

*Jimmy's Pearl*

Find Jimmy, and within a stone's throw you'll find Pearl—not snapping at his heels like a starved-crazy sheep dog, even if at times Jimmy feels it that way, but out to one side, keeping watch from the shadows like a small, skittish animal. Pearl has it bad for Jimmy Quokka. While she doesn't fully fathom it herself, she'd be down the courthouse in a flash to sign the marriage license papers if Jimmy would only give the word. But after three years together, with little to show for her troubles but the one thing she's keeping to herself, Pearl's beginning to wonder if she can ever trust that blackfella of hers to do the right thing. That's the truth of it. There's no telling the trouble Jimmy would find himself in without Pearl to keep him straight.

Look down through the night, past the film of red dust lining the louver windows, to where Pearl stands at the sink. The big boss, whitefella McAffey, pays Pearl thirty-five bucks a day to wash dishes for the shearing team and clean up after meals. Pearl figures it's good money for someone like herself. Meals and lodging thrown in, not a penny to spend. She reckons it says something that she and Jimmy are the only local Aborigines McAffey's hired these last three seasons. They're on a good wicket, she and Jimmy, even if Pearl has to kowtow to Coraleen, the shearers' cook. In the three seasons Pearl's worked at McAffey sheep farm, it's the first year the Maori shearing team have brought a woman cook to Western Australia, all the way from their home in New Zealand. Pearl won't deny Coraleen's good at her job, but just as she told Jimmy, a woman like Coraleen will only end up causing trouble among a mob of randy shearers, especially with a trigger-happy brother heading the team. Rosco would shear the balls off anyone who touched her.

Pearl doesn't think of herself in the way she thinks of Coraleen. Pearl's Jimmy's girl, and even if she weren't, the Maori boys would never look at her the way they look at Coraleen. The shearing team see Coraleen as one of their own, Polynesian, with skin not so dark that anyone would call her black, not so light she'd be mistaken for a whitefella. Pearl's seen the way the boys ogle Coraleen when they

sit down to dinner. It's the same way they look at a leg of roast lamb laid out on a platter in the center of the table, the skin golden brown, the meat inside tender and succulent. Pearl's waiting to see which of the boys is damn fool enough to grab the first slice.

Coraleen laps up every bit of attention the Maori shearers pay her. Privately, Pearl thinks Coraleen's been brought along so Rosco can keep an eye on his no-good sister. Same as Pearl needs to keep watch over Jimmy. Not even Mr. McAffey would argue the toss with the head shearer over who he chooses to bring on his team. All the head Cockie cares about is getting his sheep shorn quick and getting them shorn good. Besides, no one's going to mess with Rosco, the biggest, meanest Maori working the West Australian coast.

Pearl's at the kitchen counter now, washing evening dishes, rinsing plates and bowls in a bucket of hot water, stacking them on the wooden rack to dry. She's working hard at doing dishes, getting them done as quick as she can muster. Up the hill at the shed, she can hear the hootin' and hollerin' of the shearing party—an ice-cold keg of beer put on by Mr. McAffey as a thank you to the boys.

Take a closer look and you'll wonder why Pearl stands awkwardly, her angled body so small and waif-like it could easily be mistaken for an Aboriginal girl's or boy's, hardly that of a twenty-four year old woman feeling worn before her years. Pearl wants life with Jimmy to settle down. It has to. In six months, when she becomes a mother, she wants a home she can call her own. Pearl still has to find a way to break the news to Jimmy, but not tonight. Right now she has other problems on her mind.

Angled awkwardly as she is, Pearl catches a clear reflection in the louver windows. Not her own. Pearl glances, unnoticed, into the slatted pane of glass that returns a mirror image of the scene behind her back. Each time she rinses a plate, a knife, a spoon, a fork, she sneaks a look at Jimmy and Coraleen on the opposite side of the kitchen behind her line of vision. Pearl has good reason to worry.

Coraleen is everything that Pearl is not. Each one of the shearers working on Rosco's team registers, through a measure of desire, the difference between them. It's not that one is Maori and the other blackfella, Coraleen with a body that has the sheen of oiled wood. It's not that Pearl's features seem obscured by her charcoal black veneer, the same color that marks Jimmy and the rest of the indigenous people around these parts. It's not the difference in the

women's age, though Coraleen is well into her thirties with a ripeness that Pearl will never know or understand. It's nothing made apparent on the outside. It's something intangible, best described as the way Coraleen sees her place in the world, a self-assuredness in the way she holds herself proud like she's daring the boys to come closer for another look. When she gives Pearl that same surly look, it's more by way of warning: you'd better know what you're doing if you're going to mess with me.

In the heat of the kitchen, an inch away from Coraleen, Jimmy feels the Maori woman's presence as something he could reach out and touch. It's all he can do to stop himself sliding his hand across Coraleen's hair, just to say he's touched it. Her black mane hangs heavy to her waist as shiny as silk. Jimmy imagines it sliding across his body. Mostly it's her body Jimmy can't get past, every curve of it, an abundance that makes Pearl's thin frame look childlike and pitiful. It rattles him when he compares Pearl to Coraleen. Brings to mind how others look at him—the Maori shearers who bark their orders at him, the whitefellas from town who give him a wide berth. Whitefellas are the worst. They look at him like he's nothing better than a feral dog, not to be trusted. Perhaps that's why he's stuck with Pearl these last three years. When they're alone together she treats him like he's the biggest man in the world. He knows she's got their life together all mapped out in her head, waiting for him to hitch the knot.

Some days it makes him strong, the power Jimmy feels in knowing how bad he's needed. Those days he feels tough enough to take any amount of shit. Other days, Pearl's devotion drives him nuts, the way a yapping dog nips at your heels without a moment's rest. When Pearl suffocates him, he blames her for everything—the way he feels about her, about himself, the things they both lack. If Pearl could be something better, someone like Coraleen, she'd have the strength to hold Jimmy up when he needs holding up. Then he'd look the whitefellas straight in the eye and they'd have to look back. Jimmy knows he gives Pearl a hard time, but the way he figures it, what's he got to lose? Some days it's a game: see how bad he can treat Pearl before she snaps; see how much he can get away with before she'll stop coming back for more.

On a night like tonight, the finish of shearing season, the night before the Maori team drive down to Perth and fly back home to

New Zealand, Jimmy figures it'll be a long time before he again lays eyes on a body like Coraleen's. Perhaps because it's their last night together, perhaps because the desert heat's sending him stir-crazy, Jimmy sets to wondering at his chances.

Coraleen stands so near he can feel her breath warm on his neck. She wears a nylon blouse stretched over pendulous breasts, the top buttons loose. As she talks, Jimmy can't help staring at the swell of her breasts as they rise and fall. He looks across the kitchen to where Pearl rinses dishes in a bucket, her frizz of red-brown hair cropped to a cap. As he wonders at his prospects, Jimmy feels physical want bubble up inside, a want propelled as much by risk as it is by lust. He draws in Coraleen's perfume that hangs in the space between them, air heavy with the scent of jasmine. He whispers in her ear, murmurs something that has her smile and nod, something private that has her turn toward the door to leave, Jimmy following in her tracks.

Pearl spins in a half circle from the sink to face them, her hands dripping sudsy water onto the lino' floor. She snaps, "Where you think you're going, Jimmy?"

Pearl's face looks heavy as thunder. "Up to the keg," he says. "Where else?" He follows Coraleen out the door, head hung low.

Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough for Pearl. Good riddance to Coraleen and her brother Rosco and the rest of the damn-fool shearing team. Tomorrow it'll be just her and Jimmy again. Pearl scrubs the insides of the pots with a steel scourer flecked with soap. Her insides grow jittery knowing Jimmy's out there with Coraleen. It feels like half an hour before she cleans the last cast iron pan and hangs it on its hook above the stove. She dries her hands on a damp dish towel, takes the sealed packet lying on the window sill and stuffs the month's wages inside her shorts pocket.

Pearl understands a thing or two about whitefella bosses, at least the whitefellas with their heads screwed on the right way. McAffey's no fool. He knows it would have taken a local team of Western Australian shearers five weeks to shear the merinos the Maori boys got done in four. The big boss knows a damn good roustabout when he sees one, too. When McAffey drove by at dinner to hand out the wages and drop off the keg for a job well done, he shook Jimmy's hand hard, like he meant it. "Good work, Jimmy. Will we see you again next season?" That's McAffey's way, putting it to Jimmy like Jimmy has a choice. McAffey knows Jimmy needs the money. When

Jimmy nodded, Mr. McAffey handed over the two packets of wages, the bigger one for Jimmy: "Give us a call next spring, then. Pearl's welcome back as well."

Pearl switches off the lights and pulls the kitchen door closed behind her. These last four weeks at McAffey's farm, Pearl's spent her free time up at the shearing shed. McAffey called in each day for a bit and stood quiet in a corner. Pearl watched McAffey watch the boys. The big Cockie saw Jimmy gather up the fleeces and spread them on the sorting table for grading. He watched Jimmy swing the broom in a wide circle to round up pieces of loose wool. McAffey soaked it all in, Jimmy running over to a pen to gather up a fleece the moment one of the shearers yelled, "Over 'ere, Jimmy boy!" When Jimmy wants to, he can move like the wind.

Jimmy likes a party, but tonight he won't be drinking a drop from the keg. While he's learned to hide it for the most part, Jimmy's always had a short fuse. Pearl learned the hard way that too much drink turns him madder than a cut snake. But he's kept his promise to her since the last bad time. He hasn't touched the rocket fuel in over twelve months.

When he has the cash, Jimmy sticks to weed. He likes the mellow glow it gives, the feel of being and not being, of not caring where the next paid job will come from. When Jimmy's stoned he stops wishing for better things. As he leans on the porch rail beside Coraleen, drawing in her perfume, the smell of eucalyptus oil rising into vapor from the leaves of surrounding trees, the weed makes him float right up there above the branches. Laughter from inside the shearing shed drifts out through the screen door, across the porch and into the night. The cackling and whooping from Rosco and the other seven shearers—men who drink as hard as they work—sends Coraleen into trills of laughter. When she stretches back against the wooden railing, her breasts look round and firm. Her arm slides against his in a way that radiates want. Jimmy's in with a chance.

From where Pearl watches in the shadows of the branches, Jimmy stands with his back to Pearl. She can't tell if he's reaching up to slide his fingers inside the Maori woman's blouse. She can't tell what the hell he's doing. Coraleen tilts her head up to the moon and drags on the joint long and slow. The tip crackles red. Coraleen pouts her lips and blows a smoke ring right into Jimmy's face. Coraleen and Jimmy giggle like a pair of teenagers, half-stupid from the weed.

Pearl strides up the steps to the porch. She knows she's out of her depth with Coraleen but she's not putting up with this kind of bullshit.

"Why the big scowl, Miss Pearl?" Coraleen offers the joint to Pearl, the Maori woman's floral perfume sickly against the smell of weed. Pearl ignores it and Coraleen passes it to Jimmy. "Scared I might steal your man, hon'?"

Pearl stays silent, holding her ground, waiting for Jimmy to take a stand.

Jimmy grins like a fool. "Nobody's gonna steal Pearl's man." He says the right words, but his vacant gaze offers hollow comfort to Pearl. Jimmy doesn't know what the fuck he's saying; he's as high as a kite.

Pearl reaches for his hand. "Let's go inside, Jimmy."

She leads him through the screen door to the shearers in the shed, the eight men fixed around the cold keg like pigs at the swill bucket.

Rosco stands beside the keg, filling a plastic mug to the brim. Froth spills onto the wooden floor. Rosco holds out the mug. "Beer, Jimbo."

Jimmy shakes his head. That's when Rosco pushes it at him.

"No," Jimmy says.

"What's wrong with you, you bastard? Get a beer into you." Rosco presses the plastic mug against Jimmy's chest. Beer slides to the floor. Jimmy backs away, wiping beer from his yellow teeshirt.

"I'm not drinkin' tonight, Rosco."

Rosco takes a step forward, towering head and shoulders above Jimmy. "Take the fucking beer, you stupid coon." Rosco tips the mug until beer begins to drip onto Jimmy's feet. Jimmy, his hands in his pockets, doesn't move an inch. Rosco crushes the mug. "Fuck you, then." Beer splashes across the floorboards and stains them as dark as Jimmy's wet feet.

Rosco returns to the keg. He takes a new mug and grips it so hard that the plastic splits before it's a quarter full. "Jesus Fuck. Fuck!" He slings the broken mug across the floor. The boys grow quiet. They've all seen Rosco turn mean. The head shearer's every bit the warrior he's decorated to be on the outside. Farmers who hire the Maori team think Rosco's head shearer because he's the best and fastest. That's not the sum of it. Rosco's named himself head shearer

because he's twice the size of the other boys. There's rarely a dispute in the team that Rosco, arms thick as fence posts, can't put to rest. The last shearer who kicked up trouble found himself pinned to the floor of a shearing pen and left the shed half an ear short, courtesy of Rosco's electric shears.

Rosco keeps his skull shaved to show off his crop of tattoos. From a distance the tiny scrolls of ink look like tight locks of hair.

"Where's my fuckin' sister, then?" he says with an ugly laugh. "At least she'll have a drink with me. Coraleen. Coraleen!" Coraleen slides in through the screen door, her blouse buttoned to the top. She takes a beer from her brother, knowing better than to argue.

Rosco waves Pearl over. "Go grab some pint glasses from the kitchen, Pearl. Enough for everyone." Right now Rosco couldn't give a shit if the boys leave broken glass on McAffey's shearing shed floor—give the old man something to whine about in the morning once they're gone. Rosco can tell Pearl's not happy about having to go down the hill again. He pulls her over to his side and grips her arm hard. "Read my lips, Pearl." Rosco says each word slowly and deliberately, as if he's talking to a child. "Go-down-to-the-fucking-kitchen-and-get-the-fucking-glasses."

Pearl yanks her arm free. The minute she leaves, Coraleen sidles over to Jimmy. The three shearers at the sorting table hold up a deck of poker cards. "You in or out, Rosco?"

"In," he says, hitching his jeans and pulling out a wallet stuffed with cash.

While they deal the cards, Jimmy slinks toward the door. He keeps his head cast down, figuring if he don't see no one, no one sees him. It's not until Rosco catches Coraleen heading out the door that he realizes she's trailing the blackfella like a bitch in heat. "Where do you think you're going?" he calls after her.

Coraleen ignores him, leaving the screen door swinging on its rusted hinges.

Look down through the night, through the branches of the old wandoo tree, to where Pearl stands rigid, stalking the shadows. Four weeks she's had her eye on Jimmy Quokka and the Maori cook, the way a hawk waits for a lizard hiding beneath the bushes. Hawk knows that damn lizard's gonna come out sooner or later. Pearl stands beneath the wandoo branches watching her fears unfold before her. Moonlight etches the outlines of Jimmy and Coraleen's

bodies. Jimmy takes the Maori cook by the hand and leads her down the dark side of the shed and around the corner. The dirt track they tread leads to Jimmy's car, five hundred yards past the shed.

Pearl resists the urge to chase after them, even though she wants to grab Jimmy Quokka and smash his damn face in. She paces back and forth beneath the tree, angry, frightened, uncertain what to do. She's gotta put a stop to Jimmy's shenanigans. But she's dead meat if she doesn't bring back Rosco's beer glasses quick smart. Pearl sprints down the hill to the kitchen. She runs back with beer glasses rattling and chinking in her arms. She collides with Rosco coming out the screen door of the shearing shed. He's got a face turned ugly-wild. He gives Pearl the kind of look she's seen before. Rosco thinks he and his sister are a cut above the blackfellas. She'd like to tell him she's not a fucking dog; she's every bit as good as him. Now that Coraleen's out there wanting to be fucked by a blackfella, Rosco doesn't like it one bit.

Nor Pearl.

She dumps the glasses on the sorting table. In the heat of the shed, wool oil seeps out of the jarrah floor boards and fills the air all the way up to the corrugated tin roof. Pearl's gotta get out in the fresh air before the smell of sheep makes her spew.

Outside on the porch, Rosco listens for Jimmy and his sister. Moonlight through the branches casts patterns across the dirt. The shadows play tricks on his eyes. He'll lay bets Jimmy and his sister are down at Coraleen's living quarters near the kitchen. Rosco paces down the hill, farting as his walk quickens to a march.

Pearl, watching through the screen door, waits until he's out of sight before she heads in the opposite direction. She knows exactly where Jimmy's taken Coraleen. She rounds the corner of the shed and follows footprints down the track. She's had a gut-full of Jimmy Quokka. If it wasn't Coraleen, it would be some other bitch. Pearl's not putting up with it a moment longer. She's going to look Jimmy in the eye and tell the bastard she's through with him, tell him once and for all.

Deep down, Pearl knows she'll never understand what makes Jimmy tick, even though she's tried. For a long time now she's turned a blind eye to his ways, ignored the drinking, the fights, the bad times. She figured if she kept a watch on him for long enough, kept him straight, one day he'd come good. She knows he's got



good somewhere inside him. Right now she's tired of looking. Something's been eating away at Jimmy's insides long before Pearl hooked up with him. He outright refuses to talk about his past, and Pearl's given up asking. She doesn't even know where Jimmy grew up. But none of that makes up for the way he treats her now. She's on *his* side; she's not out to get him. Pearl thinks these last three years she's been no smarter than any one of those stupid sheep at shearing time. Those damn fool merinos get scared shitless when the shearers haul them on their backs into the pens. They bleat like babies at the buzz of the electric shears. They struggle and whimper until they end up getting nicked by the shears because they're too damn stupid to realize that getting rid of a heavy wool coat is just what they need at the beginning of the summer heat. Not Pearl. She's done with being a fool. If she can't have Jimmy to herself, she doesn't want the bastard at all. She'll catch the bus down to Perth, she'll find a job in the city, go on welfare if she has to. She'll get herself hooked up with a decent fella, one who treats her nice. She won't even tell Jimmy about the baby.

Yet there's something else gnawing at her insides: Pearl knows if Rosco gets to Jimmy and Coraleen first, he won't stop till he's smashed Jimmy to a pulp.

Look down through the crown of an old wandoo to where a mopoke owl hunkers down among the branches, her feathers fluffed, caught in moonlight. The owl looks down through the branches, looks down at the small Aboriginal woman and the scars Pearl carries in her step. She hoots to another owl down by the dam, *moh-poke, moh-poke*, who *moh-pokes* back.

Shadows out of reach of the moonlight soak up the buzzing of cicadas, each group of insects droning at a different pitch. Not a twig rustling, not a leaf twitching, not a crackle of bark nor the sound of lovers murmuring. Nothing but still, parched air, starved of breath for eighty-five miles from farm to coast. The owl calls down from the wandoo branch as if she's talking right to Pearl: *moh-poke, moh-poke, go-back, go-back*. Pearl can't stop now, never mind the trembling in her legs.

Pearl glides through the shadows as she moves along the path to the cars. Needles of spinifex puncture her ankles like snake bites. Pearl can put up with any amount of physical pain; it's Jimmy's bullshit she'll never grow used to. Beyond the stand of eucalypt

trees, she sees the line of the fence. She crosses the cattle grid to where the farm hands' cars are parked in a row beneath the shine of the moon.

She moves in close enough to see Jimmy kneeling in the dirt, the back door of his red Ford slung open. Not a sound from Jimmy, the upper part of his body hidden inside the car. From the back seat, Pearl hears the Maori bitch moan hard and long. Jimmy does to that woman what Jimmy does best. Pearl grips her stomach, feeling ill. But she can't stop now. She strides toward the car when a crash of trodden bush from somewhere near pulls her up sharp. Cicadas stop their song. Pearl catches Rosco's outline two fence posts away. He pulls his bulk over the top of the wire and thuds through the dirt toward the cars.

"Jimmy," Pearl screams before she has time to think. "Jimmy. Run! It's Rosco!"

Jimmy steps up from the car. Rosco's four car lengths away, closing in with a look of murder in his stride. As quick as a strike of lightning, Jimmy takes flight, runs from the cars, a tall, lithe figure scaling the fence and disappearing through the thicket of bush.

From where she stands near the fence, Pearl listens to Rosco scream blue murder at his no good sister. Yet Pearl doesn't feel the satisfaction she thought she would at hearing Coraleen getting her comeuppance. Pearl stays only long enough to see Rosco pull Coraleen by her ankles and dump her bare ass on the ground. Pearl's too scared to turn back at the sound of Coraleen's wailing, too sick to do anything but hold her hands over her ears and run like hell.

Mid-morning's hotter than hell. Pearl holds her arm out the window of Jimmy's Ford and feels air moving on her skin. It's going to be a hundred degrees in the water bag. The broken white line on the asphalt stretches in a long slow curve westward, eighty-five miles from McAffey's farm to Coral Bay. Pearl hasn't spoken a word to Jimmy in the hour since they drove out the gates of McAffey's. At the edge of the road, mallee bush looks brittle and brown, green foliage obscured by a coating of desert dust. Pearl sees no eucalypts or wandoos growing along the coastal strip. They left the last of the big trees a long way inland.

From where she spent last night huddled in the bushes behind their living quarters, Pearl saw the Maori team hit the road an hour

after daybreak. Rosco, two of the shearers, and Coraleen—her head low, hair lank around her face—drove out in the first car, the other boys behind them in the next. By now they're two hundred miles down the highway, on their way to Perth. Wherever Jimmy spent the night, he must have watched them leave as well. Not ten minutes after the team drove out, Pearl saw a second rise of dust as Jimmy's red Ford wended its way up the track to the quarters. Before Pearl had a chance to say a word, he'd piled up their belongings in his arms and slung them in the trunk of the car. Pearl wasn't gonna be left stranded. All she could do was get in her side of the car and slam the door hard.

Pearl doesn't say a word to Jimmy until they near the outskirts of Coral Bay. Part of her knows she's already left Jimmy. Part of her feels the pit in her stomach grow heavy with each mile they travel. She's got plenty of money in her pocket from earnings, plenty to catch the bus from Coral Bay to Perth and make do for a while. But she can't help feeling scared. Never mind that she's been fending for herself since fourteen years of age. The thought of going back to that way of life, being on her own—makes her stomach roil. She watches the broken white line running down the center of the road. She wonders, has she been alone all her life? Coral Bay holds more good memories than bad. It's where she met Jimmy the year he drove into town. She thinks about the baby growing in her belly. Coral Bay is where she pictured they'd live the rest of her life.

Pearl doesn't say a word until Jimmy slows the car and pulls over to the gravel shoulder. It's then she feels her heart race. Maybe Jimmy's planning on dumping her; perhaps he'll turn the car around and leave her stranded on the side of the road. Pearl wouldn't put it past the son-of-a-bitch.

"What the fuck you doing?" she yells.

Jimmy smirks. He knows he's got her. He steps out onto the road then leans in through the open window. "Can't a fella take a piss?"

Jimmy leaves the engine idling. He strolls to the back of the car where he stands in full view of the road. Jimmy Quokka couldn't give a rat's ass about the whitefellas driving by. As he pisses, Jimmy thinks about Pearl. She's fuming about what happened last night with Coraleen. When Pearl doesn't speak, it rattles him more than when she yells and screams blue bloody murder at him. And how about last night at the farm? How long did she stand watching him

with Coraleen in the back seat of his car? He'll never figure Pearl out. Sometimes he wonders if she knows things before he knows them himself. She probably saved his life last night, warning him about Rosco. At the same time, he loathes her for it, putting up with any amount of shit he dishes out, just so she can say he's hers. Jimmy's his own man. He doesn't belong to no one, not the whitefellas, not the Maoris, least of all, not to Pearl. He stands on the road taking all the time in the world, playing the game of making Pearl wait, doing what he can to get her riled. It's the small things that drive her nuts.

Sun blazes in through the windscreen. Pearl cranes her neck to check the rear vision mirror, watching Jimmy stand at the back of the car taking all the time in the world while she's damn well melting in the front seat of the car. Pearl feels herself grow tight. She shrugs her shoulders loose. On the rise behind the car, a shimmer hovers above the broken white line as if two separate roads float one upon the other.

She scoots across the bench seat to the driver's side. She honks the car horn to get Jimmy moving, then presses her foot on the gas and revs the engine loud. Jimmy doesn't even bother to look up. She slams the driver's door shut and grinds the column shift from neutral up to first. He turns to stare in the opposite direction, pretending not to notice, gazing out at the bushes like he's daydreaming. Fuck him. Pearl pushes the gas pedal to the floor and guns Jimmy's red Ford Falcon off the gravel and onto the road. That makes him turn and look. In the rear vision mirror, Pearl sees Jimmy disappear in a cloud of red dust as she drives his car away.

Pearl drives over the last big rise to Coral Bay. At the crest she looks down at the brilliant white dunes stretching along the coast. She smells salt air and gazes out across the Indian Ocean sparkling in midday sunlight. This is her home. It's Jimmy who doesn't belong. She shouts through the open window to the turquoise ocean: "I showed you, Jimmy Quokka!"

Hot as blazes, Pearl's skin itches with sweat beneath her cotton top. She's going into town to buy herself an ice cream from Pieters' ice cream store. She puts her arm out the window and flips the bird at the whitefellas' caravan park. "I showed you, you bastards!"

At the shops, every inch of shade is taken up by city vehicles. Their paintwork looks so shiny new Pearl wonders if they've ever seen a dirt road. Away from the city in their fancy cars, the whitefellas look

like a bunch of wankers. She showers their cars with a spray of red dust and gravel as she yanks on the handbrake. Jimmy's car skids to a halt right in front of the shops.

Tourists sit beneath Coca-Cola sun umbrellas along the verandah. Plastic tables, once white, show a pink stain from desert dust. Coral Bay marks the line between desert and ocean, where red dirt blows west toward the ocean and dunes of white sand inch eastward. In the midday scorch, the flaps of the vinyl umbrellas ripple with the first hint of breeze.

A few minutes more until the murmur of seabreeze reaches five miles inland to rustle the leaves of mallee scrub. Waiting on the side of the road with his thumb held up to hitch a ride, Jimmy Quokka feels the first of the breeze on his back. A truck driver hauling goods from Perth to Coral Bay figures the afternoon's too flaming hot for any bloke to have to walk. He stops to give Jimmy a ride the last few miles into town.

Walking across the carpark to the ice cream store, Pearl doesn't miss the whitefellas who peer up from beneath their fancy umbrellas: the blonde woman in a pink sarong and painted nails who gives Pearl the once-over; her fella next to her who looks up from his magazine, lifts his sunglasses off his nose to cast Pearl the evil eye. Pearl doesn't miss the hard stare of a third whitefella with a body as round as a turtle. He leans against the verandah post eating fries, a newspaper wedged under one arm. The damn whitefellas have nothin' better to do than gawk. Pearl stops and glares back. She gives them the same evil eye because she's got as much right to be here as anyone. She stares until she stares them down. She doesn't start walking toward Pieters' ice cream store until the whitefellas return to their sodas and sundaes and magazines and fries.

Hans Pieters peers over the rim of his glasses: "Why, it's Miss Pearl." He's not seen her for weeks. "You have money to buy yourself something nice today?"

"I got plenty of money." Pearl reaches for the pay packet tucked in her shorts. She draws out a clutch of bills from the packet and spreads a fan of fifty-dollar bills across the counter. "Got more money than you'd see in a month."

Pieters whistles at the sight of the cash. "Better put it back in your pocket and take good care of it," he tells her, as he would his

grandchild. He waits while she does as he says. "What will you have today, Miss Pearl?"

The old Dutchman asks Pearl the same question every time she goes into his store. He knows damn well she has chocolate-mint. Pearl's been having chocolate-mint all the years she's been coming here. She can't figure out the whitefellas to save her life. "Make it a double," she says, slapping a fifty dollar bill on top of the glass case and holding it firm beneath her hand. Pearl watches Pieters, making sure he scrapes two good-sized scoops from the tub. Pieters holds the cone up high for Pearl to inspect. It's the same ritual he acts out every time she buys an ice cream. With the back of the metal scoop he presses the frozen rounds down firm.

Only when he hands Pearl the cone wrapped in a folded white napkin does she let Pieters take the money. She stuffs the change he gives into her back pocket. Pearl doesn't thank him. She doesn't say good bye. She pushes the swing doors hard and leaves them gaping on their hinges—the same way she does every time she leaves his store.

Pearl slides into the hot vinyl seat and sits at the wheel. She licks the sides of the ice cream already dripping in the heat. That's when she catches sight of the turtle gawking at her from the verandah post. He's getting her riled. She yells through the windscreen: "Whatcha looking at, fat man?" But he looks right through her, intent on something else.

When Pearl realizes, it's too late. When the passenger door clicks open it's too late to do any more than catch a glimpse of Jimmy's yellow teeshirt as he clamps his hot hands tight around her neck. Jimmy yanks Pearl across the seat and out the passenger's door. He drops her body onto the hot gravel the way he'd dump a bale of wool. The ice cream cone crumbles in her hand and the two rounds of chocolate-mint separate and tumble across the hot gravel. Pearl sees them float in a ring of brown liquid.

Jimmy has Pearl's body against the front tire where she can't move an inch. He keeps the weight of his foot pressed firm on the side of her head, the same way Rosco pins down a troublesome sheep in the pen. Jimmy wants the sharp edges of gravel to dig into Pearl's face. He wants the hot gravel to burn her skin. He's teaching her a lesson for leaving him on the side of the road. More. He's going to make her pay for what she is and for what she never can be. He senses every

one of the whitefellas watching. He'll show them what a blackfella can do, give 'em something to remember.

Jimmy yells names at Pearl she's heard him call her once before, once when the rocket juice did the talking. Jimmy's bigger than her but Pearl's no sack of spuds. She's a bag of live lobster snapping back with arms and legs to pull herself free. She fights him with all her strength. When she feels the pressure of Jimmy's foot ease, she swings up to her knees. She screams blue murder at Jimmy, but even with the sun blocking out his face, she knows she's looking into the eyes of a madman.

She grows scared. "I was tricking, Jimmy. I was coming back to get you. I was gettin' an ice cream. I was coming back."

Jimmy Quokka doesn't hear a word Pearl says. Jimmy's trapped inside the corners of something bad, something that turns him wild. His mind feels smothered by forces bigger than him. They fold, and turn, then twist his brain into a knot so tight it's madness. The men and women watching beneath their umbrellas register the black man's violence as the sum of everything ignoble about his race. Jimmy's the Aboriginal turned feral, a man who's lost his way. Jimmy's caught between two worlds, the city and the bush. He'll be the first to tell you: he doesn't belong to either one.

Every one of the whitefellas has their eyes fixed on Jimmy. Though they don't show it on their faces, Jimmy feels them snigger at a blackfella one-upped by his woman. They reduce him to a mongrel dog that makes him hate Pearl as much as he hates himself. Even if it's Pearl's body before him, Jimmy's going to beat the crap out of every one of them.

The first blow drives Pearl's face into the steel rim of the tire. A spear of white light pierces the back of her skull. Jimmy's second kick burns her lower back as though she's been seared with a branding iron. With the third, she hears bone crack, and momentarily wonders if it's hers or his. Each blow scrapes Pearl's body along the gravel until her cotton top bunches tight around her throat. Pearl lies with her chest naked and exposed in view of the whitefellas.

The woman in the pink sarong cries to her husband, "Christ. Oh, Christ. It's a woman! He's kicking a woman. Somebody stop him." She buries her face in her hands as she does through an ugly scene at the movies. "Do something." She sobs.

"It's okay," her husband says, though he's not so sure it is. If he tries to stop the fight, the black man could turn on him, on any of them. He looks around, wishing someone else would do something. No one budes an inch. It's as if they're all in a trance. The husband pushes back from the table, knocking his plastic chair from its legs. He picks the chair up and places it neatly at the table. He treads down the length of the verandah in the protection of the shadows, keeping his head low. It's not until he reaches the screen door of Pieters' ice cream store and steps inside that he feels safe enough to look back out at the Aboriginal man still beating up the small girl. No wonder the Aboriginals get such a bad rap. It's only when he calls Hans Pieters from the back of the store that he realizes how bad he's trembling.

From the corner of Pearl's vision she sees the turtle step back from the verandah post. She watches him shuffle through loose sheets of scattered newspaper fallen from his arm. In his face she sees the look of a terrified child. Amid her own struggle, through a confused blend of fear and sorrow and pride, Pearl understands that none of the whitefellas can save her from Jimmy: the whitefellas are scared out of their wits.

Hans Pieters emerges from the swing doors of the ice cream store. Pearl knows the old Dutchfella is headed to the blue phone to call the cops. This time they'll take Jimmy to the lockup and keep him there for good. No amount of lies Pearl spins will save Jimmy a second time around. Pearl doesn't understand, but she knows she's got to save Jimmy from the whitefellas. She wants to save Jimmy from them more than she wants to save herself from him.

"Cops, Jimmy." Pearl tries to make her voice loud, but the words stay trapped inside the gathers of material curled and twisted at her throat.

Jimmy hoves into Pearl with his fist and feet. With every kick she feels his hate. She knows that what he's fighting is something bigger than the two of them. Pearl curls into a ball to shield her belly and protect her soft parts. She remembers a baby echidna she saw as a child, the tiny animal rolling into a tight ball of quills when she passed it by. Pearl never would have hurt it. It was only a baby. She'd just knelt down to take a closer look.

Jimmy's blows stop feeling sharp as darts. His blows grow dull. Pearl begins to separate from herself, as if she's rising through clear



blue water to leave her drowning body behind. Pearl doesn't care if she reaches the surface, although something tells her that if she makes it all the way, she'll be free. From there she'll be able to look down at Jimmy far below, released from him and the life she's left behind.

She stays closed in on herself, the underside of her face scraping the gravel. Pearl listens to gravel crunch like the distant roar of waves inside a shell. She listens to the waves gathering speed, curling and rolling toward the beach where they'll dump their force upon the sand. She knows that any moment now it will all be over. But beyond the roar of water she registers a different rhythm—not the beating of her own heart pumping blood, but the pattern of its tiny other. She considers the new life she's holding in her womb.

Inland, the mopoke owl sleeping in the wandoo tree dreams of the small black girl. In her sleep, the old woman owl cries, *moh-poke, moh-poke*.

Pain pierces Pearl in the small of her back. She opens her eyes and squeals, her strangled voice high-pitched and strange. "Cops, Jimmy. The cops are coming to get you."

The oddness of Pearl's cry has Jimmy pull back. He stops kicking. He looks down at his right foot covered in blood and wonders whose blood it is. He squeezes his eyes and blinks, trying hard to focus. Again, he squeezes his eyes and with all his might pushes out the corners of the folds to drive the madman out of his head. He pushes against the corners until he feels the craziness subside.

Jimmy shifts his gaze to the whitefellas watching from the verandah. They stare blankly, any feelings they show obscured by their chalky white veneer. In their colorless faces, Jimmy can't tell what the whitefellas are about. He can't tell good from bad. All he knows for certain is that he and Pearl have to get away before the cops show up.

Jimmy opens the back door of the Ford and lifts Pearl by the scruff of her shorts and top. She has nothing left to struggle with. Jimmy dumps her thin, broken body along the back seat. When he shuts the back door she feels her knees pushed to her chest like a limp, soft doll.

Jimmy collects Pearl's plastic sandals from the ground and throws them through the open window of the car. He climbs into the driver's side and turns the key in the ignition. The engine rumbles

to life. He looks at the whitefellas along the verandah, and this time it's him, Jimmy Quokka, not a wild stranger, who twists in his seat to Pearl laid along the back seat.

"Quiet," he tells her, but Pearl keeps moaning, bleating like a wounded sheep. He's got to make her stop before he starts bawling himself. "Shut up, Pearl."

She won't stop. She won't listen. She just keeps moaning and he feels his own mouth start to quiver. She's only got herself to blame. He stretches over and crunches his fist into her cheekbone, once, twice, until she slumps into silence. Jimmy turns forward, pushes the stick into gear, revs the engine and spins the Ford out of the carpark in a spray of bloodied gravel.

Look down through the night, in through the windows of Jimmy's moving car, to Pearl silent and still along the back seat. Shapes of twilight skim past the windows in flashes. Pearl drifts in and out with the drone of the car engine and the rhythm of tires drumming on the road. She's beyond caring where they're headed.

Jimmy follows the highway south to Perth. As they move along the straight stretch of road, he turns from the driver's seat and reaches to the back. "It's okay, Pearl," he murmurs, resting his hand on Pearl's hip. He strokes her thigh. "You're Jimmy's girl. Just you and me. We're okay."

Just you and me. Pearl wonders if he's right.

A full moon tracks across the evening sky, casting a cold beam of light along the highway. Pearl curls her arms around her knees, her body throbbing inside its broken shell. She's past caring about pain. She feels old and spent. She wonders at the child in her belly: can it still be holding onto life? She thinks about love, being starved-crazy for love at any price. She wonders if a girl like her can expect any more. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the next day, she'll find the strength to leave Jimmy Quokka and start afresh.

Through the open window of Jimmy's car, the moon shines a brilliant pond of light against the night summer sky. But the white orb offers small comfort to Pearl, who, curled upon the back seat of Jimmy's car, draws in the faint scent of jasmine perfume before closing her eyes to sleep.