

# Dead Heifers

Ahead, through the cloak of smoke, I saw her body. She lay on her side on the grass where the land sloped down towards the river. She'd got through the barbed wire fence somehow. There were patches of bloodied skin on her hind legs; the hair still wrapped around the barbs on the mangled fence a few paces behind. She'd been running for the water. I crouched down and looked into her still, black eye. Her amber coat had turned ashen. Even her whiskers had singed. She smelled of overdone, charred beef. I pressed my hand softly to her heart and felt a slow, sluggish beat. She was too worn out to flinch. I stood up and cranked the lever of my rifle. The cartridge loaded into the chamber and I pointed at her heart. I took a breath and counted. One, two, three. The shot wrung out. My shoulder jolted back as the rifle recoiled and my eardrums reeled. That was fourteen today.

We needed to bury them all, before their bodies started to rot and what was left of the wildlife came to scavenge. Dad was working the tractor. I couldn't see him for the smoke, but I could hear the motor, as he worked the forklift, up and down, back and forth, digging a hole for the dead. My grandfather would be following behind soon, in his truck. Each time we found a body, I had to hitch a rope around the heifer's hind legs and then he'd drive on, hauling the carcass across the scorched pasture to the head of the hole. Yesterday, we buried eighteen. Sometimes, their legs snapped off and I had to find some other part of them to hook to the rope. I hadn't seen my grandmother in three days. She took off on Thursday night as the fire encircled the farm and the wind blew like a jet engine. She wanted to stay with us but I told her to get out now. We hadn't spoken since the power lines burned down but I knew she was safe. Last I heard, she was waiting in town with a car full of supplies for the convoy to drive back in. My mother, well, she was long gone.

'When do you think you'll be back?' Kelly had asked on Monday while I threw clothes into an overnight bag and then pushed passed her to the front door. My boss at the prison had watched me watching the news in the rec room that day and said 'just get out of here'.

'As soon as I can,' I'd called back.

The drive to the farm was always long, but this time, the smoke was so thick, it enveloped the car and I had no idea what progress I was making. I made it onto the Murray Valley highway as darkness fell. Put the high beams on, sucked on mints, clenched the steering wheel and listened to the drone of news radio blare from the speakers. I got to the farm at midnight, three days before the fire.

I walked on and saw another black shape through the haze. This one was on higher ground, nowhere near the water. She'd had no chance. I didn't bother wasting the bullet. If she'd stayed where we'd put her on the night, she would've survived like the rest of them. Goddamn beasts. I remembered again why I hated the farm. I took another breath and counted in my head. Dad was down thirty head of cattle at two thousand a head, fifty thousand. By spring, and with rain, I thought, he'd get back on track. Calving season was only three months off and he'd saved one of the bulls. The other, he'd shot near the house.

I heard my grandfather's truck amble up behind me. He was seventy-three now, his beard had long turned grey; he was too old for this kind of labouring. But working the farm was all he knew and all he had.

'I'll come back for these ones this afternoon,' he said, 'I need a cup of tea.'

I pushed my cap down and loosened the knot on the shirt I'd wrapped around my face to shield the smoke. My mouth was dry and my nostrils brittle with ash. I climbed into the passenger seat and my grandfather thrust the gearstick into first.

'Peter came by the house,' he said over the clatter of the engine.

'How'd he get on?'

'Not too bad. The dairy burned and a shed.'

'Lose any cattle?'

'Doesn't think so; they stayed by the river.'

'Lucky him.' Peter had bought his property eighteen years ago, which, in this part of the country, provoked a wary distance and an unveiled suspicion.

'He's got hot water,' said my grandfather, 'offering showers.'

'How's that?' I asked. I hadn't showered since the day of the fire.

'*Solar*,' he said, inflecting. 'He said to come down for one.'

'I'd kill for a shower,' I said, wiping my blackened hands on my once white shirt.

'You sure could use one,' said my grandfather, sniffing. 'I told him we'd come by later. Why don't you go into town and pick up some beers? Me and your dad can deal with those dead heifers.'

I drove the car out of the farm and onto the main road to town. The Upper Murray was one of the most beautiful parts of Victoria when you could see it. It was carved up with valleys and

foothills, cut through by the river that flowed from the Snowies. All around, beyond the farming country, you could see the mountains. I remembered how I used to jump into the river from the old wooden bridge near Tintaldra on the way to Jingellic. I'd lie in the water, floating with the current, and watch the clouds drift above the willows. We'd do it for hours – jump into the water, float down the river, walk back to the bridge, jump into the water, float down the river, walk back to the bridge, jump, float, walk back. I wondered if the bridge had survived the fire. Right now, all I could see was black paddocks, broken fences and a thick dirty smog. Even the road signs had melted.

A police road block ahead directed me to pull to the side. The policeman was wearing a mask and sunglasses but I could tell it was Greg. The same timorous curl to his shoulders. The same sagging plump over his belt. He'd been a wimp of a kid until he found a job that let him carry a gun. I wound my window down and the heat blew in like a fan forced oven on high.

'Logan, good to see you,' said Greg, leaning in, 'you here helping your folks? I mean, well you know what I mean.'

'Came up Monday night.'

'It was something else,' said Greg, pulling his mask down and wiping the sweat from his brow.

'Sure was.'

'Lose any cattle?'

'Bout thirty.'

'Not good. House okay?'

'If we hadn't stayed to defend, it'd be a pile of ash.'

'The Paton's place is gone and the Marsh's.'

'I saw three fire trucks driving in the wrong direction when the fire came through.'

'It was coming from all directions Logan, they were doing their best.'

He turned and looked back at the empty road behind me. I wasn't in the mood for an argument.

'You know when the power'll be up again?'

'Some SEC are here now and there'll be more, once the highway opens again. You just going into town for supplies?'

'Peter's got hot water and he's offering showers, so I'm picking up some beers.'

'Ah Peter and his solar. Alright, well you look after yourself,' he said, stepping back.

As soon as I was old enough, that is, as soon as I got the chance, I left the farm and moved to Canada, because it felt like the only thing I could do. Two days in Vancouver and then I was on a bus to the mountains. I found a job on the ski fields in one of the resort pubs, pulling beers. The winter season was long and reliable and there was plenty of work if you didn't want much money.

I lived in a dorm with five Canadian kids on their gap years between school and college, and earned just enough to feed myself and pay for a season pass. The snow was nothing like it is in the Upper Murray – soft, thick, and endless. I spent every spare minute I had on the slopes. I was an alright skier by Australian standards, but there I became an expert. The ritual – skiing the run, riding the chairlift back, skiing the run, riding the chairlift back – it reminded me of the river. But it gave me the distance I needed. There, in a way I wasn't able to do here, I could let the memories of her wash through me.

I met Kelly in my second year at the resort. She was Australian too and worked at the cinema. She recognised my accent when I asked for a ticket and we got talking about home. We've been together ever since. One girlfriend's all I've had. But I never was one for dating, anyhow. After three years and enough dead end jobs for a lifetime, we moved home. She was tired of earning only enough money to spend on the snow. I could've stayed longer but I wasn't up for the fight. After we moved back, Kelly studied nursing and now works at one of the big hospitals in Werribee. I tried carpentry but no one buys handmade furniture anymore and so I found a job at the prison, teaching woodwork. Lately, we've been talking about kids. Kelly wants them; she's made for mothering, it's in her bones, and she'd make a wonderful mother, I should know. Me, I'm not so sure. The future isn't something I trust. I'm not sure if what happened to me might happen again.

I pulled the car back out and drove on towards town. Corryong is set on an incline, heralded in by an avenue of honour, elms and oaks, too foreign to burn. That day, it was buzzing with police cars, firetrucks, the SEC, more uniforms than I'd seen in a lifetime. Outside the pub, someone had parked a generator. I pulled into a car space near the IGA and killed the engine. When I got out, Mark from the farm up near Walwa saw me.

'Fire's been through Logan, no need for a glum face now.'

I smiled and waved at him, pulling my cap down deeper. I walked through the IGA to the cool room out back and loaded a case of VB onto my shoulder. At the counter, I didn't recognise the cashier. By the time she'd have gone to Corryong High School, I would've been in Canada.

'That'll be fifty-three dollars,' she said.

I handed her my card.

She looked at me with squinting eyes. 'Who are you related to?' she asked, while pressing the card onto the reader and then handing it back to me. The Upper Murray family tree only stretched so far.

'My grandfather's Clive Jackson.'

'Oh you're Jacob's son. Logan?'

'That's me.'

'I really like your name,' she said, 'kind of American sounding?'

'Canadian.'

'Oh cool, I like Canada. Well, you have a good day Logan. I'm Sheeree. The pub's got a generator now and they're going to put on some live music on Friday. I reckon the whole town'll come in for it.'

'I'll keep it in mind Sheeree.'

When I got back to the house, dad was covered in blood and ash. He was sitting on the bench outside the back door, smoking a cigarette. He wore a faded red shirt, old jeans and dusty boots. His cap was filthy and he hadn't shaved in days. He was nearly fifty and I was nearly thirty. My grandmother had told me that he'd started seeing someone from Albury. Her name was Linda and she worked at the stock feed and fodder store. Dad hadn't mentioned Linda to me and I wasn't going to ask. My grandmother said she was a nice girl but in a way that made me think she was selecting her words and nice was the best she could come up with. When Dad saw me approaching, he stubbed the butt of his cigarette into the ashtray. Really, he could've flicked it anywhere, since the whole farm was coated in ash.

'If this doesn't tempt you to run the farm with me, I don't know what will,' he said, smiling.

I laughed and sat down on the other end of the bench. He knew that I'd never run the farm, that I'd sell the place as soon as I got the chance. He knew that I blamed it. I pushed my thumb into the plastic casing holding the beers and handed him one of the cold cans, taking another for myself. We flicked them open and drank.

'Where's Pa?' I asked.

'He's sprucing himself up for Peter. We get invited over to clean ourselves up and he goes and cleans himself up before we get there,' dad chuckled.

'Country standards.'

'Your mother never understood them either.'

We didn't talk about my mother all that much and I could hear the effort it took him, to keep her a part of the conversation.

She grew up in Vancouver, in the suburbs. Her dad, my other grandfather, got a job on the Snowy Hydro project and they moved to Khancoban in her last year of high school. It must've felt like moving planets – to go from the west coast of the Americas to the Upper Murray. She was beautiful, my mum. The whole school was drawn to her like they were in a magnetic field. Sometimes, on good days, I liked to imagine how mum and dad first met. How she chose him from all the others. Sometimes, I imagined they met in class, sometimes on the oval, sometimes behind the petrol station where everyone smoked cigarettes. In some versions, she'd come up to

him, ask for a lighter, or just linger near him. Other times, he'd go up to her, make her laugh, call her darling.

She was nineteen when I was born, so was dad. The breakdowns started when she was twenty-three, dad told me. He didn't need to, I remembered them. After I was born, my grandfather divided up part of his farm and gave it to dad to manage. They ran dairy because my mother didn't like the idea of slaughtering animals for profit. In those days, they didn't have the money for labourers and so did everything themselves. Dad was gone from daybreak to milk the cattle and mum was left with me. I remember playing with her after breakfast, her fingerpicking a nylon string guitar and me singing the songs she'd learned in Canada, and then I remember her going into her bedroom and not coming back out. After two miscarriages, they stopped trying for any more children. She started to go into Albury to see a doctor and he put her on medication that made her sleep for most of the day. Maybe it was the loneliness of the farm, or being far away from Canada, or not having all the children she wanted. 'It just was what it was', dad used to tell me, 'stop looking for answers'.

The only thing that seemed to make her happy, to bring her back to us, was the river. In the summers, we'd go there once dad got back from milking. There was a bank of sand in the bend of the river, on a part of land that now fell on Peter's property. When I was old enough, mum taught me to jump from the bridge. I'd climbed over the barrier with her and then we'd stand, together, on the precipice. I was always scared of the distance we'd drop and that the water wouldn't be deep enough but she never hesitated. She'd just look over at me, say 'ready' and jump.

Dad never let me see her body. He said it wouldn't be right. They had her cremated instead. When he came back from the crematorium in Albury, we took her ashes down to the bridge. Dad told me that the river would take her to the ocean and the ocean would take her back to Canada. My grandfather and grandmother dressed up especially, even though it was only us standing there on that bridge. I held one of their hands each, while dad said a prayer and then tipped the urn into the river. She was twenty-eight.

'Do you think we've buried them all?'

'I reckon,' said dad, taking a final sip from his can.

I leant back against the cool brick wall and stretched my legs out. The smoke had dulled the setting sun and turned it purple. The clouds were bulging and red. The mountains were still lost in the haze. The wind had settled down and the heat had come out of the day. Even after a bushfire, I thought, the Upper Murray was beautiful.

'Come on,' said dad, standing up from the bench and holding out his hand to lift me up, 'let's go to Peter's place and wash off this ash.'