

Verge

Clay had been on the road for a month when the girls drove through. He was moving the sheep west along a stretch where the fences pinched in and the roadsides were narrow. Pickings were scarce; autumn had brought little rain. Clay sat behind the flock, resting his horse near a stand of casuarinas, and he watched the red Mazda approach the head of the mob. The wethers were thick on the bitumen and they turned and ran in front of the car, gradually streaming off to either side like a bow wave. The driver was pushy. Locals knew it took longer to pass if the sheep panicked. When the Mazda finally got clear and drew alongside the trees, Clay raised his hand from the pommel, gave a nod. He expected the car to accelerate as it hit empty road. Instead, it pulled over.

‘Is it you, Clay?’ The girl said as she got out. Sunglasses glinting, bobbed black hair. He didn’t immediately recognise her. It was Bernadette McCorty. Her parents owned the farm next door to Clay’s old man’s place; they had a lot of land. Bern had been plump at school, but now she was thin.

‘Bern.’ He said. He hadn’t had anything to do with her at school; she was three years older. But you did that with everyone around here: called them by their small, short names.

He dismounted from Duke, walked towards the car. The disrupted sheep stood with heads lowered, flanks heaving.

The passenger door opened and another girl stepped out.

‘This is Mandy.’

She was shorter, different to Bern. Her fair curly hair bounced as she walked over and stretched out a hand. ‘Hi there!’

They were on mid-year break from uni. Mandy was staying at Bern’s, getting a taste of farm life. They’d driven to Barigal for coffee. It was the closest town west, a good forty-five minute drive.

‘You’ve quit school,’ Bern said.

‘Yes.’

‘All grown up. Poor Stuey.’ She laughed. ‘Left behind. He’d hate that.’

Clay grinned. He didn’t know about that. Stuart McCorty, Bern’s brother, had been his classmate last year—but they weren’t friends, not really. Clay had a *Year 10, Class of 93* rugby top with Stuart’s scribbled signature on the back, along with names of the other seven kids. Now, when the schoolbus passed through the mob, Stuart stared straight ahead as if Clay was not there on the roadside.

‘Do you still keep in touch?’ Bern said.

‘Now and then.’ He shrugged. It was a lie.

‘Cute,’ he heard Mandy say through the open window, as they got back in the car, and Bern replied ‘He’s just a kid.’ Then she turned the ignition. Perhaps they didn’t realise how sound travelled, out here on the flat. Perhaps they didn’t care.

The girls came back that night, to where Clay had set up camp with the droving rig. Bern had her fingers hooked in a six pack of Hahn Premium.

‘We thought you could do with the company. Come on, just one.’

Clay took polite sips from the stubby Mandy handed him.

‘Where’s your dad?’

He jerked his head in the direction from which they’d come. ‘Back home.’

They knew it anyway. Word got around. Clay's father, Max, had bruised his spine, falling from a young horse last week. He and Clay had been farther south with the mob, following old stock routes Max knew, where there was more feed; but they'd had to circle back closer to home while he mended up, slept on a proper bed.

It will turn, his dad said. If we can just keep them alive long enough, it will turn.

'What do you do all day?' Mandy asked.

Clay poked at the campfire with a branch.

'Don't you get bored?' Bern said.

'Do you sleep here, like, beside the fire?' Mandy swung her arms around.

He jabbed his thumb to the rig. 'In there.'

'Can I see?'

He shrugged.

'Mandy,' said Bern. 'Leave it.'

Mandy came back to the fire and sat obediently. She picked up the half-finished stockwhip resting on a canvas chair near the campfire. Clay had been plaiting the leather. It was something he did when the sheep were grazing and settled, spread on a nice patch of roadside—a rare find these days.

'That's really pretty,' she said. 'That's neat. Look Bern.'

'Yeah.' Bern gave it a glance. Looked away.

'That's so cool. Wow,' Mandy held the leather close to the fire, running her fingers along the plait.

'It's cow. You know that right?' Bern said. 'That's cowhide. That's dead animal.'

'I know, Bern.' Mandy flicked her hair over her shoulder.

'Ok. You're the vegetarian.'

Clay reached out and took the whip from Mandy's hands. He didn't like her touching it.

'Can you crack it?' She asked.

'It's not finished.'

'A finished one.'

Clay shook his head. 'Nah, it spooks the mob.'

'Oh, please.'

His camp was far enough away, downwind of the sheep. His dad wouldn't like it. The whips were for cattle work. But he thought: just once. It won't hurt. He had a little whip he'd made at home; he had it hanging in the droving rig. He took the girls behind the rig, to muffle the sound.

Bern crossed her arms, looked bored.

Clay flicked the whip sharply. The crack resounded in the greybox canopy. In the night air it was a gunshot. He was pleased.

'Again!' Mandy said.

But he shook his head.

'Can I have a go.' She took it from him and swung it uselessly around her head, the cracker hitting the ground with a dull thud.

'Give it here.' Bern flung it back and forth, got tangled up. The girls bent over, giggling.

He grinned. Someone would get hurt. He reached out for the whip but Mandy danced away from him.

Then Bern said 'That's enough.' She moved back to the fire. 'You'll take out an eye. For Christ's sake, Mandy. You're pissed.'

He crouched by the fire, shifting the embers with a stick. He felt shame. He didn't know why. 'I'll buy it from you,' Mandy said. 'How much?' 'You're fucking nuts, Mandy. What do you want a whip for?' Clay shook his head. 'It's not for sale.'

It was late when they left. Clay kicked dirt over the fire. He had the taste of beer on his tongue. He brushed his teeth and swirled water through his mouth, spat into the dark, but the trace of bitterness remained as he drifted to sleep.

In the past, his father had been agile, slim. But he'd thickened over the years, almost without Clay realising. Now, where once he would have fallen lightly and strategically, he landed heavily. It was only when Clay looked at the photos on the mantle at home—the young body of his dad astride a horse with four-year-old Clay upfront on the pommel—he saw time shifting. Some sort of responsibility moving his way, trapping him.

Over the next days, Clay and his dad moved the wethers along the stock routes west of the farm. Clay was at the head of the flock on Duke: a brake on the pace of the leaders as they hunted down feed. Unchecked, they would run for miles, stubbornly dragging the rest of the mob forward in relentless hungry momentum. Max brought up the rear, the rig on the ball of the ute, kelpies on short chains fixed to the headboard. But he was too sore to do much. He cursed getting in and out of the HiLux, downed morphine tabs with swigs from a plastic bottle of Sprite. One afternoon, when they were steering the mob to water at the bore-fed troughs on the route, Clay saw the red Mazda approach. He was out on the fenceline keeping the sheep off the sagging ringlock, far from the road. The car slowed to pass the stationary ute. It didn't stop, although Max was standing on the bitumen, easing his back, the ute door ajar. Clay saw his dad through the eyes of the girls: the browned-off teeth, the rattle of phlegm in his throat that took all morning to clear. Not an old man, but careworn. Clay pushed his heels into Duke, spurred the horse forward between the fence and the hollow-flanked, restless sheep. It was his dad's gamble, months back: buying up stock cheap and waiting for the weather to break. They needed to go south, but it was a two-person job, and Max's back wasn't right for the road, not yet.

The girls came to Clay's camp again, later in the week. The air was sharp; the season edged deeper into winter. There would be a frost. Mandy wore a short corduroy skirt and plum-coloured lipstick; she sat at the fire with her bare legs stretched in front of her. Bern's eyelashes were clumped with mascara. In the firelight, their makeup looked out of place.

Clay shook his head to the stubby of beer, cracked the top on a can of Solo.

'You're no fun,' Bern said. This time it was Bern's turn to drink; Mandy was the driver. They were on their way to Barigal, to the pub.

Clay looked over in the direction of his old man's place. It was at least 15 kilometres away, but he sometimes imagined he could pick out the lights. He thought of his dad: the creak of the mattress as he lay down on the bed, the tight-lipped grimace; Dencorub tube on top of the bedside drawers.

'How long do you keep the sheep out here anyway?' Mandy asked. 'I mean, why don't you put them in a paddock?'

Clay dug the toe of his boot into the dead ash at the fire's edge. The farm was a finger of land

squeezed between the McCorty's property and the scrubland of the Forestry Commission. One thousand acres. It wasn't enough. Not even in a good year.

'No feed at home at the moment,' he said.

'Can't you buy some? Feed?'

Bern smirked. 'Jesus, Mandy.'

'What?' Mandy said to Bern. 'I'm just making conversation.'

'You're such a city girl.'

Mandy sighed and lay back to look at the stars. 'Wow,' she said. 'Clay, you're so lucky.'

Clay didn't know if he liked her or not, but when she smiled at him his heart beat faster. He had no experience with girls. He'd always been passed over as too quiet. It was only in the past year he'd begun to draw attention from older drunk women, in the pubs he and Max visited on the road. His dad would tell them to rack off, but there were times when he'd been cornered. They'd put their hands on his face, pat his cheeks. 'Pretty one, aren't you,' they'd say.

Clay got up and took a leak around the side of the rig. When he zipped up and turned around Mandy was waiting for him.

'Come here,' she said softly. 'Don't worry about her.' She took hold of his waist and kissed him; her tongue was small and wet and darting.

'Is this ok?' She said.

'If you want.'

She stepped back and looked at him.

'Come on Mandy, let's go.' Bern shouted from the fire.

Mandy rolled her eyes at him and grinned. 'She's such a pain.'

'Mandy!' Bern called again.

Clay followed Mandy out to the car.

'Plenty of room in the back.' Mandy leant her head out the open window, after she'd got into the driver's seat. He couldn't. He couldn't leave the stock. He watched the red tail-lights disappear west up the narrow road; the lonely one-vehicle hum receding. Later, preparing for bed in the rig, he realised his little cowhide whip was gone.

He didn't see the girls for a week. Clay and his dad were losing sheep now, almost every day. There were times when Clay walked behind the mob with a club hammer. The weak sheep would tail off, stagger; their legs moving in an out-of-kilter way, like a strange dance. Then they would fall. At first he had searched for his dad's eyes, a brief nod. After a time he knew what to do. The dead bodies were cut up and bagged for dog meat. When the freezer was full and the excess black garbage bags began to reek of decaying flesh, the carcasses were taken home on the tray of the HiLux, and thrown into an old dry dam turned graveyard.

The next time the red Mazda nosed into Clay's camp, only Bern got out of the car. She squatted down at the fire, pulled a bottle out of her jacket pocket, and took a swig. Something hard—a spirit; when the lid came off he caught a taste of it on the air.

'Mandy's gone back to Cronulla. She was missing her boyfriend. She told you she has a boyfriend, right?'

He felt Bern's eyes on him. He rubbed his forearms under his coat; it was a cold night. 'When do you go back?' He said.

'Soon. Can't wait. This place is a hole.' She drank again. 'How can you stand it?'

Clay said nothing.

She snorted. 'Oh well. Good luck.' She raised her bottle into the firelight.

The smoke billowed to Bern's side of the fire, and she shuffled around next to him. The alcohol was strong on her breath. He moved just a bit, so her shoulder and hip were no longer touching his.

'What do you think of my Dad?' She said.

Clay supposed Bern heard talk at home: McCorty bad-mouthing his old man. McCorty's opinions on Clay's dad weren't a secret in the district. Last year at school, when Stuart wanted to turn mean, he'd make sly comments about overstocking, running a place into the ground.

He shrugged. 'I don't think anything.'

She leant right back, stared up at the sky. 'He's a prick. If it's any consolation.'

He became aware of the back of her hand stroking his jean-clad thigh.

'Don't do that,' he said.

Her hand stopped moving, but she let it linger on his leg. 'You didn't mind before,' she said.

'What's the problem?'

He wondered what Mandy had said to Bern. It made him twitch, the thought of it. A heat rose across his skin. He stared into the fire.

She drew her hand away.

He'd have to drive her back. He could see that. Her father would come looking, and it would make trouble for his dad. When she began to close her eyes, Clay nudged her with his foot. The fire was dying down.

'I'll stay here,' she said.

'No.' He walked to the Mazda, found the keys in the ignition and started it. The beam of the headlights lit up her body, slumped by the fire.

They did not speak as he drove. It was ten minutes. The road deserted.

At the house Bern held out her hand for the keys. Clay looked at her. It would take over two hours to walk back, in the dark.

'Wait there,' she said.

He watched her shuck off her shoes on the verandah, slip inside the door. Lights came on in the house. In a few moments a man's figure, McCorty, came outside in socked feet. He squinted into the darkness, pulled on his boots and walked to the Mazda.

'Clay son,' he said. 'You need a lift back out to the road, I hear.'

'Tough season.' In the car, McCorty turned up the heating so the fan roared.

Clay made a sound, assented.

'Where's your old man? He know you're driving around unlicensed?'

Clay cleared his throat. 'He's hurt his back.'

'That's too bad,' McCorty said. 'Backs. Sometimes they never come right.'

The headlights swung over the flat, bare ground as the car pulled up near the camp.

'I admire what you're trying to do, son. But time to sell was months ago. Can't give them away now.'

'No,' Clay said. It was all true.

'You've worn the pickings down here pretty thin.' McCorty opened a window, letting in the chill air. He looked out at the black night. 'Might be time to move on.'

The breeze was up, the morning Clay and his dad prepared to move the wethers south. They'd held the mob in a dead-end lane overnight. Clay saddled up Duke at the roadside camp, while his dad slowly pushed the sheep out of the lane. Max was on horseback again, astride the filly which had thrown him the month before. He was taking her through some paces off the road, where she was less likely to be spooked.

Clay tightened the girth on Duke and ran his hand under the horse's chest, checking there was no pinching. He turned when he heard the car.

It surprised him, to see the red Mazda, pulling off into the gravel. It was two weeks since he'd driven Bern home.

'Steady now,' he heard his dad's voice, carried on the breeze. He was talking to the filly. The wind was making her ticklish.

Bern got out of the car and waved.

'I thought you'd be gone,' Clay said. He tethered Duke to the side of the float.

'I'm going,' she said. 'I just wanted to say thanks for the lift the other night.'

'Ok.'

'Can I show you something?' Bern was smiling.

Clay looked over his shoulder at the mob marching towards the road. They were less than 100 metres away. His father leaned down to stroke the filly's neck. His dad would notice the Mazda soon, if he hadn't already.

'Kind of busy,' Clay said.

The smile on Bern's face hardened.

'Fine. Forget it.' She turned back to the car.

He wasn't sorry. He wanted her to leave. He began to unlatch the tailgate on the horse float, ready for Max to load the filly. When he didn't hear the Mazda start, he looked up at the road.

Bern stood in a clear space with a whip in her hand. His own missing whip; the one she'd taken from him. She still had that hard grin on her face. 'I've been practicing,' she said, and she raised her arm, swinging the whip over her shoulder.

'No,' Clay shouted. But it was too late, she was already in motion. She flicked her wrist, and the crack resounded: breaking open the air, drowning out Clay's voice.

He knew she didn't do it on purpose. She just hadn't seen Max on the nervous young horse, or even if she had, had only seen him as a part of the landscape, something in the background.

Clay spun around. The sheep scattered, Duke tossed his head, the filly reared up.

'Steady, steady,' his dad said, in his beautiful, tender voice. But the wind had lifted in the moment the whip was cracked, and the filly's nerves had been pushed too far. 'Whoa now.' Clay's father spoke like a person with something slipping from his grasp. The filly screamed her piercing horse scream, and unleashed a series of violent bucks and swerves.

'Oh shit.' Bern's voice was behind Clay, faint and small.

And Clay watched, helpless, as his father's body landed heavy and broken on the ground.