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WE WERE THE ONES IN THE DILAPIDATED HOUSE EVERYONE WONDERED ABOUT, THE FAMILY ON THE BRUCE HIGHWAY, JUST OUTSIDE GLADSTONE. The ones who the passing world, adults and children, wondered what those people did for a livelihood, if they had money, how they could bear living there. While all these people raced by on their way to enjoy school holidays, to clinch deals on business trips, or whizzed by on their way back home from relatives and friends, they probably imagined a scruffy, scraggy family, Mum, Dad, kids, definitely too many kids, struggling to make ends meet. I often wondered, the dirt blowing into my windswept, tiny girl's eyes, what it was they thought, those cars whooshing by our dusty property.

On the best of days, sometimes even the worst, as a child I thought Dad was a good bloke. At six foot and three inches he towered over everyone, and with his square-jawed Ricky Nelson looks and remnant Elvis Presley hairstyle, the larrikin in his sparkly hazel eyes would tell us stories about his youth, how he used to run amuck and get up to all kinds of mischief.

But also he would tell us how in the end he always did the right thing, how he helped out on his own mother and stepfather's property that was in the Anondale district, near Lake Perenjora, not that far from where we lived.

Without boasting, he would tell us children how he was the young lad who carried the Olympic flame as it was heralded through the district for the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne. He is even mentioned in a book for it and had a large medal the size of my palm back then, in acknowledgement of the feat. I still have that book and my little brother Sam is the proud owner of Dad's medal these days.

But the thing is, through his stories, through his gregarious and charming ways, he made us feel connected, and with him, or by ourselves, we would pick watermelons off the vine on hot summer days, especially at Christmas time, and the pink juice would pour from our mouths and drizzle through our fingers back to the thirsty soil from which the fruit sipped its nourishment.

On the surface of it, it could be easily gleaned from the highway, we may have been scruffy and scraggy, even scrawny and wanting, but we were children in love with life. On the best of days, sometimes even the worst, I loved Dad. I couldn't help it. He had that sort of "connectedness" about him.

Always phenomenally dark-skinned from his work outside, a tan that continued even through the cold months, on crisp winter mornings he would look out from the back door and seeing the property covered in a layer of white flakiness that looked like someone's sugar-frosted flakes had spilled over the earth, he would tell us Jack Frost had been around and left his tidings.

For us it was a huge mystery, and Jack Frost, although he never gave us anything but a scene of vast ice cold, was no less a figure in our imaginations than Father Christmas.

On those icy winter days, in the early morning cold, all of us kids would sit on the backstairs eating hot white toast covered in thick yellow honey. As the orange sun slowly rose on our expectant faces and over our bodies, the warm honey would slide down our hands and shine golden through our fingers. The image of frosty mornings with warm toast and melting honey shining through little fingers is one that will never leave me.

Inside the house, Mum, forever busy, would always be preparing something, usually meals, but also at times there was the sweet smell of things being baked in the oven. Usually it was biscuits made from no more than flour and sugar, but always hungry, we knew that smell meant there

was a treat in store.

Her special treat for us on the odd occasion was a dessert called Roly Poly, which naturally we whooped and carried on about as though it was the best thing since Tim Tams, but in actual fact, personally, I didn't really like Roly Polies. I think it was because of the mixed dried fruit she flavoured it with – it was hard on a kid lacking a sweet tooth. But then again I did look forward to the delicious warm custard that was inevitably served with it. Tim Tams we never had.

Mum had seductive curls of dark brown-red hair and I am told that's where I received my own thick helmet of bushy, rust-brown hair that made my head look like a dramatically curly version of an echidna. In later years Mum would dye her hair black, giving her an Italian look that was apparently very appealing to men.

But she stood a mere five-foot tall and was, so to speak, half Dad's size. She was also never "half" the match for him, either verbally or physically. She worked tirelessly in the kitchen and outside too. All day long, as Dad cut the timber, she would be the one snigging the cut logs with a tractor.

How hard could life have been for them? It's hard to imagine even from my modest home in suburban Ipswich. Everything seemed dry and stoic in those days, everything a tough physical chore. Everything taking a mental toll. While the Beatles may have been starting out on rock and roll's most lucrative career, and most people were beginning to really relish the post-war comforts that flooded into Australia's cities through the fifties and sixties, we may as well have been struggling to survive on Mars.

The first two houses I remember were never our own, the one rented on the right side of the highway as we faced Gladstone, our biggest nearby city, and the other, which we moved into before I was three, on the left-hand side of the highway. Yes, between 1962 and 1965 we moved from one side of the highway to the other, and either way, the terrain was always hot and flat and dusty and people looked into

our lives and made aspersions about us from their safe glass windows as they whipped by on the highway.

Dad always told us kids in those days life would have been different if his own father had not been killed in Singapore. In the War. It happened before Dad even had a chance to recognise the word Dad. With gargantuan courage and tears streaming in his eyes, he one day gathered us kids around his knees and told us his story: how his father was shot and killed defending the Commonwealth.

He even showed us a picture in an old magazine of Australian World War Two soldiers boarding a boat for Singapore. He pointed with a badly rasped working man's finger at a tiny blurred head with a slouch hat and duffle bag whose face we could not see, and told us that was his dad.

He was very proud to have in his possession his dad's War medals and carefully unfolded and then refolded the frail, yellowed telegram that his mother had received telling her that her husband, Bennett Gallagher, had died a hero, killed in action.

Also with tears in his eyes, he would tell us kids of his pet kangaroo and its cruel, eventual end, with its guts spilling out. He would sometimes drive us out to his first house, which was a shed with a corrugated tin roof that had no more than hessian bags for walls. It had a dirt floor. If we thought we had it bad, he had it worse.

Dad's stepfather, Uncle Harvey, just happened to be their mother, Grandma Glad's first cousin. There was a whiff of scandal associated with the union, especially in that there never seemed any proof of an official marriage certificate. But to us kids it didn't really make much difference and we were happy to call Grandma's "husband", Grandad Harvey.

In Dad's time, because his sister Dulcie did not get on with her stepdad - actually hated him - and because the small old farmhouse was now overflowing with two younger stepbrothers and four stepsisters, he and Dulcie managed to make a break from the cramped home, and moved in with Dad's grandmother, our Great Grandma Cecily Flanagan

and her son who was always known to us merely as Uncle Col. A bit complicated? That's how it was in those days.

Dad, the hardworking timber-cutter, would talk to me more than to any of the other kids, or so it seemed to me. He would talk with me openly and matter-of-factly especially while he constantly sharpened his knives and saws in the old work shed.

When he was out working in the field, no one but no one, not even me, was allowed to come near him. We were only allowed to approach him when he got back to the shed of an evening. I always felt at those times like I was being loved. There was a part of me that trusted him, not just in any ordinary way, but deeply, in the skin.

A true working man and protector, he always warned us about people and how others may harm us, and there was always a profound sense with Dad around that we were safe. He was also very strict, as was Mum, and they almost never allowed us to visit other children or to have other children over.

The only children allowed over, and only at times, belonged to our nearest neighbours, the Groves, who had a couple of kids around me and my older brother Jim's age. Because of the size of the open, dustbowl properties, near wasn't exactly over the fence but was near enough to sometimes even hear the neighbours.

On the negative side, there was a feeling of isolation on the property, on all the properties we lived on, the one on the right side of the Bruce Highway as well as the one on the left - not to forget the property at the centre of my life, the large acreage Dad would eventually buy from the Crannies.

The Crannies were an older couple who thought the world of Dad. He would assist them in every way he could, always helping to cut things as well as hammer and move and fix things, and they treated him like a son. Eventually, at a rock-bottom price, they sold Dad 300 acres of their property on Perenjora Dam Road.

It was this property that we kids really grew up on. It had a border right on the rail line and the noise of tooting and shunting trains became the noise of my childhood. Not only did we have passing trains now, but we were still within a hop of the Bruce Highway. Wherever you looked, there were eyes that could see into our place. Not just from the cars now but from the trains as well.

Just like Dad was to the Crannies, he stood up for everyone who needed help. Always willing to lend a hand, he especially stood up for children.

Nevertheless, there was at times something in the way he treated animals that shook me. He called cows "beasts", and I remember once how he belted the hell out of our one lone cow when it would not move into its milking stall. He was beating the cow so badly with a piece of four-by-two that as the animal went down on its knees and its body curved down to the earth, I was absolutely sure Dad was going to break its back.

No one had the courage to tell him to stop. That poor, old Brindle. On the other hand, if he saw someone else beating an animal, he'd probably get out one of his guns and shoot them. At any rate, threaten to shoot them.

That's another thing, talking of shooting, Dad had lots of guns, and he was a damned good shot.

'Just watch this, Deb,' he'd say to starry-eyed me. I'd turn around and see him throw a bottle top in the air, and - bang! - with a shotgun or his chosen rifle of the moment under his arm, he'd shoot the target out of the sky. He did the same with soft drink cans and old beer bottles, and actually anything that could be hoisted into the air was a good enough target for his eyes.

Sometimes even, he'd turn away and get one of us to throw a small object as high into the air as we could, and then he'd turn back and shoot it spot on. We were awed by his prowess.

‘You don’t ever want to piss Dan Gallagher off,’ he would say.

Maybe it was because of this, but because of other things too, things to come later, as I grew up I developed a very strong dislike of guns, to a ridiculous point where I wouldn’t allow any of my children to have toy guns to play with in any form whatsoever.

Dad also had weird theories. He told us how good salt was for you, and that we should have lots of it on our food. At the dinner table, in the smokiness of the woodstove, or while sharpening his saws and knives, he would tell us kids about kings and queens and princes and princesses, and how it was through interbreeding that they maintained their lineage.

Or as he said it, “kept their blood good”. He also told us, not quite in this language, but by some sort of child-interpreted association, how there were far-flung tribes in the world where it was perfectly natural for parents to perform fellatio on children and for parents to tickle their children.

But as I said, he was hardworking, helpful to others, and he was there to protect us.

We used to have people coming in and out of our house, relatives and friends in need, and on the acreage on Perenjora Dam Road we would often have people staying in an old caravan.

On one occasion we were helping out Lyn and her husband, John Boetcher, to help “tide them over”. They were staying in the house with their four year-old daughter, Grace.

Mum had a Devon luncheon sausage in the fridge, and because we kids always walked around hungry and the sausage looked to me like such an easily obtainable treat in the near empty refrigerator, I couldn’t help but eat a massive chunk out of it.

Of course Mum saw the great big bite mark and wanted to know who did it. She was sure it was one of us kids, just

not sure which one. I was eight at the time, and as we all lined up and stared at her accusing face with innocence in our eyes, for some reason the Boetchers' little girl, Grace stepped forward from nowhere. It was probably a total misunderstanding on her part, but she said it was her.

Lyn, upset that her child would steal from someone else's fridge, stepped in and began to beat her. As Lyn slapped her daughter across the backside and her daughter ran around screaming, Dad stepped in.

With all six foot and three inches of his awkward, bird-like frame shaking, he began to rage: 'For Christ's bloody sake, Lyn. Stop that, will ya. Just bloody stop it! She's just a little girl, the poor little bugger. She's only hungry, for chrissake!'

I felt like confessing, but something in me told me if I did, Dad would not treat me in quite the same way. So, I kept my lips pursed.

I guess this is my confession now, how guilty I have felt over all these years for poor innocent little Grace. As I grew into adulthood, I vowed never to let another person take the blame for something that I did, whether by choice or inadvertently. I hope that my honesty earns some respect now.

On another occasion, while they were still staying with us, little Grace did something really naughty, something apparently so naughty that it made her mother unstoppably livid, and she began to repeatedly slap her little girl's legs.

'Don't you dare touch that child!' Dad strode towards the action and put an end to the lathering, his head hovering like the world's tallest policeman. He looked at Lyn as though asking how anyone in the world could treat a child like that. 'I never want to see that in my house again,' he ranted.

But I remember mostly from those days the smell of burning dung and mosquito coils; it was always so hot and the soil so dry and dusty, and of a night the mosquitoes would have a field day on our white skins and pink blood.

While we children always shared a room, Mum and Dad slept in their own bedroom. They had a large white net like an ornate regal canopy hanging over their double bed. From a distance they looked like they were very important, like a king and queen.

From that bed would come us, their princes and princesses. It was sacred ground. And yet for Dad... for Dad maybe that bed and its hallowed nature didn't make any difference. Time - and expediency - would be the judge of that.