Lovewriting.co.uk

Opening extract from

Ruth

Written by

Marlene S. Lewis

Published by

Matador

All text is copyright of the author and / or the illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1

Friday 14th December 1956 had arrived at last. Fed up with boarding school, Ruth's final day couldn't come soon enough. She longed for the familiar lush, green landscapes of Papua with myriad flowering trees and vibrant, cascading orchids. And, of course, seeing Tommy. She hoped he'd missed her as much as she had missed him, and wondered if he had changed over the last year. Ruth knew she had changed. No longer beset by outbreaks of acne, her skin had blossomed. Her figure had also done what it should, by filling out in all in the right places.

The four-hour journey by train to Sydney from St. Margaret's Ladies' College seemed interminable. Ruth's interest in Neville Shute's latest novel couldn't compete with the pending trip home on a flying boat. Indeed, she might have been reading about her own life in *Beyond the Black Stump*. Even after six years of attending school on the mainland, the mountain vegetation still appeared foreign to her eyes. It had a lot to do with the shape and blue-grey colour of the trees; their branches weren't as densely leaved as trees back in Papua, and their trunks possessed a bare appearance. The sandy soil even resembled dust more than earth. Still, unlike most places west of the Blue Mountains, the eucalypt forest did bear some resemblance to the Owen Stanley ranges where she had grown up.

Pretending not to notice the two men who burst into the compartment, she stared at the pages of her book. The shorter of the two, plonked himself down on the seat next to her, and the other sat opposite. Dressed in well-worn dungarees and boots, she surmised they were jackaroos or shearers returning home. As soon as the men

sat down, the smell of alcohol permeated the air; they had been drinking.

"So where are you off to, darlin'?" the one sitting opposite asked, then smiled conspiratorially back at his friend.

"To meet my father and do some Christmas shopping," she lied; hoping the mention of her father would cause them to lose interest.

"Christmas shopping, eh?" he said, turning back to his friend.

It worked. They began to speak about some lady, and then the taller one pulled his hat over his eyes and sprawled out along the seat.

Hopefully they'll fall asleep or pass out from the alcohol, she thought, as her mind turned to all the other girls who would probably be home by now. She almost regretted her decision to leave a day late, just to meet an uncle whom she didn't know. Still, she reasoned, her grandmother would be happy that she had waited to catch his flight.

Ruth was close to her grandmother, Eliza Madison. Kindred spirits in a way, they both shared a sense of disconnection from family ties. But visits were few. Eliza spent most of her time in the highland villages, documenting local customs and tribal histories. Ruth remembered her grandmother as always being interested in her and what she thought about things, which was in contrast to everyone else, especially her brothers and, more recently, her mother. It saddened Ruth that she didn't have a closer relationship with her mother. They hadn't always been distant, but since going to boarding school on the mainland, she had found her mother increasingly withdrawn.

"I reckon you should share ya chips, luv." The man next to her eyed the bag of potato chips perched on her arm rest.

"Here you go," she said, holding out the bag, but instead of taking the chips, he grabbed her wrist. Shocked, she hastily withdrew her hand and the chips flew across the floor.

"Now, that's not nice. Anyone'd think ya don't like 'avin' ya hand held."

"I don't, and if you can't keep your hands to yourself, I'll pull the emergency cord," she said bravely, as her insides knotted with fear.

"Hey, did ya 'ear that, Jack? She's go'na pull the cord on me."

The other man continued to snore.

"Crabby bitch, you're lucky it was only me hand I put on ya, miserable cow." His face twisted in disgust as he put his feet up on his companion's seat.

For a good ten minutes, Ruth sat wondering whether she should try to leave the carriage. Her holdall was on the luggage rack above the other man's head. To get to the door, she would have to climb over their legs. She decided to stay put and move if the ticket inspector came.

The air was heavy and sticky when the locomotive pulled into Penrith for water. She drew-down the wooden shutter to block the sun that was streaming through the window. Eyeing the two drunks, she wished her brothers, Jake and Matthew, had been travelling with her. They were twice the size of these fellows, both over six feet tall. Ruth's brothers had preceded her to school on the mainland and, being older, had already finished their education. When they first went away, she had felt deserted. John Madison, her father, was rarely home, and her mother, Alice, was usually busy – or sick. Ruth had always depended on her brothers for company.

The colour bar in Papua between local, native families and the Australian administrators further compounded the isolation of many white children, although for Ruth, this turned out not to be an issue. As her mother's headaches and confinement to bed became more frequent, the servants let Ruth play with the native workers' children. This had opened up a whole new, exciting world for her.

Ruth jumped, the compartment door flew open.

"You two boys'll 'ave to move yourselves and let an old bloke sit down," the tall, well-dressed man ordered, as he pushed past the two sleeping men. He threw his bag up on the rack, making a loud rattle.

They both shot-up, bleary-eyed. "Where are we?" asked the one named Jack.

"Pulling out of Penrith, mate," the newcomer said.

The two young men swore profusely, grabbed their swags and staggered out of the carriage towards the exit. Ruth breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hope they weren't giving you any bother, Miss."

"They were okay, once they fell asleep," she replied, wondering if he had detected her obvious relief.

"Looks like someone's been having a chip fight." The stranger looked at the scattered chips still on the floor.

"Yes, I dropped them," she said, and began picking up the worst of the mess.

"I suspect you're off to visit relatives, eh?"

"I'm on my way home for the summer, to Papua," she replied, expecting this to invite interest.

"Strewth, you're a long way from home!"

Ruth smiled, but caught herself, she didn't want to appear too friendly; he could turn out like the others.

"Not long after my wife and I got married, we moved out West, to the grandparents' property. That was a world apart, too, in those days."

"I was born in Papua, so it isn't such a strange place really." But unless you've grown up in the islands, she thought, it probably would seem like the end of the earth.

"We didn't think we'd survive at first," the man continued. "I wouldn't change a thing now, though; life on the land is good, once you find yourself."

She thought the stranger was interesting, but still would have preferred to daydream her way to Sydney. "Do you often travel to town?" she asked, filling in an awkward silence.

"No, I'm meeting my wife and son. His missus is in hospital, women's problems." The conversation stopped dead.

"I hope she gets better soon." Ruth didn't know what else to say.

"We're all praying, honey," the man replied, visibly upset.

Ruth gazed through the shutters at the passing trees in an attempt to stymie any further conversation about the man's family.

"I'm surprised to see such a young girl travelling alone; someone meeting you at the other end?"

"Yes, my uncle. We're catching the same flight."

"Ah, that's all right then, can't be too careful these days, luv."

She wondered if he referred to all young women as 'young girls'

or whether she did seem obviously young. She guessed it was because he was old, maybe he hadn't noticed how tall she was. Ruth was proud of her five-foot-eight inches height and developed figure. She was the envy of a lot of girls at school.

Opening the window shutter again to study her reflection in the glass, she scrutinised the mass of titian frizz cascading down her shoulders, and decided to put her hair up before getting on the plane. She wondered if her uncle knew that she was eighteen. It will be such fun meeting him, she thought, trying to imagine what he would look like.

The train accelerated across the plains on its approach to Sydney. Houses appeared with ever-increasing frequency and small suburbs punctuated the whistle-blows. Living in little boxes in a large city had always intrigued Ruth, but she imagined the claustrophobic conditions would be intolerable. She felt uneasy as the greenery faded behind her, revealing an almost continuous row of buildings and suburbs melding into one another with no clear division.

As the locomotive navigated the criss-cross tracks of MacDonnaldtown and Redfern, it slowed. Abruptly, point changes interrupted the rhythmic clickety-clack of the steel rails, and through a torrent of hissing steam, the train came to halt.

Ruth marvelled at the busyness of Central Station, and at how purposeful everyone appeared as they hurried by. It was too early to go to the flying boat terminal, so breakfast in the railway dining room seemed a fitting way to kill time.

Pushing through the early-morning commuters, she realised this was the most people she had ever seen in one place. To her surprise, she enjoyed the anonymity afforded by the crowd; just another face in a sea of hundreds.

She sat alone at an empty table for four. Ruth had always struggled with self-consciousness when eating in public, but decided it was a pleasant place to dine. The room was large and airy, with pristine white tablecloths. Each table had a vase of flowers and was set with the shiniest cutlery.

She opened her satchel and groped around for her grandmother's letter.

…he is a tall man like your father but older and slightly bald, so he'll look quite old to you… Eliza went on to describe how Ruth would recognise her uncle, Lindsay Drummond. She memorised the description and carefully refolded the letter.

Her grandmother had emigrated to Australia from Scotland with her first husband, James, who died of dysentery while trying his luck at gold mining. They had only the one child, Lindsay. After James' death, Eliza had continued prospecting on her own with the boy until she met up with Horace Madison. Horace had big dreams and planned to follow his quest for gold to New Guinea. When he proposed, Eliza accepted, having no other alternative. She couldn't go back to Scotland, destitute, and she knew she wouldn't last long on the gold fields, a woman with no man to protect her.

Before leaving for New Guinea, Eliza sent Lindsay to live with relatives back in Scotland. She had always intended to bring him back after a couple of years, but then she gave birth to a second child, John Madison. This put an end to their travels and they ended up settling in Papua. With a new baby demanding his wife's attention, Horace decided Lindsay should remain in Scotland and complete his education. He never did return, although Eliza endured the eight-week sea journey to visit him on a number of occasions.

"Mind if I join you?"

Ruth glanced up from her musings; the man from the train was standing next to her. "Oh, I thought you'd left."

"I missed the tram and decided to come back for some breakfast."

She felt intruded upon. "Oh, I'm sorry; I have to rush to catch mine." She had heard a number of disturbing stories about girls coming to harm while travelling alone and thought a speedy exit was the best strategy. As charming as he seemed, it was disconcerting that he had followed her into the dining room.

"That's fine, luv, don't let me keep you. My name's William McGrath, by the way."

"Lovely talking to you, Mr McGrath; thank you for the company." she started to walk away.

"Look us up if you're ever out near Collabine," he called out.

Ruth smiled back at him, knowing she would never be going there.

Finding the Rose Bay terminal turned out to be quite an ordeal. Unfamiliar with the route, she got off at the wrong stop and then had to run the rest of the way; all the while wondering if William McGrath was following. But she suspected her concerns had more to do with her own over-active imagination. When she arrived, hot and agitated, she discovered a mechanical problem had delayed the plane's departure; if you could call the bulky-looking vessel a plane. The body was entirely silver and had the appearance of a boat with wings stuck on top. It explained why they were called flying boats, but she hadn't expected such a distinct nautical shape.

The aircraft took forever to be repaired, and the terminal had little to offer in terms of entertainment. The suffocating air inside the waiting area added to Ruth's discomfort and her neck ached from briefly dozing off with her head crooked to one side. She began having second thoughts about taking this flight, when suddenly, the Tannoy burst into life.

"The launch conveying passengers for the ten-thirty flight to Port Moresby is now boarding." Ruth jumped up; the final leg of the journey home was finally underway.

As she approached the shiny, metallic vessel, she decided this was a far more romantic way to travel than by aeroplane. It reminded her of something you saw in a Tarzan movie, where they fly along jungle rivers, stopping along the way to let off explorers and news reporters. They even served hot meals!

Once on-board, she surveyed the other passengers. She had been too excited to notice before, but everyone appeared to be wearing their Sunday best. Embarrassed, she tried to conceal her scuffed shoes under the seat in front and quickly put on her cardigan to hide a tomato sauce stain from a wayward breakfast chip. She had never

been one for worrying much about her appearance, especially at school, where her curvaceous body and formless navy uniform were often at odds. At home, she mainly wore colourful sarongs with her hair tied or pinned up with flowers, like the native women. Make-up was a waste of time due to the humidity, although her mother always said she didn't need any with her rosy cheeks and brilliant, emerald eyes.

The Sunderland, now repaired, wasted no time at all in becoming airborne. According to the itinerary, this would have been a quick flight if it had left on time, stopping at Brisbane and Townsville before arriving at Port Moresby in the evening. Owing to the delay, the arrival time had been pushed forward to the morning.

For the first hour or so, the plane flew close to the water, which Ruth found exciting. But then it unexpectedly climbed higher and stayed at around ten thousand feet. After the initial novelty, flying above the New South Wales coastline became monotonous and she became bored – until delicious aromas drifted through the cabin. Her mouth watered when the hostess appeared with a nicely laid-out tray containing corned beef, boiled potatoes in a creamy parsley sauce and dainty baby carrots. Even dessert which, she noticed with glee, was strawberry blancmange!

The warm cabin became oppressive after dinner, and she drifted in and out of sleep. Half dreaming and half awake, her thoughts turned to landing. She hoped her mother, Alice Madison, would be waiting for her, and they could spend a night in town. Before her mother's illness, they used to go to Port Moresby on shopping trips. Those were special times, shopping for clothes and books at Burns Philps department store, having lunch in the dining room under the punkahs, then in the evening, dressing for dinner at the hotel.

The war had taken a lot from Ruth's mother. Her own parents had refused to leave Papua when the Japanese invaded and they were found slaughtered just a few weeks before the war ended. On her return to Papua, Alice discovered her only remaining brother with both his legs blown away and dying of malaria. In a way, the delirium

of the malaria had been a kindness, they all decided, as it provided some respite from the pain of his gangrenous limbs.

Like most civilians, Ruth and her mother had been repatriated to Australia before the Japanese landed at Basabua. Her father stayed on until the last minute, in case it turned out to be a false alarm. He thought he would be able to wait out the war, stockpiling the coffee harvests. He didn't plan on the invaders moving inland through the jungle.

When the administrators and business people returned after the Japanese surrender, they found a lot had changed. Even they had changed, along with their belief in British supremacy. More disturbing was the change in the local inhabitants. Perhaps it was resentment at having been caught up in the white man's war, or maybe something more fundamental, an awareness that in spite of all the distinct tribes, they were, in fact, one people; a colonised people. This had become increasingly apparent to Ruth as she arrived home each summer. Sometimes Papua seemed as foreign a place as the mainland. It was an uncomfortable realisation, not fully belonging to either place. She wondered whether she would experience that same sense of unsettled dissonance on this visit. Her main concern was for Tommy. She feared that he might become caught up in the smouldering undercurrent of political discontent that pervaded Papua.

The plane landed at Redland Bay, not far from Brisbane. Ruth glanced towards the doorway to see who was getting on but an elderly man, chatting to the hostess, blocked her view. Then something clicked, a sense of recognition. There stood Uncle Lindsay, the man who had always intrigued her by his absence – and the hushed tones with which his name used to be mentioned. He looked straight in Ruth's direction.

"Ruth!" he called, making his way to the empty seat next to her. "I'm so glad to meet you; Mum said you'd be on this flight."

She tried hard to be welcoming through a sudden attack of shyness. He was extremely dapper-looking in his stone-coloured safari suit, and he possessed the carriage of a much younger man.

"I'm sorry, Ruth. I'm Lindsay," he said as he surveyed his brother's

daughter, "and what a treat it is to meet you. You look exactly like your photograph, only prettier."

All Ruth could do was smile. She wasn't at all sure how to navigate her way through this encounter. She blushed; everyone seemed to be watching.

"Your grandmother wired to say I'm to make sure you catch your connecting flight. Apparently there'll be no one at Port Moresby to meet you."

Trying to conceal her dismay at not being met at Port Moresby, she asked, "Have you come straight from Scotland?" She was at a loss for something more engaging to say.

"I've just had two lovely weeks in Brisbane." He squeezed her hand and smiled. "Don't worry, there's nothing worse than meeting long-lost relatives and trying to make conversation. I speak from experience."

She eventually relaxed a little. "I'm amazed that I've finally got to meet you. Gran's the one who always goes to visit you."

"Yes, I never wanted to go to New Guinea, although I did think about coming here to Australia after I finished university. But I got married shortly after I qualified, and with marriage and the war, I just didn't get around to travelling."

"Well, I'm glad you came." Ruth warmed to Lindsay. He seemed such a jovial and likeable character.

"Yes, I thought I'd better take a gander at the place my mother has loved for so long. Besides, I needed a vacation and your gran had a couple of legal matters to take care of in Brisbane. Her will actually; she has never made one. So it's a working holiday, if you like."

"Gran told me about your work and some of the cases." She wondered what this obviously cultured gentleman would think when he arrived at her grandmother's village. "You know where Gran lives, don't you?"

"Yes, my dear, Mother has given me directions to her *haus*, as she refers to it."

"She lives in a village, quite remote."

"Yes, Ruth, your grandmother has always been positively eccentric, and if she lived anywhere other than a native village, I would have been surprised." He laughed.

There was a definite kindness and warmth about him; he had her grandmother's eyes, even the same creases when he smiled.

The two new acquaintances chatted away like old friends, until the lights dimmed for everyone to sleep. Ruth needed some quiet time to process her thoughts. She wondered how he had felt growing up in Scotland without his mother or father around. It seemed cruel, forsaking a child for a man. Maybe her grandmother believed his education was more important than being with her. Ruth imagined he probably missed his mother, remembering her own feelings of abandonment after Jake and Matthew had gone to boarding school. Lindsay must have experienced an even greater sense of loss.

The monotonous drone of the propellers lulled Ruth into a semi-conscious daze, and her thoughts turned again to Tommy. They had grown up together and had always been close. She recalled how he used to play outside the plantation fence, and she would tease him. It had been such a delight when her mother agreed to let him come inside. Their friendship blossomed, although as far as the family were concerned, Tommy was and always would be just the native gardener's son. It was a harmless alliance which she would eventually outgrow. As time passed, however, this failed to occur.

Their attachment became so troublesome to Ruth's father that he broke with custom and sent his daughter to the mainland for her secondary schooling. Normally only boys would be sent away. She wrote to Tommy every few weeks initially, but then her father found out and forbade her to write. Hurt by what she saw as a senseless intrusion into her life, she never did understand her father's actions and her relationship with him never fully recovered. She assumed he didn't have much regard for her feelings.

Ruth watched the sun steal its way into the aircraft from around the edge of the curtains, until she was distracted by the hostess readying breakfast. The cabin came to life again with passengers fishing through

their purses and bags for make-up and combs, then rushing up the aisle to the toilets.

Looking down past the wing, she wondered at the expanse of water, majestic and vast, a picture-book blue that extended all the way to the horizon. While Lindsay snored, she surveyed his face for further evidence of family resemblance. His nose had the same aquiline shape as her own, although his was larger, of course. She checked her reflection in the window. Her chin was round, his was square and firmly set. Probably from Gran's first husband, she thought; Dad's is more like mine.

Her attention turned back to the mottled water below with the tell-tale light-green patches of reef. The turquoise-blue expanse transformed into the purest crystal green as the plane banked around the contrasting white sands of Ela Beach. The ramshackle, stilted houses of Hanuabada stood out distinctly against the tropical backdrop. The village on stilts had been rebuilt following its destruction by the Japanese, but even now, eleven years later, remnants of war remained. Deserted planes, boats and heavy, rusting vehicles. Fleetingly, Ruth realised how close she and her family had come to the atrocities of war, something she hadn't contemplated before.

The Sunderland landed effortlessly on the smooth waters of Fairfax Harbour and as the cabin door opened, the warm, dry, familiar air rushed in. Embarking onto the wooden platform, she luxuriated in the penetrating warmth of the sun and breathed in the recognisable sea-grass and salt aromas. Home at last, she thought and smiled.

A crowd of people had assembled at the gate, waiting to meet disembarking family and visitors. There were smartly dressed official-looking men, simply clad *haus bois* and *meris* ready to haul their family's luggage, drivers and eager porters, as well as entire families waiting to celebrate reunions. Ruth didn't recognise anyone; her uncle was right, although secretly she had hoped her mother would appear out of the crowd on this stopover.

She had little time to enjoy the scenery. Lindsay called her to the minibus that was waiting to convey them to Jackson Airfield. Okoro,

Ruth's home, was less than an hour away, once airborne. For Lindsay, the trip would be much longer; he had to continue on to Garua, where he would meet up with a guide to help him through the jungle to Eliza's village.

"I don't envy you, Uncle Lindsay; you have another ten hours' travel after I get off."

"Yes, I know, but your gran assures me she'll send a jeep to save me having to hike all the way; should cut a couple of hours off the trip."

Ruth glimpsed his smiling eyes again. She liked him; he had the same do-or-die attitude that characterised Eliza's approach to life.

The cramped DC-3 contained only two men, a woman in a white pantsuit, and piles of parcels. The lady traveller must be new to the territory, Ruth decided; she wouldn't have chosen to travel in white otherwise. The dirty cabin had electrical equipment stuffed under the seats and two large, covered cages at the far end.

Within minutes, the plane was banking away from Port Moresby to the accompaniment of honking and hissing noises as the altitude increased. New breeding stock, Ruth guessed, or someone hankering for a traditional Christmas goose.

"Penny for them…" Lindsay looked across and winked.

"Not much, I'm just wondering what my friends at school would think about how we travel here."

"I'm sure they'd love the adventure, Ruth; it's a remarkable place, from what I can see."

The plane moved out from behind heavy cloud, and Ruth noticed they were flying along a vast crevice of banked cumulonimbus. She half expected angels to appear; it reminded her of a Sistine Chapel fresco.

A sudden thud caused her to reel back from the window in fright. "What was that?" she shouted, more as a reflex than a question.

The other passengers looked across in stunned silence.

"Must have been a bird; can't be anything to worry about," Lindsay said, looking as though he were trying to reassure himself as much as anyone else.

The pitch of the engines had changed; it was higher and more laboured. The co-pilot entered the cabin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have an engine out; please remain seated. We will try to land at Kikori."

Ruth thought he looked nervous. The other passengers peppered him with questions.

"The plane can fly safely with one engine; just stay in your seats," the co-pilot tried to reassure them, but he was clearly agitated.

The remaining engine spluttered as if it were also going to stop. The woman on the other side began to cry and then became hysterical. Looks of horror crossed all their faces as the solitary propeller cut out. The cabin fell silent, apart from a strange, rushing sound made by the wind. The co-pilot ordered everyone to put on their safety belts.

"Stay calm, and put your heads down," he shouted before hurrying back to join the pilot.

Ruth clung to Lindsay, who held her head tightly to his chest. She could still partly see out the window, but they had flown into a cloud. Ruth wondered how confident the pilot was of gliding through the ranges with no vision.

Another loud thud in the undercarriage caused the plane to lurch to one side. It didn't recover its pitch and remained at a skewed angle. The electrical equipment under the seats catapulted noisily to the opposite side of the aisle and an ear-splitting crack came from underneath the floor, as if something had snapped. The female passenger screamed; there were crashing and breaking sounds interspersed with the violent thumping of branches hitting the body of the aircraft. The sound of tearing metal reverberated through the cabin, followed by a ferocious gush of cold mountain air. Everything went black.

The remains of the DC-3 came to a thudding halt. Trees and vines had somehow broken the impact of the plane, preventing it from entirely disintegrating. The wingless wreck remained lifeless and silent.

"You should have asked Ruth to collect the package on her way," John said.

"Well, it's a bit late now. What time did you say the plane was due?"

"Jesus, Alice, that must be the tenth time you've asked in about an hour. Eleven o'clock. I've sent Tom and Billy to wait, in case it's early. Do you remember what to say about your trip to Townsville if she asks?"

"I was visiting Aunt Daphne; I wouldn't forget that." Alice had been rehearsing her trip details for over a week. No one was to know about her hospital stay, and to keep it a secret, John colluded with his wife.

"I'm going out to the strip. Put on some make-up and do your hair; she'll suspect something if you look like that." He left.

Alice would normally be hurt by the way John had spoken to her, but since returning from the hospital, she had somehow become immune to his commands. Bugger him, she thought, as she tidied up her hair.

"Matthew!" Alice called out towards the packing sheds.

"Yes, Mum, what's up?"

"I'm going to get changed, and then I want you to drive me out to the strip. Dad's already gone. We have to be there when she arrives." Alice's demeanour had suddenly changed; the excitement of Ruth's imminent arrival had quelled her annoyance with her husband. She was dressed and ready within minutes.

The jeep skidded on the muddy track as long, wet clumps of *Kunai* grass splattered across the windscreen.

"Don't worry, Mum, we'll get there before the plane." Matthew had taken the short route.

"Just make sure we arrive in one piece," Alice said, knowing it would make no difference.

The airstrip wasn't far but negotiating the muddy terrain required skill, something Alice wasn't entirely convinced that her younger son possessed. It took the best part of twenty minutes before the jeep pulled out of the vegetation into a large clearing.

"We even beat Dad!" Matthew declared, looking pleased with himself.

Within seconds, the other jeep arrived with a cross-looking John Madison at the wheel.

"You should be more bloody careful, Matt," he shouted as he checked Alice's appearance. "We'd better find the boys. I told them to come out over an hour ago."

"Masta, Masta!" The small group turned to see Billy Lamb running towards them with the two-way in hand. *"Balus em pundaun!"*

Alice's pidgin was good, but on this occasion, her mind refused to translate the ominous message. "Where are they, Matthew, still over the ranges?" she asked, looking at her son with fear dawning on her face.

"He said the plane's gone down, Mum."