

## The Drover's De Facto

(a short fiction inspired by the iconic 19th century Australian tale, *The Drover's Wife*, by Henry Lawson, coupled with my own 'reading' of the vast western Queensland landscape of the mid- to late-20th century, its spirit of place as much as the characters drawn to it like moths to a flame)



It was a wood stove she hated most of all. That and the whispers at Woolies. There she goes. No, not 'er, Maggie. *Her*. Yeah, that's the one, livin' with him. And him away so much an' all. Wouldn't be surprised if she's runnin' a – well, you know – in that old house.

It was old but it was the one thing in her life she really liked. That old cottage, only tiny, mind, but large enough for the two of them and that little kitten he'd bought her to stave off loneliness.

And the verandah, wide and breeze-catching. She'd sit out there and study while they whispered and walked by and watched.

She did it for a lark more than anything else.

At one of those singles bars where you can choose your meat, she met him – big, bold, brash, and a man. She was sick of all those emaciated city boys with their thin bodies and thin ties. Here was one with real shoulders, not padded shirts, and the kind of face that clung to honesty like a life-support. No sly half-smiles like the city boys who tried to impinge on a girl's right to be sought after. The new sex deal not for her. Still wanted to be wooed and bought expensive drinks.

She left with him.

He took her to a classy hotel in his big Mack truck. Called ahead on the CB to reserve the honeymoon suite while she giggled like a schoolgirl, twenty-five with a degree. He told her of his wife, the girl he'd gone through country high school with, fondles and cigarette butts behind the lavs and a marriage because of a bloody bun in the oven.

He asked her to live with him straight away. Not much to offer, he conceded, and he'd be away quite a lot because of the droving, but the house was cosy, in town and all, and it shouldn't be too lonely once she got to know some folks.

The romance of the bush overtook her sensibilities. Paterson and Lawson combined to urge her toward a life for which she was uneducated and unprepared.

But – that's OK, she said, I'll work on my Masters. Yeah, he said, something to do, I guess.

Something to do, she mused as a wayward gust of wind swung under the awning to tug at her papers. Something to do as she watched the occasional car pass or heard the occasional road freight train down on the highway. And she chewed her pen end into a pulp just for something to do.

She'd looked at the old wood stove with a feeling mixing trepidation with revulsion. He'd just laughed. You'll get used to it, he said. You'll have to if you want hot showers and hot food. She felt sick.

She remembered a time camping with friends when it rained for a week. Fears of not being able to cook brought a man from a nearby site to the rescue with a tried and true method for roaring fires in pouring rain. They'd revered him like God after that and he drank most of their beer accordingly.

A real bushie, she thought wryly as he explained the more intricate workings of the temperamental stove. She considered herself fortunate that electric light had preceded her coming.

She stoked the thing hourly and when he said he'd be gone for a while, it was up to her to chop the wood. Her lilywhite hands turned to red blisters and open sores while neighbours whispered and watched and smirked.

He was away so much, he was away so much.

She felt like a half-caste, a fringe dweller between suburbia and ten acres. It wasn't like in the books and that made her sad. Prying noses, none of the anonymity of her former existence, but all the pioneer spirit. I can't even make a mistake without the whole of town knowing about it, she found herself saying to him. He would only stare blankly at her anger and frustration and ask for a cold one out of the fridge.

Spent, like loose change in a lolly machine, she was tired of her incompetence and the disapproving non-association of those on their side of the fence.

He was away so much, he was away so much.

At first she used to be waiting eagerly out front for him to steamroll in in that huge machine, parking it with a wince and a groan on the spare allotment beside their thirty-two perches. She'd run out like she'd seen Scarlett O'Hara do, to be whisked from the ground in a mad and passionate fling. But he'd just pat her behind and say not 'ere, love, some o' me mates might be watchin', with his eyes dully flicking round to the neighbours' windows.

Then he'd ask about dinner and would sit and drink stubbies until he'd lost his appetite while she laboured and stoked and it hissed and spat back at her. Havin' a bit o' trouble are ya, he'd call and take another gulp of his amber bubbles.

Her hands would be black with soot by the time the meal, or what could loosely pass for one, was prepared. And with expectant love, she'd watch him eat first like a devoted lioness, hoping for the gratitude that never came between slurps and gulps and munches and mutterings for more, more.

Coarsely, she thought. And then he'd be gone, to snore in front of the ABC news while she forced down cold steak and rock-hard veges and salty teary tea.

But that was only on short hauls.

Sometimes it was 3am before she heard the truck pull up outside, finally home from taking four decks to Brisbane.

She never drove with him because of the nauseous smell of sweating beasts behind the cabin. And the pain they have to tolerate if one slips on a curve, she quizzed him on occasion. Pack 'em in too tight for that, love. Yes, so each one lives in the other's excrement. Charming. It's money, love, and that's food in yer mouth.

She recalled that run of truckie movies with disgust.

And he'd arrive home at whatever time it was and want to lay her. At first she thought it romantic until it came to the physical torture of no foreplay and no satisfaction ever, for her, enduring half an hour at a time. Like a hulking ape, he'd groan and grunt, twist and push with no knowledge of the shapely log beneath him. She'd go limp in his arms and if it was dark, she'd cry. Whimpering that he took for signs of ecstasy.

Then he'd finish with a thrust and a florid expending of air from his lungs. Roll over and lie there, alone and apart. Soon, he would lift his head and say I'm hungry, how would ya like ta cook somethin' for me, love? And when it was ready, he'd be wheezing out loud in that sleep of the unconcerned and uncaring.

And neighbours would waken at 5am before he was due to leave, droving his crates of cattle to the coast, a girl's brown head bobbing over steak and eggs in an uncurtained kitchen.

And they'd say, she'll run 'erself into the ground fer 'im.

And he'd tell his mates in the pub on a Friday night, yeah a good lay an' not a bad cook. A man can live with that pretty well, ya know. He was pleased she didn't often leave the house, because she was still quite attractive and well, you know. I guess a woman hangs out fer it sometimes too when she's been off it a while, just like I gets when I'm in the city waitin' on a load back. Them ones at Lu-Lu's are nice'n'clean. Getting' to be like them sailors, one in every port, they jibed him. He grinned, hope I get the Sydney run next. Winked wickedly at the barmaid while his mates laughed with that raw raucous humour of the mentally inept.

But she never used to drink much. Until later, when spates of depression hung over her like rainclouds. She was always damp with the continual degradation so she drank to dry off.

Whenever he brought home a dozen cans she'd hide four while he drank himself toward oblivion. Then he'd send her out for more and she'd get extra with the money and keep him drinking while she fed him the line about prices going up because of the wage rise. Then, when he was away, she'd sit and drink and kick the cat. Becoming agoraphobic, and undisciplined when it came to her thesis and they were writing angry letters about her failure to comply with university regulations. She used them to stoke the fire.

He came home one night and found her on the lounge with empty and half-empty cans scatted all over the floor. Himself personified.

There was shock in his eyes. Get up offa there and get me m' tea, he said, pointing directions to her glazed eyes.

Tonka toy, Tonka toy, she taunted.

What? his anger rising.

Yeah, what – what *is* that thing out there? Nothin' but an oversized Tonka toy, she said.

He stood for a moment dully. You talkin' about me truck?

Her laughter was uncontrollable and gulping. Your truck, your truck – it's like saying your dick, your dick. Gives you a potency, huh? Bigger *is* better but you don't have that in bed!

His eyes grew wide with fire and he rushed at her with arm extended. Why you little bitch, while she screamed her defence.

He backed off and left the room while neighbours hurried to their windows in the hope of witnessing a murder. A starting motor and very audible sobs dashed their pleasure. Poor kid, always knew 'e was no good. After that young thing with the little 'un ran away from him an' all. He was all smiles on 'is wedding day then too. Nodded in silent agreement of an ensuing character assassination.

She tried to muster some semblance of sobriety from her drunken spinning head and managed to clean up the lounge before vomiting conveniently into the toilet.

She felt better later so chewed her way through some corn chips while she thought about what she had said to him. It didn't seem misplaced. Cruel, maybe, but no crueller than his expectations of her and his bedroom mundaneness. Fully justified, she slept easily and when he came in later to deliver his own brand of dominance, she was prepared to perform her duty humbly and on her knees.

It was OK for a while after that.

Things went on as before but she felt a new enthusiasm for making it work and he noticed a subtle change in her, hair not unkempt and face exhibiting traces of blusher and a little lipstick.

Pretty lady, he murmured.

What's that, dear?

Nothin' luv, but by jeez you're cookin' some good tucker lately. She smiled, a portrait of feminine perfection. Trying to please. Succeeding.

She started going out more. Looked up some elementary psych texts and decided to do something about her situation. He wasn't too bad, gave her money to do things with, though she hadn't bothered before. Now she walked tentatively down the main street. Switched off to the whisperings. It was the first step.

She felt best when he wasn't around to check up on her. Just like everyone else in that poky little town, he wanted to know her every movement. Not to spy, mind, just a healthy curiosity like all the other people there. Not enough of their own business to keep them occupied so kept themselves informed of the rest of the town's doings.

He chose me because I'm me, well I'm gonna be me, she decided. And when he was gone, she could.

Went into the butcher's. Where's yer mate, they'd ask of the lone woman without the shield she usually took shopping.

Gone on the Sydney run this week. And could I have 250 of mince too please?

To the bakery and where's yer hubby luv? Gone off and left ya, ay?

No, just took a trip to Kathmandu to find himself. One of those buns please.

She was enjoying herself. It was a Friday and a while weekend to herself. She'd get into some serious study.

She saw the oilies further on up the street before they saw her. Came to town each weekend to drink after working the fields in the Basin. Giggled as she proposed what she'd do. They looked different to town folks. Brighter, more alive.

Hi fellas. I'm doing some work on the social habits of oilies. Like to be guinea pigs?

They laughed and looked at each other. Why not, come an' we'll buy you a beer. In the public bar.

I can't even make a mistake without the whole of town knowing.

Tinted windows but she could still see the frowning faces move past the bar in the hot afternoon sun. Still noticed how the regs and the barmaid ignored her presence.

But she had fun. With the dirty jokes and tall tales they told. Two were engineers. She remembered their type at uni. The Monty Python humour and fresh-faced friendliness. One especially appealed to her.

He asked her out to the local football club's disco the next night. She agreed.

Still liked to be wooed and bought expensive drinks.

The rest of the oilies were there too. Not liked by the locals. Outa-towners always caused trouble. And they noted her presence with their number. Not done.

Not one o' us, always knew it. Can't have bad eggs in our midst. Destroyin' the whole fabric of society. Get the children away, Martin. Don't want them witnessin' a slut at work.

She was laughing. Really laughing. He was so nice. And they danced to the loud music and she thought for a moment she was back in the city and she was happy and then it faded and they were being thrown out for disturbing the peace.

It's always the same, one said. We bring industry to the area, spend our money in the town and then they treat us like trash. No wonder the place's dying.

The nice engineer looked at her. Sorry about this, guess we've ruined your evening.

She smiled. More eventful than anything else I've done in a while.

Let's go get pissed and smash the place up, someone said.

She got up to go. I think I'll go home. He jumped to his feet and asked if he could see her again. Scarlett O'Hara once more on her mind. She shook her head and kissed his cheek. Then she left.

Four days later he arrived home spitting fire. Rushed into the house and as her lipstick and smooth hair welcomed him, he struck her full across the face.

Screwin' oilies you fuckin' bitch. Don'tcha have any respect for me!

Neighbours, ears plucked to the altercation, quietly opened their windows wider and turned out the lights, glued there as though to an evening soap. Reckon she had it comin' to her, they agreed, closing ranks on her guilt.

She was wide-eyed with astonishment, too shocked to react to the pain his blows inflicted. What on earth are you talking about?

Get out, pack yer bags an' get out. Slut, you fucking slut, he screamed, red in the face with red ears and red neck.

She stood still, quiet, calming. Can't I tell my side of it? None of them touched –

He cut her off with another smashing assault which flung her to the ground. I heard all I wanna hear from the blokes in town.

She cared less about her pulped face than her pride.

Oh yeah, listen to a crowd of bloody gossips and don't believe the truth – that I talked with them and danced with them. No more! she yelled at his thick pulsing skull. No more! Oh yeah, I'll go but because you questioned my fidelity. When have I asked you about blonde hairs on your coat or powder on your shirts? Yeah, I'll go, she sneered. How can I stay with someone who doesn't know the difference between truth and malicious rumour.

He stood still, trembling, red turning to purple as he crumpled. Deflated like a balloon with a slow hole in it, he hissed to the floor and curled there crying. She did it to me, too, she did – ran off with an oilie and took the little 'un with her. I couldn't bear it with you too. He looked up at her with his only life-support, honesty.

She pitied him and sighed. Do you want your dinner?

He nodded while she slapped it coarsely on a plate and set it on the table. Eat then, and she went to put Savlon cream on her swollen cuts.

She packed next day while he was out short-hauling sheep from one property to another for fattening. Droving in his truck. Wish it was on a horse like in those old Chips Rafferty movies but progress can't be helped. Makin' the best of me life, I reckon.

He left her that morning with a kiss and an apology and was coy when he asked if he could have pork chops for tea. She smiled, tired and hurting and after he'd gone, began to pack.

She walked down to the main street with her two ports bulging, bandaids on her face and no need for lipstick on a red and swollen pout. Left the bags at the Greyhound terminus to be put on the bus to Brisbane. Not enough money for her to ride with them so she started walking.

He came home at lunchtime to find her gone and as he backed the truck out, one of the neighbours beckoned him over and said, I seen 'er leaving this mornin' with two full bags of stuff.

He swung the cabin round and bottled out of town like the devil was after 'im, I swear, she told her husband that evening.

He found her ten miles east with her thumb hanging out like a nail knocked wrong into a piece of wood.

Come back love I didn't mean it.

I'll have the scars to prove you did, she said.

Please come back, I need you.

Go away, just go away.

He shrugged – pride too strong and ego too big to beg further. Next run to Brisbane, ask that Katie at Lu-Lu's if she'd like a taste o' the country life, he memoed to his mind.

Goodbye, said the girl.

Yeah, good luck an' all that, and he U-turned slowly to make her suffer. He watched her in his rear-vision mirror, saw her staring blankly after him, watching the exhaust's blue smoke follow the truck like a faithful dog as it disappeared down the road back to town.

She turned and started walking again, the sun beating down on her uncovered head. And she decided to change the topic of her thesis.

