

(Your Story Years 11-12)

If Only

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‘Okay class, stick together!’

The teacher bundled us together like a prehistoric fowl rounding up her chicks.

‘If you get lost or separated from the group, please press your locator and I’ll come and get you. I will now turn you over to our guide droid.’

The silver droid slid in front of us, its scanner eyes whirling.

‘I will first draw your attention to the exhibition in front of you. It shows the death of the last Koala. It spent its life in the Taronga Park Zoo. You will note that its state of the art enclosure was an exact replica of its natural habitat, which includes the rare eucalypt tree.

‘Next is the Platypus which, by the year 2009, was already vulnerable. When Australia continued to pollute the waterways they disappeared. We don’t know if they’re dead or simply adept at hiding.

‘The Kangaroo, on the other hand, has reached plague proportions and has become Australia’s racoon. They have adapted by foraging through the rubbish and dumps for vegetation.’

I turned and wandered to the next exhibit. I had been to the museum of Australian history more times than I can count and knew all about kangaroos. Next the droid would talk about all the different containment measures in place and then it would move onto the birds we humans have killed. That list goes on for five minutes. Seriously! I’ve timed it.

It’s much too depressing.

As I wandered along, I imagined what it must have been like to live when all these amazing animals were around.

There would have been real grass, not that bogus stuff we have now. A complete ozone layer too, rather than the weird gas stuff the scientists put up there.

The air would be sweeter and the clouds whiter...

My thoughts were interrupted when I walked into a sign. Glaring up at the offensive lights, I read the flashing message:

Past simulation. Come and see what Australia’s bushland looked like in the early 2000s!

Perfect!

Walking into the booth, I inserted a token and put on the helmet. I felt it mould around my head and then I was drifting...

The leaves above me rustled and I could hear kookaburras cackling at the look of wonderment on my face. There was a river nearby and I ran down and dabbled my toes in, watching the ripples softly fade.

A platypus gave a flick of its tail and vanished. I peered into the water and saw small fish and tadpoles writhing below.

Galaha and cockatoos gathered on the far bank. I watched as they chattered to one another. Their crests and pernickety preening drew a laugh from me and then the flock took flight in a flurry of feathers and screeches.

The sun, unfettered by clouds of pollution, shone down and warmed my skin. Lizards basking on rocks and logs scuttled away at the sound of my clumsy attempts at stealth to get a closer look.

Magpies warbled, eying me off worriedly as I traipsed past their nests. Their chicks screamed for attention as the parents glided off in search of more food.

I decide to climb a tree for the first time. Choosing a sturdy looking gum tree, I ran my hands over the bark. It was smooth and surprisingly cool. Gripping a low branch, I hoisted myself up and sat for a second, wondering how I'd get to the next. After a good five minutes I had made it halfway up and marvelled at the scenery below.

The river glistened and shone in the harsh sunlight and the grass and trees waved gently in a breeze that whispered past, tousling my hair.

I reached the top and whooped. There was a sudden grunt beside me. I whipped my head around and found I was nose to hairy nose with a snarling, cantankerous koala.

I gave a weak chuckle to hide my fear. I had heard that these things could rip you to shreds with their claws and could grip you so hard you could never shake them off.

It didn't matter that I was in a digital world.

I had heard about a guy who had tripped over in the digital world and was sore for weeks afterwards. So I wasn't even going to blink at this razor-clawed fuzz ball.

Edging away, I began to climb down the branches. When I reached halfway, it began to rain.

I winced away before realising that it wasn't the usual acid rain but actual water. Opening my mouth I caught a few drops on my tongue.

As I placed my foot onto the water-slicked branch below, I felt it snap. I grabbed the branch above, but it was slippery and slithered out of my grasping fingers.

I tumbled down in free-fall. The ground rushed up to greet me and I wondered if I was going to die when I hit it. The sensible part of my brain told me not to be silly... it would just be excruciatingly painful.

Out of the blue there was a feeling of being sucked into a worm-hole (I've done it before and it's fun). Then, like magic, I was back in the booth. Thankfully my token had run out. I sighed as I pulled the helmet off and tottered out, still a little dizzy from my almost fatal experience.

Above me was a stuffed whale – one of the last of its kind because of whaling in international waters. It swayed gently on its cables and looked at me sorrowfully with large glass eyes.

I pushed my locator button and the teacher bustled up.

'Wander off, did you?' She eyed me, expecting another escape attempt. 'Well come on then, the rest of the class is outside already.'

She led me past stands, displays and some odd-looking birds called doo-doods or something. When we got outside I looked around, taking in Sydney in all its nefarious glory.

I sighed once again.

If only...