

The Way Home

Born in the south, how could she leave it? That land of sunshine and wattle bloom, where the dusty summer evenings scented the world ruddy?

Lifting his nose westward, he sniffed at the breezes – dry wheat, dust, rotten sunshine – such scents he caught on the wind. They were all very beckoning and inviting, pulling him in towards home. But it was the gentle, sifted breezes which kept him travelling. Home might wait, but the night would not.

She might have been born anywhere else. The thought grabbed her, tenacious. Yet here she was, rough and lively and brown from the past January. She had strong limbs for living but was soft all at once. This Lady of the Bush turned with a bunch of kindling held to her side like Ruth of old with her sheaves of wheat. She crashed through the spinifex and old eucalyptus leaves and weedy, clumpy grasses. Crashed all the way home and began breaking up the sticks on the doorstep. Her face, though young-ish had a look of strain, like one trying to keep something at bay. She muttered as she worked. Her house was empty in the bush. But the bush was filled with coming night.

Before heaping his goods upon the ground – his swag, his rolled-up blanket and pack with food – he kicked at the ground, scraping away bits of dead stuff with his boot to get to the soft dirt beneath. Above his head, far above, the stars were hidden, soon to come out full of delight, ladies every one of them.

Rolling out his swag, he lay down on the canvas with a huff. His thoughts strayed to home, but he was weary of thinking, and he turned over violently with a daring growl of frustration to interrupt the thoughts. But the wind remained to taunt him. Skyward, a thin whisp of smoke showed itself, drifting eastward. He could smell it. Stale and woody. Tomorrow, he'd reach the highway into the city and hopefully catch a ride with a truckie hauling goods across the country. He was hungry for the north – that distant place of childhood, of burning sunsets, humidity and sweaty, laid-back grins. He was tired of looking, but he was going to find his north. He put his hands behind his head and spoke out loud to the sky. He

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spoke struggling pieces of thought he wished would go away; shreds of poetry pathetic and desire unsung, the regretful, ordinary mess of his lost 30 years. He whispered to the silent sky. He slept.

The darkness of indoors flooded her pupils, and she felt them widen in the dark. The day was done. She lit a candle and stood, unsure how to spend the evening. Why had she done it – moved out here? Was it so she could have the lovely bush all to herself, and the adventure of thought? Her braids were hurting her head. Steadily, she undid them and threw the ribbons aside. She bent to set the fire and noticed her hands were dry. She was a study in defeat, this girlish-woman. Restlessness took a sudden hold of her soul and she rose, bounding to the cupboard where she kept the matches. She was mostly demure on the outside, but on the inside her soul roved, rebellious and wanting. Dry sunshine was not enough – never would be. 'I'll be content with the hills, the mountains, the bush,' she had told herself. She was not but found instead that anguish of soul that could never be another's load; for it was tailor-made to fit her shoulders and hers alone. She looked again at her hands, and blew into the fire – a fierce, angry blow to get the flames going and feeding on the sticks.

'Rejoice in it, it's your lot. Rejoice in your lot in life – this is a gift,' she told the dark room. 'Rejoice!' she shouted. 'Cease to wonder why.'

Why had she moved out here? Perhaps it was to forget, or just to give up. And then something settled into the room, shifting about her thoughts – something like thin sunlight, home, the excitement of the youth that was still hers, the many memories ahead, the blessedness of being tried and found true. A smile threatened, like a tiny banner of victory. The flames in the hearth grew frantic.

He awoke to magpies warbling and vaguely thought how precious it sounded in the dawn. And then his body began to ache with weary travel, and he was struck with his true state. He sat up and rubbed his face, ran his hands through his dark wiry hair a couple of times

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and pulled the canvas back. The new sun rose to meet him: this unscathed Adam from times past, this sinner in his prime looking for home, this lost, confident hero.

He made breakfast over a small fire, gathered up his things and – he wasn't sure what made him do it – but put his mother's tiny New Testament in the back pocket of his jeans. Up until today, it had journeyed tucked inside his pillowcase. He saw himself reading it on the roadside. Good travelling stories there were in it he knew well enough: sore feet and sweat, dust and stony ground, impatient looks and growling bellies and laughter, fear and apathy, more hills to climb, landscapes to look upon, and wide lakes and people passing, always passing, maybe greeting each other as they went on, perhaps not.

He stood for a moment of quiet. Satisfied, he began walking towards the distant whooshing that was the peak-hour traffic flying on rubber wings to the heart of the city for work. True, he couldn't really hear the road yet, but he imagined he could, knowing vaguely in what direction it lay. The bush thickened, the sun rose higher, warmer, and the young man walked along bearing his pack and his swag, occasionally swatting at flies. Come noon, he began to listen for the moan of trucks on their exhaust brakes. He really wanted that ride. Blithe and bonny he was, after his monologue to the sky the night before. He whistled for the fun of it and for the charm. He came to a fence. It was new and taut and abrupt. He looked along it, left and right, wondering. He decided to go over, being hungry for his north and wanting no unnecessary detour. Clambering over, he became aware of a presence watching and caught a light form out of the corner of his eye. Being mid-stride, he couldn't turn to look properly until both feet were planted. He adjusted his pack, looked up and was only a little surprised to see a woman. He thought no one lived out here. He noticed she was holding a bunch of wattle down by her side; and her hair was sun-brushed copper. His hair was standing on end, lending more to his height. They stood there staring at each other in the sunlight and that uncanny silence that belongs solely to the bush at noon. She nodded slightly, her cheeks reddening. He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. He lifted a hand in greeting, as if he were tipping his hat, and then he walked on, leaving the bush lady behind. He walked on, listening for the noise of traffic, while the north beckoned and the bush waited.

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Born to the bush, how could she leave it? That sprightly world of phantoms and wakefulness, where fancy held her, and madness grew, waiting just around the corner.