

CRIME FICTION BY  
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... AND MORE

# WHITE KNUCKLE RIDE



FREMANTLE PRESS

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# ALAN CARTER

## FISHY BUSINESS

**Wednesday, October 8th, 2008. Late morning.**

**Katanning, Western Australia.**

The way the body was lying, it was obvious she hadn't seen it coming. The limbs were splayed at a grotesque angle. A pool of blood beside the head had dried in the sun before it could make it the few centimetres to the side of the road. Blowflies hovered impatiently. The October sun was high and unseasonably nasty. Anybody with any sense was sitting under the shade of the only tree for miles. Or they were somewhere else.

The sergeant was crouched beside the rapidly ripening corpse, talking into a small digital recorder. Cato Kwong squinted at the sergeant and took a swig of lukewarm water from a bottle that felt like it was melting in his hands. On his iPod, *La Bohème* was reaching a screeching crescendo. He turned it off and removed the earphones. He checked his watch. Time seemed to move so slowly these days. The sergeant's name was Jim Buckley: he chattered to himself, loving every minute, every detail of the task at hand. For a big bloke his movements were graceful. Pavarotti in a butcher's apron.

'Bullet number one entered just behind the left ear and exited through the right cheek; bullet number two entered the left eye. No apparent signs of an exit wound so we presume bullet

number two is still lodged inside. I now intend to conduct an on-the-spot autopsy to confirm. Recording suspended at ... 10.22 a.m. Detective Sergeant James Buckley?

Buckley reached over and opened his toolbox. He pulled out a handsaw.

That's one big difference between Homicide Squad and Stock Squad, Cato mused, you don't have to wait for the autopsy, just do it yourself. He was still getting used to the idea: Detective Senior Constable Philip Kwong—Stock Squad. Homicide Squad, Major Crime, even Gangs, they had a ring to them that made you puff out your chest and stand a bit taller. Stock Squad? They were there to deal with cattle duffers, sheep theft, stolen tractors. They were touted as industry experts, they knew the farmers, knew the lingo. In Cato's view they were washed-up has-beens recycled as detectives. Mutton dressed as lamb? The Laughing Stock Squad. So if you come across a suspicious cow will you take it back to the station and grill it? Or leave it to stew?

So far Cato felt like little more than a glorified agricultural inspector. Stock Squad. It kind of escaped from the corner of your mouth like a coward's curse. Coward's curse pretty well summed up his situation. He was here because he'd been hung out to dry by a bunch of cowards he'd once worshipped and he couldn't do anything about it because of the Code, the Brotherhood, the whatever other bullshit name that might conceal a multitude of sins.

The Stock Squad was on tour: hearts and minds. The other two members of the squad taking the high road to the north, Cato Kwong and Jim Buckley on the low road south. A week of 'intelligence gathering' was how Buckley saw it: pressing the flesh, nosing around, random checks and a healthy per-diem budget—it would keep them in piss until they got back to Perth. A week of chewing straw, swatting flies and nodding sagely at stuff he didn't give a rat's arse about was how Cato saw it.

Cato Kwong: Stock Squad. Cato, like Peter Sellers' Chinese butler and martial arts sparring partner in *The Pink Panther*. A nickname inflicted on him at police academy. Cato hadn't seen any of the movies so he'd rented the videos to see what they were getting at. Cato, the manic manservant? Cato, the loyal punch-bag? Or just simply Cato the Chinaman?

The beginning of day three and Cato felt like he'd been on the road for a month.

'Oi, Kwongie, you gonna give us a hand, mate?'

Jim Buckley was already red-faced with effort as he saw bit into the back of the cow's neck. Blood spurting, blowflies going berko, he was in hog heaven. Cato winced primly; he preferred his meat plastic-wrapped and barcoded.

'Jim. Sir. Sarge ...'

Cato still didn't know how to address Jim Buckley. It wasn't that he didn't have any respect for authority, it was just that he was still working on it in Jim Buckley's case.

'Look, do we really need to do all this stuff? It's pretty obvious. The cow was run over, finished off with a couple of bullets to the head. The back leg was chopped off with a chainsaw and taken home to the barbie. End of story.'

Cato took another swig of the mountain spring water. He didn't function well in excessive heat. Maybe he should join the Canadian Mounties, or the Tasmanian ones, somewhere nice and cool.

Jim Buckley frowned, a tad disappointed with the younger man's attitude. 'It's still a crime, Cato mate. And it's our job to find the bad guys.'

Cato knew he was banging his head against the proverbial. Buckley, after twenty-five years in the force, had finally found his niche. Stock Squad was Jim's domain and he was in no mood for negativity. He mopped a sodden brow with a wipe of his shirtsleeve and passed the blood-soaked implement to Cato.

‘So, as your senior officer, I’d advise you to shut the fuck up and start sawing.’

**Four hours earlier. Hopetoun, Western Australia.**

Her lungs were bursting and her left hip was agony: two kilometres from home and four behind her. For the last twenty minutes she’d been feeling a bit old, worn out. Too many twinges these days and getting harder to keep them at bay. But then she rounded the corner, hit the top of the sand dune and there was the ocean. Beautiful, she thought, gorgeous. A slight breeze rippled the surface and the sun was just coming up, dispelling the shadows on the hills in the national park over to the west. The huge open sky was striped orange, pink, purple, and blue.

And would you believe it, dolphins, two of them, splashing in the shallows near the groyne. She semi-sprinted the last two hundred metres along the sand where it was packed hard at the water’s edge, never taking her eyes off the dolphins. As she drew nearer something changed. The way those dolphins were moving, the shape of the fins, the frolicking and splashing; no, it wasn’t splashing—it was more like thrashing. Sharks. And there was something in the water with them, something brown, floppy, lifeless. A seal maybe, from the colony on the rock a few hundred metres out from the groyne. She quickened her step. This would be something a bit special to share with her primary class in news today.

One of the sharks seemed to be shaking the seal in its jaws, like a puppy with an old sock. Finally it let go and the seal flew a few feet through the air, landing with a soft plop at the water’s edge. From five metres away she could see they’d ripped the poor little bugger to shreds; just one flipper remained and the thing didn’t seem to have a head. She was right on top of the carcass now. She stopped, caught her breath, shivered. It wasn’t a seal; it was a human torso. It wasn’t a flipper; it was an arm—a left arm, no

hand. She'd been right about the head though—there wasn't one.

She bowed forward, hands on knees, and threw up. Behind her she could hear the sharks still splashing in the shallows like a couple of dolphins, playfully taking the piss.

Hot flush. Senior Sergeant Tess Maguire put down her coffee, opened her jacket and cracked a car window. The smell of rotting roadkill nearby forced her to shut it again, quickly. Tess swore and flicked on the air conditioning. Six-twenty on a sharp, spring south-coast morning and she was sweating like a pig. Suddenly cold again, she flicked the air conditioner back off. She felt completely out of sorts. How could she be getting hot flushes when she'd only just turned forty-two? Tess looked at herself in the rear-view. The short-cropped blonde hair was losing its fight against the wispy greys. She kept on threatening to let it grow out to all-over grey. It was natural. What's so bad about grey anyway? She tried to think of some attractive, well-known, grey-haired women. She couldn't get beyond Germaine Greer. Tess added hair dye to her mental shopping list and turned the radio on.

The interviewer sounded young enough to be her daughter. She'd countried her voice up a bit, talking with an authoritative twang to a primary commodities broker about the grain and wool prices. Apparently one was up and the other was down, in contrast to the stock market in general which was still in freefall. Tess couldn't get her head around how a handful of venal mortgage-brokers in America could trigger what seemed to be a global financial tsunami and the end of the world as we know it. Never mind, it was unlikely to hit them here in Hopetoun—the end of the world and proud of it. This was Tess's first posting since she came off sick leave. Nine months. Most of the first month in hospital and outpatients, the next three in physio, the rest in therapy. She wondered how Melissa would go: new to town, year nine in high school, sharing a classroom with a bunch

of teenage hard-cases whose dads had come down to work at the new mine. She'd seen them hanging around the park—the kids, not the dads. Testosterone. The pushing and shoving, swearing and shouting: youthful high spirits, some called it. Only these days it sent her into cold sweats and panic attacks, fighting for breath, tears welling up. Even now, just at the thought of them.

A new life, a new start, new hope in Hopetoun, they'd promised her. The place hadn't warranted a permanent police post in the past. For decades it had been a laid-back holiday or retirement spot for wheatbelt farmers. There was nothing to police except maybe the occasional drunk driver or domestic. Now, with the nearby nickel mine, the population had steadily grown from a stable four hundred in the old days to a whopping two thousand—and rising. It would still be a while before it was Gotham City, but with more houses, plenty of money being tossed around and the pub getting busier it meant more bad behaviour, temptation, vandalism, domestics and drugs. Hopetoun was a good place to put ageing or wounded or useless cops out to pasture. Tess ticked all three boxes. At first she'd turned it down. Senior Sergeant Tess Maguire—the bump up to 'Senior' was a reward for getting the shit kicked out of her—wanted to tough it out. But after a few weeks at a desk in Perth HQ with the concerned but embarrassed stares, the traffic, the noise and the crowds, Tess was sold on the sea change. Hopetoun. No crime to speak of, she reasoned, no stress, just sunshine and sea breezes to clear out the cobwebs.

As the sky brightened, Tess passed a convoy of white utes heading in the opposite direction out to the mine, forty kilometres away. On the outskirts of town she climbed the low hill to the roundabout leading off to the light industrial on one side and the new sprawling off-the-peg Legoland housing estate on the other. Cresting the rise she relaxed a notch or two at the view down the main street to the bright blue Southern Ocean at

the bottom of the hill. After three months she still hadn't got over how small, quiet and, yes, beautiful the place was. And she hoped she never would.

Tess pulled into the beachside gravel car park. Her colleague, Constable Greg Fisher, was on the beach talking to a middle-aged woman dressed in running gear, while the town GP crouched examining something on the sand; it was hidden from view by a makeshift canvas windbreak. Greg's initiative: he was in his first year out of police academy and eager to impress. Tess had long forgotten that feeling. A pair of pied oystercatchers pecked the sand irritably with scarlet stiletto beaks. A small handful of early-rising onlookers strained to get a glimpse of the body, careful not to overstep the invisible line established by Constable Fisher.

As she got closer, Tess recognised the woman as a teacher from the primary school: she'd seen her around, hard not to in a town this small. The teacher was a bit green around the gills; her eyes were puffy, her lower lip trembled as she talked, Greg taking notes. Tess left them to it and walked, white sand squeaking beneath her feet, over to the doctor and the body. The torso glistened in the morning sun; green tendrils of seaweed sparkled on the mottled, lightly tanned flesh. There was no head, no legs, only part of one arm and a pale grey mush where the missing pieces should have been.

The doctor stood up, broad-shouldered, early fifties. Tess had met him once before, a few weeks back when she dropped in a young miner who'd been on a bender and tried to punch out the pub ATM when it argued with him about his PIN number.

'What's the word, Doctor Terhorst?'

'Well he's dead, that's for sure.' His lip curled slightly at his little joke, then he continued in his clipped Afrikaans accent. 'But at this stage I can't accurately say what age bracket or even, for sure, what race. From the torso length I'd estimate medium height, medium build. Don't ask me for a time of death, with

something that's been in the water it's too hard without the proper tests. Ball park? Less than a week.'

'Shark attack?' Hopetoun. Southern Ocean. Not an unreasonable question.

'Well I've seen a few of these back in Cape Town and the injuries are consistent with sharks.'

Tess pointed to the mush at the base of the spine where the legs were meant to start. 'Looks like they bit clean through him.'

The doctor nodded grimly then scratched his chin. 'Possibly. I'd be more worried about the sever wound at the neck.'

'Why?'

'It's very neat compared to the punctures and tears everywhere else. The spinal column looks like it's been sheared with a clean straight edge. Either our shark had meticulous table manners ... or somebody cut this poor man's head off.'

Sergeant Jim Buckley was heaving, puffing and fit to have a coronary. His normally flushed drinker's face was nearly purple and his ginger-grey sideburns glistened with sweat. The cow's head was now separated from the body after a joint effort by himself, Cato and three hacksaw blades. Its neck was flat to the ground and the eyes were staring skywards to cow heaven. Buckley had a foot planted firmly on either side of the head, pinning the ears to the ground. With his left hand pushing down hard on the nose for extra leverage, he gave one last mighty tug with the right. His hand emerged triumphant from the cow's face, pliers gripping a small blood-soaked lump of metal.

'A .22, just as I thought.'

Cato finished pissing against a ghost gum and zipped back up. He had retired to the shade and was halfway through today's cryptic from the *West*. He'd managed to snaffle it from the neighbouring breakfast table at the Katanning Motel. It had been a close shave though, the guy had only gone to the toilet and

when he came back for his paper Cato had to plead ignorance and suggest that the breakfast lady had cleared it away. Buckley had shaken his head in disgust.

‘Why don’t you ever buy your own, they’re only a dollar, you tight-arsed bastard.’

‘Dollar thirty. All I need is the crossword, I don’t need to read all the other crap.’

His father had taught him how to crack the cryptic codes a couple of years ago and now he was hooked. There was something about the search for clear reasoning among the insane ramblings, and identifying the cold calculation behind the crafty wordplay. It came in useful in the interview room sometimes. Dad meanwhile had moved on to Sudoku to enrich his widowed dotage; he’d knock them off in ten minutes if his hands weren’t shaking too much. He’d tried to get Cato onto it, reckoned the process of patient, logical elimination would be good for training his detective brain. Cato was sticking with the cryptics; intuition, flights of fancy, twisted logic and inspiration backed up later by the facts—that was more his style.

*Merit Cup for perfect roast.*

Cup, roast, something to do with coffee? The heat was curdling his brain. Cato stretched out his long legs and smiled encouragingly.

‘Good work, Sarge. Any idea whose gun it came from?’

Jim Buckley’s good mood had withered in the heat.

‘Get fucked. Bag this evidence while I clean up.’

‘What, the head as well?’

‘In the esky; sooner it’s on ice the better.’

‘No worries,’ Cato sighed. He wondered if he should resign now or after next payday. That was the intention after all: disgraced, demoted, demeaned, despised—until he had taken enough and went of his own accord. They wouldn’t sack him; he knew too much. But they certainly had their ways.

Cato grabbed a Ziploc bag out of the Land Cruiser glove box, hauled the esky off the back seat, and kick-closed the car door, planting his heel dead centre of the bull's-head logo. He popped the bullet in the bag and crammed the head into the esky. A mobile buzzed in his trousers. It took Cato by surprise; he hadn't expected a signal out here.

'That you, Cato?'

'Detective Senior Constable Kwong speaking, who's this?'

'Hutchens.'

DI Mick Hutchens, his old boss from Fremantle Detectives. Now with Albany Detectives, enjoying a south-coast sea change in Bogan Town. He'd fared better in the fallout than Cato had.

'What can I do for you, sir?'

'Cut the crap, it's me, Mick. Where are you?'

Cato looked around at the parched, blistered landscape.

'Somewhere near Katanning.'

Hutchens chuckled. 'Enjoying life with the Sheep-Shagging Squad then?'

'Not sure the Commissioner would appreciate your cynical tone, sir.'

'Right. That fuckwit Buckley with you?'

'Want a word with him?'

'No. Listen up. Got some real work for you. A body, well, half a one anyway. Human though; would make a nice change for you.'

Cato's pulse quickened like it hadn't done for a long time.

'Where is it?'

'Down in Hopetoun; maybe three hours drive for you.'

Cato racked his brain—Hopetoun, south coast, fishing spot? Other than that, the place meant nothing to him.

'Why aren't your mob onto it? I'm supposed to be banished to Siberia, remember?'

A momentary uncomfortable silence, then Hutchens cleared his throat.

‘Three are on suspension, two on sick leave, two on holiday. I’m scraping the bottom of the barrel. Thought of you immediately.’

‘Cheers.’

The faintest whining hint of desperation crept into Hutchens’ voice. ‘Cato mate, I need you. For the next few days anyway.’

Cato couldn’t shake the thought that there was more to this than met the eye. Was Hutchens really scraping the very bottom of the barrel before he thought of his old mate Cato? The sun scorched the back of his neck, flies worried his face, and the headless three-legged cow was starting to smell really bad. The road out of Katanning shimmered in the heat haze. Who was Cato Kwong to look a gift horse in the mouth?

‘Tell me more.’

‘Washed up this morning. Looks like a shark attack but the local doctor reckons our bloke might have been dead before he hit the water. He’s a country quack so probably talking through his arse.’ Same old Mick Hutchens, thought Cato, Zen master of the sweeping generalisation. ‘I need you to take a look, confirm or deny. No hassle, no fuss. Fill out the paperwork and file it, Cato. Home by Friday.’

Cato had lost track of time—then he remembered, today was Wednesday. If it really was that simple and clean-cut he’d still be home in time for the weekend. It was his turn to have Jake. They could have a family weekend together, just the two of them. Yeah right.

‘Who’s the officer-in-charge down there?’

‘Senior Sergeant Tess Maguire ...’ Hutchens paused, no doubt for effect. Cato didn’t miss a beat, didn’t give Hutchens the reaction he wanted.

‘Taser Tess?’

‘The very same.’

After her ordeal at the hands of the mob up north, the Commissioner had made taser stun guns standard issue for all officers

in the optimistic belief that the outcome might have been different had she been 'suitably equipped' with a fifty-thousand-volt zapper. Cato had his doubts about their effectiveness in that kind of situation, particularly if they fell into the wrong hands. Scepticism aside, it had made Tess something of a folk hero among her colleagues right around the state. She had been more than that to him, once.

'I thought she'd left the job.'

'Sent to Hopetoun. Same thing. Look, take Buckley with you to make up the numbers but mate ... keep him away from those sheep.'

Hutchens signed off with a 'baaaaaah'. Cato sighed and snapped his phone shut. Then it came to him, *Merit Cup for perfect roast*.

*Merit Cup*: an anagram, 'Prime Cut'. It was enough to turn a good man vegetarian.

Jim Buckley was hunched over by the wing mirror, mouth pursed, using a Kleenex baby wipe to try to get the bloodstains off his Stock Squad shirt. Cato coughed politely for attention.

'Sarge. Something just came up.'

They should have been in Hopetoun by early afternoon but Jim Buckley had insisted on backtracking to put the cow's head into storage in the freezer at the Katanning cop shop. The local boys weren't happy. They'd have to find somewhere else to store the snags and steaks meant for this Friday's sundowner barbie.

'Use some initiative,' Buckley had snapped at them, rather ungratefully.

Then they'd stopped along the way for a late lunch: two meat pies, a Mars Bar and a Coke for Buckley; for Cato just the one pie, a floury bruised apple and an orange juice, having caught sight of himself in a window and seen what just half

a week on the road can do. Then there were the four smokos and two piss stops. Then they'd pulled up a couple of speeders and issued tickets, Buckley getting his stats up, Cato getting his blood pressure up. He was impatient to get to the body. He wondered if Buckley ever felt the thrill of stuff like this—a possible case, a mystery: was the body dead before it went into the water? That kind of thing. Probably not. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror—flecks of grey at the temples but, at two months short of thirty-eight, he was in as good a shape as he had been for years. The banishment to Stock Squad left him with extra time on his hands and he used some of it to get fitter. Swimming, cycling, and avoiding the kind of junk he'd eaten when he was doing normal cop hours—whatever they were.

Recently Cato didn't seem to be able to get enough sleep. There was a time when he buzzed along on four or five hours. Nowadays he usually got the full eight, often more, but still sometimes woke up exhausted and lethargic. Today? Today he saw a flicker of energy in his eyes that he hadn't seen for a long time.

It was midafternoon by the time they crested the rise that would drop them down into Hopetoun. The suffocating heat of the interior had eased as they neared the coast. The hot easterly had become a fresh south-westerly and Cato was beginning to feel halfway human again. As they rolled down the Hopetoun main drag—Veal Street it was called—Cato reflected they were having a big meat-themed day. Cows' heads, gift horses, barbies, pies, even the crossword solution. And now Veal Street; that's life in the Stock Squad.

Two telephone boxes stood outside a cafe where a handful of people drank coffee on a pine deck. In one of the booths was a man with his back to them, wearing dusty blue and fluoro-yellow work overalls and holding one hand over his free ear

trying to block out the wind noise. He turned to face them and Cato saw that he was Chinese. Their eyes met for a moment as Cato rolled past.

‘More than just the one of you in town then,’ Buckley observed.

Cato continued looking at the man through his rear-vision mirror.

‘Well spotted. That must be why you’re the sergeant and I’m a mere constable.’

‘Senior constable: don’t put yourself down, mate,’ Buckley corrected him.

Cato had phoned ahead and got through to Hopetoun second-in-command, Constable Greg Fisher. Greg told him to meet them at the Sea Rescue hut beside the skate park. He had forewarned them: the hut was the cop shop until the new whiz-bang multipurpose emergency services building was finished. It might take a while, he’d said, ‘chronic labour shortage’. From what Cato could see—a big pile of sand inside a temporary wire fence—there was little evidence the new cop shop had even been started. He pulled up onto the rust-coloured gravel. The Sea Rescue hut was a faded and peeling olive-green and about the size of a shipping container—but not quite as pleasing to the eye. The door was open so Cato walked in. Greg Fisher was sitting at a desk talking on the phone. He looked up and acknowledged the visitors with a wink. Senior Sergeant Tess Maguire stood by a recently cleaned whiteboard, the smell of cleaning fluid hung in the air. She had a red marker pen in her left hand and Cato noticed her bare ring finger. In the centre of the whiteboard she’d given the body a name, ‘Flipper’, and drawn a question mark beside it. Over to the right-hand side, a short list of names and telephone numbers.

She turned. At first glance she still looked the same Tess to Cato but, on closer inspection, her eyes seemed darker and sadder. She was using them to measure him up too. Cato sucked

his stomach in a little bit and lifted his head to give his neck more of a chance but Tess seemed to be more focused on the bull's-head logo on his Stock Squad breast pocket. Cato winced inside; he really needed to change back into civvies at the first opportunity.

'Nice uniform; heard you were coming to town.' The light seemed to have gone out of her voice as well. 'How's things?' she inquired idly, like the answer didn't matter.

'Good. Good.' He said it twice as if to reassure himself.

Cato introduced Buckley who was, after all, the senior officer. Tess filled them in on what little she knew: teacher, sharks, torso, doctor, head (lack of).

'Why Flipper?' Cato nodded towards the whiteboard.

Greg Fisher failed to smother a grin. 'The teacher who found him thought it was a seal at first, thought the arm was a flipper.'

'Do you get many people dropping in here?'

Cato could see Tess bristling.

'There'll be a room divider up by tomorrow,' she said. 'No member of the public will see the board.'

Cato wondered how you could divide such a small space any further. Callous nicknames aside, as the days went by there would be plenty of other reasons why the information board would need to be blocked from public view.

'So tell me about the doctor's take on this.'

Jim Buckley clearly thought it was about time he asserted his presence. 'Yeah, has he been watching a bit too much telly, or what?'

Tess summed up what she'd been told, finishing with the news that the body had been carted up to Ravensthorpe, fifty kilometres away, and put into cold storage in the hospital there.

Cato swore. They'd had to come through Ravensthorpe to get to Hopetoun; he could have checked out the body on his way through—if somebody had bothered to let him know. Now

they'd have to waste time backtracking. Greg looked uncomfortable. Cato could see that Tess didn't give a hoot: this was her patch, her rules.

'A pathologist is coming over from Albany; he should be at Ravensthorpe in a few hours. You can meet him there. Anything else you want to do while you're waiting?'

She had addressed the question to Buckley, letting Cato know who was boss. Buckley looked over at Cato. Detective Kwong took his sunnies out of his Stock Squad shirt pocket.

'Let's go to the beach.'

The beach at Hopey didn't offer any major new insights but Cato enjoyed the squeak of the brilliant white grains under his Stock Squad blundies and the sparkling clarity of the water rolling and crashing onto the shore. For him it was as much about getting a feel for the place, the lie of the land and all that. First impressions? Small. The tour of the town had taken about five minutes; there seemed to be about half a dozen streets either side of the main drag. East of Veal Street were mainly older holiday shacks; to the west, the newly built Legoland—as Tess called it—courtesy of the mine. At the south end of Veal Street, the town centre—three shops, a couple of cafes, a park, a pub, the beach, the ocean. At the north end, Veal Street became the Hopetoun–Ravensthorpe Road. Hopetoun was the original one-horse town and, at first glance, a beautiful and peaceful place to die.

Cato had asked Tess and Greg to find out tide and weather conditions for the last few days to see if that would tell them where the body might have entered the water. He also suggested following up any missing person reports from the last few weeks or so. Tess had given him a 'No shit, Sherlock?' look. Obviously, in both instances, she was already on the case. Cato should have expected the hostility from her but it still bothered him.

It was at least twelve or thirteen years ago but it was clearly a sore that had never properly healed. And why should it? Cato was fairly fresh out of the academy and four years her junior. They had been partnered up, working nights out of Midland, Perth's bandit country, in the souped-up unmarked Commodore. Cato Kwong—Prince of the Mean Streets. High-speed chases through the suburbs, domestics, prowlers, break-ins. Routine stuff but still usually more a thrill than not in those days. And the adrenaline had fed the spark between them. It all seemed natural and inevitable and it was good, great at times. All over each other like a rash. Until he walked out on her.

It was nearly dark as they drove into Ravensthorpe. Just a few pale strips of sky lay in the west, sandwiched between the silhouette of distant hills and a blanket of ink-black clouds. Ravy, as it was known locally, was bigger than Hopey, only just. The main street was dark and deserted except around the two-storey red brick Ravensthorpe Hotel where an array of utes and four-wheel drives were angle-parked in anticipation of the Wednesday night pool competition. Some of the utes bore mine company logos. Cato had seen the lights of the mine off in the eastern distance as they passed the airport turn-off halfway between the two towns. You couldn't miss it, a patch of brilliant daylight in the surrounding dim dusk. They'd had to pull into the side of the road while an ambulance, with lights flashing, sped past.

Cato pulled into the hospital car park and killed the radio. According to the eight o'clock news the Australian stock market just had its worst day in twenty years. Jim Buckley snorted and muttered something to the effect of 'Boo-fucking-hoo'. It was deadly quiet, not many lights on. Like many country hospitals, Ravensthorpe was little more than a glorified nursing post, kept open by the skin of its teeth, the marginality of the electorate or, as in this case, the persuasive power of the mining company. The

ambulance, having deposited its patient, was swinging back out onto the road; the driver and Cato exchanged a relaxed hand-flick wave.

Cato and Buckley approached the front entrance expecting the automatic doors to slide open. They didn't. Except for emergencies, the hospital operating hours had recently been cut back to an eight to eight shift. 'Staff Shortages' said the handwritten notice blu-tacked to the door. It was 8.05. Cato rang the bell and they waited. And waited. Cato cupped his hands to the door and peered through the glare for any signs of life or movement inside. Nothing. He swore loudly and pressed the bell a tenth time. Finally an elderly woman in a pink dressing gown floated into view with a cup of something steaming. She almost dropped her mug as she saw Cato's face up against the glass. He pressed his ID against the door mouthing 'POLICE'. It didn't help; in fact she seemed even more determined to hurry back to her bed and hide under the covers.

Jim Buckley stepped forward with a kindly smile, a cheery wave, and a non-Asian face. That seemed to do the trick. The old woman poked a button on the inside and the doors slid open. With a bedside manner that was a complete revelation to Cato, Buckley got directions to the operating theatre at the rear of the hospital as well as learning all he needed to know about her hernia and cataracts.

'Thanks Deirdre, and you take care of yourself now, love.'

'Are you coming back tomorrow, Roger?'

'Yes love, 'course I am.'

Buckley gave her a last little wave and led Cato down the corridor. Cato wondered who was meant to be looking after Deirdre overnight when he spotted a grumpy-looking woman with angry red hair knotted up in a bun. She was coming out of the ladies. She didn't give either of the men a second glance, as

if strangers wandering the hospital corridors at this hour was an everyday occurrence. Instead she thumped through a set of double doors behind which Cato could hear muffled cries and commotion. Dear Diary, remind me to avoid needing an overnight stay in Ravensthorpe General and to never whinge about city hospitals ever again.

The lights were at least on in the operating theatre, a good sign. They pushed open the doors and walked through. A short wiry man paused, scalpel in hand. Behind him an assistant sat on a stool at a steel bench in the corner taking notes with one hand and eating a sandwich with the other. She didn't pause or look up from behind her curtain of black hair. In the other corner stood Tess. She looked at her watch meaningfully and smiled mock-sweetly.

'So you found the place okay.'

Cato's patience was stretched paper-thin. 'Had a bit of trouble getting in.'

The man with the scalpel was obviously keen to get on with it. 'Evening gentlemen, you must be the detectives. I'm the pathologist. Harold Lewis, Harry to you. Forgive me for not shaking hands. Shall we proceed?'

All this addressed in a fey voice to Jim Buckley who nodded. His attention was elsewhere.

'That's Sally,' said Harry waving his scalpel in the general direction.

It was a kind of low-rent *Silent Witness*, silent except for Sally munching on the sandwich and the scratching of her biro on a notepad. The body lay on a shiny steel table. Cato edged closer. His eyes travelled over the skin, the wounds, the stumps and the handless arm. Flipper. It didn't look human any more. But it—correction, he—once was. This shapeless lump of meat had a family somewhere. Cato would try to hold on to that thought. The smell was like an extra presence in the room. Sally seemed

oblivious to it, wiping a wholemeal crumb daintily from the corner of her lips.

Dr Lewis got to work. The subject was a medium-sized male probably in the twenty to forty age-range. No obvious indications of any disease or illness. No scars, tattoos, or distinguishing birthmarks, and no obvious indications of racial origin. 'Going by the general slippage and flesh deterioration I'd estimate he's been in the water for up to a week. Sorry I can't be more precise.'

Harry examined, and Sally listed, the various wounds, mainly teeth-marks and tears. With the sandwich out of the way, Sally hopped off her stool and took some photographs.

Dr Lewis held the pale arm up, quite gently. 'Pity about the missing hand; it might have had a wedding finger, something to help us along. No such luck.'

As far as he could tell, the missing hand, right arm, and legs were probably the work of sharks. Lewis turned his attention to the neck, dragging down the magnifier on its extension arm.

'The neck hasn't been snapped like you might expect from the wrenching movement of a shark's jaw. It has been cut, or more likely sawn, perhaps with a chainsaw? A handsaw would be a lot of effort and leave more jagged markings on the bone. Not exactly my specialty but we'll get it looked at in Perth.'

Cato certainly agreed with the 'handsaw effort' part. Was it only that morning they'd been decapitating a cow in Katanning?

Lewis continued. 'So my observant friend, Dr Terhorst, would appear to be on the ball. Speaking of which, I thought he might have been with us tonight?'

He looked around the room as if Terhorst might have been hiding somewhere.

Tess looked up from writing her own notes. 'He was booked to give a talk at the Hokey Wine Club tonight. He gave his apologies, said he'd call you tomorrow.'

'A wine buff too. A man of many talents, our Dr Terhorst,' Lewis

said, a touch insincerely. He made the 'Y' incision and opened the body up. Tess went pale. Cato made himself keep watching; it wasn't his first time, by any means, but it had been a while. Buckley was concentrating on Sally's calf muscles, oblivious to the carnage on the steel trolley. Lewis lifted the lungs out. Cato could see where the wiry muscularity came from. A few lung lifts every day would keep anyone in good shape.

'The lung contents rule out death by drowning,' Lewis confirmed.

He examined them further, probing with his scalpel, humming softly to himself. Cato tried to place the tune: it might have been a bit of Puccini, or Shirley Bassey. Finally Lewis glanced at Cato.

'I would say your friend was definitely dead before he went into the water.'

Cato and Tess shared a look; it seemed he was going to be around for a while longer. Lewis plucked out and squeezed what appeared to be a blood-soaked semi-deflated balloon into a plastic container. Stomach contents: pretty empty, but there were indications of rice and chicken in there. Blood, skin and tissue samples would be taken for further testing but Cato had seen enough for now. His neck prickled with something approaching excitement.

'Are you saying this is a murder, Dr Lewis?'

'Possibly; that's your job not mine. There could be any number of reasons for what we see here: accident, panic, cover-up, foul play. Anyway ...' he tapped Flipper's neck lightly with his scalpel and looked Cato straight in the eye, 'it's definitely a bit fishy.'

(From *Prime Cut*, a novel, 2011.)

# GOLDIE GOLDBLOOM

## THE ROAD TO KATHERINE

When I was five, my father dropped me off the second floor balcony of our house in Darlington. Now, I don't want you to go thinking this is one of those fake-oh made-up stories where Satan is a guy in a turban who has a thing about chopping off ladies' heads. No mate. This is God's own truth. Bloody straight up. When Satan appears in this story, he looks a hell of a lot like my dad: a bog-standard ocker in a singlet, with his gut hanging out, and no Y-fronts under his shorts.

I've never been sure if my dad dropped me on purpose. If he said, 'You're a hell of a kid, Care,' before or after he let go of my legs. I can't tell if he was a total bastard or just a dad who'd been listening to his little girl do a dummy spit for a couple of hours too long, and I don't suppose I'll ever really know. Either way, dropping me got Mum's attention.

She came blaring out of the house, hurdled the pool and was yanking my arms and legs to see if they hurt before Dad had stopped saying, 'Why'd she do a stupid thing like that?'

'Pull your finger out,' Mum called up to him, 'she's probably broken.'

She may have said this because my two front teeth were jutting through my lower lip in a way that looked unnatural.

'Call the doc,' she yelled, beer-tasting spit spraying my face.

‘Why’d she jump?’ he shouted back, with the concerned look of a Saint Bernard.

‘He dropped you,’ she hissed at me. ‘He dropped you. He dropped you. Whatever he says, remember: he dropped you.’

I used to have these wicked dreams about falling.

In one version, I’d be wearing me dad’s army coat, a scratchy greengreen thing with live bullets rattling round in the pockets, and as I jumped, the coat ballooned out like an umbrella opening—phwoop—and I’d float gently down like Mary Bloody Poppins. In another version, I was a Great White, swimming in a hot blue sea, and I rocked up to take a munch outta this dirty old man with mould growing down his back, only the fella turns into the bit of backyard I buried me head in and I’ve got double gees, the world’s worst pricklers, stuck right between me teeth. But the dream I’d wake up from, ice water in me veins and the echoes of screams still bouncing round the room, was the one where Dad was yelling at me not to be a sook. He had his paws around me ankles and he was shaking me over the railing like a bit of shark bait, wagglng me around so the twin streamers of snot running out me conk don’t end up on his person and he’s saying he’ll educate me not to be afraid of heights, he doesn’t want any kids of his to be bloody pansies, and right then my hand almost touches him but instead grabs the railing, and a great string of me snot splats on his leg and he gets a sick look on his face that I just see out the corner of me eye as I feel his hands opening and myself hitting the edge of the concrete balcony with the side of me head, but I’m not stopping. Oh no. Not stopping there.

You’d think watching your kid take a dive off a balcony at an early age would be the kind of thing that permanently turns a man off his drink, but it was water off a duck’s back with me dad. When he didn’t make it home, Mum took me down to the

pub and sent me in. She herself chatted with the other wifies out on the kerb. If he was blotto, he stood me up on the bar and called for bids. 'This kid's tough as nails. Jumped off the second floor balcony and *bounced*. What'll you give me for her?' he'd say, turning me around and punching my arms. The blokes at the bar reached out and pinched me bum, squeezed me muscles and handed me half-sucked butterscotch lollies covered in fluff from their pockets. 'Slave for a day?' they asked. 'Give youse a quid.' Me dad would snatch me off the bar, complaining, 'Bloody cheapskates. Mob of larrikins. This girl's a flamin' miracle. Not a mark on her. Catholic yahoos in Rome are lookin' into it. Yer can't buy something like that for a quid.' I hated the way me dad turned me around just as he said, 'Not a mark on her,' so that the jagged scar over me lip didn't show and I hated that bar and them stained-glass windows like it was a holy place, a place where you could get your sins forgiven or at least forgotten, the bartender the priest at the altar, mixing the holy spirits, and the chiming of the pint glasses the mystery, the church bells, the transformation, God help us.

I would have settled for a dad who held my hand and skipped on the way home, clicking his heels in mid-air and singing Monty Python tunes in a voice as milky and demanding as a calf's. He did all that, but the words he sang were the names of places he loved, those tin shanties beside rivers of red dirt, giant tingle trees' warm black boles filled with duff and ants and the smell of the sky, hot silver sea boiling over on a beach hidden inside the very land itself: Dumbleyung, Kojonup, Dalwallinu, Cascade, Bungle Bungle, Butty Head, Coal Miners Bay, Thirsty Point, Tittybong, Goomalling, Wave Rock, the Houtman Abrolhos; all stuff to serenade his little girl with on the way home from the pub, unaccompanied by banjo or bagpipes or anything but the snorts of his wife and his own tapping Blunnies. I would have written him off but he was too bloody likeable.

And there came a day when Mum and Dad were having a booze-up with the relatives and they—being more than half-pissed—thought it would be educational to take us kids around Australia. Of course, my dad was big on anything educational although he hadn't learned a whole lot from the last time he thought he'd teach me something. We—the kids who needed educating—were out on the balcony in our underpants and singlets, lolling about under the mosquito nets, sweating and playing Cheat by flashlight. What we thought was educational was turning leeches inside out down by the creek out the back of our place, and lining them up like burnt-out grey matches on the stones that edged the water. Or pinning beetles down over bull ant nests. Cripes, you could learn a lot from the way them buggers fought to stay alive.

But the grownups thought we were stunned mullets, stupid as all get-out, and that it would take a fair bit of educating to make us solid citizens, so, bright and early they loaded up the trucks and turfed us in the back. By us, I mean me and me brothers, Fred and Bill, and me half-arsed cousins, Chaz, Baz, and Flox.

Right off, I started whingeing that I wanted breakfast and me dad came back and started laying about with his belt. It was hard not to laugh, he was that predictable. The mums went in one ute, and the dads went in the other truck and there was a mad scramble when us kids realised this, all scrambling for the ute where the mums were because they had the fizzy drinks.

Dad had rigged up a tarp from each roll bar to the tailgates of the utes, half a tent where we could sleep or talk or play cards, no worries about getting sunbit. I sat on the round dooverlackie over the tyres. I was royalty. Me brother Fred lounged against the tailgate, which was typically lacklustre of him, because the latch was stuffed and it snapped open on the bumps and a year ago he'd done a belly flop onto the bitumen. Ended up with a

broken collarbone. Dad knocked him around a fair bit, called him a daggy little queen, and hauled him off to shoot twenty-eights and kangaroos, without getting Fred to say more than, 'Lotta blood in them parrots, i'nt there?' Dad fair wet himself when he found out Fred had a stamp collection. A *stamp collection*, for God's sake. Fred may as well have painted a target on hisself.

Chaz was older than me, but she was albino and had glasses and a face like a festered pickle. Baz was a boy, a point he didn't hesitate to prove, although he didn't have all that much proof at the time. Little bugger couldn't have pulled a greasy stick out of a dead dog's bum. He was a prawn. Honest. And Flox was the only living brain donor in our neck of the woods. So I was the boss cocky amongst the cousins and the best at Cheat and the best at Liar and the best at Greed and everyone had to give me all their green snakes when the mums stopped at the Billabong Roadhouse and bought us lollies. The dads stopped too but they didn't buy any lollies. They were strict beer boozers.

It was at Billabong that I started thinking it would be ace if I could get half the kids over in the back of the dads' ute, because then I could stretch out, maybe even take a kip in one of the sleeping bags and, since we'd gotten up at four, this seemed like an excellent plan. I went to me mum and whined that Flox smelled like wee and so did Fred, and Chaz was too yucky to look at, with her specs and red eyes and ghost skin, and I wanted them all out. It would be better anyway because then the mums wouldn't have to watch as many anklebiters. Her eyes lit up at that, and I knew that the dads were about to become the proud new owners of a litter of mongrel puppies. She might not have been so keen on the idea if she'd seen Dad stuffing a carton of Swan Lager down next to his seat.

So I suppose it was really me own stupid fault what happened next.

It was hot as blazes and all you could see of the educational

bloody bush was an orange-red blur whipping by in the triangles at the sides of the tarp. The wind came dry and mentholated, full of bushflies and the screams of cockatoos and the feathers of the twenty-eights that'd smashed on the roo bar. A hessian bag full of water hung at the tailgate and squelched as it slopped around like me dad's own belly. We'd been told that the wind cooled the water, which was bogus—it tasted like muddy tea—and we spent a lot of time spitting it at each other through our front teeth, which was fairly amusing, and then, when there was none left, drumming on the cab window, yowling about being thirsty.

'Me tongue's stuck to the roof of me bleedin' mouf.'

'I'm as dry as a dead dingo's donger.'

But the mums didn't pull over until Baz howled, 'I gotta poo. Mum! It's coming out in me daks! Mum!'

We'd just blown past the Nanuturra Roadhouse, not stopping, mainly because of the crabs Dad had picked up there a couple of years back. Mum says they weren't the edible kind, which makes sense, that far from the ocean. So Baz got pretty stinky before we pulled in at the Nerren Nerren water tanks. The station owners still hadn't twigged that tourists and truckies regularly helped themselves to their water. This far north, water was gold, diamonds and tiger meat.

Mum chucked a roll of toilet paper under the tarp, took a peek at the flyfest on Baz, and told us to get going. She told Baz to make sure to polish his date till it *shone*. I smacked aside the other contenders, grabbed the bum hankies and took off into the bush. It was a bloody hot day, the sky gone runny near the horizon. A goanna toasted himself over the sizzling red sand, his tongue moving slowly in and out of his mouth like a shellacked earthworm and smoke curling off his hide. Flies fell out of the sky and lay buzzing on the ground with heatstroke. I crawled under a bit of scrub and listened to the others spazzing about the lack of toilet paper. Baz, particularly, was doing a nutter. I

kid you not. It was excellent, from my point of view, and I was a happy little Vegemite until I heard the utes start up.

‘Oi!’ I yelled, standing up, but the flippin’ tank stand was in between me and the utes and they couldn’t see me.

‘Hang on!’

No one looked my way. Under the tarps, the ferals tumbled and screamed and threw cards at one another: the ace of clubs cartwheeled out and snagged on a grevillea. The utes skidded onto the track and a curtain of red dust rose behind them. I heard Dad’s faint shout over the tin bucket clanking of the engines, ‘Shut your gobs, youse lot!’ The utes didn’t stop.

I ran into the middle of the corrugated road, staring at the stakes that marked every half-mile in a straight line off to forever, and at the cloud that followed the utes and my family.

Every year, tourists die on this road. They’d be found a couple of miles from their cars, legs swollen from the lack of water, their pelts hanging in tattered red strips and they’d be eyeless. Parrots love eyes. We always carried extra jerry cans of water and petrol because the distance between roadhouses was just a bit more than one tank of juice could take you. There weren’t any signs warning you about this all-important fact. The locals barely cracked a smile when foreigners in Range Rovers said to fill ’er up. Later, they’d mention that another one of those slack Pommies had carked it on up the road to Katherine, silly buggers, and no one would be surprised. No one would laugh, but they’d want to. By God, they’d want to.

I walked back to the tank stand and drank tinny yellow bore water straight from the tap before counting geckoes and termite castles and how many handfuls of the hot red dirt it took to cover my leg. Even though things were moving in there—slick, slick—I buried my other leg, and then my belly, my bum and one arm. At least it kept the sun off. The stinky socks were blooming, so I picked one and, holding my nose, ate it. A snake

essed across the road and tasted the damp earth under the tap. It was a king brown. They have huge black eyes and a splotch of black on their heads and my dad told me they are twelve times more poisonous than a cobra: if a king brown chomps your ankle, within five minutes you start vomiting green stuff, your gums turn purple and your heart explodes. Nice. The males are so crazy they'll hump she-snakes that were squished on the road days before.

The king brown looked in my direction and stuck out its tongue to taste the smell that was rolling off me. I saw a man like that once, in the Freo Markets; his tongue was split in two, and he could make each side move by itself. It gave me bad dreams. I wasn't afraid of the king brown though, because it wouldn't bother me unless I stepped on its tail, or ate its babies, or tried to bash in its head.

I thought that Mum and Dad would get to Carnarvon and figure out they'd left me back the track a-ways. Mum would say it was Dad who'd left me behind. Dad would say she was a dog's breakfast, and besides, she's the mum, the one who is supposed to count the kids and wipe their bums and such. Mum would tell the cops and Dad would tell the whole story down at the local pub while they waited for a truckie to bring me in. That's what I thought would happen.

Now, if I was telling you a made-up story, this is where the little lost princess would be rescued by the handsome sultan. But since I'm telling you God's own truth, I have to say that I was knackered and I fell asleep and while I was sleeping, a man driving a cement mixer pulled in to fill his water bottles with stolen water, and I woke up because I heard him calling, 'Is anyone here?'

Who he thought was hanging out at these godforsaken water tanks, I don't know. But deadset, that's what he was saying, so I stood up and said, 'Yeah. Me.'

‘Shite, girlie. What you doing out here, all by yourself?’ he said, scratching his armpits, right and left, with a sound like sandpaper on a block of wood. He was dressed like my dad—singlet, shorts and desert boots—but, unlike Dad, who was stunted and hairy, this bloke was tall and bald, much older, and his clothes didn’t have things growing on them. He had two tiny gold hoops in one ear like Sinbad.

‘Me mum and dad forgot me here, I reckon.’

‘Bloody sods. When did that happen?’

‘Lunchtime about,’ I said, but I was already cheesed with him for calling Mum and Dad names.

The sun lay squashed near the edge of the sky and the man—Scurry, he was called—offered me a cold sausage with creamy grease on its side and a bite missing.

‘Get that into you,’ he said.

He said he’d take me to the police station and they’d get me sorted. We’d be there just after dark. He told me to get into the truck and I got in and dropped the sausage onto the seat between us. He stared at the banger for a moment.

Right in front of me, six polaroid photos of little kids were taped to the dash board. I leaned closer. One of the kids was an Abo, dark navy black, and her eyes were closed. She was pretty and I thought that, despite his white skin, Scurry must have some black blood in him. I touched the girl’s eyes. A narrow glass vase was taped next to the photos, filled with donkey orchids and everlastings. They smelled like warm honey.

To be friendly, I said, ‘You’ve got a lot of kids, mistah.’

‘Yeah,’ he said, picking up the sausage and eating it. ‘I’m good at getting kids.’

‘What are their names?’

‘What?’ he said. ‘Geez. What do you care?’

Folding his sunnies, he gave me a look that’d fry spuds. I ran my fingers over the photos, played them as if they were

piano keys. He took a loop of fishing line, sawed it between his teeth and a fountain of spit and rotting sausage spattered the windscreen. He splashed Old Spice on his tongue and under his arms.

He asked what my name was and when I told him Bugs, he said, 'Pig's arse,' and asked for my real name, which is about as bad as a name can be. When I told it to him, he laughed, pretty much the reaction I always get.

'Care?' he said. 'Your name is Care? I've got a bleedin' CARE package in me truck? Strewth. A CARE package from home. Everything a man could want in a little box.'

His CB radio crackled and I heard '... little girl left at the Nerren Nerren water tanks ...'

'That's me!' I said, sitting up. 'They're looking for me!'

'No drama,' he said and leaned over and turned off the radio. 'That's old news. I've got you now.'

He pushed a tape into the cassette player and Mick Jagger croaked something about laying my soul to waste, a song I happen to know because me cousin used to have all the Stones' records before she barbecued them in the backyard when she went on a religious kick.

When he smiled, just one corner of his mouth turned up. The inside of his lip was black. He didn't have any hair or eyebrows and his arms and legs had whopping bald patches. He only had a few eyelashes left. As he was driving, he'd pull out one of those and balance it on the top of the steering wheel. When that eyelash fell off, he got a cranky look on his face, and after a while he'd huff, and pull out another one.

'What are you staring at?' he said, looking quickly into the rearview and touching the place his eyebrow might have been. 'You're not exactly Marilyn Monroe yerself.'

Which was true—me being an alabaster runt in homemade floral bloomers—but at least *I* had eyelashes. I imagined him

in a blonde wig and fake titties, wearing stilettos and standing over a blower, trying to hold down his flapping skirt.

‘So,’ he said, ‘how old are you?’

‘Twelve,’ I said, ‘in a bit. I’m eleven and a quarter.’

‘Really?’ he said, sitting up straighter and squeezing his thighs together. ‘Twelve’s a beaut age... my dad took me to Coober Pedy to look at the opal mines when I was twelve. The miners put quartz on the opals to make them look bigger. If the quartz is on one side, it’s called a doublet, see, and if it’s on both sides, it’s called a triplet. We stayed in a dugout, a house that’s underground, to keep cool. One bloke stuck an entire crocodile skeleton on the wall of his dugout. Hung opal rings on its claws. I nicked one. I’ve got it here.’

Sure enough, an opal ring strangled his pinky.

‘Where’s your dad now?’ I asked.

He didn’t answer, so I asked again, and he said, ‘Dumb shit fell down one of the mine shafts and I got put in a foster home,’ which was a lie if ever I heard one, to make me feel bad for him.

Just before it got dark, he stopped to siphon the python and when he came back, I saw that his fly was still half open so I said, ‘Flying low,’ and pointed at his zipper. He flipped me a look like a rat with a gold tooth. I told him it happens to me dad all the time—he’s forgetful—and it’s easy to come out of the dunny and flash the family jewels at someone’s old granny, so I remind him with codes. ‘Flying low’ was one, and so was ‘LBW’ which meant ‘leg before wicket’, or ‘XYZ’ which was ‘examine your zipper’, or ‘are you afraid of heights’, which I told him I was.

‘I fell off the balcony when I was five, or maybe my dad dropped me. Are you afraid of heights?’

‘Shut up about me fly,’ he said, and plucked out one of his eyelashes.

I pointed out that his fly was still open and he stepped down

hard on the pedal that makes the engine vroom, and then he zipped up.

This was the first time I had ever ridden in the front of a truck and I liked the way you can't tell you're attached to the road. It looks like you're flying. When you walk, you can see your feet touching the ground, each step gluing you down again and again but in the truck, you couldn't see any of that.

'Have you ever been on a plane?' I asked. 'Or a flying carpet?'

'There's no such thing as flying carpets. It's a load of codswallop,' he said, busy shaving the white stuff off his front teeth with his fingernail.

'Wrong again. I have a book at home that tells all about flying carpets. They gave it to me in hospital when I went to get me lip put back on after dad dropped me. It's called *The Arabian Nights* and it's the best book ever made. All the kids in hospital got books that day. It's s'posed to make you want to read, when you get your own book.'

'If my old man dropped me off the veranda, I'd have pulled his guts out of his eyeballs,' he said. 'Your dad's a danger to humanity.'

I thought of all the things I could say that would prove that Dad was a good dad, if a bit forgetful: his gentle brushing of my white hair; his reading my book to me every night—even when we'd had to haul him back from the pub—until him and me both knew every posh word; his dressing up in a sheepskin carseat cover on the way here, to try and rustle a sheep we saw near the road; the way he laughed, and called 'Gambol!' while kicking out his hind legs and wagging his bum as our lamb lunch ran away. But I couldn't say these things to Scurry, mostly because he wouldn't believe them, but also because it was hard to think about Dad that way ... like maybe he really was a good dad or at least trying to be. Also because I'd suddenly remembered the Stranger Danger class we'd been given in Grade One and

how we weren't supposed to chat with people we didn't know, which it was definitely too late for, so I viciously said, 'Mum says Dad's an *excellent* dad.'

'Excellent candidate for the electric chair, more likely,' he said, and I decided to change the subject.

'Do you like to read?'

'I hate reading,' he said. 'Reading's for nongs. Who the hell would ever believe in a flying carpet except for a total nong?'

I touched the photo of the Abo girl with me big toe. She had her dad's nose. I thought I could see that. I wondered if she liked her dad. If she let him boss her around or if she imagined him in hot pants and a beehive hairdo.

'You know, Scurry, the way you got your belt, your belly looks like a humungous grandma bosom. I tell my dad all the time that if he keeps on drinking beer and eating snakes, he's going to get diabetes. The way you're going, that could happen to you too.'

'It's all muscle,' he said, patting his gut and giving me a dodgy look.

'Like fun,' I said, 'I can hear it sloshing.'

'That's the cement,' said he.

He had a head on him like a sucked mango. Dad's a bricklayer. I happen to know that cement hardens in ninety minutes and we'd been flying down the road to Katherine way longer than that. I closed my eyes and I could still see the photos of his six little kids, their faces floating and ghostly in that colourless forest.

'Do your kids like to read?'

'What kids?' he said.

Scurry was playing with my head; he thought that kind of thing was funny. Dad did too. I wanted to cry just then, but no. I'd taught Fred and Bill and Chaz and Baz and Flox my special method of not crying and it was this: You picture yourself as a two-by-four. Hitting doesn't hurt you; names don't hurt;

forgetting doesn't hurt. Whoever's pounding on you feels it when they connect, feels the little bones in their hands snapping, splinters from you stuck so far into them that they poke out the other side. Your guts beg them to hit you again, and you smile a wooden smile when they do.

So when he said, 'What kids?' I smiled.

The truck surfed through the night sky, the flick of light on the marker stakes the only thing to say we hadn't gone roaring off through the uncharted bush, and the darkness made me itchy. Scratchy in all the wrong places. It felt like something had climbed into the cab and sat down between us. The door wasn't locked. I could have jumped, flown out into that blackness if I'd wanted to, like an apple core or a beer can. If I'd had an army coat, I might have jumped. It could have worked. The coat could have opened with a phwoop and floated me down. It's London to a brick that he didn't lock the door because he thought I wasn't game for taking a ten-foot header out into the quartz dust, but that was nothing compared to a swan dive from a second floor balcony. He just didn't know my history.

Instead of jumping, I said, 'Do you want to hear an interesting story? I could tell you the one about Sinbad.' Which I thought would interest a bloke with earrings.

'No,' he said.

'It's in my book.'

'Listen, squid, I wouldn't be so chuffed about that bloody book if I was you. You only got it because your old man chucked you off a balcony.'

'He might not have dropped me. I might have jumped. I think I did jump.'

'If you jumped,' he said, 'why'd you land on your head?'

'You're yucky,' I said and I twisted and kicked him as hard as I could in the place that everyone says hurts the most, the toyshop

under the awning, and it was squashy there and he screamed, 'You liddle bugger!' and grabbed my ankle, reeling me in as the truck swerved to the left and I bashed my head on something. The drying concrete squealed and metal parts I didn't know the names of ranted as the right side of the truck rose and stars spun down into the window. I thought we'd roll over. I thought we'd have mushy grey brainstuff on our faces, and broken glass for diamond rings, but Scurry didn't let the truck escape. It bumped back onto all its wheels, and the glovebox sprang open and his polaroid camera fell out in me lap. Black pearls of sweat shone on the camera, smelling of motor oil, trembling before they slid down and bled into me cotton bloomers. I put the camera back, next to the duct tape and the filleting knife, and shut the little door with a click that made Scurry flinch.

'You're a bastard,' I said, watching his face in the black reflection of the side window.

'The only bastard you know is the one who dropped their kid off a balcony,' he said, grinning like a shot fox, and the truck hit a marker. The stake flew up past my window, a comet, or a falling star, just a blur inside my eyeballs.

'They should have locked him up,' he said. 'Why didn't they?'

I didn't want to talk about my dad anymore with this mangy bloke with no eyelashes, so I stuck my fingers in my ears and said, 'Woo woo woo woo.' Another marker whipped up, hit the silver bulldog on the front of the truck and shattered.

He yanked my hand away from my ear and said, 'I bet you told them you fell.'

Which was the truth. Straight up. I lied to the doctor who asked me how I fell, and I lied to the nurses and, what the heck, I lied to Scurry too. I'm the queen of Liar. But I put me fingers back in me ears and closed me eyes and whispered 'Woo woo' like it was a spell, some kind of voodoo prayer that could turn me into someone else. After listening to me for a while, he cranked

up old Mick, and lay another eyelash on the steering wheel.

'Scurry,' I said, 'I could tell you a different story. Something you'll like.'

He didn't say anything for a long time.

'I could tell you about Scheherazade. She's the towelhead who told all the stories in me book, a thousand and one stories, one every night.'

'Why?' he asked, glancing at me and his eyes looked huge and black. He binged on the brakes and pulled off the road. I didn't have the foggiest where we were. Somewhere dark, in the back of beyond. He opened his door and told me to get out. The wind from the coast was strong enough to blow a dog off its chain and it thudded in my ears, blew the hairs in me eyebrows backwards, whipped me eyelashes against my dry eyeballs. I could barely suck in a breath, the air rushed by so fast. A sheet of sand peeled off and snapped a few feet from the ground. My shorts rippled, my shirt ballooned, hair lashed my face. I felt my body lifting, my feet barely touching the ground.

At last, he asked, 'Why did she tell so many of them stories?'

He held my wrist so I wouldn't blow away. I could smell his strong penicillin smell and the Old Spice on his tongue. The polaroid camera, shoved by the wind, hit me, and it smelled like a gun after it goes off. He put his sunnies on.

'Just listen,' I said. 'There was once a wicked king, who got married to a different girl every night, and every morning, he'd cut off her head.'

'Hah!' he laughed, '*Excellent*.'

'I told you you'd like it. It's your kind of story. Scheherazade offered to get married to him. All the other girls was forced, but she offered. She told her sister to come in the night, and then she told her a story, and the shah began to listen too, because she was a dinkum storyteller. Right when the sun come up, she stopped. She wouldn't tell the end.'

‘Did he kill her?’ he asked and I smelled the old fish stink of the knife.

‘No. The shah wanted to hear the end of the story, so he let her live and she come to him the next night, and that night, she done the same thing. Told a story, but not the end.’

‘For a thousand and one nights.’

‘Yeah. And he let her live because he liked her stories.’

His voice floated to me, soft in the darkness. ‘They must have been good stories.’

‘I could tell you a good story,’ I said.

‘Go on then,’ he said. ‘Tell me.’

The wind shouting through the casuarinas, the strips of hanging bark pattering against the gum trees, the boobooking of the tawny frogmouths, everything, stilled, and the bush breathed deeply, waiting.

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