

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Slow Falling Bird

by Christine Evans

EXTRACT

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Slow Falling Bird

Characters

RICK:	Guard at Woomera Immigration Detention centre, South Australia
MICKO:	Guard at Woomera. Part-Aboriginal; passes for white.
JOY:	RICK'S agoraphobic wife. Beautiful, in a shampoo-ad way.
ZAHRAH:	Iraqi asylum seeker, '30's; recent widow.
FISH CHILD:	ZAHRAH'S daughter: a hovering spirit, reluctant to be born.
LEYLA:	Afghan (Hazara) Asylum-seeker, age 15
MAHMOUD:	LEYLA's brother, age 12
MORTEIN & BAYGON*:	A spectral Chorus in cheap trench coats and sunglasses. They look like salesmen from Hell's used car yard, and give the impression of being one mind in two bodies. They also appear as the sinister Truckies at Spud's Roadhouse & Karaoke Bar.

Setting:

An Immigration Detention Centre (IDC) for asylum seekers in the desert. In the play, the town and its camp are at once a real place; and a place inside a desert of the mind. All characters (though not all events) are fictional.

The Set is minimal, sparse and not 'realistic'. A sense of wire cages within cages, some made of only shadow. Lighting changes the world from hallucinatory moonlight, to the harsh daylight of a prison routine controlled by guards, to the delirious world of Spud's Roadhouse and Karaoke Bar. Centre upstage is a basketball hoop, which also serves as FISH CHILD'S customary perch and a pole for erotic dancing at Spud's Karaoke Bar. ZAHRAH'S baby, of which FISH CHILD is the animating spirit, is represented by a plastic toy shark.

Note on Punctuation:

A slash (/) indicates the interruption point in a line by the following speaker.

Singing:

MORTEIN, BAYGON, FISH CHILD and ZAHRAH need to be played by competent harmony singers. MICKO and JOY need to sing simple songs well. It's OK for RICK just to bellow.

***NB:** Mortein and Baygon are the brand names of two leading Australian pest control products.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

MICKO and RICK are on lookout. They squint out towards the perimeter fence.

MICKO:
[spotting movement] What was that?

RICK:
Where?

MICKO:
There! You see? Right by the fence!

RICK:
Nup.

They stare for a while.

MICKO:
There it goes.

RICK:
Rabbit.

Beat.

MICKO:
The worst thing about this dump is the heat.

RICK:
It's not the heat mate.

MICKO:
Heat's pretty bad.

RICK:
Yup.

Beat

It's hot all right.

Beat.

Nah, the worst thing is that it doesn't let up.

MICKO:
'S what I said.

RICK:
Nope, it's different. The worst thing's the boredom.

MICKO:

Yeah, not much to do.

RICK:

Four head counts a day, talk about useless. Same heads, nothing in 'em except misery and lice.

Beat.

MICKO:

Mate. You ever think about leaving?

RICK:

Nope.

MICKO:

Big world out there. Not that you can see much of it from here.

RICK:

You see enough. Way to the pub. Way home. My wife's pretty face. The camp, keeping the lawns green with its little Christmas rain of dollar bills. What else do you need?

MICKO:

Something different.

RICK:

Like what?

MICKO:

I dunno. Something old, like in Europe.

RICK:

It's different for blow-ins like you. I grew up here when the Yanks were doing all the early warning missile stuff. Top secret, special access only- place was crawling with spies and special services. Pub was like a beer fountain. Always something going on, F1 11s flying in the top blokes for meetings, you felt like you were part of / something, you know?

MICKO:

[*spotting movement*] What was that?

RICK:

Where?

MICKO:

Over there. [*they squint out*] It's gone now.

RICK:

What is this, the bunny-rabbit police?

MICKO:

Sorry.

RICK:

Relax. [*Beat.*]
Eyes play tricks on you, it's the sun.

Bright, all right. MICKO:

Fucking blinding. RICK:

And nothing for miles. Flat as a day-old beer. MICKO:

Old lady's tit. RICK:

Snake on the Hume Highway. MICKO:

Fart joke at a funeral. RICK:

Beat

Yep, she's flat, all right. MICKO:

RICK:
Should have seen it when the Yanks were here, everything shined up. Seven thousand here, everyone working- man, two years ago we couldn't scrape up a footy team. My first job after the Yanks closed down the army base was painting the playgrounds. Just painting a bunch of the old missiles they left behind for the kids. Blue, like Thomas the Tank Engine. They looked pretty good in the red dirt. But it was fucking depressing, working all day on a playground with no kids in it.

MICKO:
Must have been real quiet. I like the quiet out here. You can hear yourself stop thinking.

RICK:
You're full of bullshit mate. Quiet means dead. The camp rescued this town from the morgue.

MICKO:
Yeah well, the money's good. But you'd want it to be.

RICK:
What do you mean?

MICKO:
Oh, you know. The kids. Cutting themselves up and all that. That's stressful, that is.

RICK:

Mate, you can't let it get to you. That stuff just goes straight through me. It's like the heat, it's always there. Sends you to sleep. *[Beat]* Wouldn't mind waking up occasionally.

MICKO:
Yeah well, you get pretty lively down at Spud's.
[sings, parodying RICK] -'Do you remember when –
We used to sing. Sha na na na/ na na na

RICK:
Come on, that's only when we're shitfaced.

MICKO:
When you're shitfaced, you mean.

RICK:
What do you do for fun? Go home and beat off to porn movies?

[Beat]

MICKO:
You were just saying how great it was here

RICK:
Bullshit. I said I grew up here.

[Beat.]

MICKO:
How's Joy?

RICK:
The same. Beautiful.

MICKO:
You should think about getting out.

RICK:
She doesn't like going out.

MICKO:
I mean- a trip or something.

RICK:
She likes being at home. She's a home-maker.

MICKO:
[uncertainly] Oh.

RICK:
Wouldn't mind something real happening, know what I mean?

MICKO:
Man, what more do you want to happen? Another riot? Camp to burn down?

RICK:
Not that kind of shit. Stuff inside doesn't count. Something real. Something that would wake me up. Know what I mean?

MICKO:
Yeah. – No, not really.

RICK:
Forget it. – [*Beaf*] - What was that? – Over there.

MICKO springs to alert, looking out. RICK laughs at him.

RICK:
Bunny-rabbit alert.

MICKO:
[*amiably*] You prick.

RICK:
Dickhead.

MICKO:
Shit-for-brains.

RICK:
Wanker.

MICKO:
Moron.

RICK:
Bunny- fucker.

Beat. They stand looking out.

RICK:
It's hot, all right.

SCENE 2

FISH CHILD is seen, suspended in a peaceful light above the darkness. She is dreaming the dreams of the unborn, rocking in her private ocean. Then the loud crash of a boat breaking apart. FISH CHILD is startled awake.

Storm sounds, groaning of a boat. Waves, creaking timbers. We see the following fitfully, as if in a night storm at sea. ZAHRAH is praying softly in Arabic. Her prayer continues through the following.

I'm going to be sick again. MAHMOUD:

No you're not. LEYLA:

Drink some water. MORTEIN:

There's none left. MAHMOUD:

So suck on a button then. LEYLA:

I need a drink MAHMOUD:

I could really do with a drink. BAYGON:

Don't let's get started on that. MORTEIN:

Are we nearly in Germany? MAHMOUD:

I thought they said "Austria". BAYGON:

Baygon. It's Australia. You don't get to Austria on a stinking old boat from Java. MORTEIN:

Is Australia in Europe? BAYGON, LEYLA, MAHMOUD:

Isn't everything? MORTEIN:

Sounds of storm build. Waves crashing.

FEMALE VOICE (LEYLA):

Get the children up the front!

FEMALE VOICE (ZAHRAH):

Children up front! We're going down-

LEYLA starts crying. ZAHRAH'S prayer grows louder along with the chaos of shouting, splashing, storm sounds. Lights up on MORTEIN and BAYGON, as they stagger to shore; the others have vanished. The FISH CHILD perches on BAYGON'S shoulder; he doesn't notice his "passenger"

Somehow they "land" in Woomera, 1,500 miles inland. Storm sounds stop. They look around, completely lost.

BAYGON:

Jeez. Where are we, the moon?

MORTEIN:

The moon doesn't have barbed wire, Baygon.

BAYGON:

Well, it's not a beach, is it, Mortein?

MORTEIN:

But it is dry land. [beat] I'd say... very dry land.
Very flat, dry land.

BAYGON:

Like the moon.

MORTEIN:

Let's not go there again.

BAYGON:

We didn't go there before.

MORTEIN:

Baygon!

BAYGON:

Sorry. [Beat] For real. Where the hell are we?

MORTEIN:

I'd say.... approximately... dead center.
[Consults compass] Yep. The Asshole of Nowhere.

BAYGON:

Yeah, smells like it.

MORTEIN:

Well.... at least it's dry.

BAYGON:

Very dry.

ACT TWO, SCENE 11

LEYLA, alone in her room. Her face is dirty. Her white dress hangs from the basketball pole. She is in her underwear- a singlet, underpants, diapers. A plastic bag of used diapers has overflowed on to the floor. She rocks, thumb in mouth. But when the singing begins, she hears it and slowly the world becomes a beautiful underwater cave. MAHMOUD appears with MORTEIN and BAYGON, looking down on LEYLA. MAHMOUD sings to LEYLA.

MAHMOUD:

[Singing]

There's a cord from me to you
Made of dreams and seawater...
And your brother's broken mouth
Sings the blood songs of sharks.

There's a cord from me to you
Made of living through slaughter
And the waves rock him down
Through the green ocean dark

MAHMOUD, MORTEIN & BAYGON:

[Singing] Your brother can't hear you
He doesn't see you clear
He sees the boot coming down
Shark songs are all he hears

But with half his mind gone
He still calls your name
Still tries to swim
Falling like a bird
Drowned, flying in the rain

There's a cord from me to you
Made of bones and seawater
And your brother's open mouth
Singing shark lullabies

During the above, LEYLA stands on the bed, smiling up at MAHMOUD, and holds up her arms. He smiles back down at her and pats playfully at LEYLA'S dress, hanging from the pole. LEYLA laughs; transformed back into a hopeful young girl. She takes hold of the dress, and swings from it, like a child playing on a rope over a lake. MAHMOUD swings the dress/ rope faster from above; they play, laughing a little.

MICKO:

[offstage] OK kid, the lawyer's here. You got ten minutes to-

MICKO enters. Sudden harsh light. MORTEIN, BAYGON, ZAHRAH and MAHMOUD are gone and we are back in the unadorned harshness of LEYLA'S room. But LEYLA has vanished: only her dress hangs, swinging from the basketball hoop.

MICKO: