

Pilbara Pearl

© 10 March 1997

Produced by CVA FILM & TELEVISION July 1998.

Directed by Christopher Watson.

Synopsis and 10 Minute Script

by

Sarah Rossetti

This short script was jointly funded by ScreenWest and the Australian Film Corporation. In addition, it secured a presale from the SBS network, and corporate sponsorship. After production, it went on to acclaim with a theatrical release around Australia with the feature film *Radiance*; it was selected to screen at SPAA Australia 98, Brazil 99, and Aspen 99. Winner of the 99 AWGIE award for short film script, nominated for the AFI Award for best short screenplay 99, winner of the Lotteries Commission Award for Film Excellence (for the script), winner of the *What if* Award (for the script) winner of the ASC Award for Best Cinematography in a short film 99, and The Chris Award (Ohio) 2000 this film has also enjoyed a popular broadcast life, screening on Channel 4 Movie Network in the UK, SBS in Australia, and on Australia's ABC Australia Day 2000 *Home Grown Shorts* with an introduction from the Writer and Director. The film has also screened on Qantas international flights. In addition, *Pilbara Pearl* won Best Cinematography in the WA Film and TV Awards 99, and Best Overall Film for Emerging Director.

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EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY LATE AFTERNOON

A dirty 4WD SURVEYOR'S UTE hurtles by. We are assaulted by its speed, close proximity, diesel engine noise, rolling wheels, rattling undercarriage, dust, and flashes of equipment in the back as it passes.

As the w h o o s s h h of its passing dies away, and the swirling dust disperses, we make out a battered, white fridge door sign, hand-painted and decorated.

The dust settles. The sign says: PEARL'S ROADHOUSE 10 KMS. It is decorated with an odd assortment of Aboriginal-style hand-painted fish, coral, shells, and a happy, black mermaid.

SFX: A couple of crows swearing at each other, into a strangely-beckoning Aboriginal vocalist (Pearl) singing softly to herself. (Pearl's singing throughout is almost Anya-esque: an ancient music form in a new metamorphosis.)

Roll Title Credit: *Pilbara Pearl.*

INT. OLD ROADHOUSE LATE AFTERNOON

PEARL, a youngish, attractive Aboriginal woman, wearing a simple screen-printed dress with ocean designs, and a shell necklace, is softly singing to herself, whilst dusting the laminex tables with a limp t-towel. It's very hot. There are sweat circles under Pearl's arm-pits. Her feet are bare.

The roadhouse is cluttered with the usual, unimaginative Aussie kitch, and one of Pearl's eerie sea-scape paintings, featuring herself as the black mermaid.

PEARL stops singing, pours a drink of chilled water from the fridge, and drinks it, facing the dining room. The free-standing fan revolves too slowly. The occasional fly is zapped by the fluorescent fly catcher. The clock ticks.

PEARL sits at the table near the fan, opens an old diving magazine, and turns to her favourite, sensuous advert for Ningaloo Reef. PEARL sighs. The water looks aqua-inviting, and the reef is teeming with brightly-coloured fish.

PEARL

Cool.

PEARL caresses the page, gazes out of the grimy window at the endless stretch of road, and returns to the advert. Her expression is filled with longing.

EXT. OLD ROADHOUSE/HIGHWAY LATE AFTERNOON

The ROADHOUSE is the only building for as far as the eye can see. Behind it, the 4WD UTE is a just-recognizable dot on highway, approaching. Dust billows behind it.

INT. OLD ROADHOUSE LATE AFTERNOON

PEARL hears the wheeze and gurgle of the AQUARIUM. She gazes at it, gets up, turns on the overhead light, and lovingly rubs some fingerprints off the side of the glass.

PEARL is sensuously attracted by something inside the aquarium. She leans closer to peer inside.

A few exotic little fish dart between the brightly-coloured ornaments at the sandy bottom of the tank. A sea-horse glides between strands of almost-transparent seaweed.

PEARL

Giddy, Curly.

SFX: A bubbly little horse whinny.

PEARL smiles, leans closer, inhales, and closes her eyes.

SFX: Faintly, we hear the hush and suck of waves rolling in, and the far away cry of a lonely seagull.

INT. MOVING UTE CABIN LATE AFTERNOON

The driver's big HAND changes the ute down a gear. As the diesel grinds down, we see the ROADHOUSE, a kilometer or two ahead, through the windscreen.

INT. OLD ROADHOUSE LATE AFTERNOON

PEARL reaches her hand inside the aquarium, and touches Curly. The sea-horse dodges away. PEARL webs her fingers through the seaweed, and leans even closer. Air bubbles up from the little sea-chest ornament in the corner, tickling her palm.

SFX: Children happily playing at the sea shore.

As the sound of a big wave breaks . . . PEARL removes her hand from the aquarium, holds the sides, takes a big breath, closes her eyes, and plunges all of her face into the tank.

INT. AQUARIUM LATE AFTERNOON

From beneath the surface, we see Pearl's eyes opening. Her submerged FACE, wide-eyed now, is diffused with pleasure and

excitement as she looks around her brightly-lit underwater world.

SFX: Underwater ocean noises, whale cries, and wondrous original instrumental music.

Behind Pearl's back, we see the UTE pulling in, as it parks outside the roadhouse, blocking some of the light.

SFX: Keep up underwater sounds.

PEARL begins to roll forward into the tank. Her whole head is submerging under the surface of the water.

INT. UNDERWATER 'NINGALOO' FANTASY SEQUENCE DAY

PEARL, still in her screen-printed dress, completes her dive into her underwater world. We follow her as she kicks down, down, into the cool aqua ocean, her dress floating, her bare feet kicking.

SFX: Keep up underwater sounds.

There are giant-sized ORNAMENTS on the sandy bottom, identical to the ones in the aquarium. Bubbles float up from the sea-chest. As PEARL playfully swims toward it, a brightly-coloured fish passes.

We see the ecstasy on Pearl's face as she follows it.

EXT. OLD ROADHOUSE LATE AFTERNOON

The driver's door opens. We see his sun-tanned hairy legs, dirty steel-capped boots, and footy socks as he jumps down with a thud.

SFX: Cicadas, mosquitoes, and the peep peep of small birds settling for the night.

The driver's door is slammed shut. We see his BOOTS, as he stomps toward the roadhouse. The driver's HAND opens the front door of the roadhouse, and pushes aside the striped, vinyl-strip fly deterrent, and dangling tinkle bells.

INT. OLD ROADHOUSE SUNSET

EDDIE, the surveyor's assistant, sticks his head through the door expectantly, glances around, and frowns with disappointment.

INT. UNDERWATER 'NINGALOO' FANTASY SEQUENCE DAY

SFX: The tinkling front door bells are distorted into the underwater sounds.

PEARL is happily swimming between the aquarium ornaments. She is delighted to see a giant CLAM SHELL with golden light coming from it's opening. PEARL swims closer, and reaches into the light. Her face is lit with gold.

INT. OLD ROADHOUSE SUNSET

EDDIE playfully slaps the side glass of the aquarium. PEARL lifts her head out of the water, gasping.

She is very surprised to see EDDIE, the attractive, sandy-haired youngish surveyor, wearing stubbies and a ripped-sleeveless shirt.

EDDIE
(he's seen her do
this before)
Geez, Pearl!

PEARL
(delightedly
slipping something
into her pocket)
Eddie!
(slightly hopeful)
Aren't you goin' to the Nullarbor?

EDDIE fidgets with something in his hands.

EDDIE
Had to say good-bye.

PEARL struggles with her disappointment. Eddie notices.
PEARL grabs the t-towel and wipes the water from her face.
EDDIE awkwardly gestures at the aquarium.

EDDIE (CONT'D)
Where were you?

PEARL
Ningaloo!

EDDIE nods, like he doesn't believe her. PEARL frowns.
Eddie thrusts something in a paper bag at her.

EDDIE
I got you something.

PEARL is surprised. She doesn't receive presents often.
She accepts the paper bag, and looks up at Eddie.

EDDIE (CONT'D)
(gesturing
nervously)
Go on.

PEARL reverently opens the paper bag, withdraws a Japanese pagoda aquarium ornament, and holds it up to the light. It glows almost magically in her fingers. PEARL is wowed.

PEARL

I've always wanted to go to Japan.

EDDIE enjoys watching PEARL carefully place it into the aquarium, but his enjoyment is edged with discomfort. All of Pearl's attention is now focused on the pagoda.

SFX: Faint, lilting Japanese music.

She leans closer to listen, smiling. EDDIE grabs her arm. PEARL looks at him. The music stops.

EDDIE

Come with me.

PEARL wasn't expecting this. She stares. EDDIE is standing opposite her, with the aquarium between them. The slanting rays of the setting sun play on their faces.

PEARL

(gently)

This is my place.

EDDIE

You've never been anywhere.

PEARL is hurt. She glances into the aquarium.

PEARL

Just got back from Ningaloo.

EDDIE

In your dreams.

PEARL

(firmly)

You'd better go, Eddie.

EDDIE shifts uncomfortably on his feet.

EDDIE

I can't stand the thought of you out here alone with your head stuck in that flamin' fish tank. Some bastard could come along . . .

PEARL

Edd-ie.

EDDIE

(simply)

I love you, Pearl.

BEAT.

PEARL is torn. She glances at the aquarium, and back again.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

I'm offering you a life.

PEARL shakes her head.

PEARL

Half a life.

BEAT.

EDDIE abruptly begins to leave. PEARL is struck by the reality of losing him forever.

PEARL (CONT'D)

(going after him)

Wait.

EDDIE stops just inside the door-way, but doesn't turn around.

PEARL hesitates, then withdraws something precious from her pocket. She moves to EDDIE quickly, pulls his shoulder back, and pushes her gift into his shirt pocket.

PEARL (CONT'D)

It's something special ... from Ningaloo.

EDDIE flicks the bells and vinyl-strip fly deterrent aside with annoyance, and leaves.

We stay on PEARL as she stays inside, watching him go.

SFX: The driver's door slamming, the diesel engine firing.

PEARL flinches.

EXT. OLD ROADHOUSE/HIGHWAY (FROM BACK OF THE UTE) SUNSET

We travel fast with the UTE, looking back at the ROADHOUSE, as PEARL moves to stand just outside the doorway. She looks vulnerable and very alone as the UTE travels away, revealing again the absolute isolation of the ROADHOUSE.

EXT. OLD ROADHOUSE SUNSET

PEARL remains standing just outside the doorway, watching the UTE growing smaller and smaller on the horizon.

PEARL goes to wave, but lowers her hand again, sadly.

INT. MOVING UTE CABIN SUNSET

Eddie's big HAND is roughly changing up into overdrive.

Through the windscreen, we see endless road, a rise, and more endless road ahead. EDDIE passes a truck stop sign. One KM.

He pats his pocket, then presses it, to feel the texture of Pearl's present.

The truck stop looms ahead. EDDIE abruptly changes down, and pulls in, braking hard.

INT. STATIONARY UTE CABIN SUNSET

EDDIE tentatively reaches into his pocket, and withdraws something dainty in his fingers, rolling it into his palm.

EDDIE looks down at his open palm with wonder. Within it, is a glowing grey-tinged pearl.

SFX: A haunting memory of PEARL, the strangely-beckoning Aboriginal vocalist, singing softly to herself.

EDDIE contemplates the meaning of the pearl for a long, long moment, and reaches a decision. He turns the engine back on with new determination.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY SUNSET

The UTE does a fast U-turn, and heads back at speed.

INT. OLD ROADHOUSE NIGHT

EDDIE pokes his head through the bells and vinyl-strip fly deterrent, and looks around expectantly for PEARL. There is only one light on, above the aquarium, as it was at sunset, when he left her.

EDDIE
(frowning)
Pearl?
(louder)
Pearl?

EDDIE strides across to the front counter, and looks behind it. He opens the door to the kitchen, and yells.

EDDIE (CONT'D)
Pearl!

EDDIE stands, listening. The fan revolves too slowly. The clock ticks. EDDIE is worried. He strides to the front door, and yells at the top of his lungs.

EDDIE (CONT'D)
Where are you?! PEARL!

A fly is zapped by the fluorescent fly catcher. EDDIE spins around. His gaze settles on the gurgling, well-lit aquarium.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

(softly)

Nah.

EDDIE looks at the pearl in his palm, looks again at the aquarium with dread, and shudders. He glances up at Pearl-the-black-mermaid in her painting, and back to the aquarium.

EDDIE is drawn toward the aquarium as though against his will. He peers inside.

SFX: The haunting memory of PEARL singing softly to herself.

EDDIE grips the sides of the aquarium, his knuckles white, his teeth clenched, takes a breath, and plunges all of his face into the tank.

SFX: Toilet flushing.

PEARL emerges from the ladies, a little teary-eyed. She sees EDDIE with his head in the aquarium, and stops in her tracks. Her eyes widen with amusement.

PEARL creeps over to the aquarium, and slaps the side of the tank, with a giggle.

EDDIE rears back, gasping for air. Water streams down his shirt. He wipes the water and wet hair from his face.

PEARL

Whatcha doin', Eddie?

EDDIE

Looking for you!

PEARL laughs with relief, which quickly subsides, as they share this moment of quiet exaltation.

BEAT.

PEARL reaches out, takes Eddie's hands, and places them back on the sides of the tank. She covers his hands with hers.

SFX: Lilted Japanese music.

EDDIE hears it. PEARL looks at EDDIE with a world of playful suggestiveness.

INT. UNDERWATER 'TOKYO' FANTASY SEQUENCE DAY

PEARL and EDDIE are swimming to the sandy bottom of the sea. PEARL is dressed as before. So is EDDIE, who is in there boots and all. EDDIE is awed. PEARL is delighted.

The giant-sized PAGODA radiates light. As PEARL and EDDIE swim closer, they look at each other. Their faces are aglow with golden light. They swim away together.

Dissolve Credits into underwater footage over 'Pearl' music.