

on corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter One

Prime Suspect

By Pat Lowe

I'd do anything for my Auntie Gracie — anything she asked me. She's like a second mother to me. In some ways I feel closer to her than to my mother, although, because my mother is my mother, I try to put her first. But in my heart, I'm closer to Auntie Gracie. Right from when I was a baby I was more attached to Auntie Gracie than to anyone else in the family. She even smelt better than anyone else — I'd rather be held by her than by my poor old mum, who stank of cigarette smoke. Auntie Gracie didn't drink or smoke, and she smelt of warm water and bubbles. I loved sinking into her big, soft breasts, like pillows, when she cuddled me. I've never lost my feelings for Auntie Gracie, even though I'm older now.

One day, a few months ago, we were walking together in Chinatown. We'd been to do the shopping and were carrying the bags back to the bus stop — we didn't have a car then. Auntie Gracie liked to do what she called 'window shopping', which means looking at things but not buying them. When you do window shopping you can look at all the things you can't afford and imagine owning them. I don't see the point of it myself, but I enjoyed doing it with Auntie Gracie, who talked about what she would do with things she admired and made a big joke of some things she didn't like the look of, such as dowdy dresses on models. She called them 'daggy' and we'd have a good laugh. On this day, we were walking past all the pearl shops, and Auntie Gracie stopped in front of one of the windows and just stood there, not saying anything. She was looking at a pearl pendant, set in gold. It was a big pearl on a gold chain around a model's neck — well, the model only had a neck and a bit of chest — it

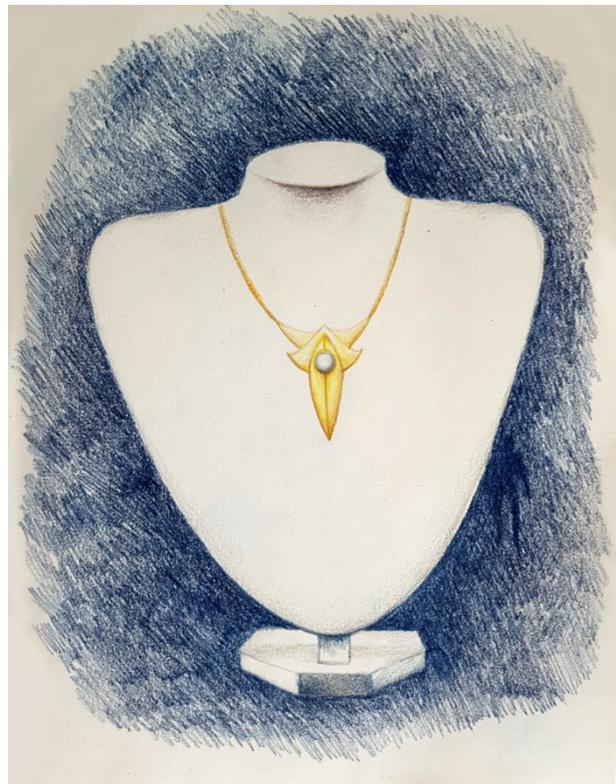


Illustration by Bernadette Trench-Thiedeman

had no head or shoulders or any other part of the body, it was just a display stand in the shape of a woman's neck and chest front. And there was this pendant, hanging from a chain around the display stand's neck. That was the only piece of jewellery in the window, and it looked special.

Auntie stood looking at it for a long time. It had a price tag on it, which I couldn't read because it was turned upside down on the glass. I bent down and turned my head up sideways to see if I could read the price tag from underneath, but I wasn't close enough.

'Look at that!' said Auntie Gracie at last. 'What a beauty. I wish someone would steal that little treasure for me.'

I didn't think that Auntie Gracie was serious about wanting someone to steal the pendant for her, but that comment set me thinking. I started to imagine getting the pendant for my Auntie Gracie. I imagined the look on her face when she opened the box and saw the pendant, and her wonderment about how I got it for her.

I worked up my courage to go into the shop one afternoon and ask how much the pendant cost. I was thinking, if I saved all the pocket money that people sometimes gave me, maybe I could buy it for my favourite Auntie. The woman in the shop, with her blonde hair tied back, wearing lots of makeup around her eyes and bright red lipstick, in high-heeled shoes and a tight skirt that I didn't think she could sit down in, and a string of pearls, gave me a look that told me she thought I was a nothing person, and said, all hoity-toity, 'A bit too expensive for you, I think, Sonny.' But she did look at the price tag. 'It would cost you four thousand, five hundred dollars,' she told me, with a superior smile.

I tried not to show how shocked I was — there was no way I would ever be able to raise that sort of money, even if I tried to earn it by washing cars, as I'd seen some kids doing outside their houses. I just said, 'Thank you, I'll be back,' and walked out.

So then, since there was no other way I could get it, I did start thinking about stealing the pendant. I didn't plan to steal it, I just thought about it — a fantasy, sort of thing. Every time I walked past that shop — and I did so quite often, to make sure the pendant was still there — I cased the joint. That's what I said to myself, 'I'm going to case the joint,' like in movies. I couldn't just run into the shop and snatch it off the model; everyone would see me and I wouldn't get as far as the door. The only way would be to get into the shop when it was closed. I didn't want to smash the window — it would make too much noise and there was sure to be an alarm — so I had a good look around the side of the shop, to see if there was any weak point — a loose shutter, or a window I could force open. Nothing.

I went into the shop another time, pretending to take an interest in different pieces of jewellery. While I was there, I had a look around to see if there was somewhere I might be able to hide. I was thinking of perhaps slipping into a cupboard just before the shop closed, and staying there till everyone had gone, then coming out, grabbing the pendant, and getting out through a window. It was a sort of game I played in my mind — I knew I'd never do it. There were a couple of doors in the shop, but I didn't dare open them, with that woman watching me.

One day after school, I was hanging out in town with my two best mates, Pete and Jane, and I got them to walk past the pearl shop with me. I wanted to see if the pendant was still there. It was. 'I'm going to steal that, one day,' I said to them. Stupid.

Pete just scoffed. 'You never will,' he said. 'What would you want it for, anyway?'

‘I’ll give it to my Auntie Gracie,’ I told him.

‘That’s silly,’ said Jane. ‘Even if you got it, your auntie could never wear it, because someone would see it and know it was stolen.’

Although I still argued with her and Pete, I knew that was true, and before long I started to lose interest in my fantasy.

And then, only a few weeks later, the pendant went missing. It was in the news, and everyone was talking about it. I went to look, and saw that the big window in front of the shop had been smashed with a brick. The shop owner offered a reward for information — and one of my so-called best friends must have told their parents what I’d said, and next thing, the cops are at my house, wanting to question me. I was scared and denied it all at first, but in the end I did admit that I’d told my friends I was going to steal the pendant. I said it was a joke. I didn’t tell the cops about Auntie Gracie, though, or my fantasy, because I thought that would only make things worse.

The blonde woman in the pearl shop told the cops I’d been asking about the pendant, and said she’d seen me lots of times hanging around, looking in the window, so that looked bad for me as well. And that’s how I became Prime Suspect.

Pat Lowe

Pat Lowe is a writer and psychologist who grew up in England. She taught at secondary schools in France and East Africa and has spent more than half her life in Western Australia. She met Jimmy Pike when she was working as a psychologist at Broome Prison, and later joined him at his desert camp, where the pair stayed for three years, before moving to Broome. Pat has written a dozen books, several of them in collaboration with Jimmy.



Image: Julia Rau

Bernadette Trench-Thiedeman

Bernadette is an artist, animator, theatre-maker and writer. Her work has been exhibited at the Art Galleries of WA and SA, PICA, Flux Gallery, Platform Gallery (Vic), and C3 Contemporary (Vic). Her animations and films have been shown on ABC, ABC Asia, NITV, SBS and ICTV. Her show 'Phantasmagoria' will premiere in Melbourne in September 2021 at Theatre Works. She has worked with Theatre Kimberley, co-directing, writing, performing, designing and building puppets for The Shorebird Quest. She is lead artist for the Big Country Puppets, and has worked as a performer/puppet maker for Big Mama Production's 'Ngalyak and the Flood'. She has toured internationally with the Snuff Puppets, Lyric Opera, Black Hole Theatre and worked at Arts Project Australia, Arts Access Victoria and Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre.



Image: Millie Cooper