

Once upon a riverbank.



*a short story by
Jay Mountney*

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Murray looked round one last time at the mountains behind them. He had loved his holiday with Morgan in the Flinders Ranges and in some ways was sad to be leaving. But he'd had such high hopes, and there had never been the right moment to broach the matter he so desperately wanted to resolve. Would Morgan consider him as a permanent partner, or not? He'd intended to propose at one of the beautiful watering holes near Arkaroola, but they were constantly interrupted. Wallabies came to drink. Humans came at dusk to photograph bats. Bats flew around fae heads with no respect for personal space. Or the other fae, the ones they'd met there, would call them to ride one of the bunyips that lived in the Paralana springs. Murray wondered if the radioactive springs were responsible, at some remote time, for the evolution of bunyips in general. He had never expected the wilderness to be so full of activity. Maybe they'd have had more privacy down near the ocean. But what was done was done, and at least Morgan had seemed to enjoy himself. He fingered the bag of rings in his pocket and sighed.

Now they were heading home, though it would take some time to get there. Humans took hours, probably all day, to drive from Big Bend on the Murray River to the outback wilderness sanctuary. Fae could cover the distance much faster, flying, but they'd still need to stop at least once on the way even though they avoided the human road system and flew directly.

"Did you like it?" He thought Morgan looked happy but wanted verbal confirmation.

"It was beautiful," the other fae responded, dark eyes flashing with remembered pleasure.

"What were your favourite bits?" Murray had liked the wallabies best. He'd fed some of them by hand, encouraged by a wallaby shifter who had decided to befriend the fae tourists. Murray had loved the feel of small paws delicately holding his fingers and a small tongue licking treats from his palm.

Morgan took time to consider. "I think the bunyips," he said at last. "We ride them at home but these made me feel our more populated part of the continent was truly connected with the wilderness. And of course, I love riding, as you know."

He was one of the first to volunteer to tell stories and spell dreams to the baby bunyips in their local billabong, in return getting the grateful parents to offer their furry backs for him to ride. Murray smiled. He liked watching Morgan and some of the others riding and sometimes competing to stay mounted though he personally preferred sitting by the river's edge observing water birds or just watching the sun rise or set.

It was setting now, the perfect time for them to leave on their homeward journey. He hadn't managed to propose, but he'd made Morgan happy, and that contented him for now. They could always come again, or perhaps they could

explore one of the closer protected wilderness areas. Or maybe he could ask Morgan for his hand on their own riverbank, even in the clearing they called home.

They stopped the next morning just south of Lake Frome. They were careful to avoid human campsites and soon found a fae settlement though the leaders of the group told them sadly that they would soon be moving south.

“The lake is drying too fast,” one said. “We need better access to fresh water, and the bunyips want somewhere deep to settle.” He gestured at the salt crust that made the lake strange and almost unearthly.

“But you’re welcome here for a day or two,” said another. “We aren’t moving just yet, merely considering what to do and where to go.”

Murray and Morgan joined the discussion wholeheartedly.

“There’s plenty of room along the Murray River, Murray told them. “And I’m not just recommending it because I share its name.”

“I do wish,” said Morgan, “that the bunyips would travel further from water. Then we could ride home instead of flying.” He sighed and Murray could see that he was tired. His delicate translucent wings drooped, almost invisible where they met his skin, which was the colour of milky coffee. Murray knew his own wings were tired, too, and his darker mahogany skin was taking on a distinctly dusty overcoat.

“They’ll help us move, I think,” said Hill, one of the fae elders. “They know the need as much as we do and they know we’ll have problems with baby fae, baby bunyips and a few frail older people as well.”

“All the same,” said Morgan, “I was doing some wishful thinking about the unicorns we heard of. I know Murray was, too. A fae visitor from England told us he and his group ride them everywhere. It sounds blissful.”

“But then they hunt with the creatures as well,” Murray pointed out. “I don’t think bunyips would be too keen on hunting away from the lake or riverbank.”

The fae contemplated the idea of hunting on bunyips and most of them shook their heads. “Besides,” said Peter, another of the Frome group, “I understand unicorns merely have a horn to hide from humans. I wouldn’t like to expend the energy required to hide the true nature of a bunyip for long.”

He was right. A giant rabbit with teeth like a shark and a tail like a crocodile would be hard to disguise.

The fae shared food willingly with the travellers. There were sandwiches of flatbread with various fresh greens and the occasional witchetty grub. If the lake continued to shrink there would be a dearth of foodstuffs, too so the fae would be forced to move. Climate migrants, mused Murray, thinking of what he’d learnt on the internet via his mobile phone when he was within reach of any kind of access.

They settled for the day near the others but not quite part of the group. This was possibly why their sleep was interrupted by an indignant swamp antechinus who came rushing out of his burrow right into the space between their faces chattering crossly. They were sleeping on the entrance to his family home and the fae almost laughed at the tiny, long nosed mousy creature scolding them, but moved, obligingly, whereupon the little thing went rushing back, grumbling about them no doubt, to tell his wife and children they could reach the surface again.

They stayed two days while their wings recovered, then when dusk fell on the second day they breakfasted and set off once more. They chatted occasionally, comparing Arkaroola with their closer park, the Danggali conservation park.

“It has kangaroos,” said Murray, hoping Morgan would agree to a further trip.

“But not the beautiful watering holes with the bats,” said Morgan. “And we wouldn’t have seen Lake Frome.”

That didn’t sound like rejection of Danggali, just gladness to have seen the Flinders Ranges. Murray tucked the possibility of a visit into the back of his mind and flew on.

They paused once or twice to drink from their water bottles and rest their wings. Fussing with packs and bottles, and feeling tired too, didn’t, Murray thought, lend itself to a proposal. So still he hesitated.

Not far from the human road that they called the A32, the fae stopped for another day’s sleep. They chose an abandoned farmstead which was apparently for sale though neither of them could see how anyone could make a satisfactory living in the dilapidated farm and farmhouse. It had a sign that said it was for sale, with smaller print boasting of the acreage and outbuildings.

“Grandiose words for such a derelict place,” said Murray, and Morgan grinned.

“I expect whoever settled here started with high hopes and new buildings,” he said. “At least they’ve left us somewhere to ‘park’ for the day. I don’t know about you but I’m tired.”

They had some bread and cheese in their packs and an apple apiece, too. Their water bottles, refilled whenever they saw fresh water, were brimming, but still, they didn’t gulp. It was all too easy to drink too fast and too much.

Morgan fell asleep as soon as his head was on the ground, closing his eyes as the sun rose. Murray stayed awake for a while, wandering around the steading, trying to imagine it in better times, and checking his phone in case he got a signal. There was nothing urgent that he knew of, but the world could be ending while they were so far from friends and news, and they would not know. Eventually he settled next to Morgan and took his friend’s slight body in his arms. They tangled together, changing position as they slept, now one and then

the other providing a protective hold and a shoulder to use as a pillow. Murray thought this was becoming a habit, and he loved it, but it didn't necessarily indicate permanence. Morgan could just as easily move to sleep with one of the others and Murray most certainly didn't want that. He wanted to have Morgan all to himself in a nest of branches on the riverbank. Permanently.

They awoke with the scent of smoke drifting on the evening breeze. Nothing to worry about, or not yet; it wasn't close, but Murray still wanted to get news. They were only perhaps a night's journey from home but he would be glad to find out where the fires were and how fiercely they were burning. The smell permeated all the air and it was hard to tell where it was coming from.

He kept checking for a signal and eventually got one, erratic but adequate.

"They're saying the vineyards in the Clare Valley are threatened," he told Morgan. "So it must be pretty serious."

"We'll be OK by the river," said Morgan, but he frowned.

The constant stops had delayed their progress and now they were flying as dawn broke. Soon they saw traffic, humans in cars and pickups, farm animals in some of the pickups and wild animals on the tracks and dirt roads, all heading towards the river. They would be visible against the sky. Their wings might be translucent but their bodies weren't and brown against blue was not conducive to disappearance. They landed and decided to walk.

"We're close now," said Murray.

"Close enough that if there's a last minute emergency we'll dare to risk flying because nobody will be looking," agreed Morgan.

They thought someone might stop to offer them a lift, but they could hear engines from a long way off and could hide if necessary. Besides, all the vehicles they'd seen had been full to the brim with passengers and their animals.

The sky, after the first streaks of dawn had faded, was a peculiar bronze colour, and they could taste ash. It was settling on their skin, too, making them look dusty and strange.

They walked briskly with regular pauses to drink from the water bottles. Once, they shared with a panting koala who seemed grateful. When he'd almost emptied Morgan's bottle he lumbered off, clumsy without trees to aid his passing. There would be trees soon, and the fae just hoped they weren't in the fire's path. Most people would be heading for Morgan, the town, not the fae named after it, or perhaps one of the smaller townships, though those might well be threatened. The animals would be heading, like the fae, for the river. Things could get crowded. All faces, human, animal or fae, were creased with worry, and everyone was hurrying as much as they could; not that the cars could make much speed on the dirt roads without risking breakdown. The fae put on shirts from their packs, carried for just such occasions. Their wings didn't fold down completely but the bulkiness of their figures would not be obvious unless the

observer was very close and they would just have to avoid that if possible. Murray hoped their dark curls would cover their pointed ears, and since nobody would want to stop and shake hands, he thought their extra fingers would not be a problem.

A few vehicles passed, lurching along the dirt roads and leaving dust eddies in their wake. Murray and Morgan tried to look as if they weren't there. Sometimes, fae could fade into the background and fool humans about their presence, a result of being able to remain extraordinarily still and being capable of exerting a hypnotic effect. They both hoped that would be the case now. At any rate, nobody stopped for them.

"Just as well," said Morgan after another car had passed them in its cloud of dust. "They'd insist on taking us to town and that's the last thing we want."

"Safer by the river," Murray agreed. And they continued, still on foot, hoping to see one of the tracks that might lead them home. The smoke was getting thicker, almost like fog, and they could hear, with their enhanced hearing, the sound of crackling in the distance. Without speaking they quickened their pace.

Then someone was coming towards them, heading the wrong way. Murray squinted at the approaching figure.

"Not fae," he said, "and yet, something tells me it isn't quite human."

"Shifter?" Morgan was squinting, too.

"Maybe. Whoever or whatever it is, surely they know they shouldn't be coming this way."

They were within hailing distance and Murray shouted out.

"Wrong direction, mate. Are you lost?"

"Not lost." The amorphous shape in the gloom resolved into a well-muscled masculine figure. "No time to chat, but thanks for worrying," he added.

"But you're heading towards the fires," said Murray.

"I'm not stupid." He almost snarled. "My wife's there. With our joey." He seemed to realise what he'd said and clapped a hand over his mouth.

"It's OK, mate, we're fae," said Morgan, gently. "Won't she be heading this way now?"

"I'm not sure," came the reply. "Our joey isn't old enough to hurry and yet he's too big to carry for long. She'll need my help."

Murray turned and looked back along the route they'd taken. The fire was visible now, flickering in the ashy mist. There was no sign of anyone, human, fae or kangaroo. They were at the end of the exodus.

"What if...?" He didn't finish.

The shifter just looked straight at him and said, "I have to find them. If I'm too late at least I can be with them." And then he was gone.

They watched him shift and bound towards the fire, vanishing from their sight into the smoke.

"I should have given him my water, at least," said Murray.

“I’ve spelled him good luck and speed,” said Morgan, “but I’m not sure either will do any good.”

“He must love her a great deal,” said Murray. “I’d love to help but there’s no sense us getting caught there too. There’s nobody around now. Let’s hurry.”

They scrambled out of their shirts, tying them roughly around their waists, and took off.

Nobody saw them. Murray didn’t think anybody was likely to be looking, and if they did, they’d just be a blur in the smoke. They reached their stretch of the river and landed with relief. A river was a good place to be if there was fire around. Though the billabong might be good too.

“You said the vineyards were threatened,” said Morgan. “Can the fire cross the river?”

“Depends on the wind,” said Murray. “Stray sparks can be carried a long way and the bush around here is tinder dry on both sides of the water.”

“You mean we’re not really safe?”

“We could probably jump in the Murray and survive anything. The water’s moving fast and I shouldn’t think it’ll heat up much. But no, not completely safe until the wind changes.”

Morgan frowned. “I have something important to get from the tree where I keep my things,” he muttered, and set off for the clearing round the billabong. Murray trailed after him, wishing he didn’t have to get anything of importance at all; that everything important was in Murray’s nest of branches. He wished, too, that they didn’t have to stop and chat to various friends who wanted to know about their journey and the fires, more than they cared about the holiday. He’d been looking forward to telling everyone about the wallabies and the bats, but it seemed likely their adventure would always be overshadowed by the flames.

Morgan was holding a white box not much bigger than a fae’s clenched fist. He grabbed Murray’s elbow and dragged him away from Mannum, who was asking where they had stayed the previous day.

“Come on,” he said. “I need to show you this.” Murray cast an apologetic glance at Mannum and followed. For some reason Morgan seemed determined to return to the riverbank and not just to the bank but to Murray’s particular bit of it.

The nest was a scramble of branches and twigs. To anyone passing on the river it would look like a snarl of driftwood. Murray had built it carefully, and he frequently dampened the wood with river water. No sense having a fire risk as a home.

Morgan stopped and held out the box. “This is for you,” he said. “I got it before we went away but I wanted to give it to you today especially.”

“Today? Why?” Murray took the proffered box but didn’t open it. “Because we’re back safely?”

“No, because it’s the fourteenth day of February, which the humans call Valentine’s Day.” It must have been obvious Murray had no idea what that meant because Morgan continued, a faint blush shadowing his cheeks. “It’s the day they tell people how much they love them,” he whispered. “Open it, please.” The emphasis on the the last word was heavy. “It’s my Valentine’s gift to you.”

Murray fumbled with the box, not sure how it opened. Then he realised the inner box would simply slide sideways out of the smooth cover. He gasped as he saw the contents.

There was a bracelet, consisting of copper links, with three charms hanging from it. He thought the charms were ivory. Some fae artists bargained for children’s milk teeth, lovingly collected, and used them as their material. There was a tiny koala, an even tinier bat, and a slightly heftier kangaroo with a hint of a joey in its pouch. Morgan fastened it round Murray’s wrist and the magnetic clasp gave a satisfactory small click.

“We can get more charms,” he told him. “They had a dingo and a platypus, I know for sure. We could get another every year. The chain will go green gradually So will the pendant.”

In another compartment of the box there was a braided leather cord with a pendant in the shape of a gum nut like a small. Morgan demonstrated that it was hinged and it opened to show a smaller nut inside and then inside that, yet another. Just as Murray thought there could be nothing else, Morgan gently prised the last nut open. Inside was another ivory carving, this time of a miniature unicorn.

“I knew you wanted a unicorn,” said Morgan. “I thought this might be the best way to give you one.” He smiled, and Murray smiled too.

“It’s perfect,” he said. “I don’t even ride bunyips often, so a real unicorn would be of little use to me. But this is beautiful and I’ll treasure it.”

“Maybe you could treasure me, too?” Morgan sounded absurdly hopeful and uncertain.

“Of course.” Murray couldn’t quite imagine how Morgan hadn’t realised how he felt. “And I have something for you, too.”

“There’s no need,” Morgan said quickly. “It’s enough if you agree to be my Valentine. Permanently.”

“Permanently.” Murray nodded and drew the little suede drawstring bag out of his pocket. “I was going to ask... but there were so many other things going on... and I wasn’t sure... but...” His words faltered but he tipped the two silver rings out onto his palm and held them out to Morgan. He felt stupidly shy and yet he knew Morgan would accept. After all, he’d asked first.

It was Morgan’s turn to gasp. Then he slid one of the rings onto Murray’s finger and let him put the other on his own.

“This is a forever thing,” Murray murmured. “Like the kangaroo.”

“But a much longer forever, I hope,” said Morgan, grinning.

“We’ll never know if they made it out of there,” said Murray. “We can hope, but you’re right, they don’t live as long as fae in any case.”

The wind had changed while they were talking, and the smoke was clearing. The moon shone down on the riverbank, highlighting the nest and the two fae who now merged, as if into one, inside it.

The fire danger seemed to have passed, for now, and Murray’s phone told him people could relax. Fae, too. It was even possible the shifter had reached his mate in time.

“Now I know why it never seemed to be the right moment,” said Murray, kissing and caressing his lover as he spoke. “I was meant to propose on Valentine’s Day only I didn’t know, and you beat me to it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Morgan. “As long as we both feel the same way.”

He returned the kisses with enthusiasm, and the bracelet twisted on Murray’s arm, the small kangaroo turning gently in the moonlight.