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Acknowledgement

This story was written by Dr Barry Chant, Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. It can be found on www.barrychant.com. Dr Chant is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the founding president of Tabor College, Australia. He is married (to Vanessa) and they have three adult children and twelve grand-children.

For further information and other writings by Dr Chant visit www.barrychant.com.

Barry Chant

Snug as a Rug in a Bug

It had been a bitterly cold night. I was weary and stiff. I wiped the condensation from the car window and looked out to see two grey kangaroos feeding quietly just a few metres away.

Vanessa opened her eyes slightly and closed them again, tight. She blinked a couple of times and eventually sat up straight, shielding her eyes against the light with her hand.

‘What time is it?’ she asked drowsily.

We had been married about a year. Young, enthusiastic, full of life and hope, we were beginning our quest to change the world.

A few weeks before our wedding day, I had graduated from Teachers’ College. My first appointment was to the High School at Murray Bridge, a country town some eighty kilometres from Adelaide, South Australia, where we lived.

We had not been there long when a call came from a little church in Pinnaroo, another 180 kilometres further east, in the Mallee. They had no pastor, had heard of our arrival in Murray Bridge, and wondered if we could visit them occasionally to preach the Word.

It was an invitation too enticing to be resisted. But there was a major hurdle to overcome. We had no car. We said ‘Yes’ anyway and arranged to go. Phil, a fellow-teacher, offered to drive us in his little green Austin car and we set off eagerly one Saturday afternoon.

That night about twenty people gathered in a hired hall. The building was normally used as a kindergarten. There were gum-nut babies painted all over the front of it. Inside, the floor creaked and there were children’s pictures and posters on the walls. The piano needed tuning and the chairs were tortuous. But we had a meeting.

We sang the old songs and I preached the best I knew how. Looking back, I shake my head with despair as I realise how immature my preaching was and how little I really

knew of life, of people and even of God. I console myself by believing that somehow God filtered those messages to make them meaningful.

We stayed overnight and next morning held another service before setting off for the two-hour journey home.

Soon we were committed to a fortnightly visit. We scraped together a few dollars and made a down-payment on a Volkswagen car. We even had to borrow part of the deposit. Our Vee Dub was a kind of chartreuse colour, in the classic ‘beetle’ or ‘bug’ shape of those days.

By this time, we had learned that one of the Pinnaroo farmers had an empty shearer’s hut on his property that we were free to use. Not wanting to upset other people’s families by taking over their children’s beds, we opted to stay in the cabin. It was basic, but liveable. It meant we had to take food supplies with us and provide our own bedding, but we didn’t mind. We had a key and we didn’t need to notify anyone of our coming.

The farm was a few kilometres out of town. Once we reached the main house, we had to follow a bush track that led a couple of kilometres further to the shack. Often there was no one at the homestead, as it was a sheep property that could be managed from a distance.

One night, as we drove to the cabin, all was going smoothly, as expected, when suddenly the track disappeared completely from view—which was not expected. We found ourselves skidding through deep, soft, wet uneven earth. Someone had ploughed the paddock, track and all. There had been rain that afternoon and the earth had turned to sticky mud. We were now trapped in the middle of it. The wheels began to spin and it was difficult to steer. I tried to accelerate but this only made things worse. The car slipped and slid like a drunk skater. We had to go slower. Eventually we stopped. There was no moon. Around us, everything was pitch black.

It was late. It was dark. It was cold. We couldn’t move.

‘What do we do now?’ I asked annoyed at our predicament.

‘Looks like we’ll have to sleep in the car,’ Vanessa suggested.

‘In the car? You won’t be able to do that,’ I answered. ‘You’ll be awake all night. You need a good bed before you can sleep.’ I paused and then wondered aloud, ‘Perhaps we could walk to the hut?’

‘Through this mud? Carrying everything?’ she replied. ‘I don’t think so. And where is it, anyway? You can’t see a thing out there. I think I’d rather stay in the car, even if I don’t sleep.’

There was nothing for it but to settle down and wait for morning. VW Beetles are neat and compact. They are not designed for sleeping. It was impossible to stretch out or even to hug one another. We twisted and turned. We struggled to tuck our bedding around us to keep warm. We tried to find comfortable positions without dislocating our necks. It was a long night. Finally morning came, and here we were, stiff and aching, tired and weary, with a church service to conduct in a couple of hours’ time.

Vanessa cleared a spot on the front window and looked ahead. In the light of day, our situation did not look so bad. The soil had dried a fraction. It still clung fiercely to the tyres but it had firmed.

‘Oh, don’t tell me,’ she lamented with a sigh. ‘Look, we are only a few metres from the next paddock. We almost made it last night.’

She was right. Just ahead of us was a well-grassed block of land with a well-marked track running across it. Maybe we didn’t need to spend all night in the car after all. I thought mournfully of what a warm bed would have been like. I started the motor and tried to ease the car forward. It moved slowly. Gradually we slithered our way to the fence, and into the next paddock. We yelled with delight as we drove easily to the shack where we able to make breakfast, to clean up and to prepare ourselves for the day.

Finally, it was time to leave. We packed up, said a prayer, locked the cabin and clambered into the car. We decided our only hope was to follow the tracks we had left the night before. At least we could see them now. There were some anxious moments, but by and large we made it without incident.

We were young, we were flexible. Before long we were regarding the whole episode as an exciting adventure, a story worth telling to our friends.

I would never choose to sleep in a Volkswagen again. Once was enough. On the other hand, there was something special about that one cold, dark night bogged in a paddock in the remote, sparse Mallee country of wide South Australia. It was hardly suffering for the gospel—on a scale of one to ten it was barely even a one. Compared to Paul’s shipwrecks and beatings and stonings and fastings, it was nothing.

But on the other hand, doing it for Jesus did give the experience a touch of divine grace. And when trouble comes, that does make a difference.

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