

That Sinking Feeling

Issie wasn't having a good day. Which was unusual. Her habitual sunny and positive attitude to life seemed to have deserted her.

Why did her father insist on her doing such a stupid and embarrassing thing?

She was secretly proud of him. She thought of him as a real-life superhero who swooped in to save the day when someone in a remote part of Australia needed medical attention! Equipped with a cape (okay, maybe it's just a white lab coat) and a trusty plane, "Digger" Hewson was a Flying Doctor, always ready to tackle any medical emergency, no matter how big or small.

She was also happy with her life in general. Popular at school, academically gifted, and good at sports, Isabella Hewson was a well-balanced teenager. She enjoyed living in her home town of Alice Springs. She loved the vast desert landscapes and rugged mountain ranges that surrounded her home. She cherished its striking natural beauty and rich cultural history and thought of it as a place of adventure and discovery.

Whenever possible, she liked to go hiking in the nearby MacDonnell Ranges, with their stunning landscapes of rocky mountains, deep gorges and vast desert plains. She never tired of seeing mobs of majestic red kangaroos. Or catching sight of a dingo stalking its prey across the desert landscapes.

Recently, Issie had become fascinated by the local indigenous culture. Last year, in Year 11, she had taken part in a school trip to Uluru, the massive sandstone rock formation that is an iconic and sacred site for the Anangu, the traditional Indigenous owners of the land. Long a source of wonder and inspiration for visitors, something about the experience had touched the teenager deeply. She had been lost in wonder at sunset when a warm, golden light illuminated its towering cliffs and deep crevices, making the rock seem to glow from within as if it were alive and pulsing with energy. And its smooth, curved surface, etched with ancient Indigenous symbols and stories, had fuelled her desire to know more about the land's rich cultural heritage.

But with a growing sense of foreboding at her imminent indignity, Issie now contemplated the shame and embarrassment that she was sure would overwhelm her tomorrow.

She should never have agreed. When her father had first put the proposal to her, she had thought it might be fun, and her mother's enthusiastic endorsement had persuaded her to agree. But now that the reality was approaching fast, and with the torture of yesterday's excruciating practice behind her, she bitterly regretted her decision.

All her friends would be there at the Henley-on-Todd regatta, and she was sure she would become a laughing stock. It was all very well for her father. As a past president of the Alice Springs Rotary Club, he was morally bound to support the annual fund-raising event in the desert. And it sounded hilarious if you weren't involved. Rather than using real boats, teams of participants run their own cobbled-together 'boats' down a dry riverbed.

Tomorrow, Issie would be part of a raggle-taggle team thrown together at the last minute to compete in the "sinking" boat race. A race in which participants must run their "boat" as far as they can before it falls apart or "sinks" to the ground. It could only end in disaster.

"I wish we had a river – a "real" river so that we wouldn't have to play these stupid games," thought the luckless teenager as she contemplated her forthcoming discomfiture.

Terry Cooke-Davies

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