

## Lukey

Lukey Pease had a German Shorthaired answered to Jazz – a touch of Doberman about the teeth, the eyes – and Jazz had a nose on him could track a goanna up a tree.

Mid morning and Lukey walked, Jazz galloped head high ears flapping through the high meadow and Jazz's gallop sank into cold treacle, yellow eyes eager, nose questing – locked upwind, legs stilled mid-stride, trembling.

Lukey crept forward beside Jazz, silent as a cloud brushing the ground, slowly pulling off his old felt hat. Snake swift he clamped the hat over a sett of brown quail huddled under the whitetop tussock. One burst into the air with an explosive whirr and Jazz watched its flight, eyes full of hunger.

Lukey folded his hat around speckled brown bodies, crept his fingers into the warm fluttering bunch, crushed small skulls, slid still-quivering quail into his jacket, walked down the hill to the scattering of cottages along the creek.

Mavis Adamson hung washing on the line back of her house. She bent down to the basket, lifted a shirt, mouth full of pegs – there was already heat in the morning sun, and her shift clung, pulled free, clung again.

*Lukey*

Mavis wiped dark hair from her face, looked up.

‘Lukey – You like to scare me creeping up like that.’ But Mavis did not look scared.

‘Cut some kindling for ya while ya finish that. Got me some little quails – ya like quails? I can skin em if ya want.’

‘That sounds real nice Lukey – Dan’s down to the sawmill, took his lunch.’

Lukey nodded, tugged the little tomahawk out of the chopping block, split a deal offcut into long pale sticks. By the time he’d filled the box by the back door Mavis had the washing pegged and hoisted, waving in the sunshine.

Mavis held the back door open, smiling at Lukey, a fine dew on her top lip, dress clinging to dampness here and there, a waft like the sweet smell of early morning milkers.

‘Home, Jazz.’ The dog’s tail drooped and his ears fell. He turned and trotted up the hill, stopped, looked back. Lukey waved him away. ‘Go on now, git.’ The dog turned and trotted out of sight.

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*Lukey*

Tom was a half bred Clydesdale, occasionally pulled Lukey's sulky. Tom grazed in the meadow by the cottage, the sulky rested shafts down in the grass – the cottage tucked in a fold of the cliffs out where people seldom came.

Sandstone cliffs bulged grey with lichens above ironbark and wattle. Soft yellow caves like the gills of mushrooms pocked their sides, housed swallows and bats, goannas and jewlizards, possums and skinks, wasps and snakes, handprints in ancient ochre.

A raucous cloud of cockatoos drifted white against the tall cliffs and their secrets.

The cottage sat beneath them, grey timber and rusting iron that had never smelt paint. Bullnosed verandah stacked with old bedsteads, cupboards, square kerosene tins, enamel bathtub, fraying wooden barrels, a rocking chair.

The cottage was long empty when Lukey came upon it – Lukey moved in, disturbed little save rats and possums from the stove until the flue sent up a pale blue thread against the dark of the cliffs.

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‘That little Romany bastard been around here then has he?’

‘Who d’ya mean Dan?’

‘That little gypsy Lukey Pease. I seen them quails in the safe – he’s the only one hereabouts fools with things like that. Bless ya money, tell ya fortune, steal ya blind – take whatever ain’t screwed down he will – and more besides.’

‘Oh Dan, don’t be silly – he’s a harmless little feller – cut some kindling for me, gave me them quails, showed me how to cook them – thought ya might like them for ya supper.’

Dan spat.

‘Eat em ya self if ya got a mind to – get me a proper meal chops and potatoes and all the rest – can’t do a day’s work on crap like them quails.’

Dan sat hunched over his mug of tea, dipping thick biscuits into it.

‘I hear stories about that Lukey. He’s a gypsy see? – ya can tell by them eyes and that skin – that’s the Romany in him.

‘They got ways with animals and that, like them quails.

‘He ain’t got no gun, how’s he get them quails? Them people runs with the carnny people – not too fussy to hire their women out neither – carry knives they do the lot of them, women too, use em soon as blink. Got their ways them Romanys have.’

*Lukey*

‘How come you know all that stuff? Women and knives and like that?’

Dan shrugged, reddened. ‘You pay me mind now.’

Mavis laughed. ‘Oh Dan – there’s no harm in Lukey.’

‘I hear what I hear – You take care who ya let in the back door.’ Dan rose from the table. ‘I’m down to the pub.’

Mavis watched him go. How could he know all that stuff about Lukey? Lukey who could have his hands under her dress in a moment, natural as breathing, no right or wrong about it with Lukey.

And things was different afterwards – for a sweet while things held their proper places – breezes blowing through the leaves carrying scents – birdcalls clearer, sweeter.

Whereas Dan – well, Dan did keep a roof over their heads.

But Dan might leave her feeling like she wasn’t that much ahead of the slop bucket – jamming her against the wall, snoring – she would lie there and listen to him and eventually his snores would deaden her down into thick sleep.

But nobody warned against Dan – only Lukey.

*Lukey*

Dan suspected alright –he just didn't know what he suspected. Never do for him to find out.

Her skin felt silky and alive where Lukey had touched. Her fingertips brushed places where Lukey's had been – reliving small pleasures they had trailed in their wake.

She took down a hogget hindquarter from the meatsafe, split loin chops off with the cleaver. She curled the fatty tails and put them in the baking dish, three tablespoons of dripping fat with a bit of the brown jelly from the bottom of the dripping bowl, pumpkin, potatoes, flour and salt and onions – put the dish in the hot oven.

Mavis looked at the little plum-coloured quails in their striped coats of bacon, rude white apple sticking out between their legs, put them on a tin plate in the oven beside the chops.

Twenty minutes and they filled the kitchen with their heavy scents – no sign of Dan, she took the quails out and ate them, dark and sweet and juicy, bones like matchsticks – hint of apple and rosemary. That Lukey –

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*Lukey*

For a month or so Lukey might take on a job of fencing. If he was building a set of yards the rails were smooth, knots and lumps adzed to silk. When he morticed a rail into a post there would not be room for a cigarette paper in the spaces between. When he strained a wire fence the wire sung.

Lukey was the last person a man would notice in a group.

But a woman might see reflections of her femininity in those dark eyes, images she might no longer find in her husband's gaze, catch excitement from the flash of teeth, be careful not to show it.

A woman might run through bits of things that maybe needed fixing, recipes for fancy cakes and biscuits sitting long years unused in the kitchen drawer.

Remember stories.

Yet it was Alma – the glow of a new bride about her, young body open in its grace, her Robert off with the fettleers for the next month – it was Alma laughed at something he said, touched his arm in her easy way, pointed up the hill to her house.

It was Alma's butter churn that Lukey made the new handle for, Alma sitting beside him, watching his clever brown fingers shape the wood.

*Lukey*

It was Alma smelt the cinnamon smell of him, saw how the dark curls clung behind his ear until she must reach out a finger and touch one, uncurl it and let it go like sprung silk, while Lukey worked on the handle.

It was Alma's fingers played with the dark curls, the skin on the back of his neck soft as her satin slip, played over that brown skin until Lukey turned to her – white teeth, his eyes so full of possibilities they choked a quick little laugh from her.

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Lukey built Alma a little dressing table for her bedroom, built it out of old cedar, dovetailed and pegged and glued, not a screw or nail anywhere in it – a little drawer in the centre and a framed mirror on pivots behind, polished with many coats of shellac and spirits until it glowed with a richness that fingers ached to touch.

He brought it up to Alma's house on the back of the sulky behind old Tom, brought it up in pieces wrapped in an old blanket, pulled up by the back gate, carried it piece by piece through the sunny morning while Alma watched silent on the verandah, back of her hand to her mouth.

*Lukey*

Lukey set it on the verandah, set the top on the carved legs, fixed the frame of the mirror in its little holes in the top, whispered the drawer into place, closed it and when he looked up Robert was standing beside Alma.

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Next morning Lukey's face was dark – his lips a tight slit.

He put the adze aside when it glanced off a knot of wood and grazed his leg, slicing a cut in his grey pants.

‘Some cunt’s been digging fuckin holes with this – blade’s blunt, chipped see? – bounced off the stay, like to cut me fuckin leg.’

‘Any you bastards been digging holes with Shagger’s adze?’ Big Jim Cullen, ginger haired overseer of the crew building the yards. Jim looked around – all heads down, carefully busy.

‘Nope, don’t look like no one here Luke boy ,’ grinning. ‘Must a bounced against them crowbars in back of the dray.’

Lukey looked at Jim Cullen unsmiling. He’d tied the razor edge of the adze in its fold of old leather like he always did. The big red bastard would have taken it out himself, dug a hole to shit in – Lukey had seen him do it before.

*Lukey*

Loose the edge on an adze and it'd bounce off ironbark, take your leg if you weren't quick. Lukey was quick

But that dressing table.

Taken him three weeks to build that dressing table – match the grain in the legs, carve them out, steam the curve on the table front, sand it all smooth, boil the glue down in the old brown pot, cut and fit the dovetails, drill the peg holes, taper the pegs, fit it all together time and again until it sat tight and neat as one of them Chinese puzzles, peg it and glue it, let it set.

And then the polishing. Rub and shellac and rub again, eight coats, more in places, till it had a deep red glow to it and every eye of grain in the rich wood opened and looked back – took a lot of work to bring out the heart of the cedar.

His best piece – but no more than a match for Alma – fresh, open, generous, with the dew still on her and needing a man after her husband had woke the sap in her and went off with the fettlers gang.

And now it lay smashed in the road outside her gate, shards of mirror flashing careless fire in the morning sun. Lukey hadn't checked his stride, didn't glance at the cottage, didn't see the blotched face by the kitchen window.

*Lukey*

Robert hadn't hit her. He'd just looked at the dressing table and his face had shut down and he'd went inside – took his hat and walked out the door, shut the gate, headed off down the road to Dooley's.

He'd come back late that night, still didn't hit her, but hurt her bad and deep – worse than if he'd hit her – used what had been between them to hurt her in ways she had not thought possible – left her bone cold – bleeding in places that should never bleed.

In the morning he'd went back with the fettlers gang – she'd heard the snapping and crunching by the gate– discordant music of shattering glass – and what little warmth remained had drained from her.

Later she'd stood by the window and watched Lukey walk past and she'd felt something tear inside, seep down her legs.

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The yards had ironbark rails big as sleepers side-cut into ironbark uprights foot and half thick – four rails to a panel, each rail heavy as two men.

Lukey began on the bottom rail, cut the mortices into the posts, trimmed the rail with the newly sharpened adze, rested the rail in the side-slots of the posts, worked on the one above, and then the one above that.

*Lukey*

Big Jim Cullen bored the bolt holes – bulging muscles twisting the hand brace through the unyielding ironbark – curled corings falling with the bittersweet resin of freshcut wood.

Jim started at the bottom rail.

The bit was through the rail and deep into the post when the top rail fell, brought the next rail with it, landed on Jim's arm holding the brace, snapped the steel bit deep in the post.

Jim screamed when his extra elbow speared white and red through freshly smiling flesh – it took two men to lift the rails off his arm, freckles vivid against suddenly pallid skin, sweat darkening his ginger hair.

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Lukey found Alma huddled in a red smear by the sink, teeth chattering. He carried her to the tub, bathed her in warm water and crushed ti tree leaves, lay her on the bed, covered her with the down quilt, stripped and laid himself under the quilt beside her, held her cold body against him until the trembling stilled.

Alma's cottage caught fire that night, burnt to the ground as timber cottages will – nothing in the ashes but grey crinkles of corrugated iron, black block of stove, tilting sink and a brick chimney. No trace of Alma.

*Lukey*

When the fettlers returned a funeral was held in the small wooden church  
– Robert scattered a jar of ashes in the churchyard.

‘No – I ain’t going to put up no stone for her. Not wasting good money on  
no stone – still owe a hundred and fifty pound on that there heap of ash back up  
the creek. Take more’n a year to pay that off.’

Robert spat in the ash at his feet.

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Jim Cullen – right arm in a cast greased with sweat, a glass of beer clamped in  
the fingers of that cast – raised the glass to his lips with the outward swing and  
bobbing head of clumsy machinery.

‘He’s got her in that shack back in them cliffs.

‘ I seen a black snake mesmerize a frog once – frog couldn’t move –  
snake swallowed it whole. That’s what them gypsies do with women.’

Sweat ran from his red face like water from a full sponge.

‘How ya know?’ asked Robert.

‘Seen her meself – shootin rabbits, come on this little shack real quiet, up there back a nowhere – seen your Alma plain as day hanging out the washing and here’s this little gypsy in the rocking chair on the verandah, big speckled dog an all.’

Jim Cullen took another neck stretching swallow from his glass, wiped the sweat from his face.

‘How d’ya know it was Alma?’

‘Mate – them tits, that arse – no offence mate – yellor hair flashin – ya couldn’t mistake that woman for no one else hereabouts.’

Robert downed his beer, ordered another.

Jim Cullen peered at him. ‘What ya going to do about it then?’

Robert shook his head, stayed silent.

‘Can’t leave her there mate – can’t leave her there with that dirty little Romany – ain’t right mate – ain’t right what them gypsies do to women – ya can’t leave her there mate.’

Robert said nothing, drained half his beer.

‘We’ll help ya mate – we’ll help ya, won’t we boys?’

*Lukey*

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Jazz took Jim Cullen in a silent rush, leapt at his throat. At the last moment Cullen raised his plastered arm and the dog's teeth closed on it, knocked them both to the ground, rifle clattering on the rocks.

The dog released the cast, worried his face – snarling – tore an ear.

Men scattered in the dark. .

'Hey you bastards come back – get this fucken dog off me.'

Jazz vanished.

Jim Cullen staggered to his feet

Running feet faded into the night.

Jim lumbered after them, cursing.

He passed within five foot of Lukey, standing by a tree a rock in his hand,

Jazz silent at his feet.

Cullen was ten paces past him when Lukey threw the rock – it tore the air with its sigh, hit Jim Cullen with the sound of an axe biting timber. Cullen fell.

*Lukey*

Lukey stood motionless, hefting another rock, watched the dark bundle that was Cullen slowly separate itself from the ground, groaning.

Shapes came back, lifted him between them, bore him feet dragging into the night.

A slow light bloomed in the cottage, Alma silhouetted in the doorway, hair silk in the light. Jazz padded up the steps, laid his muzzle by her legs, tail rapping the doorjamb.

Alma could see Lukey's teeth before she could see him.

He grinned at her, tossed the rock into the night, brushed his hands on his trousers.

'You okay?'

Lukey shook his head 'Yeah – They'll be back.'

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Morning crept down the cliffs, stirring white cockatoos into screeching flight.

No smoke rose from the little flue.

No dog lay carelessly by the verandah steps, no horse grazed quietly in the meadow below the cottage.

*Lukey*

No sulky stood shafts down in the grass.