

# Afterglow



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**0:00**  
me

**I** had never been one to give up on something before. Rory had always told me “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing properly”. And plus, I always wanted your Nana to see how much better I’d gotten while she was away. At a certain point it just got too hard though, with the baby bump and all that. It’s just one of those things I suppose – there’s only so much you can do with your time, and I wanted to spend it on you.

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After everything she had told me the night after the surfboard mishap, I felt compelled to check out the hike from Mum’s story. It’s clearly a special place for her, and for Nana and Rory as well. I was being drawn to the idea in just the same way I was with Rory’s surfboard. Hopefully with a better outcome this time.

So when the next weekend rolls around, I chuck my (well, Mum's) guitar in the back of the van along with a sleeping bag and mattress. Just before leaving I head back downstairs and grab mums birthday guitar mix from the box of cassettes.

By the time I got on the road it was already 11am. It wasn't a short drive – pretty sure I won't make it with time to hike today. I'll have to camp and start early tomorrow instead.

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The mixtape Rory had made for mum was certainly eclectic. I had instinctively rewind the tape – Mum had taught me to always listen from Side A in order to “get the proper experience”.

Let's just say Rory definitely wasn't pushing her in any specific direction in terms of genres. Heavy rock, funk, soul, jazz, pop, folk – it was all there. Maybe mum had been overwhelmed trying to choose her guitar style, not just because of me.

*Maybe.*

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The tape had finished, so now I was (safely, of course) searching the floor of the passenger seat for a particular CD. I always listen to this one before hiking, but I can't seem to find it now. So I resign myself to drive in silence, soothed only by the squishy hum of tyres on asphalt and the wind as it ricochets off the nose of the car.

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**1:13** The sun is bending towards the treetops as I approach the lake at the foot of the mountain. I guess it was more of a large hill, or rocky outcrop really. We don't really have proper mountains in this part of Australia unfortunately.

The drive had taken even longer than I'd anticipated. I wasn't particularly prepared for this trip, and that included finding any kind of accomodation. So I pull over in a side street of some sleepy town to check the map for any free campgrounds or rest areas that I could potentially park up at overnight. Reception is spotty though, so while waiting for the page to load I admire the cabins nestled into the bush surrounding most of the lake.

*If I was ever to move away from the coast, I'd come somewhere like this.* It is a different kind of silence here compared to the beach. The wind whispers through the leaves of countless trees, in lieu of a soft swell brushing over the speckled sand. Plus, the cabins here seemed so still, beyond time almost, unlike the weather-beaten shacks back home.

The page loads. Turns out there's a spot to stay not too far down the road, just on the other side of town.

After all of three minutes back on the highway I turn down a dirt track, following it as it winds its way through the bush. Finally, arriving at a small clearing ringed by towering gums, I pull up and turn off the engine. There's that silence again.

**1:46** The sun had dipped below the tree line by the time I'd set up the van for the night, but there was still plenty of light to explore by. So, I set off towards the setting sun, in the direction of the lake. At the last moment, I grab mum's guitar – *just in case*. The birds are just beginning to find their way home for the evening, calling out from obscured perches in the twisted upper reaches of the gums. Waiting for a response.

*I wanted to spend it on you.*

Mum's words echo in my head as I push back the many branches that reach across the overgrown track to the lake. While I love her to bits, I'd always been a bit disappointed that I hadn't grown up with musician parents like some of my other friends. Now I just feel guilty.

I thought of all the other things she must have given up for me. She's always been a surfer, but I can't imagine her doing a whole lot of surfing with a baby in her belly, or with one in tow. Growing up near the beach, I can't really imagine anything other than a lack of swell preventing me from surfing whenever I wanted. She also told me she'd been studying literature at the time. Whenever it gets brought up, she just laughs it off as a 'dead end course'. But she loves reading, and sometimes she gets that look in her eyes like they've got stories to tell, locked away somewhere deep.

And what did she have to show instead of all that?  
*Me.*

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**2:13** The trail had been petering out for some time now, but as I rounded the next corner I was confronted by an uprooted tree. Its massive trunk was completely blocking what was left of the track, its severed roots away to the right searching for soil they would never again feel.

As I stood considering the best way ahead – around the base of the tree, trying to rejoin the dwindling trail; or off to the left, picking my way through the scrub alongside the trunk – I was struck by a thought, or was it a memory? Something mum would sometimes say after a long hike, or if we got lost somewhere along the way. I guess now I was just understanding what she really meant.

*We almost always walk on the paths we are given. The obvious ones that have been well maintained, maybe even with signs to tell you the right way to go. Every so often there may be some twists and turns where you can't see very far ahead. Some uphill sections where the going is tough. Ultimately though, it will always be a relatively comfortable walk with a defined end point.*

*Every now and then you might veer off the path. Maybe you see another one in the distance that looks promising, or you're just sick of the same old trails. But it's tiring, bushbashing like that, and before long you find yourself exhausted and covered in scratches. Or maybe the scrub is so thick there's just no way through.*

The point is, it's so easy to just follow the signposts and do the walk the 'right' way. It's exhausting to veer off and create your own path, and so often we don't want to be exhausted.

*And fair enough!* When we don't have anything beyond our hope to tell us where we might end up, why risk losing the easy path and having to fight your way back?

And I think that's what mum might have done after she had me, at least to some extent – stayed on the path that society has made easier. Be the mother, the caregiver. Put everything else on hold.

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**2:30** Today I veered. West, alongside the tree trunk, towards the setting sun. I picked my way through the upper branches of the fallen tree. I ducked under the ferns, weaved between saplings.

I had just lost track of the sun when all of a sudden there it was. A narrow clearing hemmed to the shoreline. The maroon sky, a picture of symmetry in the stillness of the lake. I had veered well.

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**2:59** I brush the remnants of the bush off my shirt and guitar case as I make my way to the lake's edge. There is a tree root, as thick as my leg, protruding out over the water. The soil in which it had once grounded itself had long been washed away.

So, guitar in hand, I make my way out onto the root. With my back resting against the trunk, and one foot dipping into the lake, I start to play.

**4:18**

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