

Kim Ferguson

STRANGERS

A hollow musical note came from the flat tyre as it hit the dusty road. The fine red dust fanned up over him, over the dirty white sedan. Yellow stones knifed up out of the dust. Sharp enough to break skin. Pointed enough to burst a tyre.

Get out here and help me, the man said.

Linda stepped out of the tilted-up car. The air felt like she had opened a clothes dryer. She balanced between the sharp rocks, holding her Smash Hits magazine over her head for shade. Her father was wearing his blue towelling hat. It made him look even more stupid. She was glad there was no-one to see her with him.

Put that down and give me a hand, he said.

I don't want to get sunburned, actually.

Her freckles were like the red dust. But unlike the dust, they wouldn't scrub off. No matter how hard she tried, they never scrubbed off.

Hold these, he said.

The wheel nuts were hot as the desert. She juggled them from hand to hand.

What happens if we get another one? She said.

It was their second flat tyre, and they had two spares. He was putting the last spare on the car now.

We won't, her father Bob said.

Linda had not heard the first tyre blow. She had been plugged into her Walkman. Ace of Base, Pearl Jam, 4 Non Blondes became her friends on the long trip. Her father did not care. He never spoke to her, listening to the cricket on the radio as he drove. She and her father were like strangers. Linda could have been a hitchhiker.

Every day she found it harder to work him out any more. On the long blue straights of the highway she sat next to him with her orange headphones on. Sometimes at home when he gets wild he says I'm getting too big for my boots.

Mum says he just can't handle that I'm growing up. Getting smarter than him. Then he shuts up. You can actually see him shut himself off. When she got sick of reading the same magazine over and over, she thought about watching tv, even how she should be studying for her Year eight exams. I wish I could have my own room at home tonight. Instead of the motel rooms where he snores like an idiot all night. Then she would put on her headphones again, turning up the volume loud.

He wheezed, lifting the new tyre and putting it on.

Wouldn't it be funny if we got another one, she said.

It couldn't happen.

About 500 metres later, another tyre split.

Bob sighed like the tyre.

What'll we do now, she said.

We wait for someone to come along.

Outside, termite hills grew into the blue, pink, white and purple sky. They pushed up dark red from the scrub as if they were growths on the earth.

But what if no-one does, she said.

Of course someone will. We'll be right.

It's his favourite saying. Until he gets angry or drunk, then nothing's right. He yelled in the kitchen and made Mum cry. Now he's scaring me again.

We've got no food or water, Linda said. We're stranded.

Stop overreacting. You're just like your mother. Bloody redheads.

He opened the door, got out. Dust oozed into the car. Linda picked up the warm Diet Coke can from the floor, upended it over her mouth. It was empty. She had bought it at the service station an hour back up the road, had drunk it in the hot car where she waited for Bob.

Coming back from Exmouth, they had turned off the highway onto a dirt road. She turned down her music.

Where are we going? She said.

We're taking the inland road back home, he said. I've always wanted to see the outback. God's own country.

She plugged herself into the Walkman.

They travelled east. The picture in the window changed to a blur of yellow, green, brown, orange, red and purple.

Twisted termite mounds and demented trees flashed by. They stopped at tiny towns where the people were dark as the ground. Bob always had to just nip into the pub. Linda walked up and down outside like a hitchhiker scuffing up dust.

She heard water, saw her father standing widelegged towards a termite hill. She watched the dark stain spread like a shadow on the mound.

Gross, she yelled.

They heard the motor and saw the dust gushing into the air. A rusty Landrover towing a pop-up caravan pulled up. Dust snorted around it.

Gawd, take a look at this, Bob said.

A man stepped down from the driver's side. He only wore cut off jeans, a pair of old sneakers. He had a beard and his long hair was tied in a pony tail. His hair was matted with dust and no brushing. One by one he lifted three little girls down from the back seat. They stood close together on the road. Then a pregnant woman got out. She wore a flowing cheesecloth dress. To Bob they meant two words: druggy hippies. To Linda the woman was a balloon ready to burst. Linda got out of the car.

Need some help? The man said, swaying through the heat towards them.

We've run out of spare tyres, Bob said. Got three punctures in the last mile.

The woman and the girls had joined them. The woman looked tired, dreamy. Linda wanted to look at the swollen stomach in front of her but she looked at the woman's sandals instead. The girls' big eyes stared up at Linda.

I'll take you back to get some more, the man said.

Bob looked in his wallet.

Okay, he said. We'll get a couple of beers too.

Geez Dad, don't get stuck in the pub and forget we're here.

Bob laughed to the man and woman.

It's a phase she's going through, he said. She'll grow out of it. She better anyway, he said and laughed again.

Bob and the man unhooked the caravan from the Landrover. They rested the towing shaft on the low kerb of rocks and scrub at the side of the road.

Be a couple of hours, the man said.

The four wheel drive turned, cutting wheel marks into the dust like two flat knives. Linda watched the dust swirl out from under the Landrover as they left, back the way they had all come.

It'll be okay, the woman said. Kris doesn't drink. My name's Ruth. And this is Sky and Bliss and April.

I'm Linda.

We better put up the van, Ruth said.

Linda watched and copied what she did, turning plastic handles and snapping aluminium stays into place to put up the canvas roof. Ruth moved slowly in the heat, her fat face the colour of an almost ripe tomato. The little girls played on the ground between them. They whirled up dust, stopping now and then to watch Linda. Whichever way she turned her face Linda could taste the dust.

Where have you been to? Ruth said.

We went to see my brother for the holidays at Exmouth. Mum had to stay at work, naturally.

Did you have a good time?

It was okay.

How old is your brother?

Eighteen. He works on a crayfish boat.

How old are you?

Twelve.

You'll soon be home again.

I hope so, Linda said.

Inside the sparse caravan Ruth lowered two bunk beds from the wall. Then she unfolded a stool for Linda to sit on.

Everything unfolds here, Linda thought.

Sky, get the water from the fridge for Mum, Ruth said.

The biggest of the girls opened the small fridge, lifted out a bottle of water. They all had a drink. The way Ruth gave some to each of the girls reminded Linda of a plump mother bird feeding her thin chicks. There was the dullness of plastic in the water. But it was cool and did not taste of dust.

Ruth eased herself onto the bottom bed, sitting there out of breath. She pushed off her sandals. They left marks like red roads in her swollen feet.

It's okay, Ruth said. I'm used to this.

When are you ... when is the baby coming.

Any day. They never arrive when you expect.

Don't have it now, Linda thought. I don't know what to do.

Ruth pulled her tarpaulin of a dress up to her knees. Her legs were fat and round. She swirled her hair up into a bun.

We were lucky you came, Linda said. At the last petrol station there was a sign about only coming on this road if you had a four wheel drive. Dad said we'd be alright. Naturally he'd been in the pub across the road first. I had to wait outside. Pub's smell. You can smell them even from the outside.

The two smallest girls drowsed on the mattress next to their mother. Their mouths were slightly open, their eyes were slits looking at Linda's red hair. Sky had scuttled up to the top bunk. She looked at her too.

I'm so out of it today, Ruth said. Let's all have a rest.

She lay next to the two girls. Linda quietly put the water back in the fridge. She sat looking at the two tents of Ruth's breasts, the soft outcrop of her stomach. It made her feel strange.

Like when my breasts started to grow. The sore swelling. Something building inside me. My freckly skin nudging out showing everyone I'm not a boy. Dad working out I'm not his son. I'm his daughter.

I want a wee, Sky said and climbed down from the top bunk.

Soon I'll get periods. Then you'll know all about being a woman, Mum says. Calls them a curse. Talks about them the way she does about Dad. Blood and pain. She thought she could see movement in the swell of Ruth's belly. That'll be me. How could my body expand so much. My skin'll tear if I had a baby. Be a mother myself. And with all that going on somehow I have to make sure I don't end up miserable like Mum.

Leading Sky around the side of the caravan, Linda felt her small fingers wriggling inside her hand. Where Sky squatted there were tiny tracks in the sand. Off the road, small wiry bushes and pricking grey grass cast thin shadows that could hide snakes that were looking at her. Or lizards that bit and did not let go.

Don't be scared, Linda said.

The air was hot as a headache, powdered with dust you swallowed with your breath.

At Exmouth, the sand was white, the breeze was blue. Linda sat on her haunches in the back of her brother's ute. She held onto the side wall, bouncing

as they sped along the corrugated dirt road to Turquoise Bay. The bay was as clear as an aquarium. A lagoon hemmed in from the navy blue sea by the Ningaloo reef. From the shore she could see tropical fish swaying through the lagoon. Linda wanted to swim. Even if she got sunburnt. Even if she had no bathing suit.

Well, strip off and go in, her father said. We're hardly going to watch. Let's go back to the ute and have a beer, he said to his son.

On the deserted beach, Linda stripped to her underpants, waded into the water. It was cold and she held her arms out then dived. When she opened her eyes she was flying over the hills and valleys of another planet. Purple, white, pink coral reached up. A shadow became a green fish. It swam past, smiling at her. She sputtered back to earth, got a new breath. When she squinted, there were faces in the coral the way there are in clouds. The clouds of coral floated past and bright fish danced through her fingers, over her arms, along her body, up between her legs.

Peeling prawns made her hands smell. Her father and brother had fussed for hours with the wood barbecue. As they drank they stoked it up, let it did down too much. Drank more, stoked it up again. It was like they were home together again.

Those prawns ready to go on? Her father said, the way he would ask his wife if they were at home.

Linda handed him the prawns as though they were poison. She could not believe the hard, dead prawns came from the same ocean where the fish danced and smiled.

I saw this big gold and orange fish with wings, Linda said.

We saw something too, her brother said.

Her father laughed and a black smoke of suspicion came over to Linda from the barbecue.

Getting little boobies, aren't we, her brother said and her father was still laughing. We saw you jiggling around out there in the water.

Bastard, Linda yelled and flailed inside.

She hammered onto the couch and wished she was at home.

The afternoon sun was hostile as a hangover. Bob watched Kris pumping the jack, lifting the flat tyre from the dust. The Landrover tilted up. Sweat ran down. Kris' curved back, was brushed into his swaying pony-tail.

I must be jinxed, Bob said.

Ung, Kris grunted.

Geez I could do with a beer.

Kris lifted the spare tyre, a big black circle against the red dust of the vehicle. Bob passed the tyre lever to him.

You're pretty good at that, Bob said. What do you do for a crust?

We just travel around, Kris said. I pick up money where I can.

Wish I could do that, Bob said. Free as a bird. Just get up and go when you want.

I do have to look after Ruth and the kids.

Three girls, heh?

And another baby soon.

I spose you're hanging out for boy.

Girls love their dads, you know.

He had seen her out of the corner of his eye. At the edge of the kitchen doorway. When he and his wife had been shouting. When she yelled: *Piss off out of here you ignorant pig.* He remembered the words exactly. It was a mouthful for an angry woman. He had got time off work. Taken Linda to Exmouth for her school holidays. As an excuse to get out of there for a while. That day when they were shouting, he had seen her. There in a corner of the white door frame. Linda's wet green eyes were looking at them.

Bob shouted. The metal broke the skin under his hat. He heard a hollow note as his head hit the ground. The fine red dust fanned up over him. Kris tossed the tyre lever into the Landrover, pulled the wallet from Bob's back pocket. It slid out like a knife.

Sky had the orange earphones on over her head. She held the Walkman like it was a kitten. The little girl rocked softly on Linda's knee, where she sat on the stool in the caravan. Linda knew the batteries would be worn out soon, but she did not care. The hill of Ruth's body moved. She propped herself up, blotted red and bloated.

What time is it? Ruth said, her voice gritty as dust.

Five PM. Linda said. They should have been back hours ago.

Thank you for looking after her, Ruth said.

Linda put her hands under Sky's arms to lift her down, as though she was going to hand back a biscuit she shouldn't have taken.

No, no. She's happy there. You've done a great job coping. You're okay.

I wish my dad thought that. He doesn't care, that's why he's in the pub. He only likes my brother.

Don't worry about your dad, Ruth said. Just wait till you're a bit older.

When Linda was small, she was on a merry go round and her pink dress floated out behind her. She rode her beautiful horse around and around, up and down. She knew everyone was admiring her. She had heard her mother use that word that morning. She came inside and said: I've just been admiring next door's roses. Pity we don't have a garden like that. When the carousel stopped, the man lifted her down. She walked, didn't run, to her mother and father and brother.

You're my princess, her father said.

He lifted her up, the familiar smell of beer as his face came near. I'm just a little girl. When I'm older, he might call me princess again. We might both grow out of the phase we're in, me and my stupid Dad. He might understand each other again.

Dust pummelled into the caravan as the Landrover pulled up.

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