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**LOCUST
SUMMER**



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1

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The drunk lay moaning on the pavement beneath the neon sleaze of the nightclub's entrance. Both his eyes wore bruises. His forehead was gashed. 'No-one who'll be missed,' Detective Lovestone said, winking at me while he approached a security guard who had skinned knuckles.

'Talk to me and tell me what you know,' the sly copper said to the man. 'Or I'll just make it up, and say you told me.' I scribbled in my notepad – *oldest trick in the book*. While the meathead mulled it over, Lovestone turned in a slow circle, smiling at all the revellers that had gathered around the crime scene. Two medics lifted the moaning victim and took him to an ambulance. As they pushed him through the crowd, I saw my brother on the stretcher, the wounds on the drunk's face echoing Albert's autopsy photos.

Uniformed officers closed in on the bouncer. 'Bring this idiot to the watch house,' Lovestone ordered. 'Leave his hands as they are.'

Bloody as this was, none of it would make it to print. It would be too routine for Holt, my editor, who wanted me to 'get some real marrow for the afternoon edition', and this was just weeknight typical. He would say, 'Deal in facts. Only facts. Use short sentences. Direct language shorn of sentiment. Anything else is literature. And that has no place in a newspaper.'

Lovestone's bulk weighed down the suspension of the black

Ford as he lowered himself inside. ‘Boozy bullshit I can handle,’ he said, settling in the seat. ‘When I started it was blokes doing the six o’clock swill on a Friday and hitting their wives. Now it’s ten o’clock drugs on a Thursday.’

Some coppers go quiet when a vulture like me observes them. Not Lovestone – he enjoyed playing the part. ‘The bouncers stomped on that bloke’s head when he was down. He’ll be lucky to spell his name.’

The image of the drunk’s bloodied face came again, holding the humour of my brother’s eyes. He’d been dead for two years. Still I saw him walking down the street, sitting down next to me in a pub, reflected in the gore my profession sometimes elevated to the front page. Lovestone lowered his sunshield and looked at me in the mirror.

‘You okay, son?’

I swallowed hard and held my hands to stop them shaking. ‘Just tired.’

Lovestone snorted and nudged his partner awake – Sergeant Wilson, whom I suspected had had a few drinks before, and during, the shift. ‘Come on, mate, our ace reporter here needs some more action.’

Wilson dropped the column shift into drive and the plain-panelled Ford rumbled through Northbridge, both detectives wearing dark leather jackets to conceal their pistols and badges. Traffic lights glowed horror-movie red and a few wide-eyed lads pointed at the car, shout-singing a version of ‘Camptown Races’ – ‘What’s the colour of a two-cent piece? Copper, copper.’ – pleased to have made out a plainclothes ride. Lovestone wound down his window and gave them the finger as the lights changed green.

‘I’ll have to move away when I retire,’ he said as the Ford crossed the Horseshoe Bridge into the city proper. ‘This is no place for nostalgia.’

Up St Georges Terrace the workday streets were deserted, the only movement from office buildings where cleaners were

pulling the night shift. Scaffolds and cranes and skip bins stood guard at a dozen worksites where towers of glass and steel were going up, replacing squat limestone classics designated unfit for heritage. A few remained: Newspaper House, the Treasury, and the old guardhouse of the pensioner barracks. Wilson gunned the engine and threaded the Ford up the hill, past the dark embrace of Kings Park, leading us to Subiaco where the car radio was broadcasting another bashing, this time a melee near the football oval. Plenty of marrow, but nothing for the afternoon edition.

Their shift ended at midnight, and when we got back in the Ford to head for HQ, Wilson drove us along Mounts Bay Road, threading its riverside curves twenty k's above the speed limit. We stopped under the lee of the CBD's buildings where there was a clean, fluorescent place serving hot drinks and hot dogs. Lovestone ordered three of them, coffee for Wilson and me and a tea for himself, everything served in polystyrene that squeaked as we ate.

'What I wouldn't give for a murder,' Lovestone said, and tapped the notepad I'd placed on our table. 'That's off the record.'

'No such thing,' I said, remembering one of Holt's dictums: 'Your taxes pay their wages. Everything's fair game.'

Lovestone frowned, concentrated on his hot dog, and devoured it in three efficient bites. Like me, he had the appetite of a man who worked through his lunchbreaks. He belched into his hand and said, 'How did you get the police round, son?' Light tone, listening eyes, while Wilson glowered at me over his coffee. Good cop, bad cop, never off the clock.

'Been with the paper a few years. Had an interest -'

'Yeah, that's not good enough. Where you from?'

How easy it would be to be able to say Joondalup. Warwick. Greenwood. Some bland Perth suburb up the freeway they could roll their eyes at and tell a drug story from. 'Wheatbelt,' I said, keeping it vague. 'Up the Mid West.'

'Wheat and sheep?' Lovestone said, stirring sugar into his tea.

I nodded. ‘Tough line of work that.’ I nodded again. ‘You going back for harvest? Got cousins in Bruce Rock. Time of year for it.’

I should have been able to say ‘when I can’, but Lovestone’s eyes waited in ambush for lies, to pull the whole story from me. Before I could answer, Wilson cleared his throat, lit a cigarette and said, ‘Grew up on a farm meself. Couldn’t get out of there fast enough.’ He stared right at me, as if seeking recognition. Silence at the table grew. He broke it by looking past me, out the reflecting windows to the Swan River where navigation lights burned their night-time warnings.

‘Don’t let him fool you,’ Lovestone said. ‘It was a hobby farm. His father was police commissioner.’

‘Fuck off,’ Wilson said, and stood to leave, exhaling a cloud of impatience at Lovestone’s reclined pose. ‘Your turn to pay.’

Lovestone grinned at me. ‘They give you expenses?’

I reached for my wallet. ‘I haven’t got a story yet.’

Wilson muttered, walked out to the Ford. Lovestone knocked back the dregs of his tea and rapped the mug on the table, inhaling slowly, gathering a lesson for the initiate. ‘Can never please you journos. When it’s too bloody, you look away. When it’s not bloody enough, you complain.’ He leaned in, holding his stare. ‘You’re the one who picked a weeknight. And you didn’t answer my question. You going back for harvest?’

‘No,’ I said, unable to bullshit. ‘I’m too busy.’

‘Shit excuse,’ Lovestone said, and signalled the girl at the till to ring up the bill. ‘You’re alright, mate. Come out with us again next week. We might have better luck.’

The detectives were good enough to drop me at my flat in Scarborough. Lovestone whistled at the coastal digs, said, ‘Not bad for a hack,’ shook my hand hard, and then flicked a cigarette butt as the Ford guzzled away down the road.

Two floors up, my place opened empty and sparse, cluttered with packing boxes and drifts of books with cracked spines. I took a beer from the fridge and stared at a photo stuck by a

magnet between a power bill and a real estate calendar marked with X's till the blank October 31st. There was Mum and Dad in the middle, Albert at the old man's right hand, me at her left, smiling in the home paddock. A dull ache sat like tetanus in my neck. So I took a swig from the bottle and slumped onto the couch where I reclined in another memory – my brother's funeral, the last time I'd been home.

Right in the middle of the wake at the pub, a lightning storm blinked mutely on the horizon, sending rolls of thunder through the corrugated roof to cut the power: a quick thrill, a magic trick, electricity cutting electricity. Everyone drank in the dark till Dad tapped me on the shoulder and led me out under the cloud-steeped sky to where his ute was parked.

'Back her in,' he ordered, his hands and voice shaking. 'You remember how to do this?'

I cranked the door and slammed myself inside the old Toyota: a cracked windshield, a tape deck stuck on 6PR talk and sinus-bending dust on every surface. The engine turned over and breathed through a smear of insects covering the radiator grill. Steering reverse, left became right, and the big metal tray swung over to Dad's waving arms, back and back and back till he held up a slow surrender.

'Go get a lead from the kitchen,' he rasped, and hauled himself up onto the tray where a generator was bolted to the floor.

Running to the back room, I found the old publican working by candlelight, scraping ice from the sides of the deep freeze. 'Garnish for cocktails,' he said, face cut with shadows. 'And the beer if it comes to it.'

'Dad's got a better idea,' I told him, and we rummaged around for an extension line in the odds and sods next to the sink. He found a greasy orange coil and plugged it into a wall socket. I hurried back outside, the long line unravelling from my hand as the generator yawned and teased and protested.

'Start, you bastard,' Dad said as he gave it a kick. The machine coughed, turned over, and roared into rumbling life.

'All set,' I said to Dad and passed up the female end of the line. He plugged the generator's power pack and the pub's lights fired up again – cold sweat back to the beer taps.

'Good to see city hands work,' Dad said, patting me on the back as we walked around to the veranda, his careful cadence measured with the plosive tick of the generator. When we came through the door, the crowd inside cheered.

Mum stood alone at the bar, staring at me with hard eyes as if to say 'should have been you'.

2

The phone chimed and I woke in my work clothes on the couch. The digital clock on the oven glowed five am. A month before summer, just before sunrise, faithful to the timetable. I picked up the receiver, and after some chalky pleasantries, Mum's voice carried clear.

'Harvest,' she said, and got straight to it. 'Can you come?'

I breathed slowly, tiredly, buying time. Imagined her in the kitchen at the homestead, watching the sun over the paddocks. Maybe she had a coffee on the go, one for Dad as well, the old man slipping his workboots on at the veranda where the dogs were worshipping at his side.

'There's a lot on,' I said. Mum cleared her throat, held her silence, making me wait for a response. Something was up. Usually she let me off the hook easy after I refused, saying they'd handle it without me before changing the subject to the weather, the price of grain, who was cheating on who in town. The call was a courtesy, prodding the ashes of my farming connection.

'I'm selling,' she said, and I sat up straight, groggily awake, sharpening to her words. 'Your father's in no shape to lead this one.'

'Dad wants to sell?'

Mum fired back quick. 'He can't make that decision anymore.'

Perhaps we were all pretending the day would never come when Dad couldn't keep going. Time was up the moment the power cut out at Albert's wake. On the land the earth spins steady, the moon rises, and all crops grow: wheat, sheep, dementia.

‘You said he’s getting treatment.’

‘Not enough for him to carry on out here.’

‘How long does he have?’

She exhaled slowly. ‘I’ve got a deal that will get him the care he needs.’

Mum had a workforce for the fields. Contracts for shipments. Buyers lined up for the grain. Why did I need to come? If she was serious about selling, then movers could pack the house. She already took care of Dad and refused all help.

‘Rowan, will you come?’

The sea breathed through the living room curtains. Rising light was bringing the promise of another hot day; hotter inland where desert winds trapped eddies of heat over the paddocks of wheat ready for threshing.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ I said, and Mum breathed relief. A smash like a cymbal rang through the phone. She was forever dropping plates and cracking glasses. At least that would be one less item to pack from the generations of crockery her kitchen cupboards held.

‘We’ll get it done quickly,’ she said, and rang off.

I left the phone off the hook.

Awake far too early. There was no coffee in the cupboard and nothing on the TV. So with nothing else to do till I was due at work, I walked from my flat down the hill to the ocean where choppy waves surged through the shallows. The muffled tang of salt was in the air and early commuters revving along the coastal highway. I wished I could sink my hands into officework instead of thinking of all the calluses a harvest would inflict.

I bought an espresso and the new day’s edition from a café and rifled through the pages, looking for my by-line, scanning for stories I’d missed or been elbowed away from. The beach held a few early-morning walkers, keen joggers and beachcombers searching along the tideline. Out at sea a few container ships rode at anchor in Gage Roads, while the shimmering mirage

of Rottnest Island refracted under high clouds. Views for a postcard. But my mind twisted north, driving up the long roads past the Swan Valley junction to the saltbush country of Jurien Bay and then the ghostly stretches of trees made hunchbacks by the trade winds. Up to the wheat-growing country where the farm waited with what used to be my Dad, a light bulb without a spark.

I went down to the shallows and shucked off my thongs at the water's edge, then my shirt and shorts till I was wading in my jocks to where the waves broke in goutts of white flame. Diving beneath the turbulence, I groped through green darkness and emerged where the swell gathered in wide ridges. I floated on my back, feeling the hot sky above and the cold depths below.

Without a story from the field to tell to the new day's editorial meeting, I pitched a feature on the just-appointed police commissioner and his love of Rugby Union – a game that was mostly alien to Western Australia. I thought it could illustrate his outsider status as a splice from New South Wales. Holt chuckled and said to dig up any charges the commissioner may have had for rough police work so we could say 'Scrum Bag' in the headline.

I wasn't able to stand it up. And when the instant sunset of the five pm deadline was half an hour away, Holt strafed my desk with haughty commands. 'Brockman. Office. Now.'

Waving through the smoke of the cigarette he'd just flicked onto the carpet, I followed past the subs desk and the beat reporters to the only office with a door, which he slammed shut. The bashing of typing keys and panicked chatter was muted.

'Sit,' he said, and I took a battered chair while he perched on the edge of his desk, a bare metal slab more like a factory workbench; he had it hoisted into the building through a window when he was made editor. The joke was that he played chess with the lives of his reporters on its drumming surface, shifting us around with the knowing randomness of a despot.

‘No yarn on our top cop then?’ He lit up a cigarette, offered me one, which I refused. He puffed thoughtfully, looking down his nose at me from his hip-high altar. ‘You didn’t hustle hard enough.’

I answered the only ways he accepted – quickly and frankly. ‘Just couldn’t stand it up. He’s a good man.’

‘No such thing. He’s just never been caught.’ Holt smiled. ‘Or he’s never made a decent enemy. Which means he’s boring and unimaginative.’ He punctuated the air with the tip of his cigarette. ‘Breaks no rules. Loves the limitations. Works within the law. That’s because he loves Rugby Union. If he was a League man I’d be interested. Fast, flowing, improvising. And over quickly so you can go to church, play a match and then get to the pub on a Sunday. It’s the workers’ game.’ He ran a hand through the last of his hair, pleased with the homily. ‘Your man’s a cake eater. What we’d call a clubbable man. And this city needs a different kind of man.’ He stubbed the cigarette out in a standing ashtray. ‘Write the hit piece anyway.’

Full stop. Capital letter. Get out.

Perhaps I took a second too long. Or maybe it was because I refused the cigarette – unusual for a man facing what could have been a firing squad. Nothing got past Holt.

‘Distraction kills intention,’ he said. ‘You’ve something else pressing to attend to.’

‘I don’t want to bother you with it,’ I said, and his response was to spread his hands wide, as if to say ‘I’m all ears’.

Harvest. Dad sick. Mum selling. Bare facts arranged in the house style.

‘How long has the farm been in your family?’ he said, lighting another cigarette, offering me one again, which I took.

‘Three generations. Story goes that the land was staked out by John Septimus Roe. He was the explorer –’

Holt held up a hand. ‘You’re no farmer then? Not keen to inherit a money-making machine?’

‘No. I’m a journalist.’

He bellowed. 'To succeed as a newspaperman you need a grasp of language, vague work ethic and rat-like cunning. In fact, you can dispense with the others and keep the cunning. Do you want to go?'

'No. But it's my duty.'

'Said like a first-born son.'

I shook my head. 'I'm the second.'

He looked me up and down, as if reading me all at once. 'What happened to your brother?'

'He's dead,' I said, and looked to the door.

Holt didn't press the issue, just said, 'When my mother died I took the morning off for the funeral then came back to work.' He sucked hard on the cigarette, stubbed it out on the ashtray neatly next to his last one. 'You're only as good as your last story. You don't want to miss out on anything here.'

So that was a no. Before I could get up to leave, Holt clapped his hands together and drummed them on the desk. 'Write me something while you're there. Keep your hand in back here and knock out some prose for the weekend editions. How long will you need away?'

In my mind I ran through the key events of a harvest routine: Prep. Strip. Terminus. 'Three weeks,' was the final tally.

'Take it as annual leave,' Holt said, standing to usher me out. 'Go tomorrow and write what you will. Remember that our soft-handed city readers love tales of the hard bush.'

I opened the door and let the newsroom's chaos back into his office. As I stepped out, he threw a dagger. 'Empty-handed from a ride-along with the cops. No dirt on the commissioner. That could be two strikes. Leave a telephone number we can reach you at. I want real marrow, whenever that will be.'