

Leaving Ceduna

by Sarah Taylor

The Ford Falcon station wagon was packed and ready. All that remained was the menagerie. A galah in an old fruit box with chicken wire stretched across the front. I pushed it hard against the slatted barrier separating the back from the cabin. The two cats next, held down by my father's large hands,

'Hurry,' he growled. 'Now the dog, sit Sam sit.'

'And the lamb.'

'Quick shut the door, not on my bloody head.'

The cats mewed nervously their tails erect. The galah screeched, raised his comb and thrashed his head up and down. Sam stared through the partition as if to say,

'I really should be up front in my usual spot not here with this rabble.'

I slid carefully into my seat alongside my younger brother Edward and baby sister Carmel. The amount of leather I could occupy had been meticulously fought over on each Sunday drive, down to the last millimetre. Mum took her place beside my father and the car pulled away.

I looked back at the fibro cottage that had been our home for the past year. The wind was already whipping up the desert sand that could now cover Mum's garden with impunity. My father had been lured once again to the challenge of a different job. He'd come to fly the small aircraft belonging to the Royal Flying Doctor Service. My passion for collecting stray animals ran free here and I wasn't leaving without them.

I had released the pigeons in a flurry of dusty feathers. Sydney was too far for them to find their way home. I risked my life and my mother's sunhat climbing up under the long jetty to steal them from the nest as featherless babies. Hand fed under the enclosed water tank stand they were let loose to come and go as the pink flesh of hatchlings disappeared. A gust of wind blew the borrowed bonnet into the surf below as I reached to pluck a tiny body. Without thinking I dropped into the bottomless ocean more frightened of being punished than drowning. I swam with fury. The tide kept it just out of my reach. One last stretch and the sodden fabric stuck fast upon my head once again.

'The lamb is only coming as far as the first paddock full of sheep,' said Dad.

I'd raised him from a few weeks old. The word went out 'lambs in the sale yard' kids came from everywhere. He followed in my shadow desperate to mistake me for his mother and my arms grew strong as he butted the bottle of foamy milk so greedily. Carmel whined that she still needed a suck on the same teat to go to sleep. I held on tight until he emptied it and froth settled around his little mouth.

I glanced into the travelling zoo. A large blue tarp covered the carpet. Black, grassy smelling pellets rolled from side to side. The dog pressed himself into a corner. He hung his head as if ashamed. He would never lack that kind of control.

'Paddock up ahead,' said Mum.

'No, not that one, those sheep don't look very friendly.'

'Well this one,' said Dad. The odour of moist hay began to fill the car. I wound down my window.

'No they are too old. He needs someone to play with.'

The car crawled to a stop.

'Say goodbye. We won't do any better than this mob,' said Dad.

Over the barbed wire fence went the woolly bundle. His tail waggled, he ran off bleating and without turning back.

'I am not eating chops ever again,' I said into a slump of folded arms.

'We'll see,' said Mum.

Sam sighed and settled his head between his paws and closed his eyes.

'First opportunity I'll stop and send Edward to buy a deodoriser,' said Dad keeping his nose close to the rushing breeze.

The Eyre Highway fell away under the car. The wheels turned over the same spot, saltbush and dust, blink, saltbush and dust.

'He's got his finger on my side,' I whined seeing five wrigglers snake across the divide.

'Have not,' said Edward.

'Have too,' I flicked him only moving the air above his skin.

'I'm sitting nicely,' said Carmel.

'Move Edward,' I yelled.

'Make me.'

I punched him hard on the hand. He yelped.

'Right that's it,' Dad roared as the engine slowed.

'Out, you can walk the rest of the way.'

I knew the routine. The car pulled away and disappeared over the rise. I kicked up stones and picked a bit of greenery to wack the flies. The shiny grill appeared grinning as if to say 'fancy meeting you here'. It executed a wide turn and pulled up. In Sydney I'd be left to find my way down the steep hill from the railway.

'You ready to sit still and behave.'

'I suppose. Edward should be kinder to me. I'm sad.'

'Edward say sorry to your sister.'

'Sorry.' His tongue poked between his lips like a lizard on a hot day.

'Let's play a game,' said Mum breaking off slithers of melted Kit Kat and handing them behind her.

Edward measured his against mine.

'I've got more chocolate from the snap,' he said.

'Have not,' I hit it and the excess dropped on his shorts.

'Ed's poohed,' I shouted with glee.

'Shut up ugly, freckle, face fatty.'

'I want everyone to say one thing that they will miss,' said Mum heading off any more squabbles.

'We go by the alphabet,' said Carmel. 'That means I'm first.'

'No, I'm a boy. Dad or I go first.'

'There are three girls so we win,' I said.

'I'll start,' said Mum. 'I'll be sorry to never visit the mission again to see the babies sleeping in the old pram and the kids playing with the toys you so kindly gave away. I'd love to be there as the children grow. Their lovely faces as I tell them the bible stories.'

'You did a lot of work out there. I'm hope it was appreciated,' said Dad. 'My turn, I'll miss flying by the seat of my pants.'

'You don't do that,' giggled Carmel. 'You sit up the top and press all the buttons to make the wings flap.'

'Remember the time the eagle crashed into the cockpit window and smashed it,' he said. 'I dragged my old leather flying suit and goggles out of mothballs. I took the plane to Adelaide for repairs. The wind blew in my face and I cruised below the clouds. Back to real aviation before we had all the gadgets.'

'The eagle just got a bad headache didn't he?' I asked.

'Carmel, your turn,' said Mum.

'I lost a tooth in the friendly forest where the lions and tigers live. We looked and we looked. They won't know where I am if they dig it up one day.'

'That's a baby story. It's not even true,' said Edward. 'Me now.'

'The boys will wait for me on Saturday morning to collect the empties. They might forget I've gone and my best spots be stolen by someone else. Do they have money for bottles in the city?' he asked.

'No darling,' said Mum.

'That's so unfair. How will I get money?'

'You can deliver papers,' said Dad.

'Why didn't you tell me? I want to go back and get my cart,' Edward whimpered.

'I'm sure we can build you another one,' said Mum.

'Last, last lucky last that's me,' I said. Edward groaned.

'Let me think. I want it to be the best,' I said.

'It's not a competition,' said Mum.

'I will miss the girl from the cave.'

'What girl?' asked Mum. Dad glanced at her.

'The dead girl,' I said.

With each move my night terrors changed. In the house at Nundah I saw Humpty Dumpty sitting on the wall. He fell and broke over the floor oozing yolk like spilled custard. I'd wake screaming. At the Armidale house in Benson St a man came through the front gate each night. I had to move to a back bedroom. In Ceduna a girl appeared at the bedroom door and beckoned me to follow her.

'There is no girl you are making it up,' said Dad.

'All the kids know her. She is the same age as me. She had blood all over but the sea washed her clean,' I said. 'It comes back bright red on the crabs when we pull them out of the boiling pot.'

A whispered conversation began in the front seat.

'We were so careful to not talk in front of the children,' hissed Mum.

'We probably should have warned them. I wasn't convinced they had the right person. So easy to round up the first black man and pin it on him. The culprit was probably still out there,' he said.

'It was a nasty shock to arrive in town and be confronted with the news. Mary Hattam aged nine found murdered and raped. I remember the joy of the journey coming to an end. We were so hot and tired. The hotel served a delicious clear chicken soup. My queasy tummy settled. The cool crisp sheets on the bed, I slept so soundly. I couldn't eat a thing after being told.' She paused,

'I relaxed as soon as they caught him and now you tell me the culprit was out there all along.'

'The children had a wonderful life roaming free. I never knew where they were,' said Mum. 'I should have kept them closer to home. Thank God we are leaving.'

'And all the time she knew. I thought the nightmares had stopped. This is the worst of her dreams and yet she didn't say anything. She didn't once wake in a sweat of fear and tears,' whispered Mum.

I sat quiet and still with my eyes lowered. I wanted them to keep talking.

We'd made up our own stories. So scary, we avoided the secret places at the end of the beach and stayed around the hotel and the jetty. Somehow we knew they hadn't gaoled the right person. When the temperature reached forty degrees the school closed. On our way down the hill we hurled rocks over the cliffs to hurt the bad man below.

'If you go in the cave a man will get you and hit you with a stone until the bones stick out,' said Marie Crisp. 'You can't see your Mum and Dad again.'

'He'll take your clothes off and see your rudie,' said Lyndell Probert.

'Jesus got up and ran around and didn't make even a little sound,' sang Carmel.

'He isn't real you know,' said Edward.

'That's enough Ed,' my mother scolded.

'I'm pleased my children are making up their own minds,' said Dad.

'That maybe so but they are going to church schools,' she said.

'I'm not,' I said. 'No one has seen Jesus so he can't be real.'

'I can't see the girl so she isn't real either,' said Edward nah, nahing his hands in big circles around his head.

'Where would the bush be without the church?' said Mum sounding like she wanted to stamp her foot. 'No aeroplane coming in to help when they are sick. Answer me that.'

'No mission that's where. Those people have been here for millions of years with their own beliefs. We've got a hide filling their heads with nonsense,' he said.

'I sometimes wonder how we got together,' said Mum. 'Of course my father's money paying for your dreaming is a big attraction.'

'Here we go the landed gentry of the merino clan the only way to live,' sneered Dad.

'You are being ridiculous,' said Mum. 'You could have been part of it. He'd give you a farm to manage in a flash.'

'And I'd go slowly mad with the conversation around rain and wool prices.'

‘That’s what allows you to change jobs every five minutes,’ said Mum. Her foot came down hard into the mess of wrappers and drink bottles.

‘I want to know what we won’t miss,’ said Dad.

‘I went last my turn to go first,’ I jumped in.

‘The rabbit sickness,’ I said.

‘Girls are so stupid,’ moaned Edward.

‘You don’t care anything about animals. Boys have no hearts.’

‘Poor Whiskers hiding under the wood heap and then coming out with the hair falling off her belly and then she was dead.’

‘We don’t know that’s what made her die darling,’ said Mum.

‘I do,’ I said. ‘The bunnies out in the paddock had no fur left just maggots and flies eating them.’

‘Nothing can get her now, she’s in a shoe box with the lid on tight and a little cross with her name on it.’

‘You gave her a lovely funeral,’ said Dad. ‘I’m sure she enjoyed the singing.’

Whiskers joined the large pet cemetery at the bottom of the garden behind the garage. I rescued birds fallen from nests almost daily, stayed up into the night dropping soggy cereal into noisy beaks and then woke to find them stiff and cold.

‘I’m already celebrating soft water. To be able to turn on the tap and have a drink will be a luxury,’ said Mum. ‘The struggle to keep my garden alive with that hard, white moisture, I nearly gave up.’

‘I don’t have to pretend to be dumb,’ blurted Edward. ‘My new school will put me in the right class. They couldn’t understand I knew more maths than them because our other school was ahead. Why don’t they change the rules that all schools have to be the same?’

‘Oh Ed you didn’t tell us you were having problems,’ said Mum.

‘I fixed it myself. I wrote the wrong number and missed out words in reading,’ he said.

‘I’m not going to baby school ever again,’ said Carmel. ‘I’m starting a school with no beds aren’t I Mum?’

‘Oh sweetie you are and it breaks my heart. My last baby,’ said Mum.

‘You could get another one out of your belly,’ said Edward. ‘I want a brother. Then three boys and three girls, that would be more fair.’

‘I’ve given the baby things to the new ones on the mission. They need them now,’ said Mum.

‘I’ll be glad to be free of Henry,’ said Dad with a big sigh. ‘I tried so hard to help him. I stuck my head out to put him into that job. He turns up when he feels like it wandering off into the bush on a whim.’

‘That’s his home, his family is there. He doesn’t know anyone in Adelaide,’ said Mum.

'You think you can get cross with people and make them do what you say,' I said thinking of the many times I'd stood my ground. 'You are not the king of Australia you know. I like Henry. He sits and listens as you talk on and on and then he does what he wants.'

I remembered the day he'd wandered into the yard asking for a job with a wide grin. His skinny frame occupied the chair brought in from the spare room each mealtime. His long legs curled up under the table, his feet bare. 'Missus makes good tucker,' he smiled and cleared the plate waiting for the leftovers.

The bouquet of the enclosed space changed to distinctly feline.

'Those filthy cats have pissed,' cursed Dad. 'Windows open. Thank god we are nearly at Port Augusta.'

Our desperate faces leaned out and were soon belted by the smell of brine and ocean. The temperature suddenly dropped and the goose bumps rose on my arm.

'Look out for a chemist,' shouted Dad.

'There's one,' said Mum from beneath a hanky covering her nose. The car angled into a park with a view of the water.

'Edward you go, here's the money,' said Dad.

'I can't. I don't know what to say,' he stammered.

'I want to buy a spray that will cover up a bad smell,' said Dad. 'You can do it.'

Edward crossed the street and disappeared into the shop. We stretched our legs and drew in great lungfuls of sweet air. The animals pressed their faces against the glass begging to join us.

'I'll hold the cats, let Sammy out. He'll be busting,' said Dad.

One of the cats slid the trap and ran, a streak of grey getting lost amongst the fishing paraphernalia.

'Leave her she'll come back when she gets hungry,' said Mum as I began to cry.

'What took you so long son?' Ed handed him the small packet folded over and secured with clear tape.

'Ed this would be perfect if I wanted to apply it to the cat's armpits,' he chuckled holding up a vial with a roll top and the perfume of an old spice.

Edward blushed. He was brave in filial wars but went to water in strange company.

'You know I'm no good at talking to people I don't know. I'm not going back.'

The galah took up residence on the neighbour's garage roof. He spent his days lopping the heads off annuals, tapping on the kitchen window to be fed and nibbling the steel ends of shoelaces as we sat for a meal. Sam took up new hobbies; rounding up cars, collecting golf balls from the local greens and was adopted by the family on the corner guaranteeing two feeds a day. One cat sleeps on Edward's bed and presents him with dead rats, mice and an occasional snake.