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M A D E L A I N E D I C K I E



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## [prologue]

It's your last night in Melbourne. Outside the apartment, the summer sky is ice-lime and black. There are linocuts of thunderheads and a cold wind saws the chimes. Your sister sips her white, says,

—Ava, that country will eat you alive. I just can't see you in the outback, fishing and camping. And I definitely can't see you drinking burnt coffee and beer with men who don't shave their pubes! I mean, are there even any shops up there?

There are no shops. At least, not many. And for the first few months it does feel like the north-west is eating you alive. Or perhaps cooking you alive. In January, February, in March, the turquoise bay throws heat like sheet metal, and the taps piss hot, even when twisted to cold. There's a perpetual salting of pindan on everything, and hundreds of cockroaches hatch and hitch inside on the sun-singed laundry.

Eighteen months in Tokyo ate you skeletal—but northern Australia ... northern Australia's thickening the waist and eating the mind. Or maybe nibbling the heart. Because, while you're not ready to admit it to your sister, only three months in to 2009, it's got you captivated.

## [you strange and sour tale]

You're a tiny, dark-haired bombshell of a woman, sub-twenty-five, with a smoky singing voice and a weakness for afternoon margaritas. You're a journalist, and while colleagues thought it was career suicide to take a job on a rural paper, you were sick of Melbourne. Sick of her panicked arteries and weekend annihilation in cocktail bars and clubs.

At first it was a shock going from a team of twenty in the CBD to a team of three in the small town of Gubinge. Here, there's the sports journalist Lucia, the editor Jeff and yourself. According to Lucia, Jeff's,

—The biggest slackhole I've ever met. They've put him out to pasture up here, true God.

Jeff's got the puffy eyes of an asthmatic and the sunburn lines of a channel marker. Sometimes he wears singlets to work. You can tell he's sussing you out, waiting for a slip-up.

No chance.

You've reported diligently on juvenile crime, upcoming tourism forums and a visit from the Shadow Minister for Agriculture. Still, you get the feeling there are bigger stories here. And it's not long before one comes to find you.

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When you get a haircut at the local shopping centre, you ask the hairdresser if she likes Gubinge. She says,

—I don't drink, I don't fish and I can't stand the heat. And I'll tell you something else. Where we live, there's all these ... undesirables.

You guess she means Aboriginal people.

There are break-ins every weekend. Just yesterday, a bloke boasted on social media that he'd trapped the fingers of a young black thief prying open his laundry window.

*Hope I broke them all, too, he wrote. These kids need to be taught a lesson. Fucking up my Friday night before a neap-tide Saturday!*

That evening you meet a guy at the pub. On first impression you think he must be a backpacker, Italian maybe. But Ash is an aquaculture lecturer from TAFE. He's lean, with black ringlets, dark stubble and a gold stud biting his left lobe. He sees you're alone, shouts you a beer, introduces you to some people, and asks you fishing.

The following morning, Ash and his mate Mark pick you up at dawn in a four-wheel drive. Mark's blond and stocky, an ex-pro bodyboarder from down south. Both are boisterous, laugh a lot, and when you buy a pink handline at the servo, Ash says,

—Yeah, for sure, we'll show you how to use it!

The fishing spot's on a station—De Beer Downs—which is two hours away across country desiccated by cattle and wind. The instant the car hits the dirt, there's the hiss of opening red cans. You're on the gates, and every time you slip from the car air-con, the soil burns your feet, even through thongs. The last gate is locked. Ash hands you the key.

The car lurches onto a saltpan where an illusion of water trims the horizon. It's eye-achingly bright. Ash steers away from the mirage.

—Heaps of blacksoil around here. If we end up in that, we're fucked.

The four-wheel drive follows a set of old tyre tracks through spinifex and you finally pull up in a clearing. The sun's split the soil into the shape of diamonds and there are gold tampons and half-smoked cigarettes in the cracks. Shit, you realise, they're not tampons, they're bullet casings. Down below, the river is a thin trickle.

—How we gunna fish that? you ask.

—We gotta get liveys first, Ash says. Wanna learn?

—Sure.

—You take the cast net like this. And then ...

He dances his feet in a graceful cross-step. The net glides white from his fingers, falling over the spinifex in a perfect hoop.

He draws it closed, then twists it a few times and hands it over.

—Quick, Ava, quick! yells Mark. Imagine there's a big mob of liveys just here!

You try to dance your feet, toss the net, but it only half opens, catching an empty beer can.

—Plenty of time to practise, says Ash. Come on, let's get some real ones.

The guys fill two buckets and the captured fish thrash like knives. They're big enough to pan-fry but Ash urges patience, says you're after saltwater barramundi.

—Don't be fooled by the muddy water, Ava. Down here, there are big girls with scales like fifty-cent pieces. I'm not even kidding! Tell her, Mark.

So you puncture a livey with a hook and watch its eyes bulge, its mouth gape.

—Pinch it, Ash says. Just here, on its head. That way it'll bleed a little.

You throw the brain-damaged livey into the water and sit tensed, bait-slimy hands tight on the line. For over an hour the only bites you get are from sandflies, march flies, mozzies and midgies.

—This isn't a fishing hole, says Mark finally. It's a shithole.

—True! you agree, and trudge up to the esky for a beer.

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When another fishless hour passes, you tell the boys you're keen to stretch your legs.

—Keep an eye out for crocs, Ash warns.

—And king browns, adds Mark.

—And dogs, says Ash.

—Dogs?

—Yeah. Bloke who owns the station's got a couple of feral hounds.

The heat's staggering, the mud's spongy, it's slow going. Your new akubra casts a saucer of shade over your face and neck. The rest of you burns. After a bit, a side creek splits from the river and you follow it, cutting around salt-stunted shrubs and pockets of mangroves. There's not much to see up here. Three more bends, then you'll turn back. Always the allure of corners, a quickening to the unknown.

You're glad you persist, because swinging the final bend you see paperbarks hanging over a deck of waterfalls. The water in the shallow pools is clear. There's the drift of lilies, the gloss of moss and, through the gums, the light is blissfully cool.

In your first week at work, Lucia warned,

—Gotta be careful, Ava. Country is always watching.

From the safety of the office it seemed kind of crazy, the idea that country can ‘watch’. But out here ...

Maybe you shouldn’t be here.

Maybe it’s time to go back.

Nah, you’re keen to find a pool clear and croc-free for a dip. So you follow the creek’s curve up through stone, climbing waterfalls, until finally you come across a cave.

Inside, star-like flowers drift under a gallery of ancient art. There’s the half-curved shape of a baby on the cave’s roof, and it’s watched over by ochre spirit figures with no mouths and huge flat discs for eyes.

You feel like you’re trespassing. Doubly so when you swing around and catch a glimpse of a bulldozer, parked in the bush below. It’s branded with Gerro Blue’s logo. They’re the paper’s biggest advertiser, a Japanese-owned uranium mining company. This must be one of their tenements. But so close to the water? So close to rock art?

You scramble down from the cave and circle the bulldozer once. A cheap pair of sunnies and a silver chain loop the gear stick. It’s knocked a track through the undergrowth and, churned up in the soil, clearly visible, are hundreds of white splinters of bone.

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Back on the shadeless bank of the river, the boys haven’t landed a barra. Four hours and nothing.

—Only a hundred fucken catfish, grumbles Ash.

—You gotta slay the dragons to get to the princess, says Mark.

—Only princess here is Ava, Ash replies.

In the car on the way home, you join them in a consoling beer while they muse about the metre-long barra one of their mates



caught here last weekend. Ash drops Mark off first, then turns in to the old part of town where you live, the part of all-night street parties, trollies without wheels and spider-hiding palms. When he pulls up in your driveway, he looks meaningfully at you, and then at your front door.

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Lucia comes into the office carrying a dead goanna. She dumps it on the table next to yesterday's papers from Perth.

—Ever tried barni before?

The reptile's tongue pokes from its mouth like a bit of stiff and twisted wire. There are flakes of charcoal on its scales. Its claws are unbelievable. You shake your head.

—We'll have some for morning tea with our coffees. Found it in the lounge room when I got home from netball. As soon as it saw me, it took off down the hallway. 'Boys!' I said. 'You better find that fucken thing!'

She puts down her yellow Frida Kahlo tote.

—You have a good day off?

You tell her about the luckless fishing mission, about the waterfall, about the cave; you ask which mob has native title over the spot. It's her mob—Burrika—but they don't have native title yet, only a claim. You ask about the bulldozer.

—Gerro's applied for an exploration permit, but we're challenging it through the tribunal. So, no, Gerro Blue shouldn't be there. And you shouldn't have been there either.

Chastened, you're about to ask her why when the desk phone rings. Lucia points with her lips and you pick it up.

A two-year-old has been eaten alive by a crocodile.

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Your fingers quiver with iced coffee and anxiety as you hurtle down the highway to Whipsnake Creek. Lucia overheard your conversation, picked up her handbag and left. Jeff stared with disgust at the goanna and, through a fume of mint-scented chewy, said,

—All yours. Probably won't see Sweetheart for the rest of the week.

You ignored him, asked,

—Sure you don't want to cover the story yourself?

He was sure, said to drive past the roadhouse and turn down the third track on the left at the *No Shooting* sign.

The car windows scald, the air-conditioning jets dust. On either side of the road there's a bristling verge of spinifex. It's been a long time since you've had to do a death knock—they're the worst part of journalism.

The car's low on diesel and you're busting for a wee, so when a roadhouse appears with its appendages of trucks, its single pump, you skid in. Just as the pump clicks full, you notice the centipede on the bowser. Like everything up here—the crocs, the roaches, the necks of the men—it's terrifyingly overgrown. Long as two joined fists, it has prehistoric pincers and there's violence even in its stillness. You ease the pump into the cradle and back away. These echoes of eras long past are everywhere: in the insects, in the reptiles, in the coral reefs turned desert.

In the wailing.

By the creek, a group of Aboriginal women wail in a pitch as other-worldly as the warning wind of a cyclone. You want to turn around, to leave, to respect grief so raw. But you press on and the mud sticks and grips around your sandals.

The women have been camped here for a few nights. In the patchy shade there's a bed frame with a mattress and a dozen swags. Scattered around a campfire are tongs, fish bones, empty

coke cans, an esky and the carapaces of crabs, big as handbags.

A woman approaches. Her dark eyes are dry and angry. She wears a polo shirt with the logo of a local Aboriginal health organisation on the right breast. She lifts her chin, stares hard.

—What now?

—I'm Ava, from the *Daily Gubinge*. I'm so sorry, I... would you be able to tell me what happened? Perhaps, when it happened?

—Use your eyes, sis. Can't you see what happened?

There's no body, no child, no blood. Only a few kids, playing well back from the creek, and the huddle of women, wailing, hitting a note that makes your heart race and your mouth dry. You press on.

—The police aren't here yet?

—Nah, nothing.

—Is the child's mother here? Could I speak to her?

She doesn't reply. Another woman breaks from the group. She's in her forties, very beautiful, with Asiatic eyes and beer in hand.

—Who dis one?

—Says she's from the paper.

—Are you the mother? you ask the beautiful woman.

She looks down, pauses, then points towards the huddle.

—More better you talk to him lateron.

The women share a look and the first woman walks back to the group. The other walks over to two camp chairs. After a moment, you follow. On one of the chairs is a water bottle. The label reads *Gerro Blue*. The woman picks it up, tosses it away. When you're settled, her face becomes savage with grief.

—Your mum, dad, sister, husband, you can lose them, y'know? But not your child.

The woman takes a bracing sip of beer and tells you that three

years ago, her eleven-year-old daughter was found dangling at the end of a rope. It was all over social media before she heard about it.

A wind clatters the empty cans, carries the sweet scent of rain.

—My husband dug the grave. Every few minutes he had to walk away.

She lifts her can.

—That's why I drink. That's how I found God. And now that's my country.

She points.

—That's my country, in the sky.

Once you've got what you need, you leave.

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Sitting in your undies on the verandah, a second glass of white washes your heart empty, but not your mind. Your mind is racing: about the child taken by a croc, the stories you haven't finished writing, and this company, Gerro Blue. Uranium exploration and mining fascinate you, especially after reporting for the *Japan Times*. One of your first big stories was covering the 2007 Chūetsu offshore earthquake, which caused radiation to leak into the Sea of Japan from the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa Nuclear Power Plant.

At that point, you hadn't visited the Korea-facing coast, though on several occasions, craving salt and space, you'd spent weekends on the Pacific at a lonely seaside hotel in Kujūkuri, Chiba prefecture. Each time, you were the only guest. Your room, on the third floor, had rice paper sliding doors and tatami mats. The lift was broken and there was a view of the ocean. In the early morning, the water was the slack silk of Brighton in summer; in the afternoons, wind. It lashed up whitecaps

and sent a torrent of cold salt down the stairwell. Eventually, you realised the hotel had no level two. Or rather that the door to level two was boarded over. Were pornos being shot in the rooms? Were backpackers stapled to the walls? Or was there, perhaps, a *1Q84* portal to the shadow of an overpass?

This ominous feeling came hard on the heels of the disenchantment inevitable when you stay in cheap hotels too long—the men at reception were too attentive, too familiar; there were cigarette butts and the sharp lips of bottle caps embedded in the carpet; the bins in the foyer hadn't been emptied in days ...

One Saturday evening, walking home from the 7-Eleven, you stopped at a small restaurant and took a seat overlooking the empty highway. A fan made the light flutter. You were served a fatty slice of salmon and a two-dollar glass of sake with fumes that made your eyes water. Your guts tightened around it, and you tried to place it, this town. Places were always 'like' somewhere else. New Zealand? That's just like Tassie. The Philippines? Totally Indo. The beaches of Chiba? There are elements of Wollongong: the concrete diamonds, the waves that clip the grim edges of breakwalls.

But there was something else—that quality of seaside towns out of season, a forlorn quality. From your window seat you looked out at the flashing neon, aquamarine and lemon, and at the sand, as it shored up against the power poles and made fine grey eddies in the car park. There were no cars, no people in sight.

And then suddenly your blood rocked, sick, as if the sake had thrown your balance, and it took a moment to realise it wasn't the sake, it was the earth. A tremor. Three, four, five seconds maybe. The old waiter didn't flinch.

Later that night, you read that Japan gets a hundred thousand earthquakes a year.

So the Chūetsu offshore earthquake on July sixteenth wasn't surprising in itself. But it was the first time waste from a Japanese nuclear power plant had leaked into the sea. When you arrived in Kashiwazaki, the fishermen and hotel owners said it was nothing, that the rumours had damaged their businesses far worse than any so-called leak. You weren't so sure, and didn't touch fish for a month.

Now, clicking through Gerro Blue's website, you find their rhetoric brassily optimistic: they're proud to be undertaking grassroots uranium mining exploration in Western Australia and are planning to be a major contributor to the regional and state economy through construction contracts and ongoing investment. There's the usual sugary spiel about environmental safeguards, rigorous water testing and Indigenous engagement. Further digging, beyond the website, shows that Gerro Blue is owned by オレンジフィールド—Orangefields, a Japanese energy company with head offices in Perth and Tokyo.

A beetle dives at the screen and you swipe it away. If they don't have an exploration permit yet, then why the bulldozer?

In the garden, a hot wind shakes loose a hibiscus. You close the lappy and pour another glass of wine.

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Six a.m. and the day's already a strangle of humidity and sun. You're regretting the decision to ride your bike to work. In Tokyo you rode every day and it was never too hot, except for a few muggy weeks in July. Everyone rode: wherever you looked there were bicycles with baskets and baby seats and lovely curved handlebars. Between four and seven a.m., commuters whisked quietly toward the stations and you joined them, part

of the morning migration, parking your bike among the glittery metal millions.

Not so here, where instead there's a morning migration of white Japanese Toyotas. Only the poor and the drugged and the mad ride bikes in this heat. An old woman shuffles toward you with a bag of groceries and a face like a riverbed. A white kid lurches across the road, jaw and eyes working in a panic of ice-high paranoia. A man on an electric scooter gives you a wave. His burned, horned feet jut at odd angles and his mouth slopes sideways with stroke. You wave back and then turn onto the dirt track toward the office.

It's right at the end, past the mechanics and meatworks, white tin with a view of the mangroves and the bay. Every morning, there's a fresh tessellation of bottle glass in the car park. Sometimes there's a swag of clothes.

The office used to be an old pearler's house and so there's a bathroom downstairs where you shower. After your shower, a caffeinated trawl of the news and social media reveals your croc story. Usually you don't bother reading your own stories, but this one was important. You wanted to report respectfully, were conscious of the women's request that you follow correct cultural protocol around death.

The story's been changed. There's a racy headline, *Croc chomps kid at popular fishing spot*, and two by-lines: Jeff Williams and Ava Kelly. The article has been sensationalised and, in a direct flout of the family's wishes, there's a grainy shot of the child next to a photo of a lunging salty.

Outside the window, the turquoise tide throttles the mangroves.

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