

THE TRUNK

Sarah drove her battered Kingswood Ute over the dry Katingal lake bed. Scattered bones crunched beneath her tyres and the wheel wells protested the assault. Their cattle had died first, unable to wrap their thick tongues around the stubble prickling the parched earth. Sheep had fared better, nipping and pulling until they dislodged the last of the jaundiced stems and withered roots.

The V8 cleared her throat and sped on towards the lake centre, kicking up a cloud of dust and a hail of white shrapnel. Sarah's thighs were slick against the vinyl bench seat. She should've put down a towel.

Dave had always known Sarah was different. For one thing, she hadn't been born to his mother, she'd turned up in the shearing shed, naked. Not naked like a baby was naked but naked like only a young woman could be naked. She didn't know who she was or where she was from. That suited his mother fine, she'd always wanted a daughter. 'God's favour,' she had said. It was Dave who named her Sarah, and in seven years, she hadn't complained.

Sarah was smart, so when she'd taken off in the Ute towards the lake after he'd told her it'd gone dry, Dave hadn't understood at all. His mother had shrugged in her own sweet Jesus time, between the click of her knitting needles, and told him to go get her. Why anyone needed woollen socks in the middle of a drought Dave couldn't

figure either. He'd straddled his dirt bike and *eeeeeee'd* and *aaaawww'd* down the long track that led from the house to the lake, grit peppering his back from a broken mudguard.

Sarah pulled the Ute up and slid from behind the wheel. Her cut-offs were damp and she adjusted the inside leg against a tanned thigh. She dropped the Ute's tailgate and pulled a hot handled spade from the cargo tray leaving the sledgehammer in its place. A finger of dust moved against the horizon. Sarah squinted at it.

The lid of the travel trunk lapped at the thin space between heat shimmer and the barren sky. It was old-fashioned, the kind people packed for long-distance travel by ship or train. Sarah never expected to see it again, but there it was, settled into the lake bed all cock-eyed and heavy on one side. The metal banding and reinforced corners were rusted like red lichen, yet the stainless steel padlock glinted firm. Sarah no longer had the key.

Like the trunk, the spade was old, the wooden handle almost petrified from use. It pivoted against Sarah's palm as she stabbed it into the soft silt. She kicked it down with the heel of her boot and levered a slice out of the earth. A thin breeze carried the high pitched death rattle of Dave's bike.

Sarah paused only to drink from the hessian water bag hung from the front bumper of the Ute. The water tasted like sack-cloth. She turned her back on the dark

speck that now accompanied the finger of dust and continued digging.

There should be water in a dry lake bed, deep down. It has an odour, like rain on a hot wind. But the drought had parched even the deep earth at Katingal. Sarah threw the spade up and hauled herself out of her pit. Dave was a distinct figure, crouched over his handlebars, his faded blue singlet top billowing like a hunched back over his shoulders. She watched a few moments as he made a slow turn in her direction. Why had he come after her?

The surface of the trunk heated her palm when she ran her hand in a wide arc. Wind-blown dirt rubbed like sandpaper but she could still read some of the faded black letters she'd painted, **_RAG__E: H_NDL__ITH CA__**.

A laugh rippled as she remembered the months of travelling. In all that time she'd only lifted the lid once to follow instructions.

Seal it up good and tight, the voice had said. Find a place with water, where no one will see, and make it disappear. She had complied, but the voice could not have anticipated the drought.

The air was heavy against her bare arms as she hefted the silt from the base of the trunk. Dave's bike slid to a halt near the Ute, covering her in a miasma of dust that gritted like eggshell against her teeth when she turned to face him.

'Mother says to come back to the house,' Dave held up a hand against the western sun. The damp, dark hairs under his arm were veins stuck to his skin. 'What's that?' He pointed to the trunk.

'None of your business.'

‘Come on, Sarah,’ Dave said, kicking the stand down on his bike before swinging his leg over. He wiped sweaty hands over his flat backside and dusted down his shorts pulling a crumpled I ♥ NY baseball cap from the waistband at the small of his back. Mother had brought it back from a trip when he was a kid and he’d worn it ever since. He settled it on his head and took a few steps towards Sarah. His kneecaps stood out like walnuts.

‘Is that why you’re out here?’

‘I said it was none of your business.’ She snatched up the spade and continued scraping.

‘Come on, sissy, don’t be like that.’

Sarah jerked away, ‘I’m not your sister.’ The words were over her dry lips before she thought to stop them.

Dave backed up a pace, mud cracks crumbled under his boots.

‘You’ve remembered?’ He pointed again, ‘Has it got something to do with that?’

Sarah could not tell him she’d never forgotten. ‘I don’t know.’

He rushed at her, wrapping her in his gangly arms, his sticky rib cage against her cheek. ‘That’s good, that’s really good. We could open it and see what’s inside.’

‘I need to bury it,’ she said and slouched out of his embrace.

‘Why?’

She closed her eyes, her brows coming together as a dark thing that sloshed at the base of her belly. ‘It isn’t good.’

‘But if you’re not sure?’

The sledgehammer from the back of the Ute was in Dave's hands. His thin biceps strained against the skin of his upper arms.

'Please, don't.'

In one fluid motion, Dave swung the hammer, his body arching, hand sliding down the shaft as the head hit the padlock and shattered the corroded clasp. The lock fell to the ground, and the remnants of the clasp clattered against the side, flapped once, then stilled.

'The metal's rusted 'round the edges,' Dave said, crouching. 'She'll need a few taps to get her open.' He held the hammer in one hand, close to the head and brought it down hard several times on the edge of the lid.

Fragments of rusted metal juddered loose and mingled with the silt.

'Shall we give it a go?' Dave looked up at her.

'I don't want to see inside,' she shook her head, her eyes still fixed on the broken clasp.

'It might be important.'

'I don't think so.'

'If it's not important, why'd you come all the way out here and dig that hole?'

'It doesn't matter.'

Dave peered at her out of the corner of his eye as he wiped a sweaty palm down the front of his singlet. 'One way to find out.' He dug his fingers under the lip of the lid. His arms heaved. The trunk resisted but then gave. The lid flipped back in a rush and Dave reeled from the gust of foetid air that swooped up towards his face.

'I told you it wasn't a good thing.'

Dave peeled off his baseball cap and held it over his nose and mouth.

‘Christ!’ He steadied himself and leaned over the trunk. It was half filled with a black, oily liquid. Yellow-grey scum had formed and crept up the sides. Beneath the surface, something moved. ‘What the hell was that?’

‘I didn’t want to open it.’ Sarah paced back and forth, spade forgotten on the ground. ‘I brought it here. I left it. It wasn’t meant to come back.’ She stared up at the sky, hands on hips. There was nothing but blue.

Dave picked up the spade and prodded at the murky water, a turgid fold of cloth broke the surface and sunk back down. A dark shape was stuck to it. Dave drew it to the surface with the flat of the spade.

‘Sarah, what’d you do?’

A discoloured skull peered at them, tendrils of knotted hair still clung to patches of soapy skin. The maxilla gave a snaggle-toothed grin.

‘What it told me.’ Sarah chewed a thumbnail, one arm wrapped across her midriff.

Dave eased the spade out of the trunk, allowing the skull to fall back. He wiped the blade on the edge, dislodging most of the gore before stabbing it into the ground. ‘Does anyone know?’

‘No.’

‘What about whoever told you to do it?’

Sarah looked at the baseball cap Dave had clamped over his mouth again. She wondered if he would be sick. She tapped at her temple with an index finger and watched as he dropped the baseball cap to below his chin. There was sweat on his three-day stubble.

‘They were in your head?’ He bit his lip. ‘Were they already dead, or did you...’

A nod.

‘Then we bury it.’

‘I was burying it. You opened it.’

Dave wrung the cap in his hands, ‘I thought it was things that would help you remember like photos or letters.’

A gust of decay billowed over them when Sarah slammed the lid of the trunk closed. Dave gagged.

‘So help me.’

A smile crawled its way across Sarah’s face. Dave was stupid but had a kind heart. She could not blame him for wanting to look, because he was incapable of understanding.

Between them, they manhandled the trunk to the pit and manoeuvred it in place, a task made more difficult by the insecurity of the lid. One unbalanced move and the contents could spill across the lake bed. Sarah scowled at Dave as they took turns spading silt.

The sun hung low on the horizon.

‘We should go back to the house, Mother’ll be worried,’ Dave said when they finished.

‘You won’t tell her.’

Dave, cap once again on his head, shuffled his feet in the loose ground making patterns with the tread of his boots.

‘No.’

Sarah watched him, she did not trust the skinny look on his face. An old friend shared her concerns.

He knows. You will have to do it.

‘Put your bike in the back and we’ll drive home together.’

Dave left the patterns on the ground to wrestle his bike up the tailgate of the Ute.

The drive to the house was silent save for the wind rushing through the open windows, tangling Sarah’s hair and making Dave pull his cap down tight over his eyes. Sarah sensed him looking at her sometimes, but when she turned her attention from the track, he found the dirt under his nails, or a loose thread in his singlet interesting.

‘I did what needed to be done.’

‘To the person? In the trunk?’

‘Yeah,’ Sarah flicked on her headlights in the gathering gloom, tweaking them to high beam. More of the track stretched out before her.

‘Were they bad?’

‘Very bad,’ Sarah said, allowing Dave to play out the possible scenarios.

‘Did they do things to you?’

Sarah’s smile mocked a grimace in the shadows cast by the dashboard lights. ‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m sorry too.’

On the veranda outside the kitchen, Sarah and Dave beat the dust from their clothes.

‘You’re late for dinner.’ Mother fished roast potatoes out of a pan. ‘It’s meatloaf,’ she said when Dave bent to sniff the pale grey slab on his plate.

‘Thank you, Mother,’ Sarah said, taking her seat at the worn Formica table.

‘I want no thanks from you, missy, running off like that.’ A potato slipped and jumped to the table before being rescued.

‘I’m back now.’

Mother’s expression softened, ‘Thought you’d gone, girl.’

‘I’m here.’ Sarah put a reassuring hand on Mother’s forearm, old skin slid over her bones. It reminded her of something.

It will have to be done.

Lines blossomed across Mother’s cheeks to marry those at the corners of her eyes. She patted Sarah’s hand and turned it over, running a finger over a fresh bubble of blisters. Sarah pulled her hand free and picked up her cutlery.

Dave’s eyes darted between them, small and black in the light of the single bulb hanging from the grease-stained ceiling.

‘Sarah’s been workin’ on the fence by the lake. Rewiring the strainers. That’s why she was gone s’long.’

‘Always such a good girl.’ Mother beamed at them both, ‘And you too, Dave.’

Dave’s eyebrows beetled beneath his cap as he shovelled meatloaf about his plate mixing it with watery cabbage. Flecks of black pepper gawked like a slug’s eyes on their stalks.

‘Yeah.’

‘Eat up now, the pair of you. Tinned peaches and Carnation milk for afters.’

Dave cleared away dishes before folding himself into the sway-backed couch, a bottle of beer settled against his navel. Sarah watched him through the doorway as she scrubbed at the willow pattern plates in a half inch of murky water.

The clack-clickety-clack of knitting needles drew Sarah’s gaze further into the living room, to the dark corner where Mother sat upright in her battered recliner. The cushions sucked at her baggy frame so her slippers scraped at the floor. Clack-clickety-clack, clack-clickety-clack, the needles beat out a reassuring rhythm like an old train rattling along its tracks.

Everything was normal again.

Sarah undressed with care. Steady hands folded her cut-offs, top, and underwear and placed them on her bed atop the knitted blanket Mother had made her when she’d first arrived. The sticky weight of her breasts against her ribs and the salty heat of the darkness above her thighs made her itch.

She washed with the basin of tepid water on her nightstand and a cloth crafted from one of Dave’s old flannel shirts. The only disturbance was a Bogong moth, its

bulbous abdomen throbbing as it tapped against the window pane like a finger. Sarah suppressed the desire to grab it by its scrabbling legs and squeeze the body between her thumb and forefinger until it burst. She could almost taste the acrid insect scent at the back of her throat.

Her skin dried in the barren night air.

Mother was asleep, a half-finished sock clung to a needle, its slender partner in Mother's lap. Sarah paused at the living room doorway, her hands pressed against the yellowing paintwork. A memory of her father worked its way to the surface.

'Like this, push the backs of your hands hard on the doorframe. There you go, keep doing it, keep pressing. Hold it, a bit longer. Count to ten. Now for the special bit. Take one step forward.'

After a moment, her arms had soared into the air of their own accord.

Her father had winked and tapped the side of his head. 'Magic mind control, poppet.'

For a long time, she'd believed him.

A spike of anticipation made Sarah's tongue curl over her dry bottom lip and suck in the roughness to soften the skin with saliva. Her teeth nipped, and she tasted copper.

It won't take long. Do it.

She pushed herself clear of the doorway and moved across the living room in the light from the TV towards Mother. The hessian fibres of the threadbare carpet were rough against her heels.

Get the needle.

It lay crossways in a fold of limp skirt tucked between Mother's legs. Sarah leant in and plucked it free, holding it high like a rat by the tail. Mother did not stir, save for the hitching of her chest and a crackle of air at the back of her throat.

Do it now.

The needle snaked down. The thin skin between Mother's left clavicle and shoulder resisted before popping like sausage skin. Twelve inches of metal slithered, puncturing Mother's lung and tore open the great blood vessel of her heart. Sarah pictured blood rushing into the cavity behind Mother's wind-sock breasts and smiled. A once pink carpet slipper seized, the tatty heel scuffling out a faint staccato beat. Dead breath groaned.

Sarah sat back on her haunches. Her hand brushed Mother's skirt and fell to the knitting basket at the side of the recliner. She retrieved a pair of circular needles, joined by a flexible nylon cord.

With his arms crossed over his chest, Dave lay in a dress rehearsal of death, his beer on the floor. The nylon cinched about his throat. The needles dug into Sarah's fist as she twisted the cord tight and pulled upwards. A clot of Dave's greasy hair slid against her breast as his arms came up, his skinny fingers clawing.

She met his bulging eye.

'The person in the trunk,' she bent close to his ear, 'I did things to *them*.'

Dave's tongue pushed and flapped. Pinpricks of blood peppered the whites of his eyes. His legs thrashed, knocking a dirty olive cushion to the floor. Beer foamed

on the carpet, masking the sharp smell of urine as it crept across Dave's shorts.

Dave was not quiet at all, not like Mother.

Sarah kept the cord tight for several breaths before releasing her grip. The needles fell and dangled at Dave's shoulders as she ran a finger over the livid line left on her palm. She followed it, like a lifeline to where it ended at the edge of her hand.

'It is done.'

She picked up the remote from the floor to turn off the TV. The glass sizzled with static. She stared at it, waiting for the after image to fade. When her eyes adjusted to the moonlight cutting through the net curtains, she replaced the fallen cushion on the couch and set the near-empty beer bottle on the coffee table. The TV remote went in Dave's flaccid hand, his thumb over the standby button.

With a final glance at Mother, she moved through to the kitchen, turned the little handle on the fly screen at the back door, and stepped naked into the night.

END