

## ALICE IN WONDERLAND

“Listen”, insisted the Hatter<sup>1</sup>, “you can hear water dripping off the cave ceiling”. The navvies, with a condescending smirk on their faces, joined the old man on their knees, each with an ear to the ground. A bird’s eye view in the dusky light would have revealed a small circle of men around a campfire in the middle of a vast, almost featureless, limestone plain. Beside them a thin metal thread stretched from horizon to horizon. The navvies were engaged in building the Trans Australian Railway, a grand enterprise intended to link Port Augusta with Kalgoorlie, and bring the citizens of a newly federated nation closer together. Hearing nothing below ground, each man got up after a respectable minute or two had elapsed, a look of disgust on his face.

The navvies had wanted to humour the Hatter. Unlike them, the old fellow had read books and seemed to know a lot. He’d told them that “Nullabor” was Latin for “No Trees”. And they’d thought it was the name the Blacks had given the place! What’s more, he was entertaining in an odd sort of way. In hushed theatrical tones, he told them the ground was treacherous, littered with sink holes, and that under them was a huge watery cavern, in his words, “a pool of tears shed by Mother Nature”. The men grinned and nudged one another, secretly uncomfortable with the sensitive turn of phrase. All the while the Hatter gulped down the navvies’ grog, growing more loquacious as night came on, with tales of lost bullock wagons and vanishing flocks of sheep.

By late evening the men had had their fill of the old vagrant as he slipped into a state of drunken melancholia, muttering incoherently to himself. He was now about as interesting as a sermon from the travelling parson. Leaving him in his blanket roll by the dying embers, they retired to their tents for the night. After dark the Hatter seldom ventured further than the light of the campfire.

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<sup>1</sup> In Australian folklore a hatter was a “madman”, who was commonly transient, frequently a recluse, and sometimes an alcoholic.

Lew, Alice's husband, dismissed the old man as just another sundowner — a bloke who turns up at the end of the day after the hard yakka is done, bludges a feed, and disappears when work gets under way next morning.

Lew didn't spend his evenings drinking with the other navvies. He disliked their dark home brew. It was rumoured to be adulterated with metho and boot polish. Instead, he and a mate borrowed a pump cart and made for Queenie's place, a sly-grog shanty at No. 2 platelayers' camp a bit further back along the line. There they enjoyed a less dubious drop and played Snap with the proprietress — the latter, an imperious woman, heartless in her disregard for men's wives. Alice and the other women knew her as The Tart.

Once attentive and carefree, Lew had grown sullen, angry and distant after the birth of the couple's child. Alice's every utterance offended him. The baby suffered from colic and cried much of the time. Lew shouted at Alice for failing to keep the kid quiet, pronounced her an unfit mother, and told her he intended to leave her once the job was done.

From the sideline Alice watched the track advance unerringly across the landscape. One day, somewhere in the desert waste, the eastern and western rails would meet and husband and wife would part. Every shift of camp carried Alice closer to the dreadful destination.

On windy days the couple's canvas and corrugated iron humpy rattled and quaked — a house of cards like their makeshift marriage. At night, from her shelter, not far from the fire, Alice could hear the low murmur of male voices, strange and unintelligible, interspersed with sniggers and occasional bursts of laughter.

One evening, before starting out for Queenie's, Lew again chastised Alice for her lack of motherly skills and reminded her of his plan to leave when the work

was done. The colicky child continued to whimper after he left. Alice decided to take the baby for a walk – anything to pacify him. She flicked a tear from a blackened eye, picked up the red-faced infant with the bloated belly from his cot, and wrapped him tenderly in her shawl. The baby’s stuffed rabbit looked at her with reproachful eyes as if to confirm her unworthiness. Quickly, she slipped the toy bunny under the shawl with the child, and stepped out into the moonless night. Alice’s rhythmic forward motion gradually calmed the infant. Saltbush brushed gently against her calves and dry grass tussocks caressed her ankles. In the darkness, earth and sky were as one: mother and child moved through a landscape studded with plants and stars. With every step Alice felt the magnetic pull of the metal rails grow weaker, and the barbs of a hurtful husband grow less painful. With every step she felt her self-doubts diminish. With every step ...

Lew arrived home late to find his wife and son gone. A quickly organised search party set off along the track to look for the pair, but returned disappointed hours later, the men’s hoarse calls lost in the black void. Next morning, after breakfast, the Hatter disappeared as per usual. While desultory searches for the woman and baby continued throughout the day, most men returned to their labours. The boss expected half a mile of track laid per day – that, or no bonus.

At the close of the working day, one man looked up from the campfire and spotted the Hatter some way off. He was walking towards him, his figure silhouetted against the setting sun. In one hand he held his dirty battered topper. “Hello, wonder of wonders”, the navy called to his mates, “the old bludger has brought his own supper for once”. From the Hatter’s other hand hung what looked like a plump young rabbit.

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