The old ute skidded to a halt in a cloud of dust that took a minute to resettle on the sparsely spinifexed area that served as the car park for the railway station – in reality just a short platform with a small shelter and a faded sign announcing the destination as *Palparu*. It was the tallest feature on a flat, relentlessly dry land that stretched towards the horizon in all directions.
She left the motor running to keep the air-conditioning going and turned to her son in the passenger seat. ‘I hope we haven’t missed the train – it might have gone through already’ she said with a touch of anxiety.

‘Mum, the train hasn’t come yet. It’s always either on time or a bit late – it’s never early, and even if it was, it would wait for me. Stop worrying, they know I’ll be getting on here.’

‘It’s a Mother’s duty to worry you know’ she replied defensively. ‘Anyway, we may as well stay in the car where it’s cooler – it’s not like we won’t see the train coming.’

They fell into a seemingly comfortable silence with just the rumble of the motor and the faint hiss of the struggling air-con in the background, waiting for the train to appear.
She glanced at her watch for the third time in as many minutes and broke the silence.
‘You’ve packed everything you need?’ she asked.

‘Yes Mum.’

‘Let me know when you reach your Aunt Margaret’s place. She’ll be waiting for you at Central when you arrive.’

‘Yes Mum, I know. And yes, I’ve got a hanky in my pocket and clean undies on, and yes I’ll write once a week’ he replied, exasperated now.

‘I’m just making sure, ok?’

‘Yes Mum.’ This time with a smile on his face.

‘No regrets?’ she asked.

‘What, leaving the farm and heading to the City to go to Uni? Not at all really. Of course I’ll miss you and Dad and Sis, but I’ll come back home between semesters.’

’I’m sure you’ll do well – just keep your head down and study hard. Have some fun as well but don’t let it lead you astray. I don’t want you to reach my age worrying about *what ifs*and *if onlys*. Take your opportunities and run with them if that’s what you really want to do with your life’ she reflected.

‘It’s what I really want to do Mum. As much as I love the farm, it’s not for me. I want to be an engineer so I can design and make cool stuff. What about you – do you have any *what ifs* and *if onlys*?’ he asked.
She looked out the side window thinking about her response, trying to avoid answering. She nodded towards the faint silvery shimmer enlarging on the horizon.

‘Train’s coming. Better get your bags out of the back’ she said, killing the engine and opening the door.

The heat was stifling, the small shelter on the platform not offering much in the way of protection. They stood together in silence, not really knowing what to say to each other as the diesel loco and two carriages squealed to a stop at the station.
‘Well, this is it I guess’ she said, arms open wide to give her now adult son a goodbye hug. ‘Have a good trip – and don’t forget to ring me when you get to Aunt Margaret’s.’

She squeezed him close and whispered in his ear ‘Love you, son.’

‘Love you too Mum’ he replied.

She let him go and watched him throw his two suitcases onto the train before he climbed aboard, turning to wave to her, a big grin on his face.
The train slowly pulled away on its journey eastward carrying her only son on to another phase in his life, but she remained on the platform, in the heat, arms folded tightly across her chest, thinking of her own unspoken *what ifs* and *if onlys*.
She stayed there, motionless, until the train was just a silvery shimmer on the opposite horizon, the tears evaporating before they hit the platform.