

After the Rains

By Kerry Ashwin

With a bosom that stretched beyond the imagination and a wild tangle of grey hair, Horsey gave the instant impression that she was not one to be taken lightly.

Her whole demeanor was one of no nonsense and the men on the farm knew her word was law. The seasons came and went on Twin Pine Acre and Horsey just kept the place going. The name Twin Pine Acre was a misnomer as it wasn't an acre nor did it have any pine trees, but the name stuck after some English pom won it in a poker match and feeling home sick, renamed the place. The family history recalls Great Great Uncle Herbert won it back, but the name remained. Horsey was another anomaly as she was baptized Charlotte, Ephemea Jacobson but because of her infectiously horse like laugh the name stuck much like the whip marks from her father, just after her 13 birthday. All that seemed a lifetime ago to Horsey. Hers was supposed to be a better life, her mother would say. The women, the homily went, were to pave the way for better things to come. Horsey believed it too, until both her brothers were killed in the Vietnam war and it was left to her to pick up her parents and Twin Pine when it fell into neglect from their depression at the loss. They stopped caring about things and horsey stopped caring about herself.

Horsey's parents Herb and Effie went through the motions of living. The farm survived the drought, the flood and the tax man, but the land wasn't nurtured. It wasn't cared for, and in the end it became a private battle ground between Herb and Twin Pine. It demanded attention and Herb refused all of its advances. Horsey watched the rage, slowly turn to hate, and that hate was metered out on the one surviving sibling.

Her mother and father quietly retired from life and eventually gave up when Horsey was just twenty one. It wasn't the coming of age she had imagined, and the local papers played up the suicide as if it was the only thing that happened on the peninsula. Horsey forgot to laugh for a long time after.

A legacy can be a curse as well as a blessing and Horsey threw herself into the latter with a determination that became almost legendary on the land. Twin Pine responded to her devotion and grew. The farm hands worked like dogs for Horsey. They respected her and treated her like one of their own. She dressed in men's trousers and no matter what the weather, an old flannelette shirt. If it was hot the sleeves were rolled up, if it was cold, then there would be 2 shirts. Horsey only demanded that the help work as hard as she did, and no more.

But in the quiet of the evening she would sit on the verandah after a hard day and reflect on her life.

The radio might lull her into the world outside Twin Pine. The people, the places and the possibilities, and Horsey would promise herself. Promise that, after the rains she would take that trip. Go to Sydney, see the bridge, do the sites. It all seemed a possibility until life and the broken tractor, the blocked bore, the trampled fence intruded. After the rains, she would say, after the rains.

The homestead was a ramshackle collection of add-ons and with no-one to impress Horsey lived a frugal life. Her needs were few and her wants almost nonexistent. The kitchen was the one room that had a lived in feel with the wood stove secretly keeping its embers alive, waiting for the next malley root from the wood pile. A kettle sissled on the edge and the one brass poker was shiny with use. It was here next to the fire that Horsey finally wept on her fourty ninth birthday.

She wept for herself for the first time.

Dragging a tea towel from the oven rail Horsey blew her nose and cursed.

“Bloody dam fire, and bloody dam smoke” She blew her nose again to dispel her fear of weakness and viciously poked the fire.

It responded and threw up a shower of sparks some landing on the rag rug that lay next to the kindling bucket. Seeing the embers catch the mat Horsey began to stomp them out swearing, and beating the rug as if it was the cause of her tears. When the last ember died she flopped back in her chair and laughed. Not the laugh that the men might hear after a dirty joke, but a real laugh, as if she was 10 years old and had just been caught by her brother Rob in a game of chasey around the house. It was the laugh of a release of innocence. The laugh of a new beginning.

“Right you ol’bitch,” she said, “Get crackin’” She flung herself into action. Turing up the radio and singing along to the country hour she ransacked the spare parlour and found an old bag.

Then lugging her prize into the bedroom she flicked the latches and opened the suitcase. It was full of old knitting patterns and paper Vogue dress designs that might have been fashionable in 1942. Wasting no time Horsey up ended the case and threw the memories onto the floor, then grabbing a few shirts and a pair of trousers she packed. Her wardrobe was sparse, but right at the back there was a cardigan. Her mother had knitted it all those years ago. It hung there like some sort of evil reminder of the past. “Why didn’t you chucked it out years ago?” she asked herself. She held it up to herself in front of the mirror and instantly saw her mother. The eyes, the hair, the lines on her weather beaten face.

“Cat’s arse mouth” she said to the reflection, pinching her lips into a small doughnut. He mother had had that very same expression. The cardigan was hastily thrown next to the pile of rubbish on the floor,

and she once again turned her attention to the wardrobe. Her father's blazer hung under a raincoat and she brought it out to the glare of the light after thirty odd years in the dark. She had conquered her particular demons about her father long ago after a vicious beating, and now she tried on the jacket. It fitted well enough and she turned to study herself in the mirror.

"Not bad, not bad at all." She said feeling in the pockets. Deep in the lining her fingers felt a stub. It was a cigarette stub. It smelt of her father after all these years.

"Bastard" she cursed his memory and the stub went to the floor.

She folded the jacket into the suitcase and as Slim Dusty played, Horsey packed.

"Jeez, this has seen better days," she pulled at the disintegrating sponge bag which had stuck to the bottom shelf of the bathroom vanity. It came away in small plastic flakes and all that remained was a green cake of very old parmolive soap. There was an old biscuit tin in the pantry and she grabbed that for her toothbrush and things, wiping out the stale scotch biscuit crumbs with a tea towel.

When the bag was done she stood back and smiled.

"This is it ol'girl." Pulling the lid down she saw the cardigan on the floor.

"Ah, what the hell" and grabbed it stuffing it in the case, then thumbed the latches shut.

"Well what ya waiting for?" Horsey stood at the back door, listening to the crickets in the early evening. Their chirrups seemed to taunt her decision, telling her she wouldn't do it.

"The hell I won't" she said to the night and lugging her bag made her way to the ute. Ever since her parents had left her, Horsey had talked to herself. Decisions made over a cup of tea and a chat had kept her sane. The farm hands knew she muttered to herself and her stock answer was that was you always get an intelligent answer. She might joke with the lads, and banter with then, but she and they knew the boundaries. She was the boss and they were the hired help, and the kitchen was her preserve.

"No use feeling sorry for yourself ol'girl, you got work to do" and it was work that saved her. Maybe once or twice she'd wish for someone to share the kitchen, but the wisecracking about men and their uselessness staved off any real feelings from poking their ugly head through the cracks.

Inside the ute she looked at the house and the outers as the other buildings were called. They had seen it all. The hope, the promises, the disappointments and the death. Now they would be witness to ...Horsey turned on the headlights startling a kangaroo. Witness to her escape. She turned the key.

"I'll ring Joe when I get to town. He can look after the place for a bit." Saying the words made it feel more real.

As the ute crunched over the gravel drive and then hit the dirt track to the first gate, Horsey cranked up the radio to Johnny Cash. She had travelled this rutted track many times and yet tonight it felt like the first time. Because now she was going somewhere.

After the third gate she would hit the tarmac in 20 minutes and the highway to freedom. As she shut the gate and climbed back in the ute the announcer said the weather would be fine for the rest of the week and no rain in sight.

“Rain,” Horsey laughed until her sides ached. “No rain in sight” she reiterated the forecast.

Twin Pine’s access road ended and Horsey stopped at the black metal road. She hesitated, then flicking the blinker, turned right and headed for Langton Plains and the bright lights of the rest of the world.

Langton Plains, named after Pop Langton and his mechanical thresher stood in the middle of nowhere. It boasted a post office, a pub and an agricultural co-op store. There were a few incidental stores like a hairdressers, department store and a new supermarket precinct, but the town thrived on the big three.

Her headlights hit the sign which had a few bullet holes in it and the ‘n’ missing naming it La gton. Street lights flared on her dirty windscreen as she cruised the main drag and slowed to sixty kilometers an hour. At this hour the pub was the hub of activity and Horsey pulled up in the car park and cut the engine. She sat in the car looking at the lights advertising XXXX beer and underneath a sporadic purple neon saying vacancy.

“Don’t stop now Horsey.” She watched the sign trying to stay lit.

“Jeez woman, it’s only the pub, you can do it. Stewth, it’s only the God dam pub.”

Slowly she opened the door and walked to reception.

“Hello Horsey, what you doin’ in town?” Raylene Pilkington lolled on the counter twiddling a pencil between her teeth.

“I’m just here alright Raylene. No big deal.”

“Alright keep ya shirt on, just asking.” Raylene stood up and smoothed her blouse over her breasts.

“Do ya want a room or ya gonna stand there all night?”

“A room.”

Raylene twisted the sign in book over to Horsey and pointed with vivid red nails to the next free line.

“Sign in please and your room will be B3” she said with a practiced air, reaching for a key on the peg

board.

Horsey took the key with an enormous wooden circle attached indicating B3 and followed Raylene.

"This lino's seen better days," Horsey said with a laugh.

"Watcha expect for the price. The bloody ritz. Anyway wherez ya bag?"

"In the ute, I'll get it later"

"Suit ya self" Raylene said as she pointed to the door with a hand painted B3 on the middle panel.

"Ya get breakfast. It's at seven sharp, mum don't wait for stragglers. OK?"

"Fine."

Raylene left, strolling back down the corridor and Horsey opened the door. The room had a bed with a pink candlewick bedspread and a dressing table that had seen better days. She closed the door behind her and took a deep breath, then fell onto the springy bed and laughed.

"That wasn't so hard was it" she said.

After retrieving her suitcase she sat on the end of the bed and listened to the noises of the pub. The music thumped through the walls and every once in a while a poker machine would chime with a win.

"Go on," she goaded, "have a drink, it won't kill ya."

Pulling her shirt straight and running her fingers through her hair she took the key ring and ventured to the front bar. She got as far as her door, then turned back and grabbed the cardigan. Whipping off her flannelette she buttoned up the blue knit and looked in the mirror.

"Still a cat's arse" she pursed her lips and laughed.

It was busy at the bar, the regulars sat on the four stools, the rest of the customers standing in groups of two and three watching the tele. Horsey walked up to the bar and ordered a schooner of XXXX.

Glen the barman, smiled and in a lilting Scottish accent turned on the charm. He was a backpacker making his way around Australia he said over the schooner and loving it.

"Horsey we don't see you in town very often, what cha doin'?" Narelle the barmaid asked, as she tipped the slops into a bucket.

"Just in town that's all" Horsey said pulling at the cardigan.

"You live around here then?" a man to Horsey's left joined the conversation.

"Sort of," she replied turning to the interloper.

"Sort of, now that's an Australianism if ever there was one."

He had an American accent that was smooth and easy listening. He smiled and held out his hand,

“Gilbert Baxter, Souter Agricultural”

“Souter? Aren’t they the tractor people?”

“Well some say so. We are world wide. And you are...?”

“Hor...” Horsey stopped. She corrected herself and continued, “Charlotte. Charlotte Jacobson” she smiled.

“Well nice to meet you Charlotte, and may I say you look quite nice in that shade of blue.”

Horsey blushed and Narelle turned away, smirking behind her tea towel.

Over the next few hours Horsey and Gilbert talked. They talked about the weather, the crop, the tractors, the state of the market, the price of fence wire and everything but themselves. Narelle watched the pair struggling and took a hand. She was known around town for her expertise in matters of the heart and in her estimation if any two people needed each other it was Gilbert and Horsey.

“You know,” she said to Gilbert when Horsey had gone to the ladies, “Horsey runs a farm out west”

“Horsey?”

“Oh yeah, everyone calls her Horsey, can’t say why, before my time, but there you go. Anyway as I was saying, she runs Twin Pines all by herself. Has done for years. Knows a thing or two about the land.”

“Is that right?”

“Too right mate, she’s the fill quid our Horsey. Real smart.”

Horsey came back to the conversation and Gilbert smiled.

“It seems you have somewhat of a reputation as a land owner Charlotte. I hear good things about you”

“Really, what good things?”

And they talked. They found they had more than the price of diesel in common. They were both forty nine and lost their parents. Gilbert had taken care of his, and the farm and then his father had left him a small holding which had prospered, but he found he needed more. He took the first step and left.

“The bar is closing in ten minutes, last orders.” Narelle yelled above the din.

“One for the road Charlotte?”

“Why not?”

They drank a whisky and then Gilbert asked for the bottle.

“Come on Charlotte, lets go somewhere...maybe the balcony,”

“you mean the verandah”

“Yeah, the verandah.”

“Not out there,” Narella interrupted, “We got no chairs on account of the painters.”

“My room perhaps?” Gilbert said holding up his own enormous key ring, B4.

Horsey looked to Narella, then caught her reflection in the mirror.

“Why not ?” she said with a smile and followed.

Gilberts room looked much like Horsey’s except the bedspread was a pukey shade of lime green and had an alarm clock.

“All mod cons I see,” she pointed at the clock. “I didn’t get one of those” and they laughed plopping themselves down on the end of the bed. “This will give you a back ache in no time,” Horsey said patting the bed which had as much give as a plank on wood. “I get a back ache sometimes,” she pointed to her upper back, “just here.”

Gil put down his drink and leaned over , “May I?” he massaged the spot and Horsey closed her eyes, relaxing at his gentle touch.

“Oh yes, just there,” she cooed, as her head lolled to one side.

Gil expertly soothed the knot in her back and then his hands moved up to her neck and he turned her face and kissed her forehead.

“I...”

“Don’t talk,” he put his finger to her lips. He smiled as she closed her eyes again and he kissed them. Then cupping her face in his hands he sort her lips. Horsey took a moment to react, then kissed him.

“Gil, I...”

“What?”

“I...” Horsey looked into his eyes, searching for understanding.

Gil tenderly took the pins from Charlottes hair and it cascaded down her back. Charlotte smiled and let herself be carried along watching his eyes, knowing this was more than just beer and whiskey.

With loving hands Gil laid her down on the bed and kissed her neck then moved to her cardigan and slipped it off her shoulders planting affectionate kisses on each breast. Charlotte undid the buttons on the cardigan and then Gil took her bra. She covered herself with her forearm, embarrassed.

“Gil, I...” she stammered, “I haven’t ..”

Gil smiled and standing up, helped Charlotte off the bed, then threw the covers back. He took her

arms and wrapped them around himself and kissed her as they sat back down on the sheets.

“It’s ok, really.” He took off his shirt and trousers and began to undo her belt.

“Here, let me,” Charlotte kicked off her boots and flicked her jeans from her legs. And they fell into bed, Gil covering them with the sheets. He pulled her close and she shivered.

“Are you cold?”

“No, just..., no not cold.” She closed her eyes and smiled, as he pulled her into a deep embrace, his hands moving over her body, exciting her senses. Charlotte responded by giving herself up to the night. Thought and emotions whirled around in her mind as she felt like a whole woman, for the first time. Gil knew this was special, knew he was in a privileged position, and he too knew this was more than a night at the Sovereign Hotel. The rapture, the bliss that B4 experienced that night was different than the hundreds of occupants that had rutted, made love, and bonked in that room. To Charlotte and Gil it was the only real thing they had experienced in a long time.

They talked endlessly through the night. Talked about hopes, desires and disappointments and they talked of the future, until sleep embraced their weary bodies and they dreamed.

Raylene knocked on B3 several times then gave up. B4 gave the same response and she cursed the “bloody guests” and went back to the kitchen.

Charlotte propped herself up on one elbow to look at the clock. 7:25. She flopped back down and looked at Gil. He was sleeping with his mouth slightly open and a stubble of grey hair had appeared on his chin in the night. Charlotte studied his face. He had deep creases at each corner of his mouth and a furrowed brow, probably from squinting she thought. Gingerly she traced his eye brows with her finger, and he woke up.

“Hi there.”

“Hi”

They lay still staring at each other, comfortable in their shared memories.

“Thanks Gil”

He smiled and kissed her nose. “No problem. Come here Charlotte, I want to tell you something.”

She snuggled into his shoulder, their legs intertwining under the covers.

“What?”

“I don’t want to loose you. I just found you, and...”

“Me neither.” She held on tight to him.

“Look, If you want breakfast, then Mum says she will only wait another five bloody minutes” Raylene yelled at doors B4 and B3.

Gil looked at the clock, “We’d better get a move on, or Mum will be all fired up. What da ya say?”

“Ok,”

The entered the ladies lounge, sitting at the only table, set for two. Charlotte eyes the place mats and raised her eyebrow at Gil. He smiled.

“Come on sit down. Mum hasn’t got all day ya know. Tea or coffee?”

“Er. Coffee for me.” Gil said.

“Me too.” Charlotte added.

“Right, two coffees and two breakfasts,” Raylene wrote the order on a pad, as if the place was packed and she might forget by the time she got to the kitchen. Charlotte kicked Gil under the table and they laughed.

When Raylene arrived with plates of bacon and eggs, toast and sausages, she had a wry smile on her face. She smirked at Charlotte, and then bit her bottom lip, before scurrying away.

Gil looked at Charlotte and rolled his eyes to the receding figure, “Small town.” Charlotte nodded.

Later at reception, Raylene studied the bookings, Gil and Charlotte standing to attention on the other side of the counter. “Well,” she smiled. I guess you only had one room, so that’s just \$10.”

“Right.” Gil said handing over a \$10 note.

“Fine weather all week and no sign of rain” the radio announced. Horsey laughed.

“No sign of rain, he said. No sign of rain!” and they laughed, as if it was raining, after a long drought.

© 2011 Kerry Ashwin