

**K.E. Miller**

## **TEAR DROPS**

Pearls, once believed to have been the tear drops of angels that were shed, dropped and rolled into oysters, have been treasured for 5000 years. Gabriel has been selling them from a stall at Paddington Market for five months to support himself while he writes.

At the market the other stall-holders call him the pearly king. He has become an expert on pearls. Knowledge sells. He spoke to jewellers, took out books from the public library. He tells customers how to judge a genuine pearl and its quality, how they are made, the difference between cultured and freshwater pearls. He has become quite obsessed with their beauty. At night he dreams rivers of pearls flowing towards him, all different shapes and colours.

To increase sales he decides to advertise in the local paper; **FRESHWATER PEARLS-TOP QUALITY FROM \$25 A STRING. ALSO CULTURED PEARLS AT BEST PRICES-CALL 3875990.** He sits at home waiting, trying to write, but he can't work.

The first day there are no calls. Nor on the second, third or fourth. He looks at the advert repeatedly, with each passing day finding more fault. It doesn't stand out, the wording is wrong, it's on the wrong page. On the weekend there are four calls. The people come to his unit and he sells four strings. Enough profit to cover the advert so he continues it for another week.

On the Friday of the second week he has a number of calls from elderly women not able to come out from their homes, asking him if he will bring the pearls to them. He finds himself passing through some luxurious homes in the Eastern Suburbs, wondering each time he knocks at the door what he is doing. Is this really him, a trained solicitor, a would be writer, knocking on old ladies' doors to sell them pearls?

At the first address he passes a Rolls Royce in the driveway. The door is opened to a vast expanse of fluffy white carpet: Clouds floating on the floor, as if the aged occupant wants to experience the sensation of heaven before she actually departs. Unfortunately, he hasn't cleaned his shoes properly and leaves a trail of dirt across the expensive premonition. Despite this a bracelet is bought and he follows his tracks to the front door when he leaves.

The last address on his list is a stark contrast to the affluence he has been gracing. A dingy building off Macleay Street. He knocks on the door of the unit. He can hardly see the numbers on the doors in the gloomy light. "I won't sell pearls here," he thinks. There is no answer. He can smell potatoes cooking. "I've had enough. I'm going home." As he turns to leave he hears a slight shuffling noise. He looks back.

"Who is it?" A soft voice from behind the door.

"It's Gabriel. You called me about the pearls." There is a silence. "You asked me to come and show them to you. I've got them here." More shuffling noises behind the door. Then the sound of a chain, keys turning in a lock. He counts them; one, two, three. Slowly the door opens. Mrs Hopewell.

She is very large. His first impression is that a string of pearls will not fit around her neck, shapeless layers of flesh separating her head from her shoulders. She moves with great difficulty aided by two walking sticks. The loud sound of her wheezing like a rough kettle.

He stands, waiting patiently till she reaches her chair and very laboriously lowers herself into it. The room they are in is sitting-room, bedroom and kitchen. A bed which looks too narrow for her body, two old Parker Knoll chairs covered in worn red fabric. A table between the two chairs, a crocheted doily. Dead carnations in a vase on top of an old television set.

The effort of walking from the door exhausts her. Gabriel feels claustrophobic in this small room, burglar-barred from the light outside. He brings out the pearls, little expecting a sale. She probably wants conversation not pearls. He lays out the jewellery bag on the little table. She can't see properly so he holds it open in front of her, telling her the prices.

"I've always wanted more pearls," she wheezes. "I had a string which my husband saved for months to buy. He couldn't really afford it and was so proud of himself when he gave them to me. That was before we were married." She paused. A tear rolled over her cheek.

"When he died I wore the pearls to his funeral. After the service, as I bent down to throw some earth onto his coffin, the catch on the pearls must have come undone. The pearls fell off my neck and landed on top of the coffin. Maybe he wanted a memory of me. I didn't try and get them back and they were soon covered with brown earth." They sit as if observing a moment's silence when she stops talking.

The pearls she likes are the most expensive. Seventeen millimetre baroques with a beautiful pink lustre. One string won't go round her neck. He measures one and a half to be just right. He promises to ring

her as soon as they are strung. She asks for her bag and gives him a deposit of \$100. He could walk out and never return and is touched by her trust.

Gabriel lets himself out. He breathes the fresh air as if it is something extraordinary. Happiness is simply health, mobility.

A week later the pearls come back from the jewellers. They look stunning. She will like them. He calls Mrs Hopewell after lunch and is surprised to hear a younger voice answer the phone. He thinks he has the wrong number. "Is that 3275646?"

"Yes."

"Could I speak to Mrs Hopewell please?"

"She can't talk on the phone, she's just had a stroke. Who is it?"

"I sold her some pearls last week. I said I would call her when they were ready. What should I do?"

"Hold on." He hears her speaking away from the phone. "Mum, there's a man on the phone who says you bought some pearls and he has them ready for you." A short silence. The voice again, speaking to Gabriel. "I told her the pearls are ready and her eyes lit up. We're waiting for the ambulance."

Gabriel interrupts her. "I'll come over immediately. Maybe I can get them to her before she goes to hospital." He drives quickly up to the Cross with the pearls in his pocket. As he gets out of the car an ambulance arrives. Her daughter lets him in. Mrs Hopewell is lying on the bed, her eyes open. Gabriel feels the very uncomfortable presence of death. He holds the pearls up close to her face to show her. They drop out of his hand on to the bed. Holding them up again he can see a flicker of pleasure in her eyes.

"Do you want to put them on Mum?" her daughter asks. Turning to Gabriel she says, "Help me put them around her neck." The ambulancemen are waiting at the door.

The necklace fits perfectly. Her daughter brings out a small mirror from her bag and holds it up for her. "She likes them very much," she says. Tears drop from Mrs Hopewell's eyes, rolling down her face and onto the pearls."