

## JACK'S PROMISES

I keep my diaries in an old shoe box on the top shelf of my wardrobe, in the darkest corner of my bedroom. I'd hidden them there among leftover balls of wool, partly moth-eaten clothes, my 'special occasion' hat, boxes of letters and the pair of shoes I was wearing the day my friend Lola died. Those damned note books, my name written on the inside covers—Frieda Ramon—haunt me day and night; they invade my dreams. Had I burned them, the memories of that horrible day, and the dreadful years that followed, would have vanished forever.

I began writing those diaries in 1937. Times in Australia were hard, but my family was okay—Jack, the kids and me. I was content with our lives in Townsville and with the little we had. Despite our hardships, we were happy, and that's what mattered most. Other families were living in tents, some trying to survive in the streets like stray dogs, scrambling for scraps of food and hunting through garbage bins. But luckily for us, we had a roof over our heads, and Jack had a good job with the council, making fences and carting railway sleepers in his old Bedford. We grew our own food and had chickens that gave us a good supply of eggs. I made the kids' clothes out of cheap curtain material, and we managed to get by.

But that all changed the day Jack made me pack up and go west with him.

I still remember that day in every detail—a Saturday in February, late afternoon. I was admiring Castle Hill through one of the back windows of the house. It was more like a crag than a hill. Jack used to say it reminded him of an old tooth. Its striking orange, sometimes blood red, weather-scoured rocks against the uninterrupted blue sky always fascinated me. It stood there like a barrier between the Coral Sea and us, protecting us from easterly storms and tropical cyclones. On the other side of the hill was the town, two long streets of little shops and pubs crowded next to each other right down to the Strand and the port of Townsville. Closing my eyes, I relished the cool afternoon breeze on my face; the sweet breeze that floated across the bay, through banyan trees and coconut palms growing along the Strand, bringing with it the scent of roses and jasmine and a faint taste of salt.

Looking away from the window, I laid out the pieces of a skirt I was preparing to stitch together. The material, pale pink with cream white trimmings was on my sewing table and some spread out on the floor. It was for Rosie, my little girl, a perfect match for her tiny shoes. After threading my sewing machine, I drew the mechanism towards the belt, and pulling the hand-wheel slowly to get it going, began treading with my right foot. The needle stabbed at the material as the machine clattered and clicked. It was noisy, but at the same time, strangely

soothing, taking my mind off those bad times, the Depression, as people now call it. I finished stitching, and holding the skirt up to the light, checked it again before laying it out on my table. Then I tied back the curtains, that were fluttering lazily in the sea breeze, to watch my children and our two dogs playing under the mango tree next to the chicken run. Happy kids. Like any parent, I often wondered what they'd turn out like. I made sure they were well-clothed and never went hungry. What I wanted more than anything was for them to go to school and get a good education, always have a roof over their heads. That's what my parents should have done for me, but unlike them, I vowed I'd never abandon my kids for anything in the world.

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard a truck approach the front of the house and crunch heavily to a stop on the roadside gravel.

"Come on," Sam yelled to the other kids. "Dad's home."

"So what," Ralph stuttered. "I wanna finish our game."

"We can finish it later," Harriet said as she raced up the back steps, her angelic hair that flickered like strands of gold across her eyes.

"Wait your turn," Sam said, reaching out for her sleeve and pulling Ralph along by one hand.

"Stop it," Ralph whined. "That hurts."

"Well then hurry up."

In all of the fuss, my little Rosie was left by herself, for her legs were tiny and she wasn't stable on her feet. Leaping up, I pushed my chair to one side, ran to the back door, and lifted her into my arms as she tried to climb the steps. I then strode after the other children who were now charging barefoot along the floorboards of the narrow corridor that stretched in a straight line to the front verandah.

"Be careful! The mirror," I called after them. "And don't bang the door against the wall when you open it."

"It's Daddy," they shouted in a chorus of rowdy voices.

When Jack had left for work that day, he said he'd come home in a new dump truck which we were all eager to see and go for a ride in. For me, those days were the best. I loved everything about my husband. His eyes that matched the sky on a perfect day, nose as straight as a blade, hair cut short, military style. He was fit and strong with muscles of an athlete, due to an active physical life, not of sport, but of labour. His carefree manner made him popular with everyone. I loved the way he tilted his head slightly to one side when he smiled, and the way he tipped his head right back when he laughed. I'd fallen in love with him from the moment we met. We were both so young and how quickly time passed. How we'd changed!

The children streamed down the front steps under the passion fruit vine that clung to the fretted eaves, and tore through the gate at top speed with me trotting along behind them.

“Keep off the road, you kids,” I yelled, even though there was not another vehicle in sight.

I’d put Rosie down by the door and, reaching the front gate, pressed myself against the wooden pickets, eyeing the brand-new Ford Jack was sitting in, the motor still humming.

“Jack, you’ve really done it.”

“Told ya I’d buy it, didn’ I? Traded the old bastard Bedford in for this beauty. You can call it my birthday present. Come and have a look inside.”

“Your birthday is *next* week,” I said, standing on tiptoes on the sideboard while holding onto the polished chrome door handle with one hand.

Grinning proudly, Jack pressed his hands on the oak steering wheel, admiring the dials on the dash. “All new,” he said, then leaned out of the window and kissed my cheek.

“Your mates at work will be jealous. I’m so proud of you, Jack.”

I jumped off the sideboard and scuttled back along the path, leaping up the four wooden steps two at a time. Rosie had wobbled towards the top step, and picking her up, I lifted her onto the verandah railing.

“Look at daddy’s truck, Rosie,” I said. “It’s real flash. Green, just like the trees.”

“Hey, Frieda,” Jack called from the cabin, “Ya gonna like this! A padded leather seat and lotsa room inside.”

Elbow poking out of the window, he tipped his hat back and tooted the horn twice. There was hardly a speck of dust on the black fenders or the chrome bumper that dazzled in the remaining sunlight. Every tiny detail was newly painted and perfectly in place.

“I put down forty pounds in cash. Have to pay her off over the next five years, or sooner if I get lucky.”

“She’s wonderful.” I laughed as I ran my fingers through my hair and unrolled the sleeves of my cotton top. “It’s nearly high enough for the kids to stand up under, and for a mob of kangaroos to hop around in. When can we go for a drive?”

“Right now. Come on, you lot. Before it gets dark. Get in, Frieda. You kids get on the back. I’ll let the back down and help yas up there,” he said, then after switching off the engine he opened the door and jumped to the ground. “Don’t stand up while we’re drivin’ along. Your mother can sit with Rosie in the front with me.”

“Wait,” I said. “I’ll be back in a second. I’m getting Rosie’s shoes.” And laughing as though my Christmases had come all at once, I headed back towards the front door.

“Okay. Then after we come home, we can start packin’.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, taking hold of the verandah railing with one hand in case I should fall into the garden.

“Packing?” I said as I turned to face Jack. “Packing for what? A holiday? You know we can’t take the kids out of school.”

Jack lit up a cigarette and drew the smoke in deeply. He said nothing, just stared into the street, and it was then I realized he meant what he’d said.

“You’re not serious,” I said, but it was just like him to make spontaneous decisions and expect everyone to fall in with them.

“Forgot to tell ya. I’m quittin’ my job. We’re goin’ west—to Cloncurry.”

“What? But Cloncurry is hundreds of miles from here. You’re only kidding, right?” My lips parted in a half smile because I was sure he was baiting me. “You’re just teasing me, aren’t you?” I said, hoping it was just another one of Jack’s bad jokes.

“No, Frieda. I’m not pullin’ ya leg. This is the day I’ve been dreamin’ about. I’m gonna be free. Don’t have to work for no one but myself. No more bloody bosses. You know I can’t stand the mongrels.”

“Jack, you can’t do this. What about me? The kids?”

For a moment I couldn’t say another word. My mind was flitting around imagining how I’d have to pack our belongings, what to do with the house, where we’d live in Cloncurry, and what we’d live on. And all the while, Jack was sitting in his truck, that bloody truck, sucking on his filthy little cigarette with one arm hanging out the window.

A numbness crept cold over my skin with the recollection of what had happened only three years earlier. It was because of living in the bush in a blasted tent, seven years of it, the loneliness and hardship had sent me mad. This was like history repeating itself. I thought about the lessons I’d learned and how I could survive better a second time round. But what if it were worse?

I stepped back towards the front door. My feet that now felt like two blocks of lead. My head felt as though it was going to explode as my worst memories came flooding back—those years of traipsing around the bush, living in shacks and tents with barely anything to survive on. You stupid man! I wanted to yell, but my voice was stuck inside my throat. Lifting my head slowly, I glared at that fool. Say something Frieda, you pathetic woman, I thought in that brief moment of silence when all I wanted to do was throw something at him.

“Yeah, sure. I know what ya thinkin’. Ya wanna stay in the big smoke. I get that.” He flicked his cigarette butt onto the ground, and climbing back into the cabin said, “You’ll have fun out there in the bush. And the kids too. It’ll be different this time. I promise.”

“No,” I said. “You know what it did to me the last time. But what did you care?”

“I promise ya. We’ll all be together. The way we should be. A family.”

“No,” I said again. “But you’re right about one thing, Jack. We *should* all be together. I want us to stay here in Townsville. I’m not going bush with you ever again. I’m staying right here with the kids. Who do you think is going to pay our bills?” My lips thinned as tears flooded my eyes. I felt my frustration turn to rage. “That’s what you always do. Make decisions without consulting anyone.” I wiped my face with my handkerchief I kept tucked under my bra strap. “It’s always all about you. What about me, your wife? What about our kids?”

“Listen to me, Frieda. Now I’ve got a truck that won’t be forever breakin’ down, we can head off to where the real money is. There’s work out there in them copper mines. Don’t you see? They’ve been abandoned for years, shut down for good. There are fences to make and kangaroos to shoot. Nothin’ for us here.”

“Everything we *have* is here. You have a job. And you’re throwing it away. There are people trying to get work and all you do is give it up! The bloody dole queues are getting longer. Haven’t you noticed? Are you crazy? And who’s going to pay for the truck?”

I bundled Rosie into one of the deck chairs on the verandah, reached for the straw broom that was leaning against the wall and stamped one foot heavily on the floorboards.

I screamed, and hurled the wretched broom at the gate. “You kids shouldn’t be listening to this. Get out of that thing right now. Go play somewhere!”

Jack leapt out of the truck, unlatched the tailgate and helped Harriet and the boys off the back. “Do as ya mother says.”

Harriet ran to the house and squeezed herself underneath. Ralph and Sam dashed into the back garden as far away from us as they could get.

“And when have you decided to leave? Tonight?”

“Aw, don’t be like that.” Jack lit another cigarette. “We can leave next week. Friday. Plenty of time to pack.”

“You bastard. You want to go bush—in a week? I’m not going. Do you hear?”

The argument continued between me on the verandah and Jack in the green metal monster, its two bulging eyes staring into nothing, its grill now looking like savage chrome teeth.

“You know what you are? Insane.” I took a deep breath and tried to calm down and think of practical solutions. “What about the house?” I said, knowing that nothing would change his mind. “The kids and me, we’re staying right here. You go bush by yourself, Jack.”

“You stay here if you want,” he replied. “I’m going out west and the kids are coming with me.”

“But you can’t,” I said.

“I can, and I will. Think about it—you alone in this house and me and the kids in Cloncurry.”

I tried to imagine my life without my family. The kids meant everything to me and nothing could ever come between me and them. Wherever they went, I would go too. I had no choice but to go with him. Fear and anger gripped me like a vice then my mind switched to practical things.

“If we can’t live here, then I suppose you’re going to rent the house out. At least that would be some money coming in.”

“Nah. It’s my house. Gonna board her up. Don’t want no tenants wreckin’ the place.”

“You idiot, Jack. You’re a dreamer. What about us? Where do you think we’re going to live in the bush? In a tent? Like the last time?”

“You’re my wife. You’ll live where I tell ya to live. At least I’m not leavin’ yas behind to fend for yourselves the way other poor bastards are doin’. Get it into ya head, woman. I’m not gonna work for anymore bloody bosses.”

“But when I was sick your cousin Joy even paid the fifty-pound deposit on the house so you would settle down, and she even came to Townsville to look after the kids. Have you already forgotten that? She did that because I was in hospital and you went bush again, without even telling me. She was right. You have to stop running around the outback. There’s no money to be made there. And how are we going to pay for the house? Why are you doing this to us?” I shouted. “You want us all to suffer. That’s it, isn’t it? Well you’re doing a bloody good job of it. You don’t care a shit about anyone but yourself.”

Jack, as receptive as a block of wood to an electrical current, hoisted himself back into the cabin, wound up the side window and slammed the accelerator to the floor. The engine roared. Wheels spun in the gravel. Stones went flying.

“There you go again. Always running away. Bastard!”

I stared dumbfounded at the truck. Its tailgate was hanging open, banging loudly until it disappeared down the street and around the corner. I couldn’t live without my kids and I knew I shouldn’t go back to the bush, but that was the only option I had. I had to follow Jack. Picking up Rosie, I hugged her then slumped into the deck chair as the afternoon dimmed and faded into night. I wanted to scream, but my voice felt rough from already yelling so much. Then I thought of Lola. She would know what to do.