

Copyright © 2018 by Glenn A Kershaw

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the address below.

Glenn A. Kershaw

glenn_a_kershaw@yahoo.com.au

The Shadow of an Absent Man

By

Glenn A. Kershaw.

Prologue

Her office door was solid, Dr Ruth Wainz liked that. The solidity. Something she could rely on. The door reduced the noise from the reception, which was both good and bad. There was the gentle and continuous, 'shush, shush,' of the air-conditioning. Both comforting and necessarily. The relative quiet helped her forget where she was Normally, she liked to keep the office just a little chill, it helped her

stay focused. There was no scent to the office, no perfume, no flowers on display. The walls were bare with only evenly spaced indentations, holes that had been roughly filled and painted over, giving the any hint to the office's previous life. That and the rooms odd dimensions, the office was longer than it was wide and the small window set up high near the ceiling. The only personal item she allowed was her watch which was sitting next to the computer's monitor.

A half dozen solid, meaty thuds on the door made Ruth look up from her notes. She automatically glanced at the watch. Five minutes to the hour, she smiled at the military precision.

'Come in,' she called, her voice wavering a little and not carrying very well. 'Hmm, Come in!'

The door handle turned silently and the door swung inward. Framed in the doorway was Ivana, her orange prison uniform looking two sizes too big for her so that she seemed diminutive. At the urging of the guard behind her she shuffled into Ruth's office, her steps controlled by the shackles on her ankles. She walked with a careful, experienced step so that the connecting chain did not trip her. A second chain ran from her leg restraints to the handcuffs that kept her hands secured to the wide leather belt that ran around her waist. With each step her chains rattled with a cold, 'Chink, chink, chink.'

Jocelyn, a mountain of a woman, her guard's uniform barely containing her, took Ivana by the arm and directed her to the patient's chair. Ivana had to double shuffle to keep up with Jocelyn's long, heavy stride. Ivana sat and, as always, kept her head bowed.

Wainz's office was well lit from the four fluorescent lights. This was the top floor and though the office faced outwards, there were no other windows that could look in.

'How has she been this week, Jocelyn?' Ruth asked.

'Same as always, Doc,' Jocelyn Staresnan said and pivoted her watermelon head. Her eyes were small, an earthy brown, always suspicious were focused on the prisoner. 'She aint got into no trouble. Not since that last time, anyways.'

Staresnan's accent was from the south, maybe Louisiana, but had attained a guttural hardness from years as an employee of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

'That's good news, Ivana,' Ruth said and smiled at the woman.

'Yes, mam,' Ivana replied. She spoke softly but the words were clearly articulated and quite audible.

'Speak up, you!' Staresnan snapped, giving Ivana a solid thump on the shoulder with the back of her hand.

Ivana barely reacted but repeated, 'Yes, mam,' though not much louder.

'The parole board will be pleased, Ivana,' Ruth said. She smiled again at the woman's bowed head.

'Yes, mam,' Ivana said, with the same soft voice, her head still bowed so that Ruth could not see her face or gage the young woman's reaction.

Her blond hair was cut into a severe crew-cut.

Ruth glanced at the guard, her bloated body compressed around her middle by her leather belt. The tools of her trade, the baton, handcuffs and torch were attached at even intervals around her circumference.

‘Thank you, Jocelyn,’ she said.

‘Yes, Doc,’ Staesnan replied. She stared warily at Ivana for a long moment and then waddled out of the office on her tree stump legs.

Ruth sat down at her desk.

‘You’re making excellent progress, Ivana,’ Ruth said. ‘You have every right to be pleased.’

‘Yes, mam,’ Ivana said as softly before. Her eyes never leaving the floor.

Ruth returned to her notes, finished off the comment she’d been writing and placed the sheet in its folder, which she placed on a similar pile on the book case behind her. From a small pile next to it she took Ivana’s file.

When Ruth turned around again Ivana was sitting upright, shoulders back, head up, looking at her. Ivana seemed to have grown in those few seconds, seeming to fill out the prison uniform.

‘Assume the position,’ Ivana ordered, like an army officer giving an order to a recalcitrant trooper.

Ruth smiled at first, but then quickly changed to a neutral expression. She stood and took a position halfway between her desk and the old leather lounge that sat against the opposite wall, about a metre and a half from the window. She was facing the window and she placed her hands on the nape of her neck, her fingers tightly

interlaced and with her arms pushed back as far as she could get them, as she had been taught. Her feet were a shoulder width apart, her back straight and her breasts out. She closed her eyes.

Ivana examined the woman, starting with her ankles. Her shoes were plain, sensible and low set. The stockings were flesh coloured. Her grey skirt came down three centimetres below her knees and the skirt was held in place by a slim, black leather belt. She wore a white business shirt, no jewellery, no makeup. Ruth's hairstyle was basic, cut to stay off her face, and resting just above her shoulders.

Ivana stood and she shuffled around the desk, the chains clinking with each step, opening the top left hand draw. Ruth remained standing as she was, perfectly still. The draw contained a jumble of pens, pencils, sticky tape and a pad of reminder notes. Ivana reached in as best she could with a handcuffed hand and rummaged around till she found what she wanted. She shuffled back to her chair, sat down and unlocked her handcuffs with the key she'd taken from the draw. Once her hands were free she reached down and unlocked her feet.

Standing once more she pulled the leather belt around her waist, opened it and dropped the restraints to the floor with a metallic clatter. Then she went to the draw again. This time she picked out what she wanted without needing to search and came to stand in front of Ruth. Ivana's fingers were sinuous, long and easily tore lengths of medical tape off the roll, using them to stick Ruth's eye lids closed. Though Ruth said nothing Ivana had noticed the signs; her breathing increased, a flush of colour came to her chest and she was trembling a little as though nervous.

Ivana replaced the tape in its drawer and then came to stand behind Ruth. She reached around the woman and undid the belt holding her skirt. She slowly slid the

material down Ruth's thighs and let it fall to the floor. She did the same with Ruth's stockings and underwear. The buttons on Ruth's shirt came undone easily, as did her bra. Ruth had to drop her arms briefly then returned them. When the shirt lay on the ground in an unruly heap Ivana took a moment or two to run her hands lightly over Ruth's breasts, felt the woman's tightening nipples. Ivana's expression softened, her eyes half closed as she ran her fingers along Ruth's skin, feeling the warmth, the suppleness, the softness. She felt the intimacy, the closeness building between them. And with it her need.

The moment passed and Ivana stepped back and spent some time examining Ruth. The woman was taller than Ivana, her body lean and on the athletic side without being overly muscular. Ivana turned away and went back to the chair, picking up the restraints. They rattled and she heard Ruth's quick intake of breath. The chains rattled again as she returned to Ruth and as she wrapped the leather belt around Ruth's waist.

'No,' Ruth said. 'What if someone comes in?'

'Shut it!' Ivana snapped and tightened the belt till it creaked, then locked it.

She came round the front, took hold of Ruth's right hand and secured it in the handcuff. She did the same with the left. At each 'Click, click, click' Ruth shivered. Ivana knelt down, picked up the ankle cuffs and locked Ruth's feet securely. She stood up again and checked the handcuffs, unlocking the right hand and then relocking it ensuring the metal didn't cut into Ruth's wrist. Once more she stepped back and surveyed the doctor. She smiled. It was a cold thing, without warmth or humour.

'Turn around,' Ivana said.

Ruth did as she was told, taking one careful, faltering step after another, her chains clattering sharply with the movement. Ivana stepped in close, feeling the heat come off Ruth's body, and ran her fingers down her back from her shoulders to her hips. Ruth's breathing grew faster, she shuddered at Ivana's touch.

'Walk,' Ivana ordered.

Ruth stepped forward hesitantly. She wasn't used to the limitations of the manacles and several times the chain snagged her feet. She stumbled, tried to reach out with her shackled hands but the metal held them close to the leather belt. She recovered herself and walked toward the end of the office.

'Stop.'

Ruth stopped, the chains 'tink, tink, tink'.

'Turn... Walk.'

Ruth slowly became used to the restrictions of her restraints and took her steps more carefully. Each movement brought with it the sound of metal on metal.

'Stop.'

Ruth came to a halt. Her taped eyes preventing her from seeing the cruel, measured smile on Ivana's lips.

Ivana took hold of Ruth's shoulder just as forcefully as Staresnan had held hers, and steered her over to the lounge, settling her down on her back. The creak of the leather adding an odd spice to Ruth's captivity.

Ivana lifted Ruth's legs onto the couch.

‘Cross your ankles,’ Ivana ordered, but Ruth struggled to do so. She was not yet that familiar with wearing restraints. Ivana reached forward and manoeuvred Ruth’s ankles so they crossed.

‘When I’m free of this shit hole you’ll get used them,’ Ivana said and raised Ruth’s legs so that all of Ruth was available.

Ivana’s fingers played with Ruth and soon had the woman moaning. Her breathing came harder than ever, her body flushed and hot. After a while Ivana glanced at the watch on the table, though from where she was she couldn’t see the face to tell the time, but she was aware that the guard would be coming to collect her soon. Focusing on the doctor Ivana used her skills to good effect, so that at five to the hour Ruth was back at her desk, writing notes in Ivana’s file while she struggled to breathe normally and Ivana, wearing her restraints, was quietly sitting on the chair.

‘She give you any shit, Doc?’ Staresnan asked.

Ruth looked up from her writing, her face having returned to its normal colour.

‘No,’ she replied. ‘We’re making great progress.’

Staresnan pulled Ivana up off the chair with a thick hand and pushed her towards the door. Ruth had to clench and unclench her right hand and fight to control herself at the rattle of chains each time Ivana took a step.

‘See you next week,’ Ruth said.

The door closed and Ruth was left with the silence and the memory.

Chapter 1

‘Bloody hell...!’

Those two words were forced from my lips as if shot from a cannon. Till that moment I’d been hunched over a glass that fizzed and bubbled in a languid, lazy way. I was enjoying the moment. Anticipation. That was the word. I’d been enjoying the anticipation. The bubble of the liquid on my lips, the sensation as it slid down my throat, the...

I’d never been a frequenter of pubs, not before my fall from grace and certainly not after, that is when I’d risen back up again. As a young, green eared cop when the boys had gone off to their favourite oasis I’d beg off. There was always study, Erin was a hard task master – more about her later - and, to be honest, there was always skirts to chase.

The Thursday night writing class had finished – I still had trouble with classes that lasted only two hours – and I’d wandered past the uni’s car park and my BMW with a single purpose on my mind, and there before me, as if materialising out of the out of the thin fog that had come down with the dark, was the pub. Situated close to Police Central and, coincidentally, only a few streets away from where I’d met Kat, my first wife. It’s not that I didn’t want to go home, you understand. I had a warm bed and a willing wife waiting for me. It was just....

Anyway, on the outside the pub was all flashing lights attached to a hundred-year old awning and with ancient posters pitching long dissolved heavy metal bands on the painted brick walls. While inside there was the usual long bar with its shining glasses and tempting bottles behind, rocky tables and pensioner chairs in the single

room and buckets of black paint that covered old electrical wires, ancient mounting holes and, just as ancient, blood.

It was warm in here though, quite at the moment till the band struck up at nine (except Mondays and Wednesdays, so said a sign), with only the hushed chatter of harried people catching up and these people were cops. Of course, I didn't recognise any faces, they were all new since my time but, but they seemed to turn in their chairs as I entered and one or two appeared to raise their glasses in welcome. There was a young woman, maybe a senior or a newly minted sergeant who stared at me from the table she shared with no one and a hopeful smile shaped her lips. It can be lonely in a paramilitary organisation when you're not one of the boys. The smile faded when I found an empty table.

I'd thought why not? Why shouldn't I join my colleagues, ex-colleagues I mean, in this ambience. Just the one drink though. Only the one.

But I'd been grabbed like a naughty school boy peeping through the key hole of the girl's showers by the scruff of the neck and dragged, without so much as a by-your-leave, out from the cosseting warmth of the pub into the hungry cold of the night. It was August and a bitter one at that. I must have made a sight, my arms flaying like a disorientated Dalek, such that they banged against the door as I was dragged out, my feet struggling to gain purchase on the pub's slippery timber floor.

Then I found myself thrust against the Pub's rough brick wall, the frame of a poster in my back, a fist wrapped tightly in my \$120 shirt, the flashing lights on the awning blinding me, and the stale breath of my aggressor in my face, with eyes flashing like a neon sign glaring at me enough to strip the paint off any cars unlucky enough to be in his line of sight.

‘Detective Inspector Lew Baxter! Mate! Damn, it’s good to see you! How are you, you old grizzly bear?’ I said.

But the face was not to be turned by my delight in recognising it. It was red like a red tide had washed in.

‘Never mind the Detective crap, you bastard! What the fuck were you doing in there!’

His left arm pointed like a dramatic arrow up the street, but I knew what he meant.

‘Relax, mate,’ I said. I couldn’t help but slip him the widest of grins. ‘It’s not what you think.’

His grip on my expensive shirt tightened, twisted the material. Another centimetre and I’d be hearing a ripping sound.

‘I mean it, mate,’ I said, placing a hand on top of his. ‘Relax, she’s fine.’

‘Yeah, mate, sure.’ He snarled. Lew was never the type to be fobbed off with a smile and a few sweet words. ‘So answer me, mate, what the fuck were you doing in that pub?’

Lew always had this way with words. He’d grind them up in the tumbler of his mouth, then toss them out into the world to fend for themselves.

‘Just winding down,’ I replied but I’d said the wrong thing, the way his face went volcanic. ‘Just a soft drink.’

His face settled down to a look that said I’d just told him the Titanic had docked at Darling Harbour. That is, he thought I was bull-shitting him and he walked

back into the pub, but came back a few seconds later, disgruntled I'd say because the waitress had cleaned up already.

'I can't fucking believe you were in there, there of all places!' he growled and I mean growled. Lew had just cause to be angry with me.

Lew'd never been a handsome man. No more than a boulder that's recently fallen fifty metres down a cliff face; a chipped and battered wreckage. But that was a good thing for a cop. To crims he looked frightening, especially when he was angry and the blood was up. But time hadn't been good to our Lew. There were new creases, crevasses almost, across his forehead and around his mouth. His dusty black hair had started to look more a winter's noon than moonless midnight. A deep coating of worry covered his face. He stooped a little now, too and I could just about see the lead weight packed on his shoulders. Which was odd, he was a Detective Inspector, a heady height that I never thought he had what it took to achieve. But now that he had a team of underlings to do the work life should be pretty cruisey for him.

On my doorstep life had been good to me too since I'd given up living on the streets and drinking myself into the grave; a great wife - who craved sex as much as I did - three wonderful kids, one of them mine, a small mansion down at Manly with all the trimmings and a view across the ocean, money in the bank and a job with some of the best looking women in Sydney as clients. One of partners, Henry, had started talking partner a few months back.

'I was just drinking diet cola,' I said. I couldn't help but laugh at him. 'Let's go in, I'll buy you a beer. Come on you, old bastard. It's good to see you again.'

'Fuck you!' Lew replied sort of sotto voća.

‘Ok, maybe not,’ I said. There was a coffee shop across the road advertising its wares, in a tired, grimy sort of way, but it’d do. I nodded in that direction. ‘How about a coffee, then?’

He mumbled, ‘I’ll never sleep,’ but led the way.

‘Large skim flat white, and a cappuccino,’ I said to the bored girl behind the counter, while we sat at the back. Old, tired posters of bull fights and Spanish films surrounded us. A few ancient shelves, mostly vacant except for the odd packet of cigarettes or wilted chocolate bar, waited out eternity behind the counter, and the lights, well, they’d mostly packed their bags and gone back to the old country, leaving the elderly and infirm behind.

‘You’re avoiding my question,’ he snapped. There was still the glare in his eyes.

We’d a funny old relationship in the past. Lew’d got me my first detective gig, later he’d worked for me and I’d made him a Detective Sergeant when I was a Detective Superintendent. But it was after I left the force that I’d got him his rank of Inspector. It’s all in the first volume of my memoirs, ‘Where the Street Sleepers Die,’ (\$29.95 at all good bookstores). I was a homeless man and on the bottle then, and Lew didn’t want to see me fall back there again. We both knew there’s no such thing as an ex-alcoholic or even a recovering alcoholic. There are only two types of Alco, the one with a glass in his hand and the one looking for the glass. So you can see which he thought I was on first glance.

I shrugged and looked over to my left, I thought I saw someone I’d known from the old days. The pub, the Green Fiddler was the haunt of cops.

‘I like to unwind after class,’ I said. The far wall had prints of famous movies starts of the 80s ‘I can’t get used to classes only two hours long.’

‘You studying again?’

I nodded.

‘Christ. They’ll be tossing text books into your coffin when the time comes.’

‘Probably,’ I said.

‘What’s it this time?’

‘Master of Creative Writing. Up at UTS,’ I replied. Lew took a couple of seconds to mull that over. But I jumped in with, ‘University of Technology Sydney. I’m thinking of writing my memoirs.’

That stumped him. He looked at me, his eyes puzzled while he thought it through. His mind was like one of those hand driven calculators dug up from the Stone Age you see in documentaries. Don’t get me wrong, he was a great assistant, or off-sider. Lew took his time, that’s all.

Eventually he said, ‘You’ve got to be fucking joking!’ but then he followed that with, ‘No, with you that makes sense. Kinda sense. So why were you really there? Gathering... atmosphere?’

He was also nobody’s fool.

‘Like I said,’ I said, ‘I’m just winding down after class. I can’t get used to only two hours at the desk. With my MBA it was four.’

The class had ran from 6pm to 10pm with only twenty minutes for tea, four terms a year, ten weeks a term with one week for exams and one month off at

Christmas for four years. When I started I was at the city campus, don't bother looking its gone now, because it was easy to get to from the cop shop up at Central. But like so many things in life it was sort of a double edge sword. I was living up north at the time, sharing a house with a friend at Berowra and it seemed every class night the railways people took it into their heads to do track work, so nine out of ten times I had to catch a bus and two trains to get home, and that sometime after midnight.

The girl came and diffidently placed our coffees. Lew's cup had a small chip.

'I came in for a coke, wind down and go home,' I said.

'Bullshit!' Lew snapped and glared at me, right in the eyes.

The fact is I wasn't really sure why I went there.

'You've got that fucking good looking woman and a warm bed at home and you're here. What the fuck's going on?'

'I don't know,' I shrugged again, sort of a delay, I don't know. 'I just thought I might see an old, friendly face.'

Lew took a pull at his coffee, grimaced. His expression changed as he switched tracks which said he'd put the matter aside for the moment. He'd not forget, but he was prepared to let it sleep.

'You won't see too many old faces any more,' he said. 'Been a lot of changes, the old fossils have mostly gone.'

'So it would seem,' I said. But now I was looking at him, searching the crevasses and crevices of his face. I'd picked up on something.

Lew drank again, tipped the cup to his lips and slugged the rest of it down, I followed sipping at my dish water. I couldn't help screwing up my face. I mean, God, coffee isn't that hard to make.

'Same question. Why are you here, Lew?' I asked. It was just after 9.30pm. He should have finished work three or four hours ago. 'Why aren't you at home, tucked up nice and tight with Esme?'

His face changed, the glare dissolved like an aspirin in water.

'What?' I asked.

Lew drank again, long and slow, like he was delaying. Then he looked around, to the right and not to the left as I had done, which made me feel a little guilty

'Things...' he started, but like an old lawn mower shuddered to a halt. Most men of our generation, well, his, Lew had a good ten years on me, couldn't talk about his problems, particularly if it was something to do with 'Relationships'. I had to kick him into life again. It helped we had a past.

'What? Things not good at home?' I asked and I meant sex. He was still young enough.

'You know,' he replied and his cheeks reddening a touch, so yeah we were talking about his sex life, 'Esme doesn't lift her skirt for me much anymore. It's the grand kids. They take up most of her time and everything. And her bloody embroidery club and the weaving. She's out most nights and... you know what it's like. No, maybe you don't.'

He was right. My sex life, I mean. It'd always been good, well, fantastic if exhausting, and sometimes scary. Kat, had warn me to a shadow with her

inventiveness. I've said this before, the internet made my life hell. And Helen, while she was eager and she had a body you could just sink into, was more missionary position. But the sex was good and regular.

Sex was often the biggie in a marriage. Especially when the sex drives between the partners were unbalanced. Women will talk endlessly about their sex lives but only to their close girlfriends. Men, usually not at all. Well, unless it's to boast about sexual conquests that never happened.

I was surprised I'd gotten so much out of Lew, but then we went back to the dim dark past, when dinosaurs swam in the harbour and darkened the sky. What needed to happen was they needed to talk, him and Esme. Openly, frankly, about their needs, preferably with a trained councillor. And that simply wasn't going to happen. What was going to happen was Lew continuing to walk around cross eyed and Esme oblivious to the gathering storm.

'And the young women constables you get these days... Fucking hell! In those tight uniform shirts. It drives ya bloody mad.'

'You need to talk to someone,' I said. 'I've a colleague who ...'

But now that I'd got him started he ran right over me.

'And this bloody job. Four years and I still don't know what the hell I'm doing. All the paper work. New bloody forms every day. And all the acts I've got to follow. That WHS crap. And the changes to the law. "Strategic Planning". What the hell is that? One of the other Inspectors in the team brief the other day was talking about "Strategic Drift" and applying Porter's Five Forces to policing. I don't know what the fuck they're talking about half the time.'

Lew shrugged his shoulders as an act of despair.

I knew about “Strategic Drift” and Porter’s. I’d covered them in my MBA. It was an interesting idea, applying Porters to policing, I mean. Why not have the cop on the beat do a HAC and a SWOT before pulling out his Glock. More likely the young, degreed up Inspector was browning for his next promotion. You get that sort of crap the more you move up the pole. But then again, for a moment, I liked the idea of exploring Porter’s, see what the young gun had in mind. For that moment I yearned to be back amongst it all.

‘Learn to delegate. It’s easy,’ I said like a damned fool.

‘Easy! Fuck me dead! I wish...’

He didn’t finish the sentence, but I saw the wistful, reflective look that came into his eyes. Lew wanted to say something about still being a detective Sergeant. Life had been good back then, easy. He understood what he was doing; he was catching crooks. But now he was in a new place, a different planet in an alien universe he’d not dreamed existed when he fantasised about moving up the ladder. I’d bet a dollar to ten cents he was dreading the future. A future where the struggle to understand an ever changing world and the ever changing and confusing demands on him never went away. A world where he was no longer certain he was making any difference. I’d loved it.

Lew emptied the dregs out of his cup, pushed back in his chair and went back over to the counter for another. I stared, a little sadly, with a little frustration at the few faces around me. At one of the tables two men and a woman sat, dressed up like executives or PAs, all young. Not one a cop.

Lew was back with two cups of something from the river.

‘Is that the reason for the flag?’ I asked.

He reached up and touched the small pin of the Australian Flag, including Tasmania, attached to his lapel.

‘They’re all wearing ‘em upstairs.’

It’s would never work. Management from below is a skill, one Lew didn’t have. Looking like one of them was only the half of it.

‘How’s Helen and the kids?’ he asked, changing to a safer subject.

Another stab of guilt ran through me. I knew Lew didn’t mean to dig at me, or maybe he did.

‘Fine. Helen’s thinking of getting a job now that Bobby’s off to Kindergarten. She’s doing a TAFE course this year, Web Design or something. She started at community college and then moved on up.’

‘And the girls. I remember ‘em starting to grow up,’ he said.

‘Starting to. Both in high school so Helen’s got a lot of time hanging loose on her. The boys are staring to circle like vultures. I mean the girls are only 13 and 15, for Christ’s sake.’

Lew laughed.

‘My nephew’s only 13 and upset because he aint got a girlfriend yet. All his mates have one.’

‘We were never like that,’ I said.

‘Not me. I was 21 before I first dipped me wick,’ he said. I was significantly younger, but I could see nothing to be gained from comparing ages.

‘Kids,’ he said. ‘It’s all that yank T.V., video games and ‘I’ bloody ‘Smart’ phones.’

I smiled as he drank and glanced briefly at the assets of a woman behind him, then looked back at Lew. I know the look. T.V. and video games were the simple answer and life’s nothing as simple as that.

‘How’s that house of yours. I heard on the vine you were doing some renos,’ he said.

Now who in the force would want to keep an eye on me? Other than Lew I’d lost contact with my old colleagues.

‘We’re in finally. The tradies were taking forever.’

Lew nodded, not exactly enthusiastically.

‘We took some time off and spent two months in Canada and the US. The Kids loved Disneyland. The renovations were finished soon after we got back and we’re in now. The place looks great. You and Esme should come over for lunch.’

Yeah,’ he said again then like a train, switched tracks. ‘How’s the job going.’

‘Fine.’

I took a couple of sips of my coffee, grimaced. He was looking at me and so I added, ‘Yeah, fine. Going great.’

‘You got many clients?’

‘A few. My case load. You know, my share. The truth is a bit more and I do some other stuff for the practice.’

‘You enjoying it then? The work?’

He looked at me the way I’d seen him look at a criminal he knew was lying.

Following that line of thought I said, ‘In some ways it’s like interrogation. Sifting for the truth from what they tell you. The patient often wants to tell you what’s haunting them but they can’t. Sometimes the thing hurts too deeply, sometimes its shame, sometimes its culture. Men are like that. It’s detective work.’

The woman behind Lew had been in an intensive whispered conversation with her male friend, but she suddenly sat up right, took a practiced swing and struck him square on the jaw, sending his glasses flying. She stormed out of the café like a hurricane looking for its next landfall.

Lew glanced at her, then looked back at me.

‘Being a detective... having been a detective... once upon a time, comes in handy,’ I said.

‘You get many lookers?’

It’s funny how often I get asked that question. I suppose they see me cosseted in a sumptuous office with a young, ripe, woman, who’s bursting out all over and just ready for a good...

Lew’s eyes followed the silky arse of the young woman as she left her friends. Forensic is the incorrect use of the word. But it suited.

‘Mostly,’ I said. Which was true. I was ‘Blessed’, some would call it that, with mostly young, good looking, okay, downright beautiful, women as clients. But then I had Helen at home. A man, even a man like me, can’t ask for more.

‘Mostly? What’s that mean, “Mostly”?’

‘The practice is situated at Bondi Junction and draws its market segment from the wives of the newly rich, testosterone driven, hyper competitive execs and entrepreneurs from the Junction, Rose and Double Bay. The best, or should I say wealthiest, of the Eastern Suburbs.’

‘Is that so?’ Lew’s eyes hadn’t quite glazed over at that spiel but it was a close run thing.

‘These women come to us because they are afraid they’re getting old and will be replaced by next year’s model.’

‘An’ there’s money in that?’

‘Buckets.’

The young woman and her shapely backside dissolved into the darkness I guess because Lew gave me his full attention once more.

‘They all doctors like you? I suppose they’d have to be.’

‘No. I’m the only one with a Doctor of Applied Counselling Practice. It’s a practical degree. It’s still new and is struggling to get a place. Like the force, the Psychology world has trouble accepting change.’

Lew gave me a grimace at that, but he knew it was true.

‘One of the owners of the practice is an MD PhD, the other did Psychology from bachelors, through Masters right up to PhD.’

To clear up Lew’s confused look I added, ‘Regular medical doctors who’ve studied psychiatry to get a Doctor of Philosophy. Mine isn’t a PhD but a Professional Doctorate, as I said, practical.’

I couldn’t be bothered to explain, yet again, the difference between psychiatry and psychology. Or why an MD would study psychiatry to get a Doctor of Philosophy, so I rattled on, ‘We’ve also got six with their Bachelors of Psychology under supervision and a couple of students to do the coffee run.’

‘Right,’ he said, nodding emptily while his eyes flicked hopefully out into the dark. The young man had retrieved his glasses and slipped passed us after the woman.

‘Must be fine, all the young woman.’

When I didn’t respond his eyes flicked back to mine.

‘Yes,’ I said, perhaps a little hastily. ‘They’re talking about making me a partner, for everything I’ve done for the practice.’

He mulled that over for a few seconds.

‘What more do you do,’ he said, ‘than what you do with the women.’

‘I reorganised the office. Brought the finances up to scratch. The practice manager was a fool. He was losing the practice money in bad investments. Under me it’s all coming good. The partners know, I make sure they know, how well I’m running the business. Both Henry and Larry have said it themselves, any day now and its partner.’

It was getting late and past time for me to trawl off back home. I eased myself off the chair; Lew finished his drink and followed me out into the cold dark. August was chilly with a bitterness that nipped at your heels. Helen and I'd had to warm each other up by friction more than once this month. I'd have suggested an electric blanket, but I knew I'd get a mouthful. There was a desperation in her approach to sex I didn't understand.

We stepped out into the night, I pulled on my driving gloves. The smooth whoosh of the traffic in front of us, the light from the Café at our backs. Lew looked west to his home and me, I looked to the North-East to mine.

'Ok, Lew,' I said. 'It was good to catch up with you.'

I offered my hand.

'You too, mate,' he replied. 'You go for a drink after University? Maybe we can make this kinda regular.'

He looked at me and I think I saw in his eyes something I was yet to realise was laying wait in my own soul.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I'm here down from UTS just after nine p.m. every Wednesday evening for the next eight weeks.'

We stood like that for some time, like performance art, or concrete statues placed on the footpath as the Council's modern approach to art.

Two women walked by, going around us. Lew's eyes followed them down the street till they turned a corner and were gone. Still he didn't move, didn't say a word. But something was coming.

I was tempted to glance at my watch to prompt into action, when he said, 'I'm seeing someone.'

It's called a euphemism. Writer's use it all the time. And now so was Lew.

'Who?' I asked.

'Someone,' he said, looking down at the concrete as if hoping the women would come back.

He seemed to have trouble with Broca's area of his brain. He seemed to know what he wanted to say but couldn't marshal the words required in the right order to get them out.

'I met in her in a shop a coupla weeks ago. A month maybe, maybe a bit more. Yeah, maybe six weeks. Sounds... about... right. We got talking. You know, just talking. This and that. Had a few laughs and... .. you know.'

I knew.

'Esme doesn't know,' I said.

Lew didn't answer. His eyes were on the night.

'These things...' I started to say 'never ended well' but the words died before they were born.

'I tell her I'm doing paper work. At the start that was the truth. Bloody paper work. Never fucking ends.' He was angry but not at his job.

'These things never end well,' I said.

Esme was old school, Victorian era. A good sergeant's wife. A good, solid, reliable woman. They'd done their bit; paid their taxes, had two kids and then grown old. I'd always liked her.

'Lew,' I said and took his arm. He'd not heard a word I'd said. 'Tell Esme. Get some counselling. I can get you help. Both of you. Does Esme know how miserable you are?'

Lew snatched a quick glance and said, 'I've got to see a friend,' and wondered off into the night like some lost soul only vaguely aware of where it's going.

I walked back to the Uni's car park and fired up the BMW and drove home to my warm wife and my warm bed feeling unsettled and a little lost. What I didn't know, couldn't possibly have known, was that I'd be calling Lew the next day, and not to invite him out for a coffee.