

Holidays with Rover

New Zealand. Age three.

Somewhere at the Rotorua mud pools is a tatty scrap of lambskin blanket. I lost it there when I was three. Dad walked the entire trail twice trying to find it. I wailed like a banshee. Mum cried too. It had been hers when she was young.

They let me select a replacement at a nearby petrol station. I chose a skinny soft toy dog with floppy ears and button eyes. I named it Rover.

Narooma. Age six.

Whale watching, off the south coast of New South Wales. It's a sparkling day and the sea is a waveless weave, but still the rusty tub my Dad paid bottom dollar to hire bucks in the water. I'm wearing a life jacket. Rover isn't. Dad dives in to fish his bedraggled body from the water. I squeeze my dog so tightly sea water dribbles on my feet.

Alice Springs. Age ten.

Uluru was beautiful, but Alice Springs scares me. I hold Rover close while an Aboriginal woman swears at my Dad after he offers her one of our sandwiches instead of money. We hurry back to our hostel. All night I hear loud voices on the street outside. I pull the drawstring from my cotton pants and knot Rover around my chest, so no-one can take him.

Moss Vale. Sweet sixteen.

My dad was never a hale man. He had a belly the size of a wine barrel and a nose like a sunburned prune. We stop for a meal at an American-style diner in Moss Vale on the way home from visiting Grandma. Dad orders the Steak'n'Bacon, with an extra-large strawberry shake. It was the last meal he ever ate.

Newcastle. Age nineteen.

Mum lives with Grandma now. I visit them during the uni break. I'm in the attic looking through boxes when I find Rover mixed in with some of Dad's things. He smells like mothballs and Dad's cologne. It's the most glorious scent in the world. I put Rover in my handbag like a celebrity chihuahua.

Fiji. Age twenty-eight.

Warm sand under my bare feet, a white dress. The sun's about to drop below the ocean as I walk down the aisle towards Gary and the frangipani-covered arbour. Mum is holding my left hand, Rover is in my right, in Dad's place. I even sewed him a little tuxedo.

Sydney. The present.

Gwen's having trouble sleeping again. We left mum's sixtieth early to put her to bed, but the hotel room air-conditioning is noisy and as parching as a desert. Gary suggests she might like something soft to comfort her. Is that safe at her age? I ask. He chuckles and pulls Rover from my handbag. A weird sense of jealousy rises inside me.

Rover's an old dog now. Flaccid and droopy, down to one eye. I nod. Gary places the scrap of worn fur into Gwen's port-a-cot.

For the first time in her life Gwen sleeps through the night. And so do I.