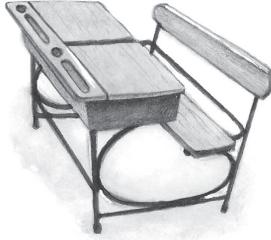


1
Snow Whites



‘OH, peanuts!’ Pearlie cried, clutching her satchel to her chest to protect it from the rain that had just started falling. She didn’t want the precious thing inside to get wet.

In seconds her clothes were drenched, but it was warm rain. And just like that, the dark cloud passed and out came the morning sun. This was ‘the wet’ in far north Australia.

Pearlie splashed through the puddles in her bare feet. She rarely wore shoes. What was the point when they’d only get ruined?

A platoon of soldiers marched along the

street towards her. Pearlie had seen more and more troops landing in Darwin lately. And fighter planes, too. She smiled when she heard the soldiers' American accents. Just like the actors on the picture shows at the Star Theatre, she thought.

Pearlie's best friend, Naoko, liked the handsome cowboy Hopalong Cassidy best of all the movie stars, while Pearlie's favourite was Hoppy's horse, Topper. Oh, how I'd love my own horse, she thought. Or a dog. Or any animal, really. She sighed. But she *was* saving up for one. Mum had said she could get a dog if she paid for it with her own money.

A loud explosion made Pearlie jump and the air around her head throbbed. She looked up and saw a plume of smoke above the trees.

A passing soldier patted her on the shoulder. 'Don't be scared, little girl,' he said. 'It's just one of them anti-aircraft guns practising for when they might need to shoot down enemy

planes.’ He winked at her and marched on to join the others as the white smoke drifted over the town and blew out to sea.

Pearlie walked through the school gate and up the steps of the main building onto a wide verandah. When she reached her classroom, Naoko was already sitting in the double desk they shared. Naoko had moved from Broome to Darwin three years before, and on the first day of school Miss Lyon had sat her next to Pearlie. From that moment on, they were hardly ever apart. It was as if they were twins, they felt so close.

But they were different in lots of ways, too. In Pearlie’s family there was a mix of backgrounds – some Aboriginal from way back, Scottish, Macassan, and maybe Afghan, her mum said. And Pearlie’s dad was full-blooded Chinese. Naoko’s family were all Japanese, and her dad was a fisherman. She was an only child, whereas Pearlie had a baby

brother, and Naoko was taller than Pearlie, with hair cut short like a boy's. Naoko said that long hair only got in the way when you wanted to climb trees or crawl into burrows. She was louder and more adventurous than Pearlie, who often felt quiet and shy.

'I brought something for the scrapbook,' Pearlie said, slipping into her seat. Their scrapbook, which was hidden in Naoko's bedroom, was where they kept their most special things. Pearlie put her school bag on the desk and took out a ruler, eraser, four pencils, two peanut toffee slices – one for Naoko and one for her – and a soggy exercise book.

Naoko leaned forward curiously to see what Pearlie had brought to show her.

Pearlie shook the pages of her book and a dead butterfly fluttered onto the desk, deep brown with pale pink spots on its wings and tiny white dots on its black body.

'I found it lying in the backyard,' Pearlie

said, picking it up gently and laying it on her palm. 'Butterflies only live for a few weeks as adults. Isn't it beautiful? It's for you.'

'It's perfect,' Naoko whispered. 'I've never seen one this close up before. Wow, look at its furry body.' She smiled at Pearlie. 'You've taught me to pay attention to the small things.'

As Naoko slid the butterfly between the pages of her own exercise book Pearlie saw a glint in her eye. She knew that look! 'What are you up to, Nao?' she asked.

Naoko leant across to Pearlie. 'You know the place where we found the giant seabird skeleton?' she whispered.

'Near the big gun on the cliff by the point?'

Naoko nodded. 'Well, my dad's friend was on his boat the other day and he saw the cliff collapse into the sea. But here's the exciting part. When the dust cleared there was a cave. A brand new cave.' Naoko's eyes shone even more brightly. 'Just think, Pearlie. We could

be the first explorers inside it! We have to go there before anyone else does.'

'I don't know, Nao. It could be dangerous. What if it caves in some more and—'

'That's what makes it more exciting . . . the *danger*,' Naoko said.

It was true that since Pearlie had met Naoko they'd been on many adventures together. If it was the small things that Pearlie had taught Naoko to notice, it was the big adventurous things that Naoko had shown Pearlie.

'We'll go on Saturday,' Naoko said without waiting for Pearlie to agree.

'Ow!' Pearlie and Naoko cried out as their skulls bumped together. Someone had come up behind and pushed them.

Of course it was Dulcie McBride, the meanest girl who ever walked the streets of Darwin. Pearlie watched her stroll away, her blonde ponytail, her pride and joy, swinging from side to side like a well-trained pet.

Pearlie rubbed her forehead and Naoko glared at Dulcie as she sat down in the back row next to Peggy. Dulcie poked out her tongue. Her gang of ‘snow whites’ gathered around and laughed at them. Snow white was Dulcie’s name for anybody who wasn’t coloured, like Pearlie and Naoko and almost half the school. Darwin was made up of many kinds of people of different races, and they all mixed together – all except Dulcie and her gang. She was from Sydney and she’d moved up when her dad got an important job with the Northern Territory government. That’s why she thought she was better than everyone else. She said Darwin was full of country bumpkins.

‘I’ll get her back one day,’ said Naoko.

The bell rang and their teacher, Miss Lyon, entered. Everyone loved Miss Lyon, who was very pretty with light-brown curly hair. She had come up from the south, from Adelaide,

where she said things were very stylish and fashionable. But she wasn't a snob like Dulcie. Today she had on a blue dress with tiny yellow flowers, which Pearlle thought was beautiful.

She watched as Miss Lyon unfurled the giant canvas map of the world. Pearlle loved learning about other parts of the world. Once she'd found a bottle washed up onto Mindil Beach. The thick green glass had foreign writing etched into its surface. Where had it come from? she'd wondered. Who was the last person to touch the bottle? Pearlle had written a story about it for the scrapbook. Naoko had done the drawings.

The Australian soldiers were off fighting overseas and Pearlle often tried to imagine what they were seeing. Was the sky the same? The clouds? Were there hills? Or was it flat, like the Territory? The stars would certainly be different.

'One day I'm going to visit some of those countries,' she whispered to Naoko.

‘I thought you loved Darwin and wanted to stay here,’ Naoko replied.

‘Oh, I’ll always come back. I’m born, bred and buttered here,’ Pearlie said. ‘But I still want to see the world.’

With her long wooden stick, Miss Lyon pointed to France and told them about Paris, the capital city. ‘There’s a tower there made of grey steel that reaches up to the sky,’ she said. Then she showed them Australia and the huge distance between the two countries. ‘It takes months by ship to get there,’ she told them. ‘And now there’s a war . . .’

‘And all our soldiers are over there in Europe,’ Reddy finished.

Miss Lyon nodded. ‘They’re needed by the Queen to help the British troops. And so we’re happy to have the American soldiers here in Darwin to help *us*.’

‘So America is Australia’s new friend?’ asked Flora.

‘The Americans are also watching out in case Japan attacks us – or any of the countries in the Pacific,’ said Dulcie in a know-it-all voice. ‘My dad told me all about it.’

Pearlie and Naoko looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

‘Excuse me, children,’ Miss Lyon said, her voice trembling, and turned away.

She’d once told them that her fiancé was over in Europe fighting. The war had been going for two years and Germany had invaded so many countries, including France. Britain was leading the fight to try and stop them, which was why Australian soldiers were over there helping. And Dulcie was right – Japan was in the war too, now. Almost every country was.

It made Pearlie think about her dad. Japan had bombed and killed many people in China, and her dad had been so worried about his own mother and father, who were in their

home village in Canton. He'd not heard a word from them in several years. She couldn't imagine what that would be like. Pearlie had never met her Chinese grandparents but she'd seen photos of them.

Miss Lyon looked pale and sat down on the chair at her desk. 'I received a telegram this morning,' she said. 'My fiancé, Tim, is in a hospital in England.' A tear rolled down her cheek.

There was silence. Nobody had ever seen a teacher cry before. Most of them had never seen a grown-up cry. Pearlie and Naoko looked at each other, not knowing what to do. Pearlie felt the familiar bubbles of fear in her stomach. Sometimes it seemed like there were so many things to be afraid of. But she loved Miss Lyon. Even though Pearlie's knees shook a little, she stood up.

She took a clean handkerchief from her bag. It was the one with hand-embroidered birds

that her Por Por, her grandma in China, had sent her when she was born.

Pearlie walked up to Miss Lyon and held the handkerchief out to her.

Miss Lyon looked up at Pearlie with teary eyes. 'Thank you, dear,' she said.

'I hope he gets well soon, Miss Lyon,' Pearlie said, and returned to her seat, feeling a tiny bit braver.

For the rest of the day, even the naughty boys were good. And no one complained when Miss Lyon gave them homework.