

Slow Walks and Post-Polio Syndrome

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Red Rock

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*
William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

People wear knit caps, coats and scarves, steam puffs from lips as they trickle back towards the parking lot to the bus. On the dunes coastal spinifex shimmies with the onshore wind, long white lacy growth wafts like witches' hair. Connie, the park ranger, watches from the large window overlooking the boardwalk that zigzags out for more than half a kilometre down to the shore of Seal Bay. From the window she can see patches of vibrant coloured wildflowers growing close to the ground sheltered from the wind; wattle, bottle-brush, gum, grevillea and banksia. It is their time to bloom, grace and colour, strutting their stuff and showing off. They herald on the onset of spring but most of the tourists have come to see the seals and sea lions. The sky is soft and pillowy with grey blue clouds lifting and drifting away. The wind carries the barks of the seals and sea lions from the beach half a kilometre away and the sky is beginning to clear. The seals have whelped. The small liquid eyed pups shelter behind the dunes waiting for their mothers to return from the hunt.

The tour bus leader is rounding up the last of his passengers. The driver turns the ignition. The heavy thrum of the engine, a clarion call for straggling tourist to pick up their pace and board. The tour leader opens the door to the National Parks Shop and checks for stragglers. The shop has emptied.

"All gone," says Connie. The tour guide, smiles gives her a thumbs up.

An elderly woman enters. Her arms are wrapped around herself. Her face flushed with chill. She and her husband were the first to enter the park this morning a few hours ago.

"Phew. Cold!"

"You've been out there for a while," says Connie, "did you enjoy it?"

"Beautiful! That boardwalk is just wonderful. My husband's in his element. Can't tear him away. I'm waiting here where it's warmer."

Connie and the woman stand before the picture window. Their shoulders almost touch. A man with forearm crutches and camera appears on the boardwalk from where it was obscured by a dune. He stops looks over the safety rail where dunes rise to eye level, leans forward, and lines up his camera.

"What's he doing?" asks Connie.

The woman squints through the window. "Who knows? Whatever it is I'm sure it will show up in his camera. We've been here for less than a week and he's taken hundreds of photos. A wildflower, driftwood, a rock, a bee deep inside a flower petal, spider's web, a single bird feather. Things he sees that most of us don't."

"What does he do with them?"

"Stores them on his computer."

Connie smiles. Turns her head slightly.

"I know," says the woman, "weird, huh? He says it's about learning how to look at things."

The man stops again, lines up another shot. Connie and the woman face each other and smile. Connie likes her. The man looks up and sees them watching. He waves, his forearm crutch dangles from his upraised arm like a pendulum. Connie and the woman wave back.

"Wow! It must take a long time," says Connie.

The woman shrugs. "He's a polio survivor. The crutches protect him from falls. He only started using them a few years back."

"Polio?" asks Connie.

"Yeah. Young people don't know much about it anymore. Polio was a big thing before the vaccine. A children's disease. Sam got it as a baby, left him with a limp and a damaged leg but it didn't get him down. He led an active life. Skin-dived, fished, hiked, and camped. A few years back he was hit with post-polio symptoms. Pain, falls, fatigue. Times when he didn't want to get out of bed because he knew it would hurt."

"That's terrible," said Connie and she meant it.

"Wasn't nice. His GP didn't know what was wrong and neither did the neurologist. We researched it ourselves, internet, wrote letters and found it was post-polio and there wasn't a hell of a lot he could do about it. The more he fought it the worse it would get. The wrong kind of exercise would be like mass murder of nerve cells."

"What did you do?" asked Connie.

The woman shakes her head. "I was worried. Afraid it would get him down. He'd always been a fighter but now fighting was dangerous, would make it worse. He fretted. Said what was he supposed to do sit on his derrière and wait to die?"

"He looks happy enough now," said Connie.

"Sam does things differently. He says when you slow down, see things, think on things, immerse yourself in their beauty, celebrate them, it opens up a whole new world. His only regret is that he wishes he learned to do it earlier. He calls them slow walks and they taught him about what was really important."

"Well," says Connie, "there's some wisdom in that when you think about it, isn't there?"

"Hey," says the woman. "Who am I to argue? It's made him happy and really the pictures he takes have a special beauty about them. And I suppose he's just found a different way to stay in the fight."