

Serendipity

We pulled off the road at the Southern Cross Lookout and sat at the picnic table, eating our sandwiches. After driving and inspecting properties all morning, I was hot and tired. Unscrewing the lid of a water bottle I took a long swig.

The mid day sun hit the metal roof over the table and made it crack and groan. Around us the newly planted trees wilted in their green bags.

“You wouldn’t believe it now,” drawled Grant, “But this place is green as, in summer. So much feed you wouldn’t believe it.”

I looked across the paddock in front of us to the valley down below, the grass parched and dry. A creek wound its way through rolling hills that unfolded like bumps in a cloth. Farm houses nestled among clumps of trees, and barns and sheds dotted the brown landscape.

One end of the valley stretched way up into the National Park, a windy, twisting road disappearing in a sea of trees that rose up into the hills.

I knew I had to ask. “Any farms for sale around here?”

Grant grunted. “Not many farmers sell in this area. Hold on to their places for their children.”

I sighed. Familiar.

We’d been searching for ages, looking for a suitable farm. Sitting in the back of a four wheel drive, we bumped over gravel roads and lumpy paddocks with our farm manager, and the local real estate agent.

“How about this one Grant?” we’d say hopefully, trying hard to cast a discerning, but uninformed eye over the property.

“Not enough water,” he’d say. Or “Soil’s not good enough.”

Disappointed, we’d carry on to the next place, hopeful that maybe this one would cover all the requirements.

Permanent water, basalt soil, a decent house, and potential!

Ever optimistic, we’d drive through yet another front gate and eagerly scan the fences and fields, wondering if this one would pass muster.

Grant didn't give much away. We'd stop in the middle of a paddock and get out, looking all around and getting the feel of the place. He'd stoop close to the ground and scratch in the soil, peering at the grasses and weeds.

"What about this one?" we'd say, trying not to sound too anxious.

"Next!" was all he said in a gruff voice.

This had gone on for a couple of years, and frankly, I was getting sick of looking and looking and never settling on one.

I was starting to think that maybe we should buy a beach house. Sea, sun and relaxation!

But my husband wanted a retirement project. Something to improve and develop, and hopefully, make some money. He was at loose ends, now that he'd sold his computer company. He needed to get his teeth into something.

We both loved the land and the big wide spaces. Fresh air. Trees. Birds. And without a doubt, the farm had to have a soul. It had to grab us in our guts and make us love it.

A tiny speck circled over the valley and I watched a wedge tail eagle . High above us he soared on the thermals, barely flapping his wings.

He drifted lazily, round and round, over the valley.

"A bird's eye view from up there," remarked Grant. "They can spot the smallest movement down below."

"The view from there would be spectacular!" I said.

Our musings were interrupted by the noise of an engine and a Toyota 4 wheel drive approached in the paddock in front of us. It pulled up about fifty metres away and a man got out and walked towards the fence.

Pulling some pliers out of his pocket, he bent down, twisting and pulling the netting over a hole.

"G'day Tom," called Grant as the man stood up and looked over to where we were sitting.

"How are you Grant?" he said walking over.

Grant introduced us and said we were looking for a farm.

“Not much in this area,” said Tom. “But I heard old Gordon might be willing to sell. He doesn’t have anyone to take it on and it’s all getting a bit much for him. Missus died a long while back and he’s finding it hard to keep going.”

“Where is the farm?” I asked.

Tom turned around and pointed to the valley below. “It’s the farm next to the vineyard. That long winding drive is in the middle of it. Cuts the property in half. ”

“How big is it?” asked my husband.

“One thousand acres,” said Tom. “A soldier’s settlement. He’s the last of the soldiers to still own his place.”

Grant explained. “The valley used to be one big station, but after the war, the government bought it up and divided it into one thousand acre lots for the returned soldiers. They gave them low interest loans and made it easier for men to buy some land. There was a shortage of food then, and the country needed farmers.”

I looked down at the farm in the valley below and tried to picture it as the first soldier settlers would have seen it. Hillsides covered with trees. No paddocks or fences.

The men would have had to hack through the bush with horses and saws. Chop down trees for fences and yards. It must have been back breaking work.

Tom walked back to his truck and we gathered up our lunch things.

“Let’s go down and ask him,” I said to Grant. “You never know...”

“Waste of time,” said Grant. “He’s pretty unsociable, doesn’t talk much to folks and keeps to himself.”

I looked up again and watched the wedgetail eagle circle in the paddock next to the vineyard. Suddenly it dropped. Down it fell like a stone. For a moment I thought it was injured, but it touched the ground and rose again, a small shape dangling from its talons.

“Wow!” I exclaimed, and turned to the men. But they were busy fiddling around in the back of the car. They’d missed nature’s spectacle.

Suddenly I felt a stab of something in my stomach. A feeling of wonder and awe. I had an overwhelming urge to go down to the valley and put my feet on the ground, and connect with that wide open space. I wanted to feel the hills around me, envelop me, unfold me.

I walked over to men. “I want to go down there,” I said decisively. “And ask Gordon.” I turned to my husband. He shrugged. “Nothing to lose.”

We climbed back in the car and drove back the way we came, turning at the first road and going down a hill. Crossing a bridge, we turned onto a sandy road.

Grant pulled up at the entrance. The mailbox had fallen off its stand and was now perched on a large rock. We drove over the grid and down the winding road. Grant stopped the car and turned off the engine.

“See those old gum trees over there?”

I looked at a stand of magnificent trees, with fat golden trunks and spreading stretching branches.

“Yellow box,” he said. “They only grow on a place that’s got good soil.”

We drove further down the drive. Even my untrained eye could tell that the place was run down. The fences were leaning foolishly and a few skinny cattle sheltered under one solitary tree.

We passed an old shearing shed and machinery shed with rusty tin roofs.

Grant stopped the car in front of a weatherboard house that badly needed painting. A couple of dogs were chained up at the side of the yard, barking madly.

“Gordon’ll know we’re here,” mumbled Grant.

We got out of the car and stood at the gate. The screen door of the house swung open and an old man stumped out. He shielded his arm against the sun and clumped down the steps.

“G’day Gordon,” said Grant, extending his hand. “Grant Latham. How ya doing?”

Gordon peered up at Grant and shook his hand. “Haven’t seen you in awhile,” he said.

Introductions were made and the men made small talk.

I looked around at the property. An old tractor with a tree growing through its seat was near a shed, and bits of tin and old fence posts lay scattered around. The paddocks stretched all around the house mostly empty, except for a mob of sheep near the wool shed.

Paddocks stretched all the way up to the hills and large gum trees stood out on the skyline. Dots of cattle speckled the hillside.

There was a pause in the conversation.

Grant cleared his throat. "These people are looking for a farm to buy. City folk from Sydney. I was just wondering if you had any thoughts about selling."

Old Gordon shuffled around and took off his hat, wiping his brow. "Ah, I've thought about it but I just can't see...." His sentence trailed off into nothing. "I've been here for sixty years."

"We'd be willing to settle quickly," I said hurriedly.

The men looked down at the ground, and there was a painful silence.

"Ahh," drawled Gordon, "that don't matter much to me. I haven't really got anywhere to go."

I felt embarrassed. Patronising. Stupid thing to say.

"Not to worry," said Grant, smoothing it all over. "We just thought we'd ask."

I felt I had to say something. Make up for my pushy city manners.

"This place must have been really rough when you first moved," I said, "After the war."

He looked all around him and then at me, startling me with his piercing but rheumy blue eyes .

"You wouldn't know this place then," he said. "Big stands of trees we had to fell and clear. We lived in a little hut at first, while I chopped down the trees to make the house." He pointed behind him. "No electricity, or telephones, water from the creek."

"It must have been hard work," I volunteered.

He stared at me. "In those days you had to get up at sunup and work all day and go to bed at dusk. We worked till our hands were bleeding from all that tree felling and stump digging." He spread out his hands.

They were gnarled and weathered, brown and calloused.

Suddenly I wanted to leave. We were too presumptuous. I shuffled towards the car.

"Well, thanks for your time," said my husband. He shook his hand. "It's been a pleasure to meet you."

I turned and shook his hand too and again he looked me straight in the eye.

"What you say your name was?" he asked still holding on to my hand.

“Claire,” I said.

He blinked and let go of my hand.

“My first wife’s name was Claire,” he said. “We were childhood sweethearts, and after I came back from the war, we got married.” He looked out over the fields. “But she died in childbirth, babe too. “

“Oh,” I said foolishly.

He looked back at me. “Actually, she sort a looked like you... Blonde, petite, very direct in her manner.” He laughed and I felt my face get hot.

“Why don’t you come in for a cuppa,” he said. He turned and walked stiffly up into the house. Grant and my husband and I looked at each other and shrugged.

“That’d be nice,” said Grant, following Gordon up through his front gate and into his garden.

I looked at the climbing roses spilling over a trellis in the garden, their sweet yellow blooms standing bright against the aged wood.

“Nice roses,” I called to him as we climbed the porch steps.

“My second wife planted them,” he said. “Afraid I’ve let the garden go a bit.”

We walked in his house and he motioned for us to sit at an old wooden table.

Putting on the kettle, he placed mugs and tea bags on the table, and went to the fridge. He pulled out a bottle of milk and poured it into a mug with a chipped handle.

I looked around the room.

An open window looked out to a small orchard, boughs bending with the weight of apples and plums. I could hear the sound of water rushing.

I stood up and looked out. Behind the orchard, a creek rushed over rocks and stones and disappeared around a curve in the bend.

“Your creek is beautiful!” I said. “And it’s still flowing!”

So many creeks had dried up over the summer.

“That creeks’s flowed even in the drought,” said Gordon. “Never dried up once.”

“You’re lucky,” said Grant. “So many people have had to truck in water just to use in the house.”

“In the old days we used to catch trout in that pond,” he said putting in the tea bags and pouring water in the mugs.

“Trout!” I exclaimed.

“Now it’s just the platypus that’s there,” he said.

“Platypus! You have a platypus?” My mouth dropped open.

“Couple. Maybe three or four sometimes in spring,” he said. “They live in that pool down there.”

I went back to the table and sat down, sipping my tea.

The men talked weather, farming, sheep prices.

I stared out of Gordon’s kitchen window, imagining myself, making jams from the orchard and going for walks along the creek. Sitting on a rock at dusk and looking for the platypus.

There was a pause in the conversation. “I love your place,” I said impulsively to Gordon. “You’ve made it really nice.”

He smiled and I caught a glimpse of the young man, coming home from war, looking forward to his newly married life on the farm.

“You put your heart and soul into your farm,” he said. “My wife and I made it a great farm all those years ago. But I’ve let it go. It’s a lot of work.”

We stood up and walked to the door and down the steps.

Around the house trotted a little brown and white dog. It wagged its tail and pranced over to me.

“You’ve got a corgi!” I said squatting down and patting its head. “I grew up with corgis!” I gushed. “They’re the best dogs. So adaptable.”

Gordon smiled. “This property has always had corgis.”

The dog started licking my hand. I laughed.

“Thanks for the tea,” I said.

I looked up one last time to see if the wedgetail was still there. The sky was empty except for the big ball of sun.

We got in the car and Grant turned over the engine.

Gordon stuck his head in the window. "Now that you're here," he said, "I might as well show you around."

I unfastened my seat belt and moved over. Gordon climbed in beside me.

We phoned the agent as soon as we got back to Sydney and made Gordon an offer. It was pretty reasonable considering how run down the place was. Plus we added extra for having 2 houses on the place.

As well as Gordon's home, there was another small cottage that used to be used by the shearers. It had been done up, sort of, and we figured we could get a couple or family, to live there to keep an eye on things. When we were in Sydney we didn't want any ferals breaking into the property.

We waited impatiently for the Gordon's reply and when we didn't hear after a few days we thought he'd reconsidered.

We were having dinner one night at home when the phone rang. Congratulations said the agent. The farm's yours.

It was done. We were now the proud owners of a rundown farm, 5 hours from Sydney. And we really didn't know the first thing about farming. But we had Grant. He would manage the farm. And we would pay the bills.

In mid April we went to visit the farm and discuss with Grant what had to be done. Walking over the property we planned fencing, spraying, stocking numbers and so on. We drove around the front paddocks and then drove through the creek and climbed slowly up the hills at the back. At the top of our property we got out and looked down. The valley unfolded below us.

It was a typical April day, sunny with a slight breeze. Away in the distance, we could see the Snowy Mountain peaks, stretching across the skyline. Forests of trees spread in front with the National Park, and in front the cleared land rolled with farms and hay shed.

The view was breathtaking. Our farm nestled between two other farms.

First one on your left is an agronomist. The father is a soldier settler, but the son runs it now. Used to grow tobacco in the old days but now he's got 20 hectares of vines.

What's that, I asked pointing. Looks like a runway?

Yep, said Grant. The son's a pilot. Owns a couple of planes and made an airstrip through the vines.

It was beautiful. Tidy rows of trellised plants neatly arranged, and at the back, cattle and sheep grazed.

Who are the neighbours on the other side I asked looking over the other side. I saw our boundary fence and a large stand of gum trees up the hill with cattle grazing underneath.

They're an older couple said Grant. But I hear they're really nice. Lived there all their lives. Have 3 grown up children. Run a good property.

I took a big breath of air and slowly exhaled. All this was ours. The creek, the rocky hills, the rolling farmland.

What's our main concern here Grant, asked Brendan, ever the business manage.

See all these blackberries said Grant. We turned around and looked at the mass of thorny vines that covered the hill. They stretched all the way to both sides of the boundaries.

I reckon you've got a hundred acres of blackberries to get rid of, said Grant.

How do we go about that, asked Brendan.

Got to aerial spray said Grant. There's so many blackies, it's your best option.

He looked over at the vineyard. But we have to do it when the grapes are dormant. Going to be tricky he said. Timing that is.

We got in the 4 wheel drive and drove down to the creek.

Creek's passable in summer said Grant. But we want to stock this place with Merino sheep. It's a hell of a thing pushing sheep through the creek.

We drove through the creek and up the other side. Grant stopped and got out, stared at the creek crossing.

What we need is a bridge, he said.

Bridge! We exclaimed Dollar bills signs clinking in his business man's head.

A bridge would make all the difference to this farm.

Old Gordon mostly ran cattle. Moving sheep across the creek became too hard. Sheep want to run every way but across the creek. And when they do, they often get so heavy and wet, they lay down and don't move. It's hell to get them up.

We drove back to the homestead and planned to get stuck into it after settlement. A few more weeks and it would officially be ours. As long as Gordon still wanted to proceed.

I was worried that he might have second thoughts.

Come on in for a cuppa, he said as we stopped in front of his gate.