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Where the Street Sleepers Die

By

Glenn A Kershaw

Prologue

Kat reached over and closed the lid of her laptop, though her eyes lingered on the images projected there till the lid closed with a snap, then she returned to the newspapers she'd been working on. He was coming. The rush of waves onto the shore at Coogee beach and the thickness of the carpet Ross had imported from Brussels conspired to muffle the sound of his footsteps on the stairs. Only the friendly creaking of the landing had warned Kat of his approach.

From the front page of a woman's monthly Ross stared out confidently at the world but not at her. She ran her fingers along the paper version of his jaw line and feasted on the authority in his deep blue eyes, then she reached for the scissors and started cutting out the article.

A moment later there was a tap on her door and the young man stepped into the office.

'Constable?' Kat asked, glancing up at him.

'Umm... Sergeant Baxter got called away,' John Crane said.

She'd heard Lew's distinctive ringtone above the TV in the theatre room below then, a few seconds later, the sound of the front door open and then close again.

'Called away?' she asked.

'There's been a body found in Darlinghurst, Mrs Courtney. Shot... could be murder,' he said. 'Sergeant Baxter thought he should take the case.'

Kat smiled and then laughed. The detective's oval face became ossified and he turned his pale brown eyes away to focus on his shoes.

'You boys,' she said. 'You do so love your murders.'

She gave him an appraising glance. He had plenty of 'thank you's' and 'I'm sorry's' and 'Umms to go around. He might do in uniform, she thought. Ross looked so commanding in his.

Crane was shorter than Ross, thinner too, without his broad shoulders. Ross's hair remained in place and never seemed to need cutting. Crane didn't have Ross's piercing blue eyes, eyes that x-rayed you. Ross had an animal athleticism, that at the same age had drawn her to him. Even though he'd arrested her.

Crane's career would take a boost if he cultivated Ross's style, his confidence with people. Ross was at ease with the worst murderer's, green cops and with Andrew and Andrew's boss, the minister. The top brass of business, ambassadors and door men.

When Ross entered a room you felt the rise in temperature. Crane was more like a waiter.

'Umm, yes, Mrs Courtney,' Crane said. He glanced, briefly up into her eyes. 'Don't worry though. I'll be here. To guard you, I mean. Till Sergeant Baxter comes back, that is. But then I'll still be here.'

'That makes me feel so secure,' Kat said.

'Yes, Mrs Courtney.'

'We'll be leaving at 6pm,' she said.

‘Yes, Mrs Courtney.’

‘And call me Kat. Everyone does.’

‘No, Mrs Courtney. What would Sergeant Baxter say?’

A wicked gleam came into her eyes.

‘Who are you more afraid of?’ she asked, ‘Lew Baxter or my husband.’

‘Sergeant Baxter, Mrs Courtney.’

Crane shifted his weight from one foot to the other, started to raise his hands as if to slide them into his jacket pockets, but then stopped himself.

‘I’ll be down stairs, if you need me, Mrs Courtney,’ he said.

‘It’s so comforting to know that,’ Kat replied.

‘Yes, Mrs Courtney.’

‘Help yourself to a cup of coffee.’

‘No, Mrs Courtney. Thanks.’

After Crane left Kat listened as his footsteps recede, then returned to the newspaper clipping. She finished cutting it out then paused to read it. A dreamy smile came onto her lips, her eyes returning to his face after every line, then to her laptop and the purchases that she could see if she but lifted up the lid.

Instead she laid the article face down on the cutting board and covered every millimetre with creamy white glue, then placed it in the centre of the left-hand page of the open scrapbook page. Not happy with its position she gently adjusted its position,

taking care not to tear the wet and fragile paper. When she was at last satisfied, she smoothed out the wrinkles, running her index finger slowly over Ross's image.

Rather than reach for another magazine, Kat pushed away from the desk and sat back in her chair. She closed her eyes, sensing her breathing and became aware of the scent of salt and seaweed mixed together with the perfume of the roses from the garden and of wet earth and damp grass. Lazlo had watered that morning and, despite the heat of the afternoon, there remained enough of the smell to distract her from the scrapbook and the magazines.

She listened to the surf pounding away on the beach. Most weekday mornings she walked the sands after Ross had gone to work and the girls were delivered to day care and primary school. She liked the feel of the sun on her skin, on her bare shoulders and on her midriff. She'd find a secluded spot that was raised up a little, sit down on the sand and watch the seagulls strut around like British Imperial Generals in search of an army to lead. They'd dash away from the other people strolling along in startled affront, and when they'd passed by the gulls formed up again and returned to their searching.

Out amongst the dashing waves the young men in their tight fitting rubber steamers danced through the waters on their surfboards, doing tricks while rushing headlong towards the beach. Some fell into the swirling breakers, others leapt nimbly into the shallows at the end of the run and then lazily paddle back out to sea.

Kat reached out for the lap top, but stopped, her fingers resting on the lid. Just a small movement of her hand and it would be open and the screen visible to her. But she changed her mind and returned to the pile of newspapers.

The hours passed quickly to the sound of snipping and the rustle of newsprint.

At 5pm Kat packed the scissors and glue away, tossed the scraps into the waste bin and took the scrapbook across the hall to Ross' office. Here, she laid it open at the first of the new pages on the keyboard of his computer. She fussed with it for a second, placed a paper weight in the shape of a Dalek at the bottom to ensure that it didn't slide off.

In the main bedroom, Kat put on her make-up and lipstick, changed into a formal dress and adjusted her hair.

Christine and Anne were in the theatre room watching cartoons. Annie was lying prone on the floor, her head supported on her hands, while Christine was in her favourite lounge chair, her body against the back, arms and legs askew like a rag doll and her eyes and mouth wide open. Kat rustled them away and up to their bedrooms to get dressed.

'Why do we have to go?' Annie said, practising her whining.

'Because we have to,' Kat said, helping her into her dress. 'It's important.'

'But it's sooooo boring,' she replied.

'It's for daddy,' Christine said.

Annie made a face.

Annie, the youngest, was the tomboy and yet she always took the longest to get dressed. She fussed over her clothes and would often stop and stare vacantly into space before fussing again.

‘Where’s daddy?’ she asked.

‘Daddy’s in Canberra,’ Christine said. ‘I told you, remember?’

‘No you didn’t!’

Christine looked beseechingly at her mother.

‘I did! Mum, she never listens.’

‘Daddy will be back on Monday,’ Kat said, straightening Annie’s dress. She smiled at Annie and ran her fingers through the girl’s dark blond hair.

‘Daddy said he would come. He promised,’ Annie said.

‘Daddy had to arrest a man,’ Christine said.

‘What man?’ Annie asked.

Christine bobbed down and whispered, ‘A very bad man.’

‘Come on you two or we’ll be late,’ Kat said, and herded the girls downstairs and towards the front door.

‘Ready, Constable?’ she called into the living room.

Crane leapt onto his feet as if caught in a guilty act. His face, always pale, went a little paler.

‘Yes! I mean, yes, Mrs Courtney.’

‘Come on then. Christine, Annie,’ she said.

Kat buckled the girls into the back seat of the BMW and then slipped into the driver's seat, sliding her backside slowly down the leather seat, slowly gyrating her hips till Crane sat down in the passenger side.

'This is Ross's new car,' she said with a grin. 'He's only driven it once.'

'It's nice, Mrs Courtney,' Crane said, looking straight out the window.

Kat ran her fingers down the leather bound steering wheel, enjoying the smoothness of the material on her skin.

Crane kept his eyes forward.

'He doesn't want anyone to drive it. Let's be naughty and not tell him, shall we.'

'Yes, Mrs Courtney,' Crane said, keeping his arms fixed in place on his lap. He was seated as far away from her as the bucket seat and seat belt would allow.

'Ross says the BMW has the same quality and engineering as the Mercedes but you don't get ripped off over the price,' Kat said.

'Is that so, Mrs Courtney,' Crane replied.

Kat set her handbag down in the space next to Crane. He jumped as though he'd received an electric shock. Kat suppressed a laugh.

As she looked at the car's controls a twinkle came into her eyes. She knew Ross would be angry. The twinkle brightened.

I might wear those things when he comes home.

She felt like laughing as she reached forward and pressed the starter button...

Chapter 1

‘Melon’s, Roscoe, you wouldn’t believe me, as big as melons they were,’ and he demonstrated the size with his cupped hands spread about four hundred centimetres apart. ‘And firm mate, firm just like they were... well...’

Ivan the Terrible was my superior in rank at the time. We were walking east up Albion Street, just up from Elizabeth Street and around the corner from Central railway station, just after two in the morning. We’d just been to a scene and felt the need to walk it off. Ivan was rabbiting on about the girl he’d just met.

‘Melons?’ I said.

‘Yeah, mate, you got it, melons. No, mate. Softer than that, like, like... Hey, watch where you’re fucking going!’

Four young women had spilled out of a pub and barrelled drunkenly into Ivan. He was upset, I couldn’t see why.

‘Watch yourself. Christ!’ he said as he fended one of them off. ‘Drunken bitch.’

One was taller than the others, better built. The joints in her body could have been filled with fluid as she wobbled for balance in her low heels. She struggled wildly, her eyes unfocused but then the words came out, ‘Go fuuuuck yourself.’ And she laughed in that free-spirited way that only the soundly drunk will do.

‘Mind your mouth,’ Ivan said. ‘Or I’ll run you in. I’m a cop.’

She slowly raised her left hand, lifted her little finger and wiggled it around a bit while fighting for balance as if she stood on a storm tossed deck.

‘You... you do that smaaaalll think. Thing. You boy’s aren’t cops. Cops, cops, cops wear uni-form. Like a, a nurse.’

‘Plain Clothes,’ Ivan snapped. ‘Detectives.’ He reached into his jacket but he was Ivan. ‘Shit. Roscoe, you show the bitch your warrant card.’

‘You show me yours, I’ll show you mine,’ she said and laughed and almost fell but just managed to keep her feet. Her friends giggled behind her.

The wind was starting to blow, not hard but like a knife, and behind you could feel the rain coming.

‘Roscoe,’ she turned to look at me and smiled as sweetly as drink will allow, ‘Nice name.’

‘Ross,’ I said and pulled out my warrant card. ‘Detective Senior Constable Ross Courtney.’

Her dress was a flattering combination of blues and some greens that looked good even in the streetlight. The material hugged her and almost made it to her knees. The wind told me how thin it was.

‘I like Ross,’ she said. ‘Ross is a nice name. I like Ross. Does Ross like me?’

Her friends were equally as poorly equipped for the night and had huddled together.

‘I don’t know your name?’ I said and I probably shouldn’t have but I smiled at her. The alcohol briefly left her and her wobbling stopped and she smiled back at me.

‘Katrina Howel, but my friends,’ she looked round at the girls and her voice dropped to whisper, ‘not them, my friends call me Kat.’

‘I wonder why,’ Ivan said.

Her expression changed, that something in her smile vanished and she was simply drunk again. Then her face went blank, the colour drained from her face. She was focused inwards, she staggered towards Ivan, he put up his hands to ward her off, but she grabbed his forearms and then it happened, she vomited all down his jacket and pants.

‘Aww, shit!’ he tried to step back, out of the way, but she held onto his arms and stumbled after him.

I was stunned and for a second stood where I was, then moved behind her and wrapped my arms around her body till she’d finished.

‘Oh look at that. Fuck!’ Ivan said. ‘Shit. You fucking bitch.’

Ivan slipped his hands out of her grasp and I took her weight otherwise she’d have been on the footpath. He grimaced at his jacket and pants.

‘Aw fuck, d’you smell that. Arrest the bitch.’

‘What for?’ I asked.

‘Dunno. Assaulting a police officer. Aw shit. You know the kind of crap. Jesus, it’s all over me suit.’

‘Come on, Ivan. It was an accident. She didn’t mean that,’ I said.

She seemed to have lost her strength and was leaning against me and I almost fell over. I was the one stumbling as if I was drunk.

‘I’ll take her home in the car,’ I said.

‘Not going home,’ she said and struggled to get away from me.

‘Fuck that,’ Ivan said. ‘I’ve got to get changed. Shit. Drop her Ross, let the wolves have her. Serves the bitch right.’

‘I can’t do that,’ I said.

‘Wanna party,’ she said and threw her arms wildly about. I had trouble keeping hold of her.

‘She’s your problem then mate.’ And Ivan walked back the way we’d come, his hands held shoulder height as if somehow that made it easier for the smell to dissipate.

Kat regained her strength and pulled away from me. She wobbled about but was steady enough on her feet.

‘Lemme be,’ she said.

‘Listen miss,’ I said. ‘You’re drunk. You should go home.’

‘Not going home. I’m going for drinkies.’

‘Look, how about I put you in a taxi?’

‘Wanna party.’ She’d some vomit on the front of her dress. The smell was fairly strong. ‘Whoo, stinks around here.’

‘I’ll put you in a taxi,’ I said and looked around, but there were none. The nearest taxi rank was up at Central Station.

‘No,’ she snapped with some determination and started to walk past me. Her girlfriends were still huddled together, surrounded by a pack of men who, sensing an opportunity, were smiling broadly. The girls weren’t giggling anymore.

I grabbed her arm and, as she tried to slip out of my grip, I put my training to good use.

‘Mus...’

‘Kat,’ I said softly into her ear, ‘Kat, you need to go home. Look, there’s a taxi rank near the railway station. How about I put you in a taxi? Take you home?’

‘You said you’d take me home.’

‘I can’t. I’m on duty,’ I said.

‘You lied. You liar. You lied.’

‘Ok, I lied. But how does that sound? I’ll put you in a taxi and send you home.’

She struggled a little but gave up. Despite the smell of vomit her perfume had something about it that lingered.

‘No. I wanna... Cross. I want to go up the Cross.’

The men moved in a little closer. The girls huddled a bit more. The men were grinning and watching, whispering to each other, divvying up.

‘Listen, Kat. I’ll put you in a taxi. You go home to bed.’

‘Wanna party. Wanna go up the Cross. Drinkies.’

She tried to dance and shook her backside.

‘What’s your address?’

‘No.’

‘Come on, it’s late, you need to go home. What’s your address?’

‘No,’ she said.

I looked at her friends but did not want them yelling it out with all the ears around.

‘Look, Kat, look. I’ll put you in a taxi and I’ll pay for it. Ok? I’ll let you go and we’ll go to the taxi...’

‘Let me go. You let me go. I want a drink.’

‘Listen,’ I said, trying a trick that usually worked. ‘I’m going to put you in a taxi and send you home. If you don’t give me your address I’ll arrest you.’

It usually worked. The shock of the lockup, the bang as the holding cell closed, giving up your details to the crusty old copper, and the threat of a judge looking down on you with the next few months of your life in his hands, usually

stabilised them. It took a lot to get through to someone who's drunk but that usually did it.

I loosened my grip on her and she managed to slip out and she turned and faced me. She was thinking and I guessed she was seeing sense at last.

'I want a drink and you can't stop me,' she said.

'Did you hear what I said? I'll arrest you.'

'What cha, charge?'

'Drunk and disorderly for a start.'

She stumbled over nothing, turned her back on me and started to walk away.

'I dare you. I want a drink.'

'Damn it,' I said and was behind her in a few steps, my handcuffs out. The young men were grinning to each other; they were out for a chance. I glared at them, 'You, all off you, fuck off or I'll get a bunch of cops down here to ruin your night.'

Slowly, with some grunts and snorts, they started to drift away. Too slowly so I growled at them, 'Fuck off' and they moved a little faster.

Kat was resisting playfully and I didn't want to hurt her. Steel handcuffs aren't the best way to restrain someone, but they are what I had. I got them on her at last and she settled down, she still wobbled a bit but didn't resist. I turned her round to face me.

'Are you going to be a good girl now?' I asked.

She nodded her head like a puppet controlled by an amateur, more wobble than anything else.

‘Ok. I’m not going to arrest you, for now. If I put you in a taxi will you go home?’

She was looking at the footpath.

‘No,’ she whispered softly and backed away from me.

‘What do you mean? You don’t want to go to the lock up, do you? It’s not nice there. It smells,’ I didn’t add, ‘like you.’

‘You said you’d take me home,’ she said.

‘I’ll put you in a taxi.’

She was still staring at the ground. I shivered in my suit as the wind picked up. I could feel the change in pressure. Rain was coming.

‘You said you’d take me home.’

‘Look, I’ll take the cuffs off and put you in a taxi, ok? The taxi’ll take you home.’

The boys had gone, and I looked for the girls to get Kat’s address, but they’d vanished too.

‘Shit.’

‘You said you’d take me home.’

‘Ok, look. I’ll call for a van. Ok. I’ll take you home in that. Now turn around and I’ll take the cuffs off.’

‘No,’ she stepped back a few more steps, stumbled, her cuffed hands shooting out awkwardly to try and stabilise her. ‘When we get home, you said.’

‘Look...’

‘You said. You promised.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You said you’d take me home. You’re just like him.’

‘Look, alright, I’ll take you home. There’s a taxi rank down the road and around the corner, near Central. Give me your address and let me take the cuffs off and I’ll walk you there.’

‘No.’

‘But...’

‘I’ll, I’ll give you my address, address...’ she stumbled over nothing again and would have fallen but I’d moved quickly and caught hold of her. I was close to her again. ‘I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you when we’re in the taxi.’

‘Fuck, ok. When we’re in the taxi you give me the address, right?’

‘Right.’

‘And you’ll let me take the cuffs off?’

‘No, when we get home.’

‘Why not? I’ll see you to your place, see you inside, ok?’

‘No. You’ll leave me. They all do. When we get home, I’ll let you.’

She never looked at me, even when I held her, her eyes were on the ground.

‘Ok, but I need to hold you, hold your arm. It’s a long walk down the hill and up to Central.’

‘Please.’

We set off, Kat stumbled a few times, it didn’t help she was leaning into me. We must have made a sight, Kat in her pretty party dress, me in my cheap suit marching along Elizabeth Street. I felt stupid. At the stand there were plenty of taxis and I helped her in. She shuffled over to the other side of the cab and waited till I was seated and the door closed before she gave an address in Cremorne. I had to help with her seat belt.

I took the opportunity to search through her purse but all it contained were a bunch of keys, a dozen twenty dollar bills, two dozen condoms and some loose change.

It must have been going on half three when the taxi pulled up. I paid the cabbie and let him go, I’d call Ivan, he’d be clean by now so he could come do his duty.

‘Ok, off with the cuffs.’

She was somewhat more sober now and slipped out of my light grip and stepped away.

‘When we get upstairs, please.’

My jacket wasn't keeping up with the fall in temperature and the rain started to fall. I'd heard it coming over from the city like cavalry at the trot that changed to a canter and now was racing towards us at full charge.

I grabbed her arm and rushed her up the steps to the entrance, while the cab drove off. There was no cover here and I had to fumble with the bag and then struggle with her keys while getting pelted with rain. She was laughing.

It took only a few moments before we were inside out of the deluge but my jacket was drenched and her dress clung to her giving me an audit of what she was wearing. She laughed again and danced around the hall, still a little unsteady on her feet, but sadly not enough so that I'd need to grab and hold her. Her hair was wet and matted, loose strands lay across her face. She danced towards me and stopped, laughing and I reached over and gently brushed the hair aside, pushing the strands behind her ears. She was facing me. Her eyes looking at me, she didn't laugh, but she wasn't frowning. Strangely I was aware of the curve of her shoulders, the way her collar bone ran into the top of her arms.

'Thank you,' she said.

We stood looking at each other, the rain thundering outside, the hall washed in light from the lightening. It was a little bit warmer here and dry.

'Can I s...'

Lightening flashed, then the breathless moment before the deep rolling boom of the thunder.

‘This way,’ she said and led me the few steps to the lift, where she awkwardly pressed the lift button then stood so that she was always facing me.

‘Look...’

‘Upstairs,’ she said. ‘It’s only a few floors, please.’

The lift doors opened and she waited for me to enter, she nodded for me to go first, just like a prison guard would do, taking no risks. Then she followed.

‘Seventh floor, please,’ she said and she stood beside me, but turned towards me. It would have been difficult for me to grab the cuffs and, anyway, we’d soon be at her door and I’d be out of here.

The lift was smooth and silent and when the doors opened it didn’t feel as if we’d moved at all. Again, she nodded for me go first.

‘To your left, down the end of the hall.’

I went ahead and she escorted me.

‘Here.’

‘Ok...’

‘That key, the large one.’

‘Oh, ok.’

The door opened easily and again she nodded for me to go first. The light switch was to the right of the door and I found myself in a long apartment. To the left a large window let in the dark, a large round coffee table took up the centre with a

lounge and two chairs. A large screen T.V. sat on a table against the internal wall. The rooms colours were blues and greys and seemed to me comforting, welcoming.

‘Now can I have my handcuffs, please?’

She’d slipped past me and placed herself on the other side of the coffee table. Despite the rain there were still vomit stains on her dress and the smell was making itself known.

‘No,’ she said.

‘Look, miss...’

‘Kat.’

‘Oh, have it your way, Kat. I’ve brought you home and you promised I could have my cuffs back. So stand still.’

Assuming we’d reached an understanding I started round the coffee table, but she danced away, laughing like a little girl.

‘Come on, will you. I’ve got to get back to work.’

But she wouldn’t stand still. I could try and grab her across the coffee table but I’d risk missing and even if I caught her I could still fall.

‘This isn’t a game you know. I’m a cop I could arrest you!’

‘Good,’ she said and skipped away out around the table again.

I lunged at her once more, but the alcohol still had some hold over her, she stumbled, couldn't maintain her balance and fell hitting her head on the lounge. I caught hold of her just at the end of her fall.

'You'll leave me,' she said, her eyes brimming with tears. It was the last hand of all the drink she'd put away. 'They all leave me. No one wants me. No one loves me.'

She cried, her body shaking, tears running down her cheeks like a stream. The rain beat the windows outside, the lightning lit up the night, thunder drummed and I held her throughout the storm. Some of the vomit got onto my suit and the smell lay between us. But I held her till the tears stopped and the shaking ceased.

After a while she struggled to a seating position, her back against the lounge. She looked at me, her cheeks wet, her hair bedraggled.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'You've been so kind. I'm sorry.'

'That's ok, that's ok,' I said. 'You need to get a shower and then to... get some sleep. Let me take the cuffs off you.'

'But then you'll go.'

It hurt the way she said it.

'I promise. I'll stay. I'll be here when you've showered.'

Her face brightened.

'Let me handcuff you to something...' she said.

I reached up and held her chin, stroked the side of her face.

‘No. You need to trust me. I’ll be here,’ I said. ‘Ok?’

‘Ok.’

I helped her to stand, took the cuffs off her. Aware how close she was to me.

‘I’ll get a shower,’ she said and left me, though she paused at the doorway to what I guess was her room and stared at me for a long time.

‘I’ll be here when you get back. I promise, and I keep my promise, cop’s honour.’

I sat down on the lounge, then stood up and took off my jacket, placing it far enough away so that the smell was only mildly offensive, and sat back. I closed my eyes, after a while I heard the shower run; I was alone except for the smell. I closed my eyes for a second.

When I opened my eyes, everything had changed.

I was in a bedroom, so bright it had to be daylight, so it must be day, morning perhaps and the storm had passed. The room was so large I couldn’t see the walls. I was lying on a soft bed, arms stretched out wide and I was naked. I couldn’t move, I was pinned down like a beetle on a display board. I lifted my head up and looked at my hands and feet, each was cuffed and the metal links were stretched out tight but the cuff at the end wasn’t attached to anything, it simply lay on the bed, yet I couldn’t move.

‘Honey.’

I knew the voice. It was Kat. She approached the foot of the bed. She was wearing the light salmon coloured teddy that she knew I loved. She had a look in her

eyes, wicked, but not the look she would have when she had planned something, not the look that said my dick was in for a hell of a workout. And the way she moved, not the way a body normally moves, bone working in sync with sinew and muscle. This was a strange cooperation of parts, like a jelly walking. She was at the foot of the bed. I struggled but could not move, she leant over and worms fell from her arms and upper chest like bits of skin falling off. Where they landed on me they burrowed into my skin. She lent further and like a water balloon that's been punctured, she exploded onto me, worms landed on my face, in my eyes and mouth and commenced digging into my body. Worms with mouths and teeth ate into me. I screamed.

*

The sound barely echoed off the walls of the buildings that surrounded the blind alley. Above me there were clouds which kept the morning cold and dim. I felt a mild pain down the centre of my back. It took some time but as the horror of the nightmare faded my mind started to work and I realised the pain I felt down the centre of my back was the concrete kerb of the footpath I was partially lying on, and the dampness in my right heel was a trickle of foul water running along the gutter and into my shoe. The image of my late wife faded, and I was left on my back staring up at the sky my heart pounding, my throat trying to make noises that would not come.

I tried to sit up, my arms and legs flailing around like a turtle's when trapped on its back. In my struggle I caught sight of my right hand and froze. The skin was torn across the knuckles and stained with dried blood.

How did that happen? When?

At the next attempt I got up onto my elbows and stared at the flesh of my belly. The buttons had been ripped from my shirt and the material was torn into strips. My body was usually white under the grime, but now my chest was purple in places from numerous bruises.

How...?

I struggled my way to a crouching position, kicking a discarded wine bottle in the process. I watched, unsteadily, as it bumped its way across the uneven surface a few metres and then settled to an uneasy stop. Three others surrounded me, lying still like soldiers fallen in battle. My body ached as if it had been beaten.

But...?

I stared at the bottles for a moment, as if I was missing something, then crawled over to one, this one was different. The base was shaped like a bulb and the neck was longer. I picked it up, checked it out, no damage and hugged it to me. I stared up into the brightening sky, blinked away the night and the alcohol, then forced my creaking bones up off the road and stumbled, the world wheeling crazily around me like a Ferris wheel come off its gimbals, to the solidity of a nearby shop. The thud as I collided with the wall would disturb no one as the windows were blind, covered in sheets of yellowing Chinese newspaper that were white the first time I woke up in this lane. A lone pigeon landed on the gutter of the shop and crapped into the lane. For a frantic moment I thought I might have crushed the bottle between my body and the wall. But a glance told me it was ok.

It took a few long minutes but at last the world steadied itself and I pushed off from the bricks and walked out of the alley onto the main street. Elegantly shaped

blurs of moving metal sped by so fast I could only briefly glimpse the mannequins inside. I recognised where I was, my favourite lane, Happens Lane, off High Street, near the Rocks.

I stopped there, swaying, struggling to hold myself both still and upright, and turned back to the ally. Staring from the left I scanned the footpath, then the road and finally back to the footpath on the right hand side. Turning my head upset my balance and I fell to the footpath again, striking my bad hand.

‘Fuck.’

Someone walked around me; I think I heard him or her mutter, ‘Disgusting’. Maybe I didn’t. My palm throbbed and a trickle of blood seeped from beneath the handkerchief. I shook my head to clear it and a strand of wild hair fell across my face and I brushed it away.

Something was missing.

*

...‘Here, drink this,’ Jokey pushed his bottle at me, it was three quarters empty.

I lay on the grass in too much pain to move, so he helped me up with me grunting in pain, and supported my back with his knees and put his bottle to my lips. I wouldn’t have done that. I swallowed, spluttered and coughed and some went down.

‘Better?’ Jokey asked...

*

I shook my head again and the memory faded and the blind lane was as empty as before.

Jokey.

My mate, Jokey. Where was Jokey? We'd started drinking together, I think. I tried to search the past few days but there was nothing.

*

... 'You should have stayed in there longer' he said.

Jokey was waiting outside the hospital as I came out. He sat on the bench across the drive like he was at a board meeting. He was talking to himself but he stopped as I approached. His shoes had holes in them in the soles and the top at the front. I could see his toes, clean except for the nails and some bits of sock. But I recognised good Italian leather when I saw it. Add to that his suit had once been something special.

'I don't like hospitals,' I said.

'The food is nourishing and the beds are clean.'

I didn't respond, but instead stared at the ants on the concrete path doing their thing.

'I saw the wounds,' he said, then added, 'After I helped you in there, they took your clothes off to examine you.'

Ants were crawling up blades of grass, for the view I supposed.

'Old wounds?' he asked.

‘So?’ I replied.

‘Healed?’

‘Yes. Old wounds, healed. Alright?’ I noticed my hands had clenched, the nails digging into my palm and I opened them, spreading the fingers out. ‘I was a cop.’

He nodded.

‘I witnessed what happened,’ he said.

The ants made a long dotted line along the edge of the footpath.

‘In the park. I saw what happened,’ he said.

‘You could have done something.’

‘I didn’t know you then.’

I grunted.

‘Where are you staying?’ he asked like a barrister.

‘What’s your name? I don’t even know your name,’ I asked.

He froze, his face went pale.

‘Jokey. People call me Jokey.’

‘Why? Are you funny?’

*

‘Jokey,’ I called, then a little louder, ‘Mate.’

My stomach growled. I knew I should eat but what I really wanted was to have my bottle filled to the brim and the taste of a cheap red on my tongue. For that to happen I had to have money. The holes in my pants didn’t let the money out; it was never in there, well, not for long.

I had a job up at Paddo, Paddington, a suburb to the south east of Sydney CBD, in a grocery store. That thought got my brain working. I knew it was morning, but what day was it? And how long, how many days had I been out? I’d get a sharp word or two from the owner of the shop for being late again. I’d tell him lies to shut him up and then sweep away the crap that got dumped behind his shop. For my efforts I’d get a handful of shiny coins, enough to buy more drink. Enough to burn away the memories and kill myself a little more. But first I wanted to find Jokey.

Perhaps he’d gone to the men’s shelter up at Surry Hills. In those days you’d find it on the corner of Riley and Anne Streets . We’d sleep there if we could get a bed. And most days if I looked to my right he’d be there but recently something had changed and he’d enough dollars in his pocket to keep himself smashed for days at a time. Knowing him he’d be passed out in some little secret lane in the nether regions of Sydney. I’d no idea where he got the coin to purchase his particular poison.

It took a solid half hour of a shambling walk but at last I stood outside the shelter and by then my feet ached like hell. The walk done them no good. It was the shoes. They were new, the Salvation Army had been good to me, but the shoes were too small for my feet. But at last I was at the shelter. The building was as desiccated as the men who haunted its shabby rooms, like ghosts that couldn’t be beaten back

into the grave. The place was built of ugly red bricks that sat uneasy, endlessly teetering like a homeless man with the DT's.

The timber fascia and the window sills once sported a coat of paint but now, so far down the track, all that was left were stray strips of blushing pink undercoat. The ground floor windows were boarded up and had steel bars to keep out... well, I don't know who. The front door didn't fit too well. Which didn't matter since it was rarely closed and when it was a few more dents got added. Some of them were mine.

As I swayed my way up to the entrance I heard the sound of Maggie stabbing at her keyboard as if trying to drive the little squares of plastic through the bottom of the desk all the way down to hell.

The smell of ancient dust and ruined men came out to greet me as I lurched my way inside. The lino covering the floor was some crazy black and white pattern, chipped and scratched and worn through the centre where generations of homeless men dragged their feet. The walls were a dirty yellow and the fluoro light fittings were more dust and rust than anything else. The first room, off to the left through a shit brown door, was the closet where Maggie did her thing.

Maggie. She was a big bodied woman, with lots of meat on her bones. The lumps of flesh beneath her dress hung over her bra straps at the sides, and bulged over her knickers.

'Maggie,' I slurred at her and then deflated into the only other chair in the room. It complained back at me, swearing at me with creaks and groans but it held out.

The clock on the wall behind her said it was just after nine a.m.

Maggie grunted at me, but kept watching the computer screen intently. I imagined it was to ensure that none of the characters she'd so laboriously typed snuck away and hid out on her when she wasn't looking. She wore glasses with thick black plastic sides that dragged the focus, so that your impression of her was formed by the glasses. An orange and green striped lanyard held them off the floor when they were not on her face. Her dress was this long, dark brown, shapeless thing, with a wide black plastic belt cinching her waist and cutting her in two. Around her neck she wore a gaudy bright orange, yellow and brown necklace made up of bits and pieces of plastic blocks.

She went to run a hand through her thin, straggly brown hair but stopped halfway. She did that often, stopping halfway. I think she meant to break the habit but kept forgetting.

The office stank of dust, stale beer and old man's urine. It stank of bodies too long unwashed. It stank of clothes rotting on those bodies.

'Seen Jokey?' I asked.

It had become a habit to scan the room. But there was nothing worth nicking. Maggie's computer was so old I think James Watt had a hand in cobbling it together. She spent most of her day clacking away on it.

Battered filing cabinets of different, but dull, colours and various sizes sat against the wall on my left. On top were piles of elderly phone books that blocked the single window. It didn't matter; the window, like all the others, was boarded up. Two cups snoozed on top of the cabinet furthest from me. One had printed 'Greetings from L.A.' in bright California colours in an arch along the front. The other was silent, just

another white enamelled two dollar shop job. Scattered around them were cockroach droppings, but they were antediluvian. The new turds were all around the coffee makings on the table snuggling against the wall on my right, just a bit in from the doorway.

Next to the cabinets ran a long line of postcards thumb tacked to the plaster wall. Except the first, the one on the left. That one was held in place by a little badge with 'First time at Disneyland' stamped on the front and was attached to a sheet of paper with 'Maggie! You're next! Love, Jazz,' written on it in a swift, feminine hand, and an arrow pointing to the badge. The paper was curled and both paper and badge were yellowed from age and cigarette smoke and heavily fly specked.

As my eyes followed the line to the right the cards grew newer, as though becoming younger and more vital. The last of the line, just behind Maggie's bobbing head, was new. It hadn't been there the last time I was around. A typical 'Tourista' postcard of the Parthenon. But the guy who took this shot had caught the moment just right. I'd been there; standing where the tourists in the photo were standing and it had looked like an ancient hovel waiting for the Reno men to come in.

But with this one, it was either a trick of the light or the skill of the photographer, the Parthenon looked fresh, new, despite the chips and pockmarks on the pillars and all the tonnes of fallen stone. I could see the stone mason, at the end of the day's work and on his way home, pausing, turning round and looking back with a light smile settling on his lips as he marvelled at the magnificent thing he had wrought into being, where it sat in all its glory in the afternoon sun.

Above us the single bulb was dying a slow death so that the office was dusky like a winter's late afternoon. But I liked it. It suited me, the half-light.

Maggie gave me a quick look and picked up the phone just as it started to ring.

‘Yeah?’ she said into the dark grey mouth piece. The cord was twisted and tangled and she played with it absently. She was still looking at me but she wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes were empty as she listened.

The only things on her table beside the computer and the telephone was a photo of a young boy, the frame was new and had a blue ribbon, and a greeting card of some type. I couldn’t tell as it was face down. I think it was a kid's one and it cost seven dollars and fifty cents.

I heaved myself onto feet that and stepped behind the door to the makeshift kitchenette, to find the usual mess; dark brown rings, a small pile of dark brown dust and numerous little heaps of white and brown sugar. I made coffee with too much sugar. It was the closest I’d get to a meal till I saw the Saints at lunchtime. The Saint’s ran a soup kitchen over at Central Railway Station, in a prehistoric shop built into the arch of the railway bridge.

Maggie was playing a game of verbal jigsaw puzzles on the phone with. It was an easy guess the he or she on the other side was describing some homeless man. But from the conversation I could also guess that the description of the probable victim was so vague that he/she could have been asking Maggie if she’d recently spotted Jack the Ripper for all the sense it made. And Maggie was laying bricks and mortar for an image that was probably a composite of every drunk she’d ever met. How did I know? Because I’d seen that vaudeville routine, oh, only a hundred times before.

Now she was squinting at the table. I took my coffee out of the office and into the main dorm. The internal walls here had been torn out years ago so there was

nothing like privacy. But there was a bed, if you were quick to get in. Sheets, a blanket and a bit of warmth. The smell of fallen men was here as well. All the ground floor windows had been boarded up, as I'd said, and the only light came from four overworked and underpowered light bulbs. Electrical wire was stapled to the ceiling like long, thin, yellow snakes. Someone had done a crap job of rewiring.

A couple of clients, that's what we are these days, clients, were lying on the beds. I nodded at one I knew and mumbled a few words in greeting. Frank usually chased them out around 8.30 am so he could clean up. But some he let be.

The man himself was sweeping up at the far end. He stopped and was looking at me with those beer bottle brown eyes of his, then at the men on the bed, he looked puzzled.

In build Frank was two pieces of wire twisted together yet he managed to look like a manikin inside his country and western shirt and the faded blue jeans with the cuffs up at the bottom. His face was a fine network of red spider webs and was what they called 'ruddy'. These were the signs of his life addicted to the bottle and living rough and meant he wasn't going to set any longevity records. But he was made of good stuff.

'Hmm,' he grunted.

'Frank,' I replied.

Frank was special, by the way. You see, Frank was a success story. The one, the only one I knew, who'd climbed up out of the sewer, shaken off the muck and stayed clean. He helped run the shelter and many times he'd let four or five men sleep on the floor when the limit to the building was well and truly past and the rain was

beating down like god was washing his car and the wind howling like all the drunken souls that had gone before me.

‘Seen Jokey?’ I asked. I didn’t know his real name, but then names were bits of the past and who’d want that, the past?

‘Ain’t seen the bugger since last week,’ Frank said. ‘He’s been working.’

I asked, ‘What day is it?’

‘Thursdy,’ Frank replied instantly, if it wasn’t the most commonest of questions.

Thursday?

‘How long have I been gone?’

‘Three weeks or thereabouts, mate,’ Frank said and continued his sweeping.

What had I done, been doing? I trawled my memory but nothing came up.

‘There’s hope for ‘im,’ Frank said. ‘I can see him up on the strait and narra.’

I sat down as the battery was getting a little low.

‘You think there’s hope for everyone,’ I said.

‘There’s gotta be, why the fuck am I still liven then?’

He hammered his broom into the old tiles.

‘Are you doing any more courses, like the social ones?’ I asked

‘Could be, maybe.’ He stopped, some of the sadness left his eyes. ‘Jokey says I should do law. He knows Sydney Uni. Says it’s a goodun.’

‘Have you seen him much?’

‘A bit.’

‘Is he drinking much?’

‘A bit.’ He started sweeping again, moving away from me, his eyes as sad as ever.

‘Do you know what he’s been drinking.’

‘You know,’ he said, moving just a bit more away.

‘What?’

‘You know.’

‘What, Frank?’

‘Red diamonds.’

‘Fuck! How come he got onto the red?’

Franks back was mostly towards me now.

‘He had money in ‘is pocket. You weren’t around.’

‘He’s the one who kept me from the red!’ I didn’t mean to let that slip out.

‘He was here. Don’t worry mate. It’s just one of them phases he’s going through. The old Jokey’ll be right in a few days. Right as rain.’

He gave me a wan smile and continued with his sweeping.

‘Where’s he working?’ I asked. A thought came into my mind. ‘What’s he doing?’

The old Pommy I worked for at Paddo underpaid me but after two days sweeping the street, emptying the garbage bins, that sort of high end strategic stuff, I’d buy enough of my favourite red to send me into nothingness. But if Jokey was onto something better and it was easy work, well, I wanted in.

‘Some restaurant up at Newtown,’ only he said it like ‘New Tonne.’ ‘Dunno much about it. Sweeps, tidies, runs errands. Dunno what they pays him. But he was as ‘appy as last I saw him.’

‘Ta, Frank,’ I said and he grunted back.

I drank my shit coffee. There was just a hint of coffee aroma floating lazily in the air to drag up a memory of coffee in Vienna, in the Night Market. I’d been there working on a report, some international policing policy. I pushed the memory aside, angry that the past kept intruding on to the present.

The coffee was bitter on my tongue, sharp and hard as stone. Too much instant powder, too little milk and too sweet. A conflicting taste of burnt beans and sugar cane mingled in my mouth. As the sugary liquid ran down my throat I felt a rising surge of energy. For just a moment the world of the men’s home brightened and a lost shard of hope glimmered in me. But then died again just as quickly and the shelter became the grim waiting room for the soon to be departed once more.

I finished the coffee but before I shambled my way back to Maggie's glamorous office Frank called me.

'Hey, Ross.'

I stopped, turned to look at him. Then looked closer.

'Yes?'

'Don't pester Maggie.'

'Pester? Why?'

'It were the lad's birthday today.'

'Fuck,' I said softly. 'Fuck.'

She was off the phone now and watched me as I made my way to the micro kitchenette. The surge of sugar had passed and my hands were starting to shake, I was feeling blurry. She watched me as I made another coffee and she watched me as I drank it.

I wanted to say something. Something that wouldn't make things worse.

Maggie watched me as I slumped down in her visitor's chair again. She watched as I finished the coffee and when I put the cup down.

Before I said anything, she got in ahead of me, 'Ross...'