

Sacred Song For The Earth

Next services 200 kilometres, reads the shotgun peppered sign outside the Last Chance pub, its white metal plate yellowed with age, green writing pitted and scored. A blazing sun fires laser beams through the bullet holes. A few houses surround the pub—not much more than ramshackle humpies, a dilapidated service station boasting a petrol and diesel pump and a run-down general store. Skinny kids play kick the can while puny dogs laze around in the searing heat, tongues lolling.

“What’s a young lass like you doing headed off alone into the desert in your condition?” The grey-haired, grey-bearded storekeeper dressed in sweat-stained singlet and shorts nods at my bulging belly.

“I’m headed home. My parents own the Coolamunda cattle station up at the far end so I’ve driven through before, but not for a while.” Looking to find my last chance at happiness I could’ve added. I hadn’t found any since I’d driven away five years ago to seek out love and happiness in the big city, vowing never to return ‘to the isolated dung smelling heap’ I’d called home.

“Get me a can of beer,” my latest live-in had demanded, drool slaverling down his chin, stubbing another cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray. I guess we take love where we can find it.

“Can’t you get it yourself?” I knew I’d pay the price as soon as the words fell from my mouth but I was tired from standing on my feet all afternoon, scanning trolley loads of groceries through the check-out. And my back ached.

I crept out of the front door, leaving behind my car keys in exchange for his four-wheel drive. I grimaced at the thought of his anger when he woke from his alcoholic fugue and found me gone, together with his precious vehicle, but he’d never see me again—I had someone else to love now.

I fill up on diesel at the Last Chance pump; load several six packs of water and a few plastic triangles of sandwiches, their crusts curling in the baking heat, onto the back seat then pay a visit to the rust-stained fairly clean toilet behind the store. Back outside a circle of aboriginal women, faces dotted with painted ochre raindrops, eyes closed, hands joined, have gathered beneath the shade of a gum tree chanting a haunting, harmonious melody.

“That’s beautiful. What is it?” I ask the storekeeper.

“They’re singing out for rain; some sacred song telling of their respect for the earth. They reckon if the cosmos listens it’ll send help with the dry.” His head droops. “We ain’t had so much as a sprinkle for months on end.”

If I can keep up a speed of 100 kilometres—shouldn’t be too hard, it’s not as if anyone’s hogging the road—I should reach Coolamunda in just over two hours. I imagine a high-heeled silver shoe sitting on the Forester’s roof trailing a silver ribbon. Guy Pearce is riding shotgun and if the bump turns out to be a girl I’ll call her Priscilla. The desert highway stretches towards the horizon and I cruise along scaring a frill-necked lizard lazing by the roadside; it skitters alongside, frill raised to warn me off, before bounding away on its two

back legs. A snake slithers across my path and I slow to avoid running over it; don't want it to coil around the wheels and hitch a ride. A red kangaroo bounds in the distance leaving clouds of dust in its wake.

After a couple of hours, the sun morphs into a hazy, fiery red ball even though it's only mid-afternoon. The wind picks up making the sand whirl and dance across the road. Spinifex twirls alongside the vehicle and the air inside becomes oppressive. Outside everything turns orange; visibility zero and my heart leadens—I know what's coming.

Screeching to a halt next to a dried-up water hole I only just manage to curl up inside a hollowed-out treefall before sheets of sand rise from the ground and the full assault of the sandstorm roars through like a road train, stinging and biting at my legs. I scrunch into a ball to protect the bump and my face. When the noise finally dies down, I crawl out from the treefall, mouth full of grit, skin dry and feathery. The four-wheel drive is a sandblasted sculpture; sand blocking its every nook and crevice. I dig out a six pack of water buried in a mound on the back seat—no hope of a sandwich—and park myself beneath a lone gum tree next to the water hole, seeking shade beneath its scrawny branches and brittle leaves.

"We're so pleased you're coming back home ... make a new life for yourself." I'd phoned my parents from the pub to say I'm on my way. When I don't turn up on time they'll set off to look for me.

"What will they think about you?" I hadn't told them over the phone about the new life I was already making. My hands cradled their grandchild who's slept peacefully throughout the drama, not a kick to be felt. "Please find us," I prayed, before I turn into a piece of frazzled flesh, my last thought before I doze off beneath the baking sun.

Thunder roiling through steely-grey clouds wakes me. A haunting melody floats on the oppressive air that leaves me gasping for breath and for a moment I'm back at Last Chance. A rare desert storm is brewing and a hint of the wetness that will soon fill the deep-water hole dampens my hot skin. The heavens open and the rain cascades down. I leap blissfully into the rapidly filling water hole and splash away the grit, bump bounces and kicks along with me; even the leaves on the gum tree seem to dance with joy.

Thank you, I cry out to the aboriginal women.

Their song has been heard.