

## Xmas in the Bush

Running along far away from the road. Along the shallow creek bed, the wide flat rocks just below the water, creamy brown. The creek is wide here and open for hundreds of yards until it makes a turn. And straight ahead above the blackberry bushes and foliage along the water's edge is the typical country house with a row of yellow pines up one side, white walls and a red roof. The mother, the father and the children are here. With friends. The adults stand on the beach made of river stones or on the big rock in the middle of the creek or on the bank, talking, talking. All day. They make sandwiches while they talk. They smoke cigarettes. They point at things. The sight of a parent's eyes following the pointed finger across to the bank on the other side of the creek or into the branches of a nearby tree. They gesticulate sometimes. The men put their hands in their pockets and take them out again. The women fold their arms or put their hands on their hips. They go for a walk very slowly while they talk. Along the road, across the ford, up the hill, round the corner. They stay away for hours, talking. The shadow of the hill falls over the creek. It grows cooler. They come back and organize dinner while they talk. The women talk to each other. The men talk to each other. The men talk to the women. They all talk at once. They set out the card table under the trees, light the kerosene lamp and play 500 while they talk. They miss tricks while they talk. The children go to sleep in the tents and wake up in the night and hear them talking. Then later they wake up and everything's quiet.

In the morning the father throws the dog in the water. The dog paddles madly to the shore. The father talks about snags in the river. They all discuss the difference between snags as in water hazards and snags as in sausages. Sausage dogs. Smoke. Children who've drowned. Bushfires. Snakes. Carpet snakes. The long grass. The blackberry patch. The tar baby. Was there such a thing as Brere Bear. The pyjama girl. Bull-rushes. Flash floods. Flying foxes. The hazards of flying foxes. High tensile wires and electricity lines. Broken electricity lines hanging down into creeks. Fords with cars on them washed away in flash floods. River snakes. March flies. Bot flies. The difference between bot flies and sand flies. Maggots in sausages. Maggot stories. Meat safe stories. Ice chest stories. Milk delivery when milk was in pails. The bread cart. The sound of the bread cart. Draught horses. Old draught horses. Horses being sent off to the blood and bone factory. Horses in the city. Sewerage. The sewerage works. Polluted creeks. The correct drinking sections of creeks. The aeration process. Stagnant water. Boiling the billy. Billy tea. The Billy Tea brand name. The inferior quality of Billy Tea. Swaggies. Gypsies. The cleverness of gypsies. Poverty. Bread and dripping. Sausages. Home-grown vegetables. Outdoor toilets. Improvised toilet paper. The long summer nights. Mosquitoes. Marshes and bogs. Moonee Moonee and Brooklyn. The possibility of a mosquito breeding in the dew on a leaf. Bites. Bee stings. Allergies to bites. Death from bee stings. How to make a whistle from a leaf. Playing the comb. The mouth harp. The bush bass. Bottle tops. The corrosive qualities of Coca Cola. Big Business. Monopolies. Bigger and bigger monopolies. Free enterprise. Russia. The idea of women working in men's jobs. Suez. American election campaigns. The Ku Klux Klan. The colour bar. The Iron Curtain. The Cold War. The ideals of communism as distinct from the practice. China. Industrialisation. Cuba. Atheism and agnosticism. The idea of the supreme being. The church in Russia. The Jews. Israel. The world wars. The next one. The fatalistic approach. The end of civilisation. The end of the human race. The inexorable continuation of the universe in spite of the human race. Humans as microscopic and trivial beings. The frailty of humans. The stupidity of humans. The innate badness of humans. Animal life and animals' code of behaviour. The rationality of animals. The fowls of the air and other biblical quotes. And now I see as through a glass darkly.

At the end of the last hand of 500, they remember other discussions they've had and that they always concluded with politics. The father turns down the tilly lamp.