

CYCLONE SANTA

By

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and

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FADE IN:

EXT. OUTBACK AUSTRALIA - DAY

Kangaroos bounce across the dusty red desert.

Three camels laden with heavy packs plod forward against a cloudless summer-blue sky.

A distant sound of an engine splutters as a yellow 1939 Tiger Moth comes into view.

THREE DUSTY CAMEL DRIVERS shield their eyes from the sun and watch the noisy biplane pass overhead.

EXT. TIGER MOTH IN FLIGHT - DAY

The front of the Tiger Moth hosts a P.M.G. (Postmaster General's Department) logo. VH-AYE is painted on the rear of the fuselage.

A PILOT in flying goggles, squints against harsh sunlight, his face ruffled by the wind. His hands grip the controls of the vintage propeller-driven biplane. The engine splutters. The pilot leans over and looks down to...

EXT. OUTBACK AUSTRALIA - AERIAL VIEW - DAY

...a wide red-stained desert. A rural community comes into view.

EXT. OUTBACK ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY - DAY

The Tiger Moth heads for a makeshift landing strip. The engine splutters.

ABORIGINAL CHILDREN, scantily clothed, barefoot, run toward the landing strip. Some wave to the aircraft, others do flying impressions.

The Tiger Moth lands. The children keep a safe distance.

The pilot's feet thud against the dry earth. He wears a summer Santa top and red shorts edged with grubby white fur. A Santa hat pokes from his shorts' pocket and a white fake beard hangs around his neck. He tugs off the flying cap and goggles to reveal an unshaven weathered face.

Meet BEN AYERS a late-thirties bush pilot. To Ben, a Tiger Moth is man's best friend. The sky is his home, flying solo his bliss. Everything else gets in the way.

The children run to Ben, their excitement unbridled.

ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

Santa! Santa!

Some of the children jump up and down. A few braver souls rush right up to Ben and cling to his legs. Ben tries to shake the children off but they hang on like human barnacles.

BEN

Whoa there, I ain't Santa Claus.

A girl rips the Santa hat from Ben's pocket and waves it around.

ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

Santa! Santa!

Ben snatches the hat back. He lurches toward the children.

BEN

Get out of here. Shoo! Scram!

The children shriek, squeal, and scatter.

Ben reaches into the front cockpit and pulls out a red mail sack. He slings the sack over his shoulder.

ABORIGINAL GIRL (O.S.)

Presents!

The excited children swarm around Ben and grab at the sack.

BEN

Hey! Cut that out!

Ben loses his grip. The sack tumbles to the ground. The children reach in, grab and pull at the contents. Ben tries to stop them.

BEN (CONT'D)

No presents. Careful! Leave it!

Letters and a few parcels litter the ground. The disappointed children run away.

ABORIGINAL GIRL

Grumpy old fella.

BEN

Hey, who you calling old?

He steps back. CRACK! He lifts his foot to reveal a small parcel. Crushed. He picks it up. Frowns. This can't be good.

Ben notices an Aboriginal boy, JAM, 12, hovering near the biplane. The boy is tall, lanky, with messy brown hair. He wears shorts, nothing else. Jam runs away.

EXT. DARWIN CITY STREET - DAY

Legend: Darwin, Christmas Eve, 1974

The sky over Darwin is heavily overcast with low clouds. It's the wet season -- high humidity, monsoonal rains and storms.

A large Christmas tree stands in the centre of a shopping district. Darwin is at the height of seasonal celebrations. The shops are decorated, festive, and busy with last minute SHOPPERS.

People hurry along the street, many laden with shopping.

A sudden shower erupts. Everyone ducks for cover.

EXT. MITCHELL NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Clouds heavy and low. Strong rain squalls and wind gusts blow in and around a street of fibro-clad houses with galvanized iron roofs. Each house is built on steel stilts with stairs leading to front and back porches.

Christmas decorations are at the mercy of the elements, plucked at by the wind.

A large, tin model of Santa Claus in his sleigh blows along the street.

EXT. MITCHELL HOUSE - DAY

A large gum tree towers over the pavement and front lawn of a fibro-clad house. The side boundaries are delineated by galvanized iron fencing.

A large front window is adorned with frosted festive shapes. Rain spatters against the glass.

INT. MITCHELL HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - DAY

Wind and rain rattle and spatter the front window with the frosted festive shapes.

A decorated Christmas tree, with presents around the tub, takes up one corner of the room.

Next to the tree, two children sit on the floor, playing. LUCY, 11, long brown hair, big blue eyes, wears a short summer dress. She'll be a beauty when she outgrows her tomboy years. MIKEY, 6, is a pint-size version of his favorite superhero Commander Australia, dressed in a yellow suit, green mask, and green cape. Lucy's Australian Terrier dog, FOXY, lays on the floor with them.

JOE MITCHELL is a mid-thirties, unemployed electrician turned house-husband. His manhood is being challenged. He sits in a chair, dressed casually in shorts and a T-shirt, staring at a note-pad on which he's written two business names: Joe's Electrical Services and Mitchell Electrical Maintenance.

Mikey picks up the presents and shakes them at his ear. Foxy sniffs at them as he puts each one down.

Joe glances at Mikey.

JOE

Wait until tomorrow, Mikey.

MIKEY

Can't I open one now? Just one?
Pleeeeeeaaase!

JOE

Tomorrow.

Mikey's face scrunches up in disappointment.

MIKEY

(to Lucy)

I asked Santa for a Commander
Australia game.

LUCY

I know.

Mikey peels back the wrapping paper and sneaks a peak at one of the presents. He screws up his nose. Lucy snatches the present from him.

LUCY (CONT'D)

It's not yours.

MIKEY
I don't like soap.

LUCY
(defensive)
It's special soap for shaving.

MIKEY
Yuck!

Lucy smooths the wrapping. The gift tag, in her own handwriting, says "Uncle Ben".

EXT. OUTBACK COMMUNITY SHOP - DAY

Cotton balls are scattered on the ground to look like snow and the windows are frosted with snowflakes. This is the last place on Earth you'd expect a "white" Christmas.

INT. OUTBACK COMMUNITY SHOP - DAY

The owner, LES, looks out the window. He's an Aboriginal man in his sixties, a good samaritan from way back. The interior of the shop is festive with an assortment of childish, homemade decorations.

Ben enters and approaches the counter. He drops the sack on top of a small pile of newspapers. He doesn't notice the headline: "Cyclone Tracy To Miss Darwin".

Les returns to the counter.

LES
Afternoon, Santa.

BEN
Give it a rest, Les.

LES
The kids are excited, that's all.

BEN
Lot of fuss about nothing.

LES
Bet you were the same at their age.

BEN
Nope. I had more sense.

INT. OUTBACK COMMUNITY SHOP - LATER

Ben stands at a public payphone, holding a homemade invitation written and decorated by a childish hand. We recognize the handwriting as Lucy's.

LUCY (V.O.)
 Uncle Ben, you're invited to
 Christmas lunch at the Mitchell
 home from 12.30 PM. Please come. We
 miss you. Love Lucy.

Scrawled on the invitation in Ben's handwriting is a telephone number: 089 555138. He hesitates. Then he picks up the receiver and dials the number.

INT. MITCHELL HOUSE/KITCHEN - DAY

A 1960's kitchen, comfortable and lived in. Above the sink is a row of louver windows. A large table is covered with a festive tablecloth. A wall-mounted telephone rings.

Lucy runs to the phone and answers...

LUCY
 (into the phone)
 Hello?

Silence.

LUCY (CONT'D)
 (into the phone)
 Hello?

INT. OUTBACK COMMUNITY SHOP - DAY

Ben clutches the phone and wrestles with his demons.

EXT. MITCHELL HOUSE - DAY - FLASHBACK

Ben hurries across the front lawn, his jaw clenched, his eyes ablaze, his hands balled into fists.

YOUNG LUCY, 5, tinsel draped around her neck, races after him. Tears run down her cheeks.

YOUNG LUCY
 Don't go. Uncle Ben. Please.

INT. OUTBACK COMMUNITY SHOP - DAY - PRESENT

Ben hangs up the phone. He crumples the invitation, tosses it into a bin, and walks away -- cool, calm, the lone wolf.

INT. MITCHELL HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - DAY

Joe glances at Lucy as she enters.

JOE
Who's on the phone?

LUCY
They hung up.

She flops on the floor next to Mikey.

LUCY (CONT'D)
When's Grandpa getting here?

JOE
Soon, sweetie.

LUCY
And Uncle Ben?

JOE
Lucy--

LUCY
He might come.

Before Joe can set Lucy straight, Mikey leaps up and flies from the room in superhero fashion.

MIKEY
Zoookooom! Commander Australiaaa!
Eat my dust!

JOE
Keep an eye on the superkid, Luce.
And don't go outside!

EXT. DARWIN HIGHWAY - DAY

ERIC AYERS, mid-sixties, rides a motor cycle. Dressed in helmet and leathers, he could be anybody.

Eric rounds a bend. A car, with surfboards on the roof rack, straddles the lane and veers into his path. He swerves to avoid the car, skids across the road off the bitumen.

There's an O/S CRASH! Then the sight of the mangled bike with a wheel spinning.

INT. OUTBACK COMMUNITY SHOP - DAY

Les and Jam stand on opposite sides of the counter, inspecting the damaged parcel, now revealed as broken bottles of insulin. Jam coughs -- he hasn't been well lately.

JAM

Looks like a dog's dinner.

INT. OUTBACK COMMUNITY SHOP - LATER

Jam and Les look at a glucose test strip, indicating Jam's blood sugar is...

LES

Too high.

Les holds up a syringe half full of insulin. A plate containing the broken bottles of insulin sits on the counter.

LES (CONT'D)

That's it. All I can save.

They both know it's not nearly enough.

EXT. TIGER MOTH - DAY

Ben, wrench in hand, works on the Tiger Moth's engine.

BEN

Come on, you bludger. We got to get going...

He notices children as they walk by with a dog.

BEN (CONT'D)

...back to the North Pole.

He laughs, then drops the wrench into the toolbox. He pulls the Santa hat from his shorts' pocket and mops his brow. The radio crackles.

BOSS

(over the radio)

Postmaster Ground to Victor Hotel
Alpha Yankee Echo. Over.

INT. TIGER MOTH COCKPIT - DAY

Ben talks into the radio microphone.

BEN

Victor Hotel Alpha Yankee Echo to
Ground, go ahead.

BOSS

(over the radio)

Ben, your dad had a motorbike
accident. He's been taken to Darwin
Hospital.

Ben listens, stony-faced.

BOSS (CONT'D)

(over the radio)

Ben, do you read me?

BEN

Roger. Victor Hotel Alpha Yankee
Echo. Out.

EXT. DARWIN HOSPITAL - DAY

A modest two-story white-washed building with an old
corrugated iron roof. The original hospital is being
renovated and extended. There are many temporary
prefabricated wards.

INT. DARWIN HOSPITAL/GROUND FLOOR - DAY

TONI MITCHELL, mid-thirties, talks on a public telephone. Her
crisp white uniform tells us that she's a nurse. She has a
lovely bedside manner, though you can't tell by the tone of
her telephone call.

TONI

I understand, Joe. They're ripping
people off.

A commotion behind Toni as a gurney rolls in, wheeled by
HOSPITAL STAFF. DOCTOR ROB, mid-twenties, is like a
superhero. Wearing the white doctor's coat, he's a person of
authority and wisdom. Without the white coat, he's invisible.

Doctor Rob tends to the patient, Eric Ayers. About all we can
see of Eric is his grey hair. His face is covered with an
oxygen mask.

TONI (CONT'D)
 How could you quit without talking
 to me? Look, I have to go.

She hangs up as...

...PEG, fifties, Senior Nurse, rushes past. Peg arrives to assist Doctor Rob. She's a tough cookie, whose seen it all, and often rubs people the wrong way.

DOCTOR ROB
 Eric Ayers. Motorbike accident.

Peg grabs Eric's paperwork and flicks through it.

PEG
 Oh, heavens, you're Toni's father.

INT. TIGER MOTH COCKPIT - DAY

Ben wears his flying cap and goggles. He flicks several switches and pushes the throttle. The engine fires up, purrs a healthy rhythm. He looks around to scan his surroundings...

EXT. OUTBACK ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY - DAY

...and sees Les running up to the biplane. Panting, Les yells over the engine.

LES
 Wait! We need help. A crook kid. A
 boy--

BEN
 I ain't the flying doctor.

The Tiger Moth slowly rolls forwards. Les races after it.

BEN (CONT'D)	LES
I'm running late.	He needs insulin. You broke...

An out of breath Les holds up the broken parcel, trying to attract Ben's attention, without success.

Ben taxis along the runway.

Les drops back to watch helplessly as the biplane takes off.

INT. MITCHELL HOUSE/MIKEY'S BEDROOM - DAY

Lucy pokes her head around the open door.

Commander Australia comics are scattered on the floor next to Mikey's bed. A poster of the superhero is stuck to a wall. There's no sign of Mikey.

LUCY

Mikey?

Lucy catches a glimpse of a green cape outside as it flashes past the rain-smattered window.

She dashes to the glass, but the green cape is gone.

LUCY (CONT'D)

He wouldn't. Oh, yes, he would.

She runs from the room.

EXT. MITCHELL HOUSE - DAY

On the back porch, Lucy tries to shelter from the rain while looking for Mikey.

LUCY

Mikey!

A wet Mikey is on the back lawn, near the garden shed. He holds out his cape, jumps up and down, billowed by the wind.

MIKEY

Able to soar through the skies
faster than a meteorite! Commander
Australiaaaa flies!

LUCY

Mikey, come here! Don't be stupid!

She gasps as...

...a gust of wind picks Mikey up and, though suspended for a few tantalizing seconds "in flight", he's thrown backwards against the garden shed. He screams.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Mikey!

Lucy stumbles down the rain-slicked stairs into the full force of a wind gust. She races to Mikey.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Mikey!

Mikey is sprawled on the ground, covered by his superhero cape. He's motionless. Lucy squats by his side.

LUCY (CONT'D)

Mikey. Are you all right?

He sits up, rubbing his elbow.

MIKEY

I flew. I flew. Did you see, Luce?

LUCY

You're not Commander Australia. You can't fly, dumbo.

Mikey clambers to his feet.

MIKEY

Did too.

Lucy pulls Mikey toward the house.

LUCY

It's lucky you weren't hurt.
Daddy's going to kill you.

INT. MITCHELL HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - DAY

Joe sees Lucy and Mikey enter. He takes in their damp appearances. Mikey has dirt and grass stuck to him, evidence of an "outdoor" mishap.

JOE

What have you done, Mikey?

MIKEY

Been flying, Daddy, like Commander Australia.

JOE

(to Lucy)

I told you not to go outside. Why don't you kids ever listen?

LUCY

It was Mikey, not me.

JOE

You were supposed to keep an eye on him.

MIKEY

It was during a storm just like this, Daddy, Commander Australia defeated the evil Yellowcake.

JOE

Commander Australia could've been killed, Mikey.

MIKEY

But he wasn't, Daddy.

JOE

Look, Mikey, Commander Australia isn't real.

MIKEY

Yeah, he is, like Santa.

JOE

Santa's not...

MIKEY

Not what, Daddy?

JOE

Not... Commander Australia, okay? He's real and Commander Australia is... is...

(exasperated beat)

Just do as you're told, Mikey.

INT. DARWIN HOSPITAL/SECOND FLOOR KID'S WARD - DAY

The decor is old-fashioned and unsophisticated by today's standards. Colorful murals and pictures brighten the walls between large louver windows. Christmas decorations hang from the ceiling. A tree, with presents beneath it, stands opposite the entrance.

Toni hurries to a patient in a bed. It's Eric. The cuts and bruises have been tended. His hands are bandaged. He looks out of place amongst the small children.

TONI

Oh, Dad. What have you done?

ERIC

Did you bring me some crayons?

TONI

Dad. They did me a favor. You're here so I can look after you.

ERIC

I don't need looking after.

Toni's expression tells him otherwise.

TONI

We're short of space, thanks to the renovations. Luckily a lot of patients have gone home for Christmas.

Doctor Rob approaches.

DOCTOR ROB

How are you feeling, Mr. Ayers?

ERIC

Like I've had a bust up with a motorbike.

DOCTOR ROB

You were lucky. Your EKG revealed a minor coronary thrombosis.

Eric has no idea what that means. He looks to Toni.

TONI

A blood clot that causes a heart attack.

DOCTOR ROB

Exasperated, no doubt, by your accident.

Alarmed, Eric is keen to change the subject.

ERIC

How's my bike?

TONI

I had them take it to the tip.

ERIC

You what?

He winces in pain. Toni sits in the chair next to the bed and takes his hand. Doctor Rob continues on his rounds.

TONI

Dad, you're going to have to make changes. Besides, the bike was in pieces.

Eric looks forlorn.

ERIC
It could've been fixed.

TONI
You'll have to start eating a
healthy diet.

ERIC
Darling, I haven't had a drink in
five long years. Don't go taking
away my steak, chips, and gravy.
I'd be better off dead.

INT. TIGER MOTH IN FLIGHT - DAY

The engine hums a regular rhythm. The white beard flies from around Ben's neck. He appears more relaxed -- at home in the sky in his vintage flying machine.

The radio crackles.

BOSS
(over the radio)
Ground to Victor Hotel Alpha Yankee
Echo. Come in, Ben.

Ben tenses, turns off the radio.

INT. MITCHELL HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - DAY

Lucy lays on the floor with Foxy, toy cups and plates set out in front of them. The TV is on in the background.

LUCY
(to Foxy)
Okay, we've got a place set for Mom
and Dad, Grandpa Eric, Uncle Ben,
you, and me. Have we forgotten
anyone?

Mikey noisily runs into the room in rejuvenated "Commander Australia" action mode. Joe follows, reading a washing machine operating manual.

JOE
Keep it down, Mikey.

Joe sits in a chair and flicks through the manual, frowning. Mikey does a superhero pose.

MIKEY

Never fear, Commander Australia is here!

JOE

(mind on the manual)
How's he at fixing washing machines?

Mikey gives an "ech" grimace.

MIKEY

Superheroes don't fix washing machines. That's girl's stuff. Lucy can do it.

LUCY

I don't have enough plates. Mikey, you can't have Christmas dinner.

MIKEY

I can too!

Mikey flops on the floor and grabs a plate. Lucy notices a news report on TV.

LUCY

Another cyclone, Daddy. Are we going to get ready?

MIKEY

Not another one.

JOE

It's just a warning.

MIKEY

It's Christmas.

JOE

Tis the season to be jolly.
(sings - Lucy and Mikey
join in)
Fa la la la la, la la la la.
Fa la la la la, la la la la.
Fa la la la la, la la la la.

Lucy notices the weather map on TV.

LUCY

It's heading this way, Daddy.

JOE

So did the last one. And it changed direction.

(as if he's had a great idea)

Hey, why don't we get milk and biscuits ready for Santa?

MIKEY

Commander Australia likes milk and biscuits too.

Mikey races to the kitchen. Lucy and Joe follow.

As they leave the room, we focus on the TV.

TV NEWSCASTER

...gusts to one hundred and fifty kilometers an hour are expected between Darwin and the Perron Islands tonight and tomorrow morning...

EXT. OUTBACK HOTEL - DAY

A lone ramshackle pub stands in the middle of the dusty red desert. Christmas lights reveal a patchy, multicolored frame and galvanized iron roof. A large plastic Santa on the roof tries to wave an arm but fails.

Flatbeds, pickup trucks, a FJ Holden, and other vehicles are parked around the pub, even a couple of reined horses.

Ben walks toward the hotel, a bundle of mail in one hand. Behind him, near a makeshift runway, is the Tiger Moth.

INT. OUTBACK HOTEL/FRONT BAR - DAY

"Step Into Christmas" plays on an old jukebox. A TV, the sound down, shows a festive program.

Ben enters and heads for the bar.

BUSHIE 1

Looky, if it ain't Santa Claus himself.

The crowd cheers. Ignoring them, Ben sits at the end of the bar, near a miniature Christmas tree decorated with tinsel and snow (cotton wool). He deposits the mail on the bar.

Behind the bar is SUE, an early thirties, attractive country girl, who knows how to handle herself. She's seen more drunks than cooked dinners. She approaches Ben, a smirk on her face.

SUE
Wow, you look--

BEN
Ridiculous.

SUE
Red.

She picks up the mail, without looking at it, and drops it behind the bar. She pours a shot of whiskey and places the glass in front of Ben.

SUE (CONT'D)
Your boss wants you to call him. He said it's urgent.

BEN
It's nothing.

Ben's expression tells Sue to drop the subject.

SUE
You know, I've always liked a man with whiskers but they're usually on his chin.

She moves away to serve another patron.

Ben picks up the whiskey.

INT. AYERS HOUSE/KITCHEN - DAY - FLASHBACK

A glass of whiskey is deposited on a table in front of YOUNG BEN, 11, who holds his grazed knee and winces in pain. Eric dips his fingers into the whiskey.

ERIC
This'll do the trick. Fixes everything.

He wipes the whiskey over Young Ben's injured knee. Young Ben grimaces.

YOUNG BEN
Ow!

Eric gives him a stern look.

ERIC

No crying, ya hear? Men don't cry.
Only sissies do. You don't want to
be a sissy.

Eric pushes the glass of whiskey across the table toward
Young Ben.

ERIC (CONT'D)

Drink up. It'll do you good.

Young Ben looks at the glass but doesn't touch it.

ERIC (CONT'D)

Do it! Or I'll give you something
to cry about.

Eric slams the table, right in front of Young Ben's face.

INT. OUTBACK HOTEL/FRONT BAR - DAY - PRESENT

Ben downs the whiskey in one gulp.

EXT. OUTBACK AUSTRALIA - NIGHT

The setting sun is hidden behind thick clouds. Light is
fading fast.

An old pickup truck races along a dirt track.

INT. PICKUP TRUCK - NIGHT

Les drives as fast as possible, clearly used to dirt roads.

Jam sits in the passenger seat. He's now dressed in shorts, T-
shirt, and sandals. He clutches a carton of juice.

The surrounding darkness is pitch black, pierced only by the
truck's high beam illuminating the dirt track.

JAM

A Tiger Moth can fly twelve
thousand feet. You think we'll fly
that high?

LES

Probably. How you feeling?

JAM

Thirsty.

LES
Drink your juice.

Jam sips the juice. The first signs of diabetic ketoacidosis are beginning to show. Jam is a ticking time bomb.

JAM
My stomach hurts.

LES
You gonna be sick?

Jam shakes his head.

INT. MITCHELL HOUSE/KITCHEN - NIGHT

Joe hangs up the phone. Lucy stands in the doorway.

LUCY
Was that Mommy?

Joe nods.

JOE
Grandpa Eric had a little accident.
He's okay but he's in hospital.

LUCY
He's still coming here?

JOE
Not today.

LUCY
Tomorrow?

JOE
I'm sorry, sweetie.

Upset, Lucy runs from the room.

INT. OUTBACK HOTEL/FRONT BAR - NIGHT

On the TV, a headline appears "Cyclone Tracy Heads for Darwin", followed by a map from the Darwin Tropical Cyclone Warning Center.

Everyone is in high spirits, enjoying the festive celebrations. No one notices the TV.