

Wendy's Echidna

They got off to a bad start. By the time the departmental car pulled into the curb outside her place, Wendy had been waiting for over half an hour, sitting on the top step of the verandah with hands draped languidly between her knees, staring fixedly at the chameleon changes in the colour of the distant mountains as the sun rose before them. Her old canvas sausage bag, roughly packed, sagged over the edge of the step beside her.

The horn sounded. Wendy got up slowly, hoisting the bag over her shoulder as she padded across the lawn. The vehicle's front window slid down. Wendy recognised the grinning face and jaundiced eyes of Lionel Brown, the Probation Service's Indigenous parole officer from the south coast. Wendy had never really taken to Lionel, even though he reckoned they were distantly related. He was likable enough – half the women at Head Office were crazy about him, including the Regional Manager's daughter – but when you had to deal with him day to day, as Wendy did, you soon saw through it. Lionel scored a lot of points talking up his koori heritage, but he really didn't know much about it, and he always seemed too busy to find out more. There was a bit too much of the whitefella in him for Wendy's liking: he used people; a bit of a corporate climber, too full of himself.

"Where you fellas bin?" she said, wrestling with the back door latch. "I thought y' said y'd be here by six."

The grin broadened, and the head tilted towards the back seat. "Yeah," Lionel said sheepishly. "We bin waitin' for Richie, eh. We told 'im y' was goin' t' kill 'im, but it didn't make no difference. 'E Reckoned 'e was three quarters dead after last night anyhow. Eh, Rich?"

There was a stirring and muttered expletive from the rear. Wendy wrested the door open and tossed her bag onto the back seat, raising another muffled curse

from its occupant. "Yeah," she said as she climbed in. "I shoulda known y' was gonna play up, once the pair of you got together. Hope y're ready for five hours drivin', then; we're s'posed to be in Moree by two, y'know."

She settled her large frame stiffly into the seat, folded her hands in her lap and stared fixedly in front of her. "No worries," Lionel said, easing his way into the stream of traffic heading for the Great Western Highway.

It took several minutes for Wendy to realise that they *were* heading for the Great Western Highway and not, as she would have expected, for the F3 heading north.

"Where you goin'?" she demanded. "If you're headin' for Moree, you're goin' a funny way about it!"

Lionel pursed his lips and frowned over the wheel, as if absorption in the task of driving might avert the fracas he feared was coming. "We gotta pick up Georgie Taylor and Dougie Sampson at Bathurst."

"Bathurst!" Wendy repeated incredulously. "Bathurst! Who says we gotta pick them up?"

"They arkst me," Lionel replied flatly. "Dougie rang, said e' needed a lift."

Wendy sucked in a deep breath, exhaling slowly. For all her frustration, she knew further protest would be pointless; worse, it would be counter-productive, on two counts. First, the vehicle to Aboriginal people is a shared asset, a means of getting as many people from A to B as had a need to get there; and if the two fellow-workers needed a lift, there was an expectation it would be provided. Also, she knew that, however much authority she might appear to have in her wrath, when it came to such matters of obligation she would ultimately defer to the men, because their need was to feel respected in a world where respect was so often denied them. The women understood this, and knew that if the men lost their self-respect they would be truly lost, and everyone would suffer.

In fact, Wendy wasn't too concerned about their late arrival. The conference, she knew, would be unlikely to begin on time anyway; there were too many people coming from too far away to expect a prompt start. Lloyd Haradine, chairman of the Aboriginal Education Foundation, was scheduled to speak first, and everyone had a pretty good idea what he was going to say: support for new initiatives, but within current budgetary constraints, etcetera. Lloyd was a political man, in the narrow sense of the word, and no one expected much from him.

The real business wouldn't get an airing till the second day, when people had had a chance to workshop some of the issues and sort out their lobbying strategies. Wendy wanted to push for the Indigenous Prisoners' Art Project. A lot of her colleagues were sceptical of the idea, and some – including Lionel – opposed on the grounds that it would threaten other programs; but the latest Deaths in Custody hearings had given her a strong support base across a lot of sectional interests, and politically she knew the idea would have a lot of appeal.

So she kept her silence, and before long the tension eased and they began to talk of other things, of relatives and friends and the business of the journey. They wound their way up through the Blue Mountains, enjoying the balmy coolness of the spring air, then down through Lithgow to Bathurst, with the air warming up around them, so that their backs began to sweat against the vinyl seats.

They picked up George and Dougie shortly after one, grabbing some Kentucky Fried Chicken on the road to Moree. The heat was now solid, and the bush sang with insects as they passed through it. Conversation became short and sporadic. Richie had his ghetto blaster, but he'd forgotten his discs and the best anyone could come up with was a selection of old country and western spirituals that George found in the console. The player's batteries ran out in the middle of "Soldier, Jesus is Your Saviour", and after that they continued the drive in silence.

It was Wendy who first noticed the creature trundling across the bitumen a few hundred metres in front of them. She grabbed Lionel's arm.

"Hey! Hold it! Slow down! Pull over!"

Lionel jammed on the brakes, unsure why, and then saw the ambling animal. "What *is* that?" he asked incredulously.

Wendy stared at him. "You kiddin' me, Lionel? It's an echidna." She flapped her hand towards the verge of the road. Lionel pulled onto the shoulder opposite the creature, which paused briefly, sensing their presence, then continued clumsily across the tar.

Wendy jumped out of the car and blocked the animal's path. The echidna hesitated again, then quickly folded its snout and legs tightly in against its body, forming a seemingly impenetrable ball of hair and quills.

Lionel opened his door and got out. He prodded the coiled animal with his shoe. "Wha'cha gonna do with it?"

Wendy circled the animal. "Make good eatin', echidna. We used t' have 'em when we were kids out west. Reckon I could still remember how t' do it."

Lionel grinned. "Oh yeah? Taste a bit like chicken, y' reckon?"

Richie rolled down the rear window and peered out. "'Ow y' gonna carry it?" he asked. "I'll be buggered if I'm gonna have it in 'ere with me."

Wendy thought for a moment. "We got a sack or somethin'? Anythin' in the back?"

Lionel grunted and got out of the car, lifted the rear door and rummaged around inside. "Nothin' 'ere." He held up an old jack handle. "Why don' you jus' dong 'im on the head now an' shove 'im in the boot?"

"Can't," Wendy replied laconically. "Gotta cook 'im fresh t' get th' quills out, otherwise they don't come off."

They considered further. Wendy, announcing she had an idea, went back to the car and extracted her sausage bag, forcing the contents into a couple of grocery bags she found in the boot. Dumping these onto the seat, she placed the open bag next to the echidna, which remained tightly coiled, then picked up a stick from the side of the road and rolled the animal into the bag. Hurriedly zipping this shut, she hoisted it into the boot and returned to her seat, pushing the heap of clothing she'd discarded there roughly aside. She sat, without inviting comment, waiting for the journey to continue.

Which it promptly did. Lionel, clearly uncomfortable with having to share his vehicle with the new occupant, hunched over the wheel in sullen silence. Wendy tried to lighten the mood with a bit of chatter about echidnas, what little she could remember: that they ate grubs, ants and so on; that they lived in burrows and laid eggs. But the conversation became stretched, and after a while she fell asleep.

When she woke up they were pulling into the conference venue. They could see that the proceedings were still in progress, and they sat for a while in the resort's car park, uncertain what to do next.

"We'd better go in," Lionel said finally. "Otherwise they're gonna see us hangin' aroun' the place when they come out, and reckon we been slackin' off." Wendy caught Lionel's eyes in the rear view mirror, and they were intense. She bet herself that he wouldn't be dropping his "h"s when they got inside.

"What's the matter, Lionel?" she asked, with just enough emphasis to sound jovial, "You gonna miss out on mixin' with some of them bigfellas?"

Lionel flashed her a quick look, enough to reveal that he'd been caught out. With a snort of annoyance he got out of the car, put on his jacket and headed for the reception desk. The others followed, Wendy handling her bag with some care to avoid the damp urinous patch spreading across its bottom.

They registered quickly, ditched their bags in their allocated rooms and drifted discretely into the main hall, where the hundred or so delegates were shifting restlessly at the end of the day's plenary. Wendy kept a low profile, blending in at the back of the crowd until Lloyd Haradine closed the proceedings and invited the delegates to the bar.

There were numerous people from the funding bodies among the crowd, most of whom she'd managed to put offside at one time or another. Prisons were a tough call, and she had no time for the political game-playing that went on around funding important programs, one of which she believed to be the arts program. "The cherry on the icing on the cake", the bureaucrats liked to call it; but she'd seen enough hopeless cases turned around with a paintbrush, a pen or a camera to know the program mattered. Wendy's standard approach to anyone she credited was worth talking to was to go straight to them and dropping into the conversation like a bombshell: "Sorry to butt in like this, but I wanted some advice ...".

She was about to commence on this exercise when a scream and a cacophony of voices from the adjoining accommodation corridor caught everyone's attention. A young white woman rushed into the hall, followed by an entourage of sympathisers seeking to placate her. "It's moving," she wailed. "The bloody thing's moving!"

The cause of her consternation soon became clear: a bag, deposited in her twin-share room, had suddenly and inexplicably begun rolling towards the door. When the woman babbled out the room number, Wendy quickly grasped the implication and bolted down the corridor ahead of the crowd to her allocated room. Sure enough, the bag had moved from the spot beside the bed where she'd dropped it and was turning in slow, ponderous circles in the middle of the room.

Wendy snatched up the bag and was about to make an exit when the conference centre's manager, clearly displeased, arrived at the door with the

hysterical woman and numerous other curious guests, among them a grinning Lionel, who magically appeared at the distraught woman's side.

"We don't allow animals in the rooms, madam," the manager said frostily, blocking Wendy's retreat. "What do you have in the bag?"

Before Wendy could get her mouth open to reply, Lionel said loudly: "An echidna, I reckon!" Every head, including the young woman's, turned in his direction.

The manager swung on Wendy accusatively. "Is that true?"

Mary glared at Lionel but nodded, partly unzipping the bag. The echidna extended an inquisitive face and snout. Several of the gathering, including the young woman who'd made the complaint, gave a sympathetic sigh.

Mary groped for an excuse and quickly found one. "It's for me son, see. He's got this assignment for 'is HSC, native species n' that. I was goin' t' take this little fella back with me, see, let 'im study it for a while before we let 'im go."

There were a number of nods at this explanation, and the manager, not wishing to appear ingenuous, retreated from his hard line. "Well... maybe we can come to some arrangement," he suggested, smiling. "Why don't we talk to the maintenance section, see if we can find something, perhaps one of the packing crates, to make our... special guest more comfortable?"

"What does he eat?" someone asked.

"Grubs, ants and stuff," Lionel said, quickly and loudly enough to again turn heads. He eyeballed the young complainant. "They live in burrows, they reckon, lay eggs." The young woman smiled, evidently impressed.

The manager, riding acrest the wave of customer approval, ventured a proposal. "There's a woodpile at the back of the shed. You might find something suitable there."

There were several offers of assistance with this task, and Wendy, much to her surprise, found herself accompanied by a sizable party of guests as she

transferred the echidna to a closed wooden crate and fed the animal a smorgasbord of insects.

She parked the crate, its lid secured by a couple of heavy paving stones, in the centre's loading bay, washed out the soiled bag and went back to the bar, where she enjoyed something akin to celebrity status.

George and Dougie were dubious at first about going along with the school project story; but after Wendy shouted a few rounds they changed their tune, and by the later stages of the evening started to enjoy the attention. The echidna became part of a much larger fictional menagerie including snakes, goannas, spiders and even crocodiles that Wendy was reputed to have tirelessly, and at some risk, collected for her son's inventory. Lionel milked the story dry for the benefit of a select audience, then vanished with the dignitaries and his *nouveau belle*.

Wendy went to bed around ten-thirty, but her head had hardly hit the pillow when her mobile phone buzzed. It was Morton, her assistant from the parole office. "You better get back here", he told her tightly. "I just got a call from George Clarke's PA. He's had a heart attack, apparently; happened this evening." There was a brief pause. "They've appointed Harry Hargraves to take Clarke's place."

Wendy cursed. George Clarke, the chair of the parole board, had been a long-term ally, a bit of a humanist. Hargraves was known to be hardliner, especially in cases involving women; he needed special handling. One of Wendy's clients, a lifer, was up for parole the following day. Wendy had gone to the conference thinking it was a sure thing; she'd done the lobbying, counted the heads. But with Hargraves in Clarke's place, the balance of opinion within the board was less certain.

Morton went on hurriedly: "Sally's at her wits' end; reckons Hargraves's got it in for her. She says she can't face doin' any more time; it's now or never; she reckons. She reckons she's gonna top 'erself if it goes against her this time." Wendy could hear the quaver in Morton's voice. "You've got to get back here."

"So how 'm I s'posed to do that?" Wendy shouted in exasperation. "The hearing's tomorrow at nine. I'm out at Moree, for god's sake. Th' only one here with a car that might give me a lift's pissed off with some... bimbo, an' I don' reckon he's gonna be lookin' at daylight for a day or two!"

Morton's shrug was almost visible. "I dunno. I'm just tellin' you what she said, that's all."

When Wendy shut the phone, she stood for a moment fiddling with it in her hands. She felt close to panic. She knew Sally Morrison, and she knew the suicide threat was real. She'd supported Sally through her trial and several years of incarceration for the murder of her husband, a fate that Wendy privately believed was justly deserved. Wendy had personally prepared Sally's brief for the parole board. She'd also given her a solemn assurance that they were going to get a good outcome this time around.

The sense of responsibility gnawed at her, and sometime after midnight she decided she should at least *try* to get back. The question of means, however, was problematic. She went to the night reception desk to ask about commercial flights, but the only one going to Sydney wouldn't get Wendy into Mascot until eight-forty five, too late to get her to the hearing on time.

The centre manager was still on shift, and again came to the rescue. A light aircraft, he explained, landed at the local airport about five-thirty each morning to refuel after delivering metropolitan newspapers to outlying townships. The plane then returned to Bankstown airport, and it was possible Wendy might be able to get a ride with it. After an urgent call to the charter operator, it was confirmed that if she could be at the hangar when the plane landed, she could catch the flight.

Wendy accepted the offer gratefully, and by four-thirty next morning she was standing at the centre's entrance, waiting in the chilly dark with the crate and her bag

for the arranged taxi. The taciturn driver made no comment as he hoisted the odorous luggage into the boot.

There was no one about the terminal precincts when they arrived, and for several anxious minutes Wendy stood alone in the light of a single security lamp, wondering if she might have been misinformed. But eventually she saw the lights of a descending aircraft, and shortly afterwards a single-engine Cessna coasted across the tarmac and came to a halt at the nearby fuel bowser. A tall, fair-haired youth jumped lightly from the cockpit and began filling the plane's tank. He grinned when he saw Wendy approaching.

"You the lady going to Sydney?" He took the bag and crate from her, chuckling when he felt the crate shift in his hands. "What's this? You doing a chicken run or something?"

Wendy recalled Lionel's smart remark about how echidna was supposed to taste like chicken. "Somethin' like that," she said non-committedly. She hoisted her large fram into the cramped cockpit, and after a quick run through the emergency procedures they were on their way.

The flight progressed uneventfully, the pilot pointing out the tiny clusters of lights in the dark landscape that identified the settlements below. Wendy marvelled at the proximity of the stars, so much brighter than anything she had seen since her childhood in the bush. Then the sun began to rise in front of them, a glorious smudge of colour that soon blossomed into a radiant, blinding orb. Behind the droning engine, the cockpit became comfortably, drowsily warm. Wendy discarded her jacket and leaned back against her seat, basking in the heat.

Crossing the Great Divide, they struck several pockets of turbulence. The small plane creaked ominously at each encounter, the baggage in the back bumping around loudly. Wendy took her cue from the pilot, and remained outwardly calm. The turbulence subsided as they began their descent into Sydney basin.

Two things happened simultaneously: the pilot gave a loud expletive – “Jesus Christ!” - and the plane dipped violently to the right, dropping several hundred feet in a dive that pinned Wendy against the straps of her seat belt. Her thoughts gathered themselves only long enough to panic when the plane suddenly skewed again, then rose abruptly skyward, the pilot’s legs pumping frantically at the pedals as if on some unruly bicycle.

Glancing down, Wendy saw the cause: a large ball of spiny quills, rolling haphazardly about under the pilot’s feet. When she looked behind she saw that the crate had somehow become dislodged from the luggage rack at the rear of the cabin and now lay on its side, its lid wide open.

The plane lurched again, and the echidna bounced across to Wendy’s side of the cabin. She screamed and lifted her legs; then for want of any other solution dropped a booted foot to the floor, wedging the animal against the door. She looked around for something to cover it with and, seeing her jacket on the seat behind, snatched it up and threw it over the prickly bundle.

The pilot, still cursing, wrested the plane back onto level heading, his eyes flicking continually to the object on the floor. Ignoring repeated calls from the Bankstown control tower to explain what was going on, he requested urgent landing consent and, with it was granted, guided the plane quickly and bumpily onto the runway. He said nothing to Wendy while they taxied across the tarmac, and as soon as the aircraft drew to a stop he jumped out and strode off towards the terminal, muttering to himself and shaking his head.

Wendy pushed open the door and vomited. Then she nudged the echidna out. It fell noiselessly, still wrapped in her jacket, onto the reeking puddle below. For a minute or two the animal remained there, tightly coiled, until it deemed that this latest threat, in the litany that it had recently experienced, had passed; at which point

it sluggishly disentangled itself and trundled away across the runway's verge to the dense scrub beyond, where it disappeared.

The parole hearing was underway when Wendy got there. Hargraves wasn't pleased, but after Wendy had to ask for a couple of short recesses to race to the bathroom and throw up, he became more conciliatory. She told him it was something she'd eaten. With a bit of pleading and a bit of tough talk on Wendy's part, Sally Morrison got her parole. Wendy went home and slept for ten hours straight.

The buzzing of the phone awoke her, some time in the early hours of the morning. It was Lionel. "Hey, Wen, 'ow ya goin', Sis?" he said, cheerfully and loudly enough to make Wendy wonder if he'd been drinking, or on the weed. She was even more pissed off with Lionel than usual: with his lack of common courtesy, with his big-noting act at the conference; with the fact that he'd done nothing to help her out – there'd been no offer to take the echidna, no offer of a lift. She hadn't heard from him, in fact, since he'd taken off with the screamer in the bar.

As if he sensed Wendy's antagonism, Lionel became conciliatory: "Yeah, we wondered what'd happened to ya, eh. One minute y' was there, next thing y' was gone."

"Yeah" Wendy replied flatly, unconvinced. Her head was throbbing.

There was another long, uncomfortable silence. "Yeah, well..." Lionel said at last, suddenly brightening. "Listen, me and Christine're jus' comin' off th' freeway now. We was thinkin' 'bout comin' 'round."

"Jesus, Lionel, it's two-thirty in th' mornin'!" She sighed. "You eaten, then?"

"Naah," Lionel replied predictably. "Don' suppose you got anythin' we could tuck into, have ya? We been drivin' the last five hours straight, eh darlin'?" A female voice said something in the background. Lionel laughed "Yeah, maybe we cin tuck into a bit a that echidna ya got. They reckon it tastes a bit like chicken."

By sheer coincidence, Wendy's eyes were resting on a tray of chicken breast as he delivered the tired joke. She'd planned to have the chicken for dinner, but she hadn't got to it.

An idea sparked in her mind, flared. She wondered if she could get away with it. Lionel would never know the difference, not unless someone told him - or told somebody else, spread it around that he'd been duped. Lionel would die of embarrassment if she did that; he'd be the laughing stock of the department. Wendy doubted she'd do such a thing, even if she thought he deserved it. Lionel was more of a nuisance than a threat. But maybe his *knowing* that she knew would be enough. Persuade him to use a few of those gubba skills to do a bit of good; use his charm and influence to find some funds for a worthwhile cause - the arts project, for example.

The words were out before she had time to think about them: "Yeah. Yeah, it does taste a bit like chook, mattterafact. "I cooked up some for dinner. Nice. Yeah, why don' y' come 'round? I'll cook y' up a bit. Bring your lady friend, too."

When she got off the phone, the idea was still there. She placed the chicken breasts on a foiled tray, garnished them liberally with salt, pepper and herbs, lit the oven and slid them in.

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