

PAUL JENNINGS

Undone!



Paul Jennings

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More
Mad
Endings



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For Sally

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Batty

A stone with a hole in it. A sort of green-coloured jewel in a leather pouch. Just lying there in the beam of my torch.

Someone must have dropped it. But who? There was only Dad and me and our two little tents, alone in the bush. I picked the pouch up by the piece of leather thong which was threaded through it. Then I crawled into my tent.

I should have shown Dad the stone with the hole in it. But he was snoring away inside his tent and I didn't want to wake him. And there was something odd about it. The pouch was worn and the thong was twisted. As if it had hung around someone's neck for many years.

Who was the owner? Who had lost it way out here in the wilderness?

I snuggled down inside my sleeping bag and hoped that no one was snooping around. The noises of the bush seemed especially loud. Frogs chirped in a billabong. 'Well, they can't hurt you,' I said softly.

Something bounded through the scrub. 'Kangaroo,' I whispered to myself.

A growling grunt filled the night air. 'Koala,' I thought hopefully.

I closed my eyes and tried to make sleep come. I dared not listen to the rustlings and sighings outside. I told myself that Dad's tent was only a few metres away. But in that dark, dark night it could have been a million miles.

Scared? I was terrified. What if someone was out there? Creeping. Watching. Waiting. 'Get hold of yourself, girl,' I said to myself. 'There is no one out there.'

A twig broke. Snapped clean in the night. I stopped breathing. I stopped moving. But I didn't stop thinking. 'Go away. Please go away,' begged my frozen brain. I wanted to call out to Dad but my mouth wouldn't work.

The flap of the tent lifted. I could see the stars and the black trees. Someone moved. A shadow rustling, searching. Hands took my bag and opened it. I wanted to cry out but something stopped me.

Two pinpoints of light moved in a dark head. Eyes. Desperate eyes.

Quietly I moved my fingers. Like a spider's legs they crept under the blankets towards my torch. 'Softly, don't disturb him. Don't make him angry.' With shaking hands I pointed the torch into the

gloom. I felt like a soldier with an empty gun. I flicked on the switch.

And there he was. A wild boy with tangled hair and greasy skin. He was covered in flapping rags.

The tent was filled with a terrible squeaking like a million mice.

The boy reared back. In one hand he held a piece of cake from my bag. And in the other was the pouch with the hollow stone. He sucked in air with a hiss, turned to flee and then stopped.

He looked at me with a silent plea. A desperate call for help. He held his hand in front of his face to stop the light of the torch. The moon escaped from a bank of clouds and softened the tent with light. I should have called for Dad. But my eyes were locked in silent conversation with the intruder.

I could see that the boy was as frightened as me. He was poised to run. Like a wild animal wanting food but unable to take it from a human hand. I had to be careful. A wrong movement and he ...

‘Hey,’ yelled Dad.

It was just as if someone had turned out a light. The boy vanished in a twinkling. I didn’t even see him go.

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Dad and I sat up nearly all night talking about what had happened.

It seems that a hermit called Lonely Pearson had once lived out here in a hut with his wife and son. The wife was an expert on bats, like Dad. Nine years ago she died and Lonely became enraged with grief.

Lonely did some mean things. He burned everything that belonged to her. Her books, her clothes, her photos of the bats. The lot. It was almost as if he was angry with her for dying and leaving him alone with his little five-year-old son - Philip.

The only thing that was left was a green stone with the hole in it. Philip's mother had always worn it around her neck. He used to play with it while she read him stories at bed time.

After she died Philip hid the stone. Lonely Pearson ranted and raved. He shouted and searched. He nearly tore their hut to pieces. But Philip wouldn't show him where it was. He closed his mouth and refused to speak. He kept his secret and Lonely never found the stone.

'So what happened to Philip?' I asked Dad.

'He ran off into the bush. Lonely couldn't find him. No one could find him. The police searched for weeks and weeks. Then they gave up. Everyone thought he was dead.'

I took a deep breath. 'What about Lonely?' I said.

'He spent every day searching for his son. He never gave up. Lonely died last year.'

I couldn't stop thinking about that sad, bewildered

face staring at me in the moonlight.

'How can he live out here?' I asked. 'It gets really cold at night. And there's nothing to eat.'

Dad shook his head and turned down the kerosene lamp. 'That's enough for tonight,' he said. 'You go to sleep. We have two days of climbing before we reach the bat cave. You are going to need all the rest you can get.'

'But ...' I began.

'Good night, Rachel.'

I heard him zip up his sleeping bag. I was in Dad's tent. It was a bit of a squash but Dad thought it was safer.

'Good night,' I mumbled. I was thinking about the next night. I was going back to my own tent. I had no doubts about that.

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The next day was hot and our packs were heavy. Dad and I struggled through the dense bush. Down into wet gullies filled with tree ferns and leeches. Up dry, rocky slopes through sharp, scratching thorns. Along trails where kookaburras called and cicadas filled the air with chirping.

It was wonderful country but my pack was heavy. And so was my heart. There was a sadness in the air. At times I thought I glimpsed a hidden watcher. But I could never be quite sure. I would turn quickly. A branch moved slightly. Or did it?

We stopped for lunch in a mossy glen. Dad passed me a piece of cake. It was starting to go stale. I wrapped it up and put it in my pocket.

‘Not hungry?’ asked Dad.

‘I’m keeping it for later,’ I replied. I was too. But not for me. I had plans for that bit of cake.

We packed up and moved on. Sometimes we went up. And sometimes down. But we were getting higher and higher.

My Dad was a greenie. And of all living things he loved bats best. He was mad about them.

We were heading for a bat cave in the mountain’s highest tops, Bat Peaks. Dad was going to block off the entrance to the cave. The roof was beginning to fall in. If it collapsed the whole colony of bats would be destroyed.

‘But they will all starve,’ I had said when he first told me the plan.

‘No,’ he had replied. ‘We block the cave entrance at night. When they are out feeding. They will be forced to find another cave. It’s the only way to save the colony.’

So there we were. Trudging up the mountain. On our way to blow up a bat cave before it collapsed and killed the bats.

Dad had bats on his brain. But all I could think of was a boy called Philip.

That night we camped in a forest clearing. Our camp fire crackled between a circle of stones. Overhead the stars filled the cold night like a handful of sugar thrown at the sky. It didn't seem as if there could be anything wicked in the world.

The gums were ghostly and grey. The ground was home to pebbles and thorns and ants. I shuddered at the thought of someone living out there. Barefoot and alone.

Dad crawled into his tent. 'Go to sleep, Rachel,' he said.

'I'll just sit by the fire for a bit more,' I told him.

You couldn't put much over Dad. He knew what I was up to. 'He won't come,' he said. 'He's wild and frightened. We'll call out a search party when we get back.'

I sat there alone, but not alone, as the fire crackled and tossed sparks into the arms of the watching tree tops. The noises of the night kept me company.

I stared into the dark fringes of the forest. Watching for the watcher. Waiting for the waiter. Willing Philip to come.

At last the fire died and I shared the dark blanket of the night with the unseen creatures of the bush.

Quietly I walked to the edge of the trees and broke off a piece of cake. I placed it on a rock. A few metres

away I did the same. I made a trail of cake leading to the edge of the dying fire.

Then I sat and waited.

Minutes passed. And hours. The moon slowly climbed behind the clouds. I struggled to keep my eyes open. But failed. You can only fight off sleep for so long. Then it wins and your head droops and your eyes close. That's what happened to me.

How long I dozed for I don't know. But something woke me. Not a noise. Nothing from the forest. More like a thought or a dream. Or the memory of a woman's voice. I woke with a start and stared around the clearing. Something was different. Something was missing.

The first piece of cake. It was gone.

At that moment I half saw two things. High in a tree off to one side was a shadowy figure, watching from a branch. And on the edge of the clearing was someone else. I was sure it was Philip.

It was.

He cautiously crept forward into the open. Shadows fell across his body. He was still dressed like a beggar. Hundreds of flapping rags hung from his body.

The boy's eyes darted from side to side. He looked first at the cake and then at me. He crept forward a few steps and bent and picked up the cake. The moon slid out from its hiding place.

And Philip stood there, revealed. For a moment I

couldn't take it in. Couldn't make sense of what my eyes were telling me. His rags flapped in the breeze. But the night was still and there was no breeze.

They were alive. His rags seethed and crawled and squeaked.

The wild boy was covered in bats. They hung from his arms and hair and chest. He was dressed in live bats. I couldn't believe it. Only his eyes were clear. His beautiful, dark eyes. I gave a scream and staggered backwards.

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The movement alarmed Philip and he threw his arms across his face. He was like a living book with its grey pages ruffling in a storm. Two bats flew up into the air and swooped under the trees.

Philip looked at me in fear and then up at the circling bats. Without a word he held his hands up to his mouth and started to whistle softly. The bats in the trees flew straight back and attached themselves to his hair. The others became calm.

'Sorry,' I said in a hoarse voice. 'I didn't mean to scare you.' There were lots of things I wanted to say. My stomach felt strange. I could feel myself blushing. I wanted to say something tender. Something caring. Something that would make us friends. Or more than friends. But all I could think of saying was, 'Have some cake.'

Philip stared at me. And then at the cake. I could see that he wasn't sure. I wondered if he had ever seen a girl before.

'I'm your friend,' I said. 'I won't hurt you, I promise.'

He was hungry. I guess that he hadn't tasted cake for a long, long time. Maybe he had been eating bat food. Fruit and moths and things.

He gave a sort of a smile. Only a small one. But it was enough to make my heart beat so fast that it hurt. Philip took a step towards the next piece of cake. He was starting to trust me. Maybe even to like me. As quick as a snake striking he pounced on the cake and began munching.

He ate like a five year old, shoving the cake in with both hands and smearing crumbs all over his face.

If only I could get him to trust me. I might be able to talk to him. To make him stay. He swallowed the last crumb and then just stood there staring into my eyes.

Slowly I took a step forward. 'It's okay,' I whispered. 'It's okay.'

The bats murmured and fluttered. He was ready to run. But he let me approach. An invisible bond was holding us together.

'Aagh ...' There was a terrible scream from the tree tops. A branch broke with a crack. The shadowy figure I'd seen plunged down, grabbing at branches

and yelling. He landed with a thump and lay there groaning. It was Dad.

The bats scattered into the air like a swarm of huge bees. Philip's cloak was gone. He stood there, naked. He glared at me. He thought we had tried to trap him. He raised his fist and then, thinking better of it, fled into the forest.

'Come back,' I yelled. Tears flooded down my face. 'Please come back.'

But only the bats stayed, circling above me, squeaking in fright.

I ran over to Dad. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I couldn't let you meet him alone. I had to keep an eye on you.'

'Are you okay?' I asked.

Dad tried to stand but he couldn't. 'Sprained ankle,' he groaned.

We both looked up at the circling cloud of bats. They didn't seem to know where to go. A sound drifted on the night air. 'Sh ...' said Dad.

A soft, squeaking whistle pierced the night. It was the whistling noise Philip made through his fingers. The bats squeaked frantically, circled once and flew off after the sound. Dad and I were alone in the dark, silent clearing.

Frenzied thoughts filled my mind. Philip, Philip. We have betrayed you. Dad, how could you spy on me? Dad, are you hurt?

Dad was groaning and holding his ankle. 'That's the end of the expedition,' he said. 'I can't walk a step.'

'But what about the bats? The cave might fall on them. The whole colony will die unless we blow up the cave.'

'I'm sorry, Rachel,' said Dad. 'I can't move. And you can't go alone. We'll stay here. The Rangers know our route. They'll send a helicopter when we don't arrive back on time. We'll be safe if we stay here.'

I took a deep breath. 'But that's in three days. What if the cave collapses? I'm going on my own.'

'Don't be silly,' said Dad. 'You've never even seen a stick of dynamite. I wouldn't let you anywhere near it. You'd kill yourself.' He grabbed his pack and held it tight. The dynamite was inside.

'There's something you haven't thought of,' I said. 'Yes?'

'Philip. He is covered in bats. He wears them like clothes.'

'So?' said Dad.

'And he whistles through his fingers and calls them.'

'Yes?'