

# RED IN THE CENTRE: THE NOMADS AT LARGE

## *Sample Chapter* THE LITTLEST NOMAD

Women alone are seldom defenceless and this one carries an axe. She tells me that upfront, the same way a woman you've just met in a bar will tell you she's got a partner meeting her anytime now, even though the subject was never raised. Some will even give you the impression he's a big bastard, too, just in case you're reluctant to take your cue. But increasing the size of the weapon doesn't always increase the size of the threat, and this one's so tiny she looks barely capable of lifting an axe much less wielding one with menace.

In fact everything about this meeting seems to be on the small side. To begin with it takes place in Eulo, southern Queensland, population 48. The car she drives is small enough to tip on its side to change a wheel. The caravan she's towing is so small it looks like a dog transporter. Indeed that's what I thought it was until she opened up the back and put the kettle on. The table and chairs she sets up for us on the side of the road make me feel like Alice in Wonderland. And she'd have no trouble qualifying for children's concession on the bus.

But small in size doesn't equate to short on pluck, and she's got no qualms about travelling the country alone, admittedly with a few sensible precautions, like an axe. And she does have a fluffy dog about the size of a killer guinea pig.

"I planning to camp here tonight," she tells me in fluent Asian-English. "I just looking a little bit safe. I drive along and looking nice place and safe place."

"Well I'll show you one. I'm planning to camp here as well."

"Because I travelling alone."

"I understand. But I'll show you a place and I'll camp somewhere near so you've got protection," I offer. And that's when she tells me she's got an axe. And a handsaw, which she was planning to do what with, I shudder to think. But in spite of being heavily armed she's a generous and hospitable soul, so hospitable in fact that the next thing I know she's inviting me into her bed.

"This is the bed," she states, proudly showing me the interior fit-out of the tiny, bubble van. "Television, stereo, DVD."

"Wow, you're better set up than me."

"You can put your feet," she offers me a try on the bed.

"No, I won't get in, but I can see I'd fit, although I'd have to put my feet there and my head here," I say, indicating the diagonal.

“No, no, completely, because this is a double,” she insists, and I relent.

“I don’t often get into a strange woman’s bed so soon, you know,” I say, removing my boots and folding myself into this compact capsule of modern ingenuity. It’s not as easy for a clumsy Australian as it would be for this diminutive Asian woman, I’m sure, but without too much trouble I do manage to tuck both ends of my body in and stretch out full length on the bed. “Look at that. You can too!”

“I told you,” she says. “And you still got feet left.”

“I’ve still got feet left?” we both laugh at her faux pas, though I am secretly pleased to hear it, and quickly extract them from her bedroom and put them back in my boots before anything changes. After all, maybe that’s what she does with the handsaw: makes people fit.

The back end of the van, too, is a triumph in space saving. The hatch door opens to reveal a full kitchenette with portable fridge, gas burner stove, retractable bench top and shelving. There’s even cupboards built into the bedroom space from where I was only recently lucky to get out with my feet intact. All things considered, it’s an impressive set-up, and she promptly whips up a cuppa for us as if to illustrate the point.

“Many years ago, actually, I see a commercial for Australia when I come to Australia,” she tells me over coffee, “they say the words, ‘If you never go there’ or something.”

“If you never never go, you’ll never never know,” I prattle, reminding her of one of the catchiest tourism slogans the Northern Territory ever coined.

“Exactly,” she smiles. “And I say, he was right.”

“Do you know what’s out there?”

“Yeah, desert,” she says happily. “I crossed before in another four-wheel-drive. That one camping.”

“And you’re not afraid of anything in the bush?”

“Yes I do, yes I don’t.”

“So some things you are and some things you’re not?”

She murmurs assent as she sips from her cup. “Not animals, people. That’s why I say if I out [bush], people can harm me. But if I want to camp, I camp around next to the town.”

In due course, I show her the camping area I know on the banks of the Paroo, just upstream from the bridge on the edge of town. It’s a tranquil spot where the river runs brown and lazy and fluttering wagtails skim the surface for insects, while eucalypts stand uncomplaining as the reflections break into thousands of rippling slivers to wash against their trunks. Many have camped here before us and there’s easy access to a number of sites. We choose one with a friendly old fireplace on the waterside of the clearing, and I collect some wood and light a fire as she busies herself setting up camp, her scruffy brown miniature poodle loyally dogging her every step. By the time I’m ready to leave – to watch a game of footy at the Eulo

pub – she’s sitting at her miniature table with the dog curled up in her lap, lighting up a joint. I’m glad she feels secure enough to relax.

Two hours later when I return, the fire is out and there’s no sign of life in the little van. I half consider knocking on her door to see how she is and maybe crank the fire up and talk some more, but decide it wouldn’t be prudent to frighten a lone woman, especially one with an axe.

In the morning we say our goodbyes and she thanks me, and as I watch this brave little soul tootling off on her next outback adventure, I recall a snippet of our conversation from the day before. We’d been talking about how good the country looked and how plentiful the wildlife was and she said, “I’ll tell you what, today I driving and you know what I feel? I feel how lucky I am. I have life.”

“Yes you do,” I agree.

“And some people stress to death, work to death. What life they got?”