CARELESS

by Judy Campbell

I consider myself a trusting sort of bloke. Someone who sees the good in people rather than the bad, and gives ‘em a go. That’s how it was when John swept into town and into our lives. I was fair taken with him. Everyone was. My big sister Mary was so struck, she married him. Ended up in a hole in the ground. It wasn’t his fault. Hard to look him in the eye all the same; but the trust thing came later.

It was more than a year before I could stand to take out Mary’s diaries, and it wasn’t only ‘cos I struggle with the reading. I felt like a bloody peeping Tom. There were two books. The first was filled from cover to cover; the second only about halfway. She did much better than me with her letters, but her writing was still scrawly. The diary was about her time at the Moira sheep station.

John Oldbury Atkinson had already been the overseer at Moira for fourteen years before we met him proper. Imagine that … a white bloke on his own out in the bush all those years. He’d come into town now and then, but not often, Echuca being much closer for supplies. Besides, there was no real town to come to till 1847, then bang! Within a year they built the Wanderer Inn, north of the river. Our dad moved here to work on the carpentry. Hotels popped up all over the place after that, even though there were so few residents. Thirsty buggers in Deniliquin.

Some knew John from those few visits; maybe raised a tankard with him over at the Wanderer. I was too young for that. But our dad took a shine to the lean, tanned overseer. Said he was a right gentleman who also told a good yarn, and kept the locals and passing travellers entertained for hours. One visit, Dad invited him over for a home cooked meal the next evening. Mum wasn’t impressed. Muttered all day while she and Mary plucked the chicken, dug up potatoes, picked the greens, kneaded the dough and stoked the kitchen fire. My job was to keep the two little ones out of their way. Mary was excited. We didn’t get too many visitors.

“Whadya want?” Mum snapped when I brought the gang into the kitchen looking for some lunch.

“We’re hungry,” I said.

“Oh. Mary, find them something, will you?”

Mary smiled at us, then looked up to the ceiling. Our dear mum would’ve complained if a distant uncle left her a fortune. My sister went down into the cool cellar and came back with salted meat and yesterday’s bread.

We were ravenous again by late afternoon, and right pleased when we heard the clip clop of horses. Mum had covered the roughness of our table with a cloth she’d embroidered, and was laying out the dishes. Mary had changed into her good dress by the time Dad and his guest led their horses over to the water trough. Mum was going to do the same, but got caught too soon. She ripped off her apron, which looked pretty bad by then, and put a clean one over her regular dress. We all lined up outside to meet this new bloke.

He didn’t disappoint.

Neither did Mum. We hadn’t had a spread like that since Dad invited the Chief of the Murray River Border Police over. Mary wasn’t old enough to help her with much that time, except looking after me, and the baby. Just the three of us kids then, it was that long ago.

John had a story for every occasion. A favourite was the tale of how he drove a mob of cattle halfway across New South Wales from Berrima to the Moira station back in 1843, when it'd only just begun. In those days the trip was even more dangerous than it is now; needed bush knowledge and a bucket load of courage. John was only nineteen. It took months to reach the new settlement at Albury, then down the Murray River to the station. Mr Lewes, the owner, was living in the only hut on the property, so more had to be built real quick. The life was rough. But John told us it was a grand adventure to be so free after his well-to-do upbringing as landed gentry back in Sutton Forest. I wouldn't know. I never met any such folk in Deniliquin.

John was back in town a few weeks later. He took us to the Highlander's Inn for Sunday lunch after church. And paid for it. Impressed Dad no end. Mary and I had been there once before, but you should've seen the little ones – eyes nearly popped out of their heads. Actual roast beef; not mutton like usual. I'd never had Yorkshire Pudding before. I ate three of 'em before Mum hissed that I'd be in big trouble if I took another one off the platter. I stopped. That was when I saw Mary fluttering her eyelashes at John. And he was looking at her like us kids had looked at that spread Mum put on for him at our place.

They were engaged the next month. No point muckin' around.

Mum and our neighbour, Mrs Mac, went crazy scrutinising every piece of cloth and lace, every embroidery thread the merchants brought into town. Their needles flew. Between them and Mary, they put together a decent bundle for John to load onto the cart when time came to take his bride off to the Moira station.

What made me start reading Mary's diaries, finally? Probably John being back in church with wedding bells ringing again. Sure, he had small kids on his hands who needed a mum, and a man shouldn't be alone in this world anyways. Still felt pretty soon though. So, there I stood with a twist in my gut, thinking of my sweet sister, and threw confetti with the rest of 'em outside the church. Family is family, and those kids were Mary's. We all liked John and wished him well.

Then I started on the diaries: Her fancy writing was hard to read.

I knew it'd been hard for Mary, living out there. She never let on how much she suffered though. I'd forgotten their first kid, John, was born there. I have to say, I shed me a few tears reading the entries from that time. She was so lonely; trying hard to be brave and please her husband; struggling with the rough life.

The first half was full of stuff about wildlife and nature. Mary liked that kind of thing. Then came the morning sickness. Terrible, but she got through that. It was a bit further on when things started to change.

16th November 1857

"It's all very well for him, being a man. Also, he's called this wretched place home for so long, he's become accustomed to its discomforts, which are many. My belly is large for six months, but I could still ride back to town, I think. It's further than Echuca, but Deniliquin means family. I could certainly manage to ride in a cart. But John says we can't spare the beasts nor the driver at this time of shearing. Nor himself, mainly, and he wouldn't want me making the journey without him. I am filled with fear for my first birthing with no midwife in sight, far less a doctor. "Enlist the help of the black women," he said. "They're having babies all

the time, and mostly successfully, I think." I wish he hadn't suggested the woman they call Kitty. I find her hard to look at. But not as hard as that boy of hers. He must be about seven or eight. When I look at him, the eyes that look back at me are those of my husband. The worst moment of my life took place yesterday, when, trying to be friendly, I asked Kitty the name of her son. "Johnnie Atkinson," she said."

What the flaming hell? How did Mary bear it? Why didn't she talk to me? Was she ashamed?

I wanted to wring his neck. But he was just remarried. We used to call his new wife Haughty Harriet back in the school house. She'd be giving him more kids, for sure. She already looked a little on the heavy side in that wedding dress, if you ask me. I kept me mouth shut. It was a struggle, but I read on, slowly.

18th November 1857

Did John put her up to it? I believe he must have. Kitty came to our hut yesterday. She's with child herself, but at an earlier stage than I. Or do black women carry differently? Anyway, she offered her help. "Done this lotsa times, Missus," she said. Did she mean having babies? Or acting as a midwife? Has she no shame? It appears not. Am I the only principled person here at Moira?

I thanked her and assured her I was fine, but couldn't stop my eyes from filling. Even through tears I could see she didn't believe me. She had a small one hiding behind her legs. I couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl, and wasn't going to lower myself to inspecting its anatomy. In any case, it's the bigger boy I can't bear to look at.

24th November 1857

It seems they report back to him, or perhaps it's only Kitty who does so. John asked me why I've been refusing her help, and that of the other woman she has recruited. They come every few days to check if I've changed my mind. I dislike this feeling of conspiracy. Of course, John has been here for a long time, and knows these people well; even better than he knows me, though this thought displeases me. On that subject, after days of agony, I summoned my courage and asked my husband why Kitty's eldest bears his name. "I fear the answer, husband," I said, "but cannot bear not knowing."

"Ah," he said, "I should have explained this. They don't operate by the same rules as us. Your natural delicacy will have obscured how a number of our labourers spend a number of their nights in, shall we say communion, with one or other of the women. It may shock you, but

they consider this not only acceptable, but an honourable occurrence. Children surely follow, but the migrant workers move on. So, what shall these children be named? I have agreed, upon Kitty's request, that nominated offspring of hers may be known by my family name. At least I am a constant here at Moira. I'm very sorry that you've endured this pain without asking sooner, and that I have doubtless been insensitive. I should have anticipated your confusion."

My relief at his account was immense. And yet I find a thread of doubt remains. I can't abide harbouring such thoughts, yet John's affection for this boy, also called John, is clear. And for the smaller one, who I've confirmed is a boy, called Aaron Atkinson. And most difficult for me is John's easy engagement with Kitty, even in her native language sometimes."

12th December 1857

Today she brought me a sketch of the boy, apparently drawn by one of the workers. It's rather good, I concede, but where can I put it so I don't have to catch sight of it? What if she asks after it?

20th January 1858

It's so hot. I would scream, if I could summon the energy. At least a month still remains, but I can't imagine getting any larger. I don't want to worry John, but I'm so very afraid. My mother might be willing to travel to be with me, but she'd be shocked to see how we live. The sight of her pinched disapproval, her muttering – I couldn't bear it. Kitty and the other woman are visiting me nearly every day now. I've become strangely accustomed to having two black women rubbing my body with – I don't know what it is, but it smells like it contains eucalyptus. I've come to enjoy it, and feel strangely calm when they're finished. Is that wrong of me? Shameful? They don't bring their children anymore. Perhaps they sense my distress at the sight of them. Some are darker, some lighter. Perhaps I am losing my grip, but I see John's eyes in the faces of them all.

That was the last entry before the birth, which came on sooner than expected, she told me. I wish she'd told me all that other stuff too. No wonder she made 'em leave Moira and move to town before the year was out. The birth went well, as far as I know, but family tradition to name their son after his grandfather meant there were two little Johnnie Atkinsons running around the place. That would've been hard, especially if they looked kind of similar.

I always meant to ask her about her time in the bush, but didn't get to see that much of 'em after they moved to town. John must've made some money at Moira, and not had much to spend it on. He got the licence and bought the inn at Hill Plain right away. It wasn't that far out of Deniliquin, but they were always so busy, it was hard to find time to sit down and have a chat.

Next thing little Mary Jane came along. Then the twins. She died trying to bring 'em into the world and that was that. There'd be no more asking. We buried all three together one miserable winter's day I'll never forget. John looked ready to jump in the hole after her, but had those two sad little kids hanging onto his hands like they'd never let go.

I tried to help out with the kids. But the new lady came along pretty soon. Johnnie and Mary seemed to like her. Always the country gentleman, John was, so I can see why Haughty Harriet would've liked him. And why he would've wanted Mary's things out of the house.

I know I left it too long, reading those diaries. How to ask about them now?

But I got the chance a year or two later, when I'd downed a few pints with John, and my courage was up. His younger brother, James, had lately been to visit. I couldn't stop staring at the eyes of those brothers standing there together. Identical.

"Did your brother ever visit you at Moira?"

"A few times," John said.

"When Mary was there?"

"No. It was several years before that. It was a tough trip to make, so I didn't have many family visits. But my young cousin visited the station too, once. Then he came to Deniliquin a few years ago. You met him, remember? Also named James."

Right. It'd been the same: the eyes.

"Yeah, I do."

We drank for a bit, then he said, "Your sister was a fine woman."

"Yeah. I miss her," I said. And grabbed the chance he'd given me. "Remember those diaries you gave me after she passed?"

"Yes. Do you still have them? I couldn't bear to read them at the time. I didn't feel I ever would. But I confess to being a little curious now that we're oh, must be five years on now. It felt strange to ask, but seeing as you mention it …"

I knew he wouldn't be wanting to read what Mary had said about him, and those half-caste kids. I crossed my fingers under the table.

"Nah," I said. "Took a while before I could manage it myself. I'm not good with the reading, y'know, and it was all about plants and stuff. I tossed 'em out."

He looked at me funny.

"Really? That's all she wrote about?"

"Well, she did say one strange thing. That's why I asked about your brother."

Maybe this next bit is why we never spoke much again afterwards. But damn, I had to, for Mary. And I was full of ale.

"She said there was a black woman, Kitty, who had a bunch of kids."

John sat up at that.

"And?"

"She said they were all half-white, half-black and she was too scared to ask who their father was." I hesitated. John leaned forward.

Hell, I was in this far; even telling lies about not having the diaries anymore. "She said they all had … your eyes."

"Oh, Mary, Mary." John leaned back again, clasped his hands behind his head and closed the Atkinson eyes.

I waited. He opened them, eventually.

"You've heard the story of how I drove the cattle from Berrima?" he said.

"Yep, heard that one. Good story."

"Yes. With much learning along the way. It was 1843, in the very early days on the Moira station. Soon after I arrived, there was a nasty business with the locals. Two men were killed at Tumudgery station on the Edward River and the superintendent ordered a reprisal expedition."

I wasn't sure what that fancy word meant, but got the general idea, so just let him keep going.

"Henry Lewes and I," he said, "he was my boss - accompanied a group including men from the Native Police Corp. and the Murray District Border Police. I grew up more during those hours in the Moira Swamp than I had on the entire journey from Berrima. I saw more bodies that day, many more, than were later reported."

If Mary had been sitting with us, she'd have reminded me to close me mouth. I'd heard about things like this, but never from someone who was actually there.

"Did you … I mean …".

"I didn't kill anyone, if that's what you want to ask. But Henry and I saw it all. The distress of the survivors was profound, many of them women and children. Kitty and her mother were among them. I lifted them onto my horse and walked them back to the station, where they lived in safety from then on"

This put a different shine on things, I thought. But had John just been kind, or was he protecting himself? Shooting the natives was starting to get a bad run in the newspapers these days.

"Did Mary know all this?"

"As I said, your sister was a fine woman. I mean that in every sense. She didn't ask where Kitty had come from, and I chose to spare her the brutal details of Kitty's earlier life."

All well and good, but he still hadn't answered the big question, had he? I took another swig and dived in.

"What about the brutal details of where all them kids came from?"

It was like I'd slapped him.

"My good man," he said, "I do consider you to be family, more or less. You're a good uncle to Johnnie and little Mary, which I appreciate. But I don't appreciate your line of questioning and what I believe you're suggesting. I was a responsible overseer. I took care of our blacks and of our workers. But I didn't keep watch over them all bloody night. It was cold and lonely out there for those men. The women didn't seem to mind. Mixed children were born. They all looked about the same to me, regardless of who the fathers were. It wasn't her fault, but Mary struggled while carrying our son, and started to imagine things."

The air had turned chilly, that's for sure. But he *still* hadn't given me a real answer. And I'm no liberal agitator, but John's view of what went on out there felt callous to me. I mean, did those women really not mind, um, 'keeping the men warm' at night? Wouldn't they have wanted fathers for their kids? What about the kids? Wouldn't they want to know, one day? I tried one last time.

"Why so many with your name?"

That really did it. There was only one more direct way I could've asked, but I couldn't force the words out. John stood up.

"I wish I'd never lent my name to those children. It was only as a favour to Kitty, out of sympathy. There were many labourers named John, and James. There was a James Cooper. Kitty and he had several children and I was relieved that they bore Cooper's name. Then he moved on,

as they all did. And as I now must. I do not wish to have this conversation again, and trust you will respect that wish."

It was the best I could do. I guess no one'll ever know for sure who was who.

Truth was, I felt badly for all those black folks. Maybe 'cos of what Mary wrote? I could never have said so over an ale with the blokes over at the Commercial Hotel. Especially after all the carry on about the new mission and the fuss about black women being abused by … well, it could've been by some of the fellows I was drinking with, who worked out on the stations. Seemed like maybe the women did mind, after all. We also heard talk of two blackfellas leading a noise about rights and stuff. Their names were Johnnie Atkinson and William Cooper. Blow me down. I kept me mouth shut.

I also kept looking out for Mary's kids, poor little tykes. But they grew up and moved away, as kids do. I lost touch with John and Harriet in the end. Couldn't keep up with all their hotels around the area. Who knows why he took off for Ballarat after more than twenty years in Deniliquin. Not a great idea, as it turned out. He died of a heart attack just three months after making the move. That was a couple of years ago. Harriet came back and still runs The Globe while poor old John fills a grave way over in Ballarat, with no family nearby to keep things fresh and tidy; place the odd bunch of flowers.

I've not been well myself lately, as you see. The back's been no good for years, but these days it doesn't take much for me to lose me breath. Then come the pains down the arm. Right up into the jaw. My daughter reckoned I should take a trip to Echuca to see a specialist, now that we have the steam train. She knows I don't feel up to going on horseback. But old Doc Hodges has looked after us townsfolk for decades and I'm happy for him to see me out the door of this life.

Just in case, I started sorting out stuff around the place. Don't want the kids to have the bother when I'm gone.

That box of Mary's things was at the back of the spare room wardrobe. It'd been years since I'd opened it and whew, what a stink. There were her diaries, a bit mouldy, and other papers from Moira station - some official looking pages, maybe certificates. I couldn't read a bloody word; the handwriting was so bad. A drawing of a half-caste boy pulled me up short though. He looked like my nephew Johnnie at around that age. Was that the picture that upset Mary so much? If it was, why'd she keep it?

Down the bottom I found the reason for the smell: something made of possum-skin. Maybe one of those cloaks the natives use. Come to think of it, Mary mentioned something about that in her diary – come winter, Kitty made her one to keep the babe warm.

Well, no one was gonna want this old stuff. I took it all outside and tipped it onto the pile of broken furniture and other things nobody'd want. Made a great bonfire.

So, that's it, Father O'Brien, whether I make it out of this hospital bed or not. But tell me, did I do wrong? Did I do enough?