

Parallax South

by Carol Major

(Sample pages)

Parallax South is a story of how an entire town conspires to cover up a murder. It is a story of physical landscapes, memory and what we chose to believe and eventually forgive.

It is the late 1970s in the far west corner of New South Wales, a place not yet visited by modernity. Stewart Flats, a dying town, has been revived by tours to Lake Mungo where prehistoric bones have been found. Trevor, an odd-job man, kills visitor Gloria Brighton with his employer's tour bus. He was drunk but the girl should have known better. What was she doing walking along a dark road at night? But was it murder, an accident or even her suicide?

*Twin lens reflex cameras
disadvantages centre on parallax
due to using one lens to compose
and a different lens to take the
photograph.*

Robert Monaghan
Twin Lens Medium Format Cameras

chapter one

1978: Joyce's Santa Claus Parade

The sun has risen and the parrots are screaming over the camp. A woman grinds seeds with a stone. Most of the others are still sleeping but one child is awake. She runs out past the edges of the camp, throwing a piece of wood high above her head and catching it again.

Yesterday when they arrived, it had all been the same place: one ground with grass and dirt and scattered trees. But now they have made fires and ovens in the ground. This is the camp and beyond is somewhere else.

You are driving west on a highway in New South Wales, Australia. The land is flat and you feel as if you're headed into one of those white backdrops used in photography studios, the ones that imitate infinity. White sky, white ground, no horizon. The sun is directly above.

What month is it? Well, it could be any month because it's often hot in the middle of the day when you're this far from the coast. As for the year, that's open for debate as well. Parts of Australia are forever caught between the present and a prehistoric past that still shimmers despite telephone poles and melting bitumen. But let's say it is nineteen seventy-eight, a decade or so before mobile phones and later the Internet. A time when physical geography still held the edges of a place. And so you might come to Stewart Flats.

What would you think of it? The only thing that might enter your head is that it's been some time since you saw any sign of a town. And should you decide to turn off the highway and drive through the main street, you might notice the place is small: a hotel, post office, a few other shops—so that you might wonder about the people who live here. What do they do with no cinema, shopping mall or public swimming

pool? Although the thought would be fleeting. All in all you'd attribute nothing good or bad to it. You're simply passing through.

On the other hand, if you'd grown up here you might change the boundaries, take in more. Because you'd know that Lloyd Weatherbee's property is up the gravel road and that old Arthur has a funny little museum off the beaten track. The circumference would move out from the town centre to take in woolsheds and paddocks, and a river that is further away. In this case there might not be a circumference at all, simply one big unified place that makes up your whole world.

Joyce Hardie sees Stewart Flats like that, its rhythm as natural as breathing in and out: the fly season, the droughts and the pink Christmas decorations fading in the December heat. Because it is December and the flies are here already, carried in on hot westerlies. Her son-in-law—well he might have been her son in-law—swipes at one as it tries to crawl up his nose. His skinny body sweats inside a Santa Claus suit. But Trevor isn't bothered. There have always been flies and glaring sun. Besides, he likes riding down the main street on the back tray of a ute. The name *Hardie Tours* has been painted on two fat ribbons and decorate the sides. He shouts at Charlie to crank up the loudspeaker and tosses lollies to the pack of screaming kids. Christmas Carols blare and Charlie makes a show of waving too, holds up the plump stubs of fingers lost to a harvester—Charlie's always making a show of those.

Joyce's face shines. The Christmas parade is her idea, a way of promoting her tour company. Maybe a way of promoting Trevor as well, proving to herself and others that it was worth putting up with him. For a split second she thinks of her daughter buried in the graveyard and wonders if Cheryl is watching him too. Her heart curls and in that moment something close to shame flickers and is gone.

“Hey Mum,” Trevor shouts, bringing her back into the sunshine and the cheering crowd. He always calls her Mum. “Buy us some cigs.” His wallet spins in the air, and despite her big body, Joyce catches it neatly as a cricket player, slap in the palm of her hand. She salutes with her thumb and grins. Joyce is the product of a big-boned family. A no-fuss family. A family of people able to twirl spanners around car wheels, pound out bread dough and lob a cricket ball straight at the wicket. Everyone in Stewart Flats knows Joyce.

She heads toward the milkbar, passing a brand new Holden Commodore on the way. Pretty flash with its gold paint. She notices the Avis rubbish bag on the dashboard and figures the owners must be tourists. She’s proud of that too. Tourists. If it weren’t for her son George running the bus across the border to Mildura and bringing them here, the town would be dead. They play the pokies in Sam’s hotel and then Trevor runs them out to Barnes’ property. There’s an ancient lakebed there surrounded with huge shifting dunes. Quite a sight when the sun goes down.

A man and woman inside the milkbar are bent over the ice cream selection in the freezer. Joyce reckons that’s them. She’s pleased they’ve seen her parade, maybe seen her ad in the *Courier* too. Rita stands behind the counter. Been Joyce’s friend all these years. A rosy little woman with small, sharp eyes. Rita was there when the children were born, when the farm was lost, and there when Cheryl died. She was also there when George fell into a four-month weeping fit after his Canadian wife ran off. Joyce catches her breath. Now what made her think of that? It’s been almost five years since Ladonda disappeared. Strange little minx.

Rita flicks her head toward the tourist’s backs. City people wearing brand new Akubra hats, like this will make them locals. She doesn’t have much time for tourists

these days even if they spend money in town. “Not like I’m getting much of it.”

Although she’s quick to add that it’s fair enough for Joyce and the hotel.

Joyce glances round for the *Courier* but can’t see any about. “*Courier* not here?”

“Tossed the last of them out this morning. Fresh lot due today.” And just as Rita says this, skinny old Arthur carries in a bundle and plops them on the floor.

“You delivering the newspapers now too?” says Joyce. She doesn’t like Arthur. He doesn’t approve of her petrol station, doesn’t approve of her tour out to the Barnes’ property either. A few years back the bones of a woman over 40,000 years old were found near the ancient lake, artifacts too. You’d think Arthur owns them they way he goes on. He complains Trevor’s the last person who should be driving people out there, gunning Joyce’s ute up the dunes.

Joyce snatches a *Courier* from the pile and says, “I’d like one of those,” in a very loud voice. She hopes the tourists will turn, in a silly way hopes they will realise it’s her who organised the Christmas parade. The tourists do turn but she doesn’t get the chance to see their faces because at that very same moment she catches what’s on the front page. There, right underneath a story on sheep immunisation, an advertisement too big for anyone to miss.

Public Notice

Photographs collected in a world tour of farming communities

will be mounted at the University of California.

We require permission to use the photograph below.

If anyone knows the whereabouts of Ladonda Hardie

(Nee Ladonda Birdtail Blackburn) Please write to:

PO Box 53, Santa Barbara, California

Below is a photo of Ladonda, that hunted expression on her face. Is that the old woolshed in the background? Joyce drops the paper face down. Rita scurries round the counter to have a look. “The Yanks?” She gasps.

Joyce turns to the tourists and imagines for a moment they put in the notice. They still have their backs to her, haven’t spoken yet. And in that moment it all comes flooding back. Her son George returning from Canada with Ladonda—a photograph of the two of them in their wedding gear sitting in a sleigh. And then George bringing her here and parading her around like a brand new bicycle, as if this made him better than Trevor, a person who was prepared to do a hard day’s work. Later that autumn, two Yanks turned up, oh so cheerful with their big American faces. Said they were on a world tour of farming villages, taking pictures of everyone and everything. Bloody pictures. Seemed the main interest that autumn and into the winter too. And Arthur, he’d encouraged it by giving Ladonda a camera—some old thing you had to hold in front of your stomach and look through the top. Joyce heart starts to thump thinking of all those rolls of film. She should have snatched them out of Ladonda’s bag. She should have smashed Arthur’s camera too. She turns to see if he’s looking at her. But no, he’s pretending to be stacking the rest of the papers onto a wire shelf, like he hasn’t heard Rita gasp, *Those Yanks*. Like he hasn’t seen the expression on Joyce’s face. Well, she’s not going to give him the satisfaction of taking it any further. She asks Rita for the packet of *Winfield’s* and to put four cream buns in a paper bag. Adds that she’d like to stay and chat but she’s got accounting to finish and tonight’s tea to cook. She pokes around in her handbag as if she’s trying to find the keys to the ute, even when she knows Trevor has them and that she came in with him this morning.

Rita places the cigarettes on the counter and says she'll need to put that many in a box.

“What?”

“Four cream buns won't fit in a bag.”

“Then make it two.” Joyce snatches the sticky package and marches out the door. She's forgotten the cigarettes. She's forgotten to pay.

Out on the street Bernie waves at her. That's the local policeman, wide bland face. He calls out that he'll see her at the pub. But that's the last place Joyce is going. She scuttles down the lane beside the Elder's Office and leans into a shadow to catch her breath. It won't be long before the rest of the town sees the notice. And then the same awkward silence will descend, at least in public. Joyce isn't ready for that charade just yet, but how is she's going to get home without the ute and without being seen? She recalls a shortcut across a paddock at the back of the shops. It isn't the easiest route if you're fat but that can't be helped now. She heaves her way past a row of rubbish bins, all the time thinking what to do next. Is this blackmail? Things were never clear-cut with Ladonda or those Yanks. And what to tell George? The notice is bound to stir him up and then he'll start blaming Joyce all over again. How it was her fault Ladonda ran away. How they should have tried harder to find her that night.

Harder? Harder! The nerve of him. His sister was lying in a morgue, the funeral the next day. Had he expected his mother to be paying attention to his lay-about wife? As for Ladonda herself, sometimes Joyce feels that it was the girl's own flights of fantasy that brought the world tumbling down that July—the way she put odd things together. Those silly photographs. The back fence looking like there was a great sea behind the washing basket instead of dirt. Now how did she do that?

“It’s the way she frames the picture.” That’s what Cheryl had said. Well in the end she framed herself. There’d been a road accident involving Joyce’s bus and Cheryl had been ill at the time, Ladonda drawing little threads between those events, like they were orchestrated, and scaring herself half out of her wits. In the process she almost brought down the business, could have had people thrown in jail.

Joyce catches her breath at the memory and because the walk across the paddock is making her pant. She hasn’t crossed the paddock by foot since she was slim, and now look at her, a big lump of exposed woman. That’s how Ladonda used to make her feel, like she didn’t even belong in her own house.

Back in town the Christmas parade has reached the hotel. Sam Cowan runs that, hair slicked back and wearing white loafers as if he’s running a resort on the Gold Coast. Jean Woodley’s cottage is right next door and shares a side wall with the hotel veranda. She peers through a decorative portal. She hasn’t come out of her walled garden since she arrived from England as a girl. In those earlier years there had been camels on the street, herds of sheep, and sometimes dust storms that turned day into night. Now there are utes and radios, and Joyce’s Christmas Parade.

She runs her finger along a crack in the mortar. People are thundering onto the hotel veranda. Charlie’s voice is above the noise. He’s saying, “Wha-a-at?” and “Wait til the family sees that. You seen that Sam?” Sam tells him to shut up.

“Where’s Joyce?” That’s Charlie again and now Lloyd, his voice soft and sensible. Lloyd bought most of Joyce’s land when she’d had to sell the farm. He’s telling Charlie to leave Joyce alone. She doesn’t need to know about these things. Sam says something else about curiosity killing the cat.

Jean looks around for her cat wondering what this is all about. Had someone complained about the Christmas parade, that noisy ute, the megaphone blasting so loud? If it were up to her she'd see Christmas moved right out of December and settled into the middle of July. At least that's some sort of winter. Almost sixty years away from England and she still can't get used to Christmas in summer: cicadas as big as mice, trees moulting ribbons of bark in the heat. And the size of the snails munching through her lilies after the sun goes down. Last night she'd gone out with a torch to catch them and almost stepped on a lizard by the back door. It hissed and stuck out its blue tongue. Later she discovered her side gate wouldn't close properly. What else might crawl in?

"A lizard won't harm you," Arthur called softly through the portal when he heard her sobbing earlier this morning. "You expect to see the odd shingleback out here." He also asked if she would like him to fix the gate but she told him no. It would mean him coming into the garage and then he would start pestering her all over again about going outside or bringing people in. A little hand squeezes around her heart. Cheryl. She'd been so—oh, how to describe it—so wondrously hopeful in spite of her brace and cane. Stepping into the world was the death of her.

Now there are other voices coming from the hotel veranda. They are asking questions about the town and the parade. How many people live here? How old is the building? Another heavy set of footsteps banging across the wooden planks and then Sam Cowan's voice. "There he is! The man himself." Does Jean hear a camera go click? Something goes click, the tiniest noise, yet it seems to suck all other sounds out of the air because for a moment there is complete silence and then something goes bang. Trevor begins to shout—it must have been his heavy boots that had banged so hard— but he isn't saying "ho, ho, ho" anymore. He's calling someone 'shit for

brains’, and then, “what you perving at ya old faggot? I’m not paid to be a fuckin’ postcard.” A chair falls over. At least it sounds like a chair and then Trevor’s boots banging across the veranda again. There is a moment of silence until Sam tells someone not to mind. “That’s just our Trevor. Doesn’t like getting his photo taken. Been funny about it for years.”

Jean shifts along her wall to have a peek through a second portal. She can see Trevor running to Joyce’s ute, his weedy ponytail flapping. She feels like shouting ‘thief, thief’ and bends to find a stone to throw at him. She spots a newspaper instead. Perhaps Trevor pitched it over her wall. He used to throw lots of things over her wall when he was a boy.

Her cat plops mewing at her feet, reminding Jean he hasn’t had breakfast, then pounces on the garden table and paws at a clay jug. It teeters and crashes onto the patio stones.

“Cato!” Jean kneels and proceeds to open the newspaper so she can carry the sharp bits safely to the bin. But there, right in front of her is a grainy picture of Ladonda on the open page. Ladonda? Jean looks closer at the photograph. Yes it is Ladonda and she is looking off to the side as if she’s heard someone coming and is set to run away again. Jean often told her that if she was that nervous about living out there she could stay with her inside here. But Ladonda wasn’t the kind of girl to stay put, as if *here* has to be a moving thing the way the globe circles the sun. The night she did make a run for it, she was hysterical. She said the only way to get out of Stewart Flats was to die. Cheryl was dead. That girl who was run over by Joyce’s bus was dead. She was darting back and forth, wild-eyed and wringing her hands. “I can never confess. I can never confess. That’s the only thing that will get me off the hook.”

“Confess what?” Jean was so alarmed she rang Arthur. Strangely he didn’t say much except perhaps it would be sensible for Ladonda to leave town. It was the sort of surprise that might make someone speak out.

“Speak out about what?”

Arthur was vague and then suggested that Ladonda borrow Jean’s car. “Could you lend her some money as well? She’ll need to buy a ticket home.”

Jean took a wad of banknotes from under her mattress and handed them over reluctantly, not because she minded giving money to Ladonda but because Ladonda didn’t look capable of driving anywhere, never mind getting on a plane. Oh why couldn’t she stay in the cottage?

Arthur had appeared soon after. He pushed the old Ford out of the garage into the street, and kept pushing it a ways down. He didn’t want to start it right in front of the hotel. He instructed Ladonda to follow the highway to Sydney, leave the car on the outskirts and catch a taxi to the airport from there. But the car was never found again and afterwards Jean imagined Ladonda driving forever, the windows of the old Ford rolled up and the locks pushed down. As for Arthur’s saying Ladonda’s departure might make people speak out, no one really said much at all, just that it was a shame to see a vintage car disappear. They grew even quieter when a woman arrived, an older version of Gloria, the girl who’d been hit by Joyce’s bus. Jean saw her on the opposite side of the road just staring in much the same way Ladonda had stared after saying she could never confess. The woman approached the hotel veranda, a clip clop of heels and the screech of a chair being pulled back. But she didn’t speak to anyone or order a drink. This went on for a week and then she was gone too.

“Probably the mother,” Jean heard Rita say to Charlie. “But nothing to be worrying ourselves about. It makes sense that she’d want to see the place where her daughter died. Make some peace. It doesn’t mean she’s trying to find out more.”

“Find out what?” Joyce had been close by. Her tone was sharp.

“Nothing,” Rita replied.

So that seemed to be the end of it. Then two (was it two?) years later Jean received a large envelope with no return address. Inside was a letter from Ladonda and all the money Jean had given her that night. Ladonda wrote that she’d been able to get back to her grandfather’s house in Canada but discovered it had fallen off a cliff. It was typical of Ladonda to be theatrical about things—those stories about having an Indian mother who’d taken to roaming lakes and river beds. Arthur used to say that the longing in those stories felt real enough, even if the facts could be a bit confused. Well, real or not, Ladonda had also written that she’d come back, ‘not to Australia,’ as she put it, ‘but to Sydney’ and that she was holding the fort—‘holding the fort’ being one of the cowboy type terms she often used. *Holding it for whom?*