

Change

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Special mention:

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The mist crept through the trees in swirling fingers and the rain fell gently on the windscreen as they crossed the Black Spur. She was awed by the height of the trees and the umbrella top of the giant ferns. The raindrops glistened on the end of their fronds. They'd always taken her breath away, but today she sank deeper into the passenger seat, aware of the possibility that a cold death could beckon her at any time. Those sentinel trees were unpredictable and had little depth in the earth, so could fall across the road without warning. She glanced at the man beside her. It was a hooded glance, one that held a mixture of contempt and love. Yes, even after all this time, she could admit to a little spattering of love. His long, broad fingers gripped the steering wheel and his eyes looked straight ahead as they approached yet another bend. She plucked nervously at the fringe of her scarf and shifted her feet uneasily from side to side.

The road up to their place was winding and menacing. He'd told her of the fire that had burned through the trees and the houses just a few years before but there was no sign of that now. The trees were tall and their bark trailed from their trunk in long strands of grey fabric. Their silver trunks shone as their headlights rounded each bend. He slowed to a crawl when he spotted a wombat waddling along by the side of the road. He scanned the road for kangaroos as he feared if one hopped in front of them it would damage their Range Rover. Fear seemed to sit menacingly between them as they drove and she found it difficult to relax and be at one with him.

She remembered when she'd first crossed the Spur. It had been a sunny day and she was filled with awe, and the desire to please, as they drove towards his homestead. There was much love between them then. She was enthralled by this farmer who promised her a country life of ease and opportunity to pursue her art. Part of her was frightened, by the space of the man and the space of the wide open countryside.

They rounded the last bend and the road lay before them, familiar now. Soon they would reach their laneway and he'd say, as he always did, "It's so good to be home!" Did he know when he breathed out in a long rush of air and uttered these words that they were as predictable as his lifestyle? Her sigh was silent and sat in her lungs in a tight vice-like grip. It was three years since she had first driven up to the farmhouse and the pink spring blossom that lined their path did nothing now to raise her spirits.

The house was cold so he knelt by the heater and put a match to the fire he had prepared before they left. The flames licked the pyramid of kindling and soon the glass door of the fire sparked into life.

"Would you like a hot drink love?" he asked "You must be cold. Let me feel your hands."

He took her small bony hands into the warmth of his large working hands and rubbed them into life. She allowed him to hold her hands even as her feet told her to move and pull away from him. He was a good man, a kind man, and yet her spirit was hankering to be away from him. Was it him or was it the eeriness of the land around them that made her tremble and want to run back over the Spur to the life she had left behind? "I'll try again, I'll try again," she resolved as she stood small beside his large frame.

"There's nothing to do up here," she'd complained to Sylvie. "I've no one to talk to, no one who understands anything of life. They talk about the weather and the cows and the crops and they are content. My research in philosophy will be of no value if I have no one to converse with and discuss new ideas."

She made her way to the kitchen and turned on the kettle. The bread she had made was still fresh so she cut four slices and placed them in the toaster. It was good bread, rich with oats, seeds and wholemeal flour. He'd marvelled the day he came into the kitchen and saw what she had created. Like a child receiving a gift he had run to her and swung her off the ground in elation. Did he think she was now becoming the wife he had hoped for and this was the first sign of progress?

She placed slices of cheese and pickle on the bread and took a plate to him, with a mug of hot tea. He beamed up at her, unaware of the turmoil bobbing around reluctantly in her stomach as she got her own plate and tea and took the armchair opposite him, close to the fire.

She paid little heed to his work on the farm and kept mostly to the house where she cleaned, washed and cooked for a short time each day. The rest of her day was

spent at her easel. She loved landscape painting but didn't think there was much of interest in this landscape to occupy her. "It's all so predictable," she had complained, "Just fields of nothing." She copied the landscapes of other artists, especially the ones of the city beach and the little streets of Fitzroy. As she painted she tried to return her heart to these familiar places but there was something of life lacking in her and memory was fading with time.

It was a cold night and he hadn't returned for dinner so she gathered he was still with the cows. It was now their calving time. She'd prepared a stew with mashed potato so hoped that he would return to the house quickly. The shrill ring of the phone broke into her pensive reverie. He asked if she could bring him a coffee. He was in the barn and was waiting for the vet as one of the cows was in labour and was having trouble delivering the calf. She searched out the old Thermos and filled it with tea from the teapot. She wrapped a few slices of bread in a tea towel and made her way to the barn. The old heavy coat he'd gifted to her was hanging in the hall so she would wear it for the first time. It would help keep her dry and warm.

As she approached the light of the barn she could hear the deep-throated cry of a mother in labour and pain. She'd never gone to this part of the farm before so stumbled over the grass sloshing through the puddles and the mud. She realised now she should have worn her gum boots but they were still on the stand in the hall, clean and untouched. She swore to herself and vowed to tell him that from now on if he wanted tea or coffee he must come to the house and get it himself.

He stood behind the cow, his old hat pulled over his eyes. Sweat ran down his face and he wiped it away with the side of his hand. The cow was in a stall and was crying out in the agony of childbirth. "It's breech," he told her. He tied the rope around the one leg sticking out from the mother but the attempts he made to free the calf caused the mother to bellow in pain. He had blood up to his elbows but didn't notice. "I've sent for the vet. I wish he'd hurry!"

She walked to the flank of the cow and gently rubbed the rough hide. "Why am I doing this?" she asked herself but had no explanation. The mother seemed to sense her there so she continued rubbing and muttering, "It's alright. You'll be alright." The calf hadn't moved and was stuck firmly, struggling to see light but barred by its own position.

The vet arrived and an epidural removed the calf from the mother. He held the calf gently to him. "It's no good," the vet said, "The calf has been through too much

trauma to survive. I'll make the mother comfortable and she'll be right to have more calves next season."

Her husband carried the calf to the door of the shed. Its huge pleading eyes begged for life but it was too late. Slowly the eyes shut and the body became limp. He laid it gently on a bed of straw and walked a few yards down the laneway. She found him there, sobbing inwardly, trying desperately to wipe this evidence of softness from him before anyone would see a strong man cry. She walked to him and put her hand in his. He reached down to her and she held him tight.

That night she had no sleep. She made her way to the kitchen and poured herself a hot cup of tea. How wrong she had been! This man knew more of life and death than any philosophy book she had ever read. He engaged with life and struggled with the reality of death, right here on his doorstep, season after season. Perhaps he couldn't talk to her about it but he knew! How arrogant she had been in her ignorance. Her judgements now condemned her and the bleakness of her fragility overwhelmed her.

She walked to the back door and stood in the yard. The night sky was alive with the light of stars – millions of them visible without the harsh light of the city. The full moon bathed the trees in luminous light and somewhere in the distance an owl called. She listened to the silence, deep and mysterious. She breathed in the fresh air that numbed her nose and seeped into her lungs. She stood there in the freezing cold and felt nothing.

He came to her later and gently carried her into their bed. He wrapped his body close to hers and held her until her trembling stopped. She tried to tell him, to explain, to ask for understanding but he silenced her and held her closer.

The doctor reassured her that she would recover. She was suffering from exposure but she was young and her temperature would go down and she would start to eat again. She lay in darkness for many hours, and avoided opening her eyes to the reality of beginning again. The husband tempted her with food and the neighbours called by to enquire after her health. How could she face them? Judgement is condemnation and that's what she'd lived with for too many years. She hoped they would forgive her and try to understand.

Her name was Henrietta Graham. I know you will have heard of her. Her landscape paintings of Murrindindi are famous. Art critics credit her for her ability to see and capture the beauty of the gum trees, the bush, and the native animals. They say her

spirit is in each of the paintings, making them poignant and alive. Her palette is vibrant and crisp and conveys to the audience a depth of appreciation rarely captured by an artist's brush. The neighbours who live close to her farm have been advised to hold on to the paintings she gifted them over her many years. They are now a valuable investment. She was much loved by her neighbours and was generous in sharing her art.

Henrietta was my mother. I was the eldest of her four children, born into our father's family farm. She instilled in each of us a deep appreciation for the bush. She taught us to see colour, texture and beauty in our landscape. She was a member of the Murrindindi Art Society and was a valued speaker at their meetings and the art conferences held in cities around the country.

I was surprised when I discovered her diaries and read of the struggle she had had in adjusting to the change from city to country. She had never spoken to us of her life in the city and travelled there only when she had to. When I thought of those time we had returned from the city what I remembered most was her sigh of relief each time we reached our driveway and her intake of breath as she announced, "It's so good to be home."