

Walking with the Sisters: Julie Howard

Three pinched faces emerge from the bush. Scrawny necks stretch. Listening. Seeking. Searching.

In the distance, a thin trickle of dust twists into the dimming sky. Limb's twitch. Muscles tighten. Birds call, but three sisters are silent. Watching.

The dust trail blooms and dips towards them.

At the sound of splashing water, six eyes swivel. A dusty camper crosses the creek and slurs into view. The woman winds down her window, grins and yells 'Whoo Hoo we're here'. The man blasts his horn. She leaps out and calls to them. 'Hey kids! This is Aranui campsite, right?'

They stare blankly. Then as one slither into the bush.

'Well, that was kind of weird'. No answer. She glances over her shoulder. The husband is running his fingers gingerly along the side of the van.

'Weird', he says.

'Yeah, that's what I said'.

'No look honey. There's not a mark, not a dint. Nothing!'

She frowns. 'I don't get it. We hit a wallaby, right? I mean I've listened to you chuntering on about insurance claims for the last half hour'.

'Freaky', he shrugs.

They drive through the encroaching darkness along a curving pathway passing one empty campsite after another.

'How come there's no one here?' she asks. 'I thought you said it was all booked out'.

They pass a small clearing with the three girls hunkered motionless around an ebbing fire. There's a low chant of comradeship.

During the night she's awakened by a low keening. 'Did you hear that?' She hisses. 'Just the wind' he says, but she hears the quiver in his voice.

A filtered sun wakens her. She peers out. A deep coloured wallaby marked with bronze, grazes lazily on the edge of the scrub. Smoke rises from campfires. Breakfast smells fill the air. Children shriek, people talk in low comfortable voices clasping coffee cups to their chests, but in the awakening campsite there's no sign of the sisters.

Each day they set out to walk and swim but memories of the girls invade their thoughts. Finally, a few days earlier than planned, they decide to pack up and leave. The man powers the camper across the creek and up the hill. The woman shakes her hair out of her ponytail, stretches her arms to the sky and gives a huge 'YEEEEEE HAAAH!'

They pause at the crossroads. A movement in the bush catches their attention and there they are. Three sisters. Sitting, cross-legged, empty eyed, listening. As one they raise a finger. Three fingers point and then heads and fingers slide to the right.