



Shedding the Skin

Kyra Bandte

Wailwan is probably a lot like any other country town with a population of about two and a half thousand. There's a lot of dirt, a lot of single-storey houses, and the Castlereagh River is like an artery: beneath the skin, you can feel a pulse. The earth is flat.



When Mum, Dad and Lorrie took trips to Wailwan in the school holidays, Uncle Andy's house was like another home. Lorrie had her own toys packed away in the cupboard: plastic apples and oranges, cartons of milk and fake tins of baked beans. So she played shop in the morning and ran around with Arnie in the afternoon. Arnie was a Jack Russell Terrier named after the actor; like other small dogs he thought he was big. Arnie had free rein over the backyard, but was never allowed in the orchard where the orange trees were fenced off at the back and a passionfruit vine clung to the shed like a lover. There was a tap that dripped non-stop into a pot full of mint beneath it; Lorrie washed her dirty red hands, bringing up the sweet green smell.

The thermometer hit forty degrees early and Uncle Andy pumped up a plastic pool in an empty greenhouse. Lorrie sat in the water and felt how hard the concrete was on her bum. There was mesh over the roof: it crawled with vines and green leaves so the light came through like cellophane and made everything jade.



Lorrie remembered going to the local pool in the summer when Dad bought everyone ice-cream from the kiosk. Lorrie had her first Cornetto and Auntie Marge told her: 'Just wait til you get to the bottom!'

Lorrie would rather be in Uncle Andy's pool than the local; the older kids jumped off the diving board and splashed the brown bodies below. They all knew each other from school and Lorrie was like a tourist in a place where nobody wants to tour.



The Castlereagh still runs through the middle of Wailwan, where Wahwee the water serpent lives, swallowing men whole. It isn't the drought that threatens her survival, but people's arid memories. A white bridge arches its back over the water. When Lorrie feels the car bumping over the wooden-plank vertebrae, she needs to see how full the river is. For a long time it was empty, the riverbank cradle was just dirt and held nothing but dead branches. The trees still hang like ancestors.

It's been a few years since Lorrie was in Wailwan; they stopped taking family trips when she was old enough to stay home on her own, and now that she's back, the place feels heavy. The air is full of something else altogether and she isn't sure if it's because she's older or because Uncle Andy has died. Lorrie presses her head against the cold window of the car and checks the river: it's full like a pregnant belly. Soon these watery babies will overflow and run out into the dry land, into thin creek beds.

Instead of going to Uncle Andy's, Dad drives to Nanna's house. It is a washed-out white colour, half hidden behind a bottlebrush with red bristles bending to the ground. A blurred Jack Russell bolts from around the back to meet them at the

gate, tongue out and tail nubbed off: it's Arnie. Lorrie kicks up red dirt with her shoes and wipes them off when she gets to the doormat. Mum, Dad and Lorrie go inside, Arnie trotting in behind before the door shuts.

An avalanche of aunties tumble over Lorrie, all hugs and kisses. Nanna rocks up out of her recliner and has her turn at half-held hugs and ashy lip-smacks. She doesn't smoke inside anymore, but the walls are still yellow; one is covered in photographs of cousins Lorrie barely knows. An empty white square shows where someone's ex-girlfriend has been taken out.

'There's some curry chicken on the stove, help yaselves,' says Aunty Marge.

Arnie sniffs Lorrie's ankles and his cold nose nudges her. The pet cockatoo screeches piercingly through the kitchen window; Lorrie can see him hanging upside down and head-banging his yellow Mohawk.

'We've already picked the casket and the flowers, and rung up about the service. We just have to choose the music,' says Aunty Em, throwing a teatowel over one shoulder and wiping down the table.

'I think we should go with Slim Dusty, but these say Johnny Cash. Whaddaya think, May?' Aunty Marge asks Lorrie's mother.

Lorrie watches her mum scoop another mouthful of curry to take up time, while someone turns on the stereo. May is a fence-sitter and says they should play both, and the sisters nod their agreement. Somehow Lorrie expected more tears. She wonders if that's why the river's so full.



Lorrie wakes up early the next morning to the cockatoo screaming and the kettle rasping. At the kitchen table, Aunty Em and her mum are pawing over paper: old photographs,

birth certificates, scrappy notes. Aunty Marge is at the stove cooking a full breakfast of bacon, eggs, sausages and tomato and onion gravy. The kettle clicks off and coffee cups are filled.

Nanna's got the TV turned up while Lorrie's dad tries to talk over it: 'Morning! There's bacon and eggs ready, grab a plate!'

Lorrie piles up her plate with everything but the gravy (not a fan of soggy tomato) and heads out the back door. There's a round table under the awning, and Lorrie sets her plate down. Her dad follows a few seconds later and sits opposite. It's quiet out here, and empty like a vacuum. Lorrie looks out over Nanna's land while she eats; the landscape is nearly all sky and the sky is nearly blue. Yellow paddocks wiggle their grassy fingers at the horizon, and somewhere down the back there's a creek Lorrie's never seen; the river's vein pumping out to Wailwan's legs; Wahwee's babies hatching out from the womb.

'You remembered to bring something black, didn't you?' Dad asks.

Lorrie catches on. 'Yeah, the only black pants I have are three-quarter jeans, though. Is that wrong?'

Her dad pauses and Lorrie's wondering whether she'll have to pinch something from Mum's suitcase.

'Nah,' he says, 'there are worse things in the world than jeans.'



Everyone stands around outside the funeral parlour, cigarettes between their fingers and smoke wafting up into the blue as if they're making new clouds. Lorrie isn't sure where to stand and there are so many people she doesn't know. Men in suits bring out the coffin, three on either side like six black legs on an insect. They put Uncle Andy in the back of a hearse and Lorrie can almost see him lying there. People start getting in

their own white and burgundy and blue cars to follow behind, so Lorrie goes along with Mum, Dad and Auntie Marge. Dad drives and nearly swears when someone tries to cut them off. The procession is long and winds through the town like the great serpent Wahwee.

The cars trundle to the end of the street, engines grumbling like hungry stomachs; the radio is off and Lorrie can hear Auntie Marge breathing through her mouth. Past the red post office on the corner and onto the main street, Lorrie sees a woman on the sidewalk; she watches the procession pass and stands still as a ghost. Uncle Andy is the first to go over the bridge, and as Dad clacks over the wooden spine, Mum starts crying. There's a man paused with a pram at the crest of the bridge. Lorrie cries too. The river is flowing fast and its waters are almost clear; the muddy spell is broken. Outside the convenience store a row of cashiers and stock assistants stand in the red dirt median strip. Mum's still crying and now Auntie Marge has started too.

The Wailwan cemetery is about a kilometre out from town and into the dirt. As the long snake of cars drives along, a wave of ochre dust sweeps up and rolls across the terracotta land; Wahwee swims through it and comes out dry.

Each car strips away from the snake body and parks itself under a tree marking the long rows of graves. Lorrie has her arm around Mum and they follow the zombie-throng to Uncle Andy's plot. A hole in the dirt surrounded by flowers; already they're crisped brown at the edges. Johnny Cash is playing on a black boom-box until a bloated man in a suit fades out the volume and starts talking, his bald head shining under the sun. Sweat drips down Lorrie's back and into the band of her black jeans. Dad gets up and reads from a piece of paper which is creased in the middle. They play Slim and tears cling to Lorrie's chin. She watches a white cabbage-moth flitting around as if someone has it on a string. Lorrie thinks it's Uncle Andy.

They toss roses in the hole, which thud on the coffin lid, rapping at a door where nobody's home.



The next day Lorrie wakes to quiet. Nanna is watching Question Time with the TV on mute, and the kitchen is practically empty. Mum and Dad are at the table, steam spiralling from cups of coffee. Even the cockatoo is silent, clenching and unclenching his grey claws outside. Arnie yelps and feels big again.

'We're going over to Uncle Andy's today, do you wanna come?' asks Dad.

Lorrie nods and gives Arnie a quick scratch with her foot. She doesn't have breakfast, but they're ready to leave; Lorrie sits in the backseat and watches Arnie yelp at the fence as they pull away and drive off.

Going to Uncle Andy's house feels like trespassing. Aunty Em and Aunty Marge are already there, cars parked in the driveway. Lorrie shuts the gate quickly before she remembers there's no dog to let out. The backyard is littered with boxes: plates, cups and bowls in leaning towers, a wicker chair and a lounge off to the side.

Aunty Em comes out with a box of plastic toys. 'All this stuff is going to Vinnies, except the furniture. Marge is taking the chair, do you want the lounge, May?'

Mum says no and goes inside to help. Lorrie remembers the box, with the apple and oranges, the milk and the beans. The orange trees at the back are bare, a few dried husks of hollowed out peel on the ground. It's a sweet smell, sick and rotting. Lorrie picks a mint leaf from the pot and chews, rough and fresh on her tongue. The tap is dripping, and in a way everything is the same. It is the boxes behind her that are wrong: the furniture on the bristly lawn, the lack of a little dog.

Lorrie wipes the sweat moustache from her lip; the sun here is at war with the world. While Dad wedges the dining table out through the back door, Lorrie goes out to the empty greenhouse. The shade is cool and green, but the viny roof is dead and brown. The light comes through differently now, as if it has been passed through a muddy filter. The pool is gone. Lorrie isn't sure if it's a bead of sweat or a tear, but she knows it doesn't matter. She wipes it with her finger and throws it to the ground, giving the salt back to the earth and the earth takes it back to the Wahwee.



Kyra Bandte wrote this as a university undergraduate in 2012.

\