

Ring of Fire

by

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EXT. AUSTRALIAN OUTBACK. DAY.

Against a pure blue sky, a bloodied SHEEP CARCASS spins downwards in slow motion. Twirling through space, the headless torso is imbued with a terrible grace.

The frame is divided into a field of deep blue sky and red ochre land. The carcass lands with a heavy thud, its limbs splayed in an undignified manner, creating a cloud of billowing red dust.

A DINGO, a telltale white blaze on his forehead, lopes toward the carcass. It sniffs at the meat and then begins to feed, tearing hungrily at the bowels of the splayed torso.

The strange yellow eye of a CROW fills the screen. The crow is sitting on a tattered remnant of fence, the strands of the barbed wire broken and hanging in space. ON the post is nailed a crude metal sign with a skull and crossbones on it. It is pitted with bullet holes, underneath is written: POISON 1080 BAIT.

We HEAR the VOICE of MAYA a nine year old girl...

MAYA (V.O.)

I asked Sister Mary Margaret if animals
go to heaven.

From above a SMALL PLANE recedes. Its ominous CRUCIFIX SHADOW glides across the barren land.

INT. SYDNEY. CHINESE MEDICINE CLINIC. DAY.

Smoke wreathes like dust over the contour of a naked torso as a disembodied hand passes a wand of burning bound herbs in a smooth motion from the heels to the neck. It's shadow, passing over the undulations of the body, echoes the crucifix shadow of the aircraft over the landscape. A shift in focus reveals a line of silver needles, protruding from the flesh. The hand reaches to vibrate each in turn.

JACK HARRIS, mid thirties but looks older, is helped down from a massage table by a white-clad Chinese woman DOCTOR. As he leaves, the woman hands him his hat. It is a large white Akubra. He places it on his head. He lifts his face to the sun streaming in the window and closes his eyes. The atmosphere is one of grace.

EXT. OUTBACK MESA. DAY.

The Dingo finds a shadowed place beneath an overhanging rock and lies down, the poison takes effect, his body begins to convulse.

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CONTINUED:

MAYA (V.O.)

She said that animals do not have
immortal souls so they do not go to
heaven.

INT. ART GALLERY. EARLY EVENING.

A large black and white photograph of MAYA looking directly into camera as she hugs her father, shifts precariously as BETH RITCHIE, an American woman in her 40's, attempts to hang it. CLARA WOO, the gallery owner, comes to Beth's aid. They back up to view the photos hanging on the wall -- a series of B&W photos of father and daughter in close-up -- LARRY, a bespectacled, good looking man in his thirties and nine year old Maya. The images feature Maya looking directly into camera while Larry is never fully revealed.

CLARA

Perfect. Are Larry and Maya coming
tonight?

BETH

They wouldn't miss it for the world.

On the wall in black letters is the title of the show. "CLOSE UP, DAUGHTER/FATHER" by Beth Ritchie

INT. MEDICAL CLINIC. DAY.

Close Up of X Rays pegged on a light board. Images of hip bones reveal a contorted skeleton and murky areas of calcification. Jack Harris watches from an examination table as a SURGEON points to details on the X Rays.

Jack looks at the X Rays and then slowly lowers himself from the table. He reaches for his hat, which is lying on the table beside him. He looks at the doctor and shakes his head.

Jack tips his hat and walks slowly to the door. He smiles to himself, ruefully.

INT. APARTMENT. MAYA'S BEDROOM. EVENING.

The camera pans slowly along a row of small ceramic Australian animals - a Kangaroo, Wombat, Alligator, Dingo, Emu and a Brolga. We pull focus and see MAYA's eyes as she looks at her animals.

She touches the Dingo figurine. Larry walks up behind Maya, he loosens his tie and leans down next to her. This is not the smiling man in the photo, he appears sullen and stressed.

MAYA

Sister Margaret said that animals don't go to heaven.

LARRY

And you believe that?

MAYA

No.

Maya turns to him. He touches his heart.

LARRY

Good. Listen to your heart Maya, then you will know.

Larry tries to believe what he just said. Maya examines him.

MAYA

You ok dad?

LARRY

Of course. Now finish your homework Miss Maya and then get dressed for your mother's big event.

Larry leads her to her desk and kissed the top of her head.

INT. BONDI APARTMENT. EVENING.

Larry sits on the couch, he is dressed in a stylish suit, his tie ready to be knotted. He is going through some bank statements and bills. He leans back and sighs. Maya observes Larry secretly through the gap in her bedroom door.

LARRY

If you do well in school this year, I'm going to get you a puppy.

Through the crack in the door we see Maya's face light up.

LARRY (CONT'D)

But don't tell your mother, ok?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Larry gets up and walks toward the bathroom.

LARRY (CONT'D)
It'll be our little secret.

INT. BATHROOM. EVENING.

Larry studies himself in the mirror, his sweet face contradicting his troubled soul. He reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a small bag of heroin.

EXT. BATHROOM.

Maya leans down and looks through the keyhole.

INT. BATHROOM. SAME TIME.

Larry's face registers intense physical relief. Widen to see him withdrawing a needle from his arm.

INT. ART GALLERY. EVENING.

The Gallery opening is in full swing with an eclectic mix of clientele. Beth, excuses herself from an older couple and walks to a quieter part of the gallery to call Larry.

EXT. ART GALLERY. SAME TIME.

Jack Harris looks through the window of the gallery, his reflection stares back at him, a willowy creature beneath a signature hat. He enters the gallery, appearing oddly comfortable for a cowboy in the art world. He walks around observing the art. Clara Woo greets him and shortly after Beth joins them.

CLARA
Beth, this is Jack Harris, he's quite taken by your work.

They shake hands, Beth slightly taken aback by the claw like nature of his hands.

BETH
Thank you Mr. Harris.

JACK
Jack please. The other sounds too much like my father.

Suddenly her wrist is caught by a firm hand. She looks up to see TIM, a man in his fifties, hanging on desperately to his forties. He joins the group with the confidence of a line or two of coke under his belt.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BETH

Tim. Glad you could make it.

She looks around for the others.

TIM

Kevin and Stace wanted to come but they're out of town - finally got that beer script approved to shoot in Cairns. Where's Larry?

Beth looks confused.

BETH

Larry didn't say anything about Cairns.

There is an awkward silence as Tim stares at Beth. Jack and Clara sense something.

TIM

He's not on the account anymore.

BETH

I don't understand.

Tim's eyes dart around, looking for a way out, but Beth's got him cornered.

TIM

You should talk to him.

Feeling the tension build, Clara moves Jack away to look at the pictures. But Jack keeps one eye out for Beth.

BETH

What accounts does he have?

TIM

Ask him.

Beth stares him down.

TIM (CONT'D)

None.

BETH

He's goes to work everyday Tim.

TIM

Not with us.

Beth pulls out her phone and just stares at it.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BETH

When?

TIM

About three months ago.

BETH

You were the reason we left Chicago Tim.
Opportunity of a lifetime.

TIM

His ideas weren't working.

BETH

He has brilliant ideas.

TIM

It's advertising, not philosophy. The
clients didn't like his stuff.

Beth turns away and walks toward Beth and Jack.

TIM (CONT'D)

Sorry Beth. Larry was a square peg in
a...

She looks back at Tim.

BETH

(cutting him off)

Ass hole.

Beth starts to walk away then turns back to Tim.

BETH (CONT'D)

Why did you even come here?

TIM

You sent the invitation Beth, I assumed
everything was fine.

Tim raises his empty glass and walks to the bar. Clara comes
up to Beth, smiling.

CLARA

I believe we have a buyer!

She nods over to Jack who is standing in front of a large
photograph of Larry and Maya arm wrestling. It's a close-up
of their hands and arms -- Maya's small hand gripping Larry's
large hand. She is clearly beating him.

INT. APARTMENT. NIGHT.

Maya, in a blue velvet dress and patent leather shoes, kneels next to Larry who lies at an awkward angle just outside of the bathroom. She's put on her father's glasses and leans close to him, studying his silent face. Maya picks up Larry's hand and caresses it.

Suddenly Beth comes bursting through the front door, livid. Her expression changes as she sees Larry's prone body.

BETH

Larry?

Beth's tone scares Maya, she drops Larry's hand in fright as her mother rushes toward them.

BETH (CONT'D)

Larry!!

Beth leans over Larry and shakes him violently. Maya grips Larry's glasses in her hand. Her mother climbs astride Larry and tries to revive him.

EXT. BONDI BEACH BOARDWALK/ALLEYWAY. NIGHT. SEVERAL MONTHS LATER.

Jack walks among the throngs of revelers, cutting the same fragile, lone wolf figure as before, albeit now with a cane. He turns down an alleyway and stops at the back entrance of a busy water-front pub, exhaustion has got the better of him and he leans against the wall of the pub. He puts his hand up to his chest as he catches his breath.

Beth staggers out the door heaving a crate of empty bottles onto a stack. Maya follows her like a shadow, she wears Larry's glasses and a stethoscope around her neck. Beth leans against the door, wiping the sweat from her brow. Maya comes around from behind her and looks to her left to see Jack just a foot away. Maya gazes at him through Larry's glasses (we see Jack in a BLUR). Maya removes the glasses. Her eyes go to Jack's hand on his chest. She then looks up to his face.

Beth follows Maya's gaze and sees Jack. Jack nods politely in their direction. Maya gives him a tentative nod and Beth waves in recognition.

ANGELA (O.S.)

Beth?!

BETH

Sorry. Coming.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Beth rushes back into the bar. Maya grabs a hold of Beth's sleeve and follows her back into the pub.

INT. BONDI PUB. NIGHT

ANGELA, mid fifties, strong, weathered and beautiful is the pub owner; she, ROBBIE and Beth work the bar. They have perfected a smooth flow, during which they can ignore the chaos beyond the barricade and converse among themselves. Maya sits tucked behind the bar, she listens to her heart with the stethoscope. She does not take her eyes off her mother. Beth is on edge, but coping by keeping busy.

BETH

Angela, I need a favor.

ANGELA

Sure, what's up?

BETH

I need more hours if you can give them to me.

ANGELA

I'll see what I can do. I thought you had some good sales at your show?

BETH

Only three pieces and the gallery gets 50%. The show is coming down this week so it will be awhile before I even get anything.

ANGELA

Get some work together for another show, keep the momentum up.

BETH

I just don't have it in me Ang.

Beth looks to Maya, gives her a smile then turns away. The cracks start to show...

BETH (CONT'D)

She's hardly said a word since Larry...

(pause)

How could I have been so stupid? I had no idea.

ANGELA

Overdosing is far too common in this town. You just concentrate on yourself and that little angel.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Angela looks over to Maya. Beth composes herself.

ANGELA (CONT'D)

You can have as many hours as you want.
But don't stop taking pictures. You
don't want to be working here when you
turn forty, like me. Ok, forty five.

BETH

That's my age.

Angela and Beth look at their reflection in the mirror at the back of the bar. Angela puts her arm around Beth and raises her other arm to show some muscle. Beth does the same. They relax their arms and shake the wobbly bits, laughing. Beth's first laugh since Larry's death.

In the mirror Beth notices the distorted reflection of Jack, who is watching her. Jack's stillness is in sharp contrast to the raucous behavior of the other patrons. She turns to face him. Their eyes meet. He smiles at her.

The moment is broken when an AGGRESSIVE YOUNG BUSINESSMAN jostles in front of Jack and holds up his full glass to Beth.

PATRON

I ordered a double.

BETH

That is a double.

PATRON

You're joking.

She looks at him, turns to the till, opens it, takes out ten dollars and lays it down in front of him. The she takes the drink out of his hand and throws it in the sink. She turns to Jack.

BETH

What can I get you Jack?

Jack smiles slowly, there is a still point in the noise and movement all around them.

JACK

Could I trouble you for a glass of water?

BETH

Sparkling or still?

JACK

Tap.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

BETH
It could kill you.

JACK
We all gotta go sometime.

Beth fills the glass with tap water and puts it down in front of him. She turns to help the next customer.

JACK (CONT'D)
Excuse me.

She turns back slightly exasperated.

BETH
Yes?

JACK
Got any lemon?

Beth reaches for the tongs. Maya has stood up and is looking over the bar at Jack, she takes a sip of her pink drink. Jack raises the glass so Beth can drop the lemon in. He has to use both clawed hands to steady it. Some spills.

BETH
Sorry.

JACK
It's not your fault.

He smiles and looks down at Maya. He raises his glass.

JACK (CONT'D)
Cheers!

Maya raises her drink and smiles. Jack moves away. Beth is taken aback by this interchange, especially by Maya's smile. Beth sees that Jack has left her a twenty dollar bill. She picks it up and looks after him, thoughtfully.

EXT. BONDI BEACH BAR. NIGHT.

Jack comes out on to the street and walks towards the sea wall. The sounds of the beach revelers are replaced by the soothing sound of the ocean. He leans against the sea wall and thoughtfully contemplates the dark ocean.

INT. BONDI BEACH BAR

Beth is wiping down the bar. She looks up to see Tim, staring intently at her. Maya sits on a stool watching this interaction.

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CONTINUED:

Beth stops wiping the bar and stares at Tim. He puts his hand over her hand and stares at her, playing up the pathetic puppy eyes. Beth pulls her hand away and keeps wiping the bar.

TIM
I'm sorry.

Beth just looks at him.

TIM (CONT'D)
I am.

Beth stops wiping down the bar.

BETH
You didn't even go to the service, none of you guys did.

Tim stares at her, drunk and a little too melancholy.

TIM
I know.

BETH
All the secrets...

TIM
He was a good man. He'd been clean for years Beth, it was a really bad decision and bad smack.

Tim takes her hand again.

TIM (CONT'D)
How's the photography going?

Beth takes her wet sponge and pushes Tim's hand away with it.

BETH
It's not.

TIM
Your show was good.

BETH
It's not paying the bills. This does.

Tim doesn't know what to say.

Maya starts spinning on her stool. The image of Beth and Tim SPINS around and around.

EXT. BONDI BEACH PUB – NIGHT

Beth and Maya come out the front door of the bar with Tim hot on their heels.

TIM

Lets go to the Club it's open late.

BETH

No thank you. We're going home.

TIM

I'll go too.

BETH

No Tim, go home to your wife.

EXT. BONDI BEACH – NIGHT

Beth and Maya, holding hands, walk along the seawall. Maya looks over her shoulder and sees Jack in the shadows, watching them. Tim jumps up on the sea wall and pantomimes being a tight rope walker (he is trying really hard to impress). Despite herself, Beth laughs. Maya sees a flock of seagulls and pulls her hand free. She runs into the sand, scattering the seagulls which rise and wheel above her head.

Maya's attention is drawn to a limp, bedraggled body of a fallen SEAGULL lying in the sand. As she crouches down to inspect it, Beth comes up behind her.

BETH

Don't touch it Maya!

Beth's attention is distracted by Tim who right at her side acting like an enthusiastic puppy. Beth pulls away and heads off down the beach, Tim does not give up.

TIM

You know there's always been something between us Beth. You can feel it.

BETH

No. And your wife.

TIM

Fiona and I have an open relationship.

BETH

How seventies.

Tim comes in close, he puts his arm around Beth. She pulls away but he draws her in again.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Maya picks up the bird, stroking the soft gray feathers and the dangling head. Maya closes her eyes. Suddenly IT COMES TO LIFE, fluttering in her hands. She opens her eyes and frees it. She watches it ascend into the air.

Jack has observed this whole scene from his place at the seawall. Maya gives a delighted giggle as she watches the birds wheel over her head in the moonlight.

EXT. BONDI BEACH. NIGHT.

Birds POV looking down on Tim, Beth, Maya and Jack.

TIM
Anyone ever tell you this beach is
haunted?

BETH
Get out!

TIM
No seriously. Some nights you see the
ghosts of the poor bastards who got
caught in the rip.

BETH
Yeah, right. Maya hurry up!

TIM
True, my mates have seen them.

BETH
What were they on?

Camera swoops down skimming the surface of the waves to the accompaniment of evocative music.

INT. BONDI APARTMENT HALL WAY. NIGHT

The front door opens. Beth comes in with Maya hanging on. Tim follows. Beth turns to Tim and says...

BETH
You can use the bathroom, but then you
are leaving.

Maya breaks away and runs into the bathroom, slamming the door. Tim hops up and down, over emphasizing his need to pee. Beth shakes her head and points to her bedroom.

BETH (CONT'D)
Use the one in the bedroom.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Beth opens the bathroom door and leans in to talk to Maya.

BETH (CONT'D)
He's leaving Maya, everything's ok.

INT. BETH'S BEDROOM. NIGHT

Beth walks into the room and sees Tim stripped down to his underwear and lying on the bed. He slides under the covers and pats the place next to him.

He looks at Beth like a lovesick puppy.

TIM
You're so beautiful.

BETH
Get dressed.

TIM
Come on, you need this, we both do.

Tim relaxes back on the bed. He snuggles in.

TIM (CONT'D)
Comfy bed.

Beth picks up his clothes and throws them at him.

BETH
I'm going to see to Maya. And I want you dressed and out of here.

Tim leans forward.

TIM
Maybe we could use a photographer, we have a yogurt ad coming up.

Beth starts to open the door, then shuts it and turns to face Tim.

BETH
Are you serious?

TIM
I'm sure I can do something.

There is a bang on the door. Beth opens and almost trips over Maya. Maya peeks around Beth at Tim.

BETH
Go to your room Maya, now!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Beth shuts the door and turns to face Tim.

INT. MOTEL ROOM. NIGHT

Jack lies awake. He looks at his several bottles of pills on the side table. He swallows them down one by one.

INT. BETH'S BEDROOM. SAME TIME.

Beth sits on the edge of the bed.

BETH
You know what Tim?

Tim reaches out toward Beth.

TIM
What baby?

BETH
Well baby, all I can say is that the thought of even touching you is repulsive. No, more than repulsive, it's obscene, grotesque. Now get out of my bed so I can wash my sheets.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE BETH'S BEDROOM. SAME TIME.

Maya stands outside of Beth's bedroom door, clutching her stethoscope. She puts it on to the door, trying to listen. She squeezes her eyes shut.

INT. BETH'S BEDROOM. SAME TIME. (MAYA'S IMAGINATION).

Beth and Tim stand next to each other, they place their hands on the top of their heads and slowly unzip out of their human skin. Underneath they are GORILLAS.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE BETH'S BEDROOM. SAME TIME.

Beth bursts out of the door, again almost tripping over Maya. Maya SCREAMS in fright.

BETH
Maya, what are you doing?

Maya hugs her mom.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MAYA

Mommy, you can never leave me, you can never unzip yourself.

Beth holds Maya as Tim (partially dressed and holding his shirt and jacket) scuddles out behind them.

EXT. BONDI BEACH APARTMENT COMPLEX. MORNING.

Maya is hunched in the grass next to the walkway, watching through her father's glasses as black and yellow ants distribute grains of sugar she has poured for them. We see them as she see them, in macro. They are working hard.

Suddenly a shadow falls over the ants. RIPPER a tough looking man in his twenties leans into frame.

RIPPER

Wow, ants, I used to fry them with a magnifying glass. Your mother home?

We stay on the ants and the sugar. We hear as Ripper KNOCKS on the door. The hear the door OPENS.

BETH (O.S.)

Can I help you?

RIPPER (O.S.)

This is an eviction notice, you have two days to vacate the premises.

BETH (O.S.)

There must be some kind of mistake.

RIPPER (O.S.)

You haven't paid rent for three months, that's the mistake.

BETH

I have paid the rent for three months.

RIPPER (O.S.)

Not the previous three months. You're out. Two days.

The ants keep moving the sugar as Ripper walks through frame, stepping on a few as he passes.

EXT. BONDI BEACH. AFTERNOON

Bondi beach in the height of summer. The boardwalk and shoreline are full of sun worshippers and voyeurs. The surfers ride the waves. The sun bathers take it off. In the shallows, parents dunk their children and lift them above their heads, the children shrieking in delight.

Beth and Angela sit on the beach. Beth keeps her eye on Maya who is at the shore line, they wave to each other.

ANGELA

You stay as long as you want, I like the company.

BETH

A few days will do, I am so grateful.

Beth looks toward Maya then scans the beach. She is surprised to see Jack heading in her direction.

Maya sees Jack from where she is playing on the shoreline. Their eyes meet, she waves, he waves back.

Beth lies back on her beach towel and pretends to be asleep as Jack's shadow falls over her body.

JACK

Coo-ee!

Beth frowns and opens her eyes. From her angle, his disability is heightened.

ANGELA

Hi Jack.

Beth looks at her.

BETH

You know him?

ANGELA

It's a beach town and I own the pub. Who don't I know. He's one of the good ones Beth, and it's not just the hat. Gotta go, work beckons.

Angela leans over and gives Beth a kiss on the cheek.

BETH

See you soon.

As she leaves a GROUP OF GUYS in their twenties meet up right in front of Beth and Jack.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

A couple of them have boogie boards, some are drinking beer. They gawk at a couple of sunbathing girls in the near distance. They greet each other...

MATE #1

Mate.

MATE #2 AND #3

Mate. Maaate.

MATE #4

Mate. Mate.

MATE #5 AND #6

Mate. Mate. Mate. Maaate.

Mate #4 kicks sand over Beth and almost steps on her with no apology. Jack has to duck as Mate #1's board almost hits him. Jack stands awkwardly.

JACK

Would you guys please move!

The boys's don't like being bossed around. Mate #1 takes Jack's hat and plops it on his head.

MATE #1

Is this your Mardi Gras hat mate?

Jack's face darkens, a look of anger crosses his face that is frightening to see. He takes a swipe at Mate #1 with his cane. He misses and loses his balance. The boys cackle in delight. Jack steadies himself and swings the cane again. Mate #1 grabs it and jerks Jack forward. Mate #2 steps in and takes the cane. He hands it to Jack.

MATE #2

Sorry mate, he failed etiquette at boarding school.

Jack, embarrassed, shaken and exhausted puts the hat back on his head. The boys run off to the surf. Jack scans the shoreline looking for Maya.

BETH

You ok?

Jack keeps looking out to sea. He shades his eyes to see better.

JACK

Can your daughter swim?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Beth jumps up and runs to the shoreline. Jack follows.

INT. OCEAN. SAME TIME.

Maya floats down toward the bottom of the sea. At first she kicks and struggles a little, then she opens her eyes and discovers herself in another world. It is clear and quiet and beautiful. Patterns of light flash all around her.

EXT. BONDI BEACH. SAME TIME.

Beth runs to the water. Jack shouts to the SURF LIFESAVING TEAM in a surprisingly powerful voice.

JACK

Little girl, just to the right of the
flag, about a metre out!

INT. OCEAN. DAY.

Under the water, Maya can see the intricate furrows of the sea bed. She sees swimmer's legs paddling, she hears the rush of water in her ears. She lets her little body relax and she floats, caught in the sea's embrace. She sees a figure swim toward her. It is Larry, he's in the same clothes he died in. They swim to each other. They touch and then Larry pulls away. Maya swims after him. Larry turns and pushes her back to the surface.

EXT. BONDI BEACH SHORELINE - DAY

Above the water, people are shouting, Beth plunges into the water, calling Maya's name. The SURF LIFESAVING TEAM plunge into the breakers.

INT. OCEAN. SAME TIME.

Maya floats peacefully in the water when suddenly hands grab her and haul her to the surface.

EXT. BONDI OCEAN/SHORELINE. DAY

Maya gives a gasp of fear as she is hauled onto a surfboard. Her breathing steadies as she is floated in toward the shore.

Beth and Jack wait for her at the edge of the water. Maya looks up at Beth and smiles.

MAYA

It was beautiful, I saw dad.

Beth cries and holds on to Maya. Jack stands silently by.

EXT. BONDI BEACH. EARLY EVENING.

Beth, Maya and Jack sit on the beach in the setting sun.
Maya builds a sand castle, the stethoscope around her neck.

JACK
Will you go back to Chicago?

BETH
Not with my tail between my legs.
There's only my dad and he's got his own
family and no interest in mine. Same
with Larry's family.

Jack looks at Beth.

BETH (CONT'D)
Sorry to spill out my pathetic story.

JACK
Far more interesting and a lot less
obvious than mine.

Jack gestures to his body.

JACK (CONT'D)
Maybe we can help each other out.

BETH
I'm not asking for any help.

JACK
No, but I am.

Beth looks critically at Jack, who is looking at her with a
half smile.

BETH
What?

JACK
I want you to drive me home.

Beth looks relieved.

BETH
Sure. What suburb do you live in?

JACK
Lucknow.

BETH
Haven't heard of that, is it in the
northern suburbs?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JACK
More in the center.

BETH
Downtown?

JACK
A bit further out.

Beth gives him an impatient look.

BETH
How far out?

JACK
Center of the country.

BETH
What?

JACK
Terra Nullius. The Dead Center. My
family's Station near Lucknow.

BETH
My car can't go that far...

JACK
That's ok, my truck can.

BETH
I can't be away from work that long, I
need to make some money.

Maya is listening to her heart through the stethoscope.

JACK
You can make a lot more money with this
gig than you will in bartending.

BETH
What are you on about?

JACK
\$10,000 and a ticket home, even to
Chicago if you like.

Beth stands up and takes Maya by the hand.

BETH
Come on Maya, we're going.

Beth tries to pull Maya away, she digs her heels in the sand.
Beth begins to tug at her.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MAYA

I want to see the Dead Center.

BETH

He's just messing with us baby.

JACK

Come on, you two look like you could use a holiday! It's just like the Gold Coast if you take away the ocean, theme parks and casinos. And the green stuff.

Beth stops pulling at Maya and looks back at Jack.

JACK (CONT'D)

It's got it's own kind of beauty.

Beth puts her hands on her hips.

BETH

Why do you need someone to drive you anyway?

Jack holds up his hands and tries to move them, they shake and are claw like.

JACK

Doctors say I can't drive. Actually they say alot of things I don't believe, but I do know I can't drive.

BETH

You could hire a limo, a driver and a cook with that amount of money. And a nurse.

JACK

I'd never find such an attractive driver. And with a side-kick to boot. Anyway, a cowboy can't leave his truck.

He smiles at Maya.

BETH

You can seriously afford to pay that?

JACK

Yes.

BETH

No strings attached?

JACK

No strings, anywhere.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Jack waves his hands around.

MAYA

I like him mom, he has Kangaroo hands!

BETH

How long will it take?

JACK

Two days there, one rest day and then you're as free as a bird. You can always stay longer and take in the sights if you feel so inclined.

BETH

No thanks.

JACK

Ok then.

Jack holds his hand out to Maya first. She takes it shyly. He then holds his hand out to Beth. She tentatively shakes his claw like hand, and withdraws it very quickly.

BETH

Okay.

EXT. BONDI. ANGELA'S CONDOMINIUM. MORNING

Beth and Maya are putting the final items in the back of Jack's black Holden Pick Up Truck. Beth is on edge, not sure at all about this odd arrangement.

Maya rearranges some things. She tries to move a large framed piece of art, wrapped in brown paper.

JACK

Careful, I paid good money for that photograph!

Maya, slides it back carefully. Beth adds even more water to the bottles and bottles that fill the back, as well as a huge first aid kit, a box of CDs and three large suitcases.

Angela comes out carrying Beth's camera bag.

ANGELA

You almost forgot this.

She raises the camera bag.

BETH

Not taking it. In fact, you can keep it Angela, I've got no use for it anymore.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ANGELA

I'll keep it safe until you return.

Angela hugs Beth good bye, Jack shakes her hand. They get in the truck. Maya hangs back to give Angela a big hug.

EXT. BONDI. DAY.

Overhead wide shot of the truck leaving Bondi.

EXT. CENTRAL SYDNEY. DAY

The truck heads north through the inner city, travelling slowly in the dense traffic.

INT. TRUCK. DAY

Beth sits dwarfed behind the wheel of the truck. Maya sits in the middle and Jack sits by the window. Beth squints into the sun. They are barely moving, hemmed in by cars all around. Beth tries to merge into traffic as a car aggressively blocks her way. She honks, flipping them the finger.

JACK

How can anyone live here? It's like being in a corral of bulls with a heifer just out of reach.

BETH

Are we going to have cowboy analogies for the whole damn trip?

JACK

I think you'll find it was a metaphor, but I could give you an analogy if...

BETH

(cutting Jack off)

Sydney, is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It's full of culture, interesting people and amazing beaches. And personally this no man's land where we are going has about as much attraction as a fat man in a Speedo.

JACK

That's a metaphor.

Beth turns up her music. Jack is jolted with pain, he reaches for his pill bottles. Maya surreptitiously watches Jack swallow a pill. She leans over the seat and hands him her water bottle. Beth notices and hurriedly takes it away. They both look at her in surprise.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BETH

Jack's got his own water.

(pause)

What exactly is wrong with you anyway?

Jack tips his hat back and assumes a cowboy persona.

JACK

Depends who you talk to. Rheumatoid arthritis, M.S., Lupus, Immune Deficiency, Bad Chi, blocked chakras. Got any theories?

BETH

Nobody knows?

JACK

One of life's little mysteries.

Maya looks up and catches Jack's eye.

EXT. NEW SOUTH WALES RURAL LANDSCAPE LATE AFTERNOON.

The red truck travels through the rural landscape, it is still green, but barely. A few scatter farms are dotted in the landscape. The music from Beth's U2 CD underscores the scene.

EXT. NEW SOUTH WALES RURAL LANDSCAPE EARLY EVENING.

The truck travels through a golden rural landscape. Their faces are gilded through the windscreen by the late afternoon sun. Beth screws up her eyes against the glare. Jack sits impassively under the shade of the Akubra, staring straight ahead. The CD player is playing Jack's CD, Johnny Cash "I Fell in to a Burning Ring of Fire".

Jack leans over and turns up the music. Beth winces.

BETH

I don't know how you can listen to this crap.

She turns it down.

JACK

Madam, it's metaphysical poetry.

Beth snorts derisively. He squints at her from under his hat.

BETH

It's loser music.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JACK
Be careful with that anger.

BETH (ANGRILY)
I'm not angry.

BANG! Suddenly, the back tire blows. Beth wrestles with the truck to keep it on the road. They glide to a bumpy halt. They sit for a moment.

JACK
Did you know that anger is just a
manifestation of fear?

Beth gets out and slams the door. Jack slowly opens his door and gets out of the truck. Maya jumps out too. Maya stays uncomfortably close to Beth. Beth gets a bottle of water, gives it to Maya.

BETH
Here, drink this.

Beth moves over to where Jack is struggling to get the spare tire. Maya remains uncomfortably close.

BETH (CONT'D)
Let me do it. Maya, could you please
stand over there honey? Jack let me do
that.

JACK
I can do it.

Maya goes to the edge of the road and stares at the wide horizon. It frightens her and she turns back to watch Beth and Jack. Beth helps Jack lever the tire to the ground.

BETH
Give it to me.

Beth pulls the tire away from Jack, she picks it up and tries to carry it.

JACK
It's not healthy to carry a lot of anger
around with you. It wears you down.

BETH
Look, I don't need a lecture.

The tire is too hard to handle and falls over, she gives it a swift kick, venting her frustration. Maya's curiosity gets the best of her and she turns back to the desert. But again she feels intimidated by its vastness.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

She turns back to Jack and Beth. She squats on her haunches and it is from this low angle that we see the images of Jack and Beth as they change the tire

JACK

Easier if your roll it, like a wheel.

Beth gives him a caustic look and rolls the wheel over to where Jack has managed to get the jack in place. He hands her the wrench, she grabs it from him.

BETH

You don't have the faintest idea of what I'm going through.

JACK

Those bolts have to come off.

BETH

How do you think it feels losing someone you lived with for over twelve years? Having all your hopes and dreams killed at the same time?

Jack leans back against the truck. Beth touches on some sensitive issues with him, but he doesn't let on. However, Maya stares closely at Jack, catching his emotion.

BETH (CONT'D)

Someone you thought you knew inside and out, trusted, loved...

Beth hauls the wheel off, picks up the other and tries to put it on.

JACK

Wrong way around.

BETH

Do you have any idea what it's like to feel so helpless? Useless? Because you couldn't stop them?

(pause)

Because you can't bring them back?

Jack is deep in thought. Beth releases the jack too fast and the truck bounces back onto its wheels, Jack is thrown off balance, regains composure and grins, intrigued by her manner. He hands her a bottle of water.

JACK

I used to be angry.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

BETH

And?

Jack holds up his wasted arms, and curved hands. Beth takes the bottle of water and looks away. Maya stands and turns bravely back to the desert. The camera pans off the couple out to the wide horizon.

Overhead shot of the three of them...Beth and Jack leaning on the truck some distance apart and Maya at the edge of the road, they are all staring off into the horizon, all in their own worlds.

EXT. ROMA MOTEL ROOM. NIGHT.

From inside the truck we watch Jack come up to Beth's window.

JACK

Seems they only have one room available.

BETH

Anyplace else in this hell hole?

JACK

Nope, horse race this weekend. If you want, we could camp.

BETH

If there's one thing I hate more than a scummy motel room, it's camping.

JACK

I knew it would improve your mood.

Jack smiles and starts to pull stuff out of the truck. Maya helps. Beth just leans her head against the steering wheel.

INT. ROMA MOTEL ROOM. NIGHT

Takeaway food containers are spread around the room. There is one double and one single bed. Jack sits on the edge of the single bed, he is putting his pill bottles on the side table.

Maya has Jack's hat on and the stethoscope around her neck she sits on the double bed watching Jack. Beth comes out of the bathroom a towel wrapped around her head. She takes the hat off Maya and sits on the edge of the bed drying her hair, she is uneasy about this situation. Maya watches Jack start to take his pills.

MAYA

Does your medicine work?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He looks at her carefully. Beth looks at her in surprise, she hasn't heard Maya speak in a long time.

JACK

It kills the pain.

MAYA

My dad took his medicine and it killed him.

Jack takes time to think about this. He looks at Beth who looks away, disturbed by her daughter's comments and this whole damn situation. Jack notices Beth's unease. He makes an effort to change the subject. He looks to Maya.

JACK

Want a race me to the bathroom? No, better not, I'd hate to see you lose.

He draws his tooth-brush out of his pocket and twirls it like a six gun for Maya's benefit. Then he makes his way to the bathroom and shuts the door.

BETH

(hurriedly)

OK, get in here with me.

She quickly flicks off the light and TV, takes her sarong off, leaving her T-shirt on. She pats the big bed.

Maya is confused by her sense of urgency but she complies, climbing in next to her mother. Beth turns out the table lamp. Maya watches her mother in the half dark.

Beth lies with her eyes open listening to the shower being turned off and Jack coughing. She sees the glowing face of the alarm clock, Jack's hat and his bottles of pills. Her eyes focus on the murky outline of the obligatory painting on the motel wall. It is a rural scene of two steaming draught-horses, pulling a laden hay cart. Underneath is the title: Almost Home. Maya snuggles in close and Beth caresses her. The bathroom door opens and Jack comes out his wasted body clad in pajama pants. She watches through half closed eyes. Thinking he is unobserved, he allows himself a grunt of pain as his body protests against the effort. He takes some pills from the bottle and swallows them. He crawls into the single bed.

Beth lies with her eyes open, clearly anxious about what she has got herself into. She looks across and sees that he is watching her. Their eyes meet.

OUTBACK - CHANNEL COUNTRY SCENE - DAY.

A shimmering landscape. A single black truck travelling through an immense void that is flat to the horizon. No fences, sparse trees, red dust. A U2 SONG plays, Beth turns it up, sings along, Jack turns it down, Beth turns it up...

BETH (O.S.)
Where the hell are we?

JACK (O.S.)
Channel country.

BETH (O.S.)
It's spooky.

INT. TRUCK. DAY

Maya's POV as she watches the passing scenery in fascination. A line of KANGAROOS flow across the skyline and disappear from view.

Jack is playing a Garth Brook's song. He turns it up, Beth turns it down.

MAYA
I have to pee!

BETH
Honey, you just went.

JACK
You're the one that keeps making her drink water.

Beth gives him the evil eye. They pull over.

OUTBACK HIGHWAY. DAY.

A grossly distorted shape materializes into focus. It is the bloated carcass of a huge steer lying by the road, its legs sticking up in an undignified manner.

Maya takes her first steps into the desert. She looks back at her mother who is talking to Jack. She becomes braver with each step, looking out at the horizon and up at the sky.

Beth and Jack lean against the car, Jack hands Beth some water.

JACK
That's the way I want to go. Leg up in the desert.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Beth looks at the bloated steer and then squints across the plain to where Maya is heading towards a stand of leafless scrub.

BETH
Maya that's far enough.

Jack lifts his face to the sun as if it offers him some kind of succor. He closes his eyes and breathes a deep sigh of relief.

Beth is surprised to see that he is smiling to himself. There is a harsh cry and sweeping shadows pass across them. She looks up and sees birds are wheeling above them, waiting to get to the kill.

BETH (CONT'D)
Is it safe for her to go out there?

JACK
Fine.

BETH
I should go get her.

She starts to move, but Jack gently holds her back.

JACK
Listen.

BETH
What?

JACK
Just listen.

She listens. There is an immense, awe-inspiring silence. Not even wind. Only the sound of the truck engine ticking as it cools. The sun flares off the metal flanks of the car. She views the emptiness and wraps her own arms around her. It unsettles her even more.

BETH
Maya! Come back now! You hear?

Beth goes and sits in the truck, waiting.

From across the plain Maya looks back at the truck. She squats down and pees in the red dust. When she looks down the steam has already been totally absorbed. She spits and watches in fascination as her spittle disappears. An insect buzzes loudly in her ear. She looks around her at the unfamiliar details of the landscape.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

She notices the small, delicate flowers that still grow in the shade, the delicate insects. She grabs a handful of red dust, letting it sift through her fingers. Maya takes her water bottle and waters the delicate flowers surrounding her. She stands and like Jack, is taken in by the landscape.

EXT. WINTON. DAY

The surreal image of Winton materializes out of a mirage on the horizon. A town in the middle of the vast, flat plain. It looks like a Hollywood back-lot western movie set. A line of colonial buildings on either side of a wide main street. The plains stretching to infinity on either side.

EXT. WINTON MAIN STREET

The three of them tumble out of the truck on to the main street of Winton. Three dogs astride a grim cargo of dead kangaroos, bark maniacally at them. Maya is mesmerized by the cargo of dead animals.

JACK

Leggo!

The dogs cower in submission. Beth pulls Maya away from the dead animals. The three of them walk up some steps to the pub. Beth looks nervously into the open doorway of the pub. There is dried blood on the front steps and an unearthly roar emanates from within. Jack bows them in the door. Beth hesitates.

JACK (CONT'D)

You wanted a pub lunch.

Beth holds Maya's hand as they walk in. We hold on the truck load of dead kangaroos.

MAYA

Animal heaven must be really full.

Beth looks down at Maya and hugs her close as they walk into the pub.

INT. WINTON PUB

The pub, like most Outback pubs, is crowded with serious drinkers even though it is just midday. There is a raw, raucous buzz of conversation over the whir of the ceiling fans and the monotonous lament of the country music on the juke-box. The architecture is ornate, in contrast to the rough appearance of the patrons: Roo shooters, stockmen, drifters and the odd salesman or stock agent in a sweat-stained white shirt.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Uniformly they have the strange, bleached out and distant gaze of men who have stared across vast distances and found nothing. Behind them on the wall the myth of the outback frontier is perpetuated in a large MURAL of drovers and settlers in heroic poses under vast skies.

ESTHER the barmaid, an older woman with frosted elaborate hair and lots of gold jewelry, plies her trade cheerfully under the shot-gun which hangs over the bar to discourage bad behaviour.

Jack leads them through the drinkers to a spare table covered with empties and full ashtrays. Apart from Esther there are no other women in the bar. The men stare at Beth in her sarong and T-shirt, Maya turns and stares back at the men. Jack drinks Coke, Maya Sprite and Beth drinks a XXXX. Beth feels uncomfortable at being the object of such open scrutiny.

MIKE, a young stockman, comes to join them, he carries a couple of beers and some shots of rum, he puts them on the table.... he pumps Jack's hand enthusiastically.

MIKE

Jacko maaate, I hardly recognized you.

Jack's demeanor changes a bit here, toughens up.

JACK

Mike. How you doing you old bastard?

MIKE

Better than you by the looks of it. I heard you were crook.

Mike slides the beer and rum toward Jack. He notices Jack's hands.

MIKE (CONT'D)

Drink up, it'll kill the pain.

Their food is called out at the bar. Beth willingly gets up.

MIKE (CONT'D)

Hey sweetheart, get us another round while you're up.

Mike slides the shot of rum toward Jack. Beth stands looking down at the two of them, in awe.

MIKE (CONT'D)

Just like old times. Jacko Harris, best drinker, best shooter, best lay...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Mike looks at Beth and gives her a wink.

MIKE (CONT'D)
Or so I heard.

Beth grabs Maya and they go get the food. Mike downs his shot, looks to Jack.

MIKE (CONT'D)
For old times mate...

Jack still hesitates. Mike pours the rum in Jack's coke.

MIKE (CONT'D)
Come on...to the good old days!

Drink up maaate.

Jack takes a drink of his coke.

MIKE (CONT'D)
How is the old man? Still giving you a hard time? Surviving the drought?

Jack throws back the drink. He enjoys the taste, the memory. Beth returns with the food, and no drinks.

MIKE (CONT'D)
Worst drought since '62. Mother nature, what a cunt!

JACK
Don't blame her Mike. It's self inflicted.

Mike turns toward ESTHER the barmaid shouting.

MIKE
Esther! Four more for me and our old mate Jacko.

Jack starts on the beer. Mike turns his focus back on Jack.

MIKE (CONT'D)
Self inflicted? You going soft in the head as well as the body?

There's a bit of a lull here, but Mike's not deterred, he gives Jack a good look up and down.

MIKE (CONT'D)
Last time I saw you was at Ray's place - remember?.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

MIKE (CONT'D)

You were built like a middle weight champion back then. First time I ever saw you get knocked out.

Jack smiles and gulps down his beer. Mike turns to Beth.

MIKE (CONT'D)

Knocked out by a horse!

JACK

Damn good stallion too.

Esther arrives with the drinks, puts them on the table. Nods to Jacko.

ESTHER

It's been a long time Jacko, these are on the house.

Jack nods and smiles. Mike keeps talking...

MIKE

Jacko's on the back of this big old black bastard, the horse throws his head back and Whack! Jack takes it right in the forehead. Knocked out cold.

JACK

You other bastards couldn't even get on the damn horse.

MIKE

So what does this old cunt do? He gets right back on the damn horse and shoots him in the back of the head. Stone dead.

Jack is not doing well, the combination of pills and drink have accelerated his drunkenness. An angry, aggressive nature is being revealed. Maya has put her dad's glasses back on, she stares at Jack, but he doesn't notice.

MIKE (CONT'D)

And then Ray had those twin daughters - coo-eee, you haven't forgotten them have you?

JACK

No way. Have you?

They crack themselves up with the memory. Beth is finding this intolerable. Along with the behaviour at the table she is watching THREE YOUNG STOCKMAN engaged in a drinking contest at the bar, the beer slopping down their faces.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

One of them sees Beth watching him. He pulls down his pants and moons her. His mates laugh.

STOCKMAN #1

That's not the part she wants Macka.

STOCKMAN #2

Give her what she wants!

Beth grabs Maya and half pushes her through the crush of men towards the open door. Maya looks back toward Jack. Beth shoves her on.

MIKE

That's not the first time you've seen the back end of a sheila now is it?

Jack tries to get up, but his body is like jelly.

JACK

Oh fuck it. Up tight city girl.

MIKE

Come on Jacko, one for the road.

EXT. WINTON PUB. DAY

Beth and Maya come out into the debris strewn yard behind the pub. A group of ABORIGINES are hanging out, some drunk, others sleeping. Two Aboriginal children, CATHY and BOYD, about Maya's age, sit with a dog. Maya has eye contact with them as she walks by, they watch each other knowingly. Maya gives them a shy wave, they wave back.

Beth hustles Maya to the truck. There are three men sitting on the hood, cheering on two VERY DRUNK MEN who are swinging ineffectually at each other. They fall, wrapped in a clumsy embrace and continue to head butt each other as they lie on the floor. Another MAN is peeing on the wheel.

INT. TRUCK. DAY

Beth pushes Maya into the cab. She pulls Jack's suitcase out of the back and drags it to the side of the road. She hops back into the truck.

MAYA

We have to wait for Jack.

BETH

He can get a lift home with his classy friend.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Beth swerves to avoid a VERY DRUNKEN MAN who staggers in front of the car. Beth stabs the horn. The man holds up his hands unsteadily, and staggers on to climb into the cab of an enormous road train.

Maya is concerned. She looks out of the back window at the town receding behind them.

MAYA

This is Jack's truck.

BETH

He'll get it back. We're just borrowing it.

Maya has gone all quiet, this concerns Beth.

BETH (CONT'D)

Maya, I am going to pay him back everything.

Beth turns on the music. It's Jack's CD.

DUSTY SPRINGFIELD

I wander alone through the dark, crowded places, trying to forget you...

BETH

Oh shut up!

Beth shuts the music off. Maya puts her stethoscope on and listens to her heart. They drive on in silence. Eventually Beth turns to look at Maya. Maya stares straight ahead.

BETH (CONT'D)

We're not responsible for him.

They drive on. Maya remains staring straight ahead.

BETH (CONT'D)

The last thing we need in our lives is a dying man. One was enough.

They drive on in silence. Suddenly Beth hears a RATTLING SOUND. She looks over to Maya and sees her holding Jack's pill bottles. She shakes them for better effect.

BETH (CONT'D)

Shit!

Beth pulls over to the side of the road. She gets out of the car and walks up the road a ways. We see this from Maya's perspective. Beth stares heavenward, her back to Maya.

EXT. WINTON PUB. DAY.

Jack is sitting on a bench in front of the pub. He could be asleep like the dogs who are curled up nearby in the shade, or he could be dead. The two aboriginal children we saw earlier (Cathy & Boyd) are with him. One sits on his suitcase, the other plays with his cane. There is a screech of tires as the truck comes to stop in front of him. Jack lifts his head. They all stare at each other for a moment.

Maya opens the door and gets out. She and Cathy grab the suitcase and haul it into the back of the truck. Boyd helps Jack to the truck. Jack looks in at Beth, who continues to look straight ahead. Maya opens the passenger door for him.

JACK

Best I get in the back.

Boyd helps Jack in to the truck bed. He sits rather comfortably on his swag. He settles in pulling his hat down. Maya gets back in the cab. As they leave she looks at Cathy and Boyd, all three of them share a knowing smile and a wave.

EXT. OUTBACK. LATE AFTERNOON TO EARLY EVENING.

OVERHEAD shot of the red truck driving on a narrow paved road that stretches right into the horizon. No telephone poles, just road and bare red sand and a deep blue sky.

CLOSE-UP of the truck's tires spinning endlessly onward.

Maya holds her hand out the window, playing with the wind in her hand.

CLOSE-UP of the windscreen, TIME-LAPSE as the SPLATTERED INSECTS collect on the glass.

OVERHEAD shot of the black truck driving on a narrow paved road that stretches right into the horizon.

EXT. OUTBACK. DUSK.

They have pulled over for a stretch. Jack has a great deal of physical pain due to his drinking binge. He feels equally bad at how he behaved. But he doesn't know what to say to Beth, so they just stand awkwardly together. Beth stretches, Jack supports himself against the truck. Maya is pouring some water onto a struggling plant.

A small PLANE travels over head. Jack and Maya both look up at it. A haunted look comes into Jack's eyes. Maya looks at Jack, she notices.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JACK

The turn off for my place is just up ahead.

BETH

Thank god, I'm dying for a hot shower.

The truck is dwarfed against a vast expanse of scarlet landscape and under a violet horizon. A crucifix shadow is seen crossing the land.

BETH (CONT'D)

How big is this place.

JACK

Two hundred thousand acres, give or take a few.

BETH

So, how long until we get to the house?

JACK

Not tonight. We have to camp.

Beth just stares at him.

JACK (CONT'D)

No worries. I have the gear in the truck. Never leave home without it. I know the perfect spot. You'll love it.

Beth just stares at Jack. He's fighting an uphill battle here.

EXT. OUTBACK WATERHOLE EVENING

The truck's headlights swerve across the contorted shapes of trees and illuminate the startled eyes of animals who flee before their path. Beth pulls up near the edge of an ancient water-hole which is fringed with verdant growth. A flock of Galahs start up from the branches of a tree and are silhouetted against the purple sky. The engine stops. Everything is still. They open the doors and hear the intense chorus of the cicadas, the green frogs and the tree nesting birds. Beth leans her head against the steering wheel.

BETH

I must have done something really terrible in a past life.

EXT. OUTBACK WATERHOLE CAMPSITE. EVENING

Maya wanders away into the twilight, captivated by the profusion of life around her. She can hear Jack and Beth arguing in the distance as he insists on trying to put up the tent and she tries to help.

BETH (O.S.)
Let me do it.

JACK (O.S.)
I can get it.

BETH (O.S.)
No, you can't. God, you are so stubborn.
Give it here.

JACK (O.S.)
That's not how it goes.

Maya sees the butcher birds whirring above her like little space-ships. The trees are alive with parrots. As she reaches the muddy shore, wild pigs grunt and run into the shadows. She is confronted by a kangaroo which is stooped, drinking from the yellowish water. She freezes. It lifts its head and freezes. They stare at each other. It slips silently into the shadows.

BETH (O.S.)
Don't go too close to the water!

JACK (O.S.)
She's fine.

BETH (O.S.)
Are there crocodiles around here?

JACK (O.S.)
Too far south.

BETH (O.S.)
What about dingoes?

Maya sits at the edge of the water, across from her a DINGO comes up to the water. They stare at each other. Maya smiles.

MAYA
(whispering)
Puppy!

JACK (O.S.)
Not anymore, we've poisoned most and shot
the rest.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BETH (O.S.)

Why?

JACK (O.S.)

When the indigenous animals threaten the introduced ones, you destroy them. White man's way.

Maya looks up at the sky. The stars are starting to emerge. The setting is like a haven, a bowl of fertility in the desert. She is a wraith, a fragile figure in a welcoming landscape. She is not afraid.

EXT. OUTBACK WATERHOLE NIGHT

Jack, Beth and Maya sit around the fire. Maya has fallen asleep, her head in Beth's lap. Jack reaches for more sticks for the fire. Beth watches his slow and painful movements. He seems to have gotten worse, probably the effects of the alcohol.

BETH

I can't believe that they don't know what's wrong with you.

JACK

I believe I defy rational science.

BETH

Well, I believe they have medical breakthroughs every day.

JACK

And I believe that for me it is simply payback time.

He looks at Beth as if for the first time.

JACK (CONT'D)

Maybe I deserve to die.

(pause)

I'm tired of the fight

This comment really pushes a button in Beth.

BETH

What is this, some kind of death wish with you guys? Next we'll see Death walking out of the swamp with a chess board.

Beth gently gets Maya up and leads her toward the truck. Jack looks after them and says to Beth,

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JACK
I'd prefer scrabble.

DREAMSCAPE — EXT. STATION VERANDA NIGHT

CLOSE-UP of Jack's hands playing guitar, the fingers are perfect and play the strings brilliantly. DISSOLVE to another guitar being played with similar ability. CLOSE-UP of Jack's face smiling at the other person, CLOSE-UP of ALLAN, Jack's brother, concentrating and returning Jack's smile.

EXT. OUTBACK WATERHOLE. NIGHT.

Jack sits at the fire staring into it, lost in this memory of his brother. He HEARS someone come up beside him, he knows it's Maya, she sits down beside him. They just sit quietly next to each other. Jack reaches for his pills, he starts to unscrew the cap, he senses Maya watching, he stops and looks at her. She wears her father's glasses and listens to her heart with the stethoscope.

JACK
Shall I call you Doctor Maya?

MAYA
My dad told me to listen to my heart,
then I would know.

Jack smiles.

JACK
He's right Maya, the heart is the seat of
wisdom. But that stethoscope just gets
in the way. It's how your heart feels.
If it's right your heart will feel good.

MAYA
Mom's heart hurts.

JACK
I know.

MAYA
Does yours?

JACK
For so long now, I've just gotten used to
it.

MAYA
Do those pills get in the way?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He looks back down at the pills and back to Maya. He hands her one pill bottle. And then he tosses his bottle of pills into the pond. He nods. Maya lifts the pills above her head and throws it in. They sit silently staring into the night.

The ripples accelerate rapidly out from the spot where the bottles went in, until they finally wash against the muddy bank.

INT. TRUCK DAWN

A harsh bird call wakes Beth. She opens her eyes and sits up trying to work out where she is, she sees Maya asleep beside her with Jack's hat. As she wakes she remembers her situation and it wells up in her, this place, Larry's death, this odd, odd situation. She hurriedly puts her shoes on.

EXT. OUTBACK WATERHOLE DAWN

Beth starts walking out across the plain, deep in thought. Where once Beth was walking on her own, now we see Larry walking beside her. He is in the same clothes as the night he died. She doesn't acknowledge him, but he is there because she is thinking about him. He follows closely behind her, then beside her and finally in front. Beth's inner dialogue is shouting at her, at him, it is expressed in her face and body language. Beth kneels and pounds the ground. She stands motionless, the camera circles her. She cries (the first time we've seen this). She hugs Larry. She is hugging herself.

The beauty of the morning and the celebratory chorus of the wakening wildlife undulates and throbs around her. Slowly the beauty of the surroundings get through to her. She begins to jog across a wide water-course, where the surface of the land is as hard and cracked as though it has been fired in a kiln.

INT. TRUCK MORNING

Maya lies asleep in the truck, Larry leans over and kisses her. She opens her eyes and smiles. A wider shot reveals that Larry is not there.

EXT. OUTBACK WATERHOLE. MORNING

The truck drives away from the water-hole, leaving it to its original calm and beauty. Maya turns around and looks back to this magical place.

EXT. EDGE OF WATERHOLE. MORNING

Lying in the soft mud at the edge of the waterhole are Larry's glasses and the stethoscope. A large, beautiful butterfly lands on the glasses, its wings shimmering.

INT./EXT. TRUCK OUTBACK STATION. DAY

Rocks thud rhythmically on the chassis of the car. Beth's face is framed in the wind screen, her eyes screwed up against the glare. Her hair and skin are caked with red dust. Her eyes are strangely bright, as if she is hypnotized. Beth, Maya and Jack are silent and subdued, lost in their private worlds of being.

Up ahead shimmering in the heat haze is a large white colonial farm-house, raised high above the ground. It has screened porches running all around the perimeter and various outbuildings. In the middle of the desolation and drought, the gardens are lush and blooming.

As they pull into the yard, they can see a group of people waiting for them on the shaded front porch. Jack's mother, RUTH HARRIS, in a print dress and sun hat, stares into the distance with her wide set, soft gray eyes. MURRAY, the stockman, is a tall, sinewy, hard-faced man. His wife, DIANNE, who is pregnant, is a shy woman almost half his age. Jack's father, TOM HARRIS is a tall, barrel-chested, deeply tanned man with a commanding posture. He stands at the foot of the steps, his hard blue eyes squinting against the sun as he watches the truck approaching.

EXT. TARA STATION HOUSE. DAY

The truck pulls up in the yard and the dogs run out to greet them.

Jack opens the door and painfully pulls himself out of the truck. Maya jumps out to help and Beth hands him his cane.

JACK

Hey, Jessie, Hey Blackie.

Flanked by the dogs, Jack makes his way slowly towards where Ruth and Tom are waiting. Following behind, Maya and Beth can clearly see the pain in his mother's expression as she observes his weakness. She gives him a hug, but his father simply nods and grunts. Beth and Maya linger at the bottom of the steps. Maya is giving Blackie a pat.

Jack grins at his father. He holds out his hand and his father shakes it, his firm grip a sharp contrast to Jack's fragility. Tom Harris is obviously disturbed by his son's physical condition. There is silence. Jack turns and looks out across the landscape.

JACK (CONT'D)

She's dry.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

His father look out across the landscape as if he is seeing it for the first time.

TOM

Yep. Who's this, you got here.

Beth advances cautiously with her hand extended.

JACK

This is Beth Ritchie. And this is her daughter, Maya. They live in Sydney.

TOM

Rotten place, wouldn't give you two bob for it.

Beth smiles and holds out her hand. Tom shakes it but he is obviously unused to shaking hands with women. Tom watches Maya as she pats Blackie and Jessie.

TOM (CONT'D)

Watch those dogs, they're not pets.

Maya hugs the dog to show she is not afraid. Beth shakes Jack's mother's hand. Maya's laughter draws her attention. They all watch Maya, tousled and bare-foot, as the dogs bark around her legs. Ruth steps forward to get a better look at Maya, Maya looks up at her, they connect. Maya takes her hand. There is a long silence. Tom Squints at the sun and addresses Murray as if they are alone.

TOM (CONT'D)

We'd better get on to that mob before the light goes.

MURRAY

Shouldn't take long, there's nothing left on them.

There is silence. No one moves. A black crow flies over the yard and lets out a harsh accusing cry that hangs strangely in the stillness. Maya watches the crow and then observes the strained dynamic between father and son.

TOM

Well, better get on to it.

Tom turns to Jack.

MURRAY

You want to come?

JACK

I wouldn't be much use to you.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

MURRAY

Doesn't matter.

A look passes between father and son that reveals an emotional intensity between them. Tom turns on his heels and he and Murray walk towards the shearing shed.

INT. STATION HOUSE HALLWAY AND LOUNGE. LATE AFTERNOON.

Beth follows Ruth down the long screened porch and down a hallway that is lined with framed photographs of prize cattle. The main room is large and comfortably furnished. There are ribbons and trophies from AMP shows on the mantelpiece and PHOTOGRAPHS of family members, mainly posing with animals. Beth stops to admire a photo of Jack as a six foot four cowboy astride a beautiful black stallion. She examines another photo of Jack, his father and another young man holding guns and proudly displaying an enormous pile of dead kangaroos. There is also a photo of two young men in school uniform, holding sports trophies.

BETH

Is that Jack?

RUTH

No, that's his younger brother, Allan.

Ruth shows Beth what is obviously her favorite picture of Jack, it is Jack in his cowboy gear, except instead of his cowboy hat, he has on his graduation hat. He smiles both proudly and cheekily.

RUTH (CONT'D)

This is Jack.

Beth admires his handsome, fit, physique.

BETH

What a spunk.

Ruth smiles proudly and puts the picture back.

INT. TARA STATION SHEARING SHED. LATE AFTERNOON

Jack and Maya lean on the rail, watching Murray shear a starved sheep whose skin is scarred with cancer from the unnatural heat. He finishes taking off the fleece and lets the frightened animal loose. Tom is very aware of his son's presence as he boots the shorn sheep down the chute, then hauls another up the shearing platform, handing it to Murray. Tom walks over to Jack, he kicks at Jack's cane.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TOM
Who do you think you are? Charlie
Chaplin?

Jack does a little impersonation, Maya laughs. Tom is
sullen.

TOM (CONT'D)
You look into that hip replacement?

JACK
I looked into it.

TOM
And?

JACK
Reckon I'll give it a miss.

TOM
You're bloody mad. The doctor said that
was your only hope.

Maya turns her eyes from Jack and Tom to the frightened
sheep.

JACK
I don't want to do it their way, any
more.

TOM
So what now? Wait for a bloody miracle.

JACK
Why not?

Jack shrugs, Tom spits in the dust and steps forward to
assist Murray. Jack turns to Maya, they share a private
smile. Tom shouts back to Jack...

TOM
Where is the fight in you?

JACK
Fighting's only made it worse.

That goes down like a lead balloon. Jack looks off into the
distance. Tom stares at the naked, scarred sheep shivering
below them.

TOM
What use is a man without his legs?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Murray sends the last sheep through to Tom, who unceremoniously kicks it down the chute. Murray comes and stands next to him.

TOM (CONT'D)

Put them out of their misery.

Tom hands Murray the gun. Jack and Maya walk away. As Tom looks after him we see tears well up in his eyes.

EXT. TARA STATION SHEARING SHED. LATE AFTERNOON.

Jack and Maya walk back across the yard towards the house. Gun-shots can be heard in the distance.

INT. BATHROOM. SAME TIME.

Beth showers, watching the red dust run off her face and down into the swirling water. She looks up when she hears the sound of repeated gun-fire.

INT. SHEARING SHED - EVENING

On the sorting table, the pathetic fleeces lie, ruffled by a gentle breeze.

EXT. TARA STATION GARDEN. EVENING

Beth walks into the garden, a lush cornucopia of plants and trees, where Ruth is busy pruning. She notices the contrast between the garden and the red, dry earth surrounding it. Maya jumps back and forth through the sprinkler, playing tag with the dogs. She stops for a moment to check on her mother.

BETH

This is amazing. Quite a contrast from what we've been driving through.

RUTH

If it wasn't for the bore, nothing would be alive around here. Jack and Allan helped me plant this garden years ago.

BETH

Jack never mentioned his brother.

RUTH

Like night and day those two. Allan was born tough like his father, Jack gentle, sensitive.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BETH

I've heard some of Jack's stories, he sounded like a pretty tough cowboy.

RUTH

He fought his nature, trying to prove himself.

Ruth looks over to where Maya plays with the dogs.

RUTH (CONT'D)

As a child he was like Maya. That look in their eyes, like they know something we don't.

Beth looks lovingly at her daughter. Who giggles and wrestles with the dogs.

BETH

As a baby she'd look at us and we'd feel this inexplicable joy and wonder. Still do. Larry said she had the gift of pure love. But I suppose all parents feel that way.

Tears well up in Beth's eyes.

RUTH

Is Larry back in Sydney?

BETH

His ashes are. He died a few months ago.

Ruth is embarrassed and compassionate at the same time.

RUTH

I'm so sorry Beth. Dealing with that kind of loss is like starting life over.

(pause)

It's as if through death you learn more about life.

BETH

You seem to have a good understanding of it.

RUTH

It's the country Beth, we're surrounded by death. And life.

Ruth clips a yellow rose from her bush and hands it to Beth.

INT. TARA STATION HOUSE KITCHEN. NIGHT

The setting is simple, a plastic table cloth. A jug of lemonade and a bottle of dark rum for Tom. A big dish piled with steaks and plate of buttered bread are in the centre of the table. Maya looks around the table at each of the assembled company. Jack, fumbling with his food. His father nursing his glass of rum. Beth nervously picking at her food. Ruth does not sit down, she hovers, making sure everyone has food. She holds up a big scoop of mash potatoes to Maya, who is too shy to respond, so Ruth piles her plate high. Tom notices Beth picking at her food.

TOM

That's prime Queensland beef. Cost you a few bob back in the city.

BETH

I'm not much of a meat eater.

Tom snorts, derisively. He indicates his son.

TOM

You don't want to end up like that clown, do you?

He turns his attention to Maya. His tone is gruff, but affectionate.

TOM (CONT'D)

You ever ride a horse?

Maya shyly shakes her head.

TOM (CONT'D)

I'll saddle up the pony for you tomorrow.

Maya smiles.

BETH

I doubt we'll have time. I'd like to get an early start.

TOM

That's a bit bloody premature.

BETH

I need to get back to work.
And Maya has school.

Maya audibly groans. Tom reacts...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TOM

My sentiment exactly. Jack went to that university there and came back with all sorts of queer ideas.

JACK

(lighthearted)

At least I learned enough to keep this place afloat.

Jack's comment infuriates and challenges Tom.

TOM

It's just luck that you have.

Jack looks straight at his dad. It appears these sparring matches are not uncommon.

JACK

Yea, I'm such a lucky guy.

Tom takes a big swig of rum. He looks at Jack.

TOM

It's such a shame son, a few years back you could have taken the plane and flown her home.

Ruth stops in her tracks, Jack's face reddens. Tom abruptly pushes his chair back.

TOM (CONT'D)

Saved her days in travel time.

Taking his glass and the bottle of rum he leaves the room. Tom has a noticeable limp. There is silence.

Ruth sets down a large container of ice cream that she was holding. She sits in Tom's chair and spoons some out for Maya.

RUTH

(to Beth)

I have to go out to the old homestead tomorrow. From there I can show you a shortcut to the highway.

JACK

What's left out there?

RUTH (SMILING)

A couple of good horses got missed in the draft.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

RUTH (SMILING) (CONT'D)

And I want to bring the land title and documents back before the place gets taken over by the desert. I'd like you to come with me Jack.

Jack doesn't look thrilled with the prospect. The beautiful strains of Aida filter through from the lounge.

BETH

Your dad's an opera buff?

JACK (LAUGHS)

Hardly. We only get the one station out here.

Maya eats her ice cream and looks from face to face.

EXT. TARA STATION HOUSE PORCH. NIGHT

Tom sits on the porch nursing his rum and holding his shotgun. The lush opera plays to a huge night sky. The full moon casts a silver shadow over the station. Tom gets up and heads out into the yard.

EXT. TARA STATION HOUSE YARD. NIGHT

From a secret vantage point, beyond the perimeter of light a DINGO watches him.

INT. TARA STATION HOUSE - KITCHEN. NIGHT.

Maya helps Ruth with the dishes. They enjoy each other's company, it's like Maya has known Ruth her whole life.

MAYA

My daddy died.

RUTH

I know Maya, I'm sorry.

MAYA

Do you think Jack's going to die too?

RUTH

I don't know Maya, I hope not.

MAYA

Maybe nobody really dies. Maybe they keep on living and we just don't see them anymore.

RUTH

Maybe. Or maybe they go to a better place.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MAYA

We could make this a better place and
maybe they wouldn't have to leave.

Ruth smiles at Maya and hands her a plate to dry.

EXT. TARA STATION HOUSE PORCH. NIGHT.

Beth follows Jack out to the porch. When he lowers himself into a chair, he cannot help groaning in pain. She sits down beside him. They watch Tom who is now across the yard, prowling the perimeter with his gun.

Jack shifts his position and grunts in pain.

BETH

You want your pills?

JACK

All gone.

BETH

You ran out?

JACK

Chucked 'em out.

He gives Beth a cheeky grin...

JACK (CONT'D)

I want to play Scrabble with a clear
mind.

Beth shakes her head in frustration and gets up to leave. Jack watches her for a moment then says quietly.

JACK (CONT'D)

Beth.

His tone makes her stop and turn toward him.

JACK (CONT'D)

It's important that I work this out my
way.

Beth looks at Jack, she tries to work out this 'death wish' thing that these men she knows seem to have. She returns to her seat.

BETH

I don't understand.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JACK
I'm trying to understand.

The sit in silence, relaxing a bit.

JACK (CONT'D)
I want you to take the truck. It's no
use to me anymore.

Beth digests Jack's words, she is perplexed.

BETH
Jack I'm not a charity case.

JACK
I give you the truck, and you leave me in
peace. Fair dinkum deal.

The sparring is back on...

BETH
Is it your truck or your dad's or is the
farm's?

JACK
You think this farm makes money?

Beth looks around and back at Jack.

JACK (CONT'D)
One of my 'queer' ideas, as dad likes to
call them, was playing the market.
Forrest Gump invested in Apple, I
invested in several varieties of apple.

Beth smiles.

BETH (SOUTHERN ACCENT)
Run Forrest, run!
(pause)
And what are your other ideas?

JACK
Changes to the style of farming and land
rights issues. But dad and I don't
exactly see eye to...

Jack stops speaking as Tom emerges from the darkness, his
limp even more pronounced, still carrying his gun. He pours
himself another rum. He sees Beth watching him, he lifts his
glass to her, with an insolent smile.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

TOM
Keeps the wheels of industry lubricated,
eh Jack?

JACK (CONGENIALLY)
I've got to hand it to you dad. You
never give up.

He holds out the bottle to Jack. Jack shakes his head.

JACK (CONT'D)
No Thanks.

TOM
Come on it'll kill the pain.

Jack shakes his head. His father sighs. He looks out across
his domain.

TOM (CONT'D)
There's a big old Roo sneaking around,
getting in your mother's roses. I've
been sitting up nights waiting,

Tom lifts his gun.

TOM (CONT'D)
but I reckon he's too smart.

JACK
Too smart for you dad?

TOM
Reckon he's got my number.

JACK
You getting soft in your old age?

TOM
Maybe.

He offers the gun to his son.

TOM (CONT'D)
You want to have a go at him?

JACK
No thanks.

TOM
Few years back you would have wrenched
the gun right out of my hand.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

Tom can't bear his son's acceptance of his condition. He bangs the gun on the floor of the porch. Beth jumps.

TOM (CONT'D)
Fifty-fifty odds if you have the bloody operation. So what's stopping you?

JACK
The fifty odd.

There is a long awkward silence. Tom pours himself another rum.

BETH
Why do you shoot the kangaroos?

TOM
If we didn't there'd be no feed left for the stock.

BETH
Why don't you farm kangaroos instead? Roo meat's pretty popular in Sydney.

Jack laughs.

TOM
Where'd you find her?

JACK
Not a bad idea. This place was never designed for cloven hooved animals. When I was a kid, I used to sit out here and watch the top soil blowing away into the desert. No wonder there's a drought.

Tom's been listening in amazement.

TOM
The drought's a natural phenomenon

JACK
Don't kid yourself dad. This place is a bloody ecological disaster.

The tension is palpable. Tom goes to pour another drink, but the bottle is empty. He gets up shaking his head in disbelief and stomps into the house.

BETH
Where'd he get that limp?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (4)

JACK
Ask him, he'll get far more enjoyment out
of telling you than I will.

After a moment Beth rises.

BETH
I'll pass. Better get to bed, we should
get an early start tomorrow.

JACK
Why are you in such a hurry to leave.
You and dad are really hitting it off.

BETH
Yeah, right, five more minutes and I
would have turned the gun on him myself.

Beth starts to walk away.

JACK
Maya likes it here.

Beth pauses and turns back to Jack.

BETH
She's a kid Jack, she doesn't know any
better.

JACK
Maybe she does.

As Beth exits, Jack stands and leans against the railing
looking up at the moon, he throws back his head and HOWLS.

EXT. DIANNE AND MURRAY HOUSE. SAME TIME

Dianne and Murray sit on the front porch of their house.
Dianne is cradling the head of Blackie, who is looking pretty
unwell. She strokes him, gently. They hear Jack's HOWL.

INT. STATION. KITCHEN. SAME TIME

In the kitchen Tom grabs a fresh bottle of rum from the
pantry, the ice clinking in his glass. He listens to the
sound of his son howling at the moon.

EXT. STATION - KENNELS SAME TIME

In the darkened garden Ruth, who is chaining up the dogs on
the back steps, smiles to herself as she hears the sound.

INT. STATION BETH AND MAYA'S ROOM. SAME TIME.

Maya, in bed, hears Jack's howl, she howls softly back.

Beth comes into the bedroom. She pulls back the covers on her bed and finds her camera hidden there. She picks it up and looks over to Maya who is pretending to sleep.

Maya opens her eyes and sees Beth sitting at the edge of the bed holding the camera in her lap, they share a smile.

EXT. TARA STATION NIGHT.

The moon hangs over the house, which is dwarfed by the immensity of the star-studded sky.

INT. STATION JACK'S BEDROOM. NIGHT.

Jack sits on his bed, struggling to play his guitar. In the background, leaning against the wall, is Beth's photograph. Jack clumsily strums then gives up and stares at Beth's photograph. His eyes then shift up to a picture hanging on the wall. It is of him and Allan on horseback.

FLASHBACK EXT. TARA STATION — FIVE YEARS AGO

Beauty shots of a younger, healthy Jack running, we focus on his body and strength, it seems like this is a memory of him being fit and healthy, as if he is running for the exhilaration of the experience. But as we light upon his face we see anguish — he is running toward something that terrifies him. He stumbles/dives to the broken body of his brother Allan, there are bits of plane fuselage scattered and smoking around him. He cradles his brother's face in his lap, Allan looks as if he is peacefully asleep. Jack looks up and sees his father propped on his side, alive, but holding his leg which is torn and bleeding. A look of anguish comes over his face as he reads Jack's look. Tom points an accusing finger at Jack.

INT. STATION MAYA AND BETH'S BEDROOM NIGHT.

Maya slips quietly out of bed, past her sleeping mother.

EXT. TARA STATION YARD NIGHT.

The chained dogs do not bark, but they greet Maya by whining and wagging their tails, turning on their bellies. Suddenly a large dingo glides into the moon-lit yard. It stops, sees Maya and becomes perfectly still. We see its eye in close-up, watching her, and she in return, watching it.

She steps out toward it. Suddenly there is a bright flash over her head, the sound of a gun firing.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Maya SCREAMS and falls to the ground. The dingo lifts its head and then melts into the night.

EXT. TARA STATION PORCH NIGHT.

Lights come on in the house. Ruth, Beth and Jack come out on to the porch. Tom turns on the searchlight and aims it at where he took the shot. They see the small crumpled figure of Maya in her T-shirt. Beth SCREAMS. There is an awful moment and then MAYA wriggles up and stares at them. Beth runs to her.

BETH
Maya! Are you hurt?

MAYA
It was a dingo, I saw it.

TOM
(argumentatively)
It was a bloody roo.

Ruth gives Tom and his rum glass a scathing look.

TOM (CONT'D)
I tell you, it was that bloody red man
come around again.

Ruth glares at him. Jack steps forward.

JACK
Go to bed dad.

TOM
There are no bloody dingoes around here.

He looks around and sees everyone's shock and disapproval. He picks up his gun and shrinks away.

INT. STATION BETH AND MAYA'S BEDROOM NIGHT.

Beth lies asleep with Maya in a single bed, cradling her protectively.

INT. STATION JACK'S BEDROOM NIGHT

Ruth stands over her son, watching him as he sleeps. She takes a blanket and carefully covers him, tucking him in. We see the pain in her face.

EXT. STATION YARD. NIGHT.

Tom stands alone with his gun at the spot where he almost shot Maya. The look on his face is perplexing – anger? Fear?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Self contempt? We are allowed some insight into a troubled soul.

EXT. STATION. DAWN.

The strident crow heralds the morning. The sun rises over the station, clear and pure.

INT. STATION KITCHEN. DAWN.

Maya comes into the kitchen to see Ruth serving breakfast to Tom and Murray. In the sink she see a large yellow-belly fish flapping among the tea-leaves. She stares at it in amazement as it tries to free itself. The radio is playing a report on the failure of the Australian government to provide adequate farming subsidies for drought conditions..

TOM

Thought we might go down to Number Three and take a look at that busted sail.

MURRAY

You're not going to send me up that bloody thing again? I hate heights.

TOM

Bloody girl.

Maya hovers awkwardly, watching the last feeble efforts of the dying fish. She skirts around Tom, warily. He smiles at her baring his teeth like a dog.

TOM (CONT'D)

Did I give you a scare last night?

She nods.

TOM (CONT'D)

That'll teach you to go running around after dark.

Maya drops her head.

TOM (CONT'D)

Big dingo's gonna get you.

He howls. Ruth comes to intervene. Tom mimics a high voice.

TOM (CONT'D)

Help, help, a dingo's got my baby!

Ruth glares at him and comes to Maya's aid.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RUTH

Do you want to come help me feed the
chooks?

TOM

No, she's coming with me. I promised her
a PONY ride.

RUTH

Come with me Maya.

She takes Maya's hand and leads her out the door. The fish makes a monumental effort and flips itself down on to the floor. Murray and Tom ignore it completely as they eat. Tom belches and grunts at the radio.

TOM

Come another war and they'll all be up
here looking for a bloody hand-out.

The fish makes one last movement and lies still.

INT. STATION HALLWAY. MORNING

Beth comes down the hall towards the kitchen. She hears a groan from the open doorway leading to Jack's room.

INT. STATION - JACK'S BEDROOM MORNING.

Beth looks in the doorway and sees Jack, painfully trying to dress. She notices her photograph too. Jack's feeble hands fumble with the buttons on his shirt. He is noticeably weaker. The effort exhausts him. Beth quietly goes into the room and stands in front of him. He watches as she gently takes his hands away and finishes buttoning his shirt. She looks up and smiles. Neither of them say anything. She leaves and he looks after her.

INT. STATION - KITCHEN. MORNING

Beth enters the kitchen to find Ruth and Maya making scones, rolling out dough on the large old wooden kitchen table which she has covered with greased proof paper. Maya cuts shapes in the dough with an overturned tea cup. Beth hangs back, unsure of what role to take. Dianne enters, flustered. She is shy about being late, she starts to help right away. Ruth notices something is wrong.

RUTH

What is it Dianne?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIANNE

It's Blackie, he's hid himself away in the wreck behind the shed. He's really crook.

RUTH

What's wrong?

DIANNE

Murray thinks it's heartworm. I think he got into some of that 1080.

Ruth shakes her head and hands Dianne a tray to put in the oven. Maya has been listening intently. She slips out the door.

BETH

Don't you go far.

Maya nods and disappears.

EXT. STATION AIRPLANE WRECKAGE. MID MORNING.

Positioned behind the shed is the rusted out wreck of a SMALL AIRCRAFT. Maya is examining it, looking for Blackie. Inside the fuselage we see old cans, debris of 1080 poison and old bones.

Maya hears a low WHINE. Peering into the cavity of the plane she makes out the shape of Blackie. As Maya approaches, he thumps his tail weakly and tries to lift his head. His flanks are heaving with the effort of his breathing. Maya strokes him gently, rests his head in her lap. She hugs him and strokes his heaving flank.

Maya puts her hand to her heart.

MAYA

(whispering)

You are perfect.

A MYSTERIOUS WIND passes through the yard, making Ruth's windchimes tinkle and the trees shimmer in her garden. It starts up the sails on the wind-mill until they creak and turn slowly. The horses raise their head in the corral. As it travels it gathers dust into itself and becomes a WILLYWAW. It whirls towards the plane wreck where Maya and the dog are lying.

MAYA (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)

When daddy told me to listen to my heart
I didn't hear anything, no matter how
hard I tried.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MAYA (VOICE OVER) (CONT'D)
 So I'd forget about that and started thinking about how much I loved dad and mom and animals. Then I started to feel something in my heart. First it felt warm and then it felt like it would burst. Not like bursting to pee, but bursting to laugh or sing. Like it couldn't hold all the love inside.

INT. STATION KITCHEN. MID MORNING

Jack and Beth sit at the table with Tom and Murray who have come in for morning tea. The wind comes in through the back door and rattles the windchimes. While Dianne pours the tea, Ruth puts down a big plate of scones.

TOM
 Only one thing to do when a dog gets sick.

Jack SIGHS audibly. Tom turns to him.

TOM (CONT'D)
 What's your problem?

JACK
 Leave it alone dad.

TOM
 What do you mean? It's a simple question.

We look closely at Jack as he REMEMBERS...

EXT. STATION YARD - FIVE YEARS EARLIER.

TOM and JACK are at a standoff, two powerful men ready to take this argument to the physical plane.

TOM
 You are flying that god damn plane.

JACK
 Over my dead body.

Jack stands stubbornly, arms folded. Allan comes up to his father, touches his shoulder, he bats him away like a fly.

INT. STATION KITCHEN. PRESENT TIME.

RUTH
 Tom we've got a guest here.

He looks to Beth.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TOM

All the better, show her how we do things
around here.

Jack is looking concerned, the memory impedes ...

EXT. STATION YARD – FIVE YEARS EARLIER

Tom stares at Jack.

TOM

You're not changing things around here.

JACK

They have to change. We shouldn't even
be handling that poison – we're killing
more than dingoes.

Tom lurches toward Jack, he staggers a bit, Allan grabs him.

INT. STATION KITCHEN. PRESENT TIME.

Tom's come back to the kitchen with his gun.

TOM

Here Jack, you're the crack shot, put the
thing out of its misery.

JACK

Stop it dad, don't do this again.

Tom leans over his son. Everyone else is very quiet.

TOM

If you can't pull your weight, you're no
bloody use.

EXT. STATION YARD – FIVE YEARS AGO

Tom shakes himself free from Allan and stares Jack down.

TOM

You're no son of mine.

ALLAN

Leave it dad, let's just get in the
plane.

Allan tries to turn Tom toward the plane.

JACK

Don't let that drunk old man fly, Allan!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Tom lunges at Jack, Allan holds him back. Tom points his finger at Jack.

TOM
You'll pay for this.

Allan turns to Jack.

ALLAN
Just go inside Jack, let me handle this.

Jack turns his back on them.

INT. STATION KITCHEN. PRESENT TIME.

Tom holds the gun out to Jack.

TOM
Shoot the bloody dog.

Jack lowers his head and stares at the floor. He shakes his head slowly. Ruth's voice is tremulous, but determined.

RUTH
That's enough Tom, leave the boy alone.

Tom glares at Jack.

TOM
He's my son and I can talk to him any way
I want. He's bloody useless.

He glares at Jack but Jack keeps his gaze to the floor. Beth watches in fear. Ruth glares at Tom. The others avert their gaze.

TOM (CONT'D)
Did you hear me?

Jack nods.

TOM (CONT'D)
What are you?

RUTH
That's enough!

Jack lifts his head WE CUT TO...

EXT. STATION PLANE CRASH SCENE...

Jack cradles his dead brother, he raises his head and sees his father propped on his side, alive, but holding his leg...Tom points an accusing finger at Jack.

INT. STATION KITCHEN. PRESENT TIME.

Jack stares back calmly at his father.

JACK

Bloody useless, no bloody good to anyone.

Jack raises the barrel of the gun that his father is holding and puts it to his head. There is a pause while the two men eye each other.

JACK (CONT'D)

Come on dad, don't tell me you're going soft in your old age?

Ruth moves swiftly to push the barrel of the gun away. She stands between Jack and his father. She addresses her husband.

RUTH

Get out!

Tom considers answering back, but thinks better of it.

RUTH (CONT'D)

Right now, you hear me!

Tom storms out carrying the gun. There is a shaken silence around the table. Suddenly Beth stands.

BETH

Oh my god, Maya, she's probably with that dog!

Beth runs out, the others follow.

EXT. STATION AIRPLANE WRECKAGE. MID MORNING.

Inside the fuselage Maya, her head tilted upward, opens her eyes to find Blackie on his feet licking her face excitedly. She sits up.

MAYA

You are perfect Blackie.

Maya sees Tom walking/limping aggressively toward her.

In the bright sun, Tom cannot see inside the plane. He walks up closely and peers in. Blackie bounds out, almost knocking him over. It is hard to tell which one is more startled, Maya or Tom. Tom puts the gun behind his back.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

TOM

Come on out girl, I'm not going to hurt you.

Maya is not sure. He reaches out his hand. She takes it. She emerges, filthy and sweaty.

The others approach hurriedly, worried. Blackie jumps all over Dianne and Murray. Maya calls out to Beth, Jack hangs back. Maya runs to Beth, Blackie comes up to her, licks her hand. Tom turns to face them, he points his gun at the dog.

TOM (CONT'D)

What's the matter with you? There's nothing wrong with that dog.

The group turns back to the house, anxious to get away from Tom. Tom turns back to the plane wreckage, he REMEMBERS...

EXT. STATION YARD / INT. PLANE - FIVE YEARS AGO

Tom is getting into the cockpit of the plane, Allan is trying to stop him.

ALLAN

Get out of that seat Dad, I'm piloting.

TOM

Get your hands off me!

He pushes Allan forcefully back, he knocks his head, which infuriates Allan.

ALLAN

You stubborn old bastard.

Allan, in the co-pilot seat, tries to stop his dad from starting the plane, but Tom is too quick, the plane starts up and Tom takes the controls. There is nothing Allan can do. Tom looks cheekily at Allan. Allan just stares at him. It is this look that is FROZEN in TOM'S MEMORY...

EXT. STATION. AIRPLANE WRECKAGE. MID MORNING.

We hold on Tom's face, lost in the memory of his son Allan.

Maya comes up beside him, she slips her hand in his.

MAYA

Can I ride the horse?

Tom looks down at this angel face and smiles.

EXT. STATION CORRAL. DAY

A horse rolls happily in the red dust of the stockade. Maya and Tom are watching the horse through the stockade rails. Tom's eyes are piercing and blue as the sky. He observes the movements of the horses. He takes a swig from his flask. Maya watches him.

MAYA

Is that your medicine?

Tom laughs in surprise.

TOM

I guess you could say that.

Tom looks at her.

EXT. STATION PORCH. DAY

Ruth, Beth and Jack look over to the corral where Tom and Maya look at the horses.

RUTH

If you want me to show you that shortcut to the highway, I'll be leaving for Kalkadoon in an hour.

Ruth throws a look in Tom's direction. She turns to Jack.

RUTH (CONT'D)

I'd appreciate it if you'd come too, Jack. Help with the loading.

Jack knows this is not a question.

EXT. STATION YARD. DAY

Jack sits on an old couch under a huge tree in the yard with his guitar. He labours to form the chords while he watches Maya learning to ride. Beth comes out, dragging her suitcase.

Maya looks across and waves excitedly to her mother as Tom leads her in a circle around the yard.

Jack stares out across the dusty, barren yard. He starts to sing. His voice, beautiful and strong, belies his fragility...

JACK

...I spied a young cowboy, all wrapped in white linen, all wrapped in white linen and cold as the clay...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

BETH
Are you coming?

Jack strums his guitar forcefully and throws it aside. He grins up at her.

JACK
To the end of the road? Why not?

Beth watches as he stumbles to his feet. She leans over and takes his arm to help him up. He is growing noticeably weaker. He looks her in the eye but this time he doesn't protest. She puts her hands on his shoulder and smiles into his face, lovingly. Then she recovers, turns away, shades her eyes and calls across to where Maya is riding the pony on her own.

BETH
Come on Maya, we're leaving now!

EXT. STATION CORRAL. DAY

Maya rides over to Tom and he helps her down. She wraps her arms around him instinctively and he presses his face into her hair. He closes his eyes and smiles. It is probably the only hug he has had for a long long time.

EXT. ROAD TO KALKADOON. DAY

Ruth's Toyota Landcruiser leads Jack's truck as they leave their dusty trails through the empty desert plain. There is no road, no foliage, only multi coloured mineral rocks. In the far distance, we can see the smoother undulations of sandy dunes on the horizon. We HEAR...

PATSY CLINE (OFF-SCREEN)
Crazy, crazy for being so lonely...

The sound cuts off abruptly.

BETH (OFF-SCREEN)
I'm the DJ from now on.

BOB MARLEY (OFF-SCREEN)
Get up, stand up, stand up for your
rights....

They bump across a dry creek bed where the roots of the overhanging trees have been exposed and are splayed out like bony skeletons.

Music rises with the long plume of smoke that stretches out behind them.

INT. TRUCK DAY.

Jack is asleep. His face is drawn and pale. Beth look across at him and we register her concern. She negotiates a bumpy patch and he shifts in his seat and groans with pain. He opens his eyes and looks around him at the desolation.

Suddenly a huge gray and white bird flies up from the scrub beside the road. Beth brakes, stops the truck.

BETH
What is that?

JACK
Brolga. Drought must have brought it out, they're normally pretty shy.

They watch the bird transform into a graceful silhouette gliding on the invisible wind currents above them.

JACK (CONT'D)
When they mate, they do this amazing graceful dance. Their movements are perfectly synchronized.

They sit in silence, watching the bird fly into the sky.

BETH
Are you scared?

JACK
I think the fear of death is highly over-rated. I'd rather see it coming than have it sneak up from behind.

He indicates a sheep skeleton bleached clean by the sun.

JACK (CONT'D)
At least out here I'm in good company.

Beth continues to drive.

BETH
What would you do if you suddenly got better?

Jack is surprised by this. He thinks.

BETH (CONT'D)
Well?

JACK
I reckon the first thing I'd do is take you out dancing.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

She smiles at him.

INT. LANDCRUISER DAY

Maya slugs from a metal water canteen while she chatters happily with Ruth.

MAYA
Who lives out here?

RUTH
No one anymore. I used to when I was a little girl. It was green then.

MAYA
What happened?

RUTH
It stopped raining.

MAYA
Why?

RUTH
I don't know.

Maya sees a shape crossing the road in front of them through the heat haze. The DINGO stops in the middle of the road and turns its head to look at them. Ruth rolls to a stop.

MAYA
It's the dingo!

RUTH
That's strange.

Before Ruth can stop her, Maya gets out and runs after the dingo as it heads off towards a stand of white trees on the horizon.

INT. TRUCK DAY

Positioned behind Ruth, Beth stops the truck and shades her eyes to see what is happening.

BETH
Is that one of your dogs?

Jack squints his eyes into the dusty foreground.

JACK
Nope. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was a dingo.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Beth swerves the truck off the track to follow Maya.

BETH

Knowing her, she'll go right up to it.

EXT. LANDCRUISER. DAY

Ruth get outs of the truck and looks at the sky, in the distance we see the start of a dust storm. A worried look comes across her face.

OUTBACK PLATEAU/BORA GROUND. DAY

Maya follows the dingo across the plain. It turns its head to make sure that she is following. A large BLACK CROW watches Maya from a dead tree. His head is tilted to one side. A small WILLYWAW starts up and dances around her, stirring up the dust. She giggles and looks back to see the truck following her. She turns back to the horizon and follows the dancing wind towards the perimeter of a large dried up water-hole that is fringed with shimmering GHOST GUMS.

Maya approaches the edge of the water-hole. There is a steep slope leading down to a scooped out bowl of cracked dried earth. The trunks of the Ghost Gums are like the sinuous limbs of dancers. Maya looks into the leafy canopy, where the leaves tremble in a gust of invisible wind.

The dingo watches her from the distance. His jowls hang open as he pants in the heat, giving him the appearance of grinning.

INT./EXT. TRUCK/BORA GROUND. DAY

Jack and Beth drive slowly over the bumpy ground to the edge of the waterhole. Jack has gone very quiet. Beth notices his discomfort.

BETH

What is this place?

Jack is grim.

JACK

Go get her.

Beth is surprised by his tone. She jumps out of the truck and calls from the edge of the waterhole down to where Maya is making her way from tree to tree, touching their trunks, looking up into the shimmering canopy. The rich loam of the dried-up water-hole is scored with a pattern of deep cracks.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Jack opens the door and climbs unsteadily out. He is so weak he has to lean on the truck for support. He watches Beth making her way to Maya. A sudden GUST OF WIND comes out of nowhere. It hits Jack so that he staggers to keep his balance. It catches his white hat and whips it off his head, sending it flying down into the waterhole. Maya runs after it and catches it. She puts it on her head and mugs to him.

Beth takes Maya's hand and leads her back to the truck.

BETH

You must stop running off like that.
It's dangerous out here.

MAYA

It's not dangerous.

She smiles at Jack and offers him back his hat.

JACK

You keep it.

Maya looks at him and sensing something is wrong, she grips his hat. As they drive away, the mysterious wind flurries over their tracks in the sandy ground obliterating them.

EXT. KALKADOON STATION. DAY

Kalkadoon Station has been reclaimed by the desert. The scenery is bleached out. Grey clouds of dust blow around the vehicles. There is no signs of life. No standing cattle or wild-life remain, only bleached bones and decomposing carcasses, their sun-flayed skin stretching over skeletal ribs and skulls. Ahead, are the outlines of a long, low building, a large shearing shed and stock pens, a tattered wind mill, water tanks and fences that are broken and incomplete. Drifts of sand have half-buried some of the smaller out-buildings. They drive into the main yard.

INT. TRUCK. DAY

Ruth comes up to the truck window, carrying a carton of supplies.

RUTH

Beth, you may be stuck here for the
night, from the looks of that sky.

BETH

Maybe I should head out before it gets
dark.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RUTH

It's too dangerous. Once that dust comes up, it's impossible to get your bearings.

Beth sees Maya running in the wind towards the outbuildings.

EXT. YARD. KALKADOON

Beth follows Ruth into the house with boxes of provisions. Jack stands in the yard, resting on his cane with the dust swirling around him. He looks like a ghost, staring into the mysterious reaches of the desert.

INT. KALKADOON SHEARING SHED. LATE AFTERNOON.

We follow Maya into the vast expanse of the abandoned shearing shed where hundreds of men use to shear thousands of sheep. Now there are only the echoes of their presence in the shreds of wool caught on barbed wire, the dusty remains of pieces of farm machinery, the dull blades of a pair of discarded hand shears.

Maya is a graceful and ethereal contrast to the stark ruins as she flits from doorway to doorway, stirring up the dust motes that dance in the shafts of lights through broken windows and ragged doorways.

EXT. KALKADOON YARD. LATE AFTERNOON

Beth reaches into the truck for her camera. She holds it, makes a few settings, puts an extra lens in her pocket.

EXT. KALKADOON YARD. CORRAL. LATE AFTERNOON

Beth's POV through the camera as she pans, and FOCUSES on the dramatic shape of Jack as he leans on the railing of the corral, staring out into the mysterious desert dunes of the horizon. His strength is visibly fading. She is thoughtful, obviously moved. She takes a picture.

Beth joins Jack, they lean on the broken fence. Jack points to Beth's camera.

JACK

Nothing worth shooting around here.

BETH

Oh, you'd be surprised.

There is silence, then Beth looks to Jack.

BETH (CONT'D)

What was that place back there?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Jack seems lost in thought, he speaks almost to himself.

JACK

As a kid I used to go there all the time.
It was magic... those beautiful trees
that grew with no water, the animals, the
huge bowl of earth.

Maya and Ruth lead the two horses into the corral. Maya shows no fear of the horses and they in turn are calmed by her presence. She strokes a dappled pony with a long mane and lays her head close to its neck. Both Jack and Beth turn their backs to this image and lean their backsides against the railing.

JACK (CONT'D)

Once I met an aboriginal man on
walkabout, we ate honey ants. He had so
much...grace. Another time I spent the
night, it felt safe, like I belonged
there.

He looks to Beth.

JACK (CONT'D)

Until my father found me. Beat me black
and blue and forbade me to ever go there
again.

BETH

Why?

Maya sneaks up behind the two of them. She listens to their conversation.

JACK

Our dirty family secret.

Beth looks at him, puzzled. He regards her, thoughtfully.

JACK (CONT'D)

About sixty years ago my grandfather went
out with his boys to look for some
missing stock. They tracked them to the
waterhole, where they found the local
Abbos having themselves a barbecue.

He looks to Beth, calculating whether to continue. Maya is still keenly listening, the horses have now come up to muzzle this curious little girl eavesdropping on the adults.

(CONT'D)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

JACK

So they drove them into the waterhole and massacred them in cold blood. Every last one of them.

BETH

It wasn't your fault.

JACK

The sins of the father.

BETH

But you have ideas to change things, you said so.

JACK

Words only Beth. Like I said, it's payback time.

BETH

Don't Jack, don't think like that. How could the place have felt so special for you as a child?

JACK

I was naive, optimistic and full of dreams.

BETH

Good qualities.

JACK

Somebody has to pay Beth.

Maya listens. Beth takes in the serious nature of his words. She touches his arm.

BETH

Someone has to forgive.

Jack turns and leans over the railing coming face to face with Maya. She searches his face and then slowly smiles.

EXT. KALKADOON LATE AFTERNOON

Beth's attention is drawn to a patch of colour against the monochromatic backdrop. There is a spill from the watertank and where the drops have fallen, a patch of green, speckled with delicate desert flowers stands out in deep contrast to it's background. She crouches down and takes a photo.

EXT. KALKADOON LATE AFTERNOON

From a vantage point Beth sees Jack and Maya at the fence, she takes the camera, focuses, CAMERA POV as we see a long lens shot of Jack and Maya. Several shots are taken.

EXT. GENERATOR SHED. EVENING

From outside of the generator shed we see Ruth trying to start the old generator. We HEAR it start briefly then fail, followed by Ruth's CURSE. Finally it starts for good. We see a montage of the following images:

LIGHTS COME ON IN HOUSE.

LIZARD SCUTTLES AWAY, STARTLED AT THE LIGHT

GREEN FROG BLINKS IN THE BATHROOM SINK.

INT. KITCHEN KALKADOON HOMESTEAD NIGHT

Ruth and Maya are crouched at the grate of the old wood stove. Ruth digs around in the darkness with the shovel. As she pulls it out a large snake is entwined on it. Maya draws back in awe. Ruth shakes the shovel and the snake drops to the floor. She pushes Maya back behind her and approaches the snake with the shovel. Maya watches as Ruth smashes the snake over and over again with the shovel, displaying a rage that exceeds the requirements of the task. The heeler is off to one side, barking enthusiastically. Beth comes into the kitchen watching in amazement. Ruth throws the dead snake to the excited heeler. The dog shakes it violently in it's jaws.

EXT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD. NIGHT

The ghostly homestead sits in the immense desert landscape. Its windows are lit and the vehicles stand in the yard. The road is being obscured by the blowing dust as the clouds gather in the darkened sky. The horses move restlessly in the corral.

INT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD. NIGHT.

Maya is standing at the screen-door watching a bright green LIZARD that is preying on insects that have been attracted by the light. It has big sticky feet and it moves in swift, abstract patterns. She looks beyond the lizard to the yard where Jack is now only a vague silhouette in the darkness.

She looks back at the warm pool of light where Beth and Ruth sit at the table, examining a box of old photos and papers. On the middle of the table is an impromptu centre-piece made of tiny desert flowers in a glass of water.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Ruth is pouring over an old faded document, which includes a map of the region from the last century, on which we see clearly the words 'Terra Nullius'.

RUTH

This is the original claim to the property.

She leans toward Beth to show her the document.

Ruth sees Beth looking at a photo of Jack and Allan. Beth looks at Ruth.

BETH

What happened to Allan?

EXT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD YARD. NIGHT

Maya slips out the screen door and goes to join Jack

INT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD NIGHT

Ruth and Beth are at the table, the story continues...

RUTH

...I came out to the porch to see what all the commotion was about. I see Jack storming up the steps and the plane taking off. It rose unsteadily into the air and then seemed to just drop out of the sky.

(thinking)

It was like one of those dreams where you can't move. I heard Jack's cry as he took off after the plane. Allan died, Tom lived. Jack blames himself. He always flew the plane, Allan had only flown a few times.

BETH

Jack and his dad do have an intense relationship.

RUTH

I'd always hoped they'd patch things up. But with Jack wanting to bring in the new and Tom stubbornly holding on to the old there is little hope.

Ruth and Beth fall silent.

EXT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD YARD. NIGHT

Maya and Jack stand silently side by side, looking out into the night. Maya slips her hand in Jack's.

MAYA

Your body is sad because you are.

Jack looks down at her and slowly smiles.

INT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD. NIGHT

A strange ghostly square of light flickers on a bare white wall. An image of a little boy of about four years in full western cowboy regalia, riding an elaborate rocking horse. The colour is bleached out. The old 16mm HOME MOVIE FILM dates from the eighties.

Ruth stands behind an old 16mm projector, smiling at the memory. Beth and Maya sit on the floor in front of her with their arms clasped around their knees.

On screen, LITTLE JACK looks at the camera trustingly. Another slightly younger boy (LITTLE ALLAN) comes into view, similarly dressed. They put their arms around each other.

The image jumps and we see little Jack on his own, he advances jerkily towards the camera, obviously under the instructions of someone off camera. He stops and looks quizzically at the camera, then awkwardly reaches for the toy six guns in his holster and draws them out. He looks at them as if he does not know what they are for. Under further encouragement he aims them at the camera and fires, then smiles disarmingly.

Beth and Maya smile at the image.

The image changes. The two boys are riding together on a horse. Little Jack has his arms protectively around Little Allan.

Jack lowers his head, there are tears in Ruth's eyes. The boys smile and wave goodbye at the camera as they ride off together.

JUMPCUT back to Little Jack in the cowboy suit, we see him run into the loving arms of a YOUNG TOM. Little Jack places his hands on either side of Tom's face and gives him a kiss. We see his father hug him lovingly, give him a big kiss and hold him up proudly to the camera.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

In the dark, Beth watches Jack as he realizes the affection that his father once held for him. Tears form in his eyes. Ruth stares impassively at the image of the man she once knew. Maya stares straight ahead, the light patterns flickering on her face.

The generator shudders and dies. The lights go out.

INT. KALKADOON JACK'S BEDROOM. NIGHT

Jack lies down slowly and painfully on his makeshift bed. The room is lit by candles. Ruth unfolds a white sheet over Jack, she tucks him in. He is already half asleep. Beth and Maya come to the door of the room. As Ruth walks away from Jack, Maya goes up to him. As Ruth passes Beth their eyes lock in grief.

Maya goes up to Jack, undeterred by his weakness, she takes his hand.

Jack slowly opens his eyes and focuses on Maya. She leans close to him staring into his face. Maya smiles and Jack gives her a smile back. Beth comes up behind Maya.

BETH
Sleep well Jack.

JACK
Thank you for bringing me home.

All Beth can do is watch Jack as he closes his eyes.

INT. BETH/MAYA'S BEDROOM KALKADOON. NIGHT

Beth wakes with a start and sits up in bed. She hears the old wooden boards of the house creaking as they cool from the heat of the day. There is strong, silvery moonlight shining through the window.

Careful not to disturb Maya, who is sleeping beside her, she climbs out of bed and makes her way through the house, until she comes to the bare room where Jack is sleeping.

INT. JACK'S BEDROOM KALKADOON. NIGHT

Jack lies under the blue moonlight with his wasted body exposed beneath the white, funereal sheet. He resembles a religious icon, something austere and primitive. He does not appear to be breathing. One arm is dangling over the edge of the bed. Horrified Beth races up to him, she takes his arm, tries to find a pulse, no luck. She straddles him and begins to pump his heart.

Jack opens his eyes. His hands reach up to grab hers.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JACK

Hey, what did I do this time?

She stares into his face. Her eyes are wild, as if she is in a trance. She sobs with relief.

BETH

I thought you were dead.

He smiles.

JACK

No such luck.

He places her hand over his heart. She feels it beating, the blood still coursing through the veins under the pale skin. She traces the contours of his frail torso with her hand. There is a beauty to his translucent skin.

He strokes her back with his clawed hand. She looks into his eyes. He smiles. She gently lifts him towards her. They embrace, tenderly.

LIMBO/DREAM SET

Jack and Beth dance. They are a silhouette of grace and movement against the deep blue and red backdrop of the outback's wide horizon. Their hands touch and caress, arms intertwine, hips move as one and their faces are filled with joy and contentment. . They are impossibly light and graceful on their feet.

INT. BETH/MAYA'S BEDROOM KALKADOON. NIGHT

Maya sits up in bed. A mysterious breeze lifts the old muslin curtain from the window invitingly. Maya gets up and slips down the hallway, stopping when she sees the moon-light shining in the doorway to Jack's room.

Jack and Beth lay entwined together, asleep. Jack's clawed hand is dangling down the side of the bed. Maya closes her eyes and smiles ...

(MAYA'S IMAGINATION) Jack and Beth stand up and face Maya. They reach to the top of their head and unzip themselves. As Jack unzips we see him as his perfect self, healthy and happy. He smiles at Maya. Beth is unzipped and her perfect self as well...

Maya opens her eyes and leaves the room.

Jack and Beth lay entwined together, asleep.

EXT. KALKADOON CORRAL. NIGHT.

Maya runs to the stockade and wrestles open the gate. The dappled horse comes to her. She snaps a rope to it's halter and guides it to the railing which she climbs up on and grasping the horse's mane she slides on.

Determined, Maya turns the horse towards the bora ground. As she rides away, the stars are brilliant and luminous above her head, in the great bowl of the night sky.

INT. JACK'S BEDROOM KALKADOON PRE-DAWN.

Jack and Beth lie peacefully asleep. A sharp WHINNY from the remaining horse wakes Jack. He opens his eyes. He carefully frees himself from the embrace. Beth half wakes.

BETH (SLEEPILY)

What?

JACK (WHISPERING)

Just getting some water.

Beth falls immediately back to sleep. Jack struggles into his pants. As he leaves the room he looks back at Beth, he can't believe this has happened.

INT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD PRE-DAWN

Jack walks down the hallway. He stops at Maya's bedroom, he sees the empty bed. He checks some other rooms then steps outside.

EXT. KALKADOON CORRAL. PRE-DAWN.

Jack makes his way to the corral. It is no longer night, there is the stillness of pre-dawn, even though the sky looks threatening. The remaining horse is nervously pacing the fence and whinnying. Jack puts two and two together. Maya is no where to be seen. He approaches the horse. It's a huge struggle for Jack. He manages to get a rope on the nervous horse. His first attempt to get on fails, he falls painfully to the ground. Both he and the horse are nervous. Jack is a master horseman and he knows he must calm himself and the animal. He uses some gentle techniques he knows and he gets the horse to follow and trust him. He then gently and carefully gets on in the same method that Maya did.

When Jack is on the horse's bare back he is immediately at home, still stiff, but at least the animal is moving for him now, not his own failing limbs.

JACK

Go find your mate.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

He loosens the rope and urges the horse to follow after his mate. They cantor out of the yard.

EXT. BORA GROUND PRE DAWN

The pre-dawn light makes the huge bowl of earth with it's chorus of ghost gums a surreal image. We see the dapple horse pacing riderless along the edge of the bowl. Making our way to the centre of the empty lake bed we see Maya lying in her T-shirt, flat on her back with her arms splayed out like Jesus on the cross. She is forcing her eyes shut, as if she is waiting for a bolt of lightening or some similar means of violent death. She opens her eyes then shuts them again, waiting.

INT. JACK'S BEDROOM. KALKADOON. DAWN

The rattling of loose tin sheets wakes Beth as she look out the window at a gray, dusty square of sky. She sits up and sees the dawn has just broken and a high wind has come up, blowing dust and loose debris across the yard.

She gets her bearings but is confused by Jacks absence. She goes out to the hallway.

INT. BETH'S BEDROOM. KALKADOON. DAWN

She makes her way to Maya's bed, which is empty. She feels the bed. It is obviously cold. Trying not to panic, Beth searches through the creaking house. The faces of the ancestors stare down at her from the walls in stern disapproval.

EXT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD. DAWN

Ruth and Beth are out in the yard, calling Maya's and Jack's names. They meet by the truck. As Ruth speaks she opens the truck door for Beth, gets her in, points out the compass.

RUTH

You take the truck and head back the way we came. Now that's due East, so you just drive directly into the sun. If you can't see through the dust the truck has a compass. I'll radio back to the station for help. I'll be following behind in case you get stuck.

Beth screeches out of the yard, a plume of dust covers Ruth.

INT. KALKADOON HOMESTEAD. DAWN

Ruth radios back to Diane.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

RUTH

Dianne, we've got Maya and Jack missing.
Can you get Murray and Tom to drive to
the old Bora ground, meet me there?

DIANNE (OFF SCREEN)

Oh goodness. Murray and Tom have gone
out to the number 3 line to fix a sail.
There's no truck for me to take.

We see Ruth problem solving.

RUTH

Take the lawnmower Dianne.

DIANNE

The lawnmower?

RUTH

Yes Dianne. Now do as I say, go
immediately.

DIANNE

Yes ma'am.

As Ruth runs out the door she sees the box of documents and
old pictures blocking the door. She grabs the box and runs
out the door.

EXT. KALKADOON STATION MORNING

Ruth power walks with the box documents to the Landcruiser.
As she nears the truck, she is suddenly hit by a gust of
wind. She stumbles and the photographs and papers – the
titles and deeds and the history of their tenancy – are
whipped away from her and sent sailing into the sky.
Unaffected, she throws the box down on the ground, jumps in
to the cab, makes sure her dog has jumped in the back and
takes off after Beth.

EXT. TARA STATION WINDMILL. MORNING

Tom and Murray are on top of the big windmill about four k's
from the house. They wrestle with a rope as they fight the
strengthening wind. They fasten the rope to the platform
they are standing on, curbing the movement of the huge metal
sails that tower over their heads. Cattle bawl below them,
patiently waiting for water at the bore. Tom bends over the
mechanism that allows the sails to turn. From this height,
they can see for quite a distance. Murray's attention is
drawn to a movement on the shimmering plain below.

TOM

Hey, where's the wrench?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MURRAY

Sorry.

TOM

What's got into you?

MURRAY

I told you, I hate heights.

TOM

Then don't look down. Here give a hand to loosen this.

Murray is looking out across the landscape below.

MURRAY

Do you see that?

TOM

Where?

Murray points to the moving shadow. He shades his eyes and squints into the sky.

MURRAY

Off to the left there, over by that patch of scrub.

Tom squints and makes out a small four legged moving shape, weaving towards them.

TOM

It must be Jessie. Got tired of waiting for them and come back on his own

MURRAY

I reckon it's a dingo.

Tom bends back over the job.

TOM

Don't be daft.

MURRAY

I swear it's a dingo. It's too long in the leg for a dog.

The older man straightens up again and shields his eyes.

TOM

It's a bloody dog.

MURRAY

Suit yourself.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

All of a sudden a gust catches the sail and it strains against the restraint of the rope. Murray looks back over his shoulder just in time to see the rope break and the sail start to swing towards them.

MURRAY (CONT'D)

Look out!

He throws himself down, but the old man doesn't stand a chance. The blade hits him in the back of the head and he reels back as it swings wildly over them. Tom falls to the ground below.

MURRAY (CONT'D)

Oh, my God, Jesus sweet Jesus.

INT. TRUCK MORNING

Beth is distraught as she drives the car.

BETH

(to herself, like a mantra)

Oh please dear God, take care of my little girl, please.

EXT. BORA GROUND MORNING.

Maya is still lying flat on the ground, but she is getting a little bored with this waiting to die stuff. She turns her head and sees the Dingo. From this angle he doesn't look very friendly. He was the one that drew her here anyway. So this is the way she is supposed to die. Ok then. She watches it approach her, she shuts her eyes in fear and anticipation.

EXT. TARA STATION WINDMILL. MORNING

Murray cradles Tom's head in his lap. The windmill spins wildly above them, sending striped shadows across their faces. Tom opens his eyes. He is alive.

TOM

It was a bloody dog.

Dianne pulls up on the lawnmower. She awkwardly crawls off the mower. She runs to Murray and Tom. She stares dumbfounded at Tom.

MURRAY

What are you doing here Dianne.

DIANNE

Jack and the little girl have gone missing.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DIANNE (CONT'D)

Ruth wants you and Tom to drive out to the Bora ground, help look for them.

MURRAY

Bora ground? What the hell are they doing...

Tom groans, distracting Murray.

TOM

(whispering)

Take me there.

Murray and Dianne help him get up.

EXT. BORA GROUND MORNING.

Jack arrives at the Bora ground. He is sweaty and feverish, swaying a bit. His horse gives a whinny and the dapple horse whinnies back. Jack sees the dapple and moves his horse toward it. He doesn't get far before he slides off his horse and falls to the ground in pain and weakness. He closes his eyes.

Jack struggles to stand. He looks out at the bowl of earth beneath the ghost gums. He stares in absolute bewilderment. The empty bowl is full of water. Jack heads toward the water. As he nears, he sees something floating in the centre of the lake. It looks like Maya, possibly floating face down, her T-shirt billowing out around her.

Jack tries to run, he stumbles, falls. He gets up immediately, he tries to run again, it gets easier. Jack is forgetting about his illness, he moves faster, he almost runs. He hits the water, dives/flops in. He swims out toward Maya. As he swims he gains strength.

He takes one last stroke and reaches the T-shirt, and that is all it is -- Maya's T-shirt. He treads water and holds up the shirt. He dives under the water.

INT. BORA GROUND LAKE

Jack swims underwater. He has a similar experience as Maya did in the ocean off Bronte. He sees Allan, they touch hands and Allan swims off. He sees some aboriginal children, a boy and girl (Cathy and Boyd). And then he sees Maya, she is swimming with Cathy and Boyd. They are naked and they look like spirits under the water. Jack panics, Maya must be dead.

Jack stays suspended motionless in the water -- he passes out. Maya swims up to him, holds him. The other children swim up to him, they push him up to the surface.

EXT. BORA GROUND MORNING.

Maya's eyes are tightly shut as she waits for the jaws of the dingo. But instead, she hears a little girl GIGGLE. She feels a shadow cover her. She tentatively opens her eyes. She sees RICHARD an Aboriginal elder looking down at her. He is an imposing figure, scarier than the dingo in Maya's eyes. She stares at him, paralyzed. It takes all her strength to speak.

MAYA

I'm ready to die, somebody has to pay and that's me.

RICHARD

You don't say.

Cathy and Boyd crack up laughing. They come out from behind Richard along with a Dingo puppy. Maya sits up, bewildered.

INT. TRUCK - MORNING

Beth is at wits end, she strains her eyes. Away from the peaceful waterhole, the wind still howls and dust blows. Suddenly Beth sees something, she can make out the two horses, riderless, up ahead. They trot in circles around each other, a kind of game. She takes off in their direction which is just on the outskirts of the bora ground.

EXT. BORA GROUND MORNING.

Jack wakes from where he fell off his horse and finds himself cradled in Maya's arms. Cathy and Boyd sit staring at him. And Richard leans over him.

RICHARD

You're looking better mate.

Jack looks up to see Maya smiling down at him, she is completely dry. He props himself up as best he can. He looks out to the lake bed - there is no water. It is as dry and mysterious looking as it always was.

JACK

The water?

RICHARD

It will come.

Richard looks closely at Jack. And Jack looks at him.

There is a hint of recognition.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JACK

I know you. I was a little boy.

RICHARD

We ate honey ants.

Jack reaches his clawed hand up to Richard, their hands clasp.

Maya cradles Jack, she tilts her head and slowly closes her eyes.

EXT. BORA GROUND MORNING.

Beth screeches up in the truck. She comes to a halt in a plume of dust. She sees this odd group of people at the edge of the empty waterhole. Jack lays peacefully in her daughter's arms, and two children and an older man sit in a crooked circle around them. She starts to run toward them, then slows down, feeling the peaceful nature of the group.

As she reaches the group, she looks at Jack. Is he dead? He lies so quietly? Beth comes up behind Maya, sits down.

Maya opens her eyes, she takes Jack's hand and as she holds it his fingers relax. They become supple again. Slowly he flexes his fingers. His eyes open, he looks up at Maya and past her to Beth. He reaches his hand up to Beth. She grasps it, tears welling in her eyes.

Two plumes of dust announce the arrival of Ruth and Murray and Tom. The group look up as they see Ruth and Murray supporting a very injured Tom toward them.

Jack lifts himself up. Ruth and Murray can't carry Tom anymore, they set him down. Tom seems to see no one but his son.

Jack rises and walks toward his dad, he walks slowly, but we see he is healed. He stands over his father. Tom looks up at him. He reaches his hand slowly up toward his son. Jack sits down beside him, takes his father's hand in his. Tom seems to be losing consciousness. Jack holds his father. Tom tries to speak, Jack has to lean closer to hear him. Tom manages to say a few words to his son.

Tom DIES in Jack's arms. Ruth, Beth, Murray and Richard gather in silence and respect.

BOB MARLEY (REDEMPTION SONG)

Old pirates, yes, they rob I; Sold I to
the merchant ships, minutes after they
took I from the bottomless pit...

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

The group HEAR the children LAUGHING. They look toward the centre of the empty waterhole.

JOHNNY CASH AND JOE STRUMMER (REDEMPTION
SONG)

... But my hand was made strong by the
hand of the almighty. We forward in this
generation Triumphantly.

Maya, Boyd and Cathy and the Dingo puppy are looking down at the earth in the centre of the waterhole. Water is rising up from the dried and cracked earth. The children laugh and splash in this fountain of life.

RITA MARLEY (REDEMPTION SONG)

Won't you help to sing these songs of
freedom? 'Cause all I ever have
Redemption songs. Redemption songs.
Emancipate yourself from mental slavery.
None but ourselves can free our minds...

The adults smile in wonderment.

The big Dingo watches with his little smile from the shade of a Ghost Gum.

FADE OUT.

THE END

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