

*Like fish.* In the rear view mirror, Ian Trickett's daughters had begun to look like fish.

He eyed them again. With their down-turned mouths they reminded him of the big sad Murray cod in the photos yesterday. It was as if this trip was making them like that.

Nothing, he said when the older one, catching his eye, wanted to know what he was staring at.

But yes, he could see on her the serious eye and thin lip of the fish.

The Murray cod photos had been at a reservoir near Tamworth. Although they'd only stopped to buy ice-creams at the kiosk, his girls had got the better of him when he tried to haul them back into the car. He'd ended up paying ninety-five dollars for an overnight cabin. The noticeboard outside the kiosk had been crowded with photos of fishermen with prize-winning cod. Length seemed to be the deciding thing. The grand winner was a hundred and eight centimetres long, caught by a father and son team in matching hats. Deliberate, proud, they offered the fish to the camera with their fingers curling intimately around its fins. It had occurred to Ian that the cod had a look of dismay.

Back on the road, Ian's hatchback was often the only vehicle. He was sticking to the back country - left here, guess at the cross-roads, straight on, heading for Queensland. But taking as long as possible.

Since the day of Gina's operation, Ian had been noticing that dismayed look on just about everything. Gina had gone into hospital five weeks ago. Everything was supposed to be okay. Ian's sister had flown to Rockhampton to collect the girls and

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take them down to her place in Newcastle while Gina had her operation. Steady as a rock, she'd had them the whole time. She was fantastic with them. Now it was over to him.

He'd done the drive from Rocky to Newcastle in three days, alone. In Newcastle he'd drunk too much cask wine at night and gulped into his sister's hugs. Now he was bringing his girls home, whatever home now was.

Promise you'll tell them soon, his sister said the morning he left. Promise me. He wouldn't let her do it. It was his job.

He promised. I'll tell them before we get home.

Ring me, his sister told him.

By the second day out, he still hadn't done it. We're going home to Queensland, he told them every time they said something. But there was time. It was still a thousand kilometres to Rockhampton, the way he was going anyway.

He wasn't sure why it was so important to take the inland route. To drive the coastal highway again seemed unendurable. On the trip south he'd faced the road with his lips stretched into a terrible weeping smile, overtaken by laughing families.

Filling his petrol tank in the late afternoon, he saw himself in the car window, grim as a fish himself. In the gloom of the back seat, his daughters fought over empty chip packets.

They ate their dinner at a takeaway shop that night. Behind the glass counter there was a mullet laid out on ice. It stared from a cold eye. He wondered if it had

struggled. Even such a glum, scaly thing would have tried to stay alive. He wrapped up the rest of his fish burger and stared at his hands while his girls finger-painted in tomato sauce on the table.

It was the finality that was getting to him.

Later in the motel he lay listening to his girls squabble over packets of soap. He shouted at them and they burst into tears. Tucking them into the double bed he remembered he'd left their books behind at the cabin. No story. Just the comic strip from a Courier Mail he'd found outside. Kissing them, he felt their sticky faces. There'd been a scalding, snotty, salty feel to their lives on this trip.

Nearly in Queensland, he told them.

When they were asleep he went to stand outside.

A guy came out of the room next door, sat down and pulled on his boots.

Kids gone to sleep, said the guy.

Yeah, said Ian.

No problem. Access arrangement?

Nah . . .

The guy rattled on. Yeah, I should see my kids every second weekend but hey, my job doesn't work like that. Like, I'm here for five weeks doing vegetation surveys for the mines. Is there any give and take with the mother? Nah. But I'm off in the morning.

Yeah, said Ian to the ground, and the guy soon drove off in a ute.

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At five-thirty in the morning all the vehicles at the motel started up. Mine workers. His girls hadn't woken up yet. He reached for the Courier Mail. Holding it over his face, he cried silently. When he put the paper down he saw, in the other bed, his oldest snap her eyes shut.

The day he'd pulled up in his sister's driveway to collect them, his girls had peered past him looking for Gina. Where's Mummy? Every time they asked, he twisted away. Soon they stopped asking. But they seemed newly wary of him, always looking at him. They weren't stupid, his girls. Any moment, they could approach him gravely, a deputation.

But now they came sweetly into his bed with solicitous fingers curling into his beard, one on each side. He wasn't sure he would understand them now, these children of his. He squeezed them tight.

When he opened the motel door they burst outside. He watched them run mindlessly around on the concrete, still in yesterday's clothes. The vegetation guy's ute was gone, but on the chair outside his room was a book. Ian picked it up. *Australian Grasses* by A J Stanbrown. The guy must have dropped it. The seed capsules on the cover looked like hairy green creatures. He handed it to his girls.

The electric jug wouldn't fit under the bathroom tap so he filled it from a glass. There were sachets of coffee and tea and sugar all over the floor. The milk was long-life, three small cartons of it. The sweet coffee warmed him and he took it outside and held it to his chest. His kids were fighting over the book. Stupid. They couldn't even read. He swiped at it. No-one gets the grass book now. The little one blubbered and hiccupped. She lost every battle. The oldest shouted at him with her hands on her

hips. They were probably hungry. He went inside and tore open the packs of milk. He brought them out, one each. But they wanted coco pops. Milk's all there is, he told them, and they started whining again.

Jesus Christ. He couldn't stop himself flinging the milk at them. They ran away from him, their legs moving quickly as they disappeared into the room. The milk puddled on the concrete.

He found them lying squeezed in the space between the single bed and the wall, looking up at him, holding hands. Come on, and he smoothed their hair with his fingers. Stuffing the grass book in his bag, he promised to read it to them later.

In the car it haunted him that their legs had looked so swift as they fled from him, like the legs of startled animals. He let them have Twisties for breakfast at a service station. They watched him as they chewed. He felt like telling them then, but he didn't do it.

*Later on they met a dog.* There was a park; he waited for his girls in the doorway of the Ladies. Then he sat them at a picnic table to eat pies and bananas he'd bought. They had the park to themselves until a woman pulled up in a red station wagon. The woman opened the passenger door to let out a dog. It was a funny-looking thing, like a border collie with stumpy legs. With its plumed tail held high, it nosed around their table. Ian's girls dropped bits of pastry on the ground. She doesn't bite, said the woman, and she headed for the toilets. Loves kids. It gave him a friendly look when

he ran his hand over its back. You can pat her, he told his girls. Be gentle. The two of them slipped off the bench and bent their faces over the dog, sliding their fingers through its fur. It rolled onto its side and opened its mouth. They moved in closer. They stroked it from head to tail, they smoothed it. They whispered to it and it lay still. Watching their slow hands, he almost forgot what had happened. There was a shining wake in the fur where their hands passed. The little one looked into the dog's eyes. I love you. The dog gazed up at her. The older one pressed her face into the black fur.

Here was the woman coming back, laughing. Indi, you sook. The girls escorted the dog back to the car. Ian hovered behind. The oldest girl eyed Ian over her shoulder. She moved closer to the woman. My mummy's in hospital, he heard her say softly. When the woman turned to look at Ian, he fixed his eyes on the dog.

They all waved as the station wagon pulled away. The dog sat motionless in the passenger seat, looking straight ahead. They could see its ears sticking up as the car turned onto the road. Indi, Indi Indi, sang the girls.

Watching them running back to the picnic table, it occurred to him that most of the time they inhabited a different world. They were always staring at things he couldn't see or playing games he didn't understand. See how they moved, their feet pointing everywhere and their eyes all over the place. When he told them, how would they ever take it in? And if they took it in, what would he do then?

The hair on the back of their heads was fuzzy. He'd forgotten to look for the hairbrush. They always had their hair in ponytails, like dolls. Not streaked faces and black feet. But at least they weren't fighting.

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In the car they talked on and on about the dog. Happy Indi. So soft and smooth. The pies they'd feed her. The ribbons you'd tie around her neck. How she'd snuggle up with you at night in bed. You could cuddle in with her and push your face against the warm fur, and she'd nuzzle you. You could whisper things to her and she'd understand. She'd make you laugh, and if you cried she'd hold you tight.

Their voices in the back seat became softer. Eventually their heads lolled sideways. He drove on through a quiet landscape of paddock and black tar, crows the only movement, hopping out of his way at the last minute.

*Grass in all directions.* He pulls up at the side of the road. It's quiet outside, just birds. The clouds are different out here, lonelier. You can't read them. His sleeping girls slump in their seats, little white faces through the window. He walks through tussocky grass to piss against a gum tree. Coming back he notices the trudge in his legs. Flies walk on his face. He leans on the car.

The oldest girl lifts her head and rubs her eyes with her knuckles. She waves to him through the car window and he waves back, like a traveller. He lets her out of the car and she stands holding his hand. The other one wakes up too. He shows them the map of Queensland and tells them the names of the towns. Emerald, Springsure, Blackwater. A truck comes past with dogs in the back, and they talk about Indi again. He gets them to squat and they make little creeks on the ground. While he's searching the car for tissues they drag up their pants and chase away, no thought of snakes. He pulls the Australian Grasses book out of his bag and holds it up. Time for the grass

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book. They come running back. Grass book, grass book. He sits them on a smooth rock in the shade of an acacia.

It's just a botanical book. There are more types of grass than you'd think. He makes up a game. Grasso. The oldest goes first. Open the book at any page and shout *Grasso!* The grass tells you the future. She flips it open. *Grasso!* She gets Goose Grass. She'll meet a goose very soon. The youngest has a turn. *Grasso!* Beetle Grass. She'll see a beetle. His turn. He gets Stink Grass. They'll have to wind the windows down because his boots will stink. Around they go. They get Mud Grass, Kangaroo Grass and Cockatoo Grass. The oldest one opens up at Giant Hairy Panic so he shows them a crazy dance. When he gets Weeping Grass he pretends to cry.

But it's the Queensland Bluegrass they like. It says they're going home to Queensland. It's a tufted grass with soft pink hairs, he reads out. Maybe we'll see some up ahead, he says, and they run for the car. We want Queensland Bluegrass, they call from the back seat. It's our grass.

Back on the road he sings to them as he drives.

*O that Queensland Blue*

*Makes me think of you*

*With your pink hair too*

*And your tufty leaves*



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Late in the afternoon he fills up the car again and buys them a cheese sandwich each. The day's glare has softened and the shadows are long. They'll be in Monto in an hour. There'll be a motel.

The sun is low as Ian Trickett drives his girls north. With the windows down, they travel in golden light on a road that takes them through sweeps of soft grass with shining seed heads, trees standing knee-deep. A fox streams across the road. There's a swirl of wild budgies. A white circle of a moon edges up in the east, and in the west the sun edges down. Breathing into the pink evening, sensitive as blades, they speed towards the Bluegrass. They are a good team going home, proud and purposeful. The grass is a soft pink wave as smooth as fur. You can ripple your hand through it, there'll be a shining wake where you've been. You can curl your fingers in it. You can lie down and bury your face in the warmth and it will lie still. You can whisper deep into it. The grass is a happier thing. The fish-like dolefulness of the past days has gone. Quietened, brave, they go speeding along towards the Queensland Bluegrass.

*Love that Queensland Blue*, they sing softly, and he drums on the steering wheel.

*Love that Bluegrass*, he sings. *Makes me smile, makes me cry.*

Now he'll tell them. He'll tell them now.