

# LAST WOMAN IN TOWN

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Eddie knew when she woke in the cool freshness of pre-dawn that something was wrong. There was an unfamiliar pain in her chest, arms and back, and she felt sick. As she lay there, her breath coming in short gasps, the magpies in the gum tree near her bedroom window began their morning roundelay.

"That does it! If I don't stir meself I could get stuck in this bed, and that damned bush nurse'll be shuntin' me off to that pensioners' prison that she's always talkin' about! Probably feel better after a cuppa".

Swinging her legs to the floor, Eddie swayed and might have fallen if she had not instinctively grasped the high, wooden bedhead.

"Steady, me girl!"

Beads of perspiration stood out on her wrinkled forehead, and her hands were ice-cold. Switching on the bed lamp, Eddie flooded the room with light. White and hollow-cheeked, her face looked back at her from the dressing-table mirror. The shapeless mouth gaped and toothless gums quivered.

"Won't put me teeth in. The way I feel I could lose 'em".

Eddie dressed slowly and painfully, her fingers fumbling with the button on the front of her faded, floral dress. She finally fastened the buttons askew, but was too ill to notice. Slipping her feet into worn, misshapen shoes as crumpled and unpolished as Eddie herself, she managed to get to the kitchen by bracing herself against the passage walls as she went. She groped for the light switch just inside the kitchen doorway, and slumped into a familiar chair by the fridge to regain her composure. The pain increased in the right side of her chest, and burnt its way up the side of her neck. Eddie leaned against the side of the fridge, grateful for its cool surface. Her eyes closed, and the thought of the raspberry ice-blocks she used to make for the children when they came to the store for papers, bread and mail after school. No school now. They had taken away the building years ago, leaving only the wooden stumps. No post office and store now, either. Eddie's father had run the store when the town was abuzz with miners fossicking for **GOLD**. They would put their purchases on the slate in the store "just until me ship comes in", but they were usually gone before the slate was wiped clean. Her father had been gone for some years now, and there were only the clay mounds beside the holes in the bush where the miners had been.

Eddie still lived in the building, a faded advertising hoarding proclaiming the virtues of a certain tea of flavour to the infrequent traffic that sped by. The few farmers still left in the district now went to one of the larger towns to get what they needed. No longer did the words "Post Office Store", still visible on the peeling weatherboards on the side wall of the shop attached to Eddie's house, have any meaning. "Post Office no longer economically viable" was the blunt report from the bureaucrats in the Head Office. The mail was now delivered by courier into roadside boxes. Eddie even had a mailbox outside her house. She rarely saw the mail courier. The young woman did not have time to get out of her car, let alone have time to stop and chat. When old Tom Pascoe used to bring the mail bag some years ago, he always had time for a cool drink and to share a bit of gossip.

Eddie remembered how she used to be able to recognize some of the handwriting on the letters as she sorted them into the pigeonholes in the tiny post office. She took a pride in her ability to do that.

Before Tom came, one of Eddie's children would collect the mailbag from the railway siding. The railway had long gone. Even the rusting tracks had been torn up, and the wooden sleepers trucked off to adorn suburban gardens.

Goods for the store used to come by rail; it was such a treat to open the boxes left at the railway siding. When the line closed, a supply truck called on its way to the stores in the larger towns. Now that same supply truck called once a week with supplies for Eddie from one of the supermarkets in the closest town.

Recovering a little, Eddie rose unsteadily and filled the electric kettle from a large bottle on the sink. She took a small, enamel teapot and a cup and saucer from the dresser while she waited for the kettle to boil. Her husband, Jack, had always been going to connect the water to the sink, but had never got around to doing it before he died fifteen years ago. Eddie did not mind. She was used to filling the bottle from the tank at the back door. However, even the tank was showing signs of neglect, gradually seeping its precious contents through a rust-stained rag that had been stuffed into a hole a few rungs from the bottom. When the tank got too low, one of the farmers filled it for Eddie from a standpipe beside the railway siding. Eddie carted water in a

bucket, and heated it in a copper in the washhouse for her weekly bath.

Her lavatory was still the traditional pit, and each time she heated the copper she tipped a shovel full of coals down the hole. This helped to reduce the amount of excrement and paper, and lessened the necessity to dig another hole.

It was the lack of modern facilities and Edie's isolation that prompted a bush nurse to include Edie on her regular round of visits in the area. Edie certainly did not welcome the visits, but the nurse was concerned that an eighty year old woman should live alone in a deserted town, ninety kilometers from the nearest centre and hospital. Edie, however, was adamant that with two dogs, a cat, and a couple of goats, she had all the company she needed. She had always managed on her own. Even when her husband was alive, he was away shearing for most of the year. She had three surviving children; two lived overseas, and the other lived interstate, and she rarely saw him.

Edie sipped her tea, cooling it by pouring it into the saucer because the hot liquid scalded an ulcer in her mouth. Her thoughts wandered back to her children. She remembered them rushing home from school and flinging their schoolbags into the back porch, before dashing off to play cricket on the sandy strip of land beside the district hall.

The district hall had long gone. It was burnt to the ground after a coal had fallen unnoticed from under the copper in the supper room lean-to after a school dance. Edie had tried to organize the raising of funds to rebuild the hall. However, the school closed soon after a severe drought caused many farmers to walk away from their farms. The few who remained drifted into the larger towns for their shopping and entertainment. There was no incentive to rebuild the hall.

"I wonder what happened to the schoolies who used to board with me? Some of 'em used to write to me after they left here. 'Spose some of 'em went on to become headmasters – that's if they survived their bush schools. Some of 'em didn't. That poor wretch – what was his name? Preston ..... Alec Preston. Drowned 'imself in Tregonning's dam .... Used t' shut 'himself in 'his room and write poetry rubbish".

Edie turned off the light as the pink and grey feathered dawn lit the sky and made the artificial light unnecessary. "Like some great galah stretchin' 'his wings – not that I'd ever tell anyone *that*. They'd be convinced that I was a few screws loose!" Although the pain persisted in her chest, Edie took a bag of dried dog food from a wooden safe, and hobbled outside to call the dogs. "Fried Egg! Fart! 'Ere!"

Two dogs of dubious pedigree came at once, tails wagging. Fried Egg was the younger of the two. He was so called because of a large, orange stop like a golden, fried egg between his eyes. Fart, his mother, was almost as old as Edie, if you were reckoning in canine years, and had been named by Edie's husband for obvious reasons. Edie filled their bowls, and then filled a baking dish with water from the tank. She placed it in the shade of a large cactus. As she did to, she stumbled and pricked her fingers on the cactus. Head spinning, she backed into the tank stand where she sat down heavily, her breath coming spasmodically. The dogs raised their heads from the bowls, and came over and licked Edie's hand. Dimly, she recognized their presence with a fond pat for each dog. Satisfied, they went back to their meal.

Edie sat there for some time, the rough boards of the tank stand scratching the backs of her legs. The sun burned through her closed eyes, appearing as a series of blue, transparent discs.

Suddenly she jerked awake. "Toe! There you are! Alright, I know y' want y' breakfast". A large, grey cat with white feet sprang on Edie's lap and rubbed her chin with the top of its head. "Get down, then, and I'll go and get y' biscuits".

The cat obliged, and Edie hesitantly raised her body from the tank stand while holding on to the tank for support. Slowly she made her way inside the house, and came back with Toe's biscuits in a bowl.

While the cat crunched its way through its breakfast, Edie went into the washhouse and reappeared with a tin of pellets. Beyond the clothesline, encircled and shaded by silver-grey wormwood, two solemn-eyed goats looked up as Edie approached. Long past their ability to produce milk, they were Edie's favourites. She had raised them from kids, and unless penned in their yards, they followed her everywhere. They pushed against the gate as Edie approached, hoping that she would set them free.

"Not t'day, Pearl. I'm not puttin' up with your nonsense, Semolina!"

Edie tipped the pellets into a dish, and then went to get some water to fill the cement trough that sat under a pepper tree on the far side of the yard. Each step was slow and painful, but she could not leave her companions without sustenance.

Retracing her steps to the house, she found her walking stick by the fireplace. Beads of perspiration stood out on her brow and puckered upper lip. Hands trembling, she tried to pour herself a cup of water, but managed to guide little of it to her lips. Leaning on her stick, Edie took her large cotton hat from the top of the cupboard with the other hand. She dragged the elastic band under her chin and slowly made her way to the door.

A hot, north wind was rising, sending spurts of red sand under the back door. As Edie opened the door, the wind lifted the frayed, brown linoleum, and it rose and fell in rippling wavers across the floor. If she had possessed teeth, the melancholy sound of the wind see-sawing through the rusting blades of the windmill would have set her teeth on edge. The windmill had been used to pump water from the town bore. However, the bore had been dry since the year that the hall burned down.

Pain etched even deeper lines around Edie's mouth. Down the silent street she tottered, bent almost double. The wind snatched at her dress and the swirling red sand stung her eyes. Leaning into the wind, she struggled past the hall site where the wind uncovered an odd, blackened pot or the remains of a fine, china cup now and then. She stumbled past the remains of the galvanized iron church which had been blown away in a severe dust storm only a year ago. She hesitated by the cluster of graves where her infant daughter had been buried. She reached the schoolyard where tangles of wire, once used for fencing, lay submerged by mounds of red sand.

She fell to her knees, and the earth seemed to float upwards to meet her. She retched. Shoulders heaving, Edie vomited into the sand. Sand and vomit blew up into her face, caking her mouth and blinding her vision. Dragging herself forward by her hands, her whole body shaking from the effort, Edie managed to reach the shade of the straggling line of Arbor Day trees planted by school children over a number of years. Once tree stood tall, a eucalypt ablaze with scarlet blossom. Parrots screamed and jostled each other, and the scarlet blossoms went spinning away with the wind and sand. Edie sank to the ground under the scarlet tree. She rolled on her side, drawing her knees up to her chest in foetal agony. Clutching her thin chest, her head jerked backwards.

Through weakening vision she thought she saw Thomas – Thomas Edward, who had planted this tree so long ago. Edie had tended it until it grew tall and strong. Thomas Edward was the youngest of Edie's children, and he lay under a foreign tree in a rainforest somewhere in Vietnam.

It was under Thomas' flowering gum that the driver of the supply truck found Edie the next day. They buried her in the little cemetery where the gravestones anchor the prickly bushes, and the footprints of visiting birds are marked briefly in the shifting, red sand.