

Brenton Rossow

A DELIGHTFUL WEEKEND IN THE COUNTRY

Blinch's fingers were creeping up the side of her leg to the synthesised sounds of *Tears for Fears*. Ten years since he'd lost his virginity to her but they'd remained good friends. At eighteen they would crawl back from the pub; her as sober as a judge in a floral dress, him all leathers and long hair, smashing the windows of shipyards with bottles and stones from the railway track.

She was a good-natured girl who grew into a mature woman. After many years of complaining about life in Australia, Blinch finally left The Big Brown Hump for the jungles of South East Asia and became an English teacher. He and Lucy kept in touch and every year he returned.

Somehow, within the loose morality of Generation X it was perfect — they didn't have to get married and drive each other insane and could instead experience that special spark, caused by a long absence.

He poured Lucy another Kahlua and milk and stared at the outline of her nipple. His mother banged on the glass window behind him, opening the sliding glass door of the garage as her two little dogs ran inside and began scratching lines up and down Blinch's and Lucy's legs.

Blinch quickly withdrew his hand from Lucy's leg but his mother already knew what he was doing. Everybody knew what Blinch was like. His mother once told him about the importance of condoms, which he agreed was good advice, but apart from that, nobody ever said anything to him about his loose behaviour.

Looking over his shoulder as his mother entered the garage, he asked, "When are we going down South, Mum?"

"Umm... In about an hour, I guess."

When he first met Lucy, she was incredibly shy and snuck out of the garage at the first sign of dawn. Now everybody had grown older they didn't seem to worry too much. Lucy was a qualified teacher. His mother was a counsellor in a drug rehab center and he was still a rogue who disguised himself as a teacher in The Orient.

"Really? I just got here. I'm hanging out with Lucy. Do we have to go tonight?"

"Well, you know, we'd like to get away before it gets too late. Your father gets tired when he drives at night. You just come upstairs when you're ready and tell us what you're going to do," said his mother as she picked up her little dogs and said goodbye.

"Shit, I only just got here and they want to rush me off into the woods," he said, putting his hand back on Lucy's leg. "They've got this thing in their heads about *getting away from it all*, but I only just got here and I've got nothing to get away from. If I don't go with them for Christmas, they're going to be pissed off at me."

Lucy smiled.

"Well, family's family, Blinch. You've gotta do the right thing. Look at my brother. The cops've got a warrant out for his arrest."

"Yeh? What did he do?"

"He broke into a kiosk at the beach and the cops caught him trying to remove the safe. He went to jail for about a week and was supposed to do some community service but he didn't show up. Now he's some kind of junky and spends all his dole money on drugs. He tries to steal shit from our house. When Nana fell down in the driveway and the ambulance came to get her, he was inside, stealing money from her purse. I've tried everything. I've offered to go to counselling with him. I've fed him and given him money but the only thing he cares about is getting his fix. It's like my brother isn't there anymore. My dad and Nana have gone back to England and probably won't come back, so you should think yourself lucky. Go down to the forest with your family and make them happy. It's not like you have to do it all the time."

To Blinch, sleeping under the stars in the middle of nowhere was the last thing he wanted. All he really wanted was to push Lucy onto the bed and take her knickers off. He imagined she had similar desires, but as usual, she didn't want to get between him and his family.

"All right, I've gotta go," she said, rising to her feet, picking up her bag. "I'll catch you when you get back from down south."

"Orr, come on, Luce! Have another drink!" he said, reaching for the bottle.

"Yeh, right! I know what you want. I'll see you when you get back."

Blinch didn't know what to expect in regards to his folks' Down South expedition. Perth was technically the most isolated city in the world, and as if that wasn't enough, his parents' property was three hours drive from the city.

Getting away from it seemed like a ridiculous idea. When his mother began talking about growing tulips and breeding reindeer, he wondered what they were planning amongst the gum trees and cattle flies. What was there to escape from in Perth anyway? Sure, there were a few junkies and thieves, but most days, the city was a ghost town boarded up before ten pm. People lived in nice houses, drove nice cars, didn't pollute the environment, ate healthy food and had reasonable paying jobs. Maybe that was it. Maybe his parents were bored out of their minds. Both he and his brother had moved away and his parents had bought two little dogs to keep them company. Strange, considering his mother had sworn she would never own another animal, after his dog took a dump on her prized rug. Strange, considering his mother was a cleanliness freak, who now slept with two dogs that pissed on the carpet and chewed bones at her feet. Weren't elderly people supposed to be stable and afraid of change? Most fifty-somethings wouldn't dream of sleeping in the woods and getting up at five am to climb ladders and build a barn.

First stop was his grandparents' house to drop off a case of beer and some flowers and chocolates. His step-grandfather was a big bull of a man with a long white beard, who was once the owner of a banana plantation in the far north of Australia. He was renowned for his foul mouth and fiery temper, which had made him one of the most unpopular members of the family. As Blinch and his parents entered the living room, they saw a home nurse standing behind him with some gauze and scissors, trying her best to tend to an enormous hole in the back of his head.

Two years before, Blinch's step-grandfather had a tumor removed from his skull, but the hole had never healed. It was so deep, the old man's head took on the appearance of a cubist painting, slicing inward in a triangular fashion. When the nurse had finished patching the gauze, the old man's eyes opened as if he had been travelling to a distant shore. He carefully hunted about his feet for his neglected beer can.

"Christ! Who's this?" He said. "Who's this bloody Arab sitting in my chair? How did you manage to get through immigration? You're the bloody Shoe Bomber! The bloke who hides bombs in his shoes and blows up planes! You're one of them. You've been living all the way over there in Asia and now you're a bloody terrorist!" He shouted, slapping his hand on his knee, bellowing out a big Santa Claus laugh that bounced off the chimney and reverberated around the room.

In his teenage years, Blinch thought of his step-grandfather as a hardnosed flag-waving redneck. Now that he'd grown a little older, he was beginning to appreciate the old man's sense of humour. Just as long as he agreed with everything his step-grandfather said and ate his sandwiches and drank his beer, everything turned out ok.

Blinch's grandmother was a sweet pint-sized skeleton who couldn't give up the cigarettes. In her youth, she had been a champion sprinter who'd won many prizes but now the cigarettes had chewed up her insides and clogged her arteries. She too, was waiting for death. There was a strange feeling in the house, as if death had taken off his shoes and was waiting for someone to fall.

His grandmother apologised for not being able to make her famous Lemon Meringue but Blinch told her not to worry. After a few beers, they were off again, heading south to a place where people could *get away from it all*.

Ten kilometres from his grandmother's house, Blinch already felt as if he was in the middle of nowhere. He kept thinking, *what do people do out here? All they have are their houses and their land. Sure, it's beautiful with the trees and the birds but how could anybody make a life from this?*

The summer heat licked the countryside with its long brown tongue and over barbwire fences, black crows sat in pale dead trees. The more he thought about *getting away from it all*, the more Blinch desired all the things he was getting away from, like greasy meat pies and the smell of Lucy's knickers as they flew from his fingertips into the corner of the room.

Smooth black road, brown fields, green trees; they drove for miles without stopping. Blinch kept expecting to see a house or a person but it never happened. He fell asleep. When he came to, he found himself staring at a fat young girl who was putting petrol into the car.

The girl's dress was short but her ankles seemed to melt into her shoes. Blinch wondered if it was genetic or if she'd just spent her childhood pigging out on chocolate bars. As he got out of the car, the girl smiled and juttied out her ass. Her cute country girl's freckles were nice but the thought of her ankles emerging from a misty shower sent him straight into the store.

After four years without eating a meat pie, Blinch couldn't seem to get enough of them. In the past three days, he hadn't missed a day without eating one. His father was a vegetarian with heart problems and was jealous of his son's newfound love. He eyed the pastry like a hound looking through the window of a butcher's shop. He talked the pie down as if it was a horrible unhealthy thing,

full of horse lips and pig bladders. It was obvious he would have loved to devour one when his wife wasn't looking and wash it down with a full cream choc-milk.

Ignoring his father's lecture, Blinch walked inside and ordered an extra large pie. When he went to hand over the money, he recognised the girl behind the counter as the younger sister of his best friend from high school.

"Lee Anne!"

"Ben!" she said smiling, all gums and glistening teeth.

"Blinch! Remember? I'm your brother Scott's old friend from high school."

"Yeh, I remember now. You guys used to listen to *The Doors* and smoke pot together."

"Yeh, that's right. How's Scott doing?"

"Good! He's still fixing cars. You want his number?"

"Umm ... ahh ..." Blinch hesitated, not sure what to say, trying to find the right words. "Nah, that's OK, Lee Anne. I'm just down here for a few days with my parents visiting their property. Thanks anyway."

Lee Anne seemed hurt.

"Ah, OK. Take care. I'll tell Scott you said hello."

After leaving the petrol station, Blinch felt bad about not taking Scott's number. If he had been by himself with a car and a mobile, he would have paid him a visit, but upon this journey he was just a hollow log, dancing to the beat of his old folk's crazy drum. He had to be a good son. He had to make them happy. The stuff Lucy said about family was true. He had to cast aside his selfish desires and do the right thing.

A few kilometres down the road from the petrol station, his parents pulled into a hardware store, and his mother began talking to a big-shouldered woman in a khaki uniform.

"Yeh, I would have liked to have built a barn with my hubby," the woman said as she pruned away at the limbs of a rose. "But we didn't have the guts. It's too much bloody hard work I reckon! Where you folks at?"

"We're in Cundinup."

"Cundinup? Struth, that's a ways out! Boy, that's too far out for me. Must be beautiful, hey?"

"Yeh, it is. It's our dream place."

Back in the car, and the little dogs were jumping about, clawing at Blinch's arms and legs as they hung their heads from his window, desperate for a breath of fresh air. His mother spoke to them as if they were naughty little children, referring to herself as *Mommy*, and Blinch's father as *Daddy*, and the little dogs as *darling* and *sweetie*. Then his mother was shouting, "Look! Look!" as Blinch lunged up from his sleep to see the dogs growling and clawing at the window as a couple of emus ran alongside a barbwire fence.

Looking out the window, he saw a large grove of jarrah trees standing seventy-foot high amongst green ferns, shadowed by the metal frame of a two-storey barn on a hilltop, skeletal and half finished, covered in plastic tarpaulins.

"Those bloody whackers from Queensland still haven't delivered my tin!" shouted Blinch's father, slapping his hands on the steering wheel. "Now I can't finish enclosing the top section before Christmas!"

Through the glass windows at the front of the barn, Blinch's eyes swooped down in the valley amongst a cluster of pine trees. Far in the distance, the silvery roof of a homestead shone like the head of a pin, hidden within a pocket of bluey-grey eucalyptus.

"That there is Hillbilly Winery, my son!" shouted Blinch's father, slapping him on the back.

Apart from the tin roof, there were only trees and small patches of brown earth as if someone had dragged a razor across the jaw of a hairy green giant. The trees were magnificent, the air was fresh and orange and brown butterflies slowly opened and closed their wings. Looking towards the horizon, Blinch saw the sun filtering through the clouds.

"Come and have a wander," said his mother, moving towards the gate like a school girl on holiday. "Come on, Pippy, come on, Lilly. Let's go and have a look down at the dam."

The dogs yapped and squealed with excitement, racing off after his mother, darting between her ankles, snapping away at flies. Upon Blinch's father's back and shoulders, teams were waiting to get at his eyes or crawl into his nose and ears. They formed a pattern that resembled a black bloated love heart that oozed and swarmed. Having to look at it gave Blinch the creeps. He picked up

a dead branch and squatted at them until they dispersed and re-grouped in a more likeable design.

Scores of arrow-headed grass seeds burrowed into his socks and disappeared under his trouser cuffs. Kneeling down to remove them, he noticed a large bull ant with a shiny purple abdomen, jaws clamped around the face of a soft grey spider.

If the bull ant could have spoken, Blinch was sure it would have told the tale of a mighty battle. In a way, Blinch felt similar. Six years ago, he had disappeared into an alien landscape and seen and done amazing things, but now he was back in Australia with his parents — unable to tell his stories the way he wanted to.

Down at the dam, his mother had planted a few red canisters in the muddy soil along the water's edge and close by, half a dozen ducks were slurping up insects amongst the reeds. When the dogs saw them, they began to growl and shot off through the grass, yapping and barking.

By the time Blinch and his parents reached the dam, the ducks were long gone, and the dogs were rolling about in their muck, kicking their feet into the air in the midst of a vile Pagan ritual.

"Pippy! Lilly! You naughty things! Don't do that! It's horrible!" shouted his mother as the dogs continued to roll about and paid no attention.

Blinch just smiled and looked into the pine trees like an embarrassed stranger who didn't want to be there. What could he do? The dogs were his mother's replacement for him and his brother, and he had to accept them.

"This dam is me big bath tub, son," said his father. "This is where we wash our bods and get our water from. I'm gonna build me a flying fox from those treetops, so you can ride down the valley and jump off into the dam."

Blinch's father always put on his Scottish accent when he was excited about something. "Yeh, or maybe I'll make a concrete slippery slide, so you can come hurtling down this hillside and get airborne. What do you think of that?" he asked as he sucker-punched Blinch in the ribs.

"I'd say you want to worry about amoebic meningitis, Dad. When you jump into a stagnant pool of water and it goes up your nose, your brain swells up and the bugs kill you in forty-eight hours."

As soon as he said it, Blinch felt weird, as if their roles had been reversed and he had suddenly become an annoying parent.

To the left of the dam, a group of kangaroos were feeding upon the grass in the late afternoon sun. When the dogs saw them, they tore up the hillside.

There were six or seven roos but the dogs scared them off. Blinch conjured up an image of a kangaroo rising up on its tail, kicking one of the dogs into the bushes.

Shit! Am I really that twisted? He thought. Am I really that jealous of these stupid little fucks?

Back at the half-finished barn, the wind had picked up a few notches and was blowing the tarpaulins about. As they finished their dinner, Blinch's mother started up one of her favourite speeches.

"You know it's lovely to have you back, but we really worry about you over there in Asia."

Blinch had heard it all before over the phone and usually let his mother get it out of her system. This time he decided to bite and try to get to the bottom of it.

"What do you worry about, Mum?"

"Oh you know, just some of the places you go. If something was to happen how would your father and I know? We'd be devastated. It would be such a tragedy to lose you."

Blinch's father knew what was coming and shifted about uneasily in his chair.

"What do you mean lose me? You're not going to lose me. I'm not a toy!"

"Well, it's just so dangerous over there. The current situation with terrorism and all..."

"What are you talking about? What has any of that got to do with me!"

"Well, we watch the news, and sometimes they mention some of the countries you go to. It's just so dangerous over there."

"Well, what do you want me to do? I can't avoid somewhere just because some tin-can news station stirs up a whole lot of sensationalised crap. They're all in competition. It's just a case of who's got the wildest story. In a city like this some small piece of news becomes so blown out of proportion, you'd think a spider drowning in a toilet bowl was a major threat."

“Oh OK, so you know it all, don't you!” said Blinch's mother, raising her voice to meet his aggressive tone. “I wish you'd just think about us sometimes.”

“Hang on a minute! I'm always thinking about you guys. A few years ago, I realised one of the biggest things holding me back was the pain I'd cause you if I died. Then I realised it was just such a stupid way to live my life. I couldn't stay here in Perth, I wouldn't be happy, I'd be bored out of my mind. I'd end up in a prison or with a mental illness.”

And with that the mood was spoiled. Blinch didn't want to have an argument with his parents — in fact it was one of the things he promised he wouldn't do — but somehow it had happened; somehow his mother had gotten under his skin and brought the angry little boy out in him.

He skulked off to his allocated bed in the corner of the barn, picked up a book and sparked his gas lantern. Half an hour later, the wind blew stronger and the two tarpaulins at the end of his bed began flapping about.

Looking out the window above his head, he saw a cluster of seventy-foot high jarrah trees shaking madly in the wind. One of the trees was old and gnarled — dead at the top — and hanging dangerously close to the barn.

What am I doing here? He thought. *My mother carries on about being killed by terrorists in Thailand, and now in their obsessive madness, they've gone and built a barn — half-finished, on top of a hill, under giant jarrah trees that could very well fall on top of the roof and crush me in my bed.*

As Blinch walked outside and pissed in the dirt, he became furious.

It's just typical! he thought. *They harp on about how I'm going to be murdered by terrorists then stick me in this fucking barn with giant fucking jarrah trees hanging over it. It's just so typical!*

He began to laugh. It was beautiful. All the anger he'd suppressed, bubbling up like a hot spring. Everything he'd tried to be. All the smiles he put on; it just wasn't in his nature to bite his lip and grin. He too was a paranoid obsessive freak. He too was a dreamer in his own little world; a tragic creature on the face of the earth, full of passionate mixed up emotions and desires. So what, if he didn't agree with his mother's harebrained schemes and ridiculous monologues about the ever-present danger of terrorism; he too was guilty of some pretty

wacky ideas. For the first time since the journey had begun, Blinch smiled a real smile. The chance of a tree falling on the barn was remote. He'd be all right.

He walked back to his bed and crawled under the covers. In the darkness his old man was wandering about, looking up at the roof, shining a flashlight about.

"Pretty strong winds, hey?"

"Yeh ... bloody strong! Don't worry, she'll be right, Dad! We'll live."

"You're right, me boy! We will. We'll see another day ... and it'll probably be a good one."

Blinch rolled over, looked out the window, and saw the moon. It was so bright it illuminated his pillow. It was so bright it made his ears glow. The wind and the trees no longer frightened him. He rolled over and went to sleep. Lucy was waiting; lily-white legs walking between the centipede trees.



michelle dicinoski

SIGHTLINES

You've strung prayer flags across
our back deck: reds and golds so rich
that butterflies cling to them
mistaking them for flowers.
Beneath are my pots
of basil, thyme, rose geranium.
A house-warming aloe from Kylie
rests on a hoop-pine table.
By the doormat, pink thongs
still thick with last week's mud.
In the backyard, the clothesline's
bright with tea-towels and underwear.
In all the small things that we call ours,
I see a prayer and a flag.