

## **dark about the light**

Word count: 2924

The morning after was almost like normal. I did my chores and Dad worked up in the top paddock with Chook Barry and Leon MacLeod and a couple of others. The only interesting thing that happened was I threw a tennis ball that was lying around in the yard and it went straight down the drainpipe on the side of the house. And that was interesting only because it hadn't happened before.

I was looking for another tennis ball when Dad and Chook came into the yard. Chook was talking very loud as per usual. I went over and Chook said *g'day Sam-I-am* and stretched and his shirt lifted up. His tummy looked crazy, I couldn't stop looking at it. If you can imagine what a sack of meal looks like right after you've put a knife through it, that's what Chook's tummy looked like. All hairy and brown and like everything was rushing to come out through his belly button.

Chook pointed at my hands. *See you've been playing bongos with an echidna* he said.

*No I haven't* I said.

*Only joking* he said. Chook always says weird stuff then says only joking. My hands were mad with splinters and they hurt so even if it was a joke it wasn't funny.

Dad kneeled down and said *how you doing Sammy?*

*Good Dad* I said.

He said *you were very brave last night mate, brave as buggery* and he ran his hand through my hair. It felt lovely. I said *what's buggery* and Chook laughed and Dad said *how about you put the kettle on, Chook?* Chook went inside and Dad looked at me. He smiled but it was sort of crooked, like someone was pulling his mouth with string.

Dad asked if I'd done all my chores and I said I had. I told him about the tennis ball going in the drainpipe and I asked if that'd ever happened before. Dad said he didn't know. Then he grabbed me and for a second it was a bit scary because it was so quick but then I realised he was giving me a hug. My face was in his shirt, it smelt good. It smelt clean and dirty at the same time. Dad said *I'm sorry I left you last night Sam.*

*It's OK Dad* I said.

*I'm sorry you had to see Arnie like that* he said.

*It was dark* I said.

Then Dad stopped hugging me and he looked at me again and his mouth was slack and serious. *Someone's coming round to ask a few things* he said.

*Jane?* I said.

*No* Dad said. *A copper.*

*What for?* I said.

*Just so they can dot all their eyes* Dad said.

I said *is it the same one from when Mum and Dad said Constable Mulvey, that's right mate.*

*Rita* I said.

*We call her Constable Mulvey when she's working* Dad said.

*She said call her Rita* I said.

Dad snorted like a horse. *Then I guess you've got official permission* he said.

*Arnie saw Mum* I said.

*Don't* Dad said.

*He must've stopped looking at the road* I said. *Then his headlights went funny and he went into the tree.*

Dad ran his hand through my hair again but he did it hard. *You don't say anything about that* he said. *It's not right, Sammy.*

*You're hurting my hair* I said.

*You're not going to say anything about your Mum or any of that stuff are you?* Dad said.

*No Dad* I said.

*Not to Constable Mulvey and not to Chook and not to me* Dad said. I shook my head but it hurt. He had my hair in his hand like a kitten in its mum's mouth. Then he let go and he hugged me and he said *I'm sorry Sammy.* It sounded like he was crying. *Are you crying Dad* I said. *No mate* he said. Then we went inside.

Chook gave Dad a cuppa and a biscuit. I had milk and a biscuit. The biscuit was a shortbread cream and it tasted beautiful. I asked Dad if I could have another one and he said yes which was not what I expected. I was eating the second biscuit when Rita came in. I like Rita. She's very tall, she'd probably get the tennis ball out of the drainpipe without even going on her tippy toes. She also has red hair like me, which is more special than the other kinds of hair. That's what Mum used to say. Mum had brown hair so she wasn't talking herself up by saying it. Mum doesn't have hair now, she's just a big bright light.

*How's everyone today?* Rita said.

*Fine* Dad said. He stood up and then sat down again. *Didn't hear you pull up.*

*I walked up from the road, tow truck's just taking the ute* Rita said.

*Ah* Dad said.

*Mr Barry* Rita said.

*G'day* Chook said. *Tea?*

*No thanks* Rita said. She looked at me and said *g'day Sammy.*

I said hi but I said it full of biscuit. Rita smiled. Dad said *go on now Sammy*. I said *why* and Dad started to get up and Chook said *easy Dob* and Rita said *this won't take a minute, Sam, go on*.

I went outside onto the verandah and down into the yard. I counted to sixty before I even got to the clothesline. I went back up onto the verandah and I heard Rita still talking to Dad. She hadn't meant literally a minute. So I went back down into the yard and round the back to see Marcus. He was close to the fence nuzzling the grass with his nose. There were flies on him. I counted seventeen, not including the ones buzzing round his bum. I got up on the fence and put my chin on my arms.

Marcus didn't look up but he moved around a bit to face me. If he wanted to he could charge right at me. He didn't want to though, Marcus is my mate. One time he charged at Chook but only because Chook was being rough. Marcus is actually very nice. He never kicks and he's very patient when Dad gives him a wash, and he lets the chooks hang round him and even sit on him sometimes. Chooks being the birds, not Chook Barry the man. Chook is called Chook because his name is Henry which goes to Hen which goes to Chook. So it sort of has to do with chickens but not really.

Sometimes I talk to Marcus but mostly we like to be quiet. I wonder what Marcus would sound like if he could talk. I think he would sound like Dad, but Dad when he's doing a voice. The voice he does when he gets off the phone with the insurance man or when he sees the Prime Minister on TV. Serious but also a joke, but a bit scary because the voice can get very loud very quick. I started to do the voice but I couldn't do it too well. Then I started to think about last night with Arnie.

He was halfway out the ute when we found him. I don't know if he tried to climb out or if he just ended up that way, but he still had his seatbelt on so either way he couldn't get out. At first I thought the ute's engine was trying to turn over, then we got closer and I realised the sound was Arnie. I'd never heard someone do that sound before. If Arnie was an engine you'd sell him for scrap just based off the sound. All rattly and wet and with bits in it. Dad said *Jesus Effing Christ*. He didn't say *effing* he said the swear. He said *stay there Sammy* and I stopped and he went down to the ute with the torch and he said *Arnie mate can you hear me? Arnie it's Dob it's Col Dobson*. And I just stood there in the dark and waited.

I looked around and I could see the lights from the house, the ones Dad had switched on when he got out of bed. The verandah light and the kitchen light were taking turns being bright and dim. The lights always go funny when Mum's around. Dad said he'd have to replace the generator but there's nothing wrong with the generator, it's Mum that does it. She does it every time.

I looked back around and Dad was saying *Sammy Sammy Sammy*, and I don't know if he started saying it when I turned or if him saying it made me turn. Dad said *come here mate I need your help*. I started walking down to the ute. It was leaning up on its back wheels like it was trying to sniff a treat in the tree, but really it was because Arnie had driven into the tree so fast. I said *will it explode Dad* and he said *no mate*. I kept pricking my feet on rocks and sticks because it was dark and the ute was off the road. Dad put the torch on me and he said *Christ Sammy where's your shoes?* and he came over and picked me up and carried me to the ute and put me in the trailer. *Sorry mate* Dad said. *There's loads of glass*. Dad gave me the torch. *I need you to keep the light on my hands, OK?* he said. *So I can see what I'm doing*.

*OK Dad* I said.

*Mr Mogg needs our help so we really need to pay attention, OK mate?*

*OK Dad* I said. I'd never heard Dad call Arnie Mr Mogg before. It made him sound like he was from a book. I held the torch in one hand and I held onto the side of the trailer with the other hand. I had to hold on because the ute was leaning and if I let go I'd slide down the trailer like it was a slippery dip. We have a slippery dip in the yard but it's rusty and if you go on it your pants go brown.

*Don't put the light on Arnie, Sammy. Just hold it on my hands* Dad said.

I held the light on Dad's hands. They were covered with blood. I'd seen blood on Dad's hands lots of times, usually when he was helping the cows have their babies. Arnie's blood looked the same as the cows' blood. Dad was talking to Arnie and Arnie was talking back but not with words. He would breathe slow and then fast and his breath was like slop in a bucket. Dad stopped talking to Arnie and just said *eff eff eff eff eff eff*.

*The airbag's big* I said.

*I know* Dad said.

*He's still got his seatbelt on* I said.

*Eff's sake Sam keep the light on me* Dad said. Dad wiped his hands on his shirt and got his phone out. Dad's phone is all cracked because he dropped it on the tiles. I like it, it looks like spider-webs. Dad said *you're OK Arnie*. He held the phone up and said *eff* again. I'd never heard him do so many swears. *I'll be back Arnie* he said. *I'm coming back mate*. Dad picked me up out of the trailer and carried me back up towards the road. He put me down and said *Sammy I need you to stay here mate. Don't go down to the ute and don't go onto the road. I need to go back to the house.*

*Why* Dad I said.

*There's no signal out here* he said. *I need to use the phone in the house.*

*It's Mum* I said. *She makes things break.*

*Sit down* Dad said.

*Will Arnie die* I said.

*Sit down and don't move* Dad said.

I sat down and Dad ran. He took the torch so I sat in the dark. I'm not scared of the dark, I like it. It means Mum's around. The nights she visits the stars go out. I think they get shy. Some nights I go out and sit on the shed and wait for her, but mostly she doesn't come so I just look at the stars. There's billions of them, I read it in my book. The most I've ever actually counted is three hundred and eight and then I had to stop because my eyes went funny. It was like I'd fallen into a hole but upwards.

Arnie started to cough. Then he made a noise like the plug being yanked out of the bath. I made the noise too. After a while it was just me making the noise so I stopped. Arnie was rattling a bit but all things considered he was very quiet.

*Did you see my Mum?* I said.

Arnie didn't say anything. Maybe he couldn't. He didn't have to answer because I knew he'd seen her. I was up on the shed when he came round the bend from the main road and drove down near our place. I knew it was Arnie because I could see all the teddies strapped to his roof bar. Mum was right over him. Arnie was speeding up and slowing down and swerving round a bit but Mum pretty much stayed over him the whole time. It looked funny. It made me think of night fishing with Dad, when we stand ankle-deep in the dam with our torches and the yabbies tap dance in circles near our feet. I yelled out and waved but they were too far away. I climbed down off the shed and that was when I slipped and got the splinters. I didn't really feel them though, I just got up and started to run.

Arnie and Mum were almost at the top of our drive by then. Arnie's headlights looked like a couple of sparklers, all fizzy and hot and swirling. Then they went out and Arnie started to turn like he was going to come up our drive, but then he turned the other way and went down off the road. There was a crash but it sort of sounded like music. Like windchimes but if they were made of corrugated iron. Then Mum was gone and everything went dark and quiet. I got to the top of the drive and I went onto the road and my feet were sore on the scratchy bitumen. When I got to the other side I heard the muddy churning that I didn't know was Arnie. Then I heard Dad running and yelling behind me, and I turned around and saw the flash of his torch, and I closed my eyes and waited for him to find me.

Arnie died before Dad got back from the house. He'd stopped rattling and it was just me sitting in the dirt doing big breaths that came out like speech bubbles in the cold. I heard Dad coming for ages, his boots were all crunchy on the gravel of the drive. When he saw me he said *ambos are coming* and he went down to the ute and he stayed there for a long time. Then he came back up and he sat down next to me and he switched his light off and we sat there in the dark not saying anything. Arnie was Dad's mate since school. After a while Dad said *come on Sammy* and we went back towards the house. Halfway down the drive Dad picked me up and I suppose I fell asleep because suddenly I was in bed and it was this morning.

The sun was big and hot and low in the sky. Marcus sneezed and I said *God bless you Marcus*. I don't think a bull can be a Christian but it's still polite. I'd been sort of snoozing with my chin on the fence. I looked back at the house and I saw Dad and Rita and Chook coming round the side. Rita waved and I waved back. It had taken much longer than a minute but that was OK. It wasn't a lie it was just a figure of speech. Rita was still waving. Chook was pointing and Dad was running. Marcus sneezed again. I looked back round and the sun was bigger and hotter and lower and it wasn't the sun. Marcus was down on his knees like he was praying, like he'd been converted. Dad grabbed me and pulled me up and away from the fence and he started to run. I said *put me down* and I started to squirm and Dad said *stop it Sammy* and he was holding me hard and I said *it's hurting* and he said *hold on to me* and I said *do you see it* and he said *please Sammy* and I said *it's Mum* and Dad said *no Sammy* and I said *it's Mum it's Heaven* and Dad said *it's not your mother* and I said *she's an angel you said she's an angel* and I suppose I was screaming but Dad didn't say anything he just puffed and puffed and ran and ran and I looked at Mum and she was so close and bright and beautiful and I could feel the heat coming from her and I was kicking and screaming and reaching and she was so close and then we were falling, falling upwards into the darkness of the light.