

THE QUARRY

Signposts

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Instead of sitting down to tell you a story confined to a single beginning, middle and end, I invite you to walk with me through the rugged trail of the coastal Coogee track. If a beginning *must* be established, one might situate us roughly half-way down Coogee Bay Road leading directly to the water. I cannot, however, tell you how far we will go or where we will end up. But in all honesty, that is how this walk always begins.

By the end of the day in mid-July, the boutiques and salons typically start dimming their artificial lights while owners close their doors to the subtle bite courting

the breeze for the month. Couples huddle together in lines outside restaurants while seasoned runners, seemingly immune to both daylight saving and temperature, dart past in tanks and shorts, almost in defiance of the lowering sun. Yet, beyond the bustling glow of The Pavilion, the landscape quietens. Metres from the shore, the concrete turns to grass and a path, rising steadily upward, forms one entrance to the trail.

It was here on one such night that I was first told the rather dizzying words: *Every five years your life changes*. Perhaps it was a product of the blushing clouds that reflected on the water like rose tinted glass, irresistibly coaxing a more philosophical way of looking at things. Maybe it was the fact that it was a second date and the words were a rather tactful manoeuvre on his part to maximise the romance the scenery so gratuitously afforded. Regardless, at barely nineteen such a proposition that the start and middle points of each decade promised outlandish adventures enamoured me; like two sides of a mountain, time would mark a tipping point at which life itself would transform.

‘You’d better be right. I’m putting in my order now for a high-flying job in the city. I’m talking corporate suits, barista-made coffee every morning...’

He smiled. ‘Don’t you forget me when it happens.’

Hand in hand, we scanned the shrinking shore, discussing birds and other matters of life. My sneakers steadily gripped the ground. Though reluctant to admit it, we both secretly carried the belief that we could take on the world.

The smooth, flattened rock at the top of the first cliff extends quite a distance. Though the path inclines relatively quickly, the next few metres make for an easy first-timer’s walk. Bordered by a white barrier, not unlike a picket fence, one might even believe the easy terrain promises to stay this way. Beyond a stretch of tall grass, however, the bushes start to thicken. The path here is hard to find but once on the trail, the walkway snakes abruptly downwards.

The night before my twentieth birthday, this part was particularly hard to navigate. The sun was turning in earlier than expected, albeit normal for that time of year, but sudden for a small group of teens who had believed summer would last forever. Gripping the handrail, I shakily raced after my childhood friends as the path led us down to sea level. Kicking off our shoes, we scrambled across the ramp into the

pocket beach of Gordon Bay. I watched as they jumped unconcerned from rock to rock, exchanging shrieks and laughter while the waves hissed at their feet. Perhaps it was different for those who still had months separating them from the next decade. My stomach knotted as the tide edged closer. I thought of the new blazer and skirt laid out on my bed and wondered whether or not to tell them about the impending morning interview. Silence, I concluded, preserved the last few hours separating the night from morning.

‘Guys, look over here!’

Gathering around the side of a beached fishing boat, we gazed at a shell cradled in one girl’s hands. The glossy face formed a jagged swirl dotted with holes.

‘Aw shame it’s broken,’ one remarked.

‘All shells get like that over time,’ another replied. ‘It’s basically hardened calcium carbonate. Once the mollusk discards it, it washes up wherever the current goes.’

Holding the shell to my ear, I listened to the swirling sounds of its travels and wondered whether it too had felt apprehensive about the journey. Glancing up at the mountaintop, I marveled at how sure I had once felt treading over the smooth terrain.

Tiptoeing along the rocks, another wave leapt up. Catching my breath, my feet slipped momentarily. *Every five years your life changes.*

Beyond the Gordon Bay cove, the path climbs a new cliff. Though reaching a similar height as before, the series of oncoming steps challenge even the more experienced walkers. There, the sun temporarily disappears behind the bottlebrush trees and for a moment, more than ever, it is impossible to predict just how steep the incline will get.

I only gained an appreciation for this part of the walk the morning of my first day working part-time in the city. After removing the university textbooks from my bag and grabbing my keys, I briefly paused by the mirror to adjust my jacket. Twenty and a month. Having since replaced the blazer that had drowned my shoulders in the interview, I regarded the new, unnerving image of a woman standing in a well-fitting suit and corporate bun. Scanning her made-up face and pearls, we both raised a hand to

our cheeks. Impossible. Double checking my bag for my concession card, I gingerly started towards the door, clinging to the hope that people would see her instead of me.

Stumbling off the bus, a familiar bite seeped through my layers as the aroma of coffee drew me down York Street and passed a greasy figure exiting a street-side café. *Hey there lady, where are you off to? Lady?* Pushing the glass door, my eyes darted to the woman reflecting back.

It was only once I had started up the office building steps, with barista-made coffee in hand, that I thought of the boy. Being a month into a new decade, I could not refute his philosophy although, had he been present, I would have offered one qualification: that life changes every five years promises nothing about the preparation in the climber.

Wobbling in my corporate shoes, I continued up the stairs. Though I looked the part, it was perhaps the first time I truly felt the weight of my inexperience.

It was a while before I revisited the path connecting to the next lookout. The track was neither empty nor busy, with neither a sunset nor sunrise. Yet, the Bundock Park viewpoint marks the furthest and potentially most memorable point of the walk thus far.

It was the first time I walked the track in silence with a friend. The silence stemmed largely from my not knowing what to say but in hindsight, any of the possibilities would have been unnecessary. After a year working in the city, I had been waiting at the bus stop when he reached out with the news about his mother. Walking along the track, I decided to let the birds and quiet rustling take the conversational reins.

Though each turn presented its challenges, I began to wonder whether my shoes had since improved or whether my feet had somehow toughened. Regardless, the constant treading over unfamiliar terrain was, in some ways, becoming comfortable. As we sat down at the rock's edge, I listened to the distant laughs of my childhood friends and the swirling sea. I listened to the boy speak of big words and philosophy and eventually, to my friend as he stared at the water and began to talk.

Only by Bundock Park did I realise, in looking at my friend, the error in how I expected life to unfold. At twenty-one and witnessing someone reach such a devastating

turn before the next five-year period, it dawned on me that those elusive words never promised to restrict the movement of life to a singular point in time. While my own landscape at fifteen compared to twenty told of significantly different terrain, so too did the comparison between nineteen, twenty and a month, and twenty-one. Ultimately, it appeared reaching one arbitrarily marked time period was not to say that life would remain the same until the next five-year marker.

I never found the ‘right’ words to say to my friend. But much like the trail we had followed until this point, there was a developing steadiness in navigating situations I was in no way familiar with, nor prepared for. Sitting along the edge of Bundock Park, I squinted into the distance, attempting to catch a glimpse of the trail ahead.

Depending on how one decides to define the walk, I am told the length extends more than double – if not triple – the distance already covered. Perhaps by then, the road will grow familiar and life itself will become easier to tread. As for now, my only goal is to reach what lies between this point and the next. If we meet again, I will show you what I have seen.