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Reading 10

The Drover's Wife

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It ought to be set straight. All very well for them to spin yarns and make jokes but nobody has written any sense about me. Nobody has even given me a name except one and he got it wrong and said I was called Hazel. The drover's wife, the doctor's wife, the butcher's wife. You wouldn't think of all the countries the one where women are the fewest would be the one where they don't exist, where men'll say "the missus" sooner than give a name. Small wonder the Eyetalian got his facts wrong and said there weren't any women in the country for the first hundred years. I had to laugh. I don't know why; it isn't funny when you think about it.

I better say first who I am. I'm forty-six years old. I have four children, all of them boys. My womb has fallen, so've most of my teeth, but I've got a straight back and a good head of hair and I can match anyone on a hard day's work. I know seventy-three poems off by heart and I'm not afraid of the dark.

I was born somewhere on the stock route between Tibooburra and Broken Hill; nobody ever told me exactly where.

My father was a drover. Times there was no stock to be moved he dug dams or went fencing — hard grafting for very little money. He died quietly one night by his campfire without saying a word to anyone. I was twelve.

We weren't on the road with him. We had a shack out of Nyngan — my mother, my two brothers, my sister Bessie and me. Ma was a hard-handed woman. I never saw her after I cleared out with the dentist but sometimes still I dream I run into her. I'm glad to wake up.

The boys cleared out as soon as the first was old enough. We never did hear what became of them. We had a few acres and three cows and some pigs and fowls. It wasn't much of a life. Ma took up with a shearer when I was fourteen and *she* cleared out for six months. It was better there without her than with her. Then they both came back and the next thing was Bessie ran off with a Bananalander. I'd like to see old Bess again; I really would, but

she was never much for writing letters so there wasn't anything I could do, not knowing where she was. She's forty-nine now, if she's alive.

That left me stuck there two years with them, like a bandicoot on a burnt ridge. I gave as good as I got but I took the first chance that offered to get out of it.

Now it's a matter of what each of them had to say — answering it. Take them as they came. Mr Lawson first. He didn't mean me any harm, far from it. But men can only see women as being heroines when they do something a decent man would do for them if he happened to be around, like killing a snake or an injured calf, or hauling a rotting sheep carcass out of the well.

He was a nice little bloke, Mr Lawson. No bother to anyone, quiet, deaf; drank too much. Every man I've had to do with from my own dad down to the drover drank too much on occasions, but very little was too much for Mr Lawson and it didn't seem to make him happier any longer than the time it took to get it down his gullet. He was a good listener — the best I ever knew in those dry times when there wasn't much listening going begging for ones like me who'd spend weeks talking to the flies on the wall. And he really listened. You could tell because he'd ask things, wanting more.

So I told him a lot. Talked too much — must've — because some of it he took and turned into that story about the snake, as though what I'd really told him wasn't true or wasn't fit. His snake story was true enough. Nobody goes to sleep with a black snake under a floor that's got gaps in it in a room that's full of children. Yes, I watched; I had a candle going and a green sapling close at hand and Alligator in with me because he was a champion snake-dog all his life till a big brown brute got him down at the dam. Mr Lawson made it a great and terrible night. It wasn't. I've spent great and terrible nights.

Like the one I told him about. Joe was droving and the baby was ten months old the time it happened. He was the one Mr Lawson mentioned that I had without anyone with me, only the old black woman, Mary. I was into my time and Tommy and Billy both in the cot together and me blind silly with the pain and the fear of what'd happen to them if I died, which can happen. And her ugly face came in at the doorway. I screamed, and that set the

two kids screaming. Next thing I knew she had her hands on me, and she knew what she was doing.

Only time I worried was when she went off down the cowyard with the bucket to get some milk for the kids. I thought she mightn't come back, being who she was. It made me feel a bit different about the blacks and Reg was as fine a baby as the others had been, and fatter.

Until he was ten months old. One moment he was as bonny as usual, the next he was screaming and going into a fit. I got the tub and the hot water the way I'd been told but had never needed before. It was no good. I got the dog in and threw the tub of water on the fire and banged the door and left the kids yelling in the dark hut with only Alligator to mind them.

He took another fit in my arms while I was catching Roley, and another on the ground while I was saddling up. Then I don't know how many more there were. Roley wasn't a fast horse but he was a stayer and we would have made the nineteen miles in an hour and a half. We'd gone maybe ten miles, perhaps eleven, when the baby had another fit and right at the height of it everything stopped. I knew he'd gone.

I got down, holding him, and lay down with him behind some bushes. I don't know how long I was there. When I do remember again there was enough light, starlight I suppose, to see Roley, off a hundred yards grazing. I was lucky he'd been trained not to light out for home.

But I wasn't thinking of home. I could only think of the baby. I was hugging him, crying and talking, kissing him, closing his eyelids and then opening them up again, trying to push my tit into his mouth. You do strange things when you're by yourself at a death. I must have been there a long time. He began to get cold. I put him inside my clothes and caught Roley and went home.

The dog got up when I opened the door, but the boys were asleep with their arms round each other. It was near dawn. I got the spade and went out. It took me a long time to dig deep enough, being a dry year and my head full of strange fears out of things I'd read about vampires and wolves' claws digging him up. It was when I had finished and was making it all tidy that I suddenly felt the pains, and there was no mistaking what they were. I could have gone back, but what was the point? The kids would have woke

and asked about their brother. All I could do was what the black gins do — scrape a hole in the ground and squat over it, waiting for what was to come to come. I would have given Roley and his saddle and bridle then for a sight of Black Mary, but there was nothing there but small trees and the dry ground and the grey light that said it was nearly sun-up.

It hurt me a lot for a little thing no bigger than a small peach with the stone out of it. I covered it up and went back, gathering sticks on the way, knowing I'd have a wet stove to work at before I could boil the kettle and start the day. But later, when I had the fire going and the children were fed and playing round the woodheap, what with the sadness and no sleep and the sick fancies I had about wolves and that, I went back and scratched the soil off the hole and took the thing back with me and lifted the lid of the stove and dropped it into the heart of the fire. I don't know why I did that.

That was the story I told Mr Lawson a long time afterwards, or at least the parts of it that were all right to tell to a man. Funny the way he was more taken by a snake story, the sort that happens to everyone two or three times in a year. But that was the thing about him. Nervous. A nervous man who could never write about things as they really were but only about how they would have seemed to be if he'd been what he would have liked to be.

Gloomy, that, but I wanted to tell it just to show how wrong they are when they write about us. They don't understand the strength women have — won't see it, because they think it takes away from them. Not that I'm gloomy much, far from it. Wasn't it the dentist said I had a silly streak? Well, fair enough, if that's his name for someone who laughs a lot and can see the funny side.

Mr Lawson could laugh himself when he felt at his ease and had half a pint of tanglefoot under his belt, but it's a funny thing about humorous men — they don't go much on other people's jokes, only liking to work them over into something funnier for themselves.

He said another thing that wasn't right; he said "As a girl she built the usual air-castles, but all her girlish hopes and aspirations are dead. She finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the *Young Ladies' Journal*, and, Heaven help her, takes a pleasure in the fashion-plates."

Who says they're dead? Who thinks that hopes and aspirations have anything much to do with expectations? Even the hardest times don't stop your fancies, don't stop a woman being broody, trying to hatch out stones like an old hen we had when I was a kid. And times haven't all been hard, not by a long chalk.

Hardest thing of all for women is that everything they do is for un-doing. It's not like sinking fence-posts or putting up a shed. *They'll* last, maybe fifty years if they don't get burnt. But the work a woman does hardly lasts a minute — if it's not mouths today it's moths or mould tomorrow, and the whole lot's got to be done over again. You have to laugh sometimes at the way your hard work goes down people's throats or under their dirty boots. Either that, or lash out with the copper stick. Best to laugh if you can and get on with it.

Another thing; didn't he notice the hut was papered floor to roof with pages from the Bushman's Bible? Perhaps he thought I put them up and never looked at them again. I put them up for two reasons — they were all pieces that were worth keeping to read again, and because they were the best thing I had for teaching the boys something a bit better than the simple rubbish out of school readers. Well, for three reasons, the third being that the walls looked better covered than bare.

If he'd looked he would have seen one of his own *Bulletin* stories. There was *Telling Mrs Baker* stuck right along under the shelf we kept the plates on. His idea of a good woman — a fool who'd believe anything she was told even when the truth was plain in front of her face. But I had it up there for the words, and the beautiful way he had of using them.

That's something I got from my dad. He had a way with words and a great belief in them. He used to say, "No one knows what's coming after you die, or if anything's coming at all. Best you can do is stuff your head with words and poems and things to think about, just in case that's all you're going to have to keep you happy for ever and ever." Well, he's gone now, so he knows what the answer is. It makes me laugh to think of him up there somewhere, spouting all those verses from the *Bulletin*, loud-voiced.

Come to think of it, if you could count hymns I know a lot more than seventy-three poems. Some of them must be by poets. Only a poet could have thought of "blinded sight". It doesn't

make any sense but it's beautiful enough for me to think of it six times a day. And the one that says "Before the hills in order stood." I like that. I suppose it's because all around here it's so flat and there's no hills to make you lift up your eyes. I suppose the best thing you could take with you when you die is some words you've put together yourself into a poem. But you try it; it's not as easy as it looks.

I wish they had more poems from women. I don't mean I like them just because they're women's poems, but some of them really get into the heart of things. Everyone says Mrs Browning but for me they're like men's poems, written on ruled lines. Christina Rossetti — there's a name. I wonder if it's made up, like *The Banjo* and *The Breaker* and *Ironbark* and the rest of them. Not that she's in the *Bulletin*, but I bought a fourpenny *Goblin Market* once in Sydney. Something to think about in the next world, if my dad's right. And I know some others of hers, too. "Sing no sad songs for me." That's a fine poem, sad and funny too, if it means what I think it does.

The next one was Mr Drysdale. He did no harm, except to my vanity, which I wouldn't have if all my hopes and aspirations were dead. He knew the place, give him his due. He didn't sit down in George Street and try to imagine it. You can smell the dust and the ants squashed under your feet, and you can hear the crows when you look at it, even though they're not there. He made me into a black dress over a big belly. And the feet! Could have been size eleven. And a soft look like butter wouldn't melt to my face. But he knew it; he knew how the ground reaches up into you.

Then there was Murray Bail. I never remember seeing him, though he may have called himself something different then. He doesn't sound like one from our part of the country — more like a cow cocky, from the river areas. He must've known the dentist, but.

He never could tell the truth, the dentist. He'd never come right out and tell an honest lie, just say enough to give the wrong idea and then never a word to put it right. Like him saying about me, "How can you tell by a face? That a woman has left a husband and two children." I'd left a husband, all right, and *his* children, which is a different thing. Isn't anything a woman can do blacker

than leaving her own kids, and that's what he was trying to make you believe.

He was a dirty man, the dentist — I didn't like him. I could tell what the night would be like by the way he came home. If his patients had been men, he'd come home wanting his tea. If they'd been women he'd come home with spit in the corners of his mouth and some of the things he wanted, in the dark with the blinds down, would've fetched him a bullet if he'd been an animal wanting them in the farmyard. Should've known, since that's the way I met him, over a rotten tooth that had to come out. Should have had more sense.

People said I'd never last, shut up in a backyard in a town. He had these two kids, poor little buggers. I was sixteen. Did what I could for them, them having no mother and him what he was. There were times I thought he was more than a bit mad — forever looking out to see who was looking in. He was very ignorant for all he had letters after his name and a brass plate. He couldn't read more than half a page of a book without getting bored and coming on words that were too big for him. I never knew him read anything much except for the racing pages in the paper and the labels on bottles, to see whether they'd thought up a better germ-killer than the one before.

All my life I never knew anyone who worried so much about germs. He was frightened of flies the way most people are of crocodiles, and a bit of fruit that hadn't been washed or a moth falling into his soup would give him something to talk about for half an hour. He says I was quiet. Well, I was while I was with him. Day to day things are for doing, not talking about, and he had nothing else.

He couldn't abide to see me chop wood or dig a hole to bury a bit of rubbish or a runover dog from the street. He'd do it himself in his good clothes and his white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and his chin stuck up on his starched collar like a sick calf trying to look over a paling fence. Poor job he'd make of it. I never knew him ever put on old clothes for a bit of hard yakka. Too afraid people would see him and think he was used to it.

That he was no bushman you could tell from the stupid thing he said, when he used a magnifying glass on Mr Drysdale's picture to see if he could tell who it was I'd gone off with. He said, "It's my

opinion, however, that he's a small character. See his size in relation to the horse, to the wheels of the cart. Either that, or it's a ruddy big horse." Any fool could see there were two horses, and that the waggon had a centre pole, not shafts. But that was him — couldn't see what didn't interest him.

That holiday he talks about, up over Port Augusta, that was a disaster. It was supposed to be for me. He never for a moment stopped grouching — the heat, the flies, the dust, the snakes, the flies, the blacks, the cattle, the flies. Frightened. His kids liked it though. He says we only saw the drover once, boiling up on one side of the track. Gordon wanted to know where his cattle were. The drover just waved his arm, gave a grin. He was half-miling them and the grin meant the half-mile had got stretched and they'd be eating someone's good grass four days or more before anyone could cut the travelling brands out from those that belonged to the place.

We'd seen him five days before, a few miles up, and that day too I'd had a mug of tea from his billy with Gordon wandering off, too afraid of germs and the look of the thing. We didn't say much — just enough for him to know the two kids weren't mine and me to know he'd make it into Adelaide in a month with the cattle. It was how he looked — I knew he'd find me.

It's no surprise the dentist can't understand it. He could never see what it was about the country, so dry that days you could sit looking at it and your mouth would melt for the thought of a peach, maybe, or a tomato. He couldn't understand you could give up a board floor and a bit of carpet and some wax fruit under a glass bell for a shack with no floor at all in the kitchen and water that had to be carried half a mile when the tank ran dry. Lonely at times, yes, but it's quiet, and that's something.

There's more to a man than trimmed nails and a dark suit, and I'd rather have beer fumes breathed in my face than fancy pink mouth-wash.

He's never going to understand it, how I could find the drover superior. Put it down to my silly streak if you like, but we could laugh. We used to laugh over something or nothing, it didn't matter, just laughing because we felt good, because our skins liked each other, and our hair and teeth. Laughter doesn't last for ever any more than hair or teeth. But what I'm saying, when it all boils

down and you've stopped laughing, he was a good man. Still is, even though his back's gone. And anyway, there are our kids, and bringing them up to know there are two or three more things in the world than how to break a horse and bring down a tree without smashing your fences.

Another thing he said, how a dentist can't afford to have shaky hands and how after I left him he sat for nights in the lounge with the lights out. Heart-rending, that is. Makes me laugh. The lights out and the blinds down too, I'll be bound, so's nobody passing could see the bottle on the table.

There's nothing better than rot-gut to give you a shaky hand next day, particularly if you're not eating right, and he'd never learn to do for himself the way men learn in the bush. Truth is I worried about those kids of his when I'd left. Kay'd have been all right, but young Kev was a picky little kid, had a weak stomach.

After him, I thought I'd done with them talking about me, but then this Eyetie bloke. Dirty-minded. Hard to tell whether he's had his leg pulled or is trying to pull ours. I'll thank him all the same not to call me a sheep. You have to laugh, though. He's fallen for one of those stories they tell, round the fire. Voices carry a long way at night. I've heard worse than that. You can tell he's a foreigner by the words he uses, like "inter-species reciprocity." I had to first look it up and then sit and puzzle it out to mean taking a poke at a sheep. Any backblocker would have come right out with it, in four letters.

But once you've puzzled it out all you've got is the old story about someone off on his own having to do with a sheep or a pig or a cow. Only when they tell it here it's not a drover, not one of their mates, it's a half-mad manager or some rotten overseer. I don't say it never happened; they say everything you can think of happened somewhere or some time. So they say. But it's not the drovers' way. I don't have to spell it out, do I, more than that he can count on his five fingers?

It's funny to think this Eyetie chap, Franco Casamaggiore, isn't really different from any of the rest of them. Truth is there are many sorts of men, all the same; only one sort of woman, all different. We could be a lot fonder of them if only they'd admit how scared they are. Having their sex on the outside leads to a lot of boasting and worrying.

A lot of them cover it up by telling yarns. With our men it's some trollopy girl or a flash barmaid they took up with. With the Eyetalians it's animals. Same difference with the Greeks. It's rams with golden fleeces or it's white bulls or it's swans having their way with young girls. Our fellows don't go as far as that but often enough they talk about women as though they were animals — "She's in pup", they'll say, or "She's running round Bourke like a slut on heat", or "Got to get home to the missus, she's due to drop her foal any minute." Reason's plain enough; these are things you can own, use, brand — better or worse, batter and curse.

I'll say that for the drover; he doesn't talk about me as though I've got four legs and he doesn't think the way to praise a woman is to say she thinks like a man, acts like a man. Perhaps it's why I'm still with him, after so long. That, and the kids.

Worst thing ever happened to me was the day the baby died, losing two of them at once. And never knowing what it was I lost. Mary's black face came in at the door about a week later. I asked her about the thing I'd put in the fire. "Inside . . . little man . . . all curled up," she said. I'd never thought to look.

That started me dreaming. Dreams all mixed up with *Goblin Market* — golden head and long neck, dimples and pink nails. Laura like a leaping flame. One may lead a horse to water, twenty cannot make him drink. I would have called her Laura. More sensible to have called her Lizzie, for the sober sister. Put it down to my silly streak, if you like, but I would have called her Laura, and hoped she'd have some wildness and wisdom, like Miss C. Rossetti. I suppose I dreamed that dream twenty times before I wore it out. Oh well, dreams go by opposites, they say. Chances are it would have been another boy.

What I meant was to tell not so much about me and the drover and the dentist and the rest of them but about how women have a history, too, and about how the Bushman's Bible and the other papers only tell how half the world lives. You ought to be able to put it down in two words, or twelve, so people could remember. Women have a different history. Someone ought to write it down. We're not sheep or shadows, or silly saints the way Mr Lawson would have. There's more to us. More to me than any of them have written, if it comes to that.

The dentist was right about one thing, though. I'm not the drover's wife. Or only in the eyes of God if he's got any, if he's not another one with blinded sight.

- it's different in reality
- sum up of all drover's wife!
kind of workshops