

Ellen van Neerven

## Hot Stones

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- 5 Thirteen is the age that makes you. I lived in the Hill End Road house with my mother and grandmother. When I complained about no electricity, or that the toilet was outdoors, my grandmother said, 'Colin, look,' pointing to the grasslands that surrounded our property and the mountain they held. 'You are living and breathing on country. This makes you my very special grandson.'
- 10 When dinner had been prepared and I'd eaten with my usual ferocity, I would sit eagerly by my grandmother's side and wait for her yarnin' time. Even when I could barely keep my eyes open, I put my head to the floorboards and listened.
- 15 As the only child in the house, I liked when my cousin Amy came to visit with my uncle, and we would nick the quad bikes at the car shop on the corner and race through the flats. The bikes never had much fuel, so we knew we could only go so far – our perimeter was the most-times empty creek bed or Magpie Rock.
- 20 "I knew we were both itching to go further, knowing that when we got home, Amy would have to go before dusk, back to the city, and I would be thinking about school the next day. School and the other kids was still something I was negotiating. My father had come from Ireland so I wasn't very dark. When I passionately shared a few of the stories my grandmother told me, the other kids called me half-caste. It didn't really stop me, though; I even spoke up in English
- 25 class, because the teacher was talking like we weren't even here before, and I got kicked out and had the whole oval to myself until lunchtime. I made a nest out of the twigs. I was the sort of kid who couldn't stop touching the earth, sculpting it with my hands.
- 30 "That was when I saw Mia. She was beautifully brown. Her face was brown and her arms were brown and her legs were brown. She was walking with her adoptive mother – they had come through the gate at the bottom of the oval. I gathered up my bottle caps and put them in the pockets of my shorts and scrambled over the banks and followed them. I knew I should have made myself known and helped them find their way, but I straightaway felt embarrassed that I wasn't in class. They would smell the cigarettes on my breath and think I was a delinquent. Plus Mia was
- 35 dressed all pretty, too, shiny black shoes and white socks. Too flash for us Murriss here. They disappeared into the school office. After lunch I saw she was in my class. I rushed home and told grandmother, 'There is another black kid in my class! A girl!' Grandmother said, 'Go easy. I have to see if we're related, first.'
- 40 Mia had come from up north way. I talked with her and found she tolerated my humour. I shared with her half of the biscuit that my mother packed me. While we were sitting under a tree I felt a sharp sting on my leg and said I'd been bitten. 'Probably a spider or something,' I said, rubbing the red mark on my knee. She looked down at my leg and laughed. 'That's an ant bite.'
- 45 We hung out after school. I took her to see the places I took my cousin, and we found our own places, too.

One of these places was the small steep hill near our property. It crawled with a sort of shrub and was a challenge to climb. Mia was new to the terrain, and often stopped to touch the leaves of certain trees. I was used to her slowing us down. She pulled one of the dry vines out from under the small plant. The plant had little round berries, the colour of bush tomatoes, except they were  
50 fuzzy.

‘These look like what we have at home,’ Mia said. She was excited by it. ‘The old women, they told me about it. They use it for bush medicine.’

‘For what?’ I asked.

55 ‘Headaches, toothaches, all kinds of things. When a girl has her period, too.’

I blushed for some reason and even got my shoelaces caught.

I noticed that Mia liked to draw in class. When the two-week anniversary of our meeting came around I got her a book – The Art of Drawing Trees – from the flea market at the showgrounds. I’d say I was in love. My heart burned and my stomach dropped into my pants.

60 She was ballsy and she was fast. We raced each other. Her legs were like stalks – and she had the skinny Murri ankles. She beat me still. She came home with me most afternoons, when we were tired and hungry. We sat on the floor drinking ginger beer and I was in bliss having all my favourite people around me. Mum and Nana loved her as much as I did. Mum and Nana were in the kitchen cooking chicken. Knowing dinner was a long way off still, Mia and I were planning the route for a  
65 race. It was going to be from the creek to Magpie Rock. Mia felt for the dusty curtains behind her and put her head outside; her nose twitched.

‘Is it going to storm?’ she asked when we stepped outside.

One side of the sky was blue and the other was black, so it could go either way.

70 ‘Don’t wait ’til the migar n maral,’ my grandmother would say to me. ‘Don’t wait until the thunder and lightning.’

Mia was wincing at the first sign of moisture dropping from above.

I goaded her. ‘You scared?’

75 She gave me a hurt look, and mumbled something about having to get home. She disappeared into the darkness. And even though I would see her again the next day, I was devastated and I went to bed cradling her scent. The storm didn’t even hit.

80 What I didn’t get was how the other kids treated her at school. Where they treated me with an acceptance sharpened by a respectful weariness, every class was built as a game around laughing at her. Mick Hammer called her names I didn’t quite yet understand. And Mick’s likely girlfriend, Emily (it wasn’t official yet), said she was dog ugly.

Mia was still herself in class and Mum would say to her, ‘They’re just jealous of your looks, bub.’ Mia didn’t talk of the family that she might have had and might have known. She loved her guardian, though Mia said she was always telling her not to do things. Mia would imitate her to a  
85 tee; ‘Mi, speak English! Mi, don’t swear, Mi put your shoes on, Mi don’t eat that.’

One day Emily came to school unable to talk because of a toothache. She was struggling with it and she would have to wait ’til the weekend to go to the dentist.

90 Mick held her hand as if she was dying. When they walked from class to class everyone stared at the way she held her mouth like it might fall off. On the third day of this, Mick said, ‘Can anyone

help her?’ My mother was a nurse before she raised me, and the women in town often called her up to ask her things, but there was no way I was going to help Emily.

Mia surprised me with her benevolence when she whispered, ‘Those berries we saw on the hill, Colin.’

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Mia went back there without me and got a handful of the berries off the tree. The next day she walked up to Emily on the playground. Emily looked at her suspiciously. Emily was the one that had started the trend for all the girls in our grade to not go within ten metres of Mia, and walk fast when walking past her, which meant that Mia was always by herself when the girls and boys were split up. If one of the girls forgot, Emily would snort her horse-like giggle and say, ‘Oh, you got fleas now.’

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Emily must have had the toothache so bad because when Mia said, ‘Here, put these in your mouth, they will help. Don’t swallow,’ Emily looked left and right and accepted them in her hand. When Mia lingered, Emily opened her nasty mouth and said, ‘What are you looking at, dog? Get away from me.’

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I took Mia away and said, ‘Why did you help her?’ Mia just shook her head.

Before the next class, I went to have a smoke in the out-of-bounds area behind the stand-up shacks. Mia, like always, refused to come when I went for a smoke.

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When I got back to the classroom, everything had changed. I learnt Emily had had an allergic reaction, her mouth and her whole face had swelled up, and she was taken to the hospital. Mia was in the principal’s office. When the teachers scolded her, called her evil, she said nothing and looked down, refusing to make eye contact. She looked like she was smiling to herself. It infuriated them further.

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But when she saw me afterwards, she was upset and said quietly, ‘I didn’t mean to. Wasn’t gammon with her or anything. You know that, right? I got ’em confused.’

I kicked at a stone in our path. I was angry. She was suspended for a week and I wouldn’t get to see her. The principal said he showed some leniency in not expelling her because the next school was an hour away. I walked her home. We were a street away from her house when we both turned around at the sound of a car zipping behind. It was Mick Hammer and his crew, his brother, Ant, driving. They screamed at Mia as they went past, and screeched the car to a halt in the middle of the road.

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The shriek made my chest heave. I started to walk right around the car, though Mia wasn’t following.

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‘I just want to ask if she’s okay,’ Mia said.

‘No,’ I said, dragging her. ‘C’mon.’

We were almost running when we stepped off the road. I didn’t get her going fast enough for her not to hear Mick’s spray; he yelled he was going to kill her. We raced each other to her house; I let her win and she knew it.

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When am I going to see you again?’ I said, forlorn and not out of breath. I stared up into her honey-brown eyes.

She must have known I wanted to hug her because she folded her arms across her chest. ‘We’ll meet every day at the hill, okay? At four.’

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'You better,' I said.

'No doubt 'bout it.'

140 It was only when I turned away that I saw her house had been pelted with shit. I drew my eyes away from the sight and to the letterbox on the street – it was crowded with envelopes. I opened them all. Some had already been opened but stuffed back in. It must have been weeks' worth. Hate mail. Mia hadn't told me.

By the next day I had forgotten about Mick and the others, I was dreaming of my life with Mia. The curve of her neck, those legs on show. In the classroom I observed the other girls and wondered why I didn't feel the thump like I did for her.

145 When the bell rang I slapped my backpack on and ran to the hill. I was there until 5 p.m. before I realised she wasn't coming. She must have only been around me because of proximity. Now that she didn't have to anymore she had no interest.

Even Mum's warm shortbread didn't help. My grandmother said, 'Cheer up, grandson. You are too young to be looking backwards.'

150 I retired to my bedroom early, surprising both of them.

I heard my grandmother tread labouredly to my door. 'Don't you want to hear a story tonight? Mum has a pie in the oven.'

'No stories,' I said.

155 The call at 9 p.m. sat me up. Nobody ever called us. No one else in our family paid their phone bill, our relatives just showed up at the house and didn't let us know they were coming.

"My mother was whispering and when she saw me her eyes got smaller.

'What is it?'

'Go to bed, Colin. I'm going out. Stay with Nana and I want you to do everything she tells you to do.'

160 I stood tall. She saw I wasn't going to move.

She said, 'Mia hasn't come home ...'

165 Our headlights found Mia's shirt, floating like a dollar note in the dust and mist of the night. We stopped the car and her guardian got out first. The way she ran down the bank I knew she had located Mia. I shut the door against my side when I got out, but the sharp and immediate pain paled to the thwack of the horror I got when I saw Mia bent over herself in the grass.

170 At first it was like I didn't understand why there was so much blood. I thought the leeches had got her. They were bad down there in the swampy area. As my mother moved past me to Mia I registered the mud on her cheeks and underneath her eyes. Her stomach was raw skin and there was blood growing on her jeans.

We raced to the hospital, surged through the Emergency doors and were hit with a buffer. The white women whispering, 'Rape doesn't take priority to heart attack. You're going to have to sit down.'

175 I snatched the television remote from the woman, pulling it apart like Lego blocks and smashing it under my feet. Mia was making her first noises of hurt. And the woman kept whispering, 'They're all crazy, twisted, that's right. Out of control.'

I heard that when they asked Mia, 'Who?' she closed her eyes and started to tremble.

180 It was a few days until I got to see her in the hospital room. Mia wouldn't look up at me, and I was afraid to get too close.

I knew it was the best thing for Mia to move away, but for a long while, all through high school especially, I thought about her dying every night. I couldn't shake it. As soon as I could I left the mountain and the stories behind.

185 Years later, when I did find myself missing it all, prodding for a former version of me that wasn't  
sculpted in anger – what do they say in Sydney: Aboriginal men are always angry – it was maybe  
too late; my grandmother had gone and my mother was an old woman who had turned timid. The  
Hill End Road house of generations had been sold and the mountain was out of my mind's eye. I  
wasn't a bush boy anymore, not a bush man. I had been in Sydney for almost a decade. I had  
190 stopped ticking the box. I thought, what's the point? By then I had seen Mia at least three times:  
on the Parramatta train, in the Chinatown food court and dancing in a flash club on Oxford Street.  
She told me if I was going to make my way back home I'd better do it soon before the dust had  
covered my tracks.

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