

Ned Kelly and Auntie Grace

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When I retired I moved to a small town on the coast. I've never liked the city, even though I've had to work there all my life, and the country, the dry, dusty, isolated farms I've always called, "the country", has never appealed to me either. Every day I go for a walk around the streets of the town and then I go down to the jetty and talk to the small boys fishing there, or I go for a walk along the shore. Although I've only come to live here late in life, a retired man, I feel very much at home here, and the people of the town all know me, at least by sight, and have all accepted me as part of the town.

The other day, the wind was blowing up from the west and I was watching the fishing boats rearing and tugging at their moorings like excited horses, and I was reminded of my childhood visits to "the country" and of my long dead Auntie Grace. I hadn't thought about Auntie Grace for perhaps twenty years – I last visited her in a nursing home in the city – and yet whenever I think or read about the country, or about country people, it's always Auntie Grace's old property that provides the images, and its people I knew there more than half a century ago that I call to mind.

In those days it was not unusual for a boy like me to be packed off in summer for a few weeks to visit country relatives. These days, I suppose, the whole family would go, if at all, but back then it was only the boy who made the trip. It was meant to be a good thing for a city child to learn about the real world of the bush. Cities then were regarded as inexplicable accidents; it was plain to the people on the land that only their hard work and their suffering supported the soft and squalid lives of the city dwellers, who were themselves apologetic in the presence of country people.

I hated going to Auntie Grace's every year. It was the only thing that spoiled Christmas for me: seeing the card she always sent to the family, and knowing that in a week or two I would be bundled off for my summer trip to the country.

I had no idea where Auntie Grace's was. I would be taken down to the main railway station and put on the right train with careful instructions which station I was to get off at. Then Mum would settle me in my compartment and ask any of my fellow travellers who were going that far to keep an eye on me and make sure I didn't miss

my stop. At the same time, Dad would hunt up and down the train to leave the same instructions with the conductor.

The train trips there and back were the only good things about visiting Auntie Grace. I can still recall the importance of sitting on the green leather seats, my suitcase in the wire rack above, a paper bag of fruit and sandwiches in my lap, and a book of stories beside me; but the best part of any train trip was walking up and down through all the carriages while the train was speeding along, and using those fold down toilets which you could look through and see the sleepers of the track when you flushed. I couldn't have said which direction the train travelled. Just inland somewhere. It ran on and on through miles of the same flat bush until, hours later, I had to get off, always the only passenger to do so, and wait at the lonely little weatherboard station for someone from the station to pick me up.

The station was no more than a platform on either side of the track with a small open shed on one side which served as a waiting room. And there was nothing but flat open country for miles around. I don't know how or why it was ever decided there would be a station there – it was the only structure in sight. On my first ever visit, there was no one there to pick me up, and I watched the train disappear and began crying with loneliness and fear. Chalky White, a station hand, came about an hour later, by which time I was really frightened and almost ready to start walking back along the railway line. Chalky was completely unconcerned, although he must have seen I'd been crying.

"Train a bit early, was it?" he asked. "I was just up at the Roberts' place lookin' over some stock for your aunt. Didn't notice the time to tell yer the truth."

Then he gave me a leg up into the truck and we drove off. In all the years I visited, Chalky was never on time, and he had always been "lookin' over some stock" somewhere or other, and when we finally got to Auntie Grace's, he'd wink at me and tell her the train had been held up.

"Late leavin' the city, according to Tiger," he'd say with a nod in my direction.

Auntie Grace was a large, blustering woman who spoke loudly and at length and who was always trying to sound gruffly jovial and hearty. She thought of herself as the sort of woman who could meet any eventuality with the same good-natured,

straightforward, unflustered good sense. A rough diamond. She wanted people to think of her as “rough around the edges, but with a heart of gold”, the sort of woman who would “do anythin’ for you, but wouldn’t want thanks for it”. But she wasn’t like that at all. She had not a spark of genuine good-nature or human warmth, and all her attempts at a rough and ready companionship just made her seem large and loud and coarse, which she was. She was mean and uncharitable, which she tried to hide with a show of being ordinary – We can’t do anythin’ for you here. We don’t pretend to be anythin’ but ordinary people here – and she was never moved to be kind or gentle, which she had convinced herself would be “weak”. One of her farm hands had once summed up her personality as “mean as yesterday’s porridge”, and the men who worked for her all called her, Old Mother Porridge, from then on. Never within her sharp hearing, of course.

The worst of staying with Auntie Grace was her cooking. I have never been a fussy eater, but Auntie Grace’s cooking was just a whisker short of inedible. Mutton, of course, was the main stay of the diet there, and Auntie Grace had perfected a method of cooking it so that all the fat and grease stayed on the plate, and whatever flavour there may have once been in it was boiled out as the cooking smells which hung thickly in the air throughout the day. Even the tea she made smelt of mutton and had little eyelets of fat floating on the top of it. People today won’t understand the monotony of a bad cook of those days. Variety was not a consideration for Auntie Grace. She excused her cooking with the phrase “good country fare”, and even today, so many years later, the expression recalls the smell of boiled mutton: a smell so strong it left a film of fat on your tongue and on the inside of your mouth.

It goes without saying that nothing was to be left on the plate. Tinned peas and carrots, grey and watery spuds, and mutton, and we finished by mopping up the plates with thick slices of stale white bread.

Although she would never have admitted it, Auntie Grace was always at something of a loss as to what to do with me. There just wasn’t anything much for a young boy to do on her property. There were no other children my age, except for the aborigines who didn’t often venture too close to the homestead and with whom Auntie Grace would have forbidden me to play if she had thought there was any danger of it; I couldn’t ride because my mother was too scared that I’d be thrown; and Auntie Grace had no other idea how to entertain a young boy than to tell me the same

stories about “your Uncle Jack” who had died after a bare twelve months of marriage to Auntie Grace. Having spent only a year together I suppose it was not surprising that she had only a few stories about him, and none really worth the telling. She probably kept repeating them just to keep from forgetting them herself. The evenings, after tea, were the times for Uncle Jack to be shaken out of his dusty slumber and remembered and honoured by his bride. When the stories ended, I was sent to bed and told to remember Uncle Jack in my prayers. The rest of the time I was only expected to keep out of Auntie Grace’s sight. It was never doubted that a healthy boy would have no trouble filling in his time on a country property, and would enjoy himself enormously.

It was always hot and dry at Auntie Grace’s. Drought there was measured on a scale of years between one and twenty-five; a fairly severe drought was “the worst for fifteen years, I reckon”, and a milder one was only “the worst for five or six years”. I don’t know how they knew to distinguish one drought from the next. Water was always so scarce that the basin in the bathroom was quarter filled with water in the morning, and everybody washed their hands in it as the need arose through the day. Auntie Grace had a bath once a week, and I was expected to use it when she had finished. Of course, by the time she had finished washing and drying and dressing, the water was quite cold and had a thick scum of soap floating on the top. Still, it was always a pleasure to wash, even though Auntie Grace used a cheap brand of bath salts and I always came out smelling like her.

On one of my early visits, I made friends with Billy, an aboriginal stockman who sometimes worked for Auntie Grace. He didn’t share the living quarters with the other farm hands, of course, but lived with his kind a few miles out. One morning Auntie Grace was scolding me for having left the lid off the Golden Syrup tin, now spotted with happily dying flies, and she chased me outside with loud curses and threats and I ran out of the house and headed for an outbuilding called the “machinery shed”, though there wasn’t even a tractor in it, where I often spent my time. Running around a water tank, I almost collided with Billy the stockman.

“Git’n a serve off ol’ Ma Porridge, eh?” he smiled at me. I knew that aborigines were people, too, because I’d heard my father telling someone once. Billy was very black, his skin was smooth and shiny, and one of his upper front teeth was missing. He was not tall, but had a slim, tidy sort of figure. He was very friendly to me, even though

he must have seen how awkward I felt talking to him, and we ended up spending most of the morning together. He showed me how to make a plait leather belt, let me have a try at cracking a stock whip, and showed me how you could sharpen a pen knife on a rock. He told me he had to check some fences the next day, but the day after he would come back and take me out riding. He said there was even a waterhole where he would take me swimming. I was so astonished to think that there was somewhere you could swim in that hot, rainless country that I forgot to tell him that I wasn't meant to go riding.

The day between my becoming friends with Billy and our proposed ride to the waterhole went as slowly as only a day on Auntie Grace's property could go. I begged some scraps of leather from around the place and made a few attempts at leather plait work, and I sharpened my pen knife on every likely looking rock until it was as blunt as the edge on a six inch nail. After each sharpening I would run the ball of my thumb over the blade just as Billy had and convince myself that it was improving with every rock. One of the other men who must have seen me spending all day scratching it on bits of stone asked me if he could have a look at my pen knife. He squatted down on his haunches and passed the knife from hand to hand.

"Good lookin' knife, all right," he said, examining the blade, "and y' could shave with it, it's that sharp. If cookie needs another sheep killed, I might come an' lend it off yer."

Then he returned it to me, and went off about his business, leaving me with a real pride in my skills as a bushman. I could hardly wait to show it to Billy, thinking he might even skin a rabbit with it. I didn't quite believe about the sheep.

I never got to visit the waterhole, never even found out where it was. Billy turned up in the afternoon of the day I expected him, but as soon as I saw him, I knew we wouldn't be going swimming. He was limping, and his face was badly bruised and cut. He was going in to see Auntie Grace to get his wounds cleaned up when I saw him, and I ran over to him.

"Billy! What happened?" I called out as I ran.

He just smiled, which obviously hurt, and said, "Bin drinkin'."

I was furious that anyone should hit him, and, thinking it must have been other blackfellas, I asked him if he knew where his attackers were camped. I wanted Auntie Grace to send some men out to punish them. I was stunned when I heard that it had been some white men from the station – Billy wouldn't say who exactly – and that they had come around where he was camped and brought plenty to drink with them. When they thought he was too drunk to notice or care, they started "havin' a bit of fun with the missus", and when Billy tried to protect her, a couple of them kept him busy while they had their fun in turns. His missus was also pretty badly knocked around, but she wouldn't come in to Auntie Grace for treatment. Billy told me about it very simply and calmly, and didn't seem to hold anyone to blame. I didn't know what to say and just dumbly showed him my knife and told him how long I'd been sharpening it. He felt the blade and smiled. He pulled his own two-bladed bunny knife out of his pocket and gave it to me.

"Fair swap, eh?" and he turned to go into the house.

I was too upset to wait around to see him when he came out, and I never saw Billy the stockman again. A year later when I returned to Auntie Grace's, I asked her where he was. She just shrugged her shoulders and said dismissively, "Prob'ly gone walkabout. No use tryin' to keep track of them."

My last visit to Auntie Grace, some years after meeting Billy, was when I was about eleven or twelve. At that age I had more trouble keeping myself occupied. The old machinery shed didn't offer much scope for entertainment anymore, and for some reason that year, I couldn't keep out of Auntie Grace's way. She was always surprising me wherever I went, accusing me of being lazy and never wanting to help anybody. In the end I took to hiding in the dunnee out the back just to avoid her until meal times.

The dunnee was an odd affair. It was attached to the side of a shed behind the house, and it was so narrow that you could brush both elbows against the walls when sitting down. For some reason, some freak of bush architecture, it had been built right along the whole side of the shed; so you entered through a rough, home-made door, and had to walk through twelve or fourteen feet of narrow darkness until you came to the dirty wooden seat of the dunnee proper, always alive with blowies. The door had been knocked together from old packing cases and was about six inches

shorter than the doorway, a small concession to ventilation and hygiene, and I used to perch myself on the door and look out through this narrow slit and pretend I was Ned Kelly. The dunnee had a low tin roof, of course, and the heat it radiated made the pretence more realistic. Anyone who strayed into my restricted field of vision was treated according to my opinion of them: the ones I liked were allowed to join my gang, people I didn't like were the rich men we robbed, and Auntie Grace was a squad of troopers and was shot on sight.

The dunnee also featured in one of the after-dinner stories of Uncle Jack. Uncle Jack, it seems, had to go late one night and had taken a hurricane lamp with him to see by. Just short of the wooden seat, on the wall of the shed at about head height was a nail which was used to hang the kero lamp on. Having hung up the lamp, Uncle Jack was just bending forward to undo his belt when he noticed his shadow on the opposite wall. He could see, quite unmistakably, a spider crawling over his hair. What had actually happened was that a small spider, disturbed perhaps by the light, had dropped down from a beam of the roof and was hanging between the lamp and Uncle Jack's head, close enough to the lamp to throw a menacing shadow on the opposite wall. Uncle Jack had such a morbid fear of spiders, a bad experience in childhood, Auntie Grace thought, that he couldn't even bring himself to flick them off with his bare hands, but had to have someone else pick them off for him, or had to brush them off with a stick. Having nothing to hand, he went tearing into the house with his head bowed forward yelling, "Get it orf! Get it orf!"

Auntie Grace, having examined his hair and having found no spider, told him to hold still.

"Keep dead still, Jack. It's a redback. I think... I think she's buildin' a nest."

And for a good ten minutes she strung him along, while Uncle Jack whimpered and sobbed and moaned. Auntie Grace told and re-told that story, crying with laughter, while any other hearers were smiling in embarrassment and thinking of the suffering of poor Uncle Jack. The final irony, which she never forgot to mention soberly as she wiped her eyes, was that three months later it was a spider bite that killed him. A harmless sort that he just happened to be allergic to.

Towards the end of that last ever visit to Auntie Grace's, I was hanging on the dunnee door playing at Ned Kelly when I spotted the troopers breaking cover, and

they copped a withering hail of fire that would have turned back the Six Hundred. The large form of Auntie Grace, however, steamed on undaunted. I planted a bullet right in the middle of her forehead for good measure and then quickly climbed off the door before she saw me. I realized that she was coming over to go to the toilet, but I didn't want to be stepping out as she came in – I thought it would look better if I was seated; so I walked quickly away from the door, pulled down my shorts, and sat myself down. I expected Auntie Grace to open the door, give a squeal of embarrassment and excuse herself, and then go away. I even wondered how long I dared keep her waiting to cause her the most discomfort I could. When I heard the door open I was sitting unconcernedly, staring at something interesting on the side wall. But there was no squeal of embarrassment. The light dimmed, and for a moment I thought she must have quietly shut the door and slipped away, but I looked up and saw the huge figure of Auntie Grace backing in towards the dunnee. She was obviously too large to turn around in the narrow building with comfort, and with a practised skill, she began hiking up her dress and pulling down her drawers as she shuffled back towards me. I was frozen with terror, astonished to see how spotty her backside was. It was covered with freckles and liver spots. And still she kept backing towards me. I seemed to be seeing and recalling every moment all at the same time, and even when I think about it now, that huge, pale behind looms up over me in a type of natural slow motion. In those few seconds every detail of that poor woman's bum became so firmly impressed on my memory that I could still sketch out a map of its features.

Then, just as she was making the final bend and her cheeks were spread to their most revealing, I found my voice.

"But Auntie Grace..." I whimpered.

Auntie Grace gave a sharp scream and dragged her knickers up over her buttocks as she ran out. She didn't speak to me again for the rest of that day. In the evening she made my dinner and put it down in front of me and left me to eat it alone. At first, I felt terribly guilty, but in the end, I took advantage of her absence to feed most of my dinner to one of the kelpies who happened to be hanging around the back door. Breakfast was served in the same manner the following morning. As soon as Auntie Grace had left the room, I looked out the back door, taking my bowl of porridge with me, but the dog was nowhere in sight. It was probably still regretting the mutton. I

fought through the porridge and then went outside. I couldn't play Ned Kelly the bushranger anymore, but I went into the old machinery shed and played the trial and hanging of Ned Kelly the convict. Such is life.

That evening, the last of my visit, after another solitary meal, I was just getting ready for bed when Auntie Grace called me into the kitchen. She was sitting down at the table and didn't look at me when I came in.

"Now, you know why I've called you in," she began, still not looking at me and speaking in a stern voice, "and the less said about it all the better..."

I didn't reply, and could feel myself blushing. I knew that she was referring to the dunnee incident, but I had no idea why she had called me in, or what needed to be said.

"You're old enough now to know certain things, and you prob'ly do, knowing how kids are brought up these days, and I s'pose you're too old now to be coming to the farm every summer..."

I was blushing very hotly now, blushing with the shame and guilt of being accused of knowing certain things, and with the sudden and unexpected shame of being forbidden to return to Auntie Grace's farm. I should have been delighted to think that I would never have to return to that bleak, dusty, friendless place, but being told that I would not be welcome to return made me feel such a bitter sense of how unfair it all was that I began to cry loudly and painfully.

"Now I want you to remember, before you go, that you have... well, you've seen things that... that no one but your Uncle Jack has ever seen..." and here Auntie Grace herself began to choke on her words, and I continued sobbing, thinking at the same time of that awesome, spotty behind that only Uncle Jack had seen before.

"And I hope, I really hope, that you'll be man enough to... to keep things to yourself... out of respect for your Uncle Jack... who died..." and Auntie Grace gave herself up to crying.

It was a strange sound to hear Auntie Grace sobbing. I looked up and saw the huge chest heaving, the shoulders shaking, and Auntie Grace's head bobbing up and

down as she cried, and suddenly I was pierced with all the pain of the loneliness of that ugly, bad tempered woman. It was such a sharp, unexpected shock of understanding that I gave a small cry and ran over to her and threw myself at her, hugging her warm, spongy body, my nose filling with the familiar, cheap scent of her bath salts.

I expected some change in Auntie Grace's behaviour towards me after that. That moment released such powerful new feelings in me. I couldn't believe that anything would be quite the same, and I thought Auntie Grace must have felt something similar. But next morning Auntie Grace was as coarse and grotesque as ever, and try as I might to remember the sympathy and overpowering love I had felt for her, I couldn't help the same uneasy repulsion stealing over me the longer I was with her. The way she spoke, the way her big fleshy arm stirred the grey mess of porridge, and the way she moved between the kitchen table and the stove, every action, from the way her nostrils flared with every breath to the way she thumped down on her chair, all reaffirmed my old feelings, and it made me strangely guilty to think how quickly I could lose that painful charity, that electric stab of knowledge I had suffered only the night before. I half expected, rather dreaded, I suppose, that she would overlook that I was not to be invited back next year, but I was never to return to Auntie Grace's. I only saw her again as a dying old woman years later. I wanted to reassure her then that I had never betrayed her, but she was too close to death to recognise me.

I hadn't thought of Auntie Grace for twenty years or more, but that day, standing on the foreshore watching the fishing boats, everything came back. All the old emotions, all the small events I could never have consciously called to mind, all the unimportant details which I have begun forgetting again already. Everything came back to me. A sign of old age, I expect. As if my memory were clearing itself. It's the time, I suppose, when all of us are meant to find some sort of judgement to pass on our lives, but I couldn't come up with one to fit mine. I didn't understand anything any more clearly, I just remembered it all, and wondered as I walked home what Auntie Grace would have thought of my life if she had known it. A whole lifetime of "being man enough". I don't know if there is anything to understand about my life. When I look back on it I can't find any judgement or reason, just a mood, a feeling that comes over me so often now on grey, windy days when the westerly seems to turn the sea itself grey and the white horses foam across the bay.