

To be an American

a short story by Tony Peluso, author of *Waggoners Gap* and *Archangel of Sedona*

2310 Hours, Dec. 26, 1968
10 Gaerloch Ave., Tamarama Beach
Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Ian, the former Aussie digger—a strapping lad in his late twenties—looked up from the beer bottle that he'd balanced on his kitchen counter. He'd heard my angry reaction to his snarky observation about the Italian immigrants in Sydney.

He glanced to his right and left, gathering support from his bulky RSL mates. Looking across the kitchen, Ian winked at Roger, an even bigger guy who sat next to me on the sill of the open window that faced the Tasman Sea. At 160 pounds and six feet tall, I was one of the smallest men at this Boxing Day rage on the beach.

Ian turned his attention to me and smiled. He began with a question.

“My knock about the reffos being dole bludgers and mongrels offended you, mate?”

“Yes, of course,” I responded, holding eye contact.

“Well it's dead set, mate! But what are these bloody guineas to you, Yank?”

“You're saying that the Italian immigrants are lazy, worthless, welfare cheats, right?”

While the Australians speak English it's often in a slang that's incomprehensible to an unschooled American. I'd been in Australia less than 30 hours when I confronted Ian. I hadn't had time to assimilate to their culture or learn “Strine.”

“Right. So what? Why are you as cross as a frog in a sock?”

— “Your comment pisses me off,” I explained, “ because I'm Italian-American.”

“If you want a burl, mate, we can have a fair go. But before we call the ambo, what’s a bloody Italian-American?” Ian asked. “You have some sort of dual citizenship? You have an I-tai passport?”

“No. I’m an American citizen. My people are Italian.”

“So you and your parents immigrated to the United States?” Ian asked as he got up from his stool and closed the distance between us.

The Aussie’s movements weren’t menacing. I’d already concluded that I’d have to fight him. This was not how I’d hoped my first night in Sydney would work out.

“No, mate,” I responded. “Me and my folks were born in Pennsylvania,” I explained, standing up and taking a position in front of Ian.

“I suppose Pennsylvania is part of America. Right, mate?”

“Yep. It sure is,” I agreed. Ian had no better knowledge of American geographic detail than I had about Australia’s.

“You and your parents were born in America, yet you call yourself an Italian-American, right?”

“That’s right, mate!” I said emphasizing the last word.

“You must speak Italian, then.” Ian concluded.

“Not a word. I do speak Spanish, if that helps you out, pendejo!” I shot back, tiring of the inquisition.

“What does that word, pen-day-ho, mean, Yank?” Ian asked, sounding out each syllable, knowing that I’d insulted him.

“It’s Mexican slang for comrade,” I said, without breaking eye contact.

“Ian, the Yank thinks you’re drongo. He called you a pubic hair,” one of the other Aussie ex-soldiers offered.

“Is that right, Yank?” Ian asked, taking a step closer.

“Ask your multilingual pal,” I said as we stared each other down.

“You know Yank, Roger and I met you at the bar today. We thought you were fair dinkum. We asked you to our rage because you’re a new bloke to Australia and a fellow soldier. I should be mad as cut snake, but I’m not sure that you’re full quid.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

I’d regretted my initial outburst. Ian, Roger and I had been drinking since noon. I’d met them at the bar in the Carlton Rex Hotel near Kings Cross. Learning that I was from Vietnam and alone, they invited me to the Boxing Day party at Ian’s house in Tamarama Beach.

“Tony,” Roger began from behind me. “Ian says he should be mad, but he thinks you’re operating with a limited intellect.”

“I’ll tell ya, mate,” Roger continued. “We’re just screamers here. We thought you were a cobber and a comrade. Ian’s not a bounce but he’s not a wuss either. We don’t get why you’re pissed about his knock on the guineas.”

“Roger, I appreciate your invitation,” I said, turning so I could get both Roger and Ian into my field of vision. “But I don’t think it’s hospitable for you to insult my ethnic origin, whether it’s your house, the Carlton Rex Bar, the street outside, or that beach out there.”

“Well, Yank, let’s get this straight,” Ian suggested. “If were going to fight, let’s understand what we’re fighting about.”

“OK!”

“Yank, you were born in the United States, right?”

“Right.”

“Your mother and father were born in the United States, in Pennsylvania, right?”

“Yes.”

“Where were your grandparents born?”

“Sicily and Italy.”

“Finally!” Ian exclaimed. “We have some actual I-tais!”

A couple of the Aussies cheered. Roger smiled at me and shrugged his shoulders.

“Satisfied? Any more questions?” I asked Ian.

“Don’t mind Ian’s tone,” Roger asserted. “He fancies himself a barrister. He’d like to be Queen’s Counsel. Too bad he never studied the law, only Perry Mason on the telly!” Roger explained, causing chuckles and guffaws from Ian’s mates.

“Listen, Yank!” Ian inserted. “My people, as you say, came from Wales. They immigrated two years before I was born. I’m the first of my family to be born here.”

“What’s your point?” I asked.

“My point, mate, is that I’m Australian! I don’t give a root where my family came from. None of me mates do either. Down Under we don’t have no Welsh-Australians, Scots-Aussies, or even Italian-Aussies. These reffos from Italy are different. They are Italians. You have no bloody connection to them. Maybe that’s why you Yanks are so screwed up. You don’t know who you are or what you are! As far as we’re concerned,

you're a Yank. You're an American! Aren't you proud of your country? Now if you want, we can fight about that," Ian offered.

How did I get myself into this? I asked myself as I stared at Ian, knowing full well how it had evolved.

On December 26, Australians celebrate Boxing Day, a holiday about which Americans know little and care less. The Aussies seemed grateful for the time off during the beginning of their summer season. They had no consensus about the meaning of this celebration. When I asked what Boxing Day was, I got seven versions from 10 people.

The reason for the celebration didn't matter. The Aussies have always been pragmatic about their good times. They have a saying: "Life is not a dress rehearsal!"

I arrived in Sydney on Boxing Day. Since I was a newly minted non-commissioned officer with 10 months service with the infamous 173d Airborne Brigade, I was fortunate to be *anywhere* on the planet. Owing to the munificence of Divine Providence, I'd survived to earn a Rest and Relaxation (R&R) trip to Australia.

In my unit, the command held a lottery for R&R. I wanted to go to Sydney. I put my request in early. Even so, the only slot available for Sydney was Dec. 26, 1968 through Jan. 1, 1969. Experts warned me that Sydney's nightlife would be muted on the week after Christmas. I knew I had only one chance. I took it.

I left the base camp at An Khe on Christmas Eve and flew to the R&R center at Cam Ranh Bay. At the center, I drew a khaki uniform with three yellow chevrons on each sleeve, appropriate service ribbons, and a blue, white, and red airborne brigade patch, to

hang from the left pocket of my shirt. Paratroopers called the 173d Airborne, the “Herd.” No trooper knew why, but the nickname sounded cool.

After I got cleaned up from the field, I went to the non-commissioned officers’ club and sought out other sergeants who sported the Herd patch. In this way eight or nine relative strangers got toasted on Christmas Eve. Eventually, a staff sergeant suggested that we all go to Midnight Mass at the Base Chapel. The club was closing and it seemed like a good idea.

The padre smiled when we came in, found a pew big enough for all of us, genuflected in unison, and took our seats. At the end of the homily, he told us to have a good time on R&R and promised to pray for our safe return.

On Christmas Day we traveled by chartered jet to Australia. We landed at Darwin on the northern coast for refueling. We had a long layover because Sydney had restrictions about planes landing late at night. Most of us spent time exchanging our money to Australian dollars. We bellied up to the bar and drank the potent Australian beer.

We left Darwin the next morning and flew southeast over the vast, unpopulated outback. We arrived at 0700 in Sydney. The Australian army bussed us to the American R&R center, where we obtained civilian clothes and rooms in the various hotels.

I scored a five-star hotel, the Carlton-Rex in the Kings Cross section of Sydney. After I checked into my room, I immediately went into the bath and took a shower that lasted more than an hour. I amused myself by flushing the toilet two dozen times in a row. I don’t recall if the water swirled clockwise.

It was noon when I went down to the bar alone. When I got downstairs, I realized that I'd left most of my money in my room. I had five Australian dollars in my pocket. I figured that I could get one beer, even at a five-star hotel, with five dollars.

The bar at the Carlton-Rex looked like any upscale saloon in the United States. The number of folks drinking at noon surprised me. The atmosphere was loud, brash, boisterous, and exciting. The clientele appeared to be locals. They were having a blast.

I took a seat at the bar. The friendly bartender made me for an American. He advised that American beers were imports and too expensive, especially considering their inferior quality. Just as well, I wanted to try the local brews.

Two men, who worked in Sydney, sat to my right. When they learned I was a Yank, they became friendly and talkative. They had both served in the Australian Army in Vietnam.

The Aussies, Roger and Ian, offered to "shout me a pot" of Tooheys. I accepted. It turned out to be first rate, better tasting and stronger than any American beer.

I wanted to return the favor and asked the bartender if I could charge the beers to my room.

"No worries, mate," the bartender informed me. "But why? The pots are only 17 cents each."

I was shocked. Even with my limited income as an Army sergeant, I could afford to drink here.

And drink there I did. Roger, Ian, and I sat at the bar all afternoon telling war stories and drinking beer. I had at least five pints before Roger suggested we try something more substantial.

I was pretty sloshed, but Ian taunted me. Neither of the Aussies were Airborne. They'd both served in the Infantry. They argued that an elite paratrooper should be able to keep up with a simple digger.

Early that evening we had three more rounds. Each of us got to choose a drink, and all three of us would drink it. I don't remember what the other guys chose, but I picked margaritas.

Cynics will dispute that I introduced the Mexican margarita to the folks Down Under. I remain adamant. I did. You're welcome, Australia!

Matriculating at Arizona State from 1965 – 1967, I became familiar with tequila. It was cheap, potent, and available to college students in Tempe. It was the drink of choice for fraternity boys who wanted a quick buzz. Those reluctant to drink shots drank the margarita.

Neither the ex-diggers nor the bartender had heard of margaritas. I watched the bartender search through a dusty book behind the bar to see how to make them.

Ian, Roger, and the bar tender—who joined us in this one round—loved them. Margaritas became a big hit. By the end of the week, when I last visited the Carlton Rex bar, dozens of Aussies were drinking them. Margaritas became a national craze. It's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Buoyed by the tequila, Roger and Ian invited me to a party at Ian's beach house in a suburb near Sydney. I declined, bid them good night, and went to my room.

I fell asleep in my clothes and woke up 30 minutes later to find Ian and Roger pounding on my door. They wouldn't take no for an answer. I found myself in Roger's car bound for Tamarama Beach.

After his service, Ian became a stockbroker. He'd had better than average success. He could afford a small house across the street from the Tasman Sea. His home sat on a limestone bluff facing southeast, north of Tamarama Beach and a half-mile south of Bondi Beach.

Since Ian was a bachelor, he'd furnished his place simply, but tastefully. The decor surprised me, since it was different from Ian's rough, Aussie-male persona.

When I got my bearings at the party, I noticed that each guy had a wife or girlfriend in tow. I was the odd man out. I recall that every one of the females was very pretty. A few were gorgeous.

The sheilas in Australia had embraced the mini-skirt. All of the ladies at the party were fit and looked fabulous.

The women flirted with me. They loved American men. Several told me that I had the sexiest accent. While I was smitten with lust, I knew better than to react to the flirtations. One look at the scowls on the diggers, told me to behave.

I ended up in Ian's kitchen with the men, who ignored the sheilas, drank copious amounts of beer, and acted like rugby players after a match.

It got bizarre when two of the ex-soldiers, Ethan and Connor, started pinning their service medals to their bare chests. I declined their offer to demonstrate my courage through self-mutilation. I wasn't that drunk.

I was sitting on the wide sill of an oversized window in Ian's Kitchen, talking to Roger when I heard Ian make a disparaging remark about the Italian and Greek immigrants who had come to Sydney from southern Europe.

Worried about the billions of Asians to their north, the xenophobic Australian government had encouraged immigration from Europe for a decade. Ian and two other ex-soldiers were hostile to their government's policy. They felt that the newcomers were quick to apply for welfare, and to seek the financial and free medical services that the socialistic Australian government too readily supplied.

Ian and his mates resented the high taxes that they had to pay to support the Italians and Greeks.

In response to a question from Michael—a huge ex-digger about my age— Ian said, “the guineas are mongrels and dole bludgers. They have no business here.”

I'd grown up in Phoenix—a town with two ethnic groups: Hispanics and everybody else. I'd lived in a Mexican neighborhood. I had scant familiarity with the Northeastern Italian-American experience that included large families with Italian surnames who lived in close proximity to each other and preserved the culture and cuisine from the old country.

Even though I couldn't tell baked ziti from eggplant parmesan, I'd bristled at the Italian jokes and crude references to my ethnicity that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s. So when Ian described the Italian refugees as worthless, welfare cheats, I responded, “Hey bud, that's a crock a shit!”

During the rancorous exchange that followed, I regretted calling Ian out. I had no moral high ground from which to launch an assault.

For the first time in my life, someone with a weird objectivity had called into question my personal worldview. Ian had disputed my self-identification. He challenged my patriotism.

I'd always thought of myself as an Italian-American. Except for people who could trace their lineage back generations, I'd viewed everyone as a hyphen American.

I never thought of myself as simply an American. In the 1960s, aside from the monumental racial problems, which then were far from any hope of resolution, America touted itself as a melting pot, where every person could pull himself up by his bootstraps regardless of his race, social class, or ethnicity.

My own observations and the need for drastic Federal legislation had proved to me that in the late 60s the ideal of equality was not available for blacks. I never believed that America was a pure meritocracy for anyone.,

Though within my own culture, I knew that race, ethnicity, and class mattered to some degree, it shook me that to an outsider, all of us were simply Americans. To the Aussies, the thought of a hyphen American seemed absurd.

While Ian and I faced off in his kitchen to the amusement of his mates, Roger got up and inserted his bulk between us.

"Ian, Tony's a jobbo. Remember your first weeks in Southeast Asia?" Roger asked.

"Rog, he called me a pubic hair!" Ian reminded everyone, though his voice sounded far from angry.

"True, so tell him he's a whacker. You'll be square. Let's have another beer and save calling the ambo." Roger said to Ian.

"Yank, you're a bloody whacker," Ian said as he extended his hand.

"I'm sure that's true, whatever that means. Ian, I'm sorry..."

"No worries, mate," Ian interrupted "Have another pot and we'll call it square."

The party went on for several more hours. I ended up hitch hiking back to Sydney after dawn. I saw Roger and Ian twice during my week and we had another party when I returned for several weeks after my tour in Vietnam ended.

I never told him, but Ian gave me a great gift. He focused a light on an issue with which I had subconsciously struggled. From Boxing Day of 1968 until the present, I've been simply an American.