

Nothing New - Emelia, Year 11, NSW

The taxi hums and murmurs along the narrow winding roads. Leaving behind the numbing roar as we left the city, my headache dwindles out. The land opens and I watch the horizon dip in and out of valleys and mountains, some with glistening rock faces and others coated with tree copses. Gradually, the hillsides flatten and become mere rises which dive towards each other and form flush green bushland.

Kilometres of land fly past, and I forget how many hours have passed. I begin to talk. The taxi driver is a single mum who will drive home this afternoon just in time to tuck her daughter into bed. She flicks her hand when I say I've asked her to come too far. Apparently she loves the country. She hopes one day to escape somewhere like here. She says she studied law and smiles at me when I tell her about my arts degree.

The familiar whirl of tyres brings my attention away from her as we turn off the road, and are thrown about in the mercy of pot holes and a grand descent from asphalt.

I glance outwards and notice how small and insignificant the wooden mailbox seems, in the forefront of the ever-intimidating front gate. The carved timber engraving spells out 'Benbullen Estate'. It invites me to stay, to rest a while.

The mailbox is tilted, and I suspect it is collapsing from the bottom up, with years of rotting caused by morning dew. The colourful swirls of paint have peeled, and I can just make out finger paintings and hanging string, which once held up birthday balloons or tinsel. When it falls, it will be replaced by a metal box from the hardware shop.

My uncle joins us by the second gate. The taxi driver puttters away and over rubble and coarse stones I drag my two suitcases. My life folded and shoved into the plastic shells.

The first days pass in comfortable silence in a dark oak drawing room. A white sheet draped over the piano. My cousin's piano. We don't talk about the memories here as I grew up. Gentle conversations over the pops and cracks of a dying campfire. The winding river full of splashing kids. The crinkly vineyard with spiked cordial and citrus stains on our summer linen.

Instead, I ask about how the weather has been, and he says the clouds have brought bugs to the grapes. I ask how the farmers' markets have been and he tells me he no longer goes. I watch him carefully, so I can ignore photo frames angled away from us, and the height markings on the doorframe.

My uncle exclaims how old I've become and glances at an empty chair – its weaving is slowly coming undone. It's lonely and forgotten. I hear him think, "*How old must I be to have watched her grow up*". I hear my uncle ponder how many grandchildren he has who he will never see grow up.

Even on these slow days, there's no time for breakfast. As routine has set, there's an omelette waiting for me in the oven. By now, it's barely warm.

Alone, I sit on the balcony each day and take great gasps of air. Before me, the driveway stretches beyond sight, there is no people-watching to be done. Instead I find harmony in the quiet chaos of bounding wallabies, the ebbs and flow of warm wind through the teatree jungle, and the soaring chases of eagle versus magpie.

My uncle has left. He is separate from the world, as he tends to the tired vineyard, clipping away at the canopy and flicking at settled moths before the sun calls them away. As I retreat to my room, dunking the limp tea bag into the compost, I watch as he retreats inside. He takes small sips from an espresso shot drowning in the solitude of a mug. He taps the bridge of his fingers along the part with a faded father's day message, handwritten in shaking curves and lines.

In the mornings I lay on the creaking four poster bed and dawdle my legs in the air as I send swooping emails to distant offices. I click away the blaring messages of professors and scribble away at to do lists. I've found an old stereo which ticks over songs I've long forgotten. I feel so young again, my murmuring lips articulating each lyric. I still remember what it felt to listen to those songs for the first time.

At lunch we eat at the kitchen bench. I have eaten leftover pizza for five days now. My uncle melts wobbly cheese on thinly sliced toast. He asks me about dinner, and I tell him whatever is easiest. Secretly, we both miss roast lamb dinner with potato missiles and small waterfalls of spilt gravy. Which do we miss the most; the food or who we were back then? It used to feel almost magical, we could spend afternoons on adventures and still return home to a royal dinner on a night in March.

In the afternoons, I pull my uncle from his pit of quietness. Sunset wouldn't have reached the city yet, but here, the light is fading and brilliant paint strokes trickle across the heavy sky and dive behind the horizon. I can't make out the movement of the loose gums, or uptight pines.

We walk. Up and down the driveway. Forcing each gate open and shut every time we pass. He sends gravel flying with short, stilted steps. I roll my ankle on the loose, fragmented rocks. I let out a sob. It didn't hurt. I'm just not sure when I'm supposed to cry anymore. My throat burns with tears as we watch gut wrenching movies, but I look on past the darkness in my room as the night seems a thin barricade against the crashing waves of my future. I am tossed in the salty sea foam of the past.

Some nights I sneak out. Folded in the corner of the cupboard, packed in with a wedding dress and a kid's nativity costume, there is a stiff woolen blanket that smells faintly of my great grandma. I can't recall her face, only the twirling atmosphere around her when she held

me. In the dark it's hard to tell, but with the help of gentle lamp-light I notice the pinkish tinge to the ugly grey colour of the blanket. It glides along the polished floors and takes great leaps down the stairs, muffling faint squeaks and the whirring thoughts I'm trying to leave behind.

I pull up my pant legs, saving them from the stinging grasp of sticky dew. Once, this would have made me feel like a princess. Now I feel like a fugitive. On the run. But no one is chasing me.

They've given me space. Wide open space to run as far as I desire. As long as I return.

I have found a spot. The distant hills are capped by a hesitant moon. Light is attracted to the loose grape vines and I trace on my goose-bumped skin a map of the inner maze I used to be so familiar with. The cool air is effortless and light, I wish to be suffocated and held down by the trapped air shared by millions. I miss the city more at night. I long to be less alone, even if I am only joined by another stranger at the bus stop. Now, I am stuck with myself. I flee the city, and I can't even escape myself.

I sit and wait for hours. My cousin still hasn't come home. I think we all know he's run too far.

Five hours from now my shallow sleep will break because of the birds crying on the tree outside my window. My day will start again, but this time my uncle has forgotten the omelette. Our entire day is thrown askew.

A week from now, a different taxi driver will take me home. He doesn't talk to me. I think he's angry he had to come so far.

A month from then, I've fallen back into life. I cry in my dorm after uni lectures and the country-side is a distant whisper in my screaming mind.

A year later I moved back into my uncle's house. My uncle doesn't meet me at the gate. He's confused why I'm there.

Three years of living with my uncle brings my cousin's return. He stays many nights as a stranger.

One morning, my uncle is awake earlier than usual, he makes himself dinner. I watch from a distance as his son joins him in the kitchen. I watch the flicker of a memory cross his face and I notice it slide out of his eye onto his cheek. "Thank you for coming home."

But right now, I notice the kitchen light turn on. It turns off and the world is all mine again.