

1st place

SS77

MIDWIFE

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Throughout the day, since dawn, they worked on the tree, the Blackbutt fallen against the hut during the night. It had damaged a part of the mud brick wall, and splintered several wooden roof shingles. Using bow saw and axe they had cleared away the branches from the roof so that they could patch most of the damaged wall with a mixture of mud-clay and straw, and repair the roof with the few shingles left over from when the hut was built.

The woman studied the boy who had toiled so tirelessly beside through the long, miserable day. Twelve years old, she thought, a baby yesterday and now almost a man. She shook her head wearily and shifted her gaze to her other children. The five year old played with wooden chips, her only toys, while the baby, six months old now and yet to be seen by her father, slept in a make-shift cradle by the fire. Childhood was so brief in this strange, cruel land, she thought, and she wondered if the girl and the baby would be given more time for growing up than the boy.

"Damned rain," the boys said suddenly, from the doorway. "Ain't it ever gonna stop!"

"Isn't it ever going to stop," she corrected absently, watching the stew pot hanging over the open fire. Meat was almost all gone, she pondered, they would have to kill a sheep tomorrow.

"Reckon it might bring the old man home," the boy said.

The woman straightened. "Referring to your father as the old man could fetch you a keen leatherin' wit' the copper stick," she warned quietly, her voice feathered by the soft lisp of

Kilkenny Irish echoing from a long time past. The boy was right, she thought hopefully. It was good rain, the first for almost two years.

Their dream when they selected the one hundred and twenty acre block on the banks of the Piccaninny Creek had become a nightmare of dust and failed crops, of thirsty, dying stock as the Piccaninny wilted from a strong stream to a lime-stained gully. It was a constant struggle to draw water from the well now, and to find enough dry feed along with lopped Kurrajong Tree branches to keep the surviving stock alive. Then there was ever the rent payment, the shilling an acre due come Christmas and the final lease payment that would ensure their freehold ownership of the land. If they did not meet that payment then the long years of toil would be for nought.

So her man had gone shearing for the squatters.

Eight months ago, she thought sadly, with herself struggling to beat the persistent morning sickness in addition to the despair of being left alone for the first time since they'd been wed. The nearest township was thirty miles away, and the nearest neighbour two miles distant, on the opposite bank of the Serpentine River.

Only once she'd heard from him during those long despairing months, and she smiled as she remembered the dirty, unshaven man who appeared on her doorstep late one evening, half scaring her to death.. Her fears were dispelled when the stranger handed her the small package from her husband. He refused to stay the night. His wife was ailing, he said, and he needed to go to her. He did take some damper with him, and half a leg of corned mutton.

The package contained a brief letter; he would be home for the spring sowing it said together with four one pound notes.

"Rider comin', ma," the boy's shout penetrated her thoughts. "By cripes, he's ridin' hard, like Old Nick hisself."

Anxiously she wiped her hands in her apron then brushed the prematurely greying hair from her forehead. "Please God," she prayed silently, wishing that she still had the holy beads that her grandmother had given her, lost so many years ago.

"By cripes," the boy said, "it's that squatter bloke, McNamara, from across the river." His voice echoed the same disappointment that she felt and shared but knew that she could not show. "Must be somethin' bad wrong, ma," the boy added, "ain't like that cranky coot -" He corrected himself quickly – "Mister McNamara to push a horse so hard."

Her disappointment washed away with her sudden concern. Mentally she calculated the days, scowling as she removed her apron. "Reckon his missus has reached her time," she said simply, knowing that the boy, as young as he was, understood. "She's most likely needing me, son." She looked around the hut, grimacing. "If that be the case you be taking care of the little-uns, boy, feed 'em and bed 'em and stay watchful 'til I return."

The boy nodded. His mother was the only midwife in the district and he was used to her being called away from home. He knew that she despaired at leaving them alone, and feared for them.

He took a flour sack from behind the door and draped it over his shoulders. "I'll fetch Old Dolly while you be gettin' yerself ready."

The woman met the squatter at the doorway. McNamara stuttered with fear and exhaustion as he babbled for her help for his wife. "She's screaming bad, mum, hurting awful. You gotta come – quick!"

"The boy's fetchin' my horse," she said, knowing it was a waste of breath asking questions. It could be the baby coming, or it might be simply a bad dose of colic, but after five years of delivering most of the district's babies she was aware that she could not expect a man to know the difference between the two when a woman was close to her "crying time."

She hugged her girl child briefly, kissing her forehead, before touching her little finger to her lips and brushing it across the sleeping baby's forehead. "Good keep you, my children," she murmured.

The boy returned with the horse. The woman had already collected her "medicine" bag from underneath her bed, and draped a corn sack over her shoulders. She spoke without emotion to the boy, last minute instructions given firmly and without any 'shilly-shallying,' knowing that the boy understood.

She rode the old mare bareback because they didn't own a saddle, and a knotted rope served as a halter. It wasn't comfortable, even at a slow walk, worse though when McNamara forced a fast trot. She felt a growing concern for the squatter's wife. McNamara's repeated descriptions of her symptoms indicated that perhaps Elizabeth McNamara was in need of urgent help – after all it was not her first child. The previous three were all easy births, without any complications.

It was almost dark, commencing to rain again when they reached the river. The stream had risen over its banks and sheets of shallow water swamped the adjacent flats. The river itself was flowing swiftly between a ragged line of half submerged gum trees.

McNamara started south, splashing through the knee deep water along the drowned river bank. "The bridge will still be there," he said. "The river's not high enough to have taken it."

The woman knew that the bridge was a long way downstream, and that it would take two or more hours to reach the McNamara homestead IF the bridge remained. The homestead was almost directly across the river from where they were. "We'll cross here," she announced.

McNamara gaped at her, his face turning a deathly pale. "Good god, mum, the river's flowin' fast and mad-crazy with drift, we'd never make it."

"If your wife is needin' help as bad as you reckon than we haven't the time to ride downriver to the bridge and back to your homestead,. If the bridge is gone there's no crossing the river there, it's too narrow and too deep. Come on now, the horses will get us across."

Still the squatter hesitated, shaking his head repeatedly. "God help me, mum, I can't swim a stroke."

The woman ignored his protest and edged Old Dolly towards the river. "Stick close to me," she instructed, prodding the mare into the deeper water.. She spoke to the frightened horse quietly but severely. Although the horse continued to quiver with fear she obeyed her rider's steadying hand and edged into the fast flowing river.

McNamara pressed his own horse close to them and the woman, looking at him, could smell his fear. "Hang on," she said calmly. "Stay close to me." For some unfathomable reason she found herself thinking of her children instead of the danger of the sullied, surging stream.

The river's flow was rapid, a violence of muddy water and debris. The man began to panic, realising that they were making little headway across the river but were being pushed downstream. He almost lost his grip and for a moment it seemed that he would be washed away by the swirling current. Somehow he managed to steady himself and remain in his saddle. He looked at the woman desperately.

"Don't fight the current," she urged. "Cross at any angle, towards those trees on the bend." She nodded towards the stand of three huge Red River Gums clinging tenaciously to the flooded river bank, barely visible in the dying daylight.

Twice she was almost unseated by flood debris. Once an entire tree threatened disaster as it rolled towards them, like some great leviathan monster surging threateningly from the deep. At the last moment some quirk of current turned it away and only the end of a single sodden branch brushed against her horse's flank. The Old Mare was now its stride, swimming strongly through the mish-mash of currents and eddies. They reached the other bank the mare grunted and wheezed as she scrambled away from the surging flood.

The woman was relieved to see the white-faced squatter following close behind.

Neither spoke but simply glanced at each before splashing away from the river. Half an hour later they reached the homestead, guided by burning lanterns.

It was a difficult birth although not life threatening. The baby was lying sideways in the womb and had to be turned, and it took a long time coming. Her previous easy childbirths did

not prepare the squatter's wife for the difficulty and the pain that she suffered with her present confinement. Nor was she a brave woman and her screaming had a sobering effect on the entire household, particularly on the young housemaid who assisted, for the first time, with a delivery. She was visibly shaken when the baby finally appeared during the early hours of the morning, her face completely devoid of colour.

"I'll be damned if I'll ever have children," she said, "not ever!"

The woman smiled as she washed the new born. "You'll change your mind some day," she replied quietly.

"No way – not ever," the maid repeated, vehemently.

They asked her to remain until dawn, but she refused, anxious to be back with her children. The squatter gave her a sack containing half a side of salted pork, together with his mumbled thanks. She left the homestead in the early pre-dawn darkness and it was fully dawn when she reached the bridge, having decided to take the longer way home rather than to swim the flooding stream again. The bridge remained but water lapped the planks and was still rising as she crossed.

The rain had stopped and when she reached the hut and the sun was rising to a clear blue sky. The boy met her at the gateway; having watched her approach. He greeted her warmly but showed little emotion. The children were fine, he told her, walking with her to the hut, both still sleeping. He had heard a dingo howling at some time during the night but it hadn't come close to the house and the poddy calf was safe in its pen. He held her horse while she

dismounted and unloaded the gunny sack containing the salted pork before leading the old mare to the house paddock and turning her loose with a nose bag and a pat on her fat behind.

Later in the day the woman while packing the salt pork into a wooden cask heard the boy calling, his voice vibrant with excitement. "It's dad-da, ma, he's crossin' the Piccaninny. ..."

"My goodness!" for a moment she was flustered, wiping her hands on her apron before brushing her hair with her fingers. The brief moment of rare emotion passed quickly, and she hurriedly removed her apron, throwing it onto a chair. "It's your dada," she said to the girl, at the same time taking up the baby from its sheepskin rug on the floor. "It's your dad-da home, lass – come now..." She took the girl's fingers in her free hand and hurried her towards the door.

Outside, the sun was shining and the day was warm, fresh and bright and clear with a green tinge already brushed across the soil that a day or so earlier was nought but dust. The Piccaninny was flowing full and fast, and the dam behind the house was brimming. Mudlarks, shrieked their territorial claims, already building a nest in the gum tree to the side of the hut, and a pair of Willy Wagtails fluttered and flirted along the split rail fence. It was a world re-born, a splendid creature which had shed its aged cocoon of decay and dust in which it had been entombed for far too long.

The man dismounted beyond the sliprails and led his horse towards the hut, the boy trailing along beside him in silent awe. He was a tall man, gaunt, with a thin face and narrow features and tired blue eyes, a stranger almost and the little girl cowered behind her mother's skirts.

The man saw them and his sudden smile wiped the weariness from his face.

proper fierce it is." He laughed quickly. "Just as well, my girl, that you didn't have to cross it, fer any reason, *you not being able to swim ...*"



