

Strange Doin's – Draft 1

“What the hell is that thing?” My best friend of twenty years, Judy Scallon startles me as I sit at my kitchen table reminiscing.

“It’s a pom pom,” I tell her. She stares at me in disbelief. “Well,” I concede, “I suppose it does look like something the cat dragged in.”

“More like something the cat threw,” she says uncharitably. She stands a moment, then realizing that I’m too rapt in a mangy ball to make her a coffee, fills the kettle and sets it to boil.

“It arrived last week,” I tell her, “in this box.” I show her the weather-beaten package. It bears US stamps from a decade earlier. It seems that there are address labels squeezed over every remaining inch – clearly the pom pom has trailed my nomadic life and finally found me.

Judy hands me a coffee and sits at the table. “It’s from your exchange year in the US, right?” I nod. “Okay, now I’m intrigued. How does a mangy pom pom find you after ten years?”

That is a very good question and the only answer that springs to mind is: “Strange doin’s”. I want to explain to Judy, though I’m not sure there’s anything very sensible to say. When I was sixteen I won a scholarship to experience an American high school for a year. It was the first journey away from my little home town of Hervey Bay, a seaside holiday spot on the Queensland coast in Australia; a thirteen hour plane ride from Kennedy High School, Sacramento, California which was to be my destination. My host family, Ashton’s had a daughter, Melody who was my age. But it was Melody’s father Joe who made a lasting impression. And now, in particular his words have come back to guide me. Joe was largely a conspiracy theorist. He had detailed, if not entirely plausible theories about everything from the moon landing and what actually happened on that Grassy Knoll in 1963 to the Super Bowl and John Lennon. Whenever we’d say the most innocent of things, he’d shake his head and say, “Strange doin’s. Strange, strange doin’s.”

The arrival of this pom pom is indeed the strangest of doin’s. I was all set to accept a job interstate when it arrived, obviously tired and distressed from its ten year journey. Joe made this pom pom for me. Melody and I were knitting beanies and his contribution to our fireside chats was to make pom poms for our projects. I thought I’d lost it in the snow – clearly I’d lost it somewhere. When we’d left the house, the pom pom was clearly attached to my beanie. Yet when Melody and I returned from throwing snowballs and making snow angels, it was gone. Now it was here. And I felt its arrival brought with it more than a message of friendship.

Travelling to American as a naïve teenagers had opened my eyes to the possibilities. I wanted to travel. I wanted to see the world. Now, at twenty-six I was still a nomad. Every year, it seemed brought me to a new town. I thought I’d meet my soulmate as I skipped around; yet he hadn’t appeared. In fact, stable relationships were fraught with a commitment that meant staying in one place – something I seemed incapable of doing.

I had been offered a job in Perth, a six hour flight from my now home town of Melbourne. I was all set to accept, when the pom pom arrived and reminded me of Joe's words: "The squirrel who flits from tree to tree, forgets where he's stored his nuts."

"Wow! That sounds like authentic native American wisdom," says Judy.

I smile. "Irish Catholic, actually – probably with a bit too much altar wine."

"And so this means, you're not taking the job in Perth?" she asks. "of squirrels losing their nuts?"

"Don't you see? It's all linked. It must be."

"Must it?"

"Yes," I say firmly. "It's one of Joe's Strange doin's. He used to say everything happens for a reason. Why else would this pom pom arrive right now, when I'm deciding another move?"

"Because a postman ten years ago got a flat bicycle tire and didn't deliver it?"

I frown at her. "Seriously Judy." She looks at me blankly. "Okay don't believe, me.

But the end result is, I'm not taking the job. I'm staying here. End of story."

"Well, you'll have no complaints from me there. I'm more than happy to have my best friend around."

"Still," I muse, "I'd like to know why I'm meant to stay."

"Maybe you never will," she says.

We're both startled by a knock at the front door.

"Expecting someone?" Judy asks.

"No" I say, moving to open it.

There standing on my doorstep must surely be the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. He holds out a cup and says apologetically, "I'm sorry, this is going to sound so corny, but I've just moved in next door and, well, I could really use some sugar. Could you spare a cup?"

My heart skips a beat as our eyes connect and my soul greets its mate.

"Sure," I say. "Come on in. I'm not going anywhere."