

# RAIN STONES



## FRIDAY

The creek smelt of hot rocks and old water. Helen sat in the shadows and watched the snake. It was small, as long as her hand. It was eating a frog, but the frog was too large. It pushed and pulled at it trying to force it into its mouth.

Suddenly the snake spat out the frog. It unhinged its jaws so its mouth was wider. This time it sucked both back legs in together. Its body pushed against a rock to get a better grip. The frog went down slowly. The jaws snapped shut again.

The girl sat still. She could see the bulge of the frog inside the snake now. The snake lifted its head. It rubbed itself against the rock to force the frog further down. Its tongue flickered. Then it was off, sliding through the rocks towards the next pool in the creek, hunting for more food.

It was cool by the creek. Beyond the shade of the casuarinas the sun beat hard on bare

dirt. The pools were green and full of algae, but there was a breeze.

Helen wondered whether to follow the snake. It might catch something else. But it was too hot. She sat where she was instead and watched.

The light thickened. It was getting darker. The blackberry thicket rustled behind her. It was a wombat—thin, with sores along its sides where it had scratched. Its eyes were crusted with mange. It blinked at Helen, but she was too familiar to scare it. It picked its way slowly through the boulders to the creek and drank. Soon other animals would come to the creek to drink—more wombats, roos, wallabies, goannas and possums, and sharp-nosed little antechinus that burrowed for beetles in the leaves by the creek.

Once there had been more animals drinking every night. That was in the early years of the drought, when the springs on the ridges dried up, and the little streams in the gullies. Dozens of animals came to drink then, their territories forgotten in the stress of thirst.

That had been five years ago. She just remembered it. The world had been dry for nearly half her life. Then the animals had started dying—too little food and too little

space. Every morning there were bodies by the creek. That didn't happen now. Only the strongest were left. There was no competition from their stock either. Dad had sent the sheep away three years ago. Keeping the orchard alive was a full-time job.

It was getting darker. Time to go home. Mum would be back from town. She was working for the stock and station agents, doing the accounts to see them through the drought. Though that job might stop soon, she had said, if things got worse. No one was buying much at the stock and station agents now.

The girl got up slowly. She'd put the stew for dinner on the stove like Mum had told her, before she came down to the creek. Mum had prepared it before she went to work.

The air hit her like a hot blast as she came out of the casuarinas. It was as though the dead grass breathed heat. It would be cooler on the other side of the creek. That was still bush. Here there were only a few trees left around the house, and in the orchard past the shed.

Mum's car was pulled up outside the house. There were voices from the kitchen. That meant Dad was in too. She washed her hands carefully in the bowl of water by the laundry door and went inside.

'Helen! I was just about to call you. Would you set the table please love? How was school?'

'All right. Sergeant Ryan came to talk to us about road safety. And Jenny Styles' mother has had the baby. They're going to call it Toby.'

Her mother was serving out the stew. She looked tired. She nodded. 'Johnny Styles came into the agency. I'd better pick up a card tomorrow.'

The stew was lamb. It wasn't theirs. Dad had kept a few sheep just for eating when he sold the rest but they'd been sold last year. It wasn't worth the cost of buying food for them.

Helen didn't like stew. She picked at it. Her father ate quickly. Her mother looked at him in concern. 'You going out again after dinner?' she asked.

He nodded. 'Have to. The big waterhole will have filled up again by now. If I can get the pump going I can give the lower trees a watering.'

'Do you need a hand?'

He paused, looking at Helen.

'I'll be okay here by myself,' she offered. 'Or I could come and help too.'

'We won't be finished till you're in bed,' he said. 'Thanks love. It'll go quicker with two.'

He looked at the clock. 'Nearly time for the weather. Turn it on, will you Helen?'

The radio barked behind them. It was too hilly to get television, but Dad had said that one day they'd get a satellite dish. One day when it rained.

There was a high over the Bight and another over Central Australia. Helen knew all about weather maps now. Highs meant fine weather, lows might mean rain. You hoped for a low and watched it, waiting to see if it came near you. But they didn't.

'And another fine, bright, weekend,' said the announcer.

Dad snorted. Fine weather out here meant rain, not clear skies.

Helen's mother served the ice-cream and canned fruit. Her father leaned back in his chair. 'Time to get back to work. If we had the money I'd get a timer for the pump. And a new pump.' Then he grinned. 'If I had the money, I'd hire a few blackfellers to make it rain.' He stood up. 'I'll be working in the shed on the pump till you're ready to give me a hand with the pipes.' He tousled Helen's hair. 'Sleep well love. See you in the morning.'

Helen and her mother cleared the table together. They washed up in half a sink of

water. The rainwater tanks had dried up last year. The creek water was too dirty to drink or wash with. They'd bought water since then. It came in a tanker from town. But water was expensive. You had to use it carefully. Mum took the washing to town. Even the bath water was used again nowadays—her first, then Mum, then Dad (the dirtiest gets it last, said Dad, making a joke of it)—then siphoned off to water the dahlias in the garden.

'Mum?'

'Yes, love?'

'How do Aborigines make it rain?'

'I'm not sure, love. They used to dance to make it happen. Special rain dances. I think they had rain stones too.'

'What are rain stones?'

'Oh, Mrs Halibut from the museum told me about them one day. I can't remember much. They were special stones. When the tribe needed rain, they'd uncover the stones to the air and it'd rain.'

'Why don't we get some rain stones then?'

Her mother laughed. 'They're special stones love. You need to know which ones to find. I think you'd have to be an Aborigine to know how to use them.'

'Why don't we ask an Aborigine then?'

'There haven't been any round here for years and years. Now, have you done your homework?'

Helen nodded.

'Don't forget your teeth then. You can read till nine o'clock. Sure you'll be all right by yourself?'

'Yes, Mum.'

'Okay then. I'll look in on you when we come in. Don't forget—put the light out at nine. I can see it from the orchard and I'll be checking.'

Helen did put the light out at nine o'clock, but she couldn't sleep. She lay in the darkness watching the clear stars outside and listening to the rumble of the pump in the distance. Sometimes she heard the echo of her parents' voices. She could hear an owl too, a mopoke, singing down by the creek. A possum screamed in the distance, caught by a fox or an owl or simply quarrelling with the other possums.

She thought about rain stones. It seemed such a simple way to make it rain. Just find an Aborigine and persuade him to use his stones and it would rain.

She fell asleep thinking about strong heavy rain breathing life again into the soil.

**SATURDAY**

On Saturday morning Helen went to town with her mother. Everyone went to town on Saturday. The Lion's Club sold raffle tickets beside the newsagent's for a load of firewood or a dressed sheep. The preschool held a cake stall down by the supermarket.

They parked by the butcher's.

'Look at that,' said her mother. 'Lamb chops are \$4.99 a kilo. You could buy a whole sheep last sales for five.'

They walked up the street together. 'Mum? Can I go down to the museum while you're in the supermarket?'

'Of course, love. Is it a school project?'

'I want to find out about the rain stones,' said Helen.

Her mother smiled. 'I'll meet you down there,' she said. 'Don't pester Mrs Halibut, though, if there are lots of people in there.'

'I won't,' said Helen.

There was no one in the museum when she got there. Mrs Halibut would be in her flat next door making a cup of tea. Helen wandered round the exhibits till she heard the door open. Mrs Halibut came in, balancing her

tea cup on a plate with two chocolate slices from the preschool stall. She smiled.

'Why, it's Helen Doherty. I was hoping it would be a paying customer.' Adults had to pay \$2 to see the museum, children under twelve were free.

'Mrs Halibut? Mum said you knew about the Aborigines.'

'The Aborigines? You mean the local ones? Well, I can tell you a bit, dear. Some of the early settlers wrote about them. Come over here then.' She put the plate down on the counter and headed off down the museum, still carrying her tea cup.

Helen followed her. Past the old Chinese wedding dress, made from silk the bride herself had threaded off the silkworm cocoons, past the old christening font made from a tree trunk, and the treadle sewing machine.

Mrs Halibut stopped in front of a small grass house, woven from reeds and bark and poa tussock. 'Now this is like the shelters they made. Len Bullock copied this one from a description in an early diary.'

Helen looked at it. 'I thought they lived in bark humpies.'

Mrs Halibut took a sip of tea. 'I suppose

some did. Round here, though, they made those. These are some of their stone axes. See how sharp they got the edges.'

Helen felt the cool smooth rock. It did feel sharp, even after a hundred years.

'And this is a woven basket. See all the different colours of the grass and the reeds used to make a pattern in it. The Aboriginal women would put lily roots and grass seeds and orchid tubers in these, and native fruit like wombat berries and eugenias. They knew all about the bush—when things flowered and fruited, how much they could take without harming the bush so there'd still be enough in poor times.'

'Like in the drought?'

'Like in a drought. They kept their population small enough so the land would still feed them in a drought.'

'I eat grass seeds sometimes,' said Helen. 'Just for fun.'

Mrs Halibut smiled. 'If you had grown up an Aborigine, you'd have known all about grass seeds,' she said. 'You'd have known when to harvest them and how to grind cakes from them and bake them. So much the Aborigines knew has been lost.'

'Like rain stones?' asked Helen.

Mrs Halibut looked surprised. 'You know about rain stones?'

Helen nodded. 'There aren't any in the museum, are there, Mrs Halibut?'

'No. We've got some grinding stones though, if you'd like to see those.'

Helen nodded politely. They moved to the grinding stones. 'Look at the dark stain on them,' said Mrs Halibut. 'Some of the grass seeds and reed seeds are oily and they stained the stones as the women ground the grain.'

'Are there any Aborigines left?' asked Helen.

'Of course, dear. Thousands.'

'I mean round here.'

'No,' said Mrs Halibut. 'I think the last one died in about 1890. I've got an old newspaper account of it somewhere. Her name was Big Maggie.'

'What happened to her?'

'She was always getting drunk, and they put her in gaol. Finally they said she had to leave the district or they'd put her in gaol for good.'

'What happened then?'

Mrs Halibut looked out the window. 'They say she ran out of the court screaming. They couldn't catch her. She was a big woman. But

she ran all the way down the valley where her people had had their last camp. They said you could hear screaming for miles around. They found her dead a few days later. It would have been the worst punishment in the world,' said Mrs Halibut, 'to make her leave the land she loved.'

The door opened behind them. It was Helen's mother.

'Gladys, how are you? I hope Helen hasn't been bothering you?'

Mrs Halibut shook her head. 'It's good to talk to someone who's interested. Come again sometime, Helen.'

'I will,' said Helen.

'Was Mrs Halibut able to answer your questions?' her mother asked as they drove out of town.

'Sort of,' said Helen. 'It was interesting though.'

The car slowed down as they passed through a mob of sheep. Old Mr MacIntosh waved to them from his horse. He'd had the sheep on the move for the last year, grazing the sides of the road. 'The long paddock' they called it.

The car speeded up again, climbing the hills towards the bush. The way home always

seemed shorter in the car than in the school bus. The bus stopped every few minutes to let kids out—it seemed you'd never get there.

The car clattered over the ramp and into the drive. Helen leant out of the window and breathed deeply. She loved their farm. The farms along the way were nice enough. She loved the bare golden hills with the sun on them, the sheep-like rocks. She loved to see who was ploughing or fencing or moving their sheep. But home was different. Here you had your back to the bush. You could smell the trees. You could hear small birds as well as sheep and crows and the distant mutter of a tractor.

Sometimes it seemed that no one else loved the bush. Not as it was, as she did. Dad loved the farm, the growth from the soil. She wondered if he'd change the whole bush, if he could, till it was all paddocks and orchards, safe and tame and human. The kids at school loved the river for swimming, and played bushrangers or space invaders in the gullies.

Mrs Green at school said she loved the bush. She told them stories of the animals—the soft, shy platypus, the kookaburra who laughed at everything, the stupid, bumbling wombat. The animals she talked about didn't



behave like any that Helen had ever watched. She wondered sometimes if Mrs Green had ever been in the bush at all.

Mum loved the bush. She had shown Helen her first goanna eggs, laid in an ants' nest for the heat to hatch them. She had shown her the heads of baby parrots poking up out of a hole high up in a casuarina and lace thin toadstools poking up through the damp bark in a wet gully.

But Mum was tired lately. There was her job and the farm and the house. Mum had no time at all these days. Not to watch or listen or share things. The sight of the dying bush only seemed to make her more unhappy. Maybe that's why no one else had thought of rain stones. They thought of weather maps and irrigation systems. You had to be close to the bush to think of stones.

## MONDAY

School was jammed between the police station and the court house. There was no grass to be watered at school. Sometime, years before, the playing areas had been asphalted over. Giant oaks shaded the lunch seats, and the thin temporary classrooms put up in the 'fifties

baked in the sun. The only water needed at school was for the toilets, except in winter, when the pipes froze and everyone had to hold on till they thawed.

At lunchtime Helen went back to the classroom to find Miss Wallace. She was sorting through the books on her desk. Helen knocked and went in.

'Helen, is everything all right?'

She nodded. 'I just wanted to ask you a question.'

'Of course. Is it the maths this morning?'

Helen shook her head. 'No, it's something different.'

Miss Wallace looked at her closely. 'Something at home then? Is there any trouble, Helen?'

'It's nothing like that,' she said quickly. 'It's just . . . where would you find an Aborigine, Miss Wallace?'

Miss Wallace was silent. 'Why do you want to know?' she asked finally.

'I just wondered, that's all. Where do they live now?'

Miss Wallace paused. 'Well, a lot live in Sydney, and in the outback. I don't really know, Helen. I've never thought about it.'

'There aren't any round here?'

Miss Wallace shook her head. 'Not that I know of. They say the last Aborigine died round here at the turn of the century.'

Helen nodded. 'That's what Mrs Halibut said,' she agreed. 'Thank you Miss Wallace.'

The school bus dropped Helen at the gate. She walked up the dusty track slowly. If she did her homework now, she could go out and explore when it was cooler. There might still be some blackberries near the creek, or some ripe wombat berries hanging from the bursaria bushes on the other side.

The house and the sheds were deserted. From somewhere down near the orchard came the thrum of the tractor. Dad must still be spraying.

Something screamed. She froze. It came again, a high keening noise. This time it went on, high and vivid through the still hot air.

She dropped her bag. She ran. The noise was coming from the creek. She scrambled through the boulders, slipping in her school shoes. She could see it now. It was the wombat.

It was standing by the boulder near the pool beating its head against a rock. Over and

over and over, so the rock was red with blood. The sores on its back had broken open again. It was mad with pain.

She ran again, up from the creek, across the flat, down to the orchard. Her father saw her coming.

'Helen! What is it?'

She was sobbing. 'Daddy! Please! You have to shoot it!'

'Shoot what, darling?'

'It's a wombat. Down by the creek. Please shoot it.'

He looked at her, reached over and turned off the tractor. 'Show me where,' he said.

She shook her head. 'By the swimming pool. You'll hear it.'

He didn't ask why. He nodded. 'You stay up at the house. I won't be long.'

She watched him stride back to the house. She followed slowly, sat on the hot verandah as he ran down to the creek carrying the rifle, trying to block her ears to the sound of pain.

The shot echoed from the hills. The screaming stopped. Helen looked at the sky, high flat clouds in a dry blue sky and wished her tears were rain.

## TUESDAY

It was hot in the playground. Alison and Deb and Jan were playing hopscotch under the oak tree. She didn't go over to them. She felt tired. She wanted to think and be alone.

The boys by the fence were having a rough house. Mr Brice would catch them if they didn't look out. Jimmie Harrison had thrown his lunch wrapper at Dwayne Sarancen, and Dwayne had him in a hammer lock. Jimmie forced himself free.

'Black bastard!' he yelled. 'Your mother eats burnt toast!'

'Bum head! Fart face!'

'All right you two.' It was Mr Brice. He grabbed Jimmie by the ear, and Dwayne by the scruff of the neck. 'Up to the office. You heard me. Off!'

The boys went reluctantly. Mr Brice watched them for a minute, then turned back to the main playground.

'Mr Brice?'

'Yes, Helen. What is it?'

'Why did Jimmie call Dwayne a black bastard? He's not black is he? He's the same colour I am.'

Mr Brice paused. 'Some of his ancestors

were black, Helen. That's all. Jimmie Harrison was just being stupid.'

'You mean he's Aboriginal?'

'Well, sort of. His grandmother was. Something like that.'

There was another scuffle over by the fence. Mr Brice was away again.

Helen thought about it. Dwayne Sarancen wouldn't know anything about rain stones. He wasn't even sure of the five-times table. He didn't even know that yabbies ate old meat when she brought one to school last term. But his father . . . he'd be more of an Aborigine than Dwayne. He was the sort of man who knew things.

Mr Sarancen was the town building inspector. He'd come from Sydney three years before, replacing old Jobbins who they said wouldn't notice if you'd put the steps on back-to-front. He knew about building codes and septic systems and how to stop a roof from blowing off in the wind.

She'd ask him.

'Mum?'

'Yes love?' Her mother was balancing the farm accounts at the kitchen table after dinner. Her hair hung limp on her forehead.

'Could I come home with you tomorrow instead of on the bus? I want to call in at the council after school.'

'Is it a school project?'

'Sort of.'

'Of course. It won't be too late for you will it?'

Helen shook her head. 'I'll be right, Mum.'

### WEDNESDAY

At little lunch, Helen slid through the school gates, and over to the phone box across the road.

'Hello. Crow's Hill Council Chambers.'

That would be Debbie Stevens. She only left school three years ago. She worked on the council desk now. Helen tried to make her voice as adult as possible.

'I'd like to make an appointment with the building inspector please.'

'Certainly. What time would you like it?'

'This afternoon? About four o'clock?'

'Four o'clock then. What name is it?'

She hadn't thought of that. It would have to be her own. 'Helen Doherty.' She held her breath.

Debbie didn't recognise it. The phone clicked in her ear.

The council chambers were in the main street. The building was tall, and made of pale pink cement, with floodlights at Christmas and Heritage Week. You went up the steps to the main door, turned left for the building inspector, right for the counter, dog licences and rates payments. Helen had been in before, when her father put in an application for the new packing shed, and when her mother registered the dogs each year and bought hydatid tablets.

The building inspector's door was shut. The sign read: 'Appointments only. Please ring.' She pressed the button and waited.

The door opened. It was Mr Sarancen. He looked surprised.

'Helen Doherty?'

She nodded.

'I see. Won't you come in then?' He gestured her through the door. 'Take a seat. Now, how can I help you? Is it a school project?'

She shook her head. She looked at him. His skin was darker than Dwayne's, not much darker than Dad's, from years in the sun. He didn't look like the pictures in the library books.

'Is it a message from your parents?'

She shook her head again. 'Mr Sarancen, are you an Aborigine?'

His face became expressionless. He looked at her for a minute.

'Why do you ask?' he said finally. 'Is it something to do with Dwayne?'

'No. It's for me. I need to find an Aborigine. Please Mr Sarancen.'

He swung round on his chair, looked out the window, then swung back again. 'My mother was Aboriginal,' he said finally. 'I suppose that makes me one. What do you need to know for?'

The relief was overwhelming. 'Mr Sarancen, please, you've got to make it rain. You've got to get your rain stones. Everything's dying. Dad's trees, the cattle, the wombats along the creek. Please help us.'

'Honey, slow down. I can't make it rain.'

'You could use your rain stones.'

He shook his head. She thought he was close to smiling. 'I don't have any rain stones, honey. I come from Sydney, not from the bush. I don't know anything about blackfeller magic.'

'Would your mother know?'

He shook his head. 'My mother's dead. She couldn't have helped you anyway. They took her away from her tribe when she was a baby, brought her up in a mission. I don't think she ever knew her family.'

'But you're Aboriginal. You have to know these things.'

'Honey, I was brought up in Redfern. I did my studying at Sydney University, not the bush. My family was disinherited generations back. You probably know a lot more about the bush than me.'

She couldn't give up. 'Mr Sarancen, couldn't you just try? Don't you want to know? Couldn't you just look for rain stones? It's so dry. The roos haven't had joeys for nearly two years and all the eels have gone from the creek and the apple boxes are dying on the hills. Dad says they're hundreds of years old. Please, Mr Sarancen.'

He wasn't smiling now. 'Honey, I wouldn't even know where to start.'

'There are some stones down past Landy's Bridge,' she offered. 'On the bend of the river. Lovely white ones with bits of blue in them. They look like they might be rain stones.'

'Maybe you should try them then. You see if they're rain stones.'

He stood up. He wanted her to go.

'Please, Mr Sarancen. It's your country. Even if you're from Sydney. You have to help it.'

He was silent a minute. 'The only bit of

land my family's had in generations is our home in Wattle Street, and even that's mortgaged. I don't reckon it'd be my job to make it rain even if I could.' He ushered her to the door. 'I'm sorry, honey. I really am. I can't help you.'

She left the office. She had \$2 in her pocket. It was her lunch money. She hadn't spent it. She went up to the Royal Cafe and ordered a milkshake. She drank it slowly, staring through the doors of the cafe. Then she wandered up the road to wait for her mother.

'Mum?'

'Yes love?'

'Could you drop me off at Landy's Bridge? I'll walk the rest of the way.'

'Helen, it's too hot. It's getting late.'

'Please, Mum. I won't be long. I want to look for something for school.'

The river bed was hot. The late sun glared on the white rocks. She wandered through them. It would be a pure white rock, she thought, an almost transparent one, one with a touch of blue for the sky and a touch of grey for cloud. It would be a rock with a special feel, a cold rock that made you think of rain.

She thought of Mr Sarancen. She wished he had come. Surely all his ancestors must mean

something to him. Surely the rain stones would still cry out to him, if only he would look for them, if only he would try. She turned over more rocks with her toe. The shadows were growing. She'd have to start back.

There was the noise of an engine on Landy's Bridge. A car stopped. It was deep blue against the brighter sky. Doors slammed. She looked up. It was Mr Sarancen. Dwayne was behind him, and Dwayne's younger sister, not yet at school. Mr Sarancen met her eyes.

'We'll look for them together,' he said.

That night it rained. The tanks gurgled, woken from years of quiet, the ground drummed with the heavy drops, the creek beds turned again to water.

In the cupboard, the rain stones waited for another day.