

Battle of the Bands

Doug. Williams

<http://www.summerhayscottage.com.au> ... doug@summerhayscottage.com.au

Fasten seatbelt when seated.

The message was stitched into the rear of the headrest in front of me. It was repeated a little lower down on the underside of the tray table and followed by another:

Life jacket under your seat.

Given we were travelling about 800 kilometres north by north-west from Perth to Meekatharra this second message was somewhat unnecessary. The only water in which we were likely to crash land had disappeared from this part of the continent some millions of years before plane flight. I didn't pay a lot of attention to the seatbelt instruction either - it's just something I do automatically.

But I did notice the top of the head just beyond it. The scalp was chocolate brown, the hair was black, tightly bound in plaited contours, and the few short escapee hairs were noticeably crinkly. The person in front of me was surely of African descent. As if to confirm my judgement the host head rhythmically nodded, no doubt driven by a mini-music device of some sort. I mused. Might the wisp I was watching be performing to the soundtrack of 'Hair'?

In a Brasilia EMB 120 aircraft conversation is not really possible. The props scream so seriously that passengers are offered ear plugs before take off. If sitting on the starboard you might just be able to yell at the person squeezed beside you, but on the port side seats line up single file. Getting to know the person in front was not an option.

Well not until the scheduled stop at Mt. Magnet. People are brought together quite quickly after over an hour of compressed flight when they are told they can't leave the plane.

"No one is getting off here. We just have to pick up briefly, so the pilot has asked that all passengers remain on board."

Well that started a conversation.

"Watta ya' mean we can't get off the plane!?!" exclaimed the hair, "I've just spent six hours flying from Sydney to take this flight to some godforsaken hole in the desert and they say I can't stretch my legs."

Her energetic comment seemed to be addressed to a travelling companion across the aisle, but with the engines off it became public. Having worked in Meeka before, I felt I should defend the situation a little, so I craned my torso forward into the aisle, seatbelt still secure.

"Meekatharra's not as bad as you might think. There's a serenity in outback Australia that isn't hard to find when you're open to it. And the next leg is a breeze. You're up and down again in about twenty minutes."

She turned sufficiently towards me to suggest a conversation was possible.

"If I travel for this long I expect jet lag, but I'm still in the same country. If I'd left Sydney in a different direction I'd be halfway to London by now."

"So, what brings you out here?"

"I'm in the music business."

Two days before, our church band had a gig at the fifth anniversary worship service at Tudor Village. When I returned to the office that day I remarked I would rather do that than work. So here was a way to connect.

"Me too." I was sufficiently unassuming to add, "As an amateur though. Have you got a gig in town?"

"I'm judging the Battle of the Bands this weekend and doing a set on Saturday night. I'm gonna get my manager for this. I've been touring a stage show in the East and I'm back to it at the end of next week. These few days are the only ones my boyfriend is in Sydney. I'm not a happy girl."

I began to think this was someone I was supposed to know.

"Mmm, I get the feeling I am in the company of someone special. Should I know you?"

She twisted further around, appeared to size me up in a millisecond, unexpectedly ripped off her Ray Bans to reveal her fine-featured, smiling face and momentarily stunned me with, "You know my mum."

The very certainty of the statement activated every memory cell I possess as I struggled to pass this test. And thankfully I did. Gingerly I offered all I could think of - a surname that had squeezed through the synapses - and I was correct. In the same instant though I was confused. The facial features had generated a response, but only the surname. Slightly embarrassed, I had to ask her first name.

"Lisa Marie."

Of course! Now, as we turned to taxi, I knew both mother and daughter.

But with this new knowledge came a vague parental responsibility. As the last opportunity for speech eroded in the cyclonic gush of take off I called, "Where are you staying?"

"The motel."

I was relieved. The alternative in Meekatharra is a donger in the car park of the Royal Mail Hotel. The Auski Motel is comfortable, well run by Bob and Diane and provides a good feed. Ours was the last plane before Monday. Perhaps we would catch up again.

"Ahh it is him. Hi Doug, welcome back. Bob thought it would be you when he saw the name."

"Thanks Diane. How's it been."

"Oh, we're getting by."

"Big weekend in town I gather. I suppose you're booked out for the Battle of the Bands."

"Booked out, yes, but not for the music. We've got a bus tour coming through. There's only a few for the music."

"Lisa Marie I'll bet, and her mate Luke. I met them on the plane."

"Trust you to know her already. Good thing. She's in the room next to you."

I drove the hire car around to the closest spot and unloaded. Lisa Marie and Luke were already settled and were making themselves comfortable in the sun on the white plastic chairs outside their rooms.

"Guess who's in the room next door." I announced. "I suppose you won't mind if I tell my friends I slept with Lisa Marie for the weekend will you?"

"Idiot! Unpack and come and join us. Even you look like reasonable company in this backside of the universe."

So I made a cuppa and went out for a yack with some chocolate to offer around. It was the first of several lazy sessions in the sun before, between and after the different directions our work took us through the three days. It wasn't hard to get Lisa Marie talking. She had an opinion on everything and since it was the election weekend opinions were the order of the day. Luke was used to Lisa since they are not only work colleagues, but flat mates, and mostly he just let her lead.

Consequently, I had to work a little harder to break ground with him. But he did reveal an interest in horror fiction writing which led to a description of his next film script.

By the Saturday morning chat session we were warm with each other - but not necessarily warm. Lisa was wrapped in a blanket claiming that her African blood had not yet woken up despite the sun and blue sky - winter desert air: dry, cold nights; clear sunny 20 degree days. We talked music, family, childhood, Africa, charity work, boyfriends (well Lisa did) and Bob showed us his once beautifully customised PT Cruiser, wrapped in a tarpaulin as tightly as Lisa in her cloak, that he had rolled at Mt. Magnet avoiding a 'roo at dusk.

I don't quite know how we got there, but by morning coffee we started talking church and religion. Perhaps it was the initial introduction through my Christian music gig. Perhaps it was my tale about my grandson telling his kinder teacher he believed in God '...because my Grampa does'. But I do remember the curve in the conversation coming when Lisa quizzed, "What is it with you and God?"

You used the word church to me three times on the plane yesterday and I didn't say anything. Are you on a mission here or something?"

Ignoring the Blues Brothers reference, we chatted on and I discovered both she and Luke had a rather hell fire and brimstone view of the church apparently developing from a limited Catholic education and a lack of further investigation. Where appropriate, I tried to shift the focus more Jesus-ward. Then, out of nowhere, Luke asked, "What's your view on gay relationships?"

"Mine or the church's?"

"Yours." answered Luke.

"The church's." responded Lisa at the same instant.

"For myself , I approach life meeting people where they are. Everyone gets a fair go as a starting point. So, and I know this from past experience, whether or not someone has a homosexual preference doesn't come up in day to day interactions ... But I will admit to not understanding that preference ... And part of that is an evolutionary query in the back of my mind. I don't see how homosexuality contributes to the survival of species."

That was accepted, so I moved on confidently to the church view. I reported that my church - the Uniting Church in Australia - has extensively, publicly and not without criticism of itself, struggled to reach open acceptance of homosexual relationships, while, at this stage, stopping short of sanctifying homosexual marriage.

"How does all that sound?" I asked Luke.

"Mmm. Better than I thought. You see I'm gay and I don't see why I should be condemned just because I choose to love a man."

The conversation wandered on and we heard how his mum responded when he finally told her of his self-discovery. Perhaps like many mums, she had known before him and was simply waiting.

But that was about it, because Nigel, the organiser of Battle of the Bands, joined us to start their heads moving towards the imminent activities. Music briefly moved to the forefront again and within minutes Lisa and Luke were up and back into their rooms to prepare. Well, not quite. Out of nowhere, Lisa first stepped over to me as I slouched in the white plastic chair, put her arm around me and gave me a simple, sincere hug. Surprised I mumbled something about breaking a leg.

For an hour or so later in the day, I joined the battle at Meekatharra footy ground. Can't miss an opportunity like that. Aboriginal bands had come from hundreds of kilometres away and the joint was gonna be jumpin' for a day and a half. There were T-shirts, cheap jewellery stalls and the mandatory sausage sizzle. Even a little Chinese food from the footy club window. Cloaked in the same red blanket, Lisa was there with Luke, Nigel and others discussing, rating and recording. I returned to the battle ground after dark to watch Lisa work the crowd with her lusty soul singing. And I mean work the crowd. She leapt from the stage into the middle of a hundred Aboriginal kids and led them with her lips and hips through a set of six amplified backing tracks that could be heard at Mt. Magnet.

We met for dinner later and the group expanded to include Brian the Truckie. That's just the way it is in the dining room at the Auski. And of course we had to keep each other updated on the election results later at the corroboree of the plastic chairs. The one advantage of being in Western Australia on election night should have been that we knew the result straight after dinner. But not this year. By the time we hit bed there were more opinions filling the air than at Don's Party.

We were all working Sunday, but again our paths crossed for dinner. With the battle won - the winners had driven for two days across the desert to compete - Lisa and Luke had definitely turned their heads to the Monday morning plane. There was after all, at least one night with the boyfriend to be squeezed in before the touring.

Monday morning we parted. The musos were behind closed doors packing as I was about to start my fifty kilometre drive to work. I knocked on Luke's door and shook his hand. I wished him good luck with the script. I knocked on Lisa's door - warm, perfumed air met me - and hesitating, but not for long enough, I held out my hand. She took, shook it and we wished each other well.

I will always wonder if in that moment, my arms would have offered more meaning than my hand.

September 2010