

*Pobby and Dingan***1**

Kellyanne opened the car door and crawled into my bedroom. Her face was puffy and pale and fuzzed-over. She just came in and said: "Ashmol, Pobby and Dingan are maybe-dead." That's how she said it.

"Good," I said. "Perhaps you'll grow up now and stop being such a fruit loop."

Tears started sliding down her face. But I wasn't feeling any sympathy, and neither would you if you'd grown up with Pobby and Dingan.

"Pobby and Dingan aren't dead," I said, hiding my anger in a swig from my can of Mello Yello. "They never existed. Things that never existed can't be dead. Right?"

Kellyanne glared at me through tears the way she did the time I slammed the door of the ute in Dingan's face or the time I walked over to where Pobby was supposed to be sitting and punched the air and kicked the air in the head to show Kellyanne that Pobby was a figment of her imaginings. I don't know how many times I had sat at the dinner table saying: "Mum, why do you have to set places for Pobby and Dingan? They aren't even real." She put food out for them too. She said they were quieter and better behaved than me and deserved the grub.

"They ain't exactly good conversationists, but," I would say.

And at other times when Kellyanne held out Pobby and Dingan were real I would just sit there saying, "Are not. Are not. Are not," until she got bored of saying, "Are. Are. Are," and went running out screaming with her hands over her ears.

And many times I've wanted to kill Pobby and Dingan, I don't mind saying it.

My dad would come back from the opal mines covered in dust, his beard like the back end of a dog that's shat all over its tail. He would be saying: "Ashmol, I sensed it today! Tomorrow we'll be on opal, son, and we'll be bloody millionaires! I can feel those bewdies sitting there in the drives, staring back at me. Checking me out. Waiting. They're red-on-blacks, Ashmol, I'll bet you anything! There's rumours going that Lucky Jes has taken out a million-dollar stone and a fossilized mammoth tooth with sun-flash in it. We're close, boy. Close. There's definitely something in that earth with the name Williamson on it!"

"Fairdinkum?"

His excitement always caught ahold of me. I would get a tingle down my neck and I would sit there with my ears pricking up like a hound's, my tongue hanging out, watching my dad's eyes darting around in his head. They were strange eyes-blue and green and with a flicker of gold in them. "Eyes like opals," my mum once said with a sigh, "only a little easier to find."

Well, while Dad was pacing around the yard brushing himself off a bit and swigging from a stubby of V.B., Kellyanne would say, "Dad, be careful! You almost trod on Pobby with your fat feet! Watch what you're doing!" But Dad would be too excited to do anything but say: "Aw, sorry, princess. Did I tread on your fairy-friends?" That was Dad. Me and him never took Pobby and Dingan seriously one bit.

But there were others who did. The older, softer sort of folks in Lightning Ridge had sort of taken to Pobby and Dingan. They had totally given up throwing Kellyanne funny looks and teasing her about them. Now when she walked down Opal Street, some of the old-timers would stop and shout: "G-day, Kellyanne, g-day, Pobby, and how's Miss Dingan doin' today?" It made you want to be sick all over the place. Lightning Ridge was full of flaming crackpots as far as I could see. It was like the sun had burnt out their brains. Now, I was as much a rockhound as the next kid, but I wasn't crazy enough to talk to imaginary friends, I'll tell you that for nothing. But one time Ernie Finch let

Kellyanne enter Dingan in for the Opal Princess competition because Kellyanne had a cold. I'm not kidding. And the judges voted Dingan third place, and Nils O'Reiordan from the newspaper came and took photographs of Kellyanne with her arm around Dingan's invisible shoulder, and made out he was asking Dingan questions and everything. It was embarrassing. When the newspaper came out there was a picture of Kellyanne wearing a little silver crown over her long blond hair, and underneath there was this sentence saying: *Two Opal Princesses Kellyanne Williamson aged eight) and her invisible friend Dingan, who won third prize in this year's Opal Princess competition. Plus, every time we went to Khan's, Mrs. Schwartz would hand my sister three lollies and say, "There you go, Kellyanne. One for you, one for Pobby and one for Dingan. They look like they're both doing good."* Everybody knew everybody in Lightning Ridge. And some people even knew nobody as well, it seemed. Pobby and Dingan fit into that little town just fine.

"Find anything today?" Mum asked one night when she'd got back from her job on the checkout at Khan's and me and Dad were relaxing after a hard afternoon's work out at the claim.

"Potch. Nothing special."

"Nothing?"

I could see Kellyanne through the window over Dad's shoulder. She was sitting out back on a pile of stones talking to Pobby and Dingan, her mouth moving up and down, her hands waving around like she was explaining something to them. But all she was really talking to was the night and a few gallahs. And if she was honest she would have admitted it there and then. But not Kellyanne.

"Where's my little girl?" Dad asked.

"Outside playing with some friends," said my mum, fixing my dad a look straight between the eyes.

"Pobby and Dingan?"

"Yup."

My dad sighed. "Jesus! That girl's round the twist," he said.

"No she isn't," said my mum, "she's just different."

"She's a fruit loop," I said.

"I kind of wish they were real friends, Mum," Dad said. "She don't seem to get on with the other kids around here too much."

"What d'you expect?" said my mum, raising her voice and putting her hands on her hips. "What d'you bloody expect when you drag your family to a place like Lightning Ridge? What d'you bloody expect to happen when you bring up an intelligent girl like Kellyanne in a place full of holes and criminals and freaks?"

"I still say Kellyanne could do with some real-live mates," went on my dad, as if he was talking to someone inside his beer.

Mum had stomped off into the kitchen. "Maybe they are real!" she shouted back at him after rattling a few plates together. "Ever thought about that, ye of little bloody imagination?"

My dad pulled a face. "Who? Pobby and Dingan? Ha!" He drained his beer can, positioned it standing up on the floor and stamped on it until it was a disc of metal. Then he threw me a wink as if to say: "Here comes the next wave of the attack, Ashmol!" And it came.

"Damn, Rex! You make me so bloody angry. Honestly! You haven't found any opal in two years. Not a glimpse of it. And opal's real enough for you. You don't stop dreaming about it and talking in your sleep to it like a lover! Well, as far as I'm concerned your bloody opal doesn't exist either!"

But that was a stupid thing for Mum to say, because the shops were full of opal and there were pictures of it everywhere and everybody was talking about it and the

Japanese buyers forked out a whole heap of dollars for it. That's a fact. I saw them doing it with my own eyes out at Hawk's Nest.

Well, after my mum said this stuff about opal and after she'd done her usual piece about there being no money left in the tin under the bed, Dad sulked around a bit and kicked a few rocks around out in the yard. But then suddenly the door swung open and he came in full of energy like a new man and with a strange smile on his face. And what did he do? He started asking Kellyanne about Pobby and Dingan and how their days had been and what they were doing tomorrow. And he had never done that before in his life, ever. But he did it in a voice so you weren't too sure if he was joking around or not. Kellyanne was studying his face carefully, trying to work him out for herself. And so was I. And so was Mum. And then Dad asked Kellyanne if he could run Pobby and Dingan a bath. And he asked straight-faced and honest-sounding and Kellyanne eventually said yes, that was all right, but only she was allowed to dry them after it.

I said: "Dad, what the hell are you doing? You know all that Pobby and Dingan stuff's just horseshit! She'll never grow out of it if you talk like that!"

And Dad answered, looking at his feet: "No, Ashmol. I think I've been unfair on Pobby and Dingan. I think that they do exist after all! I just haven't, like, recognized it until now." He grinned and rubbed his hands together and disappeared into the bathroom to run the taps while Kellyanne stood there glowing with pride and flashing me a smile from the doorway which made me feel sick. I looked at Mum, but she had a contented look on her face and started setting about making tea and cookies. I sat at the table feeling like someone had marooned me on a desert island.

Well, I don't like thinking about it, but from that moment on my dad became a total dag. Now when he got up in the morning and woke up Kellyanne for school he would wake up Pobby and Dingan too. Yes, he would. He started talking to them like they was real people. And he wasted all kinds of money on buying them birthday presents too-good money that could have gone into a better generator if you ask me. Oh, yes, Dad had himself some fun by going along with the Pobby and Dingan thing. One time he even took Kellyanne, Pobby and Dingan out to the Bore Baths in the ute. When I ran out to join them with my towel around my shoulders, my dad shouted: "Sorry, son. Can't take you today, Ashmol. Not enough room with Pobby and Dingan in here." He waved out of the window with a big smile on his face and drove off thinking he was a funny kind of bloke. Sometimes Mum would ask him to come and help with the washing up. But no! Dad was helping Pobby and Dingan get dressed or helping them with their homework. Kellyanne loved it. But Mum went a bit strange. I don't think she could decide if she was angry or pleased that Dad had become mates with Pobby and Dingan. And I think even Kellyanne began to realize pretty soon that Dad was only doing it to get back at Mum for having a go at him or something. He wasn't a very subtle sort of bloke, my dad, when it came down to it. He drank too much for a start and spent too much time underground in the dark.

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When Dad left for the claim one morning he volunteered to take Pobby and Dingan with him to get some exercise while Kellyanne was at school. He was trying to separate her from them, I suppose, now I think about it. Kellyanne's teachers, you see, had complained that she wasn't concentrating in class and was always talking to herself and hugging the air. Well, I got to admit it was a funny sight seeing my dad heading out holding hands with two invisible people. Kellyanne watched him, making sure he helped them up into the cabin of the ute, and then Dad started the car up and waved out of the window and made out he was fastening Pobby and Dingan's seat belts.

"Don't worry, princess!" he shouted. "I'll look after them while you're at school and make sure they don't get up to no mischief. Won't 1, Pobby? Won't 1, Dingan?"

I was getting a bit worried. My dad was turning into a poof. And the neighbours were talking about him walking alone and talking to himself and things like that. They said he was even drunker than normal.

That same night Mum still wasn't back from work and Dad had swallowed a few beers too many, shall we say. He was singing "Heartbreak Hotel," and doing a sort of Elvis dance. I knew he had forgotten to bring back Pobby and Dingan from the claim, but I didn't say a word. I wanted to see what Kellyanne would have to say about it, so I just sat there playing on my Super Mario with its flat batteries, hoping Kellyanne would come in from the kitchen and get all ratty. Dad sat down and started talking about how he had been up at the puddling dam doing a bit of agitating. He told me that today Old Sid the Grouch had found traces of colour within twenty metres of his claim. I said: "Do your Elvis dance again, Dad, it's really cool." Of course it wasn't cool at all, but I wanted to keep him from thinking about his day. He might have remembered about Pobby and Dingan in the nick of time. Luckily he didn't and Kellyanne came rushing in from the kitchen, where she was having a go at cooking yellowbelly from Mum's instructions.

"Dad. Where's Pobby and Dingan? Where are they?" she cried, all anxious.

"Now you're in for it, Dad," I said. "Better make something up quick."

Dad's face suddenly flushed all kinds of colours. He swiveled around and spilt some beer on the floor. "Hi, princess! Relax now, darl. Pobby and Dingan's right here sittin' on the couch next to Ashmol."

Kellyanne looked over at the couch. "No they're not, Dad," she said. "They hate Ashmol. Where are they really?"

"Oh no, that's it," said my dad, "I completely forgot. They're out in the back yard watering the plants."

Kellyanne ran outside. She came back looking pale. "Dad, you forgot all about Pobby and Dingan, didn't you? You've lost them, haven't you?"

"No, princess," said my dad. "Calm down, sweetheart. They were in the ute with me when I came back."

"I don't believe you," said Kellyanne, tears growing out of her eyes. "I want you to take me out to the claim to look for them right now." That was my sister! She was mad as a cut snake.

"Christ, Kellyanne!" I said. "Grow up, girl!"

Dad looked a bit desperate. "Aw, princess, come on, now. I'm busy having a brew and a chat with Ashmol. Are you sure your little friends aren't here?"

"Positive," said Kellyanne, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

And so Dad couldn't do nothing except take Kellyanne out to the claim called Wyoming, where he had his drives.

"You come too, Ashmol," Dad said.

"No thanks," I said, folding my arms across my chest. "Count me out. No bloody way is Ashmol Williamson going looking for two non-existent things."

But in the end I went along all the same, making sure I did lots of tutting and shaking my head.

When we arrived at the claim the two of them walked around calling out: "Pobby! Dingan! P-P-P-Pobbbby! Where are you?" I sat firm on a mullock heap and opened up a can of Mello Yello. I knew what my dad was thinking. He was thinking that any minute now Kellyanne was going to suddenly imagine she had found her imaginary friends and start beaming all over her face. But she didn't. She kept calling out and looking real worried. She ran around the four corners of the claim looking from side to side. Pobby and Dingan were nowhere to be seen, she said. And who was going to argue with her? Dad wasn't. And I was having shitall to do with it.

They looked behind the mullock heaps and they looked in the old Millard caravan, where we used to live when we first came out to the Ridge, and they looked

behind the mining machinery and behind a clump of leopard gums. And I'll bet all the time my dad was thinking: "I must be going hokey cokey. If the other miners could see me now!" Dad knew pretty darn well, you see, that only Kellyanne was going to find Pobby and Dingan. He would just have to wait until she did. Or maybe he was secretly hoping that this was Kellyanne's little way of putting her imaginary friends behind her for good. Anyway, he kept throwing desperate glances my way and shouting over: "Come on, Ashmol, lend a frigging hand, will you?" But I wasn't budging, and so eventually Dad sat down exhausted by the hoist where the huge blower was curled up like a snake and just called out, "Pobby! Dingan! Listen! You two! I'm sorry I didn't look after you proper! I'm sorry I left you out here! I've got some lollies in my pocket if you want some!" That was a fat lie. He never had any lollies.

Well, in the last hour before dark Dad pulled himself off his backside and looked real hard. You had to hand it to him. He got down on his knees and crawled around in the dirt. He rummaged through piles of rocks. He looked behind trees, in front of trees, up trees and down trees. He crossed over onto the next claim, which was owned by Old Sid the Grouch. He shouldn't of. But he did. He searched like he was mad, and there was sweat slipping down his cheeks. He worked harder than he ever mined in his life, I reckon. And it was hard to believe he was searching for Nothing. Diddly-squat. Stuff-all. And then there was a piece of very bad timing.

Old Sid, who lived out there in a camp made out of pieces of corrugated iron, came running out from behind a weeping-wilga tree and stood by the starpicket at the corner of our claim with his arms folded. He had a big grey moustache, and he wore this kind of stupid beanie hat that made him look even meaner and stupider than he was. And believe me that was stupid. The rumour was he ate frill-neck lizards on toast for breakfast.

Old Sid watched as my dad got down on all fours and leant over the hole of Old Sid's mine shaft and called out, "Pobby and Dingan! You down there?" Sid couldn't make head or tail of what was going on. He thought my dad was ratting his claim and stealing all his opal. He shouted out: "Hey! You! Rex Williamson! What the hell you doin' on my claim?"

My dad turned around, startled. He was totally off his guard. He began to go red and get all embarrassed and then he started trying to make up some sort of story about looking for his watch, but then he changed it halfway into a lost-cat story-but he stuttered over that too and so he got back down on his knees and started spinning some yarn about looking for one of his contact lenses. It all went a bit wrong. My dad wasn't much good at lying.

"You been drinking, Rex?"

I walked up to Sid to put things straight.

"My dad ain't been drinking nothing, Mr. Sid," I said. "You see, my sister's got two imaginary friends called Pobby and Dingan-maybe you've heard of them-and she thinks my dad lost them out on the claim. And we're here looking for them. Sounds strange, I know-but there you go, that's the truth of it."

Sid looked totally baffled and pretty angry. He said: "Now, don't you go making excuses for your old man, Ashmol Williamson! You may be a clever kid, but your daddy's been ratting my claim, ain't he? Some of us miners have been suspecting him for some time. But now here's the proof of it! And you're just trying to stick up for him, ain't you?"

My dad stumbled over to Old Sid with his fists clenched. He said, "Now, look here, Sid. I ain't been ratting nothing. I ain't no thief. I'm looking for my daughter's imaginary friends and you'd better bloody well believe it, mate!"

But Sid wasn't having any of it. "You can talk about invisible people as much as you like, Rex Williamson," he said. "But I've had my doubts about you. A lot of us have. I've already reported you to the mining authority, and as soon as I saw you on my claim

this evening, snuffling around for my opal, the first thing I did was radio the police, and, as a matter of fact, here they are right now!"

The noise of a car drove into our ears and a fourwheel-drive police jeep came wobbling down the creamy red track that leads to our claim. It pulled over by our old Millard caravan and out came two policemen. Bulky fellas with hats and badges and shit. I was getting a bit worried. Kellyanne was still looking around the claim for Pobby and Dingan, and Dad had started shouting about how dare Old Sid call him a ratter, he who'd worked honestly for God knows how long, and been a pretty good sort of bloke all round. And then I went up to one of the police blokes and told him the truth of the matter about Pobby and Dingan and what my dad was doing on Old Sid's claim. But I hadn't got too far when there was this noise of scuffling and a grunt and I turned around to see that my dad had lost his cool and snotted Old Sid one in the nose. Well, after that the police were on my dad in a flash, and they had him in handcuffs and everything. Kellyanne came running over in a panic, saying, "Leave my dad alone! Leave him alone!" But Dad was bundled into the car and driven away in a flash. And it was us who were left alone. And then Kellyanne sat down on a mullock heap and broke down in sobs, for I reckon it was a bit too much to cope with, losing two imaginary friends and one real dad in an afternoon.

For a while I didn't know what to do. I just stood there watching one of those fluffy roly-poly things go cartwheeling over the claim on a breath of wind. And I thought about my dad and what a tangle he'd got himself into. And then I said: "Kellyanne, come on, we'd better get home. Pobby and Dingan will come back tonight on their own and Dad will be fine as soon as this is sorted out and the police realize what he was doing on Sid's land. Come on, we'll walk back and tell Mum, and get the bad bits over and done with."

But Kellyanne didn't stop looking worried. She legged it over to the mine shaft and stepped over the tape which was around the top of the hole to stop people entering. She got down on all fours and peeked over the edge. And she called out Pobby and Dingan's names down the mine shaft. There was no reply, of course. She stayed there on all fours looking down that shaft for half an hour.

"This just isn't like them," she said. "This is not like them at all."

While Kellyanne was doing this I walked over to Old Sid the Grouch, who was still watery-eyed with pain and holding on to his nose and mooching around his claim checking to see if all his opal dirt was still there. I said: "You've made a big mistake here, Mr. Sid. We Williamsons were just looking for my sister's imaginary friends. We ain't no ratters."

Old Sid spat on the ground and said something about our family needing our heads inspected, and how my poor mother was too much of a pom for this place, and how he felt sorry for us that our dad was a ratter, and how the rumour was my dad had come to the Ridge in the first place to hide away from the law. And I felt so angry I walked right away, pulled Kellyanne up by the arm and marched her home. It took an hour and a half, and all the way Kellyanne was whining about how she'd lost Pobby and Dingan, and how she wouldn't be able to sleep or eat until she found them, and how if they'd been there then they could have saved Dad and none of this would have happened. Her worried little face was covered in white dust so she looked like a little ghost.

Well, it was dark when we got back to our home, and my mum had already heard what had happened from the police and she sent us to bed and said not to worry because everything would be sorted out soon. But I never saw her looking so angry and panicky and unsorted-out in her life. And her bedroom light stayed on all night, I swear.

And that night at around twelve was when Kellyanne crawled into my bedroom through the Dodge door which I'd got Dad to fix up to make going to bed more

interesting. And my sister looked at me all pale and fuzzy-faced and said: "Ashmol, Pobby and Dingan are maybe-dead." And she just sat there in her pyjamas all nervous and hurt. But I was half thinking of Dad and if he was in prison and how the whole thing was Pobby and Dingan's fault. And then I tried to get my head round how it could be their fault if they didn't even exist.

And I fell asleep thinking about that.

3

When I woke up the next day, Mum told me how Dad had been in prison overnight but he was being released and sent home until there was a trial or something which would prove that Dad hadn't been ratting Old Sid's claim. Mum was pretty frantic with worry, though, and she said Dad would have to keep a low profile in the Ridge and stay at home a while, until the whole thing had blown over and he'd got his respect back amongst all the miners and stuff. Ratting, you see, is the same thing as murder in Lightning Ridge-only a bit worse.

We waited for him to come home and played a game of chess to help pass the time and calm each other down. I got Mum in checkmate after fifteen moves. No one can beat me at chess, and I reckon one day I'll be a bloody grandmaster or something. Either that or a secret agent like James Blond. But I have to admit that this time Mum wasn't concentrating too well and so she made it pretty easy for my bishops and knights to do the business. The problem was that Mum kept gazing out of the window with a dazed look about her, and I was pretty sure she wasn't just thinking about Dad but she was also pommie-sick again and thinking about Granny Pom and the other pommie friends she left behind her in England all those years ago.

Anyway, when Dad eventually came home late that afternoon he gave us all a hug and said that the prison was okay and a bit like a motel except that the beds were hard and the bars weren't the kind that served beer. He said not to worry, because he was going to sort out this whole mess good and proper. But he didn't know quite how. And Mum told him he'd better not try and sort out anything but just keep his head down and keep out of trouble until the trial and all that shit. And then my dad asked me if Pobby and Dingan had come back yet. I shook my head. "Kellyanne thinks they are maybe-dead," I said.

"She's still very upset," said my mum. "She's been sulking all day. You shouldn't have been so careless, Rex, you really shouldn't."

"I shouldn't have done a lot of things," said my dad, letting out a long sigh. But he was pleased to be back. And he was glad I think of all the attention we were giving him. I even went and got him a stubby of V.B. from the fridge and then I sat there asking him more things about prison. And after that we talked about opal all day, until it got dark and until there was suddenly this godawful shriek and Mum came rushing in from near the front door saying, "Oh, my Lord! God! Help! Get water! Get water fast!" She ran into the kitchen and started filling up a bucket from the sink.

We rushed out front and what hit me first was a smokey smell like the smell of a cigar. And then, when I peered out into the dark, I could see grey figures twisting up into the sky quite awesomely. Dancing. But my dad whispered: "Jesus! They've set our fence on fire!" And then I twigged that those figures were swirls of smoke, and some of the stakes were actually flaming at the tops. The light from the flame danced against the walls of our little house and showed up enormous dark lines like zebra stripes. They were letters sprayed on with an aerosol can or something, and they said:

BURN THE RATTERS

Mum threw her bucket of water over the fence post while I ran in to fill up some more and Dad just stood gaping at the words on the wall beside the living-room window. He was there when I came back, still staring, his hand on the back of his neck, not saying a word. And then he disappeared around the back of our house for paint. When the flames were out I went into Kellyanne's room and told her what had happened. But she just hid under her blanket and said nothing.

Ramone

Always lift a skull with both hands.

They come back to me,
These instructions from my
Dead uncle Ramone.

Let me excavate him.
Let me ease him out of the grave.

ii.

Let me think of him clasping my head
And brushing the hair from my eyes

As if it is earth. The wonderful size
Of his fingers as they take hold of my haw.

You scrape away the soil from the exterior,
Then cover with layers of aluminium foil,
Put it in polythene foam in a container
And then repack with acid-free tissue paper.

It's easy but you have to be thorough, you see?

iii.

Umpteen stories my guardian whispered me
About who he'd turned up; how he'd find skeletons

Laying all warm in the clay, or just the fragments:
Nappy their souls were in heaven.

One or two were *even older* than him.
And some of them looked like they were copulating,
They were so close.
Some of them were tiny scraps of enamel.

iv.

*You have to be careful when lifting.
Or the ribs will crumble to dust.*

Ramone could tell me all about it
Now I was old enough.

It was like he was making a song
out of old vertebrae

As he hitched me up on his back
And I swung on his collar bone.

And I worshipped the ground my Uncle Ramone
Dug in; he brought toothpicks home,

Plasterers' leaves and lollipop sticks
Which sometimes had jokes on.

v.

I learnt them by rote.

The one about cremation pits,
About pyre debris and carbonized seeds.

I'd stay up late most nights
With my head full of coprolites,
With intestinal parasites,
Or a decaying patella.
What else do I remember?
That epiphyses look like small stones.

That remains of children are often confused
With small animals like rabbits and dogs.

That they are fragile as anything.

That bones of infants and adults should never be
Bagged together.