

The Garden

Evie watched Doug drive off. Once the first of the station gates had thudded back into place and the dust plume had settled behind him, she walked heavily back into the house and automatically checked the gun cabinet. All present and correct. She didn't think he was a suicidal type but then again 'The Land', was full of terse little pieces on men who had taken a gun into a paddock. So for the last two years she had watched Doug, kept an eye on the whereabouts of the guns on the place. She pushed the cabinet door slowly shut and lent against it. I'm tired, she thought. I'm tired of this.

Twenty-five years of being a farmer's wife, of watching the skies, rejoicing in rain. You couldn't live in on this land without developing the horizon-scanning stare of a weather prophet. The skin around her eyes was crinkled and lined from the effort of staring at the endless blue sky and the unrelenting sun. Her childhood in the city seemed a mirage. She had never thought about water then. Why would she? She had been a child in the lush and manicured surroundings of Sydney and had showered and swum in pools filled with dazzling refractions of light. She had scattered water around her with a feckless grace that made her feel almost sick with longing when she remembered it. And then she had fallen for Doug MacDonald with his slow smile and the country charm that tipped his hat to a lady and so now she lived on a property where the creek had run red dust for over three years, where every shower was a

dribble and water tank levels were assessed daily. Each time she turned on the tap, she listened for the clunk and echoing gurgle of the rainwater tanks running dry. She knew that she shouldn't complain, they were lucky that the station had good bore water that would keep the homestead going, but she dreaded the minerally taste, the chalky gritty feel of it.

Moving daily through the arid landscape, water had become an obsession with her. Her nights were filled with dreams of rivers of crystal clarity, of water cascading down rock faces, cool, limpid pools, the surf of the Sydney beaches pounding down onto the sand.

I reckon a psychiatrist would have a field day, she occasionally thought. They'd think it was all very Freudian and sexual, but then again they haven't lived through a drought where the lack of water sucks the very life out of the ragged, red land and people who live precariously on its crust.

Doug was driving the two hours into town, the bank manager had summoned him and she was betting that he would be driving back knowing that he no longer owned the land his parents and grandparents had farmed.

She walked back out into the heat of the day, the flyscreen door banging behind her. The dogs fell into step at her heels. As the land had dried out, green had become a foreign colour here amongst the reds and the browns. Only the grey twisting leaves of the gums moved in the hot wind.

The children, Alex and Harry were away at school, cocooned by distance from the drying out of their livelihood. There wasn't really the money for school fees but somehow they'd cobbled together enough for the rest of this year, and after that who knew. It was too hard to think of. Even now her skin burnt with a deep red glow as she remembered the humiliation of her interview with the headmaster, her misery inexorably linked with the kindness of the man.

Gently he had said, "Unfortunately there are so many country people in the same boat as you, Mrs. MacDonald, the school just can't afford to subsidise all those fees." Even at the time she had thought what a stupid analogy the boat was. As if there was enough water to float even a row boat in the whole damn district.

The garden had been her defiance, her own private stance against El Nino, climate change, whatever the land threw at them. It had been her banner, the tangible proof that she was damned if this drought was going to beat her. But now the garden was a travesty. Evie stopped at the first rose bed, the roses that Sutherland Station was famed for, those glorious imported beauties that thrived so incongruously in outback gardens. These beds had been the backdrop for all the wedding photos, framed by unthinkably green lawns. Now the jagged twists of brown stems stood as a testimony to the power of this drought. She had been nursing them along, conserving shower and bath water to water them, even emptying the dregs of the teapot over the shrivelled stems, but it was no use. They were dead. In fury she started to rip them out, unheeding of the thorns. The sunbaked earth was so hard it was almost impossible and she sobbed with frustration and rage.

The roses had been her mother-in-law's pride and joy. As Evie ripped each one out she felt as if she were tearing the MacDonald family off the land, pulling their very bones from the red earth that rejected all life that struggled to grow in it. The two Labradors whined, sensing her fury and despair but she ignored them. She had no room for anyone else's distress.

Evie only managed half a bed before she began to stagger. The sun was remorseless, the activity pointless.

"Enough" she said. The dogs' tails thumped in agreement.

She walked slowly back to the house, kicking off her boots on the verandah. She didn't look at the destruction and mess behind. There was a sense of peace now, a job done.

The way ahead seemed clearer. She took off all her clothes. It seemed important to shed all the dirt and the dry. Naked she glanced ruefully down at her body; her life emblazoned upon it, the stretch marks across her stomach, the deep reddish vee of a neckline, the scratches and scars of a farming life and the recent red welts from the roses.

Doug drove back from town, elbow crooked out the window, good jacket tossed on the back seat. He'd been trying to get Evie on the home phone and her mobile for the past hour and couldn't raise her. He beat his fingers on the steering wheel as again he got the remorseless, steady ringing and then the answer phone. Where was she? It

was so unlike her not to pick up. Living on a property with the nearest neighbours a good 10km away, the phone was the lifeline. Evie always answered it.

He felt sick. She'd been so tense and strung out. This winter and spring had sapped the life out of both of them. She'd always been such a strong woman but then again she'd been so strange this morning, just standing on the front verandah, one hand raised in a curiously formal farewell as he drove out the gate. He kept thinking of that motionless hand.

Please God, he thought, please don't let anything have happened to Evie. Even as he used the euphemism, an image flashed across his mind. Years ago one of his cattle dogs had jumped off the ute and hung herself. He'd been haunted by the thought of the animal frantically scrabbling at the ground with the tips of her claws, trying to support her weight before the inevitable happened. Jess had been such a good, sensible dog too.

Stop it, he told himself and slammed his hand on the wheel before trying the phone again. Nothing. He swung in the driveway, cursing the gates.

He ran into the kitchen, shouting "Evie." His voice was rough with fear. His terror was enough for him to commit the cardinal sin of keeping his boots on in the house.

"Evie!" His voice echoed round the house, the shape of a rope uncoiling in his mind as he flung doors open.

“In here.” Her voice had a light and gaiety in it that he hadn’t heard for months.

Relief made him violent as he shoved the bathroom door open. Steam and scent enveloped him. Evie was in the monstrous cast iron bath that his grandparents had optimistically installed when they built the place. The reality of constant water shortages even in the good years meant it had rarely been used. It was a curiosity piece rather than a functional bit of bathware.

She lay in a froth of bubbles; her hair moist with steam and droplets. Bubbles! He didn’t even know they had such a thing on the place, let alone stuff that smelled of tropical paradise.

He stood dumbfounded on the threshold. The dust from his boots joined the steam to create rivulets of brown liquid trickling across the tiles.

“What are you doing, Evie? Have you gone mad?” He was nervously casting his mind to the doctor’s number on the fridge and the two-hour drive to the hospital.

She laughed at the consternation on his face. “Get your clothes off and come and join me.” She waggled a toe playfully at him.

“Have you been drinking?” He stammered, glancing round the room in search of empty bottles.

"No", she said, "I'm stone cold sober, but there is a bottle of champagne in the fridge waiting for us."

"I'm sorry Evie, but I don't understand what's going on." He spoke in the soothing tones he had used on the children calming their childhood upsets and passionate grievances.

"I decided we're done, Doug, done and dusted. In fact the whole place has turned to dust around us. But I'm not going to let it pulverize us into a nervous breakdown and wrecked lives. I don't care if we've lost the place. What are we hanging on for? The children? They don't want it and I wouldn't necessarily want it for them. So if we have to sell, so be it. But what I won't let this Big Dry do, is dry me up, and you, and the way I love you. So I'm having one last glorious celebration of a bath where I soak my body with the last of the tank water, and drink champagne, and then you can tell me what the bank said and whether we're hanging on in there or whether we're done.

Her smile filled the room. Tears flooded down his face. The relief was too much for him.

"The bank said....." he started to say

"I don't care what the bank said, it's you I love, Doug MacDonald, not the bank.

Now are you getting in here or not?"

"I damn well am." He kicked off his boots and clothes and slid into the foam with her. The red of the dust gave a rose coloured hue to the bubbles that sloshed on the floor.

As she kissed him she said, "And when we're finished in here, Doug, we're going empty this bath, bucket by bucket all over your mother's poor old garden, so just watch where you're splashing, will you."