

Take me back to the end

I can see she knows. There's still a half-dozen houses between us and I can't see her face, but the instant we turn the corner into Mica Street I can see she knows. It's not that she's there. She's always there at this time every afternoon when I'm on day shift. Right there, at the gate, Heidi next to her and Johan on her hip. He's always on her hip, because the gate's broken and she won't put him down lest he runs out into the road.

Oh God, how long have I been promising to fix that? Three months? Six months? It's been a while. Usually, he bounces around in her embrace – excited because she's told him, 'Daddy's coming'. Usually, she jiggles him and laughs down into his face. Usually, Heidi jumps up and down and waves. That's how I know. They are all so still. Johan bobbles when he sees me though. She stings his legs. Jane never slaps the children.

'Steady on mate!' the copper barks. I've quickened my pace because I need to get to them, tell her it's alright. Does he seriously think I'd try to escape? I'm not his mate. And it isn't alright. Things won't be right for a long time. The blokes reckon it'll be six months before the war is done. It's a good thing we don't really know. It means we can be brave for each other.

We reach them and Johan stretches out pudgy arms, still yowling from the slap. She lets him come to me and he turns to scowl at her. She looks right into my eyes instead of at him and rests her now freed hand on Heidi's head. She doesn't touch me though. Neither does Heidi. She's frightened of the copper and presses her blonde curls in against her mother's thigh, one hand up behind clutching a fold of skirt, the other to her mouth so she can suck the tips of two fingers.

'You'd better move it mate.' The copper's gentler now he's seen them. But I still don't like him calling me his mate.

'I can get some things,' I tell her. 'I've got 30 minutes.' They're peculiar first words. There's so much to say to her and none of it about things.

'I've started a suitcase.'

She feels the same as me. The best way to deal with this is to pretend it's not important. We move inside and I can see she has more than started – she really has finished the packing for me.

The Silver City is an amazing place. Not only has she known of my arrest before I come home to tell her, but she's known long enough to have already gathered the things I'll need. Not for the first time dusty smelly Broken Hill takes me back to the magnificent grapevines of the Barossa – news (or gossip) can enter at one end and travel along interwoven old brown branches and young green tendrils to arrive at a distant point in rapid time. Now there's been many an occasion here when I've come home from work to tell her something that's happened in the bowels of the earth and she already knows because the grocer's told her.

'I've mended your coat,' she says, inclining her beautiful blonde head toward a black bulk on the bed next to the case. I'm puzzled. I haven't been at the police station *that* long. And it's January. Within weeks we'll swelter in heat so oppressive even a singlet will be too much to wear.

But, if the miners are right and it does take six months for this war to be won, then I suppose I will need the coat in June. But it wasn't torn. Then I see the old crib tin on the floor, and it makes me touch the coat. She's put our savings in there, stitched the notes into the lining.

'I don't want the coat,' I tell her gently. 'You'll need the coat for you and the children.'

'No, we need you. And you'll need the coat to get by so you can come home to us.'

'Come on mate! Grab the bloody coat and let's get back! If you miss the bloody train it'll be me in a cell!' I want to tell him he isn't my mate.

'Go home to your mother Jane. They'll forgive you when they meet their grandchildren.'

'No!' She says it so loudly the copper jumps (perhaps he isn't as comfortable with what's happening as he pretends) and Johan starts crying again. Our beautiful boy had forgotten the slap and was happily playing with his wooden blocks on the floor – but she startled him. There are no raised voices in our house.

Heidi has still been hanging on to Jane's skirt, but she lets it drop as though it burned her. She's four. She has two more years than Johan and she understands everything is wrong about this day. She still won't look at me.

It seems only minutes – or hours – and we're back at the front gate, me with the suitcase held together with a strap.

'I need to fix this,' I tell the copper, one hand on the broken gate. 'To keep them safe.'

'Nuh mate. No tools. You can't have any tools. And there's no time. We gotta go!'

I'm not surprised he refuses me and I'm not even sure if he had agreed, the gate is the task I would choose. There isn't much wood stacked against the back of

the house. A wonderful aroma drifts from the kitchen through the open front door. The bread is ready. The bread that should have been for my tea. Johan is crying again.

We're back at the corner before I give in and turn to look at them. They're so still. Jane's back is stiff. Heidi has her face buried in her mother's skirt. She doesn't want to see. Johan does. He strains forward, with one arm outstretched, but this time Jane just moves her hand up to gently hold his arm in close to his little body.

I shut my eyes; push up my cheeks to shut them tighter. But I can still see them. I don't want to remember this. In all the days to come after this one I want to think of my little family standing at the front gate, but not still like this. I want them jumping around, happy because Daddy's coming home.

I open my eyes and the hot wind taunts me. It unlooses one of Jane's long curls to dance with it, sends a tumbleweed rolling along with red dust on the footpath – and swings the gate a little to remind me I've left her with it broken.

We're almost at the railway station before I realise I won't be alone. There are three Italian miners being marched by two guards with rifles and a small group of spectators has fallen into line behind them. The guards have bayonets fixed to their weapons and I'm immediately grateful my copper isn't armed. Jane and the children don't need the image.

We hang back to let the little procession go up the steps first and the copper seems confused. He turns to look at me and I realise this is the first time we've made eye contact. His eyes are blue. Like Johan's. He's very young to be a copper.

We move through the vestibule in silence and I'm stunned to see hundreds of people cramming the platform. Mostly they're men, but there are women and

children too. They won't all fit on the train, I think, and then I realise they're not here to board, they're here to see us do it.

Pictures flash in my head. Angry miners' faces contorted with rage, blackened not just from working among the rich lead and zinc ore underground, but from smoke billowing from the building they've just set alight. The German Club.

They didn't just burn it. They smashed it and pissed on it. And laughed. They sang songs and slapped each other on the back when the roof fell in and cheered young boys who threw rocks. When the firemen arrived to put it out, they jeered at them and threatened to cut their hoses. They frightened me then and they frighten me now, even though now they're mostly quiet and still. Everyone seems to be still today. It's as though the world has stopped. Clearly, mine has.

My copper reacts to his audience. His hand is now gripped tight around my arm and he shoves me toward a Sergeant with some paperwork clipped to a board.

'Johann Schumacher,' he growls. He's very young to growl like that. I haven't been called Johann since I arrived in Australia eleven years ago. I'm Johnny. The Sergeant flips over a few sheets one at a time until he finds mine.

'Over there.' He says it more loudly than needed. We're right next to him. He doesn't look at me or the copper. All in a day's work. No need for niceties for either of us. I join the end of a line of more than ten men. More than half I've never seen before. They can't be from Broken Hill. But I do recognise a Serbian fellow who eats in my crib cuddy. We nod at each other, but don't speak. Our eyes meeting was enough.

For both of us, Broken Hill was a new beginning – and an ending.

For him, it was the end of life in a war-torn country. For me, the end of trying to overcome the uncompromising bias of two battling Lutheran factions which each thought their differences were important enough to stop Jane and me from marrying.

Now we both know we have new beginnings – as internees on Torrens Island. We have no idea how long this new beginning will last. I don't want any beginning at all. I just want to get back to the happy ending Jane and I wrote more than five years ago.

'Take me back. Take me back mate'.

My young copper doesn't understand the significance of my use of 'mate'. He shrugs. I cry. Not for the beginning of what I know will include abuse and deprivation. But for my ending. If I come home, I will be a different person. And so will Jane and our children.

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