Opening extract from

The Middle of Nowhere

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Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

For Veronique and Laura, with love and thanks

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First published in the UK in 2013 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com

Cover illustration by Ian McNee

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

JFMAMJJ SOND/13 ISBN 9781409522003 02351/1

Printed in Reading, Berkshire, UK.

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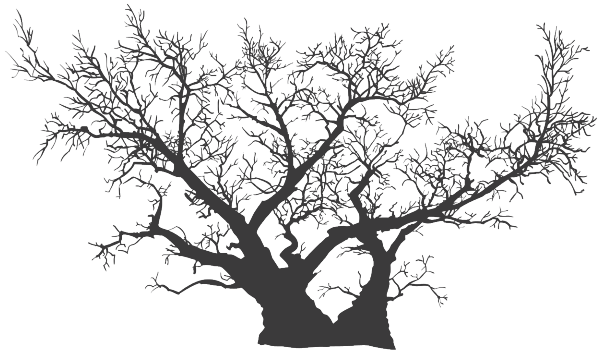

Camels in the Yard

The piano arrived too late to stop the sky falling in. If it had come earlier, things might have ended on a sweet note. As it was, everything was jangled, unstrung, struck dumb.

Pestered by flies, Comity squatted beside the mound of red earth in the corner of the compound, watching ants explore the new upland in their landscape. How huge it must seem to them – how startling that the ground should have suddenly risen up, disturbing their nests, their sacred sites, their ant city.

"Take your shoes off your feet," she told them. "The place whereon you're crawling is holy ground."

The ants paid no attention. Four feet below the surface, Comity's mother lay wrapped in a sheep fleece, safe from dingoes or crows. By tomorrow, though, the ants would have searched her out and made her part of their underworld territory. Comity looked back at Telegraph House. The curtains were drawn. After the funeral, her father had fairly sprinted inside, slamming shut the door on the sunshine, the heat, the flies, the stockmen, the words of sympathy, the appalling truth. Today he had not set foot outside, not even to see the wooden grave marker someone had wedged into the mound:

Comity, on the other hand, was drawn time and again to this corner of the yard. She told herself that she was there to pray, because that is what people do at gravesides, isn't it? But part of her knew she was checking, over and over checking, that she had not dreamed it, that it had all

truly happened; the snake, the horror, the sights, the sounds. The Unimaginable.

The sky blazed. The telegraph poles trooped like silent, stricken mourners, from the southern horizon, up to the station, through the yard and away across the northern wilderness, finding nothing to say. Even the windmill sails stood stock still. Some time soon, Comity knew that grief would overrun her from head to foot, like a colony of ants. For now, she seemed to be shrouded round in a fleecy weariness that made her stupid, vacant, clueless.

"But what of the piano, Mary?" That was what her father had said. What kind of words are those to say to someone dying? *But what of the piano, Mary?* What did it mean?

Skinny little Fred, the yard boy, came up behind her. For once she even heard him coming, because his hands were full of large round stones that rolled and grated against one another. He had painted them with dots of colour, matchstick figures, animals, patterns.

"Words," he said, pointing to a zigzag squiggle of paint. "Missus like words bigly." Dear, kind Fred.

Comity laid the stones round the head of the grave, so that the place would still show, even after some whipping wind had whirled the dirt around. She tried to ensure that the matchstick figures were well spaced out, patrolling

the perimeter of the grave, keeping the ants at bay. Fred turned others over so that the "writing" was face-down where Mrs. Pinny might appreciate it.

Then they looked up and saw the thing coming.

Comity was more sure than ever that she was dreaming. An angular monster of immense size loomed over the ridge amid a plume of red dust, rolling and rocking as it came, warped by the wavy heat rising out of the ground. The shape gained four spindly legs, as the camel beneath it emerged into sight. A camel wearing a house: that was the impression.

As the beast came closer, they could see it was bearing not one but two vast slabs – one on each side of its hump: a wooden crate on one side, a metal tank of slopping water on the other. The tank was a counterweight: without it, presumably, the camel would simply keel over sideways into a tremendous noise of splintering wood. The outlandish shape lumbered towards them through a blizzard of flying things. The tank's stale water had drawn countless insects and birds. The camel had become a travelling oasis. A single crow perched supreme on the summit of the wooden crate, which was leaking music every jarring step of the way. Behind it came two more camels, lumpy with bundles and boxes.

One by one, various other people caught sight of the

camel train and came to stare. Camel trains came by once a month, but had never delivered anything like this before. Comity ran into the house. "Pa! Pa! Camels in the yard!"

Her father did not turn to face her. He was sitting in the machine room, hands clasped on the table edge. The short stems of hair that always stuck out above his ears quivered violently: she could see the Macassar oil hanging like teardrops from every strand.

"Camels in the yard, Pa. Load as big as a house!"

He did not move.

When Mary Triggers said yes to Herbert Pinny's offer of marriage, he'd had to ask her again: yes was not the answer he had been expecting. He knew he was nothing much to look at: a timid man with some absurd, finicky ways. Why would anyone – let alone Mary Triggers – agree to marry him?

Mary told him he would get used to the idea in time. But he never did.

Four years later, disastrously, he was promoted and awarded the post of Stationmaster at Kinkindele Telegraph Repeater Station Number Four.

The Overland Telegraph Line was two thousand miles long, and the messages that pulsed along its Wire could

no more complete the journey non-stop than a man who set out to walk from coast to coast. Without refreshment they would fail and die on the journey. So at regular intervals along the Wire were "Repeater Stations" where telegraphers helped the flagging messages on their way. It was work of great importance…but it meant living in the loneliest, most godforsaken patches of nowhere on the whole continent of Australia.

But for love of Herbert, Mary left behind the sea, her well-to-do mother, her oh-so-respectable sister, her walnut-veneered Hapsburg Beale piano, libraries, concerts and civilization in general, to live at a tiny outpost of the British-Australian Telegraph Company, ninety miles from the nearest anywhere.

Her new life swarmed with insects. Snuffling, unseen animals spied on her from behind every bush. The laundry she hung on the clothes line turned red whenever the wind stirred up the dust. Her pet cat was gutted by an eagle hawk… But to Herbert's bewildered disbelief, Mary stayed on, reading aloud to him after dinner, teaching Comity her letters and numbers, teaching herself the Morse code so that "some day I might be almost as clever as you, dearest Herbert".

A deputy telegrapher arrived to share Herbert's workload – a handsome boy called Leonard, who naturally

fell instantly in love with Mary Pinny. Jealous fear caused Herbert to lie awake each night clutching his aching chest, thinking he was going to die.

But amazingly Mary did *not* love Leonard back: not a bit! Leonard (being both heartbroken and sensible) wrote a letter of resignation, apologized for any inconvenience, and left with the very next camel train.

Herbert held the letter of resignation over the oil lamp and watched it burn. He found he did not want a deputy: better to manage on his own. (Mary could always help out, now that she had learned Morse.) Let Leonard's wages go on being paid into his bank: the Company need never know that Kinkindele had no deputy telegrapher.

And besides, the next one might not be as honourable as Leonard and might manage to snatch Mary's love away.

There were other men on the station, of course, but they did not worry Herbert so much. There was Smith the blacksmith – a man the same width in every direction. There was smelly Mr. Sankey the land manager, who ran the little farm which surrounded Telegraph House, and the Aboriginal stockmen who were so good with the goats and cows and sheep. Three wiremen lived over the barn – Amos, Hart and Cage – though they were gone for much of the time, checking and mending the Wire.

The precious Wire. That frail pencil line on the map

gave purpose to everyone who worked for the British-Australian Telegraph Company. It stretched across the entire continent, a wonder of the modern world, borne aloft by forty thousand poles. But he secretly knew of a greater miracle by far: Mary had chosen to live with him at Kinkindele Repeater Station. She could have won the love of the Company President himself, and yet she had chosen him. Even seven years on, he had not thought of a way of thanking her.

Then it came to him! He telegraphed his mother-in-law in Adelaide, and asked that Mary's piano be sent up by train and carrier. The shipping cost him two months' pay, but there could be no better use for money (especially in Kinkindele, where there was nothing to spend it on). When the piano arrived, Mary would be able to sit at it in the evenings and play Schubert and Schumann and Chopin. And the angels would gather overhead, jostling each other for the chance to hear pure joy plinking out of the walnut-veneered Hapsburg Beale piano.

Then, in the bottom of the wash basket, busily sucking moisture out of the washing…a tiger snake.

A pale, freckled arm plunged in among the sheets and shirts.

A cry in the yard.

By the time Herbert reached Mary, she was past speech. Her eyes looked into his so intently, so imploringly, that he forbad himself to blink. And all he found to say was, "But what of the piano, Mary?"

He loathed himself for all the things he had failed to say instead. *But what of the piano?* How puzzled Mary must have been, too: he had kept his plan a secret, wanting the piano to be a surprise.

And the tiger snake had up and surprised her first.

"Camels in the yard, Pa. Load as big as a house!" said his daughter's voice behind him. "I think it's a piano!"

Herbert swallowed down the bile in his throat. "Tell them no. It's too late. Tell them to take it back," he said.

When Comity went outside again, the camel with the piano had brought its load right up to the house. She stepped outdoors directly into its square shadow. The wooden crate towered over her head, blotting out the sun. Smith the smith came at a waddling run. Even the Aboriginal stockmen turned up (though as a rule they would not go anywhere near the Afghan camel-drivers).

The other camels watched with interest from beyond the gate.

No one seemed to have any idea how to offload the piano. It was Fred the yard boy who came up with the idea of dragging straw bales out of the barn and piling them up underneath the crate – to catch it as it came down.

"Pa says…"

The camel's head swung round at the sound of her voice, and Comity was enveloped in the stink of its breath. She could not help seeing how its ribs bulged downwards between its front legs, distorted by the tremendous weight it had lugged a hundred and more miles from the railway at Oodnadatta. Why did her father not come out? Why must she be the one to say it?

"Don't fetch it down. Pa says to take it back."

The tails of the camel-drivers' turbans were wound around their faces, covering all but their bloodshot eyes – eyes that did not rest on Comity even when she spoke. The cameleers were not accustomed to looking station females in the eye, let alone exchanging words with them.

"It came too late," said Comity. "You took too long. You have to take it back."

Wireman Amos explained to the camel-drivers about the Stationmaster's wife dying. The ghans did not understand – did not respond, anyway – and simply set

about unstrapping the piano and water tank from either side of the camel's hump. Comity could not manage to say it more than three times over before her voice dwindled away to nothing.

The crate came down safely into the arms of seven men and a boy. The water tank fell with a thud, rolled over and nicked a slice out of the camel's belly, so that the animal moaned and stumbled backwards.

"Oh, you poor beast!" cried Comity involuntarily. The handsome ghan youth holding its lead-rope glanced at her, as if to say, *You were happy for her to carry it all the way back to Oodna*.

The spilled water from the tank soaked instantly into the ground, leaving only a gravel of drowned flies. The chickens rushed in to peck them up.

Then Amos, Cage and Hart broke open the crate and somehow wrestled the iron-framed piano up onto the verandah of Telegraph House. But when Smith tried the front door, it would not open.

The piano's candleholders slipped round to point at the floor, like a thumbs-down.

The men looked sullen: Mr. Pinny ought at least to show his face, even if he was built too puny to lend a hand with the lifting. Fred, who had never seen a piano in his life, lifted the lid and, seeing the keys, mistook them for

teeth and dropped it again, loudly and heavily. Smith slapped him round the head.

Comity tried to think what her mother would do. "Thank you, gentlemen," she said clearly and politely. "I expect you would care for some refreshment before you go about your business."

Everyone cheered up. Comity pushed at the door of Telegraph House herself. Still it did not open. With her hand on the doorknob, she could feel it softly vibrating, and realized that her father was leaning against the other side of the door, holding it shut. "I shall bring you out lemonade, gentlemen," said Comity. "In a moment."

Fred smiled encouragingly. The camel shook itself, easing its bones back into place with a noise like an ancient leather couch creaking. It dropped a mountain of dung, then broke away to amble around the yard, trample a flower bed and get its neck caught in the washing line. Laundry that Mary Pinny had hung up but not lived to take down again capsized onto the hard-packed red earth. Shirts and sheets tangled around the camel's feet.

Then it came.

Like a dust storm, grief spun in through the myrtle trees and smashed Comity in the face, choking, stinging, blinding. She stood on the verandah and wailed and screamed and sobbed for the loss of her mother.

Smith, the wiremen, the Afghan cameleers and the stockmen disappeared as quickly as water soaks into dry ground.