

The Wildflowers

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(First published in Fantastic Wonder Stories, 2007)

"Where are we?"

"Jesus, Amy," Jody squeezed the steering wheel, her palms squeaking against the plastic. "I told you, we'll be there soon, okay? Just be patient." A tickle of perspiration rolled down from her temple and she used her shoulder to wipe it away.

"You said that over an hour ago and nothing's changed." Amy's words grew muffled as she turned to stare through the dusty window at the red landscape beyond. "There's still just dirt out there. Red dirt as far as you can see. I *told* you I didn't want to go away. Why wouldn't you just listen to me?" More than fifteen years without any form of contact and then here she was, appearing like a magician and wanting to start over, as if it were that simple. And damn her husband for thinking it a good idea.

"You used to love camping, Amy. When we were growing up, you'd get so excited the night before we'd leave to meet dad—"

"That was a different life, Jody. I'm not the same person as then." She stared at her reflection in the filthy side window. "I hate the outback." Her hair, so ponytail neat at the start of the day now reflected a spiky image full of angst. Beyond that window, small scraggly needlewoods rose above the otherwise barren landscape in a mockery of her appearance.

The last sign had read 'Elsewhere 25,' and that seemed a millennium ago, before the world outside had grown barren, before the wind had eroded away the rocks and buildings and spread red dust remains everywhere.

"We used to have fun out here when we were kids. What

happened wasn't your fault, y'know."

Amy ignored her.

The dirt road continued to unpeel before them, shimmering away into the distance, leading towards the end of the world – or perhaps this was how Armageddon would look, she thought; hot, barren and endless. Trapped with a memory of bitter times.

Finally, after further eons of awkward silence, blocky shapes and smears of green started to form from the haze on the horizon.

"See? I told you we were nearly there," said Jody, flashing her younger sister a crooked smile.

They passed another weathered sign; 'Elsewhere 2.'

Amy reached for the map by her feet and searched for the approaching township. She knew what she would find though, just as before when they had seen the previous sign. "Where are we, though? This place isn't on the map, Jody. I've got no idea where we are."

"Just like when we were young."

Amy flopped back in her seat and let the map fall to the ground. "I should've just stayed home; I can't believe you talked Tom into agreeing with you, and I can't believe I listened to him." She wiped her brow, then leaned forward and fiddled with the controls of the air con but they were already set on full. "Does the air conditioning even work in this car? I've never been so *hot!*"

The car slowed down as Jody turned into the car park before a general store named Elsewhere's Everything ('*We've even got the Computer Internet!*'). She stopped in front of one of the two old petrol pumps and let the engine idle.

"We're not *really* staying here, are we?"

"Jesus, Amy!" Jody thumped the steering wheel like an exclamation. "Do you ever stop complaining? How does Tom put

up with it?"

"It's your fault for making me go somewhere I didn't want to go!"

"But you never want to go *anywhere* anymore!"

Amy turned away, looking instead at the dilapidated buildings outside. She wanted nothing more to do with this conversation. There were memories there she had spent a lifetime forgetting.

The air conditioning unit whirled and clanked over the silence, but it did little to cool the heat.

There was a man on the general store's veranda, hiding from the sun under the old corrugated roof, his face masked by the shadows. Amy watched as he took off his cowboy hat and wiped his brow, stepping back into the shade as he did so as if he did not want to be seen.

"Well?" Jody asked as the silence stretched.

Next to Elsewhere's Everything was The Dusty Inn, a large squat building with red and black West End Draught signs on the roof like eyebrows. A large veranda spread along the front of the pub, casting deep shadows despite the afternoon brightness. The awnings were down to cover the windows, but even as Amy observed, one rolled silently upwards to reveal a window like an empty eye socket.

"We have to talk about it eventually, Amy. Things won't be better between us until we do."

The man back at the general store had moved deeper into the shadows, now little more than a suggestion among that darkness; Amy could barely see him.

"Fine, be that way," Jody turned off the car and opened her door, letting in more of the desert heat. "I'm going for a walk to chill out, and then I'm going into that pub to have a drink. When you think you can be a bit more pleasant, maybe you can join me." She slammed the door and stalked away, not once looking back.

"Hey!" Amy called after her but Jody ignored her. She sat there for a moment, watching her sister walk off. Surely she was joking? She wouldn't really leave her out here, would she?

But even as those thoughts fluttered through her head, her sister disappeared around the corner of the General Store.

"Jody, wait a minute!" She fumbled with the door lock, managed to unlock it and reached for the handle-

A fly-screen door slammed like a gunshot in the afternoon stillness.

She looked up, across the carpark; a scarecrow of a man in faded jeans and a black singlet had emerged from the shadows of the pub. He was heading towards her.

Amy locked her door again and sat back, watching him come.

He walked with a jerk, his arms twitching in time with his step. His face was like creased leather, his cheekbones prominent, almost pointed. He stumbled towards the car, his eyes resolute, searing hers. Then, just as she was sure he was going to try and open the door, his eyes flicked towards the man standing deep in the shadows of Elsewhere's Everything, and in that second, his step faltered and it looked as though he might collapse. He quickly gathered himself and hurried past the car, keeping his eyes downcast.

He muttered something as he went, but she couldn't hear what. She turned to watch the scarecrow man round the corner; he too, never once looked back.

The sound of another door closing was unmistakable in the sudden returning silence; it carried far across the carpark, this time like a forlorn cry.

Amy turned back to the general store; the man in the cowboy hat had gone inside.

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Out across the desert, where neither shade nor cloud gave respite from the baking sun, out among the scraggly Saltbushes

and dead-looking Mulga Trees, something stirred...

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Amy fidgeted in the passenger's seat; perspiration had soaked the back of her shirt and her armpits, had plastered her brown hair to her scalp. Parked in the scant shade of a River Gum, the car was stifling without the air con, and winding down the window only let in the flies. The backs of her legs stuck to the vinyl upholstery as she tried to get comfortable.

If only Jody hadn't taken the damn keys, she thought bitterly, but of course her sister had done so deliberately.

She drained the last mouthful of water from her bottle before letting it fall onto the map. With the beginnings of a headache pulsing in her vision, she stared at The Dusty Inn; how long a walk would Jody take in this heat? It was too hot to go far, but unless there was a back door into the pub, she was yet to come back this way.

The pub shimmered like an oasis; it was likely to be cool in there, and there were bound to be people, too. Sounds to tell her she wasn't alone, wasn't yet dead.

She scanned the parking lot again; no blind or door had opened since the scarecrow man had passed by and the man in the cowboy hat had gone inside. But it was such a formidable landscape; there were bound to be spiders scuttling up the wheels, scorpions waiting amongst the dust, and snakes, snakes slithering about under the car.

She trembled at the thought - but it was growing unbearable inside the car and without water, she didn't know how long she could sit here.

Maybe there was a back door to the pub. Perhaps Jody was already inside, sipping a cool drink in air-conditioned comfort and losing patience again.

"Damn you, Jody," she whispered. She wiped her sweaty forehead one final time before unlocking the door. She leaned

out, looked under the car, then got out, locked the door behind her and hurried towards the pub.

A fly landed on her lip and she quickly brushed it away. It came back to land on her cheek, its feet like cold pin-pricks. Again, she swatted at the insect.

The desert heat sucked at her breath. High overhead, a solitary kite glided on the hot currents of air, and its whistling cry was a sound of despair.

Another fly came to join the first, buzzing about her face before landing at the corner of her eye. "Go away!" She demanded, swiping at that one and the others that were growing in number about her head. The flies dodged her attempts, persistent and determined, even landing on her waving arms.

She hurried up the porch steps. As she pushed open the door, a welcoming breath of cool air greeted her and frightened away the flies. She quickly closed the door behind her to keep them out.

Her eyes struggled to make out the interior details after the brightness of the desert: a bar directly opposite, several barrel tables in-between, a handful of people. Booths lined one wall, and she quickly took a seat in the one nearest the door, suddenly conscious of the stares. She pressed her sweaty forehead against the cool wooden table top and closed her eyes, willing herself to disappear.

Jack Johnson sung lazily from the jukebox. He was probably near the sea, with a cool sea breeze blowing over him.

A sudden bang on the table caused her to start. She looked up; a glass of iced water sat in front of her, beads of condensation trickling down its sides. An old woman stood next to the table, her face a weathered landscape, her eyes yellow and veined, the skin beneath them saggy and shadowed.

"I didn't ask for that," Amy said, licking her lips.

"You look thirsty, is all," The woman shrugged. Her voice was

dry like the desert.

Amy's shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry," she sighed. "I'm just hot and bothered. I'm not used to this heat." She reached for the glass and took a drink, her eyes closing as she did so. It tasted good, so cold and refreshing, despite the desert aftertaste.

After drinking nearly half, she put the glass down and wiped her mouth. She looked back at the waitress, who hadn't moved from the table. "I'm looking for my sister," she said. "I was supposed to meet her here, but--"

"You don't smell right."

"Excuse me?"

The lady looked at her a moment before turning away. She said something as she headed towards the bar, and it took several seconds for Amy to register what she had said. Like the beginning of a sensual melody, a chill danced along her arms and the air conditioning suddenly made her shiver:

'The Wildflowers will still hear you.'

A long-suppressed memory suddenly glistened from the darkness of her past; she was sitting around an open campfire, listening to the fire crackle and the wood spit as a man from a nearby town told them about the Wildflowers, the beasts of the desert, made of the land-

She struggled to recollect more but the memory slipped away like a dream upon waking, taking the chill with it.

Amy felt her bottom lip start to tremble; she bit into it and looked around the pub, desperate now to find Jody. She started to stand before laying eyes on the people sitting near the bar; dusty desert folk, dressed in jeans and singlets, some in shorts and T-shirts. They were languid, like the day had dried them out, but they were all watching her, smiling sly smiles, sharing looks amongst themselves.

A new song started up from the old jukebox; The Devil Inside,

by INXS.

She sank back to her seat, her pulse thundering in her ears.

"Hi!"

She spun around; a young girl stood before her, looking as dusty as the town. Hair platted in pigtails that looked grey beneath the dirt, her face worn, eyes too old for a child.

"You're not *really* from the city, are you?" The girl asked.

Amy nodded, too startled to speak. *Where had she come from?*

The girl shrugged. "They'll hear that in your scream then, when they come. It's what they do. It's why you're here."

"Who?" Amy croaked. Something about the girl-

"If I were you, *I'd* remember. City screams sound different."

Pool balls smacked against one another from a nearby room, and Amy jumped. She glanced in the direction of the sound and when she looked back, the girl was gone.

Another tock! from the hidden room, but now the sound was somehow wrong, as if eggs were being used instead of pool balls, the shells cracking with the impact.

Cold fingers tickled her neck. She stood, bumping the table, knocking over the glass, spilling water everywhere, and lurched for the door.

Her head spun and for a moment, she thought she was going to collapse, but the feeling passed as quickly as it had come. She grabbed the door and jerked it open, running outside, back out into the heat and dust and flies, heading for the car, fumbling in her pockets for the keys as she ran.

But she didn't have them.

They'll hear that in your scream-

The door wouldn't open. "No, no, no!" She curled her hands into fists and thumped the car's roof. A fly landed on her lip and she blew it away as she ran around to the driver's side.

She tried the handle - locked.

"No!"

Her head spun, her vision swirling as if she were drunk; she grabbed the car in fear of fainting and dropped to her haunches. With one hand, she feebly shooed away the persistent flies as a terrible thought laced her.

They had drugged her!

The sun blasted her like an interrogation lamp, making her squint and causing her head to ache even more. The flies were a constant now, a cold prickling panic crawling all over her face, ignoring her attempts to disperse them.

There were shadows out in the desert, shifting about as if under a wind. She rubbed her face and looked again; the shadows were still there, shading the Mulga and straggly Saltbush as they swelled across the flat desert landscape.

A dust storm?

As her dizziness passed, she rose and peeked over the bonnet. She couldn't see anyone across that dusty landscape, but then she remembered the man in the cowboy hat and quickly dropped from sight.

He could be there now, waiting for her to collapse.

Amy pressed both hands against her face and willed herself to calm down. The flies crawled over the backs of her hands and across her neck, but she ignored them.

She forced herself to look over the bonnet again, knowing she had to find her sister if they were to get out of here.

There was no one about. The townsfolk were making no effort to chase her down - but how long until the drugs kicked in?

"Oh Jody, where are you?" Her voice trembled, threatening to fall apart in the desolate afternoon. With one final look at the General Store, she hurried towards the road.

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Flies buzzed and circled but never landed as the approaching storm of shadows drifted towards town, breaking apart and reforming as it came.

The cramps of hunger drove it, drove *them*, for now figures grew more distinct amongst that roiling darkness, each as determined as the other, each so much more in *need* than the next.

On they came, relentless, their eyes bleeding with desire as they crept towards Elsewhere..

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"Oh no," She croaked as she rounded the corner of Elsewhere's Everything and saw the town. Her arms dropped to her sides and instantly, the flies landed.

Elsewhere almost did not exist; a handful of houses on either side of a wide dirt road that merged seamlessly with the desert. There were no fence lines, no gardens, lawns - nothing other than the red sand. Behind the houses on her left was a meandering line of Red River Gums. And that was Elsewhere, in all its glory. The weathered town showed no signs of life, no signs that people lived there or had for some time.

"Jody," said Amy, hugging herself and staring down the dirt road. "Where are you?" She could be inside one of the houses or wandering the desert beyond. Maybe among those trees, where at least there'd be shade.

Amy started walking towards the trees, the desert silence loud around her. She held her breath, feeling like an intruder.

Run-down houses coated in dust, windows closed and obscured, gutters rusted, paint weathered away.

Behind her, the shadows had spread across the day, closer now, yet still without a touch of wind in the air.

She no longer felt the flies that were crawling over her face, supping at the moisture from the corner of her eyes and from her lips. She no longer felt them on her arms or neck, or crawling up her nose.

There was no need to build the houses close together out here

where land was so abundant, but between two, slipping into darkness too thick to see through, Amy saw an alleyway.

The dizziness returned and Amy staggered. She felt her stomach churn and suddenly she was sick, vomiting onto the red desert sand of the road.

As the nausea passed, she wiped her mouth and looked behind her again, back towards the carpark and the approaching darkness. *What had they done to her?*

Her arms prickled with goosebumps. How long did she have before they came for her and she couldn't run away?

She approached the alleyway and stood upon the threshold for a second before stepping into the darkness, drawn by the comfort and security of the city.

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The old man took off his cowboy hat and wiped his brow. His hair was grey and long, his skin wrinkled, but his eyes remained fierce. *"How could she have gotten away?"*

"She hasn't gotten away," said the waitress. "It's just taking longer than usual for the drugs to work."

"Oh, so you know where she is?"

"Not exactly, but she can't have gone far. People don't get lost here unless we make them, Des. She *has* to be here somewhere."

Des closed his eyes. His nostrils flared.

"Des, we didn't change a damn thing. We gave her the same dose as all the others, only this time it didn't knock her out. It looked like she was hallucinating, talking to someone who wasn't there."

"Did you hear what she was saying?"

"No."

"Did *anyone* hear what she was saying?"

No one answered; the dusty town folk in the bar looked away from Des' burning eyes. Some shuffled their feet, some picked

at leathery skin around dirty fingernails, while others stared into their warming drinks. No one met his eyes.

He stood up and threw his hat to the ground. "*Jesus H. Christ!*"

"Don't worry, Des, we'll find her."

He glared at the old woman until she looked away.

"How long do we have?" One of the dusty townsfolk asked.

Des calmed himself and collected his hat, brushing off the dust. "I don't know. Not long. They're already on their way."

There were murmurs among the people, then silence as their fear grew.

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Water dripped from a blocked pipe somewhere overhead. She looked up and in only a matter of steps, the sky had turned black, day into night. The alleyway was thick and cold with shadows. Behind her, the sun continued to shine but that light barely penetrated this new world.

The continual rumble of cars sounded in the distance.

Her sneakers, covered in red desert dust from a far away world, were stark in contrast with the stained concrete now underfoot.

There was a small poster on the wall a little further ahead, with a blurred image shaped like a face. She approached but the details remained indistinct, somehow growing more obscure the closer she came.

A siren sounded in the distance, growing slowly louder before fading again into nothing.

She shivered and glanced behind her, at the far away sunlight of the desert world.

Soon, another poster formed from the darkness. She stopped and stared at the blurred image, trying to decide if she wanted to see the details, the expression. It could only be bad.

A car horn blared in the early night, setting off another and making her jump.

She moved closer but as before, the details dissolved upon her approach. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, she saw other posters scattered over the wall, partially covering older ones, some completely separate from the rest, a few torn. They were also on the other side of the alleyway the shapeless faces clustering over one another like a desperate, silent crowd.

She stepped towards them, but the pictures became distorted, indistinct, as if they had suddenly turned shy.

Further ahead, something moved; a quick fleeting shift amongst the darkness.

"Jody?" She dared. She could feel the eyes of those smudged faces upon her and a sob escaped. Quickly, she put a hand over her mouth to prevent another.

Smells filled the narrow space before her; the stench of litter, the corruption of bodies and the fatty smell of fast foods.

Her legs weak, her stomach churning, Amy slowly reached towards one of the posters and tried to pull it from the wall.

Her fingers found only brick.

She scratched the surface, trying to find an edge to the poster, to any poster, but the pictures seemed to be part of the wall itself, the images flowing over mortar and brick alike, the edges merging, blurring with the wall, melding into adjoining pictures.

"No!" She cried, jerking her hand back. She tried to turn, to run, but the ground held her fast.

Ahead of her, a person emerged from the deepness of the alleyway. She gasped, trembling, her heartbeat deafening as the figure approached, its details materialising from the blackness.

As if jolted loose by what she saw, the memory she had previously unearthed sparkled again in her mind:

The bearded man at the campfire, telling them of the Wildflowers, the beasts of the desert, made of the land-

She remembered sitting there, her sister on one side, her father on the other, listening to the man with the bloodshot eyes telling the old legend, the one mostly forgotten. She remembered hearing the emptiness of the desert echoing in the man's every word as she shifted closer to her dad, feeling his warmth and comfort holding the desert at bay-

She remembered feeling content, happy in the barren existence.

Their dad had worked for Australian Exploration at the time. On summer holidays they would fly out to meet him, and then spend weeks driving back home across the outback, stopping overnight at hidden towns of only a handful of people.

"The Wildflowers come once a year," the man in her memory said, a local from some desert corner of Australia. "And in return, they bring the rain."

The shadowed faces upon the walls started moaning as the memory faded. Their cries grew in temper until they filled the strange alley like a ferocious storm, the howls like wind tearing through trees, their screams echoing with the sounds of the city.

Closer now, this figure came, and Amy staggered, her breath knocked from her by what she saw, by *whom* she saw before her, approaching as resolutely as that storm outside, back in the faraway desert world.

"Dad?"

Another memory surfaced as her father stepped closer, a memory she hadn't viewed for more than two decades; her dad, bitten, lay shivering, his forehead beaded with perspiration, spasms twitching his body as she held his hand, waiting and

preying for Jody to return with help before it was too late, and then the despair-

Her long-dead father smiled and grasped her outstretched hand.

Around her, the despairing howls and forlorn wails of the posters slowly lost their voices, one by one falling silent as Amy let go of her guilt. The blurred faces continued to writhe but they were mute, their city screams now unheard.

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The afternoon darkened; the light fading quickly until a dim, foggy gloom covered the land. It was as if the sun was dying.

"We're out of time," said Des, looking up at the dull sky.

"What are we going to do?" One of the dusty folk asked.

Another echoed the first's concern. "Yes, what?"

"We *need* a sacrifice."

"We must have a city scream to feed them," a desert-worn man said, "Or we won't be given any rain."

"And without the rain," said Des slowly, not taking his eyes from the blackening sky, "we won't make it through the summer."

"Please, just another couple of minutes. She can't be far, we'll find her. I don't understand it, I've searched everywhere! She can't just disappear!"

"You're a cold bitch, Jody, wanting your sister dead like that, but I like you, I do. You've served this town well, going in to pick up our friends each year. Thing is, we just don't *have* those minutes to give you."

"She let my father die, Des."

He shrugged. "Like I said, we don't have any other option."

The storm was coming on quickly, spreading across the red desert horizon on unfelt wind. There were shapes, shifting forms in the darkness; rippling silhouettes that were somehow even more opaque than the shadows surrounding them.

Jody stepped back from the man in the cowboy hat, from the desert folk turning her way. "Des," she said, "Please, I'll find her."

But the dusty desert folk, the weathered and worn people of Elsewhere, shuffled closer.

She backed away, knocking into the bar.

"It's nothing personal, Jody, but what more can we do? You're the closest we've got to city blood now."

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The alleyway had dissolved until the rough bark of the Red River Gums had shown through, and only then had Amy realised where she was. How she had gotten here, she had no idea.

The shadows had receded back into the desert a while ago now, and natural twilight was approaching to once more darken the land.

Her eyes were full of desert sand but she was no longer afraid of her tears. As she finally collapsed, she thought of Jody – they had a lot of talking to do, and she was ready. So many lost years.

The steady approach of footsteps barely registered, but the words came clearly; "Well, well, well," said the man in the cowboy hat as he crouched before her. "What do we have here?"

He poked her and she groaned, but that was all she could do. He lifted her effortlessly and slung her over his shoulder. "You know," he said as he headed back to town. "Jody had something lined up for you but it seems as though she ended up getting it herself. People mostly get what they deserve in the end, don't they? I think that's called karma." He laughed as he trudged along. "You're gonna like Elsewhere, though. We've already got a job lined up for you."