

The Dunes – Ruby, Year 8, NSW

The sun is high in the sky above me as I make my way across a desolate sandy landscape of dunes, looking around to get some sense of my direction noticing the squeak and crunch of sand beneath my bare feet. I can see waves of heat rising from the sand all around me and feel the sting of it on my skin. The scorching sand burns my feet as I slowly step forward feeling a heaviness and exhaustion that I can't make sense of, because honestly, I can't even make sense of being here.

In the distance I see an object, too far away to see exactly what -- but looks like it may be a vehicle, and I head towards it thinking that whoever is in it may help me. With an urgency compelled by my confusion, I start running and waving my hands above my head to gain the attention of the driver.

The further I travel towards it, the more I realise it is not moving, and when I finally arrive at the car, I realise it is just a broken down car with no driver in sight. My shoulders slump as I take in the realisation that help is not here.

The car smells of oil and is covered in rust, making me wonder how long it has been here and where the driver is as I mindlessly walk around it, running my hand along the hood, making a soft scraping sound. A sharp pain rushes through my hand. I wince and draw it up to realise I cut it on the rusty hood of the car. I clutch my hand to my shirt at my stomach to stop the sting and bleeding as I push on.

I don't know what I am trying to reach, but I place one foot in front of the other for what feels like ages, although I cannot be sure as my mind is murky. My mouth feels drier than the sandy place I am in, and my head begins to spin, my vision of the desert around me blurs and I tumble. The hot air whooshes past me as my body falls toward the sand and I hit the ground, completely winded and feeling dehydrated, hopeless, so tired, and consciousness leaves me.

Unaware of how much time has passed, I open my eyes to a face full of sand and my mouth devoid of moisture, tongue swollen and throat harsh and sore as I try to swallow and get some moisture back in my mouth. I blink and notice the night sky as I push myself to a seated position, the sting of my cut against the sand beneath me making me wince. I clutch it with my other hand, remembering that it is still bloodied from holding it earlier and thinking it is filthy, cringing at the risk of infection.

Now seated, I look around and observe that in between the mountainous sand dunes, a beautiful pearl light gleams in what is a surprisingly cool night after the furnace I walked through in daylight. The light flickers and disappears. Curious, I pull myself up and look between the dunes again.

I may not have my wits about me, but I know enough to know that if I don't get help soon, I will expire out here.

I have no idea how long it has been since I last had water let alone food, surmising that the ache I feel in the stomach is most likely hunger.

The thought that the light may be from a person or a building or even a vehicle not of the same fate as the one I was leaning against provides me with a glimmer of hope. I pull myself up from the sand, hearing the crunch and feeling it scratch against me as I do so, and once again put one foot in front of the other -- this time in the direction of that light. I find this simple act of walking more challenging in the state I am in.

The sun burning me earlier is nowhere to be seen and a sky full of stars shines above me, illuminating the way so I am not tripping over the uneven and rocky ground beneath me. I notice in the light that my wound on my hand has stopped bleeding, a positive sign, and all that was left was a throbbing, almost like a heartbeat. I ripped off the sleeves of my shirt and ripped them into two cloths I could then tie on my wound to prevent it having any sand get in it if it were to crack open again.

As I am walking, I reach into my mind for any reason why I'm here, but realise how little I remember. I begin to dig even further through my mind to only find the memories of waking up in these desolate sand dunes. Fear grips me as I cannot remember earlier than being in the dunes. For some reason, even though all I want to do is give up, something in my mind keeps pushing me forward.

I need to find help. I need to remember. I need to survive.

Feeding that bit of hope all the positivity I could muster, trying to keep it alive like shielding a dying candle in a gusting wind, I keep walking ahead. If I keep walking, the answers will come. I will find help. These thoughts keep me going as I continue walking throughout the night, realising I must have awoken in the early hours of the morning as the black night sky was lightening around me.

I came upon a road that had a cell tower that looked like it was no longer in use and made my way to it and began to follow the road, sending out a silent plea that I will find some people to help me. *Maybe they could help me remember what I had forgotten!*

After another hour of the sun rising as I walked along the road, I crested a hill and a town came into focus and I continue forward, feeling the cool air whipping against my body turn warm and noticing stinging along the backs of my arms and my back. Hesitantly I reach my shaky hands to see if I could feel what was stinging and felt angry raised welts that stung as my fingers made contact.

Thwack. I winced at a memory of being struck by something.

I tried to pick through the memory but I couldn't make sense of it, but I continued trying to force my brain to conjure memories as I walked on towards the town growing larger with each step.

One building after the other slowly came into my blurry vision and I saw a few people turning to look at me limping toward the building closest to me. Almost at the entrance of the building, reaching shade and pavement, the adrenaline finally wore off and my knees collapsed beneath me. People who were watching me came rushing toward me and I heard gasps and felt kind hands gathering me up and preventing me from hitting the pavement.

My exhaustion was overtaking me, and shadow pooled into my vision, head spinning and my consciousness crept back away into the deepest darkest corner of my mind to hide from the pain I couldn't bear to endure any longer.

The dark was soft and cool and comforting as I slowly buried myself deeper and deeper not wanting to come back to reality.

The anxious chatter shattered the darkness. "*Mila.*"

Familiarity clawed at me and I blinked to familiar faces staring at me, still unable to place why these faces are familiar and I saw an elderly lady with a tear strewn face reaching for me and saying, "*You're alive! We didn't think we would ever see you again.*"

The people gathered started moving aside as a man with a weathered face and wearing a blue uniform came into focus, shock took over his features and he spoke into his radio, "*Mila Klein - kidnapping victim - is alive, at the service station, I need an ambulance at my location.*"

Some questions answered, safety established, the sound of sirens lulled me back into the darkness. I knew more questions remained and would be answered in time, but I am safe and for now, that is enough.