

Country Boy

The next time I saw her she was on the train, looking out of the window. Her eyes flicked at the scenery gathering speed, catching on something now and then –the backdoor of grubby terrace, kicked in and hanging on one hinge, a strawberry red billboard advertisement promising something *Longer Lasting*, the carcass of a carriage derelict on the sidings, burnt out and made over with graffiti like an old whore. She watched the train line detritus of the city surging away. And I watched her.

She didn't remember me.

She'd looked up from her book and I'd seen the green of her eyes, waited for them to stall on me and flare with recognition. But they didn't. They just passed aimlessly down the aisle, up over my boots, across my chest, fit to bursting with held breath, and over to the opposite window.

She didn't remember me.

I knew her, though. Couldn't forget even if I wanted to. Here it was again: my life aligning to hers, swinging away and re-aligning, like a needle to the pole. Huh. In Mingindiri I'd have been laughed out of the pub for that one. Fate, destiny, whatever. No one believed in that sort of thing where I came from. In Mingindiri, they say people are born in their boots, die in their boots and their boots don't go very far in between. In a place where you wake up to the yearning expanse of empty sky slapped above the slow curve of the earth, you'd think a man would have room for a bit of philosophy. Not in Mingindiri. Livestock diseases and feed

prices, new fertilizers and GPS rigs, they were the realities that marked the years. Despite that great flare of blue above, there wasn't room for anything else.

We'd been rocking across from each other for fifteen minutes out of St Pancras. The gentle sway of her shoulders and knees in the wheelchair marked out the seconds, as I charted the lines of scars on her cheek and neck and on her hands holding the book. White ridges of skin like puckered sealant, closing her up where the windshield had shattered in on her. One long track gathering her upper lip right up to her nose where she'd spilt her mouth on the steering wheel. But it was her green eyes that made me sure. The green eyes and that white skin that made it seem she'd have milk flowing through her veins instead of blood.

After I found her, that's what my mind kept sticking on. How wrong the blood had seemed on her face, filling her ears, leisurely coiling across her pale breasts, like a red-bellied black nesting in the warm white sheets just off the line. For years afterwards when I was with a woman, I'd be getting off more on remembering the even blanch of her skin than from anything they were doing. Perverted, I know, and I tried to shake it from my head. But, you see, she went inside me like nothing else had for a long time. Funny how being close to death can do that –I mean, make you feel more alive, jump-start part of your brain that had gone flat long ago and make you urgent with thoughts.

I'd seen her at *The Imperial*. I was filthy from dipping and weary with the prospect of another whole week of it ahead of me. And that day I'd seen the years filing out before me as predictable and mindless as the long line of sheep through the channels. She was new at the bar and there were quite a few of us giving her more than the once over. She wasn't local, not even Australian, or at least hadn't been for very long. Christ, that red hair and the marble skin

and those eyes like some shady pasture seemed exotic out there where everything was degrees of brown, sapped and desiccated with drought. Most of the women in Mingindiri have skin as tanned and creased as an old pair of Baxters from the neck up, cuff down. Some mornings in bed with Dee I'd see her neck on the pillow, furrowed and mottled like Red Gum bark. So she went through us like rain, this girl, and we were sucking her back more greedily than our beers.

“Hard day?” she said to me when she'd no more glasses to fill.

I nodded and my fingers in my hair loosened dust and bits of dry grass onto the bar.

“Where'ya from?” I said.

“Ireland. Waterford.”

“And what do you want here, then?” I asked her. She looked a bit indignant, so I said, “I mean, why would you leave a place called Waterford for a dust bowl like this?” She laughed.

“Ah, ya know. See what's out there,” she said, and even her lilting voice went through me like a breeze scuffing though an old shed. Right then, all I wanted to tell her was, “Just keep talking.”

A week later I found her on the back road to Munde, all bloodied up and the ute mangled around her, trapping her in from the waist down. And while we waited for the ambos on the hour-long drive from Moree, I got to tell her that.

“Keep talking, OK? You need to keep talking to me.” Through the open window I held my T-shirt to her face and watched those green eyes rolling up into her head and flicking back again.

“And what is out there?” I’d asked her, elbow pointing to the bay windows of the pub behind me. She’d cupped her chin in her white hands on the bar and tapped her cheek with translucent nails, and she said, “A lot of feekin’ chick peas, for sure.”

I’d laughed. I’d laughed a lot, because no one had made the truth funny for a long time.

“What, then? I’m only telling it like it is,” she said.

“Yeah, you are,” I said.

Then she asked me, “Is it true one of the farms up here is nearly the size of Ireland?”

The road where I found her ran through that property. My father had managed part of it when I was a boy and the tree she’d ran into marked the entrance to the homestead, still over a kilometre away. I’d bike to that tree in summer and climb up it to look down the road, a shimmering line of mercury through fields of sorghum and wheat as far as the horizon on 360 degrees. In the holidays I’d scout the perimeters of the stock farm for lost sheep. Sometimes I’d find one or two in the bush, legs raw to the bone, straining to get free of fox traps. Or sometimes there were ewes that had been attacked by feral dogs and were lying shivering in pools of their own innards. I’d shoot them with the rifle and sling them in the back of the ute, as mindlessly as taking garbage out to the skip bins down on the sealed road.

When I found her she was panting the way those sheep did when they were too far gone for bleating, when the unconscious reactions of the body, like suck of the diaphragm or the slow squeeze of the heart, have become conscious and are all a creature can manage. I looked down at the casing of metal crimped about her legs and knew that even if she got out of this alive, she’d never be using them again. I could have so easily covered her bloody mouth and broken nose with my shirt, pressed a tiny bit and just waited for the paltry remnants of life to let go of her.

“Have you never wanted to see what’s out there, then?” she’d asked me while she was stacking the glass washer.

“No,” I’d said. But I’d wanted to say, “Not until now.”

She told me about Ireland and her family and coming to Australia, her voice lithe and getting inside of me like a child’s laughter, until she stopped and snatched her breath.

“Shit,” she said, holding up a finger pumping blood.

I grabbed a napkin from the table behind and cupped it about her hand.

“Broken glass in the washer. Sorry.”

“What for?” I asked.

“I got blood on your shirt.” I saw the drops on my grimy shirt sleeves where the cuffs were rolled back but I kept my fingers pressed on the napkin around hers until she laughed, “You can let go now.”

“Talk to me,” I told her and her eyes twitched and her tongue clicked on her dry mouth like she was about to say something. “Can you hear me?” I said. In unison, the pulse of cicadas stopped and I held my breath, listening. Her fingers fluttered in my hand like moth wings.

I talked to her. I didn’t know what else to do. I told her anything: the weather forecast for the month; the latest price of sorghum at auction; how Harrisons had spread flu through their stud pigs, so they could monopolise the market with their own immune stock. I told her how I didn’t love Dee, but couldn’t leave when she’d got pregnant and anyway where was there to go? I told her how the baby had tested positive for some chromosome deficiency and I’d convinced her to abort it. I told her how she’d left eventually because she said I treated people no better than fucking sheep. And I asked her again why she’d really come to this hole of a place. Then I ran out of things to say.

Her breathing had become shallow and fast, but her eyes under their bloody lids still moved and her fingers still had the tremble of life in my hand. And then she whispered. She tried to say something. Her lips moved in the shape of words but no sound came out. I leant further through the window of the jammed door and put my ear up close to her mouth. I felt her breath.

“Do,” she seemed to exhale.

“What?” I asked.

“Do it,” she clicked the words from the roof of her dry mouth like code.

I pulled away to look at her. Her green eyes were open and as lucid as when she’d leaned across the bar to me and asked my name.

“Do it,” she mouthed again. Then she inhaled a long hissing breath, suddenly alive and violent, “Don’t save me for this shit.” As she was looking at the bloody shirt in my hand.

I yanked away from the car then and stood up too quickly, the blood banging in my head like fireworks. “Oh, Christ,” I said reeling. “Ah, Jesus,” and I meant it as a prayer of sorts, as much as I’ve ever managed, because she’d nailed me. In those few tragic minutes when our paths had crossed again she’d nailed me exactly for who I was: a fucking brutal no-hoper country boy, who might take her out like wounded stock.

When the stars cleared from my eyes, the ambo and the firies were there and I sat in the ditch and watched them cut her out with chainsaws and get her in the van. Afterwards one of them checked me over. He took the bloody shirt off me and looked down at my bare feet. “Where are your boots, Dean?” It was Johnno Sands, the ambo from Moree who drank at *The Imperial*. He pulled his chin in and scanned me over like I was naked.

“Dunno,” I said waving him away and walking barefoot through the dust to my ute.

“You know you should come back with us. You might be in shock, mate.”

“Yep,” I said and drove away. And I kept driving for ten hours, until I got to Sydney.

I called Johnno two weeks later to ask about the girl.

“Mate, where are you?”

“Construction site. Coogee,” I told him.

“Look, Deano. She was in a bad way. They had to airlift her to Brissie and she was on a machine. I’ve got no idea, man. But you did everything you could, right?”

“Right-o.”

“And Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“Got your RM’s mate. You left ’em in the ditch.”

“You keep ’em for a bit, Johnno, OK?”

So you see, I knew it was her the moment I saw her. You’d never forget something like that, someone like that. Even six years later, on the other side of the world. Of course I’d seen her plenty of times before, in my dreams, sucking her finger at the bar or bloodied up and whispering at me from behind the wheel of the ute, her eyes rolling back in her head. And I’d seen her on buses, in shops, passing building sites all over the world. But she always walked away and turned into someone else. Now I was raw with the certainty of it, trembling so much I couldn’t sit still and had to lean my forearms on my knees just to breathe. The memory of her and the reality of her fused and came at me like a knee to the stomach, until I had to swallow back vomit. When I’d caught my breath and pulled myself together I just stared at her down the carriage, watching her turning the pages, rocking with the train, her withered legs rubbery-looking and perfectly still as only nerveless limbs can be. I watched every

movement as if it was a revelation, like a father with a newborn: the biting of a thumbnail, the stroke of a hand under the fine hair of her neck as she stretched, the roll of her wrist unscrewing a water bottle, the flash of her teeth as she swallowed, and the settling back to the book. All the inconsequential movements of a life.

As the train pulled into Luton, a steward came to wheel her off. He flicked the brake and rolled her chair backwards, and she caught my eye and held it all the long length of the carriage to the door. “Thanks,” she said. “Thanks for your help,” she said, without looking at the steward behind her.

I dragged my eyes off hers then, away from that green that could break a drought and for a long time I looked at the deep wet creases of my boots.