

Black Opal

Two cars are travelling the same road. There are no side roads of any consequence.

Sam and Olympia have completed their 'Art to the Outback' project and are heading home from opal country in their hired green four-wheel drive. With them is Laurent who was forced to abandon his own painting trip when his vehicle collided with a kangaroo.

Olympia is flattered that Laurent, who is a big shot in the art world, would want to join up with jobbing artists like her and Sam. During the long drive she will tell him about her art. The tiny etchings and woodcuts you can hold in one hand. So different from his.

Sam definitely doesn't trust Laurent with Olympia. He has only just started making some progress with her himself. But so far Laurent has spent most of the trip asleep on the back seat.

Neville is alone in the other car, a battered station wagon. He is heading home to the opal town that the artists have just left. He is relieved that his trip to the city is over for another six months. In the quiet of the desert he can forget crowds and car fumes and escape underground to chip away at seams in the rock that

promise riches. At night he will share tales of success with mining companions or look at the stars in the icy desert sky.

Sam parks by a sign that directs them to a cave where ancient Aboriginal art can be viewed. They walk into the deep shade of a ravine with overhanging rocky sides on which grow ferns and thin trees.

‘First water we’ve seen in days,’ says Sam, tossing a stone into the scummy green pool. ‘Hello crocodiles—anyone home?’

‘You saw the signs—don’t remove sticks, leaves, any aspect of nature—it’s a sacred site.’ Laurent sits on a rock and blocks out dark shapes on his sketch pad with a stick of charcoal.

Sam looks among the scattered rocks around the pool and finds little skulls and bones of animals that have come to drink here. A beer can is wedged in the rocks and there is an overpowering smell of animal urine and decay. Above is the cave with the paintings they have come to see. Sam shivers.

‘Are you allowed to paint sacred sites?’ he asks Laurent.

‘I want to capture the essence, not the details.’

Sam has seen Laurent’s huge paintings in galleries and knows people pay thousands of dollars for them. He imagines Laurent’s essence of cave, blotches of green and grey rock, no sky or water.

Sam sketches the figures on the cave wall, kangaroo-like creatures that flee stick figures with spears. He is distracted by the sight of Olympia sitting on a rock as rounded as her buttocks. The essence of Olympia is what he really wants, her warm female smell on his fingers, on his face. Her taste on his tongue.

He is angry to see that Laurent has put down his pad and is looking at Olympia too. Does he think Olympia is posing for him?

Olympia draws fine lines representing the leaves and ferns and striations on the rock face. She thinks that the long drive with Sam and Laurent is unlikely to be boring.

The cars are half a day apart when Neville pulls off the road. He walks towards the dry creek bed carrying a billy and a canvas bag. He gathers twigs and leaves, pausing to finger small things, a skull with tiny teeth intact—a mouse? And the skeleton of a miniature lizard. It is completely quiet but after a moment or two he can hear insects buzzing, things cracking and exploding in the heat, twigs snapping.

He sips his tea and eats the biscuits he bought at the petrol stop. The new man in charge is not the sort to chat about politics and the weather like the last guy.

‘This really is the last petrol for a day,’ the man reminds him gruffly. ‘You’d better stock up. Water, too.’

‘Yeah. Opal miner.’ Neville brushes his advice away, shows him he knows what he is doing out here.

The man grunts. He’s probably regretting his move to the outer edge of civilisation. Not interested in opals or anything else much. Just living out what’s left of life at the last petrol stop.

Neville reads the paper he picked up at Broken Hill on the way through. Two artists have completed a tour of outback settlements, taking art to people who can’t get to cities. Teaching them how to paint their landscapes. Neville wonders why anyone would want to paint scenes they were surrounded by all day.

He has always enjoyed driving on these roads, steering confidently to avoid heaps of dust, watching the vegetation becoming sparser the closer he gets to the mine, keeping his eye out for a puff of dust

that might signal an oncoming car. He is excited at the thought of being back in opal country.

In the Pajero, Sam slides a disk into the player, repetitive minimalist music he brought specifically for this environment.

Laurent says, ‘Wagner would be good out here. Or Eminem. Something violent.’

He tells them about the painting he’s planning, a canvas as big as a garage showing only the sky and one huge thorn bush with a bird nesting among the thorns. ‘Not that you’ll be able to tell it is a bird—just a black blob like Ernst’s rossignol.’

Sam decides against turning the volume up. ‘Rossignol—crow?’
‘Nightingale. It’ll be menacing. Clouds like carnivorous animals, the bird cowering in the thorns. I’ll scatter the foreground with bird bones.’

‘Don’t the thorns protect the bird from the carnivores?’ asks Olympia.

‘That’s the whole point of menace, isn’t it? There are no certainties. Especially about protection.’

Sam thinks Laurent is a menace where Olympia is concerned. Not that he talks to her about anything interesting or suggestive, just spouts his theories. And statistics—metres, dollars. Everything is big in Laurent’s vocabulary.

Sam finds it hard to keep his mind off Olympia. At the next rest stop they’ll all change places and he’ll be sitting next to her again. He’ll talk to her quietly about the prints he plans to make of gum leaves and ferns, the twiggy understorey of the cave above the pool. She’ll want to see his pictures, want to see him, will want him.

Neville folds the newspaper, puts it in his bag and takes out his new pick. It's really a geologist's pick but perfect for chipping the edges of seams that might hold opals. It's a strong, accurate little tool, beautifully balanced. The head is sharply pointed on one side, mallet shaped on the other and the wooden handle is as shiny as a new floor. He taps at a crack in a rock until a sliver chips off, a sharp chip that could become a spear head. Pieces of fossils, shell and bone are embedded in the exposed face of the rock. He leans down and puts his left hand on the rock for balance, then taps, harder this time, at another small crack. This time the crack does not split and come away. Instead the pick bounces back and pierces his left arm just above the wrist. It hangs there, stuck.

Blood pours from his arm when he disengages the point of the pick and he kicks himself for not having checked the first aid kit in the car. A useless handful of bandaids. No painkillers. He uses his teeth and one hand to tear strips from a spare shirt but it is impossible to bind his arm tightly enough and the blood soaks through quickly. He wonders what damage he has done to his wrist. Smashed a bone by the feel of it, by the pain.

He weighs up his options. Too far back to the petrol stop. No phone signal. Wait for a car to pass and hope it has a CB radio or a sat phone. He decides to keep driving in the direction of the mine.

'Those clouds are like rabbits feeding. If I paint them people will think I've become a surrealist.' Sam is driving again and Olympia is sitting next to him. He needs to make the most of his time as Laurent might wake and take his turn to drive sitting next to Olympia. 'We should meet in a few weeks. I'll show you my clouds.'

‘Laurent too? We could see his paintings.’ Olympia moves her thigh away from his hand.

‘His are so big he won’t have finished any.’

‘We could have an exhibition together. Images of a barren land, or some crap like that.’

‘You call this barren. I can see three trees and a bunch of emus.’

He doesn’t want her to change the subject. ‘Seriously though, what’s the chance of us getting together? In a week or two?’

‘Let’s think about that in real time.’

He watches the saltbush, thorny shrubs and the occasional weathered tree. ‘Look, the clouds are turning into goldfish.’

He wonders whether she’ll let him into her city life. But for the moment his hand is on her thigh and this time she doesn’t push it aside.

The cars are fifteen minutes apart.

Neville’s arm is throbbing with pain and he presses his damaged hand against his thigh to keep it as immobile as possible. He can think of nothing but pain. He knows he’s about to faint so he puts his foot on the brake and slumps over the wheel. The car slews in the dust and stops across the road blocking it from both directions. The road bends only a car’s length ahead.

Sam is thinking only about Olympia. He wonders if she will allow him to move his left hand from her thigh to the zip on her jeans. She has her eyes closed but he knows she is awake. Laurent is lying on the back seat and has not spoken for an hour.

Now the cars are three minutes apart, two, one.

Olympia keeps her eyes closed but moves to accommodate Sam's hand inside her pants. He reaches over to pull her hand towards him.

Laurent dreams of the opening of his next exhibition. Olympia is by his side, the thin silk of her dress outlining her beautiful buttocks. She toasts him with her glass of champagne and in her eyes is the invitation he saw when she posed on the rock, in the cave.

Sam steers the car around the bend in the road.

Olympia opens her eyes briefly.