



~~MEDICAL COLUMN~~ ...Continued

BACK IN TIME

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PARTY LINE

~~as medically or surgically planned, timely and perfectly executed. Also, in both these instances, I received excellent customer care. The food was excellent (and abundant! I even gained 1.5 kg in 4 days!) and the personnel were more than attentive to my needs. If my situation as a VIP (a staff doctor turned into patient) had any influence, I'd consider it natural and I'm more than thankful for the smiles, the hand holding and the minutes they spent at my bedside.~~



~~All's well and ended well. I'm back to normal health and exercising as usual. I was privileged to go through this stressful experience knowing that my medical needs always came first, although I made the most of the customer service as soon and as often as I could!~~

The farther inland we went, the more Australia felt like nothing but wide-open spaces. We were jackeroos, the three of us, on sabbatical from everything we'd ever done before, observing the country from the windows of a moving car. We stopped here and there to work at odd jobs, then moved on. Towns were scattered far apart on the fringes of the outback, and some days we drove for hours without seeing any sign of civilization.

Every town had a hotel, usually on the main street, and every hotel had a pub. The publican always knew if anyone was looking for help, and while he poured three tall schooners of cold beer he'd tell us who was hiring, and for what. Sometimes we cleaned out a warehouse. Sometimes we harvested a field of barley. On one occasion we built a whole row of grain silos, wearing heavy worker's gloves because the sheets of corrugated tin were scalding hot in the Australian summer sunshine. Sometimes there was no work at all, so we moved on.

At a lonely crossroads stood the tiny town of Jerilderie, a handful of houses in a vast expanse of endless, flat farmland. We arrived at the Jerilderie Hotel one Saturday afternoon, and spent the evening with people who, for the most part, had long forgotten that they were living in the middle of nowhere.

The guestrooms were on the upper floor of the two-story building, each with an uninterrupted view of the horizon. At sunset the western sky turned a violent red, and then the world was suddenly dark and silent. Stars gradually appeared, millions of them glittering, magnificently clear this far from city lights. Long ago, on this enormous plain, nomadic aboriginals gazed up at this same night sky and wondered about their origins and their survival. Dwarfed by the landscape and humbled by the heavens, they created a web of myth and ritual to believe in, passing down creation stories from one generation to another to reassure them that they were inextricably connected to the eternal circle of life. But we were in the twentieth century now. We were rational inhabitants of a modern world,





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unswayed by the unseen. Things were different now. Or so we thought.

The hotel saloon had a high ceiling and tall windows along one wall. Juanín and Keith and I sat on stools at one end of the long wooden bar drinking schooners of ice-cold beer. As the evening wore on the saloon filled with regulars. The air became thick with shared indulgence, voices grew steadily louder, and people laughed enthusiastically and often. It was Saturday night at the local pub and all was well with the world.

A sentimental sense of camaraderie, all-pervasive as pipe and cigarette smoke, gradually broke down the natural resistance to outsiders. My companions and I became engaged in a pleasant conversation of no great consequence with Daphne and Neal, who worked a nearby farm. We were interrupted when Trevor, the proprietor of the hotel, slammed something down on the counter near Keith's elbow. "Look at that!" he said in disgust, pointing at the handset that appeared to have been ripped from the telephone in the alcove at the foot of the stairs. The black cord was only a few inches long and frayed at the end. "Some drunken bastard's gone and pulled it clean off the wall!" Trevor moved away, muttering to himself, leaving the handset on the bar.

Keith absentmindedly picked it up, smiling as he held it to his ear, and spoke into it in hushed, confidential tones. Daphne giggled and asked if he was making a long distance call. The smile vanished from Keith's eyes and his expression was suddenly serious. He covered the mouthpiece with his hand, said yes it was, and would she like to go next? Now her smile faded and she too became serious. She stared wistfully at the handset for a moment, then turned to her husband. "I wouldn't half like to talk to me Mum. It's been ever so long."

"Where is your Mum?" asked Keith.

"Dorchester. In England."

"What's her number?"

"Won't it be expensive?" she inquired.

"No," said Keith. "There's no charge to use this phone."

Daphne looked at her husband again. He merely shrugged and grinned clumsily. She opened her purse and pulled out a small, brown notebook. She found the right page and held it up for Keith to see. He went through the motions of placing the call. There was a pause during which we all stared at him, hunched forward in an oasis of silence. Then he spoke into the mouthpiece. "Mrs. Wilkins? You have a long-distance call from your daughter in Australia." And he handed Daphne the phone.

Somehow, none of us were surprised to see Daphne take the phone and begin speaking to her mother. Her husband sat quietly beside her, listening and nodding from time to time. When she had finished she handed the phone back to Keith. "Thank you," she said, her eyes as bright as stars. "And me Mum says thank you also."

Then she turned and called to her friend sitting a few stools down the bar. "Hey, Marge, this bloke's got a beaut phone if you'd like to talk to that daughter of yours in America." Daphne laughed a little unsteadily and said, to no one in particular, "I just talked to me Mum!"

The word spread fast through the rowdy crowd, and soon Keith was busy making the rounds of the bar, placing calls all over the world. Demand was so great that he had to limit them to three minutes each. Trevor had difficulty clearing the saloon at closing time; all his customers wanted to use that phone at least once before stepping back out into the vast, empty darkness.

