

## YOU CAN'T MISS IT

By Felicia Johnston (Australian)

The road is just how I remember it. Tall, skinny gums straggle into the sky. Birds flutter through the trees, some singing melodiously, others squawking. The air smells of melting bitumen. A drop of sweat tickles its way down the back of my leg. London's grey drizzle seems a world away.

It is a long road, stretching from the highway through the suburban bushland all the way to Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary. I knew it well, having walked lengths of it daily to school and friends' houses as a child. As I walked, lost tourists would stop their cars to ask me the way to Lone Pine. 'Keep going straight ahead', I would say, self-importantly. 'You can't miss it'. I had been a very blonde child, so the Japanese tourists had always wanted to take their picture with me, fingers held in the peace V. I wondered at times at the number of photograph albums I graced in Japan. A skinny blonde child with permanently scraped knees and elbows grinning out from the pages. Stereotypically Australian, I was a souvenir to be shown off alongside their stuffed kangaroos and beer coolers.

I smile to see that the letterbox my father made is still in place at number 491. In a fury following repeated letterbox thefts, Dad had cut a large hole in a bright orange water bottle, and nailed it onto a post. Twenty years later, it is still there. Peering through the bushland, I can just make out the roof through the trees. I know the driveway is nearly a kilometre long. Bored, as only children can be during school holidays, my sisters and I had walked its length, counting our steps then calculating the distance.

I retrace those old steps. The air, dense with humidity, clogs my lungs. By the time I reach the house, I am dripping with sweat. It looks different. The carport is gone, and the chook pen is now a flower garden.

A man kneels in the front garden, picking weeds from the rocky soil.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

I'm nervous. A deep breath.

"My name is Katie. Do you own this house?"

"Yes." He looks suspicious, but with a hint of a smile that tells me he's not unfriendly.

"I – I grew up here. My parents built it. We sold up when they divorced. I was wondering if you might consider selling?" There. It's said. A childish wish, but one that's never left me.

He looks at me, almost sorrowfully. "I'm afraid not, Katie. We love this place." He pauses. "So you grew up here? Would you like to have a look around, for old time's sake?" I shake my head. "You sure?" I nod.

I am reluctant to give up. "Well, just in case..." I pull out a business card and hand it to him. "If you ever change your mind, let me know."

"Will do. Are you alright?" He is kind, but I can see he wants me to leave now.

"I'm fine, thank you. I'm glad you love this place." I feel foolish. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye Katie. You need a lift anywhere?"

"No, thank you."

Reaching the top of the driveway, my eyes prickle. How ridiculous, I think. It's just a house. I stand there, staring stupidly at the tiny scrap of roof through the trees, as a car slows down.

"Excuse me!" a voice calls. I turn and smile, expectantly. "Is this the way to Lone Pine?"

"Yes," I say, pointing down the road. "Keep going straight ahead, you can't miss it."