

Lennie Wallace

THE BEREAVED

Lil Hunter was dead. Ted Hunter brought the news. Stumbling down the track that wove the two miles from their farm to ours, mouth agape, a trickle of saliva drooling from the corner of his lip, red cheeks puffing, he almost fell at our gate.

We saw him coming and knew by his uncharacteristic haste that something terrible had happened. Tod and I were feeding the poddy calves when we saw him lumbering through the paddock, lurching from side to side of the narrow track. We could even hear his breathing. It rasped in his throat like a blunt saw in hardwood.

Alarmed by the unusual sight of Ted in a dreadful hurry we left the calves and ran to the gate. Miriam was throwing scraps to the chooks and saw him too.

"Mum!" she cried, concern pitching her voice an octave higher. Ted Hunter was never in a hurry. Never!

Mother came quickly from the kitchen rubbing her hands on her calico apron, her creased face crinkled with worry. Lil was her friend. Nothing short of calamity would make Ted hurry like that. She ran to us at the gate. That was how all the Macdonalds except Dad, who was away shearing, met Ted Hunter as he staggered in.

"She's gone, Dolly," he gasped, wiping the escaping spittle with the back of his hand. "She's gone. I'm left on me own."

Mum looked puzzled. Lil would never voluntarily desert her responsibilities. Something too horrible to contemplate had happened. She led Ted to the squatter's chair in the kitchen, Dad's favourite. We followed with the two littlies who'd appeared from nowhere like a clutch of chickens.

"Now, Ted," Mum said in the calm tone she used with us when we came back bloodied and bruised from some expedition. "Tell me what happened."

"She's dead, Dolly." His voice was breaking from sorrow or disbelief. "She just fell down dead."

Mum made a sympathetic sound but an expressive shadow flicked across her face suggesting that she, like me, had a picture of Lil dropping in the traces like the Old Grey Mare.

The heavy cast iron kettle on the wood stove was continuously just under the boil. With deft movements Mum lifted the stove lid, put the kettle over the open hole and jiggled the fire with a poker. In seconds steam billowed from the kettle's spout and its light metal lid began a demure tap dance.

"Here," Mum said soothingly as she handed Ted a cup of the freshly brewed tea. "Get this into you and tell me what happened."

As he sipped, she called Miriam and whispered to her to get Mr Scanlan. The Police.

Ted found it hard to tell the story. He'd been in the kitchen. Lil had been outside feeding the chooks, milking the cow and giving her old mare a fork of hay. She'd made a pot of tea and left toast in the oven for him as usual. He was sitting eating it when he heard a bit of a clatter outside and Gypsy snicker. He called out to Lil but she didn't answer.

When he'd finished his tea he went to investigate. Lil usually came back inside and got his hot breakfast before she set off to do the major chores of the day. Today she'd planned to use Gypsy to snig in some of the logs she'd felled to make a floor in the pig sty. Ted was going to concrete it but that was before they found he had a bad heart.

As Ted left the house he saw Gypsy standing back, her old speckled-grey neck arched, snorting half-heartedly at something familiar yet unfamiliar on the ground near the hay stack.

It was Lil.

The hay fork was still in her grip. She lay still, on her back. Her battered hat tipped forward as she fell and covered her face, brown and creased as old wrapping paper.

Ted called. She didn't move. He went to her. Took her hand. No pulse. Tried to sit her up, to get her to speak to him. No use. She was gone.

He was close to panic. Lil had done everything for him all their life together. What would become of him? He had to get help.

Without a second glance at the small inert figure near the hay he shambled off, down the road to our place, leaving Gypsy and the hayshed cats to keep vigil. Gypsy, reassured by Ted's appearance, moved closer, softly nudged her prostrate mistress. A gentle reminder about that

promised hay. The cats sniffed Lil in turn, turned their backs on the corpse and with tails and backs bristling stalked warily back to the shed.

Mother, with Sergeant Scanlan's help, made "the arrangements". The shock of losing Lil — and his security — battered Ted into numb helplessness.

The doctor wrote the death certificate.

"If she'd had that by-pass done last year when she came to me, she'd be here today." The doctor glowered at Ted sitting despondently in Dad's chair. "Do you hear?"

Ted stirred himself. "Didn't know she was sick. She never said."

The nurse came with the doctor to help Mum lay Lil out. There was no undertaker.

"What'd be the good of telling him?" she remarked caustically to Mum with a jerk of her head in Ted's direction. "Fat lot of good it'd do her. He'd never raise a hand to help."

"He'll miss her," said Mum. She'd miss Lil more. They'd been friends for over fifty years. Grown up together and then neighbours all their married lives. Lil had no children. All that heavy work had twisted her insides.

Lil used to mind us when Dad was away and Mum went in to have a new baby. We slept on mattresses in her back room, came across mornings and evenings to feed the chooks and water Mum's vegies. We either went to school or followed Lil around the paddocks.

Sometimes she hoisted two or three of us on old Gypsy as she led her back from snigging posts for the new fence she put around the corn patch, or let us ride home after she unharnessed the old mare when the ploughing was finished.

Everyone said Lil worked the place like a man. But Mum said she wasn't at all like a man. She was "refined". She did have a certain grace about her, light and free-moving, quick as a tiddler fish darting away in the water weeds. Anything she did looked effortless, so that when she let us help we puzzled at how difficult the job really was. Watching Lil it seemed so easy.

From a distance Lil looked like a young girl, slightly built with the fluid action of a gymnast. There was no mistaking her age when you got close enough to see her face, weathered and wrinkled. Despite her slender build Lil was strong. She could lift the heaviest rocks and the

biggest posts. We tugged and pushed and levered but Lil handled the largest loads with ease and laughed at our blundering efforts.

Ted had a bad heart and couldn't do any hard work so we helped Lil pick her corn. She did all the heavy jobs and could hold her own with any of the men at hay making. Though she scarcely came up to their shoulders she was wiry and quick, forking hay well over her head with a natural rhythm. Nothing she did seemed laboured. Every move was graceful. A smile was never far from her cracked lips and when she smiled her eyes lit up and sparkled and she looked as young and as carefree as any of us kids. She saw the funny side of everything too. Even Ted, Mum told Dad.

She was a good cook, too. When we went to stay she made all our favourites. Gingerbread men, fairy cakes and butterfly sponges. Lil had a light touch with everything, Mum said.

She was good with animals too. When Dad's best horse went down with colic and it looked as if he'd die Lil mixed up a drench for him and sat with Banjo until morning and he was up and about again. Lil was better than a vet. Dad said. Lil cared.

She'd never go anywhere much. Ted wouldn't, so she had to stay home too. He was as helpless as a baby without her, she said. We laughed with her at the thought of big, fat, balding Ted as a baby.

Though she loved animals and was so good with them, Lil had no pets. Gypsy was a workmate and they got on well. And there were the two half-wild cats in the hayshed. They got fresh milk every day to keep the mice from Lil's carefully hoarded corn. She never had a dog. Ted couldn't stand them. It must've been awfully lonely for her in the evenings without a cat or a dog for company. Ted never spoke much. He listened to the wireless while Lil washed up and tidied the kitchen and then they went to bed.

Dad came home from shearing specially to take us to the funeral. With Lil gone there was no one to mind the little ones so we were all loaded into the old ute for the trip to the church. A minister came from town to hold the service. He didn't know Lil. She didn't have time to spare for church-going but he saw how the tiny church was packed. Some of the men, shy at church-going too, waited on the grass outside. Lilian Louise must have been a wonderful loving Christian woman, the minister said, to have so many good friends to care for her.

It was hard to believe that the silver-handled box in the aisle held Lil, our Lil who was never still, the Lil who was always ready to stop

for a kind word to any of her neighbour's children. A Lil who bandaged our wounds, who commented companionably on the fish we caught or the new baby we'd brought with us for her approval.

"Lilian Louise", the minister called her. A pretty name. Mum said she had been the prettiest girl in the school with her short black curls and her sloe-black eyes. Lively and clever with it.

We were here to bury Lil but we'd never bury our memories of her.

The pall-bearers, six of them, lifted the casket. Any one of them could easily have carried her on his own. We stood back respectfully as they lowered Lil to her rest. Some of the women had clusters of white roses to drop on her coffin. They waited courteously for Ted to throw the widower's customary handful of earth.

He hung back, uncertain now Lil was gone, what to do.

The minister took his arm but Ted resisted. He was staring at a work-shiny shovel with its crude handmade handle, thoughtlessly left in the pile of dirt at the grave-side. Awkwardly he made a move towards it. His mouth opened and shut without any speech. Concerned, the minister tried again to propel him to the head of the grave and his widower's sacred rite. Ted remained aloof, wholly unconscious of the clergyman's prompting.

Feet shuffled uncomfortably. Mother gave Miriam her roses to hold and moved towards Ted. Unexpectedly he suddenly straightened his back, squared his shoulders and turned to face his wife's friends, searching for a fitting tribute to pay to honour her. He frowned. His face crumpled as he strove to compose his eulogy. He looked at all Lil's friends for inspiration but his eyes kept returning to the abandoned shovel.

With a final effort at self-control he blurted, "She was pretty to watch with a shovel!"

And to the horror and embarrassment of all the mourners threw himself on the raw, red earth and wept like a baby.