

## NIGHT RIDE

She wants to escape.

At night trying to do her homework, she sits on her bed. Flipping the pages over math puzzles that confuse her with  $X=Y$  and other algebraic equations that speak a foreign language.

16 years old and she wants to leave her mother.

She climbs out the window, walks to the side of the shed; quietly lifts her old faithful bike from the fence and wheels past her Mum's banged up car. The night is welcoming, and she is embraced by the darkness. Humid air wraps around her body. She can smell the sweet cloying fragrance of frangipanni and hear bats shriek in the mangroves of the Bay. She glides past gardens and then starts to pedal again. Straining to see in the dark to avoid potholes on the road and random dogs wandering the streets.

She is free with each rotation of the pedals; each push is further from her mother and the chaos of home.

Horrie's mother knew she was gone again. Val could hear the wheels broken spokes; tick...tick...tick.

She'll come back; she always did. Not many places to ride to around town. The long road to the beach has too much traffic, the beach isn't safe, young ones drinking and smoking dope, fooling around. Her girl avoids that sort of thing. Probably she stops at the all-night petrol station.

Val, her mother, overweight, loud and not much of a thinker, cared only if there was enough money for cigarettes, beer and a bet at the TAB. She sits heavily on the cooling concrete step, looking out to the street as her daughter rides off. Val coughs and then lights another cigarette, unable to speak to her daughter.

Bitch! Thinks Horrie, she hears her mother's hack. She can't be bothered to speak to me but wastes her breath sucking in lungful's of crap. Angry thoughts fill her heart, she is furious at her mother's indifference, her lame attention, her not caring, sour breath, stale smoke smell, her mini dresses that show too much of her loose thighs hanging over her knees.

Restless and in motion Horrie coasts through the scented night, leaving the image of her sad mother behind. Past the smells of late BBQ dinners, dogs barking and the blare of TV noises and the flash of blue lights on walls. Other people's nighttime.

The moist air is salty, and it sticks to her skin. She is on a track that runs past the silos, and she can see the lights of the small town from the jetty.

Silhouettes of palm trees create the illusion of a tropical paradise. The night hides the truth of the red heat of day, where the sun burns and thongs melt, sticky and abandoned. Dogs pant and hide in the shade. Going nowhere. Stuck.

The night, like bait, lures her here, pulling her in its net, trapped. Immovable.

Horrie swears again at the thought of nowhere to go, swears at her mother for coming to this town following a man that might save her from herself. This red dust covered town. One way in one way out.

She bumps along the jetty with crickets for company, the white, orange lights reflecting in the water below, their quiet blinking from the moths that dive into the glow. She misses her brother, he used to ride with her at night and in the day exploring dirt tracks between the town and the jetty. Some big shady trees their refuge. Finding themselves back where they started from or nowhere at all, like this town. She was suffocating here in its emptiness without him.

She stops and listens to the sea. Alive down there, dollops of waves wash and roll weed and shells across the sandy bed. Filling rock pools with bubbles and froth that curl in and out and swirl around the pile-ons. Alive with the pop and clicking underneath. Strange fish and the briny wood smells all together, wet, smooth and slippery.

She listens to the sounds of the families, clonk clonk plank clank plunk as they throw out hand lines and laugh in their attempt to catch a feed. Everyone escaping the heat in town and in their homes. The jetty is always cooler, jutting out from the peninsula, catching the faintest zephyr.

Horrie imagines the fishes and sea snakes or sharks' underneath, sees her brother down there, his terror at being trapped in the stolen car. His mates, joy riders, dare, dickheads cheering him on watching to see if he can brake in time before the end of the jetty.

She hears the wind in her ears and the sound of metal rigging clanging on a boat mast somewhere. The creaking wood also distracts her wandering minds dark thoughts. Waves collide and soothe her, their rhythmic motion goes deep, comfort her, like the memory of how her mother would before that night. Stars flash above like the millions of tears that blind white behind Horrie's eyes. Like a kaleidoscope of colours, she plays with blinking the red, orange, green and white light as they mix together to form magical images only she can see. She remembers the night rides at the Circus when it came to town, her brother always on the scariest ride, looking for a thrill. Here there are no screaming riders only the screech of seagulls fighting for bait, echoing her cries.

A breeze blows up from under the jetty and over the railing, lifting her hair and whipping it across her eyes and stinging her cheeks, she's holding on tight to the railing, she screams at the night as the water eddies and shifts in constant motion. Below, a turtle appears, its hard shiny shell shimmering under the jetty lights. Horrie wonders if it is the same one she saw the other night. Breathing above the waves, the turtle drifts with the current under the shadow of the jetty. Momentarily it reappears, she sees the turtle lift its flipper, it beckons her, its black eyes connect with hers. She sees deep into the green black of nights dark secrets.

Warm and dark, an offering of something, Horrie leaps and plunges feet first down to where the pressure hurts her ears. She surrenders to her pain and then pauses to listen. Underwater sounds, clicking and popping. She kicks her feet, moving faster to reach the surface. She gulps in air and treads water gasping for breath, pulling air into her lungs. She wants to float and look up into the milky way above her, but the current pulls her. She must kick harder to move through the murky water. One hand finds the rung of the ladder. Her clothes are heavy and dragging her down, she finds another hand hold on the ladder, in the undercurrent something grazes over her leg. A glimmer of shell, jewel like golden green, an emerald in the shadowy green water, the turtle fades into the void.

