

The Colour of the Night



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THE NATIVE bushland was silent. At least it was to others: *It is eerie*, they would say, *eerily quiet, like a vacuum*. But it was no vacuum to Shaun Bellamy. Instead it was all animation; complex, manifold and systematic. Like language. Shaun knew the bush's native tongue and could decipher it as easily as spoken English. Walking through bracken that grew taller than he, that ancient dialect came to him, steadily and uninterrupted.

Silent? Not to Shaun. If city folk acknowledged sound at all, they often mentioned the birds. Yet they rarely registered the cuckoo's gentle trill, the scornful chatter of thornbills, the thrush scratching in the leaf litter, or the rattle of a kookaburra's beak. Nor did they notice the spiderweb that wasn't there yesterday or the teethmarks in the bark of a wattle, let alone why they were there. But Shaun did; he knew it all. He was born to it.

He rode a pushbike on bush roads, half an hour to school. There he blended with those around him, happy to comply, responding readily to all the nominated programs. He often attracted the attention of others, yet he

was no talker – perhaps it was the few words he chose that caused heads to turn and conversations to pause. From his classmates he drew little more than an uncertain stare, but Shaun’s teachers took particular interest, regarding him as something of a curiosity. Perhaps, they imagined, his progressive parents had instilled in the boy an unusual soberness, or perhaps it was his comparative isolation that caused him to respond with a degree of composure more common in older folk.

One sports day afternoon Shaun stood on the edge of the field watching some older boys playing cricket. Henley at the crease knocked the bat on the hard earth, brought his knees together and turned his elbow to the sky. There never was a ganglier child. All at once Shaun realised that his Phys Ed teacher was staring down at him, leaning in like a big old tree. The man fixed Shaun with his squinty eyes and suddenly declared, ‘You think too much, Bellamy.’ The boy looked up at his teacher’s planet-like skull against the pale sky, and tried to unpick that trenchant claim. Perhaps it was meant as advice, but instead, the comment simply gave Shaun cause for further reflection; how might he curtail the practice?

The thinking affliction had dogged him from the age of six. It was around then that another of his teachers casually asked the class what their favourite colour was. Most said *blue* or *pink* or *green*. But for whatever reason, Shaun spontaneously responded, *The colour of the night*.

‘That would be black,’ his teacher replied.

‘No,’ Shaun said, ‘it is only black because people are

afraid of it. You have to look harder. Then it is a special colour that no one can copy, not even in the movies.'

It was the expression on the man's face that stayed with Shaun, a lesson in itself. Had he crossed some forbidden line, pierced some inner sanctum reserved only for adults, for the qualified? He was not to know it but he'd merely baffled the man: what is the appropriate response to a child who takes extemporaneous questions so seriously?

You think too much was the latest advice, which only encouraged the boy to think quite a great deal more.

Apart from that one serious anomaly, Shaun attended to his maths, science and social studies like all the others. He had a laptop, and with the improved satellite signal, he carried a smartphone, utilising apps and predictive text just as they all did. But it was the natural world that drew him. When home-time beckoned, he entered the bush as other children entered an interactive game – although Shaun's console control was little more than a snapped stick, his keyboard the whole forest, his mouse a mouse.

Ask Shaun what a peppermint is and he'd explain that it's a rough-barked native eucalypt growing on the drier slopes with distinctive-smelling leaves that curve inwards to deliver raindrops closer to the trunk. Ask him how leaf-curling spiders curl leaves and he would describe the process in detail; ask him why dragonflies dart, why White-eared Honeyeaters sit on kangaroos, why the seeds of certain grasses have spiralling tails, and he would deliver an answer more comprehensive than most textbooks. Hardly anyone in the world knew why night-flying moths were attracted

to the light. But Shaun did.

Much of his knowledge came from direct experience, but not everything. While other children read *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games*, Shaun absorbed his parents' textbooks – history, biography and the natural sciences – with the assiduousness of a quiz-show celebrity. But Shaun's prize lay in the sheer joy of knowing, in drawing a little closer to the birds, animals, wildflowers, grasses, insects, fungi and ferns. At twenty paces he could separate the dicots from the monocots – *monocotyledons*, to use the correct term.

Yet Shaun could not distinguish a Honda from a Hyundai, a terrace from a tenement, a bagel from a baguette; these were objects beyond his terrain. The big city was far to the south, a humdrum of men and machinery, women and fashion, urgency and speed. In Shaun's mind it all flashed brightly: glinting cars reflected in shop windows, trucks and traffic, ambulances, diesel buses, networks of wires – and people: striding, bumping, texting, preoccupied.

With his mother, he'd once visited his Auntie Adele before she moved, before she was divorced. Her brick house seemed indistinguishable from many others, the front façade strapped back and forth by whizzing cars and bicycles; a kind of incessant monotony unseen in the green world. But it held a certain charm and, though now a distant memory, that blur of frenzy occupied a special place in Shaun's eleven-year-old mind.

After his aunt's divorce she moved into the city along with Elton – Shaun's older cousin – but to which part

the boy wasn't sure. At night in his room, listening to the chuck-chuck of Marsh Frogs in a nearby pond, he conjured an image of that inner-city location and contemplated an excursion there as others might consider a trip to Moscow or Marrakesh. It was far away and exotic and some day he'd go, he was sure of it. Some day he'd navigate that foreign land; it would broaden his knowledge, allow an appreciation of things he knew only from films, books and the internet. Some day.

ELTON BRIGHT – Shaun's older cousin – would rather contract the self-replicating Storm Worm virus on his PC than be subjected to a half hour in the bush. He'd rather lose his warrior status on *Guild Wars 2* than venture to a place where trees replaced power poles, where grass supplanted the grey exactitude of concrete.

He didn't need it. He had everything he could possibly want in his blacked-out bedroom: friends, information, games, videos, and the entire world to traverse, from the loftiest mountain, real or imagined, to the inner workings of another's mind. Elton could tell you what a friend from Switzerland – that he'd never met – had for breakfast that morning, and what he'd dreamt about last night. It was all right there on the net; was there any reason to go outside?

On this day, as he sat in his darkened man-cave, awaiting responses on Twitter, he spontaneously and unconsciously unzipped his trousers and released his penis. Well, why not?

It was not at all uncommon for Elton Bright to be sit-

ting at a screen conversing in one chat room or another, and not at all uncommon for his member to rise. Yet the two events – the conversing and the rising – were unconnected and an erection was no more irregular than a yawn or a cramp in the foot. Sometimes he'd shuck down his pants and stroke the thing like a family pet. And sometimes while he did it, he'd click on www.sweetly.com stored in his *Favourites* to observe some anonymous girl's body, a young woman, purportedly a teenager, posing naked in a wheat field, astride a bicycle or sprawled in the sun next to a hotel swimming pool. But he rarely took interest in pornography – that other kind of imagery featuring the full gamut of sexual deviation – although he sometimes wondered who did. In Australia, it was a 1.5-billion-dollar industry with most viewing it for free, so how many Australians *weren't* looking at it? For Elton, that question was more fascinating than the imagery itself. It wasn't that he felt any sense of taboo; in fact it was the familiarity that rendered it dull, like looking at the back of one's own hand – no surprise could be found there at all.

He'd first discovered digital nudity at the age of five. On his father's computer, an innocuous *Search* word had brought forth a naked woman who seemed to be drawing nutrition from her own breast, prompting instinctual recollections within him. Another woman appeared to be crawling – something he'd done himself only a few years earlier – and a naked man was pressing his body against her buttocks, causing her breasts to oscillate magically, like a ball on a string. He grunted, she groaned, and none of

it made any sense at all. At seven, with his own laptop, he'd chanced upon all manner of male and female body parts not unlike some of the peculiar fruit and vegetables he'd observed in his mother's shopping trolley. It all seemed rather homely and commonplace. So, these days, when he sat stroking himself, he often continued in an online conversation – or sometimes he brought up a picture of some trim girl just to share that brief, casual event.

He preferred this to any thought of a real-life partner, knowing that, unlike three minutes of an MP4, actual encounters always incurred further complications. Even his mother's profession – which he understood completely yet kept secret (not even she knew he knew) – involved transactions he was not prepared to accept. So a completely passive, naked girl on the screen who would leave the room at the click of a mouse worked fine. He'd catch the stuff in a Kleenex, crump it into a ball and while typing a message to a friend in Spain, toss it into the bin. The bin itself was occasionally emptied, particularly when his room took on the musty smell of a caged animal and threatened to disrupt his online concentration. It was his one concession to untidiness. In all other respects his body, his clothes and his bedroom were as neat and clean as an unoccupied hospital ward, and he had a large collection of selfie pics on his iPhone to prove it.

Elton was the quintessential Gen Y modern male.

But he did not see himself as such; he was just a normal person living in a time when technology had triumphed, when sanity had at last prevailed. He was overjoyed that

society had permanently escaped the twentieth century, a bygone era when a totally different world existed. Back then, life was literal rather than conceptual, and people were impressed by things that today only excited the dull and naïve: garden blooms, sunsets, mammals in the sea, a kite in the sky, a 'stolen' kiss. Back then, even a wink was wonderful, while ecstasy could be found in a ripe apple.

What an absurd, disturbed, witless world it must have been. And how isolated. Elton could not imagine having a mere handful of friends. He had several thousand, in fact he was more popular than all his forefathers put together. And without difficulty he could stay in contact with each one of those several thousand friends, conversing regularly, confirming the stupidity of other people's lives, sharing anecdotes and playing games. Some of his friends he had even killed for.

ELTON LIVED with his mother Adele at 42 Frederick Street, the centre terrace in a block of three. Her bedroom upstairs adjoined her son's but was right at the front of the building. Her window faced the main thoroughfare, and from there she could look out across a sea of single-storey rooftops; a choppy vista of red tiles and tin running all the way to the horizon. In the distance, the irregular central-city monoliths stood clustered amid an amber monoxide glow.

When Adele had first moved to that inner city suburb, the urban image from high up seemed exciting and epitomised everything important about making a fresh start.

But now she rarely bothered to glance out; familiarity had sucked the novelty right out of it and the view had become as predictable as the boys who kicked over the council bins on Thursday evenings.

Elton, whose bedroom was right behind hers, couldn't care less about the view, now or ever. On the day they moved in, he pulled a single drape across his own small window and pinned it shut with a line of thumbtacks, denying the trifle of daylight that had previously limped through the smeary pane, any possibility of backlighting one of his monitors. He invested a little of his estranged father's money on a long melamine benchtop which now ran the length of one wall with a return on each end. Atop it sat four monitors, two of them connected to the one hard drive, the others operated from laptops and all wirelessly connected to the internet. In front of this there were two ergonomic office chairs and it was from one or other of these that, all day and night, Elton met, talked and played games with his several thousand friends.

To suggest that Elton was agoraphobic would not sit well with the young man. Hadn't he undertaken a science degree? Hadn't he managed a whole year of it even while his parents were going through the last ludicrous stages of divorce? *You must complete your studies*, his father had commanded. *If you want to make me proud, please finish the course.* And so he did, one year at least, not to make his father proud but to obligate him: he had two years to go. Now, with the intermittent conscience money from his corporate father's canny dealings, Elton could afford to defer

before deciding on the actual trajectory of his life. But he'd already decided that a professional career was objectionable – one in the family was enough. And surrounded as he was by his devoted circle of worldwide friends, it just didn't seem necessary to go anywhere.

Except to shop. Clothes were Elton's only real interest in the tangible world. For apparel, he would go anywhere, traverse the length and breadth of the planet – New York, Hong Kong, Barcelona, Beijing – and he saved to *Favourites* a list of online stores. Stuff arrived in the mail, usually a softpack of socks or shirts or a sports jacket which he donned with some solicitude before skyping a confidant in another corner of the globe.

Elton was no slouch, no nerd; he would not be an overweight, bespectacled, pimply *Übergeek*, and he had a Wii EA Sports Active 2 Cooperative Multiplayer Fitness Game stationed to one side of his workbench with its own dedicated flatscreen monitor. His mother had bought it for him as a Christmas gift. She hunted it down, added it to the shopping cart and proceeded to the checkout. There she clicked *Buy*, entered her PayPal details and within three days the box turned up at their front door. She wrapped it in coloured paper and placed it one Christmas night beside the pointy plastic tree.

'If you are to stay inside then I want you to *exercise*, Elton,' she'd insisted. And so he did, every day in the first week; she even joined in – twice. But keeping the boy to the rigid program turned out to be more exhausting for her than for him, and in the end the *twenty-minute circuits to*

target upper and lower body as well as cardio, deteriorated to a simple verbal exchange:

‘Are you exercising?’

‘Yes.’

‘Don’t forget.’

‘No.’

Adele wanted to be fit herself; it was one of the first things she thought of as Randall drove away in the family car, his vintage number-plate, ICU, disappearing ironically into the distance. Good riddance.

Now without a partner, it seemed logical to take special pains with her appearance. She had no intention of attracting yet another untrustworthy male, but with only the walls to appraise her, it was easy to let appearances slip. Her new career also dictated that she should stay fit, though she refused to take over Elton’s neglected trainer. Instead, she pumped her limbs briskly around the block each day, regarding her trim figure in the bathroom mirror as reward alone.

But her son Elton never walked anywhere. He never advanced beyond the outer walls of their new dwelling – except to fetch the rubbish bins, which obliged him to venture at least as far as the rear yard. He hated it all, the green and brown and blue above, the uneven earth, the air weighted with dust, diseases and allergy-bearing pollens. Inevitably a breeze would bat him back inside to the comfort of a space that was square and clean and neatly defined. He could hardly imagine how he’d once caught the tram to uni and back, a concept that now seemed so

pointless, so alien.

Adele did not object. Her son had other qualities, for instance his application to tidiness. How could any mother be critical? He managed his bedroom with unmatched diligence; he was clean and shaved and his creaseless clothes were parked on hangers or meticulously pressed and placed in drawers. His shoes were tiered on wire racks according to a hierarchy of regular use. To Elton, it all made sense: his orderliness in the regular world meant he could immerse himself in cyberspace free of encumbrances.

ADELE BEGGED her leave at 11 p.m. The parliamentary function that she'd been asked to attend had not gone well. Her client turned out to be a bore, leering unpleasantly and finding opportunities – where none actually existed – for sexual innuendo if not downright crudity. But as Adele understood, every profession had its disappointing moments, even hers; its unexpected ruptures just when things should be going smoothly. She was good at her job and she knew it, but no degree of skill could compensate for certain ineptitudes, for acts of stupidity. As soon as her agreement had been fulfilled, she excused herself and caught a cab home, closing the front door quietly behind her.

Upstairs, she was not at all surprised to walk past Elton's door and find him still up and illuminated by the blue light of several screens. Normally he'd have his door closed but he was not expecting her home so early. She went to her room, stepped out of her evening dress and pulled on a

tracksuit. In the mirror, she removed her lipstick, brushed out her L'Oreal leather-black hair and tied it loosely at the back. She returned to Elton's bedroom and leaned against the door jamb.

'Hi.'

'Hi.'

'Want to take a break?'

Elton didn't turn. 'Can I catch you in a minute? I just have to finish something.'

Adele never argued, well aware that her son had crucial things to complete. And so it was. Sargeraz, the fallen Titan, had unleashed an army of unspeakable evil on the Draenei. They'd been slaughtered in the thousands and tonight Elton had joined his guild to repel the Burning Legion in its demonic quest to undo all of creation. A fierce battle had ensued and many despicable monsters of the Horde had fallen to his blessed blade. There were rivers of blood yet his guild was not yet safe. His guild: 128 others from all regions of the world.

Adele went downstairs and switched on the kettle. As the whistle blew, she heard Elton thumping down the carpeted stairs. The clock read ten past one.

'Jesus, I'm bugged.' Elton stretched his slack-muscle frame and marched towards the fridge. A photo of the two of them, taken right there in the kitchen, was held to the heavy door with a giveaway magnet. Elton gawked into the fridge and closed the door again. He thought about asking his mother why she was home so early, but decided against it. That was her business, a subject he habitually avoided.

‘Had a call from Morry this afternoon,’ Adele said and put a cup in front of him.

‘Who?’

‘Morris – your Uncle Morris and Aunty Sharon.’

Moz and Shaz. It was they who’d suggested the friendlier appellatives, so why did his mother insist on the antiquated Uncle and Aunty? They’d chosen *a country lifestyle*, whatever that was supposed to mean. Elton hadn’t spoken to them for a couple of years and these days they rarely came in from the bush. A disappointment really; they used to bring such good presents.

Adele sat on a stool opposite her son and placed a wet teaspoon on the cutting board.

‘I had a talk to young Shaun as well.’

A vision flashed through Elton’s mind: a small tanned two-legged creature in shorts and nothing else running through the scrub with a projectile of some kind.

‘The wild kid?’

‘He’s not a wild kid; he’s your country cousin. He’s just turned eleven and he wants to come and visit.’

Elton thumbed some digits on his iPhone and Adele watched him. ‘He sounds like a very bright little boy,’ she said. ‘Lots of questions, very curious about everything. He said he wants to visit the State Library. He asked if he could come down during the school holidays. To see what city life is like,’ she added, studying her son. ‘I was thinking, maybe at the end of the month.’

‘Okay with me. As long as he can take care of himself. Has he ever caught a tram or a train?’

‘Probably not, but you could show him.’

‘Is that necessary? Let’s talk about it, Mum.’

But of course they didn’t, at least not right then. They put their cups in the sink and both retired once more to their rooms. Elton had to return to *World of Warcraft*; the mission was not yet complete. In this realm he was known to others as the Dark Knight, a class of man who would stop at nothing to eliminate the diabolical evil, who would gladly sacrifice his compatriots to destroy the enemy. *His empty soul knew nothing but vengeance.*

Later, Elton visited other worlds, other quests. But his life wasn’t all games: he was also very much attuned to political and social concerns. A Facebook link to some atrocity in Iran or Iraq always prompted him to press the *Like* button. And many of those he followed on Twitter offered anything up to 140 characters on important social shifts. Every night was a long night for Elton, but that was his usual routine; he worked by night and slept a fair portion of the day, just as his mother did.

IT WAS A BRIGHT sunny day, though Elton didn’t know it. He was sitting in the dark watching a live feed from Toronto. Australian singer Jordie Lane was playing at The Planet and Elton streamed it onto one of his monitors. On another PC, he saw that Lane was asking for requests on Facebook. Elton wasn’t especially interested in the singer’s brand of down-home music but he did like the idea of a national profile. So he typed a request on Lane’s Facebook page and moments later the singer announced in real time

that Elton Bright of Melbourne would like to hear ‘The Publican’s Daughter’. Elton smiled and switched off the live feed.

Just then the front doorbell rang and Elton’s body went as rigid as a shop mannequin. He listened for his mother.

‘Elton, can you get it?’

Reluctantly, he lumbered down the stairs just as the doorbell rang a second time. Through the spyhole he saw a young man about his own age, standing casually, thumbs in pockets. Elton stayed perfectly still, and it wasn’t until the bell sounded again that he removed the safety chain and opened the door. On second inspection, he decided that the guy was a little older, perhaps even into his twenties.

‘Hi. I was wondering if you want your old bike.’

Elton eyed his visitor suspiciously. ‘I don’t have an old bike.’

‘Whose is it then? The one up the side of the shed. I live next door and saw it when I trimmed the hedge. It’s a mess, rusty and everything ... I thought you might want to part with it.’

Elton tried to think. Perhaps there *was* a bike; he recalled some angular object being unloaded with their other junk from the old house. The removalists must have shoved it up the side. It was probably his father’s.

‘What do you want with some random bike? Like, why don’t you get one off eBay? Be in better nick than ours.’

The older boy shrugged. ‘I just thought, if you don’t want it I could clean it up, pump the tyres and –’

‘Twenty bucks.’

‘*Twenty bucks?*’

‘Ten then.’

A motorbike blattered past and James paused.

‘Okay, ten bucks. Can ... can I take it now?’

Elton hesitated before backing away from the door. He called to his mother. ‘We got a neighbour. Wants to buy our old bike.’

Adele came out of the kitchen drying her hands and introduced herself.

‘James Warner,’ the boy volunteered. He glanced at Elton, who was avoiding eye contact. The two were not at all alike. Elton was tall, thin and pale with red hair chopped by his own mother and waxed into soft spikes, while James looked solid and well-muscled. He stood with legs spread and his black hair, long and unwashed, fell about casually, a parody of his general demeanour. Adele broke the silence.

‘James, this is Elton, I suppose he didn’t introduce himself.’

Elton nodded and James addressed Adele. ‘He said he’d sell me his bike.’

‘Sell it?’ she laughed. ‘You should just take it.’

Elton shrugged. ‘He said he’d give me twenty bucks.’

‘Twenty? You said ten.’

‘Whatever.’

Adele suggested they go sort it out and Elton led the way into the backyard, his shoulders slumped as though the sky weighed heavily. James entered the narrow space between the wall and the fence and dragged out the bicy-

cle. He went down on his knees and spun a pedal. Elton watched with accomplished vapidness.

‘Needs a bit of work,’ James declared, jolting Elton back to consciousness. ‘The tyres might be bugged. The seat’s wrecked.’

‘Don’t take it then; I don’t give a flying fuck.’

James pushed the bike towards the door. He could use it, he said, though he didn’t have the money with him. Elton told him to shove it through the letterbox later. He held the front door to let his neighbour out, and it surprised him to see the older boy lift the frame and carry it under one arm. He closed the door as soon as James stepped onto the footpath.

AN HOUR LATER Elton was assaulted a second time: the doorbell rang again. His mother had already left for work so the young man, once more, had no other option but to answer it himself.

‘Hi, I brought your money,’ James said, fishing into his pockets. ‘And I was wondering if you ever had a stack-hat to go with it?’ It was raining lightly and Elton could scarcely believe that his neighbour was standing there, apparently unaware of it.

‘A helmet,’ James added.

Elton thought he could visualise one stuffed in some tight corner, another thrifty preserve of his mother’s.

‘Ten bucks?’

‘That’s what I paid for the whole bike.’

‘Take it or leave it.’