

1881

Currabubula, New South Wales

AS soon as she could walk, she knew she wanted to be outside, moving. The house was too dark, too small, smelling of stale woodsmoke and dogs. It was outside she wanted, the horizon shaped by the perfect cone of Duri Mountain on one side and the high ragged outcrop of Terrible Billy on the other. Outside, and moving around. The sky above you and the dirt under your feet, and always the shape of the land against the sky like a familiar face.

She was Sarah Catherine, but always called Dolly. She'd arrived into an already crowded family, five brothers and sisters before her and another brother coming along behind. Sophia was thirteen, her red curly hair like a shining river glinting

with light when she undid it. Next down was Tom, his face made crooked by a bent eye. Their mother said it was because she'd been frightened by a bull when she was carrying him. Then Willie, everyone's favourite, always had time to give Dolly a ride on his shoulders. Rose was the kind sister, put Dolly's hair in papers, said she was the prettiest thing she'd ever seen. Eddie was close enough, only four years older, that sometimes he'd let Dolly tag along with him. Showed her how to catch a sheep, set a rabbit trap, milk a cow. Below her was the last child, Alfred, always known as Sonny.

They were six miles out of Currabubula, three dusty streets and a pub. She was five before she saw a town. Tamworth was twenty miles away and the Maunders didn't have much call to go there.

Dolly started life indulged and petted. The dolly. Her big sisters had to churn the butter, make the bread. She was always the little one, the one whose hands were too small to lift the milk pail or drive the churn through the cream. It was always easier for someone else to do it.

In Dolly's childhood there was Before Willie and After Willie. He was killed off a horse one morning, leaned down from the saddle to open the gate, the same way he'd done a hundred times, but the horse was fresh and bucked and threw him against the gatepost, and then trampled him, trampled his head with clumsy great iron hooves. The blood balled on the dust, glittering in the early sun, Dolly ran out with the rest and saw, and the flies coming to it as quickly as if they'd been waiting.

It shattered the world of the little house. After that everything was ugly and angry and sad. Dolly's mother went into a long silence, her face wooden, moving slowly like a person asleep, or wanting to be. In all the years After Willie, Dolly never saw her mother smile, only go about the endless tasks, banging open the stove door to throw in more wood and clanging it shut as if to punish it.

Dolly could see that her mother's life was just a lot of hard work. There wasn't often anything gentle in her voice, except when she went through the family story, telling over where she came from, where everyone fitted together, as if all the raggedness in her life could be knitted up into that laying-out of the generations.

Her mother's father had been John Martin Davis. Your Grandfather Davis, Dolly, she'd say, as though he might walk in the door, but he was long dead. He'd come from Ireland way back, a free settler, and set himself up beside the Currabubula creek. He'd married Sarah Wiseman, daughter of a thief-made-good who'd been *sent out*.

Everyone knew about old Granny Davis coming from *the taint*, but her children—*your Aunt Em, your Uncle Bob*—all married well. All except Dolly's mother. Each time she talked about her past she used the same words: *I married down*. That made no sense to Dolly, her father was a big man, taller than her mother, how could she have *married down*? But she didn't ask. There was something grim in her mother's voice when she said *I married down*, and as Dolly got older she could see what it must mean.

Thomas Maunder had been brought out from London as a poor Cockney boy to work on the huge sheep run near Curra called Goonoo Goonoo. It gave him a special bitter satisfaction to go over and over the stories of his humiliations there. How he'd been made to take three rams from Goonoo Goonoo over the open country to Quirindi—without a dog!—and him a boy fresh off the boat who'd never seen a sheep. Made to dig his own sister's grave when she died. Made to stand humbly with his hat in his hand while the boss Mr King called out, Stand back, my man! You harbour the flies so! Dolly's father told over the hurts like jewels, turning them in his memory so they flashed with his anger.

But he'd worked hard, boasted that in his younger days he'd held the shearing record in the area, 222 sheep in a single day with the blades, and finally got his own place, where they were now: Forest Farm.

Dolly never saw anything soft in her father. When he came in from the paddocks he filled the kitchen: massive, solid, a great rock. Sat at the head of the table, his big rough hands flat on the wood, waiting for his tea to be put down in front of him, and woe betide if it wasn't ready when he was.

Her father was a mystery to her, his rages and his strange jerky laugh, like a dog barking. Even when he'd had a few, he was always a hidden man. The only thing that softened him was telling over the streets and lanes of Home. The Old Country this, the Old Country that. Born within sound of Bow Bells, he'd boast. What he meant was, anyone born in Currabubula, New South Wales—which was everyone else

around the table—wasn't worth a damn.

There'd been no schooling back in Shoreditch for Dolly's father. He could sign his name, that was about it. But Dolly's mother wrote a fair hand and could read most things, because Grandfather Davis had been an educated man and found a tutor, old Charles Job, to make sure his children had a bit of learning. So in the Maunder household it was Dolly's mother who did any reading or writing that had to be done, and it was her tricky task to save her husband's pride.

Her father sat at the table one night with some legal paper in front of him. Her mother was the one who could read, but her father was the man, so it was him had to sign it. She saw him take the pen in his unaccustomed hand and grind out his name onto the paper. He glanced up, saw her looking, and his face shifted under its wrinkles and whiskers in a way she'd never seen, some strong thing working away within him, knowing his little daughter was watching that labour with the pen.

They were all frightened of their father and his belt with the big brass buckle. The house was small, everyone around the table in the kitchen could hear it from the front room, that slap of leather on skin. The pressed-down feeling, no one looking at anyone else while they waited out the bad weather of their father's anger.

Now and again, though, at the end of a long day of shearing or getting the hay in, there'd be moments of rough warmth between the father and his sons. They'd all gone together at some mountain of work and beaten it, and one of them would

say something over the stew that made the others laugh, something that had happened in the shearing shed or the paddock. But it was only for the pleasure of the men. They weren't going to explain the joke to the women.

Girls were of no account, you learned that early on. Good enough to make the bread and milk the cow, and later on you'd look after the children. But no woman was ever going to be part of the real business of the world.



There'd never been a school in Curra, only old Mr Job who'd taught the Davis children. Once they grew up he'd made a few shillings every week teaching around the table in his room at the back of the pub, but he was too old now to manage a roomful of children. Then, the year before Dolly was born, a new law came in that said every child had to go to school till they were fourteen, and the government would pay for the school and the teacher. Dolly was a year old when Currabubula Public School opened.

Her older brothers and sisters went along till they turned fourteen. For Sophia and Tom that was just a couple of years, and even for Willie and Rose it wasn't for long. In any case, none of them went every day or even every week, only when their father could spare them. The farm ran on sheep, and in the days before fencing wire was cheap, if a man had sheep he had to have shepherds. *Children are cheaper than fences.* That was a joke their father liked. They were supposed to attend for

the Required Number of Days, but easygoing Mr Goard at the school turned a blind eye, especially at shearing and harvest time.

By the time Dolly was school age, Mr Goard had been transferred down to Murrurundi. The new teacher, Mr Murray, was a different kind of man. One afternoon their neighbour Edwin Harper arrived at the kitchen door red in the face, sweating, swearing, shouting. Wouldn't sit, brushed away the cup of tea, paced up and down hitting the palm of his hand with his fist while he told the story. Pat Murray had dobbed him in! Got Constable Grant from Werris Creek to give him a bloody summons! He had to go before the judge in Tamworth next week for not sending the kids on the Required bloody Number of Days!

Her father poured Harper a whisky, agreeing yes, it was a shocking bloody thing. But with a thoughtful kind of look.

In the end Mr Harper had to go to court. Was found guilty, six children, a shilling fine for each one plus four and tenpence costs, and if the Harper children weren't ticked off on the school roll for the Required Number of Days in the future, next time it might be jail.

So from then on it wasn't a matter of going along to school when their father could spare them, it was every day up to the Required Number of Days. It was a fence run through the middle of the family: the older children who'd snatched what learning they could and now spent every day working, and the younger ones—Eddie and Dolly and Sonny—going off to school every day. One or other of the big brothers and sisters

opened the gate for them, lined up one behind the other on the pony. Watched them go, saying nothing.



Currabubula Public School was a solid little square of brick with a house for the schoolmaster next to it. One room, fifty children aged from five to fourteen, long wooden benches. A smell of feet and the dripping on lunchtime bread, and the peppery smell of too many people in not enough air. Out the front, Mr Murray the teacher and Miss Thuell the pupil-teacher.

At school you could see exactly where everyone stood. At the top were Dolly's Davis cousins, whose parents hadn't *married down* the way her mother had. It was never spelled out, but known just the same, that no matter how many sheep Thomas Maunder could shear in a day, he'd never be as good as Mr Davis of the Davis Hotel. Yet those cousins and Dolly had the same grandfather, Grandfather Davis, and the same grandmother, Old Granny Davis, in her eighties now but still going strong, you couldn't kill her with a stick.

Dolly and her mother visited Granny Davis now and then, Dolly's face washed and the blue check pinny on. Old Granny Davis was blind, her eyes cloudy grey with red rims, but she wouldn't let anyone else pour the tea. Stuck a finger down the side of the cup so she'd know when to stop. Granny Davis's face was such a great age it seemed dark, all the wrinkles making a web of shadows. Blind or not, she always knew where the biscuits were, groped for Dolly's hand and pushed the biscuit into it.

Auntie Clara lived with Granny Davis and looked after her. Dolly would see them from the playground, Old Granny Davis sitting on the verandah with her knees apart under the black dress and Auntie Clara sitting beside her looking out at the dusty street. Auntie Clara was really a cousin, not an auntie, and she wasn't that much older than Dolly, but there she was, just sitting, hour after hour.

At school there were the Davis cousins, and the Dalys and the Murphys and the Howletts, and the ones who rode in from Piallaway, two or three together on a pony, their hair cut the same way by the same mother putting the same pudding-basin on each head in turn.

At the bottom of the pack were the children who came barefoot, their clothes patched till they couldn't be patched any more. Bert Russell was one of them. Only a piece of bread, no dripping, for his lunch, and his jacket cut down from a man's, all the buttons missing and a torn greasy rim around the collar.

Bert was nearly the same age as Dolly and got to wear Mr Murray's special star nearly as often as she did, so his place was next to hers on the long bench. She drew a careful chalk line on the desk so his elbow wouldn't jog hers as he wrote, and she agreed with her Davis cousins that he smelled.

The thing about Bert Russell and his brothers and sisters was that they didn't have a father. There was no man in the little house down by the creek. Mrs Russell was supposed to be a widow, but she was always big in front with another baby coming. Teddy Abbott's aunt was Mrs Clewes, who did the necessary when the women of Curra were brought to bed, so

Teddy knew the story, or thought he did.

Who's your dad, then, Bert? he taunted. Ain't got no father, have you, he taunted. Youse is all bastards.

Then one day, dancing around little Allan Russell, he shouted You're half a black, Allan Russell! Got a touch of the tarbrush!

And it was true that Allan Russell, a quiet boy, had dark hair and greeny eyes, and a bit of sun tanned him browner than tea. But Teddy never had a chance to say it again, because Bert was there in front of him. Quite calm, with no particular expression on his face, like a person patiently going at a cow to make it turn the right way. But merciless. At the end Teddy Abbott was sitting on the ground with a hand up to the side of his head, his mouth ajar and his eyes looking at nothing. But not a mark on him that he could go home and show anyone.

Jim Murphy was two years older than Dolly, so he sat on the bench behind her. A smiling sort of boy, didn't seem to mind that he hardly ever got the star. Every time she got it he'd lean down, his head next to hers, and draw a tiny star in the corner of her slate, and when she graduated to a workbook he drew a star in that too, even though you weren't supposed to write anything that wasn't work.

Dolly's best friend was Minnie Lewes whose father ran the general store. When your father ran the store, you got to know about people. Minnie always knew the back story, the secret. Who had to put everything on tick and then be chased for the money. Who were the charity cases, Mrs Lewes slipping a bag of broken biscuits across the counter to them, or the chips of

bacon that no one was going to buy.

The charity cases were all women, women without a man. There was Bert's mother, worn-out-looking and gaunt in the face, and Mrs Tierney the widow, and poor Miss Trumper with her cats.

Mr Murray the teacher was a big man with a red beard and he spoke with such a strong Irish accent he was sometimes hard to follow. He didn't hold back on the punishments. They all watched when Mr Murray lost his temper with Abner Jones one hot afternoon and gave him a great backhand slap across the face, his whole man's weight behind it, and the silver ring he wore left a mark that you could see for a week.

Mr Murray's daughter Molly was one of the big girls when Dolly started at school. A couple of years later you had to call her *Miss Murray*, because now she was the pupil-teacher. She took the littlies, teaching them how to make their letters, and when they fell over she'd take them into the teacher's house to put a plaster on their knee.

She was a prim, thin, buttoned-up young woman, her clothes always smooth and tidy, her hair neat in its bun. When the inspector came she answered him clear and confident, Yes, Mr Parkinson sir. No, Mr Parkinson. When Dolly was ten, Miss Murray was put in charge of a small school down the road at Terrible Vale. She was just seventeen. Dolly would see her sometimes in the afternoon coming back on her pony, a serious young woman with round glasses from all that studying she'd had to do. By yourself, in charge of eighteen children, with the inspector coming to check on

you twice a year: no wonder Miss Murray looked serious.

There was Miss Murray, running a school all on her own, managing all those children, with a salary and money in the bank. But she was the only woman Dolly knew who wasn't just at home all day, banging the stove door open and closed, heaving the wet sheets around on washday, milking the cow, and always a baby wailing from the crib in the corner. It was coming to Dolly slowly, like water seeping into sand: if you were born a girl that was the life you'd have to live. Unless you could find a way out.



Dolly liked going to school. Was often the one picked out to parse the sentence on the board. *The sun and south wind had a dispute as to which was the stronger.* She drew an arrow to the word *sun* and wrote in small neat letters *sun, common noun third person number singular neuter nominative case.* Enjoyed the puzzle of long division, 39387463973045333 divided by 965, all the way down the page and the answer there at the bottom, and the way fractions could split and split again into their lowest common denominator and join up again. They started every day with Mental Arithmetic and then Dictation. Even the long words, and Mr Murray's Irish way of saying them, didn't puzzle her. *The disposition to avoid manual labour of any kind, the idea that it is degrading and the belief that greater respectability attaches to clerical employment, are the errors which too frequently mislead the young and mischievously influence their choice of occupation.*

Every week she got another verse of ‘The Wreck of the Hesperus’ off by heart. Loved having Mr Murray’s little felt star pinned to her pinafore so often.

You’re a quick study, Dolly Maunder, there’s no doubt about it, Mr Murray told her one day, and she thought she’d burst with pride.

Mother could sometimes be soft, just for a moment, towards a daughter who wore the star so often. My clever little Dolly, she said. Oh my clever little Dolly. Smoothed her hair as she said it, but there was something in her voice, almost like regret, that made Dolly wonder, was there something wrong with being *clever little Dolly*?

Go on then Dolly, her father said out of nowhere one night, the dinner eaten, the lamp sputtering. Go on, show us what they’re teaching you.

She never forgot it, everyone around the table watching her, Rose meeting her eyes in a funny way and shaking her head to say no, but Dolly was too little, too silly, too puffed up with pride in being a *quick study*, and somehow she thought her father really wanted to know.

*It was the schooner Hesperus
That sailed the wintry sea;
And the skipper had taken his little daughter,
To bear him company.*

She knew six verses by heart. She did the first verse, she did the second. What a pleasure, to have the words rolling out so obediently! How impressed everyone would be! She didn’t look at her father but felt him watching as her voice rang out

clearly into the silence. She was finishing the third verse when he leaned forward and slapped his hand hard on the table. The lamp jumped, salt flew out of its dish.

His voice was quiet, that dangerous quiet. So that's what you're learning, he said. What that fella Murray thinks is more important than you pulling your weight around the place. Leaving it all to your brothers and sisters.

She stared down at the table, at the grain of the wood, the dent where the big iron pot had fallen long ago and left the mark of its weight behind. She wished she was that wood, that grain. It seemed the silence would never end, everyone sitting as still in their chairs as if they were pictures of people.

It was her mother who rescued her.

Bed, Dolly, she said. Her voice had a rough edge as if her throat was being squeezed. Just go and get yourself to bed, quick now.