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Hunting the Qualup Bell

Glen Phillips
Edith Cowan University

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Hunting the Qualup Bell *by Glen Phillips*

Towards evening I drove into Baler Bay, gravel crunching under the tyres of my Austin A40 and drew to a stop outside what looked like the shop. Or was it merely a roadside shed? There was a rusty petrol bowser outside, the canvas fraying on the filling hose. The shed or shop was festooned outside with green glass cray-pot floats, orange plastic rope and an assortment of weird sea shells, sponges and cuttlefish bones. Some notices for local events (a football match, a CWA fete and the Fishermen's Ball) were posted crookedly on the window next to the door.

Inside it was difficult to see at first because the only light other than from the window was a flickering fluorescent tube in the glass display unit. There wasn't much in it. A couple of slabs of dripping and one of butter, a tired end of a roll of polony with the white flecks showing in the pink sliced part and some bottles of orange-ade was all that was there. I waited for some sort of movement from beyond the hanging curtain of beaded strings that screened whatever was in the next room. There was a bin full of bread loaves, some tired vegetables in crates and the usual lolly jars. Then I noticed on a side wall above the shelves of fishing tackle - hooks and sinkers mainly - a fly specked illustrated calendar. It was for the month of September of the year before, even though it was already August of the following year. But what had really attracted my attention was the large fading picture with its caption: Qualup Bells. I peered at it more closely and, despite the fly specks and the fading, could marvel at the delicate pendulous sepals of this rarest of rare varieties of wildflower: pimelea physodes.

Just at that moment a stirring from the inner room had me turning back to the counter. Beneath the fringe of the beaded curtain I could see a pair of men's carpet slippers and grey, sock-clad ankles shuffling to the doorway. The beaded curtain was pushed aside with a rattle and a woman, in her seventies at least, straight iron-grey hair reaching to her shoulders, passed by the counter with amazing speed. Almost simultaneously a girl of thirteen or fourteen came flying after her. She grabbed the old woman's wrist as the latter plunged a hand into a large glass jar of biscuits.

'No, Elsie! Not the bickie jar again.' The girl was shaking the old woman's arm as biscuits fell back into the jar or onto the counter. It was then she seemed to catch a glimpse of her customer, 'Excuse me a mo mister I've got to put Elsie back in her box.'

I nodded and watched as Elsie was turned around like a mechanical toy and propelled back the way she had come. Wickedly triumphant, the automaton

popped a broken fragment of biscuit between her gums as she disappeared back where she had come from.

'You really put Elsie in a box? What sort of box?' I asked when the teenager finally reappeared.

'Oh, it's a great big crate, really. Washed up on the beach from some freighter years ago, but it is weatherproof and dry. Except when she can't find the pisspot.

Eventually I got from the lass the information I needed in order to find the beach house that a friend had said I could use as a base for my expeditions. Thoughtfully, she suggested I stock up with a few provisions until I had time to work out my real needs. My plan for a research expedition was only half-formed in my mind. However, with the few notes I had already collected and my excellent set of reference books and maps, it didn't look to be too overwhelming a project. Certainly it wasn't as if I was putting myself in any great danger. Or so I hoped.

These thoughts flicked through my mind while Louise was wrapping for me six eggs, half a pound of butter, a few ounces of dripping, some bacon and a tin of IXL light plum jam. Oh, and a loaf of bread. That would get me through breakfast. I would be too tired to eat that night, probably.

'So I keep going down towards the bay until I get to the T-junction? Then right, and the place is on the left behind a ti-tree hedge?'

'That's right, mister,' Louise said, already glancing nervously towards the room behind the store. 'That will be seven shillings.' It seemed a bit steep, but I was in no mood to argue. Louise was stifling a yawn by the time I counted the loose change on to the laminex counter.

'See you,' I called as I turned towards the door, but Louise had already disappeared. The shaking of the beaded curtain was all to remind me that the weird scenario had actually occurred at all. That and my crudely wrapped brown paper parcel of provisions.

After I made the right turn down by the bay I let the Austin roll along the sand road. Nightfall was coming sooner than I had expected. I switched the headlamps on, peering ahead for the hedge the girl had told me about. There it was. I eased one wheel over the deepish gutter at the side of the track. It was actually more abrupt than I had thought so I used the trick of taking it diagonally and letting the little Austin run up and back, until I guessed I had the momentum to jump out of the gutter and power up that excuse for a driveway. I stopped beside the rainwater tank next to the shack. In haze of dust I turned off the engine but left the lights on. Apart from a smell of burnt petrol, the fresh scent of eucalyptus and some sort of pungent swamp vegetation, only the hush of the night was welcoming me to Baler Bay.

The upper floor of the shack or cottage loomed above me in the car headlights, which were reflecting back from a grove of redgums at the rear of the block. The living quarters seemed to be all on the upper floor. Probably it was to get a good view of the bay. I noticed piles of building materials yet unused as I grabbed the handrail of the rickety set of steps and climbed up to

the balcony and what had to be the shack's main door. I felt in my pocket for the key my friend had given me, but the door pushed open anyway. He had told me there was a hurricane lamp just inside on a hook. I scraped a match and lit the lamp.

It was certainly a spartan room. More like a cell, I thought. But the bunk in one corner was looking pretty good to me by then. I turned around and gingerly descended the stairs to get my bags and the food parcel. By then the car lights had dimmed rather noticeably. Bloody secondhand batteries, I thought.

By the time I had found the metho and pumped up the little stove my eyelids were growing really heavy. I made a mug of tea from some left-over tea leaves in the caddy and took the mug out on the balcony. I didn't want to fall asleep before I finished drinking it. In gaps between the rapidly passing clouds, sweeping up from the Southern Ocean, a half moon that had arisen. It shed enough light on the bay for me to see where the inlet broke through into the sea in a narrow stream. The inlet's black waters seemed lined with dense bush. Cloud was coming in more thickly now so I flung the dregs of the tea over the rail and made my way back towards the yellow glow of the lamp, inside on the home-made pine table.

It was then that I was overcome with the one thing I didn't particularly want to come to mind. It was from back in the city I had left that day. A tear-stained white face. That and her hands scrabbling at my coat and trying to hold me back. Yet I had strained equally hard to pull away. The intensity of that emotional tug-of-war was still exhausting me mentally. More than anything else. A loose plank in the floor of the shack made me stumble and I snapped out of all those haunting images. If I was going to be able to sleep that night I had to do something about it now. I forced myself to unpack my bags. books onto Joe's makeshift shelf and food into the kero fridge, which I'd make operational in the morning. I left all my clothes still packed in one bag and just pulled out a pair of pyjamas. I had brought the day's paper but decided against trying to read it by lamplight. Maybe there was a pressure lamp somewhere. Anyway my sleeping bag was snug and I'd found a cushion for my head. I think I remember that I heard the first lashing of rain as I was blowing out the light, but nothing after that for quite a few hours.

It must have been about two in the morning when thunder shook the beach cottage with such force I sat up, or tried to, in the sleeping bag. There was a slight spray of rain on my face from the open window so I closed it securely. Then I realised I needed a piss so I stumbled out to the balcony and did it through the railing. Fortunately the wind was at my back but the rain was so drenching I had to peel off soaked pyjamas and crawl into my sleeping bag as I was. For the next few hours, until the storm died down again, I dozed and woke a dozen times as the shack's loose joints and gapped sheets of asbestos were fully tested by thrusting squalls. After each assault of yet another gale, there would be a frenzied burst of rain as if someone had emptied a bucket full of ball bearings over the roof.

When I awoke it was much lighter than it should have been. I hauled myself out of my sleeping bag and wrenched open the window. The air was cold enough to take your breath away. And the sea wind was still pressing in relentlessly. I stumbled over to one my bags and pulled out a polo neck sweater. It was a heavy one that reached nearly to my knees. Then I remembered who had knitted it for me.

I felt I'd better make myself a pretty good breakfast with what Louise from the shop had packed for me. Afterwards I left the plate and frypan in the big tin wash-up dish for later. I needed to look around. Get my bearings before I started the serious fieldwork. Selecting a pair of old army trousers, I pulled them on, grabbed my boots and clumped down the stairs. Everything was still wet from the overnight soaking so I avoided the long grass and the weighed down boughs of the peppermints. The Austin was standing out in the yard rather forlornly, its windows opaque with condensation.

Joe's shack was pretty 'essential'. Apart from the piles of wood and water pipes I had negotiated the evening before, I could see some forty-four gallon drums Joe must have used for lime mixing, big stacked sheets of corrugated iron and other junky stuff. Even from ground level, however, the views over the bay were impressive. The great arc of the ocean beach was completely deserted, the inlet, now deep blue and almost calm again. Everything was clean-washed, sparkling in late winter sunlight.

I felt a surge of good spirits and decided I'd drive down and inspect the mouth of the inlet. Maybe I could pick up some firewood, since Joe had warned me he'd run out of it on the last occasion he and this boys had been down. I went over and pulled the back seats out of the A40 and put them under the shack. There was an axe leaning against the tankstand so I grabbed that and put it in the boot of the car. I really had no proper plan beyond scrounging a load of wood and having a look around the bay. Oh, and I needed to get a lot more food, in tins, or dried stuff. And some proper meat. A bag of potatoes would be good too. On my way back I could call in at the store and talk to Louise.

Where the river had cut its shallow channel across the bar there was a place to park on hard-packed sand. I wandered down to the granite headland, all hollowed out and contorted by aeons of thundering surf. Looking far out across the sickle-shaped bay I could see the line of detritus where the storm-wrack had been thrown up. I got back in the car and gingerly bumped across the inlet channel. The sand on the other side was just as hard so I started driving out along the beach itself, running along next to the line of debris - kelp, driftwood, cuttlefish bones, blobs of what look like tar, dead fish, sea urchins and lots of shells. I was surprised how firm the sand was and how the Austin could speed along quite briskly. I had to keep clear of the soft sand further up the beach but in doing so I didn't realise I was gradually getting closer and closer to the surf. Only when the remnants of a breaker smashed into the front bumper did I have a moment of panic. How was I going to turn around? Over my shoulder I could see that I had come so far that the settlement was already out of sight.

Luckily, there was a broader patch of beach ahead and, as a wave receded, I drove down as close as I dared to the water and swung back up and around. Even then, a wheel caught in the soft sand for a moment and I thought I was gone. But the sturdy Austin roared as the wheels spun, bucked for an instant and, at last, I was heading back around that great crescent of a bay, thanking my lucky stars.

With that risky exercise behind me, I drove back onto a gravel bush track near the estuary crossing. I wanted to start looking for a place to collect my firewood. After a kilometre or so this track became more recognisably a road. Someone, the Roads Board probably, had cleared a swathe of the road verge over a distance of several hundred metres. There were tumbled trees, roots and broken branches everywhere, some piled up for burning, others half buried in the sandy soil. Then I had a brilliant idea. If I set the car's hand throttle to just above a slow idle, I could walk beside the vehicle and throw wood into the open boot and an open back door. It worked surprisingly well and I got quite a kick out of loping along side the little car gradually building up a good load. Once or twice I stopped the Austin and went ahead with the axe, cutting and stacking good pieces. Then I went back to the car, started it off and jumped out. At first it ran a little off-course at times but I just gave the plastic steering wheel a tug or two until the car was running straight again. When I felt I had enough for about three days' burning, I turned the car round and headed back to the Bay. Luckily, there was still space on the front passenger seat for the food I needed to purchase from the store.

Louise came out from the back room when I banged the handbell on the shop counter. 'How's the grandma?' I asked, still cheerful from my success as a woodman.

'She's not my grannie, silly. She's dad's old auntie. I told her I'd leg-roped her like a poddy calf if she didn't stay put!'

'In the box?'

'Nah, I let her come into the kitchen last night. She gets frightened if there's a storm.'

'Well, where's dad?'

'My parents had to go to town to pick up supplies. They won't be back until tomorrow. There's a race meeting and one of dad's friends has got a horse running.'

'I bet you'd like to have gone with them,' I said, guessing she was just the age to be mad about horses or ponies. She didn't answer. Clearly she wanted me to make my purchase and leave her to whatever occupied her time. Preparing Elsie's next meal, maybe. Or homework? She probably did her schooling by correspondence, the School of the Air? I couldn't help asking.

'I'd rather be out fishing,' Louise confessed, 'but I have to finish these correspondence lessons before mum and dad get back.' I almost offered to help her, but while driving down from the city I had resolved that I didn't want to identify myself to the locals as having anything to do with education. In any case, my research was only one reason to be at this end of the earth place, or

so Baler Bay had seemed. Moments later I was outside the store, lugging a fruit case full of provisions to the waiting car. I discovered I'd had to get dried milk since the shop was clean out of fresh. Elsie probably survived on bread and milk, with her toothless gums.

Back at the shack I took the box of food upstairs and had a look at the stove. It was a No 2. Metters, and would certainly keep the room warm as well as providing a more convenient means of cooking than the primus. As I was unloading the wood I put aside the driest stuff and took that upstairs to load up the woodbox. Some nice pieces of sheoak looked promising for a brisk fire, but there was jarrah, red-gum, peppermint and a little of the melaleuca: A good balance. The trees near the shack had lots of deadwood twigs on them. They would provide me with my morning sticks, as my mother used to call them. If only I could pick up a bit of grass tree trunk, or xanthorrhoea, as people should call it. The amber cortex is thick with resinous gum. As good as any firelighters you could buy nowadays at a hardware store. I made myself cheese and onion sandwiches and munched at an apple.

Sipping a strong mug of tea, I thought over what else I could do that afternoon. My current research project wouldn't need to be tackled with real seriousness for a day or two. First I needed to locate an area for the intensive fieldwork.

Although I had a lot of straightforward varieties of the key species to map, my main interest was to determine precisely the distribution of my special target plant, pimelea physodes, and to get an accurate count of the individual plants in a chosen trial area.

What the heck, I thought suddenly, why not start looking for a location straight away? The weather was pretty good, now the storm had passed, and I had most of the afternoon left. I checked the maps, grabbed a field notebook, camera, my field guides and reference books. I should drive east along the road where I had collected my wood. According to my maps, where this road joined the next proper access road to the coast, if I went north for several kilometres, I'd strike the main access track into the west side of the national park bush reserve. My mind was made up.

I threw my gear onto the floor on the passenger's side and pressed the starter button. I assumed I must have left the radio or something on because the engine was reluctant to turn over. No matter, I let the car run backwards down the hill a little bit, did a turn and rolled it forward so I could start it in gear as it rushed down towards the road. I suppose I should have realised right then that I wasn't being very bright. There was no excuse for me to take risks with a dodgy starter, was there? I'd been on many a trip with the best bushman and the rules had always been recited to me. There were all those things in my personal life I was grappling with then, so I suppose that partly explains my eagerness to get on the road while the early afternoon was beckoning me to enjoy it. Still, the first rule is always to let people know where you are going and when you expect to be back.

As I picked my way over the stones of the inlet crossing, I was thinking a long way ahead. That calendar in the little shop had only reminded me of the comparative rarity of the Qualup bell.

With the light so good I might find them in an hour. Even come back with some stunning close-up shots that would be so much better than that faded calendar image. The hunt was on! I chuckled to myself as the Austin swept up the sandy inlet bank and on to my wood track. There were plenty of common flowers out by that time, orchids, darwinias, hibbertias, catspaws, but I needed to find a good clear patch of ground, rich in species, to do my detailed survey. After some kilometres, I came into a bit of farming country. At least, there were a few fence corners and some patches that looked as if they had been cleared to encourage pasture. The Austin was chugging along very nicely, wheels swishing in the sandy bits, gravel whanging on the mudguards where the surface was harder.

Then I came to the junction with the north-south roads. The country was so flat I could easily see a range of hills in the distance, one of which was a really impressive rocky peak. I needed to keep that one in view as a destination.

Finally I chanced on the start of the bush track into the reserve area to the east. I went past it the first time but then just caught a glimpse of two wheel tracks winding away through the low scrubby heath. Turning the car back, I nosed into the ragged trail, which wound all over the place. Luckily I could always keep in sight of the big, rocky peak I had seen from the main road. Here there were many more plants in flower, kangaroo paws, smoke bush, more darwinias, red leschenaultia, even some great royal hakea with their fiery leaves. I was feeling excited and my hunting instinct almost had me sniffing the wind. I could just see the examiners opening my Higher Certificate thesis with amazement. Especially if I included plenty of colourful photographs.

I remembered a thesis which another teacher had done. A friend of mine up at Mukinupin school had actually discovered an unrecorded species of pseudo scorpion living in some huge granite rocks. Apparently it was one of the most ancient of insects. So how it had survived millions of years out there virtually in the desert was a complete mystery. Or that's what he said.

Just then, as I bumped over the trunks of a fallen mallee, burnt out by a bushfire or lightning strike, I saw my first Qualup bells in the wild. They were just beyond some long puddles in the curve of the track. The initial patch of water was no more than an inch or two deep and there was almost no slipping from the tyres as I gingerly drove through. My eye on the Qualup bells, I noticed just in time that the next water-filled rut was much deeper. There was only one thing to do, churn through it and get onto drier ground. There had been several tracks running parallel, where previous wheels had sought out the best way through the scrub. But slowly all forward motion was lost. The back wheels were spinning furiously but in vain. I knew what you had to do in these circumstances. Keep the four wheels as straight as possible and reverse back to where I'd had a semblance of traction. It worked for a few yards and

then I was stuck even deeper. The greasy clay just wouldn't give the tyres any purchase. However, I knew what to do. First of all, stay calm and assess the situation. Anyway, at least I could have a decent look at the Qualup bells, even try a photo or two. I took the camera and scrambled to the side of the track where it wasn't so muddy.

I picked my way across the deep wheel tracks, navigating my way towards the clump of Qualup bells. They were so wonderful in their gold and salmon colours I couldn't help falling to my knees. My camera almost dipped in the mud but I was able to get some wonderful close-ups even though the light was past its best. I reached out to caress the pendulous bells. The flower was tubular and almost firm as I ran a finger over one, stroking the silkiness. Looking in my field guide to the flowering plants of the area I checked out the vital parts of the bells.

My discovery was so exciting that I must have spent more than an hour - sketching, filling my notebook with details of the pimelea and the species surrounding it in this area of the heath. If only the roads in were better! Then I felt the chill of evening coming on. It was definitely getting darker at a rapid rate. Reluctantly I stood to my feet and gathered up my camera and notebooks.

Back at the Austin, I went straight to the boot where I had stowed a tow-rope. I'd read that you could pass it through the slots in a wheel and hook it to a tree. This would stop one wheel spinning uselessly while robbing the drive from the other one. Problem number one was the scarcity of trees on that stretch of sand plain. The shrubs were all impossibly small to provide any purchase. No matter, one could use the method of jacking up the car and putting logs under the wheels. I remembered the burnt remains of the mallee tree but when I had a look it was not only burnt but crushed by my running over it.

At the car again, I reached for the rope. If I hitched it to the bumper maybe I could pull the car clear? The terrain was perfectly flat so I tied the rope round my waist and onto the rear bumper. It was only a light car, anyway. What I hadn't counted on was that my shoes gave me even less grip than the tyres of the car had been getting. I wiped as much mud as I could off myself, where I'd fallen face down and tried to dry out my clothes with my handkerchief. I remembered another old adage: 'Don't panic, think clearly!' So, perhaps I could jack the car up. Could I get enough small branches or brushwood? I began collecting, but there wasn't a lot of substantial material. When the pile seemed big enough I ferreted out the jack and its long winding rod. It was one of those in the shape of a small tower that you wound out of the base. Probably it worked very well on English-paved roads but here it simply screwed itself deeper into the mud without raising the car one iota. I did have a small moment of panic then but gathered myself together. I needed a support for the jack. The spare wheel was too big. Then I remembered my field guides. Better to sacrifice them than be stuck on a lonely track for days!

After a lot of effort I got the back wheels an inch or two above the mud but the car was leaning sideways and seemed to be sinking back. Feverishly I stuffed the brushwood underneath the tyres. There wasn't enough to make a path out of the bog, so I went back for more. It was getting totally dark and I had to scrabble around trying to find bushes by touch alone. My last handful was, I knew, my Qualup bells. I took the whole bush.

Ready to try the escape, I wound down the jack and got back in the car. The battery was much worse but by some stroke of luck I managed to get the engine to fire. Giving it plenty of revs would be best if I was ever going to get out. I selected reverse, checked the handbrake was off. I dared not use the headlamps with the battery so weak so tried to remember how the track curved behind me. Then it was all go and with a terribly thrashing of the brushwood that I had stuffed under the wheels, I got traction. The car shuddered a few feet but then settled down into a deeper rut which I hadn't seen. The engine stalled and I just sat there. No lights of farmhouses showed in any direction. I tried to start the engine again but the battery seemed to have no life whatsoever. It was going to be a long walk back to the Bay.

As I trudged back along the track, trying to avoid the deeper puddles I congratulated myself on having stayed so calm. At least by starting back straight away I'd be in the settlement before everybody was in bed and could maybe organise a tow out of the bog. Then it hit me. In my frenzy I'd forgotten the obvious. There was a crank-handle in the boot of the Austin and, although I'd never used it, there was a slot in the front of the bumper to insert the thing. I struggled back and retrieved the crank handle. Working by touch I felt around for the slot with one hand and then threaded the long spindling crank through to the front of the engine.

Then I remembered to check whether I had left the car in neutral. Back at the front again I grabbed the handle. Each time I pulled upward, the handle would slip out of alignment. I couldn't see what I was doing and lost a lot of skin off my knuckles. I probably managed to turn the engine over a couple of revolutions before realising I hadn't put the key in the ignition. With that fixed, I tried again but there was no sign of life. I was losing precious walking time. So, reluctantly, I gave up and re-commenced the long trail back.

As I walked, I calculated how long before I could expect to reach Baler Bay. If I was 25 or 30 kilometres out and walked at five kilometres per hour it was going to take me five or six hours. It was now five-thirty so I would probably get there at least by midnight. I remembered Shakespeare's advice: 'Come what come may, time and the hour run through the roughest day.' Even if I'd been back at the shack, I'd just be living through the same six hours. Comforted, I began striding out. The road was now firm sand and presently a partial moon came out strongly. There were no clouds and my eyes were getting used to the light levels.

Here and there the bush thinned out. At one place there was a small salt pan--or that was what it looked like--a crazy eye made blazing white by the moonlight. It took me back to that last confrontation in the city. The screaming and crying and my self-recriminations. The storm of emotion at the

time had me feeling as if my brain was destroying itself. In the pit of my stomach a curdling pain had grown and grown. Going down the steep steps from the suburban brick house, I remember I heard the front door slam so loudly the windows of the house rattled. Lights had come on even in the homes across the street. I remember driving away quickly thinking to myself, 'Surely there can be no love to salvage out of pain like this!' But by the time I reached my own flat I was dreaming up plans for reconciliations, a fresh start, forgiveness. But why couldn't I give up? Anyway, there had to be a cooling off period. It was unbearable to go on like that.

On the track something flew out of nowhere and flapped against my face. I stumbled in fright, beating it off with my arms. It was probably only a boobook owl, but my protective instincts had the adrenalin rushing through every muscle in an instant, drenching me with a new level of perspiration that the walking hadn't aroused. I went on more carefully, hearing every insect, every rustle of grass or scurry of small creatures in the nearby bush. Somewhere very distant, a dog howled. Or maybe it was a dingo? Once a kangaroo went crashing away into the gully that I was passing.

I had no illumination on my watch, so could only guess the time. My mind seemed to contract to the pacing of my legs. I counted each hundred steps, but then I would forget the additions after a few more hundred. Finally I just counted each ten and started again. I became one of Capek's robots, pace after pace.

Strangely, after the first two or three miles, pain and fatigue faded, a sort of tingling began throughout my body, as you sometimes feel in a finger after accidentally touching, without realising it, an electric saw or knife blade. Looking back, I guess I was in some sort of trance, yet my mind was quite clear. I could see everything as if I was staring down a telescope. Maybe my personal problems just needed swift resolute decisions. My research project would take only a couple of days of intense fieldwork. The first draft could be done in a week quite easily. And I had glimpsed a way to provide a stunning visuals portfolio to supplement the text of my thesis.

In the moonlight the pale image of each muddy boot successively striding forward on that gleaming road must nearly have hypnotised me. Until suddenly, the rich scent of reeds and still water jerked my bowed head up. I was in a grove of paperbarks and the road was dipping downhill. I had to be approaching the river crossing at Baler Bay. In a few more minutes I was blundering into black water up to my knees. I must have strayed off the crossing itself, but I was now wider than wide-awake. I climbed up on to the ankle deep causeway. The river from the inlet running in its channel through the bar was not swift. I kept going resolutely towards a light still shining in the settlement. Pain came back to my aching feet and shot up to my thighs. I was beginning to tremble with a terrible fatigue for which there had been no warning.

I trudged on towards the faint light up ahead, until at last I realised it came from the caravan park. There were no caravans at the time but the light was on in a cottage that had to be the park manager's. I hesitated a moment.

Perhaps it was better to go back to my shack and retrieve the Austin in the morning? But I knocked anyway and the door opened. A bearded man of stocky build opened the door. In the lamplight I could see a table with a bottle and enamel mugs. Someone else was there but out of view.

'What's up? Want a berth here?'

'I'm sorry,' I said 'but I've had a bit of bother, bogged my car. About twenty mile out'

'Come in mate,' he said. 'We're just having a drink. Enid and me, I'm Wally. I'll get a cup.'

'It's ok, I don't drink.'

'We've only got this plonk. Enid can make some tea.'

'I was wondering if you could tell me who I could contact to get my car out in the morning? Is there a mechanic locally?' Enid came back with a tepid mug of tea but said nothing.

'Twenty mile, you said?'

'Yes, just down the track into the National Park. I think the battery's fucked too.'

'No worries. We'll go back and get it out. Use the Land Rover. Enid likes a drive a night. Don't you?' he said to the shadowy figure, incognito with her maximum fuzz of hair. She didn't reply, but moved to his side in anticipation.

'I can't ask you to do that,' I protested, feeling weariness start to weigh me down.

But we did go out there. The three of us were wedged in the front seat bumping and grinding along the roads with the feeble headlamps showing the way. He was an expert at retrieval. Towing my car forward and in a great arc around to the hard surface of the road back to the Bay. He even managed to get the engine started after a another bit of a tow. All this time, Enid was sitting there stolidly, saying nothing but radiating contentment.

'Don't turn your lights on and keep the engine running,' my Samaritan advised. 'I'll light the way. You just keep as close up as you can.'

It was ten o'clock next morning when I woke and rolled out of my bunk high up in the shack. The light was blazing in. I could hear the noise of a truck pulling into the block next door. I felt stiff as a board but limped over to the window. From the number plate of the truck I could see they were a couple of farmers from about 300 kilometres away. Down for a fishing trip by the look of the equipment on the back of their pre-war Maple Leaf truck. I put the kettle on the primus and gave my face a splash in the tin wash dish. When the water was hot I had a shave and made a mug of tea. I was unhappy with myself, worrying that I hadn't offered Wally payment. Actually, I didn't have a lot of money on me and I knew I'd have to be careful to make it last. Still, I had asked him how much.

'Aye mate, you don't owe me nothing. It was a good excuse to take Enid for a drive. She loved it. Listen bro, you would've done the same for me, eh?'

By the time I got down in the yard the farmers had unpacked their truck and were sitting on benches outside their hut, cleaning and assembling their rods and attaching hooks and sinkers to lines. I said hullo and they asked me

whether the herring were running. I'd explained I'd only just got there myself. 'So you've got no fish yet?' one of them asked.

'I'm going to be too busy to fish,' I explained. 'I have come down here to research for a book.'

'Hang about,' the other fellow said and disappeared into the shack, only to reappear almost instantly carrying a large forequarter of mutton. 'Here, mate. We've got half a sheep. We intend to be eating fish mostly.'

'Thanks, very much,' I stammered. 'Sure you can spare it?'

'Of course,' the other guy said. 'We can't use it for bait.'

I thanked them and went back to my place and put the mutton into the kero fridge, which I'd managed to get started. Then I went down again and lifted the bonnet on the A40. I could see what Wally had warned me about, the battery terminals were thick with corrosion. I found a round file in Joe's toolbox and gave them a good cleaning, including the clamps. Then I let the Austin roll down the hill and this time the engine started. I left it running for half an hour to get some charge back into the battery. I remembered I was going to get some fresh milk and more bread from the shop, so I went back upstairs to get my wallet from beside the bed. It was then I had a sudden idea. Wally might like the mutton.

When I finally drove down to the caravan park, I found Wally cutting grass there. He seemed to be on his own. In the daylight I realised something I hadn't noticed in the darkness of the previous night. Wally was from Aboriginal origins. He smiled cheerily, showing a missing tooth I hadn't noticed either.

'Would you like a leg of mutton?' I asked, holding it out for him.

'You bet,' he said almost beaming. 'I haven't had a decent bit of meat for weeks. Thanks, bro. Thanks a lot. Hey, Enid, come and have a look at this.'

That evening, I worked out a lot of things. I stayed up late preparing for several days' field work. I wrote some crucial letters to drop in at the store. My life was ready for new directions. I wrote the introduction to my thesis. Only the research to do before I left this place.

Less than a week later I packed up the Austin and prepared to leave Baler Bay. At the store I stopped for petrol. Louise was gone but her parents were back. I asked her mother how the lass had enjoyed being in charge of the shop. She was non-committal, merely mentioning that the girl was back at boarding school. I asked about the boxed Elsie but she pretended not to hear. 'I wonder if I could have that old calendar with the picture of the wildflowers?' I asked.

'Take it if yer want it,' she said dismissively.

I was driving out of the settlement to the main road, thinking of how I was going to make myself a new life, when something caught my attention. It was a flash of colour in the ditch on the verge. Decisively, I pulled over and jumped out. It was an excellent specimen of the Qualup bell, right here close to the Bay. I looked back up the road. There was no sign of anyone. I could break off the whole bunch and put them on the dashboard. But something stopped me. All the way back to the city I kept on looking at the faded picture

of them I'd stuck on the dashboard instead, Anyway, the real ones would have been limp and dried-out before I got there.

Glen Phillips was born in Western Australia in 1936, in the remote gold-mining town of Southern Cross. Glen was brought up mainly in outback wheatbelt areas where he developed not only a strong identification with the Australian landscape but an early love of Australian literature. His poetry has been featured on national radio and television. Glen's short stories also have been published in Australia and overseas. Glen is an adjunct Associate Professor of English at Edith Cowan University, Perth and Director of the University's International Centre for Landscape and Language.