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Bronwyne Thomason

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MAD AS A CUT LUNCH

Bronwyne Thomason

It was their dream. They answered an advertisement promising a prosperous future: 'Go West Young Man'. Conditional purchase meant they could afford to buy a farm, even though they were broke. They up-rooted their young lives and said goodbye to New South Wales. Together, they hitched a disused bus to the Massey Ferguson tractor and traversed the Nullarbor to Western Australia. Edi drove the battered ute while Rob towed the bus piled high with their possessions: a mattress, a wardrobe, a kitchen sink—all teetering on its roof, the adventure beginning on this tangled block of mallee scrub just west of Ravensthorpe. They would call the place 'Avago'.

Rob proudly set up the bus for them to live in—temporarily.

'Over there. That's where I've surveyed the house paddock,' he said, stretching his arm out front and pointing to an endless mass of bush. 'And we'll put the house over there. Just up on that rise so you can look out the window over the veggie patch.'

Edi was not convinced. Her vision of a future was blurred by lack of money. 'But it's not fair, Rob,' she said. 'The government expects too much. How can we afford to build a house within three years, to live on *this*?' A rustle in the bush frightened her enough to reach for Rob's hand. She shuddered. 'What if one of us gets hurt? There are snakes out here.'

'She'll be right,' he said.



Twelve years later, the old bus is used as a bedroom for the two boys, David who is eight, and Bobby who is almost ten, while she and Rob have a bed in the corner of a machinery shed, partitioned off by the wardrobe and some home-sewn curtains. In another corner, curtained off, is the bathroom. The kitchen and dining area take up the rest of the space.

Rob is busy tying his laces. 'Be ready by noon?' he says as he turns the leather over and back, inspecting the eyelets on his boots.

Edi stands with her hands soaking in warm dishwater, the lemony scent of Palmolive rising from the suds. She is daydreaming again, staring out across the vegetable garden: tomatoes, snow peas and honeydew, as promised. The only window is a square above the sink, about a foot wide and covered with a small red curtain. A pane of glass, taken from the rear door of the old Holden ute, covers the opening. The shed is cold in winter, hot in summer, and the wind rattles the angry iron sheets on autumn nights.

Accusing him of breaking a promise, she says, 'When will we ever live in a proper house. When am I going to get a decent car, Rob. When? By noon?' She dries her hands on a tea towel.

'At least we've got a proper couch,' he says, bouncing on the bench seat which he took out of the bus. 'You should be happy with that.'

'Pah!' Edi rolls the tea towel in a ball and throws it hard aiming at his head, but his reflexes are honed. He catches it in one hand. Chucks it back. She spreads it over the dishes draining on the sink, lifts the kettle off the wood fired stove and fills it from the hose. The water trickles in. When the kettle is full, she bangs on the stove top.

'One?' she asks. 'Can you wait till one o'clock for your lunch?'

Rob stands up abruptly. His breath hisses inward. Edi knows not to argue as he repeats the point she has heard a dozen times before. 'It'll be a hundred in the shade by ten.'

In this heat, the veggie patch will wilt. The taps won't run. She'll need to prime the pump, or to carry water from the dam squelching to her knees in pink mud, blistering her hands on the wire bucket handle. Old Butthead the Jersey is waiting to be milked and offered an apple core. The milk will need boiling, yesterday's needs separating, and the cream must be beaten into butter before it goes rancid. How can she get all that done by one? Why did Rob have to buy that cow? 'Just think,' he'd said, 'real milk.'

Edi must shake the sleepy boys out of their beds, and drag them from their scruffy-headed dreams. The school bus will be woofing toward 'Avago' in an orange dust cloud along the gravel road, and if they don't hurry, they'll miss it and be on her heels all day.

David moans, pulls the doona up to his chin. 'Mum. It's too early.'

She is unsympathetic. 'Hurry up. Get dressed.'

Rob continues to complain, trailing her to the boys' bus-room and back. 'Come on, Edi. It's a long shift. It's bloody hot by one o'clock. Anyway, I'll have a load ready for carting by then.'

She sighs as she shoves a green plastic lunchbox into a schoolbag, smelling the stale waft of peanut butter sandwiches. 'Half past twelve then? That okay?'

'Ah!' He throws up his hands and stomps out.



The car won't start. The battery is flat—as usual. She resents having to walk to the road where she has to wait with the children until the school bus comes to take them away. If she wanted to visit Jen for a 'cuppa' she would have to walk there too. Rob gets around on the tractor.

The sun sits directly overhead as Edi finally sets off for the paddock on foot. It is hot; the sun is like a white hole in the sky. She brushes off a swarm of black bush-flies, which rest on her sweating skin, drinking salt and staying cool, refusing to budge. As she moves, the flies lazily bump against her, and she feels their tiny sticky feet on her lips.

She won't begrudge Rob the pleasure of his lunch-time trips to the bin. She drives the harvester when he goes.

Last night he was happy: 'You know what, Honey? I might have the junkiest harvester, the smallest tractor and the oldest truck in the district, but I can be just as efficient as old John with his new *Steiger*.' But after a couple of beers, he became cynical: 'Macka only got one load in today. Jack run over his dawg. And old Bluey got a rock caught up in his auger. Rotten luck.' He said it with a kind of mean satisfaction, plucking the pencil from behind his ear and sniffing it.

Now, as Edi stomps through the bush, she begins to daydream. Jen, so adaptable, so organised, so pragmatic. Jen, with her homemade Anzac biscuits, and her kettle always hot. Jen, with her spare rag hankies. They share tears of frustration when poverty becomes too much. With Jen, Edi can cry about the dust, the flies, the prickly bush, and the constant sunburn.

Edi glances up and to the right. A grey dust cloud moves steadily along the horizon marking the progress of the harvester. Lunch time soon. Rob will be getting hungry and agitated in this heat. His arms will be black with dust and sweat, and his eyes will be wet holes peering out of a muddy mask. The smell of diesel permeates the air; granules of dust are grinding her teeth. How did it get there, she wonders, when her mouth has been closed all day?

With no telephone and no car to go visiting, it is only when she can afford the time to walk to Jen's that she has someone to talk to during the day. Jen often says a laugh is what

she needs, but there is no time for that today, it's too hot and she's too busy. And the car's broken down. Again.

With aching muscles, she trudges on through the fine white sand lining the floor of the West River Valley, up into the low-lying scrub that bites her ankles. The bush might just as easily snag her by the leg and send her flying face first into an ouch bush as she half trots half staggers onward, dangling the esky from her right arm. Her shoulder aches. She swaps the lunch box, shifting its weight to her left hand. She pauses. There is less than a quarter of a mile to go. She squints through the sunlight to see the tractor and harvester stop and rev down, a burp of black smoke firing out of the exhaust. Better hurry. She re-adjusts her weight, re-aligns her body, steps.

'Thwak.'

'Shhit.'

She doesn't look to see what has hit her on the calf, assuming it is one of those ouch bushes with a prickle like a bee-sting, complete with poison. After rubbing the painful place, she wipes away sweat from her face, rubs her itching eyes, and then begins to feel ... as if ... she ...

She is drifting. Her hand is away in the distance. Floating over the tractor. She can almost touch the top of the exhaust with her fingertip, like ... Sleeping Beauty about to prick her finger on the spindle.

She looks down.

Two holes.

Her chest constricts with sadness. She chokes, desperately reaches toward an empty space. Edi wishes she was with Jen sitting face to face at her table, feeling Jen's soft fingers squeezing hers, a thumb pressed in her palm, hearing Jen's ghostly whisper, 'Stay calm, Edi.'

Edi looks back through the bush. The distance between her and Rob stretches and then shrinks. The bush seems strangely familiar, like the arms of a lover outstretched to wrap around her, should she fall. There is movement in the undergrowth. Although she tries, her foot refuses to lift and step over a nest of piss-ants and she feels its spongy resistance as dried needles and sand spread out beneath her boot. She watches as a swarm of tiny ants scurry over her bare legs, and around the bite.

'Ah. There you are.' A little tiger snake coils back under the bushes. 'Rotten little stinker.'

She reaches for a stick or a rock that she might use to crush the head, to smash those beady eyes into oblivion. 'I'll show you!' She tries to remember where she left the esky. Inside is an iceblock she could throw at the snake. Better still, she'll trap the snake inside the box so she can take it to the doctor and show him.

Struggling to her feet, she easily locates the iridescent blue box amongst the mist-green bush, flips back the handle and throws the contents all over the ground. Four rounds of sandwiches scatter, half unwrapped across the dirt. She almost smiles at the irony of it. If they had been lovingly put together it would be sad to see them mangled in the dirt. But there was no love in those sandwiches. They were quickly assembled, each slice slapped with butter, laid with roughly cut cheese and lamb hacked from the bone and splashed with Heinz tomato sauce. She was always in a rush.

'So much for that then!' She thinks of Rob's growling hunger, stares at the tomato wagon wheels sliding out of the uneven chunks of white bread. 'Oh well. Maybe he can salvage one.'

Edi sees his angry face in the slices of tomato—stretching, grinning, grimacing. Seeds are becoming teeth and eyes, chunks of cheese swell into big white rabbits ...

The snake is hiding at the base of a bottlebrush. Suddenly lucid, Edi flips the lunchbox up and over, but the handle swings as she drives it down onto the sand, catches on the ground and clunks forward with a bang. The edge of the lunchbox comes down hard on the snake's head as Edi falls onto it. She regains her senses, turns her backside around and sits on the upturned box. The snake head is gaping out of the edge, its jaw twists sideways in a startled snarl, its eyes bulge. 'Jees. That was easy. Poor little bugger. Ah, but ya bit me. Serves you right.'

Her heart is throbbing, blood pumps in her ears, pounds its way into her memories; David's young high pitched voice, 'So you see, Mum, you have to keep calm. You have to find out what kinda snake it is. You have to ... look ... Mum ... I'm talking to you.' He does his homework accompanied by the ominous hiss of the gas lamp.

Cartoon sketches on David's 'what to do if you get bitten by a snake' poster come back to her in a swirl of giggles: 'Sit quietly while your friend runs for help.' Edi looks around her, swaying on her makeshift seat. 'Hey,' she waves in Rob's direction, 'want to run for help while I sit here quietly?' She giggles again.

Reaching up behind her back she unsnaps her bra, then stretches it over the bite, wrapping it around her leg. 'What's the point?' she murmurs, 'I'm dead anyway.'

Somewhere in the distance, the tractor snorts into action, the gears grind as it revs up to take off, and Edi slumps in despair. He is annoyed. She's late. He'll do another round instead of wasting time waiting for her.

Tired. She's tired. As she crawls down onto her knees, pushes her fingers into the soil and hugs the earth, all she can think of is sleep, the years of sleep she lost when breastfeeding, while her breasts became hard as rockmelons, filled with puss. Jen's cabbage leaves wouldn't cool them. She thinks of the weeks she waited for the pain to abate, not knowing that breastfeeding should not be so painful, that her fever was not normal, that a simple visit to a doctor would have relieved her mastitis sooner. If only it was easier to get to the hospital.

As the poison spreads she becomes tranquil. Edi dares herself to think of Astrid. Was it freedom from the futile monotony of farming that Astrid longed for? Was she sick of waiting for the bumper crop which would put money in the bank to buy the next year's super phosphate, or a real toilet, or a hot water system, only to see it flushed away by unseasonable rain? Was it the promise of rest? What finally disconnected Astrid from her love for little Stevie?

Edi pushes grains of sand into rivulets, making hills and valleys in the dirt. The pain recedes, and she discovers that venom is a wondrous drug.



Time and distance are nothing. A moment ago, blackness. Now, her body is oddly positioned, twisted between gearstick and cabin. She focuses on her fleshy thigh dimpled by the pressure of a lever. All is numb despite the sharp handle almost cutting her skin. There is a mucky smell of mud and diesel, and the gurgling of the tractor at full throttle, hurtling along at a smooth speed. She looks at Rob's face and neck, set in concentration, like the bust of a Greek god. He stares out the window of the tractor, hands clamped onto the steering wheel, like vices, and leans forward as if by will he can make the tractor go faster. In the reflection of the windscreen, she can see white lines blipping upward and over the cab, like Morse code, dash dash dash. Hurry hurry hurry.

As if he has sensed her gaze, he glances at her, and, without speaking, pats her knee. It is then she sees something in his eyes—terror? But she feels fine. She opens her lips to

tell him so, but her body is unwilling to draw enough breath to talk. She could float away to heaven in this tractor, on this highway.

As if wanting to reassure her, he speaks softly. 'I'll get Jen to take the boys tonight. Don't worry about a thing.'

Edi manages a moan. Inside she is screaming, kicking, biting back at this trip along the road to heaven which seems so close, so wonderful. But Rob has reminded her of a reason to live.

'You'll be all right, Edi?'

Was that a question? She doesn't feel like talking. Shut up. Shut up, Rob. Let me sleep. Let me sleep.



She wakes up, painfully aware of her body. It is as if the time she enjoyed floating and dreaming has to be made up for in pain. Her hands by her sides press like gloves filled with mercury into a mattress of cold hard iron. With great effort she focuses on the muscles above her eyes and lifts her eyelids. She sees Rob in her peripheral vision, a silhouette against the hospital window, his head bowed over a newspaper. She tries to get his attention by moving a hand, but he only flicks the pages of the paper to straighten them, turns the page and continues reading.

'I see you saved yer lunch.' Talking hurts.

The lunchbox is sitting on the bench in front of her bed, the blue contrasting with all the white. Rob slowly folds the paper and turns to face her. 'The usual sarcasm, I notice.' He touches her hand and causes her to grimace. 'That hurt?'

'If they sent me back from heaven, this is hell.'

'Rather be in hell with you, than all alone.'

'Thanks a lot. So it was you who called me back?'

His face contorts. 'Thought I was gonna lose ya. Thought I lost ya, Edi. What would I do without you?'

His hair is clean; she can smell the Pears shampoo as he rests his forehead on the bed by her hand. He has shaven, too.

'You get the snake did you? You get the little blighter?'

He doesn't look up because he is crying. And not so discreetly either. His back is shaking and his voice is strained, like David's when he complains about his brother's teasing. Rob rocks his head from side to side in denial. 'What would I do, Edi? What would I do without you?'

Despite her throbbing head, she is angry. A shadow comes across the floor, and then Jen appears. She pauses. Edi puts a finger to her lips, signalling that Jen should wait, and then, as if drawing strength from her neighbour, Edi has the tenacity to say what she has been holding back for so many years.

'You'd fix the bloody car,' she says, 'so you could drive the kids to meet the school bus. You'd prime the pump of a morning, or at least get a decent windmill. You'd have to buy your milk too, you know. That cardboard milk you hate so much. And Rob. You'd come to the progress association meetings with me and ask, no you'd *demand* that the district get the power and the telephone on, at the very least! And you know what, Rob? You know what else you'd do?'

He lifts his head, his eyes startled and wet. She lowers her voice, nearly to a whisper. 'You'd make your own bloody lunch.'

Before Rob can answer, Jen is in the room. She flips back the handle of the esky, while Rob quickly dries his face. Jen's dress floats softly around her legs as she turns toward him.

'Mmmm,' she says, winking at Edi. 'Snake sandwiches'.