

# The Bush

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The car bumped across rocks and ditches, rivulets in the red dirt road, trees on all sides, the tiny track stretching up the mountain. Scraggly, thorny branches of lantana and feathered wattle leaves slapped against the windows, every time eliciting a response from the 15-year-old, pink-haired girl inside, who at that moment was looking in anguish at the status bar of her mobile phone.

"What do you mean, no Wi-Fi?" She shook her phone frantically. "Do we have to do this?" she whined.

"Come on, it's going to be great! We've been through this before," her mother said with exasperation.

Kaitlin's sister Melanie, who was seven years younger than her and a cheeky, freckled brunette, was practically bouncing in her seat with excitement.

A few weeks before, they had been chatting over dinner in their tiny twenty-sixth floor apartment as cars and planes bustled about in the sparkling network of coloured lights below. Their father James, a brown-haired stereotypical Aussie, began talking.

"So, we might be going away for a bit."

"Where?" Eight-year-old Melanie responded, with interest.

"Well, your mother has a university friend, I think..."

Melanie's mother Annette confirmed this.

"Anyway, she has offered to let us stay in her guest house! It is like, literally surrounded by bush, so we could go on bushwalks and stuff. How does that sound, hey?"

Kaitlin's response was not exactly what could be called "enthusiastic".

Melanie was ecstatic. "The bush! With spiders! And snakes!" She enjoyed watching Kaitlin twitch and grimace.

Eventually, they arrived. The mountains stretched away into the distance, forests of giant trees slowly merging on the hills that became tiny grey-blue humps on the horizon. The house stood, elegant in the russets and greys of corrugated iron, the twirling vines climbing up onto the veranda and past blue plastic water tanks. Trees stood on all sides, with paths snaking down into the forest.

They unloaded their supplies with the help of the person who owned the guest house. She seemed friendly enough; their mother greeted her old friend extravagantly, exchanging hellos, laughing and hugging. They went to have dinner with her and her son, Tarquin, an adventurous nine-year-old with mousey-brown hair and a cheeky grin.

They woke up the next morning in a cabin made from a shipping container that sat on a small hill and had breakfast - toasted white bread, bacon and fried eggs. Kaitlin discovered that there was reception at the top of the hill, and spent a while texting her friends and looking at pictures of shoes. Melanie almost immediately ran off to explore the surroundings, giggling, with Tarquin, who had become friends with her over dinner. They found a scorpion under a log at one point, which Tarquin picked up and admired and Melanie politely refused to hold.

A while later, Kaitlin, Melanie, Tarquin, Anette, James and Tarquin's mum, Beck, got in their respective vehicles and drove off, one after the other, back down the road that they had come up, through gates, past bracken, past cows. They drove for some time along the grey and dusty road to their destination, eventually bumping down a grassy hill with ferns and cowpats dotted about the slope. There were a few cars parked at the bottom near a gate, all of them dusty and somewhat battered by the bush. Just past the gate was an almost idyllic waterhole, with lichen-covered rocks tumbling down and jutting out into the water from the forest above. The water was clear and inviting, with tiny schools of fish darting about and river-smoothed rocks on the bottom. About half a dozen kids were there, splashing about and jumping off rocks, paddling around in canoes and exploring up the banks.

There was a massive splash as their dad entered the water suddenly. "Woo! Yes! Come on in, guys!" he called from the creek. Kaitlin was hesitant. She dipped a toe in the water, swirling it around for a few seconds. The water was cool, refreshing, but she held back.

Melanie came around from behind and pushed her in.

Kaitlin shrieked loudly, and swam towards her little sister, eager to get her back.

"Come look!" someone called out. All the kids rushed in to get a closer look; the eel, frightened, slithered through the forest of legs, and brushed up against Kaitlin.

She screamed, once again, and quickly departed the swimming hole to sit on the banks and watch the others launching themselves from the rocks.

The next day, they decided to walk along a forest track, deep into the bush. Kaitlin stayed back, not very keen on the hike.

After a while, she began to get nervous.

She walked off into the bush, in a vain attempt to find her family.

It didn't work, and she was lost.

She began to panic, looking around, wondering, silently screaming.

She looked, and could see patches of blue between the trees, and began to head for the light.

She sat down and took a breath, watching, and saw birds in the branches all around her, and vines that twirled elegantly up saplings.

She began to appreciate the bush, and stayed, watching things moving and looking at the trees, then headed back.

***By Morrow Taplin***

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