

RED DIRT
TALKING

JACQUELINE
WRIGHT

FREMANTLE 
PRESS

1.

Let me tell you, there's a lot of stories going around about that girl. Lotta stories. Stories from the local rag. Stories from the townies, the station folk, the mob. Then there's the police. Plenty stories there. No one can work it out, everyone's gotta theory and with my job, I get to hear them all, whether I like it or not.

The truck's reversing signal wakes Stirling on my run past Ransom Council. Stretching and yawning on the green wedge of lawn, he pushes the ten gallon hat from his face. 'Here, let me help you with that, Maggot!' he says jumping up, and shouldering the last of the bins. Then hops into the cab and joins me for the rest of the run. By the time we reach the roadhouse, he's given me the drum on the girl as he knows it. Reckons she got taken by the wild dog living in a waterhole.

'Musta been a pretty big dog to go eating up an eight year old girl like that,' I say pulling into a parking bay.

'Ya better believe it,' he says scratching his head. 'When the dog gets outta that there water it's only about the size of a pussy cat, see? But it climbs up the bank, growin' and growin' 'til it's as big as a bullock.'

'True?'

He nods. 'That there little girl? Well, she never did listen to her time-to-go-home voice.' His hair sticks up like some riled cockatoo as he stares out of the window into the shimmer of the Western Desert. 'Time to go home, time to go home,' he whispers menacingly to himself. Fights a few demons he does, the old Stirling.

Over bacon and egg sandwiches and milky coffee at the roadhouse, Bob—Two-Bob, that is, not Fearless Bob—scoffs. 'It was a dog all right but not the four-legged variety.'

'No?' I shovel a few million spoonfuls of sugar into my cup.

He lowers his voice, 'It's a suicide.'

I think about a girl that young taking her own life and I shake my head.

‘You don’t get to hear what I hear in the courtroom, Maggot.’

‘I just can’t see it, you know.’ But there’s no telling Bob.

Fearless Bob reckons Two-Bob’s suicide story is a crock. He chucks a handful of chook heads over the fence to the seven metre crocodile and his female companion. ‘I don’t want to let the cat out of the bag or anything, but I know what happened.’

‘Let me guess,’ I say. ‘She got taken by a salty?’

‘No way! She was topped by her uncle.’

Fearless isn’t the sharpest tool in the shed but regardless I just have to ask. ‘Why’d he wanna do that?’

He cites jealousy as the main motive. ‘Couldn’t handle the fact that his mother put him up for adoption yet kept her second baby, so he hit the old girl where it hurts the most and murdered her one and only granddaughter.’ He watches the male crocodile moving with unexpected speed to savage the female. ‘Hey Maggot, do ya reckon you can take the bits of beast lying out the back with you? The crows won’t even touch it and now the punters are beginning to complain.’

And I can’t say I blame them. The whiff I cop when I back the truck up to the hopper makes even my stomach turn.

I’m about to pull out when he whistles me back. ‘You wouldn’t know where I could get hold of some old beer bottles?’

‘King browns?’

‘Thought I’d have a go brewing my own beer.’

‘See what I can do.’

‘Thanks, I’ll shoot a few your way when I bottle them up.’

‘You’d be doing me a favour if you didn’t,’ I say slipping the truck into gear.

‘A bourbon man.’ Fearless tuts and shakes his head.

‘A cautious man,’ I say to myself, turning right and onto the highway.

Next stop is the Land Council which sits on the saltflats halfway between the old part of town and the new part of town. I call at reception on the off-chance Lori’s got any cake going.

‘Disappeared, bullshit,’ she taps the local newspaper on her desk. ‘The girl’s been front page news for two weeks straight now. Her uncle snatched that little girl away into the desert, that’s what.’

‘Well, Fearless says he murdered her.’

Lori laughs infectious big belly laughs. ‘He’s as sharp as paint, that

Fearless!’ She wipes her eyes. ‘Not that uncle. I’m talking about Tommy Mutton Junior. Her great-great-uncle.’

I’m not sure about this either. Tommy’s a senior Lawman but I just can’t see him snatching a small kitten away, let alone an eight year old girl.

Lori reckons it’s deadly that a tribal man took his brown-skinned niece after all these years of it being the other way around. ‘Kuj could be the first in a line of recovered children,’ she says, smiling.

‘Hey, what’s happening with that bath out the back?’ I change the subject. ‘Can I take it off your hands?’

She narrows her big blue eyes and retrieves a ringing phone ‘Marntu Jarranyjanu Lalyku Putiputi Ngankawili.’ It rolls off her tongue like flowing water. ‘Yes, this is Ransom Desert Community Land Council ... Just a minute and I’ll put you through.’ She punches a few buttons. ‘Shithead for you,’ she says into the receiver before hanging up. ‘I dunno, I was thinking about turning it into a pond. The old people sit outside when they come for meetings and I wanted to make it pretty for ’em.’

‘Lori, take a good look at whose leg you’re pulling here. No one’s gunna sit outside in the sun come the wet season. I’ll swap you ten metres of shadecloth for the bath.’

‘Only ten metres!’

‘Twenty then, give or take a few holes. I’ll even organise a few palms for you from CD, and there’s your garden.’

‘Gorn then,’ she smiles, tossing her head.

‘Speak of the devil,’ I say opening the door for the snatching-away uncle. Tommy Mutton Junior is long and lean, with a shock of white hair and stubble to match. He shuffles his way forward and clasps my shoulder with his stiff gnarled hand. I’m buggered why they call him Tommy Junior. If he’s Junior, then the Senior Tommy must be as old as the hills you drive through on your way out to Yindi Community. He’s got a nice way about him, this old man. Ancient he may be, blind as a bat, but nuthin’ gets past him. When he finally decided to sit down in one place, he sat down at Yindi and started drawing these unreal pictures. Though it beats me how he even finds the page, his eyes being like they are. Tommy shakes my hand, turns those milky eyes onto me and hits me for silver and tobacco and a lift out to Eight Mile Camp.

I tell him I gotta pick the young fella up at the depot and then I’ll drop him there on my way to the tip.

‘Ngani one?’ he asks.

You know, the new trainee we’ve taken on? Jason ... Jay he calls himself. Gotta show him the ins and outs of that beautiful, big hole in the ground.’

Jay’s hanging outside the depot when we arrive.

‘Uncle,’ he nods to Tommy, plonking himself between the two of us and grinning widely. He loves the tip run, the young fella, and it heartens me to see it. When we pull up at the bridge, I ask Tommy if there’s any news on Kuj but it’s hard to pick any sense out of the language he speaks.

‘He’s asking about Stirling,’ Jay translates.

‘Just dropped him off at the roadhouse. Looks as though he had a big night.’

‘Dunno what way my young fellas are lookin’ today,’ Tommy says, shaking his head.

‘Not me, Uncle!’ Jay protests but Tommy still looks sad.

I remember the axe head I found a few weeks ago and reach behind the seat. ‘You want it?’ I show it to him. ‘You’ll need to cut yourself a handle.’

‘Palya,’ he says smiling and running his finger along the blade.

‘Lotta bush tucker out Yindi way?’ I ask and know I’ve hit a hot topic, the way he tells me about all the bush honey, riverside, miming how to chop it out as he goes.

At the tip face, we run into the Mullet brothers. They’re on the scrounge for green waste having just embarked upon another new venture: worm farm, commercial scale. Sounds too easy but the catch is that worms eat heaps. Just imagine eating your own body weight in food every day.

Loading up a trailer with grass clippings and palm fronds, they chat away about that girl. They’ve been living with each other that long they talk on top of each other. It’s tricky keeping up with them but I get the general gist that they aren’t interested so much in what happened to Kuj, more the nitty-gritty of the disappearing itself. They say her destiny is a foregone conclusion. Bodies disappear fast in these parts.

‘How’s about that one-legged body the Mt Edgar station worker found in a car?’ Jay manages to get a few words in edgeways. ‘When he opened the door a big, fat goanna crawled out licking his lips. Thought

it'd eaten off his leg but he found out later that he only had one leg to begin with!

'Between the worms—'

'The birds—'

'The ants—'

'And the dingoes—'

'There wouldn't be too many clues left if they don't find her body soon,' they chorus.

Mick pulls in alongside us in the Yindi loading truck.

'Now here's a man who might shed a little light on the subject,' Mullet One remarks. 'Hey, Mick, you know what happened to that girl?'

He's a man of few words, is Mick Hooper. Always was, but since he left all that bad business behind him and took up the job as project officer for Yindi Community, the words are fewer.

'She must be somewhere,' he says, scanning the 360-degree horizon. We all follow his gaze and watch the kites wheeling around in the thermals for a few moments before the Mullets ask, 'So ya reckon she's still alive then?'

Mick wipes the sweat from his brow, reaches into the cab and pulls out a bully beef sandwich.

'Want some?' he offers, but no one's game.

Jay wanders off picking through the rubbish while the Mullet brothers and I watch him chew through half his sandwich before realising that's about as far as this conversation's going to go. Mick starts frisbeeing sheets of corrugated iron into the pit.

I ease a perfectly good hose and a stack of plant pots from beneath a pile of disposable nappies and slide them into the cab of the truck.

Jay swings himself up into the cab. 'Check these out!' He opens up a grubby notebook to a page stuffed with drawings of demons, crosses, dripping blood and a hangman's noose. 'How deadly are these?'

I shrug.

'I'm gunna frame them.'

'Why waste the frame?'

Jay kicks at the hose and plant pots by his feet wrinkling his nose with disdain. 'You know the saying ... one man's shit is another man's treasure. I reckon someone famous done them and one day I'm gunna sell to that joint in France for a squillion.'

'It's poison,' I say.

'It's art,' says Jay looking closely at the drawings.

‘No, the saying, it’s “One man’s meat is another man’s poison”.’

‘Yeah, whatever,’ says Jay tracing the jawline of the demon with his finger.

‘Might be I catch ya later,’ Mick shouts as I pull out, and we head back into town none the wiser.

Even at knock-off it doesn’t stop. I’ve got neighbours to the right and left of me chewing my ear. Take CD for example, out watering the garden. He feeds me a few cold beers and a story about the Assembly of God mob brainwashing her and shipping her south to serve soup to city deros.

CD says he’ll swap the pots and hose for some plants for Lori. ‘Folk chuck out all sorts o’ grand stuff,’ he says, shaking his head in wonder. ‘Any road, ar’ll get you those plants.’

Then there’s Nancy. She’s got some wild story about a snake. Dancing from one foot to the other, trying to hop the gauntlet of ants, she hangs up one of those magic laundry baskets of kids’ clothes which fills up as soon as you empty it. As she pegs, she tells us about the big snake grabbing Kuj.

‘He was wild, boy! But he’ll spit her out, you’ll see,’ she looks up at the sky. ‘He’ll pull up trees and drag that horrible old smelter into the sea. And when he’s done, it’ll rain down on us and give us all back a bitta life.’

I ask Nancy if she wants the bath I scored from the Land Council and she tells me, come next pension day, she could give me twenty dollars for it.

‘Nah, you’re right,’ I say. ‘It’s a Christmas present for you and the kids.’

See what I mean? There’s plenty stories going around all right, some of them really out there. And that’s just the half of them.

2.

Annie begins her trip to Yindi Community in the dark hours of a November Tuesday morning armed with a thermos of black coffee laced with rum, and a large pink-iced bun.

Her sense of adventure mounts as she drives beneath the arc of streetlights, over bridges, through suburbs, beside railway lines, supermarkets that never sleep and past the edge-of-city petrol stations. By lunchtime, however, as she slices her way through wheatbelt towns listening to the last few furlongs of the Melbourne Cup being called, this sense falters. Now it's just her, the bun and the long road goodbye. She takes stock of the wonderfulness versus terror and she begins to wonder what in the hell possessed her to embark upon a trip like this?

She had never envisaged that university would take her to the north-western edge of the country. A phrase in a book had led her onto postgraduate studies where she began researching the connection of the dead to the living through public and personal memorial. Massacre stories had been her supervisor's idea. She hadn't been keen to take it up, preferring instead the soft, swollen narratives which the living told about the dead through statues and sculptures, the planting of trees, plaques, roadside shrines, photographs and mementos. She didn't want to touch this national blood-on-her-hands, guilt-by-association narrative. But once Professor Thornleigh had sent her down that path, she was hooked. Systematically, she worked her way through the boxes brought to her from special collections in the belly of the archives and was at once shocked and captivated by mention of a particular massacre at Rumble Crossing. She trawled through field notes hammered out by anthropologists on typewriters or scrawled in ink on the pages of bound, brown-covered notebooks to find more information about it. She gathered that the manager who worked Marda cattle station during the time of the massacre was a God-fearing, law-abiding man. A strict husband and father, someone with business acumen, who ruled with an iron fist. These 'sources' amounted to Constable Fowler's field report,

the scrawling hand of the Lutheran minister who ran the food depot, and a published poem penned by a literate stockman. The oral history collection was more helpful, especially when it came to information. 'A rough old bushie' was probably about the kindest thing anyone ever said about him, but from what Annie gleaned from people's stories, if she searched the length and breadth of Australia, she wouldn't find a nastier man. He chained up men like dogs, raped the girls who worked as domestic servants in his house and administered electric shocks with cattle prods as punishment for wrongdoings, but there was little reference to his involvement in the massacre. The only other possible sources she could think of were the personal records of people affected by this incident but Professor Thornleigh reminded her that access to these files was becoming more and more restricted. There was only one thing left to do, he said, and that was to conduct a field trip in the area and speak to the people who were involved directly.

'What you can get from books and records is nothing compared to what you can get from oral history,' he said. For the rest of the meeting he dropped his veil of professionalism to reminisce about his own field work.

'Perhaps we can approach the Institute of Australian Indigenous Cultural Research to finance your trip to the north-west,' he finally suggested.

A few phone calls and a further meeting revealed the institute could indeed provide the necessary funds. But there was a catch, a particularly tasty catch, Annie told her colleague Abby over a Friday afternoon glass of wine. She had to use the data she collected to give a joint presentation with Thornleigh to the United Nations' South Seas Forum for Indigenous Peoples.

'Just think, a trip to New Zealand all expenses paid.'

Abby, whose international business trips were more a hassle than a pleasure, shrugged. 'You've got nothing to lose I suppose.'

Within months Annie had received a letter from the Aboriginal community of Yindi consenting to her visit.

Before she left for Yindi, Thornleigh told her that she was embarking upon 'the opportunity of a lifetime'. So Annie chants the 'opportunity of a lifetime' mantra as she travels north along Highway One. But when the vegetation gives way to red earth, she begins to question her own ability to achieve such a task. 'Can I do it?' soon ousts any optimistic

thoughts and, as to answers, none are immediately forthcoming.

She stops counting the hours she has travelled by the time she crosses the first of the dry rivers. Against the advice of her father, she doesn't take the opportunity to sightsee along the way. The only sights she's interested in are roadhouses and designated highway rest zones. She drinks loads of coffee: unlaced, cappuccinoed, free driver coffee, Caterer's Blend, and pulls off the road only when the lights of oncoming cars become alien spaceships.

On the second night, she notices the moon sailing by her side. A crescent moon, cradling the reflection of the earth. It gradually sinks from view only to bounce out, once again, cusp or belly-first, depending on the lie of the land. Finally, it skims along the spinifex at eye level before leaving her completely. Annie begins fishing for answers to the hard questions in the dark swim of her mind. They feather to the surface but as she reaches out to them they swirl from beneath her grasp and disappear. Then, she is jolted awake when she leaves Highway One and enters the desert at one hundred and ten kilometres an hour. The white beast bounces over mounds of spinifex and is stopped by an anthill.

Lifting her head from the steering wheel Annie remembers the torch sitting on her kitchen bench sixteen hundred kilometres away in Perth. She listens as a repetitive metallic clanking noise is slowly taken over by a loud hissing. She won't be back on the highway tonight and she can't open the driver's door. So she pushes the empty polystyrene cups and wrappers from the front seat onto the floor, winds up the windows and locks the doors. For the first time in years, she falls asleep immediately, pink-iced bun for her pillow.

The following morning a couple in a Winnebago help her to straighten out the bashed plate and change the tyre. About two hundred kilometres up the highway she spies the open back door in the rear-vision mirror and no suitcase. It must have gradually shimmied its way down to the end of the troop carrier, falling out somewhere on the road. She squints into the shimmer of the highway. The thought of going backwards so close to her destination is agonising so she cuts her losses and continues. It's taken almost two days to get to the town closest to Yindi and she estimates it will be another day on top of that to get out to the community.

It's late afternoon by the time she pulls into Ransom. She re-reads the letter from Mick Hooper, the project officer who advises her to stay at Eight Mile Camp, just outside of Ransom. From there, he will organise someone to take her out to Yindi. She drives through the town

trying to find the road out to Eight Mile Camp. Ransom is bigger than she had imagined. The old part has a hospital which overlooks a huge sandspit and a harbour where big tankers come in and load up with salt and iron ore. The new part of town has an Olympic-size swimming pool and a shopping centre. Despite its size and variety of shops, Annie can't find shorts and t-shirts in her size. Outside the sobering-up shelter, she asks a man how to get to Eight Mile Camp. In the process of giving her directions, he also manages to sell her some local artwork.

Annie examines the drawings, black ink divided into three or four frames, each frame featuring a setting, a slice of story. 'They are remarkable,' she says. 'Do they tell a story?'

But apart from a vague reference to them being about 'The Dreaming', she is unable to get much information out of him.

'You stayin' in the visitor's donga,' he says, more a statement than a question.

'Yes,' she says, scanning the letter again. 'What is a donga?'

'It's a house,' he tells her, but Annie is not convinced. She'd looked the word up in the dictionary before she left. *A makeshift shelter*, she remembers clearly.

The man detects some anxiety. 'With a kitchen and bathroom and thing.'

The next morning, Annie is looking at the overhead fan whirring above her bed in the visitor's donga when the ground beneath her begins to shake. Window frames rattle and the glass of water does a slow shimmy across the bedside table to the edge before coming to a halt. She winds a sarong around her torso, tiptoes to the door and peers outside. The only movement is a pink dog panting its way between the snatches of shade, and a tangle of children shooting stones from slingshots at finches dipping in and out of a running tap. A lizard waves at her from the steaming strip of lawn separating the donga from the rest of the desert. She steps back inside; a breeze blows through the screen door turning the pages of a week-old newspaper. A note under a coffee cup on the table reads, *One bullet should do the trick. N*. She hadn't noticed the note when she arrived last night and there is no sign of the mysterious 'N'.

She tries filling the kettle to make a cup of tea but only rust-coloured water splutters from the tap. The pipes outside shudder and the flow stops.

‘Powerhouse’s down,’ says an older woman through the open kitchen window. Annie drops the kettle in surprise.

‘And the water.’ The woman makes a peculiar gesture with her hand which involves turning her wrist and pointing her middle finger at the ground. ‘Finished. Seen Nundi?’

‘I only arrived last night, I ...’ Annie feels embarrassed and uncomfortable dressed only in a sarong, after sleeping most of the morning away. Now part of the kettle’s plastic spout lies in the sink.

‘Powerhouse bloke.’ The woman is dressed in a printed cotton skirt, a man’s bright orange t-shirt and a lawn bowls hat.

The broken piece fits onto the spout with jigsaw precision.

‘No water,’ the woman tells Annie again as she turns on the tap trying to fill the kettle. ‘Nuthin’. Bullocks bin drain that tank.’ She steps away from the window and motions up the road.

‘Oh?’ Annie puts the piece of plastic onto the draining board and lies to herself about gluing it back on later.

The woman’s voice has a lulling quality: quiet and even and not prone to the pitch of emotion. ‘They turn the taps on with their noses.’

‘Their noses!’

Nodding, the woman smooths the sand with the ball of her bare foot. Her toenails look like oyster shells. ‘That Nundi, he’ll fix things.’

‘I don’t know Nundi.’ Annie shakes the kettle and some leftover water sloshes around in the bottom of it.

The woman looks away towards a cow sauntering up the road with her calf while Annie busies herself plugging the kettle into the socket and flicking the switch. ‘Would you like a cup of tea?’ she asks.

‘The powerhouse is down,’ the woman tells her. She tells her twice, in fact, before Annie realises that no amount of wriggling cords and flicking switches is going to make the kettle with the broken spout boil water.

The woman’s name is Louisa and she is probably not as old as Annie had first thought. Her hair has only a few flecks of grey running through it. Her eyes are intense and Annie gets the feeling that children wouldn’t get away with much if Louisa were looking after them. Annie drives her to a house at the other side of a creek that runs through Eight Mile Camp. It takes some banging on the door to rouse Nundi, but Louisa perseveres. He throws some gigantic electrical leads and a toolbox into the back of Annie’s car and directs her to the powerhouse. On the way, they pass an old man sitting on a mattress surrounded by mangy dogs and reading a dictionary. Nundi waves at him from the window and

shouts something with the English word ‘powerhouse’ squeezed in between the deep and resonant sounds of his own language. A linguist who shared the postgraduate study room with Annie had told her that Indigenous languages around Ransom are still spoken as the mother tongue. *Muwarr is an AGGLUTINATIVE language*, Annie had written in her notebook underneath the word *DONGA*. A language, the linguist explained, with everything—tense, pronouns, subjects and cardinal directions—pulled around like carriages behind the main engine of the root word.

Eight Mile is not a pretty sight. Spinifex bushes fly flags of toilet paper. Nappies, playing cards and sand-choked clothing carpet the community’s verges. Supermarket bags flake like well-cooked fish in the sun. Cans are squashed flat into the dirt road: circles of Fray Bentos steak and kidney pie, round-edged rectangles of Spam. Coke, Coke and more Coke. They pass a telephone box surrounded by a halo of smashed glass.

Annie sees a lizard sunning itself on a rock. ‘What’s that lizard called?’

Louisa names it in Muwarr and Nundi translates.

‘It’s a ta ta lizard.’

Annie waves at it and the lizard waves back before running away on the toes of its hind legs. ‘Friendly little chap.’

Louisa chuckles.

‘It does that,’ Nundi mimicks its wave, ‘to cool itself.’

They stop at the watertank and Nundi gets out and knocks on the side. The sound is hollow and resonate.

Nundi grimaces. Louisa tuts.

‘It’s the size of a swimming pool!’ Annie exclaims.

‘Yeah,’ says Nundi glumly, ‘an empty one.’

Louisa gets out of the car and squeezes herself into what little shade the noon sun has left. Annie stands next to Louisa and it isn’t long before sweat is running down her stomach and the backs of her knees. She tries flapping her hands around, like the lizard, but finds it ineffective. They watch Nundi um and ah around terminals and cables. He lugs the pair of giant jumper leads over his shoulder. He points to a bank of batteries, each one as big as a coffee table, and suggests maybe they can kickstart the backup generator using the leads, but he is having difficulty remembering which terminals need connecting.

‘What that Crispy bloke bin tell you?’ Louisa asks.

‘I can’t remember if it’s black to this and red to that, or ...’ he points

to some other terminals, ‘... this to that one.’ He disappears around the back of a row of conductors. ‘There are these ones here, too.’ He bites his bottom lip. ‘Crispy’s not in town this week ...’ Scratching his head, he clamps a black clip onto one of the terminals on the battery, then hands Annie the red lead. She stares at him when he motions for her to clip it onto another terminal.

‘Try that one, over there.’ Nundi points like Louisa, not with his finger, but by pursing his lips.

She hesitates, sweat soaks her clothing. She glances up at the DANGER sign with 11,000 VOLTS written beneath it. Nundi smiles at her.

‘This one?’ she walks over to the battery closest to the generator.

‘Might be,’ Nundi says.

Annie needs both hands to open the stiff clamps of the jumper lead. Trembling, she leans over and closes her eyes as the clamps connect to the terminal.

When Mick Hooper said he couldn’t guarantee being at Eight Mile by an exact time, he wasn’t talking hours, he meant days. She finds a note on the door informing her he’ll be at Eight Mile Camp by the end of the week. When he finally arrives, Annie discovers it might be another week before he is able to show her the way out to Yindi. She suggests he draw her a mud map.

‘Keen to get started are we?’

‘Well, yes,’ says Annie confused. She isn’t sure if his gaze is sparked by admiration or suspicion.

‘It’s far too complicated for the likes of a mud map. Besides, the track is rough and there are loads of creek crossings.’

‘Surely there is someone who could drive out with me,’ Annie pleads.

It’s another few days before Mick arranges a reluctant guide—Stirling, the man who had sold her the drawings.

Immediately after they turn off the highway and onto the track to Yindi, Stirling puts his feet up onto the dash, yanks his ten gallon hat over his eyes and starts snoring. She grips the steering wheel, trying to keep the car from vibrating off a road rippling with corrugations. Stirling had wanted to drive but Annie insisted she needed the experience. The road dips and they drive down into the first river crossing. It looks like some kind of sand quarry and the running water seems deep. She

gets out and locks in the hubs, just like her father showed her. Stirling watches as she wades into the middle. It is just above her knee and the track beneath her feet feels firm.

To her relief, Stirling talks her through the crossing and from then on, gives her the occasional clue: 'Listen to the engine, don't fight the wheel, drive in the ruts of others, slow down, give it thing.' By the fourth crossing and the third bogging, she starts getting the hang of it. They stop by a river for lunch. A truck pulling three ore-filled trailers drives across a concrete ford. Stirling delves into the back of the troop carrier. He unearths a tub of margarine, smears a slice of bread around it, dips it into a jar of jam, pockets an orange and walks away upstream. Annie watches him disappear. What would I do if he didn't come back? she asks herself. Trudging across smooth pebbles and coarse river sand to the main tributary, she finds a deep pool nestled amongst the muscular roots of the paperbarks. She is tempted to swim but something tells her *no*. So she ducks her head quickly into the water and sits against one of the trunks. High above her head in the forks of trees there are lumps of muddy leaf litter, where the river had risen. The trees are thick and gnarled. She shuts her eyes and listens to them whisper, clutching at this temporary peace like a sucking rag.

When she walks back, Stirling is sitting cross-legged in front of a fire.

'He's havin' a nice, hot sleep.' He pokes at whatever is tucked into the coals with a stick.

When it is cooked, he offers her a taste. The flesh is firm and white.

'It's very tasty,' she says surprised. 'It's like a cross between chicken and fish.'

'Jalangarti,' says Stirling. 'Plenty goanna and thing round here.'

She tells him about the waterhole she found.

'You swim in that there waterhole?'

'No.'

He looks at her directly for the first time, 'You tellin' me true like?'

'Yes!'

What he sees in her face eases his concern. He nods, picks through the blackened skin and bones. She wants to ask why but refrains and files it away with the 'one bullet' question to decipher at a time when she feels more able to take it all in.

They drive out of the catchment area and up onto higher, drier ground, skirting the edge of claypans, still full of water from the unseasonable rain and separated by odd stands of white gums, rocky outcrops and anthills higher than the car bonnet. She asks Stirling about Yindi.

‘Good huntin’ at Yindi. Kangaroo, emu, goanna, karlimartaji.’

‘Karli ...?’

‘Turkey.’

‘Turkey?’

‘Bush turkey.’ He gazes out of the side window at some kangaroos bounding across the spinifex and lines them up with his thumb and forefinger, making soft explosions.

‘Is it hot out at Yindi?’

‘Little bit hot, little bit cold.’

Annie glances at him to ascertain if he is joking, but he gives no indication.

The further they drive, the larger and drier the claypans become. Then the claypans disappear altogether and are replaced by saltpans. They drive over a plain, flat as a tack, except for a lone windmill and a tree. Tied to the trunk is a bunch of flowers, wilting but not yet dried.

‘Did someone die here?’ Annie asks, slowing down.

‘Not here,’ Stirling says, waving her on and pulling the hat over his face again.

The track is rough. Annie tries avoiding potholes the size of small ravines. The air conditioner is cranked up full bore. They travel in third gear for most of the journey. She is amazed that Stirling awakens whenever she needs to change direction. At first, she thinks the change in revs rouses him but Stirling snores his way through abrupt breakings, reversing and renegotiations around washouts; then indicates, with his hand, and often without even raising his hat to view the road, when she needs to turn. The track gets narrower and rougher. Perhaps it will eventually disappear from view altogether. Annie wakes Stirling by asking for some more four-wheel driving tips.

‘So it’s good to slow down for sand and change into low four?’

‘Some sand, yeah.’

Some sand? Is there different driving for different types of sand? Do Indigenous people from the desert have different words for different sand like the Inuit do for snow?

‘Would I use low four for river sand?’ Annie asks.

‘Might be.’

And there was that ‘might be’ phrase again. Does ‘might be’ mean ‘sometimes’ or ‘I’m not sure’ or ‘it depends’ or ‘I’m not about to divulge that kind of information’? Or any of these, depending on the circumstances? Or does it mean just that. ‘Might’ leaves her floundering. Why is Stirling being purposefully indecisive?

‘What other sand is there?’ she asks.

‘Sandhills.’

Annie’s foot falters on the accelerator. ‘Sandhills!’

‘Yeah, big ones, just before you get into Yindi.’

‘Do you use low four for them?’

Stirling laughs.

‘What might you do?’

‘You drive fast, like,’ says Stirling, ‘and hang on tight.’

When they get to Yindi Aboriginal Community, Stirling directs her to a place he calls ‘Bottom Camp’. He slides out of the car and points to a track that leads to nothing but a heat haze. She nearly cries, but catches the sob before it reaches her lips. She doesn’t want him to think her a sook.

‘Mick’s camp,’ he says, hitching up his jeans.

She peers down the track and sees red sand and spinifex and the occasional wiry tree but no structures of any kind. ‘How far?’

‘Not far.’

Last time she had asked Stirling this question, he’d given the same reply and it had taken them more than two hours to get to Yindi. Panic floods her tired body. Stirling waves to a few people sitting outside in the shade cast by a big steel shed; ashes of a fire, long spent, blow up around them in a wisp of desert breeze.

‘Righto,’ he slaps the car as if it were the flank of a horse and ambles away carrying no luggage whatsoever.

Thankfully, Mick’s camp is less than a kilometre away. It consists of two rectangular metal boxes, or dongas, set a little apart from one another and joined by an open-ended breezeway. There is a bed in each box: a single in one, a double in the other. The double bed backs onto a kitchen where a motley collection of pre-loved jars, tins and rags grace a draining rack that looks like it literally fell off the back of a truck. The single bed is squeezed in the donga with a long-range radio, bicycles,

drive shafts, swags and a population of cups, their contents in varying stages of desiccation. She extracts a length of hay bale twine from beneath a milk crate crammed with books, and threads it through the loops of her shorts that have been constantly falling down over the last few days. Annie feels she should sleep on the single bed if it weren't for the piles of papers and half-finished sketches on top of it. Judging from the rectangles of dust surrounding the double bed, it looks as if he has only just relocated them. Outside an old muffler doubles as a hot water system on the camp fire.

She spends her first evening at Yindi sitting on a chair as shaky as her resolve, watching the shadows stretch to fading. A car growls around Bottom Camp. She listens to people calling in an unfamiliar language as they move between sheds and cooking fires. A child's wail carries thinly on the diluted heat of sunset. Steel drums pop as they cool. Annie feels like a foreigner in her own country. As the sun sinks below the horizon, she turns her chair a half-circle to the east and watches a full moon slide up a tank stand, escorted by dappled cloud sliding in colour from twilight white, to orange, to purple. Closer to midnight, when the moon hangs high, she begins a letter. *Dear Abby*, she writes amid a whirling halo of insects, *Remember how you said I've got nothing to lose ...*