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Abstract

The horse shifted in shade; the springcart groaned; a wheel scrunched on quartz-pebbles: hard sounds in sparse, dry bush. In the cool beneath corrugated verandah, at one end of which stood a tank bleeding rust from several wounds, and at the other a parched privet, two women took stock of distance beyond scattered gidgee. 'Russer!?' one called. 'Russer! Bring the glasses, luv!'

GEOFF WYATT

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In the cool beneath corrugated verandah, at one end of which stood a tank bleeding rust from several wounds, and at the other a parched privet, two women took stock of distance beyond scattered gidgee.

'Russerl?' one called. 'Russerl! Bring the glasses, luv!'

A yellow, blunt-headed dog, lying in deep shadow by the privet, glanced up. From within the house a baby, drawn momentarily from sleep, protested.

'Comin', Auntie Rose!'

In here, where moisture wept up the skirt of a Coolgardie safe, the flies were not so thick.

Out there, where there must have been fitful wind, a dustspiral lurked, dodging like a felon between breaks in far scrub. A kestrel in the middle distance worked the gaps above red earth, hanging, quivering, fluttering on. From somewhere beyond that, a crow's desolation carried, arid and saturnine.

The elder of the women so completely occupied the great cane chair that nothing could be seen of it. Her pudding sleeves and hands, from one of which dangled an enamel mug, concealed the armrests; her thighs spilled out at the sides; and her dress, falling to the tops of her boots, obscured the legs. Had she been positioned in the middle distance, she might have been mistaken for a dark termite mound.

She grunted as she leaned to place the mug on a stool beside her. This was the signal that she had had enough tea thickened with condensed milk and brown sugar, and would soon open the rope-noosed sack in which the sherry lay, and next roll the first of a dozen or so cigarettes.

The other woman, who was much younger, and whose face suggested blood relationship, was thickening towards the same corpulence, and had the same hair shadow on upper lip. As the one fossicked for her sack, the other returned her gaze to a letter that had fallen in her lap.

The dog, with scarred head between extended paws, again glanced up, its bulging eyes looking more saurian than canine.

A gangling lad, caught between boyhood and adolescence, in patched pants and singlet, came from the house, holding in each hand a brown tumbler that had been sliced from a beer bottle with hot wire. His hair, which had been cut round a bowl, might have given him the simpleton's look, had not lancing eyes expressed inquiring intelligence.

'There's a man,' Auntie Rose, taking the glasses, approved.
'What've yer been doin', luv?'

'Drorin'.'

'Tell me what,' the old woman urged above the sherry bottle's pain-filled cork, which travail ended with dull pop. The heavily-tinctured liquid plashed and lolloped in the glasses; a sharp sickly-sweetness entered their nostrils.

'Roo,' the boy said.

'Show me.'

The boy was pleased to fetch a head portrait, in profile, of a far-seeing red kangaroo that he had observed of an evening at the dam. The head was noble, even majestic, in strong, simple outline, and coloured in with what looked like red wash.

Auntie Rose placed a hand on the boy's head.

'I always knew yer had somethin' different in yer, luv, right from the time I set eyes on yer. So it's a real artist yer'd like ter be?'

The boy looked quickly, shyly down, then up, with flashing adoration.

'Bridge', the old woman said. 'Did yer see Russel's drorin'?'

'Bridge' had not yet sipped from her tumbler.

'I have ter say I wasn't too pleased with it.'

'But it's the spittin' image,' Rose protested.

'It ain't that. It's what 'e done it with. Made it red with rust from the tank and started it leakin' again. I tried ter fix it with a match but the hole got bigger. Lucky it was the top rung, or we would've lost our water.'

'Russel!' said Auntie Rose, and gave the boy a smart slap on the head. Tears sprang to his eyes; his nose started to run.

His mother sent him inside to look at the baby. Then she returned to the letter that Rose had delivered. The old woman watched lips picking their way over lumpy words.

'Yer can't lose yer tank water. What does Stan say?'

'He was over the border the last six months.' Bridge' plucked up the envelope and examined postmark and date. 'Nar...iel, Eskdale, Beechworth, Wangaratta, Benalla, Shepparton, Kyabram. Good country, 'e says. Hot, but plenty 'a grass. Sheep got bales on 'em. Posted this at Cohuna, on 'is way to Balranald and Hay, hopin' to work 'is way home for a spell.'

Rose swallowed sherry, after poking her tongue around her cheeks.

'Yer missin' 'im a lot?'

Bridge' brought liquor to her lips for the first time.

'Acourse. Sometimes. I dunno.'

'I know how yer feel. It was the same with me whenever Shanahan went away. It always got me in the guts the first few weeks. Missed 'is voice, I did, and 'is boots thumpin' up over the verandah. Him drunk as a fiddler's bitch and dancin' a jig with 'is thumbs in 'is weskit. The smell of the bugger. But after a couple of months, well, yer got used to 'im gone. Got ter like it even. Yer miss 'im in bed?'

A butt-end, which had burned out between yellow-stained fingers, dropped to earth among fellows.

'I dunno.' Bridge' sounded weary.

'Yer try ter remember what it was like, eh? And what was there? The snortin', and then the snorin', and you lyin' there awake wishin' it didn't have ter be over so quick every time. Yer lie there leakin' inter yer nightie, and somethin' – a appetite – curdlin' inside. And all yer get is babies.'

Bridge' looked into her tumbler.

'I don't mind that so much. It's when 'e comes home – you only get a bit of 'im. Comes in all knocked up from walkin' fifteen mile from the railway. Gives Russell a fipenny knife or somethin' 'e's found on the track, 'as a bath and a feed, and takes me ter bed. Two days later 'e's out rabbitin' or drinkin' with 'is mates. Then 'e gets a letter from the contractor and 'e's off again for another six months to a year. He aint seen the baby yet. Doesn't know 'e's got one.'

From bleached sky in the middle distance a kestrel suddenly hurled itself earthward and did not rise.

'Somethin' 'appens ter a man in the bush,' Rose said around the sideways lighting of a cigarette. 'E becomes quiet. Even Shanahan lost 'is singin' voice, gradual. The Creature got 'im in the end, as Ma Delaney used ter say. And then 'e had ter go and get 'imself drowned in the Diamantina flood.'

Rose's big hand poured again.

'Yer know what I worked out comin' along in the cart? I reckon men use the bush ter escape us women.'

They heard, coming from the far side of the privet bush, the sound of a door grinding on a hinge. Bridge' looked stricken.

– 'Gets the trots when 'e's upset. He'll be on and off the dunny all afternoon. If it aint the trots, it's 'is sinus poisonin' 'im up. It's like 'e's punishin' 'imself ter get at me.'

'Does 'e miss 'is Dad?'

'Wakes up sometimes callin' out. But in the mornin' 'e forgets. Moons and drors. Or 'elps me with the house. Likes it when 'e's

pertectin' me. Aint afraid, neither. Killed a snake that got under the floor. Him and the dog. Loves 'is correspondence lessons,' Bridge' went on. 'Reads good, but we got no books. He'll be in there now, readin' the dunny paper 'e's been over a thousand times.'

As the sun fell towards the gidgee's crimsonblack line, Rose began to look inward and talk abstractedly. She would be slightly shicker now, even though she didn't show it, Bridge' knew from old. Within half an hour, when the sun had gone over, Rose would be calling for Russell to help her up into the springcart, which would tilt six inches to the left, twisting the near shaft and prompting the horse to lean the other way to compensate, as she struggled her weight onto the step. With the boy shoving at her boots, she would half-haul, half-fall, her way onto the plank, arrange herself, and then set off without a word on her ten-mile drive. In the distance, the cart always looked as though it were loaded with produce.

In one of the lighter moments when the boy and his mother had indulged their sense of the ridiculous, he described how Auntie Rose's dress once had fallen over his head and shoulders, revealing a bloomed arse as big as the tent the circus people put up years ago at Cumargen Crossing.

'It's a fight for the kids,' Rose, dropping her last butt, said to herself. 'Why d'yer think they drag us out of the city?'

'Who?' asked Bridge'.

They heard the dunny door bang.

'Shanahan. Stan. Too big for 'em. Can't make their mark in the big smoke. Drag us out 'ere where there's nuthin'. Then they leave us. It's the loneliness gets to 'em - somethin' the Irish know well, as Ma used ter say. The more they feel it, the less they need a woman. A wife, anyway. In the end, all they want is loneliness and The Creature.'

'Stan and I had our own run,' Bridge' reminded them. 'Until The Depression.'

'But why did 'e leave Sydney?'

'Wanted a fresh start.'

'Then why did 'e drag yer out 'ere?'

'He didn't drag me. I came with 'im, when the run failed.'

The boy appeared silently by his mother's side; the dog got up, creaking, to sniff at his legs.

'Wash yer 'ands, Russell,' she said; and, when he had gone off to the basin, confided:

'I don't want 'im to turn out like Stan.'

Rose mused: 'Us women get to like the loneliness too, only in a different way. The men go out, lookin' for whatever it is just over the

horizon. We go inwards, pull our kids in with us, right inside the nest – the favourite one, anyway.'

The boy, all hurt and contrition, smelling of diarrhoea and dunny, and around these, bar soap, a leaking sinus leaving a bubble in a nostril, came again to his mother's side. She put an arm around his waist.

'Go and see if baby's awake,' she said softly. 'But don't touch 'er.'

'Yes mum.'

His trots should ease off, now that the bond had been restored.

In a little while Rose struggled from the cane chair, which tended to cling even when her weight was off it; indeed, had she not thrust it rather angrily from her, she might have waddled with it, a huge growth on her backside, to the springcart.

'Russerl?'

Then, waiting for the boy, she advised:

'Don't you worry, Bridge'. 'E won't never go drovin'.'