



This
Red Earth
KIM KELLY

'Colourful, evocative and energetic.'

Sydney Morning Herald

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 **brio**
BOOKS

ONE

NOVEMBER 1939–JANUARY 1940

BERNIE

I'm squinting out at the surf, out to the white spray shooting up off Wedding Cake Island, not looking at the Rock beside me, lying face-down on the sand, his shoulder so close by my hip I can almost feel him there anyway. See without looking the colour he's got to him, like the red earth after rain, promising . . . nothing I've ever seen. I've never been further west than Parramatta, on a school excursion I don't remember, don't know a thing about the wide brown land except for what you read in a six-penny romance, and he's going back out there tomorrow, home to Nyngan, going shearing, just as he did last year, and the year before that, and the year before that.

Shearin' – the way he drops his g's you wouldn't know he's just finished his final exams at the University of Sydney, that he's going to be a geologist. This is why I call him Rock. Rock Boy. You only get more than ten words out of him at a time if he's talking about rocks, Gordon Brock, who lives above the rocks of Gordon Bay, which I found funny when he started boarding next door with Mrs Zoc, almost four years ago now, and he looked like a boy, so skinny, such a long piece

of string, he looked like the next southerly would blow him back over the ranges.

He's filled out a bit this year. Shearer's shoulders, like his father, my dad says, and he'd know. Our dads know each other, from the army, not that I've ever met Mr Brock. And not that Dad ever says more than ten words at a time about it, but while he reckons he had what he calls a 'good war' for himself, one where he got home in one piece to become a qualified mechanic, set up shop, get married and build a nice little Californian bungalow up from this beach – things he never would've been able to do if he'd stayed a bushie in Gilgandra – Mr Brock didn't have such a good war. He got invalided home at the start, from Gallipoli, then got a soldier's settlement on the edge of the desert that turned to dust with drought in time for the depression to put him in debt to the bank for nothing forever, and that was after his wife died, leaving him to raise Gordon on his own. *Bleeding misery*, Dad says, of both the circumstances and the man. But he would never say such a thing to Rock's face. *A fine job that father of yours did with you, son*, Dad tells Rock often and with conviction. *A degree from the university*, Dad says, shaking his head with the miracle of it, as they tinker over the rusty old Triumph motorcycle Dad's let Rock sort of adopt as his own. *Keep out of this war now, son*, Dad tells him too, *There's better things around the corner for you*, having sort of adopted him. He doesn't have a boy of his own; only me.

Me and Rock.

Rock and me.

Stop going on and on about it, Bernie. Rock this, Rock that and what he had for breakfast. Stop it.

Can't.

Dad loves him. Rock got his call-up letter on Wednesday,

for this compulsory national service thing that's been brought in for everyone's twenty-first birthday, and Dad put it straight in the incinerator. *You've got essential national service to be getting on with in the woolsheds, son, and you can do it with clear conscience. Where was this Menzies in the last fight, eh? All mouth and no trousers, that one.* Dad doesn't think much of this new prime minister, or anyone that didn't serve, and he's not alone. *WHERE'S OUR SPIRIT OF EMPIRE?* is the question hanging outside the newsagent up at the Spot, looking right at the repat hospital across the road, and someone has stuck a note behind the wire answering, *Lost in Flanders.* But Dad needn't worry, not for Rock: he's safe. Shearers aren't allowed to enlist, essential industry, and at any rate he'll soon enough be getting a letter to trump the call-up one. He's applied for a field position with the Geological Survey, and the recommendation he's got from his professor says he's already got the job. A government job; the army will leave him alone then. And the government will send him straight back out bush, looking for essential rocks. In his element. One day he'll find a rock that no one's ever found before, they'll call it Brockite, and it will change the world, cure the common cold, win him a Nobel Prize . . .

That makes me stare with some more determination past Wedding Cake Island. I don't know what's round the corner for me, but it's not Rock, not any boy. It's . . . What do I want if it's not Rock?

Certainly not my job in Chalmers department store. Personal assistant to the advertising manager sounds glamorous, but beyond the three T's – tea, telephone and telepathy – my job is practically only to make Mr Heany's catalogue copy a little less of a hideosity without him noticing, to make sympathetic noises when the illustrators call to complain

about his rudeness and, come summer, to be swimsuit ring-in for mannequin parades, on account of my pins, which I agree to do mostly just to horrify Mum. I want to go somewhere beyond this, here, Coogee, a million lazy bathing Sundays and otherwise spending my time thinking up ways for Mr Heany to make the women of New South Wales desperate to want more and more things they don't really need.

I want things myself, all right – I want to see things, learn things. I want to *do* things. I want a purpose. I want a career. Awful as the thought is vague, maybe this war might let me find one. Maybe the world is going to change this time; people are fed up with history repeating like greasy pork chops, fed up with Alexander the Krauts going mad for a conquest of Europe and being asked to offer up their sons for it while at the same time being told that on-the-knee hemlines are the greater scandal. Maybe there's something for me in all this. An opportunity of some kind. Something beyond the girl next door marrying the golden-haired boy. Something coming round the corner I can't even imagine yet. Maybe. Maybe I just want to get to the end of maybe and *know*. Know I had a go. At . . . who knows? I'll be twenty-one myself next September, officially on the shelf, and *maybe* by then the army will be desperate enough to want *me*.

The laugh that bursts out of me startles a gull into the air and Rock says into his towel: 'Share the joke?'

I glance away north towards the flags, the beach filling up. 'I was just wondering, do you reckon Mr Menzies would give me a rifle?'

'No.' He snorts. 'He's not that stupid.'

'You're right – if armed, I might quickly become a public menace.' Or go AWL right now from the pitch of your voice alone: not high, not low, just perfect, just Rock. Just stop it,

Bernie; and keep things light, keep the jokes coming. ‘The government’ll probably ban retail for the war effort next and put me out of a job altogether.’

‘Now that *could* be a risky move,’ he laughs, muffled, into his armpit. Don’t look at him.

‘Is that so?’ I ask the ocean. ‘I’d be a risk without a job to go to at all?’ What’s that supposed to mean? I’m not even worth marrying? Not worth the risk?

‘Not you,’ he laughs some more. ‘I mean . . . banning retail . . . could make the Japs a menace to the public. Probably quickly.’

‘Oh.’ That takes my breath away. The *way* he speaks. His bits of sentences strung together with long-distance pauses as vast as his brain. He means of course that banning retail would prevent the Japs from continuing to sell us vast quantities of cheap imitation rubbish, which might then be excuse enough for the Yellow Peril to invade – turn all that iron ore we’ve sold them into bullets and bombs. I could reply with the expected quip about Mr Menzies here, otherwise known as Pig Iron Bob for selling this precious ore to the Japs in the first place, but I can’t. My breath remains taken, and inside the crashing of the surf I am remembering the first time Gordon Brock took it.

It was at the end of last summer, he’d just come back from Nyngan and he was standing inside the scoop of honeycombed sandstone under Bare Island, out at La Perouse; we’d gone fishing, caught nothing; it was raining and blowing a gale, and I’d been blithering on about if or when another war was coming and whether or not politicians took a special oath not to talk straight about anything, when he told me that the only truth worth knowing is in the earth, if only rocks could speak. He ran his hand over the swirling caramels of the rock above

his head and said: *Truth is like gold, not got by its growth, but by washing away from it all that isn't gold. Tolstoy said that – well, according to Scientific Mind monthly, he did.* I wouldn't know Tolstoy if I fell over him in the street, but I could have fallen for Rock then. His smile: hopeful, truthful. Wonderful. I could have kissed him then. But I didn't. I got him talking about iron ore instead – he was about to start writing a paper on some type of the stuff for his final year. Paper that has got him the job on the survey, that will take him away from me soon enough anyway. Just let that happen, gently.

I let myself look at him now, and breathe out as I tell the vast expanse of his back: 'I'm going to miss you.' That catches in my throat, because it's true.

He rolls onto his side and opens his eyes. His eyes are grey, cool but warm, a fine overcast, promising . . . perfect weather for anything. His hair streaked with caramel sunshine, needs clipping.

He says: 'Want to go fishing this arvo?'

No. Never mind gentle. I start lying for all I'm worth. 'No, better not.' I can't tell him the truth: that I can't go fishing with you because I don't want to kiss you, because if I do, that'll be the end of me. I'll disappear. Fall into the department-store catalogue of marriage, children, and worrying over whether the spuds will crisp while waiting for the postman to bring the next catalogue. Look away. Never mind the kiss. If I hop on the back of the bike with Rock this afternoon, soon as I put my arms around his waist, I'll have rendered myself unemployable for everything except being his wife. And at the very least I will then get the sack from Chalmers, that's an irrefutable law, and I will have no shelf to speak of at all.

So I tell him the worst lie I can think of: 'I've got a date. The club social, at the Aquarium.'

To put him right off. He doesn't think much of the surf club crowd, not that he's ever outright critical of anyone – he just becomes absent whenever there's a bunch of posers about.

'Oh.' He gives out a sound that stops short of a sigh with a sharp frown. I may as well have punched him in the stomach. A look that makes me want to reply, *Well, you shouldn't have followed me down here this morning*, as if this is an unusual event. As if we didn't discover three summers ago that we share a liking for Sunday morning pre-crowd quiet, right here, at the south end, not too close to the club and not too far from the Niagara for an after-surf, pre-roast dinner sneaky tub of butterscotch whirl. His frown deepens with hurt, and now I want him to say: *No, Bernie, you'll be coming fishing with me*. I want him to declare it, put his foot down, so that I have no choice. So that I will say yes, and he will stop looking so terribly hurt, and, most importantly, I won't be responsible for what happens next.

Instead he says: 'I'll take off then.'

Throws his towel over those bronzed Chesty Bond shoulders and he's gone at a jog, up and into the changing sheds, into the shadows of the line of concrete blocks below the prom, and I'm thinking: Gordon Brock, you really are perfect in every conceivable way, except that you could sulk for Australia. Doesn't he know by now I wouldn't go to a club social if you paid me? Tonight's is for the start of the water polo comp too, opening match between Coogee and Bondi – you won't be able to move for all the swelled-up blockheads and doubtless there'll be a fight. For an enormously intelligent man, Gordon can be as thick as all that lot. Come back and call me out on the lie; come back and tell me I'm wrong to let you go. I keep staring at the sheds, wanting to see the shape of him, the way he walks, always going somewhere, always with a purpose.

But the glare off the concrete blurs my vision and I don't see him come out.

By the time I start walking back home, via a long Rock-avoiding vanilla malt at the Niagara, I've tried and failed a hundred times to find the words to explain, apologise, tell him the truth, that maybe in a year, or five, or wherever. Maybe might end, I . . . go around and around until I've infuriated myself. Then, all the way up the steps of Heartbreak Hill, which has never seemed so aptly named or formed, I wrestle with my envy of his certainty, his doing, his knowing, and my knowing that the distractions that go on and on inside his mind are doubtless certain ones, important ones, about minerals and metals and maths and all sorts of things important to other people, to industry, maybe even to humanity. What am I important to? *Baaa*. I've almost worked myself into a steam of resentment enough to blame him for my not knowing, when I round the corner of our street and find Mrs Zoc at her gate next door, hankie in hand.

'Oh Bernadetta, what will I do without my good boy?' she's crying, as she does every time he goes back home. 'He did not even eat his dinner before he is gone.'

What? He's *gone* gone? He's not supposed to be gone until tomorrow. I look up the side path for the motorbike, where it's always leaning against the fence. Gone. Well, that's not just sulking for Australia, that's world championship sulking, isn't it. Incredible. And not: I once laughed at him for knowing what type of granite the pylons of the Harbour Bridge are made out of and he didn't speak to me for a fortnight.

I put my hand over Mrs Zoc's on the rail. 'You know he'll be back. And he'll come back skinny, and desperate for your spaghetti.' I could fall in a great heap myself right now. I look away, out to the ocean, over the cliffs of Gordon Bay. Oh,

Rock. What have I done? The right thing. For me. This is good. Of course it is. This is what I wanted, so I can stop going on and on about it now, put my own mind to something more constructive.

Dad pops his head out from under the latest eyesore, the utility truck he's been working on, out on the street in front of the house. 'You two didn't have a falling-out, did you?'

But before I can lie about that, Mum's barrelling down the footpath from mass. 'Who's had a falling-out?'

Dad says, getting up off the ground: 'Gordon's just choofed, in a sudden hurry to be home.'

'Oh.' I might as well have hit Mum with a brick. Speechless: not a common state for her. I think the last time I saw her face like this was when Dad told her the lad coming up from Nyngan was Presbyterian, and for which Mum gave him immediate dispensation after the opening *Pleased to meet you, Mrs Cooper*. She drops a string bag full of cumquats on the footpath now; obviously she was going to make him his favourite marmalade to take, visited Mrs Cronin's tree especially on her way back from St Brigid's, and I won't be getting dispensation for a while.

The three of them stand there gawking at me, cumquats rolling into the gutter and disappearing down the stormwater drain. Dad's big brown eyes are round with disappointment, eyes that have seen more of the world than I will ever know.

I send myself to my room. If you want me, you can find me in the catalogue under D for dill. And you can all start saying it now: Gordon Brock, my one that got away.

GORDON

‘Going far today?’ the bloke at this Penrith servo asks me. He’s screwing the cap back on my fuel tin, too slowly, wanting to chat.

‘Nyngan,’ I answer him, not wanting to chat.

‘Nyngan? Where’s that then?’ He looks behind him at the mountains that divide Sydney from the rest of the country.

‘Between Dubbo and Bourke,’ I answer him, about three hundred and fifty miles away from this stretch of nowhere, if you’d let me keep on.

‘That’s a fair way.’ He sleeves the sweat off his forehead and looks at the bike again, looking doubtful she’ll make it. But she will. It’s only a bit of rust on her. She’s still a Ricky Triumph that goes seventy flat out, and at the moment the only woman making any sense to me. ‘How long will that take you?’ he asks.

‘Should get there tomorrow. Evening.’ Probably. Probably would be more sensible to have got the train, but I’ve been looking forward to this ride for weeks. Or I was. A cow complains, bored and lonely, from behind the workshop and, yeah, that’s about the strength of it.

'Where you stopping tonight?' this servo bloke is asking me now.

He's getting annoying. Or making me more annoyed than I already am. But then I suppose I'd be wanting company too if I was stuck manning a servo in Penrith on a Sunday. I tell him: 'Bathurst, probably.'

'Camping out?' he asks, looking at my swag on the rack. Rack that Bernie should be sitting on, holding on to me, only the tackle box between us.

'Probably.' I have my hand in my pocket to pay him now but I'm not quick enough before he asks: 'Going out there for work?'

'Yeah.' To make some money to buy Bernadette Cooper a ring. I've calculated how many sheep it will cost me to get her the one I've just put a deposit on at Prouds. It's a Bingara diamond. It's got a speck of graphite right in the centre, like a pinhole view into the universe. Alternatively, I could turn around now and be back in Coogee in time to clout whoever is taking her to this club social. If that was the way I did things. And I don't. It's Bernie I'm angry at anyway. She knows how close I am to asking her; she must do. She's giving me the shove, isn't she. Either that or she's a flip, doesn't know what she wants, and either way, I should leave it alone. I only feel as I do because she looks like Merle Oberon. The only straight lines on her belong to her nose and her teeth, and you don't need science to explain the effect of that. I'm only stuck on the look of her. And that's worse bull than her going to a surf club social.

I've been stuck on her like phenolic adhesive since the day I first saw her. The tight waist of her suit. She'd just got her first pay from Chalmers, only sixteen and she'd bought her parents a bottle of champagne, and they invited Mrs Zoc and

me round to share it. *Here's to our Bernie*, Mr Cooper raised his glass, and then he said to me out the side of his mouth: *Don't let on to her it tastes like* –

‘Warm today, eh sport?’

‘Yeah.’ And it’ll be a lot warmer in Nyngan. I will make up my mind what to do while I’m there. Four years I’ve waited to ask her; another couple of months won’t kill me, will it.

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I don’t stop again till Blackheath, at the top of the mountains, and I haven’t been sensible on the way up. It’s only half-past two. Good that it’s Sunday and the wallopers must still be at dinner. I consider begging a traveller’s beer at the pub on the highway, but turn off to Govetts Leap instead, to the lookout over the Grose Valley. It’s the best view; the best place to see that these mountains are not mountains at all but a series of escarpments. A massive plateau cut through with gorges.

This view always settles something in me, making me feel small, but in a good way. This giant block of ocean floor forced up from the bottom of another world makes me and whatever’s bothering me seem like just grains of nothing on a scale of time that’s unimaginable. I close my eyes, smell the eucalyptus oil coming up off the forest below, let the noise of the cicadas get above the engine buzz in me. I stretch out the cramp in my knuckles from gripping the handlebars and I’m not thinking about anything.

Till I hear a woman laugh.

‘Oh, hello,’ she waves through the banksia scrub, dragging her man out from a trail behind her. She’s missed doing up the second button on her dress, and the hem of her petticoat’s hanging down. Honeymooners. Surprised to find they’re not

the only people on earth. I don't think I even manage to smile at them. It should be me and Bernie up here.

I want to turn around again, be with her now, and ask her, right now. Bugger waiting till I can afford the ring. Tell her: *Marry me, now*. Promise her: *I'm not going to keep you in a box in the suburbs afterwards*. Tell her: *Come on the survey with me, I'll show you the world*. But I can't do that. I'd look like a halfwit now. Tearing off the way I did. Man with the shits – if it was a form of energy, I'd have saved myself a few bob in fuel.

I go back up to the pub to cool down with a beer, and when the first taste hits my head, I realise I haven't eaten anything since breakfast, so I order a pie. One that tastes like wet gravel as I realise that I am a bloody halfwit altogether: come on the survey? As if Bernie would want to begin her married life living in a tent while I map out bauxite deposits across the long paddocks of the Northern Tablelands. Show her the world: the one from Gunnedah to Inverell. As if they'd let a girl come out on the survey at all. And as if I'll be anywhere but living in a tent while this war is on: it's suddenly important for the government to know what we've got, and New South Wales is a big place. War or not, I could be waltzing Matilda for years.

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Back on the Great Western Highway, Victoria Pass is good for clearing my mind with the concentration it takes to negotiate it: a gradient that should probably be illegal if it wasn't so grouse flying down it. Then after that, the road through the hills towards Lithgow is easy, and it's a pretty ride. This is what I came for, and I do enjoy it. I enjoy it so much I keep on going past Bathurst. The road is smooth and new, on this

Mitchell Highway. It was a dusty stock road the last time I was here, and now it's been surfaced all the way to Narromine. Amazing. Civilisation has always stopped at Bathurst, according to those east of the ranges that decide where public money will be spent, but this Mitchell Highway, it looks freshly painted on. Not a pothole in it, though that's probably because it hasn't rained since it was laid.

There is, however, a kangaroo standing in the middle of it, about a hundred yards ahead. Roos, they make sheep look smart. There's no reason for it to stop in the middle of the road like that. It's just stopped there because it has, and it will take off again because it does. You can't read a roo. Last year I was kicked in the chest by a male, a grey just like this one apparently not noticing the motorbike coming towards it right now. I was coming out of the sheds at Mullengudgery, knackered after the rams, and there it was, as if it had been waiting precisely to quilt me, for no reason. Unless it liked the sound of Dad's laughter. That was pretty good really. A rare enough thing, Dad's laugh, but I don't think I'd get one from him if I chose to start an argument with a roo here. It's heading on for dusk, when they get up and about from spending all day just as pointlessly sleeping, so I'd better slow down, find a place to stop, get off the road. The roo continues to ignore me as I veer round it, and it's tiredness that hits me now, with a sudden shot of thankfulness for every drop Dad's sweated to get me here. All these years. Even with the scholarships, it's taken everything he had to give, and I'm half a whisker from handing it back to him framed. It can't end here in a collision with a roo.

Not five minutes on, a gully appears off to the right, a stretch of willows and green weeds between the gold of the hills saying there's a creek down there, coming off the

Macquarie, and probably the spot to camp. It is. It's a beautiful spot, and it would be yabbies for tea tonight if, in my hurry to get away this morning and show the world how angry I was, I hadn't forgotten to bring anything to catch yabbies with. No meat. Except the bedourie oven full of spaghetti and mince Mrs Zoc made me take, a small lorryload, but that won't do. You need a piece of meat that can be tied to the end of some string. But then I remember I do have some meat, of a sort, shoved in the bottom of my swag: the tin of sausages I've kept meaning to toss out because they are not food. I work quickly, setting three stick-and-string traps on the edge of the water and getting the fire going.

And then I wait. The sky turns piccaninny pink, not a cloud in it. Blue dragonflies are darting over the surface of the water, too quick for yabbies. I look behind me over the hills. With the sunset, they're glowing now as if they really are made of gold, and that would be beautiful too if this colour wasn't caused by this country not having had a drop of spring rain. The grass is paper dry. Who'd be a farmer? Not me. My father would have shot me himself if I'd ever got an inclination that way. Good then that a fascination with rocks has taken me a long way elsewhere. Dad wouldn't let on he was proud of that under torture – not too proud for anything, he picked peas one whole long summer to pay for my senior school blazer, only work he could get at the time – but he is proud, of me. I can't wait to see him.

Dad won't know what it means for me to have impressed the Surveyor General with that paper on haematite, proposing that there might be a lot more high-grade iron ore than the estimated two hundred and sixty megatons we think we have in the ground, that if in fact this ground of ours did once spend a considerable amount of eternity under a muddy puddle we

might have an entire continent of haematite, enough to sell to the whole world – a mineral jackpot. Dad won't care that Professor Richardson thinks it's the most exciting undergraduate paper he's come across for years, that even if it's a bit wild of accepted wisdom, it's imagination that drives science, and that will secure me the Geology prize. *A given*, Professor Richardson said. *That's good*, Dad'll nod, and then he'll add a smile to the nod: proud.

It would be good if Bernie was impressed, even just a bit. She finds my fascination with rocks either funny or boring. She either laughs or says 'hm' a lot. I don't blame her. How many famous geologists can you name? How many would know that Mitchell, whose highway I've got here on, was a surveyor, and Govett too? Most people, if they have heard of Govett at all, think he was a bushranger who leapt off the waterfall at Blackheath after being cornered by troopers. The reason why most people think this is because it's written in the *Junior Australian History Reader* which we all learned by rote in first form. Even the Department of Education thinks surveyors are too boring. This continent rides on the sheep's back, not a bulldozer, and that is an actual fact. I can still hear Mr Farris, the Science master, asking me, for the last time: *Are you sure you don't want to apply for the School of Medicine, Brock?* Not for the first time I wonder if I should have. I'd be just as boring, but I'd be a doctor, wishing I'd gone into geology. Would she be more keen on me then?

What's she doing now? Down at the Aquarium, having a dance, roller-skating? Laughing, at some other bloke. She can't really have gone to this surf club social. Can she? No. Hang on, isn't it the start of the water polo at the Aquarium tonight? She wouldn't go to that: the girls who go around with the water polo – Ah, I see. She has lied, hasn't she. She just

doesn't want me, that's what she's doing. Putting me off. Too bloody boring, and I can't change a thing about that.

Before I can get too far along this dismal line again, I catch sight of one of the yabby sticks twitching. I've got one on the string, a big one, about five inches long, and he thinks tinned sausage is pretty good stuff. I grab him fast behind the claws and throw him straight in the billy. And when I taste him, muddy and sweet, it tastes like home. I eat half the spaghetti then and have another yabby for pudding and I'm nearly asleep as darkness falls and I crawl into my swag, already dreaming of her. She's wiping her chin, beside me close to the fire, saying: *These yabbies would be good in a cheese sauce, don't you reckon, Rock?* Hm, I do reckon. I want to listen to her talk forever; she's never got a wireless voice on, always just herself. Natural. She smiles, and that seems more like home than anything.

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I've been walking for miles, days or weeks. Or years my legs are that sore. But I've found a sapphire, a huge fist-sized sapphire, and we're both holding it, between us. Her thick dark hair touches my neck and she's kissing me. Finally. The fact that she is kissing me is a lot more exciting than the sapphire. But she pulls away, holds it up to the light, like a hunk of frozen sea, and she asks me: *What's this type of rock again, Rock?* I tell her, *It's a type of corundum.* She laughs: *Conundrum! That's right.* I want to pull her back, to kiss her again, but instead, I say: *No, corundum – the crystalline form of aluminium oxide.*

I try to force myself to wake up, so I can't spoil it further with an explanation of corundum's atomic structural similarities to haematite. A whipbird is calling it dawn, so I should

wake up anyway. But she's kissing my neck now, and now she's kissing my face. I don't want to wake up ever. But I become aware of an odd smell, which doesn't smell like her White Lilac scent, not at all.

I open one eye, and see it's a dog.

A red kelpie bitch standing over me. Wagging her tail. Her slobber on my left ear.

She's pretty keen for something. I open both eyes, get up on my elbows, and she jumps away, over to the bike, pushing her snout against the pannier with last night's leftovers in it, pawing at the buckle of the strap. She's a working dog, fallen on hard times, or maybe lost. She's also pregnant. Sorry Mrs Zoc, I'm going to have to sacrifice the spaghetti. This poor girl is so hungry she just about licks a hole through the bottom of the bedourie when I give it to her. As I'm packing up I wonder if I could get her into town somehow, into Orange, if she'd sit on top of the swag on the rack, she obviously belongs to someone, but when I look to see where she is, she's taken off. I whistle for her a couple of times, but she doesn't come back. Nothing here but me and a fine streaky mist hanging over the creek. If it wasn't for the evidence, I'd wonder if that happened at all.

The evidence of the drought extends almost all the way to Orange, where some decent rain has fallen, I can see on the hills ahead. I wouldn't have the nerve for farming, I know just looking at the land, someone half an hour up the road getting good rain while you got none. A small heap of freshly shot ewes stacked on the brown grass against a fence here outside Lucknow is a temporary memorial to the sentiment. The grazier'll have a good year next year, he'd be hoping, and there'll be guaranteed prices for even the mangiest fleece, for army uniforms across an empire, and he'll be shouting the bar.

That's what they live on, hope over logic, the smallholders at least, with nothing to fall back on but the mercy of the bank, that has nothing to fall back on but the sale of the clip, and round it goes. Dad reckons the big droughts come in roughly fifteen to twenty year cycles and we're due another now, but he would say that: he lost his hope altogether in 1919, apart from me.

I cross the tracks into Orange, its main street lined with roses and shop windows full of wealth, Mount Canobolas rising up behind, rich with volcanic soil, and it's always odd to think that Dad passed up an offer of a settlement holding here. A decision he stands by. This town is all church spires and orchards and pansified squattocracy – not his country. Too easy. I go for breakfast at the Hotel Canobolas, the place as brand new as the bitumen outside, and the couple of old rough heads already at the bar tell you of the season, swaggies tramping through with the stone fruit harvest and whatever piece work they can get, drinking their pay as they go, heading south and away from the heat.

I'm heading northwest, lucky me, with a full engagement card, nine weeks on twenty-five shillings a hundred head, and probably for the last time. That's sort of sad to consider, sad as the reason wages are so good this year, until I consider the hundred and thirty pounds minimum I'm banking on, half of which I hope will go to Prouds. When she sees that ring, when she sees how much I think of her, surely . . . Yes. She'll have to say yes. I bolt my plate of sausage and egg the quicker to be into it.

Into the heat. As the sun rises higher the air gets hotter and drier and the engine becomes a small furnace between my knees. The hills disappear into the plains, past Wellington, past Dubbo, and as the bitumen disappears into the dirt

there's only one thing on my mind: only ninety miles to go and it's not yet three o'clock – I'll be home for tea. The road is as straight as the land is flat here. But it does contain a few cracks you could lose a dog in after Trangie, so I slow down a bit. Enjoy the scenery, of my country.

There's been decent rain here too, I can see from the extent of the grasses, the saltbush and the bluebush. There's wildflowers along the verges as well, lots of them, these little purple ones with yellow centres. I don't know what they're called, but they are the happiest things to come across, purple against the red lateritic soil. The rusted roof of the Nevertire Hotel says only fifty miles to go, but I don't stop in to say hello. A way off a big mob is being driven across the highway. The dust they're kicking up looks like smoke in the heat haze, a wall of smoke against sky that's so blue it almost hurts. A pair of emus watch me buzz pass, curious. I wave to them.

I am happy as a boy. Riding into the sun.

BERNIE

‘This is wrong.’ Mr Heany stabs the stack of catalogue proof pages with a finger, bad smell under his nose. ‘What is this *slinky and svelte for summer*, Miss Cooper? *Slinky* is not a Chalmers word. It is not a word at all.’

‘Ah, slinky . . .’ I cast my mind back through my shorthand notes for Lingerie, to these slips he’d been told to push beyond the Young Miss market, because we’ve got half a warehouse full of them, and remember his original *comfy and cool*. I don’t think the mothers of this State want *comfy and cool* if they’re going to spend 15/6 on cheap and nasty Jap satin rayon that will stop up the airholes in your perfolastic girdle and broil you before you’ve stepped out the front door. I tell him: ‘Yes, I think I recall Foy’s used something similar last month for theirs, the taffeta rayon, so you came up with “slinky” – which suggests comfy, in a graceful sort of way, and er, cool, too, like a cat.’ I am so full of it.

‘Oh yes, of course, that’s right,’ he smiles, not at me, but at his own evil genius, and when he smiles like that he looks like Bela Lugosi’s Count Dracula. I want to add: *Yes, Master, soon, soon you will be Supreme Overlord of Department Stores and*

every Australian lady's housekeeping will be yours! And just as I'm thinking that, an almighty clap of thunder shakes the whole building, southerly buster belting into Sydney, flickering lights and all.

I squeak out an, 'Excuse me please, Mr Heany,' and make a dash for the ladies' down the hall, lock myself in and exhale with my back to the door. I've been in this job nearly five months now and I hate it, hate it, hate it. Hate that I seem to be very good at doing things I don't like – pointless, useless things – and doing them very well. I should be grateful, it's such a good job, half the girls here would kill for any three T's position in the offices of the top floor, Monday to Friday only, perfect job to have while you're awaiting promotion to matrimony: no typing, can't even break a nail. It could be a foot in to working in advertising properly too. A career. If I wanted to do that. And I couldn't think of anything more shameful at the moment, other than announcing to Mum and Dad: 'I'm not ready for marriage right now because I'd like to try my hand at prostitution for a while.' Whoring against my own sex. If you don't buy this vanishing cream or have an agitating spin wringer, you're not a proper wife, mother, woman. And woe betide you let anyone see your *flabby, disfiguring fat* stuffed beneath that perfolastically *fragile, stem-like waist*. Giving you problems you don't have but that only a department store can fix, while no catalogue even acknowledges that you wear underpants – everyone else in the family does, except you. You wear thirty-seven different types of euphemism.

I step across to the sink and press my forehead to the coolness of the mirror above it, don't know where I fit in to the picture. But I do know I can't keep going on and on with this dithering, blithering whingeing that's threatening to overrun me. Be realistic: I'm an ordinary girl with no specific talents or

ambitions. Apart from a demonstrated aptitude for advanced blarney, I have certificates in level one accounting and stenography, as well as a diploma in dressmaking abandoned halfway through because I lost interest in it. Maybe I should go back to business college to try for university matriculation, see what it's like, see what I might do, and I said as much in the face of Mum's ear-bashing over *poor Gordon* last night. *Matriculate!* she squawked. *What on earth for?* Perfectly valid question, to which I have no answer but *maybe* . . . Dad wasn't interested in the discussion, if you could call it that; he was out of sorts all day, went to bed before 'Singapore Spy' at eight, and he never misses his serials of a Sunday after tea. Barely said goodnight. That's punishment; his disappointment is a ten-ton load, even if he is a little bit to blame for it, for thinking I'm God's gift. And who can blame him for that? Not even Mum does, for all her carry-on. Because, whatever it is I do, he knows too well that there's a lot worse things can be done to upset Hughie, on first name terms with God as he is.

It's also not a reason to get married, to make Dad happy, or to give Mum something to stick in the beaks of the Catholic Daily gossip-mongers. I wouldn't do that to Rock, much less to myself. Because . . . Because . . . Because I miss him already and he's only been gone a day. I run the tap and splash my face. Better get used to missing him, hadn't I. He's not going to last long on the Young Miss market, is he. Saying I'm not ready now is saying no for all time.

Fat raindrops are splattering the window next to the mirror, and I look down through them onto the chaos of Pitt Street, people running through the traffic, taken by surprise, umbrella-less. Tears taking me by surprise. Oh Hughie, what have I done?

'Bernie, you in there?' Tap, tap, tap on the door of the lav.

It's Yoohoo, otherwise known as Edie Peterson. 'Yoohoo,' she chirps with another tap to make that clear. One of the chirpiest people I've ever met, but I don't want to open the door to her. She's twenty-seven, the oldest of us top-floorers, and the idea of possibly still being here when I'm twenty-seven makes me want to jump out the window. But she is also one of the loveliest sorts you'd ever meet, and as it possibly wouldn't be a bad idea for me to spill my beans to a sympathetic ear at this minute, I unlock the door and swing it back.

'Yes, I'm in here.'

'Oh dear,' she frowns to match mine. 'Cattle dog strife?' she asks, supposing I've had trouble with Mr Heany over the catalogue. I wave vaguely, not sure what strife to begin with. Then she throws a pair of bathers at me. 'This'll cheer you up.'

I hold them up by the shoulder straps. A white Jantzen, skirted. It's a lovely cut, and I am a little bit cheered. The Jantzens are always a lovely cossie, you could be built like a brick and look great in one. Twenty-five shillings and you get what you pay for: style and functionality wrapped in Lastex, *the miracle yarn*. It is too: *Nothing swims like Lastex*. No moral quandary about that claim. Maybe I could go and work for Jantzen, or Lastex . . . In America . . .

'Bernie?' I am aware that Yoohoo has been chirping away, no doubt about where and when I am to parade this – that's her job, organising the parades, and balls, dinners, bridge club, all the public events. It was she who spotted the form of these pins during a staff tennis social when I first started in accounts. But she says: 'Did you hear me? You'll have to get yourself to Broadway by eight am sharp.'

'Beg pardon? Am? What for?'

Yoohoo rolls her eyes. 'The photograph – for the Summer Sensations programme.'

‘What! Me?’

‘No, the little purple fairy standing behind you. Of course you.’ Then she frowns again, concerned: ‘You look a bit pale – that time of the month, is it?’

I shake my head. ‘No.’ Sigh and spill: ‘I think I’ve only let a wonderful man walk out of my life – ride a motorbike out of it, actually, at speed.’

‘Oh, sweetheart,’ Yoohoo wraps an arm around my waist, gives me a squeeze. ‘Tell me all about it tomorrow? No time for a natter now. Will you be all right for the photo?’

‘Yes.’ I suppose so. Mum will be so pleased to see these pins sensationally programmed, scattered across the city in a thousand handbags. That might just give Dad cause to smile.

Yoohoo gives me the address, and a final chirp: ‘Plenty more fish in the sea, Bernie – plenty.’

*

There are one million of them in Sydney and they’re all on Pitt Street, bang on five, and it’s still raining. The throng is so chock it’s either barely moving or I’m fighting against the tide rushing for Central. I only have to get halfway round the block into Elizabeth Street, but at this rate I’m going to miss my tram.

I do miss my tram, watch the Coogee Bay disappear around the corner of Hyde Park from the wrong side of Liverpool Street. Poo. Fifteen minutes till the next one, and I’m not going to wait in the rain, so I pop down into Museum Station, under the park, to browse the paperback stand of the magazine man there. ‘Evening, Miss. Nice weather for ducks,’ he recognises me, and nods at the stand to his left: ‘Some new books just in today, American.’ He uses the term

'books' loosely and the term 'American' as if they might be a bit suspect, and I know what he means: if we're going to read rubbish let it be Australian rubbish, not more *ma'ams* on cowboy ranches in *She Braved the Wilderness*. These Yank ones here are all crime stories, though, and I never go for them anyway. I give the magazine man a smile: 'Well, at least they're not Japanese.' And he chuckles, 'Very good, Miss,' as I do my patriotic duty choosing *The Stockman's Daughter*, not wondering how many times that title's been rehashed as I hand over my sixpence, or if I've read it before. Wouldn't matter if I had: they're all the same.

Back up on the corner of the park, I'm faced with a far tougher decision: whether to turn right to the stop on Elizabeth, where I will be sure to get a seat on the tram; or left, the shorter distance up to Oxford, where I can wait in the shelter. I choose left: I want that seat; I want to give my heart and mind up to the stockman's daughter for the whole trip. I run through the rain, cold rain in the warm air, glorious, and only just make it, *ding ding ding*, sliding into the middle of this soggy toast rack on tracks. But I don't get further than *Jane Willoughby gazed out across the* – when I'm interrupted.

'Hey, Bernie!'

Stuff Jane back in my handbag, automatic reflex, can't be caught reading this sort of thing by anyone I know. But it's only Colin Quinn pushing through the sardine pack; I'm doubtful he can even read. He once put a handful of slobbery mandarin pips down the back of my school blouse in primary, last seen pouring a bottle of beer over his own head after his squad won the junior surf boat champs. Boys will be boys and surf club boaties will always be especially mental. But this one is wearing a suit, and a tie, in town. I'm intrigued.

'Hello, Colin, you're a long way from home.'

‘Yep,’ he says, very pleased with himself. ‘I got a new job today.’

‘Oh?’ That makes me soften a little. Colin lost his job with Howard’s Automotive a couple of weeks ago, for his twenty-first birthday, not because he’s a blockhead but because he’s due adult wages now. Dad was disgusted by it; money-grubbers like Howard sack at twenty-one and hire a fifteen year old the next day as if it’s best business practice. Colin might be a boatie, but Dad’s heard he’s a good mechanic; so I ask him, more for Dad: ‘What job did you get?’

‘Working on the trucks for the AIF,’ chest puffed out even more above me. ‘At the army depot in Marrickville.’

‘Oh?’ I blink with the shock. ‘The army *army*?’ That is, not marched off into this national service conscription thing?

He rolls his shoulders, awkward. ‘Not really, not you know, but, um, yep.’

Oh. I can already hear the argument with his own father not going too well. Mr Quinn is of the same mind as Dad – they have a drink at the Bay on Saturday afternoons – only Mr Quinn more so; he’s Irish ex-army, emigrated here to get as far away from Britain as physically possible, wouldn’t be seen dead at any returned services things because there’s always toasts to the King.

Colin’s already bracing for it; he says, somehow defensive and aggressive at once: ‘I’ve signed, can’t take it back now. Anyway, I’m not sitting round while others get going.’

‘What others and going where?’

He reels off half-a-dozen names, most that I haven’t said two words to since primary, and after my ‘What on earth for?’ he gives me a list of reasons that sound like they might be slogans off an AIF advertisement. The Empire needs them. This time it’s different. It’s about the freedom of the civilised

world. It's about protecting what their fathers fought and died for. 'It will be this city, this land, our country at stake this time if we don't.' He is excited and he doesn't care who on the tram hears it.

My head is saying, *You really are mental*, but my heart is with him as he speaks: he really does think he's doing the right thing. I even envy him for a moment, envy his purpose. He's set his course. His country is giving him a rifle. But millions of twenty-one-year-old Germans are getting rifles too, aren't they. I'm suddenly so lost in the hugeness of what he might be getting into, I barely hear him ask me to the pictures tomorrow night.

Still, the lie is automatic: 'I'm sorry, I'm busy.'

He says: 'Are you and that Brock bloke going to get engaged or what?' Doesn't care who on the tram hears that either. A demand, hanging there above me off the roof rail like a great ape. Arrogant boatie. As if I don't know you call us Jackaroo and Jillaroo behind my back.

'None of your business.' I shred the question with the tone of my voice and pull out my paperback. But I can't read a word. Stomach churning over with greasy pork chops, with everything, as we rattle down Anzac Parade. Colin takes a seat across the way as the tram begins to empty and I stare blankly out the window at the rain, at the road, and back down at the words in my hands, at the lines of type, making my world neat and small between them, and certain with gratitude that this war has nothing to do with me or mine. It won't touch Rock. It can't, can it. He's a long, long way away in a different direction altogether. At any rate, his father would kill him first, and my father would murder him twice. I would go in for triple if I had to. I might not be ready for marriage, but if anything happened to Rock, I –

‘See you, Bernie,’ Colin says, hanging off the roof rail again as we near the terminus, looking like a boy, just a boy, and I reply, ‘Take care, won’t you,’ hoping he can hear that I mean it sincerely, before he heads west and I head north.

But every step I take up Heartbreak Hill the greasy-chops churn gets worse. As if the world is expanding beneath my feet. Like the universe expanding in that story Rock read me from one of the secret-rubbish magazines he buys – *Extravagant fiction today, cold fact tomorrow* – that we are just a hunk of rock flying round a star that’s flying through space inside a balloon that’s constantly being filled with more and more nothing. That he said might actually be true for once, minus the red-scaled lizard men from another galaxy that invade Earth after the balloon goes pop. Funny then, but now . . . an unsafe feeling, and I don’t know quite where it’s coming from. I stop halfway up and look back over Coogee, at the long stretch of bay surrounded by Heartbreak Hills in every direction, lights flicking on in the banks of flats above the baths, above the cricket oval, above the little colonies of Californian bungalows, all still there . . . thousands of greasy pork chops on the stove . . .

It’s only Coogee on a grey evening giving me a chill, and I am absolutely drowned-rat soaked. I look up at the ten or so yards of Heartbreak’s steps left to go, up to my street sign. Arcadia. Nothing bad ever happens in Arcadia, does it? It’s heaven on earth, on the bluff between Coogee and Gordon bays. A little Californian heaven on earth, Mrs Zoc’s strawberries and cream gable next to our gumdrop green, lolly boxes with an eyesore ute out the front. It’s home.

Where onions are on the stove, with garlic, coming from Mrs Zoc’s. An instantly comforting smell; I wish Mum would be adventurous and use a bit of garlic, until this nose discerns

that it's Monday in heaven on earth and Mum has cooked shepherd's pie: the most comforting smell in the world.

That is, until I open the door and I hear her screeching from the kitchen: 'How could you, Bill!' Pot slamming against the sink. 'What about the building society payments?'

I can't think what Dad might have done to his building society payments, his housing loan, big fat point of pride with him that he even has one, not to mention the home that goes with it, but he's done something all right. And he's angry too, fist slams the table as I walk in on them: 'I have no choice!'

Mum's cheeks are fuchsia with rage. 'We all have *choices*.'

Dad spits through his teeth: 'My conscience doesn't.'

Both of them in such a fury they either don't know or don't care I'm witnessing this . . . argument. They never argue. Not like this, not seriously. Unsafe feeling is now fully fledged fear.

'Mum, Dad, what? What's happened?'

Mum doesn't look at me; she's too busy goring Dad. 'You tell her, Bill. You tell her.'

But all he manages to get out is: 'Bernie love, I-' before Mum tells me anyway.

'He's enlisted. Your father has enlisted.'

'Enlisted?' I almost relax my panic: that can't possibly be true. Mum's lost her cumquats. Dad's forty-seven years old; fit for anything as he is, it can't be true. *Keep out of this war now, son.*

But it is true. I can see it in his eyes. It's not disappointment there, is it. Nothing to do with me at all. A terrible sadness, grief that was put there before I was born, grief that does break my heart as he says: 'I'm sorry, Bernie love. I-'

He walks past Mum and out the back door, closing it gently behind him.

GORDON

‘Well, look who’s here.’ Jim Fletcher turns at the bar: ‘It’s Gunner Did.’

Jim is a contractor for Carlyle’s, Dad’s and my contractor, and I’m Gunner Did, a name Jim’s called me since I can remember, for the boy who was gunner do this and gunner do that, and usually I did. A year since I’ve seen him and he hasn’t changed; doesn’t look any different from the big ringer that used come up to the verandah of wherever it was I was doing my schoolwork, wanting me to box him, *Come on, Gunner, have a go*. Only now, he’s holding up a schooner to me.

I smile, ‘G’day,’ but shake my head at the glass; I’m looking for Dad, but he’s not in this Court House line-up of townies, a dozen or so, the butcher, the baker, the blacksmith. I look at the clock above the bar: half-past six, half-past closing time, which is as relaxed here as every other rule, unless the union made it. Sergeant Brant will be in for his tea shortly, and Dad’ll have gone by now, if he came in to town at all.

Jim says: ‘Come on, for your twenty-first.’

I laugh: I had my first beer here at seventeen. ‘Just thought I might catch Dad. I’ll see him at home.’

‘Home?’ Jim raises his elbow off the bar and comes over to me at the door, a look on his face saying *Hang on a minute* before his mouth is telling me: ‘But your dad’s up at Brewarrina.’

‘Oh? What’s he doing there?’ I’m more disappointed than surprised. Dad never stops working. I’ll see him tomorrow then, because that’s when he’s expecting me.

But Jim is saying: ‘Tank-sinking, I think he said, left more than a week ago.’ He looks at me as if to say *You really don’t know, do you*. I shake my head *No idea*, and he tells me: ‘Said his back was a bit crook and so he was taking other work for a spell.’

That doesn’t make sense, and not only because excavating earthen dams is not spell work, not work you would want to do with a crook back or otherwise, leading a team of heavy plodders back and forth across the dirt with a plough and grader, for days, or weeks on end, and with summer coming on. But still I say to Jim: ‘So he’s meeting up with us at Coolabah on Thursday?’

‘No. He told me to scratch him till further notice.’

‘Right,’ I say, but there’s a look between us that says there’s something not quite right about this, and then a different concern from Jim, a more important one for him.

‘Don’t you start thinking about letting me down too, Gordie. I’ve got two young chaffers on this Coolabah team – where these blokes get their tickets from, I don’t know.’

I do: their dads making them go shearing to get out of national service, and hopefully stay there, in a protected occupation. Jim would know that too of course, but I don’t want to chat about it right now. I tell him: ‘I won’t let you down. But I’d better be going or I’ll fall down. Probably see you tomorrow for tea, yeah?’

'All right, Gordie,' Jim tips his hat back with the rim of his glass to watch me leave. I can feel my gait is slow, creaking so as you could probably hear me coming: I didn't bank on the ride being this hard on my arse.

'You come from Sydney on that thing?' Jim laughs.

I don't turn back as I say, 'She's a beauty, isn't she,' mostly because my neck is stiff too.

'Gunner Did,' he calls above her engine, 'you might be clever, but you've got a roo loose.'

In my top paddock. I probably do: that was quite a ride, and I am dangerously sleepy now. I can only just wave hooroo. There's an inviting smell of mixed grill coming from the new Greek milk bar across Pangee Street, the California Cafe, and the light's still on there, too. But as much as I can taste their American Beauty butter-scotch whirl from here, I know I'd probably only pass out in it. I keep my eyes on what I can see of the road out of town, keep awake looking for actual roos. I've got to get home. Why didn't Dad tell me what he's up to?

It's not far out to our property, if it can be called much of a one. Still Waiting, she's actually called: waiting for the flood that never comes. She sits on just enough of an elevation on this side of the Overflow, just far enough from the Bogan River to the west and Gunningbar Creek to the east to keep her perpetually in drought. As I see the first of her fence posts now I remind myself that Dad never did a walk-off from any of it. He stood his ground with the bank each time he defaulted, daring them to kick him off, and they never came either, that's how decent this land is. But he paid off the debt all the same. That's who Dad is. Tough as fencing wire. And he hasn't done a walk-off now. He'll be back from Brewarrina tomorrow and he'll tell me what's gone on then. He's sent me a note last week and it's missed me. That's probably what's occurred.

The sun is beginning to set directly behind our house when I see it, the pitched roof and verandah posts in shadow against the sky that's turned to copper plate in the dusk. Copper. That's what's in this land, and might've given Dad's life a different story if the government was interested in it. There's little diggings all over the place, made by the Chinese and which I mapped out last summer. There's also what I think might be an old ochre pit at Blackie's Camp, on the Crown land just beyond our northern boundary, but no one's interested in that either, not even Professor Richardson, and Blackie's no longer here to tell anyone about it anyway. No one's here. Moved off, or moved on, left a pile of stones for an unmarked prospector's grave. As I pull up at the gate, the wind picks up and makes a sound like a shiver, reminding me that when I was little I used to think that sound was the sound of the land, I used to think that rocks could really speak. I was probably that desperate for company at times. Now, it's just the drop in temperature and the lack of Dad's ute out the front, the lack of Tess our kelpie barking hello.

I can't get through the gate and across the verandah quick enough to get the lamp on, and when I do I push open the door and see that everything is as it should be. Always as it is with Dad: everything neat and tidy and in its place, ready to pack up when the work is on. I smile as I feel the weight of the lamp in my hand: he would have topped up the kero for me before he left. I light the big lamp on the table by the hearth, that lights the whole place, which isn't difficult: it's only one room. Dad's bed is on the far side, sheet regulation-folded over the blanket, corners as square as the joinery of the loft above it: where my bed is. Cup of tea first. I could murder a cup of tea. I get the fire on and find that the billy is full. Of course it is, just as Dad has the handles of the four cups on the

dresser standing at exactly forty-five degree angles.

It's not until I'm pouring the brew into one of them that I see the note on the table, sticking out from under the base of the lamp:

Dear Gordon

I am sorry that I am not around to meet you but I had to get away to work. I wanted to congratulate you in person on finishing your university degree but I'll just have to write 'well done' here for now.

All the best,

Dad

PS here is £10 in case you need it

Ten pounds it is, folded under the base of the lamp. It's too much money: more than I could spend till my own pay starts. A warning bell is ringing quietly in my head: this is not right. Dad is a man of few words, but the ones he speaks are always clear and true. This is as clear as mud. *All the best?* Pip pip cheerio, that's not Dad. This note should state when he expects to be back from Brewarrina. It gives me the shivers enough that I check to see that my rifle is by the door. It is, where it should be. And so is Dad's, next to mine. We'll go rabbiting tomorrow at dusk and I won't remember what I was worried about.

But before I can worry some more about why Dad decided not to take his rifle up there, I have to eat something myself. I've got a headache coming on from not eating since Dubbo, and now I'm too far past it to even open a can, so I check the biscuit tin first, and find a whole fruitcake. This is good, and reassuring for two reasons: I know Dad's left it for me – a

lone, unnoted fruitcake is permission for me to eat the whole thing – and it indicates that Dad continues to be looked after by the Country Women’s Association, who regularly provide him with cakes and slices of all kinds when he’s home. CWA special charity: he might be cranky and old before his time, but he’s a good-looking bloke. They took it in turns to look after me when I was a baby. This is Mrs Wells’s fruitcake, I can tell from the amount of peel. But as I tuck in, a heaviness drops over my shoulders, and it’s not just tiredness. There’s a good reason why the women of this district have a soft spot for Dad. I don’t know much about her, my mother, other than that she was a nurse, from Bourke, her name was Caroline and they met in Bathurst when he was discharged from the army, and that’s who I get my brains from. That’s always seemed enough to know about the tragedy. But tonight . . . the loneliness of Still Waiting is . . .

What’s happened to Dad?

Nothing’s happened. Dad’s tank-sinking in Brewarrina for a spell. And, as he would say, worrying about things you can’t change is about as useful as kicking a dead dog backwards up a hill. I’m just disappointed he’s not here. Crawl up into bed and go to sleep.

ALSO BY KIM KELLY

Black Diamonds

The Blue Mile

Paper Daisies

Wild Chicory

Jewel Sea

Lady Bird & The Fox

Sunshine

Walking

Her Last Words

The Truth & Addy Loest

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'Kim Kelly seems to understand the sounds and scents of the country ... The strength of *This Red Earth* is that it reads as authentic in terms of the times in which it is set. Yet it does not succumb to saccharine nostalgia and feels like you are looking through a wide and clear window back to the 40s.'

- *The West Australian*

On the cusp of summer 1939, another war has begun in Europe. Bernie Cooper is wondering what might be in it for her; she's looking for adventure, some way to stretch her wings. The boy next door, Gordon Brock, is wondering if Bernie will marry him – before he heads off on his own adventure, his first job as a geologist with an oil company in New Guinea.

But the war has plans for them both neither could have imagined in their wildest nightmares.

As Gordon braces for the Japanese invasion of Rabaul, Bernie finally finds her purpose in the midst of the battle being fought on home soil – against the worst drought in living memory, the menace of an unseen enemy, and the torment of not knowing if those dear to her are alive or dead.

From the beaches of Sydney to the dusty heart of the continent, *This Red Earth* is a love letter to Australia, with all its beauty and terror, and a tale of telling the truth – before it's too late.

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