

Drury Comes Home

He drove across the border at nine in the morning, the sun already warming his beard-stubby cheek and deepening the colour of his right arm. Clear, hot Northern Territory air blasted in through the open window.

The border signalled a short couple of hours drive before he arrived in his beloved Alice, so now officially on Territory soil, he grinned broadly.

“We’re coming home,” he shouted. “Home, home, *home!*” All the years he’d spent getting on with life everywhere but here, and yet on a twist and a turn, he was coming home.

Drury Campbell let the prickle of emotion rush up from his toes. He’d forgotten the overwhelming love he had of the place, and every tree and rocky outcrop welcomed him back.

He swiped away a push of happy tears before they left tracks on his dusty cheeks to tell tale on a man who never shared his feelings. He kept grinning, rubbed his nose, sucked in the warm breath of baked, dry soil he knew so well to be his Territory’s signature scent.

So familiar: the hot earth shimmering, blurring the black ribbon of road which led to the pretence of hills in the distance; the blue sky, deeper for its contrast to the myriad of reds which built the Territory’s masterful landscape; the casuarina trees, the corkwood trees, the *tyre* trees...

And still there was something else, something that remained out of reach, a connection he couldn’t verbalise, or even construct in his mind. Perhaps it was just Coming Home. It was a sense of ownership.

Yes. That felt right. Ownership. No - not that word in particular - it was more like a Belonging to something rather than Owning something. That was it. That was as close as he could come. He Belonged here. "*We* belong here," he said aloud and glanced at the rear vision mirror and into Blue-dog's eyes. "Don't we, boy?"

A slurp on the back of his neck and one dog-word agreeing indicated that Blue-dog was happy about it.

Drury laughed aloud again as he passed through Kulgera, a tanned arm out the window, fingers splayed to catch the breeze as he pushed into his world, his for the taking, his alone.

All thanks to Uncle Daedo, who'd left him with a peculiar little shack on a couple of acres just through the Gap in the Mt John Valley. He knew the area well, but hadn't lived with Uncle when he'd been in Alice before. He'd visited the eccentric old Centralian - his mother's uncle - often, but had always declined the invitation to live at the house.

Daedo Campbell was of the old stock: crusty, boozy, hard-working, rich. He had an RM Williams look about him: wise eyes, gentle features, capable hands. Drury had no idea how old he was, but he must have had a few decades under his belt before he died in his sleep at the Old Timer's Village. His mother thought he was perhaps around the mid nineties.

Drury thought at one stage that Uncle Daedo was like two hundred and ten: for Pete's sake, only someone that old would have a name like Daedo. Where the hell that'd come from no one was old enough to remember except Uncle, and he had no clue either. Nor possibly could remember if in fact he ever knew.

When the time had come for Drury to leave and explore the outside world, his mother also packed up and left town to enjoy small city life in Adelaide. And Drury never looked back, made his way through life with all the get-up-and-go of a bullet train. He hadn't spent a lot of time over the years thinking about, or even contacting Uncle Daedo. Of course, the inheritance changed all that, and he and his Blue-dog headed for Alice as quickly as possible after Uncle's death.

He mourned little for his uncle: he hadn't felt that close, yet now he experienced a certain shame that he'd missed seeing Daedo in his last years. Drury had even missed the funeral, being overseas at the time. Well, he couldn't help that: he hadn't been able to get a flight home in time, had he?

He slowed up coming past Jim's Place, over Orange Creek and at last on to the final thirty kilometres before he could turn left and drive through the Gap. His head swung side to side every so often as a well-known outcrops of rock appeared before him, or a lone tree atop a bare stony, baked hillock. He remembered this one, and that and *that* one, and marvelled at how deeply embedded in his memory were these small icons of his beloved Cental Australia.

And there they were: the ranges, the Gap, the three towers. Drury's heart expanded, and now emotion gave his chin the tremors.

Blue-dog spoke two dog-words and stuck his head out the window, his face flattened by the wind and the speed of the car. Drury laughed with him.

When he pulled up at the shack, the first thing that struck him was how well looked after it seemed.

The garden was open, native flora only, untidy and exciting, just as he remembered. He followed the higgledy pathway savouring the bush, inhaling the

Drury Comes Home

dry, warm mid-morning air. And when he emerged from the yard, the verandah of the house offered a comfort he'd forgotten.

He sucked in oxygen deeply. Daedo's rocking chair was still there by the door.

He bit down on his lip, the memory of old boy vivid, as if he were still sitting in that chair. Daedo had taken strongly to Blue-dog, then just a puppy who'd sit by the rocker at Uncle's feet when they visited with a six-pack of Coopers. Together they'd listen to the silence of arid land country.

Drury avoided the chair and opened the front door. Light spilled across the sparse furniture of an old Centralian living room and his gaze settled on an envelope propped on the mantelpiece. He recognised Uncle's big, bold scrawl.

Oh no, Drury thought, a Letter from the Dead. He looked at Blue-dog and the dog looked back at him. Maybe Uncle Daedo was going to make him do some weird sleuthing or whatever to pass a test before he could legally take over the house.

That wouldn't be right. Drury had the title in his name already.

His heart beat an extra thud as he approached the fireplace. He reached out, and his hand only shook a little as he turned over the business-sized envelope. Lowering himself to the floor with Blue-dog, they both stared at it. It was a moment or two before, with a deep inhale of dusty, musty air, Drury peeled it open.

'Dear Drury-boy

'By the time you get this, I will of course be gone. As you can see, I write this on the day you leave Alice Springs and go off adventuring somewhere - '

Drury glanced at the date. 19 February, 2004.

' - and no doubt to make your fortune. Good for you.

'I decided to leave you this land and the house, and whatever money I have left because in truth, apart from your mother, there is no-one else I would rather give it to.

'I'm not a bloke to run to a lot of words, so this is short.

'Don't be a selfish, lonely old bastard like me. I watched you leave without a backward glance today and it told me I should have a care that you don't turn out like me. Share your new life here, make this house a happy place it never was with just me rattling around in it. Be the best Drury you can be.

'I loved the times we had together. You made me see I should have shared more. God bless you, boy.'

The signature was as steady as Drury remembered, a great heavy scrawl across the page.

The world blurred for a time then, and Drury was hard put not to wipe his nose on his sleeve many times. For a long time, Drury thought about Uncle's message.

Uncle Daedo had shared; he'd left over four hundred thousand dollars as well as the house and land. There'd been no secrets divulged in the letter, no sleuthing to get through, just a message: Drury had to be the best he could be.

And Drury wasn't lonely like Daedo, he was just alone and hadn't needed company before. Didn't really want the hassle of it. He was content, just as he was. Was that selfish? He didn't know. He decided he didn't care. But did that make him a fool?

He swagged it that night on the verandah, Blue-dog dosing down on his blanket beside him. As he drifted towards sleep, Drury wondered why no-one

Drury Comes Home

from the Old Timer's had called him to come see Daedo when he was dying.

Perhaps the old boy hadn't wanted anyone to visit.

The night sky filled him with peace and he slept soundly. Neither he nor Blue-dog knew if the other stirred during the night.

The morning dawned as it usually did, but today the day would be different. Drury cranked up the old gas stove, noting it was clean of dust and dirt. He put a billy on to boil, ducked into the bathroom to check for hot water. All still on the go he found, so he shucked his clothes, stood under the prickly needles of hot water and soaped up.

Later, just dressed, he heard a knock on the front window. Blue-dog gave one dog-word, the one that meant 'stranger'.

"Hello?" a female voice enquired.

"Hello," Drury replied, pleasantly surprised as the woman stepped through the door.

She was as tall as he, and dark haired, her face free of make-up, or so he thought. She smelled good, sort of citrusy.

Blue-dog sniffed and she reached down to scratch his ears. "I'm Fran."

"Drury." They shook hands.

"I nursed your Uncle. He asked me to put that letter here once he passed." She lifted her chin in the direction of the mantelpiece. "I'm returning the key - I did a bit of cleaning, but it didn't need much."

"Thanks. For everything," Drury said. "For nursing Uncle Daedo. I bet it wasn't easy."

"I like old people. And he was good fun. Right to the end."

“Oh. Good. Um, billy’s just boiled.” Drury said and thumbed towards the kitchen.

“Love one,” she answered.

He poured water into tin cups, dunking Irish Breakfast teabags. Blue-dog had taken a seat beside Fran. Dog approval.

Drury asked what Daedo had spoken of over the years.

“I only knew him a short time, but he spoke of lots of things,” she replied. “I was his nurse for maybe a year. He rarely spoke of you, if that’s what you mean,” she said, watching him. “When he did it was to wonder why you hadn’t come back earlier.” She was silent a moment. Then, “He knew you’d come back some day. He always said, ‘The Centre’s a hard place to stay away from and Drury Campbell knows it.’”

Drury laughed at the way she’d pulled her chin in, dropped her tone to the deepest she could and boomed out Daedo’s philosophy. She was pretty good.

Blue-dog agreed with a dog-word.

She stood up to leave. “What will you do now you’re back?”

Drury watched the sunlight tickle an earring of hers. “I’ll do whatever. It really doesn’t matter now I’ve come home. But I am a qualified geologist.”

“Ah,” Fran said. “The draw of the land, is it?”

He wondered at her mockery, then ignored it. “Of this particular land, that’s true. I finally feel like I belong to something. But it’s even more than that. It’s in my psyche somehow, in my blood. It’s as if I’m *of* it, like it is with the Old People. Do you see?” He wondered why his tongue had run away with him.

Fran’s eyes were green, with a most unusual fleck in them; black lashes. Her dark eyebrows lifted in mild surprise. “It sings to you, does it?”

“It is a spirit thing,” he agreed, and shuffled awkwardly.

“Tell me.” Her gaze was steady. “Would you have come back if Daedo hadn’t encouraged you with what was in his will?”

He held her gaze. “Eventually,” he answered, perhaps a little more stiffly than he intended. He shoved his hands into his pockets. What was it to her, anyway?

“He missed you a great deal.”

“He didn’t ask for me,” he protested. “I would’ve come sooner.”

Blue-dog moved to sit at Drury’s feet. He looked back at Fran dolefully.

She softened. “It’s all right,” she said. “I’ve no business being angry with you. I told Daedo I was angry for him; he told me not to be, that he knew you better than you knew yourself. That you weren’t really a selfish person.”

Drury felt the rush of guilt flaming his face. “If you think I came back *only* because Daedo left me the house, you’re very wrong.”

Fran tilted her head to one side. “Daedo knew how to get you back. That’s all he wanted for you. Sort of guiding you, I think.”

He clenched his hands still stuffed in his jeans. “I would’ve come back sooner if he’d asked for me.”

Fran nodded. “He was lonely.”

The pain in Drury’s chest swelled. “He never needed anyone before.”

She smiled then. “He told me he didn’t want you to be like him.”

“I’m not.”

She checked her watch. “Don’t want to be late for my shift. Nice meeting you.” Blue-dog shuffled on his bottom until she reached down and patted his head. “See you, boy.” He gave one loud dog-word, then another.

She had gone through the door and was down the steps before Drury could clear his head.

“But I’d like to know more about him,” he called after her, striding on to the verandah. “You could tell me. You could give me a chance to know him more. He was family, you know. We belonged here.”

Blue-dog gave another loud dog-word behind him. He rushed at Fran, launching himself from the verandah and landing just beyond her, herding her back.

She laughed at the dog, and it sounded like a clear bell in Drury’s head. “When?” she asked, her cool gaze meeting his bemused stare.

“Tomorrow. Same time for breakfast.”

She nodded. “See you then.”

Drury restrained Blue-dog from tagging along behind as she disappeared down the raggedy path.

Uncle Daedo had missed him. How could Drury have possibly known that? How could he *not* have known?

The old man hadn’t left him any clues before, only what was written in the letter, and just now a few pointed words spoken by a woman who’d been a nurse and a carer for his uncle’s last twelve months.

Drury felt gutted, bereft. The homecoming was spoiled somehow, stained with a guilt he hadn’t realised he carried.

He read and re-read Daedo’s letter, tucked it in his shirt pocket, walked around the boundary of the property, retraced his steps and walked it all over again. By dusk he and Blue-dog were ready for a beer on the verandah.

Sitting there, he gave respectful thanks to Uncle Daedo, apologised for the years of neglect. Blue-dog looked at him as he spoke aloud to the stars. "I'm sorry you missed me. It's no excuse to say I didn't know. I should have known."

He wanted to say more about Uncle's gift to him, but his voice stuck in his throat. Blue-dog laid his head on Drury's knee.

That night they bedded down in Daedo's old room, he in his swag, Blue-dog on his blanket.

His last thought before sleep crept in was that it felt good to be back, to be home. He belonged, he knew it, and for all his faults, his childishness, his self-absorption, he'd found his niche. With a little help, he conceded, from Uncle Daedo.

The next morning dawned much the same as it usually did, again - sunny and dry, and with a hint of lemon scented gum wafting in from somewhere close by. He'd find that tree and make sure to plant others.

By mid-morning Fran hadn't shown. It made him feel worse than ever, that perhaps she'd decided to forget about Daedo's selfish nephew. He brewed himself a third cup and he and Blue-dog took another boundary walk.

This time he noted the fence sagging here and there, the odd clump of discarded building materials, an old fire pit and the beginnings of what might have become a revegetated area.

He climbed to a high spot and turned slowly, gazing at the view draped in mauves and hazy blues until his heart settled, and his mind released the tension. He would fix up the place, meet some people, entertain, get a good job, work hard. The Centre was where he connected, where he belonged. He would make it work,

Drury Comes Home

because it would work for him, with him. Things flowed here; the energy was tangible.

When he trailed back to the house Fran was sitting on the verandah steps. She held up a bottle of red wine. “First thing about him,” she said, “Was that he loved his red. Good full-bodied shiraz.”

After a moment in which he tried to sort his relief from his pleasure, then gave up, he said, “Must run in the family.”

He watched her drape an arm around Blue-dog’s sturdy shoulders. Watched as his dog sat snug beside her, grinning at him.

“Glad to hear it. Runs in mine, too,” she said. “So, how do you feel about things today?”

He shifted his gaze to her face. “Like I’ve got what it takes,” he answered her challenge.

“That’s a good start,” she said. “Welcome home.”