

FIVE BUSH WEDDINGS

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Red & Janelle

Six twangy notes of guitar were all it took for every man in a one hundred metre radius to unbuckle his belt and drop his pants. Stevie-Jean Harrison sighed and clipped the lens cap back on her camera; she'd shot enough country weddings to expect this response to "Eagle Rock". While she loved collecting colour from the dancefloor, this sight was one that every Queenslander of a certain age already has burned into their memory. The in-laws wouldn't be interested in seeing it immortalised in the wedding album.

Now listen! Hmm we're steppin' out!

Under an endless, inky sky crumbed with stars, the groom's brother and his best friend swayed in their boxers with their arms around each other, bow ties unclipped and collars loosened. Their eyes were closed in ecstasy as they sang along with Daddy Cool, a cigarette dangling from one's lip.

At 31, Stevie had seen this scene play out at weddings and wakes, 18ths, 21sts and B&S balls since she was old enough (legally or not) to hold a stubby. But it still brought a smile to her face, the literal abandon of men young and old dancing a shuffling two-step, hobbled by the pants spilling over their boots.

Stevie recognised a cousin of the bride racing away. At the portaloos she stopped,

grasping her mother's shoulder, her face sunburned under a fascinator. Her eyes filled with tears as she inspected her feet in their strappy designer heels, now caked with red dirt like chocolate truffles. Not a local, then.

"I don't know what the hell is going on over there," she wailed, her fascinator pointing back at the dacked denizens of the dancefloor, "but I've gotta get out of here and there's no phone service, let alone Ubers!"

Stifling a laugh, Stevie swung her camera strap around her body and followed, maintaining eye contact strictly above the men's chests. She was glad she'd pinned up her frizzy hair; the sun had long set but the heat of Queensland in late January lingered.

There was barely a breath of breeze to stir the leaves of the eucalypts, or the strings of coloured light bulbs stretched above the hired dancefloor. The band were clambering back onto their stage, the back of a hessian-draped flatbed truck parked on the bride's parents' property. Floodlights beamed down over the Lions Club-run bar, where clusters of people were chatting and drinking. A few kids were still racing around, hiding from their parents' attempts to put them down to sleep. Beyond the halo of the lights was a darkness so thick you could almost touch it, alive with unseen creatures, swallowing fields and trees and channels and dams and tracks into one unfathomable expanse.

Stevie looked down at her trusty boots. She'd polished them before leaving Brisbane the previous afternoon; now they were covered in dust after a long day's work. Stevie had been on location from the first bridesmaid's blow-dry and ill-advised early rounds of prosecco. She'd slunk around the cottage while they were made up, captured the delivery of bouquets, the arrival of wedding cars, and nailed the father-of-the-bride's first look at his daughter that had everyone welling up. She'd captured the ceremony from "dearly beloved" to the last handful of confetti, and deployed her bawdiest jokes to keep the bridal party smiling through a series of set ups. Then it was back to the reception, with barely time to

snatch a canape before she had to work through dozens of configurations of family photos, then racing off into the paddock for kissy portraits of the newlyweds as the sun set.

As the guests filed in to the marquee and sank into hired chairs for a three-course meal, Stevie had no such respite. She shot the speeches, the cake-cutting, the first dance. Most other wedding photographers she knew ducked out after the first dance, but Stevie stayed to capture scenes from the raucous after-parties. It was something she'd started doing when she was learning the ropes. Often, she was shooting for friends and dancing around with her camera in one hand and a drink in the other; a tangled, glorious mess of business and pleasure. She'd caught some hilarious moments over the years, and now her clients expected it.

Having photographed more than a hundred weddings, Stevie barely had to think about her checklist of images any more. She was pretty sure she had it all, which was lucky given the flasks of Bundy rum now being passed around with increasing frequency. The “Eagle Rock” moment usually heralded a turning point of sorts, after which her camera lens was less welcome. But it would be good to do one last sweep for family friends and relatives.

She ducked under the marquee, where empty wine glasses littered the long tables dinner had been served on. The candles had burned down, wax pooling amid the gum leaves scattered on the tables, and Stevie clocked a quiet moment that made her lift her camera and inch silently closer like a nature documentarian spotting a big cat.

Red, the burly groom, was trying to feed his famished, tipsy bride a piece of wedding cake. It was a classic, old school fruitcake with too-thick fondant—a sign this family was ruled by a powerful matriarch with a love of tradition and an iron fist—and Janelle was not interested.

Stevie knew this was their first moment alone as a married couple, and she also knew that Janelle's untouched plates had been cleared while she'd been circulating the room

downing bubbly. She was perched on Red's lap, a generally capable and no-nonsense woman reduced to a giggling mass of tulle skirts.

As Red tenderly nudged a forkful of cake into Janelle's laughing teeth, Stevie snapped a frame that said more about their relationship than any of the shots they'd posed earlier.

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Satisfied, Stevie made two milky cups of tea, grabbed a piece of wedding cake, and pulled up a chair next to the bride's Aunt Mabel.

Mabel had proven herself an ally earlier in the day, when she deftly helped Stevie avoid a family faux pas while setting up the group portraits. But Stevie had recognised Mabel's role as the family fixer as soon as they arrived at the church.

Mabel was the sort of woman who carried an arsenal of floral hankies to hand out at the first sign of a sniffle. She'd headed off renegade relatives as they entered the church and guided them toward neutral pews with a kind but firm hand on the lower back. At the reception she had stocked the ladies' bathroom with baskets of tissues, deodorant, hairspray and perfume. She made sure the waitresses knew that Grandma needed a tender piece of meat, and to take their time topping up Uncle Tony's drink. She knew everybody's business and she would know all the last pictures Stevie needed to leave the bride and her family misty-eyed over the wedding album.

"Ooh, thanks for the tea, love," said Mabel. She was ensconced in a chair, a hefty woman stuffed into a taut jacquard skirt suit like an upholstered front-rower. From the set of her curls she was single-handedly keeping Elnett in business. "You've been working hard today! Have you been a photographer for long?"

"You know, I just realised this week it's been five years since the first wedding I shot," Stevie said, blowing on her tea. "I dipped a toe in with a few friends' weddings before

I started my business, just to make sure I could handle it.”

Mabel patted Stevie’s arm. “You seem like a natural. I don’t have much of an arty eye, but I can see the way you see people. You have a knack for spotting the little moments that mean a lot. And you’re one of us—you know the land, not like some city blow-in who’ll flinch at a bit of red dust on the wedding dress and cry over a dead kangaroo on the side of the road.”

Stevie laughed. “I guess it’s a job where being a hopeless romantic comes in handy.”

“Hopeless, hey,” echoed Mabel, her voice rising with intrigue. “Do you have a partner?”

“Mabel, you might think you know about drought in this district, but I haven’t had a proper boyfriend since 2013.”

"Well, I worry for the men of this country if you can't get a date with an arse like that."

Stevie wasn't sure she'd heard that right. "Don't get me wrong, I meet a lot of lovely blokes. But I promised myself after that breakup that I'd hold out for a grand, glorious, perfect love story. And for all the romantic beginnings I've had, they all turn out to be ... not quite right."

Mabel set down her cake fork, preparing her next question delicately. "Given your line of work, Goldilocks, don't you run the risk of shitting where you eat?"

This time Stevie sprayed tea across a centrepiece with an uncontrollable laugh.

"Well, luckily I'm very good at gentle breakups, too. I've shot plenty of weddings for grooms I once dated. But now I'm starting to worry I've pashed every eligible bloke on the eastern seaboard and missed the boat on big love." Stevie jabbed at a slab of fruitcake with her fork. "Maybe it's time to give up on the big love story and just embrace spinsterhood."

"God knows no one over 35 ever falls in love," Mabel rolled her eyes. "Look, I'm a bit

of a connoisseur of love stories myself, even if I am an old maid. Believe me, I've seen it all. If you're looking for perfect, you'll always find a reason to give up on people. Everyone deserves a second chance sometimes."

Stevie swallowed a yawn and sipped her tea.

"Well, I could chew your ear off all night," Mabel started, "but I think there's someone else who'd rather be talking to you. Have a good night, love."

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Stevie looked up as Mabel heaved herself out of her plastic chair, and there was Johnno West. She had thought she'd spotted him in a back pew at the ceremony, but it had been so long she didn't quite believe it.

"G'day stranger." His voice was low, his face was cracking into the grin she remembered. The chipped front tooth was still there, a curl of dark brown hair falling into his eyes as usual, but this Johnno seemed somehow more at ease in his skin than the schlubby friend she'd known at university.

"You rascal, I thought you were in London?" She scrambled to her feet.

"Got back last week - time to face the future at Mum and Dad's."

"If you ever posted anything on social media I'd have known to look out for you," she said, punching his arm.

"Ah, I like to keep you on your toes. C'mere."

He wrapped her up in a bear hug, and Stevie marveled that there was quite a bit less of him than the last time they'd embraced.

"I can't even remember the last time I saw you!"

"I can remember exactly the last time I saw you, Stevie-Jean: six years ago at the Black Dog Ball at the St Lucia golf club. You must have just got your camera, you were taking it everywhere then. It just about flew across the room when 'Hey Ya' came on."

That brought the memory rushing back. The camera was her ‘get-over-it’ gift to herself after her atomic-level breakup. “Well—I get paid to take the pictures now!” She raised the camera to her eye and he pulled a James Bond pose.

“You’re doing well, Stevie. I love following your photos. You’ve always had a fun way of seeing things. That wedding in the Territory you got to shoot from a chopper must have been so fun.”

“If I hadn’t been able to get a good picture with that landscape, that veil and that sunset, I would have retired on the spot,” Stevie laughed. But it was definitely one of the shots she was proudest of. “Who knew you were so into weddings, Johnno! Are you back at your folks’ place? How are Penny and Rod anyway?”

“They’re good, ready to put me to work on the place. Mum’s just relieved I didn’t bring a pommy girl home, but I reckon she’s already putting together my application for *Bush Bachelors*. You know they’re desperate for you to settle down when they turn to reality TV girls.”

“That’s desperate, alright,” Stevie laughed.

“So... no bloke on the go for you either?” Johnno fished.

“Nope. Give it another year and I’ll have to remind you of the pact we made at uni to get married if we were both still single at 32.”

“You mean that night we broke into every pool between the R.E. and college?”

Johnno feigned forgetfulness. They both knew exactly the night he was referring to. A classic steamy Brisbane pre-dawn, after their favourite pub had shut down and they’d somehow lost all their other friends. It remained a confusing memory for Stevie, who still wasn’t quite sure who’d initiated the kiss at the second pool. She’d put it down to a moment of madness and they’d wordlessly decided it was better to keep it between themselves. Particularly given Johnno was best friends with Stevie’s on-again, off-again boyfriend at the time, Tom . . .

“Well, have you knocked off yet?” Johnno asked. “Cause that dancefloor is calling.”

Stevie had already spent much of the night on the dancefloor, capturing candid moments. Red and Janelle had been bashful for their first dance, but loosened up once everyone else spilled back onto the dancefloor. Stevie ducked and scooted her way in between spinning couples and high-kicking rum-drunk yahoos, her camera strap wrapped around her wrist allowing her to shoot one-handed. She had kneeled for low angles and shimmied out of the way just in time to avoid a zealous young man dipping his nervous partner dangerously close to the floor. In the slow numbers, Stevie hovered around the edges waiting for tender moments between the bridal party and parents, grandparents and little kids.

But now, with her work well and truly done, all it would take would be the opening bars of some B52s or Neil Young to get Stevie on the dancefloor in seconds. No matter how compelling the conversation she was in, no matter how hard-fought the spot in the bar queue, certain songs beg a response.

“I took the liberty of making a request,” Johnno said, as “Love Shack” started up. Stevie grabbed his beer with one hand, his hand with the other, and ran towards the music.

The drink in her hand might spill; let it. She shook her hair, whipped her skirt around, gyrated briefly in an attempt at sexiness. In the end she just jumped up and down, shouting all the words.

“Ah, you don’t see moves like that in London,” Johnno beamed before breaking into a series of school dance specials: the sprinkler, the shopping trolley, the lawn mower.

The years fell away, jet lag and tired bones obliterated by a cover band playing the hits of the 90s, and once again they were just two kids who were really, really bad at dancing.

Recovery

Stevie's eyes cracked open. There was light streaming in through an unfamiliar set of blinds. A pounding in her head resolved into a shrill point of focus: her phone alarm was bleating. Everything felt foreign. Stevie tried to piece it all together: Single bed, cheap sheets, undies on (pew), mouth like a desert...

“For the love of God, make that stop!” came a voice from the neighbouring single bed. Spluttering air-con unit, terrifying carpet; they'd made it back to the pub in town, thank god.

“What time did we get back here?” Stevie asked the voice, who she eventually recognised beneath the panda eyes and moaning as belonging to one of the bridesmaids, Ally.

“Girl. I couldn't tear you away from the dancefloor in time for the courtesy bus, and then Heath brought out a bottle of scotch that you had to partake in. We were on the verge of walking the 17 Ks back to town when an angel appeared in the form of Red's aunty Kim and her Toyota Corolla. She drove us back here about four.”

“Ugh...” Stevie tried to tally the number of drinks she'd consumed around the campfire after her dance-off with Johnno. She wasn't going to be able to drive home until she'd killed a few hours, showered and found a greasy breakfast.

“I need bacon,” Ally bellowed. “No, a bloody Mary. Not sure they know how to make them here, but recovery starts at 10am, thank god.”

Stevie gave a silent prayer of thanks to bush tradition. For the hungover who’ve been to a Bachelors and Spinsters ball or a wedding in the sticks, any host worth their salt also offers a recovery the next morning after a remote event requiring hours of driving.

From a barbecue breakfast to another full day’s partying, recoveries run the gamut to get you safely on your way home again, even if it’s not until the following day. In this case Red and Janelle had booked out the closest town’s single pub for guests to stay, and had organised a big fry-up breakfast rolling into lunch. They’d even made space in the beer garden for musical family members to jam.

Stevie dragged her weary bones and her toiletry bag to the shared bathroom. As she creaked along the hallway she heard the moans of sore heads and a cacophony of farts greeting the morning. The hot water was life-giving, shampoo and soap erasing hours of campfire smoke, dust, and the ghosts of cigarettes and spilled drinks. The hotel towel was scratchy but clean.

She combed her wet hair into a thick messy bun, pulled on a well-worn pair of Levis and a holey Magic Dirt T-shirt. She felt much better; though when she unfogged the mirror she was reminded: *You're not 25 any more, Harrison. Where's the bloody eye cream?*

Another job, another hangover. Much as she might have felt nineteen again doing the Nutbush with Johnno at 1am, these mornings-after were getting harder. *And right on cue, here comes the self-loathing. How much has really changed since the old days of sessions with Johnno*, she thought, *except the wrinkles?*

Ten years ago Stevie would have imagined herself at 31 as a professional success - published author, perhaps, or award-winning filmmaker - with a serious haircut and, let's face it, a husband. The reality was much more thrown together, both job and hair, and a lot more

single. *What am I doing with my life? I dreamed of big love and telling big stories; the best I'll do today is a big sandwich.*

Life goals notwithstanding, the thought of a big sandwich was encouraging and Stevie resolved to tackle the day. Backing out of the bathroom with her hands full, Stevie collided with a hunched form clad in stubbies shorts and not much else.

“Johnno, I didn’t see you there! Get a bit of sun yesterday, did you? You’ll have to invest in some sunscreen now you’re home, my delicate English rose.”

“Give a bloke a break, Stevie,” he muttered, rubbing his red nose. “I’m a little bit fragile today.” He seemed dazed, but she took in the bloodshot eyes and sleep-mussed hair and chalked it up to a hangover.

“You staying for the recovery?” Johnno asked.

“See you down there,” she said, drifting back down the hallway to room 24, already thinking about which of yesterday’s shots to focus on for the first Instagram post. There was so much editing to do once she got home, and a three-hour drive before that could start...

She was too lost in her thoughts to notice Johnno scratching his head in her wake.

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Stevie glanced at her watch. She should kill another hour before fuelling the Pajero and hitting the road. Considering how many miles Stevie had to cover to do her job, it wasn't worth the risk of losing points off her licence for blowing over the limit.

The breakfast barbeque had hit the spot and even if the coffee was instant, it had helped. Stevie’s bags were packed and her car was parked on the main street outside the shady Victory hotel. She pulled up a stool in the front bar and asked the publican if he’d charge her phone.

“How'd it all go last night?” he asked, plugging in the battered iPhone.

“Big night, but the ceremony was lovely and the party was fantastic.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said, introducing himself as Bluey. “We sent six kegs out and I don’t expect there was a drop left over! Even today we’ve put on extra staff in the kitchen and the bar to cater for everyone recovering.” He gestured at the dining room, a hub of activity, and continued. “You wouldn’t believe the difference a party can make for the town. Visitors drinking our beer, staying in our rooms, eating our food, fuelling up at the servo... Do you know, that’s the first wedding we’ve had in that beautiful church since about 1992?”

Stevie was surprised, given how picturesque the little church was, neat red brick with white accents like a gingerbread house of God. She’d taken some shots of all the guests outside it that she couldn’t wait to see on her big desktop screen. But then again, she’d seen many times how something as simple as a wedding party could wake up a town, bring it to life. People prepared for months to get their lawns green and gardens perfect. Everyone pulled together, stocking the caterers with local meat, donating the best blooms from their gardens to decorate tables, assembling teams of local teens to serve drinks and help with food.

It was a beautiful thing to see; hard work but rewarding for the families who made it happen. It happened enough to keep Stevie in business, shooting country weddings across two states, but she was surprised more people didn’t go the country route for their big day. She supposed the dominant trends on Instagram and in the wedding magazines looked pretty different. Rows of perfectly matching chairs, gauzy white fabric drapes, immaculate flowers, rolling green lawns and ocean views. A far cry from the red dirt, flies and whatever glassware could be supplied out here.

Stevie had shot plenty of those perfectly symmetrical city and coast affairs, and they almost felt too easy. To her, there was so much more heart in a wedding that guests had to plan and drive for. Where things quite often went pear-shaped, and the only option was to improvise with what was on hand.

Stevie had been photographing bush weddings for five years and pretty much all that time the land had been in drought. There was something profound about being there for the rare days and evenings when locals got to let their hair down and take a break from worrying what the clouds had in store. After hand-feeding stock for months and wondering how long they could get by, what a luxury to spend a night drinking beers under the stars, dancing to a cover band and sharing cake and cups of tea... Even if they did have to get up and check the fences all over again at dawn the next day.

Stevie felt lucky to be part of that. And she'd garnered a reputation for making the most of shooting in drought conditions. A bit of dust on the lens was just an occupational hazard. It could blow out your focus and obscure what's right in front of you, but she wouldn't want it any other way. Dust could blind you, choke you, but it could also catch the light and make things look beautiful.

She ordered a chicken parmy from Bluey and another ginger beer, and walked out across the lawn of the beer garden where Red's little sister Grace was singing a Fleetwood Mac cover with her acoustic guitar.

Toddlers were twirling and more than one grown up might have been snoozing behind their sunglasses. She made eye contact with Johnno, looking much less disheveled in a striped shirt and his Akubra; he smiled and patted the empty seat next to him. He stood as Stevie reached the table and she caught a breath of his smell, soap and sunshine, as he pulled out a chair for her.

"How can you possibly be drinking beer, Johnno?" Stevie asked.

"Stevie-Jean, a hair of the dog is saving my life right now, and I urge you to do the same. It's just science."

"No way. Some of us have a long drive ahead today."

"I think you'll find all of us do. I at least have the promise of one of Mum's famous

Sunday roasts at the end of mine.”

“You’ll need a nice long stick to beat away the girls when they find out you’re living with your parents,” Stevie said sweetly.

“Mmm, yes, all the gorgeous single ladies tucked away across the Darling Downs who’ve been waiting patiently for my return. Much as Mum wants to start planning my wedding, I think Dad and Kate have some more pressing jobs they want me to do around the place.”

“That’s right, you’re a farmer now,” she teased.

He sighed at the thought of it. *Another one bites the dust - literally*, Stevie thought. *I hope he can keep that sense of humour intact.*

"Are you effectively taking over from Rod?" Stevie asked. "I can't quite imagine him lounging by a pool in retirement with his holey old Akubra and his sock tan."

"Right?" Johnno laughed. "He set this deadline so long ago. If I had a dollar for every time I've heard him say, 'John, I am retiring the day I turn 65', I'd be rich enough to hire someone else to take over." As Johnno explained, it wasn't enough to just turn up on his Dad's 65th birthday, either. A year earlier Rod had begun needling Johnno about the handover process and whether he had his flight home booked.

"There's power in getting to choose when you step down," Stevie said. "Look at all the best and worst rugby league retirements. Or Mum."

"How is Paula?" Johnno asked.

"She's good. Better. But she never got to choose when she had to say goodbye to our property. Given the choice, she never would have left at all."

"So what does retirement look like for her?" Johnno asked.

"Oh, little flat in town, lots of trips to the library, dog-eared meals-for-one cookbook," Stevie said breezily. She didn't mention the laundry drying on a folding rack in the living

room, a tenth the size of the Hills Hoist it'd have once flown on. Or the looks Paula got from other women her age while serving at the grocery store checkout. Or the fact Paula wouldn't be retiring from that job any time soon. "Last I heard she was considering a pottery class. Actually, I can see Rod up to his elbows in clay, turning out some nice chunky mugs."

"I'll let you know if that's what he's plotting," Johnno smiled. "In the meantime, all roads lead to the lawyer's office on November 12 to sign the succession papers. It's all in red on the kitchen calendar. Haven Downs, the next chapter."

"And now you've got the rest of the year to prove yourself?"

Johnno shrugged.

"Truth is," he said, "my old boss in London already emailed begging me to come back. Said he can keep a role for me until the end of the year. So at least I have a back-up option."

Typical Johnno, Stevie thought, one hand on the escape hatch in case things get too hard.

"Last night I felt like we were 19 again. But this morning I felt so, so old. Can you imagine what our 19-year-old selves would make of this," Stevie said, gesturing between them.

"I would have been pretty happy to know I'd be still spending hungover mornings with you more than a decade later. And we've only gotten better looking."

Stevie laughed. "But we had such high expectations for ourselves. And here we are, both single, you're living with your parents. If you'd asked me at 19, I would have said I'd have knocked over a masterpiece and a marriage by now."

"Hmm," Johnno said, swallowing his beer. "And how is the masterpiece going?"

"I've started dozens of them but they keep falling apart!" Stevie laughed. "I've never finished anything. And now I'm ageing out of all the good competitions."

"You're working as a storyteller right now. You're capturing love stories for the ages!"

"It's hardly great literature, is it? I dunno, I just thought I had a big story in me. But if I was really any good, I wouldn't keep giving up, would I?"

"These are awfully big questions for a recovery, Stevie-Jean."

She moaned and buried her head on her forearms. Johnno clapped Stevie on the shoulder.

"Orright Stevie, I'm going to the bar. Beer?"

"Nah mate, I'm trying to sober up here."

"Just one Goldie won't hurt you. It's basically beer-flavoured water."

Stevie thought about how cold and fizzy that one, harmless little schooner of Fourex Gold would be, how she could make it disappear before the glass even stopped sweating. Grace was singing a Courtney Barnett bridge with her eyes closed and her toes curled in the grass. Home and work felt a long way away.

"Just one then, you bastard."