

The milk in the sky

The first time I seen Trace she's at the roadside lying in the sun like there's no work to be done anywhere and I think she's a bloke. So I sidle up to her, hands on my hips, cause I have to follow every avenue just in case. She's under a wide brown hat and all I see is this grin come up and then two slight rises under the check shirt. I drop the flirt straight away when I see.

Well, g'day there missy, she says, whatcha doin wandering around out here on your own?

Goin' home, I say squinting against the sun. You?

She sits up, her head close to my knees. Just blew in, she says. For the weekend. Hitched up from town. Trace, she says, and holds up her hand. I touch it lightly and say my name.

There's a dance on at the pub this Saturday, I tell her. I shift my weight, my knees trying to hide. A lot of blokes come in for it from around. Watch yourself out here ay. She nods at me, still grinning, and I step back onto the track, head for the station. My brothers are waiting for me to bring the shopping back. It's in a calico bag, and the narrow strap slices into my fingers.

She follows me up the track a bit, but every time I look back she's staring at the earth under her feet and all I see is the hat. After a while I stop checking she's there and when I get to my gate and look back down all I see is a speck that might be cast by the spots of light and dark on my eyes from the heat, shimmering things. The horse sniffs at me, scoffing at mirages.

The dance is something, anyway. I put on my dress and comb my hair out then think again and put it up, pull the fringes behind my ears. I guess I look a bit serious, practice smiling in the mirror. Curtsey like mum showed me. A lot of the blokes come in from bigger stations with money, it's my turn to catch one. Me and my brothers have a hard time making this place work on our own, now that our parents have gone. I'll be an old maid if I don't take advantage. But none of em have struck me yet.

We drive down to the pub in the ute, Frank and me in front and the other two in the tray with the dog. The boys go into the bar for a quick few, refreshing the sun from their

skin with the amber. I clutch my purse, feeling ridiculous in the dress, already got dust on my hem and my shoes. I go inside.

The fiddles are going full tilt, but hardly anyone's dancing. I wait for one of the boys to bring me a lemonade. It's still early, not even dark out yet. A couple of dances, a couple of goes around the floor with the neighbours, and before I know it the place is packed and sweaty. None of em strike me. They're decent enough. I figure I'm just tired.

I go outside to get a bit of air, and see a boot sticking out of the back of the ute. Maybe one of the boys has had enough too. I go and check, but there curled up having a snooze with the dog is Trace. Ay, I say, this is our truck. You can't sleep here. She hasn't bothered to change her clothes. The music from the pub comes out: all the lower registers and the thump and sway of boots on the floorboards.

Sorry darlin, she says, looking over at me from under her hat, but I get so bored with this shit.

Me too, I say, without thinking. I mean... I look around, but the carpark is deserted, so I swing myself up and perch on the back of the ute. The moon's out, but just under half and you can see the milk in the sky. Trace sighs. Pretty, she says, ay.

If we get talking, it's just to kill the time between dances while I catch my breath; I don't notice it's getting late until someone comes crashing out of the pub shouting fit to wake the sun up. I can hear him vomiting into the planter. I guess I used to imagine something better, I hear myself saying, but I don't see the point of that now.

Better than this? I can feel the heat of her body, it's kept the day like metal does. She's stretched herself up during our chat and leans beside me, looking at the moon. Better than this, she says, and rests her lips on my shoulder, light so I can hardly feel it. It's true, the sky is the best thing about living out here. The bloke vomiting behind us stops; I hear the doors swing open and wait for the clang shut before I speak. Where did you come from? I can hear something catching in my throat; her hand's resting against my back now, but this is the kind of thing you learn not to mention.

Town, she says, I had to get going.

What for?

Oh, some people down there wanta kill me, she says, and laughs a big, immortal laugh at the sky. I had them going for a while though. Her voice drops its register. Got any work for a strapping young bloke? she growls.

The dog wakes up and sniffs the air, turns in a circle and settles back to sleep.

Oh, I say. There's a big gap in the night. What are ya? I ask, before I think about it.

Whatever I want to be, she says, what are you?

Just, I say, and my mouth's full of her teeth. We're crashed against each other on the warm steel truck bed. Bits of straw in my hair and her hat knocked off. Hands against the soft skin that hasn't seen sun. The dog lifts an ear but decides it's all right. Guess I take that as a blessing.

I wake up after the moon's gone down, cold and with someone talking to my feet. Wondering where you got to, the voice says. It's me brother, the little one. We're going home, you right? I try and straighten my dress. Yeah, I say, yawning, just got tired from dancing. I can feel the boys eyes on me, disappointed.

Well be careful, he says, you know what some of these blokes are like. He moves to help me out of the bed but I say nah, I'll be right, you go and sit up front. This way I can watch the pub recede in the dust clouds behind us and sit with my hand between the dog's warm ears and look for a black spot in the mirage. No Trace.

Things go on as usual and I'm busy with the sheep and the milking, keeping the bugs off the vegies and making sure we're all fed and washed. I think about Trace when I wash the dishes or scrub the clothes against the washboard. The way my hands get hot in the water and sore from the work. I linger in the laundry some days, smiling to myself. I look down the track almost every day and especially into the long grass when I go in to the general store, but when I don't see her my stomach does a single lonely backflip.

One day the heat is so strong I ask frank if I can take the ute in to the store and save the walking, he says he doesn't need it for the afternoon. I take off down the dust track, moving faster than I'm used to. In the store I pick out a few sacks of grain and some tinned fruit, a comic for my little brother, soap, a few bits and pieces. I throw the bag in the front seat and turn the engine on. I drive in the wrong direction, out to the paved road that goes in to town, looking for a black mark against the grass, but don't see anything

much. I might as well drive a little way in, I think. But all I see by the roadside is the odd dead roo, black birds picking at its guts and looking over at the ute to size up if I'm gonna smash into them. They don't even walk out of my way; they know I'll go round them.

I reach the town before I know it, and drive through slowly looking for someone I'd feel right asking. The main street has two pubs, a bank, a petrol station, a charcoal chicken place, and a couple of shops. It's the heat I guess, but hardly anyone's around. One old fella comes out of the pub and stares at me, grinning. A couple of blokes outside the chicken shop are chucking burnt chips at the flies. I slow down by them, window wound down, and they stare at my face, whistle slowly. I turn the ute around and get out of there, driving too fast. I plough right into the crows, but they get out of the way.

Where'd I get to, I suppose I'll have to answer for it. I wonder if the soap is melting in the seat. I have to get back and get the dinner on. I don't check my speed, just kick up a dust cloud. I keep driving past my turnoff, looking at the verge all the while for the shape of a hitchhiker.

I stop at night, hours after the sun's gone down, no clue where I am and no sign of life. I get out of the ute and stand there like an idiot. Out here, the bush beckons to you, calling you out of yourself. There's no moon yet and I glance up at the shooting stars that punctuate the sky with a syncopated rhythm like the fiddlers play. I can almost hear the dance under the dirt. I don't know what I'm doing out here. There's no chance of finding someone in this big expanse of nothing. Only the chance at drawing breath.

When I get back on the road there's a faint blush of dawn riding the ridge, it's a wonder people can sleep through the spooky light. I pull into the station, get out to unhitch the gate, drive through, get out again and close it. I stand there for a minute leaning on the post, looking out at the familiar road. A solitary bird creaks. It's almost time to milk. I shouldn't be here.

Everyone's asleep when I get back, and I wander through the empty rooms, looking at the way the light wakes up the silence. Things go on as they always do.

I don't sleep a lot. It's only been a month. Nothing much happens, so when it does you feel it: changes in the air, in the shade of the low red ball of the sun. I don't sleep a lot for

thinking. Sometimes at night I go out and crawl into the back of the ute, lie there and breathe for a minute, but the air is stiff.

Bloke was round here looking for you, Frank says over breakfast. I perk up, try not to show it. Who? I ask. Funny little fella, he says. Bit of a cheeky bastard. I almost smile, hide it under a chewy crust of bread.

Said he'd drop back later, he says, his eyes on the fried eggs along with a couple of busy flies. Didn't catch his name.

The day is long. Without sleep the heat takes it out of me, but I get everything done. By dusk I'm watering the horse, scooping my hand into its trough to wipe the dust from my face. The animal stirs, shies sideways, and snorts. What is it? I look over at the road and see a speck of something black growing in the distance. A body walking out of the mirage of heat. I run to the gate.

Well, g'day there, missy, she says, grinning at me from under her hat. I stare open-mouthed. What happened to your face? A thick bloody line runs across it, dark with dust. Toldja, she says, shrugging. They don't like me much down there. She gestures with her head, conserving energy against the baking earth that radiates heat.

Do you want to come in?

She looks over my shoulder to where the boys stand around watching us. Nah, she says. Just came to say goodbye. I'm off up north, get some work on one of those big stations where they don't care who you are.

Oh.

Her boots scratch at the earth the way the dog does when he's forgotten where he's left his bones. She looks me in the eye, grabs her hat from behind, settles it on.

See ya, she says, and walks off down the road.

I follow her, but just with my eyes. I watch her shape dry up in the shimmering heat. The waves make everything recede and loom. Squinting against the light, the dust. My throat wells up with the expanse of it. I turn and go inside.