

The Healing

The light moved imperceptibly as tentative rays of morning sun filtered down to touch the hunched shoulders of a woman sitting in the far corner of the gallery. Jonathan took a seat near the back. There were a few placard carrying protestors in the gallery and the usual clutch of legal beagles in the body of the court, but otherwise the lofty halls of the highest court of Australia appeared to be at peace with the world. It was September 2019 and outside, Canberra was bursting with the promise of an early spring.

A bell tinkled and the audience stood as the most emanate judiciary in the nation filed in to take their places behind the bench. Formalities duly observed, the hearing was declared open. A slim young man of middle eastern appearance rose to speak. He took a deep breath. "I am Ali Elmira, Human Rights Lawyer. I beg leave of your honours to present the case for four men known as the 'Manus Four', refugees who, after arriving on Australian shores in 2011, were placed in detention on Manus Island. In November 2017 these men were released from detention into a hostile community on Manus. After a brutal altercation in which a fifth refugee and a local Manus resident lost their lives these men are now accused of murder. Today I will demonstrate to the court that the men acted in self defence to protect their own lives and that their assailant killed the fifth refugee and subsequently met his death as a result of his own reckless behaviour." Ali sat down. The woman clapped silently. Papers shuffled. Someone suppressed a cough. Jonathan's mind wandered back to that night on the atoll all those years ago.

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The light moved imperceptibly, a small yellow glow near the head of the beach. It wavered again and faded. The night was warm with a gentle breeze riffing through the low grasses. Jonathan strained into the darkness but all he could hear was the lapping of the waves in the lagoon and the constant booming of breakers beating onto the reef beyond. This little atoll, floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, well away from popular shipping routes, was his for the duration of the three month species counting season. He revelled in the solitary nature of his work— his holiday volunteering effort he called it. A supply ship called every month to drop off food and water but beyond that he was left to himself. The supply ship had visited just two days ago. Could it have returned for some reason?

He saw the light move again. A small torch. It swung an arc and disappeared. The sound of arguing voices rose above the pounding surf. Suddenly a shot rang out causing him to jump violently. An agonising cry rent the air. He immediately tensed to the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. He tried to step aside as a stocky figure loomed out of the darkness but too late. He hit the dirt hard. Worse, before he could roll out of the way, his assailant tripped and landed heavily on top of him. The man scrambled to his feet. "I so sorry. I not hurt you. Please help. My brother" he stammered in broken English.

"What the hell is going on?" gasped Jonathon.

"He try to kill himself. Please come." Jonathan snatched a decent torch from its hook inside the hut and raced after Mohamed. Ali lay whimpering in a pool of his own blood. Mohamed had managed to wrench the rifle from him and in so doing saved his brother's life. The bullet had passed through Ali's lower leg which was bleeding profusely. Jonathan ripped off his shirt and bound the leg tightly. Ali's hands and knees were badly cut from his encounter with the jagged reef coral. They were painful but not life threatening. He would mend. The two men hoisted Ali to his feet and helped him up the rise to the hut. Jonathan's mind was racing. Where had these two come from? Where there others? How had Ali come by his rifle? He had taken it out just last night to clean and oil it. Carelessly he'd left it on the table in the hut and the rest he surmised was history.

They sorted a bunk for Ali, dressed his wounds from Jonathan's comprehensive first aid kit, slipped him a painkiller and left him to sleep. Now a faint diffusion of light filtered through from the next room where Jonathan and Mohamed sat talking softly. Shadows floated into focus, melted and formed again as they moved about. Although his bed was just a canvas bunk with a couple of rather moth eaten blankets Ali felt safe, a little boy again. For the moment the pain in his leg had eased and he was comforted to be warm, safe, no longer surrounded by that heaving ocean. He thought back over the landing; the sight of the atoll, the lagoon, calm in the afternoon sunlight, the tiny boat suddenly caught by a breaking wave and flung onto the reef, surf pounding his frail body against the coral, slashing and tearing, his brother grabbing at him and easing him away into calmer waters beyond, the beach, finding the hut, apparently deserted but obviously lived in, the rifle and his feeble attempt to end these years of misery. Lulled by the rhythm of the booming surf he drifted in and out of sleep, thrashing restlessly on the tiny bunk as he fought his demons.

The bombing had started again. Dust rose around him. That cloying, choking dust, stringent, sulphurous. And the guns .. the incessant staccato of the shooting, the fear, running, clutching his mother's hand, his lungs bursting. But worst of all the screaming. The screaming was everywhere, whirling him along the village street, sweeping him upwards, twirling him out of reach then flinging him back against his mother. She clutched his skinny little hand more tightly. "Run Ali! Run!" she implored. "Whatever happens to me, keep running. Mohamed is close by!" Where they were running to he had no idea. He gripped his mother's hand tighter. Suddenly she fell heavily, wrenched from him. The jostling crowd swept him away. Another bomb exploded close by. The acrid dust enveloped him. Exhausted, he managed to crawl to the edge of this swirling flood of humanity and squeeze behind a rubbish bin.

Night fell. Ali slept fitfully as the crazy world swirled around him. At day break, by some miracle his brother Mohamed found him. The worst of the fighting had moved on and they were able to find their way home, if such a word could be used to describe the roofless, shattered building that had been their home. Miraculously their mother too had managed to find home, badly bruised but still alive. It was she who insisted that the little money they had would buy her sons a boat ride to freedom. That was six long years ago and still they had not found that freedom.

Gradually his dreams dissipated and Ali drifted into a fitful sleep. They would be back. They always came back but at least for now he could sleep.

Mohamed had discovered that Jonathan worked mostly at night. That he worked at all on this desolate atoll was surprising to Mohamed. He counted eggs ..turtles' eggs. He counted various sea birds too, but mostly eggs. According to Jonathon, the female turtle digs a hole in the sand somewhere above high tide mark, lays her eggs in the hole and carefully covers them with sand. When the little ones hatch, usually at night, they make a brave dash for the waters of the lagoon and eventually the ocean. Jonathan's job was to find the nests and count the eggs.

Ali wanted nothing to do with Jonathan or his work. He couldn't find the trust his brother had for this lanky Australian. Mohamed seemed to hit it off with him from the start but Ali was not into trusting these fair skinned foreigners. Granted, their host shared his food and shelter but Ali figured that he was waiting for the imminent arrival of the Australian Border Forces to take them to their next hell hole. Would it be Manus Island again.

Mohamed seemed to be happy to idle his time away on this isolated atoll. He spent his days observing island birdlife and was compiling a dossier of his observations. He was good at it. His way of thanking Jonathan perhaps. Jonathon had mentioned the supply ship that called now and then, but he had indicated that it had called only days before the two castaways arrived. Short of mending their own flimsy dinghy or stealing Jonathan's they would all have to put up with each other for the

time being. Ali was recovering well but was dogged nightly by his dreams. He refused to help Jonathan with his egg count and spoke with him only when forced to. On nights when his demons got the better of sleep he had taken to wandering the island, watching from a distance as Jonathan worked among the dunes. Jonathon was aware of his presence but let him be.

One night Ali found himself on a beach on the far side of the atoll. As he sat, letting the quiet of the night steal over him, he perceived movement at the water's edge. He tensed, staring into the darkness. A large sea turtle shuffled and bumped her way up the beach to a slightly raised dune close by. As Ali watched, the turtle proceeded to dig. Gradually a bowl shaped hole materialised. When she was satisfied with the nest the turtle began the serious task of laying eggs. This took quite some time. As Ali was to discover turtles lay a lot of eggs. Sometime later, the egg laying over and the nest covered and camouflaged with dry sand, the turtle lumbered back to the lagoon and disappeared. Ali crept over to the nest and felt among the recently disturbed sand. He sank his fingers into its warmth. He felt the smooth surface of an egg, smaller than a hen's egg, a soft, leathery ovoid snuggled in its sandy sanctuary. Gently he dug deeper. More eggs. His searching fingers counted thirty before he lost count. How many eggs had the turtle laid? A question that Jonathon might answer for him. All those potential new lives waiting for a signal from one of their number. This serene birthing contrasted violently with the baby turtle's frightening dash for the safety of the sea. Ali saw the strong parallels with his own life. The running, the fear of attack, surrendering yourself to the unknown dangers of the ocean to hide and perhaps survive.

Some nights later when Jonathon was out, Ali broached the subject of how they might leave the atoll. Mohamed was uncharacteristically evasive pointing out to Ali that he was not yet in a state to take on another harrowing sea voyage. Ali was about to argue back vehemently when Jonathon burst into the room. "Come on! They're on the move." "Who?" Mohamed looked scared but Ali had dropped at once. "He means the turtles. Stupid." He grabbed a torch and followed Jonathon to a sheltered part of the beach. There they watched in awe as dozens of tiny turtle hatchlings pushed their way upwards through the sand, climbing unceremoniously over each other to tumble onto the beach. The crescent moon now low on the horizon became their guiding light as they commenced their harrowing race for the comparative safety of the ocean. Jonathon danced about some distance from the turtles doing his best to wave away the score of predatory sea birds waiting expectantly for their supper. Ali and Mohamed stood memorised.

Much later as they walked back towards the hut Ali sidled up to Jonathon. "Thank you." he said softly. "If the helpless little turtles can escape to safety so can we." He looked meaningfully towards Mohamed. "We can do it brother. One day we will bring our mother to our new home."

Later as they sat eating their meal, Jonathon quizzed the castaways on their plans. Where would they go and how? "We will repair our little boat and search for a country that will give us a home." smiled Ali. Jonathon wrinkled his forehead. It's true they were by no means the first desperate men who had set sail on the Pacific in search of a better life. He admired their bravery. He had learned a great deal from Mohamed about the cruelties these young men had experienced in their short lives. He picked up his sat phone from the shelf and thumbed through a small note book. Then he paused. "Let's think about this." he said putting down the phone, swallowing the last of his coffee and making for the door. "I'd better check the back beaches. Sleep well."

Life on the atoll settled into a kind of uneasy routine. The brothers had dragged their boat up the beach and with the aid of Jonathan's well equipped toolbox were demonstrating an admirable ability to improvise. The boat was looking more sea worthy by the day but Jonathon was not happy to think that they should be considering taking to the ocean again. He was busy for much of the day digitising his data and tidying up in preparation for leaving in a few weeks but he worried for his companions. Obviously he couldn't smuggle them aboard his pickup ship. Sadly, Australia was no

place for them. But there was another very long shot. One he hardly dared to consider. One that he had certainly not mentioned to Mohamed or Ali. He has taken to going early to the beach usually with his sat phone. Mohamed noticed that he didn't actually use the phone but rather spent time scanning the horizon through his binoculars. This worried Mohamed but he didn't want to put Jonathan off side so he kept his council and remained vigilant. So it was with some anxiety that one morning he observed Jonathon leaping about and talking excitedly into his phone." They're coming ashore!" he shouted.

The three men watched anxiously as the brightly coloured sails approached the island. The slim craft furled its sails and nosed carefully towards the reef, standing off a little, then moving in again. The confident sound of its engine could be heard rising and falling as the stern of the boat lifted and fell on the swell. Then, in the blink of an eye the motor opened to full throttle and the boat slipped swiftly and smoothly through the narrow opening to the quiet waters beyond. "Bravo!" shouted Jonathon. "A perfect landing." The yacht was now close in to shore and its two occupants, having dropped anchor were in the process of lowering a dingy. Mohamed noticed the name of the yacht painted boldly on its hull. "Rainbow Worrier 2" he read. He wondered idly what had happened to the first "Rainbow Worrier".

That evening as they sat in the balmy tropical twilight, talk turned to the future of Mohamed and Ali. The yachties had turned out to be a couple of kiwis from the radical left of politics. They had spent time on the "Sea Shepherd" in years gone by and were not afraid of a challenge. "If I gave you \$500 and a cabin in a place where they don't lock up refugees, what would you do with it?" Jeb asked of Ali. "I would study to be a lawyer of course." was the instant reply. "I would help refugees, my people, and I would bring my mother to live with me."

"And you Mohamed?"

"I want to be a boat builder and I want to come to the atolls each year to count turtle eggs."

"I do a bit o' boat building myself," ruminated Jeb.

"You mean you sit in your office planning your next sailing holiday while your employees build the boats." rejoined his partner.

Talk turned to holidays and sailing, to places they'd been to and the state of the world, until the cooling night air drove them inside.

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The gallery door opened noisily prompting a reproving look from the provost. Mohamed, suntanned and healthy looking, slid into the seat next to Jonathan. "Got back yesterday" He mouthed. "Caught the red eye from Brissie this morning. How's it going?" Jonathan grinned. No one better at the vernacular than the new kid on the block he thought. "Good timing. How was your flight from NZ?" he whispered. Mohamed gave him a thumbs up and slid from his seat down to the front of the gallery where his mother sat hunched and nervous. He wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders just as Ali got to his feet for the second time to outline the case for the "Manus Four". Jonathan grinned. In his mind's eye he saw the "Rainbow Worrier 2" slipping its anchor and filling its brightly coloured sails as it slid effortlessly out into the ocean. Alone on the beach he had watched until those colourful sails disappeared beyond the horizon. "The world isn't the best of worlds, he thought, "but it's the only one we've got and sometimes we get things right."

GRM's fair e-tales