

corrugated lines

Theft of a Pearl: A serial novella

Chapter Five

31 Hours

By Therese Phillips

On any ordinary occasion, I loved the drive to Derby. But not today. Leaving the Indian Ocean behind, the road to Derby is like a highway to another world. Thoughts of Broome and the real world evaporated like early-morning mist as we headed west...it was just like being transported into the wide-open space of an ancient land. Usually, I daydreamed of the dinosaurs that would have roamed around here, but not today; today all I can see is Kimberley stone, flowering boab trees and spindly brush, all sitting on a blanket of red pindan soil.

Super-wide verges, slashed in the dry, become fields of tall grass in the wet, and the perfect place for cattle to hide as they wander about the million acres of unfenced savannah grasslands.

“Zac, will you slow down! There’s a big mob just up ahead...and I’d like to arrive in one piece,” cried Jane.

“Thanks for sharing, Jane, but I’ve got eyes in my head, and what I can see is that they all have their heads down, looking at grass.”

“Will you two just stop!” I yelled. “We still have a long drive to Derby town and I need to think of a plan.”

Pete, ever the voice of reason, suggested he write down the facts and look for clues. He dragged out his notebook and pen from his school bag and asked me to tell him everything I knew.

“Good idea, Pete – you daggy, bookworm types come in handy...let’s make a list,” I said. I felt the



Image by Teresa Thornell

first surge of relief for a while – firstly, I was plain happy that my mates hadn't done a Judas number on me and, secondly, I realised I wasn't in this alone.

“Everybody ready,” Pete called out from the front seat. “What do you know?” and so it started.

In between Jane and Zac arguing about speeding and hitting road-wandering Brahmins, stopping three times to pee or ‘pop a squat’, as Pete indelicately called it when Jane crouched down behind the car, and pointing out our favourite boabs, by the time we idled over the Willare Bridge, craning our heads out the windows to spot the crocs, we had developed an exhaustive list of everything we thought we knew.

Nick's List of Clues in the Pearl Theft

1. Auntie Gracie is a known window-shopper and desires things she cannot afford;
2. The blonde shop lady is hoity toity and is known to brag loudly in public;
3. The blonde shop lady knows I want to buy the Pearl but could never afford it;
4. Pearl is stolen by smashing shop window – no evidence or witnesses;
5. I know I didn't steal the Pearl;
6. Blonde shop lady tells cops I've been hanging around casing the shop for weeks;
7. Police humbug me to death about Pearl theft but have no evidence to pin it on me;
8. Auntie Gracie is MIA;
9. Auntie Gracie goes to cops to get them off my back;
10. Auntie Gracie buys van in Derby from German travellers keen to leave town quickly;
11. Cops get tipped off by someone unknown about Auntie Gracie;
12. Auntie Gracie is arrested in Derby when Police find a shop-dummy shaped like a woman's neck and a bit of chest in her van;
13. The blonde shop lady is seen at Auntie Gracie's house loading a car.

“I’m starving,” said Zac, as he pulled into the roadhouse driveway. I sat in the back seat, examining my list and trying to focus on what my gut had to say...perhaps food would help...in fact, my favourite Derby road-trip snack was a freshly baked sausage roll with a chocolate milk to wash it down. I liked having money to buy what I wanted to eat; Mum never bought me a feed at Willare. In a moment of rash generosity, I called out, “It’s my shout!”

We sat out back in the roadhouse courtyard, eating our crumbly food. Fresh sausage rolls were very messy. Watching the dragonflies hover around the top of the water, we talked about jumping in the pool before we left, but Zac didn’t want the car full of us wet kids, and no one had a towel.

Rainytime heat had driven the tourists south or east, so it was quiet...just the breeze through the trees, kites whistling as they glided low in the sky in search of prey, and a rumbling road-train as it cruised on by. The early-morning sun was in full force and sweat dripped down my face as I finished the last of my milk.

“Where do you want me to drop you guys off?” asked Zac. “I’m headed for the Spini to meet Sophia. She’s a barmaid, but has two days off. I’ll be headed back to Broome tomorrow arvo, so if you want a ride back, meet me in the car park just before 4 pm – and don’t be late, or I’m leaving you there.”

It was 8.30 now. A half-hour drive to Derby...I counted on my fingers: 10, 11, 12, 1, 2, 3, 4 + 24 = 31.

I looked up at Pete and Jane and said, “That gives us 31 hours to solve this crime and spring Auntie Gracie out of the lockup.”

“Hey Zac, can we have a yarn to Sophia when we get there? Barmaids see a lot and we can ask about those Germans — they seem suss to me,” suggested Pete.

“Sure, that sounds about right to me,” said Zac.

“Then I think we should head out to the Jetty and ask around there. The tide’s coming in later this morning and there will be a mob out there fishing,” said Jane.

We all seemed in agreement so far. “Ok, let’s get back on the road,” I said.

We dusted the crumbs off our clothes, gathered up our rubbish and headed for the bin beside the gate. Just as I lifted the lid for everyone, I looked over the fence at the car pulling into the roadhouse. It was the same one I saw outside Aunty Gracie’s house, and behind the wheel was the blonde woman.

“Everyone down, she’s here!” I cried. “Who’s here? What are you talking about?” snarled Zac, as they all ducked down behind the courtyard fence.

“It’s the blonde woman from the pearl shop — she just pulled in the driveway. What is she doing here?” The three astonished faces looked back at me.

“I have no idea,” said Zac, “but we need to make ourselves scarce.”

With that, Zac reached up, unlatched the gate from the courtyard to the carpark and we all duck-waddled low behind him back to our car.

Therese Phillips

Therese Phillips has had a life-long fascination with people and their stories. Moving to Derby with her family afforded Therese both the time and opportunity to explore her creative curiosity. Photography for the *Muddy Waters*, Derby's small local rag led to her collecting Kimberley-wide audio stories for the local Indigenous radio station 6DBY, a writing stint as the Derby correspondent for the *Broome Advertiser* and the eventual completion of a Bachelor of Communication. Therese is currently writing a ficto-memoir of the six years she lived in the Kimberley and her many return trips.



Image: Reginald Jones

Teresa Thornell

Teresa is a visual and textile artist, designer, song writer and short story author. Prior to moving to Broome in 2012 her careers included hairdressing, fashion design and manufacture, arts administration and events management. Teresa has been a member of Broome Women Writers since late 2017.



Image: Nic Duncan