

**The Last Great Adventure**

### The Last Great Adventure

*“The storytellers go back and back, to a clearing in the forest where a great fire burns, and the old shamans dance and sing, for our heritage of stories began in fire, magic, the spirit world. And that is where it is held, today.”*

—Doris Lessing



Nathan Thomas packed his last pair of jeans into a Samsonite suitcase as he took a final glance at his apartment. It was a fine place to live in – the balcony overlooked the cityscape of Sydney, and large windows illuminated the barren white walls. His bookshelf bore titles such as *Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries*, and *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. He was an ambitious, young professional, captivated by the endless possibilities that lay before him. The travel brochure sat on his bed, it read: *Blissful Borneo*, in bright, swaying calligraphy, printed with saturated images of cloudless blue skies and aquamarine oceans. It was getting dark on a Friday night, and he had to make his way to the airport to board his flight to Kota Kinabalu International Airport. His adventure was about to begin.

Nathan decided to spend his first day in Borneo on one of its pristine beaches. He sat alone on the coastline, digging his hands into the fine white sand. Even under the towering palm trees lining the coast of Borneo, it was impossible to find refuge from the scorching heat of the sunlight.

Nathan lay down on the sand in solitude, staring at the vast ocean and endless blue sky. It appeared just as it had been captured on the brochure. His smartphone was gripped firmly in his hand; he was unable to divert his thoughts from the corporate lifestyle that he'd left behind. Nathan's mind continued to rush through the catalogue of opportunities that he may have been missing back in Sydney.

Five long, lingering days he'd spent relaxing in Borneo, but Nathan was having trouble adjusting to the slow pace of the island. He sipped on a cold bottle of Heineken as he watched the passers-by from an open bar. As he gulped the last of his beer he overheard two backpackers behind him discussing their next destination in a heavy Australian accent. *They must be from the suburbs...* he thought to himself. When he turned around to take a glimpse at them, they noticed him and beckoned him over.

The two young men introduced themselves, telling him of their plans to visit the edge of the jungle in hope of meeting one of the last remaining isolated tribes that were still living on the island. They informed him that the tribe was called the Iban, and that entering the jungle required a permit, only given to a few anthropologists and government officials.

Nathan was tantalised by the opportunity to break the monotony of his island vacation, and further by the risk involved by doing something forbidden. It sparked within him a desire for a true adventure fraught with the possibility of imprisonment or even death in such an isolated place.

After contemplating his escalating discontent with the long and dreary days in the shallow façade of his luxury holiday, he asked the men if he could join them on their journey. They agreed to let him come along, delighted at having a fellow Australian to accompany them.

It was the fifth hour and the early morning sun was rising from the peaks of the limestone mountains. As Nathan waited on his balcony, he heard the familiar accents of the young men calling out to him from the street below, standing beside a muddied Land Rover. He made his way downstairs, pulling his jacket over his shoulders to protect himself from the cool, misty air.

The three men climbed into the truck and the driver set out down the dirt roads, passing the crude streets of Kota Batu and into the dense jungle lining the muddy path. The constant stream of logging trucks driving past them made their trip arduous, causing them to swerve to avoid a collision on more than one occasion.

In the long hours spent cramped in the vehicle, the two young tourists exchanged fragments of their origins, explaining that they were aspiring anthropologists in their third year of university, hailing from the sun-baked stretch of Perth. Although they seemed to be of the same age and stature, they had strikingly different dispositions. One man called himself “Dylan”; he bore the semblance of an athlete, who spoke brief sentences in a low guttural voice, leaving his friend to elaborate on his ideas. The other, “Marky”, was a man, slight of figure, who buzzed unreservedly with whimsical anecdotes from their past adventures “back home, in the big smoke of Westie,” as he would say. He wore a tattered straw hat, casting a shadow over a long lock of gold hair that trailed across his forehead.

Marky anticipated his first-ever contact with a real tribal community, having read James Brooke's recounts of his befriending and eventual rulership of the Dayaks in the nineteenth century. He made emphasis on the word "rulership", nudging his friend who responded with a roll of the eyes. "Some fierce warriors they are," Dylan chimed in, "killed some thousands of *pirates* for the guy."

Dylan recalled the accounts published by the anthropologist, Tobias Schneebaum, who documented his journey into the jungles of Peru, where he was accepted by the Arakama – a tribe of Indians who were still practising cannibalism. "They were well known to have killed outsiders who had ventured into their jungle, in search of unique artefacts," he said, before lowering his voice into a whisper: "such as the shrunken heads of human beings."

Nathan chuckled in disbelief, smiling to himself as he imagined himself watching a tribal battle as he sat, crowned, on a throne of bones. He was charmed by the life the young students brought to an otherwise droning expedition, although he kept to himself as he was short of any exciting experiences, having spent the majority of his life within the white walls of a sterile city. He rolled down his window to soak up the pure air of the dense tropics, only to realise that they were already alone and stranded in the heart of the jungle, where the canopies seemed to encase them in a shroud of lush greens.

After setting foot into the soft soil, the tourists watched the four-wheel drive trample across the snapping sticks as it drove back to town. Dylan pulled a machete out of his backpack and began carving a path through the thick green underlay. After six gruelling hours of making their way through the jungle, Nathan was exhausted. "How long until we find this tribe?" he grunted, brushing a fern off his cheek.

Dylan replied, “You don’t understand; we won’t find them. They’ll find us.”

Marky added, “We’re in their world now. We can’t tell, but we all reek of tobacco, aftershave, cologne and what-have-ya. We can be seen and heard from miles away by every animal and human being who lives here.”

Nathan was unsettled by their answers. He’d imagined he would walk into a village and be welcomed by its inhabitants; his heart was racing with the realisation that he did not ask enough questions beforehand. He was now faced with the true implications of his decision to follow the young and naïve students into such a dangerous place.

At the moment of this realisation, he heard a sharp rustling of the leaves hanging from the tree trunk beside him. As he inspected the trunk, his eyes widened in horror. It was a hand-crafted arrow, which had only narrowly missed his companion’s head.

“Run!” he shouted.

After a few minutes of racing through the dense jungle, Nathan was no longer able to follow the students’ path. Having lost sight of them, he tried to catch up by listening to their footsteps, but as he tried to make his way towards them, he realised that he was lost. He was now all alone, deep into the jungle, aware that the Iban were hunting him down.

Exhausted and scared, Nathan stopped to hide under a rotting log, and waited. While he was frozen with fear, he listened to his surroundings and realised that he was still in grave danger. The birds had stopped singing. The only sounds he could hear were the pounding of his heart and his heaving breathing. It became clear to him that the silence indicated the presence of a predator still present in the area. He knew that the predator, or predators, were the people who had just attacked him and his friends.

An hour passed and Nathan had managed to steady his breathing. He concluded that he was safe from his hunters because the jungle animals had once again resumed their noisy chorus. Slowly he emerged from underneath the log, scanning the area around him to determine his next move.

A figure shifted within the plethora of shadows cast by the rustling foliage. Cautiously Nathan moved in the opposite direction as the steadily diminishing light seeped through the towering trees of the rainforest. In a thirsty trudge, he ventured through a pathway following the sound of water, eventually coming to a small waterfall tucked in the corner of a rock pool.

He removed his muddied clothes and bathed in silence, drinking up the sweet taste of fresh spring water from the fountain splashing down on his cheeks. The cool air calmed his spirit, and soon enough he had fallen asleep by the edge of the waterfall. An old voice bellowed behind him, speaking in an unknown language.

Nathan's eyes sprang open as he turned toward the sound, realising it was not a part of a bad dream. He saw an aged man, dressed in leopard fur and adorned with carved bone jewellery. The old man locked eyes with the tourist, and maintained a curious gaze as if he was trying to decipher Nathan's purpose for being there. He turned and stepped into the shadows of the jungle while gesturing with his arm for Nathan to follow. As he slowly got up on his feet, he instinctively understood that the old man had no ill intentions toward him.

The old man had patiently waited for him to wake up. Nathan watched the old man as he skilfully manoeuvred over the rocky outcrops lining the pool of water through the giant tropical leaves just a few metres from where he was standing. As they ventured deeper into

the jungle, Nathan found himself in the midst of thick vines that draped from the outstretching arms of the trees. Following the old man's movements, he rushed to catch up with him and they made their way to a camp dotted with a dozen or more small huts with a fire in the centre emitting a warm glow upon the trees that encircled the dwellings.

The old man called out to his people, and a crowd gathered around them. Nathan looked around nervously, noticing a few burly spear-wielding men among the curious tribespeople, who shared the same expression of anxious curiosity. The old man called forth a tall, gaunt man who shuffled through the scrum of backs to reach him. The tall man took notice of Nathan's unusually pale, sharp features and greeted him with a meek "Hello".

Nathan was somewhat settled by the man's calm demeanour, and politely returned the greeting, although his teeth clattered in anxious apprehension and from the approaching cool air of the night as he stood in his damp, muddied clothes. The tall man conversed with the elder and then he turned to Nathan. "Rentap wants to know your name."

"Rentap?" Nathan enquired.

The elder responded with a nod.

"Nathan Thomas," Nathan chirped wryly. As the old man stared at him, Nathan realised his error. "My name is Nathan," he continued while pointing to himself, taking the elder's hand into his own. The tall man briefly translated his introduction as Nathan awkwardly shook his hand, to the tribe's amusement. Although Nathan's foreign greeting left the elder feeling awkward, the tall man who could understand Nathan's language and translate his words told Nathan that he should not be scared. The elder was the tribe's shaman, and as the most respected member of the tribe, he welcomed him as his personal guest.



When Nathan enquired about the fate of his two Australian companions, the tall man failed to answer. Instead he advised Nathan to take shelter in one of the huts and rest for the night, “We will talk more tomorrow. It’s time for us to sleep.” he hushed.

Nathan was escorted to a hut where seven other tribespeople, all adult males, were already resting in hammocks. Navigating in almost total darkness, the tall man, who introduced himself as Yagi, guided him to an empty hammock before leaving.

Early the next morning, Nathan was woken up by the chatter of children gathered around his hammock. They were watching him sleep with fascination, taking turns to tentatively touch his clothes as a game of dare. As Nathan made his way out of the hut, he glanced at the women busy weaving and cooking in the centre of the small camp. He noticed for the first time, that the night before, the women were all absent from the crowd. He saw that the women did not wear any clothes to cover their breasts; they only wore a twisted cloth that covered the lower half of their bodies.

In contrast to the previous night, the men were now absent from the camp. This made Nathan feel somewhat safer, knowing that they did not see the need to leave a party of armed men to watch over him.

The morning sun was blinding. His eyes hurt as they adjusted to the glare outside. He heard a familiar voice greeting him and turned to acknowledge his presence. Once again he was surrounded by the many children that had been watching him sleep.

Yagi took him to a longhouse, where a sharp scent grew intense as he approached the entrance. There he saw the shaman who had found him and escorted him to the camp. The longhouse had sharp straws of grass protruding out of its walls. Inside the structure, the dirt floor was smoothed over and the air was filled with a pungent odour coming from the pot in the middle of the room. The ceiling bore intricate totems suspended from ivory hooks on the ceiling, each resembling a different wild animal and all sorts of engravings. In the centre of the room, a sizeable pot of water was infused with an assortment of herbs that bubbled from the bottom in a slight effervescence.

Nathan was asked to sit in a circle of men who appeared to be taking part in a ritual. While chanting in unison, one by one, they were offered a wooden bowl from the elder from which they each took a small sip. The shaman looked directly at Nathan and uttered a few sentences. Yagi translated to Nathan – the shaman had chosen to spare Nathan’s life. He would be allowed to receive the elder’s message and would then be escorted to the edge of the jungle and allowed to return from whence he came.

It became apparent to Nathan why he was not told the fate of his companions when he had asked Yagi the night before. Nathan was suddenly confronted by the thought that the students may have been dealt with in a less compassionate way by the hunting party who intercepted them the previous day. The students’ folly was to hope for a peaceful encounter with this tribe, even though they were fully aware of the violent nature of previous encounters with the people found in the deepest parts of the jungle. Nathan dealt with his growing sense of guilt with feelings of contempt for the ignorance and immaturity of his two Australian friends.

He thought back to the car ride, when he had first listened to the two students convincing themselves that being unarmed while entering the jungle, with peaceful intentions, would inspire the natives to accept their transgression. Their desire to venture into the unknown in search of a real adventure in an increasingly homogeneous world, while seeking the opportunity of a true discovery that would catapult them to world fame, inspired their plans while completely blinding them to the serious risks they were facing.

Nathan's mind was racing with these thoughts. He remembered that on the night that he asked the two students if he could join them, they talked about their reasons for going on this adventure. All of a sudden it became clear to him that, if it weren't for his wild excitement and thirst for adventure, a rational person like himself would never have accepted the high stakes that this journey entailed. Nonetheless, being inebriated after having been subjected to the increasingly monotonous pace of the island had clouded Nathan's judgement while listening to his companions. Nathan was confronted by the irony of the situation he found himself in; he received the gift for which his two companions had been knowingly willing to risk their own lives.

Nathan's thoughts returned to the present as Yagi once again turned to translate the shaman's words. "There was a man who came to teach our neighbouring tribes about the outside world. He was himself a true shaman; his name was Major Tom Harrison. He wanted to learn from us while showing respect for our traditions.

"The elders had learned this from the neighbouring tribes. The Major had taught them about the vicious nature of civilised men who came here long ago during your second world war from a place called Japan and other parts of your world, but a new invasion is presently

coming from our own people who live along the coastal areas of the island. The modern way of life brought to the island by Westerners encompassed the many destructive ways in managing and benefiting from the fragile balance of nature. Many of the people who live on the coastal lands of Borneo adopted the modern ideals of civilisation which is a kind of savagery of a different sort. The stories that the elders told us about the wartime were rife with nightmarish atrocities committed on our native people, but also on each other.

“My people are the sons of the first men living by the laws of nature, we are free. We have a special relationship with the spirits, we live with a knowledge that guides us and keeps us free from our brothers living along the coast. Unfortunately, our brothers adopted a destructive way of life and have become indifferent to our ancient culture, gradually laying waste to our world. We don’t lay claim to any personal possessions. In our world there are no words for jealousy or greed. We see each other as members of a big family. The jungle protects us from those who would see us vanish, but the loggers are getting further into the jungle with each passing day. Apparently, the government’s policy is meant to protect us from commercial interests, but the profits that the jungle provides corrupted those in power.

“We lived with the forest like the wild animals; we are connected to each living thing around us. Part of us dies with each piece of the jungle that is destroyed. The jungle is becoming a cage that gets smaller and smaller with each tree that is cut and taken away.

“We have always been prosperous, well-fed people with time to devote to other interests; many of us are craftsmen, artists, carvers of wood. In our village the oldest carver is almost blind, but to watch him you would never think so, with so much knowledge stored in his fingertips that being blind hardly matters.

“We want to remain independent. We don't want government control, we don't need missionaries. You are a representative of a civilisation that fails to recognise the fragility of our mother Earth and ignores our right to exist.”

After listening attentively to Yagi's translation, Nathan straightened his spine and shuffled into composure. “If I may ask,” he addressed the shaman, “what do you want from me?”

“We want to send a message to the outside world” he uttered in his own language while looking at Nathan as he waited for Yagi to translate.

“This potion has been brewed from the sacred bark of the Kahayan River tree. Drink it, and I will send you into the spirit world. This is a place devoid of time – you will experience a realm without the boundaries and limitations of space.

“Drink, my friend,” the shaman ordered, as he extended his arm and placed the wooden bowl in front of Nathan's face, “drink now.”

As Nathan took a tentative, small sip from the bowl, his eyes swerved in both directions and he was taken aback by the fact that all of the people around the pot were quite old, a detail that he had not previously noticed. “Yes,” the shaman in front of him uttered, “we are all shamans, elders, and this is a special gathering of all of the leaders from neighbouring tribes.”

Now Nathan was certain that he was hallucinating – how could they have responded to his thoughts? And how could he understand their words? As he took another sip from the wooden bowl he started to sweat profusely. He felt as if his entire body was melting into the floor of the longhouse, like a bar of chocolate in the scorching heat of the midday sun. He started to feel that he was physically becoming a part of the house. Nathan's eyelids became

heavy and as they closed, he felt as if he was uniting with a complex entity. He didn't feel as if he was part of the universe like he had expected. He *was* the universe and everything that existed within it, tangible or otherwise. Everything that was, or that will be, had always been within himself.

As Nathan gradually woke from the intense experience induced by the shamanic potion, he felt as if he had been forcefully dragged back into a world that now felt less real. He realised that he no longer felt an attachment to the material world. He was angry and reluctant to awaken from his altered state of consciousness, as if he was being forced back into a cage that keeps his mind trapped by the illusion of what he had previously perceived to be reality. "No! No! I want to go back, I want to be free!" he exclaimed. Yagi comforted him and reminded him that it was not his time to leave the physical world, and that he had a mission entrusted to him by these wise elders. His mission was to go back into the world and try to make it a better place for everyone who lives in it – every person, and every living creature. "We live on a sick Earth, a world threatened by a collective indifference." Yagi said. "Your life was spared because you were chosen by these wise men to be enlightened, and return to the world as a messenger, entrusted with making people see the real impacts of a system based on ruinous consumption. Your mission is to make your people see the need for a change to allow our Earth to heal."

Three days had passed and Nathan had fully recovered from the life-altering experience. He nevertheless retained a powerful sense of purpose and an unshaken conviction that he could no longer remain indifferent to the folly of humanity. Yagi escorted him on a five-day journey to the edge of the jungle and pointed him to a nearby village at the edge of the Gunung Mulu National Park in north-eastern Sarawak, where Nathan would be able to

contact the Australian consulate from the coastal city of Miri. Before leaving, Yagi expressed his sorrow for the loss of Nathan's two companions, but he explained that his people were fighting for their survival.

Yagi was surprisingly knowledgeable of what was being done to his people and he understood why. He went on to say, "The powerful logging companies routinely sponsor raid parties to ward off indigenous people from the areas where they intend to advance their activities, and many of my people had been murdered with no recourse to justice. It's an increasingly corrupted system where everyone can be bribed, paid off, or intimidated to cooperate."

"Allowing outsiders to venture into our jungle without fear jeopardises the survival of my people. The message sent out by adopting this violent approach with anyone who enters our jungle is... *leave us alone and we will leave you alone*, a message that you and your two companions chose to ignore at your own peril. You are very lucky; you are the only one to come into our jungle and leave to tell about it. Maybe because of this the world will be willing to listen to our message."

"We are seen as an embarrassment by those who consider themselves civilised – they care less about us than they do for the orang-utan and you know how few of them are left. Without help, my people will disappear as well." Yagi bade Nathan farewell and swiftly vanished into the thickness of the jungle like a phantom, leaving Nathan to walk alone on a well-beaten track toward the nearest village a few hours away.

Nathan made his way to the village and headed straight to the small police outpost to report the loss of his companions. The officer taking his statement made a call from another room and upon his return, became increasingly aggressive and suspicious of Nathan's story and many more questions followed.

Nathan realised that this was no longer a deposition. The officer's change of tone toward him was not due to the fact that he had broken the law by entering the jungle without a permit. By then, Nathan was aware that he was once again in serious trouble as the conversation had clearly turned into an interrogation with him as a suspect for the murder of his two Australian companions.

The officer questioned every detail of Nathan's story. The officer said, "Nothing that you have told me makes any sense. The indigenous people in this area do not use arrows, they use darts poisoned with the bark of a tree." Nathan responded that the arrow or spear was cast to scare the party into scattering, and that his two companions could well have been killed with poison arrows – but he could not attest to it because he had never seen the hunting party.

The officer informed Nathan that an interrogator had been summoned and he would be there in the morning to conduct a proper investigation into the fate of the two Australian tourists, and that it would be in Nathan's interest to tell the truth and spare them valuable time and save himself the agony of an interrogation. Nathan felt like he was trapped inside of a nightmare. He didn't seem able to keep up with or comprehend his situation. Was this police officer really insinuating that he had murdered his own friends? Confusion swallowed Nathan. What was going on?



The officer was visibly frustrated – his voice had become loud and menacing, and the atmosphere was becoming progressively tense. Nathan knew he was in trouble and once again he felt real fear. Finally the officer exclaimed, “It’s only you and me here. I have been patient with you until now but you will not be honest with me. I want to do you a favour and prepare you for what is going to happen to you tomorrow when the interrogator from the big city gets here.

“He will not hold back until he returns to the city with a confession, and take you back with him as a trophy to be displayed in front of the cameras, for the whole world to see that even in these remote areas we can still do our jobs and maintain the rule of law.”

As the officer moved behind the chair Nathan was sitting on, he was struck on the head with a phone book with great force, driving him off the chair and onto the ground with a loud thud. As Nathan sprawled on the cold, hard floor, the officer quickly followed to kick him. Nathan clenched the throbbing pain that burned within his chest and mouthed a silent grunt. A wave of terror surged through his aching body. He felt that his luck had finally run out, and mentally resigned himself to the fate he believed would be his. He could not escape. The officer continued to attack him repeatedly, until it was a struggle for Nathan to move any part of his body. By then, the burning sensation of fear within him had extinguished, leaving him ensnared under the ashes of surrender.

While pretending to be unconscious, Nathan’s distressed mind raced with debilitating thoughts of defeat. He concluded that all that was left was the resignation to die and return to the place the shamans had shown him, which existed beyond the physical world. All that Nathan needed in order to return to the higher realm of existence was to abandon his mortal flesh and finally be free.

Nathan was certain that the authorities would find a way to construct the needed evidence and extort a confession from him, for him to be confined to a slow death in a prison environment. He had read the horror stories of other cases – in books about the risks of overseas business – of unlucky Westerners who found themselves caught up in the legal nightmare of a Southeast Asian country.

Being let go was not a possibility, as this act would signify the failure of the authorities to deliver justice. The bad publicity resulting from it would embarrass the country and keep visitors and their needed tourist dollars away. Therefore announcing Nathan's arrest to the world would seal his fate.

The officer grabbed Nathan's ankles and dragged him inside a cell and locked him in. Nathan, still pretending to be unconscious to avoid further attacks, heard a muffled sound as if someone had fallen onto the floor, but he did not dare to turn his gaze and look. Soon after the cell door was unlocked and he heard a familiar voice calling to him in a whisper: "Nathan, are you awake? Can you get up on your feet?"

Nathan stood up and Yagi said, "Wasn't I clear when I told you that the authorities are corrupted around these parts? I could not be seen walking with you in broad daylight, but I was worried that you might do something stupid. They would not help us and they certainly would not help you to get out of here with any kind of knowledge of what is happening to us. All they want to do is to bury any witnesses to their genocidal practices, natives and foreigners alike. You told them your plans, now we have to improvise and make our way inland across the border to Brunei, and try to get you home from Bandar Seri Begawan. You can no longer go to Miri – they will be looking for you there. I overheard his telephone conversation with the headquarters – you are a wanted criminal who allegedly murdered a

police officer before escaping from jail after confessing to the killing of your Australian friends.”

“I didn’t kill the police officer nor did I kill the two Australians, why would you blame me for their deaths?” Nathan asked.

“I am not blaming you, I was listening to the interrogation, and the call that the officer made to Miri’s station. They want to make you responsible for their deaths, and they will give you the death penalty regardless.

“Let us go quickly,” said Yagi, “it will take four days or more to reach Bandar Seri Begawan by going through the jungle. Tomorrow, every police officer in every town will certainly be looking for you. Your only chance to make it home alive is to reach an Australian official across the border and be smuggled out to a neighbouring country across the sea, the Philippines or Thailand. Only then you will be safe.”

They walked for four gruelling days through the jungle with hardly any food and small rations of water. Nathan and Yagi finally reached the coastal city of Bandar Seri Begawan which, although on the island of Borneo, was a city belonging to the sovereign nation of Brunei, outside the reach of the Bornean authorities. However, given the serious crimes with which he was being accused of back in Borneo, the risk of extradition remained; so Yagi had instructed Nathan to leave the island of Borneo where he could seek refuge and assistance from an Australian embassy who could help him get home. Yagi and Nathan said farewell for the last time.

Nathan returned to Sydney via Thailand with the help of an American yachtsman, who had stopped in Brunei while sailing on the South China Sea. Nathan’s life had been altered by his experiences in the jungle of Borneo.

A year had passed since his great adventure. As he stood on the balcony of his apartment once again, he looked out to the cityscape of one of the most beautiful modern cities in the world. When Nathan turned his gaze to his bookshelf, he realised how profoundly his perception of life had been altered by his journey. The books no longer spoke to him in the ways they once had. It was obvious to him that these books were written by people whose lifestyles mirrored his previous ignorant ways of thinking, dominated by illusions of success.

He remembered the many times he had contemplated his own death, and how each of his naïve mistakes ultimately culminated into a significant turning point in his life. Each of these tragic mistakes brought him closer to a new awareness and a powerful sense of purpose.

The focus on climbing the corporate ladder and reaching a position of advantage was no longer occupying his thoughts. The intensity of his experiences in the jungle of Borneo pushed Nathan to mature. He acquired a sense of understanding and insight about himself and his place in the world that can be described as “enlightened”.

Nathan looked forward for any chance to spread the message of the Iban shaman with enthusiasm. These experiences taught him to live a humble life without taking advantage of his elevated position in society. Nathan reached into his bag and pulled out a newly-printed hardcover copy of *The True Cost of Life*, by Nathan Thomas, and proudly placed it in the centre of his bookshelf.

**The Last Great Adventure**

The subject chosen for the major work is a reflection and commentary on our economic environment. It was inspired by the growing awareness of the unsustainability of an ever-expanding economy that promotes the inherently flawed idea that continually increasing consumption of goods is beneficial to our wellbeing.

The prevalent views on our capitalist system among the working class naïvely place the blame for the degradation of the environment, and the growing economic disparity on big corporations and corrupt political leaders. From these observations, I was inspired to create a story based on a society resistant to the vices of the modern societies. The protagonist's disposition reflects his former lack of personal accountability towards environmental issues as they are being proliferated by the media.

The increasingly prevalent attitudes of personal entitlement to our current lifestyle can only culminate in a global degradation of natural resources, which will require significant changes to the social-political systems that brought us unprecedented widespread prosperity. This message was reflected in the creation of the protagonist, who was preoccupied with his struggle to reach a higher level of financial success in spite of the increasing pressure that his goals manifested in his life. His decision to take a vacation to Borneo serves as a catalyst to his change in perspective toward these attitudes, inspired by the realisation of how demands of natural resources affect the global climate.

There is a growing sense of being deprived of our share of the planet's immense resources by powerful commercial entities. This sense of discontent focuses on the current power structure that places greater resources in the hands of fewer people, which I implemented into the story through the shaman's message to the protagonist. The tribal community featured in my short

story represents a counteracting venue for ideas that have been gradually abandoned in our Western socio-economic environment.

The intended audience are the readers of *E - The Environmental Magazine*, an online publication which intends to “provide information about environmental issues and to share ideas and resources so that readers can live more sustainable lives and connect with ongoing efforts for change”<sup>1</sup>. The targeted age group is 15-25 year olds, who are the most affected by media influence.

The story is written in a way where the socio-political statements are hidden to encourage the reader to connect with and appreciate the indigenous groups whose natural relationship with the environment perseveres in spite of the expanding commercialisation of natural resources. The character is placed in a real-life context with an imagined story taking place within it, so that the reader is left wondering if such a story did indeed take place. The major work touches on many important points. It encourages personal responsibility for the degradation of our environment, and it challenges the notion that cultures which have a less materialistic way of life are inferior and more primitive. It encourages the readers not to be afraid to take risks in pursuing their dreams for a more fulfilling life.

Research on the geography of Borneo, focusing on Sarawak, Bandar Seri Begawan, and Miri using Google Maps was used to calculate distances and travel times both by road vehicles and on foot. The setting of the island began to take shape after reading the travel blog *Crossing Borders: Malaysia to Brunei*<sup>2</sup> which provided information on the transport available

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<sup>1</sup> E - The Environmental Magazine; <http://www.emagazine.com/about-e/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://lifeinarucksack.com/crossing-borders-malaysia-brunei/>

on the island, including the time taken and transport destinations. The articles by Iban blogger Janggang posted on *Iban History, Customs, and Traditions*<sup>3</sup> provided insights to the history, culture, and traditions of the tribes of Borneo which I synthesised into the plot of the story.

From these sources, I delved deeper into the history of Bornean tribes and discovered the Western expeditions to their primitive lands. BBC Four's documentary *Tom Harrisson: The Barefoot Anthropologist* recounted the journey of Major Tom Harrisson, who was commissioned to infiltrate the tribespeople of the deep interior on the island of Borneo and persuade them to fight alongside a small group of commandos chosen personally by Major Harrisson to halt the Japanese advance on the island. Major Harrisson succeeded in his mission and later decided to remain on the island to further study the customs and tradition of the indigenous people he had befriended.

The documentary *Banged Up Abroad: Indonesia/Escape from Hell/Busted In Bali* in which Chris Parnell, a tourist from Melbourne, was arrested in Indonesia after being falsely accused of smuggling hashish while in Bali with his wife and young daughter, inspired the plot in which the main character finds himself unable to defend his innocence for the disappearance of his two friends. In Parnell's story, the police's evidences proved his innocence, and regardless of the concrete evidence, he was kept imprisoned due to the local authorities' reluctance to admit their mistake.

The journey of the protagonist was guided by my study of the Area of Study: Journeys in the English Advanced Preliminary course. The protagonist of the story undertakes a physical journey from the city of Sydney to the island of Borneo, which instigates an inner journey as

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<sup>3</sup> <https://ibancustoms.wordpress.com/iban-history-in-brief/>



he discovers a more meaningful relationship between himself and the world. The structure used in the major work is a series of conversations and reflections that parody similar underlining principles present in our own day to day lives.

Researching the ideas expressed in my major work allowed me to conceptualise my own attitudes to consumerism; it exposed fallacies and faulty attitudes that had previously gone unchallenged within myself. The Extension 2 course has inspired me to reach for a greater level of creativity, and this enabled me to appropriate and fully internalise the principles presented in the story. These ideas of personal responsibility in regard to the degradation of our environment had previously been conceptualised in a passive manner.

In constructing this story I had the privilege to mentally immerse myself into an environment that felt quite real to me. The close relationship that I have felt with the characters in the story was aided by the extensive research that exposed me to the accounts of real people who embarked on similar journeys. I enjoyed discovering and refining my own literary voice and style to a higher standard. Developing my creative abilities allowed me to enjoy storytelling as an author for the first time and I am sure that the memory of the journey undertaken in developing this story for my major work will compel me to develop these storytelling and writing skills even further as soon as the opportunity presents itself.