

Pearl

It was a slight, old woman in a pie shop off the highway that told me who my grandmother was. I barely saw her over the counter but she propped herself up with one foot on the skirting board and pointed at me accusingly.

‘You’re a Kresinger,’ she spat. ‘I have something for you.’ She tried to put what looked like a wood whistle in my palm. ‘This was your grandmother’s. She worked here.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘My grandmother was Marie. Passed now, but she’s my grandmother.’

‘Sister,’ the woman behind the counter said. ‘That was your grandmother’s sister.’ She told me a story, starting with my grandmother’s real name, Pearl.

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The first time Pearl Kresinger was taken by the wind we were both twelve. It had been raining so long the water reached the library of our school on the hill. But it was the wind, cyclonic, that kept anyone with common sense inside. Not Pearl. She went out on the beach. She was standing on the jetty star-posed and everyone saw her. She seemed to fight with the wind for a moment, her torso wrenched back and her chin to the sky, but then we saw her fall into the grey water.

Trying to save her, one man yelled out he had felt her skin. But in the next wave he was gone.

A day later she came out with her hair streaked white, and the wind had settled. She didn't stay at school, none of them did, though I tracked her over the years.

Her skin was burnt butter, her forehead small and high, her fingers straight, her nails blue-grey from a permanent chill. She wore a red floral dress that dropped off her narrow shoulders. Her now black and white hair was waxy and feather-like, stretching down her back and creeping from behind her ears into her mouth when she turned to you. I could tell what others couldn't, her ears weren't really there, her eyes hissed and some of her teeth were missing. But the men followed the dance of her hair from back to mouth.

When the wind was kicking in and I'd be walking home from school near the beach through empty car parks, before the streetlights turned on, I'd see her between buildings, her hair entwined, her face in someone's neck, a man mostly, though there were women. It seemed all were hopeless against her.

After school I moved across the border and off the coast to a stopover town and got a quiet job behind the counter serving truckies.

I heard about the freak storm in the early fifties, Pearl Kresinger cheating death for the second time. The wind ripped the Kresinger tent up, into a tree. The others ran for shelter and Pearl stood there and let it lift her, she went into the electricity wires and they curled into each other like lovers as she was jolted. Her brother moved to her lifeless body and she touched him, and he took her place.

The people of the town drove her out of there. Nobody would touch her again. She lived in the hills for a while, and then she came to my town, and into my store.

I was jealous at the sight of her. The truckies passing through the store did not know of her curse.

It wasn't just that she was Bundjalung that made them think she was beautiful. It was the way she duck-called.

~

I tug at the traffic all the way back to the city, and quickly go into the house I grew up in. I find my father – on the back stairs, painting – who denies everything the old lady has told me. He spills paint three times on his boot, so I know I have to go back.

My thoughts are running wild as I drive to my place. If I didn't know my grandmother, then how could I know myself? My grandmother as I had always known was Marie Kresinger, Auntie Marie to everyone. She'd spent most of her life as a domestic. She died from heart failure at the age of seventy-two. People said her heart was too big. I was eleven. My dad wanted me to sing an old-time song at the funeral but I was too shy.

She was the daughter of Zahny Zahny, otherwise known as Jack Zahn Kresinger. He was one of the men the settlers gave the title of King of his people. Zahny Zahny had three wives and ten children; Marie had many half-sisters and brothers, and maybe I had heard the name of one of her sisters, Pearl, in passing. Grandmother Marie wasn't here to tell her own story, and my father would tell me nothing about our history, whether he knew it or not. This leaves me with the shopkeeper. It is Sunday afternoon,

after closing time. I will have to go back down the freeway tomorrow, to the pit-stop just over the border.

I grip the wheel to hear my thoughts. I am Amy Kresinger, twenty-six and already war-weary with life, already feeling pushed into the ground like some sedated potplant.

The usual reason I go down the highway and to ancestral country is to go surfing, not to meet family or do any of the practices you'd expect me to do.

I thought I was going to become a nice woman one day, get married, have a cosy family, and be called Aunty, all because of my grandmother Marie. I thought I'd mellow and tame with time. Now I'm not so sure.

When I arrive back at Jimmy's Pies the old woman is rolling up the doors, no one beside her. This old woman can spin a yarn. She puts her whole body in it.

~

There is a kind of woman that draws men like cards, that has beauty, and knowledge as well in those siren eyes. That's Pearl Kresinger. Jimmy hired her before she even opened her mouth. She was put in the kitchen with him. He said every morning, 6 a.m. It didn't feel kosher, at that time, in the sixties, to have a black woman working at your establishment. That's why Jimmy put her in the kitchen, I assumed, though she wasn't out of sight. When the pies were in the oven baking, she was out there on the tables.

I don't know where she learnt to duck-call. Women don't duck-call, at least not where I'm from.

There were three men who usually came in most mornings around eleven. They'd shot a few thousand roos,

rabbits and camels between them, but what they all had in common was the ducks. One of the men had lost sight in one eye. They called him Bandit for his eye-patch. I'd heard he was in a highway crash when he was younger. Two roos went through the windshield.

I was behind the counter half the time and swept the floors and ran errands for Jimmy the rest. I melded in – I was invisible when they wanted me to be.

The shop was a brothel before they made the highway. Then it was a warehouse for sporting goods. Jimmy had bought the place and done it up a year before I'd started. The cars were starting to pull in, most came from trips to and from Brisbane, which was really starting to boom.

Jimmy liked that Pearl was strong – she could carry the boxes of meat from the delivery. He was getting on, his strength was starting to decline. And compared to Pearl, I was a Chihuahua.

Although Jimmy and Pearl started before me every day, they did most of their work in the afternoons. Pearl was getting good at cutting the pastry, learning the techniques. Sometimes I watched her from where I was standing and although I already felt a strong sense of responsibility and ownership of the store in what I did, I wished I was the one making the pies.

Pearl snapped the scissors when she was bored, which was often. One time we were alone and I said to her, 'Do you remember me from school?' She didn't answer.

The truckies loved meat, and they loved our pies. I was sitting behind the counter when Bandit's group came in. These three men played long games of dice as they sat there, bludging, until mid-afternoon. I listened and heard

the gossip of the surrounding towns where they lived. They requested I play anything but the Bee Gees on our tiny wireless, perched on top of the glass cabinet.

The other two were opposites: Goh was a tall thin skeleton of a man, married and silent. George was fat, and the one who talked the most. Between the three of them, they mainly discussed the road, hunting and women. Jimmy would come out and talk with them. They were ex-criminals, the lot of them.

The truckies were the kind of men who talk about hating native women. There was a lot around here, and Jimmy told Pearl it would be best for her not to come out while they were there.

‘Bad men,’ Jimmy said to her. ‘But they’re half my business.’

Pearl didn’t listen, of course, and one day when they were talking about wildfowl she went out and sat down at their table. They looked at Pearl as if she was possessed. They were dazzled by her stories, and of course the flash of pale on her brown body, her well-positioned cleavage.

The men didn’t look at me. I was just a short woman. Pearl and I were the same age, going on thirty, though she trumped me in conversation. No one looked at me twice, I was big-eared, pale and freckled.

Pearl bragged about catching ducks, even said we should start selling duck pies here. The men were dim, they didn’t see her for what she was.

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I am like my grandmother Pearl. I am a strong black woman, and love comes too easy for me. There is always someone to drown. I have those Bundjalung eyes, too.

My father doesn't know that I go to those coffee shops in the inner-west, where the older, wealthy women go, women who like women.

It is always a bit of an intellectual seduction. I offer to buy them a cuppa, ask them what they're reading. Women like that are always reading. Searching for women like them in the texts. True they're always keen, their hand movements on the tabletop say it.

Today I snare Shirley. I've been meeting her for months now, on and off. She has a long-term partner, ten years or more. Shirley is gorgeous. She is in her forties but looks thirty. Blond curls, surfer looks. A dazzling smile. Strong, masculine hands. Nails cut.

This time I meet her at the pub for lunch in the industrial section – this shows I mean business. She is sitting there when I rock up. She always wears a sports jacket even if it's humid outside. And flash jeans that are tight at the crotch. When we finish our meal and drinks I get her to follow me along the road, under the freeway, where the milk factory is. It is 3 p.m. on a Friday and we are around the corner and out of sight of the state post office and the Murri art studio. We're by the fence. I cup her small angled face and she grabs my collar as we kiss, our crotches already pressing together. Her jeans are easy to undo and I slip my hand in that small gap between her underwear and the hot centre of her. She groans like I knew she would and she roughly palms up my skirt, pulls my thong down to my knees. I lift up the hem of the skirt and pull her to me. We give up on kissing. A train vibrates the tracks above us, and the shudder goes to the ground.

Driving home I switch on the radio and one of those old Motown voices comes on and reaches my heart. I have a boyfriend. He's a teacher. When I first met him I thought I could marry him. Now I say I'm too busy to meet on weekends and he should be catching up on his marking. I don't want to be the person who captures the hearts of many.

I am often stirred by a woman walking down the street or at a bus stop. In my teens, I was one of the ones every Friday night in the last carriage on the 1 a.m. train having sex with anyone who would have me. I am cursed to be this.

I remember the next half of the story the old woman told me.

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Pearl Kresinger had only been in town for a week or two but she was already known for her duck calls, people in town had seen her by the waterways. She always wore her call around her neck, between her breasts, so the men couldn't help but notice it.

Goh, Bandit and George were obsessed with wild-fowl hunting, a distraction from their meandering lives. Individually they were hopeless, but as a group they got some luck, they weren't too bad. They talked of the Pacific blacks and the hardheads.

'What do you go after?' Bandit asked Pearl.

'The mallards,' she said, surprising them.

'How many?' Goh asked.

'Fifteen, once. Or more.'

There was a silence. Standing there, behind the counter, I knew they'd never shot that many in their life. Bandit

seemed to make a decision. He pointed to the wood whistle around her neck. ‘Show us.’

She tugged at the string and brought it to her lips. It was a noise that sounded nothing like her voice – an immersive murmur that carried across the shop and lasted a total of four seconds. I was holding my breath and I didn’t know why. Her body, her thick brown arms seemed to shine into a bronze and the men couldn’t keep their eyes off her.

I wished I had an excuse to go outside and not watch them inflate with her. I could go to the car park and stand looking at the cars and maybe have one of Jimmy’s cigarettes, even though I hadn’t smoked in years.

In their thick silence, the men were in agreeance that they couldn’t replicate such a natural vocalisation.

‘You should come out with us sometime,’ Bandit said.

‘You’d be our little luck charm,’ George said, wiggling his fingers.

Pearl played with her lips, ‘But I got no gun.’

‘We do.’

She twirled her hair, and I saw the different bits of colour, the streaks of deep white, the etch of electricity.

‘Show us again,’ Bandit said firmly.

They made her draw the call until her eyes teared up.

Bandit said, ‘You reckon fifteen. You’re going to have to prove it.’

~

I carried a special sort of shame from not singing at my grandmother’s funeral. Everyone said Aunty Marie was a classy sort of woman; in photos, she was always looking

flash in opals and her hair all up and everything. I know I come from a different era, but dressing up for me is leaving the thongs at home and collapsing my ponytail.

I initially rejected the thought of Pearl being my grandmother. What the woman at the pie shop had said about her made her sound like a succubus, cursed, a monster. I wanted eventually to be the baking biscuits type, like Auntie Marie; I honestly believed I would get there one day. I told my father and the other mob at the youth centre I outgrew singing, like it was a pair of shoes. But I do sing to myself sometimes, when I can't go to sleep.

Marie Kresinger had two children older than my father, a boy and a girl. She was raising them out at Hune Hill, on the family's property, when Pearl must have come to see her with news of her pregnancy. Their father had recently passed and Marie, her husband and the kids had moved back into the house at Hune Hill after living in Brisbane. Marie had been living in Brisbane ever since she'd married at the age of eighteen.

I have one photo of my great-grandfather. He has long hair in his face. In a photo taken at the mission, he sits on the right. They had put the king plate across his neck. I wondered if he had got used to the weight, the way it clanged to his chest when he walked.

He had made friends with one of the whitefellas high up, Malcolm, who recognised him as an important man among his people, this helped out the family quite a bit. My great-grandfather would bring mob together at this Malcolm's place and they would sing. All English songs. Malcolm taught my great-grandfather to read over one

summer and so he was keen to show his favourite daughter, Marie, when he went to visit her in Brisbane.

I have been told the story a number of times of my great-grandfather walking alongside the road on his way to the town, when Malcolm's car pulled up alongside him. Malcolm stuck his head out of the car and asked, 'Where you going, mate?'

'See my daughter.'

'We got the new track, mate. I'll get you on. Lot faster.'

The railway was spanking new, and it glistened in the sun. He stepped on the train. Wind in his hair. A free pass was unheard of. Though this was the last time he took it up. The next few years, while he could still walk, Zahny Zahny was known for walking along the railway lines, not catching the train.

Marie and Pearl were the closest in age, and were like salt and pepper shakers, opposites, but always together. Zahny Zahny tried not to show it, but they were his favourite daughters. When the children were growing up he made sure they knew certain things. In spring, stone-grey seeds floated in the breeze and spread across the reddened dirt. He told his daughters not to pick up the seeds. Those who could not understand would say that they were dispersed by the wind man.

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One cloudy day when Jimmy wasn't around the men called Pearl out of the back. 'Let's go out to the lake,' they said. 'A good day for it, ducks like getting wet.'

The lake was a dark place in town folklore, a sinkhole for small children and women. A euphemism for many

things. I'd heard from their conversations that the wildfowl flew more on cloudy or rainy days, even though Goh liked the visibility of the sunny days.

They told Pearl she had to come along, 'We'll wait until you finish here. Right outside. Bring your gear and we'll walk down.'

Pearl's dress was a warm orange-red with a geometric print. It must have been new. The group finished their pies and walked out as early as I'd ever seen them do. It was only 12 p.m. Three hours until knock-off. I wondered what Pearl was going to do until then.

When they were out of sight, Pearl turned to me and acknowledged me for the first time. 'Can you come?'

I blinked for a few moments. She continued to stare at me with her dull eyes. That's when I knew what was going to happen explicitly. They were going to take her there, away from the protection of the store and Jimmy and they were going to attack her. And I would be there to know it.

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After I talked that last time to the shopkeeper, I shot straight through, kept going down the highway. I went to the family property near Casino, halfway between somewhere. *Hume Hill* is what the sign said. I remembered the house a little bit from staying there a few times when I was younger. Grandmother Marie lived there with my Auntie Irma and my cousin Colin.

At the front of the property was an assortment of wild dogs tied to trees, and old raggy goats. It was raining. Auntie Irma came out in her nightie and ushered me in. The rain only touched my boots. Auntie hadn't seen Colin,

who now lived in Sydney, for as long as I hadn't, so she was happy to see me, and more than willing to tell me about my grandmothers.

Marie was very surprised when her sister came to her to tell her she was pregnant. From the curse, and all the years that had passed, she thought Pearl couldn't have children. She hadn't seen Pearl for a long time. Marie watched as Pearl's belly swelled and she walked the stairs of the house holding her back.

It had been understood from the very beginning that Marie would take the child. The baby, when it came, was ugly, huge, as if it had waited there, in Pearl's womb, all of her adulthood. Pearl left the baby boy, a few hours old, and Marie quickly learnt to hold it as if it was hers.

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At 3 p.m. I looked out of the window to see the three men standing with bags by their boots. They were dressed in camouflage and looked slightly ridiculous considering the weather. Their waterproof pants made their legs look like parachutes. They looked at Pearl's bright dress.

'Why you wearing that?'

She shrugged.

'You dumb bitch, we'll see how you go.'

I followed them down the streets. I had the advantage of knowing the town and the paths very well. Pearl was in front. Goh coughed on occasion and Bandit smirked. I saw them look at each other and communicate a shared want they could not say out loud.

When they went into the bushland with their gear, the decoys they carried began to weigh them down and they

walked slowly – all three were unfit or weak. Pearl carried nothing and walked easy. I noticed she had slipped off the clogs she wore at work and was barefoot.

When the lake was in sight I stopped to find a vantage point. I found the old wooden lookout that had been there since I was a kid and surveyed the surroundings below. The men stepped out and surveyed the area and where they would set up the blind. Pearl half-turned; her eyes found me and she nodded in recognition. The little flecks of light flicking up from the lake caught their expressions and I felt I could see them perfectly. The men crouched to set their plastic painted decoys down in the mud. From where I was, the decoys looked quite lifelike. Pearl had found her spot a little bit further down, closer to where I was. She also knelt and opened her hands, and I saw she had made a grass duck, out of reeds. It was beautiful.

Bandit looked – his mouth gaped for a moment and then he laughed at her creation. I couldn't help but share his sentiment, as remarkable as it was, there was only one.

They stepped back thirty metres or so into the vegetation and started to get their gear out of the bags. George handed Pearl a shotgun. 'Don't miss,' he said. And they put on their gloves and face masks, and held their calls and their guns. Pearl stood straight and stripped her dress off, spread out her arms and slipped off her undergarments.

'Shit,' George said and they exchanged a placating look between the three of them that made them carry on as if nothing had happened.

With her feet, Pearl covered the red garment with

leaves. Bandit gave a nod to indicate the start of their hunt and they widened their stance.

Pearl put the call in her mouth. The wind picked up and melded with her hail call, a long, low note. The wind began to pull at the tassels of the lake, and I held my hair in place. The wind shuddered the ten or so decoys the men had laid out, and they fell down in a row.

The men swore loudly but Pearl kept calling. She went to a new call – a rapid round of short, sharp notes. This is what the men in their conversations at the shop had called a feed call, when a hen has found food. I heard the ducks above, and I looked up to see their formation swooping down. The mallards slowed their wings and came towards the outstretched Pearl like a train to a station. There were at least two dozen. Pearl raised the gun and fired. But nothing was shot. The mallards landed unaffected around her. She looked down, confused, at the gun.

That's when the camouflaged men made their move. With their masks they looked like executioners and that's what they were. They grabbed Pearl by the shoulders. Goh on the left, George on the right and Bandit at the front.

I got to my feet but there was nothing I could do. Though the wind, as always, was on her side. The gale swept back – it was a wind that bit – and George let go. He flailed his arms out and toppled backwards into the lake.

In the confusion Pearl got away and then she was running and Bandit and Goh were chasing hard and I could not see everything exactly. The heat from the day had carved a dull headache in my mind.

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On the way home I find a lover, in a hotel in a one-street country town. She smells like apricots and is too pure for me. I started surfing when I realised I needed something to quell my undiagnosed sex addiction. When I go out to the beach it's usually to clear my head from anyone muddled up in there. Mystery does not always equal desire, and for every woman I've been with there has been one who turned me down. Like that Fleetwood Mac song, women, they will come and they will go.

This woman doesn't turn me down. We giggle as we pay the clerk for a room upstairs. As she unlocks the door I search her hands for a ring or tattoo or some sort of sign that will remind me that she is not mine. She is the kind of girl I would have thought about being with when I was younger and hadn't yet fucked up a million times. She gardens and she volunteers at the school near Hune Hill where lots of my mob went. She says she will take me to see the farm where she lives and show me her orange trees. They are the biggest oranges, the size of basketballs and they taste like love.

'Will you cut them up for me?' I ask.

'Yes,' she says, slipping off her singlet top.

'And take the skin off?'

'Of course.'

We take the covers off the bed and she gently puts her hand on my chest and drives me back onto the mattress. She lowers herself and her legs come around my waist – I squeeze her ankles and we kiss like we've kissed each other before. How can it be that I don't feel the weight of her. That there is no taste on her tongue. No drug, no cigarette,

alcohol or coffee. I thought she'd taste like apricots or oranges. I'm getting sick, it might be the flu I've resisted all winter. Because I can't continue. My breath is ragged and the shapes and colours of her are blurring.

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I found Pearl lying on the ground a long way from the lake. She had called me there with her whistle. She looked half-dead.

The jealous part of me could have kept going but I helped her. I felt a bunch of guilt that I hadn't done anything. And I had been one of those who had talked about her at school, and after I finished school, I had helped in outcasting her. She had come here to the town for a fresh start and she hadn't got it. I got her up and walked her to the lookout where I know she stayed for a time.

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So much is in what we make of things. The stories we construct about our place in our families are essential to our lives. My father still won't say anything about it. He refuses to admit that Pearl is his mother. I make him have a break from the painting and sit him down at the kitchen table and try to convince him to accept the truth. I guess he doesn't want to know that his mother didn't want him, and all of the other things she was. But I think she was a fighter. I think there is a lot of struggle in our family and she has passed on that strength. I don't know yet if she's alive or dead, at peace or not, but I know she deserves to be a part of our family's history. The woman at the pie shop left me with this last piece of information.

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The next day when I turned up for work I heard that the bodies of all three men were found. All three of them had heart attacks, but somehow they linked it to Pearl. More rumours began to circle around the traps, about her shame and how when she was young the wind man had taken her ability to have children.

It was a few years until I figured it out. She had transferred the curse to me, by blowing the spores into the whistle and calling me with it.

I don't get people wrong. I knew she was trouble.

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I feel the old woman's fury ripple through me. And then I look at the wooden call in my palm. There's a tiny grey spore sticking to my finger. The old woman had done it. She had cursed me back.