

## Stranded Assets

*Jason Nahrung*

The glass viewing platform jutted out over the lip of the crater. Roberta's hands clenched around the rail as she fought a swirl of vertigo. The massive gouge yawned beneath her, stepped sides dripping with greenery cut through with walking trails. An oblong lake in the floor, stories below, looked like a distorted moon, the crater rim casting a half eclipse over the brilliant blue of reflected outback sky.

She cancelled the Real-D hologram. One of the options for redeveloping the site vanished, and she took in the reality through her smart glasses: the "Hanging Garden of Galilee" reduced to dust and rock, the open-cut mine now nothing more than a barren hole in the ground. The crater, they called it in the brochures; locals called it the Pot Hole. There was room on the floor for an entire village, but the only thing down there was a row of oversized autonomous dump trucks. A dragline still hunched on the rim, its frame skeletal, conveyors silent and rusting, a manmade dinosaur dead of thirst at this waterless hole. They should keep it, a symbol of the approaching extinction of an industry that had outlived its time and threatened to take the planet with it. Roberta's rage grew, unbidden, surging so that she might have screamed into the pit—would it echo?

The teetering world had yet to completely unshackle itself from fossil fuels, but the closure of the mines in central Queensland's Galilee Basin had been a

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*Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique* 35/36 (2018): 183–195. doi.org/10.26180/5c11d085d31d6

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powerful symbol of the changing of the guard. Australia, the great pariah of the Asia-Pacific, falling on its sword. All that money invested in this grand pot hole, filled with coal that no one wanted. She began to blog it, but pulled back, took a photo and uploaded that instead: “a hole lot of promise ☺.” The locals did not need a government minister crowing over the bones of their former livelihoods.

A message interrupted her. Her driver waved from the nearby car to emphasise it would not do for the infrastructure minister to be late to her own party. They were parked at the combined administration hub and visitor centre, a ramshackle edifice that was part demountable and part moon base, surrounded by parched, grassless plains. Behind the centre stretched hulks of scintillating glass and bare steel ribs. Cranes arched over the unfinished greenhouses like eagles picking at road kill, and she had to remind herself that they were building, not tearing down.

Roberta headed for the car, her movement only momentarily dispersing the buzz of flies that clouded around her face net. All this tech and no one had found a foolproof means of repelling the bastards. In the midst of the sixth great extinction, the most annoying species prospered. The collapse of ecosystems wasn't that different to politics, or big business. Blog it? No. This was a moment for optimism, not cynicism. On with the show, and flies be damned.

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Roberta closed the hotel door behind her and leaned against it, taking in the air conditioning.

Kim, propped up on the bed, put her tablet to one side. “So, was it worth the drive?”

They'd been up before dawn to get here in time for Roberta to take her solo inspection of the site, after having spent a couple of days in Rockhampton viewing the retreat zone at Yeppoon, the flood mitigation works on the Fitzroy.

“It's looking good. Sure you won't come out for the shindig?”

“Nah, I got a date with our girl here.”

“Lucky you.” Roberta bent over the smartpram’s open carapace and smiled at their daughter. The little chubber lolled in post-feed bliss. She brushed her lips against Penny’s forehead, inhaled that smell of talc and milk and *baby*. Oh, the books she wanted to read to her. The sights she wanted her to see. The world she imagined for her.

“The Krib says her temp is up.” She looked at Kim, saw her brow wrinkling in a frown, and regretted mentioning it.

“I know. I told you that this morning. It’s within normal range, Robbie. High, but normal.” She paused. “She does this, from time to time.”

Roberta checked the pram’s sensors, as much an excuse to avoid the accusing stare of her wife. Apart from Penny’s slightly elevated temp, the SecuriKrib was showing all systems green. “Maybe it was a mistake to bring her. It’s so hot out here.”

“At least it’s a dry heat,” Kim said, ever the stoic Queenslander, though she was from the Sunshine Coast, a place of humidity and voracious tides. “Anyway, we’re here now.”

“Is it the offset you’re worried about?” Roberta asked.

“You know it’s not.”

“Then what? You don’t think we can use some time together?”

This week’s break was hardly a solution. Just, Roberta was away so much. She did what she could when she was home, around the house, with the baby; she and Kim so tired all the time. The guilt stabbed at her; she had been treating their child as a side project next to her portfolio, yes. It was something she was trying to rectify. But what if she really just didn’t have the mum gene?

Kim, reaching for her tablet, said, “Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

The clock in the corner of Robbie’s glasses told her that, yes, she should be. She threw her hat on the bench and stripped off her abaya. Sweat was caked under her arms, down her back, under her bra, despite the smart cloth’s best attempts to save her. Her face felt hot and sticky with sunblock.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have dragged you and Penny out here,” she said, aware she was circling again that void of her absence. But a few days on the road together, it was a start, right? A motion of intention.

“I did suggest letting Steve take her.”

“Steve can’t express.”

“Great, I’m the udder—joking.” Kim held up one hand to ward off the automatic defence Roberta had been preparing. “We both know I wanted it more.”

“Not true.”

Kim sat up, leaned over to check on the baby, though the pram reported all was well, the child gurgling away under a swaying mobile of jungle animals, only some of which still existed. Just having Penny had been such a vote of optimism, that they could give her a world worth living in.

“Kim-Ly...” Roberta only used Kim’s full name when they were arguing or fucking, and Roberta knew the warning it represented. She didn’t need a full-on argument, not now. “This will work out, Kim, you’ll see. Once we get to Cairns... just the three of us. Damn it.”

A calendar had popped up at the edge of her vision.

“I gotta go.” She headed for the bathroom—a quick rinse, fresh sunscreen, a change of clothes.

“Work, work, work.” Kim held up a hand again, the gesture so familiar she could’ve been a traffic cop. “I know, it’s important. It’s always important.”

Roberta paused by the door on her way out. “Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

Kim held up the tablet. “It’s a lovely offer, but Penny and I have a report to finish before we head into the Wi-Fi wasteland, don’t we, Henny Penny?”

The child gurgled, sounding as unsure as Roberta felt.

“It’s on my list of things to do.” Such a long list. She felt her shoulders slump under the sudden weight of it.

“Don’t. Even if this was your jurisdiction, which you know damn well it isn’t, you can’t fix everything in two terms.”

Typical Kim, keeping Roberta grounded even when Kim was angry with her.

“I can fix the important things.”

“All of them?”

“I can bloody well try.”

Again the guilt bit hard, that she had had to schedule this holiday amid site inspections and planning meetings, meet-n-greets and press conferences. Robbie the Robot, the cartoonists drew her as, a two-edged nod to her work ethic and her pragmatic bloody-mindedness. She had overseen the retreat and even abandonment of townships due to consistent, catastrophic risk of inundation and fire, Kim’s seaside hometown among them; “robot” was one of the nicer names she’d been called.

“Have a good shindig,” Kim said, donning her glasses as her tablet glowed into life.

Roberta took a breath, squared her shoulders and opened the door. *Wind me up and watch me go.*

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Had Alpha ever seen such a gathering? The Governor General, the PM and half her cabinet flown up from Canberra; anyone who was anyone from the State Government; representatives from the SoPac nations they were aiding. It was an unlikely site for a population of Pacific Islanders: a fly speck town four hundred kays from the coast, not quite out past the black stump but certainly within sight of it. Claim to fame: the Gateway to the Goldfields, and a bunch of murals painted on decaying brick buildings and crumbling cement water tanks. The relocation of climate refugees here was, the PM said, an interim measure to help them acclimatise. So many interim measures.

Clad in trademark pants and blouse, always blue or black to reduce her decision fatigue, Roberta donned a shade hat before heading over to allay her PA’s fears of tardiness—Aidan gave her that familiar *just in time* look. It was quite the bustle of vehicles in the broad main street: dignitaries being marshalled, the locals out

for a gander, some waving signs about jobs and water and “Australia for Australians” along with the equally trusty “Australia welcomes refugees.”

Their driver hustled them into the back seat. Roberta cracked open her briefing notes. Aidan worked his console, feeding the socials, tying in promo vision and Roberta’s own pictures from the redevelopment site.

He flashed her a picture of their recent dinner in Rockhampton from a news site. “Taxpayers fund Minister’s Real Beef bill.” And another: “Minister loves Aussie meat.” But it came with a picture of her and Steve, looking so young. Very much pre-Robbie the Robot.

It had been a risk, going public with her ex as the sperm donor for their child, with Steve remaining as an involved father. But she had weathered that—*they* had weathered that, all three of them together facing down the prurient interest focused on their relationship because of Roberta’s politics. The gutter press had rolled out a mercifully short parade of her past lovers, none of whom had been embarrassing enough to have been worth quoting.

“Should I take them down?” Aidan asked.

“Let it go. Susan told me once, don’t let the bastards wear you down. Short attention spans; the vultures will move on soon enough.”

The car jittered over corrugation in the gravel road, and the smell of dust leaked in. The driver tweaked the atmosphere control.

“No such thing as a smooth ride these days, hey,” Roberta said, and Aidan agreed promptly enough, frowning at the intermittent connection now they were caught between the town’s wireless and the project’s drone server.

They alighted in a makeshift car park close to one of the near-completed greenhouses. A train of refrigerated freight cars made a stark line to one side. It looked like a silver worm, solar panels supplementing its batteries and brake-generators and the feed from the massive thermal solar farm outside Collinsville for its journey to and from the port.

“You must be proud, Robbie.” Aidan pointed to the train. Off the cuff, off the record; they’d do the official stuff once the ceremony was underway. “First cargo set to go.”

“It’s been quite the juggling act, hasn’t it?” An understatement, with so many bureaucracies and business interests involved, even the UNHCR watching on, and local councils sticking their beaks in, putting their hands out. At least the refugee workers weren’t fly in–fly out; they were building something that would last. An actual future.

“I guess that’s why it took Susan’s circus to get it done, hey.”

She had to laugh at that. “Send in the clowns.”

They were escorted to one of the newest greenhouses, big enough to house airliners. The squawks and thumps of a band tuning up indicated it was almost show time, confirming what the display in the corner of her glasses was telling her. There would be a Welcome to Country ceremony by the Wangan and Jagalingou people, followed by music, speeches, a group swearing-in ceremony to grant the refugees probationary resident status, a ceremonial dance of celebration and thanks by the refugee groups. And then they’d all parade over to the loading area to watch the train pull out with its load of produce.

“A hell of a lot of cucumber,” as Aidan had noted.

Susan messaged her: *so far so good*. She sent back a smiley face. The PM was only a couple of chairs along in the front row that included the G-G, Kiribati’s President Baaro, and Rupert Steinhardt, whose company was running the project following the collapse of his coal interests. It had been quite the turnaround for Steinhardt, who had lobbied hard to keep the old guard in power. Roberta had kept a printout of a memorable photo of him standing next to the defeated conservative prime minister, disbelief on their faces, when Susan Chang’s confederation of minor parties won the election. This Galilee project was a step towards some kind of redress, but so help her, trying to unwind all those decades of inaction and obstruction from both of the traditional major parties... it felt like she was pushing through melting bitumen.

The band appeared with a crash of brass and percussion. Drones hovered like dragonflies, security machines dogging the media's eyes in the sky.

Roberta's phone flashed an alert into her glasses. A health alarm. She frowned, then swore under her breath. People nearby looked at her. The phone vibrated, the call display flashing: Kim, no doubt to tell her what the medi alert already had. Something was not right with Penny.

"Kim?" Roberta hunched over, whispering, the earpiece cutting back the ambient noise to allow her to hear more clearly. Kim's face filled her vision, taut, tearful. Frightened.

"It's Penny. Her Krib says she's running a fever, but its treatment isn't working. It's flagging a possible viral infection—a *serious* viral infection—but it can't identify it and there isn't a decent auto lab here. The hotel has paged the local doctor, but he's at the celebration."

"Connect him through to me. We can travel together."

Aidan introduced her to the doctor at the car, but she was too caught up in the rush to catch his name. Her software dropped his details into her contact list: Safal. From poor bloody Bangladesh, half way through his four-year stint in regional Australia as part of his rehomings—

"Sorry?" She dismissed the pane; he was qualified, and he was here, and that was all that mattered.

"I've got the data from the Krib," he told her. "I'm thinking malaria VII, something like that. It seems quite early in the infection, but the data is quite basic."

"The Krib said it was serious."

"For sure. But we need more time and better equipment to know just how serious."

"But we're fully inoculated—we're on our way to Cairns."

"Do you know which batch?"

Aidan, hovering at a polite but still useful distance, said, "Four-fifty-six."

"That hasn't been released yet," the doctor said.

"Being in government has its advantages," Roberta said.



“They should’ve explained to you that the vaccines aren’t foolproof,” Dr Safal said. “We live in a soup of various nasties, new strains adapting to the new environments, spreading where they’ve never been before, and the gods alone know what could pop up out of the ice.”

“But Penny will be all right? This is treatable?”

“Once we identify the virus, we’ll know more. Getting her to suitable treatment will be the issue. Townsville would be best. Top tropical disease protocols there, as you’d expect. Brisbane, of course. We’ll see who’s in the best position to take her.”

“We have full private medical.”

“Of course. But the disease units are under-resourced, understaffed.”

I’m not the bloody health minister, she thought, then shelved it, feeling churlish.

“I don’t even know when she could’ve been bitten.”

“It might not be malaria. Let’s just hope we can get an accurate diagnosis. Then we’ll work out the where and what of treatment.”

“Unless... we stayed in Rocky.” Bloody expensive steaks, even at Australia’s self-declared “beef capital,” and the diners at the riverside pub had stared at them all night. But the rumps, off the hoof, an inch thick, oozing blood on the plate, had been totally worth it, even with the carbon offset. Or so she had thought at the time. They’d been inoculated, and Penny had her Krib, and the health threat has been rated low. Fuck, had she put her baby in danger because of her work? That, and a simple, rare meal out with her family...

She left the doctor to his analysis, as much as he could do in the car. Bandwidth was an issue. Yes, it was on the minister for infrastructure’s list of things to look into.

Aidan told her the office was up to date with “the situation.”

She nodded her thanks, then stared out at the blasted earth, the stubbled grass, that massive, cloudless dome of blue. Is this what Penny saw, looking out of her pram? Just sky and the looming faces of her cooing parentals? Did she feel dwarfed by

it, afloat in it? Was she cowed, or fired up to explore, to reach for that blue vault? What if she never got the chance to step out, to find her way? Willing the vehicle to go faster, she triggered her glasses to contact Kim. For all her doubts of her motherly qualifications, the knowledge that her daughter was in danger filled her with dread. She had only one thought: *I need to be there.*

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Kim met them at the motel room's door. Roberta could see the fear behind those brown eyes, could hear it under the controlled tone of her voice.

"Temperature, her breathing..."

"I've been watching," Dr Safal said with a jerk of his phone. "We don't see a lot of tropical ailments out here." He conducted a physical examination and checked his findings against the Krib's readouts, then contacted his nurse with a string of requirements.

Roberta stood with Kim, who was kneeling by the Krib. There was nothing else to do, but watch the lights on the Krib, their daughter's chest rising and falling, her little face frowning under the sheen of sweat.

"She has temperatures all the time," Kim said.

This, Roberta thought, is true powerlessness. She squeezed Kim's shoulder. "She'll be fine."

"Of course."

"We got on to it early."

"Yes, we did." And then, with eyes fixed on their child: "It's all over the web, you know."

"What?" Roberta brought up a screen. News squeaks, footage of her leaving the ceremony, entering the motel. The doctor's presence was noted. She swore.

"Office is on it," Aidan assured her.

“We could go to my clinic, but given the child’s age, I think it’s best to just get her to a specialist unit as soon as possible,” Dr Safal said. “I can get in touch with the air ambulance, but if you have a quicker alternative...”

Roberta rang the PM. Yes, the government jet she and her party had flown in on was at their disposal.

The doctor made his preparations. Roberta rang Steven, left a message when he didn’t pick up. He was chasing some rare critter out woop woop, where not even an infrastructure minister could contact him easily. The bloody country was just so bloody big, reinforcing how very, very bloody small she felt at this point.

Kim was wiping Penny’s forehead with a wet cloth. That simple gesture, amid the computers: oh. Roberta knelt on the other side of the Krib, held their daughter’s hand, rubbed one finger over that tiny pad, those tiny nails, the flesh hot and clammy. “Please,” she thought.

The nurse arrived with a briefcase of gadgets. Dr Safal ran a blood test. The wait was interminable. They hooked up an oxygen cylinder and a drip. Ghastly.

“MVE, possibly,” Dr Safal reported.

“We had all the vaccinations,” Roberta repeated, reinforcing the fact.

“You can’t protect them from everything,” he said. “Take it from a father of three. You do what you can, but the important thing is being there when they need you.”

Kim squeezed her hand; Roberta pulled her into a hug. “So I’m learning.”

Dr Safal reported that Townsville was on standby. Aidan wished them luck.

They kept Penny in her Krib, the nurse and the doctor holding it steady on the back seat of a four-wheel drive for the short drive to the airstrip.

Kim scrambled in the back with the luggage where she could lean over the Krib. Roberta, forced to ride up front, craned around the seat, trying to see Penny but blocked by the Krib walls. Its data filled a pane on her glasses; facts about Murray Valley encephalitis scrolled in another. She couldn’t remember if they’d shut the door to the motel room; she had her phone—were there any other sensitive documents left lying around? She messaged Aidan to check, but she could be confident he’d be

holding down the fort. Details about the hospital, a booking at a nearby motel, ambulance transport from the airport downloaded in reply.

The Krib jolted with the roughness of the road; the IV bag swung from its stand, the nurse restraining it best he could. Such a long drive. Were they going all the way to Townsville?

“She’s doing fine,” Dr Safal assured them. “The preliminary data suggests it’s an aggressive strain, but we’ve caught it early thanks to the Krib. Her chances of coming through this unscathed are very promising.”

Very promising? Was that a euphemism? Roberta’s mind sifted for spin. She felt like running it past her team for evaluation and response.

Breathe, she told herself. All that could be done was being done. Breathe.

The airfield emerged out of the shimmer of mirage. The basic concrete strip, the sagging wind sock, the rustic iron sheds with dust-covered PV screens—it felt as though they were in another country, distant in time and place.

But there was the jet, hybrid engines already growling with suppressed power, exhaling heat and paraffin. Had she ever seen such a beautiful sight? A staffer rushed their group up the stairs as a drone swooped low. Roberta swore at the whirring spy that was no doubt streaming the jostle around Penny’s Krib.

“Great,” Kim said. “Our kid can grow up watching vision of herself almost dying.”

Roberta messaged Aidan to get the thing the fuck away and look into charges for the violation of airspace regs. “Already on it,” he replied. Earning his money today. Lots of well-wishers, he told her; he was enjoying flaming the trolls but would need a shower and a stiff drink later.

Dr Safal plugged Penny into the tiny medical bay as soon as they were on board.

A tousled steward told them to sit down for takeoff as the engine noise built, the plane vibrating with its keenness to be airborne.

Kim’s grip on her hand was so fierce Roberta expected to hear bones crack. She squeezed back, relishing the sensation, the purity of the feeling.

“She’ll be all right, won’t she?” Kim asked.

“She’ll have the very best care,” Dr Safal said.

Roberta caught Kim’s gaze, offered a reassuring smile, wished her arm was long enough to cross the distance to smooth her worried forehead. “Penny will be fine.”

Kim reached, their hands met, held.

Roberta messaged Aidan to blog it. She needed the world to know. “We’re all going to be okay.”

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