

SPECIAL FOREVER - INTRODUCTION

As I sit in my office here in the inner city preparing to write the introduction to this wonderful book ...

What do I *hear*?

I hear planes flying overhead, and cars braking to a shuddering halt. Somewhere nearby is a dog. It's letting me know that it has been left alone for the day, again. While in my tree outside my window one bird is calling, but by the time I type these words it has stopped. And voices are mumbling and screeching and making inaudible sounds.

And what do I *see* outside my window?

I see the brick fence that marks the boundary; the waving tree and the bird that I know is there but cannot see. I see the black road and then more houses, with more trees, footpaths, and communication lines that I know are spaghetti-ing down the road.

And what do I *smell*?

I smell the city air, the lunch that someone has cooked way too long, the car that accelerated way too fast, the smell of garden soil freshly turned and worked over. I smell the rain that is coming but I know that it won't last long.

And then I remembered my days away from the city out west way past the reach of the seas and the mountains and the hills. What do I remember?

I remember:

The first journey on that road, the straight road, dark, hot, black, straight road that meandered on and on so that I was sure it would never end, and driving that road for hours and hours. Winding up windows because along that road were carcasses littering the roadside. They had been there for ages and were cooking under the boiling sun (my neighbours cooking reminds me). Signs that I couldn't read, punctured with gun shot holes, and wondering how many shots missed their mark. And counting trees as they puncture the flatness alongside the roads. There was nothing else to do. Or counting the bends in the road and the number in between each turn, this I remember well. There were only 14 before the levee bank appeared, where it all begins and

ends. I wished, as the sun fell below the horizon that time would hit midnight.

I remember:

Other roads, straight roads, red dusty straight roads with table drains and soft sides or the hard packed stony deck squashed by the heavy-laden transporters rumbling on and on and on from one town to the next.

And flat tyres, I remember those well, especially when I had more tyres flat than I had spares. I was driving. Suddenly I was spinning and then I was facing the way I had just come. And now I was waiting for help, help from anyone who would travel this road with me, but the only travellers that came were the goanna and the snake – not much help. They couldn't get me home or even sit to wait with me. Alone. I listened and heard the wind whistling above the surface. The whistle became a roar as the sun sank with ever increasing speed. Still alone. All alone. But it was calm, and cool, and friendly and quiet and there were whispers coming from the ground and the trees.

And the trees that I sat beneath to think on this flat land. The trees were cooling. The trees were comforting. The trees were whispering but I could not understand what they were saying, but if I closed my eyes I could imagine that those trees were singing and I felt not alone.

I remember

The clouds of dust that came ever closer accompanied by the roar of trucks and then lingered and drifted and hung in the still air, long after the machines had left their mark. Or the clouds of dust suddenly whipped up by the wind that made us seek shelter and squeeze tight shut our eyes. That red dust found every opening and drifted inside. That gave the word *dusting* a whole new meaning. The smell of the dust. The marking of the dust. The feel of the dust as it irritated the skin. A closed door was no barrier for every closed door must eventually be opened and then it would come.

I remember:

The nights, star lit, deep and dark sparkling nights. I had never seen so many lights. Surely there were never that many stars piercing through the sky. It was so black it was blue. And I could smell the night air and the newly turned earth from someone's hard work during the day. It was fresh. It tickled the nose hairs. It was moist. And somewhere in that sky were rockets and satellites all flying overhead, somewhere, so small, up there, between those lights. A comet streaked by, they all said that it did and we waited for hours

in the night watching the skies move and glisten and sparkle. Even though we had the best, unpolluted view, I don't remember seeing that comet. I am amazed by the glorious, the smallness of me and the bigness of out there.

And I remember:

Whistling winds

Cold nights

Hot days

Searing nights

Freezing days

Dust

Dirt

Flat land

Small hills

Birds and lizards and snakes

Rivers rising

Rivers falling

And then ...

A teasing drop of rain.

And more rain that quenched the thirst, washed dusty, dirty bodies which were covered, but only just, and that rain caused us to sing and shout and clap and be so very thankful for the rain.

... and then

Rain and

Rain, and

Rain ...

Will it ever end? So much rain turning dusty red bowls into a thick red paste. It oozed between our toes, smeared on the clothes, traipsed through the house (dogs can't remove their shoes at the door). It stole our shoes.

I remember:

People calling "hey you", no name, just calling, "hey you" to me. Just stopping. Friendly people, just talking. I don't know you but still they want to talk and tell me where to go, and what to see, and where to eat, and what to do. And the stories they told of years long gone before we were here. And the laughter, I remember the laughter sooooo well. She had a deep, low down in the belly laugh with a *whoops* to finish. And she wobbled and danced when she laughed. Her laugh made us all laugh too.

I remember:

Schools of hundreds and a school of 7 where we all went home for lunch and a rest and sometimes, we all came back. But not always.

And the air conditioner in that room that rattled and made so much noise that it was better to sit in the box and sweat rather than have our bones shaken all afternoon. On those afternoons we sat under the trees for lessons, learning and dreaming at the same time. The insects were buzzing, licking and sucking the liquid covering the skin. After a while we let them suck and lick. It was better than having our bones shaken apart.

And the bell we rang was an old tractor rim hung from the veranda beam. It was heavy and rusted and when it was struck the whole town heard. It had been the bell since the early days they told me. Clocks were set by that old school bell. We could never be late.

And races in the schoolyard, they were common with all kids running as one, from one side of the paddock to the other, around the incinerator, past the pens, through the aged tree trunk, next to the memorial for those who died on killing fields in distant lands, over the path where the snake was once seen and back to the classroom steps. Somehow the youngest ones always won, the bigger kids were always disappointed at losing and said that tomorrow they would do much better. But we knew they never would.

And talking, those children always had something to talk about. Stop, take a breath, slow down but still they kept on talking with barely a pause, until they saw my city.

And I see those smiles, the kids of that school they could smile from ear to ear and usually, they did.

o-o-o-o-o-o

The bird outside my window is calling once again and the voices I hear tell me that school for another day is over. I know there is more to remember, a lot more, but that is for another day. I still can see those glowing smiles from ear to ear, a wonderful ending, for this beginning.

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