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Chapter 1 - On The Track

"Clicketty clack" "clicketty clack"

"Going to Sydney" "going to Sydney".

The train wheels were talking to Billy-telling him something he didn't really want to know. For all of his five years he had known only life in a remote Gippsland valley. He knew nothing of Sydney except that he did NOT want to go there!

He clutched his teddy bear defiantly and glared as he remembered



the photographs he'd been shown, photos of children in neat school uniforms-boys in ties, blazers, long socks, straw boaters and shoes!

Photos of tall buildings crowded together; crowded together on streets crowded with traffic and people. Even the photos of Sydney harbour had not pleased him-he knew about sharks!

Billy looked quickly at his brother and sister but they weren't taking any notice of him. Peter was reading the paper and Robyn stared out the window.

Billy's eyes smarted with tears as he thought of his beloved creek in the foothills behind his grandparents' house. It was his favourite place. He would spend hours sitting on the tiny footbridge looking into the water and talking to the frogs.

"Going to Sydney"

"Going to Sydney"

...sang the wheels mockingly.

"We're not going Ted", mumbled Billy. Suddenly the train wheels changed their song to

"Running away"

"Running away"

The little boy snuggled further into the corner seat and shutting his eyes he began to plan his escape. In a few seconds he was fast asleep.

Eleven year old Robyn glanced at Billy and smiled at the blonde-haired child. He looked such a baby and so easily hurt. She reminded herself of the great responsibility that was now hers-to be both mother and sister to him, and hoped she could do the job.

The events of the last month had left Robyn stunned. Ever since Billy was three months old the children had lived with their only grand-parents. Their parents had died in a car crash, and Robyn scarcely remembered them. There had been little money but lots of happiness in their home in the



tiny valley. Peter and Robyn rode their bikes each day over dirt tracks six kilometres to the school. Billy was due to join them after these summer holidays. But then the dreadful thing had happened.

A bout of Sars influenza had swept the district. The grand-parents became very ill and were put into hospital, where they died of pneumonia a few days later. The local authorities had located some distant relatives who would take the children. Neither the children nor the relatives, who lived in one of Sydney's 'better' suburbs, were very keen on the arrangement. Robyn just knew she could never cope in the big city.

Peter had a plan. He'd been quietly working on it for several days, but he did not want to tell the others. He didn't want them to be disappointed. Also he did not want the child welfare officer to get even an inkling of the plan, or it would certainly be stopped.



Peter had phoned his relative, Mr Bingham-Jones, from a telephone box in the large country town where the children had been staying for a few days while the welfare officer waited for train day.

Peter had explained to Mr Bingham-Jones that he was getting a job on a sheep and cattle station and that if it was alright with him, they'd not be coming to Sydney after all. Mr Bingham-Jones was quite delighted, and as his idea of country life was taken only from history books, he saw nothing strange at all in a 14 year old supporting his younger brother and sister this way.

Peter had heard his grandfather's tales of 'humping his bluey' around the country as a lad, working at different stations, and he knew he could do the same. The wage for a lad was not great but he knew they could manage.

His one concern was to look after his little brother and sister. They would be most unhappy in the city, he knew that for sure. When the train reached Melbourne he'd tell them his plan.

To Peter the wheels sang;

"On the track,"

"On the track,"

"On the track,"

"On the track,"

Chapter 2 – Pies, Chips and Hamburgers

“Wake up, sleepy- heads we’re here,” shouted Peter. Robyn shook her head and blinked against the strong light. She moved to the window and put her arm around Billy. The little boy gazed excitedly at the city scenery, his plans of running away temporarily forgotten. Peter reached three bags down from the luggage rack overhead.

Screech! Jerk! Clang! Hissss..... The train stopped at Flinders Street Station – Platform No.1. The children joined the crowd of people on the platform.

“You sit here with the bags, Robyn. We men will go and get the bikes from the guards van.” ordered Pete. Billy swelled with pride at that handed his teddy to Robyn – solemnly instructed her not to let him wander off – and marched alongside Pete.

There weren’t many people left on the platform by the time the boys returned. Peter expertly strapped their bags - one to the luggage carrier of each bike, and Billy’s teddy onto his handlebars. “How about we leave these bikes at the cloakroom and go down to the cafeteria in the basement for a feed” suggested Pete.

In a short while they were all tucking into a meal of pies and chips, washed down with large glasses of flavoured milk. Robyn gazed admiringly at Pete as he explained his plan – it all seemed so simple. Billy at first was too thrilled to even speak and then he felt content and secure. Peter obviously had his life under control – all Billy had to do was obey and enjoy – just as he had always done.

“What about money, though?” Robyn was concerned that the venture might fall flat before they even got past the city.

“Well there’s the \$500 the school teacher gave us for our poddy lambs and calves. Then I’ll cash in our tickets to Sydney – that’s another \$250,” replied Pete.

“We’ll need some sort of camping gear – plastic tarp, blankets, billy – that sort of stuff,” added Robyn. “Maybe we should stay in the city for a few weeks and try to build up some money from odd jobs.

“Yes, that’s an idea – we can always start with selling newspapers, and then there’s aluminium cans to collect, and we should be able to pick-up some free food from the damaged stuff at the markets and.....

“The Orange People,” interrupted Robyn “I read about them in the paper. They have a kitchen and they give out meals to people – no questions asked. Apparently some kids from the big flats go there every day.”

“I know just where we can live,” chimed in Billy “There’s lambs and ducks and calves and chickens and pigs and a cow and...”

“What are you talking about” enquired Pete. “This is the city, boy- that sounds more like a farm.”

“Tis too,” said Billy “A farm in the city”

“The child’s dreaming again”

“No, really” cried Billy “I saw it on telly at that welfare officer’s place it’s right in the city. It’s called Collingwood Farm.” Peter and Robyn looked across at each other and grinned. “Sounds just like the place fella; I’ll go across to the Tourist Bureau and ask about it right now. Shan’t be long” Pete ducked off leaving the other two to finish their meals.

“A farm means a bit of bush around it and we can make a hidden camp there,” mused Robyn

“Why do we have to hide?” demanded Billy.

“The welfare don’t reckon that children on their own can manage without getting into trouble, so we have to make sure that no-one realises that we don’t have a grown up with us. You understand that – don’t you Billy?” explained Robyn. Billy nodded and looked suitably solemn; after all he knew grown-ups had funny ideas about most things. Robyn stacked up their dirty dishes and carried them over to the counter.

“Thank you dear, that’s very kind of you.” Said the grey-haired lady who had served them. The two children climbed the steps and stood in the noise and rush of Flinders Street waiting for Peter.

Peter came out of the Tourist Bureau feeling happy and excited. The friendly lady there had been happy to give him maps of Melbourne and to tell him about Collingwood Farm.



It was set in bushland – being part of a large reserve that surrounds a bend in the Yarra River. The farm was for the use of all folk in the city – to picnic or play, to keep animals or grow vegetables. It was never locked-up and vandalism was no problem, so there were no security guards. Obviously with so many different folk using the area, no-one was going to take any particular notice of three children who appeared to be often playing in the bush nearby.

Yes, to make camp there would be ideal with the huge Housing Commission flats nearby they’d be just three of the many children in.....“Heee-rr-aw-ld, Heee-rr-aw-ld!”. Pete was startled. Lost in his thoughts he’d not noticed the boy selling newspapers now he remembered his plan, and approached the boy – an olive skinned youngster, stocky build with curly black hair and a broad grin. “G’day, can ya tell me how I’d get a job like yours?” asked Peter



“It’s not that easy mate. Y’see all the best spots in the city are taken, you’d do better at delivering for a suburban newsagent and flogging the odd bundle at the traffic lights. The pay’s the same two cents per paper. ‘Course in a spot like mine y’kin sell a couple thousand a day so yer make a decent amount. But all the good spots are well and truly taken. Still tell yer what. Yer reckon yer kin do this job eh?” Peter nodded. “Well” the boy went on “I do wanna go to the pictures wiv me mates, so if you’d take this spot on fer me. Just for this arvo I mean yer kin have the full pay fer whatever yer sell – I mean I wouldn’t want any commission.”

“It’s a deal, I’ve just got to go and get my brother and sister from the station. They can help. My name’s Pete by the way.” The boy extended his hand “Tony,” he said grasping Pete’s hand firmly. “Look if yer going ter the station just pop in to the newsagent – see over there under the arch. Tell Jim that yer subbing fer me this arvo.”

“Righto” replied Peter striding off briskly

Peter looked at his watch. Crikey, it’s half past three. Robyn, can you and Billy hold the fort while I just go and cash in these tickets before it gets too late? Shan’t be longer than half an hour” Robyn nodded as she was too busy to answer. Peter went off at a quick trot towards the station. Billy was enjoying this ‘game’ of shops – with real money! Some brightly coloured feathers waving above the



crowd attracted his attention he stared as the feathers approached, and saw that they were attached to a straw hat worn by an elegantly dressed lady. She swept down upon him and said in the poshest voice Billy had ever heard – “Look at the dah-ling wee paper boy isn’t he just the cutest little angel?!” and before Billy even knew what was happening she kissed him soundly on both cheeks, popped a two dollar coin into his hand and continued grandly on her way.

“Hey lady” Billy called in a puzzled voice, - “you forgot-cha paper!” then he reddened in embarrassment realising that he- a tough man- had been kissed in public!

It was 6.30pm when the children took their money to the newsagent and received their share -\$34 including tips.

“Well troops,” grinned Pete, “I think we’ve all earned a real treat, let’s try McDonalds for tea.” Billy’s eyes shone and danced with delight.

“I saw it on telly at the welfare officer’s place; they’re giving away free boats. Can I have one Pete? Can I have one?”

Robyn and Pete exchanged smiles over the little boy’s head as they walked along the street towards the large red and yellow neon ‘M’ that marked McDonalds Restaurant.

Peter and Robyn carrying two trays laden with food carefully made their way to where Billy was sitting, holding a table for them.

“Seven hamburgers, four chips, six ice-creams, three apple-pies and four milkshakes?” counted Billy as the trays were unloaded. “Gee Pete; are we really going to eat all that?”

“You bet” replied Pete “I could just about eat all of that by myself. Oh and here’s your boat”

“Thanks Pete,” breathed Billy his little face glowing with pleasure.

“Well you earned it mate,” grinned Pete “Now everyone tuck in”. And they did.

The street lights were twinkling in the dark as they left McDonalds. Peter took a deep breath and said “Well the last problem of the day is to find somewhere close to camp for the night.”

Chapter 3 – A Bit of Luck and a Tree House

Peter and Robyn gazed around. A street over, they could see the dark shapes of some older style office buildings.

“I reckon we should find a spot over behind those old buildings. Probably where someone’s thrown out some cardboard boxes and paper, so we can make a bit of a sleeping cubby” Suggested Robyn sensibly.

Billy cradled his precious boat with one arm, and held tightly to Robyn’s hand as they walked cautiously along the dark narrow lanes leading away from the light of the city street. They stopped beside a doorway of a likely looking building. Robyn didn’t know what made her do it. She let go of Billy’s hand, stepped to the door, and gave it a push. To her amazement and delight it opened!

“We should be ok to camp in here,” said Pete “If someone didn’t even bother to lock the door then it can’t be a place that anyone cares about much. Let’s go up the stairs and see what we can find.”

The children walked softly up the stairs that creaked with age. The first floor landing was crowded with dusty boxes. They went on. The second floor landing was clean and there was a stout wooden door with a sign. Robyn peered at it and by the light coming through the stairwell window read;

“Council for the Single Mother and Her Child - Accommodation And Counselling Service – Hours 9am-6.30pm Open Every Day Except Sunday.”

“I wonder,” said Robyn under her breath and she shoved on this door too. It swung open.

“It’s as if someone knew we were coming.” Said Billy

Inside were several rooms. The first was a messy office area; they walked through into the next room. There were rugs, chairs, a cot, couches, pillows and many toys scattered in bright confusion. The windows were large and modern and the light from the city streets streamed in. Beyond this was a bathroom and kitchen.

Billy fell on the toys with delight. There were so many lovely things there and he wanted to play with them all at once.

Meanwhile Peter and Robyn discussed the situation.

“Is it alright for us to be here Pete or are we breaking the law?”

“Well, we haven’t exactly broken in – after all someone left the doors open,” replied Pete “and there aren’t any notices about trespassing.”

“The name on his place,” added Robyn. “It’s some organization for helping mothers and children, so I can’t see that they’d be worried about us using their place for one night.”

“I’ll fix some beds up for us, “said Peter beginning to unfold some rugs. “And I’ll get Billy into a bath,” said Robyn

Billy wasn’t too keen on the idea of having a bath, but he did want to try out his boat. Robyn found that he was more cooperative than usual. There were some old clothes on shelves in a corner of the

room, so she dressed him in a tee-shirt that hung down to his knees. Then she washed out his clothes and hung them to dry by an open window.

Soon Billy was tucked up snugly with a large panda bear for company. He was asleep in a few minutes.



The city seemed almost familiar as the children pedalled along the wide street beside the Yarra River. The broad trees cast cool shadows in the early morning light. They had left the building at first light – taking care to have tidied up after themselves. Breakfast was buns bought at an early opening milk bar on the way to the station. After collecting the bikes from the cloakroom, Peter looked at his map (given to him yesterday by the lady at the tourist bureau) and now led the way.

There were scarcely any cars on their side of the road. At this time day most traffic was going into the city centre and the children were going in the opposite direction.

About an hour later, Peter led them into a narrow dirt track that ran between the river, and the tangled bushland that was alongside the paddocks of Collingwood farm.

“This is national parkland and free for anyone to use,” informed Peter, “And over there, on the other side of the river, are some abandoned factories - the government has taken over that land to use as a freeway some day.”

The track ended. On one side was the river, on the other thick undergrowth and large trees.

“The paddocks of Collingwood Farm are just on the other side of this thick bush, according to the ma,” said Pete, “Somewhere in this “jungle” we should find a spot to make a camp that will be out of sight”, he continued.

Laying their bikes down, the children looked around. Billy dropped t the ground-he had spied an interesting insect. Looking up he saw a hole in the tangle of shrub. Rapid like a rabbit he darted through, tumbling into a clearing around the base of a huge tree. Overhead the spreading leafy branches almost blocked the light.

“Hey! Robbie, Pete -come here! See what I’ve found,” he called

Robyn and Pete joined Billy. They stared up into the massive branches.

“It looks like there’s a tree house,” said Robyn thoughtfully
“What do you say Pete?” she pointed high up, where there seemed to be some planks wedged firmly between some forked branches. Pete’s answer was action. He swung onto a



low

branch and began to climb.

His movements were swift and easy and in a short time he disappeared into the foliage around the spot where the planks could be seen. Then he reappeared, waving excitedly. Soon afterwards, he was on the ground again - his face one big grin.

"It's perfect!" Pete exclaimed, "Just the thing. It hasn't been used in years I bet. Some of the planks need fixing, but I should be able to scrounge some timber and so on from the yards of those old factories. We just need to buy nails and some strong rope. By tonight we should have as sturdy a hideout as we could want.

"Billy, you get some of those branches and stuff from over there. Pete and I will make this hole bigger so we can get the bikes through. Then we can use what you've collected to disguise it," organised Robyn

Even though they could faintly hear the sounds of the city they felt like they were in the bush. Birds called overhead and the river went slip-slop against its banks. Peter and Robyn grinned at each other, things were working out fine.

"Gee, we did a good job, no-one would know there was a hole there at all," said Billy. They walked back along the track and came out into a quiet street.

Pete had been thinking and now had their morning planned.

"Now you two go along there" Pete pointed down a road that in the distance ran into a freeway. "Turn right at the second street. That will take you to the main entrance of the farm. I'll go and scout around the shops to see what jobs we could get. I'll buy the things we need and food for lunch. Meet you at the hide-out at noon ok?"

"Righto" replied Robyn

"See ya" called Billy, he was eager to explore this farm and play with the animals as he was used to doing.

Robyn grinned at Billy and said "Now come on nipper, I'll race you to the corner."

Pete waved as they raced away and then strode confidently down the road.

Chapter 4- Milk and Eggs

“Chooks, Robbie, Chooks!” – Billy flung himself through the gate into the fowl-yard, crouched on the ground, and began talking to the chooks. From a toddler, his grandmother’s hens had been his chief delight. He had spent hours following them around, imitating their noises and now could instantly make friends with any hen. Robyn watched as Billy stroked and cuddled the hens that now clucked about him eagerly.



“Hey! You kids!” Robyn swung around to the sound of the voice. A large lady in blue overalls and gum-boots was striding purposefully towards them.

“Billy! Put that chook down!” hissed Robyn, “I think we’re in trouble already”

The lady spoke to Robyn. “I’m just going to milk the cow. You want to watch?”

“Oh,” sighed Robyn in relief “I thought you may have been cross at my little brother for playing with the chooks.”

“Nonsense” replied the lady with a large smile, “All the farm animals that live here are used to being handled by children. It never seems to put the hens off the lay at any rate. Now come on, the milking stall is in the barn over there.”

They walked to a stone building where a cow waited patiently by one doorway. The lady plonked herself down on a small stool and milk was soon frothing into a bucket.

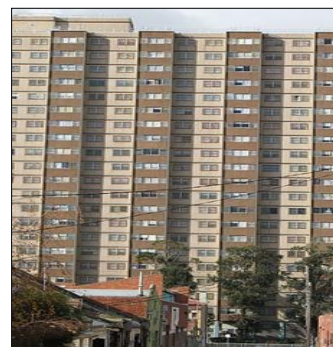
“Robyn can do that, can’t you Robyn?” said Billy conversationally. “She used to milk cows all the time.” Robyn shoved him to make him shut up.

The lady, was used to the boastful ways of small boys, smiled at him and said to Robyn, “Would you like to have a go, love?”

Robyn slid onto the stool and milked expertly. “Seems you were right, young man,” commented the lady, “And where did you learn to do that, love?”

“Oh, at my granny’s farm once,” replied Robyn vaguely.

“My name is Penny” said the lady “I haven’t seen you kids here before.”



“I’m Billy and my sister is Robyn.” Informed Billy importantly, “And we’ve just come over here and our big brother Peter has gone to see about a job and....” Robyn interrupted “We’re just living over there.” She gestured in the direction of the high rise flats “and we’ll be leaving in a few weeks again.” Robyn gave a sharp look at Billy. Penny nodded – She was used to the odd comings and goings of the folk who lived in this poor area of the city. In fact, it was for children such as these two, who seemed a bit lost and nervous, that the farm had been set up. Contact with the animals such as the gentle old cow was calming, and children soon found that the farm was a place to feel relaxed and happy.

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