To Build a Home

There was a river that separated the gorge and Victoria. It was coloured with an unexplainable shade - not brown and not yellow, but if pure gold were liquid and could raise a cream. By nature the body of water inhabited a sort of veiled and brooding aggression, rushing over the grooves of the bed with an urgency that resembled that of the Snowy employees; tireless, purposeful, with the slight lean indicative of a labourer's career. Each relentless heft of water encouraged a mist to spray up in the air, but that was the extent of its brutality. It did not erode the developing towns or farmland which took homage on the bank. That force was entirely reserved to its pursuit of open water, which could be found in the ocean that occupied the east.

On the wide level acres of the valley that dipped beneath the gorge, the topsoil lay dampened with the August snow. Grasses headed out on the uplands and live gums were strewn through the alpine ridges, which like some savage staircase, led down from the mountain. Where it was possible that once those ridges had allowed passage to higher ground, they now crumbled from old mining structures.

Up the bank and below the valley, a mile or two from the township, was an uncultivated patch of land. One particular Saturday it had stood out from the pale, snow-felt ground as a result from earlier when four Poles had poured river water over its ashen complexion and watched the runoff dribble back down the slope of the lower-leveled land. Whilst their efforts had cleared the area of snow as well as any man willing to collect water from the Murray would’ve liked, the wet residue had sheeted over the ground in one final defence of its independence, and the mildly agitated men were put to work once again.

That land belonged to the delegated leader of the group, Josef Skapski. In stature he stood lankily amongst the other men of the Snowy, which majorly consisted of the Italians and the Dutch, but with his Pole brothers he was the shortest, and the most well-fed. He had inherited his mothers Germanic nose and dull blonde hair. Sometimes he would pass it off as some invented Slavic heritage, but more often than not, Julek - a man from East Poland - would laugh: “I know a Boche when I see one!”. His men didn’t take offence to it though, because when they had picked up their axes to build their own homes, he had shown them just how Polish he was when he had got down in the dirt with them. It had earned him a certain degree of respect among the men, and they had seemed too lonely and homesick to deny him the company anyway.

The temporary work visa Josef had been granted had expired, and he had served his fifteen years residency working in the construction of the hydro-electric plant a few miles North. Only a week before he had received a letter from the Commission in regards to his permanent residency, which meant he could now acquire and build on crown land. Naturally, when he had decided that the discussed plot of land was to be where he would build his family home, the men volunteered to help.

“Peet?” Josef kicked his heel on a plank of wood as he looked to Piotr. Of the men, he had adopted a father-like affection for the scraggly boy. It made him feel queasy to refer to him as a man, because he couldn't have been any older than Josef’s own son, Nikolas, who had barely finished being weaned when he had left those fifteen years ago.

When he stared too long at Piotr he could see that they both shared that same hint of young optimism in the eyes. The thought of his son losing it made him shiver, and so every time the older men in the group would poke and prod, Josef would nod in Piotrs direction in that subtle and uncharacteristic way his own father used to employ in such situations. It was a sort of encouragement to bear the weathered tendencies of old men, much like the land bore the river: unwavering and steadfast.

“Is it the wood? I tried to sand it but the first load was soaked from last night's ra-” He started, but Josef put a hand on his shoulder.

“No matter about the wood. Go have a break.” Piotr didn’t think twice, and turned to rest his anxious temperament.

There was a whistle from behind, “You're too easy on that boy.” Julek screwed another rivet into some pressed tin. He was rather nearsighted, rather red-haired, rather skeletal, with a small bald spot on his head and wrinkles on both of his cheeks. His family was from Warsaw, and all six of his red-haired sons now lived in Australia working on the plant. He had been in the terrain so long that he had picked up a sort of horrid humour that sided towards the more uncivilised persuasion, and yet he still retained that adamant belief that hard work made a man.

“Ah Kretyn!” Hubert, the oldest Pole, snapped from his station to the right. “I did not come out on the Sabbath to listen to you moan!” Whilst his tongue was always sharp, his sapphire eyes would never match it. They held a regret, just like so many of the men who came out from around the world to find work in the promised land, the land of redemption.

A stream of idle profanities were mumbled in response. Then they continued sawing and screwing and brooding in silence. They were not agitated at each other, only tired of being tireless.

Josef’s wife, Angela, had never liked swearing. She had always said, “The behaviour you ignore is the behaviour you accept!”, and smacked him over the forehead with a rolled-up advertiser anytime he thought about cursing. She had surely kept him on his toes, and in other moments, settled him. They were content in their little boxy Torun apartment until they had Nikolas, and then they had three mouths to feed in a city that survived off scraps and wild cabbage. Then his wife had said, “We’ll go to Australia, they welcome everyone there.”

The scheme had paid well considering the group of men were building homes and making their own fortunes on individual contracts, but the construction of a new world had a price, and it was fifteen years.

The sun flickered through the hedges of mountains above, signalling the fall of dusk. A strangely calm wind blew past the site, and it encouraged the men to put down their tools and stare up at the coming night sky which enveloped the purpled clouds.

Josef stepped back to look at their work from afar. The bones of a house stood eerily in the misty air, a light fog appearing. An echo, almost like a promise, murmured through the valley and the damp wooden structure gently vibrated in response, as if it were alive. Josef knew he was not finished. There was lots of work to be done and resolutions to be made, and he understood: to build a home was more than a house.