

On the outer

‘Whatsh-you trying to do?’

I look into his eyes, reddened by the years and perhaps the fire-smoke of ages. Short curly hair, now grey. Patient face, gnarled by sun and life. Body tilted forward in question – that innocent enough question – but suddenly all the insecurities of my ignorance feel exposed.

My thoughts have flown back – years ago – to my own homeland, on the other side of the world, where a gaffer from the Hebrides asked me the same question. We’d been pulling in salmon nets on the banks of a wide Scottish river towards the end of an eight-hour shift.

I’d answered, ‘I’m doing my best!’

To which, he snarled, ‘Well, your best’s nae good enough!’

I was just into my teens; heaving the wet ground rope, muscles straining when I relaxed my pull – allowing a big salmon to escape the trap. That was when I really understood expectations in life. That old encourager of “just try your best” didn’t cut it in a grown-up world.

What to say to this man who has had experiences far beyond my understanding? My head is whirling – trying not to say the wrong thing.

In my few seconds of thought, time seems to stand still. I can sense the warm Australian air, laden with eucalyptus scent, a hint of wood-fire cooking, the background clamour of activity in a busy community of children playing and adults chatting. Two sulphur-crested cockatoos shriek their way across the sky towards the billabong – shaking me back from my memories.

‘I’m just trying to help,’ I manage. Why am I so nervous?

The old man takes his time before, ‘Why didn’t you come and ask?’

What an obvious question. The truth is I'd been wary about going onto an Aboriginal community – unsure of the reception a young white teacher from old Britain might receive now, in 1980, as old-era attitudes rule Queensland and land rights protests make the news.

‘We’re just running a program in Aboriginal culture at the school to try to help the students feel proud of their heritage.’

He’s not aggressive – gently waiting. He knows I’m feeling the guilt of arrogantly assuming that a teacher might know best – about everything. And I know nothing of this man’s life – his hurdles, his successes – to become the senior Elder in his community and be known as Pop.

When I'd told my mother about the fishing episode, she'd said that lessons learned the hard way stay with us longer. Listen, learn and improve, son. Respect the wisdom of experience.

But, in my rush to be successful in society, perhaps I'd allowed myself to adopt the attitudes of the entitled. I trained to be a teacher of mathematics. It was a time when we schooled students to pass exams – a process of inculcating academic skills within the cultural expectations of that era.

‘The words you’re telling them to use are not from our language,’ Pop says. ‘Where’d you get them?’

‘From Tindale’s map of Aboriginal Australia and a bit of research.’

‘I see.’ He nods. ‘A good map, based on what he’d heard it was like centuries ago. It doesn’t show how Aboriginal people were deliberately moved off their own country – onto separate camps – out of the view of mainstream Australia. This community here is not on the tribal lands of any of us. We were displaced to break up our cultural ties – moved three times. Where are you from?’

‘Scotland.’

‘Ah, you’ve a different accent and words there. We learned about British history in school – only to Grade 4 though. What if you were moved to England or Wales? Do they speak the same there?’ A smile. He pauses. ‘You’re trying to teach a strange language and customs to our *jarjums* – children – as if they don’t know the words of their own families.’

‘I didn’t realise. Sorry. You see, Aboriginal culture isn’t taught in our high schools. I’m new to Australia. There’s so much I don’t know. Will you help us get it right?’

‘Hah! It’s not just you.’ He shrugs and adds quietly, ‘Most white people grew up with false stories about us – as if Australian history only started with Captain Cook. There’s a long Black history in this country – 60,000 years – and the white version is very different from how our story is told. We’ve been resisting since settlers first arrived – and we’re still here. Yes, we’ll help you understand – not just language, but our journey on this land over the past two hundred or more years.’

My mother was always stoic. Her grandmother came from the Western Highlands, amongst many moving from the crofts to seek menial work in the Lowlands. They were called “Teuchters” – a term of contempt for Highlanders with broad Gaelic accents.

Mum spoke about massive evictions after the Scots lost the Battle of Culloden to the English back in 1746. It was an English government policy to break the power of the clans and subdue uprisings.

Tens of thousands were driven from their homes in the Highland Clearances, to be replaced by more profitable sheep. The English condoned that social

engineering by inducing hereditary landowners to force poor crofters from their land, mostly onto emigration ships to the Americas.

As a boy, I recall us children being moved out of our beds to host distant Canadian relatives visiting their family roots, filled with romantic notions of clans, heritage, songs and poetry.

The visitors were invariably wealthy, compared to us. They'd done well in their new lands and had grown up with a fanciful longing for the landscape of their ancestors.

‘The Elders are the custodians of our culture,’ Pop says, ‘of both family and ancestral mobs. You must always start by listening and involving. What do you understand about the White Australia policy?’

I’m suddenly feeling even more ashamed at my lack of serious critical thinking – and now I’ve been put on the spot.

‘In honesty, I’ve never given it meaningful thought. At the back of my mind, I’d accepted that successive governments wanted to prioritise migrants who would fit in and contribute to the emerging nation – a land of opportunity. To me, that policy was a relic of history.’

There is no surprise in the old man’s expression. He takes time to respond.

‘But we, Blackfellas, were here all along and before. The lie about *Terra Nullius* – nobody living here – was worsened by centuries of massacres and exclusion against us.

‘They stole our land – by the force of their law, to give to white settlers. And then they relocated any Aboriginal survivors to reserves that they called “missions” – to fit with their religious justification. But, we were under the total

control of a government supervisor. He trained us all brutally, boys and girls, to be lowly paid or unpaid labour on outback stations.

‘And you’re right, no part of this truth was ever taught in schools, so white children grew up seeing us only in a demeaning way – Black, not served in shops, not welcome inside the Boundary Roads of white Australian towns, fair game for cruel abuse, huddled under trees, our enforced desperation and even existence mocked.

‘We became the lowest of the low for centuries – until some improvement recently – unless needed for our cheap labour or for curiosities like boomerang throwing. But we’re still here – resisting that way of looking at us. And you might be wondering how we managed that.’

The insects are buzzing around. The constant thrum of the cicadas is a background cacophony – and all other casual noise has stopped. It’s as if everyone in the community knows what Pop, the Elder, is saying to the teacher from town.

I have no words.

Pop smiles. ‘Would you like a cup of tea? Maybe a nice scone as well? It’s good that you’ve come. Meet Neola – my daughter.’

A cheery maternal Neola brings out a pot of tea, china cups and warm scones – clearly readied in preparation for our meeting. I hear comforting voices resume in the houses. Children return to larking around the buildings.

‘No witchetty grubs or goanna.’ Pop laughs. ‘We don’t fit the cartoon caricature! See, I’ve learned some of your white words. Have a scone.’

He passes the scone plate. ‘Tell me about you. What d’your friends call you?’

I am relaxing. ‘They call me Jock.’

‘Well, Jock, how come you’re out here – not understanding us Blackfellas?’

‘I came to teach maths. That’s my job. You’re short of maths teachers in the bush so I answered an advert. I’ve been here just since the start of the school term.’ I pause. ‘I’ve never met Aboriginal students before – find them very shy. I asked how to say “Hello” and “Goodbye” in their language and they either didn’t know or weren’t telling me. I could sense their disadvantage and we’ve just been – naively – trying to help.’

‘So what’s Scotland like? We hear about kilts, bagpipes and singing.’

‘That’s maybe the **Scottish** caricature.’ My turn to grin. ‘I had a happy, loving childhood. Lots of hard physical work. We didn’t have many material things but lots of friends – we stuck with our own. I found I could do maths better than many so I trained to be a teacher to earn a respectable living.’

Neola sits with us, kindly using a cloth to protect the remaining scones from flies, and politely deferring to her father – who waves his hand for me to continue.

‘I saw the chance to come to Australia – it has opened my eyes. And, listening to you now, your circumstances seem strangely similar to the world of my ancestors at the hands of English conquerors – even on a similar time scale.’

‘Really?’ Pop’s voice rises in question. ‘Tell me more!’

‘1746 was the start of the Highland Clearances. The English had beaten Prince Charlie’s revolution in battle. The troops pursued the fleeing rebels without mercy. Cottages were burned. Murders were committed – most never officially recorded. Wearing tartan was banned, as was our native Gaelic language. Long established families were hounded off their lands.

‘You see, back then in Scotland, all the country was owned by clan chiefs or *lairds*. They had power of life or death over their subsistence crofters. The king

encouraged them to replace their people with sheep for the profit it would bring. Over the following century and more, tens of thousands saw no alternative but to board ships to “the new worlds”. Any Highlanders who remained felt shunned, as people. They scarcely eked out a living on tiny crofts. Without income, their children were hired out as labourers and domestics in the Lowlands. Some just left altogether. I notice many of the Aboriginal kids at school have Scottish surnames. Many Scots would have headed here eventually.’

I pause, checking Pop’s reaction. But he says. ‘Keep going.’

‘Okay. But, unlike your experience here, the stories of Highland resistance became popular nostalgic themes overseas – longing for a lost homeland, inspiring songs, bagpipe music and romantic novels, particularly by Walter Scott. Heroic myths replaced the reality. Then, Queen Victoria set a trend for prosperous English to enjoy the empty peace of the mountains for hunting, fishing and hiking. That fascination still seems to charm tourists.’

Pop’s face creases in thought. ‘Our world wasn’t quite like that. From 1788, when the first fleet arrived, any excuse was used to push our people out or just kill. There are many documented massacres by men with firearms killing our defenders who used boomerangs and nulla-nullas – hardly a fair fight. Then the reports were written up by the killers to justify their actions. It was a hanging offence to murder. No-one was going to admit to that.

‘Soldiers committed some of the atrocities but many others were carried out by knuckle-headed misfits who were suddenly given power over people that they could bully and kill. So the official record – white history – paints settlers in a rosy light, as people entitled to our lands that supposedly belonged to no-one.

‘My surviving kin were transported to missions – tribes and families split up. They made us barely tolerated as people in our own country. Hard!! Worse when we were easily identified by the colour of our skin and our disadvantage.’

I nod in understanding and reply, ‘Yes. My mother’s people were mocked for their broad Highland twang. We didn’t speak the King’s English like the lairds or even Lowlanders did. I had to modify my inherited accent to be understood in classrooms. So, we do have some things in common, Pop. We can relate to our resistance against colonial English rule – although your’s has been a lot more oppressive than mine.’

The old man sits deep in thought, head nodding slowly. And then he smiles.

‘So how did we resist – survive?’ he asks, not expecting an answer. ‘Jock, we adapted and waited our time, just as in nature. Both our peoples lost to stronger armies but we have other skills. My father was a “Black tracker”, called on by the police to help solve mysterious crimes. He was once called to Central Queensland, where a man had been murdered with a knife but they couldn’t find the weapon. Dad found it in twenty minutes.’

I gasp. ‘Wow! I’m impressed. How did he do that?’

‘Observing. Keeping his head close to the ground. Understanding the dirt markings – and the insects. He saw a trail of ants, each carrying tiny blobs of fat. He tracked them back to a thick spinifex clump and there was the knife, shoved point down, deep into the grass. Invisible, unless you knew it was there. The ants found the bloody knife and Dad found the ants. You see what I mean. We’ve many skills to survive in this often harsh land, without wrecking it – like the cool burning of forests to avoid disastrous bush fires.’

He continues. ‘We’ve lived in this land for thousands of years, listening, learning and adapting. But too many whitefellas presume to know what’s good for us. It hasn’t worked well that way. They don’t think like we do!’

‘So how do we move forward?’ I ask.

‘Our children can go to high school now. That’s a huge improvement – but not quite good enough, yet. Why don’t you take my daughter here, Neola, into your school as an adult go-between person? She’s a mum, a grandmother and a counsellor, trained in our ways.’ Neola smiles, as Pop continues. ‘She’d be available, on site – a calm black presence to overcome cultural misunderstanding, to help us all resolve tense situations and rid us of the ignorant unthinking put-downs of the past? It’s really all about respecting other people as worthy human beings. Listening and learning together. It’s a start. What d’you have to lose?’

‘Everything to gain, Pop. Thanks. I’ll take your suggestion to the school principal. Here’s to the future!’

And we chink china tea cups with a grin – not at all fitting **any** opinion-influencer’s caricatures.