

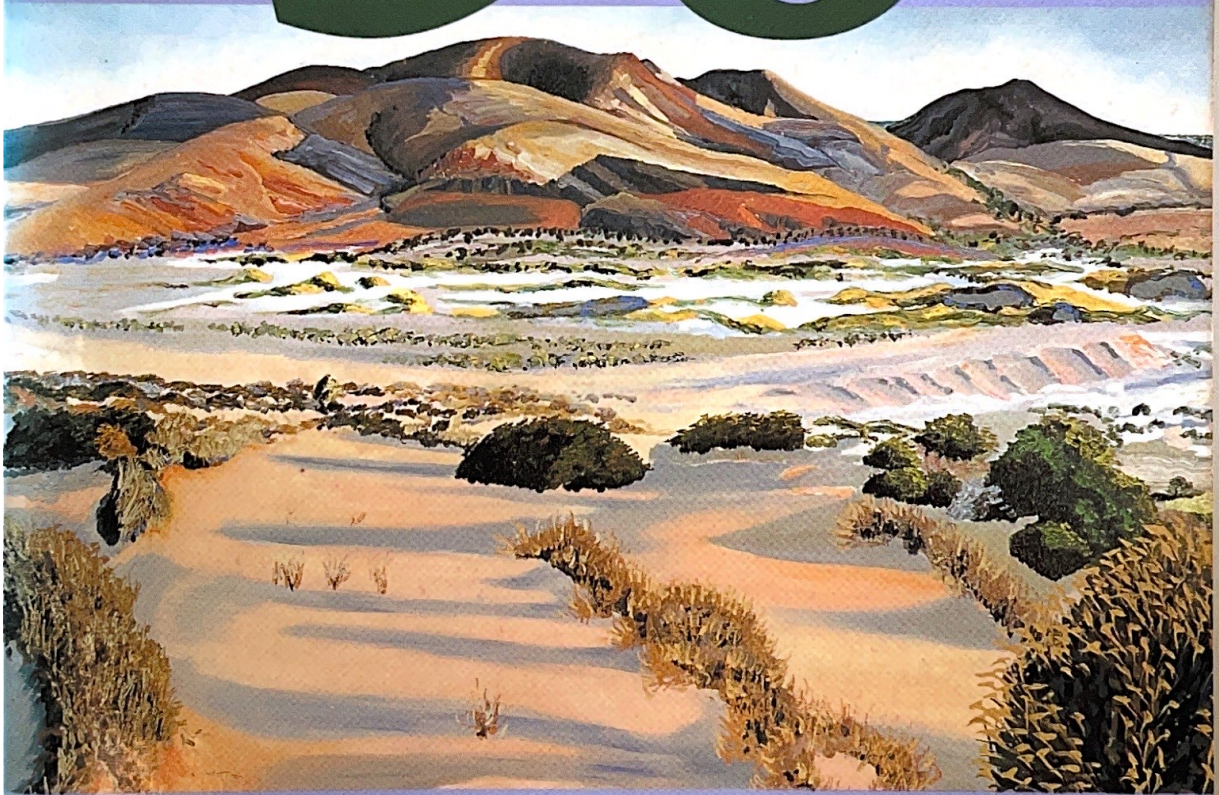
A U S T R A L I A N

SHORT STORIES

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# LOVERS ON HOLIDAY

by Lyn Hughes



In the first morning, Augustus arrived. He pounded on the rondavel door until Alice got up and opened it. She saw a young black man, waving a coathanger threaded with live lobsters.

'Fifty cents each,' he said.

Alice frowned.

'Forty,' he coaxed. He swung the coathanger closer. 'Fresh!'

She bought two to get rid of him. Julie put them in a plastic bucket and boiled them for lunch. Alice stayed out of the kitchen until they'd stopped moving. It was a special lunch. They'd never spent an entire night together. It was bliss. Alice made fresh mayonnaise. They drank a bottle of white wine. And then they lay down and made long sweaty love.

All the other rondavels were empty. Mrs Isselblad, who owned them, said it was terrible. The winter weather kept everyone away.

'There's too much work, since Mr Isselblad went,' she said.

'Went?' Julie asked.

'Drowned,' Mrs Isselblad said. 'Two years ago. A wave took him. He was fishing off those rocks.' She pointed beyond the palm trees and sighed.

They made soothing noises and later fell about laughing in the rondavel.

'The sea destroys people's lives,' Julie imitated Mrs Isselblad's voice. She was good at it. She got the body movements right. She sighed and pulled a make-believe cardigan over a large bosom.

'Poor woman,' Alice said.

Mrs Isselblad knocked on the door. She wanted to show them the braai. They helped her stack the wood for it. She hung around until Alice said she had to do some washing.

Alice didn't think about Julie's husband. Not at first. They were quite safe. He was in Mauritius, on business. When she did think about him, she had mean thoughts. She hoped he was eaten by something large. That he was swept out to sea. That he fell in love with an air hostess. Julie looked so happy. She'd stopped wearing make-up. She tied her dark hair in a pony tail. Alice untied it at night and brushed out the salt.

Every morning they rumped the sheets of the unused bed before the cleaning woman arrived.

'You must be Augustus' sister,' Alice said the first morning.

'His sister!' She pulled a face.

Sliding around on the polishing cloth, she moved her hips, jiving on the red concrete.

On the first evening, Alice and Julie sat on the polished step of the rondavel watching the sunset. The palm trees quivered with monkeys. She held Julie's hand. She kissed it. There wasn't a soul in sight.

Augustus was always fishing on the rocks. They were smooth and black and slippery.

'Be careful,' Alice called to Julie, thinking of Mr Isselblad.

'I think Augustus is a spy,' she said that night.

'Working for my husband,' Julie said, with a dry laugh.

'He's always watching us,' Alice said.

'He's fishing,' Julie said.

He stood on the rocks for hours. Alice never saw him catch anything. It was suspicious.

Leaving the beach one afternoon, a young man raced up behind them.

'Come, quickly,' he shouted.

They hesitated.

'Augustus!' He waved behind.

Alice could see Augustus sitting hunched over on the rocks. She and Julie ploughed through the sand. He had slipped. He followed them back to the rondavel, holding a jumper to his head.

'Head wounds always bleed a lot,' Alice said, calmly.

The young man was called September.

Julie peeled off the jumper and used a tea-towel to mop up the blood.

Mrs Isselblad came to see what the fuss was about.

'But I'm a trained nurse,' she exclaimed, elbowing Julie aside. She took Augustus' pulse as he sat on a kitchen chair, under the shade of a flame tree. Mrs Isselblad bound his head with a white bandage.

Augustus groaned, 'My rod . . .'

'You lost it?' Alice asked.

He nodded and winced.

'It's his brother's rod,' Mrs Isselblad said. She stood back, admiring her handiwork. 'No stitches. Lucky, hey?'

Julie made him a cup of sweet tea. He got up, dazed, and

September took his arm. They walked off into the bushes.

'Lucky he's got a hard head,' Mrs Isselblad said, straightening her first aid kit. 'That one's always in trouble.'

Julie gave Alice a look.

'Did you see his left ear? Only this much,' Mrs Isselblad pinched her plump fingers together. 'I fixed that, also.'

Julie offered her tea.

She took teaspoon after teaspoon of sugar.

'And you girls? Are you married?' Mrs Isselblad asked.

Julie nodded.

'My husband's in Mauritius, on business . . . ' she tailed off.

Alice said, 'I'm not the marrying kind.'

Mrs Isselblad laughed a lot. 'Well, that's the right way. Take your time. There's plenty of time . . . They don't need encouragement,' she added, more soberly.

They sat on the beach until dark. The sea rolled between the low headlands.

'Why don't you leave him?' Alice said. The sun had gone. The sand was cold in her fingers. 'Couldn't you leave him?'

Julie shook her head.

The wind came up the next afternoon. They saw Augustus and September in the bushes next to the beach, smoking marijuana. The bandage was a dirty pink. Augustus waved at them. Mrs Isselblad was on the beach. She was wearing shorts. Up close, her white legs had veins like blue worms. She had tied her cardigan around her waist.

'Hello there!' she cried. They waved and hurried on. Further on an old man stood, waiting for them. Leaning against the wind, he was grinning. Alice bought a kierie that he'd carved. He tapped first one stick against his toothless head, and then the other, until Alice chose. Mrs Isselblad invited them for a drink. She drank brandy on the rocks. She opened a bottle of white wine for them.

'From Hendrik's cellar,' she said.

She didn't touch it herself.

'You must call me Evelyn,' Mrs Isselblad insisted.

She was drinking fast.

'I haven't even got a dog,' she said, waving a soft freckled hand at the cluttered room. 'Hendrik never liked dogs. He was allergic.'

'You don't have children?' she asked Julie. Slyly, Alice thought.

Julie smiled, shaking her head.

'Plenty of time. It's better late. They say you have more patience. Hendrik didn't want children. Me neither,' she added firmly. 'Still . . . He drowned, did I say? He was fishing at night. Sometimes

I went with him. Ag, I wish I'd been there that night! That boy was lucky.'

The room grew dark but she didn't turn on a light. Alice realised after a while that she hadn't noticed. She probably always sat in the dark. Drinking brandy. Listening to the hum of the generator which drowned out the sea.

They walked down to the beach afterwards, breathing in deep breaths.

'I bet she pushed him,' Alice said. 'It was winter. No-one around. Augustus probably saw her do it.'

'Probably,' Julie said.

They sat down on the damp sand.

Alice threw her arms around Julie.

'Do you want a baby?' she crooned.

'So what are you going to do about it?' Julie laughed.

'Buy a cake syringe,' Alice said. 'You know, my mother won prizes for icing. Wedding cakes, birthdays, christenings . . . '

On the last morning they walked on the beach.

'Sea horses,' Julie said, standing on the water-line.

A cold wind was blowing off the Indian Ocean. I hope it's blowing up a typhoon in Mauritius, Alice thought sourly.

It was too rough to fish. Augustus was prising mussels off the rocks with a knife. The bandage was filthy. They sat watching the sea, dipping their toes into the warm yellow froth of a rock pool. It was almost the end. Which made Alice think of the beginning. How Julie had been trying on a dress in the change-room of Truworths. Alice squashed in beside her, best friends. Julie had stood there in a white lace bra. And Alice had reached out, suddenly, and traced a finger down her cleavage. Julie had laughed. Alice had laughed. They couldn't stop laughing.

'The Wild Coast!' Mrs Isselblad scoffed. 'A graveyard, more like.' She'd joined them on the rocks. Snuck up on them, Alice thought. They all looked out to the mean sea, charging towards them.

'Summer's different,' Mrs Isselblad said. 'He'll tell you,' she nodded at Augustus. 'Summer's busy, hey?' she shouted at Augustus. He grinned. A mad woman, Alice thought.

'He sells ice-cream in summer,' Mrs Isselblad said. 'Up and down the beach. Hundreds of people.' She looked into the future, narrowing her eyes. 'Ag, lots to do,' she said, getting up.

Sleepless in the single bed, Alice said, 'You love him.'

Julie held her.

'I'll always love you,' Alice said.  
Always, always, for hours the sea whispered.

In the morning they woke to strange voices. Alice lifted the curtain an inch.

'People,' she said, bleakly.

Mrs Isselblad's voice rose from the rondavel next door. 'Two years ago. He lost his footing on those rocks.'

Augustus came whistling up the dirt road. Passing Alice, he pointed at his head. The bandage had gone. The cut was plum purple. Alice heaved a suitcase into the boot.

'All ready?' Mrs Isselblad asked, brightly. 'Fishermen,' she nodded at the rondavel. 'Arrived this morning. Augustus?' She waved him over. 'Go and get bait for them, man. Go on! Quick! I warned them,' she added, shrugging her cardigan into place, nodding towards the beach.

'Ready?' Julie said from the doorway.

Alice nodded.

'Safe trip!' Mrs Isselblad cried.

Waiting for the pontoon to take them across the river, Alice said, 'Do you think they'll survive?'

'The fishermen?' Julie said.

Alice nodded.

And us?

But the pontoon had already reached the bank.

