

Paradise

‘The cow’s milk has stopped.’ Milly shows her mother the bucket; the swish of white that barely covers the bottom.

‘Your father won’t like this,’ says her mother, gritting her teeth. She’s sweeping the floor, creating more dust than it’s worth. ‘I’ll take a look when he gets home.’ It’s Sunday; her husband’s day off.

On Sundays he hunts wild pigs. ‘Relaxes me,’ he told Milly as he loaded his gun.

Milly wishes he would never come home.

She notes the dark stain of sweat on the back of her mother’s blue singlet, the way her hair sticks to her neck. Milly dampens a cloth. ‘Here Mum, for your face.’

Her mother stops for a moment and wipes her face. ‘With a bit of luck he’ll bring home the bacon,’ she says with a grimace. Milly bites her lip and rushes for the dustpan. She holds it in place for her mother.

Her mother looks up from the pile of dirt as she coaxes it into the dustpan. She raises a conspiratorial brow. ‘Might soften him up if he does.’ She hurls the dirt out the gap where a window should be.

Milly’s father steps out of his ute. He kicks the dark stain where he butchered the last pig.

Milly gathers her little brothers, whispers ‘be good’, and takes them inside. Her mother dishes up the soup. The family eat lunch in silence.

Milly holds her brothers' hands as they tag behind their parents. Her father pulls the cow's eyelids up and down and forces her mouth to open. Her parents peer inside. The large Friesian is restless. She tries to break free. Her father jerks the rope hard. He knees the cow in her side. Jittery and scared, she tosses her head from side to side and gouges his arm with her horn.

'Bitch of a thing!' He examines his arm where the shirt is torn, watches his blood seep through his sleeve. 'Get me the saw!' He points Milly to the shed.

Milly bites her lip hard as her father positions the jagged edge of the saw at right angles to the cow's horn. Her eyes bulge wide as he saws right through the horns. First one, then the other, right off at the base. She crosses her fingers hoping it doesn't hurt. When the blood oozes out she knows he's cut too deep. She's sure she sees tears fall from the cow's dewy eyes.

'Poor thing,' Milly whispers, stroking the cow's rump.

'*Useless* thing!' says her father, flicking her hand away from the cow. He storms off.

As Milly fills the cow's drinking trough her brothers squeal and splash with delight. Her mother stares off to the front gate. Milly looks around at the unfinished jobs, at the caravan park her father calls *the wife's little hobby*. She wishes they'd never moved to this rotten rainforest.

'Let's water the garden.' Milly picks up her youngest brother and slots him onto her hip. She offers the other boy's hand to their mother.

Milly's mother stirs from her dream, smiles at her middle child, bends over and whoops him up over her head. He lands with his chubby legs wrapped around her waist, his arms circled tight around her neck, cheek snuggled against hers.

They follow Milly over to the water tank. Milly finds a small bucket for the boys and pours just enough water so it's not too heavy. She fills four large buckets for her mother and herself.

'Hope they haven't ruined it already,' says her mother. The flimsy fences never stop the wild pigs.

'Please, Mum!' Milly holds out two buckets, willing her mother to take them.

She herds her mother and brothers down to the park; she and her mother strain against the weight of their buckets.

Milly freezes. The little garden around one of the vans is destroyed. The earth has been dug up and spread in great clumps; the red geraniums are trampled, the bright yellow daisies are torn and crushed, their little roots exposed and frizzled in the heat. Milly's mother falls to her knees; the buckets spilling around her. Milly rushes around poking the broken flowers back into the soil.

Her mother slumps into the puddle.

'Come and rest in the van.' Milly opens the door and reels back from the fierce heat blasting her face and the thick layer of mould coating the inside of the van. She slams the door fast.

When they had first arrived in The Daintree, everything was okay. Her father smiled and laughed and they had begun to relax. But six months later, he got bad news. Something

about new regulations that would stop people cutting down trees; something to do with the area being listed as World Heritage.

Milly's father cursed at the outsiders who thought they could tell him what he could do. '...on my own bloody property,' he'd say, red in the face. 'I'll beat the bastards.' He bulldozed their plot, sold off the rich red top soil to 'those bloody hippies' down the road, and set about creating Paradise. The only welder for two hundred kilometres, he was soon working hard six days a week.

One morning, a family walked up their drive. 'We're your neighbours... is your Dad around?' said the man. There was a girl about Milly's age, a mother and a boy.

Milly led them to her father's shed.

'Goodday, Ralph's the name,' the man shouted above the noise. 'Wanted to talk about your generator. Don't know if you realise... it echoes right over to our place? Kinda spoils the peace.'

'Don't have much time for peace, myself. Some of us gotter work.' Milly watched her father look down his nose at the long-haired man.

'Is there any way you could silence it?' The man drew his boy into his side. The girl stayed close to her mother.

'Not that I'm aware of,' her father shouted.

Milly slunk behind the tractor.

The huge sign down by the gate clanged in a sudden gust of wind. It said *Paradise*, in blood red and jungle greens. The man and his family turned away.

Today, before breakfast, Milly goes down to check on the cow. A frenzy of flies buzz around the wound where her father has cut too deep.

‘Poor girl,’ she whispers, stroking the cow’s wet nose. Normally, by now, the cow’s udder is full. Today it’s a shrivelled sack.

‘No milk, poor thing,’ Milly croons. She gathers fresh hay and smiles while the pretty cow nuzzles her palm. ‘I’ll come back soon,’ she promises, brushing the flies from the wound.

Milly interrupts her mother who is murdering the dough for the bread. ‘The cow looks sick. The flies are pestering her head.’

‘Be there in a minute.’ Her mother wipes her sweaty brow with the back of her hand. ‘Have to get this lot in the stove. Take the little ones outside for a bit.’ Her smile makes her worn face look pretty. Her smile makes Milly happy.

Milly’s younger brothers are pushing small plastic trucks between their mother’s feet, in and out, making tracks in the flour that coats the rough concrete floor. The wood stove swelters, ready for the loaves. It’s thirty eight degrees inside the make-shift house. Milly shoos the little ones outside, then sits in the doorway. She watches her mother pound the dough into three large tins, then brush the bench clean of flour. The telephone rings. Her mother walks around the kitchen, tidying with her free hand while she talks on the phone.

‘...nothing I can do...it was my stupid idea to go bush.’ She pushes the loaves into the oven. ‘...nothing to go back to...we sold the lot.’ She runs her fingers through her hair.

‘Be still!’ Milly’s mother tugs the cow’s holster hard.

She swats the air with the tar-laden brush as the cow evades her attempts to seal off the wounds.

‘Stand still for god’s sake!’

Milly pats the cow’s side. ‘Shh’, she whispers. Her stomach has butterflies.

The cow keeps dodging the brush. Her mother tilts the pot, gets a good aim and tosses the tar at the seeping holes.

The arc of warm tar cascades through the air and lands in a great splash over the cow’s head. It drizzles down its face, and into its eyes.

Her mother drops the brush and the pot and squats on her haunches. The backs of her fists dangle on the ground; her head is bowed close to her thin chest. Great heaving sobs rack her body. The young boys paw and climb on her back. They try to get onto her lap. She doesn’t resist.

Milly tears clumps of grass, wipes the cow’s eyes.

Milly’s mother cackles into her lap. ‘*Welcome to Paradise!*’ she says.

‘No, no, no! Come on, Mum, I’ll make you some tea.’ Milly lets the grass drop from her hands. She takes her mother’s arm and leads her back to the house.

Smoke billows out from the wood fire. The heat is too fierce and the bread has caught.

Her mother slumps into a chair, staring at nothing. Her face is blank.

Milly screams at her brothers to be quiet and rushes around the kitchen flapping her arms at the smoke.

She will make more effort to help. She doesn’t want her mother to get sick again. She can’t imagine how she would manage all the work on her own.

She vows as soon as she's old enough she will leave Paradise. She just needs to make sure her mother stays well until then.