

The Old Farmhouse. Matisse Donnellon.

The original farmhouse still stood on the hill as a grim reminder of the events of that day years ago. Somehow the house withered away along with Daniel. The slats grew tired and the roof was worn but showed familiarity, warmth and a sort of understanding. Something that no one else could offer.

Daniel had just come home from an afternoon at the pub drinking schooners with his neighbour, Darrel. The pub was extremely old, but stood as tall as a mountain. Over the hours he'd have a chat with all the people he knew. He talked to Chris the postman about the footy, he talked to Lisa about her cafe down the road, to Truck and Pete about the dog races and to Anthony about his crops. Daniel grew up in this town, would most likely die in this town and would do anything for anyone in this town.

The afternoon sun was glaring, casting spotlights through the gaps in the leaves of the gumtrees. The fresh air and the bright blue sky hugged the earth without a cloud in sight. The deep greens of the grass and the leaves softly blanketed the hills all the way to the horizon. Daniel loved this time the most, when the cattle calmly grazed, Chip had his last run of the day playing tiggy with the birds and Daniel could have a moment to breathe.

Daniel did this every day. He would sit under the tree and climb as a child and would just watch the array of colours sculpt the sky. Although this day was underwhelming, with no clouds, the blue just faded to black and no images danced in the sky. The grass swayed and the wind whispered to the trees.

A little prick was all he felt, like he sat on a little stick or got his finger on the end of a needle. But when he looked down to find the stick that stabbed him in the leg, a black snake stared back. The cunning snake just laid there drawing sunlight into his dazzling scales.

This had never happened to him before. Sure, snakes used to slither through the backyard and every once in a while would scatter away underneath the house, but he had never been bitten. One summer when he was twelve, the cattle dog Saddle, was found by Daniel's older brother, Sam, out the back of the house under the clothes line. And that was it. After that he never saw Saddle again.

"Chip come 'ere, come on," Daniel yelled, feeling his foot starting to tingle. Like a thousand tiny ants crawling all over his foot.

"I reckon it's time to go." His mind was a void of nothingness, no ideas of what to do. The ute was at least three paddocks over and with his hands starting to shake he didn't know what to do. Chip came galloping over and the little snake had disappeared. Chip whimpered as Daniel struggled to stand, his legs not having nearly as much fight as he had hoped. The tree he used to climb as a kid now held him up. The salty sweat trickled down his face as he stood there, hopeless.

He had made it about 50 metres before stumbling and hitting the ground with a thwack. His mind was a scrambled puzzle with no solution. Chip sat next to Daniel and whimpered once more, and his eyes grew fearful, staring off into the distance. The wind shifted, the whispers he once heard from the trees became hollow and the pit in Daniel's stomach grew deeper.

And then there she was. Daisy. Daisy was the cow that towered over all the others. She was the harsh defensive one that didn't stand with the rest of the herd. She had broken fences, had fights with tree trunks and had never showed anything but hostility towards Daniel or the rest of the herd. Daniel usually threw her food into the paddock for her to eat alone. And last year she kicked the neighbour's wandering sheep so hard it couldn't move.

There she was, headed right towards them. There were no trees or shelters inside to offer some safety, just a plain of danger. Her eyes locked with his and somehow the razor sharp horns grew longer. Chip slowly rose from the ground, unfaltering. His gaze set on Daisy. Daniel's legs grew weaker and the distance between them and Daisy dwindled. Chip's growl intensified and was fearsome. Chip was Daniel's best friend. And with one glance back to Daniel, with total sincerity Chip sprinted away.

Chip's legs strode long and his head was held high. His bark was forceful and aggressive. Daniel was lost for words - Chip was about to risk himself to protect Daniel.

Daniel couldn't look, too scared to see the aftermath. Chip yipped and whined into the night sky as Daisy ran away. Chip's body was still, his head rising to find Daniel. Daniel couldn't feel a single emotion, the thoughts of pain disappeared with the wind to just see his best mate fade away. As they locked eyes, Chip's head lowered, his expression diminished and Daniel was distraught.

A rumble on the ground, and beams of light came over the hill along with Daryl and his rescue.

Years passed and routine returned. Daniel and Darryl would go to the pub and drink a beer. He'd talk to Chris about the footy, to Lisa about the cafe, to Truck and Peter about the dog races and to Anthony about his crops. But there was always something missing - a hole in his heart. His little companion and his best mate. And when he would return home the house felt empty, the dog door with no purpose and the view of the paddock filled with memories. And yet the original farmhouse still stood on the hill as a grim reminder of the event of that day years ago.

