

By the track

I shiver in my sleeping bag.
There's dew on the grass,
and the faint silver of dawn,
but dark shadows hide the everyday
world outside my tent.

There's the first magpie call
then
Dad slams the back door,
the motorbike revs.
It's cow-milking time
and the sun is not even awake.

Dad yells 'Morning Toby' as he passes by
and I smell exhaust fumes, sharp, strong.
It's every morning, every evening,
milking our herd, 150 cows trekking
from paddock to milking shed,
then back out to a new, fresh, juicy
paddock for the day.

I unzip the tent,
peer outside.
I am camping on the grass
near the farm track,
on our farm, once Pa's farm,
and his father's before that.

I look around as if
I've just landed
on this tiny piece of rural
planet Earth. 'Deep Well Farm' –
that's how it's always been known.

Once families came from all around
in horse-and-drays to bucket
clean water.
That's one of Pa's farm stories,
'How our farm was named.'

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'All covered up before my time,' says Pa.
'But the original well is somewhere
in that little orchard
behind the house.
My father showed me
how to divine for water.
Maybe I could show you and Leah,'
Pa had said.

'Yes, yes,' we'd shouted
and even though Leah's
arms weren't strong,
we each had a forked twig
and held it just like Pa,
then walked up and down
the little row between the mulberry tree,
the peach tree, the apricot tree, the apple tree,
until Pa's twig moved and pointed down
like an arrow.
'Oh, that hurts my arm, all that water
energy. Perhaps, Toby, you should just have a go,
not you Leah, maybe when you're stronger ...'
And Leah's face had gone stormy,
so Pa had held her twig too
and walked with her
and the water energy had shaken
along her twig. 'You've inherited the skill, Leah.
You could be a water diviner,
but it's hard work. Although some people think
it's a joke.'

And we'd placed a big rock where the well once was.
'It would take a lot of digging out,
maybe if there's another
drought we could dig,' said Pa.
And we hadn't gone back to the old well
lately, not since Leah had to spend so much
time in hospital.
But Pa and I still talked
about our farm's namesake.
Maybe I will visit the site this morning,
have another go at water divining.

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Maybe.

I hear the first cows
coming up the track.
Whoosh of urine,
walking always makes the cows' bladders active,
the stop and start
of the motorbike,
Dad chasing those straggler cows,
the tearaway cow,
bringing them down to the cowshed.
Morning milking time.

Trigger comes
to look in the tent,
to sniff for crickets
or chocolate crumbs left
over from my midnight feast.

'Help me cook breakfast,' I say.
I light a fire at the tent's front,
a little fire dug into the ground,
kept safe by a ring of rocks.
Twigs flare,
I find the frying pan.

'A sausage for you, two for me.
An egg as well, Trigger?'
Trigger licks his doggy lips.
'Alright, an egg it is.'
Sizzle noises,
eggshell cracking noises,
then I put bread on
a toasting fork.

But I remember not long ago,
it wasn't just Trigger and me,
but Leah too. Mum and Dad as well,
all of us together, cooking,
sitting, laughing,
throwing twigs on the fire.

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We'd gone camping at One Tree Rock.
Just for one night; Pa milked the cows
the next morning so we could go camping.

'Family time for Leah,' Mum had said.
'We'll keep her warm, extra safe.'
And there was Leah toasting bread,
Leah melting the marshmallows
Leah making a song about
a campfire, about sparks and fairies
and eyes of coals and smoke
leaping into the morning light.
Mum and Dad laughed at her song,
telling her she was a born story maker ...
That was maybe five months ago, not long before
Leah died and Mum had held her close
and whispered about the baby to come ...

And I drop my bread,
my hand seems weak
remembering that camping time,
then I quickly pull the bread out of the ashes,
knock off tiny pieces of charcoal,
sticks and dust. I place it on the toasting
fork once more.

Machinery brrrs into life,
the rhythmical hiss and sigh
of milking machines.
The huge steel milk vat
purrs like a big stomached cat
ready for endless thick milk.

The day has officially begun
with the first set of milking cups
on the first cow
who is always the leader
and is always first.
Cows are bossier and love routine
even more than my friend Emmy.
And the very last cow is always last too.

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Now I explore this farm,
our family farm,
as if it's my first visit, like I'm a cousin
or a friend coming to our farm, learning,
seeing our family's treasures,
but I try to hide that it's really close
to the last time I will be able
to wander and remember how our farm
is right now.

Soon it will change
and another family will work things
out a different way, maybe pull down a building,
make a new laneway, build a new cow shed ...
I don't know, but it won't be the same, it will
be their farm, no longer ours.

I walk to touch each hand-planted tree:
red gum, sugar gum, Melaleuca,
bottlebrush, wattle. Mum grows all these trees
for farm shelter,
bird shelter,
ladder steps to the sky
for me.

Some trees hold my history:
my growing-up falls
my tree house skills.
I touch the scars left by my building
and climb my favourite
tree just for fun.

Now up high I look across
the flat farmscape,
try not to see or remember the huge
'For sale' sign hammered into the soil
near the fence of the paddock closest to the road,
and the bright red 'Sold' sign plastered
across it.

Mum and Dad had talked about selling,
about moving on, a fresh start, but I'd
said, 'No, no! What about Leah?'

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And I'd shouted and shouted and run
to the haystack. Trigger had come too.
And he'd licked all my tears until I couldn't
cry anymore.

Then after a week or two had gone by,
somehow I'd grown used to the idea.
A little bit.

Then Dad had talked to me, shown me
the rolled-up map he'd drawn as a boy.
How he'd marked important spots around the farm
with little sketches and coloured them in with pencils,
labelled them with names and hints of mysteries.

'Several generations of little stories,
yours now,' he'd said.
And I'd taken that map
and looked and looked, until I'd renamed it
'Leave Taking' and made my own version.

Leah would have liked that.
She liked all the places around the farm I liked.
I'd wanted Dad to tell her about the farm too
and Pa to tell her his stories. And they did,
often when she was in for a hospital stay;
the farm stories helped her to forget about her pain,
about her tiredness.
Leah would have made a great farmer.
She was gentle. Dad said Leah was good with calves,
with cows. Gentle is good for the milking shed.

I rub my eyes and look again
from up high
and see the silos
higher still than me,
the sheds are dotted
around: machinery,
calf sheds, storage sheds
welding, mechanical repairs sheds
bursting with it-might-come-
in-handly odds and ends
accumulated over many years.

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Yesterday, Dad began to sort
them into clearing sale lots.

Trigger is barking for me
to come down.
'Okay,' I say. 'We have to move camp
anyway.'

I have a plan to visit different
sites around the farm and camp
at each one before we shift.
It will be like a special goodbye tour,
my way, for Leah, for the farm
stories she didn't have time to hear.
I have my 'Leave Taking' map with me
and I can add new labels for Leah's and my
farm history.

I've seen a spot from my treetop
lookout. A concreted corner
of the machinery shed.
I want to find my initials that I
wrote in the wet cement three
years ago.

But first I throw the breakfast scraps
to the magpies, I know them.
They don't swoop me, generations
have been born and lived here:
that big sugar gum over there
is their home nest.

'Just in case I don't get
another chance,' I say,
'goodbye', then add
'fly well and thanks.'
The words my grandma used to say,
every time she shook the tablecloth
out the back door
and the crumbs were scattered.

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On the last word I toss the scraps
and the magpies squawk and pounce.

I pull out the tent pegs
and start the packing up. I move to
my new sleeping spot.

Trigger sniffs for mice.
'Chase them all out before
tonight,' I say.

Then I remember Dad and the cows,
look across to see the number
of cows left in the yard.
Last two lineups of cows, the backing gate
moving down slowly.
It's my cue.
I change my sneakers for
gumboots, walk to the shed.

My job is hosing down
the manure,
all green and thick
from the yarded cows.
It covers every speckle of concrete.

There's a system, a rhythm
and I power away the manure
in thick rivulets, directing
the flow towards the manure pit,
the manure pump on.

I had to show Leah how
to fire the hose so it sweeps
away the manure.
The hose was almost too thick
and heavy for Leah to hold. Even though
she was two years younger than me,
she wanted to share the jobs.
She was determined to do it.

Dad waves to me

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from the pit of the milking shed.
It's too noisy to talk.
We wave and smile.
Co-cow workers.

Once the yard is clean
and the hose rolled up,
I head back to my new
camping spot.

I want to look for my initials
and see if Leah's are there too.
When the concrete was poured,
Leah had just begun to write letters.
She said, 'Wet cement and a stick
are like writing on the beach in the sand.'
Even though we'd only ever had one seaside
holiday, she remembered.
Leah made thick furry letters
and she had tried hard.

I search in the corner,
scratch at the dust with my boots.
Yes, like a little sandwich triangle
of concrete, crusty,
but there are my initials
and nearby Leah's initials
and a half-moon shape
as a smile.

I squat down and move my fingers
across Leah's initials, then jump up
quickly because Trigger is still sniffing,
whining at some
stacked hessian bags.

Snake, I think, snake
hunting for mice.

I run back to the cowshed.
Dad is just switching off
the machines, he's ready

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to head back home for
breakfast.

'Snake,' I blubber out.

'Snake, in the machinery shed,
Trigger's there.'

'Get Trigger out,' orders Dad.

I remember one of our cats
getting a snake bite; I don't want
Trigger to die. I want to take
him to our new place, part of
my old life coming with me to the
new.

I call then, pull Trigger away,
my knees are shaky.
We run from the shed
just as Dad runs in.
Lucky the machinery shed is close
to the milking shed.
I hear Dad grunting,
pulling the bags back,
scraping, his boots scratching
and rasping on concrete.

Then silence.

'Dad, are you alright?

Dad?'

Dad reappears.

'Yes son, it was a brown snake,
fat from all the mice.

Those bags have got to go,
we'll put them on the bonfire
after breakfast.'

I remember Dad's dog White Tail.
He'd chase the cows home, follow Dad everywhere,
not let anyone else pat him. Just Dad
and occasionally Mum.
Then one night when Dad was out
switching the irrigation channel to flow water down

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another bay, White Tail was bitten by a tiger snake.

And White Tail died, even though
we'd taken him to a vet an hour away.
And Dad cried.
First time we'd seen him cry, Leah and me.
But since then I've seen Dad cry a lot.
Even when he doesn't mean to cry,
he does.
So do I.

'Are you camping in here tonight?'
Dad is looking at my tent,
my sleeping bag, my cooking gear
and nodding.

'Yes,' I feel my eyes begin to prickle.
I don't want to tell him that I'm following his map,
have made a map of my own.
I'm not really sure why I'm doing it, but it feels right,
and I have to do this before we leave for good
in less than a week. But Dad seems to know
what I'm thinking, why I'm doing it
even though I can't explain.

'Okay, that's fine son, just keep Trigger
with you, I'm sure we won't see
that brown snake again.'

Dad heads to the house
and I walk to the bonfire.
So many gardening scraps, bits of old
boxes, paper, anything that will burn,
to clean up the farm
ready for the new owners.

I helped Mum, a few days ago,
to sort through Leah's drawings,
she had so many.
'We can't keep everything,' Mum explained
and she'd smothered a sob.

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So together we chose a little history of Leah's life,
from her first preschool drawing
right through to the last, when even her fingers
wouldn't hold a pencil properly.
The rest we placed in a big cardboard box
and made sure it was in the heart of the bonfire.

The tractor is parked nearby
with the front end loader attached.
Dad has pushed up the rubbish,
making the bonfire higher,
more compact.

I'll help him later
with the hessian bags.

But now, I want to go
to the hayshed, remember
the times we made cubbies,
tunnels, our own private castles.

I wonder if the cubby Leah made
is still there or if the rain and winter
have knocked it away, or maybe Dad took
the bales to feed the cows, I don't know
but I'll check.

Trigger comes and nuzzles my hand.
Funny how my dog knows when I feel
sad.

Then I open the hayshed paddock gate.
Close it again. I remember once Leah
left the gate open and all the cows raced in
and ran round and round the hayshed
all night long. Rubbing, knocking and nibbling,
snatching at hay in wild mouthfuls,
pooing everywhere and running in
an unstoppable flow of legs, swishing tails
and belching moos.

It was both funny and sad.

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Dad was angry and Leah
was sorry.
My sister ...
I brush the words away,
look at the old bales of hay
thrown on the ground,
too mouldy for the cows to eat.
Cows are fussy eaters,
or they might get sick.

This haystack area
is used to nurse a sick animal,
like a calf, or a cow, back to health.
Hard work.
I remember one time, one special calf.
I'd bring a bucket
of warm milk, a tube and rubber teat.
Try so hard to get it to drink,
rub its legs, make it stand
but after a while it died.
I cried
so much.
'You tried hard son,'
Dad had said, 'but the calf needed to be
able to stand for longer, to drink more milk.
A sick calf takes a lot of attention and care.'
And Dad had ruffled my hair.

Farms are for new life
and new death.
We know.

Trigger is bounding up the bales,
they are wide, thick steps
but tricky steps.
A bale could be soft, broken
and Trigger could fall down to the next layer.

Trigger is always full of energy;
brown kelpies are like that. He loves
chasing, running, exploring.
All these things he can do all day

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if he wants to,
on a farm.

He's sniffing again.
How many mice live
on this farm I wonder?

I follow, I want to see over
the farm, the land is flat.
Trigger sits with me,
wanting me to scratch his ears.

I remember Leah climbing
these hay bales, looking for the right layer
to change and switch the small bales
until they made a house shape.
'Don't move too many bales,'
Dad had warned, 'they could cave in,
smother you.'
So Leah had climbed back down
to the bottom two layers
and I'd helped push, shove,
pull those bales to where Leah directed.

Jaxon had been over that day
and we'd each had a little room
and played pirates racing from
top to bottom of the hay bales.

Our arms and legs were scratchy afterwards
and Leah's little arms had been bleeding
so Mum had quietly said, 'No more moving
the bales, Leah, take a rug for your house
next time.' But there had been no next
time for Leah and our cubby
had been knocked down
by the front end loader, by the weather.
Luckily Leah had taken a photo that day
of our cubby and each time I see the photo
it makes me smile.

Trigger nudges me,

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I see a wedge-tailed eagle
soaring up above,
maybe it sees mice too,
or a hare.

I hear Dad's motorbike rev again,
he's out to check on the cows,
see if they got to the day paddock
all right.

Then I see a small spiral cloud
coming down
the dirt road beside our farm.
A ute passing,
dust tracking its
progress like a light flashing.

The blue wrens dart for insects
several bales away.
I am quiet,
steady, watching.

The wind makes little scurries
in the loose straw
right down below
at the base of the haystack
and I sigh.
I don't understand how we can leave
this farm. I don't.
But I'm trying.
Funny, suddenly there are lots
of things I don't understand.
At least here, leaning on the highest hay bales
with Trigger, looking, feeling
the softness of summers past,
imagining Leah with me,
I can try.

The blue wrens dart
away.
Trigger looks at me with mournful eyes.
Does Trigger know we are leaving too?

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'Come on back to the machinery shed,
we've got some sorting to do,' I tell him.