

Coconut

‘Buddy! Why on earth are you getting so fat?’ Jenny examined the width of her cat’s girth as it wound clumsy figure eights around her legs, squawking in friendly anticipation of dinner. Like a dancing duo they tangoed to the shelf above the twin tub—the home of the cat food. Buddy stood up on his hind legs, digging his front claws into her jeans, his belly pooching out around his haunches till it resembled a bum bag.

‘Yes, yes, I’m hurrying!’ Jenny tried to gently disengage the claws from her jeans while measuring exactly half a cup, and not a bit more, of Noblecat Scientifically Formulated Diet Cat Biscuits and pouring them into Buddy’s bowl. Half of them made it into the bowl, but the rest slid off the top of the cat’s head as he ate greedily. Partially chewed biscuits dropped on the floor in small pools of cat saliva, as he looked up appreciatively at his owner, purring and chewing at the same time, before promptly tucking in again.

Jenny watched him, perplexed. ‘I spend a fortune on you at the vets, put you on this premium low-fat food, and you’re *still* obese. You *have* to be stealing food from somewhere!’

Upon waking and dressing the next morning, Jenny flicked on the kettle and chucked a spoon of instant coffee into a hastily rinsed out cup taken from the slagpile of dishes around the sink. Opening the fridge door, she found that one of her hopeless flatmates, just as illiterate about living with others as perhaps she was, had used the last of the milk and returned the empty carton to the fridge.

Jenny sighed, scraped some coins together and headed out into the broad sunlight to rectify the milkless situation. Upon reaching the first intersection, she turned left, walking along the wide red verge towards the little deli on the corner of Boulder’s main street. About halfway there was a high green fence, Super Six or Hardifence, she wasn’t sure, against which a tall, thin figure reclined. It wore only boxer shorts and its hair stuck out at gravity defying angles. As she neared she could make out that he was trying to extract the dregs out of a cask wine bladder.

Great, she thought. Some itinerant, hanging onto his goonbag like it's a life raft.

The figure stopped what it was doing and stared at her, pointedly, rudely, and Jenny stared straight ahead, at the ground, at the street signs—anywhere but back at him. After only a couple of months, fresh from the leafy suburbs of Perth, she wasn't yet used to this town, and, she thought, would *never* be used to chaps like him hanging around.

Finally she could ignore his staring no longer. Common courtesy insisted that she acknowledge him, even if she did so without smiling.

'Morning,' she muttered, as she walked past.

The figure lurched into an ungainly walk beside her.

That's where being friendly gets you.

'Hey girl, where ya goin'?'

'To the shops,' she said. 'I need milk.'

Jenny kept walking, but so did he.

'Do *you* need anything?' she queried, not so much out of generosity, as wondering why he was still by her side.

'Nah. I got cat food yesterday. I'll walk with ya though.'

She shrugged her shoulders, oblivious to his first comment. 'Okay. Whatever tickles your fancy.'

'Tickles my what? Oo-ee. What's ya name?'

'Er... Jenny,' she said reluctantly.

'Erjenny, well I be. Where'd ya get a name like that?'

She sighed. 'My mother.'

'Ya named after yer mum?'

'No, her name's not Jenny.' Jenny started to walk a little faster. 'And not Erjenny, either.'

'Oh I dunno, that's too confusing... I'll just call ya Girl, if it's all the same to you.' The stick-thin, wild-haired, bare-footed and mostly naked itinerant shuffled along faster to catch her up. 'Me name's Coconut.'

He stuck a huge bony hand in front of her.

'Coconut?' She refrained from asking "Where'd you get a name like that?" but he answered the implied question regardless.

'Hairy on the outside, sweet on the inside. Just like a coconut!'

Jenny shook the offered hand, inwardly cursing her inability to disregard common courtesy. Looking him in the face for the first time, she noticed his eyes focused in different directions. She wasn't sure which one to look at.

'I got a thick skull, too,' he said, knocking on the side of his head. He grinned the widest, most disarming, cross-eyed, tooth-missing grin, and she couldn't help but smile back, albeit hesitantly.

It didn't dawn on Jenny till she was back home that Coconut had mentioned cat food. The next morning she set out with purpose in her stride. Coconut was there, propping up the same fence he'd been at the previous morning.

'Hello there, uh... Coconut. Tell me, do you actually own a cat?'

His eyes widened, one focused earnestly on her and one to the sky, like a searchlight. 'Ooh, yeah, I got a cat! He visit every day.'

'What do you mean he visits? He doesn't live with you?'

'Nah, he don't live with me. He my buddy though. Keep me company.'

'Is he a Burmese by any chance?'

'I dunno what 'e is. Brown.'

'With a torn ear and a kink in his tail?'

'That's 'im! They make 'em with a kink in their tail now? Burmese is it? Hoo hoo, that's fancy.'

Jenny sighed and Coconut laughed with delight. 'Does 'e visit you too?'

'No, he doesn't visit me. He *belongs* to me.'

'Oh. Well, lemme tell ya, he like *me*. I give him tuna, and chicken, and beef...'

Coconut trailed off in mental search of more varieties of cat food. 'And tuna, and...'

'You shouldn't feed him, you know. He's overweight.'

'Yeah, and he get chicken, and tuna—'

'What brand do you get?'

'Oh, the stuff at the deli.'

'Domesticat?'

'That the one. He get tuna, and beef—'

'Tuna, chicken, beef,' Jenny snapped. 'That cheap stuff is all the same rubbish, don't you realise? They *all* have small amounts of chicken, tuna, and beef in them. Mainly by-products. Please don't feed him, Coconut—he's too fat.'

Coconut looked at her earnestly, eyes wide. ‘Ooh, but he eat it. Must be hungry!’ He nodded for emphasis.

‘He’s always hungry. But he’s on a diet. He’s only allowed a certain type of food, and only half a cup of that per day.’

‘But he likes *all* the food I give him! Chicken, tuna, beef... chicken...’

Jenny rolled her eyes.

‘...Tuuna...’

‘God. It’s a losing battle.’

‘What is?’

‘Dealing with you, Coconut.’

‘I reckon I fought a few losing battles in my time, Girl.’ He grinned his toothless grin and winked with his good eye.

Undoubtedly true, she admitted to herself, softening a little. ‘I’m going to the shops. You coming?’

‘Sure thing, Girl.’

‘No cat food, though, okay? Get an iced coffee, or a KitKat or something, instead.’

‘Eh?’

They walked a short way in silence.

‘Do you have family?’ Jenny ventured, after a while.

‘Yeah, I got family. Lots of. Don’t reckon they seen me for a long time.’ Coconut stared at the ground, scuffing the gravel with his bare feet as he walked. ‘One day I reckon I’d like to see ‘em again.’

Jenny’s house was on Dwyer Street, four or five blocks back from the main drag. The further back you got, the dodgier it felt to her. Closer to the prison, for a start. To live on the fringes of a town as remote as Boulder made her feel it more keenly—the isolation. Living on the brink of town, and the brink of craziness. Hundreds of k’s of nothing between here and the next human dwelling on the periphery of some other town. She’d lie awake in bed at night, hearing the constant murmur and beeping of heavy machinery in the Superpit up the road, but listening to what lay behind that. The miles and miles and miles of... silence. The outback is a cold and lonely place at night, she mused. And in the daytime... a town of more than 30,000 people is still an almost insignificant speck in this vast country, baking under an unforgiving sky.

But, for some reason she couldn't put her finger on, Jenny loved it. She loved the red dirt and the absence of grass, the sprawling roads wide enough to turn a camel train. She loved the saltbush smell in the air when torrential storms flooded the town after days of almost unbearable, stifling sultriness. She didn't even mind the tinge of desperation this town gave her and the other inhabitants alike. She liked that the view from the lurching sickness of a small plane was of an oasis in the desert, a town of neat rows and surprisingly green trees and swimming pools in backyards, but that from ground level, to be honest, it was a bit of a hellhole. An interesting hellhole, though, she mused.

She might even get used to living here.

'One day I'm gonna get myself an F truck. You know those big ones? That's what I want. One of those, and I'll drive it to Geraldton and find my family. Hoo hoo!' Coconut threw his head back and laughed. 'That'll be one good party!'

They walked in step. Jenny grinned at the thought of Coconut having a hoedown with his long-lost family.

'Yeah, Coconut, do it. It's too lonely here by yourself. Go find them!'

'Yeah, well.'

'Well what?'

'Gotta get the cash first.'

'When will you have the cash?'

'One day, maybe.'

'You have to stop spending it on cat food,' she chastised. 'And goon.'

He shrugged.

'You'll have to get a job.'

'Who gonna give a fella like me a job?'

Jenny frowned. She noticed, while pondering his question and listening to the crunching and scraping of gravel under her shoes, that Coconut's footsteps were silent—it was only her own she could hear.

Eventually she gave up on trying to answer his question.

So was the friendly routine that would be kept up for three years. Every morning Coconut was reliably propping up the fence until Jenny walked past, at which point he would lurch into a sauntering gait, keeping stride with her. He'd chat for the few minutes it took to reach the shop, and then peel off to who knows where. Jenny soon began to enjoy their short walks—there was no pressure, for they always came with the guarantee of brevity... until the next day when she'd be walking past again. And she would be, whether she needed milk or bread or cigarettes for her flatmate, or even nothing at all—because she found that she also needed the exercise, the morning sunlight, the open air. The song of birds, before the day became too hot for them to bother. She needed, too, the few short words of conversation, or quiet companionship—because she discovered that Coconut could be a pensive chap, and some days he talked hardly at all—and that was okay too.

Jenny got home one morning to the phone ringing.

'Hello? Oh hi, Dad! What's up, is everything okay? You've just heard from the doctor? What's wrong with Mum?' She laughed nervously. 'What do you mean, the C word?' Her face clouded over and she sat down. '... Oh... *That C word.*'

When she hung up the phone she sat still for a long time. She should feel something, she thought. But what are you supposed to feel in the face of cancer?

Maybe feelings would come later. Being told your mother's been given six months to live probably takes a while to sink in. But what is one supposed to *do* in this situation? She sat, trying unsuccessfully to think, for what felt like an age. Abruptly, though, she found an answer. She picked up the phone and hit number one on auto dial.

'Dad—it's me again. I'm coming home. I'll sell my stuff. Okay. Yes. I'll stay with you guys for a while. Help out a bit. Yes, I want to. No Dad, I'm doing it. Yes, I'll look after myself. You too.'

Within two weeks of receiving the news, she'd wound up her job, hocked her furniture, and packed up her old Toyota Corolla until it was full to the brim and all she could see in the rear view mirror was an accumulation of necessary junk—and far too soon, it seemed, she was covering, bit by bit, the 600 k's of straight road between her home and... her other home.

Buddy meowed and caterwauled from his cage on the front seat. In an attempt to occupy him, Jenny rummaged through loose papers and rubbish in the console, finding an envelope from some long-ago opened mail. She began to feed it through the wires of the cat carrier and jumped as it was torn from her fingers by razor sharp talons at full extension. The envelope was then methodically ripped apart into myriad tiny pieces, each one chewed up and spat out by the enraged animal inside.

‘Not happy about leaving, Buddy? Should I have left you with Coconut?’ Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. ‘No. It’ll be hard enough saying goodbye to Mum. I can’t lose you too.’ She stuck a finger between the wires, hoping to give him a scratch behind the ear. He tore a sliver of skin from her finger.

Jenny was settled back in Perth when the realisation came that she’d never even said goodbye to Coconut. She wondered how he was going with his dream of buying an F truck and seeing his family again. She remembered that time her handbag had been stolen and he’d stood outside her house all day, guarding the place in case the thieves came with her keys and knowledge of her address from the cards in her wallet. He’d threatened to string them up to the tree on her verge. She laughed to herself, remembering the call she’d made to her flatmates at their work, to warn them to get their story straight!

She tried to remember the last time she’d seen Coconut. All their shared walks to the shop seemed to merge in memory. It was like he’d always been there—always had been, and always would be. His was a presence that had faded out of her life without ceremony, but with a finality that escaped her at the time.

In the ensuing year she said goodbye to her mother, and had such a hard time finding work that she felt like an outsider looking in on her old life. She decided she knew a tinge of how Coconut must have felt. Grief and job seeking took up a large part of her energy—but still she found time to think of Coconut.

When two weeks’ worth of work came up in Kalgoorlie she jumped at the chance. With her ex-flatmates long moved on, she rang friends who still lived a block away from her old house and asked if she could sleep on their couch. When she arrived, though tired from the drive, they had beers and talked late into the night. They surfaced late the next morning.

‘How’s old Coconut going, anyway?’ she asked her friend Robbo, over coffee.

‘Who the hell’s Coconut?’

‘You know, that guy who... nevermind. If you knew him, you’d know who I mean.’ She slurped the rest of her coffee and slapped the mug back on the table. ‘Thanks. I’m just popping out for a walk!’

Robbo raised a bemused eyebrow. ‘No worries.’

Meredith and Robbo lived a block closer to Coconut’s hangout than Jenny had. She got to the end of their street and turned left, her eyes scanning the green fence that soon came into view. There was no Coconut, not even any trace of his presence. There was only a pile of leaves and rubbish, blown up against the fence where he once resided. She walked past unhurriedly, and then turned left and meandered down the road for a couple of blocks and then up the next, searching in vain for any evidence that he might still be around. She realised how little she actually knew of him. What was his real name? Did he have a house around here? There had never been a supermarket trolley filled with belongings, or other sign of homelessness... she’d always assumed he’d had a place to go to at night.

Speaking of home... she doubled back to walk past her old house. When she finally got there, she stood by the tree on the verge that had, thankfully, never ended up needing someone strung up to it. From there she could see over the front fence and down the side of the house, nearly the full length of the quarter acre yard. She smiled at the little bull nosed verandah, the row of geraniums in front of it that she’d planted from cuttings taken through fences, and the tough old vinca, stubborn enough to survive summer after summer with hardly a drop of water. She remembered the camping trips, the drives out bush. The parties they’d had. Nights out. Hangovers. Laughs. She stood, basking in three years’ worth of memories—there were so many of them, some good, some bad, but none regretted—and she wasn’t really paying attention to the little girl staring back at her from the gate, or the lady, presumably the girl’s mother, who was hanging out washing on the hills hoist, throwing frequent looks in Jenny’s direction. She came up to the gate. ‘Can I help you?’

‘Oh, hi. No thanks, I’m fine.’

‘So... what are you doing here?’

‘Uh, nothing. I just used to live here, that’s all.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, you can come in if you like?’

‘No, it’s fine.’

‘Well... can you please go away then?’

Jenny sighed. ‘Sure. Okay.’

For the whole two weeks Jenny kept an eye open for Coconut, but it was a fruitless pursuit. And then her work was over, and she felt her stay with her friends was worn out. Any idea of returning to this town in the Goldfields was squashed. It was all history, no place left for her now. She threw her bags into the back of the Corolla and thanked her friends, allowing herself to be talked into one last cup of coffee on their verandah as the sun began its descent and the shadows grew long.

‘You sure you won’t stay another night?’ Meredith asked. ‘It’ll be really late by the time you get back to Perth.’

‘It’s okay. I don’t mind driving at night. It’s cooler, the car runs better.’

‘Yeah, but the roos...’ Robbo warned.

‘I’ll be careful.’

‘And what about psychos?’ Meredith worried.

‘Plenty of them around,’ Jenny countered. ‘Time of day won’t make any difference.’ Finally, leaving could be postponed no longer, and her friends stood at the gate, waving goodbye, until she was at the end of the street.

Wasting no time settling in for the long journey ahead, she kicked off her shoes and turned the radio on. As she turned the corner, her eyes couldn’t help but scan Coconut’s fence, and she saw a group of Aboriginal boys hanging around. Without thinking she pulled over, grabbed her handbag and jumped out of the car. They started walking away as she approached. ‘Wait! It’s okay, I just want to ask something!’

They ignored her.

‘Wait, I’ll pay you!’

They stopped, curious, and she caught up to them, walking frantically but as if on stilts, the gravel disrespectful of her soft bare feet.

‘Is Coconut still around?’ she asked, slightly out of breath, to be met only with blank stares. ‘You know, the guy who used to always hang out here? Wild-haired, wild-eyed?’ She grinned at the memory of him. *Warm-hearted*, she nearly added.

‘Nah,’ said the oldest of the group. ‘Dunno anyone called Coconut.’

‘What kind of a name is that, anyway?’ said another.

‘Brown on the outside but white on the inside,’ said another. ‘You don’t know that?’

That’s what it means?

Jenny was suddenly ashamed of her own naivety. An insult that had likely been leveled at Coconut so often it became the only name he was known by. Too white to fit with the other blacks in the area, yet he would not be accepted as white—not in this town... not the way *he* looked. He was lost in a kind of no man's land.

Disheartened, she turned to go. Then she hesitated. *Maybe...* It was worth a shot. 'Maybe you saw a fellow with an F truck?'

Shrugs and head-shakes all round. She stood still, as if waiting longer might prompt recollection.

'You said you'd pay us?' said one. His baseball cap was on backwards.

Jenny scuffled around in her handbag, eventually handing him a \$5 note. 'It's all I've got.'

He took it with a grin. 'Oh yeah,' he piped up, as if the money magically aided recall. 'I saw an F truck once.' The others guffawed, and they all began to leave.

'Wait! If you ever see him again, can you pass on a message? Tell him I've got his cat.' She shuffled along faster to keep pace with them on her bare feet, too busy scrawling her number on a scrap of paper from her bag to notice the role reversal taking place—this was a re-enactment of her first encounter with Coconut, except this time *she* was the unwelcome barefoot one. She shoved the note into the oldest boy's hand. 'This is my number, in Perth. Tell him I'll look after the cat for him. It'll have a good home—it can have chicken, and tuna, and beef, and...' she trailed off, trying to remember the complete range of Domesticat flavours. 'Chicken... and tuuna... and...'

She snapped back to the moment. 'You'll do that for me, won't you?'

'I spose.'

'It's important to me, okay?'

'Alright, alright, I'll do it,' said the boy, shrugging in irritation.

With a mumbled word of thanks Jenny turned to go.

'Hey,' the boy called after her. 'It doesn't say your name?'

'Tell him it's...' She stood, deliberating for a moment. She realised that to Coconut, *she* had no real name either. 'Girl. My name's Girl.'

She walked back to her car and dropped her keys twice while trying to unlock the driver's-side door, before remembering she hadn't locked it in the first place. She got in, turned the key in the ignition and checked the mirrors, no longer really expecting to catch a glimpse of Coconut's ungainly saunter. She killed the radio and slowly

drove the journey her and Coconut had walked so many times. When she got to the Burt Street intersection she sat for longer than necessary. In fact, she lost track of how many moments she idled there, only snapping out of her reverie when a car behind her honked its horn.

It wasn't an F truck.

Instead of turning left as she was indicating, she turned right to do a slow trawl of Burt Street, noting the orange radiance of the fading day, and the quiet dignity of the heritage listed buildings. At the top of the street she did a U-turn and doubled back to stop in at the deli, buying an iced coffee, a KitKat, and every tin of cat food on the shelf. She chucked it all on the passenger's seat beside her, put on some tunes, and began the long drive home.