

Steeple



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Sarah and Jacob reached the hill's apex. Sarah picked up the pretty plastic doll that sat on the granite ledge, stroked the doll's lush auburn hair, adjusted the pink and white floral dress. She placed it next to her as they sat down, positioning their buttocks in their buttocks' favourite spots on the smooth stone. Arms and hands were adjusted so that Sarah's right and Jacob's left intertwined and rested in the valley between their welded together thighs, the doll next to Sarah looking towards the distant town from blue eyes framed in exquisite long lashes. Jacob and Sarah absorbed each other's strength, the quiet tenacity, as their gaze drank in their particular favourite beauty of their farm.

Sarah liked to rest her gaze on their sturdy little house, the metallic shimmer of the corrugated iron roof now purpling and softening in the embered sunset. She loved the way it belonged, the stones in its thick walls gathered from the very earth on which it sat, the wide all-round verandah shading the blasting heat of summer, her gardens a vibrantly coloured moat separating it from monochrome paddocks. She lifted her eyes to their boundary delineated by an olive strip of scrub from their neighbours and beyond that the pale wheat silos like a cathedral indicating the town eight miles away. The town. A pivot point, a draw for her thoughts both of comfort and indescribable grief. And what did it consist of? A pub. A Four-Square supermarket. A haberdashery, a butcher, bakery, the proud little school with its dusty yellow buses, one of which passed their farm gate each morning and afternoon without stopping. Sarah felt a crushing weight each time she happened to hear its rumbling uninterrupted progress or saw the plume of dust coming and going. The town's grandest buildings were the churches - Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, Church of England - each congregation thinking the others slightly peculiar in the way they worshipped the same God.

Jacob's perspective from this high central point of their farm mirrored his motivations, his peasant DNA formed over countless generations on the granary plains of Europe, gently rolling open lands where voracious armies swept through ruthlessly, taking everything. It never occurred to him that his European vanguard, albeit without a formal army but rather platoons of settlers, had done the same here on the peninsula to the Mirning, Nauo, Wirangu and Parnkalla. He knew nothing of this. Jacob only felt a constant inbuilt anxiety to plant and nurture and reap, while you can. And pray. Even now he was slightly disbelieving at all they had achieved together, and knew that something, someone,

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an act of God, could take it all away, could rip their hearts out as had happened already once.

He squeezed Sarah's hand, she squeezed back. She knew what he was thinking, how his soul worked, just as he did her. Life goes on. Sun rises, sets. Crops are planted, burst from winter soil and lift their filling heads to the summer sun. The man was ready. The woman was ready. The machines and the heavy nodding heads of grain were ready. The steeple silos were ready for the offerings of their God's own country.

With the last of the day's warmth cloaking them and the red light on the very top of the distant silos flickering into life, they ambled down the hill through the rocky wheat paddock to the modest homestead, having told each other everything, without saying a word.

An hour after the following dawn out in the furthest paddock the comb of the little red Massey Ferguson header sliced into the wheat. Cogs, pulleys, chains and belts whirred. The knives at the front of the comb hummed, scything the heads off to be shivered into the machine's maw. Hard fat grain poured into the steel bin behind Jacob's head, smashed straw plumed from the rear sieves and glinted dusty gold in the sun. Soon the old Mack truck was full. Sarah arrived in the ute, smoothed the load, unrolled and tied the canvas covering over it, and headed off for the town silo.

The long hot day went on. The header had just a white fibreglass roof to shade the operator from the sun. The Mack truck had no air con, no radio and a driver's seat that felt as if hewn from granite. All of this was luxury to Jacob and Sarah, their hearts experiencing a new lightness this year, this unbelievably blessed by God year, at last. Finally, years of toil, of starting out with a depleted neglected farm where the previous owner had gone broke during a brutal drought and they were the only bidders at the auction, and using cobbled together, beaten up machinery had led to this – their own land. *Their* land! After this bumper harvest they'd replace some of the old equipment – the header, and the Mack they'd bought at a clearing sale for a song. It had served them well carting its regulation ten tons to the town silo on countless trips, mostly driven by Sarah who felt each time she returned alive was a miracle in itself.

The day slid off the peninsula on its way to Western Australia, the immense Indian Ocean, Africa. It was always leaving, always on its way back. Stars took its place and the dry heat hung like a blanket. Jacob reaped on into the night, fuelling up on sandwiches, tea and

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kisses Sarah brought him. Soon though the whirr of the blades, the fans and sieves and metal pathways of the guts of the machine began to alter in note. It was God's way of telling Jacob it was time to stop. All over the peninsula the lights of headers doused like blown candles as a layer of moist air from the Great Australian Bight descended and made the wheat too damp to thresh and store.

Over the following days and weeks Sarah and Jacob worked their way towards home. Both were surviving on just a few hours sleep a night. Everyone knew the crop had to be got off without a minute to spare. A year's work could be destroyed in an unseasonal hail or wind storm, or a fire. An act of God. It was hideously costly to put in a crop, and a farm could be set back years or even lost with one failed harvest.

For Jacob and Sarah the only rest was on Sunday – they did no farm work on that day. Church, prayer, visiting the cemetery on the edge of the town, making love with the lazy breeze through the lace curtains in the slow waning afternoon, followed by the early evening walk up to the granite hill overlooking their farm - Sunday was God's fulcrum and it would never change. Anyway, the silo was closed on that sacred day of rest, though lately there had been increasing pressure for it to open seven days a week during the height of harvest. Pastor Sauerbach said they would all go to hell and/or be condemned to never ending droughts should they not turn up to church each and every Sunday. But the world was changing, the traditions and catechisms being studied for more utilitarian interpretations. Sometimes now on a Sunday they could see the slow ant like movement of a machine across a distant paddock. And no one would ever forget Sarah standing up in the middle of a sermon and shouting at Pastor Sauerbach why God would allow a thing like leukemia to grow in a little girl, and why would such a benevolent God not allow her to become pregnant again? Her grief was so all-encompassing she didn't even care afterwards if she and Jacob were shunned by the congregation. But the opposite happened. The entire district heard the story as always happens in small communities, and embraced them unconditionally. Even Pastor Sauerbach added a note of compassion to his sermons. Human empathy can see over the highest fences.

On the final Saturday of harvest, a day of brilliant hot sun, Jacob was almost asleep on the header as another night settled over the peninsula. At ten pm the heat had barely abated and in the ideal conditions Jacob worked on. He was in Old Rocky now, the home paddock of barely submerged stone and shallow topsoil that surrounded the granite hill that

Jacob and Sarah visited each Sunday. The Old Rocky wheat was always thinner, so they'd left it till last. Now he was so close to finishing there was a good chance it would be done before Saturday turned into Sunday. The little red Massey Ferguson was racing the spinning world.

As midnight approached Jacob felt his chin become unbearably heavy, a dreamy fuzz suffocating his eyes. There was a rectangle of wheat in the middle of Old Rocky. Keep going, he told himself, and we'll be finished, the harvest done and safely in the town silo for another year. The year at last to free them from debt and, God willing, even with money left over. But the dead weight of his head was like an anvil, the fuzz in his brain cuddly and soft as the quilt on their bed.

Early one morning Eleanor somehow climbed out of her cot, as always clutching that favourite blue eyed auburn haired plastic doll, made her way into their bed and snuggled between them, put her soft little head in the crook of his arm, her sweet warmth on his chest. She had the finest long lashes, the prettiest face. He had never felt such peace; all his worries and anxieties replaced by contentment and surety. Bursting with happiness he breathed in her beautiful scent till his eyes too began to close...

He slapped his forehead, closed the throttle and fumbled the gear lever into neutral. He opened the thermos of tea Sarah had brought out for him, and stomped around the idling header sipping the hot sweetness, listening for the sounds of a worn bearing, a chain or belt on its last legs, trying to get his brain back into gear. He stretched and twisted, shook his head, stamped his feet, drank tea, and clambered back up into the driver's seat.

Ten minutes to midnight, a strip of wheat to go, perhaps half an hour, less even. If he could just finish it tonight, Sunday would be so much nicer, freer. Church in the morning, flowers at Eleanor's grave, lunch with cousins or friends, the whispering curtains of the slow lovely afternoon, sunset on the granite hill, all of it would be so much sweeter. That strip of the last wheat in the middle of Old Rocky, if it was left, would be there in plain sight nagging all day like an unpicked scab. And with this weather he wouldn't be the only one reaping on into Sunday. Not these days. The header whirred on, somehow keeping a pretty straight line. The pinprick lights swam, brightened and dimmed, pulsing like a heartbeat. Midnight. Jacob swallowed, said a small prayer aloud, and continued. Earth and sky tilted, steadied, shimmered. He was a sailor on a lullaby sea. A star became a meteor, an approaching vehicle, a lost airplane. He rubbed his eyes and stared beyond the pool of header light moving over the wheat. There, something emerged out of the darkness, coming rapidly

towards him, pushing away the black sky, all other light swallowed by it. It paused below the lip of his sun canopy, a ghostly being filling his vision. He jerked the throttle half closed. The engine shuddered and stalled. A white hand the size of a plough disk reached for him. He leapt from the seat, his knees buckling as he hit the stony ground, the cut stubble stabbing into his arms. He felt the shape at his back, sharp white light swamping over him like spilt milk. A great weight pushed on his back; the world whirred and vibrated. He went to his belly, didn't even feel the stones bashing into his knees, and like a startled goanna slithered under the header. The huge being slid along the ground, expanding, reaching for him. He shot out from the other side of the header and ran into the darkness.

Sarah had driven the empty Mack back from town late that afternoon in sublime happiness. She was sure now. Her body tingled with the anticipation of sharing this with Jacob. But she'd wait till the morning – they were both exhausted and tomorrow they'd have the whole blessed Sunday to revel in the joyous news. Her period was seven days overdue now, and she was regular as the rising sun. Each of those days had seemed like climbing step by step to heaven. She'd dusted Eleanor's room, brushed a palm over the soft bedding of the cot, then stood silently letting the delicious scent of baby, of family, of love, fill her soul, and gone to bed early listening to both the hum of the header in the nearby rocky paddock and her heart singing, so that she fell asleep with a smile on her face.

She woke with a start. The house was far too quiet, the hollow next to her where Jacob usually slept, empty. She checked the clock. Ten to one. Something was so definitely wrong. Jacob did not work even a second into a Sunday. She listened for the sound of the header but the outside world was deathly silent. As she threw on clothes she thought of Paul Wilson who had crawled under his header's comb to free some kind of blockage and a leaky hydraulic valve had slowly lowered it on him, first trapping and then crushing him. The lanky teenager Adam Wilson, who worshipped the ground his father walked on, found the silent machine when he came out to the paddock after school. It took him but a moment to spot the boots sticking out from the grounded comb. It would take young Adam a life-time to never get over it.

She jumped in the ute and headed flat out to the lit-up header ominously parked in the middle of Old Rocky. She hit the brakes, enveloping the scene in a cloud of glittering dust, and leapt into that cloud calling his name. No answer. Yellow flecks of straw swam in the lights. She circled the silent machine. The comb was up in the heads. She climbed the

ladder to the empty seat, as if it would provide answers. Strange – ignition on, engine stalled, lights blazing, all things Jacob would never do. Back on the ground, she bent and shone the torch beam along a gouged track where it looked like a giant snake had slithered beneath the machine. The stubble under there was flattened, lumps torn out, the dry dirt scored, rocks scattered. Her heart roared. She stepped back, eyes wide, swept the beam over the silent shaved stubble. Nothing. Jacob had disappeared from the face of the earth.

She called his name, an anguished cry that sped outward to all points of the black compass. She heard a shout, above her, spun around, stared out from her small pond of light. ‘Jacob?’

The cry came again, and she realised it was coming from the granite hill.

She ran through the wheat, spearing the darkness aside with the torch beam, ignoring the stones that gouged into her bare feet as she raced up the hill path. And there she found him, sitting in his favourite place on their granite ledge. Hatless, hair sticking up all over the place like a little boy who’d just got out of bed, the lovely dusty face streaked and glistening with tears, eyes huge and red, Eleanor’s doll, small and pretty and safe in his big hands. She ran to him, out of breath. He took her hand, managed a bewildered half smile. ‘I’m alright, Sare. Everything’s alright.’

‘What happened my love?’

Jacob tilted the doll and Sarah watched its long lashes gently open. Inwardly she smiled at the thought of carrying it down the hill and replacing it in the nursery. Eight miles away the red light on the apex of the town silos shone steadfast. ‘I don’t know. Do you think God is trying to tell me something?’

‘Yes, I do.’ She took his hand and placed it on her belly.