

### **Bush Wisdom**

“They all die of death.”

The old village carpenter spoke with the solemnity of the grave. As if to emphasise his point, he turned his face away from the watching boy and hammered another nail into the lid of the rough coffin. It was his response to the scruffy lad who seemed to think it important to know how the person had died.

The boy nodded in confused respect, faced screwed up as he struggled with the answer. It had seemed such a sensible thought to him – to question if the person had drowned or fallen off a horse or collapsed from some terrible disease.

But the carpenter-cum-undertaker had reduced it all to the simplicity of bush wisdom.

These memories and others are coming to me a lot these days. I was that small boy, a long time ago.

But now, I can only lie and ponder; looking at the glossy cream-painted hospital walls and a vase of fading flowers. This old wooden place has served generations out here in the dry Central West.

An open window lets me smell the outside air. I can separate each part of the scent, just as I used to do with Harry over all those years out on the dusty tracks.

The nurse has raised the bed for the morning. I can see out past the verandah, over the fading patch of laid grass ... onto the familiar dirt and peaceful gums of the Queensland bush; home, love ... and loss.

“G’day, you old bastard!” My mate Harry rarely entered a room quietly.

I grinned my weak welcome back at him... and let him continue.

“Some blokes down the pub were saying good things about you. ‘Digger’s a dinkum bloke’, they said.”

I smile against my better judgment.

“But I stood up for you.” He chuckles.

Caught again.

“Wanna cuppa tea?” Harry’s always full of enthusiasm. I was once the very same.

“Yup. Thanks, Harry.”

As he heads off to the kitchen, I am thinking of when Harry was droving a team with me, out on the Barcoo headwaters. I see the sleepy creeks weave through the low wilga and gidgee trees; the moisture keeping the spark of life in the occasional ghost gums and coolabah, scattered along their banks.

In my mind, I watch their branches swaying in the breeze. They seem so ... relaxed. No-one hassling them. Just watching the world, the blue canopy of sky, the migrating pelicans up high ... and, down below, our team passing slowly by in a billow of flies and dust.

Grey-green pines cloak red sandy ridges, strutting between the brown-water channels. They are sentinels, rustling their importance to the darting shoals of wrens.

Then there is the hairy unmistakable smell of the steaming cattle, lowing and nudging their way through Mitchell grass and spinifex towards any juicy clumps of nourishment. Yes, I am there, Harry and me.

I can see that particular night. Rare clouds blotting out most of the heavens.

Something had spooked the mob in the dark and they’d rushed.

Harry was on the night horse, old Midnight, his favourite friend next to me. They took off into the blackness while I got out of my swag. There was hardly a star but Midnight was a sure-footed animal. Harry gathered the break and herded

the mob. They were nearly back in the light of the camp when one spooked again. As Harry turned to head it off, Midnight's hoof caught a rabbit hole and I could hear the snap from where I was.

If you have never heard a horse cry, then I don't wish it on you.

Harry did what he had to.

After the shot, he walked back into the fire circle, saddle over his shoulder, rifle in hand. The gidgee coals was glowing, lighting his shape but not his face. It was bent real forward, in fact his whole body was rounded, slumped and beaten.

I handed him a pot of tea and put my hand on his shoulder, in silence. It is the only time I have ever seen Harry cry. He's a tough old bastard but Midnight was as close to him as a horse can be with a drover.

"Was the only thing to do," he'd whispered, coughing to hide his sobs.

"You couldn't let him suffer," I agreed. "You done right, Harry."

I am picturing the scene as if it was only yesterday. That's the problem with being laid up in bed.

"Here you go." Harry is back, a rough-handed old excuse for a nurse-maid. "Not too hot. I put a straw in it, just in case."

I ignore his apologetic look. I appreciate that he is here, to care.

"The young priest came to see me today," I tell him. "Super keen. Wet behind the ears and a kinda distant peace in his eyes. Y'know the look."

Harry holds the cup to my lips. My arms no longer work as they should.

"Fine, mate," I say. "Perfect temperature. Jeez, you're good." I sip, then nod towards the open window. His gaze follows mine.

The breeze is wafting the eucalyptus through the room – just heaven, mixed with the rough earthiness and the friendly chatter of the grey-pink galahs.

I lift my eyes to the distance. I know Harry understands.

I've been watching an old kangaroo today, slowly hopping over to the river gums, dodging gingerly round the rough patches. Poor old bugger. I sympathise.

"Harry." I smile at him. "Sometimes, I think I can even smell the pines on the far sand ridge. Jeez, them was good days."

Harry's eyes are glazed. I know he is with me out on the track, clear as if it was now. Then, he focuses back. "The young minister?"

Now, neither Harry nor me was ones for church nor praying. Not much call for that out in the bush. Better with our rough yarns... their quiet humour. We had ourselves, our wits and the stars. Still, you've got to give it to them priests, they are patient reliable visitors to the sick.

"Yup, Harry. The priest. He's young enough to be me grandson, yet we call him, 'Father'."

I laugh at the ways of the world but I continue my story, "'You know, Father,' I says to him, 'we treats our animals better than we treats our people.' I was thinking of old Midnight being put out of his misery – with love and dignity."

Harry is looking at me sadly. Maybe I shouldn't have reminded him of Midnight. I hope he is thinking of me a bit though.

"Yet here I am, stuffed, but forced to suffer on. If you was to help me end it, Harry, you'd be charged with murder or some such, at least."

"So what did the Father have to say to that?"

"He said, 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. All life is precious.' I farted real loud just as he said it. I can't control me body these days. It shook the dreamy look out of him, though."

Harry laughs. He is such a solid decent bugger. He's been visiting me every day, just to sit and have a cuppa tea.

"Anyways, I says to him, 'So all life is precious, Father?' and I waits till he agrees. Then I says, 'Well, what about all our cattle we breed for market and trot into the abattoir to be killed for steaks? That's life, isn't it?' He looks at me confused, and he is holding his precious black book, so I says to him, 'The answer is on page two one four six.'"

Harry looks at me impressed.

I grin at his expression. "Laugh, I was bursting to laugh. He'd even started to open his book at the page when he realised I was taking the piss. His answer was, 'They're animals, Digger. We're humans. That's the difference.' So I says, 'Isn't that just what I said? Animals get treated better than humans.'"

Harry looks at me like I'd just been made boss-drover. "Good on you, Digger. Nothing wrong with your head or your tongue. So did the Father just leave it at that?"

"Naw. He was holding his little leather book to his chest, eyes rolling between the ceiling and me. So I says to him, 'Father, don't get me wrong, you're a decent enough bloke, but your bloody rules about keeping life going is stopping me getting to me bloody salvation.'"

The breeze blew as my sister, Kath, opened the door to my room.

"Digger, you haven't been stirring that nice priest, have you?"

Not even a private conversation is sacred in this place – paper-thin walls, despite their solid painted look.

I look at the sun-gnarled face of my beautiful sis, beaming its cheery smile, despite what I must look like. We are the last of our generation. Neither she nor I have any kids – more through circumstance than choice. Well, at least we haven't added to the flood of population spreading over the planet – jeez, I can't believe these city suburbs; all the good bush gone – it's got to slow down sometime. You can't run more cattle than the land can hold.

"Aw, Kath. I was just having a bit of sport with him. They take all this sin, guilt and heaven stuff way too serious."

"He's a good man, Digger. He comes to see you, bring you hope for the next life."

I give a racking cough as I try to laugh. "But the bugger won't let me die, Sis. Don't you ever wonder how all the Murris managed to get through thousands of years before anyone had even thought of the Bible?" I manage a chortle at last as a thought crosses my mind. "Isn't a shame all these generations passed away without even knowing there was a Hell to be frightened of? Jeez, they missed out." My laugh is making me cough again.

Kath takes that as divine wrath.

"You be careful, Digger, or they'll be stoking the fire even bigger for your arrival. I brought you some new flowers."

She fusses about replacing the withered blooms with fresh bush colours. She is a kind soul.

Harry is just sitting there grinning. He knows better than to interrupt a woman in full song.

"Digger, I'll leave you with Harry for a while. I just want to catch a chat with the nurse before the doctor arrives."

"Fine, Sis. Thanks for the flowers."

She disappears in a blur of busyness and Harry holds the tea mug to my mouth. I enjoy another sip.

"I should have a chop at the doctor when he gets here, Harry. You know a condemned man has more rights than I have."

Harry just smiles – a good listener while I rave on. My eyes catch some chicken-hawks soaring over by the river gums. Harry follows my gaze.

"There's an old roo lying under the tree," he says in case I don't realise. "Gathering for the end."

We both understand nature's ways. It's so normal to us – scavengers clearing and sustaining the next passage of life.

"He's still beating away." I sigh ruefully. "Least till the hawks settle in the trees. That'll be the finish then."

We've seen it all before.

I go back to my previous thought. "A condemned man gets a last smoke and a last meal before they adjust the blindfold. Then bang – gone. Do they call that murder? No, they even have the priest there for the last rites. But me, Harry? I have to suffer on. Why?"

My old mate waits patiently. He hardly ever argues. Just lets me talk.

I'm on a roll. "Who makes up these bloody rules? I had no say where when and how I came into this world and now I have no say in how I can leave it. I wish I'd topped meself while I still could. Now I lie here with me head working overtime and me body on permanent smoko."

Harry gives me a wry nod. "Yup, Digger. She's a crazy old bloody world. I'll be buggered if I understand it, mate."

My eyes are watching the hawks soaring lower but I am listening to Harry. He's just talking for company's sake. I know that. There's nothing new to say.

He knows I'd rather be wrapped in a blanket beside the wood-fire coals out on the stock-route, listening to the bleating calls of the mob, flies buzzing in my ears, old Bluey my dog flopped against my side. That's the way a drover should go – not on this starched white linen.

I look at Harry. His left eye is watering. I haven't seen that look since old Midnight at the campfire.

He knows.

"It's that bloody Hippo oath these doctors take..." he is saying.

"What?"

"Keeping people alive beyond nature's call. Them doctors is sworn to keep people alive."

"But Harry, I even signed permission for life-support to be switched off. But I'm not on bloody life-support. I just can't move me body to top meself. It's a crock of a law that makes friends into criminals if they help. So all you and Kath can do is sit... and wait."

"The doc will be here soon, Digger. He'll replace that patch on your arm to keep the pain down – what is it? Murf something?"

"Morphine, Harry. It works; relaxes. Soothes the sharp stabs. Makes me grump less and go to sleep. Give the patch a few decent rubs, Harry, will you? Make sure it's still working."

I try to grin as he presses a couple of times or more on the patch.

"A bit more, Harry," I say. "That's good."

And he rubs some more ... and more, as I keep nodding.

I feel peaceful – floating.

There is something I want to say but it is not easy to find my words.  
“Harry,” I say. “Me saddle’s yours, you know that. Me swag too if you want it.  
Anything useful for you. Kath will clear all the rest.”  
He nods, his face kind of tense, screwed up.  
I feel him hold my hand.  
With effort, I squeeze back with the little strength left.  
“A bastard couldn’t wish for a better bloody mate, Harry.”  
I feel my left cheek wet.  
I look over to the river gums again. The hawks are settling in the upper  
branches.  
Harry’s eyes are glistening wet. We both know.  
His hand is on my shoulder. I try to smile, to comfort him. I know what it is  
like to see a mate suffer.  
There is a calmness as I know my eyes have closed.  
Images of my life whirr swiftly and silently through my brain like a riffled  
deck of cards.  
And then they stop.  
I see the old carpenter’s sad look in my mind’s eye. The wise old bush folks  
understand better than any of us.  
I hear Harry’s voice fading into the distance.  
“Kath. Kath. You’d better git in here, girl ...”