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## The Arrival at the Homestead A Mind-Film

### Abstract

After the jolt at the dry creek bed, and the turning of the red road through the straggling myall, part of the homestead came in sight. And the traveller knew it. Or perhaps did not quite know it, since it was any homestead at all in that part of the country, such as he could have drawn from memory or built like Meccano in his mind. Yet something made him slow down the car, something at last made him pull up and wait, in the soft red dust by the rotting gate through which he could see down the beaten earth to the house.

# The Arrival at the Homestead

## A Mind-Film

After the jolt at the dry creek bed, and the turning of the red road through the straggling myall, part of the homestead came in sight. And the traveller knew it. Or perhaps did not quite know it, since it was any homestead at all in that part of the country, such as he could have drawn from memory or built like Meccano in his mind. Yet something made him slow down the car, something at last made him pull up and wait, in the soft red dust by the rotting gate through which he could see down the beaten earth to the house.

It was any homestead at all. Sheds of corrugated iron, railed yards, a windmill. Near one end of the house a thicket of bamboo masked what must have been a very large tank. But of the house itself he could see not much more than the roof, of faded red iron, and the window of some addition, perhaps the kitchen, which had been tacked on to the lefthand wall. The rest was screened by a verandah densely overgrown with bougainvillaea, flowering in that crude purple he had always loathed. He could see that the house was built of the local stone, and consisted of probably not more than four rooms, divided by a passage. That was not counting the kitchen, of course (it was certainly the kitchen), through the window of which he had the impression of being watched.

He loathed the bougainvillaea, he loathed the homestead. The patch was bordered by straggling vincas and by beer-bottles driven nose-first into the dirt. The fence had a hedge of saltbush. No lawn, no greenness, only bare red earth, and one scrubby oleander whose white flowers had shrivelled brown in the heat.

And the heat was stunning. His shirt stuck to the seat, and

separated from it with a sound like a kiss. He slipped a hand down his trousers and scratched his sodden crotch. The brush of his own sex reminded him.

The homestead was astonishingly still. The windmill was motionless, no dog had barked. He heard nothing, nothing at all, but the distant carping of crows.

Through the kitchen window he had the feeling of being watched. And inside, perhaps . . .

The dusty car stands by the gate, framed in the window. The man inside does nothing; he simply sits.

Impossible to see what sort of man he is.

On the table is a sheet of lined paper, a red pencil with a chewed end, and a fluted green bottle.

The man sits.

The man sighs, and opens the car door. He pushes the gate and walks up the path. Then he turns to his left and looks in at the kitchen window.

The room is cheerful, spotless. The woman sits writing at the table, pretending not to have seen him. He taps on the gleaming glass.

She looks up. Their eyes examine. With her thumb she indicates a door at the far side of the room.

The traveller comes in by the back door and goes to the woman. He lifts her hair from her neck, he raises her to her feet. Their lips suck, their bodies press together.

Where? asks his mouth.

She takes his hand and leads him, by another door, through a dim sitting-room. They cross a passage, they go into a dim bedroom. Very little light can penetrate the bougainvillaea. Fumbling, they undress one another. Then they fall. He kisses her mouth, her breasts. She sighs as she strokes him.

By the bed is a photograph of a hatless man in an Australian Army uniform of World War II.

To some question, the woman only smiles.

When he enters her it seems to last forever. She cries and moans. As the moment comes he groans, burying his face in the hollow of her neck.

Never, her mouth says. Oh never, never oh never.

His face is confident, man-proud. His desire amazes her. In the glistening heat they cry out like birds. Nothing like this has ever happened to him.

From the car he noticed that the kitchen window looked dusty, but still there was the sense of being watched. And the familiarity of the place irritated him. Was it simply that so many homesteads were alike, or had he indeed been there before?

On a plastic tablecloth, checked red and white, sheets of newspaper are spread out.

A woman's hands, freckled and time-spotted, reach into the light of the kerosene lamp.

By one hand lies a worn, non-stainless carving knife.

The hands fold and refold the newspapers. The carving knife slits them into squares.

The woman's hands gather the squares into a pile.

On the topmost square can be seen the upper face of a woman in her best hat of World War II.

Beside it is the headline: A BUSH TRAGEDY.

Definitely the window was dirty. And the arrival was watched, he knew it.

The woman in the lamplit kitchen has reshuffled her newspaper squares for neatness. Her left hand holds them, her right approaches with a bag-needle.

She spears the papers through one corner, threading them on binder-twine. Her hands make a knot.

On top of the pile, under some columns of crude print, there is now a photograph of the homestead.

The homestead was astonishingly still. The windmill was motionless, perhaps out of action. And yet there would be days when

hot wind would sweep through the kitchen, showering dust on the floor, and the refrigerator (he could see that) would be shrouded in a wet blanket to keep it from defrosting. Someone sitting alone in the kitchen, with nothing to do

Someone sitting alone in the kitchen, with nothing to do all day but listen to the crows . . .

The sweat of his crotch felt like slime. And inside, perhaps . . .

The man sighs, and opens the car door. He pushes the gate and walks up the path. Then he turns to his left and looks in at the kitchen window.

Through the dust and cobwebs nothing can be seen.

He comes in at the back door, which is unlocked, and sees the room carpeted with dust. On the stove the "fountain" is rusty, its brass tap green. On the table is a red pencil with a chewed end and a sheet of ruled paper on which something has been written, something now made illegible by dust and mouse-piss.

He goes to the other door, enters the dim sitting-room. There is light enough to see that mice have been tearing up the armchairs.

He crosses the passage, goes into the dim bedroom. A dusty counterpane on the bed covers a humped shape. On a table nearby, beside a photograph, is a bottle of fluted green glass.

Very slowly he stoops and draws back the counterpane, which tears.

She has died screaming. Every tooth is visible, some with amalgam fillings.

The empty eye-sockets regard him out of the mummified face. Her hair, of indeterminate colour, is spread out on the mouldering pillow.

He replaces the counterpane, which tears again.

Suddenly, the man in the car had it. "Of course", he said aloud.

In a dim earth closet, smelling of phenyle and excrement, a bundle of newspaper-squares hangs from a nail by the door.

A boy's hand reaches out and tears one off.

The headlines of the yellowed paper read:

SEQUEL TO  
A TRAGEDY  
A Letter  
Two Years  
Late

The boy's hand opens the privy door for more light. The paper rests on his bare knees. His shorts and underpants are around his ankles.

His hand tears off a second square, and fits it to the other. The newspaper, so reconstructed, shows beside the headlines a man in an Australian Army uniform, and a woman in her best hat of World War II.

Both of these studio portraits have been retouched to the point of inhumanity.

The boy's hand tears off another square. Below the columns of print is a photograph of the homestead.

A khaki pick-up truck, Army surplus, drives up to the gate.

The kitchen is squalid. A bachelor has been living here.

A stumbling tread comes nearer down the path. The back door opens, and the legs of a man unsteadily cross the room.

The man's bare right forearm plants bottles of liquor amidst the debris on the table. Some empty, ill-smelling tins are knocked to the floor. The man's body sways. His right hand supports him on the back of a kitchen chair. With his left he takes a handful of money from his pocket as if to count it.

The chair falls. The man, laughing, shouts: 'Whoops!', and sprawls, in a rattle and roll of coins.

On the floor, still laughing, the man says: 'Fuck.'

His arm gropes beneath the pinewood dresser. It fetches out cobwebs, dead insects, a few shillings. And at last, a dirty sheet of

lined paper.

The back of the sheet is against the man's drawn-up knees. He reads it, sitting on the floor. His head is out of sight behind the dresser.

In the dim interior of the next room the man's forearm opens a drawer. He reaches into it.

On the floor by the back door dust stirs as the man's legs approach. The door whines open, and the man is gone.

A shot; and the crows cry out in astonishment.

The window was unmistakably dirty.

'Abandoned,' said the man in the car aloud.

He turned the key in the ignition. Red dust billowed around as he drove off.

The car drives off, out of the square of the window.

The man inside did nothing; he simply sat.

The car drives off. The paper flutters to the floor.

Impossible to see what sort of man he was.

The letter drifts, and lodges under the dresser. The car drives off.

On the table forever, on the table forever and forever are:

a sheet of lined paper

a red pencil with a chewed end

and a fluted green bottle.

On the paper so far are only five words: **TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.**