

ISA AND HER SHEEP

SALLIE MUIRDEN

The first time he saw her she was standing on the oval with her sheep on a lead. She still had her Queensland tan and sun-bleached hair. He was walking his border collie, and the dog had seen her sheep. His dog made straight for her sheep and ran around it, barely barking enough friskiness to terrify the sheep.

But she wasn't Miranda then. She was Isa, named after a mining town somewhere near where she was born. They were at different schools, when she had the sheep.

He saw her on the oval many times before he ever spoke to her. She was always in the company of four small boys. Before Matthew knew who these boys were, he imagined that the girl they called 'Iza' was their nanny. Before he knew her real name he imagined that the little boys couldn't say it properly, and that she would be Liza.

She was Liza, the nanny. She couldn't be their older sister because she didn't look like them. They were Chinese and she wasn't.

Liza the nanny with the sheep, he thought. Then she was Isa. That he learned later. He'd never heard anyone called that name before.

Matthew talked to the children in her care before he spoke to her.

'She is our next-door neighbour, not our nanny,' they corrected him.

'Why does she always have the sheep with her?'

'It has to go for walks. It has to eat the grass because it is a sheep,' the two elder boys chanted, as though they thought it was Matthew who was stupid. These boys were aged seven and five, and the twins looked about three, though they could have been younger as they couldn't yet talk.

Isa never spoke to Matthew because he never spoke to her. She never smiled at him because there was a chance he wouldn't smile back. And she didn't have a smiley nature, let's face it.

He decided she was aloof. That weird name Isa suited her after all. She was an ice-maiden.

'I was born in Isa,' she was to tell him later. 'A red-hot town with silver nuggets in the soil.'

In the photo at Delbreigh College she is wearing the charm bracelet he gave her. She is pale, her hair darker, almost brown. No bleaching sunshine inside those bluestone walls. No suntan possible, not even in summer at that school.

Leon considered burning this photo and destroying the past. Or cutting out the part with Isa in it.

He still didn't want to remember; he didn't want her to be Isa ever again.

He wanted her to be Miranda, the woman he'd managed to reach out and hold on to. She was complete as Miranda in his mind. As Isa she was only a tiny bit of herself.

He had changed his name shortly after she became Miranda. Change was necessary. You had to keep up appearances with the person you were following in life. And so Matthew, who had been left behind, became Leon, who had been able to catch her up.

Leon. Noel back-to-front. Christmas, but not really. It was more of a lion-sounding name.

Changing partners was not possible. It was possible to change selves and so believe that you were someone new, even if you were not. To believe that you were in a new relationship, even if you were not. Your relationship with yourself changed. A born-again love affair with someone you'd forgotten you always were.

Every day you woke up. There was sound—the mumble of the TV, the hum of the air-filter. Outside there was not enough sound. It was like living on the moon; there was no wind to carry the sound about. The washing couldn't dry on the line. It hung limp as the dead American flag on the moon in 1969. You still went out to buy bread, though. To hear cars rushing past. People honked their horns like never before!

Leon walked a block to the sole surviving milk bar. He knew that he would meet someone in the milk bar who looked the same but who had changed utterly. New clothes, new walking gait, less apprehensive stare.

'Giga?' Uncertainly.

'No, I'm Beta now.' She moved off, lugging her two-litre container of milk. Confidently, as predicted.

If Leon were to join her he would have to throw on a new hat and follow quickly.

'I am Gretto, as of this minute.' And she would turn as though she had been expecting this transformation.

But Leon would not follow. And Beta would not turn in the wake of his pattering footsteps like a handful of nuts thrown onto the cement path.

Leon was aligned to another planet, his Miranda. While others changed course, he could not. Or did not want to just yet.

'I looked up your name in the encyclopaedia.'

She heard him, but she kept typing on her computer in the sunroom.

'Here's what it says. Miranda is the most battered moon in our solar system. A moon of Uranus, it has been shattered in a giant collision, then the pieces soldered back together again by gravity.'

'Do I look like a battered planet?'

Battered wives or battered fish; the word didn't have to be sinister. They'd collided all right, but not from the start. Not even at the school where she'd worn his charm bracelet.

When he first met her, when she was Isa, he was thinking that she came from a farm somewhere. She was golden brown all over, the colour of

roasted sesame seeds. The sun had kept daily watch over her. And over her sheep, apparently. It had yellow sun-stains on its creamy fleece.

When Isa's sheep was hungry it tore pieces of grass from the oval with its ugly mouth. Isa had a pocketful of seeds and threw them on the soil that her sheep exposed. One of the little boys had a toy watering can, and he would run to the bare patch of soil and pour water over the light-brown seeds.

'Keep off the grass,' the little boys ran around chirping. Especially to Matthew and his dog.

'There was no one, there was no one, there was no one and then there was Matthew,' Isa sighed as she made her way home with her four little boys and her sheep.

'No one' meant there was room for everyone, for all possibilities. The great solitary self that people slipped in and out of each day. She touched no one, even as everyone touched her.

She had her sheep, her new city and the boys she liked to imagine were her own children some time in the future. Isa didn't need anyone else. Matthew was like an extra on a film set. She didn't even know what he looked like, though she was aware of him on the oval most days after school. Was he blond and tallish? She had a vague idea he was both these things; but later, when she looked at him properly, she would see he was neither. She was as conscious of him as she was of the goal posts that stood at either end of the oval.

His black-and-white animal was another matter. It barked a lot and scared her sheep.

If you had asked her to describe the dog, she could have told you it was much slighter than her sheep, and rather annoying.

The climate in these times was unchanging. It was like a stuck-on, felt-picture climate. The clouds, the sun rays. Pitter-patter raindrops. The even temperatures were regulated by the meteorological bureau, indoors and

out. Always a few degrees cooler outside than in. The grass continued to grow. A perpetual September or April. Pleasant days and nights. Never too hot or cold.

The climate was no longer unpredictable, and some people longed for cyclones and bushfires to make them feel alive again. None were possible here. There were droughts in some places and floods outside the safety zones, but that was another thing. They were working on it. All-over climate control. In the level temperatures, the birds sang in chorus. Never alone. Twenty would drop dead at the same moment. Twenty replaced those in the morning, sprung from the loins of trees. Real birds that followed their own seasons had disappeared long ago, when the rain grew scant.

The lost climate had to go somewhere, so it had gone into Matthew. This was a blessing.

Isa felt his presence as a warm simoom some days. A Mount Isa summer breeze.

Other times he was thawing ice. Cold on her cheeks and shivers running down her neck. But her little boys playing ball weren't affected, were they? They remained clammy and warm. An air-con malfunction? Then she saw Matthew. Frosted like Shackleton in Antarctica. A scarf covering his mouth. He was circling in a centrifugal direction. Away from her. They wouldn't have to acknowledge each other that day. Their lives wouldn't cross.

They weren't supposed to know each other. Not yet. But he had made his point. Frozen her out, she supposed. Inside the gardening gloves she wore to stop the sheep's lead chafing her hands, the tips of her fingers were hurting. She took the gloves off and half-frozen water ran out onto the ground. It was like the dishwashing water that got caught in rubber gloves, only this water was icy not warm.

She forgot about him and his (attention-seeking?) antics. She had the sheep to attend to. She had to watch the little boys. Find a water fountain to quench their thirst. Keep her eye on the time. Back home by five-thirty

for their tea. She was getting pocket money to do this. But she probably would have done it for nothing because she liked doing it.

Another day he turned on the heat for her. She felt the warm wind that did for clothes throughout the year back home in Mt Isa. Matthew's arc was moving closer. His body was swinging in small circles to reach the stick his dog had dropped after its rapid chase. She looked up and saw him taking his thin jumper off, making a mess of his silky reddish hair. Isa could feel him like a sauna. She looked away. He turned, gyrating back the way he'd come. Then the weather changed. Isa shivered and noticed him again. Matthew coated in a swirl of white pompoms. The snow coming out of his body in clumps and falling on the ground. Tiny snowballs stuck to the grass of the oval. The little boys ran to watch the blobs of snow being sucked into the soil, like water down plugholes.

'Gone, gone!' they cried, their mouths gaping. A minute later the grass was dry. Matthew carried the heat and the coldness with him. It could not survive for long once it had departed his body. He was across the other side of the oval and she noticed him accurately for the first time; he was narrow and slightly bent like a hairpin.

Isa had lost her sheep. Her roly-poly sheep, desperately in need of a hair-cut.

It had got out of the backyard, headbutted its way through the side gate and disappeared down the lane.

(end of excerpt)