story

from Alison Stuart



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LOST!

By Alison Stuart

***"Though far and wide they sought him, they found not where he fell;
For the ranges held him precious and guarded their treasure well."***

A.B. Paterson

At the place where Tidal River meets the sea the tents and caravans blended in among the tea-tree and banksias. Towels and socks hung from haphazard clotheslines. Mothers sat in the shade quietly chatting and fathers, freed from the tedium of their everyday lives, gathered up children and cricket bats and headed down to the fresh, tannin stained water of the river that wound its way through the tide, hardened sands.

On this glorious summer's day, perhaps as many as fifty children slipped and slithered in the cool, clear waters of the river, leaping with squeals of delight from smooth, round, ancient rocks. Forgotten were the distractions of computers, televisions and play stations, superfluous now to the sheer delight of just being children.

To the south, Mt. Oberon loomed over the happy scene, dark and as old as earth itself, gathering to itself the clouds of an impending change in the weather. The wind began to rise, sand whipped off the beach, stung bare legs and Mt. Oberon's shadow cast a sudden, dark chill on the campsite. Word passed from group to group. The voices of the fathers became anxious. The mothers, suddenly alert, came down to the water's edge, scanning the brightly coloured figures in the water.

A parent's worse nightmare, a missing child on the Prom.

In the car park at Lilly Pilly Gully, barely a kilometre from Tidal River, Senior Constable Les Briscoe, leant on the bonnet of his landrover, nursing a cup of tea in his hands. He had been a policeman in South Gippsland for nearly twenty years and had seen it all. There was only one call he dreaded:

Missing hiker on the Prom.

Over the years he had been in many search parties, combing the impenetrable bush of Wilson's Promontory for some fool who had strayed from the clearly marked paths. Some they found, others were not so lucky. It had only been eighteen months since the last one had gone missing. A university student, he recalled. They'd never found him. The bush had swallowed him up as if he had never existed. He recalled the boy's girlfriend, her beauty lost in her grief, clinging to the boy's mother who had come down from Melbourne to be with the search.

Now in place of the two women, Reg and Libby Coleman stood mutely helpless watching as the well-oiled search party swung into gear. *An ordinary couple*, Les thought. They didn't deserve for this to happen.

He could hear Libby Coleman's voice, choked with emotion. "He ran on ahead of us. We thought he'd be waiting around the next corner but he wasn't. There was no sign of him. Oh God, he's only five!"

Reg Coleman had been called over to talk to the co-ordinator of the search party and the description was circulated among the searchers. Brad Coleman aged five, wearing a blue and white striped tee shirt, blue shorts, white socks and sneakers, had last been seen on the

Lilly Pilly Gully walking trail three hours ago.

In the last hours of daylight, they moved out. Deployed in a line, they walked slowly down the hill towards the creek, each searcher quickly disappearing from view in the thick heathland growth. The boy's name echoed mournfully across the gully, bouncing back from the mountain to be carried into the depths of the forest

Christ, thought Les, they could pass within a foot of the boy in this bush and not see him..

As night fell they called off the search. The Colemans returned to their tent at Tidal River. Friends took the two youngest children and other campers passed them warily, afraid to meet their eyes. In the morning the camping ground quietly emptied as the wind rose and the grey clouds hung over Mount Oberon obscuring its peak.

Helicopters and police tracker dogs were brought in but both were useless. The weather prevented the helicopters from flying and the overnight rain had washed away any trace of footprints. It was as if Gods, far older and less forgiving than white man's Christian God, had demanded a sacrifice.

At the end of the fruitless day's search, Les returned home to his patient, loving wife and his noisy, rat-bag kids. He opened a can of Fosters and parked himself in front of the day-night match from the "Gabba". He didn't want to think about the little boy in the blue and white striped tee shirt, facing another night alone in the unforgiving Australian bush.

"Hope is fading for young Brad Coleman..." the girl on the ABC news said the next morning.

Les couldn't bring himself to look at Libby Coleman. Her eyes were dead. She had no more tears. It was as if a part of herself had gone with her child. Reg Coleman stood hunched in his rain jacket, his face like his wife's beyond anxiety.

Les zipped up his sturdy Japara and checked the laces on his boots. This weather brought out leeches and he hated leeches. Les pulled his hat down over his face and picked up his stout stick and two-way radio.

The search moved further inland, kilometres away now from Lilly Pilly Gully. Here the forest was completely wild, the bush dotted with smooth round rocks and hidden gullies. It was easy to lose a foothold and fall. Easy for a man, easy for a child.

By midday, Les had reached the slopes of Mt. Oberon. He paused and looked upwards through the forest. *I'm getting too old for this*, he thought, his breath catching in his throat. *Too many beers*, his wife had said only last night, giving the paunch a slap.

He caught a movement through the trees. So subtle it could have been the wind or a small animal moving through the undergrowth. He narrowed his eyes, suddenly alert.

Beside a large box gum about a hundred metres ahead, he could just make out the figure of a fair-haired young man in a bright red shirt. A sudden squall of rain obscured his view for a moment. When he looked again the young man was closer, gesturing furiously for Les to follow.

"Found something, mate?" Les called out.

In answer, his fellow searcher plunged at a furious pace into the bush. Les almost had to run to keep him in sight until the young man stopped beside one of the huge monoliths that rose out of the bush.

Puffing furiously Les laboured up the slope towards him. He had to stop, leaning on his stick, fighting for breath. When he looked up again there was no sign of the young man. Les muttered an expletive and trudged towards the rock and the place where he had last seen him.

He leant against the damp, mossy surface of the rock, reaching in his pack for his water bottle. As he took a swig, a flash of blue in the bracken barely three feet away caught his eye.

If he had not stopped for a drink he never would have noticed it.

His heart in his mouth he knelt beside the small crumpled figure of Brad Coleman. The blue he had seen, came not from the blue tee shirt or shorts but a dirty, torn and stained Japara that had been placed over the boy.

With shaking hands he felt for a pulse. A great shudder of relief went through him as he was rewarded by a small, faint but steady beat.

"Thank you God," he muttered. Like all non-church goers he was grateful to God when the occasion warranted it.

He pulled the Japara off the boy and quickly scanned him for broken bones. The kid's legs and arms were badly scratched, his face dirty and tear streaked but he seemed in one piece. Les wrapped him in the thermal blanket he carried and radioed in his position to the base. Cradling the boy in his arms, he sat in the shelter of the rock and waited for the rescue party to come crashing through the bush.

"You've done well Les." Constable Brian Flanagan thumped him on the shoulder as they watched the boy lifted on to the stretcher and strapped in for the tortuous walk back to base camp. "There'll be a commendation in this for you I reckon."

Secretly pleased, Les assumed an air of modesty. "Well I can't take all the credit. It was the guy in the red shirt found him."

He looked around the small crowd of searchers, looking for the fair-haired boy in a red shirt.

"What guy in a red shirt?" Brian followed his gaze. "I haven't seen anyone in a red shirt. No weather for shirts." He added as the rain dripped off his hat brim.

"He must have taken off his Japara to cover the boy. I'll give it back to him when I see him."

Les picked up the filthy garment and looked for a name. The initials TE were written in faded black text on the label.

"TE," he said aloud.

Brian had wandered off. From behind the rock Les heard his mate swear. "Jesus! Les come here!"

Wearily Les trudged after Brian, following his tracks through the bracken and found Brian squatting on the ground behind the rock.

He looked up at Les. "What do you make of this, mate?"

To call what Brian had found "a body" was probably a misnomer. Time and animals had reduced it to no more than a few whitened bones but still enough to clearly identify its origin as human. A skull, missing its lower jaw stared up at the bleak sky, a few strands of fair hair clinging pathetically to the dome. The ribs shrouded in the tattered remains of a shirt, once red but now faded to pink, still seemed intact. Other bones, not readily identifiable lay scattered around.

Wedged into the crevice of the rock Les found a once green daypack. Its contents were relatively undisturbed, an empty water bottle, a few food wrappers, a camera and a wallet. He turned this last item over in his hands, feeling the comfortable shape of an item well used and moulded to the shape of its owner from long being carried in the back pocket.

He knew whose wallet it was even before he opened it. With a bleak sense of inevitability he pulled out the University of Melbourne student card and looked at the photo of the fresh young face, topped with an unruly mop of fair hair. The name on the card read *Timothy John Erskine*.

Despite himself Les shivered. He shook his head, dispelling the image of the young man who had led him to Brad. He must have been imagining it, thinking too much about last time.

He had been around long enough to know that the bush could play weird tricks on a man.

"You all right mate?" Brian looked at him, an eyebrow cocked in query.

Les replaced the card and closed the wallet. "It's Tim Erskine. The kid who went missing eighteen months ago."

Brian nodded. "His mum will be pleased we've found him. It must be hell not having a body to mourn over." He'd been involved in the search for Tim and knew the bleak despair his mother had suffered.

They would have to come back to tidy up the remains of Timothy John Erskine. Someone would have to tell his mother. Perhaps, Les thought, he would volunteer for that task. There was something else he wanted to tell her that he thought she would appreciate.

Brian looked down at the pathetic pile of bones at his feet. "I guess that was Tim's old Japara Brad found. Probably saved his life."

"Yeah, lucky that," Les agreed. 'Let's get back to base.' Les picked up Tim Erskine's daypack and slung it over his shoulder.

"Bloody good game last night." Brian said. "Did you see that six that Clarkey hit into the stand?"

Brian nattered on about the cricket and if his companion seemed unusually thoughtful on the trek back to the base camp, Brian Flanagan did not notice.

Later that night in the quiet ward of the little hospital at Korumburra, Brad Coleman stirred. He blinked sleepily, his eyes focusing on the adoring and relieved face of his mother.

"Hello, darling," she whispered, gently stroking his soft, scratched cheek.

He frowned as if trying to remember something very important.

"Where's Timmy?" he asked.

THE END