

All the Little Things

As I stare out the window from this 4th floor room and idly observe the hustle of the city streets below they are silenced by the double glazing. The heat out there is sweltering, ladies in pretty summer frocks and hot faced little kids eating melting ice cream, mill around the park seeking shade. The gentlemen I see with sweat marks on their smart business shirts hurry off to their next appointment and are swallowed into the next big air-conditioned building. All in a hurry, no time to spare. The trees line the streets all precisely planted to meet what ever the street architect had envisioned, the cars all buzz about on the hot bitumen going about their day. Are they happy, all those people penned up here in the big hot city? All living on top of each other? Is that their happiness?

My Name is Joseph William Stevens. Everyone just calls me Jo. I am here on a permanent basis now, on the fourth floor of the Stuart Street Assisted Living Residence, I know that because Freddy made me a little postcard that is stuck on my wall that says, "We are on the 4th floor of the Stuart street Assisted Living Residence" It sounds posh. Bit to posh for me. My Son is paying for me to be in here. Freddy. I do love Freddy dearly, my only son, he is so concerned about doing the right thing! He wanted me to go and live with him after my accident, but I didn't want to be a burden on him, he has his own life and partner Jenny. So he helped me find this place, it's very nice all clean and painted and very well nice. It is a little different from my home. From where I belong. From where I long to be, but I can't go back there, for now I just accept the niceness, and I store all the little things about home in a safe little cupboard in my head and in my dreams I can go back home.

The home of my dreams is captured in a slide show of memories and stories in my head that play along to keep me company in this new place. I want to like it here, but I am a stockman and im stuck in a big old cement box in The city. Who are these people that come and go, I don't know them I only know Freddy. I do love Freddy. These People who tell me when to eat and when to wash and when to sleep and when to get in my wheel chair and go and 'Socialize'. I smile and play bingo and eat my meals, but my heart is longing for my home. My Home.

When I started my life I lived with my mum and Dad and 3 brothers on a big sheep station 'Longawarra' in western NSW. A land of salt bush and red dirt, dust storms and flies, little clumps of waddy trees on the horizon, the sheep would huddle under them in the summer to get out of the searing dry heat. The Winters so cold in our old drafty homestead that we would all sleep in the main drawing room next to the fire in the night to stay warm and wake up to frozen water troughs and burst house hold pipes. That red dirt and sheep shit got in my eyes and under my skin and worked its way into my heart. I have a picture of our family standing out the front of the homestead at 'Longawarra' I am about 11. My brothers all younger, dressed in our shorts and button down shirts with bootless feet. My mother and father frozen in their youth in that fuzzy picture, I keep it in the Shortbread tin by the bed. In my tin of home things, all the little things.

One of those people has just dropped in a very nice lady called Julie ...? She was so nice and bought me a cup of tea, I love tea. I would prefer tea from the Billy, brewed on the fire. I asked Julie today if that is how she had brewed it, and she gave me a little wink and said of course, just how you like it. I think shes telling fibs though, because now she has gone I look down at a plactic beaker, only $\frac{3}{4}$ full of luke warm water with a tea bag string hanging over the edge!!

When I was 15 I left school and joined a shearing team that worked the big western sheep stations of NSW. I absolutely loved it, the competition the hard physical work, I loved the sheep the comradery of the shearing team was so fulfilling. Our old cook Pat would brew the tea for smokos on an old cut in half 44 gallon drum with a fire under it. When the boss rang the smoko, Pat bought 2 giant old billy can tea pots to the shearing shed, and we would all gulp down the tea with scones or damper, fuelled up ready for the next run of hard work. If we were at a place where the sheep and wool were really nice, I would take just a small sample of wool. Only about the thickness of a piece of string, and only from the best wool, 'AAA' class. I love the sweet pungent smell of the lanolin and the feel of the fine crinkle in the fibre as I bump my fingers over its softness. I was in the sheds for 4 years. When I left I had quite a good hand full of wool, so I plaited it into a sort of pony tail, about 8 inches long and about 1 inch thick. I still have it that little piece of home, in my tin of home things, all the little things.

A very nice lady comes into my room and asks if id like to come and play some cards. I think her name is Julie? I love cards, im good at playing cards and I love winning at cards. The Lady helps me get into my wheelchair and we head out to a nice big room full of tables and lots of other people. I don't know who they are. A familiar man sitting at my table says,

'How you going Today Jo?'

I have no idea who he is but i am a little embarrassed that he knows me, so I just smile and say

'I'm very well thank you, Sir'. We settle into a familiar game of Rummy, that I win!

I was first introduced to playing cards when I went to Queensland when I was 19. I got a job with a droving team ran by an Irishman called McGuiness McGee, I'm nearly certain that was not his real name but that's what we all called him and it defiantly suited his love for the grog. Our job was to Drove 600 bullocks from Mt Isa in Queensland to Townsville. We meandered our days on horseback along the stock route following the cattle. There were 8 stockmen, the cook and the boss. We went from water hole to waterhole, grazing these big old bullocks along, travelling about 10 mile a day. When stopped for the night we would take it in shifts keeping watch over the cattle as there was not always a yard to put them in

McGuiness McGee loved to drink and he also loved to play cards, poker mainly! When we would stop at a place for a rest, be it a town or homestead he would always find someone to play. It became apparent to him that I was better at the poker game than he was. This led to a very untidy habit of gambling on me winning the poker game as he drank to much, watching on!

We arrived in Townsville a few months later on the eve of my 20th Birthday. I told Old McGuiness I wanted to head over to the Northern Territory and have a look around. So much to my surprise as we all hit the town pub for a Birthday drink and to celebrate the finish of a job well done, McGuiness presented me with a deck of Diamond Back playing cards! It seemed an extravagant gift. I accepted thinking to myself that he must have made enough money gambling on my poker games to warrant such a thing. I still have the deck of cards, they have been well used. They are in my tin of things. My tin of all the little things.

Night never seems to fall properly in the city. They seem to be an endless flow of twilight. Streetlights obstruct the view of the sky, and as I look out my window all I can see is a sea of twinkly lights. Cars zooming home, lights on in shop windows and in restaurants . Even in this Stuart Street Assisted Living it is never dark, always a light on, and always someone up and awake at all hours of the night, the thick walls and windows don't shut out the noise enough for me, I can hear it all in the

silence. The busyness unsettles my heart and I lie here on my stiff bed with its plastic mattress not quite sure how I got here! I close my eyes and dream of a campfire and a sea of peaceful stars above me.

Wanting to get to the Northern Territory, I had hitched a ride on the Mail Truck from Mt Isa. The driver said I could hitch a ride if I helped him unload his mail parcels on and off along the run. At Rockhampton Downs I said goodbye to the mailman and took a job as a ringer in the stock camp.

Days in the stock camp were endlessly long. The mustering was split up. Firstly we did the northern run, then southern run, then the home run. For the Northern run we camped at a bore with a set of cattle yards and a lean-to hut for the cookhouse made of corrugated iron and wattle brush. Our supplies for the 2 months mustering were transported the 30km out to camp in Fordson tractor and big trailer driven by the cook. We kept our mustering horses in a small paddock right next to the bore. We all arrived at the camp ready for the job ahead. We pulled out the wire stretcher beds that were kept in the cook house, and each set them up under a nearby tree to the main camp. This was home for the next few months.

The ebb and flow of stock camp life worked its way into my body. The long hot days riding horses, sometimes pretty rough horses that would buck all day long. The physical work of drafting, sorting and branding the cattle. The absolute thrill of having to handle the cleanskin untouched cattle that would come through the mob. Sometimes having to chase them and catch them one at a time to get them into the yard. Sometimes them chasing you. But the nights in my swag were just the most relaxing peaceful calming times I have ever known. The hum of the night time bugs, the quiet lowing of cattle in the yards. The most glorious view of the stars, all quietly shining down on me. That calm is home, but it will never fit in my tin. My tin, of things. Of all the little things.

Mornings seem to drag on these days. Freddy is here this morning. Freddy I do love Freddy. He pushes me out into the little garden of the Stuart Street Assisted Living facility. He looks very smart in his Sunday best.

'Is it Sunday Freddy?'

'Yeah Dad, we are off to church!' he says with amusement in his voice. We both snicker enjoying the familiar Joke. Neither of us has ever visited the inside of church but for a wedding or a funeral, even then it all seemed a little stuffy and claustrophobic for my liking.

I remember the first time I entered a church as a grown man was for my wedding.

I had met and fell madly in love with the most beautiful girl in the Katherine shire. Mary Bradly, the daughter of the largest land holder in the Northern Territory at the time. I was 24 and she was only 20. We met at the Easter picnic races in Katherine. Held on the first Saturday of May every year. What started as a dance turned into many dances that night. At that time I was working as a Cattle buyer for Sullivan's in Darwin, travelling around to big cattle stations filling big orders of bullocks to head to Darwin to be shipped overseas. I was only in Katherine for the week. At the end of the night I asked if I could call on her the following day where she was staying with her Aunty in town. I then called on her every day for the rest of the week, then had to leave Katherine and go back to work.

I wrote to Mary every chance I could. I spent the rest of the year looking for cattle buying jobs that would send me back through Katherine so I could see Mary. By Christmas Time I knew I had to do the right thing and ask her father if we could get married.

Lucky for me Mr Bradly was a nice old man. A giant of a man at 6ft 6 inch. Who had bread himself 7 daughters to various wives. Mary was the youngest and old Mr Bradly was glad to see her happy. So I asked her to marry me on Christmas Eve and we got married the following year at the Katherine Easter Races. All I remember of that day was how beautiful Mary was, and how unbelievably hot the church was. The flower pinned to my suit was made from delicate paper, a beautiful pink rose. I still have it, in my tin of things. In my tin of home things, of all the little things.

Freddy and I sit at the picnic table and he puts 2 tin pannikins on the table between us. Freddy pours some whisky from a flask that looks to everyone else like it should hold tea. And we sip. We sip in silence. Just me and Freddy. I do love Freddy.

Mary and I were married for 10 years. We had Freddy within the first year of our marriage. We took a Job managing a station in Western Australia 150km east of Broom. Much to our dismay we did not give Freddy any siblings. Freddy was 9 when Mary died, suddenly and quite abruptly, stomach cancer, and then she was gone. On the day of Marys Funeral Freddy stuffed a white lace handkerchief in to my trouser pocket, he said that he had taken 2 from his mothers draws that morning one for each of us. He said he needed to feel her there. So did I. That little white hanky is in my box also, my little piece of Mary. With all my little things.

I want Freddy's visit to never end. But he has to go. I want to tell him that I cant sleep here, that I miss the bush and I want to go home. I want to tell him that after 50 years I still miss Mary, I still dream of her.

Freddy Pushes me back up to my room. I stand from my wheelchair and hug him. I look at my Tin of home things sitting on the table. Freddy also looks at it.

'Do you want to open it up Dad? Can you tell me a story from the tin Dad?'

Freddy has not asked me this in many years. I shuffle to the table and sit down on my bed.

In my mind I am not in the Stuart Street Assisted Living complex. I am younger and stronger, so is Freddy. We are sitting on the verandas of our house in Katherine. I am not sitting on the plastic covered Bed I am sitting on my Old cane chair, and Freddy is sitting on his. He is 19, and has just been accepted into University in Sydney to study Law. Tomorrow he is heading off. My pride in his achievements is tinged with sadness for his leaving. I tried my best to educate him once Mary was gone, we bought this place so I could be there for him in school. I worked breaking in horses. Every holidays we would pack up and go bush helping friends to muster cattle, go fishing, doing anything to stay out of town. Now he was ready to go off and live his life. My Freddy.

I open the tin and look at the picture of my Family in front of the homestead at 'Longawarra'. I tell Freddy how I felt leaving home for the first time. But I also tell him that home is in your heart. Home is not necessarily a place. Home is the feeling of being at true peace. Not just one thing But all the little things woven together.

As Freddy left the Stuart Street Assisted Living Facility I could see his tear stained cheeks.

Tonight I can't sleep, I reach over to my tin and pull it into my bed. I hug that old Tin so tightly and wish that all the things in there would soak into my body; I am scared I might forget them. Im not sure why im here, but I know I miss my home. Tonight the only thing that comforts me is my tin of things. My tin, of all the little things.

The END.