

Bindoon

Sam Elkin

Over the din of my classmates playing Uno in our first class one morning, I caught an announcement about the City Kids Salinity program, where we could go on rural exchange for a term to learn about Western Australia's growing salinity crisis. I knew nothing about Western Australia's salinity crisis or life in the country, but things were bad at home and anywhere sounded better.

My step brother Daniel had recently suicided and my blended family, never particularly functional, was disintegrating. My stepmother just slept all day, and I'd go days without seeing her or my Dad, who treated me like an unwanted house guest that he occasionally bumped into. My stepsister Crystal spent her time partying, shoplifting strappy dresses and getting high for days to try and block out what'd happened. My brother Seth had moved into his girlfriend's parents' house to get away from us all.

After daydreaming about sleeping under the stars in a swag with a trusty cattle dog by my side, I went to speak to the academic counsellor about the City Kids program. She didn't think much of me since I'd been caught drunk in class at 10am after sculling the dregs of a bottle of vodka in an alleyway before school. Previously a good student, my grades had started to hit the skids. She looked down at me from her high-backed chair. 'Well, Sarah, I'm really not sure you'll fit in too well in the country, given your lifestyle choices.' My cheeks turned red. Was Mrs Waller openly referring to the rumours amongst my classmates that I was a lesbian?

I looked down and tried to suppress my embarrassment. 'I really want to go. I'll be good. I promise,' I said, picking at the frayed edges of my boys' army surplus jacket. 'Well, I doubt that we'll be able to place you at a family home, as it's usually boys who do these kinds of agricultural programs,' Mrs Waller replied. 'Wouldn't that be discrimination, though?' I asked. 'Like, you can't just not let me go because I'm a girl.' Mrs Waller looked at me. 'No one is discriminating against you, Sarah. I'm just trying to be realistic.' She sighed, and flicked through some pamphlets. 'There is an educational Catholic Agricultural College in Bindoon that's signed up to the City Kids program, perhaps they'll take you.' She handed me the booklet, which had images of

old-fashioned buildings, orange orchards, and smiling kids sheering sheep, feeding piglets and riding tractors. 'Great, looks nice. How can I sign up?' I asked.

When an enrolment package from the Education Department arrived at home a week later, my Dad immediately said yes, but then backtracked after he read about the \$500 parental contribution. 'But that's all my food and everything, and you wouldn't ever have to pick me up from the train station or buy me anything,' I said. He mulled over that. The next day after school I found the house empty, the signed forms and a cheque for \$500 on the kitchen table.

We left early on Saturday morning. Dad and I made our way up the way up the Tonkin Highway, passing through the newly cleared regional fringe suburbs. As I looked out at the huge signs offering cheap house and land packages, I wondered what had happened to all the animals that lived in the bush. After a while, things started to look a bit more like "the country", with huge, spiny grass trees, red clay dirt and stately gum trees dotted between yellow and brown paddocks.

The town of Bindoon was just a bakery, a petrol station and a cream-coloured town hall. I was keen to look around, but Dad didn't want to stop. We turned onto an unsealed, gravel road. We passed between two brown stone pillars with chunky white crosses on top that looked like chess pieces. We drove along the dusty road past olive orchards and paddocks until we spotted a huge white cross painted with a stark black and white silhouette of Jesus being condemned to death. I'd seen stuff like this in churches before, but never outside. We drove past the remaining crosses along the road as we continued down the long driveway. In the final scene, Jesus lying dead. I wondered if might not fit in here after all.

An imposing double-storey brick building emerged from the middle of the dry farmland, and an oasis of well-reticulated, rich green grass and some improbable-looking palm trees flapped around in the breeze in front of the school. It had verandahs on all sides, and white crosses mounted at the top of every available structure. The side of the building was full of staircases leading up to small, labyrinthine rooms.

We followed an internal road past scrubby bushland as we made our way towards the girls' dorm. I was relieved to find that it was a bit less scary looking than the rest of the school; just like a school camp hall.

A woman in a loose fleece emerged from a side room to greet us. 'I'm Kayleen, the house mother,' she said. 'The girls who have arrived are all out and about, but they'll be back before long. I'll show you to your room,' she said, gesturing for us to follow her up the wooden staircase to the second floor. Kayleen expertly dead-batted all of my Dad's efforts at conversation as she showed me to my sleeping quarters, with two single beds and a cupboard.

Dad soon decided that it was time for him to go, and I watched his car kick up a small storm of red dirt as he drove off. It felt strange being away from him for the first time. My room felt huge and empty. I hung up my clothes, unpacked my CD player and turned the radio on, relieved to find that I could still pick up Triple J from out here. I sang along to a new You Am I track before the midday news bulletin came on. It was dominated by the waterfront dispute, the GST and One Nation, who were contesting the federal election.

I woke up from a nap to footsteps on the front verandah, and pretty soon a group of girls spilled into my room. 'So, you're the city kid?' a girl with chestnut, brown hair asked. The four of them plopped themselves on the two single beds in my room and started peppering me with questions. It was a much warmer reception than newcomers got at my own school.

Vanessa was from Cunderdin, where her family were wheat farmers, and Amy was from another wheat farm in Dowerin. Kylie's family lived in Pinjarra, where her family bred horses and looked after horses belonging to rich people from Perth. I had only really been 'down south' to Margaret River and 'up north' to see the dolphins at Monkey Mia and I had no idea where any of these places were, but I nodded along. Vanessa had originally been at Santa Maria College, a much more affluent boarding school, but had gotten expelled for smoking pot in the toilets. 'So, I got sent here with all these deros!' she said, laughing.

'It must be way better living in Perth than the country,' Amy said. I told them about Mirabooka shops, which had a Toys 'R' Us and an Ice-Skating rink, and spent ages recounting nights drinking vodka mixed into raspberry Frozen Cokes out the front of the Whitford shops, bumming cigarettes off passersby. 'Well, there's definitely no booze here; only the Brothers are allowed to get tanked on all their church wine,' Vanessa said, laughing. They then ranked each Brother according to

how much each of them looked like an alcoholic. Brother Frank was the clear winner, with his bulbous red nose and burst veins.

‘So, have you heard about all the ghosts here at Bindoon?’ Vanessa asked. ‘No, that wasn’t in the brochure,’ I replied, expecting a laugh. ‘Oh yeah, seriously, there’s heaps of ghosts here,’ Amy said. ‘There’s lots of little dead boys who came here as slaves from England and then got raped by the Christian Brothers. Sometimes the Brothers just killed the kids and buried them. There’re bones under the buildings practically everywhere. If you don’t want the ghosts to haunt you, you’ve got to show them that you’re on their side,’ she said. ‘How do I show them that I’m on their side?’ I asked, nervous now. I knew it couldn’t be true, but they all seemed to believe it. ‘You have to steal the rosary beads from Brother Keaney’s grave, who was the worst of them all, and throw them in the river.’ ‘I can’t do that, I’d get expelled,’ I said. ‘You have to,’ they replied. They all looked at me intently. ‘Well, where is it?’ I asked. ‘Out the front of the school,’ Kylie said. ‘That’s why you have to sneak out at night to do it, otherwise you’ll get caught.’ ‘Shit, I don’t even have a torch or anything though,’ I said, nervously thinking about what I’d need to do to carry out the heist.

At that point, Amy broke into giggles, and then they all collapsed about laughing at me. ‘Is that all bullshit then?’ I asked. ‘Nah, it’s all totally true. But you’d be seriously fucked if they caught you though. I can’t believe you were almost going to do it!’ I smiled, and laughed along with them, relieved that I wasn’t really going to be pressured into vandalizing a grave on my first day. Even if it was a pedophile’s grave.

The girls left my room to get ready for dinner. The temperature dropped as evening set in, and I had to put on both of my jumpers before we walked down to the dining hall. The four of us kept warm by sliding along the gravel and throwing twigs at each other from the bushes along the way.

When we arrived in the quad outside the dining hall, the girls pointed out the huge bronze statue of Brother Keaney. His giant bronze hand was resting upon a small boy’s shoulder. ‘That’s him. It used to be out the front but the old men who got abused here kept complaining, so they hid it back here,’ Amy whispered.

The little bronze boy looked terrified. Or did I only think that because of what they'd told me, I wondered.

The dining room was full of old wooden dining tables surrounded by cheap plastic chairs. The metal wall heaters had been turned on full blast, and there was a steaming bain-marie and a huge stack of plates and cutlery. A few of the boys had arrived for the start of term already as well, and they were laughing and talking loudly about what they'd done on the holidays. I eavesdropped on their tales of escapades on quad bikes and family trips to rodeos. I had no idea there were even rodeos in Australia.

One of the Brothers came and sat at the head of our table to supervise. He was younger than the others, with big, wavy brown hair and a cropped beard, like someone from The Bee Gees. He introduced himself as Brother Byrne, and asked me and the other girls how our days had been. They all rushed to answer, clearly all smitten with him. A much older Brother with a bulbous nose, who I assumed must be Brother Frank, clinked a fork against a glass, and started to say a prayer. To my surprise, everyone put their heads down and closed their eyes, and followed along in the prayer. I looked around, expecting at least one of the girls to look at me and roll their eyes, but no one did.

There was a cacophony of chair scraping as the three front tables were permitted to go over to get their dinner of lamb with mashed potatoes and mint sauce. When it was our turn, I followed along with the others and got served lamb, despite having recently decided to become a vegetarian. I got the feeling this wouldn't go down well amongst these farming kids, and decided to just eat the lamb. It was really good.

The next day, the rest of the boarders arrived from all over the state, and the place started to feel full. A group of Aboriginal girls and one Filipino girl from Broome arrived on a minibus late on Sunday after a long journey, and I notice the frosty reception they received from Kayleen, the house mother. She directed them to two rooms at the furthest end of the corridor, and the other girls barely said hello to them. I was curious about them, but I didn't go down to their rooms to introduce myself, afraid to break the unspoken social rules of the dormitory,

We started school the next day. I was really surprised by how basic the classes were, and that it was more like the stuff we learnt in Year 7 than what I'd been learning. Many of my classmates couldn't even write more than a few sentences, and their spelling was terrible. At lunchtime, I saw heaps of kids lining up out the front of the principal's office. I asked Amy what they were doing. 'Oh, they are all lining up for their dexies. Half the school is on them,' she said. 'Heaps of the boys have been expelled from other schools for behavioural issues, and then got diagnosed as ADD.' 'We should break in one night and steal the bottle and have a party!' Vanessa said, before getting in the line herself for her daily dose.

At the end of the day, we had to get changed out of our school uniforms and into our farm gear. When I emerged from the change room in blue jeans, a broad-brimmed hat and a blue canvas work shirt, I felt like I was playacting in a western. One of the teachers read out a list of which area of the farm we were assigned to for practical agriculture duty. I was assigned to sheep duty with Brother Thornton. Six of us reported to his banged-up Toyota Hilux. He was in his late sixties, with a big belly and fuzzy white hair. I went up to pat his kelpie, who seemed surprised at the attention. 'Jump in the back, kids,' Brother Thornton said, and I followed the rest of the kids as they climbed up in the tray of the Ute.

He drove us round to a grain bin, where one of the boys arranged for the grain to be poured into the back of the Ute. From there, we drove off towards a sheep paddock to feed the sheep. 'Don't sheep just eat grass?' I asked one of the kids. 'Yeah, but look around you. Can't see much grass this year, can ya?'

I laughed as we went over various bumps in the road while standing in the back of the Ute. When we got to the edge of a paddock, Brother Thornton told me to jump out and open the fence. As I jumped back in and we took off, grain trailing onto the ground behind us for the sheep to eat, I felt a massive sense of achievement for the tiny part I'd played in providing care to the flock. I loved the feeling of the wind through my hair as we bumped along to the next paddock.

Over the next few weeks, I did the rounds of the farm. I worked in the cattle sheds with Brother Kelly, the chicken sheds with Brother Byrne, and stacking hay bales for Brother O'Malley. Hay baling was by far the hardest, and my feet stung as the hay managed to find its way through my socks and poke into my ankles.

I learnt nothing new in our classes, other than how to correct my classmates' spelling mistakes without them thinking I was making fun of them. On the weekends, we'd attend Saturday night Mass, which was presided over by an aggressive priest, who even the Brothers seemed exasperated by. After that, the Saturday night Tuck-shop opened, the sole opportunity for kids to buy lollies and Cokes for the week.

I settled into the rhythm of life on the farm, and was the first to put my hand up for extra duties, as I didn't want to be seen as a pampered city kid. Sometimes on the weekends, men would turn up unannounced at the school, and wander around the school grounds. They had a washed-out look on their faces. 'Are they the ghosts you were talking about?' I asked Kylie, trying to make light of things. 'They're the sexual abuse victims,' Kylie told me quietly. 'They come here all the time because they can't get over what happened to them. One of them calls in a bomb threat every year on the school Foundation Day, so we get to hang out on the lawn all day.'

A few days before I was due to leave Bindoon, one of the teachers remembered that I was meant to be learning about salinity, so I was directed to hastily complete some worksheets that they printed out from an Education Department workbook. Some saplings were ordered, and a plan was made to plant them in the company of someone from the government and a photographer from the local paper. I got to ride on one of the large tractors for the first time, as the principal took me and the government representative on a tour. With thirty saplings now planted, my land-saving project was apparently complete.

When my Dad picked me up, I told him we needed to stop at the local servo so that I could pick up a copy of the *Northern Times*. Out the front, I saw a stack of papers with a picture of me smiling in my broad-brimmed hat under the title "City Kid Gives Back". I looked relaxed and happy, a whole different person to the one who came up here just ten weeks ago. When I got back into the car, I told Dad I didn't want to go back home after all.

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