

The Bureau of Lost Distances

The Bureau of Lost Distances operated out of the old rates office between the Murray Cod Information Centre and the public toilets, so people approached it with the same hope and caution they brought to fish facts and council plumbing.

There was no sign at first. Just a laminated A4 sheet Blu-Tacked to the window.

BUREAU OF LOST DISTANCES

OPEN MONDAY–THURSDAY

CLOSED FRIDAYS DUE TO RECALIBRATION

PLEASE TAKE A NUMBER UNLESS YOU HAVE LOST THE ABILITY TO COUNT

By the time I moved back, the Bureau had become part of town infrastructure, like the library, the weir, and the bakery that had been “under new management” since 1998.

I had been away for eighteen years. Brisbane, mostly. A few months in Melbourne when I believed owning a black coat made me mysterious. I came back with two suitcases, a persistent cough, and the feeling that my childhood had continued without me.

Mum had gone into care the previous March, which she called “the facility,” in the same tone she used for “the dentist” and “your father’s people.” Dad had been dead six years. The house had been sold to a couple from Canberra. I told everyone I was back to help Mum.

This was not entirely untrue.

The first person to mention the Bureau was Bev from the pharmacy, who had known me since I shoplifted a packet of eucalyptus lollies at nine and then returned them crying because guilt had made them taste medicinal.

“You should go,” she said, sliding my antihistamines across the counter.

“To the Bureau?”

“You look like someone who’s misplaced something.”

“I’ve just driven from Brisbane.”

“That’s your issue.”

The Bureau waiting room had twelve plastic chairs, a water cooler, and framed photographs of local bridges. A ticket machine stood beside the door. The carpet had the permanently damp look of council carpet, although it was dry.

I took C34.

The woman beside me held C33 and a zip lock bag of buttons.

“First time?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Don’t say closure at the counter.”

“Why?”

“They charge extra.”

A teenage boy across from us stared at his phone. His T-shirt read: *EMOTIONAL SUPPORT HUMAN*. His mother kept patting his knee every thirty seconds, as if checking whether he was still occurring.

The receptionist sat behind a counter made of pale laminate. She was maybe sixty. Maybe older. Maybe she had reached the age where people stopped guessing and began calling her “love”.

Her name badge said *MAVIS*. Beneath it, in smaller letters: *TEMPORARY*.

The button woman went up first.

“Reason for visit?” Mavis asked.

“I’d like the distance back between the person I was before Harold died and the person who keeps putting the egg flipper in the fridge.”

Mavis nodded, as if this was well within ordinary council operations.

“Form yellow.”

“I filled in mauve.”

“Mauve is for anticipatory distance.”

“He was sick for nine years.”

“Yellow with mauve attachment.”

The woman sighed and accepted a clipboard.

Next was the teenage boy. His mother spoke for him. “He says he’s fine.”

Mavis looked over her glasses. “And?”

“And I don’t think he is.”

The boy’s thumb froze on his phone.

Mavis opened a drawer of forms in colours I had never seen in nature. “Distance between ‘I’m fine’ and ‘please don’t leave me alone’?”

The mother’s face loosened so suddenly I looked away.

“Pale green,” Mavis said. “Two copies. Applicant must sign both, even if applicant is being a little shit.”

The boy laughed. His mother took the forms.

Then C34 appeared on the screen.

The counter smelled faintly of dust, toner and eucalyptus wipes. There was a brass bell, a mug that said *WORLD’S OKAYEST NAN*, and a dish of Minties with a handwritten sign: *ONE PER CUSTOMER*.

“Name?” Mavis asked.

I gave it.

“Date of birth?”

I gave that too.

“Address?”

I hesitated. In Brisbane I had an apartment where the neighbours smoked on the stairwell and someone’s dog barked every morning at six. In town I was sleeping in Mum’s spare room at the facility, which was not allowed, so technically I had no address, only a suitcase and an ability to look apologetic near nurses.

“No fixed distance,” I said.

Mavis paused her pen. “Cute. Don’t.”

“Sorry.”

She ticked something. “Reason for visit?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Uncertainty is blue.” She handed me a form.

APPLICATION FOR RECOVERY OF LOST DISTANCE

FORM B: UNCERTAIN, MIXED OR POORLY LABELLED

Question 1: When did you first notice the distance was missing?

I wrote: *Upon returning.*

Question 2: Was the distance lost gradually, suddenly, or during a conversation about bins?

I wrote: *Gradually, then all at once, possibly bin-related.*

Question 3: Please describe the distance in plain language.

I looked around the room. An old man was measuring the space between his wedding ring and his hand with a piece of string. A girl in school uniform was crying without making any noise. A woman in hi-vis was arguing that “roadwork delays” should be tax deductible. Behind the counter, Mavis stapled something.

I wrote: *The distance between here and home.* Then I crossed out home. I wrote: *The distance between Brisbane and Albury.* Then I crossed that out too. I wrote: *The distance between childhood and now.* Underneath, I wrote: *The distance between my father and me.*

Mavis read the form without moving her lips. “Dead?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Six years.”

“Actual death or conversational death?”

“Actual.”

“Was there a period of conversational death prior to actual death?”

I laughed, because it was that or answer.

Mavis slid another form across the counter. “Grey attachment.”

The grey attachment was titled *PARENTAL DISTANCES: FATHERS, FATHER-FIGURES, MEN WHO STOOD NEAR BARBECUES IN SILENCE.*

“Is this mandatory?” I asked.

“Nothing’s mandatory,” Mavis said. “Except rates.”

I took the form back.

Dad had not been a cruel man. This was the difficulty. Cruel men gave you something solid to push against. Dad worked at the feed store, knew the price of everything that came in bags, and could identify rain from smell. He fixed things with wire, quoted footy scores as if they were scripture, and believed feelings were a private species that died when exposed to air.

When I was twelve, I won a regional writing prize for a story about a robot who wanted to become a postman. Dad drove me to the ceremony in a clean shirt. After they gave me the certificate, he bought me a sausage roll and said, “Don’t get a big head.”

Question 7: Did the father indicate affection through any of the following? Tick all that apply.

☐ *Verbal affirmation*

☐ *Physical affection*

☐ *Financial support*

☐ *Acts of service*

☐ *The silent placing of cut fruit*

☐ *Checking tyre pressure*

☐ *Appearing in doorways then leaving*

☐ *Other*

I ticked tyre pressure. I ticked doorways. After a while, I ticked cut fruit, though in Dad’s case it had mostly been oranges hacked into quarters with a pocketknife.

Question 9: What did you want him to say?

I could hear the water cooler gulping to itself. The old man with the string coughed. The teenage boy’s mother whispered something.

I wrote: *I’m proud of you.*

Then, because the form had made me bitter, I added: *Or something with roughly equivalent nutritional value.*

When I returned to the counter, Mavis was eating a Mintie.

“The sign says one per customer,” I said.

“I work here.”

She stamped the blue form, the grey attachment, and a small pink slip for reasons known only to administration. “Processing takes ten working days,” she said.

“I’m only here for two weeks.”

“Then you’d better hope your request comes in under budget.”

Outside, the Murray moved with an old animal patience. I walked along the bank past gums with shedding bark and teenage carvings. The town looked smaller than I remembered, but less interested in proving itself.

At the facility, Mum was sitting by the window watching galahs vandalise the lawn.

“You’re late,” she said.

“I didn’t say I was coming.”

“That’s how late you are.”

She had become very small. Her hair, once a helmet of dark curls, had gone white and thin.

Beside her sat tea, a crossword, and plastic flowers no one had to water.

“I went to the Bureau,” I said.

Mum snorted. “Your father would have hated that.”

“Dad hated self-serve checkouts.”

“Your father hated everything.”

Through the window, one galah chased another in furious circles.

“Did he ever talk about me?” I asked.

Mum picked up her tea. Her hand trembled, but only a little. “Who?”

“Dad.”

“Of course.”

“What did he say?”

She looked at me as though I had asked what shoes the moon wore. “He’d say, ‘He’s doing all right.’”

“That’s it?”

“That was Shakespeare for your father.”

I laughed, but the laugh had a limp.

Mum turned back to the window. “He kept your newspaper clippings in the biscuit tin.”

“What clippings?”

“All of them. Little things. Stories. Mentions. That photo of you looking constipated in a blazer.”

“He never said.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Mum watched the galahs. “Some men grow up in houses where praise is considered a gateway drug.”

On the tenth working day, the Bureau rang at 8:04am.

“Your distance is ready for collection,” Mavis said.

I sat up too fast and hit my head on the underside of Mum’s spare-room shelf.

“Do I need to bring anything?”

“Photo ID. Your receipt. Comfortable shoes.”

“Why shoes?”

“People underestimate distances.”

When I arrived, the waiting room was full. The teenage boy was there again, alone this time, filling in a form with enormous concentration.

Mavis called me to the counter. “You’ve been approved for partial recovery.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the Bureau cannot return the full distance between you and your father.”

“Why not?”

“Some of it was never lost,” she said. “Some of it was built.”

I looked at her.

From beneath the counter she produced a small brown envelope. My name was typed on the front. The flap was sealed with a sticker showing two blue lines for the river and a gum leaf. Inside was a small clear vial, no bigger than a matchstick. It contained nothing I could see.

“What is it?”

“Three seconds.”

“Three seconds of what?”

“The exact amount of time your father hesitated before saying what he meant.”

“When?”

“August. Six years ago. Feed store car park. You had just told him you might not come back for Christmas.”

I remembered the day, though not as a day. As heat. As flies. As Dad’s hand on the open door of my car. He had been thinner by then but pretending not to be. I had said Brisbane was busy. Work was busy. Flights were expensive.

“Righto,” he’d said.

That was what I remembered. *Righto*.

Mavis placed the vial in my palm. “You can spend it once.”

“Will he say it?”

Mavis’s face did not change, but something in it stepped back. “The Bureau recovers distance,” she said. “It does not manufacture courage.”

I closed my fingers around the vial. “What do people usually do with these?”

“Waste them immediately. Save them forever. Blame us for both.”

“And you?”

“I’m temporary.” She called the next number.

I carried the three seconds around for two days.

I took them to Mum, but she was asleep with one hand resting on the crossword. Seven down was *River creature, three letters*, and she had written *DAD*. I sat beside her until a nurse came in.

I took them to the old house. The Canberra couple had installed a brass number and a native garden. Through the front window I saw a child run across what had been our lounge room wearing fairy wings and one gumboot.

I wanted to hate them. Instead, I hoped they were happy.

I took the three seconds to the Murray. There is a particular cruelty in returning to a place that remembers you. The streets know the shape of your bike tyres but not your adult shoes. Even the river, which had seemed to me at seventeen like an escape route, turned out to be going where gravity told it.

I sat on a bench near the bridge and held the vial up to the light.

Three seconds.

Enough time for a man to clear his throat.

Enough time for a son to wait.

I could spend it and hear whatever had nearly happened in that car park. Perhaps Dad had almost said, *I'm proud of you*. Perhaps he had almost said, *Don't leave it too long*. Perhaps he had almost said, *Your rear tyre's low*.

I uncorked the vial. Nothing happened. Then the world took one small step backwards.

Heat lifted from gravel. Flies stitched the air. My car door was open. Dad stood beside it in his feed store shirt, one hand on the frame, looking at the place just below my shoulder.

"I might not make Christmas," I heard myself say. "Work's mental."

Dad nodded. His thumb tapped once against the door. His mouth opened.

The three seconds held us there.

In them, I saw the effort move through him like rainclouds crossing a paddock. Saw the words hit whatever old fence had been built inside him. Saw him reach, not far enough, but reach.

His eyes flicked to mine. Then the three seconds ended.

"Righto," he said.

The Murray returned. The bench returned. A pelican watched from the shallows.

I did not cry. This annoyed me.

I walked back to the Bureau because I wanted a refund, or a fight, or one of the Minties.

Mavis was alone at the counter, sorting forms into piles. Yellow, blue, green, grey. A fan clicked in the corner.

"You spent it," she said.

"Yes."

"And?"

"He said righto."

Mavis nodded.

"I already had righto."

"Did you?"

I hated her a little for being good at her job.

I sat in the chair opposite the counter. The room was empty.

"Do you ever apply?" I asked.

Mavis kept sorting. "For distance?"

"You must lose things."

"Everyone loses things."

"That's not an answer."

"No," she said. "It's a sentence wearing an answer's coat."

I noticed then how tired she looked. Not ordinary tired. Not end-of-day tired. The deeper kind. Tired from witnessing. Tired from handing people envelopes and watching them discover they still had to live.

On her desk, beside the Minties, was a stack of unprocessed forms bound with an elastic band. The top one was blank except for a name.

MAVIS ELAINE PORTER.

Reason for visit had been left empty.

"You should submit that," I said.

She looked at the form as if surprised to find herself there. "Conflict of interest."

"You're temporary."

A smile moved across her face, small and disobedient.

"What would you apply for?" I asked.

Mavis aligned the corners of the forms. "The distance between being needed and being known."

I reached into my pocket. The vial was empty now. The envelope was still there.

I placed it on the counter. "I don't think I can use this."

"No," Mavis said. "You used it."

"I mean the rest."

"There is no rest."

"There's always rest. That's the horrible thing."

She looked at the envelope for a long time. Then she opened it.

I cannot explain what passed from it. Not light. Not sound. Something smaller. A permission, maybe. A gap in which no one asked for anything.

Mavis closed her eyes.

For three seconds, she did not answer the phone. She did not stamp a form. She did not sort grief by colour or advise anyone on whether yearning required evidence. She sat perfectly still behind the counter of the Bureau of Lost Distances, and no one in the world needed her to be useful.

When she opened her eyes, they were wet. “Against policy,” she said.

“I won’t tell council.”

“They know everything except what matters.”

She took a Mintie from the dish and handed it to me. “One per customer,” she said.

I unwrapped it. The wrapper tore badly. Dad would have taken out his pocketknife. Mum would have told him not to make a production of it. I would have rolled my eyes, already leaving, already gone.

The Mintie stuck to my teeth.

At the door, I turned back.

Mavis had taken her own form from the pile. She was writing slowly, carefully, as if the words might frighten if approached too quickly.

Albury went on being itself. The bakery sold vanilla slices. The public toilets remained a gamble. The Murray moved under the bridge, carrying leaves and light.

I walked towards Mum’s facility, past the old house, past the feed store, past the places that had become ordinary in my absence.

The distance between my father and me had not closed. Not exactly. But it had changed shape.

It no longer looked like a road leading away from him.

It looked, if I held it gently and did not ask too much, like a man standing beside a car on a hot day, reaching the limit of what he had been given, and trying anyway.