

## Red Rattler

By Katy Knighton

What she liked most was walking outside and having no one else around. Her property backed onto State Forest, and the only other dwelling on her dirt road was the decommissioned train carriage, one of the old Red Rattlers. It was a mystery how it had arrived, and who had arranged to put it there. People would stay in the Red Rattler – drifters, unemployed, swagmen, single mothers fleeing with their scrappy kids. Sometimes Anne heard the hum of a generator, or drunken yelling, or smelled the reek of meat being cooked on green wood. She supposed there must have been a way of sharing knowledge about squats like the Red Rattler.

Anne didn't mind the sparsity of human contact, in fact she preferred it. She had chosen this life. If she felt lonely she would ring the mechanic, who had been first on the scene of the crash. They would meet at the footy oval and drink beer while saying nothing. Then they would drive off separately. It was the only friendship she had.

'Hello.' A young girl was staring at her. She wore a red dress that was too big and her feet were bare.

'Hello,' said the girl again. 'Hi,' replied Anne.

'What sort of trees are these?' asked the girl.

Anne wanted to laugh because the obvious answer was *gum trees*, but the girl was so serious she turned it into a cough. 'I'm not sure.'

'Do you think they might be sugar gums?'

'I don't know, I don't know much about trees.'

The girl took a few steps forward. 'What are you doing here?'

The question was so innocent and direct that Anne was taken aback. 'I don't know that either.'

'Are you a man or a woman?'

'A woman, I think.' Anne hadn't thought of herself in these terms for a very long time.

'Are you a Missus?'

'Not any more.'

A man's voice echoed faintly through the bush, but Anne couldn't catch what he was yelling.

'Dad wants me,' said the girl, pulling a fallen dress strap onto her shoulder. She made her way back into the bush using the kangaroo track, stepping high to avoid sticks and branches.

Anne was busy typing and cursing.

'What are you doing?' said the girl, from the doorway.

'Writing.'

'Oh.'

'Shouldn't you be at school?'

'It's the holidays.'

Anne nodded. 'Ah.' She was out of touch with the timing of school holidays.

'Do you want to go for a walk?' said the girl.

'Yeah, why not. Hold on a moment, can you?' Anne saved her work and took the pouch with its orphaned sugar glider, nestling it under her top and pulling the zipper up.

'What is that?'

'A baby.'

'Awww...can I see it?'

Anne unzipped her top a little and loosened the pouch with a finger so the girl could see.

‘It’s so cute! Where did you get it from? Can I have one for my own?’

‘I’m helping it grow into an adult because it doesn’t have parents.’ It struck Anne that she had never talked about her job in these terms, and how sad she was about this statement.

‘Are you going to set it free?’

‘Yes, when it’s ready.’

‘How do you know when it’s ready?’

‘That’s complicated. It’s different for all the animals.’

‘How many do you have?’

‘Just this one and a wombat joey right now. After the bushfire it was too many. I even had a pair of owlets.’

‘Wow,’ breathed the little girl. ‘Where are they?’

‘Grownup. They’re on their own, now.’ On still nights she was convinced she heard them calling to her, *hoooh hoooh...hoooh hoooh*.

‘You’re wearing the same dress as the other day,’ said Anne.

‘It reminds me of Mum. It used to be hers.’

The bluntness of their conversations wore a gap in Anne’s resolve to suppress her past. ‘You know...I have clothes that might fit you. What’s your name?’

‘Becky. Bec.’

‘Becky-bec.’ Anne smiled.

‘You can call me that. It can be the name that only *you* call me,’ Becky-bec said generously.

‘Come with me,’ said Anne.

In her spare room were various animal enclosures and a wardrobe containing boxes wrapped with thick plastic. Anne’s wardrobe had remained closed since moving – seeing what was inside the boxes would make her weep. But today she managed to unwrap the top box without tears.

They were just clothes.

She tried to be business-like about it, shaking each item open. She wanted to smell them but resisted.

‘Oh, I like this one,’ said Becky-bec, taking a pair of overalls. ‘Look at all the pockets!’

‘Try them on, if you want.’

Becky-bec jammed her legs in and the red dress bunched up around her waist. She wrestled her arms through the straps and put her hands in the pockets.

‘Would you like to try a t-shirt under the overalls? This one?’

It was pink with a unicorn on it, and had been a favourite of her daughter’s. Anne was suddenly very glad Becky-bec was here.

‘Ok. But I still have to wear the dress,’ said Becky-bec sternly.

‘Of course,’ said Anne. ‘I will leave the room so you have some privacy.’ She still had the sugar glider, and it needed a dropper of feed.

‘What’s your name?’ Becky-bec called.

‘Anne.’

‘I like you, Anne.’

Anne wanted to cry, but held herself together.

Becky-bec appeared in her new outfit, the red dress over her daughter’s clothes.

‘Do you want shoes?’ asked Anne.

‘No,’ said Becky-bec, ‘I like bare feet.’

They set off through the bush. The Red Rattler wasn’t visible from Anne’s house, and at first Anne thought they were making their way towards it along the narrow wallaby path. But Becky-bec abruptly went off-track, stomping down a hill toward where Anne knew there was a fern gully.

‘Shouldn’t you tell your dad where you’re going?’

‘He knows.’ Becky-bec picked her way through the undergrowth. ‘I told him I was going to visit the fairies.’

A pang went through Anne. *Fairies.*

‘Oh, yeah,’ she said. ‘Of course.’

‘Do you believe in them?’

‘Yes,’ said Anne, looking right at her.

Becky-bec put her arms out for balance as she walked a fallen trunk.

‘Look at this moss! My favourite kind is cushion moss, though. What is yours?’

‘I like cushion moss, too, I think.’

‘Luuuu LA!’ a man’s voice echoed. The birds ceased their trills.

Becky-bec stopped dead. ‘I have to go.’ She scrambled off the trunk and pushed past Anne, high-stepping and hopping along. Anne watched Becky-bec, or Lula, until she was no longer visible.

‘Why do you live here?’ It was Becky-bec’s voice.

‘Where are you?’

Becky-bec stood up. She was wearing the overalls. Anne smiled. Becky-bec held a stick and looked like she had been poking at holes with it.

‘What are you doing?’ asked the little girl.

‘Nothing much,’ said Anne.

‘Can I do it with you?’

‘Ok.’

Anne made bread. Becky-bec helped to knead it and chattered about all the types of bread she had ever eaten. Anne noticed the little girl didn’t mention where they had come from, or how many different places they had stayed, or why.

‘My favourite is wholegrain with lots of crunchy seeds. One time, dad sprouted wheat and put that in but it was disgusting and I got in trouble for spitting it out and wasting the food.’

They put the loaf aside to rise. ‘Does your dad think you’re looking for fairies again?’

‘No, I told him I was with a friend, and he said it was okay.’

Anne wanted to ask a thousand questions – how did her dad know it would be okay? Had he seen Anne? Heard about her? Did he think Becky-bec’s friend was imaginary? Wasn’t he scared something might happen to her? Had Becky-bec told him Anne was a fairy?

Becky-bec watched Anne’s face change, and said, ‘I have to go.’ She trotted off.

A wind was picking up. Some of the taller trees creaked as they absorbed incoming gusts and a pleasant wood-fire smell with the quality of properly seasoned wood drifted Anne’s way. Usually, when the Red Rattler people lit a fire, the forest canopy would hold stinky clouds from hastily cut timber.

Tonight there would be the kind of sideways rain that wet everything and made trees come down. She settled in for the night, and imagined Becky-bec and her dad doing the same in the Red Rattler.

Becky-bec appeared, breathless, on her doorstep with something in a bundle.

‘Can you help it?’ she plaintively asked.

It was clear the run-over animal was close to death. For the purpose of euthanasia Anne had a gun, but obviously it was ridiculous to shoot something this small and besides, she wasn’t a monster, she wouldn’t use the gun in front of a child. The gun also replaced the need for a dog, and the need for a man, neither of which she didn’t think she would ever want again.

‘I don’t know,’ Anne lied.

Becky-bec stroked it. ‘Can we name it? Do you give names to the animals you rescue? Are they like pets? Do you tame them?’

‘No, they aren’t tame. No, I don’t call them anything.’

‘Are they...why do you help them, then?’

Anne was silent. She thought about the crash and the sensation of tipping over and tumbling. They had swerved to avoid a kangaroo, knowing the

impact would be deadly. It was unclear how much time had passed before she was pulled from the wreckage. She called for her husband and daughter, thinking they had been taken out first, but they never answered. The lights and noises made it hard to work out what was going on. Later, the mechanic had visited her in hospital to give her some keys. 'For when you're ready to drive. It's a spare.'

Becky-bec's chest began heaving. The little animal had died. She sobbed, 'Why would someone run it over and keep driving?'

Anne wasn't sure what kind of comfort to give her.

'Can we bury it?' said Becky-bec.

They dug a rough grave. Becky-bec gently placed the bundle into it, sprinkling earth and saying, 'Now we lay you down...what are the words?'

Anne improvised. 'You were a wonderful creature whose life was cut short. Now you are in the big sleep. Goodbye.'

'Is it different for animals? They said something else for my mum.'

The general store was a long walk away. This was the first time Anne had seen them walking by the road, and she pulled over to offer them a lift. Becky-bec jumped into the front seat before any offer was made, and her dad slowly got in the back. Anne was surprised that he wasn't mean looking, or cross, or wire-thin. She didn't know why she had been expecting him to be these things. He had kind eyes, and he was quiet, with clothes that were clean but well worn. Becky-bec chattered until Anne pulled up outside the store and said, 'I'm dropping my car in to the mechanic. He's giving me a lift back home, and can pick you up too, if you like.'

'That's fine. We'll be ok,' said the dad. Anne couldn't remember either of them exchanging names and felt awkward while they got out. 'Chris,' he said, amused, and patted the car roof farewell.

Anne laughed. 'I'm Anne,' she called out the window. She flicked a look in the rear view mirror after she pulled away, and saw them go into the store. Her wish was that they would return to the Red Rattler, an easy wish, as they had taken no luggage with them.

'Dad says we are going to make you dinner and bring it over,' said Becky-bec, 'to thank you for the lift. Dad found a road-thing and he's cooking it.'

Anne felt repulsed by the idea of this meal. ‘Oh. That’s good of him,’ she said.

‘It won’t be yuck. He’s good at making dinner.’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Anne.

‘Yes! And we will see you tonight.’

It was a great dinner, in the end. Chris knew how to treat whatever the road-kill had been with the dexterity of a good hunter; the meat cut free of bones (wallaby? possum?), stewed with potatoes and carrots, and a touch of flour to thicken the gravy. He had arrived with a guitar slung over a shoulder, and after they ate he strummed quietly while they all stared at the fire. Becky-bec produced a harmonica from her pocket. She was surprisingly good. They worked through their song catalogue together.

Anne didn’t say anything; she didn’t want to break the spell. Something dormant in her was allowing enjoyment of this moment, so long as she didn’t speak. Becky-bec pocketed her harmonica and cuddled up to Anne’s side. Anne put an arm around her. Chris kept strumming. Becky-bec yawned and was soon asleep.

‘Where were you before you came here?’ asked Anne.

‘Further north. We picked fruit for a while. Lula wanted to see a forest and we heard about the train carriage.’

So it was true, then. Drifters passed on the knowledge about Red Rattler. Anne wanted to ask him if he had found a job here. They didn’t have a car, which was unusual. Even the single mums with their tired, ratty kids had cars.

‘Is she bothering you?’ asked Chris.

‘No! It’s lovely having her around. That is, if *you* don’t mind. To be honest, it’s like having a therapist drop in. This is the most talking I’ve done in ages. Is her real name Becky-bec? Or Lula?’

‘She likes you,’ said Chris, smile-lines radiating, not answering her question.

His voice was unexpectedly resonant and she wondered if he had ever worked in radio. He was well spoken. Anne wanted to make him feel welcome to stay in the Red Rattler forever. This evening made her miss her family.



‘There’s a good primary school, you know, for when the holidays are over,’ she said.

Chris shifted his weight. ‘We’re taking a year off. This is better, for now.’

They thoughtfully examined the coals.

‘How did you end up here?’ he asked. ‘Or have you always been a local?’

Anne said, ‘My husband and daughter died in a car crash.’

‘Oh, I’m so...’ Chris reached a hand toward her.

‘I was driving.’

He blinked rapidly, speechless, and fumbled for his guitar. Anne wondered what he thought about the unicorn t-shirt and overalls.

She said, ‘I couldn’t face my old life anymore, so I moved here.’

He had his eyes shut. He began playing the guitar, and she wondered if she should say something about his wife.

Anne closed her eyes.

When she woke propped against the couch it was morning. The fire had gone out. Becky-bec and her dad weren’t there. She got up stiffly, and cared for the animals before making tea and toast. The evening with Chris and Becky-bec had awoken a sense that the future, her future, would be brighter for having them next door. She had to thank them. Anne held the wombat joey in the crook of her arm and got another bottle of wombat milk replacer ready. She would let Becky-bec do it.

Anne had another idea as well – a book and pencils. Anne rummaged in one of the plastic wrapped boxes, and thought that next time she saw Becky-bec and Chris she would hand over the rest of its contents to them.

Outside the back door someone had written with a stick in the moist earth. *Thank you.*

Holding the wombat joey, the bottle, and the present, she picked her way along the wallaby path, imagining being allowed to drive Becky-bec to school one day.

But when she got there, the Red Rattler was cold and empty, and they were gone.