

Travels with Pa

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“Do you want to come to Rylstone Show with me?” asked Pa.

I always enjoy spending time with my grandfather, even when bouncing along a country road in a derelict truck. I’d never been to Rylstone before, but if I looked past the grime that coated the windows in the vehicle, it was hard to miss the beauty of the countryside.

If you’ve never taken a two-and-a-half hour ride in an old Dodge truck with its blue paint faded and chipping, it can be hard to imagine. Suspension is nonexistent, while every component of the vehicle – loose or not – rattles with such ferocity that one might be forgiven for imagining oneself inside a bass drum being rolled down a hill while a two year old happily bashes away on the outside. The intoxicating aroma of dog and oily rag makes such a method of travel something of an acquired taste. Sunlight beating on the grimy windows made the dust motes in the air shine like fairy lights. I might have started out showered and clean that morning, but by the time Pa and I got to Rylstone no one would know that the tan on my lily-white legs was caused by the thin layer of dirt that coated everything in the truck. Next to Pa, I was always as pale as chalk on a blackboard. His hair, a salt and pepper mix of wild, wiry curls peeked out from around the brim of his hat, adding to the rugged look of his hard-worn, wrinkled face. His skin was a dark chocolate brown from a lifetime of working in, to me, unimaginable conditions. He would have been handsome once.

I didn’t know why we took the Dodge rather than my grandparents’ car. The egg-yolk-yellow tarpaulin-covered cattle crate on the back seemed a little superfluous to our needs as spectators for the day at an agricultural show. But at seventeen, I asked no questions of my grandfather; not about his strange and sometimes insensible ways of doing things, and certainly not about the life he had lived. I had not yet realised the wealth of wisdom and stories he kept hidden under his shapeless and holey black Stetson. I did not know what I was missing, did not know that the age and disrepair are just the outwards signs of a life well lived, of years of accumulated knowledge and experience bubbling away under the surface, waiting to be told.

The Dodge slowed to a drunken crawl as the road began to climb the first of the steep hills - hairpin terrain that would be treacherous in the wet. Although we teased Pa for his slow driving, the crosses that guarded the precipices reminded me that sometimes there are good reasons behind habits grown deep. Half-heartedly decorated with fake flowers faded and dirty, the ghosts of those stupid or unfortunate enough sit cross-legged on the arms of their crucifix, guarding the place where their lives ended. Most of them were too young.

As we trundled past the turn to a small road that split off to the left, I smiled. Just last year, Pa and Dad sprang a similar trip on me, spinning me some yarn about needing my help to go pick up a new bull. Since I was inherently uneasy around cattle, I was not particularly enthusiastic at the prospect, but I agreed without much struggle when I saw my father take a halter off the hook and stash it under the seat in the Dodge. People did not take halters with them when they went to collect a new bull.

On that day, with the three of us crammed in the cabin of the rattling truck, we'd taken that left turn. A few minutes more and we came to a deer farm, a thing I had never expected. I was more surprised still when we turned into the driveway. Were we getting a deer? The Dodge rumbled to a stop and we piled out, Dad grabbing the halter as he went. A grandmotherly lady with black hair pinned up in an unruly bun came out to greet us. She spoke a few words quietly with the men while I stood there, trying my best to blend into the dusty ground, too shy to make eye contact. Instead, I watched the horse in the yard next to us, a rotund flea bitten grey thing trying her best to graze in a paddock that was full to overflowing with Patterson's Curse.

"Come on," my dad said to me, and took me by the hand. When he led me through the gate into the thigh-high sea of purple, he finally let the secret out. "She's yours. Her name is Misty."

I squealed and giggled, forgetting my shyness as the lady laughed at my delight. We chased Misty around the paddock in an eternal game of tag before we got the halter on - a habit I soon learned she would never break out of - and then she was mine.

But this time we drove straight past the turnoff, straight past all the memories. We were coming up to Baerami, a tiny place that you could easily fit into a thimble if you wanted to. The main attraction of the place, for those who do not know it so well, is the hall. Indeed, for many people, the hall *is* Baerami. Once it was a busy village mining shale to fuel the nation, now various local occasions are held there throughout the year. The fire brigade headquarters sits opposite, and that's as much as most people see of the bucolic little township these days. It's just a stop on the way to bigger and brighter things. Blink and you'll miss it.

“See that?” Pa said, breaking the long silence, if you can call it that when your brain is being rattled about like rocks in a tin can from the shaking of the truck. He pointed towards the hall and I nodded.

“We used to have balls and dances and pictures there every Friday night,” he told me. “You’d get dressed up and go out and meet people, or take your girl out for the afternoon. Everybody around turned up when the films came around, but you had to watch whatever they were playing, there were no choices like there are at the cinema today.” He chuckled, a deep throaty guffaw. “There was one dance I remember, before I met your granny. We were all there, and we’d had a few. Anyway Stocksy asked this young lady to dance. Real pretty she was, beautiful, with brown hair that was all done up in a bun, and he took her out onto the floor. Next thing you know *woosh!*” His hand made a dropping motion. “Down came his pants, straight to the floor! We howled with laughter, howled, and the poor young lass was so embarrassed that her face went bright red and she took off and we didn’t see her again for the rest of the night.”

Pa’s face crinkled in amusement. It was obvious when he smiled how most of the lines were born, like a book that has been opened to one place so many times that it naturally falls to that page ever after. Fifty years after the event and it still made him laugh.

By the time he finished with stories of Baerami, we were roaring past an in-between place. There are a lot of in-between places along old country roads, places that probably had a name once but have dwindled so much that they are forgotten, not quite here and not quite there. As we followed the curving road, a small plantation of pines sprang up on the left, a darker green than the rest of the landscape, mismatching the towering sea of eucalypt-and-acacia-carpeted mountains and cliffs. Not really expecting him to have the answer, I asked Pa if he knew the reason why the pines were there.

“Oh, they were a screen.”

“You mean like a windbreak?”

“Nah, a screen. To keep people from seeing in.”

I was really intrigued now. “What was in there that they didn’t want them to see?”

“It’s probably all fallen down now,” he said “but there used to be a nudist place in there. What do you call them these days, a retreat? Not that anyone ever called it that back then, it was just the place where the old men went to get away from their missus’.”

Tale after tale I heard. Every place we passed, whether it still existed as he remembered it or not, had a story he could share. It made me feel quite small, in a way. I could babble on about deconstructing Shakespeare, or why the republic of Rome failed, or the precise

chemical equation for photosynthesis, but all that paled into insignificance when faced with the history he kept hidden under his moth-eaten hat.

“How do you know all this stuff?” I asked him.

“I worked out here for a while when I was a young thing,” he explained “delivering milk cans all along the road.” This was before he went jackarooing up in Queensland, and after he worked as a logger clearing land in what is now Wollemi National Park, and between meeting my Gran and when my father was born.

My head was going dizzy as he explained it all, and I lost track of the chronological order of things. How he ever managed to fit so much into one lifetime I will never fully comprehend. He’d been *everywhere*.

There’s a running joke in our family that no matter where you go with Pa, you’ll always run into somebody he knows and hasn’t seen for years. Amazingly, it always turns out to be true, and listening to him talk of the places he’d been, it wasn’t hard to see why. Seventy five years and a gypsy way of life make it impossible not to meet people.

At Bylong we stopped for an ice cream and a coke, and to give our aching bones a rest. It was not far now to Rylstone. I had almost forgotten that we were actually headed for a specific destination. We didn’t talk much for the rest of the trip. I licked my paddle pop stick clean and sat back to enjoy the ride.

The show was wonderful. Sure enough, in the poultry pavilion, we ran into somebody Pa knew and hadn’t seen for years, a man called Craig. He and Pa reminisced for a while and then we left to go buy ourselves a steak for lunch. “I thought he died years ago,” Pa mumbled as we walked away.

This year, in February, a friend and I took her three nephews to Rylstone show. On the way I shared some of the stories my grandfather told me three summers ago, but the boys weren’t interested. So Emma and I laughed at the idea of old men running around naked behind a strand of pines, and marvelled at the thought of getting up at three in the morning every day to deliver cans of milk two hours away from home, while the boys sat in the back seat and listened to music, interested only in the destination.

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