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*You might ask why I or anyone else kept going. You keep going because you have to, and because if you stop, you stop nowhere, but if you keep going you might get somewhere.*

Private Barney Findlay, Kokoda digger<sup>1</sup>

To walk the Kokoda Track is to undertake two journeys. The first starts at Owers' Corner and undulates through 96 kilometres of primary jungle over the Owen Stanley Range until you reach the village of Kokoda on the other side. This journey is ordinarily taken in the company of others and with a backpack, which you may hire a porter to carry for you if you wish. The second journey began the moment you were born. It brings to the track baggage of a different kind. This you must carry yourself, and the journey you must make alone.

I decided to walk the Kokoda Track at a time in my life when I was entirely lost. No one in their right mind would go looking for direction or answers in a jungle, but I was not in a right mind. I was listless and bored and

numb to life, being in the throes of an especially bleak patch in a major depression.

Perhaps I knew instinctively, what I now know through trial and error in trying to beat this thing, that inertia is the constant enemy of the depressive, and that if you are to have any hope of alleviating this pointless mental illness then the first thing you must do is *move*. Meds and therapy will help, but you can't optimise them unless you move. If you want even a temporary respite from this horrible, hopeless existence, you must move. When your every thought is conspiring against you, when your will has been depleted so that you do not want to go on, you must, somehow, go on. And to go on means to move. It is not a matter of desire but of necessity. To stop is to die a little more, to let the boulder we put our shoulder to each day roll back down the hill and crush us. To move is to survive. There is no way around it. If you want to live, you must *move*.

Moving served another purpose: it provided an excuse to escape. From what exactly, I'm not sure. From Brisbane, certainly. I'd had enough of its choking provincialism. But I was fleeing from things other than my hometown. From life, perhaps. Perhaps even from myself. I was not hoping to "find myself". Rather, I was hoping to lose myself. I was 33, had recently emerged from an eight-year relationship which I'd singlehandedly destroyed through infidelity and indecision (I was engaged and in love, just not with the same person), and had tossed in a cushy, well-paid job as an in-house

lawyer in a fit of pique. It is said that we hold down jobs, but in truth that job held me down. It anchored me and once I'd unmoored myself, I was hopelessly adrift and seized with the impossible feeling that my life was not going to plan despite the fact I had no plan.

Then there was my head. Psychiatrists have examined it for over twenty years like a car mechanic assessing a faulty engine. Each psychiatrist (I've had five) has offered a fresh diagnosis or a variation on a theme: unipolar depression, bipolar disorder, soft bipolar, rapid-cycling bipolar, major depressive disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and borderline personality disorder. It all reduces to the same thing: I am not right up top. I say this with no shame or pride, though there was a time when, oddly, I revelled in the diagnosis of a mental illness. It is upon this unstable platform that all one's troubles, self-inflicted or otherwise, are delicately balanced. This was the baggage I brought with me to Kokoda.

I walked the track twenty years ago, in 2002. My first attempt to write a book about it shortly thereafter was a complete disaster. It was factually accurate but emotionally dishonest, and the writing was abysmal. I was trying to be the kind of writer I am not. The universal rejection of this cringeworthy effort by the Australian publishing industry was a mercy killing, though it didn't feel like it at the time. Looking back now, I didn't have the maturity or perspective to appreciate the experience. Kokoda was something I had to shelve and allow to gather dust before

taking it down again and appreciating it afresh.

Kokoda was a fortunate impulse. I don't know how the idea of "doing Kokoda" got into my head. Like Gallipoli, Kokoda is so ingrained into our national consciousness that most Australians know *of* it if not *about* it. But once the idea caught on, I simply couldn't budge it. It became a fixation. Something I wanted to do became something I *had* to do. Some ideas are well planned but never executed. Others are executed without any plans at all. Kokoda was one of those. Back then I was in one of two states: paralysed by indecision or impulsive in making decisions. Fortunately, Kokoda was the latter to which I didn't give much thought. I knew the Kokoda Track was in Papua New Guinea, but to me it was just the name of a place with the exotic allure of being somewhere in a jungle. I booked my trip with little appreciation of what I was getting myself in to. I did not know where this pilgrimage would take me, as I did not yet realise I was even on a pilgrimage. That path was yet to be illuminated for me.

I found a trek operator online. There were only a handful in 2002. These days, around 5,000 Australians walk the track each year, but in 2002 it was less than 400. He was ex-army and ex-police, and his photo showed him beribboned with the customary fruit salad of military and police honours. The paintbrush moustache offered extra reassurance that he was a safe pair of hands. On the track, some of us nicknamed him "The Captain", though we never had the nerve to call him that to his face. He'd

been taking people over the track since the mid '80s and had walked it over 50 times. The cost was cheap: less than 2,000 dollars for a ten-day hike. Some trek operators take longer, some shorter; the Captain seemed nicely positioned in the middle. The \$2,000 included a porter, a Papuan who would carry my backpack over the track for me. I'd be hiking with a group of around fifteen, the Captain said.

The waiver he asked me to sign confirmed this would be no pleasure trip. He also needed a letter from my doctor certifying my fitness to walk the track. I wasn't overly perturbed. I was in modest shape, no athlete but no couch potato either. I am six feet and was then about 90 kilograms. I had cottoned on early to the benefits of daily exercise to improve my mental state and was running ten kilometres a day. The track was less than 100 kilometres; ten days at ten kilometres a day. How hard could it be?

The Captain looked like he was in his early fifties and slightly potbellied. If he had walked the track 50 times, I figured I could manage it once. Besides, we'd have good walking conditions, he said. We would walk the track in September at the end of the dry season before it closed to trekkers until the following April. During the wet season there are parts of the track even the sure-footed Papuans find challenging.

I knew only the basics of the Kokoda campaign. We had fought – and beaten – the Japanese there during World War II. Today, they are our friends and allies,

“the Japanese”. But to a generation of Australians, like my grandparents who lived through the war, they would always be “the Japs” or “the Nips”. I was otherwise sketchy on the details.

Walking Kokoda was to change all that. The track is a path to knowledge above all else. I knew some things though. I’d heard of the legendary Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, the Papuans who endeared themselves to generations of Australians by carrying our injured diggers over the track during the campaign.

I did not come to Kokoda as an unworldly novice but as someone who was reasonably well travelled. I’d been travelling since my early twenties and had visited around 30 countries, mostly in Europe and Asia, and a smattering of the Middle East, but no more than the average Australian satisfying our national wanderlust. But these were urban adventures not jungle ones, and I had never ventured far from the comfortable, safe surrounds of a city.

I had been to Gallipoli too. Any Australian who has been there will tell you the birthplace of the Anzac legend is a soul-stirring place, but I can’t say I gave it the attention it deserves. I was recovering from a bout of “Sultan’s Revenge”, which I’d acquired in Istanbul a few nights earlier, and was nursing a tender stomach and feeling ginger. I was only at Anzac Cove for a matter of hours. The track would offer something entirely different: a ten-day immersion course in the Kokoda campaign.

Our party would pick up the track at its starting point

of Owers' Corner outside Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, on the south coast. We would walk over the range from south to north and emerge at the village of Kokoda, from which the track takes its name. Most trek operators go north to south, which follows the progress of our diggers' retreat as they fought a rear-guard action against the advancing Japanese. The Captain preferred to follow the advance of our troops, south to north from Owers' Corner, not far from where they commenced their counterassault and pushed the Japanese back along the track.

Accommodation would be mostly "jungle camp", he said. But we'd get to stay in a few Papuan villages along the way. The Captain left me in no doubt that once we entered the jungle we would be effectively cut off from the outside world. There would be no mobile reception, no telephones, no internet, no communication of any kind except for shortwave radio, which is only used in emergencies. There would be no television, no radio, no newspapers, no news at all. The world could have gone to hell, but we'd be among the last people on the planet to know it. None of this bothered me. I *welcomed* it. In this digital age of constant connectivity there was something wholly liberating about being disconnected that appealed to me.

Kokoda would do me the world of good, I told myself, with the added benefit that I might emerge from the jungle a few kilos lighter. Above all, it would get me out of my funk. I needed shock therapy, a jolt to the system,

a reset of the hard drive. The challenge of Kokoda would provide this, I thought.

I would also be spared the traveller's usual lot. I wouldn't have to worry about accommodation, rewiring technology, waiting in queues, sweating over maps, or concern myself with bus or train timetables or even money. In short, I wouldn't have to think. For the depressive, who spends too much time in their own head, this promised a welcomed relief: a holiday from oneself.