

An Australian Christmas Story

When my Nan was sixteen she lived in Ngambie in Central Victoria with her father and sister and brothers. Her mother died when she was quite young, I don't think she truly ever got over it. Her father was the publican at the Lakes Hotel, and she was a barmaid and one of his best workers. My Nan always maintained that her sister Ada was too busy preening herself to be of much value. As well as working in the pub she still attended the local high school and also had to help mind her younger brothers. But my Nan had dreams of leaving the Pub and becoming a nurse in Melbourne. As a step in this direction she used to volunteer her services at the local bush hospital, and on this particular Christmas Eve she had been asked to work the evening shift.

But my Grandfather didn't really approve of this because he would be losing his best worker and on the busiest night of the year.

Of course my Nan realised this and knowing her father to be sometimes a very difficult man she waited for the right moment to let him know she was off to the hospital. Vera was quite cagey about it and she knew just the right moment to tell him. It was closing time and Henry Stevens was getting ready to draw the winning ticket to see who had won the giant Christmas stocking that the pub was raffling.

Times were tough and everyone in the pub would be glad to be able to bolster their own Christmas offerings. Just as he was pulling the winning ticket from the old barrel she called out to him,

'I'm off to the hospital now.'

He still managed to curse under his breath as she headed off, 'I don't know what's wrong with being a barmaid.' 'Oh stop your grizzling old man Steven's, them nurses do a great job.'

It was Snowy Jackson, a well-known Ngambie identity sitting in his regular spot at the end of the bar. Everyone knew that Snowy had a soft spot for Trilly because his only living relative was a sister who'd been a nurse in the NT for over twenty years.

So my Nan managed to slip out just as several regulars headed out to a back room for further drinking, as was the custom of the time. Nan told me even Jack Powell the local copper was there that night.

My Nan arrived at the hospital amid a flurry of nurses changing shifts. There was a festive feeling in the air. The local church choir had arrived to sing Christmas carols out under the huge Moreton Bay Fig. The children settled down quickly lulled to sleep by the choir. Considering where some of them had come from it must have seemed like the heavenly hosts themselves. My grandmother, a determined, enthusiastic 16-year-old checked the patient list, it surprised her to find there was seven children in hospital that night. "And on Christmas Eve." She thought out loud. She recognised most of the names When all the activities were over and the children had finally fallen asleep Vera made her rounds to check that they were all tucked in It was then that she noticed the pillowcases at the end of each bed. Some families had left a few gifts for their children but they were sadly deflated. My Nan knew most of these kids and she could hardly bear to think of their despondent little faces as they dived to the ends of their beds in the morning. My grandmother headed off to find the matron

and when she found her she splurged out. 'Oh Matron, it's terrible there's no presents for the children.'

Being an eminently sensible countrywoman the matron immediately dispatched Vera to the kitchen, the storerooms, and the staff to find anything that might be of slight interest to a child on Christmas morning. Vera and two others sat in the nurses station wrapped some biscuits and fruit and were now fashioning peg dolls. They found an unopened packet in a storeroom. Finally they distributed their efforts across the pillowcases. But still they hung sad and limp. Tril thought longingly of the Christmas stocking at the pub. Which lucky family would spill its contents over their lounge room floor the next morning? If only she could have just a few things.....

As my Nan sat there contemplating, the pad of small feet interrupted her thoughts. Vera looked up to see little Esther Johns rubbing her eyes. Vera scooped her up and sat her on her knee. 'Darling what's the matter.' She asked the little girl. 'Has he been yet?' 'Who darling has who been?' 'Father Christmas, he'll find me at the hospital won't he sister?' She looked up at my Nan with bluey , green eyes that sparkled like opals. My Nan reckons her heart nearly broke, Esther being from a poor farming family had the saddest pillowcase of all.

Tril thought to herself that she'd ride home and find a few things under her tree.

'No darling,' she said truthfully. 'He doesn't come unless everyone's asleep. Come on, off to the toilet and back to bed.'

Just at that moment there was a loud pounding at the front door. The other nurses sprang into action. Who would it be at 2.00 am in the morning? A friendly drunk needing a cuppa, or maybe more exciting a Christmas baby

Sister Newton opened the door to find Snowy Jackson rolling and reveling from too much Christmas cheer. Snowy aptly named for his white mane and beard.

'Is Vera Stevens here? He enquired

Vera heard her name and passed the child along. She went over to Snowy. She heard singing behind him and looked out the door to see two of Snowy's mates holding the giant Christmas stocking from the pub.

'Vera you wouldn't believe it,' he hiccuped. 'Me Snowy Jackson, confirmed bachelor that I am won the bloomin' Christmas Stocking. I thought maybe some of the kids.'

Vera threw her arms around the old man. 'Snowy, you darling, you wonderful man - you don't know how badly we needed this. Oh this is wonderful, now it's really starting to feel like Christmas.

When my Nan had settled down a little and passed the stocking over to some others she walked down to Snowy and his mates. 'I'd like you all to come to the pub for Christmas lunch as my way of saying thanks. About two o'clock.'

Snowy looked at the other pair and nodded, 'we'd like that miss.'

Nan watched as the trio headed off down the track, 'Thanks Snowy, thanks heaps', she called after them.

And for the next half an hour on that crystal clear night Snowy and his mates could be heard singing carols as they made their way home.

Vera and the other nurses hugged each other with joy and then set to gleefully distributing the contents of the stocking. They also decided to send home presents for the brothers and sisters, the stocking had been so big. Between them they knew the name of every child and their siblings.

Tril said it was pretty hard to sit down and write her report that night she could hardly stop smiling. At first light she went on her final round of the children's ward. She found Esther sitting up with paper and presents all around her.

'Esther darling, it's so early,' said Nan

I know Sister; I couldn't sleep a wink, when I saw Father Christmas last night I could hardly wait till morning. But it was so dark I couldn't see I had to wait 'til now.

'You saw Father Christmas?'

'Yes, last night when you were talking to him in the hall,' said Esther

Instantly my Nan flashed on an image of Snowy Jackson standing at the front door. Snowy in his red flannel shirt and braces, with his flowing white hair and beard. Well yes it wouldn't be hard to take the old man for Santa Claus himself.

My Nan chuckled and said in all honesty,

'Yes darling it was Father Christmas.'