

The Rainbow Man

Rob Simpson

1.

The carriage lurched over a series of switching points, and Peter Harris awoke with a start. He blinked and glanced around, unsure at first where he was, and then, as his surroundings fell into perspective, eased back in his seat and turned to stare dully out at the passing landscape.

What he saw there was dramatically different from the stroboscopic montage of coastal greenery that had earlier lulled him into sleep. Now the country was flat and open, the tawny land merging almost imperceptibly into a bleached and seemingly boundless sky. A sea of dry, fatigued wheat lapped against the train, ebbing away to a distant horizon of low, sparsely pastured hills. Lone stunted eucalypts and the occasional rusting hulk of farm machinery drifted by, as if borne on a vast, muddy floodtide. The only prominent feature in this vista was a massive twin-peaked mountain, its dusky timbered slopes rising sharply above the valley rim.

The ocean of grain abruptly gave way to a bleak expanse of rail yards, and the train glided through long lines of flat-topped lumber wagons, their titanic pincers clasping loads of fresh-milled timber. Between the loaded cars, Peter caught glimpses of the main street of a small town, its brief extension marked by a ragged line of shop facades. Behind these, as if prevented from tumbling down the incline on which they sat by the store-fronts themselves, was a cluster of bland weatherboard houses, a couple of hundred in all, barely distinguishable beneath the glare of their silver-painted rooftops.

As Peter took in this scene, his jaw tightened, and a grim intensity crept into his piercing blue-green eyes. This wasn't what he'd expected. The offer of the posting had come at short notice, and all he'd been able to establish in the few days he'd had between accepting the job and jumping on the train was that timber milling was the economic mainstay of the town. Upon this morsel of information he'd constructed a vision of rustic tree-lined streets and forested surrounds. Self-evidently this was not the case; wherever the timber came from that supplied the mill, the source clearly wasn't local. The town looked desolate and inhospitable, as parched of solace as the bleak country around it.

This realisation led him instantly to a second unwelcome conclusion: that the job offer had been no accident; that he'd been set up, sent to purgatory for his sins. He recalled Virginia's warning, in those final, turbulent moments before they'd parted: that the Department never forgave troublemakers, and when the opportunity arose it would exact retribution. The prospect that he might have been duped in this way infuriated him, but faced with the reality of his situation, rage proved unsustainable. He experienced a helpless fever of despair.

The train halted beside the platform with a final convulsive jerk. Peter rose and moved hesitantly into the aisle, wresting his bulging rucksack from the rack overhead. As he shuffled towards the exit, a small opal stud in his earlobe caught the light, scattering tiny shards of colour around the carriage's dim interior.

The heat enveloped him the instant he stepped from the train. Sharp with the essence of the parched Australian interior, it seemed to radiate from the air itself. It dominated the senses, scouring the throat and nostrils while perversely soaking the armpits with perspiration. Peter scurried into the dense shade of the station awning, then followed the others disembarking to the narrow footbridge linking the station to the street. Here he stopped and looked about, shifting his

sneaked feet on the scalding bitumen. A nondescript cafe on the opposite side of the road caught his eye, and he quickly crossed to it and shouldered his way inside, his rucksack bumping awkwardly through the squeaking doors.

The two women behind the counter looked up sharply when he entered. The older of the pair, a stocky middle-aged woman with stiffly coiffed hair and overdone make-up, studied him coolly for a moment, then vanished through the curtain of clicking plastic strips at the entrance to the rear of the shop. Her companion, a tall, plain-looking girl in her late teens, readied herself to take an order, wiping her hands on her grease-stained smock before plucking a pencil and notepad from the pocket.

Peter was the only customer. He selected a table near the window, set down his bag and picked up the grimy menu card. The waitress approached and stood with her pencil poised, ruminating on a large wad of gum. "Wha'd'ya like?"

Peter scanned the card quickly, and ordered a coffee and a toasted sandwich. The girl rolled the gum expertly across her tongue as she laboriously scratched down the order. "That it?"

When he nodded, she stuffed the pad and pencil back into her pocket and departed, slipping from view through the fluttering strips. An oppressive silence descended on the room, broken only by the faint putter of the antiquated ceiling fan. Peter gazing morosely through the tinted window. The scene outside did nothing to lighten his mood; if anything, the town seemed even more desolate at close quarters than it had from the train. The few townsfolk who passed by the shop – a grumbling, bucolic farmer and his wife, a sullen group of young Aborigines, a young mother tugging a complaining child – appeared to be set against the world.

The bitter taste of betrayal returned. Virginia's warning echoed, drawing his focus back involuntarily to the circumstances in which it had been delivered. She'd been leaning against the bedroom doorway with her arms folded, watching him pack; Peter remembered the corona of the

refinery lights behind her. But it hadn't concealed the pallor of her face, or the thin line of her pursed lips.

"I still don't see why you have to do this."

He'd avoided her eyes. "We've been through it all before, Ginny. It's the only offer I've had. I can't afford to knock it back."

"Has it occurred to you that it's a bit strange, a job suddenly coming out of the blue after all this time?"

At the time, the question had given him little cause to reflect. "The principal said they needed someone in a hurry. Maybe he didn't know about the strike."

Virginia snorted. "I work for the Department, remember; I know how they work. They don't like troublemakers. They might put up with a bit of stirring, but calling the entire student body out was definitely over the line." She paused. "I don't know why you had to get into all the political stuff, anyway. So what if you thought they were out of touch? Why couldn't you have just done the training and left it at that, like everyone else?"

"Not everyone," he'd reminded her quickly. "Others who felt the same way as I did."

Virginia's lips curled. "Yeah, and where were they when it mattered? They cut and ran as soon as things started to go pear-shaped. You're the one who ended up carrying the can."

He'd known she was right, but the affirmation had stung him. "Maybe they didn't realise what was at stake. Maybe I just expected too much."

"What, a little loyalty; a bit of solidarity?" She scoffed. "They were like rats leaving a sinking ship! They sold out, and you know it. And where did it get you, any of you? None of you've seen the inside of a classroom yet."

"Exactly! Which is why I'm taking this job now, to show it can be done."

Virginia had snorted again. “As if anyone’s going to care. You think your mates’re going to be impressed by you being sent to purgatory? Because that’s what this is.”

“It mightn’t be so bad. Some of these country places have a lot of character.”

His remark triggered more derision. “Character?! The Gulag Archipelago has character, for Christ’s sake, but I wouldn’t want to go there. Anyway, how would you know? You’ve never been west of the Divide.”

Again she was right, but he’d opted to ignore her, and after a few seconds she regained her composure. “What did you say the name of the place was again?”

“Wall’s Creek.”

Virginia frowned. “Funny, I’m sure I’ve heard of it before: something that came across my desk, maybe, some kind of kafuffle at the school there. I can’t remember what it was about, but I’m sure it wasn’t good.” She shifted her weight against the jamb, then changed tack. “So what’s wrong with what you’ve been doing, the gardening job? You’re always saying how much you like it; why couldn’t you just stick with that?”

Peter had jammed the last of his belongings into the rucksack and stood up. “We’ve been through that. I don’t want to be a labourer all my life. It might sound corny, but I want to try to make a bit of a difference, make life a bit better for people. School teaching is a pretty good place to start.”

“Commitment,” she’d retorted sardonically.

“Something like that.”

“So what about your commitment here, to me?”

He’d juggled the rucksack in his hand, feeling its weight. “Offer’s still open, Ginny; you can come if you like.”

Her anger had boiled over again. “What? Give up my life for a cup of tea with the P and C, while you go out and save the world? Why should I? There’s no work out there. I’ve just been promoted, remember; I’m doing fine where I am. Anyway,” she’d concluded quietly, “I don’t think you really want me to come. It’s a way out for you.”

Looking up, he’d seen a glint of tears in her eyes, and for a moment he’d been tempted to console her. But he’d resisted, reminding himself that it was unfair for her to blame him for the way things had turned out. The gap between them had been widening for a long time. Virginia wanted things – money, marriage, a predictable existence – that he instinctively knew wouldn’t satisfy him, and that he wouldn’t be able to provide. His own needs were less tangible, and he’d found it impossible to communicate them to her: the opportunity to explore new experiences, to pursue a quest for personal fulfilment whose grail he felt lay somewhere ahead, sensed but unseen. The arguments had become an almost daily event. Neither of them was to blame for what had happened; they’d just grown apart. The job *was* a way out for him, but maybe for her too. He’d decided to say nothing.

Peter recalled that she’d plucked for a moment at a flake of paint on the architrave. “So how long’ll you be gone?”

“Hard to say. It’s a probationary thing; depends how it goes.”

“That’s not much help to me.” Her eyes had flashed around the room. “I can’t keep up the rent on this place by myself. I’ll have to look for somewhere else, or get someone in to help out.”

He’d thrown the rucksack over his shoulder, wanting to have the discussion over, wanting to be gone. “Fair enough. I can keep sending my share of the rent down for a while, if you like, till you get something sorted out.”

“Fuck you!” She’d wheeled and walked away.

He'd heard the television come on, a gush of canned laughter. He'd picked up his belongings and left, leaving her to cope with the fact of his absence as best she could.