

The Road to King's Canyon

Tony had greeted the day with a dash out of the tent and unceremonious emptying of his stomach onto the red earth around our campsite, courtesy of some mysterious gastro gift from the shared bathrooms. While he rested in the shade, his skin pallid, the children and I upped camp and bravely loaded the 4WD, without his engineering precision.

The road to King's Canyon was a nightmare of planing across deep corrugations, in a moonscape of deep dust clouds pierced by glimpses of green and wrestling of the steering wheel. Sticky with stress and sweat, I gratefully pulled over in an empty clearing, declaring it lunchtime. Tony staggered from the car and lowered himself to the ground, pale faced.

The realisation that the boot - with all our food and water - wouldn't open highlighted our precariousness. From our hilltop location the land rippled starkly before me in ochre folds and gullies. We were utterly alone. My stomach flipped too, in sympathy with Tony. Four pairs of eyes looked solemnly at me.

"Ahh... slight problem," I announced, "The rough road has jiggled the food bags on to the boot latch and jammed it closed. We may be missing lunch and rationing the water in your drink bottles until tonight."

The kids - dirty, disheveled and starving - looked at each other then moved as one with the wordless communication of siblings.

Lucia posted a stick from the back seat through the cargo barrier grid towards a fridge bag handle, Joe did likewise through the one-inch openable window on the side of the boot towards another offending bag. Anna directed from outside the car and Nico, the smallest, climbed up to help Lucia, spare stick in hand.

I stood, momentarily redundant, and watched the graceful performance before me. They moved and flexed in unity with wrists twirling stick batons around and around. Gradually, inexorably, the fridge bag handles wrapped tighter and tighter, encasing their sticks like gymnasts' ribbons.

As one Lucia and Joe began pulling on their sticks, slowly inching the captured bags towards them. Anna kept testing the boot handle until the weight shifted just enough.

"Yes!" she declared as the boot swung open and the kids tumbled towards me.

Relegated once again to my mother role, I stepped quickly into action. In a short time, ingredients were sliced, wraps were filled and silence descended as we sat in a line staring out across the land's barren beauty. I thought again of the first people's incredible ability to forage their lunch without the convenience of salads and cured meats.

Our children sat peacefully in the red dirt, unaware of their own magnificence. They had acted with the innate confidence born of children grown on the land, flicking aside my defeat by the day's trials and revealing hitherto unsuspected strengths. The wind's hot force whipped their hair, but they sat in stillness, gazing as a distant eagle surfed the gusts high above this ancient place. In travelling this country, their truer selves walked free.