



THE COLOUR OF
KEROSENE
AND OTHER STORIES

CAMERON RAYNES

“These beautifully realised stories are true to what William Faulkner called “the human heart in conflict with itself”. Cameron Raynes is a writer who deserves a wide and appreciative audience.”

Ron Rash

Wakefield Press

The Colour of Kerosene and Other Stories

Cameron Raynes has worked in Perth, Meekatharra, Katherine, Darwin and Adelaide as a barman, welfare worker, anthropologist, historian, archivist, editor, academic and scriptwriter. He has a PhD on the moral subtext of Aboriginal oral history and writes whenever he can. He lives in Semaphore and is currently writing a script for a feature film based on his story, 'The Colour of Kerosene'.

By the same author

*The Last Protector: The illegal removal of Aboriginal children
from their parents in South Australia*

*'A Little Flour and a Few Blankets': An administrative history
of Aboriginal Affairs in South Australia, 1834–2000*

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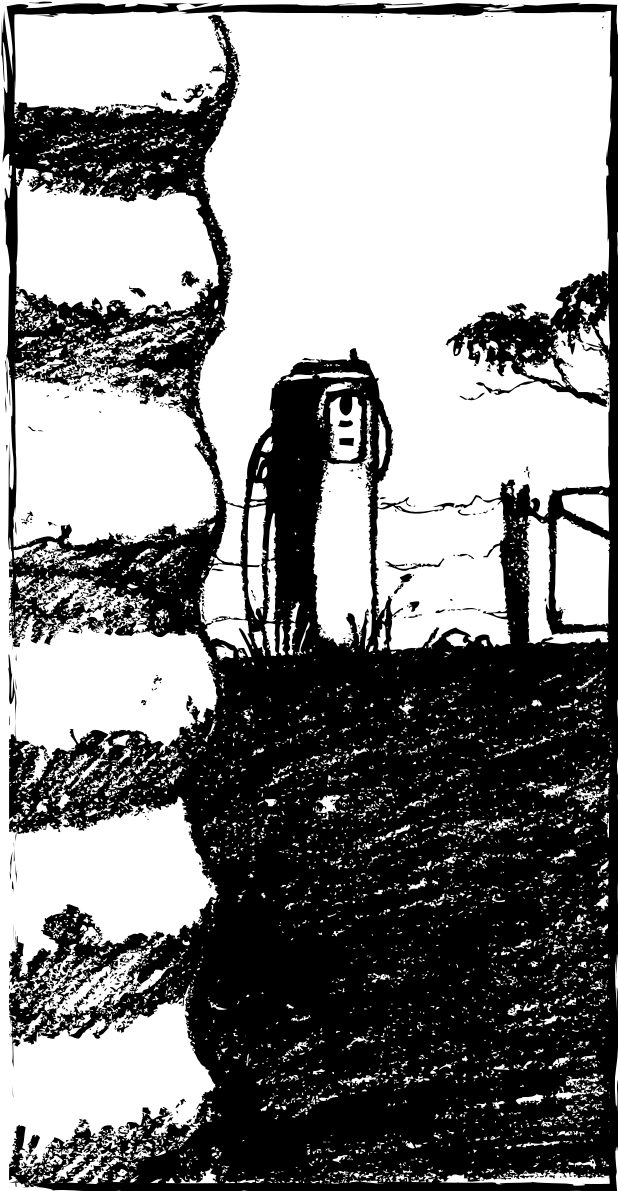


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For Tania

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The Colour of Kerosene

It felt wrong from the moment he picked up the fare outside the hotel on Marine Terrace.

‘Turn here,’ the man said.

They drove on, almost to the end of Rifle Range Road. ‘That’s the one,’ said the man, pointing to a weatherboard, Housing Commission house with a dying wattle out the front.

‘Didn’t know you could kill them,’ said Luke.

The man didn’t answer. He hadn’t said much since talking Luke into the job, ten minutes earlier. A three-hundred-kilometre trip to the east, to a station. The promise of a six-hundred-dollar fare and a tank of free diesel when he got there. It was too good to pass up. Luke could use the money.

The man wound down his window, leant a meaty arm across Luke and depressed the horn – two, three times. ‘Jess!’ he shouted.

They waited. The front door opened and a woman appeared. Her dress was shapeless but for the slightest hint of hips as she came down the steps. A still-pretty face, dirty blonde hair, meagre breasts, she had the same unnaturally translucent blue eyes as the man.

‘Where’s Annabel?’ asked the man.

‘Inside. She’s coming.’ Jess stood beside his door, passing a Coke bag from hand to hand. ‘Pete. Are you sure I should come?’

‘Get in,’ he said, nodding towards the back seat.

She opened the back door and climbed in.

Annabel looked a couple of years older than Jess, in her late twenties perhaps. Smooth, brown skin, and lots of it. They headed east, the nude hills of the Geraldton plains, stripped of their trees a century before, leaning into them on both sides as the car climbed into the marginal country. Behind him, Luke heard the gurgle of fluid sluicing out of a bladder and into a cup, smelt the sweet stink of cheap wine. It occurred to him that it was not too late to turn back.

‘Jess, you get to meet the Greek,’ said Pete.

Annabel laughed – a gurgling, resonant chuckle. For Luke, it was hard to hear that laugh and not think of her body and how it must look, feel, smell.

Fifty minutes later, approaching Mullewa, Pete leant over, his breath sour and hot on Luke’s face.

‘How’s ya fuel?’

Luke looked at the gauge. ‘About a third,’ he said. ‘Should I get some here?’

‘Nah. We’ll make it. Two hundred clicks to go. You can fill up there. Take all ya want.’

The Railway Hotel on their left, worn out rolling stock on their right, a church, dusty roads lined with ugly cottages, their yards defeated by drought, a petrol station. Not a soul in sight. By the time they’d reached the ‘80’ sign on the outskirts of town, Luke was doing a hundred and ten.

Pete fiddled with the glove box and opened it. Luke turned to him as a road train blasted past on his right and tried to make a point of holding his gaze.

‘Hey! What’s this?’ said Pete, rummaging among Luke’s rego papers and petrol receipts. ‘Didn’t know you were packin’ heat.’ He laughed, holding the little blue water pistol that Luke’s nephew had left there the week before.

‘Put it back,’ said Luke.

‘Spray me,’ said Annabel, gurgling. A sound like water going to waste.

‘I’ll piss in it at the next stop,’ said Pete. He rested his hand on the dash, pointing the pistol at a LandCruiser rushing towards them. His arms were brown, scarred, his forearms as thick as pythons. Not the defined, neat muscles of the gym, they were arms you got from working outside,

straining fences, hoisting bales of hay, holding an animal still while someone else worked on its horns, teeth, or balls.

We're not stopping, thought Luke, eyes on the odometer, willing it to tick over, conscious of the needle on the fuel gauge falling backwards.

An hour later, the car full of cigarette smoke, he pulled up at a truck stop. Pete belched, opened his door and got out. He stood in front of the car, his back to them, pissing. Luke resisted the temptation to throw the car into reverse and roar away. They were now closer to the station than to Mullewa, and he wasn't sure his fuel would last. *Maybe if the car was empty of passengers ...*

Luke turned to look at the girls.

'Anyone else?' he asked.

Annabel ignored him. Luke looked out the passenger-side window. Flat land all around, the car hemmed in by scrubby bushland as if the world ended at fifty paces in each direction. Pete had stopped pissing and was throwing rocks at the 'Rest area' sign, thirty metres away. Jess groaned.

'You okay?' Luke asked.

She shook her head, fumbled with the handle, opened the door, leant out and vomited loudly onto the ground. Luke popped the boot and got out.

'She's always been like that,' Pete said, aiming at the sign.

‘Since she was a kid.’ The sound of rock hitting metal and he shouted, triumphant.

Luke got a container of water from the boot and poured some into Jess’s cupped hands. She spat, then brought her hands up to her face, rinsed, then spat again.

‘Not far now,’ said Pete.

Ahead, the road veered to the left. The day was easing into dusk and the scrub racing by was softened by shadows, its upper foliage picked out here and there in gold.

A 44-gallon drum marked the turn-off to the station. Luke concentrated, keeping his wheels out of the deep ruts that scored the track. It looked like it hadn’t been graded for years.

Through one open gate, then another, then past a row of dark, misshapen pines, their lower limbs hacked away. Then a homestead squatting in the gloom, its veranda sagging. He opened the windows to the smell of pine and wood smoke. The needle on the fuel gauge didn’t even move when he turned off the engine.

The Greek was skinny, with a beer belly. Late forties, face and nose reddened by booze and sun. He emerged from the side of the homestead. The girls and Pete got out. Luke stayed where he was, keys in the ignition. Pete said something to the Greek, and he spoke back, too soft for Luke to hear.

Pete came round to Luke’s side of the car and leant on it. ‘Pump’s locked.’

‘Locked?’

‘Yeah. We’re gonna have to wait for Frank.’

‘Who the fuck is Frank?’ said Luke, fighting to keep the thin vein of panic rising in his body from coming out his mouth.

‘Manager. Got the key. Should be back in a coupla hours.’

‘A couple of hours!?’

‘Gonna have to wait. He’s got your money too.’

The five of them sat on the veranda, cards in hand, the light from a pair of battered hurricane lamps spilling around and leaking into the night.

The Greek was organised. He had a box of casino chips – everything from ones to fifties – a brand new pack of cards, a slab of beer beside him. Luke hadn’t wanted to play.

‘Might as well,’ suggested Pete. ‘Fuck all else to do.’

Luke cashed in the twenty-five dollars he had left in his wallet and took his first hand of poker. Jacks and threes and he won fifteen dollars with the Greek seeing him with a pair of kings. Luke soon had a hundred dollars in chips in front of him and he relaxed a little and took the beer that the Greek offered. The girls stopped playing.

‘Jess,’ said Pete, nodding his head towards the front door. ‘Get us somethin’ to eat will ya?’

She shuffled off and came back a minute later with a bowl of beer nuts and a bowl of chips. The game changed to blackjack and somewhere around his third beer, Luke realised

he wouldn't be driving anywhere that night, even if Frank turned up. He sighed, nodding gently to himself, a jack and a nine on the floorboards in front of him. He had twenty-five dollars riding on it, Pete had bust, and the Greek, the banker, had a queen and a seven.

'Might as well go for it,' said Pete, and the Greek smiled and his red face glowed and he turned over the three of clubs.

That was the start of a bad run for Luke. By the time he'd finished his fifth beer, Annabel was writing down his borrowings. She did it on Jess's calf, with a biro. By midnight, there was a '50' with a line through it, a '100' above it with the same treatment, and above that a '150'.

'That's it,' said Luke, swaying as he got up. 'That's a hundred and fifty I haven't got. I'm goin' to bed.'

In the weird, piney darkness he got the picnic blanket from the boot and climbed into his car. He put the little blue gun carefully back in the glove box, thinking of his sister, Claudia, and their plan, long shelved, to run a bookshop in Geraldton. Thirty-odd-thousand people and no proper bookshop. Maybe there was a reason for that. He laughed. He made sure each door was locked, then reclined his seat and draped the blanket over his chest.

At one point he woke up, hearing someone shout. He wound down his window a notch, heard Jess's voice, pleading, 'I couldn't do nothin' about it.' He wound the window back up.

He was the first one up. He went for a walk, past the pines and towards a small rise to the west. Stunted eucalypts all around him and as far as he could see. A busted-up fence in front of him, the wires all brown and broken and tangled. *Tetanus*, he thought. There wasn't an animal in sight.

It brought back a memory of one of his family's more disastrous 'holidays'. He'd been about ten. His dad had camped them beside a murky, mosquito-infested waterhole and had spent three days crisscrossing the ground with a hired metal detector, searching for gold, finding nothing but the bottle tops and ring-pulls left by the fossickers before them. On the fourth morning, on seeing her third 'holiday snake', as his father called them, Luke's mum had shut them all up in the car and tooted the horn until her husband, grubby with dirt and frustration, had relented and packed up his gear.

Walking back to the homestead, Luke found the diesel pump near the first gate, behind a water tank. The padlock's shackle was as thick as his finger. There were a couple of fist-size rocks dumped beside the tank. He picked one up and kept walking.

Jess was on the veranda, her head sticking out of a bundle of blankets. Her face tried a smile, gave up and fell back on itself. He walked up to her and stood in front of the veranda. Her eyes were the colour of kerosene. He couldn't hold her stare.

‘Is Frank back yet?’

Jess shook her head. Luke remembered he was holding a rock and moved his arm behind his hip.

‘What’s going on here?’ he asked.

‘Whatdaya mean?’ she said, softly.

Luke gestured with a nod of his head towards the west. ‘Where’s the animals? I thought this was sheep country.’

Jess frowned. ‘Dunno. Never been here before. I dunno why anyone would want to live out here. It’s horrible.’

‘We came out this way once,’ said Luke. ‘When I was a kid. Family holiday. Mulga, mallee. Fuck, I don’t even know what it’s called. I remember saying to my dad, “Why are all the trees so small? Where are all the old trees?”’

‘We never had no holidays.’

Luke gave a laugh that died quickly in the back of his throat when he saw she wasn’t joking. He let the rock drop with a soft thud behind him. They both pretended not to hear the sound it made.

Later, the men came out with plates of bacon and sausage. Jess cooked some for Luke and he sat there with them.

‘He’ll be here soon,’ said Pete.

Luke said nothing, ate everything on his plate and then put it down beside him on the veranda. He watched as the Greek got the cards out again, cut them, shuffled and placed two cards in front of him, picture-side up.

‘Double or nuttin?’ asked the Greek. Luke knew this game: In-Betweens, or Stupid, as it was sometimes called.

It was one of the simplest games.

‘Okay,’ said Luke.

It was a generous offer. He had a king and a four in front of him and had just been offered double or nothing on a hundred and fifty dollars that the next card the Greek turned up would land between them.

The Greek turned over the four of hearts and shook his head. ‘Your luck will change,’ he said, dealing him another two cards. This hand was even better. A king and a two. Luke looked at him.

‘Okay,’ said the Greek. ‘Hey, we like you. You’re a good boy. Same as last time? Double or nuttin?’

Anything other than an ace, a two, or a king and his debt would dissolve and they’d still owe him the six-hundred-dollar fare. Luke nodded. When the Greek turned over the two of spades it was like everything in his life had been building towards that one moment in time and he just kept nodding.

‘Looks like we’re just about square,’ said the Greek. He wouldn’t look at Luke, and Luke could see Pete out of the corner of his eye, grinning. Annabel stifled a laugh. Luke got up from the veranda and walked over to his car and then just stood there, leaning against the driver’s door.