

spinifex baby

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FINCH PUBLISHING
SYDNEY

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First published in 2014 in Australia and New Zealand by Finch Publishing Pty Limited,
ABN 49 057 285 248, Suite 2207, 4 Daydream Street, Warriewood, NSW, 2102, Australia.

14 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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There is a National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry available at the National Library.

Edited by Emend Editing

Editorial assistance by Megan English

Text typeset by Vicki McAuley

Cover design by Ingrid Kwong

Cover photograph by Alistair Dermer

Printed by McPhersons Printing

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All in a morning's work

Slowly, all became still on the land. The burrowing frogs nestled deeper into their tunnels beneath the dunes and slept away the long months or years between rain. The only movement, as the summer sun burned its way to a midsummer crescendo, was the constant shimmering mirages. These glinting streaks of silver just above the horizon drew my gaze. They were a cruel, untouchable reminder to a parched creature of what water looks like.

Up to twice a week through summer, the earth and sky would slowly take on a tinge of pink. We'd glance around through the altered light at the sudden build-up of clouds to the west.

'Is it rain?' one of us would ask every time in vain hope.

'Nope, it's dust.'

Then the wind would start to claw, howling in its strange circular, gusting motion. Looming up behind the dunes would be a wall of pink, a dust tsunami. Breaking into a run, we moved around the homestead yard, securing every unfastened item.

Through that long hot summer, early rises were the only way Al's simmering Tasmanian blood could work in the heat. Still with eyes half closed, he pushed himself up and out the door by four in the morning. It was a race against the sun to get the bulk of the physical work done before it reached forty degrees at around ten am. When driving on a bore run, he'd often pull water out of the working bores and dump bucket loads on his head, fully clothed. He was bone dry again in a few minutes. After this, he struggled on

for a couple more hours until metal melted the skin on his fingers.

Creeping inside around midday, it was time for a siesta and any office work that I hadn't finished. The thermometer rose steadily to forty-eight degrees. As the sun began dipping in the sky, he headed out again to finish jobs that hadn't been completed that morning, often doing fourteen-hour days to keep the property running.

On very rare days, we could occasionally both be found driving out of the yard in a roar of diesel fumes. On the first such morning, Al looked at me sideways as I grabbed my hat and followed him out the door. I had woken up, steeling myself to go outside. This was why I had come to the desert, after all. This was work I loved.

'You sure you're up to this?' he asked.

'Um, no, but I've got to try.'

'Righto,' he said blankly, and led the way through the hesitant dawn light to the ute, a heap of star pickets and fencing wire in the back.

We bumped along the southern boundary fenceline as the last of the stars clung in the sky. Most of the fences were in some state of neglect. The holes and breaks enabled the neighbouring stations' cattle and feral camels to enter at will. We were desperate to get rid of the stray cattle on the property, to give the cracked, depleted earth a chance to recover. Al's foot pressed down hard on the accelerator as we crossed the flat, harsh gibber plain and scouted the fence for breaks. With such massive distances to cross, we usually travelled at a good pace around the property.

Staring out the window as the sun edged above the horizon, I took a long, slow breath. The gibber reflected a mirage of light from the millions of smooth angular rocks that had once formed the bottom of an ancient sea bed.

How could there be so much beauty in a land of such desolation? I should be hurting from the knowledge that the land is curling up and shrivelling away from the heat, yet I am rejoicing in the pattern of a coolabah tree's shadow on the sand. It was so good to get out of the house. I felt lucky to be able to experience this bizarre part of the world that makes my heart do handstands.

Endless claypans stretched out in front of us. They were cracked, stuck in time with an unfulfilled memory of water. The water was once there, but had now sunk down deep, back into the Great Artesian Basin.

Bull camels were the worst culprits for destroying fences. Their testosterone levels could do with some serious taming, I thought, studying the mangled mess of another fence.

Usually known as herd animals, lone bulls, outcasts, would occasionally come across a lead bull and his harem. Particularly if one or both were in season, they would charge, regardless of who or what was in their way. With spit flying out of their mouths and noses, aggressive grunting and low rumbling fart sounds bubbling from their ballooned tongues, they would run towards each other, legs flailing, oblivious to the fencelines which trembled before them.

Dragging the fences behind them, the bull camels wore the wire like Arabic head scarves in the wind, pulling out pickets and post. The female camels stood well back, imperiously scornful from a safe distance, bottom lips furled in disdain at the males' antics. In this case, they had managed to wrap the fence up to fifteen metres away around an already stunted gidgee tree.

Mobs of the neighbours' cattle followed the fencelines in their endless search of fodder and water. The herds would simply pass

through the fence at the break, discovering the new growth and succulent desert species optimistically regenerating on our side. There they picked out the best of areas, particularly damaging the precious mound springs and ephemeral waterholes that Al and I were so desperate to protect. Many long days were spent scouting the property, following tracks, and trying to send the cattle back to the station they belonged to.

With hundreds of thousands of acres of property beyond any built fence, it was difficult to fence and maintain every boundary on the half-million or million-acre properties. But cattle are strong herd animals, so it was possible to trick them. As natural followers of the fencelines, it was common for station managers to build a 'hook fence' wherever the fence ran out.

The ringers came up with the idea of building the fence around at about a thirty-degree angle. It would then be 'hooked' for a short distance, so while still following the fence, the cattle would find themselves walking back in the direction they had come but they were none the wiser, happily following their old tracks right back to where they'd come from.

Our red-smeared ute eased its way out of the gibber and ventured over the long parallel lines of dunes. Music softened our journey, the cotton wool of civilisation blanketing us against the harshness outside our windows. Australian hip-hop thumped over the dunes, then slower folk or country ballads rolled over the flat plains.

The air-conditioner worked intermittently, taunting us with the promise of cold air. By late morning, however, the heat was too much for the overloaded engine, and it was always the first thing to go.

It often took three or four attempts to get over the worst of the dunes. The landcruiser burned up the swale in third gear, then dropped to second on approach, maintaining speed and keeping the revs just high enough to clear the crest, but not so high as to get airborne. It required a light hand, and fast footwork to clear the soft dunes. Scorching wildfires had burned out much of the property leaving the dunes devoid of almost all the vegetation that would normally bind together the fragile grains of sand.

If the vehicle didn't look like it was going to make it over the crest, we had to put it into reverse before it came to a stop, to prevent the wheels sinking too deep into the red sand. The idea was that the momentum would be enough to throw the car backwards and drive it out, rather than forcing us to dig it out, yet again, by hand.

The flies were so thick that the shovel seemed to tip as many flies backwards as sand. Getting bogged wasn't unusual, especially in the early days of perfecting the tricks of desert driving. It took courage to head out alone into landscape like this.

Crossing the dunes was always easier when driving west, as the dunes build up steeper on the side of the prevailing winds. These winds push the dunes towards the north-west, like long, slow slugs, or serpents from another time, rolling along with the force of the winds.

So there we were, driving on the edge of nowhere, dunefields edging out from our tyre tracks all the way to Alice Springs or rolling down into South Australia. We would bump along until we found a spot where camels or cattle had broken the fence, or the dunes had simply reclaimed the land, and rolled right over the wire and steel. In these places, often on dune-crests, the sand would

have piled up over months or years, literally burying the fence. The best solution often was to build another fence right on top of the old one.

We caught ourselves staring at the dunes, wondering just how many whole fences lay buried under that sand, and what other secrets the sand had rolled over and hidden.

‘There’s a break.’ My wavering arm pointed at the fence. Holding on with the other arm grimly to the handle conveniently placed on the dash, we launched up the side of the dune.

Only a foot or so of the old almost two-metre star picket was left poking out of the sand. Of course, livestock could simply now walk up and step over it.

Al parked the ute just over the crest of the dune and turned off the engine. The cool blast of air-conditioning was instantly replaced with the breath from a furnace. It was like jumping headfirst into an oven as I opened the door. We pulled our Akubras over our heads and our shirtsleeves down to our wrists.

In these forlorn places, the desert seemed to scornfully sweep aside any human attempts at taming it. My heart surged, looking out at the endless horizon. To the east, past the dunes to the flat white claypans, the earth seemed to curve ever so slightly.

Al lifted out pliers and wire-strainers from the toolbox, which he opened cautiously, the steel burning to the touch already. Together we pulled out a heavy star picket rammer, five salvaged star pickets and a new reel of wire.

‘I didn’t bring the welder today. We’ll have to ram these droppers in.’ Al talked to me over his shoulder.

Often he would weld a new row of picket onto the old, and run fresh wire through, but not today. I pulled on my gloves and

walked over to where the new fencing wire needed to be joined and tensioned. As I sat down next to the old wires that disappeared under the sand, I heard the sharp 'clang, clang' of the star picket rammer pushing in each dropper.

Flies ran thick into my eyes and the dunes started spinning. Stars danced in front of me and the dune became a fairyland of disjointed specks.

'Oh, this isn't good.' I bent my head into my hands.

Al stopped raising the rammer above his head, and looked over to me.

'Go sit in the shade, Karen, and have a drink. There's some gatorade in there.' I stumbled back and sat in the small patch of shade the ute offered. There I remained, feeling more and more useless as the land heated up for another day.

Eventually, Al came back to the ute. Sweat poured off him in long cascading droplets, and new grime smeared dark across his forehead. His raw red eyes told of the sand blown into them as he lifted off his glasses to wipe them.

'Remind me again why we're here?' he asked me, shaking his head.

'Mmm, I'm not too sure actually. I feel completely useless.'

'Yeah, you may as well stay behind next time. You're not much use out here, and I can stay out longer on my own.'

My eyes stung with futile tears as we turned the ute back to the house.