

Julie Lewis

DRY SEASON

THE BUT-BUT-BUT of the engine continued all night. More forceful than a two-stroke, it impinged on the threshold of consciousness to a maddening degree. Occasionally stronger concentration blotted it out. But not for long. Marg Patching threw back the damp sheet and lay for a moment, the heavy still air pressing on her like some physical thing, intolerably. Across the caravan the other bed was undisturbed, still empty. Marg Patching levered herself onto one elbow to peer at the distant glowing figures on the clock. Nearly three! And still not home. She tried to pin down what she felt. Not longing. Longing, like Bert, had long since ceased to be her bedfellow. Nor disgust. She didn't care enough to feel disgust. Irritation perhaps. And certainly resentment.

She swung her feet to the floor, her nightgown clinging to her in moist, damp folds. God! it was hot! She flicked a switch and the rhythmic beat of the engine was thrown into a brief spasm before its throb resumed. The light, in sympathy, flickered and died once or twice before revealing in its yellow glare the glint of chrome and stainless. For a brief moment she was back in the city, in the safe suburban box that had been her home. She tried to recapture the night sounds of the city. The swift start and stop of the milkman's ute, the soft slap-slop of his footsteps, the crash of the milk crates, the clink of bottles. The throaty roar of the incoming jet, the meaningless yelp of a nearby dog, the steady whine of a car far away, but driven too fast.

With swift familiarity born of habit, Marg Patching lit the gas under the kettle, prepared pot and cup and sat to await the kettle's boiling. Nearly six months they'd been here. Six months and not even TV to pass the time. Her fingers left five little pits in the dust on the ledge. Red dust. Always red dust. The kettle boiled and she made her tea. Its steaming well known fragrance helped put things into a more acceptable perspective. She could even think about the other night without it hurting quite so much. There'd been a crowd of them and they'd all had a few beers. Bert's laugh was louder than most and his jokes were hovering on the blue side. The plump blonde girl, convulsed by giggles plonked down beside Marg.

'He's a bomb, that Bert, isn't he?' she managed between splutters.

'Depends how often you've heard it before.' Marg's voice was flat.

'Go on,' persisted blonde hair. 'Where's your sense of humour?'