

## **Undercurrent – by Louise Jennings**

### **Winner of the AA Directions New Travel Writer of the Year Award 2009**

Two pelicans wobble along a white ribbon of sand that separates a shallow lagoon from the calm sea beyond it. On the grass a few metres away a lanky ibis mooches about, his thin black beak delicately searching for treasure. The serene suburb of Labrador looks out over The Broadwater, a flat stretch of sea speckled near the shore with moored boats. It is protected from the Tasman Sea on the far side by a long spit, at the tip of which perches Sea World theme park. Three kilometres north of Surfer's Paradise, Labrador is home to birds, a multitude of mud crabs, laconic fishermen, retirees, commuters and the quieter type of tourist.

Ignored by the pelicans, an elderly swimmer, a shrunken walnut of a man in black Speedos, finishes his lagoon laps and air dries off in the balmy afternoon; no towel in sight. It is early June and winter in Queensland, but definitely not winter as I know it to be. Wearing shorts and a cotton singlet as the temperature hovers in the mid twenties seems to betray me as an outsider, and locals appear quick to notice difference and comment on it. Sitting on top of a wooden table close by is a ruddy cheeked woman in a pilling polar fleece, delicately eating hot chips. Fingers slick with grease and salt, she points a chip at me and states hoarsely, "You're not from around here are you?" "No, I'm not", I smile in reply, thinking to myself, "...but I'm not in togs either". I have stopped beside this small lagoon three times in as many days on meandering bike rides from my resort. A wide bitumen path, popular with i-pod people; runners, other cyclists, and all manner of dog owners, follows the edge of the shore. It weaves through parks populated with cabbage and banyan trees, past wooden jetties smattered Pollock-like with guano, an ice-cream parlour, seaside restaurants and million-dollar apartments. On the embankment in front of the lagoon sits 'Charis Seafoods', a large fresh fish market which also boasts the best cooked fish and chips for miles. Bizarrely, it completely disregards the sea view; floor to ceiling windows face directly out to a boat trailer car park and beyond that a busy four lane highway. This situation clearly works for the two Greek families who own and manage the fish market; both locals and holiday makers frequent it in droves, with over 6000 customers served in an average week. Sturdy wooden picnic tables line the back wall of the building so that customers can look on as sandy children splash about in the warm lagoon water or watch fishermen winch their dripping boats up onto trailers.

Three fat pelicans brake overhead, slowing to land in the water like bottom-heavy sea-planes. After a short but steamy rainstorm this morning, there are fewer people out today. Along from my straight-talking, greasy fingered friend, at another of the picnic tables is a married couple in their early twenties. He is a study in black; black pants and shoes, a black cotton shirt, thick black wavy hair. He talks animatedly to his wife, brown eyes widening every so often as if to underscore the importance of what he is saying. The young woman seems startlingly exotic in this seaside setting; a shoulder-length diaphanous burka covers most of her face, accentuating downcast eyes lined thickly with kohl; eyelashes small black caterpillars resting on creamy skin. She doesn't look around, but sits quite still and listens quietly to her husband. Even though she looks a thousand miles from home, she is more likely to be a local here rather than a tourist.

Muslims from different homelands have been settling on the Gold Coast in increasing numbers over the last few years; over 5,000 now live and work here. Queenslanders, traditionally conservative in their views on foreigners, have new neighbours in full burka, speaking Arabic and worshipping at Islamic mosques. The Islamic lifestyle presents a dramatic contrast to the laidback, sport loving Queenslanders'; and unsurprisingly social unrest is a regular topic in the local newspaper "The Sun". Yesterday's paper had headlined with, "For God's Sake", a story about a local Christian church vandalised by pro Islamic graffiti. The Christians had been vocal in their recent opposition to a proposal to build the Gold Coast's first Islamic school in their neighbourhood. Such conflict has a long history in Australia whose past is blotted by racial policies (such as the White Australia policy of the early 1900's) and violence against indigenous and immigrant populations. The current friction on the Gold Coast reflects similar racial unrest elsewhere (the 2005 Cronulla riots and the simmering disquiet in the western suburbs of Sydney) but it is a little shocking to see it evident in the tranquil locality of Labrador.

Queenslanders are not overly shy people; maybe living cheek by jowl with some of the deadliest reptiles on the planet requires some personality. They can be very forthright, "...if we've got something to say, we'll say it" the resort porter had told me with a grin. Apparently so, as with no qualms an elderly woman on one of my bus trips jabbed a teenage boy, standing by her and speaking to his friend

animatedly in Arabic, sharply in the hip with a bony finger. “Oi! I thought you were supposed to speak English now that you’re in Australia”, she berated him loudly. To his credit the boy smiled at her and softly replied, “Oh, my friend has only been here for a few weeks, so...”, and he shrugged his shoulders and tilted his head to one side as if saying both *what can you do*, and *I’m sure you understand* in the most good natured way.

My porter pal Brian, a proud third generation Gold Coaster, confided that many Queenslanders aren’t happy with the recent Middle Eastern influx; “...especially the older ones I think...they’ve got issues with them. It’s like an insult to the Australian way of life. They come here and don’t try to fit in; try and keep doing things they way they did back where they came from. The other week I had a scheduled pick-up from a room, and when I got there the guy opened the door, saw me and then shut it right in my face. Couldn’t believe it...stood there stunned, two minutes later it opened again, and then I saw his missus behind him all covered up n’ that. Reckon she must have been without all the gear when I first knocked. Unreal eh? And they go out like that too....28 degrees that day”. “Mate”...he chuckles as we walk down a brightly carpeted passageway, “that’s bikini weather isn’t it?!”

The weather is one thing; the climate is another. And there is rain on my romantic parade even as the sun warms my back and turns the lagoon into a sheet of beaten silver. Runners pad past, their shoes crunch softly on the biscuit coloured sand strewn across the path. The small fit swimmer is dry now, but makes no further move to cover up. He sits Buddha-like on the edge of a low stone wall, his feet buried in warm sand, gnarly hands on shiny round knees, face lifted up toward the sky. As the warm sea embraces the Labrador coastline; onshore a cool undercurrent of social prejudice pervades.

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