

2. VIGIL

There had been a moon earlier in the night. A *scimitar* moon, Pete Davis had once heard it called. A curved blade of white light on a bed of black velvet.

Black velvet. Jesus.

Now the only light came from the watch lamps which Manny and Forensics had laid out: a fat, yellow squalid of light that ran down the bank from his car and settled on the dark water at the lake's edge. Manny—Manolis Papa—was his work colleague, and the only real friend Constable Pete Davis still had in this dump.

The lamps lit the area where the bundle had been found, snagged on some reeds. A young couple had been out walking their dog, taking in the sunset, and they'd Triple-0'd on the boy's mobile. Manny had been first to the scene. By then it was chaos, he said. The girl's black labrador was chasing ducks all over the shallows, the blue shawl in which the bundle was found had been partly unwrapped, and the girl had vomited on the fucking thing. *Un-be-lievable!*

His first instinct, Manny said later, had been to rip into the girl, but she'd already seen the anger in his face.

'We rang you,' she'd said, retreating before him. 'It's not our fault we found it.'

It was dusk by the time Davis got there. Manny had finished staking out a crime scene and salvaging what evidence could still be salvaged. The cold was rising off the water and Manny was shivering from splashing about in it for the previous hour. When the station Commander arrived and ordered Manny home, it didn't take a genius to work out who was going to draw the short straw. The night watch. Yet again.

Still Davis could hardly complain. Manny was a family man, after all. He had a wife, kids, a hot shower and dinner waiting for him at home. While stripeless Constable Pete Davis had barely started in on *his* punishment.

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'Never know—maybe sumpin I c'n do for *you*, eh?' the black girl at the counter had suggested. After she'd told him what he could do for her.

Pete Davis had still been a Senior Constable back then. He'd come to this place on the back of a promotion, hoping to make Sergeant in three, maybe four years, and then get posted on somewhere decent. All he had to

do in the meantime was keep his nose clean. How hard could that be?

'It's already in the charge book, luv,' he'd told her. 'I can't do anything once it's in the book.'

That wasn't true, it wasn't in the charge book. It should have been by then. It would need to be by the end of his shift. He looked at the large black and white clock on the Station House wall behind her.

'Yeah?'

He knew her, of course. He'd spotted her the first day he arrived in town. She was in the supermarket, buying lollies for a mob of kids, who were milling around her, their long fingers plucking at her dress. How old was she? Seventeen? Eighteen? Christ, it was hard to tell. She could be anywhere, he guessed, between eighteen and twenty-three. He'd seen her a few times after that first day and always smiled at her. She'd never smiled back.

'Yeah.'

She was smiling at him now, though. From under black brows. One thonged foot twisted this way and that on the linoleum floor. The smile, the twist of her foot, her leg, her hip, could be signalling shyness. Something told him otherwise.

Not long after he'd arrived in town, he'd stood in a queue in the Post Office behind her. Her shoulders were bare. Usual thongs, cheap cotton shift, spaghetti straps, no bra. He'd breathed in, letting the smell of her sweat and the cocoa butter in her skin come to him. And along with it had come a sudden painful rush of childhood. A swarm of small creatures, boys and girls, running wild on a station—different breeds, different colours, white, black, yellow, brindle, the five slanted, tawny kids of the Malay cook and the two Chink kitchen maids all mixing together, teeming like bush rats though the homestead,

the outbuildings, the kitchens, the stockyards, the blacks camps, sharing everything, scents, skins, sweat, germs and, above all, games. Games riding stock animals, games by the river, swinging on ropes out over the water, secret games of show-and-tell, and sometimes show-and-don't-tell, games that kids in towns and regular schools never got to hear of. Until the day he turned eleven, and his mother, without warning, blew the whistle. Sounding full-time on all their games. His. His father's.

He'd hated town, Toowoomba, school. In his first year he'd run away three times, but they always knew where he was headed and dragged him back.

The girl had shuffled forward in the queue at that moment, breaking into his thoughts. He'd looked around quickly, wondering who'd been reading his mind. The Post Office clerk behind the counter, a pimply boy of eighteen, met his eye. Might even have winked at him. He kept his own eyes off the girl after that, simply breathing.

'Heaps of them yellas round here,' the pimply boy had bragged. To the newcomer in town, when Davis had finally made it to the counter, and the girl had gone.

'That right?' he'd said back, and frowned. He handed the boy a form—his details, Christine's, the two boys'. 'I'm just here to organize the delivery of mail.'

'Some of them still camp out,' the boy had gone on, ignoring his frown. As if some connection—some kind of complicity even—had been established between them. 'By the river, or on the old Reserve.'

'You don't say.' He'd fixed his gaze coldly on the boy until he blushed and was forced to look away.

'In the charge book, or not,' now it was the girl who was offering helpful advice, 'you could jus rip it out, cou'nt ya?'

The yella wasn't right, either. On a school tour of Government House he'd once seen gifts presented by the Queen. One was a smooth metal dish, so smooth it begged to be touched. *Plate gold*, the card in the glass case said. Even today he couldn't say exactly what colour plate gold was, but it wasn't yellow.

'Every page is numbered. You can't just tear one out.'

Her eye broke from his. She dropped her head. A pink thong pivoted and squealed once on the resistant linoleum surface of the floor. There was no one else in the office.

'*Portan* man,' he thought she said. To the floor. 'Police can do anything he want.'

'Look, there's nothing I can do. He was speeding, and he was drunk,' he began to tell her again. But she wasn't finished.

'C'n have anything he wants.'

Her eyes came up to his again. Black. Not smiling no more. He felt the blow of her look in the centre of his chest.

'Everybody want sumpin, eh?'

He stood, breathing again, and spread his fingers on the counter.

'What's your name?'

'Lily.'

'That your real name, or your town name?'

'Real name.' A quick smile. That *was* shy this time. 'Same like water lily, eh?'

'Lily, did your father tell you... did he ask you to come?'

She shook her head.

'You sure?'

The clock behind her loudly ticked away the minutes to the end of his shift.

‘Scratchim name outa charge book, nobody gonna know then, eh?’ She wasn’t going to accept no for an answer. Or believed that he wasn’t.

‘But, Lily, people do know. I know. You know.’

‘Me?’ her astonishment was genuine. ‘I not tellin no-one. Bout anythin.’

Twenty-three, he guessed. It was the outfit, the gestures, that made her seem much younger. The downcast eyes, the twisting of her whole body on one ankle, the girlish pink thongs.

‘Jus goin now,’ she said. And stood. The best part of a minute passed before he spoke again.

‘Going where?’

‘Dunno. Down the lake nice now, eh?’

‘The lake? Why the lake?’

‘Dunno. Fishin. Swimmin maybe.’

‘Swimming?’

Water washed over gold plate. As he looked on.

‘Swimmin, n’ things.’

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Every hour or so someone checked on him. About nine a patrol car cruised by—Watts, his colleague, the Station’s *other* junior constable—bringing coffee, a cold burger and chips. Standard police issue for a vigil. At ten, then again at midnight, he was checked on again. On his car radio this time.

‘You weren’t sleeping out there, by any chance?’

‘Like a baby.’

He caught the swift intake of Manny’s breath, followed by a silence while they both weighed what he’d just said. Without intent.

‘You understand something like this, Pete?’ Manny’s mood had shifted down. ‘How people can do something

like this?’

Manny’s own family was Greek. Everything revolved around family for him. His mother, father, his wife Helen, his kids.

‘Pete?’ he said again. When there’d been no answer.

‘People feel they’re in a corner.’

‘Yeah, but there’s always a better answer than this. There’s gotta be...’ For a time there was only radio static between them. ‘Pete?’

‘Yeah, mate, I’m here.’

‘I’m finishing up now. You want me to swing by? Bring coffee or something?’

Manny and he were still close. Not *as* close. For a while after it had all happened he’d continued to swing by their place for a beer, a coffee, coming off shift. Or on a weekend, after he’d dropped the boys back to Christine, and an empty night was opening up in front of him. Manny understood all this. Helen was okay too, always greeted him with a brightish, ‘Hi, Pete’. Set out chips and nuts if he and Manny were having beer, olives if it was a glass of wine. It was what she didn’t say that counted. Didn’t ask about. Didn’t reminisce about. When the four of them had once been so close. He knew she kept up with Christine, but never mentioned the fact, and after a while—when there were more and more things not to mention—he stopped swinging by. Manny would still ask him in for a beer if their shifts coincided and they were sharing a ride. But it was a formality, not a offer he could accept. They both understood that.

‘Nah, mate, I’m okay. It’s after midnight, Helen’ll be expecting you home.’

‘Watts said he brought you something.’

Junior Constable Watts. Nineteen. A raw kid, just starting out. And now his equal, and—who knew?—a

future rival. It wasn't the kid's fault. He was just trying to fit in, be accepted as one of the team.

'Yeah, coffee, a burger. I'm sweet.'

'You didn't take a thermos?'

Their conversations these days had as many holes as a used target. For a stake-out, a night-long watch, Christine had always made sure he was properly kitted out. Sandwiches, a blanket, a thermos of hot coffee. A stack of his favourite music disks to keep him company.

'I got a lakeful of water out here, remember?'

'Okay,' Manny laughed. He wouldn't press it, his laugh said. Days were, Pete would always be pressed to eat, drink, take a plate of *something*. It wasn't hard to imagine the conversations, the quarrels that must have gone on in Manny's home—Helen feeling awkward, divided, Manny protesting, defending him but in the end wanting peace. Still, imagine it, a Greek not pressing you to stay. To have a drink, a bite to eat.

'So, what do I put in the book—*No incidents? Nothing to report?*'

'Just me and the ducks, Manny, minding our own business.'

Manny laughed again. Then was quiet. He'd be writing, updating the report sheet.

'There,' he said when the notes were finished. 'I've spared them the ducks.' He was about to switch off.

'This made the News yet?'

'Not yet. Coroner's suppressing it till the morning. He wants to see the site first before the next lot of labrador elephants trample all over it.'

'Manny?'

'Yeah?'

'They say what it was?'

Manny cast about. For the point of this question.

'A girl. Six, maybe eight days. Why?'

'The blue wrap. Made me wonder if it was a boy. You get to thinking, sitting on your arse out here all night. You know?'

'You sure you don't want company?'

'Nah, mate. Get home.' He was the one moving to switch off now.

'Don't forget,' Manny warned him. 'Coroner will be out there at sparrow fart. Six sharp, he said. You know what the bastard's like, so set your watch in case.'

'I'll be awake.'

'Set it anyway.'

'Appreciate it, Manny.'

'Say hi to the ducks for me, will you?'

'You bet.'

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A sound had reached him, from somewhere outside the car, somewhere out in the darkness. Not loud, but enough to snap him awake. His mind fumbled, trying to drag the sound back. Had it been a human sound? A cry, a shout? The cold lake air caught him in the throat as the window rolled down, and he waited, peering out in the night, his senses now on hair-trigger alert.

Two a.m.

He'd been trawling the past. Christine, the boys, his parents, hers. His life was fucked. His, the boys', Christine's. Christine was crazy, cracked-up. Last time he'd dropped the boys back to her, she'd mocked him, laughed and jeered in his face when what she'd really wanted to do was tear out his eyes. Her own eyes were crazy. In front of the boys. In front of Tom and Carey. And this was months and months on, long after he'd begun to hope the worst was over. *Cunt-stable*, she'd shouted into

the street after him.

Somebody must have snubbed her, said something to her, to bring back all that seething hatred.

He strained to hear the cry again, and thought he did. Then thought it was the echo of another cry, one he'd heard or dreamt.

Christ, it wasn't just Christine who was cracking up.

Then he heard it again, and knew it was real. High, plaintive, a child's cry, from somewhere down by the edge of the lake, in the reeds. It came once more, full of fright, or warning. He shivered, and slid the catch to release his door. It couldn't be a child. What the fuck would a child be doing out here now? In this cold, this darkness?

He was out of the car by the time the third cry came. This time followed by a weird piping chorus. You're spooked, you're *being* spooked, he told himself. He stood with his right hand on the clip of his holster and waited while the tremors passed through him, through his shoulders, down through his legs into the solid earth of the lake bank. He waited in the darkness, still outside the yellow perimeter of the light from the lamps. He scanned the shoreline on either side of his car, half-expecting to see another car. Watts or someone else, stepping out from behind a tree, laughing, *Had you shitting yourself for a minute there, eh, Pete?* Typical fucking Station prank. And a good way to get yourself shot.

But there was no car, no Watts. Just him and this tortured fucking cry.

There, again.

He'd seen a movie about Vietnam. About captured soldiers staked out in the jungle at night. To lure their mates.

He unclipped the holster and drew his pistol. Because he'd spotted it now. A shape moving in the water right

by the break in the reeds. Right where the blue bundle had been found, and where Manny had set out a row of stakes. Not just one small block of shadow, but two, three, more. Passing back and forwards across the fogged margin of the light, now *in* the light, the next second slipping back into darkness.

He raised his pistol and followed the perimeter of the plastic tape, taking care not to set foot in Manny's lighted square. As he passed the first lamp, a shadow rose and ran ahead of him down the muddy bank. It fell on the yellow, misting water. The cry came again. An alarm pierced his chest, set off a flurry of cries, a piping chorus of panic.

What the fuck—?

He stopped metres from the water, his breath heaving. The catch in his throat came out as a laugh. A half-sob of relief. His pistol now hung loose in his hand, his arms by his sides.

The ducklings were being nipped and nudged savagely back out of the light, the fake dawn that had deceived them. The adult duck, maybe the same grey teal Manny had told him about, snapped at their tail fluff until the last of them had passed back into the darkness of the reeds, squeaking and chittering in protest.

Only the adult duck was left. Before it too disappeared, it turned its head and looked directly at him.

You're to blame, its eye said. For all this confusion, this pain.

He fought the urge to raise his arm. To put the whole fucking lot of them out of their misery once and for all.

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At the disciplinary hearing Manny had tried his best, but in the end he'd dumped him in it. Not that Davis held it against him, he'd have done the same thing himself.

Manny's only option was to plead that he'd been naive, that he'd thought it was a legitimate request from a fellow officer. Background data—licence, personal details, criminal record—standard check on a suspect in a current operation.

'But there was no operation.'

The chair of the tribunal was a Deputy-Super from a neighbouring command.

'I didn't know that at the time, sir.'

'You didn't ask?'

'No, sir. I trusted him.'

'He's a personal friend? A mate?'

'Yes, sir. But that's not—'

'You never thought to enquire who this...' the Super had consulted his papers, 'this Patrick Trimmer was? Or even what the alleged felony was? Before, or even after, you did the data search?'

'No, sir. I know it doesn't sound...'

'No, it doesn't, Senior Constable. Did it occur to you to ask Senior Constable Davis why he didn't do the search himself? It was his investigation not yours after all.'

'That's correct, sir.'

'So?'

'I thought... I mean, I assumed the investigation was moving fast. Pete... Senior Constable Davis was out of the Station a lot around that time. He rang in and asked me to do the search.'

'As a favour?'

'I suppose so, sir.'

'And you did it? Did you even ask him where he was, what he was doing, when he made the request?'

'Like I said, I trusted him, sir. Trusted his judgement.'

'You didn't know he was sitting in a car outside Mr Trimmer's house at the time?'

'God's truth, I didn't, sir.'

The irony was, Manny didn't know. He knew about Trimmer, of course. That prick. Mr Patrick fucking Trimmer. *Patrick's got a boat, Dad. It's got an outboard motor, and everything. He's promised he'll take us fishing in it, out on the lake. He said we can water-ski when it's warmer.* Manny didn't know he was staking the prick out, though, and putting in doctored time-sheets to cover it.

'God's truth?' the Super wasn't buying it. 'Is it also the truth that you didn't know that Mr Trimmer was in a relationship with the officer's ex-wife?'

'I don't remembering him mentioning a specific name.'

'But if he had, you would have connected them, wouldn't you think, Senior?'

'Sir?'

'*Trimmer's* not exactly a common name, is it?'

'I'm saying I don't recall him mentioning a Mr Trimmer in specific relation to his wife... his *ex-wife*, sir.'

'How long had Constable Davis and his wife been separated? At the time the data search was undertaken.'

'Seven months, I guess, sir. Eight maybe?'

'And he had, I understand, shown evidence of stress—understandably—during that time?'

'Sir?'

'He has two young sons, I believe?'

'Yessir.'

'Would you say that Senior Constable Davis was acting, generally behaving, in a rational, professional manner at that time?'

'I don't know that any of us would be rational in those circumstances, sir. He was still doing his job.'

'That's what we're here to determine, Senior.'

'He hadn't brought any of it on himself... the separation, I mean, the filing for divorce. He wasn't the one who initiated any of that.'

'Mrs Davis had, I take it?'

'I understand so, sir.'

'And he felt bitter about it? That it was wrong, unjust in some way?'

'He felt he was losing everything. His wife, his kids, the house, she even got the car.'

'And yet he didn't appear to be resisting, to be fighting any of it. Didn't you find that curious? That—legally at least—he wasn't fighting it at all?'

'I can't say, sir.'

'This separation, the filing for divorce. You were close to both parties. Do you happen to know—?'

'No, sir.'

'Very well. If Mr Trimmer wasn't involved before the separation, then it's probably outside our scope anyway. Whatever mitigation it might have offered Senior Constable Davis.'

'Nobody else was involved, sir. Not on Christine's side.'

'I see.'

Manny had managed to save his own skin. He was reprimanded, counselled, but no fatal black marks went on his record.

Pete Davis, on the other hand, had been found guilty of invasion of privacy, and a serious breach of ethical standards. But for his personal circumstances at the time, the Super told him, he would have been drummed out of the Police Service. As it was, he was busted two ranks. Back to plain Constable Davis, where he'd begun eight years earlier. On a rookie officer's salary. The better half of which the Family Court or some other body would requisition. A black stain on his record, and his prospects

zilch. For one mistake. Two mistakes.

Welcome, he'd told himself, to the country of the fucked.

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'That girl,' Christine had said.

'Which girl?' When there were dozens of girls. It was a supermarket, for God's sake.

'The slutty one, eyeing us.'

How did women do this, pick the one out of dozens?

'Let's just shop, why don't we? The boys are dead beat.' They'd come from a long barbeque lunch with other parents from the kids' school. He shouldn't strictly have been driving, but who was going to pull him over round here? Manny? Watts? The Sarge? They all knew his car well enough not to see it. 'We'll feed them, put them to bed, and we've got the rest of the night to ourselves. Okay?'

She'd nodded, moved on. Pushing the trolley towards the frozen, ready-made food cabinets. They'd been thinking pizzas.

He followed her.

'Cheeky though, just staring at us like that,' she said over her shoulder. 'Who did she think we were?'

'Cheeky?' he'd hissed, and looked quickly around.

Cheeky was verboten, a complete no-no word. Police College had drummed that into their thick heads. *Black bastard*, yes, black slut, okay. But cheeky? Never. Not in public anyway. *Cheeky* had a history, defence lawyers loved it. *Is it true, officer, that when you arrested my client you called her a cheeky slut?* Christine would know nothing of this, of course. *Cheeky slut* wasn't what the girls normally called one another at the posh private school she'd gone

to in Melbourne. But he had told her often enough. And the look of shock she was giving him now said that she did recall something of the sort.

‘I didn’t say it because she’s black. If that’s what you’re thinking.’

‘Christine, she’s not *black*.’

The trolley stopped. Christine turned her head and looked directly at him.

‘I thought you said you didn’t know which one.’

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Sex with Lily. You gave it, you took it. With none of the usual stupid power games. The negotiations, the endless palaver. Before and after.

With Christine, it was the switch points of desire which had always bewildered and de-railed him: those precise moments of change at which what he’d taken until then for sounds of hunger or pleasure—his or hers—had somehow become a discussion of what they needed from IKEA, or how they’d find the money for the private school Christine wanted for the boys.

He’d have liked to ask Manny about this, about whether Manny had the same experience with Helen, or whether it was just him. Whether he was simply blind to the signals which everybody else saw, and reacted to. He never did ask, knowing Manny would find the subject too intrusive, too private to discuss. And so he was left with only his own experience to go by—and the conviction that all women should be issued, at birth, with a set of red and green flags.

Lily was an exception to all this. Lily was as oblivious of signals, of switches and flags as he was. Or so it seemed to him. She laughed, and fucked him. He laughed back, and fucked her.

And it was fun. And there it was.

Sometimes she was a small, golden, pelted animal, glistening, just out of the water. Laughing and slipping over him—and *away* from him, until he could lock a hand around each small-boned hip and hold her still enough to push inside her. And she’d become still then. For a moment. Then smile once more, and begin to move.

‘Ohh, so *that* what you after? Why d’nya say before?’

Other times she’d be serious. Watch his face as he touched her, just as he in turn watched hers. Watched the clouds of expression passing on her face. One moment he thought he saw fear in her eyes, then playfulness, then doubt, then something else altogether. He had no idea what she saw when she looked at him.

‘Lily?’

‘Just do it,’ she said, and spread her legs.

She made no sound that time, just took him. As he was taking her. Her skin was hot, dry, but near the end she wrapped her arms around his neck and shoulders and began to thrust with him. The sweat broke on her skin, and her smell came to him. Rich and rancid all at once, and he soaked his face and his lips in it.

And in the act of doing this, he was drawn straight back through the wall which had separated him from himself for so long. Back into those magic spaces of childhood which he’d been abruptly torn away from all those years earlier. Twenty-plus years of rules. Of city rules, grown-ups’ rules, school rules, Police College rules, Court rules. Years of regulations, of parades and drills, of yes-siring and no-siring and three-bags-full siring. Of work and marriage and family...

Until he was almost convinced that that other world was gone forever, or had never really existed in the first place. Except as whitefella fantasies, as old Bushies’ tales.

A world without rules. His father's world, and one which had just been becoming his own. A world of games, of *runnin* free. Of *chasin velvet*—the secret compulsion of that. All bullshit, people said. Just another of those—what did the newspapers call them, *white urban myths*?

Except, in his soul, he knew different.

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There had been moments, especially early in their relationship, when it had been like that with Christine—or so close as to mask the differences from him.

Indeed Christine could still turn him on, and she knew it—those rare nights when, her hair pulled up, the nape of her neck bare, the lamplight in their bedroom finding hidden colours and tones in her normally milk-white skin, she sat naked before her mirror and, with her eyes, invited him to inspect her.

'Bet there never *been* anyone that white,' Jimmy Branco had laughed when he first saw them together. 'Jus like that Nicole Kidman, eh?'

And there *was* a faint resemblance. The long willowy figure, the elfin mouth and chin, that pale, bone-gleaming forehead. That air of unreachability.

'Not like you, eh?' Jimmy had gone on teasing, 'all that good sun you getting up here—you nearly same colour as me now, eh?'

Jimmy Branco was a blackfella, a Kurtijar man from the Western Gulf. He was a ranger at the Lawn Hill National Park where Davis, as an eighteen year-old, had spent time as a labourer, a gardener and camp-ground rouseabout, while waiting for entry to Police College. Christine had come there as part of a tour, exploring the Park with two girlfriends in her uni break.

'You sure you the one doin the slumming?' Jimmy

had quizzed him with his white teeth. 'Not her?'

Davis had loved his time at Lawn Hill, had loved the colours of the place—the impenetrable, massed blue of the sky, the black soils, the emerald green waters of the Gorge, its pandanus and palms, the pink and white lily-flowers in the Creek, in the lagoons and the billabongs following the Wet. Had loved, above all, the feeling of space, the wide-ranging freedoms of the Park.

That June, when he met Christine, he'd been thinking of staying, of withdrawing his application to Police College and training to be a ranger himself. Jimmy, as his supervisor, was keen to put his name forward to act as his sponsor.

'Do you *have* to go back?' he'd pleaded with Christine the day before she was due to leave.

They'd made love that morning on the bank of a lagoon. Dazzled by the flawless, exotic bloom of her skin, he'd lost sight for a time of the rich natural array around him.

'I can't stay. Not here,' she'd said, and the lack of any hesitation or doubt had both hurt and provoked him.

Perhaps she saw this.

'If you want me,' she'd prodded him more gently towards a logic that he himself was incapable of at that moment, 'you'll have to be the one who follows, you understand...?'

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He had trouble with his leave, his rosters. Senior ranks and married men—family men—got preference, and they cherry-picked the weekends. Same as he'd done when he'd been one of them, when he'd still had some rank, a marriage, family of his own. Now he got the leftovers, a rookie's share: one weekend a month, and the

rest weekdays, days when everyone else was at work and there was bugger-all to do in town. It hadn't mattered so much in the early months when Lily was still around.

The one or two mates he had kept were always working now when he was off. His older boy, Tom, was at school, Carey in kindy or at home with Christine who'd quit work. *To guide the boys*, she'd told Manny and Helen, *through this difficult phase*. So, what was *he* supposed to do—ring up Mr Patrick fucking Trimmer and ask him around for a beer? So they could compare notes?

Christine didn't need the money any more, that's why she'd quit work. She had the house, he had the mortgage. She had the maintenance, and the rest. The *benefits*, Christ. She was a one-armed Welfare ATM these days. She could afford to sit around thinking up new ways to twist the knife in him. In that useless dipstick, Cunt-stable Pete Davis.

'Christine, please, we can get over this.'

'Get over it? You mean like a cold? Like the flu?'

'No, of course not. But with time people do, lots of people.'

'No one I know.'

'But, Christine, that's just not true. You know at least two couples...'

'Not like this. Nobody's ever done anything as dirty, as humiliating as this.'

And then he knew. The needle of her eye split his forehead open and he knew. She needn't have said anything then.

'A black slut of a thing like that.'

There'd been too much at stake at that moment for him to defend Lily. Even if he'd wanted to.

'What...?' Christine had gone on, and he saw her lower lip trembling. 'What does that make me?'

'Chris, Chris, it doesn't make you anything.'

'Exactly,' she spat, her hatred of him streaming back. 'It makes me *nothing*. Less than *nothing*.'

He knew then that this wasn't about infidelity. Infidelity, with time, they might have got over. But that wasn't the charge she was making.

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Policemen's wives knew about infidelity. Or should have. The wives talked about it among themselves often enough, claimed to be shocked, disgusted by the offers their husbands told them about, laughed about. Always involving guys from other stations, other commands, of course. The highway patrol man who'd pulled over some piece speeding in an red 911. *What will it take, Officer, to um... overlook this?* The woman hadn't even got out of the car—she'd sucked him off through the driver's window. Dabbed her lips with a tissue, checked her make-up in the mirror and driven off. And not young women, mostly. Or sluts. But toffy women, professional women, doctors, lawyers—people would be amazed at the offers policemen got from women wanting to keep a licence, not be done on an RBT, keep a husband in the dark about where they'd spent the day.

And in ten years, Constable and then Senior Constable Peter Davis had turned down every offer, along with the hundred dollar notes that had accidentally stuck to the licence or the spare case of Jim Beam that happened to be on the back seat. He'd followed the fucking rules to the letter. And then one day he'd made a mistake, one mistake. In ten years. One mistake. Okay, that had led to another, but that was in consequence of the first, a knock-on. Without the first, Mr Patrick fucking Trimmer would never have been on the scene to begin with.

He knew Trimmer of course, from the stake-outs he'd done at the prick's flat and at Christine's house—fuck, *his* house. Also from the details of Manny's data search. Two speed tickets, one DUI, two counts of possession. Small amounts of weed, personal use, a fine each time and no convictions. He knew Trimmer by sight as well. Fucking painter. Not houses. *Artistic* painter. Christine had always said she hated beards, long hair, rural hicks, hippy types. Trimmer was always in bludstones, grubby overalls. *He's got a boat, Dad. It's not like fishing from the bank.* Boat, fuck. Centrelink was buying boats as well now? For painters, for fucking artists.

He almost walked into Trimmer one day in the main street while out of uniform. He didn't know whether the prick had seen him. Trimmer, he figured, must know him, too. Prick had ducked into a shop ten metres or so before they'd have had to pass one another. Town pharmacy, it'd been. Davis had dawdled in the street outside, scoping the bastard from the edge of the glass. Watched him go straight to the front counter. Heavy mechanic's overalls today. *Mechanic's overalls*, shit. Paint stains, daubs and splashes of red, yellow, *Prussian blue*, if you don't mind. Dusty boots, ponytail. He squinted to see what the prick was buying and guessed before he even reached for them. A pack of condoms. The cunt was laughing at him.

Okay. He rocked on the balls of his feet. In the main street. Okay.

If the bastard came out of the shop and turned left into his path, it was a sign. He could rip his bloody throat out and let whatever happened after that, happen. If he turned the other way, then that was fated too, and it was Trimmer's lucky day.

The prick came out of the shop. He clopped down the steps and headed straight out across the street. Without

looking right or left.

Which told him what—that the guy was as dumb as shit, or as smart as his own paint?

And if it was the latter, if the prick *had* spotted him, knew he was watching through the glass, and still went ahead and bought the fucking things...

He spun around, but the bastard had legged it. Was nowhere to be seen.

.....

They weren't the most likely couple, Christine and him. Even to themselves.

'God never make two people so diffn't, eh?' had been Jimmy Branco's take on them. And his warning?

Davis had dismissed it, pretending to himself it had just been a comment on the stark contrast in their looks, their colouring at that time—Christine so pale, so blonde, blue-eyed, and Davis so dark. Dark hair, dark eyes, sun burnt deep in his skin. He'd wondered since whether the sheer starkness of that contrast could have been as much part of Christine's initial attraction to him as his was to her. If so, she'd never expressed it, even in their most passionate moments. Even now, he found he still had no idea of what went through Christine's mind when they fucked. No sense of her imagery of lust. And he knew now that he never would. Another set of rules, another mystery.

He'd been brought up—*dragged* up, was always Christine's way of putting it—in the Far North. Cattle country, a station a hundred-and-fifty miles out of Julia Creek. Hot, dry country most of the year—until each summer the Wet arrived and the billabongs and lagoons filled up again, and then nothing, not even talk of crocs walking overland, could keep him and the other kids out

of the water.

He'd tried often enough to explain that world to Christine, to describe the brilliance of its colours, its freedoms, its extremes—tried to re- evoke for her those few days (confusing but still magical days for him) which they'd spent together at Lawn Hill. Each time she'd just shaken her head, no more able or willing to imagine his world than he could hers: the city, the suburbs, the smart private schools—Toowoomba first, then Brisbane—ballet lessons, piano, the works. The most he'd got was School of the Air—and that was only ever when his mother could actually catch him and tie him to a desk for ten minutes at a time. Despite that, they'd always had their own way of settling things, their differences, Christine and him. A kind of glue of opposites, he supposed. Until this happened. Now she went about telling everyone who'd listen, '*Genes count in the end. Breeding will out.*'

His own mother couldn't have put it better herself. She'd been the first to come running up here, anxious to console, and to try out all the old guilt buttons to make sure that each one of them was still in good working order. *I blame myself...* she'd started in as soon as she laid eyes. *Staying on in that hell-hole year after year. Living like animals. People fornicating, whelping like dogs in the dust...* There was only one place this 'blaming herself' was going to lead. *Is it any wonder he ended the way he did?*

Twelve months of living down South and his father had cracked up completely. Twelve months of arguments, of slapping and screaming, and he'd lit out for good. Died as he'd have wanted, however, burnt up in a helicopter crash while mustering cattle in the Gulf country. His mother hadn't gone, and wouldn't let him go either. *There was nothing to bury*, she'd said at the time.

No sooner had his mother headed for home than

Christine threw a tanty of her own. At his daring to enter the house—he was only there to pick up the boys—without ringing beforehand to tell her he was coming. She carried on about his not *knocking*. Not waiting to be admitted. To her house. It was shortly after that that an AVO was taken out. Bastards at the Station got Manny to serve it on him. Serves you both right, was what they were telling the two of them. Manny was a bush boy like him. Greek, grape country. But Riverina. Table grapes, raisins. Not your posh Barossa vines.

Stakeouts, vigils—Jesus, but he'd just about had his fill of these by now. Even Manny was full of shit about vigils being *a good chance to think things over*. Oh, yeah? Like at midnight maybe when you've already busted your arse for five hours alone at the edge of a freezing fucking lake with only a duck for company?

Think? Think, shit. Think mayhem, more like. Sitting in the street outside his own home on a Saturday night waiting for Mr Patrick fucking Trimmer to finish whatever he was doing in there. A good chance to think about all that. *Patrick's started reading us the Harry Potter books, Dad...* Trimmer putting his kids to bed, tucking his kids in. *Sleep tight. And then what? Tucking his own end in, that's what. Those condoms, Jesus.*

.....

'What if I get pregn'n? Pipul seein that, pipul knowin then.'

'Pregnant? You told me there was no way.'

'Some time happen anyway.'

'You said you always made sure afterwards. You said you had a way.'

Your people, he meant. He'd believed her.

'S'okay,' she sulked. 'Din say I was. Jus sayin what if.'

He thought then.

‘This is still about your sister. This is about Cheryl, isn’t it?’

‘Constabul Watt, he say she gotta go ta Court... say she stealin from supermarket. From Cole.’

‘Lily, there’s nothing I can do about it. Nothing, don’t you understand? Once it’s on the charge sheet, once it’s in the book...’

‘Was in the book lars time, eh?’

.....

Watts called on the radio phone a bit after 2 a.m. Said he was shutting up the Station till dawn.

‘You’ll be flying solo now, Pete.’

Bastard didn’t ask him how he was doing out there, how the squirrel-cage experiment was working out. Didn’t offer to *swing by* with more coffee. Probably knew Davis would make him do it.

‘And if there’s an emergency in the meantime?’ These were only words. But for one moment longer they held off the thick black silence that lay all around him.

‘There’s always Triple-O, I guess.’

He shouldn’t have asked. He should have known he’d get more change out of talking with the duck than with Watts.

‘Yeah. Now why didn’t I think of that?’

Before switching off, Watts reminded him that the Coroner would be out for a look-see.

‘Seven sharp, better make sure you’re awake for him, eh?’

Bastard.

Manny had definitely said six. Coroner would be at the lake at *six*. When you fail, people wanted to see you fail bigger, better. Watts was applying for promotion next

round. He couldn’t really be thinking that Davis was a rival, could he? Nah, just turning the knife, more like—and taking out some insurance at the same time. In case Davis was a secret bum boy for the Super.

Yeah, that was likely.

Regular radio had nothing to listen to. How much talkback could any one person stand before they wanted to put a bullet through the dial? American religious freaks. Father Frank offering counsel, a shoulder to lean on. To all those suffering communities out there, the farmers, the rural depressed, the drought-struck. Not a word of consolation for the cunt-struck... and the music, shit. When he was growing up, there’d been an FM station devoted to country and western. Real country, real western, not the country-lite shit the Commercials played. You couldn’t get that station up where he was now, what with the hills and escarpments in between. The only music channel he could get clearly at this hour was ABC Classical. A night of that, and he’d be Baching at the moon himself.

.....

How Christine had found out about them—about him and Lily—you wouldn’t credit it. He’d been so careful; where they’d met, when. Perhaps Lily hadn’t been, but who was going to believe Lily? And ever since Christine had found out (all the while claiming she was the most humiliated woman since Mary Magdalene before Jesus), she’d been telling God knows who *the whole lurid story*—Manny and Helen for a start. Manny, fuck. Manny was a mate, but *talk*, shit, could he talk. Manny talked to the rocks in his garden. So every fucking gnome from here to Kingdom Come probably knew the story by now. And was laughing up their sleeve. It was like Christine

wanted everybody to know, so they could pile shit on him, and wanted everyone *not* to know at the same time. This thing had really sent her crazy.

And how had she found out? Bureaucracy. Fucking bureaucracy was how.

He'd gone for his physical. It was compulsory. Yearly, like pilots. He hoped the pilots were doing a whole lot better than the cops were.

'You appear to be holding your breath, Constable.'

'Senior Constable.'

'Ah, that's better. If we want an accurate body fat measure, we can't have people sucking their stomachs up into their chests, can we? It's the waistline that sets the standard, remember.'

Sets the standard, shit. With them, with the police, you thought up the figures first, then you set the standards to meet them. Weird to think that some people were still doing it the other way round.

Anyway the physical was the usual palaver. Heart, lungs, cough, deep breath, breathe hard into this tube (*breathe hard into this tube*, they're telling *him* this?), reflexes, balance, blood pressure, blood tests. His had come back from Pathology with a request for him to visit the clinic. They wanted to re-test, to double check symptoms of an STD.

Lily, fuck.

And this letter of request, which came attached to the results of his physical—this letter doesn't go to the Station, does it? It doesn't go to Senior Constable Peter Davis as it's supposed to, with an instruction to share the results with his Supervisory Officer by such and such a date. Oh, no. It goes to *Mr* Peter Davis. At his fucking home address. Where his other Supervisory Officer proceeds to open it. Thinking, why is the Police MD

sending this here? Thinking, perhaps it's bad news about her husband's health and well-being...

Which, by the time she's read it, it fucking *is*.

A bureaucratic stuff-up. A chance mistake in what, a thousand cases? Five thousand? It's the day Senior Constable Pete Davis wins the raffle. Lucky, lucky Pete. But then someone's got to win the fucking thing.

.....

Lily pregnant. Wouldn't that just put the icing on the cake? Lily strutting around town with a gluey-nosed yella on her hip—one that looks weirdly like that Constable Davis fella down at the police station. Lily and her kid lined up with Christine at Centrelink to clarify her benefits. While the whole town looks on. The ones not shaking their heads laughing behind their hands.

Yeah, Constable Peter Davis could see all that. That was the way things were running now.

Christine was already hinting about shaking off the heat and dust of this place. About moving back to the city—which *she must have been plumb out of her cotton-picking mind to have left in the first place*. Living close to her parents, who could help her raise her boys in a civilized way. *Before it was too late for them as well*.

Just how long did you have to go on paying back?

.....

'It's no good here, Dad.'

The dismay he sometimes heard in Tom's voice beat him up worse than anything else.

'What's that, son? What's no good?'

They were fishing off the bank. Father and son. Had been since first light. The fish had bought all the tickets in this particular raffle. For the third week in a row. Still

it was a chance to talk to find out how Tom was coping. If he had something he wanted to say to him, to ask him. Davis had sworn to himself he would tell the boy the truth. If he asked.

The day was cloudless to this point. No breeze to speak of. And barely a ripple on the surface of the water.

‘Tom? What’s no good here?’

He held his breath. What was it? Teasing? Bullying at school? Had Christine poisoned the boy’s mind against him? Christ, if Tom and Carey wanted to leave here too...

‘The fish,’ the boy cried. ‘All the good fish...’

This lightning strike of hurt and anger had fallen from a clear sky.

‘They’re out there.’ The boy stabbed a finger at a stand of drowned, grey tree trunks clumped in the centre of the lake. ‘Way out there.’ The boy’s eyes, he saw, were filling with tears. ‘There’s no way we can reach them from here.’

.....

You understand something like this, Pete? Manny had asked him. *How people can do something like this?* All he’d said back at the time was, *People feel they’re in a corner.*

You set someone in a corner long enough, he might have added, *they begin to forget they’re able to move at all.*

But a cop would know that already.

He’d sat in an unmarked car one Saturday a little way down the street from his own house. This was seven months after their separation, and he was coming off a six-hour shift of highway patrol. He hadn’t eaten, hadn’t even been *home* yet. Home, fuck. Around ten he saw the lights in the boys’ bedroom going off. Carey would be long asleep, but Saturdays they let Tom stay up later,

watch TV. Cop-shows. *The Bill*—no matter it was the hundredth repeat—was still his favourite.

Nothing happened for a while after that. He’d already scoped the street for Trimmer’s car. It wasn’t there, but he knew *he* was. They’d got cunning since Christine had taken out the AVO. She would have picked Trimmer up. Swung by his place. The *Pottery*. What did she imagine he was going to do? Tamper with Trimmer’s car? Slash the tyres? Set fire to it? To the house?

Did she suspect he was out here now, sitting in the dark, watching the house? Was that why she was being more careful? Blinds pulled, only chinks of light showing along the edges of the blinds, the blue shimmer of a TV.

Did she really think he would do anything to hurt them, his own sons? Tom and Carey?

Jesus.

The AVO had been his own dumb fault. He hadn’t been able to resist telling her that he knew all about Mr Patrick fucking Trimmer.

‘What’s any of that got to do with you?’ she’d said back.

When he’d phoned to complain. About the prick staying over in his house. With his sons there. She could at least have had the decency to wait for the nights they were with him.

‘Did Tom tell you this?’ she’d gone on.

‘If I find he’s been smoking his stuff in the house...’

‘Stuff?’ Her voice was needle-sharp now. Where before it had been her usual lazy contempt. ‘How do you mean, *stuff*?’

‘Just things I know.’ He shut up then. Too late.

‘You’ve been snooping on him, haven’t you? You’ve been snooping in files, records.’

A policeman’s wife.

He was sweating all of a sudden. Saying nothing.

'Did you have permission to do that?'

He'd rung off. He hadn't slept that night, wondering whether she'd actually lodge a formal complaint. She'd know what it would mean for him. By morning he'd convinced himself that she wouldn't. By midday he'd learnt that she had. There were no lines, he understood then, that she wouldn't cross to see him pay. And go on paying. That was what she was telling him.

Another light in the house went on. In their bedroom. Not the overhead light—this one was too dim, just an orange lamplight flowing on the cotton drapes. Shadows passed, one figure, two. One of them became nine feet tall for a moment. Someone—Christine—with her arms outstretched above her head. Shrugging off a shirt, a blouse. Then a round-arm motion. Unhooking a bra? The lamp went out. Christ, if she *did* suspect he was out here...

All he wanted to do now was get away from here before this jangling electricity in his head drove him crazy. He reached down to start the car, but a voice stopped him. *She knows. She's lying there, being fucked, and she's listening.* For him. For any sound from him... any car starting in the street outside. He could see the smile forming on her lips.

Later, thinking these moments over, he found he could scarcely remember what had happened next: how he'd taken his pistol from its holster, how he'd unlocked the safety catch and put the barrel of the gun in his mouth. The metal had been hard and cold, deliciously cold, against the roof of his mouth—that much he did remember. The rest was merely a voice, a few scattered words. *I'll give her noise.* He might have said it aloud. Might have said it more than once. Maybe he'd said it

over and over, as though he wanted her to hear... *I'll give her a noise she'll remember for the rest of her fucking life.*

.....

'Frighten clinic, not goin there.'

'You're going.'

'Not pregn'n, I tole you.'

'It's not about being pregnant. It's a blood test, that's all.'

'Not gettin pregn'n.' She looked at him from the corner of her black eyes. 'Less'n maybe I want to.'

He let the potential of that pass.

'They'll take your blood, they'll test it, they'll give you some medicine.'

'Ain't sick, why I gotta take med'cin?'

'You are sick. You've got an STD. You know what that is?'

Blank. Or black cunning.

'It's from sex,' he told her.

'From fuckin?'

'Yes.'

'Never get sick from fuckin before.'

He let that pass as well. Just registered the sound of the universe laughing.

'What if I doan take it?'

'You'll take it.'

She pouted, pushing her lips out at him.

'If I take it, you gonna help Cheryl?'

He'd be taking his own protection from now on. Maybe he and Trimmer could team up? Buy condoms by the gross.

'Cheryl's case,' he told her for the umpteenth time, 'is nothing to do with me. Constable Watts booked her, he charged her. I can't change any of that.'

‘You did lars time. You rip that one outa book.’

‘Lily, I didn’t rip anything out of the book.’

‘You lyin. You catchim old man, you take ‘im Police Station, lotsa pipul watchin. How come he never go ta Court, if you doan rip ‘im out?’

‘He was never in the book in the first place, that’s what I’m telling you. ‘Somehow...’ he went carefully here, ‘it never got itself registered on a charge sheet.’

She studied his face.

‘So forget all that palaver about Cheryl. And forget about your father. Otherwise he mightn’t be so lucky next time, you understand?’

She nodded—a gesture which could mean anything.

‘Maybe,’ she said, still watching his face, ‘if he get trouble again, judge wanta know how he get off lars time...’

Fuck.

He’d have to do something soon, he knew that. About Lily and her father. Not now, not yet—she was still one of the few lifelines he had left. But soon. Talk with the two of them together. Lily had family, cousins, aunties up-country. Maybe better she visited them for a while, eh? After all, policeman ’portan man. Could help her do that. Littul money maybe? Policeman c’n do anything he wants, eh?

.....

He’d set the alarm on his watch for a quarter to six. But he didn’t need any alarm. He woke at five-thirty, busting to piss.

It was cold outside the car. A low mist was hanging on the water. He made his way up the bank in the opposite direction from the lighted patch Manny had staked out. His legs and feet were numbed with long sitting, and he

stumbled as he went.

He stopped by an old paperbark. The scent of his piss was bitter and sharp on the chill air. The hot liquid foamed and steamed on the soft white skin of the tree.

He stood for a while then and stretched, looking out over the yellow square of light from Manny’s lamps, out over the low misted water to the crack of light just opening above the far shore of the lake. In minutes, as he looked on, the black of the sky was streaked with grey. Then with banners of black and green.

It’s always darkest just before the dawn. Well, one thing was for sure: the Einstein who’d invented that saying had never been up before dawn, had never seen a dawn. Just one more of those urban fucking myths. Somebody ought to write a book about all these dumb, half-arsed sayings that people mouth every day, console one another with every day. *Each new day is a new beginning.* Yeah, well not for this particular dawn-treader freak it’s not. Each day starts the fucking same, ends the fucking same. From his vantage point above the lake’s edge, he could see the roll-call of days unfolding one after another out in front of him. *Don’t just stand there, occupying space,* a football coach had drilled into them as teenagers. *Get in there, boy, make something happen.* Like what? Deciding to piss or not to piss? That was about the reach of his powers these days. *Policeman c’n do anything, have anything.* Christ, even Lily had more power than he had now. *Maybe judge wanta know how he get off lars time.* He heard a laugh, directed at him. He looked around quickly. There was no one else here but him.

The phone in his car was ringing, and he hurried back down the bank. It had rung out by the time he reached the car. He looked at the phone. *One missed call, caller unknown.* His watch said a quarter to six. It had

probably been the Coroner's driver ringing to say they were on their way. Though what the fuck they hoped to see in this light. Old goat just wanted to be seen to be busy, on top of things. Probably had a reporter and a photographer, a radio news crew following him. *The Coroner was already out at the lake when the sun came up, inspecting the site, the alleged crime scene.* Jeez, the town would be saying, the old boy's getting on, but he doesn't let any grass grow under his feet.

Grass grow under his fucking feet. There's another one that should go in the book as well.

It was light now. Enough to make out the grey arms of the dead trees emerging from the lake water. The black and green streaks in the sky had given way to purples and to reds. It would rain. Of course it would. It was his day off.

His phone rang again. Checking on him. They'd have him marked down now as going AWOL. Sitting in Maccas, they'd be telling one another, stuffing his face with hotcakes and maple syrup. Bastards. What was he supposed to do, piss in the car? *Constable Davis has had his authority to piss taken away from him.* He laughed aloud. Which went unanswered. He'd missed Lily more than he expected in the long months since she'd gone. Missed her fun, her white smile, her quick, responsive laugh.

Which still ghosted its way around town. At first in rumours, in camp gossip. *Lily's back, she's been seen in the district,* the whisper went. But when he enquired—carefully this time—all he got back was denial, a stubborn, dumb resistance, on one occasion a grudging, eye-evading, *Gone away, Boss. Gone up bush, that one.*

He'd no sooner accepted this than she was there—a sudden apparition on the road in front of him. A sandy road, which led to a favourite drinking camp. *Lily?* his

mind had shouted. Taking in the same cheap cotton shift, the same worn thongs, same slow, liquid rotation of her hips. She'd turned quickly at the sound of his car. Cheryl. Not Lily after all, but her sister. He'd beckoned her as he approached, but she'd slipped off the road and melted away into the bush in the seconds it took him to get there. Later he wondered what that all meant. What Cheryl might be hiding from him. Or who.

'Where were you?'

'Manny? Did you ring me before? I couldn't tell.'

'I was on Helen's phone. Where were you?'

'Taking a leak. Did you think I'd gone AWOL?'

Manny laughed. 'Drinking coffee in the warm at Maccas? No, mate. I just wanted to make sure you're awake. Didn't want to see you caught snoozing.'

'No, mate. Wide awake. But I appreciate it.'

They were both quiet for a moment. Listening to each other's silence. Though whether there was anything more yet to say...

'But you got through it all right?'

'Yeah, mate. Night watches, you know.'

'Yeah. Rather you than me, eh?'

A movement at the water's edge caught his eye. The reeds were waving and rustling, their canes now rattling against one another in the dawn breeze. A pair of grey teal, their plumage now eerily brown and earthy like that of a bronze-wing in the yellow light, began to patrol the shallows. One of them uttered a series of sharp calls, and seven or eight fluff-balls flung themselves, chittering incessantly, out of the reeds and onto the golden tarpaulin of light.

'You didn't get spooked or anything?' Manny asked again. 'Out there by yourself all night, thinking about it.'

'About what?'

‘About *what?*’ There was another pause. ‘You know, Pete, sometimes you do worry me? Seriously, mate.’

‘Sometimes I worry myself.’

They both laughed.

‘I know I’d have been as spooked as all hell. Baby-sitting *that* in the dark.’

‘Manny, it’s not here. It’s in the morgue.’

‘No, but the thought of it.’

‘That’s because you saw it. I didn’t.’

‘A quick look, was all. I just needed to make sure there was no pulse, no signs... you know?’

‘Maybe if I’d seen it, I’d have been spooked too.’

‘Do you think?’

He thought about it.

‘No.’

He saw a pair of headlights swinging onto the slipway that led down to the lake road. He switched his gaze to the bend where he knew they’d re-appear in a minute or two.

‘Not that I saw that much anyhow. A girl. Thick swatch of black hair, yellow tinge in the skin. Asian maybe. Or Koori.’

‘Koori?’

‘Dunno. That curve of the lake, you’re not so far from the old Reserve there.’

‘You didn’t say anything about Koori.’

‘I’m not saying it now, mate. I’m no expert.’

The headlights emerged from the bend on cue. A pair of dazzling dewdrops bobbing, in silence, on the uneven road towards him.

‘I gotta go, Manny.’

‘Before you do,’ Manny’s voice had dropped now to the level of a whisper. ‘You feel like catching up today? Grab some lunch, a few beers?’

‘What about Helen?’

‘She’s taking the kids over to her mum’s for the day.’

He heard the first noise of the car’s engine, the slap of rubber tyres on the misted road.

‘Pete, you still there?’

‘Yeah, mate.’

‘Well, waddaya say?’

‘Yeah, sounds good. Got any ideas?’

Long spears of grey light were striking the water now, the flashing silver panels of the Coroner’s car.

‘What about we spoil ourselves and eat out? Grab some Chinese, a couple of six-packs.’

‘But go where?’

‘The lake, mate.’ Manny’s answer was immediate.

‘The lake?’

‘Why not? Forecast’s good. Bring a rod if you feel like it.’

‘Okay, then,’ he said. ‘Okay.’

‘Catchya,’ said Manny quickly, and rang off. Davis thought he’d caught the muffled sound of Helen’s voice.

The Coroner’s car came to a halt close to his. He sat for a moment longer, still feeling his way through the conversation he’d just had.

He opened the car door and climbed out, hoping to Christ that lunch was all that was on Manny’s mind.

And that there wasn’t another shit-load of bad news headed his way.

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