

Years 9 & 10

1st Place and Best Overall: Stella Veldman

Year 10, John Calvin Christian College

Charlie's Last Dance

Before I found that sheep, my day was going great. I was on my way to see Tilly after two long months, and we were going to get married in town the week after. I'd never met a sweeter girl. She didn't care that I only combed my hair twice a month. Her brothers, Banjo and Hamilton, were plenty of fun too. So I was really looking forward to getting back and having a good chat over a hot meal – it'd been a while since I'd had one of those, too.

I tied Duchess to a tree next to the water where I'd set up camp and built a fire for my tea. As it warmed, I began to properly settle for the first time in a while, drinking in the calming smells and sounds of the good old bush around me. I couldn't wait to see Tilly's face when I got to see her again. I hummed a little tune and imagined the two of us dancing together again. I was so relaxed that the sudden bleat from beside me almost sent me falling into the water!

I turned and saw a little sheep struggling in the dense thicket. It looked plenty good enough to keep, so I grabbed it with both hands and went to shove it into my tucker bag for dinner that night. But another noise made me stop in my tracks.

"Who do you think you are?" growled a voice.

Duchess pulled on her rope, giving a warning nicker, and I spun to see three troopers, four horses and a very angry station owner. Mr Paterson, in fact. Tilly's Dad. "We've been chasing that sheep for half an hour, son. Hand it over!" fumed the station master. Then his eyes widened, and I could tell he had just recognised me. "You!" he spat. I swallowed nervously, not daring to meet his eyes.

Now, I have a little explaining to do. You see, Tilly's mum is sweet and all, but her Dad doesn't care one bit for swagmen, not even one with his own horse. (She's a beauty, by the way – the sweetest chestnut mare that ever lived, and she'll outrun any emu in the outback!) But horses aside, Mr Paterson didn't tolerate me courting his daughter. Absolutely hated my guts. Probably still does, mind you, but I'll get to that later.

As far as I recall, the first time he saw me and Tills together he almost exploded. His face went red and swollen like a ripening tomato, and he bellowed,

"If I ever catch you near my daughter again, you'll be hanging on that tree down yonder quick as you can blink!"

Me and Tills were like peas in a pod – you couldn't separate us that easy! We just met down at the billabong behind her house instead, reading stories to each other, and then dancing through the night under the stars. But I couldn't shake how scared her Dad made me feel.

So you can understand my panic when he jumped off his horse and stalked towards me. I edged towards the tree where Duchess was tied, thinking desperately. I couldn't outrun four men on horses, and by the time I could untie Duchess, Mr

Paterson would have his hands around my neck. I looked around frantically for something, *anything*, and spotted the billabong. Pretty hard to miss, really. And an idea hit me like a whack in the face with an old shoe.

As a kid, I'd win bets on holding my breath the longest as sure as my name is Charlie, so I figured I could jump into the billabong and hold my breath long enough to convince them I was dead. Then I could jump out a free man, and Tills and me could go and get married! We could live happily ever after and get our storybook ending.

"You won't get me alive!" I yelled as I jumped into the pool. The cold hit me right away, and my clothes stuck to my skin. Then I began drifting further down into the dark water, and a terrible feeling filled me from the tip toes up as I realised a mighty important fact; I had never learned to swim.

I'd sunk a few metres at least, and my lungs had already started burning. It was a whole lot harder to hold my breath underwater, and I struggled furiously to the surface with one thought fuelling me.

Tilly.

In just a few short seconds, my reflexes would take over and I would breathe, helplessly, and my lungs would drown. I'd never see her again.

I kicked desperately, but it was too late. My vision clouded and went dark.

Involuntarily, I sucked in a mouthful of water, realising that I'd let her down. We wouldn't get our happy ending after all. The water pulled me down into the darkness below.

Fragmented memories swirled before my eyes.

"If I ever catch you near my daughter again, you'll be hanging on that tree down yonder quick as you can blink!" yelled Tilly's Dad. I swallowed in frustration, but Tilly just smiled over her Dad's shoulder.

"Billabong, tonight," she mouthed, and I grinned inside. What a girl!

I read Tilly's latest letter out loud. She'd left it in our secret hole, inside the big coolibah by the billabong.

Mother and Father are in town this weekend, so it's safe to come to the homestead today. Dinner is at six o'clock.

Take your two-up spinner; Banjo is keen for a few rounds!

Forever yours,

Matilda

I swung onto Duchess's back.

"Can't say no, can I?" I said with a smile, urging her into a trot.

". . . they married in the church the very next day and lived happily ever after." Tilly smiled wistfully, looking up from the book in her lap. The moonlight reflecting off the

billabong lit up her face so perfectly I couldn't help but lean forward and kiss her on the cheek.

"I promise we'll have a perfect ending, Tills. Trust me."

She reached back and hugged me tight. "It's perfect just like this." she whispered. "I don't need anything else, just you and me. Forever." I smiled and hugged her even tighter.

I was standing on the veranda out the back of Tilly's house. Tilly sighed and took my hand in hers.

"Are you sure I can't come? Two months -is a long time, Charlie."

I grinned confidently back at her. "I'll be back before you know it! We'll dance together again, I promise."

I jumped into Duchess' saddle and rode into the bush, doffing my straw hat as I turned around to say goodbye a final time. Tilly blew a sad kiss in my direction and slipped into the house.

Tilly.

Tilly!

Everything snapped into focus. I felt light and practically weightless, and I floated to the surface grinning from ear to ear. I'd outwitted and out-breathed Mr Paterson, and I could dance with Tilly again just like I'd promised. I could hear that light laughter, feel her arm around my shoulder and her soft, smooth hands in mine.

Hands.

Pulling myself out of the water, I realised something was wrong. My own hands were a transparent, silvery blue.

"No," I whispered in shock. I hadn't out-breathed Mr Paterson, not even close. And now I was dead, just like he thought. A real, proper ghost. And Tilly – I could just imagine the expression on her face when she found out.

"Oh, Charlie," she'd say. "But you promised!"

And didn't I know it. What I'd do to sit with her again, her hand in mine as we watch the moon rise over the billabong. But that could never happen now.

Alone, I knelt by the water's edge and began to sing quietly, "Waltzing Matilda? Waltzing Matilda? Please come a-waltzing, Matilda, with me." I sat there, staring into the water, until long after the sun had set.

That night, a single figure slipped through the trees. Gravel crunched under her feet as she ran towards the billabong and fell on her knees at the shore.

"Charlie, how could you?" Tilly sobbed into her hands. My heart split in two at the thought that her despair was all my fault. Silent tears trickled down my ghostly features.

“Tills,” I called softly, not wanting to scare her.
She spun around, confused. “Charlie, don’t do this to me,” she cried.
I stepped into the moonlight, cringing as her eyes widened in fear.
“No, it’s okay, really,” I tried to calm her.
“Really? Is it truly you?” Tilly breathed, wiping tears from her cheeks.
I nodded and explained as best as I could everything that had happened. Her tears began to flow freely again, and she ran forward to wrap me in her arms. Her chest heaved up and down, and she whispered, “What am I going to do without you, Charlie?”
I took her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes.
“I don’t want you to cry any more tears for me. But first, can you dance with me?”
Tilly looked as if she were about to burst into tears again, so I took her hands in mine. “Just one last dance, Matilda?” She hesitated, then placed her hand on my arm. “I love you, Charlie,” she whispered. “That will never change.”
So we danced and twirled and ran and whirled all around the billabong, all night long.

The first rays of sunlight were peeking through the trees when we finally stopped. We collapsed into a heap on the ground, laughing and smiling and gasping for air. Then Tilly kissed my cheek and whispered, “Thank you for keeping your promise, Charlie. I’ll never forget you.” Like the moonlight, she slipped away.
“Me either,” I smiled.

Now, there’s a fair chance you’ve heard my story before, just with bits missing. Andrew ‘Banjo’ Paterson, Tilly’s older brother, knew some parts, and made up the rest.

Everything else . . . well. That’s just for Tilly and me.