

Raea Gragg

Song Of The Canary

*Drama Thriller*

Something flutters about in the darkness in a panic. Grunting, clanging metal, a faint echoing of light illuminates the blackness to reveal a mining tunnel. A group of coal-covered men approaches, shining their candlelight onto a canary cage. The man in front, PAPA JOHN, picks up the cage and exits, stumbling out of the coal mine into the light of day just as a car jostles down the main dirt road leading to town.

A 12-year-old Aboriginal girl stares out the back dusty window, both hands on the glass as she watches the coal-covered men come out of the mine onto the road and fade away behind a corner. This is GMYEA, she is wearing a simple grey dress, stained and tattered. Her thick black hair is unkempt and wild. Clearly, she hasn't been well cared for. She lays her bruised hands in her lap and watches the small 1930'th depression struck coal-mining town come into view from the back seat of the car.

Driving in the front, lips drawn into a permanent frown, MADAME PAULINE maneuvers the car over pot holes, complaining about the drought, the depression and how glad she is that soon, she will have one less half-caste to take care of back at the institution.

Gynea sits solemnly in the back watching the town pass by out the window. The town is held in the clutches of poverty and a sort of coal-covered despair.

They arrive at their destination: a small half-burned down house with barred windows and a crippled chimney. Madam Pauline gets out, not bothering to open the

door for Gymea, gathers her papers and heads to the front door. Gymea follows her, looking around nervously.

Standing at the door, Madam Pauline knocks, knocks and knocks for the tenth time. Finally, she straightens her dress, and hands the stack of papers to Gymea. Turning on her heels, she brushes her hands together and mutters, “good riddance, one down, 86 more heathens to go.”

As the car leaves behind a trail of dust, Gymea looks around. She eyes the forest edge just beyond the town; now is her chance. She drops the adoption papers onto the porch and is about to set out when, from the direction of the forest, a small sickly kid, LITTLEBIRD (10) runs around a corner. He’s running for his life. Gymea hesitates as Littlebird runs her way. But it isn’t a small boy: she’s a very, very ugly white girl. Her cheek and ear are horribly scarred. She has not a speck of hair on her head. Behind her, a group of boys chase her, throwing sticks and rocks. Calling her a demon.

The girl runs right to her, up the porch and quickly opens the door. Gymea slips inside and the two girls slam the door shut as the gang pummels the outside with rocks one of which crashes through the already partially boarded up window.

The girls hold back the door as it threatens to give way while the gang shouts about how ugly, demon-like and pathetic Littlebird is.

Finally the attack comes to an end and Gymea stands back and studies this ugly creature. The girls sit in uncomfortable silence, distancing themselves from each other - neither saying a word. Gymea decides to leave and is about to make her exit when, PAPA JOHN walks in, dirty, rum bottle in hand and bird cage under his arm.

As he does so, the adoption papers from the porch flutter inside and settle on the floor. He looks at the girls then at the papers, putting two and two together. He signs the papers declaring Gymea and Littlebird sisters. Gymea is disgusted by the prospect of her new family as Papa John sits in front of the fire, fishing out some coal from his pocket. Littlebird makes a move to help light the fire but Papa John yells at her to back off and don't touch anything in case she causes another 'accident'. He then slams the soot-covered canary on the table and sits down.

Gymea flashes back: she reaches out her hand and looks up, her mother is guiding her through a grove of paper bark trees. Her mother raises a hand to her lips and points to a kookaburra nesting in the treetops. She tells Gymea that the birds shall watch over her and if she is in trouble, look to the birds.

Gymea blinks the memory away staring at the canary in its cage. Littlebird goes to her father and rests her hand on his dirty one, but Papa John can't bear to look at her and orders her to go to bed and leave him be. Heartbroken, Littlebird reaches up to the birdcage and makes her leave, but not before glancing at Gymea, who looks away, repulsed at her ugliness as well.

Gymea stands for another moment, unsure what to do, until finally Papa John turns to her and threatens his new stepdaughter that is she is only here for work, that she should consider herself lucky to have been adopted at all and to keep her head down and do what's she's told or else he will send her back to the institution.

Scared, she climbs upstairs to join Littlebird who sleeps with a protective hand around the canary's cage. The other half of the house has been poorly boarded up but it's obvious that half of the house had burned down in an explosion. Gymea whispers a

prayer to the caged bird to please help her get home. As she closes her eyes, she flinches at the sound of breaking glass from downstairs.

Downstairs by the fire, Papa John empties his rum bottle and delicately unwraps a picture of his family: himself holding up two smiling children, a boy and Littlebird, blonde and scar-less, and his wife who grins beside him. He angrily throws his rum bottle against the fireplace.

The next day, Gymea wakes up to the gentle prodding of Littlebird. She nearly jumps out of her skin at the mere sight of her. Littlebird carefully unwraps a hard biscuit and tears it in half giving the bigger half to Gymea. Gymea takes her portion of bread and watches Littlebird tear her already small portion in half and gives the rest to the ugly bird. Gymea eats her half and follows her new stepsister downstairs.

Papa John is sprawled out on the floor, glass shards scattered around him. Littlebird wordlessly cleans up the shards but wakes up Papa John who angrily gets to his feet and yells at Littlebird to stop, he cant trust her to do anything not after 'the last time'. He turns to Gymea declaring her the domestic servant. He then grabs his helmet, mining gear and exits, but not before grabbing the canary out of Littlebird's hands reminding her that he she didn't care so much about the birds maybe her Mommy might still be there.

Alone again, Gymea grabs the adoption papers off the table and rips them up. She decides to leave. She wants nothing to do with these people, they are not her family, this isn't her home and this isn't where she belongs.

She makes it half way down the street when a police car passes by, 'Aboriginal Protection Police' reads the logo on the squad car. She freezes, terrified. The police

harass her before sending her back to the house threatening her to not so much as step out of line or they will shoot her and replace her with another no good half-caste.

She runs into Littlebird who is just leaving the house with an empty pail.

Following her wordless mute stepsister to the town well, they endure hateful commentary and distasteful glares from the other townsfolk. Who whisper under their breathe about the ‘cursed girl’. It’s clear that they’re both outcasts and are seen as worthless in the eyes of the community.

Wordlessly, the two gather water and spend the day doing chores, cleaning laundry, sweeping the floors and particularly cleaning the coal dust that covers everything. At one point they pass by the coal processing plant to feed all the canaries in the large cage attached to the building. All the while Gymea’s observant eyes linger on the forested horizon just itching for her chance to make a run for it.

Towards the end of the day Littlebird grabs Gymea’s hand in an attempt at friendship, but Gymea pulls away, bitterly proclaiming how they aren’t sisters. She wants nothing to do with her and that she hates her and all the white people who are responsible for taking her away from her mother and people and forcing her to become one of them. She isn’t one of them.

Littlebird runs away in tears. Gymea tries to leave once again headed to the outskirts of the town she walks up a big hill through the cemetery and walks stealthy into the edge of the forest. But she hesitates when she sees Littlebird carying flowers. Gymea eyes Littlebird from the brush as she lays down some flowers on two newly dug graves.

Despite the chance for escape Gymea walks out of the woods demanding whose graves are these, Littlebird doesn’t mutter a word. Gymea asks if it’s her mother to which

Littlebird gives a nod. Slightly ashamed of herself she apologizes to Littlebird and asks what happened. Littlebird, clearly terrified leads her back to the house and points to the half of the house that exploded and points down below to the coal mining tunnels that snake off into the black underground.

Both girls shudder. But then they hear the faint echo of a bird calling from inside the tunnel. Littlebird grabs her, shaking her head miserably. She's terrified. Gynea mocks her about how she is weak, scared and pathetic, not to mention ugly. And tells her to be more brave and wanders into the dark coal tunnel beneath the house. Unafraid, Gynea follows the fluttering sound until she comes across the birdcage, crouching down she looks quizzically at the bird inside its cage, "you don't belong here." She picks up the cage and prepares to unlock it when someone screams from above. Gynea runs back, birdcage slung over her shoulders. She crawls out of the concave tunnel back into the house.

The neighborhood gang is beating up Littlebird, viciously taking out all their frustration on her and mocking her father for being an aboriginal lover. Gynea stubbornly tries to break up the fight by hitting back. She knocks the leader to the ground. But he quickly gets up and she realizes the fury she has unleashed. Recovering, the mean kids get to their feet and charge, Gynea grabs Littlebird and the two race across town, the gang of bullies in pursuit. A few neighbors watch passively; no one tries to intervene.

Littlebird leads them to the coal processing plant on the edge of town. Inside the coal plant is a drafty three story high metallic beast of a machine. Once inside, the two pause.

Until the boys appear. Gynea and Littlebird try to make a run for it but

They're surrounded. In a last act of desperation Gymea picks up a burning log from the furnace and throws it on the piles of coal. Before anyone has a chance to react, the processing plant is up in flames. The boys scatter and Gymea runs off as well.

She runs all the way outside the burning structure before realizing that Littlebird is still inside. She looks to the forest edge then back to the power plant in a moment of indecision. The bird at her back flutters madly, forcing Gymea back into the burning structure.

Again inside the structure, she dodges falling, burning pieces. She runs around till she finds Littlebird huddled beside the large canary cage, too terrified to move as the flames tease their way ever closer. Gymea grabs her hands and pulls her to her feet. But Littlebird is paralyzed in fear. She won't leave the birds behind, she cant. Gymea grabs a piece of rebar and breaks the cage, freeing thousand of canaries. Following the birds out, the girls race off. Gymea leads the way into the forest.

They run and run and run.

They run long after the sun has set.

Slowing to a fast pace walk, they continue through the dense brush. The girls are wordless as Gymea navigates their way, careful to avoid creating tracks. It isn't long before Littlebird gets on her nerves.

She remarks how they aren't sisters and how she wants nothing to do with white people and that she's going home to her mother and Littlebrd isn't going to stop her.

Littlebird only response is to reach a friendly hand out. Gymea pushes it away hands over the canary cage and leaves.

When Littlebird continues to follow, she then demands to know why she's called Littlebird and why she doesn't talk. Littlebird does not respond. Gymea then goes to explain how careful they must be in order avoid being caught, how she can't go back to the institution, for they will likely kill her. Their only hope is to make it to her homeland.

As they go about their day, instead of Littlebird teaching Gymea all the household chores, Gymea teaches Littlebird some bush skills. The first thing they do is survey the land, following the direction of the sun. Before long they have walked into a stretch of flat desert that expands before them. Gymea leads the way down a dry creek and begins to dig into the sand, uncovering a small pool of water. They each take turns drinking from the puddle and then Littlebird gracefully gives some to the canary. Gymea asks why she doesn't just set the bird free. Littlebird pretends like she hadn't heard her. Suddenly, men's voices are heard from behind them. The girls dart and watch as a pair of hounds come across their puddle followed by a few aboriginal police on horseback among them Papa John sits on his horse in livid anger. The Police tease Papa John about actually adopting a 'heathen'. Then they joke about how they're going to skin the little imbecile alive. One of the men laugh about how they also need to find Littlebird. One of the police suggests they start singing like birds to attract the girls. Everyone starts laughing but Papa John gets defensive when the hounds catch the trail of the girls.

Gymea and Littlebird make a break for it, chased down on foot. The two barely get away by climbing high onto a ridge, out of reach of the dogs and horses. Papa John angrily calls after both of them.

Safe for now they continue heading east across the desert.



The men on horseback scoff; those girls will never make it across the desert alive. Papa John is furious, but his face melts into that of wrinkly worry.

A few days have passed, the girls, especially Littlebird, are starting to show signs of dehydration and heatstroke, not to mention starvation.

GyMEA waits steadily in the sand. A goanna sits a few yards away, unaware that the girl is there. GyMEA raises a makeshift spear over her head and lunges at the large lizard. The goanna goes down a hole, making its escape. GyMEA angrily slams her spear into the ground in frustration.

Littlebird comes up behind her. Offering a hand by placing it on her shoulder. GyMEA shakes it off. 'I don't need your help' she says and storms off.

They continue walking and GyMEA begins to spiral into hallucinations. She spots a hawk circling above her but it's just a vulture following them into the desert. When she lowers her head, she is sitting beside two aboriginal women, her grandmother and her mother. They are collecting wattleseeds that have fallen onto a dirt road. Her mother smiles as the two work collecting peeling the fallen seedpods.

Suddenly a car echoes down the road. Both of the older women look up. GyMEA's mother grabs her hand and the seeds fall everywhere. They start running as GyMEA's grandmother blocks the oncoming car, it's the aboriginal police.

GyMEA and her mother run off the road, spotting the safety of a nearby forest edge across an open savannah. The two run as fast as they can towards it.

The police hit the grandmother to the side with a bataan and go off-road, gunning their engine, storming across the meadow and shouting and cheering from the windows.

GyMEA trips.

Her mother tries to pull her to her feet.

The car unloads and the men rip Gymea from her Mothers arms, kicking, crying as they handcuff her and throw her inside the car.

Screaming, Gymea's mother fights back, but the police take advantage of her slamming her to the ground. Gymea's mother screams for Gmyea to turn away, but she doesn't, Gymea stares eyes cold as steel, pulling at her handcuffs from inside the car window.

Pulling up their pants the men hop inside and start driving away, and despite herself, Gymea's mother chases after the car, limping. She throws herself against the back window, hands covered in blood. Gymea cries out for her mother through the glass but the two are separated as Gymea's mother is left behind in the dust.

All Gymea can do is watch, both hands on the glass as her mother fades away.

Gymea looks down at her feet staring at the sand. Littlebird walks up beside her. The two look at each other and then out at the expansive desert. They don't speak a word. Littlebird takes the lead and Gymea follows.

Gymea strikes a fire and the two sit in silence as they watch the flames. Gymea explains the bird legend, telling Littlebird about how the birds guide her and protect her, how her name means bird in her native language. Gymea then tells Littlebird that she's kind of used to her and that she isn't so ugly to her anymore.

Littlebird wakes Gymea up the next morning. She leads her to a farmhouse and points to a well, they have no option but try and steal some water, and risk getting caught.

They contemplate it but Gymea finally makes the gamble, they're going to try and steal some water. Sneaking up to the well, the girls lower the bucket, slowly, while

watching the front door of the small farmhouse. Littlebird is scared, but Gymea is terrified. There's a white man living there.

They successfully raise the water bucket and both drink and drink and drink. Littlebird points to the open window where some bread sits on the windowsill, as if tempting them. Gymea tells her no way. They're going to be caught. But Littlebird is starving, neither of them have eaten in days. Littlebird scurries up to the window and snatches the bread. Just then the front door opens and the farmer pours out, gun in hand. Littlebird runs for her life as the farmer shoots at them. Gymea gets up and the two run as fast as they can. Gymea stumbles; a bullet has grazed her leg, she can't walk.

Littlebird doesn't know what to do; the angry farmer is running their way. Littlebird runs back to Gymea bread in mouth, birdcage dangling from her chest, from an unknown reserve of strength she pulls Gymea onto her back and begins to run for all she's worth.

The farmer stops. He goes back inside and makes a radio call that two girls, one bald, the other an Aboriginal misfit, have just been spotted. The police now know their whereabouts.

With Gymea on her back, Littlebird does the impossible, carries her through the outback.

They come across the beginnings of coastal forests. Gymea picks up her head, she knows this place. They're getting closer. There's a town up ahead and they need to go across the railway tracks that divide the town. They're almost there.

They watch from the town's ridgeline. The only way across is to expose themselves along a railway. They decide to wait until dark to cross.

Night falls.

Littlebird picks up Gymea. She is at the end of her reserves as she carefully walks down the tracks. Suddenly dogs bark nearby. Two groups of police come from either sides of the track. Littlebird does the best she can but Gymea slips off her back. The men seize them both.

They are taken to the local police station where both are locked away into individual cells, but they are not alone, other stolen half casts are in there with them. The triumphant police tell Gymea that she is being sent back to the institution, that since she ripped up her adoption papers she isn't going home with anyone, as a matter of fact she will never have a home again.

As for Littlebird, Papa John storms in to claim his daughter. He is furious, they have nothing left for he was fired. He lost their half-burned house and he confesses the only reason he adopted Gymea in the first place was because the government paid him to do it.

Littlebird is dragged away, leaving Gymea alone with the brutal police.

Papa John and Littlebird wait for a train, they're getting out of the northern territory, headed to Sydney where he will help build the Sydney harbor bridge - one of the few projects offering jobs in the country. Littlebird is starving and delirious but Papa John has no food to offer her.

Meanwhile, the police, unlock Gymea from her cell. They proceed to drag her by her hair outside and into the tree line.

At the station Littlebird sits beside her father and watches the canary flutter in dismay. She takes a breath, grabs the birdcage and races off into the night. She runs

through the forest following the tracks taught to her by Gymea herself until she finds the police brutally beating up Gymea and tearing her dress apart.

“STOP!” Littlebird screams her fist word since the "accident".

The men turn and mock Littlebird for the small pathetic ugly creature that she is.

This doesn't stop her. She runs to her friend.

The men begin to meddle with her too until, suddenly, Papa John is there, standing with authority, 'step away from my daughters'.

The men get into a heated argument, on the cusp of violence. Littlebird doesn't stick around to see what happens, she grabs Gymea's nearly unconscious body and with her diminishing strength, takes off into the woods.

They run until morning, collapsing into a dry creek bed.

The two girls lay there, unmoving sprawled out in the rocks and sand. They have no strength other than to look the other in the eye.

“Sister?” Littlebird coos softly.

Gymea smiles. “Yes.”

In one final act, Littlebird lifts the birdcage and sings a sweet song to the bird. Together they unlock the cage and set the canary free. Then they succumb to their fatigue and injuries and close their eyes.

Papa John runs through the forest calling out for his little girl, and Gymea too. He is so sorry and so worried he can't possibly lose the very last thing that is important to him.

He sees the canary in the treetops and runs toward it. It flies away and he follows to the two girls lying facedown in the dry creek bed. He hurries to them. Apologizing for being a terrible dad to them both, he can't go on without them.

He picks them both up and carries them to the closest help, an Aboriginal camp, where they are met by a crowd of Aborigines. Amid the crowds, Gymea's mother breaks away and cries with joy. They bring the girls inside a hut and Gymea's grandmother begins to chant over the girls and sets about healing them in a traditional manner.

Papa John demands to know if they will be okay, both of them. Gymea's mother insists they will be okay and thanks him for bringing his daughter back to her, for saving her. The two adults walk away by themselves, Papa John tells Gymea's mother that actually it was the girls who saved him. They ask each other what they're going to do now. Both remark how the only way they could ever be safe is if the Aborigines had the rights to their own homeland. If only they could get the white government to listen to them. Papa John scratches his head declaring, 'they might listen to me.'

Gymea gently prods Littlebird awake. A few weeks have passed, Littlebird's fluffy wisps of blonde hair has grown in and covers her scarred ear and cheek. She sits up as Gymea hands her some Aboriginal food, splitting it between them. She motions for her to hurry.

The girls grinning from ear to ear, exit the hut. Gymea hobbles on one crutch as they pass by Gymea's grandmother who lovingly waves at them as they go by. They pass by Papa John who is building an Aboriginal Community center for the reserve, Arnhem Land Australia. He calls out a good morning to his daughters.

Gynea leads Littlebird to the edge of the forest. Littlebird points to the canary singing in the treetops. The girls chase it through the forest laughing like the happy children they are as the bird swings higher into the canopy separating from the earth it flies high over the land and heads off into the horizon.