

## ***The Three O'clock Bus***

I heard it some minutes before it finally hove into view. Even today it's sound causes my stomach to knot with anxiety. I winced at the grinding gear change as the ancient vehicle prepared itself for the last steep climb. The three o'clock bus struggled over the rise and descended, groaning and belching, towards our gate. It stopped by the milk stand and the children spewed forth, the three Peters kids, wild and feckless, school uniforms clinging desperately to their gangly bodies, bags swinging. And our own two, quieter and still very young to be making that long trip each day. I wondered again why I'd consented to come back here.

The bus lingered by the gate as a flock of ducks waddled majestically across the road. The kiddies were already headed for the horse paddock. How they loved their animals. It would be a while before they came in and milking would still be in full swing in the dairy. It all took so much longer since Billy had left.

My younger brother had come to work on the farm as soon as he was allowed to leave school. Maybe it had grounded him and helped him to deal with our dreadful loss. I know he blamed himself in some odd way for that fateful day and he had badly needed a connection at the time. But a few months ago he'd up-ed stakes and left for South Australia. He'd taken a trip down to the coast and came back full of weird stories about bums and drifters. After that he couldn't settle. He babbled on about unfinished business and about how he'd met a bloke who'd been working on a cattle property somewhere up north. Said there was good money to be earned jackarooing in the outback. It broke my heart to see him go. With the same twist of emotions, his presence had in turn grounded me.

I looked out across the peaceful valley. A late afternoon sun lit up the trees on the far ridge as the cows meandering back to their pasture to chew cud and manufacture a new batch of milk. It was beautiful, but, oh the relentlessness of it all; and the isolation. So often the best dairy country up here is to be found where rivers cascade off surrounding mountains, slowing their pace as valleys flatten into flood plains separated by heavily timbered ridges. The soil's good but few people own cars and a trip to the major cities is only to be dreamed of. Winter comes early to these parts and roads are invariably winding and slippery.

A tear trickled down my cheek as my thoughts drifted back to Keith and that awful day. Keith had always been the life of the party. A country kid like the rest of us, hard working and uncomplicated. In those days, wherever Keith went so did fun and laughter. He wasn't one for hanging around the barrel with the boys at the weekly dances. He'd be more likely scheming some mischievous prank or flirting with the girls on the dance floor. I loved his good looks, his uncontrollable fair hair and his happy disposition, so different from his brother Dave. Dave was quiet and dependable. It was Dave who used his diplomacy and clear thinking to get us out of the scrapes Keith dropped us into.

.....

The school bus was known as the 3 o'clock bus because years ago school finished at 3 o'clock but that's where the relevance ended. It was square in the style of buses in the 40s, not big and not always mechanically healthy, but it did the job; two runs for the school children, one to the closer farms and the other, a much longer circuit to Lower Marshes returning via the back farms. Ordinary folk could hitch a ride as long as there was a spare seat. In good weather the back farm kids found it

quicker and certainly more liberating to walk home across the paddocks, skylarking and chewing on stolen turnips, the odd ferocious bull notwithstanding.

I had intended to walk that day. I'd been into the township on business and was emerging into the street when the bus stopped to pick up the Lower Marshes kids. We'd had an inordinate amount of rain that week and it was unseasonably cold, heralding an early winter. On an impulse I climbed aboard to be greeted by a babble of young voices and a broad grin from Keith. Billy rocketed over the doorstep reminding me with a jolt why I had been so determined to walk that day. There'd be no one at home to help Dad with the milking. Too late now. He'd have to manage alone. Keith had already slipped the bus into gear and we were underway.

Familiar images flickered by, rain soaked hay bales lying forlornly in untidy heaps, a woman tussling with sheets under the now glowering sky, cows ambling contentedly along a muddy track towards a milking shed. Ah the milking shed, that warm bovine smell of methane and dung, the clack, clack of the milking machine, the pffshing of the milk as it frothed into the vat, the scoop from which we drank copious amounts of warm milk. You could make a good living off thirty odd cows in those days.

I had a bit of a thing for Keith. He was good looking and fun to be with. He turned his head and winked. "You free Saturday night?" I blushed, snuggling into the seat thinking that perhaps I'd made the right decision after all.

Lower Marshes post office is a particularly uninspiring building. We dropped the half dozen local kids into the muddy road and, having swapped mailbags and pleasantries with Mrs Quilty, we were off again; just Keith, four children and myself; a long, unexciting trip through the forests. No wonder we all preferred to leg it.

My reverie was interrupted by a clap of thunder and the storm broke just as we spun into the dark overhang of the forest. The road descended rapidly now, twisting and ducking among the trees. Twilight was well advanced and Keith had his hands full keeping the bus on the slippery road. We were almost to the river.

As we rounded the last corner Keith let out an urgent shout, "Hang on kids. This is going to be worse than a kicking heifer at milking time." The smile died on my face as the river came into view and I became aware of the awful predicament we were in. The river was a raging torrent of water and fallen trees. The bridge, its surface just above the water line, swayed precariously. It still clung desperately to both banks of the river but only just. "We'll never make it," I screamed. "Keith! Stop!"

"What the bloody hell do you think I'm trying to do." He yelled. "The road 's too greasy. We've got to gun it and try to make the other side. Heads down everyone. Big smiles. We can do it!" With that he hit the accelerator and the bus shot onto the bridge.

Bridge, trees and swollen river went into slow motion, the far bank a distant and seemingly impossible prize. The swaying bridge snaked rapidly out of sight beneath the bus. "We're going to make it," I breathed. At that instance the back end of the bus lurched sideways. Part of the bridge was breaking away behind us. Trees loomed. We felt hard ground. The engine roared and wheels spun as the bus bravely clawed its way onto the opposite bank, but with such momentum that it is slewed around and careened off the road. It teetered precariously, front wheels on firm ground while the back of the bus hovered over the bank above a roaring torrent.

On that night so long ago it had been twelve year old Billy who brought sanity to the situation. As I surfaced from the shock, I heard him quietly cajoling the other children as he shepherded them cautiously towards the door and off the bus. He guided each one gently and reassuringly to firm ground. Then he can back for me. "Move slowly Sis. It's a bit --- hey are you ok?" There was blood on my forehead and I felt close to passing out I staggered up the sloping floor to were Keith lay slumped over the steering wheel. He was in a bad way. The bus teetered as I moved, slipped a few yards and stopped. "Get off while you can!" yelled Billy, "The little ones will need you." It made sense. Keith appeared to be dead and we weren't out of trouble yet. I stepped gingerly towards the door and down onto the sodden leaf litter. Even as I felt firm ground, the bus slipped again, this time it didn't stop. We watched in dismay as it hit the river with an almighty splash, surfaced, bobbed and rode the bucking, plunging torrent until the current swept it from sight.

The frightened children stood ashen faces, staring at the spot where the bus had been. It was Billy who took command. "Come on you lot." He said firmly, "We've got some walking to do. Maybe Keith will be ok too. That bus can ride out anything." With that he turned and lead the children up the slope. With the simple wisdom of the young, he knew exactly what to do. It would have been impossible to make our way down that densely forested valley in this half light. And if we could find the bus we were not exactly equipped for a rescue. The only thing to do was to get help as soon as possible.

By road, home was a good ten miles away but we knew of an old miners' trail that would bring us almost to our bottom paddock in about half the time. Although it would be dark in another 40-50 minutes we knew the lay of the land well and had often played along the trail. We were confident that we could make it. Although night was on us and intermittent cold showers still scudded in from the west, the rain had eased. Billy lead us unerringly upwards toward the glowering ridgeline. He seemed to remember every curve and undulation. In an effort to keep my mind off Keith and the angry river below, I took to keeping the younger children's spirits up as we struggled on. Billy seldom spoke. The trauma and a misplaced but tangible feeling of blame were taking their toll.

For an excruciating two hours we battled our way up and over that ridge. As we limped over the last rise we heard the horses. Searchers had been out since dark and, having already checked out the river, had a good idea of what had happened. A team had already set out down the river and another, second guessing our movements, was headed for the miners' trail. They found the bus a few days later, a good half mile down the river wedged against the trunk of a fallen myrtle but Keith's body was never recovered.

.....

The bar of the at the William Creek Pub was almost empty. Just a couple of old timers playing crib in the corner, himself and a young feller hanging around outside. Waiting for a lift most likely. His beer stood neglected beside him his thoughts far away. He never could fathom what it was that had prompted him to go droving. It had proved to be hard, dusty and often lonely, but being in the saddle always brought a warm feeling of security; a security he had hankered for more and more over the past couple of years. He still clung to the feeling that, although much of his life would always be a mystery to him, somewhere there lurked a past that he must try to recover. His eyes wandered to an old newspaper clipping pasted on the lathe and plaster wall beside the bar. The paper was yellow with age and dates indicated that it had been there for a good ten years. Idly he

read the article about a fellow being swept away in a flood. In a bus of all things. "You'd 'a' been ok on a horse mate," he thought, but a bloody bus ...". Faint images of a river danced before his mind. Just then the door swung back and the young bloke appeared at the door. "Wanna take a lickin' at the pool table, Snow?" he said cheekily.

They made snatches of conversation as they played. This bloke was up from Tassie. Looking for adventure he guessed but still wet around the ears when it came to the ways of the outback. Why did he ask so many questions. He'd find out. Droving is a solitary life. It teaches you to think instead of yabbering. Still, he was a nice enough kid and, yes, he wouldn't mind the company on the trip south.

.....

The ducks had completed their majestic crossing. As the bus slowly gathered speed and disappeared, I became aware of a figure limping towards the house. I didn't recognise him as one of the locals but there was something distinctly familiar about his bearing and that shock of untidy fair hair, looking for all the world like something from a hay stack. Realisation hit me like a sledge hammer. Aghast, I flew to the door, my heart pounding, the colour draining from my face. "No" I gasped, "you can't!" The grin, that seconds before had lit his face, faded. "Can't what?" he stammered. He turned in time to see Dave heading towards the milking shed, totally unaware of the excitement. Keith turned back to me, "You mean ...". His voice trailed off. "Don't tell him", he whispered, "It's best if I never came back." He gave me a quick kiss and, face pale, he turned and hurried from the house.

Epilogue:

It's six years since Dave so uncharacteristically disappeared with a floozy from town. Mid life crisis they all said. The kids are away at ag college now and I spend my time pottering around my house. I'd kept my secret since Keith's brief appearance that day but I'd lapsed into a malaise and found it hard to engage with life. I guess I just wasn't fun to be with any more.

But life is different now. That rainy night and all it had brought with it has slipped away. There's a movement behind me. "Cuppa Honey?"

"Thanks Keith," I smile.