

The Saltimbanques

by Terry Dowling

FOR DANNY TRUSWELL, HIS WORLD CHANGED FOREVER that day in 1962 exactly one week before he turned fourteen, a hot dusty day in Reardon, one of those blistering Australian summer days just after Christmas when the air shimmers into haze in every direction and the trees hang and it seems no-one is out on the streets.

He followed his usual summer holiday routine, got his chores done early, then planned ways to lie low till about 4 pm when the sun was far enough down the sky for life to ease back towards normal.

'Normal' was hardly the right term with Danny's Dad taking a rig across the top of Australia and not due back for six days, and his Mum away in Dubbo visiting a sick sister. Danny was having his meals with Kenny's folks and sleeping over.

'Lying low' was hardly the right term either, for Danny and Kenny (and sometimes Annie), like most other kids, rarely managed to do the sensible thing. It was summer holidays, after all. And Danny liked to think they had something of an advantage over the others. They had the chart.

When you saw Reardon from the air with its dozen streets and eighty or so houses (population 434), its two pubs, two churches, community hall, school and library, the co-op up by the railhead near the railway station, the sheds and silos, the clumps of trees following a creek pretty well dry for a half of any year, it looked like so many clustered flecks of grey and silver set in a large, mottled, red tile, with a splotchy line of dullest green winding across it (the creek with its eucalypts) and a thinner silver hairline dividing the top third (the railway line).

That was the view framed on the office wall of Hendist's Stock and Station Agents. An even larger version, two yards on a side, hung over the saloon bar of the Stockman Hotel, the red sweeping out as if Reardon was a colony on the planet Mars.

But a third such aerial shot, left over from the same 1956 International Geophysical Year shoot, tattered, faded and almost forgotten, was pinned to the wall of a deserted shed at the back of the Woke property, and that's where Kenny Woke, Danny Truswell and 'Sometimes' Annie Hendist had their clubhouse and planned which properties to visit, which parts of the creek to try. It gave them an overview, a sense of the town as finite and just *a* place on the land, not *the* place. Horizontal vistas somehow locked you in too much, were too real, too irresistible to allow that other kind of perspective.

The Reardon Rangers, as they called themselves, were lucky. There'd been six of them in the group originally, but Cathy's folks had moved the family down to Dubbo, and Billy Mack and Keith Spicer, just a year before, had gotten too grown up, they reckoned, for that sort of clubhouse stuff.

Annie Hendist, curiously, had stayed around though. She was already fourteen, a long-legged brunette, disturbingly female, and while her mind often seemed on other things, she'd surprise the boys by dropping in and tagging along just as it used to be. Sometimes it'd be for cricket or soccer with other kids, sometimes on one of their Ranger expeditions.

That was how it came to be three not two on that momentous Thursday. The boys were so glad to see her again (awkward as well, they were at *that* age) when she appeared in the doorway in her shorts, striped tee-shirt and old sandshoes. She looked so grown-up and knowing that they made it her turn, let her point to a destination on their aerial 'chart'.

Barrack Creek. Dusty and dry until five weeks after the rains in the north, when with all the impact of a miracle, it flooded just like that. But mostly dry and dead, just seeming cool because of the river gums and occasional scrappy willows, because there was shade that wasn't made by blazing, overheated iron and canvas and old boards.

She pointed to a spot close to where the creek, the train tracks and the dirt highway almost came together, creek and road curving in and curving away again, the tracks dividing them.

"How about there?" she said in that calculatedly artless way that had Danny and Kenny swapping looks.

"Roger that," Kenny said, as he so often did, a misuse of old World War 2 lingo.

Danny grabbed his Dad's army surplus canteen. "Fine with me."

If it had just been the two of them, Danny and Kenny would've been laughing and joking, pushing and shoving, saying goofy things, making a big deal of it. With Annie along they kept it simple, sensing that there was something fragile, special and fleeting in Annie being there. You couldn't talk it, could barely even grasp what it was, but they all knew, which had made Mr Jarvie's words at school for the past two years so much more thrilling and embarrassing.

"Here's Kenny and Danny. Now where is Annie?" Mr Jarvie would say. And when Dan retorted (fairly he'd thought) that Annie was only with them sometimes, that naturally became part of the refrain. "Here's Kenny and Danny and Sometimes Annie," he'd say when they came in, which had the other kids sniggering and sing-songing it too. Kids can be cruel, but how often their cues came from adults enjoying a different kind of humour.

Sometimes Annie it was from then on. In fact Kenny even said, "Roger that!" the very first day, because he figured everyone had to have a nickname.

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They were a good mile from town when they realised they probably should've picked somewhere closer. The heat was relentless. The land shimmered in every direction; the railway tracks blazed up at the sun as if just freshly poured and still molten; the highway stretched off into the burring of haze, a crusty deserted ribbon. The trees along Barrack Creek danced as if they might vanish at any moment.

When they finally did reach the bank, they found the scant shade barely helped.

Leaning against the trunks of the larger river gums, they looked out at the flat stretch of creek-bed, rippling with heat, set with the shifting, black and grey shapes of old tree trunks left by past flash-flooding, set to the mindless sawing of insects, then began moving along to where the trees were thickest.

That's when they saw that someone had set up camp right near the creek. Three drab buses were parked under the thickest stand of river gums, all with roof-racks packed high with bundles and boxes lashed down every which way. No cars were visible, just three old buses, one with its dusty windows catching bits of sun, the second with the windows of the back half painted over, the third all riveted metal with no windows at all that they could tell, just the front windscreen glinting dully.

"Who's that, y'reckon?" Kenny asked, and got no answer. It was so quiet that his words seemed way too loud. Danny and Annie didn't want to speak.

They moved closer, edging along the opposite side to the visitors, slipping from tree to tree.

No-one was about. The buses had to be like ovens inside, especially the third one, but Danny couldn't see anyone lying underneath them or leaning against tree trunks. The occupants were in town or off somewhere else, visiting one of the properties maybe. *Inside* only if they were crazy.

There wasn't a lot of mystery in Reardon, so sometimes you made it up. You told other kids stories about the bunyip that lived in Barrack Creek (you knew someone who knew someone who'd actually *seen* it), or the 'bore' woman who appeared around the clanking windmills and poisoned the water and sometimes stole children to drown in one of the artesian dams, or the *min-min* lights you saw flickering over the railway tracks after midnight, sometimes dancing along the creek. But this was the real thing, a real mystery, nothing like the box Mr Jarvie had put on his desk and asked them to write about, what it might contain. Here were three genuine 'mystery boxes', made only more mysterious by the faded letters Danny could make out on the sides of at least two of the vehicles.

"There are words," he said.

Kenny agreed. "Roger that."

Annie turned on him. "Enough of the 'Roger that', will you, Kenny?"

Kenny blinked at her. "Roger. Right. But there *are* words. Can you read 'em?"

None of them could. The buses were angled wrong and too dusty. They discussed moving closer, trying to make out what the words said, but even sneaking out to hide behind one of the bigger logs left by past floodwater still meant crossing the creek-bed in plain view, and, though they didn't say it, none of them wanted to do that right then.

It was just so quiet, so eerie, with insects sawing away in the scraps of grass, the tides of heat rolling along the creek and those dark windows glinting.

If only there was movement, someone visible, maybe a dog about. But it was all heat shimmer and unexpected strangeness.

"Know what?" Kenny said. "We oughta come back later an' spy on 'em. What d'you say? Come back after tea?"

Dan and Annie agreed to it, then all gladly turned and headed back towards the shimmering spill of dirty quicksilver that was Reardon.

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It took no effort for Kenny to get his Mum to serve them all an early tea. Monday's leftovers made it easy. The three of them were back at the clubhouse soon after six, killing time till it got darker by testing their flashlights and locating the little caravan of buses on the chart.

"Right here, I reckon," Danny said.

Kenny leant in close. "Roger that. Er, sorry, Annie."

"It's okay, Ken," Annie said, leaning in to see as well, which had Dan suddenly, totally aware of her, of her dark hair and how much her skin smelled of heat and summer. He could've gone crazy on it right then, but just kept pointing at the map, trying to ignore her arm pressing on his, most of all the alarming stirring in his loins, suddenly there, determined not to goof off like Kenny did whenever Annie Hendist came too close. He wanted her to like him. He liked her being close.

Then, when the air had cooled by twenty degrees and the sky was a rich, deepening blue, with stars pushing through and a scrap of a moon showing, they set off again, striking out pretty well in a straight line to where they figured the camp ought to be.

This time there were people. The kids smelled the smoke from a cookfire and heard voices well before they could make out the welcoming flicker of the fire itself and see the cheery, calmer points of hurricane lanterns. There were tents set up now too, two of them, large and square, and four people at least, then five, laughing and joking just like people anywhere. Six, Dan counted, when someone else stepped from one of the buses: four men, two women.

Without discussing it, Annie moved down onto the creek. The boys followed, moved out to halfway where she was hiding behind an old log and hunkered down next to her.

In a whisper, Annie spelt out the words on the side of the bus nearest the fire. "S-A-L-T-I-M-B-A-N - now what's that? Oh yeah - Q-U-E-S. There's a 'The'. The Saltimbanques, it seems like."

"The Salt in Banks?" Danny said, even as Kenny spoke too.

"Salting Banks? What's that?"

"The name of our carnival," a man's voice answered, right near them.

Kenny yipped in fright. Danny's heart caught in his throat. Someone was there on the creek-bed close by.

"It's French," the voice continued. "I'm Bertie Green. Why don't you come over and say hello?"

The fire, the lanterns, the fact that there were two women, more importantly that Bertie, whoever he was, had started walking on ahead, made it seem okay. They were just carny folk camping along the road, tired from driving in the heat.

"Let's go," Kenny said.

Dan and Annie exchanged a half-seen glittering glance, and the three of them followed Bertie up into the camp.

Framed above and around by flickering tree-forms in the firelight, warmly lit by yellow lamplight and walled in by the sides of one bus and one of the tents, to Dan it was like walking onto the stage of the Community Hall back in town to do a play, or peering through the eye-hole of a diorama at some painting by that guy Mr Jarvie liked, Breughal. Updated, sure. Australianised, yes, but just odd and interesting people caught in the middle of being easy among themselves. Yet not altogether *his* people.

And there was Berty, fully visible now and quite a sight himself, a short dusty-looking man with a sharp face, his chin and forehead pulling back from his nose like some cartoon figure who'd stood too long in a scorching westerly.

But there was hardly time to take it all in properly because Berty Green was introducing them.

"Some kids from town dropped by to pay their respects. Don't reckon I caught your names, kids."

"Danny."

"Kenny."

"Annie."

Berty gave a deep bow, then gestured at his companions. "Right you are. And here we have Jeffrey, Gwen, Walter, Haunted Jack, May and Robert."

There were nods, smiles, salutes, quick looks at the boys, longer looks at Annie from all of them, not just the men. Danny couldn't be sure who was who, but it didn't seem important just then.

"Take a seat! Take a seat!" Berty cried. "Gwen, pour our guests some tea, will you? Later we'll take you in to see Mr Hasso."

"Mr who?" Kenny asked.

Berty grinned. "Mr Hasso. Our ringmaster, our maitre'd. The boss. He's been shut away all day doin' his calculations."

"All day?" Danny said. "Not in the bus without windows?"

"Oh, not in there," Berty answered. "That's our darkwagon. We only go in there on special occasions. His office is in the back o' that one." He pointed to the one with the closed off back half. The painted-over panes glowed with dim yellow light.

"All day?" Kenny echoed. "He would've fried to a crisp in there today."

Berty laughed. "You'n me maybe. Not our Mr Hasso. He's a bit of a lizard that way. Likes it warm."

Gwen handed them tin cups of steaming billy tea, sweetened with condensed milk, stirred with a eucalypt twig.

"What are Saltimbanques?" Annie asked, blowing and sipping.

"That depends," Berty replied. "Going traditional now, we're showfolk, mountebanks, jugglers, acrobats, harlequins, ballerinas and buffoons."

"Clowns?" Kenny asked, missing some of the words.

"Inevitably, Kenny," Berty said. "Ask any juggler who drops his balls."

"Or any ballerina past the point of doing point," one of the others said, laughing. Walter, Danny thought it was.

"We're all just clowns if the figures aren't right," Gwen said, sitting by the fire again.

"How's the tea?"

“Great.”

“Beaut.”

“Terrific, thank you.”

Berty got up. “How 'bout you set your cups down awhile and we'll pay a call on Mr Hasso?”

Danny was glad to, if only to get away from the indulgent gaze of the others around the fire. He didn't much like adults having jokes at his expense. Mr Jarvie was bad enough.

Berty led them between the tents towards the middle bus. There was only the dull yellow glow from the back section, but Berty switched on a front cabin light as they climbed in, illuminating bench seats, a fixed table, some fitted cupboards. A door in the wall halfway down its length had a plaque with the name *Bernard Hasso* on it.

“There. Let's see if he's taking visitors.” And Berty winked at them as if they knew a lot more about Bernard Hasso's ways than they let on.

He knocked lightly at the door. “Mr Hasso? We've some young visitors from town come callin'.”

There was no reply that Danny could hear, but Berty smiled at them and turned the handle, opening the door on an office that took up the whole back half of the bus.

There were bookshelves and charts along the walls, all aglow in the light of two parafin lamps, and a big desk at the far end littered with papers, maps, lists of calculations. Bernard Hasso sat grinning at them with a pen in his hand, a large blacksmith of a man in a grimy sweat-stained shirt and dark pants. Where Berty Green had sharp features, Bernard Hasso had craggy ones, his eyes set deep under heavy black brows and above a full black mustache. It was as if a gypsy and lion-tamer had been blended with one of those dark mysterious Egyptians from either version of *The Mummy* - the 1932 original or the recent 1959 remake Hank Burgess had shown as a midnight double at the Lyceum in town only a month back (surely one of the weirdest choices for a double-feature ever). The smile was amiable enough, but his eyes glittered approvingly at Annie in a way Danny didn't like, the same way the others had looked at her, all except Berty. Hanging on the plywood wall behind the man's chair was a framed picture - a painting of circus figures caught while performing or rehearsing.

“So, kids. What's the verdict? What d'you think of us so far?”

“We haven't seen much yet, Mr Hasso,” Kenny said, eager as a puppy.

Bernard Hasso nodded and set down his pen. “Not much to see yet, I'm afraid. “We don't play many towns during the summer.”

“Don't see any animals,” Kenny rattled on, clearly on automatic.

“Oh, animals come and go. We don't go in for animal acts too much. Not too much.”

And Berty Green sniggered.

“You're Saltimbanques,” Annie said, as if identifying a rare breed.

“Why yes, Miss - er?”

“Annie. This is Kenny and Danny.”

“Miss Annie, yes.” He gave glancing nods at the boys, turned his deep-set, black eyes on her again. “That's exactly what we are. Not your usual troupe of wandering players certainly. Saltimbanques every one!” He indicated the framed print on the wall behind

him. "Picasso, 1905. *Family of Saltimbanques*. From his pink or rose period. The name is from the Italian *saltimbanco* - coined in 1646 from *saltare*, to leap, *in*, on, *banco*, bench. Leap-on-benches, yessir. Mountebanks, yes, charlatans and quacksalvers - another marvellous word - from the Dutch *kwakzalver*. Ignorant pretenders. Quacks. That's us."

"Do you do magic?" Kenny asked.

Berty Green sniggered again and sat on a bench seat near the door.

"Why yes, Master Kenny. Sometimes we do." Bernard Hasso patted the papers on his desk. "When the planets are right and the wind blows a certain way. Sometimes it just flows out of the land. Real magic, yessir. A fickle thing though sometimes, just like the favours of pretty young ladies."

"You sure made yourselves disappear today," Annie said, with more pluck, Dan thought, than this Mr Hasso expected. There was something going on that Dan didn't entirely understand.

Bernard Hasso frowned, even as his eyes widened and his big smile came back. "Ah, Berty, hear that? Our young friends called earlier. We were remiss."

"Couldn't see anyone," Dan said, feeling both annoyed yet curious. Something was going on. Adult stuff, but not like with Mr Jarvie.

The ringmaster nodded. "Off getting supplies probably."

"Sometimes there's a bunyip here in Barrack Creek," Kenny said, determined not to be left out.

"That so, Master Kenny? What sort?"

"I dunno. You got bunyips?"

"Sometimes. Bunyips are easy." Bernard Hasso's dark eyes twinkled and glittered under his heavy brows, and Kenny looked puzzled, as if not sure if the man were making fun of him or not.

"We should be going, Mr Hasso," Annie said, and it struck Dan that she needed to be the one to say it, that he had just been sort of drifting there in this stuffy, closed part of the bus while some other level of exchange had been going on. He wished he could've re-run everything they'd said, but it was too late now.

"Yeah, we should," he heard himself say, just to be out of there.

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Dan wasn't really sure why he had to go back that night. A lot of it had to do with Annie, with how Mr Hasso and the troupe had looked at her, with wanting to both keep her safe and impress her. It was just something he had to do.

He didn't stay at Kenny's long. He told Mrs Woke that there were some chores he'd forgotten to get done like he'd promised but that he'd be back later, that Kenny should expect him in their front verandah sleepout as usual. At 10.12 pm he was pedalling out of town on his bike, riding without a light, using what moonlight there was, heading to where the creek and the highway bowed together, the silver tracks cutting between.

Dan figured he didn't have to tell anyone he'd done it, maybe Annie later on. He hurried along under a vast field of stars, watching australites streaking down, now and then looking back at Reardon where it made its neat huddle of yellow light in the greater darkness.

Reaching the closest point to the creek, he left his bike just off the road and moved carefully across to where he figured the buses were. The camp was quiet, with a lantern burning and the fire low. The two tents were dark amid the long hulks of the buses. The only other light came from the back of the second bus where Mr Hasso was probably still working on his mysterious calculations.

The odd thing was that no-one slept in the open as you'd expect on such a mild night, arranged about the fire like you did when you camped out. Maybe they were in the third bus - the closed-up one Berty had called the 'darkwagon', sleeping or practising tricks away from prying eyes.

Dan had intended just to look them over again from the safety of darkness, to maybe eavesdrop on conversations and gather more information about the group, but mainly to just get a better feel of the whole thing, to make up for being so out of it in Mr Hasso's office.

It was seeing the dim yellow glow from the second bus that made him cross the creek-bed and go among the darkened shapes. He'd say he'd lost a ring or something if anyone caught him, say he'd come back looking for it, though that would mean he'd have to be using the torch he had in his back pocket, the last thing he wanted to do.

He made it to the second bus, stood beneath the yellow panes, heard the muffled murmur of voices within. But the windows were closed and Danny couldn't make out words. It was infuriating.

Then the office door opened and Bernard Hasso and Berty Green emerged into the front of the bus.

"I want it brought up first thing," Mr Hasso was saying. "Take Walter and Jack. We've got a little over eighteen hours. Mr Atterling's party will be here at 7 o'clock."

"Right," Berty said (Dan almost expected him to say 'Roger that!').

"And I've reconsidered. Tomorrow you will take the mantacycle into town, drum up some local business. We might as well be seen to be earning our way in case folks get to talking."

"Right you are, Mr Hasso. Good night."

"Good night, Berty."

Bernard Hasso went back into his office and closed the door. Berty clambered out of the second bus and headed for the darkwagon.

Danny stood as motionless as possible, vividly aware of his heart pounding, of the torch stuck in his back pocket, of a stone in his left shoe, of how perspiration had to be making his forehead shine in the moonlight through the trees. But Berty passed obliviously by, climbed into the closed-in bus and shut the door behind him. Only then did Danny cross the intervening space and stand beside that third dark vehicle with its faded legend: *The Saltimbanques*, snaking in the darkness - an incantation to the night and all its silence.

It was *too* quiet. There were insect sounds, the usual clicks and chirrups, but absolute silence from the bus, no footsteps, no voices. But it didn't *feel* like the silence of seven sleeping people, rather more like the silence of people standing, waiting inside till he had gone away so they could resume what they'd been doing before. He imagined them there, eyes wide but catching no light whatsoever, the sighted but unseeing eyes of the living trapped in caves, buried in tombs, caught in air pockets in the holds of sunken ships.

Danny moved away as silently as he could, crept back across the creek, taking care to avoid any logs, reached his bike and hurried back to town, finally joining Kenny in their sleepout.

"You sure took your time," Kenny said drowsily as Danny climbed into bed.

"You know what it's like, Kenny. Sometimes you just get caught up."

"Roger that," Kenny said, and slipped off into sleep again.

Danny lay staring at the night, watching the stars move round the sky. When he slept at last, he dreamt he was being chased by a terrible creature called a mantacycle with Berty Green perched on its back. Bernard Hasso sat to one side working on his calculations.

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Danny had meant to wake early to go spy on the camp and see what it was Berty and the others had to bring up for Mr Hasso first thing, but when Kenny roused him at 8.06, he knew it would be too late for that.

But Annie called by the clubhouse at 9 o'clock and Dan made sure the three of them were at the northwestern end of town, maybe two hundred yards out, when Berty Green came pedalling in from the direction of the creek.

The mantacycle was quite a sight, a tall four-wheeled contraption at least six feet high and six feet square at the base and tapering in, as rusty and weird-looking as an old torture machine, with arms and overhangs and a dozen flags snaking out from as many flagpoles set into the tube-metal frame, all long, faded pennons: blue, orange, red and purple, curling out behind. The whole thing was like the skeleton of a pyramid hauled up from the bottom of the ocean, and Berty was as extraordinary a sight, bent over the pedals on a small saddle seat, elbows out, legs pumping furiously in the early heat, his long, tattered dust-coat flaring behind him. He was wearing a wide-brimmed hat set with corks on strings, no, not corks - set with dancing, swinging, bleached-white things, bird skulls, Danny saw when the mantacycle got closer.

Seeing what they were, Danny realized the little man's name was probably Birdy Green, not Berty. Somehow it just tipped everything further over into strange.

"Mornin' to you, kids!" he called when he recognised them, breathing hard and letting the tall vehicle roll to a stop, its four pumped-up tires making their gritty tearing sound on the hot road surface. "You were a big hit with Mr Hasso last night, I have to tell ya. He figured, what the hell, let's put on a show anyway! Seven o'clock tonight. Five bob admission. Go tell your friends!"

“Roger that!” Kenny cried, as Berty - Birdy! - set to pedalling again, and ran off to follow the machine into town, as if there was anything else happening in Reardon this Friday night that might stop folks being available.

In a strange way, standing there in the road with the dust settling around them was the first time Dan had ever felt truly alone with Annie. They watched Birdy ride off with Kenny scrambling back and forth like some native runner in a Jungle Jim movie and the silence just grew up around them, the sense of being together.

“I went back there last night, Annie,” he said, expecting her to act annoyed and disappointed.

“So did I,” she said.

You could have knocked Danny over. “You what? When? What did you see?” So much for protecting her.

“I went real late. Around midnight, I guess. That Mr Hasso was so creepy, Dan. I just wanted to see the place again.”

“See anything?”

“Nope. When did you go?”

Danny told her, describing what he’d heard and felt, growing more and more uneasy at the thought of Annie crouching there in the dark watching the buses and the tents.

“What do we do?” he said finally.

Annie shrugged. “I’m just really glad you’re here, Dan.”

“Me too,” Danny said. “That you’re here, I mean.” And they started walking back towards town.

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Birdy Green and his ‘Frying’ Machine, as townsfolk cheerfully called it (it was 10 am and already 93°), was a definite hit. Locals bought him beers, shouted him an early lunch, offered to give him a tow back. By the time he was pedalling out of town at 11.48, he had two dozen kids straggling along behind like he was some latter-day Pied Piper doing a practice run. Kenny was one of them.

The kids straggled back ten minutes later, dusty and exhausted, and the day settled into its most terrible phase, the heat lending everything its dreamlike shimmer for what Hank Burgess called the ‘wait-out’.

“Whatcha doin’ after wait-out?” Hank would say from behind the bar at the Stockman Hotel, asking any number of patrons staring up at the big aerial shot of the town as if expecting some trace of Birdy’s carnival to suddenly appear like stigmata or a face on a shroud.

“Dunno,” most said as usual, though more and more added, “Might give the circus a look-see” and “Yeah, might give the circus a go”.

Pete Byles would invariably correct whoever said it. “Ain’t a circus, you blokes.”

“Must be,” someone would invariably answer. “Seen one clown already.”

And round it would go, all through the blazing afternoon.

Annie's mum ran the pub's kitchen, so Danny heard part of it when the three Rangers dropped by so Annie could get permission to go see the show. You always remembered to check in when money was involved.

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Now that they had a legitimate reason to visit the carnival (and since Kenny was seeing himself as something of a self-appointed sidekick to Birdy Green), the three Rangers went out to the campsite around 6 pm, this time riding their bikes along the highway and leaving them by the road near where it bowed in to meet the railway line.

They were rather surprised to see two tents set up on the flat hard ground this side of the creek, both warmly lit, one quite large and unusually long, the other smaller and square and placed a few feet away from the bigger one like an afterthought.

No-one was about so they looked into the large one first, saw twenty hurricane lamps set on as many supports, warm and welcoming, and lots of benches set up down the far end. All it was really was a large empty space. There was no bunting or posters, no attempt at decoration at all. When they peered into the smaller tent, they saw nothing but one of the bigger, darker logs from the creek. It seemed to swallow the light from the eight lanterns hanging on the uprights. Maybe that's what Birdy had had to carry up.

"Hey, they've got a chain on it!" Kenny said, and laughed. "Maybe they're worried someone'll steal it."

Kenny was right. Around one gnarled length of snapped-off root was an iron ring, with a short chain leading to a spike driven into the hard ground.

"Maybe they're going to turn it into an elephant!" Dan said, more to ease his nerves, he realised, than because he thought it was funny.

Kenny laughed though. "Roger that! Sorry, Annie. Say, why don't we go find Birdy?" It wasn't a bad idea, Dan thought, given the little man's good humour towards them earlier in the day, and it gave them a reason to cross the creek-bed and go among the buses again, which Danny found was what he wanted to do.

But when they reached the camp, Birdy was nowhere to be seen, which made Danny think of the closed darkwagon and the silence there. The only sign of life was Mr Hasso sitting on the doorsill of the second bus puffing on a pipe.

"Right on time," he said, knocking the pipe against the lowest step to empty it, then getting up. "Come on in awhile. It's almost showtime."

Dan had reservations about going into Mr Hasso's office again, but at the same time wanted to test himself after what had happened the previous night. He followed Annie and Kenny and was soon standing before the ringmaster's big desk, littered as before with charts and pages of figures.

But now there was a different picture on the plywood wall behind where Bernard Hasso was once again seated. Smaller than the Picasso, almost a foot on a side, it showed a washed-out grey landscape under a lowering sky, with shapes like polished river pebbles scattered about, dull and metallic-looking, some set on their ends, some more geometric than others, those in the foreground rising up in columns like those

limestone shapes you read about, stalagmites. Among the clustering and spill of grey and white forms were a few touches of colour, here a drab yellow stone, there an ochre one, there a pale red trapezoidal shape, but there was only one distinctive focus in the whole moody scene, a rectangular patch of red on the left side, like a window or door or even a mirror in a worn, rolled, leaden frame.

Dan was about the mention it when Mr Hasso clapped his big hands together and grinned at them, his eyes flashing under dark brows.

“Now you see us at our best!” he said. “This is our emergent phase.”

Their what? Danny didn’t understand what that could mean.

“And the tents over there?” Annie asked. “All part of your calculations?”

“Exactly so, Annie. Position is crucial. Always crucial. What do they say: time, place and identity, that’s what it’s all about. You kids won’t know it but the layout of Reardon configures to the sacred geometry of the Vesica, quite by accident, mind you, purest chance, sweetest serendipity. A circle, a square, a triangle, a rhombus, a hexagram and polygons all tipped in together.”

“Is that good?” Kenny asked.

“Oh surely it is, Kenny. Very much so. And just there where the road bends in to the creek with the tracks between, we have a most wonderful confirmation of Bruno Taut’s *Stadtkrone*, can you believe it? If only I could convey even a fraction of what it means to us - the theosophical blend of ley-line traditions and geomantic corridors with the *axis urbis* of imperial Rome. The cityline. Cities built along lines of force. The ancient scemb lines. No wonder all these crackpot doctrines sprang up, spring up and will forever do so. How else to interpret the truth. But I do forget myself, going on like this. Kenny, Birdy says you were a great help today. How would you like to assist him with his final preparations now?”

“That’d be great! We didn’t see him round though.”

“Oh, you’ll find him, I’m sure. Off you go. You’ll see your friends again when the show starts.”

“Hey, roger that!” Kenny cried as he left the office. “See ya!”

Danny heard him clamber out of the bus, heard a dwindling, somehow disturbing: “Hey, Birdy! Hey, Birdy, wait up!”

Now Mr Hasso’s smile changed, or rather changed at the eyes, which glittered full of unreadable emotion.

“You changed the picture,” Danny said, partly to relieve the tension, the dreadful awkwardness he felt, partly out of determination to stay with it this time no matter what happened.

“I did. We always do. Yves Tanguy, 1954. *The Saltimbanques*. What do you think of it, Danny?”

“It’s strange. I prefer the other one.”

“The Picasso. You do? Tell me what you see in this one.”

Danny studied the strangely lit plain, the clustered eroded shapes and spires in the foreground, the scattered ones farther out, the dramatic patch of red in its frame.

“It’s like things waiting for other things to arrive.”

“And when they do?” Mr Hasso’s voice was rich, his words lulling, soothing. Danny concentrated on the shapes, partly wishing Annie would chip in, partly wanting to impress her and hide the fact that he was truly and deeply afraid.

“I don’t know. They change. They grow.”

“I see. And the patch of red?”

Danny knew he’d be asked that. “Energy. Force. Or something has scratched through the surface. Made a door maybe. Something showing through under the grey. Peeking through.”

“Mr Jarvie never knew what a smart student he had, did he, Dan? Now tell me. Did you find your ring?”

“My what?”

“Last night when you came back to pay us a visit. Did you find your ring?”

Danny felt the clutch of panic, pulled back from the picture, from Mr Hasso’s incredible voice and eyes and saw that Annie wasn’t standing next to him.

“Where’s Annie?” he cried. “What have you done with Annie?”

“You didn’t hear her? She said she had to - you know - use our convenience.”

Danny didn’t believe him for a moment. “And where’s that?”

Bernard Hasso gestured casually. “Back over there a ways. She’ll only be a minute.”

“Mr Hasso, what’s going on?”

“What do you feel is happening, Danny Truswell?”

“I didn’t tell you my last name!”

“Birdy picked it up in town.” An answer for everything.

Did not, Danny wanted to shout right into his face, tried to recollect what else he had to remember, something Mr Hasso had just now said. He was forgetting again. Forgetting to notice things. Like Annie going off, leaving the office. She couldn’t have. Wouldn’t have. Then how – ?

“I asked what you feel is happening, Dan,” Mr Hasso said, snaring him again with that way he had, killing thoughts by imposing others.

“Something’s pushing through,” Danny answered.

“Almost right. Almost got it. Now forget the red bit.”

How could he? Danny stared at the picture, just couldn’t help it.

“Something’s getting nearer.”

“Now that’s really got it!” Bernard Hasso said, seeming genuinely pleased.

“Slouching towards Reardon to be born. Something very pure. A network of energy, Dan. Moving across the land, travelling in lines. Lines of force. Spotlights of magic. Some of us know how to plot ‘em, track ‘em, use ‘em. We travel the grid. Sometimes we follow, sometimes we wait for them to catch us up. It’s what gives history its buzz and fizz, Danny, me pure boy! Shamans and wizards! Smart old codgers figurin’ out the conjunctions. Merlin having a good day. Sacerdotes and mages, seers, sibyls and sorcerers all waiting for auspicious windows of opportunity, knowing how to play the game. Oh, it’s an art, I tell ya!”

Dan tried to imagine lines of force, thought of moving spotlights of magic, and something else.

I didn’t tell him my last name.

“It’s supernatural then!” he managed to say.

“No, it’s not! That’s precisely *not* what it is. Once your so-called supernatural manifests itself then it’s *natural*, don’t you see? *Part* of nature. This isn’t nonsense about mummies responding to ancient curses. This is things happening as they always happen whether we notice them or not. It’s like forgetting to notice gravity because it’s always there, or what the Moon’s tidal pull does to your body, or negative ions from thunderstorms. This isn’t quackery, Dan. Not this! We travel the grid, flexing muscles most of us never get to try, meeting lots of different people, looking for those who think the same way we do, keeping an eye out for apprentices, too, though we’re very picky there. Taking turns in trying to pass it on.”

Dan was hearing yet not hearing, snared by the smooth round stones, the shadowy sky, the clustering shapes.

“Now Mr Atterling is a politician, see, and this show’s really being put on for him. He’s one of those secret-handshake Freemason mystic types too, you see, Danny, but he doesn’t know how to use it. So it’ll do us all good to keep him careful and in his place, in awe of the way it is. Make ’im think it’s us. Pay to get bits of it. But for us, for me, it has to be pure, Danny, you do understand that. It’s important you do.”

Danny understood stones and sky and a shadowy distance, disturbing weights, curves and edges, a comforting patch of red. Though he did hear, part of him did.

“Whatever happens, Dan,” Mr Hasso was saying, kindly enough it seemed, “it’s all for a good cause. Now you run along and find your friends.”

Danny stumbled from the office, blinking, shaking his head, trying to fathom what it had all been, nearly fell out of the bus.

Spotlights of magic. Moving. Getting closer.

The carnival following them.

These Saltimbanques.

The spotlights.

The lanterns. Dan noticed the lamps hanging in the trees, hanging from the buses, lighting the tents across the way, noticed how the words on the long bus sides seemed brighter, richer, firmer. So magical.

The Saltimbanques.

Performing in spotlights. Moving about. What *had* Mr Hasso said?

Kenny was there then, grinning, excited, seeming too young all of a sudden, just too young.

“Danny, hi!”

“You seen Annie, Ken?”

Kenny shrugged and grinned. “Think I saw her over at the big tent. Lots of people are arrivin’. You’re getting sweet on her, Dan!”

“Hey, she’s a Ranger too! Just want to know where she is.”

Kenny’s grin became a leer. “Whatever you say. But ain’t that closed-up bus weird?”

“Sure is. Why, do you reckon?”

Again Kenny shrugged. “Dunno. Just don’t like goin’ near it. It’s real quiet. Spooky.”

Like someone’s waiting in there, Danny thought. Listening. “You keep clear of it, Kenny, okay?”

“Don’t have to tell me. See you at the show.”

“See you.”

#

By the time Danny reached the big tent, there were well over two hundred people either crowded on the makeshift benches at the far end or standing along the sides, talking and laughing, poking good-natured fun at the modest set-up. Dan hurried to join them, unable to see Annie in the crowd but sure she’d be there waiting for the show to get underway. After what Kenny had said, he was sort of glad she didn’t come over to join him, though another part of him wished she would.

He’d just squeezed in between two kids he knew on one of the front benches when he noticed the four serious-looking men in crumpled dark suits seated further along the row: no doubt Mr Atterling and his party. They were definitely from out of town and were clearly impatient; one of the men kept looking at his watch and muttering to his companions.

When Bernard Hasso entered the tent, it was without a fanfare of any kind. He just strode in looking appropriately splendid in black tails and top-hat, carrying a glossy ebony cane with a silver ferrule at one end, a faceted crystal knob at the other. It glittered and shone in the lamplight.

The chatter subsided immediately. People were grinning. This was more like it.

There ought to be a spotlight, Danny thought, seeing the ringmaster standing before them all. He looks good but he should be standing in a spotlight.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,” Bernard Hasso said in his rich and wonderful voice. “Welcome, one and all! We are The Saltimbanques. Nature’s clowns and mountebanks. We have travelled the highways and byways of Australia to be here tonight, to offer an entertainment to the good folk of Reardon. The time is right for magic and merriment once again!”

And he held his arms wide, the crystal knob of his cane twinkling with lamplight. There was no fanfare, but there was a sense of one as the performers ran into the tent: Walter, Haunted Jack and Gwen to the left, Robert, May and Jeffrey to the right, all wearing loose, brightly coloured bodysuits, stitched all over with shapes and signs like Danny drew with his compass set at school, arcs intersected by straight lines.

All but Mr Hasso himself ran down the length of the tent to shake hands with members of the audience, then, after pinching cheeks and tweaking noses and pulling coloured kerchiefs from the pockets of some of the children, they all rushed back to form up around Bernard Hasso near the entrance.

“Here it comes!” the ringmaster cried, and began twirling his cane, making a Catherine Wheel of flashing light as his troupe began making a human pyramid to one side, Haunted Jack supporting the other six as they climbed aloft to compose themselves in a very impressive display.

Something was wrong about it though, Danny realized. He had done a bit of balancing at school, and this looked like it should topple over any second. But there was

Haunted Jack holding them all, and now raising his left leg, supporting the whole thing, *and* going up on his toes.

And - was Dan really seeing it? - now raising his right leg, so the whole pattern of human forms was just hanging in the air, all strobed by the dazzling twirl of Mr Hasso's cane.

It couldn't be.

Everyone was leaning forward trying to be sure of what they were seeing.

That's when Danny noticed how close and warm it was, and that the air smelled of woodsmoke and resin and something else. He kept blinking and sniffing to make sure of what was going on.

These hardly appeared to be the same people as the night before. They all seemed taller, stronger, not so much younger as more, well, in control, focused, powerful. They radiated confidence and energy.

And just how had the hovering pyramid been dismantled? For now Haunted Jack balanced Walter and an improbably nimble and alluring Gwen more skilfully than he'd seemed capable of sitting around the campfire that first night. Robert was juggling twenty balls with casual recklessness, an almost disdainful smirk on his face. May and Jeffrey strode about on stilts, seemed to fall, would catch one another, then go teetering and tottering towards those standing along the sides at that end of the tent before steadying themselves and staggering back the other way. Now Birdy made his appearance, running about in his long coat and bird-skull hat and flinging buckets of confetti over the laughing onlookers.

At first glance, apart from the opening pyramid, the acts weren't anything special, though if you did look close, you started to notice things, how every now and then May and Jeffrey would lean too far over on their stilts yet not fall, or how one of Robert's hands would lift to wave at someone in the crowd or mop his brow without disturbing the steady flow of the balls. Even when Birdy substituted warm perfumed water for the confetti, the audience responded with delight.

There was a drunkenness, a euphoria surrounding everything. The air became heavier, smokier, dimmer. The lanterns had haloes. The resin smell was stronger than ever. People were still blinking and squinting to be sure of what was going on, but no-one complained, no little kids cried, no-one got up to leave. It was as if they were in the presence of magic and knew it, and all wanted part of it.

And the players came ever closer as the evening progressed, moving from the far end of the tent towards the benches.

Spotlights of magic.

Danny found himself remembering bits of what Mr Hasso had said. Something about moving points of energy.

The performers were getting nearer. Soon they'd be clambering over the benches. No, Danny realised. The show would end first. The smaller tent was next-door - *in a straight line to this one!*

What was it Mr Hasso had said about ley-lines and the *urbis axis*? Cities built in lines.

More to the point, why would he have told him?

There was no time to consider it further, for once again Mr Hasso had his arms raised, and his voice was rumbling in the silence.

“Our final treat, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, is in the tent next door. Yes, the Barrack Creek Bunyip itself! But it’s one at a time, I’m afraid, bunyips being nocturnal and shy creatures when a crowd’s around.”

#

Muttering and exchanging uncertain smiles, the townsfolk filed out of the long tent and formed a queue outside the smaller one. Just as Mr Hasso had stipulated, one person was allowed in at a time, to emerge a short while later blinking, with looks of puzzlement on their faces as if not quite sure what they’d seen.

“Keep it short, folks!” Robert kept saying from his place by the entrance. “There’s lots of people so keep it short!”

“What did you see? What did you see?” younger kids were calling, eager for their turns, but it was clear that those who’d been inside didn’t know what to say and just went off looking bewildered and smiling sheepishly to join relatives and friends.

Danny held back, hoping to see Annie, to share as much of the experience together as Robert made possible.

“You there! Danny!” Robert called. “You wanna see the bunyip or not? You’ll need to be quick. Show’s over in a few minutes.”

Danny pushed into the tent, smelled resin almost immediately, saw the lamps had haloes, saw the log over by the tent’s far wall. Someone had moved it; the chain was stretched at full length. That was all.

“Too bad, kiddo,” Robert said, right behind him. “Too late, I reckon. Maybe next time.”

Danny was glad to be out of there, was relieved to see Kenny right in front of him, a few feet away, noticed too over near the large tent, Mr Hasso shaking hands with the men in Mr Atterling’s party. They no longer looked bored or impatient but were smiling and nodding as they started walking back towards their car.

“Did you see it, Danny?” Kenny asked. “The bunyip, did ya?”

“I missed it. What did you see?”

Kenny frowned and got a silly grin on his face. “I dunno. Hard to describe it really. But it was real neat.”

That’s when Mr Hasso came over. “Right then, Dan. Thought Kenny might like to help Birdy and the others strike the tents while you and me walk a bit and continue our discussion from before.”

And before Kenny could express his pleasure at being a carny roustabout, Danny got in with it first. “Roger that!”

Kenny stared at him in amazement, unable to believe what he’d heard.

Mr Hasso slapped Dan on the shoulder. “That’s the way! Never know when you can use twice the pure!”

Danny looked straight at Kenny. “Roger that, too, Mr Hasso!”

And they walked off, leaving Kenny Woke staring after them in confusion and disbelief.

Moments later, Mr Hasso and Danny had left the others and were moving along the creek-bed. Almost all the townsfolk had gone, walking or driving back to town. A few headlights could still be seen heading off to distant properties, and if anyone noticed three bikes left by the highway they would've paid no mind. It was summer holidays, barely 10 pm, and with the days so hot, kids stayed up till all hours.

All Danny could hear apart from their footsteps and the occasional insect sound were members of the troupe calling to one another as they brought down the tents. The voices faded with distance.

"Twice the pure, Dan," Bernard Hasso said, guiding him with a hand on his shoulder. "That's the way. Still workin' on that part of it - why that kind of sacrifice is the best way to go, why sacrifice is necessary at all really. Like to think it's like the Indians killing a buffalo, you know, making an offering to the Buffalo Spirit. Then there's the alchemical angle, reconciling the opposites, and the geomantic tradition. There's just so much to know. But, hey, so long as it works, I say. What d'you reckon, Dan? Ah, but here we are."

Another tent stood in the middle of the creek, square and dark in the thin moonlight.

"In you go, boy," Mr Hasso said. "Don't keep her waiting." And he lit the single hurricane lamp hanging on its wire hook, illuminating the only two things inside.

One of them was Annie Hendist, sitting in the middle of the dirt floor, bound hand and foot, a hankie tied in her mouth. The other was a large black tree-trunk, hooked and broken, shaped by some past flooding, just lying there. The tent had been set up around it.

In line with the other tents, Danny knew.

He hurried across to Annie, pulled the hankie from between her teeth and started freeing her while Mr Hasso took the lantern outside with him and began lacing the tent flaps together behind him. "Won't keep you long," he said, then the lamp was extinguished, plunging them into darkness, and Dan heard footsteps moving away.

"Oh, Dan!" Annie said, grabbing his arm, standing close. "I've been so scared!"

"What happened?" Dan was vividly aware of her.

"I - I'm not sure. One moment I was in the bus with you and Mr Hasso. Then they'd brought me here. I was so terrified, Dan. They just left me here. I didn't know what they'd do."

"It's okay, Annie. You're safe now. It's okay now." *So* aware of her.

She continued gripping his arm. He could feel her breath on his cheek. "Do you know what's goin' on, Dan?" she asked.

He didn't. He did. He tried to think back, almost had it. It was gone, then bits slipped back again.

"It's something about spotlights of energy. Moving in lines. They follow them." He was surprised to hear himself saying it. "Go from place to place, keeping up. They use it, Annie."

"For what?"

“Everything. Their performance. They were so different, so - changed. And that long tent, remember? Everyone was down one end. Their performance got closer and closer. Then it moved to the bunyip tent.”

“The what tent?”

“The smaller tent. The one with the log chained down.” And Danny went silent a moment. “Like this one.”

Annie’s eyes twinkled in the dimness. “This one isn’t chained.”

“I know.”

They peered off to where the hooked, torn silhouette of the old log showed against the moonlit east side of the tent.

“How long we got?” Annie asked him.

“I lose track of time whenever I’m with Hasso. An hour or two. I don’t know how long it takes. Let’s try to get out of here.”

The sturdy canvas walls had been spiked through brass eyelets on the ground outside; the lacing on the flaps was knotted outside as well. The central and corner uprights were simply too thick and too well planted to break or dislodge, and repeated running against the tent’s sides seemed to have no effect at all.

They were standing by the entrance, trying to work the lacing rope so the knot was nearer, when they heard it.

Barely heard it, for it was the softest wrenching, the slightest sound of twisting.

They stared at each other, then at the shape.

And saw one of the snapped-off roots at the top move, twist.

The log was alive.

They could hear it creaking as it lifted slightly, testing the life it had, then heard a scrape, and another. There were a few pounding heartbeats of silence, then a third scrape, this time louder, harsher as it gouged the ground where it lay, made with the determination of something *discovering* itself alive, filled with the desperate chance to live again as something so new.

Annie grabbed Danny by both arms this time.

“You believing all this, Dan?” she said. Such an odd question now.

“Of course.”

“He wants us ’cause we’re pure, Danny. That’s what he told me. You know what that means?”

“Yeah. Sure. Course I do.”

“And are you?”

“What? Me? Yes. Of course. You?” He would never have dreamed of asking it. That sort of directness was four, six, ten years in his future at least.

“You know it. Quickly. Take off your shorts!”

Perhaps it was what they did then, perhaps it was Kenny arriving in time, perhaps the enlivening energy simply moved on, but Kenny Woke *was* suddenly there, stirred from his hero-worship of Birdy Green by Danny using *his* signature line like that - a sailor’s SOS, a flyer’s Mayday, a carny’s Hey Rube! - fumbling at the tent rope, undoing the flaps, never noticing how Danny and Annie checked their clothing as they left the tent.

#

It all remained so dreamlike and uncertain, what happened in those few days, what Mr Jarvie later described as “smoke and mirrors” when school started back, just “so much hypnosis and hallucination”.

The heat and the sameness of the days soon wore it down all the more. Blokes at the bar of the Stockman Hotel stopped peering into the aerial shot of Reardon, began looking at their beers again as they talked, and when Danny reminded people (even Kenny) about the carnival that had played out near Barrack Creek, they said, “Oh yeah”, as if it had happened years ago not weeks, but sure, of course they remembered it. But what else could you expect in a land where the heat doomed normal folk to the limbo of wait-out, blurred grain trucks and silos into dragons, burred every lonely windmill into Don Quixote tilting at himself?

And just like that, Annie went off to stay with her aunt in Mildura for a while, which was no big deal, she'd done it often enough before, but she didn't say goodbye and it just pushed the whole thing further across into unreality and lack of proper consequence.

Then Mr Hasso's letter came.

Dear Daniel,

We pay our price too. Forfeit things like families. Something to do with the energy, May says, probably where the notion of changelings comes from down through the ages. But no Dannys, Kennys or Annies for The Saltimbanques unless we borrow, find apprentices however we can. Where else do you think we come from? It's the other thing we do. You didn't disappoint us, Dan. The magic passed through you. The child will always be drawn to magic.

For that, our heartfelt thanks.

Bernard Hasso

PS: The 'bunyip' was just to motivate, you understand. Excuse the theatrics.

For a moment Danny actually thought the 'child' reference was to him, but the postscript stole that in an instant. There was only one thought then, a question, desperate, bittersweet and somehow extending his whole life out into something infinitely, ultimately beyond Reardon.

Had she known all along?

In the space it took to read the few dozen words, Danny learned two crucial things, vital to learn at any age but so powerful to have at fourteen, that you always had to

grant unlimited possibility, and that happy endings were as fleeting as you let them be.
If not protected, they vanished out of lives like the bunyips along Barrack Creek.

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