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The Importance of Being Myrtle

Written by Ulrika Jonsson

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The Importance of Being Myrtle

ULRIKA JONSSON



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For my father, the late, great Bo Jonsson.
Jag saknar dig.

Yours by nature and by nurture.

The Going

Why did you give no hint that night
That quickly after the morrow's dawn,
And calmly, as if indifferent, quite,
You would close your term here, up and be gone
Where I could not follow
With wing of swallow
To gain one glimpse of you ever anon!

Never to bid good-bye,
Or lip me the softest call,
Or utter a wish for a word, while I
Saw morning harden upon the wall,
Unmoved, unknowing
That your great going
Had place that moment, and altered all.

Thomas Hardy

Chapter One

(2006)

It was the inescapable moisture in the cold, and the way it insisted on invading his bones for so many months of the year, that he really struggled with, and this Thursday was no exception. Despite this, Gianni D'Amico reminded himself that he had made a vow of friendship with the land of the Poms, to which he was determined to stick. This alone was normally enough to humble his aches and pains.

Today, however, the cold was dark, cumbersome and heavy to bear, and he found it harder to pacify his ailing joints. It was on days like these that he was eternally grateful for the salsa classes on Wednesdays and the occasional Friday evening – they kept him nimble, if not so quick. *Still*, thought Gianni defiantly, *there's life in the old bastard yet.*

True, he did miss the arid heat, the mildness of the winters and the domineering Aussie sun, which had gilded his skin so persistently throughout his childhood and beyond. He often longed for the large, cyclonic skies and the vast, magnificent plains of the Northern Territory he had encountered as a considerably younger

man some forty years ago. He yearned for the grand open spaces, which, contrary to popular belief, did *not* induce a feeling of loneliness but instead awoke in him the very strongest sense of inclusion and belonging. Gianni was always at pains to point out, to anyone willing to listen to his ramblings, that he had never had such an overwhelming sense of belonging as he had experienced in the Outback. It was a native feeling somehow, inherent to this Italian immigrant boy, who perhaps should not have been in Australia in the first place.

On reflection, it had been the best decision he had ever made, he always thought, leaving his loving parents behind in an urban, densely populated Victoria, where they had established new roots. From there, he had ventured north to the great big Never Never – the nothingness that was the Outback – to engage his gritty determination and to liberate his curiosity. It had been the renunciation of the little Italian boy and the making of the adult Aussie.

He would never have imagined that his trip up north would eventually take him so much further north in the world than he had ever been – to England, a country of limited tolerance, whingeing and notoriously bad weather. He thought he'd seen it all until he'd discovered that in the UK it was, in fact, possible to experience all four seasons in just one day.

During irregular and unpredictable lulls in his daily life, Gianni's mind would wander and he would

sometimes contemplate a return Down Under. But aside from the obvious climatic advantages, neither his roots nor his bones could face the upheaval once more, and with no family to speak of beckoning him back, he felt he lacked any real reason or, indeed, obligation to go. He had, by now, established a good but not extensive circle of friends and learned to live with the occasional snobbery of strangers – and the truly unreliable weather. Besides, on a more practical level, the flight alone was more than his small salary would facilitate.

The driver greeted Gianni as he boarded the relatively busy bus with a nod and a smile – a smile that was as baffled, amused and full of wonderment as it always was at the sight of bare legs sprouting from shorts in mid-November. He might not have known the passenger's name but it was clear he wasn't British.

You don't keep a tan like that in this country, he thought. At least he's wearing socks and a good pair of walking boots!

Gianni spent many of his bus journeys to work indulging in the warm, strong memories he harboured of the D'Amico family. Seating himself each time in the very front row, diagonally behind the driver, he had effectively secured himself exclusive access to the large front windscreen – a window on the world – as the bus drove along. The passing images became a source of entertainment but, equally, they served as indistinguishable background for his distracted, wandering thoughts.

As the bus approached the next stop, Gianni saw the outline of a lone figure, who stood out, upright and seemingly unmoved by the rain falling all around him, waiting patiently, enveloped and distinctly defined by a smart overcoat. The man's frame appeared solemn, yet distinguished, from what Gianni could make out from his prime observation point. The figure was topped with what looked like a trilby hat but . . . *That's a fedora for sure – it's what Papa used to wear.* He smiled in recognition.

It did not go unnoticed by Gianni that the man took a great deal of pride in his attire. So much, thought Gianni, that there was even an air of superiority about him. *Good on ya, he thought admiringly. You found yourself a style years ago and you've stuck with it. Just like me and me shorts.* He chuckled.

As the bus was brought to a somewhat faltering stop, the morning's rain, which had collected and failed to hurry down the drain, made a perfectly arched spray over the kerb where the man was standing. He glared down at the water as if it was poisonous. Gianni felt drawn to him and continued to stare, fascinated – almost in some kind of anticipation.

The man hardly lifted his head towards the driver and instead waved his bus pass in short, sharp moves just out of his pocket, slightly above his waist. It was a strange motion, agitated almost, and it had not gone unnoticed by the driver, who frowned with a mixture of surprise and annoyance.

As if further to draw attention to himself, the passenger who had just boarded the bus then grappled with his coat as he tried to return pass to pocket. For a brief moment, his head rose slightly but then, with an air of heaviness and an audible sigh of annoyance, lowered again, as if it had increased in weight. The man was about to be defeated by the bus pass and his machine-stitched pocket when he turned right towards the no man's land of the aisle.

Gianni's compulsion to stare did not relent.

Suddenly, in one very fast, sharp movement, the man clasped his head with a flailing hand and let out a loud cry of agony. The bus pass fell to the ground, followed very swiftly by the man himself.

There was a thud – the sound of solid life against wet linoleum – and this was quickly followed by a series of smaller scrapes as the man's overcoat and shoes settled uncomfortably on the floor.

Gianni took a sharp breath. Briefly he almost forgot himself – it was as if he had witnessed the man falling in slow motion, time and time again in a moment that seemed to last minutes.

But it wasn't minutes, it was seconds and, before he knew it, Gianni shouted, 'Get up, mate! What you doing down there? You haven't been on the sauce, have you?' in a manner that was as empathetic as it was accusatory.

But as the words left his mouth, he knew he wasn't truly directing them at the man on the floor – the

words merely bridged the gap between him sitting in his seat and standing up to move closer to the still pile.

The man lay face down, the fedora to his side, near to Gianni, empty and purposeless alongside the smart overcoat, which only partially covered the wearer. There had not been time for him to secure a protected landing – his hands remained by his sides – and it appeared that the left side of his head had borne the brunt of the impact.

‘Crikey!’ Gianni bent down to the man.

A heavy, dark dribble of blood had formed a small pool by his left cheek. His eyes were not fully shut and as Gianni bent lower, his face close to the stranger’s, he could hear soporific groaning with every shallow breath. It was the sound of regret, weariness and remorse rolled into one – all this from such tiny whispers of inevitability. Gianni wasn’t sure if it was the sheer weight of the man’s body that pinned him to the floor or whether he might soon end life’s great journey face down on the No. 53 bus. Whichever, he was overwhelmed by a sense of urgency and a greater sense of responsibility.

He knelt next to the man who, it was clear, was in a bad way and shouted passionately, ‘Someone call a bloody ambulance! Call an ambulance, for Pete’s sake! We’ve got a fella here about to die!’ With that, he closed in further on the man on the floor and decided his instinct was right: these were precious moments

for both of them – yet Gianni had no idea why this was so. It was just a feeling.

The minutes that followed seemed endless and Gianni prayed that help was on the way. The driver communicated something to him but Gianni didn't hear, focusing instead on some instinctive responsibility and automatic sense of fate.

With every murmur from the man, who slipped in and out of consciousness, the urgency within Gianni crescendoed. He felt as if his chest was about to burst wide open with anxiety. But he remained calm – not out of diligence or lack of empathy but from necessity. You don't battle your way through Australia's Golden Outback fossicking for gold without learning a thing or two about human life, humankind and, more appropriately in the circumstances, about your own tenacity. And Gianni had not been found lacking.

Despite the distractions around him on the bus – other passengers whispering, gasping but mostly pointing – he kept his eyes on the man, but he felt a growing distance between them. The man had not moved since his fall and his position seemed most uncomfortable, but instinctively Gianni did not want to move him. He offered the man reassurance by stroking and patting him gently on the back, soothing him with words of comfort – 'Don't worry, mate. You'll be all right before you know it.'

By the time the ambulance finally arrived, the fallen

man was completely silent. There was no moaning or murmuring and his eyes were decidedly shut.

As a man in a heavy green uniform approached the disaster, he asked Gianni to step to the side.

‘Has he died?’ blurted Gianni, considerably more direct than he had intended to be.

‘Let’s just take a look here first, shall we? He a mate of yours?’ asked the paramedic.

Gianni hesitated: he had temporarily felt close to the man. Then he confessed, ‘Nah, nah, he just boarded the bus and then keeled right over. Easy as that!’

The man was heaved on to a stretcher by two men who, despite the weight, showed no awkwardness in their approach and execution.

As no one volunteered a name for the fallen man, and with no obvious sign of identification, the paramedics loaded him into the ambulance with the efficiency born of regularity.

As the rain continued to fall hard outside, Gianni found himself standing by the vehicle with a sudden and very deep sense of incompleteness. Something compelled him to pursue his participation. ‘The hospital is how many clicks away?’ he asked nonchalantly, in the way a lone boy might ask a group of older boys where they were heading.

‘Clicks?’ frowned one of the medics irritably. ‘It’s three miles, if that’s what you’re asking. Are you coming?’

As he sat in the ambulance, Gianni remained silent

for the journey to the hospital – he wasn't sure if this was out of respect for the fallen man or if he was lost for words. It wasn't often that that happened.

After the ambulance had pulled up outside the hospital's Accident & Emergency Department things moved very quickly. Before he knew it, Gianni was without his new acquaintance, who had been swept away from him by staff with such urgency that he could barely trace their steps.

The hospital, Gianni noted, was a place of speed and panic, tragedy and trepidation, but most of all, it looked as if it was a place of waiting.

In a vague attempt physically to order those whose anxiety and restlessness kept them pacing or yo-yoing on and off their seats, four long rows of chairs had been formed. They might well have been straight before the night shift but by the time Gianni arrived the waiting room was chaotic. *What a terrible place*, he thought.

Much time passed and Gianni spent most of it looking out of one of the rain-spattered windows at the persistently wet grey day. He wasn't sure where he preferred to be: inside this hospital with its pungent smell of astringent substances or outside living through another cold and rainy day. But then he realized that, of course, he would have given anything to be out in the cold.

If he'd had one of those mobile phone things, he thought, he would have called work to *throw a sickie*.

His job was hardly of an urgent nature – it wasn't as if he saved lives. His lateness would have been noted but not remarked upon. He would make his way there as soon as he knew the fella was all right, and simply explain to them what had happened so peculiarly this morning.

Eventually a woman, dressed head to toe in garments designed to protect her from blood, tapped Gianni hard on the shoulder with an air of importance and impatience. 'Did you come in with the man on the bus?' she asked abruptly.

'Er, yeah . . . yes, that's me,' faltered Gianni. 'How's he doin'?'

'I'm afraid your friend didn't make it. We did everything we could but early signs are that he probably had a subarachnoid haemorrhage. We won't know for sure until an autopsy has been carried out . . .

'I'm very sorry,' she added.

'A sub-what?' Gianni was still two sentences behind.

'A b-r-a-i-n h-a-e-m-o-r-r-h-a-g-e,' she mouthed, in a slow, loud and deliberate manner, as if she was talking to the hard-of-hearing – and, as if to alienate Gianni further in this place of now most-definite tragedy, she began to walk away.

'Wait! What was his name? Where did he live?' questioned Gianni, keenly.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you said you were friends. Well, I'm not at liberty to divulge that information – patient confidentiality . . .'

‘Patient confidentiality? What’s that when it’s at home?’ mumbled Gianni. ‘Look, lady, I’m not some psycho from the back of beyond. He may not have been a mate of mine but I want to pay my respects to his family – I mean, it’s the right thing to do. How does that fit in with your patient whatsit?’ Gianni raised his voice as if to exert power that clearly wasn’t his. He couldn’t let this woman’s rigidity and impatience go just like that. Today had been a strange day. It’s not every day someone dies in front of you when you’re on your way to work. Gianni was keen to see the day’s unusual deviation through to its dignified end.

The doctor was clearly busy and she wanted Gianni to know it. She was consumed by her own sense of purpose and she oozed intolerance from every pore. ‘Look, I can’t tell you anything,’ she threw at Gianni, in reckless abandonment of all empathy. ‘It’s up to you, Sherlock,’ she taunted him. ‘Now, *if* you’ll excuse me . . .’ With that she turned, smug and defiant, on her hygienic white clogs and joined the *mêlée* beyond the swinging doors.

Gianni was taken aback.

So that was that.

There he stood, a slightly dishevelled second-generation Italian from Australia who had failed to save the life of a fellow passenger on the bus that morning.

He felt bewildered, probably for the very first time in his life. But uncertainty and an instant and painful

sadness partnered his consternation. Very briefly he allowed his mind to wander to the ripples of grief that this morning's drama would doubtless cause anonymous relatives and faceless friends.

He felt hot – and glad of his shorts. The heat was brought about by a sudden recognition of his deep unease. The memory of his father's death flashed before him and the terrible sadness Gianni had felt. The man on the bus, though – the fallen man – had been around Gianni's age and had clearly taken his last breath well before what should have been his expiry date.

With a heavy heart, Gianni brought his left hand up towards his face and, with the back, wiped moisture from the corner of both eyes. As he did so, his head bowed and his eyes creased shut.

When they opened he was shocked to find, secured between the thumb and index finger of his right hand, the dark grey fedora. The soft felt, which was creased, so definitely, lengthways down the crown and pinched in the front on both sides, had almost been dented by the pressure of Gianni's hand.

He let out a soft but audible whoop of near delight. The hat passed between his hands and, not unlike a potential purchaser, he balanced it and turned it to and fro with his short, firm fingers as if to display and view it in the very best light.

He turned the fedora over and looked inside, along the rim of its crown. There, in neat, handwritten capital letters, he read: 'PROPERTY OF AUSTIN LEWIS'.

'Holy shit!' exclaimed Gianni, in wonder and complete disbelief. 'What a nutter I've been!' All the while the man's identity had been balancing in his hands . . .

With a spring in his step, and in defiance of the pouring rain, he marched out of the hospital.

To work! thought Gianni, holding the fedora protectively against his chest out of the rain.