

1909

out in that country

Out in that country the sun smeared the sky and nothing ever altered, except that one day a scrap man came by with his wife, who had cost him twelve shillings once upon a time, and a wispy girl, who had cost him ten.

The people of the hut heard them first, the clop two three four of hooves, the creature-in-torment shriek of an axle and a mad symphony of tocking and rattling. They froze. Then, from the scrub line, came a bony horse, a wagon hung with pots and pans, a dog panting along in the lurching shade and three faces, dusty and gaunt.

‘Whoa!’ said the man, spying the hut and hauling on the reins.

The dust settled over the clearing. The pots and pans fell silent on their hooks. The horse hung its head and the dog belly-flopped onto the dirt.

After a while a child appeared, wearing a flour-bag dress and slipping soundlessly from beneath a sulky parked

broken-backed in a collar of grass. Other figures joined her, the odds and ends of a used-up family, materialising from the hut, a barn, a post-and-rail fence and the tricky corners of the mallee scrub. Count them: a mother, a father and eleven children, ranging from a baby on a hip to a boy whose voice had broken, all staring at the apparition.

‘Bring out your bottles,’ rasped the scrap man from his wagon seat, ‘your rags, tin, copper and brass.’

He was a dapper man, his hat at a jaunty angle, but the family might not have heard him, so mute were they, without suspicion, hope or awe. They were too numerous, too hungry, too far from the nearest town. Out here the sky pressed down and the dirt hemmed them in. No outlander like the scrap man could save them.

Acknowledging this, the farmer exchanged a look with his wife:

Do we have anything worth selling?

No.

‘Saucepans mended,’ tried the scrap man, appealing to the wife. ‘Knives sharpened.’

She gestured at her threadbare existence. ‘Ain’t got no money,’ she whispered.

But the scrap man’s attention had wandered. He’d spotted the daughters. So many of them clustered together, ankles grimy and showing out of their dresses, yet each as beautiful

as a wildflower. He jumped down from the wagon. He gave an elaborate yawn. He stretched the kinks in his spine.

No one was fooled. The older girls took a step back.

Undeterred, the scrap man fished a tin and papers from the breast pocket of his gappy shirt. He rolled a miserly cigarette. 'Smoke?' he suggested, fixing on the farmer.

The two men ambled away to the barn, trailing ash and business. The minutes lengthened. The wife, overcome with shyness, ducked back into the hut and one by one her sons and daughters drifted away, leaving only the little ones, who continued to stare.

And so much to stare at. The three-year-old drank in the enormous wheels, a brief shudder in the hide of the horse, the woman and the girl motionless on a wooden bench . . . and the painted stars, gold, silver, speckling the canvas hood.

Presently she sensed the scrap man at her side. His long fingers flicked up and down her limbs, squeezing, testing. 'This one,' he said.

She took no notice. She continued to marvel, a tawny-headed, scab-kneed, fearless scrap of a girl. But she occupied an indeterminate position among her brothers and sisters. Her name was scarcely known or remembered. All in all, she was worth less than the nine shillings and sixpence the scrap man had counted into her father's hand.