

## Paddington's Story – Part 9

First published 20<sup>th</sup> January 2013 on [www.suziehindmarshknights.com](http://www.suziehindmarshknights.com)

The trip from Oodnadatta seemed endless. I heard pet Sooz ask how much further and guessed by the creak and groan coming from her seat, she needed to stretch her legs. Pet Pete enlightened us by talking about our journey that day.

'Not much longer,' he said. 'We've travelled about one hundred and twenty ks, through the sandy desert and open gibber plains.'

'I hadn't noticed the gibber, I must have drifted off,' laughed Sooz. 'Did I miss anything?'

'The gibber is a large stony desert. So I guess you did.'

'No Sooz, you didn't miss a thing,' I was compelled to put her mind at rest. If there was one thing I'd learnt this trip was that one desert led to another and another and when there were no animals to make friends with or watch from my seat in the back, I, like Sooz, drifted in and out of sleep. Silence once more descended over my pets in the front, while Pete drove the Toyota into another valley, the scenery changed yet again and boredom finally took away my conscious state and my eyes closed in sleep.

'Here at last,' said Pete.



My eye lids flicked open and an oasis of trees and water shimmered before me.

'It's beautiful,' said Sooz

'Water and trees,' I yapped, waking instantly and pushing up to get a better view.

'We'll park up, unpack and have a lazy night by the campfire,' said Pete.

'Good idea,' replied Sooz. 'I'm bushed.'

'Aren't we going to explore?' I asked, but nobody answered, they were too busy making plans.

Sooz laid the blue plastic sheet on the ground, under a grove of eucalypt that hugged the edge of the Eringa waterhole, while Pete and grand Poo parked the vehicles either side of it. I knew what Sooz intended, and objected by bellowing out a high pitched bark when she plonked me in the middle of it. I didn't want to sit. I'd been sitting all day in the back of the Toyota. I wanted to run.

'Sooz, Sooz.' She didn't turn around, but carried on unpacking the back of the Toyota. *I'll try my forceful voice.* 'Soozzzzzz, Soozzzzzz,' the howl grabbed her attention and she turned to look at me.

'Paddington, be patient. Once I've unpacked the car I'll take you for a walk.'

Walk, I loved that word almost as much as food. 'I'm bored Sooz. I want to chase something.' Lola came into my mind. I hadn't thought of Lola for a few days and I wondered if she missed me. *Probably not.* Lola didn't like me, so why would she miss me?

Behind me, the waterhole sparkled under the late afternoon sun and in front of me, the dusty plain held no life. Beyond the plain the land rose and I could see the remains of a house and yards and fences. *Wow, a house to investigate.* I couldn't imagine anyone living in a house where there wasn't a roof. *It must be empty.*

'What's that?' I hadn't realised I'd spoken, while staring at the movement of something at the front of the house. It shimmered like an image in water. A memory flooded back from fifteen minutes before, when I'd led Sooz to the waterhole behind me. The perfect toilet spot drew me in that direction and there were trees and bushes for privacy.

'Sooz, turn around please.'

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She'd ignored me, staring instead at the far bank. I quickly dealt with nature and kicked a pile of dirt to cover it, before following her gaze. I too found myself mesmerised by the sight of trees growing down into the water – *eerie looking*, I thought. I dragged my eyes to the water directly below me and gazed into its depths. My heart leapt in my chest at the sight of a dog looking back at me.

'Ohoooooooooooo.' I leapt forward to say hello, but ended up doing a double somersault, backwards flip, when Sooz yanked on the lead and nearly strangled me.

'Paddington, it's your reflection, silly.'

'What's all the noise?' Pete joined us rolling a stone between his thumb and forefinger. He angled the stone into the water and it skimmed across the surface. I watched my image disappear when the water rippled.

Sooz laughed. 'He saw himself in the water and was about to jump in.'

'He could learn a lesson from the dog and bone story.'

'I think, he thought, he'd found a new friend,' she laughed.

'Come on, time to set up camp.' Pete put his arm around her shoulder, guiding us away from the waters edge and back to the vehicles. I didn't get the joke about the dog and bone. I filed it away to ask Lola when I got home.

I came back to the present and stared hard at the shimmer. It disappeared. Where did it go? It was another of those strange occurrences and there had been a few on the trip. I dismissed it, after all, it had been a long day and although I'd slept through most of it, the long journey left my head befuddled. I needed a run to clear away the cobwebs.

'Soozzzzzzzzzzzz.'

'For goodness sake, Paddington – Pete I'm taking puppy for a walk.'

'Sounds like a good idea. I'll come with you.'

'Me too,' said grand Moo.

'Might as well join you,' said grand Poo.

'Let's go then.' I yapped loudly. My pets needed a bomb under them – sometimes they were so slow.

Sooz clipped the lead to my collar and I took off at a sprint, leading the way across the plain to the rise. I wanted to check out the house.



'I believe this house is Kidman property now. Originally it belonged to the Treloar family. I'm not sure if the Kidman's ever lived here though.'

Good old Pete. He made it his job to know the history about the places we visited, so he could educate us. I'd learnt a lot on our trip because of Pete. I'd heard Sooz say he was our oracle, I wasn't sure what that meant but it sounded impressive.

'Looking at the state of it, I'd say it's been some years since anyone did,' said grand Moo.

'I read somewhere the place is haunted,' said Sooz.

'As in Ghosts?' grand Poo laughed. 'No such thing.'

'Ghosts! Sooz, what are ghosts?'

'Last time we were here, I'm sure I saw something,' continued Sooz ignoring me.

'You've an over active imagination,' said Pete.

'Believe what you like. I get a strong feeling of something...'

'... Okay enough. If you keep this up you won't sleep,' said Pete.

I listened to Sooz and Pete's discussion and wondered what it meant. *Ghosts, strange feelings*. I thought of the shimmer earlier.

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I pulled Sooz through the gaping hole that must have once held a door and we walked into a dilapidated room. It looked like it could have been the kitchen, but I wasn't sure. The chimney breast showed years of neglect, and the walls were full of holes and the floor long gone.

'Oh, sorry,' I said, colliding with a young girl and a medium sized dog. Dog, a dog, what's a dog doing here? 'Hello, I'm...'

'I know who you are, pup,' said the girl.

'Grrr...' said the dog. 'Can't you watch where you're walking?'

The temperature around where we stood dropped and I shivered. I noticed Sooz rub her hands over her arms. 'I'm sorry,' I took a step back from the dog. He didn't look happy at all. 'Are you here on holidays?'

'No, you've come into our home uninvited,' said the dog. 'Do you always enter a house without knocking?'

'There isn't a door.'

'That's not the point,' said the dog. 'This is our home.'

'But you can't live here. There's no roof or windows or bathroom or kitchen. There aren't any beds – it needs repairing.'

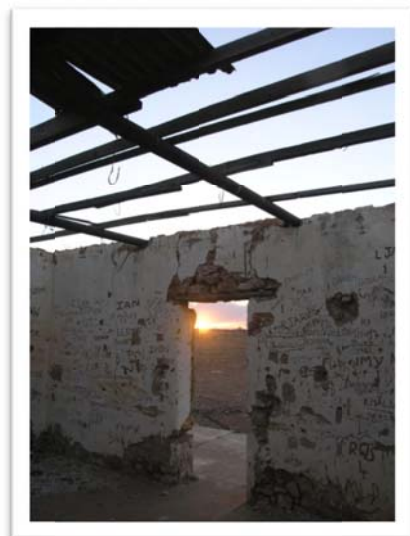
The girl put a finger to her lips. 'Shoosh little pup.'

I dropped my voice to a whisper. 'I'm sorry to have disturbed you. I didn't mean to intrude, but I thought we were the only ones here – I'm so excited to meet you.'

'You are a chatty little fellow, aren't you?' said the girl.

'Do you really live here?'

I watched the girl turn away and the dog went with her – through the wall.



I couldn't make sense of it. 'Sooz, where did the girl and dog go? Didn't you see?' I spun in a circle searching for them and put my nose against the wall, testing for a way through. *No way could anyone walk through that solid wall*, I thought.

Pulling on the lead, I led Sooz into the next room. Empty. I blinked my eyes. One minute they were here and the next – poof – gone.

'What's wrong, Paddington?' Sooz looked down at me and I didn't know what to say. *I must have dreamt it*. And so I sniffed the ground looking for their scent and sneezed when a particle of dust lodged in my nostril. *I'm definitively awake, and I can't pick up their scent and the room has warmed since they left. What does it mean?*

'Come on, let's check outside,' said Sooz.

She tugged on my lead and I reluctantly

followed her through the house to the back door.

Beyond the house I saw the girl and dog walking through the yards towards a grove of trees. 'Excuse me,' I howled. 'Don't go – wait for me.'

Rushing forward I yanked Sooz off her feet and she obediently followed me.

'What's the rush, Paddington? You're full of energy today.'

'Sooz I can't believe you can't see that girl – over there,' I pointed my nose in the general direction. 'Are you looking properly? You need your glasses on. She's wearing a long dress and a bow's tied around her neck and a funny hat covers most of her head and a braid hangs to her waist,' I took a breath. 'And the dog, he's sort of like those dogs that ride the backs of sheep, you know, the ones we've seen on the telly. Only his ribs are showing, and his ears are tattered like Fred's in Oodnadatta.' My words were lost on Sooz, they were leaving my mouth faster than she could understand them.

'Your pet can't see us,' the girl stood under the shade of a eucalypt tree, waving me closer. 'Only you can.'

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'Why? Sooz is a good pet. She will help you. Your dog looks hungry and Sooz feeds us all r – e – a – l – l – y well.'

She twittered like the blue wrens back home. 'We don't need food.'

'Everyone needs food. I love my food.'

'Yes, little pup, you look like you do.'

'How long have you lived here?' I changed the subject. The word food caused problems for some people and I didn't understand why.

'Umm, now let me see. I think my family moved here in the 1870s.'

I tried to remember the current year. 'It's 2007. Gosh, your family lived here a long time.'

'Yes. The Kidman family bought the property, but we remained. We frighten away unwanted visitors. We've made it our life's work.'

'How long have you done that for?' I didn't understand this strange girl and her strange clothes and speech.

'Grrr you ask a lot of question for one so young,' said the dog. 'In my day we knew our place.'

'But it's the only way to learn. My mother said...'

'It's okay. He's only a puppy,' said the girl.

'Paddington,' Sooz pulled on the lead. 'I think we need to head back to camp.'

'No Sooz. I'm talking.'

'It's dinner time.'

I turned to gaze at her when I heard that lovely word. 'Oh yes, my stomach's growling at me. 'Can I see you again?' I turned to the girl and dog but they'd vanished.

I reluctantly followed Sooz back to camp. The way the girl and dog kept disappearing bothered me and that Sooz couldn't see them – why couldn't she see them? Strange!

Back on the plastic sheet I waited, while Sooz prepared my dinner.



'Here you go puppy.'

I didn't know why Sooz had to belittle me by calling me puppy. 'My name's Paddington, Sooz, and I'm growing up. I'm not little anymore.'

She patted my head affectionately. 'Sit.'

I sat. This constant game I played just to get my dinner sometimes irked.

'Good boy. Here you go.'

She placed my bowl in front of me. 'Yum, thanks Sooz.' I gobbled down dinner in seconds and looked up in the hope there might be more.

'Come on, Paddington. I'll take you for a toilet stop, before we eat.'

Grand Moo clipped my lead onto my collar, and under a starry sky, I led her away from the river and towards the rise and the house. I didn't need a toilet stop, but got the urge when the pungent smell of a cowpat drifted my way.

'Oh no you don't!' grand Moo pulled me back at the very moment I lunged forward to throw myself into it. Sometimes, I got this urge to roll in lovely perfumed cowpats and fox poo and my pets didn't understand why.

Damn, I would have smelt lovely for Sooz, if I could have rolled. I continued walking across the plain hoping to find another one.

'That's far enough Paddington. We're not walking up there in the dark.'

'Please, grand Moo?' I wanted to see the girl and dog again.

'No Paddington.' She yanked the lead and pulled me to a stop.



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'But grand Moo, there's a girl and dog who live at the house. They won't mind if we visit. They've lived here a long time.' I told her everything I knew, but she wouldn't have it. I should have asked Pete or Poo to take me for a walk. They'd have understood.

'Hello little pup. You should be tucked up in bed.'

The girl stood a short distance away and the dog sat by her side.

'Hello,' I smiled at them. 'Did I tell you my name's...?'

'... Paddington,' finished the girl. 'I know all about you.'

I didn't understand how she could know, unless she'd overheard my pets using my name. 'How do you know about me?'

'I've heard it said you're the first Bearded Collie to travel through the outback. That's some accomplishment.'

'Yes, well my pets brought me along. They needed me to look after them and I had a swollen ankle. But it's okay now because I've rested it. And we have lots more places to visit...'

'... Paddington, you're full of yourself,' said the dog.

The dog sounded grumpy. 'Can I ask what your names are?'

'I'm Alice and this is Red.'

'Alice, Red – would you like to come to my camp and have dinner?'

'... No, little man. I told you we don't eat,' said Alice.

I found the no eating issue hard to understand. 'But why? If you don't eat you'll die. My mother, used to tell my brothers and sisters and me, we had to eat up all our dinner, otherwise we'd not grow big and strong.'

The girl's laugh sounded like a rippling brook and the dog opened his mouth in a grin that reached his ears. 'I don't understand.' They were laughing at me. Why would they do that when I wanted to help them?

'It's okay Paddington. We know you're being kind and we don't mean to mock you. But, we died a long time ago.'

My mouth fell open at her words. 'But, you're standing in front of me. How can you say that?'

'Because what you see is an image of what we once were, we're no longer solid objects like you. Think of us a breath of air.'

'Is that how you moved through the wall, because you're lighter than air?'

'Yes something like,' replied Alice. 'It's been nice meeting you Paddington. I doubt we will cross paths again. Take care of your pets and remember to take time to look after Lady Lola when you return home and learn about the greatness of those who went before you. Ask Lola to tell you about Gromit.'

Gromit again! 'How do you know about him? Nobody will tell me about Gromit.'

'Lola will tell you if you ask her. We must go.'

A cold gust of air surrounded me and I remembered the coldness in the house. 'Alice, Red.' I called their names, but they'd gone.

I led grand Moo back to camp and went to Sooz. She picked me up and cuddled me against her chest. I buried my head into her neck and breathed in her perfume and her warmth. 'I love you Sooz.'

She kissed my head. 'I love you Paddington,' she said.

'Do you love me as much as Gromit?'

'He's a real smooch tonight,' said Pete.

'Don't disappear, Sooz – promise? Please.' My heart raced when I thought of Sooz disappearing from my life.

'What's the matter Paddington? It's been a big day for you. I think it's time for bed.'

Yes Sooz. Can I curl up with you?'

'Come on little man.'

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When we huddled down under the sleeping bag and I curled into Sooz side, I thought about Alice and Red. What had their lives been like? I had a million questions to ask them, but I didn't know if they would return before we left. *Perhaps it's for the best*, I thought closing my eyes and drifting into a world of ghosts and dogs.

