

## *from Shadow on the Sun*

Greta took her grandfather's hand. They crossed York Street. The old man placed the .22 rifle on the ground on the other side of the strained wire fence before they climbed through. They walked down a slope through long grass to a stand of white gums which traced the course of a gully to a dry creek bed. They had left behind the town and the highway.

Greta kept her eyes open. She followed a short distance behind the old man who dawdled as he made himself a cigarette, the rifle tucked under one arm. A plume of smoke rose above his hat, his free arm flicked the spent match to the side. He did not speak as they ventured further from the town, traversing the flank of a hill with a soft round summit. With his baggy trousers and black coat, her grandfather looked dressed up, like he was off to an appointment somewhere in the grey green country. Every now and then he pushed his hat off his brow. A red rim marked his forehead, his see-through skin. On one occasion he spat.

— What do you reckon, Gret?

— I don't know, Grandpa.

— Don't you now?

— No, Grandpa.

— I'll be blown.

He did not look at her. Greta liked that, it meant the old man had confidence in her. They walked further into the bush until, eventually, she no longer knew in which direction the town lay. Then the old man

sank to his knees. He released the safety catch on the rifle and handed her the gun. He nodded ahead, to a rabbit warren where three or four rabbits mooched about, standing up and twitching their ears, falling softly onto their front paws.

— Hold it firm against your shoulder.

The rabbits waited. In the sights of the gun, they tended to evaporate and reappear elsewhere. The gun grew heavy in her hands.

— Easy now.

The gun kicked. Forty metres away the earth erupted in a tidy spurt. The rabbits vanished into the warren which seemed, instantly, desolate pock marks.

— Straight between the bugger's ears.

Her grandfather struggled to his feet. He took the gun, released the bolt and took the shell from the breech. He handed it to her.

— Souvenir.

— Grandpa, you know the Chinaman?

— Charlie Chin, you mean?

— Where does he come from?

— From here, Gret, he's lived here all his life. I've known him and his brothers man and boy.

— Can I see him?

— You'll find old Charlie at his shop.

Greta watched her grandfather, the proprietorial ease with which he poked about among the pellets of rabbit turd. She had seen her father do the same. It was the way of her men, their comfort with so little ceremony. They walked further, alongside a stream, the banks overgrown

with wiry, treacherous serrated tussocks. A dead tree trunk, weathered as a fence post, leaned over the solidly moving water.

— Did Mum know Charlie Chin?

The old man did not answer straight away.

— Him and Ronnie and Oscar. She knew them all.

— Did she like Charlie Chin?

— That I don't know for sure, Gret. I expect so.

It sounded like he regretted the gap in his knowledge. He stared into the water and put his arm around her shoulder. He was crying.

— There's a lot I don't know.

They were entering the uncoordinated chit-chat which accompanied their wandering through the bush. Occasionally, across the high sky, a bird sailed. It confirmed somehow their pivotal existence and dissolved the burden of what others might say and think.

— What was here before us?

— Not much. The land and a few blackfellas.

Greta decided that blackfellas did not fit as answers to the questions which popped into her head. But Charlie Chin was another matter. She had a feeling about Charlie Chin after she had heard her mother and father talk about him one night. When people were moving away from old Adamstown before the dam waters rose to claim their homes, he had terrified a party of tourists that had forced entry into his storehouse. He surprised them with his shotgun. Firing in the air. Reloading and advancing down the street. Firing.

Greta entered the general store of Chin and Bros Ltd. A bell on the door tinkled, trapping her. The shop smelled of rope and new buckets. She

was alone except for indistinct sounds coming from beyond a calico curtain which hung across a doorway behind a counter. She smelled dust and the corrosive aroma of utensils.

— Yes?

Charlie Chin now stood behind the counter, the palms of his hands flat on the scoured surface. A lick of dark hair stretched across his head from a part just above the top of his left ear. Otherwise he was shorn close to the skull. He wore a buttoned cardigan and an open neck shirt, the soft apparel of a small businessman. He was old, like her grandfather.

— Who have we got here?

Greta came forward, closer to the man with the black eyes like almonds and yellow transparent skin. Her grandfather, scratching his head at the sophistication of it, said Charlie's people knew their way around the workings of money. Her grandmother said Charlie had been married to Leila Shanahan for forty five years and it caused such a ruckus when they eloped. Leila's father banished her from the old town. Leila stayed away for seventeen years and brought up two sons and a daughter in Glebe. Charlie wouldn't budge but commuted those long years to Sydney to see his family.

Greta studied the man whose life was such a story. She drew near. He allowed her the leisure to look him over. Here stood the wide world rolled up in a man whose old face was smooth, whose neck was slender like an ancient vase. He wore a gold watch on his wrist and a ruby ring on one finger.

— You'd be Greta. That right?

— Yes.

— Pollie's girl.

— Yes.

— Where's your dad, then?

— He's gone to Cooma to work.

This sort of talk could go on all day. Old people loved this endless chatter. Greta felt the Chinaman in Charlie Chin begin to slip away. He took a packet of cigarettes from his cardigan pocket and lit a cigarette with a silver lighter which materialised in his hand.

— Do you still have the gun?

He seemed to expel and inhale smoke at the same time. He eyed her through even narrower eyes.

— I do.

She could only conclude that Charlie Chin's yellowness was the factor which set him apart. His eyes contained the counsel of foreign ways. Leila Shanahan had seen it. And her father. And the town and the district.

Charlie Chin smiled. The wrinkles in his face were young and fetching, Greta saw. She wanted to understand this strange mystery in their midst.

At dusk, one day soon after, she climbed through the wire fence along York Street and stood in the paddock to watch the sunset. The sky graded downwards from blue to silver to an intense yellow band on the horizon. Charlie Chin's colour, suffused with energy and garish confidence. She concluded that Charlie and his brothers had travelled on the sun's rays and settled. A breeze as soft and personal as new breath suggested to her that the bush tolerated all kinds even though her kind generally owned it in the way they fenced it and derived their life from it.

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Zoe Mainprize loved driving on the left-hand side of the road. A novelty still, after how many visits to the Kimberley. The experience wrong-footed her brain, kept her alive to the foreignness of the country. She waited for the car and caravan to pass before she ventured onto the Great Northern Highway. They were a way off yet, a shimmer on the wet tongue of bitumen. Zoe was in no hurry. She was certain Hal McNair had not taken it into his head to drive to the east coast. She would use the time to settle on the framework of a story that had suggested itself that morning in Fitzroy Crossing as she searched for the ute and rounded up the boys.

'It sure is a hot one.' She tuned the radio to the community station in Fitzroy. The John Albert band. A crackly reception. She tapped the steering wheel.

'Why don't you wind up the window and crank up the air conditioning?'

'You see this car coming, Angus? On my right, here?'

'The only car on the road in both directions for the past ten minutes. Is that the one you mean?'

'That's the one. You see it?'

'Yes.' What was the point of conversation with this woman. Angus wound down his window. The vegetation was an immense ocean of unremitting sameness. So it seemed to Angus. It was like looking at water, it went on and on and if you weren't careful it washed into your head and dissolved your identity. He told himself that this was his country. Back at the clinic with Mary, he felt it was so. Now his stomach

weakened at the weight of grass and scrub. In the back seat the boys showed no sign of having diagnosed his dread. Their names were Gary and LSD. Their clothes stank. Gary's baseball cap prevented conversation or even much light reaching his face. LSD was a blank who grinned when spoken to.

'Yes, I see it.' One thing Angus couldn't get out of his head was Hal McNair's seminal fluid sloshing around in Zoe's vagina. How long before it evaporated or got digested. Could he smell it?

'What state do you figure it's from?'

'I have no idea.'

'Give me a rundown on the driver.'

'What?'

'How old?'

'I really have no idea.'

'You boys in the back help out Angus here?'

The boys in the back remained in character. Gary didn't move. LSD stared from dark sockets and blinked now and then.

'I got this theory.'

'What theory?'

'First things first. The car is from the eastern states and it's driven by a middle-aged man. He's got a wife. He's trailing the caravan.'

Angus resented the missed opportunity. If the boys in the back were to tap into the same wavelength, together they could make mince meat of Zoe Mainprize. Really give her the run-around. The boys, however, were uncommunicative. Back at Lavender Station, having been snatched off the streets of Fitzroy Crossing and dragooned into returning to the community, they remained in the car, wrapped in custodial numbness

and sullen resistance. When it was time to set off in search of Hal McNair, Zoe made no allowances. They boys might have been baggage or deferred chores.

The car rushed past, a new model Ford Falcon and lightweight caravan.

'Like I said. A middle-aged man and his wife. You catch the registration plate?'

'Victorian.'

'What did I tell you?' Zoe's efforts to get the car onto the highway combined the methodical ponderousness of a learner driver and a heavy foot. She released the handbrake, jerked the gearshift from park to drive, stamped on the brake pedal periodically to verify that the brakes worked, ventured onto the highway and, late, swung the car into the left lane. Half on and half off the road she planted her foot. The car roared, skidded and gripped. Angus checked out the boys. They had slunk a little further down the bench seat but were otherwise unfazed. Zoe now barrelled down the middle of the highway.

'Left in this country. Left,' Angus said. The wind, hot and snarly, whooshed past, splintering their hair.

'Light me a cigarette,' Zoe shouted. She wore a replete grin. She veered left as she wound up her window. Angus followed suit as gravel and sand pocked the undercarriage of the car. He took a packet of cigarettes from a compartment near the gearshift.

'Where's your lighter?'

'Let's see now.' Zoe lifted her bottom off the seat, shifting her weight onto the accelerator, and searched a pocket of her shorts. 'I got it here somewhere.' The car emitted throaty power.



'Slow down. You drive. I'll get the lighter.' And there he was, with his hand in her pocket, hard against her thigh, inches from her genitals. Circumstances and a reason were the combination that delivered this taste of intimacy. Angus did not think Zoe Mainprize an attractive woman, even as her flesh the other side of a cotton pocket brought sweat to his fingers. It was like looking at the sculpture of a nude. Marble or stone, the form called up a tingling sense of universal possibilities, the wondrous impersonality of being human.

'You having a good time?' Zoe cackled in a blokey way.

'Got it.' Angus lit the cigarette and handed it over. What had been in his mouth now jutted from Zoe's lips. He couldn't stop thinking about her. 'What do you think Hal's up to?'

'Give those fellas a cigarette. It might do some good.' Zoe threw her head back. She drove, somehow, as if the road did the steering. Angus thrust the packet at the boys. LSD took one, pleased and avid, Gary expertly lifted two from the packet. One disappeared into his shirt pocket, its existence no longer certain. Not even the flaring lighter could illuminate his face, his raw thoughts.

'So, what's Hal up to?'

Zoe Mainprize contended with the seatbelt. 'Hal is a man and men need a lot of affection. I reckon he's found some shade somewhere and when he figures he's got most everyone upset he'll turn up and pretend he can't understand why some folks are stricken.'

'He doesn't know my mother,' Angus said. 'She's heartless.'

'Your mom needs Hal alive, that's enough for Hal.'

'Do you like my mother?'

'Don't have a view, Angus. I can talk to the woman.'

'Do you like Hal?'

'I like Hal but I'm not his nurse.' Zoe intended to use Hal as one stereotype for her story, a planned feature for the *Cincinnati Sentinel* in which she would lay out her theory about whitefella Australians. Retirees racking up the miles in the outback were the chief protagonists. The way they scooted through the Kimberley and barely rubbed shoulders with a blackfella. Why was that? What were they scared of?

'Mary reckons Hal is sick.'

'I get the impression you're not a fan of Hal.'

'That's correct.'

'Hal's direct. You can't hold that against a man.' With more licence than the facts allowed, Zoe would explain Hal's symptoms as typical of a pampered middle class professional derailed by the stark reality of Aboriginal disadvantage. The folks back home loved such a fearful tale. They quaked deliciously and funded the missionary endeavour. Without leaving home, they put the world to rights. Zoe counted it a boon the God-fearing folks of Ohio boggled at intercontinental travel.