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author of

The LIGHT BETWEEN OCEANS

A

FAR-FLUNG

LIFE

a novel



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M. L. STEDMAN

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New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London
Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi

To the cherished voices of wise counsel, with gratitude.

“Nothing human is alien to me.”

—TERENCE, *from* THE SELF-TORMENTOR

“Out beyond ideas of rightdoing and
wrongdoing, There is a field. I’ll meet you
there.”

—RUMI, *translated by* COLEMAN BARKS, “A GREAT WAGON”

PART I

CHAPTER I

Western Australia
Friday, 10th January 1958

Out here, it's red earth for as far as the eye can see. Overhead, the sun plows an unending blue sky. Under dust-green mulga, a lizard seeks shade and shadow; ants engineer heat-defying nests; kangaroos suck moisture from tender leaves, ears swiveling to locate a distant rumble: on the straight vermilion line that cleaves the sparse trees, a lone truck is approaching.

Strung along the seat of the Bedford, the three MacBride men sit, like unpacked Russian dolls. Phil's straight, dark hair and oval face is repeated in Warren, his eldest son, and echoed in Matt, his youngest. Like peas in a pod—same story for generations. Everyone reckons even Rosie, the daughter back at the homestead, born between the brothers, is the spitting image too. The mother, Lorna, doesn't get a look-in. You can tell a MacBride a mile off.

Warren punched his little brother's arm. "God, you come out with some bulldust!"

"No! Sailing around the world. Discovering uninhabited islands..." Matt said. "It'd be great!"

"Well, unless you put in the elbow grease, the damned boat'll be eaten by white ants, so you'd sink as soon as you hit the water," said their father. He gave the gear stick a shove, coaxing the truck over the coming rise. From the back, the few dozen sheep *baaed*.

The fact that the MacBrides had a boat on their sheep station might have been unremarkable if their property bordered the state's six-thousand-mile coast. But Meredith

Downs, nearly a million arid acres, is far inland, fringing into desert country in places.

“What was the bet about again?” Matt asked.

The discussion had begun when they passed a towering, solitary shape in the distance: “Monty’s shed.” Named for Phil’s uncle, Montgomery MacBride, it was the most outlandish structure for hundreds of miles. The legend of how Meredith Downs—a property with twenty thousand sheep and an average annual rainfall of eight inches—came to be home to a fully rigged pearling lugger had been much embellished over time, but the essentials remained: a debt from an old mate of Monty’s, settled in kind; towed behind a camel team by some Afghans; a dream that one day Monty would sail it himself, perhaps off the continent’s south coast, despite the absence of pearls in the freezing Southern Ocean. It had come with the name *Alpha Crucis*, the brightest star in the Southern Cross. When Monty marched off to the Somme in 1915 to do his duty, his father promised to keep it in good order. He built the shed around it with money from the wool clip, and kept the vessel’s timber oiled, and the spiders and termites at bay.

But when Monty came back gassed, all he was good for was to hunker in the boat in the blinding heat of the shed, and sail away to some safer shore in his imagination. When he died not long afterwards, his boat bone-dry and his dreams unlived, they stowed his ashes in the bow along with a compass and a bottle of beer, and a promise that one day they’d get the lugger in the water, to scatter his ashes in the Indian Ocean. Phil MacBride still kept up the ritual: varnishing the timber; replacing frayed lines; bringing Monty a beer every birthday. A man not given to whimsy, Phil made this exception: “It’s tradition” was all he’d say, placing the bottle reverently in the bow.

Now, he answered his youngest son’s question: “Monty reckoned he could find water on his friend’s property up north using just a divining rod: if he did, he’d get the boat. Sure enough, he turned up fresh water at thirty feet, and they never looked back. So the mate made good on the promise. Took the better part of a year to tow it here.”

The truck grumbled along, the sun stalking it more greedily with every hour. The orange gravel road was riven with parched gulleys from recent unseasonal rain. “Better get the grader out here, Warren, see if we can iron out this stretch,” Phil said as they shuddered over a badly corrugated patch which sent the sheep stumbling. “Get Miles to give you a hand,” and they went on to discuss how the Pommy trainee overseer, Miles Beaumont, had done, now that his stint with them was nearly over.

Saltbush began to give way to spinifex in places, and six black swans glided onto the massive salt lake, its border crystaled white. The lofty metal windmills in the paddocks turned gently in the breeze, pumping up the precious underground water. Now and then a few sheep scattered at the sight of the truck.

Wedged between his father and brother, Matt watched as a pair of emus darted out at the side of the road and for a moment kept pace with them before bolting back into cover. Daft buggers. But fast. Faster than the bungarras that would be there somewhere too? Countless animals, disguised by the scrubby bush: the Brown snakes and the redbacks; the little skinks; the ants in their millions. Camels, too, roaming wild after the era of cameleers: right now, somewhere on the property, there'd be one kneeling on a fence to break it and get to water. But they weren't nearly as bad as the dingoes, wary of traps and waiting for night to get at some poor sheep. And the roos. Bloody thousands of them, despite the best efforts of Pete Peachey, their roo shooter.

Matt's eyes began to close, weighed down with the early start, and yesterday's excitement of the telegram from Perth announcing his outstanding Leaving and Matric results: the end of school forever. He'd lain awake most of the night, thinking about what he would do next. Warren, more like forty-two than his actual twenty-two years, would take over Meredith Downs when their father retired—that was set in stone. Matt would have to do something else. And right this minute, two days short of his eighteenth birthday, it felt like he could do anything at all: go to university, become an engineer or a scientist—or a cartographer—he loved a good map... Or, with his parents' help, buy a station of his own. Get married even? One day. He conjured the pale green eyes of Pattie Gosden, who, his sister, Rose, had promised him, would be at his Young Pastoralists' meeting in town today...

After hours rattling along flat dirt roads, stopping to swing open and close the broad gate of each paddock, they reached the boundary of Meredith Downs. The truck, with three men and the load of sheep, was no more than a grain of living sand in the landscape.

The MacBrides took up country in Western Australia a few decades after the Swan River Colony was settled in 1829. Lyle MacBride and his brother Lachlan left behind their father's modest sheep farm, braving the grueling voyage from England with wives in tow, and over a couple of generations, their families fanned out across the west, as land opened up for grazing. As years went on, the Crown Lands maps showed block after block leased to "MacBride" in red cursive ink.

The MacBride name also began to turn up in all the other records you'd expect: Registers of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and the minutes of meetings of Vermin Boards and Roads Boards. In Bureau of Meteorology logs, which sent weather observations back to Perth and Melbourne, you'd also find mention of a MacBride or two. They were there in the Pastoralists' and Graziers' Association minutes and the Royal Agricultural Society ledgers and much else besides.

The MacBrides had the touch, it was said: sensible but shrewd, careful but not mean. When fortunes allowed, they were ready donors to good causes both religious and secular. They made ideal neighbors: fair in disputes, practical in disasters; good husbanders of land who followed the best practice of the day. Whilst Lachlan's lot drifted up north, descendants of Lyle stayed put on Meredith Downs and eventually increased its boundaries to just shy of a million acres, the maximum extent then allowed by law. But a million acres barely registers as a dot on the map of Western Australia, the million square miles that makes up a third of the continent.

The MacBride men were handsome fellows, and had the knack of attracting debutantes to join them in their bush life. These wives sometimes came with dowries bestowed by stockbroker fathers or gold-mining grandfathers, which meant there was usually the wherewithal to tide the station over the tough times that came often enough.

It's hard country, out this way. Back in England, a farm might support two or three sheep per acre. Here, with the lack of rainfall, you need more like forty acres per sheep. There is heat. There is sun. But on winter nights the water in the tanks will freeze over. The searing light that coaxes life into being here will bleach it out of existence with the same indifferent shrug, leaving blanched trees, and rusted corrugated iron on the roofs of abandoned homesteads. The wind that brings the rain can bring floods and flatten shearing sheds. Everything that can do you good can also do you harm here—that's just the way of it.

This land has seen improbable things: the evolution of marsupials and monotremes; of flightless birds and animals that fly. It's seen continents split and islands arise. It's seen oceans turn to desert and desert turn to glaciers. And it's watched people drag their little lives across its surface, flat and unforgiving.

As for drought... Well, that's like the bad relation you know will turn up sooner or later—it's not a question of whether but when. That's another reason properties have to be big out here: to spread the weather. At least on some part of the million acres you might get a bit of a shower and be able to move your stock to the green feed that springs up in the paddocks or around the clay pans that fill with water. If it looks like you're heading into a perish, you destock as quickly as you can, cut the staff numbers, and wait out the eerie silence that comes when no sheep bleats, no bird flies, and no leaf rustles in the wind because there are no leaves.

On the day of that drive to Wanderrie Creek in January 1958, as Phil and Warren chatted about fence repairs, and Matt daydreamed about his future, about seeing Pattie Gosden, the MacBrides' luck changed, and they headed into an altogether different kind of perish.

Phil MacBride had been able to drive since he was seven years old—as soon as he could reach the pedals. He'd taught his sons at about that age too. And one of the main rules he'd impressed on them was this: never swerve to avoid hitting a roo. There was no telling which way it'd jump, so you were better off taking your chances of a busted radiator than to risk skidding out of control and rolling.

Perhaps it was the heat mirage, then, that made Matt's father, for less than a second, register the six-foot upright figure on the road in front of him as a man instead of a red kangaroo buck. By the time Phil's feet had moved to slam on the brakes, his head had told him his mistake, but by then the truck had plowed into the treacherous soft gravel shoulder and twisted onto its side in a snarl of metal and force, flinging one of his sons through the windscreen and impaling the other on the gear stick.

Phil had just enough strength to pull Warren from the cab and drag him clear. He could make out Matt, further from the truck, head bleeding, limbs sprawled. Then he saw nothing more.

Petrol fumes doused the tang of the saltbush, and the thrum of the nearby windmill died under the frantic bleating of the sheep as the truck's wheels spun in midair, flicking fuel like a Catherine wheel. Within minutes, the vapor had ignited in the heat and drowned the vehicle in an orange roar of flames, black smoke from the melting tires sketching a ladder to the boundless, empty sky.

Peas in a pod, the MacBride men were, strung along the dusty road in blood that welled and eddied and banded into a single scarlet pool.

CHAPTER 2

When Sneaky Snook in his mail truck happened upon the wreckage near the boundary of Meredith Downs, sheep were scattered along the roadside and the fence, bleating, dazed. Anyone approaching the scene could be forgiven for thinking they'd stumbled on a grisly barbecue. The bars of the truck had caged in a dozen wethers as their wool was singed away and they gradually burned to death: distressed, sacrificial, but smelling just as delicious as a grilled lamb chop ever had. So the barking of the mailman's dog, Lightning, could have been consternation, or merely appetite.

Fortunately, this was a relatively busy road for the area—usually at least one vehicle came along it each day. In fact, it was not even an hour before Sneaky found them, alerted by the smoke. Warren was bleeding but conscious, propped on an elbow, ordering Sneaky to get the sheep back, swearing when the man tried to move him. Matt, as still as a rock on the gravel—like his father not far away—was dead, Sneaky assumed: his leg was gashed, and blood crusted his ears. So the mailman concentrated on the one still talking. Save the life he could save, and so forth... Turned out later Warren's liver had been leaking blood, letting him swear and curse all the way to oblivion. The three men were just far enough from the truck to avoid being incinerated—"At least we'll have the bodies," Lorna would say later. "At least we can bury them."

Wheezing with the heat, the mailman hauled Warren into his truck cab, then dragged Phil's body over, letting out a grunt as he hoisted it into the back. Lightning, nobly forgoing the chance of a mutton lunch, was standing over Matt's chest, growling, when Sneaky returned.

"Get out of it!"

The dog ignored him, and licked the boy's face. An eyelid twitched.

“Crikey, Lightning!” Sneaky bent down to reassess the corpse. Detecting a faint pulse, he turned to the dog. “Clever boy!” To Matt, he said, “Hang on there, son. Don’t you go anywhere, now.” He shoved aside parcels and mail sacks and crates of groceries to make room for him beside his father. “Right. Keep an eye on him, fella,” he said, wagging his dog’s snout, “and yell out if he gets worse.” With that, he squeezed himself back behind the steering wheel and drove hell for leather to the nearest roadhouse, twenty miles away, where they had a pedal radio and bandages and an airstrip for the Flying Doctor.

When he landed his plane, Dr. Finbar Rafferty, the normally unflappable Irishman who’d known the MacBrides for years, flinched at the sight that greeted him. “Mother of God!”

Then he rubbed a hand across his face to collect himself, and began assessing the figures as patients rather than old friends; followed the clinical steps that led his thoughts onto safer ground.

On the morning that the lives of her menfolk were being haggled over by Life and Death, Lorna MacBride was in her kitchen, moving with her usual brisk efficiency as she made the fruitcake for her youngest son’s approaching birthday.

The sprawling kitchen was the heart of the old stone homestead, which in turn was the heart of Meredith Downs. Its immaculately neat pantry, which Lorna provisioned on an industrial scale, held enough supplies to get them through months of being cut off by fires or cyclones. In addition to her own preserves and Vacola’d produce, shelves were stacked with cans of fruit and packets of dry biscuits, great hessian sacks of rice and flour, and jumbo tins of powdered milk.

The kitchen had fueled generations of MacBrides when they set off before dawn for a muster or came home thick with dust and grime after putting up a fence or repairing a bore. Its long jarrah table was the construction site for hearty lunches for neighbors who came to help erect a mill or for a cricket match, and for visitors calling in on their way to or from Perth. Sporting victories were celebrated here, floods and droughts lamented.

This morning the room was filled with the wafting aroma of the bread Lorna had put in to bake in the enormous wood-fired Metters: the only electricity in the homestead came from the thirty-two-volt generator, which provided a few hours of electric light in the evenings. Though the system managed only a dim glow, Lorna was still grateful for the flick of a switch rather than the toil of refilling oil lamps and trimming candles.

Like many stations out this way, there was no telephone either. Instead, beside the cooling rack that stood ready to receive the scorching-hot loaf tins, sat the ped set, the pedal-operated transceiver that was the MacBrides' lifeline to the outside world.

It was not from the wireless, however, but from a knock on the front door, that Lorna learned of the crash. She had just put Matt's cake in to bake when two policemen from Wanderrie Creek, sixty miles away, hats in hand, guided her back through the house to sit at her own table before breaking the news.

Like rain running off a greasy fleece, their words barely touched her with meaning. Then, as they sank in, Lorna was aware of a strange, sick sensation: her family, the world—reality itself—had been destroyed, but every cup on every shelf, instead of falling to the floor to smash into a shattered mess as it surely should, sat, unmoved: unimpressed to be handled, at last, by Sergeant Wisheart, who made tea and put three sugars in it for her and for her daughter Rose. The girl, full of excitement just moments before as she recounted her ride to the old mine on their property with Miles that morning, now stood speechless and deathly white with shock.

All their men gone. The phrase echoed in Lorna's mind as she put her floury fingers to the cup handle, but couldn't remember how to lift it.

The crash that claimed those MacBride lives was not an extraordinary event. A light coating of death dusts any scene you care to observe in the bush: the desiccated tree weathered into twisted stone, the rams' horns flaking in the dirt, the insects banked up against the flywire of a homestead window in a snowdrift of wings and legs. Death twinkles in this landscape like mineral sand.

In any given year, you'll know someone fatally thrown from a horse, or killed when their car ran off the road, or bitten by a snake, too far from help. Mine shafts are a popular haunt for death too. As well as the miners who get lashed by a snapped steel cable, or whose heads are crushed when the operator absentmindedly hoists them up instead of down, there are plenty of people desperate for somewhere to jump from, in a largely flat landscape with no tall buildings. The mine shafts oblige them generously, particularly after a bender or a jilting. And an abandoned shaft can keep this a secret for months or years.

So you can't survive out here without the invisible network that spreads across stations and towns, like veins in a body, sending vital support to victims of calamity and carnage. After the radio call to the Flying Doctor, word flowed like water over the Sched, the nickname for "the Schedule" on which the various stations were allotted time to use the shortwave radio frequency run by the Flying Doctor.

Everyone knew where Meredith Downs was on its yearly schedule of lambing and mustering and shearing. And everyone knew that if they were in the same godforsaken straits, they'd want their neighbors to appear on their doorstep to help. At least it was January, the quietest month of the year, when you mostly just kept your head down and waited for the sapping heat to lose interest and move on.

Rose had insisted on following Matt straight to the hospital, many hundreds of miles away in Perth. "Someone should be there when he wakes up. Or if he—" The two women had looked at each other across the table in silence. Though Lorna couldn't bear to part with her last healthy child, she yielded. She herself would get there as soon as things were under control at the station.

Maudie Knapp from Deep Springs Station, fifty miles to the north, was the first to turn up after hearing about it on the Sched. She bustled in with a hastily packed suitcase, a big tin of her famous shortbread, and the pot of stew that she'd had on the stove when the news came through.

"Oh, Lorna!" The sight of her dear friend, gray eyes gazing blankly, barely able to stand, robbed her of words for a moment, and she took a deep breath. "Right. I'm here now, love. And Charlie's on his way. Bob Sowerby and some of his boys'll be coming from next door at Maundy Creek. Just tell us which paddocks the stock are in and what

the hands are due to be doing.” She opened and closed cupboards until she found what she was looking for. “Here. Drink some brandy.”

If you’d asked Lorna MacBride exactly how the time passed after that terrible event, she couldn’t have told you. That first day, it was a matter of getting through a breath at a time, as though she might actually forget to take in air if she didn’t make the effort.

She found herself obsessing about funerals. The undertakers could wait a few days, but she knew they didn’t have a cool room, and the Wanderrie Creek hospital morgue would accommodate “guests” for only so long. But it might be bad luck to plan funerals before she knew whether there would be two or three?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Maudie, who was saying gently, “I know you’ll want to get to Perth to see Matt...”

“Mattie... Yes, of course.” But just in that moment, Lorna couldn’t for the life of her remember whether that particular child was dead or alive. She knew—yes, she knew her Rosie had survived. Which of the boys, though?

CHAPTER 3

The slim woman with the graying hair and trembling hands who took the glass of brandy was almost unrecognizable, her old friend thought. It was as if she, too, had been hit by a truck. For a few seconds after he came in, Charlie Knapp, Maudie's husband, didn't recognize Lorna either. Her usually ruddy cheeks were waxy, her shoulders stooped, and her warm, clear voice a timorous whisper.

Yet this was the same Lorna MacBride, daughter of an Adelaide stockbroker, who had been swept off her feet by Phil at the Shell Ball in Perth in 1933, and had come to Meredith Downs armed with humor and common sense and fueled by the certainty that she had married the love of her life. She had swiftly taken root in the homestead, and settled so well into the district that she was soon known and admired for hundreds of miles.

Lorna could fix the generator and get the car out of a bog. She made the best Victoria sponge known to any branch of the Country Women's Association, and when word got around that she'd bottled her annual batch of tomato chutney, people made excuses to "drop by" and pick up a jar while they were "passing."

Some stations sent their women to Perth for the summer. Suburbs like Peppermint Grove were dotted with cool limestone houses sheltering ladies with powder and blue-rinse perms who occupied themselves with tennis and bridge until the heat eased off sufficiently to return inland or up north. So the women like Lorna MacBride and Maudie Knapp, who stayed behind, were bonded by hardships big and small: like not being able to wash your hair for weeks on end because there was too little water, or what water there was was so hard that your hair stuck out like a scarecrow's. They lamented the difficulty of keeping food from going off in smoky kerosene fridges that half the time ended up

covered in slime inside and out, or, worse, caught fire. These women reached for the rifle to shoot the snake that slithered into their kitchen, then chalked it up on the blackboard, comparing this year's tally with the last. They cooked and cleaned and tended to wounds and taught the kids their correspondence-school syllabus in temperatures that took your breath away. They plucked chickens and gutted them, seared the hair off the pork rind of the pig their littlies raised as a pet and that their husband killed in their slaughterhouse. They comforted those same husbands when the bank threatened foreclosure or rain refused to fall or the government announced some new tariff that would cripple them.

And they passed these abilities on to their daughters.

In the case of Lorna MacBride, that was Rose, the other person to receive the terrible news in the kitchen over Sergeant Wisheart's sweet tea.

Rose wasn't a beauty like her mother, but she had a winning smile, and radiated health and vigor. Her stocky build and determination suited her to station life: she could wrestle a ram down the drafting race, and change a flat tire as easily as her brothers. Rose had none of Warren's cockiness or the easygoing charm of Matt, but she was quick and tenacious and a good sport. Perhaps naturally, everyone assumed she would be a chip off the old block, and would, in time, marry a decent chap from a good property and go on to forge a family under another name.

"It's funny," Lorna would say. "You feed them the same. You love them the same. But every child's its own country."

It was Lorna who had the first inkling that the happy wedding and the quiet, motherly life might *not* be the path for her daughter; just as it was Lorna who first noticed that from an early age Rose was occasionally a stranger to the truth. Lorna MacBride, for whom there was black and white and right and wrong and not much in between, was uneasy that Rose's account of events did not always tally with fact.

As a kid, if Warren smashed a cup or hit a ball through a windowpane, he'd take pride in claiming responsibility: Phil had told him that "that's what blokes do—take your punishment like a man." So he'd get his wallop, or go without his rifle for a week, and life would go on. Matthew was still too little then to be getting up to anything you could really call mischief. He adored his older brother and sister, and would often be their unwitting stooge, fetching things for Warren, or sitting still while Rose, almost three years

older, dressed him as a princess. Rose developed a habit, if items were broken or missing, of saying it was “Bubba’s fault,” then rushing to add, “But he’s only little. He couldn’t help it,” and Lorna would invariably let it go. Until one day she found one of her few hats, a toque with a net veil, covered in dirt and its netting torn. The hat was kept in the top of the linen press, which Lorna had to stand on tiptoes to reach. She had sometimes caught Warren and Rose clambering up the shelves like monkeys, perching inside the cupboard while Mattie watched with frustrated admiration.

Phil had bought the hat on their honeymoon. When he put it on her head, he let out a whistle of admiration: “Like they say, ‘There’s nothing as beautiful as a woman who is loved.’” It was the most romantic thing he had ever said, and the hat had been a talisman of those words, and of that time.

Things changed after kids, of course. Then war came. So, with Phil’s battalion posted to North Africa in 1942, something in Lorna gave way at the sight of the damaged hat, and she didn’t try to keep the crossness from her face when she marched into the lounge room, where the children sat playing. She held up the offending object. “Right. Anyone have anything to say about this?”

“Mumma hat!” chirruped Matt.

Warren had a *Search me!* expression. Rose went a dark shade of pink, eyes darting from one brother to the other.

“Rosie?” asked Lorna.

“It’s a hat. *Your* hat.”

“Any idea how it got dirty?”

Rose minutely inspected a piece of Meccano.

“Well?”

“I think Warre—” She saw Lorna’s eyebrows shoot up. “I mean Bubba—I think Bubba did it.”

The lie was so bold, and the performance so earnest, that Lorna had to suppress a laugh. “Go to your room, and have a ponder. Then come and tell me whether that’s right. I won’t be cross. But I *will* want to know the proper truth.”

Lorna mentioned the episode in a letter to Phil, and, sitting in the kitchen late one night, she could almost hear his laugh when he wrote back, “She’s quick on her feet, I’ll give her