

1. McAllister

On a still night on the plain, the light from McAllister can play tricks on you. After hours of driving in the dark in more or less a straight line, with only the headlights of your car, the gleam of the speedometer and sound system to provide any relief from the vast, open night, the sudden glow of lights in the distance can seem huge, almost like a hidden city has suddenly sprung up from the ground in the middle of nowhere. Like the earth itself just played a magic trick on you.

Often, drivers will assume it is Arthur's Crossing, overlooking the existence of little McAllister. It's an easy mistake, but Arthur's Crossing is still another 42km away down the Flinders Highway.

As drivers approach, the lights seem to diminish. When they are finally moving through the almost entirely abandoned town, drivers are surprised to find that all that light has been coming from a single building. An old Outback pub, with a wooden veranda covered in yellow lights and a thousand flying insects. Some might notice the name of the pub and get a chuckle from the unexpected variety, and some may even get a glimpse of apparently human life inside the pub itself, most often a thin woman with pure black hair, if they are passing through at night. Sometimes a man with wispy white hair with her, or another, younger, with brown hair. They like to play cards on the veranda and wave at the rare vehicles who pass through the town.

No one stops though. Not at night. If they are stopping anywhere, it will be at the motel at Arthur's Crossing, or maybe further down the road at Julia Creek. Some will even pull onto the side of the road and sleep in their car, despite the killer of local legend who roams the Flinders Highway. Occasionally in the light of day locals and tourists might visit the pub in McAllister for lunch, or for a cold beer in the evening, but no one stays there for long, and no one spends the night.

They call McAllister a ghost town, and tell stories about the pub. They are idiots. Always and everywhere, 'They' are idiots.

As the owner of the pub was fond of saying, however, 'They' are not always wrong.

His name was Herculaneum Popinjay.

That name set him back when he first moved to the Arthur's Crossing Shire. It was a part of the world where a stranger would have to stay for at least 20 years before considered a local, but if your name was something like Herculaneum Popinjay, you would probably have to wait another couple of decades on top of that. But that didn't worry Herculaneum. Time was something he had a great deal of.

It was the sort of name you get when you decide to furnish yourself with a new moniker after a three-day drinking bender in 18th century England. He chose Herculaneum as a mark of respect and remembrance, and Popinjay because he liked the sound of the word. He occasionally regretted it, but never enough to change it again. Not yet, anyway.

It was not a name that inspired fear, which pleased Herculaneum despite his occasional forays into highway banditry over the centuries. He always abandoned those forays quickly, because they were always less glamorous than the popular culture of whatever time it was led him to believe.

It was a name that lent itself to rambling, outlandish tales into the small hours of the long, hot nights of the North Queensland summer, over cold beers and endless rounds of Five Hundred. It was the name of a short, stocky man of indeterminate age, less than average physical fitness, a somewhat elastic sense of honesty and a rather lazy intelligence. It was the name of a man who had stumbled onto the secret of immortality and wasn't much fussed by it.

It was the name of the owner and proprietor of Popinjay's Beverage Emporium, the only business and abode in the otherwise abandoned town of McAllister, North West Queensland, Australia. The Gulf Country. He was standing behind the bar, polishing it with a dirty cloth and talking to his friends Sonny and Polaris, who will have their own introductions in good time. For the moment, it is enough to know that all three would probably be the most amiable monsters in all of Australia, although Polaris could be a bit severe at times.

They prefer the term 'supernaturally gifted,' incidentally, but they're OK with 'monsters.' They've seen enough heroes in their time to feel comfortable in the other group.

'What this place needs is music', Herculaneum said, not for the first time. Herculaneum couldn't play any instrument worth a damn, and his singing could kill a brown dog, but he was a great lover of music nonetheless.

The monsters didn't know it, of course, but there was a musician of sorts making his way towards them, provided he didn't die of thirst or heatstroke first.

There was something else headed their way, as well. It thought of itself as The Hero. They didn't know The Hero was coming, either - but then again, The Hero didn't know there were monsters in McAllister in the first place. The Hero wasn't coming to North Queensland for them. He had other business to take care of and, if the musician *had* died of thirst, it's possible the monsters of McAllister would have never encountered The Hero at all.

Possible, but not very likely. The Hero was very, very good at his job. He really should be, though. He'd been doing it for nearly 5000 years.

The musician never wanted to die with purple hair.

His name was David and, to be fair, he never really wanted the purple hair to begin with, but he lost a bet in Bangkok a few weeks ago so was doomed to put up with it. He hoped the dye would start washing out soon, but it was proving to be stubborn. He thought Australia would be an easier place to travel after a few of the other countries he'd visited on this backpacking adventure, which would have made some of his friends laugh back home.

As citizens of the online world, they had all seen the articles and photos on various comedy websites and social media that portrayed Australia as a place of horrors. The shark-eating crocodiles, the crocodile-eating snakes, the snake-eating spiders, and so forth. When he went backpacking and told people Australia was on his list of destinations, the jokes about his imminent demise came as predictably thick as molasses.

His aunt even joined in at one stage, before embarking on a long, wistful ramble about her travel adventures from the 80s.

'I never made it to Australia, though. Who knows what you might find down there?' she said, the day before his flight. David travelled around Greece, the

Balkans and Eastern Europe before drifting down to South East Asia over several months, then finding his way down to Australia on a passing yacht, which dropped him off at the port in Townsville.

I certainly didn't think I'd find a slow, painful death, he thought with a pained smile. He ran his tongue over his gums in search of some moisture. He found none. In a way, dying of thirst after trying to hitch-hike along the Flinders Highway in November was a bit embarrassing. At the very least, some terrible spider could jump out and bite him to give him a worthier end. There was no excuse for dying this way either, as he had been warned about the problems he might face when he'd had a drink with some people in Townsville, who had told him he was insane.

'Not in November, mate,' they'd said. 'It's 1000km to Mt Isa and it's 45 degrees out there. Humid, too. If you don't get a lift with someone quickly you could be in real trouble.'

David was in real trouble. His last lift had lasted only 20 minutes before the farmer who had been driving to Arthur's Crossing had turfed him out beside the road with a hasty apology and a half-empty bottle of water, hot from the inside of the car.

'Sorry mate', he'd said, after receiving a call on the two-way radio wedged in next to the gearbox of the Toyota. 'There's a broken water trough in the yards at my place and I have to get back to fix it or the cattle in there will die. McAllister's not far along and there's a little pub there where you should be able to get a drink and wait for another car.'

And with that, he'd done a U-turn and sped off in the direction of his farm. David watched as the heat haze swallowed up the vehicle, and mused that, at this time of the year in Northern Australia, it must be very easy for livestock to drop that all-important first syllable. He wasn't entirely sure how much further McAllister was, and he remembered some of the advice of his Townsville drinking companions.

'If you get stuck somewhere, don't bother walking. You'll just dehydrate faster. If you're on a road, you're better off just waiting where you are - someone will come along sooner or later.'

While this is ordinarily the best advice, for David on that road, the 'later' seemed much more likely at this stage than 'sooner'. He had waited almost two

hours when he finally turned off his phone to save the battery, and he wasn't sure how much longer it had been since then. Only a single car had passed in that time. It was like the stretch of road had been placed outside of time - he imagined he could sit here for all eternity and the bright, unblinking sun would never set.

That single car had been no help whatsoever. The small, red hatchback Ford Festiva didn't even stop to check if David needed help.

Finally, David had thought, standing up and slinging his guitar case over his shoulder so the driver could see he was not just an unwashed backpacker on the side of the road, but a worthy travel companion, a maker of music. He tried to put on a friendly smile to mask the genuine desperation he felt, but something about the rapidly approaching car bothered at him. A quiet but insistent thought kept prodding at his mind, determined to be heard.

OK, try not to look like a serial killer. I'm just a friendly backpacker with a guitar, he told himself, while the little insistent thought went prod, prod, prod. *Friendly backpacker with a guitar who really, really needs a ride. No one would be heartless enough to drive past in this heat, surely. Prod, prod prod. What an odd little car it is to be all the way out here. It looks like a little cherry tomato. Santorini tomato, that's what they're called, apparently. Prod.*

Prod.

The little thought finally made itself heard.

It's not slowing down. Like, at all.

Shit. It's not slowing down. It's really not slowing down. It's not going to stop. And the little red Santorini tomato vehicle sped past, the large man with a short-sleeved business shirt and clip-on tie inside not even glancing in David's direction as he left the young man to his fate. David watched as the little car disappeared into its own little heat haze. In his mind, the car sped through McAllister, Arthur's Crossing and Julia Creek then kept going west, through Cloncurry and all the way to Mt Isa. The number plate fixed itself in his mind: 568-ATE.

He never forgot that car. In the coming weeks he thought about it a lot. He might never have even heard of Popinjay's Beverage Emporium if it had just stopped for him.

That fucking little red car. It nearly killed him.

Ok, he thought eventually, when the car was long gone and the heavy silence of the savannah had returned. He said McAllister wasn't far. Time to start walking. What would those Townsville people know anyway? They come from a place with a stupid name.

He looked around the vast expanse of wide, open country, dead grass and dead grey soil, with no shade except the occasional thorn bush. Every horizon shimmered in the heat, which beat down on him with physical oppression. His mouth was dry and a swarm of flies flickered around his eyes and ears before settling on his back. In all his travels, he had never seen a place that looked so desolate. The sheer breadth of those shimmering horizons, with no sign of human civilisation apart from the empty highway, forced him to accept the facts. No one else was coming along this road for a long, long time, and he needed to find water and shelter. He started walking to McAllister.

He was 6.4 kilometres from the town, which isn't all that far, under normal circumstances. It's a bit of a hike, but if you're young and fit it shouldn't present much difficulty.

But David was already dehydrated. The half bottle of warm water had gone in the first half hour of his wait. It was 47 degrees with 90 per cent humidity and he was carrying 18.5 kilos of guitar, clothes and books. Within three minutes of walking, his shirt was soaked in sweat. After fifteen, he felt his first small spell of dizziness, which grew worse with every passing step. He couldn't raise his eyes from the road without feeling like he had just got off a bad rollercoaster. After that, inertia and stubbornness kept him going; head bowed and eyes fixed on his feet, which followed one after another on the baking bitumen road.

He wasn't sure how long he had been walking, trudging, stumbling when suddenly his eyes lifted from his feet and he found he was looking at a small town all around him, sprung up from the ground as if by magic. It seemed quite dead. Twenty-two buildings and not a sign of life that he could see. The world spun around him as heat stroke struck hard and the buildings shimmered like he was standing in the middle of a mirage. A desperate, terrified laugh started building in his stomach.

'There's no one here,' he said aloud, his voice croaking, dry and strange to his ear. His dehydrated brain couldn't seem to function properly and he didn't trust

his feet to move any further, so he stood on the empty highway in the empty, spinning town, swaying on his feet.

Through the mirage, voices reached him but David could not focus on where they were coming from. He listened, wondering if they were real or hallucinations from the heatstroke. It seemed likely to him that the two voices were imaginary. Surely there couldn't be an Australian and an Indian talking about the rise and fall of civilisations in this empty little town.

'Here's the thing people forget about humanity - progress is not a given', said the first voice, loud with a broad Australian accent. 'It's easy to forget that when you look at how human civilisation has come along in leaps and bounds. Shit, especially over the last century. You know there are parts of Africa now where they are bypassing all the expense, effort and inputs of building phone lines because it's easier for everyone to just get on Wi-Fi?'

'Yes, but you hate Wi-Fi. You think the Internet is the greatest tool of mass dumbing-down ever created. Didn't you call it a vehicle for a billion people to simultaneously share their own stupid opinions and ignore everyone else's?' the second voice asked in a musical, subcontinental accent.

'Not really the point, Sonny. The point is that it would be easy for humans these days to look around and think progress is a sure thing. But you can regress. It happens. You know I was in Gaul in about the eighth century or so-"

'It wasn't called Gaul then, Herculaneum. I've never set foot in Europe but I know that.'

'It was still Gaul to me, Sonny. Anyway, it was only a few centuries after the fall of Rome, the real Rome. I was passing through this town near Nemousus, not far from the big aqueduct, and there was this massive argument happening in the street between a couple of blokes. They couldn't agree on what had built the huge structure carrying water that loomed over the town - was it a giant or a god?'

'Ha! No god I ever met was keen on building anything. Lazy, every one of them. Getting other people to build for them was more their style.'

'Yeah, fair shout. Useless bastards. I met a few giants in my time who were handy with masonry, but really, I was absolutely staggered when I heard these blokes. They had already forgotten it was their own kind who had built these things. The work of actual human hands and engineering ingenuity and they thought it

must have come from one of us. I was so bloody shocked I hung around the town for a few days asking other people about the aqueduct, to make sure the two men I first saw weren't a couple of isolated morons. No such luck. Giants built it, was the general consensus. No one had a clue. And most of Europe was like that for a few centuries. Knowledge was lost. Technology was forgotten and had to be re-learned. It's happened in most parts of the world at one time or another. Look at Central America after the Mayans fell, before the Aztecs rose to pick up the ceremonial dagger again. Or in China when the Han Dynasty collapsed and they struggled for centuries of civil war and getting beaten about by external raiders.'

David swayed on his feet and when he blinked it was like sandpaper scraping over his eyeballs. For a second he was sure he saw the ghost of an old woman floating past in front of him. She stopped and glared at him in disapproval, then vanished. He had a vague thought that perhaps he had already passed out somewhere on the road and all this was inside his head. Somewhere, the second voice was continuing the discussion.

'I can't say I ever paid that much attention to the various human kingdoms and empires that came and went over the course of my travels. But I remember that between the Kushanas and the Guptas there was a bit of that sort of thing going on as well. I see your point, Herculaneum, but just because something has happened in the past doesn't mean it will happen in the future. You'd have to agree that, despite all its setbacks, humanity has still progressed as a whole.'

'Yes, but that's because there was always another human civilisation somewhere else in the world picking up the slack whenever a big one went down. A part of the world could go through its own little Dark Age but somewhere else would be having its own little Enlightenment. And the whole show just kept creeping forward.'

'Exactly, and now there are fishermen in Indonesia watching American TV shows on smartphones built in China.'

'Don't 'exactly' me, Somnamble. That's my bloody point - nowadays humans just have this one big civilisation spread across the globe. No one to pick up the slack if it goes sour. If it falls now, they all go down together.'

'You don't sound too heartbroken at the thought, Herculaneum. Although I suppose Polaris would feel the same. She was telling me the other evening how

much she hates all these 24-hour fluorescent lights and headphones to cancel out the noise of creaking floorboards and groaning wind. No more lonely crossroads at midnight in dark forests. Anyway, you might be right in saying that the progress of human civilisation isn't a given, but I would say it is certainly a probability. We're living in that probability right now. The world is progressing right past us, all the old monsters and demons and heroes."

David's spinning mind held onto only fragments of this conversation, discarding almost immediately most of the bizarre, fantastic and outright impossible, and simply focussed on the idea there were living people somewhere nearby, and that meant water had to be close. He wasn't sure how long he had been swaying in the heat radiating off the bitumen highway when his eyes finally caught up with the sound of the voices. They were coming from a building directly to his left - he was practically on their doorstep. He staggered up onto the wooden veranda and heard people hurriedly standing up inside, perhaps shocked to have company - there not being a lot of foot-traffic in downtown McAllister. He had time enough to glimpse a sign above the door which read 'Popinjay's Beverage Emporium', and another in the window below reading 'Always Open', before the world spun too far away from him and he hit the ground.