

Extract from

# **Out of Water**

by

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## **One - Australia.**

**H**attie sits by the fire. She watches the red and orange light draining from the sky and strokes her belly, which is full of meat and damper. She thinks about that goanna; how his fat scaly body twisted as she grabbed him, how he scuttled around just before his wise lizard eyes locked onto hers one last time, understanding everything as he died.

Hattie's grandmother, Mollie rubs her wrinkled hands together, dislodging a greasy scatter of red dust particles which crackle in the flames like exploding stars.

A bogong moth flies by and Hattie shivers as the dusty wings scratch her skin. 'What you doin' here little one?' she asks. 'You lost eh?' The dark creature makes no reply.

Hattie's mother, Langa is standing on the other side of the fire, smoking a cigarette. She straightens her back and places her hand on her belly; another baby's coming soon. This time Hattie's hoping for a sister.

Hattie's brothers are playing nearby. Goddo is sixteen, two years older than Hattie. Hiram is twelve, two years younger. Goddo and Hiram dash around on the slope, battering the boab tree with a footie ball.

Their baby cousin, Pearl is curled up like a joey, feeding from Rubi's breast.

The men are away, hunting. and won't be back for a week at least.

Hattie wriggles further down into the sand as the rustling gum tree sheds strips of white bark from her scaly trunk and spreads them on the ground at Hattie's feet like offerings.

Mollie's peering into the sky. 'Look at those black clouds; a storm's coming soon,' her voice is as dark and scratchy as the moth's wing. She pokes the fire with a stick. The stick is gnarled and twisted, like the hands that hold it. The stick crackles and spits. Mollie's face is illuminated. Dark brown and shiny as polished jarrah. Gran's beautiful, Hattie reckons, like a rock or an ancient tree.

The lightning flashes, whitening the world. A second later, thunder mumbles dark threats in the distance. The tree creaks in the wind. The storm hangs over the hills like a big old feathered warrangana, getting ready to drop on his prey. The clouds puff themselves up then flinch as a bright flash pierces them like an X Ray. Tiny red sand-spirits whoosh through the hot air.

The bogong moth flaps her black wings and rushes off into the night.

Hattie's been reading one of Gran's old books, but it's too dark now. She puts the book in the sand behind her, away from the fire-specks. Fire has a mind of its own and you can never trust it.

Stars are shining from behind the ruffled clouds and the moon's fat face is silver-white.

More lightning flashes on the horizon then another much louder rumble of thunder shakes the earth. Hattie flicks a strand of rust-coloured hair out of one eye and stares into the distance, watching a little sandstorm approaching from the west.

With a jump, Mollie sits up straight, watching the sandstorm. 'Yurrrh-ma! Gabam-na!' she whispers. 'Hide! Quickly! Gadia coming!'

Without a word Hattie springs to her feet, gathering her thin cotton dress around her legs and running as a car makes its way towards the camp, churning up sand as it comes.

'Oh, no! Please Wandjina, not again!' says Mollie.

Hattie runs into the house, where Langa's standing by the sink, smoking another cigarette. Her face is puffy and her eyes are dull and Hattie knows she's been drinking. When she's full of grog Mum's true spirit leaves her and she's taken over by something ugly and brutish.

'What you doin'?' Langa shouts as Hattie scrambles over the threshold.

'Gadia comin'.

Mum stumbles into the bedroom and Hattie follows. There's a rug next to the bed and Langa pulls it up to reveal a trap-door in the floor. Underneath is a hole, four feet deep and three feet wide.

Hattie wriggles inside. It's like getting into a grave. A couple of her mother's bottles are hidden in here and Hattie pushes them out of the way then lies still. Langa closes the hatch over her,

and Hattie can see nothing. She can smell the earth but, and feel it breathing against her sweat-soaked skin. Now she can hear a scratching noise as Mum pulls the rug back over the trap door. Hattie's throat is dry. Her hands are damp. She feels sick but she keeps still in the darkness.

After a time, muffled by the walls of her tomb, the growl of an engine reaches her ears, followed by the kookaburra-screeching of brakes. Loud bangs. Boots stamping. Men's voices shouting: 'Okay, you lubras, where is she?'

Hattie hears her mother's voice; slurry and thick: 'Who? What you fellas talkin' 'bout?'

'Don't give me that. We know you got a half-caste kid here. Tracker-fella told us. Now, don't make this difficult for yourself. Where is she?'

Fear is running from Hattie in rivers of sweat. They soak into her dress and mingle with the earth to form a smooth silty skin of mud over her legs. Her eyes are wide open in the darkness. Thirst and fear and panic torment her. She holds her breath, listens.

Like all their mob Hattie's Mum can speak English as well as any British aristocrat. Better probably, Hattie reckons. Langa's smart. She's read most of Gran's old books: Dickens, Shakespeare, all that ancient mirlimirli that belonged to their ancestor, Godfrey. And she can speak several ngarrangu languages as well as English –Yawuru, Nyamal, Warlpiri, Wageman not to mention their own language, Luritja, of course. But right now, in spite of the grog Mum's being clever, pretending to be an idiot.

Grandma Mollie says people don't like surprises. So when the situation warrants it, as this one most certainly does, Gran says it's wise to give people what they expect. Which in this case is a bunch of dumb, tongue-tied natives jabbering in pidgin Kriol.

'When the gadia are near, just act stupid,' Mollie says. 'Make out you have the brain of an emu and the reasoning skills of a platypus. It won't hurt for anyone over the age of about thirteen to pretend to be pissed too. Stagger about a bit. Act like that beer-drinking camel over at Whim Creek. Be what they expect you to be and you won't go far wrong.'

Hattie grimaces. Unfortunately her mum is more than living up to the gadia's expectations in the matter of grog consumption. Hattie hopes her mum's not too far gone; Langa needs to find the right words tonight, to fool these cops.

Language is stronger than a gun if you use it right, Mollie says. It can create great stories. It can make poems that force you to cry. Or it can be used like a boomerang or a spear as a way of defending yourself against attack. Also it makes excellent camouflage.

Langa's speaking in a whiny voice, a bit slurred by the grog but that's a good thing for once: 'You think we got half-caste picannin hereabouts? Who bin tell you that rubbish? You wastin' you time, mister. Only black-fella kids here. We got no nu-jabing-nga. Look-see for yourself.'

Baby Pearl is crying. The noise stops suddenly and Hattie pictures her little cousin latching onto Aunty Rubi and sucking milk from the heavy dark breast.

The fire is crackling and the land is whispering: 'Don't worry, little daughter. You are safe here. Your Mother Earth is hiding you. Stay calm, those men will leave soon.'

Then a noise like thunder crashes above Hattie's head. Boots thumping across the wooden floor. Mum sniffing: 'What youse blokes want? We got nothing in here for yez. Why you bin make 'im mess here?'

The bed screeches as it's dragged across the floor. The footsteps crash above Hattie's face. She holds her breath.

'Look missis, we know you're hiding a half-caste. Just tell us where she is. We're gonna find her anyway, so you might's well save yourself a lot of trouble. You know it's the law; you can't keep her here.'

'I don' know what youse talkin' 'bout, misters,' repeats Langa.

Hattie hears a slap followed by a whimper; her mother's no longer faking; she's crying for real now. Another slap, louder this time. The bastards are hitting her!

Now Hattie can hear Aunty Rubi's voice. 'Leave my sister 'lone. Can't you see she's pregnant? Don't hit her like that you. . .'

Yet another slap. Rubi's voice stops mid-sentence. Pearl's screaming.

Gran's speaking now. 'Please misters. We not bin see no half-caste here for years eh? Not since me little sister Emily got took and that were a good fifty year ago or more.'

**H**attie has heard the story of Grandma Mollie's sister so many times she has almost become immune to the horror of it. Poor little golden-skinned, three-year-old Emily, who would have been Hattie's Great Aunty. But she was stolen by the police way back in 1910 and nobody ever saw her again. Gran still talks to Emily every day and sometimes it makes her cry.

Mollie is pleading: 'Don't you go scarin' me daughter now, she havin' baby eh?' There's another slap. More wailing from Pearl.

Goddo's shouting in his deep, almost-man's voice: 'Leave my grandma 'lone, you mongrels. . .' Goddo, Langa's first-born was named after Mollie's Grandfather Godfrey whose own father was a white-fella. That was back in the days of the gold-rush when all the gadia went mad trying to get rich in the mountains around the Kimberley. *This* Goddo's a lot like the first one, according to Mollie, who remembers everything from the old days but sometimes forgets what happened yesterday.

Hiram speaks next, his shrill, little boy's voice shaking with fear. He may be only twelve, but he's as brave and untameable as a baroomby: 'Yeah, Misters please go 'way. Debil-debil promise eh? No half-caste kids here, just us blackfella picanninis eh? We got nothin' for yez here, eh? Not no walypala him bin here long time, mister sir.'

Hattie smiles in spite of her fear. Hiram is a great actor. Smart too, like Mum. He's putting on a good show but Hattie knows the policemen will never give up. Not until they get what they've come for. There's another slap followed by a muffled groan from Hiram. Hattie imagines her little brother staring the policemen in the eye, refusing to cry.

**S**he can't take any more of this. She brings her hand up to the trap door above her head. Moving her elbows into position, she takes a deep breath. She can taste dust. Pressing her back against the earth, she starts to push against the wooden hatch with the soles of her bare feet. She

feels the muscles in her legs flexing. She hears the rug sliding aside as the hatch creaks open. At that moment another rumble of thunder explodes, directly overhead. Mollie was right; here comes the rain. Whoosh, the storm-breeze picks up, disturbing the old gum tree. The tree's creaking in the wind: 'Don't knock me over,' she groans. 'I don't want to die today.' The tree's an old lady, like Mollie. Still plenty of life there, but. In both of them.

**H**attie steps from the hole in the floor and walks out into the room. She sees her family standing frozen in front of her as another bibijgaja-lightning flash illuminates the room, turning everything bone-white for several slow, sad seconds before disappearing and taking them with it.

The room's almost dark again, but the picture of her family is printed like a photograph on the back of Hattie's eyes: Langa, crying, clutching her swollen belly. Mollie, old and frail-looking in the half-light. Little Hiram, wide eyed as a possum in the storm-flash. Goddo with that almost-man warrior glint in his eyes. Aunty Rubi, her plump cheeks shining with tears, holding baby Pearl in her arms. Fierce, snarling men in dark uniforms glistening with buttons. The noise of thunder and policemen shouting. The smell of fear. The taste of earth in her dry mouth. The roughness of the floor-boards against her bare feet.

Nobody can save her. Wallo and the rest of the men are away on walkabout, hunting for food. They are far, far away. Hattie's going to have to go with these policemen. Will she ever see her family again?

The only light's coming from the moon now. Hattie can see the two white men standing side by side like ghosts hanging in the air. She walks towards them as they come forward to grab her. At that moment the rain comes in a rush, tons and tons of fat water drops crashing against the corrugated tin roof of the little house.

Hattie straightens her back. 'You can stop that now,' she says. 'I'm here.'

**T**he two men waste no time in grabbing Hattie and forcing her into the back of their car where they handcuff her to a door handle then lock her in. As soon as Hattie is secured, the two

men ease their own fat, sweaty bodies into the front seat of the car. Hattie twists her head round to look through the rain-smearred window. The fingers of her one free hand are slippery with rain and sweat and panic but she manages to wind the window down an inch. She can hear Langa and Mollie crying. Her grandmother's holding something in her hand; it's the book Hattie's been reading, *Great Expectations*. For one insane moment, Hattie worries that the book'll get wet, or that her Gran'll lose her place, as if any of that mattered now.

The fatter of the two men is in the driving seat. He rattles the keys in the ignition then the engine splutters into life. Langa's standing alone a couple of feet away from the car, clutching her belly, her face turned up to the sky. Now she's sinking to her knees. Mollie's shouting something but Hattie can't hear her over the noise of the engine and the storm. The world's strobe-lit by another lightning flash - everything moving in jerks and halts. Goddo's walking towards Langa. Hiram's banging on the window of the car, mouth open in a cry that's swallowed by a sudden thunder clap. Goddo's bending over Langa. The book's flapping in Gran's hands, like a trapped bird beating its wings against her face. Now Hiram's running, steadily falling back as the car drives away. Goddo's lifting Langa and carrying her towards the veranda. Mollie's dropped the book and left it lying in the mud. The car goes faster as the driver shifts through the gears. Before long Hattie's family has disappeared into the storm.

'Please, stop the car,' Hattie's frantic. 'Oh please, I think my Mum's having her baby. Please, I must go back!'

But the two policemen don't even answer. Hattie carries on weeping quietly all the way to Port Hedland but the two men ignore her. The rain drums on the roof of the car. The wind howls. The policemen say nothing to Hattie and only the occasional word to each other. Finally, the one who isn't driving addresses Hattie directly: 'Come on now, you cheer up, it ain't so bad, eh?' He's the smaller of the two. He has sand-coloured hair and a broken front tooth.

‘No,’ adds the other one, without taking his eyes away from the windscreen. ‘You’ll be right. Lots of kids go away to school, you know. Think of it as an opportunity, why don’t ya? They’ll learn ya how to read at the Methodist Mission.’ Hattie looks at the back of his head.

‘I can already read.’

‘Well good for you,’ says the other one. He takes a breath, as though to speak again then seems to think better of it.