

James' Journey

Have you ever felt like the entire world has dropped from under your feet? Have you ever felt like someone placed twenty stones in your stomach? Because that's what it was like when I was fired. "I'm sorry, James Walker, but there are plenty more *experienced* people out there in the shoemaking industry. Especially ones older than fifteen. Now get out." Those were his ever-so-kind words of parting. But what was I meant to do? Let my family starve to death? I couldn't let Daniel - my 8 year old brother - starve. We were barely making ends meet as it was with my meagre minimum wage salary. But with nothing.... How were we meant to survive?

I pondered these questions as I slumped home through the freezing winter rain. It soaked through my thin grey hoodie in seconds, and I was left shivering. I couldn't believe it was only the *start* of winter! I had just turned my head down to the ground so I wouldn't be blinded by the downpour, and that's when my eyes caught on a fluttering black-and-white piece of paper trying to escape a puddle. I freed it from the water and had a look. '*Come to Australia! More jobs, higher paying salaries, and wonderful beaches! Now for only £10!*', read the flyer. It was still quite expensive, but this was an opportunity not to be missed.

My mother took weeks to convince (with a lot of begging), but we signed up for the "Ten Pound Pom" scheme, nevertheless. The house had to be sold because we'd get extra money, and what else were we going to do with it? We packed our bags and boarded the SS Himalaya on the brisk 23rd of March. The person at the front desk gave us a room number and we had to find it ourselves. The room numbered, '165' was small, but was perfectly tidy from the two bunkbeds to the pristine white walls and beige-coloured carpet. There was a small window at the back of the room we could peek out of, so we watched the waves SS Himalaya's hull made as she swayed gently away from Tilbury Port.

When we eventually arrived here in Sydney, Australia, we were surprised by multiple things. The first one was how much warmer the weather was. There were almost always clear blue skies dotted with fluffy white clouds, and the air was warm and balmy on our skin. Sometimes it was a bit much though, leaning more towards the density of a thick soup rather than breathable oxygen. It must be because the weather is flipped. While my cousins and grandparents were freezing in England, I was roasting here down under. Even during the summers England could barely reach above twenty degrees Celsius, whereas Australia seemed bent on burning every living being to ash.

The last and most disappointing thing we were surprised by was that the flyer was only half telling the truth. It did cost £10 each for my mother and I, but it was free for my younger brother. The beaches were and still are lovely... but no matter how hard we searched, there were no available jobs. We were living in the cluttered shed of a kind lady named Alice, whose husband was on a business trip. I constantly felt like the willy-nilly stacks of random objects were going to collapse and suffocate all three of us, but at the same time I was tremendously grateful for the shelter. It was better than being down in the slums, after all.

On one fateful Wednesday, I decided to go back into the city to continue searching for a job. The sun had only just scraped the horizon with its glowing orange fingers when I left out the garage door as quietly as possible. I didn't want to wake either Daniel or my mother, who were both going to help Alice with her garden later. As I walked down the street, I tried to figure out whose business door I would go to first. Where would I start? The local grocer? A petrol station? The plumber?

I ended up knocking on all their doors, along with a plethora of others, but everyone once again turned me down with disapproving eyes. I briefly considered moving to Birchgrove where I could mine coal for a living. I had seen a poster advertising coal mining the day before, but I no longer had a clue where it was, and I was already lost in this endless tangle of alleyways, busy roads, and concrete buildings.

Walking this way and that, trying to find a familiar sign or a recognizable street bend, I only wound up back home by the time the sun had almost set. As soon as I opened the garage door, my mother brought me into an embrace and asked, "Any luck?"

I just shook my head with defeat and sat down on a dusty cushioned sofa, covering my face with my hands. "Alice said that she needs to evict us by Friday because her husband is coming back, and we've used almost all our money already. We can't even afford stale bread. Let alone a house.", I wailed, my voice full of despair, "What are we going to do?"

She clucked her tongue and patted my back. "I don't know, but we're going to survive no matter what. Go to bed, and I promise things will be better in the morning."

So, I did, and drifted off into a light, restless sleep.

Scrape. Scrape. I was awoken by a sound coming from the garage door. I continued listening, frozen.

Scrape. Scrape. The noise continued. Then, the doorknob jiggled. My breath caught in my throat. As quietly as I could, I inched over to my mother and whispered in her ear, "Someone's trying to get in." Her eyes flew open, darted around, and then her hand flew to cover her mouth. The scraping and rattling persisted. *They're trying to pick the lock*, I thought. **Scrape. Scrape.** Now my brother was awake as well. His scared eyes shone in the dim light. **Scrape.** The knob turned and the wooden door slowly creaked open. The silhouette of a man holding a knife stepped carefully into the shed, and his other gloved hand reached to touch an antique mirror near the door. A thief! He hadn't spotted us yet. I started to think that we would all be okay... but then Daniel made a noise somewhere in between a gasp and a sob, and the man's head whipped toward us.

There was nowhere to run. The back of the shed was solid concrete, and the man blocked the door. At first, he jumped back when he heard Daniel, but he was now shouting, "Stay where you are! Don't move if you want to live!"

I didn't doubt for a second he was going to use that knife. My heart thumped like an elephant in my ears. I could feel it all the way in my throbbing fingertips. I didn't want him to hurt my family. The idea of strangling him crossed my mind. Even if he stabbed me, I thought I might be able to suffocate him before I bled out. At least my family would be safe. Sad without me, but safe. There was no other option. Despite the enormous risk, I was determined on strangling him. In fact, I was about to get up when I was distracted by metal shining in the moonlight.

It was an axe used for chopping firewood that rested just to the wall to my right, within reaching distance. Without hesitation my bony fingers wrapped around it, and I jumped to my feet, screaming like a madman and waving it around. I could've thrown it at him. I could've killed him. I *wanted* to kill him. But I didn't get the chance to. He dropped his knife and bolted out the door, running down the street as fast as he could. My family was safe now.

Both Alice and her husband (once he got back) thanked us again and again for stopping the thief from stealing any of their precious antiques and family heirlooms. They thanked and thanked and thanked until it became almost comical. Apparently, everything in there was worth its weight in gold because they gave us enough money to start a business. Even then they said it wasn't enough to show their gratitude. It was quite a strange scenario to be in. Such bizarre luck I'm still dumbfounded how it came to be.

It all worked out in the end. We helped tidy Alice and her husband's shed and opened a small home run shoemaking business out of it, using the money they bestowed upon us. I had to show my mother the basics of leatherwork, but she latched on quite quickly and is now teaching Daniel. Using the money from the business, we bought a house that is much bigger than the one we had in England. We moved out of the shed after thanking the kind souls who helped us, along with promising to invite them over for dinner at least once a month. I wonder what my boss's face would look like if he saw how far I've come. I'm sure it would be a sight to behold.