

1. *Are We There Yet?*

January 1936

THE CAR ENGINE DRONED ON AND ON, HOUR AFTER HOUR, mile after mile. I sat staring at the back of the leather seat of the Model T Ford. I discarded my shoes and socks and untied the sash around the waist of my dress, more for something to do than for comfort. Now I was watching the nape of Mum's neck as the bun of her thick black hair bobbed up and down every time we hit a bump and I counted the number of times it touched the seat. It was a long, dreary journey and the heat and the dust was endless. I was sick of it. I had to make Dad stop the car somehow and the only way I could think of was to whine, 'I want to do a wee.'

'We'll stop soon.'

'I want to do a wee, now!'

'Soon.'

I was three, the baby of the family then. Marie, my sister, sat beside me. She was a year older than I and was less concerned about the discomfort than I.

Mum made valiant efforts throughout the trip to help minimise the tedium, vacillating between the two strategies she had on offer, 'What do you want to do? Sing or count?' We sang. We sang all the Nursery Rhymes until our voices were hoarse. Then we sang them all again. We counted. We counted the white horses, the emus, the black cockatoos and the kangaroos. We counted forwards. We counted backwards. We counted forwards in twos. We counted backwards in twos. We sang more

Nursery Rhymes. We counted the mulga trees and the spinifex, the ant beds and the grass trees. My counting ability improved but the tedium remained.

‘How far do we have to go now?’

‘Not far,’ Dad responded. He had driven without comment during all the counting and singing. His patience was infinite to me. His focus remained on the road ahead, a two-wheel track, a track sometimes there, other times not, made by the infrequent travellers through the savannah grasslands that grew in the heavy black soil of the Gulf. We sat quietly for a time, then, ‘Are we there yet?’

‘No. Not yet.’

‘I want to do a wee.’

The car lurched and shuddered on the unmade road. The engine groaned as the vehicle traversed the undulations, winding its way through low scrub and cautiously crawling in and out of the rocky creek beds. I looked up at the water bag swinging from the cross structure, ‘Can I have drink of water, Mum?’

‘Dear, you’ll be sick if you have another drink of water.’

‘Hang on, everybody!’ Dad called as we bumped along the rough track.

‘Ann, sit down and hang on or you’ll fall out.’

One minute we were bumping along, the next minute we dropped into a cavernous rut. There were no warnings, not even an indentation in the soil. Bulldust deceived even the most experienced driver.

‘What’s wrong?’ Mum turned as she heard a painful intake of breath from the back seat.

My answer was an agonised, ‘Urgurgh!’

Dad stopped the car and switched off the engine. I tried to speak through the film of dust that swirled about us, but I was winded by the drop into the pothole. Mum opened the car door and moved quickly to take me in her arms, and, while I struggled to regain my breath, she held me gently until my lungs resumed their normal rhythm.

Dad unfolded his body from the confines of the Ford to examine the damage. He ran his fingers through his crew cut and said, 'I hope we haven't done the axle.' To 'do an axle' in such an isolated place was a serious mishap. We were miles from anywhere with no communication facility and the sun was scorching. When he completed his inspection Dad expressed his relief to Mum, 'We've only blown a tyre, May. I'll have to patch it, so you may as well put the billy on.' He was a tall young man, thirty-three years old, with a head of thick, black hair and a heavy, black beard that demanded a twice-daily shave. Because he loved life in the bush and enjoyed working with stock, he had augmented his academic education in Sydney at an Agriculture College.

Mum was two years younger than Dad and had been brought up on a prosperous sheep property in Western Queensland. She was the eldest daughter in a family of ten and received her formal education at a boarding school that embraced the arts. She was a tall girl with fair skin and long, black hair pinned up in the fashion of the day, as a bun at the nape of her neck. She had a happy disposition, loved people and, like Dad, loved life in the country.

Dad retrieved the patching kit from the tool box, positioned the jack under the back axle and raised the car while Mum searched for sticks in the bush with her two enthusiastic assistants, Marie and I.

By the time the fire was alight, Dad had the wheel off and the inner tube of the tyre vulcanised and replaced. He reassembled it and tightened the nuts with the crank handle, drank his tea and called to us, 'Righto kids, back in the car.'

The engine gave a throaty growl and we were back on the road. Darkness would descend in a little while and the lights of the car, if they worked, would not pick up the sporadic ruts of the dirt track at night.

On... and... on... we drove, on towards iridescent sheets of liquid that rippled ahead, waves lapping ocean

shores and lakes of brilliant blue—distant mirages inviting, beckoning, teasing.

Our teeth chattered, the car rattled and we gripped our seats as we hit the top of the corrugations with grit in our eyebrows, in our hair, up our noses and in our mouths.

There were only four in our family then.

My baby brother, Peter, was still in Goodooga and I wondered how he would get to our new home. When he was drowned in the bore drain, we left Mulga Downs, a station close by, and returned to the family in Sydney. For a short while Dad worked in the COD with his father, developing a process to yellow bananas for marketing. But my parents were unhappy in the city. They were both progeny of pastoral families and the call of the bush was strong, so it was not surprising that Dad accepted a position as manager of a sheep station in the Gulf Country. Soon after, we were on our way, driving through the endless savannah, and on through the swirling bulldust of the black soil.

‘When are we going to get there?’ I whined.

Where we were going was not really my concern. The trip was hot and dusty and I was thirsty.

Then, all of a sudden, the car came to a stop. The engine ceased its continuous droning and all was quiet while we waited for the dust to clear and below us was the bottom of a wide cleft. A river wound its way from the limestone hills of Lawn Hill down to the Gulf of Carpentaria, glistening and sparkling in the sunlight as it bubbled over the rounded stones that formed its bed.

On the ledge of this beautiful fissure and on the edge of the dry, dusty plain stood a log cabin, the Gregory Hotel. Close by, two buildings kept it company: a small house and one room standing alone, the ‘lock up’. The three buildings were the sum total of the white settlement.

‘Are we there yet? Can we get out, Mum?’

I climbed onto Mum’s lap in the front seat and wrapped my arms around her neck.

'Can we get out now?'

'We're stopping here to say hello to our new friends. It won't be long before we're at our new home, dear.'

Her face was strained and her eyes shadowed from the long and arduous trip, and the anxiety of moving into the unknown so soon after the tragic loss of her baby son. She smiled when she heard a friendly voice call, 'The billy's on!'

We soon became engrossed in the camaraderie offered during that pleasant outback tea ceremony, and the warm welcome overshadowed the earlier discomforts of the journey for me. But the journey was not yet complete, so it was back in the car and back on the dusty road again.

'It won't be long now,' Mum assured us.

Three more gates and we passed Planet Downs in the lengthening evening shadows. We waved to the silhouette of the homestead, knowing that there would be a friendly wave back from the folk inside.

A few more miles along the track and we waved again to the buildings at Kunkulla. Two more gates and a faint light flickered ahead. As we came to the front of the house, Dad stopped the car and switched off the engine. The lurching and shuddering was replaced immediately by a cacophony of sound from the canine fraternity while the bulldust settled.

'We're here, girls.' Mum sounded as glad as I was.

No more driving, no more swirling bulldust, no more flat, grassy country. We had arrived!

A light bobbed its way from the house to the front gate and a lone figure greeted us.

Fred Muller was part owner and manager of the station, a large person in his middle years with the bandy legs of a man who had spent many years in the saddle and walked with the swagger of his ilk—his taciturn manner, typical of the true bushman. He was glad to be moving on. He greeted Dad.

'Ow ya' goin, mate?'

'Well, thanks.' Dad hesitated to recall his name. 'Fred, is it?'

Put the Billy On

'Yeah, mate.'

Dad extended his hand in greeting.

"Ave a good trip?"

'Yes, it wasn't too bad. Hit a few potholes in the bulldust. No real damage though, only a blowout. The kids are glad to get here.'

The conversation continued with outback talk of roads, the weather, the waterholes and the quality of the stock.

'When are you leaving, Fred?'

'I'm orf ta morra, before daylight. That orright? I was hopin' ya'd get here before the rain did, 'cause I mightn't've got out by the look of the clouds buildin' up. We had a few storms before Christmas, and I reckon the wet season's gonna set in real soon.'

'Where are you going, Fred?'

'I'm goin' down to Dobbin with the mailman and then I'm gonna git the train down to the big smoke, the 'Curry, an' 'ave a holiday.'

He turned towards the kitchen, 'Hey, Winnie, put the billy on and make a cuppa for Mr and Mrs Colless.'