

MAUREEN KOZICKA

SQUARE TRIANGLE

Stirling Downs.

Sunday.

Dear Uncle Bill,

I've just been standing in the sun. Waiting for the steak to cook for breakfast. Dad's gone for the horses. We've got a big day mustering the boundary, and the way things have gone since Mum died, I reckon this'll have to be my last muster. I can't even look the old man square in the face any more. This house is that bloody cold, empty and silent. Except for our clattering boots and the dishes getting chucked in the sink. What can you expect? Dad and I are like two robots. Working as though we're both automated.

Yet outside there a minute ago — remember how Mum used to curl up in that soft old chair in the corner of the verandah, let the dishes wait for five minutes, and soak up the early morning sun? We used to laugh and reckon she couldn't get enough of the Queensland sunshine. But she'd say, "It's the only time of day the sun is friendly. I'm recharging my batteries — listening to everything."

I suddenly woke up to what she was on about you know. The morning had a waiting feel about it. Waiting for me to understand something. One person goes and it makes no difference, does it. The same stillness, the wind only starting to get up through the trees; the little foal trying to work out how to live, struggling around after old Bessie; that same dingo howling its question over against the hill. I could actually hear seeds popping, and the birds of course are the prima donnas. It's funny, we always have the news blaring forth, but I didn't turn it on. Wouldn't have been able to hear anything. Maybe I'd miss what it was all trying to tell me. That old mango tree that came down is shooting already. That's another tree for some other little bloke to build his tree-house in one day. The whole world goes on building and growing regardless, doesn't it. A huge spider web near Mum's roses. Every now and then I walk right through it, without fail. Today it's there again, the same meticulous detail. All set up and glistening in the mist.

What the hell's it all about, Uncle Bill. Mum used to say, "Do the best you can with what you've been given and don't worry. Nobody's got it all. Least of all me." She was wrong there, eh. never be anyone like Mum. Never let anyone down. Wouldn't know how to go about I reckon. Used to think the same about Dad. Not any more.

It's a funny thing about Dad. He was holding up pretty well, although losing weight trying to spend as much time as he could at the hospital, then back here to check the place was still O.K. It was only two days before . . . Mum was conscious for a while. Don't know what they talked about, but when I came into the room, Dad suddenly had a strange, small look about him. It sounds damn silly. He's such a big bloke. Yet there was this fallen in look about him. Do you know what I mean. All Mum said to me before she slipped back into unconsciousness was, "Look after Dad for me Tom." It was the last thing she said.

I was too upset at the time, but I've thought since, that was the time Dad started to change. Losing Mum hit him real hard, but there was more to it than that. Did you notice it? There was something else wrong.

For a couple of weeks I kept having this feeling. As though something was missing. Then this other thing happened. Hit me like a sky rocket. I can't write about it. Can't expect you to explain it either. You and I have always talked the same language somehow, so you'll understand that I've simply got to leave home. What the old man does now is his affair. He's on his own.

I'd like to hear from you though before I go. There's no one else I can talk to. I remember you and Mum and Dad were good mates when you were young. Mum used to tell me — something about getting caught by a river in flood once wasn't it? But I'm raving on, and the steak's had it. Have to chuck it and start again.

Better get going, the horses are coming up to the yard already.

Love to Auntie Pat if she's there.

Tom.

Mt. Waverley Station.

Thursday.

Dear Tom,

I'm writing to you — one man to another. In this kind of situation I'm no longer your Uncle Bill, provider of birthday pressies, kind words after a fall, benevolent sympathiser when things go wrong. More's the pity.

However I'm glad you feel close enough to vent your feelings. Unless you want to be helped, you can't be helped, if you ask me. You'll have no difficulty understanding your father's reactions once I've explained a couple of things — on paper, Tom. Not in person as I ought

to I'm afraid. I suffer from a distinct shortage of the commodity commonly known as guts, as you'll realise soon enough.

Your father was the sort of kid who always fought with anger against an injustice, regardless of how he'd come out of it. Loyal to the point of idiocy in my opinion. A friend of George's could ruddy well commit murder and he'd see the reason for it. Rather conflicting these two traits in my brother's character, although the latter always seemed to prevail and will continue to do so I trust.

Yes Tom, the three of us were good mates. Your mother must have told you about the day we were mustering cattle out of the bottom paddock. There'd been a storm and we were all soaking wet. Suddenly the river came down in a five foot wave, leaving George on one side of the raging torrent and your mother and me on the other side. George rode off to bring the dinghy back on the truck, but his horse crippled his leg in a melon hole and he had to walk. Muriel and I found some wood in the old hut and managed to dry out. Just as well, because George didn't get back with the dinghy till the following day.

As you say the three of us were good mates, but it wasn't long after that adventure that George and Muriel were married. By then I was down in Victoria. I remember Dad writing to say he'd never seen George so happy. A bit of a contrast to me and your Aunty Pat. I suppose we both married on the rebound. I know I did. And unless you're totally blind and deaf, the family grapevine will long ago have informed you of our extra-curricular interests. Still, we get by.

Muriel and George however were a different kettle of fish. Never did anything apart. Take the mustering not much horse sense Muriel, eh. But she'd always be there, poking along at the tail of the mob. As for George, you know yourself he'd not only front up in a dress shop, but have them bringing out the entire stock for Muriel to try on. I've tried to get George to step aside on the odd occasion just for fun, but he honestly never saw the point. Envied him of course. Pat did too I think. Probably hoping for something similar when she left me for that Carruthers fellow a few years ago, but I digress. Point is, your Dad was and always will be a one woman man.

George used to be fond enough of me, but in a puzzled tolerant sort of way. Although we look a bit alike, we never quite saw eye to eye. However his fondness for you Tom is something else again. I don't want to put pressure on you or justify what has happened, but you're the only one he cares about now, I assure you. It's desperately important that you don't turn your back on him. Yes I know. You've got righteous indignation rising in your throat. You loved your mother. O.K. then.

Why in this bloody wide world would your father turn around and have a cheap affair with a floozy as soon as your mother died. Brutal isn't it. But fact. So let's face it.

You put your finger on it Tom when you noticed the time your Dad began to change — that last time they talked together. You were right of course. There was more to it. More even than the tragedy of losing Muriel to bring about that change in George. Enough to turn him to the nearest warm human contact, although such a shallow and shadowy semblance of what he'd known. But let's face it — in his extremity he turned to life didn't he. Not death.

At the moment he's so stricken with remorse and shame and general disgust, intensifying his shock and loss, that his morale is explosively low. Imagine then, what is it going to take for the charge to go right off. Nothing more or less I reckon, than to be left alone.

I don't think you'll do that Tom, once you understand. Mind you no one will blame you a bit if you go ahead as planned. Family, friends, neighbours, not to mention the local gossips. They'll all say, "Of course you couldn't expect the poor boy to stay after that!" But are you still a boy?

I think I know you well enough Tom to judge you as being ready to handle what I've got to tell you. Your mother has left us, and George will never bring it up himself. In all fairness to you and the consequences of what you feel you have to do, and in all fairness to George — in trouble now but still loyal to the core; I have to tell you Tom, that he is not your father.

Your Mum did love another man; but when he learned she was pregnant, he just lit out. Couldn't take the thought of permanent responsibility. That was his weakness, and his sorrow as time passed. You'll realise one day it's possible to love two people at the same time, in different ways. Muriel was always the lovable, sensitive woman you remember. She loved George in a different perhaps less exciting — but more durable and lasting way. Their marriage seemed so natural and right for them both. No one gave it a second thought.

Think no less of your mother for this, Tom. She'd been let down badly. She still married for love as well as the security of a home for you. Rather, think less of the man who left her stranded. Think more of George. A trusting man. Not for him the kind of mind that pondered your early arrival.

The only criticism I have of your mother is that she could never bring herself to tell him. In the beginning she put it off, I suppose, afraid of spoiling their happiness. As time went by and they had no children of their own, you became more and more important to George who was

glad at least he'd had one child. Do you see. Was she going to let George down by telling him? Or by not telling him? All those years she must have been torn with indecision. Human frailty. We all suffer from it. For the first time in his life George showed frailty in himself when Muriel finally changed her mind and told him.

Think carefully about all this, Tom. If I know the man you're fast becoming, I doubt very much you'll do George the injustice of leaving him now, the only true father you've known. Instead, I imagine you'll feel closer to him.

My idea is, get stuck into some decent hard work the two of you. Those fences down by the river are rotten after the floods. Work daylight till dark. Don't leave the old man. Get in a couple to cook and do the odd jobs. You both need to be properly fed. Make sure the woman keeps the place as Muriel liked it and feeling like home. Get into a good argument about next year's plans. You told me yourself he wished he had more improved pasture, but it'll mean a hell of a lot more fencing. Remember the fun times. Talk about the good memories. there'll be days when you'll hardly swop a word, but that's not important. All he needs now is time, good hard work and simply having you around. You did right to stand in the sun that morning and take a look around.

When you decide the time has come to talk, and George tells you who your real father is, try hard to think of the man with some compassion — for all that he lost.

Tom your mother feels so close to me now, it's as though she's dictating over my shoulder. I'd say that what I have written to you is very close indeed to what your very dear Mum would have had me write.

I'm leaving for overseas this week, Tom. Taking the early flight out of Townsville Friday for London. Looking at that new harvester in France for a start.

I'll be home about Christmas, by which time I'd like to hope that you'll be back to thinking me again as your favourite uncle.

Bill.