

# The Grass is Always Greener

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The earth rumbles, gentle and soft. From the warmth and safety of her burrow, it's almost comforting. But the second rumbling, coming from inside her own body, pushes the wombat to wake, and yawning, begin her nightly journey.

She stands in the last body-length of the tunnel, sniffing cautiously. The crisp autumn air is full of the usual scents. Fallen eucalypt leaves, decomposing slowly in the dirt; fungi creeping ever further into the base of the great trees, shaded from the sun by rich, wet ferns; her own scent, untouched from where she left it hours ago. Nothing unusual. Nothing dangerous. Poking her head out, she is greeted by a brilliant pink and orange sky, already starting to bleed violet. She clammers the last few paw-lengths and stands in the open, blinking sleepily at the sky. The rumbling is more subtle above ground, but now she can hear the intermittent roars that accompany it. Although the sounds are unsettling, they are easy to ignore as the beasts never veer from their predetermined path.

Slowly, luxuriously, she arches her back, and then stretches out each leg, one at a time. Next, she refreshes her scent, leaving fresh cubes next to the old ones. Finally feeling awake, she begins to amble through the dense undergrowth to where she knows a bounty of fresh grass awaits. As she walks, the wind rustles the leaves above, and a lyrebird sings nearby. It's pleasant, and she thinks for the first time in a while of her mother, who had taken her along this very track, many moons ago. They had chosen a nice spot for her very own burrow, and then her mother had gone her own way. She has been alone since then and will be until it is time for her to have joeys of her own, a time she can feel is drawing nearer.

It is properly dark now, the moon a softly glowing slither, surrounded by a few pale stars. As she grows closer, the air begins to smell sour, and the clamour grows louder with every step. Now the ground is shaking properly, the vibrations moving through her feet and into her body, drowning out the thumping of her own heart. She pauses in the last of the undergrowth, two body-lengths away from the dark track that splits the bush. On the other side, a little further up, she can just make out the decomposing body of what had once been a wallaby. It had almost made it across but perished in the last stretch. The side of the death-track is littered with bones and ghosts.

A bright light burns through the darkness, the sound grows unbearably loud, and something rushes by, too fast for her to see more than a blur. In its wake, it leaves an acidic smell that seems to burn her nose. Silence follows. She puts one paw gingerly on the track. It is hard and cold, like stone, only darker than any rock she has seen before. It is hard to pick up any new scents over that of the death-track itself. She listens hard but can't hear anything. She wants to go cautiously, sniffing the air and knowing the other side is safe before she dives into the scrub, but she knows there might not be time. She takes the first few tentative steps, then pauses, looking around. A low tremor sounds in the distance.

She starts to hurry.

The track is vibrating harder now.

She begins to run, as fast as she ever has.

The light is blinding, it's like the sun itself has come down from the sky and decided to chase her.

Her paws touch the hard gravel of the other side of the death-track just as the beast reaches the spot that she had been in only heartbeats before. Although she has never seen one veer from the track, she half expects it to turn and follow her, even as the terrible roar fades into the distance. Panting, she continues moving forward until her paws touch grass and her ferns brush her face. Then, she sits, back against a tree, shivering. She can hear another beast approaching, but the sound is softer now, further away. She has made it once again. Her body has not joined the others on the side of the death-track, a feast for the ravens when they wake. Slowly she resumes walking, and step by step, she begins to calm.

Ahead is a series of narrow, leafless trees, connected by thin, deceptively strong vines with sharp thorns. She finds her usual spot, and wriggles under this strange barrier, emerging in a field of uniformly short grass. A feast for a wombat, stretching as far as her eyes can see. A few sheep stand in the distance but despite their intimidating size, she isn't scared. She knows from experience they won't bother her. Bending her head, she takes a bite of the grass, then another, and another. Her terror, just minutes before has been, not forgotten, but diminished in her mind. It is hours until sunrise when she will have to return to her burrow. Hours before she will need to face the death-track again. The night is young and there is plentiful grass to graze at, softer and sweeter than any she has tasted on the other side.