

Too Close to the Wind

by Cate Hensen, Cardinal McKeefry School
Winner of the Elsie Locke Writing Prize 2011



Harold gave us a gap-toothed smile as he pulled up outside the cottage. “Thought I might give you a tour of the farm,” he said. I took in his battered Swannndri, his gumboots caked in Canterbury mud, his unshaven face, his one gold tooth, and the mud splatters on his ute. Harold followed my gaze.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’d better take her in for a warrant. She’s due for one ...”

Mum’s eyes widened in shock, and she looked longingly back at the cottage door, where the cat was standing guard. Harold opened the passenger door and hastily kicked aside a jumble of lolly wrappers, gumboots, pellets, batteries, and chalk, then motioned for us to get in before moving round to the driver’s side. With a couple of dull thuds, the ute sprang into life.

We jolted along the uneven farm track, bobbing over ruts and potholes. Fences bent by the fierce wind and khaki-brown hills flecked with wandering sheep and shrivelled gorse rolled past my window like film on a loop. The clouds – old men with wispy beards – were travelling slowly across the sky as we moved into higher country.

We lurched to a halt on a steep hill, and Harold leapt out to open the last of the rusty farm gates. “I usually make the kids get out here,” he yelled over his shoulder, “cos you just dunno what’s gonna happen. But I’ve put the handbrake on. You’ll be sweet as.”

The gate creaked as he kicked it open. In front of us was a narrow bulldozer track. Harold climbed back into the ute. Once again, we were on our way. I looked at the little green numbers on the dashboard clock. They were telling me we’d been up here for an hour and a half.

“Oh,” said Mum, suddenly noticing the rifle behind us.

“Don’t worry, it’s not loaded,” said Harold. He picked it up, left one hand on the steering wheel, and stuck his head – and the gun – out the driver’s window.

Mum’s shoulders clenched, and the colour drained from her cheeks.

“You know,” said Harold casually, “there’s a boar up here that’s really bothering me. It’s been eating a couple of sheep a night. It could tackle a grown man no sweat. If you see it, let me know.”

We passed a rundown sign with letters missing and paint peeling off. “We’re up 1096 metres now.” I could hear the faint hint of glee in Harold’s voice. “Look, 3300 acres,” he went on proudly. “My baby.” He gestured towards his empire of dead, flat paddocks, with dark green raffia pines and regal mountains in the distance. The ute jerked forward as Harold put the handbrake on and jumped out. Mum gripped the seat with white knuckles and muttered a Hail Mary under her breath.

Meanwhile, Harold had decided to play weatherman. He licked his little finger and stuck it up into the buffeting wind. He paused for a moment, scratching his sharp grey stubble, and then nodded. “You really don’t want to be up here when it rains. It gets a bit unhealthy.”

As if on cue, raindrops began to fall like tiny shards of glass, stabbing the muddy ground. “We’d better turn back,” I heard him chuckle softly to himself as he climbed back into the ute.

illustrations by Vaughan Flanagan



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