

# Christmas Glow

James Webb

Christmas 2006 I was going to be alone. This was the fourth year of Meredith's and my being separated and, with the children having grown up, Christmas could no longer be a forgone conclusion. Everyone else had their plans. Our son was taking his two boys down to Sydney to spend the time with his two sisters and their families and Meredith was going trekking. To be specific she was walking from her house in Koonorigan to her sister's house on Mount Tambourine, accompanied by her two pack saddling donkeys. It was to be a ten-day walk and she would be on the track somewhere on Christmas day.

Two days to go and I was wrestling with my feelings about "that day". Being alone on Christmas day loomed as the profound manifestation of my disintegrated family and my role in it's demise. One part of me said "grow up" and to just spend the day hanging about the house and doing nothing – something of a gift to myself. Another voice, the voice of primal fear kept crying "run". Of all the dialogue going on within me, this voice was the loudest so I decided to pack my bushwalking gear and head off early the day before Christmas, to spend two days challenging myself in the wilderness. It's hard to feel the pain of being isolated from the ones you love when you're half way up a mountain, stinking hot, trapped in a wall of impenetrable head-high scrub and with the pack cutting into your shoulders.

Having established my escape plan I felt less stressed and my thoughts casually found their way to a less strenuous idea: whilst driving to my wilderness, I could sort of "bump into" Meredith on the road and hope she might ask me to join her on the track for Christmas day. I estimated she would have spent the night of the twenty-third at Tyalgum so early the following morning I headed there, taking the route she would have used in case she'd set up camp on the outskirts.

I cruised the town, including scanning the showground from the roadway but could see no sign of the donkeys. I then drove on further in case they'd been running ahead of time, but after ten kilometres, including checking every likely campsite I knew she wasn't out there. I returned to Tyalgum, despondent but with the intent of asking the general store if they'd seen a woman with two donkeys. I'd just turned into the main street when I saw the telltale long ears and grey bodies outside the store and tethered to a verandah post. As I parked the car, Meredith emerged from the shop.

She seemed to look straight through me at first and then recognition dawned and her face lit up. 'Oh hello, what are you doing here?'

I walked towards her and we hugged. 'Surprised?'

'Very. How did you know where we'd be?'

I began to hug the donkeys. 'I remembered the first few days of your plan but couldn't find you on the road or at the showground. Where did you stay?'

Meredith told me they'd had spent the night at the showground after all but on the far side of the pavilion, which is why I didn't see them. When I told Meredith my bushwalking plans, referring to all my gear in the car, I was hoping she'd suggest I bring my pack and join her for the day and overnight camp so we would have Christmas breakfast together. She didn't do that but after chatting generally for a while asked if I wanted to walk with them as far as Chillingham, about four hours away, after which I could head back to the car and resume my own journey. It wasn't exactly what I wanted and I felt a slight disappointment but it was something.

In any event, I got over it and we had a pleasant walk, a familiar routine for the four of us. The familiarity continued at Chillingham where we found a nice riverbank to tether the donkeys and a shady tree under which to have our bushwalking lunch. In the quiet that followed the meal, Meredith began talking about her planned camp for the night. It was to be beside a forested creek, a further seven kilometres on and then accessible by a four wheel drive track. She suggested I might like to spend the night at camp with her and then accompany her next day on the climb to the border. There was a flutter of excitement at having Christmas together after all but a slight annoyance that she hadn't mentioned it back at the car, where all my gear was.

Then she outlined the specifics of her plan the first part of which was for me to hitch back and get the car, drive it to the junction with the campsite track, leave it there (otherwise it would spoil her wilderness campsite experience), then walk with my pack from there to the camp. The following day, I could join her on the climb up to the border, then I would make my own way back to the car.

This sounded familiar: whether Meredith was asking or I was offering, it seemed that what she finally wanted was just that one step beyond what I was comfortable giving. In this case it was the walk to the border. I'd looked at the map and already doubted I could make it up there and back in a day. So instead I offered to drive up there today while she was still walking and to check out the route for the donkeys, an offer which Meredith accepted. The road turned out to be narrow and winding, with many places where they wouldn't be able to get off the bitumen for passing cars. It was also a long and constant uphill grade. In the end it would take them a full day, which for me would have meant, had I met Meredith's initial request, a night bivouacked on the side of the road, half way down the mountain.

I arrived back at the four wheel drive track before Meredith so drove into the forest until I found a suitable area by the creek where there was room to tether the donkeys and for the car to be away from the tent area. When Meredith arrived I began to put my case for leaving the car where it was but it was clear she was tired and accepted its familiar presence.

From then on it was a well practised routine: unload the donkeys, tether them to a running line, unpack the saddle bags, set up the tent and sleeping bags, make a fireplace, collect firewood. This was where we were at our best together.

It was getting dark by the time we were finishing dinner and I became fascinated by occasional flickers of light in the bush on the other side of the creek. After a while, as darkness became more intense so did the lights and there appeared to be more of them.

'Across there', I pointed, 'what do you see in the trees?'

'I've been looking at them; I thought at first it was an illusion but they are lights aren't they?'

'Remember the Glow Worm tunnel at Wollemi? They're glow worms.'

By now the whole of the bush in front of us was a mass of bright and flickering lights. I asked her, 'What do they remind you of?'

'Christmas tree lights.'

Despite all my anxieties and mixed emotions about Christmas I now felt content. 'It's as if Nature has given us a Christmas gift.'

Meredith didn't reply for while. 'You know I've been avoiding Christmas – I'm sure you understand that well - but those little beings glowing in the trees over there seem to be signalling that the great spirit is blessing our family.'

She looked at me and we smiled in acceptance of this truth before becoming lost again in our Christmas glow.