

Friday Afternoon on Thursday Island, Northern Australia.

Often when we revisit the past, the places and times of our childhood, we are disappointed and disillusioned with the changes we face. Thus with some hesitancy, but also with great excitement, I embarked on my first visit to TI after 38 years absence. I had eaten the fruit of the wongai tree many years ago, and now it had finally worked its magic, and lured me back to these soft, turquoise coloured waters.

Air travel as it used to be...no security screens, no long lines, no fuss. That's what it is still like when you land on Horn Island, gateway to the Torres Straits Islands. The bus from the airport to the wharf meets a boat, manned by a courteous but not rushed crew. On the wharf people are fishing, catching queen-fish and trevally as we wait to board. We travelled over the bouncy, white tipped, turquoise coloured waters, on the ferryboat to TI in five minutes. And then I step back onto the island that I left four decades ago.

I remember well as a 15 year old, standing on the Engineer's wharf at TI, in January 1972, awaiting the Mary Elton ferry boat to take me over to nearby Horn Island, for the flight south to Cairns. To start my naval career and my transformation from boyhood to manhood. So fitting then that this is the first place I land on, for this journey of time travel.

The wharf is now cast in concrete and steel, the wooden pillars and rails long gone. Gone too is the swimming pool alongside the wharf, now it is a car park. The pearling luggers, sitting low and sleek, riding anchors to glass marker buoys, are missing. And there are many other changes evident on the island. More cars, more buildings, more choice. But above all the changes, there is still constancy in the life and spirit of TI and the people who live there. And the feel of the place. Its ambiance of welcoming, of a desire of its people to get along with each other on this remote speck of land. There are no crowds evident for anything, in fact I found myself wondering where the supposed 4,000 plus inhabitants all were. There is no mad rush and haste, no traffic jams, no suburbia precocity. No people lying in the clean, wide streets, no beggars. No groups of hooded and loud juveniles with their music and attitude at full blast. No hustle and bustle. Just an overall feeling of calmness and a well-paced lifestyle. The way mainland Australia used to be. Some people call it TI time. I call it smart living.

After lunch I travel to the office of the Torres Shire Council to see if my old friend and classmate, Pedro is around. I knew that he was the mayor and very busy, so I did not expect that he would be available to see me at short notice, and without any warning after almost 40 years. But it is Friday afternoon on Thursday Island. He makes time, and soon we are travelling the island in his Ute. With each road and turn we take, the layers and the years peel back, to the time of my boyhood, our boyhood. We recall the people and places we knew and shared, and soon there is lightness, warmth in our restored friendship.

Pedro is a survivor, a philosopher, sailor and a leader. He has fought bowel cancer, and brought so many positive changes to the islands since he has been Mayor. And he has been Mayor continuously since 1991. In our school days, he was always first past the finish line in our school carnival sprints. I usually came in third placed. Pedro talks with great understanding and belief in the meaning and symbolism of the traditional dances we watched, later that night. He explains the link between Island culture, the spirits of the dead, and how we live our lives now, and in the future. Of connections with the past, through both the living and the dead.

The next morning, the winds are still blowing strong, but it is an inviting and cooling breeze, that carries the scent and freshness of the sea with it. Along the foreshore, the ubiquitous almond trees stand, with their green, yellow and red leaves providing relief from the strong blue sun. The wongai tree, with its red-purple, bullet shaped fruits, carries its allure and myth, for generations of islanders and visitors to TI. Birds are everywhere, calling and whistling. Elsewhere, the deep red of unscented hibiscus and the creamy pink of the frangipani trees, add to the setting of this small, delightful island.

This is a special morning for my wife and I. We visit the back beach of TI in a hired speedboat, to let my father go. We poured his ashes onto the waters, said our prayers, and think back to the time when he had a boat here, and enjoyed himself as did our family. The waters take up his ashes, and soon he is gone. But to touch the waters is to touch his spirit, so we know where to find him again. I think back to the Hindu prayer of cremation: 'choose whatever form you wish, if you are happy there.' My father was a sailor also, and spent many years in the Royal Navy and then in merchant fleets across the world. I am sure he will be happy here.

How ironic I think. Maybe I chose this spot, only sub-consciously aware of the proximity of Panda's burial site. It was almost 40 years ago that my Dad and I buried our old Labrador dog, Panda at sea, nearby this spot. We wrapped her tired, old body in a canvas, weighed down with iron bars and stones, stitched along the side. Dad then drove the boat out about 200 metres from the shore cut the engine, and we slowly lowered her into the water. I remember that moment so clearly now, as a young boy then. My imagination was fuelled from the stories Dad told me of when he was in the Royal Navy during WW2, of injured men and burials at sea. Of suffering and hardship.

Soon our departure back to the big south is upon us far too quickly. In my romantic mood, I imagine myself settling and living here. And why not? It has everything for us. The safety and facilities of mainland Australia, and the colour, charm and lifestyle of a Pacific Island. But commitments and work beckon to us, reel us in like fish on a line. We can fight but know that we will lose. But we will return to these waters soon, not as fish but as fishermen. The power of the Wongai is too strong for any fishing line to hold. Old TI, my beautiful home, sees you soon.