

## Adelong.

He was only ten when his father bought the red 15hp International truck. It had solid rubber tyres that magnified the clattering battle of road surface and chassis, shuddering him with vibration. Each pothole became huge and corrugations rumbled the contents of his stomach. But then everything at ten is enormous and maybe the tyres were not as villainous as he imagined.

At ten proportion was always a problem. He remembered once throwing open the screen door and tearing into the kitchen breathless, "Mum! Mum! There's thousands of cats up the back yard!"

His mother turned from the fuel stove with its clutter of simmering pots and glowered at him through her small, severe, shell rimmed glasses. "Don't tell lies! I've warned you before about exaggeration. How many are there?"

"Dozens Mum, honest!" his eyes wide in awe and his face alight with excitement. "How many?" his mother queried, unmoved as she always was with any emotion beyond her own compressed response to all things.

He lowered his gaze as the excitement drained from him. "Well, there's our cat and another."

The story became a family tale, repeated with great mirth and embellishment at family gatherings. He grudgingly accepted the personal expense of the story since it garnered attention, but the truth puzzled him. He had been riveted by the vision of the family cat pinioned by the neighbour's tom while another stalked the periphery to the guttural growls and mating wails that shifted octaves and electrified his attention.

It had been this astonishing scene he had intended to disclose as he rushed into the kitchen to seek explanation, but it had suddenly altered in his mother's presence. He intuitively understood that exaggeration would elicit more tolerable censoriousness from his mother than her likely response to forbidden fornication. So possibly it was not so much the proportion of things as the careful evasion required to navigate childhood.

The brand new International however was something entirely out of proportion. It not only had pre-pneumatic solid rubber tyres but a chain drive instead of a differential. The windscreen wipers were operated by hand so that winter weather was negotiated with one hand on the wheel while the other flicked the mechanism at the top of the windscreen to frantically cajole the wipers to shoulder the down pour from the drivers shrouded vision. His father, Ken, was a carrier in the town, one of several that operated carts and drays about the district and his purchase of the truck was intended to put him ahead of the competition.

On that August day of 1922 when the truck was delivered to the Mount Horeb railhead, his father drove from the station through the Adelong township, aloft like royalty. He scrupulously ignored the crowded knots of people that gathered outside pubs and shops in whispered excitement to observe arrival of the first mechanised transport to the town. He

sat beside his father that day and drank in the focus of people and the worth it bestowed, elated by his father's undeniable social coup.

They continued through the town, past pubs with verandahs wide enough to shelter a bar room brawl and suitable audience, to the corner where the main road jack-knifed to the left over the bridge spanning the Adelong creek. That direction led to their home and beyond that the road wound on to Tumut and Batlow where the orchards in spring sparkled with apple blossom and a scent that conjured the comfort of warmth and spring elation. But they turned right instead, up a gradual gradient that nevertheless tortured the gears and shuddered the truck with determination, up the narrow, gravelled lane with vast grass verges on either side. Country towns seem all to have roads wide enough to turn a loaded bullock dray and possibly that's the reason. They turned off the gravel after several blocks, swayed across the uneven rutted path and stopped outside the solid red brick police station.

His father squeezed down the handle and swung the door open. He shifted his body into position to alight and gestured over his shoulder for his son to remain while business was transacted, but as he spoke the police commander, Sergeant Justelius stepped down from the station verandah and ambled across to the truck. Justelius was South African, an ex-Boer war officer which compelled him, by imperial command, to sport a drooping Lord Kitchener moustache and to dress in the trooper habit of riding breeches and leggings. His conscious military bearing assumed command as supreme legal arbiter in an area sufficiently distant to make any official contradiction unlikely. While obviously curious, his expression disclosed not a flicker of interest.

"Yours Ken?" he inquired as his expert eye for horseflesh studied the unfamiliar flanks of the truck.

"Yes", his father replied, entering into the role of studied nonchalance required for the part. "It seems I need to see you about a license to drive it though", he added, leaning against the tray.

"You can drive it, I see." Justilius observed.

"Oh, yes. The agent delivering it gave me a few lessons at Mt Horeb this morning."

At this point the absurdity broke through and Justilius smirked. "Well, you know more than me, so I'd better write you out a license," and turned and made his way towards the police station.

From the cab he observed his father shift with a nervous discomfort he had not seen before and watched him begin to move around the truck stopping to inspect each aspect, to twiddle and turn each part and polish with a handkerchief he drew from his coat pocket. He toured the vehicle till he got to the bonnet and lifted the hinged hood back over the engine to inspect the block. He checked the oil, wiping the dipstick and reinserting it, then placing his hanky on the cap as he had been told, to avoid the scalding steam, undid the cap of the radiator. It was sufficiently full but he nevertheless leant into the cabin to take out a can of water. As he unscrewed the cap, Justilius returned with a form waving gently in his hand. His father topped up the radiator and Justilius queried with curiosity.

“That thing run on water, Ken?” he asked somewhat astonished and more animated than before.

“Oh, yes,” said his father, without altering his passive expression. “Wouldn’t have one of those bloody expensive gasoline things.” And screwing the cap back on the radiator, he took the form from Sgt. Justilius, cranked the engine with a quick jerk and climbed into the cabin to reverse his way back onto the gravelled lane.

That was his father. A smart-arsed galoot, expertly schooled in country drollery, but he had seen this skill turned on his father as well. They had a roan house cow, a milking Shorthorn that milked like a fiend and never went dry which eliminated the necessity of regular impregnation. Like most of the town livestock she was prone to wander where she fancied but in whatever part of the paddock or orchard, he happened to find her, she would stand without flinching or fidgeting while he slid the tinned bucket under her udder. It was one of his jobs twice each day, to crouch on his haunches beside her and strip the teats of their harvest. The thin spurts of pearly milk crossed like duelling swords, pinging the side of the bucket, but as the volume increased the high-pitched screech subsided into the muffled foam of rabid milk.

He would then take the bucket to a lean-to off the harness room, grandiosely termed, the ‘dairy’, and pour a couple of pints into an enamelled jug for the house, which he carefully covered with a small circle of crocheted net with beaded weights around the edge. The remainder he ran through the separator. The highly geared centrifuge could be wound to the whirr of a bull-roarer and from separate spouts cream for butter making and skimmed milk for the baconers would divide like Moses commanding the Red Sea.

Once the cream had ripened his mother would supervise the butter making, pouring the cream into the Cherry churn and setting him to the tedium of turning the handle. Schooled in Calvinist obsession his mother saw this simply as another opportunity to extend his learning and he was required to endlessly repeat his ‘times-tables’ or, for a change, sing suitable hymns as he turned the churn. The droning rhythm remained smooth and continuous while the cream was liquid but as it solidified it would clunk in odd staccato and the accompanying hymns assumed the same stilted tempo of “Jee...zus .... luvvvvzz.... me....this....I ....know ..... cos the Bi...ble... tells.. me... so.”

That was the usual routine until the roan cow suddenly went dry for no apparent reason. Miraculously she came back on in a week of so but there was no explanation for her sudden cessation until his father received his monthly account from the produce store. His father was indignant. “A shilling for turps. I didn’t buy any turps last month. What’s that bastard playing at!” And round to the produce store he went, account in hand.

He found Perkins at the rear of the store at the loading bay surrounded by bales of straw and hay, bags of seed and potatoes and necklaces of ironmongery hanging from the walls. Perkins maintained his rhythm of moving bags and shifting bales while his father queried the bill in self-righteous indignation.

“Oh, the turps, Ken.” Perkins responded in his flat, slow, amiable drawl. “That was for the cow. She’s a coot, Ken. Always wandering around the back here for a feed. So, we turpsed her.”

His father was in no doubt what had happened. Perkins and his assistant had taken a rag and soaked it in turps then lifting her tail they had painted her arse and vulva. She had galloped off at a low moan that turned to a bellow and they had charged his account a shilling for the turps.

That was the way it was. A measure of cruelty in their dealings with animals - and children – that would be unacceptable in the present. Like the time Dida Pallet tied cans to the tail of a horse – another town wanderer - belonging to one of the Boston brothers, town blacksmiths. The horse bolted and tore in terror down the street, round the corner and propped at the gate outside his owner’s house. And promptly keeled over dead. It was a whispered mixture of shame and bravado that made the rounds of the town in the week that followed.

The mix of malice and drollery was the town’s staple means of cementing connection and expressing underlying antagonism simultaneously. A far cry from the bush romanticism of the present, country towns seethe with envy and malice. And compromise with astonishing generosity and paradoxical acceptance. Yet it remained a struggle to find a personal space beyond the one generously assigned by the community.

His father though found it a comfort to assume a role partly chosen and partly assigned that placed him within the mosaic of town relations and confirmed his existence. He joined the Masons for camaraderie - and business – joined the local drama society to hone his thespian skills and was always ready with a sentimental song, like “Come into the Garden, Maud” or a ‘recitation’, something stirring like the jingoism of the “Kaiser’s Dream”. Despite his father’s frequent resort to patriotic outpourings he knew he had escaped war service by his reserved occupation as station master at Mt Horeb. And stayed there till war’s end before beginning his own carrier business of goods between Adelong and the Mt Horeb rail head.

The town was a place of endless reinvention conjuring constant fabrication of its own myths to which his father generously contributed. Adelong had been founded by miners and fossickers drawn to the rich alluvial gold deposits. Camp Street, near where the family lived, had been the site of the first confusion of shacks, tents and humpies, of Chinkytown, Germantown, Yankytown, housing the dross of humanity first drawn to the district by the odd mix of hope and greed. The spivs, wanderlusts, con artists, incorrigible fanaticises, whores, and naïve hopefuls that gathered in pursuit of dreams. Ten thousand at one time: then barely 800.

Camp Street, now on the periphery of town, still housed the poor, the misfits and that compulsory part of humanity everyone else needs to feel they are getting somewhere. And gold still clung to the town narrative glittering with hope even though the Reefer Battery had ceased about 1915 and the last of the dredges that harvested the rich alluvial gravel of the Adelong creek were nearly ended as well. But the stories never ceased of this find or that discovery.

He could remember his father on the verandah with a gathering of cronies, bonza blokes all, according to his father, as beer increasingly lubricated the conversation. The companion of one, a stranger to the usual gatherings, told the convoluted tale of a miraculous find of gold after near miss which held them all in awed silence. He sat silent too on the top step, at the seat of male learning. It was a tale of adventure to be recounted

next day in the schoolyard among class cobbers. That was how stories passed down; from verandah to stoop and stoop to schoolyard.

What astonished him, however, was to hear his father some weeks later tell the same story subtly altered to include his father in a role pivotal to the success of the tale. He sat as usual on the top step of the verandah, on this occasion with a schoolyard companion, who turned to him in awe, gripping his skinned knees beneath his short trousers, "Gee, I didn't know your Dad done that." Neither did he but he shrugged his shoulders to indicate such family accomplishment was commonplace. And stood up to vaguely attend to something else so as to get over the shock of discovering his father capable of telling whoppers.

His mother maintained a steely command of Truth where language was apportioned in the measure required to fulfil its obligations. His father on the other hand, he discovered, did not. Words expanded to encompass stories that were not the same as Truth though considerably more interesting. It was a very confusing, part disappointment and part relief that his mother's impossible standards could be breached with a certain amount of immunity from the instant damnation she guaranteed.

The carrier business his father entered into in 1919 consisted of two horse drawn wagons with 12-foot trays capable of carrying 3 to 4 tons. Each was pulled by five hefty dray horses, two pole horses with three leaders harnessed to the pole by swingle bars. It was his job as an eight-year-old to take the horses out to the paddock at night and at six in the morning to bring in the teams for the day.

There is a much romance attached today to horses, but it takes considerable skill and strength to manage them. More than once his father had been toppled from his perch between the pole horses, had been kicked or had a team bolt. And as any experienced ploughman will tell you, treading a furrow with a mouldboard downwind of a farting draught horse is no pleasure. Draught indeed.

The decision to mechanise though was part compulsion and part strategic opportunity. In 1922 there had been a serious drought so keeping feed up to livestock became a costly challenge. Buying the truck was one thing. Selling horses in a depressed market was quite another. One was sold for seven shillings and sixpence along with a collar and a set of shoes that had cost seven shillings the day before. The change though was utterly opposite: from animals with all their exasperating foibles to the steely perversity of an inanimate object. That was the future: the past no longer played a part.

It must have been a Saturday for his father to allow him to accompany him in the International. The offer was not so much an eagerness to accompany his father as avoidance of the inevitable and ever-expanding chores his mother would discover for him if he were to remain at home.

"We've a job at Prowse's Nacki Nacki shed, shifting some of the wool to Mt Horeb. Want to come?" His father's offer was embraced by his eyes enlarged by the prospect. They drove out of Adelong winding their way out of the town the way you wove your way out of an open cut mine, a wound in the earth. The gears strained in lamentation before the crest then changed to the relief of open travel along the ridge, out into wider country that purred in the heat. Once they reached the Nacka Nacka creek, they turned off

the main flint and gravel road and followed the meandering track to the Nacki Nacki Station, along the creek through the heat of gums. The fumes of eucalyptus resin released by the incessant heat glazed the distant landscape so it moved like water down a pane, but it was dry, with no thought of moisture.

As they mounted the ridge overlooking the valley where the Nacki Nacki wool shed humped over like a shearer bent to the task, he noticed in the insect distance the line of bullocks like an ant track from the shed, the mound of wool following in their wake. As they descended the bullock team loomed into proportion. These were huge juggernauts, wagons 30 feet long, loaded with three tiers of bales and pulled by 20 pairs of bullocks. He heard the bullockies whistle and call the names of the leaders that bent and strained against the paired yoke, swaying against each other's exertions. Then the quick twirl of the long-handled bullock whip and the crack of leather. The team lurched and swayed as the dray crept with reluctance to a complaining discourse of creaks and complaints. They passed the dawdling dray, rattled over the timbered bridge that perked high above an absurd trickle of water that had become the mid summer stream and swung immediately into the lane leading to the shearing shed and the bales of wool pressed to bulging.

His father swung from the cab after backing alongside the loading platform and drew up in the enervating air near where the shed foreman crouched on his haunches studying the distance with considerable concentration. Their few words avoided effort and were swallowed by the silence. He sat too, watching the horizon and the bullock team inching into the distance. Eventually a chatter of conversation, belled with laughter, made its way towards the loading bay, and from around the side of the shed appeared a gaggle of workmen who proceeded to leap like an infestation onto the dock, gathering bale hooks and cast iron wheeled trolleys, straightening wool bales into upright positions and leaning them onto the trolleys that conveyed them across the boarded bridge for stowage on the truck's flat tray. A percussionist's dream of a rattle of noise. It did not take long to load the tiers of bales, for the truck held nothing like the hump of bales on a bullock dray, and they were soon on their way, the engine lurching across the lane to the main track.

It did not take that long for them to overtake the bullock team and to reach the rail head some miles away at Mt Horeb. There the station master, which had been his father's old job, greeted Ken with familiarity. The porters knew him well too and eased into familiarity and work they knew like their sweat and callused hands. The sweat tricked down their faces and formed blistered stains on their shirts, a choreographed movement of men moving bales from truck to rail carriage stacking and standing the sentinels of wealth. The Golden Fleece and like argonauts they laboured at the task of aiding the country to ride on the sheep's back.

They rounded their vessel and made once again for the wool shed, passing once more the bullock team plodding towards the rail head. Again, they loaded, passed the bullock team, and unloaded at the rail head. And again, they wheeled and returned to the shed, passing as they did the straining team of bullocks until the routine became so familiar that they called to one another as they passed, coarse humoured insults and smiling abuse. The methodical pattern continued over the next few days until the last bale was loaded and unloaded at Mt Horeb, and not just from Nackki Nacki but from other sheds as well where his father had contracted. And when the last bale left the truck the bullock dray from Nackki Nacki finally wheeled into sight at the railhead.

He watched while they unloaded the towering wagon of its mound of wool and listened to the banter and abuse that accompanied the labour. It was not something altogether conscious, but he was aware like an itch under the skin of something turning in time, of the passing of something familiar into something strange and past like longing.

His father climbed into the cab and leaning forward cradled his arms about the steering wheel of the truck. He watched as the bullockies expertly turned the team for home with guttural instructions uttered in a lilt of language, the tone rising and falling in a rhythm of voice like a Byzantine chant. A pause in his attention gave way to his usual tendency to grandiosity. "You're watching history, son. You won't see them in a few years."

He took little notice of his father's portentousness. History was vast and distant like the Great War, just ended, or the Kings and Queens of English pageant learned by rote in the fly blown schoolhouse where he sat in the back row with the other elders of the primary grade. But the thing was the bullock team never again took wool to the railhead, not the next year and not ever again. And when he became older, much older, when his father had died and another war had passed, when he realised history was not something that took place somewhere else, he realised he had watched history passing. And far from an event of inconsequence he saw it like a detailed miniature as he tried to remember the details, the way the bullocks lowered their heads before straining the yoke, the way the muscles strained and gathered in knots along their flanks. And the bales on the dray like a snail's house of wool.