

**Kim Winter**

Born in snow country, I spent the first twelve years of my life in the mountain paradise of Waste Point- Perisher - Smiggens. Taught to ride by men of the mountains, I skied and rode the plains and slopes of Kosciusko ( as I knew it), haunted the local riding school of Valhalla, until my father changed work locations to the Mid North Coast of NSW, and I was dragged kicking and screaming away from my mountains.

Teenage years were spent at the beach, and riding my horse at shows and pony club. After being advised that I would have to do Year 11 again, because I had read books all through the year, instead of school work, I left home at seventeen after obtaining a position to ride at El Caballo Blanco, when it opened near Leppington, NSW. Following the birth of my daughter, I enrolled in an evening writing course, and wrote a short story which I put away for a long time.

After living in a few different places, twenty years ago I made it back to the mountains and began to, periodically, have a go at writing after Maija read my original story and encouraged me to keep at it. My special interests are the Anzacs, horses, history and high country.

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**LOST**

**WINNER – UPPER MURRAY WRITERS CATEGORY**

Mary shuddered as the cold wind blew through her thin blouse, her hands shaking as they gripped the reins, guiding her horse up the steep hill, between the tall mountain ash and granite rocks. Rosellas swooped low over her head, and cockatoos screeched a warning, as they watched trespassers enter their forest. She wished she had paused to take a wrap from her room, but no-one had thought that it would take this long to find a child.

The first they had known of the missing child was announced by the noise of a galloping horse along the dirt track, its rider slowing only long enough to yell at the people who sat on the verandah of the hut by the creek.

“McDonald’s little girl has gone missing. Gone at lunch time.”

The dust hadn’t settled before the horses were caught and saddled in the yard. Mary’s father shouted orders, sounding again like the Sergeant he’d been at Gallipoli, before being shipped home, blinded in one eye, and dragging a shattered leg.

“Tom, you take the ridge, Mary, the west side of gully, I’ll take the east. McDonalds would have searched their home paddocks, we must go wider.”

He grimaced as he lifted his leg over the saddle, reaching over to force his foot through the stirrup with his hand.

“I’ve no need to tell you what will be the outcome if we do not find the child before dark. A five year old will have no chance at this time of year.”

He turned and rode north, leaving Mary and Tom to mount and go their way.

Mary winced as a branch struck her across the face. She had been looking back, calling, and had not seen it coming. Cursing the horse for taking her under the low limb, she resumed her calling.

“Rosie, Rosie, where are you? It’s Mary; I’ve come to take you home.”

Gentle pressure on the reins brought the gelding to a halt, and she listened intently to the sounds of the bush. The cold wind rustled the leaves of the trees overhead; birds whistled, chirruped and squawked. A gurgling creek, hidden from view by tall fronds of ferns and grass tussocks, rushed the melting snow down to the mighty flowing Murray.

Mary called again, and waited, wanting a child’s voice to answer her, praying for the girl to call back to her. Hearing nothing but the sounds of the bush, Mary squeezed her calves, pushing the horse into a walk. His head bobbed up and down in a gentle rhythm as he weaved in and around the trees, stepping over fallen logs, his hooves leaving prints in the soft boggy soil at the side of the creek as Mary pushed him into its icy waters. She glanced up at the sky, through the eucalypt canopy. It was without the brightness of mid-afternoon. The deepening shadows told her that time was running out; she had to make a decision of when to head back.

Although it would be a full moon, she had ridden out unprepared to stand a night on the mountainside.

“You stupid girl,” she admonished herself out loud. “You should have known better!”

In her haste to help find Rosie, she had mounted and rode away without the makings of a camp. She had no-one to blame but herself. Her father had taught her all he knew about survival, and that was quite some knowledge given his experiences in life; she knew that he would have expected her to take the necessities.

Mary made her decision and turned the horse’s head for home.

As she crossed the creek again, she turned in the saddle, calling once more.

“Rosie, it is Mary!”

A faint cry caused Mary to throw her weight to the other side of the saddle in her haste to hear it again, causing her to jerk the reins. The horse threw his head up, bringing his hindquarters under him, and thrusting his forelegs forward, he slid down the bank of the creek. He had no control over the slide, the boggy encrusted mud giving no purchase to his hard hooves; those hooves that sunk into an old wombat hole, causing the gelding to somersault, crushing Mary beneath him.

Her scream startled the settling birds, and they took fright at the foreign sound, their alarm drowning out her moans.

The gelding lay still, trapping her legs. Slowly gulping deep breaths, holding back the screams, she raised herself on her elbows and stared at the reason she could not move. Through the pain, a flash of common-sense told her that as she had fallen from the horse she had kept the reins in her hand, and now they held the gelding's head tight against her. His struggles to rise while she held his head had been in vain, and so he lay quietly.

She opened her hand, and the leather fell to the ground. Gritting her teeth, waiting for further agony, she prodded the neck of the horse with her finger.

"Get up," she whispered. "Come on, boy, get up."

Getting no response, Mary slapped the horse between the ears, her body cringing, waiting for the horse's movement. Her lips bled as her teeth bit deep into the flesh, trying not to scream when the weight was released from her legs, not wanting to scare the horse into panicking and trampling her.

Slowly the gelding had raised his head, rolled forward onto his chest, and put his forelegs out. Grunting, he rose from the ground, and with a shake that started at his head and finished at his tail, he wandered off, picking at the snow grass that grew at the edge of the creek.

Pain roiled through her, hot shafts of lightening ran through her legs, and clouds of black suffocated her mind. He flung her head back, screaming words that made no sense to the inhabitants of the bush, but caused them to be still, twitch their noses and wonder what had come amongst them.

Slowly her sobs became quieter and her mind began to work again.

"If I don't move, it won't hurt."

Her first thought.

"But I have to move, I have to find shelter."

Her second.

Already the cool ground was numbing her. A child of the mountains, she knew the danger of being caught out ill equipped, at night. That thought overrode her shock and pushed her into action.

Taking deep breaths she willed herself, using her elbows, her fingers, to crawl, her legs useless. Out of the cold wet mud, she slowly dragged herself, each movement causing her to utter curses and screams.

Feeling drier earth beneath, she turned on her back and looked up at the darkening sky. A thought, sharp and stark, drove into her mind.

What had caused her to turn? What had caused her to pull at the reins? She closed her eyes and muttered to herself, trying to recall.

Recall the soft cry. The voice of a child.

“Mary? Mary?”

Lying on the deep bed of forest floor, Mary tried to put the pain aside, and concentrate on whether it had been her imagination or had the voice been real.

“Rosie? Are you there?”

She bit her lip and tried again.

“Rosie, it is Mary. Can you hear me?”

She stared at the stars gleaming in the ebony sky, and heard the creek sing its rushing song, as she waited.

“Where is Mother?”

Mary’s head jerked up, the movement flowing down into her body, awakening the agony in her legs. Forcing her lips closed, stifling the screams, she drew herself up, know she must not frighten the little girl who was out there.

Mary dug her fingernails into her side, and called in a tight voice.

“Rosie, can you hear me? Can you follow my voice?”

Mary eased herself back down, grateful for the softness of the leaf bed beneath her.

“I’m here Rosie. If I sound louder, keep on coming. Can you do that, Rosie?”

The small voice answered, sounding closer.

“Mary, where are you?”

“I’m here Rosie. I need your help. Can you come and help me?”

“I’m coming but I can’t see you.”

“Rosie, I am going to sing a song. You just keep coming towards my singing.”

As Mary spoke these words she realized that her mind was not working properly, she could think of any songs. Desperately she searched, but nothing came. She began to hum, a meaningless mix of notes, but it would give something for the child to come towards. Slowly the notes began to take form, and Mary put words to them.

“There’s a track winding back,” she sang, her throat tight, so that the notes were high and sparse. “To an old fashioned...”

Mary stopped as she heard the splashing, the sound of someone wading through water.

“Rosie, are you in the creek?”

“Yes, Mary I’m coming.”

Mary shuddered as she thought of the child wet in the ever dropping temperature.

“Rosie, I’m up the hill a bit. I am waving my arm. Can you see me?”

Mary knew it was a hard ask; the moon was just skimming the top to the mountain, its light feeble.

There was no answer.

Mary held her breath. Everything became magnified; the cold, the depth of the sky, the dank forest floor beneath her, the scent of the bush.

“Rosie?” “Rosie.....Rosieeee?”

She ceased calling as a shadow crossed her vision and she felt the soft touch of the child take her hand.