



Welcome to Western Australia

A short story by

T.J. Beach

Mary thanked the driver, tucked her purse strap into the crook of her elbow and took the steps one at a time so as not to trip out of the bus and make a fool of herself.

She tutted and coughed as diesel fumes enveloped her. Everything magnified in the heat. Five thirty. Late again, but when a legal partner needed an urgent letter typed the new secretary had to stay back. She'd have to apologise to Betty again. Mary hardly knew the woman. What must she think of her?

No time for recriminations. She put her head down and strode, watching the cracks in the pavement and the parched yellow weeds.

Everything in Australia baked dry and brittle. The kids couldn't roll in the grass like Mary did in Richmond Park when she was little.

Sweat dribbled down her spine. The waistband of her skirt chafed. English woollen clothes, but she couldn't afford new outfits, not even when the first month's pay came in.

There'd be snow on the ground back home. Mum's gout would be giving her gip.

Double damn and hell, she'd promised herself not to think of mum. She missed her so much.

A fortnight yet before Harry's ship got back from up the coast. She could hang on till he got home.

Mary passed through the migrant hostel gate with a sigh of relief and hurried past the dining hall and the shower block, down row E to their Nissen hut. A corrugated iron half pipe with a concrete floor, a double bed and two singles, a table and chairs, a sink and a kettle - for a family of four. She couldn't complain. Some had six or more in their huts.

A blast of musty heat greeted her when she opened the door, instantly doubling the perspiration so her makeup ran. The aroma of dust and institutional bedding made her blink.

"Mummy, mummy, mummy!" Little Emma ran down from Betty's hut - three up the row - with Joanie toddling behind. So brown from the sun, like little Aborigines.

She dropped her purse and opened her arms. "Come here, Emmy. Mummy needs a cuddle."

A perfunctory kiss on the cheek, then Emma danced past to her bed. "Can we have an icy pole, Mummy? Auntie Betty gave us one, but that was ages ago and it's really hot."

Joanie grabbed Mary around the legs, so she deposited her purse on their little table and lifted her baby onto her hip.

Emma pulled an envelope out of the big pocket on the front of her dress. "Oh, I forgot! We got a letter."

Pale blue, with red and navy chevrons on the edges. Airmail. She turned it over. Sender: Mrs M Collins. The familiar handwriting, and address. Home. A letter from mum. Tears welled up.

She popped Joanie on the double bed and spun out into the lane. She couldn't let the kids see her cry.

Warm arms closed around her and before Mary knew it she'd been bundled to Betty's hut. The older woman steered her to a chair.

"Sit ya' down, Mary, and I'll mek us a brew. Wipe those tears, hinny." A clean handkerchief with a flower embroidered in the corner fluttered to the table beside her.

A cup and saucer appeared out of nowhere. Mary stared at it for a while, head still spinning. Then she picked up the tea and sipped. Glorious warmth, odd how it soothed, even when the temperature was up over a hundred.

"Come on, then, Mary. Tell me all about it."

Mary looked up into Betty's friendly face. Chubby cheeks, lipstick a little askew, nose scrunched to hold up her National Health glasses.

"I'm sorry, Betty. Sorry I was so late."

Betty waved it away. "Your bairns are a delight."

"And sorry for weeping. It's a fuss about nothing, really. Just a letter from home. I don't know why a letter made me cry. I haven't even read it, yet."

"Oh, I do love. I've had a few of those little moments my'sen." She patted Mary's arm.

"I'm so homesick, Betty. And Harry's away and it's so hot."

"Oh, I ken completely. Don't forget my Tommy's on the same ship. Ya' think I wasn't exactly the same back a few months? Did ya' hear that Suzie and her Bobby got a house? It's a bungalow in Embleton a fine wee place. They're having a barbecue on Saturday. I told her I'll take you and the kids. Hope you don't mind, but I know you don't have a car yet. We sailors' wives should stick together!"

Emma poked her head around the door. Joanie right on her heels. "Mummy, can we go with Tommy? We're going to play tag round the washing lines."

Mary's heart fluttered. There was long grass just over the hostel fence by the washroom, probably snakes.

Betty patted her arm again. "Dinna' fash yoursel'. Little Tommy'll look after them."

Emma rationalised that as a yes and took off. Joanie smiled, waved and skipped after her sister.

"Isn't this what we came for, eh?" Betty said, "the kids can play in the sun and the wages are so much better for our men. It'll be brass monkeys and lashing down in Glasgow."

"Same in London." Mary plastered a grin on her face. Set her cup back in her saucer. "I'm not going back." She nodded to convince herself. "Days like today I want to go home so much, but it will get better here. I'm going to make a go of this."

"There now, that's the spirit." Betty stood and raised a finger. "I've got some Christmas port left, and I think this might be just the time to finish it."

She found the bottle and tipped a slug into each of two tumblers. She handed one to Mary.

“Get some of that down you, love.”

They tapped their glasses. “Cheers.”

Betty smiled. “Welcome to Australia.”

To keep up with my latest releases, why not sign up for my newsletter? You get a free book for joining and there are links to more free free books every month.