

EXTRACT

THE HOPE

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THE HOPE

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CHARACTERS

BET, mid-twenties
MICHAEL, mid-twenties
MRS G., fifties
BOSS, mid-forties
CHARLIE, early thirties
GAVIN, forties

SETTING

An old, small Western Australian mining town on the verge of another boom.

PROLOGUE

There are some pepper trees in a far corner and the representation of a one-room shack in galvanised iron sheets in the opposite. Inside the shack there is a door leading to the bathroom and the kitchen. The furniture—a double bed, an armchair, table and chairs—is old and unmatched. The shack is littered with dirty plates and cups, empty stubbies, newspapers and clothing. A metal sculpture of a woman, in the Giacometti style, is near the back door.

The sun is setting and MICHAEL, wearing singlet and shorts, lies asleep on the bed while MRS G. stands next to the pepper trees. A train hooter can be heard in the distance. The hooter sounds again, louder now. MICHAEL wakes with a start. He jumps up, looks around the shack as though he would try to clean it up, then decides to make the bed.

MRS G.: That's the train in, Mikey!
You'll be late if you don't go now.

[He is about to run out of the door when he looks at his clothes. They are filthy. He quickly changes his shirt.]

Mikey, did you hear me? Train's in.

[MICHAEL runs out the door and exits.]

[To herself] It were a scorcher today, alright. Not even a whisper in the pepper trees. Not even a whisper.
[Blackout.]

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The shack, a few hours later. BET is in bed with a sheet pulled over her. MICHAEL, wearing only a pair of shorts, sits at the table with a can of beer. Sexy red underwear lies discarded on the floor. Two travelling cases stand under the pepper trees.

MICHAEL: Want a beer?

BET: I feel like another shower.

MICHAEL: You'll get used to it.

[BET wraps the sheet around herself and gets out of bed. She looks at the mess in the room.]

BET: You weren't leaving this for me?

MICHAEL: No!

BET: Just wondered.

[BET picks up the red underwear and puts it on the bed. She examines the room and stands in front of the statue.]

Where did this come from?

MICHAEL: Part of the furniture.

BET: It's beautiful.

MICHAEL: You think so?

[BET looks in the kitchen, then sits in the armchair. She gets up quickly.]

Broken spring.

BET: *[collecting the empty stubbies and cans]* It'll look nice when it's cleaned up.

[She loads MICHAEL up with the empties.]

MICHAEL: The train was on time. The train is never on time.

BET: So you said.

MICHAEL: I didn't want to be late.

[Pause.]

BET: I was worried when you didn't come.

MICHAEL: Why?

BET: Maybe I'd have to sit there on my cases till the next train.

MICHAEL: You'd be dead before then. We only get two a week.

BET: Oh, I knew you'd turn up . . . sometime.

MICHAEL: Bet, I said I was—

BET: [*interrupting*] This really stunning girl got off the train here. Dressed in tiny white shorts and incredibly high heels. All those yobbos just went mad—yelling and whistling and calling out. But she just kept walking—acting as if they weren't there—and you could see they were getting annoyed. So one of them stepped in front of her, so she had to stop, and said, 'Give us a smile, love.' And she just stared at him as if he was the lowest kind of rat and said, 'I don't do anything for nothing.'

MICHAEL: One of the knockers.

BET: The what?

MICHAEL: The girls.

[*He knocks on the table.*]

Up from Kalgoorlie. They change them every three weeks.

BET: Like library books.

MICHAEL: The blokes get sick of the same ones.

BET: Think of . . . with those animals.

MICHAEL: Fair go!

BET: It's degrading.

MICHAEL: The girls make good money. [*Quickly*] So I'm told.

BET: But to sell yourself like that.

MICHAEL: There's not many women here. What's a bloke supposed to do?

BET: What did you do?

MICHAEL: What do you think?

[*Pause.*]

BET: Get the cases, will you?

[*She goes into the bathroom and turns on the shower. MICHAEL shrugs and goes outside to get the cases.*]

MICHAEL: You can have a good laugh with Shirty and Bill. Once they get to know you. They don't care where you came from, what you've done. Probably knew I was out of an office. They take you as they find you.

[*He picks up the two cases and returns to the shack.*]

What have you got in these? Anvils?

BET: [*from the bathroom*] I'll be out in a minute.

MICHAEL: And I'll be one of them when I get underground. They're good blokes. Especially Boss.

[*He puts the cases on the bed.*]

You'll like Boss.

[*He picks up the copy of Playboy hidden under one of the pillows and flips through it. He becomes engrossed. BET comes out of the bathroom in a dressing gown. He knows that BET is looking at him but he continues reading. BET opens the cases.*]

BET: Didn't bring much.

[*MICHAEL throws away the magazine.*]

MICHAEL: You might get to like it.

[*She takes out a white lace tablecloth and spreads it on the table. She looks closely at the table and runs her finger across it with a puzzled look.*]

BET: That's better.

[*She takes a small box of wine glasses out of the case.*]

Look, from the set Josie gave us.

MICHAEL: Nice.

[*BET takes more things out of the case: a few paperbacks, an art deco vase, sheets and towels obviously new.*]

You might get to like it here.

BET: [*producing a couple of newspapers*] The weekend papers.

[*MICHAEL takes them without interest.*]

I've marked the ones that look interesting.

MICHAEL: What?

BET: The houses.

[*Pause.*]

I will have a beer.

MICHAEL: We could get a house here.

BET: We don't want a house here.

[*MICHAEL gets a beer from the kitchen and hands it to her.*]

In a glass.

[*He finds a glass and pours it for her.*]

To our new house.

MICHAEL: We could get a house here.

BET: A house in the city in one year.

Cheers.

MICHAEL: Cheers.

[*She unpacks some books, including some art books, and stacks them on a shelf.*]

Bet . . . I don't know where Steve was working, but . . .

[*BET goes back to the case.*]

BET: Your mother's sent a Christmas cake.

[*Pause.*]

Michael?

MICHAEL: No wonder the case was heavy.

BET: We can always use it as a door stop.

[*She looks at him.*]

Hey, what's up?

MICHAEL: Nothing.

BET: Sick of me already?

MICHAEL: No. It's just . . .

BET: [*kissing him*] Just what?

MICHAEL: [*brightly*] I can't believe you're here.

BET: Did you miss me?

MICHAEL: What do you think?

BET: In your letters you seemed . . . far away.

MICHAEL: [*turning away*] I was.

[*He gets another beer.*]

BET: On the train it was like I was never going to get here. We just kept crawling along, this long silver tube of people, just crawling through nothing, going nowhere. And then the train would stop, like it was out of breath, and we'd wait there until another train suddenly rushed past. And then we'd crawl on. Like we were looking for a place to die.

[*MICHAEL sits on the bed.*]

MICHAEL: They say the Hope's enough to kill you.

[*He lies down.*]

BET: And we'd go through these little sidings, about ten houses all shut-up, with the iron flapping on the roof and a ball of spinifex at the front fence. And at the door of one of the houses there might be a woman looking out at the train. Not moving. Just watching.

MICHAEL: Plenty of shops here, and trees. And new houses going up.

[*BET unpacks a knife block with two knives. She takes out one of the knives.*]

BET: It's an adventure.

[She goes to the window.]

It's so quiet out there. You can hear the trees breathing.

[She absent-mindedly tests the knife on her finger.]

I can stand anything for a year. Ow.

[She licks her finger.]

Even one of those railway sidings.

[Pause.]

Michael?

[MICHAEL is asleep. Blackout.]

SCENE TWO

The shack. The next morning. MRS G. stands at the pepper trees.

MRS G.: Brian! Brian!

[BET, in her dressing gown, comes out of the kitchen.]

Git out of there! Haven't I told you never to get under the house?

[BET walks to the door.]

Look at the state of your clothes. I'll never get that red out of yer shirt. And you'll be late if you don't get going.

[Pause.]

Will you git going, boy? I'm not tellin' you again.

BET: [going into the bathroom] I bet you do.

MRS G.: Will you get going?

[BET starts to sing and hum 'Oh for the wings of a dove' over the sound of the shower.]

I'll swing fer you, so help me.

[Pause. She turns to the shack.]

Yoohoo.

[She approaches.]

Yoohoo. Anyone there?

[She comes inside, listens at the bathroom door for a moment, then examines the room. She goes to the bed, smells the sheets, picks up the red underwear and holds it against her, dancing around as BET sings. She examines the knives on the table, then rummages in the suitcase. She has a pair of white lace knickers in her hand when BET comes out of the bathroom.]

BET: [singing] ' . . . forever at rest.'

MRS G.: Good strong gusset. Hard to get underwear with double-stitched gussets these days. I'm from next door.

[She holds out the hand clutching the knickers, then quickly throws them back into the suitcase.]

Mrs G. Pleased to meet you, I'm sure.

BET: Mrs G.?

MRS G.: Well, George's name was Grainger.

BET: Oh?

MRS G.: George Grainger. I always thought it sounded distinguished—George Grainger. But you could say a lot about Horse but one thing you couldn't say was that he was distinguished. And I was always down on the lists at the C.W.A. as Mrs G.G. And so they called me Mrs G. A bit silly, but better than Horse. Not that George didn't look a bit like a horse. Sort of slow and patient-looking as if he were dragging a milkcart behind him. It weren't no milkcart he was dragging, it was me and the kids.

BET: But what's your real name.

MRS G.: Eugenia. That made you stop and think.

BET: It's a . . . lovely name.

MRS G.: My father picked it up in France during the War, the Great War. They reckon he picked up a few other things there too. Dad always said there was no country like France for turning out beautiful women. Used to make Mum real mad when he said that. Then he'd say Perth women weren't bad too, and that would really get her going on account as she was third-generation Goldfields herself. And then he went and called me Eugenia. There was Wally and Glad and Merv and then Eugenia. You could understand Mum being mad. Kettle's boiling.

[MRS G. goes into the kitchen briefly.]

Mind, she got him back. Had six more kids just to spite him and their names as common as dirt. And me, plain as a sponge cake, dragging round a name like Eugenia.

[She laughs without bitterness.]

But what do they call you when you're at home?

BET: Elizabeth. Elizabeth Wint—er . . . Sargent.

MRS G.: Trips you up the first few times, don't it?

BET: Does it?

MRS G.: You being married only two days and two . . . nights.

BET: How did you—

MRS G.: [interrupting] He's a lovely young fellow. A real gentleman. I had him over for dinner once or twice. A proper baked dinner. You know what men are like for letting themselves go when they're batching.

BET: Michael's a very good cook.

MRS G.: Not much cooking to do in two days.

[She nudges BET.]

But perhaps you two had been . . . living together?

BET: We weren't ready.

MRS G.: I dare say it doesn't hurt to give them a trial run, but once a man's got what he wants . . .

BET: [coldly] And Michael is very house-proud.

MRS G.: [looking around] Looks like three months at the Hope have wreaked a transformation in the lad. Now why don't I just help you clear the decks.

BET: Oh no, I—

MRS G.: [interrupting] My Brian's off to school—you probably heard me yelling at the bugger—and I'm free till dinner time.

BET: No really I don't—

MRS G.: [interrupting] You couldn't spend your first day in the Hope slaving away in the house. We can get everything shipshape in two shakes of a dirty duster and then you can have a lie down. It'll be as hot as Hades in a few hours.

BET: It's hot now.

MRS G.: [going into the kitchen] The heat can hit you hard if yer not used to it.

[She starts clattering dishes.]

Last woman here wasn't used to it. Never got used to it.

[Pause.]

Never left here on her own two feet, neither.

BET: [horrified] Dead?

MRS G.: [appearing at the doorway] No, but it would've been the best thing for her. Put her out of her misery. Now you just sit down, Elizabeth. Or would it be Lizzie?

BET: No! You can call me Bet.

[*BET takes some clothes from the suitcases into the bathroom.*]

MRS G.: Right you are, Betty. And when I've got rid of this lot I'll make us a nice cup of tea.

BET: But I can't . . .

MRS G.: Course you can. It's not often we have a bride in the Hope.

BET: We've been married three months.

MRS G.: But only shared a bed for two nights. I don't count you were having a try out. No, a bride's a bride.

[*She nods at the clothes BET is holding.*]

I reckon you ain't had time to get the crease out of your white what-nots. Better not hang them on the line, neither. There's not much snow in the Hope but there's a fair lot of snowdropping.

[*MRS G. dusts the books with a teatowel.*]

BET: What?

MRS G.: Knicker-nicking. Pantie-pinchiug. Some bugger even took my bloomers. Reckon he'll be using them to bag spuds.

[*BET tries to hide the red underwear.*]

You looked a real treat in that last night.

BET: You saw . . . [*me?*]

MRS G.: You can see everything through that door. Not that I'm looking but sometimes you can't help seeing. Now the last couple who lived here, they was better than the TV. Talk about a soap opera—

BET: [*interrupting*] I don't watch TV.

MRS G.: —Every night he'd be staggering about, yelling this and threateuing that. And she wouldn't say nothing, just sort of smile to herself and put the dinner on the

table. But then she didn't smile no more. And one night I hear her begging him to leave, saying the Hope was destroying him, destroying her. How the place was a monster devouring them bit by bit. Reckon she must've got that out of one of them books she was always reading. And she was crying—first time I ever saw her cry—and saying she was sorry but she couldn't stay in this prison any more. And then he was crying too. Choked me up to see them, it did.

BET: You shouldn't be telling me this.

MRS G.: No, love. And he was down on his knees saying he couldn't live without her and I had to git up on the table to see. And then he carried her over to the bed and I didn't feel it was right to watch no more. And anyway they put out the light. And two days later she's carried out on a stretcher.

[*BET sinks onto the bed.*]

Here, I'll give you a hand with that.

BET: [*quickly pulling up the top sheet*] No, thanks.

[*MRS G. tests the mattress.*]

MRS G.: I always reckon a hard mattress is the best. Never know when you're going to need an extra bit of purchase. Now, my George used to suffer terrible from his back.

Terrible. Bein' down the mines didn't help neither. Killed him in the end.

BET: I'm sorry.

MRS G.: [*stripping the bed*] They always say the Goldfields'll get you some way. If not the mines, then the booze. Take my George, for example. Come up here from Pemberton way just for a few years, to get a stake for a farm. He wanted to work outside,

just loved being out under the sky. Now a Goldfields fellow, he wants to escape from the sun, but it's different where George come from. It's cool and green and the wind's so fresh you can open your lungs to it, at least that's what George said, but the only time we went to visit his folks it rained every day and if you'd opened your mouth outside you would have drowned.

BET: I like rain.

MRS G.: [*tucking in the bottom sheet*]

Top first for the bottom. And bottom for the top. And cream's a better colour for the stains.

[*BET pulls the top sheet up quickly, almost pushing MRS G. away from the bed. MRS G. immediately picks up the broom and starts to sweep the floor.*]

George reckoned the sky down there tasted better than champagne. After twenty years up here, all he could taste was dust. No matter what I give him for his dinner he said it was like eating dust. And when he was getting thin and coughing all the time, he told me about this friend of his, a butcher from down his way who started smelling meat—rotting meat—all the time, even when he weren't working.

[*BET tries to take the broom from MRS G.*]

BET: Let me do that.

MRS G.: Folks used to laugh at him, said he was imagining things. But then he started getting headaches, real bad ones, and they stuck him in the hospital, and the doctors put a little hole in his skull, just to have a look, like, and all them doctors and nurses nearly gagged from the smell. You see his brains were rotting. His skull was just crammed with rotting

meat and he was smelling himself dying.

[*Pause.*]

And that's what George said about himself. All he could taste and smell was his own flesh turned to dust. And sure enough, in a few months he was dead.

[*Pause.*]

Didn't have the heart to cremate him. And would you believe, the day they buried him, such a dust storm hit the Hope that you couldn't see nothing. It looked like the whole world was on fire. I reckon George was having a joke on us, having the last word, so to speak.

[*Pause.*]

What about that cuppa?

[*She goes into the kitchen.*]

BET: And you stayed on?

MRS G.: Where would I go? The Hope's not a bad sort of place—when you get used to it. [*Appearing*] Mind, when they carried *her* out of here, I thought a bit.

BET: Don't you ever get away?

MRS G.: Twice a year. Esperance every Christmas and Kal for the shopping. Brian's a bugger for shoes. And I go to Perth for me plumbing. The doctors in Kal are pretty good, but for a big job you'll have to go to Perth.

BET: I never get sick.

MRS G.: But when you start your family.

BET: We're saving for a house.

MRS G.: Kids have a habit of just arriving.

BET: Not these days.

MRS G.: You taking that pill?

BET: Yes.

MRS G.: [*pointing to the statue*] She was taking that. Her.

BET: Oh.

MRS G.: If she'd had a couple of nippers to look after, she wouldn't have been whingeing about nothing to do. She'd have been glad to rest in her bed at night.

BET: You can't have children just for something to do.

MRS G.: Why else would you have em? That and you ain't got any choice over the matter. And what would I do at the Hope without a tubful of washing and a few kids to yell at?

[*She goes into the kitchen to make the tea.*]

This were her kettle.

BET: Hers?

MRS G.: Everything was left behind after they took her away and Freddy upped and went.

[*She appears, holding the teapot which she puts on the table.*]

Couldn't stand the shock, they reckoned. I kept waiting for someone to send for their things but nothing came, so I packed up her clothes and personal things and sent them to the hospital—the one in Perth for the mental cases. I always wondered if she'd had another go.

[*She puts some cups, saucers and plates on the table.*]

BET: You mean all these things—the plates and cups and furniture—belonged to her?

MRS G.: A few people in the Hope did reckon that, seeing they wasn't coming back . . .

[*She gets the milk and sugar.*]

Well, they reckoned that it wouldn't be doing any harm to do a swap.

BET: A swap?

MRS G.: [*pouring the tea*] These are Winny Dodd's. I reckonise the pattern. Never liked stripes on a plate meself. The set she took has a real pretty floral band in green and yellow. And bone china too. And this table come from Barb Long. She's been having crowds to dinner at her place ever since she got the jarrah with the drop sides. Maisie reckons it was unfair Barb taking the chairs too, but they was a matched set. Maisie had to be satisfied with the armchairs.

[*MRS G. takes three spoonfuls of sugar.*]

Sugar?

[*BET looks around in horror.*]

That one of Maisie's'd almost kill you. But nobody wanted the kettle.

[*She slurps her tea.*]

Nor the mattress neither.

BET: The mattress!

MRS G.: On account of the blood from her wrists.

[*BET jumps up, spilling her tea, runs to the bed and rips off the sheets.*]

Oh, it's not that one. Couldn't have a bride sleeping on a bed where someone tried to do away with themself. Now look at you, you're all of a-shake. Marriage can play havoc with a girl's hormones. [*Pushing BET towards the table*] Now, you sit down and pour yourself another cup of tea while I throw this together.

[*BET sits down and pours the tea.*]

That teapot pours bad, too. It's never been right since Brian threw it at the cat. It's funny, you know. When she first moved in here I was over all the time, helping out and making sure

she wasn't lonely. But then it got so that she wouldn't open the door to me. I'd be knocking away and she'd call out she was fine. Later on she wouldn't say nothing at all. And then they carried her out. Like a mad woman she looked with the blood dripping from her wrists. I felt real sorry for her hubby.

BET: You didn't like her.

MRS G.: She was . . . different.

BET: Hadn't been here thirty years.

MRS G.: Couldn't take things as she found them. Always wanting to pretty things up.

BET: What's wrong with that?

MRS G.: Nothing. [*Examining the vase*] No flowers here.

BET: [*firmly*] Then I'll grow some.

[*Pause.*]

Your tea?

MRS G.: Thanks, love.

[*She drinks her tea noisily.*]

Very nice cloth. It'll hide those scratches real well. Barb used to get wild with her dad cutting up roos on the table. Turning the place into a slaughter yard he was, with every dog in town hanging around the door.

[*Pause.*]

She liked lace too. [*Slowly*] They say Freddy used three cloths to stop the bleeding.

[*BET chokes on her tea. MRS G. drains her cup and rises to go.*]

Well, I best be off. Just wanted to see that you were settled in comfortable. It wouldn't be neighbourly not to come over; and remember, you just give me a hoy if you want anything.

[*She stops in front of the statue.*]

Nobody would have this. Maisie reckoned it was art. Well if that's art, who needs it?

[*Blackout.*]

SCENE THREE

The same day at dusk. The shack is in darkness. MRS G. stands by the pepper trees.

MRS G.: Betty!

[*Pause.*]

Betty!

[*She exits and soon after MICHAEL appears.*]

MICHAEL: Bet!

[*He switches on the light. BET, in her sarong, stands in front of the statue.*]

What are you doing?

BET: [*tersely*] Nothing.

MICHAEL: [*stripping off his shirt*] Sure was hot today. Forty-five in the shade. So Boss said.

[*Silence.*]

No joke digging trenches, I can tell you.

[*Silence.*]

[*Brightly*] Mrs G. come over today?

BET: [*emphatically*] Yes.

MICHAEL: She's a bit like that.

BET: She's overpowering.

MICHAEL: Just being friendly.

BET: She's dangerous.

MICHAEL: Mrs G.?

BET: Yes.

[*Pause.*]

She told me about the woman.

MICHAEL: What woman?

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